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English 300

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Real Zombies in America

In *A Journal of the Plague Year*, Defoe refers to death by the plague to be humbling: “for here was no Difference made, but Poor and Rich went together,” (Defoe, 55) and yet the zombie apocalypse has repeatedly, and especially in *A Journal of the Plague Year*, embodied displaced rage of inequality centering around food, shelter, health care, class and race. A zombie at its core is “not a returned soul but a returned body—a person bodily raised from the grave” (McAlister, 459), who has a long history of representing “repressed memories of slavery’s horrors; white alienation from the darker Other,” (Dery, 11) and free willed people turned slave worker. The zombie as an unconscious body acts as a definition for a normal, conscious person. Not only does the zombie stand in for both a representation of the conscious and unconscious human body, it also represents the separation between class, race and religion that occur on a regular basis, which even become more visible in a post-apocalyptic zombie infested world.

There is no doubt that the plague along with death from the plague do not unite class differences as Defoe so profoundly states. On the contrary, it makes each social difference glaringly worse and more visible. In *A Journal of the Plague Year*, the rich are able to escape the plague without worry, and ultimately decide the fates of the lower class, their servants. The

lower class could only wait and see whether “they should be continued in their services, and carried with their masters and mistresses into the country,” (Defoe, 28) or left for dead to starve or die of the plague. There is no escaping these social, class, racial and religious differences. Even in a zombie apocalypse, there are unearned privileges that allow an unfair advantage to escaping death.

While the zombie “began as a glassy-eyed metaphor for the plight of Haiti’s [people] forced to do the boss’s bidding even in death,” (Dery, 14) as a representation of the “dead eyed, bone-gnawing underclass” (Dery, 14), it has morphed into the very people that kept the zombie a slave. The former zombie has been “jolted into action by class consciousness” (Dery, 14) seeing itself unfairly deemed mindless due to the place in society in which it was born. “The ultimate have nots,” (Dery, 13) in “a nation whose haves and have nots regard each other across a grand canyon-sized income gap,” (Dery, 13) no longer stand in as the unconscious or the mindless. The zombie itself is still the unconscious body, still the infected. But it is those who are morally unconscious, those who find it “easy to translate non-whites into the role of the zombies, as they’re currently blood sucking leeches who are overrunning our countries” (Dery, 15) who are the true zombies.

In “Slaves, Cannibals, and Infected Hyper-Whites,” McAlister argues that “whites [are] over-endowed with traditionally white characteristics, [having] little or no culture or language. It is the hyper whiteness, and the death they both embody and spread, that is destroying human civilization” (McAlister, 480). This idea of the zombie having little or no culture, could be taken one step further in saying that the zombie is an embodiment of intolerance, not only of culture but class, race, religion and anything else that can be seen as a difference, especially that may put

one at an unfair advantage or disadvantage. In this distinction, we can not only say that a zombie can stand for a hyper-white lack of culture, but also a hyper-white intolerance of culture - both being causes of the destruction of human civilization as a zombified metaphor for toxic mindsets in American culture.

If McAlister states that zombies “comprise a form of mythmaking that affects the mystification of slavery and ongoing political repression” (McAlister, 461) we could also say that zombies as an undead person stand for people and personalities that perpetuate the intolerance of differences in race, religion, and much more. If we can say that an infected person is unconscious and a non-infected person is conscious, we can also relate this to a moral consciousness. Which is to say that just as a zombie is a zombie because of its missing consciousness, intolerance in a person or a person who is intolerant is the result of missing an important part of one’s consciousness; therefore making them unconscious and morally infected.

In the nineteen eighties in America, “the white race was becoming the minority race [and] racist groups used that as a calling card” (*Oklahoma City*) for their hate fueled agendas. The argument used by white supremacists preparing for the zombie apocalypse was that “non-whites ARE the ‘zombies’,” (Dery, 16) born as zombies. It is understood in most zombie movies, books or comics, that the virus came from somewhere, whether it is explained or not. A person is not born a zombie, does not simply have the virus; instead we can argue that it is learned. In *28 Days Later*, we see the rage virus comes from the violent imagery that “infects the animals with humanity’s desire to destroy itself” (Boluk, 141). The virus is engineered by humans, learned by the animals they have infected, as hate and violence had been learned by

people before them. Like the movies and the books, the American zombie virus is also something that is learned, not something someone is born with.

Similarly, in *A Journal of the Plague Year*, we see two men being described as being guilty of many hate crimes, particularly disrespecting and taunting others beliefs. Their intolerance of religion is cast in as horrifying a light as the plague itself. We learn as their story unfolds that:

“They continued this wretched course three or four days after this, continually mocking and jeering at all that shrew’d themselves religious, or serious... when one of them... was struck from heaven with the plague, and died in the most deplorable manner.”

(Defoe, 58)

Here, it is their intolerance and their hate crimes which gives them the plague. It is in fact this type of intolerance that manifests itself as the zombie virus and America’s desire to destroy itself. Not only are “zombies... a logical result of the racism, corruption, greed, violence, and other flaws that already characterize Americans,” (McAlister, 475) zombies are the Americans that embody and wholly believe in these flaws. They are the Americans that carry out horrific hate crimes with the deliberate intent of perpetuating this prejudiced ideology in order to terrorize the uninfected America. Wylie Lenz’s “The Digital Zombie” makes a parallel to the Christian philosophy, comparing the zombie to an “inversion of Christian resurrection - instead of soul without body, the zombie is a body without soul” (Boluk, 141). It is, ironically, the people preaching that being or not being a certain religion, race or class is what makes you a zombie, are actually the zombies walking around without a soul.

Any person who can be completely disillusioned to believe that unearned privilege, or even such things as race, religion, or class makes them better than another must be missing a key part of their consciousness. In “The Digital Zombie”, Stephanie Boluk and Wylie Lenz define “the zombie [as] a body without a soul” (Boluk, 141). In other words, the American zombie is a human body without moral consciousness. The zombie’s disease exists as a learned intolerance inflamed by a winner-take-all culture. Similar to racism, it is developed gradually in a person and created by humans. With the end of slavery, white America “traded in the... ‘I must eat you to live’” (Dery, 12) ideology, and in turn, allowed its culture to settle instead “for ‘I must eat you to stay dead’,” (Dery, 12) which manifested as a new form of slavery through racial, class and religious oppression.

Western culture and the American zombie are totally capable of taking a culture, taking an entire race, and cannibalizing it, destroying it to the point of extinction. History has shown us time and again such acts performed all around the world over the last six hundred years. McAlister states that “just as whites in society are “ordinary looking,” and therefore unmarked as white, as “nothing in particular,” so too are the zombies” (McAlister, 479). These zombies do appear normal only due to the normalization of whiteness in American and western culture, but there is nothing ordinary about these hyper-white zombies. They are dangerous and capable of cannibalistic genocide in an accelerated extreme.

These zombies “need no convincing on the virtues of Selfishness”, have no problem “emptying their political ammo clips at illegal immigrants,” (Dery, 14) and in fact take pride in aiming to do so. The zombie apocalypse does not profoundly bring together all types of people, miraculously disappearing all differences. There is no sudden connection between the wide gaps

in class once a virus spreads. There is no end to intolerance with the arrival of a plague. These ideologies cause the zombie virus and the violent destruction of humanity. These differences and intolerances *are* the zombie virus, and America is infected with the virus.

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Consider the closing paragraphs from *Pride and Prejudice* and *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*

In *Pride and Prejudice*, there is a recurring theme of women's bodies functioning as being there for the sole purpose of being looked at, especially in the traditional domestic space of marriage. In the scene in which Mrs. Bingley asks Elizabeth to walk about the room at Netherfield, Mr. Darcy comments that there are only two reason a woman could want to be walking about a room: "You either chuse this method of passing the the evening because you are in each others confidence and have secret affairs to discuss, or because you are conscious that your figures appear to be the greatest advantage in walking; - if the first, I should be completely in your way; - and if the second, I can admire you much better as I sit by the fire" (Austen, 55). Here, Darcy's commentary is exactly what he says and is attributed to "female" characteristics and stereotypes.

Grahame-Smith's take on women's bodies seems to be commenting on instances such as these with a clear miscomprehension of thematic points touched upon in *Pride and Prejudice*. His liberation of women through their fighting skills and ability to take care of their own lives misses the mark when he simply places male attributes onto this so called female empowerment. In the ball scene of *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, "from the corner of the room, Mr. Darcy

watched Elizabeth and her sisters work their way outward...he knew only of one other woman in all of great Britain who wielded a dagger with such skill, such grace, and deadly accuracy” (Austen, 14). They are compared to “only one other woman” and not other male fighters. Scenes like this make us question whether the author allowed these women their fighting capabilities to be able to take care of themselves or if they were only given as a means to capture the attention of a male. The scene of Mrs. Bingley and Elizabeth walking around the room could be taken as existing only for Darcy’s “admiration of the brilliancy which exercise had given to her complexion” (Smith, 28), just as in the scenes of Elizabeth’s and her sisters fighting. Their skills are measured as separate than a man’s skills, not the same or equal.

For this reason, the women in Smith’s rendition lack consistency of real characteristics to their personalities. They are not real people, as their bodies are looked at as more desirable because of their strength therefore diminishing the empowerment through physicality that Smith sought to give them in the first place. While he believes that it is liberating these women from this terrible world of Jane Austen, he has trapped them in a worse environment than before. When he says “their swords quieted by that only force more powerful than any warrior” we can assume he means love, insinuating that women cannot exist outside their marriage once married to a man. He perhaps thinks it is echoing on the themes of gender oppression in marriage or lack of options for women presented in Austen’s novel, but he misses the point Austen makes about ridding the idea of marrying for money - something that has trapped women in a world where they cannot exist outside their own marriage. Through Darcy and Elizabeth, she presents to us that marrying for love gets you more than you ever could when marrying for money. Smith contradicts this by saying that a woman cannot exist outside her marriage no matter the context.

He presents to us a world that moves on with zombies, in which zombie does not always mean apocalypse but where even then women cannot progress.

In the scene in *Pride and Prejudice* in which what it means to be an accomplished woman is discussed, Austen gives us two women's take on what it means to be an accomplished woman. There is an argument of the definition presented that "a woman must have a thorough knowledge of music, singing, drawing, dancing, and the modern languages, to deserve the word; and besides all this, she must possess a certain something in her air and manner of walking, the tone of her voice, her address and expressions" (Austen, 39) in order to be accomplished. Darcy then adds that she must also "add something more substantial, in the improvement of her mind by extensive reading" (Austen, 34). In *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, Smith adds even further to this, stating that a woman must not only be a "master of the female arts, but the deadly as well" (Smith, 34). Not only does he designate entire categories of learning to a gender, he then uses Elizabeth to designate a superior type of woman in this zombie ridden world: "I never saw such a woman. In my experience, a woman is either highly trained or highly refined. One cannot afford the luxury of both in such times. As for my sisters and I, our dear father thought it best that we give less of our time to books and music, and more to protecting ourselves from the sorry stricken" (Smith, 34). Smith appears to be implying that it is better to be a woman who can fight than a refined woman because this is a woman whose body can be looked upon as attractive for her fighting skills.

The two opposing closing paragraphs place marriage and gender roles into two completely different categories. There is respect in *Pride and Prejudice* for marriage that stems from love, and a condemnation of marriage for money that traps women in unhealthy

relationships. There is gratitude for healthy marriage though. In direct contrasts, *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* creates a world in which women cannot ever escape their roles even in a society that is falling apart, where traditional roles could be broken but are emphasized through false senses of empowerment - which are stripped from the women in the end. Smith's marriage ideals are bleak for women, confining them to their marriage and stripping them of their individuality, identities and own free human will that is so emphasized in Austen's original text. There seems to be a miscommunication from Austen's hopeful ending to Smith's unchanging world in which anything is "helpless to stop" the coming zombies and the negative effects of marriage "feasting on" women and their individual persons in the traditional domestic relationship. Instead of building on this advocating of healthy loving relationships, Smith is in favor of perpetuating and advocating for not bothering to change something that cannot be changed.

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Reflections on the lines from *I Am Legend*

I Am Legend contains recurring themes of perpetuating gender identity stereotypes through characterization along with zombies standing in for race. The zombie fear creates and emphasizes these stereotypes of gender identity and especially racial stereotypes by placing them onto the zombie to exasperate human characteristics that are associated with “the other”.

There is a constant common theme coming from the texts read this semester that is especially noticeable in *I Am Legend*. This theme makes the statement that one race is consuming the other and the connection of race or gender onto the zombie figure. There is never a medium or a common enemy against all humans, but instead the zombie always seems to pit one race against the other, or stands in as one race versing the other and their respective stereotypes. In *I Am Legend*, Neville sees the “black zombies” as a threat to what he sees as his “racial superiority”, which he believes comes from a biological difference “with blood as the prevailing indicator of who’s who. Under the lens of Neville’s microscope, his own blood becomes the standard for identifying what is pure - and by default, what is human: the middle class white heterosexual male” (Davis, 21). The idea of the zombie (like the original zonbi) always stands

for some type of cultural destruction which stems from an appearance of an attack by the one's own construction of "the other."

In "Echoes of Dracula: Racial Politics and the Failure of Segregated Spaces in Richard Matheson's *I Am Legend*" Davis discusses the "racially charged subtext...reflects the cultural anxieties of a white America newly confronted with the fact that it can no longer segregate itself from those who it has labeled Other" (19) brought to us through Neville's inner monologues of the zombies:

Friends, I come before you to discuss the vampire; a minority element if there ever was one, and there was one. But to concision: I will sketch out the basis for my thesis, which ... is this: Vampires are prejudiced against. The keynote of minority prejudice is this: They are loathed because they are feared ... But are his needs any more shocking than the needs of other animals and men? ... Really, now, search your soul ... is the vampire so bad? All he does is drink blood. Why, then, this unkind prejudice, this thoughtless bias? Why cannot the vampire live where he chooses? Why must he seek out hiding places where none can find him out? Why do you wish him destroyed? Ah, see, you have turned the poor guileless innocent into a haunted animal. He has no means of support, no measures for proper education, he has not the voting franchise. No wonder he is compelled to seek out a predatory nocturnal existence. Robert Neville grunted a surly grunt. Sure, sure, he thought, but would you let your sister marry one? (32)

There is a clear statement of the fact that these zombies are prejudiced against. Neville makes a case for them and acknowledges his discriminations, but then ends his monologue by

perpetuating those intolerances in a sarcastic joke - dismissing their plight, and in turn dismissing the idea that differences exist and can coexist.

Neville's constant talk of the vampires sexuality and temptation as well as blackness places something similar to blame onto the differences of him and them. They are like this because they want to be and because they want to affront him. It is a personal attack and insult to his superiority as a white man. He blames the women for his lust, "posing like lewd puppets in the night on the possibility that he'd see them and decide to come out" (Matheson, 19), and blames all the vampires for wanting to eat him as though they asked to be infected. These perpetuate stereotypes of gender and race in subtle ways, but that can also be found if you look for it.

By saying "for he was a man and he was alone and these things had no importance to him," Matheson is automatically designating certain jobs, aspects and characteristics, like changing pillowcases and sheets, dusting furniture, washing toilets, sinks and tubs, to one gender identity, and stating that cleaning doesn't belong to a masculine gender identity. We see this again when we are introduced to Neville's late wife. She is said to be not feeling well due to the fact that she hadn't gotten out of bed and made him and their daughter breakfast. Neville says he isn't helpless and can make his own food, but there was still that expectancy towards his wife to do the cooking as a woman and his wife: "Usually she was at the stove turning eggs or French toast or pancakes, making coffee...On the stove, coffee was percolating, but nothing else was cooking" (Matheson, 53). He says to her "if you don't feel well, go back to bed. I can fix my own breakfast" (Matheson, 54) heroically as if he should be applauded for his efforts of taking

on not only his role as a husband and breadwinner, but also hers as the wife and the one who is thought to be doing these domestic jobs.

This theme is explored a little more when he is alone in the home. While he initially says that he is a man who shouldn't be bothered by having to do both the man's work and the woman's, but he must do it. He never seems to run out of time to do these things though, proving that he *can* do both, that he is capable of doing things that he believes are beneath him as a man. He is capable of doing both these things and does do them, but constantly refers to the domestic, house jobs as menial and complains constantly in order to remind the readers that he is a man who should not be associated with these tasks he is only forced to do only for the reason that he is alone and without a wife. He makes this clear in the beginning with his pointing out that he works and his wife cooks and stays home with their daughter when he says "We have to eat" when she asks him to stay home from work.

How neville sees himself in society and his place is very early on defined through his own description of the "other" or the zombies, his appearances and through his defining of his wife's title in their home and her purpose in accordance to him. The race and gender identities are defined through each other as opposites and never without the other race or gender, always being emphasized by the zombies lurking in the background.