On June 9, 2008, the Canadian House of Commons passed an amendment to the Immigrant and Refugee Protection Act. Titled Bill C-50, the amendment shifts discretionary powers from Parliament to current and future immigration and citizenship ministers. Touted by the Conservative Party as an expedient remedy to the 900,000-applicant backlog and an estimated labour shortage of 300,000, Bill C-50 raised immediate concerns within immigrant and activist communities (CBC News, 2008). Critics contend that the bill caters to the interests of Canadian employers and business lobbyists in its provision of “disposable” and inexpensive labour, while “family” and “refugee” applications may be deferred indefinitely and without recourse. In some ways, the changes under Bill C-50 are redolent of the Live-in Caregiver Program in Canada as well as the Bracero Program (1942-1964), Guest Worker legislation and H-2A initiatives in the US, all of which offered temporary visas to migrant workers but resembled what Gilbert Gonzalez calls “an imperialist schema of colonial labour” (2006, p. 2). Whereas government policies in North America continue to reduce migrants to economic figures, other conservative discourses depict migrants as self-identical foreigners who flood the economy with cheap labour, deplete welfare resources reserved for “native” citizens and present a possible threat of terror in the “post-9/11” era. If “the so-called invasion of immigrants is the exaggerated rhetoric” of political pundits, however, “the increase in global migration within and from Third World countries is real” (Bakan and Stasiulis, 1997b, p. 30).

In response to an anti-immigrant backlash, on the one hand, and the precarious labour conditions facilitated by government policies, on the other, activists have adopted a variety of tactics—from protests and unionization to boycotts and independent media production. Nationwide rallies like “A Day without an Immigrant” (2006) in the US and “No One Is Illegal” (2008) in Canada draw urgent attention to the contradictions between state and capital that continue to plague immigration legislation and underwrite nativist ideologies of race and nation. As part of a wider protest against conservative immigration reform, the demonstrations called for a boycott of businesses, workplaces and schools by (un)documented immigrants and activists alike. In a similar spirit of opposition, documentary films like Anayansi Prado’s Maid in America (2005) and Dana Inkster’s 24 Days in Brooks (2007) illustrate how migrant workers are instrumental to the economy and image of the multicultural nation-state but are exploited by employers and unwelcomed by “nativists” in North America.
We may find aspects of the immigration debate dramatized in unexpected areas of popular culture, including blockbuster comedies, television sitcoms and, perhaps most ominously, zombie films. While the zombie is often read in North America as a caricature of whiteness and mindless consumption, it has recently returned to issues of alterity and labour in ways that conjure its Haitian mythological origins. Andrew Currie’s *Fido* (2006), for instance, presents a Canadian satire of suburbia that positions the domesticated zombie as both worker and commodity. Here we find a zombie workforce in households of the 1950s, a time when the Canadian government and middle-class families turned increasingly to the Caribbean for cheap domestic labour. As a result, *Fido* may be read in part as a racial allegory of migrant labour, one that draws on the fantasies of the past to explore and interrogate the anxieties of immigration in the present. By presenting alterity through labour (and vice versa), the film provides an entry point into an historical examination of a conservative multicultural agenda in Canada, which presently imagines migrants as an inexpensive remedy to shortages in domestic work, the service industry and healthcare. Within and beyond the genre of horror, *Fido* may provide an alternative pedagogy of multiculturalism by engaging the politics of “difference” through the “monsters” of migrant labour.

**SKETCHING THE ZOMBIE AS SOCIAL CRITIQUE**

Romanticized by the travel writings of William Seabrook, the zombie is widely believed to originate in Haitian folklore of the early twentieth century (Plawiuk, 2005). “Zombi” tales were especially popular during the American occupation of Haiti (1915-1936) when US investors gained increasing access to sugar plantations and a cheap workforce to form, most notably, the Haitian-American Sugar Company (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2002; Plawiuk, 2005). According to legends, the zombie was a dehumanized plantation worker hypnotized by a vodoun priest or “houngan” to toil “like a robot in the fields” or be “sold to others” (Ackermann and Gauthier, 1991, p. 474). But the zombie also embodied “a proletarian myth” of a Haitian revolt against American employers and forced labour during the 1920s” (Plawiuk, 2005, p. 6). More recently, the zombie has been used to describe and deplore “a shadowy alien-nation of immigrant black workers” in South Africa, “whose demonization is an equally prominent feature of the postcolonial scene” (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2002, pp. 789, 783). Despite a range of regional vernaculars, the zombie tradition generally emerges from conditions of enslavement and exploitation of colonial labour by capitalist enterprises, marking the folklore’s explicit political-economic origins. The zombie stands in for what is otherwise inconceivable.

Following a wave of fascination inspired by Seabrook’s *The Magic Island* (1929), early Hollywood films like *White Zombie* (1932), *Revolt of the Zombies* (1936) and *Revenge of the Zombies* (1943) featured an “evil sorcerer who ran a Caribbean sugar plantation” and “a workforce of resurrected corpses” (Beard,
Despite its political potential, the zombie was adopted mostly as a visual prop with little diegetic significance. Early zombie films sensationalized Haitian “voodoo” rites and privileged melodrama over any sustained critique of colonial labour practices. Not until the 1960s did the zombie film become politically oriented with the release of George A. Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) and later, *Dawn of the Dead* (1978). Romero is said to have modernized the genre, turning the zombie into a poignant metaphor of various social anxieties and afflictions related to the breakdown of the nuclear family (*Night*) and the perils of consumer capitalism (*Dawn*). Specifically, *Dawn* has been lauded as a clever critique of hedonistic consumption and commodity fetishism set satirically in a Pennsylvanian shopping mall (Dendle, 2001). Indeed, critics and filmmakers alike typically posit the zombie’s preternatural consumption of human flesh alongside the shopping frenzy of the “living”. In *Dawn*, for instance, we find a “consumer citizenry – figuratively zombified by commercial culture – literally zombified by those who once were us, our simulacral doubles as cannibal consumers” (Loudermilk, 2003, p. 85). Lacking any concern for the production of material life, zombies are bound by consumptive drives, desires and needs that are said to typify the most vitriolic elements of late capitalism (Webb & Byrnand, 2008).

As dehumanized characters, zombies have also been used (on and off screen) to condemn the conditions of production in the US (Dendle, 2001; Harper, 2002; Shaviro, 1993). From the proletarian diatribes of Paul Romano (1947) to the activist writings of Harvey Swados (1957), “shop rat” memoirs have often denounced the monotony of assembly-line production by using ghoulish descriptions of the dispossessed worker and his “state of suspended being” (Swados, 1957, p. 143). In the more recent and colourful prose of Ben “Rivethead” Hamper we find a “workforce that was subhuman at best – a slaughterhut full of foul-smellin’ mutants who couldn’t tell dusk from dawn nor harmony from homicide”, not unlike the “brainless ghouls in a George Romero flick” (1986, pp. 45, 126). As for the zombies of US cinema, Peter Dendle describes them as “blue-collar undead” and “the ultimate Marxist working-class society” (2001, p. 11). If zombies are idealized as mindless and alienated workers fit for a routinized workplace, however, they are always laid off or unemployed in Romero’s films. In other words, they symbolize “demobilized Organization Men” of post-Fordism in the 1970s (Beard, 1993, p. 30). To this end, Steve Beard describes *Dawn* as a coded critique of outsourcing, unemployment and the antecedents of Reaganomics rather than the illusions of consumer culture *tout court*. As “moaners, idlers [and] scavengers” zombies present “a hysterical class fantasy … filtered through a bourgeois imaginary of disgust” (Beard, 1993, p. 30).

Many of these nightmares, however, are laden with racial overtones. Both *Night* and *Dawn*, for example, are often described as racial parables where a black hero battles a mob of lower-class “flesh eaters”, most of which is white (Dyer, 1997; Guerrero, 1993; Harper, 2002; Newitz, 2006). In her analysis of “capitalist
monsters in American pop culture”, Annalee Newitz draws on an assortment of films – from Night of the Living Dead, Blacula (1972) and Zombie (1979) to Nightbreed (1990), Tales from the Hood (1995) and Bones (2001) – to explain how a racialized underclass is symbolized by and against a variety of ghastly characters. In such films “‘undeath’ is implicitly associated with colonial-era social and economic relationships, where one racial group engages in state-sanctioned subordination of others” (Newitz, 2006, p. 108). Here the trope of the “undead” is used to narrate the overlapping themes of economic and racial injustices, sometimes warning of a symbolic subaltern insurrection by evisceration. Such themes reemerge in Romero’s Land of the Dead (2005), where avaricious whites are eaten alive by minoritarian monsters that “embody the contradictions of a culture where making a living often feels like dying” (Newitz, 2006, p. 2).

While such horrors provide interesting commentaries on reconciliation and the haunting memories of slavery in the US, they are less explicit of racialized labour in the current context of “postindustrialism” and global migration flows. Economic dislocations over the past three decades have certainly resulted in widespread layoffs and the outsourcing of North American jobs, but they have also brought a range of “Third World” migrants to some of the most undesirable and precarious worksites in Canada and the US. In other words, the rampant unemployment and vagrancy used to situate Hollywood zombies do not explain an emerging (under)class of “working poor”, one that is comprised disproportionately of migrants from developing countries. Some of these economic changes are reflected in Andrew Currie’s “throwback” setting of Fido. Using reanimated corpses in suburban homes and the service sector, Fido (re)locates labour at the heart of the zombie tradition, twisting Romero’s oeuvre by recycling the original themes of exploitation and revolt found in Haitian folklore. With the “return” of the indentured zombie, Fido provides a curious commentary on a series of “multicultural” developments shaped by immigration policies in Canada. To this end, “the poetic particularity of phantom workers” may be a “sensitive register of shifting experiences of labour and its value” (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2002, p. 794).

FIDO AND THE “MONSTERS” OF MIGRANT LABOUR IN CANADA

Filmed in the Okanagan region of British Columbia (Kelowna and Vernon), Fido is a Canadian-produced zombie homage starring Carrie-Anne Moss, Billy Connolly and Dylan Baker. It is one of several satires produced by Currie’s own Anagram Pictures, which includes films that dig at Canada’s colonial history (Elijah), the banalities of parking enforcement (The Delicate Art of Parking) and an eco-horror (Thaw). As a social commentary, Fido may be situated within a larger historical context of Canadian horror films and political allegory. Whereas the hysteria surrounding the Red Menace of the 1950s, for instance, found an energetic outlet in Hollywood – from Invaders from Mars (1953) and War of the Worlds (1953) to Invasion of the Body Snatchers (1956) and The Angry Red Planet (1960) –
political commentary within Canadian horror is a more recent development (Vatnsdal, 2004). Film producer and critic Caelum Vatnsdal traces the onscreen origin of Canadian political horror to David Cronenberg’s Rabid (1976), a film that borrowed from the events of the October Crisis in 1970 with its depiction of a militarized Montréal under a state of martial law. Five years later, George Mihalka’s My Bloody Valentine (1981) offered a brooding portrait of a small mining town stricken by a stagnant maritime economy and a maniacal miner abandoned by his coworkers. Such films illustrate a burlesque convergence of politics, economics and horror in sordid but significant ways.

It is perhaps not surprising that several Canadian horror films have used monsters to convey various social anxieties, including the perceived disruption of Canada’s “white settler colony” and the transgressions of racial “otherness” (Abu-Laban, 1998, p. 71). Early monster flicks like The Werewolf (1913) and Secrets of Chinatown (1935), for example, traded on a popular fascination with indigenous “shape-shifters” and Sinophobia, respectively. Indeed, the politics of marginality are sometimes at the centre of Canadian “monster” productions both on and off screen. The Corpse Eaters (1974), for example, relied on homeless people of Sudbury for its “undead” extras, epitomizing the notion of cheap zombie labour (Vatnsdal, 2004). In addition, Zombie Nightmare (1986) was originally written as a retribution narrative in which a black teenager returns from the dead to exact revenge on the privileged white hoodlums responsible for his death (Vatnsdal, 2004). Here the zombie is a jarring but appropriate narrative prop; “the oppressed remain monstrous, but monsters are celebrated as being more sympathetic than the people who hunt them” (Newitz, 2006, p. 112). Recently, an apparent subgenre of Canadian zombie satires has emerged, one that now includes Graveyard Alive (2003), Rotten Shaolin Zombies (2004), Eat the Parents (2007) and the short Canadian Zombie (2002), whose tagline draws implicitly on neoliberal citizenship: “They don’t vote. They don’t recycle. They eat your flesh!” The purpose here is not to nationalize specific zombie films, but rather to ground Fido within the cultural context of its production and consumption.

Fido presents an allegory of alterity that mocks a variety of moral panics both past and present. When a radioactive cloud engulfs the earth, mysterious “space particles” bring about the reanimation of corpses, which thrive on the consumption of human flesh. Funded by the ZomCon Company, the military engages in a series of “Zombie Wars” in order to contain the undead. With the invention of the ZomCon “domestication collar”, however, zombies become as “harmless as a household pet” and are put to work in a variety of dead-end jobs throughout suburbia. But when the Robinson family discovers a malfunction in its zombie’s collar, Fido (Connolly) attacks several suburbanites and triggers widespread panic amongst the middle class. After a zombie uprising nearly destroys the town of Willard, order is restored to the suburbs and Fido returns to the Robinsons as not just a family “pet” but also a surrogate father and companion. The zombie, in other
words, is ironically incorporated into a white suburban fantasy of the heteronormative family, but not without first eating a hole in the middle class. Although *Fido* lampoons a range of social maladies – from suburban conformity and a crisis of masculinity to commodity fetishism and the denigration of the elderly – it is perhaps most effective as a playful commentary on exploited labour signified by the zombie worker. As subhumans, the zombies are ontologically “othered” and forced to perform unskilled labour, freeing the white middle class to enjoy leisurely pursuits. Zombies are employed in a series of positions, from servants, groundskeepers and custodians to domestics, machinists and personal escorts. What distinguishes *Fido* from many zombie films, then, is its depiction of zombies *at work*. The undead are seen mowing lawns, planting flowers, serving beverages, toiling in factories and “playing catch” with the town’s children. They resemble “proletarian servants in the paragon of ‘postindustrial’ society” (Rouse, 1996, p. 252). So if some zombie films forecast the impending death of capitalism, as Loudermilk (2003) suggests, *Fido* turns death itself into value. Indeed, the consumptive terror that eviscerates capitalist society in Romero’s series is inverted and exploited in Currie’s satire. In *Fido* “the zombie is transformed into alienated labour power … and made to serve as someone else’s privatized means of production” (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2002, p. 794). As I argue below, Currie’s exploited zombie is a provocative symbol of difference, one that resonates with the racial politics of migrant labour and the underside of multiculturalism in Canada.

**THE “SPECTRAL WORKFORCE” AND THE ETHNIC OTHER**

Set in the fictional suburb of Willard during the 1950s, *Fido* offers a “stylized social criticism” within a satire of “nostalgic longing” (DeFalco, 2008, p. 37). It invites the audience to reflect on the anxieties and injustices of the present through an imitative but no less important re-presentation of the past. Specifically, Currie credits the work of Douglas Sirk and David Lynch for inspiring *Fido*’s sardonic Technicolor portrait of postwar suburbia (Billington, 2007). As Currie himself explains, the “fable-like quality” of a retro suburban setting provides “satirical moments in the film [that] really reflect our modern world more clearly”, including post-9/11 anxieties over homeland security and the construction of “bigger fences” at the border (Billington, 2007, p. 4). As a result, we might read *Fido* as a symbolic but highly mobile critique of racial fantasies in North America, which are often channeled by the immigration policies underlying multiculturalism. While multiculturalism in Canada is informed by several political streams – including indigenous rights and substate nationalisms – I am primarily concerned with immigration policy and how it contributes to a conservative undertaking of “inclusion” (Kymlicka, 2007). As Habiba Zaman (2006) points out, this
undertaking narrows the terms of citizenship to economic value by de-emphasizing family reunification and amnesty, which are perhaps the hallmarks of liberal multicultural ideology. Such terms are punctuated by the indentured zombies of Fido, which may provide a pedagogical space that is both critical and creative. Specifically, the film’s setting and storyline reflect the systemic use (and abuse) of migrant workers, illustrating (via the zombie) what Rey Chow calls the “ethnicization” of labour.

Under the shifting economic conditions of neoliberalism, global divisions of labour, and multiculturalism in the West, ethnicity is often understood and articulated in relation to certain types of work. As Chow (2002) contends,

a labourer becomes ethnicized because she is commodified in specific ways, because she has to pay for her living by performing certain kinds of work, while these kinds of work, despite being generated from within that society, continue to reduce the one who performs them to the position of the outsider, the ethnic. (p. 34)

Ethnicity, in other words, becomes “society’s mechanism of marking boundaries by way of labour” (Chow, 2002, p. 35). While Chow is referring mostly to neoliberal developments, the “ethnicization” of labour was especially evident in the Bracero Program (1942-1964), a diplomatic agreement between the US and Mexico that relocated more than 450,000 Mexican workers to farms and factories across the Southwestern US (Briggs, 1986; Craig, 1971; Gonzalez, 2006). Although the Bracero Program ended in 1964 it has been revisited through Guest Worker and H-2A initiatives, which continue to encourage migrants from developing countries to fill underpaid and unappealing jobs with potential pathways to citizenship (Chang, 2000; Gonzalez, 2006). In the US, Latina/os, for instance, are now “particularly concentrated in jobs considered unattractive, demeaning, dangerous, dirty, temporary, or comparatively poorly paid – i.e., ‘Mexican work’” (Gomez-Quinones & Maciel, 1998, p. 35).

In Canada, the ethnicization of labour has taken a variety of shapes. During the late 1800s, for instance, the Canadian government imported thousands of Chinese bachelors to build the most treacherous routes of the Canadian Pacific Railway (CPR) (Zaman, 2006; Chan, 1998). As Margot Francis suggests, “Chinese workers were often described as ‘living machines,’” whose supposed docility “justified employers relegating them to the most menial tasks, underpaying them, and often minutely controlling their labour” (2006, p. 180). Nearing the completion of the CPR in 1885, however, Chinese labour became disposable under the terms of the Chinese Immigration Act, which sought to curtail immigration from Asia by imposing a “head tax” of $50 and, by 1903, $500 (Zaman, 2006). In 1910, the first Domestic Scheme was introduced to import women from Guadeloupe to work as caregivers in Canadian middle-class homes. With the passing of the second Domestic Scheme in 1952, however, the Canadian government participated in “the
first full-scale recruitment of Caribbean domestics” (Zaman, 2006, p. 67). Because of these programs the relationship between domestic work and women of colour from developing countries became increasingly normalized in the popular Canadian imaginary (Stiell & England, 1999).

Canada continued to express its labour shortages through immigration policies long after the 1950s. In 1973, for instance, the Canadian government introduced the Temporary Employment Authorization Program, under which migrant workers were “prohibited from quitting a job without leaving the country” (Zaman, 2006, p. 68). Since 1992, Filipino women have been channeled into domestic work under both the Labour Export Policy in the Philippines and the Live-in Caregiver Program in Canada, which offers temporary visas and two years of “virtual bonded servitude” (Bakan & Stasiulis, 1997b, p. 31). As the Canadian Labour Congress notes, some provincial governments have recently lobbied the Ministry of Health in Barbados for temporary workers, adding to what Agnes Calliste calls the “brain drain” of the Caribbean (1991, p. 148). Such are the understated colonial antecedents of multiculturalism in Canada. The immigration policies from which the nation’s vaunted image of diversity is derived include an inglorious underside of economic exploitation. As a result, migrant worker programs speak less of the “liberalization” of immigration policy than Canada’s recurring need for cheap labour in positions that are typically “low-paid, repetitive, temporary and monotonous” (Zaman, 2006, p. 2). This conservative arm of “multiculturalism” may be bolstered by Bill C-50, which aims to increase migrant labour despite ongoing economic uncertainties (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2008). According to the activist group No One is Illegal, Bill C-50 “makes clear that poor people, working people, and people of colour need not apply to come to Canada as permanent residents unless they are willing to come temporarily as workers in exploitative and marginal jobs” (Bonnar, 2008, p. 1). Such programs illustrate what Abigail Bakan and Daiva Stasiulis call a “global apartheid”, which may also be found in Fido (1997a, p. 8).

Although Fido features no characters of colour, its racial allegory emerges in implicit ways. As Newitz explains, “When racial difference cannot be talked about in a narrative – or is willfully ignored – one way it gets described is as a difference between … dead bodies and animated ones” (2006, p. 89). The zombie, in other words, stands in for racial and ethnic “otherness” by wearing a fictional disguise. Currie’s zombie workers, in particular, invite a critique of conservatism and prejudice in ways that deliberately borrow from classic 1950s melodrama, including Sirk’s Imitation of Life (1959) and Sirk tributes like Rainer Werner Fassbinder’s Angst essen Seele auf (1974) as well as Todd Haynes’ Far from Heaven (2002). Despite obvious narrative differences, zombies and characters of colour in these films occupy nearly identical roles: domestics, guest workers and gardeners. As such, Fido’s racial allegory vividly unfolds from a division of diegetic labour that is highly intertextual; the undead are marked in ways that reflect the ethnicization of work within and beyond the 1950s melodrama. Nearly
every shot of *Fido’s* suburbia shows zombies gardening, serving beverages, removing garbage, cleaning yards or tending to children – jobs performed typically (but not exclusively) by migrants of colour. If certain types of work in North America are increasingly ethnicized, as Chow suggests, *Fido’s* “spectral workforce” constitutes in many ways a metaphor of ethnicity whereby unskilled labour is performed exclusively by zombies (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2002, p. 788). Because of their difference, zombies are made to work particular jobs; but their ontological difference is marked by the types of work they perform, making labour and “ethnicity” (though theoretically different) virtually indissociable.

In some ways, Fido’s situation in the Robinson home is not unlike the conditions experienced by migrant domestics in Canada since the 1950s. Incidentally, the film’s zombie workers appear at a time in Canadian history when the erosion of labour rights and citizenship status “coincided with the shift to Third World sources” of female domestic labour (Bakan & Stasiulis, 1997a, p. 21). Specifically, the second Domestic Scheme subjected Caribbean migrants to more precarious terms of citizenship and systematic screening for venereal diseases, underscoring “the Canadian government’s racist and sexist assumptions about black Caribbean women” (Calliste, 1991, p. 147). Likewise, the zombies in *Fido* are perceived as a contagion in need of invasive examinations to ensure the sanctity (read: whiteness) of Willard. Suspected of draining the community with their “infectious” broods and “indiscriminate” (sexual) appetites, both the zombie and the migrant are framed by a discourse of “contamination” and “containment”. This echoes what Carmela Murdocca (2003) describes as the racialization of “degeneracy” in which public concerns over infectious diseases like Ebola, tuberculosis and SARS converge with anti-immigration rhetoric in Canada. *Fido*‘s zombie workers amplify similar racial anxieties of viral infection which also intersect with the “privatization” of labour exploitation: the first shot of suburban Willard features a zombie serving lemonade to a white couple, who joyfully watch their daughter “jump rope” with a zombie nanny; *Fido* serves the Robinsons dinner and cares for their son, but is repeatedly harassed by the father, whose bigotry towards zombies is trenchant. Following the workday, we find Fido chained to a tree in the Robinson’s backyard, an embellished but effective way of emphasizing the plight of the live-in caregiver and the anxieties of infection. Symbolically, then, *Fido* contains more than one Caribbean import: the zombie and the domestic worker of the postwar period, which converge in the film. And yet, as Currie suggests, the political commentary in *Fido* is not limited to a Sirkian setting of the 1950s. This begs the question, how can we understand the nostalgic narrative of zombie labour in a contemporary context?

Incidentally, *Fido* was shot and released at a place and time that coincide with labour turmoil and the use of migrant workers at a large healthcare facility in the city of Kelowna. In September of 2006, Park Place Seniors Living Ltd. laid off twenty percent of its care staff, only to advertise (via a private contractor called AdvoCare) those same positions at twenty-five percent less pay (Valiani, 2007).
After receiving no legitimate applicants, AdvoCare turned to the Canadian government’s Temporary Foreign Worker Program to fill an alleged labour shortage at a reduced cost. As Salimah Valiani (2007) observes, “temporary foreign labour in Canada is predominantly racialized” (p. 6) and used by employers like AdvoCare “to provide sub-standard wages, benefits and working conditions in a given sector” (p. 4). And so it seems that Fido’s ominous narrative of precarious “postindustrial” labour speaks to endemic concerns of marginalized workers within and beyond its nostalgic setting. The present Conservative government in Canada has failed to include any significant measures to protect the rights of migrant labourers within the Temporary Foreign Worker Program, despite several grievances filed by the United Food and Commercial Workers Canada and INTERCEDE (Valiani, 2007). Although the conditions experienced by migrant workers vary by origin, industry and era, Fido draws our attention to the continuity of exploitation under temporary foreign worker programs, a theme as relevant today as it was during the 1950s. While the film’s ironic suburban fantasy may rest in the past, its workers clearly do not. As a result, Fido participates in a discussion of racialized labour in ways that exceed its director’s expectations and intent.

As national boundaries and borders are said to collapse under market pressures, migrants – “those wanderers in pursuit of work, whose proper place is always elsewhere” – have become valuable economic resources which are, like the zombie, depicted as outcasts of the national imaginary (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2002, p. 779). This is particularly evident in Fido’s tension between zombie labour and white suburbia. Whilst some zombies are banished to the “Wild Zone” beyond the town’s protective fence, others are indentured as domestics, gardeners and servants, suggesting that the state is “more preoccupied with border control and national security than with migrants’ well-being or rights” (Zaman, 2006, p. 27). In the US, border militarization and the “fence project” were perhaps the most draconian (yet anticipated) elements of the Bush administration’s “comprehensive” immigration reform, according to which a 700-mile double-layered barricade was to be erected along the US-Mexico border and patrolled by an additional 6,000 National Guard troops. (While current US president Barack Obama has shelved the “fence project”, he deployed 1,200 National Guard troops to the southern border in the spring of 2010.) At the same time Latin American migrants are demonized in mainstream media, however, they “have become an institutional labour force in such industries as agriculture, construction, and textiles as well as in the service sector” (Maciel & Herrera-Sobek, 1998, p. 4). Similarly, Fido’s zombies are highly ambivalent “internal outsiders”, born on earth but reanimated by radioactive particles “from the darkest depths of outer space”. As alien workers they are hunted but also domesticated; feared as “an evil no man could predict” yet fetishized as fashionable commodities. For instance, Mr. Bottoms is a decorated veteran of the Zombie Wars and head of security at ZomCon, but his family owns a pack of zombies as gardeners, servants and housecleaners.
Evidently, the zombie’s presence in Willard is highly precarious and contingent upon obedience in the workplace. Late in the film, for instance, Fido misbehaves and is banished to a ZomCon factory on the outskirts of town where a mutiny takes place. Promising a “better life through containment”, ZomCon is responsible for not only the employment of zombies but also their deportation, placing the fate of the zombie workers in the “invisible” hands of the marketplace and the capricious interests of the corporation (which doubles as a neoliberal state). In other words, the narrative dramatizes “an extremely imbalanced relationship in which workers are dependent on employers to maintain their legal status, and employers can disregard their responsibilities toward workers whom they ultimately have the power to deport” (Valiani, 2007, p. 2). Neither dead nor alive, the zombie cannot qualify for citizenship and is not privy to labour rights offered to “human” workers. It is temporary, expendable and reduced to unfree labour. Like the indentured campesino (farm worker) living in squalid American labour camps or the Filipino nanny caring for affluent Canadian children, the zombie “exists within the boundaries of state regulation, but outside the boundaries of the national collectivity” (Arat-Koc, 1997, pp. 55–56). Once their value as labour expires they are swiftly, but not always effectively, repatriated to the “Wild Zone”. That is to say, both the zombie and the migrant worker are spectral entities in suburbia. They are neither living nor dead; neither present nor absent.

LESSONS AND LIMITATIONS OF FIDO’S ZOMBIE LABOUR

The “spectral workforce” of Fido speaks to a narrative tradition that uses a language of the occult to explain and interrogate capitalism as well as convey grievances to a wider audience. This tradition can be traced to the consortium of ghosts, grave diggers, spectres and vampires that line many of Marx’s manuscripts. What Derrida (1994) calls the “spectropoetics” of Marx’s writing include the use of ghosts and apparitions to describe and diagnose curiosities of capitalism like the “bodiless body of money” (p. 56) and the “metamorphosis of commodities” (p. 51). For Marx, the ghosts of labour and the social relations of production haunt the commodity-form, which of course takes on a spectral presence of its own. On the one hand, the occult narrative of capital “jolts the reader” into recognizing the “confusion” and “concealment” embedded within the system (Smith, 2001, p. 50). In its urgency, the language of horror and fright invites us to condemn the chilling and unspeakable conditions of forced labour and colonial exploitation. On the other hand, the “occultism of accumulation” renders the exploitative origins of value as mysterious as the “space particles” that awaken the dead. Because the zombie narrative, for instance, appeals to magic, which is by definition beyond rational inquiry, it may “preclude a deeper examination of the practices in which these figures are engaged” (Smith, 2001, p. 44). Marx was aware of this and sought a practical end to the ghosts of a bourgeois economy. He was certain that “the whole mystery of commodities, all the magic and necromancy that surrounds …
commodity production, vanishes ... as soon as we come to other forms of production” (Marx, 1977, p. 169).

We may find similar “spectropoetics” in Fido and its image of working zombies. Though “not particularly fast”, zombies provide the underlying but undervalued services that sustain Willard. To this end, Fido is concerned with “the struggle for recognition” of the oppressed (Wood, 1979, p. 28). While not conventionally “horrifying”, Currie’s film offers an alternative space of multicultural critique where the disruptive presence of the zombie accentuates the “hidden” labour provided, for instance, by migrant workers in Canada and the US. The zombie marks a “hyperbolic return to consciousness” of that which is displaced from dominant multicultural society (Schneider, 2004, p. 131). As historical figures, “zombies have ghostly forebears who have arisen in periods of social disruption, periods characterized by sharp shifts in control over the fabrication and circulation of value, periods that also serve to illuminate the here and now” (Comaroff & Comaroff, 2002, pp. 782–783). Incidentally, Romero’s recent installments – Land of the Dead and Diary of the Dead (2008) – follow remakes of Night of the Living Dead (1990) and Dawn of the Dead (2004), all of which illustrate the enduring curiosity and pedagogical potential of zombie metaphors in light of current economic uncertainties and a distended military-industrial complex in the US. As sordid symbols of alienation, zombies provide narrative subterfuge for a biting social critique, which is often overlooked as gruesome but “light” entertainment; the apparent absurdity of zombie films enables and constrains a potentially subversive commentary. If zombies mark a return of the repressed, they may also mark the “return” of exploited colonial labour.

But Fido contains a series of vertiginous storylines that complicate the coherence of its radical critique. If the plot is driven by zombie labour, for instance, it is also driven by a “boy and his dog”. To be sure, Fido is more than an alienated worker; he is also a childhood companion, much like Richard Pryor’s character in The Toy (1982) and the lovable canines of classic Hollywood. (Timmy often refers to Fido as “boy” – an epithet connected to both chattel slavery and pet ownership.) By this logic, the film’s satirical tone could just as easily turn the zombie labourers into a spectral work farce. Indeed, much of the film’s humour is derived from the zombies’ terrible inefficiency but also their steady employment by the residents of Willard. If working zombies are a joke, so is the white middle class that hires them. Zombies may be “mindless”, but their propensity to consume the middle class of Willard is instinctual and, I might add, instructional. Though zombies are usually indiscriminate in their appetite for human flesh, they only devour the affluent residents of Fido’s white suburbia, a trend that sharpens an already acute visual economy of class.

And yet the film mocks the insurgent possibilities of the zombie subgenre by absorbing Fido into a suburban fantasy of the heteronormative family. If the zombie relieves a housewife of taxing domestic “duties”, it also stands in for an unaffectionate father and a dispassionate husband. Indeed, Fido becomes an
improved model of masculinity by performing housework, dancing with Mrs. Robinson and spending time with Timmy. He is the film’s “emotional centre” that “suffers, … responds to music, [and] longs to relate to people”, unlike “the cardboard representatives of normality” (Wood, 2002, p. 32). While this development neutralizes the zombie’s “monstrous” alterity, it also “manages” Fido’s difference by converting him into an ideal replica of the white middle class. In the end, Fido has replaced his ZomCon coveralls (and his proletarian identity) with a gaudy Hawaiian shirt, which he wears while smoking a cigarette and doting on Mrs. Robinson’s newborn. With his impending “fatherhood”, Fido has also replaced the late Mr. Robinson. The emergence of this “new” masculinity is foreshadowed by Fido’s budding romantic interest in Mrs. Robinson, which appears to be (bashfully) reciprocated. At this stage, the film’s symbolic critique of colonial capitalism may collapse under the rhetorical weight of heteronormative desire; Fido’s acceptance in suburbia is legitimized by his affection for Timmy and Mrs. Robinson, that is, his compatibility with the “normal” family unit rather than his value as commodified labour.

Although Fido mocks middle-class suburban values, its racial allegory can be troublesome. If the monster of science fiction and horror has been “one of the most powerful icons” for representing the Other, it is also notoriously slippery (James, 1990, p. 28). In some ways, the subhuman status of the zombie conveniently doubles for a range of oppressed identities, including those of “Third World” migrants who continue to struggle for the provision of the most basic but elusive human rights. If the monster invites sympathy for the dispossessed, however, it negates the prospects of agency by reiterating a condition of terminal oppression. Zombies and monsters are more often objects of fear and pity than subjects of their own political change. By extension the zombie worker provides a skeptical commentary on the self-activation of labour, which belies the mobilization of migrant domestic workers by activist organizations like the Philippine Women Centre, MIGRANTE International and INTERCEDE (Zaman, 2006). As such groups (and “shop rat” memoirs) would suggest, workers may be exploited but they are anything but mindless (or inherently monstrous).

In similar ways, the monster plays on the same terrorizing trope of “difference” and disorder found in anti-immigrant rhetoric in North America, from Lou Dobbs’ fear of an Aztlán conspiracy to “reconquer” the Southwestern US to Glenn Beck’s phobia of Mexican “illegals”. Such fears are often organized along class lines. At an Internet Movie Database (IMDB) discussion board, for example, one participant quipped about the dislocation of the (white) working class precipitated by Fido’s “cheap zombie labour”:

Am I the only one who has a problem with all the jobs [the zombies] are taking? In this movie every low wage or service industry job has a zombie replacement … [which takes] jobs away from hard working living americans
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(sic). In real life no one would be embracing these zombies, they’d be calling for a wall to be built on the earth/hell border. (Markusx1x-1, 2007, p. 1)

These remarks are symptomatic of a wider displacement of class struggle in North America, one that is guided by racial anxieties. As Juan Gomez-Quinones and David Maciel argue, “During periods of economic crisis … immigrant workers are held up as lightening rods for public discontent, thus diverting antagonism from those actually responsible for the crises” (1988, p. 32). Another discussant at IMDB, however, drew sympathetic comparisons between the plight of the living dead and “Hispanic workers in Texas”, claiming the irrelevance of the wall since America’s “Republican/Wealthy/Oligarchy would LOVE zombie labour” (Kelticpete, 2007, p. 1). In response, a third discussant emphatically wrote: “STOP ZOMBIE OUTSOURCING” (Ruxxy, 2007, p. 1).

Apparently Fido and its zombies elicit competing responses surrounding the racial dimensions of labour in North America, dimensions that percolate between Canada and the US. If the racial allegory is notoriously elusive, then, the zombie may roam in a variety of political directions. “Because the idea of zombie travels so widely, and across so many fields, it has become a very familiar character … that gestures to alterity, racism, species-ism [and] alienation” (Webb and Byrnand, 2008, p. 83). By this logic, the zombie may offer an inventive critique of multiculturalism because of its twisted and wildly popular spectacle of “difference”, which deliberately slips between human and inhuman. Indeed, within the general field of horror “the state of being human is fundamentally uncertain” (Prince, 2004, p. 2). The zombie violates the same ontological boundaries of humanity that provided the shaky foundations of the eugenics movement and modern racial logic (Goldberg, 1993). As such, the alterity symbolized by the zombie is tentative not absolute; the undead blurs ontological hierarchies by questioning the very fixity of “difference” upon which “sameness” depends.

CONCLUSION

As a range of programs and policies indicate, the Canadian government has a vested interest in procuring temporary labour from a host of developing countries. To this end, Bill C-50 only elevates the government’s participation in an expanding global division of racialized labour that relies on “Third World” migrants to fill largely unregulated, temporary and exploitable jobs in Canada. And yet Bill C-50 has evoked a wave of protest from labour and immigration activists across Canada, as illustrated by the “No One is Illegal” marches in Vancouver, Toronto, Ottawa and Montréal. Though former Citizenship and Immigration Minister Diane Finley claims Bill C-50 will correct the oversight of immigrant education and experience,
“Third World” credentials are not historically recognized by “First World” employers. As Himani Bannerji points out, “Decisions about who should come into Canada to do what work, definitions of skill and accreditation, licensing, and certification, have been influenced by ‘race’ and ethnicity” (2000, pp. 113–114).

Against this phenomenon, the zombie narrative represents a popular but political riposte. The allegory of the undead may double as a critique of not only thoughtless consumption, but also the “otherness” of unskilled labour. Borrowing from both political satire and horror, Fido provides an alternative vernacular of multicultural critique by situating “difference” in an imaginary but no less insightful context, one that trades on racist fears and fantasies in symbolic but duplicitous ways. Fido is fundamentally concerned with “difference” and its precarious division from the land of the “same”. It uses a sardonic nightmare to dramatize what Fredric Jameson might call the “political unconscious” of the multicultural nation-state (1982). As a result, Fido presents an imaginative space to work out and critique the fears and fetishes of alterity and immigration. The zombie fantasy is a “symptom of something else” (Jancovich, 2002, p. 21). It is loaded with “synchronic associations, ideological and social messages that are part of a certain … historical moment” (Prince, 2004, p. 2). As a liminal character neither dead nor alive, the zombie may signify some of the complexities and contradictions surrounding citizenship and the anxieties of “otherness”.

By reading Fido within and against a discourse of immigration, we are perhaps better able to grasp not only the fecundity of the zombie trope but also how political constructions of the migrant overlap with popular narratives of the monstrous “outsider” in ways that are neither entirely planned nor wholly coincidental. Indeed, “official and popular forms leak into each other and rely upon each other for their constitution” (Walcott, 2003, p. 136). Together, they represent complementary cultural vernaculars used to condition and comprehend a range of experiences central to the articulation of multiculturalism in Canada. Underlying these vernaculars is a concern for labour and immigration in late capitalism. By turning to the hyperbolic but compelling imagery of the zombie, Fido illustrates some of the prominent contradictions and concerns surrounding migrant labour within conservative iterations of “multiculturalism”. Indeed, the playful trope of the zombie contains a series of latent barbs that may otherwise be prohibited in more “serious” genres of popular culture. That is to say, Fido is both a political commentary and a site of pleasure, which might be used to smuggle its transgressive possibilities into a mainstream media complex; “at the level of plot, action and character … the most dangerous and subversive implications can disguise themselves and escape detection” (Wood, 1979, p. 30). Perhaps, then, the zombie allegory offers “not just a mode of depiction” but also a defiant vehicle of transformation (Shaviro, 1993, p. 87).
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