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## The Heart of a Zombie: Dominican Literature's Sentient Undead

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A formerly human being that has been separated from its human consciousness, the zombie has always been a liminal figure, occupying a space between life and death. The *zombi* of Haitian folklore, a recently deceased body reanimated by magic to serve one master, exists in “that misty zone which divides life from death” (Métraux 282) in complete subservience to the sorcerer who made it.<sup>1</sup> In contrast, the “modern” zombie introduced by George Romero’s horror films, beginning with *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), is the ultimate cannibal monster, driven only by the urge to consume human flesh, or, failing that, bite humans and thus transform them into other zombies. Whether created by magic or produced by a virus, however, the zombie has become internationally recognizable as what Sarah Juliet Lauro terms “a global mythology...a kind of icon of disempowerment” (*TransAtlantic Zombie* Loc 272). The undead reveal the fragility – and the limits – of our own previously certain humanity.

As “a body reduced to an object, stripped of its subject status, but which nonetheless maintains a type of agency” (Lauro Loc. 235), the zombie’s lack of consciousness has marked it as more dead than alive. Yet in recent cultural production, another kind of undead figure has emerged, what we might call the “sentient zombie.” Rather than following Gerry Canavan’s observation that “the audience for the zombie narrative never imagines itself to be zombified” (432), in these narratives the zombie is not only the protagonist but a conscious actor, aware of his or her liminal state. Television series such as *iZombie* (2015--) and *Santa-Clarita Diet* (2016--), films like *Warm Bodies* (2013), and book series such as Daniel José Older’s *Bone Street Rumba* novels feature protagonists who are simultaneously both zombies and thinking, feeling individuals, aware of their differences and anxious to return to their living human state. In these recent narratives, the zombie’s liminal position can be closer to life than to death: the undead protagonist is conscious of his or her inhumanity/non-humanness, along with the marginality of this position, and his or her potential “redemption” or return to humanity is often what drives the plot. A number of these narratives go so far as to distinguish between their conscious, “less-zombified” main characters, who exist as members of a kind of marginalized subculture, and fully zombified monsters who, lacking any consciousness, are viewed – by both humans and sentient zombies – as outside the borders of humanity and fully expendable.<sup>2</sup> Although the sentient zombie’s outsider position can function as a meditation on the social mores that make up human behavior, it also allows for a deeper exploration of life on the border of humanity, offering a nuanced—if sometimes contradictory – subject position from which to examine the biopolitical borders of the citizen.

With the position of the sentient zombie in mind, this article examines two recent texts set in the Dominican Republic: Puerto Rican author Pedro Cabiya’s *Malas hierbas* (2010) and Dominican American writer Junot Díaz’s short story “Monstro” (2012). In both texts, the expanded borders of what constitutes

“undeadness” allow for a more complex exploration of the zombie’s function as a figure that is less-than/other-than human. Cabiya and Díaz make use of the expanded liminality of sentient zombies to illuminate other kinds of exclusionary social borders, particularly those associated with race and ethnicity, issues that connect to both the island’s contemporary issues and its historical traumas.

### **A Complicated Caribbean Icon**

The zombie’s connection to Haitian history and folklore makes its flexible liminality a powerful device for engaging with the complicated present of Hispaniola, the island Haiti shares with the Dominican Republic. Given that according to Haitian folklore, the zombie originates in a state of complete subservience, compelled to serve a master, the figure has been seen both a symbol of and metaphor for the experience of chattel slavery, a reflection of the plantation system that was at its height in colonial Saint Domingue (as Haiti was then known) prior to the Haitian Revolution. At the same time, as a myth associated with the only country in the Americas founded as the result of a successful slave rebellion, the Haitian zombie also maintains a connection to rebellion from slavery. Lauro argues that in its capacity to represent both slavery and rebellion from it, the Haitian zombie “is itself a representation of the people’s history” (Loc 256). In her study *The Transatlantic Zombi*, she shows how the undead have been utilized as symbols of both political conformity and political resistance at various moments in Haitian literature, particularly in connection with Duvalier and his manipulation of the symbolic language of Vaudou. Within the Haitian context, the zombie is thus a malleable but undeniably national symbol, one that maintains strong symbolic ties not only to the country’s past connections to chattel slavery but also to more contemporary forms of labor exploitation, political conformity and/or resistance.<sup>3</sup>

The zombie’s position with regard to the other half of Hispaniola is more complicated. Haiti and the Dominican Republic share an intimate, often contentious history, due in part to the fact that the Dominican Republic was briefly taken over by Haiti following the former’s independence from Spain. Since Dominican independence (from Haiti) in 1844, Dominican nationalist discourse has represented Haiti consistently as the country’s negative other.<sup>4</sup> This racist strain of Dominican nationalism has led to concrete acts of violence or exclusion against Haitians at various moments in the island’s history, most notably in 1937, when the Dominican dictator Rafael Leónidas Trujillo mobilized the Dominican military to massacre more than 12,000 Haitians on the Dominican side of the border between the two countries.<sup>5</sup> More recently, it was in evidence in the 2013 *Sentencia*, a ruling by the Dominican Supreme Court that denied Dominican citizenship retroactively to anyone born of Haitian parents since 1929. The immediate result of this ruling was an escalation in violence towards and deportations of Haitian workers residing

in the Dominican Republic, despite the fact that difficult socioeconomic conditions on the Haitian side, made more acute by the 2010 earthquake, had pushed increasing numbers of Haitian migrants to cross the border to the Dominican Republic in search of work.<sup>6</sup>

The fraught nature of borders in the Dominican—Haitian context also points to an instability inherent in the construction of *Dominicanidad* (Domincanness) itself. As scholars Ginetta Candelario and Lorgia García-Peña have both observed, when the Dominican Republic came of age as a nation it found itself caught between Haiti, isolated on the world stage as the first black republic in the Americas, and the United States, which at various moments has exerted political, financial and military control over the country. García-Peña identifies the country – and *Dominicanidad* – as existing “in a geographic and symbolic border between the United States and Haiti” (3). Candelario sees this triangulation as visible in Dominican constructions of race as well: “[D]espite the country’s African heritage, Dominican identity formations negotiated the fraught space between U.S.-dominant notions of white supremacy that defined mixture as degeneration and the geopolitical positioning of Dominicans as ‘*los blancos de la tierra* [the whites of the land]’ relative to Haitians” (Loc 514). This complicated social and racial positioning not only demands the constant reinforcement of unstable borders both physical and discursive but has required a re-writing (or whitening) of the national narrative at various moments in the country’s history.

Given the instability of national, identitarian, and racial borders on Hispaniola, the zombie –tied to Haiti – is a particularly volatile figure in the Dominican context. Both Cabiya, a longtime resident of Santo Domingo, and Díaz, a Dominican-American who was born in the Dominican Republic and maintains close ties to the country, are aware of the charged nature of the zombie once it crosses the border. Their narratives reflect a desire to exploit this charge, as their reconfigurations of the zombie highlight the tensions created by the instability of these social and racial borders. Tacking back and forth between Haiti and the Dominican Republic, *Malas hierbas* plays with the contrast between conscious and unconscious zombie models to present the intertwined tales of two very different zombies. In modern-day Santo Domingo, a zombie scientist, one of the text’s two first-person narrators, searches for a cure to his zombie-ism. Meanwhile, in the wealthy suburbs of the Dominican capital, upper-class Haitian emigrés traffic in “unconscious” zombies, providing the local elite with a workforce of compliant undead. The scientist zombie’s quest to recover his humanity stands in stark contrast to the enslavement of these Haitian zombie workers, a narrative that makes visible the precariousness of Haitian lives within Dominican borders. In Díaz’s short story, set in a future Santo Domingo, an anonymous working-class Dominican-American college student returns to the island for the summer, where he finds himself spending time with a wealthy college acquaintance. Both his

friend's privileged lifestyle and the narrator's failed romance with a female acquaintance inure him to the dangers present in the outbreak of a degenerative virus that gradually turns Haitians into zombies.

The presence of sentient zombies in *Malas hierbas* and "Monstro" emphasizes that the lines between participation in an exploitative system and the experience of being a victim of said system are far from clear. In his study *Slavery and the Culture of Taste*, Caribbean scholar Simon Gikandi examines the relationship between the Enlightenment-era construction of "the cultured subjects of modernity" and the simultaneous existence of slavery in the Americas as a bedrock of both commerce and societal formation. Despite the tendency to see slavery as separate from the formation of a culture of taste, Gikandi finds that not only are these two experiences intimately linked, but that one is contingent upon the other; as he argues, "[I]deals of taste could not be imagined or secured except in opposition to a negative sensorium associated with slavery" (xiv). Slavery's degradation confirms and solidifies the experience of cultured aesthetic pleasure. Although Gikandi's careful contrapuntal exploration of the interconnections between slavery and taste begins several centuries away from present-day Santo Domingo, it could be argued that in Dominican nationalist discourse, Haiti has often functioned as the Dominican Republic's "negative sensorium," a poorer, darker country whose problems make possible a narrative of Dominican success and Dominican whiteness. Building on the historical and symbolic connection between Haiti and the zombie, the undead in Cabiya's and Díaz's texts illustrate the extent to which a "culture of taste" and the "negative sensorium" that sustains it is still operative. Through the question of sentience in its relationship to both the living and the undead, both texts highlight the ways in which systems of social exclusion present at the Caribbean's colonial founding have permeated present – and future – Caribbean society.

### **In Pursuit of the Elusive *Qualia***

*Malas hierbas* places the question of sentience at the heart of the narrative; the novel is, on one level, the story of a zombie's search for his lost humanity. Before his untimely demise, the unnamed narrator-protagonist of Cabiya's novel was the scion of a wealthy Santo Domingo family. Although it is unclear exactly how he became a zombie, when he is "reborn" as a member of the undead, he uses his money and privileged position to fashion the "perfect simulacrum" of a normal life (21). Cabiya's narrator is neither an unconscious cannibal nor a mindless servant; he is, rather, an efete urban sophisticate, scornful of those more decrepit zombies "que llevan años vestidos con los ajados gabanes que tenían puestos el espantoso día en que se despertaron en el interior de un féretro" (20). Aware of the fragile nature of his decomposing carcass and desirous of a return to humanity, he

obtains a job as the Executive Vice President of the Research and Development Division of a large pharmaceutical corporation, under whose auspices he can carry out research into the condition of zombiehood and – hopefully – search for a cure to his condition. From this privileged position, he is convinced that he can find a solution to his zombie state through scientific means, by understanding both the chemical compounds that trigger zombification and the mechanism in the brain that allows for the perpetuation of the undead state. He is, in short, not only aware of his condition but convinced that he has the ability to control – and ultimately, to change – it.

Although he has an intellectual consciousness, the zombie narrator is keenly aware of what he lacks: the ability to feel, to form emotional relationships with living human beings. This has resulted in a solitary existence (another ironic way in which Cabiya's zombie differs from Romero's crazed zombie hordes). Dionisio, one of the oldest zombies in Santo Domingo and the narrator's confidant and advisor, diagnoses the narrator (and, implicitly, all zombies like him) as lacking *qualia*, a sense of self that is connected to the world. Dionisio explains:

Un vivo puede comprender que las cosas que *le* suceden, le suceden a algo que *es* él, su yo, la consciencia de ser uno mismo. Si siente alegría o pena, si lo sobrecoge la belleza o el peligro, sabe que todas esas cosas las está sintiendo él, de tal modo que percibe las *cualidades* de las cosas. (24, italics in original)

As Dionisio makes clear, both he and the narrator have consciousness: they are able to reason, to think, to use evidence to arrive at logical conclusions. What they lack is the affective connection that provides depth and context to basic perception. Although the narrator has managed to replicate the appearance humanity with make-up and clothes, he is unable to connect to his sensorial experiences, with the result that he comes across as stiff and awkward. Qualia, a somewhat ineffable attribute, would seem to be difficult to achieve by means of scientific experiments with chemicals and brain reactions. Coupled with the fact that the narrator is constantly afraid that his zombie identity will be discovered and his “monstrousness” revealed, this lack of affective connection means that he leads a life almost completely devoid of human contact.

Despite the zombie's insistence that, not having qualia, he cannot fully understand what it consists of, his narrative documents a gradual awakening to human sensation and emotion through an unexpected source: his interactions with the three female scientists with whom he shares his lab. Mathilde, Patricia Julia, and Isadore, friends who have known each other since college, begin to behave in what can only be described as an increasingly flirtatious manner. As the narrator describes his three attractive colleagues, the language of the text displays a

sensuality of which the narrator himself initially purports to be unaware. The reader's first glimpse of the women, through the narrator's description, is presented as if it were a kind of erotic tableaux: Mathilde leans over a microscope, her lifted blouse revealing "tersos abdominales de acero, en cuyo ombligo prístino y chato rutilaba un *piercing* gótico" (35). Patricia Julia's short skirt highlights an extended leg, "una columna perfectamente esculpida y lisa," while Isadore's open labcoat reveals a flowered dress "que a duras penas podía represar la incolumne masa de sus pechos" (35). The text's language traces the women's bodies in an almost cinematic fashion, focusing on sensual details in a way that seems designed – ironically? – to animate a reader's desire. Despite the narrator's explanation that he chooses to work in this room because its glass doors alleviate his claustrophobia, his written narrative puts forth the women as objects of desire.

As his relationship with his lab companions continues to develop, the narrator's unconscious sentiments soon make themselves evident in his conscious reactions. When the three women arrange themselves in poses that appear designed to serve as potential seduction scenes, the zombie scientist behaves as though he does not understand what is going on, reacting awkwardly to what seem to be obvious provocations. Mathilde leaves a chocolate kiss in his office, and he runs out to give it to her, not understanding that she has left it there intentionally as a romantic token for him. When Patricia Julia invites him into her car to show him sexy pictures of herself at the beach, the zombie can only comment that she should be a model, since her poses seem professional. Although the narrator purports not to understand that these encounters are meant to be flirtatious, he does notice clear physical responses to these encounters in himself. In recounting the scene with Mathilde, he remarks to Dionisio, "A mí todo esto me provoca una desazón extraña, un vacío en la boca del estómago, como de vértigo" (55). Not only does his body react to the presence of the attractive woman in his office, but the narrator's consciousness also registers this physical change. It may be that the narrator is not (yet) responding emotionally to these interactions. However, Brian Massumi, in his study of affect, argues for the separation of affect and emotion. For Massumi, affect can be "equated with intensity" and intensity can be understood as "the unassimilable" (86). The narrator perceives that his interaction with these women inspires a strong reaction in him; his struggles have to do precisely with how to assimilate (and respond to) that provocation. However, the "intensity" of his reaction is not the mindless, irresistible desire for human flesh typically demonstrated by the members of a zombie horde. Some kind of subtle emotional shift is clearly underway.

The narrator's growing response to his laboratory companions comes to a head when the women finally convince him to come out dancing with them. At the club, Mathilde steals him away from the dancefloor, shepherding him upstairs to a lounge area for a kiss. They finally do kiss, and the narrator discovers that Mathilde

is crying. As the tears fall on his cheek, he experiences both a sudden realization of the separation of their cheeks – “*mi mejilla*” vs. “*su mejilla*” – and a sudden rush of empathy for Mathilde:

De pronto *imaginé* por qué lloraba. Por un mágico instante *fui* Mathilde y *supe* por qué lloraba. Pude ponerme en su lugar... Yo estaba libre de lo que le pasaba a ella; ella era algo que respondía a una situación que la hacía llorar, y saber eso demarcaba misteriosamente unos límites que me hacían sospechar que yo, que la veía llorar, también era algo, algo que no era ella, pero que podía pensar en ella... (181, italics in the original)

One might say that in this sudden sense of both separation and connectedness the narrator perceives – or begins to perceive – his own qualia. In other words, he begins, from the standpoint of an emotional consciousness, to begin to be – or to sense what it is like to be – human.

The narrator’s growing qualia, awakened by the kiss from Mathilde and further stimulated by a more sexual flirtation with Patricia Julia, reaches its full flowering as he returns to the dance floor to find Isadore engaged in conversation with a group of men. One of the men wants Isadore to dance, but she rebuffs his advances by taking the zombie’s hand and introducing him as her boyfriend. Although Isadore appears to make this gesture as part of an act, the two continue to hold hands even after the rejected suitor and his companions have departed. Both physical and emotional, this voluntary connection marks a watershed in the zombie’s coming to consciousness, what he identifies as a “return to life.” As he tells Dionisio, “Era como si ninguno de los dos quisiera tomar la decisión de soltarse, pero también había otra cosa, una extraña sensación de que habíamos perdido nuestras manos para siempre, de que nuestras manos, en adelante, no podrían existir de otra manera que no fuera enlazadas” (216). This moment signals the realization of the attraction – already evident – between Isadore and the narrator. It is also the point at which the zombie is able to fully perceive a simultaneous interconnectedness with another being and his own integrity, a position that allows him to finally understand the substance of his previous confusing interactions with Matilde and Patricia Julia. This very human connection also allows him to imagine a future with Isadore, a future full of continued human interactions.

If the only tale told in *Malas hierbas* were the story of the zombie scientist’s gradual awakening, then Cabiya’s novel could be seen as a kind of charming fable in which the return to humanity from an undead state serves as an allegory for falling in love and an awakening to a connected emotional present. Yet our zombie scientist narrator is not the novel’s only narrator, for this zombie tale is about more than one zombie. As the author figure “Pedro Cabiya” tells us in a brief paratextual preface entitled “Advertencia,” the novel the reader has in her hands is actually

Isadore's "scrapbook," a diverse collection of texts that includes the zombie scientist's first-person narrative; the chronicles of Isadore's trip to her father's hometown in Haiti; Isadore's own reflections on what makes us human; the transcripts of a series of police interviews with Mathilde, Patricia Julia, and Isadore when the zombie scientist is apparently murdered on his second outing with the women, and, most revealingly, an annotated list of the plants and naturally occurring chemicals that are used to create a zombie. Isadore, it becomes clear, is also interested in how zombies are made and in where the border between humanity and inhumanity can be found. Her search, which runs parallel to the zombie scientist narrator's search for his own humanity, takes us beyond his privileged, self-centered musings to explore the other kinds of zombies that reside in Hispaniola. Revealed through the other texts in her scrapbook, these darker histories show how the narrator's life of pleasure-filled experimentation in Santo Domingo may not be without social cost.

### **The Zombie Notebooks**

Like the zombie scientist, Isadore's interest in the undead begins with personal experience, or at least an act of witnessing. Dark-skinned, intelligent, and industrious, the adolescent Isadore is friends with Valérie, the less-academically-inclined daughter of wealthy Haitian emigrés. One night at Valérie's house, Isadore is witness to a kind of "macabre *Tupperware Party*" (50): Adeline, Valérie's mother, invites some of her socially-privileged friends over for drinks and hors d'oeuvres. At the end of the evening, she reveals the ultimate purpose of the gathering when she introduces them to Gracieusse, a zombie servant who works in her kitchen. Gracieusse makes a distinct impression on both Isadore and Adeline's guests:

Era una congo tan negra que arrojaba destellos azules. Su cabello era tan desastre, erizado y descuidado, como si recién hubieran desatado las correas que la sujetaban a una sesión de electroshocks. Era bajita, de brazos largos y cara ruin. Estaba descalza y cubría su desnudez con una miserable faldita amarilla y una vieja blusa rosada. Ambas prendas le quedaban muy pequeñas, como si la niña se hubiera convertido en mujer de un día para otro... como si nunca se hubiera quitado la ropa que le pusieran alguna vez durante su infancia. Pero lo más terrible de su aspecto eran los ojos: orbes blanqueados que no dejaban de dar vueltas en cuencas desprovistas de párpados. (47)

Gracieusse, in this case, is the "Tupperware" for sale; Adeline hopes that her guests will want to order zombie servants for themselves from her provider. The women

are initially repulsed by the zombie's disheveled appearance and the uncanny aspect communicated by her lidless eyes. However, when Adeline explains the social and economic advantages of having a zombie maid – Gracieusse neither sleeps nor eats, has no wants or desires, and exists purely to serve – the women fall all over themselves to pay the deposit to order their own zombie “chacha.”

The episode with Gracieusse lays bare in the ways in which the exploitation of the most vulnerable is both sanctioned by and sustains the elite elements of Dominican and Haitian society. Gracieusse's physical appearance carries all of the signs of marginality for the cultural environment of urban Santo Domingo: dark skin, unkempt hair (that in its natural state further emphasizes her blackness), ragged, ill-fitting clothes. What initially upsets the women at the party is not that Gracieusse should be allowed to exist in this state – indeed, she is a cypher for the many others who exist in something close to this situation – but that her abjection has been made temporarily visible. When they discover the advantages that her labor can provide to them, they are only too happy to benefit from – and, indeed, exploit – a similarly abject being. As Adeline explains, the zombies the women purchase will arrive blindfolded, their ears sealed with wax. When “awakened” they will serve unquestioningly the first person they see and hear. Unlike the zombie hordes who, according to Canavan, are seen as both a threat and as expendable (colonized) others, the compliant Gracieusse and those like her present no threat. Instead, they function as visible symbols for both the kind of labor exploitation that allows capitalist society to operate and for the race and class hierarchies that legitimate this kind of social marginalization. Nor do the bonds of national identity serve to mitigate this system; even though the Dominican housewives view Adeline, “*negra, exquisita, francesa*” (41), as something exotic, in the end it is Adeline who propagates the exploitation of her fellow Haitians, as she and her wealthy Dominican peers are united by being the consumers of the enslaved zombies' labor.

Isadore is the only one at the gathering to find herself moved by the scene. As she notes in her account of the incident, “*Necesitaba compartirlo*” (50). Yet there is no one with whom she can share her discomfort; what has upset her is not only the ethical implications of what she has witnessed, but her own closeness to the victim in terms of skin color (and, potentially, social class). Although she is initially unable to express her feelings, an experience that Oloff likens to a kind of “emotional zombification” (“World-Zombie” 206), her encounter with Gracieusse is the seed that sets her off on a search to understand the origins of the undead. Isadore's investigation is two-pronged: she hopes to discover where zombies like Gracieusse come from, and how they end up in Santo Domingo. But she also wants to understand the biological processes that make zombies possible. Both of these searches will take her back across the border to Haiti, to her father's hometown, and into Haitian history.

It just so happens that Isadore's father's village exists alongside a similar town populated by zombies. The origin story of these adjoining communities – and of zombies like Gracieusse – dates back to the dictatorship of “Papa Doc” Duvalier. Two men with magical training meet in Port-au-Prince's infamous Citadelle prison: Papá Vincent, future patriarch of Isadore's ancestral village, and a young man named Placide. Determined not to die in jail, they use their magical gifts to fake their own death, entering a deathlike state – another kind of temporary undeadness – so that the jailers will take their bodies out of the prison. Once outside the jail, however, they are set upon by two “devils.” One of the devils steals Placide's life force, but at the other devil's insistence, he leaves him with four things: a cashew seed, a peanut seed, his recipe for making “black sand” (i.e., zombification), and some “white sand,” the antidote. Once the devils have gone, Papá Vincent brings Placide back to life. But Placide is a changed man. He and Papá Vincent divide up what the devil has left them, Papá Vincent taking the white sand and the peanut, and Placide taking the recipe for black sand and the cashew seed. The two men go on to found adjoining but completely separate communities: one a poor but harmonious small town, the other a place whose wealth is based on the creation and labor of zombies.

The tale of Papá Vincent and Placide in this way establishes a Manichean contrast between humans and zombies, between the close-knit community of Isadore's family's town and the economic exploitation and devaluation of human life that happens on Placide's side of the fence. Isadore's cousin Sandrine observes that Placide's zombie town functions as a kind of bogey-man, a cautionary tale for those foolish enough to venture over the fence dividing Placide's land from Papá Vincent's community. Yet the division of good and evil is not so clear as it might be, for the border between the two communities to a certain extent separates and fortifies the identities of each. Papa Vincent and, implicitly, other adults in the community are aware of the zombies on the other side of the wall, and yet they allow Placide's exploitation of them continue, just as a city like Santo Domingo can contain both the exploited undead like Gracieusse and sentient, self-seeking zombies like the scientist narrator. The existence of the zombies on the other side of the wall also contributes to the isolation of Isadore's village. As Sandrine observes, “[Ningún forastero] dura entre nosotros más de una noche, acaso dos” (82), thanks to the activities taking place in Placide's village on the other side of the wall. Even if the villagers of Papá Vincent village are not actively involved in creating or exploiting zombies, the darkness of what takes place in Placide's village casts a long shadow.

As she collects these origin stories, Isadore seems to be intent on creating a kind of zombie ur-text. Her scrapbook includes not only the narratives that Isadore gathers on her own but also the many literary and cinematic references that she collects and analyzes. These constitute what Cabiya himself has called a “pre-

history of zombies” (Oloff, “Lo humano es una historia”). Thanks to these references, neither the zombie scientist’s search for qualia nor the story of Papa Vincent and Placide exist in a vacuum. Rather, in Isadore’s meta-narrative exploration, they become two more episodes in a rich, multi-dimensional zombie narrative. Lauro argues that “the zombie’s history is one that can be reconstituted only by sifting through the literary fragments of empire” (Loc 240), and Isadore’s album, in its gathering of anecdotes, of twice-told tales, of rediscovered recipes, is a collection of these fragments. As both a symbol of capitalist exploitation and a creation of Hispaniolian herbology, the zombie weaves together the histories of both halves of the island and the complicated colonial trajectories within and outside it.

Putting together a multi-dimensional zombie history would be task enough, but two additional pieces of information in Isadore’s collection indicate that her intentions may extend beyond scientific data gathering. First, the transcript of an interview with police detectives suggests that the zombie scientist may not have been a zombie at all. Rather, the police detectives assert, he suffered from Cotard’s Syndrome, a mental disorder that results in an individual believing they are dead or do not exist. Was the zombie scientist never actually a zombie at all? Is he simply mentally ill? The second key text, the last chapter of the zombie scientist’s own narrative, suggests another end to his story. The zombie describes a kind of awakening: a blindfold he has been wearing is removed, and he finds himself in the presence of three women (implicitly Isadore, Mathilde, and Patricia Julia): “Me toman de la mano, me conducen, y yo las sigo. Sé que estaré bien a donde quiera que me lleven. Me invade una sensación de sumo bienestar” (216). In this final description, there is a seamless fusion between experience and emotion. Whether or not he was a zombie to begin with, the scientist narrator’s description suggests that he has been “remade” into a zombie by Isadore. If this is the result, the “album” that we have been reading is actually a lab notebook, the documentation of the research for and execution of an experiment.

In spite of the suffering connected to the formation of the undead that Isadore’s research uncovers, she ultimately chooses to make her own zombie. If this is the case, it would appear that she has achieved a new fusion of these two kinds of zombie; in his description of “a state of great well-being,” the zombie’s last narrative suggests that upon his reawakening he achieves a state that is both sentient (in terms of sensual experience) and zombified, as he is under the control of a master or masters. As a dark-skinned woman of Haitian descent, Isadore’s choice to zombify a wealthy Dominican man can be seen a kind of writing-back to historical patterns of domination. Her decision subverts the narrative of masculine seduction that the zombie’s own narrative traces, as well as the story of the zombie’s mental illness and subsequent murder that the two police detectives insist on. If the zombie’s history is one of exploitation, Isadore’s zombie seems to have

been made for a different purpose. Nonetheless, this new kind of zombie does not erase the complicated histories that gave birth to it. Isadore's narrative makes visible, but does not resolve, the zombie's dark past.

### **Apocalypse Arriving**

With its playful references to the literary and cinematic history of zombies, *Malas hierbas* identifies itself as openly as a “remake” of both zombie history (real and imagined) and the nature of zombies. Although it too explores the fraught nature of Dominican-Haitian relations, Junot Díaz's short story “Monstro” appears at first glance to be more firmly in the tradition of American zombie horror films established by Romero. Yet even as he explores a zombie apocalypse on Hispaniola Díaz also refashions elements of this typical zombie narrative – specifically, the process of zombification – to produce a new scenario, one more focused on the build-up to the apocalypse than the fight against the zombies. His narrative slows down the process of zombie formation itself, showing how the crisis takes shape and the elements of social exclusion that are in part responsible for its formation. If, as Mabel Moraña observes, the figure of the zombie has often been presented as a “counter-image” to modernity (loc 7080), Díaz's narrative, argues that these monsters are very much contemporary creations, the result of a constellation of exclusionary elements fundamental to their time and place.

“Monstro” is set in a proximate future Dominican Republic. Well before any zombies appear, this future setting already displays some apocalyptic overtones: Global warming and its effects are clearly visible; the Caribbean has become a simmering cauldron, with summer temperatures consistently above 125°, and new, virulent diseases are common. Yet Dominicans' racist denigration of the inhabitants of the other half of the island has not changed much. The story's unnamed protagonist, a Dominican-American college student, is spending a summer in Santo Domingo when a strange new disease breaks out on the other side of the island: “A black mold-fungus-blast that came on like a splotch and then gradually started taking you over, tunneling through you” (2). The nickname of the new disease, “la negrura,” is a direct reference to the island's racial divide. Although the narrator translates this name as “the darkness,” in Spanish *negrura* is a term that refers to blackness with distinctly pejorative overtones. Even as the disease marginalizes its “viktims” (as the language of the time denotes them) because of their illness, it identifies them as being doubly marginalized for their race.

Both the virus's racialized nickname and its appearance on the Haitian side of the border connect it immediately to Haiti. As the narrator says in the story's first lines, “A disease that could make Haitians blacker? It was the joke of the year” (1). In a country whose struggles with poverty have been brushed to the side on the

world stage, the disease is one more challenge. Díaz, in an essay on apocalypse, describes the 2010 earthquake as having first of all “revealed Haiti,” in that the crisis illuminated existing problems with government and infrastructure, as well as the histories that had created them (61). Like the earthquake, the new disease in “Monstro” makes visible pre-existing systems of marginalization that cause the world to ignore the crisis until it is too late. As the narrator observes, “For six, seven months, it was just a horrible Haitian disease – who fucking cared, right?” (5). Since the virus follows no discernable path of infection and since all of the victims are Haitian, little energy outside of Haiti is expended either in trying to understand the path of transmission or in searching for a cure (an invisibility in the international arena that mirrors other moments of crisis in Haitian history). Beyond quarantining most of the infected in one camp – ironically named the “Champs de Mars,” neither the Haitian government nor international aid organizations seem prepared or able to do anything to help those suffering from the disease.

The narrator himself can be seen as symptomatic of the apathy and disinterest of the world beyond Haiti’s borders. A working-class Dominican American college student, he finds himself in Santo Domingo thanks to his mother, who has returned home to the Dominican capital to recuperate – from a different illness – because healthcare on the island is more affordable than in the United States. Although the narrator’s own family is not particularly well off, he manages to escape the heat and enjoy a comfortable lifestyle in while in Santo Domingo thanks to the off-handed generosity of his friend Alex, another student from Brown, an “hijo de papi y mami” who takes him under his wing. Alex invites the narrator to hang out with him and his other privileged friends and gives him a pass to “the Dome,” a climate-controlled part of the city. The Dome is a microcosm and visible symbol of elite Dominican privilege, separate from – and yet maintained by – the suffering of the rest of the country. From the vantage-point of the Dome, a position of privilege the narrator would not ordinarily be able to access, the new virus across the border seems far away.

Sheltered as they are from any real contact with or experience of the island’s many crises, Alex and his friends see the devastation of the island largely as an opportunity for a kind of disaster tourism. A talented photographer, Alex wants to be “either the Dominican Sebastião Salgado or the Dominican João Silva” (12). He is interested in scenes of poverty and environmental degradation – prostitutes, beaches that may soon disappear, unexploded bombs excavated from a farmer’s field – more for aesthetic reasons than because of any social concern. The narrator, meanwhile, has literary ambitions and is writing a piece prophetically called “Notes from the Last Shore.” When the epidemic on the other side of the border first enters their consciousness, it is only as the subject of a potential photo-op, a pathetic scene worth documenting, but not an event that spurs them to respond in any other way.

In addition to the coordinates of geography, class, and race that isolate victims of the fungus-like viral epidemic, the narrator's own late-adolescent concerns ensure that he is generally oblivious to the growing danger across the border. As he puts it: "These days everybody wants to know what you were doing when the world came to an end. Fools make up all sorts of vainglorious self-serving plep—but me, I tell the truth. I was chasing a girl" (1). The girl in question is Mysty, a friend of Alex's, whose flirtatious nature and lack of real reciprocation keep the narrator in a constant state of desire, anxiety, and excitement: "Yes, she liked me but she didn't *like* me, entiendes. But God, did I love her. Not that I had any idea how to start with a girl like her" (14). The narrator may not be a zombie, but when faced with a woman he finds so desirable, so apparently 'out of his league,' he finds himself just as confused as the zombie scientist in *Malas hierbas*, and just as oblivious to other concerns. As with the sentient zombie scientist of Cabiya's novel, the Díaz's narrator's search for love exists alongside – in what Gikandi might call "in a synchronic structure" with –the suffering of (subaltern) zombies. The narrator may not be unfeeling, but his preoccupation with Mysty "zombifies" him to the extent that he is incapable of reacting to anything else. His whole world revolves around his unrequited love for Mysty, even as the world outside edges everyday closer to total collapse.

Ironically, in the case of Díaz's narrator, it is his own perception of the fixity of the borders of race and class—rather than any emotional barrier—that makes him think that the relationship is impossible. He observes, "[Mysty] was from a familia de nombre, wasn't going to have anything to do with a nadie like me, un morenito from Villa Con whose mother had made it big selling hair-straightening products to the africanos" (22). The narrator may not be Haitian, but for the wealthy, white Dominicans in Alex's social circle, he is far from being a social equal. Kerstin Oloff sees the narrator's inability to "get the girl" as exposing "some of the ideological foundations of the national romance" ("World-Zombie" 197). If the nineteenth-century novels that Doris Sommer has identified as "foundational fictions" present allegories of racial and ethnic harmony through the romantic relationships of their protagonists, the narrator's failed romance with Mysty in "Monstro" suggests that racial and class hierarchies in contemporary/future Dominican society are both entrenched and unresolvable. Mysty's inability to reciprocate the narrator's love for her parallels the island's inability to stop the outbreak of the virus and prevent a slide into apocalyptic chaos.

Díaz may not present the reader with literally sentient zombies, but he does explore the increasingly fine line between sentience and zombification. Specifically, he details the process of zombification itself, spending significant time showing how the disease advances and the effects upon both witnesses and victims. Indeed, it is not, at first, apparent that this is the story of a zombie epidemic. "La negrura" is a disease that progresses in stages, taking several months for the most

severe symptoms to manifest; as the narrator observes, “once infected, few victims died outright; they just seemed to linger on and on” (2). In the initial phases, the victims are conscious individuals who are still aware of what is happening to them. The disease first appears in a small boy: “The index case was only four years old, and by the time his uncle brought him in his arm looked like an enormous black pustule, so huge it had turned the boy into an appendage of the arm. In the glyphs he looked terrified” (2). Zombification presents as a kind of parasite, allowing the victim to be fully conscious of his own suffering. In the next stages, as “victims” begin to experience strange compulsions – first an insistence on remaining with other victims near the quarantine area, then a desire to refrain from speaking – they still retain some semblance of their individual identities. Even as it becomes clear that the disease is evolving, Díaz’s narrative allows us to witness the effect of this evolution on individuals. The zombies – for this is what the disease will inevitably produce – do not begin as a nameless mass but as conscious individuals who make the painful, visible slide into undead subalternity. Before they become something like monsters, Díaz gives us space to feel for them as human beings.

The gradual nature of the disease’s presentation calls into question the seemingly obvious divisions between the victims and those uninfected. On analyzing data from those in the first stages of the illness, a Haitian doctor named Noni DeGraff discovers that victims of the disease register a consistently lower body temperature. When DeGraff and another colleague decide to test the temperature-scanning equipment on pedestrians around the clinic, they discover that one out of every eight people “was flickering blue” (19), indicating they too have a lower body temperature. The test thus reveals that have begun to develop the virus long before they present with the recognized physical symptoms. Even as the disease is evolving in both severity and intensity, the division between the victims of the disease and healthy individuals is not as clear as it had seemed. People are, in effect, “zombifying” without being aware of it.

In the end, the disease transforms suddenly, shockingly into an outbreak of destructive violence, as all of the “victims” in and around the relocation camps turn into homicidal maniacs, “the Possessed,” who viciously attack and kill anyone around them. A quarantine is placed over the entire country of Haiti, and eventually the violence becomes so bad that a massive bomb is detonated. Rather than solving the problem however, the bomb detonation produces a powerful electromagnetic pulse that deadens “all electronics within a six hundred square-mile radius” (25). This, in turn, unleashes all kinds of chaos, well beyond the borders of not only Haiti but also of the island of Hispaniola as a whole. This final phase of destruction produces zombies that viewers of George Romero films would recognize as fully zombified:

Initially, no one believed the hysterical evacuees. Forty-foot-tall cannibal motherfuckers running loose on the Island? Negro, please.

Until a set of soon-to-be-iconic Polaroids made it out on one clipper showing what later came to be called a Class 2 in the process of putting a slender broken girl in its mouth.

Beneath the photo someone had scrawled: Numbers 11:18. *Who shall give us flesh to eat?* (26).

As the ironic result of being treated as the absolute enemy, the zombies are transformed into an absolute, threatening other. In her analysis of “Monstro,” Sarah Quesada reminds us that the Caribbean was in fact named for a play on the word “cannibalism,” and argues that these zombie “caribs” “reappear as colonists’ worst nightmare” (loc 7166). By transforming into cannibals, zombies become the ultimate Caribbeans, taking the foundational metaphor to the extreme and erasing any social divisions designed to separate them from the uninfected. It is also worth noting here that the photographs that document this last stage in the outbreak are not the artistic, intellectual photos that Alex dreams of taking but utilitarian, frantically shot Polaroids. In the quest for survival, questions of art and taste are quickly tossed aside.

In “remaking” his decolonial zombies in the context of an already-apocalyptic future, Díaz shows how intimately connected this future is to the monstrous elements of the island’s (and, implicitly, the Caribbean’s) past. This apocalypse is one that humans have built, the final phase of which the governments of Hispaniola actively instigate. Quesada argues that the zombie apocalypse that Díaz presents in “Monstro” is a kind of “literary subversion” that transforms the zombie, once identified with the plantation system, into “a signifier of decolonial resistance” (7017). Yet in their relationship to the Haitian revolution, zombies were already connected to the concept of decolonial rebellion. This rebellion, more monstrous than the last, promises to finish the full destruction of the system.

### **Remaking it New**

Responding to the long history of zombies (both literary and non-), Cabiya’s and Díaz’s texts remake the zombie into new kind of Caribbean figure, a force that exposes and critiques repressive structures of both feeling and behavior. Their narratives use gradations of zombie consciousness and sentience, along with the juxtaposition of Dominican and Haitian perspectives, to show how modern-day affective sensibility in this Caribbean locale is both bolstered by and connected to more basic forms of capitalist exploitation. Kerstin Oloff argues that Díaz’s and Cabiya’s texts represent attempts to “world’ the zombie” – to “insert their critique of the (economic and ideological) relations between the two countries within a

larger, global framework” (“Towards the World-Zombie” 190), and a critique of global structures of exploitation can certainly be found in these texts. Yet their critique of local, Caribbean conditions is particularly resonant. If the sentient zombie, as it has appeared in American popular films and television shows, explores the borders between human and undead, *Malas hierbas* and “Monstro” both focus on how humanity – particularly in the Caribbean – has established and maintained those borders in the first place.

Díaz’s and Cabiya’s use of zombies as figures for social critique would seem consistent with the ways in which the figure has been employed in other Latin American and Caribbean texts. David Dalton, in an essay in this volume, argues that the Latin American zombie is a figure inherently opposed to “racial, global, and (neo)colonial structures of power.”<sup>7</sup> As they reveal the repressive socio-political and ideological systems still in place in the region, Cabiya’s and Díaz’s texts also remake zombies themselves in ways that suggest alternatives – however radical – to these (neo)colonial, patriarchal systems. Díaz’s apocalyptic zombies promise to break down not only the borders between the Dominican Republic and Haiti but the contours of established society. The widespread social destruction they unleash may clear the way for a new kind of society to emerge. Neither exploited slave nor mindless cannibal, the sentient zombie that Isadore awakens at the end of *Malas hierbas* is a new model, one whose creation undoes the established gendering of power and proposes a new zombie reality. In both cases, they awaken the reader to the zombie’s expanded potential.

It is worth noting, however, that Cabiya’s and Díaz’s texts end on an ambivalent, unresolved note. The zombie scientist’s narrative of sensual awakening notwithstanding, what the future holds for this remade zombie remains unclear. What does Isadore intend to do with her new creation? Similarly, the narrator of “Monstro,” also chooses not to tell the reader about how – or if – the zombie apocalypse is resolved. The reader knows that the narrator somehow survives the destruction to become one of the “time witnesses” (4), but the last thing he tells us about his experience of that time is that rather than fleeing the rampaging zombies, he and Alex decide to drive towards the border, accompanied by Mysty. If the zombie narrator’s transformation in *Malas hierbas* allows him to paradoxically to achieve a more intense level of feeling than he had experienced as a “human,” the protagonist’s haggard tone in “Monstro” suggests that perhaps his experience of the zombies has forced him out of his post-adolescent obliviousness and into a different kind of awareness. In both cases, the witnessing of a life beyond humanity has altered their perspective, but a final transformation may be far from complete.

## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Although the figure of the zombie is primarily identified with Haiti as a point of origin, it has roots in African belief systems (Ackermann and Gauthier, and McAlister). contemporary zombie lore, Following the U.S. invasion of Haiti in 1914, the early twentieth-century travel writing of authors like William Seabrook (*The Magic Island*) and Zora Neale Hurston (*Tell My Horse*) -- and the pulp fiction that soon followed -- first brought to the attention of American audiences.

<sup>2</sup> Critic Mabel Moraña observes that “el tema del monstruo es, ante todo, biopolítico” (Loc 123). This appears to be particularly true of films and texts that contain sentient zombies, where even the most light-hearted plotline can be seen in some way as limning the division between bare life and human personhood.

<sup>3</sup> The zombie has been used to similar ends in texts from parts of the Caribbean other than Haiti/Hispaniola, such as Jamaican writer Edna Brodber’s novel *Myal* (1988), Cuban writer Erick Mota’s “That Zombie Belongs to Fidel!” and the Cuban film *Juan de los Muertos* (2011), directed by Alejandro Brugués.

<sup>4</sup> For a discussion of early anti-Haitian discourse in the Dominican Republic and its connection to U.S. politics, see Lorgia García-Peña, *The Borders of Dominicanidad: Race, Nation, and Archives of Contradiction*, Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2016. For an analysis of the development of anti-Haitian discourse during the dictatorship of Rafael Leónidas Trujillo, see Néstor E. Rodríguez, *Escrituras de desencuentro en la República Dominicana*, México: Siglo XXI Editores, 2005.

<sup>5</sup> Lorgia García Peña points out – correctly – that the 1937 massacre was not just an “anti-immigrant state-sponsored crime” but was also a case of Dominicans turning “on their own” (*Borders of Dominicanidad* 14). Nevertheless, it must be emphasized that the stated target was Haitian residents of the Dominican Republic. Richard Turits has argued that Trujillo engineered the massacre as a strategy for consolidating state power. See “Bordering the Nation: Race, Colonization, and the 1937 Haitian Massacre in the Dominican Frontier.” *Foundations of Despotism: Peasants, the Trujillo Regime, and Modernity in Dominican History*. Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004. 144-80.

<sup>6</sup> See Mario Ariza, “La apátrida: Dominicans of Haitian Descent Are Deported and Forgotten,” *The Miami New Times* (February 21, 2017), <http://www.miaminewtimes.com/news/la-apatrida-dominicans-of-haitian-descent-are-deported-and-forgotten-9153733>. Last viewed 1/12/17. See also Jonathan M. Katz, “In Exile. Deportations and violence have driven tens of thousands of people of Haitian descent from their homes in the Dominican Republic — while the world is silent,” *The New York Times Magazine* (January 13, 2016), [https://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/17/magazine/haitians-in-exile-in-the-dominicanrepublic.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/17/magazine/haitians-in-exile-in-the-dominicanrepublic.html?_r=0). Last viewed 1/12/17.

<sup>7</sup> See Dalton’s essay in this issue.

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