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author:
Dorota Sajewska

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The article accompanies a project Invisible by photographer Agata Grzybowska. The author runs a parallel narrative of Grzybowska's visual practice and Maya Deren's presence in Haiti, her filming and her negotiating the "look" on Haiti and its people.

Dorota Sajewska - Assistant Professor in the Section for Theatre and Performance, Institute of Polish Culture, University of Warsaw and a Faculty Member in the Slavic Department at the University of Zurich. She teaches theater history, performance studies, and theories of intermedia. Her main interests relate to issues of mediality and politics of theatre, as well as contemporary theories of body, documentation and performance. The author of the books: „Chore sztuki". Choroba/tożsamość/dramat ["Sick Plays" Sickness/Identity/Drama] (2005) and Pod okupacją mediów [Under the Occupation of Media] (2012); Nekroperformans. Kulturowa rekonstrukcja teatru Wielkiej Wojny [Necroperformance. Cultural Reconstruction of the War Body] (2016, english version: 2019).

The Invisible. White Women and Haiti

Haiti is sometimes called the "cursed island." This phrase, however, is inherently inaccurate, as it applies not to the island of Hispaniola itself, but to the polity taking up its western part, established in 1804 in the wake of the first successful revolt of black slaves and the proclamation of Haiti as a republic. From the eradication of the native populace by Spanish colonizers, and through the import of slaves from Africa, the emergence of Saint-Domingue as one of the most prosperous colonies in the French overseas empire, the free republic's near-bankruptcy – brought on by being forced to repay its former colonizer billions in restitution, up to the US occupation (1915–1934) and sustained US policy of suppressing Haiti's efforts toward greater independence – the people of Haiti have repeatedly found themselves dealt a poor hand by fate. Centuries of colonial exploitation, numerous conflicts and civil wars, and the brutal dictatorial regime of François "Papa Doc" Duvalier (1957–1971) have further entrenched the violence and extreme poverty in this small island nation in the Greater Antilles. It is Haiti, and not the neighboring Dominican Republic, that is currently considered the poorest state in the Western Hemisphere, plagued by gang warfare, political depravity, and widespread embezzlement.

Aside from rampant human rights violations, poverty, and political instability, Haitian reality is also affected by recurring natural disasters, the most recent of which – Hurricane Matthew in 2016 and the catastrophic 2010 earthquake – brought massive destruction, left hundreds of thousands dead, and saw around three million injured or homeless. As a result of the devastation caused by the earthquake, people were deprived of their livelihoods. Nearly 60% of the country's ten million inhabitants live below the poverty line, forced to survive on just $2.41 per day, with almost a quarter suffering even more

extreme impoverishment, with only $1.23 per day at their disposal.[1] The almost-unimaginable lawlessness and unrestrained violence only grew after the United Nations Stabilization Mission in Haiti (MINUSTAH) withdrew in 2017, after thirteen years of peacekeeping presence, convinced that it had helped restore law and order. Not long after, UN troops were accused of sexual misconduct and blamed for a recent cholera outbreak which, due to poor immunity, overpopulation, and lamentable sanitary conditions, spread quickly and decimated the local population.[2] Although Jovenel Moïse had been elected president in November 2016 by a majority vote, merely three years later, under suspicion of massive embezzlement, he decided against holding parliamentary elections and began ruling by decree. As a result, Haiti once again found itself embroiled in political conflict, and citizens' protests against paltry living conditions began erupting nationwide.

It was precisely in this context that Agata Grzybowska – a photographer known for covering extremely volatile political situations, whether the war in Syria, the Euromaidan protests, or the police crackdown against Women's Strike protesters – found herself in Haiti in January 2020. Much of Grzybowska's reporting is characterized by her sensitivity to injustice and dishonesty in politics, the imperative to put herself in harm's way, and unusual courage, stemming from what the artist herself once called "an abnormal sense of fear."[3] Contrary to expectations, however, Grzybowska avoided focusing her visual explorations on the country's poor public security, abhorrent living standards, rampant crime, or the illegal drug and weapons trade. Instead, her three-month stay resulted in a series of photos called *Niewidoczne. Historia niemożliwego* [*The Invisible: A History of the Impossible*], which appeared to subvert the prevailing image of Haiti as the aforementioned cursed island. She deftly shuns the trope of intrepid reporter and avoids the colonizing gaze

that would be driven by documenting and aestheticizing poverty and suffering. Focused on meeting locals, experiencing nature, and discovering spirituality, the photographer builds an emotional and deeply reflective frame through which to investigate Haitian reality. Her approach is inflected with humility, resulting from the constant negotiation between thought and emotion, between detached examination and experience, and manifested in her subtle, targeted pursuit of visible traces of the invisible.

One of the reasons for this refocus away from ruthless politics could have been the fact that Grzybowska traveled to Jacmel, in the south of the island, some 80 kilometers from the lawless city of Port-au-Prince. Another motivation, potentially even more important, lay in her decision to adopt a different perspective from which to investigate the reality of Haiti, one underpinned by reflection and empathy. Devoid of the violence of the gaze, Grzybowska's view of the devastated periphery is further filtered through the photographer's own special position – that of a white woman hailing from a semi-peripheral space, one that, in the midst of modernization, is still markedly different on account of its distinct social and religious structures and recurring political instability. Perhaps it was this ability to see "the whole picture from a particular epistemological location that is not a center"[4] which enabled the photographer to pursue a non-colonizing experience of a different culture. First and foremost, however, Grzybowska's choice to adopt a perspective focused on that which is not visible to the naked eye, rather than the symptoms of the violence of capitalism (and therefore on spirituality and not politics), was influenced by her discovery of Maya Deren, author of *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti*. This seminal anthropological study of Haitian culture accompanied Grzybowska throughout her stay on the island and left an indelible mark on her hybrid textual/visual work,

The Invisible, making Deren an intermediary and a spiritual guide through the Haitian reality and culture.

This incursion into the past, firmly embedded in the present, brings forth a number of fascinating constellations that interrogate the experience. Not only does Deren's text come alive in Grzybowska's visual project, but it reveals the breadth of its complexity, rooted in immediately apparent correlations. Thus, the constellation is understood here in the Benjaminian sense, as an arrangement of events and objects, fragments of reality and vestiges of history – a pattern that disrupts the space-time continuum.

Art/Reality

Maya Deren, a Ukrainian Jew born in Kyiv in 1917 as Eleonora Derenkowska, adopted her new identity after her family fled to America, forced by anti-Semitic pogroms. First, her father, the renowned psychiatrist Solomon Derenkowski, decided to shorten the family surname after becoming a naturalized citizen in 1928, and then Eleonora, in the wake of the success of *Meshes of the Afternoon*, the 1943 movie she made together with Alexander Hammid, chose for herself the new (and highly significant) name of Maya. It would be hard to imagine a more fitting pseudonym for an experimental filmmaker, dancer, and scholar of ritual than *māyā*, a Buddhist term meaning illusion or mirage, or – in Hinduism – the false self, bound to the material body. When Deren first arrived in Haiti in September 1947 to shoot a film about the ritual songs and dances accompanying Vodou ceremonies, she was almost an icon of American avant-garde filmmaking. The films she shot with a Bolex 16 mm camera she had inherited from her father, including *At Land* (1944), *A Study in Choreography for Camera* (1945), and *Ritual in Transfigured Time* (1946), all proved groundbreaking for experimental filmmaking, primarily on account of their radical

subjectivization of the experience of space and time, and their dynamic approach to portraying movement as both a fundamental aspect of the human body and, simultaneously, an immanent attribute of the filmic image. Using sharp edits, multiple exposure, overlapping and repeated images, and slow- and stop-motion, her black-and-white short films unfold along scattered, multi-threaded narratives which come together as poetic and philosophical visual essays. In *A Study in Choreography for Camera*, she explored the human body in motion and the very process of filmmaking, using it as a vehicle for her vision of liberating the flesh from the bonds of physical space. By matching meticulous choreography to pre-planned editing cuts, she created an impression of unbroken human movement through different space-times. In *Ritual in Transfigured Time*, Deren once again explored dance and movement; this time, however, she interpreted them as a form of cultural expression in which social norms, patterns of behavior, and the possibility of their creative transformation are manifested. Working on the movie helped Deren formulate her own definition of ritual, the structure and influence of which would become an obsessive pursuit for the filmmaker:

> A ritual is an action distinguished from all others in that it seeks the realization of its purpose through the exercise of form. In this sense ritual is art; and even historically, all art derives from ritual. In ritual, the form is the meaning. More specifically, the quality of movement is not merely a decorative factor; it is the meaning itself of the movement. In this sense, this film is a dance.[5]

Traces of the pursuit of a visual form that would be suitable for a reality deeply saturated with performativity can also be found in Agata Grzybowska's Haitian project, where individual photographs are arranged in rhythmical configurations that seem engaged in mutual dialogue. Clashes between events

unfolding here and now and recurring, enduring elements of nature (a man with snakes coiled around him; a waterfall pouring down a rock formation), the juxtaposition of different semiotic regimes (ground drawings and ritual objects set against portraits of people in various emotional states: reflective, hiding behind a mask, entranced), and the fragmentation of organic wholes (a collage of photographs depicting boughs, branches, and tree trunks coming together into a picture of a tree) are treatments that introduce dynamics to the constellation of images crafted by Grzybowska. Furthermore, as the photos come alive in dynamic sequences, the photo-text work becomes something akin to a visual essay. The performative potential of *The Invisible* will presumably reveal itself in its entirety only with the installation planned by the artist, as this will allow engagement of the bodies of the audience in contact with the visual and sound forms on display. Likewise, the presence and motion of the audience in a pre-defined space will also permit the interference of static and dynamic elements – a sort of symbiosis between ephemerality and materiality. Perhaps another visit by the photographer to Haiti will bring further aesthetic solutions, resulting from confrontation with a reality she has not hitherto probed – the countryside and rural areas, which are much more conducive than urban areas to ritualistic forms of preserving and conveying knowledge, memory, and history.

As she set out on the first of her three trips to Haiti, Maya Deren already had a clear idea of how these events ought to be photographed and filmed: since the Vodou religion is mythology, she argued, then its manifestation in ritual can be represented only by a "poetic structure." She sought to use the poetic form in order to avoid the symbolic violence inherent in Western ethnography, based on objectifying the Other by making him the subject of detached scientific objectivization. In contrast to fieldwork methods, she highlighted the language of art as an alternative method of communicating and perceiving reality, one

that rejected the typically Western duality of spirit and matter, mind and body, and incorporated subjectivism, intuition, the immediacy of experience, and the emotionality of expression into cognitive processes. As Deren explored the social reality of Haiti and began seeing the islanders' ritual practices as a kind of commentary on it, she realized that dance was not just an aesthetic form of movement, but an integral element of local mythology and ritual. Her artistic project therefore had to blend the real with the poetic in order to interrogate the equivalence of the realms of religion and everyday life.

During her subsequent stay in Haiti in 1949, Deren described her film project as a "polyphonic fugue of voices," safe in the belief that shooting a film about Vodou must necessarily involve picturing the invisible and impossible. Because Vodou was an unofficial religion and an underground practice, suppressed by both the government and the Catholic clergy, it was nearly impossible to produce photographic or cinematic testimony of an authentic ceremony – one that was not arranged for touristic consumption. Acute awareness of that fact led Deren to integrate with the local community performing the ritual, which, in turn, enabled her to participate in ceremonies and become initiated into Vodou practice. Deren called the surrender of the self to ritual possession an encounter with "white darkness," in which she saw pure form devoid of all meaning and suspended in absolute time, in which everything exists at once.[6] At that point, the experience of Haiti became a peculiar rite of passage in and of itself, which she underwent both as an artist and an individual.

> I had begun as an artist, as one who would manipulate the elements of a reality into a work of art in the image of my creative integrity; I end by recording, as humbly and

> accurately as I can, the logics of a reality which had forced me to recognize its integrity, and to abandon my manipulations.[7]

How profound that experience of Haitian culture must have been to prompt Deren to abandon the film about Vodou despite it being essentially complete. As a result, four years after her first arrival in Haiti, the unedited footage of ceremonies and rituals was put into a fireproof tin and stashed in a closet, the voice recordings remained on their spools, and the photos were crammed into a drawer labeled "For blowup."

Visible/Invisible

Ritual, as action based on visibility, may carry meaning only within the context of metaphysics, which itself is invisible. In a Vodou ritual, the tension between the visible and the invisible is negotiated by the *loa*, spirits also known as *les Invisibles*. They appear during trances, possessing an individual or entire group, and their visibility is communicated by a moving body. It is said that to be possessed by the *loa* is to be ridden by them – as they enter an individual, they send them into a trance, expressed through animated dancing. Engagement with the invisible, but which is always conveyed through flesh, mediated by a *houngan* priest or a *mambo* priestess, is essential to the formation of communal bonds, as "the actions and utterances of the possessed person are not the expression of the individual, but are the readily identifiable manifestations of the particular *loa* or archetypal principle."[8] This image of the possessed human body proved crucial to Maya Deren as an artist, because it problematized the transformative power of the aesthetic confrontation with that which eludes capture. Although the *loa* themselves remain immaterial and invisible, they can still be

registered as manifestations of matter – as physical, tangible phenomena:

> [the Haitians] did not so much ascribe divinity to matter as deduce the spirit of matter from its manifestations. Moreover, these principles which have been abstracted from the phenomena in which they are manifest are not less real than the phenomena, but merely nonphysical and invisible; and this fact may illuminate the *Voudoun* concept of *les Invisibles* as real.[9]

To reveal themselves, therefore, the *loa* must enter a body. Has Agata Grzybowska succeeded in capturing this moment in her photographs of men and women seized in poses so removed from that which we consider normal, like the man with his eyes rolled back into his skull, and his outstretched arms bent at odd angles at the elbow, or the girl being pulled up by the crowd after collapsing to the ground?

When Deren became aware that the invisible manifested itself in the bodies of those participating in the ritual, she realized that the material manifestations of spirits must also maintain corporeality in their visual representation. As a dancer and director, she sought to devise a ritual filmic form, infected by the body, which would bring together picture, sound, rhythm, and movement, to reflect the bodily dimension of the metaphysical experience, as well as the communal and community-building character of the ritual itself. Although she never completed the planned film, Deren, drawing on her experiences in Haiti, created a heterogenous work, incorporating hours of footage, a huge collection of sound recordings, a photographic series documenting life in Haiti, the music album *Voices of Haiti* (1953), the anthropological study *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti* (1953), a selection of edited fragments prepared for television, and a number of interviews and lectures she gave for several years after returning to New York City in 1955. By redirecting her efforts toward the performative presentation of

her Haitian experiences and the incongruous nature of the project and its structure, Deren laid bare the impossibility of taking the vestiges of the ritual and stitching them into a cohesive film about Vodou rites.

"Can the invisible be photographed? What would happen were I to tirelessly chase that which simply does not leave a visible trace?" Agata Grzybowska asks, as her photos follow a reality she seems to encounter by chance. Fully aware that the invisible is an inalienable component of that reality, she uses her camera to constantly interrogate whether it is at all possible to mediate the experience of the invisible.

The photos from Jacmel attempt to portray both the city's daytime and its nightlife, the Haitians' joyous meetings and the island's darker aspects; they try to get close to nature while still capturing a portrait of newly met – sometimes even newly befriended – locals. First and foremost, however, they undertake to identify traces of the *loas'* presence within or interference with all aspects of reality – whether organic, such as trees; artificial, like cemeteries; or chanced upon, like bottles holding the souls of the dead.[10] This particular thrust toward moments in which matter would be animated by an immaterial spirit is already suggested by the titles given to the photos. One small patch of land around a cluster of neglected graves is named *Baron Samedi #2*, after the Ghede *loa* considered to be the lord of the realm of the dead, master of the underworld, and a god of death. "As Death, he is the keeper of the cemetery, guardian of the past, of the history and the heritage of race. The cross of Baron Samedi is in every cemetery."[11] Baron Samedi can also direct the power of sorcerers to raise the dead from their graves. A black-and-white photograph of a few abandoned gravestones seems to exude some sort of strong disembodied presence, similar to the photo showing two motionless elderly women – one sitting in a chair, the other standing right beside her, with her hand on the chair's back. This disturbing depiction of the two

women surrounded by ritual objects is accompanied by the words "CRIMINEL SACRIFICE SANGÉ," painted on the wall in white letters. Another photo, titled *Simbi*, shows a man lying on the ground, with snakes coiled around his body. Holding one of them near its head with his left hand, the man puts its snout into his own mouth. The photo's impact derives primarily from inversion – creating the impression that the man is swallowing the serpent, or becoming a serpent himself. This cruciform fusion of man and snake reflects the nature of Simbi as a *loa* of the crossroads, and his *vèvè* symbol – a serpent in a field of crosses.

The exhibition portfolio for *The Invisible* features not only quotes and cryptoquotes from Deren, but also drawings: the so-called *vèvè*, typical of Haitian beliefs. Rendered in sharp lines, they transpose onto paper symbols once drawn on the ground using easily crushed materials such as chalk or eggshell, or powder such as cornmeal or sand. Every *loa* has its own visual representation, and the ability to properly depict a Haitian deity in the form of such a glyph is commanded only by the initiated, as there is a belief that the better – the more accurately – a drawing is made, the greater the power of the *loa*. Creating a drawing is tantamount to inviting the deity to appear and participate in the Vodou ceremony. The ritual ground painting, derived from African tradition, from the sacred paintings of the Congo, demonstrates the power of the ties between the visible and the invisible, but also illustrates the potential of performativity within ritual – the meaning of movement, flesh, matter. Haitians believe their religion to be practical; by way of the ritual, their ancestors' abstract principles, embodied by the *loa*, become something living, tangible, something existing here and now. "In Haiti," Deren argues, "the idea, the principle, must live, must function, for the conditions of Haitian life are difficult to

endure."[12] Faith, therefore, is a reciprocal action – the ritual act of service to the gods invites the deities' response.

One particularly striking facet of Agata Grzybowska's photography is the desire to reflect motion, rhythm, and the dynamics of the human body. In one constellation, a street gathering turns into a scuffle, which, in turn, resembles a sort of collective choreography, saturated with drama but never theatrical, relying instead on broad participation. The photographer's intrusion recasts an average, everyday tableau into a spectacle that explores the fundamental significance of dance as a manifestation of Haitian culture. Elsewhere, Grzybowska visually penetrates the nature of reanimated matter, a process particularly visible in the photo titled *Granbwa*, depicting deformed manifestations of nature – unusual bulges of bark, or roots so intensely tangled around a tree trunk that they seem to penetrate its tissue and form an anthropomorphic whole. This fundamental unity of almost-animate nature is a reference to one of the Haitian *loa*, the Gran Bwa, meaning "great tree," believed to be responsible for forests, trees, plants, and herbs. There exists a reciprocal relationship between *Granbwa* and another photo – the portrait of Vladimir François, also known as Mr. Pop, who introduces himself this way: "I am Nzinga Bwa, son of Queen Nzinga of the Monomotapa Empire. My father Grandbwag once came across Granbwa, who was Tree, Forest, Sustenance, and who gave me clean air to breathe." Mr. Pop is not only one of the characters in Agata Grzybowska's series; he is also the photographer's friend, or maybe even a guide leading her through Haitian culture and tradition. One of the constellations shows François leaning against a wall on the right-hand side, and *The Voudou Poem* typewritten on the left. The text itself is profoundly political, championing social change, which, somewhat contrary to the course of history itself, would be brought about by evolution, rather than revolution, in order to

ensure an enduring union rather than division: "UNITED WE WIN, DIVIDED WE DIE."

Using photography, Agata Grzybowska seeks to retrace the origins of Vodou or, more precisely, the difference between the principle behind a thing and the thing itself that lies at the core of its origins – between material objects believed perishable and fleeting, and principles that are enduring and universal. Attempting to penetrate Haitian culture, Grzybowska abandons the purity of the photographic medium in favor of a montage of image and text, the two coming together into different dynamic constellations that draw on relationality in order to expose the dynamic character of the Haitian Vodou tradition. Simultaneously, her *The Invisible* reveals the limitations of photography, which Maya Deren describes as a medium capable of isolating a moment in a stable frame,[13] but precludes the capture of motion and time, both of which are crucial to dance and ritual alike. Hence, Deren's decision to choose film for the purpose of capturing action, seeing film as a time-based art, an effort analogous to the performing arts. She was convinced that it was not possible to capture transformation using a still frame – the process required a series of moving snapshots. "Such movement concerns itself not with details of space, but with details of movement in time."[14]

Agata Grzybowska's series is marked by a conflict between the static and dynamic aspects of the image, particularly in the context of her attempts to capture ritual itself. While the photos do indeed show moments related to the ceremony itself, its peculiar spontaneity resists photographic capture. The awareness of the constraints that photography is bound by within the context of the processuality of ritual is manifested in the radical selection of shots directly referencing Vodou. This pertains to both the pictured *mambo* priestesses – Anila Jean or Marie Suze Jean Baptiste, sacred depictions of Erzulie – as well as objects with ritual connotations, such as bottles,

rattles, drums, crosses, ropes, and beads. Static shots are a prime conduit for exploring the aesthetic aspect of religion and ritual as they best reveal the female element of Vodou, of which the *loa* Erzulie is an emanation. Although Vodou does not reserve any special status for women, it has imbued the figure of Erzulie with a particular attribute, namely the "capacity to conceive beyond reality, to desire beyond adequacy, to create beyond need. In Erzulie, *Voudoun* salutes woman as the divinity of the dream, the Goddess of Love, the muse of beauty."[15] Deren would come to realize this for herself once she gave herself to the goddess in the course of a possession she would later recount in the final chapter of her study, "The White Darkness." This beautiful metaphor would help her describe the transgressive experience of memory as the sound of light and the explosion of the individual body crossing the boundaries of the universe.

The essence of the Vodou ceremony, however, revolves not so much around the existence of a principle as the enactment of an idea, manifested especially within the act of possession, when the deity enters the human body and subordinates it to its will. Entering a trance state is marked by distinct physical symptoms such as tremors, hysterical gestures, excessive facial expressions accompanied by rapid breathing, and specific voice patterns. The brilliant Vodou scholar Alfred Métreux writes that although at first the possessed seem to lose all motor control, this stage – characterized by psychopathological symptoms – passes rather quickly. The drumbeat accompanying the ceremony enables the possessed to fully enter their trance, which itself soon becomes a dance. Ritual dance bears little resemblance to planned choreography; it is rather a meditation of the body, where there exists a continuous negotiation between the physical act and the state of mind. The poses struck by the "horses" the moment the *loa* mount them are, beyond a doubt, the most strikingly visual and visually identifiable moment of the entire ritual. The very

installation of the deity within human flesh reveals a key trait of possession itself – that it is not an act of self-expression as much as a substitution of an individual's psyche by the *loa*'s. Only a self-sacrifice may allow the archetype to manifest itself. "This, which is a major function of ritual, is something to be experienced only in participation,"[16] Deren writes, pointing out not just the depersonalization of the performer within the ritual, but the reframing of the collective as the actual artist. Merging the individual into a homogenous whole is facilitated by the rhythm of the drums, themselves a material prop used to activate the immaterial *loa*. The drumming melds dozens of participants into a collective body, subject to one pulsating rhythm, and undulating in the same motion as "a single serpentine body."[17] The drumming, therefore, is more than just the technical backbone of the ritual – it provides an organic conduit, a portal to the moment of ritual: "At such moments one does not move to the sound, one is the movement of the sound, created and borne by it."[18]

Deren argues that the time of the ritual is invisible and accessible only through participation, itself contingent on total surrender when entering the ritual realm. In the shared rhythm, a collective emerges that is constituted not by the fusion of individuals, but by the rejection of the self (I) in favor of mutual service to one another and to something that unites all. The experience of the invisible implies the abandonment of real space-time and entrance into the "white darkness," where there are no clear boundaries, forms, meanings, and definitions of space-time we would find familiar. It is only from this place, argues the white woman immersed in black ritual, that we may begin conceiving of a new kind of memory and history, one that does not impose its own interpretations, already tainted with reason, and does not seek to appropriate the experience of the Other. From the bodies of the hungry and the poor, locked in

a shared rhythm, emerge the monumental *loa* and thus "surges this lavish arterial river of ancestral blood which bears all racial history forward into the contemporary moment and funnels its vast accumulations into the denim-dressed serviteur."[19]

Ocean/Ogoun

A roiling mass of water fills the entirety of the frame in *Ogoun #1*. Included in *The Invisible*, the image of churning water brings to mind the long transatlantic journey of the Nigerian deity Ogoun, along a route that slave ships took between the 15th and 19th centuries to fetch their human cargo. As many as 12% of the 15–20 million people forcibly abducted from Africa – around two million souls – perished during what has become known as the Middle Passage (out of the 1–1.5 million captured Africans shipped to Haiti, anywhere between 150,000 and 200,000 perished during passage). Without any thought of a proper burial, the bodies of the dead were simply thrown overboard, transforming the Atlantic Ocean into a sprawling graveyard and a realm of still barely documented violence. Hailing from the Dahomey pantheon, ocean-crossing Ogoun is the god of the sky, thunder, fire, and power. A warrior symbolizing strength, valor, fearlessness, triumph, and might, Ogoun was initially the patron saint of weaponsmiths and, as such, associated with fire and iron; his sacred color is red; his liquid is blood; war and politics are his realms. It might be presumed that it was Ogoun who led the Haitians to rebel and gave them the strength to reclaim their freedom, as suggested by one of his attributes, the sacred sword or machete, which became an instrument of retribution employed by black former slaves against their white colonizers. Similarly, he has other manifestations: the most noble, that of the mortally wounded warrior, wracked with pain but still chanting: "I am wounded, oh! I am wounded"; or his most heroic incarnation, that of the national hero, a military general, domineering and

disciplining, whom Deren describes as follows: "Intense, ready to fly into a rage, he periodically shouts: 'Foutre tonerre!' (By thunder!) which is his special epithet, or announces: 'Grains moin fret' (My testicles are cold) – his particular way of demanding a drink of rum."[20] Rum is Ogoun's beverage – the deity only appears when rum is spilled on the ground and lit with a match. The Ogoun spraying rum through his teeth is the "same revolutionary hero who is representative, too, of the political Ogoun."[21] Nevertheless, Deren argues, none of these manifestations bears any responsibility for instigating the independence revolution, as the struggle was not an organized effort led by a single general, but a movement driven, at least initially, by small circles of conspirators, secret societies, and guerrilla warfare. Deren is firm on this point:

> And so the Petro cult, with its "guerrilla" organization, its individualistic emotional intensities, its emphasis on magical means, supplanted Ogoun in the role that, theoretically, he might have played. Moreover, since the Petro loa altogether are stern, violent, or even malevolent, and work with fire, a Petro Ogoun would simply duplicate functions already fulfilled.[22]

Maya Deren interrogates the duality of Haitian Vodou, encompassing the traditions of both the gentle Rada and the more sinister Petro cults. With its references to the holy city of Allada in Dahomey and to the Yoruba people, the Rada cult implies a degree of overlap between Haitian ritual and African tradition. As it contains fragments of the cultures of the island's natives, massacred by Spanish colonizers, the Petro cult is more local in character and allows for the black slave retribution of the exterminated natives against the whites.[23] Where Rada provides protection to followers, Petro metes out justice. "Petro was born out of this rage. [...] it is the rage against the evil fate which the African suffered, the brutality of his displacement and his

enslavement. It is the violence that rose out of that rage, to protest against it. It is the crack of the slave-whip sounding constantly, a never-to-be-forgotten ghost, in the Petro rites. It is the raging revolt of the slaves against the Napoleonic forces. And it is the delirium of their triumph."[24] As a practice related solely to the Haitian diaspora, Petro had the dark power of triggering events in reality. Reclaiming freedom was thus necessarily tied to violence, present not just in the ritual itself, but also in the course of the Haitian Revolution, which was a long unbroken chain of massacres and counter-massacres.

From 1791 to 1804, the French colony of Saint-Domingue was stage to an incredibly brutal power struggle between the local slave population, the white colonists, mulattoes, and the governments of France, Great Britain, and Spain. Although the Haitian Revolution culminated in the establishment of the first-ever republic founded by slaves, the sheer cost of the revolt, characterized by horrific savagery on all sides of the conflict, is impossible to exaggerate.

> Have they not hung up men with heads downward, drowned them in sacks, crucified them on planks, buried them alive, crushed them in mortars? Have they not forced them to consume faeces? And, having flayed them with the lash, have they not cast them alive to be devoured by worms, or onto anthills, or lashed them to stakes in the swamp to be devoured by mosquitoes? Have they not thrown them into boiling cauldrons of cane syrup? Have they not put men and women inside barrels studded with spikes and rolled them down mountainsides into the abyss? Have they not consigned these miserable blacks to man eating-dogs until the latter, sated by human flesh, left the mangled victims to be finished off with bayonet and poniard?[25]

This is how, in 1814, Pompée Valentin Vastey – personal secretary to Henri Christophe, a former Haitian slave and a key leader of the Haitian revolution – recounted French brutality. At the same time, as the murderer of Jean-Jacques Dessalines, the first governor-general of independent Haiti, Christophe himself embodies the ruthless violence perpetrated by the black slaves against all whites in retribution for centuries of bondage.

Now/Then

Revealing its subversive power across Haitian history, the Vodou religion, alongside its attendant spiritual practices, was ultimately adopted as a sort of foundation myth for the Haitian Revolution of 1791–1804. In contrast to Catholicism, the official religion of the colonizers and the Haitian mulatto elites, Vodou was a folk religion and a cult widely embraced by the black peasantry. Despite French efforts to eliminate this vestige of African culture, Vodou survived among the Haitians as a "religion of creation and life"[26] and a "danced religion."[27] The decree prohibiting nighttime gatherings of black slaves, first proclaimed in 1704, was never actually enforced, further exacerbating the opposition of the Catholic Church. As a vibrant life- and spiritual force, Vodou was crucial to the expression of the value of one's existence and the celebration of a community free of social, class, and ethnic diversity. Prior to the revolution, the ritual provided both mental and existential support, and functioned as a sort of "escapism for plantation slaves" and a "political credo necessary" for the survival of the *maroons* (escaped slaves).[28] Functioning as an "insurgent movement," the *maroons* ended up profoundly impacting the course of Haitian history, by organizing their nighttime assemblies and using Vodou ceremonies to impart their political strength to the masses.

One of the photos shows the young Yves Richard Coutard, also known as Darkman, who wrote the poem *World. Until My*

Physical State Change, posted next to his portrait. The text brings to mind the founding scene of the Haitian Revolution – the famous Bois Caïman ceremony, held on the night of either August 14 or 20, 1791. According to the story passed down through generations, on that fateful night, slaves from the local plantations and *maroons* met in the woods near Le Cap in Saint-Domingue, to engage in officially proscribed ceremonies. As a storm broke out, the black priestess Fatima was supposed to have entered into a trance and plunged a knife into the throat of a sacrificial black pig. Then, Dutty Boukman, a *houngan* and the leader of the rebel slaves, ordained that everyone present was to drink the pig's blood and swear an oath of obedience. As the ritual unfolded, Boukman supposedly delivered a speech attacking the white man's religion and colonial ideology, which could be said to have prompted the murders of the white masters that followed soon after and the wave of sugar plantation fires. The Bois Caïman ceremony can therefore be read as both a religious ritual and a political assembly of strategic importance, insofar as we accept orature as a method of archiving the past equal in stature to textual and visual sources. After all, as rightly noted by Susan Buck-Morss, "All of these interpretations [pertaining to the Bois Caïman ceremony – author's note] have been put forward of an event that may not even have happened. It is almost as if it *had* to happen for interpretation to exist at all."[29]

Although the lack of traditionally conceived documentation has prompted many a historian to argue that the role of Vodou ceremonies as a catalyst for the 1791 slave revolt, and, consequently, the Haitian Revolution, has been exaggerated, it is beyond doubt that during the colonial period, syncretic African religious practices "provided slave rebellions with leaders, organization, ideologies, and a community of feeling."[30] Viewed from such a perspective, the Haitian Revolution emerges not as a mere re-enactment of the events of the French Revolution,

but as a product of robust black resistance, organized along political and religious lines.

Darkman, the poet photographed by Agata Grzybowska, calls Vodou a "conduit between the present and the past," as the ceremony brings together participants and their ancestors: according to Vodou custom, in the course of the ritual the *houngan* summons the spirits of ancestors from "mythical" Africa. Thus, Vodou can be considered a manifestation of the sovereignty of African culture, entirely annihilated by the colonizers but resurgent within the ritual. Through its repeated return, the ritual – abolishing the duality of body and mind, matter and spirit, the visible and the invisible – reflects Haitians' life itself:

> THE INVISIBLES.
>
> Constant Life wave of the ocean
> Constant Life pulse of the heart
> Life the Earth in rotation.
> Life-Birth-Death § Tax-Bills-Problems …
> Thought-Emotion!

1 Maureen Taft-Morales, *Haiti's Political and Economic Conditions*, CRS Report No. R45034 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2020), 4, https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R45034.pdf.

2 Ibid., 6.

3 Grzegorz Szymanik, "Agata Grzybowska, fotoreporterka: Mam w kieszeni nóż i gaz," *Gazeta Wyborcza*, October 1, 2018.

4 Mary Louise Pratt, "Modernity and Periphery: Toward a Global and Relational Analysis," in: *Beyond Dichotomies: Histories, Identities, Cultures, and the Challenge of Globalization*, ed. Elisabeth Mudimbe-Boyi (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2002), 30.

5 *Essential Deren: Collected Writings on Film*, ed. Bruce R. McPherson (Kingston, NY: Documentext, 2005), 252.

6 See: Maya Deren, *Divine Horsemen: The Living Gods of Haiti* (Kingston, NY: Documentext, 1983), 260–262.

7 Ibid., 6.

8 Ibid., 16.

9 Ibid., 88.

10 In Polish literature, the most detailed and insightful examination of the zombie, or, more precisely, the *zonbi*, its significance in Haitian culture and appropriation by Western culture, can be found in the writings of Leszek Kolankiewicz, recently compiled into an exhaustive essay. See: idem, "Zombie czy zonbi? Fantazmat kina popularnego a haitańskie wyobrażenie zbiorowe," in: *Nekroprzemoc? Polityka, kultura i umarli*, eds. Jakub Orzeszek and Stanisław Rosiek (Gdańsk: słowo/obraz terytoria, forthcoming).

11 Deren, *Divine Horsemen*, 103.

12 Ibid., 73.

13 See: *Essential Deren*, op. cit., 131–132.

14 Ibid., 132.

15 Deren, *Divine Horsemen*, 138.

16 Ibid., 229.

17 Ibid., 257.

18 Ibid., 253.

19 Ibid., 247.

20 Ibid., 133.

21 Ibid.

22 Ibid., 135.

23 See: ibid., 11.

24 Ibid., 62.

25 As quoted in: Robert Debs Heinl, Nancy Gordon Heinl, and Michael Heinl, *Written in Blood: The Story of the Haitian People 1492–1995* (Lanham: University Press of America, 2005), 25–26.

26 Zora Neale Hurston, *Tell My Horse: Voodoo and Life in Haiti and Jamaica* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2009), 113.

27 Alfred Métraux, *Voodoo in Haiti*, trans. Isotta Meyer (Gifkendorf: Merlin Verlag, 2017), 28.

28 Edner Brutus, *Révolution dans Saint-Domingue* vol. I (Paris: L`Éditions du Panthéon, 1975), 70.

29 Susan Buck-Morss, *Hegel, Haiti, and Universal History* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009), 137.

30 David Geggus, "Marronage, Voodoo and the Saint Domingue Slave Revolt of 1791," *Proceedings of the Meeting of the French Colonial Historical Society* vol. 15 (1992), 34.

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