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Art, Gender and Gods:

A Research Trip to the Ghetto Biennale, Port-au-Prince

Within existing Caribbean (mostly fictional) representations, homosexual and trans characters tend to appear in supporting peripheral roles, often to affirm and solidify hegemonic gender binaries. Visibility of gender crossing in popular Caribbean culture, most apparent within the parameters of carnival performance, works in much the same way, more often exhibiting and reflecting dominant ideas of gender, than destabilizing and questioning the boundaries themselves.

There is a part of my project which deals with this more popular expression of transvestism, found in Carnival representation, using the work of a British artist, who like myself hails from the North West of England, Leah Gordon, whose 2008 film, *Bounda pa Bounda: A Drag Zaka*, depicts drag parody performed within a Rara band tradition in Haiti.

[Rara is the music of carnival, traditionally performed during the period of Karèm (lent) in Haiti and strongly connected to Vodou culture. Haitian rara groups can even be seen in the carnival of Martinique, recognisable by those long metal horn instruments, which create a monotone sound, but to quite complex rhythms.]

With little at stake, due to the ephemeral and sanctioned nature of what can be seen as harmless gender mimicry, the ease with which such temporary crossover is obtained makes the act a particularly intrusive form of impersonation. The man, adopting female dress, carelessly forays into the sphere of the Other (the woman), without any concern for 'realness' in order to mock that which he does not successfully emulate in what Helen Gilbert terms a "spectacle of not passing" (2003). As a process of reinscribing and renewing aesthetic standards however, it constitutes an important means of emphasizing prevailing modes of representation.

As several Caribbean scholars have examined elsewhere, cross-dressing is a fundamental element of pre-Lenten carnival festivities, particularly in the carnival of Martinique, for example I am thinking of the work of David Murray and Rochais and Bruneteaux. A sanctioned transgression which surfaces at 'l'heure de la fête', cross-dressing has been a part of traditional mas performances in the region for over one hundred years. Within a Martinican context, Edouard Glissant draws our attention to the carnival parody of the 'mariage burlesque', where we see an inversion of roles and relationships within the family unit. The man becomes the woman and the woman becomes the man, resulting in a parade of marvellously mismatching couples:

Il est une occasion en Martinique où hommes et femmes se rencontrent d'accord pour donner une semblable représentation de leurs rapports: c'est dans la coutume des mariages burlesques du Carnaval, critique de la structure familiale. L'homme y tient le rôle de l'épouse

(le plus souvent enceinte) et la femme celui de l'époux ; un adulte y tient le rôle d'un enfant au berceau...

Il n'est pas surprenant que le mariage burlesque soit une des rares formes encore vivaces de ce grand questionnement populaire et collectif qu'était et que ne peut plus être le carnaval martiniquais. (1981, 299)

There is an occasion in Martinique in which men and women both agree to give an interpretation of their relationship. This is the tradition of the burlesque marriage during carnival, a critique of family structure. The man adopts the role of the wife (more often pregnant) and the woman that of the husband; an adult adopts the role of an infant in the crib.

It is not surprising that the burlesque marriage is one of the rare forms still alive of that great popular and collective questioning that can only be the Martinican carnival.

While recognisable as a parody, in the Bakhtinian sense, of the still firmly idealised Judeo-Christian model of a nuclear family - in that such transvestite expressions temporarily invert social roles for a ritually prescribed time and in an ostensibly sealed public space - it is not clear whether they constitute a convincing critique as Glissant would suggest. It seems impossible for them to realistically undermine existing gender binaries within the sanctioned space and limited time period of the official carnival event. While such performed codes of relational masculinity and femininity do to some extent display and draw our attention to the hegemonic gender roles in circulation, in what remains, due to colonialism and slavery, a largely heteropatriarchal region, it is surely only where such spectacles 'leak' or produce 'slippage', beyond the bourgeois structure of the parade and Cartesian rationalism, that true carnivalesque resistance might be in evidence. By leakage, I refer to their permeation of and potential reception on new stages, within new arenas, working within and around their prescribed borders to propose renewed critical meaning.

British artist Leah Gordon has spent the last 20 years photographing and collecting the oral histories of characters from the carnival of Jacmel. The festivities in this south-eastern town of Haiti are particularly relevant in consideration of the aforementioned designation of particular spaces for the performance of subversion. Although the carnival celebrations in Jacmel take place according to the Catholic calendar of Lenten observances, they do not adhere to the state-structured, parade formation of other, more popular, commercial Caribbean carnivals. Jacmel carnival has been described by Richard Fleming, as truly "impromptu theatre [. . .] not so much a parade as a collective flowering of street performance" (Gordon 2010, 16). In Jacmelian celebrations, therefore, there are no boundaries as to where the narratives of Haitian history are played out, and walking the streets with her camera, Gordon would often bump into errant characters disguised *en mas* down small side streets. The spirits of Vodou, the *lwa*, inform the characters of this carnival, in which as Fleming explains, "marching in a rara amongst a crush is an almost trance-inducing experience" (24).

During her time in Haiti, Gordon produced a short film, *Bounda pa Bounda* (translated by Gordon as 'Arse by Cheek'; 2008). The film displays the visual 'making up' and 'putting on' transformation of the male leader of the Rara band, Dieuli Laurent, as he applies feminine costuming, in preparation for a performance honouring *lwa* Gran Bwa, the spirit of the forest. Although mostly

shot in close-up, the film allows the viewer, to a certain extent, to explore the space in which he prepares his costume. The *bagi*, described by Alfred Métraux as “the wings of a stage” (1959, 126), normally adjacent to the peristil or main ceremonial space, is shown as a sacred space with the back wall taken up by a Vodou altar and a place where the stock of appropriate props and costumes are stored, in preparation for the moment of possession. Thus in Gordon’s film the straw satchel and *bakoua* style hat, belonging to Kouzen Zaka, can be seen hung up at the ready.

In the film the *bagi* doubles up as a rehearsal space in which we see how the performer uses mirrors to practice his look, whilst in the background we can hear the band warming up with songs or lyrical *pwen*, created by Laurent such as:

“Bounda’m tro piti, ou ap taye’m compa ”

(“My arse is too small, you are going to put me on the kompa rhythm”)

The lyrical content here echoes the parody of the costume of the bandleader with its strap on padded out bottom. The taunting comment of his enlarged buttocks is based on a male predication that associates the female costume of having a large posterior with the social skill of dancing a good kompa. In this instance the application of false curves, wig, perfume and cosmetics, the ‘almost but not quite’ drag as a uni-form not so much conceals, but rather reveals and magnifies the hypermasculine posturing of the wearer. The designed lack of effort to ‘pass’ in this spectacle, as in the deliberate flaunting of his unshaven moustache, further accentuates dominant visions of the female body in its male authorship and before he emerges to join the band he brandishes the phallic machete wrapped in a red flag mirroring the images of the warrior spirit Ogou behind him. Laurent’s symbolic use of the machete, a ‘masculine’ weapon of revolt amongst the maroon slaves, further emphasizes gender distinction as well as the presence of a penis, as further confirmation for the onlooker of the ‘truth’ that lies beneath the costume.

Ogou Ferraille is a warrior, originally from Nigeria, who represents power and militancy. Gordon’s camera draws our attention to the warrior spirit Ogou through his incorporation into Catholic chromolithographs of Sen Jak (Saint James) lining the walls of the *bagi*, and also to the surplus army shirt, which has been removed and hung next to the religious portraits. Gordon juxtaposes these visual props, reminding us of the military origins of the Rara band in organized peasant armies, which can be traced back to the maroon bands of pre-revolutionary Haiti, who used drums and Vodou rites to spur on the troops. Historian Thomas Madiou described the Cul-de-Sac insurgent marches of 1791 headed by “an African of great height and Herculean strength” who “ruled by superstition, always carrying under his arm a large white cock which, he pretended, transmitted to him orders from heaven” and was “preceded by the music of drums, lambis, trumpets, and sorcerers, or papas, who chanted that he was invulnerable” (1847 t.1, 71). On contemporary Rara rituals, Elizabeth McAlister has noted how the bands “construct themselves as popular armies and move into public space like battalions prepared for war” (2010, 140).

There is not enough time today, but I should at least refer, if only in passing, to the maternal *lwa*, Ezili Danto, the poto-mitan spirit, considered by some as the patronne of homosexuals in Haiti and who fought on the front line of resistance in the revolution. If we take the Haitian ten Gourdes note, on first glance it’s possible to see Dessalines with his distinctive hat, but on closer

inspection, the image depicts an angry young woman, Sanité Belair. There are vodouisants who say that this girl, shown dressed in a man's military uniform with a single earring, is possessed. The earring that you see there is the power of Danto, a powerful petwo *lwa*, who is a warrior like Ogou Ferrailles.

To return to Ogou, his own power resides in his machete, which is sacred to him. To show that he is the master of this weapon, he presses its sharp edge against his arm or thigh to show that the flesh has not been pierced.

[Film clip of Vodou ceremony]

In December 2011 I had the opportunity to travel to Port-au-Prince, Haiti, to participate in the 2nd edition of the Ghetto Biennale, which takes place in an area of the capital known as Gran Ri, where a community of sculptors, some of whom you saw in the clip, live and work. Leah Gordon and Andre Eugène, an artist from the Gran Ri, founded the event in 2009 in order to bring into view local artists and allow them to participate actively in a globalised system of contemporary art. A system which prevents many artists from travelling and attending in person, their own exhibitions. The aim of the biennale is to bring together international visual artists, filmmakers and scholars to allow for on-site collaboration with Haitian artists. As art historian Legrace Benson puts it, "The Ghetto Biennale is the most dynamically pro-art happening now. It allows art, gives it place, opens up the ground and the mind."

The originality of this art biennale is due to its localisation in the disadvantaged yard of the Gran Ri, where a maze of makeshift workshops serve also as home for a group of sculptors and artisans, known collectively as *Atis Rezistans*, who transmit their skills directly via a paternal figure to the new generation of young boys within the community, known as *Ti-moun rezistans*. Working with methods of *bricolage*, they carnivalize the detritus of the capital, often waste which is dumped in Haiti by Western nations, transforming it into totemic sculptural pieces, which they then sell back to Western tourists. Vodou also plays an influential role in this syncretic weave of the superfluous, reflecting the infusion of Vodou culture in everyday Haitian society. Arriving in the neighbourhood, what immediately struck me was the proliferation of the phallic presence of *gédé*, the trickster spirit of love and death, who seems to reign in this space, which initially felt very masculine. It was therefore against this backdrop that the carnivalesque theatre of the Ghetto Biennale would be played out.

The project I undertook in Haiti, *Wob ki vwayaje* (Commuting Costumes), sought to explore dress as a political and gendered document of the archive. The idea was to work from a series of images and historical descriptions of women during the revolutionary period in Haiti, sourced during a period of archival research I carried out in Aix-en-Provence, France. I was to create a series of empty dresses made out of paper, which would provoke interesting connections between the garment as object; ideas around masculinity and femininity; and the spectator in the contemporary context of the Gran Ri neighbourhood. What I ultimately accomplished during the biennale was a process of paper costume making, where I worked with some of the young women residents and a local tailor, incorporating historical imagery with techniques learnt from Haitian artists.

By the end of the exhibition the costumes had been torn and pieced back together so many times that people began comparing them to the equally fragile, white costumes worn by the female *serviteurs* in the Vodou ceremonies. What interested me was how men and women formed a relationship with these objects emptied of a body. For example two of the pieces were installed in a more feminine, domestic space, where each day I would find the women sat doing their washing, which enabled moments even, when the costumes became intermingled with the washing hung out to dry. While the women lingered and worked in this space, it was more a space of passage for the men of the community. However what struck me was the willingness of the men to be photographed with the dresses as they passed through this particular passageway. There was one man who saw them as wedding dresses and wanted to be photographed with his companion, but otherwise, most of the men wanted to be represented on their own with the works. There was also a woven paper hat which we made, which travelled all over the neighbourhood, continually disappearing and reappearing with a new wearer throughout the festivities. The resultant pieces became therefore less important than the way they were used, how they integrated and disintegrated as accessories in the blurred scenes of masculinity and femininity of the space. I really felt like I was in a space of undiscerning appropriation and I began to understand the infusion of the disconcerting figure of the *gédé* into this mix. As Maya Deren described, 'he is both tattered and beautiful. He confounds sex with sex, dressing women as men and men as women.'(1953, 111)