



*Carroll C. Arnold*

Distinguished Lecture 2013

“The Incessant Moan”:  
Reanimating Zombie Voices

Eric King Watts, Ph.D.



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# The Carroll C. Arnold Distinguished Lecture

**O**n October 8, 1994, the Administrative Committee of the National Communication Association established the Carroll C. Arnold Distinguished Lecture. The Arnold Lecture is given in plenary session each year at the annual convention of the Association and features the most accomplished researchers in the field. The topic of the lecture changes annually so as to capture the wide range of research being conducted in the field and to demonstrate the relevance of that work to society at large.

The purpose of the Arnold Lecture is to inspire not by words but by intellectual deeds. Its goal is to make the members of the Association better informed by having one of its best professionals think aloud in their presence. Over the years, the Arnold Lecture will serve as a scholarly stimulus for new ideas and new ways of approaching those ideas. The inaugural Lecture was given on November 17, 1995.

The Arnold Lecturer is chosen each year by the First Vice President. When choosing the Arnold Lecturer, the First Vice President is charged to select a long-standing member of NCA, a scholar of undisputed merit who has already been recognized as such, a person whose recent research is as vital and suggestive as his or her earlier work, and a researcher whose work meets or exceeds the scholarly standards of the academy generally.

The Lecture has been named for Carroll C. Arnold, Professor Emeritus of Pennsylvania State University. Trained under Professor A. Craig Baird at the University of Iowa, Arnold was the coauthor (with John Wilson) of *Public Speaking as a Liberal Art*, author of *Criticism of Oral Rhetoric* (among other works), and co-editor of *The Handbook of Rhetorical and Communication Theory*. Although primarily trained as a humanist, Arnold was nonetheless one of the most active participants in the New Orleans Conference of 1968 which helped put social scientific research in communication on solid footing. Thereafter, Arnold edited *Communication Monographs* because he was fascinated by empirical questions. As one of the three founders of the journal *Philosophy and Rhetoric*, Arnold also helped move the field toward increased dialogue with the humanities in general. For these reasons and more, Arnold was dubbed “The Teacher of the Field” when he retired from Penn State in 1977. Dr. Arnold died in January of 1997.

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University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill



**The Carroll C. Arnold Distinguished Lecture**  
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## Eric King Watts, Ph.D.

**E**ric King Watts is an Associate Professor in the Department of Communication Studies at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Watts' scholarship explores the conditions in which rhetorical voice can be invented, performed, consumed, mutated, and suppressed. In particular, he examines how the endowment of African American voices intervenes in the manner in which publics mediate forms of social justice. His work has appeared in such venues as *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, *Rhetoric & Public Affairs*, *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, *New Media and Society*, and *Journal of Communication Inquiry*. Watts's work has garnered an Outstanding Book Chapter Award and an Outstanding Journal Article Award (with Mark Orbe) from the African American Communication and Culture Division, and the New Investigator Award from the Rhetorical and Communication Theory Division. Watts has served as Chair of the Black Caucus and as Editor of *Critical Studies in Media Communication*. His recent book, *Hearing the Hurt: Rhetoric, Aesthetics, & Politics of the New Negro Movement*, from the University of Alabama Press's, Rhetoric, Culture & Social Critique Series was judged by one reviewer to be "a fine achievement...[and a] valuable [work] for scholars and students of African-American culture, 20th century art, rhetoric, or identity studies from any perspective." A review published in *Research & Reference Book News* (available through the "Virtual Bookshelf" on the NCA webpage <http://www.natcom.org/VBWatts/>).

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# “The Incessant Moan”: Reanimating Zombie Voices

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**W**hen my son saw me reading *The Zombie Survival Guide* (ZSG) a year or so ago, he exclaimed, “Oh, cool, Dad! I got next!”

After he had completed it, he returned it with a perplexing frown, saying that it was interesting, but not very funny. I tried to explain that I didn’t think it was meant to be *very funny*. “But, Dad,” he protested while flipping to the copyright page, “it says right here, ‘Humor.’” Indeed, nearly every early review of the book, published in 2003, described it as “tongue-in-cheek” or satirical. Its author, Max Brooks—the son of Mel Brooks and Anne Bancroft—strongly suggested in an interview that the manuscript probably would have languished on his shelf indefinitely if his agent had not pitched it as a “parody” written by a former *Saturday Night Live* writer. And, after all, it *is* about zombies. Brooks, however, in multiple interviews and lectures has insisted that ZSG is

“not supposed to be funny.”<sup>1</sup> His insistence about how readers should respond to it could be written off as the parodist’s devotion to the fidelity of the mask.<sup>2</sup> This perspective would also explain why Brooks has sworn that “‘You have to take it completely seriously or it doesn’t work.’”<sup>3</sup> So, here’s a riddle for you: What is the work that a parody is doing when we take it completely seriously? Put differently, when is a book publicized as humor “not supposed to be funny”? I’m not channeling the energies of the Sphinx, but in order to continue along this path—alive at least—let us pose some answers. The most obvious reply is that, like a failing stand-up comic, the book “dies” on stage. It’s supposed to be funny, but it bites. And would it be the first *New York Times* best seller that missed the mark? A slightly more intriguing answer is that despite the Library of Congress subject heading promoted by Random House marketing wizards, and despite the fact that it is about a zombie outbreak, the book was not written as a put-on, and thus we should not expect it to be comical. The work itself, however, evokes a third kind of reaction that holds in suspense the first two rejoinders; its striking resemblance to a survival guide—portending parody—energizes an intense expression and transmission of some potent primal fears, dampening comedy.



Eric King Watts delivers the Carroll C. Arnold Distinguished Lecture at the NCA 99th Annual Convention in Washington, DC.

The *Zombie Survival Guide* radiates peculiar affective qualities. One can, at once, discern it as a farce and earnestly engage the advice and techniques it explicates regarding survival. For example, some posts to SurvivalistBoards.com fleetingly noted its silliness while offering extended commentary on its tactics for avoiding being eaten by the living dead. Brooks has come under fire from gun lobbyists, and not because he's a New York City anti-gun liberal; he had the un-American audacity to grade the Soviet AK-47 as far superior to the M-16A as assault rifle of choice when cutting down zombies.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, following the release of the work, Brooks was a popular lecture draw in places like Texas and Utah where, Brooks mused in an interview, "all the survivalists hang out...Why the Red States love me, I don't know."<sup>5</sup> This affection has been downright infectious, becoming airborne with the publication of the epic *World War Z*, the book's translation into a film starring Brad Pitt (released in June 2013), and the inking of another film deal for the animated sequel to the ZSG called *Recorded Attacks*.

Clearly Brooks' fame cannot be disassociated from a global obsession with the zombie. His point of contact with this unprecedented interest in this monstrous icon underwrites an intriguing problematic for communication studies. A casual survey of popular opinion about zombies yields something like this: they eat brains; they are undead; they transmit a hideous contagion when they bite; Michael Jackson's "Thriller," notwithstanding, they do not have much rhythm—they shamble awkwardly and disjointedly (except of course when they are sprinting maddeningly); their presence in our imaginaries is paradoxically contingent upon an absence; they supposedly have no minds, consciousness, or soul; our newly intensified enjoyment of them in literature, film, and television purportedly reflects a post-9/11 nervousness. They embody abjection as revolting and broad-based as to be capable of bearing up nearly all our projected fears and desires. The films of George Romero are routinely credited with birthing the genre.<sup>6</sup> Recent scholarship on the subject contends that zombies are eating machines, grotesque metaphors for ravenous consumption and the appetites of late-late capitalism.<sup>7</sup> These familiar observations are the source material for some wonderfully frightening visions of the end of the world as we know it.

But it is precisely what seems to have slipped between the cracks or has gotten displaced from our imaginaries, as Roland Barthes<sup>8</sup> would say about myth-making, which interests me. It is a truism in monster studies that zombies are speech impaired. Marina Warner fancies that "zombies are mute. They are more silent even than ghosts, but they resemble them in that they are revenants, forced to live suspended in time, neither fully alive nor fully dead, in a state of anomie degree zero, disaffection to the point of numbness."<sup>9</sup> The zombie literature is consistent on the speechlessness of this undead ghoul; while the ZSG falls in line with the wordlessness of zombies, it accentuates the potential for zombie voice.

Imagine for a moment that you use the ZSG like a home defense how-to workbook. Your home is more than your castle; you've turned it into a fortress because the first and last rule of survivalist culture is being vigilant. "Always be prepared for a long siege."<sup>10</sup> You have stored away several months' supply of canned food and bottled water; you've rigged a bicycle-powered generator; you've reinforced your doors and barred your windows. But, most important of all, you've stockpiled a diverse cache of arms. "Of all the weapons discussed in this book, nothing is more important than your primary firearm. Keep it clean, keep it oiled, keep it loaded, keep it close."<sup>11</sup> Always on high alert, you scan the media for the first signs of an outbreak:

## Reading the Signs

1. Homicides using headshots...
2. Missing persons in wild or uninhabited areas...
3. Cases of “violent insanity” where persons attack friends or family members without weapons...
4. Riots or other civil disturbances without apparent cause...
5. Disease-based deaths where the contagion seems mysterious...
6. Incidents where media coverage is limited due to government secrecy...<sup>12</sup>

You keep your ear to the ground, eyes on the horizon for signs of trouble and you “train constantly.”<sup>13</sup> You realize soon enough that “The dead have risen. You smell the smoke, hear the sirens. Screams and shots fill the air.”<sup>14</sup> You’ve already secured your family’s (or your group’s) immediate physical safety, now you must shore up everyone’s fitness to fight. “If you take nothing else from this chapter...if only one tool goes with you into battle against the living dead, let it be strict, *unwavering, unquestionable discipline.*”<sup>15</sup> To maintain this sort of brutal resolve, especially in a “situation where abject terror is a given,”<sup>16</sup> it is absolutely crucial that the undead never be identified as remotely human. That bloody stump banging on the window does not belong to Bucky, the grizzled ex-Marine from across the street. He is gone and what remains is a putrid meat-sack that will take everything away from you if you let it. It is not enough to keep its body at bay; its sonic force must be negated entirely.<sup>17</sup> To this end, Brooks advises that you “Keep your earplugs handy, and use them often.” This counsel is striking and unique for zombie tales; it also delivers us to the threshold of one of the zombie problematics for communication studies: *the danger of hearing too much*. Brooks elaborates:

The constant, collective moan of the undead, a sound that will persist at all hours for as long as the siege continues, can be a deadly form of psychological warfare. People with well-protected, well-supplied homes have been known to either kill one another or go insane simply from the incessant moan.<sup>18</sup>

What is it about this undead sound that it must be smothered to ensure one’s survival? Could it be the zombie wail threatens our fortifications because it is closely associated with being in distress? The sonorous nature of the siege is a breach in itself precisely because it offers a point of affective contingency for human and zombie. The zombie’s supposed mindlessness is transfused with the survivalist’s heightened mindfulness, bringing about the sort of disorienting conjunction that Joshua Gunn argued is responsible for producing “bodies-in-feeling.”<sup>19</sup> The connection radiates a haunting reminder of precarious life and a palpable remainder of speech. The moan expresses a social diminishment and banishment; by hearing the moan too much, a dreadful relation is reawakened. While exploring the growing tendency for scientists, public policy experts, and world health professionals to use horror stories as data for experimental models testing institutional responses to plague, the science editor for the *Daily Mail* opined that “A series of equations and graphs show human-zombie co-existence is impossible.”<sup>20</sup> And yet, this “impossible” relation has seized the imaginations of philosophers, cultural critics, anthropologists, political scientists, economists, historians, and mathematicians. This zombie relation excites a recurring scarification ritual registering global forms of exclusion, exploitation, penetration, victimization, and mobilization. The meaning of the zombie whine may be ambiguous, but its resonance allows us to temporarily find the opening through which it emanates—if we dare. It is telling that Brooks did not write the ZSG in

response to 9/11 as is often presumed. Its composition predates that awful day by more than two years; but what motivated it is eternal and preternatural. Brooks has made this clarification: “It was when Y2K was happening and all these survival guides were hitting the shelves. I was buying them and they just got crazier and crazier and I was like, Okay, that’s enough. I’m just going to write about what *I’m afraid of*.” And what’s Brooks afraid of exactly? “I don’t know what’s scarier,” he continued, “the fact that zombies could rise or the fact there are actually people out there that *can’t wait for it to happen*.”<sup>21</sup>

I propose that we examine this “impossible” relation and this fear by contemplating the zombie as figuring a returning ritual of global disaster. As such, the zombie is a sacramental harbinger of end times. This lecture will first revive our memories of zombies lost and forgotten by reanimating the Afro-Caribbean zombie. Such a restoration reminds us that the zombie implicates master-slave relations that continue to animate circuits of feelings important to apprehending our contemporary enjoyment of the undead. The lecture will then return to the ZSG as a coordinate in a field of discourses expressing panic and paranoia over ObamaCare.<sup>22</sup> By acknowledging the ethics and affects of the incessant moan, I want to put us in touch with vigorous investments in matters of life and death ordered by zombie relations. The ZSG figures these sentiments as fringe, but they increasingly rush through the major arteries of *This Town*.<sup>23</sup>

### *Tropical Delights, Enslaved Bodies, and the Risks of Being “Turned”*

There is a creepy correspondence between the two economic collapses labeled “Great.” The Great Depression and our Great Recession can be juxtaposed not only because each era was marked by financial collapse; a lesser recognized resemblance can be apprehended through the zombie relation. Each historical moment bore witness to an outbreak of tropes of the zombie, expressing angst associated with the postracial. In some important ways, the Great Depression inaugurated Western imaginaries’ love-hate affair with zombies, but we generally do not associate that time period with the postracial as we do with the Obama era. George Schuyler’s New Negro-era novel, *Black No More*, however, clearly sutures the idea of a postracial world with the zombie. Published in 1931, this send-up depicts white supremacists and black civil rights activists joining forces to conserve the idea of race in a world where blackness is disappearing due to German engineering.<sup>24</sup> Black folk from coast to coast stampede to Black-No-More sanitariums hungry for a “medical” procedure that lightens skin so as to escape the misery of racist persecution under Jim Crow. Inspired by eugenics quasi-science of the time, Black-No-More techniques isolate and electronically stimulate what is called a “nervous disease” to turn skin white.<sup>25</sup>

Meanwhile, industrialists, fearing the loss of race as a wedge issue against unionization, make zealous appeals to white purity and white female chastity. Now that one can no longer discern white people from black people, white racists propagate the notion that through unwitting interracial coupling the black pathogen will secretly diffuse through the white bloodstream degenerating white heritage. Fear and anxiety grip certain sections of white America; an optimistic mood associated with hope and change resonates through wide swaths of black America. *Black No More* is a postracial narrative in the sense that it imagines what might happen when the chief sign of racial difference goes away. It is also populated with figures and images consistent with the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century’s sense of the zombie slave; the work also gestures to our contemporary freak show of flesh eating. For instance, the novel insists that the specifics of the treatment are a trade

secret, yet suggests the operation excites an epidermal cannibalism.<sup>26</sup> The treatment provokes some skin cells to devour melanin and sets in motion the self-mutilation of key phenotypic features. Furthermore, poor white people dreading the end of an authentically white America are depicted quite specifically as being under a spell conjured by master provocateurs; Schuyler imagines them to be mindless laborers consigned to a culture war.<sup>27</sup>

Concurrent with the publication of Schuyler's novel, the Halperin brothers produced and independently released the film *White Zombie* starring Bela Lugosi.<sup>28</sup> The film has the suspicious distinction of receiving "poor critical reception" and enduring scholarly attention.<sup>29</sup> Set in an unspecified lush paradise and hellish labor camp reminiscent of William Seabrook's book, *The Magic Island*, *White Zombie* depicts the machinations of "Murder Legendre," a "mysterious zombie master," appropriating and unleashing black folk knowledge to covet "Madeline," the fiancée of a guest to his lush estate, to turn her into a zombie sex slave.<sup>30</sup> Using an ambiguous combination of chemistry, religious ritual, and a demonic will to power, Legendre commands an army of zombie slaves to gain and safeguard a spice empire. These dumb workers are also subject to being ingested by the colonial machinery, as is shown in a shadowy scene where one mill hand falls into the sugar grinder and is pulverized, his body offering a gruesome seasoning.<sup>31</sup>

Many critics have noted anxieties stemming from class, labor, race, and xenophobia animating the film.<sup>32</sup> These apprehensions bear a strong family resemblance to those vivifying Schuyler's *Black No More*; each text's affective apparatus hinges, in part, on the loss of certainty regarding status and power due to a precarious racial order. Let's highlight two pivotal issues linking the zombie slave to the flesh eater and the postracial. First, much contemporary writing on the zombie tends to treat the zombie slave as a precursor to the carnivore based on the notion that the zombie slave signified coerced labor and was induced by pre-modern black magic—voodoo—while the "biter" was twisted by modern science into a hungry mouth. But *Black No More* and *White Zombie* paint zombification in ways that cut against this common sense. Each text deploys the forces of both science and "magic"; in *White Zombie*, Madeline succumbs to Legendre after she is exposed to a white powder reported to be formulated through indigenous knowledge of herbal medicine.<sup>33</sup> The puppet masters working against the diffusion of Black-No-More technology turn poor white folk into a legion of mindless race workers through highly ornate performances resembling religious revivals.<sup>34</sup>

Both works show how the ghostly presence of oppressed labor haunts horrific rituals of bodily consumption; and this eerie possession has functioned as a condition of the zombie from its inception in Western imaginaries. The flesh-eater and the zombie slave are not distinct species of zombie tempered in different times and engineered through dissimilar technological capacities. The zombie slave and the eating machine are of the same genus; we must acknowledge that current grotesque displays of bodily mutilation and ingestion, conveniently indexed to Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* and presented in shows like *The Walking Dead*, are preoccupied with repeating this longstanding insidious relation between avarice and abject labor. Second, these concerns are preoccupied with the postracial. Against more common notions, the postracial is not understood here as a transcendence of racial structures and feelings. Rather, it indexes two bonded phenomena: first, it registers extreme foreboding and optimism regarding how rapid social change might transmute the racial order; and second it notates hysterical attempts by racial chauvinists to fabricate new political and economic alignments among

competing interests so as to resuscitate the privileges and disadvantages sustained by the late order. In short, postracial is the name presently assigned to the intense experience of these twinned phenomena. These concerns can be traced to the colonial invention of the very idea of the Caribbean as a space of tropical delicacies for North American and European consumption, the exploitation and mutilation of labor, and the severely felt potential of white insolvency. Schuyler was not oblivious to this context. As a keen journalist of U.S. political affairs, Schuyler was knowledgeable of the implications of the U.S. occupation of Haiti between 1915 and 1934; as a critic of the New Negro movement, he mapped the ways that governmental agencies and cultural outlets like the Guggenheim Foundation conspired for and against black artists and intellectuals' access to that emerging Black Republic. Many of the earliest and most widely circulated images of Haitian culture, voodoo priests, and zombies were invented and moved through networked archival projects.<sup>35</sup> As for *White Zombie*, it is important not because it is the first film illustrating the zombie; rather its significance is due to its unabashed demonstration of the integral role that Empire played in popularizing the zombie.

The making of the Caribbean as an exotic space of warm sunshine, sweet fruit, and chocolate was bound up with the fabrication of the white imperial self.<sup>36</sup> Lurking in the shadows, however, were feverish nightmares concerning white degeneration, infection, and black suffering bodies. In some ways, it makes perfect sense for these projections to eventually find themselves on big and small screens. But before that cinematic and televisual spectacle began, figures of abjection had to germinate and crystalize through colonial relations helping to bring forth the zombie. The space of this lecture is inadequate for an explication of this difficult and complex history, but I want to briefly introduce three topics integral to the invention of what we call the Caribbean. First, we should consider how our appreciation of the "tropics" is organized by the metaphor of consumption—by insatiable appetites and fears of being eaten. Second, we must ponder how this bodily breakdown corresponds to the presumed and actual transmission of pathogens and disease. Third, we should note how laboring black and brown bodies were effectively reduced to the status of the raw materials they worked—how laborers became objects that made other things and how they could be utterly un-made *as* things.

Under different circumstances it might be amusing to imagine Christopher Columbus, lost and confused, meeting native folk in the Indies and considering *them* primitive. But that's what he did and he was not alone. Just as peculiar was the sentiment that these savages were also cannibals, and if given the chance would gobble up the white conqueror. Of course, we all know that it was the colonizer who would do the eating and raping.<sup>37</sup> Mimi Sheller put the matter like this: "In this 'porno-tropics' the crisis of male imperial identity was warded off by naming the unknown as 'cannibal,' thereby 'confessing a dread that the unknown might literally rise up and devour the intruder whole.'" <sup>38</sup> The imperial craving for an abundance of goods not found in Europe was an impetus for constituting the Caribbean as a place served up by Providence as full of delicious things to eat.<sup>39</sup> This delectability was raced, sexed, and held an immanent risk of infection, contamination, and illness. It came equipped with concerns over food poisoning, overeating, and vomiting. It also energized a potent principle of volatile convertibility that shows itself linguistically in the term "tropic." Stemming from a Greek term meaning "turning" or "being turned," tropical consumption is wound up, in its gut if you will, by a restless feeling that the eaten can suddenly become the eater, health can become sickness, master made to kneel to slave.<sup>40</sup> This fear of being "turned" is immanent to appreciating the zombie relation.

Considered as a crucible for imperial subjectivity, the Caribbean provoked torturous and unwanted reflection on the moral limits of limitless consumption. A recurring thematic of such contemplation was the spread of disease and rapid degeneration, which brings us to the second topic of invention. “In migrating to the Tropics and becoming slave owners white colonists placed their own bodies at risk. Besides the risks of fevers and death, they risked the effects of their unfettered exercise of coercion over enslaved bodies, with all the associated excesses of lust and power.”<sup>41</sup> Contingencies of violence are points of transfusion as well as sites of contemplation; the risks faced by the white imperial body were multiplied, mutated, and injected back into the tropical social body in the form of “deadly new pathogens and feral animals, which together decimated the native populations.”<sup>42</sup> My point is that anxious encounters with dark bodies, pleasures of gluttony, and an imagined degeneration of the social body brought about through widespread sickness are acute symptoms of the zombie relation. The third topic of invention was made manifest through colonial labor practices.

Since much of the indigenous population of the Caribbean Islands was killed off shortly after Columbus and other early explorers from Europe arrived, the tropics were repopulated through a surge in West African slave imports. A global demand for foodstuffs shaping the Caribbean was energized by a rapacious appetite for exotic images, folklore, plants, and bodies. This tasting of blackness was mediated by the other senses. Black people and spaces were experienced as also feeling, smelling, looking, and sounding strangely.<sup>43</sup> The fabulous wealth acquired through imperial possession was imprinted by aesthetic values produced by making extraordinary racial distinctions linked to body parts. One of the more savory ingredients of the Caribbean experience came in the form of the zombie slave, which seemed to embody the backwardness of black people, the mysterious capacity to bend people to the will of a secret sorcerer, the fantastic promise of a permanently laboring body, and the perennial threat of losing one’s freedom. The zombie figured a dreadful contingency—anyone can be turned into a mindless slave. But slaves can also revolt and be set loose. Elysium can degenerate into perdition where previously condemned souls may mobilize as the undead.

By the time the United States put Marine boots on Haitian ground in the second decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, fantasies of black laboring bodies had been greatly mutated by the slow decay of the slave trade, the abolition of slaves, and the emergence of class struggles heightening anxieties regarding the insolvency of Empire. The zombie helped bring to life the modern horror genre at the very moment that an economic catastrophe formed a conjuncture with what felt like unprecedented black sovereignty. Tropes of the zombie capture and release these impressive affective pulses. I have written elsewhere that voice is the sound of these affective outbursts.<sup>44</sup> And that voice can be endowed by a public acknowledgment of the ethical implications of these affective economies for the social body. I have also consistently maintained that the metaphor of the social body urges attention to the vitality and health of the social. And we all know that if one can afford a doctor’s visit, one can expect the physician to listen intently to the breath and breathing of one’s body. Despite serious risk of infection and insanity, let us put away the earplugs and endow zombie voices.

### *Zombie Politics, Safe Zones, and the Incessant Moan*

Survivalism is not just a Red State psychosis, as Max Brooks suggested while considering the popularity of the ZSG; rather, it is a red-blooded condition that is more acutely

experienced and more sharply expressed in times of rapid social change.<sup>45</sup> Jean and John Comaroff have asserted that “zombies...have arisen in periods of social disruption, periods characterized as sharp shifts in control over the fabrication and circulation of value, periods that also serve to illuminate the here and now.”<sup>46</sup> But I argue we must also enrich and embellish the sounds of our present crises by appreciating the screeches, yelps, or sighs venting the fears, joys, and anxieties of living with others. I have often been inspired by W.E.B. Du Bois’ work on the wails emitted by certain sections of the social body functioning as public address systems signaling potential calamity. Du Bois, of course, spoke from the space of blackness when demanding to be heard. Today, we must think in terms of interpenetrating social bodies and publics crying foul and whining in fear.

Writing in the *New York Times* about the relationship between the popularity of zombies and the dull, undead sensation of modernity, Chuck Klosterman posed this question: “What if contemporary people are less interested in seeing depictions of their unconscious fears and more attracted to allegories of how their day-to-day existence *feels*?”<sup>47</sup> What if indeed; but there’s no reason to offer a more-or-less scenario. The *ZSG* proves this point nicely because it expresses both the heart-pounding exhilaration of imagining fighting for one’s life and the tedium of constant preparation. If we can say that the *ZSG* is an allegory of how some survivalists experience their day-to-day existence, what might we make of the *ObamaCare Survival Guide* and its related texts?<sup>48</sup> The book’s aesthetics are important: they formally link together the hatred and fear of Barack Obama, a deep-seated, long-standing suspicion of government, and the primal urgency of sickness and health. These generic formations also find sympathetic treatment in the *ZSG* and can be succinctly stated like this: “Disaster is looming! Arm yourself and be prepared to protect your family!” By exploring these formal resemblances between the *ZSG* and the *ObamaCare Survival Guide* we can appreciate some dreadful zombie relations. The vitriol stirred by ObamaCare has not only been ignited by misgivings over an overhaul of the national healthcare delivery system; crucially it is about *what counts* as a body worthy of care; *who gets to count* the worthwhile and worthless bodies; and *how does one even speak* about such brutal forms of dehumanization and exclusion? In the time I have remaining I will comment on each of these aspects, articulated to survivalism, zombies, and ObamaCare.

In Colson Whitehead’s introspective zombie novel, *Zone One*, our hero fondly recalls watching “Nuclear-war movies” with his father before the undead began to feast upon the living; on one such occasion he asks his dad what does the apocalypse mean? His father offers this definition to the reader from the grave: “It means that in the future, things will be even worse than they are now.”<sup>49</sup> In that even-worse future where humans struggle to carve safe zones out of zombie-infested cities and country sides, every survivor suffers from PASD, “Post-Apocalyptic Stress Disorder.”<sup>50</sup> We, too, suffer from an apocalyptic stress condition that is recurring and enduring, and thus, is more appropriately called “Perennial Apocalyptic Stress Disorder.” This particular malady is metastasized in zombie relations emerging in and around discourses about healthcare and the general well-being of the social body.

Endorsed by right-wing pundits like Dick Morris and Michael Reagan, the *ObamaCare Survival Guide* positions “you and your family” as survivalists against the awful encroachment of 30 million ravenous healthcare consumers whose inclusion into the insurance pool will bring a social breakdown beginning with healthcare rationing. But since this work links to other texts depicting a wasteland in 2014, it provokes concerns

over basic resources like clean water and food shortages.<sup>51</sup> Apparently under ObamaCare the Hippocratic Oath will become a toxic spew that should not be put in one's mouth, resulting in 40% of doctors quitting clinical practice.<sup>52</sup> The allegory is inhumane and horrific; the uninsured are considered alive yet already spent. Steve Shaviro understands this undead predicament as "zombie-labour," where working bodies accrue bills they can never pay, doomed to "flounder in eternal *indead*tedness."<sup>53</sup> And it is in this way that zombie relations are explosive and volatile. The *ObamaCare Survival Guide* imagines the zombie slave and the diseased carnivore as one in the same. And they are. But I am not principally concerned with the dystopic imaginaries on the Right or the Left; I am talking about the political economic conditions and the fearful connections provoking widespread zombification. The zombie relation calls up breached bodies and transgression of boundaries.<sup>54</sup> The fear of infection and slavery haunts the transfusion between "us" and "them." It is in and through this bleeding one can discern horrible, incessant moaning.

When Rush Limbaugh bemoaned Obama's election as the sign of "a perpetual underclass enslaved to the Democratic Party," and when Michelle Bachmann in July 2010 echoed this fear citing Obama's election as the crisis moment that America's enslavement began,<sup>55</sup> we cannot afford to simply tune them out; we must note two vital concerns. First, they are producing for public consumption a palpable, racist equation fomenting the belief that a black President signals white disfranchisement and perhaps the end of white America<sup>56</sup>; and because its inverse has at times been historically true, such sick thinking is fortified with what Daniel Drezner calls "a patina of plausibility."<sup>57</sup> Second, this tactic is part of the playbook of the new hate. It is also a modality of postracial reactionary politics, where the old is new again (and again). Arthur Goldwag explains the objective: "But 'logic' and 'sense' are completely beside the point when the object isn't to make people think but to frighten and confuse them so they won't think but merely react."<sup>58</sup>

In *The Rise of the Tea Party*, Anthony DiMaggio labels this discourse propagandistic and notes that at the very moment that the Tea Party was being manufactured by conservative elite actors like Dick Armey, formerly of FreedomWorks, the Congressional Republican conference experienced one of its sharpest right turns ever.<sup>59</sup> The *ObamaCare Survival Guide* necessarily installs the President as zombie master-in-chief and conjures those who support the Affordable Care Act, or something more radical like a public healthcare option, as zombies whose collective, incessant moan should be snuffed out. But zombie relations are at work. So, let's turn it around. An acknowledgment of the incessant moan of the Tea Party allows us to hear the hurt of people who are themselves zombified by the practices of conservative plutocrats and media celebrities whose material interests do not necessarily match those of their base. The apocalyptic theater of ObamaCare calls up the human-zombie impossible relation as a mode of politics meant to deliver to us the disaster that we fear; in such a war zone, we all become survivalists in tribes, refusing to grant a modicum of humanity to those we dread, fixing our laser sights on headshots. Zombie relations among us are sustained by anger, terror, and the unreliability of a living wage; zombie relations are experienced as a "human existential diminishment."<sup>60</sup>

The *ObamaCare Survival Guide* is published by Humanix Books, an imprint of the conservative Web-based portal NewsMax, and thus, it is profoundly skeptical of state regulation and expansion of the healthcare marketplace. Such distrust is backed by long-standing animus toward the role of government, especially exercised by the Obama administration. The derision is shaped by Perennial Apocalyptic Stress Disorder gripping

the Capital. Tea Party congressional members suggest that we ought to get used to sequestration-levels of federal spending while leading “literally life-threatening” assaults on “the poor and unemployed” through austerity, resulting in what Kevin Drum has called “Death by a Thousand Cuts.”<sup>61</sup> The exact number of wounds is not as important as the repetition of wounding; this reiteration of laceration resembles the 40-plus votes in the House to kill ObamaCare, sensed by the Right as socialized medicine and as Black Death. The excessive repetition of “beating ObamaCare”<sup>62</sup> to death, including the shutdown of government to defund it, is part of a bludgeoning ritual that expresses a visceral pleasure when performed over and over. Not only are the uninsured (and under-insured) apparently worth-less in zombie relations, the Obama administration has no standing as an agency of change.

The zombie relation incites contingencies of violence and profit-making. We should recall how the ZSG schools the reader on the proper vigilance, training, and firepower needed to survive a siege. The *ObamaCare Survival Guide* may conjure in an enthusiastic reader the memory of commercial images for target practice zombies said to resemble President 44. Perhaps we have arrived once again at an historical moment when passion toward a symbol of change, President Barack Obama, threatens to eat away the social body. Brimming with such passion, I suggested a few years ago that the far Right seemed full of “crazies” who had become infected with a virulent strain of Racism.<sup>63</sup> Frequently, C-SPAN looks more like FEARnet as zombies lurch through the halls of the Capitol driven by a mad impulse to devour the social body symbolized by President Barack Obama’s dark body. And as this contagion is transmitted through Right Wing media, the Republican Party itself, as Thomas E. Mann and Norman J. Ornstein have lamented, has been turned into “a radical insurgent” ushering in “a level of political dysfunction clearly greater than at any point in our lifetimes...Tribal politics at the national level,” they continued, “has metastasized to many states and localities, and has affected the broader public as well. The *glue that binds Americans together is in danger of eroding.*”<sup>64</sup> Rush Limbaugh, prominent apocalyptic prophet, repeatedly fulminates that Tea Partiers in Congress have no reason to work with the Democrats because “We have nothing in common with them.”<sup>65</sup> That’s right, *nothing*: no shared history or future; no common reverence for the rule of law; no collective love of democracy. Human-zombie co-existence is impossible. Among other things ailing Limbaugh, he seems to have come down with a case of what Jeremy Engels termed demophobia; a condition predisposed in those harboring derision for the masses and known to flare up when the rich don’t like the way elections turn out.<sup>66</sup> But some elections can be made to come out just right.

Writing in defense of political compromise, Amy Gutman and Dennis Thompson remind us that compromise does not so much presume common ground as much as it makes it through the production of shared values enacted in compromise.<sup>67</sup> The failure to make Obama a one-term President did not dissolve the zombie relation; it strengthened that relation’s “uncompromising mindset”<sup>68</sup> that has hardened through gerrymandering electoral safe zones. The data is clear regarding the homogenous demography of these districts<sup>69</sup>; their fortifications intensify the feeling that one’s world is under siege and, as Rick Grimes in *The Walking Dead* consistently maintains, all that matters is the survival of “my people.” This polarized attitude is heated until fervent and shaped by military metaphors to the point that the suggestion of negotiation is interpreted as capitulation and complete surrender. But zombie relations transmit contagions throughout the social body. Mark Leibovich has rattled some cages in this town by positing this mindset as typical in both houses of Congress and on both sides of the aisle. Discussing

the worldview of Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, Leibovich echoes Max Brooks' description of the proper attitude one must adopt to stay free of teeth saying "What matters" to Reid "is maximum efficiency and, ultimately, survival."<sup>70</sup> Human-zombie co-existence is impossible.

### *Reimagining the Art of Survival (This May Be the End)*

Anxieties resonate in zombie relations precisely because these points of contact are also short-circuited connections. The intense affective current riveting us in these relations must be interrupted. Part of the problem is human nature itself because we would prefer to kill the switch, turn off the juice, or mute the volume. We cannot insulate or soundproof our lives. The task of acknowledging the incessant moan and reanimating zombie voices seems foolish if we become habituated to repetitive violence toward zombies. Reawakening voice encourages a commitment to a fundamental understanding that we are all already infected; that we *are* the walking dead.<sup>71</sup> Such recognition does not necessarily signal resignation. But as Paul Gilroy recently commented about xenophobia and zombie politics in the United Kingdom, it does underline "a growing sense that analyses forged in order to make sense of earlier struggles may have reached the end of their use."<sup>72</sup> I agree. If we give in to the mentality that our survival depends on the annihilation of zombies, we succumb to a self-mutilating logic: we confuse people with things and embrace the idea that survival is a war of attrition—a numbers game. Gilroy puts the problem correctly: "New interpretive tools...will be needed if we are going to evaluate the political impact of these transmissions and comprehend the communicative and psychosocial networks that they assemble or animate."<sup>73</sup> Such analytical innovation should begin by noting that the zombie slave was a trickster, a resourceful body in chains. When we think of the incessant moan as the sounds of an expired consciousness, as a death rattle without end, we do not hear the aspiration and determination of the slave to pass along a secret code to the living. The moan is, after all, incessant for a reason. Endowing voice revives that spirit. But it requires courage and tolerance because one must be prepared to endure sounds that disgust as well as charm.



The theme of this year's gathering is "Connections." I have been discussing a potent one; the transfer point between bodies where one risks being "turned." Voice is the sound of that affective contingency and announces the humanity of us all. A vital question still remains: What kind of person, group, community, nation, and world will we become? At present we seem hell-bent on allowing an impoverished global order to take hold. Recall Max Brooks' fear provoking him to write *ZSG*, that some people *can't wait for it to happen*. The hero in *Zone One* knows why: "The secret murderers, dormant rapists, and latent fascists were now free to express their ruthless natures."<sup>74</sup> The new interpretive tools that Gilroy rightly calibrates as the work of communication have to be designed with such callousness and brutality in mind. This was our mindset when NCA's Legislative Assembly passed a resolution three years ago condemning "Extended Solitary Confinement and Torture."<sup>75</sup> Perhaps this must be our attitude once again as we try to reimagine the art of survival. We cannot be content with reproofing the spread of the impossible relation; we must go after the contagion itself by specifying the conditions of its transmission. For example, we have witnessed recently a strengthened connection between public policy making and what Jean and John Comaroff call "magical thinking."<sup>76</sup> This toxic link is made up of selling conspiracy theories as legitimate news, composing alternate histories in textbooks, and marketing racial hatred as a popular form of entertainment. Our task is imposing but it is also inspiring. And it has a recently reanimated history as well. *March: Book One* is the first graphic novel in a trilogy that re-tells Congressman John Lewis's lifetime struggle for human rights.<sup>77</sup> In a recent interview, he discussed its central lesson, its secret code: we have to learn and teach how to see and hear your attacker, real or imagined, as a *human being*.<sup>78</sup> Ideas matter because they are infectious. Lewis was inspired by the 1958 comic book, *Martin Luther King and the Montgomery Story*, which was a kind of how-to survival guide for that time. Let us be resolved this day forward to composing and teaching new kinds of how-to guides, based not on survival, but on living.

## Endnotes

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- <sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 75.
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- <sup>17</sup> Greg Goodale, "The Sonorous Envelope and Political Deliberation," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 99 (May 2013): 218-224.
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- <sup>20</sup> Michael Hanlon, "How To Survive A Zombie Attack!" *Daily Mail* (London) Wednesday 26 August, 2009; Daniel W. Drezner, *Theories of International Politics and Zombies* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011).
- <sup>21</sup> Ain't It Cool.com; published September 13, 2006 (emphasis added).
- <sup>22</sup> I choose to use the putatively offensive term ObamaCare rather than its official title, The Affordable Care Act, so as to keep attention on the linkages among caring for the social body, President Obama, and hate.
- <sup>23</sup> Mark Liebovich, *This Town* (New York: Blue River Press, 2013).

- <sup>24</sup> George S. Schuyler, *Black No More* (New York: Random House, 1999, c1931).
- <sup>25</sup> Schuyler, 11.
- <sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.
- <sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.
- <sup>28</sup> *White Zombie*, DVD, The Roan Group Restoration, 1999, c1932.
- <sup>29</sup> Gary D. Rhodes, *White Zombie: Anatomy of a Horror Film* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland Press, 2001), 13.
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- <sup>51</sup> Michael Newbury, "Fast Zombie/Slow Zombie: Food Writing, Horror Movies, and Agribusiness Apocalypse," *American Literary History* 24 (2012): 87-114. Alisha Coleman-Jensen, Mark Nord, Margaret Andrews, and Steven Carlson, "Household Food Security in the United States in 2010," Economic Research Report No. (ERR-125) September 2011, USDA Economic Research Service. <http://www.ers.usda.gov/publications/err-economic-research-report/err125.aspx>. Retrieved 10 December 2013.
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- <sup>61</sup> Kevin Drum, "Death by a Thousand Cuts," *Mother Jones* 38 (October 2013): 16-19, 64-66.
- <sup>62</sup> This phrase is so commonplace that it makes up partial titles in two works associated with *ObamaCare Survival Guide*; *Beating ObamaCare: Your Handbook for the New Healthcare Law* and *ObamaCare for Beginners: Your Survival Guide Book for Beating ObamaCare*.
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