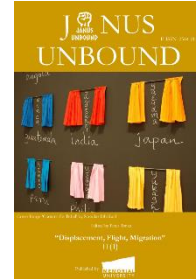


Title: Palestinian Zombie: Settler-Colonial Erasure and
Paradigms of the Living Dead
Author(s): Anna-E. Younes
Source: *Janus Unbound: Journal of Critical Studies*, vol. II, no. 1
(Winter 2022), pp. 27-46
Published by: *Memorial University of Newfoundland*



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Palestinian Zombie: Settler-Colonial Erasure and Paradigms of the Living Dead

Anna-E. Younes

Abstract

The modern zombie is a horror story of the many-headed processes of land conquest, dehumanization, and production of surplus populations. It is argued that the zombie always bore the fate of at least two positions of subjection that trouble dominant class-based analytics: namely, the African and the Indigenous slave. From the plantations of Haiti, to Auschwitz, and eventually to today's Palestine, this article follows a different figure of the zombie in a cultural analysis of its history *and* a critique of its popular culture representations, focusing on land conquest and erasure in capitalism. From the 20th century onward, a white (genocidal) gaze eventually turned the zombie myth into a flesh/meat-eating figure, roaming the land without direction and in need of cleansing from the earth. Understanding popular representations of the Haitian zombie myth as enslaved *and* erased history, however, hints at today's cultural re-productions of civilizational erasure and land conquest, war and surplus populations, and a "clean slate" paradigm to create "New World" fantasies. In this essay, Haiti, Auschwitz, and Palestine will be treated as sites of Indigenous struggles against settler-colonial ideology and genocide. This article argues that incorporation into modern (racial) capitalism and its (warring) violence made the zombie appear everywhere.

Key words: Arab Jew, Indigenous, *Muselmann*, "New World," Palestine, race, settler-colonialism, War, Primo Levi

Zombies, believe me, are more terrifying than colonists. And the problem now is not whether to fall in line with the armor-plated world of colonialism, but to think twice before urinating, spitting, or going out in the dark.

—Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 1963/2007

- Attention! *Zombie!*
- Quick march! Slow march! *Zombie!*
- Left turn! Right turn! *Zombie!*

Palestinian Zombie

- About turn! Double up! *Zombie!*
- Salute! Open your hat! *Zombie!*
- Stand at ease! Fall in! *Zombie!*
- Fall out! Fall down! *Zombie!*
- Get ready! Halt! Order! Dismiss! *Zombie!*

—Fela Kuti, *Zombie*, 1976

There is no theory of capitalism distinct from its history.

—Samir Amin, *The Liberal Virus: Permanent War and the Americanization of the World*, 2004

Introduction: Slavery, Settler-Colonialism, and the Working Un-/Dead¹

The modern zombie rose into existence on Haitian plantations approximately 400 years ago, as the myth of the working un-/dead toiling the land and crops for white masters and the political project that “we” today call “The West.” Originating as a slave myth from West Africa, this modern representation of the un-dead is an amalgam of creolized stories from different Indigenous and West African folktales and traditions dealing with French enslavement of Haiti. At the time, transatlantic slavery in Haiti also meant the horrific unfolding of reproductive technologies for capitalism: the gendered production of racial slavery via institutionally enforced rape and “slave breeding.” The figure of the zombie thus needs to be understood as a modern and fantastic folktale emerging *because of* and *alongside* the colonial violence of transatlantic slavery and settler-colonialism. At the heart of the modern zombie myth lies the uprooting from one’s indigenous land—or the returning to it, if possible. Today, however, most popular culture representations produce a constant stream of zombies: up-rooted bodies walking—reminiscent of the Indigenous/Enslaved object—facing off against those who “struggle to survive” in order for them to once again “own” and “master” the land as humans.

In this essay, the different figurations and representations of the pop culture zombie are followed in a cultural analysis *and* critique from the plantations of Haiti, to Auschwitz, and eventually to Palestine. In particular, this essay follows narratives and depictions of dehumanization vs. humanization, as well as metaphors of “cleansing the earth” from contaminated landscapes, and “wiping

the slate clean” for only a chosen few to survive. I read such phantasmatic world-viewing as *Lebensraum* (living-space) ideology unfolding through militaristic narratives that understand the killing of the contaminated non-human as essential to produce a humanity that can once again thrive on liberated, cleansed, free, and thus secured territory (Ratzel 1901; Amin 2004, 74-77). Thus the question of “land” is pivotal for understanding zombie mythology in order to tease out settler-colonial fantasies inherent in the post-apocalyptic “survival of the few.” Finally, this essay brings to light Palestinian indigenous dispossession, thingification, and erasure as these are also expressed by the zombie myth today when seen through the lenses of settler-colonialism and militarism. In this reading, the zombie is thus not simply a laborious and exploited subject in capitalism, but the colonized Other, Indigenous *and* enslaved. I separate *Indigenous* and *African* based on geopolitical origins, not because Africans were not Indigenous. In fact, I will argue that an Indigeneity-attached-to-land (and not to identity solely) is often written out of modern representations of the zombie. Following this imagination thus produces the free-floating, thingified, non-/human in capitalism. Reading Indigeneity in connection with land thus also poses trouble for the conceptual up-rooting of the Black subject from its relationship to the earth and land, and in particular, Indigeneity.

This essay further argues that settler-colonial narratives of national emancipation and racial liberation surface the fantasy that human conquerors come to a land devoid of humans, an un-free territory, waiting for the creation of a “New World” by those representing humanity and civilization. I will look at how zombie representations became free-floating non/humans amidst modernity’s logic of replacement; their roots cut off from the land that anchors them, disappropriated of their bodies, and symbolically erased. While the idea of the “Indigenous” was born alongside the event of settler-colonialism, settler ideology also brought with it a *living-space ideology* of flora-and-fauna metaphors that identify what needs to be cleansed as weed, for instance, or as enslaved labour. However, such rigid and binary classification fails to account for people with expert knowledges of how to yield products and food from the land.² Property and land are so intricately linked that categories of the “Indigenous” are often eclipsed in White/Black narratives to obscure racial dispossession and land conquest by capitalism. Similarly, the zombie’s position today—uprooted from its subject-relation to land—is also treated as a free-roaming category of all those un-dead cultures and peoples for whom modern hegemonic representations have “waivered” ethnic designations and precise geographic origins.

Since its rise in Haiti, the modern figure of the zombie has undergone many cultural turns, always depending on political currents and white-supremacist culture’s need to “digest” and “project” at the time. For enslaved peoples for whom even suicide was not permitted, the figure of the zombie and its fate was one of the purest nightmares. And while white slave-owning Christianity forbids the self-destruction of its labour force, the Christian faith appears as a savior against zombification. Furthermore, with the event of the US occupation of Haiti in 1915, white popular representations of the zombie became a product for the consumerist masses. These were used to justify slavery, the US occu-

pation in Haiti, as well as US Apartheid³ and the repression of black people (PBS 2020). In the 21st century, the zombie on reel hence changes their innate qualities in comparison to the original myth by slaves and is depicted as uprooted and roaming. Accordingly, and along with capitalist production circuits, zombies today can run and are mainly shown as such. Zombie representation has also changed when it comes to their “initial transformation” into the undead. In the old Haitian myths and early 20th century representations, it was voodoo ceremonies that re-awoke the body of an individual that killed themselves and turned them into passive robot-like zombie workers without agency. In more modern representations, it is either a government conspiracy, nature, big pharma, or biotech companies that afflict the brains of masses of people—a trope born of popular culture and video games. Originally, however, the zombie was meant as a mythological warning, preserved for posterity by the bodies that have been labouring toward death—namely, that labour *as* property is *not* allowed to die and Indigenous relationships to land must be erased.

This relationship to land and to thingification thus troubles more Eurocentric philosophical engagements with the “monstrous.” Its symbolic re/appropriation forecloses the material roots of the zombie’s origins in settler-colonial land conquest, genocide, and militarism. It also gives way to a thingified reading of the racialized other: “As in effect people of the past, the dominated group is displaced out of the lived-reality of cultural life. Fanon calls this the ‘zombification of culture.’ They suffer a living death” (Gordon 2015, 87). Yet, when consuming the “modern zombie,” common modern anxieties are sublated in a moment of mutual entertainment at the same time that the roots of understanding capitalist modernity also as settler-coloniality remain foreclosed and are rendered inaccessible. In a reading that already wrote out settler-colonialism while re/performing capitalism’s death drive on a “new population,” the zombie becomes yet another monster of global modernity alongside its many other uncanny doubles. However, I claim that zombification is still a cipher of settler-colonial violence and capitalism in a Fanonian world.

Today, in an “age of zombie movies” (Gordon 2021), the zombie figure is therefore cut off from its roots, wandering aimlessly, not knowing where it all started. We also witness new zombie narratives multiplying via capitalist doubles of a myth appropriated by a racial economy that is not interested in the cultures and bodies that produced it, but needs them, nevertheless, as psychological abjects for its own self-narrations. Today, zombies on reel portray the production and mystification of various narratives of (white) control societies. The power to define and call into being white freedom against black un-freedom via fiction (Morrison 1991) played these out against the larger meta-narrative of “zones-of-being” (Fanon 2007) and non-being where violence is used to secure and usher in regimes of being:

Hence a bitter irony between the Haitian zombie and its American counterpart. The monster once represented the real-life horrors of dehumanization; now it’s used as a way to fantasize about human beings whose every decision is exalted. ... The original emerged in a context where humans were denied control of

their own bodies and sought death as an escape. And now in pop culture, the zombie has come to serve as the primary symbol of escapism itself—where the fictional enslavement of some provides a perverse kind of freedom for everyone else. (Mariani 2015)

Colonial Violence and the Production of Anxiety

Fanon's zombie is born of colonial violence, which is predominantly extractive of land and bodies and derives profit from thingifying the latter into modern global structures of market economies. Embodying the violence and mental trauma inflicted upon them, Fanon's zombification transfers the residues from said violence onto the next generation, perpetuating colonial mentalities for generations to come. That is why Fanon's zombies personify thingified psychic structures of colonial capitalism. The zombie vividly reminds us of our lives in landscapes ruled by violence, destroyed by profit, and of people between life and death on stolen land. Zombies are the first embodiment of modernity's settler-colonial need to up-root and thingify people for its racial and economic projects. They are colonial capitalism's horror, the Janus-faced other of *white* modernity. After death, they aimlessly search for what's left to eat without knowing their own place in a landscape destroyed by colonialism. And after extraction is "over," the few 1% of "survivors" have no use for these surplus populations other than to shoot them.

The zombie myth represents in an uncanny double-move: land conquest and disappropriation, as well as labour and death as processes. The uprooting from land and laborious death can take a short while or, indeed, a lifetime. After all, time (of "contagion," to "live," or to "die") is of the essence in the zombie myth and in capitalism; in states of permanent war, genocide as a process of settler-colonial rule can take a long time, too (Wolfe 2006). The time that defines one's ability to roam this world as an active human subject is an active engagement with and thus ability to imprint one's desire into the world. The non-human zombie, however, roams on feral instinct, without political intent or an understanding of time.

In his *The Uncanny* (1919), Freud points out two important aspects of what distinguishes the fear of the "uncanny" from other types of fear. First, any kind of repressed affect leads to anxiety when it returns to consciousness. Repressed affect returning to consciousness as "unknown anxiety" can thus have different roots and meanings, unrelated to "fear," at times something entirely different, or even its multi-layered opposites, love or hatred, desire or repulsion, for example. Anxiety thus becomes a "vessel" emotion, which reigns as long as its original reason for repression remains obscure. This "Uncanny" will haunt us as something ghostly, monstrous, deadly even. Second, Freud pointed out that the Uncanny (German: *das Unheimliche*) is something quite well known to the person feeling anxious, something "familiar" whose actual original feelings and historical context got lost.⁴ For Freud, then, (signal-)anxiety surfaces in conscious everyday life when confronted with the symbols or words that remind us of the people or feelings that come from our world, yet remain abjected from it, repressed and "displaced out of the lived-reality of cultural life" (Gor-

don 2015, 87). Freud writes one year later in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, where the death drive is intimately linked to the life forces: “Anxiety describes a particular state of expecting the danger or preparing for it, even though it may be an unknown one” (1920 12). Similarly, the undead, written out of cultural life, are living shadows and labouring bodies with no other purpose than producing incredible amounts of value (being traded as vast amounts of value in and amongst white slaving societies), value that was taken away, renamed, and re-invested by colonial masters and the political project of “the West.” What built culture but is omitted from it—the repressed—thus returns in the uncanny walking dead.

Today, zombies represent capitalism’s surplus populations: they are passive and excluded from political projects. Popular culture however also posits a productive site for said repressed affective figures: a tightly controlled manner of engaging with zombies is set up, taming our cultural anxieties via consumption. If “Capital’s death drive” produces libidinal structures of pleasure through death (Khatib 2019), we can live out the psychic residues that remain and keep them from forcibly controlling the material world by transgressing phantasmatically and violently, for example, by entertainment on screen. Our desire seems to be to kill that which endangers a world as we know it, that which we cannot control. That which challenges our world and cannot be controlled is also that which is understood as persecutory and deadly. The military industrial complex on screen thus provides the weapons for phantasmatic self-defense; in real life, however, it uproots entire peoples, produces deserted landscapes, and turns people into targets of securitization, anti-terror laws, and border transgressions.

In the world of regulative ideals, the world in which everything has to be governed by predictability, by the serialization of life, etc., the normative model—the value system—becomes, what I call, the “Living Dead.” It’s no accident that we are in an age of zombie movies. (Gordon, 2021)

Pop culture representations depict the zombie as deracialized and uprooted from its original indigenous African and indigenous Caribbean geopolitical landscapes. Consequently, the zombie is seen as yet another fantastic monster of capitalist modernity, representing labouring masses, probing our anxieties, or triggering unwanted memories. However, this story does not explain why we can find (consumerist) safety in the elimination of the newly zombified natives.⁵

Every fan of zombie movies knows that cities and other former densely populated areas are to be avoided by humans wanting to survive. Weapons that can shoot “around corners” are practical for those who want to re-/conquer the city or land from contagious non-humans. In Figure 1 below, we see Angelina Jolie handle an Israeli weapon, tested on zombified Palestinians, that can shoot around corners.

Figure 1. Angeline Jolie in the movie *Wanted* (2009) from the documentary *The Lab* (Feldman 2013).



Why do we find (consumerist) safety in the elimination of the new zombified natives? Might it be that the anxiety triggered by symbols of death and mass murder as exercised on the uprooted and deracialized zombies on reel today, latches on to pleasurable fantasies of the creation of “New Worlds?” In this “New World” scenario, the zombie is eliminated in order to start civilization from scratch. “We” can henceforth enjoy zombie mass murder and massacres as a steppingstone for new beginnings, with a chosen few zombie survivors in pacified and cleansed landscapes. If genocide is a structure, then mass murder and massacres are its events. In his work on love, Tzvetan Todorov (1984 144) read colonial conquest as a love-attachment to the fantasy of money-making and a “New World” in the Americas. The advent of conquest and slavery ushers in the secularizing of Christianity and thus also new ways of killing, maiming, and producing: “Massacre is ... intimately linked to colonial wars waged far from the metropolitan country. ... If religious murder is a sacrifice, massacre is an atheistic murder.”

White Zombies and White Narratives

Haitian zombification made it to the North American mainland bodily via slave trading, later through the US invasion of Haiti, and culturally through white popular literature and film. One might thus assume—given the history, culture, and racist brouhaha that ensued in American culture after the US military invasion and occupation of Haiti from 1915 to 1934—that the zombie would become a representation exclusively of Blackness in pop culture. Yet, what (white) US imperial militarism created was a reformulation of the zombie myth in the 20th century via a white gaze. *White Zombie* (1932, directed by Victor Halperin)—the first long feature film made about zombies shot toward the end of the US occupation of Haiti—features white people depicted as zombies and as zombies controlling other zombies. Given the transnationalism of racism and colonialism, it is reasonable to assume that this depiction is also an expression of racial anxieties when white apartheid ruled the US (1877-1965). Anxieties about Indigenous and African erasure and exploitation morphed into depictions of zombified white people. In the first seven years of the US occupation, 2500 Haitians were killed trying to escape or fight off the new slavery system re/introduced by the US (Gershon 2002). If dehumanization under colonial capitalism is an all-encompassing, multi-faceted project, *White Zombie* is a self-

depiction of the many facets of such white rule: white supremacy in this movie simultaneously produces its own dehumanization *and* subsequently its own liberation.

Figure 2. “Zombie.” A Zombie, at twilight, in a field of cane sugar in Haiti. By Jean-Noël Lafargue, Wikimedia Commons.



At the intersection of white sexism and racism, *White Zombie* shows its inherent anxieties concerning white rule: a rich plantation owner in Haiti who cannot get the white woman he desires, turns to a voodoo practitioner with a foreign Eastern European accent (Bela Lugosi), who owns a sugar cane mill operated by zombies. However, this voodoo practitioner is depicted as a white (Dracula-like/Master-like) figure; thus, the original African or Indigenous voodoo practitioner is erased from script. After the plantation owner’s initial visit to the sugar cane mill, where he sees the laborious enslaved in a factory (and seems shocked), the protagonist eventually also zombifies the woman of his dreams. Such patriarchal domestication of women shows that even wealthy white females can turn into apathetic, obedient wives.

It is noteworthy that zombification is done by the owner of a factory for the owner of a plantation—and not the other way around. In this narrative, the laborious enslaved enter as uncanny blueprints of lost origin, as an “Africanist background” story of silenced Black bodies, foils for projection, as Morrison (1991) wrote. Africanist background stories in white fiction narratives operate by enabling tales of white suffering and subsequent heroism. At the end of *White Zombie*, the plantation owner, with the help of a white Christian missionary, saves the day by killing first the European factory owner (the voodoo-Dracula mix) and then himself, seemingly stopping zombification—for white people, at least. The white woman is eventually freed, and mumbles as she awakes something about a (bad?) “dream,” only in order to be reunited with her true love (see Figure 3 below).

Figure 3. The de-zombified New Yorker Madeline Short in *White Zombie* after her true fiancé Neil Parker, a bank employee in Port-au-Prince, freed her.



Together they will return to an otherwise “innocent” and safe American mainland where these “things” seemingly do not happen. Here, zombification for white people is limited in time and also by geography (Haiti). We learn very little about the Haitian slaves upon whose lives and myths this film revolves, or about the reintroduction of slavery during US occupation. Aside from the mill/factory scenes, the enslaved are only briefly introduced. At the beginning of the film, they are the ones who buried their dead underneath busy roads so that they would not be stolen. At the end, however, their characters are displaced out of narrative, which is why they seem dis-placed in the film. Neither the forced labour *corvée* system that demanded roads for the US military nor the white Western imperial warring over control of Haiti is given any context; instead, the enslaved are illustrations to the plot, not narratives of it.

In *White Zombie*, white people are dehumanized while the already thingified (the enslaved) are dehumanized *and* symbolically abjected from the plot, except through short, decontextualized glimpses. Since the original (sugar plantation) zombie is denied full narrative, a liberal white gaze can set it up as an example of an apathetic and obedient body and mind, devoid of any history, other than a white European one. Such narrative erasure makes non-white material culture and history disappear from the symbolic realm. The story that unfolds presents zombification as a product of modern industry and militarization. It does not understand the latter to be an outcome of settler-colonialism and enslavement, but as separate from them. And while the factory/sugar mill slave depiction in *White Zombie* seems to be an allusion to white class critiques, even representations like these later on disappear. Narratives of Indigeneity or stolen land are foreclosed entirely in *White Zombie*. The movie is set in 1932, at a time of already automated labour, accumulated property, and capital in the “hands of a few.” During the Great Depression (1929-1939) with white Westerners battling over imperial control in Haiti, the labouring plantation zombie myth was not needed anymore: now black death becomes a narrative demand in order to make room for white death narratives to unfold. For the first and only time Haitian slavery

is depicted on screens through a white liberal lens; it is also the moment where its full depiction is declared obsolete by that same white liberal gaze.

Zombification and the Conquest of Land

The original zombie figure was not able to own its body, before or after death. The reawakened zombie was thus unable to escape plantation labour or return to Africa; it did not feel pain, and was forced to repeat manual tasks that require a mind, yet one that is alienated, unfree, obedient, and mechanized. After the US military occupation of Haiti and the following appropriation of the zombie myth by white US American movie productions, the zombie on reel changes even more: in the second half of 20th century zombie film productions, the brain became the locus for zombification. Zombification as alienated labour on stolen land and slave plantations is obfuscated and written out.

In late capitalism, the mind defines the worker and not his body or the land where they come from. In the original myth, the return to African or non-alienated indigenous lands would end the nightmare of zombification on a plantation; yet in modern tales, the land and new depictions of Indigeneity become the background upon which the white fear of zombification unfolds. The big American series *The Walking Dead* is paradigmatic. Zombies occupy here the position of the new indigenous population. Presented with this un-dead enemy, humans unite across racialized divides in a survival fantasy against America's new indigenized enemies. There is an almost never-ending stream of zombies, expressing anxieties of settler-colonial re-/conquest of land and space. The remaining humans appear at times as the *reconquistas* of the land. In their fortified outposts, they remind us of a land once ruled by humans and surrounded by non-human enemies. In *The Walking Dead* these brave human warriors even have children who know how to handle guns like adults. At times, it seems as though the National Rifle Association (founded six years after the "abolition" of slavery in 1871) might have sponsored productions like *The Walking Dead* or other zombie movies.

This whitened zombie myth conjures up a figure that comes (from here and elsewhere) to conquer the land—a paranoid projection reminiscent of living-space ideology that imagines an Other "species" taking control over the space needed for one's own kind to survive. Today this figure aimlessly roams in lands the zombie no longer recognizes. The cynical return to the "mall" in George Romero's *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) is depicted as a comical take on the residues of capitalist mechanized habit, but not of plantation work. The aimlessly roaming zombie pursues meat/flesh, not the reclaiming of indigenous territory. In *Resident Evil: The Final Chapter* (2012), Dr. Isaacs, the main villain and head of the Umbrella Cooperation, which invented the zombie T-virus, states his desire for a "world reboot" to his assembled board members:

We are here to talk about the end of the world. We stand on the brink of Armageddon. Diseases for which we have no cure. Fundamentalist states who call for our destruction. Nuclear powers over which we have no control. ... I propose that we end the world. But on our terms. An orchestrated apocalypse.

One that will cleanse the earth of its population but leave its infrastructure and resources intact. That was done once before—with great success. [*Pointing at a bible:*] The chosen few will ride out the storm. ... And when it's over we will emerge onto a cleansed earth, one that we can then reboot in our image. (*Resident Evil: The Final Chapter* 51:40 – 53:01).

Whiteness here stands in for “divine rule” and carrying out the commands bestowed upon the “chosen people” (see also Amin 63). Zombie brain/mind imposes questions of death or life, of a fall or resurrection into civilization and humanity. Body becomes a metaphor for surplus matter, for bodies that do not matter. What matters is the creation of a new world, if only in fantasy.

Colonial Violence and the Zombies of Auschwitz: The *Muselmann*

The derogative word for Muslim. It came to name the figuration of the submitted and apathetic Diaspora Jew, but a memory monster that results from the latter—a zombified monster with a thinking mind. Primo Levi's book *Survival in Auschwitz* (1996) is one of the most well-known 20th century European narratives to describe in detail the life of zombification. When Levi starts his chapter on the *Muselmann*, “The Drowned and the Saved,”⁶ he ventures into the cultural residues of colonial history available to him: “[I]n the face of driving necessity and physical disabilities many social habits and instincts are reduced to silence ... there comes to light the existence of two ... categories of men—the *saved and the drowned*” (1996 87). In this uncanny manner, Levi describes his landing in Auschwitz as a moment where his outlook on the world shifts. Levi describes being picked up by the police, who morphed suddenly from “simple policemen” into lethal threats. He concludes that “it was disconcerting and disarming” (19). The scene continues to unfold with limited information (“How old? Healthy or ill?”) and stays quite “simplistic:” New policing categories appear (the SS), the surrounding is mundane and sterile (platforms, reflector lights, lorries), whilst people are being separated and selected, uprooted from their land, language, and families. Slave lodges, slave ships, colonial genocidal operations, labour camps, and death marches of the Indigenous operated quite similarly. All of this is also the material zombie movies are made of.

After everyone has already “said farewell to life through his neighbor” on the train, Levi describes the arrival in Auschwitz. People—“the shadows” in Levi's words—came out to stand on the platform in fear, looking at the men in command. He recalls different languages being spoken by the people that were brought in, Germans barking commands that “seem to give vent to a millennial anger” followed by a haunting silence akin to “certain *dream sequences*” (italics added). Shortly afterward, Levi recalls the shock of the captives: “We had expected something more apocalyptic” (19). Must there be something apocalyptic that announces the world of the non-human, the descent into Fanon's hell?⁷ Or is the idea of a spectacular break not a fallacy to begin with? For Levi there is a deep shock and disbelief in his description of

being treated like *chattel* upon his arrival in Auschwitz: separated into those who are economically useful and those that are not. Levi continues by detailing the everyday life of labour in the camp. He remarks that the term *Muselmann* (Muslim) was used by the oldest (Jews) in the camp to name the people in decay—the labouring “masses” of the camp. The *Muselmann* here appears close to the original zombie myth and the colonial plantation life it lived off:

Their life is short, but their number is endless: they, the *Muselmänner*, the drowned form the backbone of the camp, an anonymous mass, continually renewed and always identical, of *non men* who *march and labour in silence*, the *divine spark dead* within them, already too empty to really suffer. One hesitates to call them living; one hesitates to call their death death, in the face of which they have no fear, as they are too tired to understand. (90, italics added)

Their number was not endless, but in a confined space entirely controlled by others, it appeared so. The interpellated *Muselmänner* were “the weak, the inept, those doomed to selection,” those ordinary people to whom no one will extend a helping hand (*Null Achtzehn*) (88-9). Why *Muselmann* was used as a name, Levi seemingly doesn’t know (88), yet he nevertheless compares the selection and killing processes in Nazi concentration camps to imperialism:

We are aware that this is very distant from the picture that is usually given of the oppressed who unite, if not in resistance, at least in suffering. We do not deny that this may be possible when oppression does not pass a certain limit, or perhaps when the oppressor, through inexperience or magnanimity, tolerates or favours it. But we state that in our days, *in all countries in which a foreign people have set foot as invaders*, an analogous position of rivalry and hatred among the subjected has been brought about; and this, like many other human characteristics, could be experienced in the Lager in the light of particularly cruel evidence. (91, italics added)

Later on, bare life sets in at Auschwitz; while people continue to get zombified, hierarchies amongst the zombies are re-/instituted. Levi explains that because “everyone is desperately and ferociously alone,” yet dependent on the performance of the other, it was “in no one’s interest that there will be one more *muselmann* dragging himself to work every day” (88). The zombie *Muselmann* has no “distinguished acquaintances” that could be used, no profitable work with the Nazi Kommandos, and “no secret method of organizing.” Eventually, “in solitude they die or disappear, without leaving a trace in anyone’s memory” (89). And although Levi’s depiction of zombification is foreclosed from an optics of colonial violence, he nevertheless concludes with a life-lesson from the zombified camp: “[T]o he that has, will be given; from he that has not, will be taken away” (88).

The *Muselmann* of the camps represents the foreclosed colonized side of Judaism, the zombified Jew in Europe. Although Levi cannot trace its semantic origin, what remained was the “name”—Muslim—and the anxiety bound up with it: colonial submission and erasure. The *Muselmann*’s colonial roots were

erased by assimilation into capitalist white modernity and thus foreclosed Levi's full understanding of reality. Today, said narratives of white zombified death often find expression in cultural repair narratives, which is the labour civilization is seemingly supposed to do these days. The world of the zombie, however, speaks to something more sinister: an understanding of the all-engulfing reality of capital's death worlds, namely that everyone can be a zombie (disposable), but some are more zombie (disposable) than others. What would happen if we started to think "repair," "labour," and "civilization" from the perspective of the zombie, those drowned and saved *and* written out? And what does it mean to start thinking from a world of the living dead, from death worlds?

Israeli Colonialism, The Arab-Jewish "Memory" Zombie, and the Killing of the Palestinian Zombie

More than 70 years after Levi, while describing Auschwitz Yishai Sarid (2017) writes in his book of fiction *Memory Monster* how Israeli-state organized holocaust memory has been weaponized to create a new type of zombified Jew, a memory zombie. This time, it is not the Jewish *Muselmann*⁸ in Europe, but the Arab Jew in Israel. In this novel, his Arab-Jewish-Israeli protagonist slowly but surely goes insane given the weight of monstrous European history that has been passed on to its internal Arab-Jewish-Other inside Israel—one already colonized and now recognized yet again differently by European Jews in Israel. This Israeli memory zombie is within the realms of capital's production yet suffers from his non-alignment with a Zionist nationalist dream given the colonial nightmares still haunting him.

Much like Fanon's zombies that carry the residues of colonial hangover into the next generations, the Zionist memory zombie is born from the colonial military man in Israel without empathy for Arabs, or the Arab inside of him. In fact, as Ella Shohat demonstrated, stamping out the Arab from the Israeli Jew became mandatory for participation in the European political project that is Israel (Shohat 1988; Massad 1996). However, this assimilation process also leaves a cargo of bodies behind, bodies with "taboo memories" (Shohat 2006) and violated "spirits." Auschwitz, in Sarid's novel, thus becomes a site for mobilizing trauma to celebrate the emergence of an ostensibly "New Nation" in a "New World," also known as Israel in the Middle East. Sarid's protagonist, an educator and historian of the Holocaust, leads Israeli high school children through Auschwitz. The kids seem to have agreed that the trip to Auschwitz taught them "*To be strong*," "*to never forget*," and "*to be human*," which apparently sound like repetitive mantras the protagonist has heard before. All the while, the trope of being human echoes through the room. Suddenly, one of the tall, athletic guys in the group states:

"I think that in order to survive we need to be a little bit Nazi, too," he said.

A bit of chaos ensued. Not too much, though. He was just saying to adults what they usually only say among themselves. The teacher pretended to be shocked, waiting for me to respond, to do their dirty work for them, to take care of this monster that they and their parents had nurtured.

The kid looked perfectly normal; from a good family, with a loving mother and a functioning father.

“What do you mean?” I asked.

“That we have to be able to kill mercilessly,” he said. “We don’t stand a chance if we’re too soft” ... It’s hard to distinguish civilians from terrorists. A boy who’s just a boy today could become a terrorist tomorrow. This is, after all, a war of survival. It’s us or them. We won’t let this happen to us again. (124-5)

In Sarid’s novel and in Levi’s testimony, the un-dead appear as zombified humans against the backdrop of cruel colonial violence: a Fanonian analytic. However, while Levi testifies to the zombification of the European in Europe, Sarid’s protagonist as well as the Arab Jewish memory zombie trouble the colonial doubles of European zombification. Sarid’s protagonist’s last words are to the head of Yad-ve-Shem:⁹ “There is a monster out there. It is alive and waiting for its time to strike again. Look at me. It has bit into my flesh, and I haven’t stopped bleeding ever since” (169).

In July 2022, US President Joe Biden addressed the Israeli nation upon his landing. He talked about the necessity to fight anti-Jewish racism by referring to the past and briefly wonders, “Why weren’t the tra- — tracks bombed? Why did we not—why, why, why?” He then goes on to infer “New World” paradigms and proclaims: “One need not be a Jew, to be a Zionist” (US Gov. 2022). In this vein, Westerners and others have written themselves into the modern affliction that understands Zionist settler-colonialism as the *humane* outcome of *human* history. Political Zionism thus becomes the political project of the human and of *humanity*— leaving everyone else as its non-human enemy. Joe Biden continued:

From here, I’m going straight to a briefing on Israeli missiles and rocket defense capabilities, including the US support for the Iron Dome and Israel’s new laser-enabled system, called the Iron Beam. We’re going to deepen our connections in science and innovation and work to address global challenges through the new Strategic High-Level Dialogue on Technology. (US Gov.)

Violence is thus necessary to “birth” capitalist production circuits and maintain capitalism. In this regard, Israel is today one of the top arms dealers in the world and has, along with the US, Germany, and France, significantly increased its weapon’s exports over the past decade (SIPRI 2021). Ehud Barak (former Israeli Minister of Defense) echoes what Biden said in 2022:

The Israeli hi-tech industry started out under the auspices of the Defense Ministry. These investments have made Israel a superpower in defense export at almost 7 billion dollars per year. 150,000 households depend on the industry as well as mutual buyings of foreign currency and workplaces. It plays a principle role in our economy. (Feldman 2013, 57:04 – 57:41)

What was six billion dollars of revenue during the military Operation Cast Lead on Gaza (Feldman), rose to 11.3 billion dollars in Israeli arms deal revenues in 2021 (Fabian 2022). In comparison, Germany (around 16 times the size of Israel) has had a national arms export average of around seven billion euros over the past years, with a high of around nine billion euros in 2021 (BMWK 2022). In Yotam Feldman's *The Lab*, a documentary on the Israeli Military Industrial complex, the allure of Israeli weapons is explained by them having "been tested" in densely populated Palestinian enclaves, ghettos, and cities. As Feldman comments on Israeli settler society: "War ceased to be a burden, and is rather an asset, which many depend on so much life can't be imagined without it" (56:38 - 56:43). If war and death are assets that produce "life," security, and humanity in this world of death, then zombification and zombie-elimination must continue as a gradual process for profit accumulation. While commenting on Gaza and Lebanon, the former head of the Northern Command of the IDF said to a group of what seem to be predominantly security and military personnel: "Quantity is more important than quality. One mistake the army makes is judging each case individually, whether the person deserves to die or not. Most of these people were born to die, we just have to help them" (Feldman 07:21 - 07:33). Here, the Arab and Palestinian appear as the "walking un/dead" who roam the world in order to finally find peace in real death at the hands of the IDF. In this world, humanity enjoys freedom, life, and security by embracing settler-colonial dispossession, genocide, *and* thingification. Such an embrace involves, for example, denying and limiting access to schooling, incarcerating those that think differently, restricting and controlling the ability to move or eat, destroying electricity and water systems, and killing medical staff. The Israeli settler-colonial state has turned Gaza into a confined and ghettoized space that is frequently bombed by air and sea, instilling political apathy, personal neglect, and suicidal tendencies in those at the receiving end of its violence. Political Zionism has become a process of perpetuating settler-coloniality through zombification. It categorized Arab Jews brought to Israel as laborious workers compared to the enslaved (Massad 1996), essentially assimilating and zombifying a not-quite human Arab Jewish memory figure through colonial militarism. Palestinians, on the other hand, are seen as entirely disposable zombies, not needed at all for any political project.

Figure 5. Lt. Colonel Naveh (retired) IDF Military philosopher showing an empty "Arab village" specifically constructed for IDF military training purposes. (*The Lab* 12:55-18:25)



The film *World War Z* continues this representation in contemporary mass media of the Palestinian in the figure of the zombie. In order to find a cure for zombification, the main lead played by Brad Pitt (Garry Lane), a former United Nations investigator, needs to travel to the last standing civilization ruled by freedom and equality: Jerusalem. The Palestinian appears as a background story, thanking the IDF for saving the remaining survivors. The Palestinian and Arab zombie—outside the walls—becomes the foil upon which white human heroism unfolds. The overrepresentation of Palestinians as “subhuman,” cruel, ugly, and terrorist is nothing new on reel (Shaheen 2003; 2006). “The viral apocalypse became a rhetorical form that allowed anxious producers and viewers to handle terrorist, disease, and other threats” as “discursive contamination” from “inside” and “outside” (Ghabra and Hasian 2020, 4). In *World War Z* the apartheid wall is already normalized as a security device for humanity, producing an acceptance of “apartheid on a world scale” (Amin 26) via popular culture. The Palestinian zombie is an expression of uprooted colonial experience, of living in walled-off confined spaces: A favela in Brazil, ravaged by colonial and militarized state violence and death, is already called the “Gaza Strip” (Feldman; Hubermann and Nasser 2019). The zombification of Palestinian life has by now reached such a globalized audience, that the killing of Palestinians for money and “security” has become nothing but philosophical ruminations (Weizman 2006), negotiation and diplomacy:

While certain countries in Europe and Asia condemned us for attacking civilians, they send their officers here. ... There is a lot of hypocrisy, they condemn you politically while they ask you what your trick is, you Israelis, for turning blood into money, that is, how to use precise weaponry, precise intelligence, selective use of ground forces where needed, thereby saving lives. (Yoav Galant, Head of IDF Southern Command, 2005-2012, in Feldman 53:05 – 53:51)

Today, killing Palestinians is part-and-parcel of sustaining the Israeli nation-state’s survival by providing the bodily logistics upon which the violence necessary to maintain capitalism can be practiced. In an apocalyptic climate future, this process might produce spatially confined and separated “zones-of-being” (settlements) vs. “zones of non-being” (hordes of hungry humans in contaminated landscapes and deserted urban areas). Zombie death is needed for humanity to establish itself in “New Worlds” cleansed of non-humans. The Palestinian zombie in the 21st century operates in the zone of non-being, a ghetto life: drowned, displaced, and written out, with only a few extending a “helping hand” (Levi 88-9).

Under colonial capitalism, violence comes home to roost in Europe (Césaire 1955) as a social relationship that will eventually engulf the zone-of-being, too. Making “the connection thus means that ... we need to trace the complicated circuits of global capital, the multiple lines of relay, the multiplicity of abuses and repressions that emerge if one follows a global supply chain. If one follows the Israeli Occupation far enough, one finds oneself on the streets of Ferguson, or in Standing Rock. One finds oneself inside a decrepit, overcrowded cellblock

in California. ... Solidarity, too, and the struggle—they must also follow the global supply chain” (Koram 2019, 418).

Biography

Anna-Esther Younes (she/her) is an independent scholar of race critical theories, working on the intersections of anti-Jewish and anti-Muslim racism in a post-socialist but not post-colonial Europe. Her main interest lies in “researching up to power” and in thinking through the “War on Antisemitism” alongside the “War on Terror and Drugs” as colonially constituted wars. Zombies, Horror, and Science Fiction are her favorite movie choices. Her work can be accessed on academia.edu or else on her personal website: www.annaes-theryounes.net.

Notes

1. My thanks go to Ruth Orli Moshkovitz for helping me focus. To Prof. Alana Lentin for her comments and support across continents. To Josias Tembo for our conversation on the afterlives of zombification in capitalism. To Yotam Feldman for permitting the usage of his footage. To the unknown reviewers and editors for their valuable critique, comments, edits, and suggestions. And, last but not least, to C. Summerhill for commenting and proofreading versions of this piece.
2. In German, for instance, the word *Kraut* signifies the meaning of *weed* that can be eaten or not. Kraut is either usable or not. If it is not useable for human consumption, it is given the suffix “Un-” (see below Freud on the Uncanny). *Unkraut* in that metaphor is then weed that cannot be used and is thus in need of elimination to make space for those Krauts/ weeds that are usable, for instance.
3. Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court pp. 3-4. Article 7.2, Crimes Against Humanity: “‘The crime of apartheid’ means inhumane acts of a character similar to those referred to in paragraph 1, committed in the context of an institutionalized regime of systematic oppression and domination by one racial group over any other racial group or groups and committed with the intention of maintaining that regime.”
4. In German, Freud used the word “homely” (*heimlich*) as its counterpart, which collapses into its opposite “un-homely” or un-canny in English, while the German prefix “un-” stands in for the “repressed” (Freud 1919, 318)—the repressed from home. Put differently, the Uncanny is the “old familiar repressed” (319) *altvertrautes Verdrängtes*, the return of the repressed.
5. In 2011, the US American Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) tried to convince an American audience of the need for emergency disaster health plans by using a zombie scenario to instill a sense of urgency: “A tongue-in-cheek blog post about what people should do to prepare for a zombie apocalypse and other emergencies

attracted so many viewers that it crashed one of the agency's Web servers, went viral, and generated extensive media coverage" (Kruvand and Bryant 2015, 656). The CDC's Public Relations decision can only be explained via popular culture in the 20th century, played out against the history of land conquest, genocide, and slavery.

6. This analysis predominantly rests on Levi's chapter "The Journey" (pp. 13-21) and "The Drowned and the Saved" (pp. 87-100) in his book *Survival in Auschwitz*.
7. For Fanon (2007) colonial violence is the formative structure of and constitutive for zombification and descent into "hell."
8. Alexander G. Weheliye (2014) writes in his chapter on "Racism: Biopolitics": "Due to extreme emaciation, often accompanied by the disappearance of muscle tissue and brittle bones, the *Muselmänner* could no longer control basic human functions such as the discharge of feces and urine and the mechanics of walking, which they did by lifting their legs with their arms, or they performed "mechanical movements without purpose," leading the other inmates and later commentators to view becoming-*Muselmann* as a state of extreme passivity. Observers portray *Muselmänner* as apathetic, withdrawn, animal like, not-quite human, unintelligible—in short, as ghostly revelations of the potential future fate that awaited the still functional inmates in an already utterly dehumanized space where everyone was exposed to chronic hunger and death. Being forced to occupy a phenomenological zone that could in no way be reconciled with possessive individualism, the *Muselmänner* exemplified another way of being human and were, in fact, likened by several observers to starving dogs."
9. Yad ve-Shem is built on a hill-top where one can see 'Ain Karem, a former Palestinian village today inhabited by predominantly—non-Palestinian—Israeli citizens. This is also the outlook that one sees once one has left the exhibition on Nazi extermination and the (memory) hall of names. In this scenario, 'Ain Karem appears as the site that was not only a refuge for Jews, but also a land asking to be freed. The blank-slate narrative colonialism purported for centuries comes to find expression in this architecture and in the older Zionist mantra: "A land without a people, for a people without a land."

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