

Toni Pressley-Sanon. *Zombifying a Nation: Race, Gender and the Haitian Loas on Screen.* Contributions to Zombie Studies Series. Jefferson: McFarland Publishing, 2016. 200 pp. \$35.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-7864-9424-8.

Reviewed by Simon Lee

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Commissioned by Sarah Foss (Oklahoma State University)

The figure of the zombie has come to occupy a place in popular culture similar to that which was formerly the preserve of the vampire, or the monster of the gothic novel. So popular has the zombie trope become, it now constitutes a whole subgenre of film along with a considerable body of zombie studies, of which Toni Pressley-Sanon's *Zombifying a Nation* is the latest addition. Pressley-Sanon's approach productively shifts the focus from Hollywood back to Haiti, the home of the zombie, reading its (mis)appropriation in sociopolitical and historical contexts to highlight power inequalities, whether economic, political, racial, or gendered.

At a time when America is experiencing similar cultural and racial anxieties that motivated the first zombie films of the 1930s, Pressley-Sanon's text provides a sobering reminder of the pitfalls of "Othering," essentializing, exoticizing, and commodifying, in an accessible and entertaining fashion. In so doing, she restores agency to the maligned figure of the zombie, whose genesis lies in the living-dead state of slavery and whose demonization by the West is, on one level, a continuation of the fears engendered by the only successful revolution of black slaves in history, the 1791 Haitian Revolution. Haitian writer René Depestre (author of the most famous zombie

novel, *Hadriana dans tous mes rêves* [1988]) noted that the history of colonization is the process of man's zombification, and Pressley-Sanon's text illuminates this process.

Throughout the text, Pressley-Sanon uses various films that span the twentieth and twenty-first centuries to explore the meanings attributed to zombies in various historical contexts. For example, she analyzes two early Hollywood productions (*White Zombie* [1932] and *I Walked with a Zombie* [1943]) as products of "the foreign white male imagination" which "acted as cathartic expressions ... of their fear of a black nation" (p. 9). Another early Hollywood production, *The Love Wanga* (1935), is read as a response to the threat miscegenation posed to the black-white binary basis of American power relations in the Jim Crow era. Unsurprisingly, the film was initially banned "because of its depiction of interracial sexuality by an interracial cast" (p. 67). The more recent repopularization of the zombie in *The Serpent and the Rainbow* (1988) is read as a revival of the monster as marker of American cultural, political, and economic anxieties, following the 1986 uprising that ousted Jean-Claude "Baby Doc" Duvalier. As a foil to these Western representations of the exotic monster, Pressley-Sanon discusses two twenty-first-century productions that examine

zombification and the zombie from an insider, Haitian perspective. She analyzes *Vers le sud* (*Heading South* [2005]), a French-Canadian drama based on three short stories by Haitian author Dany Laferrière, and *Zombi candidat à la présidence ... ou les amours d'un zombi* (Zombie presidential candidate ... or a zombie's love affairs [2009]), written and directed by Haitians Gary Victor and Arnold Antonin.

The sociocultural and historical framework Pressley-Sanon structures her text on is one of the book's many attractions, making it equally fascinating across disciplines. More significantly, however, by tracing the development of modern Haitian history from slavery to contemporary times, it confronts readers with issues of racism and power imbalances, which are major features of the current world order. The West found the challenge the Haitian Revolution posed to the slave plantocracy, a major feature of Enlightenment world order, unforgiveable. At the time, both Europe and America perceived the revolt as monstrous and unthinkable. Consequently Haiti was demonized, firstly as a site of barbarism, child sacrifice, and cannibalism (early readings of voodoo), and subsequently during and after the American occupation between 1915 and 1934, following the publication of William Seabrook's *The Magic Island* (1929), popular American culture designated Haiti as the land of the zombie. American economic exploitation of Haiti and other Caribbean territories was justified as a civilizing mission, just as the later European "scramble for Africa" would be.

The first chapter offers a comparative reading of *White Zombie* and *I Walked with a Zombie* as expressions of "white male imperialist longing for a return to the colonial period" prompted by the 1915-34 occupation (p. 25). Pressley-Sanon posits that following the abolition of slavery and the emergence of the women's suffragette movement at the end of the nineteenth century, the white American male, in an effort to reestablish his su-

periority, "found opportunity beyond the US's borders ... to penetrate, subjugate and consume less powerful nations" (p. 30). Haiti resisted consumption by virtue of its history and voodoo worldview, which the Americans, though aware of its power, found impenetrable. The project of containment shifted the focus of Haitian monstrosity from the cannibal to the zombie, with these early Hollywood appropriations not only of the zombie but also of the voodoo loas or spirits. Thus "film-makers, as agents of American imperialism, found a way to allow their compatriots to, not only control and contain Vodou, but also consume its adherents from a safe distance" (p. 32). Pressley-Sanon reads these early films as much about controlling monstrous Haiti as about controlling the New Woman. The fear that white women would be caught and "contaminated in the most intimate ways by black men" is countered by representing them as corrupting and corrupted and deserving of being returned to their traditional subservient role in the patriarchy (p. 42). Knowing one's place was as relevant to monstrous Haitians as it was to transgressive women.

Chapter 2 deconstructs the film *The Love Wanga* (1935) as an expression of anxiety over racial purity, a discourse as controversial then as it is now. The figure of the mixed-race mulatto, who can often pass for white, embodies a constant threat to white hegemony and can only be contained within the monstrous. Cleeli, the mulatta protagonist, echoes many of the fears and taboos of the Jim Crow era. Her mixed racial identity, her social position as a wealthy plantation owner, and her sexual transgressiveness are all markers of white male fear and desire. Her violent death reinforces the American natural order of the day, namely, the separation of blacks and whites.

Chapter 3 offers a critique of French director Laurent Cantet's *Vers le Sud* (*Heading South*) with screenplay by Haitian writer Dany Laferrière. The film is set in the Duvalier era of the 1970s, when

female sex tourism began to flourish in Haiti. While there is nothing intrinsically wrong in a political reading, Pressley-Sanon problematically references the Jen Webb and Sam Byrnam essay “Some Kind of Virus,” where they state, “Capitalism ... works as an analogue of zombiedom because it ... is predicated on insatiable appetite, and the drive to consume.”[1] Pressley-Sanon may well be correct in reading the film as a depiction of “female sex tourism as a contemporary consumptive practice” (p. 90), but Webb and Byrnam’s definition of zombiedom unfortunately compounds Western misconceptions popularized by George Romero’s trope of the voracious living dead, a mistake akin to confusing Dr. Frankenstein with the monster he creates. The prerevolutionary plantation’s exploitation of slave labor morphs seamlessly into the neo-plantation’s exploitation of the beach boys’ sexual labor, upon which the film’s three white female characters capitalize, maintaining the inequality of power relations between North and South and the continuing consumption/zombification of the exotic Other. The power imbalances enacted in the isolated resort echo similar distortions in the Haiti beyond this oasis of privilege, where the general population lives in a condition of zombification that Duvalier’s state terror created. Cantet’s nuanced production, which presents the white female sex tourists with some empathy, complicates and subverts the shifting matrix of exploitative relations, inviting audiences to consider “the complexity of the unequal and unethical relationships” that “are tied inextricably to the existing socioeconomic and political conditions” (p. 118).

In chapter 4, Pressley-Sanon returns to the Western zombie trope in her analysis of *The Serpent and the Rainbow*, Wes Craven’s thriller, billed as “a terrifying story of one man’s nightmarish journey into the eerie and deadly world of voodoo” (p. 119). In contrast to the early zombie films, the protagonist is a white male, an Indiana Jones-style Harvard anthropologist, based loosely on Wade Davis, the ethnobotanist whose book,

also titled *The Serpent and the Rainbow* (1985), recounts his “expedition” to Haiti to discover the ingredients of zombifying potions. Pressley-Sanon argues that the film’s basis in “real life experiences” invokes the documentary genre, misleading audiences into taking for fact its representation of Haiti as primitive, superstitious, and cruel.

The final critique in this remarkable book in chapter 5 brings the zombie back to its Haitian roots with an analysis of the totally Haitian production *Zombi candidat à la présidence*. Pressley-Sanon views the film with its satirical tone as an attempt at reappropriating the zombie, freeing it from American misrepresentations of voodoo and giving it agency: “as a form of collective identity, it is also a potential tool of the Haitian masses ... that can be deployed against the elite class who seek to exploit their labor, in other words, zombify them” (p. 144). In contrast to the earlier American films where the black male is either silenced or objectified, “this film emerges from within the culture and centers the black male subject, giving him a voice” (p. 148). Pressley-Sanon also constructively positions the film in the Third Cinema genre, with its focus on the decolonization of culture, and referencing Gayatri Spivak’s silent subaltern points out how Zéphirin, the zombie protagonist who is being groomed for puppet presidency, “asserts his autonomy throughout the film” (p. 150), refusing to be silenced, and finally emerging as an anti-zombie.

It is fitting that Pressley-Sanon concludes her investigation of power relations in representations of the zombie with her analysis of *Zombi candidat* which “turns the common perception of the zombi on its head, portraying it as a site of resistance” and instead presents the zombie as “an empowered subject, reflecting Haitian history” (p. 161). Her analyses are a timely rebuttal of the distortions of Western discourse on Otherness and monstrosity, as well as a caution against the complacency of assumed superiority, which per-

petuates race, gender, and socioeconomic inequalities.

Note

[1]. Jen Webb and Sam Byrnand, "Some Kind of Virus: The Zombie as Body and as Trope," *Body & Society* 14, no. 2 (2008): 89.

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