The Entangled Times of Covid, Climate, and Race in the US: Reading the "Heterotemporality" of Colson Whitehead's *Zone One*

Abstract:
For many in the Global North, the lockdown during Covid-19 was experienced as an undifferentiated present, dislocated from the past and the future. For others it was a time of institutionalised racism violently expressed and emblematised by the police murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor. The mass protests that followed, particularly when focused on Confederacy statuary throughout the American South, invoked historical memories of slavery, but the political urgency of remembrance not unreasonably precludes the wider, planetary, and ecological contexts of racialised catastrophe. Debates over the inception of the Anthropocene, our new geological epoch, have centred on the geological epoch's beginnings in the colonisation of the New World and the institution of slavery. In other words, the racial violence of the present has not just been long in the making but is part of a planetary transition. The pandemic itself is a consequence of that transition: the Anthropocene's entanglement of the natural and cultural world and the resultant zoonoses. This chapter explores the temporal imaginary orchestrated by Colson Whitehead's post-apocalyptic zombie novel *Zone One* (2011), about another form of contagion, to reflect on the dynamics of recent US cultural remembrance and the heterotemporality of the pandemic rather than its homogenous empty time.

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1. Temporal presentism?

This chapter reads Colson Whitehead's novel of 2011, *Zone One* against the failures of cultural memory that have plagued collective conceptualisations of the impacts of Covid-19 in the Global North and the US in particular. Admittedly, Whitehead's novel is about the endurance of an altogether different kind of disease—one transmitted by the bite of the undead—but his post-apocalyptic zombie novel finds that time in the era of contagion is experienced heterogeneously. As the dead come back to life, they bring with them times past and so animate the kinds of remembrance that should be enacted in our present. Let us begin, though, by examining the forgetfulness of our times.

> With the pandemic, everyday patterns of life increasingly exemplify what François Hartog has defined as the regime of presentism. The antithesis to futurism, the experience of time as presentism denotes the temporal duration of a continuous present tense. Presentism is 'the sense that only the present exists, a present characterized at once by the tyranny of the instant and by the treadmill of the unending now' (Hartog, 2015: xv). (Kattago 2021, 4)

Siobhan Kattago's diagnosis of the perception of time during the Covid-19 pandemic is also a diagnosis of the failure of cultural remembrance in the Global North. While not diminishing the catastrophe that is the global death toll of the pandemic in any way, Kattago, and this chapter, take issue with the isolation of these times from history. For with "the perceived suspension of ordinary time during the pandemic, temporal understandings of the future are postponed, […and] the past hovers like a ghost over the present" (2). In other words, the perception of the unchanging, locked-down present during Covid-19, of undifferentiated time, has been enabled by the perception of the pandemic as unprecedented. We are in wholly new times, so the theory goes, dislocated from the past, but new times that are unchanging and, therefore, it is no wonder that the past seems insubstantial and ghostly.

The notion of an unprecedented emergency has prevailed, not just in terms of the difference between what life was like before the pandemic but also as previous historical precedents have effectively been forgotten in media, political, and popular-cultural discourse. For example, if the Spanish Influenza (1918-19) has been deployed as paradigm for making sense of the recent pandemic, it has struggled to gain purchase as a cultural memory. The Spanish Flu is usually overshadowed by the Great War's (actually lower) death toll, because compared to the latter, the former has been insufficiently memorialised, historically narrativised, and culturally encoded (Kattago 2021, 8; Erll 2020, 864-866). When paradigmatically deployed, the specificity of the Spanish Flu has been subsumed by the perceived crisis of temporality engendered by Covid-19. Here, the Spanish Flu is not so much a precedent but rather evokes the sense that the past and present are undifferentiated: The present is the past repeated in a cyclical temporality (Kattago 2021, 7-8). Consequently, the present subsumes the past.

On a related note, Chris Peckham argues that the "pandemic is being remembered before it has ended" (2020, 768-770), when precedents or analogies are deployed in media or political discourse. Despite the specificity of an epidemiological precedent, what emerges is a familiar repertoire of stock images—an iconography of another pandemic era—by which to

make sense of the present moment. Analogies such as World War Two are also sought to frame the current emergency, as in, for example, a comparison of adherence to lockdown rules to fighting on the home front. Not only is the specificity of the past evacuated to render social and scientific history available to frame and figure the present, but the pandemic itself is subject to a regime of cultural memory that cannot remember the particularities of the experience of Covid-19 because of the way that regime pre-empts the pandemic. As Peckham puts it: "The past becomes preparation for a future that has already happened." (774) In a converse analysis to Kattago's, the differences between the present and the perceived past are again collapsed, but in this theorisation, the specific nature of Covid-19 is displaced and deferred.

All of this has been exacerbated by the intensification of the digitisation of life during the pandemic, which, collapsing the difference, and temporal and spatial distance, between event and its mediation, lends itself to an almost instantaneous archiving of the experience of Covid-19 at an individual and institutional, private and public, level. However, for Kattago, this "confirm[s …] the presentist regime of historicity," in that feverish archival activity can be read as a desperate attempt to revive a culture of memory that remembers the present for what it is, thereby propping up a sense of the past in and for the future (2021, 9).

Astrid Erll concurs with the diagnosis of a failure of cultural memory, identifying the way that the past is perceived, but as something that has happened elsewhere. As Erll (2020, 863) points out, there are in fact plenty of relatively recent precedents (in living memory) for Covid-19: Ebola in 2014-16, the Zika virus (2015-16), MERS (2015), Swine Flu (2009-10), the Avian Flu (2004), SARS, "i.e. SARS-CoV, the first SARS coronavirus" (2003-03), AIDS (HIV) (since 1980), the Russian Flu (1977-78), the Hong Kong Flu (1968-70), and the Asian Flu (1957-58). However, "for most Europeans, the idea of the pandemic was either projected on the premodern Self (the Plague) or the cultural and geographical Other: Ebola as a problem of West Africa, and recent flus, as their names falsely suggest, a concern of Asia" (863). With the past happening elsewhere, time seems to have stopped at regional (the Global North/Western) and national borders, behind which presentist regimes rule (Kattago 2021). For these spaces are defined by, as Erll puts it, very "narrow emergency-frames of collective (usually national) identity," dislocating a wider sense of emergency: "for example, the refugees on Europe's borders" (2020, 863). Where a sense of emergency is widened, as in the recognition of international differences in healthcare systems, contagion rates, and death tolls, these emergencies are seen safely from afar (862-863). Kattago summarises the perceived temporality of the pandemic within the nation's borders of the Global North in

Benjaminian terms as "homogeneous empty time" (2021, 4). The presentist temporal regime is, though, an extrapolation and universalisation of a geographically, economically, and racially specific experience of the pandemic. The manifestation of the past is not something that happens elsewhere, time does not stop at the nation's borders, and the time of the nation is far from homogenous. National "heterotemporality," as Peckham describes it in the context of Covid, is exemplified acutely in the North American experience (2020, 768).

2. Monumental Time(s)

By the end of March 2020, 32 out of the 50 US states had issued stay-at-home orders, inducing, for some, the perception of an ostensibly eternal present; 42 states and territories issued stay-at-home orders between March and May of that year, although not always mandatory for all persons during some or all of that period; the remaining states and territories issued advisory orders (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention 2020). On March 13, 2020, Breonna Taylor was shot eight times and killed in her own apartment by officers of the Louisville Police Force, Kentucky. On May 25, 2020, in Minneapolis, George Floyd was murdered as police officer Derek Chauvin knelt on his neck for nine minutes, despite Floyd's protestations that he could not breathe. These deaths are not unprecedented, but manifestations of an ongoing, long history of institutionalised racism in the US. The killing of Floyd further energised the Black Lives Matter movement, a decentralised activist movement that generally began in July 2013 with the acquittal of George Zimmerman, brought to trial for the shooting and killing of African American teenager Trayvon Martin in July 2012 (Liebermann 2020), although many would trace its inception to the police murder of Michael Brown in August 2014 in Ferguson, Missouri (Jackson 2022, 479-480). Floyd's murder provoked widespread social protests, often associated with or under the umbrella of the BLM movement and not limited to the US (Hesse 2022). These protests intersected with another decentred form of activism, that of damaging statues and monuments commemorating in the American South Confederate military leaders of the American Civil War, and, across the US and abroad, slave traders, and European colonial leaders, explorers, and navigators of the so-called New World (also implicated in slavery and racialised mass violence).

Confederate statuary and monuments had long been conspicuous, controversial, and, for many, oppressive features of the Southern built landscape. They were focal points for a mythogenic cultural memory that forgets or naturalises the realities of slavery. By 2017, these

commemorative forms were becoming less rooted, as in, for example, the planned removal of a statue of Robert E Lee from its public platform in Charlottesville, Virginia—a plan that catalysed the white supremacist Unite the Right rally in August of that year—the statue was a rallying point—and the consequent murder of counter-protestor Heather Heyer. By the summer of 2020, following Floyd's murder, remaining colonial and Confederate commemorative forms—and there were plenty and not just in the South—attracted the anger of BLM protestors (Logan 2021).

Given the monumental focal points for protests in the name of BLM, this activism is not only mobilised by present atrocities but also cultural memories of the slave past and the historical consciousness and experience of time that remembrance generates. In terms of temporality, the perception remains that the time of the Confederacy endures, as the following suggests. In protest of neo-Confederate sentiment and the version of Southern heritage it peddles, African American poet Caroline Randall Williams wrote in the *New York Times* on June 26, 2020:

> I have rape-colored skin. My light-brown-blackness is a living testament to the rules, the practices, the causes of the Old South.
>
> If there are those who want to remember the legacy of the Confederacy, if they want monuments, well, then, my body is a monument. My skin is a monument.

Put another way, the racialised body, in its navigation of such monumentalised spaces, is temporally inscribed and becomes the site of a chronopolitics of memory.

Monuments are materialisations and instrumentalisations of a narrative about the past—and, as we shall see, its contestation—that has gained collective, public traction through its mediation, remediation, abbreviation, elaboration, and adaptation "across different media and platforms" in an ecology of cultural, memorative forms (Rigney 2022, 15). That circulation and repetition of narratives about the past are enabled and motivated by sufficiently powerful political and ideological historical and memorative discourses. In turn, these discourses draw upon the very materials through which memory moves, by which memory is represented, focused, and provoked, for evidentiary and symbolic anchorage. It is this material-discursive assemblage of memory that is confronted by Randall's, amongst others, embodied counternarrative. This is an assembled memory in which the atrocities of slavery are subject to cognitive dissociation of denial; putative antebellum regional

characteristics—chivalry, gentility—are remembered instead, along with the Civil War as an expression of states' rights and a tragic lost cause (Tenorio 2022, 520). As Sam C. Tenorio puts it, the sanitisation of history, the conjuring of "regional white respectability," so monumentally materialised is a "bid to reconcile a racially violent past and imagined democratic present" (520).

Although, over time, the monumental contouring of landscapes can become naturalised along with their ideological messages, the physical presence of monuments is also a potential, conspicuous "material resource for counter-memory" and thereby resignified (Rigney 2022, 17). Resignification can mean and has meant graffiti, other forms of damage, or toppling. The public nature of resignification affords the possibility of a monument's repurposing, "bringing into visibility the events and actors" screened via the monument (20). Depending on the extremes of resignification, monuments can become "platforms for dissent," focused on, provoked and aggravated by anachronistic, conspicuous, and "toxic" reminders of "outdated mnemonic regimes" that commemorated brutal pasts (21). Consequent "*dis*respect" towards these material presences opens up and politicises the public space now rendered permeable to an "alternative narrative poised to take over" (21, 27) in a "mnemonic regime change" (10). Indeed, monument toppling, amongst other forms of disrespect, provokes "material questions" that make "visible the power of white carceral geographies" that organise and spatialise racial hierarchies. This materialised disrespect "disrupt[s] the monumental hegemonic interpellation of non-white people" (Tenorio 2022, 523), the monumental didacticism that attempted to locate non-white people in both the past and the present so that they would know their so-called place then and now and for a monumentally "durable future" (520). As the police murders of African Americans activate BLM protests that often use monuments to the Confederacy (and colonisers) as platforms for protests, the experience of time during Covid is anything but homogenous.

Not only has the experience of Covid itself (as discussed below) produced particularised, racialised forms of temporality in terms of the relationship between past and present that trouble notions of a dislocated unchanging present, but the disruption of that purported temporal homogeneity is further complicated by the experience of institutionalised violence and monumentalised memory regimes and their confrontation. This racialised heterotemporal experience of Covid is further complicated by the relation of the Covid times to the Anthropocene. Media and academic discourse have strenuously pointed out that people of colour have been adversely affected by Covid-19 due to their over-representation of socio-economic precarity. However, the pandemic itself can be related to planetary processes that

were inaugurated by transatlantic colonialism and the institution of slavery—in other words, the beginnings of the Anthropocene, our new geological epoch that is characterised by the ascendancy of the human species as the primary collective agent in shaping the planet's chemistry.

3. Anthropocene time(s)

Recent conceptions of the Anthropocene point to its beginnings in the colonisation of the Americas and the so-called Columbian Exchange. This entailed the transatlantic transportation of flora, fauna, microbes, people, cultures, and of agricultural, economic, and industrial systems, and technologies, and the consequent genocide of Native Americans, ecocide committed against their life worlds, and the institution of slavery—all of which fundamentally altered American ecological and then planetary geochemical systems (Yusoff 2018; Maslin and Lewis 2015). Erll has gestured towards the Anthropocene as a context in which Covid-19 might be understood, although tracing the epoch towards earlier origin in settled human agriculture and the consequential entanglements of the human and more-than-world from thereon:

> What might play a role in the future is a greater awareness of the deep time of human-animal-microbe interactions. (Barad, 2007: ix, would possibly call it 'entangled intra-relating') in the making of influenza and other pandemics, a process whose origins go back some 12,000 years to human settlement, the agricultural revolution, and ensuing 'crowd diseases' (Spinney, 2018: 16). Human-viral temporality is thus roughly equal to Anthropocene time, and current pandemics seem to share many causes with climate change and mass extinction. (Erll 2020, 868)

Those intrarelations have been fleshed out by Andreas Malm's discussion of the zoonotic transmission of the Corona virus caused by the expansion of industrialised farming (meat production and monocultural agriculture) into terrain generally uninhabited by humans (2020, 31-61). This expansion increases contact between nonhuman and human animals, decreases biotic diversity and the nonhuman realm's ability to live with and absorb viruses, and disturbs the migratory patterns of particular species, for example, species of bat, that convey naturally occurring endemic viruses to species, humans included, unprepared to act as hosts (31-61).

Malm also points to fossil-fuelled dynamics of globalisation and the global infrastructures of trade and travel that enabled and still enable the virus to travel (61-107). In sum, it was, as Elizabeth Maddock Dillon and Kate Simpkins put it, "plantationocene thinking" that engendered the Covid-19 pandemic (2020, 724). The Anthropocene defined in terms of its plantation beginnings has been underwritten from the start by the logic of disentanglement that rendered (some) humans and more-than-human worlds as extractable resources. The continued isolation and objectification of the more-than-human and the extraction of value from it, they argue, ignores the ways that it is deeply entangled with humans, both in functional, mutually beneficial ecosystems and also in dysfunctional and catastrophic entanglements—as in the zoonotic origins of Covid-19 (724). Put another way, the presumption of extricability from life worlds and ecologies has in fact masked catastrophic entanglements, including the zoonotic origins of Covid—the latest inflection of the Anthropocene (723-724).

The counter-monumental activism in the era of Covid, particularly in the North American contexts marks an intersection of the multiple timelines of the Anthropocene's material unfolding. This is a change that has been inaugurated by colonialism and the institution of slavery but more recently expressed through Covid-19, which is not just the backdrop to the repercussions of Anthropocene's racialised origins but deeply entangled with them. However, ultimately, epochal change itself can only be measured over deep, inhuman temporal scales as it unfolds across the Earth in imbrications of the human and nonhuman realms, matter, and processes, on spatial scales from the microscopic to the planetary. With these entanglements and scalarity in mind, this chapter turns to Colson Whitehead's post-apocalyptic novel *Zone One* (2011), which not only relates contagion, race, and the Anthropocene but also gestures towards the scales over which our geological epoch has unfolded.

4. Scale and the Novel

An analysis of *Zone One* must be prefaced by a consideration of the relationship between the novel genre and issues of scale. Ecocriticism has raised questions about the capacities of the novel genre to represent the temporal and spatial scales of the Anthropocene (and its various manifestations such as climate change), and whether ecocriticism is itself sufficiently recalibrated to conceptualise and detect those scales where they register in literary texts. For example, Timothy Clark rather famously and seminally called for a "derangement" of the scales of literary theory and criticism in their confrontations with climate change (2012, 147-

167). He then went on to consider whether the novel could free itself from its habitual purview of human drama even when humanity has attained a collective, thing-like force and when that force reveals the now disastrous imbrications of the human and more-than-human world in shaping the planet; whether narrative emplotment, symbolism, and imagery could apprehend the distributed nature of environmental events, such as "tipping points, which are not unitary by nature but the contingent emergent sum of innumerable and probably incalculable processes happening across the Earth at divergent time scales"; and whether literary strategies generally designed to provoke an emotional interest in human drama are "at odds with the scale, complexity and multiple and nonhuman contexts involved" in the Anthropocene (Clark 2015, 103, 80, 181).

Contrary to these concerns, Mark McGurl has championed genre fiction, such as horror and science fiction, for the "posthuman comedy" of its "primordial flexibility" (2012, 550). In other words, genre fiction is willing "to risk artistic ludicrousness" in the "representation of the inhumanely large and long" as it attempts "to cross the threshold of the human," imagine other species and their perspectives and/or the demise of our own, and collapse humanity's perceptions of itself as distinct from or exceptional to its surrounding environments, in effect rendering humans as mere matter (539, 550-551). McGurl's faith in genre fiction corresponds with Amitav Ghosh's recent generalisations about the realist novel and its inability to extend the range of the possible and probable to catastrophic environmental events, given the novel's historical implications in bringing order and stability to nineteenth-century society and regularising the extreme and disruptive, implications that, for Ghosh, continue to shape the contemporary realist novel's capacities (2016). Ghosh argues that the representational elasticity necessary to apprehend the environmental extreme has become the province of subgenres of the novel, such as horror and science fiction. That said, although subgenre fiction may represent a capacity for flexibility, for apprehending inhuman scales of space and time, thereby registering the planetary processes that engender geological epochal transitions, for McGurl scale and its apprehension must be rendered in historically significant terms—the cultural, social, and geographical contexts and purviews of literature. Otherwise, "the inhumanely large and long," as he puts it (above), will be meaninglessly abstract. Worse, the abstractness of scale can be dehistoricising.

Yusoff (2018), amongst others, explains this dehistoricisation. While our new geological epoch is defined by the primacy of the human species' geo-physical agency in altering the planet's chemistry, this definition presupposes the Anthropos in the age of the human as a universal subject—an undifferentiated victim and/or perpetrator of planetary,

environmental transformation and its repercussions. This universalisation subsumes the racial implications of geological thinking itself. The prevailing assumption is that geological thinking has always been ideologically neutral, that it has not been complicit in historical violence, and that its identification of epochal markers is not potentially an act of forgetting other contexts of the Anthropocene. In reality, the geo-logics of the colonial extraction of resources from the lithosphere and biosphere (that is, from people, animals, plants, and what lies beneath the surface) has generated distinctions between what is deemed human and inhuman, what belongs to a particular place and what is extractable—in other words, what or who, because supposedly inhuman, can be uprooted along with the resources beneath their feet. These distinctions or conflations (that see people as an extractable resource) have informed slavery and continue to inform what, or rather who, can, as Yusoff puts it, soak up industrial toxicity and who can act as a barrier to hurricanes. While contemporary geological thinking points to abstract geological signatures or "disembodied monuments"—humanity's inscriptions in the Earth's strata marking epochal change—, Yusoff reminds us that these are "geologic claims on and in black and brown flesh [that] establish stratigraphic traces" (2018, 51-52). Therefore, in scaling up the literary critical imagination to apprehend planetary transitions as they potentially register in literature, McGurl suggests a "complex dialectical negotiation of competing drives towards expansion and contraction"—a historically meaningful localisation of the history of the Anthropocene (2012, 540; see also Clark 2015, 52, 62-63, 108, 131).

Zone One, ostensibly a novel about a zombie apocalypse and therefore a different kind of pandemic—a plague with mysterious origins, transmitted by bite and scratch, which turns the infected into zombies—, firmly belongs to the subgenres favoured by McGurl (and homogenised by Ghosh in their binary opposition to realism). As we shall see, this novel allegorically presents contagion's historical relation to the Anthropocene's racialised origins and ongoing racialised causes and effects. As such *Zone One* stages a dialectics of expansion and contraction by which the historical significance of our new geological epoch is not subsumed by abstract issues of scale. Although published in 2011, *Zone One* lends itself to the mapping of the heterotemporality of the pandemic, given this novel's ability to modulate and traverse the scales by which contagion can be read.

5. Colson Whitehead's *Zone One:* Race, Contagion, and the Anthropocene

In *Zone One*, the localisation of Anthropocene history can be found in the bodies of the undead and soon-to-be undead. The cultural history of the figure of the zombie finds its origins in slavery and the plantation, the "primal scene of colonial modernity and racial capitalism" in which enslaved Africans were reduced to "bare labour" and a "seeming corpse"-like status of "nonbeing" (Dillon 2019, 626). However, Elizabeth Dillon reminds us of the incompleteness of the power violently exercised against the slave's body, in that violence was a reiterated, never-ending process. In other words, this was a power that had to be violently reproduced so that "enslaved Africans as well as (in different fashion) indigenous Americans […] marked out the presence, being, and mastery of the resourced, white, genealogically reproductive, legally substantiated, Enlightenment man" (626-627). Violence then reveals a dependency on the enslaved body, a dependency that will out of necessity always bring that body back from the social death of slavery: "Race slavery aims to produce and protect the living after it has killed them—race slavery creates the living dead" (627). So, it is more appropriate to speak of the "aliveness of the zombie as much as its deadness" (627). The futurity of whiteness is shackled to the futurity of the enslaved, even if the agency of the slave is not reducible to the fact that the reproduction of whiteness is dependent on the violent reproduction of Blackness (through the application of a "technology of social death" (631) rather than the realisation of an immanent condition. In other words, in the spaces left by the incompleteness of enslavement agency can be realised.

Indeed, as Jessica Hurley (2015, 312) argues, the problem with many critical readings that find in the figure of the zombie an allegory of racialised biopolitics is that the undead are rendered a

> passive reflection of the way that white racism functions in society, positioning agency exclusively on the side of the state power that kills zombies or racialized others indiscriminately. Might there be another way to read the zombie, as a racialized figure that, however much you try to kill it, always bites back?

In other words, zombies allegorise "unruly, unrulable population" (312) that are driven by and embody traumatic racial histories that will not stay dead, and that cannot be relegated to the past in the name of progress and post-racial fantasies. These histories continue to haunt American modernity and continue to be relived in the present (312).

Zone One's present is set in what is presumably the last three days of the life of Mark Spitz amongst the living, a survivor of the zombie apocalypse and now member of a

paramilitary unit sweeping the streets of Lower Manhattan of "stragglers" and "skels"—respectively, aggressive zombies who thirst for human flesh, and those that passively act out routines and inhabit the dwellings of their previous lives seemingly unprovoked by the proximity of humans. The streets are swept in preparation for the human reclamation and resettlement of Manhattan, a resettlement that will venture beyond the fortified and walled Zone One, the human foothold on the island, and by which the nation, dubbed the "American Phoenix" can brought back life in this period of "reconstruction" (Whitehead 2011, 79, 8). The narrative, focalised from Spitz's perspective, is suffused with remembered episodes of earlier experiences of the apocalypse and of pre-apocalypse life.

In the novel, human survivors mostly suffer from Post Apocalypse Stress Disorder, which is particularly prevalent amongst those survivors who live in and protect Zone One. Zone One figures 9/11's Ground Zero as well as the financial district from which economic collapse emanated in 2007-2008 and evokes sites from which various types of trauma have emanated in the twenty-first century. However, so pervasive is the diagnosis of PASD, that it suggests Whitehead's satirisation of North American trauma culture. To be more precise, the satire is aimed at the cultural presumption of temporal rupture brought about by a putatively unprecedented event, after which nothing is ever the same—an understanding of an absolute discontinuity between past and present. This is a conception of trauma that is often harnessed politically and ideologically to obfuscate historical continuities; continued, institutionalised practices; and socio-cultural structures of harm, oppression, and marginalisation. Trauma is not so much *sui generis* but differentially reiterated. In the context of Covid, Jennifer C. James has argued that the cultural, social, and physiological impact of disease is not unprecedented but "the recitation of Black trauma" (2020, 691). James notes that in the context of Covid-19, the discourses on over-represented deaths among communities of colour in the US that attributed higher mortality rates to "underlying conditions"/ "comorbidities" (692) echo the racialised pseudoscience of previous centuries that essentialise and pathologise the Black body and obfuscate the socio-economic contexts that rendered Black lives precarious and which continue to modulate that precarity (691). For James, this recitation gives rise to a racialised sense of "dread" over what other pasts will be relived in the present or future presents— "the past, present and future exist at once" (693). This is a very different kind of conflation from the temporal regimes of presentism with which this chapter began. There presentism was defined in terms of the ways the Covid-19 pandemic was experienced as traumatically unprecedented, dislocating an unchanging present from both the past and a future that never seems to arrive.

Justin L. Mann's reading of *Zone One* theorises dreadful precarity in terms of "black insecurity." (2021, 4, 7, 10, 12, 14) Mann identifies the novel's emphasis on the building and maintenance of walls, barricades, and fortifications that separate and protect human dwellings from the skels outside and structure the distinction between human and non-human. The latter, when killed and reduced to waste—they are already perceived as waste to begin with—and disposed of, accordingly resonate in the current context of Covid-19 in terms of what he describes as "black insecurity." Broadly speaking, Mann's allegoresis maps a biopolitical regime that governs human survivors (and those who do not survive) in the world of novel, much as it does in our times and in our world, in terms of potential and actualised states of precarity, nonbelonging, and disposability (1-21). However, this chapter searches for longer histories of current states of insecurity.

Those longer histories are to be found embodied and animated by the undead. Before his arrival in Zone One, stationed in his first camp after being rescued by the military from a zombie-besieged farmhouse in New England (out in the "wasteland" [Whitehead 2011, 36]), Spitz finds himself laughing at the anecdotes of a group of snipers stationed there. One particular story is about a skel who appeared to be "break dancing" atop a bonfire, lit to dispose of zombie bodies, when what was left of its nervous system was "activated" by fire (36). Along with others, Spitz laughs at the story until he finds he cannot breathe:

> his head was suddenly encased in lead and his vision went on the fritz. It was as if he'd been hit on the head with a pipe—[…]. In retrospect, this drowning sensation was the first indication that something started to go wrong with him when he came in from the wasteland. (36)

Seeking a breath of fresh air at the edge of the camp, he is mistaken for a skel by the sentries guarding nearby crops and nearly shot (36). The crops, (more than) rumour has it, are fertilised by the ash from burning skel bodies (37). Beth A. McCoy and Jasmine Y. Montgomery suggest that "break dancing" evokes a racial stereotype, triggering Spitz's panic attack (2021, 1962). Hurley adds that the burning skel compounds the sensation of the uncanniness of the thing-like dead, the familiar-made-unfamiliar at the threshold of recognition (2015, 325). Spitz recognises something in the skel, but the skel is (mis)recognised in Spitz as he is targeted by the guards. While Spitz is violently (mis)recognised, his recognition of something in the burning skel brings him to the cusp of painful consciousness of what the skel represents.

A fuller racial consciousness is realised, though, at the novel's conclusion. After his comrade Gary is unexpectantly bitten by a straggler, Spitz's, perhaps compulsive, ideologically interpolated, mental confirmation of American Phoenix's orthodoxy, "There was a single Us now, reviling a single Them," is followed by contemplation: "Would the old bigotries be reborn as well, when they cleared out this Zone, and the next, and so on, and they were packed together again, tight and suffocating on top of each other?" (Whitehead 2011, 231). The language of the dependent clause is ambiguous. What does the "they" stand for, and who are "packed together again, tight and suffocating on top of each other"? These may be the new human inhabitants of the Zone, but the imagery evokes historical nautical diagrams illustrating the capacity of the holds of slave ships. The narrator here suggests the indistinction between the (racialised) undead and the living. This is not so much a universalisation of historical Blackness but a constellation indicative of the ways the supposedly new American life is both haunted and structured by a history of slavery.

Leif Sorensen further explains the structural dependency staged by the post-apocalyptic genre, *Zone One* included. In the post-apocalyptic world, a new era of a post-racial society can only be contemplated by imagining racism as a thing of the past. The post-racial imaginary can be achieved through the reconfiguration of social division now projected onto the difference between the living and the (un)dead. In other words, the objectification of the undead screens the divisive objectification amongst the living and enables an illusion of social harmony. Put another way, the zombie embodies past race relations that just will not die. The zombie is also needed for what it embodies and how it allows the living to forget how they really feel about each other. The never-ending process of eradicating the seemingly unkillable and always-replenished hordes of the undead is at the same time an attempt to repress what they represent (Sorensen 2014, 572).

Spitz's evocation of the Middle Passage, as a primal scene of historical trauma, is part of a network of oceanic, liquid, or watery figures. The semantic correspondences of these figures saturate the zombie and zombie horde with historical meanings that originate with transatlantic slavery (McCoy and Montgomery 2021, 1959). It is no wonder that Spitz feels, upon hearing anecdotes about burning skels, like he is drowning (recalling the fate of so many slaves during Middle Passage), sensing but not yet cognizant of what the undead represent historically, of the way their othering is a tacit racialisation, and therefore of the way his own racial identity (yet to be narratively declared) renders him potentially disposable.

Spitz reveals his racial identity to the bitten and dying Gary (and by implication to the reader) by recounting the story of how he earned his nickname: "Mark Spitz." The real Spitz was an Olympic swimmer, after whom "Spitz" was ironically named, when taking a stand against an overwhelming number of zombies whilst on highway-clearance duty prior to sweeping the streets of New York. That he stood his ground and relied on what turned out to be excellent marksmanship rather than jumping from a viaduct to a river below like his comrades led them to presume that he could not swim (Whitehead 2011, 146-147). The appellation is grounded in the further presumption of "the black-people-can't-swim thing" (231). This revelation (to the reader) makes retrospective sense of the undead's uncanny resonance for Spitz; it also makes sense of the way he has been (mis)recognised.

During Spitz's racial disclosure, the zombie hordes have been massing at Zone One's defensive wall, and by the time he returns to base for medical supplies to ease Gary's passing, the wall has been breached. He fights his way out and back to Gary (now a corpse by suicide), and, with the garrison of Zone One fallen to the undead, the zombie horde pours through the streets of Lower Manhattan. Outside the building where Spitz is sheltering, "[t]hey were really coming down out there" (259). Procrastinating a little too long before making his escape bid to Zone One's evacuation point:

> he didn't like his chances of making it to the terminal at all. The river was closer. Maybe he should swim for it. It was a funny notion, the most ridiculous idea, and he almost laughed aloud but for the creatures. He needed every second, regardless of his unrivaled mediocrity and the advantages this adaptation conferred in a mediocre world. Fuck it, he thought. You have to learn how to swim sometime. He opened the door and walked into the sea of the dead. (259)

Contrary to expectations, he can swim, and as he told Gary earlier, he has been treading water "perfectly" up till now (231). The "mediocrity" that had enabled him to navigate the pre-apocalyptic world, read by Hurley as the ability to assimilate in a white supremacist world—to tread water rather than drown (2015, 322-323)—has been transferred to the post-apocalypse, enabling him to survive there as well. Indeed, his mediocrity has been "unrivalled" in the post-apocalyptic world given his abilities to skirt, for the most part, rather than be implicated in, the implicit and emergent racialisation of the undead.

But assimilation to a white world that has now been submerged is no longer relevant, and that Spitz needed "every second" (Whitehead 2011, 259) to escape before it was too late might be read in another way—as a desire. He needs time to realise the historical significance of the horde, a history the origins of which are oceanic:

> The ocean had overtaken the streets, as if the news programs' global warming simulations had finally come to pass and the computer-generated swells mounted to drown the great metropolis. Except it was not water that flooded the grid but the dead. (243)

That Spitz wants to learn "how to swim" in the "sea of the dead" rather than tread water (i.e., suspended between a world of submerged but surfacing history and a post-apocalyptic America holding its history at bay) suggests an act of historical recognition (rather than suicide). This is a historical consciousness that, given the simile above, registers the alignment of climate change and therefore the Anthropocene with transatlantic and colonial slavery and its aftermath, as "the black tide […] rolled in everywhere [and…] everyone was drowning" (250).

Just before the fall of Zone One's barricade, Spitz recalls another scene from his wrecking days, clearing highways of crashed and abandoned vehicles, the owners of which had attempted to escape the city but had been overrun by zombie hordes. In particular, he remembers his superintendent Quiet Storm's rearrangement of cars and trucks, the patterns of which were only apparent from above as he was helicoptered away:

> Mark Spitz saw her mosaic, in its immense tonnage, outlasting all of Buffalo's [the location of the new government's] schemes, the operations under way and the ones yet to be articulated. What readership did she address? Gods and aliens, anyone who looks down at the right time, from the right perspective. To Anyone Who Can Read This: Stay Away. Please Help. Remember Me. (232-233)

Kate Marshall describes *Zone One* as self-reflexive geological fiction; its characters are aware of their species' inscriptions on and transformations of the planet, and that they have brought about an epochal change that we would call the Anthropocene—an epoch that will bring about their likely extinction (2015, 523-524). Marshall finds evidence for this in the way that the characters of geological fiction engage in acts of self-memorialisation in

anticipation of how the human species might be remembered by whoever or whatever comes afterwards (533-537). For example, Marshall finds in Quiet Storm's monument of wreckage just such a memorial, and one made of the very fossil-fuelled technology that has augmented an epochal change that has been underway since colonialism and the institution of slavery. Quiet Storm has been making monuments only visible from above, and even then, they are ultimately illegible—although her general intentions are clear. However (and *pace* Marshall), the anticipation of future memory work defers memory work that should be taking place in the present—the remembrance of how the present came to be. This temporal displacement serves to evacuate the Anthropocene of its historical contents and causes, which are lost over time. An aerial perspective (that presages a view from the future) does not lend itself to living historical knowledge but rather to a dislocated future to which the past is abstract. Spitz experiences something similar on another occasion when at first, he tries to read:

> The dead (that) streamed past the building like characters on an electronic ticker in Times Square, abstractions as impenetrable as the Quiet Storm's vehicles. He'd always peered from the skyscraper windows into the streets, seeking. Close to the ground, almost at their level, he read their inhuman scroll as an argument: I was here, I am here now, I have existed, I exist still. This is our town. (Whitehead 2011, 246)

The use of the personal pronoun "I" is ambiguous and could refer to either Spitz or the undead. The subsequent possessive adjective "our" suggests that "I" refers to both or that Spitz is immanently undead and has attained the literacy required to read the reanimation of the past in the present. However, this is a way of reading not from above, or from the future, but from below and from where history is immediate and fleshed out, rather than deferred and abstract.

6. Conclusion

McCoy and Montgomery counsel the reader of *Zone One* not to reread the novel

> to keep looking within its portal for what happened to Mark – to keep looking for Mark – is futile. Once he vanishes into the sea, the book encloses him,

> functionally reminding readers that the book they hold is a *hold*, one that contains not just stories of the dead, but also the dead themselves. (2021, 1968)

In other words, we should not scrutinise its pages for clues as to his survival or death and reanimation. While re-reading elicits the racial significance of various scenes and the language used to describe them, now illuminated by the knowledge of Spitz's African American identity, re-reading will never elicit the possibility of his survival, because he has always been undead. Although this interpretation confirms the fallacy of what would be tantamount to a post-racial, post-historical imagination, what McCoy and Montgomery really take issue with is the confining nature of the novel genre itself. For these critics, the novel is implicated in a long Western textual history by which slavery has been represented and rationalised, and slaves have been objectified and emplotted in deadening ways. That implication is, they argue, underscored by Whitehead's littering of the post-apocalypse with texts, documents, verbal signage, letters, and paper so that the experience of what emerges as a racialised world is always textually mediated. The history of a textual objectification of the enslaved notwithstanding, this chapter has been more optimistic about what genre fiction can and cannot hold. *Zone One*'s registration of the entangled, multiple temporalities along which the Anthropocene unfolds suggests a capacity for historical memory and for bringing the past back to life in a way that does not kill the dead again. More than that, *Zone One* provides a literary map of the relation between contagion, race, and the Anthropocene that allows us to reflect critically on, and elicit, the crisis of temporality experienced in the Global North, and the US in particular. This was a crisis brought about by the emergence of entangled yet often discrepant and incongruous temporalities: the homogenous empty time of Covid, experienced as an undifferentiated present, dislocated from the past and future; Covid experienced as racialised precarity, a repetition of the past and dread over what the future holds; the endurance of the Confederate visions of race and institutionalised racial violence; countermemories of slavery and its legacies; and Covid's origins in recent zoonosis and a deeper time frame of epochal change. Racialising the Anthropocene, as *Zone One* does, affords, then, the opportunity to read contagion as more than the spread of homogenous empty time.

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