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# "From Port-au-Prince to Hollywood: The Trope of the Zombi(e) in American Literature"

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From Port-au-Prince to Hollywood:  
The Trope of the Zombi(e) in American Literature

Connor M. Pitetti

Spring 2010

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the degree of Master of Arts  
of the City College of the City University of New York.

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## Introduction

In her 1938 travelogue *A Puritan in Voodoo Land* Edna Taft explains the process through which a Haitian would produce a “real zombi”:

Martine told me that a corpse is laid at the foot of Baron Samedi's altar. The priest is the only human being present. He brings out one of the black goats sacred to Satan, and which must have been in the evil one's service for at least a year. The *papa-loi* gives a command, and the goat bleats loud and long, to ask Baron Samedi's approval. Satan makes known his approbation by knockings. At the divine command, the goat approaches the dead body, sniffs at it, then lies down on top of it, and finally goes to sleep. Everything is ready. The *papa-loi*, alone in his *houmfort* except for the dead man, the sleeping goat and the spirit of the god, performs a blood transfusion, using the customary surgical instruments. That is all. The goat awakes, steps off the dead man who is now in the act of coming back to life. The zombi arises, like one getting up from a sick bed after a long illness. His body is sound once more, but his soul is wandering somewhere in the outside world, obeying its master, Baron Samedi. Of course it is the diabolical deity who has performed the miracle of resurrection.<sup>1</sup>

It seems hardly necessary to point out the dismissal on Taft's part of the very culture her book proposes to uncover and record. The association of the Vodun priest with the brute animal; the subjugation of non-Christian religious figures<sup>2</sup> to a strictly Christian conceptual framework; and the representation of forces which would be considered positive and progressive when associated with the colonizer (medicine, religion) as corrupt and degraded in association with the colonized: all of these are typical of the distortions which come from observing a 'native' culture through a comfortably metropolitan, imperialist lens.

Taft's book was published in 1938, in the final years of the American occupation of Haiti. The 1930s saw the publication of a number of such texts, written by foreigners who visited Haiti, which treat the figure of the *zombi* in a similar way. As scholars have, to some extent, demonstrated, the travel books published by Taft, W. B. Seabrook, Richard Loederer, John Craige, and others are rife with politically suspect biases and erasures. Subsequent anthropological investigations have shown that the stories through which these writers introduced metropolitan America to the *zombi* bear very little resemblance to the stories actually told of the same figure in Haiti by Haitians. As the historical, anthropological, and generally factual accounts which most of these works were originally presented to the reading public as examples of, they fail absolutely.

Despite their many failings, however, the Haitian travelogues did accomplish something of literary significance. When they destroyed the *zombi* they produced another figure, a trope without a story. This new figure was then further adapted by American filmmakers and combined with elements from other traditions, most notably the European Gothic. An entirely new tradition was born out of this, a narrative that has, through extensive film dissemination and years of continued development and refinement, become a truly global trope: the tale of the zombie apocalypse. Pioneered in 1968 by George Romero with *Night of the Living Dead* and embraced by generations of writers and filmmakers in subsequent years,<sup>3</sup> the zombie apocalypse narrative presents a stark, often

disturbing, and startlingly original vision of mankind and our relationships as human beings to each other and to the world we live in.

The link between zombie stories and legends of the *zombi* is clear. Beyond the etymological relationship of the two words the two sets of stories share an obvious cosmetic feature: both are organized around the figure of the living dead person. But the difference in the way in which the dead figure functions in each tradition is marked. The *zombi* is, as much or more than it is a monstrous figure, a victim; it is not the *zombi* per se that inspires fear, but the unavoidable suggestion offered by its existence that you yourself might one day share its fate. The zombie, on the other hand, is defined by its monstrousness; it is most obviously distinguished from the living human being it once was less by its physical aspect of death than by its focus on unremitting, utterly arbitrary acts of violence.<sup>4</sup>

The travelogues of the 1930s are an historical bridge across this thematic gap; they introduced to the story the elements of violence which Romero would later magnify so drastically, and they cleared the way for Romero's refocusing by dislocating the *zombi* from its original context. The texts do this primarily in two ways: through the introduction of racialized stereotypes in retellings of Haitian stories, and through the devaluation, dismissal, and erasure of nearly all the traditional tropes and figures featured in these stories. The story of Mammes, “a stalwart young peasant,”<sup>5</sup> is a good example of both of these processes at work.

This story also comes from Taft's *A Puritan in Voodoo Land*. Mammes

worked as a laborer in the dock town of Jacmel, where he was often seen in bars and at cockfights. He lost a huge sum of money gambling; desperate, unable to come up with the money by any means, “the unfortunate stevedore . . . sold his soul to the *papa-loi* [a Vodun priest named Souffrance], for the sum of two hundred *gourdes*.”<sup>6</sup> The priest transformed Mammes into a *zombi* and sold him, as a slave, to his friend Vermineux. The narrative takes a sudden turn with the appearance of Thelecide, “a negress of fifty years of age, soot black and inexpressibly ugly, clothed in a dirty blue dress.”<sup>7</sup> Mammes sees the woman when she visits Vermineux; consumed with lust, the *zombi* follows her home, “sniffing like a wild animal.” Then, “panting with foam-covered lips and bulging eyes” he breaks down the door, “box[s] the woman on the ears and accomplishe[s] what he had come for.”<sup>8</sup>

With the introduction of the stereotype of bestial, exaggerated African sexuality in Mammes, and in the equally exaggerated sexuality of the old crone who embraces her rapist, this story also introduces to the *zombi* an element of violence that the Haitian stories discussed in Chapter 2 do not include. In some ways the beginning of this story parallels those traditional cautionary tales: Mammes is in trouble socially, and the ultimate result of that trouble is his transformation into a mindless slave. But the story transforms Souffrance, who in the Haitian stories would silently represent the will of the community in ostracizing a disruptive individual, into a cheap villain preying on a misguided



but naïve young man. Both of these effects serve to disconnect the *zombi* from its traditional place in Haitian discourse, both by changing the figure itself and by erasing the narrative of which it is a part. Mammes comes to resemble Romero's rampaging hordes much more than he does the subjugated figure of Haitian myth.

Nearly all of the travel texts about Haiti published in the 1930s contribute to the forced evolution of the *zombi* into the zombie, even those which do not engage directly with the figure, or do so only tangentially. In Haiti the *zombi* is part of a social fabric, tied in various ways to family, community, and the shared tradition of Vodun, and in these records the larger part of that system is dismissed as ignorance, superstition, and devil worship. To devalue the figure of the *bokor*, for example, is to begin the process of tearing the trope of the *zombi* loose from the structure in which it operates.<sup>9</sup> Through countless misrepresentations and distortions, the travelogues ripped the *zombi* from the local discursive architecture of which it was originally a part and handed it to Romero, who was then free to refashion it as the universalized figure which has so captured the imagination of the cosmopolitan metropolis.

Before beginning this study with an analysis of the Haitian stories it is worth while to look for a moment at the African roots of these Vodun stories. Just the etymology of the word zombie is interesting in light of the claims I am making for the epistemological focus of the contemporary version of the monster.

The first step in tracing the word's history is to the Creole *zombi*, but for the next several theories have been advanced. Elsie Parsons suggests derivations from the French, *les ombres*, and from Creole, either the Jamaican *duppy*, or the *jumbie* of Antigua and Barbados.<sup>10</sup> The French that Parsons offers, 'the shadows' in English, is probably an unrelated word that is coincidentally similar in sound; there is a hint of Euro-centrism in it. The two Creole terms are both used to refer to a wide range of spirits or monsters, and seem to be words with histories parallel to that of *zombi*, rather than its predecessors, as do *fumbi*, suggested by Lydia Cabrera,<sup>11</sup> and *mayombe*, both Cuban creole words.

Maya Deren traces these Creole terms to a native word, the Arawak *zemi*,<sup>12</sup> but Hans Ackermann and Jeanine Gauthier trace it across the Atlantic ocean, to a phonetically similar body of words drawn from several West African languages, including Mitsogho, Kongo, Ewe, Mina, Binda, and Lucumí. Ackerman and Gauthier are of the opinion that *zombi*, *fumbi*, and the other terms identified here as Creole words for spirit or monster are probably derived from one or more of the following seven African words: *mvumbi*, *ndzumbi*, *nsumbi*, *nvumbi*, *nzambi*, *zan bii* (or *zan bibi*), and *zumbi*.<sup>13</sup> Wade Davis cites the Kimbundu *nzumbe*;<sup>14</sup> this is likely an alternate transliteration of one of the words offered by Ackermann and Gauthier, some of which may also be different Roman spellings of the same African root.

The definitions Ackermann, Gauthier, and Davis provide for these terms

vary widely: “corpse,” “body,” “spirit,” “invisible part of a man,” “devil,” and “creator god.”<sup>15</sup> All, however, reference a related body of thought; in its earliest forms the concepts surrounding the term zombie are all part of attempts to define personhood and the relationship of the self to the world. The word resonates with apparently conflicting ideas about a body without a soul and a soul without a body; hostile supernatural foes and the spirits of ancestors and natural forces; dissipation and omnipotence. It serves to situate human identity and perception in an uncertain relationship with death and exterior reality.

Edna Aizenberg sees these terms and their focus on a problematized life/death, self/other relationships as typical of African spirituality, with which she associates “permeable frontiers between the material and immaterial” and a two way exchange between the living and the dead.<sup>16</sup> She links the *zombi* to the abiku child and other ghostly African figures, and locates the primary power of the *zombi* tradition in its representation of free interaction between spheres of existence treated as less violable in other religious and epistemological traditions. Ackermann and Gauthier see the same sublimity in the *zombi* figure, which they link to “the Haitian idea of the [dual] soul.”<sup>17</sup> They identify gradations of zombification, varying in the number of pieces into which an originally whole human being is divided when he or she becomes a *zombi*. The mythology of souls stolen, given away, held, returned, and subdivided calls into question, as do the multiple implications of the African root words when they are taken together as

representing a body of related thought, the constituent elements of identity, and the relationship of the individual to society and the larger exterior world.

In the Haitian stories discussed here, the *zombi* defines what it means to be human, to be Self, what it would take to destroy that identity. The Self is defined not only as thinking and feeling, as a being with free will, but also as a member of a specific community. The Romero zombie continues to develop this epistemic inquiry on a much larger scale, without the contextual grounding of the Haitian tradition. On the surface Romero presents an image of divisible humanity in much the same way the mythology of souls and the *zombi* do: the fleeing survivors and the rampaging hordes of monsters appear to be humanity divided into rational and unthinking parts, into noble and bestial parts. Set against 'normal,' living, human beings in one of these binaries, the zombie seems to ask us to identify the essentials of human identity. In terms of the mythology of souls it asks for the most important piece, that bit of the soul that, once lost, sends a man over the line from Self to Other.

Romero complicates these apparently simple distinctions, however, and the question his movies ask, ultimately, is whether or not it is reasonable to talk about Self and Other at all. They ask whether we can point at something (reason, free will, civilization, art, love) and say of it 'this is human' and then point to something else (brutishness, ignorance, violence, sin, hate) and say 'that is less than human, that is in some way different than me, that is Other.' The assault

Romero wages on identity goes deeper than this, as well, because what the films finally suggest is that all definitions of Self are flawed. Neither humanity as a whole or the individual itself are monolithic; at every level identity is shown to be a sum of heterogeneous parts, parts which don't quite fit together, which never add up to a whole.

## Notes

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- 1 Taft, 260.
  - 2 Or partially Christian; the Vodun religion is based in many ways on Catholicism. The direct correlation of Baron Samedi and Satan, however, is reductive. It betrays Taft's superficial knowledge of the local tradition, her erasure of the nuance and detail of that tradition.
  - 3 See Appendix A for a survey of the many texts inspired by Romero.
  - 4 The relationship outlined here reads primary materials divided into two broad categories: the 'traditional' zombi literature, those stories drawn from Haitian mythology which feature the zombi cadavre, and the contemporary zombie literature pioneered by Romero. From these broad categories I have distilled the idealized narratives that form the beginning and end of the evolution this essay proposes to trace; and this has involved, naturally, the drawing of a number of arbitrary distinctions. The Haitian stories in no way form a single coherent canon, and are in any case not an absolute point of origin; they can in turn be traced back to the West African and European traditions of the people who came, or were brought, to Haiti. And in the fluid, cosmopolitan environment of contemporary American culture the zombie has been adopted into every imaginable narrative tradition, from the western to the romantic comedy to the action-based video game. In both cases the narratives I wish to examine emerge in full only through examination of masses of individual stories and texts; most of these works, singly, exhibit only portions of the patterns which make up the stories.
  - 5 Taft, 202.
  - 6 Ibid.
  - 7 Ibid, 203.
  - 8 Ibid.
  - 9 The transformation of the bokor into a villain or cheap trickster is only one example of the devaluation of Haitian culture enacted at the hands of foreign observers, and the cutting loose of the zombie from its traditional position is only one effect. Other details, such as the difference between the bokor and the houngan, or the role of the Haitian secret societies, are also obscured and distorted.
  - 10 See "Spirit Cult in Haiti." *Journal de la Société des Américanistes de Paris* 20: 157-79.
  - 11 Cabrera, 32.
  - 12 Deren, 278.

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- 13 Ackermann, 468.
  - 14 Davis, xii.
  - 15 Ackermann, 468-9.
  - 16 Aizenberg, 465.
  - 17 Ackermann, 469.

### The *Zombi*

The Haitian *zombi* is a difficult figure to pin down as the subject of an English language literary analysis for a number of reasons. The first is simply a lack of written *zombi* texts; the walking dead man constitutes only a single small piece of the elaborate and almost entirely oral living narrative tradition of Haiti. Many of the written texts that do exist are in French and unavailable in English translations; and, of course, the very situation this essay proposes to examine also muddies the textual waters. Most written *zombis cadavre*, preserved for us by non-Haitians, are twisted and distorted almost beyond recognition. Accounts given by other writers, those more prone to cultural relativism in their research, are often fragmentary or focused on aspects of the *zombi* other than the details of its narratives. The work of Ackermann and Gauthier, for example, valuable and interesting as it is, falls into this category.

The *zombi* figure itself also plays a much smaller role in the tradition of which it is a part than the zombie does in the Romero tradition. The *zombi* is not only part of a larger discursive structure, but the figure itself is not monolithic.<sup>1</sup> Further, as I will demonstrate in this chapter, the function of *zombi* stories in Haiti is dependant in large part on their great diversity and the difficulty in pinning them down to a single pattern. The *zombi* is a warning, a complex boogey-man story that acts to promote socially conscious behavior. Those foreigners who went



to Haiti hoping to find and record the definitive *zombi* tale were presented with a bewildering variety of stories, some of them traditional tales told to children, some of them supposedly 'factual' accounts, many intentionally exaggerated tales meant to shock, frighten, and confuse. It was getting lost in this complex narrative web, as much as it was their negative prejudgment of Haitian culture, which led these writers to distort the Haitian stories by forcing them into their own conceptual molds.

Study of the literature that does exist is further complicated by a rather unique circumstance. Written stories of the *zombi* are often difficult to read as narratives analogous to more familiar folktales because of the importance they place on dates and names. These stories read more like news reports more than they do like legends of vampires or werewolves. This is due in large part to the fact that the *zombi* has become the focus of two very different types of investigations: namely, the sort of literary/cultural analysis of which the present essay is an example and, on the other hand, a rigorously empirical physical study, in the form of biological and pharmacological research. The *zombi* texts, then, are scattered throughout a variety of publications, produced by scholars and writers who work in very different ways.<sup>2</sup>

One early text which provides a number of useful *zombi* stories is Zora Neale Hurston's *Tell My Horse*. Published in 1938, this book is part of the same bloom of American travel writing that produced the twisted *zombis* of Taft and

Seabrook, but *Tell My Horse* differs from its contemporaries in that it is mostly free of the imperially patronizing spirit. Hurston identifies with the Haitian people; her account is nothing if not sympathetic, and she clearly works hard to remove any personal biases or judgments from the stories she is recording.

Hurston's includes one story she introduces as "the most famous Zombie case of all Haiti." In October of 1909 Marie M., the "beautiful young daughter of a prominent family"<sup>3</sup> became ill and died quite suddenly. She was pronounced dead, buried, and grieved over in the normal way of things. There was no hint of anything amiss, until a former schoolmate spotted Marie through a window while passing an old house in town. Marie's family refused to say anything, and during the resulting commotion her grave was exhumed. The grave was not empty, but the body it contained was markedly larger than the girl originally buried there. The *zombi* itself was smuggled out of the country to France and hidden in a convent there. Here is another story, also taken from *Tell My Horse*:

In the year 1889 at Cap Haitian a woman had one son who was well educated but rather petted and spoiled. There was some trouble about a girl. He refused to accept responsibility and when his mother was approached by a member of the girl's family she refused to give any sort of satisfaction. Two weeks later the boy died rather suddenly and was buried.<sup>4</sup>

Some time later the boy's mother was walking when she suddenly saw her dead son, loading bags of coffee onto a cart alongside the Bord Mar. The dead man did not recognize or respond to his pleading mother, who was then chased away by

the foreman in charge of the loading operation. When she returned to the scene later with the police, the *zombi* was nowhere to be found.

These stories share very little with Taft's, but Hurston's account of *zombi* traditions does ultimately read very much as an outsider's account.<sup>5</sup> Her approach appears to have been simply to record every, or at least many, of the stories she was told. Her book consequently contains many stories of devil-worshipping cults and graveyards haunted by ghoulish villains that are every bit as sensationalist as the stories Taft tells. The conversations about Vodun, and especially *zombis*, that Hurston recounts in the book are with people who are either themselves largely ignorant of the topic of conversation or who are actively discouraging her from investigating it.<sup>6</sup> Her *zombi* stories, although they may be told as Haitians would have told them, do not show us the *zombi* as the Haitians saw it. Alfred Metraux, writing on the subject of Haiti some twenty years later, gives us even less of the Haitian *zombi*.<sup>7</sup> It is perhaps counterintuitive to suggest it, but the clearest and most complete examples in English of these stories as they have been told in Haiti historically are to be found in the most recent treatments of the subject. It is in the work of Wade Davis that American culture is given for the first time what appears to be a clear representation of the *zombi* as it is traditionally seen in Haiti.

Davis's account is, of course, an outsider's accounts just as much as are Hurston's or Taft's. Further, both *The Serpent and the Rainbow* and *Passage of Darkness*, Davis's two books on *zombis*, are ostensibly focused on aspects of the

tradition other than its narrative tropes; namely, the details of the pharmacological process through which a person might actually be buried and resurrected as a *zombi*. Nonetheless, Davis succeeded as an anthropologist and a recorder of stories in a way that no previous writer in English dealing with Haiti had done. His observations appear to be as free of bias and distortion as it is possible for a necessarily limited and subjective observer to make them. Davis does not simply present the stories as they were told to him, as Hurston does; neither does he impose upon them his own interpretation, as Metraux does. Whatever flaws his books might have as empirically sound pharmacological works, they provide not only stories of individual *zombis*, but an understanding of the way these stories fit into the social fabric Haiti.<sup>8</sup>

Much of Davis's work is focused on the story of Clairvius Narcisse. Thanks in large part to Davis's own work and a 1981 BBC documentary, this is possibly the most well-known *zombi* story outside of Haiti. The details are as follows: on April 30<sup>th</sup>, 1962, Narcisse was admitted to the emergency ward of the Albert Schweitzer Hospital in Deschepelles; at 1:15 pm on May 2<sup>nd</sup> he was declared dead. His death was witnessed by at least two family members, one of whom, his sister, signed and affixed her thumbprint to the official death certificate. He was buried at 10:00 am the morning of May 3<sup>rd</sup>. Narcisse later reappeared, apparently alive and well, eighteen years later, approaching his sister and identifying himself in a public market place by recounting details of his

childhood no imposter could have known. He said he had spent the intervening years as a *zombi*, working for some time as a slave in northern Haiti. After the *bokor* who controlled him was killed, Narcisse says he wandered the countryside in exile, only returning home when he heard that his brother had passed away. This brother, Narcisse said, was responsible for his fate, which had been brought on by a dispute between the two siblings over what to do with certain parts of the family's property.<sup>9</sup>

According to Max Beauvoir and other Haitian *houngans* and *bokosr*,<sup>10</sup> the living dead are part of a complex discursive structure which helps to maintain the social structure of Haiti at an extremely local level. Although not monumental or bureaucratic in the way of Catholicism, Vodun as a religion does include a sort of local theocracy throughout much of Haiti, in the form of legally unrecognized but very influential secret societies. These societies are composed of community members, and occupy themselves with maintaining social order in the local context. The *zombi* occupies a specific position within this framework; it does not stand alone, nor does its story begin at death. The man or woman who becomes a *zombi* is first and foremost part of a community, and the first act of the *zombi* story is concerned with this person offending that community in some way.

The fate of the *zombi* can be traced directly to his or her social offense, as a punishment meted out by the secret societies in order to maintain the patterns of behavior traditionally considered acceptable by the community. Davis reports a

number of crimes which might result in one being punished by a secret society, including:

excessive material advancement at the obvious expense of family and dependents . . . displaying lack of respect for one's fellows . . . spreading loose talk that slanders and affects the well-being of others . . . harming members of one's family . . . [and] any action that unjustly keeps another from working the land.<sup>11</sup>

These are crimes, not necessarily in the legal sense, but in the sense that they are violations of widely accepted social mores. These actions break the rules which maintain peace between neighbors; in the most basic sense, the rules which make civilization possible.

A person who violates one of these rules is 'sold' to a secret society; essentially, they are litigated against. This practice is represented in many of the accounts of Vodun foreigners have produced, where it is almost invariably transformed into stories of evil men selling the souls of their enemies to the devil in exchange for power, stories that rework Faust and locate him in the Caribbean.<sup>12</sup> The reality as it is presented in these *zombie* stories is slightly more prosaic; the secret society examines the case and passes judgment, and the accused is dealt with accordingly. The transformation of the accused into a *zombi cadavre* is one of the potential results of a guilty verdict. In this context, the figure of the voodoo priest, the *bokor* who is so often represented by foreign recorders of these stories as a malicious villain or child killing devil worshiper, acts as policeman. The *bokor* is the enforcer of the collective will of his or her

community; the force which renders harmless those situations and individuals which threaten the future of that community. Importantly, however, the *bokor* acts under a veil of secrecy maintained through the participation of the entire social group. In the stories Davis records, both that of Narcisse and of the woman known as Ti Femme, there is the sense of a widespread but tacitly unmentioned knowledge of the cause of death among the members of the troublemaker's family and the larger community.

The stories of Clairvius Narcisse and Ti Femme, the two *zombis* on whom Davis concentrates, are both accounts of unpleasant, villainous characters who are punished in accordance with an unspoken public consensus. Narcisse had been, before his sudden death, involved in a conflict with his family over whether or not to sell a portion of their property, a grievous offense in Haiti.<sup>13</sup> Ti Femme was described to Davis by those who had known her as “maloktcho,” a Creole insult referring to a person who is “crude, uncivilized, [and] raw.”<sup>14</sup> A young man who had known Ti Femme when she was alive told Davis that “she was doing everything she shouldn't have done. And she didn't like people . . . she swore at people for no reason.”<sup>15</sup> She was known as a cheat in the market place and widely disliked; one woman Davis interviewed was of the opinion that rather than having been ‘sold’ to the secret society by a single individual, Ti Femme was accused by the entire population of the marketplace.

Elements of this same pattern can be found in another *zombi* story which

Davis mentions briefly without investigating, the story of

Natagette Joseph, aged about sixty, who was supposedly killed over a land dispute in 1966. In 1980 she was recognized wandering about her home village by the police officer who, fourteen years before, in the absence of a doctor, had pronounced her dead.

Hurston's story of the young man turned *zombi* and his family's refusal to deal with the 'trouble about a girl' he found himself in also follows the pattern. Hurston's account of Marie M's family and their stubborn resistance to investigating the reappearance of their supposedly deceased daughter does not explicitly identify a crime or social gaffe, but it does suggest that the family knew more about the situation than they let on.

Many scholars read *zombi* stories in Haiti as parables of slavery.<sup>16</sup> Ackermann and Gauthier suggest, however, that this interpretation overemphasizes the importance of the Haitian Revolution on the development of the *zombi* tradition; they note that many of the key elements of these traditions predate the colonial history that has plagued the nation of Haiti. This more recent history has, clearly, played its part in shaping the *zombi*; as a warning against socially disruptive or taboo behavior, the *zombi* relies on the threat of slavery to act as deterrent. These stories do more than express the fear of slavery, however; they use that fear to demonstrate the consequences of breaking the social fabric. Internal coherence was of the utmost importance to the early black communities in Haiti; these communities were made up of runaway slaves, after all, and actions



which threatened the community were likely to land the entire group back in chains. It seems only fitting, then, that those who brought danger to the community through their behavior would be threatened with eternal, inescapable slavery themselves.<sup>17</sup>

The *zombi* is a figure which appears to be human but which is by definition not; a figure which is defined through its Otherness. The stories present this Other figure alongside representations of the Self, in the form of the members of the *zombi*'s former community, and thus offer a definition, through contrast, of what it means to be a human being. The *zombi* is differentiated from the society it has been excluded from by lack: the living dead in Haiti lack free will, reason, a voice, agency of any kind. Human identity, the soul that is stolen, is therefore bound up in the possession of these characteristics. Equally important, however, is the very fact of the *zombi*'s exclusion. The epistemic project of these stories is situated within a very specific social and historical context, and Self identity here is dependent upon a specific group identity determined by that context. The human Self is defined by more than simply possession of free will and reason; its agency acts within a behavioral framework that promotes the interests of the group, that encourages peaceful coexistence with other Selves.

It is this cultural grounding which the travelogues stripped away. In Romero's hands the living dead ask their questions about identity in a

cosmopolitan place. His inquiry does include asking what it means to be a human being, a Self, in post-Revolution Haiti, but it goes beyond this and asks how to make this definition from a perspective uninfluenced by social or historical considerations. Referencing the slavery with which the embattled Haitian people have been threatened for so long, the *zombi* defines the Self by identifying the side of a conflict to which it belongs. In Romero's stories it is the conflict itself which defines us; Selfhood is not found in any one position taken against something Other, but in the very act of taking a position.

## Notes

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- 1 There is, in fact, a sense in which I use the word itself incorrectly throughout this essay. Zombis are generally defined by Americans as Zora Neale Hurston defines them: “They are the bodies without souls. The living dead. Once they were dead, and after that they were called back to life again” (179). But as Ackermann and Gauthier demonstrate, a zombi is not necessarily an animate corpse; the word refers also to souls without bodies. The antecedent to Romero's monster, the trope which we must isolate in order to demonstrate the effect played by the foreign travel books, makes up only a part of the original zombi tradition, a part more accurately known as the zombi cadavre. For a more complete treatment of the two varieties of zombi, see Ackerman and Gauthier's “The Ways and Nature of the Zombi.”
  - 2 See Appendix C for a more complete discussion of this situation.
  - 3 Hurston, 194. Hurston uses *Zombie* in place of *zombi* throughout *Tell My Horse*.
  - 4 *Ibid*, 192.
  - 5 Another way to put this would be to say that Hurston's zombi stories are those of a novelist, while Davis's are those of a journalist, or even a critic. Hurston presents the zombi as a narrative object, while Davis seeks to explicate and analyze that object.
  - 6 An incident recorded by Valerie Boyd in her biography of Hurston, *Wrapped in Rainbows*, is illustrative of this. In November of 1936 Hurston discussed Vodun and zombis with two doctors at the hospital of Gonaives in Haiti. They warned her that investigations into such matters could be dangerous; Hurston abandoned the subject of zombis but continued to investigate other aspects of Haitian traditions and religion. A few months later she took violently ill, and believed that she had been poisoned as a warning to put an end to these investigations, news of which had “been whispered into ears that heard” (from a letter Hurston wrote to Henry Allen Moe in June of 1937, quoted in Boyd, 299). Hurston left not long after this for America, to finish and then publish her Haitian travel book.
  - 7 Referring specifically to some of the stories Hurston investigated and to several others, Metraux dismisses the entire tradition as superstition, and bemoans the fact that in “Port-au-Prince there are few, even among the educated, who do not give some credence to these macabre stories” (281). He explains the persistence of zombi sightings and their stories by suggesting that the supposed living dead are in fact “imbecile[s] or . . . moron[s] in whom the

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- peasants had recognized a person who had been dead” for many years (281).
- 8 Where Hurston was chased away from the secrets of Haitian religion, Davis pushed forward with his investigation until he was ultimately confronted with a choice between abandoning his position as observer, undergoing initiation into a Haitian secret society, and becoming completely a part of Vodun society, or bringing his search for knowledge to an end. Davis chose to return to his own culture; and when he got back and wrote his book about what he learned, many in the scientific community dismissed him as a hack. For more on the reception of Davis’s books, see Appendix C.
  - 9 Davis reports that it was actually an uncle of Narcisse’s who was responsible for setting in motion the process which led to his death and resurrection. See *Serpent*, 313.
  - 10 The insights offered by Beauvoir and other powerful members of the Vodun community can be found in Davis’s books, and in a series of interviews filmed by the BBC for a documentary on the zombi phenomenon.
  - 11 Davis, *Serpent*, 312.
  - 12 Hurston, 183-5.
  - 13 For a discussion of Haitian laws and traditions regarding property and inheritance, see Davis discussion in *The Serpent and the Rainbow* on pages 312-313.
  - 14 Davis, *Serpent*, 85.
  - 15 *Ibid*, 81.
  - 16 See articles by Laroche, d’Ans, and others.
  - 17 To labor unthinkingly as a zombi is a fate analogous to the eternal damnation in Hell promised to sinners in the Christian tradition. But Vodun has little room for delayed judgments or resolutions enacted by otherworldly figures in otherworldly realms; the power of Vodun depends on the religion’s immediacy. When the gods come down to earth regularly to dance with and speak to their worshipers, when it is quite common for some powerful spirit to plunge a possessed man's hand into a fire and save it from burning, it is not surprising that judgment and punishment are more immediate as well.

## The Zombie

A large body of critical secondary literature has built up around Romero's films and the figure of the contemporary zombie in general. Much of it, however, is not focused on the work of Romero specifically, or on the zombie as a literary trope, but instead mentions his films in the course of a discussion of a related subject. This is not true across the board, but speaking in very general terms we might divide the majority of this critical literature into two groups: those works which deal with Romero as part of a discussion of the Haitian *zombi* and the earliest American cinematic interpretations of that figure, the so-called 'zombie woman' films, and those which look at Romero as part of the larger tradition of American horror films or horror films in general.

Many of the scholars who focus on the Haitian traditions tend towards an interpretation of the contemporary version of the trope that renders Romero's zombie narratives as little more than empty shadows of the Haitian story.<sup>1</sup> I would suggest, however, that when Markmann Ellis writes that "in recent decades, the term zombie has been emptied . . . drained of almost all its original significance,"<sup>2</sup> or when Steven Shaviro says that the zombie has "become unmoored from meaning,"<sup>3</sup> their focus on those aspects of the *zombi* that were lost when the story left Haiti obscure the new zombie Romero created. Ellis may be right when he says that "the postmodern era threaten[s] to occlude the zombie's enduring and

distinctive history,”<sup>4</sup> but only in the sense that the Romero zombie is among postmodernisms<sup>5</sup> great accomplishments. Romero is Benjamin’s allegorist, synthesizing disparate cultural sources into a new mythological vision, rather than juxtaposing them in clashing relationships within a traditional style, genre, or mode.<sup>6</sup> This is a literature that rewrites its historical sources and applies their lessons in a new form to the problems and concerns of a new era.<sup>7</sup> Ellis accuses the zombie of “ontological exhaustion,”<sup>8</sup> but as a symbol these monsters are far from empty.

Edna Aizenberg gives us a particularly wonderful definition of the zombie, which she refers to as a “multilayered symbolic space in which North American, South American, African, and Caribbean cultural and political discourses cross, conversing and clashing in a noisy and revealing postcolonial colloquy.”<sup>9</sup> The study in which this definition appears focuses on Val Lewton's *I Walked With a Zombie*,<sup>10</sup> a film which predates Romero and contains a very different version of the living dead. Nonetheless, the definition is still useful here. It was through the colloquy of texts like Lewton's and W.B. Seabrook's *The Magic Island* that the Haitian *zombi* was transformed into the Hollywood zombie. If Lewton's zombie was the space in which discourses crossed, Romero's zombie is the product of that transaction.<sup>11</sup>

There are scholars who look at Romero independently from discussions of his antecedents, mainly those conducting large surveys of the horror tradition in

American cinema,<sup>12</sup> but few of these readings are complete examinations of Romero's film cycle. The vast majority discuss only the earliest of the director's six zombie films, and most have focused on only isolated elements of even those films they do look at.<sup>13</sup> *Night of the Living Dead*, for example, has been read as a despairing commentary on the war in Vietnam.<sup>14</sup> *Dawn* is generally read as a commentary on American materialism,<sup>15</sup> and *Day* as a critique of the American military-industrial complex. The films undeniably contain these commentaries; but there is more to them than that.

The sweeping suggestion that "with few exceptions, the contemporary cinematic zombie is a post-modern creature that reflects back the deadening effects of 'first world' consumerism and its attendant evils,"<sup>16</sup> interprets only one aspect of Romero's *Dawn of the Dead*, the shopping mall in which crowds of mindless zombies gather, and the comments the characters make in reference to this. The mall, and with it its economic connotations, is not central to the zombie narrative per se; it is the setting in which one iteration of this story, *Dawn of the Dead*, is set. It functions in the same way the farmhouse in *Night* and the armored compound in *Day* function: each is a quotidian revisioning of the archetypal Gothic castle, around which every zombie story is, to some degree, built. In *Shaun of the Dead* the brooding homestead is represented by a neighborhood pub; in *28 Days Later*, a country estate outside London.

The zombie in Romero is unmoored from Haiti; it is a global,

cosmopolitan figure which he has adopted into a narrative framework based on the Gothic tradition, and its stories can be set anywhere. And so by virtue of its setting *Dawn* can, as a zombie story, also contain its pointed critique of consumerism; *28 Weeks Later* can function as a critique of the British surveillance state, à la George Orwell; and *Fido* can expose the seemier side of 1950s American bourgeoisie society. At the same time all three also take part in the broader discourse of the zombie story itself.<sup>17</sup>

A more complete reading of the Romero films requires scholarship with these texts as the primary focus. Kim Paffenroth offers such a reading of the movies, taking the first four as a coherent body and interpreting it as a the modern allegory based on Dante's *Inferno*. R.H.W. Dillard's essay on *Night of the Living Dead* is another valuable, if partial, step towards a complete interpretation of the zombie. In it he makes a strong argument for this darkest and most cynical of Romero's movies as a despairing nihilistic lament:

The essential nature of *Night of the Living Dead* may be found in the way it resolves that fear which it has called up . . . less a resolution than a surrender to (and even a celebration of) the fear itself.<sup>18</sup>

Dillard is right to note that *Night* “undercuts most of the cherished values of our whole civilization,” and that “the real horror . . . is that there is nothing we can do that will make any difference at all.”<sup>19</sup> His analysis is limited, however, in that it considers only the first of Romero's films. Although the dead end Dillard



finds in *Night* does haunt the zombie in all its incarnations, when Romero's movies are looked at together as a whole, the broader view does show progression: a vision of humanity continuing to exist despite its utmost efforts at self-destruction and the other hostile realities of life in an irrational, dangerous world. The first movie presents an image of man as we hope that he is standing off against man as we fear he might be; the progression of the films is a matter of coming to terms with the fact that the two are one and the same.

Dillard rightly finds “the real horror” of the Romero zombie not in “a fear of the dead or even a fear of the ordinary world,” but in the “refusal to resolve those fears in any way that does not sacrifice human dignity and human value.”<sup>20</sup> But when *Night* is read in the light of its sequels, it becomes clear that this horror is at the same time the zombie's great promise. There is a resolution here, although not an easy one: it is a celebration of the sacrifice of the illusion of human dignity and value. *Night* tells us that humanity is something dangerous and flawed, and exposes our lives as brutish and difficult to justify; the Romero sequence as a whole tells us to accept humanity as the flawed thing experience has shown it to be. It suggests that we let this acceptance guide us in our struggle through a world that is equally flawed, and not waste what little time we have in life wishing things were other than what they are.

George Romero has written and directed six zombie films, the sequence

known as the ‘Dead’ movies: *Night of the Living Dead*, *Dawn of the Dead*, *Day of the Dead*, *Land of the Dead*, *Diary of the Dead*, and *Survival of the Dead*.<sup>21</sup> The relationship of the films to one another is episodic rather than strictly sequential in a narrative sense; each focuses on characters and situations unconnected to the characters and plots of previous films.<sup>22</sup> The independent stories of each film are linked not only by the thematic threads that run through the entire series, but also through a shared ‘historical’ background: all are set in the same fictional world.

Romero’s world is identical in most ways to our own. His movies are set in various American locales, feature normal people as their protagonists and antagonists, and evoke the day to day reality with which we are all familiar. This fictional world departs from our own by way of one foundational conceit: after a certain date in the not to distant past, the corpses of the dead regained a semblance of life, and began to move across the surface of the earth under their own power until killed for a second time through the destruction of the brain. These walking dead men and women are not the mindless laborers of Haiti; they are driven by the urge to consume human flesh, and pursue their still-living compatriots relentlessly. Neither are they the singular outcasts of Haiti; they exist in vast, uncountable numbers. In Romero’s world the zombie is the norm, the ‘normal’ human being the exception. The films assume that the mass of the world’s population become zombies relatively quickly, by virtue of the simple fact that anyone who dies opposing the hungry dead is destined to join them.<sup>23</sup>

Romero's stories are tales of survival set against this apocalyptic backdrop; each features a group of survivors barricading themselves against the rising hordes of zombies and learning the ropes of this new, violent world. *Night* features a handful of citizens trapped in a deserted farmhouse; *Dawn* an even smaller group of refugees seeking shelter in a mall; *Day* a group of soldiers and scientists in an underground government shelter; *Land* a large urban population living in a heavily defended compound within an otherwise abandoned major city; *Diary* a group of students and their professor traveling in a camper, looking for more permanent shelter; and *Survival* a band of refugees, soldiers and civilians, constantly running and hiding.<sup>24</sup> The first movie establishes the basic narrative pattern each of these stories follows; the later films elaborate on the tropes and plot points which make up this narrative archetype. A larger pattern develops across the sequence, and it is this progression which continues to develop the epistemic and social commentary *Night* introduces.

Although the films are not strictly sequential, the first four do follow one another chronologically.<sup>25</sup> In *Night* the zombies have only just appeared. In *Dawn* the zombie is still something new and alien, but Peter says that he has seen "dozens" of people die after being bitten by one; as time goes on, the zombies become more and more simply a part of life. In *Day* there is every indication that humanity has been completely overrun, and that the human characters are the last living people on the planet. In *Land* we see that humanity has survived, and here

the move towards familiarity begun in *Dawn* is completed. The zombies are no longer a mysterious threat or surprising disruption to the rules of normality; they are simply a given, something analogous to the weather. In the slums of Fiddler's Green, zombies even find their way into daily life as entertainment.<sup>26</sup>

This progression illustrates the basic literary structure of the Dead films at every level. At the scale of the entire sequence seen as a whole down to the scale of individual elements within the films, this structure is one in which a trope is carefully developed and then just as methodically picked apart and exposed as tautologically flawed. The zombie is at first clearly and undeniably Other, not only in a social sense but in an epistemic one; the zombie in *Night* is anomalous, a paradox. In each movie that status is slowly degraded, until in *Land* the zombies are simply faces in a crowd of human others.

Within each film one of the more visible incidences of this build-up/tear-down approach to story telling is in the treatment of the safe house. To a degree all of Romero's films are, as survivor stories, built around the set piece of a Gothic fortress; and one of the first moves each film makes is to introduce this as a place of safety and refuge from the zombie threat. This is accomplished differently each time. In *Night* the farmhouse is simply all there is, the only place for Barbara to run towards in the opening scene. In *Dawn* the point of safety is made more obvious, with the heroes cheering when they see the mall and then enjoying several scenes of frantic revelry once inside. In *Day* the fortress is

specifically that, replete with military guards and an impassable steel door, and *Land* begins with a commercial advertising the safety offered by Fiddler's Green, a fortified corporate city state. In both *Diary* and *Survival* the protagonists follow messages summoning them to safety, in the form of a mansion in *Diary* and a remote island in *Survival*.

As soon as the characters are safely within their refuge, however, the story begins to tear it away from beneath them. First, the safehouse becomes a prison: the characters are trapped by hordes of monsters, left to rot with nothing to do and no option of escape. The flavor of each prison is unique: it is a prison of meaningless consumption in *Dawn*, a military dictatorship in *Day*. In *Land* the city-sized prison expands into an allegory of poverty under capitalism; and in *Diary* it shrinks down to the final tiny, sealed tomb of the bomb shelter. Then the prison gives way as well, and the safehouses become death traps. The various safehouses are set up as sealed 'human' zones, separate from the abandoned 'zombie' zone that has expanded to take up most of the world. When the walls of the shelter crumble, this zoning collapses as well, and the entire world is presented as homogenous: everywhere is dangerous. Reality is a jungle in which humanity must survive, threatened at every turn.

In *Night* the collapse of the safehouse is the climax of the action; after the zombies break into the house all that is left is for Ben to wait to be shot by the zombie hunters in the dénouement. In *Dawn* the action continues, with Peter and

(?) escaping in the helicopter, and in *Day* we see the escapees free, living out their days in a tropical paradise. These three films are each built around a single monumental safehouse, and its collapse brings about the close of the narrative. The later films move past this; their scope is larger, and safehouses come and go from the lives of the characters. When *Fiddler's Green* falls in *Land* the final images are of several groups of survivors, humans and zombies, all looking for a place to live, a place to foster the illusion of security within the undifferentiated hostility of the world. *Diary* and *Survival* each proceed through the rise and fall of several safehouses; for these characters, this is par for the course.

The erosion of the idea that safety can be found inside a shelter is not due entirely, or even primarily, to the zombie threat, however. One of the first things that become clear when the Dead films are looked at as a whole is that the zombies themselves are in many ways secondary factors in the plots of each film. The zombies are the base upon which the stories are set, but the primary conflicts throughout most of the sequence are between the various human characters hiding within the shelters. The story is not so much one of embattled survivors resisting an outside foe as it is one of humanity turned upon itself in the face of an outside foe. More, the foe is not Other at all, but your brother or friend standing up against you; this is a story in which no line is absolute, where friends and enemies are interchangeable. As Dillard's discussion of Romero's thematic of the ordinary in *Night*<sup>27</sup> illustrates, one of the zombie narrative's most pronounced effects is

showing that there is very little difference between the monsters and their human antagonists; reading the Cooper family from *Night* as a “typical modern family,” Dillard notes that they are “separated from hysteria and violence only by a thin veneer of social necessity.”<sup>28</sup> When Harry and Hellen Cooper reappear as zombies, then, we do not see them transformed through some fantastic magic, but simply as unobscured by their social veneer.

When the couple first appear, they bring violence and disruption into the group tangentially, in the form of their own squabbling domestic conflicts. The disruption associated with them becomes more and more pronounced as the façade of polite behavior begins to come apart in the house; Harry ultimately comes into open physical conflict with Ben, who shoots him. Barbara’s brother, similarly, opens the film by teasing and scaring his sister, attacking her from behind a screen of socialized behavior. Later, he appears as a zombie and attacks her directly, dragging her from the house and killing her. It is not long after Ben kills Harry that he retreats to the basement, where Harry reappears as a zombie and the fight begins again; the conflict between these two men, who fought over who was in charge and whether or not the group should retreat to the basement, is now presented in clear, simple terms, without any social masking. It is the eternal conflict of two human figures, barely distinguishable from one another, struggling desperately against one another for a place in the world.

This point is made abundantly clear throughout the films, in a whole

variety of repeated scenes and tropes. The project of the movies is to attack the very foundational opposition upon which they are built, the idea that lets them be horror films in which good guys shoot guns at monsters. Each of the films includes a scene in which a former friend of the survivors, usually him or herself a major character, returns as a zombie and must be shot. *Survival* opens with this scene, and the image of a figure sitting up under a sheet which falls away to reveal a once beloved face twisted by death, mirrors the death and rebirth of (?) under Peter's watchful eye in *Dawn*. In *Night* almost all the characters in the house return as zombies, and Ben is forced to kill them all, one of them a man he had already killed. And that is perhaps the most important point of all. Zombies do kill people in these movies, and good guys spend huge amounts of time shooting at monsters, but it is people, 'ordinary' people, killing each other, and not zombies, that account for most of the deaths in these films.

There is Ben, of course, shot dead by his rescue party, and before him (?), the man he kills while establishing dominance within the safehouse and who he later kills again in the basement, as a zombie. Survivors in Romero's movies struggle constantly for dominance over one another, and it is generally the cause of their undoing; when the zombies win they do so because they are, as much as they are anything, team players. All human interaction in these movies is discordant; almost nothing is said that is not a source of conflict. Jennifer Fay warns that Romero's zombie "conveniently obscures racial, class, and gender



differences.”<sup>29</sup> The zombie does obscure differences; it is the ultimate monstrous equalizer, a hostile and uncanny Other which anybody might suddenly become. This erasure occurs within the figure of the zombie itself; Romero’s shambling hordes are a reference to those things which bind humanity together, the features we share. But the films include more than the zombie, and the picture of the world they present is very much focuses on the various lines along which humanity is split. Indeed, it is to these very lines which the movies call our attention, of which their plots are built.

At the very beginning of *Dawn of the Dead*, before any zombies appear, is a scene in which an army of white police officers surround and invade an urban project building. A few shots are exchanged, and then one of the SWAT members begins running from room to room, shooting everyone he can find, shouting about niggers and spics. The famously black protagonist of *Night of the Living Dead*, Ben, is shot dead in the final scene by a gang of white ‘rescue workers’ busy running down the living dead with dogs. The reference to white lynch mobs and the identification of both Ben and the zombies as victims of this new threat which has assailed the house are clear.

The rampaging police officer in *Dawn* is echoed in the horde of bikers blasting away at the village of helpless zombies in the opening scene of *Land*; the plot through the rest of the fourth film is an exaggerated tale of haves and have-nots, with vicious white men in suits at the top of a shining urban tower and a

teeming mass of oppressed zombies, poor people, women, minorities, and others scabbling below. By the end of *Day of the Dead* the characters have been divided into two opposing camps; vicious white male soldiers on one side, and a peaceful group composed of a woman, a black man, and a white man with an accent on the other. Far from obscuring racial divisions, or social divisions of any kind, Romero's movies paint lurid, cartoonish pictures of our divided society.

The equalizing function of the zombie should be read in light of this other element of the narrative. Zombies represent social division in very stark terms. They are people who are alike in one way, who, despite whatever differences exist among them, are a cohesive group; and their goal is to prey upon, destroy, and assimilate all those who are different. Their ubiquity is matched only by that of living characters who prey upon, mistreat, and kill those who are different. This is the zombie vision of mankind's existence in the world, constantly devouring itself, alone and self referential. Safety and security in these movies can only be achieved through social unity. Group identity is the force, far more so than boarded over windows or machine guns, that keeps the safehouses standing.

But social unity is shown to be ever fleeting, and it is divisions from within, as much as assaults from outside, which bring about these microsocieties' inevitable collapse. The tensions of conflict between races, genders, social classes, and philosophies are everywhere in these stories, and by the final installment the depiction of social divisions has become an extreme allegory. In

*Survival* the conflict between the Muldoons and the O'Flays is a war of absolute, almost religious hatred between two men who are nearly identical. There is no racial or social line here; they are both Irish, they are neighbors, they went to school together. Here humanity is turned on itself completely; the self is turned on its self. Romero does not expose the terrible way people treat one another to propose a solution, but to show us that, inevitably, there is no solution. In the final scene in the entire sequence, the corpses of Muldoon and O'Flay stand on a hillside, firing at each other again and again with empty pistols. The only scenes of lasting social accord are the strangely peaceful visions from the end of *Day*: a crowd of zombies feasting in a charnel house of human flesh.

For the Haitians, then, we have seen that the *zombi* is an indicator of a specific social status. The state of living death represents those behaviors that have made it impossible for an individual to exist within a stable social structure; it denotes that a man or woman has been therefore cast out of that society. The Romero zombie also represents behaviors incompatible with society, but here the behavior is universalized; it is not the result of individual sin or hubris, but of an overwhelming predilection on the part of humanity to violence and conflict. It is our baser nature, if you will, though the later movies make clear that neither reason nor faith, nor any other sophistication of that nature, free us from this imp of the perverse.

In both traditions, the zombie(e) retains the epistemic function found in its earliest West African incarnations. The figures themselves and their attendant narratives situate human society, or at least their audiences, in relation to the larger world. The *zombi* is focused specifically on the Haitian subject in the Haitian context, and it defines the limit between those who are inside and those who are outside of that specific cultural structure. *Zombi* stories tell us as well that to be human is to think, to speak, to act independently; to be other than human is to be a brute, a slave, a mindless automaton.

The zombie, on the other hand, defines what it means to be inside or outside, to be Self or Other, of a globalized, cosmopolitan culture. In Haiti the line that is drawn is relatively clear: to be the Self is to be part of the family and the immediate community. Only by acting against the group and becoming a threat can one be put outside and made into the Other. The line the zombie draws, on the other hand, is hardly a line at all. It is a great grey swath that, like Kinsey's scale of sexual preference, erases categories rather than delineates them. Here, to be the Self is always to be the Other; the labels are not absolute but relative, shifting constantly in reference to the changing social environment in which a subject is situated.

The climactic scene in Romero's sequence comes at the end of *Survival of the Dead*. It is not the scene of Muldoon and O'Flay's eternal gun battle which ends the film, but an earlier segment in which Janet O'Flay comes face to face

with Jane, her recently deceased sister. This is the culmination of a current that develops throughout the saga; the scene is anticipated by dozens of scenes in the earlier movies in which characters come face to face with the dead and, in one brief, peaceful moment, identify with them. Jane and Janet stare at one another as if one or the other of them is looking into a mirror; they caress each others cheeks; and then Jane takes a bite out of Janet's hand. Janet, of course, swears and starts shooting, and the mirror image persists; this is not a girl and her evil double, it is two images of one person. For Romero, this is what defines a human being: a human being is not necessarily rational, does not necessarily think or speak or act independently; but a human being is always a thing divided and embattled, even within and in relation to itself.

## Notes

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- 1 Other critics who include Romero in discussions of the *zombi* tradition in the Caribbean do not dismiss his movies or see them as ‘meaningless.’ For these critics the contemporary zombie is not something that can be dismissed, but rather something that poses a direct threat to various subaltern social groups: the exploitative artistic byproduct of a capitalist imperialism. I will not try to refute any of the political observations critics have made about the evolution of the zombie, the literary and political history which has given us Romero; this essay argues that were it not for the pervasive racism which haunts that literary history, Romero would never have made *Night of the Living Dead* and we would not have the zombie as we know it today. The traumas of colonialism are everywhere in American literature. All the arts of the New World are tied in some way to the legacy of colonialism; many take that history as their explicit subject; others, like the zombie narrative, are the product of the new cultural environment that history has produced.
  - 2 Ellis, 205.
  - 3 Shaviro, 84.
  - 4 Ellis, 206.
  - 5 For lack of a better term. Ellis and Fay associate post-modern with the deadening effects of modern first-world society; I would associate the zombie with a liberating post-modernism; a post-post (another shudder-worthy label); a subjectivity that has grown up within that deadening society. It is a noble pessimism, an acceptance of the world as incomplete and unfair, and human beings as creatures both glorious and terrible.
  - 6 This is an interesting point which bears examination in more detail. The recombination of source materials in this way is one responsible for most of the great works of postmodernity, but it carries with its cost is always some degree of cultural erasure. We might say that here, in a social context, Treskey’s allegorical violence is revealed as the legacy of contemporary modes of storytelling and invention.
  - 7 In the zombie narrative the African and European traditions which have shaped the culture of the New World are seamlessly integrated into a novel and, if its popularity is any indication, powerful expression of postmodern, problematized subjectivity. The suggestion that the Americas have been shaped by a combination of European and African cultural traditions is not perfect, but it captures something that is largely true. The third avenue of influence on the New World, native cultures and traditions, is more apparent in

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literatures developed in South America than it is in Caribbean and Northern texts. □ While authors such as M. Scott Momaday and Sherman Alexie in the United States have integrated native literary elements into broadly European forms of poetry and narrative, the nearly complete historical erasure of native culture from the United States and the Caribbean islands has resulted in the native often being represented, when represented at all, as an absence. By far the most dominant elements in contemporary American cultural productions are trans-Atlantic in origin. Caribbean religion is perhaps the most vivid evidence of this. The synthesis of the Catholic saints with various orders of African spirits and gods, the orisha, loa, and others, in the religious practices of obeah, hoodoo, santeria, and vodun is representative of a syncretic religious system truly distinct from the traditions which it is so intimately reworks. Vodun and its counterparts are a wholly American phenomenon, arising from a unique combination of cultures that took place in the specific historical context of the colonial New World. The zombie tradition is a direct descendant of this legacy; its most immediate predecessor is, after all, the vodun *zombi* of Haiti.

8 Ellis, 205.

9 Aizenberg, 463.

10 Aizenberg's suggestion that these various traditions are clashing in the space of the zombie narrative is presented as part of her postcolonial reading of the zombie in Lewton's movie as a gendered and racialized figure of oppression and erasure. Lewton's colonial sex slave is inarguably such a figure; it is also an important stepping stone on the road that runs between the *zombi* and the zombie.

11 Of course, the great promise of America itself, the object of any truly progressive society, is to obscure these lines, to render the playing field flat and fair. I won't write that America has obscured those lines, because we haven't, and I doubt that any society ever will, but the zombie is the artistic creation of a society which is at least looking in that direction.

12 Need examples. Bishop, the zombie encyclopedia guy, others.

13 Jennifer Fay sums this up nicely when she reads Romero's first three movies as "the dead ends of the American family, post-Fordist consumerism, and the barbarism of the military-scientific complex," (82) respectively.

14 See essays by Elliott Stein, Joseph Lewis, and Paul Wells, among others.

15 See Paffenroth and essays by Robin Wood and David J. Skal, among others.

16 Fay, 81.

17 Much of the Romero story's appeal is, of course, due to its ability to contain these many secondary focuses.

18 Dillard, 22-7.

19 Ibid, 28.

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- 20 Ibid, 22-7.
- 21 An exhaustive list of other versions of these films and the many works inspired by them would be longer than this entire essay; Peter Dendle has put together an extensive bibliography (The Zombie Movie Encyclopedia. Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2000) but it has quickly become dated, and does not reference any of the non-cinematic renditions of the zombie story, which has found expression in traditional novels, graphic novels, dramas, and other media. The third section of this essay will cover this topic in greater detail, including a brief summary of notable versions of the zombie narrative in various formats.
- 22 *Survival* features a number of characters from the fifth film, and actually reuses a short piece of footage from *Diary*. This is the only time Romero has used the same character more than once; the reuse functions as a way of rewriting the character and further destabilizing the audience in our attempts to get a clear picture of who people are. The Colonel is a thief and a dangerous bully in *Diary*; *Survival* presents the same character from a different point of view, in which he is a sensitive and caring leader doing what he must, even at the expense of others, to ensure the survival of his group.
- 23 Here another Gothic aspect of Romero's reimagined zombie is illustrated, namely the combination of the fragmentary Haitian trope with elements of the European vampire.
- 24 I am not going to take the space here to give comprehensive overviews of the plot of each film. Paffenroth includes very detailed synopses of the first four movies in her *Gospel of the Dead*, and I refer readers unfamiliar with the plots of the films to the relevant chapters of that book.
- 25 *Diary* breaks the chronology of the first four movies. It's opening sequences depict the very earliest stages of the zombie phenomenon, and it is only after these set up scenes that we are introduced to the protagonists and their desperate journey. In terms of sequence, *Diary* takes place at roughly the same time as *Night*.
- 26 The movies are full of these meta-textual puns and oblique breakings of the fourth wall. In *Diary of the Dead*, framed as a student film edited by the cameraman's girlfriend after his death at the hands of a zombie at the end of the film, this self-referentiality becomes the most important element of the film.
- 27 *Night of the Living Dead* establishes the fear of the ordinary and of life itself . . . (Need citation and maybe more quote.)
- 28 Dillard, 20.
- 29 Fay, 82.



## Appendix A

### Survey of the Dead

The zombie apocalypse narrative was first given form in Romero's *Night of the Living Dead*, and in the few short years since that first movie the embattled and foundationless subjectivity the narrative presents has exploded onto the American cultural scene. Its messages can be read in every major media through which stories are told today, not only in countless feature length and short films, but in the theater and other performance art forums; in novels, short stories, and other prose forms; in comics, cartoons, and other genres of graphic story telling; in poetry; and in traditional visual arts including painting and sculpture.

*Night of the Living Dead* (1968) was followed by a complicated web of cinematic 'sequels', one series directed by Romero himself, others by artists who used or modified the title (the *Living Dead* films and Italian *Zombi* films are only two examples, although probably the most famous and extensive). Romero's subsequent feature length zombie narrative films are *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), *Day of the Dead* (1985), *Land of the Dead* (2005), *Diary of the Dead* (2007), and *Survival of the Dead* (2009). *Night*, *Dawn*, and *Day* have all be reimagined: *Night* by Romero and Tom Savini in 1999, *Dawn* by Zack Snyder and James Gunn in 2004, and *Day* by Steve Miner and Jeffery Reddick in 2008.

In addition to the films explicitly identified as its sequels, *Night of the*

*Living Dead* sparked the creation of a huge body of cinematic imitations and reinterpretations. An exhaustive list would be longer than this entire essay; Peter Dendle has put together an extensive bibliography (*The Zombie Movie Encyclopedia*. Jefferson: McFarland & Company, 2000) but it has quickly become dated. Cataloging a zombie movie 'canon' is difficult, as there is extensive disagreement over what the criteria defining a zombie movie actually are. A few of the titles which would ultimately be of importance to completing the analysis of the zombie trope suggested in this essay: Danny Boyle and Alex Garland's *28 Days Later* (2002), Juan Carlos Fernadillo's *28 Weeks Later* (2007), Edgar Wright and Simon Pegg's *Shaun of the Dead* (2004), and Andrew Currie's *Fido* (2006).

Romero is reported to have based the initial screenplay for *Night of the Living Dead* on a piece of drama he had already written; I am looking for a copy of this text. Numerous staged versions of *Night of the Living Dead* have been produced, as well as a stage production of Sam Raimi's *Evil Dead*. In addition to these 'official' theatrical productions, 'zombie walks' and other interactive art performances have been staged by artists, organizations, and communities around the world. I would like to include a larger discussion of this phenomenon, which is related in interesting ways not only to traditional zombi stories like that of Clairvius Narcisse, but also to contemporary developments in the communally drafted zombie fictions created on the internet.

John Russo published a prose version of *Night of the Living Dead* in 1974

and followed this book with several novels expanding his own version of the zombie narrative: two volumes entitled *Return of the Living Dead* (1977, 1985) and a third called *Escape of the Living Dead* (2005). Max Brooks' *World War Z* (2006) is a notable recent novel which deals with the zombie trope. Romero based his initial screenplay in part on a short story, "Night of Anubis" (see Bishop, 199, and the BBC "Forbidden Weekend" Romero interview (1997)). Several volumes of short stories have been published: *Zombie!* (1985, ed. Peter Haining), *Book of the Dead* (1989, eds. John Skipp and Craig Spector), *Book of the Dead 2: Still Dead* (1992, eds. Skipp and Spector), *The Mammoth Book of Zombies* (1993, ed. Stephen Jones), *The Ultimate Zombie* (1993, eds. Byron Preiss and John Betancourt), *The Book of All Flesh*, *The Book of More Flesh*, and *The Book of Final Flesh* (2001, 2002, and 2003, all edited by James Lowder).

A notable example of the zombie narrative in a prose form other than narrative fiction is Max Brooks' *Zombie Survival Guide* (2003). Another interesting body of prose has been produced online in forums, message boards, and discussion groups (see Peter Dendle's "The Zombie as Barometer of Cultural Anxiety." *Monsters and the Monstrous: Myths and Metaphors of Enduring Evil*. Ed. Scott, Niall. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2007. 45-57.)

*Night of the Living Dead* was reworked as a series of comics shortly after its production as a film (need to find these as well). The most extensive interpretation of the zombie trope in graphic narrative form is Robert Kirkman's

ongoing *The Walking Dead* (all references to *The Walking Dead* in this paper will be to the hardcover 12-issue collected editions published by Image Comics (Berkeley) starting in 2006). For some examples of poetry, see *Vicious Verses and Reanimated Rhymes* (2009, ed. A.P. Fuchs) and Ryan Mecum's *Zombie Haiku: Good Poetry for Your...Brains* (2008). Many others can be found online. The work of Rob Sacchetto (some of which is collected in his *Zombie Handbook: How to Identify the Living Dead and Survive the Coming Apocalypse*, 2009) is a wonderful example of static visual art representations of the zombie. There are other interesting examples I would like to discuss, many of them in connection to more established sequential visual narratives like Kirkman's *Walking Dead*.

## Appendix B

### Speaking of the Dead

Kyle Bishop writes that “the traditional [Romero] zombie story has no direct antecedent in novels or short fiction.”<sup>1</sup> Bishop overstates his point a bit in stressing Romero's originality, but he identifies the first of two large problems facing a literary analysis of the Haitian *zombi*: the fact that in the Haitian context, there is no written *zombi* tradition. A number of explanations might be offered to explain why *zombi* narratives exist in Haitian culture in entirely oral form. The easiest way to explain it would probably be to point to the state of education in Haiti, one of the poorest nations in the world. A number that is given in connection to Haitian literacy today is 52.9%,<sup>2</sup> and a knowledge of the nation's history suggests that this is likely a significant improvement over past literacy rates. The large scale production and distribution of written texts is obviously an activity that takes place primarily at times and in places where the ability to read and write can be widely assumed of the populace.

This is a tidy solution, but it suggests that Haitians have not produced *zombi* texts simply because they have not in fact produced any texts at all; and, conversely, that the culture would produce these texts if the opportunity presented itself. These suggestions are not born out by the evidence; Haiti has a rich textual literary tradition. There has always been, if nothing else, a literate elite in Haiti.

To understand the the reasons for the absence of the *zombi* from the texts that elite read and wrote it is necessary to understand the position of Vodun within Haitian society historically. The religion was, in the days before the Revolution, an underground phenomena in the fullest sense of the term, actively discouraged and suppressed by the cultural majority. While Christianity was held up as the official cultural religion of both blacks and whites, Vodun acted as both a catalyst for and evidence of solidarity among the slaves. And, as many writers on Haiti have observed, the new religion played an instrumental role in the slaves ultimately successful bids for freedom.<sup>3</sup>

After the Revolution, however, Vodun did not come out of the shadows to take its place as an accepted and celebrated part of Haitian culture. Franz Fanon and Homi Bhaba both tell us, in their separate ways, that the most insidious evil ever wrought by colonialism was teaching whole populations of people to be ashamed of, to hate, themselves. There is no more vivid example of this than the post-Revolution Haitian attitude towards religion. Henri Cristophe's palace of Sans-Sousi is perhaps the most famous and imposing sign of Haitian mimicry of the French, but it is not the only one. In matters of religion, as well, the Haitian elite followed a European model. For most of Haiti's history Vodun has been both the most important religion in the country and a national embarrassment. For Cristophe and others eager to demonstrate to the world that the people of the Black Republic were the equals of Europeans in every way, Vodun was a painful

reminder of the 'barbarism' they wished to show themselves superior to, a sort of recidivist habit to be stamped out and quietly forgotten.

Those foreigners who traveled to Haiti to learn and write about Haitian culture were invariably interested in Vodun, highly so, often exclusively so. In the present study I am interested almost entirely in that aspect of Haitian culture myself, and I think that this is a valid and defensible position. Vodun is Haiti's great accomplishment, the gift the island's culture has given to the world. It is a complete mythology, a complex and beautiful tapestry of beliefs and stories and rituals that is the equal of any of the great religious traditions of other cultures. As inevitably interested in Vodun as foreign observers may have been, however, their reports tell us that it was equally inevitable for Haitians to be absolutely disinterested in and opposed to discussing the subject.

In some cases this was no doubt simply the result of reticence regarding talking to outsiders, but a great many of the books on Haiti include passages in which the author is berated by a Haitian for his or her interest in a topic considered vulgar and regrettable. The example of this found in Alfred Metraux's *Voodoo in Haiti* is particularly vivid; he tells the story of visiting a Haitian church in which was contained a large collection of ritual objects seized from local hounfords. The priests' plan was to burn these objects for the good of Haiti, and Metraux was entirely unsuccessful in begging them to do otherwise.

While Vodun continued to be widely practiced and play an integral role in

the nation's social and cultural institutions, it was officially denounced throughout most of Haiti's history. In this sort of cultural environment it is not surprising that Vodun did not manifest itself textually, especially as it was the privileged Haitian upper class that had both access to literacy and the desire to suppress Vodun. The books of Milo Rigaud are an exception to this general observation; Rigaud was Haitian, and his writings, some of which have recently been translated into English as *Secrets of Voodoo*, dealt very explicitly with the taboo subject. Rigaud was published in France, however, not Haiti, and even that is reported to have caused a considerable uproar in polite Haitian society.<sup>4</sup>

This explanation suggests, again, that Haitian culture did not produce textual Vodun narratives, narratives that would include the *zombi*, because it was prevented from doing so. And, once again, this implies that these texts might very well have been produced had the opportunity presented itself. This is not, I think, an accurate picture of the situation. It is important to remember that in the context of Haiti Vodun is a living religious tradition, one that has not been codified in any way. All reports indicate that Vodun traditions vary from locale to locale within the country, even across relatively short distances. This is no doubt due in large part to the religion's history of persecution, but is also an aspect of the way in which Vodun is integrated into the daily life of its practitioners.

Vodun has not become, as Christianity, Islam, and other religions became in the course of their development, the organizing discourse of widespread social



authority; the religion functions as a social governing structure, but on the level of family and small communities of families. The benefits of textual production are preservation and distribution, but when the audience a discourse is directed towards is immediate there is no need to supplement oral modes of distribution. Preservation is accomplished through the dedication of those members of the discursive community charged with remembering the stories and rituals; and with these rituals and stories everywhere in daily life, this is perhaps a less difficult feat than might be supposed.

## Notes

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- 1 Bishop, 196-7. It is important to note that Bishop is using the term 'traditional' here in almost exactly the opposite sense that I am using it in this essay. For Bishop, the traditional zombie is the Hollywood monster archetype established by Romero, while I am using that same label to refer to the Haitian *zombi* from which Romero's monster was drawn.
  - 2 According to the CIA World Factbook, accurate as of September 17th, 2009. Defining literacy as the percentage of persons over the age of 15 who can read and write, the Factbook gives the following figures: total population: 52.9% female (2003 est.): 51.2% male: 54.8%
  - 3 Again, I refer here to both anthropological and literary writers. See, for examples of each, Alfred Mettraux's *Voodoo in Haiti* and Alejo Carpentier's *The Kingdom of this World*.
  - 4 See, for example, Edna Taft's account of the Haitian reaction to the publication of Rigaud's *Jesus or Legba?* (261-6).

## Appendix C

### Discourse of the Dead

The *zombi* stories available to those of us who are not part of the Haitian communities in which such stories are told are stories recorded by outside observers. This brings us to the second difficulty in dealing with *zombi* texts, namely the fact that there exists a mostly unvoiced argument in the scholarly community over the proper method of inquiring into this one little detail of Haitian folklore. The essay by Bishop quoted from in the previous passage, although ostensibly focused on the modern American zombie as an object of aesthetic study, illustrates this point nicely through its structure; Bishop takes steps to keep his analysis clearly divided into sections which could easily be seen as 'artistic' and 'scientific' passages.<sup>1</sup>

This does not capture the exact dynamic to which I refer here, but the image presented by this division of source materials is suggestive of the larger confusion over how the *zombi* is best to be treated: as a cultural object and therefore a valid subject for interpretive study, or as a physiological puzzle to be decoded and reproduced in the laboratory. There are many writers who profess to treat the *zombi* as an art object, part of a narrative to be interpreted: Edna Aizenberg presents her writing on the subject of the *zombi* this way, as do Jennifer Fay, Markmann Ellis, and Kyle Bishop. And scholars have approached

the same subject with the intention of writing works of hard science, and were published in leading biological and pharmacological journals, including Wade Davis, C. Y. Kao, T. Yasumoto, W. H. Anderson, and others.

This has done more than simply scatter the available recorded *zombi* stories across a wide range of very different texts, often as fragmentary asides to passages focused on something else altogether. I have presented the authors above as divided into two very clearly distinguished camps; and this is not quite accurate. The simultaneous attention of two different modes of investigation into the same subject matter has led to confusion among those who are involved in this particular scholarly debate over which mode any given piece of scholarship belongs to. Works are read in one way when they were meant to be read in the other, and, perhaps more importantly, written in one way when what they are trying to say can only be voiced in the other.

The controversy surrounding Wade Davis's 'ethnobotanical' books *The Serpent and the Rainbow* and *Passage of Darkness* is the great illustration of this difficulty. Davis's intention in going to Haiti was to learn the formula for a poison which could produce the effects described in stories of *zombis*; that is, a drug or combination of drugs which could put a human being into a state indiffereniable from death but keep them alive through the process of burial, and which would further allow the victim to be dug up and kept in a mindless state indefinitely after he or she had been uninterred. When the real fruit of Davis's labor turned out to be

not reproducible scientific evidence of such a poison or poisons, but anthropological books which contain perhaps the most lucid and clear-eyed records of Haitian *zombi* stories as told by Haitians yet penned by a foreign observer, many in the scientific community of which he was a part turned on him and attacked his research quite viciously.<sup>2</sup>

Davis's problem, of tackling a subject matter that would not fit neatly into the conventions of the system through which he was investigating it, turns up in literary investigations into the subject as well. In Bishop, for example, we find a relatively straight forward work of literary scholarship focused on Romero's films. The final footnote, however, contains the following observation concerning the plot of *Land of the Dead*:

He proposes the possible evolution of zombies over time, showing the development of rudimentary vocal communication . . . the ability to handle firearms, and a primitive form of compassion for their own kind. Unfortunately, a zombie's brain would actually get worse as it rots over time, so such cerebral evolution makes no sense, even in a fantastic horror film (205).

This sounds as if it would be an appropriate thing to point out in a conversation with Davis's original backers about how one intended to go about producing a zombie for medical study; the point being made may be true, as far as it goes, but it does very little in terms of helping us interpret the film as a work of literary art.

This confusion can be traced to the attitude taken towards the *zombi* by the foreign travel writers who first introduced the figure to America and Europe, and

more importantly to the nature of the Vodun traditions themselves. In the Haitian context, stories about *zombis* are very much stories about actual phenomenon as much or more than they are art. Vodun is a living tradition; no one asks of the *Illiad* whether or not it is possible that the river overflowed its banks to save the Trojans, and they do not ask this because it has been a very long time since the narrative tradition Homer recorded was a vital part of the daily lives of a substantial group of people. Vodun is, on the other hand, and immediate and present faith; gods come to earth to speak and dance in Haiti, something they are not seen doing in very many places these days.

When foreigners arrived in Haiti and demanded to be told stories about Vodun, they were told tales of *zombis* and other phenomenon in these terms. The foreigners, in turn, in the most part reacted to these stories with scorn, or at the very least disbelief. None of the foreigners who recorded the stories they were told saw in them anything approaching a literary tradition that could be engaged with on its own terms. The tone of the books these writers published when they returned home, and the many theories they offer as explanations for the savage superstition under discussion, paved the way for the *zombi* to be treated as an object in the purview of the physical sciences, rather than as an art object. It is also the reason many of the more interesting *zombi* stories have been recorded and published in 'scientific' books.

## Notes

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- 1 Bishop divides his analysis not between aesthetic and physical investigation, but between literature and anthropology. There is, of course, a sense in which all literary criticism is cultural anthropology. Our focus is on linguistic art, a product of culture. As historians, we are interested in the manner in which cultures produced this art over some specified period of time; as theorists, in the nature of the words and arrangements of words, the cultural artifacts themselves; and as feminists, Marxists, postcolonialists, trauma theorists, and students of schools of thought of all variety, in the way works of linguistic art are shaped by the cultural context in which they are produced, and the way they in turn shape those contexts. Spoken of in this way, then, the object of the present study is as follows: to identify a single recurrent pattern in the narrative linguistic art produced by a specific culture, and then to describe the process through which that pattern has been adopted into the artistic production of another culture. This exercise is predicated on the assumption that literary study is by definition anthropological study, and this assumption allows for an analysis that reads all the available information regarding both the *zombi* and the zombie syncretically, whether it comes in the form of art or science.
  - 2 See articles by Kao and Hines.

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