

The Folk in Haitian Literature: Lenses for Teaching

Teaching Haitian Folk in the Context of the Harlem Renaissance

This material seeks to provide contexts for teaching undergraduates about the folk through Haitian literature. It addresses three interconnected approaches to understanding representations and constructions of the folk using Haitian literature (folktales, poems, Jacques Roumain's *Masters of the Dew*, etc.). The three approaches are "Constructing the Folk," "Ethnography," and "Occupation & Exportation."

In "Constructing the Folk" you will find information on four possible overarching narratives connecting and contrasting the construction of Haitian folk to the construction of the folk during the American Harlem Renaissance. In the section on "Occupation & Exportation," you will find historical, social, and contextual information for teaching Roumain's *Masters of the Dew* in light of the American occupation of Haiti and the international/imperial situation of the Caribbean. Under "Ethnography," you will find information to assist you in showing the effect of ethnographic writing on Haitian literature, identity, and the folk. Finally, there is a linked annotated bibliography providing a brief discussion of sources useful to educators working in this area. Ideally, the discussions in these sections could be used as a basis for a unit on Haitian folk.

One avenue for teaching this material would be to first provide students with the general context for the construction of the folk, then give them the socio-historical background for understanding one text in particular (*Masters of the Dew*), and finally offering them a lens for understanding the exportation of the Haitian identity given the particular construction of the folk and the historical context behind that construction—ethnography.

- Constructing the Folk
- Occupation & Exportation
- Ethnography
- Annotated Bibliography
- Teaching *Masters of the Dew*
- *Masters of the Dew* and Voodoo

Annotated Bibliography

Note: Unfortunately, many of the primary and secondary sources addressing this topic are in French or Haitian Creole. What follows is a discussion of pertinent English language sources addressing the topics at hand. To see how these sources are used as part of a unit plan, see the other pages in this collection of resources.

Dayan, Joan. *Haiti, History, and the Gods*. Berkeley: U of California Press, 1995.

Chapters one and two: Dayan discusses how the image of the zombie serves as an allegory of the brutal history of both slavery/colonization as well as the twentieth century occupation by the U.S., replete with forced labor, denigration, and brutalization; she as well discusses the abject dispossession of Haitian peasants within Haitian social hierarchy. In terms of *Masters of the Dew*, she explores the importance of voodoo within the novel, even as it's presented within the context of Roumain's (secular) "proletariat visions"—with such a point, she echoes a point made in her prologue: that voodoo practices may serve as ritual reenactments of Haiti's colonial past.

Dunham, Katherine. *Island Possessed*. Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1969.

Island Possessed is Katherine Dunham's largely autobiographical account of her fieldwork in Jamaica and Haiti in the 1930's. Using dance and the ritual of the body in the context of voodoo, Dunham explores the richness of Haitian culture by fully participating in the rituals themselves, overstepping the boundary between the ethnographer and "native." This text poses an interesting contrast to Hurston's *Tell My Horse*, which also chronicles a female African American scholar's ethnographic experience in Jamaica and Haiti. While Hurston's account has been generally regarded as deficient and pandering to U.S. imperialist objectives, Dunham's text is seen as adamantly against the Occupation and in support of the Haitian peasantry as the true, authentic Haitian folk. A point of interest is the publication date of *Island Possessed*, which provides Dunham with a historical context and social climate not available in the 1930s at the time of Hurston's publication.

Emery, Amy Fass. "The Zombie In/As the Text: Zora Neale Hurston's *Tell My Horse*." *African American Review* 39.3 (2005): 327-336.

Amy Fass Emery provides an extensive exploration of *Tell My Horse* through the traditional trickster trope of signifying, used in African-American literary tradition as a means to create duplicity and double-meaning to a narrative structure. Emery argues that *Tell My Horse* is not a completely deficient text in the sense that Hurston is cleverly able to subvert the constraints of her white patron by creating an ambivalent, almost implicit commentary on her own position as an African American trapped by the confines of both anthropology and white literary tradition. Emery's argument insists that Hurston is fully aware of all rhetorical choices made in the text, especially the act of becoming a "parasitic ventriloquist," or one who must essentially speak *for* her informants, while also speaking *through* them to express an "ethnographic allegory." Interestingly enough, at the beginning of her article, Emery points out that Hurston herself found the text "embarrassing," yet never reconciles this claim with the argument that Hurston was attempting to subvert the tradition of anthropology. Emery's article proves most useful in comparison to Fischer-Hornung's opposite claim of Hurston as a panderer to U.S. Imperialist objectives.

Fischer-Hornung, Dorothea. "An Island Occupied: The Interpretation of the U.S. Marine Occupation of Haiti in Zora Neale Hurston's *Tell My Horse* and Katherine Dunham's *Island Possessed*." *Holding Their Own* (2000): 153-179.

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Fischer-Hornung analyzes and compares Hurston's *Tell My Horse* to Dunham's *Island Possessed* in an attempt to explore how ethnography composed by two "outsiders" was directly related and influenced by the U.S. Occupation in Haiti. Using textual analysis and secondary sources that include Hurston's own biography and correspondence between Hurston and Melville Herskovits, Fischer-Hornung comes to the conclusion that politics separate Dunham's endeavor from Hurston's, but both are intimately connected as valuable contributions of African diasporic culture.

Fischer-Hornung uses a mode of comparison and contrast that partitions each ethnographic work from the other in order to provide detailed textual analysis and to emphasize her point that both women seemed to ignore the other's contribution to the anthropological community. She spends the bulk of her article arguing that Hurston's work closely follows the tradition of American jingoism and cannot be justified simply by text irony or parody, a point in direct opposition to Emery's argument in a previous citation. Her exploration of Dunham's text seems to have less argument, as she merely presents Dunham's position as the first female ethnographer in Haiti and notes her attempt to dispel Haitian stereotypes. Fischer-Hornung is finally careful to note that both ethnographies shaped a Haitian identity that challenged the previous exportation of Haitian culture via sensationalist travel writing, though she also argues that Hurston, to an extent, followed in William Seabrook's footsteps. This article proves most useful in conjunction with Amy Fass Emery's article, which provides a different reading of Hurston's text. Fischer-Hornung does provide historical details that chronicle the politics at the time, a feature important when attempting to understand how ethnography may have contributed to the American Imperialist objective, while at the same time fighting against it.

Herskovits, Melville. *Life in a Haitian Valley*. Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1971.

As one of the first texts by a renowned American anthropologist, *Life in a Haitian Valley* seeks to expand on Herskovits' stateside study of African retention and "Africanisms" by observing the cultural practices of the Haitian folk. Herskovits works against Levi-Strauss's tradition of structuralism and uses the concepts of syncretism and interculturalism to define the African diasporic culture he encounters. The bulk of *Life in a Haitian Valley* is centered on voodoo as a spiritual belief system that Herskovits defines as living and thriving in comparison to perfunctory, Western worship. Nevertheless, he is never able to claim voodoo as a religion; it is often labeled as a cult. Unfortunately, this limit to the language reveals how the study is dated and best used as a historical text in comparison with other more post-modern ethnographies.

Hurston, Zora Neale. *Tell My Horse: Voodoo and Life in Haiti and Jamaica*. New York: Perennial Library, 1990.

Tell My Horse chronicles Hurston's journey through 1930s Jamaica and Haiti, from mingling with the bourgeoisie to traveling to the countryside to observe real voodoo rituals. The text can be viewed as part fiction, part travelogue, and part ethnography in its aims to explore how voodoo is intimately connected to the Haitian folk. Chapter 13, which centers on Hurston's description of zombies, includes a famous picture of Felicia Felix-Mentor, a supposedly real-life zombie Hurston encountered in her travels. *Tell My Horse* can be analyzed within the framework of anthropology, and in this regard, has been highly criticized for supposedly adopting U.S. Imperialist objectives. A true exploration of the text works best by understanding Hurston's more successful ethnographies and depictions of the folk.

Kaussen, Valerie. "Slaves Viejos and the Internationale: Modernity and Global Contact in Jacques Roumain's *Gouverneurs de la Rosée*" *Research in African Literatures*. 35.4: No (2004). 40-64.

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This article discusses the depiction of global contact and politics in *Gouverneurs de la Rosée*, discussing the international contexts of the novel and how it relates the Haitian peasantry to the global context of international Marxism/de-colonial struggles of World War II period, as well relating the Haitian peasantry to ideas about global modernity and proletariat internationalism. Specifically, the article discusses the main character, a migrant sugarcane cutter, as exemplary of current ideas surrounding "creolization," and how he ultimately grounds the novel in a specific moment within U.S. imperialism.

Louis, Liliane Nérette. *When Night Falls, Kric! Krac!: Haitian Folktales*. Fred J. Hay, ed. Englewood, CO: Libraries Unlimited, 1999.

This is an edited collection of stories by Liliane Louis and is available through the [University of Florida library in ebook format](#). Louis grew up in Haiti and these stories were passed down to her from her mother and her mother's mother. It includes a discussion of common folk characters and an introduction by the editor that provides historical background about Haiti. While the written form never quite does justice to the stories, Louis includes annotations about the process of storytelling and the common tropes of the storyteller. The Bouki and Malice stories have the traditional ending elements and the storytelling flow that makes them helpful examples of folk culture. The book is a good source book to use in a class or to send students to for examples.

Magloire, Gerarde. *Ambassadors At Dawn: Haitian Thinkers in the French Colonial Context of the 19th and 20th Centuries: the Example of Jean Price-Mars (1876-1969)*. Diss. Institute of French Studies, 2005. Ann Arbor: UMI Dissertation Services, 2006.

Ambassadors at Dawn is an in-depth examination of Jean Price-Mars work. It explores Price-Mars's relationship to French colonial history and Haiti struggle to become an independent nation. The dissertation's goal is to examine local anthropological production (local being Haiti) and place it in the context of 19th and 20th century France and explore its relationship to national and regional identities. The dissertation is broken in to two sections: "The French Colonial, the Haitian Postcolonial and the Stakes of Anthropology" and "Jean Price-mars, Haiti and France: Break and Continuity in haitian Social Thought." Magloire's discussion of the folk is helpful in providing context for the reconnecting of the elite with the peasantry represented by the folk movement. It also provides a useful discussion of Magloire's predecessor, Anténor Firmin, and how how Firmin's work with Egypt and Africa lead in to Price-Mars' desire to connect Haiti to Africa. It also illuminates Price-Mars relationship to the Harlem Renaissance writers. Along with Magloire's article (listed below), this dissertation proves the core of information for the discussion of Price-Mars work in the section on how the folk both challenges and upholding imperial narratives of progress and primitivism.

Magloire-Danton, G erarde. "Ant enor Firmin and Jean Price-Mars: Revolution, Memory, Humanism." *Small Axe* 18 (2005): 150-170.

This article provides important context for Haitian social thought and the issues taken up by Firmin and Price-Mars. It illustrates the connection between the Haitian folk movement and Pan-Africanism. It was essential in developing the discussion of the colonial erasure of Egyptian civilization's connection to Africa and the importance of claiming a "respectable" history. The article contrasts the image of Africa/Haiti as savage as seen in travel writing and ethnography of the time with the project of Firmin and Price-Mars to present an independent Haitian people with a rich important history. Magloire-Danton provides evidence to show that Firmin and Price-Mars challenge established modes of critical western thought and use their work as a counterpoint to colonial discourses.

McLeod, John. *Beginning Postcolonialism*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 2000.

A general overview of postcolonial theory.

Meehan, Kevin and Marie Léticée. "A Folio of Writing from *La Revue Indigène* (1927-28): Translation and Commentary." *Callaloo* 23.4 (2000): 1377-1390.

This short article provides translations of some of the creative works from the Haitian journal *La Revue Indigène*. Meehan and Léticée analyze and contextualize the influence of Jean Price-Mars on the journal as well as the work of Doris, Carl Brouard, Jacques Roumain, and Philippe Thoby-Marcelin. Their breakdown of Thoby-Marcelin's poem "L'Atlas A Menti" was especially useful to this project. It notes the poem's use of the Bouqui character and provides a detailed discussion of how the folk is used to represent a different kind of Haitian identity—one that acknowledges the bitter past but also moves beyond the French Colonial and American occupations. The main purpose of the article is to illustrate the formal and thematic movements in the early Haitian indigenous movement and provide some context for *La Revue Indigène*.

Ormerod, Barbara. *An Introduction to the French Caribbean Novel*. London: Heinemann. 1985.

The chapter about *Masters of the Dew* discusses the religious symbolism throughout the novel—both Christian and voodoo—and as well discusses in depth the myriad ways in which the landscape is portrayed/what it signifies. Specifically, the chapter discusses at length how aspects of the landscape, including trees, water and the *coumbite*, may have multiple connotations, having to do not only with religion, but also (although these overlap with religion) fertility, sexuality, being bound to the land, and/or political power.

Price-Mars, Jean. *So Spoke the Uncle (Ainsi Parla L'Oncle)*. Washington, D.C.: Three Continents Press, 1983.

The objective, Jean Price-Mars claims, of writing *So Spoke the Uncle* is to "integrate the Haitian popular thought into the discipline of ethnography" (7). He makes a case for recuperating popular folk culture for national ends, and does so by specifically exploring how the folk can work to unify the nation's mulatto elite with its large, disenfranchised peasantry. Price-Mars considers Haiti's continued occupation by the United States as evidence of a failure on the part of the elite to embrace the customs of the "masses." Using the rhetoric of the folk to construct a strong national identity could ostensibly wield a great deal of anti-colonial power for a nation hitherto susceptible to occupation. Ultimately, Price-Mars offers a productive re-evaluation of Haitian culture by exploring the various folk customs and popular beliefs of its peasant classes.

Ramsey, Kate. "Without One Ritual Note: Folklore Performance and the Haitian State, 1935-1946." *Radical History Review* 84 (2002): 7-42.

The general focus of "Without One Ritual Note" is a comparison between the "official cultural nationalist policy" endorsed in post-occupation Haiti and the "legal regime against *les pratiques superstitieuses*" that was at the time simultaneously adopted (7). Ramsey explores the interesting paradox of the Haitian government tightening its restrictions on some forms of popular ritual (after repealing the long-standing prohibition of *les sortilèges*), while also giving the peasantry the right to organize popular dances. She sees this apparent inconsistency as evidence of the State's support for the Catholic church's antisuperstition campaign and its simultaneous "construction and promotion of ritual dance as an official national sign" (7-8). Though these policies might seem contradictory, Ramsey argues that Haiti's national identity actually depended on their "simultaneity" (8). She finds that popular cultures that had for so long served as evidence of Haiti's primitivism to Western colonizers could be constructed as "official indices of national identity" if they could be converted to a "national folklore" and figured as little more than "revivals' of a transcended cultural past" (8). Lastly, Ramsey considers the unique role of the *sèvitè* ("servants" of the spirits) in the production of folklore (as participants in ethnological studies, as

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theater directors, as contributors to “official presentations of music and dance folklore” (8), etc.) to protest their persecution by both the church and state.

Renda, Mary. *Taking Haiti: Military Occupation and the Culture of U.S. Imperialism, 1915-1940*. Chapel Hill: UNC Press, 2002.

Using the concept of paternalism to describe U.S. Occupation of Haiti at the turn of the century, Renda explores how the U.S.’s decision to infiltrate Haitian soil affected both the American and Haitian people. Renda argues that the exportation of Haitian culture occurred as a result of Marines seeking to mold Haitian life into some semblance of their own, which was a direct result of the United States’ overarching political aim to create an imperialist nation. This text provides important historical background on the Occupation and also explores how African Artists like Hurston and Hughes were affected by the relationship between the U.S. and Haiti. It might prove useful to make connections between Renda’s argument and the themes Hurston and Dunham explore in their ethnographies.

Roumain, Jacques. *Masters of the Dew*. Trans. Langston Hughes and Mercer Cook. London: Heinemann, 1978.

A novel of peasant life in Haiti. Manuel returns to his native village—now ravaged by drought and a family feud—after working on a sugar plantation in Cuba. He subsequently discovers a way to irrigate the fields and preaches about solidarity learned in Cuba, maintaining that for the villagers to collectively improve their lot, they must band together.

Schmidt, Hans. *The United States Occupation of Haiti. 1915-1934*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1995.

A history of the U.S. occupation of Haiti, in which Schmidt considers the occupation within the trajectory of a post-Civil War interest in establishing American political power and commercial expansion in the Caribbean. Includes a detailed description of the invasion, as well the actions, policies, and brutal racist practices of the U.S. administration.

Seabrook, William Buehler. *Magic Island*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company. 1929.

A bestseller in the U.S. and the first travel narrative to export “voodoo” to the United States, Seabrook’s pseudo-ethnographic/sensationalist account details his myriad observations of and participation in voodoo rituals as he periodically asserts his opinion of the voodoo religion, and the Haitian people, as being alternately animalistic and naïve. The book was written during the U.S. occupation of Haiti, and Seabrook makes direct mention of U.S. business interests—for example, the HASCO sugar mill, staffed, in part (he had heard), by zombies; in addition, he speaks favorably of U.S. marines, concluding that any rumor of marine brutality is untrue.

Constructing the Folk

If Folk-lore does exist, what is its value both in literature and science?

—Jean Price-Mars, *Ainsi Parla L'Oncle*

And that's how / the foreigners make Haiti so / small / with their maps.

—Philippe Thoby-Marcelin, "L'Atlas A Menti"

These two quotes lead to many questions about the value of the folk and its connection to national identity and colonialism. Any conception of the folk and folk culture is constructed by the discourse surrounding its collection and inscription from oral to written and from common to elite/academic. By comparing the use of the folk in both the Haitian literary movement and the Harlem Renaissance, students can understand how the folk is rhetorically shaped and the role it plays in forming a **national identity** and in **challenging and upholding imperial narratives of progress and primitivism**. Both of these threads are also closely related to discussions of what the "authentic" folk is, who can author it, what form it takes, and who can use or control it. Each of these threads will develop background on these issues and present discussion questions or models for teaching some of the most prominent issues accompanying any discussion of the folk.

Appropriating and Constructing a Niche: "Authentic" Folk and Progress, Civilization, and Primitivism

One of the bridges between the writings of the Harlem Renaissance in the United States and the push for folk literature in Haiti is how folk culture is used to counter grand imperial narratives about progress, civilization, and primitivism. While W.E.B. Du Bois is challenging and negotiating narratives of progress and primitive vs. civilized culture in his work *The Souls of Black Folk*, anthropologist Jean Price-Mars does something similar for Haitian literature. Price-Mars' discussion of the folk in his 1928 book *Ainsi Parla l'Oncle* (translated into *So Spoke the Uncle*) provides several important inroads to discussion the national and international conversations during the 1920s, 30s, and 40s about the folk, the Pan-African movement, and the Harlem Renaissance in American literature. Part of his push to authenticated the folk and alter its position as unenlightened peasant culture is a desire to help create a strong national identity for Haiti. As a product of this desire, he creates a very particular construction of the folk and, in doing so, creates a great opening for a discussion of the rhetoric surrounding and the claim to authenticity of the folk in Haiti. Click on one of the links in the navigation bar below to find a contextual, research-based discussion of each issue and a teaching model for that issue which provides discussion questions or activities to consider participating in with students.

Price-Mars' Construction of the Folk

While "folk" is a hard term to pin down in definite terms, each artist and writer during the Harlem Renaissance (both in the United State and abroad) had a different conception of the folk and its importance to their race, culture, and national identity. For Price-Mars, a Haitian physician/politician and noted writer, the folk religion, customs, stories, and rituals were essential to forming an authentic Haitian nation that was not dependent on colonial powers or occupying forces forces for historical and social validation. For him, the folk is "not the official/legal - it is the disenfranchised which have not been employed in the official religion or history of the civilization" but rather the "unwritten history of primitive times" (Price-Mars 11). The folk represented something uniquely Haitian and provided a "national spirit".

But Price-Mars closely aligns Haitian folk with the rhetoric about Negro spirituals that Du Bois has been using in the United States. He describes Haitian folklore as having a "mystical tonality" which "received from the past or created and transformed by us from being a part of ourselves" and is "the mirror which reflects most accurately the restless countenance of the nation. They constitute in an unexpected and breathtaking fashion the materials of our spiritual unity. Therefore where could one find a more genuine image of our society?" (Price-Mars 174). The folk is constructed as intimately connected with the Haitian soul and somehow an authentic version of what it means to be truly Haitian and its inextricable connection to the primitive, the spiritual, and the peasant. Price-Mars makes a claim that the meaning of many Haitian rituals/sayings/songs has been lost but that the rhythm and chant are still remembered (53). This is strikingly similar to Du Bois' claim that the African American knows the meaning of the *music* even after the knowledge of the words are lost (*The Souls of Black Folk* 153). Both of these men raise an issue of authenticity and accessibility. The true folk is known in the blood and generations of the people (Africans). However, both men feel a need to make these folk elements accessible (in some small way) to an outside audience in order to gain credibility for their culture and lay claim to a national identity (see the identity section for a more detailed discussion of Haitian nationalism). Price-Mars even uses the work of the Harlem Renaissance writers to prove the validity of his own claims about Haitian folk: "Who has ever opposed the use of the English language to express the state of mind of American Negroes in the works of James Weldon Johnson, Du Bois, Booker T. Washington, Chesnut? And why would language be an obstacle for Haitians to bring the world an idea of art, an expression of mind which may be altogether very human and very Haitian?" (175-76)

Price-Mars attempts to connect Haitian folklore to the African tradition to lend it credibility (much like Du Bois with African American folk). As noted in Gerarde Magloire's dissertation on Price-Mars entitled *Ambassadors At Dawn: Haitian Thinkers in the French Colonial Context of the 19th and 20th Centuries: the Example of Jean Price-Mars (1876-1969)*, "Price-Mars avowedly sought to renovate and redeem Haiti precisely by prescribing the place of 'Africa' within the nation" (101). The idea that African heritage provided necessary credibility to the folk was important to Price-Mars and this drive may have come from his predecessor Antenor Firmin. Firmin believed that not only did places like Haiti need to be connected to Africa, but Africa had to be reconnected to the parts of its heritage that the colonial powers tried to deny, most specifically ancient Egyptian civilization. In his article "Antenor Firmin and Jean Price-Mars: Revolution, Memory, Humanism," Magloire-Danton writes that "linkages with the African continent were based on the study of its ancient civilizations—particularly that of ancient Egypt connected with Africa through Egypt's Nubian corridor. In seeking to debiologize the notion of race, Firmin's scientific approach was informed by a vaulting historical vision that drove him to invest intellectually in the thesis of a black Egypt as the source of Greco-Roman civilization" (156). This moves the discussion of African and Haitian identities away from scientific discussions of the inferiority of races and into a temporal, socio-historical struggle over who has the deepest (oldest) historical roots. Africa, then, becomes a land of promise as a connection to history and culture that imperial and colonial powers often denied Black peoples. So by proving that rituals and practices that make up Haitian folk (like voodoo) have African roots but have been meaningfully filtered through Haitian culture, Price-Mars' creates a space for Haiti to have a meaningful history and wield political, national power.

Teaching Model

Using this context and the overlaps between Du Bois' *The Souls of Black Folk*, you might pursue the three following activities. First, have students read the final chapter of Du Bois' book "The Sorrow Song." Ask them to compare his integration of spirituals in the text to Price-Mars' use of Haitian folk songs in the first chapter of *Ainsi Parla L'Oncle*. From here, ask students to identify how the folk is being actively constructed by the two authors and what similar points they make. If part of the importance of the folk is its claim to authenticity and valuable culture, then how do we measure the "authenticity" of the folk song? What does Price-Mars gain from linking his argument about Haiti to those of the Harlem Renaissance writers? Finally, link this discussion with the context below about linking Africa to Haiti and about the attempt to control, police, and sanitize the folk.

Secondly, ask about Price-Mars' concepts in terms of an example. You might consider using a Bouki (or Bouqui) and Ti Malice tale as they were popular stories told in Haiti. The version of the Bouki and Ti Malice stories we've found are from the storyteller Liliane Louis (born in 1937 to a Haitian family - came to NYC in 1964). In the introduction to her stories, Fred Hay states "these stories [Bouki and Malice] are well-known in Haiti, and many different versions are in circulation. The versions Liliane tells are based on those she learned from her own mother, who had learned them as a child from her grandmother" (Louis 31). Does this meet Price-Mars' criteria for authentic folk? How does the class and background of the author change our conception of folk culture? Also, how do these folktales construct a particular set of values for Haiti as a nation and what ideas of class, colonization, occupation, and authenticity do the folktales and even the work of Price-Mars carry with them?

Finally, Price-Mars attempts to reconnect Haiti to Africa through folklore (although he is careful to maintain that there was a Haitian element to the folk that is particular to Haiti). This resembles the project by many Harlem Renaissance writers and by Price-Mars' predecessor, Antenor Firmin, to connect to a strong African historical heritage. A good approach to discussing the folk (in any context, but especially in seeing the relationships between all of the African folk movements) would be to ask students about the value of connecting to Africa heritage and the colonial/imperial project of creating a people without a history. What does it mean for a culture to

not have a history and how does claiming the folk re-establish a historical identity? A great point of departure for discussion might be Firmin's attempt to reconnect Egypt with Africa in order to claim "a black Egypt as the source of Greco-Roman civilization" (Magloire-Danton 156). If Egypt is African (ideologically and not just geographically) and African heritage can be claimed by Haitians (via Price-Mars and Magloire's commentary on Price-Mars' work), then Haiti has an "authentic" claim to a culture/history that is highly respected. Do these connections accomplish their purpose? What is gained by shifting from a focus on a racial argument (one privileging the humanitarian rights of Black peoples) to a socio-historical argument (connecting to a highly respected civilization deep in the past that will lend any Black culture authenticity)?

Neither Primitive nor Civilized: The New Folk

One of the important discussions around the Haiti and the folk is about how the folk becomes positioned between primitive and civilized, with writers like Price-Mars acknowledging that the folk was primitive but that it has been rehabilitated and adapted to show that the Haitian people become civilized. This positioning is important to giving Haiti a national identity. Without acknowledging the original inferiority of the folk culture, it cannot become a respected basis for identity (at least as defined by colonial powers). Price-Mars combats the existing representations (especially in the ethnographic and travel literature of his day) of Haiti as "one of the 'blackest' places on earth in colonial representations, seldom appearing without its trail of three negative qualifiers connotating the cultural (savage, barbarian, primitive), religious (cannibalistic, superstitious, fetishistic), and political (despotism, misrule, anarchy)" (Magloire 53-54). Price-Mars insists that Haiti had developed "its own distinctive culture—a syncretic product of African and European civilizations—challenged nineteenth-century and early-twentieth-century Western discourses on Haiti. Thinking Haiti in social-historical terms was at loggerheads with the colonial discourse on civilization and on 'primitive' peoples without history and without writing that heavily targeted the populations of sub-Saharan Africa and its diaspora" (Magloire-Danton 165). In his effort to prove that Haiti is not primitive, Price-Mars carefully rehabilitates voodoo and other traditional forms Haiti peasant culture by linking them to their historical foundations and showing the influences of Africa and Europe on these practices. The peasantry are then brought in to the fold of the middle class under the flag of a national identity that both the elite and peasants can share. No longer to the peasants have to be explained away as quaint and primitive: Folklore makes Haitian masses into "native figures; they are no longer simply representatives of a stigmatized slave past, but carriers of an original culture, shared in many ways with the elite" (Magloire 127). The common people then become a link to the past and important bearers of cultural memory/authenticity.

The tension exhibited in Price-Mars' work where he at once pushes the importance of the folk but also acknowledges that its past is a primitive one is illustrated in his discussion of Bouqui (the foolish, lazy peasant) and Ti Malice (the witty, intelligent uncle/cousin), one of the most common character pairings in Haitian folklore.

Ah! You see what a glorious heritage our Bouqui and his priceless companion Ti Malice can claim! Both are the spokesmen of our grievances and of our bitterness, both are indicative of our disposition to assimilate. Do not make too much fun of them and especially do not scorn them. Do not blush either at the foolish frankness of the one, or at the cunning of the other. They are, in their way, what life offers us everywhere on the globe of stupidity, of childish vanity, and of cunning competency. They are undoubtedly representative of a state of mind very close to nature, not at all because they are Negroes but because they have been molded in the most authentic human clay. They should be dear to us because they amused us throughout our childhood, because they still strike the first spark of curiosity in the imaginations of our offspring, and finally because they satisfy within us the taste for the mysterious which is one of the magnificent privileges of our species. (Price-Mars 19)

Price-Mars describes Bouqui and Ti Malice as childish and relegates them to the role of fairy tales, fodder for the imagination but definitely not a deep, "civilized" narrative. However, he also notes that the characters fulfill two conflicting and important roles as containers for the bitterness of the subjugation of the Haitian people *and* of Haiti's project to assimilate and "civilize" itself in the eyes of the western world. sense of Bouqui and Ti Malice is present even in Louis' retellings of the stories. These folktales then became a way for Haitian writers to challenge their colonial heritage. In renewing the tales, the folk becomes a link to a primitive past but also a challenge against the very dichotomy represented by "primitive or civilized" cultures. In identifying and discussing the Bouki and Malice tales we can see one of the main tensions Price-Mars illustrates, at once the folk is a sign of primitive history and a transgressive and reimagined future. The effect in Price-Mars work then is the creation of a sense of moving beyond - while this is a rich past, it needs to be recovered/revised. Everyone must understand that Haiti has moved beyond the primitive elements implicated in the history to something else that is more "respectable."

Teaching Model:

To engage students in a conversation about these tensions, you might provide them with two primary sources: a Bouqui/Ti Malice tale and Philippe Thoby-Marcelin's "L'Atlas A Menti (The Atlas Lied)." Given the necessity of finding sources in English, I have used a story from Liliane Nérette Louis' book of tales *When Night Falls, Kric! Krac!: Haitian Folktales*. The story I chose was "Bouki and the Calf," as it can be read in multiple ways. In "Bouki and the Calf," foolish Bouki tries to trick the young, juicy calf into meeting him at night. The calf is aware that Bouki means him harm and tells Bouki that he lives under the community's most well known tree. Bouki ignores the advice of hard working Malice to leave the calf alone. At night he sneaks to the tree and is attacked by the tiger who lives under the tree. Bouki stumbles home and poor Malice has to take care of him. Bouki's conclusion is that the calf turns in to a tiger at night and he should be left alone.

On the surface, the characters seem simple. Bouki is foolish and stupid (Malice never loses an opportunity to tell Bouki how stupid he is); Malice is wise, hard working, and prepared. Even Louis herself describes the characters in this way: "The two principal characters in Haitian folktales are Bouki and Malis. Bouki is a dummy to the extreme, and Malis is a very smart fellow. In some stories they are brothers; from time to time you might find both living with their mother. In other stories Bouki and Malis are *konpè* (literally godfather of one's child but often used as a general term of respect and friendship), and in still other stories they are uncle and nephew. ...Foolish Bouki never misses an opportunity to do something stupid and amusing. No matter how Malis tries to make Bouki see things sensibly, Bouki does not listen. Sometimes, Malis clearly and deliberately takes advantage of Bouki" (5). But the characters can be read in other more revisionary ways.

Bouki can be seen as a figure of resistance to imperial expectations. He exhibits a love for Haitian tradition and its natural setting. Bouki engages with the traditions of Haiti (rituals and voodoo). He is constantly trying to find a way to do something that has been forbidden and refuses the counsel of his (assimilationist?) uncle/brother/cousin Malice. Malice works very hard but is also engaged in physical labor. He could be representative of the hard working peasant (two sides of the same figure). He is also very self-sufficient and is always taking care of his Haitian relatives. Ask the students to see if they can attempt any of these alternate readings of Bouki and Malice. Then give them the truly revisionist "L'Atlas A Menti (The Atlas Lied)."

Ask the students to discuss how this poem revises the traditional Bouqui (especially contrasting it with examples from the folktale). The poem is renewing/re-membering the folk. Instead of being a primitive character from a folk story, Bouqui becomes symbolic for a shared past and a struggle for identity. In "L'Atlas A Menti" the "young, modernized Haitian intellectual" is positioned against the forces of imperialism/technology/industry and is embodied by Bouqui" (Meehan and Léticée 1379). Bouqui becomes stands in for an element of "unassimilatable resistance" (Meehan and

Léticée 1379). He become emblematic for a Haiti that resists occupation and colonial narratives. The poem asks Bouqui/the young Haitian to move away from bitterness at the past and be healed by the folk. This is illustrated in the slip into Creole and the invocation of oral storytelling culture (with the line "HEIN?") (Meehan and Léticée 1379). In your discussion of these two texts, you might ask how this revising of a popular folk figure alters the authenticity of the character and whether the new form (the poem) becomes part of the mass of folk literature itself. You might also ask about how this new use of Bouqui changes the position of the folk as primitive. If the folk is not primitive and not civilized, where does it fit? What kinds of new categories are being broached and what terms are being redefined?

Rehabilitating Voodoo

Since one of the most internationally recognizable tropes of Haitian folk is Voodoo, a discussion of Price-Mars' section on voodoo is necessary. Price-Mars sets out to remove the colonial stigma placed on voodoo. He wanted to remove the "colonial construction of peasant belief and ritual as 'sorcery' and to methodically argue for their status as a religion, albeit a 'very primitive' one, 'formed in part by beliefs in the almighty Power of spiritual beings—gods, demons, disembodied souls—in part by beliefs in sorcery and magic' [Ramsey is quoting Price-Mars 88–89]" (Ramsey 9). This representation illustrates the concession Price-Mars continually makes (see the Bouqui and Ti Malice discussion) where the folk is a "primitive" that has been moved beyond, yet it is the very historical existence of the folk that allows for a Haitian identity. This tendency to see the folk as something that needs updating is evident in the other folk movements as well (the project of McKay's *Home to Harlem* perhaps?).

Historically, voodoo (and other elements of Haitian culture derived from African culture) is seen as "barbarous and a hindrance to progress and civilization" (Magloire-Danton 166). Price-Mars' makes voodoo into a valid religion and affords it respectability. His treatment of voodoo is positive and challenges the position of voodoo held by the Haitian elite and colonial/imperial powers (even if it admits that the folk is primitive, it does so with the agenda of making the current folk practices acceptable). Kate Ramsey mentions this in her article "Without One Ritual Note: Folklore Performance and the Haitian State, 1935-1946," "Through their conversion to 'national folklore,' popular cultures long figured in the West as evidence of Haiti's primitivism could be constructed as official indices of national identity, but only, it seemed, on the condition that they were figured as 'revivals' of a transcended cultural past" (8). The folk (especially the dangerous voodoo) has to be made innocuous by being couched in a rhetoric that denies its originary power and safely encapsulates cultural rituals in a way that will not offend a modern ("civilized") audience. But this move is important to establishing a national identity and allowing voodoo to exist in a form that is not shameful. Price-Mars is working against all the narratives (like *Voodoo Fire in Haiti*) that crudely represent native ritual as primitive and sexual: "In *Ainsi parla l'oncle*, Jean Price-Mars describes such passages as constituting a kind of imperial 'plagiarism,' whereby 'accounts . . . [can be] made of the cultic ceremonies of "Vodou" by writers who have not even had the opportunity to observe them'" (Ramsey 11). It is better for Haiti to reclaim a revitalized voodoo than to continue allowing imperial powers to define Haiti's traditions and citizenry.

Voodoo then becomes a site of tension between the Haitian elite (following a colonial model) and the Haitian peasantry. Who can claim to control and authenticate the folk, if it is a peasant's culture but it is modified and utilized by the middle and elite classes to represent Haiti (and their ability to self-govern) to the world? As Joan Dayan questioned in her work *Haiti, History, and the Gods*, "What does it mean when an educated, upper-class writer, estranged from vodou through instruction and an acquired langue de culture, returns to the cult of the ancestors? What does the ethnographic precision of Haitian novelists say about the constraints of what is generally called 'history'? What do we learn about the demands of theodicy when the gods and those who serve them appear in texts that call themselves 'fiction'? Though often denounced as 'superstition' in the presentable past of historians like Thomas Madiou and Beaubrun Ardouin, vodou is anchored to

the intelligible plot of Haitian nationalist thought" (79). The Haitian folk becomes the zone of struggle that delineates Haitian (and to some extent, West Indian) identity.

The Problem of "Folk"

According to Ramsey, "With the restoration of Haitian sovereignty in 1934, the postoccupation state constructed popular practices, and particularly ritual dance, as indices of official Haitian identity and modernity, but framed such performances internationally as revivals of a transcended cultural past" (10). While this state sponsored support for the folk seems to be an embrace of the peasantry and their much maligned traditions, it becomes a power struggle over Haiti's international political image. Haitian folk rituals (voodoo, traditional dances) are not allowed to be practiced by believers, but only mimicked as relics of the past. There was a great push by the Haitian elite to sanitize cultural forms to make them more internationally relevant and more palatable to an American/European audience. There is a fear that if the rituals seemed "real" then current Haitian culture would be labeled primitive and feared (Ramsey 22). Part of this fear came from the elite's fear of voodoo and "a sense that performers could be 'contaminated'—and then contaminate others—by their bodily mimesis of ritual forms, there also seemed to be some official uneasiness around the participation of popular religious practitioners in folklore representations, at first primarily as drummers, but increasingly in independent productions, as dancers and singers" (Ramsey 23). So while the acceptance of the importance of Haitian folk culture invites brings the peasantry into a common national identity with the elite, the policing of that identity creates the peasantry (and the "authentic" practice) as a separate, confined group. Ramsey notes that even Haitian law worked against the practice of "authentic" folk rituals: "In criminalizing the ritual feeding of the spirits through sacrificial offerings, the 1935 legislation played a key role, as its antecedents had, in perpetuating the political marginalization, social stigmatization, and everyday economic exploitation of the subaltern majority in Haiti. It joined the battery of laws regulating peasant life through which, as Laënnec Hurbon has written, the elite state sought to maintain 'a peasant society closed in on itself, based on its own traditions, and effectively constituting another country . . . in the interior of Haiti'" (Ramsey 31). This conflict between elite and peasant; artist and inspiration (folk rituals); primitive and civilized; and authenticity and national/international political power opens up a wide variety of discussions one can have about the folk and Haiti in the undergraduate classroom.

Teaching Model:

Given the context above, the following activity would be instructive to illustrate the tension in the representation of the folk. This activity involves discussing two particular representations of Haitian folk, both outlined in "Without One Ritual Note: Folklore Performance and the Haitian State, 1935-1946." The first is the case of composer Valério Canez and his belief that the folk needed to be re-written and universalized. Ramsey writes:

There was another prominent sector of the self-identified mouvement folklorique in the late 1930s and early 1940s that expressed little of this populism, nor a particular interest in social transformation. They were primarily elite folk song collectors, arrangers, and composers such as Valério Canez, a violinist, and Anton Werner Jaegerhuber, a music professor and pianist of German-Haitian descent, who, in the tradition of Brahms and Liszt, sought to locate the Haitian 'national character' through the distillation of popular musical themes. Their collective efforts were encouraged by the international success and popularity during these years of so-called American Negro spirituals, harmonized and arranged for piano or orchestra. Canez felt particularly strongly, as he explained in an article in *Haïti-Journal*, that in order for its national character to be realized, Haitian musical folklore, 'with its beautiful melodies and its unique rhythms must be known, executed in all parts of the world.' To this end, Canez advocated that Haitian popular songs, including those which were ritually dedicated to the spirits, be 'harmonized,

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purified, and presented in a universal musical form, a classical musical form, rendering them accessible to all, and extricating from them all primitive form, while preserving their national character.' In response to those who argued that it was necessary to use drums 'to give the really typical, local character to our folklore,' Canez replied that conical Haitian drums were, categorically, 'not musical instruments,' and that their rhythms could be adequately replicated on the piano, or, in orchestral performances, by the kettledrum. (15-16)

Use this quote to start a discussion of what it means to have an "authentic" folk. Can it still be considered folk music if the drums are missing? If the music has been arranged according to classical (western) patterns? There is also an accessibility issue here. The desire to universalize the folk is one that hopes to allow it reach more audiences. While Price-Mars suggests that there is something uniquely Haitian about the folk that is accessible to those who *are* Haitian (and Du Bois makes the same comment about Negro spirituals in the US), Canez makes the reverse argument. It is also of note that Canez is basing his argument on the success of Negro spirituals that were rearranged and universalized. Which argument do the students find more compelling and why? What is the merit/value of each argument?

Then you can move in to a discussion of the second example from Ramsey's article: the state sponsored trip to the eighth annual National Folk Festival (in the United States - it was the first international version of the festival in May 1941). The performance at the folk festivals was carefully controlled by the Haitian government in order to ensure the proper international image for Haiti. The Haitian minister to the United States (who later became the Haitian President) wanted to send a group of performers who had been "polished off"; The US organizer, Sarah Knott solicited advice from famous ethnographer Melville Herskovits about whether or not to deny a group that was not truly authentic. While Herskovits advocated a group led by a native priest and who would perform traditional voodoo dance (the priest would then be responsible for keeping control over the dances),

Lescot convinced Knott that it would be folly to invite a group of *sèvitè* to perform at the festival who, as believers, might lose control of themselves and, in their performances, exceed the domain of representation. The control actually at stake here, of course, was that which the state sought to exercise over the construction of ritual dance as an exemplary sign of Haitian national culture. A group of peasants, who themselves served the spirits, *could not perform the nation's modernity* [emphasis added]. This is the implication of the argument that Knott recounted to Herskovits in defense of the festival's decision to invite Fussman-Mathon's 'polished off' troupe. While the performance of a group of *sèvitè* might be of academic interest to an anthropologist, Fussman-Mathon's company was modern, up-to-date, and would, as Knott put it, 'be able to show things as they are done today.' One hears in her words the echo of evolutionary anthropology's denial of coevality to the cultures it studied, ironically rehearsed back to Herskovits, an advocate of anthropological relativism. (Ramsey 19)

The new troupe had to be schooled in ritual dance and was made up of a middle class group of singers (no formal dance training or previous knowledge of voodoo). The folk cannot include "real" rituals and must now reflect the project of a modern Haiti. By establishing an national identity predicated on the existence of a folk culture, the Haitian elite found that they needed to remove the peasant from the culture the peasant created. The post-occupation government went so far as to criminalize real voodoo rituals and practices in their "crusade against 'superstition' [backed] with civil and military force, [which signals] that for the elite state there was no conflict between exploiting folklore 'to interest and attract tourists,' and ignoring, denying, or even 'stamping out' the practices on which such folkloric forms were based. Indeed, there is a sense in which the government's support of the church's campaign [against superstition] at this time might be understood as not simply consonant with the construction of ritual dance as a national sign, but even as a kind of condition of possibility for that conversion" (Ramsey 24). This opens up a

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space for discussing the legal ramifications of the folk and how subversive forms are often criminalized. It also provides an inroads to discussing class issues and whether the authentic folk has to come from the peasantry.

This folk festival provides a great context for a group activity. Give groups of students various Haitian folktales and songs or dances (if possible). Have them pretend to be a committee deciding whether or not the elements make it into an international exhibition of the folk. Ask them to record their reasons for accepting or rejecting each piece and to prepare a short presentation on what kind of identity they created by including/excluding pieces of the folk. This forces them to step in to the roles of the elite in authorizing a particular version of the folk. Have them discuss the similarities and differences between each group's decision-making process and question what the classes concerns are about the folk.

NATION, RACE, IDENTITY AND THE FOLK

Overview: National and Racial Identities in America and Haiti

Both intellectuals writing during the Harlem Renaissance in America and those writing in the anti-colonial nationalist movement in Haiti in the 1920s sought to use folk art and folk culture in ways specific to their respective socio-political agendas. For the Black intellectuals of the Harlem Renaissance, the idea of the “folk” was constructed and deployed as a means of authenticating the experiences of Black people, unifying the race, and proving to white, bourgeois America that the Negro does indeed figure importantly in the narrative of the nation’s history and future. In Haiti, the radical essays of Jean Price-Mars employed a similar logic, though the celebrated author saw the folk primarily as a way of uniting a nation whose severe color and class divide had made the nation weak to U.S. occupation and lasting colonization. So while Black intellectuals such as W.E.B. DuBois and Alain Locke were largely concerned with the rhetoric of the folk as a way of articulating the need to integrate—and thereby legitimize—a subordinated race within a dominant nationalist ideology, Haitian intellectuals sought to use this rhetoric as a way of uniting the nation’s mulatto elite with its large, disenfranchised peasantry.

Discovering the "Souls" of Black Folk

In the *Souls of Black Folk* (1903), W.E.B. Du Bois comments on the pervading confusion that Black Americans often felt at the turn of the twentieth century as a result of their apparent identity-split as both “negroes” and “Americans”: “One ever feels his two-ness,—an American Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body” (2). The confusion of identities within “one dark body” is symbolic of a general confusion regarding the status of Black people in America at the time. This kind of rhetoric is similarly drawn upon by Alain Locke in *The New Negro* (1925). Locke shifts this rhetoric slightly, however, to conceptualize a unified “soul” of the race (that is, instead of the “souls” of black folk, we now have the “soul” of Black America): “Negro life is not only establishing new contacts and founding new centers, it is finding a new soul” (xxvii). He uses a European model of progress to explain how the “maturation” of the Black race can be likened to the same process of maturation that America underwent to become an independent nation from England; and, as there became a New America, so there is also a New Negro. In Locke’s project, which is primarily to “document” the New Negro and in doing so locate this unified “new soul” of the race, “folk spirit,” “folk interpretation,” and “artistic expression” are key (xxv).

Discovering the “Soul” of Haiti

When Haiti declared its independence from the French on January 1, 1804, it was the first and only successful slave revolt in world history. Given this status, Haiti would serve as an example of how successful (or not) a country of would-be slaves could be if given the opportunity to govern themselves. The marks of colonization did not end in 1804, however, and a severe, indisputable rift between the elite mulatto class and the large peasant population (which made up a majority of Haiti’s populace) was undoubtedly sustained. This fissure was upheld at least in part by the way in which the elite class denigrated the “simple” beliefs of the peasantry. Given the Haitian peasantry’s support of Vodou, one of the ways in which this rift between classes became observable is through the prohibition and violent repression of any practice associated with *les pratiques superstitieuses* (the superstitious practices) of this religious complex (Ramsey 7-8). The abject status of these peasant rituals (and indeed peasants themselves) seems to stem from the fear felt by the Haitian elite of appearing primitive to colonizing nations, and by extension, the fear of appearing incapable of governing their own nation.

But, where there is (national) shame, there is the potential to turn that shame into a powerful source of (national) pride. For example, in “Without One Ritual Note: Folklore Performance and the Haitian State, 1935-1946,” Kate Ramsey explains that although “Imperial myths of peasant ritualism had never been so highly charged as on the eve of the U.S. military department from Haiti in August 1934,” “neither had Haitian popular culture ever been so forcefully figured as the matrix for Haitian national identity” (8). Such a coincidence suggests that an embrace of these shameful rituals might be perceived as a kind of threat to the greater imperial project of colonizing nations, who in turn must attempt to “re-shame” Haitians into submission.

Indeed, perhaps no one was more prominent in the project of recuperating popular folk culture for national ends than Jean Price-Mars. In *Ainsi Parla l’Oncle*, Price-Mars suggests that folklore is, for Haitian people, “the fundamental beliefs upon which have been grafted or superimposed other more recently acquired beliefs” (13). Centralizing the folk in this way builds an obvious bridge between members of all social classes, as it assumes that the folk is fundamental to all “modern” thought. Price-Mars explains that while folk values are embraced by the peasant classes, they are typically disparaged by the elite and thus written off as embarrassing scars of primitivism:

All [folklore] are engaging in a harsh and heavy struggle to gain control of the mind. But it is in this domain especially that the conflict assumes different aspects depending upon whether the field of battle arises in the mind of the masses or of the elites. [...] I do not know which of these two social entities has the advantage in this limited conception if we consider that those in the lower classes accommodate themselves more easily to the world, to the juxtaposition of beliefs, or to the subordination of the more recent to earlier ones, and succeed thus in achieving a quite enviable equilibrium and stability. The upper classes, on the contrary, pay heavily for these primitive states of consciousness which are perpetual causes of astonishment and humiliation for all those who bear their stigma. (13)

Given the dynamics of the various class “battlefields,” adopting a rhetoric of the folk as more or less central to all Haitians’ belief systems serves as a valuable way of amalgamating the classes, which thus makes a unified national identity possible. Price-Mars considered Haiti’s continued occupation by the United States as evidence of a need for this strong national identity and thought that the folk could ostensibly wield a great deal of anti-colonial power. The fact that so many imperial myths of Haiti’s “strange” rituals were being generated at the time (W.B. Seabrook’s *Magic Island* (1929) is a good example) seems to confirm Price-Mars’ logic—if shame can be replaced by pride, a counter-narrative of these Haitian “oddities” can be developed and deployed by the people themselves in ways that are productive to national pride.

What is the Folk?

Quotes from Jean Price-Mars that attempt to engage, answer, or problematize this question in some capacity:

- “The lore of the people, the knowledge of the people” (Price-Mars quoting Paul Sébillot in *Ainsi Parla l’Oncle*).
- The unwritten history of primitive times (10).
- It is “the culture of the people concerning strange and unrefined customs, superstitious associations with animals, flowers, birds, trees, local objects, and with events of human life which have not been employed in the official religion or history of the civilization; it includes the belief in sorcery, in fairies and spirits, the ballads and proverbial sayings that apply to particular localities, the popular names of hills, streams, of lairs, or burial mounds, of fields of trees, and so forth” (12).

- The fundamental beliefs upon which have been grafted or superimposed other more recently acquired beliefs” (13)
- Is it Africa? Is it Europe? (16)
- Idiom, dialect, patois (25)
- “Oral traditions [...] are only a very minute part of this complicated mass” (34)
- “Beliefs are the most apparent and most representative expression of it” (34)
- Popular beliefs (Price-Mars)
- “Tales, legends, riddles, songs, proverbs, beliefs” (Price-Mars 173).
- “It is difficult to explain” (10)

Common Attributes of the Folk and the Problem of Authenticity

During the Harlem Renaissance, black intellectuals and artists often evoked and made use of the folk in similar ways. Typically, for the folk to be considered “authentic” by these intellectuals, it must be connected in some way with several (or all) of the following ideas:

- Rural peasantry (though a kind of urbanized folk could exist)
- Vernacular
- Primitivism
- Unsullied Truth Anti-Materialism
- African Origins

Though scholars like W.E.B. Du Bois, Alain Locke, and others relied on a discourse of authenticity that sought to locate Afro-American art within the depths of the Negro soul, academic discussions amongst these critics and others that took place in the Crisis reveal that the construction of the Negro “soul” was itself a site of contestation. So while Albert Barnes may assert that the Negro’s “chants” are a “natural, naïve, untutored, spontaneous utterance of the suffering yearning prayerful human soul” (21), and that his art is “so deeply rooted in his nature that it has thrived in a foreign soil where the traditions and practices tend to stamp out and starve out both the plant and its flowers” (20), the answer to the question of what makes Negro art “Negro,” is not entirely clear. Can this special kind of art qualify as “Negro art” simply if a Black person writes it (and is this the only requirement)? Need it engage “Negro themes” as well? What are these themes? Can these themes change? The answers to these questions of authenticity can never be quite fixed.

With Haiti, the question of what makes something authentically “Haitian” is a considerably difficult one given the creolization of the culture from the country’s long history of slavery. While it is somewhat clear that African Americans will find their roots in Africa, Jean Price-Mars reveals that there is a clear ambiguity of origin for Haitians: “to which place should we look for the origin of our custom? Is it Africa? Is it Europe?” (16). He further reflects on the problem of Haiti’s history of slavery insofar as it renders suspect even the most well-known folk tales Haiti of which can boast; he asks,

Are these tales [of Bouqui and Ti Malice] true indigenous products or are they only vague recollections of other tales and legends which come from periods prior to that of servitude? Were they born on our own soil as our own Creole, as heterogeneous products of transformation and adaptation determined by contact between master and slave? (14)

Ultimately, it seems as though Price-Mars never fully comes to any real conclusions; instead, he appears to adopt the ambiguity of origin as being the most intrinsically Haitian element of any folk story. His acceptance, indeed his appreciation, of ambiguity is observable in the way he discusses the “flavor” of the Creole language. Price-Mars contends that

Creole, for those who comprehend it, is a language of great subtlety. Virtue or fault, this characteristic derives less from the clearness of the sounds it expresses than from the unsuspected depth of its ambiguities that it insinuates by its innuendos, by the inflection of the voice itself, and especially by the mimetic face of the speaker. Perhaps this is why written Creole loses half the flavor of the spoken language. (25)

The fact that Price-Mars believes Creole loses “half its flavor” when it is written (i.e. when it loses some of its brilliant ambiguities), along with the fact that he believes that it is only through the Creole language that Haitians can “hope some day to bridge the gulf which makes between [the elite] and the [lower class] people two apparently distinct and frequently antagonistic entities” (25), suggests an evident approval of the uncertainty.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. How can we define the folk? Does the folk actually exist beyond its rhetorical scope?
2. Why do Du Bois, Locke, and Price-Mars rely specifically on folk art/folk culture as a site for unifying Black Americans and the Haitian people respectively? How can the folk be productive of meaningful identities for these groups?
3. In what ways might Haitian intellectuals be seen as adopting the rhetoric of the Harlem Renaissance movement to benefit their own attempts at unifying the country? Why, by extension, would adopting a similar rhetoric be an effective way to generate unity in a country firmly (and perhaps dangerously?) divided by color and class demarcations among its peoples?

American Ethnography in Haiti: Zora Neale Hurston and Katherine Dunham

The following pages are designed to explore the topic of ethnography in relation to the Haitian folk and questions of authenticity. The subtopics provided are possible points of discussion in an undergraduate class. Please see the annotated bibliography for citations of secondary material that may prove useful for further research.



Zora Neale Hurston Katherine Dunham

Today we have the modern zombie film, tourist interest in hoodoo in the French Quarter of New Orleans, and [reports of an AIDS epidemic in Haiti](#). How is our current perception of the island nation related to the exportation of Haitian culture during the U.S. Occupation? Ethnography has always been an important feature of the anthropology community, encouraged not only to illuminate and humanize the practices of another culture, but to reflect the assumptions and practices of the ethnographer's own cultural identity. By examining two important American-authored (more specifically *African-American* authored) ethnographies, we can tackle the larger question of authenticity in direct relation to the Haitian folk. Not only this, but we are also able to understand the personal perspectives and viewpoints of each female ethnographer herself and her peculiar situation as both outsider and insider in a "foreign" culture.

Why not focus on ethnography by native Haitians?

Well, there are really two main reasons:

1. This project focuses solely on American ethnography about Haiti in order to explore the consequences of the U.S. Occupation and Imperialist objectives, including the exportation of the "zombie" and the religion of voodoo. The provided lesson plan and discussion points can then be used in the larger context of African American literature, more specifically the importance of the Harlem Renaissance in defining the "New Negro" and a distinct cultural identity for the African American. By examining Hurston and Dunham's contributions, we can focus on how all facets of American identity, both African

- American and white American, depended on Haiti and its political situation to help shape the identity of America itself.
2. Haitian native ethnography has mostly been written in Creole and translated into French. Because of this, primary ethnographic texts are harder to locate and use as resources. It is important to note that both Jean Price-Mars and Jacques Roumain studied ethnology early in their careers. A possible route for discussion would be a comparison between native Haitian ethnography and American ethnography.

Important Terms:

- Ethnography: a scientific narrative or description of a specific culture
- Ethnology: a science that compares and analyzes more than one culture
- Cultural Relativism:
- Hybridization: the creation of a combined identity as perceived by anthropologists and social scientists; also referred to as syncretism. An example would be the pairing of *loa* and Catholic Saints in the voodoo religion, or the creolization of the French language. I feel this term suggests incompleteness or a halfness of each culture in question; therefore please note that the Haitian folk may not define or view their own practices and language in relation to this term.
- Voodoo
- Zombie: According to Hurston, "They are the bodies without souls. The living dead" (*Tell My Horse* 179).

Timeline

(compiled with data from Renda, Fischer-Hornung, Hurston, Dunham, and Herskovits)

Disclaimer: This is a timeline that charts America's first involvement in Haiti with the Occupation to the ethnographic research of the 30's and 40's. This timeline in no way confines the richness of Haitian history to the dates provided. One text that provides a perspective of Haiti's history prior to 1914 is [Haiti: Her History and Her Detractors by J.N. Leger](#), published in 1907.

- 1914** U.S. Military, Navy and Marines, take over Port-au-Prince and eventually the entire island. The reasoning for this is Haiti's "monetary agreements foreign creditors" and "political instability" (Herskovits xi).
- 1920** The NAACP sends secretary and poet James Weldon Johnson to Haiti. Johnson writes [Self-Determining Haiti](#) in protest of the Occupation.
- 1927** William Seabrook, a former American journalist with the *New York Times*, travels to Haiti to study voodoo.
- 1929** Seabrook's sensationalist account of occult practices in Haiti, *Magic Island*, is published. It becomes wildly popular.
- 1930** Langston Hughes visits Haiti.
- 1932** *White Zombie*, an American-made film about voodoo in Haiti starring Bela Lugosi, is released. It is considered the first zombie film.
- 1934** U.S. pulls out of Haiti. Anthropologist Melville Herskovits conducts field research in Haiti.
- 1936** Katherine Dunham, a student of Herskovits, visits Haiti to study dance rituals. Zora Neale Hurston, a student of Franz Boas, also visits Haiti to collect folklore and folk traditions.
- 1937** Herskovits' ethnography *Life in a Haitian Valley* is published.
- 1938** Hurston's Jamaican and Haitian field work and research are published in *Tell My Horse*.

1943 *I Walked with a Zombie* is released by RKO Pictures in the United States.

1969 Katherine Dunham publishes *Island Possessed*, a largely autobiographical account of her field work in Haiti

The U.S. Occupation 1914-1936 and *Magic Island*



According to Mary Renda in her book *Taking Haiti*, most writing done on the culture of Haiti during the U.S. Occupation was in the form of sensationalist travel writing and memoir penned by stationed Marines. An example of this would be Sergeant Faustin Wirkus's memoir *The White King of La Gonave* published in 1931. Most of these accounts infantilized the Haitian folk, emphasizing a feeling of paternalism in the U.S. towards Haiti. Furthermore, journalists began writing pieces that further promoted the U.S. Occupation. One such journalist was William Seabrook who visited the island nation as a traveler and wrote one of the most famous sensationalist accounts of voodoo and Haitian culture: *Magic Island*. As a direct result of its release, stereotypes of Haitian culture, such as the zombie, the exotic island, and the practice of voodoo became integrated into American pop culture, from radio programs to music.

The White Male Anthropologist: Melville Herskovits

Melville Herskovits visited Haiti in 1934 and originally published *Life in a Haitian Valley* in 1937. Herskovits spent his life's work establishing the American Negro as a specific "physical type," based on anthropometry, or physical measurements of the human physique and cranium to verify racial variation. He spent six years of his life creating charts in Harlem, West Virginia, and several other locales, and concluded that American blacks fell between the European and African (*Life in*

a Haitian Valley viii). The practice of anthropometry in relation to physical anthropology is considered controversial to this day because of its use in determining the superiority of one race over another. Herskovits soon left his racial crossing studies behind to pursue field research, which led him to the discovery that the black American had a distinct culture and tradition within the African Diaspora. He then focused his attention to the nation of Haiti, which had become "the most famous source of Dahomean culture in the New World" (xi).



These photographs were taken by Melville Herskovits in Haiti in the 1930's and depict a traditional *coumbite*. They are from the [Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture](#).

In the 1971 publication of *Life in a Haitian Valley*, poet and scholar Edward Brathwaite expresses that Herskovits' main goal through ethnography is to humanize African culture (vii). The history of ethnography about the African diaspora can be charted through:

1. narratives written by ex-slaves
2. accounts of life and cultures by civil servants and scholars
3. academic field research

Herskovits was greatly interested in the idea of syncretism or "interculturalism." This is defined as "cultures influencing each other to form, as in the New World, new entities" (vii). By politically rejecting Europe during the Revolution, the Haitian people were able to achieve a cultural renaissance that supported a *retour aux sources*.

The African American Female Anthropologist: Hurston and Dunham

It might be helpful to first understand the direct relationship between Hurston and Dunham. After all, both were African American women supported by white anthropologists and sent to the Caribbean to explore island culture. In her article "An Island Occupied," Dorothea Fischer-Hornung footnotes the correspondence between Hurston and Herskovits, who was Dunham's mentor. In several letters written in 1936 and 1937, Hurston mentions that she had heard in passing of Dunham's research and emphasizes that she herself had "mapped out" the program Dunham underwent for the "Rosenwald gang" (2). Fischer-Hornung interprets this as a "personal rivalry" between Hurston and Dunham, though Dunham makes no note of Hurston at all in correspondence to Herskovits. Fischer-Hornung attributes this "rivalry" to the "scarcity of funding during the Depression and the added pressure on African Americans and women" (3).

The similarities between the two are mostly inherent in their shared "race" and gender, but it is also important to note differences in the motive, politics, and narrative structure of each text. First of all, Hurston's ethnographic focus in the United States centered on the oral tradition of folklore and capturing the performative nature of this tradition by transcribing the tales in the vernacular. Hailing from Eatonville, Florida, she felt directly connected to the country and possessed a form of built-in credibility due to her ability to "claim" the people she wrote about. While in Jamaica and Haiti, she also sought to capture life of the folk through the use of informants and observing voodoo ritual and practice. She may have assumed a transnational identity because she never makes the distinction in her text between being an African *American* in Haiti. Does this mean she essentially "claimed" the Haitian people as her own? To complicate matters, how is this reconciled with the accusation that *Tell My Horse* follows Seabrook's sensationalist text, praises the Occupation, and subscribes to the problematic complex of anthropologist as all-knowing and more knowledgeable of Haitian culture than the "natives" themselves? Scholar Amy Fass Emery chooses to view *Tell My Horse* through the lens of signifyin' or the act of creating a "double-voiced nature" to her narrative (328). From this perspective, Hurston's text cannot be read literally, but must be viewed in light of her relationship to her white patron, Charlotte Mason Osgood. Using "Chapter 13: Zombies" for textual analysis can help explore this larger issue. In this chapter, Hurston relates the concept of the zombie as "bodies without souls" (179). They are essentially used for labor and the result of bargains between a *bocor* and an ambitious "native" who seeks wealth of some sort. Hurston is quick to point out that she cannot give specifics to back up her findings; this would result in embarrassment and shame for her informants, a dilemma that is also typical for anthropologists (how do create an "authentic" ethnography and still protect your informants).

On the other hand, we have Dunham who was a pioneer in modern African dance. As an anthropologist, she ventured to Haiti to follow dance rituals as a part of the larger voodoo religion. Where Hurston's interest is in folklore, which then becomes translated as gossip and hearsay in *Tell My Horse*, Dunham's focus is less oral/aural and more kinetic. The ethnographic motives of both ethnographers, though, rely on a sense of performance and both seek to understand Haitian culture through an exploration of voodoo. While Hurston's politics have been accused of being too aligned with the Occupation (although it is important to note that Hurston's politics are more ambiguous than Dunham's, which can be a direct result of funding issues and her relationship with Osgood), Dunham is quick to point out at the very beginning of *Island Possessed* that she is herself "a lone young woman easy to place in the clean-cut American dichotomy of color, harder to place in the complexity of Caribbean color classifications" (4). Through this attention to otherness, she is able to openly critique the U.S. Occupation, while still expressing doubt about her own position as ethnographer, though a "first," in the sense that

previous ethnographers had been both white and male (she does not acknowledge Hurston's contribution). But then again, *Island Possessed* was not published until the late '60s where the climate of social change was very different than the 1930's. Also, Dunham did not have a complicated relationship to a white patron. She plainly states what she means in her ethnography and creates a narrative that reads more like an autobiography at times. In other words, the point of view of *Island Possessed* is always clearly defined, as Dunham explicitly states her whereabouts and actions, while Hurston remains somewhat ambiguous in relation to her text.

Teaching Model and Activity:

All content on this page can be used as a discussion model in an undergraduate classroom. Please see the annotated bibliography for a list of secondary material.

Relevant Context:

A primary use of this comparison between Hurston and Dunham, and then both female ethnographers in contrast to Herskovits (who represents the larger, white male tradition of anthropology) is to understand how the folk have been depicted in African American literature and art as a means of establishing authenticity or legitimacy and, at the same time, becoming the definitive symbol of national identity.

The concept of authenticity is often explored through the use of binaries, such as:

- City and Country (or Urban and Rural)
- Standard English and the Vernacular (or Dialect)
- The Elite or Middle Class (Bourgeoisie) and the "Peasantry" or Working Class

It may prove useful to discuss these particular models as a class, and then seek to deconstruct them by participating in textual analysis, viewing and listening to relevant media, and examining how Hurston and Dunham complicate the question of authenticity by documenting the folklore and culture of Haiti and Jamaica. Can the American anthropologist, though a part of the African transnational identity, be deemed authentic while she performs the role of social scientist? And even further, how is her depiction of the folk through ethnography more authentic than ethnography written by the "white" anthropologist? How does she reconcile her role as both "insider" and "outsider"?

Suggested Activities:

Compare Hurston's *Tell My Horse* to *Mules and Men*, her collection of folklore collected in the United States. A more specific look at voodoo versus hoodoo and the terms Hurston chooses for description can then be used as a representative model of both works.

Create a zombie movie timeline in the attempt to trace the first exportation of the zombie through sensationalist travelogues to the creation of the modern zombie film, dependent on themes of contagion. How has the use of technology and historical context changed and transformed the standard zombie trope? For example, how do themes expressed in *I Walked with a Zombie* compare to the political and social implications of *Night of the Living Dead*?

Teaching *Masters of the Dew* by Jacques Roumain

The following pages are designed for students: specifically, to allow them to explore/consider *Masters of the Dew* in a few different ways.

- To explore how the folk—specifically the notion of the *coumbite*—changes/takes on different meanings within the context of U.S. imperialism, as embodied by the figure of the *viejo*.
- To consider key postcolonial theories in respect to the novel.
- To explore the representation of voodoo: how it's presented within the novel, compared to the sensationalist U.S. discourses surrounding voodoo (in newspapers, pop culture and travel narratives) during the years of the U.S. occupation of Haiti.

The following section explores how the *coumbite* in Jacques Roumain's *Master of the Dew* changes/takes on different meanings within the context of U.S. imperialism, as embodied by the figure of the *viejo*.

First up: The *coumbite* as the folk in *Masters of the Dew*

In the opening of *Masters of the Dew*, Bienamé thinks back to an earlier, easier, more fertile time in his (and Haitian peasant) life, a kind of lost paradise—back when “water flowed freely in the sun” (25) and “millet had grown abundantly” (25). He spends pages recalling the *coumbite*:

“In those days when they had all lived in harmony, united as the fingers of a hand, they had assembled all the neighborhood in collective *coumbites* for the harvest or the clearing.” (25)

“In a single movement, they would lift their hoes high in the air. A beam of light would strike each blade. For a second they would be holding a rainbow.... they raised their long-handled hoes, crowned with sparks, and brought them down again with a terrific precision.” (26-27)

Herskovits and the *coumbite*

Anthropologist Melville Herskovits, too, wrote of the *coumbite*. In *Life in a Haitian Valley*, published in 1937 (eight years before *Dew*), he describes one: “....flashing of hoes in the brilliant sunlight accentuates the color of the scene; each implement is raised high above the head of the one who wields it, to be brought down at the proper instant and in almost perfect accord with the hoes of all the other men in line” (72-73).

Consider:

The *coumbite* in terms of the folk—how Bienamé's nostalgia celebrates the connection between the peasants and the land; as well, how the *coumbite* harkens back to/celebrates a shared African past.



A Haitian *coumbite*. Taken by Melville Herskovits in the 1930s. From the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture.

Herskovits calls the *coumbite* "pure retention of African practice." (Anthropological studies of the time/place were often focused on African retentions).

In "Slaves, Viejos and the Internationale: Modernity and Global Contact in Jacques Roumain's *Gouverneurs de la Rosée*," (*Masters of the Dew's* original French title), Valerie Kaussen suggests Roumain's description of this *coumbite* "seems to pick up on Herskovitz's poetic anthropological account....the invocation to the sun, the depiction of men working communally in harmony with the natural world, and the rhythmic drumming are all images intended to celebrate the peasantry's African-derived peasant culture." (135)

What happens to the *coumbite* as "emblem of the folk" after the Manuel, the "*viejo*" shows up?

Before we get to that, a few details about the *viejo*.

The Viejo

<p>In Chapter 2, Manuel returns to his village after 20 years spent cutting sugarcane on plantations in Cuba. A Cuban sugarcane cutter was called a <i>viejo</i>.</p> <p>Why was Manuel cutting sugarcane in Cuba?</p> <p>Short answer: because of the U.S. occupation of Haiti.</p> <p>From <i>The United States Occupation of Haiti, 1915–1934</i>, by Hans Schmidt:</p> <p><i>The cheapness and abundance of Haitian labor was indeed a real and continuing attraction to foreign investment: Haitian laborers were paid at the rate of 20 cents per day for twelve hours of work. Financial Adviser de la Rue argued against passing laws to raise wages in 1930, stating: "The greatest asset Haiti has is cheap labor—labor whose daily cost to an employer does not exceed the labor of other lands whose products are similar. Should labor costs here be increased artificially, that capital will go where conditions are more favorable."</i></p> <p><i>Wages were so low in Haiti that recruiting agents representing most notably the American-owned United Fruit and General Sugar companies annually induced about 20,000 Haitian laborers to migrate to Cuba during the mid-1920s for seasonal work at \$1 to \$1.50 per day. (170-171)</i></p> <p>So: the use of the <i>viejo</i> character/Manuel locates this book at a particular moment within the history of U.S. imperialism.</p>	<p>Consider:</p> <p>1) Hybridity. "Hybridity" is an important concept in postcolonial theory, generally referring to the creation of new trans-cultural forms (cultural, political, linguistic) that arise from contact between colonizing and colonized cultures.</p> <p>Think about the following quotes in respect Manuel and the concept of hybridization:</p> <p>"[Hybrid] subjectivity is deemed to be composed from variable sources, different materials, many locations—demolishing forever the idea of subjectivity as stable, single, or 'pure.'" (McLeod, 219)</p> <p>"Standing at the border, the migrant is empowered to intervene actively in the transmission of cultural inheritance or 'tradition' (of both the home and the host land) inherited knowledge can be reinscribed and given new, unexpected meanings." (McLeod, 220)</p> <p>Question: Is Manuel a hybrid character? If so, how?</p> <p>2) Eduoard Glissant's idea of modernity and the Caribbean. Glissant writes about how the Caribbean is a complex, subversive site for the production of modernity as a result of its unpredictable flows of modern, global, cultural contact.</p> <p>Question: How might Manuel fit into this idea—the Caribbean as a site for the production of modernity?</p>
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<p>Although the U.S. occupation of Haiti is never mentioned in <i>Dew</i>, some critics (Kausssen and Joan Dayan) argue that the novel's focus on U.S. imperialism (and resistance to imperialism) in Cuba serves as an allegory to both U.S. occupation in Haiti and French colonization — as well expanding the borders of Haiti, locating the Haitian struggle within a global framework.</p> <p>Considering the history of the <i>viejo</i> and the concept of hybridization, how does the <i>coubite</i> "change?"</p>	
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The *coubite*, the *huelga*, and (more) hybridization.

<p>Manuel has already been politicized by the time he comes home—he talks often about the <i>huelga</i> (Spanish for strike) he experienced back in Cuba. As both Kausssen and Beverly Ormerod (in <i>An Introduction to the French Caribbean Novel</i>) point out, Manuel conflates <i>coubite</i> with <i>huelga</i>: he uses a similar metaphor in describing the <i>huelga</i> as Bienamé uses with the <i>coubite</i>; that is, the hand. While members of the <i>coubite</i> are “united as the fingers of the hand”; of the <i>huelga</i>, Manuel says:</p> <p><i>“Look at this single finger—how small it is...” He clenched his fist. “But it is solid enough, firm enough, united enough? You’d say yes, wouldn’t you? Well that’s what a strike is: a NO uttered by a thousand voices as one and speaking with the force of the boulder.” (90).</i></p> <p>As Manuel has been politicized within the labor strikes in Cuba, his use of the <i>coubite</i> takes on a different significance. The <i>coubite</i> is not emblematic, to him, of a lost paradise and shared African past, but rather a look towards a better future; a future filtered through Manuel's politicized understanding of a Hegelian power dialectic—master vs. slave, laborer vs. plantation boss.</p> <p>And so, the <i>coubite</i>—the rural farm collective—might also stand in for Marxist-inspired resistance and “the Marxist value of cooperative endeavor by the proletariat.” (Ormerod, 29)</p> <p>Also of note: Manuel wants to implement the <i>coubite</i> not in the service of ancient farming practices, but to introduce a modern irrigation system—one he learned about working on modernized U.S. sugar plantations in Cuba.</p> <p>Consider the <i>coubite</i> in terms of hybridization: the <i>coubite</i> as both Marxist and folk, emblematic of both the past and future, the rural and the industrial, the local and the international.</p>	<p>Consider:</p> <p>Frantz Fanon. Specifically, his ideas about the “native intellectual.” According to Fanon, the native intellectual goes through three phases:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) an “assimilation” phase, in which he or she attempts to emulate the dominant culture of the colonizers 2) growing weary of assimilation, the native intellectual turns his/her back on the dominant culture and valorizes the indigenous—often much of what the colonizers deemed backward or savage. 3) the “fighting phase”— in this phase, the native intellectual does not simply champion the indigenous, but he or she modifies or reinterprets traditional culture in order to make room for struggle, creating new cultural productions that place anti-colonial struggle at the forefront. <p>Question: How might the concept of the <i>coubite</i> relate to Fanon's “fighting phase”?</p>
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Masters of the Dew and Voodoo

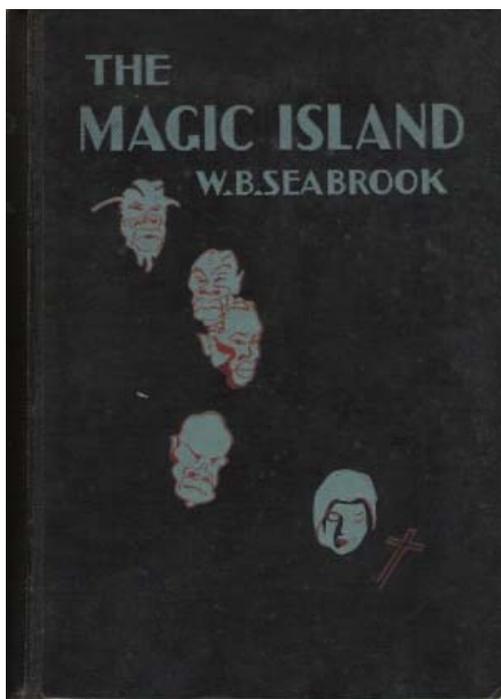
The following pages briefly explore connections between *Masters of the Dew*, Voodoo, and (probably the famous trope of Voodoo, as exported here to the U.S.) the zombie.

Before we look at Voodoo as it's represented in *Masters of the Dew*, let's take a look at one of the first zombie movies to be made in the U.S. (and as such it's partially responsible for introducing the "zombie" to U.S. audiences): WHITE ZOMBIE, set in Haiti. The movie came out in 1932.

[Here's a key clip from the film.](#)

The zombies in this clip are working in a sugar mill, processing sugarcane (remember—Manuel had also been working with sugarcane, as a cutter on a Cuban sugar plantation).

CONSIDER: a lot of cultures around the world have stories/myths concerning "undead" creatures: mummies, Frankenstein's monster, the vampire. However, those creatures don't have to work. They don't spend all day/night working in factories, or out in the field.



So why are these zombies—one of the first representations of "zombie" in the U.S.—working in a sugar mill?

Short answer: A best-selling travel narrative called *Magic Island*, by William B. Seabrook, the first to present an "in-depth" (lurid and sensationalistic) first person accounts of, among other things, Haitian Voodoo rituals. *Magic Island* was published in 1929.

See the review of *Magic Island*, "A Book on Haiti That Dips Below The Surface Controversies; To Mr. Seabrook, Who Travels 'Deeply,' the Caribbean Isle Is Far More Than a Nest of Benighted Heathen," in the *New York Times*, January 6, 1929. [Link requires Times Select subscription.](#)

In the book *White Zombie: Anatomy of a Horror Film*, author Gary Don Rhodes writes that while a lot of horror films—*Dracula*, *Frankenstein*—pull from works of literature, there were no similar works of literature concerning the zombie. There was, however, Seabrook's *Magic Island*. *White Zombie* pulls directly

from much of Seabrook's book. For instance (as detailed by Rhodes): Seabrook recounts being told that Haitian peasants prefer to bury their dead near busy thoroughfares and roads; we hear the same thing in *White Zombie*.

Rhodes also suggests that the manner of dress in *Magic Island* (of both priest and the witch doctor, played by Bela Lugosi—both wore wide-brimmed black hats and black casements) was influenced by the illustration from *Island* to the right, done by Alexander King.



And—this is key—Seabrook talks about a U.S. owned sugar-mill, HASCO.

"[It is] an immense factory plant, dominated by a huge chimney, with clanging machinery, steam whistles, freight cars. It is like a chunk of Hoboken. It lies in the Eastern suburbs of Port-au-Prince, and beyond it stretch the cane fields of the Cul-de-Sac. HASCO makes rum when the sugar market is off, pays low wages, twenty or thirty cents a day, and gives steady work." (95)

Specifically, Seabrook is told (and so he writes) that many of the workers at the HASCO sugar mill—a big U.S. business there as a result of the U.S. occupation—were in fact zombies. Just like in *White Zombie*.

And so, we can connect zombies with sugarcane and the U.S. occupation; and perhaps also to *Masters of the Dew*: Manuel's migrancy resulted from the U.S. occupation; he was politicized as a sugarcane cutter.

Of the zombie, Joan Dayan writes: "The phantasm of the zombi—a soulless husk deprived of freedom—is the ultimate sign of loss and dispossession. In Haiti, memories of servitude are transposed into a new idiom that both reproduces and dismantles a twentieth century history of forced labor and denigration that became particularly acute during the U.S. occupation of Haiti." (37)

Zombies, Voodoo and the U.S. Occupation

More Dayan: "As Haitians were forced to build roads, and thousands of peasants were brutalized and massacred, tales of zombies proliferated in the U.S. The film *White Zombie* and books like *Magic Island*...helped justify the civilizing presence of the marines in barbaric Haiti." (37)

And not just tales of zombies—Dayan also writes about how lurid depictions & stories of Voodoo (not simply zombies) proliferated in the United States during the occupation.

For instance, like these, from the *New York Times*:

- "A Voodoo Castle in Haiti; the Jungle Stronghold of King Christophe and the Black Magic He Used to Build It," by Richard A. Loederer, in *The New York Times Magazine*, page SM4, May 27, 1923. [Link requires Times Select subscription.](#)
- "Natives in Haiti Ate Marine Officer; Naval Inquiry Court Testimony Cites Cases of Other Americans Slain and Mutilated. GRUESOME DETAILS GIVEN. Lieut. Col. Hooker Tells of Practices of Bandits Against Marines and Natives," in *Special to The New York Times*, page 14, January 4, 1921. [Link to openly accessible article from The New York Times.](#) (This article mentions the cannibalistic activities of voodoo-practitioner rebels.)

Consider:

Zombies, through their connection to sugarcane, served as an allegory for slavery, occupation and dispossessed peasantry. Remember, Manuel is connected to sugarcane too, politicized by his connection to it, and changed. How does he contrast/compare to the motif of the zombie?

How is it that the motif of the zombie, as Dayan writes, "both reproduces and dismantles a twentieth century history of forced labor and denigration"?

Lurid tales of zombies—and expanding from that, Voodoo—were being used to justify U.S. occupation. What purposes do you think Roumain's depiction of Voodoo might serve?

Compare Voodoo in *Magic Island* to Voodoo in *Masters of the Dew*

Both Seabrook and Roumain describe a similar kind of Voodoo ceremony, a possession ceremony. How do they compare?

SEABROOK

It was the sound of the terrorized, shrill beating of the white he-goats, tethered out there in the shadows, as it pierced through yet was always dominated, sometimes drowned, by the symphonic female howling choral of the women. It caused something that was elemental in me, something deeper than anything that the word sex usually defines, to shiver in the grip of an answering, icy terror. Not that this had any remote connection with the fact that I, a white man, knelt there among these swaying blacks who would presently become blood-frenzied. They were my friends. It was a terror of something blacker and more implacable than they—a terror of the dark, all-engulfing womb.

ROUMAIN

Biéname, Délira, and Manuel took the straw bag in their hands together and presented it successfully to the four cardinal points. The hougan planted the cock feathers about the pole, traced a new magic circle and lighted a candle at its center. The banners waved, the dull rumble of the drum resounded, urging the chant to the new outburst. The women's voices shot up very high, cracking the thick mass of song.

Manuel let himself go in the upsurge of the dance, but a strange sadness crept into his soul. He caught his mother's eye and thought he saw tears shining there....the peasants forgot their troubles. Dancing and drinking anesthetized them—swept away their shipwrecked souls. (71)

Throughout Dew, Manuel is critical of Voodoo. How does Manuel's critique of Voodoo differ from the criticism(s) inherent in the lurid depictions of Voodoo found in U.S. news, films, and books like Magic Island?

Compare Christianity in *Magic Island* to Voodoo in *Masters of the Dew*

Both Seabrook and Roumain write about Christianity:

SEABROOK

Voodoo is alive as Christianity was in its beginnings and in the early Middle Ages when miracles and mystical illuminations were common everyday occurrences. (12)

Seabrook often writes of Voodoo (and the Haitian people) as though it/they were both primitive and naïve, in the early stages of development towards being truly civilized. Christianity, within his idea of progress, is fully evolved as a religion.

ROUMAIN

Manuel, speaking about the Christian heaven: "The sky's the pastureland of the angels. They're fortunate—they don't have to worry about eating and drinking. Of course, they have black angels to do the dirty work—like washing out the clouds and cleaning off the sun after a storm—while the white angels just sing like nightingales all day long." (44-45)

In contrast, what is Manuel's attitude towards the role of Christianity in Haiti (and likely elsewhere)? What does he likely think about Christianity's "civilizing" mission?