Kanaval

Vodou, Politics, and Revolution in the Streets of Haiti

Leah Gordon

History, in Haiti, is still a living, vibrating, organic entity. History, in Haiti, is charged, performative, poetic, and surreal. History, in Haiti, still feels revolutionary. School fees are excessive for the majority of the Haitian people, and education standards poor, but you will be hard pushed to find a Haitian who doesn't know the vast and intimate details of his or her own history. Haitian culture is a potent vessel for this history, continually transmitting, telling, retelling, and reinterpreting Haitian history, from the ground up.

I first visited Haiti in 1991, and I have been questioning what keeps taking me back there ever since. And it is history that binds me to Haiti. While in many states, history has been replaced by consumer, media, and terrorist spectacle, it is still a potent force in Haiti. Writing an introduction for my book, *Kanaval*, only two weeks before the earthquake, I used a seismic metaphor for Haiti and history. I said Haiti seems to be on a fault line of history, and you can sense this under every step you take.

And it's not just a case of what a history Haiti has had—though that has been fairly stellar in global terms with the Slaves' Revolt alone. It is also a case of how Haiti reveals its history.

Haiti, as a nation, uses every cultural tool in its box to transmit its history. The African, ancestral, and revolutionary history crashes its way through the drums,

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songs, dances, and possessive ritual of the *Vodou* religion; local intrigue, gossip, and relationship negotiations are aired via the improvisational songs of *Twobadou* groups; and gender roles, mystical rituals, and neighborhood frontiers are defined and performed through the collective melodies and rhythms of *Rara* bands. Haitian history uses the words, theater, and poems of its great literary tradition and the unique visions of its painters, sculptors, and flag makers. Haitian history, and not only that of the revolution, is also replayed through the masks, costumes, and narratives of the carnival in Jacmel, a coastal town in southern Haiti.

Each year, Jacmel holds pre-Lenten Mardi Gras festivities. Troupes of performers act out mythological and political tales in a whorish theater of the absurd that traverses the streets, rarely shackled by traditional procession. Mardi Gras in Jacmel is light years away from the sanitized, corporate-sponsored, and tourist-driven carnivals around the world. There appears to be no set time, route, or parade. One can wander a seemingly deserted street, then turn a corner to find a group of cardboard-masked solicitors and judges, with chairs and a table, seated in the middle of the road performing a play based on a nineteenth-century French novel. Around another corner you might find a painted boy riding a donkey, which is wearing sneakers and trousers and speaking on a mobile phone. It is a carnival of flaneurs and meanderers, rather than marchers and processors.

There are some extravagant, many-peopled troupes that can totally overtake the streets, such as the Zel Maturin, satin-clad devils in papier-mâché masks, with four-foot hinged wooden wings that they smack together dangerously, and the Lanse Kòd, hordes of behorned, shirtless men, skin shining with an oily patina of cane spirit, syrup, and charcoal, who range the streets, ropes in hand, before diving communally into the ocean at the end of the day. But there are also lone, idiosyncratic performers, for whom the character and costume represent their own intensely personal spiritual visions, such as Bounda pa Bounda, who enacts a Vodou vision given to him by a spirit sitting high in a tree. For many of the participants, the carnival isn't just the highlight of their year, it's also the source of their social status.

Jacmel's carnival is intense, but also so cheap. While Hollywood squanders millions on CGI and 3D effects to frighten the world, Jacmel's carnival does it far more eloquently with papier-mâché, pot black, cardboard, and nylon stockings.

Carnival has become a potent vessel for a people's telling of Haiti's history. As Henry Ford once said, "History is more or less bunk. It's tradition. We don't want tradition. We want to live in the present and the only history that is worth a tinker's dam is the history we made today."[1] What we find on the streets of Jacmel at carnival time unravels this statement with acerbity, threat, imagination, grace, and a wild surrealism. The whole event is swirling around in a miasma of warped historical retelling. This is the kind of history that would make Henry Ford's palms a tad sweaty. And so it should. This is people taking history into their own hands and

molding it into whatever they decide. So within this historical retelling we find mask after mask, but rather than concealing, they are revealing, story after story, through disguise and roadside pantomime.

Some Oral Histories

Bounda pa Bounda (Cheek by Arse)
Dieuli Laurent, 50 years old

I was born on this mountain here where we speak but I went to Port-au-Prince to find work. It was there I did a famous number for Carnival, a little puppet in a cardboard box that I called La Mayotte. A few years later I moved to the Artibonite, to work in the rice fields. There I devised another kind of Mardi Gras. I started to wear a dress, a long black and purple dress. I had two musicians on two different drums. I also carried the makout (straw satchel) of Kouzin Zaka, the spirit of agriculture. I was a drag Zaka. Then, to find a means of life, I had to move to the Dominican Republic to work on the sugar cane plantations. It was there that I had my first revelation. I saw myself in a long red dress and I saw a small chap, very high up, picking leaves off the trees and putting them into a basket. But in all my dreams I did not know who it was.

I left the Dominican Republic and finally returned to the mountains above Jacmel where I was born. I decided to form a group to follow my revelation. It was then that I realized that the character in the trees was Gran Bwa, the Vodou spirit of the forest. I wore a long red dress, wig, mascara and carried a basket of leaves and flowers on my head. I brought together musicians and dancers and called the group Bounda pa Bounda. One day, back in Port-au-Prince, I experienced a musical revelation and this song came to me.

Bounda'm twò piti, ou ap taye'm konpa
My arse is too small, you are going to put me on the compa rhythm

All my songs come to me in my sleep, but this song came as I was walking past a Vodou temple in the capital, and is the emblem of my group. I added the sunglasses to my costume just three years ago. Gran Bwa is an invisible and he dwells in the trees, but when you need him you will call him and he will tell you the secrets of the leaves. You must understand that this band is a roots phenomenon. It is a mystical group. We are all Vodou believers, born into it and who want to continue it. When we go out at Carnival we carry a basket of leaves, so if we meet an oungan (Vodou priest) or manbo (priestess) they can buy the healing plants from us. The leaves are used for teas or baths, to heal people or ward against bad spirits. We are the women bringing the leaves of the forest from Gran Bwa.

Chaloska (Charles Oscar)
Eugene Lamour, aka Boss Cota, 61 years old

The Chief Charles Oscar was a military commandant in charge of the police in Jacmel. He died here in 1912. He was tall and strong with big feet and teeth and feared by all. At a time when there was political instability in Port-au-Prince, when President Sam had just been assassinated, Charles Oscar took his chance to take five hundred prisoners from the local jail and kill them all. There was so much blood it made a river of death. The population was so angry that it revolted and tore the police chief to pieces in the street and burned him. He was killed in the same violent way that he had treated the people.

This story has always been very striking to me, and in 1962, I decided to create the character of Chaloska for Carnival. I designed the military uniform and made the big false teeth with bull's teeth bought from the market. Each year I change the costume a little by designing a different hat for the group to wear.

When I created Chaloska I also wanted to create some other characters to go along with him. I created Master Richard and Doctor Calypso. Master Richard is a rich man with a big bag full of money and a huge fat stomach. He walks with the group of Chaloska buying justice and paying the judges. He represents the impunity and corruption that hides behind Chaloska and is the real chief of the city. Doctor Calypso is an old hunchback with a black suit and a stick in his hand. He works for Chaloska and checks on the health of the prisoners, always reporting that they are healthy when they are dying.

These characters are still here in Haitian society so it is good to parade them on the street. It is a message to all future Oscars, that you will end up this way. The group goes to different places in town threatening the people. The boss Chaloska always finally dies, and the others call for mercy as they are cowards, but then another Chaloska immediately replaces him. This is to show the infinite replication of Chaloska which continues to produce the same system. There will be Chaloska until the end of the world. They started with the beginning and will not end until the end.

Lanse Kòd (Rope Throwers)
Salnave Raphael, aka Nabot Power, 32 years old

When I was a child the Lanse Kòd were always my favorite group. But I wanted to do it on a much larger scale. I have a gym here in my yard and all my friends from the gym wanted to join. We have one hundred guys, all strong and fit. We are making a statement about slavery and being freed from slavery. This is a celebration of our independence in 1804. The cords we carry are the cords that were used to bind us. We are always sullen and menacing and we never smile. The blackness of our skin is made with crushed charcoal, pot black, klerin (cane spirit), and cane syrup mixed with a little water in a bucket. Although we know that slaves never wore

horns, this is about the revolt of the slaves, and we wear the horns to give us more power and to look even more frightening.

When we take to the streets we stop at the first crossroads and at the blow of my whistle we all start doing push-ups. This is to show that even though the slaves suffered they are still very strong. Some of the slaves are so strong that they must wear chains to hold back their massive strength. I chose to do Lanse Kòd because I know and like the story, and in Carnival people like to be scared. We are the scariest. The Zel Maturin are supposed to be frightening but they are scared of us because they think that they will dirty their fancy satin costumes if they touch us. Also our costumes are much cheaper to make than many other costumes. No materials, no papier-mâché, just the charcoal and syrup mixture.

There are three other groups of Lanse Kòd: Chaneur Gym, Protection Gym, and Couvre-Feu. The last group were our true competitors in strength and size, but their chief, Lafaille Hans, died a week ago. He spent the night dancing, ate a little mango, and dropped dead. All the Lanse Kòd from the town, hundreds of us, went to the funeral and did a performance as an homage to a great master. We then went to his house and wrote our regrets on his wall. The leader of Chaneur Gym, Frisson Belleve, died just last year of electrocution. I am worried that these are bad omens, but I will continue.

CURATED SPACES provides a focus on contemporary artists whose work addresses social, historical, or political subject matter.

Note

1. Henry Ford, interview by Charles N. Wheeler, *Chicago Tribune*, May 25, 1916.

Atibruno (Atibruno), 2009

Bounda pa Bounda (Cheek by Arse), 2000

Chaloska (Charles Oscar), 1998

Esklav ak Kolon Yo (Slave with Colonialists), 2000

Esklav Yo (The Slaves), 2001

Gwoup Jwif Erran (The Wandering Jew Group), 1997

Lansè Kòd (The Rope Throwers), 2000

Lansè Kòd {02} (The Rope Throwers), 1996

Nèg nan Wob (Man in a Dress), 1996

Papa Sida (Father AIDS), 1997