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Not Your Average Zombie: Rehumanizing the Undead from Voodoo to Zombie Walks, by Chera Kee. University of Texas Press, 2017, 236 pp.

Lea Espinoza Garrido

In her ambitious study, Chera Kee seeks to revise one of the most prominent monstrous figures in Western popular culture since the early 2000s—the zombie. Building on Sarah Juliet Lauro's important work in the field, Kee proposes a rather broad definition of zombihood "as a state existing somewhere between the human and the not quite human, as a state of liminality associated with—but not entirely dictated by—a loss of free will" (15). Yet, Kee distances herself from some of the more dominant readings of the zombie as primarily an empty container onto which all kinds of social, cultural, and political anxieties can be projected to express concerns about an equally broad range of dehumanising tendencies in various contexts. In contrast, by distinguishing between "ordinary" and "extra-ordinary" zombies (3), the book provides a productive new lens through which we can study this influential figure. While the ordinary zombie as a completely dehumanised, undead, and flesh-eating being fits in with the conventions of the zombie genre, extra-ordinary zombies defy common assumptions about what it means to be a zombie by resisting and playing with these conventions; if "ordinary zombies produce stories that warn of the dangers of losing the self," Kee argues, "then extra-ordinary zombies show us what it is like to gain the self again" (16–17). As such, she continues, "[e]xtra-ordinary zombies challenge the logic of being able to strip someone of their humanity" (16–17).

Not Your Average Zombie is divided into two parts: "Zombie Identities" and "Playing the Zombie". In the first part, the author explores representations of ordinary and extra-ordinary zombies in historical perspective to illustrate that extra-ordinary zombies are not a new phenomenon but have existed in American media at least since the 1930s. Her first chapter, "From Cannibals to Dead Men Working in the Cane Fields", links these early representations of zombies to racialised literary and political discourses about Haiti that have circulated in the United States since the Haitian Revolution in 1804. Tracing the figure to its origins in Haitian voodoo culture but also highlighting how our image of zombies today is still shaped by William Seabrock's *The Magic Island*—a text that grossly misrepresented the complexity of Haitian culture and thereby installed the association of zombies with slavery "and nothing else" (6)—Kee convincingly argues that the zombie has always been ideologically charged. Just like the cannibal before it, the figure was used to depict Haitians as monstrous barbarians who need to be civilised or, at least, contained. Her analysis of films such as *White Zombie* (Victor Halperin, 1932), *Ouanga* (George Terwilliger,

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1935), and *King of the Zombies* (Jean Yarbrough, 1941) in this chapter further illustrates that these "early slave-style zombie narratives" already blur the lines between ordinary and extra-ordinary zombies since they "are predicated on the idea that zombification doesn't have to be permanent—especially if one is a young white American" (26). This tendency not only defies contemporary genre conventions but also hints at the racial dimension of the zombie, which has always framed fictional representations of zombihood, and which is one of the main interests of Kee's analysis.

Chapter Two, "Racialized and Raceless", examines such racial undertones more closely, focusing on post-apocalyptic cannibal-style zombie films, such as George A. Romero's *Land of the Dead* (2005). Kee suggests that these later films play out "fantasies envisioning the death of the current world order and its attendant forms of capitalist and white patriarchy in order to imagine what a world without race or class would be like" (18). However, she maintains, these post-race fantasies do not display utopian visions of the future as structures of exploitation and marginalisation persevere, embodied by the human survivors of the apocalypse. While Kee's reading in this chapter is intriguing, particularly its focus on representations of the living more than on the (un)dead characters in cannibal-style zombie films, she often seems to fall behind the complexity of her own concept. As her use of terms like "foils of the living" indicates (71), the zombie's primary function in these narratives is to "lay bare the vulnerabilities of the social order, […] the evils of exploitation, systemic discrimination, and social death" (71). This interpretation is certainly valid but, firstly, not entirely new and, secondly, conspicuously close to the readings of the zombie as primarily an empty container—readings that Kee so eloquently complicates and challenges in her other chapters.

Chapters Three and Four in the first section of the book offer a much more interesting take on many of the previously discussed narratives by shifting attention towards the intersection of race and gender in these texts. In Chapter Three, Kee examines the role of white women in zombie movies like *Ouanga* or the stage play *Zombie*. She suggests that they portray white women as the idealised victims of hypersexualised white men, who are, however, coded as Black through what she calls a "transposition of blackness onto white villains" (75). Kee notes that these narratives, on the one hand, police and punish white women for violating stereotypical gender norms through zombification. On the other hand, she claims, films like *Zombie Nation* (Ulli Lommel, 2005), *Zombie Strippers* (Jay Lee, 2008), and *Chopper Chicks in Zombietown* (Dan Hoskins, 1989) also show how white women as (quasi-)extra-ordinary zombies assert their agency via acts of heroism and defy the patriarchal order "by 'contaminating' their whiteness through an alliance with zombie culture" (18). Chapter Four continues this discussion of race and gender but turns to representations of Black women and women of colour in zombie films. Focusing particularly on the blaxploitation films *Sugar Hill* (Leon Ichaso, 1994) and *The House on Skull Mountain* (Ron Honthaner, 1974), while returning to *Ouanga* and *Zombie Nation*, Kee adds another layer of meaning and complexity to her own analysis of these films in the previous chapters. Here, she demonstrates that these texts not only revise the mostly caricatural depictions of voodoo in popular culture but also present voodoo culture in the hands of a woman of colour as a powerful tool of resistance and liberation. Whereas women of colour "are always already monstrous under the logic of white patriarchy", as Kee rightly criticises, in these films—rather than being turned into monsters through voodoo—they *use* it to circumvent white male control and expose "the system that would make them over as monsters for merely existing" (122). While the readings of the films in the first part of *Not Your Average Zombie* illustrate Kee's argument perfectly, at times, some

more detailed discussions, for instance of the films' cinematography, would have helped to make her analyses even more palpable.

In the second part of the book, "Playing the Zombie", Kee turns to video games and zombie walks as practices that allow people to experience what it is like to "be" a zombie. This significant shift in focus in *Not Your Average Zombie* is perhaps the most innovative section of the book. While the transition between the two parts comes a little abruptly and could have been more explicitly introduced, ultimately, the second part of the book seems like the logical addition to Kee's analyses in the first part in that it enlarges upon the notion of (re-)humanisation that permeates all her chapters. Chapter Five surveys videogames, such as *Stubbs the Zombie in Rebel without a Pulse* (2005), *World of Warcraft* (2004–present), and *Planescape Torment* (1999), which enable their player to "try on zombiness and use it" (128). Whereas these games offer ample opportunity for disrupting the good/evil binaries that characterise many zombie-killing games, they also install and reinforce a hierarchy between ordinary and extra-ordinary zombies by perpetuating a "radical Otherness of ordinary zombies" (129). This is mostly the result of these games' tendency to juxtapose the humanised extra-ordinary zombie, represented by the player, with its dehumanised ordinary counterparts which it controls and sacrifices. In other words, the cost of humanising the extra-ordinary zombie, or the potential to identify and empathise with it by "being" it, comes at the cost of dehumanising the ordinary zombie, which is turned into cannon fodder in the process. In so doing, Kee suggests, these video games somewhat betray the potential for liberation and resistance that extra-ordinary zombies otherwise inhere.

In her final chapter, Kee explores so-called zombie walks: public gatherings of people dressed in zombie costumes who move through public spaces. She uses these examples to illustrate that temporary performances of zombiness automatically create extra-ordinary zombies. While her repeated claim that "zombie walkers are never in danger of being dehumanized" (152, 163) is at risk of obscuring the unequal distribution of vulnerability among different groups of zombie walkers and the dehumanising discourses some of them may indeed be subjected to—in fact, Kee herself acknowledges "real world practices that serve to zombify entire populations" in her introduction (21)—her analysis of the differences between extra-ordinary zombies in fictional texts vs. the "real" world is intriguing. Juxtaposing the ambivalent interpretations of the walks by other scholars, Kee reasons that these events "undercut the logic of the extra-ordinary zombie" (163) by "offer[ing] up a fantasy whereby the state of exception or social death can be completely elided and ignored" (163–64). The author's conclusion, then, explores the implications of the zombie for the "real" world by examining how governmental agencies and others invoke the figure as a tool of oppression. In a pessimistic, yet doubtlessly realistic, outlook Kee concludes that the extra-ordinary zombie "becomes the logical result of a world where many people are already zombified—a fantasy of gaining agency offered up to those who feel their agency slipping away" (20).

Overall, *Not Your Average Zombie* is an insightful, clearly written, and well-researched book that both students and experts in the field of zombie studies will enjoy. While more expert readers may already be familiar with many of the claims that Kee makes—particularly regarding representations of race and gender in (historical) zombie movies—her use of the concept of the extra-ordinary zombie to frame her analysis is a productive new avenue of research, which is certainly worth exploring in more detail in the future. At times, however, Kee's neat distinction

between ordinary and extra-ordinary zombies appears too binary. After all, the zombie is a liminal figure and a fleeting concept that manifests in various and ever-shifting forms, which may warrant a more fluid categorisation that also accommodates its porosity.

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