

Commemorating the Ancestors: Performances of Death at the *Tucson All Souls' Procession*

Rachel Bowditch

Introduction

At dusk close to 100,000 people clad in black and white face paint and hand-made costumes emerge from all directions marching along a two-mile procession route from Hotel Congress in Tucson, Arizona to the finale site carrying puppets, banners, effigies, floats and posters with photographs of the dead of all shapes and sizes. Crowds of people line the streets; however unlike the *Macy's Day Thanksgiving Parade* and other official processions, there are no street barriers separating those marching in the procession and those observing; the lines are porous and blurred. Participants move fluidly in and out of the procession between spectating and marching: dancing, drumming and walking. There is no clear distinction between sidewalk and street; between official performers and spectators—everyone is a participant. There is a somber sense of excitement and anticipation. A large-scale sculptural urn assisted by guardians from the performance troupe Flam Chen weaves through the dense crowd collecting hand-written prayers and offerings from passersby. *Day of the Dead* motifs of black and white skeletons, flowers, and masks dominate the visual landscape mixed with a fusion of hybrid imagery that evokes death, memory and celebration.

Suspended weightlessly above a crowd of fire-lit faces, a figure moves gracefully without a safety net, wrapping her body in aerial silks tethered to helium balloon clusters. Stilted figures in ornate hand-constructed costumes twirl fire to the thundering beating drum. Costumed figures scale the metal tower with torches to light the large paper mache urn, which is filled with the prayers of the entire community. Flames lick up the sides of the urn transforming it into a ball of raging fire; the crowd cheers as they watch their prayers ascend into the darkness. This ritual burning of the urn signifies the culminating act of the *Tucson All Souls' Procession*. Flam Chen, pyrotechnic performance troupe from Tucson and Many Mouths One Stomach, the organizers of the event, stage a fire aerial performance followed by the symbolic burning of the urn filled with the community's prayers and wishes.