

“We Are the Walking Dead”: Race, Time, and Survival in Zombie Narrative

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The only modern myth is the myth of zombies—mortified schizos,
good for work, brought back to reason.

— Deleuze and Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*

Well, there’s no problem. If you have a gun, shoot ’em in the head.
That’s a sure way to kill ’em. If you don’t, get yourself a club or a
torch. Beat ’em or burn ’em. They go up pretty easy.

— Sheriff McClelland, *Night of the Living Dead*

■ Once banished to the gross-out fringe of straight-to-video horror, all but dead, zombies have come back. Beginning early in the Bush era—even before 9/11, with the filming of *28 Days Later* in London in summer 2001—and continuing unabatedly through the present, the figure of the zombie now lurks at the very center of global mass culture. Alongside *The 28 Days Later* franchise we might name myriad George Romero sequels, remakes, and pastiches; other films like *House of the Dead*, *Quarantine*, *I Am Legend*, and *Planet Terror*; zombie video game franchises like *Resident Evil*, *Left 4 Dead*, and *Dead Rising*; bestselling prose works like *World War Z* and *Pride, Prejudice, and Zombies*, both now adapted as films; even, I’d argue, a novel like Cormac McCarthy’s critically acclaimed, Pulitzer-Prize-winning *The Road*, with its

unforgiving landscape of starving inhuman cannibals and universal abjection; zombie-themed crossover events in superhero comics like *Marvel Zombies* and D.C.'s *Blackest Night*; independent comics' offerings like Image Comics hit *The Walking Dead* and Warren Ellis's *Blackgas*; for the first time in television history, zombie-themed series like *Dead Set* in Britain (a reality TV parody) and a version of *The Walking Dead* now greenlit to series on AMC in the U.S.; so-called "zomedies," zombie comedies, like *Fido*, *Shaun of the Dead*, and *Zombieland*; I might go on.

Playing off Marx's well-known description of capital as vampire in *Capital, Vol. I*, Steve Shaviro suggests in a 2002 special issue of *Historical Materialism* on "Marxism and Fantasy" that our preoccupation with the zombie originates out of the zombie's relationship with contemporary global capitalism:

In contrast to the inhumanity of vampire-capital, zombies present the 'human face' of capitalist monstrosity. This is precisely because they are the dregs of humanity: the zombie is all that remains of 'human nature,' or even simply of a human scale, in the immense and unimaginably complex network economy. Where vampiric surplus-appropriation is unthinkable, because it exceeds our powers of representation, the zombie is conversely what *must be thought*: the shape that representation unavoidably takes now that 'information' has displaced 'man' as the measure of all things. (emphasis in original; 288)

When our computers are compromised by hackers or viruses, they become zombie computers, and when our financial institutions fail, it is because they are zombie banks. Remorselessly consuming everything in their path, zombies leave nothing in their wake besides endless copies of themselves, making the zombie the perfect metaphor not only for how capitalism transforms its subjects but also for its relentless and devastating virologic march across the globe. The anti-ecological "proliferation of zombie bodies," Shaviro notes, inevitably culminates in "extermination and extinction" (286)—a final nightmare of exhausted consumption that in our era of endangered species, overfarmed oceans, and Peak Everything does not seem so far off.

But where Shaviro sees the zombie as already identical to the proletarianized subject of late capitalism, I want in this paper to focus on the ways this identification seems troubled and necessarily incomplete. The audience for zombie narrative, after all, never imagines *itself* to be zombified; zombies are always other people, which is to say they are Other people, which is to say they are people who are not quite people at all. A critique like Shaviro's—or, for that matter, like the one advanced by Sarah Juliet Lauro and Karen Embry, who claim the zombie in their "Zombie Manifesto" as the posthuman successor to Donna Haraway's famous cyborg—must first think carefully about

the problems of subject position and identification that arise when speaking about the "universal residue" (Shaviro 288) called the zombie. The zombie's mutilation is not one that we easily imagine for "ourselves," however that "we" is ultimately constituted; the zombie is rather the toxic infection that must *always* be kept at arm's length.¹ Because zombies mark the demarcation between life (that is worth living) and unlife (that needs killing), the evocation of the zombie conjures not solidarity but racial panic. To complicate Deleuze and Guattari's proclamation in *A Thousand Plateaus*, then, the myth of the zombie is *both* a war myth *and* a work myth (425);² one of the ways the State apparatus builds the sorts of "preaccomplished" subjects it needs is precisely through the construction of a racial binary in which the (white) citizen-subject is opposed against nonwhite life, bare life, *zombie* life—that anti-life which is always inimically and hopelessly Other, which must always be kept quarantined, if not actively eradicated and destroyed.

My approach suggests that the major imaginative interest of the zombie lies not as a stand-in for the subject positions of global capitalism but rather in the zombie apocalypse's interrogation of the "future" of late capitalist hegemony, and its concordant state racism, through fantastic depiction of its breakdown and collapse. This paper reasserts, that is to say, the biopolitical origins of the zombie imaginary, and therefore insists that before we can ever hope to "become zombies" we first must come to terms with the historical and ongoing colonial violence of which the zombie has always ever been only the thinnest sublimation.

Thinking Zombies: Robert Kirkman's *The Walking Dead*

It seems instructive at the outset to recall briefly Vivian Sobchack's approach to sf in *Screening Space: The American Science Fiction Film*. In contradistinction to the Suvinian approach to sf prose, for Sobchack the important genre distinction to be maintained is not sf-vs.-fantasy but *sf-vs.-horror*, a divide she finds to be hopelessly muddled by a blurred and indistinct "no-man's-land" between the two populated by hybrid films (in our case, zombie cinema) that arguably belong to both modes (26–27).

"The horror film," Sobchack says, "is primarily concerned with the individual in conflict with society or with some extension of himself, the sf film with society and its institutions in conflict with each other or with some alien other" (30). It is for this reason that we find a key distinction between horror and sf to be the question of scale; we expect horror to take place in a small and isolated setting (perhaps, as in *Night of the Living Dead*, as small as a single farmhouse) while sf expands to fill large cities and nations, even the entire globe. We might think, for instance, of England after the Rage outbreak in *28 Days Later*, or how in the recent *Marvel Zombies* and *DC Blackest Night*

storylines in superhero comics the zombie outbreak swells to fill the entire cosmos, even the entire multiverse.

If we accept Sobchack's genre definition, we find that the zombie subgenre starts out in horror in its earliest film formulations but winds up in sf in its later ones; while "horror" entries in this *hugely* prolific subgenre certainly remain, the most popular and influential mode of zombie narrative (especially during the Bush-era "zombie revival" period on which I focus) has been the "zombie apocalypse": the large-scale zombie pandemic that leads to the rapid total breakdown of technological modernity and transnational capitalism on a global scale. To put this another way: For Sobchack the local scale of the horror film is concerned with "moral chaos"—the disruption of the natural order—while the broader scale of sf film lends it to "social chaos" (30). Unlike horror's Monster, sf's Creature is unparticularized and uninteriorized; it does not hate, nor seek revenge, and does not even "want" to hurt us. It just does (37). The sf Creature is an eruption that is only disruption—and it is for this reason that the sf film is so often preoccupied with the *reaction* of society to catastrophe (on the one hand) and to a dispassionate, spectacular aesthetics of destruction (on the other). In the end, Sobchack's division between horror and sf comes down to the difference between terror and wonder (38). If in the horror film we feel "fear," in the sf film we feel "interest." In the horror film we find we want to close our eyes and look away, and the excitement is in forcing ourselves to watch; but in the sf film the narrative pleasure comes precisely in anticipating, and then seeing, what will happen next.

And so, having discovered the zombie right at the intersection of these two modes—the zombie is both local and global, personal *and* depersonalized, symptom of moral chaos *and* cause of widespread social breakdown, gross-out consumer of flesh *and* spectacular destroyer of our intricately constructed social and technological fortifications—I want to read the zombie's relationship to contemporary capitalism in the context of the postcolonial approach to sf John Rieder advocates in his 2008 book *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction*. In that vein I will be focusing primarily on Robert Kirkman's 73-issue comic book series *The Walking Dead* (which began in 2003 and is still ongoing). Kirkman's is a zombie narrative that has been, to coin a phrase, *de-horrored* by the diminished immediacy of the comics form, which makes the anticipatory "interest" native to sf all the more evident in his work.

The Walking Dead is described by its creator in the introduction to the first trade paperback in terms that Sobchack would recognize immediately as essentially science fictional:

To me the best zombie movies aren't the splatter feasts of gore and violence with goofy characters and tongue in cheek antics. Good zombie movies show us how

messed up we are, they make us question our station in society . . . and our society’s station in the world. (*Days Gone By* i)

Here Kirkman describes his objective in *The Walking Dead* as an extension of the work of George Romero—always the most cerebral and even, in his own way, the most *subdued* creator of classic 20th century zombie cinema, granting his characters long periods of quiet safety between the catastrophic zombie attacks that typically bookend his films. Kirkman writes that he hopes to employ the hyperbolic temporal continuity native to the comic form to create the feel of a Romero film that never ends (iii-iv). In such a story the fear of “moral chaos” of the early outbreak will necessarily give way to “interest” in the way society changes in the wake of the zombie disaster—and so it’s no surprise that Kirkman uses the same “waking up from a coma” trope as *28 Days Later* to “skip” the initial outbreak and get immediately to the post-apocalyptic breakdown world.

In his introduction to the first trade paperback Kirkman tells us *The Walking Dead* is “not a horror book” but a book about “watching Rick survive”



Top: *The Walking Dead* #1; below: *The Walking Dead* #52.

(iii). For over 70 issues readers have followed Rick Grimes (before the zombie apocalypse a police officer, and therefore functioning as a synecdoche for the pre-zombie social order) through a dizzying disintegration as he has been scarred both physically and mentally in the face of ongoing zombie onslaught. Over the year or so of narrative time that has been depicted in the series Rick has lost his place in society, his home, his best friend, one of his hands, his wife and infant daughter, and finally his grip on sanity; by turns paranoid and murderous, Rick has proven himself willing to do anything, to anyone, in the name of survival for himself and his surviving prepubescent son, Carl.

In *The Walking Dead* Rick Grimes and his band of largely expendable survivors—none of whom are safe—explore the ruins of our own late-imperial America. The story focus in the earliest issues of the series is on reaching city centers, where (we are told) the government has ordered all citizens in an effort to better protect them. It used to be that (white) people *fled* the city for the suburbs “for safety,” out of fear of rising crime rates; here that logic is reversed, and they must go back. But the government’s plan is a disaster, as concentrating survivors in one place only makes it easier for zombiism to spread, and Rick barely makes it back out of Atlanta alive. By chance he meets up with his wife and family, who never made it to Atlanta at all—only to discover that his fellow police officer and best friend Shane has snapped under the pressure of leading the group and ultimately needs to be killed to protect the others (by Carl, no less, in the climactic scene of issue 6 that ends the first trade paperback).³

A brief stint at a rural farmhouse turns bad when it is discovered that the owner of the farmhouse has been locking local zombies in his barn in anticipation of a “cure” that, we can be certain, will never be forthcoming. Another inevitable massacre ensues. Finally Rick and his group are able to find a modicum of safety in an abandoned jail. Here the inversion typical to zombie narrative between a privileged “us” and a precarious “them” is made complete: Grimes, a white police officer, will make his desperate home inside a jail, while dangerous and hostile Others array themselves against him outside the walls. In this reversal of the logic of the prison-industrial complex, the book settles for a long time into this new status quo as (in the proud tradition of Romero’s zombie films) the survivors work to build fortifications and protect themselves—as a new imagined community under Rick’s leadership—against all that is outside.

The Colonial Gaze

So allow me to return again, in this moment of relative quiet for Rick and his tribe, to theory. Where Darko Suvin privileges “cognitive estrangement” as sf’s essential feature—the de- and refamiliarizing power of alternative

worlds—and where Fredric Jameson privileges the radical retemporalization of our disordered present into the settled historical past of some possible future, Rieder focuses our attention on what he calls sf's "colonial gaze":

We can call this cognitive framework establishing the different positions of the one who looks and the one who is looked at the structure of the "colonial gaze," borrowing and adapting Laura Mulvey's influential analysis of the cinematic gaze in "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema." The colonial gaze distributes knowledge and power to the subject who looks, while denying or minimizing access to power for its object, the one looked at. (7)

Zombie narrative, I argue, should be understood as operating under precisely this sort of colonial gaze. Zombies—lacking interior, lacking mind—cannot look; they are, for this reason, completely realized colonial objects. Zombies cannot be recognized, accommodated, or negotiated with; once identified, they must immediately be killed.

To shift briefly into a biopolitical register, this is a hyperreal metaphORIZATION of the racial logic that enforces modernity's distinction between that mode of "civilized" living native to the political subject and *zoë*, bare life.⁴ For our purposes—concerned as we are about zombie narrative and its vision of "infection" run apocalyptically amuck—it seems useful to take a moment here to quote Foucault at length on biopolitics, because in the moment he introduces the concept of biopower it is to disease, to epidemiology, that he turns to explain its logic:

This biopolitics is not concerned with fertility alone. It also deals with the problem of morbidity, but not simply, as had previously been the case, at the level of the famous epidemics, the threat of which had haunted political powers ever since the Middle Ages (these famous epidemics were temporary disasters that caused multiple deaths, times when everyone seemed to be in danger of imminent death). At the end of the eighteenth century, it was not epidemics that were the issue, but something else—what might broadly be called endemics, or in other words, the form, nature, extension, duration, and intensity of the illness prevalent in a population. These were illnesses that were difficult to eradicate and that were not regarded as epidemics that caused more frequent deaths, but as permanent factors which—and that is how they were dealt with—sapped the population's strength, shortened the working week, wasted energy, and cost money, both because they led to a fall in production and because treating them was expensive. In a word, illness as phenomenon affecting a population. *Death was no longer something that suddenly swooped down on life—as in an epidemic. Death was now something permanent, something that slips into life, perpetually gnaws at it, diminishes it and weakens it.* (emphasis mine; 243–44)

When Foucault writes of death as a sort of all-pervasive, “gnawing” pollutive force against which society imagines it must array itself through careful, rationalized management, he is speaking our language: the language of the zombie. State racism, for Foucault, follows the logic of any zombie film:

In the biopower system, in other words, killing or the imperative to kill is acceptable only if it results not in a victory over political adversaries, but in the elimination of the biological threat to and the improvement of the species or race. . . . In a normalizing society, race or racism is the precondition that makes killing acceptable. (256)

The biopolitical state—inverting the sovereign power to make dead or let live in its power to make live or let die (241)—*needs* to create this sort of racial imaginary in order to retain its power to kill. Under biopower those who are imagined to threaten the population as a whole become not merely a danger but a kind of *anti-life* that must be sequestered from (white) life at any cost. Any contact with a zombie, after all, might lead to infection, just as the racial Other must be disciplined and quarantined to prevent “intermingling.”

In *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction*, Rieder demonstrates at length that this colonial discourse of superior and inferior races—the colonial gaze, Foucault’s life and anti-life—is a highly unstable positionality that is under constant threat of polar inversion, an instance of Hegelian master-slave dialectic whose fundamental precariousness is enacted and reenacted throughout the history of sf. In an alternate history, or in future days, the colonizer knows he could well be the colonized. In this way sf engages the violence at the heart of European imperialist expansion by replicating it, over and over, in metaphorical forms both for and against the colonizing subject and the imagined racial hierarchy on which his or her self-identity depends.

Therefore the exemplary sf novel becomes for Rieder not Thomas More’s *Utopia* or H.G. Wells’s *The Time Machine* but Wells’s inverted vision of an imperialized England in flames, *War of the Worlds*, which in its provocative first chapter explicitly equates the Martian colonization of Earth with the British extermination of the native population of Tasmania. Wells’s Martians are not generic alien others, they are *colonizers*; they occupy the precise futurological relationship towards Britain that Britain claims to occupy towards its imperial holdings:

Nor was it generally understood that since Mars is older than our earth, with scarcely a quarter of the superficial area and remoter from the sun, it necessarily follows that it is not only more distant from time’s beginning but nearer its end. . . . And we men, the creatures who inhabit this earth, must be to them at least as alien and lowly as are the monkeys and lemurs to us. (4)

Almost a hundred years afterwards, in *Time and the Other*, Johannes Fabian would describe this retemporalization as a strategy for what Foucault calls state racism:

. . . it is not difficult to transpose from physics to politics one of the most ancient rules which states that it is impossible for two bodies to occupy the same space at the same time. When in the course of colonial expansion a Western body politic came to occupy, literally, the space of an autochthonous body, several alternatives were conceived to deal with that violation of the rule. The simplest one, if we think of North America and Australia, was of course to move or remove the other body. Another one is to pretend that space is being divided and allocated to separate bodies. South Africa's rulers cling to that solution. Most often the preferred strategy has been simply to manipulate the other variable—Time. With the help of various devices of sequencing and distancing one assigns to the conquered populations a different time. (29-30)

Wells goes on: "And before we judge [the Martians] too harshly we must remember what ruthless and utter destruction our own species has wrought, not only upon animals, such as the vanished bison and the dodo, but upon its inferior races. The Tasmanians, in spite of their human likeness, were entirely swept out of existence in a war of extermination waged by European immigrants, in the space of fifty years. Are we such apostles of mercy," Wells pointedly asked, "as to complain if the Martians warred in the same spirit?" (4-5)

The logic of the *War of the Worlds* narrative is one in which the "future" (Mars / Europe / U.S.) is understood to be invading its own evolutionary "past" (Earth / Tasmania / the Global South) to secure its continued existence. And this was precisely the racist logic employed by the colonial imaginary to justify colonial and imperial violence: whiteness is understood to be humanity's "most advanced" form, and other races are ideologically coded as (at best) primitive or (at worst) dangerously obsolete, subject to disruption, displacement, and even extermination in the name of the European arc of history. What happens in the *War of the Worlds* template, then, is nothing less than European civilization getting a taste of its own medicine—the exterminative logic of the colonial sphere comes back home to the metropole.

The zombie narrative, I argue, is best understood in these terms as a slightly transformed refiguration of *War of the Worlds*. Zombie apocalypses, like imperialistic narratives of alien invasion, repackage the violence of colonial race war in a form that is ideologically safer. Zombie films depict total, unrestrained violence against absolute Others whose very existence is seen as anathema to our own, Others who are in essence living death. In our time, when this sort of unrestrained racial violence is officially suspect but nonetheless *unofficially*

still a foundation for the basic operation of technological civilization, zombie narratives serve as the motivating license for confrontation with these sorts of genocidal technologies and power fantasies.

Where zombies might be said to significantly complicate the temporality of *War of the Worlds*-style total violence is through their embodiment of multiple temporalities at once. Rather than invading from the future, as Wells's aliens did, zombies might be said to invade from the *past*: erupting from the graves of



our decomposing loved ones to establish their apocalyptic ecology of universal death. But this turns out, dialectically, to be our only possible future all along; the zombie’s remorseless, infective hunger is a barely sublimated figuration of the entropic lurch of time and the inevitable degeneration of our own bodies towards death, a horror which technological and social progress may delay but cannot hope to avert.

Both past and future, then, zombies turn out in this way to be coextensive with the present—they are the corpses of our friends and co-workers lurching aimlessly through the sterile environments we all once shared. The rotting zombie corpse inevitably suggests the psychological horror Julia Kristeva called “abjection,” the disturbing of the boundary between object and subject. As Rick Grimes exclaims in horror near the end of one trade paperback, it is *we*, not they, who are “the walking dead.” In the end, no matter what we do or how we live, we too must die and come back and be just like them. Zombies are our only possible future, our already actual present; zombies inherit the earth.



Zombies and Empire

If Empire, especially in the age of never-ending War on Terror, is essentially an attempt to regulate History, to make the present extend forever in both space and time, then zombie narrative is its dark reflection; as zombies flatten time they obliterate the present alongside the past and the future, only against “us,” not for “us.” In Agambenian terms, zombies activate the “state of exception,” the suspension of all juridical restraint or moral norm in the face of a perceived existential threat:

. . . modern totalitarianism can be defined as the establishment, by means of the state of exception, of a legal civil war that allows for the physical elimination not only of political adversaries but of entire categories of citizens who for some reason cannot be integrated into the political system. Since [the Third Reich], the voluntary creation of a permanent state of emergency (though perhaps not declared in the technical sense) has become one of the essential practices of contemporary states, including so-called democratic ones. (2)

Faced with the unstoppable progression of what has been called a “global civil war,” the state of exception tends increasingly to appear as the dominant paradigm of government in contemporary politics (2).

Here again we find the zombies allegorizing the racial forms of exclusion and extermination that already surround us. Zombie narratives are ultimately about the motivation for and unleashing of total violence; what separates “us” from “them” in zombie narrative is always only the type of violence used. *They* attack *us* (like “animals,” “savages,” or “cannibals”) with their arms and mouths; we attack them back with horses, tanks, and guns.

In *The Walking Dead*—as in any zombie narrative—the tools and technologies of empire are continually borrowed for the purpose of priming precisely this sort of violent colonialist fantasy. Swords and guns, tanks and trucks, repeated references to the brutal physical and sexual violence of slavery and to the cowboy or “frontier” imaginary (especially through the ubiquitous riding of horses and Carl’s cowboy outfit and mannerisms) are all employed in a bizarre postmodern pastiche of the history of U.S. imperialism, as different moments of its empire collide into a single simultaneous instant in the face of an essentially inimical and totally implacable racialized threat. There are few moments in the series that suggest this pastiche as well as the splash panel at the end of issue 12, when Rick and his group discover the abandoned jail in which they will make their home through the bulk of the series. The jail is drawn so as to visually double a frontier fort (and, for that matter, a modern military base); these locations collapse into a single spatial imaginary, with only the polarity of “inside” and “outside” reversed.

Later issues have made the relationship between Rick’s story and declinist anxieties about the breakdown of American empire even more explicit: following the final breach of the jail’s walls—at the hands not of zombies but of their fellow countrymen operating under the orders of a brutally corrupt and impossibly decadent leader known only as the Governor—Rick and Carl eventually fall in with a group claiming to be carrying a cure that they are bringing to Washington, D.C., under the auspices of the U.S. military. While this (of course) turns out to be a lie, their journey to D.C. does find them a new home to replace the jail, that *other* walled-in space for whiteness characteristic of

as already mentioned, finally destroys the jail's usefulness as a fortification in his doomed efforts to seize it for his own people, killing Rick's wife and daughter in the process; the Governor had already proven himself to be utterly reprehensible through both his repeated rapes of a black female protagonist he keeps in chains and a sexualized relationship with a zombified young girl he claims was once his daughter. And in their flight from the ruined jail, after the Governor is dead, Rick's band encounters the Hunters, humans who have embraced zombie-style cannibalism in order to sate their hunger; the Hunters began with eating their own children.

Something important emerges out of these examples. Whatever else might be said about *The Walking Dead*, or about zombie narrative in general, its uncritical relationship to a particular pre-feminist narrative about the need to "protect" women and children cannot be glossed over. "Proper" control over wombs, and anxiety that they will somehow be captured, polluted, or compromised, is a kind of Ur-myth for the apocalyptic genre in general and the zombie sub-genre in particular; speaking broadly, the function of women in most apocalyptic narratives is to code the ending as "happy" or "sad" based on their continued availability to bear the male protagonist's children when the story is over. This theme is so common in the zombie subgenre as to constitute one of its most ubiquitous and most central ethical clichés: the question of whether or not one should decide to "bring a child into" a zombie-ridden world at all—and, as is common in many such apocalyptic stories (as in, for instance, Cormac McCarthy's 2009 novel *The Road*), the death of Rick's wife and daughter, the moment the circuit of reproductive futurity is cut, is the moment that basically all hope is lost in *The Walking Dead*.⁵

Robin Wood makes the relationship between cannibalism and the breakdown of the patriarchal family central to his analysis of zombie horror, which in our context suggests precisely the sort of multivalent retemporalization at work in zombie narrative: "It is no accident," he writes, "that the four most intense horror films of the 70s at exploitation level . . . all centered on cannibalism, and on the specific notion of present and future (the younger generation) being devoured by the past" (82). Likewise, Alys Eve Weinbaum and Amy Kaplan among others have shown how this sort of anxiety over reproductive futurity is essential to the cultural imagination of race, nation, and empire, which are always defined by the question of who is allowed to reproduce, and with whom.

Zombie Ethics

So while in zombie narrative the "enemy" who is killed is always *first* the zombie—who is unthinking and unfeeling, and can be killed without regret—as the story proceeds the violence inevitably spreads to other, still-alive humans

as well. Anyone outside the white patriarchal community, anyone who is not already one of "us," is a potential threat to the future who must be interrogated intensely, if not kept out altogether. Even those inside the community have to be surveilled at all times for signs of treachery, weakness, or growing "infection."⁶

This is the second way in which the zombie infects us, besides the obvious; they infect us with their vulnerability, their killability make us "killable" too. One's position in the state of exception is, after all, never secure; the class of dangerous anti-citizens, bound for the camps, tends only to grow. In this way zombie narratives make the latent necropolitical dimensions bound up in both "survival" and modern citizenship explicit; they expose, in the raw, what Achille Mbembe showed in "Necropolitics," that to survive is also to kill:

. . . the survivor is the one who, having stood in the path of death, knowing of many deaths and standing in the midst of the fallen, is still alive. Or, more precisely, the survivor is the one who has taken on a whole pack of enemies and managed not only to escape alive, but to kill his or her attackers. This is why, to a large extent, the lowest form of survival is killing. Canetti points out that in the logic of survival, "each man is the enemy of every other." Even more radically, in the logic of survival one's horror at the sight of death turns into satisfaction that it is someone else who is dead. It is the death of the other, his or her physical presence as a corpse, that makes the survivor feel unique. And each enemy killed makes the survivor feel more secure. (36)

In this way the zombie narrative always becomes, in the end, a kind of ethical minefield, in which other humans "must" be fought, betrayed, abandoned, and destroyed so that the protagonists, our heroes, might survive. And even the pulse of that "might" is very weak: so much of the pleasure of zombie narrative in both cinema and other forms originates in the audience's knowledge that the heroes' preparations and fortifications will *never* be sufficient, that no matter what happens in the end the zombies will break through and kill nearly everyone because *this is what zombies do*. In a sense, the zombies are always the real protagonists of the zombie narrative; no matter how long they have been gone from the action, we are always awaiting their eventual, inevitable return. The *telos* of the fortress, like the *telos* of empire, is always, in the end, to fall.

Writing in 1974 of potential negative consequences from U.S. foreign aid, Garrett Hardin called the sort of ethical calculus at work in these zombie narratives "lifeboat ethics," celebrating pitiless self-interest as a necessary and rational Malthusian pragmatism. I call his "case against helping the poor" zombie ethics. And while we might be tempted to return already to Shaviri and the sort of zombic universal class consciousness he suggests, we must first follow this ethical trajectory all the way to its end and explore the perni-

cious ways in which zombie ethics inevitably “infect” our actually existing, *pre-apocalyptic* politics. The “disposability” of the zombie in zombie narrative has a still-ongoing history that simply cannot be ignored. The racial myth of inimical Otherness the zombie narrative replicates, and the forced choices it foists on us, is not just some deceased artifact of the “bad past”; it is alive and well, or if you like undead, and continues to have real-world consequences.

Fueled by hyperbolic media reporting during the Hurricane Katrina disaster, doctors and nurses at Memorial Medical Center in New Orleans came to believe they were in a zombie story—that no help would ever reach them in time, and that outside the walls of their hospital there roamed monsters. *The New York Times Magazine* described the scene this way:

Thiele didn't know [Dr. Anna] Pou by name, but she looked to him like the physician in charge on the second floor. He told me that Pou told him that the Category 3 patients were not going to be moved. He said he thought they appeared close to death and would not have survived an evacuation. He was terrified, he said, of what would happen to them if they were left behind. He expected that the people firing guns into the chaos of New Orleans —“the animals,” he called them —would storm the hospital, looking for drugs after everyone else was gone. “I figured, What would they do, these crazy black people who think they've been oppressed for all these years by white people? I mean if they're capable of shooting at somebody, why are they not capable of raping them or, or, you know, dismembering them? What's to prevent them from doing things like that?”

The laws of man had broken down, Thiele concluded, and only the laws of God applied.

Having heard the news reports proclaiming widespread chaos and mindless violence outside—many if not nearly all of which turned out to be poorly sourced and untrue—and operating in “survival” mode, in a self-declared state of exception, staff at Memorial Medical began refusing treatment to select patients, and in the end are alleged to have deliberately euthanized as many as 24 people.⁷

Just across town, during the same disaster, the mostly white suburb Gretna, Louisiana, used its police force to blockade the bridge that led from New Orleans into the town:

Paul Ribaul, 37, a New Orleans TV-station engineer from Gretna, said New Orleans and the suburbs have a complicated relationship.

“We say we're from New Orleans, but we're a suburb,” he said. “The reason we don't live there is we don't like the crime, the politics.”

Ribaul was among Gretna residents who praised the decision to close the bridge. “It makes you feel safe to live in a city like that,” he said.

...

[Mayor Ronnie] Harris said Thursday that closing the bridge was a tough decision but that he felt it was right.

“We didn’t even have enough food here to feed our own residents,” Harris said.

“We took care of our folks. It’s something we had to do.”

At still another bridge in New Orleans, Danziger Bridge, two African-American families searching for food, water, and help were gunned down by seven heavily armed, out-of-uniform police officers for reasons that remain unclear. The state of Louisiana’s charges against the officers were eventually dismissed due to prosecutorial misconduct, though local investigation into departmental obstruction of justice is still ongoing. On July 14, 2010, four of the officers involved in the Danziger Bridge incident were federally indicted for deprivation of rights under color of law and use of a weapon during the commission of a crime, charges that could carry the death penalty if they are convicted; that prosecution is ongoing.

When Haiti—of course, the ancestral home of the *zombi*, where this hybridized postcolonial figure first emerged as the nightmarish figuration of a slavery that would continue even after death—was struck by its devastating earthquake in January 2010, the same stories were told: rumors of widespread rapes and murders reported breathlessly by the media as inevitable and obvious fact, baseless (and, in context, often nonsensical) accusations of “looting” hurled at poverty-stricken people of color just trying to survive in the face of an incomprehensible disaster. In her *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (2004), Judith Butler writes persuasively of the way the inevitability of grief in human life might be employed as a ground for an Levinasian ethics of mutual vulnerability and shared precariousness, if not for the way ideology persistently codes certain lives as “mournable” and others not. Thinking both of the war in Iraq and the occupation of Palestine, she writes:

Is a Muslim life as valuable as legibly First World lives? Are the Palestinians yet accorded the status of “human” in US policy and press coverage? Will those hundreds of thousands of lives lost in the last decades of strife ever receive the equivalent to the paragraph-long obituaries in the *New York Times* that seek to humanize—often through nationalist and familial framing devices—those Americans who have been violently killed? Is our capacity to mourn in global dimensions foreclosed precisely by the failure to conceive of Muslim and Arab lives *as lives*? (12)

In post-earthquake Haiti, as in post-Katrina New Orleans, as in Iraq and Palestine, we find the moral demand made by shared precariousness once again short-circuited in favor of a prophylactic Othering. Suffering Haitians were quickly recoded as bare life—zombie life—and thereby rendered *unworthy* of

proper aid and protection. Haitians couldn't be trusted, we were told, even to accept our help.

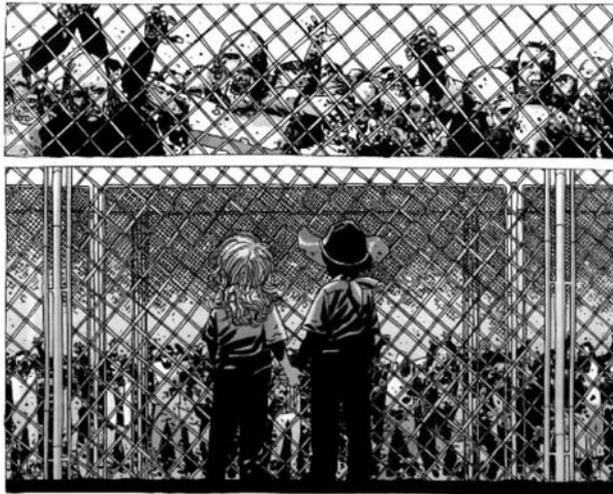
An interview at Campus Progress with Dr. Kathleen Tierney of the Natural Hazard Center at the University of Colorado at Boulder memorably called this phenomenon the "looting lie." Misled by this racist imaginary, the international aid response—coordinated, to widespread criticism, by that imperial agency par excellence, the United States military—focused on security over support, landing thousands of troops on the island while diverting international aid flights and before allowing a single food drop from the air. Fear of the poor, journalist Linda Polman argued in the *Guardian*, hurt rescue efforts: "CNN won't stop telling aid workers and the outside world about pillaging (the incidence of which for the first four frustrating days at least—did not compare with what happened after Hurricane Katrina) and about how dangerous it would be to distribute food, because of the likelihood of 'stampedes.'"⁸ In Ben Ehrenreich's report on Haitian rescue efforts at Slate.com we find this report of the initial days of the disaster:

"Command and control" turned out to be the key words. The U.S. military did what the U.S. military does. Like a slow-witted, fearful giant, it built a wall around itself, commandeering the Port-au-Prince airport and constructing a mini-Green Zone. As thousands of tons of desperately needed food, water, and medical supplies piled up behind the airport fences—and thousands of corpses piled up outside them—Defense Secretary Robert Gates ruled out the possibility of using American aircraft to airdrop supplies: "An airdrop is simply going to lead to riots," he said. The military's first priority was to build a "structure for distribution" and "to provide security." (Four days and many deaths later, the United States began airdropping aid.)

This is what we do, whenever zombies strike: we build fortifications, we hoard supplies, we "circle the wagons" and point our guns outward. And we do this even, and most tragically, when the zombies don't exist, when outside the walls there are only other people just like us.

Zombie Gaze, Zombie Embrace

Late in the jail period of *The Walking Dead* there is a brief panel sequence of Carl and his friend, Sophie, staring out through the gates at the zombies outside. We see first the zombies on the chain-link fence, particularly their dark uncomprehending eyes, their grasping hands, their gaping mouths. The second panel pulls back, camera-like, to see Carl and Sophie from behind, holding hands, looking outward; the white American cowboy man-child and his prospective love interest—who become our last hope for the resuscitation of reproductive futurity—stare at the starving masses behind the fence. On the next page they talk about what they see. Carl asks if she is still scared of



the zombies, and she says no: “Mostly I just feel sorry for them Because they look so sad. Don’t they look sad to you?”

The suggestion here is of a shift from terror of the Other to pity for the Other—which is progress, I suppose, of a type. But this sort of sympathy merely recapitulates the colonial gaze by recoding it into a new, less objectionable form. We, the privileged, still do the looking; they, our objects, are still looked *at*. The *really* radical move for poor Sophie, of course, would be not to feel pity but to throw open the gates: to erase the subject-object division altogether and abandon the zombie gaze. The really radical move, that is, would be to refuse

the demarcation between life and anti-life altogether, as Sophie's mother Carol does in a later issue when she deliberately turns herself over to the zombies to be consumed and turned. "Oh good," she says as the zombie tears into her throat in a perverse lovers' embrace, "you *do* like me."

Within the fictional space of the zombie narrative, of course, a move like Carol's makes no sense: this is suicide! But despite the protestations of biopolitical state racism, despite the endless blaring declarations of national emergencies and states of exception, *we don't* live inside a zombie narrative; we live in the real world, a zombieless world, where the only zombies to be found are the ones we ourselves have made out of the excluded, the forgotten, the cast-out, and the walled-off. To become a zombie would be to obliterate the line dividing "us" from "them" by allowing ourselves to be fully and finally devoured by alterity. To become a zombie is in this way to risk becoming "disposable" ourselves; to do it would mean forsaking the zombie gaze in favor of the zombie embrace. This is why universalism—in either its humanist or zombic guises—should never be named as something easy to achieve, much less something we have already accomplished. It is rather always a struggle of self-decentering and self-deprivileging, of self-renunciation—something easier to say than do, but at the same time the necessary precondition for a final end to our collective zombie nightmare, the nightmare called history itself.

Notes

1. As Shaviro himself notes near the end of his essay, even as the zombie slips back and forth "between First World and Third," it remains sloughed off always on other bodies, which he suggests is an apt metaphorization of the invisibility of productive labor (288–89). This is especially important in the context of the origins of the *zombi* in colonial Haiti, which as Laury and Embro show was a figure both of the resisting slave *and* of a nightmare of slavery which continues even after death (97–98); the zombie of contemporary mass culture, Shaviro says, instead alternates between figuring invisible/immaterial labor in the Third World and anti-productive consumption in the First—both of which are focalized in other people not ourselves.
2. The full quote from Deleuze and Guattari reads: "Above all, the State apparatus makes the mutilation, and even death, come first. It needs them preaccomplished, for people to be born that way, crippled and zombielike. The myth of the zombie, of the living dead, is a work myth and not a war myth. Mutilation is a consequence of war, but it is a necessary condition, a presupposition of the State apparatus and the organization of work . . ." (425).
3. Dale Knickerbocker has brought to my attention that Atlanta is a particularly interesting city for Rick to journey towards, given the apocalyptic devastation of Sherman's March and the boundless suburban sprawl of the city's recent history.

He also suggests Shane as a reference to George Stevens’s 1953 Western *Shane*, which the character echoes in both plot and theme; the difference here is that the child is not Shane’s mourner but his executioner.

4. These terms are defined on the first page of Agamben’s *Homo Sacer* as follows: “*zoē*, which expressed the simple fact of living common to all living beings (animal, men, or gods), and *bios*, which indicated the form of living proper to an individual or group” (1). This is to say that *zoē* is bare (as in mere) life, while *bios* is citizenship, political life. Much of Agamben’s work focuses on the biopolitical consequences resulting from the exclusion of certain types of bodies from *bios*.
5. We might likewise think of the infamous “zombie baby” moment near the end the 2004 remake of *Dawn of the Dead*.
6. Priscilla Wald explores zombiism as a science-fictional figure for real-world disease in her book-length study of such “epidemiological horrors,” *Contagious: Cultures, Carriers, and the Outbreak Narrative* (2008), particularly the way such stories typically employ narratives like the “Patient Zero” origin myth so commonly found in popular accounts of public-health crises like SARS and HIV/AIDS.
7. It should be noted that a grand jury chose not to indict Dr. Pou or two other nurses for the charges brought against them; these charges have now been expunged and the state of Louisiana has agreed to pay Pou’s legal fees.
8. It should perhaps be noted that “stampede” is precisely what the zombies do in issues 59–60 of *The Walking Dead*; unthinking, operating on automatic instinct in search of food, they network together into a fierce “herd” and very nearly run our heroes down.

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