

The Zombie and Its Metaphors

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***Going Viral: Zombies, Viruses, and the End of the World.* By Dahlia Schweitzer. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2018. vii + 256 pp. \$99.95 (cloth). \$27.95 (paper). \$27.95 (e-book).**

***Not Your Average Zombie: Rehumanizing the Undead from Voodoo to Zombie Walks.* By Chera Kee. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2017. x + 238 pp. \$85.00 (cloth). \$27.95 (paper). \$27.95 (e-book).**

***Zombies, Migrants, and Queers: Race and Crisis Capitalism in Pop Culture.* By Camilla Fojas. Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2017. x + 184 pp. \$95.00 (cloth). \$24.95 (paper). \$22.46 (e-book).**

Any quick survey of the landscape of contemporary American (and global) popular culture attests that the zombie is having a moment. And this moment—tied up as the zombie genre is with billions in entertainment capital, and critiquing, in its most accomplished instantiations, the racial, capitalist, and imperialist violences of the US—hardly shows sign of abating in its popular and critical appeals alike. It is thus hardly surprising that so-called zombie studies has developed into something of a cottage industry in the past decade. McFarland runs a book series, *Contributions to Zombie Studies*, which has published over twenty volumes since 2010, and Sarah Juliet Lauro has edited *Zombie Theory: A Reader* (2017) with none other than the University of Minnesota Press (in addition to her groundbreaking study, *The Transatlantic Zombie: Slavery, Rebellion, and the Living Death* [Rutgers University Press, 2015]). These are but a small sampling of the dozens of books and hundreds of articles written by academics on some of the cultural, historical, psychological, economic, and theological dimensions of the zombie. Though the zombie began its undeath in American popular culture as a racist appropriation of Haitian Vodou beliefs used to delegitimize Haiti's independence and ability to self-rule, its more recent and virally popular incarnation since the 1970s has been as the infectious cannibal, congregating in hordes, munching on brains, bringing on the apocalypse. What zombies mean—and, on all our minds, why they are

so popular—drive the seemingly unending deluge of scholarship on zombie media. What I have chosen, then, are three books written over roughly a year that will appeal to Americanists and also demonstrate the significance of the zombie figure and its metaphors for the multiple projects of American studies.

The first of these, *Zombies, Migrants, and Queers*, is Camilla Fojas's sixth monograph. It extends her recent work on the racial dynamics of imperialism in the narratives of American popular culture to the "postcrisis storyform[s]" of film and television in the decade since the beginning of the 2008 Great Recession (10). Fojas's is the most wide-ranging of the three books under review, touring American popular culture well beyond zombie media; it is thus perhaps the most broadly applicable to Americanists not only because of the exceptional breadth of texts covered and the specific, contemporary concerns with the racial-imperial dimensions of the recent American cultural and political landscape, but also because Fojas marks out multiple genres whose usage since 2008 represents specific articulations of the economic transformations taking place at local/American and global/imperial scales. An impressive book overall, its treatment of postcrisis zombie media takes up a single chapter but nonetheless makes its mark throughout a tightly argued book—no doubt itself a symptom of the imbricated layers of capital, empire, and race on display in postcrisis culture.

Fojas's book has six chapters, each focused on a different postcrisis storyform and its articulation of late-capitalist economic formations. These chapters touch on texts as disparate as *Arrested Development* (2003–6, 2013–18), *World War Z* (2013), and *Queen of Versailles* (2012). Fojas is particularly interested in showing how postcrisis texts attempted to provide narrative solutions to the problems and failings of neoliberalism and racial capitalism, but she is never wholly uncritical of the texts she surveys. What she offers, instead, is a vision of critique that takes the lessons of popular storylines seriously but seeks more, is never satisfied. As she puts it in the conclusion of her chapter on migrant domestics, "Revolutionary critique refuses remedy, solution, hope, and deferral to some sunnier future. It is a pessimism of the sad order of things and demands for another possible future, another story, or a new fiction" (59). For Fojas, there is an infinitude of lessons to be gleaned from popular culture's postcrisis storyforms. It is fitting that this utopian vision of revolutionary critique appears before her transition into the zombie chapter, since, as Fojas argues, the zombie figure offers a powerful critique of the debt economy at the same time that it prioritizes white heteropatriarchy as the formation around which resistance to the institutions of capitalist life garrisons.

“The zombie,” Fojas claims, “is an overarching metaphor whose presence across the popular culture landscape lends insight into our most abiding fears and preoccupations”; it is a “shifting and highly adaptable” metaphor that both indexes audience fears and anxieties about “capitalism in crisis” while imagining “the destructiveness of capitalism through debt, indebtedness, and forms of indentured servitude” (61). Of course, audiences of zombie cinema have long noted the anticapitalism critique performed by zombie films since George Romero’s *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) secluded its survivors in a shopping mall. This connection is nothing new to scholarship on zombie media, but Fojas goes a step farther in reading three texts—*Land of the Dead*, *The Walking Dead*, *World War Z*—as symptomatic of a particular moment in the relationship between the metaphor/figuration of the zombie in American culture and the particular crisis of global neoliberal capitalism. Debt, then, emerges as an important signifier for zombies, both on account of “the global proliferation of debt as a viral contagion that threatens the complete annihilation of humanity” and because the zombie, “like low-wage, migrant, or adjunct labor,” is “flexible and adaptable to any circumstance” (61).

Attentive to the multiplicity of formations of neoliberal capitalism, Fojas smartly links debt, zombie media, and what the Socialist Workers Party organizer Chris Harman calls “zombie capitalism,” a term that has gained widespread use to denote the capitalist system as “bent on death and destruction” (64). Fojas pairs this rather free-floating if evocative metaphor of the zombie in “zombie capitalism” with a much more detailed historicization of the debt economy and its evolution, put forward by David Graeber, to argue that under neoliberalism, debt has replaced capital as the base of the superstructure that is the global capitalist system; zombies have marked and animated this shift from capital to debt, both narratively and historically (it is thus fitting that the “rebirth” of zombie media occurred in the 1970s, typically understood to be the beginning of neoliberal policymaking in the West). What’s more, where zombie films before the Great Recession tended to emphasize a single region or community’s affliction by zombies (think the Eastern seaboard in *Dawn of the Dead* or parts of Britain in 2002’s *28 Days Later*), postcrisis zombie media imagine the zombie apocalypse on a global scale. This, for Fojas, is a key signifier that “there is no outside to the debt economy; the entire global order is implicated: “this might be read via the genre’s geopolitics, in the move from the genre’s early focus on specific locations . . . to the entire world” (65). In other words, “Caught in the endless cycle of debt, the indebted, all of us, are zombies of capitalism” (65).

But at the same time that the zombie offers a figuration of the seemingly inescapable reality of the global debt economy, these films also model a world without money and without the institutions of global debt, state surveillance, and imperial order that characterize contemporary postcrisis life; zombie films create a storyworld in which there is potential to generate “exhilarating new possibilities for interaction” (69). But, as Fojas’s readings demonstrate, zombie media often “fail to imagine a social order along radically reconfigured logical lines” at the same time that they create that possibility. Instead, shows like *The Walking Dead* and films like *World War Z* once again recast the white male he(te)ro as the savior of humanity around which others—men, women, children of multiracial backgrounds—congregate for survival. The kyriarchy of white heteropatriarchy reasserts itself in the wake of apocalypse: this “postapocalyptic communal formation is not one beyond capitalism or even a precapitalist form or anything approaching communism but the intensification of the logic of capitalism.” Here, racial diversity of survivors is merely an “alibi” for business as usual. Despite her damning reading of the genre, Fojas makes an important point, namely, that the zombie storyform both symptomizes the violence and death drive of the global debt economy *and* has the potential to radically rethink social and symbolic relations. Fojas is clear that zombie media have largely failed to imagine anything but the zombie-like rebirth of capitalism after its demise. Her readings are powerful and inventive, offering a new way to think about zombie media as critiques of debt that are themselves too often unable to think their way of the global orders of racial capitalism against which they so anxiously rage.

Chera Kee’s *Not Your Average Zombie* follows in Fojas’s footsteps with a book-long study that rehistoricizes the zombie figure, zombie media, and zombie-based social practices in American culture to argue that, far from only expressing anxieties and fears about this or that problem (invariably one of dehumanization within a system of oppression), zombies are also a vibrant site of rehumanization. In her unique, energetic study, Kee marks a difference between what she calls “ordinary” and “extra-ordinary” zombies. If the ordinary zombie is that which we expect from the typical zombie film or comic book, the shambling, dehumanized undead who exist seemingly only to eat humans, then extra-ordinary zombies are those that defy generic and cultural expectations of the zombie figure. This rather basic differentiation between uses of the zombie figure proves a fruitful way to think about zombie media of the past century, and indeed Kee’s reading of the genre’s history for extra-ordinary zombies revises the usual narrative and reaches from its beginnings in

Haitian folklore and Vodou practices all the way to video games and “zombie walks” of the last few years.

Kee chases the story of the extra-ordinary zombie through six chapters that are chunked in two parts: the first four chart “zombie identities” and emphasize the articulation of race in zombie narratives and its intersections with gender under the auspices of US racial capitalism and empire from the 1930s to the late 2000s; the next two deal with the play and performance of “zombihood.” Kee begins with a chapter on the US occupation of Haiti (1915–34) that frames the imperial dominance over Haiti in racial terms as being motivated by fears of Vodou and zombie magic alike. “Haiti,” she argues, “needed to be demonized,” since it offered a postcolonial example in a period of colonial expansion for the US (26); the nation could be used as “proof” of blacks’ inability to govern themselves. As Kee notes, questions about black autonomy “haunted early zombie fiction”; “from the very beginning, it wasn’t necessarily the zombies that were the threatening creatures in zombie media. Rather, the cultures and peoples who produced and controlled zombies posed the biggest threat” (26). Kee frames early zombie films like *White Zombie* (1932) and *King of the Zombies* (1941) around the extra-ordinariness of zombies who rise up to liberate themselves. Kee is quite clear that “zombies of color were never the reason why a protagonist tried to beat a zombie master and save the day” (46), since the human zombie master was the enemy of the typically white male protagonist; that zombihood was largely bestowed on and associated with bodies of color (and white women) forged an early link between hierarchies of culture, gender, and racialization.

Kee traces this linkage between zombies and race further in the second chapter to the cannibal zombie media initiated by Romero, but the most impressive contribution of *Not Your Average Zombie* are the final two chapters of section 1, which deal with women’s bodies and agency, and gender’s intersection with race in zombie media. Chapter 3 focuses on the ways in which the violence done by racialized zombies (and zombie masters) against white women serves to highlight the failures (and recovery) of white masculinity; moreover, the dehumanization of zombification (whether as slave-zombie or cannibal-zombie) is, for white women, often a comment on the character’s violation of gender norms, for example, a punishment for adultery. But, as Kee’s survey of some later films shows, the marginal position of the zombie also works as a “second chance” of sorts, empowering white women in films like *Troma* (1989), *Zombie Nation* (2004), and *Zombie Strippers* (2008) to turn on men and the patriarchal culture. In chapter 4, Kee turns her attention to the role black women play in

zombie media. As with chapter 3, Kee returns to the beginning of the genres and resurveys it up to the present, picking out the trends in black women's representation in zombie media and offering insightful readings of particular texts. This aspect of *Not Your Average Zombie*—the continual retelling of the zombie genre's story, revealing further depths each time, exposes again and again layers of nuanced meaning-making—demonstrates not only Kee's intimate familiarity with her subject matter but also attests to those unfamiliar with the genre that it offers infinitely more than either Foja's and Schweitzer's books let on. The interplay between chapters 3 and 4 are a great example of this: where the former shows that early zombie films offered white women both empowerment and (re)entrapment in patriarchy, the latter clarifies that this empowerment was built on the zombification of black women. But later films, particularly 1970s blaxploitation zombie flicks, showcase black women's direct assault on patriarchy either through their own zombification or through their revolt against zombie masters.

In section 2, Kee argues that the ability to play or perform as the zombie allows us to briefly embody the subject positions that films only allow us to watch at a distance. The chapter on zombie video games offers insights into how games afford rehumanization through embodiment, but the final chapter, on zombie walks, feels stunted in both purpose and argument. As a whole, the book's final section jibes awkwardly with the first four chapters. However, both demonstrate clearly the drawbacks of the extra-ordinary zombie figure, which Kee herself is clear about from the beginning. As she notes early on, while extra-ordinary zombies "may expand our expectations of zombiness and challenge narratives of victimization," their stories make us wonder how, if one zombie can overcome "slavery and powerlessness," why can't the others? "The lesson, then, is that if you remain an ordinary zombie, you have only yourself to blame" (15). Here, Kee warns that, despite their revolutionary import for individual characters, extra-ordinariness is easily co-opted by other structures of power. Kee's *Not Your Average Zombie* is an important book and, to me, the most radically interesting of the three under review, since it will appeal to scholars of zombie media for its important new directions and also serve as a rather comprehensive primer (by way of a multiply revisionist history) for scholars less familiar with zombies. Put simply: if it's the one book you read about or cite on zombie, you've made an excellent choice.

This is not, of course, to slight the other books under review. In fact, the Americanist who studies late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century America and its transnational currents will likely find them to be more comprehensively interesting, since they both feature the zombie as one among multiple figures

that American culture has used to model its problems of late. Dahlia Schweitzer's *Going Viral* is an especially appealing book, since it traces the theme of the virus, of catastrophic pandemic infection and outbreak, across American history, media, and cultural production of the past three decades, beginning with HIV/AIDS and ending with the virally spread zombie apocalypse. As the title of my review essay suggests, the virality of zombies shares much in common with the virality of HIV/AIDS, and like other viruses and diseases, is ripe for metaphorical play and manipulation, for use as a cipher of the fears, anxieties, and, yes, even hopes of society. This was powerfully demonstrated by Susan Sontag in her essays on tuberculosis, cancer, and HIV/AIDS in the 1970s and 1980s, in which she laid the foundation for what has now come to be called the "medical humanities." Schweitzer's book is the clearest successor to Sontag's essays that we have, but it takes Sontag's emphasis on the narratives of singular illnesses or viruses and broadens it to survey the metaphors of virality, infection, and outbreak themselves—the locus of fear, anticipation, and knowledge about illness that predates and frames individuals' experience of illness and is the focal point of the narratives told about a complex array of phenomenon, from the AIDS crisis to the panic over Ebola, from the spread and threat of terrorism to the processes of globalization, all culminating, it would seem, in the zombie renaissance of the 2000s.

Going Viral is straightforward: introduction, four chapters, conclusion. The introduction and chapter 1 establish the significance of viral and outbreak narratives in American culture since the 1990s. Schweitzer highlights three fears the outbreak story has indexed in American culture since the beginning of the twentieth century. These fears correspond to the "increasingly ineffective boundaries" transgressed or metaphorized by infection: between individual body and the body politic (e.g., me and ideology), between nations (e.g., the US and the USSR), and between "'ordinary' people and potentially dangerous disenfranchised groups" (e.g., heterosexuals and homosexuals) (2). Schweitzer traces the intertwined discourses of medicine, popular science, media reportings on medicine and science, government policy, and popular culture, with the greatest emphasis on film, as these discourses create narratives of boundary-transgressing infection. Schweitzer argues, for example, that throughout the Cold War, virology research received increasing levels of funding as researchers and politicians found ways to link viruses with national security policy. Moreover, she asserts that with the rapid geopolitical, technological, and transportation developments of globalization came new fears about the immediacy, unpredictability, and extent to which new viruses, particularly those from "remote" or "exotic" nations, could spread from their point of origin

to the world's Western metropolises. Thus, Schweitzer claims that, "with its explicit depictions of viral outbreak, its portrayals of bodily failure and decay, its literalization of ineffective borders and dangerous sources of contagion, and its portrayal of changing understandings of health and disease," the outbreak narrative is "uniquely suited" to exploiting and exploring—making money off of, and helping people to understand, to work through—their fears about the complexity of contemporary life under global neoliberal capitalism.

What Schweitzer means by "outbreak narrative" is explored in detail in chapter 1, where she describes it as a series of media cycles; she draws on Amanda Ann Klein's conception of a "film cycle," or "a series of films associated with each other through shared images, characters, settings, plots of themes" and which remain viable for only five to ten years, as opposed to the many decades a genre might last before mutating or spawning new ones. Schweitzer outlines three major cycles in outbreak narratives since the 1990s: the outbreak caused by globalization, by terrorism, and by zombies. Chapters 2 and 3 detail the globalization and terrorism outbreaks, respectively. Outbreak as a symptom of globalization emerged in the 1990s with the breakdown of the USSR, establishment of the EU, and various international trade agreements, such as NAFTA, that have come to shape neoliberalism today. Globalization outbreak narratives spoke to the anxiety of the seeming dissolution of borders everywhere as the ideological binary of the Cold War dissipated, as nations traded more freely and with greater disparities, and as technological advancements seemingly shrank the world. In the wake of 9/11, terrorism outbreak narratives took on increased significance. In both of these chapters, Schweitzer carefully details the changes that occur within different outbreak narrative cycles, noting, for example, how attitudes toward heroes, othering of villains, and the solvability of outbreaks become increasingly ambivalent after 9/11, or how narratives about terrorism began to see the threat of terror, rather than the biochemical weapons, as the contagion: "This fear that terror may come from the inside—that the evil is not only within our borders but that we cannot even identify it—is what truly keeps us up at night" (143).

Chapter 3—at nearly fifty pages and covering twice as many texts as previous chapters—offers a dense study of zombie outbreak and the clearest look at the significance of outbreak narratives in general in American culture of the past thirty years. If globalization and terrorism outbreak narratives deal with the threat and spread of infection as a result of the breakdown of borders, distances, and national/political boundaries, the zombie outbreak deals with the aftermath. Schweitzer takes conventional knowledge about zombie media as experiments in imagining the breakdown of social order and institution and

their reconstitution by survivors, and reframes it as the endgame of a process of anxiety, outbreak, and postapocalyptic pandemic. Schweitzer suggests, for example, “The zombie . . . is the terrorist who infects, an embodiment of *both* terrorism and infection” (151). And unlike the terrorist, the zombie is not a hidden threat: it is obvious, unambiguous, and so caters to a desire to *see* the threat made invisible by microscopic viruses and clandestine terrorists. Schweitzer goes where other scholars have not, drawing interesting connections between the history of viral outbreaks in the 2000s and their coincidence with the release of major hit zombie films, like *28 Days Later* (2002), the American release of which happened alongside the SARS outbreak in China. Other texts, such as the TV show *iZombie* (2015–present), which would fall in Kee’s extra-ordinary zombie category, complicate the relationship between zombie outbreak and narratives of infection by humanizing its zombie protagonist and emphasizing zombihood “as a chronic contagious illness with many similarities to HIV” (160).

Ultimately, the chapter and thus *Going Virals* contribution to scholarship on the zombie offer a surprisingly comprehensive overview of post-9/11 zombie narratives as they interact with popular discourses of outbreak. But in her comprehensiveness Schweitzer recapitulates much of what has already been said about zombie media, especially with regard to how the zombie postapocalypse models how we might “embrace a life strategy built on self-discipline, self-control, and self-protection without becoming a monster” (187)—a problem posed early on in postapocalyptic fiction from Richard Matheson’s *I Am Legend* (1954) to the present, and which, Schweitzer suggests, is at the heart of how zombie outbreak narratives react to neoliberalism. After all, like the zombie, under the biopolitics of neoliberalism “we are all equally complicit in the murder of others—whether real, symbolic, or social murder—to save ourselves and our way of life” (179). Taken as a whole, *Going Viral* is a satisfying study that traces a major set of American popular culture narratives and narrative strategies across a turbulent period in our recent history. It is a compelling book and all the more so because of its emphasis on these outbreak narratives as metaphorizing all the major problems in the US for the past quarter century.

These three books by Camilla Fojas, Chera Kee, and Dahlia Schweitzer demonstrate the significance of the zombie as metaphor—not only as a matter of general knowledge, declaring that, yes, zombie media “do” something, but also as a matter of disciplinary interest. As the range of these studies suggests, it is increasingly difficult to ignore zombie media—and not just because of their pervasiveness. Taken together, these three books demonstrate the variety of approaches to zombies, the usefulness of these approaches to American

cultural studies, and the ways in which some Americanists are already engaging and breaking apart the metaphors that zombie media trade in. It is not surprising that each of these books, when they introduce the zombie, use the word *metaphor* to describe the complex array of meaning making that zombie media activate, and that all three note that the zombie is far from a static sign—it is multiple, malleable, and, like a zombie horde, unpredictable, even confounding in its assignation of shifting meanings. If Fojas, Kee, and Schweitzer achieve anything with their three books, let it be a spark of interest among Americanists in the zombie and its metaphors.