A New ‘Kanavalesque’: Re-imagining Haiti’s Revolution(s) Through the Work of Leah Gordon

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A NEW ‘KANAVALESQUE’: RE-IMAGINING HAITI’S REVOLUTION(S) THROUGH THE WORK OF LEAH GORDON

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Abstract
In the Rabelaisian world envisioned by Mikhail Bakhtin, laughter serves as the regenerative, democratizing force; the carnival, we are told, is the ultimate site of social subversion. Haiti has demonstrated from the genesis of the slave revolt that was to bring about its independence its manifold metamorphic capabilities. The revolutions that it has borne witness to nevertheless been characterized by extreme violence, economic, geographic and racial cleavages and international isolation. The images that make up Leah Gordon’s ‘Kanaval’ series, exploring the carnival tradition in Jacmel, Haiti, take us beyond the democratic idyll of Bakhtin to a carnival surging with vitriol and passion; democracy is not merely ‘imagined’ through masquerade, but forged aggressively, and the masks are not merely masks but mirrors.

Using Gordon’s photographs as a lens, this essay traces the residues of Haiti’s revolutionary past (and present) through the act kanaval, through its participants, and through their active collusion in the choreography of these images. Rather than interpreting Haiti’s Revolution as a momentous, singular event, it instead posits that, like Haiti itself, revolution is many-layered and shifting, defying circumscription and constantly eluding the western onlooker.

Gordon was not to know that a year after she had finished compiling her photographs of the Jacmel Mardi Gras carnival for publication a devastating earthquake was to hit Haiti. This was the only year that no carnival was staged in Jacmel. While we come to understand that the spirit of kanaval is resilient, and while its potency is transmitted in Gordon’s images, there is a chance that they may not have been read in the same way, if at all, had this event not forced a radical psychological realignment with Haiti within the western imagination. This is not merely an exercise in interpretation, therefore, but in reading and interrogating the ways that we interpret and the ethical implications of doing so.

Key Words: Haiti, Revolution, Kanaval, Carnival, Vodou, Diaspora

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The historical spectrality of the Haitian Revolution took root almost from its very beginnings. The origins of the slave insurrection that led to the formation of the first independent black republic in the New World, from the Mackandal Conspiracy and the Ogé rebellion to the numerous subversive acts performed by nameless maroons, have been passed through the filter of the western unconscious. While the distorted dynamics of French colonial life, marked by slavery, sex, production, reproduction, and a mélange of cultural and linguistic practises, were also revolutionary precursors to this event, 1791 has become immortalised as the singular, mystical moment at which Haiti’s history was born. As Laurent Dubois nevertheless reminds us, ‘the Haitian Revolution deserves a reading that places the violence in context, acknowledges its complexity, and does not use it as a way to avoid confronting the ideological and political significance of the ideals it has generated.’1 The popular history of Haiti is simultaneously one of repression and one of fetishistic consumption, but this provides neither an honest nor ‘enlightened’ portrait of the Revolution, whose unique polymorphism is manifested in the many faces of the Jacmel Mardi Gras carnival, or ‘kanaval’ as it is termed in Haitian Kreyòl. Looking at Leah Gordon’s portraits of Jacmel’s kanaval reminds us that, in...
trying to conceptualise what Haiti is, western narratives have confined to the peripheries what Haiti is not. These narratives, with their beclouded filters, have transposed on Haiti (and on the entire ‘meta-archipelago’ of the Caribbean, as Antonio Benítez-Rojo posits) retrofitted models of historicising:

the Caribbean is not an apocalyptic world; it is not a phallic world in pursuit of the vertical desires of ejaculation or castration. The notion of the apocalypse is not important within the culture of the Caribbean. The choices of all or nothing, for or against, honor or blood have little to do with the Caribbean. These are ideological propositions articulated in Europe which the Caribbean shares only in declamatory terms, or, better, in terms of a first reading.3

Understanding this historical legacy forces us to question how we (as generators of new narratives) see, read and interpret, how we ‘other’, and how we disavow, and these questions become increasingly pertinent as we journey through the compilation of Gordon’s kanaval portraits in Kanaval: Vodou, Politics and Revolution on the Streets of Haiti. In Myron Beasley’s commentary on these portraits, he notes that ‘Gordon’s images invite the viewer to consider the “performative space” of the in-betweeness [sic] — the space of unsettling possibilities.” We are encouraged, in other words, to read an alternative history of Haiti, one in which multiple performative and transformative possibilities are imagined and enacted, by peering into the space that those before us have ‘efficiently papered over’, according to Gordon.5 As we engage with these portraits, we partake in an act of re-evaluation; it is a process of stripping back centuries of historical misunderstanding and misinterpretation and, as we re-evaluate, we must continue to question and challenge ourselves at each stage, because our first reading (as Benítez-Rojo reminds us) is almost certainly wrong.

By undertaking this exercise, we should not be led to assume that our readings are unencumbered or that, because we recognise the manifold possibilities of reading, we are beyond the purview of critical deconstruction. These concerns were certainly at the forefront of Gordon’s mind when she was undertaking work for the Kanaval project, and indeed continue to resonate throughout all of her works. In a recent conversation, she stated: ‘I like to stay totally aware that I’m a white woman photographing in Haiti [and considering] the politics of representation and who can represent who and how are of course part of issues of power and class and of history.”6 While an awareness of how we orient ourselves on this axis of power is crucial to forming balanced narratives of Haiti, we must also be prepared to defend those narratives and engage in the debates that question our ideological position.

With these problems looming large, this paper offers an attempt at reading the Haitian Revolution — and by that I mean the living, evolving, many-faceted Revolution that manifests itself in the syncretic, spiritual and ‘lower frequency’7 elements of Haitian life — through the portraits and oral histories represented in Kanaval. Endeavouring to move beyond Bakhtinian readings of carnival behaviour, it envisages how art, creativity and performativity form and powerfully alter history, and aligns itself with the recent scholarship of such figures as Colin Dayan, Laurent Dubois, Sibylle Fischer and Martin Munro, to name but a few, that aim to reconfigure Haiti’s position in western discourse.

In her commentary on the lansetkòd, or ‘rope throwers’, Katherine Smith notes that ‘the historical trajectory of these masking practices in the Caribbean parallel American minstrelsy in that they began as whites performing in blackface, but were later appropriated by blacks themselves.’8 The group emerges each successive year at Jacmel kanaval coated in a
combination of soot and cane syrup, brandishing ropes, wearing masks that cover their eyes and faces, and bulls’ horns on their heads. In their visceral and hyperbolic renderings of these blackface traditions, onlookers observe how Haitian masquerade overturns and appropriates the European traditions that were transported to the Caribbean in the colonial period; it is no accident that kanaval takes place during the pre-Lenten Mardi Gras festival that is traditionally celebrated in Roman Catholic countries in Europe and South America. It reflects, in this way, the pervasive syncretism of Haitian culture, through which the seeds of revolution were sown long before 1791. It was through the syncretic exchanges that occurred in language, religion and culture more generally that the lesser-empowered gained access to forms of appropriation and subversion in colonial Saint Domingue, and whose shifts and fissures created an environment that was prone to sporadic eruptions.

To read kanaval and indeed the troupes of *lansetkòd* represented in Gordon’s text as a synthesis of the cultural practices of Haiti’s historic populations is nevertheless crude and inaccurate. As Benítez-Rojo notes: ‘A syncretic artifact is not a synthesis, but rather a signifier made of differences’.9 Although the likes of Paul Gilroy may take issue with the use of such terminology,10 it should be underscored that the syncretism of the Caribbean is not a harmonic fusion of cultures, but a commixture of multiple components in constant dialogue with one another. This dialogism is prefigured in the body of *Kanaval* in its marriage between photography, oral history and commentary, which replicates its own syncretic structure that, like the syncretism of Haiti, is by no means unproblematic and stable. While the project strikes a balance that Luke Eric Lassiter may commend for its ‘collaborative and reciprocal’ approach,11 this is in part contested by problems surrounding mediation, of which Gordon was acutely aware when undertaking the project. The oral histories that form the narrative vignettes for Gordon’s photographs and the carnival characters therein represented are compiled from interviews that Gordon conducted with the participants of kanaval over a fifteen-year period in Jacmel. Her interviews, she recounts, were conducted in Kreyòl and translated by herself; when questioned on how these narratives could have been filtered or mediated, Gordon notes: ‘Certainly I think I put my own poetics into it. The first set I did I worked with a translator […] and now that I’m much better at Kreyòl I can see her poetics […] You obviously always have that.’12 Nevertheless, she also stresses the poetic that is channelled through Haitian Kreyòl itself, which is also a syncretic product of the exchanges between French colonisers and a multitude of diverse African tribal communities. Despite the emphasis that Lassiter places on ‘not build[ing] things up that aren’t there’,13 this may be almost impossible to achieve when transposing the poetics that have emerged from one culture onto that of another.

While mediated, furthermore, the dialogue has been neither coerced nor appropriated; the stories derive from the teller, which is highlighted by Gordon’s acknowledgement of each individual’s authorship within the text of the oral histories. Privileging Haitian mythology by aligning the histories with images of (participants posturing as) the characters to whom they refer, but who may or may not be the source of the oral history, there is a sense that these stories belong more to the character and to tradition than to the masquerader. They remain firmly entrenched in a fantasy realm that has been created by many but is owned by nobody. There is thus no sense of dilution within this syncretic text and no suggestion that the poetics of translation cannot be reflexive, honest or respectful to the individual.

The syncretic revolution that takes place during kanaval and in the body of *Kanaval* violently and grotesquely contests the homogenisation of other carnival traditions and it is once again through the figure of the *lansetkòd* that this is most demonstrably seen. Looking back on the history of slavery while simultaneously speaking to historic and current concerns about a class system that has been created and bolstered by a ‘pigmentocracy’, the *lansetkòd* are penetrating, undying and inescapable. This is exemplified in Edwidge Danticat’s narrative
about the Jacmel kanaval, *After the Dance*, an exploration of the community and ritual preparations that surround kanaval and of the anxieties surrounding its marketisation, international palatability and ‘containment’, in which she notes:

The only group I am afraid to get too close to is a band of bare-chested horned and hooded men whose bodies are covered with sugarcane syrup mixed with soot and powdered carbon. Baptized lanceurs de cordes, or rope launchers, these men gather closely together behind a rope and then launch into a fast run, all the while trying to rub the sticky ash on their bodies on revelers.\textsuperscript{14}

The *lansetkòd* evoke fear in the participants of kanaval, who wish to ‘avoid getting soiled’.\textsuperscript{15} Traces of their terrorisation are left in the ‘marks’ that they leave on their victims, which symbolise both the indelibility of slavery in Haitian memory and its centrality to acts of perennial performative resistance. While history and ancestry are imbedded in the *lansetkòd*, the sense of future acculturation that has historically defined Haitian syncretism is also part of their narrative. Although their costumes remain largely uncomplicated, with ‘no materials, no papier-mâché - just the charcoal and syrup mixture’, as Salnave Raphael casually reminds us,\textsuperscript{16} their masks may be transformed from year to year; Gordon recounts one kanaval during the course of her fifteen-year project in which the masks were made out of orange peel (see Image 1). This choice of mask seems itself expressive of the very organic and evolving nature of kanaval. Similarly, although the figure of the *Jwif Eran*, or Wandering Jew, is a character that is revived annually (despite at one point being threatened with extinction),\textsuperscript{17} he wears ‘different colours each year’,\textsuperscript{18} and his team ‘sits down every year and changes the script so that they can bring in something each year of local politics.’\textsuperscript{19} They recount a narrative that is diasporic, mirrored in and displaced to other historic Caribbean carnival traditions, such as those of Trinidad and Cuba,\textsuperscript{20} and derived partly from a European colonial heritage. The Jacmel kanaval in this way embodies a kind of appropriation, subversion and re-imagining that is perhaps best understood through Paul Gilroy’s roots/routes dichotomy, which is exemplified thus:

Marked by its European origins, modern black political culture has always been more interested in the relationship of identity to roots and rootedness than in seeing identity as a process of movement and mediation that is more appropriately approached via the homonym routes.\textsuperscript{21}

Tracing the intersections between the Black Atlantic and modernity, Gilroy underscores the importance of movement and renewal in the diaspora.

The syncretic exchanges in which Haitians have participated from the pre-revolutionary era to the present led to the genesis of a culture able to transform and re-envision itself through its consciousness of history. While perhaps taken out of the context of the historical moment with a trajectory that spans fifteen years, Gordon underscores that the intention of the project was to demonstrate the historicity of kanaval and indeed its participants’ interrelationship to this re-telling of history:

For me what was interesting was not how kanaval lends itself to a very particular time and place […] my interest was much more about how the subaltern class keeps telling its own history in a way that it wants to and [how] it finds its own themes and expressions of themes and that for me was really interesting: the aggrandisement of the peasant which comes out in a
couple of the groups. For me it was really more about keeping these stories alive and having control of a narrative that is out of the control of the ruling class.\textsuperscript{22}

There remains a risk, of course, that having such a broad photographic trajectory could intimate that Haitian culture is perhaps ‘timeless’ or ahistorical. While this appears to be undermined by the inclusion of oral histories with a clearly delineated trail of authorship and critical essays that enter into conversation with the images and the historic traditions of kanaval, there remains an aura of the mythological in this text and it seems that this much is intentional. This is in part derived from Gordon’s photographic composition; the reproduction of black and white prints and the extraction of the characters from the scene of kanaval provide an illusion of stasis. The images are in this way arresting, eliciting the gaze of their viewer. It is also manifested, however, in its focalisation on Vodou, or ‘Voodoo’ as it is more frequently referred to in western popular culture.

Vodou, we are reminded in the body of Kanaval, is at the core of Haiti’s revolutionary history. Gordon and several other commentators in Kanaval make reference to the Vodou ceremony at Bois Caïman, at which notable leading figures such as Dutty Boukman, Jean-François Papillon, Jeannot Bullet and Georges Biassou gathered and made an insurrectionary pact with neighbouring maroons, purportedly signalling the Revolution’s inauguration. ‘For Haitians today,’ asserts Madison Smartt Bell, it is ‘the story of Bwa Kayman [Bois Caïman]’ that ‘works a mythological simplification of the evolution of the Haitian identity; processes which took a long time to happen are conceived to have occurred in this single event.’\textsuperscript{23} While the mythology of the event has perhaps been embellished over the past two centuries, and Caroline Fick considers the various difficulties in unravelling slave testimony from elite white discourse,\textsuperscript{24} this seems of little real significance to whether or not the practise and philosophy of Vodou were (and continue to be) inextricably bound up with the Revolution. It is largely through oral history, after all, that Haiti has retained such a pervasive consciousness of its Revolution, for which kanaval has become a vehicle and within which Vodou is firmly embedded.

In one of Gordon’s oral histories we encounter Clerment Beauvais, a houngan, or Vodou priest, who narrates a story of kanaval in which various characters and traditions die out, are then resurrected, or transform into something entirely other. Throughout this narrative, however, Vodou remains the transcendent force. ‘Vodou is the basis of everything’, he tells us.\textsuperscript{25} Indeed, Vodou is not merely seen in the spiritual masks that are appropriated by the Jacmelians of kanaval, such as the Zel Maturin, but is deeply felt in the performative spirit of kanaval, which opens the door to collective veneration, possession and power. The Haitian tradition of Rara, a form of folk music that is traditionally performed during kanaval, reinforces this notion. According to Liza McAlister, Rara should ‘be understood as a synthesis between Carnival behavior and religious practice.’\textsuperscript{26} Kanaval provides a forum for the practice of Rara, through which a revolutionary spiritualism is channelled. Martin Munro considers this rhythm/spiritualism/collectivism dynamic in greater depth in his book, Different Drummers: Rhythm and Race in the Americas, noting that ‘Religious practices and ceremonial dances facilitated the organization of the rebellion and fostered a sense of community and identity among the diverse ethnic African groups and between them and the Creole slaves’\textsuperscript{27}, and the interconnectivity of these traditions, we learn from Clerment Beauvais, have been cemented in Haitian history. While he asserts that ‘Rara is all about Vodou’, he also reminds us that ‘Vodou is resistance.’\textsuperscript{28} Vodou, Rara and the Revolution thus form a triad that is central to the kanaval narrative.

Vodou therefore remains a major part of the metamorphic history of the Haitian Revolution. At the same time, the Revolution is deeply rooted in the practice and philosophy
of *Vodou*. *Vodou*, as it manifests itself in Haiti, has always been a religion of resistance, Bois Caïman notwithstanding. At periods during which it has found itself the subject of persecution and violent suppression, its followers have had to invent new modes of practice in order to shroud and preserve it for new generations of adherents; it was during the colonial period, when those religious practices that did not subscribe to notions of monotheism were branded as ‘superstitious’, that *Vodou* gods, or *lwa*, took the faces of Catholic saints, for example. Revolution is furthermore inscribed in the *Vodou* pantheon by the figure of Jean-Jacques Dessalines, founder of Haitian independence and ‘the only “Black Jacobin” to become a god.’ *Vodou* separates Haiti, and its revolutionary history, from the mainstream and from the monolithic; were it not seen as such a pervasive ‘threat’ to outsiders (and to insiders with vested economic and political interests), it would not have suffered such radical assaults over the past two centuries from Toussaint L’Ouverture, Stenio Vincent, and, more recently, Michel Martelly. In many ways, kanaval plays upon this outsider encroachment and fear, with its stark and hyperbolic visions of masquerade that evoke terror in the imaginations of its participants. Gordon’s *Kanaval* images, whose performers engage us in an act of looking but simultaneously acknowledge this act by inverting penetration with their own outward gaze, exemplify this evocativeness; while we are unable to see beneath the mask and the subject is able to elude us, we are conscious that they somehow have the full measure of us as viewers, who wear no masks when we look in on the spectacle before us. This is most profoundly felt in Gordon’s image of the *Kouve Fey*, a derivative group of the *lansetkòd*, in which one of the group members holds a camera up, as if to record this act of viewing, and undermine any sense of proprietorship that we may previously have held (see Image 2). Conscious of the interplay of exchange within her images, Gordon notes that

Haitians aren’t innocents in this parade of the exotic. They know the effect that it has on white people and on the bourgeoisie in their own country. They’re not innocent in their *déguisement*. It’s very pointed. […] slaves rose up against the many horsed, many armed battalions of Napoleon and they had to learn very early on how to be quite scary on a low budget.³²

Kanaval is supposed to be ‘scary’; as with *Vodou*, *Rara* and the Revolution, we (as westerners and/or outsiders) are denied the right of circumscription — this belongs to Haitians alone.

The radically transformative space of kanaval liberates it from those other, perhaps more venerated, carnival traditions that have grown out of the African diaspora. We are urged by Donald Consentino to ‘forget all the conventional wisdom and all the conventional images of other peoples’ carnivals to dig what’s happening way down south in Jacmel.’33 Indeed, the Bakhtinian vision of carnival, in which “the peculiar logic of the “inside out”, of the “turnabout”, of a continual shifting from top to bottom, from front to rear, of numerous parodies and travesties, humiliations, profanations, comic crownings and uncrowningst”34 takes precedence, has some currency but appears insipid and inadequate when held against Haiti. Although subversion remains central to kanaval, the effect is greater than one of a mere levelling laughter which permits its participants to be king for a day in a lifetime of feudal peasanthood. The political activism witnessed in each performance of kanaval does not subside with the end of Mardi Gras, but is repeatedly envisioned in the daily lives of ordinary
Haitians in their many and varied acts of resistance to hegemony, whether it is located in the local ‘bourgeois’ or foreign imperial interests of Haiti. Kanaval is, in this sense, really only another vehicle for resistance, and is by no means its apotheosis. This is perhaps best understood through Gilroy and Aching’s conceptualisation of ‘lower frequency’ politics.

Within the lower frequency realm, the disempowered and disenfranchised are able to carve out a creative space in plain sight of the ruling classes. What is enacted is a ‘politics of transfiguration’,35 in Gilroy’s terms, whereby individual and, indeed, collective agency can be retained through the careful mediation of social performances. These instances of ‘lower frequency politics’, according to Aching, ‘do not always aim to achieve social upheaval but seek to gain and maintain visible representation within the region’s democracies.’36 Kanaval does not (necessarily) embody a literal rebellion but is situated on a continuum of revolutionary discourse that is ingrained in Haitian popular culture. It offers those who are not conventionally admitted into political hierarchies the opportunity to create and imagine their own. As much as kanaval is about communality, it is also, therefore, about the individual, and celebrates the entrance of the individual into the revolutionary discourse. This is part of the Haitian tradition of the gwo nèg, or ‘big man’. According to Braziel, the role of the gwo nèg is ‘to command the attention of the local power broker; to utilize the linguistic and cultural resources of pwen, spoken or sung points, or pointed critiques; to challenge corruption; and to question those officially or unofficially vested with authority and renegotiate its terrains.’37 This is observed in kanaval’s resurrection of political figures such as Chaloska (Charles Oscar), the military commander who, according to Eugene Lamour, created a ‘river of death’ from the blood of the 500 prisoners whose murder he commissioned in Port au Prince.38 Those that appropriate the mask of Chaloska are thus able to transform themselves into gwo nègs, accentuated by the assertive posturing and the combination of ‘accessories’ exhibited by the various Chaloskas represented in Gordon’s photographs (see Image 3). There is also a form of agency-doubling in process, here; while ordinary citizens excluded from the political sphere are able to imagine themselves as political agents from history, they utilise these masks to express their dissatisfaction with the present political climate, taking great personal risks in doing so. They are able to become both ‘imitation’ or imagined agents and real agents. As Richard Fleming suggests, it is no ‘coincidence that Lamour claims to have revived him for kanaval in 1962, in the wake of Papa Doc Duvalier’s first massive election fraud’.39 Appropriating the mask is simultaneously an act of recuperation and subversion, the interchangeability and mutability of which confirms its place within the ‘lower frequencies’ of Haitian political discourse.

Through the collective activism of kanaval thus emerge the individual agents that are celebrated colourfully in René Depestre’s novel Hadriana dans tous Mes Rêves (Hadriana in all My Dreams). An extract detailing the idiosyncrasies of the Chaloska character follows:

Un peu plus loin, je tombai sur les Charles-Oscar de Madan Ti-Carême : coiffés de képis bleu et rouge, ils étaient en redingote noire aux boutons jaune safran, en pantalon écarlate enserré dans des guêtres blanches, des éperons géants aux talons. Chaque Charles-Oscar affichait son mérite militaire sur un écriteau suspendu à son dos […]40
Although the transfigurative opportunities that kanaval offers up to lower class Jacmelians should not in any way be diminished, it is important to reflect upon the absence of women from the 


Although the transfigurative opportunities that kanaval offers up to lower class Jacmelians should not in any way be diminished, it is important to reflect upon the absence of women from the *gwo nèg* narrative that is channelled in *Kanaval*. Certainly, the cult of ‘big men’ appears to be the sole preserve of men, who have exclusive access to the performative space. This seems unusual in consideration of the vital role that women play in Haitian *Vodou*, not least in the Bois Caïman narrative within which the *Vodou* priestess Cecile Fatiman is enshrined. On discussing this issue of imbalance with Gordon, it becomes clear that this is perhaps more a problem of class than it is of gender. While there exist women on the Artists’ Committee, there is little opportunity for the majority of Jacmelian women to take part in the performance rituals that take place each year and this, ultimately, comes down to the power of purchase; Gordon notes that ‘bourgeois women in Haiti have equality, or at least more equality, and poor women don’t.’

It is not really an issue of obstructed
admission, therefore, but of limited opportunity. Gordon recounts the amount of time she noticed that the women of Jacmel dedicated to doing laundry during her successive visits — an arduous task in and of itself, but compounded by an absence of the technologies that those of us whom are able to enjoy the pleasures of the first world take for granted. Neither Gordon, nor the participants of kanaval, can apologise for this phenomenon. Kanaval operates according to its means, with a lack of government funding or a tourist industry to bolster it, and with little outside interference; it is yet to fall victim to the (total) embourgeoisement or marketisation to which other diasporic carnival traditions have notably succumbed. The women of Jacmel have helped to preserve it thus, as a narrative that remains in the hands of Haitians, and occupy a presence through their absence that is pointed to in the numerous acts of ironic transvestism.

Such a topic deserves more intense scrutiny than can be afforded within the scope of this article, and Gordon and I speculate whether it might be part of a future Haitian project. Hoping to return to kanaval next year for the first time since the earthquake struck will enable Gordon to see what kind of ‘sea changes’ it has undergone, if any. ‘Perhaps more women are tigers now’, Gordon speculates; for the present, we can only imagine.

Towards a clearer-sighted blindness
It was an unfortunate accident that Kanaval’s publication coincided with one of the worst natural disasters to befall Haiti in modern history. Gordon reflects upon the significance of the 2010 earthquake and its global resonance in a postscript to her introduction, noting with some optimism: ‘If there is a positive side, perhaps it is this, that people will sit up finally and really take notice of Haiti’s creativity.’ Indeed, it seemed that, at that moment, the world could hardly look away; Haiti exploded across social media forums and international broadcast media, rising out of the vaults of the western unconscious where it had been safely locked away for over two centuries. Western commentators began to look at Haiti in a different way and while Gordon’s images of the Jacmel kanaval would become no more or less charged as a result of this event, there arose an opportunity for seeing into the previously unobservable ‘space’ between Haiti and the outside world and face up to the secrets generated by that chasm. In a compilation of essays entitled Haiti Rising, the editor, Martin Munro, explained it in this way:

The earthquake has cast Haiti into the world as never before. The terrible events there have piqued public interest in this remarkable country and its history and culture. There is now an unprecedented empathy for and interest in Haiti, and a related need for information and insights into Haitian reality, beyond the clichés often associated with the nation.

Contemplating this statement almost three years on, when cholera rages along the entire stretch of the Artibonite, 300,000 people are still living in displacement camps in Port au Prince, and Haiti’s political infrastructure remains non-existent, we must ask ourselves if this still holds currency. Indeed, this seems an even more pertinent question in the light of Hurricane Sandy, which, despite having barely touched Haiti, destroyed ninety per cent of its agriculture, a source upon which the majority of Haiti’s population is still largely dependent for food and income-generation. Since the earthquake, Haiti has been gradually slipping back into the recesses of the western unconscious, and, following this most recent event, was reduced to a mere footnote. This in no way seeks to deny agency to the creative and revolutionary forces which underlie Haiti, nor render Haiti as helpless or pathetic; Haiti is resilient, its history intact, and the flames of revolution still very much alive. As Gordon notes at the end of her postscript, ‘Kanaval is not Dead. Long Live Kanaval’.
While kanaval did not take place during the Mardi Gras of 2010, it has since resumed. Channelling this resilience, Leah Gordon’s images shift back into focus a meaning of ‘revolution’ that we have seemingly forgotten. More than a designation of ‘change’ or ‘upheaval’ and beyond a mere synonym for ‘rebellion’, we are reminded that revolution also indicates a ‘circular movement’, or a ‘cyclical recurrence’. Haiti changes perpetually, rising to new challenges, shifting according to international pressures and, while unbending in its commitment to its rich and multi-layered history, it retells this history in such a way as to make it perpetually resonant; *Chaloska* is not merely Charles Oscar, but ‘Bébé’ Doc or the UN, or, indeed, any other body of contempt in the current Haitian imaginary. The stasis that enshrouds the images is in fact a mirror to our solipsism and to our linearity. It is easy, at this point, to descend into bitter cynicism when considering the disavowal of Haiti in western narratives, but this is neither productive to present historical discourses nor to Haitian creativity and performativity which, as Gordon has helped us to see in a recent exhibition of Haitian artwork that she has co-curated at the Nottingham Contemporary entitled *Kafou: Haiti, Art and Vodou*, continues to penetrate the defences that we have fought so hard to build. Although we may sometimes (choose to) forget it, or indeed ‘look away’, Haiti is ‘rising’, whether we like it or not.

**Notes**

2. I write with an awareness of the tendentiousness of this term and draw attention to its dual currency; while we may consider the histories of Haiti to have been borne out of a tradition of western ideology-formation that denied agency, subjectivity and discourse-participation to ordinary Haitians (and, thus, shaped an ‘unenlightened’ or parochial history of Haiti), the Haitian Revolution has also been relegated from discourses of ‘Enlightenment’ and modernity (for more on this, see Sibylle Fischer, *Modernity Disavowed: Haiti and the Cultures of Slavery in the Age of Revolution* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2004).
13. Lassiter, ‘From “Reading Over the Shoulders of Natives” to “Reading alongside Natives”’, p. 146.
15. Ibid.
18. Ibid.
Gordon (personal communication, November 27, 2012)
20 See Aching, *Masking and Power*, p. 15, for more on this.
22 Gordon (personal communication, November 27, 2012)
28 Gordon, ‘Oungan’, p. 120.
29 I refer to monotheism in general as opposed to Christianity in particular as a large proportion of slaves brought to the Americas practised Islam and were often held in greater esteem (sometimes being given more ‘privileged’ positions) by white slaveowners. See Michael A. Gomez, *Black Crescent: the Experience and Legacy of African Muslims in the Americas* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), p. 84.
31 Gordon (personal communication, November 27, 2012). Gordon notes that Haiti’s current president, Michel Martelly, has recently repealed the 1987 law that officially recognised Vodou as a religion and made its practise legal.
32 Ibid.
40 René Depestre, *Hadriana dans tous Mes Rêves* (Paris: Gallimard, 1988), p. 60. Translation: ‘A little further along, I stumbled on the Charles Oscars of Madame Ti-Carême wearing blue and red kepis [French military hats], dressed in black overcoats with yellow buttons, crimson trousers and white spats with giant spurs on their heels. Each Charles Oscar exhibited his military merit on a sign that hung on his back …’
41 Gordon (personal communication, November 27, 2012)
42 Ibid. Gordon notes the complete corporate destruction of the Trinidad carnival that was orchestrated by the mobile telephone network, ‘Digicel’, which at present threatens Haiti.
44 Gordon (personal communication, November 27, 2012)
Kafou (meaning ‘crossroads’ in Haitian Kreyòl) was on at the Nottingham Contemporary from October 20, 2012–6 January 2013.

Bibliography


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