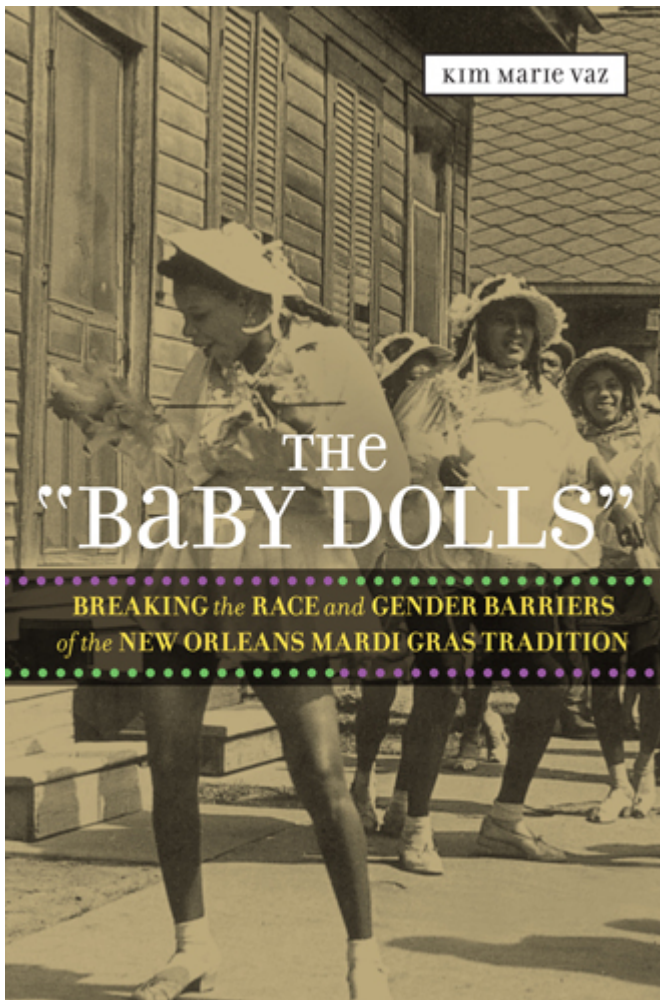


Baby Dolls instigate Carnival fun

January 11, 2013 3:30 AM Mary Ann Travis

mtravis@tulane.edu

"All fun things spread from the margins to the center," says Tulane alumna Kim Marie Vaz.



The book jacket for *The "Baby Dolls"* by Kim Marie Vaz features a 1938 photo by noted photographer Bradley Smith.

Vaz has just published [*The "Baby Dolls": Breaking the Race and Gender Barriers of the New Orleans Mardi Gras Tradition*](#) (Louisiana State University Press, 2013),

telling the story of the first masking, streetwalking groups of women at Carnival in the post-Civil War era.

In 1912, the first Baby Doll groups came together in the Perdido-Gravier area of New Orleans, known as black Storyville. They were fun-loving women coming out for Mardi Gras, wearing short, satiny skirts, looking sexy, drinking and having a good time.

The nascent Baby Doll groups were mainly composed of prostitutes and “rough” women. But the groups were always friendship-based. “That’s the beauty of it,” says Vaz.

Proper black women emulated the early Baby Dolls, and by the 1940s, Baby Doll neighborhood groups were in their heyday, says Vaz.

Following the civil rights movement, when African Americans were no longer restricted to North Claiborne Avenue as a gathering place during Mardi Gras, the Baby Doll groups largely died out, says Vaz.

“Then it became old-fashioned,” as African Americans became more integrated into the rest of New Orleans Carnival.

Baby Doll groups, however, have recently experienced a revival.

It’s amazing how the early Baby Dolls created an “expressive culture that captured the imaginations of all kinds of women – middle-class, respectable women who wanted to have fun,” says Vaz.

Vaz is an associate dean at Xavier University. On Friday (Jan. 18), she’ll be signing her book at the [opening](#) of an exhibit on the Mardi Gras masking tradition at the Presbytere in the Louisiana State Museum. Millisia White’s New Orleans Society of Dance’s Baby Doll Ladies, a professional dance troupe, will perform. Vaz and White are guest co-curators of the exhibit.

Vaz also will make a presentation at a book-signing event at 6 p.m. on Tuesday (Jan. 22) at Octavia Books, 513 Octavia St. in uptown New Orleans.