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Some hundred thousand people were killed in the Bosnian War in the early 1990s, nearly forty percent of them unarmed civilians. The war was sparked by territorial disputes, but it devolved into a nightmare of genocide and rape.

And yet, until a week ago, I knew almost nothing of the conflict. I had to double-check the Wikipedia page to get the numbers right before I wrote this essay's opening paragraph.

The protagonist of Aleksandar Hemon's *The Making of Zombie Wars* has a similarly sheltered view of the world. He is an aspiring screenwriter, bumbling through a life of unearned privilege and pleasure in Chicago. He wants to write a script illuminating the raw emotions of wartime, but, despite being surrounded by survivors of the Bosnian conflict, decides to write about a battle between humans and zombies rather than any of the real-world conflicts going ignored around him.

The Making of Zombie Wars is riddled with references to real-world horrors, especially the U.S. invasion of Iraq — Bush is seen fumbling through lies on the television, a Cheney lookalike is glimpsed through a car window — to emphasize that stories about imaginary battles with mythical monsters are much *easier* for readers than learning about actual war.

After all, the violence wreaked by moaning, groaning hordes of zombies is not our fault. Whereas we *are* to blame for the tragedies in Syria, all of us who enjoy the wondrous standard of living brought by the industrial revolution and the resulting climate destabilization. Our wealth was manufactured by burning oil, which changed the air, which destroyed arable land in the Middle East, among other places, which caused a food crisis, which led to violence. Mass exodus. Innocent children drowning.

We *are* to blame for the horrors in Iraq, all of us citizens of the United States, because the country was invaded on our behalf. And abandoned a wreck.

And, on a more personal level, our ignorance is our own fault. I should have known more about the Bosnian War. I was old enough to watch the news when it happened, and for years I could've picked up a book to learn. But I did not. Beneath the madcap plot of *The Making of Zombie Wars*, in which the unlikeable protagonist stumbles through one misadventure after

another (*cheating on his out-of-his-league girlfriend! Getting her cat killed! Bludgeoning a refugee! Abducting another refugee's daughter!*), Hemon is castigating *me*, too.

So I think it's interesting to consider that even the escapist fantasy — the zombies of *The Making of Zombie Wars* and countless other popular works — has a horrific real-world underpinning. I found myself explaining this mythology to my daughter a few days after finishing the book. She'd noticed a patch I have sewn onto my backpack: a zombie cat stumbling forward while mewling a pictograph of a small, pink brain.

"Zombies," I told my daughter (who recently turned two), "are mindless creatures. Rendered incapable of making their own decisions. Enslaved, say, by sorcery. So it's a closed loop. In the modern world, zombies eat brains. They have no thoughts of their own, so they want to eat the thoughts of others."

My daughter pointed at the patch again and said, "Brain!" Toddlers would make good zombies, actually. Fumbling, stumbling, leaking, snerking, drooling, grubby-handed monsters. They're a little too short and weak to be frightening, but they're certainly gross enough.

My wife chided me for that explanation. "Just pretend," she reassured my daughter.

At least I didn't go into detail about the slavery or suicide.

The zombie myth originated among the enslaved people in Haiti. Workers were underfed, dehydrated, hyperthermically exhausted, beaten, raped — abused in such myriad ways that, honestly, their circumstances are difficult for me to adequately comprehend. In lieu of my fumbling through further litany of despair, here's Edward Baptist in *The Half Has Never Been Told:*

Torture walked right behind them. But neither their contemporaries then nor historians since have used "torture" to describe the violence applied by enslavers. Some historians have called the lashings "discipline," the term offered by slavery's lawgivers and the laws they wrote, which pretended that masters who whipped were calmly administering "punishment" to "correct" lazy subordinates' reluctance to work. Even white abolitionist critics of slavery and their heirs among the ranks of historians were reluctant to say that it was torture to beat a bound victim with a weapon until the victim bled profusely, did what was wanted, or both. Perhaps one unspoken reason why many have been so reluctant to apply the term "torture" to slavery is that even though they denied slavery's economic dynamism, they knew that slavery. . . made a lot of product. No one was willing, in other words, to admit that they lived in an economy whose bottom gear was torture.

Yet we should call torture by its name.

Amid such horrors, the zombie myth was born.

One way to interpret the mythology is as a threat, per Amy Wilentz's "A Zombie Is a Slave Forever." A person, after death, might be magically re-enslaved by the oppressors. The soul does not return to Africa. Instead, sorcery might be used to re-animate the corpse into a half-dead man-thing that mindlessly performs its master's bidding for eternity. Not even suicide would allow the victims to escape.

But not all versions of the original zombie myth involve death. In some tellings, victims are plied with sorcery or drugs to convert the still-living into pliable, mindless slaves. It's a very *Matrix*-esque mythology. The victims telling the myth, and the victims listening, know themselves to be human beings. And yet they are being treated in a way appropriate only for zombies — who but a zombie could bear torture and enslavement?

The European overlords, in this telling, *are* sorcerers, but crappy ones. Because the people brought to Haiti were *not* zombified. They were still human, but the ineffectual sorcerers treated them as though they were not.

And so the original zombie war was the struggle in which humans — who'd been treated as miserably as though they *were* zombies — rose against their oppressors.

But — as Hemon demonstrates in *The Making of Zombie Wars* — we quickly forget the harsh stories of history, distracted by fantasies and make-believe like *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies* or *The Walking Dead*. Indeed, although the "zombie" side of that first revolutionary war was the good side, heroes who should have won and *did* win their struggle, zombies have been vilified ever since. We rarely root for the zombie hordes to defeat their creators or masters. And the few times I ever heard the Haitian Revolution mentioned in history courses in high school or college, it was maligned as a factor that *prolonged* slavery in the United States. In Ira Berlin's *The Long Emancipation*, he summarizes other historians' views that the Haitian Revolution "sparked a backlash, which frightened even the most stalwart opponents of slavery and fueled hostility to the movement toward freedom."

We do not celebrate zombies' efforts to break free from their misery. In their contemporary conception, they have no opportunity for redemption (unless you believe the buddy's return to console gaming in *Shaun of the Dead* qualifies as redemption, or Manny's flatulent rejuvenation in *Swiss Army Man*).

Nor do we in the United States celebrate the violent efforts of once-enslaved humans to assert their humanity. In the long struggle for civil rights, only those who pursued justice through nonviolence are commended — this despite our extremely jingoistic culture, what with an anthem that glorifies "bombs bursting in air" and the bro-tastic t-shirt proclaiming that we are "back to back World War champs" — leaving Ta-Nehisi Coates to muse that

[o]ur teachers urged us toward the example of freedom marchers, Freedom Riders, and Freedom Summers, and it seemed that the month could not pass without a series of films dedicated to the glories of being beaten on camera. *Why are they showing this to us?* Why were only our heroes nonviolent?

Indeed, only the threat of violence from federal troops allowed the Selma march to proceed unimpeded. The march was nonviolent at the level of individual black activists, sure, but, without the threat of violence, the protest could not have occurred. At issue was the threat of violence *from whom?*

In the United States, violence — or the threat thereof — from the downtrodden themselves is rarely tolerated.

Indeed, in the contemporary United States, only mythical violence commands respect. If the protagonist's script from *The Making of Zombie Wars* were filmed, it'd stand a chance of

grossing millions, just like all the other superhero space-invader zombie-riddled battle movies. Our nation's long-ago wars, too, have attained acceptable mythic status. All those World War II books! The Civil War memorials! And don't get me started about re-enactments.

Whereas current conflicts are quickly neglected. Veterans of our ongoing wars return to a country that hardly wants them, that views them as essentially damaged, that fails to provide for their needs, that abandons droves to suicide. The Iraq War will continue killing Americans long after the last soldier has come home.

But — as Hemon posits in *The Making of Zombie Wars* — their stories won't hold our interest long. We'll be too busy munching popcorn at the movies.