Shakespeare Among the Zombies in Carrie Ryan's *The Forest of Hands and Teeth*: Memory, Meaning, 'Moving Forward'

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Introduction

Zombie stories are by definition explorations into humanity.[1] Often set in a post-apocalyptic environment, the zombie narrative makes us confront some of our deepest anxieties: how capable we would be of surviving in extreme circumstances; what lengths we would be willing to go to in order to survive; what meaning would exist in such a world; and what legacy humans leave individually and collectively. Scholarship on the zombie constellates around two centers: first, the philosophical definition of the zombie and, second, the sociopolitical implications of zombie texts and culture. These strands share a common interest, namely the human experience. Philosophical treatments primarily attempt to identify what recipe of physical, mental, and spiritual features distinguish humans from non-humans (Macpherson 2010; Saad 2016; Olson 2018). Socio-political examinations typically critique the limitations of colonialism, capitalism and neoliberalism and consider whether alternatives are possible for better human social models in the future (Newitz 2006; Drezner 2014; Brooks 2014; Wadsworth 2016). The humanistic drive of these responses betrays an assumption that the human endeavor is worth carrying on (even central to the purpose of the universe). But, of course, this insistence on always 'moving forward' (a seemingly innocuous phrase that has become the most offensive of institutional and political 'buzz phrases') echoes the drive of the zombies themselves. As Elana Gomel says, 'The dead do speak, after all, telling us that we are all zombies' (Gomel 2013: 39). While many

readings see these narratives as constructively admonitory, 'propel[ing] us into action' with an awareness that 'We can only preserve ourselves as a future memory by changing our present behavior in the present' (Groes 2016: 177), other treatments recognize that zombie texts work against this salvific pull, negating any coherent narrative that re-establishes the meaning of human memory: '[t]he zombii's dystopic promise is that it can only assure the destruction of a corrupt system without imagining a replacement—for the zombii can offer no resolution' (Lauro and Embry 2008: 94).

In this article, I question the anthropocentrism constellating around zombie fiction by focusing on aspects of *memory* in Carrie Ryan's young adult zombie novel, *The Forest of Hands and Teeth*. Ryan's novel, like most teen fiction, centers on the establishment of identity, but the post-apocalyptic setting foregrounds memory in this quest for the self: the adolescent protagonist, Mary, recollects formative moments from her childhood, especially the stories told to her by her mother, and at points doubts whether her culture and her own essence will survive to be remembered by future generations. Moreover, Ryan incorporates *textual* memory thematically and more complexly through the reader's own practice of reading. At one point in the novel, Mary comes across an edition of Shakespeare's sonnets, which provides the key to a system of paths that Mary must navigate to flee the confinement of her village and reach her destination (the ocean). Ultimately, though, the novel remains ambivalent about the status of oral and written memory. Ryan's narrative follows a typical zombie structure of repeated dislocations, a series of re-iterations that signals the non-arrival at any kind of *telos* to human endeavor. And while memory becomes an impetus and even a practical tool for this incessant re-building, there is a sense that this repetitious memory will finally give way to the mindlessness of the zombie-ridden

forest in the theoretical space 'beyond/after' the human. Both 'outcomes' (never-ending recurrence and the cessation of human life) can be said to divest human life of 'meaning'.

Before treating Ryan's specific strategies in *The Forest of Hands and Teeth*, I offer a few larger reflections on memory in the modern zombie narrative. Memory holds a special place in the zombie engagement with the human role in the world. First, the apocalyptic/post-apocalyptic setting of zombie fiction leads characters to reflect not only on their lives but on human cultural achievement in general. In some cases, human civilization as we know it is lost, positioning us as readers or viewers to feel simultaneously the presence and absence of our own culture, and thereby to remember those things we value and to assess that value. Second, the apocalyptic/post-apocalyptic environment reduces the number of possessions in the characters' world, and so objects can take on a heightened significance. A photograph, a book, or a gift from a loved one can unlock a wide expanse of recollections and emotions based upon those memories (and these may be cultural as well as individual). Third, adolescent apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic fiction highlights family relationships, especially between parents and offspring; while the older generation often dies or needs to be surpassed for the sake of survival, the child taps into passed-down lore or wisdom. In zombie fiction specifically, the centrality of family relations can hold a further import: not infrequently, a relative becomes a member of the living dead, and so the protagonist faces questions regarding whether anything survives of the relative's old identity and whether to kill this new being even as its physical body summons the memorial weight of the beloved. Finally, and perhaps most obviously, the intellectual vacancy of the walking dead themselves accentuates the mental capacity of the living: the zombies exist in an unceasing present, while the human survivors retain the value of—and face the burden of—

memory and thinking ahead. The irony that zombies are typically dispatched by a shot or blow to the head serves to underscore this mental emphasis. The horror of seeing the human body so unceremoniously violated at the site of the brain evokes the horror that what the human mind stands for—including what it stores of individual experiences and culture—could also be so fragile.[2]

While zombie texts foreground suffering and death in keeping with horror generally, it is often the threat of human *oblivion*—individually and as a species—that provides the anxiety of the zombie subgenre. Simon Bacon discusses how the film *Harold's Going Stiff* (Keith Wright, 2011) responds to current personal and social concerns involving the elderly by 'equat[ing] memory loss, such as that seen in Alzheimer's or senile dementia, with zombiism' (Bacon 2017:89–90). Bacon, in treating how 'the notion of memory constitute[s] what is human, or humanness', emphasizes that 'memory not only creates identity but links one to the wider culture and society' (2017: 90). Discussing Colson Whitehead's *Zone One* (2011), Kyle William Bishop asserts that 'To survive the trauma of a zombie apocalypse [. . .] people construct subjective *lieux de mémoire* for both comfort and security' and notes how the structure of Whitehead's novel 'manifests its consuming interest in nostalgia' (2014: 100). Such memorial anatomies of the human signal that *memory is meaning*, and that life is 'worth it' as long as we have memories to hold on to. The romantic zombie film *Warm Bodies* (Jonathan Levine, 2013) transfers this perspective to the walking dead themselves by having its zombie protagonist 'R' experience thoughts and feelings stored in the brains of those he consumes; without those memories, 'life' feels too colorless and meaningless to R (a notion played out visually in the film's gray scale v. color palette). While there is a decidedly humanistic core to these fictions and even an optimistic

sense that memory *does* establish value, an acknowledgement of defeat haunts these narratives at every turn. I turn now to the memorial elements employed in *The Forest of Hands and Teeth* as one lens on the attempts and failures to preserve human meaning.

'Who Will Ever Know I Existed?'

Carrie Ryan's *The Forest of Hands and Teeth* participates in the basics of zombie fiction: people 'return' after dying, the zombies infect others by biting them, and decapitation or significant brain injury disposes of the walking dead (who are called Unconsecrated here rather than zombies). In this post-apocalyptic reality, the Unconsecrated so vastly outnumber the remaining humans, that those in the village, sectioned off by fences from the surrounding forest, believe they may be the last people alive. While Mary dreams of reaching the ocean, her mother has told her about, there is no assurance that this location, if it exists, holds any promise of a better life, and between the protagonist and the imagined sea lies a potentially endless forest full of Unconsecrated. The first third of the novel focuses on Mary's containment within society. The Sisterhood, the nuns who govern the village, have determined a set of social roles and guidelines for the community. Females (other than the Sisters) are expected to marry not for love but for the sake of producing more offspring. (Mary becomes betrothed to her childhood friend Harry, although she really desires his brother Travis, who becomes affianced to Mary's best friend Cass). When Mary's mother allows herself to be bitten by an Unconsecrated in order to be released into the forest in the hope of reuniting with her deceased husband, Mary is forced to live with the Sisters, restricting her limited movements and options even further. The book's latter two-thirds chronicle Mary's bid for freedom primarily on her own terms; she has the opportunity

to be with Travis instead of Harry but ultimately chooses her own quest over either of them. As we discover part-way through the novel, a gate that has often aroused Mary's curiosity (but which the villagers are forbidden to go through) leads to a maze of fenced-in paths that separate the surviving humans from 'the Forest of Hands and Teeth'. When the Unconsecrated breach the larger fenced-off village barrier, Mary and her friends (along with her brother Jed, his spouse Beth, and a rescued boy named Jacob) escape through the gate and enter this labyrinth.

While *The Forest of Hands and Teeth* contains some of the glaring weaknesses of current adolescent literature focused on teen protagonists in romantic quandaries, the novel addresses memorial concerns from the outset and introduces several avenues for serious reflection on what persists in individual and collective human identity. The opening lines set the memorial framework: 'In my mother's stories, passed down from her many-greats-grandmother, the ocean sounded like the wind through the trees and men used to ride the water' (Ryan 2009:1). The mother's stories augur something beyond Mary's walled-in existence that seems, at times, futile. Additionally, the stories offer the possibility for human preservation through memory, which is really Mary's central anxiety: not that she will die, but that nothing will endure of her and her culture. Late in the novel, Mary asks:

> Who are we if not the stories we pass down? What happens when there's no one left to tell those stories? To hear them. Who will ever know I existed? What if we are the only ones left—who will know our stories then? And what will happen to everyone else's stories? Who will remember those? (Ryan 2009: 207)

This post-apocalyptic worry over how a story survives finds a parallel, as Amanda Wicks discusses, in trauma narratives: 'The shock associated with apocalypse—like any trauma—must

be remembered, narratively structured, and shared in order to help characters regain a sense of identity and order' (2016: 141). Critical and psychological responses to authorial and readerly recollection can take a decidedly humanistic, optimistic tone: 'narrative and representation can have therapeutic effects [. . .] societies do not need to be caught in endless cycles of horror, *jouissance* and ideological fetishizing' (Berger 1999: 29). *The Forest of Hands and Teeth* begins by foregrounding transgenerational memory as a liberating option.

While there are few writings in Mary's life, they hold a vital and immediately more ambiguous status than the oral stories just mentioned. The villagers ritualistically pass their hands over scriptural passages carved into the woodwork of their doorways upon entering and exiting their homes. When Mary returns to her house after her mother's death, she performs this manual gesture in an unconscious attempt to hold on to the past:

> I think about all of the memories trapped in the rough log walls, all of the warmth and laughter and dreams. I feel as if I can almost see these things leaking out, slipping away into the sunlight. As if the house is cleansing itself of our history. Forgetting my mother and her stories and our childhood. Without thinking, I place a hand against the wall to the right of the door. (Ryan 2009: 21)

The scripture's presence on these liminal spaces accentuates writing's (and religion's) power to contain, a relationship that Sister Tabitha, the oldest member of the Sisterhood, makes explicit: 'I know I must sound harsh, Mary . . . But what is a village without order?' (67). In one such act of social organization, Sister Tabitha recites the Scripture as she binds Mary's hands to Harry's the night before they are supposed to take their 'final Vows of Eternal Constancy' (119). Whereas

oral memory from the start impels Mary beyond her current space, written memory initially helps to keep her in her place (physically and socially).

At the same time, while this containment is the intention of the Sisters, the placement of Scripture on the *threshold* opens the opposite possibility: that writing could allow one to *cross* boundaries. Two moments are crucial in Mary's transgression of social and physical barriers, both involving writing. First, during Mary's tenure with the Sisters, a newcomer arrives, only to be hidden in one of the Cathedral rooms. Mary realizes the mysterious guest came through the forbidden gate, and that there must be (or have been) people beyond her town, yet the Sisters notify no one, and Mary later discovers that the stranger was released into the forest among the Unconsecrated. Going into the outsider's room, Mary breathes on the window (where Mary had caught a glimpse of the guest) and thereby reveals the name 'Gabrielle' and the letters 'XIV' that the visitor had written with her finger. Second, after Gabrielle's disappearance, Mary explores a tunnel in the cellar of the Cathedral, breaks open a door and finds a room where it is clear guests have recently stayed. In the middle of the room, a copy of the Scripture contains marginal writing that turns out to be a condensed history of the time since the Return. The door frame of this room contains not a scriptural passage, but the names of those who have stayed in the room (with Gabrielle's name last). The window writing in Gabrielle's room is ephemeral, and the historical account in the copy of the Scripture, while recording the past, is kept hidden by the Sisters. Writing can be said to 'fail' in these respects. But it is also true that Mary witnesses each of these moments of documentation, and her continued investigative relationship with the writings allows for the further crossing of thresholds.

This dual valence of events and their witnessing—loss and preservation/adaptation—recalls Shoshana Felman's work on the Holocaust. Speaking of the function of singing in the film *Shoah*, Felman proposes that:

> the song stands for the activation of the memory of the whole film, a memory that no one can possess, and whose process of collecting and of recollecting is constantly torn apart between the pull, the pressure of the words and the different, independent pull of the melody, which has its own momentum and its own compulsion to repeat but which does not know what in fact it is repeating. (Felman 1992: 277)

The post-apocalyptic idiom of *The Forest and Hands and Teeth* and other zombie texts share with trauma studies, in a fictional way, a revelation of 'the inconceivable historical site' of the apocalyptic event (Felman 1992: 269). Moreover, as Amanda Wicks notes:

> Contemporary post-apocalypse narratives challenge memory and, subsequently, narration as a pathway to memory. The act of working through trauma by means of memory and testimony—what psychoanalysis traditionally views as a constructive means to recovery—instead becomes a violent act within the post-apocalyptic space. (2016: 136)

Felman helps us to see that any simple 'recuperative' notion of the traumatic event and of the 'history' in which it is embedded is misguided; Wicks furthers this distance from a naively humanistic approach by showing how in recent post-apocalyptic texts *memory* actually becomes 'a dangerous connection to a damaged and damaging past that must be discarded' (2016: 136). The goal is not so much doing (impossible) justice to past horror, but simple survival; preserving

the space of trauma becomes not just tenuous but threatening to self-preservation. In *The Forest of Hands and Teeth,* Mary will eventually question the 'burden' of memory.

'So Long Lives This'

Through most of the novel, though, memory is a driving force, and receiving pride of place in this influence is the figure so often evoked as cultural touchstone in children's and young adult texts: Shakespeare.[3] The climax of Mary's reading/interpretive journey comes after the Unconsecrated breach the village barrier (led by Gabrielle, who after being released into the forest by the Sisters has become a rare high-speed Unconsecrated). Mary, Harry, and the boy Jacob escape through the forbidden gate, followed by Travis, Cass, Jed, and Beth, and embark on the maze of fenced and gated pathways. Mary soon notices letters on an old wooden trunk at a fork in the paths: 'XVIII' (Ryan 2009: 157). She does not understand the import of the letters (her culture having lost the Roman numeral system), but she remembers Gabrielle's mark on the window. After several days of coming across a series of apparently random similar letters, Harry reads out 'XIV' from a bar on one of the gates (186). Mary convinces everyone to take that path; although the group endures no little danger and becomes divided (allowing for further romantic development between Mary and Travis), they do find another village with food and supplies. While holed up, Mary discovers a small book and a photograph of New York City before the Return; opening the volume, she 'trace[s] the elegant letters on the first page, not understanding their meaning: *Shakespeare's Sonnets*' (260). Mary turns to the beginning of the sonnets and discovers 'over the first block of text is the letter *I*. On the next page, over the next block of text

are the letters *II*' (260). Mary realizes the significance of the pattern and its basic application to the architecture of the paths.

Shakespeare's poems directly intersect with central thematic elements of the novel. When Mary finally reads some of the sonnets, she begins with XIV (recalling Gabrielle's message) and finds that it 'talks of judgment and plagues and good and evil and truth and doom' (Ryan 2009: 260). The infection of the Unconsecrated has certainly reached plague proportions, and Sister Tabitha proposes that the Return stemmed from God's judgment (63). But it is writing's potential to preserve our lives for later generations that makes Shakespeare a particularly apt intertextual selection. Remembering the 'XVIII' carved in the trunk near her own village, Mary turns to that sonnet: 'One line jumps from the page, making me catch my breath: "Nor shall death brag thou wander'st in his shade"' (260). Sonnet XVIII is perhaps Shakespeare's most optimistic proposal that verse can preserve humanity ('As long as men do breathe and eyes can see, / So long lives this, and this gives life to thee'—Shakespeare *Sonnets*, XVIII.13–14). Mary's anxiety about being remembered finds a possible answer in Shakespeare's claim that writing can sustain human identity.

Before examining the writing-specific implications of Ryan's deployment of Shakespeare's sonnets, it is worth recalling that the first seventeen poems propose a different answer to the loss of one's existence/identity: offspring. While *The Forest of Hands and Teeth* admittedly panders to young audiences with a host of hackneyed romantic sentiments, the book's erotic impulse also functions to raise this biological response to the problem of legacy. Sister Tabitha ultimately rejects Mary from the Sisterhood, explaining that Mary is 'needed more out there as a wife and

mother than in here as a Sister' and later elaborates, 'Our ancestors knew that in order to survive we had to persevere . . . That creating each new generation was the most important task beyond keeping the village safe and fed' (76; 113). The rituals surrounding marriage are the most solemn and celebratory time in Mary's culture. The christening, in which each baby is passed around to all the villagers, helps remind all that 'These children belong to all of us [. . .] they are our future' (88). The value of childbearing is repeatedly emphasized through references to Jed and Beth's loss of a baby. (Beth, in fact, becomes pregnant a second time, which leads to a second child death). Mary herself carries a hefty 'Western' cultural expectation for motherhood: Mary (as in the mother of Jesus) is visited by Gabrielle (like Gabriel in the annunciation).

Mary's resistance to settling for marriage and family becomes not only a rejection of religion and God but also a specific response to reducing a woman's value to reproductive biology. In this regard, *The Forest of Hands and Teeth* largely evades a facet of many traditional post-apocalyptic narratives, the need for an 'ending' that assumes the centrality of the child as legacy: 'the futuristic child is a common hedge against the narrative closure suggested by apocalypticism. In a sense, post-apocalyptic narratives exist in service of the child' (Sorensen 2014: 588). While Mary as a youth partially fulfills the role of 'the futuristic child', she refuses to adopt maternity and family in turn. Indeed, when she has extended time alone with Travis in the village beyond Gate XIV, she realizes Travis and family life are not enough for her. In a disturbing moment when she and Travis first take shelter, Mary finds an Unconsecrated baby, momentarily holds it, and then soberly drops it out a window. Before a fire instigates flight from this new village, Mary shows some maternal care for the rescued Jacob (e.g., giving him her dog

to cheer him up), but Jacob winds up in the care of Cass (with Mary clearly choosing a life without attachments to others).

Thus, the novel parallels the course of Shakespeare's early sonnets, which first embrace the drive for progeny but shift to the possibilities of written memory. How does literary childbearing hold up as an alternative to biological offspring? Shakespeare's own musings were ambivalent. He boldly proclaims, 'Not marble, nor the gilded monuments / Of princes, shall outlive this powerful rhyme' (Shakespeare *Sonnets*, LV.1–2), but he also depicts poetry as 'barren' (XVI.4) and suggests that verse is 'but as a tomb / Which hides [the beloved's] life and shows not half [the beloved's] parts' (XVII.3–4). In *The Forest of Hands and Teeth*, the power of the inscribed word to preserve both culture and individual identity is highlighted, especially given that words and names are often *carved* (making the association with physical permanence palpable). At the same time, the reader encounters multiple instances of writing as transitory, miscommunicated, and fluid: Gabrielle's window writing disappears; the Sisters keep the written village history a secret and promulgate benevolent fictions in its place; and even the carved Scripture, one of the most reassuring elements of Mary's village, is absent from the thresholds in the village down Path XIV (a fact that destabilizes Mary's worldview).

Shakespeare's sonnets as a *corpus* also create an intertextual ambiguity. While the numbers follow an order and structural elements and key themes recur, promoting a sense of 'meaning', as a body, the sonnets resist the relative linearity of plot found in Shakespeare's plays and fail to tell a coherent story. As Helen Vendler says, 'the story of the *Sonnets* will always exhibit those "gaps" and that "indeterminacy" intrinsic to the sonnet sequence as a genre' (1997: 3). Ryan's

linking of the paths with the sonnets sets up a tension between narrative containment and openness: a potential governing thread to the maze construction materializes (through the sonnets' serial numeration) and conjures a sense of closure (there seems to be a *system*); yet the various tracks do not follow in expected numerical order, instead coming together at junctions with no apparent sense. For example, Mary finds a group of tags labeled 'XXIX', 'XXIII', 'VII', and 'IV' at proximate splits in the pathway. As with the interpretive relationship drawn forth by Gabrielle's writing, here again, is a sense that writing can announce meaning and, conversely, that writing will fail to sufficiently recall that meaning.

Ryan playfully inserts the ordering and unbinding aspects of writing into the formal construction of her novel. Mary's discovery of the first path-marker, XVIII, comes in Chapter XVIII (also titled with a Roman numeral); the chapters themselves are pathways that must be traveled, contained units that nonetheless propel the reader beyond their markers. The forward/serial progression of the narrative is in turn broken through a non-linear interaction between some of the chapters. For example, when Mary sees the 'XVIII', she remembers Gabrielle's 'XIV'; given the connection between Gate XVIII and Chapter XVIII, the attentive reader is driven to look back at Chapter XIV, only to discover that this was the chapter in which Gabrielle breached the fence, overwhelmed the village, and sent Mary on her route in the first place. These numeric hints prompt the reader to look at corresponding Shakespeare sonnets. Mary does this herself for the two key poems, XIV and XVIII, but the inclusion of additional specific gate numbers raises the possibility that other sonnets merit further scrutiny. The heightened complexity of textual relationships (moving from a simple one-to-one correspondence between chapter and sonnet, as in the case of XVIII, to a more fluid and multidirectional set of links between chapters and

sonnets, as in the case of XVIII and XIV) intimates a grander structure of 'meaning'. However, attempts to find further (intra- and inter-) associations with the sonnets based upon chapter numerals remain mostly evocative, just as the path schema thwarts formalization.

Some of the tensions mentioned appear to imply only partial forfeiture, such as the persistence and alteration of the past through intertextuality (as we see through the general thematic relevance of the sonnets adjusting to meet the context of Ryan's novel). While partial survival may not sound so bad, *the constant cycle of adapted repetitions*, a defining feature of zombie texts, undermines memorial meaning in a particular way: 'This particular genre resists a concrete ending because the act of narrating "the end" extends time beyond a linear, historical frame so that there can never be a true end' (Wicks 2016: 138–139). The episodic form of the genre—concentrated on constant movement to new sites and attempts to reconstruct life—reflects the long history of human reiteration that threatens to exhaust meaning in the post-apocalyptic world.

Endless Reiteration

Gothic and horror texts have a particular investment in setting. What is striking in zombie narratives specifically is the *series* of locations central to the experience (for both characters and readers/viewers). While on one hand, *The Forest of Hands and Teeth* generates a traditional journey narrative, it is also true that the spaces themselves are more compelling than the events. We know the Unconsecrated will continue to attack (and Mary will do a lot of adolescent

emoting); what is interesting is the *sites* in which the characters find themselves. In this serial, but ultimately unresolved structure, the novel opens itself as anti-narrative:

> In many ways, the zombie genre even represents a form of antinarrative that relies much more strongly on the continuous establishment of spatial coordinates than it does on the causal chain of classical narrative [. . .] In lieu of causality, these texts foreground concepts and categories that are spatial rather than logical or temporal: zombie films are about how space is reorganized, boundaries are reestablished, and characters follow new trajectories across a deeply unstable geography. (Hassler-Forest 2014: 118, 130).

One consequence of this generic approach is a heightened emphasis on non-closure. As Dan Hassler-Forest notes, 'the object of the narrative is only very rarely the successful resolution and containment of the crisis or even the establishment of a rational explanation of its key events' (2014: 118). What is at stake here is unending repetition; despite the constant movement of the zombie narrative, the protagonists will never really get anywhere. As Jennifer Rutherford points out, this lack of arrival has broader social implications:

> In lieu of the modernist maxim 'make it new' zombie fictional works drive the future into a cul-de-sac of no return. They hold out no promise, no hope, only the working through of what it is that makes the present an endless prolepsis of ruin (2013: 9).

We do not enter a space that removes us from our problems; instead, we encounter and re-encounter a perpetuated and perpetuating cycle of 'ruin'.

This re-iteration in *The Forest of Hands and Teeth* (containment/breach/flight in Mary's village, containment/breach/flight in the second village) climaxes at the end of the path maze. The final marker, 'I', announces the end (beginning) of the system, and Mary rightly interprets this writing as a sign of another community. The 'I' perhaps carries a verbal as well as numerical connotation, as Mary chooses herself—her own vision—over the group and suddenly exits through the gate, leaving the others presumably to die as they continue to search aimlessly and without provisions along the paths (excepting her brother Jed, who winds up chasing after Mary and dies attempting to help her reach her goal). While the paths have been a means of trespass, their labyrinthine nature positions them as *another site* that needs to be escaped, and so Mary's departure becomes yet another iteration of the pattern (containment within the fenced-off paths/dead-end/flight). Mary does make it to the ocean and is discovered by a lighthouse keeper, who informs her that another community of people exists there. Yet the beach is littered with Unconsecrated who have washed up *en masse* after the storm of the night before and seem to be a fact of life in this new location also. The novel provides no sense of optimism about humans overcoming the threat of the Unconsecrated, instead ending at the beginning of the cycle with Mary about to be again contained within a communal space (threatened always again by a breach).

Carrie Ryan allows both oral and written memory (the mother's stories, Shakespeare's sonnets, the documented history in the Scripture) to propel and guide Mary to the ocean but the freedom she expects to find there is short-lived. Given the loss of Mary's lover, family, friends, and the whole community, one might expect that *memory* would provide a reassuring note of hope/meaning as a substitute for the aborted biological survival. Indeed, despite the continued

presence of the walking dead, the lighthouse keeper suggests, 'That doesn't mean it's not worth being here' (Ryan 2009: 306). But Mary's closing thoughts betray her uncertainty:

> And then I remember Travis pulling me against him and telling me about hope. His voice in my mind is soft, just out of reach like a spent echo. I wonder if these memories are worth holding on to. Are worth the burden. I wonder what purpose they serve. (308)

The arrival at the ocean leads to a re-asking of the old questions: is life worth it amidst the horror? How long will we survive, and what of our identities will remain? Even insofar as Mary can carry forth the past, she questions whether there is any *purpose* to this 'burden' (a pregnant word, memory substituted for child). Notably, *oral* memory here—Travis's voice—the most intimate kind of memory (going back to the opening page and the connection with Mary's mother), seems inadequate. We tell our stories over and over, but to what end? As for intertextual memory, Elana Gomel, drawing upon the work of Kristeva, reveals how zombie fiction's meta-consumption leads us to the same 'cul-de-sac':

> Intertextuality [. . .] is the condition of all literature, as the meaning of the individual text becomes dependent upon the ever-growing and potentially unlimited textual corpus [. . .] The metafictionality of zombie narratives acknowledges the dynamics of predation implicit in this notion: texts absorb and transform each other, just as the walking dead do to the living. If the endless proliferation of the walking dead threatens to consume humanity, the endless proliferation of self-replicating texts threatens to consume meaning. (36–37)

Rutherford reaches a similar conclusion, suggesting that the zombie 'empties meaning while proliferating it. It critiques, questions, interrogates the way things are while bleakly laying out

the impossibility of them being otherwise' (Rutherford 2013: 23). Proliferated empty meaning [. . .] an endless prolepsis of ruin.

The terminus of the ocean, in keeping with the spatially episodic nature of the genre, becomes a *re*-iteration of existing anxieties, a new locus of what had already been and what presumably will remain. Ryan deepens this identification of the ocean with the prior reality by inserting various connections between the forest and the ocean at various points in the novel, such as the sound of wind in the trees reminding Mary of her mother's stories of the ocean (Ryan 2009: 90), Mary's sensation of 'being tossed in a sea of Unconsecrated' during an attack (236), and her regarding of the forest as '[t]he only ocean I've ever known' (254). We never clearly get anywhere; there is no salvation. Gomel's formulation is on target: 'Just like the plot structure of the traditional [prophetic] apocalypse is flouted by zombie texts, so is its meaning' (Gomel 2013: 34).

Post-Reiteration

As evidenced by so much scholarship on how the zombie *critiques* socio-political constructs (with an implicit suggestion that an alternative is standing off in the distance), we struggle to get away from a humanistic approach to these texts, and thus we wind up in the ever-presence of the recycled past. But always haunting the subgenre is the further threat of actual human annihilation, a possibility that human memory—human meaning—will disintegrate and disappear. One way we see this in Ryan's novel is through a recognition of the theoretical space that pre-exists and post-exists humanity, out of which writing comes. Writing in the novel is frequently associated with wood, whether on paper (as in the case of the sonnets), or the

markings of the paths on the wood trunks, or (most notably) the carving of scripture on the wood of the doorways. Thus, while writing to some extent perpetuates individual and cultural memory, it also stands as a reminder of the 'uncivilized' (pre-/post-civilized) forest overrun with Unconsecrated. There is always the sense humanity will cede to the 'natural world' (the forest, the ocean), and that memorial structures we create (building and writings) will deteriorate and decay.[4] The Unconsecrated themselves are an image of this surrender in their ongoing state of dismemberment and dissolution: 'They do not rot, do not decay, only slowly pull themselves apart' (Ryan 2009: 183). Not surprisingly, the Unconsecrated exist outside of the novel's 'civilized' bound spaces. 'Life' would seem to be a repetition of meaning—a moving from site to site in a recycling of oral and textual memory—only to conclude in the downed space where meaning disintegrates to the elements out of which we began to construct it. The human experience—memory itself—exists within the mythic (and social) bounds that allow this reiteration.

Perhaps the most graphic expression of the novel's ambivalence about the survival of human identity comes at the house in the village down Path XIV. Mary has become desperate to connect with the woman who lived in the house before her, to tell her 'that someone still remembers her. That her life holds meaning' (Ryan 2009: 213). Anxious about her own identity, Mary writes out everything she wishes she had said to her loved ones, attaches each sheet to an arrow, and fires the pages at the Unconsecrated from her third-floor balcony: 'Again and again I embed my story into the skulls of the Unconsecrated that surround us and they still keep coming [. . .] By the end, when all my arrows are gone, I've dropped twenty Unconsecrated. And yet there's no rest. No dent. Nothing to mark my accomplishment' (218). The sheer volume and the brain-dead nature

of the Unconsecrated underline the futility of Mary's writing here in the face of overwhelming oblivion. At best, perhaps, we can hope for ages of replicating memory (one form of emptied meaning). Even this legacy, though, as indicated by Mary's effort to record her story, seems doomed to be swallowed up by those forces which threaten biological survival and by the pre-, and post-, human forest and ocean that surround our existence.

Conclusion

Zombie texts provide a particularly apposite vein for exploring our tendencies toward humanism and the threats to that humanism. These stories always hinge upon the centrality of human *meaning*—what it means to be a human and what meaning we create and preserve. In some cases, that meaning is re-codified and protected for the audience, as in the film *Warm Bodies*, in which a traditional 'Western' conception of romantic love not only proves salvific for the human protagonist but even re-forms the zombies themselves into functioning humans. In other instances (perhaps most famously George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* [1968]) that return to an ordered humanism is deferred or even rejected. Whether ultimately recuperated or not, it is the imperiling of a humanistic world that drives the genre.

In this article, I have explored strategies for and the jeopardization of such humanism through a focus on memory. Memory holds a key position in zombie narratives, in part because of the memorial nature of narrative itself, but also, as I have sought to show, because of various considerations fundamental to the genre. Carrie Ryan's *The Forest of Hands and Teeth* offers a rich site for an examination of these memorial concerns. Oral and written memory, especially

through the authority of Shakespeare (at once a ready figure of cultural memory and a writer who explicitly addresses possibilities for and anxiety about preservation), encourage the protagonist Mary into and along her journey. Yet *The Forest of Hands and Teeth* deals a surprisingly potent blow to the humanistic nervous system. Memory here remains at best ambivalent (oral and written memory both charting absence and loss as much as preservation) and at worst a burden whose value is ultimately questioned. Even insofar as memory persists, it gets caught up in the exhausting cycle of endless reiteration. Finally, memory gives way completely under the annihilation of the species, our seemingly long trajectory but a brief flash in oblivion. Shakespeare's Lysander said it in another forest text: our experience is 'Brief as the lightning in the collied night, / That, in a spleen, unfolds both heaven and earth, / And ere a man hath power to say "Behold!" / The jaws of darkness do devour it up' (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*).

Notes

[1] Robert Kirkman, creator of the graphic novel series *The Walking Dead* and co-producer of the television adaption, notes that other 'monster' narratives tend to focus on the experience of becoming the monster, whereas zombie tales highlight the human experience amidst the zombie outbreak: 'A story about vampires or werewolves is a story about people going through that transformation [. . .] But zombie stories are about human beings doing relatable things: protecting your family, finding food, building shelter' (Peisner 2013).

[2] Roger Luckhurst suggestively notes the coincidence between the rise of the modern zombie genre and the modern medical shift in locating the brain instead of the heart as the seat of death (2015: 174–79). See also Patrick, 2014: 113–119.

[3] For Shakespeare's role in identity formation in children's and young adult literature, see Hateley (2009).

[4] Robert Pogue Harrison suggests that in Western culture the forest provides an estrangement, an exterior, that allows for human culture to define its interior. He proposes that 'the forest, in its enduring antiquity, was the correlate of the poet's memory, and that once its remnants were gone, the poet would fall into oblivion' (Harrison 1992: xi). Harrison is concerned with the threat of deforestation on our cultural memory, but his remarks are a propos here: the forest throughout Ryan's novel provides the outside space that allows those within the boundaries to define their meaning; however, Ryan offers a future in which humans do not destroy their memories by destroying nature, but rather one in which nature always transcends human memory

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