

UCLA

Thinking Gender Papers

Title

Zombies, Haiti, and (Sex) Workers: On Relating to Modernity/Coloniality and Subalterity

Permalink

<https://escholarship.org/uc/item/2n84m6gn>

Author

Koné, Mzilikazi

Publication Date

2010-04-01

Mzilikazi Koné is a second year graduate student in the Department of Political Science at UCLA. Her research focuses on sex-work, race, resistance and organizing in the Caribbean.

Zombies,¹ Haiti and (Sex) Workers
On Relating to Modernity/Coloniality and Subalterity

The LA Weekly got it right. The May 15-May 21st 2009 issue entitled “This Zombie Moment” once again highlights the seemingly ever-present issue of zombies in the American consciousness. The recent “outbreak” of the swine flu not only scared people around the world about the possibility of a major health disaster, but lovers of the zombie film genre could already imagine a repeat of the film *28 Days Later*, where a zombie virus sweeps across England. Zombies make sense, and apparently have been making sense since the first zombie film in the U.S., *White Zombie* (1932). Zombie films, books, and metaphors appear to be here to stay, and this paper will go further to question the extension of the zombie metaphors into other realms. This work seeks to question whether workers in general, and specifically, sex-workers are an imagined zombie community. Do the original perceptions of the zonbi in the Haitian context mobilize this metaphor? And can the zombie metaphor be related to the literature on the subaltern, and on perceptions of modernity and coloniality?

It is necessary to situate how a country as small as Haiti has made such a large impact on North America. The practice of Vodun has been consistently depicted as practice of black magic, complete with Voodoo dolls, and other “African practices” in the American imaginary. Perceptions about the island go back to Haiti’s independence from

¹ This paper will go between these two different spellings of zombie/zonbi. I will use the spelling of *zombie* to refer to popular culture references, while the spelling *zonbi* will refer to the conceptualization of zonbis in Haiti.

France in 1804. The act of becoming the first independent black republic through revolution threatened the systems of slavery that existed throughout the colonies. This was a direct threat to the existing world order, and Haiti was isolated as a consequence for becoming free. The independence of Haiti shocked all of the colonial powers, and incited fear in further slave revolts around the colonies. It is no wonder then that perceptions of Haiti and all things Haitian, especially the practice of Vodun, would be considered threatening. Sidney Mintz and Michel-Rolph Trouillot write about the revolution and religion, “Surely no other “religion of Negroes” has ever received so much attention, nor was it ever as important to demean its content. That slaves would fight their colonial masters—that masses of uneducated black slaves would wage war against Napoleonic and French dominion—was thought to be morally hideous”(125). As a consequence for achieving freedom, Haiti and Vodou would henceforth have a face in the colonial imaginary as related to resistance. In addition, the religious practice, which is thought to have played some role in the revolution, would also be seen as related to witchcraft and black magic, a perception more associated with Vodun than other Afro-Atlantic religions.

It is important then to not only imagine the role of zombies as they relate to the American subconscious, but to directly address their source. In this case, the source will refer to Haiti, and not to the more distant source of the concept, which is in West Africa.² The West African relation is though the Key Congo word that refers to the first dead. In Haiti, the concept of zonbi’s also serve as a Haitian nightmare, and as Kathy Smith recounts, as a fate worse than death. The zonbi kadav is the zonbi that most people are

² The following concepts about Zonbis are taken from the lecture “Vodou is not a nice little religion”, given by Kathy Smith, April 28, 2009

familiar with: the animated dead. As a zonbi, a person can be forced to do anything, as they are no longer in control of their body. Smith relates the zonbi as “an expression of the memory of slavery” and connects perceptions/fears of present day zonbis to enslaved people taken to the Dominican Republic to cut sugar cane. The fear of becoming a zonbi is a fear of becoming a meaningless slave. Zonbis are real expressions of the commodification of the human body. It is no wonder then that any expression or hint of slavery—from French colonialist, U.S. interventionist, and Haitian migration related to work, re-animates concepts related to the living dead. Smith hammers in the point about being a zonbi when she recounts that zonbi possession is like a capitalist possession, where human chattel are the possessions.

In relating zombies to an original understanding of what zonbis are as enslaved subjects, it becomes clearer how to integrate zonbi kadavs as metaphors for the working masses into the discussion of modernity/coloniality, as well as to the subaltern subject. When recounting Haiti’s history and resistance to colonialism, and location in the Caribbean, the country is arguably at the center of the discussion for locating modernity and coloniality. In “Worlds and Knowledge’s Otherwise”, Arturo Escobar positions modernity/coloniality research as based on “an emphasis on locating the origins of modernity with the Conquest of America and the control of the Atlantic after 1492” and also that it has “a persistent attention to colonialism and the making of the capitalist world system as constitutive of modernity” (Escobar, 184). Escobar and others who write on modernity/coloniality place the new world, and specifically the Caribbean at the center of analysis for addressing this perspective. In the discussion of modernity/coloniality, Haiti has a central role to note considering the role of the Haitian

revolution. It is an especially important re-imagining of events from a different perspective, where Europe and North America are no longer the center of conversation. This idea is to re-imagine history from the perspective of the subaltern. This gets to some of the questions raised in these studies, most famously asking, “Can the subaltern speak?” In this case, before the subaltern is allowed to speak, there is a re-positioning of the locations of center and periphery, modern and colonial. If Haiti, a place that was arguably at the center and birth of modernity, is still positioned from the perspective of coloniality, especially in the period after the Haitian Revolution, then it is constantly at the position to be made “other” in this conversation. In the dichotomous nature of modernity/coloniality, then Haiti is positioned as an anti modern colonial state, first to Europe, and later to the United States. Haiti becomes a subaltern state. In the modern/colonial context, the ultimate subaltern figure is the slave. The slave worker, who could literally be worked to death, is manifest as the ultimate zombi state. In the neo-colonial context, the same is true, while often times the work is not technically slavery or perhaps even coerced labor, but rather peripheral participation in the capitalist market. Consequently, today’s zombies are these laborers on the periphery, (the factory workers, day laborers, sex-workers), the subaltern that we know is there, and yet, like the zombie and narratives on the subaltern, is a worker unable to speak.

The discussion of zombies as both real objects and metaphor are perhaps forever inextricably linked to zombies through popular culture. Authors Joshua Gunn and Shaun Treat briefly address the role of gender as shown in early zombie films. The primary focus of their article is on relating scholarship to zombie films, ranging from the laboring

zombie to the consuming zombie. In relating to the role of capitalism and gender in zombie films, the authors note,

Many films that followed, such as *I Walked With a Zombie* (1943) and *The Voodoo Man* (1944), repeatedly revisit titillating possibilities of female sex-slaves as a standard plot. Given this representation of women in zombie films, it is not surprising that capitalism's role in the production and dissolution of the family unit was also of primary concern to communication researchers in the first half of the 20th century (151).

The link of zombies to the discussion of capitalism clearly is not new, but there is this additionally interesting critique on the role of women in the films, the affect on the family unit, and their roles as potential sex-slaves. In film, this racy theme of sexual control over zombified women signals both the desire to control women, and simultaneously how the loss of the woman to zombification is a threat to the traditional family. This discussion of zombie women is similar to some narratives on women as sex-workers.

It may potentially seem a stretch to link zombies to sex-workers, but U.S. popular culture again steps in to show that someone has already thought of this possibility. There exists to my knowledge both an online video game created by Adult Swim featuring zombie prostitutes called *Zombie Hooker Nightmare* and a song by the artist Voltaire entitled *Zombie Prostitute*. In the online videogame, the tagline reads, "Zombie hookers are bad for business—kill them ho's and get that money!" The premise of the game is that there is a prostitute out to meet "Johns", but there are also an overwhelming number of zombie prostitutes out to kill her. The goal of the prostitute is to make money by getting these "Johns" to follow her into her trailer while simultaneously defend from the numerous zombie prostitutes. In the song, "Zombie Prostitute", the narrator recounts his experience of finding a zombie prostitute in a cemetery. He proceeds to become intimate with the undead woman, even though it is clear through the lyrics that she seems to be

literally falling apart. As they continue to get intimate, the man finds that as a result of being with her, he is becoming undead. Zombie films might relate this experience to the diseased, virus- carrying zombie as the “John” relates his experience of becoming a zombie as though he were catching a disease from the zombie prostitute. In this case, the “John” becomes “infected” by the prostitute. This video game and song serve as further points of understanding perceptions of zombies in American popular culture, mixed with perceptions about prostitutes. In these two examples, the zombie prostitutes perform different tasks. In the videogame world, they are murderous former prostitutes who are ruining business for the living and threatening their lives. In the Voltaire song about prostitutes, the undead woman seems to be a disease carrier of some sort, infecting the unknowing John with her zombie disease. This perception of prostitutes (even the undead variety), are not really much different than how sex-workers have often been characterized as potential disease carriers infecting the unaware. Prostitutes have been pinpointed and problematized as disease carriers and home-wreckers rather than addressing the broader issues of prostitution. In the land of the living, prostitutes are on the periphery of the labor force. They are generally subaltern figures, who we tend here more about, than directly from. Gunn and Treat begin to get this point by looking at both capitalism and gender, where the desire to both control and commodify women’s sexuality adds another dimension to the discussion of subalterity.

There must be some resolution to imagining (sex) workers and other laborers as zombies. To compare sex workers to zombies through the use of popular culture only helps to firmly link, and present to an even broader audience to the positioning of this subaltern subject. That sex-workers are seemingly even further marginalized in

communities, and that there generally is a gendered dynamic to the discussion further emphasizes the importance of gender in the subaltern debate. The way in which Haiti is imagined in respect to modernity/coloniality are similar to the ways that zombies are imagined in American popular culture, how *zonbis* are imagined in Haiti, and even how laborers on the periphery are imagined in relation to capitalism. Perhaps it is too narrow to think in this dichotomous approach, and yet these various themes create concentric circles that articulate communities, both real and imagined. If we return to Haiti as a point of departure for the debate on modernity/coloniality studies, we can see how Haiti as “other”, and how *zonbis* and other laborers are related to varying perceptions of what it means to be subaltern. While zombie films can begin to get at broader concepts of consumerism and capitalism, imagining laborers who are truly peripheral and subaltern further problematizes the consequences of capitalism. These metaphors beg to question then about the zombie state. Is the sex-worker, or other peripheral laborer doomed to remain in the world of the “undead” forever? The resolution can be found in the effort that existing scholarship in subaltern studies and modernity/coloniality studies is already attempting to do. In the work of modernity/coloniality scholars, the effort to reposition the periphery as the new center of analysis to understand the world from a non-Eurocentric perspective is one way to reanimate those on the periphery. In addition, the subaltern studies scholarship also seeks to open the spaces so that those on the margins are allowed to speak for themselves. However, when those from the periphery are actually successful in getting their own voices and stories out, it is almost as if zombies *were* able to speak, or that the dead *were* brought to life. It is so rare an experience that it may indeed seem supernatural. If there is a continued effort to create the space, as well as

the desire to hear the unspoken, then the perhaps there is resolution to the plight of the zombie (sex) worker.

Bibliography

Alimurung, Gendy. 2009, May 15-21. "This Zombie Movement" *LA Weekly* 31(26): 20-27.

Escobar, Arturo. 2007. "Worlds and Knowledges Otherwise." *Cultural Studies* 21(2): 179-210.

Gunn, Joshua and Shaun Treat. 2005. "Zombie Trouble: A Propaedeutic on Ideological Subjectification and the Unconscious" *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 91(2): 144-174.

Hurbon, Laennec. 1995. "American Fantasy and Haitian Vodou" Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou. Comp. Donald J. Cosentino. Los Angeles, Regents of the University of California.

Mignolo, Walter. 2000. Local Histories/Global Designs: Coloniality, Subaltern Knowledges, and Border Thinking. Princeton University Press. Princeton, New Jersey.

Mintz, Sidney and Michel-Rolph Trouillot. 1995. "The Social History of Haitian Vodou" Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou. Comp. Donald J. Cosentino. Los Angeles, Regents of the University of California.

Smith, Kathy. 2009, April 28. "Vodou is Not a Nice Little Religion" Guest Lecture, Black Atlantic Religions.

Voltaire, "Zombie Prostitute"

Lyrics- <http://www.sing365.com/music/lyric.nsf/Zombie-Prostitute-lyrics-Voltaire/923A840A440881EA482573480010007B>

Video- <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FXebnJ1D0OU>

Zombie Hooker Nightmare, Adult Swim,

<http://www.adultswim.com/games/game/?game=zombiehookernightmare>