3

Decolonizing the Zombie: *I Walked with a Zombie*'s Critique of Centrist Liberalism

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What does it mean to decolonize the undead? If we seek to disinter the past in order to liberate ourselves from our own contemporary nightmare, then studies of Gothic, Horror, and the Weird must be central to any emancipatory endeavor. For narratives and figurations of the undead are rich with guiding spirits for the future. Could the zombie be a sentinel, rather than obstacle, for a way forward out of the past's rotting matter?

Yet removing the past's trauma of violence and social inequality is not simply an act of flipping the switch, of jolting peoples from conditions of coerced inertia into ones of liberated vitality. No substantive social change will occur unless it contains a thorough engagement with the structural conditions that created the catastrophe in the first place. Could a decolonial approach help us here, and how would that differ from other emancipatory intentions? Nick Couldry neatly summarizes the distance of a decolonial approach from prior endeavors. He argues that an earlier "postcolonial critique" responded to the conditions of historical colonialism by making a "counter-claim against capitalism, globalism, and neoliberalism in our times, as it seeks to make evident their colonial roots even if these roots are partially obscured by contemporary ideologies."[1] Here "postcolonial theories posit that the foundation of colonial modes of representation is *difference*" which is "not merely a passive description, but a form of systemic violence."[2] Tied to this critique is a suggestion that Enlightenment-era knowledge claims, especially those using "the language of modernity and universal knowledge, inscribed in historical discourses,"[3] were imperialist devices deploying civilizationist claims to ensure that colonial subjects emulated their colonizers.

Decoloniality, on the other hand, for Couldry, provides "strategies for surviving in a neo- or postcolonial context" by looking for "intellectual resources from beyond the Western canon," especially ones "inspired by movements from the Global South."[4] Additionally, while postcolonialism was perceived as sacrificing economic factors in favor of more cultural ones, decolonial theory understands "coloniality of power as both an ideological and material phenomenon."[5]

We might add to this criticism of postcolonial discourse theory the claim that it not only marginalized the role of capitalism as a primary driver of modernity but also that the keyword "Western" was used in as homogenizing fashion as was "Orientalism," as the former term both erased conflicts, counter-alliances, and political alterations *within* the so-called West and reinstated a mirror image of civilizationalist claims, wherein the ideal was now located in "the Rest," rather than "the West," as if non-Western nations are exempt from their own capitalist procedures and historical inequalities.[6]

Building on Couldry, I want to add a Warwick School perspective that uses a world-systems knowledge movement as a way of unthinking the categories of cultural analysis that obstruct a decolonial motivation. From world-systems analysis, we initially take the claim that a capitalist world-system emerges in the late fifteenth century and it is one that operates through the creation of social inequalities (rather than simply social differences) as a way to achieve its drive for endless accumulation for accumulation's sake. One feature that distinguishes a world-system from other materialist approaches on international divisions of labor is its insistence that capitalism must operate through labor relations that are weakly proletarianized, often involving poorly, precariously, or frankly unwaged and coerced labor. Recent arguments regarding racial capitalism and the persistence of bound labor and necropolitical mastery within capitalism are ones that fundamentally belong to and help differentiate world-systems perspectives from other "global" approaches.

For our purposes, it will not immediately be the elements of the world-system itself that can decolonize the zombie but their use within Immanuel Wallerstein's description of centrist liberalism's secular trend (or long duration). Wallerstein argued that the interlaced American, French, and Haitian Revolutions, along with rebellions in Ireland, Egypt, and among the indigenous peoples of South America, created two self-evident social truths.[7] The first was the inevitability of ongoing social transformation. No longer would it be possible to imagine eternal or unchanging societies. Tied to this realization was a second truth involving the shift of power away from the sovereignty of blood aristocracies and the Roman Catholic Church to forms of democratic or popular rule.[8]

Modernity of change and popular rule then gave rise to three metastrategies in response. Wallerstein calls these metastrategies, ideologies.[9] First to appear was conservatism, exemplified by the writing of Burke and de Maistre. Conservatism sought to slow down the trajectory of these truths by advancing the notion that small groups should continue to rule, and these would be the ones associated with pre-existing elites, like the gentry, according to ideals of family, community, tradition, established religion, and resistance to transformative legislation. The third ideology came later during the 1840s and is variously known as radicalism, socialism, communism, or Marxism. This perspective not only embraced the new truths but also sought to accelerate their arrival through sudden, mass discontinuity, that is, revolution.

In between conservatism and radicalism, both chronologically and positionally, is centrist liberalism. Liberalism accepts the inevitability of change and democracy, but it seeks to moderate their tempo and regulate their expansion in order to prevent explosive and disruptive social changes, especially those that might limit capitalist accumulation. Liberalism sought to ensure this control by a *gradual* expansion of voting suffrage, as the means for managing the extension of representative democracy beyond white, propertied men, and guarding access to (higher) education, as the apparatus that would credentialize the expertise of the technocratic and bureaucratic managers who sought to legitimize themselves as the best rulers of society, ones empowered ostensibly on merit, rather than blood lineage, cronyism, or popular authority.

While each ideology claimed to be against the post-sovereign state, each had their own strategy for using it to their own ends. Conservatives sought to legislate and criminalize threats to their authority. Radicals sought to organize political action as a way of occupying the state in order to re-engineer or dismantle it. Liberals *theorized*; they deployed a set of statist concepts, which they then gave themselves the task of administering, and they refashioned a set of institutions as their material barracks and proposed an intertwining set of binary oppositions as a means of canalizing and controlling popular rule.[10] Among these distinctions are the separation between the public and the private, normal and abnormal, and, above all, citizen subjectivity and those consigned to social death as exchangeable objects: women, non-whites, proletarians, and so on. Consequently, liberals' rhetoric of universalizing equality was a promise betrayed in practice by their introduction of a new set of social distinctions to replace older aristocratic and religious ones. As Wallerstein explains:

> When inequality was the norm, there was no need to make any further distinction than that between those of different rank—generically between

> noble and commoner. But when equality became the official norm, then it was suddenly crucial to know who was in fact included in the "all" who have equal rights—that is, who are the "active" citizens. The more equality was proclaimed as a moral principle, the more obstacles—juridical, political, economic, and cultural—were instituted to prevent its realization. The concept, citizen, forced the crystallization and rigidification—both intellectual and legal—of a long list of binary distinctions that then came to form the cultural underpinnings of the capitalist world-economy in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries: bourgeois and proletarian, man and woman, adult and minor, breadwinner and housewife, majority and minority, White and Black, European and non-European, educated and ignorant, skilled and unskilled, specialist and amateur, scientist and layman, high culture and low culture, heterosexual and homosexual, normal and abnormal, able-bodied and disabled, and of course the ur-category which all of these others imply—civilized and barbarian.[11]

Centrist liberalism's theories were then institutionalized in two main ways. First, since formal education was made into a central mechanism for producing expertise, liberals spent a tremendous amount of effort toward reconstructing the university for their own ends. The older faculties of law, medicine, theology, and philosophy were transformed into contained disciplines that were given control over aspects now considered to be autonomous fields, each with their own particular methodologies, as a way of verifying truth claims made by trained experts. So, for instance, economics was given the marketplace; political science, the state; sociology, the study of the so-called advanced civil societies; anthropology, the study of "primitive" groups without a large textual record; and Orientalism, as the study of former world-empires, which did have textual archives but whose government had fallen into disrepair, such as China, India, and Egypt.[12]

One more academic field was constructed that has consequences for this study: Classics. In the early nineteenth century, spurred on by Romantic celebrations of Greek Independence efforts against Ottoman Turkey, ancient Greece and Rome were moved out of the disciplinary category of Orientalism as a way of creating a white, non-Muslim past that would be taken as the genetic foundation for Western European civilization's development into modernity.[13] This distinction was also a feature of competition within the core nation-states of the capitalist world-system since Germany and Britain devoted particular attention to the invention of a Greco-Roman classical tradition, as a means of differentiating themselves from Napoleonic France and its occupying links to Egypt.[14] Yet this tactical deployment involving the separation of "white" Greece and Rome from

"Black" Egypt was never a clean break or without a paradoxical self-awareness of its incoherence. The resulting strained awareness of the inconsistencies within this invented division was compensated by the creation of cultural productions that might mediate its tensions. One of these "odd" categories is that which we today call "Gothic" (and Horror and the Weird). It is not accidental that the two national cultures that largely produced Gothic narratives are the ones that sought to position themselves in opposition to Napoleonic France's reopening of the door to Africa and the Middle East through its invasion of Egypt accompanied with a host of academic observers. As Gothic-associated cultural productions are inescapably the terrible child of centrist liberalism's production of disciplinary subjects and its creation of modern mythologies about European genesis, they also became a lens through which we can see the machinery of the capitalist world-system and its historical conflicts and transformations.

For instance, liberalism's knowledge formations were aided by their incorporation of Baconian science and Newtonian concepts of uniform, linear time and the reproducibility of events, especially as the social sciences were tasked to produce quasi-empirical, normative "laws" that could simplify social complexity into knowable laws.[15] Claims for the correctness of developmental predictability seemed believable because centrist liberalism was lucky in its timing to appear during a long phase of global expansion. As liberalism's knowledge claims and theoretical prognostications seemed to be true, centrist liberalism became so dominant that it forced conservatives and radicals to accept and adopt many of its claims.[16]

Throughout the nineteenth century, liberalism managed to endure through various capitalist crises as it disarmed working-class rebellion through its skilled management of nationalism, reinforced through its educational structures, and controlled wealth redistribution through social welfare schemes. European welfare was largely financed through imperialist carving up the world in renewed instances of colonial brutality. Here liberalism's theoretical claims of knowable processes were turned into civilizational claims that embedded racism and the "white man's burden" of sociologizing the anthropological, of making the colonized mirror the colonizers, and looking to dictate the pace for their gradual incorporation toward citizenship. Yet when inter-imperialist tensions resulted in the First World War and ensuing demands for national self-determination, liberal planning was then turned into a model for the entire globe's development, a pathway that recently decolonized nations should follow.[17] When postwar liberalism began to fall into crisis by the 1960s, it had nowhere else to go and slowly began to recede before neoliberal tactics. It is this decline of liberalism's

long secular trend, one going back to the late eighteenth century, which has created a space and context for decoloniality beyond postcoloniality.

In terms of the above, to decolonize does not mean simply insisting on anti-Eurocentrism. It is not "the West," or even European-oriented ideas, that ought to be the target of decolonial critiques. Instead, decolonial criticism should be directed against centrist liberalism and its deployment of developmental regulation, linear prediction, and the maintenance of the binary exclusions of citizen and social death in order to maintain capitalist profiteering. In this sense, the decolonial project differs from one version of the "postcolonial" one in that it sees the goal of gaining citizenship privilege by the recently emancipated as itself a limit. Hence, decolonization is not the pluralism of diversity; it is the detonation of the theoretical claims of liberalism, especially the ways in which the personnel of institutional knowledge formations (i.e., the assumed writers and readers of this collection) consider their evidentiary material as a means of legitimizing their own social authority, privilege, and status. If intellectual resources from the Global South are often invoked, this has more to do with their likelihood of having less liberal centrist content than from any difference within an itself essentialized notion of the West.

The mandate to decolonize the undead comes then as a means of dissecting Gothic narratives, broadly conceived, to show their anatomy as a product of the developmentalist and civilizational split that separated Greco-Roman "classics" from Afro-Egyptian orientalisms. As discussed below, the figuration of the zombie endorses centrist liberalism's conceptual divisions of citizen and subject of social death, often in ways that still bear the imprint of Anglo-German competition against France and its colonies. Thus, to decolonize the zombie means, first, going beyond simple emancipation or independence claims in order to challenge the method underpinning the citizen-state subjectivity/social death objectivity split and, second, highlighting the context of conflicts for hegemony within the capitalist world-system.

Decolonizing Literary and Cultural Studies

If decolonizing literary and cultural studies means unthinking liberalism's assumptions, some guidelines are consequential. We must look for regularities of appearance within a phase's curation of cultural expression, rather depend on fictions of transhistorical autonomous lineages. Here we must self-emancipate from a literary-studies Newtonianism that insists on seeing narrative generic

figurations as a cultural "tradition" that has an untroubled, linear developmental passage. Instead, we need to see each cluster of figurations as a *curation*, a selection and arrangement of particular elements, some of which are familiar, albeit obsolete, while others are new due to the onset of emerging historical events and pressures. Each historical phase foregrounds and disregards specific figurative elements, often highlighting features that its immediate precursor moment disregarded. By insisting on a universal or "authentic" meaning of the zombie and its putative folklore as determining the present, we participate in centrist liberalism's recolonizing of cultural elements for its own purposes. Instead, we need to gain a better sense of why and how cultural figurations function within their own conjuncture.

For instance, while it has become common today to insist on the context of Atlantic slavery and rebellion in treatments of the zombie, this focus can often obscure the actual problem that sparks zombie figuration at different times.[18] As Kee says, "Because zombies become intertwined with the ways in which many people conceive of vodou and Haiti, the tendency to associate zombies with slavery (and nothing else) ties these three concepts (Haiti, vodou, zombie) together in a way that is indicative of an overall victimization."[19] Yet throughout the nineteenth century and well into the mid-twentieth, the primary and initiating reference for most treatments of the zombie was not slavery in itself, as a transhistorical feature, but the uncertain status of the Black Republic after the declaration of Haitian independence. If Atlantic slavery and resistance was, indeed, the unchanging primary coordinate for zombie curation, then we would expect these tales to have been simultaneously prevalent throughout continental North America during this time.

Instead, nearly all the zombie tales in this phase closely link accounts of rural events within commentary on the various ways in which Haitian self-governance was perceived to have failed. In reality, the Black Republic's establishment was frustrated, not least by the imposition of crushing debt payments by France as a prerequisite of international recognition of Haitian self-determination. The period's zombie curation by Euro-American commentators contemplates liberalism's failed mythologies and bad faith claims, by suggesting that zombification is an apt metaphor for Haiti itself, as no longer a colony, but not yet an inter-state equal. In these stories, it is the figures of the Black Republic, and not either colonial slavery or the Revolution, that stand as the narrative touchstones.

Examples of this emphasis include "Salt Is Not for Slaves," the 1931 story penned by Canadian Garnett Weston under the pseudonym before he wrote the script for *White Zombie* (1932), which is narrated by an old woman, herself

a zombie, who tells a story of incomplete liberation specifically as a result of Christophe, "Emperor Henry of Haiti['s]" proximity to a plantation run by a zombie overseer in lieu of an absent planter.[20] Inez Wallace's short story, "I Walked with a Zombie," used as the initial impetus for the later film of that name, begins: "Haiti, the dark island of mystery, where such incredible figures as Christophe, the Black Napoleon, rose to world fame as the Negro emperor."[21] Judge Henry Austin's "The Worship of the Snake," a 1912 first-person reportage in *The New England Magazine*, which may well have been the inspiration for H. P. Lovecraft's description of a vodou-like ceremony in "The Call of Cthulhu," likewise begins his essay by directing the reader's imagination to "the pleasure palace of the mad negro Christophe."[22] A December 13, 1937, *Life* magazine article, "Black Haiti: Where Old Africa and the New World Meet," cited as a source in the shooting script for *I Walked with a Zombie*, balances a sensationalized reproduction of "the only zombie ever photographed," an image provided to them by Zora Neal Hurston, against a realist documentary photospread of a vodou ritual.[23] Yet it, too, begins by speaking of "Christophe, black king of Haiti," who "was born a slave and his driving fury in life was to make his people respected… Today, as in the day of Christophe, the Negros of Haiti have no love of superimposed Western grandeur. They prefer the intricate, if primitive, culture that is their own." That Christophe, rather than L'Ouverture or Dessalines, is the familiar touchstone suggests that nonfilmic Anglophone zombie figurations before the Second World War highlight the Haitian Republic's challenge to models of linear nation-state development, more than standing as a reminder of Atlantic slavery or the Revolution's rebellion.

Furthermore, the complicated tripartite grouping of white creoles, the Black enslaved, and the mixed-race "free people of color" confuse the binary logics of nineteenth-century racial categories. For example, Austin conveys that zombification is not emancipation, but a competitive ruse to gain coerced labor from white slavers. The "trance-producing poison" was a device to steal the enslaved "because slaves, as valuable chattel, were carefully enumerated and a search would be instituted by the masters if a negro disappeared."[24] Consequently, a poison simulating death allowed for the enslaved to be buried in order for later exhumation. But this rising up did not result in emancipation. Instead it simply transferred the subject from being in bondage to a white master to being in bondage to a non-white one. In this sense, zombie curation before the mid-twentieth century locates a crisis of frustrated liberation, a failure of state equality, and liberalism's broken promise about the gradual expansion of suffrage and education's conscious-raising.

The first cluster of Hollywood films, from *White Zombie* (1932) to *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943), is substantively different from prior curations as they clearly select and disregard earlier elements in immediately noticeable ways. First, the Hollywood films distance themselves entirely from any historical recollection of the Republic and are as much influenced by *Jane Eyre* and *Dracula* (and their own filmic adaptions) as they are by African-transplanted rituals. Even in pre-code Hollywood, and its greater comfort in displaying the outrageous, the films are silent on the topics that appear in nearly every prior Anglophone discussion of vodou: human sacrifice ("the goat without horns") and cannibalism. Moreover, the films even abjure any mention of animal sacrifice or the use of snakes as a fetish for the spirits.

Second, the Hollywood films entirely silence the role of Haiti's disempowerment within the capitalist world-system as these films exclude the prior accounts' standard element of narrating the white narrator's encounter with Haitian political and social elites. For Hollywood, Haiti and its imagined surrogates are places without any kind of national government. This amnesia is intentional, since even William Seabrook's *The Magic Island* (1929) continually embeds his sensationalism with accounts of American military-backed capitalist interests in occupied Haiti. Austin's preceding essay piece for *The New England Magazine* focuses on President François Antoine Simon's government and ends with Simon telling Austin, "My policy is to encourage American capital."[25]

Rather than approach zombies from the perspective of the de facto zombification of the Haitian State by imperial interests, the pre–Second World War American cinema often uses the zombie to stage performances of gendered sexual violence as a way of raising concerns about the period's nascent feminism that may disrupt codes of racial segregation. The traffic in zombified women encodes a concern about "passing" (in both directions) across the color line in ways that social authorities cannot control. The 1936 film *Ouanga* situates zombie making as the result of a light-skinned plantation owner's anger at being refused by a white plantation owner, Adam Maynard (Philip Brandon), as a suitable wife. On board a ship returning from New York, where Klili Gordon (Fredi Washington) has presumably been passing as white, she is told by Maynard that he cannot marry her, since "you belong with your kind." Back on the island, Maynard's Black overseer Lestrange then courts Klili, justifying this advance because he notes that Maynard's new wife is "white." Klili replies, "I'm white, too, as white as she is." After insistently showing her face, hands, and chest to Lestrange (and the viewer), she asks if they look Black. Lestrange replies, "Your white skin doesn't change what is inside you—you're Black. You belong to

us. You belong to me." Lestrange, played by Jewish American Sheldon Leonard in a filmic act of passing, then forcefully grabs and kisses her. The ensuing plot involves Klili's response to her racial dismissal and gendered body's inequality by zombifying Maynard's wife in an act of revenge.

The context of American domestic racism sets the grounds for a counterpoint. In the same year as *Ouanga*, two Black American female anthropologists traveled to Haiti on fellowships to pursue ethnographic accounts of vodou, both of which include a discussion of zombies: Zora Neal Hurston, who would publish her accounts of oral folklore as *Tell My Horse* (1938), and Katherine Dunham, whose research would not find publication until her memoir, *Island Possessed* (1969). Both accounts break from Hollywood's concerns as they seek, to varying effect, to revalue the African cultural legacy without sublimating it to the normative embodied forms of white America.

While Hurston's now well-known writing has been criticized for insufficiently challenging her white readership, Dunham's work uses zombie citation as a means of foregrounding historical complexity and cultural variegation. Both a classically trained dancer and academic student of anthropologist Melville J. Herskovits, who provided Dunham with letters of introduction gained from his own field research that led to *Life in a Haitian Valley* (1937) and the two-volume *Dahomey: An Ancient West African Kingdom* (1938), Dunham would combine her awareness of dance and training in field-participant research to study African cultural pathways in the New World through kinetic performances.

Dunham's Haitian research would find its first public presentation, however, not in print form, but through the staging of African-influenced dance, in movies like *Stormy Weather* (1943) and Dunham's own choreographed theater pieces, like *L' Ag' Ya* (1938), a tale of a love triangle that includes a sequence involving a visit to the Zombie King. In this zombie curation, Dunham seeks to make a claim for American culture as noteworthy for its cultural heterogeneity, much as had Du Bois early in his career. The anthropological model that Dunham was trained within depended on a declension model of cultural transmission and loss, wherein African tribal practice becomes folklore in the ruralized Caribbean and then secularized in America, where urbanized Black populations maintain formal elements of movement, but have little sense of the initial spiritual context for African dance. In this, Dunham follows Herskovits' lifelong scholarly project that argued for continuities of African culture in the New World and against the notion that the enslaved were entirely voided of cultural memory by the Middle Passage and ensuing conditions of enslavement. In the larger context, the cultural pathways argument resists the mid-century's notion of pluralist

consensus, which claimed the United States as a "melting pot," wherein all prior (European and African) ethnic allegiances would melt into a monoculture.

Dunham's and Herskovits' research is positioned against liberal developmentalism, especially as Dunham's choreography from the 1930s argues for the value of combined and unevenness within the United States. In an account of the politics driving these pieces, Dunham argues that Caribbean immigration to the United States "has given African tradition a place in a large cultural body which it enjoys nowhere else," even if the originating logic of the dances is weakly held. For while African culture changes more in the United States than elsewhere, these alterations are to be celebrated as creating a "sound functional relationship towards a culture which is contemporary… The curious fact is that it will be the American Negro, in his relatively strong position as part of American culture, who, in the final analysis, will most probably guarantee the persistence of African dance traditions."[26]

Yet Dunham's performances of vodou dance for white Northern audiences are less concerned with questions of authenticity, since the staging involves Broadway-stylization of different African and Caribbean eurythmics; passing, as the erasure of difference; or even "cultural appropriation," than as a gesture embracing the articulation of differences within a complex whole. In formal terms, this ideal was achieved through the "Dunham technique," wherein each body part moves simultaneously and independently of one another, while creating an overarching physical gestalt. Just as African dance flourishes in an otherwise white dominant America, Dunham's own dance zombie figurations are not bound to an idealized territorial origin or unchanging folklore. Instead, the zombie in Dunham's hands makes sense only within its own historical conjuncture and location within the American metropole where the zombie stands as an exemplary figure that is both-and-neither of white America and Black Africa. While contemporary zombie figurations often seem unaware of their predecessors within Haiti, for Dunham, this does little to diminish their value.

By the late 1960s writing of *Island Possessed*, Dunham's cultural viewpoints have aligned more with the period's rise of political negritude and Black Power. The title of *Island Possessed* conveys three of the book's main themes: the legacy of the recently ended military occupation of Haiti by the Americans; the vodou culture of loa or spirit-god possession that pervades Haiti, especially in its rural regions; and, finally, the absence of sexual violence for a young, single Black American female, often traveling alone for late-night rituals, as if to counter Hollywood's obsessions with the targeted female body. Dunham argues, perhaps overly idealistically, that while Haiti has a long history of revolutionary upheaval,

it had little interpersonal violence or abuse of children before Pap Doc Duvalier and the rise of the Tonton Macoutes.

Dunham's dance anthropology inescapably led to her hearing accounts about zombies, about which she says there are two kinds. The first is of a "truly dead person who by the intervention of black magic has been brought back to life." To prevent this transformation, some family members keep watch over the recently deceased until the corpse disintegrates, while others "hammer a long iron nail into the forehead of a dead person so that all bodily functions are interrupted beyond revival," a feature that Romero seems to have recovered and reinserted into his own filmic curation of zombies.[27] The other kind of zombie is a person who is given a potion of herbs that simulates death in ways that allows them to be buried and later excavated, "not for evil deeds generally, but… serviceable work of tilling and cultivating fields." For the former, salt-eating results in disintegration, while for the latter, it acts as an antidote to the incapacitating poison.[28]

Hearing of a Bokor who makes zombies, mainly as a device to keep several women as compliant wives, Dunham travels to Leogane for a visit. In this account she presents a relatively different view of the cultural entanglements that have given rise to the island's zombielore. While Haiti is known for its nonbinary race-caste system involving the larger categories of whites, Blacks, and mulattos, Dunham suggests that even within the Black community there remain long-standing differences among those who are descended from Africans coming from Dahomey (present-day Benin), the Congo, and present-day Nigeria. While vodou rituals are ones from Dahomey and are associated with the Rada Iwa loa, the tales of zombification and cannibalism are features ascribed to Congo rituals involving the Petwo Iwa loa. Dunham's distinction may be supported by the common etymological citation of "zombie" as coming from *zumbi* and *nzambi* in Kikongo language, rather than the Fon spoken by those from Dahomey, and that a slave revolt in late seventeenth-century Brazil was led by Nganga Zumbi/Ganga Zumba, who claimed Kongo descent.

Dunham's purpose in relating the encounter seems to speak to the larger project of the memoir, written after Dunham had moved to Senegal. For while African religion becomes synthetic in the New World, where Dahomey rituals and iconography have fused with Catholic ones, Dunham suggests that there is little intermixture between different African pantheons, either in Africa or in the New World. Hence the contact and tensions between Congo and Dahomey contingents over social hierarchy *within* the Black Haitian community may be generating the circulation of zombie tales. In her account of the visit to

the Congo Bokor, Dunham unexpectedly flees the scene after being invited to participate in an initiation ritual. The reader is left to intuit that Dunham feared the onset of sexual violence that the memoir otherwise claims is absent in Haiti. In this sense, *Island Possessed* uses zombie curation less as a means of addressing white readers' fears or fantasies, or even to defend the contribution of Black Americans in the nation's patchwork, than to consider what might be the obstacles to a pan-Africanism conceptualized outside a narrowly defined national liberation movement. The zombie stands as an object question about what tensions exist that prevent the creation of a culture of the Global South and what pan-Africanism might look like outside the scarring legacy of the artificial national boundaries created by former imperial powers. It is within this space between Dunham's 1930s cultural front politics about American heterogeneity and a 1960s concern for a Black (BIPOC) International that one of Hollywood's most decolonial films appears, *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943).

Decolonizing the Cinema: I Walked with a Zombie

The RKO studio film, *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943), exemplifies one means of decolonizing the zombie by challenging liberal assumptions. This film belongs to a sequence of Val Lewton-produced and Jacques Tourneur-directed films, mainly shot either in the immediate months before the United States' formal entry into the Second World War or immediately afterward: *Cat People* (1942), *I Walked with a Zombie* (1943), and *The Leopard Man* (1943). These films share a similar structure as they present the encounter of three different knowledge formations: one by exotic/ethnic/indigenous peoples (Catholic Serbians/ Caribbean Blacks/New Mexican Latinx and Native Americans); the viewpoint of the assumed viewer, a white, Protestant American; and the expertise of a seemingly liberal figure of academic or professional knowledge. Each film begins with a "regular" white American (Oliver Reed in *Cat People* calls himself a "[normal] good, plain Americano") who has a naïve or incredulous encounter with a subaltern or foreign figure marked by a traumatic history of grieving, domination, and continued exclusion or marginalization from contemporary society.

Presented with an inexplicable event of horror, the normative character (and viewer) looks to the superiority of white professional authorities for explanation and social repair. In each film, however, these figures of epistemological authority are revealed to be not only simply wrong but, moreover, the source

of evil itself. In *Cat People*, the posh English-accented psychiatrist activates his Serbian patient's were-shifting with a lecherous kiss that is symbolically visualized as rape, as he had previously displayed the sword-cane used to stab and kill her by violently thrusting it in and out of its sheath. In *The Leopard Man*, the tweedy East Coast former professor and now ethnographic museum curator is revealed to be the serial murderer of ethnic women. In *I Walked with a Zombie*, the female physician, the widow of a missionary before her marriage to the plantation owner, claims that she alone is responsible for turning her adulterous daughter-in-law into a zombie. In all three films, the explanations by the exotics or subalterns who speak English with accents are revealed to be either true or more worthy of consideration than that of the morally depraved, but high status, white figure of knowledge and expertise.

The typical American's ultimate realization that they failed to protect others due to their own willingness to be led by familiar authorities also leaves them traumatized, based on a combination of the shattering of their faith in authority and recognition that this faith left them passive and thus also complicit in the enactment of evil. In each film, "horror" is used to disrupt the placid surface that disfigures unquestioned (racial) privilege. Taken as a unit, it is hard not to see these films by the Jewish Russian émigré Lewton and the French-born Tourneur as constituting a message to its audience, the "plain Americanos," that something quite bad is happening to exotic Europeans in the 1940s. While these foreigners seem odd, their (Jewish) suffering needs to be taken seriously, especially if domestic, liberal white elites do nothing.

While each of these films enacts the passage from incredulity to guilt, *I Walked with a Zombie* most thoroughly achieves its decolonial purpose of delegitimizing liberal knowledge, as it asks its audience not only to question white authority but to interrogate their own forms of cultural consumption and the ways in which the "zombie" of dulled sensation is not the Black Caribbean but themselves, the audience that may sit inert in the face of social catastrophe in the world beyond the cinema. The movie begins with a naïve Canadian nurse, Betsy, who is contracted to aide Jessica, an oddly affectless wife of a plantation owner on St. Sebastian, a fictional Caribbean island. While Betsy repeatedly fantasizes about the island, and its possibilities for her own romantic awakening with the plantation owner, she is repeatedly told, to no effect, about its foundation in slavery. The continuing presence of slavery's trauma is materially foregrounded, for instance, in the plantation owner's courtyard with a St. Sebastian-like statue that was the figurehead of the ship said to have brought over the initial slaves for the canefields. The lines between Betsy's erotic yearning and the Black

community's burden of slavery's wake cross paths when she takes Jessica to the island's vodou *houmfort* (or temple) for help in her patient's recovery.

Told by Black female servants how to arrive and move beyond a guarding zombie, Carrefour (Darby Jones), by wearing a pass token, Betsy guides Jessica through the canebrake, losing the pinned token (albeit to no real effect), before coming to a stylized performance of a sabre dance in a vodou ritual. As people line up to speak to the presumed Houngan into a hole through the temple's closed door, Betsy joins the queue. When she speaks to the opening, the door unexpectedly opens, and Betsy is pulled inside. There she sees Mrs. Rand, the physician mother to the plantation owner, who explains that she has been ventriloquizing vodou rituals to more successfully dispense Western medical advice to the island's Black population. While Betsy is talking to Rand, the sabre dancer pierces Jessica and, after seeing no blood or pain reflex, exclaims, "zombie." Hearing the commotion, Rand tells Betsy to take Jessica quickly back to the plantation. When the local authorities later investigate the presence of a white zombie, Rand confesses that she believes she is responsible for zombifying Jessica to prevent her from leaving one of Rand's sons for the other. While the film shows the sabre dancer later using a doll to pull Jessica to the houmfort, aided by Carrefour, it ends with Jessica's white lover taking her into the sea for what appears to be a murder-suicide. Although the shooting script concludes with a final scene in Montreal with Betsy now married to the widowed planter, the actual film ends on a downbeat and depressed voiceover that offers no happy end for the viewers.[29]

The film's choreographed vodou ritual makes it appear exotic, but the scene is not sensationalized. Lewton and Tourney researched vodou seriously from the sources available to them (the shooting script begins with the claim that it is "based on scientific information from articles") and hired Leroy Antoine, an editor of Haitian and vodou songs, as an advisor due to his own awareness and publication about vodou practice and music.[30] Indeed, vodou and zombification is calmly acknowledged as an unexceptional part of the contemporary fabric of Caribbean society. When the Rada drumming is first heard, it is explained to Betsy as "Saint Sebastian's version of the factory whistle," a means of calling workers to the cane mill. When Betsy appears with Jessica at the houmfort, the ceremony's participants barely notice their presence and make no effort to prevent their viewing. The threat in the film is not ultimately Carrefour, whose role is to *protect* the houmfort, but that someone *else* has created the Jessica zombie, and for what ends? While the film evades the history of Haiti by setting its action on a fictitious island, where no record of past Black rebellion exists,

it does elliptically implicate American militarized capitalism, as Mrs. Rand's name indicates the link between rule and knowledge. While the military-serving RAND corporation would not be created until after the Second World War, its abbreviation, "research and development," was already a prewar commonplace as the name for corporate scientific planning units.

I Walked with a Zombie's achievement lies not simply in its acknowledgment of African religion's dignity, the history of slavery, and the duplicity of white liberals but in its meta-reflexive intervention to its viewers about their own consumption. For the canebreak and houmfort sequence visualizes the act of going to a cinema itself, with Carrefour made to stand like a ticket-taker, Rand's dress suit (inappropriate for Caribbean heat) like that of a clichéd movie director, the door with a hole looks like a film apparatus with a director watching action through a seeing optic, and the sabre dancer literally ends the scene with a "cut" accompanied by a one-word exclamation.

Lewton uses horror not merely as a device to give visual recognition to the peoples who are often made to stand as mute icons of their own suffering but as a medium for the viewer to question their own mode of observation.[31] *I Walked with a Zombie* uses zombie curation both as a suggestive device about the looming Nazi threat and also as a way of encouraging the viewer to reflect on their own act of film-watching, especially the ethnographic newsreels that often prefaced the regular movie offering, and to decolonize their own minds by questioning the liberal expertise that they have taken for granted as commonsense. In this sense, a decolonial culture may free both the living and the undead from centrist liberalism's nightmare.

Notes

1 Couldry, *The Costs of Connection*, 76.
2 Couldry, *The Costs of Connection*, 76.
3 Couldry, *The Costs of Connection*, 78.
4 Couldry, *The Costs of Connection*, 80.
5 Couldry, *The Costs of Connection*, 81.
6 Lazarus, "The Fetish of 'the West' in Postcolonial Theory," 43–64.
7 Wallerstein, *After Liberalism*, 126–44. See also Wallerstein, *The Global Left* and *The Modern World-System IV*.
8 Wallerstein, *After Liberalism*, 130.
9 Wallerstein, *After Liberalism*, 72–93 and Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System IV*, 1–19.

10 Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System IV,* 15–16, 153, 168, 219–73.
11 Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System IV,* 146.
12 Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System IV,* 219–73.
13 Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System IV,* 55–6.
14 Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System IV,* 55–8, 267–9.
15 Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System IV,* 7.
16 Wallerstein, *After Liberalism,* 72–93.
17 Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System IV,* 252–71.
18 Lauro, *The Transatlantic Zombie*, 7, 50.
19 Kee, *Not Your Average Zombie*, 6.
20 Hutter, "Salt Is Not for Slaves," 14 (39–53).
21 Wallace, "I Walked with a Zombie," 95 (95–102).
22 Austin, "The Worship of the Snake," 170 (170–82).
23 Anon., "Black Haiti," 27 (27–31).
24 Austin, "Worship of the Snake," 174–5.
25 Austin, *The New England Magazine*, 5–6.
26 Dunham, "The Negro Dance," 225 (217–22).
27 Dunham, *Island Possessed*, 184.
28 Dunham, *Island Possessed*, 185.
29 Siodmak and Wray, *Shooting Script for I Walked with a Zombie*.
30 Siodmak and Wray, *Shooting Script for I Walked with a Zombie*; Bowman and Leroy, *The Voice of Haiti*.
31 Nemerov, *Icons of Grief*.

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