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Dead Subjectivity

White Zombie, Black Baghdad

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With few exceptions, the contemporary cinematic zombie is a postmodern creature that reflects back the deadening effects of “first world” consumerism and its attendant evils. Zombies, writes Steven Shaviro, “don’t have an origin or a referent: they have become unmoored from meaning. They figure a social process that no longer serves rationalized ends, but has taken on a strange sinister life of its own” (1993, 84). For example, in George Romero’s famous trilogy, to which Shaviro refers, zombies are not only “monstrous symptoms of a violent, manipulative, exploitative society”; they are also, with their destructiveness and cannibalism, “remedies for its ills” (87). In a curious contortion of the democracy of consumption, the zombie “potlatch” in Day of the Dead—in which zombies tear apart and eat the flesh of American soldiers—“marks a democratic, communal leveling of all individual distinctions.” Watching this scene of “cannibal ferment,” Shaviro...
revels in the "unavowable delights of exterminating the powerful Others who have abused me" (103). Romero’s zombie trilogy is an explicit commentary on the dead ends of the American family, post-Fordist consumerism, and the barbarism of the military-scientific complex. And as Shaviro’s confession makes clear, we spectators would rather identify with the zombie and its savage, unthinking cannibalism than avow our resemblance to the violent but rational humans and the institutions they represent.

As redemptive and democratic entities, these zombies represent a version of liberal politics in which revivified death conveniently obscures racial, class, and gender differences. In Romero’s republic, the dead may not be gainfully exploited, and all are equally compelled to consume the flesh of the living. At the film’s end, the few remaining humans take refuge on a deserted tropical island. There, stranded without hope of liberation, they await their inescapable zombification. Though Romero’s walking dead seem to have no origin, the human characters find themselves, in the end, in the Caribbean region where the American fascination with zombies and imperiled democracy began.

The zombie does, of course, have history in the U.S. cultural unconscious that connects it to colonial rule, unpaid slave labor, and the democratic injustices of American empire. The first feature-length zombie film, Victor Halperin’s White Zombie, premiered in 1932 when the U.S. occupation of Haiti was in its seventeenth year. Haiti had long been associated with the exoticism of voodoo, especially as travel writers and marines published quasi-anthropological accounts of the country, including White Zombie’s primary source, W. B. Seabrook’s The Magic Island (1929). But it was White Zombie that first cinematically presented the Haitian zombie and connected this undead character to the “occult economy” and political magic driving America’s hemispheric project. In response to mass strikes and demonstrations in Haiti against the occupation, which began in 1929 (see Suggs 2002, 74–76), the United States was finally beginning to withdraw from this unpopular and, by all accounts, unsuccessful mission of democracy when White Zombie opened.

The zombie, a perennial favorite of American horror, refers chiefly to its own cinematic iterations. “At once so repeatable and so specific, . . . so timeless and so timely,” writes Meghan Sutherland, it may well represent the
cadaverous “physicality of memory” itself (2007, 67, 69). But this essay argues that as a figure of memory the zombie actually has much to tell us about the culture of occupation in which it’s buried. Halperin’s film, which takes place in Haiti during the occupation, makes only oblique reference to U.S. foreign relations. But the film offers a fantasy of the cultural and psychological effects of occupation through this cinematic trope of the zombie. Or, put differently, though it evades any forthright engagement with the U.S. invasion, the film stages the experience of occupation as the loss of sovereign subjectivity. Displacing politics with horror, the film also performs curious racial reversals that implicate Americans in a colonial economy and suggest that U.S. citizens may themselves be susceptible to America’s degrading Haitian policy. On the other hand, the film enacts these tensions only to expunge their enduring effects. If today’s zombies are the postmodern, timeless creatures of remakes and sequels, it is in part because they have their origins in narratives of erasure. Halperin’s zombie is less the stuff of memory than amnesia. In what follows, I read *White Zombie* and its rather incredible publicity materials with and against U.S. occupation policy and the cultural imaginary it produced. I conclude with a short discussion of historical memory and, in particular, how the American occupation of Haiti looked back to Arabia and anticipated the occupation of Iraq.

*White Zombie* is only nominally about the occupation, yet the advertising in the press books (written by United Artists’ publicity department and sent to all theaters) directs audiences to the literature on Haiti written during American military rule, including *The Magic Island*, passages of which the film and posters conspicuously quote. Ad copy boasted that the film’s representation of zombies “dug from their graves and put to work as slaves” is “based upon personal observation in Haiti by American writers and research workers, and fantastic as it sounds, its entire substance is based on fact.” Local exhibitors recreated the sounds, sights, and “horrors” of Haiti in small-town America such that audiences might first learn of the film when a troupe of listless undead paraded down Main Street, led by an alluring spectral woman in white. As the posters exclaimed, though the “practice of Zombism is punishable by
death in Haiti," it is "being practiced in this country." These rumored victims of magic, pressed into the ballyhoo of commerce, were evidence that neighbors and friends were capable of being mesmerized by the black arts. To draw audiences to the theater, exhibitors were encouraged to "hire several negroes" to beat "tom toms" while adorned in "tropical garments." "Every once in a while have them cut loose with a couple of blood-curdling yells. Be sure they simulate the Negro rhythms as heard in the first reel of the picture." Displays inside the theater teased filmgoers with supposed artifacts of magic: armed with these props—including handcuffs and a magic wand—they too might create a "white zombie" of their own. These and other racialized stunts, designed to promote the film's sensational tale of black magic and white bodies, trade on the lurid mixture of xenophobia, exoticism, and sexual slavery, all within the thrall of a form of cinematic possession. Aspiring to penetrate local everyday American life with the signifiers of voodoo, White Zombie's advertising campaign, initiated after 17 years of a controversial occupation, staged a Haitian invasion of a different order.

In fact, so novel and domesticated was this character that White Zombie's finance company, Amusement Securities Corporation, later sued a competing producer when Halperin's Revolt of the Zombies opened four years later. Amusement's legal team claimed that this new film was a copyright infringement on the word "zombie." In relation to this suit, the New York Times explained the zombie's cultural origin as a matter of conjecture: "The term zombie is thought to have originated in Haitian black magic and describes a person raised from the dead" (Suit over "Zombie" Film 1936). Claiming to have invented the zombie (or having helped to finance the film that invented it), and thus to have legal ownership of the concept, this company performs a reenslavement of this Haitian figure within the logic of intellectual property. This is only one of many ways in which Halperin's film is associated with techniques of displacement and appropriation.

The white zombie at the heart of Halperin's film is Madeline (Madge Bellamy) who arrives in Haiti on the eve of her wedding to Neil (John Harron), an American banker who is hoping to find prospects in Port-au-Prince. The wide-eyed couple is to be married at Charles Beaumont's plantation estate, available to them because the American financier Beaumont (Robert Frazer)
is so taken with Madeline that he plots to court her away from Neil and claim her as his bride. However, when Madeline refuses his advances, Beaumont seeks the help of another plantation owner, Murder Legendre (Bela Legosi), who has mastered and mobilized the practice of voodoo to staff his sugar mill with the resulting free and extremely alienated labor. Eager to please Beaumont—on whom Legosi’s tropical dandy seems to harbor a romantic crush—Legendre works his sorcery on Madeline, rendering her Beaumont’s zombie mistress on her wedding night. Told that his bride is dead, the traumatized Neil suffers an unmanning delirium that sets him on a drinking binge at a local cantina. Under the influence of local spirits, he sees his wife’s ghost and chases after shadows. He somewhat recovers his wits once he discovers Madeline’s empty tomb and, with the help of a local missionary named Dr. Brunner, learns her awful fate. Dr. Brunner explains that Madeline has been killed and reanimated. Or, as a scientist would explain it, she’s been drugged and kidnapped. We find her next at Legendre’s castle where she and Beaumont have settled into the rituals of courtship. She plays piano; he gives her jewels. Despite her unmistakably deadened affect, she carries out her womanly duties according to his wishes. But we soon realize that it is Legendre who commands her. When Beaumont decides he would rather lose her alive rather than possess her dead, he must negotiate this with Legendre, who, in keeping with his malevolent manner, refuses. Instead of releasing Madeline, Legendre casts his spell on Beaumont. Help comes when Neil and Dr. Brunner arrive at the castle. Beaumont manages with his last bit of sovereign will to kill Legendre before killing himself. Madeline awakens from her months-long enslavement and returns to Neil with no memory of her zombification and, perhaps also, still a virgin bride.

Tony Williams (1983) remarks that *White Zombie*’s reference to the occupation is circumscribed through the conventions of horror, and its racial imputation is limited by what Hollywood censorship codes permit. But where other 1930s horror films locate the source of ominous power in mythically foreign places, *White Zombie*, he notes, freely names its world-historical locale, and the plot, as well as the advertising, are generated from and generative of a nightmarish fantasy of American empire. Consistent with the contours of occupation history, white American bankers, plantation owners,
and Christian missionaries preside over the Haiti of this film, and insofar as we encounter "local color," it is in the form of servants and zombie labor. If one of the justifications for the American invasion was to guard against German control of the island, this film suggests that most of Haiti is under the spell of, if not German, then sufficiently un-American foreign domination.

By far the film’s most impressive scene takes places in Legendre’s sugar mill, which is modeled after Seabrook’s description of the real HASCO, the Haitian-American Sugar Company that in 1932 was owned by American interests (Schmidt 1971, 95). We are first introduced to the sugar processing in a wide opening shot overlooking the plant’s bilevel operations. Workers who slowly but methodically carry baskets of cane to the thresher are, like the men pushing the millstone below, backlit so that we see only their silhouettes. Though the mill’s lighting appears to be electric, the machines are powered entirely by undifferentiated “human” labor. As a notable early example of sound effects, the soundtrack emphasizes the low-tech nature of this industry: we hear not the whirring of belts, the grinding of metal gears, or even the sound of human voices, but only the monotonous moan of creaking wood as the men labor. When Beaumont, guided by one of Legendre’s somnambulist servants, enters the mill, he is momentarily framed in a long, low angle shot. He stands in the background while, in the foreground, the workers framed from the waist down walk to and from the processor. But when one of the workers falls into the sieve and is quietly processed with the rest of the harvest, we come to Beaumont’s realization that these are but the shells of men. Only now does the camera linger on the faces of the undead—white, black, mulatto, such that we may discern them—as they slowly push the millstone like mules. The introduction to labor in this gothic factory satisfies the Hollywood convention of gradually revealing monstrosity. But in suspending our knowledge of the worker’s revivified state, the film intentionally conflates deadening, low-wage, factory work with work performed by zombies.

Significantly, the magic behind this labor is not black or even Haitian, but white and European. It is Legendre who has cultivated a work force from the local graveyard. His private servants are his fallen and now reanimated Haitian and American enemies, all of them, we later learn, connected to the
occupation, including the Captain of the Gendarmes, the Minister of the Interior, Haiti’s Chief Executioner, and the witch doctor himself, who is now slave to his own art. As Legendre explains to Beaumont, “They work faithfully and they are not worried about long hours. You, you could make good use of men like mine on your plantation.” But Beaumont is uninterested in unpaid, unfeeling plantation labor, desiring only the film’s single white woman, Madeleine, for this own domestic bliss. If only she could “disappear for a month,” Beaumont reasons, Madeleine would forget her lover and accept Beaumont’s hand. In exchange for this favor from Legendre, Beaumont promises him “anything,” a debt that grows more ominous as the film concludes.

Though the narrative will focus our attention on Madeleine hereafter, this mill is the primal scene of the occupation economy. Once financed through German money, HASCO became by virtue of the occupation the largest American interest in Haiti and one of the few economically prosperous ventures during the occupation. The company’s profit margin was predicated on attracting locals to the steady, unrelenting work at unimaginably low wages (Schmidt 1971, 95, 171). Hans Schmidt tells us that during the occupation, Haitian laborers earned 20 cents for every 12 hours of work, making Haiti the cheapest labor market in the Americas (170). Schmidt shows that however the Americans initially calculated Haiti’s agricultural and mineral wealth, by the early 1920s it was clear that the country’s most, if not only, attractive natural resource was its cheap and overabundant human labor, much of which the Marines consigned to work without pay (170–73). As I discuss below, Seabrook speculates that only zombies, or men resembling zombies, could endure the working conditions at HASCO.

But the zombie represents more than just exploited labor: at Beaumont’s request, zombification is domesticated and deployed as a technology of forgetting. Becoming a zombie, Madeleine will both “disappear” and “forget” her living passion for Neil. In this way, the film connects zombism both to the exploitation of labor and to structures of memory and thus, I want to argue, of history. For the American occupation of Haiti—the longest and heretofore most brutal occupation in U.S. history—has largely disappeared from our discussion of occupation in contemporary times, supplanted by the “successes” of U.S. occupation in postwar Germany and Japan. As both an
epiphenomenon and an artifact of occupation, the zombie is an emblematic figure.

For the sake of international relations, Woodrow Wilson claimed that the invasion of Haiti was necessary to save its citizens from the cycles of violence in the wake of several revolutions and political assassinations, and to make the world, in Wilson's words, “safe for democracy” (Schmidt 1971, 10). But, as outlined by Micheal S. Laguerre, the occupation was driven by three broad goals: to control the Haitian economy and thereby create economic dependency on the United States; to control the territory as a strategically important location close to the Panama Canal and vulnerable to German and French invasion; and finally to reorganize the Haitian infrastructure to bring economic and political stability to the country (1993, 65–66).

The legal status of Haiti and the sovereignty of its citizens were the subject of intense debate in the occupation's first years when news spread of the violent clashes between the occupier and occupied. In the interest of creating roads, mostly to service military transport, the Marines revived an old Haitian law stating that peasants could be forced to work on road construction in lieu of paying a highway tax. Chained and marched to the island’s interior, and working at gunpoint, peasants of this first Black Republic experienced the occupation as slavery's uncanny return. Again, Hans Schmidt notes that this use of conscripted labor had a parallel in the corvée used during the nineteenth century British occupation of Egypt. In 1915, Haiti’s Cacos insurgents organized a counter-offensive, and this rebellion, which lasted several years, was in turn brutally suppressed. In 1921, the New York Times reported that in the occupation's first seven years, an estimated 2,500 Haitians had been slain, many of them while fleeing forced labor, while the Marines suffered only 16 casualties (Schmidt, 103).

The Foreign Policy Association of New York urged the US to withdraw from Haiti because the brutality of Marines and the exploitation of the Haitian economy violated basic liberal principles (“Demands US Quits”). According to the The New York Times the US senate heard testimony that the occupation policy had so infuriated native residents that the Cacos had mutilated and ceremoniously cannibalized American soldiers according to
voodoo custom (Says Natives Ate Marine 1921). The source of these conflicts was the undemocratic mechanizations underwriting occupation rule. Under the pretext of Haiti’s political and economic instability, the United States invaded Haiti, appointed a client president, and imposed an American-authored treaty legalizing the invasion and occupation after the fact. This document was followed by the American-authored Haitian constitution that granted foreigners the right to own Haitian property for the first time since the revolution. In short order, the indebted national economy was overseen by New York–based banks, which in turn propped up the Marine presence in Haiti as the only way to protect American interests.

In the field, Americans reimplemented plantation agriculture in place of the land-tenure system, turning independent farmers into subsisting laborers (Schmidt 1971, 11–12). And for many locals, it was the economic violence of the occupation that most endangered the long-term sustainability of Haitian life. Schmidt argues that however much the Wilson administration trumpeted the principles of democracy and national self-determination, the occupation “consistently suppressed local democratic institutions and denied elementary political liberties” (10). The “dominant theme of the American presence in Haiti was materialistic rather than idealistic” (13). Moreover, as the Foreign Policy Association argued before the U.S. Senate, the very occupation of Haiti without an official declaration of war from Congress was itself a violation of U.S. and international law (Demand Americans Quit 1922). The African-American press, especially, pointed to the hypocrisy of Wilson’s championing the sovereign right of self-determination for small countries while imposing a police state in Haiti (Suggs 2002, 72). In this context, voodoo in Haiti, though illegal and “officially marginalized” since the revolution (Taylor 1992, 814), was perforce connected to a cultural and political opposition to the American occupation, even as caricatures of voodoo projected in the United States seemed to justify the military measures of neo-colonial rule.  

W. B. Seabrook (1929), himself sympathetic to “black magic,” attempted to make sense of voodoo in relationship to the occupation. In the first part of his memoir, The Magic Island, he recounts his journey to the Haitian interior where he discovers not nightmarish primitivism, but a reenchancing religious vitality absent in modern American culture. He attaches himself to Maman
Célie, a village matriarch and voodoo priestess, and under her guidance, fully partakes of the exotic, blood-drinking, animal-sacrificing ceremonies. This “ethnographic right of passage,” writes Steven Gregory, awakens Seabrook “to his hidden self” (1992, 182). Connecting these secret voodoo rituals to Judeo-Christian practices, Seabrook describes Haitian worship as an “authentic ecstasy . . . of the ancients” (1929, 43) that had disappeared in American religious and secular life. “Better a black papaloï in Haiti with blood-stained hands who believes in his living gods than a frock-coated minister of Fifth Avenue reducing Christ to a solar myth and rationalizing the Immaculate Conception” (62). Referring to this passage from Seabrook’s memoir, Mary Renda remarks that “for Seabrook civilization could be overcome by exposure to the authentic belief of a primitive people” (2001, 248). As she notes of Seabrook’s candidly paternalistic and often sensationalized account, it was the author’s intent to dispose American readers positively to Haitian culture because, bereft of ecstasy, Americans were on the path to becoming “mechanical, soulless robots” (Seabrook 42; Renda, 247).

In the second part of the book, however, Seabrook returns to Port-au-Prince—to what he calls “Americanized Haiti” (30)—where he finds that voodoo is put toward perverse ends as a means of capitalizing on low-wage employment. Whereas in the Haitian interior Seabrook learns of sympathetic magic and sacrificial rites, it is in the environs of HASCO that he hears stories of the working undead. The factory’s wretched employees, he writes, were said to be “poor unhappy zombies” whom local middlemen “dragged from their peaceful graves to slave . . . in the sun” (96). On payday, he’s told, the exhumers claimed the group’s wages, and in this way profited from the occupation’s extortionist economy. For Seabrook there was something “incongruous” about the sights, sounds, and smells of this first-world industry (“like a chunk of Hoboken”) as a backdrop to the “exclusively local” phenomenon of the living dead (White Zombie primitivizes this industry to make it congruent with its workforce). But as local legend has it, the labor demands of the former attract and even produce the automatic bodies of the latter. In this account, zombies are a modern industrial practice of occupation culture whereby the more enterprising Haitians enslave the cadavers of their countrymen.
But as an empirically minded American, Seabrook needs to see a zombie with his own eyes. This opportunity is furnished when he comes face to face with a laborer working in the HASCO sugar fields.

Obediently, like an animal, he slowly stood erect—and what I saw then, coupled with I heard previously, or despite it, came as a rather sickening shock. The eyes were the worst. It was not my imagination. They were in truth like the eyes of a dead man, not blind, but staring unfocused, unseeing. The whole face, for that matter, was bad enough. It was vacant, as if there were nothing behind it. It seemed not only expressionless, but also incapable of expression. (101)

On the brink of a “panicky lapse” of scientific reason, Seabrook almost believes this worker a zombie, until he recalls the face of a lobotomized dog he once encountered at Columbia University: “Its entire front brain had been removed in an experimental operation weeks before; it moved about, it was alive, but its eyes were like the eyes I now saw staring” (101). Recovering from this “mental panic,” he surmises that “these zombies were nothing but poor, ordinary demented human beings, idiots, forced to toil in the field” (101–2). Finding a Haitian zombie, then, Seabrook discovers not Western civilization’s primitive past, but its soulless, robotic future.

But Seabrook does not leave the matter of the zombie worker with this canine comparison. His equivocation returns when a Haitian doctor presents him with the Criminal Code of the Republic of Haiti, a code faithfully recited by the missionary in White Zombie when Neil seeks an explanation for Madeline’s disappearance, and prominently written into the film’s exhibitionary materials:

Also shall be qualified as attempted murder the employment which may be made against any person of substances which, without causing actual death, produce a lethargic coma more or less prolonged. If, after the administering of such substances, the person has been buried, the act shall be considered murder no matter what result follows. (Seabrook 1929, 103)
Seabrook’s deliberation on zombies ends abruptly and ambiguously with this legalese. As a matter of the law, the article tells us that murder—or burial of a comatose body—is illegal and punishable. The law does not, however, adjudicate the existence of zombies; it only punishes those with the intent to create them. But the last phrase of this penal code—“no matter what result follows”—holds open the question of the undead figure that the law cannot quite name. To put it in Seabrook’s words, the zombie is both linguistically and legalistically “expressionless” and “incapable of expression” (1929, 101). This is where matters of magic collide with matters of law. White Zombie’s poetic justice meets the standards of the code when Beaumont punishes Legendre by pushing him off of a cliff before he himself falls. But the film takes the code and Seabrook’s observation so much further by animating the very zombie the law can construct only circumstantially.

What is a zombie exactly? And what is the connection between its ontology and its representability, between its legal status and its position in the occupation workforce? Seabrook offers us this definition, one the White Zombie press books again quote verbatim:

The zombie . . . is the soulless human corpse, still dead, but taken from the grave and endowed by sorcery with a mechanical semblance of life—it is a dead body which is made to talk and act, and move as if it were alive. People who have the power to do this go to a fresh grave, dig up the body before it has had time to rot, galvanize it into movement, and then make of it a servant or a slave, occasionally for the commission of some crime, more often simply as a drudge around the habitation of the farm, setting it dull heavy tasks, and beating it like a dumb beast if it slackens. (1929, 93)

Taken with the penal code above, this definition presumes a distinction between life and its semblance. The unearthed body, like an animal and without a soul, is humanity’s mechanical nature come to life. Or, it is the biological remainder of politically and legally denuded existence. Already dead, the zombie can experience neither life nor death, nor is it beholden to categories of justice. Rather, it is pressed into the service of nonexistence so that its master may live well. In Haitian cultural history, the zombie
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has long served as an allegory for slavery and emancipation from colonial rule. As Markman Ellis explains, the zombie perfectly encapsulates the slave condition, especially as produced in colonial wars. Captured by the enemy, the slave is sentenced to perpetual labor in exchange for life. Slavery is the condition of execution deferred (2000, 209). And though the zombie was also a figure of slave rebellion—a coming into consciousness of one’s state of desocialized life—it was as an allegory of slavery that the zombie myth found new application during the occupation. “In Haiti,” writes Joan Dayan, “memories of servitude are transposed into a new idiom that both reproduced and dismantled a twentieth-century history of forced labor and denigration that became particularly acute during the American occupation of Haiti. As Haitians were forced to build roads, and thousands of peasants were brutalized and massacred, tales of zombies proliferated in the United States.” (1995, 37).

Circulation of zombie fantasies in the United States was, in some sense, both an admission and denial that U.S. policy in Haiti resurrected a colonial, even slave economy. The penal codes that place the zombie at the threshold of the law resonate with the specious legality of occupation and the threats such extralegal maneuvers pose to individual and national sovereignty. The zombie, in sum, is a form of possession by one and dispossession by another that becomes visible in that temporary state of possession called military occupation. By situating this drama in Haiti, and then restaging it on Main Street, _White Zombie_ and its theatrical afterlife suggest that this is a state of non-legal non-life to which all are susceptible. As Patricia Chu writes, the Haitian zombie of Halperin’s film gives shape to the vexed politics of “democratic occupation” and telescopes a modernist anxiety about the loss of subjectivity in the face of an increasingly alienating administrative state bureaucracy and imaginary capitalism (2006, 5).

Anthropologists Jean and John Comaroff tell us that whatever the zombie may signify in the modern West, in Africa zombies continue to represent the source of unpaid labor that magically produces wealth through inscrutable and unseemly means. For example, the zombie epidemic in post-Apartheid South Africa is a response to a new, and unusual era of neo-liberal global capitalism that mysteriously manifests signs of affluence.
without labor or perceptible production. In the model of traditional capitalism, production and industry are the most visible signs of wealth. In the model of this new millennial capitalism, products seem to magically appear in the marketplace and consumption, not production, becomes the sign of wealth. (1999, 2003). Currently, the Comaroffs write, the "globalization of the division of labor reduces workers everywhere to the lowest common denominator. It has also put such distance between sites of production and consumption that their relationship has become all but unfathomable, save in fantasy" (2002, 784). In the face of this global disenfranchisement, "the zombie, an embodied, dispirited phantasm [is] associated with the production, the possibility and impossibility, of new forms of wealth" (2002, 782). And just to be clear: they are not simply talking about literary tropes and low-budget effects; in the mind of those desperately unemployed South Africans, the zombies are real and voodoo spells are cast in the hopes of possessing a living wage.

Bearer of labor’s disappearance, the zombie occupies jobs for pay, but asks nothing in return. This phenomenon is not new today any more that it was new in 1932. But, as the Comoroffs explain, the haunted and haunting worker comes and goes, finding new edges of representation in the public imagination according to the trends of a "spectral economy" and global capital flows. Today’s working dead find their historical precedence in, to offer one example, the zombie beliefs in West Cameroon which first intensified during the German colonization of the region during World War I. German imposition of plantation agriculture disrupted village livelihoods and brought with it a period of decline in income and birth rates: "Under such conditions, zombies become the stuff of ‘estranged labor’: recognition not merely of the commodification of labor, or its subjection to deadly competition, but the invisible predation that seems to congeal beneath the banal surfaces of new forms of wealth" (2002, 795).

The American occupation of Haiti was, like the German colonization of West Cameroon, a capitalist wager—an attempt to secure Haiti for the sake of geopolitical power and to discipline its economy for the sake of American investment. And it was an international venture that coincided with the stock market frenzy of the late teens and twenties. The virtual, inscrutable
wealth represented by the occupation and the stock market was by 1932—the Depression’s worst year—untenable capitalist fantasies.

The fear of a spectral workforce underwriting both the occupation in Haiti as well as the industries at home may well explain White Zombie’s eventual commercial success (despite its critical failure). It may also explain why it is that, contrary to Seabrook’s account, among White Zombie’s undead are black and whites; Haitian, Europeans, and Americans; men and at least one woman. In many ways, Madeline’s unpaid domestic work for Beaumont gestures toward the gendering of labor and the intangibility of the coming (sex) service industry. It is Beaumont’s hope that once Madeline is turned into a zombie, she’ll forget Neil and take Beaumont as her groom. But his “honorable” aspiration is undercut when Beaumont realizes that zombified affection leaves him cold. He sits next Madeline at the piano as she mechanically plays Liszt and admits the folly of his passions. “I was mad to do this . . . I thought that beauty alone would satisfy. But the soul is gone. I can’t bare those empty staring eyes!” Later Madeline is dressed for bed by her maids according to the master’s wishes. We may presume from this evening ritual that Madeline does more than play piano for her master in her undead state.

One of the posters for the film makes this sexual slavery more explicit than censorship codes would allow the film to be: “See this live, weird, strangest of all love stories!” On the left side of the poster, a vampiric figure holds an unconscious woman whose head, fallen back, reveals a bite-worthy neck. Clearly trading on Legosi’s Dracula persona, the allure of foreign mesmerism, and the eroticism of necrophilia, the rest of the ad copy suggests that it is Legendre, not Beaumont, who yearns for Madeline’s corpse: “Here’s a burning glamorous love-tale told on the border-land of life and death . . . the story of a fiend who placed the woman he desired under the strange spell of WHITE ZOMBIE rendering her soul-less, lifeless yet permitting her to talk and breathe and do his every bidding!” It is worth pointing out that Madeline—white of dress, skin, and soul—is nonetheless metonymically connected to this island under foreign military rule. Her nuptial undergarments, which we spy as she dresses for her wedding, are embossed with a map of Haiti. And despite being under the spell of amnesic voodoo, when Madeline does remember Neil, her unconscious longings are accompanied by a nondiegetic gospel
choir. The film labors to remind us of Madeline's affinity with Haiti and black culture, and it intimates that the plight of women may not be disconnected from the plight of the occupied.

Nor is it only women whose bodies may be pressed into this form of domestic labor. When Beaumont turns against "black magic," Legendre decides to turn Beaumont into a zombie—slowly and with sadistic pleasure. Rather than see Madeline brought back from the undead, Legendre explains to Beaumont: "I have other plans for mademoiselle, I'm afraid you might not agree. I have taken a fancy to you, monsieur." Already under the power of Legendre's narcotics, Beaumont's vision turns hazy, as indicated through a subjective point of view shot. In the next scene, Beaumont tries to plead, but unable to speak he can only reach out and stay Legendre's hand as he carves an effigy of Beaumont in wax. For several seconds, the men hold hands across the table gazing into each other's eyes. "You refused to shake hands once," says Legendre in reference to a snubbed handshake at their first meeting: "Well, well, we understand each other better now." If Beaumont is to become the next white zombie, then we may presume that he too will be dressed for bed according to his master's wishes.

That one American is slaving for another—that white men and women are equally vulnerable to various forms of exploitation without pay—tells us that zombified work in any form is not only a tropical malady. The occupation economy has come home, or as one of film's taglines warns: "Look around you, do your friends act strangely? They may be zombies—living, breathing, walking under the spell of the Master of the Living Dead." Intentionally or not, White Zombie offers uncomfortable parallels between modern transnational industry and local slavery, and between an occupation client government and a colonial administration. And it dramatizes the baleful effects of occupation on both the American occupiers and Haitians under military rule.

Even the marines who served in Haiti were beholden to a phantasmatic economy of their own. In his 1933 memoir, John Houston Craig describes in zombie-like terms the "degenerating magic of the tropical sun" on the troops stationed too long in Haiti: "Flesh melts from the bones, [the face] becomes the face of a corpse, with deep set eyes, like pools of smoldering fire"
Under this condition, Marines go mad like rabid dogs, become violent toward the natives, then turn suicidal. In general he finds that “white men think queer thoughts and sometimes do queer things in the tropics” (37). The only cure is “a swift return to the land of birth” (83). Craige wonders if the folks back home have any sense of the physical and psychic burdens of hemispheric patrol: “Marines have grown gray in the banana wars under the equator while the rest of the country had enjoyed unexampled quiet and prosperity” (90–91). Like the Haitian zombies at HASCO, Marines too represent the spectral labor and hidden costs of military magic and material comfort. So strange and mystifying is this mission of democracy, so violent is the culture clash between Americans and Haitians, so fantastic is the transformation of the Marines that Craige titles his account of the occupation presciently enough *Black Bagdad*.

In the first pages of his memoir, Craige explains the title in reference to an observation offered to him by a fellow American whom he meets in Port-au-Prince. His name is Hennessey, “a gun-runner by trade and purveyor-extraordinary of tropical wars” (1). Introducing Craige to this exotic port of call, Hennessey offers this rhapsodic description:

>This . . . is black Bagdad. These people are still living in the days of the Arabian Nights. You may meet Haroun al Raschid and Gaifer, his Grand Wazir, any day, walking arm in arm in the street. You may hear tales as amazing as any Scheherazade ever told. You may see woolly-headed cannibals and silk-hatted savants side by side. An amazing place. And fascinating: why, the French called these West Indian islands the *Pays des Revenants*, meaning the country to which you are bound to come back. (1–2)

Indeed, the Marines would return to Haiti, most notably in 1994 under Bill Clinton’s “Operation Uphold Democracy” to restore Jean-Bertrand Aristide to his elected office, and again in 2004 under the banner of George W. Bush’s preemptive foreign policy to help depose Aristide. This largely French-American joint invasion helped to heal the diplomatic ill will between Bush and
Jacques Chirac after the American invasion and occupation of Iraq (Polgreen and Weiner 2004).

But Craige is not looking ahead to future occupations of Haiti or Iraq; he is rather compelled to look back to Scheherazade’s Arabia, whose characters come to life on the streets of Port-au-Prince. With this model in mind, Craige’s own account is a series of fantastic tales of voodoo, violence, and disorder. Not incidentally, Seabrook, also inspired by *The Arabian Nights*, wrote his first travel narrative, *Adventures in Arabia* (1928), just one year before heading to Haiti. Having “turned Arab” through his intimate contact with tribes and sects in the Middle East, his next project was to “turn Negro” in the tropics (Seabrook, quoted in Renda 2001, 247). For the American traveler and soldier alike, Haiti was seen through the cultural lens of Arabian orientalism. For Haitians, however, the occupation was experienced as orientalism’s other side: Western imperialism. They very use of the corvée recalled the British occupation of Egypt and the colonial use of slave labor.

In 1921, a Haitian delegation to Washington, D.C., declared that the U.S. occupation of their country was “the most terrible regime of military autocracy which has ever been carried out in the name of the great American democracy” (Haitian Delegates 1921). They reported on the U.S. military’s implementation of “the water cure” and other mechanisms of torture to ferret out the Cacos “rebels” and the “ghastly mortality” in the military prisons. They denounced the U.S. corporate take-over of the Haitian economy and the insulting charade of democratic elections (Haitian Delegates). These complaints, however, do not look back to the British in Egypt so much as they anticipate present-day American policy in Baghdad. The Bush administration would refuse the logic of a “Black Baghdad” that connects Iraq to Haiti, and instead would have us compare the occupation of Iraq to the American occupation of Japan and especially Germany, where U.S. nation-building began not as a preemptive measure, but as a consequence of World War II, and where occupation gave way to prosperous liberal democracies and not to economic and civilian disorder. Thus the Bush administration would rather we see Baathist Nazis in Saddam’s Baghdad and not zombies in “liberated” Iraq.
As one of the longer military interventions in U.S. history—one, some say, that did not really end in 1934 (Dow 1995)—the American occupation has been virtually erased from the official and unofficial memory. Robert Lawless writes that his students come to his classes surprised to learn of America’s gunboat diplomacy in the Caribbean, and that “even among Haitians themselves, the folk memory of the American occupation is rather dim” (1992, 107). In this regard, White Zombie is an allegory of occupation and historical memory, and not only because zombism enacts a mode of foreign possession and enslavement. It is also the case that the film achieves its improbably happy ending by erasing all traces of voodoo horror. In the final scene, Legendre’s zombie servants are tricked into jumping off a cliff. Then Beaumont, in a semisomnambulistic state, tries to redeem himself by pushing Legendre into the ocean before taking his own life. Free from both her European witch doctor and her American necromancer, and with no “surviving” evidence of zombie slaves, Madeline suddenly—and against even the film’s own voodoo lore—comes back to life from the dead. As the magic haze clears, she recognizes her husband’s face and, smiling, wistfully declares: “I dreamed.” Her memory of servitude apparently erased, it’s as if her enslavement—and the occupation it elusively signifies—never happened. From Black Bagdad to Iraq, from White Zombie to Romero’s postmodern living dead, it is Haiti itself that gets lost in translation.

NOTES

1. The phrase “occult economy” comes from Jean Comoroff and John L. Comaroff’s research on post-Apartheid South Africa (1999).
2. All references to promotional materials including posters and exhibitionary pranks are taken from the White Zombie press books unless otherwise noted.
3. Corvée has its roots in pre-revolutionary French feudal law that sanctioned the conscription of peasants for unpaid labor to build roads in lieu of their paying taxes. The British implemented a similar labor practice in 19th century Egypt. Schmidt remarks that the U.S. forced labor practices in Haiti during the occupation’s first years, “in which unpaid conscripts were sometimes roped together in gangs” had its most recent precedent in British colonial rule (Schmidt, 12).
4. Taylor discusses the political uses and abuses of voodoo in the reign of Jean-Claude Duvalier, a reading he connects to American anthropological analysis of voodoo such as Wade Davis’s Serpent and the Rainbow. Taylor finds a theological reading of voodoo “gives way to an indigenous, Haitian critique of oppression and exploitation” (812).

5. Chu (2006) offers a sustained reading of White Zombie in connection to these crises of modern subjectivity, and she sees a connection between the imposed occupation of Haiti and the coercive logic of marriage, especially as this film brings these two technologies of citizenship together. She then pairs White Zombie with T. S. Elliot’s writing on Kipling, which also reverberates with a crises in and profound mistrust of democratic governance. I gloss the contours of her argument here because, although we share some concerns, our analyses take us to different conclusions.

6. Tony Williams’s essay (1983) brought this decorative flourish to my attention.


8. Jana Evans Braziel also notes a canny connection between the title of Cragie’s memoir and US policy in Iraq for which Haiti served as a “‘trial run’… for imperialist measures—detention, denial of legal recourse, regime change—that play out on a perhaps ‘larger,’ yet no more insidious, scale in the Middle East and especially in Iraq” (2006, 148).

9. For an elaboration on how and why the American occupation of Germany served as a public relations model for the occupation of Iraq (see Fay 2006).

REFERENCES


