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Stealing the Citadel

Icons of Nationhood and Memories of Theft in Haitian Narratives of Kout Kouto

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Abstract

This essay analyzes popular Haitian tales about sovereign theft by stealth which seek to expose machinations of graft and usurpation by outsiders and politicians. The foundational act for this genre of popular narratives in Haiti I argue is the indemnity that the Haitian State was forced to pay France of 150 million francs in exchange for international recognition to compensate for losses in property incurred by the Haitian Revolution (1791–1804) which Haitian statesman Frédéric Marcelin described as an “act of dispossession.” But popular rumors of national theft kept returning. I argue that these stories linking sovereignty, debt, and theft represent truth claims on the part of those who have long been “hermeneutically marginalized” and should be seen as a call for testimonial justice that challenges the triumphalist story of Haitian independence through revealing and denouncing deceitful chicanery on the part of those in power.

Keywords

Haiti – Dominican Republic – sovereignty – theft

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This article analyzes popular Haitian tales about sovereign theft by stealth which seek to expose machinations of graft and usurpation by foreigners and politicians.¹ The foundational act for this genre of popular narratives in Haiti I argue is the indemnity of 150 million francs that the Haitian State was forced to pay France in exchange for international recognition to compensate for losses in property—primarily slaves when they were freed—incurred by the Haitian Revolution (1791–1804) which Haitian statesman Frédéric Marcelin described as an “act of dispossession.”² Gunboats were sent to the harbor of Port-au-Prince to ensure that this debt was paid. But popular rumors of national theft kept returning. They later surged during the late nineteenth century as Haitians rebuked U.S. efforts to annex the island and build a naval base at the bay of Môle Saint-Nicolas, not insignificantly where the original usurper, Christopher Columbus, landed (Denis 2004). And during the early twentieth century period of U.S. corporate agricultural expansion, stories emerged that U.S. Marines had dug an underground tunnel from the capital city of Port-au-Prince to Wall Street through which gold was extracted from Haitian bank vaults at a time when City Bank took over the National Bank from France and the U.S. gov-

- 1 This article draws upon material collected during several bouts of research, including a Brown University Arnold Fellowship, a collaborative Fulbright Grant with Richard Turits, a Frederick Burkhardt Award from the American Council on Learned Societies, a Special Projects Grant from the Latin American Studies Association, a National Endowment for the Humanities grant and several Faculty Senate COR grants from UCLA for research trips to Haiti, for which I am very grateful. It was revised with support from the University of California Humanities Research Institute and benefitted from discussions with Aaron James and the fellows in the seminar on Truth. Thanks to Georges René and Abercio Alcántara, who have facilitated my field work on shape-shifter tales in Haiti and the Dominican Republic respectively; Winter Schneider, Andrew Apter, Peter Hudson, Jeannine Murray-Román for key citation suggestions; and Joe Masco, Richard Turits, Rodrigo Bulamah, Katherine Smith, Winter Schneider, Vikram Tamboli, and the two anonymous readers for detailed comments on the article which greatly improved it. Presented earlier at the Conspiracy/Theory Conference, University of Chicago, October 7, 2017 and Heterodox Histories, University of California, Irvine, November 8, 2017, the article benefitted from comments at both events especially from William Balan-Gaubert and Amy Wilentz. An earlier draft was presented at a roundtable “Reflections on Speaking with Vampires: Rumor and History in Colonial Africa,” American Historical Association Meetings; and at the Institute for the Transnational History of the Americas, Tepotzlán, Mexico, where it was improved through comments by Luise White, Jorge Giovannetti, Jossianna Arroyo, and David Kasanjian.
- 2 Schneider 2018a:3; Emmett Lindner, Investigating Haiti’s “Double Debt,” *New York Times*, May 22, 2022, A2, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/22/insider/investigating-haitis-double-debt.html>, accessed August 29, 2023; Lazaro Gamio, et al., Haiti’s Lost Billions, *New York Times*, May 20, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2022/05/20/world/americas/enslaved-haiti-debt-timeline.html> accessed September 5, 2023.

ernment had taken over customs houses in 1907.³ As stories of secret collusion by statesmen in cahoots with U.S. authorities for malevolent motives—hence “covert and nefarious actions of a secret cabal”—these popular narratives would be classed as conspiracy theories but to categorize them as such might serve to discredit them and they are actually based on a good measure of historical fact (Grodzicka & Harambam 2021; Van Prooijen & Douglas 2018). These stories of stealth theft might be seen as the visceral “rot remains” of imperial ruination, as anthropologist Ann Stoler puts it, “the toxic corrosions and violent accruals of colonial aftermaths,” as well as a means for the disenfranchised to speak truth to power (Stoler 2013:2).

This article takes as its point of departure scholarship that seeks to identify genre within historical narrative, building upon the foundation established by Hayden White who was a pioneer in this area. However White's work was more concerned with how historians emplotted the stories they conveyed, thus it addressed historiography rather than historical narrative (H. White 1973). Literary critics have shown how historical narratives can conform to a genre. Raphael Hoermann has demonstrated how narratives from the Whites fleeing Saint-Domingue during the Haitian Revolution who were aghast at a revolution which undid the central pillar of the eighteenth-century Atlantic economy—slavery—demonized Haiti in the gothic narrative genre (Hoermann 2016). Yet this research has been confined to elite narratives. This article explores subaltern historical narratives and how the poor have understood the logic of events outside of their purview and which they do not control.

Historian Luise White has argued that traditional witchcraft narratives in West Africa were transformed into vampire stories under British colonialism as new conditions required narrative innovation. This was also the case in Haiti where the traditional genre of stealth foreign extraction dating from the Haitian Revolution was enhanced by new popular genres as the dramatic expansion of U.S. sugar plantations in the early twentieth century and the use of debt peonage to capture Haitian labor gave rise to devil-pact narratives about zombies and other shape-shifting monster apparitions which associated profit with death as in anthropologist Michael Taussig's classic study *The Devil and Commodity Fetishism* (Taussig 1980; Ackerman & Gauthier 1991; Bourguignon

3 Hurston 1990:85; Selam Gebrekidan, Matt Apuzzo, Catherine Porter & Constant Méheut, *Invade Haiti, Wall Street Urged: The U.S. Obligated*, *New York Times*, May 24, 2022, A1, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/20/world/haiti-wall-street-us-banks.html>, accessed August 29, 2023. For another piece by the same authors, see *The Ransom: A Look Under the Hood*, *New York Times*, May 20, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2022/05/20/world/americas/haiti-bibliography.html>, accessed August 29, 2023.

1959). In her study, Karen Richman revealed how Haitian migrants having to travel for work are often accused of sorcery (Richman 2005:18, 287). These tales link visible flows of profit with surreptitious theft in ways that echo Karl Marx's labor theory of value as well as Michel Foucault's call for an ethnology of truth telling; but they presume elite opacity not transparency as in the western political canon (Foucault 2014). These popular exposé narratives of redress seek to bring to light forms of sovereign plunder in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, while revealing the sleight of hand of those in power who are cast here as "epistemically untrustworthy"; thus these anonymous rumors are the voice of people who have long been seen by elites as having "deflated credibility" (Fricker 2007:4). I argue that these stories linking sovereignty, debt, and theft represent truth claims on the part of those who have long been "hermeneutically marginalized" and should be seen as a call for testimonial justice that challenges the triumphalist story of Haitian independence through revealing and denouncing deceitful chicanery on the part of those in power.

I first became aware of this narrative genre while collecting oral testimonies with Richard Turits from survivors of the 1937 massacre in which an estimated 15,000 Dominicans of Haitian descent were brutally slaughtered in the frontier regions of the Dominican Republic in 1937 in an event Haitians remember as *Kout Kouto* (chop of the knife), a term which connotes backstabbing thus covert betrayal.⁴ Over the course of one week, Dominican troops were summoned into the borderlands where with the help of local authorities and civilian reserves, a community that had resided peacefully in the borderlands for several generations was forcibly removed, and most were slaughtered brutally

4 William Balan-Gaubert, personal communication. Although much literature on the 1937 massacre calls this event "the Parsley Massacre" after this term was publicized in a poem by Rita Dove, few survivors or participants we spoke to in the border used that name, and we rarely heard from participants that saying parsley (*perejil*) was used to identify ethnic Haitians during the massacre (Ayuso 2011). We were told in some of our interviews that accent was a Haitian ethnic marker before the massacre, but not within the heat of the moment of the slaughter itself. As a woman from Terrier-Rouge told us, "When they were killing us, they did not ask us to say *perejil* anymore" (*lè yap tiye, yo pa di perejil anko*). Isil Nicholas of Ouanaminthe told us that language was used only as a marker before the massacre and that another linguistic tongue twister test was *guala guano*. The Haitian name for the massacre—*Kout Kouto*—appears in many Vodou and *racine* (roots) songs (Winter Schneider, personal communication). The number of ethnic Haitians killed is disputed but Father Émile Robert who was parish priest in Ouanaminthe at the time estimated 20,000 (interview, Guadeloupe, 1988) and Pierre Armand, who was stationed as assistant to the commanding military general for the Hinche region told us that they counted more than 10,000 massacre refugees who lost their families in the slaughter (interview, February 9, 1988).

by machete.⁵ Since the majority of the victims had been born on Dominican soil these were actually primarily Dominicans, because this border population of Haitian descent dated from the late nineteenth century, and from the mid-nineteenth century in the central frontier.⁶ This was patently an act of state terror. Haitians and Dominicans we spoke with recall the period preceding the slaughter as peaceful and amicable, and we met couples who fled to Haiti during the massacre, as well as Dominicans who resisted, hiding Haitian friends and neighbors and helping them escape.

A predilection for conspiratorial thinking has been said to be a feature of all postcolonial societies which were once governed from afar according to policies and logics invisible to those on the ground.⁷ And both the Dominican Republic and Haiti have a legacy of authoritarian rule which has exacerbated this tendency.⁸ Yet this case focuses our attention on how mass violence can exacerbate the conspiratorial imagination as victims are left with a profoundly suspicious view of state power. So in this case conspiratorial thought becomes a means of speaking truth to power. For example, there is a strong contrast between Dominican and Haitian explanations for the massacre. Dominicans fell back upon state explanations for the event (if not certain patently erroneous elements), while Haitians for the most part presumed surreptitious logics or “occult cosmologies” behind the surfaces of state explanations which conveyed a “deep suspicion of power” (Sanders & West 2003:6–7; see also Comaroff & Comaroff 1999). This contrast in political imaginaries was partly a by-product of the slaughter itself, an event which cut a sharp divide between

5 Most of the slaughter occurred in the northern frontier around Dajabón but there were also killings in the central and southern border regions; Haitian workers on sugar plantations were spared since they were foreign-owned. For more on the Haitian massacre, see Bosch et al. 2018; Cadeau 2022; Castor 1987; Cuello H. 1985:60–85; Derby 1994; Derby, Turits & Denis 2021; Lomax 2009:77–78; Manuel García 1983, esp. pp. 59 and 69–71; de Matteis 1987; Paulino 2016; Prestol Castillo 1982; Roorda 1998; Turits 2002; Turits 2003; Turits & Derby 2021; Vega 1988:325–412; and the novels by Danticat 1998; Lespès 1983; Philoctète 1989; and Prestol Castillo 1982.

6 I base this statement on oral histories we conducted with massacre survivors in the border colonies established by Haitian President Sténio Vincent to house the victims located in Dosmond, Grand Bassin, Mont Organisé, Terrier Rouge, Thiotte, and Savane Zonbi in Haiti with Édouard Jean-Baptiste and with the assistance of Jean Ghassmann Bissainthe. We interviewed Dominican witnesses with Ciprián Soler on the Dominican side of the border in Dajabón, Santiago de la Cruz, Loma de Cabrera, Restauración, Pedro Santana, Jimaní, Pedernales, and Duvergé.

7 Elizabeth Kolbert, What’s New about Conspiracy Theories?, *New Yorker*, April 15, 2019, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2019/04/22/whats-new-about-conspiracy-theories>, accessed August 30, 2023.

8 The regimes of Rafael Trujillo (1930–61) and Joaquín Balaguer (1960–62; 1966–78; and 1986–96) in the Dominican Republic and the Duvalier dynasty in Haiti (1957–86).

Haitian victims and Dominican perpetrators even if this boundary had been hazy before the massacre due to extensive bilingualism, contact, and kinship between Haitians and Dominicans; and it forced Dominicans to align themselves with a lethal regime—that of Rafael Trujillo—which they feared could attack them next (Baud 1993a and 1993b; Fumagalli 2015). Yet these attitudes toward state power also correspond to the folk presumption in Haiti of invisible powers or *mistik* that structure reality and aligns with secrecy protocols within Haitian Vodou in as much as key rituals, prayers, and spells must be shrouded in secrecy. By contrast, Afro-Dominican religious skills are “charismatic,” a divine gift with no formal initiation required, and rites and recipes are transparent.⁹

1 Political Subterfuge: Trujillo's Imperial Designs

While the massacre was officially explained in the Dominican Republic as the result of a bloody border skirmish between Dominican ranchers and Haitian peasants in the northern frontier town of Dajabón, through a conspiratorial lens, Haitians blamed the carnage on brutal Dominican dictator Rafael Trujillo's imperial subterfuge (in cahoots with toady minion Haitian President Sténio Vincent).¹⁰ This article focuses on the popular narrative explaining the ethnocide told by Haitians, the story that Dominican dictator Rafael Trujillo tried to purchase the Citadelle Laferrière, the fortress built by Henry Christophe after the Haitian Revolution to protect Haitian sovereignty from foreign invasion, in an effort to obtain its hidden treasure and usurp the island. In one version, Trujillo sought to buy the Citadel, but the check bounced. In another, Haitian President Sténio Vincent took the money but could not bring himself to give up the country, so he called for the free-range creole “black pigs”—a symbol of the Haitian peasantry—which had wandered into Trujillo's “garden” to

9 Sanders & West (2003:6) correlate political and religious “occult cosmologies” as does Pels (2003:5). Secrecy protocols thus render Haitian Vodou similar to Afro-Cuban religions Regla de Ocha and Palo Monte. For more on transparency within charismatic religions, see Román's (2007) discussion of “man gods” (following Nathan Wachtel) in Puerto Rico and Cuba. The classic study on Dominican *vudú* (Vodou) is Davis 1987. Haitian secrecy protocols extend to the diaspora, see McCarthy Brown 1993:237.

10 The official theory of border skirmishes completely contradicted the history of free-range cattle production which ranged across the border for sale in Haiti. Rumors of Trujillo's imperial designs circulated widely among elites of course; see Albert Hicks, “Dominican Dictator Still Killing Haitians. Trujillo Seeks Excuse to Take over Haiti, Reporter Says,” *San Juan World Journal*, June 6, 1945.

be eliminated.¹¹ Vincent is patently not a hero in this account. Indeed, this story places the blame for the slaughter quite squarely on Haitian President Vincent's shoulders, casting him as Trujillo's lackey and both of them in cahoots as imperious elites allied against the interests of the peasantry.¹² As one of the massacre survivors recounted to us:

Trujillo knew that there was a fortune in the Citadel, so he asked Vincent to sell him Ouanaminthe and the Citadel, but Vincent couldn't sell it. Vincent took a lot of money from Trujillo, but he couldn't give him the country, so their friendship soured; and I have heard people recount that story. That was when they began to abuse Haitians. They said Trujillo told Vincent to "send for the black pigs in the country" and Vincent responded, "when pigs have strayed into one's garden, you chop their heads off." That's why Trujillo called for the massacre.¹³

- 11 This is one popular version of Trujillo's command to start the ethnocide. While this speech act cast Haitians as a form of menacing pollution, the urban image of the pig contrasted sharply with the rural because in rural communities pigs are actually seen as agents of cleanliness and symbols of family, since the family pig ate leftovers, fertilized the garden, and its offspring provided ready cash for school fees and medicine. Ironically, however, this imagery of wild vs. domesticated should be reversed since it was the Haitian economy which had long been based on sugar cultivation, while the Dominican Republic was predominantly free-range cattle. Rae Langton (2019) has called attention to how graphic images in hate speech can shape attitudes, and instantiated by the slaughter itself, this metaphor cast Haitians as a polluting inferior menace and interpellated Dominicans as a "tribe of superiors."
- 12 Trujillo's obsession with the Citadel is a major theme in Philoctète 1989. Thanks to Kyrstin Andrews who reminded me of this. I interpret here the most common narrative about the rationale behind the massacre. Some of our informants saw it as revenge for the Haitian occupation of the Dominican Republic from 1822–44. As Marie Lémercier told us, "the one thing I know is that the Dominican people never pardoned Haiti for the occupation, but the issue between Trujillo and Vincent—that was a state issue" (*sèl bagay mwen konnin ki se pèp Dominikin pa té jan'm padoné Ayiti paské Ayiti té okipé yo un instant, yo ka toujou ginyin antè te pou yo okipé ou, yon jou tou. Min afè Trujillo avèk Vincent, se yon bagay entré de gouvènman yo*).
- 13 In Kreyol: *alò lè sa, lè yo vini, si yon Trujillo rantré an ayti, li ouè ginyin yon fortune Citadelle, li mandé Vincent achete Ouanaminthe, Citadelle; Vincent pa té ka van'n li, lè Vincent pran kantité lajan Trujillo, li pa kapab bay péyi a, Trujillo min'm, zanmi vini k gaté, se konsa yo ranconté, mwen tandé moun kap ranconté bagay la ... Cé pou sa, rankin'm nan té vini lévé, le rankin'm nan vini levé, yo komansé ap maltreté ayisyen, yo di alè Trujillo di Vincent voyé pran kochin nwa yo li ginyin nan péyi a; alò Vincent min'm di'l konsa lè kochon rantré nan jadin ou sé koupé ou koupé tet li, alò sé pou sa ki fé Trujillo té tiyé moun. This story was collected in Savanne Zonbi. Madame Lémercier of Mont Organizé*

This is one version of several popular Haitian narratives about the massacre involving Trujillo's political subterfuge and illicit suborning of Vincent in an effort to gain control of the entire island. Another version was that the massacre was the result of a lawsuit involving land or some other kind of botched illicit deal between Vincent and Trujillo in which Vincent's failure to follow through enraged Trujillo who then called for the slaughter as a rebuke to Vincent. This version links the massacre to the disputed border treaty negotiations of 1928 and 1936 which returned some Haitian land to the Dominican Republic, rendering it part of a longstanding border dispute dating back to the nineteenth century.¹⁴

The Citadel story locates Trujillo's imperial designs at the center of the massacre, and may have been a popular version of the Haitian elite conspiracy suspicion that Trujillo had been suborning Jolibois Fils, a political rival of Sténio Vincent with broad legitimacy due to his participation in the Union Patriotique, an organization formed to resist the U.S. Occupation during the regime of Louis Borno, when his strident articles in *Le Courrier Haïtien* landed him in prison (West & Sanders 2003:11–12).¹⁵ When Vincent discovered Trujillo's plan to control Haiti via placing Jolibois in office, he had Jolibois thrown in jail where he mysteriously died, which sent Trujillo in a rage and he called for the Haitian massacre in response.¹⁶

also said that Vincent had taken care of pigs which had wandered into Trujillo's garden, so Trujillo called for their slaughter. Saying "people say" marks this story as a rumor through what Goffman calls a cue (Goffman 1974). In the version in which Trujillo tried to buy the Citadel but the scheme fell apart when the check bounced, it is interesting to note given City Bank's history in Haiti that the bank played a leading role in what amounts to an occult theft. Thanks to Winter Schneider for translation help with this passage.

- 14 As Jonapas told us in Dosmont, "Vincent had a lawsuit with President Trujillo. So that's why he gave him 34 million U.S. dollars; that's the reason he took them out." (Vincent té fè prosé avèk Prezidan Trujillo, alò se youn rézon ké yo te bay twa ka milyon de dola, se pou tout sa nou té kité yo). The use of the word "with" instead of "against" is revealing since it suggests a conspiracy between the two states. Armand believed that this rumor was propagated by Vincent's opposition. The interviews with historian Roger Dorsainville, military commander Pierre Armand, and official Pierre Hudicourt cast the subterfuge as a conflict, since Trujillo suborned Haitians to ensure control over them, but Dorsainville believed that the massacre was the result of a land dispute which started with the border treaties of 1928 and 1935, since these treaties did not follow Pujols's map; for more on the border theory, see de Matteis 1987. The fact that the 1935 border map was never published in Haiti contributed to popular suspicions about it.
- 15 Interview, Pierre Hudicourt, May 4, 1988. Hudicourt was the Secretary of Migration in 1941.
- 16 One of our informants, Irelia Pierre, described the slaughter which she witnessed as a young girl as a "revolution" which I took to mean that she thought it was the start of a war. In Grand Bassin, when we asked if anyone thought it was a war and not a massacre,

Of course, Haitians had very good reason to suspect subterfuge from Trujillo; it was a signature feature of his regime (Derby 2009; Roorda 1998). He suborned allies as far afield as the U.S. Senate in Washington DC. After the massacre, New York Republican member of Congress Hamilton Fish Jr. advocated on Trujillo's behalf after receiving a bribe in exchange for minimizing possible retribution from the United States (Crassweller 1966). In the Haitian political theater, some have suggested that Vincent benefitted from Trujillo's largesse, accepting food supplies and the massacre subvention as a means of expanding his political patronage at a critical moment in 1936 when French duties were raised so precipitously high that Haitian coffee exports were cut off from this key trading partner which dealt a major blow to the economy (Heinl & Heinl 2005:522). In December 1937 it was rumored that Trujillo supported Colonel Démosthènes Calixte's military coup against the Vincent regime, an attempt which was organized from the Dominican Republic, and was a rejoinder to Vincent's lack of response to the massacre (Smith 2009:96–97). Trujillo also provided Haitian mercenary Excellent Dérosier and his gang of 50 men with arms and munitions along the border to rattle Vincent in classic protection racket fashion.¹⁷ Finally, he bankrolled Haitian President Élie Lescot, perhaps starting when he became

Irelia Pierre gave it a conspiratorial spin; “so they made it seem as if it was Vincent, I even thought that, they said that Vincent enraged Trujillo, I think there was something between them; then the politician named Jolibois came to Haiti from the DR where he had been in exile, and there was a political problem between them. They said it was Communism but it wasn't, Vincent said that; they said ugly things to provide an excuse to kill people but that's false” (é byin, yo fè konnin ké sé Vincent, yo min'm ki pansé sa, yo di sé Vincent ki rajé al Trujillo, mwen kwé té ginyin yon bagay antré yo bagay konsa, aké yon neg yo rélé Jolibwa, li té politisyon, li té soti isit alé li té nan ékzil lòt bó a, alèkilé, te ginyin yon bagay antré yo au pwèn dé ví politik, alò yo di sé kominézon, min sé pa vré non, moun yo ki pansé sa, yo di, sé kominézon Vincent, ki di, bay lòd pou touyé moun yo min'm, min sé pa té vré). Zora Neale Hurston was in Haiti in 1937 and recounted this history in detail. As she said cryptically, “There is somebody else in Haiti that the people cannot forget. He is not there in person but his shadow walks around like a man. That is the shadow of Trujillo, President of neighboring Santo Domingo. Trujillo is not in Haiti but he has connections that reach all around” (Hurston 1990:90–91). Jolibois Films was so popular that when Alan Lomax visited Haïti in 1936–37, he heard popular praise songs about him. As one of his informants in Grand Bassin told him, “Everyone claps for Jolibois.” For more on Jolibois, see Casey (forthcoming).

- 17 Hudicourt maintained that Trujillo tricked Calixte, but there were rumors that they were allies for a while, although Armand reported that Calixte later supported a coup against Trujillo. As Hudicourt put it, “Trujillo wanted to own everyone” (Trujillo vlé toujou ginyin yon moun a li). It was only one among many coups against Vincent in which groups of officers threatened coups against him (interview with Dorsainville, May 11, 1988). Pierre Armand provided information about Dérosier and his troops (Dérosier became a Caco resistance fighter against the U.S. Marines during the Occupation) and he estimated that

ambassador to the Dominican Republic in 1934, and later tried to assassinate him (Hicks 1946:186).¹⁸ Former Colonel Pierre Armand has argued that this was a desire for political control, not imperialism per se, but this may be splitting hairs.¹⁹

Unlike the popular Dominican versions of events which have not coalesced into a single narrative, this particular account has become canonized in Haitian popular memory, and was widely diffused among Haitian refugees who recalled the slaughter.²⁰ At its core lies a “story kernel” of sovereign usurpation that has floated around since the Haitian Revolution’s conclusion in 1804, since even in the nineteenth century travelers to the Citadel reported Haitian concerns that they were engaged in plots to usurp the nation via stealing the fortress. Indeed, U.S. army officer Samuel Hazard reported that he became known as the American who had attempted to “take” the Citadel when he visited the monument in the 1870s (Hazard 1873:420).²¹ Of course, this may have been because the United States nearly annexed the eastern portion of the island in 1854 and 1866–71 and tried to force the acquisition of Môle Saint-Nicolas through gun boat diplomacy for a naval base in 1889 (Pinkett 1941).

I analyze here the meaning of the Citadel in this story as a key nationalist icon, and its function as a “palimpsest” of the revolution; as well as how idioms of theft, currency, and concealment figure in popular rumors dating back to the nineteenth century (Shaw 2002:17). As a sign of the sovereign, the Citadel may serve as a stand-in for the Haitian national bank takeover by City Bank, which took control of Haitian finances through debt consolidation and provisioning a major loan before the U.S. Marine Occupation (1915–34) (Hudson 2017:106). Rather than a commentary solely upon capitalism and the mysteries of profit

he had paid US\$ 20,000 to put a stop to them. According to Armand, the protection racket continued until Vincent stopped paying Trujillo (interview with Armand, February 9, 1988).

18 Trujillo’s support for Lescot was widely known in Haiti, and we heard various stories about him perhaps because he visited Ouanaminthe, and interestingly some of them involve a debt to Trujillo. For example, Antoine Jacques recounted to us that Trujillo had loaned him money for his electoral campaign and became enraged when he did not pay it back.

19 Interview with Armand, February 9, 1988.

20 At times the Dominicans we spoke with used derogatory racial images to express this cataclysmic event which stunned them completely drawing upon images of pollution as “matter out of place” (Douglas 1966). “Trujillo wanted to get rid of all the black pigs” or that there was a “fly in the milk” or as Hurston (1990:90) put it, that there was a need to “clean the border”, although these metaphors may well have emerged from the influence of anti-Haitian discourse after the massacre which was saturated with such pollution imagery.

21 One wonders what kind of rumors circulated when Charles Lindbergh visited the site in 1928 or when UNESCO took control of the Citadel in 2014.

as Michael Taussig has argued for devil-pact narratives, I propose that the story of the attempted theft of the Citadel may also reflect the phenomenology of debt relations which are an inescapable and ubiquitous aspect of everyday life among the poor in Haiti, at a time when these expanded dramatically in the evacuated countryside as thousands of Haitian men left to work on Dominican and Cuban sugar plantations. The dramatic expansion of everyday debt relations in the early twentieth century thus added a new layer to longstanding popular anxieties about national debt.

French anthropologist Marcel Mauss theorized how gift giving in traditional societies is a “total social phenomena,” or “the condition for the production and reproduction of the social relations which constitute the framework of a society”—a view which places debt at the very center of sociality (Mauss 1967:1; Godelier 1999:48). The condition of poverty requires investing in social debts so that one can draw upon the resources of others during times of scarcity, which is evident in the strong cultural preference for shopping at cornerstores which offer purchase by credit (Hippert 2020). Yet Mauss also revealed the open secret of the gift—the concealed identity of gifts as debts in disguise, thus that they can be poison as well as presents (Mauss 1967:62). This moral ambivalence is explained in anthropologist Parker Shipton’s work which reveals how within some contexts, forms of currency generated via “forbidden commodities” such as sugar in the Caribbean given its history of slave labor may be viewed as “bitter money” that generates toxic debt (Shipton 1989).

2 Reading Oral Narratives

The first challenge in interpreting an oral narrative is methodological. Historian Luise White encourages us to listen carefully to popular narratives—even those which are clearly false—and to read them as emblematic of popular interpretations of historical events and real fears. Even when they are patently untrue, they are products of experience, containing “rhetorical truths” if we can just discern them (L. White 2000:31). As would a folklorist, Luise White’s approach involves classifying genre and identifying formulaic elements—the details which can reveal important traces or clues to deeper meanings. Thus she deploys some of the same techniques in evaluating patterns of narrative used by folklorists such as Gary Alan Fine who adopts a structuralist approach, locating story elements and genres and their variations (Fine 1980; Fine, Campion-Vincent & Heath 2005). Yet White also reads rumors as evidence of emotional truths and varying conceptions of selfhood. Identifying processes of “ecotypification” does not explain why, how, and when the localization of

narrative occurs as it does (Fine 1992). White teaches us that interpreting symbols requires deeply embedding narratives in local and historical context since this is where the key to their meaning lies.

One difference in approach between White's oral narrative analysis and a folkloristic one, however, resides in precisely how oral forms are contextualized. One could locate core narratives primarily in terms of genre, and historically in terms of broad macrolevel changes in class structure and economy and resultant social strains; yet White encourages us to engage in an analysis that considers popular speech acts in terms of very local transformations in patterns of labor, kinship, and gender (Ben-Yahuda 1980; Fine 1980). She asks that we consider the performativity of rumor, and think carefully about transfers in meaning between speaking subject and audience, as well as how rumors as speech acts can help mark cultural differences (L. White 2000:112). She also seeks to explain popular hearsay that emerge from historical events, such as state-imposed vaccination and insect eradication campaigns, the rationale for which was not clear on the ground.

I want to consider how some techniques from White's methodological toolkit can be used effectively to elucidate a kind of narrative form that she touches upon only peripherally—narratives of statecraft. Indeed, the colonial government figures prominently in many of her own collection of narratives—from firemen to police to colonial doctors—much of the fear generated by these accounts being related to the perceived secrecy of their activities since they engaged in what she terms “veiled labor” (White 1993 and 1995). The state appears prominently in a range of monstrous accusations elsewhere as well, from the Andes, where the frightful *Ñakaq* is said to carry a governmental identity card; to Guatemala, where former government officials have been accused of organ harvesting and child trafficking, and Puerto Rico where the *chupacabras* or goat-sucking monster was said to actually be a CIA/DOD hybrid clone (Weismantel 1997; Adams 1998; Derby 2008). It need not be entirely surprising that state agencies are implicated in these tales, since as anthropologist Marc Edelman has argued, “wage labor is not the only ‘diabolically’ exploitative relation” (Edelman 1994:60). The devil, it seems, is a rich and evocative metaphor for other forms of subjection as well.

3 The Citadel as Revolutionary Icon

White's call to study “vampires as an epistemological category” with which subjects describe their world requires a deep understanding of local poetics. And reading the Haitian story of the massacre must commence with the signifi-

cance of the Citadelle Laferrière, the Haitian foundational icon of sovereignty at the core of the tale. Built in the early 1800s as a bulwark against a French invasion in the wake of the Haitian Revolution, the Citadel is the largest fortress in the western hemisphere, and as scholar Patrick Bellegarde-Smith describes it, it is “a monument to the lives sacrificed in the nation’s struggle for freedom,” that today has been designated a world heritage site by UNESCO (Bellegarde-Smith 2004:xvii). Anthropologist Rodrigo Bulamah asserts that the Citadel is also a Vodou shrine affiliated with St. Jacques (Sen Jak) or Ogun, the patron of the Haitian Revolution; there is a hidden altar in one of its rooms and a summer fête in his honor (Bulamah 2015). A material assertion of sovereignty, the Citadel is thus a synecdoche for the Haitian Revolution, an epochal event that forever changed the Atlantic world. The colony of Saint-Domingue had become the jewel in the crown of the French Empire and the strongest economy of the Americas, which is why France, Britain, and Spain fought so hard to keep it within the colonial orbit. Its independence made it the most radical modern revolution, as Haiti became the first nation to abolish slavery and outlaw racial discrimination (Ferrer 2012). Haitians are naturally extremely proud of their historical legacy, the only slave rebellion in the history of the world that brought independence and abolition, won by a largely African army that defeated the most powerful armies of Europe. A monument of popular nationalism, thus, the Citadel conjures the epic story of the making of modern Haiti, the first Black independent state in the Americas.²²

Clearly the Citadel represents the glory and power of the story of the Haitian Revolution; as such it is a key symbol of hard-won sovereignty. As Christophe’s agent in London described it:

The Citadelle Henry, that palladium of liberty, that majestic bulwark of independence, that monument of the greatest and of the vast combinations of Henry, is built on the lofty summit of one of the highest mountains on the island (Saunders 1816:79–80).

The building and corresponding estate was considered in its heyday to be one of the most magnificent edifices of the West Indies, with waterworks and artificial springs, cotton and sugar plantations secured from fleeing French planters with names such as “The King’s Beautiful Way” and “The Victory.” It was said that Sans Souci was likely to become the national capital, due to its “superb

22 Research on the Haitian Revolution is now vast; see Dubois 2004; Fick 1990; and James 1963. Erin Zavitz (2016) has studied Haitian revolutionary commemorations.

royal palace, its sumptuous apartments, all with inlaid work, and lined with the most beautiful and rarest tapestry ... all these combine to embellish the retreat of a hero" (Hazard 1873: 416 and 419). As such it was intimately associated with the person of Henry Christophe I, first republican King of Haiti, someone whose own personal trajectory from slave to monarch exemplified the triumphal national narrative of Haiti. Notwithstanding the costs of his rise to power, the cult of Christophe is vibrant even today, serving as an important emblem of Black pride since he hailed from the north which was the central theater of the slave revolt during the early years of the revolution, and his signature ostrich-plumed bicorn chapeau became an emblem of Black sovereignty worn with pride by other Caribbean strongmen including paradoxically Dominican dictator Rafael Trujillo as well as Marcus Garvey, founder of the Universal Negro Improvement Association.²³ The opulence of the palatial grounds was intended to demonstrate to the world the majesty of Black royalty.

But the Citadel can also be seen as a monument of national value and a veritable "public secret" (Taussig 2003:272). The twenty-foot-thick stone walls also encased the arsenals and storehouses of the king, and his gold and silver (Hazard 1873:418). Within its vaults lay the national jewels, which were secured at the cost of many Haitian lives; a national fetish that was rendered sacred through a costly sacrifice. It is rumored that Christophe had an enormous treasure so great that he could have "paved the Citadel with doubloons if he had desired," the gold stash known only to himself and one friend since the workers who buried it were killed (Simpson & Cinéas 1941:178).²⁴ Its dramatic architectural presence is certainly declarative of the site's importance; however, its contents, of course, are veiled from view. It is said for example, that the Citadel has secret passageways through which Christophe could surprise his workers, or escape in case on a French invasion. As such, the Citadel functions much like the Haitian *wanga* or *paquet kongo*, a magical bundle encased in sequins and feathers that commands attention, yet the contents of which may not be known; thus it represents the revelation of "skilled concealment" (Taussig 2006:293; McCarthy Brown 1993:233–38). Like the Kikongo *nkisi* or charm, the *wanga* is a spirit container clandestinely controlled by humans. As Elizabeth McAlister writes:

23 Like the Amis de la Société des Rois Christophe (Trouillot 1995:32). There is also a formidable cult of Toussaint Louverture, but Christophe was associated with the north, thus Black Haiti. For more on the bicorn, see Derby 2009:195–96.

24 If Christophe is remembered for his warehouses of hidden vast wealth, Boyer—who invaded and occupied the eastern portion of the island was said to have spent it—taking several weeks to remove the gold from its hiding place.

The bottle is speaking in a coded visual grammar that at once obscures its contents and reveals clues about it. The accumulated materials fastened to the exterior of the bottle—its clothing—are both hiding the inside and pointing to the charged, powerful presence of what is being contained (McAlister 1995:313).

These protective amulets often contain bone shavings, animal body parts, good luck stones, and poison (Métraux 1972:286; Simpson & Cinéas 1941:177).

Anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot has argued that Sans Souci is a place of silences, yet it is also one of secrets; a space of mortality and what Tausig has termed “the impure sacred” (Trouillot 1995; Taussig 1993:150). It is said that hundreds of laborers perished to build the Citadel fortress, which required hauling many huge stones to the top of Sans Souci, a 3000-foot high mountain. The project was first commissioned by Haitian revolutionary general Jean-Jacques Dessalines as part of a massive system of fortifications to protect the newly independent nation from further foreign intervention; it was completed by Henry Christophe, self-proclaimed king of northern Haiti in 1820. With 365 canons, the Citadel formed part of Christophe’s expansive imperial court, centered at Sans Souci, the king’s residence, where Christophe ruled with an iron hand until his eventual deposition. After his suicide, Christophe’s body was even buried there, thus it represents several levels of blood sacrifice (Pietz 1999). Indeed, Christophe imprisoned several Germans there whom he feared were poised to divulge military secrets (Trouillot 1995:62). Yet ironically this monument of concealment was intended to be a loud sentinel to the triumph of the revolution, and thus intended to incite discourse about it; yet it also involved some very stringent policing of the very rumors it seems it was intended to generate. Anthropologist Paul Johnson has described this paradox as “secretism” or the intentional circulation of hearsay about a secret’s inaccessibility (P. Johnson 2002:3). Johnson argues that “secretism, the claims of access to deep, foundational knowledge ... gains in force with the perceived loss of place,” which if true would indicate that these stories emerged when the Citadel devolved from the seat of Christophe’s court to a monument of a glorious past (P. Johnson 2002:19).

Luise White has argued that the power of vampire stories is ultimately metaphoric; they persuade through providing forceful images which color popular understandings of events and their emotional resonance. Just as blood-sucking provided a key trope for state-sponsored extraction in colonial Africa, theft has served a similar function in republican Haiti. Indeed, fears have been rife that foreigners were stealing national patrimony, especially gold, from the revolution onward—and often they have actually been true, but

not always exactly as imaged in popular narratives. Rumors emerged during the U.S. Occupation that Marines were growing rich from theft, and it was said that they ransacked the Citadel hunting for Henry I's treasure (Simpson & Cinéas 1941:178).²⁵ Many of these stories involve coercion as well as subterfuge.²⁶

Some of these narratives could be classed within an older pan-Caribbean genre, that of buried treasure lore dating from the colonial period (Lomax 2009:53).²⁷ Indeed, fleeing planters did at times leave loot behind, as did the earlier buccaneers based on neighboring La Tortuga island, and as in Cuba, treasure-hunting has long been a popular pastime. In Haiti *baka lajan* are slave spirits who had been buried alive along with the treasure as a means of protection.²⁸ Yet occasionally rumors have developed that take these tales in a more fanciful direction. During the U.S. Occupation, it was reported that the tomb of Louis XVI had been discovered on La Gonave, a relatively inaccessible island dependency of Haiti frequently subject to "fantastic speculation," around which it was said that "rumors and legends grow" (Seabrook 1929:194). A grotto had been found with an inscription, the newspapers presuming that the grave contained buried jewels. And it is said that the rainbow *lwa* (spirits) harbor caps full of diamonds and gold, but which are impossible to obtain (Simpson 1942:225–26). It was also said that French and Italian priests collected and sent to Europe vast sums of money, leaving the country impoverished and then sought to camouflage their theft through anti-superstition campaigns that attacked Vodou altars and practitioners (Hurstun 1990:91). Stories of hidden Haitian wealth have equally consumed the former planter class, such as those

25 Statesmen have also been accused of trying to steal the Citadel's treasure, as was Jean-Pierre Boyer in 1845 (Schneider 2019).

26 As Rodrigo Bulamah reports, fears of theft are common due to class and class tensions and land tenure precarity in certain moments of Haitian history (personal communication). And the UN troops known as MINUSTAH in Haiti was rumored to have stolen goats (Katherine Smith, personal communication).

27 Stories of buried treasure are also very important in Cuba. Andrew Apter and I met a *babalao* in Illinois in the 1990s who planned to return to Cuba to search for hidden treasure left behind by fleeing planters, which was hidden by the slaves and which he wanted to try to locate.

28 Katherine Smith, personal communication. Even if called by another name, Winter Schneider reports that "these treasures are supposed to be kept by the spirits of those who dug the pits where the treasure was hidden and who were buried with the treasure to protect the knowledge of its location. In Vodou of the Artibonite, such a treasure is considered both material and spiritual, and the exact knowledge of its placement, or the exact site on which the spiritual treasure chest ceremony is to be performed, is a matter of spiritual heritage" (personal communication).

of the Le Bon family, former coffee planters in Saint-Domingue, who sued the French government for absconding with their compensation.²⁹

4 Of Theft and Debt

There are very good reasons for Haitians to have a phobia about national theft since it has been a recurrent feature of Haitian history. Indeed, the foundational event is what today Haitians call “the odious debt”—the payment of an indemnity of 150 million francs to France for capital lost—in land and slaves—as a result of the revolution in return for international recognition and trade, which would be 560 million in today’s U.S. dollars (Lindner 2022; Gamio 2022). In 1804 when Haiti became the first Black republic, all world powers sided with France, collectively agreeing to freeze commerce, since they saw Haiti as a threat to slavery and refused to recognize its independence (although Great Britain and the United States surreptitiously continued to trade with Haiti) (Gaffield 2016). Haiti was most threatening to the United States, yet this was the new republic’s natural trading partner, and the Haitian economy depended on outlets for its coffee, sugar, and cotton. The payment of the indemnity thus recognized a debt to France—the loss of property in land, machinery, and slaves caused by the revolution—while assuring that Haiti would be locked in debt service payments until after World War II (Farmer 2004). Former finance minister Frédéric Marcelin aptly described Haitian independence as founded on a debt—the indemnity paid to France—thus casting it as an extractive conspiracy (Marcelin 1897). The ordinance was delivered by 12 warships with 528 cannons notwithstanding the fact that by 1825 slavery had been abolished (Heinl & Heinl 2005:158). Haiti continued to pay off the debt until 1947. The so-called “independence debt” has long been called illegitimate and there have been calls for its reimbursement or reparations.³⁰

Yet before this debt had been paid off, there was another shameful episode of foreign usurpation, certainly one of the darkest episodes in the history of the City Bank and one which has been carefully described by historian Peter

29 Seek Old Haitian Fortune: Thirteen Families Claim Le Bon Wealth Abandoned 120 Years Ago, *New York Times*, January 12, 1914, <https://www.nytimes.com/1914/01/12/archives/seek-old-haitian-fortune-thirteen-families-claim-le-bon-wealth.html>, accessed August 29, 2023.

30 Isabel Macdonald, France’s Debt of Dishonor to Haiti, *The Guardian*, August 16, 2010, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/cifamerica/2010/aug/16/haiti-france>, accessed August 28, 2023; Schneider 2019 and 2018b.

Hudson (Hudson 2017 and 2013). In 1914, as City Bank was seeking to expand into the Caribbean, a contest erupted between Haitian political rivals Oreste Zamor and Joseph Theodore who seized custom houses, causing default on German loan payments. In an audacious act, under the guise of fears of “theft” by the Haitian government of the Bank National de la Reserve d’Haïti’s reserve fund during a possible civil war, a U.S. Navy ship loaded half a million dollars’ worth of gold in 17 wooden boxes protected by U.S. Marines in civilian clothes and shipped it off to Wall Street (Hudson 2017:102–7; Gebrekidan et al. 2022a). This egregious act understandably incensed Haitian authorities. The Haitian government reacted with “shock and disbelief” at this audacious attack on Haitian sovereignty, stating that it “deeply deplores an arbitrary and offensive intervention which carries a flagrant invasion of the sovereignty and independence of the Republic of Haiti,” and called for legal action on the grounds that the gold was property of the Haitian State, not the bank.³¹ Their concerns were silenced when U.S. Marines took over customs houses and militarily intervened (where they stayed until 1934, one of the longest of the circum-Caribbean interventions). As Peter Hudson has argued, City Bank’s seizure of Haitian reserves was a key event in the development of racial capitalism.

Nor was this the first time that foreign bankers had manipulated Haitian reserves for their own benefit. Previous to City Bank, French bankers had also speculated with Haitian gold by withdrawing it from circulation, thus forcing farmers and merchants to borrow at exorbitantly high interest rates (Hudson 2017:244). And after the 1907 banking crisis, U.S. banks sought to expand gold reserves, using the capital to fund a dramatic expansion of loans (J.F. Johnson 1908:454–67). These facts shed new light on stories that U.S. Marines had dug an underground tunnel from the capital city of Port-au-Prince to Wall Street through which gold was extracted from Haitian bank vaults (Hurstons 1990:85).

When U.S. Marines intervened in 1907 to take over customs houses purportedly to clean up outstanding Haitian debt by repaying German creditors, Haitians were rightfully convinced this was a ruse. On the street it was said that the purported debts were an excuse to rob the Haitian treasury. As anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston was told in 1937, “I swear on the head of my mother that we had no debts. The Americans did force us to borrow the money so that they could steal it from us. That is the truth. Poor Haiti has suffered so much”

31 Hudson 2017:105; see also James Weldon Johnson, Self-Determining Haiti: The American Occupation, *The Nation*, August 28, 1920, pp. 236–38.

(Hurston 1990:91). Of course, casting a loan as a form of theft, as we shall see, has a strong element of truth to it.

In Marcel Mauss's classic formulation, gifts only appear to be freely apportioned; they may look disinterested and voluntary but they are actually interested and binding (Mauss 1967; Taussig 1999:62). And Haiti has long had its sovereignty compromised by loans which became debts. Indeed, the U.S. Marines intervened due to a clash between the governments of Germany and Haiti over allegations surrounding German debt payments. And within debt peonage which became a ubiquitous form of unfree labor throughout Latin America in the postemancipation period, the worker is tied to a plantation via an advance which looks like a gift but it is really an instrument of debt intended to tie the laborer to the plantation; these binding loans first emerged in Haiti in the 1820s and 1830s (Bauer 1979; Melillo 2012; Schneider 2018b; Ulrickson 2018).

Anxieties about theft also permeate everyday transactions in Haiti. Land tenancy is notoriously precarious and rural landowners live in constant fear of takeovers.³² Haitian merchants are rumored to never return one's change, and payments are rarely advanced on the presumption that the exchange will not be completed. Not that these acts of "nibbling" are necessarily seen as theft by their protagonists; they are often cast as effective entrepreneurialism—getting the most out of a deal (Gregory 2007:68; Hurston 1990:84). And those lucky enough to land civil service jobs are at times assumed to be "snacking" on official contracts; at times profiting even from debt itself as it was said that Louis Borno, for example, had personally benefitted from loans he contracted for the regime in the 1920s (Dunham 1994:22; Hurston 1990:87). By sharp contrast, interestingly within the domain of the *lwa* or spirits, the ritual economy should ideally avoid cash transactions, as rites are paid for in gifts of food, drink, ornamentation, or clothes, and larger donations required for important ceremonies such as initiations and *lave tête* or spiritual cleansings can be paid for in what has been described as virtual "promissory notes." As anthropologist Katherine Dunham put it, "no money is exchanged in the induction into the *vaudun*, but much is spent" (Dunham 1994:70).³³

32 Rodrigo Bulamah, personal communication. For more on the land tenure system in Haiti, see Woodson 1990.

33 When citing texts that use previous Haitian Creole orthography I have left the spellings as is.

5 Sugar and *Zonbi* Labor

Luise White would ask us to consider how these narratives of theft may have been shaped by changing regimes of labor. While devil-pact tales are a stock feature of Hispaniola lore, there appears to have been a profusion of these stories in the 1930s during the Depression.³⁴ Scholars have explained the prominence of zombie lore at this time as a result of U.S. market for tales of the exotic and the savage during the U.S. Occupation, but the *zonbi* was only one of the nocturnal creatures evoking fear and loathing among Haitians at that time (Hurbon 1988; Ramsey 2011; Renda 2001). The *garadiablo*, the *lougawou*, and *baka* shape-shifting entities were also very important figures of sorcery in popular narratives, all nocturnal spirits representative of the devil-pact canon described by Taussig in his study. Lest there be any confusion about whether the *zonbi* is a devil-pact figure, revealing details such as a village of origin, *morne-au-diable* (dismal devil), give it away (Charlier 2017:95). They are all changeling spirits linked to the left hand of Vodou which is called *maji* (sorcery) associated with profit, as anthropologist Karen Richman has put it, with “wage labor, the outside, unbridled individualism, and therefore, sorcery” (Richman 2005:17).

One is struck by the fact that these tales expose how money is made in illicit and antisocial ways, from the terrifying armies of unseen *zonbi* said to be working for prominent *bòkò* (wizards), to the diabolical shape-shifting *baka* which garner wealth by eviscerating the crops of others, thus enabling a greater yield to their owner. In a recent iteration, a *baka* left a cemetery and entered a house where it vomited up money.³⁵ Hairy *baka* can capture humans and make them work clearing fields, chopping wood and hoeing (Courlander 1990: 80). *Lougawou* (*sukuyan* in Trinidad) are old women who shed their skin and fly around at night at times with fire shooting out of their anuses; another skin shedder is the *Pye Koupe* which eats human legs. *Bòkò* can shape-shift as well. This class of *maji* often deploys invisible forces to augment one's wealth at the expense of others, a kind of covert stealing. Of course, thievery is also a stock feature of

34 Collected in the 1930s by ethnographers George Simpson, Harold Courlander, Katherine Dunham, Maya Deren, Alfred Métraux, Zora Neale Hurston, and Melville Herskovits with their Haitian research assistants and U.S. Marine travel accounts such as that of Seabrook 1929 and Craige 1933. I have used the spelling *zonbi* when referring to Haitian *zonbi* lore, and *zombie* when used in a generic sense.

35 Yon *baka* ki fenk soti nan simitye rantrè kay o depite lap vomi lajan, *World Star Haitian News*, June 29, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DYSEjtIBZSE>, accessed August 1, 2017.

traditional Haitian trickster tales which pit a clever and a dim-witted animal (*bouki* and *ti malis*, often represented as cat and dog) against one another.³⁶

Devil-pact narratives appear to have surged at a time when male outmigration to sugar plantations in the Dominican Republic and Cuba was becoming an increasingly prominent feature of the Haitian economy. In the late nineteenth century, U.S. sugar agribusiness firms expanded into the Caribbean, and in order to provide a secure labor source, they developed a contract labor system to staff the ranks of the plantations. By 1935, there were upward of 50,000 Haitian migrants in the Dominican Republic cutting sugar cane, and some 30,000 Haitians were traveling to Cuba yearly. Economist Mats Lundahl estimates that between 1916 and 1925, some 150,000 Haitians crossed the border (Lundahl 1983:119). While Haitians were drawn by higher wages and hopes of sending remittances home, the true profits were made by the government and private recruiters. Indeed, historian Avi Chomsky reports that emigration fees were by far the most important source of the internal revenue of Haiti at that time, accounting for a full 31 percent of the total in 1924 (Chomsky 2000). Indeed, theft seems a quite appropriate leitmotif capturing the essence of a deeply exploitative labor system which was described in Haiti as “the slave traffic” or the “*kongo*”; the returnees, *zonbi*, these terms indicative of the intense stigma of a particularly inhuman form of wage labor that produced “bitter money” due to its long-standing associations with slavery.³⁷ During the Great Depression, a time when “hunger and want were stalking the land,” a steady stream of able-bodied men were leaving home, evacuating the countryside of their labor, and leaving an expanse of women and children, especially in the north, all for wages of 20–30 cents per day (Hurston 1990:87; Lundahl 1983:122).³⁸ This continued until the 1937 massacre, a period of intense fear, as rumors flew about what had caused the massacre and whether or not war would follow if the Haitian government retaliated (Hurston 1990:90–91).³⁹ And after the massacre the Dominican government paid a paltry US\$525,000

36 I am thinking of stories such as those of *ti bouki* and *ti malice*, but this theme also appears in “Tar Baby: Cat as Thief,” in Louis & Hay 1999; Simpson 1943:256; see Simpson & Cinéas 1941:82, “Christophe and the Food Thief” and “Christophe’s Treatment of Idlers, Robbers, and Libertines.”

37 Richman 2005:111. The *zonbi* is treated as a phantom of slavery in Dayan 1998. See also Lauro 2015; Scheller 2003; and Métraux 1972.

38 The terrible conditions of Haitian cane cutters are well described in Casey 2017; Hintzen 2016; and Camejo & Wilentz 1990.

39 George Simpson (1943:256) who was in Haiti doing in research in 1937 declared, “Today one can walk through the country on a moonlit night and see no peasants at all. Their houses are tightly closed, and the silence is oppressive.”

indemnity to the regime of Sténio Vincent to establish agricultural colonies in the border to house the massacre *escapains* (escapees), little of which appears to have trickled down to them. Not surprisingly, zonbi worker sightings were reported at the large HASCO sugar plantation in Haiti whose vacuous bovine stare was a tell-tale sign that they were patently not human (Charlier 2017:94).

If we read the Haitian oral narratives collected in the 1930s as period-specific as opposed to an ahistoric narrative genre—as popular understandings of power and not legends—the stories circulating around Haiti at this time offer several telling details that speak to the acute sense of vulnerability which those that stayed behind experienced. Stories about lougawou, spirit beings which can transmogrify into horses, pigs, trees, and objects and when invisible can conduct evil deeds; young maidens who are actually she-devils; cats who are really *bòkò* (wizards); babies that turn into turkeys, rats, or lizards; devils who turn into beggars and then elephants; princes who become vagabonds; and White people who become thieves, seem to offer candid commentary on this new pattern of outmigration, its perceived social risk, and the ephemerality of its promised wages.

Debt is a common recurring theme in these narratives, a formulaic element that seems to underscore the apparent contradiction that while migrants were contracted on the promise of growth in earnings, their absence actually seemed to generate debt (Courlander 1982 and 1990; Louis & Hay 1999; Simpson 1942 and 1943). A lougawou must pay his *bòkò* or sorcerer a human victim each year, a debt which if not paid will cost him his life. In one story, a mistress conspires to offer her partner as the requisite sacrifice until he discovers it and foils the plot. This story also manifests anxiety about the fragility of long-distance relationships. While in this case, the woman conspires against her man, more commonly the women left behind would be replaced by new partners as temporary work extended over years, the remittances failing to materialize. A pervasive sense of fear and danger is also clearly present in the *kombite* work songs collected by ethnomusicologist Alan Lomax in 1937 some of which curse landowners.⁴⁰

As medievalist Caroline Bynum has argued, shape-shifter tales can offer commentaries on the vulnerability of identity during periods of social change (Bynum 2001). This insight pertains to these stories in which women turn into bumblebees, while men turn into pigs, bulls, or walking trees, take cover as magnificent white stallions, or become snakes. Shape-shifting is also effected

40 “Oh! Give me the tune, Cane workers! Oh give me the tune, Oh give me the tune, Oh give me the tune, oh! Cane workers! Cane workers I am outraged! Fuck them!,” Gage Averill’s translation in Lomax 2009:129–30.

by literally removing one's skin, a feature shared by other secret societies such as the *Ze Wouj*, members of which can shed their epidermis, thus divesting themselves of all identifiable features of humanity becoming walking bundles of viscera—bones, organs, and veins.

These narratives also seem to express the difficulties of reading identity across the vast distances that had come to separate many Haitians at home and in the diaspora at a moment of increased migration, and the fears that the grounds of people and relationships may have eroded in one's absence. Given the gaping hole between expectation and reality regarding migrants' earning power—the utopic hopes that can develop when the brute reality of poor remuneration is veiled by distance, face saving, and poor communication—it should not be a surprise that a frequent motif in these tales is the person who looks poor but who is actually rich, as in “sometimes one meets a poor man who begs along the road, but who is really the chief of the *loups garous*” (Simpson 1942:221). This may have represented the perspective of those left behind, since Haitian *bracero* (cane cutter) returnees are notoriously unkempt upon returning home and appear poor, yet there is a lingering suspicion that they are harboring concealed money somewhere, a motif which, as we have seen, is frequent in Haitian popular lore.

These shape-shifter stories are emplotted as travelers' tales that trace the adventures of the protagonist as he leaves home for parts unknown; as such, they offer cautionary warnings about the dangers laying in wait along roads. Alongside possible demons such as *baka* and *zonbi*, one might encounter members of terrifying secret societies such as the Red Pigs or the *Bizangos* which can kidnap or extract ransom or tax from unsuspecting wayfarers, or the *Zeau-beaups*, which are said to be cannibals (Dunham 1994:181). In these stories, the fear of roads is intimately linked to capricious authorities who have the power to extract whatever they want from passersby, and who draw upon official state nomenclature such as passports. Certainly this articulates the fear Haitian peasants have long had of the *chefs de section*, which became acute later during the regimes of François and Jean-Claude Duvalier (1957–86) when many were recruited as Ton Ton Macoutes or paramilitaries, rural magistrates who were given total control of their rural administrative sections and frequently abused it.⁴¹ Roads and marketplaces are also places where middlemen or *bus-cones* come from Dominican sugar concerns recruiting cane cutters with tactics that combine utopic promises with cash advances to ensnare labor recruits

41 For more on the Ton Ton Macoutes, see Aubourg 2021; Chocotte 2017; Laguerre 1989; and Trouillot 1990.

(Lemoine 1985; Plant 1987). As elsewhere, “popular mythology has increasingly come to portray the tarmac and the world through which it courses as a nearly magical pathway to wealth,” yet one that is also inhabited by terrifying risks such as dangerous demons, from rapists and cannibals to Dry Bone people and zonbi bound with banana cords (Auslander 1993).

As Marc Edelman has remarked, devil-pact tales can link political and economic forms of domination, binding them together seamlessly (Edelman 1994:60). If local-level political authorities and their arbitrary powers are represented as nocturnal bogeymen in these stories, it should come as no surprise that presidential strongmen have an even more sizable corpus of tales highlighting their fiendishness. Given the instability of Haitian republican politics, heads of state uncannily able to maintain power for some time seem to merit an explanation. François Duvalier was said to steal children, and to collect heads and body parts of political enemies for use in rites of divination (P. Johnson 2006; Perice 1997:4). Some presidents’ remains are used in magic, such as revolutionary chieftain Dessalines, whose essence it is said has been used to secure covenants; others are rumored to have even pledged their offspring in *angajman*, pacts to ensure their electoral success (Dunham 1994:162, 181). Some, such as President Clermeil, once a very cruel French *colon* or planter, has been reincarnated as a vengeful *zanj* spirit said to be the father of all light-colored children as the result of an angajman to save his soul from his angry slaves (Simpson 1942:227).

If politics is being cast as the occult in these stories, there may be good reason for it. In Haiti, both politics and witchcraft are assumed to be governed by invisible forces (*mistik*), for which the visible is but a camouflage, which in Haiti is called the *politique de doublure* in which mulatto presidents in the nineteenth century ruled through Black proxy heads of state.⁴² This is not dissimilar to lore about stealth baka demons which lay hidden in trees, or within rocks along country roads and which are hard to recognize since they can appear as huge dogs when they go hunting, or fleshless sacks of skin and bones, grey boar, cornstalk or snakes poised to seize and eat you, as might the *zeau-beaups* who reside in Mapou trees; or the many water spirits emanating from Yzolé (Courlander 1990:3, 21). As Dosu Bourdeaux explained:

You cannot see a baka unless he wishes to be seen, and a lougaro looks like an ordinary person until he goes out into the night to do whatever

42 Haitian Island Luminous Editorial Board, “Politique de doublure,” <http://islandluminous.fiu.edu/part04-slide13.html>, accessed June 4, 2023.

evil thing is in his mind. Most of the world is not seen at all except when it wants to be seen. We cannot be certain about anything (Courlander 1990:31).

The angajman or devil contract is also imaged as a kind of material secret since the words of the pact are actually buried in a jar in the ground, breaking on its own once the debt of the pact is paid (Courlander 1990:41). Secrecy shrouds *maji* (sorcery) such that even the site of an angajman should not be uttered or you could be taken in an *expedition* or hunt for victims (Courlander 1990:84).⁴³ The theme of concealment is also present in stories about the occult powers of presidents, many of whom are said to have succeeded in battle through magical means. For example, revolutionary war hero Toussaint Louverture was said to have had a scarf that could make him invisible (it was actually his *pwen* or powerful amulet), just as Dessalines when invisible would inspect his enemy's camps to see what they were up to (Simpson & Cinéas 1941:84–5).⁴⁴ These stories are clear evidence that Haitians have long held a profoundly suspicious view of political power.

Michael Taussig has argued that devil-pact narratives vilify market relations due to the combined and uneven development of the transition to capitalism in Latin America (Taussig 1980). Other authors have modified his paradigm, bringing gender and political power more squarely into the forefront of the analysis, yet the emergence of market relations, economic inequality, and the problem of profit have remained at the core of scholarly models (Crain 1991; Edelman 1994). Certainly one is struck by how an important idiom of Haitian sorcery concerns occult profit generation, from the terrifying armies of *zonbi* said to be working for prominent *bòkò*, to the devilish shape-shifting *bakas* which garner wealth by eviscerating the crops of others, and thus enabling a greater yield to their owner. As such, this class of *maji* can be seen as calling upon occult forces to augment one's wealth at the expense of others, a kind of covert stealing. *Zonbi* tales are also centrally about theft when you consider that making a *zonbi* requires stealing the soul of a corpse from a freshly interred body and using it to empower a spell (Thylenfors 2002).

43 This is parallel to the secrecy of names in Haiti and the prevalence of nicknames as a means of identity camouflage since names can be used as a surrogate in sorcery.

44 Interestingly, some Dominican bandits were also said to have used invisibility amulets, including Enrique Blanco. Hebblethwaite (2012:281) describes the *pwen* as “a concentration of spiritual power and ... a spiritual gift.” For more on the *pwen*, see Richman 2005.

6 Occult Meanings of Debt

Michael Taussig focused his devil-pact argument on only one element of these narratives of maji's illicit forces—profit which is cast as a form of theft. However I wish to propose that these stories are also centrally about debt. The fear of being taken as a sacrificial victim—as a zonbi or for a baka—can drive people into extensive financial and symbolic debts with the lwa as protection. This is a central theme in *The Bourdeaux Narrative*, in which the narrator travels far and wide to save his brother who has been taken as a zonbi by bòkò along the way, and he encounters many frightening night creatures and narrowly avoids their grasp by borrowing talismanic objects for protection, until the end when he succeeds in releasing his brother and then must repay all his accumulated debts. While devil-pact narratives may recount stories of illicit wealth by a few, the more generalized effect of these tales is that of pushing people into contracting debts with the lwa for protection. Occult threats force one to acquire *wanga*, medicinal packets or charms with ingredients such as a dried dog tails, beads, or a divining cord which when effective, require “feeding” (providing offerings to) the lwa, and can thus incur extensive monetary and social debts.

This raises the complex question of how we define debt, however. As anthropologist Marcel Mauss reminds us, the gift is a kind of disguised debt. Gifts and debts are not opposed, but are rather intimately entwined, differentiated merely by their varying temporalities. A gift is only reckoned as a debt when it is perceived as excessive, or as part of an antisocial relationship since a debt, after all, is an unreciprocated gift. The relationship between theft and the gift is equally ambiguous in as much as gifts may come to be perceived as theft when they are not reciprocated, or when the relationship within which they are embedded sours. Additionally, a gift between equals becomes a debt within relations of inequality (Graeber 2011; Mauss 1967).

While devil-pact narratives offer popular commentary on the moral framework of market relations, in the Haitian case they also seem to express and problematize the problem of debt in everyday life during the Depression as debt relations expanded. As William Pietz has put it, in face-to-face societies, “debt is the form within which the entire system of social relationships is expressed” (Pietz 1995:37). Much of the Haitian rural and urban poor are entangled in debt, from the *demiwatye* sharecropping system in which usufruct rights to land are exchanged for a share of the harvest which had become ubiquitous by the turn of the twentieth century as family plots over time diminished in size; to the obligations incurred when illness strikes and family and friends—one's social capital—are called upon to help provide for costly medicines. Poverty generates compound debts. In the hope that social indebtedness may

enable cash loans in times of need, cash-strapped peasants “go to great lengths to create occasions to ‘do personal favors’ for one another” so as to incur debts; others do favors in exchange for access to land (Richman 2005:11; Woodson 1990:537, 543).

Notwithstanding their paltry wages, sugar cane workers feel compelled to return home with cash for relatives and neighbors even when they do not have it which can drive people further into debt (Martínez 1995:153). Anthropologist Karen Richman recounts the plight of migrants like Little Caterpillar, who became mysteriously ill due to sorcery, which put him in a debt spiral as he sold his cows, pigs, and bicycle trying to find a remedy for a disease which conventional medicine could not cure. To make matters worse, he sent remittances for years to build a house which was stolen by his wife’s mother (Richman 2005:264). Given the generalized condition of indebtedness on both the national and local levels in Haiti, the prevalence of virtual debts in these accounts is striking, and may indicate that everyday anxieties around the phenomenology of debt are being problematized and worked out in these stories.

Anthropologists Jean and John Comaroff have described the zombie as a “phantom worker” which should be seen as a “sensitive register of shifting experiences of labor and its value.” As they see it, the zombie is a figure that expresses the contradictions of “the two sides of millennial capitalism ... one is the ever-more distressing awareness of the absence of work, itself measured by the looming presence of the figure of the immigrant; on the other is the constantly reiterated suspicion, embodied in the zombie, that it is only by magical means, by consuming others, that people may enrich themselves in these perplexing times” (Comaroff & Comaroff 1999:794). As a spectral embodiment of the theft of national value, the zonbi may have emerged as an expression of the evacuation of male Haitian labor to the promise of prosperity in the Dominican Republic; these “ghost workers” thus representing stolen labor-power and the “bitter money” generated by sugar. This idea reemerged in the figure of Trujillo, who it was said tried to steal the Citadel in 1937, after succeeding in “stealing” some 15,000 Haitian lives, and buying many Haitian allies.⁴⁵ As we have seen, as an icon of sovereignty, the Citadel has also long been at risk for national theft through the indemnity to France.

Yet like the zonbi itself which never dies, this figurative palimpsest of occult thievery had an afterlife, reemerging once again, but this time the vectors of accusation were reversed. In 1979, Jean-Claude Duvalier became the first

45 As Pierre Armand said of Trujillo, “he buys people” (*il achète des hommes*) (interview with Armand, February 9, 1988).

Haitian president to meet with Dominican president Antonio Guzmán at the border town of Jimaní to discuss the problem of political refugees. Duvalier wished to have them extradited since he had invested US\$9 million toward this end by supporting Guzmán's predecessor, Joaquín Balaguer; but the plight of the sugar workers was left to fester untouched (Lemoine 1981:261). The year 1979 happened to be the year that the London Anti-Slavery Society attacked the Dominican sugar industry for trafficking in Haitian slaves (Plant 1987:73 and 95–96; Lemoine 1981:143 and 247).

Yet the popular rumor mill recounted a different version. Dominicans accused Jean-Claude Duvalier of harboring stolen Dominican souls in Arcahaie, reputed to be the zonbi capital of Haiti. Guzmán was said to have met with Duvalier along the border to reclaim the spirits, which powered bushels of money-generating baka spirit demons; but Duvalier stood his ground and refused (Ducoudray 1980). But like the story of City Bank's gold removal, this was not at all a devil-pact folk tale, since Duvalier was indeed clandestinely profiting handsomely from the Haitian braceros, as he pocketed US\$15 per worker to a grand total of some US\$6–8 million per year, half of which was supposed to be returned to them at the end of their contract but was not (Lundahl 1983:346). This left Haitian cane cutters after deductions were removed for social security, life insurance, union and identity card, with a pittance wage of 2.21 US dollars a day, less than half that was reported by the sugar company.⁴⁶ Duvalier was also implicated in efforts to violate national sovereignty as well since he twice offered the United States Môle Saint-Nicolas as a location to build a naval base.⁴⁷

These conspiracy narratives about covert political maneuvers of malign intent could be classified as political scientist James Scott's "infrapolitics" which he describes as the politics of "disguise and anonymity designed to have a double meaning or shield the identity of the actors" (Scott 1990). They thus offer a glimpse behind the veil of Trujillista official ideology and gesture towards a less random and more sinister view of power, one that gets closer to the "totalitarian" logic of rule under regimes like that of Trujillo and Duvalier, and the only form of popular resistance against them which was authorless rumor and song (Trouillot 1990). While no collective action against the massacre was possible on Dominican soil, Haitians did find a way to make public their disgust

46 This was during the 1970s, see Grasmuck 1982:370. During the Depression, cane cutting wages in Cuba dropped to 3–80 cents per day (Casey 2017:116).

47 Haiti Offers U.S. a Naval Base Site, *New York Times*, April 8, 1961, <https://www.nytimes.com/1961/04/08/archives/haiti-offers-us-a-naval-base-site.html>, accessed August 29, 2023.

with Vincent and his silence in the face of Trujillo's act of raw terror, yet one that could only have occurred anonymously.

One of the most dramatic public acts of resistance to the massacre occurred in Pont Beudet, Haiti, a small town northwest of Croix-des-Bouquets—a central locus of sugar worker recruitment—and a place where people were not cowed by Trujillo's claustrophobic police state. Politicians had long recruited popular bards to sing praise songs at official visits on both sides of the island. In fact, we heard school children's songs to Trujillo recalled by massacre survivors who had memorized them to sing during official visits to the border.⁴⁸ In Haiti, these presidential tours of provincial towns and countryside are called *retraits aux flambeaux* or *tournee* and people who show up to welcome the dignitaries are provided snacks and *kleren* (homemade rum) and food handouts (another form of indebtedness disguised as a gift) (Averill 2009:137). In Port au Prince, praise songs to Sténio Vincent and Rafael Trujillo had become canonized in popular repertory by 1937 as Orchestre Granville Desronville played “Ochan pou Président Trujillo” which originally commemorated his 1934 state visit to Haiti and the *djaz* tune “Mési, Papa Vensan” was still wildly popular, recalling the exuberant optimism of Vincent's first term in office (Averill 2009: 25, 33 and 53). But these praise songs could also flip into songs of protest, becoming *pwen* or vernacular forms of popular critique (Averill 1997:163). Indeed, during one of Trujillo's visits after the massacre, outraged demonstrators sang threats of revenge for the appalling treatment of Haitian migrants in the Dominican Republic while expressing their dismay that Vincent had not responded to the massacre, alluding to rumors of a possible military revolt. Police responded to this outcry with *baton gayak* or wooden batons as demonstrators sang in direct challenge to Vincent and Port-au-Prince which had failed to speak out:

President Vincent tells us!
It's his decision not to take action
Wololoy!
President Trujillo has landed
It's now that we'll see some real actions

48 A woman whom we spoke with in Mont Organizé, who had witnessed the massacre and lived in Restauración, recited a speech in Spanish that she had learned as a child in school for one of Trujillo's visits: “Generalissimo Rafael Leonidas Trujillo Molina ... Jefe Benefactor de la Patria, coming from the Homeland of Duarte, with a singular act of sacrifice, the gratitude of the people honors you and proclaims you president for life, glorifying you with all the love of the world and heaven's and God's blessings” for which she received 25 pesos.

Oko City is walking forward
 Port-au-Prince City is going to pass
 Don't just stand there
 A stick made of gakak wood will make you jump up.⁴⁹

7 Conclusion

I have suggested that the profusion of shape-shifter tales in 1930s Haiti might reflect more than simply an excess of anthropologists in Haiti at the ready waiting to record them. They might also reflect a new level of precariousness as poverty in Haiti and an aggressive bracero-recruiting operation spurred long-distance migration. As the Comaroffs have noted, one feature of this new “occult economy” was distance; another was this “unnervingly visceral mode of producing value,” because these journeys promised greater wages but often entailed deepening relations of debt (Comaroff & Comaroff 1999:286). Luise White has noted how also in Africa after 1920 witch beliefs were refashioned (L. White 2000:21). As she put it, “vampires were more than new imaginings for new times, they were new imaginings for new relationships,” which in this case were increasingly with strangers and foreign-owned firms (Comaroff & Comaroff 1999:286).

Yet the 1930s *zonbi* of Hispaniola were not at all mere revenants of “spectral capital”; they were phantasmic manifestations of a long history of foreign intervention and extractive violence that commenced with the indemnity Haiti was forced to pay to France. Ghostly white sugar—which in Haiti and Central Africa is the color of death—produced fortunes by stealth for French colonists in Saint-Domingue in the eighteenth century which fueled the industrial growth of France, just as it did in the twentieth century for U.S. corporations such as United Fruit and the Porto Rico Sugar Company, accruing massive profits invisible to those on the island which expanded dramatically in the 1970s when sugar firms started speculating on sugar prices in secret collusion with the Dominican government. Indeed, 1979 was a record year for sugar profits as Gulf and

49 Averill 2009:42. The massacre was the beginning of the end of the Vincent presidency (1930–41) because strikes, student protests, and denunciations of collusion with Trujillo had poisoned his public image; as Armand told us on February 9, 1988, “that made him totally, totally unpopular” (*sa té vini fè Vincent impopulaire nèt nèt, nèt*). Historian Roger Dorsainville told us that Vincent’s lack of military response was in part a product of the fact that in 1937 Trujillo was believed to have an unbeatable army (interview with Dorsainville, May 11, 1988). For more on the army under Trujillo, see Peguero 2004.

Western—the largest U.S. corporate sugar producer at that time in the Dominican Republic—made a whopping US\$ 64 million speculating with Dominican sugar on the futures market at a time when sugar prices were hitting historic lows and the United States raised tariffs to keep Dominican sugar out (to protect U.S.-produced corn sweetener) and lowered quotas for Dominican sugar, forcing the Dominican Republic to take IMF emergency loans that eventually landed them in a major debt crisis by 1982 (Plant 1987:39). So maybe these stories of baka devil contracts were not so way off after all; it is just that the “voodoo economics” actually took place in New York and not Port-au-Prince. Which makes the conspiratorial genre of stories of the hidden tunnel siphoning gold from Haiti to secret coffers in Wall Street not so far-fetched after all.

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