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## THE ZOMBIE DIASPORA: URBAN MANIFESTATIONS AND DANY LAFERRIÈRE'S *PAYS SANS CHAPEAU*

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**Abstract:** Zombies are not new additions to our cultural horror imaginary, and yet it would seem that in recent years their presence has become even more pervasive. Where they might once have been confined to the cinematic or literary monsters that drool and stagger their way across our screens and through our texts, the capitalist, globalised landscape has become populated with these creatures. They have come to occupy urban landscapes, whether in the form of protesters at the various Occupy movements throughout the West in the autumn of 2011, through advertising campaigns or the popular 'zombie walks.' Their presence in our cities is curious and problematic, as the contemporary zombie is an adaptation of the Haitian Voodoo zombi, which is itself of West African traditions. The scope of this article is less to trace the ontological origins of the zombie than it is to question the possible implications of its re-appropriation in North American and globalised landscapes coming, as it does, from the Haitian representation of both slave and slave rebellion. As a way of focusing this exploration of zombie lore, the present article will turn to Dany Laferrière's novel *Pays Sans Chapeau* (1996) [*Down Among the Dead Men*, 1997]. Laferrière's own migration, as an exile and immigrant, from Port-au-Prince to Montreal to Miami, informs this semi-autobiographical novel in which he returns to Haiti after 20 years abroad and encounters a landscape full of zombies. By teasing out the meaning of the beings Laferrière finds when he returns to his home, and their possible relationship to the monsters present in North American culture, this paper will come to a better understanding of the metamorphosis of the zombie in its travels from West African tradition through the Caribbean and into the nightmares of contemporary consumers.

**Key Words:** Zombie, Dany Laferrière, *Pays Sans Chapeau*, *Down Among the Dead Men*, zombie walk, diaspora

**Resumo:** Os zumbis não são novidade para o nosso imaginário cultural de terror e, no entanto, parece que nos últimos anos a sua presença se tornou ainda mais abrangente. No contexto capitalista e globalizado onde eles poderiam ter sido confinados ao universo cinematográfico ou literário, como monstros que babam e cambaleiam através de nossas telas e textos, sua presença se evidenciou. Eles passaram a ocupar paisagens urbanas, seja na forma de manifestantes nos vários movimentos da ocupação do Ocidente no outono de 2011, através de campanhas publicitárias ou dos populares *zombie walks*. Sua presença em nossas cidades é curiosa e problemática, o zumbi contemporâneo é uma adaptação do zumbi Vodou haitiano, próprio das tradições do oeste da África. O objetivo deste artigo não é rastrear as origens ontológicas do zumbi, mas questionar as possíveis implicações de sua reapropriação em paisagens norte-americanas e globalizadas, considerando a tradição haitiana escravocrata. Como forma de analisar essas representações da "tradição" zumbi, o presente artigo se voltará para o romance de Dany Laferrière, *Pays Sans Chapeau* (1996) [*Down Among the Dead Men*, 1997]. A experiência de imigração do próprio Laferrière, como exilado e imigrante, de Porto Príncipe para Montreal e daí para Miami, forma esse romance semiautobiográfico

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no qual ele retorna ao Haiti depois de 20 anos no exterior e encontra uma paisagem cheia de zumbis. Ao descobrir o significado dos seres que encontra quando o autor retorna a sua casa e sua possível relação com os monstros presentes na cultura norte-americana, este artigo chegará a uma melhor compreensão da metamorfose do zumbi desde a tradição da África Ocidental, passando pelo Caribe até chegar aos pesadelos dos consumidores contemporâneos.

**Palavras-chave:** Zumbi; Dany Laferrière; *Pays Sans Chapeau*; *Down Among the Dead Men*; *zombie walk*; diáspora.

**Resumen:** Los zombis no son una novedad para nuestro imaginario cultural de horror y, no obstante, parece que a lo largo de los últimos años su presencia ha alcanzado aún más espacio. En el contexto capitalista y globalizado donde hubieran podido haber sido confinados al universo cinematográfico o literario, como monstruos que baban y tambalean a través de nuestras pantallas y textos, su presencia se ha evidenciado. Ellos comenzaron a ocupar paisajes urbanos, sea en la forma de manifestantes en los varios movimientos de ocupación del Occidente el otoño de 2011, sea a partir de campañas publicitarias o de los populares *zombie walks*. Su presencia en nuestras ciudades es curiosa y problemática, el zombi contemporáneo es una adaptación del zombi vudú haitiano, propio de las tradiciones del oeste de África. El objetivo de este artículo no es rastrear los orígenes ontológicos del zombi, sino que cuestionar las posibles implicaciones de su reapropiación en paisajes norte-americanos y globalizados, considerando la tradición haitiana esclavista. Como forma de analizar tales representaciones de la “tradición” zombi, este trabajo se concentrará en la novela de Dany Laferrière, *Pays Sans Chapeau* (1996) [*Down Among the Dead Men*, 1997]. La experiencia de migración del propio Laferrière, como exiliado y emigrante, de Port-au-Prince para Montreal y de ahí para Miami, forma esta novela semi-autobiográfica en la que retorna a Haití después de 20 años en el exterior y encuentra un paisaje repleto de zombis. Al descubrir el significado de los seres que encuentra cuando el autor retorna a su casa y su posible relación con los monstruos presentes en la cultura norteamericana, lo que se pretende es obtener una mejor comprensión de la metamorfosis del zombi desde la tradición del oeste de África, pasando por el Caribe hacia llegar a las pesadillas de los consumidores contemporâneos.

**Palabras-Clave:** Zombi; Dany Laferrière; *Pays Sans Chapeau*; *Down Among the Dead Men*; *zombie walk*; diáspora.

## Zombie Invasion

Zombies are everywhere. In recent years these revenants have multiplied exponentially, with each representation, whether in film, television, novels or other outlets, spawning increasing numbers of zombie manifestations. As they lurch through our cultural landscape, they are a constant reminder of a cultural fascination with death and the fear of ‘un-death,’ that is to say of never actually dying, but rather being condemned to a liminal state of neither/nor.

The zombie<sup>2</sup> may appear to be a relatively contemporary monster, brought to cinematic life in the twentieth century when it emerged as a flesh-eater in George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) and subsequent films.<sup>3</sup> However, the living dead have been unable to rest in peace for centuries. Indeed, they are migratory figures with a long and difficult history. The zombi migration starts in Africa, and comes to Haiti and the Caribbean on the slave ships, where new interpretations begin to emerge before migrating north where its metaphors and representations have continued to proliferate. A product of syncretism, there is no one originary source for the Haitian zombi. In fact, while there is little agreement even on where the word zombi comes from, Hans W. Ackerman and Jeanine Gauthier have noted that there is adequate evidence to suggest that several African ideologies could be the source, or that it could even derive from the French 'ombres' or shadows.<sup>4</sup> What can be agreed upon is that the belief in a being whose body had been separated from its soul was widespread throughout many of the peoples who would be brought to the Caribbean as slaves. Further, as Ackerman and Gauthier again point out, the idea that the soul could be not only separated from the body but that one or the other could be controlled by another person is found in the 'duppy' or the 'soucliant' of other Caribbean islands (ACKERMAN; GAUTHIER, 1991, p. 484). The authors also note that it is upon being brought as slaves to the islands and being forced to at least nominally adopt Catholicism that the belief systems of the various slaves that were

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<sup>2</sup> The various spellings used throughout this article attempt to articulate three different iterations of the zombi/zombie/zombi/e. Zombie will be used to refer to the mediatic creature in contemporary culture, while zombi designates the Haitian or Vodun zombi. As I hope the text will make clear, I use zombi/e to refer to those the narrator, Vieux Os, finds upon his return, the beings who are, like the Diasporan narrator, neither the one nor the other.

<sup>3</sup> George Romero's zombie films include: *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), *Day of the Dead* (1985) and a variety of remakes.

<sup>4</sup> Hans W. Ackerman and Jeanine Gauthier "The Ways and Nature of the Zombi" *The Journal of American Folklore*. 104 (1991): 467. This article is one of the most extensive in terms of the compilation of religions that believed in the possibility of reanimating a corpse. Consider also Kyle William Bishop's *American Zombie Gothic: The Rise and Fall (and Rise) of the Walking Dead in Popular Culture* (Jefferson, NC, USA: McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2009), for a comprehensive look at the ways in which the zombi infiltrated North American popular culture to become the zombie.

brought into contact with each other, began to form what is now recognised as the Voodoo religion. From the beginning, then, the zombi as a cultural figure is characterised by its adaptability, the capacity to take on the form required for its perseverance.

Thus, the increasing visibility of the zombie within Western culture reflects a widening appropriation of its form: this is seen not only in cinema, literature and popular culture outputs, but also in philosophical discourse, advertising, economics, and protest movements. As zombies are made to fit a range of individual purposes, we see that they fit into a history of cultural modes being exported and co-opted in order to serve the primary cultural demands, with each instantiation generating its own meanings. Paul Gilroy, for example, argues that

The style, rhetoric and moral authority of the civil rights movement and of Black Power suffered similar fates [to that of reggae]. They too were detached from their original ethnic markers and historical origins, exported and adapted, with evident respect but little sentimentality, to local needs and political climates. (GILROY, 1993, p. 82-83)

The zombie trajectory demonstrates an equally tense metamorphosis, responding to the various ‘needs’ and ‘political climates’ in its reterritorializations. Moving equally between what Wade Davis (1998) identifies as the Haitian zombi’s role as a means of social control, to a monster that can carry the metaphorical weight of ‘zombie banks,’ ‘zombie computers’ or the more light-hearted ‘zombie walks.’ Indeed, the flesh-eating zombie image has become so pervasive it has been used as inspiration for Thierry Mugler’s Fall 2011 men’s fashion collection,<sup>5</sup> FNAC, a leading book and music store chain in Spain used the problematic slogan ‘Zombie Pride

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<sup>5</sup> The much touted ‘zombie boy’ was one of the principal images for the fall/winter 2011-2012 menswear collection, see: <<<http://www.vogue.co.uk/fashion/autumn-winter-2011/mens/thierry-mugler/full-length-photos/gallery/567760>>>

Days' to sell books and DVDs,<sup>6</sup> and even the American Center for Disease Control and Prevention has used the impending zombie apocalypse as a way of raising awareness about health and safety measures during a disaster.<sup>7</sup> Zombies really are invading.

Thus, the zombi/e can be read as a figure that is constantly shifting, impossible to pin down, and can be seen to carry an especially heavy metaphorical burden. When appropriated for such a myriad of representational uses, it is no wonder that the zombie is often lumbering, stumbling, and decomposing, as it drags its ever heavier corpse through the urban landscape; through novels and film, television and music videos, advertising and even protest movements, it is difficult to avoid zombies. As we are bombarded with images of them, we are often told that we, the consumers of these images in this neoliberal, globalised moment, are the zombies, mindlessly feeding from the capitalist global machine. As A. Loudermilk has argued,

the postmodern zombie's desire to consume consume consume (flesh) (thereby infecting all humankind) is not so different from the capitalist consumer's desire for more more more goods, wealth, resources, status symbols (exploiting peoples globally and polluting the planet). (LOUDERMILK, 2003, p. 88-89)

At the same time, it is arguably the system itself that is mindless and repetitive, advocating consumption without discretion, feeding on anything it can and producing nothing more than the reproduction of itself in increasingly monstrous proportions: this too is the zombie. As Jamie Peck has noted, while it is

“Dead but dominant,” neoliberalism may indeed have entered its zombie phase. The brain has apparently long since ceased functioning, but the limbs are still moving, and many of the defensive reflexes seem to be working too. The living dead of the free-market revolution continue to walk the earth, though with each resurrection their decidedly uncoordinated gait becomes even more erratic.(PECK, 2010, p. 109)

<sup>6</sup> <<<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1wCeJ4EIBrw>>>, and repeated in 2012 <http://tiendas.fnac.es/bulevar/%C2%A1cuenta-atras-para-la-semana-del-orgullo-zombie-no-te-pierdas-nuestras-actividades/>

<sup>7</sup> <<<http://www.cdc.gov/phpr/zombies.htm>>>

Peck's analysis argues that it is neoliberalism that has become the zombie, continuing to reproduce itself but only as a pseudo-living entity. Christopher Moreman expands on this idea, suggesting that we can see

the life-in-death of the zombie [as] a nearly perfect allegory for the inner logic of capitalism, whether this be taken in the sense of the exploitation of living labour, the deathlike regimentation of factories and other social spaces, or the artificial, externally driven stimulation of consumers.(MOREMAN, 2010, p. 269)

The ceaseless need for the zombie to consume human flesh is frightening due in part to the needlessness of the consumption. And it is in this needlessness, this eating without necessity or a hunger that can be satiated, that the zombie comes to be linked to the post-modern consumer, whose greed for goods without generating any positive growth, symbolises the monster.<sup>8</sup> These somewhat conflicting but not mutually exclusive ideas form a part of the monster itself – its dual status as not dead but not alive, not quite ourselves but not quite 'Other' – are what make it such a successful metaphor.

Dany Laferrière's novel *Pays sans chapeau* (1996), quite deliberately asks questions about what it means to have this monstrous being increasingly present in our urban and cultural landscapes. While set in Haiti, the novel makes explicit the linkages between the movement and transformation of the figure from an aspect of Voodoo culture to one of Western popular culture, interrogating the significance of its ubiquity. As a novel that narrates the protagonist's homecoming to Haiti after a twenty year exile in Montreal,<sup>9</sup> Laferrière's text links the Diasporan subject and the figure of the zombi so as to highlight the migrant nature of the zombi/e, and conversely the zombified nature of those of us who participate in the consumption of these figures.

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<sup>8</sup> <<<http://www.channel4.com/news/zombie-nation-economy-films-popular-culture-horror-tv>>>

<sup>9</sup> The protagonist was exiled because the dictatorial government of Jean-Claude Duvalier, 'Bébé Doc', sought to arrest him for publishing anti-government tracts. This exile mimics both that of the narrator's father, and of Laferrière himself.

Alternating between chapters entitled “Dream Country” and “Real Country”, the novel tells how the narrator, Vieux Os, returns to his mother and aunt in Port-au-Prince and attempts to write about the experience. Bound up within his narrative, which leads him through the streets of the city as though it were a maze that, if untangled, would help him understand where he now fits in to his place of birth, the narrator must confront the ‘living dead’ who now populate much of the landscape. Over and over he is told that the two worlds, this life and the next, overlap, and to fully understand himself and his place, he must undergo a living death himself, come face to face with the gods, and then return. Mirroring this trip to the afterworld is his previous forced migratory movement from Haiti to Montreal and back to Haiti, begging the question of whether there is not, perhaps, more than one country of the dead.

Vieux Os’ ‘discovers’<sup>10</sup> and interrogates the zombi/e he finds populating Haiti as a liminal figure, one that is neither completely of the Voodoo tradition nor entirely globalised and commercialised. This zombi/e speaks to him of rebellion and resistance, but also resignation and death. It represents the past he left behind and the present he is having difficulty reconciling with his memory. This interrelation between past and present points at two influential lines of flight, with the zombi, like the narrator, moving first north before returning, as a figure marked by its peregrinations. In fact, I would argue that the zombi/e is as much a migratory figure as the novel’s protagonist. As it adopts instantiations within each of its new contexts, its partial function as a reflection of the society it settles into is one of its strengths.

As a way of teasing out some of these meanings and metaphors, this article will follow Vieux Os as he attempts to come to terms both with himself and the zombi/es he encounters on his trip home to Port-Au-Prince. As he reconciles his own travels and becomings with the people and places he left behind, I shall interrogate his

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<sup>10</sup> Despite the colonial connotations of this word, I am consciously using it as a means of evoking the complex relationship the narrator, a man who has had some measure of success as the ‘wealthy’ Diasporan returnee, experiences with his place of birth and the re-encounter with his family and friends after such a long time away.



representation of the Haitian zombi at the end of the twentieth century, and consider the ramifications this has for the zombies we now find haunting our televisions, other media outlets and the cultural imaginary.

### **Of Metaphors and Movement**

The novel is predicated on the constant movement of the narrator as he traverses the various landscapes, and in his research he must learn to navigate what he calls the 'dreamed' and the 'real' as he delves into the story of the zombi/e that currently occupies so many of the spaces he finds on his return. It lends itself to my interrogations of the zombi/e because the migratory path followed by the narrator mirrors part of the flight path of the zombi in its traversing of cultural spaces and its metamorphosis into the zombi/e. Characterised by Jana Evans Braziel as a migratory text, in *Pays Sans Chapeau* the narrator becomes, for her, a trans-American nomad, who moves along the dual paths of deterritorialization and reterritorialization (BRAZIEL, 2003, p. 237). These become key concepts both for Vieux Os, for his own understanding of Haiti, and for the zombi/es in and outside of the text as they are engaged in the dual process of renegotiating their cultural milieus and being renegotiated by them. I would argue that just as Vieux Os is a nomad, so too is the zombi, as it becomes reterritorialised through its constant movements. Just as it is impossible for Vieux Os to return to the Haiti he left behind, as neither he nor the country are the same, so too does the zombi shift on its signifying moors as it moves from place to place, both adapting to, and in some ways altering, its new territories. The zombi as a cultural figure of Haiti becomes, as we shall see, something quite different in its reterritorialised form as the zombie of contemporary consumer culture, and something quite different again when Vieux Os encounters it upon his return. This zombi/e, this being that is neither/nor, that is both/and, blends alters and adapts the meanings of resistance and consumption that it signifies in its other contexts.

Vieux Os returns to Port-Au-Prince after his exile as a published writer who has come not only to visit his family and friends but also to write a new novel about what

he finds there, a novel that he hopes will help him better understand the country he left behind and the implications that leaving it have had for him. As he tries to write about what he describes as his 'relation with this terrible country, what it has become, what I have become, what we have all become, and of this endless deceptive movement that cheats us into believing that we're going somewhere' (LAFERRIÈRE, 1997, p. 31), movement becomes a key image of the text as the narrator learns that 'whatever road you take it will always lead you somewhere' (LAFERRIÈRE, 1997, p. 198). Vieux Os must come to terms with his own movements, through time and space, and he must consider how these movements have altered his relationships with his friends and family and with his country. The focus of his authorial inquiry becomes not only the living and the dead, but also the worlds that both inhabit, as well as how and where these two worlds meet. It is worth pointing out that Vieux Os quite literally translates to 'Old Bones.' The implication that his bones should somehow be older than the rest of him, that they carry with them a history, life, something, which his flesh, perhaps, does not, is provocative in its suggestion that this very material and corporeal part is older than the rest of him. It is interesting that it is not his soul or mind that is old, instead it is the skeleton, around which the rest of his physical being is constructed and that which will outlast the more fleshy parts after death. His interest in the zombi/e and the afterlife can be related to his own embodiment as someone whose being is characterised as potentially at odds with his appearance or lived experience. It would seem that his very name suggests a link to the frame which underlies the appearance, and also the old and the new as well as the need of negotiating and deconstructing these binaries.

Through wandering the city and through the continual warnings from friends and family to beware 'the zombie army' who number in 'the tens of thousands,' he encounters a myriad of zombi/es, both in the flesh and in the imaginary. His mother tells him that 'The voodoo priests have scoured the country from north to south, east to west. They dug up every cemetery in this country. They woke the dead who were resting in peace' (LAFERRIÈRE, 1997, p. 42). Moving through Port-au-Prince

therefore becomes a dangerous game wherein the narrator must identify and avoid those who have become zombis, and later undergo a trip to the underworld that threatens to destabilise his understanding of the boundaries between life and death, between this world and the next. He comes to question his own ability to recognise the living dead as they walk amongst those who do not yet occupy this liminal space. Further, he comes to question whether the two worlds, that of the living and that of the dead, are really so far apart.

The unsettling mass of undead that he encounters are beings that have been denied a full death and become enslaved to the government's fight against Western occupation forces. Rather than the individual zombi, created for the purpose of working long after death, what Vieux Os finds is a country that has been zombified. Neither one nor the other but an amalgam of the zombi and the zombie, the hordes he finds are enslaved by the conditions that make sustaining life almost impossible, and also resisting and finding ways around the impossibility of their existence. These zombi/es are direct descendents of the figure that Christopher Moreman identifies as originating:

when slaves of wide-ranging African backgrounds were brought together in what became the hub of slave-trade – Haiti. Voodoo [and the zombie] resulted from an amalgam of beliefs and traditions of a people who were at once forced to accept, and yet collectively rejected, a colonial religion of oppression. (MOREMAN, 2010, p. 2)

From its very beginnings it appears as a figure of adaptation, syncretism and the Diaspora. Moreman's zombi is not the one we are used to seeing, spread across the screens of the globalised world, but rather, a body deprived of its soul, a corpse resurrected by a Voodoo priest, or Bokor, generally for the purpose of exacting slave labour from the reanimated corpse.

Far from the flesh-consuming monster that infects those it bites, the zombi, as Sarah Lauro and Karen Embry acknowledge, is the slave's nightmare, as if slavery weren't nightmarish enough, condemned to toil indefinitely, even after death, it 'only symbolically defies mortality' as the soul can neither move to the next world nor

properly inhabit this one (LAURO; EMBRY, 2008, p. 97). Yet, even this symbolic defiance grants the zombi some revolutionary potential. The enslaving of the body by the Voodoo priest raised fears of massive hordes of ‘rebellious slaves depicted [...] as nearly supernatural’ (LAURO; EMBRY, 2008, p. 98), who were not only an integral part of the Haitian revolution,<sup>11</sup> but also returned during the American occupation of Haiti in the early twentieth century. Furthermore, the Voodoo priest garnered fear as a figure who navigated both the land of the living, and that of the dead. While Voodoo, zombis and the Bokors who raise them would come to find a Diasporan home in some parts of the south-eastern United States, most notably in New Orleans, it was the fear they generated when brought to cinemas (for example: *White Zombie*, 1932; *I Walked With a Zombie*, 1943) that would propel them into North American nightmares.<sup>12</sup> Only then would they become the metaphor for capitalist consumption and the nightmarish monster that we now recognise.

When Vieux Os returns to Port-Au-Prince at the end of the twentieth century what he finds is that there is a horde of zombi/es threatening to outnumber the living. He is informed that much of this zombification has to do with the American presence in Haiti. It is in response to this presence that ‘the old president threatened to use [an army of zombies] against the Americans if they ever dared set foot on Haitian soil’ (LAFERRIÈRE, 1998, p. 54). Where, Vieux Os asks, is this army, given that the Americans and the United Nations have a continued presence in the country? ‘They were there,’ his mother answers. ‘They were awaiting their orders. But in the end, the old president signed an agreement with the young American leader. The American army would occupy the country during the day. The zombie army would have domain over the night’ (LAFERRIÈRE, 1998, p. 54). This division of geo-political order not into space, but into time suggests that space, place, and location are all too highly

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<sup>11</sup> The Haitian slave revolt of 1791-1804 is said to have begun with a Vodun ceremony.

<sup>12</sup> The films cited are some of the first to bring the zombi to North American cinemas. These beings did not feed off of the flesh of others, and their genesis could be traced back to the Bokor who created them. Romero’s films, when they brought the living dead to the screen (not using the term zombie for his creatures), introduced significant changes to the zombi, to become a flesh-eater or unknown origin, a monster that moved en masse and was uncontrollable.

visible, too easy to see who controls what and just as time is less visible, so too is the zombi difficult to distinguish from the living. Indeed, the zombi/es in the novel who rebel against the American presence are almost indistinguishable from the rest of the population; the 'living' population. As Vieux Os looks at the people who fill the streets of Port-Au-Prince and the country-side surrounding it, he wonders whether those he sees, emaciated with eyes bugging out of bony faces, covered in a fine dust, are not all, already, zombi/es. He begins to understand how his now dead father could claim that Haiti is 'one big cemetery' (LAFERRIÈRE, 1998, p. 192), and that 'everyone is dead in Haiti. There's just dead men and zombies' (LAFERRIÈRE, 1998, p. 191). Having been starved by years of famine, he sees no other way they could possibly have survived in a country where there was no food or potable water.

For Vieux Os, this zombification is both a source of fear and of interest; the latter is evidenced by the international scientific community that descends on the small town of Bombardopolis in the north-west of the country. He learns that the inhabitants of this small village need only eat once every three months. The Americans agree to finance the permanent research station in Bombardopolis, to find out why the people are impervious to hunger. The foreign interest is not due to a desire to save the zombified from their un-dead fate, but rather to discover how they have managed to defy famine which, as Vieux Os' friend informs him, 'remains the most effective weapon' according to the CIA (LAFERRIÈRE, 1998, p. 79). If a small village in Haiti can threaten to bring down the agro-food 'industry, which would be a death blow for capitalism itself' (LAFERRIÈRE, 1998, p. 79), then the zombi/e becomes yet another weapon against imperial influences. Indeed, while it might seem logical that a being that need not eat would be a desirable entity for the capitalist market – a worker that does not need to stop to rest or replenish – in its peregrinations north, the monstrous body is morphed into one that must continuously consume. It becomes the capitalist dream, if somewhat nightmarish to others, of a being who does nothing but consume and produce more consumers. The inhabitants of Bombardopolis are neither zombi nor zombie but, like the returned Diasporan, both

and neither. As beings who eat so seldom, as beings who defy the capitalist imperative to consume, they resemble the zombi. They are the object of American study, and yet they resist becoming objects of knowledge. These are not, however, zombis enslaved to a master nor are they the consuming zombies but a figure that rejects the enslavement of consumption (of both food and knowledge) that the American presence signals. They are also the zombie, the horde and multitude which threatens to annihilate everything in its path, in this case, famine and the living.

As much as the scientists and linguists and anthropologists who come to study the zombi/e in Bombardopolis may be hoping for answers, the zombi/e, in its myriad manifestations, defies scientific knowledge. It is this aspect, this unknowability, the impossibility of locating the source, of discovering how it happened and why, that makes it both such a frightening monster and an apt metaphor for resistance. The zombi/e does not, cannot, be integrated or understood by the system; it can only disrupt it.

Even in its more recent representations, attempts to discover the source or a cure for the zombie plague are generally fruitless: armed resistance and evasion are often the best techniques for avoiding zombification. While we may be afraid of zombies, because their infectiousness represents the risk of becoming one of them, this is certainly not the case for Vieux Os' zombi/es. He discovers that it was not so much the zombi that was a source of fear, even though its iteration en masse as a horde without individual autonomy, obeying the orders of the omnipresent master, is worrying. Rather, it is the zombi master, the Bokor who has the power to zombify and command, who is truly alarming.

David Inglis points out that, for those who viewed the first zombi movies in North America, such as *White Zombie* (1932) or *I Walked With a Zombie* (1943), what was most terrifying was the possibility of a reverse slavery, where the Bokor could take control of the white body and use it for its own purposes (INGLIS, 2008). Ann Kordas reaffirms this, stating that: 'The object of terror [...] was not the black zombie. The truly terrifying creature was the zombie master, the creator and

controller of zombies’ (KORDAS, 2011, p. 21). For Sarah Lauro and Karen Embry, within the shift from zombi master to the flesh-eating zombie as the source of fear, it is possible to ‘read the revision of the zombie qua capitalist as yet another imperialist act – one that dispels the dark fury of the slave and, in turning the iconography inside out, makes the zombie’s insatiable hunger figure the white consumer instead, effectively swallowing the slave body as the icon is reappropriated’ (LAURO; EMBRY, 2008, p. 97). It is curious that, for the more cinematic, flesh-eating zombie the sole imperative is to consume, and to reproduce through this consumption. This contrasts sharply with the Haitian zombi, including the version Vieux Os finds, for whom eating is an unnecessary task at best, and not one they feel compelled to engage in. As previously mentioned, it is this reconfiguration of the abject creature, from one that ceaselessly toils and never consumes to one that never toils yet ceaselessly consumes that speaks volumes of its deterritorialisation and power of metamorphosis. Within this movement, Vieux Os’ zombi/es come to represent yet a further iteration of the figure.

### **Diasporic negotiation**

Through their movement and migration, zombies have become, as Colin Davis argues, ‘in some sense diasporic creatures.’ They progress with ‘a forward drive which disturbs, deranges and disseminates the settled knowledge from which they set out’ (DAVIS, 2006, p. 346), and engage in the deterritorialisation similar to that of Vieux Os. After exile from Haiti to the North, Vieux Os is unknowingly re-transmitted back to the island, and the present trip home is only a corporeal iteration of a journey his image has made many times. As his mother gossips with a neighbour he overhears that his appearances on Canadian television have been broadcast on Haitian T.V. and that the people in Haiti have been watching him for years. In an interview with Ghila Sroka, Laferrière describes the autobiographical moment that informs this part of the narrative. He recounts how: ‘For many years, the Haitians saw me without my seeing them’ and that:

I was present and absent at one and the same time. Come to analyse [...] a country of ghosts, I realised that I myself was a ghost, because all of this time I had been present in this country without physically being there, I was an image. (SROKA, 2010, p. 65)

The reception of the narrator's image begins to take on a life of its own, so much so that he hears the same neighbour warn his mother that he must be a millionaire who sells drugs, otherwise he would not be on television (LAFERRIÈRE, 1997, p. 205).

The cross-cultural and cross-geographical transmission of his image opens up both a space for misreading and misinterpretation, as well as a space for becoming and negotiation, reflected in the movement and metaphor of the image of the zombi/e. This misrecognition runs throughout the novel, whether it is the protagonist's inability to distinguish the zombi/es that surround him from the living, or the ways in which his friends and family members have changed, and even in the ways in which he himself has changed, from the young man he was when he left to the person he has become. If part of his project in returning is to reacquaint himself with the people and places he left behind, and translate these changes into the novel he is writing, then of equal importance is the process of negotiating the rift, both geographical and psychological, between who he was, who he believes himself to be, and how others have interpreted his image and absence. For Vieux Os, as for many of the people of the Diaspora, the return requires a negotiation between the new and the old. He must 'learn to breathe again, and feel, see and touch things differently' (LAFERRIÈRE, 1997, p. 205).

Much like the zombie, the cross-cultural movement of the televised presence of Vieux Os is received and projected back, and this process necessarily involves a renegotiation of pre-existing ideas. Upon his physical return, the narrator must confront the possibility that he doesn't 'understand anything about what's happening in this country, and that [he's] completely disconnected after twenty years abroad' (LAFERRIÈRE, 1997, p. 177). Just as Vieux Os is neither the same person he was



when he left, nor the interpretation that viewers make from the televised presence, but rather something that retains parts of these components, the zombie is not a static entity either. It has been altered and manipulated in much the same way as the narrator; parts being added, changed and left behind as the body traverses various cultural landscapes. In a phrase that hints at the tension between the zombi and the zombie, Vieux Os' friend tells him to take care, for the Haitian 'citizens appreciate the well-maintained flesh of the man who has lived abroad for long periods of time' (LAFERRIÈRE, 1997, p. 174). This configuration makes visible not only the extreme hunger of the Haitian people, that they would engage in cannibalism, but also asserts the link between the zombie as flesh-eater and the zombi/e as resisting starvation.

Without a doubt, the zombie we now recognise from contemporary media is, as Lauro and Embry point out, 'a colonial import: [that] infiltrated the American cultural imagination' (LAURO; EMBRY, 2008, p. 96). It has, however, been altered along the way, in what they read as an imperialist act which appropriates the zombi for North American and later globalised markets. In so doing, it takes up the monster which fought for colonial liberation and resisted the American occupation only to re-enslave it to the servitude of the great commercialising machine. The multiple iterations of the zombie, and the ways in which it adapts, crosses borders, and insinuates itself into the cultural milieu are part of its power as a creature that can haunt us. The zombie body, which infects all those it bites, and from this bite creates even more zombies, works as a metaphor for the zombie as an iconic monster which creates ever more images and iterations of itself. Stephanie Boluk and Wylie Lenz argue that '[i]ts patterns of repetition and recirculation are seen not only in the zombie body's infectiousness, but in the recurring return of the living dead, the return of the return as seen in the serial repetition of the zombie in many interconnected sequels, series and spinoff' (BOLUK; LENZ, 2011, p. 3). With each iteration the desire for more is fed but not satiated, leading to increasing numbers of films, books and representations.

Arguably, the flesh-eating zombie has little in common with the zombi/e that Vieux Os encounters in his trips both to Haiti and to the underworld. However, it

would be short-sighted to assume that the influence of the zombi/e works only in one direction. As Steven Shaviro reminds us: ‘the periphery indulges in a sort of reverse exoticism, as it appropriates the mythology of the imperial center’ (SHAVIRO, 1998, p. 289). Thus, for the being brought first in the slaving ships from Africa, propagated in the colonial islands, and that eventually found its way into the cultural machinery of the North, this is not a one-way journey. The zombi migrates, traverses spaces and places, and slowly works its way back. Vieux Os, in writing his zombi/e story, participates in its replication and migration.

### **Replication and return**

Critics do not always acknowledge the performative interrelationship between zombi and zombie. Lauro and Embry, for example, argue that the Haitian zombi ‘is performing someone else’s labor, more like a machine, while the [flesh-eating] zombie labors for no one and produces only more zombies’ (LAURO; EMBRY, 2008, p. 99). However, I would suggest that as the monstrous zombie engages in the recirculation, repetition and reproduction of itself, it does indeed labour for others; most specifically for the capitalist market which benefits from its constant, immutable and ever haunting imagery.

The zombie invasion, however, is not limited to marketing ploys that will feed the capital machine. Interestingly, they have also been used as representations that seek to disrupt the mindless consumption for which they have become a persuasive metaphor. Sasha Cocarla has investigated one of these potential invasions, namely the ‘zombie walk’ in urban spaces. She asks what it means to introduce the un-dead into the city, and suggests that ‘[b]y bringing the living dead into spaces occupied by the living, the zombie walk participants can create questions about who is allowed to occupy which spaces and when “others” are permitted in these zones’ (COCARLA, 2011, p.126). Reminiscent of how Vieux Os’ mother describes the division of Port-Au-Prince into zones occupied by night or day by the allocated army, zombie walks seem to beg the question of who has the right to certain public or urban spaces, and

how bodies interact within them. As the zombi/e comes to be a pervasive figure in the city of Port-au-Prince and in the entire country, Vieux Os comes to recognise that what the urban zombi/e presence disrupts is his own feeling of freedom, his ability to navigate the urban landscape.

Cocarla further asserts that part of ‘the purposeful disruption of the zombie walk – the performance of the living dead in public areas – affords the opportunity to reclaim urban spaces and disrupt dominant ideologies, even if momentarily’ (COCARLA, 2011, p.114). Her argument, and the use of the word occupy in relation to the zombie,<sup>13</sup> is certainly centred along lines of economic or social imbalance. It would be remiss, however, not to mention the work done by Jen Rinaldi on urban spaces and the zombie, and her assertion that should there be a zombie apocalypse, the bodies most likely to initially survive the zombie attack are the supposedly ideal bodies, the physically fit and athletic. She argues that part of this is not necessarily due to any zombie fighting skills inherent in physical ability or fitness, but rather because cities and spaces are organised around the able body, permitting those who fit the ideal to better navigate and move through these spaces (RINALDI, 2011, p. 13). By interrupting the flow of traffic, and the speed of urban life, zombie walks can also draw attention to the way in which urban spaces are designed.

In contrast to the zombi/es Vieux Os finds in Port-au-Prince, when zombie walks or zombie protestors take to the street, it is not as figures that occupy a tenuous existence between life and death. Rather, our urban zombies are very much ‘alive.’ By which I don’t mean the obvious, that the people dressed as zombies are alive, but rather that the metaphor that drags itself through the urban landscape is one that continues to grow and change and take on new meanings. One of these new meanings is addressed in the analysis of the use of zombie attire by protestors as part of the Occupy movement in New York in the autumn of 2011 in which Andrea

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<sup>13</sup> Occupy, the American occupation force in Haiti, and use of the zombi to counter that and now it’s use as an occupying force, though also the way in which the zombi occupies Port-au-Prince and Haiti, as forcing out the American presence, or at least making it uncomfortable.

E. Shaw remarks that '[i]t is significant and in some ways ironic that zombies should become the icon for an "occupation" force, given Haiti's troubled history with America and Haiti's own occupation by American military forces' (SHAW, 2011). Certainly, those dressed as zombies were drawing most strongly on the imagery of the cinematic zombie, with its lust for human flesh and its insatiable hunger, converting the desire for bodies into a desire for money and power. Shaw further argues that, after the zombi was used as a powerful figure in Haiti's protest against American occupation, it is fitting that the zombi should now come to 'occupy' part of the United States. She notes that '[t]he protesters are effectively invoking Haiti's history and culture by way of zombie iconography to mark their stringent opposition to contemporary fiscal policies that have facilitated corporate greed and corruption' (SHAW, 2011). Similarly, Christopher Moreman argues that even Romero's zombies 'emerge out of the counter-cultural revolution, during a period in which all forms of authority were being overturned' (MOREMAN, 2010, p. 272), suggesting that while the zombi may have become modified as it migrated North to become a flesh eater, its role as a figure of resistance remains. This appropriation as part of the Occupy movement becomes yet one more manifestation of the mutable nature of this monster. Just as there is no one way to read the zombie, there's no one way to read what the protestors were doing when they adopted this form. For Shaw it is 'using the supernatural to discredit the oppressor (corporate America) by designating that entity as undead — as a subject or practitioner of sorcery, which has led to its cannibalistic onslaught on the American economy' (SHAW, 2011). On the one hand, then, corporate America becomes a monster that must be beheaded, but one that is also unaware, unconscious of what it is doing. It is an amalgamated masse of undead, involved in the repetition of behaviours it seeks neither to understand nor even to recognize its own involvement in the propagation of its actions.

There is, however, another way to read this manifestation of the undead. Loudermilk suggests, that '[t]he essence of capitalism, after all, is zombification of citizens into consumers' (LOUDERMILK, 2003, p. 96). As previously mentioned, it is

possible to read both the system and those who live in it as zombies. However, I think the protestors seem to want to break with this idea, choosing not to identify themselves with zombies, not be seen as passive creatures but to resist becoming what Moreman terms 'the de-humanized person oppressed by anonymous corporate overlords' (MOREMAN, 2010, p. 265). By acting out, arguing that it is the 'anonymous corporate overlords' who are in fact the dehumanized zombies the protestors try to resist becoming zombies themselves. For the zombi/es in Laferrière's novel, it would seem that rebellion and resistance have come full circle, not eating, not relying on the capitalist machine is the threat that they now pose.

It would seem that in moving off the screen and into the spaces that surround us the zombie has morphed yet again. These new manifestations bear a striking resemblance to the zombis who began the migration into the North American cultural landscape, used as they are to underscore not only the vast difference between the ruling class and those being ruled, but also as a means of drawing attention to the ways in which the present system is failing the vast majority of people. Needless to say, the zombie is a highly lucrative entity for popular culture markets. The image of the zombie earns its keep as it fills out the novels, television programs, films and other products available for consumers. To appropriate it, then, to use the zombie as a way of criticising the system that capitalises on the popularity of this monster suggests that the zombi has been reterritorialised again, has become yet another iteration of itself.

If the Haitian zombi was a way of resisting the imposition of the Catholic religion of the colonisers and slave owners on various religions that came with slaves from Africa, and turning it into a form of resistance (which as we have seen, was not unproblematic, straightforward or even always resistant), then what now exists, in the streets of many of the world's capital cities, is a further metamorphosis of this resistant being. As the novel finishes and Vieux Os begins to write the story of his return, one of the Voodoo gods explains to him the way in which the zombi has survived, as been able to change into both the zombie and the zombi/e. He tells him:

We turned Christian churches into voodoo temples. Ha! Ha! Ha! We transformed Christian saints into voodoo gods. Ha! Ha! Ha! Saint James became Ogoo Feraille. The Catholic priests, seeing us in their churches, believed we had abdicated our faith, whereas we were there to glorify in our own way. (LAFERRIÈRE, 1997, p. 208)

This syncretism is part of what has enabled the Voodoo zombi to successfully navigate the waters of its migration. Vieux Os is asked, by the god, to take the zombi/e and 'bring our roots and our gods back to their rightful place' (LAFERRIÈRE, 1997, p. 209). He asks the narrator to participate in the Diasporan peregrinations of this figure, to write it into his work, to continue its path of dis- and re- location.

## Conclusion

In sum, there is no simple or straightforward way to read the zombi or the zombie. It emerges in various forms, in various places, and while we may fear it, fight against it, or choose to adopt its guise, we cannot entirely eradicate it. Nor, I would argue, would we want to. As a figure that can be both a passive slave or a figure of resistance, its ability to migrate and be transformed by various cultures, as well as transforming those it touches, is perhaps its greatest power.

For Vieux Os, the navigation of his diasporic condition through the return to Haiti requires him to come to terms with the zombi/e, to recognise its myriad and multiple conditions, and to question the extent to which the living and the dead are mutually exclusive categories. The link between his own migratory path and that of the zombi/e becomes clearer as the possibility of identifying the zombi/e is blurred. Neither living nor dead, rebel nor slave, the zombi/e is neither us nor them, rather it is both.

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