

Many bring lawn chairs. It is common practice for participants to bestow gifts upon the graves of loved ones. Some bring food. Following a recent All Saints' Day, groundskeepers discovered a platter with ham, cheese, bread, brandy, and cigars. Tokens need not be sentimental or even reverent for instance, a can of pork-and-beans, a Coke bottle; on the day of my visit I observed a Metamasil canister used as a vase.<sup>4</sup>

It is not uncommon for individuals to leave letters on the gravestones, an act which I believe signifies a central aspect of the All Saints' celebration. The day is strangely dialogic, operating on different axes. At St. Roch's the dead are often addressed in conversation and apprised of the past year's happenings. Also important are the words exchanged between the living. Cecilia Gales, a Chicago policewoman, for example, returns to Louisiana each November 1st and welcomes the holiday as a chance to "catch up on the family news" (qtd. in Campbell). All Saints' has frequently been cited as the best day for gossip (Evans 45).

One particular site within the St. Roch's chapel illustrates in palpable fashion the dynamic I am describing and encapsulates the broader operations of All Saints' Day as an occasion of communal restoration. Since the inception of the chapel and the reputed miracle of St. Roch, New Orleanians have brought their afflictions and infirmities before the saint, imploring his intercession. The many resulting "cures" have caused supplicants to return and pay tribute with *ex votoes*, some of which are quite bizarre. The chapel has thus for decades been showered with items signifying recovery, items which before World War II were suspended around the altar on the chapel walls. These tributes have included braces, crutches, canes, girdles, and prostheses. Even more arresting are the wide array of plaster-molded body parts "mute testimonies to healing" ("Friends of the Dead" 13). These body parts range from legs, hands, ears, teeth, feet, and faces, to breasts, stomachs, and livers. Photographs from this period are quite fascinating and quite weird, documenting a rather surreal scene of floating body parts—the *corps morcele*—hovering around the statues of St. Roch and his dog. Today these items are housed in a chamber just to the side of the altar and are presided over by a small statue proffering two eyeballs on a platter. The scene is simultaneously endearing and grisly.

The *ex votoes* represent in a literal way the desire for a body recovered and, more to the point of this essay, the body "re-membered." If to perform is to replenish,<sup>5</sup> the enactments of the All Saints' Day commemoration restore the communal body and member the living collective anew.

This dynamic invests the holiday and its performance space with an uncanny vitality. It is significant that cemetery visitors on All Saints' often bring food for themselves and picnic upon the marble slabs. St. Roch's chapel has

moreover assumed something of an aphrodisiac aspect and has become a shrine for singles seeking matrimony; both men and women come and pray for partners. In short, one observes the peculiar encroachment of the carnival upon the sphere of the deceased, and, like the more publicized Day of the Dead festivals of rural Mexico, this feast day in New Orleans witnesses the celebration of life abundant.

An ironic sort of operation thus comes into play in the All Saints' festival. In *Death, Dissection, and the Destitute*, Ruth Richardson explains how the body orifices of the dead were once plugged before burial (17). She also writes of a particular practice in Britain where a cloth was wrapped under the jaw of the corpse and tied across the top of the head (19). This image is for me useful, as it highlights the body sealed and voice silenced. Yet the events of All Saints' work oppositionally to the segregation and encasement of the dead. Dialogue occurs. There is eating, talking, circulation, key signs of the carnivalesque (orifices in action). It is thus not surprising that the Peter Fonda character in "Easy Rider" would seek out a New Orleans cemetery for his adventure into the carnal, the site for indiscriminate sex and the border-melting experience of LSD.

What one finds in the cemetery on All Saints' is a powerful sense of revivification. Frequently, descriptions of the ritual employ metaphors of inclusion and mutuality. Nevertheless, such performances, as Roach's book so ably demonstrates, are often fraught with agonistic subtexts.

For Rene Girard, the circling and marking of the tomb bring cohesion and rejuvenation, and act as a communal anodyne (*Things Hidden . . .* 80). This exercise in community-building, though, bears darker implications. In *Violence and the Sacred* Girard explains the fear of the undifferentiated (originating in acquisitive mimicry) that fuels group anxiety and precipitates scapegoating. The resulting murder restores tranquility and reaffirms structural relations. The group, standing over the corpse, consequently experiences a swell of uplift and an affirmation of wholeness.

In *The Future of Ritual* Richard Schechner observes that rituals address matters "disruptive, turbulent, and ambivalent" (230). Mourning rituals serve in a sense to inoculate, allowing confrontation with the experience of destabilization, melding, and leveling—in short, complete carnivality—but in bearable dosages.

Underlying the funeral moment is actually a terror of death. There is also a fear that the sacrificial victim might return for vengeance. It is this fear that first prompted the use of gravestones, to fix and repress the corpse. Dancing on the grave of an enemy involves as much panic as elation, stomping the dirt assures the survivor that no resurrection is imminent (Ragon 16).

According to Girard, the death of any member of the group elicits the placating effects of sacral violence. Every death (and mortuary rite) replays the

primal scene. However, a shrouding is also evident, a mis-remembering of the victimage process. In this light, the funeral—or by extension All Saints' Day—may represent a moment that both remembers and misremembers. The original murder is forgotten; the consequent feeling of community recalled.

My research on St. Roch's has challenged me with a number of interpretive options, all of which bear upon matters of identity, community, and difference, the marking, separation, and circulation of bodies. And I have found that this New Orleans Day of the Dead produces varied and often conflictive readings. Chiefly, this study has prompted consideration of what is at stake in how one defines and determines group belonging. It has moreover brought to the fore the tension that presides between deconstructive theory and identity politics.

In *Presence and Desire* Jill Dolan has pointedly addressed this issue in her discussion of poststructuralism and feminist performance. Dolan writes:

Identity politics claim to define women's subjectivity by their positions within race, class, or sexuality that the dominant culture and often the dominating voices in feminism have effectively squelched. Poststructuralist practice suggests that any such coherent conceptions of identity are specious, since even race, class, and sexuality, as well as gender, are constructed within discursive fields and changeable within the flux of history (82).

What Dolan elucidates has bearing upon All Saint's at St. Roch's, especially in matters of lineage and ethnic identity. The celebration has since its inception been intimately linked to New Orleans' German population. John Maturri has demonstrated how cemetery practices—like those witnessed at St. Roch's—function to maintain a potent and present affiliation with the dead and thus work to protect ethnic identity in face of assimilation and Americanization (14-35). Dolan's observation, however, raises questions concerning cultural identity and its recovery or maintenance. What is being perpetuated at the cemetery? What is being annulled? Does any collective memory do violence to the past? And, if we assume a postmodern posture, upon what basis can one claim community? Jean-Francois Lyotard indeed denounced community and its "harmonization," hence his continued championing of dissensus (Sim 131).

It has become fashionable to critique constructions of nation, and it is clear that the performances at St. Roch involve kinship connections reinforced by national allegiance. But does one extend this critique to all categories in the cultural process? Such theorizing ably demystifies the operations of dominant cultural practices, yet does this mode also deconstruct positions of resistant or

alternative imaging? Is every collective based upon some type of suppression? One hears the remonstrance of those historically marginalized (Bow 48), who may regard such speculation and its trenchant skepticism as just another shift by the apparatus to deflect and defuse their emergent identity and power: scapegoating exercised through theory.

Reflection upon the formation of cultural identity invites a basic consideration of subjectivity. Deconstructive theory, of course, argues that the self is soluble, and I would here introduce a third element for analysis; to remembering and mis-remembering I add dismembering (not that of the sacrificial victim but of consciousness itself). In *Death and Desire*, Richard Boothby invokes the Lacanian concepts of ego formation to explain the death drive (72-84). While it is not the intention of this essay to endorse Lacan, his understanding of an individual's becoming—through the Imaginary and Symbolic registers—highlights the violence enacted upon the pre-formed subject, the imprinting of an illusory ego coherence. For Boothby, the death drive does not seek the death of the organism but release from ego constraints, the dismemberment, if you will, of the self formed under the imposition of the Law. This desire for a return to pure libidinal flow appears in the play of children—for instance, the dismembering of Barbie and G. I. Joe dolls. Such a reading implies that any cultural or identity formation is something of an addendum, something of a prison house or, to the point of this paper, a charnel house.

Given this direction of inquiry, the recent book *Posthuman Bodies* proves illuminating. In this work Judith Halberstam and Ira Livingston contend that “local traditions”—All Saints’ Day would fall in this category—have been “transformed (fossilized, commodified) into second order phenomena: the bodies of our ancestors line the medium in which we now swim; the reef of culture is made of their skeletons” (18). This allusion to ancestry invites the contention that the foundation of the All Saints’ ritual is not the bond of nation, ethnicity, race, or religion, but that of family itself. Certainly there is something compelling about children being brought to the cemetery to be introduced to relatives long since gone. The power of familial heritage is no doubt profound and pervasive. A young New Orleanian once playing on top of a crypt, when asked to step down, shouted back: “We ain’t doin’ nothin’ . . . just standing on my grandmother’s grandmother” (qtd. in Dawson).

In recent academic debate all bonds of community have been brought forward for inspection and critique; Halberstam and Livingston have in fact argued that the human tribe can never be family. The body is now a “zoo of posthumanities” (Halberstam 3). It is “cyborg, metametazoan, hybrid, PWA; bodies-without-organs, bodies-in-process, virtual bodies: in unvisualizable

amniotic indeterminacy" (Halberstam 19). Posthumanizing, in short, embraces dismemberment with an odd sort of gleefulness.

I hope to avoid nostalgia in ending this discussion and to not view such a prospect, that is, the demise of "the imagined unit, the imagined community of an imagined kinship in an imagined house" (Halberstam 10), with reactionary inflammation. I however must admit conflictive feelings when I consider St. Roch's, or by extension other memorials to communal loss: the Vietnam War Memorial, the AIDS quilt, the Holocaust Museum. Jill Dolan confesses no resolution to her own grappling, as she writes of her identity roots in both Judaism and lesbianism. She notes her "ironic" embrace of both poststructuralist theory and personal experience and finds that "truth is changeable, permeable, and, finally, irrelevant" (95).

To conclude, this paper has no conclusion, though All Saints' at St. Roch's posits many questions. Who can speak? Do the dead have voice? Does the bodied self of indeterminacy, an open set of criss-crossing discursive performances experience, escape, or enact violence in moving from position to position? Is the saint at once self and every player?<sup>6</sup> And, finally, when I applaud, is it to shake the blood from my hands?

*Louisiana State University*

## Notes

1. Power to Marcos's tomb was recently shut down for several days in order to force payment of overdue utility bills. For an account of the variety of mortuary rituals practiced through history, see Michel Ragon, *The Space of Death: A Study of Funerary Architecture, Decoration, and Urbanism*, trans. Alan Sheridan (Charlottesville: UP of Virginia, 1983) 4.

2. St. Roch's was founded nearly a century later than the more famous St. Louis cemetery no. 1 (1789), where tourists today visit the crypt of Marie Laveau. For a brief history of New Orleans cemeteries, see Peggy McDoweel, "J.N.B. de Pouilly and French Sources of Revival Style Design in New Orleans Cemetery Architecture," in Richard Meyer, ed., *Cemeteries and Gravemarkers: Voices of American Culture* (Ann Arbor: U.M.I. Research P, 1989) 137-58. For historical information on St. Roch's see Roger Baudier, *St. Roch Chapel and the Campo Santo of New Orleans* (New Orleans: New Orleans Archdiocesan Cemeteries, 1975); Marie Louise Points, "St. Roch's Chapel and Cemetery," *New Orleans Morning Star* 11 April 1908: N. pag.; Stella Pitts, "The Legends of St. Roch Cemetery," *New Orleans Times Picayune* 4 February 1979: sc. 2, p. 8; Valerie Faciane, "Faithful Flock to Cemetery Chapel," *New Orleans Times Picayune* 12 November 1990: N. pag.

Many of the articles reviewed for this study are housed in the vertical files of the Tulane University Louisiana Collection and the Hill Memorial Library of Louisiana State University.

3. The church in its early history coopted numerous pagan holidays, and All Saints' Day coincides with the harvest festivals traditionally celebrated in autumn. It was Pope Gregory III in the 8th century who first celebrated the holiday on November 1st, as a day to remember the martyred

saints. All Souls' Day was later instituted on November 2nd for the commemoration of those saints who led righteous lives though never received canonization by the church. In south Louisiana, the two holidays have been conflated, and November 1st serves as a day for the remembering of loved ones who have died. For information on the history of the holiday, see Valerie Faciane, "Saints Share These Days with Sinners," *New Orleans Times Picayune* 1 November 1990: N. pag.

4. I visited St. Roch's Cemetery on All Saints' Day this last year, November 1996.

5. A survey of the competing definitions of "performance" is given in Roach 3.

6. August W. Staub voiced this question in his paper, "Theatre, Computer Games, and the Re-Vision of Spiritual Space," delivered at the Mid-America Theatre Conference (Chicago, IL) on March 15, 1997.

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