

Volume 7, Issue 2, August 2010

**THE ZOMBIE FROM MYTH TO REALITY: WADE DAVIS,
ACADEMIC SCANDAL AND THE LIMITS OF THE REAL**

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Abstract

The figure of the zombie is one of the most ubiquitous in contemporary popular culture. They are also beginning to be more at the centre of academic attention in a range of areas, beyond specialists in ethnology and folkloric beliefs. The image of the zombie seems to symbolise and embody a diverse range of phenomena. But the figure of the zombie was not always so intellectually respectable, especially if it was claimed that zombies were not just symbols but were in fact “real”. In the mid-1980s the ethnobotanist Wade Davis claimed that far from being only folkloric images, zombies were in fact “made” in Haiti. Actual cases of zombification could be demonstrated, and proven to result from the particular religious, social, moral and legal codes of Haitian peasant society. Davis’s publication of the claims caused a storm of controversy that in some ways has still not subsided. This paper traces out the nature both of Davis’s claims, and the scandal they gave rise to. Reasons are offered as to why the zombie subject matter seemed at the time to be so scandalous. The implications of Davis’s unintended contribution to the development of taking zombies seriously within the academy are presented and reflected upon.

DOI: 10.2966/scrip.070210.351



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1. Introduction

The figure of the zombie is one of the most ubiquitous in contemporary popular culture, inhabiting as it does a plethora of films, computer games, magazines, comics, websites and myriad other cultural forms. Zombies have, particularly over the last decade or so, moved from the specific realm of horror fan culture out into broader, more mainstream cultural domains. Yet despite their increasing cultural presence, they bring with them lingering senses of unease and revulsion. Being neither alive nor dead, and possessed of disturbing anthropophagous drives, they retain their power to unsettle and discomfit those who view them. Indeed, it is their uncanny nature – a creature that is not one thing or another, but which seems to be a potent threat to the living - which lies at the heart of the ambiguous roles they can play in many cultural contexts. As other papers in this edition testify, such contexts are very much proliferating today. Philosophers have for a considerable period used the idea of zombies as means of engaging in thought-experiments about the nature of consciousness.¹ But nowadays zombies are to be found in such worlds as computer technologies (through the means of zombie-like malware), biotechnology (through the technological production of “life-less” but edible flesh) and artificial intelligence (through the means of the “dead” continuing to speak to their living descendants). In all of these cases, the figure of the zombie acts as a metaphor to think through curious, even monstrous, hybrid, liminal, boundary-challenging entities. This chapter, however, goes beyond metaphor and imagery alone, to deal with real zombies – zombies not only of the imagination, but also the living and breathing living-dead.

The search for real zombies takes us towards the rich, fascinating yet often viscerally tragic history of the island of Haiti. Of all the key icons of modern horror, zombies are the only ones to have originated outside of the context of nineteenth century Romantic imagery.² Unlike equally ubiquitous vampires and post-Frankenstein monsters, zombies hail from a non-Western context, namely the religious culture of Haitian Vodoun, commonly caricatured by Westerners as “Voodoo”. People in the West have been both fascinated and repelled by Vodoun since the end of the nineteenth century at least and the zombie has played an important role in this regard. Haitian *zombis* are rather different to Western *zombies*, although ideas of the latter originally derived in part from accounts of the former. The *zombi* of Haitian Vodoun folklore is describable thus:

[B]y magical or other unknown means a person may die and be transformed into a creature of living death called a *zombi*. This living-dead entity is said to have no will of his own, but can be made to perform slave labour. Opinion is divided as to the process by which this transformation can be made to occur. Some Haitians appear to prefer the

¹ Philosophical zombies raise problematic counterexamples for various positions in metaphysics. These zombies are respirating, fully functional persons in every sense except that they lack subjective states (that is, consciousness). They look and act like everyone else, but have no thoughts, feelings or interior life of any kind. [They] are technically alive, but there is a sense in which they ‘shouldn’t’ be: their existence...presents a troubling paradox that threatens to upset our most deeply held convictions about what it means to be alive in the first place. See R Greene and KS Mohammad (eds) *The Undead and Philosophy* (Chicago: Open Court Press, 2006), at xiv-xv.

² KS Mohammad, “Zombies, Rest and Motion: Spinoza and the Speed of Undeath” in R Greene and KS Mohammad (eds), *The Undead and Philosophy* (Chicago: Open Court Press, 2006).

magical explanation, while others believe that a poison is used by malevolent practitioners to cause the change.³

But the history of the Haitian zombi shows that when it has been thought about and represented by Westerners, it has generally been conflated with the zombie of Western popular culture. This conflation has been a significant part of Western misrepresentations and misunderstandings of Vodoun and Haitian peasant beliefs for many decades. The apparently widespread Haitian belief in zombis/zombies has often been taken as proof of the backward, if not outright barbaric, nature of Haitians. Surely only a truly uncivilised group of people could possibly really believe in the existence of zombies? For a long time, what seemed to differentiate Haitian credulity from Western rationality was the former group's belief in something - the zombi/zombie - that the Western mindset could not at all accept the existence of. We know that zombies are just figures in stories; but *they* show their ignorance by believing in the reality of the living-dead.

For at least a hundred years, this situation persisted with the zombie acting as a condensed symbol of Haitian barbarity for Western culture. Then, in the mid-1980s, a North American anthropologist called Wade Davis made some claims which completely reversed the standard narrative. According to Davis, the Haitian peasantry was in fact wholly rational and realistic in its zombi beliefs, because such creatures did actually exist, and could on the basis of ethnographic and other evidence be demonstrated to exist. Zombis were *real*, and they were “made” as a result of the particular social, moral and “legal” codes of Haitian peasant society. The making of zombis was enacted through the nexus of a particular technology – poisonous powders fabricated by Vodoun priests – coupled together with the particular mental-cultural context of Vodoun beliefs: the powders could have effects only on people who believed in the reality of zombis. A person was zombified if he or she had so fundamentally offended the traditional community norms of acceptable behaviour and justice that ordinary sanctions were insufficiently punitive in the view of the community. As zombified people were miscreants thought to be wholly beyond the pale by the communities they lived within, they were relatively rare, but nonetheless real. They existed in a state of living death, prisoners of the power of the Vodoun priest who had created them. They were not figments of the imagination, and their existence could be proven scientifically, using the very Western rational techniques and thought processes which had hitherto scorned peasant beliefs about the reality of zombis. Once these claims were made and disseminated, a tempestuous scandal broke with a rhetorical violence social science had not known for many years.

This paper is about that scandal, and what it tells us about various inter-related matters to do with reality, knowledge and intellectual boundaries, and how zombi(e)s – especially those that are claimed to be real - can pose uncanny threats and challenges to existing forms of knowledge. Davis attempted to do what no serious scholar had attempted to do before, namely to redefine the zombi such that it would be seen not as a folkloric figment of the imagination but rather as a living actuality. The fact that he signally failed to achieve his aims tells us a great deal not only about the academic cultural context of the time, but also about general Western cultural resistance to the possibility of *taking zombi(e)s too seriously*, transforming them from

³ WH Anderson, “Tetrodotoxin and the Zombi Phenomenon” (1988) 23 *Journal of Ethnopharmacology* 121-126, at 121.

myth to actuality, from folklore to reality, and from trivial entertainment figure to serious object of scrutiny. As other papers in this edition enjoin the wider scholarly community to do exactly the latter, this paper functions as a cautionary tale – when this was tried before, a storm of controversy ensued that still in some ways has not died down. This is because Davis is still widely represented as the man who made palpably ridiculous claims about zombies and that stigma is still attached to his reputation some quarter of a century later. But despite the apparently gaping flaws in his claims and methodology, Davis’s case remains worth considering because he remains a pioneer of sorts. Even if he was wrong in all essentials, his failed attempt to render the zombi(e) into a serious intellectual object still stands as an important staging-post towards current endeavours to think seriously about zombies without fear or shame. That is why his story and the moral to be drawn from it are worth recounting in this context.

2. The Haitian *Zombi* and Perceptions of Haiti

Wade Davis claimed he could prove he had found zombis, the technology and techniques by which they are made, and those who make them. It is crucial to note that the Haitian Vodoun conception of the zombi is not at all like the flesh-eating and often fast-moving zombie of Western media culture since the 1960s. The former is part of the Vodoun belief system, a complex blend of African and Christian religious ideas and practices, which sprang up among the populations of slaves and ex-slaves in the countryside of colonial and revolutionary Haiti. The latter is very much a contemporary creation, in large part popularised by the American film-maker George A Romero and his highly influential trilogy of zombie films, beginning with *The Night of the Living Dead* in 1968, and now a mainstay of cinema and video-gaming worldwide. The fear that is embodied in the Haitian figure of the zombi is not the Euro-American one of the dead returning to enact a cannibalistic holocaust on the living. Rather, it involves dread of the body-snatcher – the zombi master - who takes the living body and destroys the soul within it, creating a living but mentally and emotionally dead being who endlessly obeys his will.⁴

Thus the Haitian fear is not *of* zombis, which is the Euro-American disposition. Rather, the anthropological record is replete with cases of Haitians taking in and caring for people they believe to be zombified relatives.⁵ The fear is instead of *becoming* a zombi, deprived of all free will and enslaved to a powerful, predatory master. Clearly this fear harks back in important ways to the brutal conditions of the lives of plantation slaves during the colonial period – the zombi very much expresses ex-slaves’ fears of a return to the horrors of an enslaved condition. Whereas, as we will see below, whites have construed the zombi(e) to represent in condensed form all that was vile about Haiti, black Haitians instead understood the zombi within a nexus of folk memory about the brutality of the white slave-masters and their power to destroy a slave both physically and spiritually.⁶ In this sense, the idea of the zombi is both representation and product of a particular socio-cultural-legal constellation – plantation slavery – and how the ex-slaves of the social order of revolutionary Haiti and after made sense of their history and that of their ancestors.

⁴ M Sheller, *Consuming the Caribbean* (London: Routledge, 2003), at 168.

⁵ R Littlewood and C Douyon, “Clinical Findings in Three Cases of Zombification” (1997) 350 *The Lancet* 1094-1096.

⁶ J Dayan, *Haiti, History, and the Gods* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995).

While the Haitian conception has clearly acted as a source of inspiration for the mass-mediated Euro-American notion, nonetheless the latter has evolved quite markedly over time away from the former. Early Euro-American horror fiction did indeed draw on the Haitian idea of the passive living-dead under the sway of a cruel zombi-master – the films *White Zombie* (1932) and *I Walked With A Zombie* (1945) are cases in point (even if, by adding an “e” to the Haitian word “zombie”, they already point to a Westernisation of the concept). Such fictions clearly could make the symbolic connection between the inhuman conditions of the Caribbean sugar plantation during the centuries of slavery – the Haitian zombi’s birthplace, as it were – and the dehumanising and deadening effects of large-scale factory labour, creating resonances for film audiences of the 1930s and 1940s.⁷ But after Romero’s highly influential reworking in the late 1960s, the cannibalistic, aggressive and increasingly *mobile* figure of the zombie has come to resemble less and less the tragic, passive zombi of the Haitian imaginary.⁸

The beliefs held by the Haitian peasantry as to the existence of zombis ‘have always engaged the curiosity of outsiders and the interest of anthropologists’ since the late nineteenth century onwards.⁹ The outside world’s fascination with zombi lore is both generated by, and very much contributes to, more general perceptions of Haiti, “a place so often imagined as excess, and dismissed as savage”.¹⁰ On this recurring stereotypical view, which has informed foreign – especially North American – opinion about Haiti for more than a century, the country is “a pre-industrial society inhabited by ignorant, diseased peasants oblivious to the outside world”.¹¹ But as one of the leading critics of this kind of view, the American doctor Paul Farmer notes, Haiti as a geo-political and cultural entity is actually a “creation of expansionist European empires” – in this case, the French imperial state – and thus “a quintessentially Western [and modern] entity”,¹² rather than the insular pre-modern enclave untouched by modernity, progress and civilisation imagined by foreign observers.¹³

European and North American depictions of Haiti as a feverish inferno of Voodoo-induced depravity were very much stimulated by racist fears over what was in the nineteenth century a glaring socio-political anomaly, the world’s first “black republic”. This was a quintessentially “modern” legal-political entity founded through the revolutionary activities of former slaves, who had managed through impressive military strategising to overthrow the rule of the French imperial masters in 1804. A thoroughly modern state created and run by blacks was a focus of both fascination and repugnance in post-Enlightenment Europe and North America. At one level, the revolutionary birth-pangs of the Haitian Republic constituted “the crucible, the trial by fire for the ideals of the French Enlightenment”, as here were the social and legal ideals of liberty (in the strongest sense – freedom from slavery), equality and fraternity being put into practice not by the revolutionary bourgeoisie of Paris but by

⁷ S McIntosh, “The Evolution of the Zombie: the Monster that Keeps Coming Back” in S McIntosh and M Leverette (eds), *Zombie Culture: Autopsies of the Living Dead* (Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, 2008).

⁸ K Mohammad, see note 2 above, at 93, 101.

⁹ T Yasumoto and CY Kao, “Tetrodotoxin and the Haitian Zombie” (1988) 24 (8) *Toxicon* 747-749, at 747.

¹⁰ J Dayan, see note 6 above, at 136.

¹¹ P Farmer, *The Uses of Haiti* (Monroe: Common Courage Press, 2006), at 50.

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ M Sheller, see note 4 above.

the apparently wretched former slaves of the French plantation colony of San Domingue.¹⁴ That those hitherto kept in the most wretched conditions by European masters could overthrow the latter and found a republic based on the most contemporary enlightened ideals, was very much a source of fascination and wonder in early nineteenth century Europe. But as the early idealistic days of the revolution degenerated into brutal internecine rivalry among the revolutionary leaders, Western observers began to look at Haiti not with admiration but with increasing disgust. This has generally been the recurring pattern ever since, the apparent fall from grace of the early Haitian Republic and its relinquishing of the promise of social, political and legal modernity leading to “images of revulsion and hostility in the Western imagination...images of the unspeakable and mysterious” that have been recycled ever since.¹⁵

Within the negative nexus of foreign images of Haiti that have pertained since then, (mis)representations of Vodoun, the belief-system of the Haitian peasantry, have been central. Vodoun was from the late eighteenth-century the majority religion of the slaves and then ex-slaves. It is a religion of the countryside, a system of thought that borrows certain images from the Republic’s official religion, Roman Catholicism, but which has stood firm against repeated attempts by the Church and metropolitan political elites to eradicate it or diminish its influence.¹⁶ Despite being a vibrant system of thought that has changed its contours over time as Haitian society itself has changed¹⁷, indicating its very strong embeddedness within rural social structures, it remains the case today that Vodoun is “one of the most caricatured religions in the world”.¹⁸ It remains swathed in mystery, an unsavoury enigma that is the staple resource of horror fiction writers the world over. As Mintz and Trouillot put it, “Vodou[n] has fascinated anthropologists and sensation-seekers alike. Few, other than believers, know exactly what it is”, even if foreigners think they know what it is.¹⁹ As the Haitian anthropologist André Metraux has shown, the caricatured Voodoo beloved of foreign observers “conjures up visions of mysterious deaths, secret rites...dark saturnalia”, even if the reality is, of course, much more mundane.²⁰

The relentlessly negative portrayals of Vodoun as “Voodoo” spring in large part from sensationalistic, mostly fictional travel literature of the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Among the first to popularise the subsequent rigid clichés about Vodoun as involving notorious rites and cannibalism was the work of the former British consul Spenser St John, whose 1884 memoir *Hayti, or the Black Republic* caused a sensation in Victorian England with its lurid tales of murder, despotism and the rampant wickedness of Voodoo superstition. The high-water mark of such depictions came during the period of the US occupation of Haiti (1915-

¹⁴ S Buck-Morss, *Hegel, Haiti and Universal History* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009).

¹⁵ C Arthur and M Dash, *Libete: A Haiti Anthology* (Kingston, Jamaica: Ian Randle, 1999), at 315.

¹⁶ J Philippe and JB Romain, “Indisposition in Haiti” (1979) 13B *Social Science and Medicine* 129-133.

¹⁷ J Dayan, see note 6 above.

¹⁸ W Dutton, “The Problem of Invisibility: Voodoo and Zora Neale Hurston” (1993) 13(2) *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 131-152, at 136.

¹⁹ S Mintz and M-R Trouillot, “The Social History of Haitian Vodou” in D Cosentino (ed), *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou* (Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History, 1995), 123-147, at 10.

²⁰ Quoted in P Farmer, *Aids and Accusation: Haiti and the Geography of Blame* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), at 3.

1934), when a slew of sensation-mongering books appeared, often written by former members of the American forces stationed in the country, under such dime-store titles as *Black Baghdad* and *Cannibal Cousins*. The *New York Times* reporter William Seabrook also made a vital contribution to the purple prose of the period with his 1929 travelogue *The Magic Island*, depicting a Voodoo ceremony in this manner, reminiscent of the worst Bacchanalian excesses imaginable: "...in the red light of torches, which made the moon turn pale, leaping, screaming, writhing black bodies, blood-maddened, sex-maddened, god-maddened, drunken, whirled and danced their dark saturnalia".²¹

Seabrook also first popularised the figure of the zombi(e), paving the way for its use in American films – the first of these, *White Zombie*, starring Bela Lugosi as a nefarious Voodoo priest with the power to create the living dead, appeared only three years later, in 1932. These sorts of books – and later, films – were not only designed to titillate the palates of European and North American audiences keen to hear of wild revels and anthropophagous feasts. They also served to justify the US occupation morally and politically by representing the population as wholly unable to conduct themselves in anything approaching a civilised manner. The figure of the zombi(e) operated as a potent coding of racial and cultural divides and stood as an uncanny emblem of black barbarity.

Although it has now passed, the images thrown up by the particular political juncture of the American occupation still haunt Western imaginaries today. As Arthur and Dash put the point, "the time-honoured clichés of the supernatural" forged a century ago have perpetuated "the image of Haiti as the land of the zombie" into the present.²² In the mid-1980s there was a widespread belief in the US that AIDS had originated in Haiti, and that its generation was somehow connected to Voodoo rituals, although in actual fact the disease arrived in Haiti from North America, carried most likely by sex tourists.²³ Journalistic coverage of this issue in the early 1980s drew very much upon the range of images elaborated more than sixty years before. Thus the apparently abnormally high rate of AIDS infections among Haitians could be reported as "a clue from the grave, as though a zombie, leaving a trail of unwinding gauze bandages and rotting flesh, had come...to pronounce a curse" on the depraved Haitians and the whites decadent enough to have sexual congress with them.²⁴

It was not just tabloid journalism that reached towards this stock imagery. In 1986,, the apparently respectable confines of the *Journal of the American Medical Association* ran an article entitled "Night of the Living Dead", which contained these assertions: "Do necromantic zombiists [sic] transmit [AIDS] during voodooistic rituals?...Even now, many Haitians are voodoo *serviteurs* and partake in its rituals...[they] may be unsuspectingly infected with AIDS by ingestion, inhalation or dermal contact with contaminated ritual substances, as well as by sexual activity".²⁵

It was in these sorts of ways that an association was built up in the mid-1980s that to be a Haitian was automatically to be an AIDS carrier. Earlier images of Voodoo and zombies were put to new purposes, at the same time as being rejuvenated by their

²¹ W Seabrook, *The Magic Island* (New York: Marlow and Co, 1994 [1929]), at 13.

²² C Arthur and M Dash, see note 15 above, at 319.

²³ P Farmer, see note 20 above.

²⁴ Quoted in P Farmer, see note 20 above, at 2.

²⁵ Quoted in P Farmer, see note 20 above, at 3

association with matters of highly contemporary, and potentially global, concern. Such images again resurfaced in the later 1980s and 1990s, during the times of Haiti's political crises - starting with the overthrow of the regime of the younger Duvalier in 1986 - and further American interventionism.²⁶ Once again, ideas as to Haitians being congenitally unable to govern themselves – stereotypes resurrected in certain media during the aftermath of the recent earthquake that destroyed much of Port-au-Prince - effectively came to the fore, and once again, this situation could in part be ascribed to the supposed stranglehold of Voodoo over the Haitian imagination, indicated in condensed form through the association of Haiti and zombi(e) beliefs.²⁷

3. A PhD on the Reality of *Zombis*

It was against this highly charged background that the Canadian anthropologist Wade Davis went to Haiti to find zombis and those who make them. Imagine the great splash one could make at graduate seminars and academic conferences by announcing that one's fieldwork had proven that zombis – or indeed zombies – “really exist”. This is apparently what happened at the XIth International Congress of Anthropological and Ethnological Sciences in Vancouver in 1983, when Davis made exactly that kind of pronouncement in a paper he presented in a slot he filled at the last minute in place of an absent delegate. Rumour spread like wildfire that a graduate student, newly returned from Haiti, was making such sensational claims.²⁸ Davis had indeed recently returned from the field, having spent the period from April to November 1982 in Port-au-Prince and rural Haiti.

The first written fruits of his fieldwork appeared later in 1983, in a paper with the provocative title “The Ethnobiology of the Haitian Zombi” which appeared in the *Journal of Ethnopharmacology*.²⁹ This was an obvious outlet for a scholar in ethnobotany, the study of how particular non-Western societies use specific drugs for medical and religious purposes, which draws upon both anthropology and pharmacology. The paper was almost immediately picked up by the august British medical journal *The Lancet*,³⁰ which reported Davis's findings without demur, but did mention – in an uncharacteristic aside – that Ian Fleming might have appreciated this research as in the novel *Dr No* James Bond was poisoned by the same chemical, Tetrodotoxin (TTX), which Davis alleged was to be found in the powders which zombi-masters used to create zombis. The paper became the basis for the semi-popular book – part research report, part first-person-narrated travelogue, part adventure story – *The Serpent and the Rainbow* in 1985.³¹ A large portion of the text of this book was reproduced for its more explicitly “academic” sequel, *Passage of Darkness: The Ethnobiology of the Haitian Zombie* (note the addition of “e” to

²⁶ R Fatton, *Haiti's Predatory Republic* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2002).

²⁷ K McCarthy Brown, “Afro-Caribbean Spirituality: A Haitian Case Study” (1989) 11 *Second Opinion* 36-57.

²⁸ C Farrer, “New and Noteworthy” (1988) 47(3) *Western Folklore* 224-226.

²⁹ W Davis, “The Ethnobiology of the Haitian Zombi” (1983) 9 *Journal of Ethnopharmacology* 85-104.

³⁰ “Puffers, Gourmands and Zombification” (2 Jun 1984) *The Lancet* 1220-1221.

³¹ W Davis, *The Serpent and the Rainbow* (London: Fontana, 1986).

“zombie” in the sub-title), published by the University of North Carolina Press in 1988.³²

Davis had impeccable academic credentials: he was undertaking a PhD within the respected Botanical Museum at Harvard, under the supervision of the doyen of ethnobotany worldwide, Professor Richard Evans Schultes. The apparent outlandishness of the claims being made was mitigated by the fact that funding for the project had come from such august sources as the American National Science Foundation, the Wenner-Gren Foundation for Anthropological Research, and the Canadian Social Science and Humanities Research Council. But while one might expect students and scholars to be funded to carry out research on folkloric *beliefs* about Haitian zombis, it remained the case that providing money for work that alleged they were in fact *real*, was definitely out of the ordinary. Indeed, from the very beginning of the project, the assumptions animating it were that not only was zombification a real process, but that it held the promise of opening up a potentially astounding pharmacological secret.

The idea of sending a student to Haiti had come from Nathan S Kline, a psychopharmacologist then in charge of the Rockland State Research Institute of New York. Kline had worked in Haiti for thirty years at the time of his contacting the Harvard Botanical Museum and had established the only psychiatric facility in the country at that time. Along with Haitian colleagues, he was convinced that zombis were indeed real and not only folkloric in nature as anthropological orthodoxy assumed. This belief was mounted upon two apparently well-documented cases of actual zombification. Stories of the existence of zombis were thought by previous investigators, both Western and native Haitian ethnologists, to be endemic among the Haitian peasantry. Moreover, reflecting this situation and apparently quite remarkably, Article 246 of the Haitian Penal Code, first enacted in 1835, explicitly deals with zombification. The administration of any substance that creates a prolonged period of lethargy without actually causing death was treated as attempted murder. But if the substance caused the appearance of death and resulted in the burial of the victim, that would be treated as murder and punished as such. So the zombi was in fact enshrined in the state-sanctioned law of the urban elite and not just in the norms and mores of the peasants of rural Haiti. This gave claims as to its reality a certain sort of plausibility.

But what has long bedevilled the attempts of those seeking to prove that zombis are real is lack of evidence as to actual cases of those who had apparently “come back from the dead”. Kline had heard of two such cases that seemed highly plausible: fifty-eight year old Clairvius Narcisse, who had appeared near his home village eighteen years after being buried in 1962, and thirty-three year old Francine Illeus (known locally as *Ti Femme*), who had been declared dead in 1976 and had reappeared post-mortem after three years. In the former case, the death had been registered at an American-run clinic, making, in Kline’s view, the likelihood of false diagnosis of death much more unlikely than if Narcisse’s death had been registered by local officials or his family. Surely the American physician who had certified that Narcisse was dead must have had good grounds for thinking he was dealing with a corpse? But as Narcisse had apparently risen from the grave, it seemed plausible to claim that he

³² W Davis, *Passage of Darkness: The Ethnobiology of the Haitian Zombie* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988).

had merely had *death-like symptoms* which would have compelled even a highly trained doctor to certify death. Narcisse's case seemed to suggest that he had *only looked as if he was dead* when he was certified as such. So the puzzle was posed as to how this could have occurred.

Part of the folkloric tradition had it that Vodoun priests (*bokors*) could create a poisonous powder that was deployed as part of the magic ritual of zombification. Following the lead of an early quasi-anthropological study by one of the first women of colour to be trained as a professional anthropologist, Zora Neale Hurston, dating from the late 1930s,³³ it could be hypothesised that Narcisse's symptoms may have been induced by such a powder. The capacity to render a person sufficiently comatose to seem dead to a trained eye but which nonetheless would allow them to be resuscitated later, by means as yet unknown, promised to be of vast pharmacological interest. This included the possibility that the powders could be used to subdue NASA astronauts on future long-term space flights.

So it was with a bizarre conjunction of the hyper-modernity of space exploration with the apparently quintessentially pre-modern folkloric figure of the zombi – each pole mediated by the possible pharmacological sophistication of Vodoun *bokors* and their “zombi powders”, a potion both deeply “traditional” and yet potentially astoundingly future-oriented – that Kline approached Richard Evans Schultes in search of a young, keen, adventurous ethnobotanist who could collect some samples of “zombi powder”. This was a feat that had never been achieved before, either by foreign investigators or by interested parties among Haiti's urban elite. For this task, Schultes put forward Davis who had already proven his fieldwork credentials in strenuous investigations in the Amazon jungle for his undergraduate dissertation. As Davis subsequently presented it, Kline had put the project to him in these terms: he was not just to go to Haiti, but to go “to the frontier of death” itself.³⁴ As it turned out, Davis was perfect for the task, at least in terms of the capacity for garnering vast publicity for what became known as the “zombie project”, the adding of the “e” indicating the permeation of the Western figure of the zombie into the project's conceptualisation of what was being sought after.

Davis was duly despatched to Haiti in early 1982 where he spent several months. After a second brief trip to Haiti in 1984, he had not only collected eight samples of so-called “zombi powder”, but also interview material with various individuals supposedly connected to zombification, including Clairvius Narcisse himself, and some participant observational material on the events taking place within certain secret societies, the activities of which Davis believed lay at the heart of the zombification phenomenon.

On the basis of his fieldwork, Davis generated an argument made up of three elements: a *social structural and functionalist* argument (zombification is a form of social control); a *materialist-pharmacological* argument (zombification is made possible by the creation and use of certain poisonous powders by Vodoun priests); and a *cultural-psychological* argument which knits the other two elements together (the powders only have a strong effect on victims because the latter strongly believe in the existence of zombis, very much fear being made into one, and when the

³³ ZN Hurston, *Tell My Horse: Voodoo and Life in Haiti and Jamaica* (London: Harper Perennial, 1990 [1938]).

³⁴ W Davis, see note 33 above, at 25.

powders are administered, think they really are being turned into a zombi). Zombis are made by *bokors* but only at the behest of the secret societies which control the region of the Haitian countryside that the malefactor lives within. The *bokors* use certain pharmacological weapons, powders primarily based around the lethal drug Tetrodotoxin (TTX), to psychologically enslave their chosen victims, allegedly putting them to work in conditions of never-ending subjugation. The victims are those individuals who have transgressed certain community norms – such as getting rich at the expense of one’s family and neighbours – which the secret societies monitor and police in the interests of social stability in rural Haiti.

The connection Davis made between the zombi powder and zombification on the one side, and the secret societies on the other, had come about as a result of reading the then novel material of the Haitian anthropologist Michel Laguerre, which had argued that the secret societies, known at least by some Haitians as “Bizango” societies, existed to defend local community interests against what members saw as the depredations of outsiders, especially as regards the buying of land.³⁵ Davis extrapolated from this account in two ways. Following Laguerre, Davis laid particular emphasis on the societies’ “legal” apparatus, with transgressions against communal norms being punished by an elaborate system of judgements and reprimands. Zombification was understood by Davis as the most severe retribution that can be handed out by a secret society to an errant individual. Zombification is a carefully calibrated act of communal vengeance on the most reprehensible miscreants. It is emphatically not, Davis warns, either a random or criminal act, but rather the severest sanction of the secret society acting as the guarantor of local social stability. In that sense, zombification is a highly moral act, for even if it is greatly feared by the peasantry it in effect protects them from those who would seriously upset community stability. Thus the great fear of zombification is what keeps Haitian peasant society functioning. What seems a terrifying threat to the individual is actually a mechanism that guarantees the well-being of the whole social order, and necessarily so, as without the terror induced at the thought of becoming a zombi, the justice of the secret societies would be impotent.

On Narcisse’s testimony, he had been quite conscious and able to perceive events around him, all the way through his supposed “death”, including the horrifying ordeal of being buried alive; but he had been in no way able to signify this either to the doctors who certified him deceased or, later, the mourners at his funeral. He had been reduced by the zombi powder to being a wholly passive witness at his own death. He remembered in the interview with Davis that, when he was taken out of the grave by the *bokor* and his acolytes less than twenty-four hours after he had been certified dead, that he was beaten violently and then led off to labour in the fields in a remote part of the island where no-one would recognise him. Apart from the trauma of the burial alive, Davis reasoned, on the basis of endemic folkloric beliefs about there being another powder which “revived” the buried person once they had been taken from the grave, that Narcisse may well have been dosed with another drug at the point of exhumation, one which had the power to help erase his memory and put him into the stupefied condition necessary to keep him in a pacified state for an indefinite time:

³⁵ M Laguerre, *Voodoo and Politics in Haiti* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1989).

The victim, affected by the drug, [and] traumatised by the set and setting of the graveyard and immediately beaten by the zombi maker's assistants, is bound and led before a cross to be baptised with a new zombi name. After the baptism, he or she is made to eat a paste containing a strong dose of a potent psychoactive drug which brings on an induced state of psychosis. During the course of that intoxication, the zombi is carried off to be sold as a slave labourer, often on the sugar plantations.³⁶

Thus according to Davis's analysis, there must exist two kinds of zombi powders, a "before" one which renders the victim totally helpless to the point of seeming lifeless to all witnesses, and an "after" one, which keeps the recently-exhumed unfortunate in a condition of suspended mental animation. The eight different powders which Davis eventually collected from various *bokors* were of the first type. He claimed that their main psychoactive ingredient was Tetrodotoxin (TTX), derived from particular species of puffer fish to be found in off Haitian waters. Powders of the second type were not collected although Davis was convinced their main ingredient was *Datum stramonium*, a plant which was known in local patois as *concombre zombi*, "the zombi's cucumber", an apparent clue in local dialect about its pharmacological purpose in Vodoun circles.

Davis's training as an ethnobotanist oriented him towards emphasising the mutually penetrating domains of drugs on the one hand and cultural context on the other. He thus emphasised that "any psychoactive drug has within it a completely ambivalent potential. Pharmacologically it introduces a certain condition, but that condition is mere raw material to be worked by particular cultural...forces and expectations".³⁷ Thus the zombi powders could only work effectively on a person who believed strongly in the possibility of zombification. Other foreign observers had long noted the widespread use of tales about zombies to teach children about social mores.³⁸ If that was the case, then a person brought up within such a context would be very predisposed to believe that what was happening to them was indeed really turning them into a zombi. Davis argues that it is the belief that one could be made a zombi that ensures that the zombi powders have the effects that they do on those undergoing zombification.

A person brought up within the Vodoun world-view – which Davis views as an all-encompassing cosmology which the Vodounist cannot escape from – believes that the *bokor* really has the power to turn them into a zombi through sorcery. The *bokor* has at his disposal a range of magical acts, all of which are aimed at capturing the *ti bon ange* – the "little good soul" – of an individual, a key notion in Vodoun cosmology according to Davis. When a *bokor* captures the *ti bon ange* he can either create a *zombi cadavre* – a physical zombi, of the kind that is made to look dead, buried, then uncovered – or a *zombi astral* – a zombi of the spirit, a non-corporeal zombie, a spirit kept in a small vessel like a pot, indicating that the *bokor* has complete control over his or her soul. Zombies of the spirit are far more common than zombies of the flesh. Indeed, Davis and other observers have pointed out that when a foreign investigator

³⁶ W Davis, see note 31 above, at 101.

³⁷ W Davis, see note 33 above, at 151.

³⁸ J Huxley, "The Ritual of Voodoo and Symbolism of the Body" (1966) 251 (772) *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society of London, Series B Biological Sciences* 423-427.

tries to procure a zombi, it will inevitably be a *zombi astral* that is offered by informants. On one memorable occasion, Davis was told by some contacts that they had come to sell him some *zombis astrals* as they thought he would have difficulty getting a *zombi cadavre* through United States immigration and customs.³⁹

4. Responding to the Zombi(e)

Responses to Davis's claims have ranged from the enthusiastic to the viscerally damning. On its publication in 1986, *The Serpent and the Rainbow* became a subject of some notoriety and – rare thing – a work by an academic which became a best-seller in the US and other countries.

The popularity and notoriety were very much augmented when shortly after publication, the rights to the book were bought by the film producers David Ladd and Doug Claybourne.⁴⁰ Wes Craven, riding high with the recent success of his film *A Nightmare on Elm Street* (1984), was brought on board the project which, with a budget of eleven million US dollars, was far more generously resourced than most genre films of the time. The relatively large budget was won in spite of what Craven has presented as a bias against films about zombies: “I kept running up against this problem people had with the subject matter. As soon as you say ‘voodoo’ or ‘zombie’ people think it’s some old B-film”.⁴¹

Ironically, the B-films Craven here refers to are the very ones from the 1930s and 1940s that were inspired in large part by Seabrook's sensational travelogue about Haiti mentioned earlier. So there was an attempt by the director to distance himself from such fare, and to produce a piece that was more ethnographically “realistic”. Craven, the producers and subsequent fans of the film have all taken Davis's account as unalloyed ethnological fact, a quite different perspective than that taken by Davis's academic audience. As Craven put it, “there is indeed a tribal judgement where a person who affronts the tribe is made into a zombie”.⁴² Craven has subsequently said that he immersed “himself in voodoo lore to maintain the film's authenticity”.⁴³ Defenders of the film have argued that while the screenplay had to get away from “the often dry and scientific prose of Davis' true-life account”,⁴⁴ nonetheless the essential “truth” of the book was maintained, at least in spirit. That truth is maintained despite the addition of the following elements in the film that were not in the book: the hero (now called Dr Dennis Alan) is buried alive and is himself zombified; a whole series of dream sequences are added, including the constant reappearance of a desiccated zombi(e) bride and a large snake appearing out of one character's mouth; and the addition of a monstrous villain who is the head of the Tonton Macoute, the Duvalier regime's secret police, and who has the power to zombify people through his sorcery, which is presented as truly “magical” rather than, as in the book, pharmacological and cultural.

For advocates of the film – generally hardcore fans of Wes Craven – the adaptation is “an astonishingly complex film” that, despite the fantastic plot additions, really lifts

³⁹ W Davis, see note 33 above, at 186.

⁴⁰ B J Robb, *Screams and Nightmares: The Films of Wes Craven* (London: Titan Books, 1998).

⁴¹ *Ibid*, 128.

⁴² *Ibid*, 126.

⁴³ J K Muir, *Wes Craven: The Art of Horror*, (Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Co, 1998), at 132.

⁴⁴ *Ibid*, 126.

the ethnological lid off of what really happens in Haiti.⁴⁵ For Davis's legion of academic critics, however, the prose of the source material is neither "dry" nor "scientific", but rather "reads as easily as fiction as it does as science" and "falls into the fuzzy realm of literary anthropology previously reserved for writers like Carlos Castaneda".⁴⁶ These critics regarded the film as a tawdry attempt to cash in on Davis's apparent (but eminently disputable) scholarly credentials. The real Haitian dread of *becoming* a zombi is too difficult and too interior a subject to film, so that that sentiment, which Davis emphasises over and over again, is mostly ditched in favour of the standard post-Romero idea and images of *fear of zombies* (with an "e"), understood as maleficent monsters.⁴⁷ In so doing, Craven and his colleagues are alleged to have created "grist for the mill of yet another sensation-mongering American...film about bloody, sexually licentious" voodoo, the very set of clichés that Craven had initially tried to avoid, not least because he felt that, by basing the film on Davis's book, he had source material that had de-sensationalised the subject matter and had provided a reality-check on standard Hollywood fantasies.⁴⁸ Davis had begun *The Serpent and the Rainbow* with the admonition that Hollywood stereotyping of Vodoun was endemic, and his study was meant to show the sophistication, even beauty, of Vodoun cosmology.⁴⁹ When the film was released, Davis very rapidly disowned it publicly. He has subsequently stated that it is "one of the worst Hollywood movies in history".⁵⁰ This rather gives the lie to Craven's rather hopeful statement that "Wade Davis was pretty happy with the film. He understood we were making a commercial sort of picture", as if the dictates of commerce had hardly had an impact upon the transition from book to film at all.⁵¹ But for academic critics, the book was quite as sensationalistic as the film, such that Davis was just as culpable in exploiting long-standing clichés about Haiti, Vodoun and zombies as were the film-makers.⁵²

Beyond disputes about the issues of the book's translation into film, academic critics were generally appalled by *The Serpent and the Rainbow's* cross-pollination of various genres: anthropological treatise and pharmacological-toxicological report on the one hand, first-person narration and adventure story on the other. For these critics, the latter elements seriously polluted the former elements, rendering the ethnology fanciful and the pharmacology so much empty hypothesising. "As much fiction as field work...the wide eyed narrator wanders through the wilds of Haiti in search of zombies", goes a typical comment in this vein.⁵³ There is a constant oscillation in the text between different authorial modes: fictionalising of people and places, dramatising of actions (most notoriously, accompanying a *bokor* and two prostitutes on a midnight expedition to raid what turns out to be a child's grave for materials for

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 143.

⁴⁶ W Dutton, "The Problem of Invisibility: Voodoo and Zora Neale Hurston" (1993) 13 (2) *Frontiers: a Journal of Women Studies* 131-152, at 148.

⁴⁷ M J Koven, "The Folklore of the Zombie Film" in S McIntosh and M Leverette, see note 9 above.

⁴⁸ D G Woodson, "Review of Passage of Darkness" (1992) 62 (1) *Africa: Journal of the International African Institute* 151-154, at 151

⁴⁹ W Davis, see note 33 above, at 11.

⁵⁰ W Davis, "The Ethnosphere and the Academy" (2004) Keynote address, Interinstitutional Consortium for Indigenous Knowledge conference, Pennsylvania State University <http://www.ed.psu.edu/icik/2004Proceedings/section7-davis.pdf> (accessed 17 Jul 2009).

⁵¹ BJ Robb, see note 40 above, at 126.

⁵² C Arthur and M Dash, see note 15 above.

⁵³ *Ibid*, 333.

the zombi powder); presenting factual information through dialogues the narrator is supposedly having with other “characters”; then moving into the more “straight” presentation of historical, anthropological and medical data, involving veritable firework-displays of inter-disciplinary learning on occasion; then turning back towards novelistic verbal displays, describing, for example, the “extraordinary mystery” that the narrator is engaged in.⁵⁴

Davis’s initial admonitions against the stereotyping that have bedevilled previous attempts to write about Haiti in general, and Vodoun and zombis in particular, are quite radically contradicted by comments such as these. Equally noticeable is the constant slippage – present already in the original 1983 paper – between presenting what *could* be the case, and then assuming that what has been mentioned as a possibility *is* actually the case. A typical Davis passage, this time in *Passage of Darkness* gives the impression that zombification simply and unproblematically exists, and that such a claim is not a claim at all but unmediated truth.⁵⁵ This leads to a central contradiction: despite repeatedly claiming that the making of a zombi is a rare event, comments like “undoubtedly *in many instances* the victim does die either from the poison itself or by suffocation in the coffin” rather than being successfully raised from the earth, give the strong impression that zombifications happen all the time in this part of the world.⁵⁶

The Serpent and the Rainbow greatly irritated many anthropologists and related others because of its “Indiana Jones bravado”.⁵⁷ No doubt stung by such criticisms, Davis published *Passage of Darkness* in 1988. This was intended as an orthodox scholarly tract that apparently broke no rules at all, and would claw back the tarnished respectability of the fieldwork. Some critics accepted that he had indeed successfully achieved this aim.⁵⁸ A few even went so far as to proclaim the later book “a masterpiece”, wholly shorn of “formula and sensationalism”.⁵⁹ A minority also thought that *Passage* “weaves the findings of several disparate academic fields into a provocative argument”.⁶⁰

But a more consistently-held view was that the book exhibited, like its predecessor, “a curious mixture of sensationalism and scholarship – and much of the scholarship is questionable”.⁶¹ For the majority of critics, either the pharmacology was suspect, or the ethnography was faulty, or both. Far from weaving together the disparate natural and social scientific enterprises, as a good ethnobotanist must, Davis was accused of both falsifying the toxicology results and of producing hopelessly flawed ethnographic data. He was attacked from both wings of the academy that his training had endeavoured to allow him to knit together. Moreover, Davis was seen to have gone wrong precisely because of a “collision of two different worlds of research”, on the one hand a romantic world of quasi-anthropological adventure where “fame and

⁵⁴ W Davis, see note 31 above, at 47.

⁵⁵ W Davis, see note 32 above, at 9.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 221, emphasis added.

⁵⁷ B Corbett, “Review of *Passage of Darkness: The Ethnobiology of the Haitian Zombie*”, <http://www.webster.edu/~corbette/haiti/bookreviews/davis1.htm> (accessed 18 Jul 2009)

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ C Farrer, see note 28 above.

⁶⁰ PE Brodwin, “Review of *Passage of Darkness: The Ethnobiology of the Haitian Zombie*” (1992) 6(4) *Medical Anthropology Quarterly, New Series*, 411-413, at 411.

⁶¹ R Lawless, “Review of *The Serpent and the Rainbow; Passage of Darkness: The Ethnobiology of the Haitian Zombie*” (1989) 1(1) *Latin American Anthropology Review* 5-6, at 5.

fortune followed”, and on the other “a less glamorous place of mass spectrometers, gas chromatography and mouse bioassays” where his findings were found to be very much less than satisfactory.⁶² In other words, it was ethnobotany itself that was in question here, indicted as a hybrid discipline that failed to produce either good anthropologists or sound natural scientists.

The most recurring criticism of the anthropological critics was that despite his claims to the contrary, Davis had indeed caricatured Vodoun by presenting it as a closed cultural system which had not changed since its inception in the late eighteenth century, and depicting it in a manner that disconnected it from all forms of social and political change.⁶³ He had cavalierly neglected to mention that there existed different schools of thought, as to the nature of Vodoun, its roles in Haitian society and the nature of that society itself, preferring instead to present himself as an unprecedented pioneer working in *terra incognita* that was actually already well-trodden. Moreover, he had no grasp of Creole, the language of the peasantry, so his reliance on an interpreter opened up all sorts of hermeneutic pitfalls. He had spent relatively little time in the field, had carried out little or no preparation beforehand, and was unfamiliar with Haitian society before he landed in Port-au-Prince.⁶⁴ He invested far too much credence in the oral testimony of Clairvius Narcisse, and had not taken into account that the former was in fact far from a “pristine” informant but had in fact been interviewed by various persons since his reappearance in 1980, not least a BBC TV crew making a documentary about zombification. Davis’s access to the secret societies, which he claimed ordered zombification to enact community retribution on miscreants, was very limited, and he was accused of wildly over-estimating the nature of their activities, of misunderstanding the roles they played in Haitian society, and of not really proving any link between the societies and zombification.⁶⁵ Additionally, he had not witnessed any of the powders he had collected actually being used, let alone witnessing an actual instance of zombification, leaving open the possibility that unscrupulous *bokors* had conned a rich white man by selling him powders that could have been made of anything.⁶⁶

The most vicious controversy, however, involved Davis’s claims about the nature of the zombi powders.⁶⁷ Various accusations were made against Davis by his critics in the natural sciences. He was alleged to have submitted his PhD thesis, which claimed the powders had active psych-pharmacological properties, before the laboratory tests were concluded on the powders to see if they actually had the properties claimed by Davis for them. It was contended that Davis and a colleague had carried out their own tests on the powders, but when they failed to find traces of TTX in them, Davis withheld the negative results. Davis retorted to this charge that the experiment had been badly conducted, thus invalidating the negative result, and so there was nothing to report. Critics claimed that Davis had implied that TTX was present in all eight of the sample powders, but once the laboratory results were in, it seemed that the chemical was present only in one of them, a fact he remained silent about. According to the eminent toxicologists, Yasumoto and Kao, to whom some samples of the

⁶² W Booth, “Voodoo Science” (1988) 240 (4850) *Science, New Series* 274-277, at 274.

⁶³ P E Brodwin, see note 60 above. Also J Dayan, see note 6 above.

⁶⁴ W H Anderson, see note 3 above.

⁶⁵ R Lawless, note 61 above.

⁶⁶ PE Brodwin, see note 60 above.

⁶⁷ For a summary of the controversies, see W Booth, note 62 above.

powders had been sent for testing, there were only insignificant traces of TTX in the samples they examined and the samples were very alkaline in nature, so much so that the TTX would have become pharmacologically inactive.⁶⁸ Thus if the *bokors* usually made them this way, they could never have worked effectively. Davis responded that the *bokors* could not be expected to make the powders in the same standardised fashion as a pharmaceutical company, and that the fact that *these* powders did not have the capacity to make zombies did not rule out the possibility that other powders made by these or other *bokors* could be effective.

Davis's responses to the allegations particularly enraged the critics. He was in effect saying that negative results did not matter, so the critics could not disprove his claims. For the critics, this went against all the established protocols of science – Davis was requiring the sceptics to disprove his claims, rather than playing by the rules and endeavouring to prove his own claims through well-founded evidence. The debates came to a head when Kao denounced Davis as having perpetuated a major scientific fraud, with Davis subsequently indignantly denying such claims.⁶⁹ He also added that his natural scientific critics had completely failed to engage with the cultural-psychological elements of his argument, remaining bound within the narrow disciplinary boundaries he himself had transcended.⁷⁰ But the critics were able to respond that the central argument in that regard, namely that TTX had an “ambivalent potential” that could be activated in different ways within different cultures - here, a Vodoun believer being led to believe she or he was becoming a zombi - was absurd, in that all TTX possessed was the capacity to kill if used in sufficient doses, for it was not at all like a drug that could be taken for psychedelic effects.⁷¹ For the critics, the existence of the zombie powders proved nothing; but for Davis, the powders pointed to the undisputed reality of zombification and zombies.

5. Conclusion: A Cautionary Tale?

No doubt stung by the virulence of the response to his claims, Davis retreated, rather in the manner of a Conrad hero, to Papua New Guinea to begin another project and to try to put behind him the fury that he had unleashed. Perhaps the controversy made him realise that a conventional academic career was now unlikely, or at least undesirable. In time, he came to be an “explorer” and ecological campaigner, sponsored by *National Geographic* to go around the world, writing and making documentaries about ecologically threatened places and people.⁷² Thus in the long term, the zombie controversy generated a notoriety that Davis was able to utilise to generate a semi-academic career trajectory.

Many of the barbs aimed at his research were no doubt valid. But there is no doubt too that his timing was unfortunate. *The Serpent and the Rainbow* breaks all the rules of ethnographic writing as it was then practiced, operating as a first person narrative rather than as apparently distanced ethnographic science. The first-person narration of that book then seemed to have thoroughly tainted the contents of its more orthodox academic sequel, *Passage of Darkness*. But both books may well have received a

⁶⁸ T Yasumoto and CY Kao, see note 9 above. See also CY Kao and T Yasumoto, “Tetrodotoxin in ‘Zombie Powder’” (1990) 28(2) *Toxicon* 129-132.

⁶⁹ W Davis, “Zombification” (1988) 240 (4860) *Science, New Series* 1715-1716.

⁷⁰ W Booth, see note 62 above and W Davis, see note 69 above.

⁷¹ W H Anderson, see note 3 above.

⁷² W Davis, see note 50 above.

notably warmer welcome amongst North American anthropologists once the “reflexive turn” had been made in at least parts of that discipline, where the authorial self, far from being excluded from the narrative, is included within it.⁷³ If published a decade or so later, perhaps the anthropological community would have been less uniformly denunciative of what Davis had done, at least in terms of style more than in terms of substance.

But even if he had made his claims about the existence of zombis in a less brash and aggrandising manner, one might surmise that the response from within particular disciplinary communities would have been less than welcoming. Perhaps one of Davis’s greatest sins was to endeavour to cross established disciplinary boundaries of knowledge. The fact that he was endeavouring to conjoin areas that normally go unconnected – colonial history and toxicology, interviews and pharmacology, and so on - meant he was already treading on dangerous ground where the risk of offending multiple types of specialist was very great.⁷⁴

But more importantly than that, I would say that it was the evocative and provocative zombi(e) subject matter that was in large part responsible for the vehemence of the responses of his critics. Here was someone who had the temerity to say that zombi(e)s were not just folkloric creations, just symbols in a particular tradition or a cheap means of garnering thrills for Western publics, but they were in fact real, and that the life-history cases he was presenting were true and viscerally tragic and empirically factual. Moving away from standard ethnological perceptions that zombi(e)s exist symbolically within certain worldviews, towards the radical claim that they *really do exist*, was both troubling and potentially comical at the same time. How could one even begin to think that zombi(e)s are “real”, when such a thought blows apart so many aspects of the Western university’s self-perception, as a place of sober learning rather than a locale for the contemplation of the apparently fantastical, the unrespectable and the distasteful? This possibility is an outrageous one, and one way of dealing with it is to treat it either with outright contempt, or with nervous, degrading laughter.

It is notable that right from the start of his publishing in this area, the framing by editors and critics of Davis’s work, when it was not outright condemnatory, very often seemed to trivialise it with asides akin to a snide snicker. Thus as we have seen, *The Lancet* felt fit to break with its normal neutral prose to throw in a reference to Ian Fleming and the wilder imaginings of spy fiction – another despised genre like horror, according to an orthodox high-culture mentality. More remarkably, when the august journal *Science* ran a piece summarising the rancorous debates about the testing of the powders, it was accompanied by a still from George Romero’s *The Night of the Living Dead* depicting the flesh-eating monsters of that film, placing underneath the joking caption “Just enough Tetrodotoxin?”.⁷⁵

Thus the Haitian *zombi* was - once again, as throughout the last hundred years - transformed into the *zombie* of Euro-American fiction, strongly implying that claims as to the existence of zombi(e)s belong not in the laboratory but in the movie theatre. And the author of the piece in *Science* was moved to reflect “who does not enjoy a good story about zombies now and then?”, implicitly appealing to a commonsense

⁷³ R Rosaldo, *Culture and Truth: The Remaking of Social Science* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993).

⁷⁴ R Woodson, see note 48 above.

⁷⁵ W Booth, see note 62 above.

understanding of zombies as only fit for popular fictions. If zombies were to be allowed into academia at all, it would be as symbols and images, dealt with by the more respectable denizens of ethnology departments and by the somewhat less reputable inhabitants of cultural studies outfits. As purely fictive entities in thought experiments, philosophers are allowed today to have debates about zombies. But at the time Davis made his claims, there was no obvious disciplinary location for *real* zombies, for who under the current social organisation of knowledge could, or would want to, study them? They fit nowhere, and like all uncanny things, they are radically “matter out of place”.⁷⁶ What Davis in his zombi(e) claims was proposing would have sounded appallingly undermining of established notions of what is real and not-real, proper and improper, respectable and not respectable. This would have been the case even if he had had more sound evidential grounds upon which to say it. It suggested bringing into the academy, in an untamed way, an entity that was thought could only exist in folklore, the imagination and in fiction. A hundred years and more of sensationalising representations of Haiti, plus the evolution in popular culture of the zombie figure away from its roots in Haitian folk culture towards something that exists *only* in apparently debased commercial, industrial-cultural contexts, ensured that few people, if indeed anyone, could even begin to think that what Davis was claiming could ever be true.

Twenty-five years on, Davis’s early career zombi(e) adventures no doubt seem to him like the distant past. But what they indicate to us today are the barriers to thought that have up until now been erected against taking zombies as serious objects of thought and reflection unless they are handled with the sterilised gloves of metaphor and analogy. To say that zombies are real - and not just tropes, figures, symbols, analogues, and what have you - still seems provocative, indeed still seems like a good way of ensuring career suicide. Even if Wade Davis was essentially wrong in his claims, those interested in zombie affairs should still be grateful to him. He enunciated things usually unutterable, and in so doing, created a space for more serious scholarly reflections on zombies in the future. Such a space will continue to be marked by scholars reflecting upon the notoriety of his claims, and the reasons why they were once perceived to be so notorious.

⁷⁶ M Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1966).