

The Makings of a Monster: Identity and the Zombie Narrative in Tristan Alice Nieto's "Imago"

They've come to eat your brains! Or have they? This classic monster is represented in mass amounts of films, television shows, literature, and even music. Traditionally, the zombie is a slow-moving undead fiend with a hankering for brains, but as is the case with all classic monsters, the origin of the zombie goes much deeper. The zombie has been used throughout media to embody the concept of "the other", marginalized or minority identities which are viewed as causes of the majority's suffering. With this embodiment of "the other" comes the question of how the zombie narrative relates to identity, particularly marginalized or minority identities. The short story "Imago" by Tristan Alice Nieto incorporates this question, providing an interesting take on the zombie narrative. In "Imago", the main character and first-person narrator Tabitha is the undead. In a dystopian London ravaged by a disease known as "the White Death" (Nieto 348) Tabitha, a blind transgender queer albino woman, is murdered for her bionic eyes. Because her death was a homicide, Tabitha is temporarily brought back to life with a drug called Revivranol to assist police in the capture of her killer. Throughout the short story, Tabitha's identity, both in life and death, is explored through innovative subversions of the traditional undead/zombie narrative, in turn, examining the identity of "the other" and questioning mainstream society's concept of the ideal body/individual.

One of the most historically divisive identity classifications is race, and thus it is no surprise that it has a plethora of zombie representations. The topic of race is indeed prevalent within the zombie genre, appearing in many zombie narratives, including one of the most famous works of the genre, *Night of the Living Dead* (Dendle 46). Notably, the very creation of the modern zombie stems from racial tensions. The zombies of today originated in Haiti as a native superstition and myth linked to voodoo. The United States' occupation of Haiti from 1915 to 1934 was met with much resistance by native Haitians causing tensions to skyrocket within the

region. Combined with the systemic racism of the era, Haitian resistance was met with accusations of savagery and cannibalism, and reports of Haitian “zombies” became popularized. In the depression-era, the zombie was adopted to the US and western culture, becoming a representative of the mindless masses of capitalism or, most commonly, an embodiment of “the other” (Dendle 46). In zombie narratives with racial symbolism, race is often a component due to a fear of immigration, the collapse of the nuclear family, or more generally cultural tensions. With zombies representing “the other” in a racial context, those of a minority race become an invading force (representing immigration) which causes the collapse of society (representing the collapse of the nuclear family). The protagonists of the narrative must then attempt to survive by outrunning or out-killing the zombies (representing cultural tensions). The traditional zombie narrative, in turn, separates others on the basis of racial identity to represent racial tensions and divisions in real life society.

In the short story “Imago”, however, this traditional racial othering is presented in a very innovative way. Throughout the story, Tabitha’s appearance is mentioned many times, particularly focusing on her albinism. Albinism is a condition which carries with it many derogatory stereotypes, even under normal societal conditions. In “Imago” however, with a plague called the White Death (named due to the pale appearance of the infected and the white blood which oozes out of a person’s translucent eyes in the late stage of the disease) decimating society, Tabitha faces acute discrimination due to her albinism. The discrimination and bullying she faces as a child causes her to “change schools twice” (Nieto 354), “[have] her life threatened” (Nieto 354), and even have her house broken into and “covered... in pig’s blood” (Nieto 354). Rude and derogatory names like “Ghost Girl” (Nieto 359) and “plague monkey” (Nieto 353) also appear throughout the work as references to Tabitha’s albinism. This scapegoating and name calling is strikingly similar to that which minorities face in the real

world, such as the Asian community in second wave United States immigration, the African-American community from the abolition era to today, and the Latinx community in today's divided society over border security and immigration. Interestingly, despite all of the focus on Tabitha's skin color and appearance, her race is never mentioned. Tabitha's skin color is only ever referred to as albino or pale due to her albinism. The effect of this exclusion of Tabitha's race is essentially the inclusion of all races into her character. While Tabitha is absent of color, she is, in a way, all colors due to the exclusion of her race. This receptibility to all color, along with Tabitha's first-person point of view, allows one to put themselves into Tabitha's shoes as she could theoretically represent the racial identity of the reader.

Albinism is considered an abnormality by all races, and thus, by presenting Tabitha as albino, she becomes a representation of the minority experience in a broad sense. Because our zombie, Tabitha, is the protagonist and not the villain, the traditional zombie narrative trope of defensive othering is reversed. Instead of the minority horde coming to eat a middle-class white family's brains, we see the savagery of discrimination first hand. Instead of wishing that a white middle age man will kill Tabitha and save the day, when presented with Tabitha's killer, we first despise him. Later in the story, we pity him when we learn that he killed Tabitha and stole her eyes to sell to a biotechnology trader who claimed she could cure him of the White Death. Rather than fear Tabitha, we cheer for her as she goes into a zombie rage and kills the Red Witch, the aforementioned scamming biotechnology trader. As an audience, we root for Tabitha, in turn, rooting for the zombie minority within the zombie narrative. This subversion of the traditional zombie narrative challenges mainstream society's creation of an "other" based upon race as we support "the other" in her journey for justice. By challenging the idea of "the other", Nieto sequentially challenges the societal concept of an ideal identity (aka. the majority or "non-other" group) and the discrimination of those not of this ideal identity within society.

Another category of identity which is frequently “othered” by society is gender. Historically, the classifications of gender through gender norms have divided individuals according to what qualities they should theoretically have based upon their biological sex. These classifications were, of course, biased, as women were generally given fewer rights while being subjugated to men. The traditional zombie narrative originated during an era in which this sexism was still particularly rampant, yet when the feminist ideals of individuality and self-authority were beginning to take root. The zombie narratives of this time reflect such sentiments; however, women are nevertheless in the role of the zombie “others” as they are the marginalized group, regardless of the feminist messages within the films. In the 1932 film *White Zombie*, for example, a zombified woman who is controlled by her voodoo zombie master and forced to act as his wife cannot be fully conquered by her overlord despite his best efforts. The master’s inability to conquer the white zombie represents the unconquerable will of women, how women cannot be mindlessly controlled by the men in their lives, such as their father or husband (Dendle 46-49). Tabitha, another white zombie, similarly escapes the control of gender classifications, this time relating to a separate issue of gender. Tabitha is a transgender woman, who after undergoing extensive surgery, appears no different to any cisgender woman. The “othering” of transgender women in current society is extensive, even by other (predominately cisgender) women. While Tabitha is still regaining her memories after being turned into the undead, she sees a pamphlet with instructions for post-surgical care for transwomen. Tabitha is confused and wonders if her partner was transgender before realizing that it is just as possible that she herself is transgender despite not “[feeling] transgender” (Nieto 357). Even if Tabitha were to “feel transgender” (Nieto 357), she would not be able to confirm her transgender identity after advanced “nanosurgical procedures”(Nieto 357) have left her body completely undifferentiable to that of a ciswoman. Tabitha refers to her transgenderism as a “birth defect” (Nieto 376) that

was “quickly corrected” (Nieto 376), a sentiment that she does not share with her blindness or albinism. In Tabitha’s world of advanced biotechnology, her transgender identity is something to be “corrected” (Nieto 376), which speaks to the common misconception held in our own society that to be a woman, one must have a female body. Taking into account the role of zombie narratives in advocating for an acceptance of women as their own authorities, Tabitha’s transgender identity represents that a transgender identity does not (or should not) categorize an individual as “the other” within their own gender, just as women should not be “othered” by men. Thus, this inventive spin on classical zombie woman narrative presents transgenderism as a vital piece of identity rather than a flaw, disputing the “othering” of transwomen, and by extension, all forms of identity

Regardless of the human traits of the zombie in modern adaptations of the narrative, such as race and gender, the zombie is at its core a monster. However, does being a “monster” truly make a zombie any less human? The origin of the word monster, rather than referring to mythical creatures, comes from another category of identity outside of race and gender - disability. The word and the concept of the “monster” originate from historical discrimination of the disabled, as they were deemed “monsters” because of their appearances and different needs. According to Dr. Rosemary Garland Thompson, “monsters and freaks are forms that challenge the status quo of human embodiment” (Garland-Thompson) which, in a world fixated on the creation of “the other”, makes one liable to become represented within the zombie genre. Tabitha’s status as a classic monster within “Imago” turns the tables on the traditional ableist view of many zombie narratives. Once again in “Imago” the traditional zombie narrative, and by extension the othering of disability, is turned on its head as Tabitha’s disability (her blindness) becomes one of her strongest assets. Through her identity as a blind woman, combined with her role as the protagonist, Tabitha challenges the concept of “the other” and the ideal form as

decided by society. Tabitha, before her untimely death, was a lepidopterologist, an entomologist that specializes in the study of butterflies. As a result, Tabitha has eight tiny robotic butterflies which she was planning to use for research, each equipped with highly sophisticated cameras and the ability to fly like a butterfly. Tabitha connects the cameras in the butterflies to her biotechnology eye input, allowing her to see through the eyes of all eight butterflies (each with visual capabilities far beyond those of a non-disabled human) at the same time. Even with her less sophisticated biotechnology eyes (which she was murdered for), Tabitha could see well beyond typical human vision, asking those who questioned her about her blindness “what they could see beyond the edge of their vision” (Nieto 355) to illustrate to them that she, in actuality, could see more than them. Tabitha’s ability to “see beyond” (Nieto 355) is later beneficial to her as she is able to find her killer and intact justice on the Red Witch.

Rather than Tabitha’s blindness be a problem, it is through Tabitha’s blind identity that she finds justice and peace with her death. Thus, while classic zombie narratives “reinforce that disability is something to be overcome or fixed and imply that the only ‘real’ or viable human experience—or at least the most suitable one—is based on an identifiably ‘normal’ body” (McDaniel 425), “Imago” confirms Tabitha’s disabled identity as something to be celebrated. This statement is in radical opposition to the widespread ableist ideology of changing the disabled body to best conform with the abled, contesting the idea of an ideal abled body as being inherently better when compared to a disabled body. The argument against this theory of the ideal abled body, and the othering of those who do not fit this ideal, is especially poignant as the very concept of an ideal body “is a fabrication... an ideal that no one can truly achieve” (McDaniel 426), and in the spirit of “Imago”, not something that anyone should wish to achieve. By introducing Tabitha as our disabled monster, she becomes the supernatural heroine of the story, turning the stigma against the disabled into a celebration of the unique qualities and assets

with which disabled people identify. In turn, “Imago” contests the “othering” of the disabled and the emphasis put upon the ideal body within our society.

Tristan Alice Nieto’s short story “Imago” contests the creation of “the other” and disputes mainstream society’s concept of the ideal body/individual through the identity of the main character, Tabitha, as explored through innovative subversions of the traditional undead/zombie narrative. In the divided climate of our world today, “the other” and the concept of an ideal body have become common and mundane. In a world so quick to judge one another, a reminder of our inherent humanity hidden within a classic narrative has the potential to revive our concept of commonality. When the next zombie apocalypse, instead of letting them pick at your brains, perhaps pick theirs, you might learn something.

Works Cited

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