

# Special Issue: Revolution in the Dead: The Cultural Evolution of the Zombie

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## **Introduction**

Since it first shuffled into view, the zombie has captivated, repulsed, terrified, and consumed without discrimination. From folk tales and superstitions passed on through generations and across continents, the zombie has transitioned from the undead minions of African and Haitian folklore, into a cultural icon to rival the vampire, albeit, for the most part, as their decomposing, underclass equivalent. This issue does not seek provide a definitive history of the zombie, Roger Luckhurst's sterling *Zombies: A Cultural History* (2015) does that perfectly, rather it seeks to record the zombie's evolution as a cultural marker and where it

may stand to go from here. Examining the zombie's progression from folkloric Voodoo henchman to a contemporary socio-cultural signifier that, like all good Gothic horror icons, holds up a mirror to the society that produces it, these essays move from the Christian End Times through to the modern day. In doing so, the zombie is presented as an outsider; a decaying threat to civilisation, the enemy at home and abroad, and a 'liminal Gothic monster' who has journeyed from 'the speechless subaltern world of slavery into the heart of [...] empire and the networks of globalized popular culture' (Luckhurst 2017: 15). However, the contemporary zombie is also revealed as multidimensional, capable of resisting its innate cannibal impulses, and able to evolve to supersede humanity, thus redefining the concept of zombiedom. Before discussing the work collected here, we will briefly discuss the origins of the zombie concept.

### **The Z-Word**

Although much has been written on the history of the zombie, Jennifer Rutherford's seminal *Zombies* (2013) and Roger Luckhurst's *Zombies: A Cultural history* (2015) in particular, the entwined questions of what constitutes a zombie, and where it originates from, continue to inspire passionate debate. As early as the eleventh century, Christian authors and monks who ventured north, encountering Scandinavian civilisations and beliefs, began to record tales of 'unruly corpses that broke loose from the confines of their tombs to plague their communities with acts of violence' (Bruce 2016: xv). The concept of the zombie was born out of such tales, and whilst the contemporary image of the zombie may have begun in earnest on the plantations of Haiti,<sup>1</sup> it found its roots in the folklore of Central Africa.

The etymological origin of the term 'zombie' divides opinion as to the exact source, highlighting its fluidity, but the consensus considers the term to originate in Africa.<sup>2</sup> Some claim the word 'zombie' derives from the Kongoles term 'nzambi' meaning a god, fetish, or

spirit, others argue a West African term ‘zonbi’ meaning without a soul, or ‘zumbi’, which roughly translates as a cadaver in the Bonda language, to be the source (Laws 2018: 105). Perhaps, Sarah J. Lauro, in an interview with Peter Laws, offers the best interpretation, positing the word zombie as a ‘combination of terms coming out of the Kikongo-speaking and modern-day Angola regions’ (in Laws 2018: 105). For Lauro, the term is mixture of ‘the word “zumbi”, which is a Kikongo fetish, and a “vumbi”, an Angolan ghost or spirit of the dead – which can enslave souls’ (105). This supports the hypothesis that the origins of zombies lie beyond Haiti, rooted in the lore of the otherworldly deity Nzambi a Mpungu of the Loango, a Kikongo group living in central Africa, and western and southern African cultural practices that featured zombie-like creatures the xidachane (Sotho/Tsonga) and maduxwane (Venda) (Cohen 2018). In these cultures, the dead and the living alike were at the mercy of enslavement zombification by a witch or sorcerer, with the only cure being the healing powers of a local shaman (Cohen 2018). This, of course, afforded the local shaman a great deal of power, influence, and the ability to cast out those who they deemed zombified. Thus, designation as a zombie was a dangerous social position to find oneself in. Furthermore, this immediately casts the zombie in a role it would play for centuries to come, the menacing outsider come from within.

The most recognisable term associated with the Westernised concept of the zombie is the Caribbean variant, ‘zombi’, with its origins in Arawak and Kreyòl languages (Luckhurst 2015). First recorded in Thomas Lindley’s *Narrative of a Voyage to Brasil* (1805) and subsequently, and more famously, by Robert Southey, in volume three of his essay ‘The History of Brazil’ (1810–19), the term ‘zombi’ is employed in these instances to describe a prince and the leader of a band of rebels respectively (Lindley 1805: 179; Southey 1819:2 8). In the case of Southey, the rebels of Pernambuco in the late 17th century fervently followed their leader, who took the title ‘zombi’, and appeared to have an otherworldly control over

their followers, an image that would be exploited in the earliest Hollywood zombie movies such as Victor Halperin's *White Zombie* (1932) and *King of the Zombies* (1941) (Whiteley 2017).

Roger Luckhurst states the western definition of the zombie, with an added 'e', comes via a culmination of factors that, rightly or wrongly, are largely attributed to self-aggrandising, dedicated alcoholic, fervent occultist, and sometime journalist William Seabrook (2015). His 1929 travelogue *The Magic Island* (not to be confused with the zombie video game of the same name), following on from Lafcadio Hearn's vague Martinique based translations of folk tales, introduced the term to willing American readers for the first time depicting a 'soulless human corpse' (in Luckhurst: 30). As Luckhurst notes, Seabrook was by no means a pioneer but, nevertheless, his fevered imaginings of black magic raising the dead stuck in the minds of a post-WWI society which, as Angela Smith shows in this issue, was already accustomed to an enemy in an undead image.

Essentially, what these variations of definitions accomplish, is to position the birth of the zombie at the heart of 'overlapping histories of modernity/coloniality; settler/colonial; and slave and emancipation struggles of [...] people, country, territory, and cosmology' (Kone 2019: 155). Furthermore, these etymological variants evince how the concept of the zombie has existed prior to the African diaspora, and long before the Romero zombie exploded into contemporary consciousness in the 1960s.

### **Voodoo Child**

Linguistic and conceptual origins aside, the idea that the zombie 'shuffled out of the margins of empire' from the plantations of Haiti and the French Antilles birthed out of ancient practices ascribed to voodoo has, in recent years, inspired much academic focus (Luckhurst 2014: 7).<sup>3</sup> I will avoid re-treading old ground; however, the importance of Haiti in the

zombie's cultural development cannot be understated. Zombies are 'a colonial import' (Lauro and Embry 2008: 96), intrinsically linked with the slave trade and, certainly in Haiti, to uprising and hard-fought emancipation. The practice of voodoo and rituals beyond the comprehension of Western explorers and slavers immediately positioned the zombie as what Jennifer Rutherford describes as a figure with a 'dense network of meanings' (Rutherford 2013: 24). The concept of the zombie archetype reached Haitian shores around 1625 and was passed on via oral traditions and beliefs of enslaved plantation workers for whom the 'the phantasm of the zombi – a soulless husk deprived of freedom – is the ultimate sign of loss and dispossession' (Dayan 1998: 37). Dayan argues that, for slave workers, the zombi became a vessel through which 'memories of servitude [were] transposed into a new idiom that both reproduces and dismantles a twentieth-century history of forced labor and denigration', denigration that was rekindled when the US began its military occupation in 1915 (37). The US occupation brought with it a new role for the zombie, and one I shall return to later, that of the threatening foreigner who can only be controlled by the ideological superiority of western civilisation. In Haiti, the zombie cultural evolution began by taking a mythical folkloric figure of the zombi, a figure that allowed Haitians to reclaim a sense of cultural traditions and provided the possibility of freedom from the chains of slavery and creating a monster that would act as shorthand in Anglo-American popular culture and society for the perceived barbarism of Haiti and its people. Thus, before even leaving Haiti, the zombie's, 'dense network of meanings' becomes apparent (Rutherford: 23–24). It is such meanings that Sarah J. Lauro and Karen Embry's excellent 'A Zombie Manifesto' (2008) allude to when considering the rise of the zombie from the plantations of Haiti through to contemporary imaginings, asserting the zombie is an 'ontic/hauntic object [that] reveals much about the crisis of human embodiment, the way power works, and the history of man's subjugation and oppression' of its own people (87). Roger Luckhurst, invoking Vic Turner's

concept of ‘threshold people’, views the zombie as ‘anomalies that straddle crucial cultural boundaries’ (Turner 1974: 81; Luckhurst 2014: 9). In such considerations, the zombie blurs lines between life and death, reinforces folkloric ancient beliefs against modern knowledge, and threatens the nuclear family structure of Western civilisation. The Haitian zombie is pivotal because it acts as a precursor to all that comes thereafter, every modification, every evolution is based upon this culturally promiscuous, undead colonial construct.

### **Undead Evolution**

The articles here, primarily trace the zombie’s evolution since it stumbled out of the Haitian rebellions and made its way across the Pacific. However, Lisa Lampert-Weissig begins the journal by tracing the roots of zombie narrative even further back, focusing on pre- and early modern Christian End Times narratives as a base of exploration for how zombie apocalypse narratives invert and fracture traditional apocalyptic forms. For Lampert-Weissig, the obsession with the ‘zombie genre’ overlooks the multitude of genres and narrative forms in which the zombie appears and, bringing us through to contemporary zombie fiction, Lampert-Weissig illustrates how the ‘nihilistic zombie apocalypse develops in direct contrast to the telos of Christian apocalyptic form’. In doing so, she echoes Cantz’s ethos that the zombie genre is ‘kaleidoscopic in function as well as expression’ and, as such, is ‘really, not at all a “genre” in the conventional sense, but [...] an ever-evolving metaphorical vehicle that promotes a mythopoeic frame for artists to address any myriad of cultural anxieties’ (Cantz, 2018: 14).

Moving into the early twentieth century, Angela Smith considers the undead imagery employed as propaganda in the poetry and posters of World War I. Smith posits this use of undead imagery that would later become known as the zombie to emphasise the horrors of mechanised warfare. Megan Lynn Faragher takes this further, depicting the iconography of

World War II era zombie movies, *King of the Zombies* (1941) and *Revenge of the Zombies* (1943), as pivotal in the government campaign to convince the public of the threat posed by a Nazi swarm reminiscent of undead hordes, and thus reinforcing western democratic ideologies. Both articles show that decades after being employed in Haiti as a warning to the possibilities of an enslaved colonial enemy threatening civilised Western society, the zombie was again wheeled out to terrify and convince of the foreign, invading menace. As mentioned earlier, the US employed zombies to cultivate an image of Haiti as a place filled with black magic and voodoo masters to justify occupation, here, Smith and Faragher illustrate how once again the zombie was enlisted as the social outsider threatening civilised Western ideology.

Daniel Compora's essay considers the familial burdens imposed in zombie narratives, beginning with the strained social relations in George A. Romero's seminal *Night of the Living Dead* (1968). Despite not using the word 'zombie', Romero's debut caused a seismic explosion in mainstream culture, propelling the undead figure into the minds of audiences around the globe, where it has remained ever since, and signalled a vast departure from previous incarnations. Here, Compora, along with discussing *The Walking Dead* (2010–present) and *In the Flesh* (2013–2014), posits the familial bonds that flourish in our society as contrapuntal to survival in the apocalypse. Where Haitian zombies and their wartime equivalents are ultimately able to be vanquished by the adherence to western ideals and the foundations of family and nationalistic pride, in these narratives familial bonds become a precursor to danger and even death. The Romero zombie, and its offspring, force a devolution of socio-cultural structures and demand a recalculation of the bonds and relationships that are required to survive. John Ziegler's consideration of Ben Howling and Yolanda Ramke's Australia-set movie, *Cargo* (2017), touches on similar themes. Ziegler asserts the Indigenous survivors of the zombie apocalypse, who view zombies as 'an

infection of the land' survive because they find alternative ways to facilitate their ability to co-exist in a post-zombie reality. Unlike in the western narratives discussed by Compora, the survivors of *Cargo*, Ziegler argues, exist not by abandoning familial bonds but by embracing cultural practices and familial structures that existed before colonisation. Thus, in these readings, the zombie has evolved from the villainous enemy ripe for propagandised exploitation, and developed into a symbol of the futility and instability of prescribed patriarchal codes that remain in thrall to the designs of an outdated and obsolete empire.

It should also be noted that Ziegler's essay highlights the connection between zombies and nature. In the twenty-first century, the zombie has become a force for nature against the capitalist excesses of humankind. Indeed, as Sarah J. Lauro puts it, 'we might say that the zombie is inherently an ecological avenger', an ecological response from a body come from the earth, resurrected to even the score against a humanity addicted to a form of rampant consumerism that threatens our very existence (2011: 235). Simon Bacon's essay builds on this concept, considering the zombie as 'a symptom of the ongoing ecological trauma' that aims 'to unsettle and undermine human socio-economic systems' but, ultimately, offers hope. This suggests a reversal of roles has taken place in the twenty-first century, in keeping with Gothic antagonists throughout history, the zombie has turned the tables on humanity. Where once a threat to the civilised order, the zombie now raises from the dead to save the earth from its most deadly threat, humanity. Indeed, the villain in eco-motivated zombie narratives is not the undead, but the living.

This elevation to planetary saviour continues in theme with the protagonist at the heart of Karen J. Renner's essay, Melanie, in M.J Carey's 2014 book and 2016 film *The Girl with All the Gifts*. Renner suggests the novel offers opportunities for the confrontation of stereotypical gender and racial codes, diverging from traditional Young Adult literature (YA hereafter) tropes in its portrayal of the adolescent and highly intelligent, yet zombified,

Melanie as possessing openly queer desires. Renner acknowledges the problematic association that arises ascribing queer desire to zombie instincts; however, Carey's novel (less so the film) does present an interesting evolution of the zombie. The use of a zombie to express queer desire marks a major step forward for the zombie body. The vampire has been portrayed as the tortured, romantic soul, trapped by their blood-thirsty desires, and condemned to doomed love ad nauseam for centuries. The zombie, however, has always staggered on the outskirts of such encounters. The earliest zombie movies depicted young, virginal, and usually white western, maidens as inherently susceptible to the powers of voodoo masters, thus rendering them unable to fend off the advances of the marauding foreign invader, but until the twentieth century, the zombie has never been seriously capable of love. Melanie is a signifier of the potential of the post-human zombie to overcome this, to 'challenge patriarchy by embodying a physically disruptive form that defies boundaries, physical limitations, and easy categorisation' (Abbott 2016: 126). Despite her adolescence, her ability to exist in a post-apocalyptic world, to feel emotions, to think independently, and to foster a community spirit as she does with the other zombified children in the novel, without the need for adult or human assistance breaks the zombie figure free of the chains of the enslaved Haitian zombie. Her autonomy marks her apart from the mind-controlled Nazi zombie, the grotesque, decomposing visions of Romero and horror gore-fests, and the Olympic-sprinting version of Danny Boyle's *28 Days Later* (2003) alike. Indeed, considering the source of infection in Carey's novel, a fungus that comes from earth, echoing the ecologically motivated revenants of Bacon's essay, Melanie, is not just a zombie, she is a potential usurper of humanity, a humanity that failed to adapt and has lost its place in a world it can no longer inhabit.

John Kerr's consideration of Carrie Ryan's YA novel *The Forest of Hands and Teeth* (2009) situates zombie narratives as 'explorations into humanity' that challenge the

‘anthropocentrism constellating around zombie fiction’ by examining the use of memory in Ryan’s novel to preserve humanist traditions. Whilst the adolescent protagonist in this novel faces similar questions of self-identity and self-worth as Melanie in the previous essay, here the human survivor, Mary, through a series of spatial dislocations motivated by the zombie threat, is forced to accept that clinging to codes that no longer matter will lead to the destruction of the species, and indeed do so. In this novel, the zombie figure is less evolutionary than devolutionary. Where Melanie in *The Girl with All the Gifts* provides an opportunity for progress in a post-human state, Ryan’s undead menace condemns humanity to the ashes of history in the ultimate act of undead insurrection.

The threat of the zombie to western traditions and community structures is never more evident than in Robert Kirkman’s *The Walking Dead* comic book and television series. Anna Froula examines the TV series, focusing on season seven, and finds the zombies of the show have been modified by the human survivors, resulting in a combination of evolution and devolution in their repackaging as weapons for the living to use against one another. Additionally, Froula situates the audience as captives, held hostage by the producers and television networks with mid-season breaks and cliff-hangers. Tellingly, in Froula’s reading, the human’s are even more of a threat to other humans than the zombies themselves. This theme continues in Stella Gaynor’s assessment of the first season of *Black Summer* (2019–present). In a prescient piece, written prior to the Capitol Hill attack, taking each episode at a time as social commentary on Trump’s regime, Gaynor asserts ‘zombies stand as a stark allegory for the festering sickness of right-wing extremism’. In a complete reversal of terms, the zombie has evolved from the Haitian voodoo monster that threatened American ideals to the point military occupation was necessary, into a metaphor for the scourge of nationalism that has risen in western countries in recent years. Thus, the zombie narrative has now evolved to the point where humans are not only prey, but part of the equation of violence,

with zombie narratives becoming ‘allegories in which human and zombie are not pitted against each other but symbiotically bound together’ (Keetley 2014: 1).

Rachad Chafik Eldrissi’s essay delves into the *Train to Busan* (2016) and *Rampant* (2018), tracking the zombie’s evolution from western cinema to Korea, showing how the Korean zombie becomes an embodiment of the concept of fear and how its shifting nature acts as a physical mirror for Korean socio-cultural fears. Again, illustrating the zombie’s capacity to cross cultural boundaries, Eldrissi reiterates the zombie’s capacity to function as a ‘figure of the zombie as a rich expression of all manner of anxieties and ills’ (Harrington 2018: 242).

Finally, Carissa Amburgy’s piece presents us with perhaps the most evolved, socially-adapted (at least in undead terms) representation of the zombie so far. Focusing on the criminally cancelled netflix comedy-drama, *Santa Clarita Diet* (2017–19), Amburgy introduces us to a twenty-first century zombie for the Beyoncé generation, independent, and possessing an ‘unabashed sexual expression and social autonomy [that] successfully transgress male-defined gender roles without irrevocably imploding her heteronormative family structure’. For Amburgy, the protagonist, Sheila (Drew Barrymore), casts off the lumbering cliché of past zombie reiterations and banishes the tired trope of women in danger from a monstrous male by delivering a zombie feminist who provides inspiration to women that their ‘inner monstrous selves can not only be accepted, but also celebrated as part of a ‘new normal’. Where the entranced female ‘zombies’ of the early Hollywood zombie movies such as *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943) depicted women as passive, easy prey to villainous men with equally villainous libidos, Vicor Fresco’s protagonist subverts this image by refashioning the monstrosity of the zombie and its flesh-eating desires to suggest this inner monstrosity can be a liberating. Far from regressing into an uber-aggressive, blood-crazed fury, as so many contemporary zombies do, Sheila instead remains, active, fully sentient, and

able to evolve past traditional zombie behaviours and limitations and, crucially, heteronormative social boundaries.

What is evident in the articles collected here, is that the zombie is far from done with humanity. If there is to be a post-human future emerging from wreckage of an undead apocalypse, then ‘zombies are the remorseless environment in which humans [...] will evolve. They are our future – and we are theirs’ (Keetley 2014: 7). In these depictions of zombies that have evolved from the agentless legions of exotic voodoo masters, to tools of propaganda, undead eco-warriors, and fiercely independent feminist icons, the zombie has become an undead chameleon. Forever changing according to its environment to appear in a new form, or a new medium, the zombie does whatever it takes to continue ‘breaking down barriers and cannibalising what is on the other side’ (Webley, 2020: 1). Whether employed as a figure of colonial fears and anxieties, a political tool to justify occupation, a brain-hungry rotting corpse to shock and revolt, or a potential successor to humanity, the zombie remains true to itself and refuses to die. Indeed, we refuse to let it, constantly redefining, repackaging, and consuming the zombie and its legend. It may be that we cannot allow the zombie to rest in a world where the dystopian apocalyptic landscapes imagined by so many zombie narratives seems readily at hand. As I write this, Covid-19 continues to rage around the world, and I wonder, in the early days of lockdowns, masks, and blaring sirens, how many of us thought of these narratives? With talk of climate change causing irreparable damage to the earth, troops amassing on borders in Europe, Cold War era tensions, rising zombie-like from the ashes of history, and the continued rise of the far right, how far away do the scenes of apocalypse discussed here really seem? Perhaps this is why we cannot allow, as a species, the zombie myth to ever shuffle away quietly back to the grave, because ‘zombies [...] are simply us reflected back, depersonalized, flat-lined by the alienating tedium of modern existence’ (Luckhursts 2015: 10). As such, we must, as writers, directors, and audiences, keep

resurrecting our monsters to confront and challenge our histories, our socio-cultural inequalities, and, ultimately, our traumas. The zombie provides the perfect body with which to do this as ‘the terror of the zombie is that has always been with us, ready to be released’ and will never leave (Harrington 2018: 242). It would seem, then, when it comes to the zombie, the ill-fated Johnny’s teasing of his sister at the beginning of Romero’s classic debut, was wrong: they weren’t just coming to get Barbara, they were coming for us all.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Numerous critics such as Roger Luckhurst (2015), Sarah J. Lauro and Deborah Christie, *Better Off Dead* (2011), Jennifer Rutherford, et al have written on this.

<sup>2</sup> Jennifer Rutherford in *Zombies* (2013) points to African beliefs of reanimation of the dead and the stealing of souls crossing to Haiti via slave trade routes.

<sup>3</sup> Extensive academic attention is paid to this area in Rutherford (2003), and Luckhurst (2015)

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