THE UNDEAD INGESTION OF THE SELF: CANNIBALISTIC
IDENTITY FORMATION AND GHOULISH SUBJECTIVITY IN ZOMBIE
LITERATURE

A Thesis
Presented to the
Faculty of
San Diego State University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
in
English

by
Bianca Lucianna Batti
Summer 2012
SAN DIEGO STATE UNIVERSITY

The Undersigned Faculty Committee Approves the

Thesis of Bianca Lucianna Batti:

The Undead Ingestion of the Self: Cannibalistic Identity Formation and Ghoulish

Subjectivity in Zombie Literature

Phillip Serrato, Chair
Department of English and Comparative Literature

William Nericcio
Department of English and Comparative Literature

Suzanne Bordelon
Rhetoric and Writing Studies

5/8/2012
Approval Date
Copyright © 2012
by
Bianca Lucianna Batti
All Rights Reserved
DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to Nona, my wonderful grandmother, without whom I would never have been introduced to the zombie genre in the first place.
ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

The Undead Ingestion of the Self: Cannibalistic Identity Formation and Ghoulish Subjectivity in Zombie Literature
by
Bianca Lucianna Batti
Master of Arts in English
San Diego State University, 2012

In this thesis, I analyze three specific zombie texts as a means of exploring three different representations of the undead cannibalistic figure of the zombie. In this way, I hope to discover the multifaceted construction of ontology and identity (both zombie and human) that these texts convey. I first work toward this goal in Chapter 2, “Carnivalesque Cannibalism: The Representation of the Grotesque Body in Dawn of the Dead.” This chapter applies Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of the carnivalesque to George Romero’s film Dawn of the Dead as a means of emphasizing the zombie’s ability to liberate human ontology from the negative influence of normative consumerism. In Chapter 3, “Subaltern Cannibalism: Power Relations and Identity Politics in World War Z,” I examine Max Brooks’ novel World War Z through a postcolonial lens—specifically through the use of Homi Bhabha’s discussion of subalternity, hegemony, and difference—in order to examine the zombie’s ability to destabilize and unsettle colonialist discourses and to challenge social and cultural power structures. Finally, in Chapter 4, “Deterritorializing Cannibalism: The Manifestation of Hope in The Walking Dead,” I utilize Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s theoretical concept of deterritorialization in order to argue that Robert Kirkman’s comic The Walking Dead emphasizes the need to embrace change through the representation of the zombie’s positive transformative effects on the construction of the self. In each of these analyses, my goal is to display the literary and discursive power of the undead. In other words, this thesis, overall, is an effort to reveal the fact that the zombie genre has a unique ability to complicate and problematize our ontologies, our relationships, and our world.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABSTRACT .......................................................... v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ................................................ vii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CHAPTER</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 INTRODUCTION ........................................................ 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 CARNIVALESGUE CANNIBALISM: THE REPRESENTATION OF THE GROTESQUE BODY IN <em>DAWN OF THE DEAD</em> ......................................................... 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 SUBALTERN CANNIBALISM: POWER RELATIONS AND IDENTITY POLITICS IN <em>WORLD WAR Z</em> ................................................................. 22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 DETERRITORIALIZING CANNIBALISM: THE MANIFESTATION OF HOPE IN <em>THE WALKING DEAD</em> ................................................................. 37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 CONCLUSION .............................................................. 51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REFERENCES ............................................................... 57</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The writing of this thesis has been one of the most significant (and most rewarding) academic challenges that I have ever had to face, and, to be sure, it is one that I would not have been able to face without the help, guidance, and support of many people. I wish, first and foremost, to extend my thanks to Dr. Phillip Serrato, my thesis chair, for giving me more insightful (and patient) guidance than I ever could have hoped for. I would also like to thank the other members of my panel, Dr. William Nericcio and Dr. Suzanne Bordelon, for their invaluable wisdom and support. I also wish to convey my thanks to the faculty of the Department of English and Comparative Literature, and most especially to Dr. June Cummins, who have inspired me to be a better writer, teacher, and student.

Further, I also wish to express my deepest gratitude to my friends, family and colleagues for their unwavering encouragement and aid. I especially wish to thank my colleagues and friends John Peabody and Lia Dearborn, who have been vital in providing feedback and advice. I would also like to thank my sister Keena Batti, not only for assisting me during the revision process, but also for being exceedingly caring and understanding during the entirety of the writing process. I also extend my love and thanks to my parents David and Je’nee Batti, whose encouragement, love, and support has been an indispensable motivating force. And finally, I would like to thank my boyfriend Alex Jones for his unconditional love and patient support, without which I may never have completed this process. Indeed, all these people (and many more) have been instrumental in helping me complete this thesis, and I cannot stress enough how much I truly appreciate their guidance and support.
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

At the beginning of George Romero’s film *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), Barbra and her brother Johnny visit their father’s grave in rural Pennsylvania. While there, a strange man slowly ambles over to them, and when Barbra becomes frightened, Johnny teasingly says, “They’re coming to get you, Barbra!” The strange man, of course, turns out to be a victim of the zombie epidemic and *does* come to get Barbra and Johnny, being driven by his undead lust for human flesh. During the rest of the film, Barbra and friends (excluding Johnny, unfortunately, who becomes a ghoul himself) barricade themselves in a farmhouse and fight off a horde of relentless reanimated corpses. And for ninety-six minutes, we get a chance to see how the tension builds, how the horror ensues, how the chaos breaks out when we have to face a monster that—at least, upon first glance—looks just like us.

This film was completely revolutionary in its time, being the first instance in which American audiences came face to face with the Romerian conception of the zombie. And this conception has had some major staying power because *Night of the Living Dead* “has defined the zombie genre since its release, and has even spilled over into the depiction of zombies in any medium, including books, comic books, video and board games, and action figures” (Paffenroth 1). Thanks to Romero, our present day zombies are undead cannibalistic monsters who threaten to bring an end to human civilization, as we know it. And it is this role, I believe, that makes the zombie so compelling a figure. Zombie texts do not just provide us with scenes of gratuitous gore and carnage; they allow us to discuss our social and cultural anxieties about death, impermanence, and destruction. Zombies provide us with the opportunity to question who we are and to challenge social norms and ideals. Indeed, it can (and should) be argued that zombie texts “have rightfully gained much of their respectability and invited so much serious analysis by engaging in social criticism, another point that distinguishes them from more forgettable entries in the horror movie genre” (17). It is this ability to engage in a social critique that enables zombies to be a significant force in
contemporary films and literature because the zombie genre explores our anxieties in a constructive, albeit gory, way.

What is also interesting is the fact that the zombie tradition is not just a popular contemporary phenomenon; the zombie tradition actually spans many civilizations for thousands of years. Indeed, most great civilizations have been terrified of the idea of the dead rising to eat the living. For instance, in Chinese legends and folklore, the living dead are called jiang shi, who are hungry ghosts that return to devour the living as a retribution for not being properly buried. Like the zombie, the jiang shi attacks the living with unrelenting violence (*Zombies: A Living History*). The undead are prevalent figures in Arab folklore, too, this tradition spanning back to the seventh century. The Arabic undead figure is the ghoul, who lures unwary travelers into the desert in order to eat them (*Zombies: A Living History*). In Nordic mythology, the draugr prevails as an undead Viking with an insatiable appetite for human flesh (*Zombies: A Living History*). And in Western Europe, we have the revenant—a spirit who becomes the hungry dead and feeds on the living. As Claude Lecouteux explains, revenants “were regarded as imprisoned souls, or the damned” (45). Quite like the zombie, these damned individuals can only be killed by decapitation: “The most common measure for ridding the living of a revenant was decapitation, followed occasionally by cremation . . . the head was believed to be the seat of action” (141). All these figures—the jiang shi, the ghoul, the draugr, the revenant—reveal that the undead have played a role in humanity’s folklore and literature for centuries. As Lecouteux puts it, “The dead continued to live beyond the tomb in folk belief” (159). Today, the undead continue to exist in our mind and in our texts as a means of working toward an understanding of death and fear, and because of this, the cannibalistic undead figure, like the zombie, “enjoys a rich life within the human imagination. . . . Our preoccupation is really startling. Our gods and spirits, stories and fairy tales, and millennia of documentation attest to it” (Askenasy 185).

But how exactly do we define what a zombie is? How do we characterize the monstrous figure of the zombie in a way that sets it apart from these other undead figures of folklore? For the purposes of my analysis of the zombie genre, it seems important to establish a criteria for zombies here, which is something that Michel Foucault refers to as the *rules of formation*: “The rules of formation are conditions of existence (but also of coexistence, maintenance, modification, and disappearance) in a given discursive division” (94). By
establishing the “rules of formation” for zombies, by defining the specific conditions of their existence, I hope to show that the zombie genre is an important “discursive division,” one that lends itself to literary discourse and critical analysis. In short, I hope to reveal that the figure of the zombie “can be analyzed and specified” (95).

And so, let us first consider one of the most important characteristics of the zombie—the fact that it is undead. The word “zombie” itself means “reanimated corpse” and comes from the Haitian voodoo religion. But the voodoo zombie is generally brought back to life by mystical means and signifies issues of mind control. More specifically, according to the tenets of Haitian voodoo, a sorcerer or witch can revive a dead person—usually through the use of a mystical powder or drug—thereby turning the dead person into a zombie that remains under the sorcerer or witch’s control. Zombies of the undead variety differ in this sense; zombies (the way that Romero has conceived them) come back from the dead not to do the bidding of a sorcerer, but rather as a result of some sort of plague or infection and, as a result of the zombie “virus,” they “partially eat the living. They thereby resemble the traditional depiction of ghouls, mythical monsters that hang around crypts and graveyards to eat corpses” (Paffenroth 4). Thus, while linguistically descended from voodoo, the zombie actually looks more familiar to the aforementioned undead figures from mythology (the ghoul, the draugr, etc.). But unlike these other figures, zombies are generally conceptualized as resulting from a disease or a pandemic of apocalyptic proportions—zombies bring about the total breakdown of human civilization and society. Romerian zombies, although slow, lumbering, and unintelligent, are an interesting literary archetype of undead monstrosity. They do not come back from the dead to seek revenge (like the jiang shi or the draugr) but, rather, they come back from the dead for seemingly no reason at all—in most texts, the causes of a zombie outbreak are generally unknown or mysteriously vague—which makes them all the more insidious and terrifying. With no motives at all (talk about an apathetic nihilist), zombies threaten to bring about the total annihilation of civilization.

This brings me to the second important characteristic of zombies—anthropophagy, or cannibalism. In fact, I might argue that this is the zombie’s most notable trait; the fact that they consume human flesh is one of the most terrifying aspects of zombies. And this is probably such a terrifying concept because cannibalism “defined as ‘the eating of human flesh by human beings,’ has often been called one of man’s last taboos” (Askenasy 10). Now,
some might argue that the taboo of cannibalism is not present in the zombie genre because the zombie is not human. I, however, disagree with this (and I think that Kim Paffenroth, quoted earlier, would disagree as well, as he consistently refers to zombies as cannibals in his book *Gospel of the Living Dead: George Romero’s Visions of Hell on Earth*). I think we can conceive of the zombie as a cannibal. Yes, the zombie is an undead figure, but it is also a reanimated human corpse. And as such, zombies, then, retain a semblance of their humanity. They still, at the very least, look human, and because of the (mainly physical) human qualities that they still possess, the implications of cannibalism exist in the zombie genre. Whenever we encounter a scene in which a zombie eats a human, how can we not be filled with terror at the fact that the zombie looks eerily similar to us—that the zombie looks eerily like a cannibal? How can we not see ourselves in both the predator and the prey?

And because we can see ourselves—we can see the humanity—in the zombie, we are then able to consider the zombie figure as a reflection of ourselves and our own identities. In this way, we can utilize the cannibalistic tendencies of the zombie as a vehicle for the literary analysis of social and cultural values (and fears). Specifically, the zombie’s cannibalism represents itself as an invasive threat to life, liberty, and happiness (which brings to mind the foundational values of American society). Because zombies threaten human (and especially American) civilization by literally consuming it, they also, therefore, threaten the human desires to live, to be free (in this case, to be free from the oppressive cannibalistic force of the zombie), and to be happy. And because of the primal nature of the cannibalistic threat of zombies, the zombie comes to be characterized as a savage monster—they are, to borrow from postcolonial theory, the Other. And yet, even though the stigmatizing dehumanization of the Other infiltrates the zombie body, the zombie’s lust for human flesh, the zombie’s cannibalism, complicates the complete and utter othering of zombie identity. Zombies both look like us and consume us at the same time—their identity is blurred. Their identity encompasses both the Other and the Self. The zombie, then, represents “the ways in which the fear of the Other is brought home, domesticized, made both more familiar and more insidious” (Walton 3). And the cannibalistic figure of the zombie is one that evokes feelings of terror, but one that also becomes a space of interplay where we might begin to think about our own identities. And this field of meanings, the significations that the zombie provides, allows zombie texts to “perform anxieties of identity, consumption, and familial
negotiations” (25). The zombie is the physical manifestation of these ideas. It is “a performatively
embodiment of fear” (72).

But why exactly does the zombie scare us? Why does the zombie affect us in such a
jarring way? Or, as Hans Askenasy posits regarding the cannibal, which I believe also relates
to the zombie, “The mere mention of their name and the implication of their dining habits
have always evoked a reaction combining unspeakable horror, revulsion, and yet a strange
fascination for most of us. Why should this be so?” (13). Of course, the zombie’s
cannibalism is one of the things that preys on our fears of (and morbid fascination with)
death, violence, and taboos. But, to take this a bit further, I think that the zombie really
represents our fears of ourselves because the zombie is an illustration of “the strange
masquerading as the familiar” (Walton 127). The zombie is strange—it is an undead
cannibal, after all—but it is also familiar in that it looks like us, like our friends, like our
family members. The zombie, then, seems to represent Sigmund Freud’s idea of the
uncanny—something that is both uncomfortably strange and uncomfortably familiar. Or, as
Freud puts it, “On the one hand, [uncanny] means that which is familiar and congenial, and
on the other, that which is concealed and kept out of sight” (420). As such, the zombie
perfectly exemplifies the uncanny in that it is familiar—it looks like us—but it is also
strange—it is a corpse and a cannibal. And because the zombie is an uncanny threat, it
invokes in us “that sense of helplessness sometimes experienced in dreams” (426). But we
humans do not like to be made helpless, and so we often, then, reject the figure of the
zombie. Or, to put this another way, we relegate the zombie to a space of abjection. The
zombie is abjected in that it is cast off, degraded. This is to say that the zombie is violently
cast out of the cultural world (it is abjected) because it presents us with an inherently
traumatic experience—it shows us that we are capable of dying ourselves. But zombies
distort our perception of death because they present us with a tweaked version of mortality—
or, rather, of immortality. Life as we know it is impermanent, but life as a zombie, as an
undead cannibal, is not necessarily so. To be a zombie is to be damned, to live forever in a
state of indefinite death and decay. The damned, hellish, eternal death of the zombie leads us
to think about our own deaths and the unknowability of what will happen to us when we die.
And death is something that humans fear because we inherently fear what we do not know.
This is perhaps why the academic study and analysis of the zombie genre is a worthwhile endeavor—to explore the unknown and to consider our fears and our values in a different way. And seeing as how there currently is not a lot of literary or academic scholarship on the zombie genre, I believe that such analysis would therefore be different, new, and, ultimately, valuable. The zombie genre is a fairly current and popular one—with new zombie films, comics, video games, and even television shows being made every year—and this makes it ripe for analysis. By analyzing this popular genre, by analyzing this new “discursive formation” that piques our morbid fascination, we might begin to understand ourselves a bit more fully (Foucault 94). The undead do not just present us with gore and bloodshed, but they also provide us with an analysis of the human condition. And so, just because the zombie genre is a popular one does not mean that it is, then, topical or trivial. It is a “discursive formation” that warrants analysis because it is a genre that embodies and lends itself to making a variety of social critiques. As Kim Paffenroth says, zombie texts “use the fantastical ‘disease’ of zombies to criticize the very real diseases of racism, sexism, materialism, and individualism. . . . And the portrayal is so powerful and compelling in these [texts], that it is impossible to discount it as some thoughtless anti-American screed: it is a real, if extreme, diagnosis of what ails us” (18). Through these social critiques of “what ails us,” the zombie genre implicates itself as one that is more than just a passing fad, and it “is this ‘more’ that we must reveal and describe” which is, of course, my goal (Foucault 96).

Specifically, I will attempt to reveal and describe this “more” through the analysis of three specific zombie texts and in three different representations of the undead cannibalistic figure of the zombie. In this way, I hope to discover the multifaceted construction of identity (both zombie and human) that each text portrays in their individual social commentaries. I will first work toward this goal in Chapter 2, “Carnivalesque Cannibalism: The Representation of the Grotesque Body in *Dawn of the Dead*.” This chapter explores Mikhail Bakhtin’s theory of the carnivalesque—a concept that emphasizes transformation, subversion, and liberation by embracing humor, chaos, and the grotesque—and the manner in which this theory is manifested in the cannibalistic figure of the zombie. Ultimately, I will argue that the carnivalesque world of George Romero’s film *Dawn of the Dead* emphasizes the zombie’s ability to question and critique the influence of normative consumerism on the formation of human identity.
Chapter 3, “Subaltern Cannibalism: Power Relations and Identity Politics in *World War Z*” will examine Max Brooks’ *World War Z* through a postcolonial lens. By putting Homi Bhabha’s discussion of subalternity, hegemony, and difference in conversation with Brooks’ portrayal of the zombie apocalypse as a literal war between zombies and humans, I will argue that the subaltern cannibalism of the zombie works as a means of destabilizing and subverting humanity’s construct of hegemony (by literally consuming it). Brooks’ zombie effectively and productively allows for the critique of the construction of difference, prejudice, and hegemony because the zombie allows us to consider the society we have created. Brooks’ zombie narrative presents us with a postcolonial consideration of identity and power, which allows us to challenge social and cultural hierarchies and power structures and to think about these issues in a critically engaging way.

Finally, in Chapter 4, “Deterritorializing Cannibalism: The Manifestation of Hope in *The Walking Dead*,” I will utilize Deleuze and Guattari’s theoretical concept of deterritorialization (in conjunction with Antonio Negri’s discussion of the emancipatory power of transformation) in order to argue that Robert Kirkman’s comic *The Walking Dead* reveals just how complicated the construction of identity really is. In Kirkman’s conception of the zombie apocalypse, the characters must be willing to change and adapt to their environment in order to survive. As such, Kirkman reveals that these characters, these survivors, must be willing to accept and embrace change and becoming—which is the foundation of the Deleuzian concept of deterritorialization—in order to redefine themselves on the post-apocalyptic frontier. In analyzing Kirkman’s comic through the lens of deterritorialization, I will reveal the positive and transformative effects that the deterritorializing and cannibalistic force of the zombie has on the construction of the self.

In short, I believe that zombies can tell us a lot about ourselves. Indeed, the zombie’s undead, cannibalistic representation of monstrosity is a fairly pliable and malleable signifier. It represents both “familiarity and strangeness, a double denotation that appears to reinforce its recurrent usage” (Walton 152). And this is why the zombie has endured for so long; this is why the zombie has popular longevity and lasting cultural relevance. The zombie is both familiar and strange, and, therefore, it has the ability to encompass many facets and layers of ourselves. The zombie, then, allows us to consider both the good and the bad in us because it is the one representation “that is both abhorrent and easily recognizable, a means of targeting
practices that are strange and making them familiar—an ‘Othering’ stratagem that . . . still retains its efficacy in distancing as loathsome, as well as rendering commonplace, new threats to the home space. And it continues over into the new epoch, if in unexpected ways” (152). So this is why the zombie is ripe for analysis (and why it continues “into the new epoch”). The zombie’s position as an othered—and othering—figure constantly shifts and mutates (it is human but it is not, it is loathsome but familiar, it is terrifying but also joyfully carnivalesque, it is postcolonial but also deterritorialized), constantly destabilizing our binaristic relationships, our Self versus Other dichotomies. Therefore, the zombie completely complicates and problematizes everything we know about ourselves, our relationships, and our world, which gives us a perfect opportunity to come to terms with who we are and what we care about. As Paffenroth says, “It is this overlap and crossover between zombies and humans that makes zombies different than other movie monsters, and makes zombie movies more potent and deeper explorations of human nature” (7). A deeper exploration of the zombie will allow us to more fully understand ourselves because the living dead allow us to consider our ontologies in a meaningful (and gruesome) way.
CHAPTER 2

CARNIVALESQUE CANNIBALISM: THE REPRESENTATION OF THE GROTESQUE BODY IN DAWN OF THE DEAD

George A. Romero has arguably influenced the zombie genre more than anyone, which is perhaps why many (including myself) have referred to him as the “Godfather of All Zombies.” Ever since his first film Night of the Living Dead came out in 1968, Romero’s role in conceptualizing the modern zombie has been so firmly established that, as Kim Paffenroth explains, when one “speaks of zombie movies today, one is really speaking of movies that are either made by or directly influenced by one man, director George A. Romero” (1). What makes Romero especially noteworthy is the fact that he uses his cinematic exploration of the zombie apocalypse not merely to shock his audience with horrific displays of cannibalism, viscera, and gore, but to imbue these storylines with a more poignant underlying social commentary; in this way, Romero’s films reveal “thoughtful and serious examinations of ideas, not just exercises in shock and nausea” (2).

Romero’s 1978 film Dawn of the Dead (the second film in his Living Dead series) exemplifies one such “thoughtful and serious” examination of human (and specifically American) society. This film follows Peter, Roger, Stephen, and Fran, four survivors of the zombie apocalypse that has devastated the United States. These survivors end up at a mall—a setting that allows Romero to provide a commentary on American consumer society. Dawn of the Dead depicts the zombie-infested post-apocalyptic world as a carnivalesque and cannibalistic environment that subverts and liberates American society. By portraying the chaos of the zombie apocalypse in a humorous way (complete with pie-throwing and pratfalls), Romero reveals a transformed society where hierarchies can be challenged, ideas can be tested, and equality can be sought. It is a polyphonic, polymorphous environment that has a transformative effect, changing people (like Fran and Peter) from self-centered consumers into self-actualized survivors. The positive transformation of characters like Fran and Peter exemplifies Bakhtin’s theory of the carnivalesque because the zombie apocalypse
liberates them by subverting normative society through humor (like the pie-throwing) and chaos (the rise of the undead). In this way, Romero utilizes the carnivalesque cannibalism of his zombie-dominated world—the “world upside-down”—as a means of questioning the formation of human identity, critiquing our consumerist society, and shedding light on the importance of transformation, subversion, and liberation.

Before diving into my analysis of *Dawn of the Dead*, I would first like to expand on Bakhtin’s theory of the carnivalesque in order to provide a clearer lens through which to view Romero’s film. In *Rabelais and His World*, Bakhtin discusses the concept of “carnival” and its significant role in society (especially medieval society). As Bakhtin explains, carnival “is by no means a purely artistic form nor a spectacle and does not, generally speaking, belong to the sphere of art. It belongs to the borderline between art and life. In reality, it is life itself, but shaped according to a certain pattern of play” (7). As such, carnival is life—it is a version of reality, but it is a *playful* version (or inversion); it is an artistic spectacle that subverts social norms and constraints. Because of this, carnival (and the carnivalesque) is an occasion in which “everyone participates because its very idea embraces all the people. While carnival lasts, there is no other life outside it. During carnival time life is subject only to its laws, that is, the laws of its own freedom. It has a universal spirit; it is a special condition of the entire world, of the world’s revival and renewal, in which all take part” (7). This seems especially important—the universality of experience, the embracing of making multiple connections, the freedom of a more egalitarian social order. It is this freedom, this universal spirit, that makes carnival such a positive experience and allows for the celebration of “a festive life” (8).

And this universal celebration of “a festive life” revels in progressive subversion in that during carnival, “there is a temporary suspension of all hierarchic distinctions and barriers among men and of certain norms and prohibitions of usual life” (15). This temporary suspension creates a world turned upside down, in a sense, in which alternative voices may, subversively, be heard. The lack of “hierarchic distinctions”—and the celebration of this—allows for the possibility of establishing deeper connectivity between all the people involved. Indeed, Bakhtin explains, “Such free, familiar contacts were deeply felt and formed an essential element of the carnival spirit. People were, so to speak, reborn for new, purely human relations. These truly human relations were not only a fruit of imagination or abstract
thought; they were experienced. The utopian ideal and the realistic merged in this carnival experience, unique of its kind” (10). Therefore, these carnivalesque human relations establish a rebirth, a metamorphosis, a transmogrification of the self.

It is also important to note that this transformation is based on (as Bakhtin explains) grotesque realism’s principle of degradation, which is especially revealed through the figure of the grotesque body. The grotesque body degrades or lowers all that is elevated, noble, or “ideal” by bringing it down to the material level. In other words, the grotesque body allows us to consider the idealized notions of human civilization and society in relation to the corporeal form of the (grotesque) body, complete with all its abjectifying fluids and its link to decay. This link between the corporeal and the social reveals that carnivalesque transformation, when connected to the grotesque body, “is a transfer to the material level, to the sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity” (19). As such, the human self is truly carnivalesque when, as Joseph Thomas puts it, “the cosmic and the earthy” collide and when “the mind and the body are irrevocably mixed” (Thomas). Or, to put this another way, through the representation of the grotesque body, Bakhtin reveals the carnivalesque identity to be one in which the social (the cosmic, civilized mind) and the corporeal (the earthy, material body) are joined. Because of this joint identity, the carnivalesque, grotesque body is profoundly ambiguous because its positive meaning is connected to renewal and its negative meaning is connected to decay. And the ambiguous nature of the grotesque body allows the carnivalesque world to subvert social norms and hierarchies by degrading the elevated and celebrating the lower bodily stratum. In this way, according to Bakhtin, we can conceptualize the material carnivalesque world as a positive, progressive space where the joyful subversion of the grotesque material body is celebrated.

In the beginning of *Dawn of the Dead*, though, the material world does not resemble Bakhtin’s positive, progressive space. The film opens with a close up on red shag carpeting, which looks eerily similar to ground meat, and this definitely sets the tone for the film—we are encountering an ominous, uncanny environment. One of the characters, an engineer at the news station where Fran works, addresses the rather negative, foreboding environment of this new apocalyptic world when he says, “Shit’s really hit the fan.” This chaos, at first, is perceived as an event that will bring about the destruction of human civilization. And the engineer’s statement really clues us in to the destructive nature of the zombie apocalypse—
shit has hit the fan. Shit, here, calls to mind images of the abject, or everything that is antithetical to perceptions of civilization and order. In this way, the abject—the shit—carries implications of disorder, destruction, and chaos. It reveals implications of the total breakdown of human civilization, as we know it. Notably, between the ground meat carpet and the invocation of shit, the zombie apocalypse is depicted as being quite a grotesque space. There is nothing positive about this new zombie-dominated world. It is a void. It is destructive. It is a negative space that threatens the existence of human civilization.

This chaotic apocalypse also provides the opportunity for humans to threaten each other, which the film reveals in very racial ways. As Paffenroth explains, the film depicts “a racist rampage . . . in which an out-of-control cop uses the excuse of the zombie menace to shoot blacks and Hispanics indiscriminately” (18). During this rampage, the “out-of-control cop” exclaims, “Show your greasy little Puerto Rican ass so I can blow it right off. Blow all their asses off, low life bastards, blow all their low life little Puerto Rican and nigger asses right off.” The racist cop uses the chaotic environment as an excuse to perpetuate acts of aggression against minority groups that he has deemed the Other based on their race. Indeed, instead of targeting and killing zombies, this cop targets and kills any and all black and Hispanic characters in his path. This cop dehumanizes these marginalized groups not just through his demeaning words (like “greasy” and “low life”), but also through his murderous acts of aggression. In this manner, the zombie apocalypse presents itself—at least initially—as a negative space where the survival of human civilization is not only threatened from without (by zombies) but also from within (by humans themselves). This threat from within seems to display Romero’s fairly cynical perspective regarding human nature in that it paints humanity in a negative light. And so, the film, at first, seems to represent the zombie apocalypse as a force that changes human society for the worse. This seems to be a fairly pessimistic point of view because, as Paffenroth puts it, the film “is, to be sure, one of the most cynical portrayals of human nature in any film genre” (12).

Yet, I think we can conceive of this apparent cynicism in a different way. Rather than thinking of Dawn of the Dead as a negative critique of human nature, we might begin to explore the idea that Romero, conversely, provides us with a positive carnivalesque representation of human identity. Yes, the zombie apocalypse is a force that changes and threatens human society, but I do not think that it necessarily changes society for the worse.
While the new apocalyptic world is a grotesque and even abject one, we might begin to perceive this disorderly chaos not as a wholly destructive force but, perhaps, as a regenerative or transformative force. Because the zombie apocalypse brings about the complete breakdown of civilization, it creates a new world—a blank slate—full of transformative potential. And because this new world is a blank slate, it provides people like Fran and Peter with the opportunity to recreate social relations, to reconstruct their identities, to begin again. And we might begin to see that there is positive potential in these new transformative opportunities—people like Fran and Peter can not only transform themselves, but also transform themselves into better people. This new world, this world upside down, is a hopeful one that allows for rebirth and deeper connectivity, which are, as Bakhtin would argue, the result of a carnivalesque experience.

There are many glimmers of the carnivalesque as the film progresses, in fact. These glimmers are especially revealed in the way that the zombies themselves are represented in the film. Quite often, the cinematography causes us as the audience to place ourselves in the zombie’s position—it causes us, in essence, to become the zombie. There is one scene in which Peter shoots a zombie in the head, but he shoots right at the camera, causing us to occupy the zombie’s position. This cinematographic effect is repeated and mirrored in a later scene in which a zombie chases Stephen through a shadowy machinery room in the mall; in this scene, too, the cinematography allows us to become the zombie lurking in the shadows. First, it is important to note that zombies represent Bakhtin’s notion of the grotesque body. The grotesque body is degraded, debased, lower, and abjected, and it does not get much more debased or abject than a decayed reanimated corpse. In a word, the zombie is the epitome of the grotesque body. As such, the zombie is also the epitome of the carnivalesque’s subversive power. And this, too, is the power of Dawn of the Dead’s cinematography. When Romero’s camera allows us to become the zombie, it also allows us to become the grotesque body. The camera forces us (subversively) to become degraded ourselves and to occupy a position of abjection. By allowing us to see through the eyes of the zombie, Romero forces us to consider our own unavoidable decay—and our eventual deaths. Paffenroth also sees this as Romero’s cinematographic intention: “Many of the camera shots of zombies being killed are taken from the zombie’s perspective, with us, the viewers staring down the barrel of a gun before it fires. We see that zombie ‘death’ is as fearful and final as ours, and we pause to
consider how unfair their execution is, as well as the inevitability of our own” (68). It is through this exploration of death that the film further allows us to empathize and thus connect with the zombie characters in an affecting and resonating way. This, then, is emblematic of the carnivalesque in that the film causes us to rethink our identities; instead of idealizing human existence, our perceptions of the body (the self) begin to change, to transform, as we gain a better understanding of our material debasement.

The survivors in the film also come to these conclusions, which, at times, not only affects the way that they perceive the zombies around them, but also affects the way that they perceive themselves. Indeed, their perceptions (like ours) change because of the connection that they feel with the zombies around them, a connection that they feel because of the physical human form that zombies retain and therefore that both zombies and humans share. This connection to the body allows the survivors to establish deeper connectivity because their bodies allow them to connect to each other in a material, and therefore carnivalesque, way. Peter vocalizes these feelings of connectivity when he says about zombies, “They’re us, that’s all.” This self-recognition reveals the powerful mirroring effect of the zombie body; the grotesque body of the zombie allows the characters, in seeing themselves in zombie form, to constantly seek to understand their own identities within this post-apocalyptic carnivalesque environment. It seems, then, that only by embracing the carnivalesque, only by embracing the transformative power of the zombie apocalypse, will these characters be able to survive and to understand themselves in this new (and ever-changing) world. Once they accept this “world upside down,” once they welcome the chaos of the zombie apocalypse, once they embrace their material bodily connection to each other and their zombie counterparts are they able to liberate themselves by transforming into survivors on the post-apocalyptic frontier. And this is liberating because it opens Peter and the others up to the possibilities of a universal existence—a transmogrified social order that embraces connectivity.

But one thing that the survivors must come to terms with in order for this positive ontological transmogrification to occur is the prevalence of the grotesque body in their new zombie-dominated world. The fact that the survivors must deal with zombies on a daily basis seems to reveal something that Joseph Thomas explains about the band Funkadelic (but that also seems to apply to zombies): “In Civilization and its Discontents, Sigmund Freud claims
that the three requirements of civilization are cleanliness, order, and beauty. If these are the
elements of civilization in its current form, it is no wonder Funkadelic resist them—not
systematically, but chaotically, using the intuitive logic of the carnivalesque” (Thomas). Just
as Funkadelic (as Thomas reveals) reject cleanliness, order, and beauty, so too do zombies
represent an ontological state of being that subverts and resists these normative and stifling
characteristics of civilized society. The zombies in *Dawn of the Dead* are not clean, they are
*not* orderly, and they are definitely *not* beautiful. Rather, zombies are decomposing,
decaying, disemboweling, chaotic figures that completely dismantle and subvert normative
civilization. But precisely because zombies are the grotesquely monstrous embodiment of the
carnivalesque, they also end up allowing for positive carnivalesque transformation. As
Bakhtin explains, the grotesque “bodily element is deeply positive. It is presented not in a
private, egotistic form, severed from the other spheres of life, but as something universal,
representing all the people” (19). In this way, we can think of the grotesque form of the
zombie as providing this universality; the zombie body is the body of the people (since most
people in any archetypal zombie text, including *Dawn of the Dead*, end up becoming
zombies eventually) and is, therefore, representative of the collective carnivalesque *identity*
of the people.

Peter realizes this when he says, “They’re us, that’s all.” We are zombies and the
zombies are us—we are all connected through our universally shared experiences and our
shared physical form. The body connects us, but the *zombie body* debases us, which is why it
is the zombie that specifically embodies the carnivalesque identity. This carnivalesque
identity is especially achieved through the representation of degradation in the zombie body,
something that Bakhtin describes as being extremely important in conveying the
carnivalesque: “The essential principle of grotesque realism is degradation, that is, the
lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract; it is a transfer to the material level, to the
sphere of earth and body in their indissoluble unity” (19). This transfer to the material level,
this unified connection to both the earth and the body is what makes degradation extremely
important, especially when we consider the role of degradation in the zombies of *Dawn of the
Dead*. These figures *are* degraded, they *are* grotesque because they are both destructive and
regenerating at the same time: “Degradation digs a bodily grave for a new birth; it has not
only a destructive, negative aspect, but also a regenerating one. . . . It is always conceiving”
And the zombies in the film are always conceiving through the spread of the zombie virus, and it seems to me that the idea of infection as a means of conception could not be any more degraded or grotesque because it calls to mind the completely abject nature of the human body—especially since this infection is spread through contact with zombies’ bodily fluids, which occurs in all manners of disgustingly disemboweling, cannibalistic, and abject ways.

The implications of such cannibalism also significantly contribute to the carnivalesque degradation of the zombies in the film. Paffenroth also seems to agree that cannibalism plays an important role in the film: “Romero seems to be working on the symbolism of zombies, as he did by making them cannibals” (7). Cannibalism definitely comes into play when we characterize the zombie figure because even though zombies may no longer technically be human (and are, instead, some new undead subjectivity), they still look human—and so underlying implications of cannibalism remain and affect how we view the grotesque zombie body. This is an issue that several characters in the film grapple with during a TV interview. During this interview, a scientist asserts that zombies are not cannibals because they are not human and, therefore, do not eat their own kind: “Cannibalism in the true sense of the word implies an interspecies activity. These creatures cannot be considered human. They prey on humans. They do not prey on each other. That’s the difference. They attack and they feed only on warm human flesh. . . . We must not be lulled by the concept that these are our family members or our friends. They are not.” And yet, just as the scientist argues that these creatures, these zombies are not “our family members or our friends,” someone else in the studio shouts out, “They are!” as a montage of close-up images of zombie faces—faces that look extremely humanlike—flashes across the screen.

While the scientist does make an interesting point about the perceived identity of zombies, it seems important to note that “the distasteful and horrible aspects of zombies cannot really be discounted as unhuman, but are rather just exaggerated aspects of humanity” (Paffenroth 11). The makeup of the zombies in the film lends itself to this conclusion, for the zombies’ makeup is extremely subtle; instead of exaggerating the decay or decomposition of their undead flesh (something that more recent zombies films do), Dawn of the Dead uses more subtle makeup as a means of making the zombies look more humanlike, which “invites us constantly throughout the film to see them as more like us, and to realize that we are like
them” (68). Zombie physicality is, then, extremely familiar in this way. Because of this, zombies are not wholly inhuman but are instead, as Paffenroth shows, exaggerated, grotesque, carnivalesque forms of humanity. These carnivalesque cannibals bring about the degradation of human society because it is both destructive and regenerating—it is always conceiving in that their carnivalesque cannibalism spreads the zombie virus and therefore spreads the zombie identity. This cannibalism also brings about the degradation of human society. The transformation of human identity from that of the dominant power to that of prey degrades human identity by pulling humans down from their hierarchical pedestal. This degraded, grotesque collision with the earth is completely carnivalesque; and it is this new degraded carnivalesque space within which the survivors in *Dawn of the Dead* now exist.

The film’s use of humor also contributes to the carnivalesque environment of the zombie apocalypse. Indeed, Romero utilizes a humorous tone throughout the film, which is especially seen in the manner in which zombies are depicted in scenes at the mall. There are countless scenes where zombies are shown falling down escalators, falling into fountains, or bumping into each other. During these scenes, we often see the survivors laughing at the zombies as goofy elevator music plays in the mall. This humorous approach to zombies is, in fact, a significant aspect of the zombie genre. As Paffenroth explains, “Part of the appeal of zombie movies also lies in their undeniable humor. Unlike other monsters, zombies do not need any separate comic relief . . . they are their own comic relief. But as with the other aspects of zombies, this too is not merely a part of why they are entertaining, but also contributes to the movies’ deeper meaning” (14). This use of humor to convey a deeper meaning comes into play quite significantly in *Dawn of the Dead*. The film definitely does not take itself too seriously, especially since “a pretentious zombie movie is really an oxymoron” (Paffenroth 14). And if the movie seems to have a sense of humor about itself, then we, the audience, must have a sense of humor as well—especially when there are scenes in which human characters throw cream pies at the zombies in the mall. But this humor is not merely some sort of topical, plucky comic relief; instead, there is a significant carnivalesque purpose for the comedic representation of zombies, for humor (like the grotesque body) is an integral part of the carnivalesque. Bakhtin explains that through humor “no dogma, no authoritarianism, no narrow-minded seriousness can coexist” with carnivalesque images (Bakhtin 3). Carnivalesque subjectivity is completely opposed to this “narrow-minded
seriousness,” and because of this, the carnivalesque nature of the zombie means that we cannot approach it as such. The humorous nature of the zombie allows us to laugh at evil, to laugh at monstrosity, and to laugh, then, at the grotesque body. In this way, all that is frightening “in ordinary life is turned into amusing or ludicrous monstrosities” (47).

The film’s humorous representation of zombies allows us to view monstrosity as ludicrous—but also, since we (like Fran) are able to see ourselves in these zombies, they allow us, too, to view ourselves as ludicrous. Zombies allow us to laugh at ourselves (to be sure, there is no narrow-minded seriousness involved in such an act). Romero’s stumbling, bumbling zombie hordes force us “not to take ourselves too seriously” (Paffenroth 16). To get something out of a zombie movie, we must have a sense of humor about ourselves and about human society in general because that is the nature of carnivalesque humor: “Carnival laughter is the laughter of all the people . . . it is universal in scope; it is directed at all and everyone. . . . [T]his laughter is ambivalent; it is gay, triumphant, and at the same time mocking, deriding. It asserts and denies, it buries and revives” (Bakhtin 11). As such, carnivalesque laughter is ambivalent in nature (like the grotesque body); but this ambivalent laughter—both at ourselves and at zombies in general—allows us to face fear more easily in that laughter allows us, as well as the characters in Dawn of the Dead, to defeat fear. When characters like Peter and Roger laugh in the face of the zombie hordes that surround them, they reveal the triviality of fear. They show us that “fear is the extreme expression of narrow-minded and stupid seriousness, which is defeated by laughter. . . . Complete liberty is possible only in the completely fearless world” (Bakhtin 47). Their carnivalesque laughter liberates them. It allows them to realize the positive transformative power of their new carnivalesque environment and to gain a deeper connection to each other, to the zombies around them, and to their new world. As a newscaster in the film puts it, “In spite of everything . . . there are still some people with a sense of humor.” I might argue that it is not “in spite of everything” that people have a sense of humor—but because of everything, because of the carnivalesque nature of the zombie apocalypse, that humor and laughter exist.

Ultimately, this carnivalesque environment functions as a means of subverting the traditions of normative human society. And this is why the representation of the carnivalesque is extremely important in this film—it allows Romero to make the kind of social critique that he is so famous for. By the end of the film, the mall is overrun by zombies
(Steve and Roger having died in the process of trying to keep them out), resulting in the need for Peter and Fran to escape the mall in order to survive. And while it seems for a moment that Peter’s desire to live (and his ability to evolve and transform) fails as he puts a gun to his own head, saying, “I don’t want to go. I really don’t,” he does ultimately change his mind as he relinquishes his gun to the zombies and flees the mall with Fran. Instead of allowing himself to be negatively affected by the apocalyptic transmogrification of the world around him, Peter decides to embrace this new carnivalesque world. And the world that he now lives in (and, therefore, his identity) is definitely changed—because of the subversive social force of the zombie. This force causes human civilization as we know it to come crashing down, and the zombies seem completely content with this. At the end of the film, as the credits roll, the film presents us with a series of scenes in which zombies walk, seemingly content, through the mall. This ending shows us that “theirs is the really and unambiguously happy ending of the movie, with zombies and the mall finally and eternally in a state of blissful peace” (Paffenroth 55). The zombies, it would seem, are completely content in this new society, which reveals the transformative effect of the subversive force of the carnivalesque. And even though it might seem that the representation of the zombie’s “bliss” may seem problematic or negative in that it might seem to reinforce the consumerism that Romero seeks to critique, I would actually argue the opposite; the zombie’s transformative force is subversive and positive because (as Bakhtin might argue) the apocalypse liberates the survivors (and the zombies) from the constrictions of normative society, and this subversive liberation is what actually results in the zombies’ “state of blissful peace.” For the zombies, this new carnivalesque world is a happy, joyful one.

_Dawn of the Dead’s_ zombies definitely embody the subversive power of the carnivalesque, for these zombies bring about “the complete breakdown of the natural world of food chains, social order, respect for life, and respect for death, because all those categories are meaningless and impossible to maintain in a world where the most fundamental limen, the threshold between alive and dead, has become a threshold that no one really crosses all the way over” (Paffenroth 14). This breakdown of social orders, this lack of normative categorizations, is emblematic of the carnivalesque because “carnival celebrated temporary liberation from the prevailing truth and from the established order; it marked the suspension of all hierarchical rank, privileges, norms, and prohibitions” (Bakhtin 10). And
because a carnivalesque environment is one in which hierarchical ranks are suspended, the
subversive post-apocalyptic world of the zombie, then, is more egalitarian and collectively
oriented. It is an environment in which anyone, like Fran and Peter, may survive as long as
they have the ability to transform alongside the new world in which they live.

And the subversive nature of this new world is due to the symbolic nature of the
zombie. In archetypal zombie films (like *Dawn of the Dead*) zombies are “the lowest, most
‘peasant’ type of monsters . . . but zombies enjoy greater success at annihilating humanity
than any previous monster ever did” (Paffenroth 16). Similar to Marx’s conception of the
proletariat, zombies are the lowest, the degraded, the peasants, and it is this position that
connects them to the earth and allows them to occupy the material bodily space of the
carnivalesque. This carnivalesque space is subversive because “the zombies are the class
envious and outraged have-nots, toppling the spoiled and decadent haves” (20). This
symbolic role of the zombie (which further enhances Romero’s social critique) reveals the
subversive nature of the carnivalesque in that the zombies of *Dawn of the Dead* destroy the
hierarchies of our consumerist human society. But this destruction, to be seen as truly
carnivalesque, is actually a *positive* transformative force because it creates a new society, a
new world, that has a universal spirit, that embraces freedom and liberation, and that allows
for the collective participation of all the people. Therefore, just as the zombies have now
achieved a “state of blissful peace,” so too do the survivors, like Peter and Fran, have the
opportunity to achieve such a positive position because their post-apocalyptic world provides
them with a “blank slate”—a new carnivalesque frontier full of potential, one in which they
are no longer bound by the constrictions of normative society. And even though the ending of
the film is fairly ambiguous (Peter and Fran flee the mall in their helicopter, which is low on
gas), I would argue that it is, at least, ambiguously *hopeful* because of the carnivalesque tone
of the film. This carnivalesque tone is especially apparent when they ultimately relinquish
their consumerist fortress of the mall, leaving with the hope of starting a new life together.
Peter, in fact, says, “We’ve got to find our own way.” And there *is* hope at the end of the film
that Peter and Fran do find their own way in the carnivalesque world of the zombie
apocalypse because their “carnival spirit offers the chance to have a new outlook on the
world, to realize the relative nature of all that exists, and to enter a completely new order of
things” (Bakhtin 34). As Bakhtin might argue, the new order of the carnivalesque world is
not only one that provides us with a new outlook, but also one in which all take part, and if Fran and Peter continue to evolve and transform in a positive way (specifically, from self-centered consumers into self-actualized survivors), then they will be able to successfully take part (and survive) in the new carnivalesque world in which they live.

Through this subversion and through this liberation of American society, Romero reveals a positively transformed society in the midst of (or because of) the zombie apocalypse. It is a world that highlights the grotesque body in a humorously chaotic way. And it is a world in which carnivalesque cannibalism affects the construction of the human self. Indeed, zombies defamiliarize human identity because they “do not just look like humans . . . zombies are human, and humans are zombie-like” (Paffenroth 10). Zombies turn human ontology on its head, which is actually a positive thing in that it gives Fran and Peter the opportunity to reconfigure their psyches and understand what truly matters to them. Romero’s zombies, then, provide us (like Fran and Peter) with a “carnival that exists to dismantle the normal and the everyday, that provides a new lens through which to look at the world and engage with its many contradictions” (Thomas). Because of this “new lens,” *Dawn of the Dead* shows us that zombies are more than merely B movie monsters—they are also carnivalesque figures that allow us to engage with the many contradictions of our identity, to gain a new outlook on our own ontologies, to consider what is it about humanity that truly matters. To be sure, Romero’s zombies allow us, too, to become carnivalesque.
CHAPTER 3

SUBALTERN CANNIBALISM: POWER RELATIONS AND IDENTITY POLITICS IN WORLD WAR Z

While George Romero may be the founder of the zombie genre, Max Brooks has definitely carried on his legacy. Brooks’ humorously fictional “survival guide,” entitled The Zombie Survival Guide, has been featured on the New York Times Best Seller’s List—a testament to the fact that zombies (particularly Brooks’ specific reincarnation of the undead) continue to pique popular interest. Yet, I believe that The Zombie Survival Guide is not Brooks’ most important contribution to the genre; yes, the text is humorous and intriguing, but its exploration of the zombie apocalypse is also topical in nature, focusing more on various humorous musings on survival than on making a more significant social commentary. But what The Zombie Survival Guide lacks in critical analysis, Brooks’ other novel World War Z: An Oral History of the Zombie War more than makes up for, as it explores the social implications of the zombie apocalypse in a much more Romerian way.

Indeed, World War Z transcends the silliness of The Zombie Survival Guide as Brooks utilizes a deeper postcolonial consideration of human identity. This consideration of the human self is hugely influenced by the concept of difference; specifically, Brooks characterizes the zombie as an obsessive undead cannibal who wages war on the human race through the literal consumption of the body. This (cannibalistic) difference characterizes the zombies in World War Z as subaltern—they are othered, they are not human, and they are excluded from human society; in this way, the subaltern, cannibalistic zombie works as a means of destabilizing and subverting the authority of civilization’s hegemonic power structure. But eventually, this cannibalistic war of the minority group (the zombies) versus the majority group (human society) ends up flipping the oppositional zombie/human relationship; humans become the minority while zombies become the global majority, literally consuming the entire world. Humans, then, become the subaltern in this text and ultimately work to regain their hegemonic position at the top of the food chain—a situation
that allows Brooks to effectively critique the construction of difference-based, hegemonic identity through his postcolonial representation of the zombie. I will therefore argue that in *World War Z* Brooks works to challenge and even destabilize colonialist discourses by exposing and unsettling hegemonic and subaltern identities through the apocalyptic conflict between humans and zombies. Brooks productively holds up a mirror to us, allowing us to consider ourselves and the social world we have created—a world that is problematically constructed on the basis of difference, prejudice, and hegemony. And even though the novel, at times, is problematic in its social critique, we may still consider *World War Z* to be a significant postcolonial text because it allows us to consider these issues in a critical, scholarly way.

The novel’s postcolonial context is especially apparent in its depiction of the zombies as different. In the discursive context of postcolonial theory—a discourse that seeks to destabilize Western colonialist epistemes and, at the same time, create a space for multiple (often marginalized) voices—we can define *difference* as a signifying system of relations or properties that distinguishes one being from another. Often, difference is opposed to *identity*, or the construction of the self (which is generally established on the basis of sameness). And as postcolonial discourse shows, this construction of difference is often manifested in racial ways and is, therefore, utilized as a colonialist justification of imperialism, marginalization, and subjugation. It is this manner of difference that pervades Brooks’ social commentary in *World War Z* because difference functions as a means of highlighting the zombie’s oppositional force.

This difference surfaces in the text, for instance, through the description of blood—or, at least, the lack thereof. One character, Kwang Jing-shu, a doctor in China, encounters this lack in a zombie child: “There was no blood. . . . I tried to take a blood sample and instead extracted only brown, viscous matter” (Brooks 7). This lack of blood is one of the first signifiers that establishes the zombie as different and therefore as Other. This method of othering is highlighted on several occasions, including when the character Stanley MacDonald discusses his first experience tracking a zombie: “The drag marks were sprinkled with fluid. Not blood, not human, but droplets of hard, black, crusted ooze that none of us recognized” (19). This black, crusted ooze is *not human*, and therefore is *different*. This characterization of inhuman difference reveals “the Manichaean structure of colonial
consciousness and its non-dialectical division” that Homi Bhabha discusses in *The Location of Culture* (88). The “Manichaean structure,” in this case the binaristic relationship between humans and zombies, reveals the prevalence of colonial discourse and consciousness in Brooks’ work. This colonial consciousness is what causes Kwang Jing-shu and Stanley MacDonald to perceive zombies as different in the first place because, as Heidegger puts it, in the case “of the Being of Existence and the Existence of Being we are concerned every time with a difference” (271). And, to be sure, the establishment of ontology and identity—both zombie and human—turns on the establishment of difference.

The zombie’s difference is also revealed not just in depictions of its blood but also of its skin. As Jiang-shu continues regarding the zombie child, “The boy’s skin was as cold and gray as the cement on which he lay. I could find neither his heartbeat nor his pulse. His eyes were wild, wide and sunken back in their sockets. They remained locked on me like a predatory beast. Throughout the examination he was inexplicably hostile” (Brooks 7). Jiang-shu’s emphasis on the zombie’s cold, gray skin seems to be emblematic of Bhabha’s claim that skin is “the key signifier of cultural and racial difference” (112). While Bhabha is really talking about the signification of racial difference, I think this can be applied to undead difference as well, for the decomposed skin of the zombie (like its lack of blood) becomes construed as a *grotesque* signifier of difference. The zombie’s skin, then, represents the fact that its difference, its inhumanity, “is at once visible and natural—colour as the cultural/political *sign* of inferiority or degeneracy, skin as its natural ‘*identity*’” (114). Because the zombie is inhuman, because it is different, it is then characterized (as Bhabha might argue) as *inferior*, and Jiang-shu’s negative reaction to the zombie child’s physical form (namely, its skin) reveals this. Indeed, Jiang-shu, after emphasizing the color of the zombie’s skin, describes the zombie as being very animalistic—as an inexplicably hostile predatory *beast*. These animalistic descriptions further convey the dehumanization of the zombie figure—because the zombie is different, humans (like Jiang-shu) view it as *inferior* and othered.

And perhaps we might begin to consider the symbolic implications of this characterization of zombie difference. More specifically, the language used to describe the zombie—grotesque, inferior, inhuman, othered, different, savage, beastly—is consistent with the language used in racist discourses of difference. Such parallel implications further reveal
the postcolonial context of Brooks’ novel because Brooks utilizes racist, colonialist characterizations of difference to portray the zombie as the Other. The character Todd Wainio, like Jiang-shu, characterizes zombies this way as well when he describes the zombie horde he faces in Yonkers: “You could see their wounds, the dried marks on their bodies, the gouges that made you shiver even inside that sweltering gear” (97). The physical appearance of these zombies is completely grotesque—they are covered in wounds and gouges—but they also still retain a semblance of their previous human form. The grotesque nature of the physical zombie body, then, is both comfortably familiar and horrifyingly alien, which manifests the complexity of the zombie’s undead difference because, as Jacques Derrida explains, “in the one case ‘to differ’ signifies . . . the order of the same” (279). This sameness which is not identical perfectly describes the zombie body; it is a physicality that makes us uncomfortable because it is simultaneously unpleasantly horrifying and eerily familiar. As such, the zombie body emblematizes Freud’s concept of the uncanny because zombies look like us—but they are not. They are not identical to the humans they strive to consume because of the fact that their grotesque actions and their grotesque physical appearance renders them as different (and uncanny) in the eyes of their human prey.

As such, humans like Wainio and Jiang-shu view these zombies as different, as inhuman, and as, therefore, nonbeing because zombies are not human—they are not represented in the same way as the human self. They are, rather, constructed in opposition to humanity. And there is tension in this opposition because, as Antonio Negri might say, being and nonbeing “affirm each other and negate each other simply, discretely, immediately” (732). This tension reveals the complexity of zombie difference; it both negates and affirms the being of human identity. In other words, the image of the zombie affirms humanity because they look (at least mostly) human, but this image also negates humanity because it is monstrous (and because it literally negates human life by cannibalistically consuming it). And because of this, the complex characterization of the zombie’s uncanny nonbeing (and thus its difference) causes humans to question everything they know about the world, everything they know about the self. And this is what makes World War Z a successful postcolonial text. Brooks’ characterization of the zombie as uncanny begins to destabilize the construction of difference.
We can extend this line of thinking by beginning to conceptualize the zombies in the novel as a subaltern, marginalized group. Specifically, we might begin to see the subaltern force of the zombie through the fact that zombies are an othered group excluded from human society who both help to define and subvert the hegemony of humanity. The zombie’s otherness is key in establishing it as a subaltern figure in that it is barred from human society because of its physical difference. As Bhabha explains, its “race becomes the ineradicable sign of negative difference in colonial discourses” (108). And in the colonial discourse of *World War Z*, the zombie is a zombie wherever it goes and cannot be seen otherwise because of the negative difference assigned to its physical form. In this sense, the subaltern figure of the zombie is wholly othered and is, therefore, viewed as an inhuman monster. This monstrous othering is especially apparent in the example of Sensei Tomonaga Ijiro of Japan who, when discussing the manner in which he dispatches his zombie enemies, says, “The heads I always separated; most of the time I just burned them, but at Tokachi-dake, I threw them into the volcanic crater where Oyamatsumi’s rage could purge their stench. I did not completely understand why I committed these acts. It just felt correct, to separate the source of the evil” (225). Here, the subaltern difference of the zombie is viewed as a noxious source of evil and monstrosity. And Ijiro’s actions against his zombie foes reveal the fact that he views them as the monstrous Other; he considers the zombie, then, to be “the trace and the enigma of absolute alterity, that is, the Other” (Derrida 293). And because zombies are the subaltern Other, they then allow humans to define their own identity as the Self.

But these subaltern zombies also have the ability to subvert the hegemony of the human self in terrifyingly cannibalistic ways. Zombies literally come back from the dead (a horrifyingly traumatic experience that disrupts the order of things for the surviving humans) in order to consume members of the human majority (of which they used to be a part). We might consider this manner of subaltern cannibalism to be a representation of the zombie’s subaltern subversion (via ingestion) of human hegemony. And Todd Wainio reveals just how terrifyingly powerful the zombie’s subversive power can be: “They came by the thousands, spilling out over the freeway guardrails, down the side streets, around the houses, through them . . . so many of them, their moans so loud they echoed right through our hoods” (Brooks 99). It seems that, in a sense, the zombie’s cannibalistic attacks allow them to seek revenge from their oppressors. And, of course, these attacks cause the humans they eat to become
zombies in their own right—the implications of which signify the fact that, by becoming zombies, these humans, too, will become subaltern.

This is a terrifying and traumatic prospect for humanity. As Wainio explains, “The fire was dying, Zack was still coming . . . and the fear” (99). Wainio, here, reveals humanity’s fear of the subaltern (and subaltern-making) force of the zombie. It is this subaltern force that completely turns the construction of human identity on its head, for as Bhabha argues, it is not possible “to calculate the traumatic impact of the return of the oppressed—those terrifying stereotypes of savagery, cannibalism, lust and anarchy which are the signal points of identification and alienation, scenes of fear and desire, in colonial texts” (104). The return of the oppressed—the return of the living dead—does have a traumatic impact, in part, because it is also a return of the repressed. And this is because, from a psychoanalytical standpoint, the zombie is an abject figure. It is cast off, it is degraded, it is debased. This is especially true because the zombie is technically a corpse (a reanimated one), which causes it to be violently cast out of the cultural world or the symbolic order (which is something Julia Kristeva asserts). As such, encountering these walking, undead corpses—which are alive and yet not—is an inherently traumatic experience because it forces us to think about our own deaths, to think about the fact that we are capable of dying ourselves (an acknowledgment that most people typically repress or avoid because of how uncomfortable and unacceptable it seems). And this is why the zombie repulses us. The specter and sight of death repulses us. We fear (and then cast off and marginalize) the zombie because we fear death and because we fear the traumatic experience the zombie forces on us. To be sure, Brooks’ zombie brings about this colonial trauma, this colonial fear—a fear that results from the terrifying subaltern force of the zombie’s savagery, cannibalism, anarchy, and subversion of human hegemony.

But Brooks takes his discussion of human hegemony further than this because he not only reveals humanity’s hegemonic tendencies through their binaristic and confrontational relationship with zombies, but through their binaristic and confrontational relationships with each other as well (which is one way that Brooks works to challenge hegemonic relationships and colonialist discourses). The character Arthur Sinclair especially displays this when he discusses the class hierarchies (and their subsequent post-apocalyptic dismantling) of the United States:
Yes, there was racism, but there was also classism. You’re a high-powered corporate attorney. You’ve spent most of your life reviewing contracts, brokering deals, talking on the phone. That’s what you’re good at, that’s what made you rich and what allowed you to hire a plumber to fix your toilet, which allowed you to keep talking on the phone. The more work you do, the more money you make, the more peons you hire to free you up to make more money. That’s the way the world works. But one day it doesn’t. No one needs a contract reviewed or a deal brokered. What it does need is toilets fixed. And suddenly that peon is your teacher, maybe even your boss. For some, this was scarier than the living dead. (Brooks 140)

Even in the midst of the zombie apocalypse, humans still manage to interact with each other based on the signifiers of race and class. Those in power (like Sinclair’s corporate attorney) stubbornly hold on to (and fear losing) their hegemony because it is, unfortunately, the only way they know to be. It is the only way they know how to define themselves—based on power structures. These power structures and the (colonial) desire to dominate and control cause the hegemonic corporate attorneys to reject and fear the transformation of the “peon” into a post-apocalyptic leader because the hegemony “is always threatened by ‘lack’” (Bhabha 110). They are threatened by (what they have deemed) the lack—the inferiority that they have forced on the subaltern “peon.” They are also, therefore, threatened by the fact that they now no longer dominate the subaltern because the new society destabilizes (and subverts) hegemonic constructions of identity. And so, it would seem that the zombies’ subaltern power not only allows them to free themselves from human hegemony but also to free other subaltern humans (the peons) from the hegemonic forces of their fellow humans (the corporate attorneys). We might, then, begin to see the zombie’s subaltern force as a representation of Brooks’ effort to destabilize colonialist discourses and to deconstruct hegemonic relationships.

Because of the postcolonial representation of the zombie as a subaltern force, we might also begin to see Brooks’ zombie as an equalizing and even Marxist force. Indeed, zombies seem to function as the proletariat and humans as the hegemonic bourgeoisie. And extending this analysis, the zombie apocalypse seems to function as a metaphorical representation of a cataclysmic class struggle between the two groups, a struggle that, at first, seems to reveal the goal of equalizing the status of the two groups (a representation that, again, seems to reveal World War Z’s position as a successfully destabilizing postcolonial text). But actually, what ends up happening, and what therefore, reveals the problematic and
unsuccessful nature of Brooks’ novel, is that an inverted hegemony only ends up installed. The zombie apocalypse ultimately displaces human hegemony and domination with a dictatorship of the undead.

In other words, because the zombie is such a powerful destabilizing force, it completely turns the structure of hegemony on its head, and the zombie transforms from a subaltern force into a hegemonic one that oppresses and marginalizes humans. The zombie’s oppressive hegemonic force is physically and literally manifested in the sheer size of the zombie hordes. Terry Knox, an astronaut, witnesses the huge scale of these hordes by using the imaging equipment aboard the International Space Station: “The images they gave us weren’t clear. They gave us our first look at the mega swarms over central Asia and the American Great Plains. Those were truly massive, miles across” (Brooks 259). These mega swarms reveal the massive extent of the zombie’s oppressive hegemonic force—they eventually completely take over and consume the entire world, thereby becoming the world’s dominant power. But this is a grotesque form of power that the remaining humans resist and reject. The zombie becomes a tyrant that humans, then, strive to overthrow. As Ernesto Olguin explains, the American Ambassador at the global conference exemplifies this rejection of zombie power: “It was time to go on the attack, he said, to all get out from behind our established defenses and begin retaking infested territory. . . . The United States intended to go permanently on the offensive, marching forward every day, until, as he put it, ‘every trace was sponged, and purged, and, if need be, blasted from the surface of the Earth’” (265). In this way, the surviving (now subaltern) human society seeks to, as the American president says, save “the human spirit” by resisting the hegemonic power structure of the zombies’ consuming force and by attacking the now oppressive zombie majority (267).

The binaristic and antagonistic relationship between zombie oppressor and subaltern human is further complicated by the nuances of the post-apocalyptic (and postcolonial) human subaltern identity. One manner in which this complication is manifested is through Bhabha’s concept of mimicry. Mimicry, as Bhabha defines it, manifests itself when the colonized subject seeks to imitate the dominant power or ideology in order to achieve a level of cultural camouflage. In actuality, this level of cultural camouflage can never be fully actualized because the mimic man is a “subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite” (Bhabha 97). Because the mimic man is “the same, but not quite,” his cultural
position is inherently problematic (and perhaps, for him, even dangerous). This problematic (and dangerous) side of mimicry is literally depicted in Brooks’ novel. At one point in the novel, one of the characters, Joe Muhammad, discusses a group of people termed “quislings,” who “went nutballs and started acting like zombies” (Brooks 155). This, of course, is an extremely twisted form of mimicry in that quislings are colonized subjects seeking to be integrated into the social order of the colonizer—which, in this case, happens to take the form of the zombie.

The fact that the colonizers are zombies allows Brooks to make a much more overt commentary on the literal menace of mimicry and its disturbing social implications. As Joe Muhammad explains, “There’s a type of person who just can’t deal with a fight-or-die situation. They’re always drawn to what they’re afraid of. Instead of resisting it, they want to please it, join it, try to be like it” (Brooks 156). Just as the colonial mimic desires to please, join, and try to be like his hegemonic colonizers, so too do the quislings desire such acceptance from and appropriation into zombie society (if we can even call zombie hordes a society). Of course, the quisling’s desire to be a zombie can be read sympathetically or even pathetically as a desperate, distorting effort to survive. But this desire to be seen as a zombie is also extremely problematic, as quislings are “just as hostile as regular zombies and in some cases even more dangerous” (157). And the quisling’s dangerous hostility is profoundly disturbing because, really, what could be more disturbing than humans, by mimicking zombies, attacking and eating other humans? Indeed, the quisling is a dangerous and hostile figure, but it is also a figure that productively reveals the postcolonial context of the novel as a whole.

Brooks depicts quislings in an extremely eerie way, and his discussion of their warped identity is especially disturbing: “These people were zombies, maybe not physically, but mentally you could not tell the difference” (157). Mimicry has such a profound and all-encompassing effect on quislings—so much so that, in their minds, they are no longer human but are completely zombie. Yet, the quisling resemblance to zombies is not total or complete, for quislings are never fully appropriated or accepted by zombies. As Joe Muhammad explains, “Even though we can’t tell the difference between them, the real zombies can” (Brooks 158). Even though quislings strive to be accepted by the dominant zombie society, zombies still reject them because zombies will always view them as othered (a role reversal).
No matter how well quislings mimic or resemble zombies, zombies can still see their difference, and that idea of *difference* is deeply engrained in this idea of mimicry, where the mimic—the quisling—is always “*almost the same but not quite*” (Bhabha 127).

The subaltern quisling desires to be accepted into the dominant ideology of zombie hegemony in order to survive, resorting to desperate mimicry in order to work toward achieving this. In this way, the quisling reveals that, as Bhabha terms it, mimicry is really just a form of cultural *camouflage*. As the quisling (and of course Bhabha) shows, the concept of mimicry is an extremely important part of colonial discourse because “under cover of camouflage, mimicry . . . is a part-object that radically revalues the normative knowledges of the priority of race, writing, history” (Bhabha 130). This revaluing of “the normative knowledges” greatly affects human identity in the novel—human identity is transformed, is revalued, is *reshaped* from that of the hegemonic to that of the subaltern, a fact that is revealed, in part, through the figure of the quisling. In other words, the quisling is just one representation of the new inverted hegemony of the post-apocalyptic society. And even though Brooks’ representation of the hegemonic zombie and the subaltern human is problematic in its reinforcement of hegemonic colonial relationships, his representation of the transformed, reshaped subaltern human self affords us the opportunity to witness the negative cultural implications of colonialist interactions.

But the rest of society (just like the quisling) goes through this reshaping too, which, at first, has a profoundly negative affect on the human psyche. Admiral Xu Zhicai, for instance, says, “We were the ones drowning, choking to death” (Brooks 235). The transformation of humans into the subaltern causes many of the survivors to completely give up hope—to figuratively drown, in essence—for they cannot situate themselves within this new identity. They give up all hope when forced to define themselves in opposition to the undead nonbeing of the zombie because where there is “no human *nature*, hope can hardly spring eternal; but it emerges surely and surreptitiously in the strategic return of that difference that informs and deforms the image of identity, in the margin of otherness that displays identification” (Bhabha 88). They cannot possibly comprehend their new identity as one defined by lack and marginalization even though “now the truth was everywhere, shambaling down their streets, crashing though their doors, clawing at their throats. . . .The truth was that we were standing at what might be the twilight of our species and that truth
was freezing a hundred people to death every night. They needed something to keep them warm” (167). And what keeps these people warm is the hopeful quality of *resistance*. This resistance—this “dangerous place where identity and aggressivity are twinned”—highlights the fact that human identity is formed through a binaristic system of differences, and the human rejection of zombie dominance is a completely aggressive and binaristic process (Bhabha 88). By rejecting their marginalized position as the subaltern, the post-apocalyptic human, then, contains (as Negri might say) a political constitution that is “set in motion by the resistance to Power. It is a physics of resistance” (Negri 737). Human identity, it would seem, is now constructed through resistance and through *difference*, and it is this construction that reveals the human need for freedom and liberation.

But, as Brooks shows, it is hard to completely liberate oneself from an enemy whose difference is ambiguous—they do retain a semblance of their human form, after all. Identity, then, is complicated and blurred by the fact that we continue to see a portion of ourselves in the zombie no matter how hard we try not to (something that Romero, of course, reveals in *Dawn of the Dead*). This blurring affects the way that many characters in *World War Z* perceive and interact with zombies and, more significantly, complicates the binaristic zombie/human dichotomy. Colonel Christina Eliopolis, for one, grapples with this complication during her post-apocalyptic military training: “That was another thing they taught us at Willow Creek: don’t write their eulogy, don’t try to imagine who they used to be, how they came to be here, how they came to be this. I know, who doesn’t do that, right? Who doesn’t look at one of those things and just naturally start to wonder?” (Brooks 178).

Eliopolis cannot help imagining who the zombies used to be—she cannot help humanizing or anthropomorphizing them—because of the ambiguous nature of zombie identity. It is not fully human, and yet it is not fully inhuman either. Because of this, the zombie/human binary becomes blurred and problematized.

Even the manner in which zombies must be killed (by destroying the brain, of course) is symptomatic of this blurring as well. One character, Jurgen Warmbrunn, muses on this method of destruction: “Why wouldn’t destruction of the brain be the only way to annihilate these creatures? Isn’t it the only way to annihilate us as well. . . . Isn’t that all we are? Just a brain kept alive by a complex and vulnerable machine we call the body?” (Brooks 35). And this is an instance in which ambiguous identity seems to be especially apparent, for even the
biological annihilation of zombies and humans is the same (to an extent, of course, since humans can be killed in other ways while zombies cannot). And even though zombies are viewed as inherently different, this blurring of identity reveals that constructing difference is not really as black and white as all that; rather, Brooks’ zombie reveals that identity, no matter how different or binaristic it may seem, can be complicated through ambiguity and ambivalence. And this exploration of ambivalence is important, for it is necessary to understand the “productive ambivalence of the object of colonial discourse—that ‘otherness’ which is at once an object of desire and derision, an articulation of difference contained within the fantasy of origin and identity. What such a reading reveals are the boundaries of colonial discourse and it enables a transgression of these limits from the space of that otherness” (Bhabha 96). This transgression of limits, of binaries, of clear-cut differences makes it difficult to liberate oneself from the zombie enemy (the realization of which instills even more fear in most of the characters in the novel) because the zombie, it can be argued, is an ambiguous colonial subject. And this ambivalence causes us to question not only the characterization of the zombie subject but the construction of human society as well. Because the zombie’s ambivalence allows us to question and challenge the social order, the Brooks’ postcolonial critique seems to be successful in that the zombie destabilizes binaristic, hegemonic, and colonial constructions of human identity.

This exploration of the human self is, to be sure, the driving force of World War Z. Throughout the novel, Brooks constantly questions what it means to be human and what it is about humanity that truly matters—something that he calls “the human factor.” In fact, he starts this line of questioning from the very first pages of the novel: “Isn’t the human factor what connects us so deeply to our past. . . . Isn’t the human factor the only true difference between us and the enemy we now refer to as ‘the living dead’?” (2). Ultimately, regardless of how ambiguous a figure the zombie is, Brooks perpetuates its characterization as different. It is not human—it does not qualify as having the human factor—and therefore it is the enemy. Bhabha also perceives the significance of difference in establishing human identity, for he asks, “How can the human world live its difference; how can a human being live Other-wise?” (91). Brooks, it seems, cannot conceive of a world that is “Other-wise,” as he consistently characterizes the post-apocalyptic world through binaristic manifestations of hegemonic/subaltern relationships based on difference. And this difference breeds fear in the
human self, for emotion plays a pivotal role in characterizing human identity—in constructing the human factor. Fear, as the character Breckinridge Scott explains, “is the most basic emotion we have” (Brooks 55). Fear is natural, it is primal, and it is therefore intrinsically a part of our ontology. In the novel, fear is specifically manifested as the fear of difference, the fear of being subjugated by zombie hegemony. We fear the force of the zombie because (in the Heideggerian sense) the zombie “is Being thought of as emerging from difference” (Heidegger 272). But it is significant to understand, to know, and to come to terms with this fear because it allows us to gain a better sense of what it means to be human, and this seems to be Brooks’ goal in the novel—to understand (and critique) normative human ontology through the postcolonial representation of both the human and zombie self.

But this is the problem with humanity, or, at least, with the humanity that Brooks has chosen to display in World War Z; even though this “human factor” is what allows the global survivors of the zombie apocalypse to band together, to unite, in a fight for their collective freedom from oppression, it is also what causes them to turn on each other, yet again, as soon as the zombie threat is eliminated. As soon as zombie difference (and zombie hegemony) is no longer a threat to the power of the human race, humans immediately turn against each other in a series of aggressive power plays because, in the words of the character Ernesto Olguin, “we still couldn’t take our heads from out of our asses or our hands from around each other’s throats” (Brooks 266). And this is because human identity has come to be irredeemably formed on the basis of difference, and whether this difference is constructed through zombie/human binaries or human/human binaries, the end result is the same—the human factor is, in the end, characterized by colonial consciousness and hegemonic power plays because of the “urgent need to contest singularities of difference and to articulate diverse ‘subjects of differentiation’” (Bhabha 105). This need to articulate differentiation, then, results in the need to articulate domination, which is, of course, the whole goal of the zombie war: “[The living dead] robbed us of our confidence as the planet’s dominant life-form. . . . We had to reclaim our planet. We had to prove to ourselves that we could do it, and leave that proof as this war’s greatest monument. The long, hard road back to humanity, or the regressive ennui of Earth’s once-proud primates” (Brooks 267). The zombie war, here, results from the human desire for the return of their dominant hegemonic status. And it would seem that this is a fairly bleak and cynical characterization of human identity because,
instead of learning from humanity’s collective position as subaltern, and instead of learning from their collective marginalization by zombie hegemony, humans do not treat each other with egalitarian respect but rather interact with each other based on hegemonic difference yet again. As the character Maria Zhuganova says of Russia, “The war drove us back to our roots, made us remember what it means to be Russian. We are strong again, we are feared again, and to Russians, that only means one thing, we are finally safe again” (331).

Hegemony, here, is reinstated, and colonial consciousness is perpetuated—and for Maria, this is a good thing. And for Brooks—or, at least, for his intention of unsettling hegemonic relationships—this is a good thing, too, because it reveals the successful nature of World War Z’s postcolonial critique. This evaluation of hegemony and colonial consciousness productively dramatizes and, thus, calls attention to humanity’s stubborn will-to-power.

Unlike Maria Zhuganova, other characters view this reinstatement of hierarchical structures a bit more dubiously (which further reveals Brooks’ postcolonial intent). Joe Muhammad, for one, posits, “I’m sure that as soon as things really get back to ‘normal,’ once our kids or grandkids grow up in a peaceful and comfortable world, they’ll probably go right back to being as selfish and narrow-minded and generally shitty to one another as we were. But then again, can what we all went through really just go away?” (336). And this is, perhaps, where we find some (very) ambiguous hope. Joe desires to see (as I think Brooks does too) a more hopeful, positive, egalitarian, and liberated side of humanity; he hopes that, even though humans are inherently narrow-minded and “generally shitty,” something as collectively jarring as the zombie apocalypse has the ability to positively change human society. This positive transformative potential implies a potential for destabilizing hegemony, destabilizing binaries, destabilizing difference. But still, Brooks ends on a bit of an ambivalent note—where humans are both the enemy and the hero. This ambiguity reveals, perhaps, Brooks’ cynical commentary on the fact that humans may never learn, may never change, no matter what they go through. There is no closure in this narrative.

And even though this characterization of human nature is, at times, problematic, that is only because human identity is inherently problematic in its own right anyway. Brooks’ narrative, I would argue, is therefore significant not just for the zombie genre but for postcolonial discourse as well because it is “through the effort to recapture the self and to scrutinize the self, it is through the lasting tension of their freedom that men will be able to
create the ideal conditions of existence for a human world” (Bhabha 90). Even in a problematic text like *World War Z*, the attempt to recapture the self is vital and worthwhile because it allows us to question and challenge the problematic facets of our ontologies and to, then, seek to better ourselves, to “create the ideal conditions” of our existence. To be sure, in *World War Z*, Brooks works to recapture and scrutinize the self through his postcolonial representation of the zombie. The figure of the zombie, here, allows us to consider hegemonic power structures and significations of difference. And because of the zombie’s destabilizing and subversive force, Brooks is able to (at least, partially) challenge institutionalized hierarchies and difference-based ontologies. As Bhabha might say, though, “This may be no place to end but it may be a place to begin” (93). Indeed, *World War Z*’s ambiguous and complex representation of human identity *is* no place to end, but Brooks’ zombie narrative does, importantly, allow us to begin (or, at least, to continue) the postcolonial analysis of identity and power.
CHAPTER 4

DETERRITORIALIZING CANNIBALISM: THE MANIFESTATION OF HOPE IN THE WALKING DEAD

In 2003, Image Comics published the first issue of *The Walking Dead*, a monthly black-and-white comic book series written by Robert Kirkman and illustrated by Tony Moore and Charlie Adlard. Since the comic’s conception, ninety-four issues (most of which have been compiled into fifteen volumes) have been released, and there is no end in sight for the series—a testament to the contemporary popularity of both zombies and comics. In the comic, Kirkman, like Romero and Brooks, chronicles the journey of the survivors of the zombie apocalypse. But unlike Romero and Brooks, Kirkman utilizes a much more extended narrative form, due mainly to the nature of the series’ monthly production. As a result, this extended narrative allows Kirkman to explore human ontology and society in a different way. While Romero’s film contains a carnivalesque representation of the zombie and Brooks’ novel contains a postcolonial one, Kirkman’s comic offers a thematic portrayal of deterritorialization.

By utilizing the Deleuzian notion of deterritorialization (in conjunction with Antonio Negri’s discussion of the emancipatory power of transformation), I will argue that Kirkman reveals just how complicated the construction of identity really is. Kirkman’s survivors, especially the character of Rick Grimes, display the fact that identity cannot be statically constructed, but is rather fluid, oscillating among many terms. And this fluidity is the result of a more important character trait—that of progressing, changing, becoming—that shapes the deterritorialized human self. It is this acceptance of and desire for change, which is at the heart of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari’s concept of deterritorialization, that defines the survivors’ ontologies. And *The Walking Dead* specifically explores this idea of “becoming” by detailing the transformative effects of the deterritorializing and cannibalistic force of the zombie. When faced with this transformative force, the characters attempt to achieve hope and to (re)establish a collective identity as a result of their grappling with the manifestation
of the apocalyptic zombie body. In this way, *The Walking Dead* explores the manner in which Rick and the rest of the survivors embrace processes of change and, specifically, the Deleuzian notion of deterritorialization in order to understand and explore their identities and values on the post-apocalyptic frontier. In doing so, the comic explores the complexity of the effects of change on the construction of the self (both zombie and human). And this manner of change is a good thing because it not only allows Rick and the others to survive, but it also allows them to perceive their new existence in a more hopeful way—to perceive this new world as one in which they may be able to live happily together.

*The Walking Dead* documents the travels of Rick Grimes, a Kentucky police officer who wakes from a coma (after having been shot in the line of duty) in the midst of the zombie apocalypse, the cause of which—in archetypal zombie genre fashion—is unknown. When he wakes, he leaves the hospital and travels to Atlanta, Georgia in search of his wife and son, whom he finds in a small survivor camp just outside the city. Once he finds them, he leads the group on a journey to find a safe place in which to settle, a journey that leads them to a variety of places, including a farmhouse (with a barn full of zombies), a prison (which is attacked by the Governor—an insane tyrant—and his minions), and finally a survivor town just outside Washington D.C. called the Alexandria Safe Zone. All along the way, Rick and the others encounter extreme peril, not just from the zombies that hunt them, but also from each other. These perils—of both zombie and human origin—are an integral part of the comic’s plot because they foreground the fact that the survivors must embrace and accept the transformative force of the zombie apocalypse in order to carry on with their (new) lives.

Before I expand on the significance of this transformative force, I believe it is important to define Deleuze and Guattari’s theory of deterritorialization. In their work, Deleuze and Guattari reveal that deterritorialization, in its most basic sense, means to undo what has already been done. Or, to put this another way, deterritorialization is a process that decontextualizes any set of relations (be they, for instance, social, political, or cultural), which creates the possibility for establishing a new set of relations. Psychic or ontological deterritorialization, for instance, occurs in a subject who is in a state of “becoming”—a state of (re)conceiving, (re)constructing, or (re)forming of the self. And this manner of deterritorialization, this becoming, is positive when it is absolute, when it completely liberates or severs the subject from their ontology, their existence, their manner of being that
they used to know. *This* is absolute deterritorialization. By liberating us from our previous identities, deterritorialization provides us with the opportunity to begin again and to become. It follows, then, that the zombie apocalypse perfectly foregrounds these deterritorializing opportunities because the zombie apocalypse *is* a deterritorializing force. In *The Walking Dead*, the zombie apocalypse deterritorializes Rick and the other survivors because it forces them to begin again. Because human civilization as they know it has crumbled, they must rebuild their society and psychically reconceive themselves—they must embrace deterritorialization—in order to move forward with their lives (and with zombies).

At first, though, it seems that the survivors are unwilling to embrace such change. Rick, for one, seems to think that this apocalyptic setting is only temporary; after lending his police car to a man named Morgan, Rick says, “When things get back to normal . . . you’ll have to give it back . . . so try not to bang it up or put too many miles on it” (Kirkman, *Compendium One*). At the beginning of the zombie apocalypse, Rick still believes that things will go “back to normal” and that this new world is, then, abnormal. In deluding himself into believing that the world will go back to the way he remembers it, Rick reveals the fact that he, at first, seems to be resistant to change. Glenn, another character who Rick runs into on his way to Atlanta to find his family, expresses this same manner of delusion: “We figure if we stick close to the city they’ll be able to find us when the government sorts all this mess out” (Kirkman, *Compendium One*). Glenn, too, is in denial, thinking (or, at least, hoping) that the zombie apocalypse is a temporary mess that the government will sort out. Glenn’s faith in the government, first of all, signifies the fact that he and the other survivors are typically used to putting their lives in the government’s hands. They are used to relinquishing control to the government in hopes that it will make everything better. But this faith is apparently misguided and even delusional because the government in *The Walking Dead* has rapidly crumbled in light of the chaos of the zombie apocalypse (which seems to always be the case in any zombie text). And this type of deluded hope, accompanied by a resistance to change, results in an ontological crisis for the survivors because, as Negri explains, the “space of the crisis is the ontological condition of a project of transformation; the limit inheres in the infinite as a condition of liberation” (726). This resistance reveals the beginning of an ontological breakdown in the survivors’ psyches—an existential crisis. They begin to endure a crisis of being, for the world as they know it has been completely turned on its head. And
because of this crisis, the characters, at first, are unable to liberate themselves in a project of transformation. They desire not to be fluid or to embrace change, but to remain stagnant and inert, to remain in the world that they have always known. This problematizes their ability to become a subject who, by embracing change, “always moves into new spaces” (726).

This inability to move into new spaces is especially true for Shane, who is Rick’s best friend and another police officer. One day in the early stages of the zombie apocalypse, Rick and Shane go hunting near their campsite just outside of Atlanta, during which Rick says to Shane, “I don’t think it’ll ever be the same again” to which Shane replies, “Don’t say that, man . . . this won’t last” (Kirkman, *Compendium One*). Shane, of course, reveals himself to be plagued by the same denial and false hope that causes all the other survivors to consider this new world a temporary one. But this false hope affects Shane in a much more negative way than the rest of the survivors. While Rick and the others begin to accept the fact that the world will never “be the same again,” Shane cannot allow himself to embrace this new world. He reveals this inflexibility during one conversation with Rick; when Rick suggests that they and the rest of their group of survivors move away from the zombie-infested city, Shane shouts, “Are you crazy?! What happens when the government starts cleaning this mess up? They’ll have to start with the cities . . . they’ll find us faster if we stay here!” (Kirkman, *Compendium One*). Shane is afraid to leave Atlanta because he is restricted by the confines of civilization; in identifying so much with civilization (and especially the government), Shane reveals just how limited his ability to transform, evolve, and *become* really is because he cannot allow himself to break away from his connection to the city and, therefore, from what he believes to be the salvation of civilization. As such, he cannot open himself to change, and he cannot leave the city because he resists the fact that civilization has fallen. And because of this, Shane can never achieve positive, absolute deterritorialization because his intense resistance to change ruptures his deterritorialized line of flight and obscures his chances at transforming or reconceiving himself in this new world.

Rick, however, *does* have the ability to change, as he begins to realize that their government—the world as they know it—has crumbled. And because of this realization, Rick is able to move on (unlike Shane). In fact, Shane and Rick continue to clash over the subject of moving their camp; when Shane, as usual, insists that they stay near the city in hopes of rescue, Rick, questioning the chances that rescue will ever come, argues, “If we go
someplace safer maybe we won’t need to be rescued so soon. I’d rather be able to get a good night’s sleep every once in a while than have to sit up at night hoping the government is still intact and is going to find us” (Kirkman, *Compendium One*). In this way, we might begin to think of Shane as a foil to Rick, as Rick seems to accept—and even embrace—the need to change, whereas Shane resists change to such an extent that he literally cannot move (as represented in his desire to remain near Atlanta). But Rick sees the value in moving, in exploring, in seeking to find and live in a new place with possibilities, room for development, and freedom. He wants, in short, to live in an area with the potential for the process of change. Rick, unlike Shane, seems to desire to “assume the entire dimension of being as the horizon of construction, of the rationally directed possibility of liberation” (Negri 726). Rick, in disagreeing with Shane, seeks the possibility of liberation through the positive force of deterritorialization and of becoming. Shane, unfortunately, does not embrace this change, which ultimately leads to his complete ontological breakdown, for he explains, “I thought I could make it . . . I thought I could hold out . . . wait until they came and rescued us. They would have brought us nice beds . . . and hot showers . . . and fresh clothes! They were coming Rick! We were going to be okay!” (Kirkman, *Compendium One*). Shane does not allow himself to “be okay” because he does not allow himself to transform. Instead of seeing the positive possibilities of establishing a new identity in this new world, Shane sees only negativity. Rick, however, does see the possibilities, as he responds to Shane, “We still are [okay], Shane. Everything’s going to be fine!” (Kirkman, *Compendium One*). Everything is going to be fine for Rick, it would seem, because he sees positivity in the potentiality of his evolving identity. While Shane cannot live in this new world (Rick’s son is forced to kill Shane after Shane has a nervous breakdown and attempts to shoot Rick), Rick embraces the need to explore his psyche and to become—something that Deleuze and Guattari stress as playing a pivotal role in the absolute deterritorialization of the self.

But before Rick and the other survivors are able to completely deterritorialize themselves, their identities remain problematic, which is especially revealed through their perceptions of the zombies that surround them. At the very beginning of the first issue, Rick wakes up from his coma in the hospital, finding it deserted; he leaves his hospital room and approaches the cafeteria (the doors of which have been barred) and upon opening the doors, he encounters a gut-wrenchingly grotesque scene of unimagined horror—the cafeteria is full
of the decaying undead, who are surrounded by human entrails and mostly consumed corpses. This is Rick’s first encounter with zombies, before he is able to embrace the fact that he now lives in a new world in which he needs to change in order to survive and succeed. And the fact that this first encounter takes place in a cafeteria is extremely telling because in this cafeteria, a symbol of normative human food traditions, a group of zombies views Rick as food. These implications of cannibalism deconstruct and subvert the civilized traditions of food and eating that we know, thus turning this post-apocalyptic world upside down. As a result, we might begin to think of this setting as a deterritorialized one, one that is in a state of change, one in which everything that we thought we knew becomes unknown and transformed.

At the beginning, though, this transformation is not yet a wholly positive manifestation of deterritorialization, as Rick (and the other survivors) has not yet fully embraced it. Instead, he views zombies as monstrous, due, in part, to the implications of their cannibalism. At one point, during an intense zombie feeding frenzy, Rick shouts, “Bastards!! What the hell is wrong with you?!?” (Kirkman, *Compendium One*). Rick’s words and actions reveal that he views zombies as the monstrous Other, and their “zombie otherness” is established through the way they eat. The grotesque nature of the zombie’s cannibalistic-tinged identity does bring about an othering effect, and because of this, the dehumanized and othered zombie seems to be an obstacle to humanity’s ability to achieve positive transformation. In other words, the zombie’s displays of cannibalism make it extremely difficult for the survivors to embrace the new world in which they live and to allow themselves to change (to become deterritorialized) along with it. Because they view the zombie’s cannibalism with horror, they reject the zombie, they reject the new world, and they, therefore, reject the positivity of transformation. But they cannot fully reject these things because they must accept them (and deal with them) in order to survive and make a new life for themselves. As such, it can be argued that, in spite of these problems, the zombie is an inherently deterritorializing force—they force humanity’s survivors to recontextualize and recontextualize their identities, to transform their understanding of the human self.

The recontextualization of the survivors’ identities does take some time, as transformation is a difficult undertaking, which prevents the deterritorializing force of the new zombie-dominated world from positively influencing their identities right away. Rick
especially struggles with the concept of change after Shane’s death. After Shane’s “funeral,” Rick says to Dale, an older man who is a member of their group, “Dale, do you think any of us will ever be back to normal?” to which Dale replies, “After today? Not really” (Kirkman, *Compendium One*). Even though Rick has come to realize that the world will never change back to the way it used to be, he still cannot help but use the binaristic signifiers of “normal” and “abnormal” to think about the different spaces that he has occupied. But this new world can perhaps be seen as a blank slate—it is a new world in which Rick and the others may explore the self and search for one’s identity. This is very much in keeping with the idea of deterritorialization, or “becoming,” in which Deleuze and Guattari encourage us to embark on a journey to “plumb the depths of the unknown in search of the new” (Holland 61).

This exploratory journey is something that some of the characters come to embrace. Axel (a kindhearted convict whom Rick and the others encounter when they finally leave Atlanta and settle in a mostly abandoned prison that they stumble upon) admits, “It’s a new world, but God help me . . . I like this world better” (Kirkman, *Compendium One*). In the old world, Axel was a convicted felon who made a mistake and who was subsequently locked up in a prison; in the new world, Axel is able to shed this old identity and search for a new one—he is able to become and to explore the possibilities on the new deterritorialized frontier. For Axel, the zombie apocalypse is a liberating transformative force. It is a positive emancipatory opportunity because, for Axel, the new world is full of much more potential than the old.

Luckily, Rick, like Axel, begins to see the positive potentiality of deterritorialized emancipation. Rick begins to realize, finally, that the world has changed, that it is real and present. As he says to the other survivors, “Things have changed. The world has changed—and we’re going to have to change with it. Understand?” (Kirkman, *Compendium One*). In this new world, the ability to change is synonymous with the ability to survive; without deterritorialization and becoming, without the ability to embrace change, one cannot survive among the zombies. And Rick comes to understand that the resistance to change has the possibility to bring about their downfall (just as it did with Shane); he, therefore, urges the others to stop deluding themselves and to allow themselves to transform: “We will change! We will evolve. We’ll make new rules—we’ll still be humane and kind and we’ll still care for each other. . . . This is it. This is our life. We’re not waiting here. We’re not biding our
time—waiting for what comes next. Or waiting to be rescued! This is what we have! This is all we’ll ever have” (Kirkman, *Compendium One*). Rick sees the importance of rejecting the stagnating effects of waiting for the reestablishment of the old world and resisting the staying power of the new world. He, instead, embraces the positive transformative effects of changing, evolving, becoming. In this way, Rick and the others have the potential to use this new world as a means of escaping the confines of the old one. They can use the new world as a plane of potentiality on which they can break free from their old, stagnant identities. And liberating themselves from the old and embracing the new is a good thing for Rick and the others because, without these steps, they will not survive. Without change, they will most likely find a horde of zombies gnawing on their legs.

We might begin to think of this new post-apocalyptic world, then, as representing Negri’s discussion of the Spinozian idea of the “disutopia,” an emancipatory, transformative space where the “reconstruction of the world is thus the very process of the continual physical composition and recomposition of things” (Negri 726). What seems especially interesting here is the fact that the disutopia’s reconstruction of the world, its continual “composition and recomposition of things,” is just like the process of absolute deterritorialization, a process of continuous change and becoming. And this disutopian idea of reconstruction reveals the transformative effect of the zombie environment; as such, we might begin to posit that the force of the zombie disutopia is “a philosophy of transition to a society completely, radically constituted on the basis of freedom” (733). Therefore, the zombie landscape is not merely a transformative environment, but also one that brings about the potential for freedom and liberation—as Negri explains, emancipation “is the disutopia” (733). Yes, the zombie world is a grotesque one full of horrific displays of savagery, cannibalism, and violence, but it is also a world full of potential. In other words, it is a world that forces the survivors to rethink their lives, to reconsider what truly matters to them, and to make the most of what they have. The zombie world forces them to strive to make better lives for themselves. And this is the value of the disutopia. The zombie world affords Rick (and Kirkman) and the others the possibility to explore their ontologies, to deterritorialize themselves, because the disutopia “means pursuing the tracks of the power of being” (733).

When the survivors begin accepting their new place in the zombie disutopia, not only do their human identities begin to shift, but the zombie identity (or, at least, the survivors’
perceptions of zombie identity) also begins to change. In fact, a blurring of the zombie/human binary begins to occur—something that we have seen in both Romero and Brooks’ texts as well. This blurring is especially revealed in the spread of the zombie virus itself. The survivors come to realize that once people die, they become zombies regardless of whether or not they have sustained a zombie bite. Therefore, the zombie infection is not merely spread through the zombie bite—rather, everyone is already a zombie to begin with. As Rick himself says, “We are the walking dead!” (Kirkman, *Compendium One*). In this way, binaristic ontologies are dismantled and destabilized; humans are already zombies and zombies, therefore, are also human (or, at least, the retain some of their humanity).

This conclusion is also revealed in a visual way in the comic. On one page, there is a series of panels that depict a scene in which Rick and the others fight off a horde of zombies; there are four rows of four images each (giving the page a claustrophobic feel) where the frames alternate between close up images of the human characters and the zombies (Kirkman, *Compendium One*). These alternating frames, through the juxtaposition of human and zombie faces, seem to have a mirroring effect, causing us to question what it really means to be human—what the human self really is. And I think that, at this point in the survivors’ journey, their ability to begin exploring their psyches allows them to question the way they impose their own constructions of identity onto the zombies they encounter as well. Axel, specifically, follows this line of questioning when he asks, “You don’t wonder about that? What kind of people they were before they died and decided to try and eat us. I bet most of them were good people. . . . You gotta ask yourselves these questions. I mean, odds are we’ll all be like that before long. Odds are” (Kirkman, *Compendium One*). The blurring that results in the construction of human and zombie identities causes Axel to see himself in the zombie, to see some semblance of humanity left in them. In humanizing the zombie, Axel begins to view the zombie not as monstrous, othered, or different, but as us. As Phillip (a particularly villainous character, but one who, nonetheless, seems to have an insightful understanding of zombies) says, “The thing you have to realize is that they’re just us—they’re no different” (Kirkman, *Compendium One*).

But there is a problem with this transformation. Even though zombie and human identity becomes blurred, this blurring never becomes fully actualized because of the inherent threat to human survival that zombies pose. Dale, after almost losing his life during
a zombie attack, says, “You forget how dangerous they can be—how easy it is for one of them to get you. I had completely forgotten what it was like out there. It almost got me killed” (Kirkman, *Compendium One*). For the survivors, the complete destabilization and deconstruction of the zombie/human binary can never be fully realized because of the danger that the zombie represents. As Andrea (a young woman in Rick’s group) says while teaching the others how to use a gun, “The minute you start thinking they’re not a threat . . . you die” (Kirkman, *Compendium One*). While this threat results in the fact that the survivors can never fully allow their identities to blend and connect with those of the zombies around them, this threat not only reminds them that they want to survive and to live, but also that they want to transform so that they can learn to live and thrive in this new dangerous world. The zombie threat is just another catalyst that allows the characters, then, to further deterritorialize themselves and to see the potentiality of their new society.

And in the end (or, at least, in the latest two volumes to have been published), the characters have come to embrace the new world and to embrace change and becoming. Rick and the others leave the prison—as it has been attacked by an antagonistic and violent group of survivors led by the insidious Phillip—and, yet again, search for a new home, one that they find with another larger and more organized group of survivors in Alexandria, Virginia. But after being attacked by a huge horde of zombies, several people in the community die (and Carl, Rick’s son, goes into a coma after having been accidentally shot in the eye), while the rest of the community is just barely able to salvage their home from being totally annihilated. But Rick learns something valuable from this horrible situation—he sees that complete deterritorialization and the collective value of the community can be their salvation. As he says to his unconscious son, “I see the mistake I made, wanting to run . . . not willing to stand and fight . . . but I’ve seen what we can do with numbers. I’ve seen how we can organize, plan . . . how if we do things right . . . if everyone does their part . . . we can survive anything” (Kirkman, *No Way Out*). Rick now sees himself not as a solitary, isolated figure, not as a lone (and lonely) survivor of the zombie plague. Rather, he has come to see himself as a member of a community—his ontology, as such, becomes collectively constructed. This is a completely Deleuzian idea, as Deleuze and Guattari stress the need to seek connections and heterogeneity through one’s community, something that they call becoming “rhizomatic,” where “any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must
be” (“A Thousand Plateaus” 380). The connectivity that results from becoming rhizomatic is key to a successfully deterritorialized identity in that it allows one’s identity to become a part of the multiplicity and to explore new territories and new potentialities. For Rick and the others, this allows them to increase their territory and their understanding of their ontologies through the transformative and collective value of deterritorialization; their new collective identity in Alexandria allows them to “extend the line of flight to the point where it becomes an abstract machine covering the entire plane of consistency” (“A Thousand Plateaus” 384).

And Rick only sees positive potential in this line of deterritorialized flight: “I see now what we can do, with enough people, with a strategy . . . we can make this place much more safe . . . make our community better than it ever was” (Kirkman, We Find Ourselves). Even though Rick and the others have struggled through a great deal of pain and turmoil in order to survive, Rick does not let this get him down. Instead, he has undergone a metamorphosis that has allowed him to gain a sense of hope in this new world. And while he sees that there is still difficulty ahead for him and the others, the manifestation of hope is, nonetheless, a driving force for him: “I think about the road ahead of us, and for the first time it seems long . . . and bright” (Kirkman, No Way Out). This road will be long because he and the others will have to continue to deterritorialize themselves, to consistently undergo processes of becoming in order to survive, but Rick now sees that as a positive thing, for deterritorialization “becomes absolute and positive only when the search for meaning is abandoned in favor of experimentation, and when such experimentation intersects and connects with the experiments of others in a depersonalized, collective form of enunciation” (Holland 62). Only now that Rick has embraced his community and his new collective identity is he able to explore all the possibilities in this unknown realm, to experiment, to no longer merely try to survive, but to try to live. As Rick says, “After everything we’ve been through, all the people we’ve lost . . . I suddenly find myself overcome with something I thought we’d lost . . . hope” (Kirkman, No Way Out). Only once Rick is able to fully embrace the deterritorializing forces of his new world is he able to find hope. And even though the world of the zombie apocalypse seems to be the epitome of negativity and destruction, Rick embraces its optimistic potential for liberation and for a successful future. He sees the positive alternatives in this environment, and instead of giving up hope, he decides to forge ahead and to strive for a better life. We might then begin to see, through Rick, “a utopian
element in the disutopia” (733). Indeed, Rick is utopian, he is hopeful, because by embracing the positive forces of deterritorialization in this post-apocalyptic world, he becomes a representation of the “power of the future” (735).

And yet, Kirkman’s representation of the positively transformed human identity is not quite that simple (unfortunately). Rather, he problematizes the effects of transformation by representing the negative side in conjunction with the positive. Many of the characters find themselves changing in extremely negative ways, especially due to the fact that violence and murder become a central part of their lives. This is something that Tyreese, for one, finds himself grappling with; he tells Rick about a situation in which he kills a man who attempted to rape his daughter: “I killed that man, Rick. I wanted to . . . but I didn’t mean to. I beat on him . . . and he died . . . I’m not beating myself up because I did it . . . I’m beating myself up because I don’t feel bad about doing it. . . . Yeah—the end of the world changed him . . . but look at how it changed me” (Kirkman, Compendium One). In this way, Tyreese reveals that the dichotomy between good and evil becomes obscured and ambiguous. In this new world, morality and ethics become even more of a grey area than they ever were in the pre-apocalyptic society.

This issue of violence-related morality is something that Rick struggles with as well. After Rick kills a man in order to protect the rest of the group, he confesses to his wife Lori, “Killing him made me realize something—made me notice how much I’ve changed. I used to be a trained police officer—my job was to uphold the law. Now I feel more like a lawless savage—an animal” (Kirkman, Compendium One). On one hand, Rick views this transformation as negative, as he feels that it dehumanizes him. By becoming a “lawless savage,” Rick sees himself as monstrous. But, on the other hand, Rick does not necessarily view this as a wholly bad thing. Instead, he sees it as a means of survival; as he says to his friend Abraham, another man who struggles with the implications of violence, “You said some people . . . it was like a switch went off . . . one minute they were good people—then this whole thing started and poof—they’re monsters. Thing is, I don’t think that’s an entirely bad thing. . . . You and me—our switches flipped. We’re doing whatever it takes—whatever it takes to survive and to help those around us survive” (Kirkman, What We Become). Yes, Abraham, Tyreese, and Rick’s use of violence causes them to question their morality—and question their humanity—but in the end, it is something that they come to terms with. They
begin to see violence not necessarily as a rejection of humanity, but as a means of protecting it—as a means of survival. Thus, while the use of violence does problematize the characters’ ability to achieve positively deterritorialized transformation in their identities, it does, at least, allow them to survive long enough in order to actually transform. And this, perhaps, speaks to the idea that deterritorialization is, itself, a violent dynamic—it is a violent means of reshaping or reforming the self. In this way, even though violence can be seen as a negative part of the post-apocalyptic human identity, it can also be seen as a necessary part of this new identity, a part of humanity that allows them to continue progressing and exploring who they really are.

And by exploring their ontologies on this post-apocalyptic frontier, the characters come to the conclusion that their identities are not individually constructed, but collectively manifested because they cannot exist alone. They cannot live as solitary individuals. Rather, they must live—they must be—together, collectively. Glenn, for instance, says, “I don’t want to be alone” (Kirkman, Compendium One). This is a sentiment that Carl also mirrors: “I can’t—I just—I can’t be alone” (Kirkman, Here We Remain). They cannot live isolated lives. They do not have isolated identities. Instead, their identities are joined with those of everyone else in their community—they are a collective, deterritorialized multiplicity that can only thrive and survive together. And this collective ontology becomes something that is not just embraced but is actually actively sought. One character, Eugene, transforms from a man who runs from danger in order to save himself into a man who runs toward danger in order to save his community; he explains, “I’m a part of this—I’m not giving up” (Kirkman, No Way Out). The collective, then, both transforms and liberates Eugene’s identity. The emancipatory power of the multiplicity reveals that emancipation “is therefore the weaving together of plural, ethically motivated human activity with the power of being presented in its givenness and determination. Emancipation is therefore the organization of the infinite, the declaration of human power as a determinate expression of the indefinite. The disutopia is the specific form of the organization of the infinite” (Negri 733). For Glenn, Carl, Eugene, and, really, all the other survivors of the zombie apocalypse, their ability to form a collective and to realize the positive transformative potential of deterritorialization allows them to liberate themselves and the rest of their community—to assert the power of their deterritorialized collective ontology. And this power is positive, for as one character, Donna, puts it, “It’s just nice to see
people happy with all that’s going on” (Kirkman, *Compendium One*). Deterritorialization allows these characters to be happy and to be hopeful. The survivors’ deterritorialized identities allow us to see that freedom “and happiness, therefore, are constructed as manifestations of being” (733). As Deleuze, Guattari, and Negri, too, reveal, the forces of transformation, freedom, and happiness are all integral parts of human ontology that must be embraced in order for us to thrive.

At a funeral for three members of the Alexandria community, Rick asks, “Do any of us really know who we are? And even if we do now, did we know before all this started happening? Without this adversity, this hardship, how do we really know who we are, and what truly matters to us? This is something I find myself thinking about a lot, now that I’m living here” (Kirkman, *Too Far Gone*). These kinds of questions are what make *The Walking Dead* so interesting; in this comic, Kirkman provides us with the opportunity to critically think about the construction of human identity, ontology, and social values (and other big philosophical issues, as well). Ultimately, the forces of deterritorialization, transformation, and collective enunciation play a huge part in establishing ontology in this text. And the representation of these forces is significant in that it allows Kirkman to explore the complexity of human nature. In doing so, Kirkman sheds light on the fact that these forces challenge our assumptions of the self, which, as Deleuze and Guattari might argue, reveals the “revolutionary force for all literature” (*Kafka* 19). *The Walking Dead* exemplifies the fact that zombie literature *can* be a revolutionary force in that it *does* allow us to question what we know and to question our values. In this way, Kirkman’s depiction of the zombie apocalypse continues the critical and analytical function of the zombie genre—a function that allows zombies, in essence, to explore what it means to be.
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

As this extended analysis of the undead comes to an end, one question still remains—so what exactly does the zombie reveal about our ontology? Or, as Foucault posits, “The analysis of thought is always allegorical in relation to the discourse that it employs. Its question is unfailingly: what was being said in what was said . . . what is this specific existence that emerges from what is said and nowhere else?” (93). In other words, what is it about our being, our existence, our ontological reality that the well suited figure of the zombie has the ability to show us? What was being said in what was just said?

Ultimately, what is being said is that the zombie genre is its own unique branch of literature, and as a result, the genre has the ability to both work within the discourse of the field of literature and outside it at the same time. The genre both relies on literary tropes and archetypes and subverts these archetypes by presenting its own unique themes and ideas. And this is what is important in studying zombie literature—to explore how the genre reinforces and perpetuates age-old literary themes, but to also explore how it does this in a new, exciting way. As Foucault says in “The Archaeology of Knowledge,” “To reveal in all its purity the space in which discursive events are deployed is not to undertake to re-establish it in an isolation that nothing could overcome; it is not to close it upon itself; it is to leave oneself free to describe the interplay of relations within it and outside it” (94). To be sure, the zombie genre is not an isolated one. It is not one that should be discounted or discarded as unscholarly or outside the academic realm, and therefore without literary worth. Rather, the zombie genre is academically worthwhile because it leaves us free to “describe the interplay of relations” both within the genre and outside it (in other words, in popular culture and within the field of literature as a whole).

George Romero’s works are a perfect example of this. Not only has he essentially created the zombie genre with Night of the Living Dead, but he has also singlehandedly showed the world the genre’s ability to make a social critique. Indeed, Dawn of the Dead exemplifies Romero’s ability to provide a critical consideration of the human condition,
which is probably why even Roger Ebert has said that the film is “one of the best horror films ever made . . . brilliantly crafted, funny, droll, and savagely merciless in its satiric view of the American consumer society” (Paffenroth 45). But what is especially interesting is that Romero’s critique of the American consumerist identity is revealed in a carnivalesque way. In other words, Romero utilizes the chaotic and grotesque world of the zombie apocalypse to subvert consumer society and to emphasize his argument in favor of transforming and liberating ourselves from the oppressive forces of American consumerism. And even though Romero’s social critique is definitely scathing, I would argue that it is also hopeful. I think that *Dawn of the Dead* sees the potential for change, the potential for transformation, the potential for the questioning of hierarchies and difference, and the potential for the achievement of equality. Romero, then, utilizes the zombie genre to explore the hope that we can improve ourselves—we can change ourselves from selfish consumers into self-actualized beings (just like Peter and Fran). And it is the figure of the zombie specifically that allows us to discover these possibilities because zombies are “just exaggerated aspects of humanity” (Paffenroth 11). This is why *Dawn of the Dead* remains a classic horror film; we see ourselves in Romero’s zombies—as Peter says, “They’re us, that’s all”—and we are, as a result, able to critique and question our ontological reality.

Max Brooks, like George Romero, allows us to consider our ontology as well, but in a bit of a different way. Instead of a carnivalesque critique of identity, Brooks utilizes a postcolonial lens in *World War Z* to consider the symbolic social implications of the zombie apocalypse. While Romero critiques consumerism, Brooks critiques the postcolonial concepts of hegemony and subalternity. And even though this critique is, at times, problematic, Brooks still shows us that our identities are hierarchically constructed on the basis of difference. Our ontologies, then, are constructed on the basis of conflict, tension, juxtaposition, and opposition because of the influence of our perceptions of difference (and how this difference causes us to represent the Self versus the Other). But by representing this opposition, this tension, through a literal war of humans (the Self) versus zombies (the Other), Brooks provides us with a productive critique of such a construction of identity.

This critique allows us to begin considering the possibility of subverting the prevalence of hegemony and subalternity. As Homi Bhabha says, “It is from such tensions—both psychic and political—that a strategy of subversion emerges. It is a mode of negation
that seeks not to unveil the fullness of Man but to manipulate his representation. It is a form of power that is exercised at the very limits of identity and authority, in the mocking spirit of mask and image” (89). World War Z, I would argue, is definitely mockingly subversive—Brooks’ text is a satire that questions humanity’s antagonistic relationships. And Brooks’ zombies (or, rather, his undead army) are the “mask and image” that allow us to consider the limits of our ontologies, the flaws of our psyches, the psychic and political shortcomings of the self. As a result, the subversive postcolonial representation of the zombie allows us to embark on “a painful re-membering, a putting together of the dismembered past to make sense of the trauma of the present” (Bhabha 90). Brooks’ zombie, then, allows us not only to question and challenge who it is we have been, but also to realize the potential of who it is we can become. Only by problematizing the notion of the postcolonial (or undead) subject are we able to effectively consider the effects of power and knowledge on our ontology. Only by considering these things are we able to rethink the construction of the human self. Indeed, Max Brooks’ zombies allow us to consider our existence in this way and to work toward transcendence and perfectibility. By presenting us with an undead, uncanny mirror with which to view the limits of our identities, Brooks challenges us to break the boundaries of these limits and to become something better.

Robert Kirkman challenges us to do the same in The Walking Dead. But instead of critiquing normative social and cultural constructs through postcolonialism, he does so through the use of the Deleuzian concept of deterritorialization. By representing Rick Grimes and the other survivors of the zombie apocalypse as deterritorialized subjects, Kirkman reveals the fact that our identities and our ontologies are not statically constructed but are, rather, fluid and oscillating. And there is positive potentiality in this because it means that we have the ability to change, to progress, to transform into something better and less stagnant. We have the ability to learn and to evolve, and therefore the nature of our being is not regimented, restricted, or predetermined. Rather, we have the potential to construct our identities in an infinite number of ways by extending ourselves down an ontological plane of immanence. To be sure, Deleuze and Guattari believe that we must free ourselves in this way; as they argue, our identities must “break away from a chain that is still all too signifying” (Kafka 6). And this argument in favor of deterritorializing oneself completely permeates Kirkman’s comic. His zombies (forcibly) provide Rick and the other survivors
with the opportunity to begin again on the post-apocalyptic frontier; because the zombie
hordes bring about the complete and utter breakdown of human civilization, the survivors
must evolve, must rethink and reform their ontologies, in order to survive in the new world of
the zombie apocalypse. And even though this (re)construction of ontology is a completely
violent and chaotic process, it is not a negative one because it allows Rick and the others to
see the collective value of their community. Deterritorialization allows the survivors to gain
deeper connectivity to each other (and to themselves). In this way, Kirkman allows us to
question the isolated individualism of normative society (similar to the self-centered
consumerist identity that Romero critiques) and to, instead, see the value in seeking to
deterritorialize ourselves, to embrace change, and to work toward establishing a more
collective, connected, communal ontology. As Rick says, “I think about what we can
accomplish together, now that I’ve seen what we’re capable of when we work together.
Guys, I gotta say . . . my mind is racing with the possibilities” (Kirkman, We Find
Ourselves). These possibilities give us (like Rick) hope because these possibilities
cause us to aspire to become something better.

But what is important is the fact that the zombie allows us to conceptualize these
ideas; the zombie apocalypse provides us with a context within which we can begin to
consider our ontological and epistemological concerns. And this is because the zombie is a
mirror for the human self. This brings to mind Jacques Lacan’s psychoanalytic concept of the
“mirror stage,” which he outlines in “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the Function of the I
as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience.” Specifically, Lacan argues that the mirror stage
is a process of identification in which the relation between the Ego (the organized or realistic
construction of the self) and the body are realized, and because of this, our own image, our
own specific identity, is realized and recognized. As Lacan says, “We have only to
understand the mirror stage as an identification, in the full sense that analysis gives to the
term: namely, the transformation that takes place in the subject when he assumes an image”
(442). We can consider the zombie to be a metaphorical representation of this mirror stage—
it presents us with an image that we can identify with, that we can see ourselves in. But we
can also think of the zombie as a skewed or distorted version of the mirror stage; the zombie
is a decayed, cannibalistic, undead version of the human self. Therefore, the zombie mirror is
an alienating one, but through this combination of both alienation and affinity that we have
with the figure of the zombie, we are able to think about our own ontology because the zombie allows us to encounter “that existential negativity whose reality is so vigorously proclaimed by the contemporary philosophy of being and nothingness” (445). The zombie, as a negative reflection of the human self, allows us to consider how being and nothingness affect the construction of the self. And this is why the zombie is a significant literary figure; its position as an undead Lacanian mirror allows us to think about our ontology in a way that no other literary figure (not even the vampire, which we might conceive of as the zombie’s undead cousin) can. This is why the zombie is unique—it is monstrous yet familiar, sympathetic yet oppositional, us and yet not. Therefore, I would argue that the zombie has both literary and academic staying power because it is a culturally popular figure in the horror genre that challenges us to think about the structure of our society in a unique and complex way.

However, there are those who might disagree with this argument. In fact, there are those who consider the zombie genre not as a lasting one but as a passing fad. In a Publisher’s Weekly article entitled “Might of the Living Dead,” Stefan Dziemianowicz discusses the recent popularity of the zombie genre and argues that the genre “has recently gone mainstream” (20). But in exploring the zombie’s recent mainstream appeal, Dziemianowicz reveals that some people are dubious about “how many more zombie reimaginings and genre invasions the popular fiction market can bear” (24). Don D’Auria, executive editor of the Leisure Books horror imprint, for one, argues, “I think the horror market, as opposed to the general mainstream market, has already moved on from zombies. We're seeing zombies crossing over into a lot of other genres. . . . Zombies have moved from the horror genre into the mainstream and lost much of their scariness in the process” (Dziemianowicz 24). Susan Chang, senior editor at Tor Books, also doubts the staying power of the zombie’s popularity: “The very fact that zombies are so outrageous by nature that they wear their campiness on their rotting sleeves has Chang doubting that they'll ever yield a body of fiction as popular or large as the omnipresent vampire” (Dziemianowicz 24). Indeed, Chang believes that the zombie will never outshine the vampire because, as she says, zombies “have no personalities. They don't have a romantic aspect like vampires do. You're not gonna fall in love with a zombie—you're gonna run like hell from one” (24).
With all due respect to D’Auria and Chang (and vampires), I believe this position is flawed. Yes, the zombie has become more mainstream (which, I will admit, has resulted in some rather unfortunate texts), but I do not think that this means that the zombie has necessarily lost all of its “scariness,” as D’Auria contends. Rather, I think that this actually reinforces the fact that the zombie is thematically and critically malleable; it can be both terrifyingly represented and humorously constructed at the same time (which, I think, *Dawn of the Dead* is especially a testament to). This makes sense, because by being so complexly constructed, the zombie, then, can more effectively represent the complexity of human identity as well. And we do not need to feel romantically attached to the zombie like we are to the vampire (as Chang argues) for the zombie to resonate in us. In fact, because we are not attached to the zombie in this way, the zombie, then, has the opportunity to discuss ontology in a different way (than the vampire). This is why I think the zombie will last as a literary figure; its ability to challenge social norms and to critique identity formation in a unique way makes it culturally relevant.

And this is the power of the undead. Undead figures like the draugr, the jiang shi, the revenant, the ghoul, the vampire, and now the *zombie* have consistently had a place in our minds and our texts. The undead allow us to explore the human spirit because they force us to confront the chaos of human existence. And the fact that they do this through representations of cannibalistic gore is part of what makes the living dead so fascinating. As Hans Askenasy explains, “It is apparently part of human nature, then, to pay rapt attention to such unusual sights and sounds as blood spurting from wounds, loud shrieking and howling, or a part of our anatomy being roasted over a fire. Or, for that matter, to read (or write) about such things” (14). This darkness, this fascination with and fear of pain, is a part of the human self, and the zombie genre gives us an opportunity to explore this side of humanity. It allows us to explore both what we fear (like being eaten) and what we hold dear (like the survival of those we love). And because the zombie allows us to read and write about all these things, as Dziemianowicz says, it is “best to assume that you can't keep a good (or bad) zombie down” (24). To be sure, it is best to assume that the zombie genre itself is undead—it will be around for quite a while, challenging us to question our ontologies, our social and cultural values, and, really, who it is we choose to be.
REFERENCES


