Never too big, never too much: the Order of Osiris and the LGBTQ community in Mobile, Alabama

by Isabel Machado

Abstract: An openly gay ball would have been unimaginable for the founders of Mobile, Alabama's Mardi Gras mystic societies in the 1830s. Yet, around 1,600 people attend the Osiris Ball every year. Founded in 1981, the Order of Osiris (OOO) is Mobile's oldest surviving gay carnival organisation. Using interviews to reveal the people involved in and the historical context of the creation of the OOO, this article investigates its role in the development of a shared identity and a visible community for LGBTQ Mobilians. It argues that by appropriating the signs, structure and symbols of the mainstream culture, an underground, marginalised sub-culture gained visibility and relative acceptance. Yet, that process of legitimisation eventually led to embracing the status quo.

Keywords: Mardi Gras; Alabama, USA; LGBTQ; Order of Osiris

In the early 2000s, a young man was invited by his new boyfriend to attend his first gay Mardi Gras ball in Mobile, Alabama. He was excited, but also terrified since he was still in the closet. He spent most of the night wondering if someone would recognise him. The ball was becoming increasingly popular among straight folks. Would people assume that he was gay? At his date's request, they got their picture taken at the photo booth, but for days he wondered if the person developing the photos would identify him. Yet, he also saw a lot of people proudly expressing their sexual identity in public, and being cheered for it. By 2014, he had come to terms with his sexuality. When he attended the Osiris Ball the following year, the only thing weighing over his head was a gorgeous silver crown covered in Swarovski crystals. He commanded the 2015 Ball as King Howard XXXIII.[1]

An openly gay ball would have been unimaginable for Mobile's Mardi Gras founders. Traditional mystic societies, created in the 1830s, were extremely exclusive and composed by a white male elite seeking to uphold and display their perceived superiority.[2] Their annual pageantry reflected the city's social hierarchies: African Americans were excluded, white women played a secondary role, and codes of gender and sexual normalcy were imposed (at least in public). During the twentieth century, however, Mobile's African American Carnival Association, women's parading groups and LGBTQ mystic societies have challenged that tradition.

This article investigates the origins of the Order of Osiris (OOO). Founded in 1981, it is Mobile's oldest surviving gay Mardi Gras organisation.[3] Around 1,600 people, many of them straight, attend the Osiris Ball each year, which is held at one of the city's main convention centres. No academic work has explored Mobile's LGBTQ history and the official history of its Mardi Gras celebration has ignored

King Howard XXXIII at the 2014 Osiris Ball. Author not available, King Howard's personal collection. Photograph reproduced with King Howard's permission.

LGBTQ Mobilians. Therefore, stories such as King Howard's help us understand the role of Mardi Gras, and of this particular organisation, in the emergence of an increasingly visible LGBTQ community in the city. I am interested particularly in how the OOO affected LGBTQ Mobilians in terms of the development of a shared identity, and of their place in the city's society.

I argue that by appropriating the signs, structure and symbols of the mainstream culture, an underground, marginalised subculture gained visibility and, to a certain extent, acceptance. Being a member of a Gulf Coast mystic society means a public acknowledgement and display of identity, of social hierarchies, of inclusion and exclusion. These organisations can also be seen as a vehicle for organising. They require setting boundaries for who belongs to (and is excluded from) the group, and a public declaration of identification with what it represents. Hence, by creating an openly gay mystic society, Osiris members and their annual extravaganza have contributed to the visibility, organisation and acceptance of the LGBTQ community in Mobile. This process, however, was not without its price. In the legitimisation of their community, they seem to have embraced the status quo rather than completely challenging it.

In the past couple of decades, scholars have defied US LGBTQ history's 'bi-coastal bias' by investigating different aspects of US southern queer history.[4] Yet, the region is still perceived and portrayed as a place unsuitable for LGBTQ people. In casting the US south as a scary, repressive place, we disregard the ways in which LGBTQ southerners have constructed identity and community. Despite Mobile's conservatism, members of that community expressed their gender and sexual identity, even if they had to do so by conforming to certain parameters. A comprehensive study of the history of Mobile's LGBTQ experience is well beyond the scope of this article. It investigates a very short period and most of its protagonists are white cisgender men and women.[5] What I propose here instead is a contribution to the critique of the assumption that the US south is and has always been inhospitable for LGBTQ people.

The 1970s were a conflicting time for LGBTQ people in the US south. In the wake of the Stonewall uprising, they had to negotiate the climate of change and militancy in the rest of the country with local traditions. As John Howard has shown, that decade marks the emergence of gay identity politics in Dixie.[6] Daneel Buring acknowledged the role of 'southern distinction' in the creation of gay and lesbian identities, noting that southern culture and tradition tends to discourage radical dissent. Buring sees this as the reason why LGBTQ political activism took longer to develop in southern cities than in other parts of the United States, and shows that gay and lesbian Memphians, for instance, focused on 'less obtrusive social pursuits' instead of direct political activism.[7] That same process can be seen in Mobile.

My trajectory as an inside outsider (or the other way 'round)

Most cities have some sort of public festival or celebration, but that does not make them a Carnival City. People who live in Carnival Cities know what I'm talking about. It means that whether you participate in the revelry or not, like it or not, your daily life is deeply affected by it. Your most mundane decisions have to take into consideration an unusual and sometimes inconvenient calendar. In a Carnival City, the year does not start until the partying ends, and it is all but impossible to avoid the sounds, the smell and the euphoria surrounding you. Although I do not consider myself a foliã,[8] I was born and raised in a Carnival City: Salvador in Bahia, Brazil. Hence, it is not surprising that for my PhD dissertation in US history I decided to write about the other Carnival City dear to my heart: Mobile, Alabama.[9]

When I began conducting my research in 2014, I had no previous experience producing LGBTQ history. Hence, I naively assumed that the OOO would be a less challenging starting point, since it had a relatively recent history.[10] Furthermore, I was involved at the time in the production of the *I am a Parent* documentary film, which followed Cari Searcy's struggle to have her marriage to Kim McKeand recognised in the state of Alabama so she could adopt their son, Khaya. My relationship with Kim, Cari and Khaya, now my Alabama family, provided the necessary introductions to kickstart my project. Although I do not identify as a member of the LGBTQ 'community',[11] I could not have wished for better credentials. They were the public face of the same-sex marriage struggle in Alabama, respected and loved as community members and LGBTQ activists. My main role in the production was interviewing the couple and documenting the milestones in their journey.[12]

Preparing myself in advance presented a challenge. Even though I had been conducting interviews for over a decade, this project marked my transition from interviewing as a film-maker to doing so as an oral historian. I tried to familiarise myself with the scholarship, but most of it dealt with queer oral history from an insider's perspective.[13] Not much has been written by or about oral historians who do not identify as LGBTQ.[14]

My incursions into the Mobile archives in search of information about the city's LGBTQ history were also unfruitful, until I decided to visit a friend who worked at the Mobile History Museum. Luckily, he was not available and I was introduced to another research historian.[15] I explained to him my project, noting my specific interest on the OOO. After a long and dramatic pause, he looked me in the eye and declared: 'I am Osiris'. It took me a while to realise that meant he was the organisation's emblem for that year and, as I would later discover, a current member and former king.[16] After securing their board of directors' approval, I gained access to documents containing the history of the OOO, which listed early members and previous monarchs. At the same time, through Cari Searcy and

Kim McKeand's introductions, I met Kathie Hiers and Queen Danielle II, who gave me the devastating news of the passing of many of the group's founders, but also agreed to be interviewed and put me in touch with other narrators.

I recognise that my account privileges the experience and subjectivity of those who survived, which is particularly problematic when dealing with LGBTQ history around the 1970s and 1980s, as many of the protagonists of this story were lost during the AIDS epidemic. I also acknowledge that it represents people who were/are open enough about their sexuality to want to speak about it on the record. Furthermore, I understand queer theory's 'critique of empiricist methods that claim directly to represent the transparent "reality" of "experience"' while presenting 'identity categories' as 'stable, unitary, or "authentic"'.[17] Yet, I argue that an articulated common sense of identity and community were essential to the creation of this organisation and its public spectacle. It should be noted, however, that this process was more problematic for some than for others. Whereas some of the early Osiris members lived openly because of their labour in gay bars, others had to compartmentalise their sexual identities to be accepted in mainstream society.

Being 'unmarked', my gender identity and sexuality were not a defining element in my identity formation until I began this project.[18] This research made me aware of my subject position as a cisgender woman married to a man, a fact that I was never quite sure when or how to reveal to my narrators.[19] When time permitted, I met them off the record before the interview. In those first encounters I usually spoke a lot, not only explaining my project and intentions, but also answering their questions about my background, which often revolved around how and why I ended up to the US and my relationship with Mobile. Very few directly inquired about my sexuality or my interest in LGBTQ people. My interviews focused on less obtrusive topics such as my narrators' involvement in Carnival and their memories of the city. Yet, when the subject came up, men seemed to feel more comfortable talking about sex with me than women did.

As a non-resident alien Brazilian woman, I am the quintessential outsider in Alabama. Yet, I did not feel particularly dislocated while I lived there or during my subsequent research visits. Mobile does not have a strong Latinx presence, and being neither black nor white I often feel like a racial Rorschach test there: people project onto me what they want to see. Although I am aware of the critique of people who do not identify as LGBTQ invading safe queer spaces, my work documenting the McKeand-Searcy family made me a familiar face in LGBTQ circles.[20] To be sure, some of my interview requests were unsuccessful. But, in true southern hospitality fashion, no one outright refused to talk to me. They would say 'of course, *hun*' and then give me the run-around by either not returning my messages or being unavailable during my visit.

The insider-outsider issue is particularly confusing to me as I am not sure where I would be considered an 'insider'. Having lived almost half of my life (definitely most of my adult life) outside of the place that I was born in, it is hard to have a clear sense of 'home'. I feel like an outsider pretty much everywhere, all the time. I am different things in different places and who/what I am depends on my narrators' frame or reference, what they see when they look at my face or hear my accent. Only four of the thirteen years I spent in the US were not below the Mason-Dixon line. Therefore, I have lived in, studied and documented the US south long enough to be able to understand and navigate its socio-cultural codes.[21]

This project often had me questioning how to properly establish my subject position and my understanding of power dynamics.[22] Queer oral historians have particularly noted the importance of intersectionality, and how other identity markers such as race, ethnicity, class, gender and place of origin need to be considered in conjunction with sexuality. So I question why/if my sexuality should be the defining element in marking me as an insider or outsider in this project. According to E Patrick Johnson, 'power dynamics are inescapable within the context of oral history and ethnographic research'. Johnson advises researchers to be 'aware of such dynamics, approaching and working through them with a sense of ethics and moral responsibility'.[23] I hope that is how I have approached my narrators and that I have honoured their stories. While we often did not have a lot in common, we share a close relationship with Mobile and, more importantly, we understand what it is like to live in a Carnival City.

Gay Mobile

'We were the only ones downtown. There weren't even a whole lot of black people down there. Some gay bars were opened 24hrs. Nobody cared'.[24]

Mobile is a fascinating place, literally stuck between the 'Redneck Riviera' and the 'Big Easy' (New Orleans), a geographical location that reflects its split personality. It is a port city that simultaneously identifies strongly with Old South mythology and presents itself as a Carnival destination. Its post-Second World War story of urban decay, suburbanisation and white flight mirrors trends seen around the US at that time. The official history of Mobile describes an abandoned, lifeless, desolate, downtown while focusing on the city's westward expansion.[25] Yet, a vibrant 'gay world' emerged in the area in the late 1960s. According to Queen Richard IV, during the 1970s and 1980s,

> If you were downtown in Mobile at night, you were either a prostitute or queer. Nobody was in downtown Mobile at that time. Other than Mardi Gras. Mardi Gras was totally different.[27]

Downtown gay bars buzzed with activity throughout 1970s and 1980s. It is possible, then, that the abandonment of the area created an opportunity for a subculture

to develop and later become accepted into the mainstream. The first 'queer bar' that my narrators remember was the Princess House on Government Street. Opened in 1935 as a diner/restaurant, it became a hangout for gay and lesbian Mobilians sometime in the 1960s, and by the early 1970s was known for its elaborate drag shows. The first actual gay bars opened in the early 1970s, and concentrated on a particular section of downtown Mobile that became known as the 'fruit loop'.[28] One of my narrators, who described himself as a 'closeted little boy' at that time, recalled his experience there:

> No, growing up I only thought there was one other gay person in Mobile. And that was […] And, I mean, I though: 'OK, here's what I'm gonna be in sixty years.' You know? And then you would hear, well, you know, there are these bars downtown. After everybody leaves at five o'clock, they go home and it's empty downtown now, that's where gay people hang out. The Princess House and, I think, I feel like it was called the Stein and Still on Conti Street. And I heard that gay people hung out there. And I went there one night. I'd go out on a date, take her home eleven o' clock and then go downtown.[29]

I had assumed that, as with most aspects of social life in Mobile, the city's 'gay world' was racially segregated. Yet, anecdotes and photographs show that African Americans frequented the 'fruit loop', and some of my narrators noted that interracial couples frequented gay bars looking for privacy.[30] In his recollections of his first visit to one of the bars, founding Osiris member Al Vaughan provides an example of the ways in which queer Mobilians negotiated their sexuality in the complicated terrain of Alabama's racial dynamics:

> I walked through the front door and the place was packed with men having a great time. I flashed the bartender my fake ID and all was good. Then I felt these arms wrap around my waist and it was a black man. I was not a prejudice person, but had never been hugged by a black man, it was the 70s and I came from a redneck family. He asked: 'Do you mind?' I replied: 'It's my first time here and I wish you wouldn't'. He let go. I got my beer and a then a good looking man came up to me and asked: 'Do you want to go some place more quiet'. I said yes and off to Tee Jays we went.[31]

Even though some interviewees described different butch lesbian and gay scenes, the gender line was also somewhat more flexible than in other larger cities. Unlike the early New Orleans gay Mardi Gras krewes, Osiris was a co-ed organisation from the beginning. As Queen Danielle II recalls:

> I've always said this, and I've always heard it: gay women and men in Mobile, Alabama have always gotten along. Now, when I would go to New Orleans with the guys I was treated real bad. There was definitely an attitude that I was not welcome. First they thought I was straight, I didn't look gay, and there are only certain guys that like fag hags…but when they like them they like them.[32]

Technically, homosexuality was still illegal in the state of Alabama until 2013. In and around Mobile, morality laws were used to arrest and shame gay men for public 'deviant' sexual activities.[33] Yet, the people interviewed for this project did not recall any bar raids or systematic instances of police brutality. Apparently, downtown Mobile was in such abandonment that it did not matter that 'the queers' congregated there.[34] Some narrators recall instances of homophobic violence: a friend who was shot at a gay club, a bar owner who got beaten, a dance instructor murdered by 'rough trade'.[35] But they do not remember regular official persecution at the bars, such as the one that inspired the Stonewall Riots. Queen Danielle II credits this to the community's discretion. 'We were quiet about being gay. We respected the law. We didn't want trouble'.[36] Queen Vicky V, another founding Osiris member who worked in a few local gay bars at that time, also does not recall any police raids:

> They might send in somebody undercover to see if we are selling to minors, but we never had any lewd or weird charges like that. Never raided. We were over there, and it was kind of dark, you know? There wasn't really a lot of businesses around there… it's not like being on Dauphin Street… and it is still a bit more secluded.[37]

Queen Richard IV, however, painted a more nuanced picture:

> I don't remember raids, no. But I definitely remember harassment. Police and public. I can remember police driving by, if anybody was out in the street, […] You could not be out in the street. I remember young boys riding by in trucks calling us faggots, sick, whatever. You're going to hell. I got a vodka bottle thrown at me one time. […] There may not have been raids here because it was more isolated. […] You think of these other cities New York or whatever. Those bars were right in the city. And they had beat cops. […] Downtown was dead. Nobody cared, what's the big deal, you're gonna raid it? Nobody cares. There was no reason to raid it. You're not gonna get any publicity out of it. You're not gonna get any political advancement out of it.[38]

Although it seems like Mobile's LGBTQ residents were creating a separate safe space for themselves in the abandoned downtown, the city's gay and straight communities converged during Mardi Gras as the parade route included part of the 'fruit loop'. But that encounter was not always friendly. Kathie Hiers recalls

how they used to congregate at the Fireside Lounge located in the parade route.

> It was great because you could see everybody you know, you'd go in and out of the bars and I can remember the police would come at least one or two parades a year and just march like a military unit and line up in front of the door of the bar just to intimidate people. We'd just walk around them and go in. But it was a little bit scary.

She also remembers that:

> Some of the older Mardi Gras societies when they would pass the gay bars they would throw hard stuff absolutely as hard as they could trying to hurt people. It was a different era. I don't think Mobile has ever been as uptight as other cities because of its port city nature but I do think that it's so much better now.[39]

Arguably, things began to improve after they organised their own mystic society.

OOO – origins

'On the evening of March 16, 1981, an idea became a reality. Neil Aldridge convinced Budgie Atkinson and Larry Argo to meet at David's Lounge to hear his ideas and plans for a new gay Mardi Gras organisation'.[40]

LGBTQ scholarship has acknowledged different sources of heteronormativity defiance and community building. John D'Emilio placed post-Stonewall gay rights activism as part of a larger historical process, arguing that there was already identity formation in place in order for people to organise as an oppressed minority.[41] Allen Drexel identified drag queens and gay balls as sites of 'informal homosexual resistance', while other historians have looked at bar communities as places of resistance.[42] Nan Alamilla Boyd noted that the diversity in LGBTQ communities at times hindered the development of 'a larger collectivity'. Yet, she also recognised that instances such as bar raids and police repression brought a 'sense of community' to 'the brink of articulation' since by identifying a common threat, different groups of people managed to develop a common identity.[43] Gay bars were indeed places of community and identity formation in Mobile. Yet the absence of repression there requires us to look for another agglutinating agent.

Several of the original members of the OOO worked in local bars, and that is where many of the activities leading to its creation took place. It is likely that the organisation began with bar folks because they were the ones with less to lose from exposure since they had already embraced an openly gay identity through their labour. Wealthy gay men and lesbians did not have as much need for a separate Mardi Gras society, at least not an openly gay one. Members of the aristocratic 'Old Mobile' families, known as the 'A-gays' or the 'lavender elite' were accepted, or at least tolerated, among city's high society, as long as they did not flaunt their homosexuality or hid it behind an aura of European sophistication.[44] They also had access to traditional Mardi Gras events through family or social affiliations. Creative labour and connections also presented a point of access into the city's elite circles. Mardi Gras designer Ron Barrett told me that he never felt disrespected for being gay in his almost fifty-year career, despite not being born into an 'Old Mobile' family. When I asked why, he replied:

> Probably a big fish in a little pond. See, people give me respect. People give me so much respect that... and I wouldn't get that in Los Angeles, or Washington, DC. Yeah, 'cause, see, I'm the only one doing this. I'm the go to person for anything Mardi Gras. And, hum, that's because I live in our little city.[45]

Middle class gay men and lesbians appear to have been the ones with the most to risk. Many held public jobs and could be fired for 'misconduct' if they were open about their sexuality.[46] King Lawrence XV noted his reservations in talking about his past:

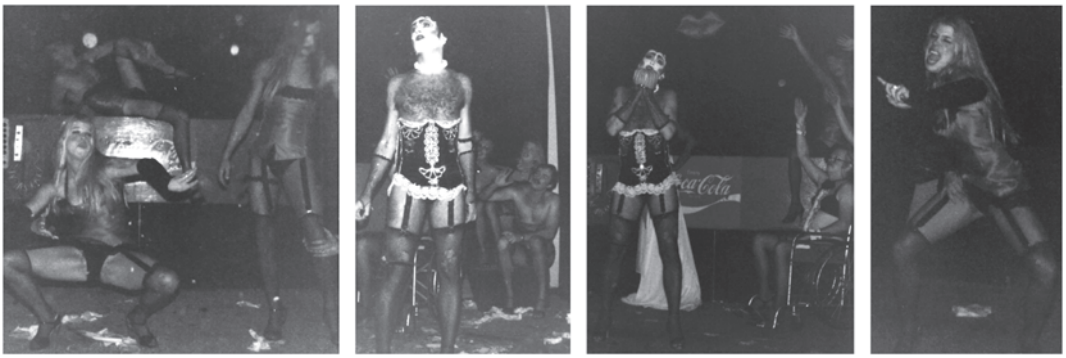
> Well, I did too because I taught school. You could lose your job for teaching school and being gay. Whether you ever touched a soul or not. It was just the idea. So, you know, it's like, I know I'm kinda evasive on some of my answers. But, you know, I don't know what to say because you were sort of... hum, guarded, on a lot of occasions.[47]

Hence, in a period when identity politics was becoming increasingly important, a group of working-class gay young men, from the bar culture, decided to create this organisation.

Nobody personifies this process more than Osiris's founding father. Martin Neil Aldridge was born on 23 March 1952 in Robertsdale, Alabama. Neil was a popular kid, a drum major, a dancer and the bandleader at Robertsdale High School. According to his close friend Sherry Odom, Neil moved to Mobile in his late teens, to 'find a place to be gay'.[48] Queen Vicky V, who worked with him for many years, summarises his personality and the strong impression he left on people:

> This guy from Robertsdale, Alabama, this Podunk place, he should have been a dancer in New York City. He should have been on Broadway. His expressions, his dance, his make-up… just everything about him was… it was new to all of us, really. Nobody that talented had been around that I knew of… Neil didn't have a single enemy. No one disliked Neil. […] He knew everybody, he didn't meet a stranger. And by the end of the night, if you came in a stranger you certainly weren't one when you left.[49]

Neil also had the habit of walking the streets of Mobile during Mardi Gras in extravagant costumes. According to former roommate Al Vaughan, people would throw things at him and yell homophobic slurs,



Neil Aldridge as Dr Frank-N-Furter, Sherry Odom as Janet Weiss and Joey Potter as Brad Majors in a collage of photos from a performance of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. Author and date not available. Sherry Odom's private collection. Photograph reproduced with Sherry Odom's permission.

but he used his training as a dancer to strut elegantly through it all.[50] Queen Richard IV describes Neil's defiant nature:

> The man was refrigerator white. I mean, this man was white! Ok? And he had black, black beard. Didn't have much hair, but his beard was black as ace of spades. Ok? And he would put these outfits. I mean they were over the top outfits. Like something Cher would wear. I mean, feathers flying, wing tips, dragging ten yards of material, boots, high heels, the whole bit. With this black beard. And strut. He could strut. He was a professional dancer [...]It was one of three reactions: they were just aghast, or they thought it was the most fabulous thing, or they'd wanna kill him. It was very homophobic back then.[51]

By several accounts Aldridge, who tended bar in different gay clubs in Mobile, was the catalyst for a number of organisations and events that brought the city's LGBTQ community together and out into the open. He bridged gender, race and class gaps, and combined unlikely groups of people in the Broadway-style performances he staged in local gay bars and on regional tours around the Gulf Coast. Neil also constantly travelled to New Orleans, which already had a more organised gay movement, and brought back new ideas with him to Mobile. His amateur theatre group employed bar-tenders, drag queens, public service workers and even straight people, performing camp classics such as *The Rocky Horror Picture Show, Jesus Christ Superstar, The Wiz* and *Best Little Whorehouse in Texas.* At times these shows served as fundraisers. Sherry Odom remembers performing as Janet Weiss in *Rocky Horror* to raise money for the support of people with AIDS before she even understood what it meant. Joey Potter, who designed the first Osiris logo, calls Neil the 'Harvey Milk of Mobile'. Potter credits Neil's musical performances as the 'grassroots organisation that originated Osiris'.[52] Aldridge remained the driving force behind the OOO until his untimely death on 13 August 1990. He was one of the city's earliest losses to the AIDS epidemic.

According to the OOO's official history,

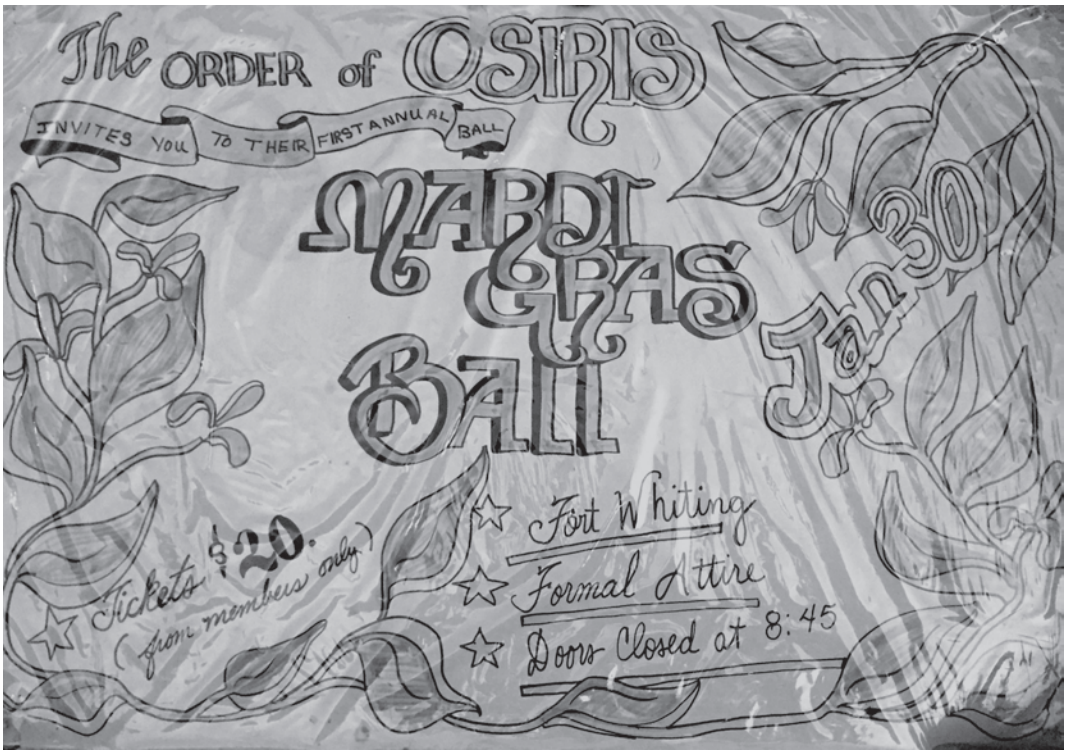
> Several names for the organisation were submitted and considered by the membership. The finalists were Crew of Heronians, Crew of Culigula [sic], Order of Galaxian, and Order of Osiris. After research and study by Andrew D. and much discussion by the membership 'Osiris' was overwhelmingly adopted.[53]

Sherry Odom, however, remembers that Neil originally wanted to call his mystic society 'The Order of Zeus', but the name had already been taken by a New Orleans krewe. Nevertheless, he attended the Magnificent Monarchs inaugural ball as the Olympian god. Andrew D passed away in 1998, so therefore it is hard to know why he championed the Egyptian deity, which he represented in the inaugural ball as the OOO's first emblem. The Osiris Ball began as a separate, safe place where gay and lesbian Mobilians could enjoy their city's most cherished tradition without hiding their identity. Over the years, however, it became a sort of Trojan horse for LGBTQ acceptability in the city.

The first ball

'For more than an hour and a half the audience feasted their eyes on the gorgeous scene. Gold lame flew past like American flags at a DAR rally, Egyptian slave boys were squandered like chickens at Colonel Sanders'.[54]

Joey Potter describes the inaugural ball, held on 1 January 1982, as 'almost like an AA meeting' since they tried to downplay the fact that it was 'gay men and women' to rent the Alabama National Guard's Fort Whiting Armory.[55] Neil was the first ball captain, and King Jan and Queen Budgie were the first monarchs. Budgie was a well-known drag queen who coached a women's softball team and worked as a medical technician at the University of South Alabama. An anonymous reviewer wrote a flamboyant account for the *Azalea City News and Review*, noting that the OOO's 'long tableau featured some of the most sumptuous costumes ever seen in Mobile'.[56]



Poster of the First Osiris Ball. Photo of a framed poster by Isabel Machado.

The process of organising and attending a ball can be seen as an act of resistance on the part of Mobile's gay and lesbian community.[57] Even simple details such as renting a space and formal wear required some level of exposure and identity affirmation. Danielle, who became the first female Osiris queen, attended the inaugural ball almost by chance. Her recollections of the event provide evidence of that process.

> I had just broken up a long relationship and I needed some friends. Me and a bunch of girls that I knew went to the bar one night and I saw the poster for the ball hanging out there and we wanted to go. We didn't know anybody in town. I am from Bayou La Batre and went out to college and had just arrived in Mobile.

She talked to the bartender and bought the ticket, which required *costume de rigueur*.[58] This was very exciting, but it also presented a challenge.

> We talked about: 'How can we get tails? We're girls. We can't go in there [to the formal wear rental place], they're not gonna rent them to us'. […] We were petrified to go in there. We didn't know any kind of way we could even enter the place. And we didn't want to wear dresses. […] 'Cause I was excited about wearing tails. They said: 'No, you won't'. I said: 'I will'. Because I'm a femme, I'm not a butch. I have my butch moments, but that's about it. [...] So we called Randal's and we said: 'listen, we want to go to a Mardi Gras Ball and we would like to come in and get some tails, but we are girls'. […] And they said: 'well, you'll come in after 5:00'. So they locked the doors and let us come in after 5:00. […] I mean they literally locked the doors and did it. We laughed and thought it was the most hilarious thing us wearing tails. […] We were so excited about it. We were hiding to get in and out of the car, worried about getting down the road, everybody was just freaking out. Literally freaking out. And the girls in the dresses, they didn't want to be around us with the tails. You know, that year, 1981, women didn't wear tails. 82. […] And now, you can hardly get a woman in a dress. Even the femmes wanna wear 'em 'cause they are so much fun.[59]

Other lesbian women expressed feeling out of place, or excluded from Mardi Gras tradition, because they were not comfortable wearing gowns. To them, the possibility of participating in the festivities while wearing clothes that expressed their true identity was extremely liberating. Kathie Hiers' family belonged to the traditional Order of Inca. She took her 'gay boyfriends' to their ball every year and believes that not being able to enjoy the party with their real partners was part of the motivation for creating a gay organisation. Another reason was the fact that more conservative, older societies 'didn't really want gay people'. Or, as she explains it, some gay people:

Queen Richard IV at the 1985 Osiris ball. Author not available. Queen Richard's private collection. Photograph reproduced with Queen Richard's permission.

> I believe that people are born along a spectrum, and some are very gay and some are not as much gay. For the people who are born very very gay and it is very apparent that they are gay – those kinds of folks are not very welcome in these events. I hated putting on the damn gown. My mother would buy me a $400 gown, all the way to the floor and, yeah, it was pretty, but it wasn't me. I wanted to wear tails.[60]

These personal anecdotes reveal a lot about the process of appropriation and identity affirmation. Mardi Gras is a defining feature of the city's identity. Yet, for LGBTQ folks, it meant a time when they had to choose between different identities. To go to a straight ball meant embracing their Mobilian selves while masking their sexual orientation.

Although some interviewees recall the impulse to create Osiris as just another way to throw a fabulous party, the fact that they chose to occupy a public space seems to indicate otherwise. Even though some of them wore masks to hide their identity and expressed apprehension when the ball was moved to a less secluded location, it seems like they not only wanted to participate in Mardi Gras festivities, they wanted to do so as LGBTQ people. They appropriated the dress codes, rules and format of traditional Mardi Gras societies. Only they made it their own. In doing so, they also had to reach out to local businesses and authorities, initiating a process that connected the city's straight and LGBTQ communities.

A personal anecdote from Queen Richard IV exemplifies this process well. As he puts it, he grew up in an 'Old Mobile' family that had the right name, but not the money to go along with it. So he navigated the different circles of the Mobile 'gay world'. He knew the 'lavender elite', but frequented the downtown bar scene. He says that his family was less concerned with him being gay than with him associating with 'trash'. So when it was his time to command the Osiris Ball as queen he felt apprehensive when his family, especially his father who was a prominent member in one of the city's oldest Mystic Societies, decided to attend.

> I was panic-stricken, I really was… I'm looking through the curtain, I can't see them, I don't know where they are, and I'm in full cocktail drag. I mean, I was queen there was no two ways about it. I had red velvet, gold lamé, dripping glitter, the hair, the jewellery, the whole bit, face beat, you know? And I'm like: 'Oh my God, what are my parents gonna think of this? Oh my God! Oh my God!' […] I go down, down the line greeting everybody, and there's my mom, and she gives me a hug. I don't remember her saying anything. But then my dad… Now, this man has been doing Infant Mystics Mardi Gras, Old Mobile Mardi Gras, forever. He was gonna die on the float. I get up to him, he says: 'Go for it queen!' All he knew is I was leading a ball. He didn't give a shit what I was wearing. I was important. He knew that… He couldn't have been prouder.

Crossing over

It is hard to point out precisely how or when the Osiris ball ticket became such a hot commodity. The organisation's official history tells us that the OOO was 'widely accepted and recognised in the Mobile Carnival celebration' by the time it moved to a larger venue, the Municipal Expo Hall, in 1987.[61] Some members, however, remember a bomb threat in one of their early years.[62]

The ball's newspaper coverage illustrates the changes in the organisation's visibility in the last three decades. Except for that very colourful aforementioned review, not much was written in the 1980s. Nowhere in that *Azalea City News and Review* article is Osiris directly referred to as a gay or lesbian organisation, but the anonymous reviewer provides some hints: 'This latest star in the crown of the Mobile Carnival Association had a distinctly cosmopolitan flavour. Warm breezes from Rio de Janeiro were blowing that night,

Neil Aldridge dressed as Zeus at the 1982 Magnificent Monarchs of Fact and Fiction Ball. Author not available, author's private collection.

and festive rhythms from Christopher, Castro and Bourbon Street were hovering in the air'.[63] The special Mardi Gras issue of *Southern Forum* a decade later was much more direct: 'The Order of Osiris is a dream come true for the gay community in Mobile in that a carnival organisation composed of its members is representing them in the celebration of Mardi Gras'. *The Mobile Register*'s society editor Susie Spear Cloos revived the international motif in 1998, describing the ball as 'Rio-meets-Vegas-meets Mobile scene with men and women in elaborate and clever museum quality costumes'.[64] By this time, however, rather than focusing on the organisation's distinctiveness, the columnist stressed its inclusiveness: 'Membership is diverse – the group is the first in Mobile to include both men and women, white and black, as well as straight (about forty percent by most estimates) and gay members'.[65] The writer of Susie's Parlor returned to the ball four years later and confirmed Osiris' crossover success: 'The always-creative ball, hosted by members of Mobile's gay and lesbian contingent, drew hundreds of mainstream Mobilians who so enjoy this annual party'.[66] In 2001, the Masked Observer, a columnist known for his humorous portrayal of Mardi Gras festivities, also acknowledged the ball's popularity, but stressed its difference from traditional organisations: 'The Observer has heard for years that this particular event is among Mobile's hottest tickets. This year, he is fortunate enough to look at the group's twentieth anniversary, which boasted two kings and no queen (it's a long story, ask us later)'. In another passage he described the costumes of a particular member's escorts, who at some point in the tableau removed their bath towels to reveal G-strings, and exclaimed: 'Try doing that at the Order of Myths!'[67]

It seems clear from these articles, most of which appeared in the city's primary newspaper, that by the early 2000s the OOO had already been integrated and accepted into the official Mobile Mardi Gras tradition. Well, sort of. The Carnival Museum's website lists the creation of Osiris in its historical timeline, but has none of the OOO monarchs' trains, crowns or sceptres in its permanent exhibition. A more recent special article epitomises the city's relation with its LGBTQ community. The piece talks about Osiris, the Order of Pan, and the Krewe of Phoenix and is entitled: 'Insider's look at Mardi Gras: alternative lifestyle organizations.'[68] It is a positive portrayal and, once again, praises the organisations' tableaux, 'the distinctive factor of all these balls'. But the fact that homosexuality is still considered an 'alternative lifestyle' implies that there is a norm with which they are failing to comply.[69]

This emphasis on the spectacle is important, because it shows how the language, structure and symbols of an exclusive culture and society have been appropriated by a non-normative group of people that was then accepted by the mainstream. Or as King Charles XXIV sees it:

> It is a bridge for the expression of our identity. That we have something to offer. Artistically and intellectually. That we are not horned beasts from outer space. We have no interest in people's children. I know a lot of people have been hesitant because they are afraid of being associated with a ball that has gays… and now that is dying, thankfully. I would love to see the day when nobody cared about your sexual orientation, that it didn't matter. Just like the civil rights thing. It still does, realistically speaking, but not in the same ways it did sixty or seventy years ago.[70]

The Osiris ball gets bigger each year, attracting more straight revellers. Yet, as the OOO gains more acceptance and respect from the city's mainstream community, it inevitably loses some of its original identity. As audiences became bigger the participants in the spectacle began to not only *express* but also *represent* themselves and what they believe their community should look like. They know they are being watched and judged by a group that once excluded them. Yet, this does not detract from the fact that Osiris has created an important connection between LGBTQ and straight Mobilians, and an outlet for community building and identity formation. And, after attending their ball twice, I can attest that, so far, they have managed just fine to adhere to their founding father's motto: 'Never Too Big, Never Too Much'.

NOTES

1. Conversation with King Howard XXXIII; conducted by Isabel Machado, 6 August 2014. All Carnival mystic societies or 'krewes' are secret organisations. In respect of that tradition, narrators that are currently members or have been monarchs in the past will be identified by their titles rather than by their legal names.

2. For more on the origins and nature of Mardi Gras mystic societies, see Anne Janine Pond, 'The Ritualised Construction of Status: the men who made Mardi Gras, 1830-1900', PhD dissertation, University of Southern Mississippi, May 2006; and James Gill, *Lords of Misrule: Mardi Gras and the Politics of Race in New Orleans*, Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 1997.

3. There have been earlier attempts to form gay carnival organisations in the city, but they did not last very long. Newer societies have also been created since.

4. The term queer has widely been accepted in LGBTQ scholarship as an umbrella term to define people who defy heteronormativity, while queer studies has emerged in the 1990s as an important tool for analysing and challenging hetero (and homo) normativity. That is how the term is used here when it is not in quotation marks. See Lisa Duggan, 'Making it perfectly queer', in *Sex Wars: Sexual Dissent and Political Culture*, New York: Routledge, 1995. Examples of US southern LGBTQ historiography include: James T Sears, *Lonely Hunters: An Oral History of Lesbian and Gay Southern Life*, 1948-1968, Boulder: Westview Press, 1997; E Patrick Johnson, *Sweet Tea: Black Gay Men in the South,* Chapel Hill: University

of North Carolina Press, 2008; John Howard, 'Place and movement in gay American history: a case from the post-World War II south', in Brett Beemyn (ed), *Creating a Place for Ourselves: Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Community Histories*, New York: Routledge, 1997; Daneel Buring, *Lesbian and Gay Memphis: Building Community Behind the Magnolia Curtain*, New York: Garland Publishing, 1997; John Howard (ed), *Carrying on in the Lesbian and Gay South*, New York: New York University Press, 1997; James T Sears, *Rebels, Rubyfruit and Rhinestones: Queering Space in the Stonewall South*, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2001; John Howard, *Men Like That: A Southern Queer History*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1999; Brock Thompson, *The Un-natural State: Arkansas and the Queer South,* Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2010.

5. Cisgender is a term used to refer to a person who identifies with the gender that was assigned to them at birth.

6. Howard, 1999.

7. Buring, 1997, p 233.

8. A *foliã* or *folião* is a reveller, or someone who avidly participates and enjoys the festivities.

9. My dissertation investigates how an institution that was created for/by rich, white, straight-identified men as a heteronormative tool of white supremacy became an important mechanism of social ascension and acceptance for African Americans and LGBTQ people. It seeks to put a variety of different voices in conversation. Unlike other oral history projects that collect interviews from people within a particular community or group, it is interested in cacophony and dialogue.

10. As compared to the first balls held by 'colored' Mobilians in the late nineteenth century, for instance.

11. Both oral history and queer theory have problematised the concept of community. Stephen High recognised the 'obvious dangers in thinking of community as unitary. When taken for granted, community becomes a static category that exaggerates differences with the world without and erases the differences within'; 'Sharing authority: an introduction', *Journal of Canadian Studies/Revue d'études canadiennes,* vol 43, no 1, 2009, p 29. For a good primer on this issue, see Kevin P Murphy, Jennifer L Pierce and Jason Ruiz, 'What makes queer oral history different', *Oral History Review,* vol 43, no 1, 2016, pp 1-24.

12. I began collaborating with Cari in June 2011. Although I moved to Memphis a couple of years later, I often travelled to Mobile to interview them when important developments in their case happened. Cari helped me conduct a few of the interviews for this project, which we envision turning into a larger local LGBTQ oral history collection some day.

13. See, for instance, Allan Bérubé, *Coming Out Under Fire*, New York: Free Press, 1990; Nan Alamilla Boyd, 'Who is the subject?: queer theory meets oral history', *Journal of the History of Sexuality*, vol 17, no 2, 2008, pp 179-189; Nan Alamilla Boyd and Horacio Roque Ramírez (eds), *Bodies of Evidence: The Practice of Queer Oral History,* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012; Howard, 1999; Johnson, 2008; E Patrick Johnson. 'Put a little honey in my sweet tea: oral history as quare performance', *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly*, vol 44, nos 3 and 4, 2016, pp 51-67; Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline D Davis, *Boots of Leather, Slippers of Gold: The History of a Lesbian Community,* New York: Routledge, 1993.

14. Martin Meeker discusses 'interviewing across sexualities', but from the perspective of a gay interviewer interacting with a straight-identified narrator. Martin Meeker '"You could argue that they control power": politics and interviewing across sexualities', in Boyd and Ramírez, 2012.

15. He was interviewed for this project and is here under his monarch title, King Charles XXIV, as he is still a member of the organisation.

16. Emblems represent mystic societies in parades and/or balls. It is considered an honour to be chosen to embody the organisation's symbol.

17. Lisa Duggan, 'The discipline problem: queer theory meets lesbian and gay history', *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies*, vol 2, 1995, p 181. For a discussion on the problematic nature of narrator selection, see Boyd, 2008.

18. Initially studied by linguists, 'markedness' is the asymmetric relationship between words that can be, and has been, extended to social relations and hierarchies. Unmarked forms seem to be neutral, normal or natural, reflecting dominant cultural norms while hiding their privileged status. Marked forms, on the other hand, are perceived as derivative, deviant and subordinate. See Linda Waugh, 'Marked and unmarked: a choice between unequals in semiotic structure', *Semiotica*, vol 38, 1982, pp 299-218; Deborah Tannen, 'Marked women, unmarked men', *The New York Times Magazine*, 20 June 1993; Kathryn Woodward (ed), *Identity and Difference*, London: Sage, 1997; Stuart Hall (ed), *Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices*, London: Sage, 1997.

19. For a discussion of the role and importance of self-disclosure and sexual desire in the production of queer oral history, see Boyd, 2008.

20. Miz Cracker, 'Beware the bachelorette!: a report from the straight lady invasion of gay bars', *Outward: Expanding the LGBTQ Conversation*, Slate, 13 August 2015. Accessed online at www.slate.com/blogs/outward/2015/08/13/should_straight_women_go_to_gay_bars_a_drag_queen_reports_on_the_lady_invasion.html, 24 May 2017.

21. I have been studying US southern history, culture and identity since I began my MA in history at the University of South Alabama in 2009. I have explored the region in my thesis, in articles and documentary films.

22. As Stephen High notes, the line that separates insiders and outsiders 'is not always clearly drawn, and researchers' understanding of themselves as "researchers" and "community-members" is sometimes in flux'. High, 2009, p 21; Anna Sheftel and Stacey Zembrzycki also recognise that the insider or outsider status is something to be negotiated while power dynamics can shift during interviews; 'Who's afraid of oral history?: fifty years of debates and anxiety about ethics', *Oral History Review*, vol 43, no 2, 2016, pp 338-366.

23. Johnson, 2016, p 57.

24. Interview with Queen Danielle II; recorded by Isabel Machado, 15 October 2014.

25. See Michael VR Thomason (ed), *Mobile: The New History of Alabama's First City*, Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2012.

26. See George Chauncey's definition of the 'gay world' in *Gay New York: Gender, Urban Culture, and the Making of the Gay Male World, 1890-1940*, New York: Basic Books, 1994.

27. Interview with Queen Richard IV; recorded by Isabel Machado, 14 October 2014.

28. Current dwellers think that the name

is due to the concentration of gay bars and nightclubs, yet it was also a cruising circuit and prostitution zone in the past.
29. Interview with Homer McClure, born in Mobile, Alabama, 1951, Mardi Gras designer; recorded by Isabel Machado, 26 January 2016.
30. After two years of research I have not been able to find or contact a queer black narrator for this project. Nan Alamilla Boyd has discussed difficulties in the collection of oral histories of people who have other social stigmas in addition to LGBTQ identities. Boyd and Ramirez, 2012.
31. We did not have time to record an interview, but Al agreed to answer my questions via email. John Alton Vaughan, 'Neil-Al', 5 October 2015, document in the author's possession.
32. Interview with Queen Danielle II, 15 October 2014.
33. William N Eskridge Jr shows how sodomy laws have been selectively enforced and used as a mechanism of social control in *Dishonorable Passions: Sodomy Laws in America, 1861-2003*, New York: Viking, 2008.
34. As noted earlier, scholars and activists have re-appropriated the term queer. Yet, most of my narrators belong to a generation that still remembers it as a derogatory term, used to describe people who did not comply with accepted norms of gender and sexuality. I use the term here in quotation marks to signal its historical use.
35. The term 'trade' is often used to describe straight-identified men who have sex with other men, sometimes for pleasure, but often for financial compensation. 'Rough trade' describes instances in which that encounter becomes violent. For more on the terminology used to describe different gender and sexual identities, see Chauncey, 1994.
36. Interview with Queen Danielle II, 15 October 2014.
37. Interview with Queen Vicky V; recorded by Isabel Machado, 15 October 2014.
38. Interview with Queen Richard IV, 14 October 2014.
39. Interview with Kathie M Hiers, born in Mobile, Alabama, 1954, CEO at AIDS Alabama; recorded by Isabel Machado, 12 October 2014.
40. 'Order of Osiris, 1981-2001', document in the author's possession. Mystic societies produce literature for new member orientation. This particular document is from 2001, but passages from this official history can be found in earlier texts and articles.
41. John D'Emilio, *Sexual Politics, Sexual Communities: The Making of a Homosexual Minority in the United States, 1940-1970*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983.
42. Allen Drexel, 'Before Paris burned: race, class, and male homosexuality on the Chicago South Side, 1935-1960', in Beemyn, 1997.
43. Nan Alamilla Boyd, Wide-open Town: *A History of Queer San Francisco to 1965,* Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003, pp 5-6.
44. Mobile has a very hierarchical community with limited opportunities for social mobility. 'Old Mobilians' occupy the top of the social hierarchy ladder by virtue of the right last names and family connections. Part of that prestige is displayed through membership in the oldest Mardi Gras mystic societies. A few of my narrators, and other casual commentators, used the terms 'A-gays' and 'lavender elite' to refer to prominent gay men.
45. Interview with Ron Barrett; recorded by Isabel Machado, 27 July 2015.
46. Joey Potter worked at the public library at the time and notes that 'misconduct' was the coded terminology used for firing homosexual people from public sector jobs. Telephone conversation with Joey Potter; conducted by Isabel Machado, 14 October 2014.
47. Interview with King Lawrence XV, born in 1943; recorded by Isabel Machado, 28 January 2016.
48. Telephone conversation with Sherry Odom; conducted by Isabel Machado, 10 November 2014.
49. Interview with Queen Vicky V, 15 October 2014.
50. Email from Al Vaughan, 5 October 2015.
51. Interview with Queen Richard IV, 14 October 2014.
52. Telephone conversation with Joey Potter, 14 October 2014.
53. 'Order of Osiris, 1981-2001', 2001.
54. 'The first annual ball: the Order of Osiris', *Azalea City News and Review*, 18 February 1982.
55. Phone conversation with Potter, 14 October 2014.
56. 'The first annual ball', 1982. A tableau is a spectacle presented by the organisation at the beginning of the ball. Mobile Mardi Gras expert L Craig Roberts describes it as 'a staged theatrical introduction of mystic society members, often with elaborate sets, and it may even include pyrotechnic displays' in *Mardi Gras in Mobile*, Charleston: The History Press, 2015, p 41.
57. Previous gay Mardi Gras events were held in private spaces and were not widely publicised.
58. All mystic societies in Mobile require *costume de rigueur* at their balls. It means that women have to wear floor-length gowns and men tails. Osiris kept that dress code, but did not make it gender specific.
59. Interview with Queen Danielle II, 15 October 2014.
60. Interview with Kathie M Hiers, 12 October 2014.
61. 'Order of Osiris, 1981-2001'. In their nineteenth anniversary year they moved to an even bigger location, the Arthur Outlaw Riverside Convention Center.
62. Different people remember different dates. It is most likely that it took place in 1987, their sixth ball, since Queen Richard IV, who remembers quite vividly having to make the decision of not cancelling the ball despite the threat, was the captain that year. Interview with Queen Richard IV, 14 October 2014.
63. 'The first annual ball', 1982.
64. Susie Spear Cloos (Susie's Parlor), 'Splendor, diversity, mark ball', *Mobile Register,* 8 February 1998, 1A.
65. Spear Cloos, 1998.
66. Susie Spear Cloos (Susie's Parlor), 'Cavaliers plan to rock and roll with fabulous bands', Mobile Register, 24 January 2002.
67. The Masked Observer, 'Kings rule at Osiris', *Mobile Register*, 15 February 2001, 1A.
68. Pan and Phoenix are also LGBTQ mystic societies.
69. Katelyn Gardner, 'Insider's look at Mardi Gras: alternative lifestyle organizations', *Lagniappe*, 24 January 2013.
70. Interview with King Charles XXIV; recorded by Isabel Machado, 12 August 2014.

Address for correspondence:
isabelmchd@gmail.com