

WORDS on PLAYS

INSIGHT INTO THE PLAY, THE PLAYWRIGHT, AND THE PRODUCTION

Marcus; or The Secret of Sweet Glossary

BY ZACHARY MOULL

SHAUNTA IYUN TO MARCUS AND OSHA: “WE SHOULD HAVE FOLLOWED THE / CHRISTIAN JUBILEE TO THE CEMETERY”

Funerals in New Orleans can be comparatively upbeat events that celebrate the life of the deceased and the salvation to be found after death. In particular, a “jazz funeral” ceremony includes musical performances and dancing in the streets. In this tradition, a marching brass band leads the funeral procession from the church to the cemetery with slow-tempo dirges or somber spirituals. But after the burial—known colloquially as “the cutting loose of the body”—they play lively and joyful music as the funeral party marches back through the streets. Shango’s funeral seems to follow this basic musical pattern: the spiritual “Walk with Me Lord” begins the ceremony, while the rousing “When the Saints Go Marching In” signals its conclusion.

The jazz funeral tradition, according to folklorist and ethnographer Jacqueline Thursby, has its roots in Yoruba and Dahomey burial societies that performed public funerals for their paying members. West Africans displaced to the French colony of Louisiana by the 18th-century slave trade maintained a strong belief in the community’s responsibility for the proper burial of its dead, and eventually their descendants reestablished burial societies in the new land. The brass band used in these public funerals likely stems from the French colonial tradition of the time, in which mourners were led to the cemetery by a marching band playing military tunes—but when jazz music developed in early 20th-century New Orleans, the new genre became the hallmark of the unique ceremony.



Raising the Casket, 2008, by Lewis Watts

The jazz funeral also developed its own distinctive dance style: the “second line,” named for those who follow the family, band, and society members who make up the so-called main line of the funeral procession. The celebratory dancing of the second line is quite a sight, according to folklorist Norine Dresser in her 1999 *Multicultural Celebrations*:

Carrying an umbrella decorated with sequins, feathers, flowers, or fringe, the leader of the

second line struts along the funeral route. Those who follow imitate his exaggerated motions until the line becomes a sinuous snake dance, bobbing, zigzagging, and gyrating through the streets. Sometimes a group of dancers circles a single dancer or duos who perform their own routines. The soloists dance free-form with myriad dance styles: cake-walking, stamping, jumping, crossing of feet and legs, but the second liners maintain their special steps: toe, whole foot, knee flex, and twist.

Second-line dancers often carry elaborately decorated accessories: umbrellas, as described above, but also handkerchiefs and fans. While these items are practical against the sun and heat, they are at the same time integral props for the traditional dance.

For examples, watch:

“Snooks Eaglin RIP Jazz Funeral Secondline”

<http://www.youtube.com/tch?v=a1jiG66DVaM>

“Funeral Procession in New Orleans”

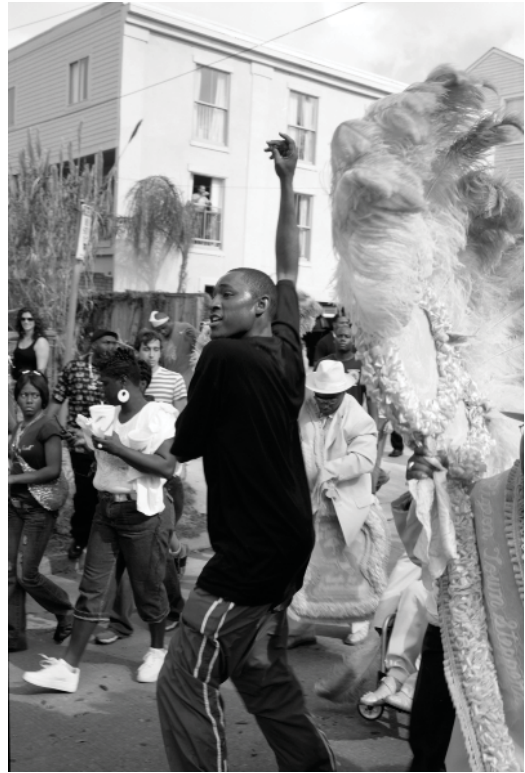
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=le7_j_U3M-0;

“New Orleans Style Funeral”

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w0s3NdfVpOE>

“Katrina’s Funeral”

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dq_PgsrACCY



2nd Line, 2008, by Lewis Watts



Former slave Nancy Green, one of the first models for Aunt Jemima, 1890s, by A. B. Frost

http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Aunt_Jemima,_AB_Frost.jpg

SHAUNTA IYUN TO MARCUS: “ONE NIGHT / MASTER COME UP ON THEM IN THEIR SECRET SPOT ’CAUSE / SOME HANDKERCHIEF HEAD OTHER SLAVE, JEALOUS OR HOLY, WENT / OFF AND TOLD”

The phrase “handkerchief-head” is an insult akin to “Uncle Tom” or “Aunt Jemima” and is in fact strongly connected with the latter. The notorious pancake-advertising Aunt Jemima, a racist stereotype of a black domestic slave woman in the plantation-era South, wore a handkerchief on her head until the image was updated in 1989. The newer version removes the handkerchief and adds pearl earrings. In market research, Aunt Jemima’s handkerchief was most frequently interpreted by African Americans as a “symbol of servitude and ignorance.” As early as the 1950s, the insults “Aunt Jemima” and “handkerchief-head” had begun to be applied pointedly to men. According to scholar M. M. Manring, this usage of the slur implied that the insulted person was “a race traitor as well as a person of suspect masculinity.” For further reading, see M. M. Manring, *Slave in a Box: The Strange Career of Aunt Jemima*, Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 1998. For a collection of 1940s images of Aunt Jemima, see <http://gawker.com/397129/just-how-racist-was-aunt-jemima>.

MARCUS IN A DAYDREAM: “YOUR MIND STARTS PLAYING ON THOSE / THINGS YOU WANT LEAST TO WANDER / LIKE SCHOOL. / LIKE LATIN. / STARTING THE SECOND YEAR IN THAT CLASS”

Louisiana was originally French and Catholic, and to this day Latin language classes are more common there than elsewhere in the country—even in the public school system.

ELEGUA TO MARCUS: “THIS HERE HEAT MAKE YOUR TITTIES SAG FURTHER SOUTH / THAN VIOLET”

Violet, Louisiana, is a town southeast of New Orleans on the banks of the Mississippi.

ELEGUA TO MARCUS: “EVERY NOW AND THEN SOMEBODY CATCH THE NUMBER OFF / SOMETHING HE [ELEGBA, MARCUS’S FATHER,] SAY”

“Numbers” is the name for an unofficial—and therefore illegal—lottery game in which players place bets on three-digit numbers from 000 to 999. The odds of winning by guessing the correct series of digits are one in a thousand, with a \$1 bet winning somewhere around \$500 depending on the local stakes. The house’s take is typically around 50 percent, so numbers games can be lucrative for the syndicates that run them. The game has its roots in the 19th century, but it became widely popular during the Great Depression and peaked in the postwar era, when, in 1960, some 1.5 million people played numbers each week in New York City alone.

Numbers was especially popular in urban African American communities, with ticket sales run through barbershops, taverns, and even milk routes. As such, numbers was largely demonized by the white-dominated press of the time—it was portrayed as a racket that exploited the poor. There is no doubt some truth to this: numbers syndicates were engaged in organized crime, after all. But numbers also created valuable entrepreneurial opportunities within a community in dire straits, and it is likely that a fair amount of the wealth accumulated by numbers runners was funneled back into the community through legitimate businesses, some of which might not have succeeded without the capital and income that numbers provided. So whether or not the game was a racket, it became an important institution within the community.

The winning numbers were taken each week from predetermined and publicly available sources: originally the last digits of the Federal Reserve Clearing House weekly report and later digits from stock prices or those generated by racetrack results. Players used a variety of techniques for selecting their three-digit number to play. Some, for example, found numbers in religious sources: playing the hymn numbers or bible verses from that week’s church service was a popular strategy, and at the height of the game’s popularity pastors would even encode numerical hints within their sermons.

The most common source for numbers, though, was dream interpretation. So called “dream books” circulated widely: these almanacs, often independently published, consisted of entries arranged in alphabetical order on common objects, situations, and events from dreams. The entries would sometimes provide a brief interpretation of the dream symbol based on a combination of folklore and pre-Freudian psychology. But more importantly, each entry listed three-digit numbers that were associated with the image—numbers that also had their roots in folklore, as well as numerology and the author’s imagination. Dreamers whose dream numbers “hit”—won the game—would be consulted time and time again for prescient hints. Numbers from the dreams of children were particularly sought after, since they were believed to be most reliable.

Numbers games dwindled as state-sanctioned lotteries were established widely in the ’70s and ’80s. But underground lotteries continue to this day, attracting clientele through their traditional places within the community and, of course, the promise of tax-free winnings. Ironically, illegal lotteries today are often based on the numbers generated by the legitimate state lotteries that displaced them.

Former Secretary of State Colin Powell's family bought their first house with winnings from a numbers game in Harlem. The following is excerpted from his memoir *My American Journey*:

My father also dreamed about numbers. He bought numbers books at the newsstands to work out winning combinations. And he still went in every day with Aunt Beryl. They usually played quarters. Then, one Saturday night, my father dreamed a number, and the next morning at St. Margaret's the *same* number appeared on the hymn board. This, surely, was God taking Luther Powell by the hand and leading him to the Promised Land. Somehow, Pop and Aunt Beryl managed to scrape up \$25 to put on the number. And they hit it, straight.

I still remember the atmosphere of joy, disbelief, and anxiety when the numbers runner delivered the brown paper bags to our house. Pop took them to his room and dumped the money on his bed, \$10,000 in tens and twenties, more than three years' pay.

For further reading, see Anthony Shafton, *Dream-Singers: The African American Way with Dreams*, New York: Wiley, 2002.

SHAUNTA IYUN TO MARCUS: "THAT'S THE SAME LADY WHO USED TO CHASE / OSHA AROUND THE PROJECTS WITH A LIGHTER"

San Pere, the community in which *Marcus; or The Secret of Sweet* is ostensibly set, is an invention of Tarell Alvin McCraney's imagination, but if it were a real place, it would, according to the playwright, lie near the town of Buras, in Plaquemines Parish, Louisiana, an area south of New Orleans at the very end of the Mississippi River Delta. McCraney has also said that the cultural world of the play is a mash-up of the Liberty Square Housing Projects in Miami, where he grew up, the infamous Magnolia Projects in New Orleans, and the more rural environment that surrounds Buras. (There are no public housing projects in Plaquemines Parish.)

For videos exploring the projects in New Orleans, see:

"Magnolia Project"

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xsj5PFKHMFQ>

"Ack-a-Azz n.o. Style @ Uptown Second Line by Magnolia Projects"

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gUbJYEpeWdc>

New Orleans' Magnolia R.I.P. Gone but Not Forgotten"

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GnZCVlhf3aw>



Liberty Square Projects in Miami, Florida

Photo by Magnus Manske
http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Liberty_Square_Housing_Projects.jpg



Magnolia Projects in New Orleans, Louisiana

Photo by Infrogmation
<http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Uptown7June06MagnoliaUnitA.jpg>

“Straight from the Projects: 3rd Ward New Orleans,” (2002), a documentary hosted by rapper/actor Ice-T that follows rapper C-Murder around the projects where he grew up

Part 1: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dcCXqit4oEM>

Part 2: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OwCymQeX054>

Part 3: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2NB2AaLmr5g>

Part 4: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1fM_lobT4cI

For photos of Buras, Louisiana (pre- and post-Katrina), see:

“Where Katrina 1st Came Ashore—Our Story: After the Storm”

<http://www.angelfire.com/la/dwalker/katrina.html>

TERRELL TO SHAUNTA IYUN AND OSHA: “LIL WHITE SKINNY GIRL DON’T GO IN THAT / DARK BASEMENT! HANNIBAL, FREDDIE, / JASON IN THE CELLAR PLAYING THE CARMINA BURANA HAUNTING MUSIC’ . . . TERRELL GIVES HIS BEST JODIE FOSTER OR JAMIE LEE, ‘MIKE, YOU THERE.’”

Terrell refers to stereotypes common to some of the most popular late-20th-century American horror films: Hannibal Lecter (played by Anthony Hopkins) is a psychologist-turned-cannibalistic-serial-killer in *Silence of the Lambs* (1991) and its sequels; Jodie Foster plays Clarice Starling, an FBI rookie tormented by Lecter as she tries to use him to catch another killer. The undead Freddy Krueger of the *Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984) franchise has a disfigured face and razor-gloved hands and hunts children in their dreams. Jason Voorhees of the *Friday the 13th* (1980) series wears a hockey mask and favors a machete. Jamie Lee Curtis plays teenage babysitter Laurie Strode in *Halloween* (1978); she is stalked on Halloween night by Michael Myers, an insane killer.

MARCUS TO OGUN SIZE: “I CAN’T EVEN SWIM.”

The demographics of nonswimming in America are defined by race and class. According to a 2008 study, only 31% of African American children aged four to eighteen could swim the length of a pool, compared to 58% of white children—and black children are three times more likely to drown than white children. This is often thought to be a vestige of pre-Civil Rights movement limitations on the use of public pools. Poor swimming skills also correlate strongly with family poverty: in the same study, children who participated in reduced-cost lunch programs at school were twice more likely than their peers to be afraid of the shallow end of a pool.

OSHOOSI SIZE IN MARCUS’S DREAM: “THESE PEOPLE AIN’T GONE NEVER HAVE NOTHING / MIGHT AS WELL GIVE ’EM SOMETHING. GAVE US / OUR OWN RAIN-MADE POOL. COMPLETE WITH TETANUS / AND RINGWORM. MAN, WE GOT OUT THAT WATER / AND GOT TO ITCHING.

Both tetanus and ringworm can indeed be spread by contact with dirty water. According to the Mayo Clinic, “Tetanus is a serious bacterial disease caused by a toxin that leads to stiffness of your jaw muscles and other muscles. Tetanus can cause severe muscle spasms, make breathing difficult and, ultimately, threaten your life.” It is a major secondary threat for flood victims who cannot be evacuated from a flooded area. According to the Mayo Clinic, “Ringworm of the body is one of several forms of ringworm, a fungal infection that develops on the top layer of your skin. It’s characterized by an itchy, red circular rash with healthy-looking skin in the middle. Ringworm gets its name from the characteristic ring that can appear, but it has nothing to do with an actual worm under your skin.”

SHAUNTA IYUN: “I’M FREEING YOU LIKE THEY DID / STEPHEN BIKO.”

MARCUS :“DIDN’T STEPHEN BIKO DIE IN JAIL?”

Stephen Biko, a leader of anti-apartheid activism in South Africa, died in police custody on September 12, 1977. The chief of police claimed that Biko had died after a hunger strike, but later that year a reporter discovered that the true cause of death was a brain injury—one that was almost certainly the result of beatings.

At the time, Biko had experienced a decade-long career of activism that began in his student days in the ’60s and continued with his leadership of the Black Consciousness Movement (BCM) of South Africa. The BCM sought to combat apartheid by rejecting its core ideology: that blacks were inferior to whites. They believed that this tenet had been internalized by black South Africans after decades of institutional racism. So they taught self-worth, pride, and empowerment to the community, embracing slogans such as “Black man, you are on your own” and “Black is beautiful,” which were also popular in the United States at around the same time. Biko testified at a 1976 trial for members of the BCM:

I think that slogan [“Black is beautiful”] has been meant to serve and I think is serving a very important aspect of our attempt to get at humanity. You are challenging the very deep roots of the Black man’s belief about himself. When you say “Black is beautiful” what in fact you are saying to him is: man, you are okay as you are, begin to look upon yourself as a human being. . . . “Black is beautiful” challenges exactly that belief which makes someone negate himself.

Due to his prominence within the anti-apartheid movement, Biko’s killing and the subsequent cover-up caused international outrage and did much to stigmatize the racism and brutality of South Africa’s regime abroad. For further reading, see “The Death of Stephen Biko,” *South Africa: Overcoming Apartheid, Building Democracy*, Michigan State University, <http://www.overcomingapartheid.msu.edu/sidebar.php?id=6>.

Shaunta Iyun is perhaps recalling the popular upbeat protest song “Free Nelson Mandela” (1984), by the Special AKA. Mandela, imprisoned in 1962, was released in 1990 and became South Africa’s first black president in 1994.

SHUA’S ENTRANCE: “ENTER SHUA WITH HIS KANGOL / LOW . . . DOWN LOW.”

Kangol hats—a type of beret—were originally produced for British soldiers during World War II. They became popular with rappers during the ’80s. A wide variety of hat styles are now sold under the Kangol brand, with its distinctive kangaroo logo. The “Down Low” is a lifestyle practiced by groups of urban African American men who have sex with both men and women, but do not self-identify as gay or bisexual.

SHUA TO MARCUS: “YOU SAID THAT AND IT WAS LIKE / ‘FLAME ON’ IN YOUR EYES, SON”

“Flame on!” is the catchphrase of comic-book hero the Human Torch from Marvel’s *The Fantastic Four*, spoken as the character employs his superpower of self-combustion. The comic-book series dates back to 1961, and a Hollywood film version of *The Fantastic Four* was released on July 8, 2005. According to *Urban Dictionary*, the phrase carries connotations of homosexuality due to the derogatory adjective “flaming,” which is applied to an overtly homosexual man. So to “flame on” someone is to hit on a member of the same sex. *Urban Dictionary* notes that this expression is often used by a nonhomosexual to deride homosexual behavior.

SHUA TO MARCUS: “NO DISRESPECT FAMO.”

According to *Urban Dictionary*, “Famo is a term of endearment for those closest to you in your social network, whether friends, family, or those from your hood.”

SHUA TO MARCUS: “GOT A LIL PHATTY”

“Phatty” is a term of approval for something large or attractive. According to *Urban Dictionary*, it is most commonly applied to a shapely rear end or a large marijuana cigarette. Here, however, Shua refers to Marcus’s erection.

SHAUNTA IYUN TO MARCUS: “THAT FAKE-ASS NE-YO KAT WITH THE USHER HAT?”

Rhythm-and-blues artists Ne-Yo and Usher both wear hats as an integral part of their personal styles. Ne-Yo has worn hats every day since he began to lose his hair in high school. His look today is inspired in part by the Rat Pack (Humphrey Bogart, Frank Sinatra, Dean Martin, Sammy Davis, Jr., et al.) and their contemporaries of the 1950s and ’60s, who, says Ne-Yo, “were fly 24 hours a day, seven days a week.”

SHAUNTA IYUN TO MARCUS: “UH UH, OH NO MA’AM. I DON’T LIKE HOW YOU GOT CREOLE ALL THE SUDDEN / MARCUS E. THROWING ALL THIS HERE WE IN THE SOUP.”

Marcus’s repeated use of the pronoun “we” perhaps reminds Shaunta Iyun of the French word *oui* (yes). This word would be used by speakers of the French-derived Louisiana Creole language. Counting speakers of both Louisiana Creole and Cajun French, around one in twenty Louisianans speaks a French-derived language at home.

“Creole” is the linguistic term for a stable hybrid language that forms from the combination of two or more separate languages. During the colonial era, new tongues developed among transplanted populations as means of communication in their new multilingual settings: Louisiana Creole, for example, has its roots in 18th-century Louisiana, then a French colony that imported Africans as slaves. French is the foundation of Louisiana Creole, but the language is influenced in both grammar and vocabulary by the languages of the first slaves brought to the colony from western Africa: Bambara, spoken in present-day Mali; Wolof, from Senegal and the surrounding area; and Yoruba, spoken by around 30 million people in Nigeria and Benin. Louisiana Creole is similar to Haitian Creole: the languages developed under similar circumstances at around the same time, and New Orleans took in many refugees of the Haitian revolution in the early 1800s. Since the influx of English speakers to the Louisiana area after the Louisiana Purchase in 1803, speakers of Louisiana Creole have increasingly added English loanwords to their French- and African-derived vocabulary.

In Louisiana, though, Creole is used not only as a linguistic term but also as an ethnic and cultural marker. The term was originally applied to all native-born Louisianans, who were “Creole” as opposed to French born. By the early 19th century, Creole referred primarily to the mixed-race descendants of French colonists and freed African slaves—the men generally in return for military service, the women often after bearing the child of a white man. So-called “Creoles of color” numbered almost 20,000 at the outbreak of the Civil War, spoke Louisiana Creole, and formed a third social class in Louisiana society. Finding themselves in an intermediate position in the racially stratified state, Creoles of color were able to own land (and slaves) and tried to emulate the dominant French culture. They were resented for this by those still enslaved, while, conversely, they were not fully accepted by the French community unless they could “pass” as white. The Creoles of color lost their special status after the Civil War and faced renewed discrimination.