Slaves, Cannibals, and Infected Hyper-Whites: The Race and Religion of Zombies

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ABSTRACT
The first decade of the new millennium saw renewed interest in popular culture featuring zombies. This essay shows that a comparative analysis of nightmares can be a productive method for analyzing salient themes in the imaginative products and practices of cultures in close contact. It is argued that zombies, as the first modern monster, are embedded in a set of deeply symbolic structures that are a matter of religious thought. The author draws from her ethnographic work in Haiti to argue that the zonbi is at once part of the mystical arts that developed there since the colonial period, and comprises a form of mythmaking that represents, responds to, and mystifies the fear of slavery, collusion with it, and rebellion against it. In turn, some elements of the Haitian zonbi figure can be found in patterns that haunt recent American zombie films. Zombies in these films are read as figures in a parable about whiteness and death-dealing consumption. This essay suggests that the messianic mood surrounding the presidential candidacy of Barack Obama was consistent with a pattern in zombie films since the 1960s where many zombie-killing heroes are figured as black American males. Zombies are used in both ethnographic and film contexts to think through the conditions of embodiment, the boundaries between life and death, repression and freedom, and the
racialized ways in which humans consume other humans. [Keywords: Haiti, Vodou, zombie, cannibal, Barack Obama, race, magical negro]

“Cool Obama” and “Zombie McCain”

After shaking hands with Barack Obama at the conclusion of the last US presidential debate, John McCain started to head the wrong way off the stage before realizing his mistake and reversing course. As he fell in step behind his opponent, he acknowledged his error with an extravagant full-body grimace. His grotesque pose was frozen by photographers and instantly uploaded onto the Internet with the caption “Zombie McCain.” Other zombie-themed captions for the image proliferated, including one on PoliticalHumor.com that read: “Obama: cool enough to just ignore zombies” (see Figure 1).1

The fact that McCain’s clumsiness figured him as a zombie in contradiction to Barack Obama’s unflappable “cool” reflects the widespread fascination with zombies in US media and culture—consider the recent success of the book Pride and Prejudice and Zombies (2009) or the sudden currency of the term zombie bank. It also indexes markers in US popular culture of racial whiteness and blackness. As Robert Farris Thompson (1973:41) points out in his classic essay, “An Aesthetic of the Cool,” the concept of “cool” in many African-derived cultures is a metaphor for the aesthetic and moral value of remaining composed under pressure, and is ultimately a marker of “transcendental balance.”2 The juxtaposition of this “cool” black presidential candidate—lithe and poised—with a stumbling and staggering white “zombie” candidate is emblematic, I will suggest, of a wider form of mythmaking about race currently at work in US culture.3

This essay shows that a “comparative analysis of nightmares” (Wilson 1951:313) can be a productive method for analyzing salient themes in the imaginative products and practices of cultures in close contact. I pair ethnographic interpretation of work on the zonbi in Haitian religious thought and art with a religious studies reading of key films about zombies made in the US.4 I run a finger along several conceptual strands from Haitian religious arts that remain to haunt zombie representations in US popular culture. Like the Haitian zonbi, the US film zombie must be understood as being embedded in a set of deeply symbolic structures that are a matter of religious thought. In both contexts, zombie narratives and rituals interrogate the boundary between
life and death, elucidate the complex relations between freedom and slavery, and highlight the overlap between capitalism and cannibalism. What I want to stress especially is that in each context, race is the pivot on which these dynamics articulate themselves.

Zombies: A Brief History
What intrigues me as a scholar of Afro-Caribbean religion is that the mythmaking comprising and surrounding the zombie in America originates from sensationalized descriptions of a set of Afro-Caribbean mystical arts. The word zonbi appears in writing as far back as colonial Saint-Domingue, glossed by travel writer Moreau de Saint-Méry (1797) as the slaves’ belief in a returned soul, a revenant. 20th century reports describe not a returned soul but a returned body—a person bodily raised from the grave and turned into a slave worker. As a spirit or a slave, complex spiritual formulae separate body and soul, and compel one or the other to work. These entities—especially the invisible zonbi astral (astral zombies)—continue to be fairly common inhabitants of the unseen mystical world of Haitian Vodouists.
A very different kind of zombie populates US film and television: a ghoul who lumbers around trying to eat people. George Romero’s “Living Dead” films exemplify this concept of the zombie in the popular imagination. The idea refers, of course, to dead people who are still alive, and driven to kill and cannibalize the living. These monsters made an appearance in Michael Jackson’s smash hit music video “Thriller,” and now star in the more recent *I am Legend, 28 Days Later*, and others. In this first decade of the new millennium, the walking dead and their cannibalistic appetites seem to be everywhere. We hear a lot lately about “zombie banks”—banks whose debts are greater than their assets—which drain bailout money from the government but don’t facilitate more lending in turn. Zombies show up in pop songs and are stock characters in comic books and graphic novels. They appear in video games such as the *Resident Evil* series and in the *Resident Evil* movie spin-offs. Since 2000, about 100 movies and scores of video games have featured undead, cannibal zombies. Zombie-like creatures called *inferi* make an appearance in the sixth book of the *Harry Potter* series. Zombies have even earned a special place in the academy: the philosopher David Chalmers (1996), in order to elaborate various ethical questions, has posited the “philosophical zombie,” or p-zombie, a human body without consciousness that behaves like a human with consciousness.

Mel Brooks’s son, Max Brooks, wrote the bestselling *Zombie Survival Guide* (2003), a tongue-in-cheek manual for surviving a widespread zombie attack, and he packs lecture halls when he speaks about the impending zombie apocalypse. Especially intriguing are the “zombie walks” in many US cities, where ordinary people dress up like zombies from all walks of life—construction workers, doctors, nuns—and lumber through the parks and streets. Zombie flash mobs move through downtown spaces, having read rules for play on the internet. In 2007, a zombie flash mob invaded a San Francisco Apple Store to stage an anticonsumerist performance piece where zombies pretended to eat the computers on display. *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (2009)—the Jane Austen novel “mashed up” with a zombie plotline—soared to the top of numerous bestseller lists. The 2010 television series *The Walking Dead*, on the cable channel AMC is set in a zombie post-apocalypse and won a Golden Globe Award for best drama. Zombies are all around us. Americans have brought to life—or death, if you prefer—a proliferation of monsters who are doing a fair amount of cultural work.
What if we highlight this fact about zombies: the zombie is the one stock horror character that does not have a genealogy in European tradition or much presence in Gothic fiction, as do the ghost, vampire, werewolf, and Frankenstein (Ellis 2000). Rather, the zombie originates in Afro-Haitian religious thought and practice, and is traceable (in part) to colonial-era Kongo religion from Central Africa. Deleuze and Guattari (1983:335) assert that “the only modern myth is the myth of zombies” and this is quite true in any number of ways. The zombie came into being (as it were) in the plantation society of colonial Saint Domingue, and I will argue here that its figure, its story, its mythology are at once part of the mystical arts that have developed since that time, and comprise a form of mythmaking that effects the mystification of slavery and ongoing political repression. That is, the zombie represents, responds to, and mystifies fear of slavery, collusion with it, and rebellion against it. The zombie was born (so to speak) in what Michael Taussig (1987) terms the colonial “space of death” and is inextricable from the “culture of terror” of the plantation. This modern monster is a complex and polyvalent Other that points us to art and thought produced out of the nightmarish aspects of modernity. In particular, this monster refers and responds to the nexus of capitalism, race, and religion.

There are many kinds of zombies, and many levels, if you will, of the representation and meaning of zombies. Working from the gothic, sensationalized travel writers’ accounts of black West Indian “superstition,” early Hollywood produced several “zombie” films, such as White Zombie (1932) and I Walked With a Zombie (1943). As a constellation of misunderstood and distorted elements in early Hollywood films, these Caribbean zombie representations might be described as a profound example of what Toni Morrison calls “American Africanism,” that is, “the denotative and connotative blackness that African peoples have come to signify, as well as the entire range of views, assumptions, readings, and misreadings that accompany Eurocentric learning about these people. As a trope, little restraint has been attached to its uses” (1993:6-7). The films invariably cast black sorcerers (or quack sorcerers) plotting for conquest of and control over white women, and blackness is unmistakably linked with primitive menace, superstition, and the diabolical.

Contemporary American zombie films have diverged quite a bit from their Caribbean beginnings. Most zombies now are figured as racially white, and most of the films that portray them are set in the US. As an American horror film genre character, the zombie has come to make certain
slaves, cannibals, and Infected Hyper-Whites: the race and religion of Zombies statements about whiteness in America. Yet this inversion or inside-out-ness of earlier racial associations also presents a meta-commentary on the same subjects as do Haitian zonbi: the intersections of capitalism and consumption, slavery and cannibalism, bodily excess and race. Whether in Haitian religious practices, art, and cultural mythology, or in US films, the zombie serves to index the excessive extremes of capitalism, the overlap of capitalism and cannibalism, and the interplay between capitalism and race in the history of the Americas (see also Sheller 2003).

Capturing, Enslaving, Feeding, and Dressing Zonbis in Haiti
I accidentally bought two zonbis in Haiti. My zonbis are not the walking dead but rather the common, everyday spirits of the recently dead, zonbi astral. The spirits were captured from a cemetery in a mystical ritual and then contained in an empty rum bottle. I did not do the capturing and containing; this feat was achieved by a man named St. Jean, who made his living (in the face of chronically high unemployment) as a bôkô, or sorcerer, in a neighborhood near the cemetery in downtown Port-au-Prince. I had gone to interview the bôkô, and when I complimented a colorfully decorated bottle that sat on his altar, he asked if I would like to have one like it. In agreeing, I got much more than a decorated bottle. My encounter with the sorcerer turned into something far more complex than the commission of what I took to be an art object. When I returned to pick up the bottle, St. Jean performed a complex ritual that infused human life into the bottle and transformed the container into a living grave, housing a human-spirit hybrid entity.

The essence of the zonbis’ spirit life emanates from shaved bits of bone from two human skulls. The zonbis in the bottle can not properly be understood as souls, but rather as fragments of human soul, or spirit. In Afro-Haitian religious thought, part of the spirit goes immediately to God after death, while another part lingers near the grave for a time. It is this portion of the spirit that can be captured and made to work; let’s say, a form of “raw spirit life.” The bôkô performed a spontaneous ritual, which began when he popped a cassette tape into a player. Our soundscape was a secret society ceremony to which he said he belonged.

He put these skull shavings into the bottle, along with the ashes from a burned American dollar and a variety of herbs, perfumes, alcohols, and powders. Robert Farris Thompson spelled out the logic of this sort of
“charm” in his work on *minkisi* (containers of spirit) from the Kongo culture, which are surely one of the cultural sources of the zonbi:

...the nkisi is believed to live with an inner life of its own. The basis of that life was a captured soul...The owner of the charm could direct the spirit in the object to accomplish mystically certain things for him, either to enhance his luck or to sharpen his business sense. This miracle was achieved through two basic classes of medicine within the charm, *spirit-embedding medicine* (earths, often from a grave site, for cemetery earth is considered at one with the spirit of the dead) and *spirit-admonishing objects* (seeds, claws, miniature knives, stones, crystals, and so forth). (Thompson et al. 1981:37)^8

In my bottle, the spirit-embedding medicine includes cemetery earth, but also more to the point, the skull shavings. At some previous time, St. Jean had most likely prepared the skulls in a sort of spirit-extracting ritual, treating them with baths of dew, rain, and sunshine. The skulls had been given food (which they absorb mystically, as spirits in the invisible world generally do), and had been baptized with new, ritual names. Their names would have been cryptic phrases such as “*je m’engage*” (“I’m trying”) or “*al chache*” (“Go look”). Each skull would have been charged with a specific strength, job, or problem to treat. Presumably, these skulls were activated with the ability to enhance luck, wealth, and health.

“Spirit-admonishing medicines” instruct the zonbis in the work that they are being commanded to do on my behalf. Ingeniously, this technology of good luck zonbi-making involves dressing the zonbis in the very instructions and work directions the maker intends them to perform. The mirrors around the center of the bottle, are its “eyes for seeing” and will identify any force coming at me with malevolent intent (see Figure 2). The scissors lashed open under the bottleneck are like arms crossed in self-defense. The dollar bill in the bottle instructs the zonbi spirits to attract wealth. The herbs are for the zonbis to heal me of sickness and disease, while the perfumes are to make me attractive and desirable. St. Jean created for them a magnetic force field by placing two industrial magnets as a kind of collar on the neck of the bottle. This object is now swirling with polarity, intention, and life (McAlister 1995). It is what Stephan Palmié has called “a life form constituted through ritual action” (Palmié 2006:861).
This zonbi bottle refuses the Western ontological distinction between people and things, and between life and death, as it is a hybrid of human and spirit, living and dead, individual and generic. In Afro-Creole thought, spirit can inhabit both natural and human-made things, and what is more, this force can be manipulated and used, often for healing and protection, sometimes for aggression or attack. When I later interviewed the bòkò, I learned about the deep moral ambiguity of the zonbi astral. St. Jean told me that the zonbis were trapped in the bottle until the time when, as with every person, their spirit would go on to God. The bòkò instructed me to ask the zonbis for anything I wanted, because, captured and ritually transformed, they were working for him, and now, as if subcontracted, for me.

I realized that I was effectively in the position of a spiritual slave-owner. Besides being dismayed and upset, I found it puzzling that people would practice the enslavement of this “raw spirit life” considering that their ancestors suffered extreme brutality during colonial slavery in Haiti, where the life expectancy of an enslaved person on a plantation was only seven years. Planters fed and inaugurated the modern system of Atlantic capitalism through dehumanization, starvation, and torture; these were the routine ways of extracting production value to fund the obscenely lucrative sugar trade.

But, then again, the living take charge of their history when they mimetically perform master-slave relationships with spirits of the dead. The production of spiritual (and bodily) zonbis shows us how groups remember history and enact its consequences in embodied ritual arts. The slave trade and colonial slavery—whose modus operandus was to cast living humans as commodities—are quite literally encoded and

Figure 2: A bottle containing spirits of the dead.
reenacted in this living object. Just as slavery depended on capturing, containing, and forcing the labor of thousands of people, so does this form of mystical work reenact the same process in local terms. It is, as Taussig famously put it, history as sorcery (Taussig 1987:366).

Under slavery, Afro-Caribbeans were rendered nonhuman by being legally transposed into commodities. Now, the enslaved dead hold a respected place within the religion. In what might seem counterintuitive, Randy Matory (2007:400) recently argued that in Afro-Latin religions, “Instead of being the opposite of the desired personal or social state, the image and mimesis of slavery become highly flexible instruments of legally free people’s aspirations for themselves and for their loved ones.” He notes that in these religions, the slave is often considered the most efficacious spiritual actor. The relationship between spirit worker and the dead is inherently unequal and exploitative, yet it is nuanced in fascinating ways that give the spirits of the dead some agency. Usually the dealings between people and the zonbis are just that—economic affairs, caught up in a system revolving around money, work, capitivity, predation, and coerson.

I did feed the zonbis a ritual meal of unsalted rice and beans, feeling somewhat sheepish the entire while. But I was determined to operate in as ethical a manner as I could toward this bottle, which its maker understood to be a living thing. Who was I not to take care of my obligations to the zonbis? I was haunted by a comment made by the scholar Luminisa Bunseki Fu-Kiau at a conference. “When you put our ‘charms’ and ‘fetishes’ in your museums,” he said, “you are incarcerating our ancestors.” I did not want to get in trouble in any way, either to the living or the dead.

I had been privy to a case of sorcery involving a malevolent zonbi. I watched while Papa Mondy, an expert healer in spirit work, diagnosed a teenager who had taken sick and was acting strange. After extensive consultation and divination, Papa Mondy informed the boy’s mother that someone with bad intentions had “voye zonbi” (“sent a zonbi”) against the teen, and had “sold” the boy mystically to a secret society. The teen had been captured mystically in the unseen world, and his life force was being “eaten.” In a family drama of sickness and healing, once again the transactions of slavery were at play. This diagnosis reenacted the capture, sale, and exploitation of the life of a person, here in the unseen world of everyday Haitian life.
The cure—and the teen was cured, at least in the semi-public neighborhood narrative—involved a complex process of ritual freeing, negotiating, and buying back: an unraveling and undoing of the spiritual enslavement. The director of this healing ceremony was Papa Gede Loray, himself a spirit of a former colonial slave—considered the best “worker” among the spirits—who came to possess the priest Mondy for most of the proceedings. The teen was ritually buried, lying down (up to his neck) beneath a light layer of earth in a symbolic grave, and the zonbi was tricked and forced to remain in the grave when the boy was lifted out. The zonbi was quickly covered up with earth, then bound and tied to the spot with a rock and a rope. These Haitian spirit workers once again performed some of the actions famously used against the African enslaved—tricking, capturing, binding, and shackling—but this time the ritual actors were the present-day descendents of slaves, enacting the commodification and traffic in humans through the ritual vocabulary most salient to their history, in what Connerton called “the capacity to reproduce a certain performance” (1989:22 as cited in Shaw 2002:6).

The boy was freed of the zonbi, but he still needed to be “bought back” from the secrecy society. Since it was unclear who (as it often is) sent this misfortune, the crucial redeeming deal had to be made with Bawon Samdi, the spirit-in-chief of the recently dead and the ultimate authority over the cemetery. We were going to buy the boy back from the cemetery, before the cemetery swallowed him up. We went, quite late at night by now, to an intersection of two roads where diplomatic spiritual protocol necessitated that the family make a payment to Met Kalfou, the spirit of the crossroads. “Si kalfou pa bay, simitye pa pran,” goes this important principle: “If the crossroads won’t give (way), the cemetery won’t take (accept).” When we got to the cemetery, Papa Mondy set up shop next to the tomb of Bawon. An elaborate series of ritual exchanges ensued. Mondy gently ripped the boy’s clothes from his body until he wore only his underthings, and then laid the boy on top of the tomb. To the accompaniment of prayers and prayer-songs, Mondy swept the boy with a broom to remove any remaining negativity. He entreated Bawon to buy back this boy from those who wanted to steal him, and stood pleading with two arms outstretched while the rest of the small group sang behind him. First he spoke to the afflicted boy, but really to us, to the dead, and to the evil-doer. “Now you are known by the cemetery. Now you are like one of the dead. How can you kill a dead man, mon cher? They can do
nothing to you.” Next he addressed Bawon: “You are the one with power over death. You are the only one who can kill him,” said Mondy. “I sell this boy to you, and you alone are buying him. It is you who will determine the day he will die.” Papa Mondy knelt down and threw down a small package wrapped in brown paper, held together with pins. He deftly poured rum over the whole thing and lit a match. A hungry blue flame engulfed the clothes, the brown paper, and the precious four hundred and twelve dollars that were inside.

With this monetary sacrifice, Bawon was paid, and the boy was bought. Mondy stood the boy atop the tomb, and dressed him in clean white clothes. He told the boy he would no longer be under the influence of other humans or spirits who wished to harm him—only Bawon “owned” him. That night in the cemetery, the teen boy was literally, and with Haitian currency, sold to a moral and powerful guardian, in order to escape being owned by a malevolent and exploitative one.

In this case, selling a person was an act of redemption, a far cry from—and yet also an echo of—the Atlantic slave trade. One cannot help but notice the various profound ways that layers of historical events and conditions are remembered and mimetically enacted through ritual, from the slave trade to the current patronage system of politically powerful “big men” and their more vulnerable followers. This religious logic also bears a parallel to the Christian notion that Jesus pays the debt of sin for the believer, whose soul is bought and paid for through the blood of the crucifixion. In both cases, a supernatural entity can buy the spirit (or soul) of a human, and become that person’s mediator with the unseen world and the afterlife.

Some Vodouists understand Jesus as the first zonbi. This myth holds that Jesus’ tomb was guarded by two Haitian soldiers, who unscrupulously stole the password God gave when He resurrected Jesus. The soldiers stole the password, sold it, and the stolen secret is now part of the secrets of sorcerers. If we examine the story carefully, we see that the buyer of people (Jesus) is victimized by people rebelling against him. The ordinary folk—the soldiers—are stealing from God, who after all set the terms of all negotiations. In this story, the sorcerer acknowledges his opposition to (Roman Catholic) Christianity, which, in its affiliation with landowning elites, has not always served the interests of everyday Haitians. Yet insofar as being made a zonbi is a terrifying form of victimization, this story also sympathizes with Jesus. In this beautiful ironwork sculpture by Gabriel Bien-Aimé
slaves, cannibals, and Infected Hyper-Whites: the race and religion of Zombies (see Figure 3), cut and hammered from a recycled oil drum, Jesus with his crown of thorns is being taken down from the cross with a chain around his neck. At the other end is the sorcerer controlling him (see also Brown 1995).

Like the colonial slave, or the oppressed worker, zonbi also possess the potential for out-and-out rebellion. There are plenty of stories of people who ask these “bought spirits” for wealth, land, or political promotion, and who cannot provide the food demanded in return. Then the zonbi are said to rise up to attack their owners, consuming their life force as payment. Eating them through magic, the zonbi becomes more and more powerful as its master wastes away through sickness. St. Jean himself was said to have been “eaten” in this manner, consumed by his own enslaved zonbi, turned cannibal in response to St. Jean’s voracious greed. Perhaps, that process is what is described in this mural, painted on the interior wall of a Vodou temple (see Figure 4). Here, a sorcerer (indicated as such by his red shirt and by the whip in his hand, a tool used to “heat up” ritual and activate spiritual energy) is attacked by hundreds of skeletal figures while facing a tomb.

Taussig (1987), the Comaroffs (1999), and others have written about the ways such sorcery narratives are provoked by, and are a rendering of, the basic mechanisms of capitalist production, that is, the creation of value for some through appropriating and consuming the energies of others. Haitian spirit-workers have redescribed this aspect of capitalism in religious ritual. Seen this way, zonbi-making is an example of a non-western form of thought that diagnoses, theorizes, and responds mimetically to the long history of violently consumptive and dehumanizing capitalism in the Americas from the colonial period until the present. Zonbi can be understood as a religious, philosophical, and artistic response to

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Figure 3: Untitled by Gabriel Bien-Aimé (iron and wire, circa 1990).
the cannibalistic dynamics within capitalism, and a harnessing of these principles through ritual.

**Human Trafficking in the Walking Dead**

In order to understand the appropriation of zombie mythology by filmmakers, we must rehearse in the broadest possible strokes the controversial mythology of the *zonbi kò kadav*, or walking corpse, which is the reverse of the astral zonbi. The idea is this: In the absence of a strong national government, traditional, male-headed secret societies operate as quasi-governments, as mafias controlling markets, and as juridical systems in the Haitian countryside. One extreme and rare form of punishment these societies can hand down to an accused criminal (who has, say, sold the family land without permission) is to be made into a *zonbi kò kadav*, whereby his spirit is extracted from his body and his body is sold into modern-day slavery to cut cane on a sugar plantation. Underneath the cultural process of becoming a *zonbi kò kadav*, the ethnobotonist Wade Davis (1988) famously claimed, lies a scientific one. He argued that the would-be zonbi is surreptitiously given tetrodotoxin from the puffer fish, which lowers his metabolism to the point where he appears dead. His family buries him, usually in an above-ground tomb as is typical in Haiti. That evening, the society’s sorcerer returns to the...
cemetery, opens the tomb, and gives the victim datura plant, a hallucinogen, and mystically separates out parts of the spirit from the body.10

In this scenario, mystical technology much like that applied to the zonbi astral separates the spirit from the body, except that the separation takes place before rather than after the body’s death. The body then is left, visible, as a religious and social corpse. In the final phase of punishment, this body—which we might redescribe as a traumatized, bound, socially stigmatized, ensorcelled, and possibly brain-damaged person—is said to be trafficked to a labor camp cum sugar plantation, with the secret society collecting a procurement fee. But before being disappeared, the bound victim is forced to pass by his family’s home and call out to someone he knows, “Se mwen-menm!” (“It’s me!”).

In this mural on the wall of a Vodou temple, a sorcerer uses a whip to drive a shrouded figure whose hands are bound behind the back with a length of rope held by the sorcerer (see Figure 5). The bottle under the sorcerer’s arm signals that the victim’s spirit has been captured inside. It is striking that the process of capturing slaves and leading them, bound and whipped, to be sold for labor is represented in religious terms. Here the moment of punishment-by-zombification throughout Haitian history replicates and reproduces the crucial transformative moment in the lives of West and Central Africans and the slaves in the colonies, where Africans were seized, kidnapped, bound, whipped, sold, and forced to labor. Insofar as this form of mythmaking (and, it is said, actual practice) reenacts this primal moment, the zonbi phenomenon in Haiti can be said

![Figure 5: Mural of sorcerer leading zonbi on the wall of a Vodou temple.](PHOT OF ELIZABETH MCALISTER)
to continue the inflicting of terror through the bodily reenactment of historical memory (Shaw 2002).

My husband—an avowed religious non-believer—swears that as a youth, he was tapped on the shoulder while walking down a country road one evening by a man from his home village who had been buried just that afternoon and was being hurried past by two other men. The two friends with my husband—who looked and witnessed the “zonbi,” became sick with high fevers for several days. They were traumatized themselves, or were victims of a poison powder spray administered by the passing sorcerers. This form of psychic and political terror is broadcast to the community and made known as a kind of “semi-public secret.” The secret is broadcast in satire during Carnival, when small bands of “zonbi“ dress in white sheets behind a sorcerer and parade the myth: the walking living performing the walking dead (see Figure 6).

The important point here is that the walking zonbi these maskers are playing is rendered a monstrous form of “raw life“ through a mystical technology that is also a political punishment. Edwidge Danticat (2002), in her book on Jacmel carnival, recalls that as a girl, she once heard a radio broadcaster announce that a few dozen zonbis had been discovered wandering in the hills. Danticat’s aunt had no doubt that those “zonbis” were actually political prisoners “who were so mentally damaged by dictatorship-sponsored torture that they had become either crazy or
slow” (2002:69-70). The announcers’ plea for family members to reclaim these “zonbis” was a trap. Danticat’s story highlights the ways in which mythmaking about zonbis can serve the interests of dictatorship and other male-dominated secret societies. Highlighting its use as a mythology of liberation, Kaiama Glover (2005) discusses how Haitian writers used the zonbi as a metaphor in their writings about dictatorship and its dilemmas, often stressing the potential for the zonbi to awaken and rebel. A living nightmare of modern capitalism, this kind of zonbi with all the secrecy, rumors, and mystification of power that surround it, remembers and re-performs the history of enslavement, as well as the capitalist consumption and cannibalism of human bodies and spirits in contemporary Haiti.

**Apocalypse and the Religion of American Zombies**

Now we’re going to move from the question of the zonbi in the Haitian context to a question of a different order: by what means did the zombie become a US American, as it were? Others have written helpfully about zombie mythology as it’s taken up by early Hollywood in Caribbean settings, such as in *White Zombie* (1932) and *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943). The horror of the Haitian zombie, for white Americans, was the image of the disfigured body dis-possessed of its soul, will, agency, and hence its interiority and its very humanity. When set against Christian dualisms of body and soul that placed theological priority on the soul, these religious differences were terrifying. White Americans became fascinated with zombie mythology and reproduced it in writings on Haiti during the Marine Occupation between 1915 and 1934, usually overlooking its obvious articulations with slavery, capitalism, and political control. Instead, the zombie myth authorized military intervention. Laënnec Hurbon (1987) writes about how the zombie, along with the cannibal practices that were imputed to be part of Haitian culture, become the image of the Other through which barbarism comes to be the sign for the Haitian.

So early Hollywood invited the New World walking corpse to take its place in the monstrous pantheon alongside Old World figures such as the vampire, werewolf, and ghost. From the 1930s until the 1960s and still today, the zombie is synonymous with a kind of barbaric racial blackness. But zombie images also spin off in a totally different and fascinating direction.

From the 1940s to the 1960s, Hollywood produced a slew of “trash films” featuring a variety of mutated, radioactive, or hybrid monsters that
were termed “zombies” but had fairly little formulaic coherence (Russell 2007). Then came George Romero's 1968 film, *Night of the Living Dead*, which he soon followed with *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) and *Day of the Dead* (1985). His independent, low-budget trilogy of Dead films set the terms for the American zombie horror flick and most pop-culture zombie images since. Consistent with the historical pattern of the horror genre, Romero lifted the monstrous from its exotic setting in the Caribbean and set it down squarely in everyday America, to lurch and rampage its way into the popular imagination. Although Romero reportedly did not think of his creatures as zombies and the word is rarely used in other films about the ravenous walking dead, from *Night* on, the critics and the public pronounced the label.\(^12\)

Stephen King writes that horror “arises from a pervasive sense of disestablishment, that things are in the unmaking” (as cited in Beal 2002:54). As other commentators have noted, Romero’s films are anti-establishment parables about the corruption and decay of the American way of life. *Night of the Living Dead* attacks the nuclear American family, patriarchy, and racism; *Dawn of the Dead* fastens its attention on the deadening effects of rampant consumerism; and *Day of the Dead* offers an indictment of militarism and American misuse of science and technology. Virtually all scholars writing on zombie films either take a Marxian economic and consumer studies approach or they spin out in Lacanian terms the films’ abject-monstrous psychoanalytic operations. I want to insist that the US film zombie cannot be fully understood apart from its meanings against a set of deeply embedded symbolic structures that, like the Haitian zonbi, are a matter of religious thought.

Now, within the narrative, Romero’s zombie films are set in a secular frame, with no reference to an otherworld or to a superhuman force. Zombies that had been created by a sorcerer in Haiti now had an indeterminate, usually scientific cause—dust from Venus, radiation, or an inexplicable virus. Romero visually rendered the metaphors of eating another’s life force. That which was religious about the spirit zonbi in Haiti—the fact that human spirit lives on beyond death in an invisible part of the cosmos and has dealings with the living—was turned inside out, like the Haitian corpse zonbi. The film zombie is a former human with a body, but no soul, spirit, consciousness, interiority, or identity. This above all has become the common understanding of zombies in contemporary culture. Zombies are autonomous, but incapable of autonomy. They are
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a representation of a stripped-down form of “raw life,” if you will, animating a body, plus an animalistic drive to consume human flesh. They are not commodified but they consume; they are hyper-consuming. The most horrifying and excessive aspect of film zombies is their violent cannibal drive, as they lumber and lunge towards the living protagonists and take enormous, gory bites out of their necks, arms, and torsos. What is more, the American zombie is almost always a sign and a symptom of an apocalyptic undoing of the social order.

As secular apocalypse film, the zombie film is postmodern in that it has undermined the opposition of God and human (Ostwalt 2000). But a religious logic inflects and infects American zombie monsters, and—in the way of so many narratives of secular popular culture—a biblical blueprint underlies and informs them. Romero’s zombies are monstrous, but not demonic, precisely because no evil animates them. However they always refer implicitly to the biblical apocalyptic tradition, and it is through this referencing that meaning is created. In this sense, zombie films are residually religious; articulated with religious themes to create secular ones.

In classical examples of religious monstrosity, we find a consistent pattern (from the ancient Near East until today), in which a chaos god or chaos monster threatens to undo creation and must be defeated by another god—or hero—to maintain cosmic order (Beal 2002:15). From the etymology of monster, the Latin monstere, we find “to demonstrate, or to warn.” The monster gestures, inherently, to a sort of prophetic revelation. Like the uncanny “danger within,” many ancient monsters are not anti-divinities or “evil,” as such, but rather are “part of a divinity that is deeply divided within itself about the future viability of the cosmos...” (Beal 2002:22). Timothy Beal notes that in some places in the Bible, the monstrous is against God, but at other times God lays claim to monsters, such as Leviathan, who is an aspect of God’s power. God and monsters are intertwined in a complicated dialectic that often confuses humankind.

The monstrosity and horror of film zombies revolves precisely around the uncanny familiarity of the zombie as a dis-possessed monster in human form. Yet zombies are anonymous and pose a counter-example to the more common Western monster narrative centered on a single figure, to whom the characters are forced to relate, such as Leviathan, Dracula, and Frankenstein. Zombies are human-sized, human-shaped, and have no supernatural attributes. They are neither sexually attractive nor are they sexually attracting. Like slaves in rebellion, they are most dangerous as a
collective hoard. Zombies (like Hobbes’ Leviathan) are formed of many strands of society, and unleash themselves on the world to release chaos from within the logic of society itself.

Film zombies are a collective of chaos monsters threatening to destroy civilization and order in a secular scenario of world destruction. However, the zombie apocalypse resists ancient chaos monster mythmaking—where the hero or god saves the world by fighting the chaos god and thus restores order to the cosmos. In the zombie films, order is not restored at all. Rather, a small band—or couple—of survivors, comes to relative, contingent and uneasy safety in a post-apocalyptic enclave. The films work around the classic end-time paradox that the world must be destroyed in order for it to be reborn, and time must end in order for there to be a future (Pagano 2008:71). The films all close with a gesture—but nothing like a full realization—towards a new beginning.

In biblical apocalyptics, a prophetic seer reveals a future rupture in time and space, which is pre-ordained by God. Apocalypse, etymologically linked to the word “unveiling,” is a process of revealing in the Books of Ezekiel, Daniel, Revelation, and others; the revelation conveys both the fact of and the details about the future divine order. In the Christian apocalypse of John of Patmos, the entire earth is destroyed in order to bring about God’s new heaven and new earth. But the survivors of zombie films certainly don’t manage such feats of new creation. The films point back to the viewers’ future, as it were, as a future of violent and chaotic degradation. Since no transcendent figure has predetermined the apocalypse, it is humans alone who have caused the end and humans alone who must survive it. There is no judgment day in these apocalypses; judgment is not internal to the film, but rather relies on the viewer’s pronouncement, based on interpretation (Pagano 2008). Film zombies are good post-modern monsters, which emerge as “self-fulfilling prophecies of modernity” (Kearney 2003:97).

Yet the “revealing” or “warning” that zombie monsters occasion is not divine revelation but rather a politics cloaked in pseudo-religious form. Especially in the Romero films, the revelation is a confrontation with the insight that the film viewers are all zombies in the making. We are all in mortal danger of being made inhuman by virtue of being conformists, empty consumers, automatons, and cannibals. One clear message of most post-Romero zombie films is that the zombies are a logical result of the racism, corruption, greed, violence, and other flaws that already
characterize Americans. Especially in *Dawn of the Dead*, in which the survivors shelter in a shopping mall, the parallel is drawn that hell is being dammed to repeat endlessly the mistakes Americans have made as hyper-consumers, effecting our own “shopocalypse.”

Whereas zombies were often cast as black workers in the early Hollywood films, the vast majority of Romero-forward zombies are figured as white Americans, and zombie film heroes, interestingly, include black men often of West Indian decent. It is interesting that Peter, the black survivor/hero in *Dawn of the Dead*, offers a theological explanation for the ghoulish uprising that refers back to Vodou in the Caribbean. It comes in the form of wisdom from his Trinidadian grandfather, who was “into all that Obeah and Vodou.” About the zombies, Peter says: “They’re us, that’s all. When there’s no more room in hell, the dead will walk the earth.” This idea transposes Vodou to deliver a prophetic vision of Christian apocalypse. In a reversal of the promise presented by the Book of Revelation—of the bodily resurrection of the saints, who will be given perfect bodies free of disease, sin, and death—*Dawn* offers the idea that the zombies are sinners inhabiting hell, which has backed up and overflowed like a sewer through some kind of divine abdication of biblical promise.

True to the classic patterns of religious monstrosity, the band of survivors who fight the chaos monsters are by definition doing battle with “otherness.” Here the “other” is a monstrous version of the human, and so like the Christian binary between good and evil, the zombie monster is in binary opposition—or at least in tension—with what is human. If zombies are not demonic and therefore not evil, what precisely makes them monstrous and not-human? Certainly their mindless, catatonic quality renders them suspect. Gretchen Bakke argues that one index of what counts as human in film is a character’s capacity to carry narrative weight, to be “seething with story” (2007:64). All we know about most zombies is that they were bitten and/or they died. One thing that marks zombies’ status as inhuman is precisely their lack of narrative freight as individuals. Zombies are generic, they are nothing except not alive—remnants, remainders.

The main way that we know zombies are not human is their cannibalism, and this is an interesting way the Romero zombies rhyme with the Haitian case. The genius of Romero was to figure the zombies as both catatonic and cannibals. Romero evokes a kind of spectral remainder of the Caribbean zonbi by reaching back to this iconic historical figure of barbaric otherness during the age of conquest and colonialism. Recent
scholarship addresses the recurring theme of cannibalism in early African and American colonialism, beginning with the term’s first use by Columbus in writing about natives of Hispaniola, now Haiti. Postcolonial scholars re-describe how the Europeans convinced themselves of the twin facts of native cannibalism and native inhumanity. Linked across representations of Africans, Natives, and Jews, the cannibal was a linchpin Other in the European imagination. The cannibal, writes Elspeth Probyn, “reminds us of that which cannot be included in the polis, the social life of man. Yet its very exclusion serves to define humanity” (2000:88). The cannibal functions in the necessary place of the monstrous other in the quasi-religious paradigm of zombie films. Perfectly uncanny, the cannibal is the perfect “something human” outside humanity.

Zombies, Messiahs, and Race
Of course, any secular apocalypse film requires a human messiah hero who will do battle with the death-seeking “other” that threatens to destroy the world. Zombie films’ plots center on the survivors, who form a kind of militaristic counter-insurgency, but who are weakened by conflicts and power struggles from within. By virtue of being the ultimate survivors, one, two, or a trinity of survivors emerge. Insofar as they occupy the symbolic place of messiah in the narrative of apocalypse, what is interesting here is that from the hero Ben in Night, to Peter in Dawn (see Figure 7), and John

Figure 7: Peter with gun in Dawn of the Dead.
in *Day*, to Robert Neville in *I Am Legend*, a central male hero is black, two of whom are West Indian.

The trend begins with Ben in *Night*, who as Steven Shaviro writes is "the sole character in the film who is both sympathetic and capable of reasoned action..." (1993:87). Self-possessed, direct, logical, capable, Ben understands the zombie threat and takes decisive action to preserve himself and the group that forms by happenstance around him in an abandoned farmhouse. His role is striking, coming in 1968 as it does, in its portrayal of black male leadership and calm authority, at a time when most black males in film were peripheral at best, viciously stereotyped at worst. A white man in the film challenges Ben’s authority, but Ben prevails and ends up the lone survivor of the zombie attack (up to a point). Peter and John in the next two Romero films are likewise solid, dependable, capable black men who strategize and fight their way to survive the zombie outbreak. All three make alliances with the one white woman in each group, who also makes it to the post-apocalypse.

Will Smith’s character Robert Neville in *Legend* is a striking example of the black male secular messiah. Neville is a consummate hero who has everything: he’s a loving husband and father, dog owner, a US Army Colonel, and Ph.D. in viro-biology who is in perfect physical, intellectual, psychological, and moral condition. He has chosen to stay behind in Manhattan, shouting “I am not going to let this happen,” not only to become the lone survivor of an infectious pandemic, but to fight off attacking zombies, shelter any remaining survivors he can find, and find the cure of the infection to save humanity.

What can we make of the interesting trend that establishes zombies as the monsters black men are to vanquish? In the successful zombie films I am considering, black men are, like the spirits of former slaves in Vodou, once again most efficacious. More than the whites in these films, black men are exemplars of moral personhood. They all work cooperatively with the survivors, they fight capably and ethically, and they are nice to the women. Unlike the trend in action films where the black characters are among the first to be killed, these black men survive by virtue of their own character strengths to see a fragile post-apocalyptic future.

A problem here is that black characters in mainstream cinema have always been made to signify both less and more than themselves. On the one hand, we get what legal theorist Thomas Ross (1990:2) calls “black abstraction,” “the refusal to depict blacks in any real and vividly drawn
social context.” On the other, black characters often carry more meaning than the typical individual character when they are made to signify blackness in general, in addition to its related associations with looseness, aggression, sexuality, and other stereotypes. Related to this, black people have long been deployed “as mirrors that help construct whiteness” in Hollywood films, as Judith Weisenfeld (2004:308) helpfully notes.

So we might wonder, in turn, what it is about whiteness in zombie films that the black male messiah characters point to. Here, Richard Dyer (1988:44) makes a fascinating argument. Blacks in film are often depicted as lively, musical, religious, as “having more life” than the whites around them. Whiteness, which appears in mainstream society as “nothing in particular,” is “revealed in emptiness, absence, denial, even a kind of death.” Examining the Romero films—and I think we might extend his argument to other works as well—Dyer argues that blacks in pop culture are often depicted as “having more life,” and “whiteness represents not only rigidity but death” (1988:59).

Dyer goes on to say that “In all three [Romero] films, it is significant that the hero is a black man, and not just because this makes him ‘different,’ but because it makes it possible to see that whites are the living dead” (1988:59, emphasis added). Zombies are overwhelmingly white in Romero’s films, and the small minority of African-American zombies have powdered whiteface. Just as whites in society are “ordinary looking,” and therefore unmarked as white, as “nothing in particular,” so too are the zombies. “If whiteness and death are equated, both are further associated with the USA” (Dyer 1988:60). In all of these films, the violence of the zombie catastrophe has killed the majority of the population, toppled the government as well as the media, and caused society to cease functioning altogether. Dyer argues that “What finally forces home the specifically white dimension of these zombie-US links are the ways in which the zombies can be destroyed. The first recalls the liberal critique of whites as ruled by their heads; as the radio announcer says, ‘Kill the brain and you kill the ghoul’ since, it seems, zombies/whites are nothing but their brains” (1988:61).

Romero and post-Romero zombies are cannibals, and white people and zombies are both insatiably destructive consumers. Bakke writes that that fact that zombies eat in order to reproduce—since in most zombie films the zombie bite is what spreads infection—means that eating is “formally and racially transformative” (2010:414). Eating and consumption are also
what make zombies reproductive and monstrous. Allegorically, excessive, rampant consumption is what makes white people white and dead.

* * *

A new racial logic seems to be unfolding in action films produced since the turn of the millennium. Bakke identifies the emergence of a new category of whites in these films: “zombies, vampires, the virus-infected and other sorts of hyperwhites—that is, whites over-endowed with traditionally white characteristics (cultural as well as racial)—have, since the late 1990s, swarmed the big screen...” (2010:407-408). Zombies, as a sub-category of hyperwhites, are exemplified by the virus-infected in *I am Legend* and in *28 Days Later*. As Bakke notes, they have blue eyes, white skin so translucent that blue veins show through, are hairless, and—like earlier film zombies—have little or no culture or language. It is the hyper-whiteness, and the death they both embody and spread, that is destroying human civilization. And it is this hyperwhite apocalypse that the black male messiah is called upon to destroy. Bakke points out that Neville in *Legend* is actually a black man inherently immune to the virus, immune to whiteness, and that “In making (the black man) into the civilizing agent the filmmakers turn an old story about colonization, savagery, and skin color on its head” (2010:424). In these films, the black male messiah must save humanity from the affliction of whiteness (see Figure 8).

This reading raises a number of critical questions. Is this sub-trend of black male hero protagonists a progressive one, as these roles feature positive and sympathetic men who fight to (contingent) victory at the end? Or are these black male heroes in white-produced films a new way for
white culture to “eat the other” in bell hooks’ (1992) terms, where whites “spice up” white culture by consuming racial difference? Is it, as Hazel Carby (1992:3) reads multiculturalism, a way to focus once again “on the complexity of response in the (white) reader/student’s construction of self in relation to a (black) perceived ‘other’”? Is white filmmakers’ casting of black men in the role of the messiah just racialization in a new form, one in which blacks, as part of having “more life,” are figured as “more religious”? We might compare the black messiah to the postmodern stock character Spike Lee has termed “the super-duper magical negro” (Gonzales 2001) in such films as The Green Mile (1999) and The Legend of Bagger Vance (2000). In these films and others, a black man with magical qualities appears out of nowhere to help a down-and-out white person realize their full humanity or attain a goal (Colombe 2002). Zombie-fighting heroes possess no magic, but they do function as capable helpmates of their white allies. Instead of redeeming one single broken white person, the zombie-fighting heroes save (what’s left of) all of corrupt or infected humanity. It is possible to read the black messiah as an exaggeration of the Magical Negro, insofar as in zombie films, blackness is figured as a personified antidote to the problem of whiteness; and black individuals are the planet’s remediator, rectifier, and redeemer.

Yet, arguably, the black male messiah zombie killer is more fully human than the Magical Negro. These black zombie-killers are not magical, but are ordinary, imperfect, and just as interested in saving themselves as in assisting their white compatriots. What is more, the white man does not end up with the (white) woman in the zombie apocalypse. In all the films I consider here, the black male is paired with the white female in the final scenes of the film. Still, just as the Haitian zonbi myth mystifies the terrorism of slavery and political violence, zombie films displace and mystify the real threats to human survival. Neither nuclear war nor climate change but rather the walking dead will trigger the apocalypse. The films foreclose the possibility of organized, cooperative resistance (since the majority of the population is dead or infected); instead, only a small band of individuals survive.

An interesting feature of these zombie films is that for better or for worse, the zombie post-apocalypse is not only black. By the end of the films (with the exception of Night), the remaining survivors are the white woman and the black man, and sometimes others. Whether surviving to stay human by not succumbing to the excessive consumption of whiteness, as in the
Romero films and *28 Days Later*, or going so far as to save the future of humanity by finding the cure to the vicious virus of hyperwhiteness in *Legend*, these films all point to a post-apocalyptic future that is multiracial. Such a future may not bring us new bodies free of disease and death, as in the Christian story. But the future society will consist of non-white and multi-raced bodies and, presumably, culture.

**Leader of the Zonbis for Obama**

Two weeks after the final presidential debate that took place on October 15, 2008 it was time to observe the feast of the Day of the Dead in Haiti. Every November 1 and 2, the cemetery in downtown Port-au-Prince fills with people who come to honor their departed loved ones. Decorated with candles and stacked with plates bearing food offerings, the above-ground cement tombs are beehives of activity. The deity Bawon presides over the spiritual affairs of this necropolis and the cross that stakes out his presence is ringed with people beseeching him for health, food, and relief from suffering. In 2008, many Haitians added another prayer to their long list: “We pray for Obama,” they said. “Give Obama health, bring Obama strength, and let Obama become president.” The head-of-state of the nation of the dead—and the spiritual leader in charge of zonbis—was being petitioned to support the election of the popular young candidate who would become the first black US president.16

A common trope in many commentaries during the presidential campaign was that the American psyche, wounded by and guilt-ridden over slavery and racism, longed for the health and wholeness that would be signified by the election of a black president. In other words, President Obama would be a Magical Negro to the entire nation; he would rectify the nation’s many problems, assuage white guilt over racism, and simultaneously recast black men as reasoned leaders in place of stereotypes of hypersexuality and criminality. Obama was also referenced in a messianic idiom; scores of journalists, commentators, and artists either likened his campaign to the second coming of Christ or noted the instances where he was described in an exalted, prophetic vocabulary (Ehrenstein 2007).17 Elected in the teeth of an economic super-crisis, Obama was figured as the zombie-killer who would slay the zombie-banks threatening to cannibalize the nation’s funds. As the offspring of a white mother and black father, Obama has also been seen both as a symbol of America’s
multiracial future and as someone with special power and authority to make it a reality. In quickly casting the stumbling, white, John McCain as a zombie, the maker of the “cool Obama/zombie McCain” image brought American zombie films into conversation with the dramatically unfolding presidential campaign. McCain was associated with the dead and corrupt cannibalistic policies of the Bush administration, which Obama possesses the natural “cool” to slay—or just ignore, until they go away.

Zombie mythmaking began in Haitian colonialism as a complicated engagement with slavery and death-dealing capitalist formations. In white American books and films, zombie mythmaking became articulated through, and into, a sign for black barbarism, only to re-emerge recently as a cipher whose meaning has to do with the death-dealing qualities of whiteness itself. The zombie has been part-human, inhuman, slave, revolutionary, cannibal, monster, destroyer, and that which it is moral to destroy. Insofar as the zombie is a cipher, it can be cast to form any number of meaning-sets; it is always shifting signification and yet it can be said to hint at something of the original. After all, we all know what a zombie is.

Endnotes:
2Scores of news articles referred to the “cool” of Barack Obama and his even temperament throughout the campaign and into his presidency.
3This discussion revisits and expands upon an earlier article (McAlister 1995). For their comments and encouragement I would like to thank Jill Morowski and Wesleyan Center for Humanities fellows Gretchen Bakke, Andrew Curran, Joe Fitzpatrick, Peter Gottschalk, Jason Craig Harris, and Letia Perta, as well as Erol Josue, Christina Klein, Nick Marshall, Pierre Minn, Robin Nagle, Katherine M. Smith, and Gina Athena Ulysse; as well as discussants following its presentation at the Society for the Anthropology of Religion including Paul C. Johnson, Patrick Polk, Kate Ramsey, Karen Richman, and all the students in my course Zombies as Other.
4I will use the Kreyòl spelling, zonbi, when discussing the ethnographic practice or thought about it in Haiti, and zombie when speaking of ideas and appropriations of the figure.
6And it goes on… The University of London hosted a conference in September of 2009 on “Zombomodernism.”
7Even the employed are not making a living wage; in August of 2009 the minimum wage in Haiti was raised to $3.72 per day, from just $1.75. It is against this background of abject poverty and exploitation that one must understand the religious arts in Haiti. Positioned apart from the societies of “servants of the spirits” in Haitian religion, and working alone for clients, sorcerers like St. Jean function through their exclusion from the normative practices of Vodou.
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8This living object surely evolved from both the contained spirits called minkisi, in Kongo religion, and bocio carvings or bo bottles, “empowered cadavers” associated with the spirits of the dead, in Benin and Togo Vodou practice. For the latter, see Blier 1995.

9For helpful descriptions and analyses of history and Cubans’ dealings with spirits of the dead, see Palmié 2002, Routon 2008, and Ochoa 2010.

10Davis’ (1988) research sparked great controversy and his hypothesis has not been conclusively validated to my knowledge, although the high-profile traditional priest, Max Beauvoir, and others, have supported it. I am not in a position to evaluate the science at issue; my interest lies in examining the social narratives surrounding people who are claimed to be zombies, which often follow the pattern Davis and Beauvoir outline.

11An exception to this is Seabrook (1929), who describes Haitian workers as “zombies” who work like slaves in a description consistent with capitalism.


13This term is coined in the context of anti-consumer activism by performance-artist-activist Reverend Billy, whose website is Revbilly.com.

14This film is a remake of The Omega Man (1971), in which the “nightseekers” are more like vampires than zombies, and in which the protagonist was not black; the screenplay of Legend apparently did not specify the race of its hero. Also, the film’s “second ending” (on DVD only) might change my analysis here. Nevertheless, the version of the film as released to theaters is what concerns us.


16Thanks for this observation goes to Katherine M. Smith, personal communication August 2009.


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Slaves, Cannibals, and Infected Hyper-Whites: The Race and Religion of Zombies


**Foreign language translations:**

Slaves, Cannibals, and Infected Hyper-Whites: The Race and Religion of Zombies

**Keywords:** Haiti, Vodou, zombie, cannibal, Barack Obama, race, magical negro

奴隶 , 食人魔 , 被感染之优越白人 : 论僵尸之种族与宗教
关键词 : 海地 , 巫毒 , 僵尸 , 食人魔 , 奥巴马 , 种族 , 神奇黑鬼

Рабы, каннибалы, и инфецированные гибербелые: Расовая и религиозная принадлежность зомби
Ключевые слова: Гаити, вуду, зомби, людоед, Барак Обама, раса, волшебный негр

Escravos, Canibais, e os Hiper-Brancos Infectados: A Raça e a Religião dos “Zombies”

Palavras chaves: Haiti, Vodoo, Zombie, Cannibal, Barack Obama, raça, mágica negroo

العبيد وأكلوا لحم البشر والبيض المفرطون المصابون بعدوى: الأجناس والدين للموتى الأحياء
الكلمات الجامعة: هايتي، الفودو، الموتى الذين تحركهم أعمال سحرية، أكلوا لحم البشر، باراك أوباما، الأجناس، الزنوج السحريون