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REANIMATING IDENTITIES

THE ZOMBIE MANIFESTATION OF A DARKER AMERICA

MCKENZIE YUASA

Zombies are the soulless reanimated corpses of human beings; they wander the border between life and death, mindlessly obeying their carnal desires.

Humans are always threatened by these unnatural abominations that relentlessly seek to satiate their hunger for human flesh. Recently zombie texts have made a rapid movement from the margins to the mainstream media, which indicates that audiences find some aspect of zombies very compelling. *World War Z* (WWZ) by Max Brooks is one popular zombie text that features a global apocalypse in which the “walking plague” infects millions of people and nearly causes the complete collapse of civilization. Subtitled *An Oral History of the Zombie War*, Brooks creates an alternate post-apocalyptic world wherein he has compiled the individual accounts of people with first-hand experience in the zombie war. In the introduction of WWZ, Brooks claims his book is an effort to maintain a narrative that would otherwise go unmentioned in favor of “clear facts and figures” used in official government reports (1). He argues that by ignoring the “human factor, aren’t we risking the kind of personal detachment from a history that may, heaven forbid, lead us one day to repeat it?” (Brooks 2). The recent boom in zombie apocalypse literature and movies would arguably stem from a cultural fear, a way to address the tensions and anxieties that undermine the optimistic American identity. In this essay I plan to explore how

THE ABJECT

The abject refers to the human reaction (horror, vomit) to a threatened breakdown in meaning caused by the loss of the distinction between subject and object or between self and other. The primary example for what causes such a reaction is the corpse (which traumatically reminds us of our own materiality); however, other items can elicit the same reaction: the open wound, shit, sewage, even the skin that forms on the surface of warm milk.

zombie texts reveal fears that are inherently American and why those fears are important, with a focus on WWZ.

In her essay *The American Gothic*, Marianne Noble argues that American Gothic literature works to reveal the counter narratives to the optimistic dominant national narrative by representing the culture's deepest fears (169). Gothic literature accomplishes this unveiling by exploiting the uncanny feelings associated with the abject of our cultural identities. Noble introduces Julia Kristeva's theory of the abject, and how we form our identities (personal and societal) through negation (170-171). It is important to note that Noble adapts Kisteva's theory of abjection from the individual to encompass the psychoanalysis of an entire culture. The abject is often repressed, especially in America, and the rhetoric that is left is a self-delusion of optimism. America as a nation tends to focus on positive cultural qualities such as freedom of speech and equality; however we generally refuse to acknowledge the negative aspects of our culture's identity. Slavery, Native American genocide, exploitation of domestic workers, and gender inequality are all examples of historical events that have been denied at times because they exposed the fractured nature of a nation that proclaims itself to provide equal opportunity and justice for all. Gothic literature unveils these darker aspects of a cultural identity as it is experienced by individual people (Noble 169-170). Zombies in particular are adept at exposing societal and individual aspects we reject from our cultural identity.

The resurgence of zombie apocalypse texts reveals American cultural anxieties about global capitalism, displaced people and the threat they pose to our 'lives,' in addition to how we form our cultural and human identities. WWZ is one example of a zombie apocalypse text that reveals these anxieties. Set a little over a decade after the most devastating worldwide conflict in history, Brooks as the narrator has compiled a collection of stories from various individuals about their experiences with the zombie apocalypse. The fact that these stories are individual accounts of a worldwide event makes them a good candidate for being a part of American gothic literature. We are able to see how the larger cultural psychological history is experienced by individual people, something that Noble names as a defining aspect of American gothic literature (Noble 170). In WWZ's introduction, Brooks defines humanity by negating the lack of a "human factor" seen in zombies. By Brook's definition, zombies are the abject of humanity; they represent what people

dissociate themselves with in order to construct their identities. WWZ provides a series of stories that unveil many of the cultural anxieties felt by Americans, one the most notable of which is a transgression of physical and geographical boundaries.

Zombies represent a transgression of the boundaries between the living and the dead, and in a global apocalyptic setting they also pass over geographical boundaries. It is their static existence between the margins of life and death that makes zombies so uncanny. In WWZ we also see a crossing of geographical boundaries that reveals the political anxieties felt by Americans. These zombies are not confined to just one country, and the impression that Brooks gives the reader is that this outbreak began in rural villages of China. The global nature of zombie apocalypse texts can be attributed to two main anxieties. The first anxiety deals with global capitalism, while the second considers the impacts of displaced people.

Global capitalism, and its virulent nature when considering advances in

technology, is an anxiety associated with how economic spaces are changing. Consider the country that is attributed as the source of the outbreak: China. As a country that has grown tremendously through global capitalism and its economic relations to America, it's not surprising that China would be the target of anxieties that Americans have about global capitalism.

After centuries of foreign oppression, exploitation, and humiliation, we were finally reclaiming our rightful place as humanity's middle kingdom. We were the world's richest and most dynamic super power, masters of everything from outer space to cyber space. It was the dawn of what the world was finally acknowledging as "The Chinese Century" (Brooks 6).

The speaker of this quote from WWZ is a doctor who examined one of the first victims of the plague. Here he laments the regression of China's power at a time where they are at their most influential. China surpassing America in terms of economic power is a current fear and concern felt by many American's. Brooks' use of China as the epicenter

of the outbreak reveals how deeply ingrained America's relative economic mastery has become for our cultural identity and threatens that definition by creating a representation of the abject as zombies.

Americans are deeply unsettled by the recent struggle our economy has had, especially at the benefit of other countries, for example oil dependency in the Middle East and manufacturing labor in China. Stephanie Boluk and Wylie Lenz in their essay *Infection, Media, and Capitalism: From Early Modern Plague to Postmodern Zombies* comment on the relationship between infection stories and anxieties about capitalism. The use of China as the source of a plague arguably alludes to the tensions associated with "contemporary social changes that those with a vested interest in the socioeconomic status quo perceived as worrisome and in need of containment" (Boluk & Lenz 129). The significance of zombies as plague enhances the association with mindless consumption and its infectious and destructive nature. Since they are already dead, zombies do not require human flesh as food, yet they crave it and seek

As monsters of the id, zombies unveil the anxieties about capitalism struggling against itself and bringing about its own cyclical demise

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it out with avarice. "Zombies are pure desiring machines—they are creatures composed entirely of excess desire" (Boluk & Lenz 136). In *WWZ* many US citizens attempted to survive by fleeing north to the cold, rural areas of Canada and Alaska. One of the interviews mentions about the belongings people chose, "hair dryers, Game Cubes, laptops by the dozen...I think most people were just afraid of losing them, that they'd come home after six months and find their homes looted" (Brooks 123). Not only are zombies monsters of consumption, but they reveal the sorts of material possessions that American culture values enough to bring it on a desperate move for survival. Ironically it is the refugees' lack of preparedness that causes most of them to die, rather than from zombie attacks. As monsters of the id, zombies unveil the anxieties about capitalism struggling against itself and bringing about its own cyclical demise. Continuing to use China as an example in *WWZ*, China is named at the beginning and the end of the zombie outbreak. As the last country to declare Victory Day, China serves as both the catalyst and the conclusion of the zombie apocalypse. Capitalism is an aspect of the American identity that causes a lot

of political strife, yet it is undeniably a part of our cultural identity. By placing zombies in a country on the advent of its economic supremacy, Brooks incites anxiety about the cyclical nature of consumerism and capitalism.

America is often defined as a melting pot which is thought to welcome all people and cultures, yet the second anxiety exposed in *WWZ* concerns the effect of displaced people, their status, and securing geographical borders. *WWZ* was published in 2006, just five years after the September 11th attacks on the World Trade Center in New York. The post 9/11 consciousness is more receptive to the anxieties posed by zombies that spread the plague by transgressing political boundaries, and present a threat to the living. Jon Stratton discusses in his essay, *Zombie Trouble: Zombie Texts, Bare Life, and Displaced People* about how "the possibility of widespread destruction and devastation which 9/11 brought into the communal consciousness found a ready narrative expression in the zombie apocalypse which over thirty years had honed images of desperation subsistence and amoral survivalism to a fine edge" (269). As a result of 9/11 and the amplified interest in securing borders, "there has been an increasing anxiety in western countries over the numbers of displaced people attempting to gain entry across their borders" (Stratton 266). The term "displaced people" includes refugees, asylum-seekers, and immigrants both legal and illegal. Zombies work as a representation of displaced people because of the similar circumstances of

living in between borders or not being a part of the dominant cultural definition. The issue of displaced people ties the zombie metaphor to an anxiety that harkens back to American historical roots of slavery and colonialism. The resulting problem of "legal personhood" has been a defining factor of the American identity.

Displaced people are the abjects of society; they simply do not fit into the culture and are viewed as a foreign element. Governments are often loath to admit the existence of displaced people, especially illegal immigrants, since an admission of their physical existence gives rise to their problematic legal existence. Zombies, as the living-dead, can be read as a representation of the anxiety of who can be defined as a 'person.' When people such as slaves or illegal immigrants do not have a legal citizenship they become a brainless group not legally recognized by the government, and yet the same government attempts to control them. The contradiction of actual vs. legal existence is displayed in the early chapters of *WWZ* where many national governments, not just the US, fail to give the threat of zombies due consideration because in order to effectively try and control this 'other' social group, they would have to admit its reality.

In *WWZ*, the former White House chief of staff defends the administration's first reaction as "What we did, what every president since Washington has done, was provide a measured,

appropriate response, in direct relation to a realistic threat assessment" saying also that "Can you imagine what America would have been like if the federal government slammed on the brakes every time some paranoid crackpot cried "wolf" or "global warming" or "living dead" (Brooks 59). This quote exposes the speaker's viewpoint on how the United States has attempted to resolve possible conflicts in the past, his diction first sounds rehearsed like a public statement. His actual feelings in the second part of the quote reveal how he fears the destabilization of the US government. If WWZ government officials were to really address the zombie threat, it would require a new system, which would then require a restructuring of social order that interferes with the current definition of American society. As a result, attempts to control zombies and 'other' social groups are still made because they make the dominant society uncomfortable, and to allow their existence without interference means a breakdown of social order and boundaries, but no concerted effort is made.

Stratton discusses the theory of bare life, which in its social context describes the lives of people who live "on the margins of social, political, cultural, economic and geographical borders are lives half-lived. Denied access to legal, economic and political redress, these lives exist in a limbo-like state that is largely preoccupied with acquiring and sustaining the essentials of life" (Stratton 267). While I argue

earlier that zombies do not in fact require food to survive, the connection of a "limbo-like state" is undeniably similar to that of a zombie which exists somewhere between life and death. How American society chooses to identify and deal with abject social groups has been a source of anxiety over our history. One choice is to attempt to assimilate displaced people into the dominant culture. Assimilation is especially important when considering America's colonial history. The process of colonization is made through an imposed act of identity negation by the dominant culture onto that of the native or 'other' people. Essentially saying that the marginalized group is no longer a true member of the group they once belonged to, while still simultaneously differentiating between the colonizers and colonized. This exercise of social control only creates an ambiguous identity where zombies are able to be resurrected as an expression of the bare life of displaced people. The zombie also presents the fear that these displaced people will eventually overwhelm us, thereby upsetting social order.

Zombie apocalypse texts expose much about the construction of the

American identity, and conversely what the abjects of that identity are. WWZ in particular expresses the large scale concerns seen in an increasingly modern and globalized community. Zombies have an uncanny ability to breach the borders between what our culture wants to see, and unveil the positive and negative characteristics that our culture actually embodies. By documenting the first person accounts of the zombie apocalypse, Brooks creates a gothic novel that explores the darker facets of the American ideology, its cultural significations, and illustrates to readers why zombies are so fascinating as uncanny monsters. ●

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