

STRONG FACE,
OR
MISOGYNOIR

by Philana Imade Omorotionmwan

*I know not how I should commend your beauty,
because it is somewhat too brown.*

—John Lyly 'Euphues

*If I didn't define myself for myself, I'd be crunched
into other people's fantasies of me and eaten alive.*

—Audre Lorde

CHARACTERS

BENTLEY JONES

A black actress who, despite her traditionally feminine appearance, finds herself typecast in male roles in Follywood films. 20s? 30s? 40s? It's hard to tell since black don't crack, but she's in her mid 20s.

YONI BAKER

A black hip-pop star who leaves very little to the imagination because, well, she's a bad bitch. 20s? 30s? 40s? It's hard to tell since black don't crack, but she's in her early 30s.

WHIP WILLIAMS

A black comedian turned man-in-a-dress film star, [so he always does the most.] 20s? 30s? You know where this is going, but he's in his late 40s.

WHITE...? WOMAN

An "ethnically ambiguous" woman who plays all of the white women in Follywood; played by a black actress. Trying to pass for 20s since women over 30 are believed to be past their prime in Follywood, but she's really in her early 40s.

WHITE MAN

A white man who plays all of the white men in Follywood; played by a black actor. He's in his late 60s, since men in Follywood are said to be like fine wine—they only get better with age.

PLACE

Follywood, USA.

TIME

The not-so-distant-past.

Scene 7.

(A partial set meant to suggest the outdoors. WHIP and WHITE MAN alone. He should be costumed to make it clear that he is not the same director from Scene 5. This WHITE MAN is an asshole who doesn't know he's an asshole.)

WHIP

(waving goodbye)

Great job, girl! I hope you get it! We'll be in touch!

(to WHITE MAN)

She was dreadful. Who else do we have?

(BENTLEY enters.)

WHITE MAN

Hi, Bentley. So good to see you again.

BENTLEY

So good to be here. Thank you for the opportunity.

WHITE MAN

Whip, this is Bentley Jones, a fresh new face on the Follywood scene. Bentley, this is Whip Williams. You probably know him from the Manehnehwandine franchise.

BENTLEY

We've met.

WHIP

Have we?

BENTLEY

You sat with me and Yoni a few days ago at an awards show.

WHIP

I remember Yoni. No disrespect, my man. I guess my memory only makes room for the faces of gorgeous women.

What is he doing here?

WHITE MAN

He's reading for the role of Truth.

WHIP

Is that supposed to be some kind of a joke?

WHITE MAN

19th Century Cocks wants to shake things up.

WHIP

And have Follywood laughing at me instead of with me?

WHITE MAN

Look, all you have to do is read with him in this room. That's it. He's a man for chrissakes, so he probably won't even get cast— No offense.

BENTLEY

None taken.

WHITE MAN

So no one will ever even know that you kissed him.

WHIP

And what if he does get the part?

WHITE MAN

Then the two of you are going to get to know each other very well.

WHIP

I'm not kissing a man.

WHITE MAN

He's not that bad. As far as men go. He's pretty even.

BENTLEY

Thank you.

WHIP

So special effects will add the kissing in afterwards.

WHITE MAN

No. We're already over budget buying whips made from cruelty-free cowhides. If he's cast, you're going to have to kiss him.

WHIP

I don't know what you've heard, but I'm not one of the children.

WHITE MAN

Then stop acting like a baby. Be a man. Your character kisses his character. Deal with it.

WHIP

Then you need to get a stunt double. Or even your assistant. I'll kiss her.

WHITE MAN

Any double we get would cost money we don't have. And the double would need to look like Bentley, so it still wouldn't be a woman.

WHIP

Then wardrobe needs to put a wig on him or something. Lipstick. Lashes. Press on nails.

WHITE MAN

He can't wear any of those things. It's during slavery, remember? No wigs. No makeup. So Bentley's character wouldn't have looked much like a woman anyway.

WHIP

Then what did my character Robert see in her?

WHITE MAN

I'll be damned if I know. But who else was there for him to look at? He would have been killed if he followed the true heart's desire of every slave.

WHIP

Which was?

WHITE MAN

The lady of the plantation, of course.

BENTLEY

I don't think—

WHIP

You know what, the script is historically inaccurate. Slaves didn't kiss each other out in the open.

WHITE MAN

Is that true? How do you know that?

WHIP

I'm black. I know everything about slavery.

WHITE MAN

Right, right, of course. I didn't mean to be so racially insensitive. Will you forgive me?

WHIP

It's already water under the bridge. Now I'm just going to shake— what'd you say your name was, my man?

BENTLEY

Bentley.

WHIP

I'm just going to shake Bentley's hand in the scene.

WHITE MAN

A handshake? We're trying to tell a love story here. And if you can't even kiss him, then the sex scene is going to be a real challenge.

BENTLEY

Sex scene?

WHIP

But he probably won't get cast, right? No disrespect, my man. I'll even make the handshake ethnic.

WHITE MAN

How do you mean?

WHIP

Dap.

WHITE MAN

Oh yeah, I like that. That seems more authentic. Does that sound good to you, Bentley?

BENTLEY

Sure. Why not?

WHITE MAN

Great. So in the moments before this scene Whip's character Robert has been beaten by his master for seeing Isabelle. Or Traveler Truth, as she later names herself. But that doesn't stop him from running to meet with her again. Roll camera. And action.

WHIP

"Master Caitlin says I can't see you anymore."

BENTLEY

"Why not?"

WHIP

"Because he won't own the children."

BENTLEY

"Children. We haven't even gotten married yet."

WHIP

“He thinks we don’t care about being respectable because we’re slaves. But I don’t care what Master Caitlin says. You’re my Belle. And no one is going to keep us apart.”

BENTLEY

“He’ll whip you if he catches you, Robert.”

WHIP

“Then I guess I better not get cau—”

WHITE MAN

Cut. Cut. You didn’t do the dappy thing. Also, are you saying the lines right?

WHIP

Exactly as they were written on the page.

WHITE MAN

I don’t know, something’s off. You don’t sound like slaves.

BENTLEY

How did slaves sound?

WHITE MAN

You know. Slave-y.

BENTLEY

I know how they’ve been made to sound in movies. But Whip, weren’t you the one who told me that Traveler Truth spoke Dutch?

WHITE MAN

A slave who spoke Dutch? This is a drama, not a comedy.

WHIP

You must have me confused with somebody else.

WHITE MAN

Just make it sound more slave-y.

BENTLEY

But that’s not the way the words are written in the script.

WHITE MAN

They’re never written on the page that way.

WHIP

It's our job as actors to take the writer's words and make them sound the way they're supposed to. Not the way they're written.

WHITE MAN

Thank you, Whip. You understand. Let's try it again please.

WHIP

Of course. But do you think maybe you could give us an example of how you think we should sound first?

WHITE MAN

I really shouldn't. I wouldn't want it to look like I'm giving you special treatment. But I did do a little dialect coaching back in my days on Fraudway. So... your first line Whip is written as "Master Caitlin says I can't court you anymore." When you say it, it should be... "Massa Caitlin says..." No, "Massa Caitlin say I can't coat you no mo." Now you try.

WHIP

That asshole Caitlin says I can't see you anymore.

WHITE MAN

No, no. I said, Massa Caitlin say.

WHIP

[That's what I said.] Asshole says.

WHITE MAN

Let's take it word by word. Repeat after me. Massa.

WHIP

Asshole.

WHITE MAN

Mas-UH.

WHIP

Ass-HOLE.

WHITE MAN

Massa. Massa. Massa.

WHIP

What boy?

WHITE MAN

Okay... maybe let's try the second line. The script say — I mean the script says, "Because he won't own the children." When you say it, it should be... Cuz he won't own... da chilluns.

WHIP

Because he won't—

WHITE MAN
No, no. I said, "Cuz he won't."

WHIP
Because he won't.

WHITE MAN
Get rid of the "be" part. Just say the cuz. Cuz.

WHIP
Because.

WHITE MAN
Maybe if we try the ending. Da chilluns.

WHIP
The children.

WHITE MAN
Da.

WHIP
The.

WHITE MAN
Chill-uns.

WHIP
Children.

WHITE MAN
You're really bad at this. Maybe you'll be better Bentley. Your last line is written as "He'll whip you if he catches you Robert." But when you say it, it should be... "He's gon whip ya right good if he catch you Robert." Repeat after me. He's gon.

BENTLEY
He's going.

WHITE MAN
Gon.

BENTLEY
Going.

WHITE MAN

Whip ya.

BENTLEY

Whip you.

WHITE MAN

Right good.

BENTLEY

Until a river of your blood flows.

WHITE MAN

If he catch you Robert.

BENTLEY

If he catches you Robert.

WHITE MAN

You're even worse than Whip.

WHIP

You're just really good at it.

WHITE MAN

Thank you.

WHIP

Maybe you should say more of the lines at once. I think that would really help us to get a better feel for the rhythm of the language as you imagine it. Right Bentley, my man?

BENTLEY

Right...

WHITE MAN

Well, okay. If that's what it takes. I'll say the lines. You two just move your mouths for now.

WHITE MAN

(deep voice)

Massa Caitlin say I'se can't coat you no mo.

(high-pitched)

Why not?

(deep voice)

Cuz he won't own da chilluns.

(high-pitched)

Chilluns. We's ain't even jumped da broom yet.

(WHIP begins to move his mouth nonsensically, encouraging BENTLEY to follow his lead. WHITE MAN continues to recite lines underneath BENTLEY and WHIP talking, too caught up in his own bullshit to notice them.)

BENTLEY
Woow... What the fuck?

WHIP
That's how you play the game.

BENTLEY
I can't believe this—

WHIP
These motherfuckers are stupid.

BENTLEY
So why do you put up with it?

WHIP
I got bills to pay.

BENTLEY
Are they worth all this foolishness?

WHIP
It beats working at the post office.

You killed that.

You think so?

I know so.
But I'm gonna need a minute to get on your level.

WHITE MAN
Then why don't you take five while I do Bentley's reaction shots?

You're the boss.

WHITE MAN
(deep voice)
He tinks we's don't care bout bein
spectable cuz we's slaves. But I'se don't
care wut Massa Caitlin say.
(high-pitched)

But he yo massa!
(deep voice)
You's mines, Belle. You's da onliest tree I
wants to clime. N ain't no one gon keep me
on da ground. Ain't no one gon keep us
uhpart.

(high-pitched)
He's gon whip you right good if he catch
you, Robert.

(deep voice)
Den I'se guess I'se betta not git cot den.

And scene.
WHIP

WHITE MAN

WHIP

WHITE MAN

WHIP

(as he exits)

That asshole— That asshole—

WHITE MAN

You'll get there, Whip. I believe in you.

So we're going to do a few reaction shots. I'll call something out, and I need you to do what feels right. Got it?

BENTLEY

Got it.

WHITE MAN

You're picking cotton.

(BENTLEY physicalizes the action.)

Under the hot sun.

(BENTLEY physicalizes the action.)

You're praising Jesus.

(BENTLEY physicalizes the action.)

You're being whipped.

(BENTLEY physicalizes the action.)

You're cursing Jesus.

(BENTLEY physicalizes the action.)

You're jumping the broom.

(BENTLEY physicalizes the action.)

You're escaping to freedom.

(BENTLEY physicalizes the action.)

You're being sold away.

(BENTLEY physicalizes the action.)

You're being raped.

(BENTLEY doesn't move.)

I said you're being raped.

BENTLEY

Rape victims freeze. And that wasn't in her slave narrative. I did my research and—

WHITE MAN

Here we go. This is why I hate working with men. You always want to use reason instead of emotion. But I'm the only one here being paid to think.

Were you there? Did you live her life?

BENTLEY

No, but—

WHITE MAN

Maybe it didn't get written down because she didn't want to relive a traumatic experience by recounting it.

BENTLEY

But Harriet Jacobs—

WHITE MAN

You mean Tubman.

BENTLEY

No. Jacobs. There was more than one slave named Harriet. She was raped. She wrote about it.

WHITE MAN

Last I checked we were making a movie about Traveler Truth, not Harriet “Jacobs.”

BENTLEY

It’s just that I’ve been doing my research, and the facts—

WHITE MAN

Maybe the facts of the story say she wasn’t raped. But as far as the truth of this film goes, she gets raped. Otherwise, it wouldn’t be an accurate representation of the slave experience.

BENTLEY

The slave experience?

WHITE MAN

Yes. That’s what we’re trying to recreate here.

BENTLEY

Recreate?

WHITE MAN

Portray. I misspoke. Any other choices you want me to justify to you?

BENTLEY

No. I think I understand now.

WHITE MAN

You think? Great. He thinks.
Look, how about we split the difference?

BENTLEY

What do you mean?

WHITE MAN

Since we can’t agree on her being raped, can we at least agree on her getting fucked? She did have thirteen children after all.

That's right. I know how to use the Poople search engine too. To do "research."

BENTLEY

Thirteen children isn't actually tru— Never mind.

WHITE MAN

Great. You're getting fucked.

BENTLEY

Do you have to use that word?

WHITE MAN

What other word would I use?

You're getting fucked.

(BENTLEY doesn't move.)

You know, whoever ends up playing this role is going to be nominated for an impOSTER.

For portraying the rawness of Traveler Truth's life as a woman.

You're getting fucked.

(BENTLEY physicalizes the action and continues to do so as each of the following are called out in rapid succession.)

Praising Jesus.

Cursing Jesus.

Being sold away.

Picking cotton.

Getting fucked.

Jumping the broom.

Being whipped. Escaping to freedom.

Sold. Broom. Cursing. Whipped. Cotton. Freedom. Praising.

Fucked.