

Racial Images Using the Biohazard Metaphor in US Media

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“This is Islamism, it is a vicious cancer inside the body of 1.7 billion people on this planet and it has to be excised.” – Mike Flynn, ret. Lieutenant General and former National Security Advisor to President Donald Trump (Kaczynski, 2016)

“Islam is a disease; we need to vaccinate ourselves against that.” – Pauline Hanson, Australian Senator (Remeikis, 2017)

Research Problem

Of the literature on race in US politics, very little of it deals with the Middle-Eastern community. One obvious explanation is that the Census, and many other large US surveys, operationalize Middle-Easterners as part of (or a subcategory of) the “white” or “Caucasian” category. This could also be in part because it is a relatively small segment of the population compared to other more often-analyzed racial minorities. A third possible explanation is that the US did not start welcoming immigrants from that region in large numbers until after quotas were loosened following the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, so it is a relatively new immigrant community. Regardless of the reason, this lack of attention leaves lots of room for analysis from future scholarship.

Much of the literature that does exist on the US Middle-Eastern community is limited to considering immigrant incorporation, or sometimes voter turnout. Furthermore, usually they are analyzed as American Muslims, rather than as Middle-Eastern Americans. While it is worthwhile to consider this religious identity component, it may lose any nuance of issues specifically related to racial identity. Especially in terms of understanding discrimination in the US, race is just as important a factor to analyze as religion, if not more so. For example, a TSA agent might

be likely to give a Sikh person additional screening following 9/11, even though they do not share the same religion with any of the perpetrators of that crime.

Racial images are often used to send political cues. From the infamous Willie Horton ad of 1988, through similar ads and discourse as recent as the last presidential election, using dog-whistles to portray a racial minority as threatening can have a significant effect on priming voters. They can even be used to frame issues that might not otherwise be associated primarily with race, such as the “welfare queen” discourse employed by the Reagan administration. Similarly, we can increasingly see racial cues by politicians used to refer to Muslims/Middle-Easterners as a biohazard. I will argue later on that this ties in to a larger history of Western countries presenting non-Western minorities considered to be undesirable as some type of biohazard. The quotes featured earlier are great examples of how politicians can be responsive to, and even incorporate these types of cues in order to evoke a specific racial image that is used to promote fear. Taking Mike Flynn’s comment as an example, while his use of the term “Islamism” implies he is only talking about extremists rather than the religion itself, his citing of 1.7 billion being infected implies he is referring to the entire global population of Muslims. In particular, the type of fear instilled by this image creates solutions built on containing and quarantining the undesirable populations. One can easily conceive of building a physical barrier as a potential solution to this type of problem presented by this racial image. Dahlia Schweitzer (2018) claims these cues are deliberately constructed by political and media elites to use this manufactured fear to reinforce their positions of power, as well as to enrich themselves.

Comments such as this from political figures are also reflected in news media and other forms of political discourse. A popular Right-Wing blog site called “Creeping Sharia” is designed to offer its consumers information on what it sees as the impending threat to Western

Civilization posed by the relatively small number of Muslims living in the Western world and their widely-held long-term intent to replace their existing secular or Christian states with Islamic law (Creeping Sharia, 2019). This site offers a local tracking feature where you can track threats posed by *Sharia* in your local country/state. Headlines from CA include: “Terror-linked CAIR leaders head to Mexican border Dec 10 to support Muslims, illegals rushing US border” and “Radical Muslim Group Operates Commune in Dunlap, California”. The use of the term “creeping” implies that even a small number of Muslim immigrants slowly gaining more influence in politics and society represents an existential threat to their preexisting way of life. While this site doesn’t always specifically engage with the biohazard metaphor, the language used in the literature on their site evokes a similar type of threat. Fox commentator Jeanine Pirro was recently fired from her show after making comments that Representative Ilhan Omar’s foreign policy was guided more by a loyalty to *Sharia* than to the US Constitution (Touchberry, 2019). This notion that one representative in a chamber of 435 is enacting a covert operation to trick Democrats into replacing the Constitution with *Sharia*, and the conclusion that this is an impending danger, is similar to discourse seen on the types of right-wing blogs mentioned above.

A large portion of the US does not actively engage in politics and does not consume news media or otherwise stay informed on political news. As such, even a subtle political cue from widely consumed entertainment media can have a significant impact on priming and/or framing their politics. Bill Clinton’s appearance playing saxophone on the Arsenio Hall show is often cited to have played a role in the outcome of the 1992 election, especially in terms of earning him some credibility from black voters. While several movies have been made since President Bush’s declared “War on Terror” where the villains are evil Middle-Eastern terrorists, usually depicted as single-mindedly hellbent on conquering and/or destroying the world, these films are

not usually huge hits at the box office, and one can imagine that their relatively small audience is already somewhat politically engaged. Therefore, to reach a wider audience with these cues one might be inclined to insert them into entertainment media in addition to more direct cues in news media or more serious films such as documentaries. Scholarship has previously documented the capacity of popular media, in particular film and prime time television, to influence public opinion through priming and framing different racial contexts and situations (Mastro & Greenberg, 2000). Hancock (2011) shows how this can be done to foster positive images, using the example of Dora the Explorer. Conversely, I will present some evidence to show that this can also be used to promote negative images of minorities (both explicitly and implicitly). Certainly Hollywood has a long and well-documented history of sexist and racist tropes being used to reshape and reinforce stereotypes that have had political, social, and economic implications. From the passive girlfriend who is written to be a trophy earned through the journey of the male hero, to the black sidekick who exists only to enhance and reaffirm the white hero's mission, I would argue that the current explicit and implicit portrayals of Middle-Easterners/Muslims in the US media continue this tradition.

Research Question

My core research question is to what extent Hollywood elites are intentionally creating cues to conjure malignant images of Middle-Eastern Americans. I am interested in probing beyond the explicit cues that I have mentioned above because they are fewer in number, and they require less analysis to unpack, although I acknowledge that there is a trend there as well. In particular, I would like to examine the extent to which the dramatic rise in production of zombie-related media (especially in film and television) can be read as an implicit metaphor whereby zombies are meant to represent a supposed onslaught of Middle-Eastern terrorists. I

think this creates a convenient frame for this type of racial image, because there is very little morality involved in killing zombies. They are mindless, heartless killing machines that only desire converting (or infecting) the living until everyone becomes a zombie. Even if this connection isn't actively pursued by all writers/directors/etc. of zombie media, I will bring in some evidence that suggests that these cues are being deliberately constructed and assembled by Hollywood elites, and that this pattern began in 2001 (following 9/11), and picked up sharply in 2003 (following the invasion of Iraq). Primarily, I will focus on the growth of zombie films produced by the 6 major movie studios and show how this growth follows the pattern described above. I will also consider an in-depth case study of the cable television program *The Walking Dead*, which averages about 10 million more viewers per episode than Sean Hannity, the most-watched tv news program (Hollywood Reporter). The source material for the show, a comic book series, was first published in October of 2003, about 6 months after the invasion of Iraq. I think a critical study of this material will offer a lot of insights into the mechanisms behind how these cues are shaped and reinforced, and the impact that could potentially have on the political landscape in the US.

This can be connected to a long history of dominant social groups attempting to portray undesirable minority groups as some type of biohazard or contagion. The infamous Nazi propaganda film *The Eternal Jew* makes frequent comparisons between the rats that allegedly migrated from Asia to Europe bringing the bubonic plague in the middle ages with Jewish European populations that similarly migrated from Asia, which the filmmaker obviously insinuated brought similar ills with them (King, 2004). Frequent sharp camera cuts are used to juxtapose infected rat hives with Jewish ghettos around Europe. This also has a history in the US, where "Yellow Peril" was similarly used to conjure fear and mistrust towards East Asian

immigrants, along the basis that they posed some sort of biological threat to society (Marchetti, 1994).

Furthermore, the history of zombies in US media already has an association with racialized imagery. The term itself was introduced as a misappropriation of a religious aspect of Haitian Voodoo referring to a corpse that has been reanimated through the intervention of spirits. 20th century zombie media often portrays some variation of a scene where a virtuous white woman is captured by savage black men who attempt to perform a barbaric and hyper-violent ritual sacrifice. These images were used, either explicitly or implicitly, to conjure fear of marginalized groups, and perpetuate negative stereotypes. Some examples are shown below:



(Gerber, Buscema, & Palmer, 1973)

This also ties into the issue of intersectionality. In virtually all zombie media, the main protagonist is a white male. Even in more modern productions with large ensemble casts that might appear diverse, the role of the main hero usually falls to a white male. If we view this

through the lens of Middle-Easterners as zombies, the implication is that the responsibility falls to white men to take the lead in defending their loved ones from this malicious bio-threat. There is a stark difference in how masculinity and femininity are shown in zombie media, and that has evolved somewhat over time.

This question can also tie into rich literature existing on immigrant incorporation. Discriminatory images can have significant implications on how immigrant communities are politically incorporated (or not), especially according to the models of incorporation that allowed for race as a significant analytical factor in evaluating outcomes. A negative racial image of a new immigrant community, especially one that encourages isolating and quarantining that community as a solution, will have implications for how open the dominant social group is to incorporate them. It may also impact how that community constructs their own identity or create additional obstacles for their political incorporation.

Theoretical Background

An important touchstone for understanding this pattern in media is the literature on racial formation. Omi and Winant (2014) argue that race is socially constructed, and can't be sufficiently captured by ethnicity, class, or nationality. They also emphasize the point that the idea of race itself and how/why racial groups are constructed is dynamic and shifts over time. This is essential to my hypothesis because a key motivating factor for someone promoting negative images of Middle-Easterners is that they can impact and influence the way people are constructing and interpreting that racial category. Kandaswamy (2012) argues that this conception needs to be expanded to include considerations of gender as well. She maintains that race-gendering-institutions are crucial to be able to understand how they function. She points to an intersectional approach as the best method under which to approach this issue. As can be seen

later in the case study, an intersectional lens provides a more precise framework for analyzing the construction of these racial images.

Hochschild and Mollenkopf (2009), present a model of immigrant incorporation with four potential barriers to incorporation, a failure to surpass any of which can result in non-incorporation. In particular, this application is relevant to the feedback component of their model, where polity can impact immigrants, and affect their degree of political incorporation. However, one glaring issue with this model is that it does not include race as an analytical factor. In the US context especially, it is especially important to understand how discrimination against certain racial minorities might affect how immigrants from that community are incorporated (or not). Schmidt et al (2010), begin addressing this by analyzing the impact of “new immigration” (essentially meaning a dramatic increase in the proportion of non-European immigrants) on how immigrants are incorporated into the US political sphere. They also present different racial hierarchies and how those paradigms can shape policy in different ways. Additionally, they explore how in some ways racial segregation is stubbornly persistent in the US, in spite of decades of judicial, legislative, and executive precedent that have established it as inequitable and detrimental to minority communities.

A critical examination of this issue should involve a consideration for intersectionality between racial and gender issues, and how those frames both play a role together in creating this image. While Winter (2009) argues that most people receive intersectional issues through either a gender *or* a racial frame, I argue that those who are constructing these cues do so fully aware of how these frames work together. As mentioned earlier, many of the earliest images of zombies were meant to spread fear by conjuring racist images of how uncivilized black men are trying to harm white women with their primitive religious rituals. These images are best understood

through an intersectional frame that can consider how gender and race are used together to create fear for the target audience. I will later present evidence to show how this trend carries on in less overt forms in more current iterations of zombie media. Throughout the history of zombie portrayals in the US, the responsibility has fallen on white men to protect their female counterparts from this malicious threat. Glenn (2015) posits that the unique history of settler colonialism is essential for understanding intersectionality in the US. A lot of zombie media is heavily influenced by the Western genre, which presents a highly romanticized version of the history of US settler colonialism from the perspective of a white male protagonist.

Another relevant theoretical consideration is Kim's (1999) theory of racial triangulation. Kim discusses an expansion to the understanding and analysis of racial politics in the US. She argues that much of the literature has focused on a black-white paradigm, and that this duality disregards a lot of the nuances of discrimination and ignores the fact that different minorities might face different types of discrimination. She further discusses how there is a tendency in the US to "triangulate" the position of one group against another. For example, there is a concerted effort to keep whites on the top of the social order, with blacks at the bottom, therefore other minority groups, such as Asian-Americans, are triangulated in between them. Their position between whites and blacks on the social hierarchy, combined with their perception as being more "foreign" than blacks in the US, results in a triangular shape when these three communities are plotted on a coordinate plane with axes representing social status and foreignness. This can be considered largely similar to the experience of Middle-Eastern Americans, many of whom are also Asian or Afro-Asiatic. Since many immigrants from this community come on student visas, or to practice medicine and other skilled labor, Middle-Eastern Americans are often able to achieve a higher socioeconomic status than other minority groups, while simultaneously being

constructed as more foreign. The zombie metaphor can be seen as an attempt to actively construct Middle-Easterners as more foreign.

Whether or not Middle-Easterners in the US are being discriminated on the basis of their religion or their race is often difficult to disentangle because the tradition of negative Western images is to conflate the two. This is problematic on multiple levels, first of which being that what is typically referred to as the “Middle-East” is a vast geographic expanse covering multiple continents and including many ethnic and racial identities, languages, religions, and other diverse cultural characteristics. Furthermore, this ignores the facts that many Middle-Easterners are not Muslim, and many Muslims live outside of the Middle-East. Dubbing this trend *Orientalism* in his eponymous book, Edward Said (1979) showed that this pattern can be seen as far back as the middle ages in many Western societies across virtually all forms of art and media, as well as in the social sciences and political discourse. However, even if this racial category is being socially constructed (as described by Omi & Winant) in an inaccurate, imprecise manner, this constructed image can still have very real consequences. Since Middle-Eastern immigrants are a small population within the US and are largely concentrated in coastal urban centers and in a few parts of the Midwest, most Americans do not have any social contact. Because of this, negative images and stereotypes can be even more influential and detrimental (Said, 2008).

Methods

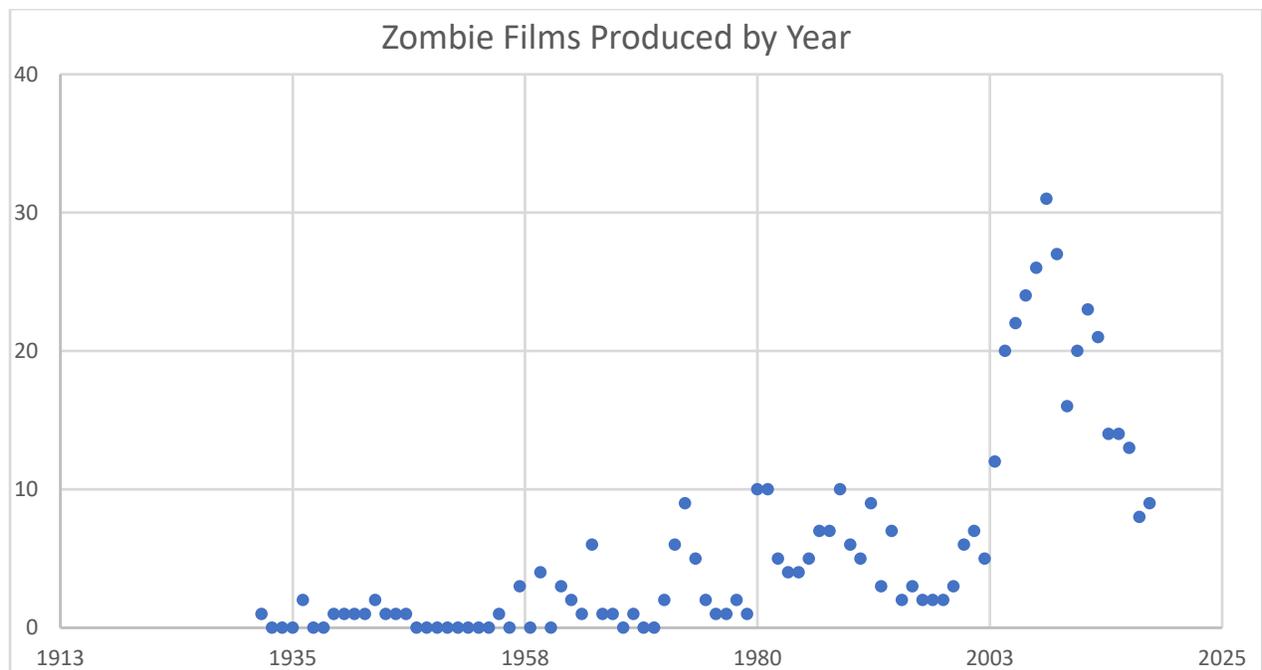
To present evidence of this pattern in recent US media, I will bring in both quantitative and qualitative data to support my hypothesis. First, to present an overall trend of zombie films’ change in saliency over time I present some numerical data. Using the international movie database (IMDB) I have assembled what I believe to be a fairly comprehensive list of all zombie films through 2018, starting in 1932 with what is considered to be the first of the genre. My

original intention was also to code this data based on the gender and race of the directors, but there was not enough variation with either to be useful for any type of quantitative analysis. I use this data to present the pattern before and after 9/11 and argue that this event triggered a sharp uptick in saliency of zombie films. I will also present some data using Google Books' Ingram book database to show similar patterns in published print media, as well as explore the change in saliency of other topics related to my hypothesis which took place concurrently. I will also use this same database to show how other issues corresponding to my hypothesis rose in saliency at the same time.

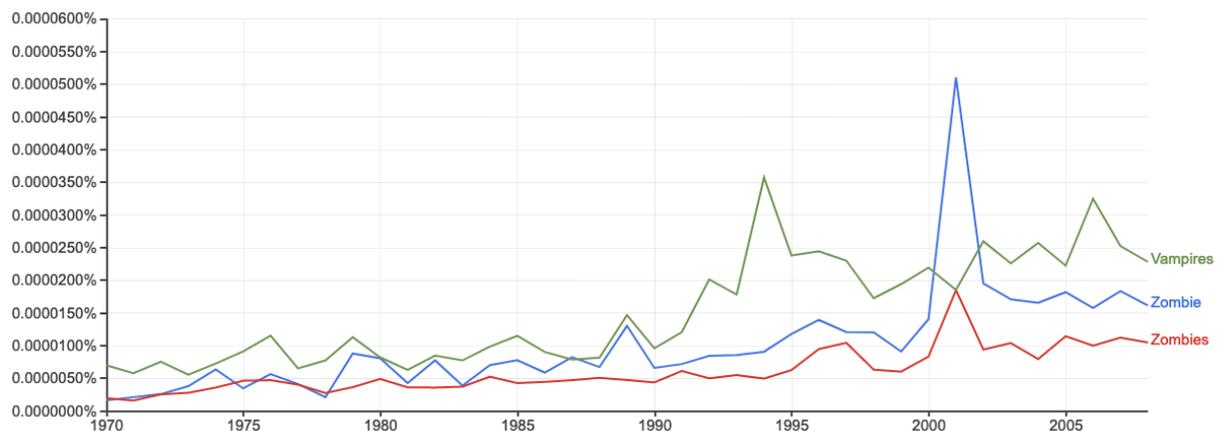
The next set of evidence I rely on is qualitative data from the popular program *The Walking Dead*. This case was selected because it is among the most popular works of this genre and has been in production continuously since 2010 and thus has a large volume of material from which to draw. Some of the particular pieces of criticism I will bring attention to have been discovered through a review of existing critical literature on this program, and these will be cited when necessary. The rest are my own observations from a critical viewing of the source material.

Data

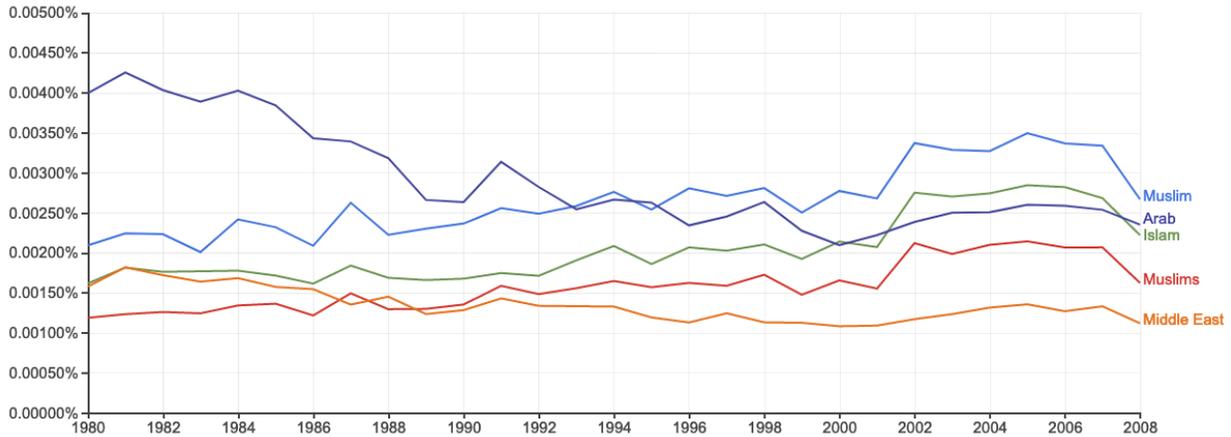
As the first piece of evidence to support my argument, the annual change in zombie films over time is represented in the chart below (data from IMDB). While a few relative peaks can be seen here and there starting in the 1970s, a distinct and dramatic increase in the volume of zombie films sets in beginning in 2003. Since a typical turnaround time to produce a film is around 2 years, this should be expected given my hypothesis that this trend is a response to the 9/11 attacks. An eventual downturn in the last couple of years could indicate that this trend is coming to an end.



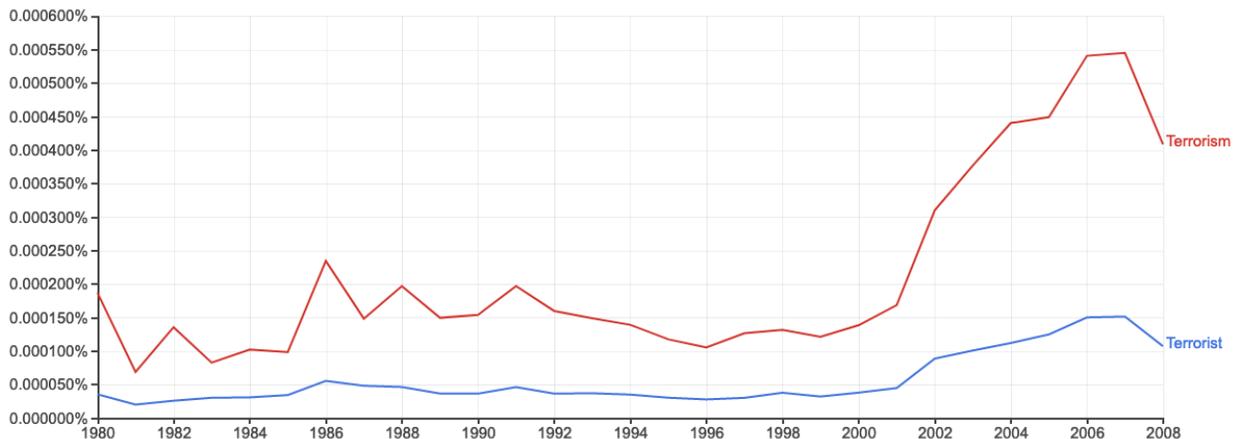
The next graph shows the growth in saliency of zombies in print media. In particular, note that there is a distinct uptick in mentions of “zombie” or “zombies” in 2001, while “vampires”, which had been trending upwards, has a distinct drop in 2001 (data from Google Books).



The following graph shows a sharp uptick in the saliency of “Muslim”, “Muslims”, and “Islam” in 2001, as well as a modest increase in saliency of “Arab” and “Middle East” (data from Google Books).



Lastly, we can see dramatic increases of the saliency of “terrorism” and “terrorist” in 2001 (data from Google Books).



I argue that these three last graphs together show that the increase in zombie saliency also corresponds with an increase in saliency in priming Islam (and Muslims), as well as priming terrorism. While this is not conclusive evidence that the three are deliberately connected by media institutions to construct a negative racial image, it is what we might expect to see develop over this time given that assumption. At the very least, it is compelling evidence that the three trends are responding to similar stimuli over this period.

The Walking Dead

The case I want to examine in-depth to explore this phenomenon is the television program *The Walking Dead*. While it is never explicitly stated that the zombie threat is a biohazard within the program, the first season finale “CDC,” which takes place in Atlanta’s Centers for Disease Control, strongly makes this implication (Darabont & Kang, 2010). Dahlia Schweitzer (2018) notes that from the very first scene of the program we are being sent cues on race and gender. Early on in the show it is demonstrated that the show’s protagonist, white male sheriff Rick Grimes, is the only leader with the resolve to bring the main group of survivors safely through the zombie apocalypse (Darabont & Kang, 2010). This is quickly established in the episode “Guts” during a scene in which another white male character goes on a racist rant and starts beating up a black male character. The other characters present (an Asian man, a Latino man, a black woman, and a white woman) all look on in horror, but all lack the resolve to stand up to the bully. Then, just in the nick of time, comes Sheriff Rick Grimes to incapacitate the racist jerk and leave him in handcuffs (Darabont & Kang, 2010). While the “bad guy” in this scene was a racist white man, and his overt racism is shown in no uncertain terms as a bad quality, the other nonwhite, non-male members of the group are shown to be powerless to do anything to stop him. Events like this help to make Rick Grimes’s leadership seem even more crucial. In fact, on several occasions throughout the show Rick demonstrates his worthiness to lead in such a toxically masculine way, often in the form that he is the only one willing to commit a particular act of violence that is necessary to keep the group safe. Even if others express disagreement or outrage at these acts of violence, they are all eventually accepted as necessary for the greater good and the survival of the group in the face of this growing biohazard threat.

Zombies are not the only threat to the survivors in *The Walking Dead*, in fact the main threat preoccupying is often an outside group of survivors. With the exception of a couple of groups that eventually become allies of the main survivors, these groups are almost always presented as morally dubious. Some groups even end up adopting barbaric practices like cannibalism (Darabont & Kang, 2013). During the episode “Vatos”, the group encounters a group of stereotypically portrayed Latino men, who wear large pieces of ornate jewelry (2010). In the end, the twist is presented that this group of “gangster”-type men are actually good guys who are projecting that image in an effort to keep their families safe. Although they are revealed to be “good guys” in the end, this is clearly meant to be surprising based on the fact that they were initially presented as unsavory characters in ways that are racially stereotypical. One other obvious point supporting my hypothesis is the conspicuous erasure of any Middle Eastern or Muslim survivors throughout the overwhelming majority of the show’s tenure. While different groups are encountered, often racially diverse (as one would expect for something taking place in Atlanta), not one survivor from the Middle East is given a speaking role in the entire series until halfway through its penultimate season. At this point (perhaps conscious of the implications of this erasure) the show introduces its token Muslim character Siddiq. Siddiq’s ethnicity is ambiguous, but his religious identity is clearly established in his first exchange of dialogue where he quotes the *Qu’ran*, and then never referred to again. He never prays; he never fasts; no part of his identity is ever explored again.

Walls are very important in the world of *The Walking Dead*. The group of survivors is constantly searching for a permanent place to settle and reside, and a key factor determining a good location is the existence of walls or a physical barrier to keep away zombies and deter unfriendly outsiders. One of the early locations the group settles in is actually a prison, which

they determine ideal because it is well fortified and easy to defend, primarily because of its secure fencing with barbed wire. Shortly after this, they end up joining a suburban gated community where a group of survivors built a set of walls out of scrap metal, where they have remained settled since then. In the US, about half a decade after the premier of *The Walking Dead*, walls became a central political issue when President Trump made it a marquee issue for his 2016 campaign.

Another core problem running through all seasons of *The Walking Dead* is trust (or mistrust) of outsiders. When coming across another person, or group of people, Rick Grimes and the other survivors are frequently forced to make a quick decision whether this person is a friend or an enemy, in the case of the latter some form of violence is often prescribed as a solution. Often members of outside groups considered to be hostile are imprisoned and tortured in order to extract relevant information (Darabont & Kang, 2016). This is typically portrayed as an unsavory, but necessary part of the post-zombie world in which our heroes now live.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I have presented several types of evidence to suggest that post-9/11 and continuing throughout George W. Bush's declared "War on Terror", and even continuing on through the Obama administration, there was a concerted effort in some US media to present cues of Middle-Eastern people as a biohazard (in the tradition discussed earlier) through the form of zombie films. I have supported this hypothesis first with some numerical data showing a significant rise in saliency of zombies in multiple media, coinciding with increased saliency in media for Middle-Easterners as well as for terrorism. I also presented some evidence to support this hypothesis from a qualitative intersectional analysis of the program *The Walking Dead*.

This study could also draw attention to several opportunities for future research. Many other cases offer potentially interesting avenues to examine with a critical intersectional lens. The 2015 Israeli Zombie film *JeruZalem* features a religious undertone where the source of the zombie contagion is some sort of demonic possession that eventually infects one of the protagonists, an American tourist. In this film, the Israeli military are frequently portrayed and referred to as the vanguard against the zombie-demon threat. Another potential option is media that portray the zombie contagion as a global pandemic, rather than focusing on its impact on a single community. An example of this could be the 2013 film *World War Z*.

Also, as mentioned earlier, the history of early zombie films (including the appropriation of the term itself) has a deeply racist history, which also incorporates gender frames to evoke fear for a mostly white American audience. This historical context, and the connection to its current usage could be something explored more deeply with additional research. The idea of walls and isolation being equated with safety is something that features heavily in a lot of zombie media. While I touched on this at times in this piece, there is much more room for analysis of this component of zombie media, and how it can prime and frame opinions on border policy, migration, and other issues.

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Appendix (Zombie Film Database Summary)

Year	Count	1958	0	1985	5
1932	1	1959	4	1986	7
1933	0	1960	0	1987	7
1934	0	1961	3	1988	10
1935	0	1962	2	1989	6
1936	2	1963	1	1990	5
1937	0	1964	6	1991	9
1938	0	1965	1	1992	3
1939	1	1966	1	1993	7
1940	1	1967	0	1994	2
1941	1	1968	1	1995	3
1942	1	1969	0	1996	2
1943	2	1970	0	1997	2
1944	1	1971	2	1998	2
1945	1	1972	6	1999	3
1946	1	1973	9	2000	6
1947	0	1974	5	2001	7
1948	0	1975	2	2002	5
1949	0	1976	1	2003	12
1950	0	1977	1	2004	20
1951	0	1978	2	2005	22
1952	0	1979	1	2006	24
1953	0	1980	10	2007	26
1954	0	1981	10	2008	31
1955	1	1982	5	2009	27
1956	0	1983	4	2010	16
1957	3	1984	4	2011	20

2012	23
2013	21
2014	14
2015	14
2016	13
2017	8
2018	9