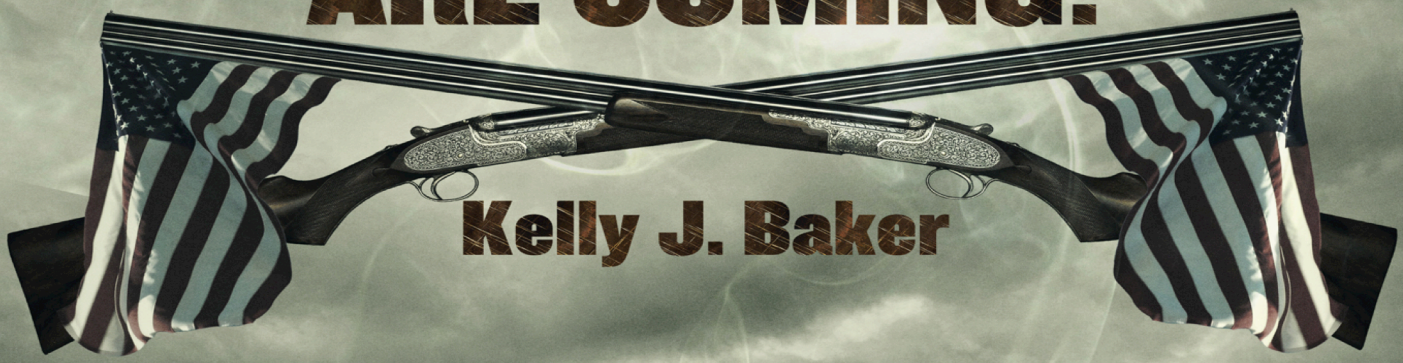
THE ZOMBIES ARE COMING!



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The Realities of the Zombie Apocalypse in American Culture

Kelly J. Baker

"[A] culture's main task is to survive its own imaginative demise."—Edward Ingebretsen[1]

"Dear Lord, please let there be a zombie apocalypse so I can start shooting all these motherfuckers in the face"—Someecards user card

Introduction: "Mommy, zombies aren't real"

I first believed in the zombie apocalypse in the stairwell of a local parking garage. Despite the sunlight that filled much of the garage, the stairs were dark and littered with debris. As I started my descent, a vision of zombies appeared unbidden. I could imagine zombies swarming the bottom of the stairs and blocking my exit. Or perhaps, they would stumble upon me from the stairs above. My heart beat faster, my palms became sweaty, and my feet moved more quickly from step to step. This, I realized, would be the perfect place for an undead attack. A horde of resurrected corpses would end me in a dirty stairwell, and there would be no meaningful death for me. Instead, I would be torn apart by ravenous zombies, who would happily munch on my flesh without any concern as to how I might feel about this turn of events.

"Awesome," I muttered, "I really wish I had a baseball bat."

After escaping the stairs unscathed, the sunny day chased away my fear of zombies, and I turned to my errands. Yet later, I was startled by my own imagination and why zombies appeared as the looming threat rather than anything real—robbery, a possible fall, or some sort of physical attack. Frankly, I should know better. As the mother of a preschooler, I am well versed in (endless) discussions about how monsters are just make-believe. I assure her that zombies, vampires, werewolves, mummies, and

ghosts are not real; they are just fantasy. They don't exist; they can't hurt us. As we watch *Hotel Transylvania* (2012) together, we laugh at the hapless monsters, which are mostly silly and only occasionally threatening. And we talk about how even these monsters are just cartoons. My daughter reassures me: "Mommy, zombies, ghosts, and dragons aren't real." I nod my head in agreement. She and I can both identify fantasy, especially in its scarier forms.

Yet, the fear I experienced in the garage *was* real. When I was confronted with a dark, slightly creepy space, zombies appeared at the forefront of my mind as a plausible threat. For the first time, their reality seemed possible to me. But why?

In that stairwell, I felt the terror that many Americans feel, and even spend part of their lives preparing for, today. My fear was palpable and motivating. The zombie apocalypse appeared as likelihood rather than fantasy, and I regretted my lack of attention, preparation, and survival skills. My fear, however, was far from unique. From the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's emergency preparedness campaign to a Miami man who consumed the flesh of his victim to groups of Americans who sacrifice time and money to prepare for the zombie apocalypse, Americans both fear and desire the arrival of real zombies. Some eagerly anticipate this end-of-the-world scenario by stockpiling food and weapons. They plan for its inevitability. Some search for signs of zombification and conspiracy theories. Others prepare by purchasing ammunition marketed specifically for zombie killing and shooting at 3D zombie targets. The zombie apocalypse, for these Americans, is not just a fiction, but also a potential outcome for which all of us should be prepared.

I am not a fan of zombies. I actually don't like them much at all. But I am a scholar of religion and popular culture, and I spend much of my time researching and

writing about the popularity of the zombie apocalypse in both the current moment and the recent past. I've lost count of the amount of times I've watched *Zombieland* (2009), which is likely my favorite undead film. Alongside millions of other Americans, I regularly tune into AMC's *The Walking Dead* (2010-present), and I can discuss George Romero's longstanding contributions and legacy to zombie cinema with the most avid fans. Simply put, I have zombies on the brain, and my sudden panicked moment about my own demise could be related to my hours upon hours of exposure to zombie media. My dreamscape is zombified too, as I awake from nightmares of battling resurrected corpses and losing loved ones.

Still, that a vision of death by monsters lingered with me was surprising. If anyone should know better about the fantasy, or unreality of zombies, it is me. Shambling corpses exist in television, film, fiction, and video games, not in daily life. Monsters are make-believe, I remind myself in the singsong voice my daughter uses. Yet for the briefest of moments, I believed that zombies could be on my trail. My overactive imagination got the best of me, right? Zombies aren't real. Are they?

While walking corpses might not be taking over our planet now, the zombie apocalypse as a fictional genre has never been so popular. Zombies appear everywhere. They are the cultural monsters of the moment, having replaced vampires, werewolves, aliens, and other monsters as the nightmare *du jour*. According to cultural critic Lev Grossman, "once you start looking, you see them everywhere."[2] They shamble and moan in every nook and cranny of American pop culture, antagonizing, maiming, and killing humans. Zombies become agents of the end of the world, often visualized as an end of the American nation as we know it, the midwife for a mangled society of human survivors facing not only the menacing undead but also the danger and violence of

fellow humans. *The Walking Dead* continually breaks records for cable television network viewership. The film adaptation of Max Brook's *World War Z* (2006) hits the big screens with Brad Pitt battling fast-moving zombies. Shelves of local bookstores groan under the weight of the many books on zombies appearing in science fiction, horror, romance, and young adult fiction. Zombies additionally appear in graphic novels, comics, music (from Michael Jackson's video to "Thriller" to band names like White Zombie and Zombie Apocalypse), social networking sites, video games, apparel, bumper stickers, posters, and toys. Zombies "walk" in cities all over the U.S., and hacked road signs warn of their presence at construction zones and closed roads. These monsters also emerge as agents of parody, including *Pat the Zombie* (2011), a mash-up of zombies and the popular children's book, *Pat the Bunny* (1940); the bestselling hybrid of Jane Austen and zombie hunting, *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* (2009); and Greg Stones' *Zombies Hate Stuff* (2012), a collection of water colors depicting all the things zombies hate, including kittens, ninjas, disrespect, unicorns, and clowns. Runners dodge zombies in 5K fun runs. College students equipped with Nerf guns play Humans versus Zombies on their university campuses.

Recent estimates suggest that zombies are a five billion dollar industry when combining television, book, film, merchandise, and video game revenues.[3] One of the reasons I started researching the zombie apocalypse was because of the sheer popularity and ubiquity of zombies. These monsters are unavoidable and ever-present, and their presence signals something important about America in the early twenty-first century. Zombies become metaphors for anything from consumerism to terrorism to mindless politics/politicians to banking to epidemics to smart phone users, and like all other monsters, they do important cultural work. Additionally, I was intrigued by how some

people describe the zombie apocalypse, a fictional event, as an actual possibility. I first encountered this sensibility from my students in a class that I teach frequently, the Apocalypse in American culture. In writing papers for this class, some students assured me that *when* zombie apocalypse occurred, they would be ready. Moreover, they suggested that my class helped them prepare for this particular end of the world scenario. (I am doubtful that my class actually did this.)

Their claims of reality at first surprised, then amused, then finally shocked me. What did they mean by *when*? Why not the less committed *if*? I could not comprehend how a fictional end might appear likely. How did zombies become probable? Or, the more important question, why did they want zombies to be real? Perhaps I underplayed the power of fiction and fantasy to shape reality. Maybe the students were teasing me, or I misunderstood them.

Yet, the more I explore the fantasy of the zombie apocalypse in popular culture, the more I confront the ways in which people make the zombie apocalypse into a potential reality. Many Americans eagerly await the zombies, while others fear the end of the world as we know it. Cracked.com notes that zombies are possibly the coolest way for the world to end when one considers the other options, like plagues, meteors, or other natural disasters.[4] The zombie apocalypse, my students assure me, would be awesome. No rules, no government, and no infrastructure appeals to them. They ready themselves for the monsters by strategizing about how to survive. Importantly, this desire for the zombie apocalypse goes beyond my students' claims and the humor of Cracked.com—some Americans not only believe that zombies will end the world, but they eagerly prepare for this end-times vision.

The apocalypse is upon us, and this time it starts with a moan and a shamble.

"Apocalypse Obsession": Apocalypticism in American Culture

Nicole Saidi, a CNN journalist, pondered the popular appeal of apocalypticism in light of the supposed Mayan end of the world on December 21, 2012. The apocalypse appeared everywhere: television, film, social media, and news coverage. She emphasized that web searches for "zombies" topped the "apocalypse-oriented terms" while "end of the world" peaked when paired with zombies. "Doomsday," however, was not the most popular search term. She described this searching for the end of the world as "apocalypse obsession," a possibly pathological attention to all things end-times.[5] After all, Harold Camping of Family Radio predicted the end of the world in both 2011 and 2012. The *Left Behind* series (1995–2007), co-authored by Tim LaHaye and Jerry Jenkins, sold over 65 million copies. The series detailed the Rapture, the end times, and the Second Coming of Jesus. The post-apocalyptic *Hunger Games* trilogy (2008-2010) fascinated readers and filmgoers alike. In 2011, National Geographic aired "Doomsday Preppers," a show documenting various people preparing for all kinds of disaster. A cottage industry developed around the supposed end of Mayan calendar in 2012. In film, actor Will Smith repeatedly saved the world from various threats: aliens, robots, and zombies.

Friends jokingly ask me for my professional opinion about what might end us, and I refuse to comment.

While Saidi is right that Americans seem obsessed with the apocalypse in the current moment, it would be a mistake to understand apocalypticism as a late twentieth and early twenty-first century phenomenon. Americans did not just discover the apocalypse. (Does anyone remember Y2K?) Instead, the apocalypse is a longstanding

current of American culture, as Americans, both past and present, look for signs of the end-times. Puritan ministers wrote jeremiads that catalogued the potential destruction of the world. Revivalists proclaimed that awakenings were clearly signs of divine providence. Enslaved Africans and white masters saw slavery as either an evil corruption of the world or a path to a civilization. Mormons imagined themselves as a chosen people living in the latter days. Millerites set multiple dates for the end and experienced painful disappointments when those dates came and went without the foretold apocalypse occurring. Pentecostals saw speaking in tongues as a divine sign signaling the end of days. Lakota Ghost Dancers hoped for a new world free from white colonialism. After World War II, the nuclear bomb became an object lesson in human potential for total annihilation. In the current day, environmentalists warn of doomsday scenarios involving global warning.

This message—*The end is near*—is a common refrain. A long line of Americans stated, proclaimed, shouted, cajoled, argued, hoped, wished, and desired the end of the world because they all wanted to be a part of the final days. Apocalypticism emerges as neither an outlier nor an oddity. Americans imagine and have imagined cataclysmic ends to both the nation and the larger world, in which annihilation becomes the required predecessor to a future, better world. These impulses, dystopian and utopian, become inseparable in every marked date and failed prophecy. While many might hope that apocalypticism is only "creed for cranks," its popularity suggests the opposite.[6] In 2010 Telegraph poll, 41% of Americans polled believed Jesus would return in the next 40 years while a 2011 Public Religion Research Institute poll of white evangelicals documented that 67% thought that we are currently living in the end times. Despite its marginalization and pathologization in news coverage, this longing for doomsday is not

just for cranks. Instead, graphic imaginings of ends are as American as apple pie. Religious and not-so-religious Americans yearn for particular apocalypses to critique, reform and revolutionize American society. By engaging this desire for the end, the darker side of American life appears starkly against American claims for progress, religious freedom, diversity and pluralism. Apocalypticism, its melding of dystopian and utopian impulses, emerges as mechanism both of social vision and critique.

Apocalypticism is most commonly defined as a catastrophic end-of-the-world scenario. However, it is better to understood as a "mode" or "voice" that evokes "horror and hope, nightmare and dream, destruction and creation, dystopia and utopia."[7] Rather than just a theology or belief, apocalypticism emerges as a system of interpretation and power relations indebted to a negative view of humanity, nostalgic renderings of the past, required chaos in the present, and a profound yearning for a future utopian society created amidst the ruins of our current world. This system can be both religious and secular (these are not as distinct as you might think) and contains common traits of prophecy, lament, prophets, skeptics, elect, dystopia, fatalism, utopia, dualism, death, destruction, catastrophe, and eventual justice. Destruction becomes the preferred method of social refashioning and revolution; the danger of the apocalyptic mode is its fatalism, its acceptance that this world is beyond saving.[8] The only better future appears after our current world is destroyed. Its social vision is built upon devastation and ruin.

We can all recognize the popularity of the zombie apocalypse as another manifestation of apocalypticism's prominent place in American culture. Zombies are often the monsters that bring about the end of the world as we know it. They bring chaos, death, and destruction, and occasionally human societies rise from the ashes of

the former worlds while zombies linger as constant threats. This belief in, and desire for, the zombie apocalypse showcases how pervasive end-times visions remain in American civic life. People hope for them to come true, and some people yearn for zombies to manifest beyond the fictional into the realm of the real. The belief in the zombie apocalypse communicates the desire for a certain type of end, in which zombies overrun us and cause the dismantling of the world as we know it. Zombies become the conduit for damage and transformation, collective and personal. Some want these monsters to tear down our present society so we can begin anew. The desire for this particular apocalypse manifests as in every *when* rather than *if*. When it comes, we will be ready. When it occurs, desires become actuality. We no longer imagine killing zombies, but we can actually do it. Yet, fatalism lurks in every discussion of a possible end. We can't stop it, so we might as well gear up for the inevitable. We are doomed, but at least zombies are cool.

This end, however, comes by the hand of monsters. According to cultural theorist Edward Ingebretsen, monsters serve as warnings as "they redefine boundaries that become frayed." More importantly, monsters become the way that "a community reinterprets itself."[9] The ways in which Americans create and consume monsters, therefore, tell us much about what we value and what we fear. The constructions of zombie apocalypses reflect the fears and concerns of twenty-first century America. Terrorism, epidemics, social collapse, political strife, and the culture wars all appear in evocations of zombies. Importantly, some Americans see zombies as a literal threat to humanity. Belief in end-times visions can make the end appear plausible, and zombies can become less fantasy and more certainty.

"[W]hen a zombie apocalypse occurs, it's going to be a federal incident": How the CDC and the DHS Prepares for Zombies

In May of 2011, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) launched a campaign for emergency preparedness that relied upon an unusual theme to urge Americans to prepare for possible disasters.[10] Instead of relying upon typical threats like hurricanes, earthquakes, or infectious disease, the CDC employed zombies. The living dead emerged as their model for disaster preparedness. Dr. Ali Khan, an Assistant Surgeon General and head of the CDC's Office of Public Health Preparedness and Response, wrote a blog post detailing how preparation for a potential, albeit unlikely, zombie apocalypse would ready Americans for other catastrophes. He wrote:

> There are all kinds of emergencies out there that we can prepare for. Take a zombie apocalypse for example…. You may laugh now, but when it happens you'll be happy you read this, and hey, maybe you'll even learn a thing or two about how to prepare for a *real* emergency.

While zombies might have seemed laughable or far-fetched, Khan's post exploited their ever-present popularity to communicate strategies for coping with disasters. While not suggesting that zombies were real, Khan noted that the popularity of the zombie apocalypse gave "credence" to the possibility of an end via zombies. Thus, the CDC provided a preparation guide for this particular crisis by directing readers toward what they would need to manage all sorts of crises. In case of an emergency featuring an onslaught of the undead, or any other standard emergency, the CDC recommended a flashlight, bottled water, food, tools, first aid, medications, clothing and bedding, and of course, important documents like one's driver's license. The listed supplies would last for around two days for the average person. Though, Kahn reminds us, "[Y]ou're a goner if a zombie bites you," so the first aid kit only goes so far in the advent of the walking dead.

Kahn urged that families develop emergency plans that include "where you would go and who you would call if zombies started appearing outside your door step."[11] Preparing for zombies equipped one for a variety of calamities, and using the undead became a method to make emergency preparedness more fun than it might seem otherwise. Why prepare for actual disasters when you could prepare for zombies? The horror of real life catastrophe gave way to the playfulness of gearing up for the undead. The CDC also guaranteed that "if zombies did start roaming the streets," they would conduct an investigation into the zombie threat.

The CDC tweeted this new campaign as a way to promote hurricane preparedness just days before Christian minister Harold Camping's date for the end of the world (May 21, 2011). For some, the timing seemed more than coincidence, and both events appeared eerily apocalyptic. While the tongue in cheek campaign proves interesting in its own right, the reaction to the blog post proves even more fascinating. The traffic on the CDC blog jumped from the average 1000-3000 hits a day, to an all time high of 10,000 hits, to 60,000 hits by the end of the day. The CDC's servers promptly crashed under the weight of this web traffic.[12] While the CDC was counting on the popular interest in zombies to help with their emergency preparedness campaign, they were not entirely outfitted to handle the ambush of zombie fans, who eagerly read and passed along the post, as well as the larger interest in these monsters. The CDC's servers did recover, and now they have a whole page dedicated to zombie social media, even featuring a graphic novella about the zombie pandemic.[13] They also posted on how *The Walking Dead* demonstrated the need for preparedness based on events from the first and second seasons of the show. (Clean water, for instance, is crucial, so keep zombies out of your water supply.)

Zombies also brought attention to the CDC's campaign in ways that they might not have predicted. Hundreds of pages of comments now accompany the initial post with wide-ranging suggestions, snark, and occasional outright derision. Many zombie fans commented on the usefulness of zombies for emergency preparedness, while detractors complained about taxpayer dollars being wasted on silly fantasies. Some commenters suggested adding weapons and ammunition to one's emergency kit while others noted that thinking about the possibility of a zombie apocalypse led them to prepping and survivalism. Even further for others, it seemed as if the CDC was suggesting the inevitability of zombies, and the guide became the proof of this likelihood, in spite of the CDC's claims that zombies were fantasy. If the CDC discussed these monsters, then, surely, zombies had to be a plausible threat.

The CDC isn't the only government agency to adopt zombies as a meme for preparation and disaster awareness. In September 2012, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) drew on the notion of a zombie apocalypse for disaster and emergency preparedness. Their public health campaign emphasized that "the zombies are coming." In conjunction with DHS, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) provided an online seminar for emergency planners nationwide.[14] Some of DHS's rules even mimicked the famed "rules for survival" from *Zombieland*. Rule 1 (cardio) and rule 4 (wear seat belts) seem broadly applicable while others are more geared to harming zombies like rules 2 (the double tap) and 25 (shoot first). Additionally, the DHS provided $1000 grants for first responders and law enforcement officers to attend the HALO-Counterterrorism Summit held in San Diego, California in October of 2012. This week-long training seminar covered topics like emergency preparedness, disaster response, and counterterrorism. The key event for the summit was the "Zombie

Apocalypse" demonstration, a dramatic simulation of a military tactical unit facing 40 zombies that was held on Halloween. This event focused on rescuing a very important person from a village overrun with zombies as well as how to handle team members who had been infected.

Brad Barker, the president of HALO Corp, told *The Huffington Post*, "This is a very real exercise, this is not some type of big costume party…. [T]he training is very real, it just happens to be the bad guys that we are having a little fun with." Moreover, he insisted that like terrorists, zombies were unpredictable, so the demonstration would emphasize the need for quality training and preparation in the face of volatile threats, human or zombie.[15] The HALO Corp's use of zombies garnered much press attention, and Barker noted that he received calls from "every whack job in the world" about whether the U.S. government was actually preparing for zombies.

While Barker scoffed at the "whack job[s]," his own statements seem more ambiguous about whether zombies might be a threat to humanity: "No doubt when a zombie apocalypse occurs, it's going to be a federal incident, so we're making it happen." Barker's use of *when* rather than *if* suggested the inevitability of zombies as a likely hazard that law enforcement, first responders, and soldiers could encounter. Although he ridiculed folks who imagined that the government was preparing for a zombie apocalypse, he still emphasized the usefulness of this exercise for a future scenario.

The HALO Corp training, particularly the DHS grants, caught the attention of Senator Tom Coburn, a Republican from Oklahoma, who did not approve of this use of government funds. Coburn stated:

> [P]aying for first responders to attend a HALO Counterterrorism Summit at a California island spa resort featuring a simulated zombie apocalypse does little to discourage potential terrorists. I hope this report encourages DHS to award funds

based on calculated risk, not politics.[16]

The senator's disdain for wasted taxpayer dollars revolved around the zombie simulation, which he deemed not useful to training in counterterrorism. Terrorists, not zombies, were a real menace that required preparation and training. Watching a military tactical unit annihilate zombified actors might be good entertainment for attendees, but Coburn questioned the practicality of such a demonstration for law enforcement, first responders, soldiers, and firefighters. How likely were attendees to encounter shambling corpses?

Halo Corp, unsurprisingly, responded by pointing out that the simulation was just one component of their week-long training that featured other seminars and features. Moreover, the security firm insisted that no taxpayer or DHS funds went to the "Zombie Apocalypse" event. For Coburn and other critics, the simulation appeared, at best, to be a gimmick, a fictional peril that ignored the real threats that Americans might face in an age of global and domestic terror. The specter of terrorism outweighed the entertaining fantasy of zombies, and Coburn insisted that grants like these were clear examples of the waste of government funds.

Halo Corp's "Zombie Apocalypse" and Coburn's critique demonstrate the ways in which these fictional monsters become implicated in larger discussions of terrorism, security, and safety. For Halo Corp, zombies functioned as stand-ins for terrorists because of the volatility of terrorism. These monsters mimicked real life threats, and to imagine terrorists as zombies also dehumanized the enemies that threaten our safety. Enemies became less than human, monstrous even, and the simulation allowed attendees to watch the military tactical unit annihilate the undead with guilt, angst, or unease. The sheer unreality of zombies, however, made Coburn declare the event

wasteful. For Coburn, zombies were simply not possible, so why would a counterterrorism summit employ them?

Zombies emerged as the perfect foil for both the CDC and the DHS for catastrophes caused by nature or humans. The monster's current popularity brought attention to the campaign and the training because we are familiar with the narratives surrounding zombies. They are fun. Hollywood has taught us to how to react to them, and the CDC and DHS could employ the lessons we've learned by watching zombie films and televisions shows. Lesson # 1: Zombies are dangerous, so we must guard ourselves against them. Lesson #2: We must be ready to destroy them. Lesson #3: Taking out zombies can be fun.

Yet when faced with a series of gruesome, inexplicable attacks, zombie narratives surfaced one again. These crimes provided fodder to previous zombie apocalypse speculations because it appeared that (finally) there was evidence of zombies. When humans started acting like zombies, the end was apparently nigh.

"No Joke, the Zombie Apocalypse Is Coming!": Real-Life Cannibals and the Summer of the Walking Dead

In summer of 2012, the internet exploded with rumors about whether the zombie apocalypse had actually arrived. News story after news story appeared in mainstream media pondering whether zombies had arrived. After a series of gruesome cannibalistic crimes, it appeared that zombies were no longer just limited to the safe confines of fiction but had spilled over into our contemporary world. The Associated Press proclaimed in a headline, "Horror movie genre becomes twisted, real-life news headline." The *Huffington Post* exclaimed, "No Joke, the Zombie Apocalypse Is

Coming!" At the heart of this speculation was the press-dubbed "Miami Zombie," a naked man who mauled and destroyed the face of a homeless man in Miami, Florida.

The details of the case are both bizarre and tragic. On Saturday, May 26, 2012, thirty-one year-old Rudy Eugene abandoned his car in South Beach and walked three and half miles along the MacArthur Causeway. While he walked, he stripped off his clothes. He then attacked sixty-five year-old Ronald Poppo on the sidewalk of the causeway. The victim later recounted to the Miami Police Department (MPD) that Eugene's attack was unprovoked. Poppo insisted that Eugene seemed unhinged and screamed at him. Eugene smashed Poppo's face into the sidewalk, strangled him, plucked out his eyes, and chewed on his face.[17] Poppo told MPD that Eugene claimed that Poppo had stolen his Bible, which was supposed justification for the "face-eating" attack. The MPD found scraps of Eugene's Bible at the crime scene, though Poppo claimed he had not taken it. When officers confronted Eugene, he would not stop brutalizing the face of his victim and even growled at the officers. They shot Eugene four times and killed him. At the end of the attack, more than seventy-five percent of Poppo's face was missing; he was blinded.

The motivations for the attack prove elusive, since Eugene died shortly after the crime. We can't know why he attacked Poppo or whether his Bible was stolen or not. But this did not stop the lurid media speculation about the crime—rather the missing information seemed to generate more theories about Eugene's motivations. Video of the attack made the rounds on the internet, and the trauma Poppo endured became a consumable spectacle. His pain and terror caught on film, empathy dissipated with every replay of the clip.

Nationwide, news reports detailed the horrible incident of cannibalism with accusations that Eugene was addled by the designer drug "bath salts," which are hallucinogenic drugs that cause rage, disorientation, and violence. The attack paired with "face eating" led the press to label Eugene the "Miami Zombie." The autopsy found no human flesh in Eugene's stomach, though the coroner noted Eugene had flesh wedged in his teeth. Additionally, there was no indication that bath salts were in his system, though the coroner did find pills in his stomach. The website *Examiner* claimed that Eugene's girlfriend categorized him as a pot smoker who carried his Bible with him everywhere. She later suggested that Eugene was possibly under a "voodoo curse."[18] The mention of voodoo added to the portrayal of this crime as a zombie attack because of the longstanding connections of zombies and voodoo in American popular culture. (The earliest zombie films, including *White Zombie* (1932), portrayed zombies as soulless humans under the control of a voodoo witch doctor.) When the girlfriend supposedly pointed to a curse as a reason for his inexplicable actions, zombification appeared more plausible. The whisper of voodoo, then, seemed to add authority to the many claims that Eugene seemed like a zombie or, perhaps, was one. A possible curse made the harrowing attack even more tantalizing and sensational.

Eugene's mother, however, refused to participate in the zombie narratives about her son. She insisted that her son was not the type to be involved in such brutality. Instead, she claimed that someone must have drugged and dumped Eugene at the scene of the crime. She further noted that he must have felt threatened by Poppo in his disoriented state.[19] His mother, who did not want her name released, emphasized that Eugene was a "good kid" who regularly attended church with his two younger brothers. She told CBS News, "Everyone says he was a zombie. He was no zombie. That was my

son." His girlfriend, who also preferred to remain anonymous, also struggled with the violent portrayal of her boyfriend versus the sweet, non-violent man she loved. She emphasized, "That wasn't him, that was his body but it wasn't his spirit. Somebody did this to him." A former high school friend further noted, "Someone in their right mind doesn't do that. This is not the act of a normal person. It has to be someone under the influence."[20] The refrain is a common one: Normal people do not act like *this*. Something must have happened or someone must have forced Eugene to attack. How could an otherwise non-violent person commit cannibalism? Why would one person harm another with such violence? Can we make sense of the horror of this crime? Maybe we can't explain away Eugene's crime because it might not make sense. It could be senseless. Yet, the crime fit into certain narratives of horror that generate the desired meaning and explanation.

Nonetheless, the "Miami Zombie" generated story after story as journalists presented the explicit details of the attack. What might appear as an anomalous violent act took a more sinister turn as some suggested this event was actually the beginning of the zombie apocalypse. Other attacks soon surfaced that appeared to be somewhat similar to Eugene's crime: a man chopped up his roommate and consumed his heart and brain; another man ate his dog; one man ate the lips off of a kitten. A man in New Jersey stabbed himself 50 times and threw parts of his intestines at the police, who had trouble subduing him. A mother in Texas killed her newborn, then ate part of his brain and bit off three of his toes. In St. Augustine, Florida, a family discovered a naked man on their roof, who later bit the homeowner. The officers had trouble restraining him because of his unusual strength. When a female fan bit actor Danny Bonaduce of Partridge family fame, *Examiner* pondered if he was the latest victim of the zombie apocalypse. After

detailing the sharp teeth of his assailant, Bonaduce blamed bath salts for the fan's biting, much like the initial claims that bath salts were responsible for Eugene's violence.[21]

While one cannibalistic crime could be dismissed, several other attacks seemed to suggest that we were on the brink of disaster. The zombie apocalypse was upon us, or at least, the media suggested that it might be. *Examiner* queried, "Was George A. Romero right all along?"[22] Did Romero's films provide a warning for forthcoming doom? Was the end occurring before our eyes? These cannibalistic attacks must have been related, right? *Newsweek* and the *Daily Beast* prepared a Google Map plotting all these attacks to suggest that zombies were now among us.[23] The map, still available online, demonstrates the small number of these attacks rather than suggesting an overwhelming threat. It is a sad map. If these were zombies, they were few in number, not an overwhelming epidemic.

All of these attacks did involve components of zombie lore: violent attacks, bizarre behavior, inhuman strength, and most importantly, the consumption of human flesh and organs, particularly brains. But while these tragic events seemed somewhat like the walking dead in popular culture, the connections were rather loose. First and foremost, none of the perpetrators were shambling corpses. Instead, they were living and breathing humans who acted horrifically by butchering strangers, roommates, loved ones, and pets. These were humans brutalizing other humans. Second, while much of the media attention to these supposed "zombie" attacks revolved around their sheer viciousness, not all of the attacks involved the consumption of human flesh.

Journalist Tony Dokoupil at the *Daily Beast* queried, "What's with all the craziness?" After the series of cannibalistic attacks, he quipped, "Memorial Day feel[s]

like end times."[24] What leads people to act in such violent, taboo ways? Dokoupil wondered if maybe the internet was blurring the boundaries between reality and fantasy. The internet age might prove more dangerous to us than we could have imagined. His article, however, ignores the ways in which media coverage also blurred the (hopefully) demarcated lines between real life and imagination. With every headline that purported the possibility of the zombie apocalypse, the media became complicit in this speculation and fervor. Yet the boundaries between the real and the fictional are ever so porous. We want them to be firm, solid, and impenetrable, but instead, things slide through. Fantasy sometimes pops up where we least expect it, and reality sometimes appears fictional. I am unsurprised that zombies appear when and where we might not expect them to be. Fantasy can stalk our waking hours too.

Examiner had "experts," primarily novelists who write about zombies, weigh in on the possibility of an "invasion of the living dead." Jonathan Mayberry, author of the Joe Ledger series, explained that these attacks were likely not the beginning of the end at the hands of zombies, but rather "it is becoming easier to believe that some kind of devastating pandemic is poised to hit." Mira Grant (pseudonym for Seanan McGuire), author of the Newsflesh trilogy, emphasized the tragedy of these gruesome crimes that demonstrate "how unrealistic reality can get."[25] Reality sometimes appeared more like horror films than we might like.

"I think the world is going to the zombies soon," noted Zomboid, a commenter at *UWeekly*, a college newspaper.[26] Like other commenters, Zomboid was convinced that these "zombie" attacks signaled a forthcoming apocalypse. In these cannibalistic attacks, zombies appeared authentic, and for some, this provided evidence that the end of the world from shambling hordes was no longer just fiction. George Romero seemed

prescient or prophetic. The end would appear not with a bang or a whimper, but with cannibalism, brutality, nudity, and some shambling. Due to mounting online speculation, the CDC officially stated that zombies do not exist. Zombies were not real. Even though the CDC employed zombies as a method to make disaster preparedness fun, the supposed zombie attacks prompted the agency to declare the monster's fictional status. The CDC's spokesperson David Daigle explained to the *Huffington Post* that the "CDC does not know of a virus or condition that would reanimate the dead." Monsters, the CDC tried to remind us, are make-believe. The *Huffington Post*, however, was not yet ready to relinquish the possibility of zombies. They reported "zombie-like characteristics" apparent among ants, which had consumed a recently discovered fungus in the Brazilian rain forest. [27] The fungus dominated the ant's brain and moved its body around. Eventually, the fungus killed its host. Surely zombified ants demonstrated that something similar could happen to humans. Science rather than science fiction informed the article. If ants could be become zombies, then maybe it wasn't a stretch to think humans could, too.

Whether zombie ants or the "Miami Zombie," these examples seemed to suggest that a zombie apocalypse was probable, even if the world did not end in summer of 2012. (At least, I don't think it did.) Rudy Eugene's actions were interpreted as an anomaly that captivated audiences for a short span of time. The media coverage quickly drew upon the popularity of zombies to explain the violence of his attack on Ronald Poppo, who now resides at a nursing home due to the severity of his injuries. The prevalence of the zombie apocalypse in film, on television, and in fiction meant that this narrative was hastily applied to Eugene. It proved as convenient as attention-grabbing.

While Eugene might have appeared like a zombie, the media coverage attempted to make this a bigger story about the beginning of the end.

The end, however, did not manifest. Zombies did not take over. I still don't need a baseball bat. But some still wait for the inevitable zombie apocalypse. More importantly, they actively prepare, or "prep," for the onslaught of the undead. If the zombies appear, they hope to be ready.

"Are you able to shoot your kid in the face?" How Doomsday Preppers Get Ready for the Zombie Apocalypse

In April of 2013, the officers at Fort Sam Houston, Texas, employed zombies to prepare soldiers for hurricane preparedness at the U.S. Army-North's Hurricane Rehearsal of Concept drill. The key speaker was Max Brooks, the author of *World War Z* and *The Zombie Survival Guide* (2003), who discussed the importance of preparation for survival. As reporter Spencer Ackerman notes, "Brooks is a cult hero inside the Army. I've found his books on practically every forward operating base I've been on in Iraq and Afghanistan." For Ackerman, Brooks appealed to soldiers because the "heroes" of his books are not human protagonists but rather key practices like preparation and logistics. In both of Brooks' books, preparation becomes the key for survival in an undead world (with handy comparisons of gear and weaponry), and both become applicable to other scenarios that require both planning and recovery.

The Army's drill centered on a mock hurricane and the recovery of damaged areas in its aftermath. Zombies emerged as a case study to think about disaster management rather than functioning as the natural disaster. Hurricane preparedness, after all, requires mass evacuation plans, logistics for rescue and retrieval, and management of recovery efforts. This task, according to Ackerman, is "[n]ot exactly

unlike the task in *World War Z*, which is to reconstitute civilization while managing the zombie problem."[28] For CDC, DHS, Halo Corp, and the Army, zombies become a way to prepare, plan, and manage disasters, but also a hook to gain popular interest in preparedness plans. Zombies bring interest to emergency preparedness by making it fun and playful, since zombies are not a possible threat, unlike hurricanes, earthquakes, or other catastrophes. Planning for zombies becomes an imaginative way to engage potential life-threatening danger. Perhaps it feels less dire when we contemplate zombies at the door rather than hurricanes toppling our homes. These campaigns rely on humor, gimmicks, and the popularity of zombie media to discuss serious topics and encourage preparation and readiness for any disaster.

It shouldn't be surprising, then, that zombies have also become popular among civilian emergency preparedness groups as well. One such organization is the Zombie Response Team (ZRT) founded in 2010 with thousands of members globally. Their mission statement is "to protect and sever," a cute play on the common motto of police departments "to protect and serve." According to ZRT's website, the organization seeks to "create the biggest enterprise of individuals ready to fight the undead, as well as to help others." Like the Army's training, ZRT relies upon the zombie apocalypse to promote emergency preparedness because "[i]f you can survive a zombie apocalypse, you can survive anything." By preparing for zombies, we can be ready for any other possible apocalyptic scenario. The co-founder, Morgan Barnhart, explained to me via email that ZRT emerged from both a common interest in zombies and the desire to help people learn how to prepare for and survive disasters. He notes, "We decided to combine our theories of 'what if the zombies attack, what would we do' into a real, practical guidance to be able to withstand any disaster or emergency situation." For

Barnhart, zombies prove useful for disaster preparedness because they so often emerge from a disease "that spreads on a mass scale, in a short period of time." Moreover, zombies appear unstoppable, unpredictable, and mindless. Barnhart explained:

> [T]hey just keep going and going and going, until they get double tapped or they decompose. That's pretty scary! Vampires keep their sense about them (for the most part), werewolves only change on a full moon and in general, nothing else is as scary as a mindless zombie.

The ZRT, then, educates the general public about preparedness relying upon zombies as an ultimate natural disaster. The organization has members from 11 to 65 years old, many of whom are boy scouts as well as current and retired military. Barnhart emphasizes the diversity of the organization's membership as crucial to helping ZRT function effectively.

The ZRT's website includes articles on how to prepare a "bug out bag," a bag with supplies that will last 72 hours; a list of necessary items that will help you survive the zombie apocalypse (boots, food, first aid, weapons, etc.); and even a discussion of the "right mindset" for survival (be positive). Additionally, ZRT weighs in on how large or small one's team should be to best improve the chances for survival. Rather than tell members which team size is more efficient, ZRT provides the pros and cons for each size group: duo, small group (two to five people), and big group (five to twenty people). While a larger group might initially seem to be the best option, ZRT warns that bigger groups "can become a liability," and they do keep you from the important work of "hunting down zombies." In addition to advice, the website also offers a forum for members to communicate and a store that offers a variety of products branded by ZRT. The store includes beanies, hats, bracelets, tank tops, t-shirts, patches, flashlight, a flint kit, a mini-crossbow, a machete, a stainless steel water bottle, and several different

decals. I am partial to the mini-crossbow, even though I am doubtful the smaller arrows would take down a zombie. Members can show their dedication to ZRT through merchandise. My favorite item in their store is a poster of Uncle Sam as a ZRT team member wearing a hat and tactical vest with gun strapped to his back. Uncle Sam glares and points his finger at the American public. The poster declares, "WE WANT YOU FOR Z.R.T."

Barnhart also wrote an ebook/audiobook, *Could the Zombie Apocalypse Become a Reality?* (2012), which examines the potential ways that the zombie pandemic can occur through variants of known diseases, likes rabies. He assures readers that the ebook was not "written to frighten" us, but rather to "inform" us about what could cause a "real life type of zombie apocalypse."[29] Diseases mutate, so why couldn't common illnesses dramatically change in ways that would result in zombification? Barnhart also points to the aforementioned zombie ants as a case study of the reality of zombies in nature. Zombies might already exist, but maybe they don't follow Hollywood's portrayal. When I asked him if the zombie apocalypse was a real possibility, Barnhart commented, "Anything is possible." These monsters might not be just fantasy, so why not get ready for them? Barnhart also wrote *Prepping on a Budget* (2013) as quick guide to prepping even with limited funds, which is available for free on ZRT's website. With ZRT, preparing before the zombie apocalypse arrives is crucial. When the zombies arrive, it is a little late to learn how to use your equipment or start accumulating what you need. ZRT encourages not only joining their organization, but also training with all your tools so using them becomes "second nature." ZRT, then, is part of the prepper community, who avidly ready themselves for survival in the face of any disaster. Barnhart notes, "As

far as we're concerned, if you're a prepper, you're a part of our community and we're a part of yours; we all help each other."

Preppers generate much media attention, especially so-called "doomsday preppers" who seek to prepare for the end of the world by stocking supplies, ammunition, and other items. Preparation for doomsday received national attention with the advent of National Geographic's reality show, *Doomsday Preppers*. The show, now in its second season, follows "ordinary Americans" readying for the end of the world. Preppers embrace survivalism, stockpile food and weapons, and train for life after the apocalypse. They seek to be ready when any disaster strikes. The show received mixed reviews with some critics disturbed by the fatalism of preppers who posit that the world will end soon and that humans are powerless to stop it from happening. But, the second season premiere proved to be National Geographic Channel's highest rated premiere with more than one million people watching. Of course, preppers disagree on how the world might end: economic collapse, nuclear annihilation, natural disasters, government shutdown, or vague social demise. The show documents how different people prep while also pointing out the flaws in each of their plans.

In *Mother Jones*, Tim Murphy reported on the Self-Reliance Expo, a key readiness trade show that offers everything from dehydrated food to gear, which occurred 10 days before the 2012 presidential election. He found that preppers were worried about the possible re-election of President Barack Obama as dangerous to the nation's well being. Murphy estimated the market for disaster preparedness and survivalism to be at around $500 million from stockpiles of food to weapons to bunkers. More importantly, he documents the political and racial dynamics of prepping. Preppers feared the re-election of Obama, particularly with concerns over stricter gun control

legislation or even the possible confiscation of guns. James Talmage Stevens, also known as Doctor Prepper, told Murphy that the prepper market is only about four million people, who are mostly "upper-middle white class." One of the prevalent fears of the preppers that Murphy interviewed was breakdown of the economy that might lead to unrest, crime, and lawlessness. Preppers wanted to be ready for TSHTF, or "the shit hits the fan." [30] Disaster could be possible at anytime, so readiness and defense were both key. While the preppers that Murphy documents tend to prepare for social and economic collapse, some in the prepper community pointed to zombies as a likely cause for the downfall of society. Prompted by the "face eating attack" in Miami, some preppers started collecting more supplies of both food and weapons as well as posted pictures of their "stashes" online.[31] Being prepared was important but documenting one's supplies demonstrated to the larger world who might survive an actual calamity.

On December 17, 2012, the Discovery Channel aired *Zombie Apocalypse*, a show examining the so-called "zombie preppers" who are readying themselves for the end of the world by the infected mouths of zombies. The show primarily focuses on four preppers: Matthew Oakey, a firearms specialist; Patti Heffernan, a mother of two; Shawn Beatty, a high school teacher; and Alfredo Carbajal, the founder of the Kansas Anti-Zombie Militia (KAZM). Pivoting between scientists and other experts who discuss the prospect of a zombie pandemic and the interviews with the preppers, the show catalogs those who believe in a forthcoming zombie apocalypse. Its tagline: "Zombies are real… They're just not what you think." Carbajal ominously notes that it is "not a question of if but when." Again, I find myself stuck on the insistence of *when*. The milder *if* must appear too wishy-washy to communicate a future end. *When* suggests

plausibility; *if* remains mired in ambiguity. All of this preparation only makes sense with the certainty of *when*.

Unsurprisingly, the show marks May 26, 2012 as the beginning of the end, which is the day that Rudy Eugene destroyed Ronald Poppo's face in Miami. To communicate the terror of the event, Discovery included footage of the attack in the show, which supposedly looks like a zombie attack. At least, it does for all four preppers. We get to watch Eugene maul Poppo again as if watching the violence over and over will suddenly confirm the existence of zombies. For Heffernan particularly, fiction had become reality. With additional cannibalistic crimes in the U.S. and globally, these isolated events appeared connected. Zombies did not rise from graves, but instead, existed among us. Humans acted like zombies. Be it drugs, government experiments, or viruses, the movie monsters could emerge in real life, and Eugene's vicious assault marked the beginning of the end.

Intriguingly, the four zombie preppers insisted that there was more to this crime than the public knew. Conspiracy theory has a starring role. More than the others, Oakey feared some form of government cover-up and suggested the government was somehow responsible for the "Miami Zombie." Discovery traced the possible conspiracy theories from biomedical research gone wrong, secret government drug experiments, and even rogue voodoo priests creating zombies. More strikingly, each prepper discussed their reasons for prepping. Heffernan insisted that the biggest threat to her family was zombies. She emphasized, "Even my daughter knows we only shoot zombies in the head." When she imagined what might happen if zombies bit her husband or children, she looked pained. The vision of such a terrible fate for her children proved particularly distressing Yet in a later conversation with fellow zombie prepper Beatty,

Heffernan declared, “If you’ve got a bite, I will shoot you in the face.” While she might have agonized over ending the lives of bitten loved ones, infected strangers were another matter entirely.

Carbajal emphasized, “This can be a reality.” He provided Discovery with a tour of the KAZM’s fenced compound equipped with an underground bunker. This organization stockpiled non-perishable foods, bottled water, water filtration systems, and a variety of weapons. Men wearing camouflage and bandanas displayed the guns, machetes, and grenades. While Oakey visited the militia compound, he asked members of the KAZM what they would do if loved ones were bitten, which led to a heated conversation amongst members. One man asked, “Are you able to shoot your kid in the face?” Another responded with affirmation and profanity. Some asserted that they are not your kids anymore if they become infected. Others expressed dismay at the possibility of killing their children, even if they were zombies. One particular member declared that he would shoot zombie children, even if the others can’t. The KAZM, after all, is preparing for war against zombies. Once bitten, a human is no longer a human, and the battle is for human survival. Humans need to protect themselves, even if the threat is zombified children.

In the first episode of AMC’s *The Walking Dead*, the show’s protagonist, Sheriff Rick Grimes, encounters a little girl wearing a nightgown and holding a teddy bear. At first, he thinks she is human, but as he approaches her, she begins to growl at him. Rick realizes that she is a zombie, and he shoots her in the head. When I watched this scene with my partner, he remarked, “This show might be rough.” As any fans of the show know, he was right. Yet a fictional character shooting a fictional child is disturbing, yet this was an episode of a television show. Listening to members of the Kansas Anti-

Zombie Militia debating about whether to shoot their children feels different. It is jarring to witness. More than anything else from the show, this argument bothered me. Frankly, I was a bit stunned by the exchange about murdering children. I shouldn't be, but I am. Imagining my child as a zombie led me to a dissimilar conclusion. She would probably bite me because *I would let her*. This is when I realized that I would not survive a zombie apocalypse. No amount of prep could save me from my feelings. I would be a goner.

In a *New York Times* review of *Zombie Apocalypse*, Neil Genzlinger notes that the zombie preppers documented are unconvincing about the possible zombie threat. What disturbs Genzlinger about the show is that "it is full of people detailing their plans for blasting away zombies and discussing things like whether they would be able to shoot their own children if they were to become infected." He writes that the program is "almost unwatchable" because of the Newtown school shooting only days before.[32]

The discussions about possible violence against loved ones cannot be detached from the real-life horror of the shooting at Sandy Hook Elementary. At the *Los Angeles Times*, Patrick Kevin Day also made the connection:, "[T]he zombie fad is having a disturbing ripple effect on public consciousness." Day's piece notes the supposed zombie attacks, the CDC's denial of zombies, and the Halo Corp counterterrorism summit as examples of the virulence of this fad. Intriguingly, he proclaims, "Zombies aren't real," as if to assure his audience that zombie preppers cannot possibly believe in zombies, nor should we. Yet, fantasy or not, the prevalence of zombies has real life consequences and sometimes ends in violence.

"We HATE all Zombies"
The Intimate Relationship Between Zombies and American Gun Culture

In early December of 2012, Jared Gurman of Long Island, New York, shot his girlfriend Jessica Gelderman over an argument about the AMC's *The Walking Dead*. The argument started because Gurman asserted that the military would cause an apocalyptic event that would inevitably lead to zombies, and Gelderman disagreed. She insisted that the zombie apocalypse would not occur. Gelderman's refusal to recognize the possibility of the apocalypse angered Gurman, who had been drinking. She left their shared apartment after the exchange became heated, and Gurman sent her threatening text messages. Concerned about the messages, Gelderman eventually returned to the apartment at 2:30 am to check on her boyfriend. When she arrived, he was sitting on the stairs with his .22 semiautomatic rifle. Gurman shot her once in the back, and then took her to the hospital. He later explained that he drinking made him paranoid. Gurman was arrested and charged with second degree murder.[33]

While it might seem far-fetched that an argument about the reality of zombies could lead to violence, this case suggests otherwise. Granted, Gurman was intoxicated and admittedly paranoid, but he could not handle his girlfriend's refusal to consider that these monsters could become real. While the argument might seem silly or trivial, it had high stake consequences for the injured Gelderman. Imaginary monsters led to actual violence. Believing in the zombie apocalypse spurred attempted murder.

Gurman's attempt at murder demonstrates the intimate relationship of zombies to American gun culture. In popular culture, killing zombies requires weapons, lots of them, and usually, these weapons are guns. Zombie films often feel like homage to the gun with characters taking out one zombie after another, and protagonists make improbably accurate shots. Guns emerge as crucial for survival against zombies. Fans, preppers, and interested others avidly discuss which weapons will best serve you if the

undead appear. Not surprisingly, gun and ammunition manufacturers as well as outdoor merchandisers create, market, and sell a variety of zombie killing tools and accessories. Remember, preparation equals survival, or so they hope.

Hornady offers Zombie Max ammunition in nine different cartridge sizes ranging in price from $21 to $39. The promotional materials urge, "Be PREPARED—supply yourself for the Zombie Apocalypse." This is ammunition specially designed to kill zombies, though Hornady warns that this is "live" ammunition, not a toy. Thus, "[n]o human being, plant, animal, vegetable, or mineral should ever be shot" with this ammunition. Gerber Gear provides an Apocalypse Survival Kit ($349) that contains three machetes, three knives, an axe, and a durable carrying case. This kit appeared on the second season of *The Walking Dead*. The product description references zombies:

> What if it happens? What if our worst fears are realized? If the Dead walk, the continuation of the human race will become a daily struggle. Are you prepared to protect and defend your family and friends? Your best chance lies in the Gerber Apocalypse Survival Kit.

Henry Miller Outdoors noted that the zombie apocalypse is "the new tactical." Labeling products "tactical" was a marketing trend, and zombies appeared to be the new catchy label for outdoor gear.[34] Knives, axes, and bullets were marketed as especially for killing the walking dead. What is so interesting about these products is that they are marketed as actual weapons and gear, but their intended targets are imaginary. Fans can purchase these bullets or machetes, but no zombies exist for the weapons' use. Yet.

Intriguingly, in December of 2012, the *Huffington Post* reported a spike in gun sales and background checks after Black Friday.[35] ABC News reported that gun stores could not keep up with the demand for guns and ammo. Gun store owners attributed this to the reelection of President Obama, zombies, and doomsday prep more generally.

Steve Parsons, the owner of the Houston Armory (a gun store), told ABC that he couldn't keep Hornady's Zombie Max in stock.[36] While the reelection of President Obama and fears about gun control might seem expected (yet still troubling) as reasons for gun sales, how are we to understand the inclusion of zombies? Why were zombies on the minds of gun purchasers? When did a movie monster become a reason for purchasing weapons?

The popularity of zombie films and *The Walking Dead* definitely contributed to the rise of zombie marketing for weapons and zombie targets, but it doesn't entirely explain this interest. *Guns and Ammo* produced a special issue ("Zombie Nation") about this fad with a featured article on an AR-15 assault rifle modified for zombie killing. At *Salon*, Marc Herman reports on Spike's Tactical, a Florida company that created a zombie trigger assembly for the AR-15 with a selector that has three options—"live," "dead," or "undead." The zombie trigger sold so well that it has been on back order.[37] Herman notes that the zombie fad in guns and ammo allows for new weapons and accessories that "dance on the edge of gun-law loopholes." While high power weapons might appear useful for killing the resurrected dead, Herman emphasizes, "it's harder to justify in non-zombie settings." I certainly hope this is the case.

Indeed, high-power and high-caliber weapons for zombie killing employ fantasy to justify guns that might otherwise violate gun laws. Has the rise of zombie culture become a method to work around existing gun legislation? Do products made for killing zombies allow fantasy to trump reality? It seems so. I can't help but wonder about the consequences of marketing real weapons for fantasy targets. Weapons for zombies can also maim, harm, and kill humans. Who are these zombies that purchasers want to eradicate? Who might these zombies represent?

In addition to zombie weapons, there is also a burgeoning market for zombie targets, both paper and 3D, to practice using those weapons and others. Paper targets offer a variety of zombies from clowns to brides and grooms. But, simulating a zombie apocalypse becomes easier with eerily realistic 3D targets. One such producer of these targets is Zombie Industries. They offer a line of 3D bleeding zombie targets "designed to help YOU prepare for the next Zombie outbreak that our World's leaders, even to this very day, are keeping top-secret." The hand-painted zombies are made in the USA and seek to "resemble an infected human that just finished gnawing your neighbor." This supposedly realistic appearance helps "you really feel the hate." The line of bleeding targets contains fifteen different models: five animals (including a zombified pig or kangaroo), an alien, a clown, a Nazi, a terrorist (who looks like Osama bin Laden), a TV director/producer, an ex-girlfriend, a grave digger, "Chris," "Leo," and "Rocky." The prices range from $49.95-$89.95. Additionally, they offer a "Sons of Guns" Apocalypse kit ($15, 999.95), which includes 250 3D zombie targets as well as 250 ZOMBOOM! exploding rifle targets that can be placed in the zombies to make them explode when shot. The targets ooze paint and come apart graphically when shot. Trust me on this. The website provides YouTube videos to document what happens to the targets when they are shot. With repeated shots, hunks of synthetic flesh falls off, and the faces and torsos become obliterated beyond recognition. The effect is haunting. These zombies never stood a chance.

Two 3D zombie targets, "Rocky" and "Alexa," have recently brought negative attention to Zombie Industries. Zombie Industries describes Rocky "as a fighter from Detroit," who received his "nickname" after "a few matches left him rutted in the head." Heroically, Rocky staved off an undead attack, but later succumbed to bites. Yet his

newly zombified state shouldn't fool you: "Be warned, Rocky is HIGHLY dangerous due to his quick wit and strength…. He was last seen screaming something like 'Zombie Industries believes in America!' That we do." The controversy that surrounded this green-skinned zombie is that for some he appears reminiscent of President Barack Obama. (I can see the similarity.) BuzzFeed reported that this possible resemblance led the National Rifle Association (NRA) to ban Rocky from their exhibit hall at the 2013 NRA Convention. Zombie Industries displayed Rocky for two days at the convention before removing the model at the NRA's request. A booth worker told BuzzFeed that the NRA feared "a liberal reporter would come by and start bitching." When BuzzFeed asked if the resemblance was intentional, another worker noted, "Let's just say I gave my Republican father one for Christmas."[38] Yet Zombie Industries CEO Roger Davis told MSN news that the NRA did not ask them to remove Rocky from their booth. Instead, the booth sold out of Rocky zombies, which is why the model was suddenly off the display. Moreover, Davis took issue with the claim that Rocky looked like Obama; rather, Rocky *is* supposed to look African-American but the target was not geared to resemble a certain person.[39]

On Zombie Industries' webpage, the company placed the blame for this controversy on liberal news outlets. The front page announcement declared, "Don't let the liberal media allow your imagination run wild with silly ideas…there is no political motivation…we hate ALL zombies." More importantly, the target manufacturer emphasized that just like the zombie virus does not discriminate among human victims, neither does the company. Davis explained to MSN news, "Zombie Industries does not discriminate on the basis of race, religion, or gender. Our zombies represent the current demographic in America today."[40] The company turned the controversy into a

promotion—if shoppers enter DEBATE at checkout, they can receive 30% off their entire purchase. While Davis attempted to distance Rocky from the claims that he looked like Obama, a YouTube review of the target purposely conjured the likeness. The video review, which has since been removed by the user, renamed Rocky "Barry." While his preschool age son looked on, the reviewer shot the target with arrows and then two separate guns. He enthusiastically noted that "Barry never stood a chance" against the twelve-gauge shotgun.

In addition to the news coverage over Rocky, the "Alexa" zombie also proved controversial. This target was supposedly an ex-girlfriend, who, according to the Zombie Industries website, had "a wicked mean streak" and a "nasty disposition." She was originally named, "The Ex-Girlfriend," but her name was later changed to Alexa. Unlike Rocky, who had green skin, the original Alexa target had fair skin splattered with blood. Her pink bra was visible under her white tank top. Simply put, she appeared more human than the rest of the zombified targets. This difference from the male zombie targets seems intentional, as their skin colors range from green to grey. Moreover, the comments on the Alexa product page at Zombie Industries are distressing. One male commenter describes the target as "this Zombie Bitch" who reminded him of "a girl he knew in high school." The *Huffington Post* noted that one commenter wrote, "The dark haired one looks like my bitch ex-wife, who I HATE! I can't wait to shoot her face off for taking my shit."[41] This particular comment has been removed from the page, though the other comments remain. Most of the reviews of Alexa are five star reviews by male reviewers, though now two female reviewers have given the product one star reviews. Zombie Industries website stated, "To discriminate against Women by not having them represented in our product selection would be just plain sexist." To exclude women

might appear sexist, but the description of, and the reaction to, the Alexa target appear rife with misogyny. Many feared that this target encouraged men to enact violent fantasies about women using guns, a troubling concept in light of the fact that domestic violence is the leading cause of injury to women in the U.S. As I read the reviews of Alexa, it was clear that reviewers weren't excited about shooting the target per se. Rather, they were eager to shoot a target that represented women they imagined had wronged them. Alexa became a conduit for their rage, and this target became a method to vent vengeance, frustration, and hate against living and breathing women. Several petitions encouraged Amazon to remove Alexa emphasized that this target made violence against women seem like a joke, and Amazon has since removed the target from their store. However, CEO Davis iterated that the goal of Zombie Industries was to provide fun, entertaining targets that promote gun safety. Shooting a target must be better than shooting a person. It is just harmless fun. Isn't it? I remain unconvinced.

Despite Davis's claims, the targets seem to suggest something else: the unhindered glee of destroying zombies promotes a vision of acceptable violence. Anyone can become a target as long as they are zombified. But the line of separation between zombies and humans seems murky here. These zombies appear too reminiscent of humans, and they allow violence directed toward a zombie president or ex-girlfriend to be marketed as fun and safe. I am not convinced that it can be either. While the stated goal of the Alexa target is to include zombified women among the male-dominated targets, I can't help but think of the argument between the Long Island couple that ended with gun violence against a young woman. Real life often mimics fantasy, or maybe, fantasy is dress rehearsal for real life, good or ill. I have so many questions for the men who buy this target: Does shooting a target that looks like your ex-girlfriend

help you? Or does it just encourage you to dwell in negative emotions about her? Why would you purchase one in the first place? What do these targets do for you?

When I look at Alexa, I see all the negative ways in which women are viewed in American culture. Objectification. Sexualization. Violence. Alexa, after all, is literally an object. Her bra is exposed, and her body oozes and falls apart when shot. This does not suggest a move away from sexism or violence against women but rather an exploitation of it. The fragility of this target, and all the others, highlights the fragility of human bodies, which can be broken, destroyed, and maimed. Flesh is delicate and easily harmed. Watching the destructions of Zombie Industries targets makes me uneasy because of the comparison. Bodies come apart, and the lauded realism makes it hard for me to look. What is the relationship between zombies and humans? What are zombies stand-ins for?

This violence against zombies dramatizes the close relationship of the pop culture monster to the American culture of violence. This attention to preparing for zombies mirrors the presence and perception of gun violence in the U.S. In zombie media and zombie prep, guns appear as both offensive and defensive, guarantors of the peace and the causes of unrest. They prove necessary. They are stockpiled. They are glorified. Americans simultaneously love and hate them; we are ambivalent. Some legislate for stricter control while others seek protection of their cherished rights. The ubiquity of guns appears to be the unquestioned given. Guns, controlled or not, appear here to stay. Gun violence is ordinary and common, as over 12,000 Americans were killed by guns in 2010. With the mass shootings at Newtown, Aurora, and Columbine, gun violence splashes into national attention. Assumed safe places no longer seem safe. It should be no surprise, then, that visions of the zombie apocalypse rely so heavily on firepower and

weaponry. If guns are a dominant component of American culture, the pop culture merely reflects those norms. While gun violence has declined 49% from 1993 until 2011, Americans still largely perceive that gun violence has increased.[42] Americans prepare for perceived threats with weapons. The larger question for me is: Does gun violence against zombies lead to violence against humans? Does preparing to kill fictional monsters lead to actual harm? Or is all in good fun, as Zombie Industries claims? The answers seem complex and fraught with tension. Still, I worry.

Epilogue: "You've Got Some Red on You"

In the fall of 2011, one of my former students from my Apocalypse in American Culture course emailed me to tell me about a Facebook event that would interest me. She was right; it did. The event was the "Zombie Apocalypse," scheduled for December 22, 2012, notably a day after the supposed Mayan Apocalypse. 1,074, 824 people signed up to attend, 157,455 offered "maybe attending," and 615,478 politely declined their invitation to a gun-toting, gore-filled end.[43] (I accepted my invitation, if you are curious.) The event site proclaimed:

> The time is finally set. The day of the dead is coming, so make sure you have your Zombie Survival Plan ready. Many people are concerned about December 21, 2012, the alleged end of the world. This is just a ploy to hide the real day of reckoning, December 22, 2012, THE ZOMBIE APOCALYPSE! Grab your sawed-off shotgun, baseball bat and your running shoes and be prepared to kill or be killed! Oh, and by the way, you've got some red on you.[44]

The wall for the event is filled with helpful hints for zombie killing, comparison/contrast of preferred weaponry, general excitement over the possible zombies, and a keen desire to do harm to zombies. And today, months after the supposed end, folks lament that the end did not occur and suggest new dates. Apocalyptic disappointment sets in again.

What proved most interesting to me was the back and forth dialogue about why someone would take an event like this so seriously. An occasional poster lamented the loss of energy and time on this far-fetched end, especially considering global unrest, hunger, terror, and war. Attendees fired back that the zombie apocalypse is fun and harmless. It is just "fun" to imagine devastation, destruction, and ruin of our world, which doesn't negate anyone's attention to global or domestic problems. Fun, Fun, Fun.

When compared to the bleakness of zombie apocalypse portrayal in film, television, and fiction, the palpable excitement on Facebook might be a bit disconcerting. Paired with zombie emergency preparedness, attacks involving cannibalism, zombie preppers, and oozing 3D zombie targets, this event seems remarkably typical. Of course, I tell myself, an event like this *would* exist. At this point, I suspect none of you readers should be surprised that many people want to imagine how to destroy zombies in novel and grotesque ways. What always stumps me is how the undead end becomes laughable, entertaining, or even joyous. I somehow miss the punch line.

When comparing the Facebook event to all the other examples I present here, the zombie apocalypse appears as a meditation about the nature of humanity in our callous and detached moment. Violent fantasy becomes a method to interpret an equally violent but seemingly safe reality. The zombies are perilous, but so are we. Humans are just as likely as shuffling monsters to destroy, consume, or maim our fellow human beings. By preparing to kill zombies, we push onto the monster all the things we hope we are not.

Zombies are the bearers of the end because they have no agency, no humanity, and no final end in sight. They are relentless, hungry, and inescapable. They are near and present death. They press forward without soul, mind, and often without

appendages. They do not stop. The fantasy of the zombie apocalypse plays out the end of humanity again and again in more and more bleak incarnations. In every rendering, the boundary between human and zombie becomes muddier and muddier, as humans become as unfeeling and callous as the ever-hungry, never-satiated monster.

Do you remember the discussion of whether to shoot your infected child or not? Do you think of an oozing Alexa target with chunks of her body missing and blood splattered across her tank top? Do you imagine what it might be like to have your face chewed on? Do you ponder the horror of having your eyes plucked out like Ronald Poppo due to a senseless act of violence? Do you wonder about caches of weapons and civilian militias? Do you pause and wonder how Jessica Gelderman recovered from a gunshot wound? I do. These stories stick with me, and I cannot shed them. They make me worry. They make me cynical. The lines between zombie and human seem too easy to ignore or to dismiss.

Zombies become the agents of humanity's fictionalized and supposedly destined end because they showcase how fragile humans actually are, with or without crisis. What the persistent belief in the zombie apocalypse might truly teach us is the centrality of violence in American culture and our familiarity with destroyed human bodies. The pervasive millennial zombies resemble the corpses that litter our actual world. Famine. Disease. War. Terror. Old Age. Young Age. Accidents. Guns. Death comes for us all. These corpses do not resurrect or walk, but we bear them with us. While we analyze which weapon would be more fun—gun or baseball bat—to harm a zombie, we become more comfortable with the destruction of ordinary folks and the casual acceptance of violence. Perhaps, I am being too harsh, too dreary, or too melodramatic. Maybe walking corpses become a method to manage those who haunt us but aren't seen. Maybe

they help us manage all kinds of things. Yet, the specter of violence lingers, and as Max Brooks reminds us, there is only one way to kill a zombie, but with humans the possibilities are endless.

All of this is to say that whether the zombie apocalypse is real or not is much less important than what participating in these fantasies can lead to. Edward Ingebretsen reminds us that monsters set up the limits for humanity: they warn us of boundaries we shouldn't cross. They also become blank canvases for what we fear and value. Zombies, then, demonstrate the reality of American fears about disaster, natural or human-made, disease and epidemic, the government's stability, terrorism, and gun control. Additionally, these monsters suggest the value of apocalypticism, fatalism, and violence in American culture more broadly. Preparing for an end by zombies reflects a deep ambivalence about our political culture, civic life, and the future of our nation. If the end is unstoppable, why try to fix anything? Zombies might be just fantasy, but they have real stakes. Preparation for these monsters allows many Americans to participate in a vision of a different world in which the current social order dissipates.

Rather than assuming there is nothing to fear in the future, conjuring the zombie apocalypse demonstrates all the horrifying possibilities. I hear my daughter say, "zombies aren't real," and I want to be reassured. I want to agree with her. I want to proclaim that fantasy can't be reality, but this is my own childish attempt to make the world bend to my wishes. The zombies are everywhere. I can't avoid them, and neither can you. Are you ready for them? You should be.

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