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The Fading Revolutionary Capacity of the Zombi. The Transformation of Zombis' Symbolism in Haitian Literature as Exemplified by the Novels of Dany Laferrière and Yanick Lahens

Zanikający rewolucyjny potencjał zombi. Przemiana symboliki zombi w haitańskiej literaturze na przykładzie powieści Dany'ego Laferrière'a i Yanick Lahens

Abstract

Zombis, unlike the zombies prevalent in American pop culture, function in Haitian culture as complex symbols with historically variable meanings – initially depicting the process of enslavement during the transatlantic slave trade, they increasingly became symbols of Haitian revolutions and resistance. This dialectical doubling of the meaning of zombis can still be found in Dany Laferrière's novel *Pays sans chapeau*, published in 1996. The article reconstructs the origin of zombis, presents a discussion on the meaning of this figure, including dialectical views, and discusses their fictional depictions. The aim of the article is to investigate whether zombis still have a twofold symbolism in narrative, as symbols of both enslavement and revolutionary resistance. By considering the vestigial reminiscences of zombis in Yanick Lahens' novel *Douces déroutes*, attention is drawn to the processes of gradual loss of zombis' ambivalence and their importance as means of creating Haitian identity and everyday experience. According to the study's conclusions, their absence (or their residual forms) in the novel of the second decade of the 21st century is as significant and interesting as their vitality and omnipresence in the works of writers of previous generations.

Keywords: zombi, zombie, Haiti, subversion, Dany Laferrière, Yanick Lahens, postcolonial literature

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Zombis are an important symbol for Haitians, charged with many cultural meanings, historically considered either as a figure of enslavement or as a figure of rebellion and potential liberation. In recent decades in Haitian literature, however, these creatures suspended between life and death have been acquiring new meanings, particularly as a result of the distancing of zombis from their origins and their discursive transformation into the familiar zombies of American pop culture[1]. These new incarnations of the metaphor, which have gained the position of dominant imagery, have resulted in interesting modifications to the strategies of Haitian writers. In this article, I will examine two such strategies developed by two contemporary writers, Dany Laferrière and Yanick Lahens. The former draws on the complex traditions of depicting zombi(e)s in his novel *Pays sans chapeau* (translated by David Homel as *Down Among the Dead Men*), published in 1996, to show how the cultural meanings that make up the figure, as well as the Haitian identity that draws so heavily on these representations in self-definition, have become entangled. The second author, in her 2018 novel *Douces déroutes*, already presents a new strategy – although Haitians are described as a people suspended between being and death (for a variety of reasons, such as social threats and political intrigue, poverty and deepening class inequality, *etc.*), Lahens chooses not to use zombi figures to describe this condition of this entity.

This transformation in the use of zombi symbolism is interesting because it calls into question their previously taken for granted ability to express the possibility of rebellion and liberation. It is an important task to formulate and test hypotheses as to the cause of this kind of deconstruction: is it inherent in the zombie figure itself, too closely related to the history of slavery and colonialism to acquire contradictory meanings? Or perhaps it is influenced by the increasingly default perception of the zombie figure through the prism of pop culture representations, as mindless and cannibalistic, thus symbolizing completely new fears (an invisible threat, a virus that can change our body, or an all-encompassing mindless capitalist consumerism)? In order to answer these questions, I will first reconstruct the history of the symbolic transformation of the meanings of zombis in the context of Haitian culture, taking into account the influence of pop culture representations.

There is no consensus on the etymological origin of the term zombi, to the point that it has been explained as a word of French origin (from *ombres*, hence *z'omb'e*), as incorporated from Arawak Indian indigenous culture (*zemis*, meaning, the souls of the dead), and, finally, from West African languages: *zumbi* (the cadaver or spirit of the dead person) from the Bonda language, *ndzumbi* (cadaver) from Mitsogho (Gabon), and *nzambi* (spirit of the dead) from Kongo (Davis 1988: 57). The latter etymology seems to be the most probable, therefore zombis would be derived from similar words used in African cultures to denote the deceased or their souls, intertwined as a result of historical circumstances (Davis 1988: 57–58; 2010, Deslauriers 2021: 337). Vodou[2] (*le vaudou*, *vodoun*) practices (including many

1 In the article, I will consistently use this spelling distinction to make it clear which cultural phenomenon is being referred to. I use this distinction ("zombi" / "zombie") after Sarah Juliet Lauro and Karen Embry (2008: 87). The term "zombi(s)" comes from the Haitian culture and vodou religion (I develop this thread later in the article), and the term "zombie(s)" – is a reference to the phenomena known from American pop culture, occurring with increasing frequency since the 1930s. Zombies of the second type, unlike Haitian zombis, have never been a figure of liberation, and are also based on racist fears of the Haitian religion as black magic or the possibility of reversing the master-slave relation (anyone can become a zombie, regardless of skin color; see: Rushton and Moreman 2011: 16, Kordas 2011, Ruthven 2017: 13, Lauro 2015: 9).

2 As with the zombi/zombie spelling used in the article, the spelling "vodou" is an intentional distinction from the widespread vision in American pop culture of the practice called "voodoo". While the former term refers to authentic Haitian cultural practices of a religious and syncretic nature (a blending of Christian and African beliefs), the latter is merely an American

incarnations of the zombi figure) migrated from the tribes of West Africa (in present-day Benin, Togo, Ghana, and Nigeria) across the Atlantic Ocean during many decades of the slave trade (Gilroy 1993) and mixed with each other at Saint-Domingue to form the syncretic figure of the Haitian zombi. At a basic level, this served the purpose of commoning: people from different cultures and languages pooled them in an effort to preserve their identity in the face of being uprooted from their indigenous cultures (Davis 2010, Gawrycki 2013: 157). However, zombis may have played a role even before that: as Sarah Juliet Lauro suggests, they made it possible to explain and reconcile the disappearance of loved ones, who were transported on slave ships to a completely different reality, through mythologization:

> Why were people disappearing? Where were they going? They were bewitched by sorcerers, their souls forced to labour in a desert land far away. Zombies at first explained slavery as an act of sorcery that steals the person's soul. Just as myths reconcile an unexplained natural occurrence (such as a solar eclipse) as having a supernatural cause, the application of this type of mythologization to a human phenomenon like slavery only further underlines the peculiarity of the "peculiar institution" as distinctly non-natural. (Lauro 2015: 16)

However, the zombis quickly ceased to fulfil their conciliatory and communal functions. In the new reality of slave labor on plantations, zombis became more and more synonymous with enslavement. The Vodou priests, (in Haitian creole:) *bokors* or *caplatas* (female priestess), were supposed to turn people into zombis in order to make them work in the fields (Lauro and Embry 2008: 90; Davis 1988: 8–9). What was most terrifying about such an explanation was that compulsory labor did not end even with the death of a slave (Cohen 1972: 60, Ruthven 2017: 10). A slave reduced to a zombi was incapacitated, mindless, and powerless instrument in the hands of the landlord. Therefore, people feared becoming a zombi, not zombis themselves, as this meant being enslaved not only by physical labor, but by emptying/stealing one component of the dualistic[3] human soul – *ti bon ange*, a spiritual astral body containing free will and personality (Davis 1988: 9). The zombi was also used in specific policies as the mean of exercising power, *e.g.* during the time of the Duvaliers totalitarian regime to justify and strengthen their power[4], in the "Tonton Macoute," a rural Militia of National Security Volunteers. This practice of describing slaves *as* zombies is criticized by Raphael Hoermann, who notes that if what slaves and zombies have in common is their being deprived of free will and reason and their reduction to labor force, it is thus assumed that being a slave is being unreasonable and unconscious (Hoermann 2016: 5): "[t]he metaphor of the slave

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fantasy of Haitian practices, introduced mainly by soldiers during the American occupation of Haiti, and by film, comic book and literature creators who quickly picked up on the interesting and thrill-inducing subject. I follow the arguments of Christopher M. Moreman and Cory James Rushton in distinguishing "vodou" from "voodoo", who claimed that the latter "should be used to signify the racist image of a devil-worshipping, black-magic wielding, and uncivilized tradition imagined by Western popular culture" (Rushton, Moreman 2011: 2).

3 According to vodou beliefs, the other part of the human soul is *gros bon ange* and is responsible for biological processes such as breath control, blood flow, and the ability to move. The two parts of the human body are separated either naturally (at the time of death, when *ti bon ange* remain near the grave for about a week after passing), or artificially, through the rite celebrated by the vodou priest, who steals the spiritual part of the living and can return it to that particular body or to another (this practice is depicted, especially in African cultures, as the entrapment of the soul in a vessel, *e.g.* in a bottle); see: Davis 2010, 1988.

4 It actually may appear as a nativist, right-wing gesture after what happened in the 1930s and 1940s when successive campaigns against superstition were launched in Haiti to eradicate "primitive vodou beliefs" (Ramsey 2005, 2011; Lauro 2015: 111).

as zombie is similarly revisionist since it precludes the slave from acquiring an awareness of his conditions and thus deprives the enslaved of revolutionary agency" (Hoermann 2016: 14). However, it seems that this criticism is aimed primarily at *zombies*, not *zombis*, and their depictions in American pop culture.

This image was popularized in the 1930s and 1940s by popular fiction (*e.g.* John H. Craige's novels such as *Cannibal Cousins* and *Black Bagdad: The Arabian Nights and Adventures of a Marine Captain in Haiti*) and the first cinematic visions of zombies (*White Zombie, Revolt of the Zombies, King of the Zombies, etc.*). In this first stage of appropriation, the zombis did not eat human brains or spread any infection, but were doing forced labor; this can be witnessed in the opening scene of the film *Revolt of the Zombies*: *bokor* calls the dead to rise from the grave and gives the order "master say, get fixed shovels, go to work." This appropriation is believed to represent the latent fears of Americans who had absorbed the stories told by American soldiers occupying Haiti (1915–1935) (Hoermann 2016: 8, Bender 2020: 175). What was most terrifying about these early movies and novels was the possibility of reverse slavery, where it would be a white body subordinated to someone else's will (Inglis 2011, Ruthven 2017: 13, Voeks 1993: 68). The second turning point in the pop culture image of zombies usually dates back to 1968, when George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* was released. At this point the zombies were far from the original vodou belief context, as two new characteristics were introduced: they fed on human flesh and spread zombification as a virus (through contact with the victim, not through ritual). Unrestrained hunger, which was a recurring element in the living conditions of slaves before and after the rebellion against Napoleon Bonaparte military (punitive) expedition (1802–1804) and liberation of Haiti (in 1804), turns in the North American imagination into a fear of cannibalism. Cannibalism is like the ultimate form of hunger, a form equated repeatedly with the Haitians (see: *e.g.* the aforementioned Craige's novels). On the other hand, the change in the method of zombification also expressed the fear that appeared in pop culture only in the second half of the 20th century and at its turn – of other life inhabiting our bodies, invisible to the naked eye, which poses a threat to it.

As migrants, zombis were constantly exposed to the process of deterritorialization and reterritorialization (see: Ruthven 2017: 8). That is in part why they took on contradictory meanings during the process. In addition to their role of conciliation and explanation during the transatlantic slave trade, the role of slaves commoning upon arrival at the Santo Domingo plantations, and the function of exercising power by separating *ti bon ange* from the slave's physical body, zombis were also a symbol of resistance and the revolutionary struggle in the 18th and 19th centuries Haiti (Lauro 2015: 112). Being a zombi meant, that despite the attempts, it was not possible to fully subjugate someone to their will (Deslauriers 2021: 341–342). "The zombie thereby incorporates a people's history of both enslavement and political resistance" (Lauro 2015: 7), because all the mystical, magical and irrational elements of vodou were seen by slavers as weapons of the Haitians. The Haitian Revolution itself is described as beginning in Bois Caïman with a vodou ceremony presided over by the *houngan* (the vodou priest)[5] Dutty Boukman and the *mambo* (the vodou priestess) Cécile Fatiman (Arciniegas [1945] 1968). But reducing revolutionary fighters to a zombi army (that arose from what became known as the only successful

5 *Bokors* and *caplatas* are also vodou priests, *houngans*, but they are not so much stewards of temples or servants of the *loa* deities, but rather they serve people as sorcerers, usually for a fee. While the *bokors* often embody the forces of evil, the *houngans* strike a balance between good and evil in accordance with the vodou ethics. They enjoy the trust of the society they serve by performing rituals and ensuring continuity. However, the boundaries between *hougan* and *bokor* are often blurred.

revolution in the black colony who became a sovereign Republic), that is, an image of unconsciousness and thoughtlessness, is at least dubious, if not neo-colonial.

In *Pays sans chapeau*[6] Laferrière incorporates the figures of zombis or the zombi army, recognizing their dialectical nature. On the one hand, zombis symbolise the life of the Haitians under Duvaliers rule, on the other – they are (as an army) a force capable of opposing the American occupation. The first of these meanings is reflected in the observation, repeated throughout the novel, that everyone living in Haiti is either dead or, to put it mildly, not sure if they are still alive:

> It's as if we're all dead here, already. (…) Didn't Jesus say, "Let the dead bury the dead?" I've spent my whole life trying to understand what Christ meant by that. Now I know. Everything is clear to me. We're already dead. (Laferrière 1997: 83)

This notion that Haiti is the land of the dead is developed by a shoeshine man: "I'm going to tell you the secret of this place. All the people you see in the street, walking and talking, most of them died a long time ago and they don't even know it. This country has turned into the world's largest cemetery" (Laferrière 1997: 47). He suggests that everyone must be dead because it is impossible to live in such conditions: "do you think we could survive this famine, and those heaps of garbage and trash you see at every street corner?" (Laferrière 1997: 47–48). Recalling zombis, Laferrière often exploits the ludic dimension of these images, noticing humour in the juxtaposition of two contradictory models of zombi(e)s. Zombis are just like other people, the narrative tells, it is impossible to recognize them (unless you happen to have a mirror, because the zombi will not have a reflection in it), and on the other hand, the Americans are too afraid to leave their barracks at night or to visit cemeteries.

Although zombis function in the novel to give an ironic commentary on living conditions,, they are also present in *Pays sans chapeau* as means of perpetuating group identity and as a symbol of resistance. This happens both through the memory of mythologized historical events in which a "group of peasants seemed to feel none of the sting of suffering, nor even the repose of death," since they are immune to damage inflicted by firearms (Laferrière 1997: 62–63), and through current events in the village of Bombardopolis. The villagers only have to eat one meal every three months – this fact surprises the Americans stationed in Haiti, so they decide to investigate this peculiarity. The aim is not to possibly find an answer to the problem of hunger, but to hide it, in defence of capitalism:

> According to the powerful food-producing companies that sell wheat and potatoes and oranges all over the world, the little town of Bombardopolis should be wiped off the face of the earth. According to them, the phenomenon could cause the destruction of the food industry, which would be a death blow for capitalism itself. Food is the primary consumer good. According to the CIA, hunger remains the most effective weapon. (Laferrière 1997: 79)

Hunger may be the most effective weapon, but it can be pointing two opposite directions – not only manifesting power, but also subverting it. Therefore, deliberate fasting is seen as an act of resistance. I would also like to emphasize that in Laferrière's novel we can see in the migration of zombis (or the zombi army) the process of internalizing by the inhabitants of the capital a phenomenon that has so far been attributed rather to rural areas. At various times in history, vodou practices, including beliefs about

6 The title of the novel is based on the Haitian expression, telling of the afterlife (no one can be buried in a hat).

zombis, have been a refuge, especially for lower-class black Haitians[7]. Many vodou practices were officially prohibited and penalized in Haiti between 1835 and 1987, "first as *sortilèges* (spells) and later as *pratiques superstitieuses* (superstitious practices)"[8] (Ramsey 2011), but these laws were never really sustained since vodou practices were socially accepted (Ramsey 2005). The zombis are usually mentioned in the context of the traditionally understood hinterlands and inland areas, such as in the cited memories of the peasant rebellion against plantation work or the resignation from food by the inhabitants of rural Bombardopolis. However, it can be noted in *Pays sans chapeau* that zombis are also beginning to enter urban areas, the capital itself. It can be assumed that folk forms of rural beliefs and practices, with a rich revolutionary tradition, provide a kind of refuge from the influence of the American "humanitarian mission." It is the incorporation of the hinterland into the inner-city that allows for an identity alliance with the people and the use of their symbols to comprehend one's own condition (hunger, poverty, litter) or to oppose neo-colonialism.

This act of opposition to neo-colonialism by referring to the tradition of vodou not only evokes the historical, emancipatory dimension of these customs, but also the consolidation strategy of politics in the Duvalier regime. In a conversation with his mother, the immigrant son recalls Duvalier's threat, discussed in the press, that an army of zombis would defend Haiti from the Americans:

> I remember the zombie army that the old president threatened to use against the Americans if they ever dared set foot on Haitian soil. The general of the army of the dead. I remember the incident very well. I was in Miami at the time, and The Miami Herald reported what the old president had said. But where was that army when the Americans landed?
>
> My mother's face was serious.
>
> They were there," my mother said after a time. "They were awaiting their orders. But in the end, the old president signed an agreement with the young American leader. The American army would occupy the country during the day. The zombie army would have domain over the night. (Laferrière 1997: 54)

François Duvalier was a chief of state perceived by many Haitians and foreigners as "a champion of the Vodou religion". While entertaining such rumours and "manipulating the Vodou-witchcraft association, the Duvalier regime tried in fact to solidify the ties between the Roman Catholic church and the Haitian state" (Mintz and Trouillot 1995: 144). It is not entirely certain whether these ironically presented forms of subversion through native religious images serve in Lafferière's novel unequivocally to liberate the Haitians. It is all the more complicated by the fact that while zombis are used in neo-colonial struggle (in the form of stories, myths, and legends that terrify the Americans), they also constitute rhetoric supporting the totalitarian rule of the Duvaliers. Finally, the conflicting impressions of Haiti result not only from the tensions and contradictions that the narrator registers in reality itself, but also from the specific subjective position from which this description is expressed. This perspective is autobiographical, as the

7 A large part of the emerging Haitian elite, the bourgeoisie and the upper classes in general, were Christians already during the Haitian Revolution (of course, another aspect is the syncretic nature of Haitian Christianity; see: Ramsey 2005; Arciniegas 1968; Deslauriers 2021).

8 It is also interesting how these legal prohibitions have been avoided by ethnographers and anthropologists interested in Haiti, especially since the 1930s and 1940s, who wish to see vodou rituals with their own eyes (Ramsey 2005; 2011); see also the interpretation of Laferrière's novel as an ethnographic narrative [in:] Izzo 2019: 128.

narrator, just like the author of the novel, returns from twenty years of emigration to his country of origin. His goal (as an author) is to bring readers closer to the essence of Haiti, so he observers Port-au-Prince attentively. However, every now and then it turns out that he himself can no longer write from the inside of this world, as he has already become a stranger. In a way, the narrator is more like an ethnographer who interviews local people, consults an anthropologist; rather an outside observer with a critical distance, than a member of this society (this is blurred only at the end of the novel, when the narrator manages to temporarily move to the afterlife and communicate with the Vodou deities; even then, however, he is guided by the principles of an ethnographer). Hence, the beliefs about the zombis invasion, although the narrator explores them for the credibility of the portrayal of Haiti, evoke a rather ironic distance[9].

Interestingly, zombis are not included in *Douces déroutes* by Yanick Lahens, even though the narrative presents us with similar doubts about the uncertain ontological status of Haitians, as neither alive nor dead: “When we turn sixty, sixty-five on this island, we become corpses. The flesh is rotting, even if the stench does not yet get to the nose” (Lahens 2018: 21). This, of course, is not synonymous with Laferrière’s “we’re all dead here,” but it raises doubts about the conditions of (non)life in Port-au-Prince twenty years later. “Here, life and death look like two drops of water” (Lahens 2018: 65) – in this quote we can witness this suspension, so characteristic of zombi(e)s, between life and death. However, this description is used not only towards Haitians, but also the city they inhabit; by night Port-au-Prince turns into a city of death/dead:

> Past a certain hour, Port-au-Prince resembles in everything a city recently pounded with heavy mortar or chemical weapons. Black, aflame at the north and south gates, smouldering elsewhere. A city with its mouth wide open. Asphyxiated because with every pouring rain it swallowed all the rock, the mud, and the rubble. A city abandoned in agony. (Lahens 2018: 68)

The polyphonic narrative of Lahens’ novel focuses on the stories of several characters who live in Haiti’s capital or in the suburbs of Port-au-Prince, “a polymorphic place with unstable and blurred boundaries, where the urban environment is a set of inextricable and unexpected habitat forms and complex social interactions” (Walsh 2019: 209). The book shows life on the verge of life and death in various ways, tracing the political, social, and economic conditions that lead to it. Each of the characters is subjected to vulnerability in some way. This vulnerability is the result of a combination of historical circumstances and natural conditions endemic to the region, as described by Mark Schuller: “the legacy of this foreign powers-state-elite [slavery, colonialism and US imperialism – I.P.] is environmental destruction, land conflicts, social exclusion, extreme inequality, centralization in Port-au-Prince, and a state that did not invest in social development, all of which amplified the destructive force of natural hazards such as earthquakes and hurricanes” (Schuller 2016). But Schuller (2016) also cautions that human resilience and survivability must be always considered when talking about forms of vulnerability. Otherwise, it threatens to disseminate the image (popular in the media depicting natural disasters) of the passivity of people affected by the disaster: “Haiti is more or less all earthquake, all the time. It would seem that the island nation is little other than this latest catastrophe, at least as far as the international media is concerned” (Glover 2012: 199). In some ways, the Haitian reality after the earthquake of January 12, 2010 resembles a state of “vegetation” (zombification), due to the loss of homes by many of the

9 Perhaps the distance of the narrator results again from a biographical detail. Lafferière emigrated to Canada for fear of being arrested and imprisoned by the “Tonton Macoute”. The formation itself referred to the Vodou beliefs in a mythological bogeyman, consuming disobedient children for breakfast.

victims, the paralysis of state institutions and increasing violence. The long-term effects of this and other natural disasters warrant a portrait of Haitians in a state of collective catalepsy. But such an approach has been overcome in Lahens' works, because the author, starting from the essay *Failles* (Lahens 2010), consequently contests the one-sidedness and imperialist nature of Haiti's catastrophic depictions. *Douces déroutes* is full of irony and bitter disappointment at the prevailing depiction of Haiti as a country of poverty, compared to the carcass of a car:

> It was the precise time when the island began to crumble in their hands. Piece after piece. As an abandoned car on the side of the road. Each used as needed. As desired. Only a gutted carcass remains from the car. But it is still delusional, since the carcasses have a quite unexpected value on the international art market. We are an installation at the contemporary art biennale, where, you have to admit it, one can really see everything. Hear everything! We still inspire admiration. What a raw beauty! What a power! What a resilience! And whatever else you want! (Lahens 2018: 23–24)

Lahens evokes worn-out phrases from the international press that strike humanitarianism, expressing admiration for Haiti because of the resilience of its inhabitants. This vision is still dominated by images of poverty, catastrophes, political turbulence and violence. Lahens also comments on the sellability and commodification of suffering, especially on the international art market, where it becomes an empty symbol.

In her essay (Lahens 2010), however, she had shown great optimism when projecting the Haitian future after the catastrophe: "Lahens shares the hope that Haiti will rebuild in ways that benefit the majority of Haitians, rather than perpetuate systems of exploitation and inequality that divide Haitian elite and peasant classes" (Loth 2015: 130). Writing *Douces déroutes*, Lahens seems to no longer have this certainty. It turned out that society was not at all based on an order that would benefit the majority of Haitians. In *Douces déroutes*, she presents a class-stratified state in which inequalities have only deepened. Lahens uses the metaphor of the cauldron to illustrate this arrangement: at the bottom of the cauldron fall either those who question the social order itself (revolutionaries) or those who no longer own anything; the majority of people, the middle class, are in its center, where they undertake a daily struggle not to sink to the bottom; at the very top, in the foam, the richest (politicians, gangs) float safely.

Although the city itself and its inhabitants are described many times in terms of zombi ontology (as neither living nor dead), the zombi does not make a straightforward and unambiguous appearance even once. So one can wonder why these figures, as well as other elements of vodou, are no longer an important component of the portrait of contemporary Haiti (the exception is one short fragment in which the protagonist, Jojo Piman pikè, mentions the *loas* he serves; see Lahens 2018: 78). I would like to propose a few possible explanations that are mutually dependent. The first and most important explanation is to emphasize that the different heroes of the novel, each in their own way, try to find their identity as a new generation, one that reproachfully addresses the previous one: "It was easier for you. I mean, the situation was as it was, with good and bad sides, but at least you knew what to hold on to" (Lahens 2018: 143). The previous generation, a generation of writers such as Laferrière and Lahens, had a clear writing purpose and struggled with very specific challenges: censorship, mass emigration, the neo-colonization of Haiti. The generation shaped after the Duvaliers, as suggested by the characters of the book, no longer has such obvious goals, and cannot duplicate the solutions and discourse developed by the previous generation. Perhaps the reason they do not really want to do this is because the people's

language, associated with vodou and resistance, was, in their view, merely a romanticization of poverty. This is evidenced by Ézéchiel's words:

> I hated my childhood. I still hate it. I hated worn shoes, hunger, rat bites at night and the absence of dreams to get over it all. I hate my early childhood and, today, even more then my early childhood I hate the stories that embellish the wonderful childhood of the poor. Those who have never been hungry love these stories. (Lahens 2018: 160)

The love of the people for their poverty is criticized. "Those who have never been hungry" should rather undertake the real task of helping and removing the conditions that sustain the poverty and inequality, abolishing the cauldron, one might add, using the Lahens' allegory. Denying the rhetoric of the people, including the elements of vodou, because of the way it romanticizes poverty and inequality, may be the second explanation for the absence of zombis in the narrative.

It would be tempting to explain the absence of zombis in the Lahens' novel by the religious demography of the present Haiti, which was described in the 2021 US Department of State, but such an argument is invalid given the syncretic nature of vodou religious practice[10]. The report reads as follows: "Christians who self-identified as either Protestant, Episcopalian, Methodist, Seventh-day Adventist, or Jehovah's Witness together comprise 52% of the population, Catholics 35%, Vodouists 2%, and 11% do not state a religious preference" (US Department of State 2021). Only 2% of the current Haitian population declares themselves (statistically) as vodou practitioners, moreover, the religion is often stigmatized, especially by Protestant pastors, as we can learn from the report: "Some Protestant pastors preach that Vodou is an evil superstition, and they could ask their followers to attack us if we decide to organize marches. Our students who attend Protestant schools are forced to deny their identity" (US Department of State 2021). Of course, this statistic cannot be taken without reservations, as Vodou is preserved in Christian beliefs, but as a separate religion it is less and less declared by the Haitians[11]. However, there is no doubt that the zombi figure itself, like the Vodou religion, has undergone the far-reaching transformation in the last two decades. The absorption of new meanings resulted in a lack of awareness of zombi(e) origins – its ties with slavery, its historical role in the revolutionary practice, *etc*. As zombies became primarily a metaphor for unrestrained consumption under capitalism, their use as a dialectical symbol of submission and liberation was no longer valid. The absence of zombis in *Douces déroutes* can be explained due to the increasing blurring of the cultural context of the zombi meaning and its incorporation by pop culture. In a way, this transfiguration of the sources of violence from colonialism to capitalism (see: Lauro and Embry 2008: 99) is very instructive for re-reading these experiences as inextricably linked. This would be one of the important postulates that postcolonial analysis should take

10 The Christianisation of Haiti resulted in a far-reaching syncreticism of vodou and Christianity. Vodou priests used images of Christian saints to represent their own deities (hence the parallels between St. Jack and Ogoun, Mary and Erzulie, St. Patrick and Damballah; Voeks 1993: 67; Davis 1988: 36–37). Today's Christian practices in Haiti largely draw from both religious and cultural traditions, hence statistics are not a fully accurate model to capture the occurrence of the phenomenon: "Although the religious life of the Vodouisants marks one of the overt differences between Catholicism and Vodou, these differences do not prevent them from practising both religions simultaneously with no attempt to resolve whatever paradoxes may exist between them" (Desmangles 1992).

11 Many different processes have contributed to the decline in the role of vodou beliefs in Haiti, for example the campaigns against superstitions, launched in 1941 and supported by the Roman Catholic Church (Desmangles 1992; Mintz, Trouillot 1995: 142).

into account, frequently falsely separating colonial and capitalist exploitation (Lazarus 2011). Although Lahens does not use zombi symbolism to draw attention to this criticism, her novel certainly situates exploitation as not so much a relationship of domination and subordination or a discursive concept (in Foucauldian sense of knowledge/power entanglement), but as a class conflict. In the representation of Haitian society, class conflict takes the form of the political and economic antagonism: whoever falls to the bottom of the cauldron will probably drown in it.

Reading the similarly constructed descriptions of Port-au-Prince in both novels (among the similarities: the opposition of the diurnal and nocturnal city, life/living and death/dead, or something in between), the analysis has revealed the significance of the presence and absence of zombis in the fictional diagnosis of the social living conditions. In Laferrière's novel, one can still decipher the dialectical structure of the meaning of the zombi figure discussed at the beginning and its close ties with the people, as a result of which the hinterland from the interior of the country becomes integrated into the fabric of the city. In comparison, the absence of the same figures in Lahens' novel seemed significant. I tried to explain this absence using three arguments: a generational shift that entails a search for new symbols of identity, a departure from the romanticizing approach to the poor, and the depletion of the zombi figure's revolutionary potential by pop culture. Of course, these reasons do not mean that zombis are completely doomed to slowly disappearing from Haitian culture, or especially to being unable to perform subversive roles any longer. Certainly, we are dealing with a far-reaching transformation of their symbolism, a transformation that testifies not so much to a failure as to the need for their evolution and adaptation to neo-colonial conditions.

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