

The Performance of Possibilities

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You will almost certainly meet a ghost. Dressed in white or black, his clothes present you with the image of a skeleton who never takes off his mask. A quick glance scares the children and adults, and his gestures and gait makes one think of a zombie. At every crossroads, he nods with his head and shows passers-by the way to the cemetery with the aid of a little hammer. He never hurries. He remains calm and incredibly silent – deathly silent, as we say in Jacmel. Michelet Divers

You will never know, nor will you, all the stories, nor even the totality of one single story, I kept telling myself as I looked at these images. Jacques Derrida

The image of the “phantom” is haunting and powerful. The performer stands still in the midst of the preparation for the carnival performance, wrapped in white sheets with a skull and horn peering from the dangling fabric. The image speaks of the phantasmic performances embodied in the Jacmel carnival images of Leah Gordon. The lurking eye reveals a teasing of something that wants to be seen but is easily evaded by a desire of *not* wanting to be seen and revealed; but edging to be exposed and ever so present. It is at the crossroads that the phantom gestures a “nod with his head” only to show the way to the cemetery. The dormitory and depository of histories and

memories, like a Shakespearian figure, the phantom, a figure from the past, appears to foretell the future, and on occasion prescribes hints for the here and now; the phantom remains elusive, always lurking.

Leah Gordon’s images of the carnival celebration of Jacmel, Haiti, as performance ethnography, occupies a space between documentation, public memory and the phantasmic theatre of the historic imagination. Performance ethnography is a critical stance in which the ethnographer works alongside the “co-participants” to create a performance - an ongoing conversation between the participants, the ethnographer and the audience. The power of such a position is that it encourages conversations. In Michelet Divers’ book on the carnival of Jacmel, he calls for the creation of an archive and for the carnival to be more structured and organised, yet he mourns the loss of traditions. Gordon’s images as performance ethnography beautifully articulate public ritual performances and also raise questions about the documentation of public memory, communal ceremony and history.

Derrida considers the photograph as an “*ahistory*”: it is an art form that is timeless. While reproducing a

repeated moment, it also makes profound critical statements of a current reality of life—regardless of the time period represented in the image itself. Such a perspective leans itself to discuss photography in the context of performance. It provides a frame that allows one to consider photography and its unsettling powers to challenge the mere interpretation of its “frozenness” or stability as commonly assumed. Performance as a guide offers a range of perspectives to read the image, ‘revealing’ the multiple levels of embedded meanings. As Gerhard Richter opines, “the language of photography is inseparable from the experience of plurality and the plurality of experience. This double plurality encrypted in the photograph works to transform the aesthetic experience of time, language, gender and genre ...” To situate photography as a set of performances is to consider such possibilities, the ongoing levels of instability and the spaces between the obvious and the not-so obvious. Gordon’s images of this event evoke an engagement, an invitation to a seemingly endless “playfulness” that functions alongside the harsh realities of the everyday lived experience in Haiti. However, Gordon’s images invite the viewer to consider the “performative space” of the in-betweenness - the space of unsettling possibilities.

The Archive and Subversion

Photographs are witnesses to a disappearance. In *Guide du Carnaval Jacmelien* Divers asks for an “organised” archive to retain this fleeting and ever changing tradition. Divers opens his book with characters that no longer exist. He recalls the families and names of those who used to perform. Clearly a function of the text is to write down the traditions in order to preserve and retain a history. Walter Benjamin reminds us that an archive is not just a stored, categorised set of remnants, but a living thing concerned with our relationships with objects in which the collector (whom Benjamin refers to as an “anarchist”) is aware of the “subversive protests” of the assembled items and who loves them as the scene, the stage of their fate.

The *mise en scène* of Gordon’s images claim a melancholia, a set of performances often dismissed as residues representing death - as Derrida might proclaim. Rather the photographs display a yearning to the present while archiving the present past. Melancholia, as Benjamin would advance, is also one of those in-between spaces. It is a love affair between the past (or even the present) and the possibilities of the future. It is piqued by the curiosity of the future and all that it promises - yet sometimes content with the here and now and not wanting to let go. It is a powerful moment of making new choices and reflecting on life and realising that the individual has the power to decide when and how to move forward. It is the transitional period linking loss with mourning, life with death. What is seen here is a Benjaminian melancholia, a position of liberatory performance and heightened political thought. It is a celebration of the past and the beauty of the present, yet sometimes displays ambivalence about the future. What is seen in these images is a heaviness, a dark tinted veneer, not of complete sadness but a meshing with the hilarity of the carnival moment - melancholia.

The images act as a witness to Jacmel’s own political and historical ruins. Gordon usurps a simple reading of “abjection”; instead her images are testimonies of what is, and what is to come. An image of a “phantom” is set among the unmasked physical decay of the colonial architecture as other “characters” muddle about waiting to “perform”. He sits against the slightly off-focused backdrop of the graffiti-filled walls announcing forthcoming political elections - suggesting Haiti’s recent political conditions. Similarly, an image of a man adorned in an old tattered dress, purse cascading down, settling still on old worn gothic steps, holding a prominent bottle of Barbancourt rum. In the face, thinly masked with white paint, some spilling over on the head rag, his farouche grimace displays a literal masking of the real, a realness of his life, wanting to be masked, but so heavy and discernable that it peers through the sparse covering of his reality. The bottle of rum so prominent is telling its own story of exportation, of how it doubles as a sacred juice in *Vodou* ritual performances, and of how in the drudgery of daily life it →112



numbs the constant pain of living. Again the character is set on a marble stone porch against a grand door - the antiquity of Jacmel's past ever-present. The power of these images resides in the bluntness of the telling, an archiving not predicated on its functionality or their utilitarian value, rather on displaying genuine narratives of possibilities.

Documenta/Publica Memoria

Whereas we are anxious that our history not be false, their anxiety centres on the possibility that their history might become lifeless or be forgotten. Whereas in our eyes truthfulness is the paramount virtue of any historical account, in theirs what matters most is relevance and liveliness.

Karen Brown⁶

The mystery of performance is that it can never repeat itself, can never be duplicated. Gordon's images of the carnival are a constant recalling or a hailing of a Haitian philosophy of history. As a motley crew of performers - each with their own narratives and histories - make a most buoyant parade down the main thoroughfare of Jacmel, like a palimpsest, the annual ritual of carnival is a stratum, a layering of the years and histories of heretofore. And once it occurs, it spurs new meanings, new texts and new readings. Its recurrence carries with it much from its previous performances, but it is never the same. So the mere act of documenting a public memory is to document slices of various moments in the creation of a performance, a creation of a history that is always changing and multivalent. Gordon reveals slices of these ever-moving histories-in-the-making.

In the provocative image of the young man in a dress, with revealing shorts and painted in red as if bleeding on the back of the dress is *bouzen red gen sida* "ugly whore has Aids". Gordon captures not "a face of Aids" that has become a common symbol since the advent and documentation of this pandemic, but a performance that speaks of the ugly present realities of AIDS in Haiti and the country's relationship with the rest of the world. A "whore," a blameworthy female body, who has been taken

advantage of and used and polluted with the tainted semen of "industrialised" countries and left to die, refused and abjected. Part of this performance is to forbid the observer to forget, because public memories are also about the forgetting, and the defacement (there is a literal "writing on the body" of the performer in this image) of the *memory*. Gordon's images "bring insides outside, unearthing knowledge, and revealing mystery", never allowing the forgetting to be confused with the concept of the public secret. The public memory is always a part of a thing and/or event that did indeed happen but under the auspices of Gede - the trickster and spirit of death - this memory is never duplicated or repeated in the same way.

Ars Erotica

The carnival is most often associated with the carnal nature of man. The celebration of the bestial sadistic desire in full performance at the eve of Lent is a Christian ritual that calls for giving up man's sinful nature for the sacred. Philosophers such as Georges Bataille and Michel Foucault note the connection between death and erotica, one sliding up and against the other, insisting also on the sacred/spiritual powers of sexual performance. Like a funeral procession marching to the grave, the carnival performance is itself a mourning walk displaying the carnality that will need to be brought to death on the forthcoming Ash Wednesday. Though the celebration in Jacmel tends to be much more attuned to sharing of the grand narratives, it is more communal, even including children, than the overt spectacle of debauchery found in Rio de Janeiro or New Orleans. Gordon's set of images tease; there is a subtlety of the visceral erotic charge. *Ars erotica*, according to Foucault, is an act of empowerment. It expresses the erotic nature so as not to avoid or hide its utterances, for to do so is to suppress, confine and debase.

In Gordon's testament of prophets, we see images of the black male body suggestively flaunting a masculinity sometimes draped in drag. A man adorned in a simple white wedding dress, with sunglasses and well-worn flat shoes with ankle-length socks, an almost casual bow-legged →116



stance among the phallic colonial columns (with even a hint of a floral arrangement in the left corner). It is the image of an almost drag, with the hypermasculinity seeping from his body. Yet the beauty lies in the teasing of the feminine. Other images include the “Pa Roro” - the bare-chested men with shaven heads covered with a splashing of body paint, wearing palm leaf skirts covering their groins; or the “lanceurs de corde” whose bodies are covered with dark molasses provoking a glistening air, an invitation to taste and touch as they enact a sadomasochistic performance of hoisting ropes whilst their faces are covered in black hoods.

The erotic impulse of these men are undercut with their gaze into the camera lens where the viewer will not sense a “come and get me” look but instead one of “this is who I am without apology”. Theirs is a stance of confidence and assurance as the subjects acknowledge their ancestors as warriors and revolutionaries, a look recalling the Age D’Or movement when the African male body welcomed modernity. But here is also a vulnerability, an openness, a co-creation (along with the photographer), a performance welcoming a promise.

On Possibilities

This essay considers the work of Leah Gordon as performance ethnography; an ethnographic endeavor that calls for an engagement by the subject, photographer and viewer to participate in the images. There are a range of possibilities in the reading of the photographic text - as archive, document, and erotic. The area of performance also considers the act of the doing. I have watched Leah Gordon in the field, in Jacmel, walking about the city in the midst of carnival preparations, holding her Rolleicord camera, pausing occasionally to communicate with Jacmelians in *Kreyol*. What is reflected in this collection of images is her commitment to a continued dialogue toward the possibilities of what is and what can be. Communal rituals such as the carnival event display a release, a suspension of the ordinary identity, to join in a play of identities - masked or unmasked; costumed or not

costumed. Gordon simply asks her participants to stand and look. The beauty of Gordon’s images is that they encourage the viewer to look, look again, and even once more - to view the evermore complex realities of the here and now.

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