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— CELEBRATING 25 YEARS —

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# THE KEEPERS OF THE LIGHT

*New Orleans's complicated history  
with the Mardi Gras flambeaux*

BY RIEN FERTEL

In my youth, I'd often join my grandmother for dinner at the iconic white-tablecloth steak house she owned in the Mid-City neighborhood of New Orleans. She dominated the dining room from table 83, a four-top with the best sight lines of the entire restaurant. On the wall behind her permanent seat, over her left shoulder, hung a grand painting: a Mardi Gras tableau of a half dozen white-robed men carrying torches, leading a parade down a spectator-thronged French Quarter street.

Seated at that table, my grandmother, who, except when she was sleeping, was cloaked by the smog from the Kent cigarettes that would eventually take her life, appeared to become one with the painting's haze of smoke and fire. Between bites of filet and fried shoestring potatoes, I'd gaze in wonder at the chaotic street scene on view. Captured mid-dance, these men, who I knew were called flambeaux—the plural form of the French word *flambeau*, which means “a flaming torch” and can also refer to its carrier—strut into the painting's foreground. With their left legs planted firmly on the asphalt, the men cock their right legs at forty-five-degree angles, like a squadron of impossibly

rubber-limbed soldiers. In the clenched right fist of each is a torch, raised high—higher than the balconies that flank the street, higher than the parade's king, King of the Mistick Krewe of Comus, who appears in the background, faceless except for a beard, crown, and scepter, which he brandishes at a likewise blurry-faced crowd, waving in adoration.

The frontmost flambeau tosses his head back, eyes closed, to the night. Unlike the king and his congregation, this man's face had been rendered in meticulous detail: the recognizable roundness of middle age, the short-cropped afro and dark skin tone. He was real. I couldn't look away. In the painting's exact center, another flambeau, his arms extended outward, turning his body into a cross, looked directly at me, as if offering a challenge: *Watch me dance.*

I had learned at least one reason why the flambeaux dance: for tips, coins generously bestowed by the crowds. My grandmother loved the beauty of a good spectacle, and she would never let my younger brother and me leave for the night parades without our pockets laden with quarters for tossing to the flambeaux. Like many white New Orleanians back then, we thrilled to the tinny *plink-plink-plink* of the

coins as they skipped across the pavement and to the drama of the men's struggle to balance their fire-heavy burdens as they stooped to scoop up the silver.

"Oh, Lord, I want to be in that number" goes the refrain of New Orleans's most iconic song. And what a number this was. I wanted to wear strange costumes, to be the center of attention. I wanted to parade. Dancing looked more fun, more necessarily and hopelessly human, than standing around—which despite what you may think, the majority of Mardi Gras revelers do most of the time: hours of standing, not doing much besides waiting, for the parades to arrive, for another drink, for the bathroom to finally free up.

But this painting also made me realize that something was wrong with not only this scene but the many scenes within scenes that filled my grandmother's upscale restaurant. There, the bulk of patrons were white, as was the all-female waitstaff, while the kitchen personnel were all black. It's safe to say that those men carrying the flambeaux rarely if ever ate there, but on any given night an entire lineage of Comus kings likely filled the seats of the dining room. Though she never had a connection to this enigmatic, elitist organization—my grandmother lived off the crumbs left behind by the upper crust—her restaurant was undoubtedly frequented by members of the Mistick Krewe, the oldest continuously operating club in New Orleans's Carnival culture. I later learned that the painting I so admired carried its own complications. The artist was Robert Rucker, famed for his impressionistic, and often stodgy, takes on picturesque Louisiana landscapes: unpeopled bayous, antebellum cotton fields, floriferous Uptown gardens, and French Quarter courtyards.

Something changed in the early 1990s, around the year I turned thirteen. As my grandmother and I watched the procession of flambeaux and I wound up to sling a fistful of quarters into the air, she grabbed my wrist and stopped me. "We don't do that anymore," I remember her gently scolding. For reasons I didn't yet understand, she removed the coins from my palm and transferred them to a flambeau's outstretched hand.

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That night, my grandmother taught me an important lesson: Carnival is not all mirth and gaiety. The festival season is a hustle for many, an albatross worn like a neck-

ful of plastic beads, and the worst time of the year for more than a few. The ugly underbelly of Mardi Gras manifests itself in countless ways, plainly visible, often unmasked.

Those plastic beads tossed during parades and from Bourbon Street balconies—and which can and do lead to fistfights—are manufactured by Chinese work-camp laborers, a situation documented in the film *Mardi Gras: Made in China*. The Mardi Gras krewes, or private organizations, that dominate the season's calendar largely remain segregated by wealth, gender, and race. Debutantes campaign, like their mothers and grandmothers before them, to become queens of krewes that will never offer them full entry to their membership rolls—a privilege reserved for their brothers, fathers, and grandfathers. Many Jewish families used to leave town as Mardi Gras rolled around because they, no matter their social standing, were barred from joining the old-line organizations simply for being Jewish.

History tells us that Louisiana has celebrated Mardi Gras—which in French translates to "Fat Tuesday," the final day of the Carnival festival leading up to Lent—since March 3, 1699, the day French-Canadian explorers originally landed on banks of the Mississippi River. It was a ritual carried over from the mother country and rooted in the Catholic Church, but observed, in some form or another, whenever and wherever pre-Christianized Western European peoples celebrated the rites of spring and its promise of rebirth. The litany of pleasures described in the early accounts of Mardi Gras—in Louisiana, the phrase is often used to refer to the entire Carnival season—could be mistaken for contemporary reports; there is masquerading (cross-dressing was just as popular then as it is today), dancing, gluttony, and boozing to excess. And because all of these activities are more fun under cover of night, Mardi Gras called for artificial light.

Flambeaux first appear in the historical record a few decades later. One of the earliest descriptions of a New Orleans Mardi Gras celebration, dating back to 1730 and collected in the recently published book *A Company Man: The Remarkable French-Atlantic Voyage of a Clerk for the Company of the Indies*, can be found in the memoir of Marc-Antoine Caillot, a Frenchman and minor administrator newly arrived in the nascent colony. Dressed as a white-corseted shepherdess, Caillot rallied a band of maskers and set off for a party "accompanied by eight actual Negro slaves, who each carried a flambeau to light our way."

Additional mentions from the colonial era are hard to come by. But open most any modern Mardi Gras guide, and you'll read tales of enslaved and free men of color forcibly conscripted in this same manner into illuminating the Mardi Gras weekend for a city that, because its system of gas-fueled streetlights was so lousy, otherwise lived in the shadows.

A reporter for the *Cincinnati Commercial* wrote of witnessing the 1872 procession of the Mistick Krewe of Comus, a secret society that had ushered in the modern age of parading sixteen years prior. The reporter describes nine "large cars," today called floats, each depicting highlights from the Homeric epics: a reclining Aphrodite, aging Agamemnon, and brave Achilles all "surrounded by colored men bearing torches, which cast a beautiful light upon the figures." If either the torches or the men were commonly called flambeaux, the chronicles of the era make no mention.

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Today, the best place to see the flambeaux up close is not along the police-barricaded parade route, but at the various staging grounds where they gather and suit up hours before the procession's commencement. Nowhere is the intrinsic dissonance of Mardi Gras more apparent than at the very start of a parade.

Before the thousands of spectators arrive; before the hundreds of cops and assorted emergency personnel; before the reporters, the merrymakers, the sidewalk hustlers; before the buzzy traffic jam of befezzed Shriners wedged into the seats of their little red buggies; before the posse of mismatched knights led by a regal Joan of Arc astride an ivory steed; before the mule-drawn carts and the tractor-borne floats festooned in papier-mâché everything: papier-mâché flowers, papier-mâché velvet, papier-mâché Greek gods; before the high school marching bands and dance teams—before this great scrum of humanity takes to the streets, all mobilizing in pursuit of Mardi Gras in New Orleans, they come: the flambeau carriers, the men, and a few women, who will light the streets.

On this Thursday evening, the sun dimmed at the end of the first day of the long Mardi Gras weekend, the second of two big Carnival weekends in 2016. A ragtag band of four dozen individuals, predominantly African-American men, formed a haphazard line along the sidewalk. A few donned makeshift cos-



tumes, but most, as custom dictates, wore tattered, soot-stained white robes. Each member of the group, which included just two women, held a cross-shaped instrument that looked positively medieval: a thick wooden stave with a small barrel precariously perched atop, reaching eight feet in height. Most barrels wept a malodorous liquid: two gallons worth of kerosene. From the bottom of each barrel, a supply line ran a quarter-length down the stave to feed a pair of burners, the light from which was brightened and reflected by a sheet of polished aluminum.

I caught the eye of Clarence Holmes, who had become my entrée to the inner flambeaux circle. If you've ever seen the flambeaux—in a parade, in a magazine photo spread, or in a commercial for Popeyes fried chicken—then you've probably seen Clarence, a great big block of a man with a Van Dyke beard and bald head. He was the one who taught me that they refer to themselves as “the Keepers of the Light” and call what they do toting—as in “toting a light” or “toting a stick.” Like most flambeaux I've met over the years, he started carrying that stick, along with its fifteen or so sloshing pounds of kerosene, at a shockingly young age: fourteen. Now sixty-one years old, he's retired, or sometimes retired—he still totes when there aren't enough hands, or when he can use the extra cash, or when he just misses the experience of walking down the main avenues of New Orleans with a sea of eyes on him.

The tie-dyed shirt Clarence wore this night, like most every night, matched that of his wife, Patricia. She carried her first torch four decades ago, at the age of sixteen and against her mother's wishes, becoming one of the first women—along with three others who joined the ranks that Mardi Gras season—to do so. “The women weren't really supposed to be toting no lights in the parade,” she told me. “The men were against it. But by me being married to—” She pointed to her husband while laughing, then whispered that her husband doesn't carry anymore because he “eats too many Honey Buns.”

Together, Clarence and Patricia are unofficial flambeaux administrators who work in a very official capacity. Each parade krewe is responsible for deciding if it will feature flambeaux, for providing the torches, and for paying the carriers. But the Holmeses make it all come together: they council newbies, weed out the inebriated, and, when the parade finally pushes forward, tag along as supervi-

sors for the first team of flambeaux that hit the streets. (Another flambeau retiree named Clarence—Clarence Lazare—acts as don of the whole operation, keeping the roll call of each night's toters.) Clarence Holmes has adopted the name “King of the Flambeaux,” a designation no one seems to take issue with.

On this cool February evening, the flambeaux had attracted a flock of photographers, both amateur and professional, who *click-click-clicked* away as a man dressed in greasy mechanic's overalls deliberately moved down the line, igniting each set of burners. As I watched the last of the torches come alive, a passerby, obviously a tourist because he was dripping in beads before the parade had even begun, stopped to stare at the black men in white robes holding burning crosses. “This looks like a KKK rally,” he whispered to me, his eyes wide at the disjunction in the scene. We shared a nod. No matter how many times I've watched the men suit up, I've shared a similar sentiment.

One by one the flambeaux burst into twin sets of flame. The lighting process took nearly an hour, and as this dusk-drowned corner of New Orleans slowly illuminated, the flambeau carriers prepared for the coming five-mile walk. They joked among themselves, while some sneaked sips from paper bags and others loosened their limbs with halfhearted attempts at calisthenics. Tonight, their fires would light the way for two parades, the Knights of Babylon and the Knights of Chaos, and the overwhelmingly white retinue of dukes, debutantes, and assorted merrymakers parading through the city's streets.

Twenty yards away from where the flambeaux stood waiting for the parade to begin, the two chief representatives from Babylon and Chaos arrived via separate limousines. While exiting their cars, both dutifully waved to an uninterested crowd. One of this year's countless kings of Carnival, King Sargon the Magnificent LXXI, ruler of the Knights of Babylon, wore a comically massive, white, bejeweled crown; a glittery gold tunic; and white tights that made his legs resemble ready-to-burst sausages. His rival monarch, the mysteriously named Number One, head of the Knights of Chaos, looked no less ridiculously regal. He too sported a crown, along with a white coat outlined in shimmering silver and, like many of the Number Ones before him, a paste-on beard and mustache that, similar to Clark Kent's eyeglasses, worked as an absurd attempt at anonymity, a prerequisite

for nearly all Mardi Gras kings.

I watched the kings amble toward their separate thrones as I tried to decide which appeared to be more intoxicated, an impairment unavailable to Sargon's attendants, a quartet of unsmiling prepubescents in blond pageboy wigs who joined their king on a mule-drawn float sheathed in dramatic cascades of orange papier-mâché. Though one of the fundamental facets of Carnival has always been mocking royals and others to the manor born, the history and culture of this New Orleans Mardi Gras tradition has engendered a self-seriousness, a solemnity that seems almost funereal. The privilege of acting as king for a day costs tens of thousands of dollars. Royal lineages were established over a century ago. Battles have been fought, businesses founded, friendships ended, over papier-mâché. The scene was both ludicrous and iconic, the perfect snapshot souvenir of Mardi Gras in New Orleans. Yet no one edged forward to take a photograph of Their Majesties. The kings were being ignored.

Compared to these rather staid and, it must be said, often stale displays of pageantry, the flambeaux were a blaze of activity and excitement, and the camera- and smartphone-lugging masses crept closer. The Keepers of the Light would be paid for their services and rewarded with tips by the crowds, but because of the unofficial limitations—chiefly race and social standing—cemented into the culture of Mardi Gras, these men and women will never join the Knights of Babylon, never rise to become the next in the lineage of magnificent King Sargons. They will walk *in* the parades without being *of* the parades.

But without the light the flambeaux provided, enough to turn the night sky red, this evening's audience might not have appreciated the splendor of the kings' finery, seen King Sargon's pageboys burst into smiles as the parade began to roll, or witnessed the moment when the heat and humidity caught up with Number One and his phony mustache began to droop down his face.

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Researching the history of the flambeaux is tricky. Men treated as walking spotlights did not warrant a mention in the pages of city newspapers of yore. All peoples and cultures, of course, misremember their shared histories; they ignore, mythologize, obfuscate, whitewash, sweep under the rug,



bulldoze, and just plain incinerate the past. “The City that Care Forgot,” as its denizens once took to calling New Orleans, has forged an identity and made a business out of forgetting. Some things, of course, are best left forgotten.

It’s Carnival time, 1887, ten years following the end of Reconstruction and all the hope and expectations it bestowed, especially on black Americans throughout the South, and most notably in New Orleans: the promise of voting rights and integrated education; the possibility of officeholding, of wearing a police uniform; the freedom to walk down the street, perhaps even to publicly enjoy Mardi Gras. A decade into a new regime, and the so-called “redeemed” South is defined by disfranchisement, lynching, and Jim Crow segregation that would last nearly a century. A time when white supremacy, which had always marched hand in hand with Mardi Gras, becomes solidified: whites-only parades mock and make monsters of people of color for white audiences, who are able to gaze upon the elaborate costumes and floats because of black men who illuminate the way.

On January 7, the *Daily Picayune* trumpeted “a new and startling feature” of Carnival: the Crescent City Flambeau Club. Modeled after similar “flambeau battalions” hailing from the Mardi Gras-less cities of St. Louis, Kansas City, and Topeka, this local franchise promised a splendid display of flambeaux and fireworks. After a weekend of soggy weather delayed the scheduled event for several days, the C.C.F.C. took to the streets late in the evening hours of Lundi Gras, or the Monday before Mardi Gras, February 21. A procession billed as one hundred fifty “drilled and disciplined” men, many of them Confederate army veterans, and all presumably white, marched platoon-style in matching white helmets and white uniforms trimmed with brass buttons. A brass band led the way, according to newspaper reports, followed by a drum corps, hulking ammunition wagons, ten pikemen armed with gold-tipped spears, and, throughout, the flambeaux, wielding torches laced with chemicals that made their fires sparkle red, green, gold, and white. Another downpour could not deter the crowds, who arrived by the thousands, huddling under umbrellas to witness the cavalcade wind its way through the city’s business district, before culminating with “a grand pyrotechnical display.”

That inaugural spectacle proved so popular that a second flambeaux procession, now doubled in size, marched about two months

later, on April 6, to coincide with the twenty-fifth anniversary of the Battle of Shiloh, a day “generally celebrated as a holiday,” according to the *Picayune*, and the unveiling of the city’s newest Confederate statue, that of General Albert Sidney Johnston astride a marble likeness of his famed steed, the aptly named Fire Eater. Just as it had weeks earlier, this “carnival of fire,” as an unidentified reporter called it, paraded down St. Charles Avenue to Lee Circle, the centrally located traffic crossroads and commercial district that had been rechristened three years prior, at the height of Carnival season, to honor the dearly departed Confederate general. Though Robert E. Lee never crossed into Louisiana as commander of the Army of Northern Virginia—he likely visited New Orleans for a brief stay while soldiering during the Mexican-American War, decades earlier—the city honored him with a bronze statue, standing and facing north, a traitorous Golem ready to spring to life and defend the South from Yankee advances, atop a sixty-foot Doric marble column. Today, despite the skyscrapers that eventually mushroomed around him, Lee’s statue still manages, from certain vantage points, to dominate the city’s skyline, at no time more so than from the Mardi Gras parades, which all circle beneath his stony gaze.

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To anyone who’s ever witnessed the flambeaux parade, this origin story sounds like it came from another world, not the New Orleans we know, not my Mardi Gras. The flambeaux I’ve known since childhood don’t march in “drilled and disciplined” fashion. The flambeaux I know peacock and buckjump and twirl their torches, to the delight—and fear—of the audience. They make their strenuous walk a competition, a tutorial in improvisation, transforming the parade route into a five-mile soul train, inciting spectators to empty their pockets. They become the center of attention, out-spectacle the spectacle, reinvent the inner workings of Mardi Gras by becoming more carnivalesque than Carnival itself.

There’s no record of when the flambeaux first transformed their walk into a dance, no reports of when tipping the torchbearers began, but it likely happened organically, from the freedom provided by having one’s feet on streets that were otherwise unwelcoming to black men. Dancing would become a form of resistance.

Theronn Stevenson, a fifty-five-year-old flambeau veteran with a deeply cragged face, came out of retirement in 2016 to tote the torch with the hope of making enough money in one evening to pay for his daughter’s wedding dress. “I take one of them things and act a fool with it,” he told me while waiting. “I know how to dance with it. I know how to spin it. It’s just fun to me. I taught these other guys: this is how you get paid,” he said as he demonstrated a vibrant shimmy-shake, while arcing his lower back, limbo-style, to dip lower to the ground than I ever thought possible.

Chris Lawless, a longtime carrier, told me that toting is like getting paid to exercise: “free money,” he called it. A perfect parade evening—clear skies, warm weather, and well-liquored crowds—can guarantee a flambeau three to four hundred dollars. The largess increases stratospherically if you’re one of a handful—torch-toting lifers all—who lead the procession into the black-tie galas that climax many of the bigger parades.

Oliver Glenn, a New Orleanian who moved to St. Louis after high school, returns home each year for Mardi Gras. Thirty-five years old, he’s been carrying the stick since the age of eight and now serves as a flambeau captain. He described what it felt like to enter the air-conditioned convention center for one of those high-dollar shindigs, after a long slog through the city’s streets: “You see the evening gowns and tuxedos. The ones and fives turn into tens, twenties, and fifties. And you forget that you’re tired.” He came away that night with forty-eight hundred dollars in cash and coins stuffed into a Crown Royal bag, a payout that would cover two months’ rent, new school uniforms for his children, and enough food and drink to satisfy all of his family and friends on Mardi Gras day.

For others, the glory of public attention, of dancing for hundreds of thousands of spectators each year, no matter how fleeting, outweighs the possibility of riches. Paul Lindsey, sixty-nine years old and long retired from carrying, likes to revisit the parade route as a sort of elder statesman. He remembers holding his first flambeau at the age of twelve, against the wishes of his mother, while shadowing his stick-carrying older brother Roy. Halfway along the route, Roy, in dire need of a bathroom break, handed the flambeau to his younger brother with a warning not to showboat. But as soon as Roy was out of sight, Lindsey gave the stick a quick twist, which, propelled by the wind, kept on spin-



ning and spinning. Like he was flying a kite in a hurricane, the slight boy struggled to regain control while the audience cheered him on. "I'm antique, an old man now," he wistfully confided, "but I want to carry one more time."

But even more than fortune and fame, most flambeaux cite tradition as the prime influence on their dedication to the trade. For those who annually carry the torch, walking beside a parade that would never have them as members is a point of pride. Like Paul Lindsey, the flambeaux take up the cross after a father or uncle, an older brother or cousin. They speak of family lineages, of inheriting the stick, of teaching the younger generation how to dance in time with the music and the flame: a literal passing of the torch.

Carrying for nearly four decades, since the age of eleven, Eddie Williams follows in the footsteps of his uncle John and, like many, refers to the flambeaux as "a family tradition." His cousin Jamal Smith, thirty-three years old, first carried at the age of nine and lifts weights each season to prepare for the walk. Oliver Glenn, he of the overstuffed Crown Royal sack, takes pride in referring to himself as "a veteran" and the extra work

it entails. "You help those who really don't know about the tradition," he told me, while weeding out those "not worthy of doing it." Though he might never move back to New Orleans from St. Louis, Mardi Gras and the prospect of toting a torch will bring him back each year. "I come all the way back home for the tradition," he said. "I'm still carrying, no matter what. I ain't retiring."

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**I** dug deeper into Mardi Gras's history, and discovered that Glenn and his fellow flambeaux lifers are beholden to a group of defiant and determined torchbearers who once refused to light the streets of seventy years ago.

Mardi Gras is rarely canceled in New Orleans, though during times of war a somber—and sometimes sober—patriotism has occasionally replaced the season's bacchanalia. That was certainly the case during World War II, a four-year period when the city ceded celebration to gravitas. Some six months after the end of the war, on February 28, 1946, the Knights of Momus led off the nighttime parading season for a populace that the

*Times-Picayune* diagnosed as "mirth-starved" and "famished for the pomp and pageantry of Carnival."

Just as the parade's procession was due to emerge from the confines of its Garden District warehouse, or "den" in local parlance, a wage dispute arose between the krewe's organizers and a cohort of veteran flambeau carriers. That night, the masked men of Momus marched through the streets of New Orleans without the full contingent of flambeaux—white service veterans volunteered to fill a few of the positions.

The strikers were demanding five dollars per parade, a significant increase from the two dollars they were paid before the war, but a raise they said they had been guaranteed. The krewe captains of three upcoming night parades countered with \$2.50 and, in a public address that was front-page news in all three major local newspapers, begged the flambeau carriers to withdraw their "exorbitant" wage demands. They then appealed to the city's African-American war veterans to mobilize, volunteer their services, and pick up a torch for the good of Carnival, a request met with derision by the *Louisiana Weekly*, since 1925



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the city's leading African-American periodical. "Momus, god of mockery and rebuke, got a rebuke," an anonymous editorialist gloated. "It seems that white Carnival parades are having a post-war rude awakening." The article went on to quote unnamed black veterans responding to the captains' appeal.

"Those white parades are not for colored people," one man told the *Weekly's* reporter. "We are able to attend because nobody has found out how to control a mob of people by roping off the streets and hanging out 'white and colored' signs."

"Of all the nerve, appealing to veterans," another protested. "There's not a place along the parade route where vets' wives or children can find seats to see parades."

A third called the entire flambeaux history into question: "Who in the h[ell] wants to put on those monkey gowns and clown for people?"

On Friday the Krewe of Hermes marched in the dark, as did the Krewe of Proteus the Monday following, and the most legendary of all parades, the Mistick Krewe of Comus, on Mardi Gras night.

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After a subsequent strike two years later, the flambeau carriers eventually received their raise, though the total fell a buck short of the five dollars they were originally promised. Wages gradually increased over time—Clarence Holmes remembers making seven and a half dollars when he started toting in the late 1960s—to the current value of sixty or eighty dollars, depending on the parade (captains make upwards of twenty dollars more).

It would be easy to view the flambeaux as a quaint and outmoded vestige of another era (much, if not all, of Mardi Gras could be deemed long overdue for disposal on history's trash heap). The tradition might be seen as reinforcing racist stereotypes, specifically that of the content and faithful black man performing for the entertainment of whites. Among others in the local black community, Kalamu ya Salaam, a leading activist, artist, and social critic, has referred to the flambeaux as "carrying the torch of oppression" while arguing for its abandonment. It's true that only the rare

New Orleanian, black or white, can name a veteran flambeau, which is certainly not the case for other figurative torchbearers of local black culture—the politicians, musicians, and Second Line club members. The flambeaux, however, remain largely anonymous, socially invisible, unembraced.

I met two flambeaux old enough to recall the era when the police patrolled the flambeaux scene with a mafioso's mien. Before the Clarences supervised the process, police officers randomly handed out numbered tickets to a mob of potential carriers. The disorder inherent in the system was met with violence. "They put the dogs on you," Walter McGee remembers (in particular one vicious canine with a gold tooth that the men knew to avoid). Bill Grady, a *Times-Picayune* reporter, described a similar process in 1987. The police made the carriers run a gauntlet between a pair of snarling Rottweilers to acquire their torches. The men were mauled. They lost fingers. They carry scars.

Today, the police still have a hand in the organization and execution of the flambeaux operation. The carriers are monitored before, during, and even after the parade by cops stationed along the route. At the staging grounds, before the flambeaux suit up to carry, a New Orleans Police Department captain gathers them in a circle to lay out the rules: no alcohol, no food, no cigarettes, no twirling. If an officer judges a carrier guilty of breaking any rule, the officer is liable to forcibly extinguish the torch and remove the carrier from the parade route. Of course, everyone admits to breaking the rules—this is Carnival after all—which creates a constant seesaw of negotiations between the festive laxness of Mardi Gras and the strong arm of law enforcement. The most absurd transaction between police and flambeaux occurs at parade's end. Though the night's wage is provided by the krewes, it is that same stern-faced police captain who hands out the bank envelopes containing twenty-dollar bills.

Many flambeaux I've talked to remain wary of the police, and for reasons that go far beyond the handful of sanctioned interactions during Mardi Gras parades. Many more shared a disdain for modernity and the threats it poses to their livelihood.

In 1960, two krewes outfitted their fleet of floats with the newest innovation in illumination, generator-fueled floodlighting, thus inaugurating an arms race eventually leading to the LED monstrosities of today,

## TOM STANLEY: SCRATCHING THE SURFACE

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affordable to only the wealthiest of “super krewes.” One once-notable local commentator, Pie Dufour, asserted years later that the more natural form of lighting the parade route had “outlived not only [its] usefulness, but tradition as well.” Further calls went out to extinguish the flambeaux for good: they were antiquated, they were susceptible to strikes (another occurred in 1957), and they posed a significant danger to spectators. One concerned letter to the editor noted: “There have been cases where the falling sparks have almost entered the eyes of bystanders. Some people have scars left from falling sparks. . . . There shouldn’t be flambeaux.”

And the stick carriers agree: there is an inherent danger in what they do—most can tell a story of watching someone, sometimes a flambeau but more often a parade goer, engulfed in flames. Theronn Stevenson was still affected by an incident he witnessed decades ago: a carrier purposely jabbed his flambeau at a spectator who had been teasing him with money. “He burnt this man up,” Stevenson told me, “set him afire.” Many spoke of fellow flambeaux who died of cancer—cancer of the lungs, of the throat—which they chalk up to the toxicity of the kerosene fumes. In 1985, the city council voted to raise the minimum age of flambeau carriers from twelve to twenty-one (the required age is now eighteen). Three years later, neighboring Jefferson Parish, a swath of suburbs with its own long-standing schedule of Carnival parades, had fire officials crack down on flambeaux, not allowing them into the parade.

A new-fangled flambeau, marketed as safer for crowds and carriers alike, became popular with the affluent, liability-leery super krewes: propane tanks lugged via shoulder-strapped backpacks. The flambeaux nicknamed them “ghostbusters.” But in private, they call them *fake*, not *the real thing*. By the late 1980s, only three parades enlisted authentic, stick-and-fire flambeaux.

And if modernity couldn’t kill the flambeaux, gentrification certainly could have. In 1969, a pair of white Loyola University students formed their own flambeaux-centric krewe after failing in an attempt to join the ranks of the torch toters—it’s not known if the flambeaux or the cops turned them away. Mardi Gras’s most fatalistically frat-centric parade, which emerged from that effort, the all-white Krewe of Tucks, made some members of their flambeaux contingent—likely fraternity pledges drunk on a mix of gin and

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## Darkling, I listen—

BY  
SAFIYA SINCLAIR

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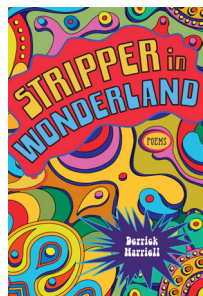
Beneath the knotted rows of cane  
that hid me, thrummed knuckle-red,  
a belting out—ribs, wrist, my gone warble  
knocked soundless, torched wails uprooting:  
What a song to be bosomed with.  
Dawn spits its hours on my singing;  
plucked girl coos sweetest just before  
she burns black—all bruise and back-chat.  
All rude refrain. Father your deft beat  
disowns me. Your croon a ruined heave  
to shun the first blue-shell off me, banged  
drum of my small self, all rue and cutlass  
or *budgerigar*. What he called me afterwards,  
as mother salved the split-back fissures  
of his strumming. *Budgie*. What a sound  
to be pinned under. Tenderly his voice  
gnawed a ditch in me so long I have known  
will never close, its hole instead burrowing  
black-out rooms where scorned men  
ransack this waning echo, gored deep until  
there was no voice left here of my rioting.  
Some nights I still wake three-personed,  
trill throat of fire, burst eardrum, blue  
field of thirst; a mute psalm battering,  
spurned solo.



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strawberry wine they called Flambeaux Madness—walk the route on their knees or carry the incendiary devices without the aid of the stick. More gentrifying thrill seekers followed, with some dressing in blackface in order to tote. Integration eventually came in 1984, when the flambeaux admitted Patrick Landry, a musician and resident bohemian, into the fold. Though he is now a respected veteran, his fellow torch carriers still call him Vanilla Ice, the nickname he received on the day he dared ask for a light.

Three years ago, an all-white female flambeaux troupe paraded alongside the Krewe of Muses, a popular organization open solely to women. Detractors accused them of white entitlement and disrespect. The group countered that they had trained alongside flambeaux veterans and that this could be a symbol of female empowerment. Their choice of the name "Glambeaux" did not help their case (nor did the fact that they, unlike their flambeaux forebearers, neglected to dance).

More recently, the flambeaux name has been commercially appropriated. There's Flambeaux Lighting, a local boutique gas and electric lantern company; Flambeaux's Grill, your place for mozzarella sticks and Buffalo wings; and, most dreadful of all, Flambeaux's, a "New Orleans-style" jazz club located at Disneyland. This past Carnival season I purchased an artisanal, hand-crafted candle that vowed to make my home smell "just like the Flambeaux's blaze" (my judgment: I'd rather sniff the unsubtle funk of kerosene fumes).

What's curious is that there would have been no flambeaux tradition to co-opt—the traditional, gas-fueled torches would have likely disappeared completely—if not for Harry Connick Jr., the childhood piano prodigy turned post-Rat Pack crooner turned *American Idol* judge. A son of the city, Connick revived the flambeaux tradition with the Krewe of Orpheus in 1993, an inauspicious time in Mardi Gras history. Two years prior, the New Orleans City Council had passed an ordinance requiring parading organizations to ensure that they did not discriminate or deny membership in regards to "race, color, creed, religion, national origin, sexual orientation or ancestry." Three of the oldest Mardi Gras krewes chose to not parade rather than agree to integrate: Proteus, which rescinded years later; Momus, which reorganized as the Knights of Chaos; and Comus, the parade featured in my grandmother's painting and which never marched again. It was during

this era of change, it took me two decades to realize, that my grandmother stopped me from haphazardly tossing coins into the air when the flambeaux passed by.

For all its faults, the great promise of Mardi Gras is its humanity. Its fluidity. Carnival can offer progress. The Latin phrase *carne vale*, after all, translates to "farewell to the flesh," thus fulfilling the Lenten promise of abstaining from eating meat, while offering an opportunity for rebirth, a chance to reimagine the world anew—sometimes for bad, but most often for good.

Connick envisioned Orpheus as a parading organization committed to returning to Carnival's roots—though without the gender, ethnic, and racial biases that remain largely entrenched within krewe culture. Designers engineered a handful of flambeaux for Orpheus's first parade—purportedly modeled after an original design dating back to the late 1800s. Orpheus continues to expand its torch contingent annually, a move that has encouraged older parades to reinstitute the use of the flambeau. (In 2016, seven parades used traditional torches—two hundred four in total. A century ago, a single parade would likely have called for twice that number of lights.) And though Connick has never carried the stick himself, he has done his best to canonize the institution within the pages of the great American songbook, singing in his composition "Light the Way":

*Light the way, light the way, light the way,  
Light the way the people say.  
We all made the parade for today,  
Oh, Mister Flambeau light the way.*

For two years I loitered around the flambeaux's sidewalk staging area, content to watch and absorb, while occasionally making an asking-too-many-questions nuisance of myself. Awed by the group's powerful and historically knotty presence, I too wanted to light the way. And though I wouldn't be the first interloper—nowadays, there's always a handful of white men and women lining up to carry a torch—I knew that by inserting myself into this tradition, I would be gentrifying a culture, warping history with my whiteness. Eventually, Clarence Holmes pointedly asked me when I was going to tote. I balked, he pushed, I acceded.

I trusted Clarence. He had become my flambeaux godfather, my guide to a deeper



understanding of Carnival and, by virtue, New Orleans. A participatory element is at the heart of every exceptional cultural expression that makes New Orleans what it is, I told myself. The crowds that turn up for Mardi Gras parades are not static spectators but active participants who shout-beg, “Throw me something, mister!” and dance along to the bassy thump of the high school marching bands. When New Orleanians fill the streets for jazz funerals, arguably the city’s most unique cultural tradition, all onlookers are encouraged to blur the line between actors and audience by parading, or second lining, behind the first line, which is composed of the casket, family and friends of the deceased, and the ubiquitous brass band. It’s a twist on the old thought experiment: *If a parade rolls down an empty New Orleans street, did Mardi Gras happen?* Parading is never a passive act.

Clarence told me to show up on a Monday for the Orpheus parade, before leaving me with the following words of advice: “Don’t stoop for pennies or silver, watch the sidelines for dollars, and keep on dancing.”

On the morning before, I awoke at dawn

and headed to a Mid-City warehouse where the sticks are stored during the off-season. There, I spent a half hour practice-toting with a flambeau, wobbling back and forth to an audience of amused, and confused, passersby. The next day, I arrived at the gathering spot, a greenspace running along an Uptown span of the Mississippi River, anxious and, for fear of the torch’s kerosene drippings, overlaid with clothes. Cary Levens, who annually refurbishes and transports the torches to the parade’s starting line, tossed me a domino cape, hooded and satiny red, instead of white—Orpheus’s only deviation from tradition—and a belt with an attached cup to anchor the stick to my body. He pointed in the direction of downtown and the storm-blackened sky that hung over our final destination. “For your sake, I hope they shorten the route,” he said as he hefted a flambeau down from the trailer and passed it my way. “You’re gonna be holding on to that thing for three hours.” I knew that the flambeau weighed seventy pounds, give or take a few splashes of kerosene. It was the same as yesterday, but it felt inconceivably heavier.

Perhaps it was the guilt I felt for taking up Clarence’s offer. The Orpheus parade had room for sixty carriers this year, in addition to a dozen or so captains who walk alongside each group of flambeaux, but at least twice as many men and women showed up to tote. I would likely be replacing someone who had done this before, someone whose father or grandfather once carried the torch, someone who needed the money more than I ever would, money to buy drinks and dresses for family members.

I skulked to a distant corner of the lawn, slipped on my cape, and strapped the belt snugly to my waist. From behind, I felt a tug on the strap. I turned to face Jamal Smith, the weight-lifting flambeau I had met earlier in the week. “These old, old,” he laughed. “Some old slave belts, here. They had these for centuries.” He made sure I was appropriately dressed, ready with the cup positioned just above my groin, and slapped me on the back and wished me good luck.

We lined up. I would be in the initial set of torchbearers—the “First Four,” as it’s known—with a trio of flambeaux veterans:



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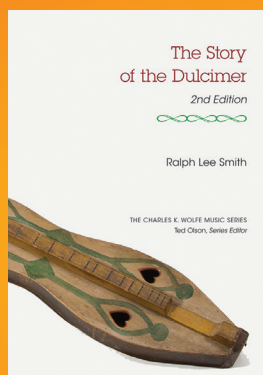


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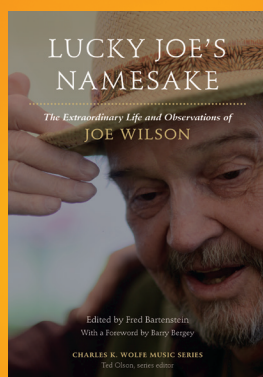
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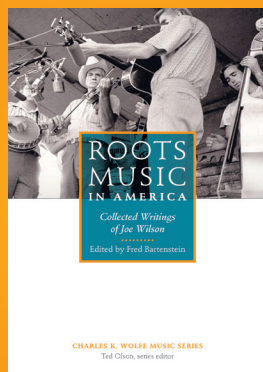
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Dwayne Lewis, Arthur Major, and Walter McGee, in addition to our captain, Clarence. We would be lighting the way for some duke or debutante or minor celeb carried by a tractor-borne, papier-mâché float. I had ridden one of those floats, a dozen years prior, with my mom. We drank too much and tossed plastic junk to the crowds—mirth that came at the cost of three months' rent.

From the front of the parade, I could hear the marching band's horns begin to blow a warm-up cacophony. I could feel the thump of their bass drums pulse up through my legs to rattle my hands and shake the flambeau I held in a tight grip. And before I could cinch my bandanna around my nose and mouth, a policeman shouted an order to start walking through a barricaded chute of screaming carnivalers.

Within three city blocks the thin leather strap that attached the cup to my belt split. I had just waved to a friend in the crowd, who yelled back, "What are you doing!"—more indictment than question—when I felt the leather piece rip, causing my flambeau to tumble to the ground. I picked up the torch, making sure I hadn't cracked the kerosene tank, and, gripping its full weight to my chest, leaned back and struggled forward, watching my group outpace me by the length of at least two parade floats. I didn't make it another two blocks before the driver of the trailing float blared his horn and told me to get moving. I could feel on me the eyes of every cop and parade goer and even the Sinatra-blue eyes of Harry Connick Jr. himself, riding on some distant float. This was my Road to Calvary, and I was the flambeaux's false prophet. I took this as a sign that I did not belong here, but Clarence, my compatriot and savior, figured a way to wedge the anchoring cup into the belt that held up my jeans. He told me again: *dance*.

It took a few blocks, but by the time we reached the second mile of the route and the day's last sunlight began to fade, I began, with the slightest of shimmies, to dance. I danced to repel fatigue and boredom. I danced for the promise of tips. I danced because I didn't want to be the only flambeau not dancing. I danced because there was a leaky cylinder filled with two gallons of explosive liquid dangling just inches above a pair of flames, which jumped and hissed just a few inches more above my head. I danced because people shouted out, "Look at the white boy!" and "What's he doing here?" I spun my torch alongside my

fellow flambeaux, stopped spinning my torch when a police officer yelled for us to stop, and surreptitiously spun a block later. I danced to belong.

And block by block, my limbs—or perhaps it was my mind—started to loosen, my hips unbuckled from their sockets, and I forgot that I was a white boy doing a really foolish thing. And so I, a resolute nondancer, danced. Because my feet hurt. Because everyone was watching. Because people were offering me money (in addition to the eighty dollars I earned for walking, which I divvied up among my fellow flambeaux, I made \$66.36 in tips, which I kept for myself to buy rounds of drinks on Mardi Gras day). I danced because there is nothing more indicative of and intrinsic to Carnival than dancing.

And as we dragged our lights and ourselves along St. Charles Avenue and into downtown New Orleans, it became apparent that we would not beat the oncoming storm. A light splattering of rain caused the lamps to sputter, and choppy squalls sprayed kerosene into my eyes (my hair would reek of the stuff for the rest of the week). When the wind and the rain snuffed out our flames, which seemed to happen every other block, we'd shimmy close to each other and touch torches to relight our flambeaux.

We neared the parade route's halfway point, Lee Circle, where the Lost Causer flambeaux once congregated to venerate their defeated general. More recently, the site has become the source of public debates—the City Council has voted to remove old Robert E. from atop his pedestal—and a rallying point for the Black Lives Matter and anti-Trump movements. The statue hovered high above, facing north, from an island at the center of the vast roundabout. Though the weather had thinned out the crowds, the diehards who lingered became rowdier, more jubilant. I danced for them, for my fellow flambeaux, for my grandmother, and for those anonymous men who danced in that painting from my childhood. I danced for myself, harder than I'd ever danced before. I danced badly, awkwardly, in unrhythmic time with the discordant drumbeat of Mardi Gras. But together we whirled furiously, twirling our sticks against the expressed wishes of the police, four fire-weaving dervishes, spinning smoke and light into the air. I looked upward, and through the glare of the fiery haze created by our torches, the statue of General Lee had miraculously disappeared. 🍌