

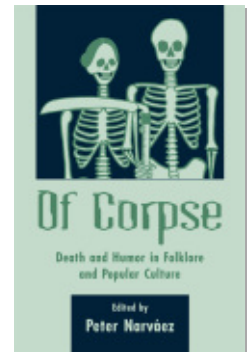


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9 EXIT LAUGHING Death and Laughter in Los Angeles and
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9

EXIT LAUGHING

Death and Laughter in Los Angeles and Port-au-Prince

DONALD J. COSENTINO

For Rodney Flambert

I would like to achieve immortality by not dying.

WOODY ALLEN

Let this essay on death and laughter begin as a tale of two cities: Los Angeles, California, where I live a few blocks from Hollywood Boulevard; and Port-au-Prince, Haiti, where I conduct research on Vodou.¹ Though they exist at opposite ends of an economic spectrum, both these extreme cities sustain singular lifestyles, and singular preoccupations with postlife arrangements. I have been an eager participant-observer in both their life and death styles, and offer this essay as a *memento mori* to lessons they have taught me.

Los Angeles

In Los Angeles, death has been subject to a treatment whose first premise is disguise. Half of us get incinerated in front of no one, our ashes discretely scattered over redwoods or grey seas. The other half get pumped full of formaldehyde and boxed out on narrow pink bunting, ready, it seems, for a tanning salon. Thus transformed into “loved ones,” we get planted in cemeteries, which more and more resemble theme malls or miniature golf courses.

Insofar as the gap between appearance and reality is the territory of laughter (*chez* Freud, et al.), these measures to deny death are inherently funny. Consider Walt Disney’s cryogenically frozen corpse awaiting some elixir (from Tomorrow-Land?) which will kick-start his DNA. Or Marilyn Monroe, our sleeping beauty, shelved into her marble crypt all blotted over with lipstick traces from still adoring fans. Or, indeed, the fate of the L.A. hoi poloi immobilized in their last great traffic jam just off the Glendale Freeway at Forest Lawn. With its glades and fountains, poets corners and babyland, Forest Lawn is the Camelot of modern

mortuary science, a Disneyland for the Dead unmarred by any reference to the sober state of its decomposing inhabitants.

Most Angelenos don't seem to get that joke, at least not the way foreign observers have. There was, for instance, English expatriate Jessica Mitford, who made a career out of documenting the demented practices of Forest Lawn (*inter alia*) in her classic *American Way of Death*.² It was Mitford who pointed out the remarkable parallels between mummification in Pharaonic Egypt and embalming in twentieth century America, and the unfortunate similarities between the skin of the embalmed and the texture of cottage cheese. It was her friend Evelyn Waugh, the brahmin of twentieth century satire, who forever memorialized Forest Lawn (thinly disguised as Whispering Glades), in his classic *The Loved One*.³ Early on in that gruesome and hilarious novel, the hero Dennis Barlow composes an elegy for his suicided friend Francis Hinsley, who has been all tarted up for his leavetaking by mortician extraordinaire, Mr. Joyboy:

They told me, Francis Hinsley, they told me you were hung
 With red protruding eye-balls and black protruding tongue
 I wept as I remembered how often you and I
 Had laughed about Los Angeles and now 'tis here you'll lie
 Here pickled in formaldehyde and painted like a whore,
 Shrimp pink incorruptible, not lost nor gone before. (1948, 85)

Barlow makes his living as mortuary assistant at the Happier Hunting Ground, a pet cemetery. From that position, he manages to seduce Joyboy's cosmetology assistant, Aimée Thanatogenos. Unable to choose between her mortician lovers, the distraught Thanatogenos injects herself with a fatal dose of formaldehyde. Barlow takes charge of their Loved One's incineration, making sure that the bereaved Joyboy receives an annual postcard from the Happier Hunting Ground: "Your little Aimée is wagging her tail in heaven tonight, thinking of you."

An even weirder sendup of L.A. death styles was concocted by Jeffrey Valance in *Blinky: The Friendly Hen*, his elegiac booklet dedicated "to the billions of hens sacrificed each year for our consumption." After finding a nice frozen hen (shades of cryogenics) at his neighborhood Ralphs supermarket, Valance drives to an L.A. pet cemetery where he orders a complete funeral service for his newly adopted dead pet. This includes a powder blue casket with pink satin lining, a pillow (where Blinky's head

would have been placed if she had one), a lot, internment, flower vase, viewing room, and a grave marker which reads:

1976 – 1978
BLINKY
THE FRIENDLY HEN

Such sentimental leavetakings do not come cheap. While the frozen Blinky cost \$2.17 at Ralphs, her funeral cost \$227.40. But a compensatory miracle did follow: when Blinky started to thaw in her coffin, she had to be placed on a paper towel. Her perfect imprint thus remained on the bloody towel, forming what might be called the “Shroud of Blinky,” which, like the Shroud of Turin, incorporated a scarcely visible negative image in sepia monochrome. Unfortunately, Valance does not tell us where this pious image might still be venerated, but a simulacrum of the hen’s funeral was featured in the 2000 exhibition “Made in California” at the Los Angeles County Museum of Art.

Port-au-Prince

Port-au-Prince lacks the resources, if not the imagination, for any such Hollywood treatment of human or chicken remains. Embalming is largely unknown, and in all that infernal heat, funerals are usually pretty hurried affairs. Besides, who but Americans could afford such fabulous necropoli as Forest Lawn? Haitians still manage to maintain a pretty lively scene down at their city cemetery. Natty tombs echo to hymns, wails, and the percussive beat of improvised bands, as the dead are wedged into their pretty new homes. Above-ground sepulchres are jauntily painted or tiled and decorated with tin wreaths, many embossed with photos of those laid to rest. Compared to this garish display, death in L.A. is Dullsville. All show and no action. An endless Sunday in the suburbs. Angeleno dead have run out of options, while in Haiti, death has just opened up new opportunities.

In their sepulchres, the Haitian dead achieve levels of bourgeois comfort which eluded most of them while they were alive. Eternal rest, however, is illusory. Port-au-Prince has a desperate housing shortage for the dead as well as for the living. Constricted cemetery space and the pressing needs of new corpses mean that old bones are pushed to the rear of tombs and finally into a central ossuary where they mingle with bits and pieces of the other nameless dead. Emaciated beggars watch while robbers smash crypts searching for

gold teeth or jewelry, and then shake out the coffin for a new paint job and a quick resale.

In Haiti, life and death are fleeting. When rioters smashed into the family tomb of François “Papa Doc” Duvalier after the 1986 revolt against the tyrant’s son “Baby Doc,” they found the tomb empty. The former dictator’s body was gone. Few believed Papa Doc had simply turned to dust. Most supposed Baby Doc had spirited his father’s remains off to France, along with most of the national treasury. After all, Duvalier dust would add quite a malevolent jolt to any *wanga* (Vodou charm devised to effect harmful magic) that Baby Doc might need or want during his exile. Others recalled that as pallbearers lifted the coffin to commit Papa’s body to the family tomb during his 1971 funeral, a dust devil arose out of nowhere. Terrified mourners turned tail and scattered, certain that Duvalier’s spirit had jumped out of the coffin and was making its way back to the National Palace.

The disappearance of the dictator’s remains was not remarkable to Haitians. In Vodou belief, the transitory fate of the corpse mirrors that of its souls (each individual has three), which are constantly on the move. At death, the personal part of the soul is ushered out of the corpse and into its afterlife by an *oungan* (Vodou priest). After a forced retirement of a year and a day under the waters, the personal soul may be recalled by family members, and thereafter repose in a *govi* (earthen jar) kept on a Vodou altar. Through ritual ventriloquy, a muffled ancestral voice from the *govi* may continue to counsel family members, until it is reincarnated in another body and the cycle recommences.

Such spiritual recycling is dependent, however, on avoiding capture by a *malfacteur* (evil wizard), who may kidnap a soul in transit, transforming it or its abandoned human casing into a *zonbi* (zombie). *Zonbi* are most commonly understood to exist in the form of captured spirits (*zonbi astral*), and not as the walking, soulless corpses favored by romancier/auteurs such as George Romero (*The Night of the Living Dead*; *Dawn of the Dead*, et al.), although those kind of *zonbi* are also understood to exist, and are much pitied for their dreary fate.

Hollywood images now inform Haitian mythology, reviving vestigial Congo beliefs regarding the reanimated dead, the way that Mme. Blavatsky and her cohort of Theosophists revived waning devotion to the *devas* (Hindu deities) in nineteenth century India. I first visited Haiti in 1986, the year Wade Davis’s bestseller docu-novel, *The Serpent and the Rainbow*, had stirred up renewed interest in the *zonbi* cult. Sensing a

thrill-seeking tourist, a young Haitian tout approached me on the street and whispered, “Hey, *Blan* [Whitie], wanna see a *Zonbi*?” with the same leering intonations other touts in other places offer dirty postcards or the services of virgin sisters.

THE GEDES

So the cemetery is a spiritual transportation hub, where souls are constantly taking off, landing, or being hijacked. Directing all this traffic is the Bawon Samdi, the grimmest member of an aristocratic pantheon of Vodou *lwa* (spirits), which includes such cousins as: Agwe, Admiral of the divine navy; Ogou, Generalissimo of the spirit armies; and Mistress Ezili, most imperious of the celestial call girls. Bawon Samdi is himself Lord of Death and presides over all Haitian cemeteries, along with a whole clan of related spirits who together bear a startling collective resemblance to the Addams family of cartoon and TV fame. There is, for instance, Bawon La Croix, his imbecilic brother, who keeps the cemetery grounds; and Gran Brigitte, Samdi’s ghoulish, red-eyed wife. Then there are the Gedes, whose antics transform the cemetery into Haiti’s theatre of the absurd.⁴

Everyone agrees that the Gedes are a family, and related to the Bawon Samdi. After that, no one can swear to the precise nature of that relationship. Sociologist Michel Laguerre says that the Bawon and Gran Brigitte (formerly a ritual prostitute) are the parents of all the Gedes and, together with their children, have surveillance over all the dead (1980, 95). André Pierre, Vodou artist and priest, essentially agrees with this genealogy. Pointing to the cross in his own yard, he explained that Gede served as ‘Executive Secretary’ to the Bawon (in conversation, 1987). Melville Herskovits, father of African and Caribbean studies in America, described the Bawon as a sort of evil amanuensis of Gede, a ghoulish dwarf dragging chains, with whom deals can be struck for the death or zombification of one’s enemies:

The Baron kills, but it is Gede who must dig the grave. He must consent to the judgment of death, and he is just. Even if the Baron has marked a victim, Gede can refuse to concur. ‘If you do not merit death, Gede will refuse it,’ say the Haitians. (1937, 247–48)

One measure of their contested relationship is laughter. Bawon Samdi never laughs or shows compassion. He leaves that sort of behavior to the Gedes, who constantly override his otherwise inexorable

timetables. Another measure of their relationship is clothing. The Bawon is always in black, looking like a mortician, a politician, or a thirty-second degree Mason (all of which in fact he is!). When the Gedes manifest themselves in groups (something the other *lwa* never do), they look like refugees from some far-out revival of Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band:

The dominant colors of their outrageous outfits are purple and black, and they have powdered faces. They wear top hats, bowler hats, airplane pilots' hats. They wear two or three hats at a time, and they often put on dark glasses with one lens missing. Around their necks hang pacifiers and baby rattles; in their hands they carry wooden phalluses. With a coffin hoisted on their shoulders, bands of Gede stage mock funeral processions through the heart of the city. Flocks of Gede, sometimes accompanied by musicians, accost innocent bystanders. Women are surrounded and not released until they have paid the toll—a kiss on the lips for every Gede. Awkward young boys are talked into spending five cents to have a look at the secret in the cigar box—a Barbie doll with real pubic hair. (Brown 1991, 362)

As is apparent from the Barbie bush and wooden phalluses, the Gedes are goofily erotic. They crack dirty jokes, dance the *banda* (a pelvic rock similar to the Brazilian *lambada*), and generally do all they can to shock prudes and mock romantics. As sacred children (note their pacifiers and rattles), the Gedes merge with the dead and the other *lwa* to form the holy trinity of Vodou: *Les Morts*, *Les Mysteres*, et *Les Marasa*: the Dead, the Lwa, and the Sacred Children. Finding life and sexual sport in death, the Gedes have come to personify the resilience of the Haitian people; their mocking response to the misery delivered by society, history, and Bawon Samdi.

Being clowns, the Gedes find their funniest shtick in death. In his great Vodou inspired novel, *Continental Drift*, Russell Banks perfectly captures their graveyard routines:

[Gede] leans wickedly on the jambs of the gate before the abyss, smokes his cigar, peers through sunglasses and in his reedy, nasal voice says, *You*, and *Not You*, and *You*, and *Not You*. He waves and pokes and even shoves you through the gate and over the abyss with his thick, stiff hickory stick, and then holds back with his stick you who are to stay on this side, lifting your skirt above your hips, if you are a woman, smacking his lips voraciously and poking the men and boys on their crotches and butts, turning his back and flipping the tails of his long black coat in a shameless prance. With his motley, his costumes and

beggar's bowl, he derides worldly ambition; with his complaints about the exorbitant costs of keeping up his dynaflow, he parodies materialism. He dresses women as men, men as women, and asserts the insipidity of biology's brief distinctions. (1985, 369–370)

How is it that Haitians imagine death in such active ways, while we Angelenos try to pretend it never happened? Answers might be found by visiting Port-au-Prince on All Saints and All Souls Days (November 1 and 2). These Catholic holy days are also public holidays and, along with Carnival, are an excuse for some of the greatest binges of the year. Both days belong to the Samdi family, and are thus celebrated (sometimes in conjunction with Halloween on October 31) as a kind of Three Ring Circus for the Dead.

The first ring is the cemetery. The second is the *ounfo* (Vodou temple), which reserves the entire month of November to celebrate the family of Gede spirits. The last ring is *urbi et orbi*: the city and the world—the bars and brothels decorated with crepe streamers and Bela Lugosi masks; the *Ti Palais* (Presidential Palace); the Vodou healing centers; those overcrowded leaky boats which may or may not make it to Miami; the vibrant, mean streets where it is not unusual to pass Gede's ambling "horses," as those whose bodies are "ridden" (possessed) by any *lwa* are called. Gede's horses are apparent from their pimp-roll shuffle, and tell-tale Ray-Bans. All these places are his realms, for at this unpromising moment in the awful history of Haiti, Gede emerges from the cemetery as the most revealing personification of the *pep ayisan* (Haitian people). As Francis Huxley wrote:

No other *lwa* is so close to man as Gede, for no others are so knowing, so active, and so intimate. The other *lwa* all idealize some part of man's nature, and thus have to have a heaven to live in, but the Gedes have no heaven other than the body of man, whether in the grave or out of it. (1966, 220)

Or as Mama Lola, the celebrated Brooklyn *manbo* (priestess) has testified, "Some people got Ogou. Some got Papa Danbala . . . not everybody. But everybody got Gede. *Everybody!*" (Brown 1991, 376).

CEMETERY MAN

Marley was dead to begin with. There is no doubt whatever about that. Old Marley was dead as a door nail. This must be distinctly understood, or nothing wonderful can come of the story I am going to tell.

CHARLES DICKENS, *A Christmas Carol*

Maya Deren, a surrealist filmmaker and modern dancer, came to Haiti in the late 1940s to study dance ethnology. She wound up staying for three years, became a Vodou initiate, and wrote *Divine Horsemen*, perhaps the most eloquent book on the religion ever published in English. What Dickens knew about Marley, Deren came to know about Gede. If He were not dead—indeed not Death itself—then nothing wonderful could come of her tale:

Gede is the dark figure which attends the meeting of the quick and the dead. This is the lwa who, repository of all the knowledges of the dead, is wise beyond all the others. And if the souls of the dead enter the depths by the passage of which Gede is guardian, the lwa and the life forces emerge from that same depth by the same road. Hence he is Lord of Life as well as of Death. His dance is the dance of copulation; in the chamber dedicated to his worship, the sculptured phallus may lie side by side with the three grave-diggers' tools. He is the protector of children and the greatest of divine healers. He is the final appeal against death. He is the cosmic corpse which informs man of life. The cross is his symbol, for he is the axis both of the physical cycle of generation and the metaphysical cycle of resurrection. He is the beginning and the end. (1953, 37ff)

Deren's account of a deity who is manifest in the most disparate things—death, copulation, dance, and healing—is reaffirmed by any number of contemporary witnesses. Regarding his cemetery connections, Gladys Maitre, *manbo*, doyenne of a cabal of Vodou hierarchs in Port-au-Prince, and my generous patron, observed, "In the cemetery you will see the Gede all over, but they stay in the cross. That is their place. When you wear your cross it can protect you from other things, but not from Gede. When you wear your cross, you always have Gede" (in conversation, 1987). Gede's provenance, however, should cause no fear, for as André Pierre explained, "Gede is your own parent. Your very own family. He is the god of death because it is in the cemetery where you find your own parents asleep" (in conversation, 1987). Indeed, Gede has become the most beloved *lwa*. Note the affection for this wild and crazy death guy randomly quoted from Mama Lola:

Papa Gede is a cemetery man. He live in the cemetery, but that not mean he's bad. Sometime he say a bad word, but . . . he love everybody. He love to help people. When people sick—all [kinda] sickness—that's his job to help. . . . He very good man. He love children a lot. He love woman a lot. He a very sexy man. (Brown 1991, 330)

What can Lola mean? How can death be sexy? To most of us, linking death with sex is macabre, even oxymoronic, though as Georges Bataille argues, it may also be the most erotic of all metaphors:

Eroticism, unlike simple sexual activity, is a psychological quest independent of the natural goal: reproduction and the desire for children. From this elementary definition let us now return to the formula I proposed in the first place: eroticism is assenting to life even in death. Indeed, although erotic activity is in the first place an exuberance of life, the object of this psychological quest . . . is not alien to death. Herein lies a paradox, that without further ado I shall try to give some semblance of justification to my affirmation with the following two quotations:

"Secrecy is, alas, only too easy," remarks de Sade, *"and there is not a libertine some little way gone in vice, who does not know what a hold murder has on the senses."*

And it was the same writer who made the following statement, which is even more remarkable:

"There is no better way to know death than to link it with some licentious image."

(1986, 1)

Perhaps it is the intuitive genius of Haitians to recognize the doubleness of death in the various members of the Samdi family, to see Bawon as death's finality, and Gede as its generative possibility? ⁵ Not for nothing do Francophones (including Haitians) call orgasm *le petit mort* (the little death). In such a dichotomy, Bawon manifests death's apparent discontinuity and Gede its profound continuity, within the enduring cycles of (re)generation. Bataille again explains: "Discontinuous beings that we are, death means continuity of being. Reproduction leads to the discontinuity of beings, but brings into play their continuity; that is to say, it is intimately linked with death" (1986, 13). In light of this argument we may better appreciate why the phallus rises next to the funeral spade on Gede altars, or why all those black goats are lying dead on the floor at the end of a Gede ceremony:

The victim dies and the spectators share in what his death reveals. That is what religious historians call the element of sacredness. The sacredness is the revelation of continuity through the death of a discontinuous being to those who watch it as a solemn rite. (Bataille 1986, 22)

What do these solemnities of death and generation have to do with Gede's various public obscenities? How do we account for his behavior in Mama Lola's Brooklyn basement, so hilariously described by Brown?

Msye Gede, Ti Malis Kache Bo Lakwa, Papa'm Te Rekonet Mwen, Gwo Zozo . . . “If people don’t remember my name,” Gede whined, “I’m not going to stay!” And with that, he grabbed his walking stick—the one carved to look like a huge erect penis—and headed for the door. “No, no, Papa Gede, stay!” Then she giggled and said in a rush of words: “I mean, Mister-Gede-Little-Mischief-Hidden-Near-the-Cross-My-Father-Acknowledged-Me-Big-Cock . . . stay!”

Halfway out the door, Gede wheeled around and planted his walking stick firmly on the floor. Spreading his legs to make the other two points of the tripod, Gede began to roll his hips in the lascivious dance step Haitians call the *gouyad*. “Little hole, little hole, little hole,” he sang, “Big hole, big hole, big hole.” The men whistled and hooted, and the women smiled. Soon everyone was swept into the simple, energetic song. With the roomful of people singing full voice, Gede took three little wide-legged jumps forward until the wooden phallus protruded directly from his crotch, and the song jumped to a new level, with a faster beat: “Little hole, little hole, little hole. . . .” Just as abruptly as he had started, Gede stopped singing. He marched back into the center of the group, snapping his cane smartly under his arm. Then he poked it mischievously at a woman and asked her to hold his *zozo*.” (1991, 258)

Bataille again offers a complex rationale for such naughtiness:

Obscenity is our name for the uneasiness which upsets the physical state associated with self-possession, with the possession of a recognised and stable individuality. . . . Eroticism always entails a breaking down of established patterns, the patterns . . . of the regulated social order basic to our discontinuous mode of existence as defined and separate individuals. (1986, 17–18)

André Pierre’s explanation is much simpler, and goes more directly to the relationship between sex and laughter: “Why not? [Gede] only does in public what we all do in private” (in conversation, Croix-des-Missions, July 1986). It is the disjunction between the poetry of romance and the physics of intercourse that Gede finds so funny:

Life for Gede is not the exalted creation of primal ardor; it is a destiny—the inevitable and eternal erotic in men. He is the lord of that eroticism which, being inevitable, is therefore beyond good and evil and is beyond the elations and despairs of love. Of this he is neither proud nor ashamed; if anything, he is amused by the eternal persistence of the erotic and by man’s eternally persistent pretense that it is something else. (Deren 1953, 103)

On a quite drunken All Souls Day some years ago, my old friend Rodney Flambert offered a yet more graphic example of Gede’s sense of

humor. He asked if I had any idea what it might be like to make love to a Gede? I answered with a curious “No.” He laughed as he remembered that once, halfway through his conquest of a new lover, she became possessed by Gede. Soon her sighs of love turned to the familiar and, under the circumstances, terrifying nasal laughter of Gede. Loudly enjoying the familiar in-and-out motion, Gede urged her now reluctant lover on to more vigorous performance in the grossest imaginable language. Master and mistress had changed places and Gede was thoroughly amused.⁶

In the immortal lyric of Tina Turner, we might then ask of Gede’s sexuality, “What’s love got to do with it?” If Gladys Maitre is right, the answer is “Not very much at all”:

Gede dance isn’t sexual. It’s funny. A way to make you laugh. When Gede doesn’t want to dance, he get mad. He stays like that, looking at you and smoking. The dance is just to make people laugh. Because he know they love him, just because he says all those bad things. To make them get excited. You can’t have Gede go after love, what are you going to do with all this pepper? So, he has nothing to say of love. Because some Gede come with pepper in the *clarin* (raw rum); they wash their face, all their body, with *clarin*. What can you do? Wash your face with pepper? Only a Gede can do that! But he can leave you with the pepper. Some Gedes always leave their horses with the pepper. So, he has nothing to say of love. (In conversation, Port-au-Prince, November 1987)

So the beast with two backs only serves to make Gede laugh. As the curtain raiser on all hypocrisies, Gede disdains naivete, even among innocent children whom he especially loves and protects:⁷

It is reported from the North of Haiti that children are thought to be incapable of sin before they have had their first sexual experience. Why then the crude and pathetic custom carried out on the bodies of children who have died sinless? The corpse of a girl is deflowered with a stick, while the dead boy’s penis is stretched up to his waist and there firmly tied in place. The parents, who have made their children guilty by this summary mimicking of sexual experience, do so for the best of reasons: it stops children from becoming little *diabs* and *diablesses*, phantoms who are so avid for pleasure that they seduce the living and abandon them, after a night of lascivious illusion, to awaken sprawled among the white graves of a cemetery. (Huxley 1966, 102)

Huxley’s apparent shock at Gede’s attitude towards infantile sexuality is often shared by other visitors to Haiti, as noted in Deren’s acerbic observation: “Gede’s unflinching discernment of attitudes toward sexuality

accounts, I believe, for the sexual emphasis which visitors have found in vodou, for nothing will more quickly provoke Gede's appearance and his defiant, overt obscenities than the presence of white visitors, particularly those of Puritan tradition."⁸

Cemetery = death + sex + regeneration: this is the equation for which Gede is the only correlate. As much as we might try to unpack its apparent contradictions, we cannot. The elements conjoin in a single "root metaphor," as Sandra Barnes defined that term in her discussion of the Yoruba (and Haitian) god, Ogun:

A root metaphor names the things that are likened to one another. The name gives the root metaphor permanence and therefore it can do its job many times over. When a psychiatrist says his patient is suffering from an Oedipus complex he can name and summarize what otherwise might take pages to explain, and he can use the label repeatedly. By the same token, when Haitian devotees call a despotic leader Ogou Panama, after a real figure, they condense into one label a complex historical essay on the uses and abuses of power. . . . By naming the metaphor, Haitians were free to augment its content. (1997, 20)

In a similar fashion, the root metaphor *Gede* glosses all his contrarious qualities, which nonetheless get summarized in the word "*balanse*":

André Pierre . . . once used the word "*balanse*" when describing the death of a mutual friend. At first what he said puzzled—even shocked—me, but later I realized that his use of the word was a key to its meaning within Vodou. "Death came to our friend's door," Pierre said, and then laughed, "*Gede te balanse kay-sa!* [Gede balanced that house!]" Death shook everything up. And from the clash and commotion more life emerged, much as Gede uses his cemetery persona to add extra titillation to his sexual one, and vice-versa. André Pierre was saying that death actually enlivened our friend's house. (Brown 1995, 223)

THE FIRST RING: PORT-AU-PRINCE CEMETERY

Now let's cut to the Port-au-Prince cemetery on All Saints Day 1987. By dawn throngs are already gathered at its various tombs and shrines. Bits of cassava bread bob in rum puddles left at the cemetery crossroads, offerings to Legba, divine switchboard operator, who must open the barriers between the visible and invisible worlds before Gede (or any other *lwa*) can take flesh in the human world. A mass of supplicants is praying at the ossuary, where discarded bones remind the living of all the lost and nameless lineages of Africa.

The largest crowd is gathered around a huge concrete cross erected for the Samdi family in this and every Haitian cemetery. One by one, weeping, sucking on sequined rum bottles, or lewdly thrusting their pelvises in open invitation to Gede, supplicants reach out to add another tiny candle to those already sputtering all over the cross. Black and yellow rivers of wax have given the cross a gooey sheen, like frosting on a birthday cake at a party that has gone on too long. Some of the dripping wax has mixed with rum spilled as a libation. For despite his antics, Gede has a reputation as a good listener, whose practical and compassionate advice is often sought.⁹ Having thus paid their graveyard greetings, supplicants will stream out of the cemetery, which is only the hub from which Gede emanates to every corner of the city. Many are headed towards the Vodou temples where birthday parties are already underway for all the members of the Samdi family.

THE SECOND RING: GEDE IN THE *OUNFO*

When Gede manifests at an *ounfo*, there is no mistaking his presence. He dons a top hat or threadbare “smoking jacket,” but his favorite fashion accessory is sunglasses because they look cool, of course, and in his own way, Gede is very chic. There are also other reasons. Shades may help him see when he moves from the gloom of the grave to the glare of the temple. Sometimes his shades have only one lens. Some say one lens helps him to see both above and below the ground. Others say the glasses have one lens because the penis has one eye, and so Gede is also called “dickhead.” Still others say the Ray-Bans are a put-on of the TonTon Macoutes, Duvalier’s hated private militia, who favored shades as an essential part of their gangsta wardrobes.¹⁰ These contradictory explanations are probably all true.

Gede may also have cotton stuffed up his nose, or a strip of linen around his chin, for he is corpse as well as gravedigger. From time to time, he may emit a gasping death rattle, or speak in the insinuating nasal voice favored by tricksters throughout the Black Atlantic world. He stinks. As Gladys Maitre says, “Gede don’t smell nice. He smell like dead meat.” His language is foul. He is a notorious liar, extremely insulting, and like tricksters everywhere, a glutton. He stuffs food into his mouth with both hands, washing it all down with his favorite drink—*clairin* (crude rum) steeped in twenty-one of the hottest spices known.¹¹ When he cannot put any more food in his stomach, he puffs on cigarettes and cigars. He is also accused of being a vagabond, shameless, a

thief—but for all this, everyone seems to love him. When he manifests, the temple *ounsis* (initiates) sing:

Call him brave-o—he’s a bold fellow
 His banana butt is bold
 His bit of chicken is bold
 His cup of *clairin* is bold
 His sweet potato bit is bold
 I call Brave-Gede:
 Come and Save the Children! (Metraux 1972, 115)

When they sing for him he does the *banda*, a dance of the hips which closely mimes sexual intercourse, and he may sing for them in return:

My dick says to my chérie’s clit
 Come and get it, my dick is hard
 I spend the whole week working:
 Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday.
 On Saturday, I give you money to buy some food.
 On Sunday, I must fuck you all day long.¹²

At the *ounfo*, the Gedes manifest themselves *en famille*. At one such ceremony held in 1987, I witnessed the Bawon Samdi, holding his phallic cane like a baton, leading a troupe of Gedes through a martial display of bumps and grinds. This *ounfo* had been a favorite of Baby Doc; the crowds of onlookers up in the caged balcony were roaring in derision at this parody of the military that had replaced him. A few weeks later the army and Macoutes aborted the scheduled national election by massacring scores of voters at polls set up not very far from this *ounfo*. Evidently Gede had forseen it all.

The most famously celebrated of Gede’s intrusions in the nation’s political life came during the administration of President Borno (1922–1930). At the end of a long day of Gede ceremonies, celebrants sing and dance out of the cemetery and temples into the streets of Port-au-Prince. One such group of “horses” possessed by Nimbo, suavest of the Gede brothers, swept through the gates of the National Palace in their tails and top hats, waving hankies and intimidating police and pedestrians. They were demanding money from the President, who like many middle-class Haitians, was reputed to serve the *lwa* secretly. Unable to bear their cavorting and taunts, the hiding President Borno gave in and sent out money. Nimbo’s political victory is remembered in a favorite Vodou song:

Papa Gede is a *bel garçon*
 Gede Nimbo is a handsome chap,
 When he's dressed all in black,
 He resembles a senator,
 For he is going up to the palace . . . (Deren 1953, 106)

Borno's successors learned little from Gede's laughter. As the power of authority has grown more arbitrary, cruel, and coercive through the Duvalier years (1957–1986) and the nightmare military regimes which followed, Gede's popularity on the streets has only increased. As state authority has refined its mechanisms of oppression, so too has Gede sharpened his flip-off of established authority into elemental, and often hilarious, manifestations of the common contempt for brummagem civility. Since the police have become regular agents of social oppression, Gede's role has increasingly become associated with the antics of social rebellion: vagrancy, pilfering, lewd and lascivious behavior, public drunkenness, impersonating officers of the state and priests of official religions, practicing medicine without a license. . . . The list goes on, but the point is clear. The Gedes are bums, louts, even outlaws, and they are all the more popular for their bad manners.

Given the oppositional character the Gedes have come to play in Haitian life, we should not be surprised to learn that the other holiday devoted to their antics is Carnival, the feast of reversals, the time when the world is turned upside down. Nor should we be surprised that the one politician Gede has championed in the streets is Jean-Bertrand Aristide, the anti-candidate, who urged his hordes of hungry supporters to go up the hill to Petionville (Port-au-Prince's wealthy suburb) and help themselves to the larders of the MREs (Haiti's "Morally Repugnant Elites"). Politically, Gede and his son, Aristide, are both Jacobins, motivated and justified by Lenin's famous query, "What is the crime of robbing a bank, compared to that of owning one?"

THE THIRD RING: *URBI ET ORBI*

It was February 1991, and Port-au-Prince was in a mood to celebrate. Jean-Bertrand Aristide, Catholic priest and street fighter against Baby Doc's dictatorship (1971–1986) had just been elected President by a landslide in Haiti's first ever democratic election (December 1990). Cynics in the hilltop mansions attributed his startling victory to the "E.T. factor": black and bony with a droopy eye, "Titid" (as everyone calls him

by the Kreyol diminutive) was so homely you just had to love him. Yet the streets were euphoric. All over town Carnival revelers were wearing *kok kalite* (red rooster) masks. The *kok* is a symbol of Titid's political party; all his political posters juxtaposed his face to that of the rooster. There were many flocks of rooster masks parading the streets of Port-au-Prince.

Like all great romances, this one had utterly heinous monsters to confront the hero. Roger Lafontant, one of the Duvalier old-timers called "dinosaurs," had rallied the Ton Ton Macoutes for a preemptive coup against Titid. Mme. Ertha Pascal-Trouillot, the acting president, went on radio with unseemly haste to announce her surrender to the dinosaurs. Titid went into hiding. The streets exploded. Furious mobs rooted out and sometimes murdered suspected coup supporters. Then, for once following the wishes of the people, the army arrested Lafontant. So on February 6, Titid's inauguration was celebrated in the pink-and-cream colored Cathedral whose clam-shaped towers are laughingly called the twin vaginas. The horrified elite looked on at the Te Deum Mass while ecstatic crowds pressed at the church doors and hung from the concrete limbs of the outdoor crucifix shouting "*Yo sezi; Yo sezi!*" ("They are shocked; They are shocked!").

Three days later Carnival began. Satin-clad harlequins whipped the ground. Mulatto beauty queens threw rose petals from their electrified floats. The *negs* (common folk) threaded about the floats, re-enacting scenes from the recent crises which had become the national soap opera. A loony-looking couple dressed in tattered tux and wedding gown stood under a satin umbrella. It was an ersatz Baby Doc and Michelle Bennett, his bourgeois wife, re-celebrating the disastrous marriage that helped bring down the dictatorship. Close by, a bald-headed Lafontant look-alike marched with a group of mock Macoutes in their red scarves and Ray-Bans, cradling cardboard uzis. Intermittently, amidst these diverse groups, Gede would pop up, his face all white except for the Ray-Bans. Mr. Bones in top hat and smoking jacket; the bogus pol bumping and grinding with all the other revellers celebrating the election of his child as President of Haiti.

Titid was of course the hero of the carnival. Bedraggled red roosters hung from the standards of many marching bands. Often the *kok* was held over the *pentard* (guinea fowl), national symbol of the 1791 revolution against France, which had been co-opted as the standard for the Duvalier regime. In the earthy idiom of Carnival song, Mme. Pascal-Trouillot, the last President, was mocked as "Mama Caca" (Mother Shit):

Ertha Pascal-Trouillot,
 Mama Caca,
 Look how you let the *pentard*,
 Into the national roost.

On a wooden platform across from the Presidential Palace a sign-board had been painted with all these same characters from the political circus. Lafontant was tied up nude to a pole. His *zozo* (penis) was also bound with cords. Trouillot, her *coco* (vagina) hugely magnified, was bent over and bare for the dive-bombing *kok kalite*. Carnival symbols are not subtle.

Counterposed to the mock politicians in the little street dramas were more familiar monsters. At first I thought I was watching play-Arabs dressed in sheets and pancaked white faces. A parody of the Gulf War being played on CNN? Then I saw the familiar black top hat tugging the rope that bound these hapless "Arabs": Bawon Samdi. Then I noticed the skeleton by his side carrying the coffin: Gede. It was *Le Troupe Zombie*, raucously mixing the ghouls of Haitian folklore with celluloid phantasms from Hollywood. Haitians are bemused by American fascination with zombies, who constitute only a small class of their mythological *bakas* (monsters). If Americans want to buy these beliefs, Haitians don't mind selling them. Herard Simon, a Vodou strongman instrumental in procuring the puffer fish "*zonbi* medicine," which Wade Davis made famous in his adventure-documentary, *The Serpent and the Rainbow*, laughed as he told me, "We sold [Wade] the plans for the B-25, but we kept the F1-11 secret."

Following *Le Troupe Zombie* came the Chaloskas, monsters with huge red lips and great buck teeth. They also wore eye masks, big hats, and Sgt. Pepper military regalia, and chased each other and the laughing crowds with waving sticks. I first saw the Chaloskas in Jonathan Demme's brilliant film, *Haiti Dreams of Democracy*. Demme caught them performing in the 1987 Jacmel Carnival. They were wearing the same mad military gear, said to be in imitation of a nineteenth-century general.¹³ Yet the objects of their satire were clearly contemporary. Marching around in a half-assed goose step, the demented Chaloskas sang, "There are no Macoutes in this troupe." In the inverted logic of Carnival, their denial affirmed their identity.

The honcho Chaloska then pulled out a notebook and barked indictments to his peons, "You are accused of telling the truth . . ."

And they brayed back through their big buck teeth, "*Wawawawa-wawawa*," like a stand of donkeys.

The general shouted, "You are accused of not kissing our ass."

And the peons responded, "Wawawawawawawa."

I recognized the interrogation. Maya Deren describes the Bawon Samdi lining up his idiot Gede children and instructing them in human ways, "I love, you love, he loves—what does that make?" Like dutiful schoolboys the Gedes responded, "L'amooouurr." I, too, had seen the Gedes line up at Gesner's temple. Holding his phallic cane like a baton, the Bawon led a troupe of Gedes through a martial display, every few steps pausing to execute a bump and grind. The brass band hired for the ceremony was playing "Jingle Bells." The audience upstairs in the balcony kept the martial tempo by chanting, "Zozo, Zozo, Zozo."

Zozo means cock, and it means fuck, and everyone—men and women, sweaty faced, laughing hard—was shouting it in Carnival. Just as every character, political, military or celestial, stripped of his pretenses is an avatar of Gede, so finally is every motive and every action reducible to *zozo*. Not *l'amooour*, or *la vie*, or even *l'honneur*; only *Zozo*. Gede may be foul-mouthed, but he is the sworn enemy of euphemism. He lives beyond all ruses. He is master of the two absolutes: fucking and dying. Group after group danced down the Rue Capois, singing the grossest of his anti-love songs:

When you see a smart ass chick,
Pick her up and throw her down,
Pull down her pants,
And give her *zozo* . . . wowowo!

One could wonder that women as well as men were shouting the misogynist lyrics, but Gede rides women as well as men. Among the Fon of Dahomey, whose descendants brought Vodou to Haiti, it is young women who strap the dildos on in masquerade. *Zozo* means cock no doubt, but what else does it signify? Is the *zozo* a flip off of established order? Of *la misère*? The antidote of life in death? Since everything is reducible to Gede, and Gede cannot lie, he makes it possible to laugh even at the most terrible things. With Gede everything enters Carnival, even AIDS (SIDA), the viral crossroads of both his domains. Thus the marchers in "Kontre SIDA" sang:

Oh Mama, lock up my dick,
So I won't fuck a trick,
If I fuck, I'll get AIDS
So go fuck your Mama's ass!

Troupe “Kontre SIDA” marked their lyrics with the *banda*, Gede’s bump and grind. One young reveler waltzed around with a rubber dildo on his head. Another was waving a wooden *zozo* from a Gede shrine with a condom rolled over it. The temptation of course was to say, “Oh, this is Haiti,” but it would be truer to say, “This is Carnival.” Celebrated with as gross a humor as Rabelais’ jokes about syphilis (the AIDS of the Renaissance) in *Gargantua*, this is the real festival of reversals, not the packaged goo from New Orleans. In this new age of pandemics and holy wars I was glad to be there, looking at the underside of things.

I watched the last hours of Mardi Gras on TV at the bar of the Olafsson, the absurdly turreted Charles Addamsish hotel made famous by Graham Greene in his novel *The Comedians*. I had been roughed up on the streets, had my pocket picked, had been shoved away from the balcony of the Holiday Inn, where the photojournalists and tourists were shooting film. So I went back to the Olafsson and watched the rest of the affair on the tube. It was nice: the froufrou of rum punches complementing the images on the screen. Bourgeois floats sailing by with their mulatto crews, oblivious to the black, saucy street ensembles swirling in and out about them. All those Kreyol *negs* moving to the same *zozo* songs I heard at a Gede ceremony just before the 1987 Massacre. Carnival and Vodou ceremony, both for Gede; even explicitly so. The TV screen panning the crowds in front of the Holiday Inn suddenly split, and the lead singer of *Boucan Guinée* appeared in the white face of Gede Nimbo, most dapper of Bawon’s children. He sang what was the theme song of the 1991 Carnival, “*Pale . . . Pale*” (“You Talk and Talk”):

You talk and talk and talk and talk;
 But when you finish talking,
 When you stop, I’m still here. And
 from the ground, I’ll come out.
 And from the ground, I’ll walk around . . .

Boucan’s image and the corpse of Gede merged with all the Carnival revelers on TV. Laughing, groping, pickpocketing, fighting, goosing, puking, guzzling, dancing, dying: Gede then and now and everywhere. In this poorest country in the New World, misery becomes a trope for three days. The dinosaurs and Macoutes, the *zombi* and the Chaloskas are defanged by Gede and a chorus of the laughing people. Finally, at 5 A.M. on Ash Wednesday, the vanities of Carnival are thrown into a giant bonfire in front of City Hall. Ashes for Gede . . . to start again.¹⁴

GEDE BALLYHOO

Gede on television; how perfect. All the Samdi family is used to ballyhoo. There was Papa Doc's patronage of course, his embarrassing attempts to look, act, and intimidate just like the Bawon. Rachel Beauvoir-Dominique (1995, 411) describes a cabinet meeting where Papa Doc dumped three buckets of white powder over his head, and conducted the entire session as the solemn and poised Bawon Samdi, terrifying the ministers with his nasalized intonations. "It was the same Bawon who, as chief of Vodou death divinities, presides over the realm of death and transfiguration: he who is asked to 'take the brats who insult elders to the cemetery' and who also leads to the 'divine' knowledge of self: *konnen moun yo, konnen bondye* (know man, know god)."¹⁵

Long before Papa Doc's copycat outfits, foreign observers had written fevered accounts of the Gedes: Herskovits, Hurston, Courlander, Deren, Metraux, to mention only the serious scholars, had all been transfixed by the Gedes' contrarious behaviors. Novelists Thomas Sanchez (*Mile Zero*), Russell Banks (*Continental Drift*), and William Gibson (*Count Zero*) had likewise created Bawon Samdi protagonists to preside over fictive American apocalypses. Then Karen Brown concluded her celebratory meta-biography of *Mama Lola*, the Vodou priestess in Brooklyn, with an ultimate chapter devoted to Gede, as I had the ultimate chapter of *The Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou*.

That was just the writers. How much more flattering to the Gede family was the ancient adolescent Mick Jagger leaping around the "Voodoo Lounge" video in the frayed tuxedo of the Bawon Samdi. Or Bobby Brown in Ray-Bans and top hat humping the floor, while the chorus chanted "Do it, do it, do it" on *Saturday Night Live*. Before Gede's tv debut, there was the Bawon riding Geoffrey Holder in *Live and Let Die*. Who can forget his white powdered face laughing at James Bond in the movie's last frames? Or the grotesque portrayal of the Baronesque chief of police in Wes Craven's new age zombie flick, *The Serpent and the Rainbow*. All these foreign scholars, writers, and artists are only picking up what every Vodouist knows: Gede has become at once the closest and most revealing personification of the *pep ayisan* at century's turning.

His ubiquity is mirrored in the staggering array of imagery Gede has appropriated. Most commonly he is saluted in the chromolithographs of Gabriel and Gerard, both handsome young saints in black clerical dress. Posed before skulls and lily sprays, they look pallid, even anemic.

Sucked of their blood by one of Anne Rice's 300-year-old Caribbean vampires? Virginal seminarians ravished by Lestat? These saints are Hollywood poster-boys for Death, victims of the lecherous Tom Cruise in *Interview with a Vampire*. Such stagey surrogates must flatter Gede, or make him roar with laughter. So, too, must the plastic bust of the Star Wars villain, Darth Vader, complete with red light bulb glowing under his lowered visor, which has been set up as his shrine by celebrated Port-au-Prince and Miami flag maker Clotaire Bazile. Across from Vader, on the door leading to a private room where Bazile keeps Gede's coffin, is a life-size painting of rap star M. C. Hammer, wearing sunglasses and a very righteous Nation of Islam hat: Hip-Hop Gede.

He's everywhere. As Karen Brown notes, "Gede, like a sponge, absorbs whatever is new on the social horizon. There is a Gede who is a dentist, and one who is an auto mechanic, and now there is even a Protestant missionary" (1991, 376). Of course he has acquired AIDS, the disease du jour. Recent Carnivals in Jacmel have paraded Papa Gede HIV in a wheelbarrow with an IV drip attached to his arm, on life support but no doubt looking to score with someone in the crowd. In some *ounfos* December 25 is now celebrated as the Bawon's birthday, the cemetery soul dispatcher having found a congenial mate in the *Jezy* of the French missionaries. The parallel is obvious, as André Pierre observed, "What is the message of Jesus to the Vodouists but Death which makes Life on Earth so dear?" (in conversation, 1987). That other mythic figure from Noël has also been gobbled up by the Samdi family. In the inner chamber of the Temple St. Nicholas near Port-au-Prince there is a small field of crosses, some surmounted by skulls. In a far corner of this faux-cemetery is a lifesize plastic statue of Santa Claus. Good old St. Nick in his red suit, but wearing the same embroidered black sombrero I'd seen the Gedes wear in other temples and at the cemetery, presiding over this strange altar to himself.

How to sum up this confounding god, this conflation of incommensurables? A *New Yorker* cartoon by Gahan Wilson may come as close as anything written or said to the heart of the mystery. Wilson pictures a little guy dancing on a proscenium stage. He's wearing a candy-striped coat and boater hat; heels clicking in midair while he holds his cane at a jaunty angle. Before him is a sea of grim reapers: skulls uplifted, shrouded in black, each carrying his scythe. The poor vaudevillian is dancing and clowning before this truly hopeless audience. The sub-script neatly summarizes his plight, "The sudden sure knowledge that

one's best efforts have come to naught." Or as Don Marquis sang of his celebrated literary cockroach Archy:

Sing your faith in what you
get to eat right up to the
minute you are eaten
for you are going
to be eaten.

Each of those skeletons is one of the thousand miseries of Haiti, as well as our general inescapable mortality. Before them all the clown dances like Haitians dance at Carnival, in the cemetery, in their temples; like the way Gede seems to be clicking his heels and laughing in the wonderful flag André Pierre fabricated for him (figure 1). Gede is both that old heel-clicker and all the skeletons before him. They'll grab him, no matter what, and he won't stop laughing. What a metaphor! What a reality!



Figure 1. Flag by André Pierre. Photo by Dennis Nervig. From the collection of the UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History (FMCH X87.19).