

Looking for Zombies in All the Wrong Places: Mayra Montero's *La trenza de la hermosa luna*

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Given Haiti's image and its representations, readers have come to expect that texts about this country will stereotypically allude to Voodoo priests or *houngans* and mysterious rituals. Undoubtedly, crucial moments in Haitian history have been marked by such connections. For example, readers of Cuban novelist Alejo Carpentier will recall the pact ceremony which took place in Bois Caïman, Saint Domingue in 1791. Scholars have established the significance of the event, and since then it has captivated the imagination of literary authors and readers outside of Haiti. Trinidadian critic J. Michael Dash summarizes the situation and its immediate political repercussions:

[The 1791 slave] insurrection has become legendary because it was planned at a voodoo ceremony held in a forest called Bois Caiman during a violent storm and was led by a priest named Boukman. The indiscriminate slaughter that followed was unprecedented in its savagery, and the planters did not have a chance against the pent-up fury of half a million slaves. The uprising of the slaves was viewed as a welcome event by the freed coloreds, who began to see that equality with the whites would come only through force. In the confusion that followed, two figures emerged as leaders of the insurrection: the colored general Rigaud, who led the mulattoes, and the ex-slave Toussaint Louverture, who led the half-million blacks. (*Culture* 5)

Thus starts the fratricide tension and tendencies amongst Haitians of different racial and economic classes. Betrayal, distrust, secrecy, violence, subterfuge, and deceit will come to mark the relationship between the “mulattoes” and the descendants of slaves; between the haves and the have nots; between those who stay and those who become exiles. These dichotomies permeate all levels and activities of Haitians well into the present time, including how Voodoo, its symbols, and its rituals, have become prized objects in high-stake games in the political arena, be they public, behind closed doors, or at international levels of not-so friendly diplomacy. These tensions are at the core of Montero’s three novels focused on Haiti.

Earlier in the twentieth century, Haiti in the American imagination had become both an object of fascination (a certain sublime) and of horror (a most definite abject). As mentioned before, Haiti captivated Carpentier, who in 1949 published *El reino de este mundo* a novel centered on the Haitian revolution and its immediate aftermath. In the famous prologue that accompanied that first edition, the Cuban author remembered his trip to Haiti and the fascination and awe he felt when he visited Sans Souci and the Citadelle. The significance of the revolution (that Haiti became the first Black Republic in the world) provided him with the possibility of hoping for a different future for all of Latin America. By examining the Haitian model (being the first), he lamented the situation of many Latin America nations faced with totalitarian regimes and civil wars, the result of colonial and plantation societies. He dares to ask if the future of the Americas would not be precisely in recognizing the contributions of “popular” culture strongly marked by African elements. Although Haiti’s revolution with its debt to Voodoo practices remains central to Carpentier’s novelistic project, he is not a naïve reader of history. The first part of the novel most certainly alludes to the beliefs in the extraordinary transformative powers of Mackandal, his knowledge of natural poisons, and the intense hatred between different groups

of people. The brutality and the minute description of the aftermath of the revolt in Monsieur Lenormand de Mezy's estate and on his wife are more representative of a naturalist style than the "realismo maravilloso" we associate with this novel. Yet for the author, in the prologue, Haiti serves as a metonymy for the rest of the nations in Latin America:

Pero pensaba, además, que esa presencia y vigencia de lo real maravilloso no era privilegio único de Haití, sino patrimonio de la América entera, donde todavía no se había terminado de establecer, por ejemplo, un recuento de cosmogonías. ... Enfocando otro aspecto de la cuestión, veríamos que, así como en Europa occidental el folclore danzario, por ejemplo, ha perdido todo carácter mágico o invocatorio, rara es la danza colectiva, en América, que no encierre un hondo sentido ritual, creándose en torno a él todo un proceso iniciado: tal los bailes de la santería cubana, o la prodigiosa versión negroide de la fiesta del Corpus, que aún puede verse en el pueblo de San Francisco de Yare, en Venezuela. (Prólogo 4-7)

For Carpentier, the issue resides in making the border-like credible events into possible happenings thanks to the confluence of various phenotypes, the result of miscegenation. The fortuitous ensemble of traditions enriches an otherwise impoverished nation. For the novelist, the fascination and "wealth" of Haiti lies in its rich popular traditions of African origin. Another Cuban author and critic, Antonio Benítez Rojo in his influential *The Repeating Island*, categorically states that by 1818 in the "new" Haiti, under "mulatto power,"

the Plantation reorganized itself anew in Haiti, although under other work and power relations. It is easy to suppose that this vast population of hundreds of thousands of men and women of African origin maintained many of their customs, among them the cults that the Church prohibited. These old slaves—like

Ti Noel of *El reino de este mundo*—were the ones who kept alive the cults devoted to Damballah, to Papa Legba, to Ogun, the voodoo and petro cults, with their ritual sacrifices, to whose sacred drums the greater part of the Haitian population, especially in the countryside still responds. (67)

In Haiti's case the national stereotypes, fostered by the United States, have had an impact on the literary imagination of American authors. Haiti's dire situation (brutal regimes, *coups d'état*, illiteracy, foreign debt) provides the perfect excuse and opportunity for the "Colossus of the North" to occupy the smaller nation from 1915 to 1934. A humiliating experience for Haiti sets the stage for the U.S. to expand its nineteenth-century notions of superiority over the region. The inevitable consequence results in a not-so imaginary objectification of Haiti and the commodification of Haitians and their culture. An uneasy combination of attraction and horror marks the relationship between these two nations. The stage is set for the arrival of François "Papa Doc" Duvalier's regime (1957-1971) and later his son's. Once set against the backdrop of the Cuban revolution and the Cold War, Papa Doc knew how to exploit the "inextricable lattice of intersecting networks' connecting [Voodoo] temples with one another and with *sosyete sekre*" (Laguette qtd. by Ramsey 251). According to Kate Ramsey,

Duvalier departed from the surreptitious patronage that defined the relationship of many earlier politicians with important popular religious organizations, and took no pains to conceal the access that politically loyal *oungan*, *manbo*, and *bòkò* had to the National Palace. Exploiting the popular linkage between political power and sorcery, his regime also encouraged rumors that the *president à vie* was himself a potent manipulator of supernatural forces. (251)

In the 1960 work *The Invisibles: Voodoo Gods in Haiti*, British anthropologist Francis Huxley hints that for Papa Doc, the inhabitants of his nation are Others with no possibility of overcoming their marginality. Huxley points out that Haiti continues to be “notorious for its Voodoo and zombies . . . its poverty is disgusting, its politics horrible, its black magic a matter of fantasy” (qtd. by Dash, *Haiti* 106). These perceptions of Haiti will not change much under Jean-Claude “Baby Doc” Duvalier’s regime. Upon the death of the elder dictator, his son became president for life on April 22nd 1971 until he was ousted by a popular uprising on February 7th, 1986. The causes for his overthrow are numerous and complex but they certainly include crossing the “color line” as well as the religious line, since he married a mulatta, Michèle Bennett¹ and turned his back to those same Voodoo leaders upon whom his father had built a complex web of support, interdependence, and, to certain degree, loyalty or tenuous trust. Papa Doc managed to figuratively zombify an entire nation. Baby Doc did not maintain as tight a control over his cabinet, relinquishing most of his control by delegating presidential decisions and duties to his advisors. The nation would eventually be able to break the Duvalier zombification stranglehold.

Precisely, the zombie has become one of the best-known and recognizable images associated to Haiti in the popular imaginary.² No other human-like being is more terrifying than the zombie because although alive, the being has lost his/her self, his/her will. As an enslaved soul with no control over his/her destiny, the future looks bleak and the enslavement could last several lifetimes. Perhaps even scarier is to be at someone else’s mercy. According to the online *OED*, the word is of West African origin and its first definition is “In the West Indies and

¹ She had been married to the mulatto officer who had tried to oust Duvalier from power in 1958. Her uncle was Haiti’s Roman Catholic Archbishop. A Catholic divorcée who had been educated in the United States was not deemed a good spousal choice for the son of the powerful Papa Doc.

² Dash analyzes U.S. and Haitian texts that deal with zombies and how Haiti is considered exceptional in its “bodily malfunction” (141).

southern states of America, a soulless corpse said to have been revived by witchcraft; formerly, the name of a snake-deity in voodoo cults of or deriving from West Africa and Haiti.”

Interestingly, even the definition is “double” and the origin of the cult shrouded in uncertainty and mystery.

From a socio-literary perspective, Dash reminds us that “in 1985, Haiti’s reputation as the land of the zombie was reinforced by the publication by Harvard-trained ethnobotanist, Wade Davis, of *The Serpent and the Rainbow*” (*Haiti and the United States* 141). The convergence of these factors prompts Cuban-Puerto Rican author, Mayra Montero (b. 1952) to publish her first novel, *La trenza de la hermosa luna* in 1987, possibly as a response to this limited and crippling view of religious and cultural traditions in Haiti. She also seeks to celebrate a hopeful and vibrant moment in the history of the nation as it breaks the chains of two brutal and consecutive dictatorships. As an admirer of Carpentier’s work and as an avowed student of his *oeuvre*, she understands that as Haiti is perceived so is the rest of the Caribbean, in particular, and all of America, in general. In several interviews and lectures, she explains her interest in Haiti and the reasons for focusing her journalistic and research skills on the neighboring nation: “What I really wish to do is . . . demonstrate that despite the isolation and the lack of communication that clearly exists among the Caribbean peoples, there are certain defining characteristics, commonalities, and, above all, a sincere eagerness on the part of all artists to break through the isolation” (qtd. by Fernández Olmos 268). *La trenza* is the first in a trilogy. The second one, *Del rojo de su sombra* (1993) deals with Haitian sugar cane cutters belonging to a *Gagá* (syncretic religious group) in the Dominican Republic. Her third Haitian novel, *Tú, la oscuridad* (1995) follows the journey of a U.S. herpetologist searching for what turns out to be the last specimen of

a frog. His research leads him into no-man's land territories occupied by violent groups. The plots of the novels are contemporary to their respective periods of publication.

Critics of these three novels often explore the stereotypes of Haiti and its Voodoo practices. Others insist on decrying a perceived perpetuation of Haiti, Haitians, and their culture as “Othered” objects to be consumed. Montero’s work on Haitians is neither condescending nor presented as an *objet précieux* full of observations recreated to sate a Western palate. Quite on the contrary, and following Édouard Glissant’s theoretical parameters, the opacity of the text is what reveals much of the intricacy of the Haitian spirit as Montero wrangles with the deeper meaning of what it means to be Haitian with a glorious past in the post-Cold War era, with the distinction of being the poorest nation in the Western Hemisphere, and with having a significant population living in exile. How is a conscientious Pan-Caribbean writer such as Montero to frame her narratives, flesh out her characters, and capture the essence of Haitianness while writing for a Spanish-speaking audience? How does one not betray the secrecy and sacredness as well as the importance of rituals that anthropologists have sought to explain without realizing that simplifying them detracts from what could be a more fruitful relationship between different nations? How does one attract readers without losing track of a reader’s pleasure?

Montero’s creative genius sets her first novel over the chaotic, violent, and confusing four-day period that leads to Jean-Claude “Baby Doc” Duvalier’s overthrow and middle-of-the-night, U. S.-sponsored flight on February 7th 1986. Jean Leroy, the protagonist, returns to Haiti, after a twenty-year exile, on the eve of the popular uprisings because his childhood friend and powerful *houngan*, Papa Marcel, has asked for his help. Instead of using stereotypes, Montero uses common *topoi* to debunk them. For example, in this novel, the word “zombies” is used only once as Baby Doc gathers the most powerful *houngans* in Haiti on the eve of his precipitated

departure: “El hougán de Les Cayes, Papá Hipolite, cabecilla a su vez de un grupo secreto de tonton macoutes que le obedecían con una pasión adormilada de zombies [sic], y la gente comentaba que tal vez lo fueran”³ (117). The narrative voice compares the submission of these *tonton macoutes* with that of zombies and allows for the people’s voice to speculate as to whether or not they truly are. As with the metaphor in this one instance, the implications of this submission as a state of zombification are the ones that occur in the text. Montero’s metaphorical use of “zombies” focuses on the political situation and the powerful groups who seek to foster a state of lethargy and maintain the status quo for their own gain. The Duvaliers, buttressed by the *tonton macoutes*, terrorized Haitians and effectively induced them into a state of zombification with the complicity of the U.S. Montero resists the patriarchal, imperialist view of Haiti as an inferior Other, offers her alternative Caribbean perspective, and warns us of the pitfalls of limiting Caribbean literature to simplistic, magic realist images for passive readers.

Her quest for an active reader leads Montero to suggest a state of zombification without presenting the image of the defiled body of the zombie. Indisputably, the centrality of Voodoo remains a constant throughout the novel. Montero’s focus is not so much to claim it as an unquestionable religious belief but rather on understanding it as a powerful unifying sign system used to advance personal and political agendas. Montero puts into practice what Ramsey suggests that outsiders do vis-à-vis Haiti and its popular religious beliefs since they are:

“modernizing” initiatives . . . Long figured as modernity’s constitutive outside, sorcery belief ought rather to be understood as its internal production. To recognize this is to break with assumptions about Haitian popular culture that

³ According to the *OED*, the word was coined in 1962 to be used in this context: “a. A militia which was formed by President Duvalier in Haiti and became notorious for its brutal and arbitrary behavior; also, a member of this.” In Haitian folklore the character is a bogeyman who comes at night to take unruly children inside his jute or sunn-hemp bag (*macoute*) in order to eat them for breakfast.

rationalize disempowering development programs and perpetuate the conditions that, among other ills, give rise to such accusations. (255-56)

Montero's zombification allegory may be divided into two temporal categories: one alluding to the epoch under Papa Doc and the other to the one under Baby Doc. Jean Leroy, who bridges both eras since he has fallen into a lethargic, zombie-like existence while away from Haiti, will do Papa Marcel's will without asking questions. In turn, the exile tries to impose his will upon Choucouné, his youth's love interest. She has plans of her own to marry her long-time lover thus trumping Jean Leroy's romantic projects because he has grown melancholy for things past, and she has been looking forward to the future. Zombie-like in his actions, he has remained on the margins of Haitian politics and expects to find an unchanged and dormant Haiti.

Upon his arrival to Gonaïve, Jean Leroy's first impression is that "se lo encontraba todo igual" (11). This thought is contradicted by his own flow of consciousness which immediately remarks that "el Puerto, le habían dicho, estaba algo cambiado" (11). It is significant that for him nothing seems to have changed, but others have told him otherwise. As he walks into the nightly meeting at the the *houngan's hounfort* [male Voodoo priest's temple], he recognizes his old acquaintances and notes their changes, but without questioning why. He deftly describes them as deadly looking:

Localizó en el grupo a Pierre, que apenas le llevaba un par de años, pero que había envejecido hasta la punta del cabello, escaso ya y canoso. Se acordaba también de Henri Pascal, pero le era difícil identificarlo en aquel guiñapo hosco, el ojo izquierdo retorcido por algún mandato cerebral e invisible, y la comisura de ese mismo lado tirándole hacia abajo el rostro. (12)

He seeks another one of his friends and at the end of the meeting, Claude Valcin's son (who is a skinnier version of his dad) tells Jean Leroy that "está en la cama hace muchos años. No se mueve" (17). These men have grown old in broken, listless bodies waiting and wanting to be brought back to life. Collectively, they represent a generation of zombified Haitians who have been victims of both Duvaliers. During their childhood and their young adulthood, they were beaten by strong henchmen, the *tonton macoutes*, who executed the will of the Big Boss in Port-au-Prince. At the opening of the novel, their children, who are in their twenties and who have grown up seeing the submissiveness of their elders are ready to come to life in the popular uprisings. They think they are invincible and are willing to risk their lives to effect a change. They no longer want to live like zombies heeding someone else's orders blindly, especially those of the *houngans*.

Montero's tour de force resides in constantly mixing the two eras within the narrative as well as the two degrees of zombification and how they coalesce during those four days leading to the ousting of the President-for-life. Throughout the novel, Jean Leroy remembers past scenes in a Haiti completely dominated by the iron-fisted government of Papa Doc. Jean-Claude has slowly transformed and eroded what his father had so meticulously built, including the relationship between the principal Voodoo priests and the Palace.

Later in the novel, once Jean Leroy has accomplished his mission, the omniscient third-person narrator looks at Henri Pascal through Jean Leroy's eyes and anew notes what the persecution occurred under Papa Doc has done to him. His body, like that of a zombie, is just the shell at the service of another:

Henri Pascal asistía nervioso a la conversación [between Jean Leroy and Papa Marcel after his "mission" of picking up powders] y los miraba angustiada con el

único ojo que le quedaba cuerdo. Jean Leroy observó sus labios decaídos, su rostro absurdo y derregado y experimentó un raudo sentimiento de conmiseración, similar al que le había inspirado, esa mañana, el niño baldado de la choza de Hilaire. (62)

On the one hand, Henri Pascal is nervous and anguished, proof that he is alive and alert, but on the other hand, the text conveys a sense of tiredness and dejection that impedes him from venturing out and being active within the popular movements. One may infer that the state of zombification has stunted this man. Other examples indicate that the older, more zombie-like Haitians can briefly shake their languid demeanor and become active participants who take life back into their hands and go as far as lighting fires during that last night of the Duvalier regime: “Un puñado de adolescentes casi en cueros se adelantó al tumulto cargando las latas de querosén. Rociaron jubilosos la fachada sobria del edificio, y un viejo, en pleno trance, acompañado por un adolescente, corrió a acercar el hacho” (74). In a trance-like state, this old man lights the fire, signifying the beginning of changes and of zombie-like beings coming back to life through cleansing and regenerative fires.

Will Jean Leroy remain zombified and continue serving his old friend? The accounts of most other characters portray the *houngan* as being in with the Duvalier regime and of betraying his childhood friends. That last night, Papa Marcel is called to Palace together with the other powerful *houngans* at Duvalier’s request. Baby Doc tries to regain their support, but he has neglected them and thus lost touch and the connection with the common folk. The tables have turned. He finds himself hated but not feared by the majority of his people. And the priests cannot provide the help he seeks. The events of those four days were incessant and intense as well as confusing. Jean Leroy, after talking with Claude Valcin who has found out his son has

been brutally tortured and viciously killed, behaves like a zombie and remains tethered to Papa Marcel's *houmfort*:

[Jean Leroy] salió otra vez a la calle, pero esta vez lo hizo despacio, arrastrando los pies, pensando en Clotilde y en la ingrata tarea de rescatar el cadáver destrozado de su hijo. Le quedaba por recorrer un largo camino hasta la ribera de la Quinte, y pensó que el aire fresco de la mañana tal vez le hiciera bien. Luego se bebería un tazón de café cargado en la casa del hougán Marcel Rigaud y se enteraría de una vez por todas de lo que había ocurrido en Port au Prince. (145)

With so many dead in the last few days, Jean Leroy cannot help but fall asleep, in an almost zombie-like state, out of tiredness. He dreams that he is lost in the labyrinth of the morgue. Does he imagine himself to be dead and visiting the deceased? After all, he has just seen Marcel's sign: the tress of the moon (a scar-like mark on the palm of his right hand) and feels as though he is in a trance. Marcel holds him in his power until his dying moment. And Jean Leroy fluctuates between worlds and levels of consciousness. In this passage, he visits the dead, as if he were one, but will come back very much alive and revived, a man willing to stay in Haiti and work for a better future. The significant passage that takes him to the realm of the dead is narrated in a free, indirect style. The readers have also entered his subconscious:

del difunto... el difunto... ¿Qué difunto? El sopor de la tarde le pesaba tanto sobre los párpados que intentó pedirle una vez más café cargado a la mujer. Pero sintió pereza de abrir la boca y se quedó flotando adormilado, la cabeza colgando sobre el pecho, el pensamiento perdido en el laberinto de la morgue. Una ciudadela oscura donde los cadáveres se descubrían los unos a los otros, se reconocían llorando, se desmoronaban en el abrazo. Veía a la viuda correr

alborozada, apretando contra el pecho la camisa agujereada de su hijo. Veía a Hubert Gourgue, bromista y tierno, conversando con un desconocido. Y por último veía al jefe de los tonton macoutes que lo detuvo de su regreso de Terre Neuve, atorado con los puñados de azúcar prieta que se llevaba a la boca y que tomaba de la bolsa de papel donde habían ocultado los polvos blancos ... (156-57)

This visit to the dead “awakens” him because now, he does not recognize the city and its inhabitants who have come alive. The city is no longer as he liked to remember it when he had left twenty years earlier. The author shows him waking up after a prolonged zombie-like sleep of decades: “Todo había pasado demasiado rápido, pensó Jean Leroy. Ahora era como si estuviera en otra ciudad. Ni más hermosa ni más fea. Otra ciudad revuelta y enloquecida que no se parecía para nada a Gonaives. Otra ciudad que estaba ya muy lejos de sus recuerdos, reñida tercamente con su vida” (165). No more city of the dead. The popular uprisings have resuscitated those who had almost lost all hope and the personified city struggles to come back to life. It is symbolic that the old guard represented by Papa Marcel is dead and so are the children of those who had been supporting him by living vicariously through the hopes of their dead-in-life parents who, because they had been petrified by fear, had to pretend that they were not alive or at least live their defiance behind closed doors.

Montero asks her readers to infer how much life has suddenly accelerated for these Haitian since the novel’s tempo is more compressed and new technologies have accelerated the results as well as the consequences of the departure of Duvalier in a U.S. Air Force plane. Jean Leroy had been asked by other returning friends to stay and help them rebuild Haiti. Yet, he is ready to leave, until a man, who had worked for a *mambo*, asks him for the bus fare while

clawing his arm and leaving “una medialuna profunda que apenas sangraba, pero que le dolía como no le habían dolido ninguno de los golpes recibidos en todos esos días” (191). He has surmounted his zombiness; he finally feels alive and feels the pain and what it means to be a chosen one. He has his own mark, has regained his strength, will not continue to live in the past (no more Choucune, e.g.), and will remain in Haiti.

During the regimes of both Duvaliers, zombies in Haiti can be found everywhere. One just has to know where to look for them since they are not the soulless corpses in need of being revived by witchcraft. Montero’s novel offers her readers a guide, through a carefully braided tress found not just in the palm of the *houngan*’s hand but in that of the novelist’s imagination. Her in-depth knowledge of Haitian history and how it is intimately interwoven with popular religious practices offers the reader of this text a more complex, complete, and coherent analysis of an entire nation zombified to the core for almost 30 years—the span of an entire generation. A country suffering a psychological soulless state of being for so long does result in a zombie-like population in need of a revival. When Montero publishes the novel in 1987, just after Duvalier’s overthrow, she shares in Jean Leroy’s—the new “king” as his name implies—hope for the “apretazón del pecho” to ease up, to “recorrer el largo trecho,” and to look “hacia arriba para buscar la hora en las estrellas” (192) with a renewed lust for life.

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