Abstract:

This dissertation argues the figure of the zombie in South African Gothic exposes and critiques the dehumanising conditions that linger in the post-apartheid era, while presenting new ways of finding human-ness and humanity. In analysing literature that uses zombies and the zombie aesthetic, I argue this figure is a tool to comprehend the neoliberal turn of South Africa, which produced the commodification of 'everything', including the human body. This is achieved in the analysis of three works of South African Gothic that use zombies and zombie-ness to critique the post-apartheid era: *Deadlands* by Lily Herne, *Apocalypse Now Now* by Charlie Human, and *The Reactive* by Masande Ntshanga. This dissertation focuses on how these depictions of this figure expose where South Africans locate their humanity, specifically in the wake of the national humanitarian crisis under apartheid. Thus, the zombie in South African Gothic allows South Africans to establish their own authority over the conditions that dehumanised them, sowing the seeds of hope from the graves of their deferred dreams of liberation.

‘To Challenge Their Very Humanity’[1]: The Zombie in Post-Apartheid

South African Gothic

The zombie shuffled out from the edges of empire, arising in African diasporic oral traditions

that bled into Haiti and the French Antilles via the Middle Passage. It then lunged into popular

culture through American sensationalist travel writing and infected global literary genres, including

South African Gothic. In its Caribbean manifestations, according to Isak Niehaus, malevolent

sorcerers gained control of bodies by robbing them of their *tibon ange*, or the essence of a person's soul

that contains personality, character, and willpower.[2] The sorcerers would raise the lifeless bodies from

their graves, leading them in a trance state under the cover of night to plantations where the zombie

(*zombi*) would toil indefinitely as an enslaved being. The prevalence of these legends depicting

zombified individuals and body snatchers grew to such an extent that Haitian penal code outlawed

sortilèges, or sorceries, that extended beyond religious practice.[3] Where Haitian zombie stories cast

scorcerers in the role of exploitative plantation owners, their African counterparts are controlled by

witches. Niehaus connects these concepts: 'during the period of wage labor master-servant

relationships between white employers and black labourers became the allegorical pretext for witches

and zombies', consolidating the relationship between zombies narratives as allegories for structures of

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[1] Nelson Mandela at a joint meeting of the United States Congress, Washington DC (26 June 1990).
[2] Isak Niehaus, 'Witches and Zombies of the South African Lowveld: Discourse, Accusations and Subjective Reality', *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 11 (2005), 191-210. (p. 192).
[3] William Seabrook, *The Magic Island* [1929], reissued as *The Voodoo Island* (London: Dover Publications Inc, 1929), p. 103.

power.[4] This dissertation argues that the zombie in South African Gothic serves as a tool of critiquing the post-apartheid government's complicity and betrayal of the South African people by exposing the dehumanising and inequitable conditions persistent in South Africa today.

The origin of the contemporary zombie lies with 1920s travel writers who went to Haiti in search of exotic supernatural material in order to please the appetites of American popular markets. Vaguely alluding to a comatose state that falls short of 'actual death', Article 249 of the Penal Code of Haiti caught the eye of many writers, including the popular 'self-mythologizing journalist' William Seabrook, whose travel writing book — *The Magic Island (1929)* — inspired the first Hollywood zombie film *White Zombie* (1932).[5] Seabrook, along with many other writers, published these texts in order to fetishise and demonise the inhabitants of the territories under imperial dominion, thereby justifying the dehumanising conditions enacted by their governments onto the people within them. Within a story of Seabrook's, the origin of the zombie lurches into focus. A source offers to show Seabrook zombies in person and, after seeing the group of men himself, Seabrook writes:

> I did see these "walking dead men" [...] The eyes were the worst. It was not my imagination. They were in truth the eyes of a dead man, not blind, but staring, unfocused, unseeing. The whole face, for that matter, was bad enough. It was vacant, as if there was nothing behind it.[6]

Significantly, these men were employed by HASCO, the Haitian American Sugar Company, an American operation that tried to reintroduce large-scale plantation farming.[7] In this depiction, it becomes clear that zombies and the zombie aesthetic is rooted in enslavement and the exploitation of

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[4] Niehaus, 'Witches and Zombies of the South African Lowveld', p. 14.
[5] William Seabrook, *The Magic Island*, p. 103.
[6] Ibid., p. 100-101.
[7] Roger Luckhurst, *Zombies A Cultural History* (London: Reaktion Books Ltd, 2015).

colonial territories by corporations. In the aftermath of the postcolonial moment, these exploitative

relationships have not disappeared. The chains of enslaved labour have only been moulded differently,

the invisible hand of neoliberal corporate extractivism clutching tight at South Africa.

Thus, the zombie in post-apartheid South African Gothic lays bare the ways in which South

African political and commercial entities have consumed the lands, the bodies, and the minds of the

African people. Rebecca Duncan summarises this idea:

> The undead, the harvested body and the witches responsible for these are thus figures that give
> form to the complex ruinations operating in the post-apartheid moment, where relationships
> between production and consumption dematerialise and become obscure, where privations
> persist and mutate in spite of liberatory promises, and where all the time great wealth is visible,
> but inaccessible.[8]

In the wake of apartheid, the liberation party — the African National Congress (ANC) — promised

to address the economic needs of black South Africans, pledging to provide 'everything that makes

human life human'.[9] Duncan notes how the ANC post-apartheid government has failed to keep its

word, instead proliferating a policy, as Patrick Bond cleverly states, of 'talk left, walk right', which has

only upheld the racial economic divide created by the apartheid state.[10]

In analysing literature that uses zombies and zombie-ness as a critique in South African

Gothic, this dissertation attempts to explain how the zombie is used as a tool to comprehend the

neoliberal turn of South Africa, which produced the commodification of 'everything', including the

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[8] Rebecca Duncan, *South African Gothic: Anxiety and Creative Dissent in the Post-apartheid Imagination and Beyond* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2018) p. 155

[9] Nelson Mandela, C-SPAN, 26 June 1990.

[10] Patrick Bond, *Talk Left, Walk Right: South Africa's Frustrated Global Reforms* (Pietermaritzburg: University of Kwa-Zulu-Natal Press, 2004).

human body.[11] This essay accounts for the rising position of the zombie in modern South African literature by exposing how the figure of the zombie critiques the very idea of modernity itself. Xavier Aldana Reyes argues, that zombies show us 'cautionary tales of who we might become and of who we already are'.[12] Thus, zombie functions by projecting the most viscerally grotesque versions of ourselves onto the page. The contemporary zombie figure allows authors to question what being human entails, how we 'lose' our humanity, and what happens if we already have. The apocalyptic nature of zombie narratives suggests an examination of the structures of power that prove to be inescapable, even after everything else is destroyed.[13] This dissertation will examine three works of South African Gothic that use zombies and zombie-ness to critique post-apartheid South Africa; these works include *Deadlands* by Lily Herne, *Apocalypse Now Now* by Charlie Human, and *The Reactive* by Masande Ntshanga.[14]

As analysed within these texts, zombies represent humans deprived of humanity. This dissertation focuses on how South African depictions of zombies expose where South Africans locate their humanity, specifically in the wake of the national humanitarian crisis under apartheid. Throughout this analysis, humanity is seen to be deeply tied to community, the ability to connect to others through ourselves. South Africa has tried to grapple with the haunting legacy of apartheid, conducting extensive processes of recognition and atonement, like the Truth and Reconciliation

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[11] David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005) p. 80.

[12] Xavier Aldana Reyes, 'Contemporary Zombies', in *Twenty-First-Century Gothic: An Edinburgh Companion* ed. by Xavier Aldana Reyes and Maisha Wester (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022), pp. 89-101 (p. 100).

[13] Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative* (Alresford: Zero Books, 2014).

[14] Lily Herne, *Deadlands* (London: Constable & Robinson Ltd, 2011); Charlie Human, *Apocalypse Now Now* (London: Titan Books, 2013); Masande Ntshanga, *The Reactive* (London: Jacaranda Books Art Music Ltd, 2014).

Commission. But the texts discussed here suggest that, in the wake of limited change, South Africans are still faced with a zombie-like existence, forced to part with their sense of agency, individualism, and will. Thus, as the human that is not recognised as human, the zombie outwardly projects how the post-apartheid state denies the humanity of black South Africans, consigning their bodies to a state of persistent poverty.

Viewing South African zombie literature through the lens of the Gothic genre also allows for vital connections between South Africa's apartheid past and its post-apartheid present, exposing the logic of haunting that permeates its contemporary society. The genre serves to embody the notion of historical hybridity, portraying the interconnectedness between dark and mysterious pasts and illuminated presents. The Gothic genre is broadly associated with a specific period of novelistic production between 1760 and 1820 when the first gothic novel, Horace Walpole's *The Castle of Otranto* (1764), was written.[15] After undergoing a rebirth in the 1980s and 1990s, the gothic became a transmutable form, its enduring relevance residing in the genre's adaptability and transgeneric fluidity.[16] This flexibility grants South African writers new ways to utilise the form, adapting it to ask its own specific questions about the limits of humanity. Through this logic of haunting, South African

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[15] Xavier Aldana Reyes and Maisha Wester, 'Introduction: The Gothic in the Twenty-First Century', in *Twenty-First-Century Gothic: An Edinburgh Companion* ed. by Xavier Aldana Reyes and Maisha Wester (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022), pp. 1–16 (p. 2).
[16] Ibid., p. 1.

Gothic allows the zombie to uncover the material shifts, or rather lack thereof, experienced in post-apartheid South Africa.[17]

Combining the corporeality of the vampire and the haunting of the ghost, the figure of the zombie in gothic texts exposes and complicates this link between apartheid past and post-apartheid present. The excess of the zombie's decaying corporeality serves as a visceral image for the damage of South Africa's neoliberal turn, which was masked in social-democratic language and the promise of economic liberty. The zombie's rotting but restless flesh, meanwhile, exposes the continued perishability of the black and othered body under conditions shaped by the post-apartheid administration, particularly Thabo Mbeki's presidency, by laying bare the skeletal remains of a deeply broken system that relies on privatisation, consumption, and the extreme poverty of millions.[18]

The zombie additionally provides South African Gothic with a means of expressing and responding to trauma that is often inarticulable in literal language. Previously, scholars like Gerald Gaylard suggest that the gothic provokes 'a distinct embarrassment [that] lurks around the mere mention of the term', the nation seemed to prefer fact over fiction.[19] I oppose this view to suggest that the form allows South Africans to create particularly visceral visuals that expose the excesses of the torture chamber. The absence of the gothic in South African literature during the apartheid period

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[17] David Punter, 'Arundhati Roy and the House of History', in *Empire and the Gothic: The Politics of Genre* ed. by A. Smith and W. Hughes (Basingstoke and New York: Palgrave Macmillian, 2003), pp. 192–207 (p. 193).

[18] As of 2022, around 18.2 million people in South Africa lived in extreme poverty, with the poverty threshold at 1.90 U.S. dollars daily. Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development, 'World Poverty Clock' <https://worldpoverty.io/map> [accessed 3 June 2023]

[19] Gerald Gaylard, 'The Postcolonial Gothic: Time and Death in Southern African Literature', *Journal of Literary Studies*, 24.4 (2008), 1–18, p. 3

was not a simple debate between 'high art' culture and 'lowbrow' melodrama, as Gaylard argues.[20] It came from the distance between the event and retelling, the inability to understand the experience of torture unless endured. This is seen as Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela tries to recount a traumatic incident where she witnesses the deaths of many of her neighbours by police: 'Blood, bodies, and death are the only meaningful words that capture the image of what [her younger self] cannot truly articulate through language'.[21] These words convey a sense of dissociation between body and mind, with the mind lacking the ability to express the nightmare the body finds itself trapped within.

The figure of the zombie emerges as a novel tool to expose the unspeakable: the oppressive legislation black Africans endured through the apartheid state, the dehumanisation experienced through its violence, and the legacies which persist. This can be understood in another moment with Gobodo-Madikizela, as she recounts an experience she had serving on the Human Rights Violations Committee during South Africa's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC).[22] She describes a story told on the public stage by Mr. Mkabile who was imprisoned on Robben Island, 'the Alcatraz of South Africa'.[23] There he was forced to dig a shallow grave, which he was then told to lie in as they covered his body with sand to the neck. Two infamous warders, the Kleynhans brothers, urinated on him and as they did so, he was forced to swallow their urine in order to breathe through his mouth.[24] Mr. Mkabile gestured and demonstrated many of the actions in this story, 'sensing' that the audience

[20] Ibid.,, p. 3.
[21] Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela, *A Human Being Died That Night: Forgiving Apartheid's Chief Killer* (London: Portobello Books Ltd, 2006) p. 10.
[22] Ibid., p. 92.
[23] Ibid., p. 92.
[24] Ibid, p. 93.

might not believe him.[25] Gobodo-Madikizela connects this to the inadequacy of language as a tool for communicating trauma, a phenomenon observed by many scholars who write on victims' testimonies.[26] Mr. Mkabile has trouble recounting his own experiences of dehumanisation. One of the ways he is able to revive this humanity is through enacting this experience, reclaiming this narrative through his own words and nonverbal cues. Similarly, the figure of the zombie provides South Africans with a way of expressing their experiences of trauma, exploitation, and dehumanisation on their own terms.

Depicting the unspeakable — the incommensurable — is complicated, but necessary to allow victims of abuse ways to regain their humanity. J.M. Coetzee expands on this idea by arguing that the greater evil does not lie in the fictional construction of real atrocities, but rather in ignoring these events by not depicting them. Imagining 'torture and death on one's own terms' is therefore a way, to 'establish one's own authority' as a victim of violence.[27] Its fictionalisation of the very real terrors experienced under apartheid allows us to see the reality of these lived experiences, producing important tools to uncover this haunting history. Thus, while the use of gothic in South African literature, especially in its construction of apartheid atrocities, requires mindful engagement from both

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[25] Ibid, p. 92.

[26] Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela cites Lawrence Langer as one scholar who has studied literary works in relation to their depiction of Nazi death camps. See Lawrence Langer, *Admitting the Holocaust* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1995 and *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory* [New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1993].

[27] J. M. Coetzee, Doubling the Point: Essays and Interviews (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992) p. 364.

authors and critics, it nonetheless proves to be a worthwhile tool in representing and uncovering the 'absurd banality' of the apartheid era, one which relied on the suppression and silencing of its history.[28]

The recognition of the genre as a constructive form has enticed many South African writers, creating a burgeoning field ripe for critical and academic study. Rebecca Duncan has done the most comprehensive analysis of South African Gothic to date; she notes how the gothic is emerging in South African plays, music, graphic novels, and critical essays, along with literature.[29] Some of the emergent post-millennial writers include Lauren Beukes, Henrietta Rose-Innes and Sarah Lotz, the last whom writes under a composite pseudonym Lily Herne. The first section of this thesis examines Herne's novel *Deadlands*. It argues that text exposes the logic of haunting in the political shift from apartheid to post-apartheid South Africa, while linking the gothic zombie to its South African context.

When Everything Else Is Gone... What Is Left?

Deadlands (2011) by Lily Herne emerged as South Africa's first foray into the contemporary zombie apocalypse novel, blending a depiction of modern and traditional African zombies. Herne utilises the post-apocalyptic setting in *Deadlands* as a projection of a possible future, exposing the failures of the shift from the National Party (NP) to the African National Congress (ANC) and foreshadowing the downfall of South Africa if it continues on its current path. The book opens ten years after the zombie apocalypse which began during the 2010 FIFA World Cup Tournament in South Africa. The ensuing struggle is referred to as the 'War', and with this, Herne creates a post-

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[28] Duncan, *South African Gothic,* p. 10.
[29] Ibid, p. 11.

apocalyptic scenario with explicit references to the South African apartheid state and the onslaught of 'Total Strategy'. This was a policy enacted by then prime minister P. W. Botha that sought to maintain 'law and order' through extreme violence against anyone connected to the anti-apartheid struggle, Herne's parallel invites readers to understand the aftermath of apartheid in apocalyptic terms.[30] The novel follows teen Lele de la Fontein after she moves to the post-apocalyptic Cape Town enclave, run by a rising political party called Resurrectionists. This party worships mysterious figures named the Guardians and, as Lele stumbles her way through the narrative, she uncovers lingering South African structures of power held within these groups that make fighting off the zombie apocalypse seem almost easy in comparison.

The eroded state institutions within the novel centre around the control exerted by the Guardians, strange and powerful hooded figures who serve as a reflection of the NP and the apartheid state. The rebel underground faction the Anti-Zombians (ANZ) is an overt connection to the anti-apartheid ANC party. Like the white politicians of the apartheid state, the Guardians hold a Machiavellian perspective, believing their actions to be justified regardless of the means it requires to achieve them. When they are exposed as having been infected with strains of the zombie virus, the Guardians reveal that they are the ones who started the South African zombie apocalypse. Herne critiques this utilitarian approach, which produces the subservience of the entire human population in the pursuit of the 'betterment' of humanity, as unethical and ineffective. They expose how entrenched this type of 'greater good' ideology became for many white South Africans who willingly looked away

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[30] Gobodo-Madikizela, *A Human Being Died That Night*, p. 146.

from the abuse of the apartheid state due to the ways in which they benefited from the system. Within

the novel, the human Resurrectionist party mirrors these white South Africans, and believe that

humans should comply with Guardian control in order to survive. Requiring blind faith from all

followers, Resurrectionist leaders 'relocate' human tributes to the Guardians to gain favour and

increased access to resources. For example, the Cape Town settlement increases their 'Lottery' for

tributes to receive electricity within the enclave.[31] Herne's vocabulary invites connections to the

haunting memory of the forced 'relocation' of black South Africans from urban cities, like Cape

Town, to townships. Pumla Gobodo-Madikizela, the clinical psychologist who worked on Truth and

Reconciliation Commission, describes her experience of these townships:

> As township dwellers, we were Cape Towners in name only. I never truly saw Table
> Mountain, the epitome of the beauty of this magnificent city, although it is within visual reach
> of the township, it was part of the world that had tried to strip my people of their dignity and
> respect, part of the world that had reduced them to second-class citizens in their own
> country.[32]

Table Mountain, this evocative symbol of power in Cape Town, also appears in *Deadlands*. The main

character, Lele, can only glimpse the top of it inside of the walls of the enclave, which are built like a

prison. In both instances the ability to *see* Table Mountain reflects the *corporeal* constriction, one that

never truly ended with the dissolution of the apartheid government.

The inhabitants of the enclave comply with their prison-like existence, in the hope that 'the

Guardians will eventually free us', but the protagonist questions this 'party line', critiquing the

system's inability to change and exposing the fragility of the line that separates others, who are

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[31] Herne, *Deadlands*, p. 85.

[32] Gobodo-Madikizela, *A Human Being Died That Night*, p. 7.

relocated, and party followers.[33] Despite the fact that the zombie population would die out if the Resurrectionists party stopped sending out tributes, the enclave continues to support them. The immediate benefit of resources encourages their complicity within the system, resonating with the ways in which the apartheid state controlled the townships and communities of black South Africans. The zombie Guardians posit that humans are fundamentally the immoral ones as they betray their own people:

> 'It is not us who are the monsters, Lele [....] People kill each other, brutalise each other, do far worse things to each other than we ever could. Like what is happening in the city now. It is not us sending people out of the enclave to become the living dead. We are not the ones filled with hate.'[34]

Herne exposes the ways in which humans are complicit in the abuse of their own people and in the facilitation of their own demise, which drives to the larger critique they are making within *Deadlands* about the causalities in the transfer to the post-apartheid state.

Underscoring the shift from apartheid to post-apartheid South Africa, a distinctive element of *Deadlands* is the text's preoccupation with transition, which extends to the corporeal zombie body. The zombie Guardians hold a Lottery in which the only participants are teenagers. If chosen, the teen is taken away from the enclave by the Guardians, never to be seen again. This is revealed to be a way for zombies to grow in number. Teenage bodies are 'in transition' and thus possess the unique ability to survive the transformation of the zombie life force into their bloodstream.[35] This emphasis on youthfulness and transformation draws parallels to another moment in the narrative that directly

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[33] Herne, *Deadlands*, p. 83.
[34] Ibid, p. 311.
[35] Ibid, p. 298.

references the apartheid era. After being assigned to read a passage from her high school's newly introduced class history book, Lele notices its peculiar texture, finding it 'slippery and padded, as if the book was coated in flesh'.[36] Herne's language alludes to the themes of corporeality and fleshiness within zombie narratives, as well as suggesting that history is a living entity, akin to a 'body' of knowledge. These histories are often shaped and curated by societal authorities and educational institutions to convey subjective narratives deemed worthy of learning. South African readers might be reminded, in particular, of the apartheid state's mutated discriminatory Bantu Educational system. The Bantu Education Act (1953) was a national education reform that, as Dr. Hendrik F. Verwoerd stated, aimed to ensure that 'Natives [black South Africans] must be taught from an early age that equality with Europeans [white South Africans] is not for them.'[37] This disparity was indicative of the broader apartheid system, which not only implemented educational discrimination but also enforced removal and resettlement projects, pass laws, and job restrictions. Herne's fleshy description of the history book draw attention to the mutability of history. Exposing the ways in which, like the bodies of black South Africans, it is subject to control and manipulation by white authorities.

As Lele is consuming the content of the book, she sees a grainy photograph of a distressed teenager cradling a blood-stained child dressed in a school uniform. The photograph evokes a sense of uncanny familiarity, and Lele struggles to place her recognition of it until she reads the caption. '*The terrible death of Hector Peterson during the height of apartheid. Sights such as this were a daily*

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[36] Ibid, p. 39.
[37] South African History Online (SAHO), 'The June 16 Soweto Youth Uprising', (2013), updated 09 June 2023 <https://www.sahistory.org.za/article/june-16-soweto-youth-uprising> [accessed 1 June 2023].

occurrence in the "bad old days", when violence, destruction, injustice and cruelty ravaged the land.[38]

The reader can now place the image as a reference to the 1976 Soweto Uprising, a horrific massacre perpetrated by apartheid police against unarmed African school children. The event is a fundamental moment in the dissolution of the oppressive apartheid regime, because the aftermath served as a catalyst for increased activism by the ANC.

As with Lele's history book, the events of 16 June 1976 are hard to reconstruct due to the state enacted suppression of historical accounts. This photo of Hector Peterson alludes to the visceral negative, the inverted image left within the consciousness of the South African people. A day that began with an atmosphere of peaceful protest, celebration, and optimism ended in the tragic loss of approximately 566 schoolchildren's lives. Sam Nzima, the photographer who captured the iconic image of Hector Peterson being carried by a fellow student after being shot, described the sequence of events.

> I saw a child fall down. Under a shower of bullets, I rushed forward and went for the picture. It had been a peaceful march, the children were told to disperse, they started singing Nkosi Skielele. The police were ordered to shoot.[39]

In the context of Lele's new history book, this photograph, taken before the apocalyptic version of South Africa began, is used to provide reasoning behind the destruction of the world through the zombie virus and the requisite takeover by the zombie Guardians. The 'New History' book posits that

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[38] Herne, *Deadlands*, p. 39.
[39] SAHO, 'The June 16 Soweto Youth Uprising'.

only through a zombie apocalypse is South Africa able to become a 'United Race' and overcome this brutal legacy of apartheid.[40]

Lele's discomfort with the statements made in the history book might mirror the potential unease felt by the reader in Herne's implication: Does it take the world ending for South Africa's racial inequalities to cease? This idea will be further explored, but for now, Herne presents Lele's dissent against this conclusion, denouncing it as a 'rewriting of history'.[41] Overall, the discovery of the Soweto Uprising photograph in Lele's textbook and Herne's emphasis on teenagers, both as the subject of the novel and as the only bodies able to transition into zombie Guardians, crucially highlights the significance of bodies in transition in Herne's depiction. The allusion to the profound weight of transition extends beyond the corporeal realm in Herne's narrative, as the text now turns to expose and critique the post-apartheid ANC government.

Herne intentionally blurs the lines between a projection of the apartheid state versus contemporary South Africa to expose the lack of critical change in the inequitable racial distribution of South African resources. The Guardians' relationship with humans in *Deadlands* is closely connected to the apartheid state, but Herne's construction of the zombie apocalypse also serves as a projection of the tumultuous shift between the apartheid and post-apartheid political landscapes, a transition that, in its own right, assumed an apocalyptic magnitude. The dissolution of the NP and subsequent rise of the ANC, a party compelled to operate clandestinely under the spectre of the

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[40] Herne, *Deadlands*, p. 40.
[41] Ibid, p. 41.

apartheid state, led to, as Alexander Johnston states, an 'improvised nation'.[42] The party was widely

unorganised and disparate, for this reason, Christopher Warnes argues, the improvised nation was

prone to long-term complications.[43] Thus, the Resurrectionist party name functions in two ways: it

exposes the shift, or rising, of the ANC party, while critiquing the systemic inequalities the new

structure just 'resurrects'.

One of the main obstacles that hindered the liberatory promises of the ANC was the

proliferation of policies that cultivated surface-level change, producing a foundationless economic

rising black middle class. This was in part due to ideologies based on what Warnes calls, 'the

enrichment of a part equals the enrichment of the whole'. This mindset facilitated the mass economic

inequality of black South Africans created by the post-apartheid state's façade of economic change.[44]

Herne's novel critiques these developments, as the rising Resurrectionist party's hyper-capitalist

endeavours mirrors the traits espoused by Black Economic Empowerment (BEE), policies and

legislation designed to redistribute wealth and resources into black hands. BEE legislation purposefully

fashioned an economy that benefited only a tiny number of elite black individuals. Due to the

economic oppression of black South Africans by the apartheid state, race and class were inextricably

linked, but many ANC leaders masked the continued existence of racial disparities by arguing that the

persistent poverty within South Africa was merely a factor of class and was unconnected to race.

Drawing on Victorian fiscal philosophy that regarded 'money as merit' and 'wealth as morality', the

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[42] Alexander Johnston, *South Africa: Inventing the Nation* (London: Bloomsbury, 2014), pp. 128–9.
[43] Christopher Warnes, *Writing, Politics and Change in South Africa after Apartheid* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2023) p. 8.
[44] Warnes, *Writing, Politics and Change*, p. 8.

black economic elite shored up their accumulation of wealth and power by associating it with the success of the post-apartheid state.[45] As Timothy Alborn explains, 'money went from being a largely local means of exchange to being a symbol of national greatness'.[46] This connects the ANC's post-apartheid language of national exceptionalism to the abuse of BEE policies. In short, the ideology behind the drivers of BEE legislation hid the rotting core of a deeply broken economic system, which has continued to exploit the majority of black South Africans. 64% of the black population still lives below the poverty line, compared to the 1% of white South Africans.[47]

Herne critiques the ways in which BEE policies and ANC politicians have been complicit in the abuse of their own people by exposing the political party within her novel for doing the same. The politicians in Herne's novel have become even more deft at hiding the inequality maintained in order to achieve exorbitant wealth. This is especially evident in the depiction of Resurrectionist leader Comrade Nkosi, who lives in a small, scruffy house. Herne posits this lack of opulence is not due to a lack of wealth but rather because 'at least one politician had learned from history'.[48] He did not want to be accused of abusing his power for 'his own personal gain.'[49] This directly critiques ANC leaders who espouse their fight against economic inequality while 'proudly wearing a R250,000 Breitling watch', such as the case with politician Julius Malema.[50] This critique is drawn even more clearly in the

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[45] Timothy Alborn, 'Money's Worth', in Martin Hewitt (ed), *The Victorian World* (London: Routledge, 2012), p. 209.

[46] Ibid., p. 209.

[47] South African Human Rights Commission, *Equality Report 2017/18* (2018).

[48] Herne, *Deadlands*, p. 281.

[49] Ibid., p. 281.

[50] Warnes, *Writing, Politics and Change*, p. 8.

name of the protagonist's high school, Malema High. Through this, Herne peels back the skin of social democratic language and empty liberatory promises, revealing the decaying putrid excess of ANC politicians.

Herne takes this logic to its conclusion, asking if this focus on the betterment of the few in favour of the many persists, what would take for South Africa to finally achieve the dreams promised by the Freedom Charter and the 'rainbow nation' under Nelson Mandela? The answer: not even a zombie apocalypse. The human Resurrection leaders within the novel become no better than the zombie Guardians. The narrative raises profound doubts about the possibility of South Africa existing without enduring corruption or entrenched structures of unequal power under the current political structure, which places surface level change, like BEE policies, ahead of constructive legislation like the Reconstruction and Development Programme (RDP). The RDP was drafted with the hard work of many South Africans. It presented a model of economic redistribution policies which would fulfil many liberatory aspirations developed by documents like the Freedom Charter and the country's constitution.[51] The Programme, however, was ultimately rejected by former President Thabo Mbeki in favour of policies resembling the Washington Consensus. The social-democratic hopes of the nation became nothing more than decaying dreams, as policies of privatisation and neoliberalisation infected the nation.

Overcoming systemic oppression facilitated by neoliberal global forces is no easy feat. By setting their story against the backdrop of a zombie apocalypse, Herne throws the challenges of living

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[51] Ibid., p. 5.

in post-apartheid South Africa into stark relief. In *Deadlands*, the zombies — controlled by the Guardians — embody a blend of contemporary and traditional zombie characteristics. Advancing in hordes, moving incredibly fast, and threatening to infect healthy human populations with contamination, the zombies in *Deadlands* are influenced by contemporary depictions popularised in the public consciousness by films such as *28 Days Later*, *Dawn of the Dead*, and *World War Z*. However, the introduction of the Guardians into this narrative constitutes a connection with, and subversion of, traditional African zombie mythos. The Guardians function more akin to the witches of African zombie lore, who steal the souls of individuals in order to exploit the body for additional labour. Duncan suggests that 'the figure of the undead laborer emerges amid this deepening postcolonial inequality, registering its disorientating effects as a state of magically imposed corporeal objectification'.[52] In essence, Herne utilises the South African Gothic zombie to critique the veiling of economic legislation, which makes postcolonial inequality seem as if it is forged by mystical forces. By literalising the violence enacted upon the body, the particular state conditions that degrade and dehumanise its people are exposed. Herne's use of the zombie figure allows for a displaced critique of the lived experiences of individuals in the shift from apartheid to post-apartheid South Africa. However, it is crucial to acknowledge that Herne's work, produced by two white women, raises concerns about the appropriation of black African traditions. I argue that Herne's utilisation of the African zombie tradition falls short of fully realising the potential for its projective critique because it

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[52] Rebecca Duncan, 'De/Zombification as Decolonial Critique: Beyond Man, Nature, and the Posthuman in Folklore and Fiction from South Africa', in *Decolonizing the Undead: Rethinking Zombies in World-Literature, Film, and Media*, ed. by Stephen Shapiro, Giulia Champion, and Roxanne Douglas (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022) pp. 157-175 (p. 163).

is unable to fully engage in the 'defetishisation' of material degradation and explore the humanising

potential of the figure.[53] This appropriation of black African culture by white authors will be analysed

more thoroughly in this dissertation's examination of *Apocalypse Now Now* by Charlie Human.

Deadlands provides an intriguing examination of the blurred boundaries between those in

positions of control and those subjected to control, through its projection of the post-apocalyptic

South African system. This narrative choice serves as a poignant reflection of the ongoing exploitation

of black workers by white employers within the post-apartheid South African economy, a distressing

reality that persists to this day. *Deadlands* asserts that authority, irrespective of the context, invariably

leads to the abuse of power, perpetuating an unending cycle of exploitation where the strong prey

upon the weak. Herne prompts readers to critically examine the mechanisms of power and control in

society, underscoring the complexities of authority and its potential for corruption. By virtue of its

critique, the series unveils the persisting inequalities and deep-seated corruption that transcend the

collapse of the former apartheid regime.

Central to the analysis of *Deadlands* is the pervasive employment of the zombie symbol,

whereby the unwavering faith of the human Resurrectionist party in the zombie Guardians assumes a

haunting resemblance to the wilful ignorance and complicity displayed by white South Africans

during the era of apartheid. It also shows how ANC leaders have participated in the continuation of

this oppressive state. This metaphorical device lays bare the pernicious truth that humans themselves,

and moreover the ANC government, are now serving as the agents of oppression, while the zombies

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[53] David McNally, *Monsters of the Market: Zombies: Vampires and Global Capitalism* (Leiden and Boston: Brill, 2011) p. 201.

embody the inescapable consequences of their actions. It serves to underscore the imperative of confronting and dismantling systemic power structures, rather than ascribing societal predicaments solely to external influences. Moreover, the depiction of the Anti-Zombians (ANZ) as a resistance faction within the enclave resonates with the complex terrain of the post-apartheid struggle in South Africa. The portrayal of class divisions and the pursuit of capitalist endeavours within the enclave further mirrors the contentious Black Economic Empowerment policies, effectively shedding light on the dissonance and disillusionment experienced by a considerable segment of the South African populace in the aftermath of apartheid. By juxtaposing this political shift with teenage bodies in transition and drawing from Rebecca Duncan's assertion that gothic narratives are quintessential texts of transformation, Herne's utilisation of horror and gothic elements assumes another layer of meaning, an allegory of the very essence of transition itself.[54]

In light of this, it becomes evident that Herne beckons us to recognize the profound significance of transitory forms, both in the literary space and within the corporeal realm. The gothic genre possessing tools of critique that allow for the scrutinization of the intricate nuances present in the post-apartheid era. Herne's portrayal of youthful bodies as the sole vessels capable of navigating this treacherous shift, advocates for the power of burgeoning minds in the face of enduring transition. Ultimately, *Deadlands* emerges as a potent critique of the prevailing social order, bearing witness to the unwavering resilience and complexities of the human, even when faced with the direst of circumstances.

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[54] Duncan, *South African Gothic,* p. 21.

The Uncanny Consequences of Neoliberal Excess

In *Deadlands*, Herne critiques the apocalyptic shift from the apartheid state to the ANC, exposing the neoliberal policies that have reinforced conditions of extreme poverty for millions of black South Africans. Following this, Charlie Human's *Apocalypse Now Now* (2013) deploys the figure of the zombie to viscerally illustrate the excess of wealth behind the black economic elite in South Africa. This very small group facilitated the corporate exploitation of millions of fellow black individuals, perpetuating their dehumanisation under economies of extraction, further making them into disposable sources of labour vulnerable to complete consumption. The novel opens with an epigraph:

> *Now now (adv.) A common South Africanism relating to the amount of time to elapse before an event occurs. In the near future; not happening presently but to happen shortly.*[55]

This definition's sense of brewing disaster foreshadows the impending descent of the protagonist, Baxter Zevcenko, into an apocalyptic underworld that lies just beyond his immediate reality. More significantly, it resonates on a literal level by depicting South Africa on the brink of destruction due to the presence of a haunting apartheid legacy. The works examined in this dissertation collectively present a distorted mirror of South Africa – a vision shaped by elements of apocalypse, inversion, and uncanny hellscape. Like *Deadlands*, Human's literary creations expose the monstrous qualities of real political figures by bringing them into parallel with corporeal abominations. The excess with which politicians and other figures of power are depicted to exploit bodies within the text serves as a visceral

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[55] Human, *Apocalypse Now Now*, p. 7.

critique, stripping away the veneer of an unassailable present and revealing the full extent of terror

concealed beneath South Africa's decaying political façade. In this light, the second application of

Human's epigraph can be understood as an allegory for South Africa's own 'apocalypse now now' –

an impending cataclysm of the post-apartheid state that, though not currently unfolding, looms on the

brink of immediate realisation.

The protagonist's high school serves as an allegory of the South African political landscape;

Baxter's personal philosophy must be understood in the context of the larger society, which is driven

by profit and opportunism. The schoolyard, or Sprawl, is a political hellscape where Baxter runs his

organisation known as The Spider. This organisation, Human tells us, 'evolved out of the primordial

pit of the Sprawl… a new life that survives not through strength but through agility.'[56] Amidst two

rival schoolyard entities, Baxter operates a pornography ring he considers a 'corporation', rather than

as one of the political gangs. Implicating the corporate landscape of South Africa in the novel's

broader social critique. Baxter runs his operation with little consideration for the outside consequences

of his work, exploiting a market called 'creature porn', where sales are driven by supernatural fantasies

and conspiracy theories that posit that 'the werewolves, zombies and other humanoid beasts getting it

on with humans are real'.[57] These monsters are, in fact, more than humans in costume.

The full extent of Human's critique is grotesquely laid bare when the protagonist enters the

Flesh Palace, a nightclub and base of operations for a corporate trafficking organisation that contains a

hybridisation of viscerally exploited monstrous forms. As he descends deeper into the dark underbelly

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[56] Ibid., p. 9.
[57] Ibid., p. 30.

of the Flesh Palace, Baxter is greeted by a 'phantasmagoric' dance floor, adorned with pulsating strobe lights.[58] Instead of human sex workers, naked zombies hang in cages from the ceiling. These grotesque figures sway back and forth, tearing strips of flesh from their own bodies and flinging them towards the human spectators below. Among the onlookers, a sweaty man in a dishevelled suit shouts, 'Take it all off'.[59] The zombie complies, peeling away muscle and tendons from her face until only bare bone remains. The man cheers and playfully slaps his friend on the back. The literalisation of the word, 'strip club', evokes a dark humour that exposes the corruption and commodification of the human body. Going beyond objectification in the form of sex and labour, here, the very matter of the body itself is transformed into a commodity. In a world driven by neoliberal profit, the exploitation of an individual down to their core becomes desirable. This unsettling depiction mirrors the alarming reality of the burgeoning black market organ trade in South Africa, where the exploitation of the body extends beyond labour to the commodification of actual body parts.

As Baxter is guided through the premise by zombie enforcers, he recognizes 'familiar faces' among the crowd and the political implications are drawn thick.[60] Along with soap stars and middle-age television personalities,

> Politicians are delicately sucking the marrow out of dismembered pinkie fingers, and several members of the national cricket team sip congealed blood from martini glasses. The Cape Town elite, it seems, are into zombie-chic gourmet cannibalism.[61]

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[58] Ibid., p. 155.
[59] Ibid., p. 155.
[60] Ibid., p. 160.
[61] Ibid., p. 160.

This portrayal of the Cape Town establishment partaking in the repulsive practice of 'zombie-chic gourmet cannibalism' serves as a scathing critique of the extravagant lifestyles adopted by South Africa's political class in the post-apartheid era. Unsure whether to laugh or shout, the reader is left, as Aldana Reyes writes on the gothic, 'unredeemed by laughter'.[62] The grotesque corporeality of excess spills onto the page, defamiliarizing the hyperbole of corporate consumption. The scene is ludicrously grisly, depicting, as Rita Barnard describes, 'the lascivious habits and obese physiques of the powerful - not to mention the copious shit that flows from their gluttonous bodies'.[63] Human thus presents a literalisation of metaphor. His configuration of these grotesque bodies allows for their uncanny greed to be exposed. Human's aesthetic highlights what Barnard refers to as 'South African excess', illustrating the inherent absurdity and repugnance of the elites' power and privilege.[64] In short, while Human's narrative ridicules this absurd excess of the political elite, its depiction exposes the chilling indifference and exploitative violence between the 'cannibal politerati' and their victims.[65] By juxtaposing the ludicrous with political critique, the novel forces the audience to engage with the unsettling reality of power dynamics in contemporary South Africa. Human's intention is not simply to entertain or shock, but to challenge readers to confront the chilling consequences of unchecked privilege and exploitation within society.

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[62] Reyes and Wester, 'Introduction', p. 4.

[63] Rita Barnard, 'On Laughter, the Grotesque, and the South African Transition: Zakes Mada's Ways of Dying', *NOVEL: A Forum on Fiction*, 37.3 (2004). 277–302 p. 290.

[64] Ibid., p. 291.

[65] Rebecca Duncan, 'South African Gothic', in *Twenty-First-Century Gothic: An Edinburgh Companion* ed. by Xavier Aldana Reyes and Maisha Wester (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022), pp. 233–48 (p. 239).

Human reveals how even unwilling ordinary South African citizens can become entangled in these exploitative systems. As Baxter makes his escape from the Flesh Palace, he comes across a group of women working on a production line. They shovel internal organs and dissect human corpses into packets, again alluding to the South African black market organ trade. He believes these women are trapped and attempts to free them, but the women reject his offer. They explain that their options are limited. They could either work at the Flesh Palace or a place like 'Chicken Ranch' where managers routinely exploit and grope them. The women express, 'we may work for zombies, but at least the pay is good and they leave us alone'.[66] This scenario reflects the real-life situations faced by many blue-collar workers who are compelled to work in exploitative conditions, even if their involvement perpetuates their own deep-seated economic inequalities.

Human's excessive depiction of grotesque and horrific beings mirrors the ways in which black South Africans were forced to endure torture and degradation that stretched past the 'vast space of human imagination', the distance between suffering and a person's capacity to comprehend it.[67] Human's narrative explains this:

> When you're faced with too many reality-bending things, your mind goes into a kind of stupor, a weird blank funk that can do nothing but stare dumbly while deep levels of your consciousness try to process the information and spit out something resembling sense.[68]

In a world where reality's brutality and horrors defy comprehension, the depiction of real-life events take on fantastical quality. The atrocities enacted under apartheid, and continually experienced in the

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[66] Human, *Apocalypse Now Now*, p. 169.

[67] Lawrence Langer, *Holocaust Testimonies: The Ruins of Memory* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1993), p. 19.

[68] Human, *Apocalypse Now Now*, p. 120.

post-apartheid present, are meant to dehumanise and monstrify black South Africans. These human brains, overwhelmed and unable to process the unfathomable, shut down. As seen in Human's work, this can result in the fragmentation of meaning, which plunges a person into a state broken from reality. This underscores Human's choice, along with other South African writers, to employ speculative fiction as a medium for political critique.

The narrative explores the complex interplay between Baxter's conflicting identity, reflecting the tension of his ancestry in his colonial and Afrikaner heritage. Readers find themselves immersed in the consciousness of a self-absorbed teenage Patrick Bateman. Human describes Baxter as:

> 'A brash asshole, the ultimate unreliable narrator, Holden Caulfield meets Gordon Gekko by way of Ninja from Die Antwoord. He deals in monster porn. He's manipulative. He thinks he's fucking awesome.'[69]

Baxter exudes manipulative qualities and an inflated sense of self-importance, evident in his shrine of 'superhero posters' that include Rasputin, Machiavelli, Gordon Gekko and Robert Greene.[70] Baxter manifests two distinct facets of his personality. He christens one side 'BizBax', embodying his darker, more business-minded traits, which he likens to the 'Donald Trump of the cerebellum'.[71] The other side, known as 'MetroBax', represents his softer, metrosexual qualities. Later on, these two aspects transform into 'CrowBax' and 'SienerBax', representing Baxter's dual heritage. The term 'Crow' alludes to the English colonists, while 'Siener' represents Baxter's Afrikaans ancestry, the term Siener

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[69] Charlie Human, 'How South African tabloids inspired my novel', *Boing Boing,* (2015), <https://boingboing.net/2015/05/04/how-south-african-tabloids-ins.html> [accessed 1 June 2023].

[70] Human, *Apocalypse Now Now*, p. 48.

[71] Ibid., p. 63.

being Afrikaans for seer or prophet. This characterization serves as a lens through which the reader can navigate Baxter's journey, observing the intricate fusion of personas that shape his motivations and actions. While, at the beginning, Baxter's ruthless, capitalist mindset sets him up to repeat the historical exploitation of his colonial forefathers, by the end of the novel Baxter has reconnected to his humanity. His love and value for others truly never too far away from the façade of 'BizBax'. Human explicitly associates Baxter's humanness with his developing relationships throughout the novel, which provides him a greater sense of community.

Human's construction of Baxter's fantasy world raises concerns about a suburban boy indulging in his wildest fantasies as an anti-hero among real and fictitious African folkloric figures, who Human uses with little cultural knowledge. The protagonist directly references this, as saving the world is in some way an attempt to 'assuage [his] middle-class guilt.'[72] By navigating the world as if he is in one of his video games or sci-fi novels, a South African suburbanite is allowed to experience this exciting world that is 'weird, fractured and full of monsters', even as he simultaneously disconnects from its indigenous contexts.[73] The backdrop of suburbia is significant to this narrative, as adventure through simulated hardships picks up on a key desire of white South Africans to mollify their middle-class guilt. Baxter's familial life functions around the archetypical demanding, overworked, and worrying mother. His father, a retrenched journalist, is the spectral presence of the husband who is always there but never present. Silent and emotionally stunned by his wife's arguments, when no one is around, Baxter's father 'probably submerges himself in the pool and screams into the blue

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[72] Ibid., p. 201.
[73] Ibid., p. 126.

nothingness'.[74] Baxter, caught in the façade of this suburban life, detests the artificiality that surrounds him. He finds solace in the honesty of the canal behind his house, which stands 'like a sick, swollen artery beneath the Botox of the suburbs.'[75] He observes the juxtaposition between this space, where drunks engage in 'sex in the long grass that border the canal' while 'bankers furtively [look] at PornTube' in the opulent houses above.[76] Through this, Human depicts the rotten core at the heart of suburbia, as the perfect facial exterior is peeled back.

Conscious of his significant appropriations of African culture, Human attempts to expose and critique his own work by introducing a case file from Baxter's psychiatrist. The report suggests that Baxter's fascination with African culture stems from a broader social phenomenon among white suburban youth. These individuals often perceive themselves as detached from any specific culture and carry a profound guilt for the atrocities of apartheid. This critique is extended further, 'much like young white Americans becoming superficially interested in Native American cultures, these young white South Africans resort to a heavily romanticised obsession with the mythology of the indigenous cultures of South Africa.'[77] Human employs African folklore liberally in the narrative to expose how people, like Baxter, who hail from white South African backgrounds, utilise indigenous cultures as a means to establish a sense of identity distinct from their colonial roots. Dr. Basson admonishes Baxter, who seems to express a belief that African culture has a 'deeper sense of heritage than his own globalised sense of self, which is largely drawn from pop culture, including television and computer

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[74] Ibid., p. 48.
[75] Ibid., p. 49.
[76] Ibid., p. 49.
[77] Ibid., p. 224.

games.'[78] This underscores the identity crisis faced by many young adults today in a world that lacks a sense of community and is saturated with mindless materialism that falsely promises self-fulfilment with each consumer purchase.

Although Human's statement is poignant, his use of African folklore is, I argue, unsuccessful. As Baxter makes his way to the aptly named Flesh Palace, in search of his girlfriend, he encounters a colossal spider goddess, reminiscent of the African folkloric figure of the Anansi.[79] As a character descended from West African mythology the Anansi, known for being a trickster, can appear in human form but is most recognized in its spider-like state. Human's narrative mixes this figure of the Anansi with zombies. One character notes, 'They're zombies, essentially... That is until the creepy little spider assholes wear the body out and have to latch onto a new host.'[80] By linking West African folklore, Western horror tradition, and South African narrative, Human highlights a hybridization of the gothic form that Justin Edwards and Fred Botting name 'globalgothic'.[81] This form of the gothic is not fixed in terms of geography, but emerges through, as Duncan argues, a 'dynamic process of transnational exchange with new forms being produced or old forms revitalised'.[82] And while Human revolutionarily engages with this hybridised 'globalgothic' to add significant insight into his characterisation of South Africa, his African figures are devoid of any connection to their indigenous history. This generates a text rife with Human's own appropriation of African indigenous cultures, the

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[78] Ibid., p. 225.
[79] Ibid., p. 155.
[80] Ibid., p. 155.
[81] Fred Botting and Justin D. Edwards, 'Theorising Globalgothic', in *Globalgothic* ed. by Glennis Byron (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2013), pp. 11-24 (p. 17).
[82] Duncan, *South African Gothic,* p. 148.

pilfered figures are used as if they are connected to Human's own culture and identity, furthering the exploitation Human himself wishes to expose.

Human's portrayal of the monster porn industry provides the main context for his blending of mythology and monster, as well as for embedded critiques of this appropriative move. Within the novel, a fictional article from *IndieFilm Magazine* provides a journalistic review of the monster porn industry depicted in the story. The article reads, 'with titles such as *Tokoloshe Money Shot*, *Anansi Zombie Chamber* and *Dwarven Ass Patrol*, Glamorex Films shot to the forefront of the eldritch porn revolution'.[83] This portrayal serves to highlight the exploitation of folkloric figures within the narrative while also hinting at Human's own use of these figures in a manner that verges on the pornographic, potentially fetishising his text. Glamorex Films, a multi-million-dollar business, 'trades on the aura of authenticity', drawing parallels to Human's own employment of these African figures.[84] The article argues that creature porn is just the newest step in the systematic dehumanisation of those working in the sex industry. It thus places Baxter's pornographic underworld in direct conversation with the fetishization of black South Africans as monstered others in Human's own present. The monster porn industry allows Human to explore, through a metaphorical lens, the exploitation and harm inflicted on vulnerable individuals in the sex industry as well as any South Africans who experience sexualisation due to their precarious position in society.

Human exposes the larger neoliberal structures within the novel when it is uncovered that Octogram, a massive corporate conglomerate with ties to British industry, is the operation behind the

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[83] Human, *Apocalypse Now Now*, p. 59.
[84] Ibid., p. 59.

Flesh Palace. This corporation has ties in 'mining, pharmaceuticals, weapons', recalling the corporate

post-colonial exploitation that has plagued South Africa.[85] The protagonist's psychiatrist, Dr. Basson,

is divulged to be an immortal figure running the corporation. His name 'Basson' carries allusions to

the atrocities of apartheid enacted by Wouter Basson, a South African cardiologist involved in Project

Coast, a chemical and biological warfare initiative. Known as 'Dr. Death', Wouter Basson earned his

nickname through his horrifying experiments on those most vulnerable under the apartheid state.

Although charged for his actions during the Truth and Reconciliation Commission trials, Basson was

acquitted in 2002 with no real consequences for the harm and suffering he caused. The association is

drawn even clearer, as the Dr. Basson in the novel was also involved within the National Party as their

'supernatural golden boy', working on horrific experiments that devised 'some real Frankenstein

shit'.[86] Desiring Baxter to become like him Dr. Basson states, 'with my help you can build the biggest

corporation the world has ever seen', he wants them to rule over the world through neoliberal

corporate exploitation.[87] Alluding to his influence, Dr. Basson states to Baxter, '"I created you… I

changed the course of history to create you. Think of that. I could have done anything and I created

you."'[88] This echoes the paternalistic mindset of the apartheid state officials, who justified their actions

and sought to shape a South Africa that would allow them power, prestige, and unlimited production.

Through his protagonist, Human imagines a way for white South Africans to divest themselves of

their roles in cycles of systemic oppression. Human critiques this, as Baxter rejects Dr. Basson and

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[85] Ibid., p. 125.
[86] Ibid., p. 285.
[87] Ibid., p. 285.
[88] Ibid., p. 296.

takes responsibility for the privileges the system has created from him, but refrains from using this power to further systematic exploitation.

Human's allegory through *Apocalypse Now Now* comes to a head as Baxter has to make the decision to either further the exploitation of his colonial and apartheid ancestry or choose to save the world around him and his humanity. The newfound relationships developed throughout the novel ultimately empower him to choose his humanity over his exploitative dark side, breaking him from his apartheid past. He rejects Dr. Basson, and through this, the post-apartheid state and the corporations behind it. Human critiques these entities for getting ahead by being 'ugly, brutal and uncaring'.[89] Human reveals that if everyone continues to follow the neoliberal turn of South Africa, which prioritises profits over people, then society could be facing apocalypse, a complete and utter collapse. After finally finding his humanity, saving the world, and, important to the gothic narrative, rescuing his damsel in distress, Baxter and his girlfriend reflect on their journey. Baxter comments that he did not feel anything for a long time and, compares this to a zombie-like existence. His girlfriend responds, "'You're not a zombie, Bax... You never were.'"[90] This underlines how people are not born devoid of humanity, but rather lose access to it by committing actions that dehumanise others. Baxter always had the power to be human, he just had to open himself up to his humanity by finding it within others.

My Humanity is Bound in Yours:

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[89] Ibid., p. 286.
[90] Ibid., p. 304.

As seen in *Apocalypse Now Now* and *Deadlands*, the zombie and zombie aesthetic serve as a means of critiquing the socio-economic disparities disproportionally experienced by black South Africans due to political corruption and corporate exploitation in the post-apartheid era. The zombie critique can then extend itself to expressions of zombie-ness as seen in Masande Ntshanga's novel *The Reactive* (2014). Ntshanga utilises zombie-ness in his novel as he depicts the lives of three young friends grappling with the deathly impact of HIV/AIDS in post-apartheid Cape Town. The protagonist, Nathi, is a troubled and aimless young man who finds solace in drugs and petty crime. He is haunted by the guilt of his brother's death, an event in which he believes he played a role. The book opens; 'ten years ago, I helped a handful of men take my little brother's life. I wasn't there when it happened, but I told Luthando where to find them'.[91] Nathi, along with his friends Ruan and Cecelia, navigate a world burdened by the weight of the past and tormented by the spectre of illness.

The narrative of *The Reactive* presents a haunting spectre akin to the zombie paradigm through Nathi's HIV affliction, which he is experiencing at the height of South Africa's AIDS epidemic. This presents the character with a sense of being trapped within a liminal space, one where he exists neither fully alive nor completely dead. The temporality in the novel is summarised by Sarah Lincoln:

> [There is] the ethical potential of what we might call "precarious time"—an affective-temporal structure that usefully aligns the literature of South Africa's transition with other efforts to come to terms with terminal being, such as life and love in the shadow of HIV/AIDS.[92]

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[91] Ntshanga, *The Reactive*, p. 7.
[92] Sarah Lincoln, 'Precarious Time and the Aesthetics of Community', in *South African Writing in Transition* ed. by Rita Barnard and Andrew van der Vlies (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019) pp. 99–122.

Thus, the post-apartheid transition, along with Nathi's HIV diagnoses, creates this sense of 'precarious time' between life and death. The characters' profound intrigue with mortality manifests in their engagement with a game known as Last Life, which serves as a canvas for envisioning their actions and aspirations during their final year of existence. Through all of this, Ntshanga creates a post-apocalyptic ambiance that permeates what would otherwise be considered to be an unremarkable South African reality.

Herne exposed the logic of haunting of the apartheid state, Human critiqued the exploitative conditions lying beneath the surface of this new state, and Ntshanga now explores how South Africa 'lost the plot' between the two. This terminology comes from Leon de Kock, who examines how South African literature criticises the ANC for metaphorically losing the plot of their liberatory promises in the transition from the apartheid state. de Kock states:

> Current South African writing is characterised by the rise of both genre fiction and creative nonfiction as ways of responding to widely perceived sickness in the body politic, where the plot, metaphorically speaking, is thought to have been lost, and there is a premium on uncovering actual conditions.[93]

Ntshanga's novel picks up here, working to uncover the conditions created in the wake of the 'sickness in the body politic', through the zombie aesthetic in his novel. This text allegorically depicts the rotting body of power onto the figure of Nathi, who is made vulnerable by the insufficient policies of the post-apartheid state. The zombie can then be seen as the post-apartheid state, as it shuffles through

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[93] Leon de Kock, *Losing the Plot: Crime, Reality and Fiction Writing in Postapartheid Writing* (Johannesburg: Wits University Press, 2016) p. 9.

apocalyptic crises, like the AIDS/HIV epidemic, all the while promises of liberation are slowly rotting off.

Ntshanga's endeavours to revive the optimism of the rainbow nation by re-exposing the plot of African humanism, or *ubuntu*. Closely associated with the beginning of the post-apartheid state and figures like Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu and Nelson Mandela, *ubuntu* highlights the mutual dependency of humanity. James Ogude states, 'ubuntu is the idea that an individual's humanity is fostered in a network of existing human relationships', emerging as a solution to the division and lost humanity wrought by the apartheid state.[94] In opposition to post-humanism, *ubuntu* allows discovery of other ways of being, to find knowledge and humanity outside of Western philosophy. By interacting with the healing power of *ubuntu* ideology, Ntshanga uses the zombie figure in *The Reactive* to serve as a potent tool to expose new paths of humanity through community.

Against this backdrop, Ntshanga presents the zombified Nathi, Ruan, and Cecelia, who coexist within Cecelia's apartment, a space pervaded by an eerie liminality, evoking the atmosphere of an 'old tomb'.[95]

> We wake up some time before noon and take two Ibuprofens each. Then we go back to sleep, wake up an hour later, and take another two from the 800-milligram pack. Then Cissie turns on the stove to cook up a batch of glue, and the three of us wander around mutely after that, digging the sleep out of our eyes and caroming off each other's limbs. We drift through whatever passes for early afternoon here at Cissie's place.[96]

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[94] Ntshanga, *The Reactive*, p. 13.
[95] Rob Gaylard, ''Welcome to the World of Our Humanity'': (African) Humanism, Ubuntu and Black South African Writing', *Journal of Literary Studies*, 20.3 (2004): 265–82 (p. 1).
[96] Ntshanga, *The Reactive*, p. 11.

Time trickles languidly throughout the novel, seen here as the three friends 'drift' through life, passing in and out of sleep and their zombie-like existence. The spectre of death looms over the group, Cissie remarks on Nathi's frequent glances at the clock as others recount their problems. Nathi can only respond, 'I suppose I'm still working on it', his limited time remains on the forefront.[97] His biological clock is ticking, but he never feels the urgency to hasten. It is revealed that Lindanathi's name means 'wait with us', although what or who he was supposed to be waiting for, '[he] was never told'.[98] Nathi's sense of waiting acts as allegory for the broader nation's own wait. Barnard connects these ideas, drawing on the pathology of South Africa's 'almost-times', the liberatory state South Africa almost was, and the suspension between when it will.[99]

As such, the protagonist is doubly entailed to the liminal space between life and death, between oppression and liberation, between human and zombie. As Duncan notes, Nathi and his friends 'subliminally recalls Hollywood scenes of the shambling undead', this gestures towards a peculiarly zombified form of subjectivity.[100] This connection is rendered more palpable when Nathi, high on 'Industrial', appears in the zombie's signature stance. Nathi's consciousness is reduced to a series of mechanical impulses, 'my mind instructs me to glide', he tells, 'so I push my arms out... balancing with my hands and trying not to slip.'[101]

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[97] Ibid., p. 14.

[98] Ntshanga, *The Reactive*, p. 7.

[99] Rita Barnard, 'Introduction', in *South African Writing in Transition* ed. by Rita Barnard and Andrew van der Vlies (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2019) pp. 1–32.

[100] Duncan, 'De/Zombification', p. 167

[101] Ntshanga, *The Reactive*, p. 23.

Although not appearing as the traditional zombified undead labourer, Nathi is in fact connected to these inescapable economies of exploitation in South Africa in selling his ARV medication on the black market. Usually, Nathi only sells to individuals who are also suffering from HIV, until a mysterious masked buyer presents a large and unexpected purchase of the rest of Nathi's ARVs. Through this figure, Ntshanga presents a quasi-magical projection of the mysterious flow of foreign capital within the post-apartheid neoliberal system. This wealthy client brings the promise of a decent life to Nathi and his friends with his large payments, but it is quickly decided that the group should not spend the money, in case it came with unknown expectations. Immediately finding that they are in over their head, when the group meets face-to-face with the 'ugly man', it turns out that beneath the tin mask he wears habitually he has no face at all, only 'skinless meat, gleaming in full view'.[102] With the power to bestow excessive wealth at will and cloaked behind his anonymity, the ugly man's presence produces a catachrestic symbol for the inscrutable operation of the post-apartheid economy, making visible the existing abundance of foreign wealth amid resilient poverty in a neoliberalising South Africa. The man is later revealed to be Ambroise Paré; his spectre looms large in later sections of the novel. The figure of Paré serves as a metaphor for the corporate promises of liberation, which ultimately prove to facilitate only a different kind of enslavement.

Halfway through the novel it is revealed that Nathi's HIV status is self-inflicted: he purposely contracted the disease in a university virology lab where he worked as an attempt to manage his grief over the loss of his brother. Existing so explicitly and deliberately in the field of his own mortality,

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[102] Ibid., p. 65.

Nathi exemplifies his living death. Ntshanga, drawing on humanities' own passive suicide through the global ecological crisis, parallels Nathi's demise with the ecological extractivism in the novel. The Earth serves as the grave from which humanity rises: '[it] was gutted open with so many new graves for paupers, that when the clouds parted, they revealed a view… that looked like a giant honeycomb'.[103] Duncan contends that this depiction exposes the unequal distribution of both social and ecological vulnerability, thereby intensifying not only the protagonist's impending demise but also the collective demise of all characters under the 'looming shadow of biospheric collapse', further aligning *The Reactive* with the apocalyptic essence characteristic of zombie narratives.[104]

Desperate to relieve himself from this looming disaster, Nathi takes the step of final destruction, making the decision to undergo the initiation ceremony that led to his brother's demise. It is important that the memory of Luthando, Nathi's brother, is linked overtly to the psychic effects of apartheid race politics.[105] Nathi remembers Luthando angrily telling him that 'everything… about [Nathi] was white'.[106] This resonates with another moment when the protagonist remembers how his estrangement from Xhosa culture is heightened by attending a 'Model C'.[107] A connection to post-apartheid Model C schools, where Nathi is educated, that were formerly reserved for white pupils and have been criticised by their perpetuation of apartheid's cultural politics. As seen within these moments of reflection, Nathi is disconnected from his community. His peers see him as relating closer

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[103] Ibid., p. 99.
[104] Duncan, 'De/Zombification', p. 166.
[105] Duncan, 'De/Zombification', p. 168.
[106] Ntshanga, *The Reactive*, p. 69.
[107] Ibid., p. 106.

to white South Africans, a betrayal to his black community. When Nathi leaves Cape Town for his home township Du Noon to undergo the initiation, Ronit Frenkel notes, 'Ntshanga offers traditional Southern African rituals and belief systems as a recourse'.[108] This initiation catalyses 'a sort of transformative healing process for Nathi', specifically in the shift in the protagonist's sense of self and his relation to the world.[109]

The poverty experienced in townships is depicted in Nathi's arrival back to his hometown, Du Noon. The construction of 'shipping container' houses are a 'temporary measure' that became permanent, as the township can only hope the next election will bring some relief in the poverty which is 'cut into sections and prepared for export'.[110] When Nathi enters the township, the vocabulary of the novel shifts. His uncle is 'sweaty and lively', he speaks with 'warmth', and Nathi cannot help but to smile in response to his embrace.[111] The township 'comes to life' and Nathi spends time 'listening to what Du Noon might have to say to me'.[112] Du Noon is not a utopian life, water is scarce, Nath's uncle holds the air of someone who's 'walking into places that surprised him with bloodshed', and 'no one has any interest in playing game[s]' in Du Noon any more.[113] The people of Du Noon are not quite 'living', as Nathi's uncle states, but they are not prisoners.[114] These depictions show what life in

[108] Ronit Frenkel, 'Post-Liberation Temporalities, Utopian Afterlives and Three South African Novels by Masande Ntshanga, Mohale Mashigo and Niq Mhlongo', *English Studies in Africa*, 62 (2019), 261–85 (p. 76).
[109] Ibid., p. 77.
[110] Reactive p. 108
[111] Ntshanga, *The Reactive*, p. 108.
[112] Ibid., p. 109.
[113] Ibid., p. 110.
[114] Ibid., p. 111.

townships are like, the extreme poverty that affects millions of black South Africans and how, even in the face of these dehumanising conditions, black South Africans are continually fighting to be recognised as human and find access to their humanity. In response to experiencing these efforts, after Nathi participates in the initiation ceremony, he moves to Du Noon. While walking back from work, he witnesses a man shouting about a figure without a face, stating 'we'll no longer be slaves, when the faceless man comes'.[115] Nathi's interaction with the mysterious Ambroise Paré comes to mind, but he rejects the ominous promises of the shouting man, as 'there was no need to be fearful of everything we didn't know'.[116] In this, Ntshanga rejects the mysterious and empty promises of liberation from the neoliberalisation of South Africa. Nathi is taken in by his community who, more than these shadowy corporate figures, provides him his sense of humanity.

Nathi's survival of the Xhosa initiation ceremony and his subsequent acceptance into his community marks his metaphorical rebirth after symbolic death. It is through this that Nathi finally reawakens to life. The revelation of what he had been waiting for becomes clear — a renewed sense of existence, both physically and mentally, through human connection after living with the profound grief caused by his brother's passing. Nathi finds hope, a sense of humanity, 'it's at times like these, with the evening tinted the bright colour of a new coal fire, that things seem possible, even for us down here'.[117] This realisation gains further substantiation when Nathi receives news that the virus has become dormant in his body, he was 'still reactive, just slow to develop the syndrome'.[118] Nathi's

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[115] Ibid., p. 114.
[116] Ibid., p. 116.
[117] Ibid., p. 113.
[118] Ibid., p. 118.

resurrection from his death-like state is cemented when he reads about the government's decision to

provide free ARV treatment to the nation's citizens, after a five-year struggle from the South African

people. Nathi's rebirth from his zombie-like state and his death sentence is doubly entailed, one from

the dormant HIV diagnoses and the other from surviving his quasi-death through the initiation

ceremony that took his brother's life.

Nathi stops frequently glancing at the time, allowing his biological clock to drop off into the

background. This can be seen in a moment where Nathi meets a woman named Esona, she asks him

for the time. Nathi realises he's left his watch in Cape Town, he no longer is 'waiting' or watching the

clock tick down in expectation for his impending death.[119] Nathi begins a relationship with Esona and

Lara Buxbaum links the intimacy of the final sex scene, where their two bodies become one, to the

contrast between Nathi's former numbness while also expressing a sense of subjective 'dissolution'.[120]

Nathi experiences orgasm as a 'melt[ing]' of the body of his partner; his connection to his own

humanity develops as he connects to the human within others.[121] Nathi's establishment of personal

and community-based relationships functions to distance the impending end of his life, and show how

alternate versions of humanity through ideology like *ubuntu* can emerge.

Once again, Ntshanga evokes the zombie aesthetic to the apocalyptic nature of the AIDS/HIV

struggle, to imagine, like Herne and Human, what is left after destruction:

> I wondered if we'd been selected in particular for this trial. Perhaps HIV was a purge, I
> imagined, a brutal transition on the other side of which might lie a newer, stronger human

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[119] Ibid., p. 117.

[120] Lara Buxbaum, 'Risking Intimacy in Contemporary South African Fiction', *Textual Practice*, 31 (2017), 523–36 (526).

[121] Ntshanga, *The Reactive*, p. 119.

species, one resistant to a thousand more ailments and vital enough to survive all the trials that were still germinating in the future. It was just an idea, but I thought that when the time came, those who knew might be looked upon to lead.[122]

All at once, Ntshanga comes to terms with the suffering black South Africans have faced. The hundreds of years of oppression at the hands of English colonists, the horrific torture and dehumanisation faced during apartheid, and the new abuses under economic exploitation that led to events like the horrendous mismanagement of the HIV/AIDs crisis. As Ntshanga writes, despite all of this suffering, black South African will continue to sow the seeds of hope for their liberation, in the unrelenting fight for their humanity.

The novel ends with Nathi recognizing his humanity and connecting to his community around him, exhibiting the concept of African humanism, *ubuntu*, within the text. The pronouns used in the last paragraph reflect this, as Nathi becomes a part of an 'us'. He reflects on his name, 'wait with us', and he makes a final promise to the memory of his brother to live for both of them, to 'react for us'.[123] A quote by Desmond Tutu aptly applies, he states: 'My humanity is bound up in yours, for we can only be human together.' That is what *The Reactive* and the zombie in South Africa reveals, and why it is being used to reckon with the loss of humanity felt by South Africans today. Through Ntshanga's skilful character development, he offers a profound examination of the human condition, challenging readers to confront their own biases, interrogate their connections to structures of power, and re-evaluate beliefs in the enduring power of the human connection.

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[122] Ibid., p. 116.
[123] Ibid., p. 119.

Ntshanga's narrative adeptly exposes the material degradation created during apartheid and facilitated by the neoliberal turn of South Africa by employing the zombie aesthetic. His work serves to reflect the lived experience of over 300,000 individuals who lost their lives due to the inadequate response of the South African government during the AIDS/HIV crisis.[124] Moreover, it sheds light on the plight of countless others who suffered as a result of the false information and the irresponsibility exhibited by South African politicians, and the new life that many were able to recover after the delayed state roll-out of Anti-Retroviral (ARV). Ntshanga presents the government's complete disregard for the humanity of those who died, by evoking the haunting and corporeal nature of the zombie. Through his engagement with Xhosa cosmology and African occult narratives, Ntshanga opens up avenues for decolonial involvement, offering an alternative to the continuance of a zombified South African public.

Through an examination of zombies and zombieness in these texts, *Deadlands* by Lily Herne, *Apocalypse Now Now* by Charlie Human, and *The Reaction* by Masande Ntshanga, this essay argues that the zombie is a tool to comprehend the neoliberal turn of South Africa and the commodification of 'everything'.[125] The humanity of black South Africans has systematically been denied, from the imperial conquest of the world by Western powers in early modernity, to the apartheid state created by the white minority. Thus, the zombie in post-apartheid South African Gothic lays bare the ways in which South African political and commercial entities have produced economies of extractivism,

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[124] Pride Chigedere et al., 'Estimating the Lost Benefits of Antiretroviral Drug Use in South Africa', JAIDS Journal of Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndromes, 49 (2008), pp. 410–15.
[125] Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, p. 80.

which profit off of the absolute exploitation of the body. In the aftermath of the apartheid state, the inadequacy of language created deafening silence. South Africans are now working towards confronting the haunting legacy of the apartheid state, engaging with recognition over repression. Due to this, the figure of the zombie is increasingly used within South African literature to expose and critique the looming spectre of apartheid, which is sustained within post-apartheid's neoliberal policies. The zombie in South African Gothic allows South Africans to establish their own authority over the conditions that dehumanised them, uncovering their present conditions in order to hope for better.

The zombie is rising within global literary works. The lens provided in this dissertation allows the figure to be uncovered as a powerful tool to critique and expose the world around it. The zombie is fundamentally connected to the globalising world, it exposes international systems deeply-rooted in structures of inequitable capital accumulation. Used in different genres, contexts, and times, the zombie can flexibly render the global by unveiling the link with the local. Serving as a microcosm for the world at large, the broader picture can appear to uncover the global battle for humanity that unfolds as many countries are face the same dehumanising conditions.

Through its exploration of the zombie in post-apartheid South African Gothic, this dissertation shows how the zombie is used as a tool to project the rising disillusionment in the governing post-apartheid social-democratic political party, the ANC, due to its failures to manifest the liberatory promises of the Freedom Charter and maintain the culture of national exceptionalism held

by the 'rainbow nation' under President Nelson Mandela.[126] The liberation from the apartheid state

was an incredible moment of freedom for the people of South Africa. Its aftermath has been corrupted

by its neoliberal turn, which has allowed economies of extraction to proliferate in post-apartheid

South Africa. The figure of the zombie is used in South African Gothic to uncover the

dehumanisation endured under this system while presenting new ways of finding humanity.

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[126] Warnes, *Writing, Politics and Change*, p. 8.

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