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Becoming a Gwo Nèg in 1970s Haiti

Dany Laferrière's Coming-of-Age Film *Le Goût des Jeunes Filles* (*On the Verge of Fever*)

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INTRODUCTION

When all men are either dead, exiled, thugs or zombies in a world ruled through violence and terror by a President-for-Life and his son, how is a young boy expected to come of age and forge his own identity? *Le Goût des Jeunes Filles* (*On the Verge of Fever*), a 2004 film about Fanfan, a 15-year-old boy, set in Port-au-Prince, Haiti, on the same weekend of François Duvalier's death in 1971, explores this question. Sheltered by his fearful and devoted mother, Fanfan is lured into the violent and unpredictable Port-au-Prince nightlife by his friend Gégé. When a Tonton Macoute (Duvalier's civilian enforcers) pulls a gun on Fanfan, Gégé vows revenge against the Macoute and convinces Fanfan that he castrated him. Fanfan, now on the run and fearful for his life and that of his mother, hides in a house across the street from his own home. Fanfan has long watched the house from his bedroom window; it is a place where four beautiful young girls—Miki, Choupette, Pasqualine and Marie-Erna—spend time enjoying themselves and doing as they please, but where the Tonton Macoutes are also a constant presence. While Gégé eventually reveals the castration of the Macoute to be nothing more than a prank, meaning Fanfan had nothing to fear, that weekend, Fanfan matures from naïve schoolboy to being a *gwo nèg* (big man). This essay examines this transformation as it is presented in the film.

THE MOVIE, VIOLENCE AND THE GWO NÈG

Le Goût des Jeunes Filles was released in 2004 by Christal Films. The screenplay was written by Dany Laferrière, based on his 1992 novel of the same name¹. It was an official selection for both the Toronto and Vancouver International Film Festivals in 2004, as well as that year's Festival International du Nouveau Cinema (International Festival of New World Cinema). Directed by Canadian John L'Écuyer, the film was shot in a few months in Guadeloupe, as it was too dangerous to film in Haiti at the time. The choice of location underscores the violence the movie portrays and comments on the violence and instability still present in Haiti. Nonetheless, the director and producers took great pains to try and recreate 1971 Port-au-Prince by using music, props, costumes and archival documentary footage of Haiti from that time. In an interview that accompanies the film, Dany Laferrière suggests that his main goal for using such elements was to look for and recreate a special time in his life and a precise moment in Haiti's history, the death of François Duvalier (aka Papa Doc) and the ascension of his son, Jean-Claude Duvalier (aka Bébé Doc) into power.²

Le Goût des Jeunes Filles opens to the sounds of typing on a typewriter. As the credits roll, Dany Laferrière narrates while black and white documentary footage of Haiti is visible on the screen. The abject poverty of Port-au-Prince and the military caravans policing its streets are juxtaposed with the sounds of children laughing at play. 'I am sweltering in this room,' Laferrière tell us.³ As the picture turns to colour, Laferrière's voice fades into Fanfan's voice declaring, 'I feel like a caged animal... Nothing ever happens to me.' Instead of typing, Fanfan is writing in a journal. The connection between the older and younger writer is established, informing the audience from the outset of the film that the protagonist survives whatever trials Haiti has in store for him; it ensures that the audience knows that it is a coming-of-age story, and not a suspense or adventure film. The physical fate of Fanfan is never in doubt; it is his emotional evolution that we are asked to pay attention to.

For that reason, explicit violence in the movie is rare. Only two violent scenes are shown, while the remainder is simply implied or atmospheric. The atmosphere in Haiti, under Duvalier's reign, was one of fear: fear of violence, persecution, disappearance, torture, death and, most potently, the fear of the unknown. This is the 'cage' in which young Fanfan lives; Fanfan is trapped by his mother's fear of losing her son to the Duvalier reign of terror—she treats him like a small child and he, in turn, behaves like one. At the beginning of the film, Fanfan hopefully asks his mother

for permission to see a movie that afternoon. 'It is too dangerous,' she says and then reminds him, 'Your father left one day and never came back.' Just because nothing bad ever seems to happen to his friends does not mean there is no threat to his safety. Her fears prove to be well-founded as the story progresses.

In her introduction to the book *Artists, Performers, and Black Masculinities in the Haitian Diaspora*, Jana Evans Braziel (2008) examines the Haitian concept of the *gwo nèg* (Kreyol, meaning 'big man'). As she explains it, 'Haitian state and cultural politics has been (and continues to be) dominated by the ritualistic practices and complex cultural codes of *gwo nègs*, or big men. To be a *gwo nèg* in Haiti and its diaspora is to be a powerful man, one who commands respect, social stature, and, above all, authority' (2002, p. 1). How does one go about achieving the said respect, social stature and authority? There are a number of different ways: '...command the attention of local power brokers; 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 to renegotiate its terrain. To be a *gwo nèg* in Haiti is to register one's place geographically and historically...' (ibid., p. 2). Given Haiti's violent history and of *gwo nèg* heroes, such as François Mackandal, Boukman Dutty, Toussaint Louverture, Jean Jacques Dessalines, Henri Christophe, Alexandre Pétion, and Faustin Sotouloque, all violent freedom fighters, it is of little surprise that the fastest and easiest way in Haiti (in fact, in most places) to achieve status is through brute force. The tyranny under Papa Doc, however, could not function with an entire country of self-styled *gwo nègs*. What happens to those who oppose the violence perpetrated by the tyrant and the instruments of his reign? And what of those who do not or cannot assert their authority?

Carrol F. Coates, in his analysis of the use of Magloire Saint-Aude's poetry in the novel *Le Goût des Jeunes Filles*, notes: 'the courageous men, of the family and of the country, die or go into exile' (2002, p. 50). And the rest? Laferrière's own father, who was not killed but exiled instead, offers an explanation: 'all Haitian men were zombified by Duvalier' (ibid., p. 49). What is it to be a zombie and what is its significance, particularly in the Haitian situation? Joan Dayan, in her book *Haiti, History and the Gods*, explains:

No fate is more feared. The zombi, understood either as an evil spirit caught by a sorcerer or the dead-alive zombi in 'flesh and bones,' haunts Haitians as the most powerful emblem of apathy, anonymity and loss... the terror incited by the zombi [is] not in its malevolent appearance but in the threat of conversion projected by this overwhelming figure of

brute matter... The phantasm of the zombi—a soulless husk deprived of freedom—is the ultimate sign of loss and dispossession. (1995, p. 37)

If one cannot hope to achieve the status of *gwo nèg*, what choice is there then but to submit to the will of Duvalier and his reign of terror, and to sit passively while the world around you falls apart? Coates explains the zombie this way: 'the *zombi* has lost his will, his ability to act, but remains conscious' (2002, p. 47). He goes as far as to argue that even in exile, the power of Duvalier to dictate your life remains powerful; Laferrière's father spent the rest of his life, Coates argues, as a zombie, 'fearing death and hiding from the *makout* of Duvalier'—even in far-away New York City' (ibid., p. 49).

These are the poles pulling Fanfan: between being a zombie or a violent, thuggish *gwo nèg*. It should be noted that most of the Haitian men in the movie who are not Tonton Macoutes are silent and their only actions are to serve the Macoutes as quickly and efficiently as possible, their will seemingly having been broken, becoming zombie to the Macoutes' commands. Fanfan, however, is confronted with a number of different types of *gwo nègs*, all offering him different avenues to become his own man, his own form of *gwo nèg*. How then, does he manoeuvre his way into manhood? Laferrière has Fanfan enter a subversive form of manhood by combining the two concepts of zombie and *gwo nèg*, with the help of a few unlikely sources.

GWO NÈGS TONTON MACOUTES

The Tonton Macoutes were Papa Doc's own secret police. Officially titled *Volontaires de la Sécurité Nationale* (National Security Volunteers), or VSN, their nickname comes from an old folktale that had been used to scare children into obeying their parents. The tales 'centre around a terrible giant who strides from mountaintop to mountaintop, stuffing bad little boys and girls into his *macoute* or knapsack. This is 'uncle knapsack' or Tonton Macoute' (Diederich and Burt, 2005, p. 32). Papa Doc realised, after a failed assassination and coup attempt in 1958, that 'he needed a personal army to stay in power' (ibid., p. 122) as the national army had done nothing to stop the attempt on his life and his presidency and thus the Tonton Macoutes became his official personal army of enforcers. At the hands of the Tonton Macoutes, people disappeared, sometimes never to be seen again, sometimes to later turn up dead in a horrendous fashion.⁴ After his father's death, Bébé Doc continued using the Tonton Macoutes to ensure his place as President-for-Life.

It is revealed early in the movie, through a report on the radio, that Papa Doc has just died and that his son will now assume the position of President-for-Life. But even in death, Papa Doc's influence is ubiquitous, from pictures of the father and son plastered all over the city, to the ever-present threat of the sunglasses-wearing, gun-wielding Tonton Macoutes. We meet Papa soon thereafter, as he drives off with the girls living across the street from Fanfan. He is an older Macoute, heavy-set and imposing. The gun-toting Papa is usually seen smoking a large cigar and wearing a very expensive-looking ring. A father himself, he looks after Miki and the girls like a father. With him, the girls go where they want, sit where they want and do what they want, be it taking over a small café and turning it into a dance hall, flirting with other women's men, or displacing a group from their table at a busy restaurant. All fear the violence and power of the Macoutes. Papa is respected by the younger Macoutes, and is obviously of high rank and standing.

This picture of Papa would seem to mirror the picture of Papa Doc as both family man and a man of ruthlessness and violence. The elder Duvalier took great pains to protect his family, and doted on all his children, especially his heir and his eldest daughter (Diederich and Burt, 2005). Even though he did not trust the man she chose to marry, and at one point wanted her and her husband killed, he eventually reconciled with her on his deathbed, she spending every moment at his side (*ibid.*, p. 38). The image of the man who loved his family and the man who ordered the coldblooded torture and execution of thousands is difficult to reconcile. The monstrous Tonton Macoutes, like the man who empowered them, may have been feared, but they were also men with a soft spot for their families and women.

Laferrrière allows Papa to explain directly to the camera both a version of how Duvalier came into power and why he is willing to enforce the reign—he thus indirectly explains his status as a *gwo nèg*:

It's a harsh country... Nobody gets a free ride. Nobody. Once, there were the rich, the middle class, and then us, the poor. The poor came from the countryside, like my family. Then we were hit by a horrible epidemic. Since it was only the peasants who were dying, not one politician came to see us. Not one. Only Dr Duvalier came. He came and he cured us...for free. That's how he came to be known as Papa Doc because he's a doctor with heart. When he came to power, there were many people who were upset. So the president called on us to come and defend his government. They gave us guns and a membership card in the National Security Volunteer Corps.

He proudly adds, 'They also call us the Tonton Macoutes.' The look on his face lets the viewer know that he understands and is proud of his power

within society. His role in the Duvalier revolution was to ensure that the old power structures that had kept him and other peasants oppressed would not be allowed to return to power.

As narrated by Laferrrière, however, 'The Tonton Macoutes are let loose in the wild like dogs with no master, like bloodthirsty beasts.' While we never see Papa get violent, this is not the case with the younger Macoutes. On Saturday, we meet Frank, another Tonton Macoute who is younger and more volatile than Papa. He does not believe Fanfan's story about being Miki's little brother (their cover story), nor does he trust him. Like all the Macoutes, he wears his sunglasses indoors and uses his gun to intimidate and scare. When Miki asks why he wears his sunglasses indoors, Pasquale answers: 'So we can't see he's scared... [Scared of] people who don't wear sunglasses like you.' He shows this to be true when he admits to not trusting Fanfan simply because he does not like his face. Fanfan offends him as he sits and cowers in the corner of the couch, while they wait for the girls to get ready to go out. 'If you're up to something,' he tells Fanfan, 'I'm warning you, I'll find where you're hiding and rip your head off!' When Choupette asks him what danger a 15-year-old could pose, he answers, 'They're the worst.' Fanfan represents a future threat to the Tonton Macoutes' status and power; the Macoutes were once the young idealists who supported a change in government. Indeed, the young could once again rise up and overthrow Bèbé Doc as the Macoutes had once done in the name of the father.

We also witness the arbitrariness and brutality of the Macoutes' justice. When a man steals the sunglasses from Papa's car, a group of younger Macoutes descends on him, beating him to within an inch of his life. Papa then puts a gun in his mouth, demanding to know who sent him. Choupette walks up to Papa and kisses him, convincing him to let the man go. The scene is largely silent, with no noise of fists or guns. The director John L'Écuyer informs the viewer in his commentary that he wanted to make sure that the violence was stylised, to keep the perspective of the two young boys, Fanfan and Gégé, who witness the event. This is also where we see the power of the *gwo nèg*s begin to be called into question.

While feared and powerful, the elder Tonton Macoute is ultimately revealed to be a sentimentalist. Easily swayed by the whims of the young girls, he seems less his own man and more a man owned by his most base desires. And the girls are not above using to their advantage his insecurity about getting older and being replaced. When Papa wants to back out of taking the girls to the beach in order to spend time with his family, Choupette threatens to ask Peddy, the lead singer of the band Les Shleu-Shleus,

instead. The threat of younger men asserting themselves in another way, through art, proves to be a powerful enough motivator for Papa to give in to the girls' demands. Coates also offers this interpretation of the events: 'The "gods," men... who have the power of life and death in their hands, are openly worn out with the weight of their power and the constant tugging of family and mistresses, in an uncertain existence in which their own lives are as much at risk as those of their victims' (2002, p. 47).

Frank and the other, younger Macoutes dislike and distrust of Fanfan could stem from the same fear: the fear of the next generation, the fear of being replaced and the fear of someone 'who doesn't wear sunglasses' like them. The worst age is 15 because it is a time when a young boy is looking for a way to become a *gwo nèg*. But Fanfan also could represent another fear, the fear of transforming from *gwo nègs* into zombies. Fanfan, through two-thirds of the movie, is largely pulled along by forces external to himself—his mother, Gégé, the drunk Macoute and Miki. He takes in everything wide-eyed and passively, even going so far as to admit: 'Like a glass coffin, I see everything, but I can't speak.' The Macoutes understand better than perhaps anyone the thin line between power and submission, between being a *gwo nèg* and a zombie. It could be argued that they are already zombies, only with an illusion of control; they are the tools of the dictator, evil spirits who have no control over themselves. Fanfan is the mirror who reflects that reality back to them.

GWO NÈGS ARTISTS

Music plays an essential role in the movie. As the girls and Papa sit in the car by the shore, they tune in to the radio and sing the songs being aired. Throughout the movie, the music from 1971 provides the soundtrack for the girls' adventures. Marie-Erna is in love with the lead singer of one of the prominent bands and the 'explosion' of talent has not gone unnoticed—a reporter and photographer from the music magazine *Rolling Stone* appear to 'get to the bottom' of the cultural phenomenon. Dany Laferrière, in one of the DVD interviews, reminds the viewer that this musical revolution really did happen and was an important part of the events unfolding in 1971. Becoming an artist, it would seem, represented another way to attain the status of *gwo nèg*, someone who had earned the respect and recognition of the community and beyond, subverting the power of those currently in control through, in this case, music. Music that fills the air, not with terror and fear, but with joy and happiness.

Les Shleu-Shleus was an actual Haitian band from that period, responsible for creating the mini-djaz (mini-jazz) movement in Haiti (Averill, 1997). Music has always been an important part of Haitian culture, from the songs of the vodou tradition of Rara⁵ to more popular African-influenced musical styles. Mini-djaz was a fusion of rock-and-roll that was popular during the 1960s and local Haitian musical styles. It specialised in 'light-hearted, teenage, dance music, in part because the increasing terror of Papa Doc's rule made music with serious content or ideological focus suspect and dangerous' (ibid., p. 103). As one musician put it, 'mini-djaz was a way of avoiding political persecution... doing nothing serious' (quoted in Averill, 1997, p. 104). These bands were even making money as professional musicians both at home and abroad, playing for the thousands of displaced Haitian who had fled Duvalier's terror. At the same time, they also enjoyed the support of Jean-François Duvalier who would often pay for the bands to play during private parties on the family's compound or appear at clubs himself (ibid., p. 108). But this love of music could not save the musicians from persecution from the Tonton Macoutes, as shown in the film.

The status of *gwo nèg* is not easily achieved, nor is it unproblematic and the position of the musicians is precarious, at best. When the reporters from *Rolling Stone* try to interview Marie-Erna's boyfriend and his band, the Macoutes at the bar glare menacingly and the band excuse themselves. Just as Papa was threatened by Les Shleu-Shleus, the other Macoutes are threatened by being overshadowed and even overtaken by this new form of *gwo nèg*. *Rolling Stone* offered the musicians recognition and legitimacy. Frank makes sure that Marie-Erna's boyfriend knows his place. Having stood her up earlier, she had sent Frank to teach the singer a lesson. Thinking he was meeting Marie-Erna behind the club, he instead finds Frank who tells the singer to drop his pants because, 'Tonight, you're the girl.' While what happens is not shown, we see Marie-Erna and the girls laughing, implying that the singer was sodomised by Frank. While Marie-Erna provides the excuse, Frank does not hesitate to remind the singer of his place within the social order.⁶

The introduction of the death of Papa Doc is juxtaposed with the first mention in the movie of the Haitian poet Magloire Saint-Aude. Fanfan reads his poems throughout the movie, and lines from his works begin to serve as introductions as the true events of the movie unfold. The English title of the movie, *On the Verge of Fever*, has been taken from one of these poems. Saint-Aude, like the music featured in the movie, represents an escape for Fanfan. 'The poet Saint-Aude much preferred the company

of the young prostitutes. He found them more sincere and spontaneous,' Fanfan reads for his mother, as much as a defence for her as for himself in his longings for the girls across the street. 'He was a great poet, you know,' Fanfan stresses to his mother. Saint-Aude spoke to him in a way that no one else did. The link to the poet is significant; fatherless with the Macoutes as his guides as to how to become a *gwo nèg*, only Saint-Aude really speaks to Fanfan: 'my temperature rises like I've got a fever,' he explains to Miki. It is established in the opening moments of the film that Fanfan is a writer; now we have been given a potential role model for him to follow.

But Magloire Saint-Aude is an equally problematic artistic mentor. Saint-Aude was closely associated with François Duvalier, and just before Papa Doc came into power, he stopped writing, becoming 'a disoriented alcoholic, a virtual *zombi*, if not literally one' (Coates, 2002, p. 44). Laferrière remembers that 'he and other boys used to see Magloire in the parks and streets of Port-au-Prince, in shoddy clothes with his private parts exposed' (ibid., p. 43). Again, we are presented this juxtaposition of the *gwo nèg* and the zombie, and the examples of the poet and the musicians show how easily one can descend into the other. As the photographer from *Rolling Stone*, who is usually employed as a war photographer rather than a music photographer, says, 'paranoia, manic-depression, inflated ego. That's what happens when you're around death too often.'

GWO NÈG GÉGÉ THE TRICKSTER

We meet Fanfan's friend Gégé in the opening scene. He is boldly playing with a lighter and lighting a cigarette; everything about his demeanour is defiant. He wears a hat meant for a man much older than himself. Fanfan, on the other hand, is standing back, looking down, and his body language conveys hesitation. Gégé offers him a cigarette, which Fanfan tries and starts coughing after one short drag. 'You're a kid in a man's world,' Gégé admonishes Fanfan. 'You'll never be in control.' The word used in French is actually 'maitrise' which translates more accurately as 'master'. Gégé goes on to describe how he smokes and drinks rum in order to be in control, in order to be a master, both of things that burn. Gégé, though young, is already a *gwo nèg*; he consumes fire so that it may not consume him. In order to steel himself against the negative effects of rum, he says, 'I drank it for 15 days straight. I completely burned my stomach. But now, rum is like water to me... It's about resistance, Fanfan. You have to be in control.' Later, as he steals food meant for the dead, he asserts to Fanfan, 'Nothing

will happen if you have no fear.' Gégé subverts all social norms while attempting to become invincible.

The figure of the trickster has long played an important role in various vodou mythologies. Their role as either creators of chaos or trickery was important in traditional slave stories of resistance and rebellion (M'Baye, 2009). One trickster figure close to the character of Gégé would be the Iwa (or god) Gédé (note the similarity in their names). He is the Iwa in charge of escorting the dead, but also mocks death. They 'tell dirty stories, perform lascivious and obscene dances, and spend their time playing jokes on the vodou faithful' (Hurbon, 1995, p. 95). Why does the Gédé behave in such a way? According to Hurbon, 'The eccentric behavior of the Gédé expresses the art of turning death into satire. Playing death in order to outwit it—this may be their scheme, for if death is unavoidable, outplaying it with life lets one face it successfully' (ibid., p. 95). The Gédé, much like Gégé, attempts to outplay death, to mock it and transgress it. It should be noted that the Gédé (again like Gégé) likes to 'drink rum and eat well' (ibid., p. 95).

'You're such a girl,' Gégé tells Fanfan in order to get him to stay out. The actor who played Fanfan, Lansanan Kourouma, describes Gégé as Fanfan's guide in the DVD commentary. Gégé also takes the time to educate Fanfan about sex and the dangers of 'premature ejaculation.' Again, the issue is control. In his bragging, Gégé confides that there is a prostitute who pays him to kiss her. Gégé must control everything and everyone around him, especially himself. This is how he survives and thrives in violence and uncertainty of Port-au-Prince. Gégé even goes further and approaches the girls from across the street, telling Choupette with a wink, 'If I got you in the bedroom, it wouldn't be long before you called for help.' And when Papa pulls a gun on him, he simply taunts him and runs off unharmed. Fanfan, on the other hand, is timid and reclusive in the scene, and is ultimately punished, being threatened and shot at by the drunk Tonton Macoute. This insult, this lack of mastery, cannot be tolerated by Gégé and he goes to avenge his friend, later claiming to have castrated the Tonton Macoute. Gégé tells Fanfan they are both now marked for death and they must split up and hide. Fanfan believes his friend and flees.

Gégé is not well loved by Fanfan's mother. A hoodlum, she calls him, and his later actions do nothing to change her opinion. But he is more like a trickster figure; mischievous, seemingly invincible, but also someone who tells the truth in a world that is built on secrets and lies. He is the only one who will tell Fanfan that he is too sheltered and does manage to succeed in leading Fanfan down the proper path to becoming his own *gwo nèg*.

It is his insistence that leads Fanfan to the bar where he is confronted by the Tonton Macoute. It is his prank that leads to Fanfan taking refuge at Miki's house. And it is Gégé's voice that Fanfan hears as he is being seduced by Miki. Gégé is also the one who tells Fanfan the truth about his father—that he was not exiled, but killed by Papa Doc.

While an important guide for Fanfan, leading him into the Port-au-Prince night, Gégé is not a reasonable model. Gégé cares little about anyone but himself; there seems to be nothing or no one of any importance to him. Fanfan, despite resenting his mother and the cage she has set him up in, loves her and recognises that she is his only family. Both the voices of Fanfan and Laferrière tell us: 'The dictator's death, my father's disappearance, my mother's pain, all this prevents me from living.' However, we also hear Laferrière's voice confiding in us: 'But as long as my mother is alive, the world will not disappear.' Throughout the movie she remains his anchor to the real world and, unable to watch her suffering anymore, becomes his reason for leaving Miki's house. While Gégé's control or mastery seems to be directionless, Fanfan is trying to create and sustain something. But he is being held back. Like Saint-Aude, the girls across the street hold the key to freeing him from the cage he is living in.

GWO NÈGS: THE SUBVERSIVE GIRLS

Juxtaposed with the cage that Fanfan lives in at home are the sounds of the laughter of young women from across the street. We peek out the window of Fanfan's tiny room at these four girls, seemingly carefree and, more importantly, in the open. Fanfan's mother calls them 'no better than prostitutes', but to Fanfan, they represent a whole other way of living: free from cares, worries and constraints. It does not hurt that they are all beautiful too! They dress in bright colours (in contrast to Fanfan's white dress shirt and dark trousers) and director John L'Écuyer reveals that they should appear like 'des bonbons' (candy). Fanfan fantasises about each of them, saying he would 'die for them.' The house is Miki's, her reward for being one of an influential government minister's mistresses. She loves the situation because, as she puts it, 'He leaves me alone.' As the four girls climb into the car, they are joined by Papa. While it may be an official member of the government who puts a roof over their heads, it is the influence of the unofficial enforcers of the government that keep the women safe.

The girls are the ultimate, and ultimately most subversive, embodiments of the *gwo nèg*. They use their sex and sexuality to get what they want,

when they want it and, as the title of the movie implies (it can be directly translated as 'The Taste(s) of Young Women') their appetites know no bounds. Late in the movie, the girls, minus Miki, get a free taxi ride by simply tantalising the driver with their sexual exploits and then offering one deep kiss as final payment. 'Since when have we ever paid for a cab?' Marie-Erna asks. Frank had noted earlier in the movie that the girls 'are driving me crazy. I prefer dealing with terrorists.' The girls are an unknown quality to the *gwo nèg*s and they use that uncertainty to their advantage.

Female deities, or Iwa, play an important role in vodou mythology. Ezili is the one vodou goddess who is Haitian and not imported from Africa. Dayan describes her as 'the most powerful and arbitrary of gods in vodou. Ezili is also the most contradictory: a spirit of love who forbids love, a woman who is the most beloved yet feels herself the most betrayed. She can be generous and loving, or implacable and cruel' (1995, p. 59). Ezili, to think of it from a Catholic perspective (an important influence in Haiti as a former French colony), is both the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene, beloved mother figure and whore (ibid.). The uncertainty, flexibility and power that Elizi possesses are also wielded by Miki and the other girls. The men, having grown up hearing the tales of Elizi, her power, love and cruelty, are to an extent helpless before these young girls.

While hiding at Miki's house, Fanfan is confronted by the girls' brazen sexuality, their openness and their freedom. He, once again, finds himself paralysed by the experience, faced by a power he has never encountered before. When asked to wash the back of one of the girls, and faced with her naked breasts, he freezes, incapable of speaking or acting. Fanfan is paralysed by his mother and her concern, by Frank and the other Macoute's threats, but also by the women and their sexuality. Miki's house does not represent the sanctuary he was seeking. Laferrière comments elsewhere: '[Miki's house] proves to be more stifling, since he finds himself at the heart of the fires of desire. I have always thought it was hotter in paradise than in hell' (quoted in Coates, 2002, p. 47).

Miki recognises the shortcomings of her and the other girls' power. She has her moment of reflection, speaking directly to the audience. She says, as we see Papa smoking a cigar and cleaning his gun, 'I must get out of this country. There's no hope for me here. Chouquette can think what she wants, but sex isn't the real power. Papa will break up with her the moment he finds a younger or sexier girl. Papa's not even the best a girl can do here. Anyway, you can't meet a man here to spend your life with. They're either married or murderers.' This sums up the situation that the girls face; while they exercise their power while they can, they are

ultimately governed by the whims of the men they command. They are not married and, therefore, do not have the security that comes from such an arrangement. They are not the powerful Elizi, capable of punishing men by 'death or impotence' (Dayan, 1995, p. 59). What happens to them when a younger, sexier woman comes along? Where does the power they exercise ultimately lead? When dancing at the bar, it is not fear or respect in the eyes of those watching them, but carnal desire or revulsion. Frank's taunt to Marie-Erna's boyfriend before he rapes him, 'Tonight, you're the girl,' illustrates that, for all their manipulations, the men see them as secondary figures. What then is Fanfan to do in the face of such conflicting ways of becoming a *gwo nèg*?

FANFAN: PART ZOMBIE, PART GWO NÈG

Fanfan is a writer without words; he is stifled by words and actions that surround him. Even at Miki's, he is silent and motionless, faced with a power he has never encountered before. But the glass coffin that Fanfan claims to be trapped in proves to be the tool of his liberation. As Miki observes, just before seducing him, 'You hear everything. You watch everything. You always look like you're learning something. But I've got the feeling you know a lot.' Fanfan is not just a passive agent in these events; he actively watches and learns from what is going on around him. But why does Miki seduce this young, inexperienced boy? 'You're skin is so soft,' she tells him. 'You're adorable... You're really sweet.' Fanfan is the polar opposite to the men Miki is used to dealing with. Rather than all the bluster, violence and bragging, not to mention that the men do not actually care about the women, Fanfan is still pure, still untainted, neither fully zombie or *gwo nèg*. Taking Fanfan's virginity is ultimately Miki's way of endorsing Fanfan's approach to survival.

But he cannot complete the task without help. Just before they have sex, we hear Gégé reminding Fanfan about premature ejaculation. We cut to his face, again reminding Fanfan about control. If there was a time to exercise control, it is now, and from the glimpses of how the sex went, Fanfan would seem to have finally been in control, although by still not doing very much while having sex. Fanfan controls himself, but allows Miki to initiate and essentially run the show beyond that. It is a fine balance, but one Fanfan must achieve between the forces in his life in order not to descend fully into becoming a zombie. When Miki greets him the morning after, we see Fanfan smile for the first time. 'Are you ok? Are you happy?' she asks

him. He is emboldened by his new-found strength, finally free of just about everything that had trapped him, either by breaking its grip on him or by embracing the power it could offer.

The next day, Monday, Fanfan decides to take control yet again and return home to his mother, consequences be damned. As Laferrière's voice-over reminds us, 'What good is virtue if I can't help protect what is most dear to us?' Is he talking about his mother or himself? Fanfan takes Gégé's advice to heart that 'nothing can happen if I have no fear' and says: 'I can't spend my life running away.' He sees children laughing and playing in the street, a reminder of his own childhood he has left behind. Poetry in hand, he leaves Miki's house. As he crosses the street, a patrol of Macoutes crosses his path, led by the man who Gégé was supposed to have castrated. He vaguely recognises Fanfan, but Fanfan's innocent demeanour, 'I never go anywhere but... school,' leads the Macoute to leave him alone, safe.

When he enters his mother's house, she praises the Virgin Mary for bringing her son home, but there is no look of relief on Fanfan's face. He has chosen to return home to his original cage, back to living in the shadow of his dead father, in the shadow of his mother's fear. 'My son, my little boy,' she exclaims. He cannot even look his mother in the eyes for more than a few seconds, his expression a mix of shame and disappointment. He is back to being her 'little boy' while having left that world behind through what he learned and experienced over the weekend. The final straw comes when his mother once again tells him to drink his milk. 'No,' he says. More forcefully, he adds, 'When I want a glass of milk, I'll get it myself,' and he finally looks his mother directly in the eyes. He is not cruel to her, telling her to leave the milk for him to drink later. She sees the change in her son. But instead of being disappointed, she rejoices, arms raised up to god: 'There's a man in the house!'

The combination of the figure of the zombie and the *gwo nèg* is particularly important for Fanfan's chosen occupation of being a writer. At the beginning of the movie, Laferrière narrates: 'I submerge myself beneath the water. I lay still for a moment. I'm drowning. I return to the foetal position, ready to be born again.' It is this state of near death, of immobility, essentially a zombie once again, looking through the glass, unable to speak, that the writer can 'contemplate his own past and deal with the ghosts that haunt him' (Coates, 2002, p. 50). Unlike the photographer, Magloire Saint-Aude or even the musicians in Port-au-Prince in 1971, Laferrière/Fanfan uses the zombie state to resist the powers that would control them. But the writer is ready to be born again, not as an evil spirit controlled by an external force, but as a *gwo nèg*, with all the power and authority that comes with it.

When he finally confronts Gégé about his prank, Fanfan thanks his friend. The two walk off together and Fanfan tells Gégé, 'Never judge a book by its cover,' as they wander the streets of Port-au-Prince, now equals in their status as *gwo nèg*. Fanfan, on his own terms, in his own way, has become a *gwo nèg*. He may appear as a zombie, but he has complete control over himself, refusing to submit to his own, base emotions (fear, guilt, desire) and also refusing to submit to the will of those around him (his mother, the Tonton Macoutes, Gégé). His position allows him to observe and learn, eventually allowing him to become a writer, a successful *gwo nèg* artist.

NOTES

1. Dany Laferrière, *Le goût des jeunes filles*. Montreal: VLB, 1992.
2. All extra materials and interviews on the DVD are in French; the translations therein are my own.
3. All dialogue from the movie is taken from the English subtitles. *Le goût des jeunes filles*, dir. John L'Écuyer. Christal Films. 2004. DVD.
4. Laferrière's best friend and colleague was kidnapped and killed in this fashion in 1976, prompting the author's own exile to Montreal. He discusses the event in his novel, *Le cri des oiseaux foux* (2000) [The Cries of Insane Birds; my translation].
5. For more on the tradition of Rara, see *Rara! Vodou, Power, and Performance in Haiti and its diaspora* by Elizabeth McAlister (2002).
6. Frank and the other Tonton Macoutes, however, were right to fear the musicians; years later and in exile in cities like New York and Montreal, they wrote and recorded songs of subversion and rebellion, fuelling the people in Haiti to eventually revolt against the dictator who at one time played an important role in nurturing the musical movement (Averill, 1997, pp. 154–60).

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SPECTACLES OF BLOOD
A STUDY OF MASCULINITY AND
VIOLENCE IN POSTCOLONIAL FILMS

Edited by
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