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# Ideal Objects: The Dehumanization and Consumption of Racial Minorities in Joyce Carol Oates's *Zombie*



April D. Pitts  
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In 1994, Jeffrey Dahmer, one of the most notorious American serial killers of the twentieth century, was murdered in prison by a fellow inmate. Though his life ended that day in the prison, the questions that his criminal case has raised about race and ideal democratic citizenship still linger decades later. During his rampage, Dahmer, a young white man, confessed to killing at least seventeen young men and boys, most of whom were gay and nonwhite. Though Mr. Dahmer insisted that he selected his victims based on their “looks” and not upon their racial backgrounds (Dahmer), several of his acquaintances recall that the young man held “both racist and ‘extremely homophobic’ attitudes” (Jamakaya) and that, at the chocolate factory where he worked, Jeffrey “constantly muttered about ‘niggers’” (Matthews). Critics of the case argue that the police were slow to investigate Dahmer as a suspect despite previous



accusations against him of wrongdoing because of the department's alleged racist and homophobic bias against his gay and nonwhite victims.

One often cited example of the alleged racism and homophobia surrounding the Dahmer case is the Milwaukee Police Department's handling of a 1991 incident involving fourteen-year old Konerak Sinthasomphone. At that time, a naked and bleeding Sinthasomphone ran to the police to escape the killer. Dahmer was able to calmly persuade the officers that the underage youth was his drunk, nineteen-year old lover. Despite the protests of bystanders, the youth was returned to Dahmer—who promptly murdered and dismembered him. Those same cops were later heard making racist and homophobic jokes about the incident with the dispatcher (Weisberg). For many, the legal community's handling of the Jeffrey Dahmer case was strong evidence of continued institutional bias against racial and sexual minorities.

In her 1995 novel *Zombie*, Joyce Carol Oates continues through fiction the discussion about the relationship between race and ideal democratic citizenship in post-civil rights era America that was begun by the actual Dahmer case. Set primarily in Dale Springs, a fictitious Detroit suburb, *Zombie* is loosely based upon the life of Jeffrey Dahmer and on his father's 1995 memoir, *A Father's Story* (Truffin 207). It is the story of Q\_P\_, a mentally disturbed serial murderer who longs for companionship and social acceptance. In *Zombie*, serial killer Q\_P\_'s assimilation of the dominant culture's bigoted attitudes towards racial minority groups leads him to believe that his social inclusion depends on their subjugation, particularly through dehumanization and consumption.

Excited by his father Professor R\_P\_'s lecture about black holes and 1940s psychosurgery texts that described the wonders of frontal lobotomy, this character believes that zombie-creation is a viable solution to his loneliness. Q\_P\_ is impressed by the submissive manner in which R\_P\_'s students cower at their desks before him as they take their notes (27). He wants to command a similar type of power over someone, preferably someone without the mental capacity to judge him. Using science as his guide, he believes that the way to create this mentally vacuous companion is to perform a frontal lobotomy. Like another serial killer novel of the same period, Bret Easton Ellis's *American Psycho* (1991), Oates's narrative uses the voice of the serial killer to highlight dangerous dysfunctions in American democracy.

Early in the novel, Q\_P\_ describes the characteristics of his ideal zombie specimen, which reads like a section in a pornographic personal ad: the ideal zombie specimen is “well hung,” a healthy male with “fight’ & ‘vigor.” Someone he can take pleasure in dominating (28). This person will cheerfully and unthinkingly fulfill his every desire: “suck with his mouth as bidden,” “lick with his tongue as bidden” (170) and would “be mine forever” (49). Although he craves companionship, Q\_P\_’s language suggests that what he *really* wants is a sex slave—one without the capacity to reason. Q\_P\_ proclaims that his ideal zombie could:

not say a thing that was *not*, only a thing that *was*. His eyes would be open & clear but there would be nothing inside them *seeing*. & nothing behind them *thinking*. Nothing *passing judgment*. Nor would there be *terror* in my ZOMBIE’S eyes. Nor *memory*. For without *memory* there is no *terror*. (169)

In addition to being a dumb sex object, Q\_P\_’s ideal zombie can also be identified as part of society’s designated “out groups,” such as drug addicts and racial minorities (especially blacks). He reasons that it is easier for him to capture and “make zombies” out of these populations because he believes that the disappearance of one of their members is less likely to attract public attention or concern. Therefore, he does not feel safe choosing anyone “Caucasian & suburban, and living in Dale Springs” as a potential zombie. He argues that, “A safer specimen for a ZOMBIE would be somebody from out of town. A hitch-hiker or a drifter or a junkie (if in good condition not skinny & strung out or sick with AIDS). Or from the black projects downtown. somebody nobody gives a shit for. Somebody should never have been born” (28).

Q\_P\_’s attempts to lobotomize his victims is an acknowledgment of actual, clinical, psychosurgery experiments done in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century in the U.S. by Dr. Walter Freeman, another inspiration for his zombie experiments (42). Freeman popularized what is known as the “ice-pick lobotomy” (which Q\_P\_ uses exclusively to create his zombies) or the use of an ice pick to destroy the frontal lobe of severely mentally ill patients. It was believed that lobotomies would cure severe mental illness by eliminating brain lesions that allegedly

caused mental disorders, resulting in the calmness of the disturbed patient (Vertosick, Jr.). Once the pathologies thought to cause mental illness were removed, lobotomy supporters felt, these patients would become “normal” again and able to be reintegrated into society. In this way, lobotomy seemed to be a social engineering program that would allow for the social control of perceived anti-social behavior, not just cure patients of an alleged illness. As neurosurgeon Frank Vertosick notes, “the goal of lobotomy wasn’t to control disease but to control patients.”

Eventually, concerns about both the soundness and methodology of the operations, particularly Freeman’s disregard for patient’s consent, led to strong opposition to psychosurgery in the medical community. However, as Vertosick, Jr. argues, lobotomized patients rarely became “zombies.” He notes that:

Although some patients ended up this way, or worse, the zombie stereotype derives more from Hollywood fiction than from medical reality. Lobotomy peaked in the 1950s, not during the Middle Ages. While we may have been a little more bioethically challenged back then, we weren’t Neanderthals either. Lobotomy could never have survived for 20 years if it yielded a lot of cretins.

In the novel, Q\_P\_’s attempts to create a zombie symbolize a larger problem of democracy because he sees the domination of racial and sexual minorities as a way to improve his own social standing. He interprets the recognition of their legal and human rights as a threat. While Grandma P\_ and other members of his family are represented as being nostalgic for a society similar to Hitler’s Nazi Germany, which legally discriminated against and violently exterminated abject populations as part of its racial hygiene program (Lifton), Q\_P\_ wants to go back to an even older organization of society—American chattel slavery. Like the slave, Q\_P\_’s zombie would be his property to do with as he wishes. As a result, he regards and resists any laws established to protect abject groups as unjust. Under these circumstances, democracy itself is jeopardized because he resists any laws that are perceived to benefit his opponents. Instead, Q\_P\_ seeks illegal means, such as murder and other forms

of terrorist violence, to achieve his goals when he doubts that the law of the land will protect him and his race privilege.

Critical articles written about Oates's *Zombie* tend to focus on its brutality and violence, particularly that of its main character, Q.P.. They are particularly interested in comparing his representation in the novel with common stereotypes about actual serial killers and the methods used to profile them. They strive to maintain a clear boundary between the "normal" (the law-abiding citizen) and the "abnormal" (the deviant serial killer). For example, Philip Simpson argues that Oates' Q.P. character "both promulgates and subverts certain assumptions about the psyche of the serial killer as most popularly defined by his FBI adversaries" (136). He believes that she both shatters and reinforces the stereotype that serial killers are easy to spot and stand out clearly from "normal" society. He cautions us to beware of confusing "real" serial killers with fictional ones. He argues that:

The fictional serial killer bears little relation to his real-life counterparts such as the psychosexually disturbed Ted Bundy or Ed Gein. In fiction, serial killers are often more exotic in terms of methodology and pathology, as authors seldom resist the temptation to sensationalize them in some uniquely identifiable way, no matter how restrained the narrative treatment overall. (20)

Steven Marcus believes that Oates's *Zombie* deals with material that has been written better in similar novels such as Dennis Cooper's *Frisk* (1991). He finds its depiction of American society's complicity in Q.P.'s violent acts to be ineffective and unpersuasive. According to Marcus:

A dozen serial murderers do not by themselves certify a monstrous social world or culture—although they're surely sufficient to cause one to think gravely about any world that in part creates them and whose material helps furnish the contents of their demented minds. The idea of this narrative—that the uncaught serial killer is somehow peculiarly representative of our current condition—is more interesting than its execution,

which, like the writing in which it is embodied, is fluid, fluent, inflated and, finally, neither convincing in itself nor successfully dramatized as fiction.

Miho Morii argues that Oates uses styles and other postmodernist elements to indicate the virtual impossibility of understanding Quentin P\_'s (and, alternately, that of his real-life prototype, Jeffrey Dahmer's) true nature, forever separating him from the world around him (95-6).

Yet in focusing so strongly upon the differences between Q\_P\_ and other white Dale Springs residents, *Zombie's* critics often ignore or downplay the disturbing similarities in attitude and behavior among these characters, particularly their mutual disdain for gays and nonwhites. It is these shared racist and homophobic attitudes that allow Quentin P\_ to operate virtually undetected by most of Dale Springs and make his violent exploitation of racial minorities and other social outcasts seem both normal and necessary.

With these similarities in mind, this reading of Oates's *Zombie* uses the novel's depiction of Q\_P\_ and other white characters to explore the relationship between racial prejudice and ideal democratic citizenship. Joyce Carol Oates denies that Quentin P\_ is "an allegorical figure" and insists that this character is so different from the people around him that he is, "virtually a subspecies in their midst" ("Psycho Killer"). For this writer, however, the novel's representation of Q\_P\_ and other white characters is an intriguing critique of political ideologies that focus on individual, not group, rights and which argue that race and racism are no longer barriers to achieving the American Dream. What all of these discourses have in common, as Howard Winant suggests, is the representation of white citizens as disenfranchised minorities and the portrayal of affirmative action and other legislation designed to address discrimination against minority groups as both undemocratic and racist towards whites (80).

### **The Dehumanization of Racial Minorities**

Q\_P\_'s prejudiced views of racial minority groups are most clearly expressed in his dehumanization of blacks. He is both fascinated by and deeply distrustful of blacks. To him, black people are cunning, unscrupulous criminals

who have taken control of the criminal justice system. He, in contrast, sees himself and other white characters as helpless against their constant demands. By representing blacks and other racial minorities as oppressors, Q\_P\_ justifies and rationalizes his violent, extra-legal measures against them when he is convinced that the law cannot or will not protect him (and the rights of other whites).

For example, Q\_P\_ believes that the judicial system is biased in favor of blacks, a perspective that shapes his public and private courtroom behavior. In his mind, blacks are demanding predators whose push for their civil rights has corrupted the judicial system and law itself. He claims that white citizens, not blacks and other minorities, are the “real” victims of social injustice. When he is charged with kidnapping and sexually molesting a young black boy, Q\_P\_ reinterprets his charge in a way that casts himself and not the child he molests as the victim: “In my heart,” he says, “I did not plead GUILTY because I was NOT GUILTY & am not. But it was a RACIAL MATTER, too. The boy was black & Q\_P\_ is white” (20). He believes that he has been sacrificed by a cowardly legal system so afraid of a black “riot” if the verdict does not go their way that he is found guilty of sexual misconduct against a minor (87). Though he repeatedly suggests that nonwhites are inferior to whites, he insists that he is “not a RACIST” and does not “know what the fuck a RACIST is” (8). He implies that his being charged at all is a sign of reverse racism.

Even more disturbing than Q\_P\_'s behavior during his sexual misconduct trial is that of the white Dale Springs community. Here, the residents' fear of racial contamination is so pervasive that it even influences their views of crime and justice. For instance, the judge presiding over his case enforces color-blind policies that *seem* fair on the surface but, in practice, reinforce discriminatory practices towards minority groups. Judge L\_ is described by Q\_P\_ as someone who is “a fair man & not vindictive”—someone who cannot be “pushed around by special interest groups” (21). However, according to him, the judge looks at Q\_P\_ sympathetically during the trial—and then gives him a two-year suspended sentence for kidnapping, fondling, and attempting to murder a minor (21). Q\_P\_'s father, R\_P\_, sees his son's trial as more of an offense against him and the P\_ family than against the black victim (23). And Q\_P\_'s lawyer is just “grateful that they didn't draw a black judge” (20). In short, in *Zombie*, Dale Springs can be seen as a community where white

skin color privilege has shaped how Q.P. and other white characters visualize and create democratic spaces. They cannot imagine a world where they are not or do not end up on top.

Pierre van den Berghe calls such a political system a “Herrenvolk democracy,” or one that is “democratic for the master race but tyrannical for subordinate groups” (qtd. in Olson 42). In such a system, white citizens did not have to share power with or socially recognize any groups whom they believed were their inferiors. In the novel, the Dale Springs community appears to be a fictional version of van den Berghe’s Herrenvolk democracy. Oates represents white characters as used to being part of a system in which they occupy a higher social status than nonwhites. As a result, they find it difficult to see nonwhites as their social equals and view any legislation that forces them to share power or space with nonwhites as “undemocratic” and “unnatural.”

Q.P. also uses the same reverse racism storyline that he uses in court to further slander the child he molested during his court-ordered group therapy sessions. In these sessions, he claims that he cannot recall what happened, whether he had “approached the boy myself in the alley back behind the dumpster where my van was parked or if the boy had followed me there & picked me up without my knowing” (46). Making the child seem like a prostitute, Q.P. speaks in one long, run-on sentence, telling the group that the child blackmailed him for money as payment for his sexual services. He insists that he only became physically violent towards the boy when he started increasing his demands for money, suggesting that he was only defending himself from a hustler:

This boy looking so much older than twelve with eyes piercing like blades demanding money from me or he would tell on me, he demanded \$10 & when I gave him \$10 he demanded \$20 & when I gave him \$20 he demanded \$50 & when I gave him \$50 he demanded \$100 which was when I lost it & screamed at him & shook him BUT I DID NOT HURT HIM I SWEAR. (47)

In these therapy sessions, Q.P. is tearful and insists that he is sorry about the twelve-year old boy he was accused of “molesting.” He has nearly everyone in the room believing in his sincerity. As readers learn later in the

novel, though, what actually happens is very different from what Q\_P\_ says in group therapy. While driving to his old home in Mt. Vernon with his family, he remembers how his twelve-year old prospective zombie “had not asked for a nickel,” and “was trusting as a dog” (90). In the following dialogue, Q\_P\_ leaves no doubt that he was the aggressor, not the innocent victim that he had claimed to be. He says:

I was so happy & feeling so free thinking of BLACK COCK, shy shrinking boy-penis like a baby rabbit, skinned. I'd held it tight in my hand tickling the tip with the tip of the ice pick but the pills hadn't taken effect yet for I was impatient & exhibited poor judgment (I see in retrospect—I was drunk) & the boy panicked beginning to bellow as he broke free like a frenzied animal crashing through the locked rear door of the Ford van SO HELP ME GOD I DON'T KNOW HOW. & running then naked but for his filthy T-shirt out into the street bellowing like a fire alarm rising louder & louder. MY ZOMBIE! (90)

In these conversations, Q\_P\_'s narrative fantasy of himself as an oppressed minority work to undermine the stability of historical narratives and illustrate a larger crisis of white identity. By using language that allows him to reinvent himself as a victim of reverse racism and not as a racist, *Zombie* illustrates how Q\_P\_'s rhetoric encourages and reinforces his violent fantasies. His use of a first-person narration that excludes all other perspectives allows Q\_P\_ to represent his voice as that of the dominant society, one which silences all other narratives.

Q\_P\_'s perception of himself as an oppressed minority exemplifies what Eduardo Bonilla-Silva calls “color-blind racism.” In *Racism without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in the United States*, Bonilla-Silva argues that existing civil rights legislation such as the Civil Rights Act of 1964 is dated since it was created to deal with the older, more obvious forms of discrimination. As a result, he feels that such legislation is ineffective against the new, color-blind racism that has emerged to replace Jim Crow since 1964. According to Bonilla-Silva, color-blind racism has five main elements: (1) the increasingly covert nature of racial discourse and practices; (2) the avoidance of

racial terminology and the ever-growing claim by whites that they experience “reverse racism”; (3) the invisibility of most mechanisms to reproduce racial inequality; (4) the incorporation of “safe minorities” (e.g., Clarence Thomas, Condoleezza Rice, or Colin Powell) to signify the non-racialism of the polity; and (5) the re-articulation of some racial practices characteristic of the Jim Crow period of race relations. (26)

In addition to the dehumanization of racial minorities by the criminal justice system, the dominant culture’s dehumanization of racial minorities is also evident in the novel’s representation of residential spaces. In *Zombie*, white racist stereotypes about racial minorities influence the composition of the novel’s residential areas. Since the nonwhite presence is often associated with contamination and decay, white suburbs such as Dale Springs are racially charged sites where “home” is defined as the place that excludes the racial Other.

Decades after the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1968 that had officially outlawed racial discrimination in housing (“Fair Housing Act of 1968”), *Zombie* portrays how residential areas continue to be strongly segregated based on race. In the novel, whites and nonwhites rarely live in the same neighborhood. When they do, it is seen as a sign of social disorder and decline.

For example, Grandma P.’s description of her old neighborhood’s changing racial composition during World War II illustrates white resistance to the social changes brought about by the war. In a conversation with her grandson, Q.P., she recalls how the family’s previous residence, University Heights, used to be all white until nonwhites started moving in. Then the P\_family and other whites moved to other areas to avoid living among them. She blames this change in the racial status quo on the Germans and the Second World War. She believes that the war against fascism and racial genocide made it easier for “coloreds” to move to these previously nonwhite spaces (102).

When whites and nonwhites live together under the same roof, it is in the (nonwhite) tenant to (white) landlord relationship that Q.P. has with the nonwhite, foreign student population in his apartment building—a job that his parents give him as “a sign of their trust” (10). This occurs in spite of his conviction for sexual misconduct against a black child and his need to take psychotropic drugs to control his violent acts against nonwhite men. Placing the mentally unstable and racist Q.P. in an authority position over a house of

young, nonwhite males (the subjects of his violent fantasies)—and not having some safeguards in place to monitor his behavior, thus seems more like a sign of the community’s deep distrust towards racial minorities. Uncritically placing Q\_P\_ in authority over the population that both he and other white characters despise only confirms Q\_P\_’s perceptions about his racial supremacy and right to control perceived inferiors.

In another sense, though, Q\_P\_’s position as a “caretaker” of a building for nonwhite residents is also indicative of his own dehumanization by other white characters because he must live in close proximity to the subjects of their racial paranoia. Such daily, prolonged contact with racial inferiors marks Q\_P\_’s body as a site of imagined contamination and inferiority.

For instance, the idea of whites and nonwhites living together in the same space is so unbelievable in *Zombie* that even Mr. T\_, Q\_P\_’s white probation officer, finds it strange. When he learns that his client is the caretaker, he never questions Q\_P\_’s suitability for the job or that he may relapse, given his criminal record, and can be a danger to his tenants. Instead, he seems more worried about Q\_P\_’s tenants being a danger to Q\_P\_. He is rude to them and pushes his way through them, as if they do not matter (131). After he forces them to leave the room, he tells Q\_P\_ that it “must be a little weird for a white man, white caretaker, for them, eh?” He suggests that a “real” white man does not take care of anyone, particularly nonwhites. Then, aware that his words can be interpreted as racist (but also sexist), Mr. T\_ quickly recovers by insisting that he “doesn’t mean anything by it” and that he’s “got lots of black friends. I’m speaking of history” (131). As in Bonilla-Silva’s earlier mentioned explanation of color-blind racism, Mr. T\_ covers his own bigoted views about racial minorities by claiming to be close to specific members of these groups. He uses these “safe minorities” as a way to deny that he harbors now socially unacceptable attitudes towards minority populations.

In its depictions of the criminal justice system and residential spaces, Oates’s *Zombie* illustrates a dystopian vision of democracy, one where white identity has been so associated with social privilege that Mr. T\_ and other white characters struggle to adjust to life in a society in which these racist cultural standards are now publicly unacceptable. Oates’s narrative thus makes clear that ending racialized and gendered violence goes beyond legal

recognition of social equality; it also requires the recognition and destruction of mental constructs that create these oppressive, dehumanizing arrangements.

## Consumption

In *Zombie*, Q\_P\_'s internalization of dominant cultural prejudices allows him to justify his torture, possession, and literal consumption of racial Others. As in the real-life accounts of serial killer Jeffrey Dahmer, Q\_P\_ represents his victims in ways that support his physical and mental consumption of them. This is particularly evident in his portrayal of his black male zombie specimens.

As mentioned earlier, Q\_P\_ has mixed feelings towards black men. On one hand, he depicts them as uncivilized and monstrous con artists who prey on innocent white people. On the other hand, Q\_P\_ appears fascinated by black men. He implicitly believes that they are “naturally” hip and aggressive and uncritically accepts larger cultural stereotypes about them. Since he looks for zombie specimens that he can enjoy dominating, black men are primary sources for Q\_P\_'s violent fantasies because he believes that they are criminals at heart and deserve to be punished.

This connection between consumption and racial dehumanization is exemplified in Q\_P\_'s encounter with the previously mentioned zombie subject “NO-NAME.” His interaction with the latter seems like a dominance game, with two predators fighting to see who will come out on top. Initially, “NO-NAME” assumes that Q\_P\_ is the stereotypical white man—gullible, trusting, and weak—and thinks he will be the one to con and control him. But as Q\_P\_ relates, this is not what happens. He recalls that “NO-NAME” is “grinning thinking he'd be sucked off by whitey & paid for his trouble & maybe clear out whitey's possessions but that was not how it came about & the panic in his eyes said this was so” (81).

But as the reader quickly realizes, Q\_P\_ is not the only one in this exchange who is not what he seems. “NO-NAME” turns out to be much younger than the Q\_P\_ character previously believes. When Q\_P\_ is about to lobotomize “NO-NAME,” he notices that “He [NO-NAME] was crying, I saw that he was just a kid. Maybe nineteen years old & he'd acted so much older, so cool” (81). Despite his insistence that he is “not a sadist” and that the young

man would not be hurt if he cooperated (81), Q.P. is incredibly turned on by “NO-NAME”’s fear. He completely loses control of himself. Q.P. quickly jams the ice-pick in his victim’s eye and comes so hard that it feels to him “LIKE A CONVULSION I couldn’t stop nor even breathe” (82).

In attempting to turn “NO-NAME” into a zombie, Q.P. seeks to deprive him of the very coolness and self-confidence that attracts him to the young man in the first place—qualities which also make “NO-NAME” an unsuitable zombie. Yet Q.P. is so obsessed with violently conquering and forcing another human being to obey him that it never occurs to him that he may not be attracted to his empty subjects if his operations are successful. Since he arrogantly believes in his own superiority, it also never occurs to him that his operations could fail. When his lobotomies do fail, he must content himself with totems from his victims such as a wristwatch or a lock of hair (14). As Fiorenzo Iuliano observes, although the term, “zombie” can at times be applied to both Q.P. and his victims:

Quentin’s frustration arises when he realizes that, instead of a zombie, the only object that he can actually create is a lifeless carcass. The pure materiality of the dead body, counterbalancing the fantasies about the perennial undeadness of his victims (with which he albeit unwarily, wants to identify), represents for Quentin that radical otherness he is not even able to deal with, probably because it reminds him of his own actual body, which he was so surprised (and afraid) to possess. (18)

Even in death, the boundaries between Quentin and his victims remain in place.

Q.P. also describes nonwhite residential spaces in ways that rationalize white racial violence against perceived racial enemies. Here, he represents nonwhite spaces as lawless and brutal, places where the conventions of “normal” society do not apply. Q.P.’s association of nonwhite spaces with the breakdown of law and order is exemplified in his descriptions of his exploits to the black side of town, where he goes to get high and pick up men, things that he cannot do publicly in Dale Springs or Mt. Vernon without attracting

attention. While in the Cass Corridor, he says that he sometimes stays in a hotel on Cass and is known as “TODD CUTTLER,” a guy who “looks kind of cool but also kind of a square, an asshole you could put something over onto if you tried” (24). Here, he uses graphically violent images and language to support his negative opinions about black people.

For instance, as he is mugged and beaten up by “a nigger gang” of teenagers (59) when he enters the black section of town, (60) people are reluctant to help him. He recalls that he’d “just seen a cop-cruiser pass through the intersection but nobody came to my rescue, if there were witnesses on the street they didn’t give a shit just walked away, or stood laughing at whitey getting pounded” (59). He compares the sound of his assailants’ voices repeatedly asking him for his wallet to the “words to some nigger music which maybe they were” (59).

In this way, Q\_P\_’s perception of nonwhites as violent predators allows him to justify his own behavior while among them. Since his victims are already considered “nonhuman” and savage, he can easily argue that he needs to be equally violent towards them to defend himself.

However, Q\_P\_’s violent experience in the black section of town is also important for another reason. It is after being beaten up that he realizes that he can change his appearance. With his bruised, bandaged face, he appears unrecognizable to himself—except maybe for his eyes. His eyes are the only part of his face left uncovered. In that moment he realizes that he can reinvent himself to gain sympathy and remain anonymous. He understands that he can change himself to attract potential “zombies”—and avoid detection. He says that he could “habit a FACE NOT KNOWN” and could “arouse PITY, TRUST, SYMPATHY, WONDERMENT & AWE with such a face.” He believes he could “EAT YOUR HEART & asshole you’d never know it” (60). With a constantly changing appearance, Q\_P\_ is able to further refine his stalking and consumption of the racial and sexual “other”—while remaining virtually undetectable to law enforcement because they cannot find him. His physical fluidity helps him to defy traditional criminal profiles used to track serial killers.

Q\_P\_’s consumption of his black male victims is reminiscent of James Dow’s definition of exocannibalism. According to Dow, exocannibalism is the consumption of those who are members of an enemy group. One consumes a

feared enemy as a way of defeating them *completely*, in mind and body. Such theft allows the conqueror to believe that they have defeated a powerful enemy. Once defeated, this enemy is then sacrificed and consumed by the victor. In this way, the conqueror feels that they internalize the enemy's power and make it their own. Theft, then, functions as a totem. It is a tangible reminder of the victor's dominance.

The idea of creating a zombie, then, in *Zombie*, can be viewed as an extreme form of consumption since Q.P. is literally "sucking the life force" from his enemies, consuming his conquests in both body and soul. His consumption of his victims seems like a scene from actual, early twentieth-century American lynching parties where participants would terrorize and murder their victims, and later collect the victims' body parts and other crime scene items as souvenirs (Young 641). Similarly, Q.P. consumes his zombies mentally by producing and feeding off of their terror, and physically by murdering and dismembering them. Once dead, he completes the consumption process by claiming his victims' personal objects as his own. Unlike Jeffrey Dahmer, whom James Alan Fox and Jack Levin believe consumed his victims as a way to keep them close to him (87), Quentin P.'s main reason for consuming his zombie specimens is for his personal gain and amusement. Instead of being beloved friends whom he consumes as a way of keeping their memories alive, Q.P. imagines the relationship between himself and his victims in unequal terms, with himself as the hunter and the victims as his prey. He attempts to control the lives of his victims by controlling how the latter are publicly remembered. Quentin's consumption of his victims is thus a two-step process in which he must be sure that his victims cannot rise up against him in this world or in the next.

Through its description of Q.P.'s physical and mental consumption of his victims, the novel suggests that the control of media representations of Quentin's prospective zombies is a crucial element in the consumption process. As long as his victims remain forgotten and unidentified, the Q.P. character is then able to take ownership of his victims' possessions. Such erasure also allows him to reinvent history by denying that his zombies ever existed. It also helps Q.P. to create new identities.

For example, Q.P. steals souvenirs from his victims such as a wristwatch, sunglasses, and a locket of hair to help Quentin to reinvent himself. He believes the objects make him look better and cooler. He says:

I am wearing RAISINEYES' funky leather slouch-brim hat & BUNNYGLOVES' soft-bunny-fur-lined leather gloves are in the pocket of my \$300 sheepskin jacket & my aviator-style amber prescription lenses are in BIG GUY'S frames so I look pretty fucking cool I think for a shy white guy on the downside of thirty, weak chin & hairline receding. (78)

In this instance, we see how personal objects are not the only things that Q.P. gains from the slaughter of his specimens. He also steals intangible objects from them such as their original names and identities. Like a modern day slave master, Q.P. erases all previous memories of his zombie specimens. When he discusses his subjects, it is through the personas that *he* has chosen for them such as “NO-NAME,” “BUNNYGLOVES,” and “RAISINEYES.” As a result, Q.P.'s zombies are most often identified by the inanimate objects and totems that he takes from them: “BUNNYGLOVES”'s leather gloves, “RAISINEYES”'s brim hat and glasses, etc. (79) Since he is the only narrator, readers can only see his victims in the way that he wants them to. Q.P.'s deadpan, factual voice is the only one that we hear in the text. No counter-narrative is offered. It is as if the reader, too, is one of Q.P.'s victims, horrified by his actions and thoughts—but unable to speak or to escape from them.

It is only “SQUIRREL,” a white, teenaged neighbor of one of Grandma P.'s friends, who retains his name and original identity after his death. Q.P.'s selection and capture of the young boy marks a departure in his killing strategy because it is the first time in the novel that he targets and attempts to create a white zombie specimen. He first sees the young boy while picking his Grandma up from her friend's home in the suburbs and is instantly attracted to him. Though “SQUIRREL” is white and a suburbanite, the older man is so smitten with him that he decides to risk capturing him as a zombie specimen. He believes the boy is destined to be his. For these reasons, Q.P. believes that a change in strategy and persona are required since the boy is “a Caucasian,

upper-middle class kid” whom “lots of people cared for, & would miss at once” (109).

At this point in the novel, Quentin creates a new persona, “TODD CUTTLER,” a regular patron of the restaurant that “SQUIRREL” works at. Unlike with previous specimens where he initiates a relationship with his victims before attacking them, he does not initially attempt to contact the child. He stalks the boy, carefully watching his habits and behavior. Finally, when Q\_P\_ is ready to capture him, he subdues the child by releasing a carton of baby chicks on the ground in front of him. Q\_P\_ then kidnaps him as “SQUIRREL” stops to retrieve the chicks (145).

When “SQUIRREL,” whom Q\_P\_ initially values for being white and male, disappoints his captor, Oates shows the boy attaining a subject position similar to that of Q\_P\_'s nonwhite and female targets. For example, when he captures “SQUIRREL,” the boy does not behave as Q\_P\_ expects him to. He is afraid and fights for his life (151). Q\_P\_ then becomes angry. He is sure that a real “zombie” should not be afraid of or resist him. Enraged, he then rapes the child and repeatedly shouts, “Who’s your Master? Who’s your Master?” (152). Once he sees that “SQUIRREL” has enough free will to reject and judge him, Q\_P\_ then rejects him. For him, the child goes from being the object of his obsession to just “a homely kid with blood-caked nostrils” (151). When the boy asserts his personhood, his punishment for “failing” Q\_P\_ is death.

However, “SQUIRREL”'s social class and white identity make it difficult for Q\_P\_ to erase his original identity after the boy’s disappearance and death. Unlike his other victims, his family is influential enough to keep his disappearance in the news. They offer “a \$50,000 reward” for any information leading to their son’s discovery and have a hotline for concerned citizens to call for this purpose (175). “SQUIRREL”'s family keeps his memory alive by reminding the reader that he has another identity and name other than the one that Q\_P\_ assigns him.

Conversely, Q\_P\_'s nonwhite victims simply disappear because they do not have anyone in their lives powerful or persistent enough to call attention to their deaths. They are destroyed in memory as well as in body. As the Q\_P\_ character observes, he has never heard “a ripple, nor any word,” about “NO-NAME,” or any of his nonwhite victims (84). After killing “NO-NAME” and

preserving his gold tooth as a souvenir, the serial killer then denies responsibility for his crimes.

“How many times,” he says. “I keep mementos but no records. My clock face has no hands & Q\_P\_ has never been one to have hang-ups over personalities or the past, THE PAST IS PAST & you learn to move on” (85). His refusal to think about the past helps Q\_P\_ to deny that he has actually stalked and destroyed human beings. Without anyone present to remind the public and Q\_P\_ of their existence, the killer’s nonwhite victims never gain public attention or sympathy. As a result, they never retain any identity other than the one that Q\_P\_ has given them. Q\_P\_’s abduction of “SQUIRREL” is the only time that he faces intense police surveillance and the possibility of a lengthy prison sentence (158). Even then Q\_P\_’s race and social class status allow him to avoid prosecution for “SQUIRREL”’s death (159).

At the novel’s end, Q\_P\_ is in what James Alan Fox and Jack Levin call a “cooling off” period from his murders (17), where he temporarily stops killing and attempts to resume a normal life. His “zombie” experiments have all failed and he has voluntarily resumed his medication to control his urges—which no one knows that he had stopped taking. Yet it is clear that this is only temporary because, though Q\_P\_ has stopped killing, his violent fantasies still remain and are becoming more and more violent. Near the end of *Zombie* he is seen imagining what it might be like to sever human vocal cords so that his zombies cannot speak (179). All the while, he continues to live in relative freedom and privacy, undetected by the police.

Since no one is willing to see Q\_P\_ for the monster that he really is, he continues to kill and feed off of the community—as long as he restricts his lethal activities to the “dregs” of American society. Unable to gain voluntary admiration from the white elites that he worships such as his father, R\_P\_, he instead attempts to force admiration from his less powerful (and usually nonwhite) victims. As a serial killer, Quentin P\_ is, for Fiorenzo Iuliano, “... the monster that, far from being an outcast, an external menace to any established social order, is its most authentic and genuine product” (23). A “zombie,” then, is his way of reminding himself that, though not on top, he is not and will never be at the very bottom of society.

## Conclusion

In *Zombie*, Quentin P.'s acceptance of dominant cultural beliefs in white male supremacy leads him to actively resist the recognition of the legal and human rights of racial minorities. For him, racial minorities are a threat to democracy itself since he feels that his status as a democratic citizen depends on their subjugation. These beliefs also allow Q.P. and other like-minded white citizens in the text to resist social equality by portraying themselves as victims of social injustice and reverse racism. In such circumstances, Oates's *Zombie* suggests that simply including excluded populations into mainstream society is not enough to transform an unjust one into a more egalitarian one; lasting social transformation requires a change in mind as well as in law. Through its depiction of the Q.P. character's pathology, Oates's narrative illustrates that as long as the legal recognition of the civil rights of abject minority populations is interpreted by the majority as "undemocratic," any hopes that social problems will be solved solely through legislation are futile.

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