

Honouring The Outcast Dead: The Cross Bones Graveyard

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Abstract

This paper explores the emergence of a unique 'sacred site' in south London; the Cross Bones graveyard. Cross Bones is an unconsecrated graveyard dating from medieval times which was primarily used to bury the prostitutes who were excluded from Christian burial. Archaeological excavations in the 1990's removed 148 skeletons and estimated that some 15,000 bodies remain buried there.

Soon after the excavations began, John Constable, a London Pagan, began to hear "an unquiet spirit whispering in [his] ear" who inspired him to write a series of poems and plays which were later published as 'The Southwark Mysteries' (Constable, 1999). 'The Southwark Mysteries' in turn inspired the first Cross Bones Halloween festival in 1998, and the date has been celebrated every year since, to honour "the outcast dead" with candles and songs.

Although the biggest celebration is at Halloween, people gather at the gates on the 23rd of every month for a simple ritual to honour the ancestors and the spirit of place. Offerings left at the site are often very personal and include ribbons, flowers, dolls, candles in jars, small toys, pieces of wood, beads and myriad objects made sacred by intent. Although many of those involved identify as Pagans, the site itself is acknowledged as Christian. Most - if not all - of those buried there would have identified as Christians and the only iconography in the graveyard itself is a statue of the Madonna.

Although there are some similarities with the shrines that mark the site of road accident deaths - intended to be a mark of remembrance and a warning of danger (Everett 2002) - Cross Bones graveyard is unique. The shrine certainly serves as a site of remembrance, not only of the dead buried there, but of more recent deaths: several messages appeared in 2007 in memory of five women who were murdered while working as prostitutes.

I describe the practices and beliefs surrounding Cross Bones and explore how the site has become "a really happy place [and ...] a really healing place", somewhere "to go with your pain or your grief" (Sally).

I begin with a short historical introduction to the origins of the Cross Bones graveyard and then outline the significance of the text it inspired, The Southwark Mysteries. I then describe the Halloween of Cross Bones festival of 2007, the role of the graveyard gates and the monthly Vigils that take place there. I close with a brief discussion of my current theoretical approach to understanding this complex phenomenon.

Introduction

Elizabethan London¹ was deeply divided: On the northern side of the Thames was the old City of London, a place of merchant guilds and monasteries, striving to maintain an impression of respectable order. But across the River Thames lay Southwark, a borough of south London. This sprawl of land was called the 'Liberty' because it was beyond the jurisdiction of the City and here taverns, brothels, bear-baiting pits and theatres thrived. Ironically, this den of inequity was under the control of the Bishop of Winchester and the prostitutes who worked there were called 'Winchester Geese' because they paid their licence fees to the Bishop².

Even though they worked under the official protection of the Church, these prostitutes were excluded from Christian burial. Instead they were buried in shallow unmarked graves with no more than quicklime to warm their bones. The unconsecrated land that holds their syphilitic bodies is called Cross Bones Graveyard³.

Over the years many paupers shared the graveyard with the working girls, until by 1853 it was finally closed on the grounds that it was "completely overcharged with dead" (Museum of London, 1999: 29). The site was all but forgotten for years. The area was poor and largely undeveloped. No-one was very interested in a pauper's graveyard and although the site had a warehouse built on it for a while, it was mostly left as waste ground.

The bodies lay undisturbed until the 1990's when the building of a London Underground extension promoted archaeological excavations. A series of digs between 1991 and 1998 revealed a graveyard overcrowded with some 15,000 bodies piled one on top of the other. Over a third of the bodies were perinatal⁴, while a further 11 percent were under one year old. As might be expected from the history of the site, most of the buried were women aged 36 years and older (Museum of London, 1999).

Although some locals knew the story of Cross Bones, it had long remained a fairly obscure piece of Southwark history. Cross Bones had become a builder's yard: just another piece of derelict land fenced, gated and almost forgotten. But that was about to change.

The Southwark Mysteries

On 23rd November 1996 John Constable, a playwright and "urban Shaman" who works with the "native spirits" of London, began to hear "an unquiet spirit whispering in [his] ear". The spirit, who called herself The Goose inspired him to write the first of many poems and plays which grew into an extensive collection called *The Southwark Mysteries* (Constable, 1999). Constable was initially unaware of the existence of Cross Bones graveyard and only later realised that the whispering of The Goose began during the excavations.

Constable writes:

- 1 This arrangement lasted from medieval times until well into the Early Modern Period. The Liberty of Southwark was thriving during the Elizabethan times when the Goose was apparently alive.
- 2 The liberty was finally abolished in 1889
- 3 Although it's origins are uncertain, Cross Bones was first referenced in 1598 in John Stow's Survey of London.
- 4 Between 5 months before and 1 month after birth.

I felt I had to try to heal this wounded spirit, by giving her a voice. In the course of the work, our relationship seemed to transform. It was she who had returned to heal me - and all the other people touched by the spirit of her sacred place (Constable, 2005).

The Mysteries were revealed to Constable through his "spirit guide", John Crow, who he describes as his "shamanic double" (Constable, 1999). Constable is intentionally vague about whether Crow is a spirit or his own alter-ego: The 300 page book *The Southwark Mysteries* is published under the name John Constable, but in ritual he becomes John Crow. A newcomer to Crossbones, apparently a little unsure about which John had shown her round the graveyard, asked if his name was John Crow. "Yes" he said, and added with a smile, "especially here".

But Constable warns against trying to unravel the 'true' nature of Crow: This Trickster uses humour, pun and paradox to challenge any fixed belief system in an attempt to shift us into a more fluid conception of reality (Constable, 1999: 265). For the purposes of this presentation, I will refer simply to "John" when it is unclear whether the title of Constable or Crow is more appropriate.

For Constable the *Southwark Mysteries* are fragments of a "Secret Knowledge" which is yet to be fully understood (Constable 1999). *The Mysteries* are complex and draw on sources including the King James Bible, the English Mystery Plays and gnosticism. Constable warns that the *Mysteries* may defy comprehension, as they are "the trick of a Whore and Whores Prophet, the chase of a wild Goose". That may be so, but certain themes are clear: the purpose of *The Mysteries* - in as much as it can be stated - is to "heal the primordial rift between the Flesh and the Spirit". The Goose promises a healing of these split dualities, revealing the mystery of the "sacred in the profane" and "the spirit in the flesh" (Constable 1999). However, John makes clear that *The Mysteries* are not to become a doctrine, creed or a belief-system: they are an expression of the conflicting ideas that can co-exist within the spiritual state of "Liberty".

The name of "Liberty" lies "at the heart of the Mystery". The Goose prophesies an apocalyptic day when

"Southwark shall arise/ naked in Her Liberty ... with all Her Children/ endowed with grace and dignity/ the deformed and the deviant/ embraced into Her Unity ..."
(Constable 1999).

Liberty thus "heals the wounds of history" and births a new world. But Liberty does not only name the Whore Goddess and some state of future unity, but refers to the Spirit of the Place: when the Goose was plying her fleshy trade, the borough of Southwark was titled as "The Liberty" because it permitted brothels and theatres.

The Mystery plays at the heart of *The Southwark Mysteries* were performed earlier this year in Southwark Cathedral⁵. The performances - which involved professional actors and musicians as well as local people - were sold out. The performance I attended was hugely enjoyable and the core message of spiritual redemption emerged very clearly despite the occasionally arcane references.

5 *The Southwark Mysteries*, Southwark Cathedral, London, 22-24 April 2010.

Halloween at Cross Bones

In 1998 the complex mythology of *The Southwark Mysteries* inspired the first Halloween of Cross Bones festival and the event has been celebrated every year since.

The 2007 Cross Bones Halloween began in the basement room of a bar close to the graveyard. On arrival each celebrant had a white ribbon tied around their wrist. [SLIDE 1]. The ribbon gave the name, address, profession and year of death of one of those buried in the graveyard⁶, and this was the spirit that you were invited to honour that night.

Many people - especially the women - were in fancy dress. But instead of the usual 'trick-or-treat' ghouls they sported Elizabethan costume of the commoners - just the kind of garb that would have been worn by the 'Winchester Geese'. The large basement room was decorated with flowers and two alters; one, for our own beloved dead, was designated as an 'Altar to the Ancestors' [SLIDE 2]. The other was dedicated to the prostitutes of Cross Bones. This second altar was laden with suitable offerings: chocolate, cigars and a bottle of gin. [SLIDE 3].

The festival was celebrated in two parts, with the bulk of the evening taken up with indoor performances which served to frame the final procession to the gates of the nearby graveyard. These performances consisted of songs and poems from *The Southwark Mysteries* and a demonstration of 'Tantric' breathing techniques from Jahnet de Light and her 'Whores D'oeuvres' [SLIDE 4]. This photograph shows John Constable - or more like, John Crow - performing part of *The Southwark Mysteries*.

After an entertaining couple of hours we were invited to join a procession to the Cross Bones graveyard to honour 'the outcast dead' with candles, incense, songs and offerings. The graveyard is owned by London Transport and fenced off from the general public so the focus of the ritual was the high metal gates that close off the land. [SLIDE 5].

Well over 100 people walked silently on the candlelit procession to the Cross Bones gate and gathered quietly in the darkness. Then the ritual, an appropriate mix of the sacred and the profane, continued with John leading the assembly in a song celebrating the outcast dead which ended with cheers. [SLIDE 5]

He then began to intone a chant which the company repeated in response as people took their offerings to the gate:

Here lay your hearts, your flowers,
Your Book of Hours.
Your fingers, your thumbs,
Your Miss You, Mums.
Here hang your hopes, your dreams,
Your Might-Have-Beens,
Your locks, your keys,
Your Mysteries.

Many people took the ribbon from their wrist - marked with the name of one of those interred - and tied it to the gate. Others brought small offerings for the Cross Bones gate shrine. [SLIDE 6].

⁶ These records were retrieved from the London Metropolitan Archives.

The gate is always covered with such offerings: Ribbons, flowers, dolls, candles in jars, small toys, beads and myriad objects made sacred by intent. [SLIDE 7]. Once everyone who wished to had left an offering, John brought the ritual to a close [SLIDE 8] with a libation of gin to the Winchester Geese. All then bade their farewells - to each other and the dead - before going their separate ways.

The owners of the site are quite amenable to these celebrations, but did have their own security in attendance. You can see a slightly bewildered looking workman with a white hat and a yellow jacket on the centre of this photograph.

The mood throughout the night was one of celebration, not mourning. We gathered to celebrate the sacred aspects of sexuality and to honour those buried in the graveyard, especially the Winchester Geese. The festival combines reverence with bawdy humour and although is rooted in contemporary Paganism, it integrates elements of gnosticism, Buddhism, Tantra and spiritualism.

The Gates

The tradition of leaving offerings at the Cross Bones gates began when Halloween was first celebrated there in 1998. Soon after the festival a carved wooden plaque appeared on the gates. Constable suggests that this was probably the work of "a local Working Girl named Emily". The plaque read:

To fix in time, this site the Cross Bones Graveyard, where the Whores and the Paupers of the Southwark Liberty, in graves unconsecrated, lay resting... where now, at Millennial turning, the Whores and the Paupers and our Friends return incarnate, in ritual, with tribute and offerings, to honour, to remember...
(Constable, 1999).

An ever-changing array of offerings now adorn the gate including votive candles, dolls, messages and religious symbols. [SLIDES 9, 10, 11 and 12].

Cross Bones graveyard is a unique phenomena, although there are some similarities with the shrines that mark the site of road accident deaths. Research into roadside shrines suggests that they are intended to be a mark of remembrance and offer a warning of danger (Hartig and Dunn 1998, Everett 2002, Excell 2004). The Cross Bones gates certainly function as a site of remembrance, not only of the dead buried there, but of more recent deaths. There's a memento of at least one local who was involved with the site before his death, and in 2007 messages appeared to memorialise five women who were murdered that year while working as prostitutes. [SLIDE 12]

The message reads:

In this place of healing where the Wild Feminine is honoured and celebrated for all that she is - whore and virgin, mother and lover maiden and crone, creator and destroyer - we will remember and offer prayers for the murdered women of Ipswich and honour them as women. For all that they could have been.

Any similarity to roadside shrines is overshadowed by the unique aspects of Cross Bones, especially the complex mythology now attached to the site. Furthermore, Cross Bones is

much more than a site of remembrance. For some Pagans Cross Bones is "a really happy place [and ...] a really healing place" where they can go in times of trial. When London was attacked with terrorist bombs in July 2005, Pagans gathered for a ritual at Cross Bones. One respondent told me that "It feels like a real place to go with your pain or your grief" (Sally).

Monthly Vigils

Although Halloween is the biggest celebration, people have gathered at the gates every month for a Cross Bones Vigil since 2004. At 7pm on the 23rd of every month a simple ritual to honour "the Ancestors", the "outcast dead" and the spirit of place begins. As these vigils are open to people "of all faiths and none" (John), Christians, Buddhists and others sometimes join the Pagans who make up the majority. In the words of John Crow these rituals are:

to renew the shrine...
to honour The Goose Spirit...
to remember her outcast dead...
to light and sweep clean the open pathways...
to commune with the living in transforming acts of vision...
and to receive the transforming energies that flow back and forth through the Cross Bones Portal...

The rituals can last from a little as 15 minutes to an hour depending on the weather conditions and who turns up, while numbers vary from half a dozen to about 20 people. The full vigil mostly repeats the ritual of Halloween: silence, the presentation of personal offerings, a recitation from the Southwark Mysteries and the libation of gin.

We typically begin with a few minutes silence, a time to quietly open our awareness of the gate as a portal between the worlds of the living and the dead. John believes that the two worlds are not entirely discrete, but intertwined and the Cross Bones gates are a point of intersection.

People are then invited to give offerings to the Outcast Dead. These might include flowers, candles incense, home-made decorations and personal mementoes or icons. Offerings are tied to the gates or placed on the ground as the group recite the poem used at Halloween which has been spoken at the shrine for more than ten years. I quoted this poem earlier; it begins:

Here lay your hearts, your flowers,
Your Book of Hours ...

This is usually the point where someone sings a song or recites a poem from *The Southwark Mysteries*. This is fairly spontaneous and whether it happens or not depends on the mood of the group.

The vigil ends with an offering of gin and - sometimes - water. Bells, rattles and whatever else people wish make a noise with accompany a call-and-response blessing:

Goose may you never be hungry!
Goose may you never be thirsty!

Goose may your Spirit fly free!

These rites are not enacted at every monthly vigil and there is considerable flexibility about their practice. John emphasises that they not fixed as "the Goose doesn't like anything set in stone".

Although many of those involved identify as Pagans, the site itself is acknowledged as Christian. Most of those buried there would have identified as Christians and the most obvious iconography in the graveyard itself is a statue of the Madonna. [SLIDE 13]. This is Cross Bones Mary, and to those who honour the site it doesn't matter if you see her as the Christian Madonna or a Pagan Goddess.

I'm at an early stage in my research, but my current understanding is that Cross Bones graveyard is a powerful historical site that may well have become the focus of spiritual practice without the input of John and *The Mysteries*. However the rich mythology that has now been woven into the place has made much it more significant.

It's not yet clear to me how influential *The Mysteries* are on people's relationship to the site. *The Southwark Mysteries* is a complex and obtuse text, so I doubt that many have integrated it into their spiritual practice. Furthermore, although John is obviously a pivotal figure, he insists that people make a personal interpretation of *The Mysteries* and always seeks to encourage others to facilitate the rituals.

Theoretical Approach

There are many possible approaches to interpreting the phenomena that is Cross Bones graveyard, but I am currently applying insights from embodied situated cognition research (inter alia, Varela et al., 1991) which claims that fundamental aspects of our thinking use our immediate environment (Clark, 1997; Preston, 2003). Preston concludes that

[t]he physical environment is not just a site in which mind operates; it is a characterful place that influences the products of the mind (Preston, 2003: 88).

This process is largely non-verbal and pre-reflective, and depends on an affective, sensual mode of being-in-the-world that reveals a fundamental integration between what we conventionally understand as self and world. Cultural influences are a key factor in this process, and the history and mythology of Cross Bones must be taken into account, but the geography of the place is fundamental. Debord's suitably fluid notion of psychogeography is useful. Debord described psychogeography as

the study of the precise laws and specific effects of the geographical environment, consciously organized or not, on the emotions and behaviour of individuals (Debord, 1955).

Cross Bones clearly has a powerful sense of place: one woman was emphatic that Cross Bones "has a certain presence", adding that "It retains a memory of place. It retains a memory of person".

Cross Bones has become the physical expression of a powerful mythologized history as well as a site of memorial for the contemporary dead. The shrine is thus a powerful place to think with. Sally, one of my respondents expressed this very eloquently:

because it's a prostitutes graveyard that taps into my feelings about the way women are treated and feminism and ecofeminism and the way the Earth's treated and all those things (Sally, 2007).

A weave of history, myth and geography has created a focus for people to articulate and express their feelings and to celebrate the 'Wild Feminine'. This process is far more than projected symbolization. Preston opines that:

people craft some of their very cognitive identity in communion with a landscape (Preston, 2003: 100).

Clearly people's physical engagement with places like Cross Bones can catalyse powerful spiritual experiences, and I propose that this process can be best understood using theories of embodied situated cognition.

Future

What does the future hold for Cross Bones? The Cross Bones land is owned by London Underground and they plan to develop it in due course, but the Friends of Cross Bones hope that future developments will reserve an area as a memorial garden and "a people's shrine" (Southwark Mysteries (b), 2007). The Southwark Council's Community Project Bank has pledged ?100,000 towards the eventual creation of a Cross Bones Memorial Garden and negotiations to secure the future of the site seem promising.

Meanwhile the celebrations continue, so perhaps I'll see some of you there on the 23rd of this month!

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