

## Loving the Zombie: Arendtian Natality in a Time of Loneliness

Peter Nelsen

*Appalachian State University*

Zombies need love. I come to this conclusion through interacting with the zombies who haunt my classroom. They lurk in the shadows and become visible at the most crucial times for me as a teacher, times when engaging my students counts most. For example, in a recent class zombies joined our discussion circle and sat blank-eyed and offered no response to a passionate question asked by a student outraged by evidence of student suffering in schools: *How can we tolerate kids being treated this way?* The question arose after our reading accounts of and hearing personal testimony from students who were psychologically and physically harmed in schools because of their sexual identities. With eyes cast down, we waited in silence for someone to voice a response. No one did. As the sole reader of their personal analyses of course topics, I heard their written but unspoken words reverberating loudly in the silence: Abomination. Unnatural. But beyond these perhaps too common responses to the issue we were discussing, many expressed another emotion, captured most succinctly by a student who described feeling numb when thinking about such matters.

As a teacher, I experienced a range of emotional responses: sadness, anger, confusion, disappointment. I saw my students as deserving of my compassion and respect; I was attempting to see them as complex beings with diverse opinions and life experiences. But in the midst of the apparent numbness, I also was fearful of the teachers they would become and the harm that they would inflict on *their* students. Their monstrous lack of affective and cognitive response to human suffering rendered them zombie-like for me, and conjuring images from popular film — hordes of flesh-eating contagion seeking to consume the literal bodies of the innocent around them — I sat in horror in my classroom, feeling quite inadequate to the overwhelming task of inspiring them to imagine schooling as something new, a place where they could affectively embrace that which they saw as monstrous.

In what follows, I attempt to understand the emergence of the zombie in my classroom and to find space for moving forward in the face of the monstrous lack of response to evidence of human suffering through two questions: *Why do students appear zombie-like? And how can we teach them through and beyond their affective numbness?* To construct a response and to add complexity to the characterization of students as zombies, I use Hannah Arendt's discussions of natality and what she calls the "nightmare of loneliness."<sup>1</sup> I then turn to her use of *caritas*, or civic love, as a way to move through the loneliness and to conceptualize how to encourage a productive engagement that helps the zombie find wholeness while fostering the emergence of new forms of schooling that also help others appear as whole and loved beings.

### ZOMBIES AS PRODUCTIVELY MONSTROUS FIGURES

Before moving on to Arendt for help, we first need to examine the figure of the zombie more carefully. With roots in the complex colonization of Haiti and the slave

trade, in our cultural context any invoking of the zombie must be, admittedly, influenced by Western cinematic portrayals “of the zombie figure as horrific, cannibalistic, and apocalyptic, all based on stereotypical and xenophobic accounts of Haitian society and culture.”<sup>2</sup> In her use of the zombie as a “productively monstrous figure,” Kelly Clark/Keefe urges us to look past simplistic cinematic portrayals to focus on the zombie’s roots as a “strong, productively dualistic figure.”<sup>3</sup> Cussans adds helpful detail here:

The Traditional Haitian zombie (or *zombi*) is a legendary figure derived from the cultural and folkloric traditions of the Dahomian people of West Africa who were taken to Haiti as slaves over several centuries.... The *zombi* is a deceased person who has been brought back to life by the work of an evil sorcerer (a *bokor*). The word *zombi*, derived from the Fon language of West Africa, has two related but distinct meanings: i) the *spirit* of a dead person who travels at night to visit the living and ii) the *living corpse* of a dead person who has been reanimated by sorcery.<sup>4</sup>

The question of belonging — both mentally and physically — haunts the ambiguity of the zombie figure: it is neither fully alive nor dead. Within Haitian culture, it is also similarly ambiguous in that some believe in real zombies who “live” in rural communities, and debates about origins abound: were zombies created through sorcery, raised from the dead, or are these characterizations of severe mental disabilities? Importantly, a “zombie cannot know and say that it is a zombie. As such, it is destined to only ever be represented by others from the outside.”<sup>5</sup>

Even this brief survey reveals that the zombie is a boundary-blurring figure who embodies contradictions. In describing students as zombie-like, then, I invoke this assemblage of fears, questions, and contradictions to point to the ways that they may appear dead in my classroom but elsewhere alive, and animated, and productively monstrous. Context, perspective, and origins matter a great deal here. I also invoke the zombie figure because I fear the zombie in our midst, traveling among our classrooms and being responsible for significant experiences of others, especially our children. I fear for both, the zombie figure and those who depend upon it for nurturance and sustenance.

#### ZOMBIES AND THE FEAR OF NATALITY

For Arendt, the specter of the zombie in a classroom would be evidence of a failure of natality. In natality, Arendt builds upon Augustine to link the event of birth with the human capacity for generation. She argues that the “new beginning inherent in birth can make itself felt in the world only because the newcomer possesses the capacity of beginning something new, that is, of acting. In this sense of initiative, an element of action, and therefore of natality, is inherent in all human activities.”<sup>6</sup> Arendt’s language here emphasizes action, which is important because action is the aspect of human life that responds to the plurality of human existence. This contrasts with the paralysis that seems to haunt the zombie’s inaction and unfeeling response to the demands of plurality.

For Arendt, natality is also a central focus of education. While each newcomer has the capacity to remake the world, to introduce the new into becoming, each emerges into a world already in motion, and moreover, is constituted *by* that world.<sup>7</sup>

Thus, the young inhabit, understand, and potentially remake features of the world simultaneously. This leads to a fundamental danger: natality can be threatened by a variety of dynamics, including calling forth the young to act too soon in a public realm. It is this concern that animates her controversial discussions of education: we must protect the young in order for them to develop the capacities to bring something new into being. As Arendt observes, “The new always happens against the overwhelming odds of statistical laws and their probability, which for all practical, everyday purposes amounts to certainty; the new therefore always appears in the guise of a miracle.”<sup>8</sup>

But she also famously urges us to protect children not for their sakes alone but for the world as a whole: “But the world, too, needs protection to keep it from being overrun and destroyed by the onslaught of the new that bursts upon it with each new generation.”<sup>9</sup> The unpredictable newness captured by natality may threaten our world, thus education must seek to protect the already given. This is a classic form of conservation, to protect that which is valuable and worth cherishing. The educator’s “task is always to cherish and protect something — the child against the world, the world against the child, the new against the old, the old against the new.”<sup>10</sup> In this way, Arendt uses natality to guard against the threat of the new as much as to protect a space for freedom.

#### THE LONELINESS OF THE ZOMBIE

Contemporary schooling threatens natality because it emphasizes recreating the old instead of creating the world anew. I see the results of this in my teacher education students’ numb responses to social injustice. I believe we can trace these zombie-like reactions to experiences so often found in contemporary schools. For example, prescriptive programs like Reading First, in which students and teachers both follow scripts, present students with limited opportunities to ask questions and explore contradictions. Rather, students are required to find given answers.<sup>11</sup> This is troubling, but even more so when linked to Arendt’s arguments that one of the primary ways that we emerge within the political realm is through language, and of course, language development is a key aspect of the school experience. She sees our linguistic births as helping our becoming unique beings.<sup>12</sup> Programs like Reading First are anathema to the emergence of unique people as these practices seek to control the unpredictable in favor of measurable replication.

Furthermore, educators using such programs communicate that our students exist in a world that has *ended* before they have had an opportunity to assert themselves. This type of experience also occurs in a peopled space so that what could be a communal activity of creation and emergence becomes co-inhabited instruction in silence and control. This is the backstory to how so many students, both pre-service and practicing teachers, repeatedly arrive at the futile conclusion that this focus on control and replication is *just what schooling is*.

Arendt’s analysis of how totalitarianism assaults natality helps explain such a response. Arendt’s focus is not on a singular event as a sudden eruption of a rare form of evil. While completely totalitarian regimes like those she chronicles in depth

might be relatively rare, they are the extreme manifestations of common and destructive trends in our contemporary world. Margaret Conovan helpfully describes these as a “set of grooves into which people are likely to find themselves sliding” that help them to cling to totalitarian ideology rather than the human realm of common experience.<sup>13</sup> Doing so makes destructive limits commonsensical; in this case, schooling must be focused on control and replication. One way of characterizing this seemingly commonplace result of totalitarian thought, one that I argue captures the core of the zombie figure, is Arendt’s discussion of the “nightmare of loneliness.”<sup>14</sup>

Arendt describes loneliness as an absence of thought and contrasts it with solitude: “[L]oneliness is not solitude. Solitude requires being alone whereas loneliness shows itself most sharply in company with others.”<sup>15</sup> When thinking in solitude, one remains in dialogue with oneself. She describes this healthy state of thinking in solitude as being marked by a “two-in-one,”<sup>16</sup> a dialogue with the self that both precedes and animates the public engagement of thinking with others. In this way, she argues, “What makes loneliness so unbearable is the loss of one’s own self which can be realized in solitude, but confirmed in its identity only by the trusting and trustworthy company of my equals.... Self and world, capacity for thought and experience are lost at the same time.”<sup>17</sup>

Again, she uses solitude to distinguish between a healthy existential state of being in company with oneself and loneliness,

where I am also alone but now deserted not only by human company but also by the possible company of myself. It is only in loneliness that I feel *deprived* of human company, and it is only in the acute awareness of such deprivation that ... [humans] ever exist really in the singular, as it is perhaps only in dreams or in madness that they fully realize the unbearable and “unutterable horror” of this state.<sup>18</sup>

The importance of thinking in the life of the human cannot be under-emphasized here. For Arendt thinking grounds us in this tumultuous world, individualizing us from the mass of humans in general. Thinking is grounded in both the past and the contingency of the present as it reaches into the future.

We in schools should take heed of Arendt’s worries about what she describes as *organized* loneliness. Doing so emphasizes why she wants to create a protected space for natality to emerge. The danger is that loneliness “threatens to ravage the world as we know it — a world which everywhere seems to have come to an end — *before a new beginning rising from this end has had time to assert itself.*”<sup>19</sup> She argues that this loneliness inserts itself between us and our contact with others; it undermines our common sense and helps us remain “enclosed” in our own particular universes rather than participating in the public actions of thinking and feeling with others.

In *Ideology and Terror* Arendt defines totalitarianism as a movement akin to a “sandstorm” started by “teaching and glorifying the logical reasoning of loneliness where” we know that we will “be utterly lost” if we let “go of the first premise from which the whole process is started.”<sup>20</sup> When focused on contemporary schooling driven by the first premises of neoliberal ideology and its instrumental rationality,

we find schools animated by a culture of fear that emerges in the hysterical focus on discovering predefined answers measured by standardized assessments, zero-tolerance policies that allow scant room for analysis and negotiation, and even militarized environments that threaten natality. Rather than create protected spaces where we nurture solitude and the development of thinking, we may foster thoughtlessness by truncating dialogue and negotiation. This clinging to the stability that the given presents captures the core of the zombie figure. It inspires a lack of outrage and questioning, a lack of curiosity that is disturbing. To borrow Arendt's controversial language, it is troubling in its banality.

*CARITAS: LOVING THE ZOMBIE TOWARD THE NEW*

While Arendt's discussion of ideology and its relationship to totalitarianism and loneliness is often portrayed as if it structures thinking all the way down, we find openings. For example, John Nelson argues that while Arendt tried to show that the fundamental premises driving ideologies provide a coherent narrative to which the lonely cling, Arendt herself knew that "the truths of reason are not iron-clad in consistency or certainty."<sup>21</sup> The lonely subject, our zombie figure, cannot cling to logically complete and ironclad ideological structures.

In contrast to the seemingly easy unification that Arendt characterizes, Deborah Osberg and Gert Biesta's work in strong emergence points to the impossibility of a successful replication of the ideological beliefs in thinkers' engagement with the world by grounding it within something quite akin to natality. Their "emergentist" conception of knowledge presents a view

that although what we can know is constrained or conditioned by the present that we engage with, each knowledge event — which is to say each taking place of knowledge (knowing) — is necessarily *also radically new*. It is radically new because, although it follows from what has come before, it does not follow on logically from what has come before.... It contains an addition — a supplement — which was not present in what came before.<sup>22</sup>

To return to Arendtian language, they suggest any act of knowing *necessarily* involves the creation of the new. Our knowledge acts draw upon the already existing, but thinking itself alters and creates in ways that are unpredictable. It is, as they describe, the discovering of the new that would be unthinkable from where we were. Thus, rather than focus on the replication of the old, the view of knowledge as emergent embraces the potential for natality. It "moves us into a new reality which is incalculable from what came before. Because it enables us to transcend what came before, this means it also allows us to penetrate deeper into that which does not seem possible from the perspective of the present."<sup>23</sup>

Building on the emergent view, rather than seeing natality as being impossible, or even a miracle, as Arendt suggests, emergentist thinking pushes us to see natality as already occurring or at least existing as an untapped potentiality. In this way and in keeping with their roles as border figures, zombies *are* capable of thinking the world anew; they may already be doing so even if they reject the results of such thought. Put another way: rather than nullifying natality, the loneliness that describes totalitarian moments instead hides it from view, providing a counter-narrative that agents can substitute for their own. But even this description threatens

the emergentist perspective. Perhaps it is more accurate to see the zombie figure as *reworking* and creating *anew* an emerging set of understandings within a space bent on replication. Those who attempt to frame the public articulation of their thinking within a deterministic framework can seemingly cling to the stability it offers, but again, they are not re-creating that which exists. Something new still emerges in the process itself, although it would be a weak form of emergence, a weak natality. The potential of strong emergence, a profound natality, exists within the zombie figure, even if we do not outwardly recognize it as such.

The challenge is to find a way to encourage the exploration of the emergent: to bring forth the potential for natality that remains simultaneously dormant *and* active within the productively dualistic figure of the zombie. While cast within different terms, I contend that it is this task that animates Arendt's final work. There we see her turning to love as a vehicle for encouraging individuals to resist the attractive stability of totalitarian ideology and instead to remain engaged, active in the public challenge of responding to human plurality by creating the new.

Appealing to love through Arendt opens opportunities but ones that are always nested within reservations. For example, in *The Human Condition*, Arendt argues that when love becomes a political motivation, it leads to corruption: goodness can be a rationalization for violence. But despite her disavowals of love as apolitical, private, and even something to be feared, in both her earliest and her final works we find Arendt exploring how love relates to the political realm. For example, in the unfinished *Life of the Mind*, we find her seeking a type of "thinking that does not depend upon a noble nature but can lead to a moral resistance to evil-doing; a willing that is healed by love and leads to respectful volitions or actions, but does not make love a political principle; a judging that does not surrender its reflectivity to imperatives."<sup>24</sup> To do so, she draws upon medieval Christian thinkers like Augustine, Thomas Aquinas and John Duns Scotus, and despite her fears, she explores the importance of love in the political realm. Scotus in particular is useful, for he considers love to be a "stabilizing counterweight for the will, understood both as 'the inner organ for freedom' and as 'the spring of action.'"<sup>25</sup>

Arendt's drawing upon love as a force to stabilize the will against wild fluctuation is useful here in our consideration of loneliness and the way that terror can make the solidity of ideological irrationality a seductive haven. Also of use is Augustine's "emphasis on love as 'the supreme binding force' capable of overcoming the split and discord in the act of willing."<sup>26</sup> Augustine's vision of love contributes to the unconditional acceptance of human plurality.

Rather than focusing on thought alone, the seeming *sine qua non* of educational engagement, for the later Arendt, the Augustinian *caritas* offers direction as something to guide the struggle of the will, the desire for stability that animates the zombie figure's loneliness. While contemporary schooling reifies replication of the old, the plurality of humanity demands that agents embrace the indeterminacy of an emergent and unpredictable natality that provides an unforeseen and unimaginable future. I suggest we need teachers who are more comfortable with embracing the

unknown in the face of the human demands of their students than with guarding the old, especially when the old harms their students. I find Joanna Vecchiarelli Scott's description of this person as a "radical pilgrim" a productive alternative to the specter of the zombie. Rather than clinging to the ideological stability of the past while being alone in the midst of others, the radical pilgrim is bound publicly to others in the mutually beneficial project of changing the world.<sup>27</sup> Likewise, rather than clinging to a static conception of the world, this radical pilgrim embraces life in between, fully engaged with others in the ambiguous process of moving forward together — creating a new world while living amidst and constituted by the old.

Importantly, Arendt argues that people become these just and radical pilgrims, these public citizens bonded by a public love, by *experiencing* loving relations themselves. But for Arendt, love offers, at best, an indirect influence. As Elisabeth Young-Bruehl observes, Arendt believed that a person "trained by love will want to preserve the world as a place where acts that ultimately flow from love – acts of solidarity, acts of mutual pledging — can exist."<sup>28</sup>

The key to loving a zombie is to look deeper to see the radical pilgrim existing in the boundaries between the past and the future. We also must provide opportunities for exploration within community in order to love the old into becoming the new in unpredictable ways. We must do so in a time where we are encouraged to love the old, to replicate, to control. Rather than focusing further on ways to engage thinking alone, we need to provide opportunities for teacher-education students to experience love, connection, reflection, *and* solitude in order to inspire them to imagine the new and just in the face of the old and oppressive. Doing so will require that we also think anew the affective and intellectual aims of our educational programs to create spaces where we love our students enough to provide them space both to experience it with others and to draw upon it as a source for remaking the world.

- 
1. Hannah Arendt, *The Life of the Mind* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1981).
  2. Kelly Clark/Keefe, *Invoking Mnemosyne: Art, Memory, and the Uncertain Emergence of a Feminist Embodied Methodology* (Rotterdam: Sense Publishers, 2010), 74.
  3. Ibid.
  4. John Cussans, "Tracking the Zombie Diaspora: From Subhuman Haiti to Posthuman Tucson," in *Monsters and the Monstrous: Myths and Metaphors of Enduring Evil*, eds. P.L. Yodder and P.M. Kreuter (Oxford: Inter-Disciplinary Press, 2004), 207.
  5. Ibid., 205.
  6. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 9.
  7. Natasha Levinson, "Teaching in the Midst of Belatedness: The Paradox of Natality in Hannah Arendt's Educational Thought," *Educational Theory* 47, no. 4 (1997).
  8. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 178.
  9. Hannah Arendt, *Between Past and Future: Eight Exercises in Political Thought* (New York: Penguin Books, 2006), 182.
  10. Ibid., 188.
  11. Nicholas Meier, "Reading First?," *Critical Literacy: Theories and Practices* 3, no. 2 (2009): 74.
  12. See Arendt, *The Human Condition*.

13. Margaret Conovan, "Arendt's Theory of Totalitarianism: A Reassessment," in *The Cambridge Companion to Hannah Arendt*, ed. Dana Villa (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).
14. Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*.
15. Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (New York: Meridian Books, 1958), 475.
16. Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 185.
17. Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 477.
18. Arendt, *The Life of the Mind*, 74.
19. Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, 478.
20. Ibid.
21. John S. Nelson, "Politics and Truth: Arendt's Problematic," *American Journal of Political Science* 22, no. 2 (1978): 287.
22. Deborah Osberg and Gert J.J. Biesta, "Beyond Presence: Epistemological and Pedagogical Implications of 'Strong' Emergence," *Interchange* 38, no. 1 (2007).
23. Ibid., 44
24. Elisabeth Young-Bruhl, *Why Arendt Matters (Why X Matters Series)* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2006), 205.
25. Shin Chiba, "Hannah Arendt on Love and the Political: Love, Friendship, and Citizenship," *Review of Politics* 57, no. 3 (1995): 507.
26. Ibid., 534.
27. Joanna Vecchiarelli Scott, "What St. Augustine Taught Hannah Arendt about 'How to Live in the World': Caritas, Natality and the Banality of Evil," in *Hannah Arendt: Practice, Thought and Judgment*, ed. Mika Ojakangas (Helsinki: Helsinki Collegium for Advanced Studies, 2010).
28. Young-Bruhl, *Why Arendt Matters*, 207.

---

I thank Kelly Clark/Keefe for her thoughtful response to an earlier draft of this essay where she provided helpful challenges *and* guidance.