



Article

The walking dead and killing state: Zombification and the normalization of police violence

Theoretical Criminology

2014, Vol. 18(4) 506–527

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DOI: 10.1177/1362480614529455

tcr.sagepub.com



Travis Linnemann

Old Dominion University, USA

Tyler Wall

Eastern Kentucky University, USA

Edward Green

Kansas State University, USA

Abstract

In May 2012, police shot Rudy Eugene, a black man of Haitian decent, dead as he ‘ate the face’ of a homeless man on a deserted Miami causeway. Because of the strange gruesomeness of the attack and other similar violent acts, some in the media declared that a terrifying pandemic—the ‘zombie apocalypse’—had arrived. While this particular case may be yet another instance of mediated panic, we suggest cries of ‘zombies’ and ‘cannibals’ should not be dismissed as simply sensationalistic, irresponsible journalism. Rather, we see this case as a powerful example of the cultural production of a spectral sort of monstrosity that obscures and justifies police violence and state killing. As such, we argue that all of the contemporary ‘zombie talk’, usefully reveals how the logics of security, state violence and punitive disposability are imagined and reproduced as livable parts of late-capitalism.

Keywords

Ideology, police violence, security, state killing, zombification

Corresponding author:

Travis Linnemann, Old Dominion University, 6012 Batten Arts & Letters, Norfolk, VA 23529, USA.

Email: Travis.Linnemann@eku.edu

Yet the demons are not only the strangers that have come among us,
but the people who have become strangers.

(Jock Young, *The Exclusive Society*, 1999: 112)

The afternoon of 26 May 2012, police shot 31-year-old Rudy Eugene dead as he ‘ate the face’ of a homeless man on a deserted Miami causeway. Because of the bizarre gruesomeness of the attack, some in the news media immediately took to calling Eugene, a black man of Haitian decent, the ‘Miami Zombie’ and ‘Causeway Cannibal’ (Green and Burch, 2012). Five days later, a New Jersey man mutilated himself with a knife and ‘threw his skin and intestines’ at police (Naanes, 2012). That same day, in Maryland, a man confessed to eating the heart and brain of his murdered roommate. Later, another report emerged from China, leading some to declare a terrifying pandemic—a ‘zombie apocalypse’—had begun (Gutsche, 2013).

These events, however they actually happened, were a boon for an ever opportunistic and decadent news media. On the one hand, what ‘leads’ could ‘bleed’ more than reports of flesh eating maniacs who hurled their entrails at police? Yet on the other, ‘zombies’ summon the mysteries of life and death and thus fears far more profound than lurid tabloid sensationalism.¹ Given this, it should be of little surprise the media had a hand in actually raising the dead and yet quite troubling that it forecast a zombie apocalypse with such little sense of parody. That the end did not come at the rotting hands of an undead horde perhaps reveals the whole affair as yet another instance of media fueled panic. Certainly, descriptions of monstrous ‘zombified’ others, seem to fit the social reflex to look on in horror, rather than confront the proliferating insecurities of late-modern life. Still, as entwined as spectacle and spectator are, much of what the public consumes in this regard settles into a background of white noise made up of a collection of tired scapegoats and populations superfluous to the neoliberal social order (Greer and Jewkes, 2005). The ‘Miami Zombie’ and attendant ‘zombie apocalypse’ however, seem to have briefly escaped the murmuring background of mediated spectacle to animate a particular sort of violent monstrosity in the social imaginary. Here we witness the mediatized transformation of a mother’s religious son to—something unrecognizable²—the ‘Miami zombie’:

crouched over Ronald Poppo’s limp body, naked and growling, chewing off chunks of the man’s face. It took several bullets fired by a stunned police officer to stop him. At 31, the son who had carried a Bible, quoted scripture and worn a 4-inch cross on a chain around his neck had become *something unrecognizable* known across the nation as the Miami zombie.

(Green and Burch, 2012, emphasis added)

We must recognize reports of ‘zombies’ and ‘cannibals’ not only as salacious, thoughtless reporting, but also part of a larger ideological frame that normalizes state violence and conceals the fundamental inequalities of late capitalism. As such, our reading of the case helps detail the process of *zombification*—the politico-cultural production of those who in the words of Sharon Patricia Holland (2000: 15, quoted in Cacho, 2012: 7) ‘never achieve, in the eyes of others, the status of the living’—what we call the *walking dead*. In this reading, zombification is a long-standing practice of

white supremacy and the walking dead, its product. As bell hooks (1992: 168, quoted in Holland, 2000: 15) writes:

Reduced to the machinery of bodily physical labor, black people learned to appear before whites as though they were zombies, cultivating the habit of casting the gaze downward so as not to appear uppity. To look directly was an assertion of subjectivity, equality. Safety resided in the pretense of invisibility.

Some might also suggest that the walking dead as we conceive them here, bear close resemblance to *homo sacer* or 'bare life' (Agamben, 1998). That is, while (un)dead these zombified others exist outside the juridical order and protections of the state (Stratton, 2011). However, in what follows, we argue the walking dead do not simply 'exist' outside the benevolence of the state and social convention, but are active constituents in the fabrication and maintenance of state power (see Neocleous, 2000). Which is to say, the reproduction of police and state power occurs through 'legitimate' violence most often exercised against those dispossessed and 'socially dead' others like Rudy Eugene (see Cacho, 2012).

While there has been much written about the zombie in popular culture, we should be clear that our aim here is not necessarily to expand or critique this literature. Rather, we treat the spectacle of the 'zombie apocalypse' seriously in order to explore the ways in which ideological production reaffirms disparate social relations. Violent street-crimes, even those hidden within the so-called 'zombie apocalypse', are a convenient and durable symbol that stirs middle-class social anxieties that are in many ways analogous to those brought on by the rising inequalities and precarity of late-capitalism (see Cheliotis, 2013). Quite often however, the media presents and the public discusses violent crime ahistorically, as if it results simply from the pathology of the individual and bears no relation to broader structural inequalities. Cases such as this one are important then, because the ensuing media coverage often proposes and reinforces uncomplicated explanations for seemingly inexplicable behaviors. These shorthand schema, what we could call the 'quasi-criminological' or what Rafter (2007; Rafter and Brown, 2011) call 'popular criminology', help circulate and reinforce individual, rational and moral explanations for violent crimes, thereby impeding any sustained critique of existing social arrangements. As we will argue here, while the media and authorities failed to provide a suitable explanation for Rudy Eugene's violent outburst, they did effectively depoliticize and normalize his death at the hands of police. It is our aim then—by way of engaging the politics of zombification—to draw attention to and contest the ways in which the logics of security, state violence and punitive disposability are imagined and schematized as livable parts of late-capitalism. To accomplish this, we begin with a critical reading of the news media's coverage of the case to detail currents of insecurity sewn into the cultural production of zombification. We then situate zombification within a broader system of violence to detail the ways in which cultural production helps reaffirm race and class domination and the existing social order.

State killing, ideological production, zombification

Police violence is often difficult to recognize as anything but legitimate and necessary because it is a category of understanding produced and guaranteed by the state. For

example, a common rationalization for ‘police perpetrated homicides’ is that the victim was an immediate threat to the life of another (Hirschfield and Simon, 2010). And though several US courts³ have ruled that police actually bear no such responsibility, the supposed ‘duty to protect’ is routinely invoked to make police killings appear legitimate, necessary and within the boundaries of legally permitted force. Some suggest that police public relations departments foreground and sometimes fabricate ‘immediate danger’ and ‘duty to protect’ narratives in order to justify or obfuscate state killings (see Mawby, 2013). Likewise, reports elaborating an officer’s biography and connections to the community bolster ‘duty to protect’ logics, while accounts that a ‘suspect was shot’ without reporting who did the shooting or that euphemize killings as ‘deadly force’ are linguistic diversions which remove the actions of police and the act of state killing altogether. Most crucial for our purposes here, tales of the ‘evil’, ‘strange’ and ‘monstrous’ among us, exaggerate the perceived dangerousness of police work and encourage the public to evaluate police killings in stark ‘him or me’ terms (Sim, 2010). Together, these discursive ruses fashion what Slavoj Žižek (2008: 53) calls a ‘fetishistic disavowal’ in which the public glosses over the causes and consequences of state violence so that it may continue acting ‘as if it doesn’t know’. This was certainly the case with Rudy Eugene, as his street-level execution failed to generate any sustained criticism of police violence or police power more generally.

Despite the brutality of his attack, we must recall that Eugene was unarmed, in fact naked, when killed in a hail of bullets apparently so panicked, that his victim, Ronald Poppo received two gunshot wounds of his own (Owen, 2012). Here we can take the phrase ‘naked before the state’ quite literally, as the hasty decision to shoot to kill marked Rudy Eugene the embodiment of bare life. Yet, with some 2000⁴ people killed by US police in a so-called ‘justified’ and ‘justifiable’ manner in recent years, this case, however spectacular, exemplifies a routinized sort of state violence that too often passes into the white noise of the everyday—unquestioned and unchallenged.

We therefore treat Eugene’s case as an instance of state killing—a death of a person at the hands of state agents. From this vantage, zombification is not merely escapism or entertaining fantasy, but an ideological production that disowns very real, human, material circumstances and consequences. As such, we do not intend to argue the killing’s legality but rather confront the fetishistic disavowal of subjective violence and everyday state killing. Eugene’s case and the contemporary interest in zombies more generally are analytically useful as they demonstrate how obscene, sometimes laughable propositions excuse and normalize brutal violence. For instance, following the mass shooting at Newtown, Connecticut, zombies appeared in deliberations among members of the US Senate Judiciary Committee over questions of gun control. Perhaps a crude attempt to bring levity to volatile debates, Senator Patrick Leahy quipped, ‘maybe if zombies attacked, you might need a semiautomatic assault weapon for self-defense’ but short of that, he would be happy with his ‘.45 caliber at home’ (Chang, 2013). This sort of ironic distancing—making light of the brutality of slaughtered children through the absurdity of a ‘zombie apocalypse’—props up and reproduces long-standing systems of ideological thinking. Žižek (2011: 3, emphasis added) writes:

Ideology is not constituted by abstract propositions in themselves, rather, ideology is itself this very texture of the lifeworld which ‘schematizes’ the propositions, rendering them ‘livable.’

Take military ideology for instance: it becomes 'livable' only against the background of the obscene unwritten rules and rituals (marching chants, fragging, sexual innuendo ...) in which it is embedded. Which is why, if there is an ideological experience at its purest, at its zero-level, then it occurs the moment we adopt an attitude of ironic distance, *laughing at the follies in which we are ready to believe*—it is at this moment of liberating laughter, when we look down on the absurdity of our faith, that we become pure subjects of ideology.

Through the lens of the obscene and absurd, we see that all the talk of apocalypse—and the zombification of Rudy Eugene—as a once laughable proposition, rendered somehow more livable. That some were more willing to entertain zombified fantasies than they were to question and challenge circumstances that left Eugene dead and Poppo disfigured, reveals the force and effect of such thinking. What zombification schematizes and renders livable then, is a particular sort of enemy, an unrecognizable, killable other, seen as the fodder for police and state violence. As Matthew Shepherd, author of the zombie-themed graphic novel, *Dead Eyes Open*, put it, zombies provide a very simple dynamic—us versus them.

The thing about zombies is they are, in some ways, the perfect tool to establish a really simple dynamic. If you want to tell a story about 'us versus them' they are not like us and they must be destroyed. Zombies are really at base, the simplest way to do it. So, Zombies become some of the last bastion of an easy way to find an enemy, fight and kill, and feel really good about fighting and killing.

(Davies, 2008)

If the popularity of the genre lies in its ability to allow the public to fantasize about killing a monstrous 'them', as Shepherd suggests, we must seriously question whether this logic encourages a similar sort of violence in the real and the everyday. Thus, our focus here is not only on what was rendered livable in the rush to report on and view the 'zombie apocalypse' but also what promises to settle into the background of the everyday as the 'Miami Zombie' recedes from memory.

'The unraveling of Rudy Eugene'⁵

Beyond the absurdity of a zombie apocalypse, the coverage of Eugene's case is important because of the simplified explanations given for his violent attack on Ronald Poppo. Like quasi-criminological theories sewn into scripts of television crime dramas and Hollywood films, these explanations, what Rafter and Brown (2011) call popular criminology, also grow from speculation strewn across the pages of newsprint and the off-hand comments and best-guesses of 'expert' commentators. Focusing our analysis on the quasi-criminological, we reviewed the balance of the new media's coverage of the case and identified three different, yet entwined explanations for Eugene's attack on Poppo.⁶ Underlying Eugene's mediatized zombification is a risk-crazed⁷ focus on his 'abnormal normality', the transformative power of illicit drugs and the supernatural Gothic. While unique in their own right, each of the quasi-criminological explanations that we document is structured by the unknown and thus characteristic of the insecurities of contemporary social life. As Leonidas Cheliotis (2013: 252) has recently argued, the punishment

and imprisonment of ‘violent street criminals’ provides a means of catharsis for the stubborn middle-class anxieties of life under late-capitalism. We argue Eugene’s street-level execution enables a similar sort of catharsis, the violence of which is obscured by his mediatized zombification. To that end, the following traces the unconscious expressions and justifications for state killings entwined with the zombification of Rudy Eugene.

*The ‘zombie’ next door*⁸

In the wake of Anders Breivik’s assault on a Norwegian youth camp that left 77 people dead, an acquaintance of the killer offered a familiar, now almost obligatory observation, ‘it was very, very strange. *He just seemed like a normal, nice guy*’ (Kelly, 2011, emphasis added). Like Breivik and countless others who emerged from the crowd only after some terrible act, much of the ‘Miami Zombie’ coverage described Eugene as a ‘fairly ordinary guy’ before his crimes made him ‘infamous’. From the *Miami Herald*: ‘Before Rudy Eugene became infamous, he was a fairly ordinary guy—he liked sports, fast cars and action movies. But even those closest to him say Eugene was introspective and private’ (Green and Burch, 2012). Even family and friends, it appears, were left struggling with Rudy’s apparent transformation from everyman to monster, leaving many not only grasping for an explanation, but also battling for his humanity. A friend pleaded:

I am shocked by the situation. I don’t know what to say about it, how to interpret it, how to express it. The only thing I know for sure is Rudy was something other than this monster people talk about.

(Green and Burch, 2012)

As pop-psychologist Martha Stout (2006) argues in her widely discussed book, *The Sociopath Next Door* a frightening proportion—one in 25 people—of remorseless, predatory ‘sociopaths’ circulate in the banalities of the everyday. The vision of social life sketched by Stout—one teeming with sadistic corporate managers and killers ‘possessed of blood lust’ who murder on a whim—provides a familiar and somehow comforting conceptual frame for the public to understand Eugene’s brutal and seemingly unprovoked attack on Poppo. Rather than confronting the myriad social and psychological forces that could produce such violence, Stout’s theory suggests that many among us are simply hidden monsters waiting to act out terribly. Here the most awful crimes, indeed all tragedies, reduce to simple chance, and no matter the preparation, when your number is up—your number is up.⁹ Yet as familiar and oddly comforting as the ‘sociopath next door’ trope may be, we see something else at work here. By highlighting an utterly normal complexion exploded by terrifying violence, cases like Eugene’s reveal the power and pervasiveness of the cultural logics of insecurity and security. By falling back to Eugene’s normality, media accounts such as these support a vision of criminality closely aligned with contemporary visions of the lone wolf gunman or terrorist, that is, an all-pervading threat that is nearly impossible to predict, locate or prevent. Anonymous, loosely affiliated or lone wolf actors pose a daunting task for the security state and are at the center of increasingly invasive anti-terror measures. For instance, the aptly named

'lone wolf provision' of the United States Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act allows the law enforcement to monitor those thought to be preparing for a terrorist act, even if they have no proven connection to terrorist organizations (Spaaij, 2010). Following this logic, critics argue, all are suspect and potential lone wolf actors. The implications of this risk crazed thinking are frightening. Indeed if Eugene, described by those who knew him as 'normal' and 'nice', could act out so violently and unpredictably, then every stranger on the street could be a 'zombie' waiting to rise from a grave of anonymity. Assuming violent monstrosity hidden behind a facade of banality also draws interesting connections to the 'abnormally normal' conception of serial killers (Seltzer, 1998). As a psychiatrist testified during the trial of 'the quiet man in apartment 213', Jeffrey Dahmer, 'dress him in a suit and he looks like 10 other men' (Seltzer, 1998: 10).

As with lone wolves and serial killers, the cultural logics of pervasive danger and unknowable monstrosity are clearly represented by the zombie. Launched by the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) months before the zombie apocalypse exploded onto the scene, a public service advertisement campaign engaged zombies as the ideal figure of unpredictability, risk and danger (Figure 1). From a CDC press release:

The rise of zombies in pop culture has given credence to the idea that a zombie apocalypse could happen. In such a scenario zombies would take over entire countries, roaming city streets eating anything living that got in their way. The proliferation of this idea has led many people to wonder 'How do I prepare for a zombie apocalypse?'

Here zombies stand in for more knowable and thinkable dangers of environmental disaster and non-state terrorism. As a CDC official (2012) reasoned, 'If you are generally well equipped to deal with a zombie apocalypse you will be prepared for a hurricane, pandemic, earthquake, or terrorist attack.'

Again proving the zombie's cultural import, followers of CDC's Twitter feed jumped from around 12,000 to 1.2 million followers just one day after the campaign's launch (Bell, 2011). While it may provide the CDC a hip up-to-date take on disaster preparedness, success of the program also presupposes that some do not consider prospects of a zombie apocalypse pure fantasy. As one 'zombieophile' interviewed in the days following Eugene's case urged, 'Zombies, they might happen. Vampires, werewolves, they ain't going to happen. There is a lot more suspension of disbelief. *But zombies could happen*' (Williams, 2012: 1C, emphasis added). In fact, in the midst of Eugene's case, so widespread were fears of zombie attacks, the CDC released an official statement denying knowledge of any condition that would reanimate the dead or present zombie-like symptoms in the living (DeJohn, 2012: 14).

This sort of necrophobic anxiety extends beyond the CDC's tongue-in-cheek attempts at responsibilization. For instance, Halo Corporation, a private security firm with several US government contracts recently held what it described as a 'groundbreaking, multi-jurisdictional, counter-terrorism summit' to train the 'entire range of national security stakeholders' (Watson, 2012). The centerpiece of the three-day event was a 'drill' organized around an imagined zombie apocalypse. Defending the drill as a 'very real exercise, not some type of big costume party', Brad Barker, president of Halo Corp, argued that 'everything that will be simulated at this event has already happened, it just hasn't happened all at once on the same night' (Watson, 2012). Regardless of the veracity of

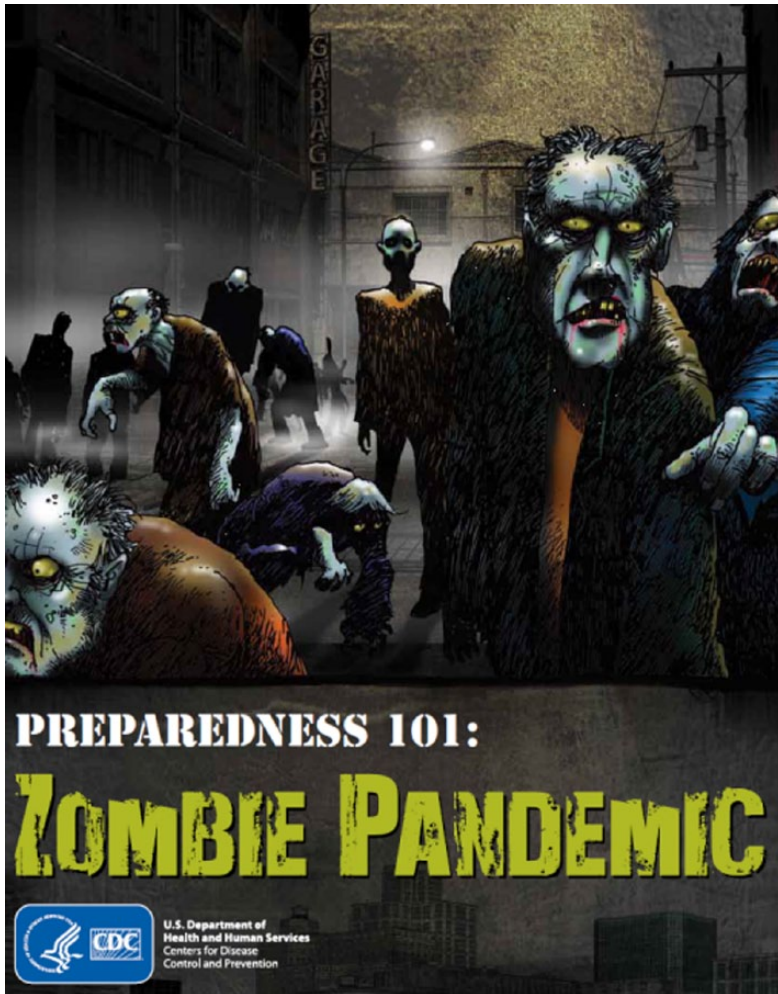


Figure 1. CDC 'zombie preparedness' campaign.

Barker's assertion, for him zombies are the perfect planning tool, a lone-wolf danger that is somewhere out there, yet completely unknowable and unpredictable. So, as both Barker and the CDC jokingly suggest, if 'prepared for the zombie apocalypse you will be prepared for anything' we warn an insidious violence—if *you can kill a zombie, you can kill anyone*—underpins the current fascination with zombies and the zombification of Rudy Eugene.

The drugged and walking dead¹⁰

It should come as no surprise that running through all of the reports on zombies and cannibals were threads of a rather mundane drug panic. In this case, law enforcement and

news media focused on a nascent family of synthetic stimulants known colloquially as 'bath salts'. An article written by celebrity physician 'Dr Oz' for a late May 2011 edition of *Time* magazine was just one of many media reports in circulation at the time to warn of the drug. Despite a clear lack of evidence, the article, 'Bath salts: Evil lurking in your corner store' described it as a 'supercharged instrument of suffering' and a 'pharmacological hell' linking it to a host of health problems, violent behavior and suicide (Oz, 2011). Law enforcement was in concert with tabloid media, distributing safety bulletins nationwide warning officers of the violent, unpredictability of bath salts users. One bulletin, published by the Ohio Strategic Analysis and Information [fusion] Center, reported 27 cases where officers 'used force' on 'hostile, violent, unpredictable, out of control, paranoid and reckless' subjects 'high on bath salts'. Given reports of users 'having unusual superhuman strength' and being able to 'shoot off the ground' like a 'flash of light', we can make better sense of how events in Miami unfolded as they did later that year (SAIC, 2012). On 23 May, just three days before the 'Miami Zombie' made headlines around the world, Rick Scott, Governor of Florida, signed a law¹¹ criminalizing bath salts and synthetic cannabis. Amid the anguish over bath salts, apparently only a passing mention was needed to link Rudy Eugene to the drug and the rash of 'zombified' behaviors that followed. In an interview with *ABC News* just three days after Eugene's killing, Armando Aguilar, President of the Miami Fraternal Order of Police, flippantly remarked:

The [bath salts] cases are similar minus a man eating another. People taking off their clothes. People suddenly have super human strength. They become violent and they are burning up for the inside. Their organs are reaching a level that most would die. By the time police approach them they are a *walking dead person*.

(Tienabeso, 2012, emphasis added)

The link between Eugene and bath salts apparently played well with the public as it originated here and was reproduced as fact by the national media. We should not take Aguilar's speculative diagnosis as coincidence, however. According to journalist Frank Owen, the drug was a convenient dodge to defuse the volatility of a black man's killing at the hands of a Hispanic police officer. Owen (2012) suggests:

Nobody could say this wasn't a good shooting. Aguilar thought. Ramirez had a clean record, and this was the first time he had used his weapon in his four years with the department. Still, the fact remained that a Hispanic officer had shot an unarmed black man in a city with a long history of racially charged police killings. Aguilar was well aware of the ongoing Department of Justice investigation into the Miami Police Department: Hispanic cops had fatally shot seven African American civilians in the span of eight months. The shootings raised tensions in a city already known as a racial tinderbox.

If Owen is correct, Miami police quite literally fabricated the 'bath salts' connection and hence the zombification of Rudy Eugene, to obfuscate and diffuse an instance of state killing. Even without such motivations, this sort of drug driven expurgation has been in use by news media and authorities for quite some time. In fact, many of the initial reports invoked the history of past drug panics describing bath salts as the 'new LSD' (Gwynne,

2012). Today, law enforcement and the security industry, represented here again by Barker and Halo Corporation, circulate similar myths about the transformative power of illicit drugs. Barker argues:

No one knows what the zombies will do in our scenario, but quite frankly no one knows what a terrorist will do. If a law enforcement officer sees a zombie and says, 'Freeze, get your hands in the air!' What's the zombie going to do? He's going to moan at you. If someone on PCP or some other psychotic drug is told that, the truth is he's not going to react to you.

(Watson, 2012)

Here, the cultural logics of security arrange familiar dangers (terrorists and drug users) under the edifice of the zombie—a mimetic, *killable* enemy. Following Eugene's case, more 'cannibal attacks' in the 'zombie drugs plague' dotted mediascapes worldwide. One such incident involved a man who allegedly growled, 'I'm going to eat you' at officers attempting to reign him in. According to reports:

A drifter high on drugs was put in a Hannibal Lecter-style mask after threatening to eat two police officers in a new cannibal attack in the United States. Brandon de Leon is believed to have taken 'bath salts' just like Rudy Eugene who ate 75% of homeless man Ronald Poppo's face in Miami and only stopped when police shot and killed him.

(Thompson, 2012b)

The 'new' drug said to transform 'drifters' into 'Hannibal Lecter' fashions a narrative where big budget Hollywood movies bleed into the routine—where everyday life becomes the stuff of nightmares. Troubling the lines between fantasy and reality, the Miami Zombie maps the liminal spaces where the 'street scripts the screen and the screen scripts the street' (Hayward and Young, 2004: 259).

Despite panicked screams of cannibalism, in the end, medical examiners found no flesh in Eugene's digestive system. Some weeks later, toxicologists also dismissed the bath salts connection, finding only trace amounts of marijuana in Eugene's tissue. These facts have failed to dispel the link between bath salts and violent behavior, further underscoring the power and resilience of myth in the punitive imagination. When confronted with Eugene's toxicology reports, Aguilar remained incredulous, insisting:

I still believe there was something else in Rudy Eugene's system other than marijuana that the medical examiner didn't detect. There was definitely something there, something we just can't test for yet, maybe a new form of bath salts or maybe even a completely new compound that we don't know about.

(Owen, 2012)

Aguilar's stubborn refusal to admit there wasn't 'something else' in Eugene's system illustrates how useful, in fact crucial, drugs are in the justification of police violence. Following the videotaped beating of Rodney King for instance, a LAPD spokesperson



Figure 2. District of Columbia Department of Health 'Fake Weed' public service advertisement.

speculated that King 'may have been dusted' (on PCP) as if King's intoxication would somehow excuse his brutalization (Baker, 1993: 42).

Aguilar's allusions to 'something else' bear something more sinister however. Like King, Eugene's case shows the imagining of drug use is a possession of sorts—a gateway into the supernatural. As some have recently described, methamphetamine users circulate in the insecure and punitive imagination as 'meth zombies' and 'shadow people'—supernatural monstrosities indeed (Linnemann and Wall, 2013). More recently, the District of Columbia Department of Public Health launched a public service advertisement campaign warning of the dangers of 'fake weed' (Figure 2). Taking a cue from the CDC, the campaign exploits the current zombie craze, situating its grotesque aesthetic at the center of a familiar fear-appeal drug control campaign. As these and many other examples attest, zombification is an increasingly visible and popular analytic for subjective degradation, monstrosity and social disposability.

Zombification and the powers of horror¹²

Unable to arrive at a suitable explanation and perhaps spurred on by Eugene's Haitian ancestry, many, even those closest him, pondered supernatural explanations for his attack. His girlfriend explains:

What happened to Rudy had to be supernatural, something humans cannot explain, something that leaves us with a lot of questions. I just wish he would come to me in a dream and answer all the questions. I wish he would tell me what happened that day.

(Green and Burch, 2012)

Somewhere in the dreamland of Eugene's abnormal normality, the mystery of his motivations and the blood and gore of his attack, are boundaries of the Gothic. Here we glimpse crime's symbolic core—its horrific energies and affects—in this case 'demons' that 'came out' of Rudy Eugene on a deserted Miami causeway. As another of Eugene's

bewildered friends speculated: ‘Drugs can open the gateway to the demons inside of you. Whatever he took open[ed] that gateway and a demon came out. Whatever he was fighting, it came out. I believe in spiritual battles. *I believe in demons*’ (Green and Burch, 2012, emphasis added).

Characterized by darkness, grisly rotting flesh and ravenous cannibalism, zombies are perhaps the ultimate Gothic monsters (Neocleous, 2005: 134). Rising from almost every corner of social life—from uniformed police to schoolchildren—the shambling herds of rotting bodies imagined by contemporary zombie films are a demographic cross-section and thus a faceless homogeneity. Indeed, as author of the book *Zombiemanía* notes, zombies ‘are the closest type of monster to us. They are us and we are them’ (Williams, 2012: 1C). In this way, zombies are endlessly mimetic—everyone and no one at all, everywhere and nowhere—a ghostly, spectral, monstrosity (see Neocleous, 2005). As such, zombification perhaps broadens, transcends or encloses criminalizations built on racial stereotypes and the ambiguities of intersectionality (see Nash, 2008). Yet as a cause of Eugene’s violent outburst however, the Gothic is no explanation at all, but something beyond human sight and understanding (Valier, 2002: 320).

Still it is not only the unknown and supernatural, but bloody gruesomeness and subjective violence of the attack that conjures the Gothic. As one shocked onlooker described, ‘he was like a zombie. It was intense. He was tearing the other man to pieces with his mouth. There was blood everywhere. It was really horrific’ (Thompson, 2012a). Highlighting the cultural fascination with ripped flesh and splayed bodies—what some describe as ‘wound culture’—cases such as this reveal or perhaps fashion a ‘pathological public sphere’ where private fantasy and sociality coalesce around the spectacle of blood and gore (see Seltzer, 1998). As he had done previously with unfounded speculation about bath salts, Aguilar animated the spectacle of the Miami Zombie with vivid descriptions of Poppo’s wounds: ‘His mouth, his nose and his ears were ripped off ... In my 30 years as a cop, I’ve never seen anything like this’ (Gray, 2012). Here the violence of the attack and gruesomeness of the wounds underpin a collective trauma that justifies Eugene’s street-level execution. In that, when confronted with a possessed, ravenous zombie ‘tearing another man to pieces’ the assumption is that police have no choice other than to shoot and kill. Yet it is this uncritical assumption that renders Eugene killable, obscures the act of killing and shields individual officers and police power from public scrutiny.

Moving away from Eugene’s biography and the mystery of his motivations, reports focused on the gore of Poppo’s wounds and resilient character further animate the collective affective dimensions of the crime and embolden the cultural logics of killability. For instance:

The homeless drifter whose face was largely eaten by the ‘Miami Zombie’ was once a brainy 1964 graduate of New York’s prestigious Stuyvesant High School. It was a long road from being one of the city’s smartest and most driven kids to lounging under a Florida bridge Saturday, when a maniac attacked him at random in one of the most gruesome crimes on record.

(Kennedy, 2012)

Like Eugene, a young man with a hardscrabble past and uncertain future, Ronald Poppo was unrecognized by a public that passed him on the street and unrecognizable to a

family who wondered whether he was even alive. It was not until the media and certain sectors of the public figuratively hoisted him on their shoulders as the resilient survivor of a horrific crime that he became anything more than a member of the walking dead in his own right. Giving a human—however mangled—face to Eugene's monstrosity, Poppo represented a particular understanding of grievable and resilient victims of violent crime (see Butler, 2006).

Underpinning the anxious concern for Poppo's recovery is what Mark Neocleous (2012: 189) calls a 'training in resilience' that hardens the public to the spectacle of violent crime. That is, viewing the spectacle through Poppo's eyes as victim, we are encouraged to ignore his very real suffering and focus only on his ability to survive the attack. For a profligate news media, Poppo is simply a victim-commodity. For the state, Poppo is a grievable victim who justifies and disavows the unremitting violence of police power. The irony is that the state—city governments and local police—has reinvigorated its techniques of banishment to ensure the dispossessed remain invisible (Beckett and Herbert, 2009). Yet as survivor of the 'Miami Zombie' Ronald Poppo is no longer a faceless member of the walking dead, but a symbol of the public's collective fears and of its desires to triumph over and destroy the underserving and 'evil'.

The cathartic affects of violence, trauma and symbolic victimization perhaps come better into view when considering how the voyeuristic public treats the suffering of offenders' families and friends. After four different churches turned her away, Rudy's mother, Ruth Charles was forced to hold his funeral in the chapel of a local funeral home. Still struggling for his humanity, she publically pleaded, 'Everybody says that he was a zombie, but I know he's not a zombie; he's my son' (Green, 2012). No obituary mourned Rudy Eugene; the circumstances of his life were left to fade into the spectacle of a bizarre crime, along with his identity as a son and brother. This is important, as public mourning is a way to recognize the life lost, but also the suffering of those who remain (Butler, 2006). By denying Eugene the status of the living, the public also failed to recognize the fundamental human dignity and moral equality of his family (Yar, 2012: 59). It is this sort of dehumanizing and ironic distancing at work in ideological production, which transforms the pain of others into absurd spectacles such as a zombie apocalypse. From the *Miami Herald*:

You'd think a face-eating naked man shot dead along the postcard blue landscape of the MacArthur Causeway would be bad for tourism, but not in our steamy Magic City. We've developed crocodile skin when it comes to police news, no matter how dehumanizing, and now we embrace our wackiness. History and our fine-tuned reputation as a storyteller's paradise have taught us that how 31-year-old Rudy Eugene met his maker—shot by police after he bit off most of a man's face right next to the Miami Herald building, the scene creating a hellish traffic jam—is the kind of news that draws tourists and filmmakers like mosquitoes to standing water.

(Santiago, 2012)

Here, Eugene's encounter with Poppo 'no matter how dehumanizing' is just another bit of 'police news' filling the 24-hour news cycle. And with an armored 'crocodile skin' sort of indifference and the liberating laughter Žižek (2011) describes, the public is encouraged to dismiss the whole affair—Poppo's disfigurement, Eugene's execution, the

suffering of friends and family and horrors of spectators—as ‘the kind of [wacky] news’ that might inspire a film or at least lure tourists. And with that, Rudy Eugene’s humanity dissolved into the Gothic horrors of an unrecognizable, killable monster—the ‘Miami Zombie’.

The walking dead and killing state

While exactly what led Rudy Eugene to act out so violently is unclear and may remain a mystery, critical reflection on the quasi-criminological underpinnings of the case details the ways in which zombification works to normalize state violence and a sort of ‘guilt free’ killability. As Trevor Fencott, maker of the zombie themed ‘Land of the Dead’ video game suggests, ‘zombies are an absolutely no guilt snack. You can put them down and because they’re already dead, you need not feel guilty about them’ (Davies, 2008). While this comment is necessarily useful, it is important to be clear that we do not conceive the walking dead simply as metaphor, but rather the literal embodiment of those dispossessed and socially dead others borne of late-capitalism.

As worldwide financial collapse looms, the once contented American middle-class, long ensconced in the securities of stable employment, health care and home ownership, is increasingly aware of its own precariousness and perhaps even more aware of a growing rank boiling beneath them.¹³ Fencott again offers:

We live in a world where you consume fast food and you’re irradiated with cell phone waves and you’re really under assault all the time. I think in many ways we feel like zombies ... Rather than a demonic force that possessed someone and they’re hanging out in the graveyard. They’re not in the graveyard anymore. The graveyard is a very religious thing. Zombies are now in your shopping mall.

(Davies, 2008)

Though once animated by pre-modern fears of god and nature, as insatiable consumers wandering shopping malls, zombies remind all they too may one day confront or join the walking dead and other threatening, flawed consumers cut adrift by late-capitalist precarity (see Hall et al., 2008; Hayward and Yar, 2006; Lauro and Embry, 2008). The entwinements of zombification and widespread social (in)security are further evidenced by a groundswell of ‘doomsday’ survivalists and ‘zombie preppers’. One such prepper and member of an ‘Anti-Zombie Militia’ interviewed for the Discovery Channel’s ‘Zombie Apocalypse’ had this to say about a government bio-research facility set to relocate to his town:

I live about five minutes away from where the proposed facility is. There is a high possibility of having some kind of zombie outbreak with a bio-lab that’s being moved in here. We formed together to be a preparation group. We are a group of individuals with different skills, some of us, ex-military, police officers, people trained in firefighting, paramedics. Home is supposed to be where you feel safe at. *I no longer feel safe, knowing that something like this is coming at me.*

(Discovery, 2012, emphasis added)

This sort of necrophobic apocalypticism buoys a vibrant market for all manner of zombieified weapons and gear. One such offering is ‘Zombie Max Ammunition’, that according to its manufacturer, ‘is for the Zombie apocalypse’ and ‘use on Zombies only’ (Hornady, 2012). From ammunition to ‘zombie proof’ cars and condominiums, threats of zombification, however absurd are a boon for capital (see McNally, 2012).¹⁴ This collage of spectacular violence and commodified security, what Žižek might call the obscene underside of American popular culture—the collective unconscious, the real of our desires—permits the punitive and voyeuristic public to fantasize about killing what it fears (see Žižek, 1992). Through this lens, the killing of Rudy Eugene, a young man of Haitian ancestry from inner-city Miami, can quite literally be read as the street-level execution of a young black, inner-city, drug using ‘monster’.

Masked by the absurd, obscene and spectacular, zombification enables further violent scapegoating of those dispossessed, non-white and working poor subjects historically brutalized by police power. In fact, recalling Owen’s (2012) accusation that the ‘bath salts’ link was engineered to diffuse the volatility of yet another black man killed by Miami police, we might argue that zombification depoliticized Eugene, rendering him effectively raceless (see Fields and Fields, 2012). This is where zombification appears particularly dangerous, as the underlying themes—unknowable and inescapable danger, drug fueled transformation and Gothic monstrosity—offer no explanatory power, but do reinforce a variety of fears, misguided assumptions and superstitions. Clearly, the zombie represents a particularly monstrous and racialized other. To zombify, is to conceal the violence and dehumanization of the existing racial order. Yet, we also suggest zombification is a cultural imaginary that may perhaps expand the logics of killability beyond skin color and other racial signifiers. That is, while clearly invoking disparate racial logics, the zombie’s mimesis also schematizes a broader understanding of killability to include all those socially excluded and dispossessed others on the business end of police and state violence. Indeed, as Gerry Canavan (2010) suggests, the figure of the zombie represents both the racially abject, invisible and immaterial labor of the Third World and the unproductive labor and flawed consumption of the First (Canavan, 2010: 450).

If authorities and news media offered explanations for crimes such as this, linked directly to the history of racialized violence and broad structural inequities, then the public spectacle of violent acts could necessarily foment rejection of existing socio-economic arrangements (see Cheliotis, 2013). As this case details however, zombification effectively depoliticizes the act of killing and obscures the ways in which violence secures bourgeois social order. As the Halo security training and to a lesser degree the CDC preparedness campaign show, the depoliticization of zombification is not confined to cases like Eugene’s. Consider for instance the article ‘Firearms training for when the “zombies” attack’. Written by a police firearms instructor, the article outlines several scenarios meant to help police hone ‘key skills [they] might use in a real gunfight’ by bringing ‘Hollywood to the range’ in the form of an imagined zombie attack. Recommending targets (see Figure 3) depicting zombies attacking ‘innocent people’¹⁵ the author suggests his ‘good-old-fashioned zombie shoot’ will encourage officers to ‘have fun’ and ‘use [their] imaginations’. Here quite clearly we see the imaginative production of ‘criminals’ as the killable walking dead. And though he is clear to remind officers it is ‘unlikely they would have to shoot real zombies any time soon’ the instructor nevertheless conceals the horrific act of



Figure 3. Zombie firearms training target.

shooting and killing other human beings within the tone-deaf humor and banal absurdity of a ‘zombie attack’ (Campbell, 2011). If we continue to view the figure of the zombie as fantasy and amusing gimmick as this author does, then it is likely to remain as such. However, if we resist adopting an attitude of indifference and ironic distance and take more seriously the words and actions of police and the state, then we may perhaps better reckon zombification as the ‘very texture of the life world’ which renders livable, in fact celebrates state killing (Žižek, 2011: 3).

Radical critique of ideology allows us to see that Eugene’s killing, though hidden within the absurd spectacle of zombification, is no different than other police killings,

even those openly challenged by an outraged public. For instance, consider the 1999 killing of Amadou Diallo, an unarmed Guinean immigrant who died in front of his Bronx apartment building in a 41 shot barrage launched by NYPD officers and the 2006 killing of Sean Bell, who died in a hail of 50 rounds fired by NYPD officers, who like those in the Diallo killing, were cleared of any wrongdoing. The obscene overkill of 91 rounds spent to ostensibly 'protect' the public from two unarmed black men seems more reminiscent of a Hollywood horror film than the material realities of crime control in the contemporary United States. Yet we should be clear that these and countless other killings do not represent some unfortunate circumstances or the indiscriminate violence of a few 'bad apples'. Rather, Diallo, Bell, Eugene—all police perpetrated homicides—expose the violent fantasies animating police power (Martinot and Sexton, 2003). That is, we should not dismiss police violence solely as the misdeeds of a few officers, nor should we assume that the spectacle of the 'Miami Zombie' reflects *only* the unconscious desires of a voyeuristic public. Rather, we must see the actions of police and public as entwined and inseparable from the unconscious desires of criminal justice and the state itself.

It is the 'institutional unconscious' that for Žižek 'designates the obscene disavowed underside that, precisely as disavowed, sustains the public institution' (Žižek, 2008: 168). Put differently, the act of killing—zombie or unarmed immigrant—allows policing as a symbolic institution to reaffirm and sustain itself. First, exercising its monopoly on legitimate violence, policing demonstrates its ability to 'protect' and 'secure' the public by annihilating violence and danger in effigy. It is here that even the most brutal *and* banal violence is disavowed, depoliticized and normalized in the name of security (see Neocleous, 2008). Even in cases where evidence is too damning to deny, prosecuting and punishing the offenders helps policing seem reflexive and faithful to its ethos of 'protect and serve'. Through the eternal demand for security and its superficial reforms, the violence of police power endures. For these reasons, we can say that police killings are no last resort of a 'thin blue line', nor are they an unfortunate outcome of human error or weakness. Rather, we must see police killings as elemental to police power and a fundamental practice of the *killing state* (see Sarat and Shoemaker, 2011). As the cruel announcement 'Dead Man Walking!' traditionally bellowed by prison guards escorting condemned prisoners to their deaths reveals, the walking dead is a category of material existence fashioned by state power, in which physical death is a mere formality. In the death house, on city streets and terrains of distant battlefields, the state—the final arbiter of life and death—generates its sovereign power through its killable subjects (Foucault, 2003; Mbembé, 2003). The violence administered by its police and prisons is not 'volatile and contradictory' then (see O'Malley, 1999), but rather the routine death dealing practices of the US killing state as it (re)produces sovereign power by securing insecurity (Neocleous, 2008).

For some reason, Rudy Eugene tore Ronald Poppo's body and life apart. As brutal as the attack was, it does not excuse the spectacle that ensued. In the crime's aftermath, there was little discussion of use of force policies or 'less than lethal' technologies and virtually no reflection on the fact that police killed a naked, unarmed man. Rather, media, police and public wrote it off as another of the innumerable dangers of modern life, offering instead contemptible 'explanations' of drug-induced and supernatural zombification.

And whether it was met with panic or laughter, the ‘apocalypse’ was a boon for capital as ‘real’ zombies riled the insecure imaginary.

‘Spectacle is a form of camouflage. It does not conceal anything; it simply renders it *unrecognizable*’ (Martinot and Sexton, 2003: 174, emphasis added). As such, zombification is simply the latest veneer to adorn timeless fears and animus, as George Romero, forerunner of the contemporary zombie genre seems to suggest: ‘[Zombies] could be anything. They could be an avalanche, they could be a hurricane. It’s a disaster out there. The stories are about how people fail to respond in the proper way’ (DiGuido, 2012). Yet hidden by the ‘failure to respond properly’ is the sadomasochist marriage of the state and its subjects (Cheliotis, 2013). While the sadistic execution of a ‘violent street criminal’ may provide a modicum of relief from the terrors of life under late-capitalism, for the uncritical public, this catharsis comes at the price of having to disavow the contradictions and inequalities of the present social order. As Frank Moretti (1982: 68) writes:

Fascinated by the horror of the monster, the public accepts the vices of its destroyer without a murmur, just as it accepts his literary depiction, the jaded and repetitive typology which regains its strength and its virginity on contact with the unknown. The monster, then, serves to displace the antagonisms and horrors evidenced within society to outside society itself.

Awash in the horror of the present, the public masochistically accept the many failings of the state and its police. It may be that all who are locked into such a relationship are zombified. Mindlessly devouring the material *and* ideological, *homo consumens* are the ideal subjects of late-capitalism (Cheliotis, 2013: 255). And those state agents who kill without question or conscience are beasts of burden—(un)dead labor in the service of a wicked master (see Comaroff and Comaroff, 2002). Police power will always be in the service of the social order that authorizes it. To reject police violence and state killing is also to reject existing social arrangements. For us, this rejection however monumental, begins with the critique of ideology. Yet we are not necessarily hopeful that the public will awaken from its own zombification and better recognize the pain and suffering of life under late-capitalism, because after all, zombies do not suffer, they are already dead.

Acknowledgment

The authors wish to thank Jessica Jones, Brandon Lutman and the anonymous reviewers for their contributions to earlier drafts of this paper.

Notes

1. Leonidas Cheliotis (2013: 257) calls this the ‘inner psychic resonance’ of human mortality.
2. We use *unrecognizable* here to denote a particular form of monstrosity, as does Derrida (2010). We also recognize that this draws interesting links to the politics of misrecognition (see Cacho, 2012 and Thompson and Yar, 2011).
3. See *Warren v. District of Columbia* (444 A.2d. 1, DC Ct of Ap. 1981); *Castle Rock v. Gonzales* (545 US 748, 2005); *Balistreri v. Pacifica Police Department* (23 August 1988); *DeShaney v. Winnemago County* (22 February 1989).
4. Uniform Crime Reports (2011) *Crime in the US 2011*. Expanded Homicide Data Table 14. Available at: <http://www.fbi.gov/about-us/cjis/ucr/crime-in-the-u.s/2011/crime-in-the-u.s.-2011/>

tables/expanded-homicide-data-table-14.

5. Title of an article published by the *Miami Herald*, 14 July 2012.
6. To gather data for our case, we performed a number of LexisNexis Academic searches with several combinations of key words: 'Rudy Eugene'; 'Miami Zombie'; and 'Miami Cannibal'. After eliminating articles that did not pertain to Eugene, we identified 134 articles published between 25 May 2012 and 22 March 2013. Using a grounded approach, we read each thoroughly, concentrating on the various explanations offered for Eugene's attack on Poppo.
7. Pat Carlen (2008) uses the term 'risk-crazed' to describe a mode of governance that cherishes and employs social insecurity in a way that it often outstrips its ability to reassure a worried public and provide 'security'.
8. Twenty (14.9 percent) of the articles countered discussions of Eugene's violence with descriptions of his 'normality'.
9. Hall and colleagues (2008: 193) may perhaps refer to this as a Luhmannesque social system, fashioned of luck and bad luck, cunning and stupidity, losers and winners.
10. Ninety (67.9 percent) of the articles made some mention of illicit drug use as quasi-criminological explanation for Eugene's attack on Poppo.
11. CS/CS/HB 1175.
12. Fifty-seven (42.5 percent) of the articles offered supernatural and gothic explanations for Eugene's behaviors.
13. By no coincidence, in the still settling rubble of the 2008 crash, analysts described several major financial institutions as 'zombie banks', lumbering along in a 'dead but dominant' state (see Peck, 2010), unable to perform basic functions, while 'threatening everything else' (see Harman, 2010: 12).
14. Some estimates place the entire genre at a 5 billion dollar a year industry (Ogg, 2011).
15. Here the innocent person is a suit-clad businessman.

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Author biographies

Travis Linnemann is Assistant Professor of Justice Studies at Eastern Kentucky University.

Tyler Wall is Assistant Professor of Justice Studies at Eastern Kentucky University.

Edward Green is a PhD student in sociology at Kansas State University.