



Second-Lining at Death in New Orleans

By Tashel C. Bordere, PhD

Author's Preface: I wrote most of this article on "second lining" prior to Hurricane Katrina. I sit at my desk now wondering how water, an element that sustains life, could claim the lives of so many. Katrina's unwelcome visit has left destruction, denial, desertion, displacement, despair and a deep, disheartening sense of loss. Due to the dependency brought on by this mass destruction, otherwise self-sufficient families and adults must now ask questions often asked by children following loss. Who will take care of us now? Will our needs be met?

In my research with African American teens and violent death in New Orleans, I found that the teens had little faith in our nation's leader to improve their life conditions. One teen explained, "President Bush...I just think he, he don't care. He say all that stuff but...don't mean it." After having to wait days to be rescued from unsafe, unsanitary, unfathomable conditions brought on by Katrina, what will our children think now?

My family lives in New Orleans, so I have been focused on them and the hurricane. I was so worried about them that I literally did not sleep for almost two days. Now, days after the flood, still I sit a prisoner to my phone, awaiting the next time I will hear from my family. In the wake of Katrina, my mother, grandparents, uncles have lost EVERYTHING—their houses, their cars, their clothes, food, jobs in some cases, everything that sustains life, everything except their faith and hopefulness and memories of a life that no longer exists.

How does an entire family, an entire city start over? Amidst the bewilderment, my family is grateful to be alive. In a conversation with my mom, she acknowledged that, "The tears flow in the early morning hours. They trickle down our faces at night and often all during the day as we ponder the conditions." Despite their tears, they remain hopeful as they contemplate daily how to build something from nothing.

As individuals and families rebuild their lives, they will need an arena to grieve not only human and pet loss but material loss (e.g., pictures, shelter), loss of the familiar and loss of contact with people and items significant to them. Knowing that that my family is safe, I am able to focus enough to finish this article. Even in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, some New Orleans' residents are still trying to practice some of the elements of second lining as a way of coping with their losses and honoring their dead.

— Tashel C. Bordere

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New Orleans is well established as a city that finds a way to celebrate everything, everything from fruit at strawberry festivals to music at jazz festivals to even crustaceans at crawfish festivals. Yet, one of the most distinctive aspects of the culture is the way it celebrates even at death through its jazz or musical funerals often referred to by natives as “second lines.” Rooted in both the city’s rich history of jazz and in African American ceremonies dating back to the time of slavery (Breux & Aristimuno, 1997), second lines are as much a celebration of life as they are a celebration of death.

But what about violent death? Amidst the celebrating around the city (e.g., Bourbon Street, French Quarter), New Orleans is plagued by a high violent death rate among teen-aged African American males. So, what is it about a second line experience that could allow a city plagued by violent death and immersed in a culture (i.e., African Americans) with a history of sudden, violent death experiences to remain cohesive and hopeful, and maintain an undying loyalty to the city under those conditions? Except through poetry and rap songs, which seldom reach helping professionals (e.g., clinicians, clergy), we know less about the perspectives of African American youth within the city regarding their experiences with death. In my research, I talked to the people who seemed most affected by the violent death rate, teen-aged African American males reared in New Orleans, to get their perspective on the deaths of their loved ones as violent and the subsequent second line rituals as celebratory.

What are Jazz or Second Line Funerals?

Jazz or second line funerals are musical processions that typically occur in addition to traditional funerals (i.e., church, funeral home), often following the burial of the deceased. However, the timing and number of their occurrences vary across individuals. Second lines may occur shortly following the death of the deceased, days after the burial and on special anniversaries (e.g., birthday, anniversary of death). The processions are comprised of a small band, playing spirited music (e.g., “When the Saints Go Marching In”), that moves family members, friends and people passing by to a dance-like strut (Touchet, 1998). The body of the deceased may also be included as a part of the procession that travels past the home or other memorable places of the deceased (e.g., restaurant, school, place of death). As one teen described, “They’ll ride around the neighborhood with his body. The band’ll come too.”

People literally flood the streets wearing attire ranging from suits to the more popular trend of white T-shirts and other paraphernalia (e.g., bandanas, umbrellas) adorned with pictures of the deceased, quotes (e.g., bible scripture), and the person’s date of birth and death. Whereas it may be odd for a total stranger to attend the traditional funeral of an unfamiliar individual, it is generally acceptable for unfamiliar individuals to be included as a natural part of second lines. In fact, although natives often refer to the actual event as the “second line,” the term technically refers to the uninvited, yet welcomed guests who join in on the dancing to commemorate the life and death of the deceased (Jones & Batiste, 1995).

The teens were keenly aware that the purpose of second lining at death is to celebrate, remember and unite on behalf of the deceased. As one teen explained, “It’s the person that died, that’s their day.” The teens also understood that celebratory death rituals are a unique aspect of the city: “We have a lot of things that other people don’t have, like ‘second lines’ and ‘parades’.”

Who Gets to Have One?

Anyone who is interested and can cover the expenses, from the city’s highest-ranking official to the most economically disadvantaged, can have a second line. For the teen-aged African American males in my study, the ritual was particularly important in that it afforded them the opportunity to publicly celebrate the lives of deceased individuals who were significant to them and died otherwise disenfranchised deaths (Doka, 1995).

Unlike traditional funerals, which are often organized and paid for by family members, second line funerals may be organized by friends or people within the community who pool their resources, with little or no involvement from the family of the deceased. Consistent with this notion, the teens reported a more active role in the planning and observance of second lines as compared to traditional funerals. At second lines, one can witness the diversity in the adaptations made by the teens, particularly regarding the type and specialization of paraphernalia (e.g., unique quotes on T-shirts, flags blowing in the wind from car antennas featuring the deceased) to make the second line experience their own.

Is Everyone Happy or Joyful at a Second Line Funeral?

Not necessarily. Although the overall climate of second lines is joyful, particularly compared to traditional funerals that the teens described as useful but more somber, a full range of emotions may be expressed during this ritual. Most of the teens in my study were happy to celebrate and pay tribute, through dance, to the life of their deceased loved ones and their transition to a “better place.” In fact, some felt too sad to dance, but were comforted by the dancing of others on behalf of their deceased loved ones. Still others were angry about the death. Second lines gave them a chance to constructively express their anger through creative dance movements (e.g., jumping, tumbling).

Participation in second lines gave African American teen-aged males in New Orleans a unique perspective on life and death, and a creative, physical way to express their feelings at the often violent deaths of their peers.

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About the Author

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