

## A New-Historicist Approach to the Zombie Narratives of William Buchler Seabrook's *The Magic Island*

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### Abstract

The present study undertakes to study the Zombie Narrative of William Buchler Seabrook's *The Magic Island* from the New Historicist perspective.

New Historicism as a title has been given to the American branch of "cultural poetics". Stephen Greenblatt is considered one of its originating voices, with edition to many other founders. He believes that the personal culture infiltrates both, the text as well as the critic. All the New Historians believe that cultural, the historical period, and the political events shape our personality and this will be automatically reflected in the text and critique, this effect cannot be escaped, thus this leads to making each critic having his point of view.

**Keywords:** Zombie, New Historicism , political events, *The Magic Island*, cultural poetics.

### المخلص

تهدف الدراسة الحالية الى دراسة رواية الزومبي للجزيرة السحرية لوليام بوجلر سيبروك من منظور تاريخي جديد. أُعطيت التاريخانية الجديدة كعنوان للفرع الأمريكي "الشاعرية الثقافية" من النظرية. ويعتبر ستيفن

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جرينبلات أحد الأصوات المهمة التي صدحت بها، مع إصدار العديد من المؤسسين الآخرين. ويعتقد هو بأن الثقافة الشخصية تتغلغل في النص كما تتغلغل في الناقد. كما يعتقد جميع المؤرخين الجدد بأن الأحداث الثقافية، والفترة التاريخية، والأحداث السياسية تشكل شخصيتنا، وهذا سينعكس تلقائياً في النص والنقد، ولا يمكن الهروب من هذا التأثير، مما يؤدي إلى جعل لكل ناقد وجهة نظري صحيحة بحسب ظروف ولادة العمل الأدبي.

### 1.Introduction

The adventure writer William Buchler Seabrook published a dramatic narrative in (1929) of his claimed personal involvement in Voodoo ceremonies in American occupied Haiti. The book is entitled *The Magic Island* and it was an instant success and best-selling. Despite his spectacular (and frequently insulting) portrayals of Voodoo. Stephen Glazier in his (2012) “Mel and Zora’s Heroic Adventure: Representing Haitian Voodoo to 20<sup>th</sup> Century Americans” states that, Seabrook claims an overall good experience in Haiti and subsequently defends Haiti’s independence against what he eventually perceives as American tyranny.

Seabrook portrays himself in *The Magic Island* (1929) as an adventurous explorer eager to try everything and dedicated to document it all with honesty, he says “trickeries must be included too if I am to keep this record honest” (Seabrook 13).

Seabrook consistently refers to Haitians’ black skin and their lack of civilization. Not to mention that the illustrations of the book are excessively racist since they depict the Haitians as grotesque figures with exaggerated black features that tend to look ugly or intimidating. Despite that, the reviews of the book praised the ‘impartiality’ of Seabrook’s novel. This contradiction can be logically explained according to the dominant powers at Seabrook’s time. The novel

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presents a great deal of racist description of the Haitians such as “[his] black face, frequently perspiring, shone like patent leather; it glowed also with a mystic light that was not always heavenly”, and “Louise [...] reminded me always of that proverb [...] ‘He whose face gives no light shall never become a star’” (Seabrook 7).

### 2. New Historical Reading of *The Magic Island*

According to New Historicism, everything is shaped, in both appearance and substance, by its unique historical conditions, as well as its unique time and location. Books or events must not be taken out of history and studied separately from the historical context. The notion that authors come from various historical eras and live in distinct cultural, political, and economic conditions will significantly influence their perceptions of reality, beauty, and politics. Consequently, this fact must frame the interpretations one assigns to their writings. To put it another way, literature must be interpreted in the perspective of its society, as well as other ideologies such as politics, faith, art, and the general economic situation (Habib 760).

Black Hawk Hancock in his “Michel Foucault and the problematics of power: theorizing DTCA and medicalized subjectivity” (2018) argues that, the monitoring eye of society, according to Foucault, is absorbed by people and it forms them via power structures. Thus, one cannot see the claim of Seabrook’s honesty as a lie, because he himself is unaware of these powers that crashes his thinking and keeps reshaping it. Foucault states that the person is precisely constructed according to a complex system of powers and materials. People are neither on the stage, where everything happens, nor on the audience seats, uncaught by the play action. Rather, the public are in an Orwellian machine,

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surrounded by power effects, unable to escape as they are part of the system. Power, then, functions like the process of “socialization” in that “the individual, with his identity and characteristics, is the product of a relation of power exercised over bodies, multiplicities, movements, desires, [and] forces” (Foucault as cited in Hancock 447).

In *The Magic Island*, the prejudice against African race and occupied people is evident in presenting the Haitian zombies as black slaves “working on a cane field” (Seabrook 98). This depiction of Haitians is controversial but it provides valuable perspectives into how early-twentieth-century social views impacted the literary creation of white, male writers like Seabrook. Seabrook engaged in the practice of negrophilia, i.e. the love of the black at the time, and he denounced the American colonization of Haiti and the re-establishing of European dominance. Yet, in the end, these power structures of race were too dominant to escape, and that is why, despite his sympathy with the black, Seabrook’s *Magic Island* was one of many texts that condemned the atrocities of slavery but continued to support the white supremacy (McGehee and Taylor 53).

*The Magic Island* is written in this political context. When Roger Luckhurst tackles the novel in his book *Zombies: A Cultural History* (2015), he criticizes how Seabrook’s portrayal of Haiti is highly influenced by the context of race and colonization. He claims “While Seabrook might have resisted many aspects of American modernity,” and that “his help in transferring the *zombie* into the zombie only retrenched a vision in the colonial center of a series of immiserated margins creeping with supernatural beings set on vengeance” (Luckhurst36).

During the twenties, the American image was presented with its imperial power, this reinforcement of the concept of colonization and linking it to good

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government strategies kept increasing despite its failure in achieving any anticipated results in reality (Luckhurs 33-36).

Seabrook's modern primitivism supports the image of Africans that Victorian prejudiced anthropologists and colonial rulers had created. Seabrook admires the "dark depths no white psychology can ever plumb," yet he still would label Haitian peasants "nave, simple, harmless children" (Seabrook 91) to demonstrate a typical description of racial supremacy (Luckhust 27).

In the most famous chapter of *The Magic Island* (1929), "Dead Men Working in the Cane Fields", Seabrook claims that he had discovered in Haiti a mythical tale that "sounded exclusively local the *zombie*" (Seabrook 93). According to him: "the *zombie*, they say, is a soulless human corpse [...] it is a dead body which is made to walk and act and move as if it were alive [...] setting it dull heavy tasks, and beating it like a dumb beast if it slackens" (Seabrook 93). These figures that Seabrook presents reflect a perfect portrayal of a faithful slave. The zombie in this narrative are not powerful or strong creatures like other mythical figures, they have no power or control on any human, and not even on themselves. Even though similar creatures might have appeared in print before Seabrook's book, but what is significant about *The Magic Island* is that it presents the walking dead into some weak and obedient creatures with no strength. According to Ann Kords, these zombies were, "akin to the fictional Mammies and devoted antebellum field hands who served to assuage southern guilt and reassure white Americans that African Americans had been (and could be again) willing workers who posed no threat to white power or physical safety" (as cited in Mcgehee & Taylor 61).

Thus, the zombies in *The Magic Island*, and in its adapted film *White zombie*, were described as perfect laborious slaves that any white employer wished to have (Mcgehee & Taylor 61- 62).

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Peter Dendle in his “The zombie as barometer of cultural anxiety” in Scott Niall *Monsters and the Monstrous* (2007) argues that, the slow corpse of Haitian is most frequently linked with economy and labor in the Western World. It is summoned from the grave to work tirelessly in the fields and industries of entitled landowners or Voodoo priests. The zombie, a soulless brute that works blindly for another, recalls a collective history of slavery, of leading a life devoid of respect and significance, of getting on with a life of no purpose. This picture may have hit a nerve in America during the Great Depression. Personal and collective values in America had been built around a constant lack of available work and the enhancement of hard effort; but for the first time during the depression, it was confronted with a disastrous excess of workers, of hands without something to do. The idle individuals queuing at soup meals or impatiently waiting in job lines are akin to zombies being soulless and tired workers (Dendle as cited in Scott 46).

Seabrook describes the purpose of zombies and how to summon them as follows:

People [. . .] make of it a servant or slave, occasionally for the commission of some crime, more often simply as a drudge around the habitation or the farm, setting it dull heavy tasks, and beating it like a dumb beast if it slackens (Seabrook 93).

In several Congo languages, ‘zombie’ means a chief or divinity. The Congo word ‘nzambi’ alludes to the ghost of a dead body; nevertheless, Seabrook’s ‘zombie’ gave a different meaning as it introduced the horror of modern day slavery and labor to western readers. A zombie is resurrected by a bokor to work and serve as a slave, “People who have the power to do this go to a fresh grave, dig up the body [...] then make of it a servant or slave” (Seabrook 93).

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The Haitians are the only people to have created their republic by fiercely rejecting slavery, and thus, the laboring zombies symbolized a unique type of terror to them. The horrors of re-enslavement loomed large during the American occupation of Haiti from 1915 until 1934, when corvee labor was restored to aid business growth. From the perspective of history in Haiti, Seabrook's zombie alluded to a dark history of enslaved labor and lack of national and individual sovereignty. However, these connotations of zombie disappeared as the figure became a classic of film horror, and a source of inspiration for a public intrigued by Ouangas and dark magic (Zieger 740).

Zora Neale Hurston, in her landmark book concerning Haitian tradition, *Tell My Horse* (1996), asks the locals about the reason for summoning the zombies instead of leaving them peacefully in the grave, and in what method they would resurrect them. One of the answers she acquired was the following:

Many told me that any corpse not too old to work would do. [because] Maybe a plantation owner has come to the Bocor to "buy" some laborers, or perhaps an enemy wants the utmost in revenge. He makes an agreement with the Bocor to do the work. After the proper ceremony, the Bocor in his most powerful and dreaded aspect mounts a horse [...] to the house of the victim. There he places his lips to the crack of the door and sucks out the soul of the victim and rides off in all speed. Soon the victim [...] in a few hours is dead. The Bocor [...] At midnight he will return for his victim. [...] The Bocor calls the name of the victim [in his tomb]. He must answer because the Bocor has the soul there in his hand (Hurtson 182-183).

The zombies here are described to be devoid of life and are led like some cattle by "a black head" to work for him. This description condemns both their leader as abusive one and the zombies themselves as dead people "staring dumbly" with no purpose except labor. If this tells anything, it tells how racism and the history of

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black slaves are deeply rooted in the writer's mind that he projects them on the zombies. Seabrook comes from background of racism and black exploitation, which is why "*The Magic Island* was one of many texts that criticized the horrors of slavery and colonialism yet continued to perpetuate white power" (McGehee & Taylor 53).

Seabrook describes zombie labor in the cane fields, and his Haitian source, Polynice, defines zombie labor as follows: "The zombie, is a soulless human corpse, still dead, but taken from the grave and endowed by sorcery with a mechanical semblance of life it is a dead body which is made to walk and act and move as if it were alive" (Seabrook 93).

Elizabeth Maddock Dillon in her "Zombie Biopolitics" (2019) explains that the zombie is therefore a physical figure of bare work namely, the degradation of the human Like the slave's mutilated body, the zombie is murdered without legal penalty or consequence, as if a machine that is devoid of significance. The African slaves are best understood as "bare labor," because they are involved into capitalist modernity by removing social life from their existence: the enslaved workers, African or not, are treated as a dehumanized body that is forced to live in order to work without rest (Dillon 626).

Seabrook, as an American white southerner, witnessed the development and perseverance of these power structures of race and economic class his entire life, and have eventually come to recreate them in his book. According to Foucault, the race and class dominance can be explained in what he called 'biopower'. This later concept means the producing and securing of a particular form of life in order to avoid the threat of death or social suffering, "[I]n Foucault's succinct formulation,

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biopolitics has the power to make live and let die, whereas the power of the sovereign is that of making die and letting live” (Dillon 627).

But the African American are in neither of these categories since they are allowed to live only as socially dead people. Racial slavery targets the production of a life where one race is secured by killing or socially exiling the other. As a result, race enslavement leads to the creation of the living dead. According to this, the American colonization of African or Caribbean countries is a recreation of old plantation slavery, it is an action that is based on a racial oppression, fear, and the establishment of abusive labor system best be defined as “zombie biopolitics” (Dillon 627).

Joni Richards Bodart and Davis Wade as cited in Jennifer Daly “Deconstructing Zombies of Capitalism: The Walking Dead and New Views of American Zombies” (2016) argue that, it remains troubling about Seabrook’s narrative that he presents his writing as truth, with no supporting evidence. Rather than substantial research, most of Seabrook’s work is marked by impression and sensation. Seabrook used powerful descriptions and interesting narrative in *The Magic Island* which made his book trusted as truth. As a result, the Voodoo beliefs were turned into a narrative account of fantasy tales that show Haitians as untrustworthy pagan savages who use dead people to labor in their fields (Bodart, Wade as cited in Daly 12).

The zombie figure was also used as a metaphor of fear to condemn Haitian faith as a black barbaric practice that is connected with cannibalism. Michel Laguerre emphasizes in Raphael Hoermann article “Figures of terror: The zombie and the Haitian Revolution” (2017), that the discourse of North Atlantic has “consistently

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identified the country with Voodoo meaning cannibalism, zombie and the backwardness of its supposed cannibal practice” (Hoermann 2-3).

Haiti’s revolution led to an increase of the hate and racial discourses in the west. North Atlantic discourse portrayed this country as the manifestation of darkness in its ugliest form. By asserting independence in 1804, the revolutionary nation of Haiti as a “Black Republic” opposed the imperial powers, as well as white racism and control in general (Hoermann 3).

With time, Voodoo religion became strongly linked to the notion of zombies. Diána Huszár in her “From Threat to Pet Shifting Representations of Zombies in Film, Video Games and Literature” (2012) states that it’s worth noting that in cinema, video games, and literature, the Haitian religion is frequently depicted as dark and wicked. For example, the novel *The Serpent and the Rainbow*(1988) which has been turned into a movie, focuses largely on the evil side of Haitian faith. *True Blood* (2008), based on the Southern Vampire Stories, is a more modern example, in which voodoo is depicted as evil and potentially false. Also, witch doctors deal with Voodoo in the famous online game *World of Warcraft*, and gamers can buy voodoo dolls for the purpose of sorcery. All these images begun with *The Magic Island* and its controversial portrayal of Haiti (Huszár 6).

According to New Historicism, every text is the product of the context in which it was written, it cannot be fully understood unless it is analyzed as a form of practice. Claire Colebrook in his *New literary histories: New historicism and contemporary criticism* (1997) states the focus, then, is on the material circumstances created by the text and in which the text is created. Even when the writer does not directly use the word capitalism, the notions of economical

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conflict, the distribution and profit gaining can still be metaphorically manifested in the book to show the prominence of such powers (Colebrook 28-29).

As a result, *The Magic Island* led the zombie to become a metaphorical figure that represents African enslavement, and capital ruthlessness. This representation is promoted by the context of zombies in a colonial land of black people. The abuse of both zombie slaves and their Haitian land in the novel refers to the interplay of political and economic forces that control the writer's context. The novel shows Haitians as unreliable people who believe in superstitions or as masters whose only concern is with money, while in fact it metaphorically shows the modern state of capitalism and the end result of having a society divided by political and racial supremacists, "The de-humanization of colonial subjects as chattel [...] or less advanced humans was inscribed into the imperialist dualism 'that placed human beings outside nature and that reproduced the difference between human and nonhumans as inferiority'" (Mukherjee as cited in Oloff 31).

To the end of the only chapter that dealt with zombie in the novel "Dead Men Working in the Cane Fields"(Seabrook 92) , Seabrook states that he does not believe that anyone has ever literally raised from the dead but what he saw there remains curious and inexplicable. He then sees an article in the Haitian constitution that states:

Article 249. Also shall be qualified as attempted murder the employment which may be made against any person of substances which, without causing actual death, produce a lethargic coma more or less prolonged. If, after the administering of such substances, the person has been buried, the act shall be considered murder no matter what result follows (Seabrook 103).

Seabrook uses this article as the conclusive remark for the zombie chapter. With this he leaves his readers wondering; is what he saw about the living dead

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something real? Or is it a type of coma that makes people act this way as the article denotes? In either case, the answer to this question has never been as important as the impression the zombie left on people. The deep horror the zombie left on Western readers was due to the poor work conditions of workers that was similar to that of zombies, especially that the publication of the novel coincided with the years of depression in American economy. However, the other reason why zombies were so popular in the American context is that Seabrook's zombies and the book's illustrations. Both reinforced the racial prejudice and discrimination that were found in the United States. At that time, with the use of media and film industry, the Haitian land was already turned into the land of savages that needed to be taught about civilization. Thus, when *The Magic Island* presented its black slave zombies, it only gave the American public something new to match old stereotypes of class and race. The zombies are merely "expressionless" as Seabrook claims, with no face and no identity, easy to manipulate and oppress and there is no one to call for their rights (Gardner 74-77).

### Conclusion

In *The Magic Island*, the prejudice against African race and occupied people is evident in presenting the Haitian zombies as black slave. These figures that Seabrook presents reflect a perfect portrayal of a faithful slave. The zombie in this narrative are not powerful or strong creatures like other mythical figures, they have no power or control on any human, and not even on themselves. Even though similar creatures might have appeared in print before Seabrook's book, but what is significant about *The Magic Island* is that it presents the walking dead into some weak and obedient creatures with no strength. Thus, the zombies in *The Magic Island*, were described as perfect laborious slaves that any white employer wished to have.

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