

Vodou, Penises and Bones

Ritual performances of death and eroticism in the cemetery and the junk yard of Port-au-Prince

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Viv Guede Viv Guede
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Papa Guede se ion neg solid o
Viv Guede

Praise the Guedes.
Praise the Guedes.
Papa Guede is a strong spirit.
Praise the Guedes. M. S. Laguerre (1980: 100)

We write history books to remember our ancestors, and the Haitians call on Gede, the playful trickster who is the spirit of the dead. Mercurial Gede appears in many forms and speaks through many voices. His special talent lies in viewing the facts of life from refreshing new perspectives.

K. M. Brown (2001: 19)

In the Western society a cemetery is usually a place for collective burials set apart from the ordinary living and working places of the folk. But a dead human body is commonly looked upon with ambivalent feeling by kin ... for hygienic reasons it must be removed for the company of the living. In many societies a dead human body is also regarded as polluting in the sense of involving ritual danger, which must be removed by cleansing performances. Yes, some sorrow is usually felt at the loss of a person formerly well-known. The mourning at the funeral may be quite genuine, and the memory of the person may lead to the wish to have the remains of the dead still near.

D. Francis, L. Kellaher and G. Neophytou
(2005: xvii)

Death, like performance, is mysterious. Death just happens, it disappears, leaving many questions of the unknown and the absence. Also, like performance, it leaves traces of the what was, a residue of a happening, a remorse, a remembering, perhaps even a mourning of the thing no longer. Yet, performance occupies a fluctuant and dual position of assisting with the death and dying while simultaneously being a part of the very act of the disappearance. This essay is about ritual performances of death in Haiti. Specifically, how ritual performances of death function as a material way of engaging in the political realities of the here-and-now in the context of contemporary Haiti. 'Vodou is who we are, it's nothing to be afraid of ... it protects us,' says the young man I met on my first night in Port-Au-Prince as he was clearing the recently vacant tomb. 'Death,' he continues, 'is both the beginning and the end, [Gede] death is a welcomed friend.'

My ethnographic practice is an attempt to make sense of the complex dialectics embedded in traditional ritual practices in contemporary society about death and loss within the African Diaspora (Beasley 2007 and 2008). Ritual performances are 'site[s] of experimental practice of subversive poetics, of creative tensions and transformative action' that produce 'imaginative possibilities from which may emerge ... new signs and meaning, conventions and intentions' (Comeroff and Comeroff 1993: xxix). Such traditional performances in this contemporary society are

transgressive, to be sure. Foucault and Bataille make straightforward connections between religious ecstasy and the erotic impulse with death. 'The whole business of eroticism is to strike to the inmost core of the living being, so that the heart stands still. The transition from the normal state to that of erotic desire presupposes a partial dissolution of the person as he exists in the realm of discontinuity' (Bataille 1962: 36). Articulated under the auspices of taboos and transgressive politics, Bataille (1986) suggests transgression is a transcendence of sorts of societal, usually oppressive, structures. To transgress is to extend oneself beyond such laws only to fall back to have a better sense of political strategies with which to confront and combat such structures. In the context of Vodou rituals of Gede there is a meshing, a transgressive set of performances where eroticism and death are paramount, because in the realm of Africana cosmologies such distinctions between the sacred and profane collapse, as they are understood as everyday lived practices. This essay contemplates such 'collapsing' and 'everyday lived practices' to reveal the complexities of the Haitian Vodou conceptions of death, represented by the sprite (*lwa*) Gede.

I went to Haiti to research Gede and rituals of death. After sharing with my guide the topic of my research, he claimed, 'Oh, there is a funeral tomorrow at the cemetery', to which I replied, 'How do you know that there is a funeral tomorrow, Port-au-Prince is a big city?' He said, 'Death is very common to us here in Haiti.' What they define as the commonality of death is what I want to explore in this work. How, through the concept of traditional rituals, the lens of performance provides insight as a literal way of dealing with death. Traditional ritual performances of Vodou are highly politically potent, as they - through subversive, poetic and creation of new imaginative possibilities - speak to the contemporary political conditions of the nation and the people who perform them.

GEDE AND DEATH

Vodou spirits are not models of the well-lived life; rather, they mirror the full range of possibilities inherent in the particular slice of life over which they preside. K. M. Brown (2001: 6)

For three years I have witnessed and participated in the Gede festival in Port-au-Prince. The Gede is a celebration to honour death, filled with ritual performances in the grand cemetery. In 2008 I walked through the narrow pathways, surrounded by the gothic statuary of tombs - some with bare cement slabs revealing the empty lots - spaces I imagined as once occupied by a physical body and which perhaps once were and sometimes are. On a most-holy of days, 1 November, bodies squeeze through the tight halls of this medina to the shrine of the Baron Samdi (the lord of the Cemetery the incarnate of Gede). On this particular visit, I allowed my body to be whisked into the midst of the crowd - body to body, sweating, the smell of the rum and chili peppers and moonshine - the libations so generously sprayed on bodies and the tall black cross in the middle of the cemetery mingled with the intense smell of incense and the ever-potent Vodou candles. The graveyard was anxious and rambunctious, it was, as Somé claims (1993), that sacred spaces are never solemn but boisterous and exuberant moments in which we tend to make sense of the complexities of our daily lives - *if* we succumb to the ritual, Somé reminds us, and allow our spirit to be challenged and changed. Vodou rituals are mysterious just as they are real and mundane.

Vodou is based on a series of *lwa*, spirits, who guide its followers. According to Brown, 'Vodou spirits are larger than life but not other than life' (2001: 6). The practitioner maintains relationships with the *lwa* through an ongoing cycle of alms-giving, both the 'tangible (food, shelter, money) and intangibles (respect, deference, love)' (2001: 7). The Vodou spirits resemble life and everyday practices and are in tune with the daily travails of life. Gede - the



spirit of death - occupies a very special place in the pantheon on Vodou spirits. He is the most powerful *lwa*, who serves both as the lord of the cemetery and the porter of the spirits of the dead to the outer realm. Noted as a trickster - a performance artist who embodies an essence (both physical and intangible) that trembles the here-and-now by making known the brunt realities of the living - who is obsessed with truth, often through hilarious, exaggerated and at times bawdy performances that transgress the mundanity of the living. All the while Gede is a loving energy and is the great protector of children. The symbol of Gede is an erect penis. Once at a ceremony I attended, when the spirit of Gede mounted one of the worshippers, many fled the spiritual house. I was later told that when Gede enters a space, people flee because he exposes secrets and hidden desires, which like an erect penis cannot be hidden. The tumescent organ is a symbol of both the generosity and giving of life, the ethos of truth and honesty and

the essence of what was, the prevaricating death. To further explore how Gede (death) and performance function to unravel the realities of the living and the dead, I consider two sites - a graveyard and a junkyard. The graveyard, the dormitory of bodily remains, is the location to ask questions of corporeality, how the body, through performance, is configured in death rituals. And the junkyard, the dumping-ground of trash and remnants and objects of the 'what was, is transformed, through performance to contemplate social critique of the industrialized world and a recycled aesthetic, thereby remaking the domain of what is considered Haitian art. These two sites double as sacred and secular and thus illustrate how death is negotiated through a highly complex set of discourses that wander between epistemologies of Africana diasporic thought and erotic contours of bodily yearnings. Despite the largely adverse representation of Vodou in the West, it is a highly complex body of thought with an exhaustive history.

BODIES IN THE GRAVEYARD:
CIMETIÈRE EXTERIEUR

The *Cimetière Exterieur* is an expansive resting place situated in the centre of Port-au-Prince at the edge of the Grand Rue neighbourhood. The exact age of the graveyard is unknown, but the dull sheen and the decaying cathedrals that sit atop the ground reveal an aged and almost ghostly and serenely gothic space. During a mere walk-through, one can see vacant tombs and the scurrying mice along with a steady stream of children hiding in and about - some even sleeping in - the monuments to the dead. On Thursdays, the day of Gede, there is rapid stream of practitioners parading to the northern edge of the cemetery where one comes upon the shrine - a big, black cross placed in front of a wall with a mural of Gede depicted as a skeleton with a top hat and bow tie. One particular Thursday I saw a small group gathered about the shrine, their chants to Gede continue until one became mounted. Mounting is a process by which the lwa infuses the body and begins to channel works and actions of the spirit. The body participates in a performance of spirit possession, often donning a particular costume, or not, but one is able to identify the *lwa* by unique gestures, mannerisms and actions associated with a particular spirit. The body is a vessel to the spirit world.

As I described above, many come out to the cemetery to make alms to the lwa of the dead, particularly on the first day of November, which is considered the Festival of Gede (known as the Day of the Dead in many parts of the world). Those mounted began to enter a performance in which their faces are dosed with a white powder, they are dressed in white or purple with the apparent black cross inscribed (fig. 1), black-rimmed glasses are set atop the face upside down and a kerchief is tied around the neck or head. Individuals swarm to the shrine to get even a glimpse Gede and to leave an offering, or to light a candle as to evoke a prayer. Gede, who appears through a human body, channels truths to those who are able to make it to his presence

and to hear his voice. I witness a man whispering to Gede, then begin crying as Gede hugs him and imparts sacred truths about his life. The man then proceeds to take the sacred juice (rum plus moonshine plus hot peppers) as a lubricant to masturbate at the shrine. What could be recognized as the most intimate erotic action in the West, becomes a most sacred public performance where the semen - the fluids of the flesh - becomes a sacred release of the spirit. To perform such at this sacred site is an honoured and blessed stance. As Gede is both the life and death, the semen (which is used in some Gede rituals as a healing potion) is a reminder of life and also that even bodily fluids have a sacred purpose and are used in these meaningful sacred meetings. This underscores the notion that the body is the vessel of the spirit.

As I made my way through the small canal from the shrine, I met a young man rattling a plastic pail, our eyes encountered, not a word spoken but he garnered my attention by rattling the bucket. I stood and gazed at his performance as he shook then discarded bones on the ground. Human bones cascaded. He gestured, and chanted to Gede, then proceeded to touch the bones as if to read them to me. The fragmented bodily remains are but reminders of the harsh realities of the cost of interment in Haiti. The cost of a tomb is too high, and therefore renting becomes a viable option. But then, after months of neglect, the owners discard the bones to make way for others. The tombs become temporary dormitories for the remains. The body is secondary to the spirit. It is as common to observe human skulls and bones as it is to observe many of the vacant tombs about the cemetery. In the context of Haitian Vodou, to engage with death is to open the physical body to a series of performative possibilities. The body becomes the site of the sacred and profane simultaneously, never fully separating the two but interrogating a host of limitless engagements with the spiritual realm. Through performance, the spirit of death channels his utterances through a vessel, the physical body.

THE JUNKYARD: THE GRAND RUE

The Grand Rue neighborhood is situated right in the center of the city. On the official map of the city the name Grand Rue does not appear, rather inscribed in its place is Blvd. Jn. Jacques Dessalines, the name of the great leader of the slave rebellion and later self proclaimed emperor of Haiti. But to all who reside on the island, this road, this major thoroughfare and the community of which it surrounds is referred to simply as the Grand Rue. Perhaps because of the expansive length as it protrudes through the busy conurbation linking various neighbourhoods with commerce and people. The true width of the street is disguised for the spillage of people and cars pushing their way through the bustling boulevard. The narrow sidewalks are claimed by the street vendors selling everything from lumber, automobile fragments, to fresh fruits and freshly fried goat from the street vendors hovering over the piping hot cauldron of oil.

But only steps away, peering through the hustle

and clamour and movement of bodies the entrance of the Grand Rue neighbourhood could be easily be passed as it were not for the tall sculpture figure of Gede with an extended penis dangling at its entrance. The sculpture serves as an invitation to a performance space of the dead. Its opening yard is a 'sculptural collages of engine manifolds, TV sets, wheel hubcaps, skulls and discarded lumber have transformed the detritus of a failing economy into radical, morbid and phallic sculptures, mainly inspired by the Vodou spirit of the cemetery, Gede, the guardians of the dead and the masters of the phallus.'

(Gordon 2008)

Their work often references tropes from the African Diaspora, futuristic endeavours, and most profoundly the Vodou ideology, particularly the energy of Gede. The three main artists Celeur Jean Hérard, André Eugène and Guyodo function as shamans transforming a community through teaching and leading other community members in the spiritual mission of reworking the dead debris to magnificent shrines to Gede.





In her august book *Waste and Want*, cultural historian Susan Strasser, claims that the nature of trash has changed in the twentieth century. Insisting, perhaps, that the concept of waste within the western hemisphere that once was associated with worn-out, broken and beyond-repair objects is now defined as replacement for out-of-date things (the rapid change of the nature of objects due to technology) for something new and the discarding of things for the sake of space. Strasser, unlike Michael Thompson and his articulation of rubbish theory, connects the concepts of waste with marginality. We tend to place our waste away from the centre of our daily livelihood - in the far reaches of the backyard, in the basement, and even in the outskirts of the city. Industrial nations even dump waste in 'third world' countries presenting a tangible performance of the abject - physically graphing 'dirt' and waste on people and the physical places in which they inhabit. The junkyard of the Grand Rue is such a place.

Of the three artists, I have worked most closely with André Eugène, who is considered the leader of the collective. As we stood in his 'gallery' space,

a portioned off space full of his effigies, he explains, 'We make do with what we have ... though Gede we see what can be, not what is.' Through an understanding of Gede, the artists of this community transform 'dead' objects into spiritual fetishes. Objects that represent the greed of the industrialized countries are a reminder of how Haiti is placed in the context of the international arena, yet such dead objects are endowed with performative elements that speak to a reuse as resistance and critique. One example is a shoe sculpture by the artist Celeur. He gestures at a large wall with hundreds of shoes scattered about and questions why the industrialized nations would send such shoes that cannot be worn in Haiti. Spiked high-heel shoes, and thigh-high thick leather boots, footwear that speaks to ostentation rather than function, greed rather than practicality. Celeur posits, 'Haiti needs to produce our own shoes, we need our own shoe companies.' This rhetoric of community empowerment is disseminated throughout the makeshift community as the men of the collective mentor and train children in the art of making-do. 'We are passionate about our art, and we are passionate about Vodou ... we must teach our children,' says André Eugène. He recalls his own childhood, an emotional topic for him, which explains his alliance to Gede. Born during the Duvalier regimes, having lost his entire family either through disease or through political violence, he concedes, 'Gede has protected me and gave me these gifts.' It is fitting that he devotes his time to nurturing children through art practices to Gede, who is also the protector of children. On my final day on the site, André Eugène walked me through the children's gallery to a small patch on a wall where prominently displayed are small human-like figurines carved out of old tires and doll parts plastered to hubcaps - produced by the children, each work reveals stories of the young as they cope in the junkyard. He gingerly explained each piece like a parent doting on his children. He laments, 'It's about life as much as it is about death. ... It is not the art of making-do, it's the art of survival.'

The political instability has contributed to the death of tourism in Haiti. Though the artists have garnered some international press, showing work in galleries in Chicago, Geneva and Miami and commissioned to produce the leading sculpture for the Museum of Slavery in Birmingham, England, the circulation of their work continues to be limited to those who, like me, happen upon them during Vodou ceremonies of death in Port-au-Prince. Yet they persist, producing a junkyard of sculptures, penises of Gede, performances that are transforming community and the domain of Haitian art.

PLAYING WITH BONES: REDUX

Situated in André Eugène's tiny sitting room are special sculptures that incorporate human skulls alongside the debris. Of the magnificent pieces perhaps the only item made in Haiti are the human skulls. I have witnessed André Eugène feed the skulls a hash of squash and millet mingled with a liquid as he chats a song to Gede. He tells me this is his alms to Gede. Like the young man in the cemetery, playing with the human remains is but a hailing to Gede, a remembrance of the Ancestors, who function to guide the living, and a constant reminder of the political potency and performative nature of Death. While ancestors (the dead) are honoured and revered, they also provide direction for the living and simultaneously recall the multiple meanings of Death. To engage with Gede is to respond to profound realities of the commonality of death, but even more, the essence of performance provides a frame in which to partake in the mysteries of Gede.

POSTSCRIPT

From November 28 to December 18 2009, I co-curated the Ghetto Biennale (www.GhettoBiennale.com) an international art happening where artists from around the world converged in the Grand Rue neighborhood to make art along side the Haitian artists. The event marked the sense of possibilities to come. Less than three weeks after the Biennale, the

country was shaken by the devastating earthquake. We lost one of the Grand Rue artists "Louco", it is through his memory that we reflect on that momentous moment in the Grand Rue and cherish the spirit of possibilities of what is to come.

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