

# **PLAYFUL DEVIANCE AS A LEISURE ACTIVITY: SECRET SELVES, SELF-VALIDATION, AND ENTERTAINING PERFORMANCES**

## **Abstract**

Framed by Erving Goffman's (1963) concept of backspaces, this article interprets the accounts people provide for participating in playful deviance during Mardi Gras in New Orleans. Backspaces provide a liminal license for people to transgress norms, participate in playful deviance, and present their secret self. The major findings are that playful deviance is a tourist attraction that provides self-validation and enjoyment for participants. Examples of playful deviance include flashing the breasts, penises, buttocks; masturbating; performing or receiving oral sex; or having penetrative sex in public with strangers on Bourbon Street during Mardi Gras.

## **Introduction: Playful Deviance and Secret Selves**

Over the past ten years an increasingly substantial body of sociological literature has developed in the areas of leisure, consumerism, and tourism (see Gottdiener 2001; Katz 2000, 1988; Rojek 2000; Presdee 2000; Ritzer 1999; Ritzer and Liska 1998; Urry 1990). This body of literature addresses how the transition to a consumer culture has impacted the meanings people assign to tourist spaces and the behaviors that occur within them. One outcome of this transition is that new forms of deviant behavior develop alongside traditional forms of deviance (Calhoun et al. 1998; Simmel 1950). Well-known examples of traditional forms of deviance include normal deviance and pathological deviance, whereas playful deviance is a more contemporary performance (Presdee 2000; Rojek 2000). Normal deviance is widespread and often occurs with large numbers of people. In contrast, pathological deviance is harmful and against the law (Forsyth 1996). Playful deviance, on the other hand, is usually considered harmless, entertaining, and fun because it is overwhelmingly concentrated and performed in leisure spaces in front of an audience who encourages it to take place (Rojek 2000). In this paper I demonstrate how playful deviance is one outcome of the theming of culture (Gottdiener 2001) that is part of a consumer economy.

Playful deviance occurs most often when small groups of tourists travel to symbolic spaces of leisure to participate in temporary forms of public deviance they will not perform in places where they live. These symbolic spaces of leisure, located inside themed environments, are associated with powerful representations that structure public perceptions and provide normative instructions on how to perform playful deviance in these settings. Goffman (1959, p.

22) explains that for these performances to occur, first there must be a “setting” which supply “the scenery and stage props for the space of human action played out before, within, or upon it.” Second, individuals must enter these settings because they cannot perform “until they have brought themselves to the appropriate place and must terminate their performance once they leave” (Goffman 1959, p. 22). Third, these settings offer “extra protection for performers who are, or have momentarily become, highly sacred” (Goffman 1959, p. 22). For instance, remote islands and beaches that cater to high-school and college students for Spring Break will structure and market their landscapes with symbols, images, sacred themes, and informal rules to accommodate, encourage, and socialize visitors on how to drink alcoholic beverages, dance, and strip in public. Amsterdam’s themed landscapes have an auspicious reputation for providing instructions to coffee shop patrons on how to purchase, roll, and smoke weed. Likewise people who travel to Bourbon Street in New Orleans will encounter a structure of cultural symbols, representations, and images strongly associated with the themes of Mardi Gras, public nudity, and public sex. These images and themes provide supportive definitions that encourage tourists to participate in ‘deviant’ activities as legitimate fun. Indeed, many tourists travel to these themed environments for the explicit purpose of engaging in ‘playful deviance’ as a leisure activity in front of a supportive, cheering, and encouraging audience.

Playful deviance is sociologically significant because participants collaborate to perform it as a public source of entertainment in front of a supportive audience who defines the behavior as fun. The important point here is that people who publicly perform playful deviance inside themed environments do not publicly perform them in public places where they permanently live (Evans and Forsyth 2000; Forsyth 1996; Goffman 1959). Playful deviance, then, is ephemeral entertainment, provisionally performed, and often kept secret from some acquaintances, peers, friends, and family. Consequently, secret information about one’s self develops that threatens to harm the person’s reputation if disclosed to people whose respect, power, and acceptance are required (Becker 1973). That is, individuals who participate in playful deviance engender a ‘secret self’ and must hide this secret information from people who are important to them. Goffman (1959, p. 141) referred to this secret information as “destructive information.”

Destructive information is discreditable facts about a person’s self that one must keep secret from others. Almost all individuals develop a ‘secret self’ at some point in their life. Therefore, the concept of the secret self can only arise when certain activities, behaviors, and performances – in specific spaces – are restricted and given a deviant label. The state, criminal justice system, courts, parents, churches, authority figures, experts, city planners, and teachers all help construct secret selves by outlawing and/or prescribing certain ways of presenting one’s self. The formation of the secret self occurs when the audience with whom a person is interacting

has the power to deem one's presentation of self as deviant. Consequently, the individual must "ensure that those before whom he plays one of his parts will not be the same individuals before whom he plays a different part in another setting" (Goffman 1959, p. 49). One device individuals employ to ensure the secret self is not identified is "audience segregation" (Goffman 1959). Audience segregation is a technique that individuals employ out of fear that they might be ridiculed. As Goffman (1959, p. 58) explains, shame, guilt, or fear from those who can sanction individuals who perform secret deviance are some of the strongest motivators for influencing them to manage and conceal their self-presentations in an impressionable way.

Individuals who feel intensely committed to concealing information about their secret self believe that if attention is drawn to them during its performance, destructive information may be revealed or they may be "openly avowed, bringing them immediate humiliation and sometimes permanent loss of reputation" (Goffman 1959, p. 59). A basic problem for many performances, then, is that of information control; the audience must not acquire destructive information about the situation that is being defined for them (Goffman 1959, p. 141). Individuals must present their self "in the right way" to an audience of people and hide their secret self out of fear. The fear is that family, friends, and community members might disavow or stigmatize them for displaying their secret self. In this instance, one "defensive practice" to prevent the disclosure of the secret self is to hide it (Goffman 1959, p. 13). Goffman (1963, p. 42) makes a similar point. "To display or not to display; to tell or not to tell; to let on or not to let on; to lie or not to lie; and in each case, to whom, how, when, and where?" Hiding one's secret self from disapproving others is a necessary condition if one desires to develop interdependent relationships, social capital, and a prominent reputation. Thus, individuals must carefully assess an uncertain situation before they present their secret self to an audience, especially in a context in which people would deem it deviant.<sup>1</sup> This systematic concealment and management of one's secret self can be emotionally exhausting for many people. Consequently, the consistent concealment of one's secret self simultaneously produces a desire to subsequently display it in backspaces (Goffman 1961a).

### **Theoretical Framework: Backspaces**

As explained in the introduction section, contemporary western society socializes its members to travel, tour, and consume. The profusion of cultural imagery and definitions attached to these symbolic spaces of travel are designed to 'seduce' individuals to participate in playful deviance and then have them consume it in various ways that include purchasing deviant commodities such as souvenirs, photographs, and video recordings. The interdependence of deviant commodities, deviant leisure, and deviant settings can only be fully experienced in certain

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contexts. One implication of building tourist spaces designed with a deviant theme is that large numbers of people who travel to them will participate in playful deviance in a fairly safe and riskless manner. The ties that bind individuals to a formal set of normative rules are either absent or redefined once they adopt the temporary identity of a 'local tourist'. Consequently, tourists who embark on deviant tours in backspaces are less likely to encounter people with the power to damage their reputation or socially control them.

Backspaces are areas where individuals can "stand exposed and find they need not try to conceal their stigma, nor be overly concerned with cooperatively trying to disattend it" (Goffman 1963, p. 81). Backspaces in tourist locations provide a liminal license for people to transgress norms, participate in playful deviance, and present their secret self. Backspaces shield individuals from community members, the criminal justice institution, and/or the government, all of which threaten to arrest, sanction, discipline, or stigmatize their performances. Backspaces also offer individuals opportunities to participate in activities labeled "criminal" or "deviant" by rule-makers and rule-enforcers. Examples of backspaces include appropriated buildings used by anarchists, temporary autonomous zones, Mardi Gras, Spring-Break, chat rooms, pop-cultural festivals, concerts, smoke-outs on 4:20<sup>2</sup>, carnivals, raves, 1-900 sex lines, S/M bars, and dance clubs where amateur stripping occurs.

The purpose of this paper is to expand on Goffman's concept of backspaces by integrating it with contemporary theories of consumerism, leisure, and tourism in the sociology of deviance. First, I use the tourist event of Mardi Gras as a case study of a themed backspace to examine how and why individuals participate in playful deviance as a leisure activity in this setting. Playful deviance during Mardi Gras occurs when individuals expose body parts and engage in public sex acts to a supportive audience.<sup>3</sup> Second, I want to illustrate how deviant leisure is understood, practiced, and consumed during Mardi Gras by those who participate in it. I argue that many individuals who participate in playful deviance during Mardi Gras in New Orleans

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<sup>2</sup> It is difficult to unequivocally state where 420, 4/20, or "4:20" comes from. Legend suggests that it was a police code used to identify persons who were smoking marijuana. However, according to Steven Hager, editor of High Times, the term 420 originated at San Rafael High School, in 1971, among a dozen pot-smoking students who called themselves the Waldos. The term 420 was shorthand for the time of day the group would meet, at the campus statue of Louis Pasteur, to smoke pot. It's historical origins have little bearing on its contemporary meaning, as pot smoking communities and individuals have claimed and embraced it as a euphemism for smoking pot at 4:20AM/PM. 4.20 can be used as a verb, noun or adjective: one can 420 (smoke pot), be 420ed (have smoked pot and be stoned), or remark "it's 4.20!", even when it is not, as an aphorism to let the smoking commence. Popular car stickers read "4.20-24-7," encouraging pot smoking every hour of every day. Another reads, "It's 4.19 - gotta minute?" Every year on 4/20 (April 20) at 4:20, hundreds and thousands of people gather in backspaces to cheerfully smoke marijuana together as a symbolic gesture of commonality and togetherness. For instance, a Deadhead flyer, passed out at Oakland, CA shows in 1990 announcing a 4:20 on 4/20 gathering: "There's something fantastic about getting ripped at 4:20, when you know your brothers and sisters all over the country are tokin up right along with you. Now there's even something more grand than getting baked at 4:20. Were talking about the day of celebration, the real time to get high, the grand master of all holidays: 4/20, or April 20th."

<sup>3</sup> Thanks to the anonymous reviewer who suggested to focus on the concept of "secret self."

define this area as a backspace where they can display their secret self in a deviant manner and receive self-validation from an audience who has no investment in stigmatizing them. I will also suggest that, far from being stigmatized, individuals who perform playful deviance in this themed environment provide vicarious enjoyment for spectators who define their spectacular act as an amusing tourist attraction. Examples of specific types of playful deviance include flashing the breasts, penises, buttocks; masturbating; performing or receiving oral sex; or having penetrative sex in public with strangers on Bourbon Street during Mardi Gras.

## **Literature Review**

In reviewing the literature on Mardi Gras, two articles surfaced. The first article by Forsyth (1992) found that the majority of people who participated in playful deviance during Mardi Gras were college-age students drinking alcohol or who wanted economic compensation for their acts in the form of “throws.” The majority of people participated in playful deviance during the evening to receive Mardi Gras beads from float riders. His central finding was that parade strippers were coaxed by their significant others and/or friends to participate in the activity. The present article attempts to extend Forsyth’s work by placing the study of playful deviance within the framework of “deviant leisure.” This fits Forsyth’s (1992, p. 401) overall frame in that he understands deviance during Mardi Gras as playful and creative. Creative deviance “functions to solve problems or create pleasure for individuals.” The current article builds on the concept of creative deviance by connecting it with play and leisure activities. The outcome of this connection is that people located in carnivalesque places pursue deviance as a leisure activity, and thus deviance takes on the characteristics of a leisure event (Presdee 1994, p. 182).

The second article by Shrum and Kilburn (1996) examines how the practice of throwing beads in exchange for public nudity is an aspect of a ceremonial exchange ritual based on market relations, gender, and hierarchy (Shrum and Kilburn 1996). The authors developed three ritual paradigms: the command, market, and veneration. They argue that paradigms reflect the market economy and are therefore legitimized during Mardi Gras. Their paradigm, however, fails to include entertainment as a component of participating in these deviant rituals. The current article attempts to provide an alternative approach to understanding these rituals by explaining why people participate in them as entertainment during Mardi Gras.

## **Research Setting and Methodology**

This study is based on interviews and participant observation during Mardi Gras from February 1994 to February 2000. In all, I spent a total of 500 hours in the setting across seven Mardi Gras celebrations. A total of one hundred and fifty (N=150) respondents were interviewed, all of whom participated in lewd behavior. The mean age was thirty. Males constituted sixty-one

percent of the sample and females made-up thirty-nine percent. Three percent had less than a high school diploma; fourteen percent completed high school; thirty-nine percent completed some college; twenty-five percent were college graduates; and nineteen percent were either in graduate school or had completed their Ph.D., law degree, or M.D. The yearly income for the sample is as follows: Thirty-six percent had a yearly income between \$0-24,999; forty percent between \$25,000-49,999; fifteen percent between \$50,001-99,999; and nine percent greater than \$100,000. Seventy-nine percent of the sample was White; nine percent Hispanic; four percent Black; three percent Asian; and five percent "other." Seventy-one percent of the respondents were single; twenty-one percent were committed, married, or engaged; and eight percent were divorced. The mean number of alcoholic drinks per hour was three and the frequency ranged from zero to twelve. The mean number of times respondents used illegal drugs per month was four, and the frequency ranged from zero to forty.

Bourbon Street was identified as the optimal site for an exploration of deviant and lewd behaviors. According to Shrum and Kilburn (1996, p. 434), lewd behaviors are specific, localized, and extremely common on Bourbon Street during Mardi Gras. Using 30 hours of video taping, they observed 500 episodes of lewd behavior, but the "number of episodes is closer to 700, a rate of more than 23 episodes per hour. . . , or more than once every three minutes" (Shrum and Kilburn 1996, p. 434). All interviews ranged in length from fifteen minutes to one hour and thirty minutes. The openended, semistructured interviews were tape-recorded. The interviewees were identified performing playful deviance by the researcher. When this occurred, an interview was requested. The interviews were conducted in streets, bars, restaurants, and one person was interviewed in the foyer of a hotel. Respondents chose these locations because they preferred to remain in the local area. While conducting interviews, a guide was used to probe into what led up to the activity, why they were doing it, what they liked the most about it, and how it felt, aesthetically and emotionally, for them to perform these activities in public. These methods allowed the respondents to focus on their lived experiences, emotions, opinions, and subjective viewpoints of the behavior. The respondents were also interviewed during Mardi Gras about their past experiences and asked to reflect on them. They were also asked to contrast their home situation with Mardi Gras and describe why and how the two are different. These results are presented in the final section of the paper.

### **Backspaces and Secret Selves**

The first finding is that respondents described their playful performances during Mardi Gras as having characteristics similar to backspaces. During Mardi Gras, like in backspaces, ordinary levels of surveillance are reduced. Second, respondents who participated in playful deviance felt free to openly engage in a range of tabooed activities with some degree of security

(Goffman 1961a, p. 230). Third, the respondents believed that the stigma associated with their “secret” performances of deviance was relatively little concern for everyone present (Goffman 1963, p. 81). The following two respondents provide excellent examples of why they defined Mardi Gras as a backspace where they can present their secret self without disapproval from others.

Male: “I am married, and have been married now for 15 years. My wife was not at Mardi Gras with me when I had my first homosexual experience.”

Interviewer: “How did it occur?”

Male: “After being approached by two other men, we talked, and I allowed one to suck my dick. It was my first time. He wanted me to suck his, but I was too afraid to do it. There were at least six people watching, which I found very exciting. This was my first homosexual experience and I was no expert. He also wanted to fuck.”

Interviewer: “What was your first reaction?”

Male: “Fear was my first reaction. I did not cherish the thought of someone fucking me, but I did feel liberated. I love the wild freedom.”

Interviewer: “Have you experienced this outside of Mardi Gras?”

Male: “No, only during Mardi Gras. I only do it when I’m at Mardi Gras.”

The second interviewee provides another example of why Mardi Gras is a backspace. He specifically states that he keeps part of his self a secret from his wife, but he displays it during Mardi Gras.

Male: “You see, I’m married to my wife in California and we never do anything like this. But I’ve always wanted to. It’s just a part of me that I can never express or show.”

Interviewer: “Does she know what you’re doing here?”

Male: “She doesn’t know what’s going on, and I don’t think she’d like how I’m acting. She wants nothing to do with Mardi Gras. She doesn’t even know I’m gay! I’ve never told her that I’m attracted to men. It’s the secret me. If she found out, I’d be embarrassed, I’d disappoint her. But here, I can be me. I don’t have to keep it a secret.”

None of the respondents stated that they were concerned with what strangers thought of

their behavior. This corresponds with Goffman's (1961b, p. 101) assertion that people depart from their conventional roles, present a secret self, and are "out of character" during backspaces because "no one important can see them." As one woman told me, "Here, I'm really free, I'm open! Although I'm married at home, here I'm single. I'm a different self and no one knows!" The following interviewees clearly state that they perform playful deviance because no one important can see them. Their public reputation in the community in which they live – California – is unimportant during Mardi Gras because of the anonymity. The outcome is the performance of playful deviance. The implication is that the social event, context, and themed environment all influence which part of one's self will be displayed, as indicated by the respondent's comment on Las Vegas.

Interviewer: "So what's it like to be on the balcony exposing yourself to everyone below you?"

Male: "It's pretty cool. It's a blast. It's pretty cool because no one knows you. You can always go back home and no one will know. We're from California, so it doesn't really matter; it's pretty easy. It's safer this way."

Interviewer: "So why can't you do it back home?"

Male: "There's nothing like this back home. You'd never find anything like this anywhere else. Only in New Orleans!"

Interviewer: "Do you think there should be other places like this?"

Male: "Well, yea! Maybe Vegas! I bet Vegas does something like this. Every town should have a strip like this. If I did this at home I'd be jailed for indecent exposure. It's not indecent at all. It's just fun! It's fun to do things you've never done, see women you've never seen, ain't that right [He looks to his male and female friend for confirmation]. People know us back home, and we'd be known as indecent."

Female: "I'd be a slut. That's what everyone thinks when they look up, 'Hey, there's some whores showing some titties'. We're really not whores. We're just family women having a good time, getting the guys to yell and holler. No one knows me. You can come out here tomorrow, and you may think that people are looking at you funny, but they don't remember you. They'll never know back home! If everyone down there knew me, it'd be totally different. It wouldn't be as exciting, and it'd ruin everything. Back home, though, it'd be bad. I wouldn't be able to establish my reputation and build roots."

Male: "It's like me, I'm a safety director of a trucking company, and if I got caught, that'd do a lot of damage to my image, my family. We have a daughter and if we got caught, and she went to

school the students would say, 'Yea, we remember you're mother! My dad told me about her!'"

Individuals realize they are unknown in the massive crowd and can therefore perform deviance as a leisure activity without the disapproving gaze from authority officials. The relative ease in exposing their secret self to strangers is partially explained by the anonymous situation that prevents authority figures from identifying them. The crowd's anonymity and acceptance of their displays function as a mask to protect the reveler's discrediting performance from vital people who have the power to stigmatize them.

These pleasurable performances in backspaces are also transgressive experiences. For instance, when I asked one respondent to comment on her act of kissing and suckling her female friend's breasts in front of crowds, she said that she was "pretending to be a lesbian" by "taking delight with another woman." Although the two women were deliberately performing as a "joke to trick the crowd," the first woman's comment indicates that normative heterosexuality also constrains her from participating in these pleasurable transgressions with other women in the city where she lives.

Interviewer: "How do you experience kissing your friend's breasts in public?"

Female: "It's just for fun. Honestly, it's more of a joke, like, to make us laugh. It's like we're performing for the audience. Like, when the guys go 'Ohh, my God, look they're are kissing!' we just start laughing because they think we're getting into it. It's totally a joke! Guys are so into lesbianism, but we're just acting like we are. They think that what we're doing is real, but it's not."

Interviewer: "Do you mean to say that what you're doing is not real for you?"

Female: "Yea, exactly. I'm not a lesbian, but these guys make a big deal out of it. They think we are lesbians because we make-out, but we're not. We're just doing this for beads, for laughs, for fun, and because we can't be this way back home."

Interviewer: "What do you mean by that?"

Female: "Well, it's simple. I'm expected to grow up, graduate, get a job, get married, and have children. Being with someone like her is out of the question. So it's my chance to be different, to not be me. But it's so funny to see all these guys watching us do something that's not real! I'm not a lesbian, but if they want to think I am, then that's fine. I can't believe all these guys get a kick out of two girls sucking each other's breasts!"

Her comment also reveals that specific cultural expectations constitute certain presentations of erotic arrangements as forbidden, unacceptable, and marginal. Yet, this very marginalization creates a seductive attraction to transgress and sometimes participate in what culture deems deviant. Enacting the performance of transgression and traversing the realm of the taboo in backspaces allow secret selves to materialize. Transgression depends on the taboo, just as deviance depends on the norm. Without prohibitions and norms, there is nothing to transgress. Seen within this framework, what culture marginalizes is often materialized and central in backspaces.

The implication is that culture creates categories of forbidden activities and secret selves by outlawing them in everyday life. Yet, these outlawed behaviors are embraced when performed in themed backspaces such as Mardi Gras. The more that playful deviance and secret selves are diminished in everyday life, the more that people have the possibility of performing and embracing them in backspaces. Therefore, the assumptions about the 'nature' and 'essence' of deviant behaviors are immediately contested if we accept that the meaning of a deviant behavior does not reside within the person who performs the behavior. Instead, it is a product of how the audience socially constructs that behavior as a prohibition and links it with shame or repulsion. Yet, the categories of shame and repulsion are inverted during Mardi Gras. The following respondent elaborates on this point.

"Well, my friend and I listened to the lively jazz music in the background while we dropped our panties and cautiously, but at a leisurely pace, began to relieve ourselves. Suddenly, a guy walked up and started peeing right next to us. For some reason, him peeing next to us was strangely attractive! I was perplexed at my thoughts as I stood there squatting in the alley, thinking about how the everyday aspect of urinating is something taken for granted. Although what I saw was disgusting by my conventional eyes, I was overwhelmed by the fascinating presence of people peeing in public streets. 'What a turn on!' I thought. My heart was beating so rapidly that I thought I was going to stop breathing! I had felt more different than I had ever felt before while using the restroom. How could something so repugnant be so attractive? 'Nothing like this has ever happened to me before,' I thought to myself. Confusingly, I had a burning desire to watch guys and women pee. As revolting and offensive as the atmosphere smelled, it began to transform into a magical place. It was attractively charming yet repulsive. It was also erotically appealing. I struggled against the built-up tension as I tried to control my thoughts when I felt this tremendous rush of excitement go up my legs and throughout my body. I could no longer control myself. At that moment, my friend looked at me, and against all reason I gave into the temptations of the moment. My friend and I started masturbating over and over again while we watched men and women pee, and while they watched us masturbate."

Because playful deviance is also embedded in culture, it evokes mixed responses: it can be attractive and repulsive simultaneously. Individuals can participate in playful deviance in backspaces and find it both delightful and repellent because they have no direct or long-term social, cultural, physical, and/or emotional investment in the people observing or performing the activity. Thus, individuals who participate in acts defined as shameful by religious mores or biblical discourse can invert these definitions during backspaces and redefine them as entertaining, fun, exciting, and thrilling. Respondent #73 gives an example.

Interviewer: "What's the wildest thing you've done so far?"

Female: "Umm, licked my friend's breasts! [she laughs] That's the first time ever! First time in history! First time to touch a girl, first time to kiss a girl! Okay, like I am very, I know it doesn't seem like it, I am a very strong Christian, like totally believe in morals and all that. Strong morals. So like for me to do that, totally New Orleans! No one else will know! No one else from our town is here, so they can't see us! No one else will ever know! It stays here! Like, as far as our boyfriends go, all we did was show tits and that's it! It's our secret!"

What is also interesting in the above account is the respondent's insistence that she is a "strong Christian" who "believes in morals, strong morals," and that her presentation of an "amoral" self in New Orleans is a "secret." As Goffman (1959, p. 251) illuminates, individuals are not concerned whether their behavior is moral or amoral as much as they are concerned with presenting a moral self and keeping the presentation of the amoral self a secret. He writes,

"Individuals are concerned not with the moral issue of realizing these standards [by which they are judged], but with the amoral issue of engineering a convincing impression that these standards are being realized. Our activity, then, is largely concerned with moral matters, but as performers we do not have a moral concern with them. As performers we are merchants of morality."

Manufacturing a consistent presentation of the moral self is essential for individuals to prevent discrediting themselves. When discrediting occurs, Goffman (1959) explains that individuals must perform 'remedial activities' to correct their image. The failure to remedy their misrepresentation might engender shame, guilt, or embarrassment. On the other side of this potential stigma is the

thrill and awe of getting away with presenting their secret selves in a deviant way. As Goffman (1959, p. 70) explains, the audience might be in awe of the deviant performance, but the performer “would feel shame were a disclosure to occur.” It is in this tiny secret that lies the “delight in being deviant” (Katz, 1988; Presdee, 1994). One respondent offers an example.

Interviewer: “How would your family respond, how would they feel if they knew you were flashing?”

Female: “They would flip-out!”

Interviewer: “How would you feel if they discovered that you flashed?”

Female: “I’d be embarrassed, a bit shameful and uncomfortable. I don’t think I could face them for a while.” [She says this with a mischievous smile and a look of shame at the same time].

Interviewer: “Does it bother you that strangers see your breasts?”

Female: “No. Why should it? I’ll never see them again. Besides, it’s Mardi Gras, and no one cares. I’m here to have fun.”

Interviewer: “Is that why you flash, because it’s fun?”

Female: “I flash because it’s liberating. It’s fun and exciting to know that people actually want to see me, I mean, my breasts. It’s also a lot of fun, and a bit flattering, when guys surround me to see my body. I’m an elementary school teacher so I don’t get to go out and do this very often [she says this with a laugh]. It’s a different part of myself that I don’t show to everyone! [she laughs].”

Excitement and euphoria develops when people conceal their deviant secrets from important people who trust them. Individuals who are seduced by deviance know that their secret presentation may be morally wrong in the eyes of those who are deemed important in their lives. They may even be aware that their loved ones disapprove of secret presentations that will damage their public reputation. Yet it is precisely this appeal in performing secret deviance, presenting a secret self, and subsequently facing potential guilt that provides the ephemeral fascination, euphoric thrills, and excitement. As one respondent told me, “ I love it here. I can present a side of myself that I can’t back home. No one knows, and that makes it so much better.”

### **Playful Deviance as Tourist Attractions**

Although the initial attraction to perform playful deviance is to present a secret self in a deviant manner, this experience is followed by a euphoric stage, where the respondents suddenly realize that the crowd elevates their performance into a ‘tourist attraction’ and public entertainment. As

one person told me, “I came to Mardi Gras to have sex in public. I did it, the crowd loved it, and I left with a new tourist experience.” Thus the second finding is that these magnetic performances are themed tourist sites that temporarily attract the crowd’s attention and subjectively enhance the performer’s status. When sightseers rush to photograph, film, and watch them as tourist attractions, the performers become extremely excited by their momentary feelings of euphoria and discover that performing deviance as a dramatic tourist attraction is eye-catching. This is followed by a realization that the crowds provide them spectacular admiration, excessive attention, and powerful visibility. One respondent provides an example.

“I enjoy people watching me show mine! It’s gratifying. Like, my tits are big, so I get big beads. It’s so exciting to be here, to be the center of attention, to be in the spotlight. It’s my first time, and I love people, the camaraderie, the competition.”

Interviewer: “What do you like the most?”

Female: “When the crowd yells, ‘One more time! Show ‘em one more time! It’s exciting, exhilarating. I love the attention! It’s clean fun. It’s so much fun! Everyone is looking at me, and I feel so sexy!”

Viewers photograph, record, watch, yell, cheer, and sometimes join the people who perform. Performers, in turn, indulge in the attention they receive from the crowd. These circumstances stir strong emotional feelings and elicit powerful responses from spectators. Their extraordinary fascination of being the center of attention heightens and stimulates the act; it proliferates the excitement and delight discovered in performing playful deviance. Those who underwent such an invigorating euphoric experience seemed surprised, almost overwhelmed and bewildered that the crowd wanted to see their genitalia, take their photograph, and shout with collective admiration.

Interviewer: “Why do you flash?”

Female: “Actually, I think it’s sort of a ‘Oh my god! Somebody wants to see them!’ And I really enjoy that! You enjoy someone looking at your breasts or your muff because, ‘Ohhhh my god someone wants to see them!’ There’s also this whole shock value to it! I’m the center of attention, and I really enjoy that because someone wants to take my picture!”

When revelers perform as tourist attractions, the spectators toss them beads, push members in the crowd out of the way to photograph them, and collectively yell with approval and

delight. Respondents said they felt “euphoric,” “famous,” or “like a star” during these transient moments of performing as tourist attractions. One respondent even directly stated that her performance was a tourist attraction. “Hell, everyone comes here to see people like me. They don’t care about the floats or what’s going on in the suburbs. I’m the tourist attraction.” In turn, visual entrepreneurs commodify their performances and market them as tourist attractions and souvenirs. When asked if they were concerned that visual entrepreneurs might place their performances on the Internet, the respondents seemed unconcerned. One woman, for instance, actually hoped that her performance appeared on the Internet.

Female: “I enjoy being the center of attention. I want everyone to see me!”

Interviewer: “How do you think of the act itself?”

Female: “For me, it was a confession. I was confessing when I gave head in public. I was confessing that I wanted to leave my husband. I was married at that time, so by doing that [performing oral sex] in public I was confessing to wanting someone else and to wanting to be someone else. I was saying that I was moving on and nothing was going to hold me back from having oral sex in public and nothing was going to hold me back from living my life the way I wanted to. At that time, you just live once, and that was my frame of mind.”

Interviewer: “What if you ended up on the Internet? Would that bother you?”

Female: “No! I hope I did. I hope my husband saw it!”

Another woman stated that her performance was a ‘fun game’.

Interviewer: “Does it bother you that so many people take your picture?”

Female: “No, not all. No big deal.”

Interviewer: “What if you end up on the Internet?”

Female: “No. To me, it’s all a fun game. It’s all a show.”

The respondent’s last comment that performing public nudity is a show is an interesting pattern. Other respondents corroborated this theme. When asked how they felt exposing themselves and performing sex acts in front of cameras and video recorders, for instance, one person shouted, “I feel like I’m in a movie, like I’m an actor in front of all these cameras and

pictures, but no one knows who I am. It's strange. It's just a whole different world! I'm entertaining everyone." Another person told me, "I feel like a star in front of all these people and cameras. I feel famous, and everyone loves me! It's just another world." Performing playful deviance in front of audiences are contemporary forms of tourist attractions that provide revelers with visibility, euphoria, and exhilaration not experienced in their ordinary lives. Their playful transgressions attract sightseers and spectators who desire to watch them perform their activities as leisure events. Hence revelers do not commit playful deviance in public; rather, they perform it as a fun game to attract the gaze of sightseers. Performing playful deviance takes on the characteristics of a themed leisure event and persists because it is a spectacular tourist attraction filled with an aura of action that stimulates the viewer's fantasies (Judd and Fainstein 1999; Presdee 1994).

### **Self-Validation and Feelings of Fame**

The third theme is that respondents received self-validation<sup>4</sup> and experienced "feelings of fame" while they performed playful deviance as a tourist attraction. For example, the respondents believed that performing playful deviance made them "larger than life." Many also believed they were temporarily famous because the media presented an awesome display of their image to public spectators, which functioned to enhance and validate their self. The following interviewee provides an example. Her self-validation resulted from elevating and enhancing her sense of visibility thereby gaining the same amount of attention the Playboy models obtained from the crowd.

Female: "It feels great to be next to Playboy women while exposing myself. If you think about it, me exposing my breasts next to them actually lowers their status."

Interviewer: "How?"

Female: "Well, because I'm no one, no one knows me. But I can receive just as many yells from men as they can, even though my body is not as great as theirs. In my opinion, I lower them, and I become better. I stand out just as much as they do."

In an anonymous atmosphere where people compete for visibility among the faceless masses, the desire to receive self-validation by standing out from the crowd is intimately woven together with the desire to be known, visible, and documented for all to see (Ewen 1988, p. 94). When being unknown and invisible is the norm, performing playful deviance in front of numerous

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<sup>4</sup> Thanks to the anonymous reviewer who suggested that I discuss "validation of the self."

cheering people provide revelers a chance to become known, visible, and publicized. After all, a culture of carnival leisure expects people to participate in intense experiences, collect memories of their deviant activities as souvenirs in the form of photographs or video recordings, and pursue a checklist of intense experiences. It is not enough to make out with as many people as possible during Mardi Gras; one must intensify this quest for transgressive leisure by flashing as much as possible, giving or receiving oral sex in public as frequently as possible, by masturbating in public, and even by having group sex in public while large numbers of people photograph and record their activities. In other words, people expose themselves to gain exposure. Respondents perform playful deviance because it provides an appealing and seductive opportunity for them to “rise above the crowds,” be seen in the spotlight by everyone, and accomplish feelings of imaginary fame and stardom. In the words of one woman:

“I just turned 50 and the crowd just loves my tits! I just started flashing, and the crowd loves me! It makes me feel so good. I get gorgeous beads in return. It’s just so much fun! You get to enjoy the voyeurism, the safety, and the attention. I am a grandmother, and I can show anything. I’m also a secretary at home. Here, I’m a star! It’s like living out of a limousine! I feel sooooo good! I have their attention. I am in the spotlight.” [At this moment the crowd begins screaming for her to reveal herself].

Lights, cameras, and action surround revelers as they become the center of attention; they feel known and admired during their performances. The interaction between the cameras and attention from the crowd constructs a dramaturgical stage on which people relentlessly perform playful deviance to experience intense excitement and feelings of fame. The following respondent, “Chris,” provides an example. Chris was shooting confetti from a “play-gun” that was attached to his penis and then allowing other men to admire what he referred to as his “confetti shooter.” After people – mostly men – looked at and admired his penis, Chris embraced and playfully kissed them. Just before the police intervened to prevent Chris from performing, he told me why he performed.

“It’s enjoyable. It’s fun, I mean it’s fun to have people admire you and have people want to be near you. People want to take your picture; it’s the Paparazzi in your face every time you turn around. And that’s fabulous. Normally, human beings don’t get that way. It’s like Andy Warhol’s statement that everyone has to get their fifteen minutes of fame. At Mardi Gras, though, you can have about four or five hours. If you have a great body, or a great costume, you can come out here and display it. People will film you, and the things that people do! The things that I’ve done! I love the fame, the attention. It’s all about hedonism, showing yourself, and enjoying the times!”

One respondent provides another example of self-validation.

Female: "When I take my clothes off here in front of everyone it makes me feel good about myself. Yea, it feels good, it gives me a high. See, I thought I gained some weight. I was like, I'm not gonna do it because someone's gonna see fat on my leg or fat somewhere or something like that you, know? But it's different. When I started doing it, I started feeling really good about myself. All these men are yelling, 'Come on! Do it!' And I felt really good about myself. I stopped worrying about if I was too fat or whatever. That's the whole thing, the whole point, to feel good about yourself."

Performing playful deviance is connected to the possibility that such performances will create notoriety, boost one's self-image, and provide self-validation (O'Malley and Mugford 1994). In other words, playful deviance is a themed tourist attraction and a ritual of enjoyment that people perform for publicity, entertainment, and self-validation. These playful rituals provide the audience with transient entertainment, laughter, and enjoyment. In turn, the revelers achieve feelings of fame and a wealth of intense emotional experiences that leave them with a fleeting sense of personal power, freedom, and self-validation.

Female: "When I'm at Mardi Gras, I get to leave many parts of me back home, like the part where you have to be the wife, the mother, the good girl, the Christian lady that goes to church every Sunday. That means you have to have everything to the utmost. You've got to be the best at everything. You can't let anyone down. You've got to leave all that at home. I love it here. If I could flash my tits everyday at home I would. I love it here. Everyone's looking at me! [she shouts], 'It's great! I love it! It's Mardi Gras! I'm having a blast, I'm partying, I'm showing my body.' Everybody looks at me when I show my titties. It makes me feel good. I mean, I'm not a very attractive lady, so it makes me feel really good when they look at my body. I'm from Southern Alabama and I'm always told that I'm nothing but white-trash because I live in a trailer out in the country. I go to church, and I'm a fine citizen. But that Southern Baptist religion don't do anything for me. They always tell me that God's on my side, and if I pray harder, the pain of my cancer will go away. You see, I have cancer, and I'm going to die soon. I have five children, and I had a good-for-nothing husband who didn't do anything around the house but drink beer all day. As soon as he found out I had cancer, he belted, packed his bags and left. This cancer is eating me alive, and I know I'm going to die soon. So, you have to understand, Mardi Gras is the one time of

the year where I can get away from that. As soon as I found out I was going to die, I realized that it didn't matter if I was white-trash. I realized that I wanted live. But since I'm always taking care of the children and working around the house, I couldn't get away. So, I hope you understand that when I show my cunt, my tits, or do whatever out here, I'm living in ways that I can't live back home. I feel that rush when other people tell me I'm beautiful, or that I'm sexy, even though I know I'm not. But it feels good for someone to tell me, especially when no one tells me at home. So, yea, it is an ego boost, I do feel significant. But I also know that I'm going to have to go home in a few days, so why not live it up!"

### **Mardi Gras as Another World**

The final stage of playful deviance involves returning home. Once the respondents leave the context of Mardi Gras, their feelings of enjoyment decrease and the spell of enchantment transforms into disenchantment. Individuals gradually realize that as the magic of Mardi Gras fades away, their recollections of the carnival seem like 'another world'. Thus, the fourth theme is that respondents interpreted their deviant performances during Mardi Gras as "not like real life," "out of time," or "in another world." Similar to Forsyth's (1992) argument, this element of deviant experience contains the same characteristics as creative play. Creative play is voluntary activity unlike ordinary or real life; it is a stepping out of "real" life into a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all of its own (Huizinga 1971, p. 75). Henry and Milovanovic (1996, p. 156) describe these playful performances as the "edge [that] produces a potential for extreme experiences of altered consciousness, a hyperreality that holds out the possibilities of resisting or escaping the mundane." One person, after returning from Mardi Gras, clarifies her description of creative play. "Now that I'm back in the real world, as I think of everywhere else except New Orleans during Mardi Gras, it all kind of seems like it was a dream, so far away. And I find that recounting the tales of Mardi Gras is hard to do. It doesn't translate very well back here, isn't quite understood by those who weren't there. Again, it's like another world that one has to experience for themselves to understand."

Her account is interesting in that she describes her Mardi Gras experiences as "out of this world" and "like dreams." According to O'Malley and Mugford (1994, p. 192), transcendence in performing playful deviance lies in the fundamental differences between experience in worldly activities and in various "other worlds," such as films, carnivals, dreams, magic, festivals, jokes, laughter, and so on. "Experience in the mundane worlds of practical reality is confined by time,

space, and social boundaries. Dreams, fantasies, and similar experiences do not defer to such limitations” (O’Malley and Mugford 1994, p. 192). In worlds perceived to be boundless, without rules and norms, anything can happen. Appropriately, the most common phrase respondents told me was, “Anything goes!”

“Mardi Gras 1998 was my first year to go, and I have never had such an incredible time! Nothing will ever compare to Mardi Gras, it is the absolute best party that one could ever know. If you haven’t experienced Mardi Gras, then you haven’t lived. Everything about it is amazing. When I think back about the whole Mardi Gras experience, sometimes it almost seems to have all been a dream. I had so many beads around my neck that I could barely breathe. The whole experience is truly magical. I’ve never felt so much excitement in the air before, and I still can’t believe what people will do for those beads ... I can’t believe what I did for beads! ... Anything goes!”

One respondent told me that the reason why he had an extramarital affair with another woman during Mardi Gras (and his wife found out and divorced him) was because “Mardi Gras is another world and people just get lost in another world. It’s so easy to do things you normally wouldn’t do back home because no one knows you. You’re just different; you just change.” The exposure of the body, performing sexual activities in public, and masturbating other bodies are all short-lived performances undertaken in a themed space of deviance organized by anonymity, pleasure, and leisure.

## **Discussion and Conclusion**

Playful deviance is an entertaining leisure activity that individuals perform in front of large crowds as a tourist site to (1) present their secret selves and receive self-validation, (2) gain personal enjoyment in life, and (3) achieve admiration by standing out from the crowd in exciting, innovative, and playful ways through the personal testing of boundaries (Rojek 2000). These performances are similar to Presdee’s (2000, p. 8) conception of the second life: a world of excess characterized by irrationality, celebration, playfulness, performance, and fun. It is “a forum for the expression of individuality through the body ... [that] provides the participants with the opportunity to be a part of a larger group” (Calhoun et al 1998, p. 324). By placing these interviews within the context of a carnivalesque space designed to educe the pursuit of playful deviance in themed backspaces for entertainment, and alongside a culture that demands that people consciously submerge aspects of their secret self and present a self to society that will enable them to be accepted (Rojek 2000, p.13), it is not surprising that individuals performed playful deviance during Mardi Gras and presented their secret selves for self-validation, enjoyment, and a tourist attraction. For this reason, playful deviance is a comforting performance

that supports people in solving their problems by creating pleasure for them (Forsyth 1992).

Future research should address how backspaces are becoming themed environments specifically designed as attractive areas to perform playful deviance. Backspaces enable individuals to expose themselves with relative ease and create new avenues for self-expression. In the twenty-first century, however, videographers, corporate media, the government, the military, and the criminal justice system have been using visual technology to film, photograph, and record people who perform deviance in backspaces. For instance, the producers of talk shows currently film the participant's backspaces as new forms of voyeuristic entertainment. Similarly, the criminal justice institution records the 'dark, dangerous, and luring' side of life, such as thrilling high-speed chases. These infotainment shows present deviance as rich in fun and exciting to watch. As such, visual technology recontextualizes deviance as a space for contemporary entertainment and a theme park. "Doing deviance" becomes a tourist site of entertainment. Actors are no longer needed to produce fiction when "reality television" presents it for all to enjoy and laugh along with (Presdee 1994, p. 186).

With the recent immersion of visual technology into backspaces, the decision to display oneself and participate in playful deviance becomes even more ambiguous. Visual technology discloses secret deviance that is kept hidden from public viewing and displays it as a public spectacle for entertainment. The backspaces where people retreat to present a self that is normally kept hidden from others are currently becoming transformed into entertaining frontstages, deviant theme parks open to public viewing. Backspaces become scenes of play on which deviant behaviors and secret selves are leisurely "staged, put on public display, and publicly watched" (Bauman 2000, p. 70). The current focus on people to display secret deviance as entertainment complies with "the duty to play out such dramas in public and the right of the public to watch the performance" (Bauman 2000, p. 70). The entrance of visual technology into themed backspaces puts individuals in the limelight. Themed backspaces are surrounded by glitz, simulacra, lights, music, and fun that offer a tempting and seductive opportunity to display parts of the self normally kept hidden so that individuals can imagine themselves on television and receive fifteen minutes of fame. The result is the visual consumption of the secret self by the eyes of public strangers in the form of entertaining deviance. Thus, visual entrepreneurs enter backspaces to transform acts of playful deviance into commodified entertainment.

In relation to Mardi Gras, video entrepreneurs, MTV, the Travel Channel, Entertainment Tonight, BBC, the Learning Channel, the Playboy Channel, and other international media all record individuals performing public deviance and place their images on the television and Internet as entertaining commodities to be bought, viewed, and/or exchanged (Hardy 2001, p. 46). One consequence of this merge between visual technology and themed backspaces is that it

transforms the meanings, representations, and motivations of deviant behavior. While people still commit deviance in secrecy, the culture of consumerism, leisure, tourism, and entertainment encourage individuals to perform it as public entertainment for an imagined and/or real audience.<sup>5</sup> When deviance is produced as entertaining images in the form of videos, such as *Girls Gone Wild*, *Mardi Gras Madness*, and *The Men of Mardi Gras*, these images can be collected, stored, repeatedly watched, and exchanged in cyberspace or in the privacy of one's home. Visual technology transforms themed backspaces into 'mediated deviance', thereby reconstructing deviance into entertainment for large audiences to visually consume. Consequently, people located in backspaces are encouraged to present their secret self in an exhibitionistic, playful, and entertaining manner to an audience of voyeurs.

Future research in the sociology of deviance should explore this fruitful area of deviant behavior, especially as it relates to visual sociology, entertainment, leisure, performance, and fun. As Barak (1995, p. 137) states, the news media has always chased deviance and the pursuit of the deviant has always been its favorite story. Today, however, it is the "deviants" chasing themselves and their friends and strangers with camcorders to record their performances as souvenirs and entertainment. Everyday people also join in the fun of recording deviant activities while on vacation so they can go home and watch the footage as entertainment with their friends. In the future, mapping out these performances and recordings is necessary to understanding deviance as a performative leisure activity within themed backspaces designed for the pursuit of entertaining deviance.

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<sup>5</sup> Thanks to Jack Katz for providing the helpful suggestion to focus on real and imagined audiences.

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