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Patricia E. Chu

Excerpt

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INTRODUCTION

White zombies, black Jacobins

The human monster. An ancient notion whose frame of reference is law . . . the monster's field of appearance is a juridico-biological domain . . . what makes a human monster a monster is not just its exceptionality relative to the species form; it is the disturbance it brings to juridical regularities (whether it is a question of marriage laws, canons of baptism, or rules of inheritance).

Michel Foucault, "The Abnormals" (1969)¹

Certainly we no longer know, except that it is primarily a craft, what art is. A South American poet of sorts spent an evening excitedly trying to prove to me that only that which breaks the basic rules is art. . . . But the apprentices to any craft first proudly acquire the tricks, then the deeper skills. This is only natural. But the young black who used to kneel in worship before the headlights on explorers' cars is now driving a taxi in Paris and New York. We had best not lag behind this black.

Jean Epstein, *Bonjour cinéma* (1926)²

Between roughly 1890 and 1945, elite Anglo-American and European intellectuals and artists described men of their status as being unable to maintain distinct personalities that could, because of their very distinctiveness, authoritatively affect social, economic and political life directly. The men in T. S. Eliot's crowd who flow over London Bridge to the financial district, each "fix[ing] his eyes before his feet," are on their way to Max Weber's bureaucratic organization. Once there, they will work with "[p]recision, speed, unambiguity, knowledge of the files, continuity, discretion, unity, strict subordination, reduction of friction and of material and personal costs."³ The metropolis, a "social-technological mechanism" with a money economy and a division of labor, imposes "general, schematically precise form[s]" on its inhabitants in a way that exemplifies life under modernity:

The individual has become a mere cog in an enormous organization of things and powers which tear from his hands all progress, spirituality, and value in

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order to transform them from their subjective form into the form of a purely objective life. It needs merely to be pointed out that the metropolis is the genuine arena of this culture which outgrows all personal life. Here in buildings and educational institutions, in the wonders and comforts of space-conquering technology, in the formations of community life, and in the visible institutions of the state, is offered such an overwhelming fullness of crystallized and impersonalized spirit that the personality, so to speak, cannot maintain itself under its impact.⁴

According to Georg Simmel's, Weber's and Eliot's stories of the rise of twentieth-century modernity, men have been reduced to acting only within strictly delineated jurisdictions using strictly delimited authority. They become administrators of society's institutions rather than independent agents influencing those institutions.

In analyzing Anglo-American modernism's self-consciousness about its own modernity, I focus on this sense of limits created by jurisdiction, categorization and rational management as the center of modernist affect. The "new" subjectivities and identities imagined by Anglo-American modernist artists emerged in tandem with changes in how Western states were defining and managing the people within their jurisdictions. I argue that modernist alienation is most usefully understood as a response to specific characteristics of governance in the twentieth century.

It has become commonplace to describe literary modernism as a formal and narrative engagement with the conditions of modernity. The modernist period, approximately 1890–1945, is a time during which modern states developed unprecedented abilities to identify, track and regulate populations. I examine the ways in which Anglo-American modernism was shaped by the development and application of these state administrative technologies.

The nature of the modern Western state, and consequently the experience of being administered as a citizen-subject by such a state, changed significantly during the early twentieth century. Increased government oversight of the economy seemed justified. The second wave of industrial revolution, like the first, quickly and substantially concentrated capital, increased systematized factory production (which contributed to urbanization and the rise of commodity culture), and started a wave of transnational labor migration.⁵ The scramble among the great powers for imperial territory before World War I was above all a competition among industrializing nations for economic modernization and expansion – the new basis of global power. Private production by individuals within each nation was now understood to have consequences for the nation as a

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whole. When Britain faltered in this competition, there were calls for an interventionist state that would promote national efficiency.⁶ As Nikolas Rose and Peter Miller point out, the ensuing debate was thus not merely about attaining efficiency but also articulated general political ideals about the purposes of government.⁷

The first modern war necessitated further government management of national economies and populations. Noting the German phrase for battles of the 1914–1918 Western front – *Materialschlacht*, battles of materials – Eric Hobsbawm writes that one of the most significant characteristics of modern war is that it “used and destroyed hitherto inconceivable amounts of materials.” The level of production suggested by the term, sustained over a number of years, required a large civilian labor force, a modern, highly productive and industrialized economy, and government organization and management of both.⁸ Civilians and civilian life became objects of strategy for military operations and propaganda. Leaders needed the cooperation of civilians to fight the war, and made calculations in terms of populations as resources to be managed. After the war, the emergent world powers similarly counted on civilians to build expanding (inter)national economies and infrastructures. One of the war’s lasting effects was the extension of expanded federal administration into peacetime everyday life.⁹

Twentieth-century Anglo-American political order, like twentieth-century war, was based on mass democratization. Initiatives such as extending the franchise increased the number of citizens who could claim the privileges attached to citizenship.¹⁰ The discourses of mass democracy – representation, participatory government and consent – became more firmly established as the basis for rights, regulation, legitimate exercise of power and social identity. In practice, this new political order neither eschewed violence and coercion nor redistributed political or economic power in the way the phrase “mass democratization” might imply. In America, the number of labor injunctions issued by courts rose sharply after the war, as did violent anti-strike enforcement by private and government police. Company police forces had broad discretionary powers and could beat, evict and kill picketing or striking workers. Vigilante groups joined them. A particular twist of the rhetoric of democratization emerging from nationalist wartime production justified these measures by arguing that a society had the right to the labor of its workers.¹¹ Meanwhile, expansion of eligibility for the franchise in America was accompanied by sharp declines in actual voter participation – from 80 percent of those eligible in 1896 to under 50 percent in 1924 – and by regulations

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against the street parades to the polls and public meetings on election day that had provided avenues for lower-class (white) men to identify themselves as political actors. As Robert Wiebe explains it, nineteenth-century American electoral politics depended on collective fraternity but twentieth-century American electoral politics individualized the voter. New bureaucratic electoral rules (not limited to the south) including poll taxes, pre-election registration, and literacy tests were not merely exclusionary but also “atomized” the democratic electorate: “Government-prepared forms that each man used in secret became the norm – voting, once a loyalty-affirming public action, became a private act.”¹² Across the Atlantic, the number of British voters tripled by 1921. But, paradoxically, the groups who were projected to benefit most by enfranchisement, women and labor, saw their movements stall after winning the vote. The Conservative Party won most of the elections from 1922 to 1940.¹³

Thus amidst what many historians consider a general political, economic and social “sinking” of the lower classes, immigrants and racial minorities, modernist elites such as Weber, Simmel and Eliot and other of my writers described their own loss of agency and authority. They decried the alleged redistribution of political power to a mass citizenship and depicted the new professionalized managerial class – including intellectual “experts” such as social scientists – as puppets and hollow men. In whose hands, then, did modern agency lie?

My exemplary text for this project is a film similarly populated by characters who cannot use their personalities to shape modern life: *White Zombie* (1932 dir. Victor Halperin), set in Haiti, starring Bela Lugosi, and released during the seventeenth year of the US occupation of Haiti. In *White Zombie*, the non-Haitian zombie master Murder Legendre uses non-white, Haitian zombies as labor for his sugar plantation. But, as the film’s title suggests, the notable zombies of the film are white. Legendre’s zombies are quintessentially twentieth-century figures that encapsulate and elaborate anxieties about whether white masculinity will still command what have heretofore been its prerogatives – free will, agency and authority – indeed, about whether it is possible fully to recognize the loss of these under increasingly mechanized and bureaucratized regimes of labor, state categorization and state regulation.

Roughly contemporaneous with the era I focus on, *White Zombie* pulls together elements whose theoretical elaboration in combination would be otherwise difficult to articulate. As I describe in more detail in my reading in Chapter 1, the film anxiously desires, but ultimately fails, to establish the boundaries between the living and the living dead in a series

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of cases: automaton-like manual labor in a cross between an assembly line and a sugar-cane mill, a bride turned into a zombie on her (white) wedding night, and Haitian nationals turned into zombies by a foreigner who has learned Haitian voodoo. The burden of each of these cases is slightly different (modern labor, marital consent as a model for democratic consent, and U.S. “democratic occupation”) but they converge in the zombie, a monster that resembles a normal human, that has lost control over its own thoughts and actions and may not even realize its own loss of agency.

In other words, *White Zombie*’s horrors are political. In the case of the zombie master’s laborers, the film references the period’s increasingly frequent conflicts between labor and industry. As companies consolidated their power over labor with the support of the government, work lost its power to anchor (white, male) American freedom. The film uses the zombie bride – that is, the idea of marital consent – to map anxieties about whether consent as a social structure accurately models the exercise of a citizen’s free choice. If consent is agreeing to terms to which there are no positive alternatives, then consent itself may be inherently subordinating. In a Western political context of self-government and individual freedom, then, the zombie expresses doubts about the foundation of legitimate government: the freely consenting citizen–subject. Is such a creature merely giving the appearance, like a zombie bride or a zombie laborer, of participating willingly? Finally, against a backdrop of a country the United States was “democratically occupying,” ostensibly with the consent of its nationals, a foreign zombie master raises the specter that domination lies at the core of U.S. democratic governance, whether practiced at home or abroad. As Foucault points out in his notes on monstrosity (see the first epigraph above), the most significant component of horror is not its distortion of the physical foundations of *humanity* but its suggestion that juridical and institutional assumptions about *personhood* have been undermined.

The zombie stalks the cities of modernism, where newly emergent methods of liberal-democratic interventionist government were becoming visible. Simmel’s metropolis – a “vast, overwhelming organization of things and forces” – was a novel interarticulation of the nineteenth century’s vast array of loosely coordinated and mostly voluntary social programs with the state apparatus.¹⁴ Governance would now take place on the level of “social management” rather than direct coercion. The state would engineer its large-scale social objectives by influencing the behavioral choices of free individuals through mechanisms such as the

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establishment of social norms. But self-government, like twentieth-century representative democracy, offers a peculiar combination of agency and disempowerment. With regard to the voter, Lynnette Hunter describes this as “the condition of enfranchised subjectivity in the contemporary nation-state.” Citizenship promises responsibility and agency, but one’s actions as an individual (through, for instance, voting) seem only to lead to assent, through participation, to a nation-state that does not substantively represent all the people theoretically enfranchised.¹⁵

Nineteenth-century industrialization had first posed the problem of maintaining social and economic stability in a locale with a dense, constantly changing and heterogeneous population of people who were often detached from traditional community associations. Victorian Britain and America had both rejected the (Continental) centralized state. British liberal philosophy and ideology before World War I was anti-interventionist and anti-collectivist, emphasizing constitutional liberty, self-governance, and individuality. Centralized responses to social problems generated by industrialization and urbanization such as the 1834 New Poor Law or the 1848 Public Health Act were perceived as antithetical to the British national legacy of a free citizenry.¹⁶ Americans similarly understood liberal laissez-faire government as part of their national identity and natural legacy. The cultural logic of American democracy at the start of the nineteenth century, Wiebe writes, was that “since all white men governed themselves equally as individuals, all white men combined as equals to govern themselves collectively.”¹⁷ American society came to describe American identity in terms of white men’s right to an independent working life. The government had neither the capacity nor the public support to regulate or organize white men’s productivity, and government policies and financial institutions (personal credit founded entrepreneurial prerogatives) became the greatest of social villains. Decision-making about the structures of social life was “relentlessly decentralized”; for example, poverty was not considered a federal problem.¹⁸

In the absence of federal intervention, British and Americans threw themselves eagerly into the now infamous voluntarism, philanthropy and social reform of the era, the foundation of modern social work. Many social theorists and historians have discussed the coerciveness of the Victorian reform enterprise. For the purposes of my project, what I would like to emphasize from those accounts here is the extraordinary scope of Victorian philanthropy¹⁹ and the reformers’ method of exercising power: establishing social norms for individual behavior. The poor, the

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unmarried, the intemperate, the uneducated, the spendthrift, the immigrant and the unskilled were to be personally addressed and then enlisted, rhetorically if not structurally, alongside their reformers in the great project of maintaining a socially stable yet economically expanding nation.

Such strategies characteristically, as Rose and Miller put it, draw people into “the pursuit of social, political or economic objectives without encroaching on their ‘freedom’ or ‘autonomy’ – indeed often precisely by offering to maximize it by turning blind habit into calculated freedom to choose.”²⁰ Thus, the first step in altering people’s behavior was inviting them to understand themselves as *having* an autonomous subjectivity. Reform rhetoric then invites people to imagine themselves as using the capacities of that subjectivity to govern themselves individually and as part of a whole society of self-governors as they “choose” to change their social behaviors. Without a Weberian monopoly on the legitimate use of violence to compel behavior, nineteenth-century non-governmental reform organizations invented social management.²¹

The oft-cited “rise” of the Western democratic interventionist welfare state of the first half of the twentieth century, Rose and Miller argue, is not a new form of the state, but “a new mode of government of the economic, social, and personal lives of citizens.”²² This mode of government inherits from classic liberal philosophy clear legal or constitutionally defined limits to the arbitrary exercise of state power. Laissez-faire government was designed to foster commerce: the state protected individuals’ rights and liberties but did not interfere with “private” business or with the free play of market forces.²³ After the turn-of-the-century democratization of citizenship, freedom from the arbitrary imposition of state power came to mean a government that enacted rather than controlled “the will of the people.” Government would act, with the people’s consent, for “the good of society as a whole.” Nineteenth-century social reform organizations provided strategies for such “non-arbitrary” yet powerful social management.²⁴

Twentieth-century liberal-democratic Anglo-American government emerged as links developed between the non-governmental nineteenth-century network of reform organizations with their strategies of “maximizing subjectivity” and the apparatuses of the state meant to track and regulate “problematic” elements of the population (courts, reform institutions, schools, clinics).²⁵ This unprecedented alliance generated a vast, heterogeneous and contesting network of philanthropic individuals and organizations, state agents and institutions, professionalized experts

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and politicians, all working to define and articulate socially desirable outcomes and the best way to produce them. It was at this time that “social problems” were first treated systematically by imagining “the individual in society” as the object of governance.²⁶ To “govern” now meant to shape the beliefs, circumstances and environments of citizens, influencing their choices, which would in their turn produce particular social objectives.²⁷ As we can see from the history of Victorian organizations, government had not been the exclusive purview of the state, and it was not to be now. As Foucault has famously explained, understanding modern political power requires focusing “not so much on the State-domination of society, but the ‘governmentalization’ of the State.”²⁸ The transformation of government during the first half of the twentieth century is not the story of a newly powerful state dominating a previously free and ungoverned private, social or civil sector, but rather the story of the growth of complicated connections between private social reform organizations already participating in government through the management of social life and the administrative and bureaucratic technologies of the state. The significance of this alliance at this time lies in the way the philanthropic techniques of addressing, individualizing, problematizing and normativizing the subject,²⁹ as Rose and Miller put it, “appeared to offer the chance, or impose the obligation, for [state] political authorities to calculate and calibrate social, economic and moral affairs and seek to govern them”³⁰ on the field of the social and without overstepping the (liberal philosophical) limits of legitimate political power. At the same time, private political authorities saw in an alliance with the state, with its capacities for revenue and information gathering and legitimate force, possibilities for achieving their organizations’ ends.

But governing legitimately within the domain of an everyday life and culture interdicted from direct political authority by the limits of liberal democracy meant that the individuals governed must be, as Foucault explains, “free subjects.” That is, they must be “individual or collective subjects who are faced with a field of possibilities in which several ways of behaving, several reactions, and diverse comportments may be realized.”³¹ Liberal states must go so far as to create and protect the freedom of these subjects; they are given “the task of shaping and nurturing that very civil society that was to provide its counterweight and limit.”³² The new subjectivities of the twentieth century, then, emerge from systems of authority and regulation. The much vaunted self-consciousness of this era is inextricably bound with anxiety about whether individual decisions, desires and the power to act on them were illusory. In other words,

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modern(ist) self-consciousness expresses uncertainty about the governed self and not only, as some critics would have it, the disappearance of unified perspectives.

My route through a low-brow American horror film and what has heretofore been understood as a minor site of colonial and postcolonial history may seem roundabout; I will say more about what this approach yields. In addition to figuring the zombie in terms of twentieth-century structures of political agency, *White Zombie* indexes Haiti's connection to *this representation* of zombies. That is, merely to have Haiti as the setting for a film about zombies is not notable, because the link between zombies and voodoo was popular knowledge. But the film also marks the Haitian zombies specifically as nationalist colonized subjects with relation to Haiti's history as a European colony, as the site of the first successful slave revolt and of the first black modern state, and as a nation occupied by the United States for, at the time of the film's release, seventeen years.

Haiti is also the site of an unacknowledged narrative of modernism: the back story of modern Western subjectivity. Critics and historians beginning with C. L. R. James have argued for Haiti's singular contribution to Western modernity. The modern Western subject – the individual and free citizen – was born economically, politically, culturally and metaphysically twice in the Caribbean. Caribbean development inaugurated an imperial commercial capitalism that held out the promise of entrepreneurial freedom from material poverty. This is not to claim that *all* Europeans inherited equally from this ancestor but rather that *only* Europeans were meant to benefit from this unprecedented transformation of economic production. The paradigm for this new economic order, as Hilary McD. Beckles puts it, was "African labor enslavement and European capital liberation." Plantation capitalists stood at the forefront of industrial technology and modern business practice. They were the first to establish and develop global networks to circulate labor (African slaves), raw materials, capital and credit, and commodities. The sugar mill was the most advanced and largest industrial complex of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. To run it, plantation capitalists developed the first industrial divisions of labor.³³

The (economic) capacity of the European capitalist to recreate himself as a man of autonomy and authority depended on an enslaved labor force. As the capitalist economic system of slavery-linked global commerce expanded, Western nation-state power began to depend more directly on each nation-state's ability to participate in that system. This structural dynamic – in which European potential could fully develop only at the expense of

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colonized “natives” – became part of European cultural, juridical and political definitions of modern personhood. As the practice of slavery expanded, political philosophers theorized the foundations of modern citizenry as the capacity for self-mastery and self-determination. Enlightenment philosophers drew from the globalized master–slave economy their metaphors for political tyranny, their definitions of what made a free citizen, and in John Locke’s case, the means to be a free citizen himself – as an investor in plantations in the Bahamas and in the Royal Africa Company. The modern individual stood in relation to the state; he must not be “enslaved” to the state but must directly participate in his own government. To do this he had to be independent and to have independent authority. The qualifications for modernity and civic participation were circular – to have authority one had already to have authority. In order to have the right not to be (literally) enslaved, one had already to be free.

The modern Western citizen was born as white in the Caribbean. It was only after the establishment of the Caribbean economic system that slavery took on its modern racial dimensions.³⁴ By the end of the eighteenth century, as David Theo Goldberg points out, Kant’s notes to his readers about the parameters of modern citizenship (white, male, property-holding) underline both how firmly established and how deeply rooted in racial identity those parameters had become – as deeply rooted in racial identity as the Western economy was in enslaved labor.³⁵ The Western citizen of the modern state, regardless of his location, was a New World Man indeed.³⁶

In or about 1791, the Caribbean – Saint-Domingue, to become independent Haiti in 1804 – again became the site for an unprecedented (re) construction of the modern, rational, autonomous and individualized citizen. This new New World man was a black, anti-colonial nationalist. The Western subject of modernity maintained his sense of modern self in part by locating unmodernity in various areas and peoples of the New World; the Haitian revolutionaries reversed those assumptions. For C. L. R. James, the Haitian Revolution, rather than the French and American revolutions, was the truer culmination of Enlightenment theories and ideals. Slave trade increased between 1789 and 1791. By contrast, the Haitian revolutionaries were the first post-Enlightenment people to write a national constitution declaring all citizens free. And though he was a Marxist–Leninist, for James the Haitian Revolution also historically upstages the Bolshevik Revolution as, as Beckles puts it, “that first moment in modernity when the alienated and dispossessed seized control of their destiny and emerged the subjects of a new world order.”³⁷