“No Grave Cannot Hold My Body Down” 1
Rituals of Death and Burial in Postcolonial Jamaica

Annie Paul

For Ma Bell did have a cache of money which she hoarded for a purpose. Every extra cent she could squeeze from her frugal living she kept in this special fund. She kept this money for one reason only. When Ma Bell died, she wanted the most beautiful coffin that the undertaker could provide—the real undertaker from town and not Brother Bertie who sent off everyone around in plain cedar coffins. The coffin was something that Ma Bell had to provide for herself, she did not believe that anyone in her family would go to that sort of expense when she was not around to see. Ma Bell had arrived at the decision about the coffin late in life when she saw that none of her other secret longings would ever be fulfilled. Ma Bell used to say to the Lord:

“Poor people just come into world so and is just so they must leave? Well I ent leaving that way and I don’t care if you don’t like it.”

She wanted to leave this world and enter the next cocooned in the luxury she never had in life and she sometimes grew impatient at the slowness with which the fund had accumulated for she was anxious to lie in the splendour of white satin surrounded by polished wood and silver fittings, in a coffin so heavy it would take twelve men to lift it. Ma B hoped that the undertaker would make her face beautiful at last so that everyone for miles around would come to ooh and aah as they walked past the open coffin where she lay in state. That is why she became fearful at the boy’s mention of money for she would rather die than part with it. 2

Funerals and wakes have always been rituals of major significance in Jamaica, as in many other societies in the African diaspora. 3 Writing in 1953 Fernando Henriques observed that: “In the West Indies burial must take place by law within twenty-four hours of death owing to the rapid decomposition of the body in the heat.” As soon as a death occurred relatives far and wide would be notified and their attendance was considered almost mandatory for “the

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3 The title of the chapter refers to one of the hymns sung at the funeral of popular dancehall icon Gerald “Bogle” Levy in February 2005.
funeral serves a dual purpose; it enables kin who have not met for years to renew bonds of friendship, and it serves to emphasize the loss by death to this group in the society.”

In the fifty years that have intervened between then and now much has changed. In twenty-first century Jamaica the rise of the mortuary industry enables bodies to be kept for weeks rather than hours, allowing the wide network of kith and kin of the departed to assemble from all over the world, not merely from the island. Funerals are routinely held two to three weeks after the death, making it possible for elaborate preparations to be made while waiting for family and friends to assemble. The coffin or casket in particular acquires the expressiveness of a status symbol signifying the importance both of the deceased and the bereaved family or community. Often disproportionate amounts of money are invested by poor communities in custom-made designer caskets. In postcolonial Jamaica then, painted and decorated caskets of various kinds seem to be the latest art objects to have surfaced, registering with fetishistic fervour the ever escalating death rate in the country.

The trendsetters in this regard have been the funerals of “dons” or “community leaders.” The don’s funeral is certainly not something new. Winston “Burry Boy” Blake, buried on 15 March 1975, had one of the largest funerals ever with an estimated twenty five thousand people turning out, including then Prime Minister Michael Manley. Chaos is said to have reigned all around. Blake was the leader of the Garrison Gang, which had helped to secure political victory for Manley in the constituency of Central Kingston.

The funeral of Willie “Haggart” Moore in 2001, another don affiliated with the ruling PNP who was gunned down by unknown assailants close to his home in Arnett Gardens, was a similar show of subaltern strength, in what amounted to a quasi-state funeral.

At the funeral, the country was treated to a show of dancehall fashion and a display of material wealth manifested by a motorcade of stretch limousines, BMWs, Lexuses, Ford F-150 pick-uptrucks, SUVs and other luxury motor vehicles that followed the Mercedes Benz hearse carrying Moore’s casket.

“Yu live in style, so yu haffi go out in style,” one woman was overheard saying as she watched the procession of mourners who had turned out to pay their last respects to Moore, a reputed “don” for Arnett Gardens, a People’s National Party stronghold in South St Andrew where he commanded significant authority.

Officially, Moore was described as a businessman who ran a trucking enterprise and an entertainment complex at the very spot where he was killed on April 18. But he appeared to many to have had resources beyond the capacity of those businesses.

The following report appeared in the newspaper immediately after the Haggart funeral describing the spectacle in greater detail.

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4 Fernando Henriques, *Family and Colour in Jamaica* (London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1953), 139.

5 Ghana also has a tradition of fantasy coffins that has attracted considerable attention. Unlike the Jamaican custom however, in Ghana, coffins are sculptural, carved to resemble actual objects of significance to the departed client. Thus, a seamstress might have a sewing-machine or needle-shaped coffin, a fisherman might choose to go out in a fish-shaped coffin, and so on. There are also cell phone-shaped coffins, and airplane-shaped ones marked Ghana Airways for people who have never traveled by air before.

6 Vernon Davidson, “Willie Haggart to be exhumed,” *Sunday Observer*, 3 February 2002. Legend has it that Moore acquired the name “Haggart” because Haggart thus became his nickname.
JAMAICA’S NATIONAL Arena was converted into a colourful shrine of orange and white balloons yesterday as an estimated 5,000 people, headed by Finance Minister Dr. Omar Davies and a contingent of People’s National Party (PNP) senior executives, led mourners in paying tribute to slain community leader, William Augustus Moore, alias “Willie Haggart.”

For about 3 1/2 hours, the entire stretch of road from the intersection of Arthur Wint Drive and Statue Road, down to the gates of the National Arena, was blocked by thousands, some from the United Kingdom, United States and Canada who had come to say farewell to their community god-father “Willie.”

The 20-gauge steel casket, complete with wing bars and decorated with a replica of Leonardo da Vinci’s “The Last Supper,” was boxed in by four iron rails, near the platform from which Roman Catholic priest the Rt. Rev. Kenneth Mock Yen conducted the service.

Later, under wailing sirens, the funeral cortège was escorted from the National Arena by about four police outriders, into his home town to the “Black Roses Corner” on Lincoln Crescent and Rousseau Road.

Shortly after the body was interred and as the mourners made their way out of the Calvary cemetery, near his hometown in Arnett Gardens, South St. Andrew, several volleys of shots were fired by gunslingers to salute their hero.7

In the days that followed Haggart’s funeral the public sphere raged with debate about the national outrage the funeral represented with the garish costumes of the mourners, the conspicuous consumption, the extremely un-European rituals that marked the ceremony, and crowning the outrage to the body politic, the attendance at the funeral by prominent politicians from both parties.

Jamaican funerals, especially those of the underclasses, are replete with ritual and ceremony.

If there is a small child in the household it is thrown three times over the coffin containing the body. But this is only done if the deceased was the father of the child. It is to prevent the father returning as a spirit to play with the child. Every ritual connected with the spirits is performed three times. One informant stated that this was because of the Christian Trinity.8

An integral part of Jamaican funerals is the wake. In communities plagued by violence there might be several wakes a week. At these wakes family members and friends congregate to “eat fried fish and hard-dough bread, drink coffee, chocolate tea and alcoholic beverages, to smoke marijuana or pipe tobacco and to sing,” according to Imani Tafari-Ama whose research focused on the troubled community of Southside near Kingston Harbour. The wake is an institution of both rural and urban life, “demonstrating strong African retentions, the wake not only encodes meanings of spiritual resistance but also provides a psychosocial coping mechanism for people who experience the death of loved ones... This tradition—the wake—might have died

7 Glenroy Sinclair, “Emotional Farewell for ‘Haggart’,” Gleaner, 9 May 2001, 1A.
8 Henriques, Family and Colour, 140.
out as a cultural practice if it was not for the pervasiveness of violent deaths.”

People die so frequently in Southside as Uncle Reff [the shepherd of the wake] told me, that the ceremonies have been made into an almost professional preoccupation for at least forty people in his group and many more people in the community at large. The wake reflects the main agenda that is observed for nine nights when someone dies.  

One of the biggest funerals in Southside was that of Franklyn “Chubby Dread” Allen from Southside who was killed in New Kingston on Friday, 7 October 2005. The area leader or don of Southside, Chubby Dread preferred to be called an “elder.” As a child Chubby Dread used to dive for coins thrown by cruise ship tourists in Kingston Harbour, such was the poverty of his background.

Funerals of dons and famous popular figures such as the dancer Bogle are occasions for supporters to parade their clothes. At the funeral of another PNP-affiliated don, Donovan “Bulbie” Bennett, leader of the Spanish Town-based Clansman gang, who was killed by police on 30 October 2005, newspaper reports gave a lot of space to describing the glitzy costumes of his followers:

From sequins to costly, tailored suits, Bennett’s supporters displayed an abundance of what in street jargon is termed “Fashion over style.”

Some women wore heels with pants; others were clad in short skirts with matching jackets. One woman, who gave her name only as Sherine, said her outfit “cost over 10 grand” ($10,000). She said that if it were anyone else that had died, she would not have bothered to buy anything new. “But a di big man, so mi haffi show up big time,” she said.

Marlon Nieta, a resident of Spanish Town, said that he paid close to $20,000 for his outfit—a black and gold Versace suit complete with matching shoes. “Dis a di bling,” he said. “Mi nuh tink twice fi buy dis, ‘cause di fadda deserve it, you see mi.”

Another man, who gave his name only as “Barber,” said that his two-piece suit and shoes cost him close to $18,000, and that he was proud to have been a part of the funeral “to put the don inna heaven.” His comment elicited laughter from his friends.

One man, who wanted to be referred to as “Glitchie,” was dressed in a dapper, two-piece black suit and had the words “One Don” carved in his hair. He did it specially for the funeral, he said.

Bulbie, who was reputedly worth $100 million, had two caskets—a glass one for the “tour” around Spanish Town (his supporters rioted for two days after his killing by police) and the other for the actual burial.

The casket that will be used for the “tour” will also be used later in the evening for the viewing of the body, and is fully

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8 Paul Clarke, “Mourners display expensive outfits ‘to show respect’,” Jamaica Observer, 28 November 2005.

10 Ibid., 180.
decorated with photos of “Bulbie,” with an orange background. The casket is made of glass and wooden strips. “He will be driven in a glass house chariot, for all to see,” said Tommy Thompson, CEO of Brite Lite Funeral Service. The burial casket, which is made mostly of glass, has handles imported from Texas, United States and was made of 18 karat gold, said Thompson.12

In early 2006, Bulbie’s main rival, Andrew “Bunman” Hope, leader of the burgeoning “One Order” gang (affiliated to the opposition Jamaica Labour Party), was also killed by police. Newspaper reports stated that:

A LAVISH FUNERAL service is being prepared for slain One Order leader, Andrew “Bunman” Hope ...by funeral services company, Brite Lite.... Like most of these renowned “area leaders,” Bunman will be given a send off “fit for a king,” with a glass coffin, glass chariots and a concrete and glass sepulchre.

Hope’s coffin is also lined with 100 per cent white silk, green neon fluorescent lights and 18 karat gold-plated handles. Although the chief executive officer of Brite Lite, Tommy Thompson, was unwilling to reveal the cost of the coffin, sources at the funeral home told THE STAR that it cost about $500,000 to build.

“The theme of course will be green ...the church will also be transformed into a garden, with natural flowers, ribbons, cloth designs, and balloons. We can’t reveal any costs, but it will be a spectacular affair,” said Thompson.

“Afta Bunman all get back gun whe police lose, dem still a tell bear lie bout wi don ...wi love Bunman because him love we. Wi nah get no money but we wi do anything fi him,” said a resident of Ellersie Pen, who assisted in the reform of the grave site.

The sepulchre will be made of concrete, marble, and glass blocks. Behind the blocks there will be green lighting.

“We don’t do funerals of mourning, we do funerals of celebration, so this will be a colourful event celebrating the life of Bunman ...Limousine service for relatives, flashy cars ...the works,” said Thompson.13

Interestingly, party colours predominate at these events, orange for dons affiliated to the ruling party and green for those associated with the opposition.

The Brite-Lite funeral home is the funeral parlour of choice for slain celebrities of the underworld as well as popular dancehall figures. Another popular funeral parlour is Taylor’s Funeral Home located in downtown Kingston. The owners of these parlours are themselves prominent individuals with aspirations towards stardom, judging by interviews they have given to the media. While making good money servicing the funerals of underworld dons and stars they make a point of subsidizing the last rites of poor individuals whose families could not otherwise afford anything other than a pauper’s funeral.

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TOMMY THOMPSON, chief executive officer of the Brite-Lite Funeral services, has devoted his life to righting the wrongs of death, and writing off debts, in his quest to ensure that even the poorest citizens of this land get a decent funeral.

In his latest philanthropic gesture, he has underwritten the cost of burying 13-year-old Shawna Palmer. The teenager was killed by gunmen while trying to save two children who came under attack during a birthday party in Greenwich Town, Kingston. The funeral reportedly cost more than $800,000.... “I hope this gesture will send a clear message to society.... This funeral ...is not just about this little girl. It’s a statement to careless bus drivers, to men who kill babies, to civil society, the business leaders, and the government that we will not allow our babies to be killed anymore. The life of every child is precious,” said Mr. Thompson who provided a custom-made $150,000 casket adorned with white baby angels, programmes and prayer cards in full colour, floral arrangements, limousines, a Lexus SUV, Benzes and company-employed ushers.

What would drive any man to incur such expenses on behalf of persons he doesn’t even know? The answer may lie in his past. At 16, Mr. Thompson’s father died. The funeral, he remembered, was a “shabby affair, which brings tears to my eyes even now”.

“It was so bad ...the smell ...I couldn’t even stay beside the casket, and how he was brought to the church ...good God. It was terrible,” recalled the 42-year-old who is a big fan of HBO’s “Six Feet Under,” shaking his head slowly.

A recent entrant to the highly profitable funeral industry Mr. Thompson, who describes himself as a grief therapist, is credited with revolutionizing the business “with designer funerals, creative, offbeat concepts and a personalized hands-on approach that endears him to the bereaved families.” He continued in the Gleaner interview:

“I attend every funeral my company takes on. I become a part of the extended family, I grieve with them. I attend the nine-nights, I drink what they drink, I eat what they eat, I go anywhere just to be with them,” he said.

“Talking with the families brings back bad memories for me, and sometimes I get teary-eyed but I like to grieve with the little man, I like to bring some light into his life, especially at this dark time. So I end up doing funerals without making a profit many times,” he said.

“No riff-raff funerals for my company, even if I have to write off a debt if a funeral costs $70,000. I don’t worry about it though, I am always blessed with the big ones which I use to subsidise the others,” he added.15

Renford Taylor, the other popular undertaker, was extensively covered in Riddim magazine, in an article that documented such facts as Taylor’s fascination with American mobster

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15 Ibid.
John Gotti, whom he claimed as a role model.

This September makes twenty years since Renford Taylor has operated a downtown Kingston funeral home. The calendar for 2003 shows a man that promises to take his clients out in style. For Taylor this was the most secure business he could ever have started. “It is a business that will always keep me in business.” He gives me the same straight faced look he has on the funeral home calendar for 2003. Considering the high death toll in Kingston’s garrison communities where gang warfare and susu (informing) keep the stakes high in the game Bounty Killer calls the “Blood Sport,” he might well be right. Taylor is as much a reflection of his community as the community is a reflection of him. Not unlike the don who serves the living, “dem build and keep the community.” the undertaker serves the dead...

The wall is papered full of newspaper clippings of murders, daily quotes, photos of friends and family, photos of himself in the Star (a popular daily tabloid) where he’s featured twice as one of Kingston’s best dressed. Rene points to one of the pictures and says proudly: “Is we bury him.” I quickly readjust my focus to read: Willy Haggart Moore, early thirties, a self styled don, leader of the Black Roses crew was shot down execution style in broad daylight, West Kingston Arnette Gardens on April 19th 2001, the gunmen remained standing over the lifeless body pumping several bullets into it, a friend of Mr. Moore says: “up to last night everything was nice and straight . . .a pure movie star vibes an sportin’ did a gwan . . .”

Movie star vibes send the clients off to meet their maker and the undertaker becomes the angel who is able to fulfil a ghetto dream, which in life might have been deferred again and again.  

The rituals of death and burial in Jamaica vary a great deal between social groups. Middle and upper class funerals are considerably more restrained affairs reflecting the preoccupation with propriety and “good” taste of these groups. “Movie star vibes” have little purchase in these communities where “standard English” is the only acceptable language and a virtual “cult of respectability” prevails. The question of language hovered unspoken over the official funeral service of Louise Bennett Coverley, Jamaica’s beloved folk poet and dramatist, who died in 2006 in Toronto, Canada. Fervently embraced by the country as a national heroine, “Miss Lou,” as she was universally known, remained a symbol emitting conflicting and contradictory signals even in death.

A popular figure consigned to the rear of national history books at the time of independence, because her poetry was expressed in Jamaican or Creole rather than English, Miss Lou was firmly enthroned centre stage by the time she died. Yet this paragon of Jamaican culture chose to live far from home, in cold and wintry Toronto. When she died her body was flown home by the Jamaican government and given a state funeral; this was viewed by some as problematic and debate ensued in the public sphere on the reasons that compelled Miss Lou to leave Jamaica.


17 For a useful discussion of the cult of respectability see Brian L. Moore and Michele A. Johnson, Neither Led Nor Driven: Contesting British Cultural Imperialism in Jamaica, 1865–1920 (Kingston: University of the West Indies Press, 2004).
Another contradiction lay in the fact that the official funeral service was conducted entirely in standard English (with a few hymns and the occasional cameo recitation of a poem in patois) although the reason most often cited for valorizing Miss Lou was that she had conferred “legitimacy” and dignity on patois by her untiring championing of the language in the face of intense hostility from the middle and upper classes. At the wake and nine nights preceding the funeral, however, patois was freely used.

The official funeral service would have been entirely designed and mediated by middle and upper class culture brokers whose taste would have been at sharp variance with that of the poorer classes. This manifested itself in discord expressed in the street about the funeral programme or booklet circulated to those attending the funeral, which was perceived to be too sober and lacking in bling for a personage of Miss Lou’s stature. Miss Lou is a good example of a popular or “roots” figure with street credibility who has been virtually appropriated and reincarnated by the middle classes and ruling elites into a national heroine in their own image.

This, however, is in stark opposition to the image Miss Lou started out with as a figure in popular theatre in Jamaica. As I have argued elsewhere, Miss Lou’s was a Creole register capable of being co-opted into the story independent Jamaica likes to tell about itself. In fact Miss Lou has been elevated into such an institution that she is beyond criticism of any sort and has become an almost oppressive “role model,” an ideal mould into which every aspiring schoolgirl poet must pour herself. That is to say her brand of Creole has been elevated to the status of standard English; or better, she has been successfully translated into the highly respectable language of the nationalist-modern. Miss Lou is not only now legitimate, she has become normative.

A contrast can be observed with the funeral of dancer Gerald “Bogle” Levy in February 2005. Bogle, a prolific inventor of “dances” and the latest in a tradition of “Legs” or male dancers in vernacular Jamaican culture, was brutally shot multiple times while making his way to Passa Passa after leaving a dance called Weddy Weddy, where he had been involved in a dispute with supporters of dancehall star Beenie Man. Interestingly Bogle, also known as “Mr. Wacky,” was named after national hero Paul Bogle because as a baby he was said to resemble him. As the most commonly available image of the original Bogle was the statue sculpted by Edna Manley and erected outside the courthouse in Morant Bay, it must have been the face of the sculpted Bogle that young Gerald Levy was considered to resemble. Of course Edna Manley modeled her Bogle on a native of Morant Bay who bore no relationship to the real Paul Bogle. Nevertheless such was the conflation between the national hero and the dancer in the eyes of some that a history teacher in Port-of-Spain who asked her class to identify Paul Bogle in a test, received the answer from one student that he was a famous dancer from Jamaica.

Bogle’s funeral (described in the media as “an elaborate, bling bling, jiggy affair”; his coffin incongruously adorned with Sesame Street figures Big Bird and the Cookie Monster on the lid) represents another landmark in Jamaican cultural and sepulchral history. Celebrated at the Kencot Seventh Day Adventist Church, Adventist officials were scandalized by the performative

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18 One explanation offered for the service being held exclusively in English was that the Coke Methodist Church in Kingston where the ceremony was held was not open to the idea of a Creole service.


20 Although the two deaths were unconnected Bogle was also from Arnett Gardens and a member of the Black Roses Crew headed by Willy Haggart.

21 This weekly dance at the headquarters of Stone Love on Burlington Avenue was itself named after one of Bogle’s most popular hits “It's a Weddy time again.”
expressions of mourning dancers and dancehall figures at the service. At one point the officiating priests disconnected the microphones to curtail what they thought an inappropriate and noisy performance by Bogle’s own troupe of dancers. The programmes were in such demand and seemingly in short supply that Bogle’s mother was nearly overrun by eager funeral participants when she arrived with an armful.

Things... started getting out of control again when L. A. Lewis, who refers to himself as “Five-Star General,” took to the podium. He shouted out “See the key deh!” to which the audience responded “Lock dem up now!” The comical entertainer, who was overwhelmed with grief, lamented how he witnessed his friend Bogle being killed and that he was still traumatized by the incident.

Delly Ranks and Voice Mail (with whom Bogle recorded the number one hit single “Weddy Time Again”) were next. They attempted to do the song in tribute, but were overcome by emotion until dancers Ice, Boisy, Kieva and Mad Michelle joined them on stage to do “Jiggy Time Again” with the entire audience getting jiggy.

Already out of control, the sermon was replaced with the singing of several lively popular gospel songs, during which Bogle’s body, in House of Tranquility’s designer casket, was taken out to the glass carriage.

As the huge funeral procession, which was like a carnival and caused a major traffic jam, passed through various communities on its way to Dovecot, curious onlookers gathered along the way shouting “A lie!” 22

Similarly virtual chaos had reigned at the wake preceding the funeral:

On the Friday and Saturday before the funeral at Matthews Lane, Tivoli Gardens, Tony Spaulding Complex and Black Roses corner, where the viewing of the body took place was total pandemonium. The most popular phrases expressed by those viewing his body were: “A lie!,” “Wey dem did deh!,” “Wey di key deh!,” “Oh so badly Mr. Wacky!,” “Him pretty eeh!,” “Him get better looking,” “Mr. Cornwall [House of Tranquility’s CEO] really mek him look smooth!,” “Bwoy, di big man glass casket tuff,” not to mention the vengeful comments from those who swore to avenge his murder.

Bogle’s mother, Dorothy Smith a.k.a. Miss Mae, holding on to the glass casket, wept bitterly when it arrived from a one-hour viewing at Matthews Lane to Black Roses corner on Friday, February 4. She was, however, soon smiling when she looked at the pleasant demeanour of her son’s face. She then chanted, “Mi son pretty sah! Look how him a smile and look like him a sleep. Wey dem did deh?” to backup shouting from the gathering who asked, “Who dem deh!?”...

When Bogle’s body in Brite Lite’s glass casket finally arrived at the Tony Spaulding Complex, it was pandemonium as persons from Jones Town, Craig Town, Top Jungle, Texas, Mexico, Havana, Angola and other adjacent communities scrambled to get a look.

Several persons, including members of the Black Roses crew, wept openly as the reality of his death hit them hard. Meanwhile, on nearby Lincoln Crescent (Black Roses), the Lover’s Choice sound system, which played at the wake, rinsed versions of the tune said to have led to Bogle’s demise, “All Dem Deh.”

As the night progressed, several persons (among them international press) from as far as Japan, USA, Canada, England and the Caribbean descended on the area for the wake that would take them late into Sunday morning.

Funerals such as Bogle’s, the lavish caskets for dons, and the extravagant ritual and conspicuous consumption attending such events could suggest a relatively recent obsession with materiality, even in the celebration of the transition to a spiritual state. Some, however, have noted that these are not new practices or customs at all:

I have been exposed to evidence which showed me that the elaborate and expensive caskets of dons, area leaders etc, did not originate solely with crime and politics in the 1960s or 70s. You have to read the works of anthropologists which indicate that the house slave, who was the sweetheart of the white bukki massa and was very powerful, stole the gold and silver from the Great House and gave the items to those who were building the coffin of the slaves. There is proof that the adornment of the coffins pre-1838 were more ostentatious than those of the English bukki massa who died. It is also true that the funeral processions of the black slave was fantastic and colourful. This pre-/post-emancipation culture has now become an integral part of the popular political dancehall funeral culture of the dons, etc, of 21st century Jamaica. It is impossible for the Church to dismiss this reality.

In her 1938 book Tell My Horse Zora Neale Hurston described a funeral she attended in rural Jamaica of a man who died in a hospital far from home and who was “as poor in death as he had been in life. He had walked barefooted all his days so now there would be no hearse, no car, no cart—not even a donkey to move this wretched clay.” It didn’t matter—the people of the district made a “rude stretcher” out of two bamboo poles and a sheet and a group of men set out to bring him home:

According to custom, several people from the district went along with the body-bearers to sing along the road with the body. The rest of the district were to meet them halfway. It is a rigid rule that the whole district must participate in case of death. All kinds of bad feelings are suspended for the time being so that they sing together with the dead.

...The corpse might have been an African monarch on safari the way he came borne in his hammock...bare feet trod the road in soundless rhythm and the dead man rode like a Pharaoh- his rags and his wretchedness gilded in glory.
The rituals of death and burial described in this paper are by no means a comprehensive account or analysis of funerals and funeral fashions in contemporary Jamaica. There is much that is merely hinted at such as the resplendence of rites associated with Rastafarian funerals which differ from both the ostentatious “bashment” celebrations described here and the refined rituals of the middle class funerals. Rather this paper is an attempt to gather visual and textual data on the subject with a view to asking what such practices might signify, if anything, and to speculate on whether these are further instances of “the uses of the body in the cultural-politics of colonial and postcolonial Jamaica” (albeit the dead body not the living one). 27 It also raises questions about the desire for majesty and splendour on the part of ordinary Jamaicans, the overweening desire “to die well’ and be buried with pomp.” Are these manifestations simply signs of the “obscenity of power in the postcolony” as suggested by Achille Mbembe? 28 Or are such rituals, as Obika Gray might claim, the practices of freedom signaling the “social power of the poor” and the presence of a “rebellious counter-society” in post-colonial Jamaica? 29

What remains beyond doubt is the ongoing and spiraling state of violence that grips this particular postcolonial society. The epigraph that Michael Thelwell quoted at the beginning of his 1980 novel, The Harder They Come, remains an elegy of exceptional currency in twenty first-century Jamaica and is worth resurrecting here:

“Behold my people: How violence does enfold them like a mantle.
It sitteth upon their shoulders even as a garment.”

_Book of Lamentations_, Jah Version. 30

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(Left): Haggart’s youngest child is passed over his casket in a folk ritual “aimed at preventing the ghost of the deceased from returning to play with the child.”

Chubby Dread’s coffin.

See-through panels on lid of Chubby Dread’s coffin. This is a traditional feature of Jamaican coffins, allowing mourners to view the face of the deceased one last time.
(Above): One of the caskets used in Bulbie’s funeral.

(Left): Mural in Spanish Town depicting Bulbie as a King.

(Below): Bulbie’s rival, Andrew ‘Bunman’ Hope’s funeral casket.
Funeral casket of a leader of the British Link-Up Crew, a London-based gang.

Funeral casket of national football player, Peter Cargill, killed in a road accident. Paying his last respects is former Jamaica Football Federation President Captain Horace Burrell. The casket is painted in the colours of the Jamaican flag reflecting the intense patriotism associated with the Reggae Boyz, Jamaica’s national football team.
The coffins of four family members, three of whom, a mother and her two children, were shot dead by gunmen on Hanover Street in Kingston in 2005. The fourth, the children’s grandmother, died of natural causes. A comparison with the simple caskets of the Crawford family in the preceding photograph, shows the evolution in casket fashions over forty years.

Members of the George Washington marching band perform while the coffin bearing seven year-old Zideane Linton, shot during a football match in Ewarton, is carried to the cemetery. It is customary to bury children in pastel-coloured caskets such as this one.

Ferdinand Madden Jr., one of the owners of Madden’s Funeral Home, whose father, Ferdinand Leslie Madden Sr. was widely regarded as the father of the modern funeral business in Jamaica. Morticians like Madden are being eclipsed by the blingy new generation.

Mr and Mrs. Fitz Crawford contemplating the coffins of their three children killed in a motor accident on January 6, 1968. Note the relatively austere style of the coffins.
Official parade for Norman Manley’s funeral in 1969. A landrover is the vehicle of choice for pulling the cart.

This hand-held carriage, that belongs to Sam Isaacs and Son, was bought in the early 1940s. The last time this carriage was used was to transport the body of Edna Manley, wife of national hero, Norman Manley in 1987.

For Bogle’s funeral a special glass enclosed chariot was used to transport the body.
These women felt that the funeral program was not elaborate enough for Ms. Lou. They thought it lacked colour and creativity.
“No Grave Cannot Hold My Body Down”

Annie Paul

(Top Left): The programme for Bogle’s memorial service.

(Top Right): The centrespread from Bogle’s funeral program.

(Left): Bogle’s mourners ran the gamut from rootsy to blingy.

(Bottom Right): Mourning dancers at Bogle’s funeral.
Mortimer Planno’s coffin

Scenes at the funeral service for the late Dr. Vernon Carrington ‘Prophet Gad’ at the head office of the Twelve Tribes of Judah on Hope Road, April 7, 2005.
A section of the gathering at the thanksgiving service for his Eminence Abuna Yishehaq Mandefro, Archbishop of the Ethiopian Orthodox Church in the Western Hemisphere and South Africa. The service was at the National Arena in Kingston.