

The Origin of the Zombie in American Radio and Film: B-Horror, U.S. Empire, and the Politics of Disavowal

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Released in 1943, Jacques Tournier's film *I Walked with a Zombie* conveys a message about the Caribbean that is ubiquitous among B-horror narratives of the 1930s and 1940s, and that continues to inform representations of Haiti within the Western cultural imaginary. Set on a white-owned sugar plantation on the fictional island of Saint Sebastian, it tells the story of a Canadian nurse named Betsy Connell. The young nurse is brought to the island to take care of the planter's wife, Jessica Holland, who has gotten mixed up in voodoo rituals and, as a consequence, is now a zombie. What is striking about the film is that despite its use of voodoo and zombies to tell a story about the Caribbean, there is a curious acknowledgment of exploitation and social injustice in the region. *I Walked with a Zombie* repeatedly reminds viewers of the history of slavery on Saint Sebastian: the mast of a slave ship sits in the courtyard of the Holland plantation and, throughout the picture, the camera returns to a close-up of the mast's figurehead, a wooden carving of the religious martyr Saint Sebastian dying from arrow wounds. As the island bears the name of a slave ship (named, incidentally, after a plague saint), and since an image of its masthead forms the final shot of the film, slavery emerges as central and inseparable part of its exotic setting.

While the film acknowledges this history, it draws no explicit moral from it, and, paradoxically, it is this interpretive void that is most illuminating. When Betsy first arrives on the island, the planter Paul Holland gestures to the masthead and tries to explain it to her: "The people came from the misery and pain of slavery. For generations, they've found life a burden. That's why they still weep when a child is born and make merry at the burial." He adds, "I've told you ... this is a sad place."

The film's basic social message—"this is a sad place"—should be familiar to anyone who tuned into the coverage of the recent earthquake in Haiti. It is a message about colonial suffering that acknowledges deep, historical wounds but refuses both introspection and responsibility. If a unique discourse of empire emerges from every particular site, then the American discourse surrounding the Caribbean is one with unique roots in B-horror. It

works, moreover, to obscure and disavow the true nature of the political relationship between the global North and the global South. Following the tragic 2010 earthquake in Haiti—a disaster that left at least 230,000 dead and over 1,000,000 homeless—the very worst example was represented by the UK's *Daily Mail*, which covered the catastrophe with the headline “Haiti: Rape, Murder and Voodoo on the Island of the Damned” (I will return to this article in my conclusion). Much more typical, however, was the coverage of the New York NBC-affiliate, whose article “The Sad History of Haiti” sympathetically presented the country's past as a tragic, un-ending nightmare only minimally intertwined with the history of the United States.¹

The figure of the zombie—which has once again become a major phenomenon in global mass culture in the last ten years—played a central role in creating imperial discourses of the Caribbean. For contemporary audiences, the more familiar zombie plot involves a pandemic within the United States (or within the West), and this narrative strand has a separate genealogy that begins with director George Romero's 1968 film *Night of the Living Dead*. Because of the singular influence of Romero—a self-described product of the late 1960s—contemporary zombie films are often vehicles to explore progressive politics (and this has extended into some zombie video games as well).² The earliest zombie stories in U.S. popular culture, however, were generally set in Haiti or elsewhere in the region. The walking dead in these older tales were not created through bites from rotting mouths, but by a “master” who used a local herb or voodoo magic to create “slaves” for a particular purpose, most typically for labor. Romero enabled a more progressive bent within the genre by setting the stories in the domestic realm of the viewers and eliminating voodoo as the cause of the outbreak, stripping the genre of its exoticism and disassociating the zombie from Haiti.

But the zombie initially entered global popular culture as direct result the U.S. occupation of Haiti from 1915 to 1934, a fact that has not been adequately explored to date. In the mid-1920s, Marines stationed in Haiti led an author-reporter named William Seabrook on a tour of the country, and his travels there, under Marine escort, inspired him to write the travelogue *The Magic Island* (1929), the first major narrative containing zombies to appear in American popular culture. As historian Mary Renda has noted, his book helped fuel a popular fascination with Haiti, and inspired similar tales of voodoo magic in radio, comic books, and film in the 1930s. Renda argues that such tales allowed ordinary Americans to participate in the project of imperial expansion, and they did so through the logic of exoticism. Much like imperialism itself, which ingests another country without allowing it to become a valid part of the national culture, exoticism injected Haiti into American culture while maintaining its foreignness and presumed inferiority. This, according to Renda, justified the American presence and its paternalistic “tutelage.”³

But what is perhaps surprising are the ways in which early narratives of zombies in U.S. mass culture in the 1930s and 1940s registered a disease with the misery of colonial labor and imperial exploitation, one which still resonates in popular Western narratives of the third world, zombie or otherwise. Early zombies were often Caribbean plantation workers, black and white, who were employed by a villainous white plantation owner to further his or her nefarious designs. In this essay, I argue that these early tales of zombies in U.S. mass culture—circulating in film, literature, and, most frequently, radio—did not reflect and reinforce a directly imperial logic culminating in an argument for “tutelage,” as Renda suggests. Rather, shifting the frame to the theme of labor reveals a deployment of the exotic which ultimately serves a popular isolationism: an isolationism based on a public ambivalence toward colonialism found in the larger public culture of the United States during the 1930s and 1940s. This isolationism ultimately serves empire, however, neither by ignoring

injustice, nor through an implicit paternalism, but by disavowing the humanity of its racialized victims and thereby negating the politics of solidarity.

During the 1930s, 1940s, and early 1950s, the zombie appeared in films such as *White Zombie* (1932), *Revolt of the Zombies* (1936), and *I Walked with a Zombie*, as well as in radio programs ranging from *The Shadow*, *The Clyde Beatty Show*, *Five Minute Mysteries*, *Adventures by Morse*, *Unsolved Mysteries*, *Strange Adventure*, and *Screen Directors' Assignment*. These productions generally posited the colonial world (usually the Caribbean) as a place of great suffering, either because of a past history of slavery or the exploitative designs of white plantation owners in the present. Such representations were enabled in part by Franklin Roosevelt's Good Neighbor Policy, which placed Haiti in the headlines as U.S. troops pulled out of the country in 1934. This foreign policy change required a new discourse of cooperation that broke with images of voodoo primitivism. But as I will argue, the notion of an oppressed Caribbean workforce was also informed by the relentless vigilance of the African American press, the activism of the 1930s left in the U.S., and the protests of the Haitians themselves. Such agitation not only made Haiti a site of anti-imperial critique, but also put the exploitation of labor more generally at the center of American public debate.

But while these early horror narratives often registered a discomfort with colonial labor, they also used the figure of the zombie to debase the humanity of the colonial subject, offering audiences no basis of identification with his or her plight. Though progressive, even anti-imperial discourses of the 1930s and '40s, were inscribed into the mid-century zombie narrative, the genre ultimately helped to neutralize the quite vocal, activist impulse toward cross-cultural solidarity that marked those decades. While these mid-century horror tales depart from more recent, multicultural readings of the global South in that they generally render its cultures in terms of absolute difference and inferiority, what remains constant is the politics of disavowal. In this regard, the early zombie genre illustrates how popular isolationism paradoxically serves as a basis for empire. Isolationism is premised on the basic idea that the nation will function best if it stays out of world affairs as much as possible — an idea which seems to preclude imperial expansion. But an isolationism that does not acknowledge the living, structural reality of U.S. imperialism — nor question the racial discourses it necessarily creates — quickly degenerates into apathy for its victims. Such is the logic of disavowal.

My examination of the early days of the zombie genre in U.S. mass culture is perhaps the first to consider the medium of radio. The increasing accessibility of commercial radio broadcasts from mid-century have made new archives available to scholars of popular culture, and these archives reveal the frequency with which the zombie tale was used to circulate the narratives about Haiti and the global south to U.S. audiences, particularly in the 1940s. In urban areas in the 1930s, less than 1 in 10 households were without a radio; by 1940, 83 percent of all U.S. households, rural and urban, owned one.⁴ Indeed, Americans had much more frequent, daily contact with radio in the 1930s than with any other form of mass culture, with the possible exception of newspapers. As an aural medium, the radio broadcasts were also well-positioned to do the cultural work of disavowal. Using voices and dialect, they dramatically enacted the stark, hierarchical separation between whiteness and blackness that had relied primarily on visual codes in the film genre.

Before discussing the zombie narratives of the 1930s and 1940s, one must briefly contextualize the historical event that led to the creature's dissemination in American culture: the U.S. military occupation of Haiti from 1915 to 1934. Acting on behalf of American business interests, the Marines occupied the island nation and forever altered its political structure. They dissolved the Haitian legislature and installed a puppet government at gunpoint. They suppressed freedom of speech in order to force a new constitution on the country that

allowed for more foreign investment, and it is now estimated that around 10,000 Haitians were killed as they rose in revolt. But the long-term consequences were far more dire. Since the founding of their country in 1804, Haitian peasants had generally been able to hold their own against the designs of their leadership; they were able to maintain a viable system of small farms against the wishes of the Haitian elite, who sought to build an economy based around large-scale plantation agriculture. The administrative reforms and infrastructure projects of the U.S. occupation, however, effectively centralized the police and military apparatus of the country, finally allowing the elites, foreign and domestic, to force their economic models and political power on the common people.⁵

Indeed, the people of Haiti have never stopped dealing with this re-composition of their social class structure. Since then, U.S. business and political leaders have continuously sought to expand the inequalities born of the occupation. During the Cold War, the U.S. government ensured the political survival of dictators Francois ("Papa Doc") Duvalier and Jean-Claude ("Baby Doc") Duvalier by providing their regimes with military and economic assistance in exchange for the easy access of U.S. manufacturers to the country's terrorized labor force.⁶ And in the 1990s, the United States worked with Haitian elites to curtail the popular, reformist President Jean-Bertrand Aristide, an effort which culminated in a Washington-backed coup d'état against this democratically elected leader in 2004. Haiti has been in a state of near-anarchy ever since.

The U.S. occupation consistently placed Haiti in American newspaper headlines in the interwar decades of the 1920s and 1930s. It made the island nation a point of interest for American writers and readers alike, and a number of authors, including Eugene O'Neill, John Vandercook, Zora Neale Hurston, and Langston Hughes, created images of Haiti that fired the imaginations of U.S. audiences. Arguably, no single work rivaled the impact of William Seabrook's travelogue *The Magic Island*, published in 1929. This book formed the template for most American stories of zombies and voodoo that followed over the next two decades. Seabrook's personal tale of adventure developed a wide readership in the years after its release in 1929, and even achieved best-seller status in the year of its publication.⁷

The Magic Island is not exclusively focused on the living dead per se, but on the general milieu of exotic beliefs and superstitions attributed to Haiti, in which voodoo and zombies figure prominently. Though the story is actually based on the reports of the Marine Faustin Wirkis, Seabrook, as narrator, leads the reader through the primitive world of Haitian "superstition" as if he witnessed it all first-hand. Most elaborate is his description of a voodoo ceremony that he purports to have observed. His breakdown of the ritual, which includes detailed descriptions of drums, wild-dancing, animal sacrifice, and white-robed processions—all in the night air of a jungle enclosure illuminated by both moon and torchlight—would furnish the basis for an aesthetic of horror tapped by a generation of set designers and script writers. He even included visual sketches of ceremonial altars that illustrated the exact placement of crosses, candles, and snakes upon their surface.

But apart from the *mise-en-scène* of the voodoo ritual, *The Magic Island* bequeathed two main narrative elements that were later fused together within the film and radio zombie narratives of the 1930 and 1940s. The first is the idea that female innocence—and femininity itself—is consumed by voodoo ritual, a ritual that creates sexless "automatons." Seabrook describes the ritual as quite sexually charged, with men and women giving themselves over to "ecstasy" at its apex and even going off into the jungle to couple.⁸ But this lustful excess requires a human cost. In his account, it necessitates the "sacrifice" of a young black girl named Catherine, whose soul is transferred into the body of a goat during the ceremony; the animal is then slaughtered in her stead in a ritual act of substitution. During the ritual itself, the girl and the goat are effectively zombified; the author describes them as "docile

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and entranced ... like automatons."⁹ Similarly, Seabrook later recounts his meeting with a "country girl" named Classinia, whom he depicts on first encounter as a "smooth-skinned negress ... mild and childlike," "soft-voiced," and "amiable."¹⁰ But when pressed into the service of Haitian necromancy, she rapidly undergoes a horrid transformation. As he discovers her later, "she was no longer a woman, but Papa Nebo, the male-female hermaphroditic oracle of the dead."¹¹ Seabrook notes with horror that "in the corner of her mouth, as if stuck into the mouth of a wooden dummy, was an unlighted cigar."¹²

Seabrook was ambivalent about the U.S. occupation itself, and actually saw his work as promoting an appreciation of Haitian culture. As has been noted by critics, *The Magic Island* comes out of the same 1920s impulse as Carl Van Vechten's *Nigger Heaven* (1926) and Eugene O'Neill's *Emperor Jones* (1920).¹³ As such, it is an exercise in "negrophilia" that exalts the primitive innocence of blacks as a valid antidote to a sexually-repressed, over-civilized, white culture. As Seabrook writes of the voodoo ritual, "their thing ... is rationally defensible. Of what use is any life without its emotional moments or hours of ecstasy?"¹⁴ But as can be seen in the examples above, a heavy strain of Puritanism nonetheless dogs Seabrook's travelogue. As the cases of Catherine and Classinia reveal, there must be a terrible price to pay in a world where so much sexual passion is unleashed. These girls, in effect, bear that cost by becoming "un-sexed" to fuel the sexual energies of the collective.

Although at first glance unrelated, the ritually de-sexed female has its counterpart within Seabrook's narrative in the generally male, zombie plantation worker. Chapter Two of *The Magic Island*, entitled "...Dead Men Working in the Canefields," can be said to have introduced the zombie to the English-speaking world.¹⁵ In this highly influential rendering of a now global monster, the zombie is "a soulless human corpse, still dead, but taken from the grave and endowed by sorcery with a mechanical semblance of life." It is generally created by a "master" for the purposes of labor, becoming "a servant or slave, occasionally for the commission of some crime, more often simply as a drudge around the habitation of a farm, setting it dull heavy tasks, and beating it like a dumb beast if it slackens."¹⁶ While the zombie is a symbol of exploited labor, it is by no means a vehicle to critique colonialism in Seabrook's usage.

In particular, Seabrook's native informant Constant Polynice tells him the story of a "black headman" named Ti Joseph, who created a score of zombies to work on plantations owned by the Haitian-American Sugar Company (Hasco), a U.S. firm. Unbeknownst to the company, which provided "low wages" but "steady work," Joseph registered his zombies to work for Hasco, then kept their wages for himself. His scheme is blown when his tender-hearted wife takes pity on the creatures and feeds them salted pistachio nuts. Zombies, who "as every one knows ... must never be permitted to taste salt or meat," become self-aware upon eating the nuts; upon realizing they are dead, they return once again to their graves, depriving Joseph of their labor. When the author later claims to see some "walking dead men" first-hand (who are employed by a cruel, native overseer on a small farm), he labels them "automatons," the same word he used for Classinia and Catherine. Just as Joseph's zombie workers, described by Polynice as "vacant-eyed like cattle," these creatures go about their menial labor "plodding like brutes."¹⁷ The motif of de-sexing continues in this instance as well, though here more firmly in the form of animalization.

As in subsequent mid-century tales, the figure of the zombie reveals a still active association between the Caribbean and the history of slavery within the white imagination. But in *The Magic Island*, the practice of slavery and the cruelty of colonial labor are displaced onto the Haitian themselves, who cruelly contract the bodies of their deceased neighbors to well-intentioned American companies. Seabrook's zombies aren't just located anywhere in the Caribbean, however, but in Haiti — the site of the first, successful, slave revolt

(Michael Denning even called the Haitian revolution “the first, global, anticolonial revolt”).¹⁸ In this context, his book reveals a psychological need to contain the subversive potential of this memory by representing Haiti as the site of the world’s last and only docile slaves. In effect, the figure of the zombie functions symbolically to put Haitians back in chains, not as the singing, carefree objects of the paternalist imagination, but as emasculated objects of pity. In sum, the mysterious culture of Haiti becomes, in *Magic Island*, a place of exploitative labor practices—purged of white culpability—with an erotic energy that threatens to destroy the very basis of sexuality for all those who enter it. It is perhaps in this vein that Seabrook writes that being on the island produced “a terror of something blacker and more implacable than [its inhabitants]—a terror of the dark, all-encompassing womb.”¹⁹

In the films and radio broadcasts involving zombies over the next two decades, this basic dynamic remained in place, but with a number of important elaborations. And in tracing the elaboration of the narrative, I am grounding what follows in the films *White Zombie*, *Revolt of the Zombies*, and *I Walked with a Zombie*; and on radio episodes featuring the walking dead in the programs *The Shadow* (1940), *Adventures by Morse* (1944), *Strange Adventure* (1945), *Five Minute Mysteries*, *Unsolved Mysteries* (1949), *Screen Directors’ Assignment* (1949), and *The Clyde Beatty Show* (1950–51). The two plot lines from *The Magic Island* outlined above—the first involving a ritual sacrifice of femininity, the second involving the employment of zombies on plantations—merge together in the narrative structures of the 1930s and 1940s. In story after story, nefarious designs hatched within the space of a plantation (usually by a plantation owner) somehow ensnare a visiting white couple, threatening their marriage by de-sexing either the man or the woman through zombification.²⁰ In *The Magic Island*, the open-air voodoo ritual and the creation of zombie laborers were separate affairs, each with its distinct setting, and each distinctly gendered. In subsequent tales of the walking dead, these two motifs became hopelessly entangled.

With the passage of time, the settings of zombie stories widened beyond the borders of Haiti. Though generally remaining on sugar plantations, a number of productions shifted the scene to elsewhere in the Caribbean, particularly Cuba, while others set the action on fictionalized though explicitly West Indian islands. A few of these tales went beyond the West Indies altogether to Asian settings such as Cambodia (e.g., the film *Revolt of the Zombies*) and South American locales like Chile (e.g., the radio serial *Adventures by Morse*).²¹ In addition, a host of zombie-themed restaurants and bars popped up in the 1930s and 1940s featuring iconography drawn from the South Pacific. Renda explains, “As white discourses began to merge diverse racial ‘others’ into a single fluid and generic, exotic object, they tended to emphasize less the specific horrors that had been attributed to Haiti since the early days of the occupation.”²² Be that as it may, the zombie rarely strayed too far from “home,” as it were, generally remaining in the Caribbean. The writers’ choice to shift the location to an island adjacent to Haiti more properly reveals the American tendency to conflate whole regions. In addition, both the setting and the plot structure of the zombie genre remained remarkably consistent through the Depression, the Second World War, and the early years of the Cold War, despite striking shifts in U.S. foreign policy vis-à-vis Haiti and the Caribbean over those years. More than anything else, this reveals the ways in which pop cultural forms, particularly B-genres, do not rigidly and mechanically correspond with shifts in official policy. As we will see, they sometimes even contradict each other.

In zombie stories after Seabrook, an important shift occurs with respect to the motif of femininity. The loss of either womanhood or female innocence—experienced by the native girls Classinia and Catherine in *The Magic Island*—is visited upon white women in later film and radio stories. As such, the physical and spiritual suffering of Haitian women

is displaced onto white, female bodies. In the radio programs “The Zombie” (from the series *Five Minute Mysteries*) and “Isle of the Living Dead” (from *The Shadow*), white female corruption manifests itself in the guise of the plantation owners, who are villainous white women. More commonly, however, the loss of (white) female innocence takes the form of zombification. In *White Zombie*, for example, a young couple named Madeleine and Neil visit the Haitian plantation of Monsieur Beaumont; Beaumont falls in love with Madeleine, and hires a man to turn her into a zombie so as to lure her away from Neil. The title of the film reveals how the idea of a “white zombie” was a novelty in 1932 (but would soon become a familiar trope within the genre). In a later radio program “The Mysteries of the Zombie” aired on *Unsolved Mysteries*, a jealous black servant woman named Clarissima (a slight twist on Seabrook’s *Classinia*) romantically desires the white plantation owner who employs her. When he rejects her advances, she gets her revenge and soothes her jealousy by turning his fiancée Helen into a zombie. The narrator later discovers the result of Clarissima’s vendetta. One day in the cane fields, a native tells him that all manner of people labor as zombies. He indignantly replies, “But no white woman!” The un-named native proves him wrong by showing him what the narrator recognizes as the once-delicate Helen, now working amongst the sugar cane as a common, zombified, field worker. Unable to bear the sight of a white woman so fallen in status, he gently puts her out of her misery by feeding her salt.

At the most general level, the Caribbean plantation is a space that breaks up white marriage bonds. But a more specific operation is at work. Transferred to the film and radio narratives, Seabrook’s narrative of de-feminization is transferred to white female bodies which are de-sexed through zombification. In the stories mentioned above, the writers make no direct link between the de-sexing of the women and the sexual energies of the racialized masses, as does Seabrook. The connection is implicit, however. In tale after tale, an environment rich with the jungle drums and un-bridled passions of the Other threaten to turn the white woman, the pinnacle of Western civilization, into a de-feminized automaton. The sexual excesses of the island are incompatible with her delicate frame, which is rendered sterile through zombification. As a zombie, she cannot reproduce either her race or her nation.

The discursive function of female de-sexualization is closely linked to the second, main theme in the zombie narratives of the 1930s and 1940s: the theme of exploited labor. Another important shift within the genre, post-Seabrook, is the re-figuring of the zombie “master,” the arch-villain of the story, as a white plantation owner. In *The Magic Island*, the cruelty of colonial labor was displaced onto the Haitians themselves, but later stories send a rather different message about labor and capital. When Bela Legosi’s villainous white character in *White Zombie* creates walking dead men to work in his sugar mill, he explains to an observer, “They work faithfully. They’re not worried about long hours.”²³ This 1932 film initiated a plot convention that soon would become a staple of the genre: the multi-racial, zombified, plantation workforce. A series of shots of the sugar mill operation in *White Zombie* reveal undead, mill workers—both black and white—carrying baskets on their heads, slowly turning a gigantic wheel, and trudging about their various tasks.

The character of the white Caribbean planter in these film and radio stories typically creates zombies out of whomever he or she requires for the purposes of labor, be they native workers or white visitors who become ensnared in their web. In a *Strange Adventure* episode entitled “Zombie,” to take another example, a white man very narrowly escapes the clutches of a French plantation owner who sought to add him to the ranks of his predominantly black workforce as a zombie. Likewise, toward the end of “Isle of the Living Dead,” aired on the program *The Shadow*, a particularly diabolical planter named Mrs. Nesbith reveals that some of her undead hands are “natives,” while others are “white men I’ve hired in their

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place." But no matter their race, they all receive from her the same degraded treatment. From atop a staircase, she yells to the captive zombies in her basement: "You're no longer men but swine in chains, just as cattle, who labor in the cane fields under my command ... I only keep you alive because I save money using you in the fields instead of native help!"²⁴

Clearly, part of the "horror" of these stories is the fear of racial leveling. Blacks and whites are interchangeable in these island labor markets, in which planters can choose to hire natives or to select white men "in their place." But rather than forming a utopia of racial equality, the failure of the authors to afford their black characters any real humanity makes their settings a nightmare world of common degradation. The white man enters the space of the plantation and, at the end of the day, is reduced to the status of blacks. The natives are never raised to the "level" of the whites, nor does the multi-racial workforce rise together. The implicitly isolationist message is that the entire space is to be simply avoided, as its debased system of labor cannot be reformed; rather, its effects are contagious. So pervasive is the leveling that even white women — the bearers of future civilization — cannot produce viable offspring in this space. Their de-sexed bodies cannot reproduce the labor power of the male worker, thus the system is not only beyond reform: metaphorically, it holds no future.

The medium of radio was particularly effective in communicating this leveling. In the 1930s, the new technology of radio took on the national project of creating a shared national culture, and it had distinctly homogenizing effects. At the same time, however, its producers labored to preserve hierarchies of difference that existed prior to its institutionalization. As radio historian Michelle Hilmes has written, radio "established a centralizing structure that could work to control the most immediately threatening aspects of local diversity and maintain local separations."²⁵ Early radio obsessively accentuated distinctions of race, class, and gender, but it had to do so in a medium without the visual cues upon which earlier genres like blackface minstrelsy depended. It maintained some hierarchies and expanded others by relying on linguistic differences, accentuating stereotypical dialects that it carried over most notably from vaudeville and the minstrel show.²⁶

This dynamic arguably extended into the international arena as well. Radio helped to create new categories of inferiority as it brought relatively unknown peoples into American living rooms. What's striking as one listens to these horror radio programs is that it is difficult to distinguish the zombies from ordinary West Indians: even un-zombified Haitians and Cubans speak with slow, drugged, and slavish voices. For example, in the story "The Isle of the Dead," aired on *The Shadow*, the first native introduced to the audience is Mrs. Nesbith's servant "Mungo," whose sluggish, trance-like drawl strikingly contrasts with the eloquent, finishing-school enunciation of his American, English-speaking master. In this context, the aural qualities of the genre were perfectly suited to underscore the horrors of leveling represented by the zombie. In a broadcast culture in which radio actors exaggerated their dialects to make themselves clearly legible as either black or white, the zombie was the only character whose broadcasted voice — generally a guttural moan — was not racially distinct.

As in *The Magic Island*, the zombified colonial laborers of the film and radio stories are still emasculated objects of pity, but the re-figuring of the villain in these subsequent tales represents at least the outlines of a critique of colonialism and a critical awareness of the history of slavery. However problematic the Caribbean plantation is rendered, its system of labor nonetheless appears exploitative and oppressive. To be sure, there are strange echoes of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and Civil War-era abolitionist discourses in these presentations of plantation life. Most every scriptwriter in the mid-twentieth century would still have been familiar with Harriet Beecher Stowe's famous 1850 novel and its portrait of the South: a

world where emasculated slaves are treated like beasts in a plantation culture that erodes the affective bonds necessary to maintain strong morals and healthy families, especially amongst the masters. But the question becomes: why did writers access these abolitionist discourses in the 1930s and 1940s given that they were absent in Seabrook's template?

The answer lies in the official and oppositional politics of the 1930s, which was incorporated (and, in part, negated) in the political unconscious of these B-horror film and radio narratives. Due in part to the ravages of the Great Depression, the 1930s were arguably the moment when the political left had its greatest influence in American culture. Working through organizations like the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), the Communist Party U.S.A, the National Negro Congress, and the American League Against War and Fascism, the left put the exploitation of labor — and the injustices of race — at the center of public debate.²⁷ It also took up the theme of anti-imperialism as part of its political discourse. Most germane to this analysis, it placed the U.S. exploitation of Cuba and Cuban plantation labor into public debate. As Ben Balthaser has shown, influential artists and writers such as Josephine Herbst, Clifford Odets, Langston Hughes, and the journalist Caretton Beals strove to expose U.S. imperial practices on the island nation. Odets' activities with the American Commission to Investigate Social Conditions in Cuba led to his high-profile arrest in Havana in 1935.²⁸

In addition, the demographic shifts resulting from the Great Migration — the exodus of African Americans from the South to the North — had created a sizable, influential block of black voters in Northern cities for the first time. Freed from the constraints of southern-style segregation, this enlarged, urban black population had greatly expanded its cultural and political institutions, from newspapers to civil rights organizations to theater troupes. Politicians at the federal level were forced to begin courting their votes for the first time.²⁹ By the mid-1930s, African Americans working in this new public sphere, together with their allies on the left, put forth new narratives of Haiti that figured it as a vibrant nation with a rich spirit of independence. While some African American writers such as Claude McKay and Zora Neale Hurston failed to break with the trope of exoticism in rendering its people, Langston Hughes, Arna Bontemps, and CLR James critically called attention to Haiti's class inequalities and its dynamic history of resistance. In addition, the Harlem Unit of the Federal Theater Project produced a number of widely attended plays on the island nation that broke with earlier narratives of the exotic, including Orson Welles' staging of *Macbeth*, set in nineteenth-century Haiti, and the 1938 play *Haiti*, directed by Maurice Clark, which was seen by 72,000 people in New York City alone.³⁰ Such progressive renderings of Haiti hit the airwaves as well. Most notable was the radio adaptation of *Babouk*, a novel of Haitian revolutionary heroism by communist writer Guy Endore. In 1937, it was broadcast on the *Columbia Radio Workshop*, one of the most popular radio programs at the time.³¹

Finally, new images of Haiti were generated by the Haitians themselves, whose actions helped to transform U.S. policy in the region. In December of 1929, their protests against the U.S. occupation were met with violence by the U.S. Marines, who opened fire on a crowd, killing twelve and wounding twenty-three individuals. Press coverage of the repression provoked an international outcry which ultimately began the process of U.S. withdrawal, completed in 1934.³² The departure of U.S. occupation forces corresponded with the implementation of Franklin Roosevelt's Good Neighbor Policy, which policymakers advertised as a clean break with gunboat diplomacy. The new agenda was to involve bilateral negotiation, not brute force, in dealings with other nations of the Americas.

The Good Neighbor Policy necessitated a new discourse about Haiti that broke with earlier narratives of exoticism and absolute difference, one that emphasized seeing things

“from the native point of view.” A wave of scientific studies, inspired by the anthropology of Franz Boas, attempted to reduce the perceived backwardness of Haitian culture in the eyes of the West. Meanwhile, a Euro-American fad for Haitian art in the 1940s broke with the dark exoticism of voodoo drums and zombies in order to emphasize the creativity and dynamism of the Haitian people.³³ On the Haitian end, improved attitudes toward the U.S. were palpable in the writings of Haitian literati and intellectuals. However, this new cordiality took a sharp turn during World War II, when large-scale landowners expropriated peasant lands *en masse* in order to grow a lucrative rubber substitute for the U.S. war effort. In response, a popular, anti-American movement emerged which finally toppled the government of the U.S.-oriented President Élie Lescot by 1946.³⁴

These new political forces of the 1930s and 1940s were inscribed into the popular zombie narratives of the period through the motif of the evil white plantation owner, and in the genre's overall figuration of Caribbean plantation labor as a problem. But the use of the zombie in American film and radio ultimately worked to contain and even negate the contemporary progressivist discourses of the Caribbean. Within the American culture industry, the zombie had come to symbolize a world of exploitative labor, but also a mysterious, colonial netherworld that threatened to reduce hapless whites to the same drone-like, sexless state of its natives. There could be no basis for cross-racial identification in such a space — only contamination. The relatively low-profile tiers of the culture industry responsible for B-horror were not in any way bound by the shifting demands of U.S. foreign policy, but only by the immediate need to turn a quick profit via low-budget entertainment. Their representations evolved from broader, long-term, intercultural dynamics. Inadvertently, this industry helped to wean American culture from paternalistic narratives of “tutelage” born of the Haitian occupation, but at the cost of a fundamental disavowal of the entire region.

Disturbingly, the most persistent narrative of the Caribbean in American mass culture before 1945 never transcended the level of B-horror (though Tournier's 1943 film *I Walked with a Zombie*, produced by Val Lewton, momentarily pushed up against the limits of the genre). Moreover, by 1949 it was clear that the zombie tale had been so thoroughly domesticated that it could be parodied on the airwaves as light comedy. That year, CBS featured the story “The Ghost Breakers,” aired on the program *Screen Director's Assignment*. It is based on a film from 1940 of the same name which, although it contained comic relief, could not be considered a full-blown farce. By contrast, the 1949 radio play, billed as “A Comedy of Terrors,” starred Bob Hope and was set on an island off the coast of Cuba crudely named “Black Island.” When the protagonist Larry Lawrence (Bob Hope) arrives on its shores, the result is in no way terrifying. Fresh off the boat, a local woman warns him “The Zombie walks!” to which he blandly replies, “Can we interest you in a subscription to *Weird Stories* magazine?” “The Ghost Breakers” illustrates that, however frightening the zombie may have been in the 1930s, by 1949 the codes of the pre-Romero genre were so internalized by U.S. audiences that this monster and its Caribbean context was neither exotic nor unsettling.

The fact that Haiti entered the dominant, twentieth-century American imagination by way of B-horror has worked against taking the country seriously in the United States: B-horror is not a “serious” genre; it touches on deeply rooted, cultural anxieties, but ultimately turns them into cheap thrills. The Western media coverage of the 2010 earthquake in Haiti underscored the lingering consequences of reading the country through the lens of B-horror. As mentioned in the introduction, *The Daily Mail* in England covered the catastrophe with the headline, “Haiti: Rape, Murder and Voodoo on the Island of the Damned.” The newspaper fused the usual narrative of hopeless, third world political violence with a particularly lurid

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set of images drawn from B-grade horror. In Haiti, we are told by the *Mail*, “Papa Doc” Duvalier ruled the country as Baron Samedi, the voodoo spirit of death, and cut out the hearts of some of his victims while collecting the skulls of others. Meanwhile, on the other side of the Atlantic, U.S. televangelist Pat Robertson revealed an imagination similarly structured by cheap tales of Haiti as a land of supernatural terror. He infamously stated that the earthquake was God’s revenge against Haitian slaves, who had signed a pact with the devil to overthrow their masters two centuries ago. Most Western journalists and commentators consciously distanced themselves from such retrograde depictions, but even those who condemned Robertson and his ilk revealed their inability to truly see the long-standing cultural and institutional practices that made such statements possible.

National Geographic, for example, consulted popular anthropologist Wade Davis to explain to American readers how voodoo was not some demonic kind of superstition, but rather a set of beliefs with a valid place in the pantheon of world religions. Davis called Pat Robertson’s comments “cruel, ignorant, unforgivable, the ravings of a lunatic,” and went on to present Haiti as a dynamic, vibrant culture — albeit with a tragic history — whose voodoo-inspired revolution represented a longing for human freedom akin to the colonial revolts of 1776. Davis even acknowledged how the indissociable relationship between Haiti and B-grade horror in the popular imagination is a direct product of U.S. imperialism. He states that

in the 1920s, the U.S. Marine Corps occupied Haiti. This was during the era of segregation, and most of the U.S. Marine Corps in Haiti were Southerners. Afterward, every one of them seemed to get a book contract, and ... they were all filled with pins and needles and zombies that don’t exist. They gave rise to the Hollywood movies ... such as *Night of the Living Dead* and *Zombies on Broadway* and so on.³⁵

Despite his tolerant gestures, Davis is complicit in the cultural and political logics that made Robertson and the sensationalism of the *Daily Mail* possible. On closer inspection, one notes that he condemns the cultural productions emerging from the occupation (which he erroneously localizes as Southern), but not the invasion itself. Davis once expressed the belief that the U.S. occupation was a boon for the country, all things considered, and in the 1980s he was even an apologist for the Duvalier regime. His own book *The Serpent and the Rainbow* (1985) re-popularized the image of the Haitian zombie — along with its larger narrative of Haiti as a haunted land of primitive superstition — at the precise moment when Haitians were making enormous sacrifices to destroy the Duvalierist state.³⁶ In many ways emblematic of the mainstream coverage of the disaster, Davis thus continues the politics of disavowal, albeit with a multicultural inflection, that fails to truly recognize the continuities of the past into the present and is thus complicit in the logics of empire. Like multiculturalism more broadly, his *National Geographic* interview celebrates cultural difference while affirming a core, human sameness, but does so without acknowledging (or questioning) the histories of conflict that continue to create hierarchies and inequalities.

But the old radio shows and films have left a residual culture of imperialism with a stunning tenacity, for the pre-Romero zombie narrative has seen a revival in recent years. The magazine *Men’s Journal*, for example, recently led readers through the Haitian countryside on a hunt for zombies in an article entitled “Into the Zombie Underworld.”³⁷ A more egregious sample is *Resident Evil 5*, released by the Osaka-based company Capcom, which became one of the hottest commodities in the booming, video game industry, selling over five million copies worldwide since its release in 2009.³⁸ The game positions the player as a white American protagonist who mows down hordes of black, zombie-like creatures in Africa, some in urban slums, and others bearing the grass skirts, tribal masks, and spears of 1930s action-adventure films. As a reviewer for *Eurogamer* put it, “It plays so blatantly

into the old clichés of the dangerous ‘dark continent’ and the primitive lust of its inhabitants that you’d swear the game was written in the 1920s.”³⁹ Like its pre-World War II predecessors, the storyline of *Resident Evil 5* contains an awareness of imperial exploitation that sits uneasily within its undeniable, racist frame, thus it fully replicates the earlier genre in this sense as well.⁴⁰ If, as Fredric Jameson suggested in his classic study of the postmodern, late capitalism is marked by its ability to pluck from earlier aesthetics, shear them from their original contexts and re-brand them at will in the form of pastiche, then the re-emergence of the early, twentieth-century zombie narrative should come as no surprise.⁴¹

Capcom’s *Resident Evil 5*, Wade Davis’ *The Serpent and the Rainbow*, and the media coverage of the recent earthquake in Haiti all illustrate the long reach of the zombie narrative first crafted in the 1930s and 1940s. In order for the colonial and postcolonial suffering wrought by U.S. empire to be truly visible, a new transnational, anti-imperial movement would need to emerge which would create a space for a wholly fresh, popular, narrative genre about the region. Ideally, this genre would neither exoticize nor pity its subjects, nor efface the fundamental relationship of economic dominance, past and present. Perhaps the first step toward breaking the spell of disavowal is to take a long, hard look at B-horror in the full, historical context of its deployment, and finally bury the dead.

Notes

1. Gabe Pressman, “The Sad History of Haiti,” *NBC New York*, January 14, 2010, <http://www.nbcnewyork.com/news/local-beat/The-Sad-History-of-Haiti-81353577.html>; Andrew Malone, “Haiti: Rape, Murder and Voodoo on the Island of the Damned,” *Daily Mail Online*, January 14, 2010, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1243016/ANDREW-MALONE-Rape-murder-voodoo-island-damned.html>.
2. I include here Romero’s *The Crazies* (1973), *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) and *Land of the Dead* (2005); Danny Boyle’s *28 Days Later* (2002), as well as its sequel *28 Weeks Later* (2007); in the realm of video games, I include *Dead Rising* (2006) and the early games of the *Resident Evil* series, all produced by the Osaka-based CAPCOM. *Dead Rising* actually expands the critique of consumerism implicit in *Dawn of the Dead*, using the zombie as a metaphor for the human and environmental devastation caused by American consumerism around the world. And the root of all evil in *Resident Evil* is a giant pharmaceutical corporation named Umbrella, whose zombie-making “T-virus” was allowed to escape because of its undue influence within local government.
3. Mary Renda, *Taking Haiti: Military Occupation and the Culture of U.S. Imperialism, 1915–1940* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 6, 21–22.
4. Barbara Dianne Savage, *Broadcasting Freedom: Radio, War, and the Politics of Race, 1938–1948* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999), 6.
5. Renda, 29–36, 47–53.
6. Noam Chomsky, “Introduction to Paul Farmer,” *The Uses of Haiti* (Monroe, ME: Common Courage Press, 2003), 19–24.
7. Renda, 246.
8. William Seabrook, *The Magic Island* (Hamburg, Germany: The Albatross, 1932), 40.
9. *Ibid.*, 58.
10. *Ibid.*, 74.
11. *Ibid.*, 76.
12. *Ibid.*
13. Michael J Dash, *Haiti and the United States: National Stereotypes and the Literary Imagination* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997), 31–34.
14. Seabrook, 40.
15. This claim needs slight qualification. *The Oxford English Dictionary* records the sporadic appearance of the word “zombie” in the English-language world a number of times in the nineteenth century, beginning in 1819. But none of these sources had the impact of Seabrook’s story. Its nineteenth century uses reveal no consistency, which suggests that this figure had yet to take a definite shape in the Anglo-American imagination.
16. Seabrook, 84.
17. *Ibid.*, 85, 86, 91.
18. Michael Denning, *Culture in the Age of Three Worlds* (London: Verso, 2004), 26.
19. Seabrook, 35.
20. It should be noted that female de-sexualization is not universal within the genre. In the film *The White*

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10, <http://www.nbc.com/news/2010/01/100125-haiti-earthquake-vooodoo-pat-robertson-pact-devil-wade-davis/>.

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e. In the film *The White*

Zombie, the lead female character is turned into a zombie in order to serve her master as a kind of sex slave. This plotline is the exception to the rule, however.

21. Cambodia and Chile would later become sites where the U.S. was complicit in mass murder. In Cambodia, the U.S. bombings of the country in the early 1970s killed 300,000 and directly led to the rise of Khmer Rouge, while in Chile, the Washington-backed 1973 coup overthrowing Salvador Allende's government brought the brutal regime of Augusto Pinochet to power. In introducing these nations to U.S. audiences, the early zombie stories arguably helped to prepare the ground for their later dehumanization.

22. Renda, 225.

23. *White Zombie*, directed by Victor Halperin (RKO Studios, 1932).

24. "Isle of the Living Dead," *The Shadow*, October 13, 1940.

25. Michele Hilmes, *Radio Voices: American Broadcasting, 1922–1952* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 16.

26. *Ibid.*, 20–21.

27. For the most comprehensive treatment of the influence of the 1930s left on U.S. culture, see Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (London: Verso, 1997).

28. Benjamin Balthaser, *I See Foundations Shaking: Transnational Modernism from Great Depression to the Cold War* (PhD diss., University of California, San Diego, 2010), 128–77.

29. Savage, 8.

30. Dash, 53–54; Renda, 283–287.

31. Chris Vials, *Realism for the Masses: Aesthetics, Popular Front Pluralism, and U.S. Culture, 1935–1947* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2009), 198.

32. Renda, 34.

33. Dash, 74–80.

34. *Ibid.*, 86–91.

35. Ker Than, "Haiti Earthquake and Voodoo: Myths, Ritual, and Robertson," *National Geographic*, January 25, 2010, <http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2010/01/100125-haiti-earthquake-vooodoo-pat-robertson-pact-devil-wade-davis/>.

36. Dash, 142–143.

37. Mischa Berlinski, "Into the Zombie Underworld," *Men's Journal*, September 2009, 108–113.

38. Those familiar with movie series would be tempted to write off a sequel with "5" in the title as hopeless garbage viewed for only the most indiscriminating fans. This same consumer logic doesn't work with video games, however, a market where each addition to the series is often more widely anticipated than the last. Indeed, *Resident Evil 5* was the best-selling game of the series.

39. Dan Whitehead, Review of *Resident Evil 5*, *Eurogamer*, February 5, 2009, <http://www.eurogamer.net/articles/resident-evil-5-hands-on-chapter1to3?page=2>.

40. Midway through the game, the player learns that the African zombies were created by a diabolical, Western pharmaceutical company called Tricell, which turned an indigenous people (called the Ndipaya) into walking dead in order to more easily expropriate their land. The urban slum sequences thus implicitly hold Western companies responsible for not only the region's primitivism, but its failed, postcolonial modernity as well.

41. Cf. Chapter One of Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), 1–54.

Generation Zombie

Essays on the Living Dead in Modern Culture

edited by Stephanie Boluk
and Wylie Lenz



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