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### ***Rio Hondo Professor: Popular Zombie Symbolism Reflects Cultural, Historical Attitudes***

**WHITTIER** – Fascination with zombies may be at an all-time high – “The Walking Dead” dominates TV ratings, “World War Z” scored big at the theaters and Halloween is fast approaching – but an expert on zombie literary symbolism says the creatures may say more about flaws in our culture than our taste in entertainment.

Zombies, from their first appearance in English literature through modern movie and comic book renderings, reflect cultural values on racism, sexism and the ability of dominant ethnicities to objectify those they deem less human, according to Dr. Steven Pokornowski of Whittier’s Rio Hondo College.

“A love of campy horror brought me to zombies,” said Pokornowski, a literature professor with a Ph.D. from UC Santa Barbara. “But I learned that the zombies in our literary and cinematic universes closely parallel today’s growing visibility of racism.”

Pokornowski delivered a paper on zombie symbolism and cultural attitudes during a workshop earlier this month at the American Studies Association’s annual gathering in Toronto, Canada.

The paper, “Biopolitics, Race, and the Sanction of Violence,” discusses zombie imagery in “The Magic Island” (1929) and “Tell My Horse” (1938) – foundational texts for much of today’s genre – as well as in iconic horror films such as 1968’s “Night of the Living Dead.”

Zombies, first encountered as an element of the Haitian religion Vodou, were introduced to English audiences in the books as symbols of colonial, racial and sexual fears.

“The zombies themselves are described in clinical terms, with blank faces, dead eyes, as being animalistic – robbed of their humanity as objects acceptable to slay without repercussion,” Pokornowski said.

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“The sheer prevalence of zombies in the media today is making us more aware than ever of these issues – and we need to be thinking about how they connect to the real world,” Pokornowski said.

Historical zombie narratives that focus on violence against women often indirectly allude to the violence or show its outcome without being explicit. In these stories, even a justification of violence can’t legitimize the attacks, he said. And there is an eerie echo of this in the contemporary dearth of coverage for female victims of police brutality, highlighted by #sayhername.

Pokornowski’s research – started as part of his Ph.D. dissertation – included a close examination of the popular AMC show, “The Walking Dead.” In addition to watching the TV version, he studied more than 20 of the trade paperback compilations of the comic book published by Image Comics.

“White supremacist, imperialist structures seem to keep reproducing and re-legitimizing themselves, and doing so quite intricately in the ever-ubiquitous zombie narrative,” Pokornowski said. “Perhaps that is the real allure of zombie narratives: they serve to legitimate racial anxieties.”

His findings about the popular TV show were captured in his essay, “Burying the Living with the Dead,” published in *“We’re All Infected”: Essays on AMC’s The Walking Dead and the Fate of the Human*.

Dr. Pokornowski is available for commentary at [spokornowski@riohondo.edu](mailto:spokornowski@riohondo.edu).

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