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‘Legally recognised undead’: essence, difference, and assimilation in Daniel Waters’s *Generation Dead*

Vampire literature, at least since Le Fanu’s *Carmilla* (1872), has been conspicuously about ‘Otherness’, that crucial term of identity politics, and has thus rendered itself most obligingly to interpretation in terms of those politics. In a concise survey of the history and problems of identity politics, Cressida Heyes says,

> While doctrines of equality press the notion that each human being is capable of deploying his or her practical reason or moral sense to live an authentic life qua individual, the politics of difference has appropriated the language of authenticity to describe ways of living that are true to the identities of marginalized social groups.¹

This tension between the Enlightenment notion of universal equality and the concentration on the ‘authentic life’ of marginalised others has been explored, wittingly or unwittingly, in many contemporary fictions of the Undead. Appearing deceptively human, animated, yet (despite the etymology of ‘animated’) without a soul, vampires have conveniently represented alterity, whether foreignness or deviant sexuality, or both. Vampire fiction is currently enormously popular; in part, I will argue, because of how easily it dramatises contemporary concerns with this politics of difference, in a new demonstration of the adaptability of the undead as political metaphor.² Lately, zombies have been spotted lurching alongside their fellow undead in greater numbers, embodying otherness in a different, perhaps less exotic manner.³

The Undead tend to quicken in Western literature (as opposed, I mean, to folklore) at moments when the certainties of Enlightenment come under suspicion somewhat. In the eighteenth century there had been the earnest rational investigations into vampirism of Cal-
met, but that which escapes rationality in the Gothic reaction coalesced in the Romantic literary vampire as exemplified by Polidori. With Stoker, the scope of Enlightenment universalism had narrowed and other of its tenets regarded with suspicion in some quarters; the Undead became very visibly what lies outside Enlightenment, registering unease with foreigners, sexuality, modernity, and women. And in the twenty-first century, amidst the postmodern antiuniversalism of identity politics, the undead Other may be examined in a way that dramatizes, critically or otherwise, that fragmentation.

The shift towards the depiction of the sympathetic vampire has been delineated elsewhere in this volume. Typically, when the monstrous Other gains our sympathies, he (as it is most usually) is cast as a Miltonic or Byronic hero-villain. Here are the origins of the rapidly proliferating genre(s) variously labelled ‘paranormal romance’, ‘dark romance, ‘dark fantasy’, which explores, sometimes transgressively, sometimes conservatively, love between humans and supernatural beings, most famously between Bella Swan and Edward Cullen in Stephanie Meyer’s *Twilight*.

Identity politics, however, is concerned with subcultures, individuals in social groups, and their integration into, or rejection from, wider society. It was probably Joss Whedon’s TV series, *Angel* (1999–2004) that first showed undead subcultures as somewhat sympathetic groups of others, existing alongside mainstream society. Two films, Joel Schumacher’s *The Lost Boys* (1987) and Katheryn Bigelow’s *Near Dark* (1987), which Whedon cites as seminal inspirations for *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (from which *Angel* emerged), conspicuously show a vampire subculture which is unassimilated to mainstream culture; the protagonists have to be rehabilitated to the latter. Rice’s Théâtre des Vampires and the undead of Poppy Z. Brite’s *Lost Souls* (1992) are similarly estranged subcultures, but receive much more sympathy. But we first see monsters interacting in groups within a larger culture in the Buffyverse (at a time, the late 1990s, when identity politics in the US and Western world generally became some-
what absorbed into the establishment). Here, cultures of the undead are either tolerated, if not
graded legal status, or are persecuted for their difference, and these issues are very self-
consciously raised with regard to carefully specified demon identities. Terry Eagleton re-
counts how a politics of culture became normalised during this period:

What had survived of the politically turbulent 1960s was life-style and
identity politics, which as the class struggle froze over in the mid-1970s
surged increasingly to the fore. […] Culture […] had severely challenged a
philistine, patriarchal, ethnically blinded left. But as national liberation
passed into post-coloniality, and the politicized culture of the 1960s and
early 1970s gave way to the postmodern 1980s, culture was the supplement
which came gradually to oust what it had amplified.8

We see this mirrored in various demon joints in Buffy, and particularly in Angel, where
groups of demons, each highly differentiated from other groups, interact on the neutral
ground of the Caritas nightclub.9 Thus in this later phase of the fiction of the undead, we dis-
cern the possibility of an imagining of an undead identity politics - and, from human charac-
ters, kinds of responses that reveal the common stances towards contemporary identity polit-
ics, ranging between radical, liberal, and conservative attitudes. Charlaine Harris’s Sookie
Stackhouse, who - herself alienated by her telepathy - loves a vampire, sets out my theme
early on: ‘We had all the other minorities in our little town - why not the newest, the legally
recognised undead?’10 In addition, in these fictions we often see the dramatisation of the
state’s responses to calls for recognition from different groups and the legal apparatuses
erected in response.

Harris creates a United States where vampires, having emerged from darkness to claim
their rights, have been granted legal status (though this is precarious and they are still subject
to intolerance). In the Anita Blake series by Laurell K. Hamilton, vampires have semilegal
status where their rights are slackly defended and full of loopholes. Hamilton’s vampires are still powerful, still killers: Anita talks of ‘a bleeding heart liberal who thought vampires were just people with fangs’. She is no integrationist, and initially there are few counter-tendencies to show that Hamilton’s fiction is anything other than a reaction against the politics of cultural diversity. Anita is curiously tempted to this otherness nevertheless, and by the later, raunchier books in the series, she is sleeping with various combinations of werewolves, wereleopards, and vampires with abandon; these others have, through the sequence of novels, also been granted sympathy as human-like subjects.

Vampires are cool; they have long been seen as sexy and glamorous. Zombies, by convention, are not so. The publishing world is well aware of the limits of sexually encountering otherness in a vein that tolerates vampires, werewolves, and, lately, faeries, and angels:

‘Zombies are not sexy. Romances don't feature zombies,’ [...] ‘Zombies are rotting dead flesh who eat brains. When you say vampire, you think David Boreanaz. Until David Boreanaz becomes a zombie - no way.’

And yet zombies do seem to be very popular at the moment for other reasons. For Christie and Lauro, there have been three phases of the fictional zombie: ‘the classic mindless corpse, the relentless instinct-driven newly dead, and the millennial voracious and fast-moving predator’. There is no slot here, it seems, for the sympathetic zombie, and certainly none for the zombie as lover. However, alongside the apocalyptic horrors of 28 Days Later and Walking Dead, there are glimpses of a more humanised incarnation.

The current fascination with the zombie may well be due to the need to fill a monstrous gap left by the assimilation of the vampire into human society. But the non-vampiric Undead is also employed - particularly in Young Adult fiction - to dramatise coping with death.
This is spelt out unmistakably by the bereaved heroine of one revenant novel for young adults: ‘I was lost and looking for answers to big questions about love, loss, and the meaning of life’. Narratives of the returning dead enable these big questions to be posed, and ‘closure’ (a favourite word) to be achieved.

Thus the Undead may appear in zombie fictions as alien and monstrous but there are also narratives featuring returning loved ones (though here the zombification is usually sanitised, even prettified) where a new, sympathetic zombie has been constructed. Sympathy for the zombie may be elicited through the depiction of pitiable, but non-human and barely sentient creatures, or simply through respect for the human beings they once were and for their families. More rarely, though, the zombie is granted autonomy and a voice. This may be revealed through autodiegesis, revealing the interiority of a trapped subjectivity; the self-narration reveals one who is conscious but denied corporeal autonomy, usually because they have been enslaved; or, alternatively, through the same narrative voice and perspective, pity is aroused through the narrator’s dawning awareness of their approaching loss of subjectivity as they become a zombie.

The father of the modern filmic zombie, George Romero, in one of the most recent of the series which began with Night of the Living Dead (1968), portrays the beleaguered human community surrounded by zombies who appear to be regaining their subjectivity, acting out parodic scenes of their dimly-remembered lives of normality, invoking sympathy (Land of the Dead (2005)). In Eden Maguire’s Young Adult Beautiful Dead series, the revenants are paradoxically corporeal phantoms rather than resurrected corpses; they bear signs of their death, but not grotesquely. The undead in Yvonne Woon’s Dead Beautiful (2010; London: Usborne, 2011) are closer to the zombie, as they are in Rachel Caine’s adult urban fantasy, the ingenious Working Stiff (2011), with its heroine reanimated, not supernaturally, but through nanotechnology. But none of these revenants are characterised by the abjection of the
‘true’ zombie. These are still exceptions, however; effective because of that exceptional nature, feeding upon the image of the classic, abject zombie. However, despite these isolated models of sympathetic zombies, none of them are perceived as social beings. None of them aspire to be citizens.

Yet one of the most dialectically subtle of recent presentations of legally undead would-be citizens is to be found in Daniel Waters’s *Generation Dead* (2008) novel for young adults, and its sequels, *Kiss of Life* (2009) and *Passing Strange* (2010). Waters’s significant gesture is to choose zombies as the subject of a teen romance and thriller rather than the over-fashionable vampires. All over the US, teenagers, and only teenagers, are mysteriously coming back from the dead, but with their movements and, perhaps, thought processes impaired, and sometimes bearing the wounds of their death. The choice of zombie over the more glamorous vampire is crucial, I think, for Waters’s eliciting sympathy and exploration of agency. *Generation Dead* and its sequels tackle identity politics more subtly and acutely than others in this genre, highlighting through satire and the paranoid thriller subplot the limitations and indeed ideological force of that politics - yet recognising the need to affirm particular identity within some sort of more collective affiliation.

What *Generation Dead* does is to portray minorities sympathetically in terms of both discrimination and powerlessness (a powerlessness which may, indeed, be a biological disability). It also explores with great sensitivity questions of identity, particularly as experienced by young adults; yet it also satirises the language and uncritical assumptions of varieties of identity politics. Over the three novels in the series, a sinister narrative accumulates which exposes the latent threat of the state and allied sectors. Waters delineates how easily identity politics can be appropriated by these forces as ideological cover for oppression. Thus, the satire is not a cheap, or indeed illiberal, gibe, but works as part of this unmasking.
There are various levels and strategies of reading that can be applied to this text, which mediate the problems of identity politics in different ways. On one level, difference here is rooted in biology; here, scientists investigate the cause of this phenomenon that has hit America’s young; the kinds of causes speculatively invoked are themselves revealing about contemporary cultural anxieties. Thus Waters oscillates between a literal representation of an imaginary physical difference (though akin to disability) and a metaphor for cultural exclusion - a very productive ambiguity that calls into question assumptions concerning naturalness, essence, and immutability that so often surround notions of difference (from radical as well as from conservative or oppressive perspectives).

The empathy that the text creates is one with people who are struggling with very real barriers to their mobility and self-expression; the cultural politics is that of disabled people. The search to establish a convincing and materialist origin helps to satisfy the demands of verisimilitude. But there is more to this; a very important strand emerges out of this concern with causality. In Waters there is an almost existentialist concern with becoming and with self-fashioning, which is thus very much to do with the origins of identity itself. On another level of reading, difference is akin to ‘race’ or, more nebulously, ‘ethnicity’; on yet another, it represents lifestyle. At this latter level, the zombies mirror Waters’s (living) heroine, Phoebe, who is herself culturally apart: she is a Goth, interested in literature and non-mainstream music, estranged from the more conventional teenagers around her.

Waters is very good at dissecting the vicissitudes of the language of prejudice: we encounter first the raw and unthinking language of the school canteen: ‘zombies, dead heads, corpses’ (2). Then, refracted through the bigoted coach’s voice, we hear the first phase of condescendingly PC language imposed from above: ‘We are required to refer to them as the living impaired, okay? Not dead kid. Not zombie, or worm buffet, or [in the first of many allusions to horror movies and their clichés] accursed hellspawn, either’ (23). Then, the neutral
term, ‘differently biotic’ is introduced, with its hint of celebration of the fact of difference; previously, says the high school principal, ‘the term diversity had been most typically used to describe a diversity of culture, religion, ethnicity, or sexual orientation’. Now, ‘the term may also be applied to diverse states of being’ (100). Finally, from the most angered and alienated dead teens themselves, the ‘Z’ word is actively reclaimed as a symbol of positivity and revolt, and of difference as separatism. I shall often use the word ‘zombie’ myself in this essay, asking forgiveness for any offence this may cause.

Zombies, in Afro-Caribbean mythology, are created slaves. By contrast, vampires are always empowered, if not legally so. The ‘vegetarian’ vampires of Stephanie Meyer may have willed away their viciousness but the temptation to succumb to blood lust is always there. They are not ‘out’, however, and do not publicly claim rights. Charlaine Harris’s vampires are a bit more complex and, because of the invention of synthetic blood, can be portrayed more sympathetically, as aliens who can make claims to be integrated. In Laurell K. Hamilton there is a suggestion that the rights have been claimed illegitimately. But Waters’s undead are threatless, and significantly powerless, and have no rights. Here, then, questions of identity intersect with the state.

In Waters’s novel, a proposed ‘Undead Citizens Act’ explicitly compares ‘differently biotic people to illegal immigrants’ (276). Immigration presents significant concerns to Western establishments, and here the undead represent those without citizenship - Hispanic migrant workers, or black people in earlier struggles. The undead are stateless, yet unsupervised; there are loopholes in the state apparatus, since ‘your social security card expires when you do, right? So no one is really keeping records on dead kids, are they?’ (277). And the spectre of the state is explicitly raised by Karen, the enigmatic dead girl. The presence of sinister Men in Black at various points in the narrative has alerted the reader to hints of a conspiracy thriller plot. Here, it begins to take a more definite form: ‘“I’m not sure the govern-
ment wants to wait around for their shadow organization to take us out,” Karen said. “I guess it would … be quicker to have us all registered and shipped to the Middle East” (277). Thus Waters gives us the context of an ongoing, unnamed war - one much like current ones where excluded working-class youth are specifically targeted for drafting; in this world, ‘There’s legislation that calls for the mandatory conscription of all differently biotic persons within three weeks of their traditional death’ (277).

The legal void leaves the undead curiously free:

The laws … do not always protect … the dead. And sometimes they do. A parent is no longer legally … responsible … to take care of their … deceased children. Colette was abandoned. As were many of us. (204)

To this Phoebe responds, somewhat wistfully, ‘if I tried to go and live in an abandoned house somewhere they would come and get me and put me in a reform school or something’ (204). They can escape parental supervision and that of the state, but also eschew their love or protection. Thus, the undead are abandoned, but their future is indeterminate - a state that young people are often intensely aware of and made existentially anxious by - and thus a theme of determination, self-determination or by culture or biology, of essences and personality emerges. This lawlessness, arising out of the enforced denial of rights, mirrors the indeterminacy subtly argued for in Waters’s rejection of mechanical materialism; paradoxically, then, the expulsion of the dead from society spurs their sense of agency. Thus death grants freedom to the dead Karen: ‘She’s crazy. It’s like dying has given her a license to act how she pleases, to do whatever she wants. Death seems to have frightened some of the kids, but I think it’s freed her in some way’ (300).

With *Generation Dead*, we are back on the same high school terrain that *Buffy*, and more recently, L. J. Smith’s *The Vampire Diaries* and Meyer’s *Twilight* series explore. The setting allows the usual (here, very effective) exploration of the issues of becoming a young
adult: love and sexuality (thus sharing concerns with the adult ‘paranormal romance’ genre); looming adult responsibility; and developing a sense of who one is, where one belongs - identity, in other words.

Phoebe and her best friends – Margi; and Colette, now dead and risen - are Goths, mocked by jocks and cheerleaders but defiant and able to articulate what defines their specificity. Phoebe’s Goth identity is both defensive and assertive:

Phoebe was used to being stared at. Her all-black wardrobe, an even mix of vintage and trendy clothing, practically guaranteed she would get odd looks from her classmates. [...] She didn’t mind. She found that her look repelled people she didn’t want to talk to and attracted those she did. The goth look wasn’t nearly as popular as it once was, probably due to the appearance of the living impaired, but to Phoebe that just gave the style a subtle hint of irony, a private joke to be shared by a special few. (45-46)

But Phoebe is fascinated by and attracted to ‘the living impaired’ because of their otherness, ‘their bravery’ (32) - and the specific otherness of the mystery of death, thus invoking the perennial angst of young adults making sense of the big questions. Phoebe is an introspective, poetic, and slightly morbid girl, whose favourite song titles always contain the words ‘sorrowful, rain, or death’ (26), whose thoughts often drift to ‘the topic of death’ and ‘What is it like to be dead? What is it like to be living impaired?’ (6). At this point, the undead are not standing in for any kind of ethnicity or disability; for Phoebe, they, the ‘certain bravery’ they display in adjusting to life once more, and the whole process of returning (and implicitly, death itself) are stimuli for her own moral and intellectual development: ‘There’s so many questions, so much mystery about the whole thing’ (32).

Phoebe’s childhood friend, Adam, who loves her and then dies and is reborn for her, is developing a sensibility that sets him apart from his more uncritical footballer friends, and
this, very perceptively, is bound up with class - the arena usually most effaced in identity politics. Adam is trapped by his class position, his future rigidly constrained: ‘Without football he wouldn’t be going anywhere: he’d end up staying in Oakville all his life, working at his stepfather’s garage, lifting tires and handing wrenches to his stepbrothers’ (58). Yet he reshap es himself in a way that Pete, the bigoted jock and Adam’s former friend, refuses to do. Adam chooses not to be bound by the identities which threaten to entrap him, either working-class or jock, but he will encounter the far more ineluctable ones of death, then living death.

Unlike Phoebe, Pete’s strategy towards the mystery of death is to direct the fear into hatred and resentment for his dead love Julie, who has abandoned him and turned monstrous (by not returning):

He wanted all the dead kids in their graves, where they belonged.

Like Julie.

Maybe if Julie had come back, he thought. Maybe if she’d come back he’d feel differently, and he’d learn to stand them despite their blank staring eyes and their slow, croaking voices. But she didn’t come back anywhere except in his dreams. And now, ever since the dead began to rise, when she returned even to that secret place, she came back changed. She wasn’t the girl he’d held hands with at the lake, she wasn’t the first girl he’d kissed on the edge of the pine woods. She wasn’t his first and only love.

She was a monster. (23-24)

The weight of the metaphor shifts. The undead begin here as aliens, who need to be repatriated to the state of death back where they belong. For Pete, femaleness and death are parallel; he directs his anger at both; each motivates the other, and so Waters here is using the undead to stand in for women.
Pete and his mates bond through that male dialect which treats everything female as sexual object - even if dead: ‘I think I could bring her back to life, if you catch my meaning?’ (19), unconsciously himself blurring the boundaries; or Goth: ‘She ought to get some colour in her cheeks and start wearing normal chick clothes. She looks like a freakin’ worm burger, you know?’ (16). So the otherness of the undead at moments like this represents the otherness of the feminine, inspiring attraction and rage simultaneously. Thus the undead once more have a metaphorical fluidity about them in that they can represent any of gender, sexuality, race, and illness at different moments.

In Pete’s consciousness, the unknown sexuality of women slides threateningly from the relatively unthreatening nymphomania attributed to all women to the deplorable coupling with the radically Other: ‘I might get pretty damn upset’, he tells her, ‘that the girl I had pegged for a closet nymphomaniac is really a closet necrophiliac’ (80). It then careers into the perhaps less unacceptable perversion of zoöphilia: ‘A living, breathing blossoming sixteen-year-old girl having a thing for a dead kid? It was just plain unnatural. Why not go and lie down with a farm animal? At least an animal is alive’ (80). That ‘closet’, suggests the possibility of lesbianism too - although, and characteristically, Pete confusedly claims Phoebe is also a virgin whom he is certain he will be able to ‘convert’ (16).

Pete senses the immanent power of revolt among the oppressed, and voices the familiar fears of economic and sexual replacement through invoking the clichés of Hollywood:

‘I don’t think they’re human, and they’re certainly not alive. I’m just waiting for the day when they throw down and start shuffling around trying to eat our brains [...] what next? Worm burgers making your milk shakes down at the Honeybee? Taking up scholarship money that should be going to kids with a life ahead of them? Just wait until a zombie wants to date your sister, Harris.’ (149-50)
There are class anxieties being expressed here; those of white working-class people made vulnerable by economic instability and sensing their disposability.

Thus the undead may be ethnically, culturally, sexually other, and Waters self-consciously invokes the politics of diversity as a background. Waters often depicts the sudden crisis that has stricken US youth in terms of 1960s politics, the era of the Civil Rights movement and birth of what would later be identity politics. The undead are ‘bussed over’ (18), echoing 60s programmes for racial integration. The significantly named Dallas Jones, the first dead person to rise, is caught on CCTV in what is referred to as ‘the Zapruder film’ (6; 117-21); Colette even dances like a hippy girl from Woodstock (368). The final decision of the persecuted and radicalised zombies of ‘going underground’ in the second book, *Kiss of Life*, has strong echoes of 60s radical groups like the Weathermen, but has a distinctly twenty-first-century resonance with one of the framed undead, Tak, being labelled as a ‘terrorist’.29

Waters engages in some very sharp mimicry of the different voices of identity politics as it later became absorbed into mainstream US society; often satirically, sometimes with sympathy. The language of assimilation is captured perfectly in all its utopianism. The philanthropic, zombie-supporting Hunter Foundation claims: ‘Our goal is the complete integration of differently biotic persons into society. We dream of a world where a differently biotic person can walk own a crowded city street without fear’ (103). This recalls the 60s yearnings of Luther King; yet this is parody, too, and the Foundation will turn out to be not all it seems.

Liberal integrationism can be tragically ineffectual. In this fiction, the legal status of the differently biotic is horrifically void - like Blacks at one time in the Deep South, like Jews in the Third Reich, they can be burnt alive; Phoebe and Margi watch a horrific piece of news footage:

Two men with jerricans were pouring gasoline on a sluggish living impaired girl whose arms were bound behind her to a metal basketball pole set
into concrete, like you’d see in a schoolyard. The girl went up in a sudden rush of yellow flame, and her twitching seemed to grow more animated, but that might have been a trick of the flames dancing around her. (121)

Note the grim irony of the parodic resurrection invoked by Waters’s wordplay on ‘animation’ (something he does with cognate terms throughout the book). As Waters hints, talk about integration is cruelly ridiculous here, where ‘talking about how parents should raise their differently biotic youth and help them integrate into a society that still does not have any legislation that prevents burning them at the stake’ exposes the impotence of mere tolerance (121).

There is a telling moment when Phoebe questions the shallowness of some versions of tolerance, or of a bland universalism, wondering ‘why everyone thought that commonality was the lynchpin to the whole “why can’t we all just get along” deal’ (134). But immediately, she faces the shear crassness and banality of the bigotry of the protesters at the football match where the undead Tommy is about to play; they are bearing slogans like ‘DEAD = DAMNED’ and linking intolerance, in an all too familiar way, with US national identity, perverting the Enlightenment goals of ‘LIFE, LIBERTY AND THE PURSUIT OF HAPPINESS’ [sic] (135). The opening speech by the state representative invokes a contrasting, liberal narrative of nationhood, which has incorporated the 1960s struggles of ‘American athletes’ like Jesse Owens and Billie Jean King against the ‘obstacles of injustice and hate’ of those who would ‘shame our country’ (137-38). Yet already, ominously, Phoebe’s conspiracy-loving father has identified the dark underside of national identity and the state’s coercive power - the Men in Black who first appear here among the crowd and who later appear to be linked to covert state activity.

One manifestation of how US society has absorbed identity politics is represented in the book by Skip Slydell Enterprises, who are what are currently, voguishly, called ‘social entrepreneurs’. The ideology under examination here is that capitalism can be benevolent; profit
can be accumulated through serving nobly philanthropic, even radical, ends. Waters accurately captures the glib slickness of business speak, of self-help and motivation talk, and the ‘culture’ word gets tossed around: ‘How can we make that acclimation happen?’ asks Slydell; ‘Change the culture’ (190). ‘Culture’ here is *not* essentialised, however; on the contrary, as with much postmodern theory, it is as endlessly mobile as capital itself.

In this ideology, the transformation of culture is achieved through a simple linguistic redefinition (one thinks of Richard Rorty here):

‘That’s the second necessary ingredient of culture change, people. The second key to transformation. Conflict. Radical action coupled with radical response. […] There was a reason that I used strong words with you, impolite words like ‘zombie’ and ‘undead’ and ‘bloodbags’ [that is, the living], and the reason was not because I wanted to be offensive. I used those words because *right now* they are radical words, and I wanted to provoke a radical reaction in you. […] The first step toward transforming a culture is to give names and definitions to the transformative aspects of that culture. You are *zombies*, kids. And you need to use that term with pride.’ (195)

All the materiality of culture (underpinned, in this particular case, by the brute biology here of being dead) has vanished. Eagleton observes how:

[i]n the dogmatic culturalism of our day […] the suffering, mortal, needy, desiring body which links us fundamentally with our historical ancestors, as well as with our fellow beings from other cultures, has been converted into a principle of cultural difference and division.30

Not only is this culturalism divisive, it has been, all too easily, co-opted by entrepreneurs such as Slydell, whose ‘conflict’ and ‘radical action’ is, of course, mere sales talk. This is a brasher version of the careful politeness of the PC talk elsewhere. Waters has fun with the
slogans on Slydell’s range of T-shirts: ‘Dead … And Loving It’, ‘Zombie Power!’ and (inspiring this book and its parallel project) ‘Open Graves, Open Minds’ (196). Ultimately this is about shifting commodities. It is a picture of how capitalism voraciously, vampirically, seizes on both youth culture and that of minorities:

‘I need a street team […] to help me get this message out. Many of these products are going to be carried in Wild Things! stores and at select music outlets. […] I want you to think on […] what other products - be they fashion, entertainment, whatever - you think we could put out that would help us get our message out there, and really start changing the world.’ (197)

Tommy, the articulate undead boy to whom Phoebe is attracted, becomes a celebrated spokesperson for the zombies, and an advocate of pacifist reformism. He takes advantage of the Internet’s potential to host a twenty-first-century public sphere, where unconstrained discourse can take place and rights argued for, by setting up a blog. His blog acutely penetrates what the corporate ‘necrohumanitarian experiment’ (207) is about and his critique of it has much validity:

Skip’s main thesis seems to be that the zombie community can achieve legitimacy through consumerism and sloganeering. [...] You can’t help but question his motives, which almost certainly are profit driven, but at the same time you can’t help but be drawn into his circle of ‘positive transformation.’ If there is cheesy packaging around a universal truth, does that make the universal truth any less valid? (208)

Tommy here has identified what Marx saw as the contradictory energies of capitalism which (if only in its early phases) is both motivated by private interest and yet has a transformative energy towards universalism.
In contrast to social transformation through consumption and liberal tolerance, or by pacifist reformism, Waters also presents the position of urgent and angry action. Tak (an undead boy who advocates separatism and forceful resistance) is dramatised in dialogue with Tommy as the background of bigoted ‘bioist’ terror escalates, with Men in Black and mysterious white vans being closely associated with the murders of zombies (308-12). Waters is not afraid to show that Tak’s violence might be perfectly rational when confronted by a State that is indifferent or even complicit in the murderous suppression of difference, where ‘The police will do nothing. Words … will do nothing’ (310).

The boundaries between the dead and the living are continually blurred, particularly with the pale, enigmatic, and disturbingly quick Karen, who doesn’t ‘move like a dead girl’ and has ‘a slight, barely perceptible smile’, whereas ‘Most of the other zombies [Adam had] seen wore blank expressions’ (38). This blurring is reinforced by language play throughout, as an ostinato theme with the existential subject of changing life, of the borders between life and death, between identities, shifting as Angela Hunter’s smile which, ‘like her legs, could bring the dead back to life’ (128). Thus Alish Hunter declares that the work at the Foundation to ‘change lives’ (129). Pete, watching the zombie, Evan, whom he is about to murder, observes ‘his jerky undead limbs trying to coax the machine to life’ (286). As a TV narrator says, ‘The presence of the living impaired has irrevocably altered the American way of life - no pun intended’, revealing the instability of the very idea of an America encountering difference (118).

Waters performs brilliant verbal plays on life and death throughout the novel. Here, he weaves this wordplay into flirtatiousness:

Karen laughed […] ‘You’re sweet. I’m just trying to bring my date, Kevin here back to life.’ Her hand left Phoebe’s skin, which tingled where the dead girl had touched her.
‘And the rest of these boys,’ she said. ‘I’m trying to knock dead.’

‘Well,’ Tommy said, ‘you are drop dead … gorgeous.’ (355)

Karen’s sexual attractiveness is frequently seen as life-giving, even setting Phoebe’s flesh ‘tingling’ (357) (there is a hint of sexual ambiguity about her). Unlike Coleridge’s pale-featured, ‘white as leprosy’ undead figure, the female ‘Life-in-Death’, she vivifies rather than ‘thick’s man’s blood with cold’.34 This interplay is more than just wit; resurrecting lovers will become central to the plot and in the sequels, Kiss of Life (whose title makes this clear), and Passing Strange, which focuses on Karen (and whose title is a triple play on the idiom itself, on ‘passing’ as a euphemism for death, and on ‘passing’ as hiding a deviant identity behind a ‘normal’ one). This destabilising of life/death is part of the critique of essences which makes Generation Dead a sympathetic, but critical, view on identity politics.

This linguistic display of antiessentialism is paralleled by the way Waters fervently asserts the agency of human subjects through a critique of mechanism. Alish Hunter, of the apparently humane Hunter Foundation, claims he ‘enjoys wearing a lab coat and conducting experiments like a mad scientist’ (129); a movie reference which is prophetic. Waters directs much of his satire against the narrow instrumental use of reason that treats human beings as thing-like and justifies their oppression.

In what is still a predominately scientific age, twentieth- and twenty-first-century undead fiction often proffers materialist causal explanations for the state of undeadness: viruses are posited in in Richard Matheson’s I am Legend (1954), and more tentatively in the Sookie Stackhouse books. One would-be scientific explanation of the returning teenagers that circulates in Generation Dead is of a ‘mold spore or something living in their brains’ (300); this is a gothic image in itself, one of possession, however much ‘spore’ makes it seem physiological. In one of his many cinematic references, Waters invokes a ‘Frankenstein Formula the-
ory’, where ‘a certain mixture of teenage hormones and fast food preservatives’ is posited as a cause of the new teenage condition (7). Again, Waters identifies anxieties, contemporary and longer term, over the threatening difference of youth and over modernity and consumption, and projects them onto the Other - but in a very knowing way.

But, without necessarily being antirationalist, Waters wants to see the creation of undeadness - and thus identity - as outside the realm of mechanical causality. Waters destabilises any kind of naturalism, with a certain sacrifice of verisimilitude perhaps, in order to further his attack on the reification of human beings. Resurrection is not presented as particularly uncanny; the supernatural is not invoked. It simply happens; inexplicably and as contingently as life itself. Other causes are offered by various characters, all signifying contemporary anxieties: inoculations, junk food, radioactivity - even alien abduction and the Apocalypse. New media are also blamed; such innovations have persistently summoned up mechanistic ideas of causality on young people’s behaviour since the growth of novels and literacy in the eighteenth century. This is against the grain, of course, of Waters’s existentialist stance. For example, one proffered cause of the young people’s undead state has been the malign influence of ‘First-person shooter games’ where, as Karen dryly points out, the target is ‘Usually zombies’ (320-21). Waters’s cultural references are always witty and never pointless. Because - and here lies the dialectical complexity - perhaps in some ways the dehumanising of the other in videogames does sanction violence towards the different, without invoking a mechanically causal power, just as the imagery of that earlier source of cultural anxiety, the cinema, is portrayed as legitimating bigotry throughout this narrative.

Yet Waters does not let such a position appear without presenting, dialectically, a counter position. Thus the bigots’ rumours portray zombies as automata; Pete’s uncritical absorption of myth posing as science shows how scientistic explanations of difference dehumanise people and strip them of agency, rendering them objects: ‘I saw on the news that they
think some kind of parasite crawls into their brains and controls their bodies after death’ (342). This is a horror movie plot in itself, illustrating the ideological power of gothic imagery when coupled with mechanical materialism. But Pete applies a similar reification to himself. Unlike Adam, he is unable to reject the bad faith of clinging to an essential nature and define an existential project of his own. Waters continually challenges the objectification of human beings in his work, whether this is performed by characters on themselves or to others.

I have shown how Waters vividly articulates, through mimicry and parody, questions and arguments around identity politics as they have become appropriated or assimilated by contemporary Western culture. This is polyphonic, in Bakhtin’s sense, with the latter’s stress on the heteroglossal rendering of multiple voices as well as positions. The indeterminacy of the tenor in the zombie metaphor facilitates Waters’s technique of shifting perspectives to build up this ensemble of arguments and ideologies of difference. And this parallels his refusal to countenance essences or the mechanical determination of human behaviour. This is a stance which also refuses to embrace an essential identity as the foundation of claims to autonomy, as in the varieties of identity politics that Eagleton identifies as ‘[t]he most uninspiring kind’:

those which claim that an already fully fledged identity is being repressed by others. The more inspiring forms are those in which you lay claim to an equality with others in being free to determine what you might wish to be.

Any authentic affirmation of difference thus has a universal dimension. The existentialist strand in Generation Dead affirms precisely that freedom ‘to determine what you might wish to be’.
The lack of subjectivity and autonomy that almost axiomatically define the zombie narrowly constrain its potential to elicit sympathy. Its abject repulsiveness is a further barrier and certainly bars it from the role of paranormal lover. Faeries and vampires have their glamour and hypnotic allure; even the werewolf or shapeshifter can be a lover in their human form (their bestial alter ego is, of course, highly effective in figuring human sexuality in these narratives). Therefore, Waters’s portrayal of returning dead who, retaining their physical wounds and having the impeded consciousness and stumbling gait of the zombie, engage in love affairs and struggle for their rights, is a daring and tricky narrative move. Through this, he is able to explore identity politics with great depth and flexibility. What Waters does is, I think, unique: these undead are humans, despite their shambling gait and mutilated bodies and absence of a pulse, engaged in dialogue with others. Contrast, too, his zombies with the revenants of Yvonne Woon’s Dead Beautiful: ‘When we reanimate, we’re born into the best version of ourselves [...] The strongest. The smartest. The most beautiful’ (424). This is far from Romeroesque; it is simply a different embodiment of the utopian transcendence that makes Meyer’s vampires marvellously intense lovers, scintillating, and super-strong. There is more to Woon’s fine novel than just that, but I want to emphasise just how original Waters’s concept is.

The Gothic mode, of which dark fantasy or paranormal romance novels are a contemporary reincarnation (though a ‘romancing’ of it), has always had some kind of relationship to Enlightenment thought, whether reacting against it or siding with rationalism against dark, archaic forces. In the Enlightenment project, rights have to be fought and argued over; they arise out of the contestation of powers and are conceived through unconstrained dialogue as theorised by Jürgen Habermas; this dialogism, in itself, dissolves identity boundaries. This process presupposes autonomous agents who are not thing-like, not deterministically con-
strained by their essences. Habermas explicitly connects the discursive activity of human subjects with both their claiming of rights and their agency:

> What raises us out of nature is the only thing whose nature we can know: 
> language. Through its structure autonomy and responsibility are posited for us. Our first sentence expresses unequivocally the intention of universal and unconstrained consensus.\(^{39}\)

Risen mysteriously out of death, Waters’s Generation Dead articulate their claims to autonomy and responsibility, remaking and questioning the language that reifies them. In his humane, literate, and witty novels, Waters shows these rights in formation and also, open-endedly, adumbrates a politics of active subjects claiming their common humanity against the forces that would objectify them and reduce them to dead things.

Notes

1 Heyes, ‘Identity politics’. For a full account of the rise of identity politics, see Nicholson, Identity before Identity Politics. Nicholson is broadly sympathetic; for a liberal and a radical left critique of identity politics in favour of universalism, see respectively Gitling, The Twilight of Common Dreams and Eagleton, The Idea of Culture.

2 As described in our introductory chapter above and explored in other chapters throughout this book.

3 See Clive Bloom’s entertaining account, ‘Day of the dead’.

4 See, in particular, Lindsey Scott’s Chapter 7, but other chapters engage with this too.

5 See Conrad Aquilina’s Chapter 2 above.

6 And as performed by Yarbro in the Saint-Germain series, then on a grand scale by Coppola and, later, subtly explored from various angles in Joss Whedon’s Buffy and Angel. These generic labels originate from retailers and publishers; it would be worthwhile to explore the relationship between such commercially motivated taxonomies and the more rigorous classifi-
cation that could emanate from genre theory. The genres, or subgenres, overlap somewhat: Waterstone’s, the booksellers, have applied ‘dark romance’ to young adult fiction and ‘dark fantasy’ to books for older readers, though both seem to intend predominately female readerships. Fred Botting’s conjunction of Gothic and Romance in *Gothic Romanced* is a promising approach to these texts. It places it more precisely in a context and it avoids the now all-too broad category of simply ‘Gothic’. On the problems of an all-encompassing, ahistorical use of the term, see Warwick, ‘Feeling Gothicky?’.

7 The vampiric subcultures in these two films are, Nicola Nixon argues, “‘bad’ families who represent the potential decay’ of American ideals of normalized family values’, and they ‘conclude with a retrenchment of the good family unit’ (‘When Hollywood sucks’, in Gordon and Hollinger (eds), *Blood Read*, pp. 127, 126).

8 Eagleton, pp. 126-27.

9 Two essays from Stacey Abbot’s collection illuminate the way that Caritas is an arena for the politics of difference: Abbott, ‘Kicking ass and singing “Mandy”’, and Beeler, ‘Outing Lorne’, in Abbott (ed.), *Reading Angel*.

10 Charlaine Harris, *Dead Until Dark* (2001), p. 1. The HBO TV series based on these novels, Alan Ball’s *True Blood* (2008– ), raises issues of race and sexuality more explicitly; Michelle Smith explores this in Chapter 12 above.

11 Hence the USA is ‘the only country in the world’ where ‘vampirism’ is legal, but vampires do not have the vote (*The Laughing Corpse* (1994), p. 12).

12 *The Laughing Corpse*, p. 90.

13 This is in addition to the more recent sympathetic portrayals of them; Dracula and Carmilla already had hints of sex appeal in the novels and their cinematic adaptations developed this. Now, alongside the humanisation of the monster there has been the immense growth of ‘paranormal romance’, where supernatural creatures and humans become lovers.
14 Note ‘faeries’ rather than the more mundane ‘fairies’; the former spelling is always used in these texts to signify the mythological authenticity and dark strangeness of these beings as opposed to twee little Victorians with butterfly wings.

15 Bond, ‘When love is strange’.


17 As Angela Tenga and Elizabeth Sherwood argue in their forthcoming article, ‘Vampire gentlemen and zombie beasts’.

18 Maguire, Jonas, p. 2.

19 As, for example, in the HBO series, Walking Dead, and in a powerful story by Jonathan Maberry, ‘Family Business’, in the excellent 2010 collection edited by Christopher Golden, Zombie, pp. 177-249.


21 ‘Abjection’ in Kristeva’s sense, which accounts for the power and dubious pleasure of the zombie narrative (The Powers of Horror).


23 Linda Nicholson suggests a like accommodation of identity politics to universalism, where there are ‘degrees of commonality interspersed with difference’ and where ‘particular identities will both vary among members of any particular identity grouping while also expressing elements of similarity’, p. 185.

24 All references to Generation Dead are to the cited edition and are in parentheses.

25 The parallels of racist registration acts in Nazi Germany and apartheid South Africa (as well as voter registration in the Southern USA) hardly need pointing out, but there are fic-
tional parallels and precedents in Hamilton, Harris, and, more distantly, with the Mutant Registration acts in Marvel Comics’s *Uncanny X-Men* (from the 1980s onwards) and associated films. For the details of popular cultural artefacts, Wikipedia is often an authoratitive source, and the history of various Registration Acts in the Marvell universe is documented thoroughly in the article ‘Registration acts (comics)

26 Waters’s ellipses indicate the struggle to form speech that afflicts the risen dead.

27 Catherine Spooner in Chapter 9 above explores the intriguing links between vampire texts and Goth subculture; her emphasis on assimilation is of interest here, too.

28 *Passing Strange* will develop Waters’s fluid exploration of otherness and strangeness into lesbian romance.

29 *Kiss of Life*, p. 407. And is there a deliberate allusion in *Passing Strange* to *Soul on Ice*, Eldridge Cleaver’s Black Panther manifesto of 1968? Tak, the radical zombie leader, wants to persuade ‘his people’ away from Tommy’s Luther King-like ‘philosophy of civil disobedience’; he thinks of them as “souls” under the ice’ (where they are literally hiding) (p. 306).

30 Eagleton, p. 111.

31 After the process famously described by Jürgen Habermas in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*.

32 Tommy’s blog has been reproduced on line by Waters as *My So-Called Undeath*. Note how this paratext supplements the central narrative by suggesting further the dialogic struggle for undead rights; here, in the arena of the Internet.

33 Tak and his allies form their own group identity, labelling themselves ‘The Lost Boys’ (312); compare J. M. Barrie’s Lost Boys, echoed by Schumacher’s *The Lost Boys*.

35 Bad faith is ‘the view that we are what we are in the way things or objects are what they are; that a man is a father or a waiter or a homosexual the way “an oak tree is an oak tree”, instead of being radically free and inescapably contingent beings, creatures whose being is their freedom’ (Danto, *Sartre*, p. 33).

36 Eagleton, p. 66.

37 ‘Romance,’ according to Fred Botting, ‘as it frames Gothic, seems to clean up its darker counterpart’; he has Coppola particularly in mind. And recent representations of the vampire, particularly in fiction for young adults, do seem to lose their unsettling and potentially subversive danger; here, romance, as Botting puts it, ‘recuperates gothic excesses in the name of the heterosexual couple’ (p. 1). Yet not all ‘dark romance’ does so, and in *Generation Dead* the two genres presided over by Eros and Thanatos mate fruitfully, bringing forth their vivaciously undead progeny in a way that retains its critical bite.

38 In his later work; see, for example, ‘Towards a Theory of Communicative Competence’.

39 Habermas, *Knowledge and Human Interests*, p. 314.