Oral Presentation
Viral Imaginations: Vaccination and the Zombie Apocalypse
Bernice Hausman, Tarryn Abrahams

Background:
If fears of nuclear disaster animated the imaginations of 20th century writers and readers, the 21st is replete with zombies and microbial dangers. These figures are part of a robust viral imagination that mediates popular engagements with public health and vaccination controversy in fiction, public health materials, and people’s lived experience of vaccination.

Objectives:
In this presentation, I consider how fictions of the zombie apocalypse can be analyzed to understand challenges to public health efforts and vaccine hesitancy. The purpose is to determine how fiction is a mechanism that both responds and contributes to concerns about public health and vaccination policy and practice.

Methods:
This research is based on (1) in-depth, semi-structured interviews with vaccine skeptics and vaccine supporters, conducted in two ongoing qualitative studies of vaccine practices and health beliefs, (2) significant scholarly research in the anthropological, sociological, and medical research concerning vaccine skepticism, and (3) tools of literary analysis. The presentation is based on a chapter in my forthcoming book on vaccine skepticism.

Results:
Analysis of zombie apocalypse fiction and qualitative interviews reveal deep concerns with public health approaches to individuals in relation to the population. The individual and the horde, or the individual in a community, is a core theme that runs through both sets of data, connecting them in important ways.

Conclusion:
Zombie apocalypse novels demonstrate some of the core concerns of vaccine skepticism, including the dangers of manipulating viruses and vaccines, as well as fears about sacrificing the few to save the many. Concerns about bureaucratic management are rife. As a result, fictions of the zombie apocalypse are more than gory entertainment—they show us new ways to think about vaccination concerns and resistance to public health efforts more generally.