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# A Braindead Nation: *Black Summer* and Trump's America

**Stella Gaynor**

## Introduction

*Black Summer* aired as a full season release on Netflix in April 2019. A Netflix Original created by Karl Schaefer and John Hyams, it is a spin-off (rather than a prequel) to *Z Nation* (SyFy, 2014–2018), *Black Summer* differs in tone to *Z Nation*, offering a more serious view of the apocalypse, rather than the tongue-in-cheek approach preferred by its bigger brother. *Black Summer* also differs in its structure, pacing, and episode length, with the first episode clocking forty-five minutes and the finale coming it at only twenty minutes. From the producers' point of view, the conditions at Netflix encourage a lack of episodic thinking and allow the narrative of *Black Summer* to unfold in its own unique way. The series is fast, frenetic, packed with hard punches, and sprints along through both its story and its pointed and poignant social commentary. The narrative and character beats are clearly marked by black title cards, consisting of one or two words: 'Rose;' 'Spears;' 'Bicycle;' 'Roll Call;' 'Two Bullets'. The cards punctuate and segment the action in lieu of commercial breaks and weekly gaps between episodes on traditional television. These cards, while clearly segmenting the narrative, also serve as a guide, a safety rail, as *Black Summer* reveals both its narrative and its politics at high speed.

*Black Summer*'s eight episodes stack up their character deaths as quickly as they stack up their commentary. This article will approach *Black Summer* through textual analysis, aligning its aesthetics and narrative beats with political events from the US, and the news coverage of them, to explore the picture of contemporary America that *Black Summer* presents to us. I will unpack how America perceives a hierarchy of worth in its immigrant population, exploring how *Black Summer* depicts the thriving underground economy and examine how *Black Summer* tackles violence in America's schools and colleges. I will contend the show is both a refugee story and a narrative in which infected zombies stand as a stark allegory for the festering sickness of right-wing extremism spreading throughout the United States. With so much to explore in *Black Summer* and the recent history of the US, I will approach this analysis systematically, and take each episode and its social commentary one by one. As creator Karl Schaefer notes, *Black Summer* is intended to be 'an 8-hour chunk you can fight your way through' (*Cinemablend* 2018), accordingly, this article will close with a look at the overarching commentary the show makes when viewed as a cohesive whole.

Zombie texts have for decades been read as a vehicle for challenging and engaging with political and social ideology. Examining *Night of The Living Dead* (1968), Dillard pointed to the initial fear of zombies giving way to fears of the 'ordinary failings' of the human survivors (1987: 22). *Night* was seen as part of the backlash against the atrocities in Vietnam and the civil unrest of the 1960s (Bishop 2009) and Romero's later film *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) saw the zombie develop into a 'satirical depiction of instant celebratory gratification' in our consumerist culture (Harper 2002). Bishop's works explore zombie texts as a tool to examine the social and political consciousness of the United States post 9/11. Untimely death on such a mass scale examines 'the limits of rationality and passion, the definition of statehood and citizenship' (Bishop, 2009: 26). Other facets of socio-political commentary can be seen in Pokonorwski's work (2014), where he argues that a zombie plague shows us the problematic ethics of sanctions to defend against disease, and Nurse reads the zombie narrative seen in *The Walking Dead* as a questioning of preventative policing versus responsive policing. Nurse points to the 'disenchantment throughout society' (2014: 67) drawn from tensions between US citizens and those meant protect them. Political and government protection explains Brooks, has little to no standing with the population of the United States as 'people have apocalypse on the brain … from terrorism, war [and] natural disasters like Katrina' (Brooks, cited in Bishop 2009: 27). *Black Summer*, then, is indicative of the evolution of the zombie narrative. Contemporary America has such an abundance of political and social incidences and controversies that the zombie narrative is the ideal tool – as it has historically shown - to engage with such topics.

## **A Sickness in America**

The rise of Donald Trump to the US Presidency served to give voice to, and stoke the flames of, right-wing extremism. Views that were once held only by fringe Republicans and right-wing activists have undoubtedly risen to the surface of American culture, riding in on the words of Trump as he has given a green light to such extreme (and previously concealed) views, allowing them to become a part of mainstream American rhetoric. On the campaign trail, Trump espoused and normalized such views, largely through his repeated promise to build a wall along the US/Mexico border. In his 1987 memoir, Trump states that he plays to 'people's fantasies' and that this method is 'an innocent form of exaggeration – and a very effective form of promotion' (Evan Osnos, *The New Yorker,* 2015). In 2015, Trump was promoting himself as not just a would-be President, but as a savior protecting the American people from a threat he himself created by linking several unrelated incidents together, and bringing fears and insecurities held by certain sections of the American public, where casual racism has historically been normalized, into the mainstream.[1] For example, Trump said of Central and South Americans attempting to cross the border into the United States seeking asylum, work and stability: 'They're bringing drugs. They're bringing crime. They're rapists' (Osnos 2015). Trump's promised wall is yet to materialize in any form that resembles the grandiose structure he discussed on the campaign trail, but his crackdown on people crossing the border has been very real and resulted in the Family

Separation Policy, which has, at the time of writing, seen '2737 children separated' from their loved ones and held in grim conditions (Mark 2019).

*Black Summer* opens with a clear commentary on the cruelty of these separations for already desperate people. 'Human Flow' (1:01) opens with a family packing supplies, including mother, Rose (Jaime King), her husband, Patrick (Ty Olsson), and daughter, Anna (Zoe Marlett), before running down a suburban street as a sirens wail. Many more families run with them as they head for a military checkpoint: the border between zombie-infected territory and a safe haven. Mirroring the treacherous route that many would-be immigrants take through the Rio Grande Valley to the perceived (and almost mythical) safety of the United States, Rose and the other families running down these streets, infested with zombies, are 'on a dangerous journey to save their children' (Flaherty 2019). For Rose and many others, this 'promised land' can prove to be cruel, brutal, and unfair. At the checkpoint, Rose, her husband, and her daughter await a health check from a rough-handed member of the military, who notices that her husband has been bitten. In a subsequent scuffle, the young girl is taken away, separated from her parents, and driven into the distance without any information being given to Rose on how she might make future contact with her daughter. As Rick Jervis and Alan Gomez note, the Family Separation Policy allows 'Border Patrol Agents [to] separate a family if they decide the adult and child are not really related or if the parent is deemed a danger to the child' (Jervis & Gomez, *USA Today*, 2019). Here, then, in the fictionalized America of *Black Summer*, Rose's husband has been deemed a danger to his daughter, and thus the family are forcibly separated from each other just as they might have found sanctuary.

As we meet more of the show's characters in 'Human Flow', including Spears (Justin Chu Cary), Ryan (Mustafa Alabssi), Barbara (Gwynyth Walsh) and Lance (Kelsey Flower), the checkpoint eventually becomes overrun with people desperate to escape danger. In the first episode, the lore of this particular breed of zombie is revealed: like the viral zombie plagues of both *Z Nation* and *The Walking Dead* (AMC, 2010–), this type of ghoul turns into a monster after death, even when the person was not bitten when alive. The transformation is rapid; bitten victims die and are up and running in a matter of seconds. Echoing the rapid and frenetic violence of *28 Days Later* (Boyle, 2002), these zombies are focused on their prey and show some levels of strategy and method in their frenzied attacks.[2] The speed of *Black Summer*'s zombies is mirrored in the quick-fire nature of its political allegory. After pointing out the cruelty of the Family Separation Policy in 'Human Flow', 'Drive' (1.02) shows us the death of the American Dream, a 'dream' that Trump himself proclaimed to be dead (Sarah Churchwell, *The Guardian,* 2018). There are, of course, two interpretations of the American Dream: one a progressive idea of equality, justice, and opportunity for all, the other an exemplification and celebration of individualism and material gain (Churchwell, 2018). While the American Dream of equality and tolerance might be dead in Trump's America, both the selfish nature of individualism and a loss of sympathy for fellow humans are very much alive and kicking.

After Will saves Barbara from being carjacked in 'Human Flow', 'Drive' sees Will (Sal Valez Jr) Barbara and Sun (Christine Lee) being pursued by assailant's unknown in a matte black, faceless pick-up truck. A clear indictment of individualism is clear in a segment titled ‘The Others’. Thinking that their pursuers want the fuel in their car, Will speeds off in the hope that he will lose the pick-up, and the two vehicles screech around the corners of suburban streets. Having lost the people chasing him, Will parks in an alley to catch his breath. Up until this point, *Black Summer* has focused on the trio in the car, making clear that they are our primary points of identification – but then we see that they refuse to help a young couple, pleading for help, who hang on the car's windows as a zombie runs towards them. They offer food, water, shelter and even sex in return for their lives, but Will leaves the couple behind and speeds away. Will then calmly asks Sun about her mother, these events clearly having had no psychological effect on him, and *Black Summer*'s understanding of the American Dream soon becomes clear. In this universe (as, perhaps, in the modern United States), the American Dream no longer represents tolerance, equality and sanctuary but rather self-preservation. Will then comments that it was only a few months ago that he was working in the town the group is driving through. The disparity between the Americas of Obama and Trump, from tolerance to hate, is summed up in Will's words: ‘man, shit changes, huh?’

## **The American Psyche**

*Black Summer* weaves its narrative through two main groups of characters: Will, Barbara and Sun (who later absorb more members), and Rose, Spears, Lance and, later, Earl (Nyren B. Evelyn). 'Summer School' (1.03) leaves Will behind and catches up with Rose. Rose and her band of survivors seek sanctuary in what appears to be a place of safety. They come across a school, easily accessible by a convenient wedge holding a door open. But in a familiar horror trope, the school reveals itself to be a place of danger (Clover, 1987: 192). In America, the school (a place of safety and sanctuary) has increasingly become associated with the specter of the school shooter. Be it in elementary, middle, or high schools or on college campuses, schools in the United States have become places of potential terror since 1999.[3] Speaking following a mass shooting at Santa Fe High School in 2018, a local resident summed up these anxieties: 'school is supposed to be a safe place, but I guess nowadays it's not' (Dart, *The Guardian,* 2018). The idea that American schools have now become dangerous places, where children arm themselves and kill their classmates and teachers, has become an integral part of the American psyche. Since the Columbine High School massacre, which saw Eric Harris and Dylan Klebold kill thirteen of their fellow students and teachers before turning their guns on themselves in

April 1999, the school shooter has become a figure as terrifying and All-American as the serial killer: '[Columbine] was an attack that could have been exceptional. Instead, its brutality has been made routine […] mass shooter drills became a normal part of the education system' (Amanda Holpuch, *The Guardian*, 2019).

In a segment titled 'Seek', Rose and Ryan find dead bodies killed by gunfire lying on the floor of the school, echoing the leaked images of Harris and Klebold following their suicides.[4] It soon becomes clear to Rose and her group that the school is a trap: in a comment on America's fear of its children, this school is a dangerous place, where students are armed and roaming the halls, killing at will. Pointing to the pessimistic view *Black Summer* takes on America and particularly its spate of mass shootings, Elisabeth Vincenttelli remarks that the show depicts 'The world [as] stupid, cruel and, at worse, arbitrary' (New York Times, 2019). As the children in the school kill seemingly without rhyme or reason, 'Summer School' (1.03) and 'Alone' (1.04) sketch an eerie picture of the near-mythical school shooter archetype and its media depiction. *Black Summer*'s killer kids are shown to be amassing an arsenal, while holding several captive adults. As Lance escapes the school in 'Alone', the children shoot a grown man on the roof and drop him to the ground. It is unclear if the children simply want to kill the man or if they are hoping he will reanimate and attack Lance – which he duly does.

*Black Summer*'s refusal to provide proper reasoning for the mindless killing carried out by the students, mirrors America's failure to understand school shooters. While the media paints them as monsters, psychologists, youth workers and mental health campaigners have long worked to look past screaming headlines and instead try to understand their motives. For example, Peter Langman's work on school shootings tries to explain the behavior of their perpetrators.[5] For the sensationalist and scaremongering American media, the reporting on such events (Columbine, Virginia Tech, Stoneman Douglas, Santa Fe, etc.) depicts shooters as monstrous and utterly lacking in empathy or compassion;

their actions are random and evil. For example, *Time* said of Harris and Klebold that 'retaliation against specific people was not the point' of the boys' actions (Gibbs & Roche, 1999). The media spectacle around school shootings tends to put aside mental health as a concern, and instead looks elsewhere for answers. For example, following her son's involvement of Columbine, Sue Klebold argues the media cited 'a thousand other reasons […] video games, movies, music, bullying, access to guns, unarmed teachers, the absence of prayer in schools, secular humanism, psychiatric medication. Mostly, though, they blamed us,' (2016: 95). Why children should do such things is both complex and harrowing and, as *Black Summer* shows us, there is no easy explanation to be found. It is irrefutable, however, that America's rampant gun culture and the alarming frequency of mass shootings in the twenty-first century have led to a feeling of unease amongst many Americans: 'Public spaces such as schools, churches, and music festivals can be turned so quickly into killing grounds' (Holpuch, *The Guardian,* 2019).[6] In 'Alone', we follow Lance after he has been separated from the rest of Rose's group, trapped in the school by the children. He locks himself in the library, an image that mirrors so many empty learning spaces following evacuations, but one that particularly references the most fatal phase of the Columbine massacre, which saw Harris and Klebold kill the majority of their victims and themselves in the school's library (Klebold, 2016: 130 – 131). Lance tries to distract himself by reading but hears gunshots and screaming from the corridors outside. He cowers on the library floor, hoping that the shooter (and the zombies) does not find him. Deciding to escape, he heads back out into the corridor, leaving us with an image of an empty hallway echoing with the sounds of gunfire.

In the collective American psyche, mass shootings have now become inevitable. With shooter drills commonplace and a thriving market for school safety equipment, including security guards and snipers for hire, bulletproof whiteboards, and armored classroom doors (Cox & Rich, *The Washington Post*, 2018), the specter of the school shooter haunts places of learning across the nation. Speaking after the Santa Fe incident, a seventeen-year-old student said: 'It's been happening everywhere. I've always felt like eventually it was going to happen here too' (Holpuch, *The Guardian,* 2019). But as terrifying as this acceptance of inevitable violence is, mass shootings such as these are good for business in the gun and security trade. As I will explore later in this article, America has a clear economy of violence.

## **Immigration and Exploitation**

'Diner' (1.05) sees Carmen (Erika Hau), Manny (Edsson Morales) and Phil (Stafford Perry), the occupants of the aggressive black pick-up truck in 'Drive', take refuge in an empty diner with Will and Sun. The driver of the pick-up, Marvin (Christian Fraser) and Barbara have both since become zombies following a crash caused by the marauding pick-up. The undead Marvin and Barbara are focused on the human prey inside the diner, who are trapped and in need of an escape plan. This episode explores attitudes to immigrants and their perceived worth, especially in light of the Trump administration. After deciding that the two groups should go some way towards helping each other, Carmen rightly assumes that Sun, like herself and Manny, were unable to board military vehicles that would take them to safety because they 'didn't have the right papers'.[7] Not having 'papers' (or being an undocumented immigrant), means that a person lacks 'a legal claim to exist' (Vorgas, *Time,* 2012) in the United States, and so they are therefore not entitled to take up any kind of employment or claim state assistance. The zombie as a barometer of social fears has evolved alongside cultural divisions which remain entrenched in the United States. In *Black Summer*, the zombies are a catalyst for those already fearful or exploitative of immigrants, highlighting the personal prejudices that people hold, and forcing those looking for shelter into increasingly dangerous situations

Not having the right papers in *Black Summer* means that, for Carmen, Manny, and Sun, they had no right to protection from the zombie outbreak. When on the campaign trail, Trump – in his self-stated 'innocent form or exaggeration' – created an 'ugly rhetoric about immigration status [and] other ethnic impurities' (Rampell, *The Washington Post,* 2015). This rhetoric was inflated by Trump's habit of repeatedly connecting violence and criminality with specific groups (i.e., immigrants) to incite fear and division. In Boston, for example, a homeless man was beaten simply because he was Hispanic. Scott Leaden, one of the attackers, told police that 'it was OK to assault the man because he was Hispanic and homeless'; the *Boston Globe* reported that 'similar attacks have flared up in Massachusetts and elsewhere in the nation, often after immigrants are in the news' (DiNatale & Sacchetti, 2015). In *Black Summer*'s 'Diner', these sorts of attitudes are replicated in the escape plan hatched by one member of the group: Phil, a white male, tries to appeal to the other men trapped in the diner (Will and Manny), to use some of their non-white companions as bait so that they can try to make their escape and reach the safety of a survivor's outpost.[8]

This episode, then, starkly illustrates how America under the Trump administration has been quite clear in deciding the worth of individuals based on their race and immigration status. In the contemporary United States, a little immigration is fine, but not too much. *Black Summer* echoes this idea: Phil says that the group cannot possibly take everyone to the outpost – America cannot take everyone – but that it is all about ‘balance’. Phil, when hearing that Sun does not speak English, turns his sights on her and argues that she is least worthy of rescue, and that she should be sacrificed so that they (or rather he) can escape. As Phil makes this point, Sun points out that he has been scratched. Phil then shouts, ‘you keep this up I'll toss you out myself! I'm not going to be railroaded by some foreign piece of shit! You're spreading lies! You're weak and you're a liar!’ (‘Diner’ 1:05).

Phil's words chime with Trump's voter base: 'the broad majority of Trump's supporters [say] that immigrants weaken America' (Osnos, *The New Yorker,* 2015). Phil's perception of Sun as a weak link that will bring the rest of the group down illustrates the same rhetoric that Trump espoused on the campaign trail. Phil's words also resonate with some of the chilling words spoken by right-wing groups that aligned themselves with Trump on his road to the White House. For example, 'The *Daily Stormer*, America's most popular neo-Nazi news site, endorsed him for President' (Osnos, *The New Yorker,* 2015). Richard Spencer, a white supremacist, leading right-wing activist and director of the National Policy Institute[9] said that 'Trump reflected ‘an unconscious vision that white people […] might be a hated minority in their own country' (Spencer in Osnos, *The New Yorker,* 2015). Journalist Evan Osnos of the *New Yorker*, who conducted several interviews with Trump's fringe supporters during the campaign run, 'sensed that my fellow attendees [at various rallies and right-wing events] occupied a parallel universe in which white Americans face imminent demise' (2015). In *Black Summer*, Phil uses his unsubstantiated fear of immigrants and his perception of their worth as a reason to discard them; this is a stark set piece in which a white American must work as a team to survive, but his hatred and intolerance gets the better of him as he shows himself to be a fearful racist. As someone who has succumbed to the right-wing's rhetoric regarding the worth of immigrants, he suggests that it would be morally acceptable to let them die so that he might survive.

## **Underground Economies**

After Rose has been separated from her daughter at the military border and Will, Sun, Carmen and Manny are refused help because they lack the correct papers, both groups eventually come together and begin the next phase of their journey to the survivor's outpost. All these characters are forced to fend for themselves in the absence of any help from the authorities, and so turn to an underground economy that profits from the desperate. In ‘Heist’ (1.06), the group approach and enter the outpost, where – as the episode title suggests – they carry out a heist and steal an arsenal of guns. The outpost is an underground operation in both a literal and figurative sense: it is built in a series of basement rooms and tunnels and is representative of the kind of underground economy that works through exploitation of desperate people – those undocumented immigrants, for example, who are unable to enter the United States and find work through legal channels.

Discussing the crisis caused by the sheer numbers of people separated at the US/Mexico border and other locations, Amnesty International has stated that 'by turning away asylum seekers at the US ports of entry, the United States has […] manufactured an emergency along the border [leaving people at risk of] exploitation by criminal gangs' (Amnesty International report, 2018). Rose and her group are turned away from government aid and are therefore left with no choice but to find alternative methods of survival through the exploitative underground economy of the outpost. America is aware of these underground economies, demonstrated in *Black Summer* when Rose and her companions request entry to the outpost under the watchful eye of military personnel on a nearby roof. These operatives know that the outpost exists, that it is exploitative and fraught with danger – but they do nothing to help.

Inside the outpost, various illegal activities are taking place. Rose is sexually assault twice, first under the guise of being checked for weapons at the door, and again as the same doorman later attempts to rape her.[10] Within the outpost's tunnels are people who have been enslaved, drugged and/or forced into prostitution, and the use of narcotics is rife both within cramped cells filled with prisoners and in an underground rave taking place somewhere within the complex. Economies like this are rife in America, with an annual '$2 trillion expenditure [on] the sale of street drugs and prostitution' (Bloomenthal, *Investopedia,* 2019) in the nation. Our group separates into smaller teams and sets about their plan to steal the guns they hope will allow them to get to the stadium where Rose's daughter is being held. Sun, Spears, and Manny get the guns, Will and Carmen turn out and lights, and Carmen additionally takes the opportunity to exact some revenge: she finds the owner of the outpost, who clearly knows her. She murders him without explanation, but we can surmise that she herself has been subjected to abuse and rape during her time in America: another victim of this underground economy.

That these exploitative underground economies are on the rise in America serves to expose the chasm between the haves and have nots: 'You normally see underground economies in places like Brazil or in Southern Europe […] but with the job situation and the uncertainty in the economy, it's not all that surprising to have it growing here in the United States' (Koba, *CNBC,* 2013). In refusing to help asylum seekers and refugees, the United States is 'pushing them back into harm's way' (Amnesty International report, 2018). *Black Summer*'s central characters are pushed back into harm's way by the military's refusal to help them – both at the checkpoint seen in 'Human Flow' and before they enter the outpost in 'Heist'.

## **The Myth of Sanctuary**

Later, the outpost falls.[11] The majority of the group escapes the episode alive.[12] During their escape, after hiding from several of the infected, the group is escorted by two military personnel – the same two that allowed them to enter the outpost in the first place. They assure the group that they are safe now, and that they (the soldiers) will accompany them to the stadium. The troops question Spears, and Sun tells her story – and, although no one understands her words, the group is moved by her evident emotion. Each of the survivors is shattered, tired and broken-hearted, and the soldiers urge them to get some rest, telling them, 'You'll be safe here. Let Uncle Sam keep an eye open' (1:07). In this episode, 'The Tunnel' (1.07), the military is indicative of the myth of a safe America – an America protected by its militarism. That 'Uncle Sam' will take care of you is a myth perpetuated both in and outside of America; see the many who head for the United States via the Rio Grande, only to fall foul of a policy that ensures 'mass illegal pushbacks of asylum seekers [in addition to] cruel and inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment' (Amnesty International report, 2018).

For these proud military men, who represent and even refer to themselves as Uncle Sam, see Spears – a Black American – and treat him as less than human. They take him away while the rest of the group sleeps, and Rose awakens to find Spears and the soldiers gone. Upon tracking them down, she finds Spears being strong-armed into a tunnel, accused of being a criminal.[13] They describe Spears as ‘the lowest of the low, the lowest of humanity’ and state that ‘today is his day of reckoning’ (1:07). These soldiers – and therefore Uncle Sam – offer a false promise of protection and then refuse to recognize Spears as a fellow human. Thus, *Black Summer* shines a light on another of America's problems: institutional racism. Not believing that Spears could be a criminal, Rose shoots both soldiers and returns with Spears to the rest of the group. They ready and arm themselves before emerging out into the daylight, ready to make the final push to the stadium. At this point, Earl wordlessly leaves the group with his dog to make it on his own.

*Black Summer* begins with Rose being separated from her daughter, and it is her mission through the show's eight episodes to be reunited with her at the stadium. That quest comes to an end in 'The Stadium' (1.08). The final push to reach Rose's daughter is a twenty-minute finale flooded with danger that provides some of the show's most stark, bleak, and yet pointed commentary. When Rose and the group make it to their destination – a supposed place of sanctuary from the devastation that surrounds them – it is empty. The refugee center they were looking for is not there. The streets surrounding the stadium are filled with people streaming towards the structure, hoping for salvation and safety. This promise of help at the stadium echoes the horrific circumstances during and in the wake of Hurricane Katrina as it tore apart Louisiana in 2005; for the thousands of refugees who made their way to the Superdome in New Orleans, they found destruction and a definitively empty promise of help and safety.

In 'Human Flow', Rose tells her daughter to wait at the stadium for her, as this is where the refugee center is supposed to be. In the hours before Katrina devastated New Orleans, misinformation was given to many who made their way 'to the dome because that's where they were instructed to go after calling the hurricane hotline' (Brown, *Journal of Emergency Medical Services,* 2005). In total, '1,833 people lost their lives' (Scott, *USA Today,* 2015) because of Katrina and, more importantly, because of a shocking lack of response from a government that failed to protect the people of Louisiana. In fact, Katrina exposed 'deep rooted problems [in] federal government response [and a] lack of preparedness. Katrina's victims tended to be low income and African American' (Gibbens, *National Geographic,* 2019). The Federal Emergency Management Agency failed in its duties; director Michael Brown 'dismissed reports that the levees had breached' in New Orleans, and the Superdrome 'quickly became a hulking symbol of government ineffectiveness, of economic and racial inequality' (Marta Jewson & Charles Maldonado, *Slate,* 2015). Echoing the institutional racism on display in 'The Tunnel', then, 'The Stadium' references Katrina, via streets flooded with zombies and no sign of assistance for the survivors, an indictment of an America that cares little for desperate people in need – whether they are its own citizens or refugees seeking asylum.

In the final moments of *Black Summer*, as Rose and her group fight for their lives to get to the stadium, they are surrounded by many other refugees heading the same way. The stadium, like the Superdome, is a 'refuge of last resort' (Scott, *USA Today,* 2015). With the military nowhere to be seen and everyone else evacuated, this structure is the last hope for Rose, just as the Superdome was the last hope for the poorest citizens of New Orleans – people with 'no prayer of getting out of town and no shelter but the [Superdome]' (Murphy, *LA Times,* 2010). So many survivors head to the stadium in *Black Summer*, but there is no real hope or help for them once they get there. This is, then, a pointed commentary on the 'people who remained in New Orleans' (Scott, *LA Times,* 2015) and how they too were abandoned and left behind by their own government. It is also a final reminder that America has failed to learn its lessons – that in Trump's America, *Black Summer*'s stadium could easily represent the United States as a whole: a false refuge that promises nothing but further suffering to those who seek asylum there.

## A Nation Built on Violence

*Black Summer* is, by design, both violent and bleak – and its overarching theme revolves around the prevalence of guns in everyday America. *Black Summer* shows us the country's obsession and on-going problems with allowing firearms to be freely available. The characters all become a part of Rose's mission to reach the stadium, and the only way that they can get there is via the outpost and the procurement of guns. Gun culture in the United States is an ingrained part of its history and has been blamed for incidents such as Columbine from both sides of the debate – access to guns caused the massacre (Langman, 2009: 5), or the lack of guns in the hands of teachers and on-lookers failed to stop it (Langman, 2009: 182-183). Contemporary American gun culture is still tied up in the myth of the frontier, a myth perpetuated by lobbyists such as the National Rifle Association and by the media; in zombie films and television shows, for example, just as on the frontier, guns are viewed as protectors against the 'savage' (Tirman, *Boston NPR,* 2018). In *Black Summer*, too, guns ostensibly protect the protagonists from the 'savage' in the guise of the sprinting infected. But here, the frontier myth is proven to be just that: a myth. Talking to the *Huffington Post,* Professor Priya Staia at Stanford University stated that when Americans were making their way into the West:

> In order to attract settlers, frontier towns took guns off people at the gates. 19th century people were not walking round with guns. The image of guns everywhere and on everyone is a 21st century invention. An NRA promoted myth. (Campbell, *Huffington Post,* 2018)

For many Americans, gun ownership is a true marker of their patriotism, their Americanism.[14] And to be American, of course, is to be free: '75% of gun owners say gun ownership enhances their sense of freedom' (Tirman, *Boston NPR,* 2018). Guns, then, are a part of American social and cultural history, and violent mass shootings have become a part of that history. Wanton violence in the streets, as portrayed in 'The Stadium' as Rose and company make the final push to their destination, is of course a picture of America that has been inflated and exaggerated by *Black Summer* for dramatic effect – but it nonetheless reveals the horrifying nature of allowing citizens to carry such dangerous and volatile weapons in civilian areas; it is pointing to the perplexing pro-gun attitude that exists amongst a sizable section of the American public, and questioning its rhetoric. Is it true that our protagonists will not be safe unless they are armed? As the final episode reveals, guns will not and do not help them. This is in counterpoint to several other American zombie texts; *The Walking Dead*, for example, puts an extreme and largely uncritical focus on gun culture.[15]

America is a nation built on a history of violence; as other nations have closed their doors to the gun trade and banned the carrying of firearms after mass shootings and other violent incidents, America has become the primary market for weapons sales. There are '857 million civilian owned guns in the world' and 'America owns half of them' (Campbell, *Hufffington Post,* 2018); and the frontier myth persists: 'According to a 2013 Pew Survey, the main reason for owning guns is self-protection' (Tirman, *Boston NPR,* 2018). In fact, mass shootings cause surges in firearms sales. In 2016, following the *Pulse* nightclub shooting, sales of the AR-15, a semi-automatic rifle, rose dramatically (Campbell, *Huffington Post*, 2018). The NRA claims the AR-15 is used for hunting, but such a weapon is hardly appropriate for that task; in fact, these guns are 'used to kill people' (Campbell, *Huffington Post,* 2018). *Black Summer* illustrates the senseless violence such weapons promote clearly during the final push to the stadium: as guns are discharged, Carmen is shot by 'friendly fire' when she is accidentally hit by a fellow survivor. Will, too, shoots another survivor, who falls to the ground from a shot to the chest (a clear indicator that he is not, in fact, a zombie). Will kills the man without a second of hesitation. These weapons, then – ostensibly weapons for use in the war against the infected – are in fact used to kill living, breathing human beings.

American's current economy of violence thrives on the sale of guns, but also on selling protection from shooters. As well as buying guns, America now spends its dollars on a bustling trade in anti-shooter security. In 2018 the Florida Hotel in Parkland, Colorado hosted an expo titled the 'National Schools Safety Conference', where representatives from schools could shop for security measures to keep their students safe in the event of a shooting incident. Talking to the *Washington Post,* one salesperson said, 'what we want to do is just give the kids, the teachers, a chance […] so they can buy a few minutes' (2018). School shootings, then, and the inevitable school shooter, are both now entrenched in American culture, as portrayed in *Black Summer*'s 'Summer School' and 'Alone', and school leaders are under pressure to alleviate the fears of parents sending children to their institutions.

On offer at the Colorado expo were 'solutions' to school shootings like '300-pound ballistic whiteboards [and] tourniquets, pepper-ball guns […] armored classroom doors that for the price of $4,000 […] could stop bullets, identify the weapon, photograph the shooter, and notify police' (Cox & Rich, *The Washington Post,* 2018). Americans can even go to their local Walmart or Home Depot and purchase bulletproof backpacks for $150 (Cox & Rich, *The Washington Post,* 2018). School security is now a business worth $2.7 billion, not including the billions of dollars spent on armed police officers patrolling school and college campuses (Cox & Rich, *The Washington Post,* 2018). This is the very definition of an economy of violence: America is one of the few markets open to gun sales; mass shootings occur; through fear, more people buy guns; to stay safe from those guns, security businesses boom. All of this is a business based on individualism and self-preservation; Trump's government, at least, has no intention of changing gun laws. American's citizens, then, must arm themselves to feel protected in a country flooded with guns – but, as *Black Summer* illustrates, more guns equate to more violence. Zombie narratives have long been a social commentary, progressing from allegories of slavery, antiwar rhetoric, and musings on consumerist culture in *I Walked with A Zombie* (1943, Tourneur), *Night of the Living Dead* (1968, Romero), and *Dawn of the Dead* (1978, Romero) respectively, to the more layered discourse around community, sanctuary, and the human condition in *The Walking Dead. Black Summer* presents a sharper and darker representation of socio-political and cultural values demonstrating the evolution of the zombie from a mild allegory to a utilization of the undead to make a strong and pointed political exposition of the many and varied issues of a contemporary America.

## **Conclusion**

While *Black Summer* ostensibly presents itself as a fast and violent zombie drama – at times relying merely on the sound of a grunting zombie to fill its viewer with fear – it is also a fierce indictment of contemporary American culture under the administration of Donald Trump. Characters in *Black Summer* are left fighting for their lives after they are separated from their loved ones are a border checkpoint in the name of 'safety'. The American Dream is dead: after the apocalypse, just as in Trump's America, the nation's citizens are only interested in saving themselves. The school, which should be a place of peace and sanctuary, turns out to be a deathtrap, as armed children stalk its halls, their motives for turning their guns on society a complete mystery. Meanwhile, right-wing ideology sweeps America; in the diner, people of different backgrounds compare notes on how their lack of documentation has left them at the bottom of a cultural hierarchy, while a white supremacist considers how to sacrifice them to save his own skin. Left to fend for themselves by an uncaring government, those at the bottom of America's social and economic ladder are then left to seek aid in the underground economy, which thrives on criminality and exploitation while the government looks the other way. Uncle Sam offers false promises of safety, soon revealing the institutional racism that plagues America's forces of authority and arbitration. In the hour of their most intense need, these people are then left abandoned and exposed to the elements, having sought shelter in a false refuge. And hanging over all of this is the constant threat of one's fellow man: in America, the ultimate enemy is simply a citizen with a gun. In its eight episodes, then, *Black Summer* comes to deconstruct every facet of Trump's America and reveal the moral sickness lying at its heart.

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**Notes**

[1] Trump highlighted incidents in which undocumented immigrants had been involved in violence with white American citizens.

[2] Some zombies in 'Human Flow' appear to check fences for weak points.

[3] There were school mass shootings prior to Columbine; for sake of focus, I have concentrated on the development of the school shooter in the contemporary American psyche.

[4] In 2002, photographs of Harris and Klebold's bodies were leaked to the press (BBC News, 2002).

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[5] Langman sorts previous shooters into one of three categories: psychopathic shooters, psychotic shooters and traumatized shooters (2009).

[6] For example, the Charlestown church shooting, *Pulse* nightclub shooting and Las Vegas massacre.

[7] The military personnel in 'Human Flow' are shown checking passports and other documentation.

[8] This outpost contains weapons and supplies needed to reach the apparent safety of the stadium.

[9] A think tank 'dedicated to the heritage, identity, and future of European people in the United States and around the world' (Osnos, *The New Yorker,* 2015).

[10] It is here that Rose and company are reunited with Lance. He is lying drugged in a cell that Rose is thrown into. He sees the attempted rape and makes moves to stop it before the lights go out.

[11] Carmen kills the man who quickly turns, spreading the infection throughout the outpost. Will shuts off the power, trapping everyone inside.

[12] Manny was shot and then quickly reanimated. Spears put him down.

[13] Spears is in fact Julius James, and the army uniform he is wearing does not belong to him. The soldiers have met Spears/Julius before, shortly before he met Rose in 'Human Flow'.

[14] There are of course many groups who lobby to tighten gun laws; in 2019 there have been many strikes and walk outs from school children across America, demanding that guns be controlled.

[15] *The Walking Dead* begins to question the usefulness of guns in its eighth and ninth seasons, when ammunition finally falls into short supply.

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