

"I walked with a zombie": The pleasures and perils of postcolonial hybridity

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This article began with a zombie. Had it not been for the zombie, I wouldn't have opened the way I did, nor said what I am about to say, nor compared what I am about to compare. I would have written about postcolonialism, but perhaps less engagingly or forcefully-- you'll be the judge of that. So you've all got the zombie to thank-and I hope you will.

I've intentionally opened on a somewhat equivocal note, part serious, part comic, because I plan to explore the pros and cons of postcolonial criticism through this painful yet so often sensationalized symbol of Afro-Antillean bondage. To be more precise and scholarly sounding, I plan to explore how reworking the zombie in various cultural and political contexts, North and South, lays bare the pleasures and perils of postcolonialism.

"[Do you know] the one about the zombie woman?" "That's it! That sounds terrific!" "Hmm . . . how does it start?" "Is it American?" "Yeah, but I saw it eons ago" "So? Do it anyway." "Well, let me concentrate a minute. . . . Oh, that's it, now I remember" (157-58). The exchange just cited comes from Manuel Puig's 1976 novel *Beso de la mujer arana* (Eng. *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, from which I quote). In it, you will recall, Puig weaves the tale of two men-Valentin, a revolutionary, and Molina, a homosexual-each jailed for his "antisocial" activities and forced to share a prison cell in the authoritarian, homophobic Argentina of the 1970s. To while away the time, Molina, a latter-day Scheherazade, regales his cellmate with some of his favorite films, many of them Hollywood "B" movies from the forties. Val Lewton's 1943 cult classic *I Walked with a Zombie* is one of the most outstanding. Puig's zombie text has a pretext, then, and the two-the North American, Hollywood version and the Latin American, Argentine incarnation-are the first zombie works with which I'll deal.

But Puig was not the only writer who saw and remembered Lewton's haunting, visually powerful flick. It seems that Jean Rhys, author of the 1966 masterpiece *Wild Sargasso Sea*, saw it as well, and, like Puig, she inscribed it in her novel (Newman, 18). Rhys's book will be my third text: the Anglo--Caribbean rendering.

The fourth and final work comes from Africa, the origin and matrix of porous cosmological borders where death-life nudges life-death, as it does in the zombie. This book deals with a liminal, in-between figure that is cousin to the zombie: the abiku child who dies and returns, dies and returns, moving continually between the spirit world and the world of the living (Ogunyemi, 62-63; Cezair-Thompson, 35). An abiku child is the protagonist of Ben Okri's 1991 novel *The Famished Road*, winner of the Booker Prize a few years back and now my fourth text for closer study.

I doubt that anyone has rubbed these works together before, certainly in this particular way; but that's one of the pleasures of postcolonialism. Because a postcolonial perspective contests the longregnant North-South direction of intellectual exchange and fosters exactly the kind of dialogue I am attempting, a dialogue of cultures, literatures, and critical discourses that have rarely, if ever, spoken to each other,

despite much lip service in previous decades to a shared "thirdworldism." A postcolonial perspective shifts focus from imperial centers and offers tools for comparing the formerly colonized's oppositional cultural politics and destabilizing, frequently innovating literary strategies. And a postcolonial perspective provides strong paradigms for reading in power situations, bringing into sharp view significant but ignored features of texts from, say, Latin America or Africa, permitting a more penetrating critical practice and a more liberating alliance-building among intellectuals.

Postcolonialism has its perils, of course. These have been the topic of copious talk and ink of late. See, for instance, the lengthy discussion in Bart Moore-Gilbert's recent volume, *Postcolonial Theory: Contexts, Practices, Politics*. It's as if after the initial rush in the last two decades or so to jump uncritically on the postcolonial bandwagon, scholars have begun to step back and question postcolonialism's own anxieties and cracks, much as they earlier did colonialism's. Does postcolonialism continue to reinscribe colonialist discourse? Are its modes of analysis deeply Eurocentric? And does it lack engagement with specific histories of suffering by specific classes, ethnicities, and genders, losing itself in a globalized mush of displaced and discontented subaltern identities? For if everyone is unhappily "diasporic" or "in-between," as the prevalent postcolonial trope of nomadism or hybridity would have it, then what's the point of the trope, and where does it lead us in any meaningful way? (See Ha, 159.)

But this sort of questioning, the naming of postcolonialism's perils, is a good thing, I believe, since it will result in stronger analytic tools with which to study the highly complex nature of cultural relations, especially unequal cultural relations. That is how I intend to approach the zombie: as an example of the trope of hybridity through which we can enjoy postcolonialism's pleasures, explore its perils, and create a more precise, newer, critical model.

So first, Hollywood's version. In the thirties and forties, amid Hollywood's production of melodramas, musicals, gangster movies, and westerns, a series of horror pictures appeared that critics now group under the rubric "'zombie women' films, because in them the heroine becomes, or is threatened with becoming, a zombie, in conjunction with enslavement by a villain" (Draper, 54). The 1932 film *White Zombie*, starring Bela Lugosi, and Val Lewton's 1943 *I Walked with a Zombie* are classics of the genre, which has survived well into recent years.

Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert appropriately entitles her study of the phenomenon "Eroticism and Exoticism in the Representation of Woman as Zombie," since the flicks' fundamental components are sexual desire--men possessing women--set against a background of tropical otherness: Caribbean, especially Haitian, sugarcane plantations throbbing with menacing "voodoo" drums and phallic "native" ceremonies performed under the stars. Through the zombie woman, the Caribbean, much like Conrad's Africa, becomes a screen onto which North Americans can project their fantasies and insecurities, the id forces of the libidinous, irrational, violent, dangerous, and, yes, miscegenated, intermingled, or hybrid.

So great is the horror, the horror, of these forces, that most cinematic analyses refuse to address the films' crucial transposition of the zombie from enslaved black victim vitiated by white colonization to virginal white victim menaced by black erotic rites. In these celluloid dreams, the physical reification and psychological annihilation of African being--zombification in other words--becomes the plight of North American "love slaves." (Denigrating any woman is despicable, but that is not the point here.) Some of the pictures do suggest a link between zombification and slavery, as in Val Lewton's more nuanced presentation, but the shifting of black suffering onto white women, and the eliding or underplaying of the oppressive historical circumstances, remains at the films' ideological and visual core.

For example, the movies don't mention the U.S. occupation of Haiti, an occupation still in force during

the making of *White Zombie* and an occupation that, in Michael Dash's words, reinforced images of Haitian and, by extension, Caribbean barbarism, cannibalism, animality, and sexual-racial debauchery. Dash's book *Haiti and the United States: National Stereotypes and the Literary Imagination* traces the textual images-fiction and travel books-that helped justify the U.S.'s imperialist designs and "civilizing mission" (22-36). The zombie-women movies did much the same, and more powerfully, with their stark play of sun and shadow, silence and sound, piano and tom-toms, death and life. Here's how Phil Hardy describes Lewton's creation in his *Encyclopedia of Horror Movies*: a "haunting, nightmarishly beautiful tone poem of voodoo drums, dark moonlight and somnambulist ladies in floating white brought to perfection by direction . . . camerawork . . . and dialogue" (quoted in Bansak, 161). No wonder that Manuel Puig, in far-off Argentina, and Jean Rhys, in Europe, remembered it and incorporated it into their novels. Hollywood's reach was-and is-more potent than that of any fiction or travel book. Indeed, one of the areas within postcolonial studies calling for much further work is that of popular culture: for instance, the role of mass media such as film in the symbolic constitution of identities, and, in this case, of stereotypes (see Gilbert, 187).

Unlike other critical approaches, then, a postcolonial reading reveals what mainstream critics overwhelmed by mesmerizing cinematographic shadows ignore: Hollywood's zombie is thoroughly enclosed within a colonialist discourse that usurps history and identity. Here, hybridity menaces, unmasking the fear of black and white intermingling, the terror of black (male) bodies dominating whites.

Now, what about Puig? What does his zombie reveal? Molina's jailhouse retelling of *I Walked with a Zombie* forms part of a cinematic web that goes far beyond entertainment, functioning as a metaphoric discourse on the two men's plight. Both are persecuted, suffering "freaks" or "hybrids" just like the half-panther, half-woman of *Cat People* (another Lewton classic, 1942), the sometimes-deformed, sometimes-beautiful lovers of *The Enchanted Cottage* (1945), or the living-dead wife of *I Walked with a Zombie*. Molina also weaves his web out of "madeup" movies that never existed outside the covers of *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, although they could have, so well do the idiosyncratically recounted horror pics and the invented screenplays blend; this characteristic has been amply noted by Puig's commentators.

What they haven't observed, and a postcolonial lens does, is how Puig gradually and significantly shifts the locales of most of the movies from the cold and frozen North-the New York of *Cat People*, the New England of *The Enchanted Cottage*-- to the warm and balmy South of *I Walked with a Zombie* and the spurious celluloids that surround it. The zombie film overflows its borders, so to speak, with its setting-a place in the Caribbean-and its situation-a story of hatred, love, and in-betweenness-becoming that of almost all of the five fabricated films. (A related spurious Nazi film is set in occupied France.) The hybrid zombie becomes a multilayered symbolic space in which North American, South American, African, and Caribbean cultural and political discourses cross, conversing and clashing in a noisy and revealing postcolonial colloquy.

Puig's zombie also reveals a great deal of ambivalence. As an Argentine writing about his country at an extremely trying time, he is caught in a bind, since Argentine society has always had a love-hate relationship with the West. On the one hand, Argentina prides itself on its "Europeanness" and its "whiteness"-largely a result of government-sanctioned nineteenth-century immigration from Europe and frontier wars designed to kill off Native Americans and Africans (see Lewis, 11-13). On the other hand, Argentina knows that it is not a European country, but a distant postcolonial republic of the South, marked by uneven development, a population whose racial makeup has more mestizo and Afro than most Argentines would care to admit, and a culture whose chief popular export to the world, the tango, rings with the sound of the Afro-inspired mulonga or milonga (Castro, 95-96). Argentines reproduce Western horror of the hybrid and its exoticizing of the "primitive," and are themselves the objects of

such othering: witness the marketing of the tango as the sensuous, lascivious gyrations of darkskinned Latin Americans on the stages of Western capitals.

The murderous dictatorship ruling in the seventies, when the exiled Puig wrote *Kiss of the Spider Woman*, stood for a racially, politically, religiously, and sexually "pure" Argentina, and arrested or disappeared the "impure"-that is why Valentin and Molina are in prison, and that is why Puig (and Molina) vindicate the hybrid and the underdog, including the zombie. Unlike the Hollywood productions, Puig's Caribbean films unambiguously name their locales--colonized Latin American countries-- and underline the onerous legacy of colonization (125). Molina's version of the zombie movie pointedly tells of a rebellion by the black peons working as serfs on the banana plantations, the revolutionary act that led to their zombification under pressure by the owners; the American film says nothing about such a rebellion. This emphasis on injustice, revolution, and hybridity spills over into the "imagined" pictures.

So far, so good. But if Puig's use of the zombie bespeaks a nonhegemonic, hybridized locus of enunciation and some awareness of Caribbean history, it also displays, certainly as Molina tells it, the stereotyped, prejudicial imagery implicit in the made-in-Hollywood horror pics and shared by large portions of Argentine society. Molina's Caribbean smacks heavily of Hollywoodism: gentle breezes under the swaying palms, soft maracas, rhythmic bongos, and sexy, oh so sexy dames in clingy lame gowns. "Very tropical," as Molina gushes. And the blacks: well, you know, Molina tells his cellmate, how blacks' eyes are "big, really big, like two fried eggs" (190); and those drums, thank God you don't always hear their drums, because they're a bad omen; and of course, there's that evil witch doctor, el brujo, and that old negra, the housekeeper, she's big and fat, and her hair's already turned completely gray, but she's so kind (162).

You find almost every cliché, as you do the ahistorical displacement that unhinges the link between zombification and a specific Afro-Caribbean slavery: now the site of oppression is not a West Indian plantation but an Argentine prison, and the substitute victim not a heterosexual woman but, first and foremost, a homosexual man. The zombie continues to be enmeshed in an erotics that is not its main strand, notwithstanding the importance of Puig's strong stand on gay liberation. If Hollywood's *I Walked with a Zombie* betrays a colonialist panic at interracial hybridity, *Kiss of the Spider Woman* projects a less panicked postcolonial hybridity, yet one still entangled within the colonialist machineries it seeks to displace.

Is that what also happens in *Rhys*? While Puig's novel has scarcely been studied from a postcolonial perspective, *Rhys*'s has become a key work of postcoloniality, a prime example of the central postcolonial strategy of "re-placing the text," as Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin put it (*Empire*, 78). *Rhys*, like Puig, appropriates a metropolitan text and tries to dismantle its power through formal subversions and thematic contestations (83). It's what Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* does to Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson* and Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*, Aime Cesaire's *Une tempête* to Shakespeare's *Tempest*, or Borges's "Pierre Menard, autor del Quixote" to Cervantes's *Don Quixote*. In *Rhys*'s case, the canonical text is, of course, Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*, a link that has been studied and restudied. To my knowledge, however, only Judie Newman's monograph *The Ballistic Bard* convincingly asserts by means of striking similarities in plot and imagery that *Rhys*, who began writing her masterpiece in the forties, used another, "less prestigious" source: none other than Lewton's haunting film, which he himself described as "a West Indian version of *Jane Eyre*," what with its unchaste, abnormal first wife, its noble suffering husband, and its selfless nurse who becomes wife number two (Newman, 18; Bansak, 145-46).

The phrase "less prestigious" may suggest at least part of the critical reticence to explore sources other than Brontë--we want our postcolonial texts to have high-cultural "class," perhaps as a defensive

response to imperialist denigrations. But reading Rhys along with Puig underlines what I noted earlier: the increasingly central role of pop-culture products—film, video, song—as the new metropolitan canon. Part of Puig's and Rhys's postcolonial innovativeness derives from recognizing this, from replacing *I Walked with a Zombie* along with *Jane Eyre*, for example.

Rhys has many advantages over Puig: she comes from the West Indian island of Dominica, closer to the fount, so to speak. She knows much more directly about obeah, the African-based belief system in many ways analogous to voodoo that has been important in the English-speaking Caribbean (Fernandez Olmos, 6). Her novel is set in the Caribbean in 1838, just after Britain's emancipation of the black slaves, not in 1975 in a South American prison; and her protagonist is the Jamaican Antoinette Mason, not the Argentine Luis Alberto Molina or Valentin Arregui Paz. In other words, Rhys's novel displaces less, maintaining the specific geography, history, and politics of zombification.

Yet Rhys shares a great deal with Puig. Both speak from Columbian zones still bearing the marks of the Admiral's voyages. If the Caribbean was shaped by the Plantation, as Antonio Benitez-Rojo poetically argues, the River Plate was shaped by the Estancia, the vast cattle estate on which nonwhite bodies labored and lassoed for white, landowning oligarchs. Both novels intend to show the other side of the master narratives and to undermine their authority by giving voice to confined, enslaved, repudiated "monstrosities," threatening in-betweens, zombies. What about that homosexual in the cell, that revolutionary in the torture chamber, that madwoman in the attic? What are their stories? Just as Puig's zombie movie overflows its boundaries, so does Rhys disperse zombie pieces throughout her book in numerous references to the living-dead and to obeah; and just as Puig uses the zombie to join the personal with the political, so does Rhys link the tale of a sexualized, hybridized zombie woman with a narrative of imperial domination.

Antoinette Cosway, the reconfigured Bertha Mason of Bronte's classic, fits Paravisini-Gerbert's definition because she indeed becomes a zombie in conjunction with enslavement by a villain. Belonging completely neither to the white world, her birthright, nor to the black world, close to her through her friend Tia and her beloved nurse Christophine, Antoinette suffers further "zombification" when her stepbrother "sells" her in matrimony to Rochester, a younger son without a fortune who must marry rich or remain poor. Sexuality and miscegenation play an essential role in this incendiary mix, since Rochester comes to perceive Antoinette's honeymoon pleasure-in-sex as the crazy nymphomania of a "dark alien," a "white nigger" too dangerously imbued with an eroticized Caribbean Africanness (WSS, 67, 102). To gain control over her—as masters gained control over slaves—Rochester "zombifies" Antoinette: covering her face with a sheet as though she were dead, renaming her, defining her as mad, transporting her overseas, keeping her under lock. Before leaving the Caribbean, he muses: "Very soon she'll join the others.... They can be recognized. White faces, dazed eyes, aimless gestures, high-pitched laughter.... Yes, they've got to be watched. For the time comes when they try to kill, then disappear. But others are waiting to take their place, it's a long long line. She's one of them" (172).

Antoinette is subsumed into the politics of slavery—the zombie's origin—into the imperialist's fear of slave rebellion, of Africans threatening Europeans. And in truth, she reacts, much as her father's ex-slaves did, by setting a torch to the Great House (Newman, 15). This portrayal contrasts markedly with *I Walked with a Zombie*, where the first wife never speaks, never acts, never does more than walk robotically through the landscape with dazed eyes and aimless gestures, only to be put out of her misery by someone else.

So potent is Rhys's postcolonial rewriting of Bertha Mason that she has, *A la Borges*, "created" her precursor. As Patsy Stoneman indicates in her study *Bronte Transformations*, Rhys's *Wide Sargasso Sea* has had an enormous impact on subsequent readings and productions of *Jane Eyre*, inevitably in the direction of greater focus on the colonial Afro-- Caribbean dimension and greater positive African--

ization of Antoinette (194). Rhys has achieved the height of postcolonial pleasure, if you will, emptying the master text and filling it with an audacious revisionist content, to speak in Harold Bloomian terms.

For all the success, problems lurk, and they echo Puig's. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak puts her finger on them in her acerbic essay "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism" when she writes: "Wide Sargasso Sea marks with uncanny clarity the limits of its own discourse in Christophine, Antoinette's black nurse. . . . She cannot be contained by a novel which rewrites a canonical English text within the European novelistic tradition in the interest of the white Creole rather than the native" (190). Firdous Azim concurs: "Crucially, in *Wide Sargasso Sea* it is a white Creole woman who represents the figure of the colonized double" (quoted in Stoneman, 190). In other words, Rhys's novel, too, exhibits the displacement that turns white women into hybrid zombies, that makes in-betweenness and doubling the heritage of whites. Spivak argues that it cannot be otherwise: "No perspective critical of imperialism can turn the Other into a self, because the project of imperialism has always already historically refracted what might have been the absolutely Other into a domesticated Other that consolidates the imperialist self" (253, emphasis in the original). Put more directly: the colonial inevitably mediates the postcolonial, which cannot escape its clutches and be truly liberational.

But must things always be this way? Can the inbetween ever overcome debilitating displacements and agonistic alterity? Can it point to a space beyond that of an illegitimate and refractory foil to Europe, to a hybridity that refuses colonial authority? (I'm paraphrasing Benita Parry here, who, unlike Spivak, sees Rhys more positively [42].) I believe that it can. Ben Okri's *Famished Road* may illustrate how, turning me once again to the pleasures of postcolonialism, or of a literary and critical practice that might come to be called by another name, maybe supracolonialism, if we decide to keep the "colonial" in

Okri's novel, as indicated earlier, presents us with a figure that is cousin to the zombie, the abiku child, who dies and returns, dies and returns. The zombie and the abiku both emerge from the womb of African spirituality, with its permeable frontiers between the material and the immaterial and its belief that the living and the dead continually palaver. Much like the probably Kongo zombie, the Yoruba abiku (ogbanje in Igbo) is at once living and dead (Davis, 57; Kongo nzambi, "spirit of a dead person"). The Nigerian poet Niyi Osundare gives this a linguistic gloss: "The morphological agglutination in 'Abiku' . . . reflects the mystery child's fusion of two states of being and non-being. It creates a situation in which being born and dying become an integrated cycle. With the passage of time the sequence of occurrence becomes irrelevant as a + bi + ku [one + born + (to) die] becomes synonymous with a + ku + bi, one + dead + (to be) born—a cyclical feat that makes Abiku truly 'ageless'" (95-96).

The abiku shares much with the zombie, but Osundare's words suggest the abiku's positive possibilities: agelessness and integration, possibilities that Okri employs masterfully. Azaro, the protagonist and narrator of *The Famished Road*, is an abiku child buried as dead, then raised, like a zombie; hence his name, Lazaro (8). His hybridity would seem a perfect metaphor for postcolonialism's dualistic anomie. Okri in fact calls the novel's aborning nation-state "an abiku nation," and he paints it with a "freakishness" that outdoes anything found in Lewton or Puig or Rhys, populated as it is with chestless, six-fingered men; two-legged dogs; hunched, toothless, green-eyed mutants; women who have breasts on their backs; and all manner of shades, spirits, strange mechanical inventions, weird political thugs, poisoned foodstuffs (494). Herbalists, juju, sacrifices, ceremonies, and magic objects pullulate on his pages to a degree far, far beyond that of *Kiss of the Spider Woman* or Hollywood's version of "voodoo" or Rhys's obeah.

Yes, strange things seem to be happening, but-- here's the rub-- they really aren't, since we're not in the miscegenating, displacing, alienating universe inherited from colonialism and still measured according to colonialist clocks. We're in an ageless, animist realist realm where colonialism and colonialist reality are mere specs (Quayson, 148). Those shapes and sounds and smells we sense aren't Conrad's estranging

and implacable forces brooding over inscrutable intentions; they're the cacophony of an African reality immediately and solidly engaged in its multiple dimensions, living and dead, spiritual and material, old and new, good and bad, peaceful and violent, a reality assumed without anguishing either/ors or in-betweens.

Azaro may be fragile and liminal, but he is not susceptible to the fragmentation of identity bequeathed by colonialism, because he refuses its authority, sucking its history and time into the timelessness, cyclical recurrence and regenerative transfiguration provided by indigenous forms of knowledge (see Cezair-Thompson, 36). Innovating literarily and conceptually, Okri embraces animist realism for its hopefulness, for its potential to find the seeds of change amid the ugliness of inherited fractures. "Our country is an abiku," Dad tells Azaro. "Like the spirit-child, it keeps coming and going. One day it will decide to remain" (478). And Azaro decides to remain, accepting paradox, the "mystery of births within births, death within births, births within dying, the challenge of giving birth to one's true self," of moving beyond the road of "our refusal to be" on to "new roads" and "new pacts" (487-88). He accepts hybridity as an empowering motor, not as an angst-filled otherness-machine. He's much like the man with a bicycle in the wonderful Yoruba sculpture decorating the cover of Kwame Anthony Appiah's influential book *In My Father's House* like a tantalizing emblem.

Contemporary, jaunty, authoritative, the man is going to town, grounded in immediate reality by the bicycle, dressed sort of polyglot (139). He's a hybrid, all right, but so what? He's produced, says Appiah, by someone who doesn't care that the bicycle is the white man's invention-it isn't there to be Other to the Yoruba self. He's produced, says Appiah even more eruditely, by the all-consuming vision of a creativity less anxious than that of many postcolonial African novels-novels, I might add, not so dissimilar from *Kiss of the Spider Woman* or *Wide Sargasso Sea* despite the geographic and historical contrasts on which I've insisted (157). Okri's abiku does remain in Africa, without the Middle Passage, without the slavery and the displacement from the source; but that by itself cannot explain the changed tone, since postcolonial African novels, as Appiah pointedly reminds us, are just as riven by ambiguous adventures and pessimistic binarisms-and postcolonial African poetry, I might add, just as reft by tortured abiku children (Soyinka, J. P. Clark).

No, I think that we have in Okri what Appiah wished for in the future African novel: the all-consuming vision of a less-anxious creativity, the abiku with a bicycle-hybrid, sort of polyglot, who doesn't care if bicycles or cameras or dictionaries are the white man's inventions. They're not there to be Other to the African self; they're not there to keep trapping the in-between in colonialist logic.

It seems to me that we have here a new reading of the trope of hybridity which moves beyond Hollywood's menacing sexist and racist version, beyond Puig's and Rhys's more contestatory though still ensnared postcolonial rendering. The political woes, economic afflictions, and social inequities aren't gone-this is no Pollyanna universe-but there's a refusal to be colonialism's and postcolonialism's generic, globalized, distressed, and subalterned hybrid; Okri posits instead a supracolonial hybridity of possibility. Marymount Mant Manhattan College

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