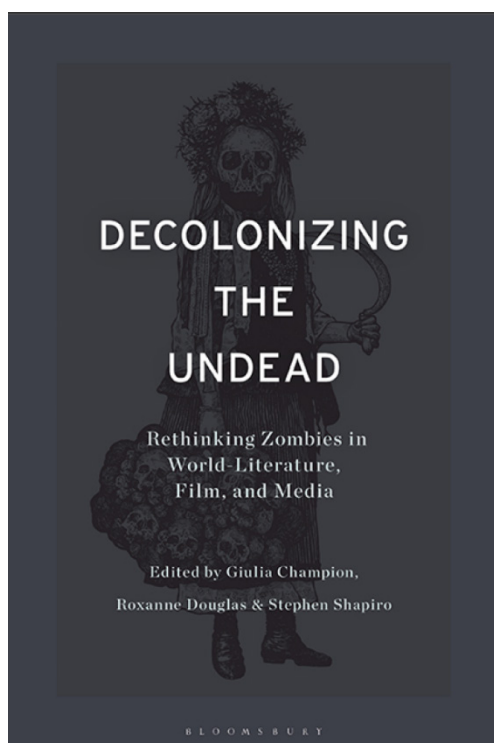


BOOKS

Giulia Champion, Roxanne Douglas, and Stephen Shapiro,
Decolonizing the Undead: Rethinking Zombies in World Literature,
***Film and Media*, London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023, 224 p.**



This collection of essays, edited by Giulia Champion, Roxanne Douglas and Stephen Shapiro, comes as a contribution towards a decolonizing movement that differentiates itself from the postcolonial attitude. As Shapiro points out, starting from a contrast expressed by Nick Couldry and adding a 'Warwick School perspective', whereas postcolonialism posited a colonial endeavor that focused on difference as a mechanism for meaning-creating epistemic violence, decolonizing goes beyond criticizing "capitalism, globalism, and neoliberalism" by aiming to find "intellectual resources from beyond the Western Canon", especially if they come from the 'Global South' (2023, 40-41). To be specific about the Warwick School perspective adopted here, Shapiro explains a fundamentally world-systems-based approach towards capitalism that reveals it to be a system which "operates through the creation of social inequalities (rather than simply social differences) to achieve its drive for

endless accumulation for accumulation's sake" (41). Furthermore, the decolonizing approach recognizes that capitalism *inherently* functions because of weakly proletarianized labor, as much as the centrist liberalism he critiques in the third chapter would theorize otherwise (41). The reason for the necessity of this theoretical preamble is the fact that it reflects upon the other entries into this collection. As much as a claim can be made for the individuality of the perspective, the methodology and of the cultural material chosen to



be discussed on the part of each author, engaging in the (same) specific endeavor of decolonizing the figure of the zombie in World Culture requires shared fundamental values and perspectives towards said figure that can be found in Shapiro's more theoretical essay. To clarify and reiterate, it is not a case of uniformity, but rather an interplay of nuance that lets each author complement or contrast the work of their co-contributors.

Having established a sort of starting point and necessary common ground, it is time to look at how it manifests in the collection at the level of structure and briefly highlight the specific interest of each author within their section(s). After the introduction written by Roxanne Douglas and Giulia Champion, the volume is divided into three parts: 'Thinking Zombies', 'Zombie World-System' and 'Zombie Decolonial'. Before moving on too quickly, however, it is interesting to note that this volume immediately follows up on the intention of seeking out marginalized sources of scholarship by dedicating a section of the introduction to Katherine Dunham, an important, even if not completely understood or appreciated, voice in Ethnography and extremely relevant to this volume's essays.

The first section starts with "*Il y a des zombies dans ceci... : Dessalines, Disembodiment, and Early Haitian Literature*" by Elizabeth Kelly, which is a perfect introduction into the problematic nature of the current perception of the figure of the zombie, since she points to the spiritual and philosophical origins of the Haitian concern with the body and its undeath. An important clarification is that in Haitian culture zombification can be seen as a disembodiment rather than a simple puppeteering of an empty body (the way in which contemporary media often portrays it). Furthermore, she contours a historical shift that evidences the evolution of the relationship between the living and the dead as a transition between the philosophies of Toussaint Louverture and Jean-Jacques Dessalines, important figures in Haiti's independence. She shows how it is the latter's conceptual contributions that claim an intertwinement between physical and spiritual whereas Louverture had put emphasis on the physical (often seen as familial) relations between bodies. The second chapter of the first section is Cécile Accilien's "White and Black Zombies: How Race Rewrites the Zombie Narrative" in which she explores how the zombie came to be in the American cultural consciousness, its different role in Haitian voodoo faith and how this gap was created intentionally in order to justify and perpetuate American discriminatory and racist views, both for cultural and economic benefits. She uses the example of the movie *White Zombie* that accentuated and perpetuated the fear the American populace had towards a supposedly barbaric population of heathens that practiced magic that had the power to enslave people, thus linking Haiti with the idea of the bloodthirsty zombie (31-32). The third and final chapter of this section is Stephen Shapiro's "Decolonizing the Zombie: *I Walked with a Zombie's* Critique of Centrist Liberalism". Besides the theoretical considerations and criticism of central liberalism, he makes an interesting comparison between the status of the zombie and the political standing of post-independence Haiti, as perceived to have failed at self-determination and thus stuck in an in-between state comparable to that of the undead.

The second section analyzes the representation and use of the idea of the zombie in a global context. What results is exactly the decolonial method of reclaim that is sought: the zombie is shown to be functional not only as a blood-thirsty monster, but

also a metaphor for the loss of agency and an ever-present past, even outside of the Haitian context. Thus, the first chapter, "Samurai Zombies: Japan's Undead Past", by Frank Jacob, explores how Japan's warrior past and the idea of the samurai can act as a similar specter that haunts today's culture. Next are two chapters that highlight the ecological value in using the figure of the zombie. Josephine Taylor's "Crude Monsters in the 'Extractive Zone': The Creaturely and Ecological Zombie" re-merges the zombie with the idea of exploitation by using something akin to personification. Oil, and by extension the natural resources that have been the target of colonial enterprises for hundreds of years, take on the form of the undead as a way that the environment fights back against capitalist exploitation. Next is Fiona Farnsworth's "Undead, Undeader, Undeatest: Narrating the Unevenness of Ecological Crisis in Nana Nkweti's 'It Just Kills You Inside'", an essay that reads the framing of a zombie uprising within Nkweti's book as a critique of the production and spread of knowledge within a world system that places value unevenly and thus uses its specific techniques of meaning-creation to manage perceptions about ecological crises. After that, Thomas Waller discusses the relation between genre and historical conditions, as they correlate recurrently, in "Zombie Proletkino: Labor, Race, and Genre in Pedro Costa's *Casa de Lava*". The specific relevance of Costa's *Casa de Lava* is argued for in the relationship with the zombie genre, namely a distancing from its earlier manifestations, and the use of the zombie figure to comment on Portuguese society. Yet again the allegory of the zombie is used to portray the brutality of the labor necessary to sustain a capitalist system. The final chapter is Roxanne Douglas' "'It Feels Like I'm Giving My Body Something It Needs in an Intense and Powerful Way': Netflix, *Santa Clarita Diet*, and the Neoliberal Feminist Encounter with Pleasure Politics". Her contribution brings a feminist perspective that provides insight into the phenomenon of the 'cognizant zombie' as a metaphor for the societal duty of managing and thus 'being cognizant' while juggling personal responsibilities (122). It is thus shown how in these cases the almost escapist fantasy of a zombie outbreak that wreaks havoc upon society, thus breaking down social barriers and responsibilities is replaced by an allegory for the status of the '(peri)menopausal' woman in late-stage capitalism (123).

The third and final part begins with "De/Zombification as Decolonial Critique: Beyond Man, Nature, and the Posthuman in Folklore and Fiction from South Africa" by Rebecca Duncan, a more theoretical discussion on the category we call 'the human', using an intercultural array of thinkers to extract the decolonial potential from South African literature. Specifically, it is shown how the figure of the "man is thus central to the process of domination that have shaped geopolitical relations across five centuries of modernity" (143). To help decolonize this conception comes the conception of a Zombie post-humanism that uses the inherently subversive nature of a Zombie's non-rationality, for example, to step away from the fixed categories delineated centuries ago. Next is "Zombies, Placelessness, and Transcultural Entanglement: Ahmed Saadawi's *Frankenstein in Baghdad*" by Netty Mattar. This essay untangles the web of racism and orientalism around the US invasion of Iraq and the zombie-like representations the US created to justify its aggression. Moreover, it looks at the titular work by Mattar to argue for an "attempt to express Iraqi solidarity with the Haitian oppressed" (162). The third chapter of this section is " 'First They Bring the HIV, then the Zombie': Portrayal of the

West in Contemporary Indian Zombie Literature and Cinema” by Abhirup Mascharak. The chapter starts with a brief history of zombie representations in Indian culture that highlights the efforts of Hemendra Kumar Roy to create a localized zombie lore that relies less on Western models and more on Indian myth (177). Roy’s efforts are thus contrasted to more contemporary works that “are markedly influenced by Hollywood” (177). Then, the movie *Go Goa Gone*, on which he focuses during the chapter’s analytical parts, gains the value of a reaction to this shift and characterized by a level of resentment and conservatism that makes the West become an ‘other’ (category which encompasses Westernized Indians as well) (179). The last chapter is “From the Mountain to the Shore: Migration, Water Crisis, and Revolutionary Zombies from Haiti to Peru”, Giulia Champion’s effort to highlight the emancipatory potential of the figure of the zombie through the lens of a similar revolutionary movement to that of Haiti, namely the one in Peru (192). This final part serves as a perfect restatement of the efforts of all the other contributors: besides the specificity of the Peruvian context, it solidifies the method of decolonizing the zombie by bringing to the surface its ability to destabilize colonial discourse and emancipate postcolonial materials into decolonial tools. This methodology is playfully illustrated even in the afterword, seen as a sort of in-between figure, focusing on the justification for the value of the present volume rather than reiterating its arguments.

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