Insecure Lives: Zombies, Global Health, and the Totalitarianism of Generalization

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Generalization is totalitarian . . . . Either the other is assimilated, or else it is annihilated. That is the whole principle of generalization and its entire process.

– Édouard Glissant, Poetics of Relation

In the video game Resident Evil 2 (1998), players struggle to escape a zombie-like outbreak in Raccoon City, a fictional Midwestern American city. The game’s heroes are trapped between two totalizing forces. They face the infectious “t-virus” which turns all those exposed into monstrous, undead creatures. And they race against a tactical nuclear strike from the U.S. government aimed at securing the area and stopping the infection. The plot of Resident Evil 2 demonstrates a dangerous logic that demands assimilation to a hegemonic norm threatened by difference. The game champions biological and national security above all else—including the lives of an entire city. In this paper, I examine how the current management of global health and security exemplified in the Resident Evil franchise and other popular outbreak narratives is bound to issues of race, empire, and colonialism.

The idea that managing and securing health has become a global issue is reinforced by popular representations of worldwide infection transmission in films such as Steven Soderbergh’s Contagion (2011) and video games such as Resident Evil 6 (2012), both of which concentrate explicitly on the challenge of regulating the global flow of bodies, goods, and capital. Cultural texts focusing on regulating and maintaining global health—perhaps none more so than zombie narratives—also illustrate the ways that disease helps us to see the borders of and interactions.

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between local, international, and global imagined communities. At the same time, I argue, these narratives also reveal the biased construction of such communities: they demonstrate not only who is included in a global community, but also who is served by it, who is excluded from it, and how it is policed.

Outbreak narratives centering on violent, infectious, often “undead” individuals—commonly referred to under the problematic moniker “zombie”—reveal some of the ways in which a logic of security permeates global cultural production. Analyzing these texts also demonstrates that this logic is the marriage between international political/military organizations—such as the United Nations (U.N.)—and related transnational medical organizations like the World Health Organization (W.H.O.). By concentrating on the figure of the zombie and its historical and contemporary relation to the military and the medical, this paper attempts to historicize and critique imperialist forces that occlude local history while reinforcing the ideologies of imperialism in the name of global health and security. Put another way, this paper examines how the rhetorics of global health and global security, like the “civilizing” colonial rhetorics before them, attempt to normativize Western identity across cultures, revising and reinforcing imperialist notions of alterity and pathology. Using the transmedia Resident Evil franchise, Max Brooks’s 2006 novel World War Z, and the film Contagion as case studies in imagining the connections between biological and political insecurity, this paper reveals how these cultural texts—and others like them—demonstrate and interrogate a generalizing, totalizing, globalized discourse that, preoccupied with contagion and control, demands either assimilation or annihilation.

The Resident Evil franchise and World War Z make evident how the history of empire cited by and embodied in the zombie figure can be obscured by a narrative focus on global health and security, and how this process reinforces the racial ideology of empire. This trend is not limited to zombie narratives, but extends across a plethora of outbreak, invasion, and post-apocalyptic stories, as my analysis of Contagion will demonstrate. By comparing these texts I will demonstrate their increasingly globalized nature and deep preoccupation with defining and policing the pathological. We might consider them together as narratives of bioinsecurity.

Such narratives are defined by tropes which, serving to emphasize the global generalizability of their threats, comprise what I will call the bioinsecurity aesthetic. This aesthetic features desolated cities, states of emergency, and an ambivalent privileging of the medical and the
military, where biomedical and political vulnerabilities are conflated in an embodied dual threat. The most culturally visible example of this threat at present is the figure of the zombie.4 The privileging of military and medical authority in the drive for security enacts a brutal violence against perceived threats, ultimately suggesting that to sympathize with the other—be it a virus, a zombie, or just a different human—is deadly. The deployment of the bioinsecurity aesthetic has developed throughout the history of zombie narratives—from the medicalized zombification represented in early films like *White Zombie* (1932), the decimated streets of Los Angeles in *The Last Man on Earth* (1964), and the conflation of medical and military authority in *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) to the explicitly viral zombies of AMC’s serial television adaptation of *The Walking Dead* (2010 – present).5 Tracing the ways that the medical and the military have been conflated through the figure of the zombie, I shall demonstrate how the aesthetic and narratives of bioinsecurity practice a totalitarian generalization that polices identity, demanding either utter annihilation or absolute assimilation to a normality defined largely by Western, white, male ideology.

The Zombie from “Dead Men Working in the Cane Fields” to Experimental Viral Monstrosities

The zombie has begun to plague cultural imaginations globally. Whether they are shambling or sprinting, Voodoo or viral, zombies have stormed the popular media of the world. In literature, film, and other media, zombies feature prominently in recent major media releases from such varied countries as Cuba (*Juan De Los Muertos*, 2012), Japan (*Resident Evil* transmedia series, 1996–Present), the U.S. (*Warm Bodies*, 2013), the U.K. (*The Zombie Diaries* and *Zombie Diaries 2*, 2006, 2011), and Spain (the *Rec* film trilogy, 2007, 2009, 2012). (And these are just a few high-profile examples; searching “zombie” online will indicate how thoroughly zombies have affected cultural production.) Although it may not be readily apparent, the zombie’s ascent to cultural nightmare *du jour* is part of an older historical problem, one bound up in issues of empire, colonialism, class, and race, all of which are at once cited and elided in these popular texts.6

The zombie famously made its way out of the spiritual and folk traditions of the Caribbean nation of Haiti when these were brought to American and international audiences in the early twentieth century. The history of the zombie before its emergence in Haitian spirituality
and folklore is mysterious, however, and cannot be captured in a neat origin tale. The figure most likely took its modern shape through a creolization of diasporic West African spiritual traditions in the Caribbean.7 This figure was again rapidly transformed when it entered the popular imagination of the English-speaking world in the late 1920s and early 1930s. W. B. Seabrook’s sensationalist 1929 ethnography of Haiti, The Magic Island, brought the figure of the zombie to American audiences and directly inspired the first zombie movie, the Halperin brothers’ cult film, White Zombie (1932). Made on a shoestring budget, with critically panned acting and a set and special effects visibly re-purposed from Dracula (1931), White Zombie was a box office success. Inspired by the success of White Zombie, the 1930s, ’40s, and ’50s saw a rash of zombie tales in the U.S. By the 1970s, Night of the Living Dead (1968) had been distributed in Europe, and European takes on this adapted figure of the zombie began to appear in the work of directors like Lucio Fulci (Zombi 2, 1979). The figure’s popularity had spread once again, ushering in the contemporary, globalized zombie.8

At nearly the same time that zombies began invading the silver screen, viruses were invading the microscope lens, being visualized for the first time with the help of the newly invented electron microscope. Just as popular culture’s preoccupation with the living dead revealed an interest in the limits of life, the virus troubled binary notions of life and death. Writing in the journal Nature in 1929, the same year Seabrook published The Magic Island, A. E. Boycott explains that studies of the virus reinforced the need to think of life on a continuum with the non-living, rather than as its binary opposite. Boycott places the filterable virus on a continuum of life in the “intermediate group”—that is to say, “not so live as a sunflower and not so dead as a brick.”9 Across intellectual production, a preoccupation with abject figures that trouble the border between life and death took center stage in 1938: the tobacco mosaic virus was being electron micrographed for the first time,10 Zora Neale Hurston was publishing an ethnography of Jamaica and Haiti dealing extensively with zombies and voodoo,11 Robert E. Howard was publishing the now-famous zombie-like horror story “Pigeons from Hell” in Weird Tales,12 and John W. Campbell Jr. was publishing a novella about sentient alien cells bent on enslaving all life on Earth from the inside out.13 All of these texts, like the micrographing of the virus, were deeply concerned with finding security from transgressive threats that were at once imperceptible and visible, whether these threats originated in the spiritual or the biological realm. Thus, as national territorial disputes set the stage for World War II,
cultural interest in the protection and maintenance of microscopic and abstract borders increased as well. Examining this history reveals that diverse narratives borrowing from medical and scientific thought were functioning as a totalizing force, a generalizing phenomenon that normativized life and health in order to delimit and destroy, as a means to protect and secure.14

Early American adaptations of the zombie sustained its specificity to the Caribbean, and often its relation to voodoo; from the start, however, these texts began to efface its history even while citing it. Even in the first zombie film, *White Zombie*, the unsubtly named villain Murder Legendre (played by Bela Lugosi) uses a mixture of mesmerism, pharmaceuticals, and stereotypes of voodoo practice to turn his targets into zombies. In fact, during a pivotal scene just before the climax of the film, Legendre describes the zombification of one of his victims as a curious medical experiment. Legendre tells his victim that it “is unfortunate [he] can no longer speak,” because Legendre is “interested to hear [him] describe [his] symptoms.” Thus, Legendre’s language implies that even in *White Zombie*, to be a zombie is to be diseased, unhealthy. Meanwhile, the medical logic followed here—seen in the pharmaceutical mixture and the description of zombification as a disease process—serves to replace the cultural history of the zombie with a universalized narrative, and attempts to legitimate itself through the use of scientific language.

This inscription of the medical over the sociocultural on the bodies of zombies appears as well in Seabrook’s ethnography, and his experiences offer a striking example of how this dynamic functions. In *The Magic Island*, Seabrook recounts his first encounter with a zombie, which leaves him nearly paralyzed with terror until he remembers seeing a cutting-edge neurological experiment performed on a dog:

I had seen so much previously in Haiti that was outside ordinary normal experience that for the flash of a second I had a sickening, almost panicky lapse in which I thought, or rather felt, “Great God, maybe this stuff is really true, and if it is true, it is rather awful, for it upsets everything.” By “everything” I meant the natural fixed laws and processes on which all modern human thought and actions are based. Then suddenly I remembered—and my mind seized the memory as a man sinking in water clutches to a solid plank—the face of a dog as I had once seen in the histological laboratory at Columbia. Its entire front brain had been removed in an experimental operation weeks before; it moved about, it was alive, but its eyes were like the eyes I now saw staring.15
While the laboratory setting is in direct contrast to the setting and title of the chapter, “... Dead Men Working in the Cane Fields,” it helps overwrite the whole scene for Seabrook. What was previously a creature so foreign that it threatened reason and the laws of the universe is instantly reinscribed by the deployment of the medical register. Seabrook’s newly clinical gaze obliterates the beseeching gaze of the enslaved man brought before him as a zombie, rewriting him as an infirm victim, a medically deficient lab animal.¹⁶

The explorer’s flashback to a Western medical procedure that could potentially explain the physical state of the zombie neutralizes the threat it poses to his worldview. The passage also glosses over the ethical opening that occurs in that moment of rupture, where Seabrook is faced with an experience of enslaved subjectivity entirely foreign and frightening to him. The relegation of the zombie to a manageable, medicalized phenomenon, present from the moment Seabrook introduced the figure of the zombie to American consumer culture, has pushed the biological and the philosophical, the microscopic and the macroscopic, ever closer together. I argue that contemporary cultural and political preoccupations with bioterror and national security have only reinforced this trend, emphasizing security at the cost of a complex confluence of cultural issues involving race, colonialism, and empire.

The twinning of the zombie with the medical, and with infectious disease, has reached new heights in the last two decades, and the Resident Evil franchise offers an expansive example of how the imbrication of virus and zombie effected an erasure of the cultural specificity of the figure. However, it also illustrates how that history constantly threatens to rend this medicalized narrative fabric. This franchise poses a particularly interesting case study for a number of reasons. First, the narrative arc of the franchise is explicitly concerned with the global health industry. Second, a shift in that arc puts increasing pressure on issues of bioterror after 9/11. Finally, Resident Evil has become increasingly global in its own production, consumption, and storytelling. For these reasons, the next section will focus on the complicated entanglement of the clinical and the cultural in relation to Resident Evil’s global zombie narrative, paying particular attention to the erasure of the cultural history of the zombie; the role of normativization or generalization in the series; and the violence sanctioned against those deemed inassimilable. I will demonstrate how the increasing imbrication of global health in zombie narratives serves to efface the dark, deeply political history of the zombie—and that the zombie’s exportation around the globe serves simultaneously
to obscure its history and to reproduce the political and ethical issues at the heart of that history.

The Sanction of Violence: Narrating Global (In)Security through Bioterror

*Resident Evil* is an impressively expansive franchise, spanning a slew of video games produced by the Japanese game developer and publisher Capcom, and sold transnationally (at least twenty-three discrete releases at the time this article is being written); seven novels by U.S. author S. D. Perry; five live action films (a sixth has been announced) produced by German, French, and American companies and filmed and released throughout the world; two CGI films produced in Japan and released on DVD in seven countries; two limited-run series of comics, produced by U.S. companies DC and Wildfire, respectively; and several lines of action figures. It is a set of texts that are developed, manufactured, sold, and set internationally, consciously participating in and metatextually commenting on global networks and the flow of bodies and capital in them. The plotlines and characters in the series vary somewhat across media, but all branches of the franchise are intimately tied to the interaction between the production and distribution of medicine and the exploitation of medical research for political and personal gain, harking back to the troubling relation between nineteenth-century colonial and medical practices. The earlier narratives of the series, those primarily from the 1990s, position a fictional transnational pharmaceutical corporation, “Umbrella,” as the main antagonist, developing biological weapons and testing them illegally on unsuspecting civilians.17 Recent titles have focused more explicitly on bioterror plots to overthrow the social order and capitalize upon the ensuing chaos.18

Crucial to nearly all *Resident Evil* narratives are contagious zombies who make up the rank and file enemies in the video games and the early films. In the majority of *Resident Evil* narratives, these zombies are created by exposure to an experimental virus.19 This insistence on the medical origin of the zombie reinforces the historical connections between zombies and viruses, and also obscures the relation of the zombie to its cultural roots, which threaten to emerge unwarranted and damage narrative integrity. Such an emergence of the zombie’s cultural specificity would upend the ideological thrust of *Resident Evil*, replacing a drive for biosecurity with the specter of colonial and racial violence.
A notable example of this narrative rupture can be seen in the video game *Resident Evil 5* (2009). The first promotional trailer for *Resident Evil 5*, released in 2007, sparked controversy when it showed the white American protagonist shooting a horde of black zombies. The fallout around this is fairly well documented, and *Newsweek* editor N’Gai Croal’s commentary on the subject is widely cited. In an interview with MTV’s online video game magazine, *Multiplayer*, Croal explained his concern over the historical erasure enacted by the game and its othering of black figures. “This imagery has a history,” he reminds us; “you can’t pretend otherwise.” Croal asserts that the black characters are all othered, threatening figures that echo a “not so distant post-colonial history.” Prior to the game’s release, Capcom attempted to address the issue of racial othering by introducing an African partner figure to work with the white protagonist, but this character, named Sheva Alomar, is significantly fairer skinned than the zombies and villagers of the game. In this way, instead of destabilizing the racial nature of othering in the game, Sheva Alomar serves to strengthen it, as the fairer skinned African is implicitly deemed assimilable while the darker skinned figures are not.

As in the other games of the series, the alliance of medical and military regimes, coupled with the reduction of the “infected” individuals to animalistic, subhuman threats, forecloses ethical deliberation in *Resident Evil 5*. At the beginning of the game, players learn that the main character, Chris Redfield, has traveled to Africa as a member of the Bioterrorism Security Assessment Alliance (B.S.A.A.). The B.S.A.A. is an NGO run by the United Nations and funded by the fictional Federation of Pharmaceutical Companies in their attempt to distance themselves from the villainous big pharma company, Umbrella. This fictional history is easily dismissed and ignored, appearing only in offhanded references and largely relegated to the game’s background; however, it reveals the intimate entanglement of health and security that is both displayed by and developed in such narratives of bioinsecurity. Furthermore, this example shows how biological and political security are implicated in a sort of neo-imperialism, where large transnational corporations exploit nations of the Global South even as the Global North is presented as these nations’ only hope for salvation. In this way, the games at once occlude and reconstitute old imperialist ideologies.
World War Z and the Foreclosure of the Ethical

The shift from national to global health and security programs evident in the evolution of the Resident Evil franchise has occurred hand in hand with a shift in the bioinsecurity aesthetic, which has come to be imagined on an increasingly global scale. This expansion has led to the problematic generalization of a politically and culturally loaded “normal,” defined largely through Western, white patriarchy. Max Brooks’s 2006 novel World War Z: An Oral History of the Zombie War interrogates this generalizing logic by constructing a careful retrospective look at a zombie apocalypse. The novel is a collection of fragmented fictitious oral histories woven together to chronicle humanity’s struggle with a global zombie pandemic.

The structural logic of the novel demonstrates the collapsing of the medical and the military as it begins with an outbreak story. Setting up the narrative as an anthropological history, its introduction is a subjective account of the zombie war that contrasts with “the official report” which “was a collection of cold, hard, data.” In this way, the reader is offered a frame that advocates for a qualitative, humanistic look at the past, rather than a statistical, quantitative one. This approach prepares the reader for the first section of the novel, which chronicles the discovery of “Patient Zero” in rural China. Running fewer than ten pages, the vignette effectively sets the outbreak in China, implying that the global zombie pandemic comes mysteriously from foreign soil. Furthermore, the rural setting of this brief chapter characterizes China in a somewhat misleading way, as a mysterious, undeveloped foreign land. This early episode presents the zombie pandemic in the language and format of the outbreak narrative: identifying a patient zero, postulating scientific causes, and describing a rushed military quarantine. The episode’s marriage of medical science and military defense acts as a microcosm where the biological insecurity of a zombie pandemic is sublimated to a military response: rather than find a cause or a cure, the global response to the zombie outbreak in the novel is to kill all of those infected. Thus, what appears at first as cooperation and organization among medical and military regimes is demonstrated as a conflation of the two. The rest of the novel has a decidedly military focus.

While the plot of the novel appears to endorse this martial response, its characters actually interrogate the logic of security that they all appear to follow, critiquing its effects in three primary ways: through the production of bloodlust, the calculated mass sacrifice in
order to save a problematically chosen minority, and the foreclosure of any ethics not founded in the politics of security. The bloodlust present in the military-medical discourse is exemplified in the concluding section of the book. Titled “Good-Byes,” this brief chapter focuses on the mercenary T. Sean Collins, whose reflection on his own bloodlust serves to ironize—and destabilize—many of the novel’s narratives of survival. The chapter begins with Collins explaining: “I’m addicted to murder, and that’s about the nicest way I can put it. You might say that’s not technically true, that since they’re already dead, I’m not really killing. Horseshit; it’s murder, and it’s a rush like nothing else.”

Collins goes on to position himself in relation to soldiers from previous wars with Post Traumatic Stress Disorder, those veterans “who never came home, even when they did,” or those who turned to gangs and violence on return. He explains, though, that the emotional anguish he feels is atypical from that we are conditioned to hear in such a case, explaining that in war “[y]ou’re living on such a high, so keyed up all the time, that anything else seems like death.” This has turned him into a man obsessed with killing: “But not only was I dead, I couldn’t think about anything else but killing. I’d start to study people’s necks, their heads. I’d think, ‘Hmmm, that dude’s probably got a thick frontal lobe, I gotta go in through the eye socket.’” In this way, the violent killing of zombies has forced Collins to consider himself as akin to them; he has become only a cold, dead killer. After a prolonged fantasy of killing the president in “at least fifty” different ways, Collins recognizes that one day he would “lose control,” that he “couldn’t stop,” so he works as a mercenary, cleaning out zombie infestations to satisfy his bloodlust. He hopes that one day he will “just decide” he has “had enough,” but assumes that more likely, “the last skull [he cracks will] probably be [his] own.”

By citing the slaughter of zombies as murder and equating the living and the undead, Collins ironizes the logic of security at play in the novel, demonstrating how the attempt to destroy the zombie threat internalizes it: the survivors are all (metaphorically) infected. The violence of security and its turn from the political outside (the zombies) to the inside (one’s self, other survivors) is part of a spread of violence. There are gestures toward this shift from a protective violence to a destructive one throughout the novel—what Roberto Esposito might call the shift from an immunitary to autoimmunitary biopolitics. This problematic trend is encapsulated in the ambivalent and ironic boilerplate for survival that the novel calls “The Redeker Plan.”
Named after its fictitious creator, said to have conceived of it as a strategy for the survival of Afrikaners near the end of the apartheid era in South Africa, the Redeker Plan proposes the survival of a select few through the sacrifice of the multitude. The racist history behind this plan and the fact that its creator believes “that humanity’s one fundamental flaw [is] emotion,” expose the cold, quantitative logic employed by the biosecurity regime of the novel. In the novel, a global society perseveres by locally employing a calculating logic that not only anticipates but relies on the sacrifice of large numbers of people for the survival of a smaller group. In fact, the novel demonstrates that the execution of such a plan requires not just sacrifice, but emotional closure, a politically necessitated foreclosing of the ethical that has deeply troubling implications.

Christina Eliopolis, a pilot in the national guard, explains how her training prepared her to face zombies without recognizing—or even imagining—their former or latent humanity. She explains that her training taught her: “don’t write their eulogy, don’t try to imagine who they used to be, how they came to be here, how they came to be this.” She goes on to explain that doing so causes one to “get distracted, get sloppy, let your guard down and end up leaving someone else to wonder what happened to you.” This reflection on violence and deindividuation momentarily cracks the façade of the novel. It illustrates the troubling dehumanization called for in the name of security. Paired with the cold calculations of the Redeker Plan and the emotional damage of fighting the undead, the novel both demonstrates and interrogates how narratives of bioinsecurity function under a logic that advocates a sweeping violence aimed at eradicating rather than understanding alterity. The totalitarianism of generalization produces a new regime that is never new at all: at the end of the novel, the reordering of the world merely shuffles national borders and identities; nation states and their major infrastructure are maintained. Even more troubling, the novel’s global scope—it touches on events in the United States, Canada, South Africa, Cuba, Japan, Russia, and China—implies that nearly all nations have followed the Redeker Plan. In the aftermath, the Global East and Global South have been refashioned by the saving graces of the West.

The novel depicts safety and security as achievable only with the destruction of all vestiges of the (pathological) other, reasoning that where there is life, there lies the threat of a viral alterity. While Resident Evil and World War Z invoke the bioinsecurity aesthetic through the figure of the zombie, the aesthetic and its effects on the imagination of
global medical and military security are not limited to zombie narratives. I turn now to Steven Soderbergh’s 2011 outbreak film *Contagion*, to the bioinsecurity aesthetic when the figure of the zombie is absent.

**A Zombie-less Apocalypse: *Contagion* and the Bioinsecurity Aesthetic**

Soderbergh’s *Contagion* offers glimpses of evacuated and filthy streets in several countries around the world as it follows the global spread of a deadly viral pandemic. Law enforcement and military figures hold back further collapse of social life and infrastructure, and demonstrate the relation between biological and political security. One scene of the U.S. National Guard protecting state borders dramatizes these connections between medical and military security, and between bodily and geographical permeability. The National Guard is just one among a series of institutions that are foregrounded in the film, such as the United Nations, the World Health Organization, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The film focuses on these institutions instead of traditional protagonists and antagonists, dispersing narrative tension among a large, all-star cast with whom viewers have little time to sympathize. This has the effect of valorizing medical science and international cooperation and collaboration, and the lack of individual depth risks turning the characters of the film into examples or statistics instead of imagined lives.

If the hero of the film is globalized medical science, then the villain is certainly the equally globalized virus, spread through trade and travel. This villainization of the microbe, a move that has been a staple of popular culture at least since Paul DeKruif’s 1926 pop-science phenomenon *Microbe Hunters*, struck close to home when the film was released in 2011, dovetailing with an ongoing debate in the academic community surrounding experimentation with influenza viruses. Detailed publications about the methods and procedures for hybridizing the H5N1 flu with H1N1 to make a more virulent, more transmissible combinatory strain, raised a number of biopolitical, bioethical, and biosecurity concerns. This factual analog exposed many of the fears upon which *Contagion* plays, and relations among biosecurity, terrorism, and the medical research industry were foregrounded in discussions surrounding the ethical and political impacts of such testing. The real-world analog of *Contagion* rendered vividly how an extremely virulent and contagious virus like the hybridized H5N1 could affect the global community, while also illustrating the places of contact and exclusion...
In that global community. In the debates surrounding H5N1, and their fictional parallels in Contagion, the fear of biological insecurity appears to threaten political stability, inescapably binding bodily and national defense even more closely.

Contagion demonstrates the precarious security of global contact points, such as the standardized non-places of travel (the airport, the hotel, and the bus) and of consumption (the casino, the restaurant), and makes visible the global flow of bodies and information. The film foregrounds the interconnectivity of the global community; however, the end of Contagion offers a critique of global capital, and briefly unveils an imperialism similar to that highlighted in Resident Evil. Contagion’s closing sequence reveals that a U.S.-based transnational corporation’s deforestation in China created the ecological conditions that produced the emergence of the virus. In this way, the end of the film, which takes the form of a prologue-as-epilogue, reveals the events occurring just before the film’s beginning, necessitating a reevaluation of the film’s portrayal of global interconnectivity. This epilogue interrogates and imagines not just the global flow of bodies of illness and information, but the role of money and privilege in regulating those flows.

The final sequence’s moment of analepsis breaks the previously linear narrative chronology of the film, doubling back on itself to stress the role of business, capitalism, and American neo-imperialism in making possible the conditions for the infection. Viewed from this perspective, the plot of Contagion appears as much about the money to be made in regulating and maintaining health as it is about the revelation of global interconnectivity. In Contagion, a tale of medical and military insecurity masks, but then gives way to, a subtext about new forms of imperialism and global trade: the United States in the film is both the source of the problem and the country that stands the most to gain from its solution. The American transnational corporation’s exploitation of Chinese resources, and the U.S.’s subsequent underserving of vaccine to China, appear in the film as complex moments of Western neo-imperialism as told through—and obscured by—global health.

The Resident Evil franchise, Contagion, and similar narratives about the policing of disease transmission uncover and participate in the erasure of historical and contemporary imperialism. Furthermore, these texts reveal how the rhetorics of global health and global security overwrite and efface local, specific, political histories, thus demonstrating and participating in what the Martinician postcolonial theorist Édouard Glissant identified as the totalitarianism of generalization. According
to Glissant, the principle of generalization calls for the assimilation or annihilation of the other, and leaves no room for a third option.\textsuperscript{45} Glissant advocates instead for an ethics rooted in disruptive aesthetics of the local in order to “oppose the disturbing affective standardization of peoples, whose affect has been directed by the processes and products of international exchange, either consented or imposed.”\textsuperscript{46} He ultimately calls for “the other of thought,” which forces us to act, to change the way we think. It is when ethically considering the other moves us so much that we are forced to act that our encounter with difference alters us, and opens the possibility of an unexploitative exchange.\textsuperscript{47} This is exactly what the generalizing rhetorics of medical and military security serve to foreclose when they necessitate global assimilation or annihilation. The global construction, narration, and consumption of the transmedia \textit{Resident Evil} franchise points to this problematic dynamic, and embodies the entangled nature of different narratives of bioinsecurity.

The global popularity of the zombie is a fitting sign of this totalitarian generalization, for the zombie is the fraught figure of an overpowering generalization \textit{and also} the figure of a threatening alterity whose sheer otherness can sanction its annihilation. The figure of the zombie, especially the zombie as \textit{infected} and \textit{infectious}, reveals the problematic normativizing tendencies of our current conceptions of health and security. At the same time that they reveal this troubling political dynamic, however, figures like the zombie and the virus also offer an ethical opening. They are the figures of extreme otherness, altering that which comes in contact with them—a literal occurrence in the case of the virus, which brings genetic material together across the borders of bodies and species in an exchange that has the power both to kill and to protect from death.

Perhaps the reason that the zombie and the virus are so intimately bound to one another and so prominent in the cultural imagination is that they embody a dual threat of contagious pathology, a spreading tendency toward threatening, unfamiliar changes. We can think of these narratives of bioinsecurity as preoccupied with anxiety about a shift in the social order, of the possibility that the pathological and the other might be accepted for what they are, changing our understanding of the normative and our relation to it. Given this, we must recognize that the fascination with imagined narratives of bioinsecurity at once demonstrates and develops the material effects of contemporary economic and political thought, action, and policy. In other words, the way these imagined texts approach alterity has material effects, and
to sanction the death of the zombie may not be as innocuous as it seems. This is not to say that we must unproblematically champion the local over the global, the cultural over the clinical; rather, we must realize the poetics of our global relations, instead of attempting to normalize them.

NOTES

1. Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation*, 20, 49.
2. The travel of disease makes visible paths, flows, and relations of people and goods that are otherwise obscured. As Priscilla Wald has explained, borrowing from Benedict Anderson, disease makes “visible the social interactions of the imagined Community” (*Contagious* 37). For more, see Wald, *Contagious*.
3. While referring specifically to biosecurity, this term’s focus on *insecurity* is intended to foreground the interconnections between biological and political security, and emphasize the role of both in outbreak narratives.
4. Agamben, *Homo Sacer*. I am referring to Agamben’s focus on places—such as the concentration camp and the state of emergency—that call for exceptions to the normal functioning of sovereignty, functionally extending sovereignty and law to previously unlegislated places (in both abstract and concrete terms).
5. While not technically a zombie film, this early film adaptation of *I Am Legend* features medicalized undead creatures that prefigure Romero zombies. For more on the influential role of *The Last Man on Earth* in the development of the zombie genre, see Deborah Christie’s “A Dead New World.”
6. There is a modest but quickly growing body of work that deals with these issues; academic interest in zombies has begun to catch up to popular demand. See for example Christie and Lauro, eds., *Better Off Dead*; Moreman and Rushton eds., *Zombies Are Us*; Moreman and Rushton eds., *Race, Oppression, and the Zombie*. These recent journal articles are also noteworthy, but once again not exhaustive: Lauro and Embry, “A Zombie Manifesto”; Stratton, “Zombie Trouble”; and Norris, “Giorgio Agamben and the Politics of the Living Dead.”
7. An idea that is now common in zombie scholarship, and one offered up by Zora Neale Hurston as far back as 1938, in *Tell My Horse*.
8. Fulci’s first zombie film—often translated as *Zombie*—was actually marketed in Europe under the title *Zombi 2*, as a sequel to *Night of the Living Dead* (which it has nothing to do with). It is also important to note that the zombie was a staple of pulp magazines and comics at the same time—in some senses it was a transmedia figure from the start in American culture. On that note, many people claim that the 1990s saw a dramatic decrease in the production of zombie narratives, which is true if one focuses only on film. But zombies took the video game world by storm in the 1990s (most famously in the franchise that this paper will examine later, *Resident Evil*), and returned to film with a vengeance in the new millennium.
10. The tobacco mosaic virus was the first infecting agent to pass through a porcelain filter and was specifically designed to catch bacteria and fungi. Study of it led to early theorizations on the nature of viruses. It was also one of the first viruses to be identified as primarily a carrier of information. Finally, it was also most likely the very first virus examined under an electron microscope. For an in-depth view on the storied history of this virus, see Scholthof et al., *Tobacco Mosaic Virus*.
11. Hurston, *Tell My Horse*. 
12. Howard, “Pigeons from Hell.”
13. Campbell (as Don A. Stuart), “Who Goes There?” This short science fiction novella is more widely known in its filmic adaptations: *The Thing from Another World* (1951) and *The Thing* (1982). The zombie is explicitly referred to in relation to the nearly unkillable “thing” of the story.
14. It may be that this is the natural development of the normativizing trend Michel Foucault identified in the emergence of public health: see Foucault, *Security, Territory, Population*.
16. To clarify, the broader scene in Seabrook is more ominously portrayed as slave labor, and as soon as Seabrook begins to recognize the zombie’s humanity—he touches the zombified man’s calloused hand—the zombie’s keeper sends him on his way.
19. I say a majority because two of the major title video games have an enigmatic trypanosome as the root of the problem instead.
20. Croal was the first high-profile commenter on the subject. For a more in-depth review of the controversy and the complex relation of video games to race, see Brock, “‘When Keeping it Real Goes Wrong.’”
22. Ibid.
23. This is also the case for another massively popular transmedia zombie franchise: *The Walking Dead* (2004–present).
25. Certainly there are exceptions—Milla Jovovich’s starring role as the hero of the *Resident Evil* films is the first example to come to mind, but even here, the tough female lead is commodified, and explicitly created and to some extent controlled by nefarious white, male scientists.
26. This article was written prior to the release of the Marc Forster film also titled *World War Z* (2013), starring Brad Pitt.
28. Ibid., 4–11. The narrator’s role and position are somewhat undefined. She or he hints about being commissioned to make a formal—largely statistical—report of the outbreak while feeling duty-bound to make a more humanistic inquiry as well. She or he thus formally witnesses this history orally.
29. Ibid., 331.
30. Ibid.
31. Ibid., 332.
32. Ibid.
33. Ibid.
34. Ibid., 333.
35. This is an idea deeply at play in the AMC adaptation of *The Walking Dead*, where the survivors are all already infected with a virus that will reanimate them upon death.
36. Brooks, 105–11. The way that this plan cites the history of the zombie as one imbricated in both racial politics and eugenics reveals a deft touch, but raises the specter of deeply problematic political issues, while also eliding them.
37. It also makes one wonder what population demographics are after the war, given that a pro-apartheid Afrikaner calculated who should survive based on: “income, IQ, fertility, an entire list of ‘desirable qualities’” (107). As they stand, income and IQ alone would skew demographics towards white survival along already contested lines—and are even more problematic given that income would appear to be meaningless in a crisis of this proportion.
39. Ibid.
40. This logic is reinforced but destabilized by the rise of a new Holy Russian Empire at the novel’s end.
41. For a concise summary of the debate surrounding the biological dangers and political issues of the H5N1 hybrid studies, see Berns et al., “Adaptations of Avian Flu Virus Are a Cause for Concern.” In this article, members of the National Science Advisory Board for Biosecurity laid out the issue and made their recommendation for the manner in which findings from experimental work on H5N1 should be communicated.
42. Ibid.
43. The complex neo-imperialism of the global health industry is already a burgeoning topic of academic discussion. For more on this, see: Lakoff, Disaster and the Politics of Intervention, Petryna and Lakoff, Global Pharmaceuticals, and Mittal, “International Health Governance in the Era of Imperialist Globalisation.”
44. Glissant, Poetics of Relation, 20.
45. Ibid., 49.
46. Ibid., 148.
47. Ibid., 154.

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