

Representing Precarity

Alien-Nation: Zombies, Immigrants, and Millennial Capitalism

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2002

A tale of a beggar and a security
guard.

Alien-Nation: Executive Summary

1. Rise of neoliberal consumer capitalism, finance and gambling
2. The symbolic importance of work declines along with its material conditions.
3. A faith in "market redemption" replaces earlier political ideologies.
4. An increasingly turbulent, obscure economy *demand*s interpretation.
5. Zombies and immigrants become fantasy explanations for immiseration.
6. Not without some precedent among the Tswana in the 1960s-1970s.

South Africa

The end of apartheid might have fired utopian imaginations around the world with a uniquely telegenic vision of rights restored and history redeemed. But South Africa has also been remarkable for the speed with which it has run up against problems common to societies—especially to postrevolutionary societies—abruptly confronted with the prospect of liberation under neoliberal conditions. Not only has the miraculously peaceful passage to democracy been marred by a disconcerting upsurge of violence and crime, both organized and everyday, but the exemplary quest for truth and reconciliation threatens to dissolve into recrimination and strife, even political chaos.

South Africa cont.

There is widespread evidence of an uneasy fusion of enfranchisement and exclusion, hope and hopelessness; of a radically widening chasm between rich and poor; of the effort to realize modern utopias by decidedly postmodern means. Gone is any official-speak of an egalitarian socialist future, of work-for-all, of the welfare state envisioned in the Freedom Charter that, famously, mandated the struggle against the ancien régime. Gone, too, are the critiques of the free market and of bourgeois ideology once voiced by the antiapartheid movements, their idealism reframed by the perceived reality of global economic forces.

(784-785)

The interpretive problem

Under such conditions, where images of desire are as pervasive as they are inaccessible, it is only to be expected that there would be an intensification of efforts to make sense of the hidden logic of supply and demand, to restore some transparency to the relation between production and value, work and wealth. (786)

What's a zombie?

An embodied, dispirited phantasm widely associated with the production, the possibility and impossibility, of these new forms of wealth. (782)

Zombies are an answer to a question about a senseless world.

Where do zombies live?

- >> In the Northern countryside
- >> Epidemic unemployment
- >> Tradition of witchcraft accusations
- >> Tradition of gendered conflict

Zombies, work and death

*No job; no sense. Tell him, Joe, go kill. Attention, quick march . . .
Open your hat, fall in, fall out, fall down . . . Order: dismiss.*

— "Zombie," Fela and Africa

Zombies and labor disputes

In 1995, for example, striking workers on an Eastern Transvaal coffee plantation demanded the dismissal of three supervisors accused of killing employees to gain control of their jobs; even worse, of keeping zombies for their private enrichment. (801n28)

Who is a zombie?

[Zombies] are held to destroy the job market—even more, the very essence of self-possessed labor—in the process. Those typically said to conjure up the living dead tend, unsurprisingly, to be persons of conspicuous wealth; especially new wealth, whose source is neither visible nor readily explicable.

Who is a zombie, cont.?

Such things, of course, are highly relative: in very poor rural communities, where (almost) all things are relative, it does not take a great deal to be seen to be affluent. In point of fact, those actually accused of the mystical manufacture of night workers, and assaulted or killed as a result, are not always the same as those suspected: much like peoples assailed elsewhere as witches and sorcerers, they are often elderly, relict individuals, mostly female. (788)

Who makes zombies?

In contrast to their victims, who are neutered by being reduced to pure labor power, they are stereotypically described as sexual perverts whose deformed genitalia and poisonous secretions make them unable to reproduce; worse yet, to make them likely to spoil the fertility of others. Also, by extension, of the collectivity at large, be it a clan, a village, a town. Which is why they have become iconic of a perceived crisis of household and community in rural South Africa. In this respect, they fuse, in a single grotesque, the very essence of negative value: the simultaneous, reciprocal destruction of both production and reproduction. (788)

Immigrants are also a spectre

The fear of being reduced to ghost labor, of being abducted to feed the fortunes of a depraved stranger, occurs alongside another kind of specter: a growing mass, a shadowy alien-nation, of immigrant black workers from elsewhere on the continent. So overt is the xenophobic sentiment that these workers are disrupting local relations of production and reproduction—that they usurp scarce jobs and resources, foster prostitution, and spread AIDS—that they have been openly harassed on South African streets. Like zombies, they are nightmare citizens, their rootlessness threatening to siphon off the remaining, rapidly diminishing prosperity of the indigenous population. (789)

Zombies as symptoms

For [postapartheid black elites], increasingly, the conspicuous consumption of prized commodities—houses, cars, TVs, cell phones—does more than just signal accomplishment. It also serves to assuage the inequities of the colonial past. But, as it does, it also marks the growing inequities of the postcolonial present. These distinctions, to those who gaze upon them from below, also seem to be a product of enchantment: given that they have appeared with indecent speed and with little visible exertion, their material provenance remains mysterious. So, even more, does the cause of joblessness amid such obvious prosperity.

Zombies as symptoms, cont.

In the upshot, the two sides of millennial capitalism, postapartheid style, come together: on one is the ever-more-distressing awareness of the absence of work, itself measured by the looming presence of the figure of the immigrant; on the other is the constantly reiterated suspicion, embodied in the zombie, that it is only by magical means, by consuming others, that people may enrich themselves in these perplexing times.

(792)

Zombies historicized

- » Longer history of African witchcraft traditions and images of undead labor
- » Other figures of displaced, fractured work: vampires, monsters...

Zombies and neoliberal capitalism

- » Zombies and immigrants become symbolically powerful as a way of making sense of an inscrutable postapartheid economy, mixing "hope and hopelessness."
- » This South African economy in turn has to be seen as a product of a larger set of neoliberal economic transformations: financialization, globalization, marketization, precarization of "working communities."

What kind of work
surprises you or
strikes you as strange?