

European Journal of Cultural Studies

<http://ecs.sagepub.com/>

Zombie trouble: Zombie texts, bare life and displaced people

Jon Stratton

European Journal of Cultural Studies 2011 14: 265

DOI: 10.1177/1367549411400103

The online version of this article can be found at:

<http://ecs.sagepub.com/content/14/3/265>

Published by:



<http://www.sagepublications.com>

Additional services and information for *European Journal of Cultural Studies* can be found at:

Email Alerts: <http://ecs.sagepub.com/cgi/alerts>

Subscriptions: <http://ecs.sagepub.com/subscriptions>

Reprints: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsReprints.nav>

Permissions: <http://www.sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav>

Citations: <http://ecs.sagepub.com/content/14/3/265.refs.html>

>> [Version of Record](#) - Jun 8, 2011

[What is This?](#)

Zombie trouble: Zombie texts, bare life and displaced people

European Journal of Cultural Studies

14(3) 265–281

© The Author(s) 2011

Reprints and permissions: sagepub.

co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav

DOI: 10.1177/1367549411400103

ecs.sagepub.com

**Jon Stratton**

Curtin University, Australia

Abstract

There has been a recent upsurge in texts featuring zombies. At the same time, members of western countries have become increasingly anxious about displaced peoples: asylum-seekers and other so-called illegal migrants who attempt to enter those countries. What displaced people, people without the protection of the state and zombies have in common is that both manifest the quality of what Giorgio Agamben calls 'bare life'. Moreover, zombies have the qualities of workers or slaves driven to total exhaustion. The genre of the zombie apocalypse centres on laying siege to a place that is identified as a refuge for a group of humans. In these texts it is possible to read an equation of zombies with displaced people who are 'threatening' the state. Indeed, the rhetoric used to describe these people constructs them as similar to mythical zombies. This article includes analyses of a number of zombie films including *Shaun of the Dead*, *Fido* and *Undead*.

Keywordsasylum seekers, bare life, displaced people, *Fido*, *Shaun of the Dead*, zombies**Introduction**

This article is about the relationship between zombies and displaced people, most obviously refugees, asylum-seekers and illegal immigrants. It is founded on a realization that the underlying characteristics of zombies are similar to those attributed to displaced people: that is, people predominantly from non-western states striving for entry into western states. The article begins from the recognition that during the 2000s there has been a tremendous increase in the number of films released featuring zombies. At the same time,

Corresponding author:

Jon Stratton, School of Media, Culture and Creative Arts, Curtin University, GPO Box U1987, Perth 6845, Western Australia, Australia.

Email: j.stratton@curtin.edu.au

zombies have begun to appear in other media. A videogame series called *Resident Evil*, which includes biologically mutated flesh-eating undead, founded a genre now called 'survival horror'. Released originally for Sony PlayStation in 1996, by 30 September 2004 the various forms of the game had sold more than 25 million units (CAPCOM, 2004), and in 2002 it spawned a film also called *Resident Evil*. The film became the fourteenth highest grossing 'R' rated film in the USA that year and the fiftieth highest grossing film globally (Box Office Mojo, 2002). There are now two sequels. In 2009, Quirk Books released *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, a 'mash-up' in which author Seth Grahame-Smith introduced zombies into Jane Austen's 1813 romance novel. The book became an instant success. In April it had reached the third spot on the *New York Times* bestseller list, and by the end of the year it had sold more than 700,000 copies (Merritt, 2009). Such was the success of the revised novel that Quirk Books were inspired to commission a prequel, Steve Hockensmith's *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies: Dawn of the Dreadfuls*.

During this same period, since the 1990s, there has been an increasing anxiety in western countries over the numbers of displaced people attempting to gain entry across their borders (the reasons for this are many, but beyond the scope of this article). Certainly there has been an overall increase in refugee numbers. One set of figures released by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) tells us that whereas in 1960 there were 1,656,669 people classified as refugees, in 2006 this had climbed to 9,877,703 (UNHCR, 2009). However, most of these refugees are situated in countries outside the developed West. Similarly, between 1980 and 2000 there was a significant increase in asylum-seeker applications in Europe, from around 150,000 to around 450,000, with a spike to 700,000 in the early 1990s, and in Australia and New Zealand from virtually nothing in the mid-1980s to around 5000 a year. In North America the figure increased significantly in the mid-1990s to nearly 200,000, then declined to around 50,000 by 2000 (UNHCR, 2000). Anxieties over border protection in all countries, but especially in the West, were heightened in the wake of the 2001 attacks on the World Trade Center in New York. The link between these anxieties and concerns over displaced people attempting to gain entry to western countries was made in, for example, *Children of Men*, which was released in 2006 and set in 2027. Directed by Alfonso Cuarón, who also co-wrote the screenplay, the backdrop to the film's ostensible concern with global infertility is a Great Britain in which the increase in unsanctioned immigration is such that asylum-seekers are placed in cages on London's streets, and Bexhill-on-Sea on the south coast has been turned into a massive detention camp (see Stratton, 2009).

In this article I will be arguing that in many of the recent zombie texts, the zombie threat can be read in terms of the fears of many members of western countries about being overwhelmed by displaced people. What might be the justification for this connection between zombies and displaced people? The recent renaissance in zombie films lifts off from the revision of zombies in western popular culture that is traced to George A. Romero's now-classic 1968 film, *Night of the Living Dead*. This film began what is now colloquially called the zombie apocalypse trope, in which entire communities, whole countries and even the world are subject to destruction by increasing numbers of zombies that appear from nowhere, often originating as a consequence of radiation from outer space – that is, if any rationale for their existence is proffered. In these films the zombie presence is qualitatively different from the earlier zombie trope, derived from claims about the existence of

zombies in Haiti in which witches or evil scientists turned individuals into zombies as a means of controlling them. Nevertheless, the foundational idea of the zombie as a dead person resurrected to a state that remains nearer death than life is a constant.

What I will be arguing is that what audiences find most frightening in the zombie idea is not the resurrection from death, but the state of living death that is the fate of the zombie. Indeed, in some films that are identified as a part of the zombie genre, such as the recent *28 Days Later* (dir. Danny Boyle, 2002), the person does not even die before turning into what is now being described as a zombie. In this case, if the key to the identification of a zombie is the interstitial state of being between life and death, then the zombie takes on the characteristic of what Giorgio Agamben calls 'bare life'. Bare life is difficult to define because it has two aspects. The first is (for want of a better word) social. In setting up his discussion of the relationship between bare life and aesthetics, Anthony Downey writes:

Lives lived on the margins of social, political, cultural, economic and geographical borders are lives half lived. Denied access to legal, economic and political redress, these lives exist in a limbo-like state that is largely preoccupied with acquiring and sustaining the essentials of life. The refugee, the political prisoner, the disappeared, the victim of torture, the dispossessed – all have been excluded, to different degrees, from the fraternity of the social sphere, appeal to the safety net of the nation-state and recourse to international law. They have been outlawed, so to speak, placed beyond recourse to law and yet still in a precarious relationship to law itself. (2009: 109)

Members of all these groups, including displaced people, can be thought of as experiencing bare life in its modern form.

The second describes the existential state of a person placed in this circumstance. Following Agamben, I argue elsewhere that the typifying existential state is that to which many Jews were reduced in the concentration and death camps of Nazi Germany: a person in this condition was called in many camps a *Muselman* (Stratton, forthcoming, 2011).¹ This state, often described as a living death, closely resembles that of the zombie – the difference being that zombies, living after death, are portrayed as fundamentally threatening to the living, while the *Muselmänner* lived only until their transformation into the dead was complete. The point here is twofold: that excluded from the rights and privileges of the modern state, those displaced people are positioned legally as bare life; and that in this legal limbo, these people can be treated in a way that enables them to become associated with a condition mythically exemplified in the zombie. The consequence is that not only can the zombie texts of films and other media be read as reproducing this connection, drawing on present-day anxieties to increase the terror produced by these texts, but displaced people are characterized using the same terminology that describes the threat that zombies generate in zombie apocalypse texts.

The popularity of zombies

Through the first decade of the 21st century there has been a very significant increase in the cultural presence of zombies.² In January 2006, Steven Wells, in an article in the

Guardian, wrote that 'there were zombies everywhere in 2005' (cited in Bishop, 2009: 19). That same year in March, Warren St. John commented in the *New York Times* that: 'In films, books and video games, the undead are once again on the march, elbowing past werewolves, vampires, swamp things and mummies to become the post-millennial ghoul of the moment' (cited in Bishop, 2009: 19). What St. John's remark signals is something quite important, that it is not just that there has been an increase in visibility of zombies as a consequence of their appearance in an increased number of texts, but that this increase outstrips other conventional horror characters such as werewolves and vampires.

It is worth noting that vampires also have recently enjoyed a renaissance in popularity. In the late 1990s, Angel and Spike appeared in *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*. They helped to start a shift to more humanized vampires that could be love objects. Since then, vampires have appeared in the four *Twilight* books by Stephanie Myer, the first of which was published in 2005, and the immensely popular film of the same name, made from the books, was released in 2008 with a sequel, *The Twilight Saga: New Moon*, being released the following year. In 2008 *Twilight* was the seventh highest grossing film in the USA (Box Office Mojo, 2008). Among other recent texts, vampires feature in a number of television series. *Moonlight* ran for one season in late 2007 and early 2008. The protagonist was a private investigator who was also a vampire. His love interest was a mortal woman who was a reporter. The show achieved a cult following and was very successful with adults in the 18–49 range. Originally broadcast on CBS in the USA, signalling the show's particular popularity with women, it was rerun on the CW television channel which its president of entertainment has said is aimed at women in the 18–34 demographic (New York Daily News, 2010). *The Vampire Diaries*, in which a mortal woman becomes romantically entangled with vampires, began in September 2009 on CW. It rapidly won its timeslot for a female viewing audience aged up to 34. In these texts vampires, which used to suggest forbidden sexual desire, now constitute the love interest in a more liberated time (Punter and Byron, 2004).³ An early example of this genre was the 1983 cult film *The Hunger* (dir. Tony Scott), which starred Catherine Deneuve, Susan Sarandon and David Bowie, although crucially in this film the vampire is a woman. In addition, vampires are a key character component of the HBO cable television network's *True Blood* series, which is based on Charlaine Harris' *The Southern Vampire Mysteries* novels, first published in 2001. In these texts vampires are either the source of forbidden romance or are integrated problematically into everyday society, or both. Vampires, then, have lost their traditional fear factor and are positioned more as a strange Other who have different cultural ways and are sometimes still a threat, especially to the one that loves them, but one that is generally manageable. Coming out of an American society dealing with major changes in its racial profile, and in a country where marriage between the races has become acceptable only relatively recently, these vampire texts suggest among others a racial reading, one in which the dominant society is struggling to come to terms with a rapidly changing racial order.⁴ As we shall see, zombies can be read racially, but this reading places them as a racial threat to western civilization.

There is nothing benign about zombies. In short, as Simon Pegg, the writer of and actor in *Shaun of the Dead*, a British zombie film released in 2004, remarks: 'As monsters from the id, zombies win out over vampires and werewolves when it comes to the

title of Most Potent Metaphorical Monster' (Pegg, 2008). It needs to be noted that Pegg has an ahistorical view of these monsters:

Where their pointy-toothed cousins are all about sex and bestial savagery, the zombie trumps all by personifying our deepest fear: death. Zombies are our destiny writ large. Slow and steady in their approach, weak, clumsy, often absurd, the zombie relentlessly closes in, unstoppable, intractable. (Pegg, 2008)

As I have argued, the sex and bestial savagery of vampires has now been tamed into a disturbing and disruptive cultural difference, fear transformed into a romantic frisson, within a cultural pluralist multiculturalism. The fear of zombies is now not so much about death as of those excluded from western societies who seem to be threatening civilization as we know it in the West.

Thus zombies have become the most important mythic monster at the present time. In an astute discussion of the zombie phenomenon, Peter Dendle writes about 'the resurgence of zombie movie popularity in the early 2000s' (2007: 54). For him, this 'has been linked with the events of September 11, 2001' (2007: 54). Making a different but still generalizing claim to Pegg's, Dendle goes on to argue that:

[A]pocalypticism has always been ingrained into the archetypal psyche of any society defining itself – as all human endeavours must – in the context of history and time. The possibility of wide-scale destruction and devastation which 9-11 brought once again into the communal consciousness found a ready narrative expression in the zombie apocalypses which over thirty years had honed images of desperation subsistence and amoral survivalism to a fine edge. (2007: 54)

Following Dendle, Kyle Bishop makes a similar point:

Although the conventions of the zombie genre remain largely unchanged, the movies' relevance has become all the more clear – a post-9/11 audience cannot help but perceive the characteristics of zombie cinema through the filter of terrorist threats and apocalyptic reality. (2009: 24)

Both Dendle and Bishop argue that 9/11 had a considerable impact on the American national imaginary, and that this is expressed in the way that Americans make and read zombie films.

However, films made outside the USA, and even a recent American zombie film such as Romero's *Land of the Dead*, released in 2005, show evidence of quite a different anxiety. To understand this, we need to begin with a discussion of what constitutes a zombie. As Dendle argues:

The essence of the 'zombie' at the most abstract level is supplanted, stolen, or effaced consciousness; it casts allegorically the appropriation of one person's will by another. It is no coincidence that the creature flourished in the twentieth century, a century whose broad intellectual trends were preoccupied with alienation. (2007: 47–48)

Here, Dendle is extrapolating from a history that refers back to the zombie as a characteristic of Haitian voodoo. In doing so he elides the recognition that, often, the zombies of the zombie apocalypse films after Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* are not created by someone. They do not have will, but they are not in somebody's control. Indeed, this is one of things that make them so frightening – their existence is entirely alien.

Dendle traces the American popular cultural interest in zombies to the American occupation of Haiti between 1915 and 1934. He writes:

Ghosts and revenants are known world-wide, but few are so consistently associated with economy and labour as the shambling corpse of Haitian vodun, brought back from the dead to toil in the fields and factories by miserly land-owners or by spiteful *houngan* or *bokor* priests ... The zombie, a soulless hulk mindlessly working at the bidding of another, thus records a residual communal memory of slavery: of living a life without dignity and meaning, of going through the motions. (2007: 47)

Dendle links the rise of American interest in zombies to the Great Depression and the crisis of labour. It is an important point. In post-*Night of the Living Dead* zombie apocalypse films, the link between the zombie and slavery, and by extension the worker in a capitalist economy, has been repressed. As we shall see, in the films where the zombies can be read as displaced people, this connection is reappearing.

Joan Dayan, an anthropologist, recently provided this description of the zombie:

Born out of the experience of slavery and the sea passage from Africa to the New World, the zombie tells the story of colonization: the reduction of human into thing for the ends of capital. For the Haitian no fate is to be more feared. (1997: 33)

Dayan goes on to explain that, in the present day:

In a contemporary Caribbean development of American style, the zombi phenomenon obviously goes beyond the machinations of the local boco. As Depestre puts it, 'This fantastic process of reification and assimilation means the total loss of my identity, the psychological annihilation of my being, my zombification.' And Laënnec Hurbon explains how the zombi stories produce and capitalize on an internalization of slavery and passivity, making the victims of an oppressive social system the cause: 'The phantasm of the zombi ... does nothing but attest to the fulfilment of a system that moves the victim to internalize his condition.' (1997: 33)

Dayan's purpose is to explain how, in the present Haitian context, the zombie functions as an explanation for the destruction of Haitian culture by American colonialism disguised as development. The mindless zombie, labouring for another, becomes a way of understanding the impact of American capital on Haiti, and the Caribbean more generally.

Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff (2002) make a similar point about the rise in zombie stories in South Africa:

There can be no denying the latter-day preoccupation with zombies in rural South Africa. Their existence, far from being the subject of elusive tales from the backwoods, of fantastic fables

from the *veld*, is widely taken for granted. As a simple matter of fact. In recent times, respectable local newspapers have carried banner headlines like 'Zombie Back from the Dead' illustrating their stories with conventional, high-realist photographs. (Comaroff and Comaroff, 2002: 786–787)

The Comaroffs argue that the zombie narrative is a useful way for people who do not understand the complexities of international, neoliberal capitalism to account for how some people apparently become rich very quickly without doing any visible work: they create zombies who work for them and do not have to be paid. Looking over the history of zombies in Africa, the Comaroffs state:

Zombies themselves seem to be born, at least in the first instance, of colonial encounters, of the precipitous engagement of local worlds with imperial economies that seek to exert control over the essential means of producing value, means like land and labor, space and time. (2002: 795)

In other words, at a conceptual level, zombies are a local response of the colonized to the impact of colonial capitalism, a way of understanding how those capitalist practices produce wealth for some and immiseration for others.

From *Pride and Prejudice* to *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*

At this point we can return to the Caribbean. Two years before Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* revisioned the zombie trope, Jean Rhys published a book in England that is now written about as a key postcolonial novel. *Wide Sargasso Sea* is a kind of answer text, which Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin (1989) describe as a literary work that writes back to the book that inspired it, illuminating the colonizing assumptions that underpin the earlier novel. In this case that novel is Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*. Published in 1847, 34 years after *Pride and Prejudice*, *Jane Eyre* tells the story of a young woman's rise from a straightened childhood eventually to marry Edward Rochester, the owner of Thornfield Hall. What Jane does not know until the day that she is supposed to marry Rochester is that he is already married. He keeps his first wife, whom he regards as mad, locked in the attic under the ministrations of Grace Poole. This wife is Bertha Mason, the Creole woman from Jamaica whose dowry of £30,000 is the source of Rochester's wealth. Unable to marry, Jane refuses to cohabit with Rochester and leaves. Later, Bertha escapes her prison and sets fire to the house, committing suicide by jumping from the roof. Rochester loses his sight and his left hand in trying to save her. Finally, Jane and Rochester are able to marry.

What Rhys divined was that behind this romance lay the story of an abused first wife, married for her colonial wealth and then discarded. *Wide Sargasso Sea* tells Bertha's story. In this novel we find that Bertha was originally named Antoinette, and that it is Rochester who renames her. Rhys's narrative highlights the power imbalance between the Caribbean colonies and Britain while also showing how, at the time of the novel, much of the wealth on which Britain's gentry depended came from these colonies in which slavery had only been abolished in 1834, and many remained slaves for a further six years. In a discussion of the novel, Thomas Loe has argued that the zombie is 'an

extremely potent central image associated with Antoinette' (1991: 35). One of its purposes would seem to be to give an exotic quality to the Caribbean, compared to the mundane realism of Rochester's England. However, the zombie motif does other work. Loe argues that Antoinette's mother is made into a zombie, that Antoinette tries to zombify Rochester in the hope of keeping his love, and that most importantly of all for my purpose here, Rochester attempts to turn Antoinette into a zombie. For Loe,

the figure of the zombie provides Rhys with an astonishingly appropriate metaphor for dramatizing her vision of the powerless and displaced woman against [what Judith Gardiner calls] the 'unified ideology' of 'capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchal domination'. (1991: 41)

Rochester tries to transform Antoinette while moving her to England, attempting to remake her as a woman of the gentry, even going so far as to change her name from the French-influenced Antoinette to the solidly English Bertha. He does not succeed. Instead, Antoinette becomes 'mad', a victim of a failed zombification, displaced from her Jamaican home to an England she neither likes nor understands, caught between two cultures.

On a blog site called Boing Boing, in a response to a review of *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, nanuq comments:

Any classic book could be improved with a few zombies around. Charles Dickens seems a natural for that (Zombie versions of *A Tale of Two Cities* or *Oliver Twist* practically write themselves). *Jane Eyre* and *Wuthering Heights* would be great too (Catherine coming back as a zombie! Mr Rochester keeping his zombie wife locked in the attic!). (Boing Boing, 2009)

nanuq does not realise that Antoinette has been made into a zombie already by Rochester – a consequence of Rochester wanting to live off the wealth acquired by her family's colonial Jamaican plantation. What is unknown in *Jane Eyre*, and remains obscure in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, is whether Bertha/Antoinette has a black ancestor. However, the implication is that she has. Nevertheless in metaphor, Antoinette's journey to England, her displacement, reveals the slave past in terms of a zombie present.

We can now turn to *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (Grahame-Smith and Austen, 2009). Austen's *Pride and Prejudice* remains her most popular book. It is a romance that is also a comedy of manners about the early 19th-century English landed gentry, and its setting is restricted to England. Stimulated by the work of Edward Said, there has been some debate over Austen's awareness of the slavery in the colonial Caribbean, the plantations of which provided some of the wealth which made the life of the English gentry possible. In 1772, Lord Mansfield's judgment in the case of a recaptured runaway slave owned by a man from Boston visiting England, known after the slave's name as the *Somerset* case, established the basis for ending slavery in England. However, as I have already mentioned, slavery in the British colonies continued until the Emancipation Act came into force in 1834. Austen published *Pride and Prejudice* in 1813 and *Mansfield Park* in 1814.

In *Mansfield Park*, the wealth that sustains Sir Thomas Bertram and his family at the home that bears the name of the man who ended slavery in England derives from Sir

Thomas's plantation in Antigua. There are problems on the plantation that require his presence. Commenting on the narrative, Said remarks:

Whatever was wrong there – and the internal evidence garnered by Warren Roberts suggests that economic depression, slavery, and competition with France were at issue – Sir Thomas was able to fix thereby maintaining his control over his colonial domain. (1993: 87).

I do not want to enter the debate as to whether or not Austen approved of slavery (although it seems to me that the evidence points to her disapproval of it; see Fraiman, 1995). Said explains that:

The Bertrams could not have been possible without the slave trade, sugar, and the colonial planter class; as a social type Sir Thomas would have been familiar to eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century readers who knew the powerful influence of this class through politics, plays ... and many other public activities (large houses, famous parties and social rituals, well-known commercial enterprises, celebrated marriages). (1993: 94).

In his history of British colonial slavery, Robin Blackburn (1997) argues that the wealth derived from New World slavery formed the necessary basis for the industrial revolution.

Austen's indication of the presence of slavery in the colonies, and its importance, occurs in the novel following *Pride and Prejudice*. As Suvendrini Perera remarks:

This growing visibility of the navy in *Mansfield Park* supplements the increasing presence of empire at the edges of Austen's texts; progressively, her '3 or 4 Families in a Country Village' ... come to encompass and incorporate more extensive portions of the globe. (1991: 47)

Only a decade earlier, in 1804, the slaves of Haiti had completed a successful rebellion against the French and, as Perera suggests, 'the terrifying possibility of a Haiti-style rebellion in the English slave colonies had instantly become a national obsession' (1991: 20).

What, then, are we to make of the zombies that increasingly threaten the social life of the gentry in *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*? As is usual in zombie apocalypse texts, we are not told from whence they came. In this text, Elizabeth Bennett and her sisters are trained in martial arts so that they can act as vigilantes, killing zombies. They have visited China where they learnt Kung Fu from Shaolin monks. What we do know is that zombies have been roaming the English countryside for a generation or more. We know that London has been walled and that the army moves from area to area of England, trying to keep the zombies under control. We know also that zombies are comparable to 'savages' because Mr Darcy remarks to Sir William Lucas that: 'Every savage can dance. Why, I imagine that even zombies could do it with some degree of success' (Grahame-Smith and Austen, 2009: 22). Zombies, then, have some similarity with the black slaves who were thought of as savages, who work the colonial Caribbean plantations that supply the wealth which supports the lifestyle of the gentry (see Constantine, 1966).⁵

Zombies do not appear to infest anywhere but England – or possibly Britain. With the connection between slavery and zombies that we have already established, we can now

understand the zombie threat as a return of the repressed. Whether we read the text literally in terms of a slave revolt that has spread to England, or metaphorically as an expression of the vengeance of the enslaved Africans on which the gentry's wealth was built, what we have is a movement of the displaced from the Caribbean colonies to England. It is a zombie apocalypse set in the early 19th century that can be read as making clear the connections between English wealth and colonial slavery which, in this early novel at least, Austen had elided.

Zombies and the displaced

The narrative of *Night of the Living Dead* centred on a group of humans attempting to defend themselves in a house by stopping it from being overrun by marauding zombies. Romero's second zombie film, *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), had the human survivors holed up in a shopping mall. The trope of a group of humans defending a space from threatening zombies has become a common theme in zombie apocalypse texts, and it is now even more open to be read in terms of the threat considered to be posed by illegal immigrants than in Romero's first film. In Romero's fourth zombie film *Land of the Dead*, released in 2005, the parallel between the zombie siege of Pittsburgh and the fear over illegal entry to the USA across the Mexican border is easily made:

To ensure the status quo, Dennis Hopper's Kaufman, the self-appointed leader of Pittsburgh, constructs the world's most extreme border security – blown up and barricaded bridges make the rivers impassible, and electric fences and armed guards protect the area from any intrusion; in an extreme example of xenophobia, soldiers shoot any invaders on sight. These forms of immigration control have become even more jarringly familiar with recent debates about erecting a fence between the United States and Mexico and the redeployment of National Guard troops to guard the United States' southern border during George W. Bush's presidency. (Bishop, 2009: 24)

Here, the zombies can be easily read as illegal migrants threatening traditional American society. With this reading, the zombie acquires again its earlier reference: a worker who either is, or is able to be worked into, a comatose state. Indeed, the worker with no protection can become a slave.

In zombie films made outside the USA this reading is more available. In *Shaun of the Dead*, with the sudden transformation of people into zombies, Shaun and his white friends make for their local pub, The Winchester, as the most defensible place he can think of. In British films, the pub is historically the place of community, as it is for example in *Passport To Pimlico* (dir. Henry Cornelius, 1949). By extension, in *Shaun of the Dead* the pub is a synecdoche for a white England under siege from a range of illegal immigrants, asylum-seekers and so forth, all trying to breach the pub's defences. Finally, the British army comes to the rescue of Shaun and his friends, killing off the besieging zombies.

Dead Set was made in England during summer 2008 and shown on television as a series of five episodes. In the narrative, a group of reality show contestants secured in a *Big Brother*-style house find themselves threatened by zombies who appear to have

taken over the rest of the country. Davina McCall, who presented the British *Big Brother* series, appears in *Dead Set* as herself and is transformed into a zombie. As the series proceeds, the zombies gradually overwhelm the occupants of the house. In this narrative, the zombies are triumphant. *Dead Set* was nominated for a British Academy of Film and Television Arts (BAFTA) award for Best Drama Serial. As in *Shaun of the Dead*, the horror of the zombie threat is increased by the ease with which the zombies can be read as illegal immigrants – or, indeed, legal immigrants from elsewhere in the European Union who are often identified as overwhelming British society.

In his *Guardian* article quoted earlier, Pegg comments on his dislike of Charlie Brooker's use of 'fast' zombies – that is zombies that walk and run, rather than stagger slowly, in *Dead Set*. In what one presumes is supposed to be read as a jokey riposte, Brooker responds: 'Simon: your outright rejection of running zombies leaves you exposed, in a very real and damning sense, as a terrible racist' (Brooker, 2008). If zombies stand for those displaced people attempting to enter Britain, then they are indeed mostly non-white. The immiseration of the displaced people at the border is expressed in the bare life that is represented in the zombies. The racialized difference of those people is metaphorized in the zombies' difference from humans.

With this in mind we should not be surprised that, in a voiceover at the end of *Shaun of the Dead* that tells us what happens after the zombie threat has been quelled, we are told that the few remaining zombies are used as gameshow participants and domestics. Domestic work is characteristic labour for illegal immigrants across the West. *Shaun of the Dead* can be read analogically, whereas *Children of Men* presents a literal image of Britain falling to the pressure of displaced people entering the country.

In *Fido* (dir. Andrew Currie), a Canadian zombie film released in 2006, zombies are fitted with a specially invented collar that renders them harmless to humans.⁶ They can be used for menial work, and any household that does not have at least one zombie domestic is considered to be socially embarrassed. *Fido* goes even further in the development of the zombie–displaced people connection. Set in a 1950s America after the Zombie Wars, towns are fenced off from the Wild Zone where the zombies without collars still prowl, attempting to enter the areas where humans live. In an information film that we see at the beginning made by ZomCom, the company that makes the zombie collars, we are told, in rhetoric which echoes anxieties over border security that stretch from illegal immigrants to terrorists, that the advent of the zombies meant that 'we were forced to defend our homeland ... mankind pitted against legions of the undead'. ZomCom also 'built security systems like the perimeter fence that encloses our towns in a wall of protective steel'. The film's title comes from the name that Timmy, the Robinsons' young son, gives the zombie that his mother acquires for their home. It is, of course, a name that is typically given to a dog, although nobody in the film acknowledges this. When Timmy plays baseball with Fido, he acts towards him in the way that black servants historically were treated: for example, by telling him to get the ball: 'Go fetch it, boy!' These zombies are marked as racially different and, indeed, not human. In these films, but especially in *Fido*, the zombie as bare life is linked with the zombie as unenfranchised worker.

An Australian low-budget film, *Undead* (dir. Michael and Peter Spierig, 2003), was made over a number of years and is perhaps one of the stranger recent additions to the zombie genre.⁷ The film includes both zombies and an alien visitation from space. A

small town in Queensland is the focus of a zombie outbreak caused by something raining down from outer space. Marion is a survivalist who has been affected by this development before, when the fish he was catching turned into zombies. He is convinced that the aliens are a part of the zombie threat. When asked by Sallyanne: 'Have you ever seen anything like this before?', he answers: 'I have. It's an invasion. The end of life as we know it.' The police are shown to be incompetent and unable to understand what to do in the new circumstance. Marion takes charge of protecting the small group of people who have escaped transformation into zombies. He is a characteristic figure in recent Australian film. Similar to Mick Taylor, the kangaroo shooter and serial killer in *Wolf Creek* (dir. Greg McLean, 2005), and the unnamed kangaroo shooter in *Lucky Miles* (dir. Michael Rowland, 2007) who both appear to be patrolling Australia's border, Marion attempts to protect the village from what he thinks are the depredations of the aliens (see Stratton, 2007, 2009). By the end of the film, it turns out that the aliens are actually trying to stop the zombie plague and return everybody to being human. Thinking that they have succeeded, they leave. Unfortunately, one of the townsfolk, who has been bitten by a zombie, escapes confinement and infects the rest of Australia. This time, the aliens do not return.

This somewhat confusing combination of zombie apocalypse and sci-fi film can make sense in the context of John Howard's government ramping up the Australian population's anxieties about asylum-seekers in the early 2000s. In 2001, the government refused entry to shipwrecked asylum-seekers picked up by the *MV Tampa*, started the so-called Pacific Solution where asylum-seekers were sent to detention camps in other countries in the Pacific region while they waited to be processed, and altered Australia's migration zone to exclude the Australian islands around the north of the country. Also in 2001, shortly before a federal election, the Howard government promoted the idea that asylum-seekers on a boat had been threatening to throw their children overboard. The practical consequence of these and other acts by the government was that the general population became increasingly concerned about the threat posed by asylum-seekers and voted the government back into power. The more general consequence was an increase in Australians' xenophobic fear of illegal immigration.

With this history we are now better able to read *Undead*. Here again, the zombie threat is a translation of the fear generated by, in this Australian case, specifically asylum-seekers attempting to find a home in Australia. In this film, it seems, nothing can stop them, certainly not the police or even the local survivalist, except aliens. We now need to think about these aliens. They emit light, they wear what look like cassocks with cowls and, as they cure people of zombification, those people are taken into the clouds until the aliens have eradicated the zombie scourge. The Christian connotations are spelt out by Rene near the end of the film, when she is trying to convince Marion that he has been wrong about the aliens' intentions. She says: 'Aliens are the saviours. It's not us.' It seems that 'we' are simply not powerful enough to save Australia from the zombies. At one point in the film, when Rene is shooting down zombies in the town's general store, she has the Australian flag behind her. We, the white Australians, need God or some Christian force allied to God, to save us. When that is no longer available, Australia is overrun. It is easy to see how *Undead's* zombies can stand in for asylum-seekers at a time when Australian anxiety over asylum-seekers had been ramped up to extreme levels.

Rhetoric

That *Fido* can make such a clear analogy between displaced people and zombies is because the same rhetoric is used for each. Zombies provide a monster for our time because they express our anxieties over the relationship between bare life and the modern state. As I have noted previously, zombies are an expression of bare life. From the viewpoint of the members of those countries of the West, the displaced people attempting to enter them are also bare life. They have no protection from any state. This underlying similitude enables the same metaphors to be used for both zombies and displaced people. Where zombies appear as a remorseless threat laying siege to wherever humans manage to collect to defend themselves, displaced people are constructed in the same way, as a threat at the border of the state. In an article on the way that Austrian newspapers write about asylum-seekers, Elisabeth El Refaie describes how ‘Kurdish refugees are quite regularly represented as an “army” on the point of “invading” Europe, and their arrival is often referred to as an *Ansturm* [onslaught] or *Invasion* [invasion]’ (2001: 364). She quotes from a newspaper article that writes of ‘new hordes of applicants for asylum’ (2001: 364). While an onslaught or invasion might conjure up an image of an organized, rational army, ‘horde’ implies a disorganized, irrational mass. El Refaie explains:

In other articles, the ‘war’ metaphor is also evoked by verbs, which describe the refugees as ‘forcing their way’ (*drängen*) over the border into Europe, of ‘invading’ (*eindringen*) Germany and of ‘storming’ (*stürmen*) Fortress Europe. (2001: 364–365)

All these metaphors suggest that Europe is under siege from a mindless throng.

In describing the language used in Australia, Sharon Pickering lists some of the terms that she found in the *Brisbane Courier Mail* and the *Sydney Morning Herald* between 1997 and 1999 to describe the threat posed by asylum-seekers:

‘we’ are soon to be ‘awash’, ‘swamped’, ‘weathering the influx’, of ‘waves’, latest waves’, ‘more waves’, ‘tides’, ‘floods’, ‘migratory flood’, ‘mass exodus’ of ‘aliens’, ‘queue jumpers’, illegal immigrants’. (2001: 172)

Terms such as ‘wave’ and ‘flood’ use the water reference to conjure up some overwhelming and amorphous force. They are dehumanizing expressions that identify the asylum-seekers as a mass rather than as individuals. These people are ‘aliens’ constructed, as Pickering points out, in a system of binary logic ‘which routinely renders one normal and the other strange/other’ (2001: 172). Thinking of the zombie as bare life, this is the binary Other of the humanizing effect of membership of modern society.

As in zombie films, Pickering shows that it is the human members of the Australian state who are the ones under siege, their civilized existence always at threat from the zombie bare life attempting to enter the protected space. As Pickering states:

In the case of asylum seekers, the boundaries [between ‘us’ and ‘them’] are easily identified by the discrete nation state – not only fixed national and geographic boundaries in the case of Australia but also those of race. In ‘record arrest’, ‘swoop’, ‘incident’, ‘criminal gangs’ and

'illegal run', criminal justice discourse becomes interwoven with that of war: 'incursion', 'sustained assault on Australian shores', 'gathering to our north', 'massing in Indonesia', all to invade the 'land of hope'. (2001: 174)

Here again, this 'war' that Australia is fighting is actually a siege in which the country is being defended against the invasion of a racial Other that is disorganized, massified and relentless. They appear, like apocalyptic zombies, as a faceless, unthinking mass of less-than-human people that accumulates at the border, threatening to overwhelm the state's defences by their sheer pressure and destroy the human beings and the social order inside.

These examples are drawn from work studying the rhetoric used for asylum-seekers in Austria and Australia, and the same terms are used across the West. As mentioned previously, displaced people – that is, those officially classified as illegal immigrants, asylum seekers, refugees and the like – are bare life striving to enter states where they will be given protection. Those states experience them as an unregulated threat to life within the border. As Aihwa Ong writes: 'In camps of the disenfranchised or displaced, bare life becomes the ground for political claims, if not for citizenship, then for the right to survive' (2006: 501). At the same time, in the modern state, bare life is the basis for the treatment even of citizens of the state. The zombie is the mythic expression of racialized bare life striving to enter the state but, at the same time, the zombie is the condition that awaits all of us from whom the state withdraws protection. The zombies besieging the places of sanctuary in zombie apocalypse films can be read as displaced people seeking recognition from the countries of the West. As *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* makes clear, they bear the histories of the enslaved whose labour enabled the quality of life at the heart of the colonial empires, and which provided the wealth for the industrial revolution. However, the zombies are also an image of what we – members of the modern state – might become. In the modern state, bare life founds the political order. In the neoliberal version of that state, where rights are dependent on what people within the border of the state can offer to its economic wellbeing, the degree to which one is relieved from bare life depends on one's economic worth. In this way, within the state, labour returns as an inverse measure of zombification, while without the protection of the state, bare life equates with the most menial and unprotected forms of labour, exemplified in the zombie as domestic.

Conclusion

As I have explained previously, bare life has a dual meaning. In the first place it refers to lack of legal protection by the state. Without that protection, the person reduced to bare life can become transformed into the second understanding of bare life: the liminal condition of death-in-life. Indeed, such a person can become one of the living dead. This is the existential condition represented in the zombie. The equation of the zombie and the displaced person occurs through the construction of bare life in both aspects of the term. The new fascination with zombie apocalypse texts can be understood in relation, but of course is not limited, to the increasing anxiety of members of western states founded in the threat that these states feel is posed by racialized, displaced people. Both manifestations of bare life are described using the same discursive terms. The fear of

what is perceived to be an external threat from the zombie Other helps those who live in western states to repress awareness of how easily their own existence can become reduced to bare life.

Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Notes

1. The referenced article is a companion to this one.
2. I even have a T-shirt, made in the USA, bearing the legend: 'Zombie Outbreak Response Team'. It includes the slogan: 'Shoot Them In The Head; They Stay Dead.'
3. David Punter and Glennis Byron in *The Gothic* write that: 'Early vampires are not only aristocrats, but also seducers, and from the start the vampire has been associated with sexuality' (2004: 269).
4. In the USA, interracial marriage was legalized across the country by a 1967 Supreme Court decision. It was only in 2000 that the census allowed respondents to claim two or more racial backgrounds.
5. On the 18th-century understanding of slaves as savages, see Constantine (1966). Constantine argues that: 'The ignoble savage stereotype came to be used as a basic factor in the defense of slavery and slave trading' (1966: 171).
6. For reviews of *Fido* see, for example, Biodrowski (2007), Cinerina (2007) and The Horror Geek (2008).
7. It is not the first Australian zombie film; that would seem to be *Zombie Brigade*, released in 1986. In this film the zombies are Vietnam War veterans risen from the dead to take revenge on the attempt by Japanese developers to build a theme park on the site of the war memorial. The anxieties here would seem to connect with longstanding Australian fears of Asian invasion.

References

- Ashcroft, B, Griffith G and Tiffin H (1989) *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-colonial Literatures*. London: Routledge.
- Biodrowski S (2007) *Fido: a boy and his zombie*, Cinefantastique Online. Available at: <http://cinefantastiqueonline.com/2007/06/fido-a-boy-and-his-zombie/>.
- Bishop K (2009) Dead man still walking: Explaining the zombie renaissance. *Journal of Popular Film & Television* 37(1): 16–25.
- Blackburn R (1997) *The Making of New World Slavery: From the Baroque to the Modern 1492–1800*. London: Verso.
- Boing Boing (2009) #16 posted by nanuq, 1 April. Available at: <http://m.boingboing.net/2009/04/01/pride-and-prejudice.html>.
- Booker C (2008) Is Obama really president or am I just watching a fantasy? It's almost too good to be true, *The Guardian*, 10 November. Available at www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2008/nov/10/barack-obama-zombies-running.
- Box Office Mojo (2002) *Resident Evil*. Available at: www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=residentevil.htm.
- Box Office Mojo (2008) *Twilight*. Available at: <http://boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=twilight08.htm>.

- CAPCOM (2004) *Capcom's million-selling series, Resident Evil, expanding to the Nintendo GameCube and Sony PlayStation2!* Available at: <http://www.capcom.co.jp/ir/english/news/pdf/e041101.pdf>.
- Cinerina (2007) *Fido*. Available at: www.cinerina.com/reviews/fido/.
- Comaroff J and Comaroff JL (2002) Alien nation: zombies, immigrants, and millennial capitalism. *South Atlantic Quarterly* 101(4): 779–805.
- Constantine JR (1966) The ignoble savage: an eighteenth century literary stereotype. *Phylon* 27(2): 171–179.
- Dayan J (1997) Vodoun, or the voice of the gods. In: Fernandez Olmos M and Paravisini-Gebert L (eds) *Sacred Possessions: Vodou, Santeria, Obeah, and the Caribbean*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 13–36.
- Dendle P (2007) The zombie as barometer of cultural anxiety. In: Scott N (ed.) *Monsters and the Monstrous: Myths and Metaphors of Enduring Evil*. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 45–56.
- Downey A (2009) Zones of indistinction: Giorgio Agamben's bare life and the politics of aesthetics. *Third Text* 223(2): 109–125.
- El Refaie E (2001) Metaphors we discriminate by: naturalized themes in Austrian newspaper articles about asylum seekers. *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 5(3): 352–371.
- Fraiman S (1995) Jane Austen and Edward Said: gender, culture, and imperialism. *Critical Inquiry* 21(4): 805–821.
- Grahame-Smith S and Austen J (2009) *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*. Philadelphia, PA: Quirk Books.
- Hockensmith S (2010) *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies: Dawn of the Dreadfuls*. Philadelphia, PA: Quirk Books.
- Loe T (1991) Patterns of the zombie in Jean Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea*. *Journal of Postcolonial Writing* 31(1): 34–42.
- Merritt S (2009) *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* by Jane Austen and Seth Grahame-Smith, *Observer*, 6 December. Available at: www.guardian.co.uk/books/2009/dec/06/pride-prejudice-zombies-grahame-smith.
- New York Daily News (2010) *The CW Television Network: Overview*. Available at: www.nydailynews.com/topics/The+CW+Television+Network.
- Ong A (2006) Mutations in citizenship. *Theory, Culture & Society* 23(2–3): 499–505.
- Pegg S (2008) The dead and the quick, the *Guardian*, 4 November. Available at: [www.guardian.co.uk/media/2008/nov/04/television-simon-pegg-Dead Set](http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2008/nov/04/television-simon-pegg-Dead+Set).
- Perera S (1991) *Reaches of Empire: The English Novel from Edgeworth to Dickens*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Pickering S (2001) Common sense and original deviancy: news discourses and asylum seekers in Australia. *Journal of Refugee Studies* 14(2): 169–186.
- Punter D and Byron G (2004) *The Gothic*. Malden, MA: Blackwell.
- Said E (1993) *Culture and Imperialism*. London: Chatto & Windus.
- Stratton J (2007) Dying to come to Australia: asylum seekers, tourists and deaths. In: Perera S (ed.) *Our Patch: Enacting Australian Sovereignty Post-2001*. Perth, WA: Network Books, 167–96.
- Stratton J (2009) 'Welcome to paradise': asylum seekers, neo-liberalism, nostalgia and Lucky Miles. *Continuum* 23(5): 629–645.
- Stratton J (forthcoming, 2011) Trouble with zombies: Muselmänner, bare life and displaced people. *Somatechnics* 1(1).
- The Horror Geek (2008) *Fido*. Available at: <http://thehorrorgeek.com/?p=496>.
- United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (2000) *The State of the Worlds Refugees 2000: Fifty Years of Humanitarian Action – Chapter 7: Asylum in the industrialized*

world. Available at: www.unhcr.org/cgi-bin/texis/vtx/search?page=search&docid=3ebf9bb10&query=asylum%20seekers%201960.

United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (2009) *Refugee Population by Origin 1960–2009*. Available at: <http://www.unhcr.org/pages/4a0174156.html>.

Biographical note

Jon Stratton is Professor of Cultural Studies at Curtin University. He has published broadly across cultural studies, Jewish studies, Australian studies and popular music studies. His research focus is on race and identity, and his most recent books are: *Britpop and the English Music Tradition* (edited with Andy Bennett, Ashgate, 2010), *Jews, Race and Popular Music* (Ashgate, 2009) and *Jewish Identity in Western Pop Culture: The Holocaust and Trauma through Modernity* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2008). He has also edited, with Suvendrini Perera, a special issue of the journal *Continuum* entitled *The Border, the Asylum Seeker and the State of Exception*. Currently, he is turning his essays on Australian neoliberalism and asylum-seekers into a book.