Of Corpse

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The “striking florescence of celebration” in the modern world (Manning 1983, 4) is rapidly transforming both the physical topography of America and the annual holiday cycle of its citizens. Throughout the Midwest, for example, local communities seem almost frenetic in their creation of ethnic theme parks and “historic” pageants and, where appropriate, their rebuilding of habitations and public buildings with Swiss, German, Norwegian, and a variety of other ethnic motifs. Larger cities throughout the country have created “festival” markets and historic districts, while “artists’” neighborhoods have become the hallmark of a thriving city. Chicago, Milwaukee, and Minneapolis all have their “SoHos.” And, like the East Coast metropolis that dominates the economic as well as the cultural life of America, cities everywhere now foster a host of public events to celebrate the cultural diversity of their populations.

This preoccupation with celebrations was already noticeable toward the latter part of the nineteenth century—evidence of the impact of immigrant festive culture on America (Conzen 1989, 73). Its adaptation by Americans of all persuasions is in part a reflection of the search for novelty and experience—hallmarks of consumer capitalism (Manning 1983, 5)—and in part a representation of the modern notion that authenticity must be found in some other time and place (MacCannell 1976, 3). Little wonder then that the rhetorical modality of these events is so strongly traditionalistic, or that the “rediscovery” of the city among the new commercial class has created a virtual simulacrum of a nineteenth century urban gentry.

The very “florescence of celebration” would suggest the existence of some variation of morphology, and it might be useful at this point to outline even a preliminary system, which I will develop further toward the end of the essay, for categorizing public events. Among the principal types of public events are:
1. Civic celebrations, undoubtedly the most common of public events. These are officially sanctioned, and have increasingly become “a distinctive genre of mass communication” that help engender a “we-feeling” among the many and disparate segments of the nation state (Chaney 1983, 120–121). They are correctly considered rituals of unification, glossing over divisive issues and presenting participants and viewers with legible collective symbols (Lawrence 1982, 163). Much like royal pageants and military parades, such celebrations are used by elites to underline the ideal social order of a given community (Cannadine 1983; Da Matta 1984, 219; Warner 1959).

2. “Ethnic” festivals, including social groups based on religion, class, and gender whose participants wish to claim a place for themselves within the American social and cultural pantheon (Wiggins 1982). These events, although semiofficial, may contain elements that do not lend themselves to incorporation into American civil religion (i.e., they may become overly rambunctious or overtly political, such as the Irish Republican Army’s participation in New York City’s St. Patrick’s Day parade).

3. “Carnivalesque” festivals that shun or are shunned by the official pantheon. Such festivals, which may represent groups that at other times seek to legitimize themselves within the social and cultural hierarchy, deny the legitimacy of that hierarchy. In her studies of the artists’ and counterculture’s spoof of Pasadena, California’s annual Rose Bowl parade—the Doo Dah festival—Denise Lawrence argues that “alternative parades” like this one have become increasingly common since the mid-1970s (1982, 173; 1987, 133). There is, however, considerable evidence that such events were quite common in the past (Bakhtin 1984; N. Davis 1975; Ladurie 1979), and that they typically occur alongside mainstream events (S. Davis 1986), particularly among socially marginalized groups (Lipsitz 1990). Given their parodic nature and their relative openness, costumers’ iconography is less legible (or at least more narrowly targeted) than civic or even ethnic celebrations (Lawrence 1982, 166).

This essay is an ethnography of a “carnivalesque” event, the Village Halloween parade in New York City. In analyzing the parade’s evolution and changing structure, I am attempting to explain what the event “has to say,” or, in Mary Douglas’s words, how it “bring[s] out of all the possible might-have-beens a firm social reality” (1982, 36). I conclude by suggesting a connection between the emergence of new expressive forms of, and recent transformations in, the cultural construction of selfhood.

Parades are not easy to document, particularly night parades that attract hundreds of thousands of people, such as the Village Halloween
parade in which most participants wear costumes having only a thin connection, if that, to the spirits and monsters we normally associate with Halloween. Also, there are those intangibles that are so much a part of this parade: the almost continuous blaring music of marching mariachi, reggae, and even klezmer bands interspersed among the other elements of the parade; noise, particularly the cheers from the audience for outstanding costumes and, more typically, catcalls for outlandish transvestites; color-vivid reds, golds, purples, and others intended by their creators to dazzle against the black backdrop of night; and the audience, many of whom are themselves dressed in Halloween costumes and masks. Indeed, squad cars from the local police precinct are sometimes driven by police wearing vampire fangs. The city itself becomes part of the celebration, as here and there people display pumpkins and other holiday decorations from their terraces. In Greenwich Village, the home of the parade, whole streets have balconies with puppets of political leaders saluting the crowds below, while a huge spider climbs the tower of the public library eerily lit by orange spotlights. What pervades the event is not so much the world upside down (Kunzle 1978) as the world upside down and right side up suddenly juxtaposed. The result is a powerful sense of irony and humor through a collective recognition of the rather easy transposition of order and chaos, when, like in a dream, familiar things can sometimes seem entirely unfamiliar. Halloween is New York’s answer to Mardi Gras. Like its New Orleans counterpart, the celebration “is a way of dreaming with others, publicly and responsively” (Kinser 1990, xv).

To provide the reader with as full an account as I have of the event, to create, so to speak, a text out of which much of the discussion will proceed, let me share the notes I took during the 1987 parade, when I tried to record every costumed participant I saw. An hour or two before the parade begins, the marchers gradually fall into formation along West Street just north of West Houston Street. I decided to use the opportunity to record as much as I could while the event was “stationary.” Since people arrive at their assigned locations somewhat randomly, my notes are not an accurate description of the order of the parade. However, because I intend to analyze the parade in terms of its content rather than its form, this does not constitute an impediment to my analysis.

_The parade begins with its current organizer, Jeanne Fleming, in costume, followed by Ken Allen, a leading member of the parade’s board, dressed as a Mexican god. Nearby are transvestites with huge protruding fake breasts, gaudy skirts and_
hats, and huge cigarette holders. I try to interview them unsuccessfully. (Most participants are “in character,” and the parade is not the time to get a “backstage” view.) I begin to follow “The Fashion Police,” dressed in white cloaks and white firemen’s helmets, who are ticketing people for wearing unstylish clothes. I receive a ticket for my buckskin jacket, which the “police” attribute to participation in Woodstock and denigrate as “sixties retro.” I walk along West Street and see a group of mixed gender middle-aged teachers from New Jersey assembling their costumes. They introduce themselves as Gladys Night and the Pits (each member of the group is dressed as a different celebrity pit dog, including Pit Vicious, Dolly Pitton, Daddy Warpits, Rock Pitson, Scarpit O’Hare, Pitter Pan, etc.). Others include: a couple dressed in flight helmets, goggles, and bomber jackets with a large-scale silver styrofoam airplane protruding from their front and rear; “Vera Carp,” a shy transvestite; a man in a white radioactive uniform; “Tortilla Flats,” a red open truck with a devil growling and a skeleton dancing to the music coming from a trailing mariachi band; the Chrysler Building with jumping stockbrokers (1987 was the year of the stock market crash); a character from “Gilligan’s Island”; a monk calling himself the “Late Father Barnaby”; United Farm Workers with a huge skeleton holding a sign that reads “I ate grapes”; and “New Wave Primitives” in a car covered in burlap, tinsel twigs, and a Balinese mask. Inside the car, characters have painted faces and are wearing bone earrings and chain necklaces. One group of transvestites, accompanied by a man dressed in a long brown costume with toilet paper dangling from it, explains: “We’re out with our date. He’s dressed as a turd because everyone knows that all men are shits.”

I see more costumes, including: “Jesus for Everybody,” a group distributing Jesus brochures; a Chinese dragon; a junior high school percussion band; a man wearing a shower curtain and a bathrobe; a woman calling herself “Post Industrial Fortune Teller” holding a tray with a lit candle, a jar, and a straw basket containing Chinese fortune cookies; “Lady Death”; “Hershey Bar”; a one-man walking Korean salad bar made from painted foam; “Pink Pig Floyd”; clowns; Indians; a man with a tall green head, which he explains is a migraine headache; a mariachi band singing “La Bamba”; a skull holding a placard that reads, “More Nukes”; a giant tube of “Crest Tooth Paste”; Renaissance costumes; Sun Ra from Sweet Basil (one of a handful of advertisements in the parade); a ghoul cocktail party; characters from the “Wizard of Oz”; the “Condom Fairy” distributing free balloon condoms; “The Village Light Opera Group”; a transvestite nun; “Death” as Chicago’s future; a man eating a baby and a woman with a sign that reads “eat me”; a pizza with its baker and a family of eaters; a Peruvian band; a graffitied wall with a half-torn poster advertising Visa; an African band; monsters holding human heads; a group dressed as individual cards from a deck that
shuffles itself by running to change places; a Caribbean steel band; “Sky Tracker”; “Ghost Busters”; “Death”; a transvestite mermaid; a cowboy transvestite; a family of monsters; a family of clowns; assorted monsters; a Chinese dragon; a transvestite trick-or-treating; a group of men dressed as huge lipstick cases; a “Free Tibet” group; an air bubble with a captive couple; white African dancers; African stilt dancers; “The Big Apple Corp Gay and Lesbian Marching Band”; a fairy godmother; Campbell’s Soup; a headless man in a trench coat carrying his head in his hands; male ballet dancers with women’s names; a giant can of Raid; a strutting male peacock; cardboard penguins; a steel band with Ronald Reagan as the drummer; vampire women; ghouls; Ronald Reagan holding a gun and a Bible; a silver-and-gold brocaded man; “Hot 103 FM” (an advertisement for a local radio station); a recycling group; two queens and a bishop; Scottish bagpipes; the “Loisida Band” (the name refers to the Puerto Rican community’s colloquial name for their Lower East Side neighborhood); transvestite “Wizard of Oz” characters; a group of “Trojanene” lubricated condoms; a man raising money to fight AIDS; “Caliente Cab Co.” (an advertisement for a Mexican restaurant); Queen Kong.

Wishes Come True

In previous years the parade culminated at Washington Square Park with music and various performances, such as the appearance and descent of a spectacular devil on the Washington Square arch. Now, due to changes in the route, the parade stops at Union Square, where musical bands entertain spectators. For many, the Halloween spectacle continues elsewhere, at numerous private parties in homes throughout the city; the more daring head to Christopher Street in the heart of Greenwich Village. The Christopher Street promenade is an annual event that parallels the parade, and there are more than a few people—both spectators and performers—who attend this while avoiding the parade altogether. Although the promenade probably preceded the parade, its growth each year demonstrates a certain linkage between the two events. (Greenwich Village has a long, albeit erratic, history of impromptu Halloween celebrations, and there is undoubtedly a link between the recent emergence of such carnivalesque celebrations and the increasingly public nature of gay culture.1 The parade, as I shall indicate below, straddles the line between civic festival and carnival; the promenade makes no claim to respectability. On the contrary, it celebrates the irreverent and the lascivious. As New York’s gay Mecca and the site of numerous gay-oriented bars and shops, Christopher Street is like an inner sanctum. On Halloween night, the sanctum transforms itself into a public stage, and the city, if not the world, is its audience. Here are my notes:
1. Spectators lining Sixth Avenue awaiting the parade.

2. These costumes are modeled on Brazilian Carnival costumes, demonstrating the wide range of influences on the current parade.
3. The police love the Halloween parade and consider it one of the safest public events held each year.

4. Some costumers improvise poses, performing for sections of spectators as they march up Sixth Avenue.

5. Costumed man on Christopher Street after the parade.
6. After the parade, celebrity ghoul, Greenwich Village.

7. Phalluses and vaginas are ubiquitous; mere exposure and, of course, size, contribute to a sense of the ridiculous and evoke tremendous laughter from spectators.

8. On October thirty-first, ghouls are everywhere in Greenwich Village, since many residents scurry about to private costume parties.
From Seventh Avenue all the way west to the river, Christopher Street is closed to traffic. The throngs of spectators, which number in the tens of thousands, make entire blocks almost impossible to traverse. There is a physical contact here that is partly ecological—a narrow street and a huge throng—and partly ideological—bodies, which seem more public than private, to be gazed at, even touched. The event is referred to as “the promenade” because it features transvestites who strut along the street, often in pairs, either acting nonchalant or actively seeking the attention and applause of spectators.

At the corner of Christopher Street and Seventh Avenue there is a man dressed as Tammy Bakker, with gobs of makeup and huge eyelashes, holding a Bible, the pages of which are from Gay American History. Nearby is “Jessica Hahn Dog” posing for Playdog. Further along I see a man dressed as a giant tube of KY jelly. In the crowd, I spot characters from the “Wizard of Oz” and a “nun” standing on a balcony sprinkling holy water onto the crowd below. Next to her a man with a huge phallus who is dressed in a bathrobe is sodomizing a transvestite. When he stops, “she” climbs the fire escape begging for more. He goes into his apartment, reemerges masturbating, and then throws the liquid contents of a cup onto the crowd to simulate ejaculation. He then hangs from the fire escape, squats, and simulates defecation. Another man pretends to masturbate with an electrically lit phallus. A transvestite, dressed like a French courtier, performs fellatio on him.

On the opposite side of the street, two bare-chested young men wearing tight blue jeans are exhibiting their lean, muscular bodies by scaling, monkeylike, the fire escape outside their third-floor apartment. The crowd below shouts its approval. When one of the climbers faces the street, people begin to chant, “Show your dick!” One of the men begins to unzip and zip, sadistically teasing the onlookers, transfixed by the promise of a live peep show. Elsewhere, a young man pulls his pants down and sticks his buttocks out the second-story window. The crowd, delighted, demands a repeat performance.

Many who are present at the promenade appear to be passing tourists, often the scattered remnants of the parade seeking a little more time in the spotlight. An “Arab” walks by with a rug protruding from his middle as if he were riding a magic carpet. A group of transvestites is dressed as Girl Scouts. Two Kabuki actors, wearing bright silk gowns with their hair tied in knots, pose as a group of Japanese tourists takes their photograph. One man is dressed as a Hasid. I also see: a plain white costume with the words “generic costume”; two transvestites dressed as middle-aged dowdy ladies; a transvestite nun with metallic hair and a mustache, wearing the Hebrew letter “khay” (a common American Jewish symbol). Toward the westernmost part of the street I spot two young men dressed as grotesque space aliens with flashing red eyes, silver boots, sequined hats, black zippered coats,
and long rubber fingers. When I ask them where they are from, they explain with Hispanic accents, “We’re not from here. We’re from outer space.” For the next few minutes we engage in a perfectly absurd discussion about the difficulty of finding parking for space ships in Manhattan, the relative age of space aliens, the time it takes to get from one universe to another, and the best place to eat blood in Manhattan.

From my descriptions, we can see that there are some very clear distinctions between the parade and the promenade. Partly because it is framed in space and time and partly because it does have a degree of organization (in theory participants register before the event; in practice many just show up unannounced), the parade is a complex mixture of iconography—some parodic and/or metaphorical join otherwise unrelated domains of experience; others are more directly representational or metonymical and use one element to stand for something larger. Sometimes metaphor and metonym blend ambiguously. The presence of a huge tube of Crest toothpaste, for example, is as much a celebration of the aesthetics of everyday life as a satire on it. As Da Matta argues, following from Turner, abstractions and dislocations “bring on a consciousness of all the reifications of the social world” (1984, 214). Completely unstructured and very chaotic, the promenade is purely metaphorical and ludic. Its iconography is entirely of a world upside down. Although I will have much more to say about the two events later, let me conclude for the moment with the rather curious observation that neither has a particularly close connection to Halloween.

Although Halloween has long been a much-cherished holiday for children in this country, its origins are tied to the British Isles, and, in particular, to Ireland, where the holiday developed as a blend of native and Catholic beliefs. For the Druids, 31 October marked the end of the year, a time when herdsmen had to find shelter for their livestock for the winter. It also marked a symbolic death, a time when the world of the living and the spirit world were less divided, and the living, therefore, felt compelled to propitiate the dead by offering them food, hence the origin of trick-or-treating (Santino 1983) and the iconography of death that pervades the holiday and its Celtic precursor, Samhain. Particularly noteworthy about Samhain is its position between the equinox and solstice. Marking the boundary between winter and summer, Samhain represents a moment of transition charged with a peculiar kind of energy (Rogers 2002, 21). That very energy undoubtedly
contributed to the attachment to it of key liturgical moments in the Christian calendar connected to the commemoration of saints and the recent dead. At the same time, its place in the seasonal calendar made it an appropriate point for the slaughter of animals in preparation for the winter, the gathering of crops, and the rethatching of cottages (Rogers 2002, 47)—elements, along with others such as masquerade and courtship, that intertwine notions of death, rebirth and celebration. Nineteenth century Irish immigrants brought Halloween to America, and with it came an associated tradition of disguise, pranks, a sense of the supernatural, and games and rituals that had more to do with the fortunes of love than death (Rogers 2002, 48).

Halloween’s relegation to the domain of children may reflect a general disenchantment with the world of spirits within American culture, much the way fairytales are treated. Perhaps it reflects Richard Dorson’s thesis—that Old World demons have proven to be extremely reluctant to cross the ocean (Dorson 1983), or, if they did make the journey, as did Norwegian trolls in Wisconsin, their relegation to the netherworld of lawn furnishings may have made the trip seem hardly worthwhile. Its recent revival as an American festival speaks less to the possibility of religious enchantment than it does to the license the event provides, a type of behavior that became quite familiar in the 1970s, when the Village Halloween parade emerged. Moreover, the license is as much a chance to misbehave as it is a chance to display oneself or one’s vision of the world, to occupy public attention, which is, as John MacAloon suggests, the most precious of human goods (1982, 262). Through the use of masks, Halloween allows people to transform themselves, to assume personae, to enter a fantasy world with enthusiasm. It offers a time out of time “when we can enter into our experience for its own sake, not for what it produces” (Abrahams 1982a, 163). According to Babcock, this fantasy world “does more than simply mock our desire to live according to our usual orders and norms; it reinvests life with a vigor and a Spielraum attainable (it would seem) in no other way” (1978, 32).

For most people, even the relatively innocuous masking for a costume party is a venture well beyond the world of the familiar. For many of its participants, the time out of time of the Village Halloween parade provides a public spectacle through which culture takes on a semblance of wholeness, and public rituals, either largely scoffed at, as in the case of ethnic parades, or ignored, as in the case of state rites, seem once again meaningful. Moreover, the profusion of individual identities in
postmodern culture, the fragmentation of families through divorce, migration, and single gender couples, as well as the dislocation of communities through gentrification—a process particularly evident in Greenwich Village throughout the 1970s—has created a need for such productions, for invented traditions that legitimize new social and class formations and give collective expression to the physical spaces they occupy (Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983). Community events satisfy the “need to feel part of something” (Bonnemaison 1990, 32). It is precisely the need for new traditions, which became increasingly acute as the economic, social, and cultural landscape of New York City was transformed during the late 1970s and 1980s by a booming Wall Street and its ancillary industries, that has enabled one man’s idea to have such dramatic impact on the life of a great metropolis.

In 1973, Ralph Lee, a puppeteer and theater director, rounded up 150 friends and acquaintances and convinced them to march through the streets of Greenwich Village on Halloween night carrying or wearing some of the giant puppets he had designed for his plays. In doing so, Lee began a tradition that was gradually to assume a life of its own, to grow beyond a scale anyone had thought possible. Lee responded by designing ever-more-spectacular puppets, including a forty-foot articulating snake capable of reaching down and kissing young children in the crowd, a giant Irish sea god riding in a chariot, and a twenty-foot three-masted ship complete with rats scurrying to abandon it. To help create the proper backdrop, Lee also designed the giant spider, which each year sat atop the Jefferson Market Library, and other creatures that emerged from buildings or otherwise made an appearance during the night’s activities. In the early years, the parade lasted no more than an hour. People generally learned about it by word of mouth, or as they happened upon these Halloween revelers on the way home from work. Within a few years, the once-intimate parade took nearly five hours to traverse the same route. The length of time was due only in part to the increased number of marchers; it had much more to do with the number of spectators.

To cope with the logistics of large crowds, changes were made, albeit reluctantly: barricades were introduced to separate spectators from participants; a police permit was acquired; and notices were posted by the traffic department banning cars from parking along the parade’s route. Eventually the route itself was changed to allow more room for spectators. By 1986, the parade was considered too large an event to hold in the heart of old Greenwich Village. Originally the parade began at
Westbeth, the subsidized artist cooperative apartments near the Hudson River, wound its way along the narrow streets, and ended up in Washington Square Park. For security reasons, the route was switched, so the parade would begin on Sixth Avenue, a bland modern boulevard that could better accommodate the half-million spectators who were coming from all over the metropolitan area to view the parade. It then detoured up Tenth Street—a token reminder of its former route of narrow twisting streets of old brownstones—turned up La Guardia Place, and ended at Union Square. In 1987, after considerable pressure from property owners in the Tenth Street block association, the Tenth Street route was dropped and the parade was completely restricted to broad boulevards—West Houston, Sixth Avenue, and Fourteenth Street. Although the new route is better suited to a parade of this scale, some who recall the early years continually lament the changes. For them, the new route symbolizes the end of a once-intimate and extraordinary ensemble of puppet performances.

With increased size and visibility, the parade now has to undergo a review by Community Board Two, the local Greenwich Village planning board. In February 1987, I attended the first community board meeting at which the parade’s organizers were invited to discuss their plans for the fall. The meeting was used by a handful of opponents to voice discontent about the event’s size and its potential impact on a historic district. Despite the testimony from members of the police department, who openly attributed the low crime rate in Greenwich Village on Halloween to the parade, the parade’s opponents assumed that the event was a powder keg waiting to explode. They complained, too, about the evolution of the parade, arguing that “it had become political,” and that they would “prefer a real Halloween parade, something for children.” In order to consider the issues more carefully and to solicit other opinions, the board decided to hold a special open meeting in April, at which the parade would be the only issue on the agenda.

When the community board met again, both opponents and supporters of the parade came with reinforcements. For the most part, the parade’s opponents were Greenwich Village property owners; the supporters were tenants. As at the February meeting, opponents complained about the changes in the parade, the fact that it had grown too large, and that it had become too political and bawdy. Some suggested turning the parade into something else, either a local event or a children’s parade. What lay behind much of the opposition, indeed what was
a recurrent theme in the complaints, were two seemingly contradictory issues: the nature of the parade’s politics, that is, its seriousness, and the parade’s playfulness, particularly its licentiousness. “We do not want this parade,” exclaimed one block association leader. “It’s lost its meaning. It’s a Mardi Gras. And Halloween is for children. It’s not a Mardi Gras!” The notion of a Halloween parade for children in part reflects the earlier dominating presence of giant articulating puppets that delighted young and old. It also suggests that despite its creator’s disavowal of officialdom and city sponsorship, the parade has at its core a coherent vision of civic order. The promenade is very much the converse. Indeed, the very combination of alternative vision and lack of structure makes such an event potentially explosive (Handelman 1990, 55).

Despite their threats, the parade’s opponents failed to stop the event. Indeed, one board member, who was himself opposed to the parade, admitted at a public meeting that an informal poll he had conducted showed neighborhood residents to be overwhelmingly in favor of the parade. The only persistent complaint he recorded was displeasure over changes in the parade’s route: local residents liked the old route of winding streets, and they generally liked to view the parade from the comfort of their apartment windows.

If opposition within the community board proved ineffectual, a much more serious threat was posed by the increasing alienation of the parade’s founder from his creation. When I met Ralph Lee in the summer of 1986, he had just resigned as head of the organizing committee, and was uncertain whether there would be another Halloween parade. What became clear during the interview was that he had begun to consider the parade a monster of his own creation. It had gotten too big, too much out of his control. Lee had meant the parade to be a ritual-like collective enactment of primitive myth. The giant puppets he saw as part of a pantheistic belief system centered around nature and incorporating ideas and images from primitive religions. Marching through the streets carrying the spirit-puppets offered the Greenwich Village community a chance to cleanse itself (the parade was led each year by hags on stilts sweeping the streets with brooms made of twigs).

Lee was particularly bothered by the increased size of the parade. In 1973, audience and participants were one. Recently, the parade had become overwhelmed by spectators. The parade had turned from ritual to theater and, in that sense, it no longer served the purpose he had envisioned for it. Not only were the crowds passive spectators, but they
had even become somewhat ominous. The 1982 parade’s stage manager
recalls what it was like to lead the event and confront masses of people
at one major intersection.

The truck came to a halt. I said, ‘Please move out of the way.’ And as the
truck inched forward there was a chant that was started in the crowd yelling,
‘Stop the truck!’ I realized that 10,000 people were yelling at me. They
wanted to hurt me because I was on top of this truck.

Despite prior concern over the possible impact of Lee’s resignation,
the event continues to grow. The smooth transition has much to do with
the organizing skills of Jeanne Fleming, the parade’s current director,
who describes herself as a “celebration artist” and “orchestrator of
events.” Fleming, who has a master’s degree in medieval studies, sees a
direct connection between medieval carnival celebrations and the
Halloween parade. She became involved in the parade as a participant,
and began organizing the event after she met Lee in 1982 and he indi-
cated his desire to let go of it. As Fleming recalls:

And I said, ‘You can’t let that parade die!’ So I said, ‘Maybe I could help with
it.’ And then I realized I was saying maybe. And I just said, ‘No, I’ll be there.
On September 1st in New York and I’ll help you do it.’ So I did.

By the time Lee resigned, Fleming had already been doing most of
the administrative work for the parade for several years, such as generat-
ing grants, securing official permits, finding sponsors, and contracting
artists and musicians to design and participate in floats. Lee, mean-
while, focused all his efforts on making puppets. Fleming was very much
inspired by Lee’s work and, at least initially, did not resent Lee’s aban-
doning the administrative work to her. The two shared certain ideas,
including a sense of the significance of the parade for participants.
According to Fleming:

Parades let people see themselves as a performance rather than as machines.
It lets them see the imaginative side of themselves. You can go to a disco and
dance and be feeling like you’re creating something of yourself out there,
but it costs you a fortune to get in, and there are social constraints. On the
night of Halloween there are no social constraints. People can be as weird, as
sweet, as mean, or whatever. They can look into their craziest mind, their
deepest desire and realize what that is.

According to Lee:
The parade charges people up. It warms their insides; energies are allowed to flow between people. The masks in that situation give people permission to play with each other and assume roles that allow them to give vent to things that they might be holding back. The obvious example is the gay people. For them to be able to be out there in the street doing their dream persona is pretty fantastic. And not just them, but if somebody wants to be Ronald Reagan to the nth degree, he can do it; he can act that out, or be Nixon, or be some witch or guru, or whatever you want to be. I don’t think people are aware of what they are doing a lot of the time or what they are revealing about themselves. The choices they make as to what their disguises are going to be are heavy-duty choices. For example, a costume years ago—I might have only seen a photograph of it—it was covered with patches of different kinds of fur and sewed on to it was this kind of vegetation. I’m not sure what he was, but it was something from inside himself that was allowed to surface.

Despite this shared sense of the value of the parade for individual self-expression, Lee and Fleming had very different notions about the significance of the parade for the larger community and the city. For Lee, the parade was closely tied to his interest in spirits, primitive ritual, and nature. From that standpoint, the “Old World” charm of Greenwich Village provided an extraordinary setting—a stage upon which to perform.

There are trees on the streets in the Village. Halloween has a lot to do with nature and the changes of the season, and the fact that there are all those bare branches at that point is a great backdrop for Halloween. You see a figure against those branches, you can imagine yourself in the countryside.

Although Fleming argues that the Halloween parade has special importance because it is “the last event before people shut themselves up in apartments for winter, and that by releasing energy it prevents evil by acting as a safety valve for restless energy,” she believes the parade has less to do with reacquainting city people with the power of nature than it does with acquainting them with the very place they inhabit.

Parades let people reclaim urban spaces not just as a place of work but to renew their relationship with the environment. By animating all senses, parades change people’s relation to the city, letting them look at the city in a new way. Parades allow all different groups of people to get together in public in an important way, crossing all political, economic, religious, ethnic barriers. There are very few events in the city that do that.
The differences in Lee’s and Fleming’s respective points of view are critical for understanding the radically different perspective each had on the parade’s evolution. For Fleming, the growth of the parade into a huge spectacle is a sign of its success. For Lee, that growth is a sign of failure, because the parade has moved increasingly away from the intimate ritual he devised. By 1987, he simply wanted nothing more to do with the event. According to Fleming:

When Ralph decided to drop out of the parade I begged him to save the giant sweepers. And he wouldn’t do it. I promised him I’d hire professionals to wear them, they’d be paid, and I’d have a stage manager, you know, every assurance he could have had about the costumes. And I said, “You know Ralph, to do that, you’re like cursing the parade because I believe in the power of these things.” And he said, “I know that it might be happening, that that’s a problem but I won’t do it.” And that was another real break for me with him. It was a real break of faith with what celebrations are about. With what this parade is about. It was a real spiritual, philosophical break that happened between us.

The “spiritual, philosophical break” was by no means one-sided. Lee was more than just tired of the work involved in organizing the parade and the annual transformation of his Westbeth loft into a factory for erecting his giant floats. The fact is that the parade had long since made a “spiritual, philosophical break” with its creator.

In conducting my interviews with people who have designed some of the more impressive costumes and floats in recent parades, I found it striking how little they knew of Ralph Lee or his work. Indeed, sometimes they began participating without ever having seen the parade before. Ross Berman, a fashion stylist, describes missing the parade altogether in his first attempt to see it because he was too busy doing the makeup for his Connie Francis drag routine. Another one of his friends dressed as Veronica Lake, and a female friend came as Marilyn Monroe. Although once in costume there was plenty to do in the Village even without the parade, he found his first venture into the world of Halloween celebrants disappointing.

We hadn’t yet gotten to our conceptual Halloween. It was fun, but I felt there was something missing. It wasn’t clicking. There were a hundred other people dressed exactly the same way, doing exactly the same thing, and we felt we weren’t reaching a degree of design that we could in creating something for Halloween. So next year we decided we could do something conceptual, and there’d be four of us. And we went through everything in the world and we
decided on ’60s stewardesses. And then we came up with the idea of TWAT, which stood for “Transvestites Will Attempt Travel.” And we decided to design the costumes in a very ’60s sort of way, but sort of update them. I was the funniest, so I was Connie, and we all had names: it was Connie, Barbie, Luvie, and Tippie. And I was Connie, formerly of Lingus Airlines. So that’s where that went. And we started planning it in August, and a friend of mine made the patterns for the costumes for us and basically did the sewing.

The costumes were bright yellow, with each member wearing either red, purple, blue, or green stockings, scarf, and gloves. “Tasteful” earrings were acquired from wholesalers.

We wanted to be “conceptual,” but not be Lana Turner, Marilyn Monroe, or Jane Mansfield. We wanted to do something that would sort of be camp and sort of fun and sort of more accessible to people, because we felt that it would be a very accessible thing to be flight attendants, where they have not met Marilyn Monroe or Joan Crawford. And as it turned out we were very well received. It was beyond our wildest dreams that people would applaud us as we walked through this parade and screamed for us. And people recognized us out of costume afterward that we had never met before but could come up to us and say, “You were the TWATs. You were wonderful!” It was incredible.

For Ross Berman, the parade is closer to theater than ritual. The costumes should “make a statement and be conceptual.” The statement is spoof, and lacks a conscious political intent. “It just so happened last year when we did the TWAT thing that was when TWA was on strike. So everyone was saying, ‘Oh, how political of you.’ But we were . . . like it just happened this way.”

Robert Tabor is another young designer whose costumes for large groups—pink flamingos, goldfish, and slices of pizza—have won a good deal of public recognition. Although he suggests that there are some commercial benefits to winning prizes at places like the Palladium (a local dance and concert hall that gives out awards for the best Halloween costumes)—“It’s great exposure. People come up to you and take your name down”—he sees the parade more as

a chance to develop any character, wish, whim that may be inside you. The chance to bring it out, express it, and in a sense masquerade your true self as people know you. And it’s a chance to really be totally creative, no boundaries whatsoever and just try to in a sense fool, fool the people that know you.
The presence of such costumes and performances has promoted the evolution of the parade from ritual to theater, and finally to something akin to a theatrical review or cabaret with the framework of limited time and set space. What we see, of course, is a “folklorization” of an event through communal re-creation (Wilson 1979, 456). Indeed, the parade has come to assume some of the chaotic, ludic quality that characterizes the annual Christopher Street promenade of transvestites on Halloween night, and, to an increasing degree, one blends into the other. Indeed, many head to the promenade as soon as the parade is finished. At the moment, the principal difference between the two events has to do with the degree of the carnivalesque. The parade is structured linearly in space and framed by time. It ends when the last marchers reach Union Square. Despite attempts to continue the event with musical performances at Union Square, the crowds tend to disperse quickly; they have come to see a parade, whereas those who choose to party have numerous private options and have little need for it. In contrast, the promenade bursts forth from Christopher Street onto neighboring streets and avenues, and has no set beginning or end. There are no walls separating spectators and performers, consequently the sense of structurelessness and communitas is much stronger at the promenade than at the parade. The Halloween celebration is a good example of what MacAlloon (1984) refers to as ramified performative type: the parade is spectacle; the promenade is carnival. There are other performative genres at work here, too.

Although these Halloween festivities may be looked upon as attempts to reestablish “old beliefs” and rites, something that has a certain appeal within postmodern culture generally, the fact is that the entire event—which includes private parties, the parade, and the promenade—in its current form is now a grand urban spectacle, and much closer to festival than ritual. As Roger Abrahams notes, “The primary vocabulary of ritual underscores such motives as continuity and confirmation; the transformations put into practice are responsible for maintaining the flow of life. Festivals on the other hand, commonly operate in a way antagonistic to customary ritual confirmation” (1987, 177). Rituals heal rifts in the social fabric; festivals may open wounds, at least for the moment, and often at the more stable moments in the group’s life (188). Indeed, were the holiday to occur in the heat of the summer, a traditional time of friction in the city, the explosion some residents fear might very well take place.5

Despite the festival quality, there remains a certain ritual component, almost an archaeology of its founding intent. Indeed, Lee’s legacy is the
continuing benign nature of this event. It is possible, therefore, to divide the costumes into two major categories: those which mythologize and therefore speak to the ritual element of the parade, and those which parody or satirize and reveal the festival element of the parade. I would argue that the two elements are competing, or at the least contradictory, rhetorics that suggest two radically different points of view on the part of participants and ultimately of viewers. The fact that they occur together underscores the power of the event: festival without ritual is hardly worth the effort. Indeed, it is precisely the resulting ambiguity that gives the event its power. At the same time, each element has its own mode of symbolization. Ritual requires metonymic representation, a part standing for the whole, which lends itself to ready meaning; festival calls for metaphor, a realignment of preexisting categories (see Manning 1983, 26). Mythology is represented metonymically, parody metaphorically. These tropes are keys for understanding the political semiotics of public events; the use of one more than another will push the event in a particular political direction. Civic ceremonies, for example, rest heavily on the use of metonym; they are fundamentally conservative, and derive their authority from common wisdom. Public events that use a good deal of metaphor are those that push against the tenets of conventional understanding.

The Halloween parade suggests the complexity of a semiotic system. For example, the mythologizing component is evident in Ralph Lee’s puppets as well as in the costumes of most of the other participants, including the nonbenign spirits and monsters that appear in the parade. Ralph Little, a Trinidadian artist, in 1986 created a giant demon representing the vices of contemporary culture, particularly drugs. One might call costumes like these “statements” rather than “questions,” or “indications” rather than “subjunctions,” altering slightly the wording of Victor Turner’s evocative formulation (1982, 82). Since their relationship to official culture is by no means univocal, it might be best to see the issue of indication versus subjunction as a continuum, rather than as an absolute division. The same is not the case for those costumes that celebrate contemporary mythology, particularly the heroes of film, comic books, and television. Of these, “Star Wars” and other sci-fi costumes were the most common in 1987. Some of the more unusual costumes included a group of people wearing white, blood-splattered shirts and black pants, screaming and holding pigeons; they were acting out a scene from Alfred Hitchcock’s film, *The Birds*. Aside from the last-named group, these costumes of popular mythology have a closer fit with the
world as known. They postulate nothing new, and so the issue of statement versus question becomes one more of division than of continuum.

The satiric and parodic is the component of the parade that is more meditative on, and generally more critical of, contemporary culture and values than are the mythological components. Whereas the mythologizing element of the parade props up icons or invents new ones, the parodic is iconoclastic and political. The parodic, for example, was represented in 1987 by the United Farm Workers float led by a huge skeleton with signs suggesting that grapes are sprayed with chemicals that cause cancer among farm workers. More typically, critical floats use the rhetoric of satire: giant human roach motels, for example, were a commentary on the pest of urban life, and the three-dimensional mockup of Greenwich Village with giant skyscrapers looming ominously over it was created by a political lobby called “Save the Village.”

The specific politics of the parade are conditioned partly by the general politics of popular culture, which, as John Fiske argues, work “on the micropolitical level, not the macro level, and . . . [are] progressive, not radical” (1989, 56). The parade is also conditioned by the political economy of the design community, whose members contribute considerably to the overall quality of the spectacle. Although I do not have precise figures here, it is clear from even a random sampling of outstanding costumes that many of their creators are professionals rather than one-time amateurs. Designers are often independent contractors rather than workers, and their dreams are readily slanted toward the possibility of ownership of the means of production; they are less alienated, therefore, from the labor process. Also, their relationship to work is more complex than other occupations, so that work and leisure are not entirely in opposition to one another. Since they see themselves as artists or craftspeople, they are likely to use fulfillment or creativity as major factors in choosing a job. Moreover, self-expression is a high priority for these designers, and if there is an overall characteristic to their politics, or indeed, to their sense of self, it stems from a perception of the world radically divided between those who work to create and those who labor. In the words of Robert Tabor, “The parade brings out creativity. It promotes unleashed creativity for everyone, even if there is no creativity at their jobs . . . It opens up a part of the self for people.” Tabor’s statement suggests Herbert Marcuse’s belief that “art is committed to an emancipation of sensibility, imagination and reasoning . . .” (as quoted in Limón 1983, 38). It also suggests the tenacity of craft and its peculiar
consciousness, both as a form of resistance, despite the bureaucratization of work, and as a political agenda, determined to impact itself upon the consciousness of others.

Although there is a tendency for anthropological literature to see this type of festival as total inversion of the everyday (Babcock 1978), or, in a Marcusean sense, as a “vehicle for recognition and indictment” (Limón 1983, 31), it makes more sense to place it in the context of Abrahams and Bauman’s analysis of festival behavior on St. Vincent and La Havre Islands (1978:195). They argue that the disorder and license of the parade is not the antithesis of the order that is supposed to characterize the rest of the year, “and that many of the people who engage in license during the festival are the community agents of disorder during the remainder of the year.” Indeed, Halloween provides a nexus for the urban community, when the forces of order—in this case the commercial and business classes who inhabit the more desirable parts of the city—and disorder—artists and gays—come together, revealing how closely intertwined, as Raymond Williams suggests, hegemonic and oppositional elements are within culture (Limón 1983, 44).

The design community’s participation in the parade has increased the quality and self-expressiveness of costumes. It has also amplified the parodic and, in particular, the campiness of costumes, many of which juxtapose the least-likely combinations: blending of genders, as in tranvestitism; and blending of once discrete physical domains, as in human cocktails, human salad bars, human slices of pizza, giant walking phalluses and condoms, gumball machines, fashion police, human poodles. “Camp,” Susan Sontag writes, is essentially “love of the unnatural, of artifice and exaggeration” (1982, 105). “The whole point of Camp,” she argues, “is to dethrone the serious” (116). Camp blends domains that are hegemonically relegated to discrete and mutually exclusive categories, particularly in regard to gender, and it is in regard to gender that the Greenwich Village Halloween Parade dons its most satirical and, in a sense, political costume.

It should be noted, however, that the political issues raised by designers, particularly gay designers, are presented in a masked way—appropriately so, given the fact that this is Halloween, and perhaps, too, because the Gay Day parade in early summer has become a more appropriate setting for overt political statements, including the public demonstration of gay or lesbian affection, bonding, and sexuality. So camp/parodic in the Halloween event is integrated with the mythological, and the rhetoric of the parade remains ambiguous.
Earlier I suggested a tripartite typology of public events—civic, ethnic, and carnivalesque festivals. Civic and carnivalesque events are similar to Handelman’s (1990) typology of presentational and representational events: the former constituting an idealized model of social reality, the latter playing with and distorting reality. My middle category, “ethnic festivals,” mediates between the other two categories, and contains elements of both. Handelman’s typology includes a third category, but not a middle one. Instead, he posits a category of events that model—worlds unto themselves that may be used to bring about transformations in the real world. Although extremely evocative, there is something awkward about this typology: presentations and representations constitute opposite ends of a continuum; model suggests a separate axis that bifurcates both presentations and representations. It seems to me that presentations that model are typical of revolutionary regimes committed to creating a “new man.” Presentations that do not model, for example, the Macy’s Thanksgiving Day parade, are those committed to a preexisting vision of social reality. A similar dichotomy could be made for representational events. The material in this article suggests that Lee had constructed a parade that blended the transformational thrust of a model with an event that fits the ethnic festival category of my earlier typology. His discomfort with the parade’s evolution hinged on its having moved increasingly toward the carnivalesque side of the spectrum, whereas the model had become overwhelmed by the sheer size of the spectacle. Lee is not the only one for whom the transformational thrust of the model has significance. Indeed, those at the margins of the social and cultural system are particularly concerned with what Jameson refers to as “authentic cultural productions” (1979, 140)—another term, I would think, for model. Given that they are marginalized groups, the models they produce are likely to contain a good deal of oppositional material. They are carnivalesque and they fall, therefore, easily on the side of representation on the representation-presentation continuum. Given the above typology, one might well expect a rather complex agenda on the part of some people at the Halloween celebration. Let me return to my field notes to illustrate this point:

An hour or so after the parade has ended, I am standing on Christopher and Bleecker Streets together with thousands of other people. In the middle of the intersection I notice a man dressed in a white ballerina costume looking suspiciously like a fairy godmother dispensing wishes with a magic wand. He doesn’t pay much attention to me, I suppose, because I’m busy with a notepad rather than a
camera; I cannot exchange stardom for a spell. “Do I get a wish?” I ask. “Yes. Anything your heart desires.” “I want your phone number.” “My phone number?” “Yes. I’m an anthropologist and I’m doing some research on the Halloween parade. I’d like to talk to you.”

Two weeks later I call Fred to confirm our appointment, and we agree to meet for brunch at a local bagel shop. Just as I am about to hang up, Fred tells me to look for someone with brown curly hair wearing red glasses. Of course, I still have a mental image of someone in a white gown with a magic wand.

At the restaurant, Fred spots me first. Out of costume he looks magically transformed: a tall, slender, good-looking man about 40. We exchange greetings, order food at the counter, and head to a table. I learn that the fairy godmother is a playwright who lives in a still-not-gentrified block in “Alphabetland” (between Avenues B and C). He has been involved in the parade either as spectator or participant for the past ten years. Fred’s description of how his costume came together this year reveals the essential self-parody of his humor.

The costume was designed by someone who’s done a lot of work for dance companies. It’s sort of a takeoff of a ballet dress from the 18th century. It was beautiful. Sort of a white satin with glitter and silver sequins. I wore a blond wig with glitter and a wonderful crown—like a headdress, which actually was from the Snow Queen. I made the wings myself from foam that had been used as packing for a stereo. I used wire and glitter. When I glued the glitter I smiled because I thought, “Yes, there’s something so fanciful and frivolous about glitter that it’s like the antithesis of being down-to-earth.” They looked kind of frumpy and weren’t straight. It looked kind of like I had done a lot of flying around. I liked the bedraggled aspect. I wanted to be slightly frumpy, as if I had gone through the mill a bit myself and had still come to the fact that goodness is the bottom line. And I wore white tennis sneakers sort of like yuppie women who go to the office in sneakers. I thought, “Well, the good fairy has got to save her feet, too.” I made the wand from a wood dowel and an aluminum tinfoil Christmas tree ornament at the end. My friend Norman has all these costumes in his apartment because he ran a children’s theater. It’s sad to see all those costumes and realize that it’s really the people that make the costumes come alive and not the other way around. Some of the jewels were falling off the crown. They looked sad in the apartment. But once I got it on and I got out there it came alive. I realized it is the spirit of the performer.

Fred talked to me about the loss of two close friends who died of AIDS, and how his participation in the promenade was a way for him to emerge from mourning by helping others.
This year there seemed to be a lot more observers than participants. But even so, I must say I was touched by the crowd. I was going up to people with all their facades and defenses, and 98 percent of the people just melted. There were three Black kids, very, very angry teenagers. I went up to them and with my wand I went bonk, bonk, bonk, and they melted. One guy came as a ghoul. I bonked him on the head and nothing happened. I did it again, and he just stood there. He wouldn’t give me an inch. He was just stubbornly staring me down. So I said, “Oh, come on.” And I bonked him. And he melted. A Korean woman came up to me and said, “What does it mean when you bonk them on the head?” I said, “It means you get your wish darling!” “Oh,” she said, “do me, do me.” Then another woman dressed as a frog hurled herself at my feet and she said, “Make me into a prince!” I kept going like this [Fred motions with his outstretched arm as if he were waving a wand], but it didn’t work so I figured I would try it again. I thought, “Maybe if she wanted to be a princess it might have worked. It’s too complicated, I can’t deal with it. It’s two wishes.” I could do it. But I thought she needed to live with it a little longer.

Also, I thought it was touching. There would be a group of friends and they would say, “Oh, get him. He really needs it.” I could tell that this person was really hurting. Whether it was for personal breakup or heartbreak or some physical situation. And they came up to me with such earnestness. Like you know, “Make this better!” And it was a very rewarding thing to hit them with the wand. It seemed to cheer them up anyway.

Fred talked about Halloween, his belief in astrology, and the Christian idea of death and renewal with All Saints Day following Halloween. His comments revealed the degree to which for him, and for designers and artists, and particularly for gay people, the Halloween parade offers a moment for creation, a collective dreamtime. During Halloween, the skills of labor otherwise used to fashion consumable commodities are suddenly transformed and harnessed through leisure for self, and for collective self-expression. For gay people, Halloween is a moment of utopian wishfulness, a time when their vision of the world has the possibility of moving from periphery to center and capturing, even if only for a few short hours, the hearts of an entire city. As Fred describes his experience:

Maybe that’s mixing up a lot of symbols, but it seems like out of negativity is a lot of potential for good. And I just felt like my costume was a lot more successful than the people who were trying to be scary. I felt like there was a magnetism and a magic coming from me. And it was a very rewarding thing
to hit them with this wand. It seemed to cheer them up anyway. People have this innate reverence for the power of this mythological figure. And I guess that was what I was thinking of. It was really the power of goodness, was really what captivated me about it and also instructed me. I had no idea that I would get such a response going out as some embodiment of merry and goodness. It was really very gratifying. A friend of mine who was with me and is very spiritual, kept saying, “Fred, you’re really healing people.” And I felt it, too. I wish in this world instead of that being a momentary thing, it could be a way of living for people. I even had a fantasy of going to midtown dressed as the good fairy. I may even do it. I think there’s a magic in Halloween that allows people to suspend things and allows certain fantasies and let their own wishes come true.

CONCLUSIONS

Unlike most parades, the Village Halloween parade makes no claim to respectability. Rather than challenge the city by occupying elite turf and marching up Fifth Avenue—the typical route of ethnic events—the Halloween parade consecrates its own terrain. Unlike other parades, this dramatization of boundaries, in its origins, defined not an ethnic group but a way of life, particularly a Bohemian, artistic, and, frequently, gay way of life. One can only surmise that it is not accidental that the stimulus to create this annual celebration of Greenwich Village culture is a recent phenomenon: one hardly needs to dramatize the obvious. Whereas the gay relationship to Greenwich Village is not in dispute, except, that is, through the AIDS epidemic, Greenwich Village as a bohemian artist colony is a thing of the past. In recent years, New York neighborhoods have undergone transformations that are leaving whole sections of the city unrecognizable to their longtime residents; neighborhoods, such as Greenwich Village, long known for their bohemian or ethnic character, are no exceptions (Zukin 1982). Despite the high cost of housing in the city in general and in Greenwich Village in particular, this charming neighborhood of nineteenth century row houses has managed to maintain its link to the artists and writers’ colony that once formed the nucleus of its identity only through Westbeth, a subsidized loft building for full-time artists. The fact that the parade originated there and fanned outward through the neighborhood suggests the contentious aspect of the parade: its attempt to incorporate and consecrate space that in real life is no longer its own. Outside the narrow spatial and temporal boundaries of this parade, Greenwich Village has become
part of the ordinary work-a-day world, and not the artists’ world of “work as play.” Ironically, this is precisely why the parade grew so quickly, why it found such a ready niche within the expressive life of a great metropolis, and why it so readily gave voice to hegemonic as well as oppositional culture. Although intended as a celebration of the spirit of a unique community, in effect, the parade has become much more than that. It has simultaneously become a celebration of an emergent mainstream, of the new social classes that have substantially transformed the city and, in doing so, have destroyed, in effect, the social basis of the city as a locus for an artists’ community.9

Finally, let me add something of a purely speculative kind. The general rise in popularity of Halloween throughout the United States suggests a transformation in American culture in the individual sense of self. If the 1950s celebrated the nuclear family as the hedge against world apocalypse,10 and the 1960s gave rise to oppositionality through a collective youth culture, the 1970s saw the emergence of the New Right and a crass individualism in which the self became increasingly severed from collective obligations. This privatization has taken an interesting twist in regard to popular culture, and particularly in regard to gender. With the demise of a procreative imperative, sexuality becomes a matter of choice and lifestyle (Harris 1982). At the same time, the emergence of transnational cultures is contributing to a “world marked by borrowing and lending across porous national and cultural boundaries” (Rosaldo 1989, 217). The optional is increasingly part of the modern experience. Indeed, the expansion of the threshold of the sexual self is intricately connected to expansion of the self in other domains as well, and this manifests itself in all kinds of expressive culture, including religious beliefs and practices. Perhaps, then, the popularity of Halloween can be seen as an implicit rejection of a collective self prescribed within the Judeo-Christian tradition. Neopaganism offers, if not a world without limits, a self without social encumbrances, then at least a cultural border zone in constant motion (Rosaldo 1989). To understand the roots of that self, clearly one ought to look at the underlying structure of late capitalism. To see its continual manifestations, one must also examine “New Age” religion. Ultimately, it is within the framework of neopagan culture—and certainly as a manifestation of an emerging post-Christian culture—that we will need to place Halloween to fully understand the position it is assuming within the pantheon of American holidays.