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Homo Amens: Epistemological Thanatopolitics and the Postcolonial Zombie

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Abstract: This study identifies a recurring yet overlooked figure in global ethnic and diasporic literature that I term *homo amens*. Drawing on Giorgio Agamben's concept of *homo sacer* and the postcolonial zombie, I argue that *homo amens* ("the man without a mind") is a powerful symbol of biopolitical violence that transgresses against immaterial bodies of knowledge—including indigenous cultural, familial, and scientific structures—instead of the material body. By focusing on the "epistemological zombie" in Erna Brodber's *Myal* (1988), John Okada's *No-No Boy* (1957), and Jonny Steinberg's *Sizwe's Test* (2008), I foreground the preservation of traditional knowledge as a political right and make the case for global ethnic literature as an instrument of epistemological equality.

Keywords: Giorgio Agamben, Erna Brodber, John Okada, Jonny Steinberg, biopower

I. Introduction

We live in the days of the walking dead. For well over a decade, the zombie has seemingly infiltrated every literary, cinematic, and scholarly field, and postcolonial studies is no exception, with zombies emerging again and again (and again) as popular metaphors for the teeming masses threatening the modern neoliberal order. Critics have identified disadvantaged groups like undocumented immigrants, refugees, and pandemic victims as "the living dead" for a variety of reasons, including their inhumane living conditions and ontological status as political menaces. Most importantly, though, their utter lack of juridical rights

places them in constant peril of state-sanctioned death and essentially elides the postcolonial zombie with *homo sacer*, the archaic figure of Roman law whom Giorgio Agamben adopts as the examplar of biopolitical abjection (12). However, in the popularization and propagation of Agamben's concept beyond the World War II concentration camp into New World plantations (chattel slaves) (Mbembe 21), sub-Saharan Africa (AIDS patients) (Comaroff, "Beyond Bare Life" 207), and the Third World (the global poor) (Povinelli 507), the scholarly conversation has become overdetermined, emphasizing only material politics in its most violent and blatant forms. This is not to suggest that analyzing the dehumanization of refugees or colonial slaves is unproductive—on the contrary, such work is crucially important—but rather to point out that such a heavy emphasis on bodies and political standing overwhelms a far less visible, though no less important, aspect of the postcolonial and neocolonial experience: epistemological loss.

While Western imperialism has helped circulate new forms of knowledge, it has undoubtedly weakened, outlawed, and destroyed traditional knowledge as well. Sometimes native culture is suppressed, such as when Western governments have attempted to indoctrinate Indigenous groups through mandatory re-education programs. Sometimes it is simply culled, as in the Spanish conquest of the Inca Empire. Boaventura de Sousa Santos labels this phenomenon "epistemicide," or the murder of knowledge (92). "Unequal exchanges among cultures have always implied the death of the knowledge of the subordinated culture," he writes, "hence the death of the social groups that possessed it" (92). Such a loss is implicated in the decline of Indigenous cultures worldwide throughout modernity. Unlike the violence inflicted upon the body of the concentration camp survivor, however, the erosion of traditional sciences, social norms, and cultural practices do not always leave a visible mark. Indeed, how many native languages have been lost over the centuries without leaving a trace because of Western colonialism? How many mythologies, genealogies, and technologies have fallen out of history? That we have even a sparse record of such enormous losses is a testament to the tenuousness of non-Western epistemes in the face of modernity. What remains underdeveloped in the postcolonial

"zombie" turn, I argue, is the loss of knowledge itself—the native histories, religious customs, scientific practices, and kinship structures that constitute a culture. A renewed emphasis on epistemology is therefore vital for providing a deeper and more expansive understanding of postcolonial biopolitics.

To this end, my study highlights a recurring figure in global ethnic and diasporic literature that I call *homo amens*. If *homo sacer* is the ultimate signifier of power loss, then *homo amens* is his epistemological analog, the postcolonial representative of socio-historical and cultural annihilation.[1] In Latin, *amens* translates as "foolish," so on one level *homo amens* is the stereotypical "idiot" of postcolonial discourse who refuses to adapt to Western scientific and religious norms—the character who simply cannot get with the program. Such idiocy is not problematic since it intimates a resistance to cultural imperialism. But more importantly, *amens* derives from "a" or "ab" (away from) and "mens" (mind), which loosely translates as "without a mind," and it is this second definition that cuts to the core of my argument. *Homo amens* is the postcolonial figure who has disengaged from traditional knowledge, relationships, and mores and, in doing so, has become truly lost, for this epistemic decline manifests as physical and mental impairments that render the subject zombic in some fundamental way. Some characters, for example, lose the ability to move. Others can carry out only repetitive motions. Sapped of indigenous modes of thinking and being, *homo amens* is neither fully alive nor fully dead in terms of functioning knowledge, which is to say he is an "epistemological zombie": a figure deprived of cultural consciousness. As a literary construct, *homo amens* is clearly indebted to *homo sacer* in both its etymological and biopolitical context, but there is an important distinction between the two. Whereas the latter focuses on the material body of marginalized peoples as a site for exploring political rights, the former stresses immaterial bodies of information as the primary medium for analyzing biopolitical inequity. According to Agamben, what distinguishes the "full life" (*bios*) of the average citizen from the "bare life" (*zoë*) of *homo sacer* is juridical rights in the eyes of the polis (10). In contrast, *homo amens* emphasizes epistemological rights—the ability to maintain, practice, and share cultural knowledge

as one sees fit—as part of experiencing a full life. As I will show, characters from a wide range of diasporic and postcolonial literature often become zombie-like when separated from traditional knowledge systems. Knowledge—its practice, prevalence, and permeation through social networks—is not just an ancillary element of political being but is tightly interwoven with it. Once prioritized in postcolonial discourse, epistemology has been sidelined in contemporary zombie conversations. *Homo amens* signals an emphatic return by making an intriguing claim about proper political rights, which rests on not only legal guarantees for the individual but also engagement with traditional knowledge forms. In other words, epistemology plays a central role in biopolitical existence. *Homo amens* is thus an epistemological symbol emphasizing cultural knowledge as a focal point of biopolitical interest, one we cannot afford to lose sight of despite the overwhelming critical focus on material bodies. If *homo sacer* and the zombie have emerged as powerful figures precisely because they offer an irresistible visual rhetoric for personifying the most unjust power imbalances of twenty-first-century life, *homo amens* leverages this same rhetoric to embody the systematic rupture of local knowledge. As such, it marks the restoration of epistemology to the forefront of postcolonial criticism and our understanding of biopolitical violence.

It is worth emphasizing from the outset that *homo amens* is not a new theoretical construct but rather a ubiquitous figure in world literature; my neologism simply reconfigures him within contemporary critical discourses on postcolonialism and power. In order to understand his etiology and attributes more fully, I will explore three key instantiations of *homo amens* in twentieth- and twenty-first-century ethnic literature: Ella O'Grady-Langley in Edna Brodber's *Myal* (1988), Ichiro Yamada in John Okada's *No-No Boy* (1957), and Sizwe Magadla in Jonny Steinberg's *Sizwe's Test* (2008). Each of these protagonists suffers from a different epistemic forfeiture—cultural loss for Ella, familial loss for Ichiro, and scientific loss for Sizwe—that manifests in their respective texts as debilitated physiological or psychological functioning, such that they devolve into "zombies" who exist somewhere between life and death. These examples are by necessity selective (rather than

exhaustive) in illustrating how Western imperialism has affected three arenas of knowledge. What these characters share, though, is a peculiar strain of zombism in which their physical abilities degrade in response to the immaterial loss of culture. To be clear, they do not exemplify the flesh-eating zombies of Hollywood lore. Instead, *homo amens* delineates a border figure caught between rival epistemes (Western and non-Western, dominant and non-dominant, modern and premodern) whose abjection arises not from thanatopolitical coercion of the material body but radical displacement of socio-cultural knowledge.

Rather than offer another zombie reading of our cultural moment, this study reconsiders the role that global ethnic literature can play in postcolonial biopolitics.[2] Epistemicide can transpire overnight and over centuries, in schools and legislatures, on scales so minute and so vast we often fail to recognize it at all. Perhaps more so than any other field, ethnic literature can highlight the devastating effects of cultural drain and knowledge loss as a consequence of colonial relations. The power of minority narratives resides not only in their ability to give form to familial, racial, and social dramas but also in their aesthetic capacity to re-form them—to distill and extrapolate them in ways that a purely historical analysis cannot. The contemporary zombie is a metaphor for colonialism, consumerism, and contagion (Boluk and Lenz 6), and in the same way, *homo amens* reifies the epistemic threats faced by the marginalized and powerless. The point is not that zombies are imaginary and can therefore be discounted but rather that epistemological zombism exists all around us in lower frequencies we too often fail to notice. Global ethnic fiction and nonfiction are thus crucial instruments for laying bare the epistemological struggles always already embedded within postcolonial relations. As long as unequal power structures exist, the loss of marginalized and local knowledges will continue. The ontological orientation of postcolonial zombie theory has occluded this fact, but *homo amens* can bring it back into focus. In connecting postcolonial studies, zombie studies, and ethnic literature, *homo amens* conceptually trades the current biopolitical focus on material bodies for informational bodies and asks: What happens to non-Western and non-dominant systems of thought during prolonged states of siege? What

is the relationship between epistemology and ontology in biopolitical life? What are the larger social implications of epistemic decline? How might these developments help us reinterpret indigenous knowledge as a political right? In bringing these questions to the fore, *homo amens* demonstrates that there is more than one kind of zombie emergent in the postcolonial encounter and more expansive ways of understanding its relationship to power/knowledge.

II. From *Homo Sacer* to *Homo Amens*

To properly grapple with *homo amens* as a new configuration of epistemological thanatopolitics, we must first retrace its theoretical lineage through two conceptual predecessors, *homo sacer* and the zombie. In *Homo Sacer* (1998), Agamben evaluates Michel Foucault's bivalent notion of biopower—"to make live and to let die" (Foucault 241)—by highlighting the modern nation-state's increasingly powerful and sanctioned ability to enforce death. Those bearing the brunt of such negative biopolitics are often the most marginalized and politically powerless in the networks of modern life. (The text's most famous examples are the *Muselmänner*[3] of the Nazi concentration camps.) Agamben provides such wretched figures a name drawn from ancient Roman law: *homo sacer*. In contrast with *homo liber*, the free man or citizen entitled to full political rights, *homo sacer* alternatively translates as the "sacred man" (Agamben 12) or the "accursed man" (51) who is defined by his capacity to be killed with impunity. Central to this concept of biopolitical difference are two contrasting forms of life: *bios*, the "full life" of all individuals with proper standing under juridical systems, and *zoē*, the "bare life" disassociated from the rights and protections of law (9). For Agamben, the conferral of political rights by the state distinguishes *homo liber* and *bios* from *homo sacer* and *zoē*, respectively, and it is this provision that constitutes a "good" life in modern society. "In the 'politicization' of bare life—the metaphysical task *par excellence*," he writes, "the humanity of living man is decided" (12).

Given the gross power imbalances in colonial, postcolonial, and neocolonial relationships, critics have found *homo sacer* a rich concept and have, in recent years, expanded his historical and geographic range

beyond Agamben's original locus of the concentration camp. For example, Achille Mbembe views the colony—and by extension, the postcolony—as a "camp" in which native populations are constantly under siege and are deprived of all political rights (23–24). Jean Comaroff broadly locates *homo sacer* in the plight of Third World HIV victims ("Beyond Bare Life" 207), while David Dalton observes him in all members of the Global South threatened by Global North technologies, like drones (16). More recently, Dolores Herrero has identified Australia's Manus Island refugees as contemporary examples of *homo sacer* (950).[4] While this rapid proliferation of necropolitical engagements makes *homo sacer* an increasingly heterogeneous and multi-temporal figure, what remains consistent in the scholarship is an emphasis on the material body as a site of violence. At the level both of the individual and the collective, the threat of physical harm, suffering, and death is precisely what attracts the critical eye—it is through the bodies of the diseased and disenfranchised that society bears witness to some of the West's greatest injustices. "The body is privileged in philosophy and science," observes Agamben (74), and nowhere is this clearer than in the progression and proliferation of *homo sacer* scholarship. Such an emphasis on the ontological (i.e., physical existence) marks an intriguing swerve in postcolonial theory; whereas previous scholars have identified culture or identity as foundational elements of postcolonial discourse (Bhabha 1), Agamben prioritizes the body as the material fact through which modern power should be interpreted. When he elides the flesh of the citizen with the power of the sovereign (Agamben 59), the physical body's premier status becomes undeniable.

This intense critical focus on the dehumanized body in part explains the zombie's ascension as a major postcolonial figure. As Sarah Juliet Lauro observes, the zombie has exploded as a cultural signifier, "an icon of disempowerment that can be made to signify everything from distrust of the government to fears of terrorist attack or viral pandemic to suspicions of science or a critique of consumerism" (9). While its symbolic fluidity seems to grow by the day, we must recall that the zombie emerges from a specific historical context grounded in Western imperialism. The modern zombie myth first arose in colonial Haiti, where

the French used enslaved Africans to grow sugar, coffee, and cotton as export crops. Chera Kee notes that the original Haitian *zombi* was the victim of magical practices forcing him or her to work nocturnally in the sugarcane fields for a Voudou master (9).[5] Such pitiable beings were "soulless" because without personal freedom or will, they were reduced to a state of complete servility (Lauro 50). That said, the *zombi* also carries with it the dangerous whiff of revolution, not least because Haiti remains the site of the world's only successful slave revolt. This dialectical figure has since morphed into the American cinematic zombie, which is largely characterized by decomposition, mobs, consumption, and capitalism thanks to George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* films. Still, the Haitian *zombi* is never far removed from its present-day incarnation, and it is this historical zombie—a "soulless husk deprived of freedom" and infused with latent menace—that populates contemporary postcolonial critique (Dayan 37). Indeed, as "the most powerful emblem of apathy, anonymity, and loss" (Dayan 37), the zombie is tailor-made to exemplify the political disenfranchisement of the Global South. Postcolonial scholars have enthusiastically taken up the zombie as a hyperbolic intensification of *homo sacer*, the living dead man of the modern postcolony who is rendered monstrous by biopolitical forces. Jean and John Comaroff argue that exploited migrant workers in Africa are "part-time zombies" because of their involuntary toil at all hours of the day ("Alien Nation" 787). Anthony Downey similarly contends that undocumented immigrants exist in limbo because their bare lives on the "margins of social, political, cultural, and geographic borders are lives half lived" (109). Jon Stratton writes that "[t]he zombie is the mythic expression of bare life in the modern world" ("*Muselmänner*" 261). What defines the zombie in this biopolitical context is that a vital aspect of its humanity—political rights—has gone missing. Here, again, political standing demarcates *bios* from *zoē* and distinguishes the healthy body of the citizen from the crippled flesh of the zombie. While a particularly ghastly necropolitical signifier, the zombie reinscribes the same physical suffering as *homo sacer*: both figures highlight violations of social justice, race relations, and postcolonial strife via the physical body. While important, this intense focus on material violence in the global

postcolony has left epistemic violence comparatively overlooked. This is an unfortunate lapse.

Knowledge, of course, occupies a central position in postcolonial studies. Edward Said defines Orientalism as a "system of knowledge" and the Orient first and foremost as an epistemological zone constructed through anthropological, biological, linguistic, and historical approaches (75–76). In her canonical essay "Can the Subaltern Speak?" Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak identifies epistemic violence as the silencing of the global poor through the subjugation of local knowledges, especially by colonizers who disqualified non-Western cultural systems "as inadequate to their task" and "beneath the required level of cognition or scientificity" (76). Speaking of native knowledge within culture more broadly, Frantz Fanon writes, "[i]n the colonial situation, culture, which is doubly deprived of the support of the nation and the state, falls away and dies" (196). Santos elaborates on this obliteration in his work on epistemicide. He views dominant epistemologies like Western science as threats to what he calls "epistemologies of the South"—"the ways of knowing developed by social groups as part of their resistance against the systemic injustices and oppressions caused by capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy" (x). For Santos, modernity has been defined by the destruction of Global South epistemes such that "whatever knowledge does not fit the image [of Western rationalism] is discarded as a form of ignorance" (125). While epistemology clearly matters to postcolonial discourse, it has also been left behind by the zombie turn; the violence inflicted upon the physical body obscures other social and cultural aspects of the (post)colonial experience. I contend that *homo amens* is a valuable concept precisely because it returns epistemology to the forefront of postcolonial studies.

The erasure of knowledge is a pervasive condition of the colonial past and present. A prime example is Australia's "Stolen Generations."[6] Starting with the 1905 and 1911 Aborigines Acts, Australia's re-education program allowed the Western Australian Parliament to legally separate Aboriginal and mixed-race children from their families for interpellation into Western society; the terrible cost was the severance of family ties and cultural knowledge. Another example is the Canadian

residential school system, which similarly separated roughly 150,000 First Nations children from their families for the purpose of destabilizing Indigenous culture and bolstering Eurocentric culture. According to Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission, the program entailed "the destruction of those structures and practices that allow [a] group to continue as a group" and thus constituted a form of cultural genocide (1). Yet another example is the attrition of spoken Native American languages from an estimated three hundred in the pre-Columbian era to roughly 175 today (Cohen), which speaks to both the catastrophic loss of life over the last several centuries as well as the loss of culture. As Colin Samson and Carlos Gigoux argue, a person's language is not just a mode of communication but a way of conveying cosmological viewpoints, family relations, and the perceptual states of speakers (184). In the instances mentioned above, there are no *Muselmänner* to suggest a thanatopolitical state, but the damage of the (post)colonial experience is readily apparent through the slow bleeding of genealogical histories, group practices, and Indigenous sciences. The bleeding here is largely invisible, an epistemic dissipation over generations and centuries.

Homo amens is a literary construct that gives a name and form to these silent deaths, to the potter's field of cultural production created by Western colonialism. It combines the discourse of *homo sacer* and the zombie in the service of epistemological critique. More specifically, *homo amens* is a bridge figure, the "foolish man" and the "man without a mind" who links biopolitical theory and postcolonial zombism in the literary imaginary to epitomize the dire consequences of cultural annihilation. In contrast with *homo sacer*, *homo amens* employs zombie tropes to foreground knowledge as the principal site of colonial violence. This distinction is crucial. *Homo sacer* and *homo amens* undoubtedly share conceptual overlaps—the threat of physical annihilation implicitly carries with it threats to power/knowledge. However, whereas the former term emphasizes political rights as the major differentiator between *bios* and *zoē*, the latter term stresses epistemic rights as a key element distinguishing full life from bare life. Knowledge, and more specifically the practice and ownership of non-dominant knowledges, is necessary to a life fully lived. In other words, epistemology is not ancillary to ontology,

as Agamben would likely argue, but fully interwoven into what we would call a good life.

The exaggerated nature of *homo amens*, which is to say his hyperbolic zombie form, is necessary for making the invisible highly visible. Indeed, it is only by personifying epistemic loss in the most outlandish means possible that *homo amens* can adequately capture its real-world manifestations. In the three case studies of *homo amens* that I discuss below, different types of epistemological decline—loss of cultural heritage, loss of kinship, and loss of science—transmute into physiological loss. I chose *Myal*, *No-No Boy*, and *Sizwe's Test* because each emphasizes a broad cultural mode affected by epistemicide in the modern era. Although these modes partially overlap (it is difficult to separate kinship from cultural heritage, for example), the texts highlight different aspects of the postcolonial experience and its less visible consequences. That knowledge depletion turns characters into quasi-zombies is significant because it literalizes the degree to which knowledge can be considered part of a full, *bios* existence. Lauro and Karen Embry argue that the zombie is a metaphor for absence because the zombie lacks something essential that makes humans human (90). However, instead of identifying consciousness, free will, or even political autonomy as that which determines a full life, *homo amens* posits knowledge (often local, Indigenous knowledge) as a defining feature of the human. Put differently, *homo amens* suggests that *bios* has an epistemological component: to live a full life means having the ability to freely participate in non-dominant systems of knowledge. Moreover, the political rights that define *bios* must take epistemology into account.

The zombification of characters also serves a secondary function. By reinscribing the physiological and psychological loss of the Haitian *zombi*, *homo amens* reminds us that the zombie myth is a "people's history of enslavement and oppression" (Lauro 9). The zombie is "biologically alive but 'socially dead'"—a lamentable figure deprived of cultural agency and networks (17). This is an epistemic history that has been overlooked in *homo sacer* scholarship, but *homo amens* once more speaks for the oppressed. The erasure of languages, oral histories, ancestral beliefs, traditional medicines, ethnoscientific customs, and social networks

that has transpired across modernity has been sidelined in necropolitical criticism, and yet such knowledges still matter deeply. There exists more than one politics of death, and *homo amens* gives form to this thanatopolitical multiplicity.

III. Epistemological Zombism in *Myal*, *No-No Boy*, and *Sizwe's Test*

One of the most compelling examples of *homo amens* in contemporary literature is Ella O'Grady-Langley in Brodber's *Myal*. The novel has drawn significant interest from scholars as a "quintessential postcolonial text" (Adams 160) in which Myal, a variant of the Afro-Creole Obeah religion, acts as a fulcrum for exploring black-white relations, the history of colonization, and cultural syncretism in early-twentieth-century Jamaica.[7] Building on this critical history, I argue that the text's use of zombification as a symbol of cultural loss emphasizes epistemology as an overlooked aspect of postcolonial biopolitics. The illegitimate child of a white father and a black mother, Ella is a young, fair-skinned girl growing up in Kingston, Jamaica. Her life radically pivots when Maydene Brassington, the white wife of the local Methodist minister, decides to adopt and raise Ella. Though Maydene's actions are well-intentioned, it also sets into motion a disastrous process of epistemological loss in which Ella is slowly and inexorably drained of the traditional Jamaican knowledge that is her cultural birthright. This struggle between Western and non-Western cultural systems is intimated early on when the narrative rhetorically asks how much richer Ella's life might have been had she remained in her village to witness the kinetic drumming and dancing of Myal ceremonies instead of learning to fold sheets in the Brassington mansion (Brodber 79). When Brodber writes that "only those who had those kind of ears or knew what the drumming could mean, could hear" (79), she suggests the loss of local knowledge also spurs the loss of some innate aptitude.

Ella's cultural evisceration accelerates upon her union to wealthy American Selwyn Langley and the "spiritual thievery" (83) that eventually zombifies her. Fascinated by Ella's upbringing, Selwyn begins siphoning her past in order to produce a Broadway show depicting what

he considers real life in Jamaica. In handing over her cultural history for capitalistic consumption, Ella turns her mind into a leaking wound: "For years there had been something like gauze in her head where she supposed her mind to be. . . . She first noticed the draining when Selwyn started to come around and most noticeably when he held her hand. The gauze barrier was melting" (80). "Draining" is a key word: in *Myal*, the exchange of information is a zero-sum game in which Selwyn's epistemic gain is Ella's loss. The emptying of her mind simultaneously bankrupts her body. The turning point for Ella arrives with the debut of Selwyn's "coon show" *Caribbean Nights and Days*, an uninformed, racist appropriation of Jamaican landscapes ("This GroveTown in which Selwyn had set his play . . . was unnatural") and bodies ("the black of their skins shone on stage, relieved only by the white of their eyes and the white of the chalk around their mouths") that essentially reenacts the historical theft of Caribbean labor and culture for Western pleasure (83). Strangely enough, it also pushes Ella into a pseudo-catatonic state in which she cannot move, think, or speak properly. She becomes as stiff and still "as a Grecian sacrifice" (4) and is only capable of repeating a single phrase: "Mammy Mary's mulatto mule must have maternity wear" (84).[8]

Ella's conversion to a not-quite human of limited functionality transforms her into a very specific type of zombie: *homo amens*. Ella is undoubtedly "foolish" for allowing others to shape her life despite the personal cost, but her epistemological zombification is the most significant element of her *amens* state. As Lauro and Embry argue, "the zombie emphasizes that humanity is defined by cognizance" (90), though the cognizance at stake in *Myal* is not biological but cultural—Ella's awareness and ownership of her historical past and social practices. Her connection to traditional Jamaican knowledge (family customs, drumming, dance, and communal stories) is what ultimately makes her human. When that cultural history is taken from her, she becomes, quite literally, a postcolonial subject who is rendered posthuman. Micheline Adams notes that "Brodber reverses the notion of colonizers *filling* West Indians with knowledge and replaces it with the image of colonizers actually *emptying* or zombifying them" (161; emphasis in original). When

Ella realizes the *zombi* sorcerer Selwyn "took everything [she] had away" (Brodber 83), the "everything" refers to her cultural past and future. In losing control over her heritage, Ella's epistemic loss manifests as bodily loss. Reduced to a figure without a culture and a body without a mind, she transforms into an epistemological zombie. In *Myal*, the body makes excruciatingly visible the invisibility of cultural loss.

Homo amens makes a very specific claim about the nature of the human, namely that knowledge plays a role in differentiating the full life of *bios* from the bare life of *zoē*. This is exactly what transpires in Ella's zombification. If we think of Ella as a living, breathing vessel for Caribbean knowledge, she only experiences *bios* when she has ownership of that knowledge. As a child in Jamaica, Ella functions normally because she has access to her cultural past. When Selwyn steals it, she is reduced to the *zoē* figure of *homo amens*. Such an interpretation of Ella's zombification aligns well with her eventual cure. Western medicine cannot heal her psychosomatic trauma, so Ella is eventually returned to Jamaica, where the medicine man Mass Cyrus performs what Pin-Chia Feng calls a "ritual of rememory" (154). This traditional Myal ceremony, involving native herbs and traditional healing, "leads to a re-membering with [her] ancestral cultures and to a certain extent frees [her] from the traumatic nightmares resulting from tribal dismemberment and racial encounters" (154). Mass Cyrus' homeopathic cure literally fills up Ella's empty vessel with premodern Jamaican knowledge and customs. Shalini Puri argues that spirit possession in *Myal* is directly connected to "ancestral beliefs, oral traditions, religions, and healing practices" (101), and if *homo amens* results when such knowledge is extracted, one's spirit can be rejuvenated when that knowledge is returned.

Myal thus asserts a novel claim about the relationship between the politics of knowledge and the biopolitics of the body. Brodber suggests that epistemological rights help define the human *qua* human. Such rights not only include access to cultural practices and religious customs but power over their use and abuse. In short, the ability to wield one's own cultural knowledge is vital to being fully human. Without that right, we are only soulless husks of ourselves.

Ichiro Yamada, the protagonist of *No-No Boy*, reveals an additional element of epistemological zombism, specifically what happens when familial and communal knowledge practices are not stolen per se but instead fractured beyond repair. Okada's seminal text is a diasporic novel of Japanese American immigration and internment, but, like *Myal*, it uses *homo amens* to explore the consequences of epistemic bankruptcy. *No-No Boy* follows Ichiro Yamada as he returns to post-WWII Seattle following four years spent in a Japanese American internment camp and federal prison. Ichiro is a "no-no boy" because he answered "no" to questions twenty-seven and twenty-eight on the Selective Service questionnaire devised by the War Department for Japanese American men in the camps: "Are you willing to serve in the armed forces of the United States, on combat duty wherever ordered?" and "Will you swear unqualified allegiance to the United States of America and faithfully defend the United States from any or all attack by foreign or domestic forces, and forswear any form of allegiance or obedience to the Japanese emperor, to any foreign government, power or organization?" (qtd. in Ling 360). While the cruel irony of coercing Japanese Americans to swear allegiance to a country that imprisoned them has not been lost on historians, what has long intrigued literary critics is Ichiro's unusual behavior, which is marked by violent mood swings, self-loathing, apathy, and aimless wandering. Critics have previously posited depression, psychoanalytic strife, or identity struggles as the source of his behavioral problems.[9] I argue, however, that Ichiro's anomalous behavior can also be interpreted through the zombic malfunctioning of *homo amens*.

As a former prisoner of America's Japanese internment camps, Ichiro exists squarely within Foucault's and Agamben's discourse of power (Chu 531; Zacharias 9). His lack of political rights is only the beginning of his struggles, though, for Ichiro's greatest problem in *No-No Boy* is the disintegration of kinship and familial epistemes. The Japanese American community Ichiro encounters following the war is atomized. Many *issei* (first-generation immigrants born in Japan) saw themselves primarily as Japanese citizens, whereas their *nisei* children (second-generation immigrants born in the US) often viewed themselves as Americans, a nationalistic divide exacerbated by the war. For example,

Ichiro's mother is proud her son refused to join the US Army, which proved his presumed loyalty to Japan ("if he had given his life to Japan, I could not be prouder"), whereas his brother Taro is humiliated by Ichiro's alleged betrayal (Okada 27). As Jinqi Ling argues, the Yamadas illustrate a generational conflict between parents and children in which both groups were forced to make a false choice of being either Japanese or American (368). This political strife frequently pitted siblings against siblings, parents against children, and friends against friends, creating an "emotional abyss" that shredded the communal structures of Japanese American culture (Wang 90). This systematic breakdown of communal relations is foregrounded throughout the novel. For instance, Ichiro's mother tells him that all those who did not pledge themselves to Japan during the war are "dead" to her: "Mrs. Kumasaka [a former friend] did not conduct herself as a Japanese, and no longer being Japanese, she is dead" (Okada 41). Ichiro despises his mother's mindset and later calls her a "Goddamned Jap" (30)—a shocking phrase that aligns Ichiro with the racist rhetoric of the state. Of course, Ichiro is also a "goddamned Jap" and a "rotten, no good bastard" to *his* former friend Eto, who willingly served in the US Army as a "yes-yes boy" (4). In Ichiro's postwar America, all Japanese Americans are already dead to one another. His perception demonstrates the radical disconnect that occurs when individuals are cut off from any larger familial, social, cultural, or national alliance. Hence, when Ichiro declares "I am not [my mother's] son and I am not Japanese and I am not American" (16) and "I'm not even a son of a bitch. I'm nobody, nothing. Just plain nothing" (76), he alludes to a widespread collapse of the Japanese American community in America.

This noxious circle of hate and self-hate suggests a shattered social episteme. The anthropologists Jane Guyer and Samuel Belinga contend that kinship is a type of knowledge; contained within the social relations of any group are its collective memories, histories, and practices. This "wealth-in-people as wealth-in-knowledge" sustains a networked epistemology that benefits individuals and the community at large (Guyer and Belinga 93). In *Myal*, for all of Ella's many problems, her communal episteme is never in doubt; in fact, when she is zombified, her Kingston friends and family rally to her aid because she is and always will be one

of their own. In contrast, *No-No Boy* details the collapse of the Japanese American community under the biopolitical pressure of the state, and therein lies the unfortunate collapse of Ichiro's "wealth-in-knowledge."

His degeneration in the face of this epistemic loss results in distinctly *zombi*-like behavior: automatonic repetition. As an "incarnation of negation" (Dayan 37), Ichiro exhibits several peculiar postwar behaviors. For instance, throughout the novel Ichiro considers moving forward in life—perhaps resuming his university coursework or getting a job. However, even as multiple educational and employment opportunities open up to him, Ichiro turns them all down. The most unusual incident occurs when a potential employer, Mr. Carrick, offers Ichiro a high-paying position as a draftsman for his engineering firm despite the fact that Ichiro has not even graduated from college. Ichiro rejects this job offer out of hand. Such a decision is not unusual if we take Ichiro's epistemological zombification into consideration. Shorn from his social episteme, Ichiro is closer to bare life than full life, and this incompleteness metaphorically manifests in his automatic rejections. Saying "no" defines Ichiro's life—it is what sent him to prison, and, in his current *zoē* state, it undergirds all of his ongoing behaviors. His "No-No" past now extends into a "No-No" future. To be clear, Ichiro is not a truly imprisoned figure like the *zombi* or even a debilitated one like Ella. As an archetypal example of *homo amens*, though, Ichiro illustrates the telos of biopolitical abjection in terms of epistemology—he is a reduced figure in whom knowledge loss symbolically evokes a static, zombic self.

Curiously enough, Ichiro's zombism also explains his "mindless" walking in the text. Most of *No-No Boy* takes place in Ichiro's head as he fruitlessly wanders Seattle's neighborhoods. The novel begins with him walking from the bus station to his parents' house and questioning his place in America: "Walking down the street that autumn morning with a small, black suitcase, he felt like an intruder in a world to which he had no claim" (Okada 1). The novel closes with more walking: "He walked along, thinking, searching, thinking and probing, and, in the darkness of the alley of the community that was a tiny bit of America, he chased that faint and elusive insinuation of promise as it continued to take shape in mind and in heart" (251). In between, he walks the streets of

Skid Row, Chinatown, and the University District, a failed peripatetic whose thoughts run in self-flagellating circles. While this constant shuffling might seem like a minor, even insignificant, aspect of his character, it foreshadows the slow trudging found in Romero's films, in which the undead also mindlessly and incessantly shuffle forth in search of something just beyond their reach. Both the *Muselmann* and the zombie "have no will," writes Stratton. "They stagger along" ("*Muselmänner*" 259). He could just as well be describing Ichiro. Zombies famously serve as metaphors for incomplete selves, and Ichiro is zombic in this regard, a figure without the social networks or communal wisdom to guide him through his existential woes.

No-No Boy thus illustrates a new dimension of *homo amens* in which the social episteme of a community differentiates *bios* from *zoē*. Ichiro experiences bare life in two ways. As a former prisoner of America's internment camps, he has already experienced a marginalized life absent political rights. But his existence in postwar Seattle is arguably even more tortured because without kinship—the wisdom, trust, and history of his community—he is so psychologically fractured that he becomes a zombie. Political rights, I contend, will not make Ichiro whole again. For that, he needs community, family, and friends, as well as the knowledge that derives from these things. In *No-No Boy*, a social episteme replete with companionship and communal ties is a fundamental part of experiencing a full life.

My third example of *homo amens* breaks with the previous two because it draws from a nonfictional account of knowledge loss and details the potential "zombification" of the self that can ensue. It also advances scientific knowledge, as opposed to cultural or social knowledge, as a major component of modern *bios*. Steinberg's *Sizwe's Test* (published as *Three Letter Plague* outside of North America) covers the South African AIDS epidemic through eyes of Sizwe Magadla, a thirty-year-old shopkeeper in Ithanga (a village in the Lusikisiki district) and the son of a traditional healer (*igquara*). Despite widespread public health campaigns, the rollout of antiretroviral drugs (ARVS), and free HIV clinics, AIDS prevention and treatment programs in South Africa have encountered mass resistance in communities like Ithanga where many villagers

continue to rely on traditional medical practices. Steinberg explores Sizwe's hesitation to take an AIDS test—despite fears that he may be infected by HIV—as a way of examining the complexities of AIDS prevention programs in regions of the world where Western science is not the dominant paradigm. In this regard, *Sizwe's Test* is best understood as a study of the fraught epistemological tensions between Western biomedicine and indigenous science.

Rural South Africans possess knowledge systems that understand AIDS in fundamentally different ways than Western science. In contrast to the biomedical model of HIV transmission, AIDS in traditional South African culture is believed to spring from several alternative sources. One is evil spirits, such as a *tikoloshe* (a spirit that murders its lover's enemies) or an *impundulu* (a spirit that seduces women), both of which bring disease to unsuspecting victims (Steinberg 133). Another supposed form of transmission is the needle that doctors use to draw blood for their AIDS tests. When Dr. Hermann Reuter, who is leading the ARV rollout in Lusikisiki, arrives in a small village, a crowd assembles to see "the doctor who has come to inject AIDS into people" (147). According to local rumors, the disease has been designed in Western laboratories and purposely disseminated through the very instruments used to locate its presence. As these stories demonstrate, disease in South Africa maintains strong connections to the spirit world, colonial history, and thanatopolitics. Similarly, the indigenous medicines for treating AIDS would be considered magical by Western standards—for instance, "Magwagota" (Steinberg 190) is a cure sold by local chemists for 245 rand, while a potion sold by a teenage girl with "extraordinary healing powers" can supposedly vanquish AIDS with a single dose (74).

Positioned against this deeply-rooted system of traditional medicine is modern biomedicine, with its army of Western-trained doctors, ARVs, mobile HIV-testing centers, counselors, and drug regimens that enter Lusikisiki with the fervor of a religious cult. Sizwe likens Dr. Reuter to "the prophet who comes to the village saying he has seen the light and you must follow him" (32). "Must" is the operative term here. As Reuter sees it, a mass HIV-treatment program can succeed only if superstitions and medical misconceptions are swept away (Steinberg 88). Adopting

Western medicine requires a conversion since it involves abandoning ancient sciences for newer ones. Western biomedicine is a dominant episteme of the modern era, and as a hegemonic form of power/knowledge it maintains its status by subjugating other types of knowledge (Filc 1275). As Jessica Langer notes, the lionization of Western science across all political, educational, and communal institutions comes explicitly "at the expense of indigenous worldviews" (129). Those caught between Western and non-Western systems of medicine are forced to choose sides—and consequently pay a substantial price.

Indeed, what is at stake for Africans like Sizwe is accepting not just a new method of disease treatment but a new way of life. ARVs can demonstrably improve physical health, but accepting them comes at the price of abandoning ethnoscientific practices employed by local communities for decades, if not centuries. As Rosemary Jolly astutely observes, biomedicine in *Sizwe's Test* offers "a choice between physical life and cultural death" (17). South Africans can choose to extend their lives by following the path of modern science, but they must also abandon the local and scientific structures that comprise part of their epistemic worlds. Sizwe admits as much when he tells Steinberg that "we [rural South Africans] do many of your things now, and we are forgetting about a lot of our own things. We believe in the things being done by you. We are losing our culture" (Steinberg 157). This ethnoscientific loss has psychological and physiological consequences that we can understand as epistemological zombism.

Homo amens figures mostly in fiction, but his specter appears at least twice in the pages of *Sizwe's Test*. At one point, Steinberg interviews a young man who has begun an ARV treatment regimen against the advice of his family. "You have been to the doctor and allowed him to put his needle into you," they declare. "Do you understand now that you are already dead? Your eyes are open but you are dead" (148). This young man's zombism transpires on two levels: the physical and the cultural. On the physical level, he is already "the living dead" because he has foolishly allowed Dr. Reuter to "inject" AIDS into him. In the eyes of his family, he has doomed himself to death in the coming months or years. On a cultural level, he is also the living dead because he has

abandoned his indigenous science for biomedical logic. His eyes are open to Western medicine but his heart and mind are now closed to traditional healing. He is epistemologically vacant, emptied of native knowledge and belief. According to his family, a life without traditional science is a life only half-lived. In starker terms, his epistemological loss translates as ontological loss: he is biologically alive but culturally dead. Like Ellen and Ichiro, he now exists in a subaltern state, as a body without a cultural consciousness.

Sizwe is the second example of *homo amens*. "If I knew I was HIV positive," Sizwe explains, "I will no longer be motivated to do the things I am doing now[:] . . . putting all my energy, every moment I am awake, into my shop. It will all become meaningless for me. I will stay in bed in the mornings" (296). Sizwe recognizes that an HIV-positive test result will affect every aspect of his life, including the unrelenting personal drive that has allowed him to become a successful shopkeeper. But in the same way that the young man discussed above is the "living dead" for abandoning his indigenous scientific beliefs, Sizwe's abandonment of traditional medicine would be a form of epistemic suicide. As noted earlier, Sizwe's father is a traditional healer. Turning his back on local medical practices is tantamount to rejecting not only his family but the traditional knowledges that constitute his understanding of reality. Sizwe's hesitation to adapt to modern medicine may be mind-boggling to the Western reader, but it makes perfect sense given his personal and cultural context. In the absence of a traditional scientific paradigm to structure his view of nature, his entire existence may lack direction and purpose. Could he operate in such a world with his prior commitment? For Sizwe, the threat of *homo amens* is not just a metaphorical hazard but a real one that would isolate him from his family, community, and understanding of the world. He would not only feel lost; he would be lost. His uneasy location between Western and non-Western sciences thus affirms the zombie's status as a "border dweller" (Lauro 9). Stuck between realms of knowledge, Sizwe occupies that dreadful void symbolized by simultaneous death and life.

Hence we can add a scientific dimension to my proposition that *bios* has cultural and social epistemological dimensions. For many South

Africans, being alive in the *bios* sense is not just about day-to-day physiological existence but participating in indigenous sciences that connect the individual to the larger culture. Sizwe's reluctance to accept Western medicine is thus borne not of superstition but from a real fear that his abandonment of indigenous science would psychologically debilitate him. Traditional African scientific practices have guided his people for centuries, and Sizwe cannot abandon them lightly. In *Modernity and Its Malcontents*, Comaroff and Comaroff write that traditional ritual is a generative "act of resistance" to the flow of knowledge in modern society (xxix). For Sizwe, to completely obey the dictates of Western biomedicine is to accept the obsolescence of his people's knowledge. In contrast, to perform ritual—to believe in *tikoloshes*, drink Magwagota, and visit *igquaras*—is to defy that cultural loss and beat back against the incessant march of scientific modernity. Like *Myal* and *No-No Boy*, *Sizwe's Test* is an epistemological novel, and it similarly reifies knowledge loss through the body. In refusing to test himself for HIV, Sizwe rejects his fate as an epistemological zombie.

IV. *Homo Amens* and the Varieties of Epistemological Experience

The variations of epistemological necropolitics found in *No-No Boy*, *Myal*, and *Sizwe's Test* allow us to understand *homo amens* as a vital contribution to postcolonial biopolitics and global ethnic literature. It is worth highlighting that *homo amens* is not a recent phenomenon. The texts in this study were published in 1957, 1989, and 2008, respectively, and they represent zombic manifestations in immigrant America, postcolonial Jamaica, and sub-Saharan Africa. The existence of *homo amens* across these diverse geographic contexts suggests that the erasure, colonization, and appropriation of knowledge are hardly isolated events but rather ongoing and intrinsic aspects of modernity. In this regard, the zombie reaffirms Said's and Spivak's emphasis on postcolonial epistemology. Understanding that knowledge loss is at the heart of the biopolitical encounter is precisely what makes *homo amens* an important figure in contemporary criticism.

As a concept, Agamben's *homo sacer* has performed brilliantly in developing a necessary conversation around power relations and the modern

nation-state, and in the process it has helped a new generation of critics study the social injustices faced by sick, poor, and disenfranchised peoples around the world. *Homo amens* adds a crucial epistemological component to this discourse, especially in its relation to what constitutes a full life. The epistemological zombie emphasizes the importance of local knowledge, not only as a collective cultural resource but as a fundamental aspect of political being. If the possession of political rights differentiates *bios* from *zoē*, then *homo amens* asserts that epistemological rights is part and parcel of that political domain. The right to practice traditional knowledge, the right to have ownership over that knowledge, the right to participate in that knowledge with a larger community—these are foundational elements of the epistemic rights constituting political well-being.

In emphasizing knowledge and the politics of knowledge, *homo amens* argues for the centrality of epistemology within postcolonial studies. Such prioritization is not just a return to an earlier era of postcolonial theory. Contemporary decolonial scholars like Walter Mignolo argue in favor of a "pluriverse" that opposes the hegemony of Western knowledge for more equitable approaches to global sciences, philosophies, and histories; it is only by recognizing the limits of Western epistemology, he suggests, that we can access "ways of thinking and doing that are not grounded in Western cosmology" (x). *Homo amens* fits into this resurgent conversation by contending that access to a panoply of indigenous knowledges is necessary for experiencing a full political life. Recent biopolitical zombie scholarship may have bypassed epistemology in its critique of colonial violence, but *homo amens* deploys the symbolic power of the zombie to showcase the significance of the episteme.

Homo amens also helps us to reconsider the role ethnic literature can play in postcolonial biopolitics. In *Orientalism*, Said proposes that texts do not simply reflect Orientalist ideologies but act as a "distribution of geopolitical awareness" that brings them into being aesthetically, philologically, and sociologically (80). Texts are instruments for both creating and critiquing postcolonial relations. Through *homo amens*, ethnic narratives like *Myal* demonstrate a specialized function within postcolonial discourse: namely, applying fictionality's unrivaled power of imagination

and poeisis to articulate what is so often an invisible process. The process of losing knowledge does not lend itself easily to material manifestations. Ethnic fiction and nonfiction make epistemicide so grotesquely visible that it becomes impossible to ignore. Ella's zombification is the best example of this reification, but in their own ways, Ichiro and Sizwe also demonstrate the *zoē* existence that occurs when one is excised from cultural knowledge systems. *Homo amens* hence borrows liberally from the logic of postcolonial science fiction, in which authors "participate uniquely in [the] process of decolonization, utilizing the particular strengths and possibilities contained in the SF genre to further the project of a world not only politically but (variously) economically, culturally, intellectually, and/or creatively decolonized" (Langer 8). In the same way that a science fiction text can extrapolate contemporary issues outwards and thereby explore their ethical consequences, so too can global and diasporic literature use *homo amens* to explore the hidden sides of epistemological erasure. Ethnic fiction can play a unique role in postcolonial discourse, not only in critiquing the problem of epistemic violence but also in actively resisting it. And what better figure of resistance exists than the zombie, whose dismal subjection is also tied to the potential of breaking free?

Homo amens is a reminder that traditional and non-Western epistemes must be protected. Like the Haitian *zombi* upon which it is partially based, *homo amens* is a cautionary figure as well as a rebellious one. The plights of Ella, Ichiro, and Sizwe involve an epistemological struggle many around the world have faced or will face. *Homo amens* is a call to arms to acknowledge the biopolitical eradication of knowledge and, to the best of our abilities, preserve ancient and communal knowledge in all of its forms.

Notes

1 Throughout this study I often refer to *homo amens* as a male figure or "he." My intention is not a gendered reading of epistemological power, only grammatical and discursive consistency. In the same way that Agamben's *homo sacer* translates as "the sacred man" but connotes a non-gendered individual, so too does *homo amens* translate as "the foolish man" without implying gender.

2 Eburne argues the proliferation of zombie analyses in recent years suggests that zombie studies itself has become zombic, an "utterly exhausted" field that somehow manages to mindlessly and inexorably trudge forward (408).

3 In *Homo Sacer*, Agamben identifies *der Muselmann* as the iconic figure of biopolitical debasement (103). Originally the German term for "Muslim," the *Muselmann* represents "a degree zero of power" because of their minority status in Europe (Stratton, "*Muselmänner*" 258). When employed by concentration and death camp occupants during World War II, *Muselmänner* became a slang term for captives so enervated by starvation and exhaustion that they were resigned to death. As Stratton writes, "the *Muselmann* [is] removed from the protection of the state, and, as bare life, reduced to the barest condition of the experience of life, and the classical ideas of zombies" ("*Muselmänner*" 261).

4 The Australian government has used the Manus Island and Nauru Regional Processing Centres as offshore immigrant detention facilities since 2001. From 2012–17, asylum seekers in these facilities suffered extreme episodes of physical, mental, and sexual abuse, which resulted in multiple suicides and riots. For more information, see the Refugee Council of Australia's *Australia's Man-Made Crisis on Nauru*.

5 Though the *zombi* of Haitian folklore and the zombie of modern cinema are often used interchangeably, the former is interwoven with the colonial history of Haiti and the practice of Voudou, which is not always the case with the latter. I hence try to distinguish between them wherever appropriate.

6 Both Australian and Canadian education programs reflect the nineteenth-century social evolutionary ideology that "savage" cultures required assimilation into Western civilization. For more, see Dafler.

7 For more on *Myal* and postcolonial spirituality, see Kortenaar, Feng, Rahming, and Castro. For more on *Myal* and postcolonial community, see Maximin and Nelson-McDermott. For more on *Myal* and gender, see Preziuso and Smythe. For more on *Myal* and the formal features of postcolonial texts, see Puri.

8 The phrase signals that Ella is a mixed-race woman whose expected social role is to bear Selwyn's children.

9 For more on Ichiro and psychoanalysis, see the work of Gribben, Xu, and Chen. For more on Ichiro and identity, see the work of Arakawa, Nguyen, and Amoko. For more on Ichiro and clinical depression, see Storhoff.

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