

A Cross-Dressed Kanaval

Charlotte Hammond

The carnival performer in Leah Gordon's photograph *Bouzin Rèd Genyen SIDA* poses defiantly, one hand revealing lace knickers while the other holds up a small photo of the feminine inspiration behind the reveller's costume. The performer, whose costume crosses enduring colonial borders of gender, patriarchy and race, holds the image as if holding a mirror to Haitian society. The masquerade offers a critique of a post-slavery society, where many of the new elite classes of Haiti used the family to reproduce colonial patterns in order to obtain the "privileges of humanity," "civilisation" and modernity. The Haitian Revolution that led to Haiti's independence in 1804 did not result in the immediate and absolute obliteration of European patriarchal values. Instead, the internalisation of French family values, a remnant of the colonial system, persisted in post-emancipation Haitian society. These family ideals promoted a Republican view of the civilised body, which aimed to clearly define Manichean oppositions of gender and race. Such discourse positioned bodies as either male or female, white or non-white, and sought to prohibit them from performing any variant between these markers. Displaying one's virility was crucial to the nation-building project of Haiti's elite with its military ideals and paternalism inherited from French colonialism.¹ The male-to-female cross-dressed character documented by Gordon embodies the history of this fragmented decolonization in Haiti which involved the piecing together and recuperation of masculinist identity. The violent possession of women's bodies by the colonizer re-surfaces through this contemporary material performance that symbolizes an ongoing, unfinished process of encounter and confrontation.



Leah Gordon, *Bouzin Rèd Genyen SIDA (tough whore has AIDS)*, 2000.

The residues of coloniality present within this performance bring into question the role of the spectator or viewer of the image. The reflective qualities of the glittering dress and the

¹ For further analysis of the processes of re/gendering and family formation in the post-emancipation, post-revolutionary period of Haitian society see Sheller, *Citizenship from Below* 2012.

glimmering black body daubed in charcoal and cane syrup deflect the panoptic colonial gaze and its Enlightenment obsession with transparency. The function of the mask, as Aching (2002, 6) reminds us, is not only to conceal but also to protect against the dominant gaze. This *revenant* thus performs (and in doing so *deforms*) the racial and gendered stereotypes of Haiti's history. The dress tucked in to underwear, connoting an embarrassing social blunder and a sense of vulnerability, is accompanied by a confident smile and sideways turn for the camera. The performer, involved in a perpetual process of self-fabrication, constructs a visual *detou* (detour; Glissant 1997, 48) in order to reframe and reconfigure an inherited binary framework. The resulting composition is thus not necessarily intended to be decipherable for the spectator.



Leah Gordon, *Nèg mete makiyaj* (man puts on makeup), 2003.

Like image creation itself, carnivalesque performances offer an altered reality. However, in counterpoint to Bakhtin's theorisation of carnival in medieval folk culture, whereby the event is confined to a temporary disruption of norms, Gordon's images challenge a clear separation of what he calls "carnival time" (1984, 10) and "normal" everyday time by mediating meeting points that expose the potential to transgress beyond the borders of carnival. The carnival actor captured by Gordon in *Nèg mete makiyaj* applies face make-up, coquettishly mimicking a selfie pose. In recording the application of this gendered mask, the image highlights the fabrication of gender in the very public *mise-en-scène* of the street. While many of the songs sung by carnival crowds openly ridicule certain groups who, due to their gender identity and/or sexuality, find themselves socially marginalised, such performances can also function to mask or screen same-sex desire.² The carnival period may offer a space of what Sheller (2012) calls "erotic agency" and homosociality, where desires that are normally restricted to the private sphere or the African-based religion of Vodou in Haiti, are played out on a public stage.³ Katherine Dunham, who travelled to

² See McAlister's analysis of *betiz* songs in Haitian Rara carnival performance which call into question sexual reputation and non-normative gender (2002, 60).

³ For more on Vodou's acceptance of a range of gender identities and sexual desires see the work of Strongman (2013).

Haiti, Martinique, Trinidad and Jamaica in 1936 as part of her study of Afro-diasporic ritual dance, noted that:

In the Grand-Rue, Port-au-Prince, the season of the mask becomes actually a season of unmasking. Masked or as part of a masked band, one is no longer oneself but is either the being represented in the mask or is merely a part of the crowd....It is common for men and women to exchange clothes, perhaps with the desire to satisfy homosexual inclinations. (...) A person who, in everyday life, shows no abnormal inclinations will, under the increasing momentum of the Mardi Gras, seek out persons of his own sex for the erotic dances. (1983, 44)

Carnival exemplifies what anthropologist Victor Turner called “the subjunctive mood of culture” (1992, 59), an affective site of possibility and “what if”. The complex crossings of Gordon’s carnival characters represent, if only during the period of carnival, the conception of a more desirable state of affairs and a release from the normative lineaments of order governing Haitian society.



Leah Gordon, *Nèg pote Wob (man in dress)*, 2003.

The old-fashioned floral frock in *Nèg pote Wob*, slowly memorialised in black and white by Gordon’s 1950s Rolleicord (the lens of which inverts its subject like a mirror), harks back to a style of Creole dress that was loose-fitting and constructed by Haitian tailors and seamstresses *twal sou twal* (cloth-on-cloth). Now the domination of tight-fitting lycra garments and denim mismatched ensembles that travel from the U.S. in tightly-packed bundles, known as *pèpè*, like the clothing castoffs passed down from master to slave, are a symbolic reminder that Haitian bodies are still dominated by neo-colonial powers. The paternalism of French colonial values, the U.S. occupation of Haiti (1915-1934) and its ongoing imperialist interventions, continue to inscribe the Haitian body, which is clothed in secondhand ideologies. Resistance to this enduring oppression involves the revalorisation of a Creole aesthetic: the recuperation of imposed material that is reconfigured in Gordon’s photographs as visual *detou*.

The 2010 earthquake in Haiti, which killed over 200,000 people, re-opened the social fractures passed down from French colonial binary discourse. Following the catastrophe, oppressed groups, including practitioners of Vodou and non-normative sexualities, were demonized with renewed vigour, both internally, by the Haitian state, and externally, by the international community.⁴ Gordon depicts carnival-goers (*De nèg pote Wob*) whose gender is visibly malleable against a backdrop of what appears to be mounds of rubble and concrete dust. The scene, shot in 2009, is a reminder that the 2010 earthquake did not constitute an isolated geological rupture. Instead, this “natural disaster” should be read as a consequence of a complex structure of neo-colonial and socio-political antecedents.⁵ With their heeled sandals removed, the performers prop up their weary carnival bodies against each other as if tired of this feminine performance. It is hard to tell whether their bodies and by extension their clothes are smeared in paint and clay from the playful carnival crowd or from the surrounding dust and dirt of a haunting ruinscape that foreshadows the social and environmental fractures of the 2010 disaster whilst simultaneously evoking its past. The half-open zip suggests a fast and intentionally failed transformation, or a decompressed state at the end of a long day’s masquerading. The potential double readings of many of these images are symptomatic of the gender doubling narrated by these carnival characters whose performances challenge the renewed policing of *either or* binary divisions. Through their subversive play, the self is fractured and the Other becomes a carnivalesque version of the self, a funhouse mirror reflection, or what Bhabha calls a “double articulation” (1994, 122) that reveals the instability of imposed gender and sexual identity. Carnival, the circularity of which still involves the ceremonial washing of body paint into the sea and the burning of costumes to return them as dust to the earth during the event’s close, offers an unfinished site of negotiation and possibility for reinvention.



Leah Gordon, *De nèg pote Wob (two men in dresses)*, 2009.

⁴ In the recent political climate of so-called “post-quake Haiti”, a prevailing NGO culture, characterized by the increased intervention of North American religious and non-religious “missionaries”, has impacted on the lives of sexual minorities paradoxically reinforcing the fiction of imported sexualities through a proliferation of imported ideologies and homophobias. See Erin Durban-Albrecht’s essay in this issue.

⁵ See Munro (2014) for considerations of the earthquake as a social disaster.

Cross-dressed carnival bodies tell an “other” story, which exists on the other side of the mirror. This alternative narrative allows for fluid performances of gender, race and social standing, merging the future and the past in the present. As a space for creation, the mirror, like a tool of mimicry, does not simply duplicate or reflect the real. Rather it makes visible, here via Leah Gordon’s lens, bodies and realities that are almost, but not quite, the same as the gendered and racialised paradigms that have dominated nation-building narratives.

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