Philippe Charlier, *Zombies: An Anthropological Investigation of the Living Dead*.

Translated by Richard J. Gray II. Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2017.

160 pp. (Paper US\$18.95)

Philippe Charlier, a forensic medical examiner and paleopathologist affiliated with Raymond Poincaré University Hospital and Paris's Descartes University, has appeared on French television and led notable European archaeological digs, earning him the title of the "Indiana Jones of the graveyards." His *Zombis: Enquete sur les morts-vivants* (Tallandier, 2015) explores the zombie phenomenon and *poudre zombie*—zombie powder—via a novelistic travel memoir. In addition to the translation of the text itself by Richard Gray II, this new English edition includes Charlier's author's preface; an afterword by Alain Forment of the Musée de l'Homme in Paris; a glossary of Haitian Creole terms, including some from Creole-language scholar Benjamin Hebblethwaite's *Vodou Songs in Haitian Creole and English* (2012); and two appendices—one explaining the basic *lwas* found in Haitian Vodou along with their syncretistic Catholic saint links, and the other a list of clinical symptoms of tetrodotoxin poisoning, all of which drape the text with the aura of serious scholarship.

In an August 28, 2017 article that appeared on the "Richland Source" website, Gray suggested that his translation "will be of interest ... to scholars of Francophile studies as well as to professionals in the field of forensic science." The University Press of Florida, an important publisher of scholarly work on Afro-Caribbean religion, such as Karen Richman's *Migration and Vodou* (2005) and Toni Pressley-Sanon's *Itswa Across the Water*, has published this most unscholarly text. Although Charlier's intention to share his investigation with the masses can be admired, he has merely produced another sensationalized portrait of Haitian cultural traditions along the lines of William Seabrook's fantastical travel memoir, *The Magic Island*, (1928). The most famous Haitian memoir, Wade Davis's 1985 bestseller, *The Serpent and the Rainbow: A Harvard Scientist's Astonishing Journey into the Secret Societies of Haitian Voodoo, Zombis, and Magic*, was marketed, like Charlier's, as an Indiana Jones-type adventure. Both Davis and Seabrook report observing Vodou rituals, meeting "zombies," and discovering "zombie powder," a narrative that seems always to feature a cadre of professional Vodouists who cater to foreigners or outsiders in search of a "mysterious" Haiti. These memoir-styled travelogues sustain a long fascination by North American media culture with the Caribbean Other. Indeed, Charlier acknowledges that "zombies quickly become a cut-and-paste of the vampire myth, and spread widely throughout the continent of North America ... as evidenced by the abundance of films and television series featuring

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the phenomenon of zombies, especially from the American film industry, ... the television series *The Walking Dead* (five seasons in all, and a worldwide success), etc.” (p. 1). And Gray writes in his afterword about the way North American films such as *Children Shouldn't Play with Dead Things* (1972) and the late George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) “encapsulated the public's curiosity for the mysticism of Haitian Vodou” (p. 133).

Unfortunately, this book falls short of its goal to provide insight from Vodou practitioners (as opposed to the professional Vodouists who cater to foreigners' fantasies), and it does not succeed in linking the anthropological approach to everyday Vodou beliefs. Charlier tries to tackle the phenomenon through scientific questioning (a collaborative effort with Haitian sociologist, Laennec Hurbon of France's National Center for Scientific Research). But crucially, both agree that they “are not trying to find out whether or not zombies exist,” instead discussing psychological, or maybe mystical, explanations of Vodou beliefs in life and death, and the idea that the “trauma of the slave trade has played a significant role in this phenomenon” (p. 7).

Charlier shows a lack of familiarity with Haitian culture, religion, and scholarship and is unaware of the Creole orthography established decades ago (for example, spelling *loa* instead of *lwa* and *houngan*, instead of *oungan*). He returns to Davis's sources, including the late *oungans* Erol Josue and Max Beauvoir, as well as Davis's questionable discussions of zombification, sorcery, and toxic poisons, without adding anything new.

This book is an undistinguished exploration of Vodou, “zombie powder,” and the question of whether “zombies” are “real,” or a metaphor for “living.” It continues a pattern in the production of travel memoirs from an outsider perspective on Haiti and Vodou masquerading as a serious anthropological work.

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