

The Role of the Macabre in the Cultural Performance of New Orleans

“Come ova heeya, baby, le’me read yo’ lines! Le’me tellya some goo’ news!” In the French Quarter of New Orleans, the rows upon rows of fortune tellers and tarot card readers stretch the length of each side of Jackson Square. Flickering neon lights ignite the heavy, humid air with advertisements for anything anyone would ever need to get along in New Orleans, from maps of the city’s various historic attractions to “HUGE ASS BEERS TO GO!” These sights in the French Quarter are only a few examples of the vast diversity that inhabits New Orleans, a diversity that makes this delta at the end of the Mississippi River a haven for both vibrancy and peculiarity. This below sea-level city is riddled with incongruity in its every attribute, from the splintered, haphazard sidewalks of its streets to the drastically dissimilar neighborhoods—a lush, gated community around the block from an incredibly poverty-stricken ghetto. This radical variation that saturates the culture of New Orleans fashions the city’s reputation and generates a curiosity that lures adventurers to come and experience the one-of-a-kind lifestyle that only New Orleans offers. New Orleans stands out because of the unique manner in which its culture culminates all of its various unique attributes, from Hurricanes on Bourbon Street to historic plantations...but *especially* New Orleans’ supernatural quality. The city’s cemeteries and Voodoo heritage help to put New Orleans culture on public display, exhibiting the various qualities and complexities that render New Orleans so legendary, “performing” the culture of New Orleans—by performing its culture, the city of New Orleans itself represents a cultural performance.

The distinct culture of New Orleans stems from many various factors that, when combined, complete the puzzle of what New Orleans culture has come to signify today.

These various elements that so influence the present state of the “Big Easy” lifestyle exist survive as products of the city’s past, living evidence that there exists a direct correlation between New Orleans’ ancient heritage and her current culture. Yet New Orleans’ culture today does not simplify to merely being the medium through which we learn about the city’s past heritage. The culture that we experience today actually endures as the living heritage of ancient New Orleans—this active history makes New Orleans’ culture so absolutely matchless. The city’s renowned present-day culture displays, exhibits, and “performs” the New Orleans’ vibrant living history through some of its most unusual features: its chilling above-ground cemeteries and its heritage of Voodoo practice.

Aspects of New Orleans’ past heritage still very much exist today, so much so that avoiding a part of New Orleans history in the hustle and bustle of everyday life proves entirely impossible, from the mules and carts that offer tourists a thrilling ride through downtown to the giant riverboats that still glide over the muddy waters of the Mississippi River. These commonplace effects, among others, create a bridge from New Orleans’ past to its present. Various models of this age-jumping phenomenon exemplify the many diverse attractions that can be found around every corner of New Orleans, special doorways that lead into the intriguing, mysterious past of the “Queen of the Mississippi.” Of these attractions within New Orleans culture today, the city’s ancient cemeteries (“cities of the dead” as they are referred to in New Orleans) and strong influence of the ancient practice of Voodoo perhaps remain the most intriguing—and perhaps unsettling....these two significant elements of New Orleans’ ancient heritage perhaps prove even more significant in today’s culture, centuries after the peak of their commonplace function. By examining these two elements and their major influence in

both New Orleans' past and present, one can gain a better understanding and appreciation of the city's culture as a whole. The way in which New Orleans displays its unique character results in an exhibition of the city's foundation, a "performance" of its culture.

What is cultural performance? To perform a culture is to put the inner-workings of a particular lifestyle on display for anyone to interpret how he or she wishes, to subject an audience to the facets of an exclusive routine of existence produced from a specific history and way of life. As Victor Turner explains in The Anthropology of Performance, cultural performances present "part of the ongoing social process—the part where those people become conscious, through witnessing and often participating in such performances, of the nature, texture, style, and given meaning of their own lives as members of a sociocultural community." (22). What better contestant for this profound dissection of culture than the captivating, mystifying influence of the macabre within New Orleans? By analyzing such a prominent theme that resonates within both the past heritage and present-day culture of New Orleans, one gains insight to the intricate, multifaceted entirety of New Orleans culture, past *and* present.

Examining the above-ground, beautifully intricate, and somewhat celebratory tombs that fill New Orleans' more than forty cemeteries exposes the age-old conflict that exists between the living and the dead. Because the dead are buried above ground (due to the city's high water table) and kept closer to the living, naturally the line between immortality and lack thereof becomes blurred, perhaps even disappearing altogether. Herein lies the plight of New Orleans inhabitants: having no choice but to face death in everyday life, to confront the chilling, however inevitable, transition from life to what does or does not extend beyond it. This continuous exposure to the certain end of that with what we are familiar and the launch into something about which we are completely

uninformed directly translates into the prominent presence and incorporation of forms of death and spirituality, such as jazz funerals and Voodoo, into New Orleans' everyday culture. Because the city's inhabitants have had to bury their dead above ground, an issue about which they could do nothing, they were instead forced to adapt and improvise. This example of the cause-and-effect pattern that a culture encounters, the process of confronting and adapting in response to the conflicts that the culture faces, reveals an opportunity for self-reflection and evaluation so as to better adjust with whatever conflicts may arise during its progression.

Victor Turner introduces the idea of "performance reflexivity" explaining that "any society which hopes to be imperishable must whittle out for itself a piece of space and a while of time, in which it can look honestly at itself" (122). In order to progress, it proves crucial that every culture frequently perform an assessment of itself; without executing this vital task, a culture cannot grow and evolve. This self-reflection represents the responsibility and duty that all cultures must fulfill so as to correct what they find erroneous within themselves, to overcome what may obstruct the culture's path to growth and development. Because this process of examination and correction should occur frequently and habitually within a specific culture, the habit represents a cultural performance in itself. Richard Schechner explains that this "symbolic and reflexive behavior is the hardening into performance of social, religious, aesthetic, juridical, medical, and educational processes" stating that "performance means: never for the first time; for the second to the nth time, 'twice-behaved' behavior" (14). This reflexive self-analysis, this "twice-behaved behavior" plays a vital role within any culture because by performing the analysis and responding to the cultural flaws it reveals, life within that specific culture ultimately improves because the culture learns to overcome and rise

above the obstacles that it encounters. The ultimate goal of a cultural performance, such as New Orleans' incorporation of death and spirituality within its everyday lifestyle, is to present a manner in which deal to with the difficult issues a culture constantly faces, to leave the culture's society better than before the evaluation process occurred. The overall improvement in the wellbeing of a society remains the objective of its culture's reflexive performance behaviors because, as William Beeman explains in his "Performance Theory in an Anthropology Program", "successful performance represents the successful accomplishment of cultural representation resulting in transformations in society" since "no one is left unaffected by performance behavior" (2). The evaluation of and response to a culture's obstacles in the present results in its overall improvement in learning to handle what cultural conflicts may arise in the future. This process by which a culture scrutinizes its various inner conflicts can unveil its many multi-faceted dimensions that perhaps do not appear so obvious upon initial inspection of the culture itself.

Just as there exist many forms by which to evaluate the general relationship between a specific culture and its overall impact on a society, there also exist many ways to study and analyze the individual influences and contributions of a culture's single behaviors to its overall display, its various parts to its whole. As Toni Costonie explains about New Orleans, it "is like no other place on earth....it is a planet onto itself," describing the city "like a pot of gumbo....all those different ingredients, each distinctive, yet combined they become something brand new" (III). By examining the aspects of the nature of a location that make it unique, the *translation* and *reflection* of these traits and attributes into the specific location's present culture and lifestyle become uncovered and put on display. Through this translation, the singular contributions of the location's assorted attributes and characteristics together "perform" the location's culture.

Schechner explains how analyzing culture through “performance is a way of studying the world” and that “everything and anything can be studied ‘as’ performance” (2). Studying the unique aspects of New Orleans, such as its world-famous cemeteries and its ever-present aura of Voodoo, “as” performance “opens up long avenues of possibilities, different models of reality, whole worlds of potential arrangement” (Schechner 2). This process of examining even the tiniest, most seemingly trivial aspects of a culture “as” performance can reveal the complexity and depth of the greater mass of which the concepts represent a part, unveiling the link between a culture’s inner conflicts and its present-day lifestyle.

Even a society’s natural response to an element of its own homeland can result in the pronounced, extinguished value of this element within the society’s present culture. For example, in “The Muse is Always Half-Dressed in New Orleans,” Andrei Codrescu describes his reaction to the above-ground manner in which New Orleans’ dead are buried, explaining that the rows upon rows of weathered, towering tombs that enclose the resting place of past New Orleans inhabitants resemble, “bread ovens: I think of the dead as loaves of bread quietly mummifying there under the blistering New Orleans sun” (260). This reaction to something as commonplace as a cemetery illustrates the profound effect these “cities of the dead” have on the city’s citizens and visitors, a drastically different response one would expect from a cemetery in any other bustling metropolis. After all, the concept behind a New Orleans cemetery parallels that of any other cemetery anywhere else in the world—rows of monuments dedicated to those who lie trapped in their unremitting rest, except for one differing detail: rather than the grave sites of the deceased being concealed underground, they reside in giant white marble tombs above ground. Does this small detail warrant such a drastically different response? Certainly

no one would respond this way if visiting any other cemetery in any other city, so why here? It is not so much the above-ground tombs that generate this reaction, but rather the natural conflict that it invokes. Displaying the dead above-ground, closer to the living objectifies the conflict of mortality versus immortality. By being able to see the resting place of those whose plane of existence does not parallel his or her own, an observer is confronted by the idea of his or her own inevitable fate, an unsettling concept, to say the least. When looking at one of these decrepit tombs, its crumbling, decaying walls the only barrier between two juxtaposing existences, an observer is forced to face the reality of his or her own transience. This response to New Orleans cemeteries' bizarre twist provides for and "performs" the pronounced significance of the concepts of death and spirituality within the general culture of New Orleans. Because New Orleans society had to bury its dead above ground, an issue over which it had no control, the only other available alternative presented the acceptance of and coping with this abnormal characteristic, which resulted in its deeper implication being incorporated into New Orleans' present-day culture. By exploring the distinct components of a specific culture "as" performance, their vital roles within the culture become clear and the culture as a whole begins to take shape and display its substance.

The city of New Orleans endures as such a special place because no matter where an adventurer chooses to visit within the city, from the clamor of the French Market bustling with daily business to the shade of the giant live oak tree branches drooping from the heavy Spanish Moss in Audubon Park, he or she comes into contact with New Orleans' distinct culture and experiences, first-hand, all that it has to offer. The city of New Orleans itself is a living, breathing, functioning, authentic museum of its own exclusive culture. Unlike traditional museums, where artifacts collected from various

time periods require a bland paragraph or chart to explain their significance, New Orleans actually *encourages* its visitors to explore the city and all its dimensions—how can one be expected to learn about and appreciate a culture without being able to interact with it? In the “museum” of New Orleans, visitors are *encouraged* to sample the city’s world-renowned cuisine, to allow the funky jazz beat to possess their every step, to let loose the inner “wild child”, to participate in a terrifying séance during the midnight hour of mystery and magic in the middle of a pitch-black cemetery, and to leave a token on the grave of New Orleans’ own Voodoo priestess Marie Leveau. As Barbara Kirshenblatt-Gimblett explains in her discussion of cultural tourism in Destination Culture, the overall “experience” of the displayed culture remains most important because, “the term indexes an engagement of the senses, emotions, and imagination” (138). Fully understanding and “experiencing” a culture requires personal, emotional interaction with it through one’s senses, which leads to a greater appreciation for, not only this particular culture, but for every culture as well.

New Orleans signifies a “hot spot” for tourists and vacationers because its culture remains so distinct and concentrated. Visiting New Orleans somewhat carries the connotation of journeying to a faraway, exotic oasis among the chaos of progress throughout the rest of the United States because it offers a kind of escape. Kirshenblatt-Gimblett clarifies this sensation explaining that, “immersion in a world other than one’s own is a form of transport” (132). When visiting New Orleans’ “cities of the dead,” visitors allow themselves to be transported not only to a time when its inhabitants still possessed animation and liveliness, but also to the blurred boundary between the living and the deceased, where New Orleans’ past meets its present. Here, visitors witness the age-leaping bridge that connects New Orleans’ ancient heritage and its current-day

culture. These cemeteries represent New Orleans' living heritage and a window into its past through its present-day culture: "the tourist stands at the edge of an open grave, not with spade in hand to bury old traditions but with a pen to record them" (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 161). New Orleans' cemeteries and the city's overall aura of mystery and enchantment together help to "perform" its living heritage and culture by representing and displaying how the odd elements of New Orleans' heritage provides much of the basis and foundation of New Orleans' culture today. The culture of New Orleans presents some of the most exotic, peculiar elements found round anywhere—from the swampy, 'gator-filled bayou of its northeast corner to the creepy Voodoo shops and intoxicating native nectars of the French Quarter, there is absolutely no mistaking New Orleans' one-of-a-kind way of life.

All of the various features of New Orleans that make the city so unique and eccentric fuse together so perfectly that even the name "New Orleans" carries with it an undertone of peculiarity and mystery. The connotation associated with the name "New Orleans" makes it impossible to mistake New Orleans culture for anything other than the exotic, free-spirited (perhaps in more ways than one), haphazard, spooky nature it displays. Why is it that New Orleans seems to be the only place in America where this quality seems so prominent? First and foremost, New Orleans and its distinct attributes have perhaps the least American influence of any other city in the United States, save, of course, the influence of the Civil War and slavery within New Orleans culture. New Orleans and its diverse features seem so un-American because, rather than having developed from early Protestant, democratic ideals, New Orleans is a product of many different European and African cultural influences. As Joseph Roach points out in Cities of the Dead, the city's distinct, un-American culture results from several different cultural

“histories joined at a pivotal moment,” yielding the explosion and combination of many different cultural elements on the delta at the end of the Mississippi River (7). The merging of French Catholicism, Spanish architecture (perhaps most evident in the city’s cemeteries), Haitian Voodoo practices, and countless other influences from these assorted ethnicities, along with New Orleans’ already tropical climate, makes for quite an interesting combination.

The American version of the Voodoo religion (or “Hoodoo,” as it is called in New Orleans) found only in limited locations around the country spawned from the simultaneous clashing and intermingling of the Voodoo practice from Haiti and the Spanish and French practice of Catholicism. According to Catherine Albanese, exploring and analyzing a specific culture’s religious influences provides insight to the history and heritage of that particular culture. She also states that “identifying the religious dimension of culture can help us to understand the power of culture to knit people together” (340). During the peak of Voodoo practice in New Orleans, thousands of African-Americans would gather together in various places across the city and hold mass celebrations that lasted for several days on end, the biggest of these celebrations occurring on June twenty-third, the eve of St. John the Baptist; this major holiday continues to be celebrated still today, though the festivities no longer nearly compare to the large scale, public displays of the past (Singh screen 1). In The Encyclopedia of American Religions, Gordon Melton comments on the lingering presence of Voodoo, stating that, “Voodoo and its manifestations can be found in the black, Puerto Rican, and Cuban communities of major cities of the United States and in the occult supply shops which sell magical items,” many of which can be found in the French Quarter of downtown New Orleans (269). The continuing presence of Voodoo practices

demonstrates how the heart of New Orleans culture pulses with its living heritage and “performs” all of the various, unusual elements that fused to make one distinct, unique culture.

The other trait of New Orleans that makes its culture stand out from other American cities manifests in the city’s seeming refusal to conform to change and progress. New Orleans takes pride in preserving and exhibiting its assorted cultural influences, from protecting its antique architectural elegance from modernization to maintaining its oldest functioning historic site, the streetcar line route along St. Charles Avenue. These features display New Orleans’ somewhat backwards nature. Unlike the rest of America that hustles with the pace of progress, New Orleans refuses to participate in a process that risks erasing heritage by putting too much emphasis on the present and future. Instead, New Orleans places its focus on its past culture and heritage in order to remain true to its roots. Only in New Orleans do people work so hard to keep their city looking old and maintaining its original cultural identity. Only in New Orleans do people still “mosey,” coming and going no quicker than is completely necessary. Only in New Orleans would it be commonplace to bury the dead above ground, on display for the whole world to see. Only in New Orleans would it be acceptable to continue celebrating and glorifying a religion so misunderstood by the rest of the country. All of these various traits and behaviors, these various “performances,” present the same common concept: “the destiny of performance is a flirtation with the possibility of accomplishing, or veering from, a future that is proposed but not yet realized” (Schechner 12). It seems that a certain conflict underlies New Orleans’ various “backwards” features, an enduring struggle between the city’s inevitable progression into the contemporary era and its desire to preserve its heritage by continuing to live within it and display it publicly. This desire

to maintain its past heritage in the present illustrates Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's claim that "heritage is not lost and found, stolen and reclaimed. Despite a discourse of conservation, preservation, restoration, reclamation, recovery, re-creation, recuperation, revitalization, and regeneration, heritage provides something new in the present that has recourse to the past" (149). This process also works in reverse: by examining all of the components that make up New Orleans' unique culture, one may gain insight into the heritage of which its present day culture is a direct product. Evaluating New Orleans' varied heritage reveals many of its past influences made manifest within New Orleans' present-day culture. New Orleans embodies many cultural influences that stem from the city's wide-ranging histories and ethnicities, and plays a vital role in "performing" the culture of New Orleans. This "performance occurs" by displaying these roles as well as through their various interpretations and impacts within society, whether through the responses of New Orleans society to the city's unusual characteristics (such as the city's above-ground cemeteries), or the refusal of the culture to stifle one of its primary influences simply because its existence may be deemed "backwards" (such as the prominence of Voodoo still today).

As Raymond Boudon and Francois Bourricaud examine in A Critical Dictionary of Sociology, "the simple fact that the different elements of a cultural system coexist certainly presupposes a minimum coherence between them" (98): the various elements that comprise a specific culture all exist as compliments to each other, merging together to embody and "perform" the unique culture as its own living unit. Because performance occurs for a specific reason and fulfills a specific purpose, this underlying order of examination and discovery proves applicable to, not only New Orleans culture, but any culture, and can therefore be used as a tool to dissect a culture, analyze its various

elements, observe and evaluate how these elements “perform” the culture of which they are a part, experience the resulting product when these elements combine, and ultimately appreciate all that a culture presents to its observers. This multi-level, complex process of cultural analysis demonstrates the “reciprocity, a recursiveness between the exhibition of the world and the world as exhibition of itself” (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 144).

Evaluating and celebrating one particular culture’s “performance” translates to celebrating its role and value within the global network of culture—appreciating this complex, however delicate, framework of culture, heritage, and ethnicity helps us better understand and appreciate the human condition.

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