

THE DARK SIDE OF TRANSLATION

Edited by Federico Italiano

First published 2020

ISBN: 978-0-367-33727-8 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-0-429-32152-8 (ebk)

Chapter 8

ZOMBIE HISTORY

The undead in translation

Gudrun Rath

(CC BY 4.0)

DOI: 10.4324/9780429321528-8

The funder for this chapter is Austrian FWF



 **Routledge**
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

8

ZOMBIE HISTORY

The undead in translation

Gudrun Rath

DOI: 10.4324/9780429321528-8

Research for this chapter has been funded by the Austrian Science Fund (FWF), project number V 393-G21

Entering the passage

When the Harvard-trained ethnobotanist Wade Davis published *Passages of Darkness: The Ethnobiology of the Haitian Zombie* in 1988, he was already well known to the US public. His 1986 study on the same subject, *The Serpent and the Rainbow*, quickly became a bestseller and served as a basis for the Wes Craven horror movie of the same name. Davis' scientific publications on the zombie, especially *Passages of Darkness*, became widely known to a public far beyond academia.

They figure amongst other key twentieth-century publications on the zombie, such as William Seabrook's sensationalist account *The Magic Island*, published in 1929, which in 1932 was adapted into the first zombie movie, *White Zombie*, directed by Victor Halperin. Seabrook, a US author and self-declared cannibal, had published *The Magic Island* during the US occupation of Haiti. Subsequently, his book on Haitian Vodou was used to underpin the stereotype of 'barbarian' Afro-Caribbean cultures.¹ While Seabrook's *The Magic Island* discussed the zombie within the context of a semi-autobiographical horror story, Davis took up Seabrook's 'documentary' narrative and transferred the figure into the realm of academic explanation. Using academic discourse, Davis, like Seabrook before him, fostered the idea that the figure of the zombie is exclusively to be associated with Haiti, once again turning the country into a subject to be explored by US academia. Both publications are still a seminal influence in European and US conceptualisations of the zombie, seen as an undead body deprived of language, will and personality.

However, a look back at the historical space of the Atlantic shows that the zombie can neither be exclusively seen as an undead *body* nor solely associated with Haiti. Rather, historical print culture makes it quite clear that it has to be viewed in a broader, transatlantic frame, including Africa, Europe, the US and the

Greater Caribbean. As J. Lorand Matory (2007) has shown, similar concepts exist all along the shores of the Atlantic, as for example in Cuban Palo Monte. The relevant historical texts, mainly published in France, open up a connection across the Atlantic that reaches beyond Haiti and comprises Guadeloupe, Martinique and French Guiana, amongst others. This shows that the zombie concept, too, circulated between France and the French Caribbean. The extensive use of the concept in historical French texts also indicates that the zombie cannot be seen as a concept derived exclusively from a Caribbean or an African past. Rather, European contributions to this concept have to be taken into account as well.

A broader historical and transatlantic frame also shows how the figure of the zombie has historically been invested with a whole variety of significations. Historical print culture mainly shapes zombies as (invisible) undead souls, referring to a version of the zombie that can still be found in Caribbean cultures today. In Haiti, for example, this understanding of the concept exists alongside the undead body, the *zombi corps cadavre*, and is called *zombi astral* or zombie of the spirit (Ackermann and Gauthier, 1991: 482). This relates to concepts of the multiple soul and its relation to the body as encountered in Afro-Caribbean religions and philosophies. It also shows that the undead body, associated with Haitian Vodou, has only quite recently entered the scene, promoted by publications like Seabrook's *The Magic Island*, Davis' *Passages of Darkness* and successive Hollywood films. The Hollywood zombie (in contrast to other current audiovisual versions, such as Nigerian Nollywood films), can thus be seen not just as an example of the circulation of concepts within the space of the Atlantic, but also as an example of cultural and linguistic translation that, on various levels, has disambiguated complex histories and significations and made the zombie into a simplistic figure.² The privileging of either the undead body or the soul in historical textual and current filmic media representations can thus be seen as a consequence of a Eurocentric understanding of body and soul as two separate entities. This is why only an investigation of the historical texts—as opposed to current media representations—can provide insight into the translation and transformation of all of these concepts throughout history.³

In this paper, I am particularly interested in how the zombie was used in textual media published in France and Louisiana in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, especially scholarly texts, and how these created a variety of significations of the undead. Taking Wade Davis' *Passages of Darkness* as a starting point, I will first discuss some implications of his poison hypothesis. Second, I will refer to the historical texts I mentioned above and examine the use of the zombie as a figure of scholarly discourse. I will then finish with some reflections on how some issues concerning historical zombie figures continue to live on in filmic representation, and conclude with the zombie as a figure of translation.

Toxic discoveries

As recently as 2010, the media platform VICE published a 'documentary' video in quest of the 'truth' about the zombie in Haiti. This sensationalist video is one

of the most recent examples of the impact Wade Davis' publications still have. It features a young man's journey to Haiti, accompanied by terrifying music, and is mainly based on interviews with Wade Davis.⁴ Davis (1988: 2) himself nurtured this spirit of discovery: *Passages of Darkness* claims to be the first scientific account of 'a folk toxin which had long been rumored to be involved in the process of zombification'. 'Indeed', Davis (1988: 2) states elsewhere in the book, 'though the preparation of the poison is specifically referred to in the Haitian penal code and reports of its existence by both popular and ethnographic literature date well into the nineteenth century, no researcher had managed to discover its ingredients'. Focusing on the discovery of the exact components of the supposed toxin of zombification, the author introduces a '*materialist-pharmacological* argument' (Ingles, 2011: 43), which he claims is a composition of the fish poison Tetrodotoxin and parts of the poisonous plant *Datura*, a recipe that other scientists have shown to be physically ineffective.⁵ While Davis' texts are still cited uncritically by most academic research on the zombie figure, scholars with more critical views on the matter have cautioned against overhasty conclusions.⁶ In his survey of the history of widespread 'white' fears of slave poisoning, which served different ends for planters and for the enslaved, John Savage suggests what can equally be stated for Davis' 'discoveries':

first of all, that we should avoid taking 'poison' as a known and given object, to be 'discovered' or dismissed according to predetermined definitions. Its cultural meanings were multiple and coexisting, whether for African or Creole slaves, planters or metropolitan physicians.

(Savage, 2007: 645–646)

Following this argument, we might say that Davis' 'discovery' of the supposedly 'secret poison' can be seen as a form of cultural translation that narrows down complex discourses and their historical layers to unambiguous meanings. Indeed, the Haitian *Code Pénal* to which Davis refers, which was originally modelled after the Napoleonic Code and implemented in 1835 by President Boyer, was extended in 1864 by President Geffrard. This extension expanded the definition of poisoning and tightened the charges for *les sortilèges* ('superstitious practices').⁷ Although the article in question does not mention the term 'zombie', international authors such as Davis, taking up an argument already expressed in Seabrook's *The Magic Island*, have taken it as official 'proof' of the 'existence' of zombification by poisoning in nineteenth-century Haiti (Hurbon, 1988: 113). In so doing, as I would like to argue and emphasise, they have *produced* the zombie as a legal fact and figure.

As Kate Ramsey (2011) has shown, the Haitian *Code Pénal* was embedded within a complex set of circumstances and discourses stemming both from colonial Saint-Domingue and post-independence nineteenth-century Haiti. It was directly related to the official perception and handling of popular religious and healing practices. President Geffrard's extensions can be seen as a reaction to

public discourse on the treatment of Vodou stirred up by an alleged case of ritual anthropophagy known as the *affaire de Bizoton* or *affaire Claircine* (Ramsey, 2011: 83–84). Because the group of people accused of, and executed for, the murder of a little girl were alleged practitioners of Vodou, the case attracted international attention and fostered the stereotypical equation of this religious practice with cannibalism and sorcery. The 1864 extensions added by President Geffrard to the *Code Pénal* were explicitly aimed at putting an end to practices that ‘dishonoured the nation’ (Ramsey, 2011: 90). ‘[The] expansion of the category of *sortilèges*, and its placement under a harsher regime through these penal revisions,’ Kate Ramsey states,

can be understood, at least in part, as an effort on the part of Geffrard’s government to repudiate the barbarism relentlessly attributed to Haiti by foreign detractors. Because *vaudou* was now figured as the primary sign of that barbarism in such literatures, penal laws and criminal procedures against those identified as its practitioners became an increasingly important space of defense and disavowal for the nineteenth-century Haitian state. Read in a certain way, such laws not only signaled the state’s will to ‘civilize’ and modernize rural Haiti, but, as performatives, seemed to back this authorizing intentions with force.

(Ramsey, 2011: 90–91)

In the twentieth century, this association of the zombie figure with the Haitian penal code has additionally been fostered by means of linguistic translation: In 1916, during the US occupation of Haiti, US gendarmerie officers working there were provided with a version of the Haitian *Code Rural* translated into English by Captain R. S. Hooker (Ramsey, 2011: 128). It contained just three of the 413 articles that form the Haitian *Code Pénal*, among them the articles prohibiting *les sortilèges* and the use of poison to produce a state of lethargy. The effects of this selective translation not only influenced the perception of Vodou in Haiti, but also encouraged its stereotypical image abroad, as shown by texts published during the occupation. William Seabrook’s *The Magic Island*, for example, cited both the penal code and military reports as undeniable proof of Vodou practices (Ramsey, 2011: 160). The effects of this selective translation can thereby be related to the consequences that followed the introduction of these laws in the nineteenth century:

The penal pursuit and prosecution of *le vaudou* by the Geffrard government paradoxically drew more international publicity to such practices (or rather, fantasies thereof) than to the fact of their prohibition and repression. Likewise, during the occupation, the marines’ penalization of ‘voodoo’ was partly driven by and, in turn, further incited foreign fascination with Haitian ritualism. What is more, how such audiences constructed the object of ‘voodoo’ during and following the occupation was crucially shaped, I would argue, by the penal regime enforced by marines between 1915 and 1934.

(Ramsey, 2011: 160)

Wade Davis' 'discovery' of the zombie poison can clearly be situated within a *longue durée* of these constructions. But it's not only discourse regarding the use of 'poison' that has to be situated within the context of its colonial and neo-colonial legacies. We also need to examine neo-colonial structures after the US occupation of Haiti. Although *Passages of Darkness* contains broader explanations of the political and religious history of Haiti, Davis' own role as a US scientist arriving in Haiti can't be delinked from hierarchies that are still operative in unequal geopolitical landscapes on a structural level. In line with this argument, Colin Dayan (1997: 33) has argued that Davis' 'findings' have to be examined in the context of economics:

If we look at Wade Davis' celebrated discovery of the secret zombi powder, we must keep the economics of the situation in mind. The ethnobotanist arrives in the poorest country in the Western hemisphere loaded with money. When he says he is looking for the zombi drug, the boco [sorcerer, G.R.] will certainly oblige: he not only gives Davis the recipe, but makes sure the requisite skulls, bones, and blood are ready for viewing. [...] And although Davis claims that he wants to rescue Haitian people and their religion from misunderstandings and prejudice, the images that conclude this book tell another story [...].

(Dayan, 1997: 33)

While Davis' book clearly promoted the marketability of the zombie, his cultural and conceptual translation of Caribbean zombie narratives into a scientific argument also provided a rational 'behind the scenes' explanation, satisfying US audiences' lust for horror. When Davis states that, '[t]o the Americans in particular, Haiti was like having a little bit of Africa next door—something dark and forboding [sic], sensual and terribly naughty' (Davis, 1988: 73), one cannot deny that the author himself has widely contributed to this stereotypical perception of Haitian Vodou.⁸ *Passages of Darkness* has itself walked into the same trap it supposedly tries to avoid.

'Which noir?'

One need only think of Joseph Conrad's African horror story *Heart of Darkness* to be reminded that the usage of the metaphor 'darkness' and its surrounding semantic fields, of which Wade Davis makes such extensive use, can hardly be seen as neutral.¹⁰ Indeed, these figures of speech have been widely criticised by scholars working on the mechanisms of racism and racialisation; first and foremost by the Martinican author Frantz Fanon in his classic study *Black Skin, White Masks*:

In Europe, evil is symbolized by the black man. [...] The perpetrator is the black man; Satan is black; one talks of darkness; when you are filthy you are dirty—and this goes for physical dirt as well as for moral dirt. If you took the trouble to note them, you would be surprised at the number of

expressions that equate the black man with sin. In Europe, the black man, whether physically or symbolically, represents the dark side of the personality. [...] Darkness, obscurity, shadows, gloom, the labyrinth of the underworld, the murky depths, blackening someone's reputation; and on the other side, the bright look of innocence, the white dove of peace, magical heavenly light.

(Fanon, 2008 [1952]: 165–166)

Of course, these semantics cannot be generalised. In twenty-first-century Haitian *krèyòl*, for example, the term for an economically and politically masterful person is *gwo nèg*—literally, a 'big black' (Matory, 2007: 410). Indeed, the term 'black' in Haiti has a different history:

[U]nlike the French *nègre* (in France, Quebec, and even in parts of the French Antilles), the Kreyòl *nèg* and the French *nègre* (in Haiti) not only does not pejoratively connote blackness (as in 'Negro') or less negatively (as in 'black man'), but moreover does not specifically reference race at all, except as a universal. In Haiti *nèg* (in Kreyòl) and *nègre* (in French) have both denoted 'man' or 'human' ever since Jean-Jacques Dessalines—the first ruler of independent Ayiti—tore the white stripe from the French national flag to form Haiti's blue-and-red-striped flag and proclaimed all citizens of the island country *nwa* (noir), and all foreigners *blanc* (blanc), regardless of race. [...] All Polish soldiers, for example, who initially fought under Napoleon Bonaparte to subdue the Haitian slave revolutionaries but later defected and fought alongside the Haitians for the country's independence, were granted citizenship by Dessalines and became *nwa* (in Kreyòl) and *noir* (in French). And to the surprise of many travelling African Americans visiting the country (and even some Haitian diasporics returning home after a long absence), they are *blanc*.

(Brazier, 2008: 5)

However, in the context of representations of the Caribbean nation-state by European or US authors, things look different. The semantic layers that 'blackness' implies in Haitian *krèyòl* are scarcely known beyond the island. Historically, 'the Black Republic', as the English diplomat Spenser St. John (1884) called it pejoratively after his visit there, drew international interest because of its revolutionary struggle.¹¹ While the massive sugar extraction in colonial Saint Domingue made it the French empire's most profitable colony and Europe's largest supplier of sugar, it was the first nation to become independent after a successful slave revolution in 1804 (Mintz, 1986). 'The manner in which independent Haiti appeared upon the world scene inevitably colored everything written about it thereafter; and to some extent this is still true, even today', as Sydney Mintz and Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995: 125) have argued.

But it isn't only twentieth-century representations that have fostered stereotypical associations with a specific Haitian 'darkness'. Historical print culture

about both colonial Saint-Domingue and postcolonial Haiti associated 'darkness' with the political-religious practices of the (formerly) enslaved population. Since colonial times, Haitian Vodou has been equated with 'black magic', while practitioners themselves see their practice as opposed to what is termed 'sorcery'.¹² A closer look at historical texts confirms that the terms 'black', 'black magic' and 'darkness', as used in colonial documents to describe the cultural and religious practices of the enslaved, were often employed in a discriminatory manner to clearly delimit racialised boundaries where, within the cultural dynamics of the Caribbean, no clear boundaries could be drawn.¹³

Historical print culture has predominantly been written by European authors—usually missionaries, ethnologists or members of the French army, merely hiding their political agenda. So while, on the one hand, it is necessary to recognise their active role in the shaping of narratives about the Caribbean, on the other hand it seems equally necessary to suppose that print culture borrowed from oral narratives that were already in circulation, as Laënnec Hurbon (1988: 209) has argued. Hence, while these texts can be seen as a hall of mirrors of Caribbean cultures (rather than as an exact representation), they also affected popular practice in the Caribbean, which, as Lara Putnam has argued, drew on different 'streams of knowledge' (including sensationalist accounts) (Putnam, 2012: 244).

As a handful of researchers have shown, the first traces of the zombie date back as far as the late seventeenth century (Garraway, 2005; Murphy, 2011). But it was particularly in the aftermath of the Haitian Revolution that zombie imaginaries haunted French popular culture and appeared constantly in nineteenth-century print culture. The travelogues, encyclopaedic and literary texts that shaped the zombie in this era were mainly aimed at a French public. Within this context, the zombie was *produced* by colonial and post-independent encyclopaedias and other scholarly texts from both eighteenth and nineteenth centuries as part of a greater narrative tracing stereotypical images of the enslaved non-white population of the French Antilles.

The Enlightenment-era lawyer, author and plantation owner Médéric Louis Élie Moreau de Saint-Méry, for example, who was directly involved both in French and in French Caribbean political events, included a brief zombie episode in his classical proto-ethnographic account of Saint-Domingue.¹⁴ *Description topographique, psychique, civile, politique et historique de la partie française de l'isle de Saint-Domingue* was published in Philadelphia in 1797, shortly after the outbreak of the Haitian Revolution, but had been written in the years preceding the revolutionary events, when the colonial regime was still undisputed. It was intended to detail the French colonies in an encyclopaedic account modelled on Diderot and D'Alembert's *Encyclopédie* (Garraway, 2005: 248 and 250). The *Description* is also one of the first known written accounts of Haitian Vodou, referred to by the name *les Vaudoux*, which the text casts as a dangerous 'sect'.

The zombie, however, is not included in this representation of Vodou. Rather, it is situated within the context of one of the main parts of the *Description*, which introduces a hierarchical model of possible racial combinations,

subdivided into more than a hundred miscegenation categories. This may be regarded as one of the precursors or models for the spread of ‘scientific racism’ later encountered, for instance, in the writings of Gobineau.¹⁵ In Moreau de Saint-Méry’s text, the figure of the zombie—in this case conceived as an undead spirit without a body—is intrinsically tied to this racialised view of Caribbean society, as it is modelled as a figure in which only the ‘superstitious’ non-white enslaved believed:

Enfin elle [cette audace amoureuse] triomphe d’une crainte bien puissante sur les esprits faibles, c’est celle des *revenants*; et ce nègre, courageux d’ailleurs, qui croit aux spectres et aux loups-garous, court la nuit avec empressement, dès que l’espoir du embers le guide. Une jeune beauté au teint d’ébène, qui un conte de *ember* fait trembler de tous ses embers, veille pour l’attendre, lui ouvre une porte qu’elle sait faire mouvoir sans bruit, et n’a qu’une crainte, c’est d’être trompée dans son attente.

(Moreau de Saint-Méry, 1875 [1797]: 61–62)¹⁶

At the same time, Moreau de Saint-Méry (1875 [1797]: 62) made use of a specific strategy of linguistic translation within this context, stating in a footnote that the word ‘zombie’ is ‘[un] mot créole qui signifie *esprit, revenant*’. Although it produces a different signification, Moreau de Saint-Méry’s paratextual strategy here has similar effects to those produced by Davis’ *Passages of Darkness*: while both authors present themselves as cultural (and, in Moreau de Saint-Méry’s case, also linguistic) mediators, the signification they focus on is presented as the only valid one, thereby foreclosing other possible significations. Translation studies scholars have shown how the paratextual strategy employed by Moreau de Saint-Méry produces an ‘ideological closure’ or ‘delimitation of the plurality of possible interpretations’ (Kovala, 1996: 121). Drawing on the work of Gerard Genette, Urpo Kovala states that:

the paratext may either convey work that its writer(s) felt necessary for the reader to comprehend the work properly; or it may strive at appealing to prospective readers. In aiming to fulfil these goals, writers of paratexts are able to rely on the knowledge and expectations of the prospected readers. Thus, the connection of paratext to context cannot properly be described by focusing on explicit references to spheres of knowledge or to readers and their knowledge or expectations. Instead, paratext works together with the entire universe of discourse of a certain society at a certain time.

(Kovala, 1996: 135)

In this sense, Moreau de Saint-Méry’s paratextual footnote on the zombie and the subsequent interest in this figure in nineteenth-century France cannot be understood only within a broader contemporary enthusiasm for ghostly, undead figures and the uncanny. Rather, rhetorical strategies like those employed by Moreau de Saint-Méry, which produced racialised knowledge about the Caribbean, were not

at all unusual for scholars who are now praised for the achievements of the Enlightenment. They thus reflect a broader frame of societal knowledge production. Indeed, as the Spanish–French philosopher Louis Sala-Molins has argued in his provocative book *Les misères des Lumières*—translated into English as *Dark Side of the Light: Slavery and the French Enlightenment*—such methods were by no means opposed to Enlightenment ideas. On the contrary: while celebrated Enlightenment authors such as Denis Diderot derived income from a shipping company involved in the transatlantic trade in enslaved people, the *Code Noir*, the 1685 decree that defined the treatment of the enslaved in the French empire, still remained valid (Sala-Molins, 2006 [1992]: 11). As Sala-Molins argues, this was not a contradiction: the ‘Black Code’ had deprived enslaved people of the possibility of being considered as human, and not merely as someone else’s property. As the *Code Noir* was still legally binding, philosophers did not face a moral conflict when they promoted Enlightenment values on the one hand, while being directly or indirectly involved in the structures of enslavement on the other (Sala-Molins, 2006 [1992]: 62). The ideas of the Enlightenment, Sala-Molins concludes, were evidently never meant for enslaved people.

This can be seen clearly if we examine the *Encyclopédie* entry for the term *nègre*, the ‘Black people of Guinea’. In this case, too, a relative of the zombie comes into play as a figurative way to signal racialised hierarchies. The *Encyclopédie* states:

Caractère des nègres en général. Si par hasard on rencontre d’honnêtes gens parmi les nègres de la Guinée (le plus grand nombre est toujours vicieux) ils sont pour la plupart enclins au libertinage, à la vengeance, au vol et au mensonge. Leur opiniâtreté est telle qu’ils n’avouent jamais leurs fautes, quelque châtement qu’on leur fasse subir; la crainte même de la mort ne les émeut point. Malgré cette espèce de fermeté, leur bravoure naturelle ne les garantit pas de la peur des sorciers et des esprits, qu’ils appellent *zambys*.

(*Formey, 1765: 82*)

This observation also holds true for nineteenth-century scholarly texts, such as the *Complément du Dictionnaire de l’Académie française* or the *Dictionnaire universel de la langue française*, which, while they translate the zombie into different meanings, keep employing it as a way to establish racial hierarchies. These texts produce encyclopedic explanations of the concept but while doing so, of course, they also establish their own understanding of the figure. For example, Louis-Nicolas Bescherelle, in his *Dictionnaire national* (1856), defines the zombie as part of a tale used by the non-white population of the Antilles to scare their children. The same explanation is remodelled in other dictionaries of the 1870s and 1880s, amongst others by a complementary dictionary of the Académie française.¹⁷

Beyond the realm of encyclopaedic knowledge production, there is also a wide number of popular publications featuring zombie figures throughout the nineteenth century, which make use of different textual strategies. On a conceptual level, different meanings are assigned to the figure, depending on the author. While some

texts relate the figure of the zombie to Africa, others signal its relation to European spiritism or to European tales about magic (Mismer, 1890). Some insist that it is a creole word for a demon (Corbière 1832), whereas others state that it means ‘sorcerer’ (Garaud, 1892). Most texts though opt for a meaning in the sense of ‘white apparition’, ‘ghost’ or ‘revenant’ (for example Adam, 1883). The most interesting explanation probably comes from the French doctor Camille Ricque who, in his 1871 text *Haïti et les Haïtiens*, claims that zombies are the bad souls of white people which return after death to continue tormenting non-white people.

Explanations of this kind also come into play when, following the leading example of Moreau de Saint-Méry, paratextual strategies such as footnotes are added to texts, assigning new meanings to the word ‘zombie’ while at the same time signalling profound knowledge to the readers. This strategy is widely applied across different genres. But zombies don’t just appear in footnotes. They also resurface again and again in standardised phrases or formulas in a great variety of texts, within which they mainly function as exoticist ornament. However, the use of zombie narratives in popular print culture cannot be explained solely by exoticism. Some of these texts even take the zombie to places other than the Caribbean, while continuing to inscribe it into the logics of racialisation. When authors like Eugénie Foa (no date) thus put formulas like ‘Par le zombi du mon grand-père!’ into a black child slave’s mouth in a short story for children set in seventeenth-century Seville, this can be seen as an indication of how the figure of the zombie became part of a popular repertoire and was projected onto an imaginary landscape that went far beyond the Caribbean.

The continuity of the mechanisms employed in this context in popular French print culture—the repeated emphasis on the statement that ‘zombie’ is a Black people’s term for undead spirits and the ensuing argument that the enslaved are especially superstitious—poses the question of how much those texts really tell us about the figure of the undead. Rather than taking them as representations of the popular culture of the enslaved or as sources for exploring the origins of the zombie figure, we should examine how these scientific and philosophical agents are involved with a colonial logic that equally structured the realm of knowledge, and highlight that, since its appearance in written texts, the figure of the zombie has always been involved in racialisation. The evident zombie obsession on the part of many of these French authors in fact makes it a *white* figure that has sustained racialisation as an ongoing mechanism since colonial times.

Niemals vergessen?

Naturally, the figure of the zombie continued to live on after its appearance in historical print culture. The popularity and form of the zombie in Hollywood film and other filmic representations has especially been shaped by the films of George A. Romero. In his classic 1968 movie *Night of the Living Dead*, Romero promoted one very specific version of the zombie, converting the figure into an undead cannibal that attacks humans en masse. As in colonial, post- and

neocolonial print culture, this version continues to maintain the divide between 'us' and 'them'. Since then, the figure has gradually evolved further with every representation. In the last decades, filmic representations have not only featured the living dead in search of human brains, but also vegetarian zombies, zombies in love and even 'Nazi zombies'. 'Nazi zombies' are especially fruitful as an example to show how certain narrative structures live on within the forms of translation to which the zombie has been subjected throughout its history.

Nazi zombie films have become well known because of the Norwegian splatter movie *Dead Snow*, directed by Tommy Wirkola and presented at Sundance Film Festival in 2009. Yet this zombie subgenre actually has a history that goes back to the early 1940s. Nazi zombie films shape an imaginary of the perpetrators as the ultimate evil. They also confront us with the possibility that fascism and racism might not actually be dead—these are issues that are more relevant than ever today, in the time of the 'refugee crisis' and the alarming increase of anti-Semitism and racism. So what interests me here is how these films, in spite of their role in reproducing violent images, can at the same time be useful in their expression of political critique and in addressing topics of cultural memory.

The rise of fascism in Europe and the outbreak of World War II also had an effect on the film industry. *Confessions of a Nazi Spy*, released in 1938, set the stage for 'the rapid succession of major studio releases with pro-intervention themes' (Miller, 2011: 140). It was in this context that the 1941 Monogram release *The King of the Zombies* emerged, directed by Jean Yarbrough: the first film to link the zombie figure with Nazism. Its plot centres around two white US citizens (played by Dick Purcell and John Archer), and their black servant Jeff (Mantan Moreland), who crash-land their plane on a mysterious Caribbean island. Seeking shelter in a nearby house, they meet Doctor Sangre, an Austrian scientist (played by Henry Victor). Later in the movie, it turns out that Doctor Sangre has not only created numerous zombies to serve him (all of whom are black), but also has captured a European admiral from whom he wants to obtain information for 'his government' by the use of Vodou magic and hypnosis.

As the film continues to reproduce stereotypes about Afro-Caribbean cultures, it also moves in line with the first Hollywood film that staged the Caribbean zombie nine years earlier: *White Zombie*, released in 1932. This line of reference also becomes clear with the fact that originally Bela Lugosi—whose engagement in *White Zombie*, because of his accent in English, has been seen as a form of response to racialised expectations of the audience—was offered the role of the evil Austrian scientist. He turned down the offer, 'owing to previous commitments (or maybe he just read the script)' (Kay, 2008: 16). As *King of the Zombies* not only refers to issues of fascism and the link between Nazism and the occult, but simultaneously produces highly discriminatory images which reduce Afro-Caribbean cultures to supposedly 'black' magic, and black US citizens to the role of clowns, the film has received considerable attention for issues of racism, and very rightly so.

But what is striking about this film is that it is the first in a whole series—followed by *Revenge of the Zombies* in 1943 and *Creature with the Atomic Brain* in 1955—to

address control of the masses and totalitarianism through the zombie theme. All of these films centre on the character of a Nazi scientist who has created an army of zombies to serve his will. Rather than Nazi zombies, these films feature zombies in the service of fascism, and by doing so they touch on issues of political critique. In the case of *King of the Zombies*, this critique of fascism is still encoded, as the film was released before the US entry into the war. But even so—and probably unintentionally—it brings up some issues of mass mobilisation and the role of individual responsibility within totalitarian thought systems.

What renders films like *King of the Zombies* (or *Revenge of the Zombies*) uncanny—released while fascism and World War II were still going on—is not the future threat implied in the zombie figures; which, incidentally, are presented quite grotesquely due to the low-cost production. What makes us shiver today is the fact that these films anticipate so much of the actual historical horrors. Present-day knowledge about mass mobilisation and mass murder, experiments on the human body under the pretence of ‘science’, and the fact that many Nazis fled to Latin America after World War II constitute the actual uncanniness of these films, thereby forming something we could call *retrospective horror*. The threat it presents, however, never dies. Rather, as current political debates show, it moves in circles.

Kobi Kabalek (2014), a Haifa University scholar of Holocaust studies, has referred to the revenge fantasy implied in scenes of fictionalised violence, like in *Dead Snow*, as offering a ‘second chance for Norwegians to slay and even get rid of the former Nazi occupiers’. But does this entertaining version of the figure really help in dealing with or even reappropriating a past that still haunts us? *Dead Snow* has been discussed as an example of a film that brings issues of cultural memory back to present-day cultural debates, in the form of the popular and brainless undead. However, the film not only depicts Nazis as zombies and therefore dehumanises them—which additionally releases them from all individual responsibility—but it also glorifies fascist symbols and uniforms. And, since the film foregrounds grotesque and satirical representations, it obscures other issues: namely, that current neo-fascist symbols have taken other shapes. In conclusion, this means that it is not enough simply to slay the old familiar evil undead.

A never-ending story: the zombie in translation

Even before it entered the medium of film, the zombie was a figure of translation, in continuous movement, and attributed with changing signifiers along its way. Nevertheless, Eurocentric conceptions have prevented it from being received as an example of cultural multiplicity. Its supposed ‘origins’ have usually been identified with the Caribbean, especially Haiti, and have thereby contributed to the underpinning of stereotypical perceptions of Afro-Caribbean cultures. As Ackermann and Gauthier have noted, ‘if the Haitian zombi is usually considered a specific Haitian invention, it is probably because of the overexposure of Haiti in the press and a relatively large volume of ethnological research in this country’ (Ackermann and Gauthier, 1991: 489).

Indeed, the search for the zombie's origins, as undertaken by scholars such as Wade Davis, has concealed the fact that the history of the figure has always been connected to different spaces across the Atlantic. This becomes especially clear in the first textual mention of the figure, the 1697 novel *Le zombi de Grand Perou*, attributed to the French galley-prisoner Pierre-Corneille Blessebois, which explicitly highlights European attributions to the concept.¹⁸

That the zombie is a figure of multiplicity also becomes clear when one examines possible etymological explanations: while one source links the term *zombi* to the African *nzambi*, the creator-god of many Bantu cultures, another relates it to the French term for shadows, *sombres* (Ackermann and Gauthier, 1991: 467). These parallels highlight that, while at least parts of the figure trace back to West Africa, they also date back to early modern Europe, from which they crossed to the Caribbean as an effect of the transatlantic slave trade. They were then incorporated into different narratives, and continued to transform themselves on a global level. The zombie can thus look back on a long history within the Caribbean, as well as West Africa, but also and specifically Europe.

The idea that the zombie comes from elsewhere—Africa, the Caribbean, a mysterious, arcane place of the 'other'—or, in other words, that there is an 'original', has been continuously repeated throughout its history. Yet this argument obscures the fact that the zombie has always inhabited different languages and cultures, forms and meanings, at the same time.

Translation studies scholars have repeatedly emphasised the violent aspects that characterise both linguistic and cultural translation processes, especially in colonial and postcolonial contexts.¹⁹ As the texts mentioned above show, such discriminatory methods can also be distinguished in the making of one version of the zombie as a figure of violent translation. Usually, the zombie confronts us with a past by which we are incessantly haunted. As Jennifer Rutherford remarks, 'through the figure of the zombie all that is past, dead and buried looms up in a future time that is upon us' (Rutherford, 2013: 23). The figure of the zombie thus has to be examined in the most critical way to remind us that racism does not belong to the past.

Notes

- 1 Following Susan Zieger (2012: 737), 'Seabrook's writings and persona' can be situated at 'several cultural transitions: from nineteenth-century travel writing to modern ethnography; from comparative anthropology to the racial desires of primitivism'.
- 2 For a discussion of the zombie figure in Nollywood films, see Garritano (2012).
- 3 On translation and transformation of concepts, see Bal (2009).
- 4 The video is available here: www.vice.com/de/video/nzambi-episode-1 (viewed 25/05/2018).
- 5 For an account of this controversy of the 'zombi powder', see Ackermann and Gauthier (1991: 466) as well as Ingles (2011). Amongst other things, Davis was also accused of setting back the anthropological study of Haiti by fifty years (Ingles, 2011: 44).
- 6 One such example of uncritical reference can be found in Lauro (2015).
- 7 Article 246 states: 'The use of substances that, without leading to death, produce a more or less prolonged lethargic state is also qualified as an attempt on the life of

- a person through poisoning [...] If, as a result of this lethargic state, the person was buried, the attempt will be defined an assassination'. (Nau 1909: 265–266 translated by Kate Ramsey; cited in Ramsey, 2011: 89).
- 8 The spelling 'Vodou' has been chosen here in accordance with current research on the Haitian religion and in opposition to the term 'Voodoo', which has been related to stereotypical and racist views and expressions. For a discussion on the terminological implications, see Ramsey (2012).
 - 9 The Haitian writer and editor Edwidge Danticat (2011: 17) poses this question in the collection *Haiti Noir*.
 - 10 On this matter, see most prominently Chinua Achebe's controversial 1977 essay 'An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's "Heart of Darkness"'. For a more recent discussion of the racist mechanisms in the equation of Africa with the 'dark continent', see Mbembe (2013).
 - 11 See Buck Morss (2000).
 - 12 For the equation of Vodou with 'black magic', see Kate Ramsey's excellent study *The Spirits and the Law* (2011: 9); for the self-description of practitioners, Ramsey (2011: 59–60).
 - 13 For an example on the impossibility of drawing boundaries, see Benítez Rojo (1998).
 - 14 For a detailed account of Moreau de Saint-Méry's political engagement before and after the French and Haitian Revolution, see Pierce 2007.
 - 15 See Banton 2000.
 - 16 Kieran Murphy (2011: 49) has shown how Moreau de Saint-Méry applies the then-fashionable vocabularies of mesmerism for this description.
 - 17 For example, the dictionary entry in the *Dictionnaire national* (1856: 1681) states: 'Zombie, s.m. Relat. Espèce de croquemitaine [sic] dont les créoles d'Amérique font peur a leurs enfants. Gare au zombi! Le zombi va venir'. Other dictionaries, such as the *Complément du Dictionnaire de l'Académie française* (1881: 1279), literally reproduce this entry. In a similar manner, the *Dictionnaire des dictionnaires* (n.d.: 1124) defines the zombie as follows: 'Zombi, s.m. Epouvantail dont les créoles d'Amérique menacent les petits enfants.—Après avoir peuplé son ciel de zombis, ces revenants des contrées noires, ces écorchés troublants, munis d'ailes.' (L. Hennique) F.L.
 - 18 On this matter, see Rath (2014) and forthcoming.
 - 19 On this matter, see most prominently Venuti (1996).

Bibliography

- Achebe, C. (1977) 'An Image of Africa: Racism in Conrad's "Heart of Darkness"', *Massachusetts Review*, 18(4): 782–794.
- Ackermann, H.-W. and J. Gauthier (1991) 'The Ways and Nature of the Zombie', in *The Journal of American Folklore*, 104(414): 466–494.
- Adam, L. (1883) *Les idiomes négro-aryen et maléo-aryen. Essai d'hybridologie linguistique*, Paris: Maisonneuve et Compagnie.
- Bal, M. (2009) 'Working with Concepts', in *European Journal of English Studies*, 13(1): 3–23.
- Banton, M. (2000 [1980]) 'The Idiom of Race. A Critique of Presentism', in L. Back and J. Solomos (eds), *Theories of Race and Racism: A Reader*, London and New York: Routledge, 51–63.
- Benítez Rojo, A. (1998) *La isla que se repite*, Barcelona: Casiopea.
- Bescherelle, L. (1856) *Dictionnaire national ou Dictionnaire universel de la langue française*, Paris: Dondey Duprey.
- Blessebois, P. (no date [1697]) *Le Zombi du Grand Pérou, ou la comtesse de Cocagne*, Brussels: Lacroix.

- Braziel, J. (2008) *Artists, Performers, and Black Masculinity in Haitian Diaspora*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Buck-Morss, S. (2000) 'Hegel and Haiti', *Critical Inquiry*, 26(4): 821–865.
- Complément du Dictionnaire de l'Académie française, publié sous la direction d'un membre de l'académie française* (1881), Paris: Firmin Didot Frères.
- Corbière, É. (1855 [1832]) *Le Négrier, aventures de mer* (4th edition), Havre: Brindeau et Compagnie.
- Danticat, E. (2011 (ed.)) *Haiti Noir*, New York: Akashic Books.
- Davis, W. (1988) *Passages of Darkness: The Ethnobiology of the Haitian Zombie*, Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press.
- Dayan, J. (1997) 'Vodoun, or the Voice of the Gods', in M. Fernández Olmos and L. Paravisini-Gebert (eds), *Sacred Possessions: Vodou, Santería, Obeah and the Caribbean*, New Brunswick: Rutgers, 13–36.
- Fanon, F. (2008 [1952]) *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans R. Philcox, New York: Grove Press.
- Foa, E. (no date) 'Le zombi d'atelier', in E. Foa *Petits artistes. Extrait des Contes historiques*, Paris: Librairie nationale d'éducation et de récréation, 99–115.
- Formey, J. (1765) 'Nègre', *L'Encyclopédie*, 11: 82.
- Garaud, L. (1892) *Trois Ans à la Martinique. Etudes des mœurs. Paysages et croquis. Profils et portraits*, Paris: Alcide Picard et Kaan.
- Garraway, D. (2005) *The Libertine Colony: Creolization in the Early French Caribbean*, Durham: Duke University Press.
- Garritano, C. (2012) 'Blood Money, Big Men and Zombies: Understanding Africa's Occult Narratives in the Context of Neoliberal Capitalism', *Manycinemas* (issue3): 50–65.
- Guérin, P. (no date) (ed) *Dictionnaire des dictionnaires. Lettres, sciences, arts. Encyclopédie universelle*. Vol. VI, Paris: Librairie des imprimeries réunies.
- Hurbon, L. (1988) *Le Barbare imaginaire: Sorciers, zombis et cannibales en Haïti*, Paris: Cerf.
- Ingles, D. (2011) 'Putting the Undead to Work: Wade Davis, Haitian Vodou and the Social Uses of the Zombie', in C. Moreman & C. Rushton (eds), *Race, Oppression and the Zombie: Essays on Cross-cultural Appropriations of the Caribbean Tradition*, Jefferson: McFarland, 42–59.
- Kay, G. (2008) *Zombie Movies: The Ultimate Guide*, Chicago: Chicago Review Press.
- Kovala, U. (1996) 'Translations, Paratextual Mediation and Ideological Closure', in *Target*, 8(1): 119–147.
- Lauro, S. J. (2015) *The Transatlantic Zombie: Slavery, Rebellion, and Living Death*, New Brunswick: Rutgers.
- Matory, J. (2007) 'Free to Be a Slave: Slavery as Metaphor in the Afro-Atlantic Religions', *Journal of Religion in Africa*, 37: 398–425.
- Mbembe, A. (2013) *Critique de la raison nègre*, Paris: La Découverte.
- Miller, C. (2011) 'The Rise and Fall—and Rise—of the Nazi Zombie in Film', in C. Moreman & C. Rushton (eds), *Race, Oppression and the Zombie: Essays on Cross-cultural Appropriations of the Caribbean Tradition*, Jefferson: McFarland, 139–148.
- Mintz, S. (1986) *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History*, London: Penguin.
- Mintz, S. and M. Trouillot. (1995) 'The Social History of Haitian Vodou', in D. Cosention (ed), *Sacred Arts of Haitian Vodou*, Los Angeles: University of California Press, 123–147.
- Mismer, Ch. (1890) 'A la Martinique', in *Le Figaro. Feuilleton de supplément littéraire de dimanche*, Paris, 12 April 1890, no. 15, 58.

- Moreau de Saint-Méry, M. (1875 [1797]) *Description topographique, psychique, civile, politique et historique de la partie française de l'isle de Saint-Domingue*, Vol. 1 (2nd), Paris: Guérin, Morgand.
- Murphy, K. (2011) 'White Zombie', *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies*, 15(1): 47–55.
- Nau, L. (1909) *Code d'instruction criminelle et pénale*, Paris: Libr. Générale de Droit de Jurisprudence.
- Pierce, J. (2007) 'Moreau de Saint-Méry, Médéric Louis', in P. Hinks, J. McKivigan, & R. Owen Williams (eds), *Encyclopedia of Antislavery and Abolition*, Vol. 2. Westport and London: Greenwood Press (Greenwood Milestones in African American History), 480–481.
- Putnam, L. (2012) 'Rites of Power and Rumours of Race: The Circulation of Supernatural Knowledge in the Greater Caribbean, 1890-1940' in D. Paton et al. (eds), *Obeah and Other Powers: The Politics of Caribbean Religion and Healing*. Durham NC: Duke University Press, 243–267.
- Ramsey, K. (2011) *The Spirits and the Law: Vodou and Power in Haiti*, Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.
- Ramsey, K. (2012) 'From "Voodooism" to "Vodou": Changing a U.S. Library of Congress Subject Heading', in *Journal of Haitian Studies*, 18(2): 14–25.
- Rath, G. (2014) 'Zombifizierung als Provokation', in G. Rath (ed), *Zombies. Zeitschrift für Kulturwissenschaft*, Vol. 1/2014. 49–60.
- Ricque, C. (1871) 'Haïti et les Haïtiens', in A. Malte-Brun (ed), *Annales des voyages, de la géographie, de l'histoire et de l'archéologie*, Paris: Challamel aîné, 145–170.
- Rutherford, J. (2013) *Zombies*, London and New York: Routledge.
- Sala-Molins, L. (2006 [1992]) *Dark Side of the Light: Slavery and the French Enlightenment*, trans. J. Conteh-Morgan, Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press.
- Savage, J. (2007) "'Black Magic" and White Terror: Slave Poisoning and Colonial Society in Early 19th Century Martinique', in *Journal of Social History*, 40(3): 635–662.
- Seabrook, W. (1929) *The Magic Island*, New York: Blue Ribbon Books.
- St. John, S. (1889 [1884]) *Hayti or the Black Republic*, London: Smith Elder.
- Venuti, L. (1996) 'Translation as a Social Practice or, the Violence of Translation', in M. Rose (ed), *Translation Horizons Beyond the Boundaries of Translation Spectrum*, Translation Perspectives, Vol. IX. New York: State University of New York, 195–213.
- Zieger, S. (2012) 'The Case of William Seabrook: Documents, Haiti, and the Working Dead', in *Modernism/modernity*, 19(4): 737–754.

Websites

- Kabalek K. (2014) 'Who cares about Nazi zombies?': <https://haifaholocauststudies.wordpress.com/2014/10/30/who-cares-about-nazi-zombies/> (viewed 25/05/2018).
- VICE (2010) Nzambi: www.vice.com/de/video/nzambi-episode-1 (viewed 25/05/2018).

Films

- Dead Snow* (Norway. 2009/D: Tommy Wirkola)
- Night of the Living Dead* (U.S. 1968/D: George A. Romero)
- The King of the Zombies* (U.S. 1941/D: Jean Yarbrough)
- The Serpent and the Rainbow* (U.S. 1988/D: Wes Craven)
- White Zombie* (U.S. 1932/D: Victor Halperin)