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Perpetual Tipping Points: Unnatural Narratology, Liminality, and Race in COLSON WHITEHEAD's *Zone One*

COLSON WHITEHEAD's *Zone One* subverts historical rupture by unsettling apocalyptic conventions and collapsing binaries of past/present, life/death, and progress/stasis. Drawing on Jan Alber's unnatural narratology and Shklovsky's defamiliarization, this paper argues that the novel reframes survival as recursive inertia rather than renewal. The paper also builds on the concept of perpetual tipping points to describe how the novel's narrative resists closure through cyclical temporality, bureaucratic monotony, and racial deferral that expose the persistence of systemic failure in a zombie-ified American landscape. *Zone One* thus becomes a haunting meditation on trauma, race, and the illusion of transformation in the aftermath of collapse.

Keywords: COLSON WHITEHEAD, unnatural narratology, recursive temporality, racial trauma, post-apocalyptic fiction, defamiliarization



Received: 01.02.2025. Verified: 08.09.2025. Accepted: 09.11.2025.

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Funding information: National Institute of Technology Srinagar. **Conflicts of interests:** None. **Ethical considerations:** The Author assures no violations of publication ethics and takes full responsibility for the content of the publication. **Declaration regarding the use of GAI tools:** The Author hereby declares that they did use ChatGPT during the preparation of the manuscript: language editing and improvement of grammar and clarity only. The Author then carried out a thorough and critical review of the text, with particular attention to potential false, incomplete, or biased information, possible plagiarism or lack of proper/accurate authorship attribution, and revised it accordingly.

Permanente Kippunkte: Unnatürliche Narratologie, Liminalität und Rasse in COLSON WHITEHEAD'S *Zone One*

COLSON WHITEHEAD'S *Zone One* unterläuft die Vorstellung eines historischen Bruchs, indem der Roman apokalyptische Konventionen destabilisiert und die binären Gegensätze von Vergangenheit/Gegenwart, Leben/Tod sowie Fortschritt/Stagnation auflöst. Unter Rückgriff auf Jan Albers unnatürliche Narratologie und Šklovskij's Konzept der Verfremdung argumentiert dieser Aufsatz, dass der Roman Überleben nicht als Erneuerung, sondern als rekursive Trägheit neu rahmt. Der Beitrag greift zudem das Konzept fortwährender Kippunkte auf, um zu zeigen, wie die Erzählung durch zyklische Zeitlichkeit, bürokratische Monotonie und rassenbedingte Aufschiebung einen Abschluss verweigert und so das Fortbestehen systemischer Fehlstrukturen in einer zombifizierten amerikanischen Landschaft offenlegt. *Zone One* wird damit zu einer gespenstischen Reflexion über Trauma, Rasse und die Illusion von Transformation im Gefolge des Zusammenbruchs.

Schlüsselwörter: COLSON WHITEHEAD, unnatürliche Narratologie, rekursive Zeitlichkeit, rassenbedingtes Trauma, postapokalyptische Fiktion, Verfremdung

Permanentne punkty krytyczne: nienaturalna narratologia, liminalność i rasa w *Zone One* COLSONA WHITEHEADA

Zone One COLSONA WHITEHEADA podważa ideę historycznego zerwania, destabilizując apokaliptyczne konwencje i rozbijając binarne opozycje przeszłość/teraźniejszość, życie/śmierć oraz postęp/zastój. Odwołując się do narratologii Jana Albery oraz do „wyobcowania” Szkwłowskiego, artykuł dowodzi, że powieść ukazuje przetrwanie nie jako odnowę życia, lecz jako inercję. Tekst nawiązuje także do koncepcji permanentnych punktów krytycznych i opisuje, w jaki sposób narracja opiera się domknięciu poprzez cykliczną temporalność, biurokratyczną monotonię i rasowe wykluczenie, ujawniające trwałość systemowych porażek w pozbawionym życia amerykańskim krajobrazie. *Zone One* staje się tym samym refleksją nad traumą, rasą i iluzją przemiany w następstwie katastrofy.

Słowa kluczowe: COLSON WHITEHEAD, nienaturalna narratologia, rekurencyjna temporalność, trauma rasowa, fikcja postapokaliptyczna, wyobcowanie

1. Introduction

COLSON WHITEHEAD is a leading African American writer of the post-soul generation. His fiction merges African American themes with popular genres like detective and zombie fiction. Whitehead's novels question fixed notions of Blackness and challenge traditional racial representation. Critics link his work to the post-black aesthetic, which embraces multiplicity and rejects narrow labels. He has written novels such as *The Intuitionist* (1999), *John Henry Days* (2001),

Apex Hides the Hurt (2006), *Sag Harbor* (2009), *The Underground Railroad* (2016), and *The Nickel Boys* (2019). He won the 2016 National Book Award for Fiction and the 2017 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction for *The Underground Railroad*. He won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction again in 2020 for *The Nickel Boys*.

Leveraging the zombie trope, WHITEHEAD's fifth novel, *Zone One* (2011), examines the nature of change and survival in an apocalypse. The novel is set in a devastated Manhattan infested by zombies known as "skels" and "stragglers". Skels are aggressive and mobile, whereas stragglers are endlessly reenacting mundane activities from their former lives. The U.S. government sends civilian units to clear the infected regions. One such designated recovery area in lower Manhattan is Zone One where Mark Sptiz, the protagonist of the novel is tasked with clearing zombies. The story follows Sptiz's introspective journey through this ruined world haunted not only by the undead but also by memories, trauma, and the remnants of a broken system.

The recurring figure of the zombie appears across cultures, literatures, and films over various eras. As a literary and cultural figure, it first appears in Afro-Caribbean folklore and has since then become one of the most prominent tropes in speculative fiction. It emerged as a symbol of enslavement and loss of agency in Haitian Vodou traditions. Zora Neale Hurston, an African American anthropologist and writer writes that "in Haiti there is the quick, the dead, and then there are zombies" (HURSTON 1938). William Seabrook's *The Magic Island* is considered as the first popular English Language work introducing the concept of the zombie. GEORGE A. ROMERO's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) redefined zombies as allegories of consumerism, collapse, and political anxiety rather than simple monsters. Later works expanded this cultural critique: MAX BROOKS's *World War Z* (2006) depicts societal breakdown amid global crisis, while S.G. BROWNE's *Breathers* (2009) satirically narrates from a zombie's perspective to explore alienation. Studying the cinematic depictions of the zombie figure, Peter Dendle observes that "through almost seventy-five years of evolution on the big screen, the zombie can be read as tracking a wide range of cultural, political, and economic anxieties of American society" (DENDLE 2007:45). The zombie figure has thus been adapted in various ways to symbolize cultural fears that evolve with time.

WHITEHEAD both follows and deviates from zombie tradition. *Zone One* evokes horror and satire as generic conventions on one hand. And on the other hand, breaking the conventional norm, the novel also registers trauma and (post)racial critique. The novel unfolds over three days, but the narrative's temporality shifts back and forth between present and past through Spitz's memories of

life before plague. The interplay between survivor's routines and traumatic recollections along with a portrayal of zombies re-enacting the activities of their past lives prevents a simple and expected closure where disaster is followed by recovery. This has become a common critical observation among scholars of the novel, namely that it denies closure and establishment of a new world order. Instead, it stages perpetuation of social and racial problems even after the apocalypse. LEIF SORENSEN (2014) argues that WHITEHEAD resists narrative closure and exposes the myth of renewal. JESSICA HURLEY (2015) contends that the zombie figure in the novel re-activates repressed histories of racial violence. MARIA BOSE (2019) studies the novel's careful distribution of racializing terms to show that it enacts a latent 'postracial' logic yet encoding racial meaning beneath its surface. JUSTIN L. MANN (2021) shows how the novel points towards persistent racial precarity amid apocalyptic destruction.

While existing scholarship illuminates *Zone One*'s critique of post-apocalyptic racial and bureaucratic renewal, little attention has been paid to how its formal narrative strategies—such as unnatural temporality, defamiliarization, and recursive structure—produce that critique. This paper argues that, beyond its commentary on consumerist behavior, the novel interweaves trauma and (post) racial consciousness into its very narrative form. The living and the undead alike embody capitalist inertia and unresolved trauma; in their repetitive acts of killing, survivors mirror the zombies they destroy, rendered mechanical by grief. Building on the frameworks of unnatural narratology and defamiliarization, this article introduces the concept of *perpetual tipping points* to capture the novel's resistance to both rupture and renewal. Ultimately, it contends that *Zone One* performs its critique of race, trauma, and systemic decay through its own narrative mechanics, where the unnatural and the defamiliarized converge to construct a structure of perpetual suspension.

Jan Alber defines unnatural narratives as those that defy real-world logic and expectations. WHITEHEAD employs such strategies through non-linear time, paradoxes, and cognitive disruptions. Zombies are unnatural characters because they disrupt physical and cognitive laws. They are dead yet active, static yet animate. Using Alber's explanation that "there are also physical, logical, or epistemic impossibilities that have over time become familiar forms of narrative representation" (ALBER 2013: PARA 2) this paper asserts that although zombies are unnatural figures and non-human entities, they have nevertheless become recurring symbolic devices in global literature and culture. Their repeated use has turned them into conventional figures of zombie fiction. COLSON WHITEHEAD, however, reconfigures this convention in *Zone One*, rendering the zom-

bie strange once more or to use Shklovsky's term, by "defamiliariz(ing)" (SHKLOVSKY 1917:21) the zombie. WHITEHEAD's 'stragglers' depart from the violent, predatory image of the zombie and instead appear locked in endless repetitions of mundane actions from their former lives. These gestures, such as waiting for clients, measuring shoes, flipping burgers, echo the routines of consumer culture and bureaucratic labor. By adding this unnatural twist to the conventional zombie trope, WHITEHEAD satirizes the inertia of consumerism and the hollow logic of bureaucratic existence. The article further argues that WHITEHEAD employs unnatural narrative structure through recursive and non-linear temporality, paradoxes, and delayed revelation of race defying reader's assumptions and expectations. The theoretical tool of unnatural narratology allows one to see how WHITEHEAD encodes structural impossibility into both characters and world, signaling the persistence of trauma and systemic decay.

Through the concept of defamiliarization Viktor Shklovsky ideates that the technique of art is to make objects 'unfamiliar' (SHKLOVSKY 1917:21) by estranging everyday life. In *Zone One*, bureaucratic paperwork is described in the same tone as zombie-clearing, turning the banal into the grotesque. The zombies no longer horrify through violence but through the eerie repetition of ordinary gestures. Even scenes of flesh-eating are narrated in a detached monotone, where horror collapses into boredom. As WHITEHEAD writes, "The New York City in death was very much like New York City in life" (WHITEHEAD 2011:64). Defamiliarization thus operates doubly: it renders horror ordinary and routine life monstrous, exposing capitalist normalcy as itself a site of decay.

In a similar vein, race and trauma are not portrayed as shocking disruptions but as elements of routine, embedded within the fabric of the ordinary. Characters experience collective and individual trauma, rooted in the loss of loved ones, the collapse of normalcy, and the horror of the zombie plague. Likewise, instead of treating race thematically, WHITEHEAD engages it obliquely through narrative structure. The delayed revelation of Mark Spitz's racial identity functions as a formal strategy that unsettles the reader's assumptions about the default whiteness of apocalyptic heroes. By withholding this information until late in the narrative, WHITEHEAD exposes how deeply such racial presumptions are embedded in genre and readership alike. The gesture simultaneously ridicules post-racial optimism and insists that racial difference continues to shape perception and identity, even in a devastated world.

By synthesizing unnatural narratology with defamiliarization, this paper argues that *Zone One* encodes trauma and racial difference not merely as themes

but as structural impossibilities within its narrative form. Through bureaucratic discourse and existential reflection, the novel unsettles post-apocalyptic conventions, revealing how systemic inertia and racial legacies persist even in imagined renewal. The theoretical framework thus formulated permits an interrogation of a historical rupture that collapses boundaries between life and death, past and present. It reframes the apocalypse not as renewal but as continuation of pre-existing failures. Mark Spitz's existence reflects trauma and memory trapped within a machine of survival. Stragglers extend this liminality, portraying the apocalypse as eerie suspension rather than decisive end. Through unnatural storytelling and defamiliarized apocalypse, *Zone One* becomes a meditation on liminality. It exposes the illusion of progress and imagines an "afterlife" where historical wounds remain unresolved.

2. Zombie Tropes and Defamiliarized Apocalypse

Alber defines unnatural narrative as one that violates physical laws or logical principles, presenting phenomena that defy real-world constraints, often featuring elements like time travel, telepathy, or, in this case, zombies (ALBER 2013; ALBER 2016). In *Zone One*, WHITEHEAD employs the figure of the zombie, typically a staple of horror fiction, as an instrument of defamiliarization, aligned with "mind-warping" or cognitively estranging narration. While zombies have become a familiar trope in post-apocalyptic fiction, WHITEHEAD reanimates them with unnerving irony by using them not merely as figures of horror but as metaphors for capitalist inertia and cultural decay. His "stragglers" are not violent marauders but "a succession of imponderable tableaux" (WHITEHEAD 2011:48), stuck mid-action in repetitive, meaningless gestures that outlive the world that once imbued them with purpose. These figures are haunting not because they deviate from the norm, but because they reproduce it too faithfully. Furthering the list of stragglers, the novel mentions a former therapist who sits eternally waiting for a patient who will never arrive; a shoe store clerk crouches at the foot-measuring device without customers; a vitamin-store employee is "depleted among the plenty" (WHITEHEAD 2011:49). These moments, oddly serene, disturbingly mundane, mirror the empty rituals of consumer capitalism, frozen at the tipping point of collapse.

Such figures, WHITEHEAD writes, "did not move when you happened on them. They didn't know you were there. They kept watching their movies" (WHITEHEAD 2011:49). Their static performances parody a life defined by utility, repetition, and compliance. As WHITEHEAD sardonically observes, they are "safe in

their houses [...] bidding their time until the electricity came back on” (WHITEHEAD 2011:50), as if the return to capitalist normalcy were simply a power switch away. One straggler “stood at the fry station of the big hamburger chain,” and had to be shot “on general principles” (WHITEHEAD 2011:49). In this darkly comic moment, WHITEHEAD collapses horror and satire: to choose fry duty out of the “abundance of a life” (WHITEHEAD 2011:49) becomes a kind of existential indictment. These zombies are not just dead; they are echoes of a society that conflated routine with meaning and performance with agency.

In their silent gestures, the stragglers defamiliarize the post-apocalypse. These zombies are, in Shklovsky’s terms, made “strange” (SHKLOVSKY 1917:21), revealing the ideological structures that undergird everyday life. Their grotesque stillness punctures the illusion of progress, turning the apocalypse into a grim continuation rather than a rupture. These scenes invite the reader to reflect not on what has been lost, but on what was never truly alive to begin with. They enact routine activities from the world before the plague, transforming the apocalyptic into a grotesque caricature of the everyday. In their silent gestures, stragglers become fossilized embodiments of capitalist rituals, offering a satirical mirror to a society that confuses motion with purpose. The vision of the apocalypse as an intensification—not erasure—of history resonates with Toni Morrison’s insight: “There is no past. That’s what trauma does. It doesn’t end” (GUARDIAN 2008).

WHITEHEAD’S zombified city also functions as an allegorical site of post-industrial collapse, and the stragglers act as mnemonic residues of a commodified and routinized society. WHITEHEAD’S city alludes to the ‘Unreal City’ of T.S. ELIOT’S *The Wasteland* (1922) where London’s crowd is “undone” by death reflecting wider spiritual decay and lack of authentic life and meaning (ELIOT 1922:60-63). WHITEHEAD’S zombies as well as the living are as passive as ELIOT’S crowd flowing over London’s Bridge. Posed in mundane gestures, such as waiting for clients, arranging store displays, or tending to houseplants, WHITEHEAD’S stragglers form a haunting tableau of everyday life frozen in time. Their eerie, static presence amid the ruins of civilization suggests that the routines and structures of late capitalism have etched themselves so deeply into the psyche that they persist even beyond death. Stragglers’ repetitive action also brings to mind SAMUEL BECKETT’S *Waiting for Godot* (1954) where the characters’ meaningless repetitive gestures serve no practical purpose. Human beings faced with existential meaninglessness develop habits that help them endure pain and despair as pithily encapsulated in the line “habit is a great deadener” (BECKETT 1954 Act 2:59). Perhaps the closest precursors

to WHITEHEAD'S stragglers are the zombies of GEORGE A. ROMERO'S *Dawn of the Dead* (1978) in which the zombies roam in shopping malls while performing consumerist rituals. "This was an important place in their lives" (ROMERO 1978:00:46:17).

These undead figures literalize the idea that individuals in a hyper-commodified society are reduced to automatons, endlessly reenacting lifeless gestures detached from meaning or purpose. The zombie figure mirror the major occurrences of the era and as Sarah Juliet Lauro notes, it has the "ability to bear a variety of cultural concerns, from environmental anxieties to political critiques" (LAURO 2017:XI). WHITEHEAD activates this potential by saturating his stragglers with the sociopolitical exhaustion of a world where the banal and the broken have become indistinguishable. The distraught world portrayed by WHITEHEAD is a representation of the chaos that follows even after the collapse of the world order.

3. Bureaucracy, Trauma, and Narrative Time

The novel sharpens its satirical undertone through its introduction of Post-Apocalyptic Stress Disorder (PASD), a fictional yet symbolically loaded diagnosis that mirrors real-world PTSD. WHITEHEAD uses PASD to critique the bureaucratic impulse to pathologize trauma through administrative labels and pamphlet-driven solutions, revealing the absurd continuity of institutional responses even in a post-apocalyptic world. Rather than signaling a rupture, PASD exemplifies how trauma is normalized and individualized. Each survivor's dysfunction becomes an ironic badge of personal identity, much like in the pre-apocalyptic world. Mark Spitz observes the various forms of survivor pathology: "Given the vast galaxy of survivor dysfunction—PASD in its sundry tics, fugues, and existential fevers—the Wastelanders' particular corner of pathology was, Mark Spitz decided, unremarkable. Everyone was fucked up in their own way; as before, it was a mark of one's individuality" (WHITEHEAD 2011:30). This satirical gesture reveals that the plague has exposed rather than altered human responses to crisis, merely rebranding long-standing psychological and social dysfunctions. PASD thus functions as a structural metaphor for the novel's recursive temporality: survivors remain caught in loops of unresolved trauma, delusionally maintaining faith in ideologies of recovery, order, and progress that have already failed. WHITEHEAD reframes psychological survival not as healing, but as repetition, further underscoring the novel's portrayal of apocalypse as a continuation of everyday malaise rather than a transformative event.

Spitz, as a character, is both shaped and numbed by this recursive trauma. His very approach to survival embodies a state of ironic resignation, reflecting a pre-apocalyptic existence that demanded conformity and quiet perseverance. As the narrator observes of him, “His aptitude lay in the well-executed muddle, never shining, never flunking, but gathering himself for what it took to progress past life’s next random obstacle. It was his solemn expertise” (WHITEHEAD 2011:10). This repetitive, identity-effacing rhythm mirrors not only the demands of capitalist labor, where efficient mediocrity is often rewarded, but also the affective structure of trauma itself. He is perpetually suspended in time, going through motions, haunted by memories, and seemingly devoid of genuine transcendence. Cathy Caruth’s influential theory of trauma as an unassimilated event that returns in repetitive, haunting forms is particularly useful here (CARUTH 1996). Spitz’s entrapment in loops of memory and routine, coupled with his functional yet uninspired existence, powerfully mirrors the structure of trauma itself especially as it challenges fundamental assumptions about the world and the self, leading to a pervasive sense of paralysis rather than progress. This aligns with Ronnie Janoff-Bulman’s seminal work on ‘shattered assumptions’, which posits that traumatic experiences dismantle core beliefs about the world’s benevolence and meaningfulness (JANOFF-BULMAN 1992). Similarly, building on such theories, critics like Nigel Hunt emphasize how trauma can prevent forward movement, creating a stagnation that mirrors Spitz’s inability to truly escape his past (HUNT 2010).

WHITEHEAD underscores this temporal and psychic paralysis by deploying recursive metaphors such as the “sweeping” cycle, a task that never ends, producing neither cleansing nor closure. Spitz remains suspended in a “Day One” that never truly ends: his daily routines are indistinguishable from the one before, caught in a loop that resists progression. As the novel observes, survivors’ lives settle into “an interminable loop of repeated gestures,” each moment collapsed into a stagnant present (WHITEHEAD 2011:50). This blunted temporality aligns with trauma’s logic, confronting readers with a structure that refuses rupture, resolution, or rebirth; thereby destabilizing the linear, teleological trajectories typical of apocalyptic fiction.

In *Zone One*, WHITEHEAD uses the post-apocalyptic setting to explore the grim persistence of societal prejudices and bureaucratic absurdities. The protagonist Mark Spitz reflects, “Would the old bigotries be reborn as well, when they cleared out this zone, and the next, and so on . . . Or was that particular bramble of animosities, fears, and envies impossible to recreate? If they could bring

back paperwork, Mark Spitz thought, they could certainly reanimate prejudice, parking tickets, and reruns” (WHITEHEAD 2011:231). This passage encapsulates the novel’s meditation on the endurance of cultural memory, particularly the less noble aspects of it. Even in a world where civilization has collapsed, WHITEHEAD suggests, the ideological residues of racism, petty governance, and consumerist culture are so entrenched in the American psyche that they threaten to resurface alongside efforts to restore normalcy. The reanimation of prejudice alongside zombies becomes a darkly comic but cutting critique of America’s inability to move past its historical and systemic inequities. LAUREN BERLANT’S (2011) concept of *cruel optimism* that encapsulates how people remain attached to dreams of progress or normalcy that are fundamentally unattainable or harmful, aptly describes the satirical impulse behind WHITEHEAD’S portrayal of reconstruction. The revival of paperwork, petty authority, and prejudice suggests that the yearning for order is bound to the very structures that produced societal collapse in the first place.

4. Narrative Recursion and the Unnatural

Unnatural narratology allows for an interpretation of the novel’s recursive temporal structure. While the plot nominally spans three days, it constantly shifts through memories and flashbacks, resisting linearity. This temporal disjunction disrupts the reader’s expectations and emphasizes the collapse of time itself. Progress is revealed as narrative illusion; each memory Spitz recounts pulls him further from resolution, each mission of reconstruction mirrors the cycles of destruction. The novel’s formal resistance to closure exemplifies the unnatural narrative mode, where sequence is fractured and causality muddled (ALBER 2009; GENETTE 1980).

This fractured temporality reflects what Cathy Caruth theorizes as the dislocation inherent in trauma where time does not proceed sequentially but instead loops, collapses, or freezes. For Mark Spitz, the past is never past; it seeps into the present in uncanny ways. As he stands under a leaking ceiling, a memory of his childhood home surfaces—not as nostalgia, but as a confrontation with loss. The house “looked normal from the outside, in that new meaning of normal that signified resemblance to the time before the flood.” In this logic, “normal meant ‘the past’”, while “the present was a series of intervals differentiated from each other only by the degree of dread they contained” (WHITEHEAD 2011:65). The temporality of trauma dissolves the boundaries between then and now, rendering the future merely “the clay in their hands”

(WHITEHEAD 2011:65)—malleable yet formless, awaiting a shape it may never take. WHITEHEAD thus reframes apocalypse not as rupture but as temporal recursion, where Day One never truly ends and survival becomes a repetition of unresolved dread.

WHITEHEAD'S recursive structure can also be read through Gérard Genette's theory of narrative time, particularly anachrony, where narrative order diverges from chronological order (GENETTE 1980). These flashbacks, looped digressions, and recursive digressions deny the narrative closure typically associated with survival tales, reinforcing the cyclical nature of trauma and systemic decay. Furthermore, the frequent analepses (a narrative movement backward in time) in Spitz's narration complicate the boundaries between memory and reality, echoing Cathy Caruth's idea of trauma's latency—that trauma is not fully known at the time of its occurrence but returns in repetitive, delayed flashbacks. WHITEHEAD'S narrative style enacts the very disorder it depicts, as Spitz's memories often surface abruptly, unmoored from chronology. Moments of mundane zombie-clearing work dissolve into recollections of his parents' disbelief during the early days of the plague or the claustrophobic anxiety he experienced while hiding in a copy shop. These fragmentary recollections destabilize narrative continuity and mirror the recursive, inescapable nature of traumatic memory. In this way, *Zone One* does not just represent a traumatized world, it formally performs its disjointed temporality.

5. Race, Post-Racial Discourse, and Narrative Deferral

The novel's racial politics emerge subtly but powerfully through its strategic narrative delay. WHITEHEAD withholds the revelation of Spitz's racial identity until late in the novel, confronting the reader with their own interpretative assumptions. This delayed disclosure functions as a textual critique of racial defaulting in genre fiction. When Spitz finally explains the irony behind his nickname referencing the Olympic swimmer Mark Spitz and adding "plus the black-people-can't-swim thing" (WHITEHEAD 2011:231), the moment is at once humorous and incisive. It calls attention to the enduring presence of racial stereotypes, even in a post-apocalyptic world. His casual but pointed commentary on racial perception forces a retroactive reconsideration of the racial optics of the narrative. This narrative technique echoes TONI MORRISON'S call in *Playing in the Dark* (1992) to interrogate how whiteness is often positioned as the default in American literature.

Touré in his book *Who's Afraid of Post-Blackness* (2011) suggests that post-racial illusions often mask the continued centrality of race in American culture (TOURÉ 2011). Michael Eric Dyson in his foreword to Touré's book identifies that post-racialism helps explore "how we are rooted in but not restricted by our Blackness" (Dyson in TOURÉ 2011:XX). Touré also argues that post-blackness is not about abandoning Black identity but rather liberating it from rigid expectations. He writes: "The moment we shatter those artificial encumbrances of race—a stereotype from without or a rigid archetype from within—and feel no need to respond to either is the moment we are vastly improved, profoundly human, and therefore become the best Black people we can become" (TOURÉ 2011:5). WHITEHEAD exploits this theme through his ambiguously presented narrator. Mark Spitz is a nickname given to him by his teammates in an ironic reference to the real Mark Spitz, an Olympic Swimmer who won seven gold medals in 1972 Olympics. His very nickname underscores his ironic mediocrity "He was anything but an Olympian" (WHITEHEAD 2011:231). He navigates a world where the rhetoric of reconstruction and renewal is steeped in the same racialized frameworks that governed the pre-apocalyptic order. When Spitz reflects on whether old prejudices will be reborn along with paperwork and reruns, WHITEHEAD exposes the hollowness of post-racial optimism. The novel constructs a satirical vision of a society so eager to rebuild that it fails to confront what destroyed it in the first place. The effort to re-establish zones and reassert order mirrors the color-blind ideology Dyson critiques—one that attempts to transcend race without dismantling the systems that sustain racial injustice. Spitz's belatedly disclosed Black identity thus becomes a lens through which the novel critiques the myth of a cleansed future, showing how the past—particularly America's racial past—continues to inform and haunt its imagined rebirths.

Stephanie Li critiques post-racial rhetoric by highlighting how 'signifying without specifying' (LI 2011) becomes a dominant strategy in the Obama era. WHITEHEAD appropriates this ambiguity, deploying it not to evade race but to expose the racial presumptions embedded within genre fiction and reader expectations. The defamiliarization of race serves as a mirror to the post-apocalyptic setting: just as society pretends to reconstruct, the narrative pretends toward racial neutrality while exposing its impossibility. Spitz's withheld racial identity operates as a critical narrative maneuver—while readers may initially imagine him as white, the eventual revelation unsettles that assumption, thereby implicating the audience's own unconscious biases. In a world where identity is supposedly flattened by catastrophe, WHITEHEAD suggests that the traces of racial difference and hierarchy remain indelible. Thus, the novel becomes

a meta-commentary not only on the impossibility of true racial neutrality in fiction but also on the fragility of post-racial ideologies in the face of America's racialized history.

WHITEHEAD'S use of narrative delay also reflects what Kenneth W. Warren describes in *What Was African American Literature?* (2011) as the historical *closure* of African American literature as a distinct political project, one tied to the conditions of Jim Crow segregation (WARREN 2011:1-2). In *Zone One*, the ambiguity surrounding Spitz's racial identity critiques this dilution and challenges readers to reassess their interpretive defaults. By constructing a protagonist whose racial identity remains unspecified for much of the narrative, WHITEHEAD enacts the very collapse of categorical identity that Warren theorizes. Spitz's persona becomes a site of convergence for the narrative's deferred revelations and the reader's interpretive habits, illustrating how post-civil rights narratives often camouflage the persistence of racial structures beneath supposedly universal experiences. This narrative elusiveness not only problematizes race-blind readings but also foregrounds the limitations of a literary landscape that aspires to be post-racial while remaining entrenched in the legacies of racial formation.

6. Posthuman Aesthetics and the Liminal Undead

Liminality emerges as a defining trait of the undead in *Zone One*, with both skels and stragglers embodying a disturbing in-betweenness. The stragglers, trapped in quotidian rituals, resist full zombification while no longer qualifying as fully human, reflecting what VICTOR TURNER (1969) terms the "betwixt and between" of liminal figures. Meanwhile, the skels—mindless, aggressive carriers of infection—mark the endpoint of transformation, yet their ferocity echoes the unchecked violence embedded in social systems. WHITEHEAD'S narrator consistently blurs the line between the living and the dead, particularly through Spitz's unsettling observations. As Spitz reflects, "It happened every so often that he recognized something in these monsters, they looked like someone he had known or loved" (WHITEHEAD 2011:16). This personal recognition deeply collapses the boundary between survivor and infected, insisting that the monsters are not external but continuous with the human world. Indeed, Spitz's perception leads to a more profound indictment of humanity itself: "The townspeople, of course, were the real monsters. It was the business of the plague to reveal our family members, friends, and neighbors as the creatures they had always been" (WHITEHEAD 2011:197). He had, in fact,

always seen himself in the roles of misunderstood aliens or “robots who roved the galaxy in search of the emotion chip” (WHITEHEAD 2011:197), foreshadowing a posthuman condition where intrinsic humanity is questioned. The liminal state of these figures reflects the ideological collapse at the novel’s heart, where social categories, like life and death or human and monster, become indistinct.

Expanding on this, WHITEHEAD manipulates the conventions of zombie fiction not to reaffirm generic tropes, but to subvert them. Rather than centering survivalist heroism or human triumph, *Zone One* deforms the genre’s temporality. The story loops endlessly, mimicking the psychological disorientation of trauma and the paralysis of repetition. Mark Spitz himself is a deeply ambiguous figure—not a traditional hero, but a deliberately mediocre survivor, someone who endures not through exceptionalism but through his capacity to adapt to banality. As WHITEHEAD reveals, Spitz “reconciled himself to his condition... He hovered on unexceptionality” (WHITEHEAD 2011:56). This pre-apocalyptic inertia becomes his strength in the post-apocalyptic landscape. As the novel underscores, “Only in the middle was there safety. He was a mediocre man. He had led a mediocre life exceptional only in the magnitude of its unexceptionality” (WHITEHEAD 2011:148). Spitz thrives precisely because the new world demands neither greatness nor courage—just the ability to endure. “A part of him thrived on the end of the world... He had a knack for apocalypse” (WHITEHEAD 2011:197). By placing such a character at the narrative center, WHITEHEAD dismantles the genre’s reliance on heroic arcs and foregrounds a more unsettling vision of survival as dull, persistent endurance.

Another figure who illuminates the novel’s ambivalent stance toward survival and transformation is Gary, Mark Spitz’s fellow sweeper. While Spitz survives through mediocrity and numb endurance, Gary is defined by a distinct, if somewhat naïve, idealism. He genuinely believes in the project of rebuilding, a faith reflected in his actions during routine sweeps. For instance, after blowing open a restaurant freezer, he quips, “They can fix it when they move in” (WHITEHEAD 2011:12), embodying a hopeful, almost reckless pragmatism. His approach unsettles the group, with Gary carrying his optimism into even the smallest acts. These moments are not grand pronouncements, but quietly persistent reminders that belief in future restoration still exists—marking Gary as an anomaly in a team built on inertia.

Gary’s death crystallizes the novel’s refusal to romanticize hope or resilience. The moment, when Gary is suddenly attacked by a straggler, ruptures the

team's fragile optimism and underscores the brutal unpredictability of life. After his death, Spitz acknowledges a haunting absence. He remembers that Gary had said "I got you" (WHITEHEAD 2011:21), and now that reassurance echoes in his mind. Spitz represents survival through stasis, whereas Gary embodies what Lauren Berlant terms "cruel optimism", a stance destroyed by the very hope that sustains it. Thus, Gary's fate becomes a cautionary tale that even modest idealism can be fatal in a world built on repetition and stasis.

Another character central to WHITEHEAD's critique of bureaucratic hope is Kaitlyn, the sweeper team's de facto leader and a fervent believer in the reconstruction mission. Unlike Gary's fragile hope or Spitz's ironic resignation, Kaitlyn exudes an unwavering faith in managerial logic. WHITEHEAD notes how Kaitlyn treats Buffalo's reconstruction protocols with near-religious reverence. She was "a stickler", and "Mark Spitz had watched her maintain a grade-grubbing continuum in the throes of reconstruction" (WHITEHEAD 2011:23). She meticulously tracks stats, enforces regulations, and repeats their directives as if reciting scripture. Her professional zeal is so intense that it mirrors a devout faith in efficiency, even as results fail to materialize. Her belief in the efficacy of managerial routines represents a form of paradoxical investment. It is an attachment to systems that promise resolution while perpetuating failure. Her character complicates the racial politics of survival. As a woman of color who has ascended within a collapsing hierarchy, Kaitlyn becomes both an agent and a casualty of institutional power. Her professionalism and assimilation are not markers of liberation but symptoms of a world where procedural efficiency is mistaken for meaning. WHITEHEAD does not portray her as deluded; rather, she is a faithful executor of a failed system, enacting its rituals even as the world crumbles around her. Through her, the novel explores how racialized subjects can be absorbed into mechanisms of control not through rebellion, but through affective labor and performance.

The undead in *Zone One* thus serve as more than just metaphors for collapse; they are unstable, shifting symbols through which the novel interrogates trauma, memory, and repetition. Skels and stragglers reflect a world in which violence and alienation persist beyond the end of society. By blurring boundaries between human and monster, past and present, and survival and stasis, WHITEHEAD reimagines the zombie genre as a vehicle for social critique. In this vision, the apocalypse is not a rupture but a recursion—an intensification of systemic dysfunction, where time is distorted, emotions are flattened, and progress is perpetually deferred.

7. Defamiliarization and Bureaucratic Horror

WHITEHEAD weaponizes defamiliarization to critique both American racial politics and the narrative conventions of speculative fiction. Drawing on Viktor Shklovsky's concept of "*ostranenie*" (SHKLOVSKY 1917 / 1965:13)—making the familiar strange—*Zone One* reconfigures the post-apocalyptic genre through deadpan narration, bureaucratic absurdity, and existential inertia. Shklovsky argued that art's purpose is to disrupt habitual perception; WHITEHEAD adapts this idea to expose the absurdities of contemporary systems that masquerade as recovery mechanisms but merely sustain stasis.

The novel's dry, procedural tone parodies institutional language, "The scientists wanted the sweeper data to superimpose it on their map of the smithereens and generate prophecies" (WHITEHEAD 2011:48). Bureaucratic routine persists even in the ruins, drained of urgency or meaning. WHITEHEAD underscores the hollowness of euphemism—how language itself becomes zombieified. The rebranding of PTSD as PASD (Post-Apocalyptic Stress Disorder), the clinical categorization of "stragglers," and the procedural management of grief all reflect a system more concerned with legibility than healing.

This narrative estrangement dovetails with Mark Fisher's concept of "*capitalist realism*" (FISHER 2009:2)—the belief that capitalism is not only inevitable but the only conceivable reality. Even after civilization collapses, its managerial logic persists, animated by acronyms, metrics, and protocol. The apocalypse, rather than signaling rupture, becomes a grotesque continuation of pre-apocalyptic neoliberalism. Through this lens, WHITEHEAD satirizes the modern crisis response as a pantomime of control—a zombieified ideology that persists despite its collapse. Defamiliarization, then, becomes both a narrative technique and a political act, turning zombie fiction into a critique of the undead structures of capitalism and governance. The zombies in *Zone One* are not used simply as metaphors for disease or consumerism; they are carriers of memory, trapped in the routines and hierarchies of the old world. These spectral echoes align with Avery Gordon's concept of "*ghostly matters*" (GORDON 1997:7): unresolved traumas and injustices that haunt the present.

8. Mapping Disorientation: Space, Memory, and Collapse

WHITEHEAD also deploys a form of cognitive mapping in the Jamesonian sense, wherein the spatial reorganization of post-apocalyptic Manhattan becomes a metaphor for disorientation under late capitalism. The chaotic geogra-

phy of the city which is fragmented, surveilled, and overlaid with bureaucratic designations like “Zone One”, echoes FREDRIC JAMESON’S (1984) notion that late capitalist subjects struggle to cognitively map their social totality. In *Zone One*, the protagonist navigates a landscape that is both physically altered and symbolically indecipherable. “the city itself was as bewitched by the past as the little creatures who skittered on its back. The city refused to let them go” (WHITEHEAD 2011:223). This spatial disorientation mirrors the protagonist’s psychological fragmentation and highlights the ideological confusion of a system attempting to rebuild itself using the very tools of its collapse.

FREDERICK LUIS ALDAMA’S (2010) work on cognitive theory in narrative suggests that narrative acts not only represent but shape perception. WHITEHEAD’S fragmentation of space and time invites a disoriented readerly engagement that mimics Mark Spitz’s own fractured consciousness. The novel’s recursive loops, shifts in temporality, and refusal of linear progression destabilize the reader’s sense of continuity and orientation. In this way, *Zone One* becomes a narrative not just about surviving the undead, but about surviving the disintegrating legibility of social space under late capitalism.

The looping narrative, dislocated temporal frames, and spatial incoherence compel the reader to participate in an affective cartography of trauma and post-racial complexity. The novel resists narrative mastery, offering instead a palimpsest of unfinished stories, lost maps, and broken timelines. This disorientation is reflected in the narrator’s description: “his brain..., the host of manic, overlapping processes” (WHITEHEAD 2011:143-144). The reader, like the protagonist, is caught in recursive time, forced to experience memory and event as simultaneity.

This affective cartography reveals the tragic irony of investing in futures that are structurally foreclosed, a dynamic Berlant identifies as central to late-capitalist disillusionment. Spitz’s world offers only bureaucratic stasis and haunted repetition, yet the narrative clings to the gestures of survival and hope, exposing their emptiness. Survival itself becomes paradoxical: hope is both necessary and delusional, a cruel optimism that animates even as it confines. This contradiction intensifies when Spitz reflects, “This was his world now, in all its sublime crumminess, where intellect and ingenuity and talent were as equally meaningless as stubbornness, cowardice, and stupidity” (WHITEHEAD 2011:148). In this bleak leveling, the novel underscores the futility of past value systems and meritocratic ideals in the face of systemic collapse. *Zone One* thereby interrogates the emotional and ideological investments in recovery narratives, suggesting that what masquerades as progress may in fact be a recursive enactment of unresolved trauma and institutional failure.

9. Conclusion: The Refusal of Closure

In conclusion, *Zone One* exemplifies perpetual tipping points not marked by rupture but by the exposure of historical continuity. The apocalypse is not the end but a mirror held to the banality of late capitalism, racial ambiguity, and traumatic repetition. By synthesizing unnatural narratology, defamiliarization, the paper observes that the novel reframes the American afterlife as a space of unresolved identities, looping time, and deferred transformation.

WHITEHEAD'S narrative resists closure, challenges racial and genre-based expectations, and critiques the cyclical violence of American history. In foregrounding recursive trauma and deferred transformation, *Zone One* challenges the very possibility of narrative resolution in a world haunted by its own unprocessed pasts. In doing so, it creates not a narrative of survival but a haunting cartography of failure, irony, and spectral continuities that define the American experience.

This defiance of finality redefines the "tipping point" not as a clean break, but as a moment of historical saturation—a point at which the repressed returns with undead insistence. WHITEHEAD suggests that societal collapse is not a deviation but a logical continuation, where old inequities, bureaucracies, and traumas return in zombified form. The moment of supposed transformation is thus revealed as a repetition of the same under the guise of the new. As such, the novel interrogates our collective longing for cathartic change and insists on the slow violence of stasis, where progress itself becomes a haunted structure.

Rather than offering a future-oriented vision, *Zone One* traps its characters and its readers in a perpetual present, a deferred apocalypse where tipping points never quite tip. This, perhaps, is WHITEHEAD'S final irony: that in a world structured by the undead logics of history and ideology, survival is less a triumph than a suspension, a refusal to arrive.

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