The world wasn’t ending: it had ended and now they were in a new place. They could not recognize it because they had never seen it before.

—Colson Whitehead (Zone 321)

In the final moments of Colson Whitehead’s zombie novel Zone One (2011), the character named Mark Spitz witnesses the collapse of the large wall surrounding the eponymous Zone One, an area in lower Manhattan between Canal Street and Wall Street. The Zone, which was once the New Amsterdam colony, Ground Zero for the attacks on 11 September 2001, and the figurative epicenter of the financial collapse of 2008, now serves as the vanguard for the novel’s imagined government, the “American Phoenix.” Intended by various security practitioners in the novel to be the site of renewal and “Reconstruction” for the US state, and the place from which the American Phoenix would rise from its ashes and reclaim the occupied territory beyond the wall from the zombies (referred to in the novel as “skels”), the Zone instead becomes a symbol of decline and collapse as the concrete and rebar walls surrounding it disintegrate under the accumulated pressure of the mass of skels just beyond. The narrative follows Spitz over the final three days he spends as a survivor in the Zone, where he works as a “sweeper,” a civilian conscript responsible for moving through the abandoned buildings and clearing out any remnant skels the Marines missed in their initial clearing of the area. The novel’s precipitous and calamitous conclusion paints the project of Reconstruction as an exercise in futility. Over the course of the narrative, through frequent digressions that defy a linear plot, the reader learns of Spitz’s life before the plague and of his time in the “Wasteland” (the territory beyond the Zone); the narrator also describes the lives of those in Spitz’s near orbit, including his fellow sweepers Kaitlyn and Gary and his romantic partner Mim, with whom he spends time holed up in a toy store in Connecticut. Despite, or perhaps because of, the frequent narrative digressions and diaphanous prose, the world of the novel never quite materializes, and those inhabiting it shift in and out of focus.

It is almost impossible to read this plotline in the year 2021 without a sense of its prescience, illuminating, as it does, the hostile conditions that became...
hypervisible in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic and in the aftermath of the (police) murders of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd. While echoes of the American Phoenix resound in the Donald J. Trump aphorism “Make American Great Again,” and although there are significant connections to the simultaneous 2008 election of Barack Obama as the first black US president and the concurrent financial collapse caused in large part by predatory housing schemes that were often directed at black homeowners, I push beyond these immediate and (at times) surface-level connections to examine deeper ties between race and security that Zone One excavates. Taking aim, so to speak, at the racial imaginaries subtending security discourse and praxis, especially around issues of embodied difference and biological insecurity or “bioinsecurity,” I look to the Ebola epidemic in West Africa from 2014–16 and the emergent Black Lives Matter protests in the wake of Michael Brown’s murder by Ferguson police officer Darren Wilson in 2014 to mark and interrogate the relationship between those forces the novel anticipates: the intersecting vectors of anti-black policing and medical apartheid.

The diaphanous atmosphere is but one of the many qualities that marks Zone One as a play on traditional zombie stories, which often position a lone (white and male) survivor, or group of survivors, as keys to resuscitating the collapsing state. I instead see Zone One as mobilizing the tropes of zombie fiction to reveal, lay bare, and undo this genre’s cultural work.¹ From its engagement with the project of Reconstruction and the pursuit of militaristic and biomedical solutions to a plague, to its saturation in the surrealist aesthetics (including time dilation and narrative digression) that Robin D. G. Kelley and others link to the black radical imagination, Zone One comprises an essential departure from genre fiction.² This departure has garnered much critical attention.³ Indeed, contemporary zombie fiction, despite its origins in Haitian folklore and its early figurations in black cultural production, is deeply invested in the project of security and the processes of securitization and neocolonial settlement and expansion, both of which Whitehead’s Zone One works tirelessly against. Securitization is a process that subsumes the world-making work of increasing and elaborating security through militarist and infrastructural expansion; it also includes transformation in the ideological and affective contours of contemporary life.⁴ As popular examples such as 28 Days Later (2002), World War Z (2006), and The Walking Dead (2003-19) all reveal, contemporary zombie fiction mobilizes survival in a temporal and geospatial matrix that imagines various routes to the liberal nation-state. Zone One critically interrogates the limits of both the temporal and spatial scales of survival by centering a black man in its story, outfitting him as a conscripted police officer, and then orienting the reader to his growing dissatisfaction with the project of Reconstruction. Even the zombies of Whitehead’s Wasteland violate the conventional rules of zombie fiction. Neither fast nor slow, these figures exist on two abstracted and altered time scales. Skels, which are “ninety-nine percent”
of the undead population, exist like other zombies, slaver ing at the prospect of consuming human flesh. The remaining one percent are called “stragglers,” and they return to scenes from their past and exist in suspended animation, flying kites, telling fortunes, and inhabiting a psychic dimension inscrutable to Spitz and his fellow survivors. Furthermore, Spitz defies the standard features of heroic fiction that position the white male survivor as the hero. He remains mostly aloof from the reader and this aloofness enables one of the novel’s key features: the belated revelation that Spitz is black.

Scholars have also increasingly looked to Whitehead, a MacArthur Fellow, National Book Award winner, and two-time Pulitzer Prize winner, as an exemplar of post-soul and, in some cases, post-racial black fiction, and to his unique brand of black speculative fiction and satire as critical of contemporary narrative, stylistic, and political racial struggle in the post-millennium. The disclosure to the reader of Spitz’s Blackness is at the heart of much criticism on the novel. For example, Jessica Hurley describes *Zone One* as a “kind of meta-passing novel” that “buries blackness exactly where we can’t see it: right there, on the surface” (321). Hurley argues that Spitz’s invisible Blackness is connected to a superhuman capacity for “assimilation” and claims that his personality “is entirely defined by its non-individuality, its lack of difference from the herd” (322–23). The belated and revelatory “outing” of the “fact” of Spitz’s Blackness leads to structural, social, and narrative denouement, in which the walls marking out the Zone collapse, the zombies invade, and the reader is disabused of their prejudices (324). However, in their hyper-focus on the disclosure of Blackness, scholars minimize two important aspects of the metatextual world-work of passing fiction: the critique of the reader and the place of Blackness in a story about insecurity. If *Zone One* indeed traffics in the tropes of the passing novel, in which the reader participates in the racializing process of recognition, then the novel’s trick is to expose readerly rather than characterological assumptions. Put differently, Hurley’s (and others’) notion that Blackness is buried where “we” cannot see depends entirely on a host of assumptions about who is reading and how they read, chief among them that the reader is white and that they will presume a white protagonist.

What is remarkable is not Spitz’s Blackness but his survival and, more importantly, the intimate time the reader spends with his insecurity. The link between Spitz’s survival and the ailing and inflamed security state reveals much about the connections between race and security in the post-millennium. Indeed, as the world around him is torn apart by the “deluge” of the dead into the sanctity of the Zone, Spitz is uniquely rejuvenated: “He was smiling because he hadn’t felt this alive in months. Ever since he left the fortune-teller’s, as the kinetics of the artillery hammered through his boots, shuddered into his bones, and sought synchrony with his heart’s thump, he’d entered a state of tremulous euphoria[;] . . . of course he was smiling. This was where he belonged” (Whitehead, *Zone* 311–12).
With all the cards on the table, the novel’s engagement with the psychic and affective contours of black insecurity becomes legible. The novel goes to great lengths to juxtapose Spitz against a world of intense militarism and danger. Spitz’s aptitude for survival—his “knack” for it, in the novel’s words (245)—speaks directly to my concern here regarding the interior forces of insecurity that have shaped and continue to shape black experiences broadly construed. Spitz’s proclivity for survival speaks both to his own talents and to the state of affairs in a world designed specifically for his destruction. As that world languishes and dies, Spitz’s “knack” becomes his shield.

Spitz’s “knack” suggests a relationship to, and thus a definition of, survival that is mediated through the experience of “black insecurity.” Black insecurity marks the disposition of black subjects who are often made more insecure by the very forces that espouse safety, not the least of which are surveillance and policing. If securitization is a world-making process in which practitioners imagine threat to institute security policy, and if securitization is inherently a racializing and racist enterprise predicated on the denigration, incarceration, and death of black people, then black insecurity is a way of thinking about how Blackness implicitly breaks the frame of securitization. Black studies has been especially attentive to spectacles of racialized policing and surveillance—practices of ensuring “public safety” through racial profiling and racially discriminatory policies—that result in black incarceration and death. Black studies has also begun to increasingly invest in the speculative contours of black arts and literature as key sites to imagining and articulating black futures. Speculative fiction is one of the premier venues for understanding and examining the relationship between real and imagined security technologies, ideas, and practices. In black speculative fiction, these relationships refract through the bodies and lives of racialized people who are enmeshed in and targeted by security infrastructures. As Whitehead demonstrates, Blackness serves as a confounding variable in the ongoing project of securitization. Black insecurity is essential to the configuration between black life and the security apparatus. Black insecurity, as has been shown in countless examples, including both recent and historic pandemics and in the repetition of police murders of black people, is a function of security praxis. Furthermore, the design and implementation of security policy, which presents itself as race-neutral, is deeply invested in the erection of a racialized and fundamentally anti-black world. I look to two nonfiction sources in order to paint a more detailed picture of black insecurity vis-à-vis securitization: a white paper written by the RAND Corporation, “a research organization that develops solutions to public policy challenges to help make communities throughout the world safe and more secure” (“About”), and the grand jury testimony of Darren Wilson, the Ferguson police officer who shot and killed Michael Brown in 2014. The contrapuntal classifications of black people during the COVID-19 pandemic as simultaneously “essential” through their labor and “expendable” through systemic
vulnerability reveals a critical level of cognitive dissonance. This contradiction is not, however, new nor is it exclusive to twenty-first-century or even twentieth-century racialization. *Zone One* keys into these ironies and mobilizes the perverse “humor” of racial stereotypes to highlight false logics of security policy and praxis.

**Dark Humor and Black Insecurity**

One of the narrative elements that marks the distance between the reader and Spitz, and a key force of narrative legerdemain that distracts the reader from his Blackness, is that the narrator never reveals Spitz’s real name. Moreover, we learn the truth behind his nickname late in the novel:

Mark Spitz explained the reference of his sobriquet to Gary, adding, “Plus the black-people-can’t-swim thing.”

“Can’t? You can’t?”

“I can. A lot of us can. Could. It’s a stereotype.”

“I hadn’t heard that. But you have to learn to swim sometime.”

“I tread water perfectly.”

[Spitz] found it unlikely that Gary was not in ownership of a master list of racial, gender, and religious stereotypes, cross-indexed with corresponding punch lines as well as meta-textual dissection of those punch lines, but he did not press his friend. Chalk it up to morphine. There was a single Us now, reviling a single Them. 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? 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. (287–88)

The narrator’s meditations converge with Spitz’s in this moment, highlighting their difference of opinion. While the narrator ponders the possibility of the post-racial world that Whitehead cynically describes in his 2009 *New York Times* opinion piece, “The Year of Living Postracially,” Spitz himself answers affirmatively that racism will indeed return like the humdrum of civil infractions and bad television. Moreover, the form of the revelations comes as the punchline to an untold joke, a bad, racist joke Spitz has to explain to the oblivious Gary. Spitz’s disbelief that Gary is unaware of such a stereotype when he suspects that Gary is in “possession” of a “master list” reveals the ongoing racial tensions, ambivalent although they may be, even in the declension of post-plague life. Indeed, earlier in the novel, the narrator hints that the “sobriquet” contains a subtle jab at Spitz, but one that fails to unsettle him: “They started calling him Mark Spitz after they finally found their way back to camp after the incident on the I-95. The name stuck. *No harm. Affront was a luxury*, like shampoo and affection” (26;
emphasis added). While the reader is unaware at this point in the narrative what might cause Spitz to take umbrage with the designation, the text hints that, in the pre-plague world, it might have been worthy of offense.

The form of the joke—that it fails, that the punchline does not land, and that Spitz is suspicious of Gary’s misunderstanding—points to the destructive role dark humor plays in *Zone One*. Its deployment in the narrative speaks to Spitz’s dissonant emotional and psychic experience and to the wider dissonant ironies of contemporary black experiences, particularly during a pandemic. It also links Spitz (and Whitehead) to a long lineage of black satirical figures, including the shape-changing trickster. Glenda Carpio argues that for black tricksters, “stereotypes are not merely described or joked about. Rather, they are conjured, brought to life, made bigger than life, through words, images, and performances” (15). For Carpio, black humorist labor evokes the world of the speculative “what if,” sounding the anti-normative and thus anti-oppressive thrust of the joke itself (6–7). By explaining the punchline and then contradicting the veracity of the stereotype of black aquaphobia, Spitz effectively unravels the narrative construct itself, *banishing* (in contradistinction to Carpio’s conjurers) the lingering worlds of racism and parking tickets to the confines of the old world and propelling himself into the present. He effects this narrative disfigurement despite his disbelief that Gary did not include “the-black-people-can’t-swim thing” on his “master list” of stereotypes (Whitehead, *Zone* 287). This racial joke that reveals Spitz’s Blackness destabilizes the centripetal force of securitization that marks the Reconstruction efforts. The use of the term *Reconstruction* further upends the post-plague project, linking the imagined terms of rebuilding the US state to the failed project of black enfranchisement following Emancipation and the Civil War. Put simply, the disclosure that a black person has been central to Reconstruction unsettles the very foundations on which the state’s notion of survival rests. Thus, the Zone and the walls and territory materializing it in the novel’s physical world collapse.

Irony is central to how the novel figures black insecurity and its relationship to the collapse of the security state. The final moment of the novel calls back, in comedic terms, to Spitz’s nicknaming. As the diluvian mass of skels and stragglers push through the collapsed wall, Spitz weighs his options for survival. He first considers trying to make it to the Staten Island Ferry Terminal but thinks he will not survive the horde. Instead, he opts for the river, thinking, “Fuck it. . . . You have to learn to swim sometime,” before “walk[ing] into the sea of the dead.” This dark humor is juxtaposed against the sound of a jangling bell, which the reader learned earlier is the harbinger of the horse survivors use to carry the dead stragglers to the furnaces that burn their bodies, spewing ash into the air. In his final moment in civilization, Spitz sees the horse, “mascot of ruin, without care or master.” Even out of sight, Spitz hears the jingling bells, “cheerful and undying” in the face of the calamitous collapse (322). Indeed, as the walls separating the dead from the Zone come down, the walls separating the reader from
Spitz also disappear, and we learn that he is invigorated by the collapse. Even the appearance of his smile, indecipherable to those few survivors trying to escape the collapse, is clear to the reader, registering his return to the Wasteland and to “belonging” (312).

By offering readers a glimpse of Spitz’s interiority, the novel participates in the imaginary project of describing black insecurity as an affective posture that resists the ambitions of securitization. Spitz’s figuration as preternaturally gifted to survive the unlivable conditions of post-plague life compounds the perpetual freefall of the novel’s narrative world and highlights that security itself is in an ongoing state of failure. Reading and writing about this novel in a moment of similar decline compounds the novel’s prescient and implicit critique of the ways and means of securitization, especially the simultaneous reliance on and gross expenditure of black labor and health. Spitz’s rich interior life, which the narrative often screens out through disruption and dilation, nevertheless usefully informs his relationship to the project of Reconstruction and the task of survival. Yet this view of Spitz’s insecurity is only accessible in the aftermath of the joke. While much has been made of the “unprecedented” nature of life in 2020–21, the novel and these documents highlight that the present has been expressly (re)constructed in and through policies that destroy black life. While these histories are no laughing matter, the sardonic perspective on Spitz and his unlikely survival uniquely exposes the dissonance of black insecurity in the contemporary moment.

Accounting for the super- and infrastructural forces of black insecurity is also crucial to understanding the novel’s critique of securitization, and, as they do in Zone One, these forces reveal themselves through speculative elements. The RAND Corporation’s 2015 white paper, Mitigating the Impact of Ebola in Potential Hot Zones, written by Bill Gelfeld et al., is one of many white papers produced by RAND and other similar institutions describing the 2014–15 West African Ebola epidemic, which proposes a diagnostic method for identifying nations that might become susceptible to an Ebola outbreak. Aimed specifically at US diplomatic and military practitioners, the document’s expressed purposes are “(1) identifying countries potentially at high risk of a future Ebola outbreak and (2) exploring proactive approaches that policy makers can take to help prepare for such risks and mitigate their adverse effects if they materialize” (Gelfield et al. 2). The document is structured by speculative elements, which, as the title suggests, aims to help practitioners in Africa and elsewhere “prepare” for the prevention of disease ingress. The document mobilizes a number of elements, including charts and tables and a tabletop exercise that implicitly describe race-neutral biosecurity measures but that rely on a racialized and neocolonial worldview for their operation. In the chart below, for example, the authors link, through the use of graphic arrows, “factors potentially influencing vulnerability to an outbreak” (see fig. 1). From this set of factors, they derive a “risk matrix” or conceptual flow chart to tabulate and forecast the propensity of one place or another to
fall victim to Ebola infection. What the table actually shows, however, is those elements that make a nation-state resilient to the virus, including “supportive political, economic, and sociocultural environment” and an “effective health system.” The line items that contribute to a nation’s “ability to prevent or contain a disease outbreak (e.g. Ebola)” include rule of law, economic development, urbanization, and low infant mortality rate (3). Read in aggregate, these elements seem more like “natural” features of “successful” nations—that is nations not susceptible to a pandemic—rather than indicators of the potential for disease ingress. The discussion of neonatal mortality alone is evidence that the calculus by which Gelfeld et al. determine what qualifies as a developed nation ignores differentials among populations within a given nation.9 Moreover, the specific contours of Ebola’s infection, its relationship to the failures of development in the region, and a broader situation in a field of anxieties that attach to specific diseases—in another context, the relationship to China and the flu, for example—disappears in the gloss of the “e.g., Ebola.”10 The white paper thus constructs development, modernization, and liberalization as symptomatic of disease resistance rather than its primary contributing factor. There is a dark relationship between the avowed description of “potential influence” and the stated elements reflecting resistance to the disease: the racialized and colonial relationship that has made West Africa a place where Ebola can happen. Put succinctly, the table conceals the work of neocolonial forces—political, military, economic—that have made and continue to make West Africa a place where Ebola threatens daily life.

The risk matrix is the first part of the two-pronged approach proposed by the RAND proof-of-concept. The second piece involves a set of practitioners engaging in a “tabletop exercise” (TTX), or a “tailored simulation” of “real-world scenario that will help to inform, prepare, and improve responses to an actual crisis,” in this case, the spread of the disease beyond the boundaries of the West African nations Guinea, Sierra Leone, and Liberia (21–22). The scenario moves through specific temporal beats, seeking to contain the various phases of the outbreak from prevention through infection and ultimately to decontextualized reconstruction. As part of the exercise, practitioners imagine a set of “proactive mitigation efforts” that would anticipate the potential development of the virus (22). Unsurprisingly, the scenario doubles down on the conflation between Africa and Ebola in a number of ways, highlighting how white imaginaries dictate security praxis. For example, the TTX scenario is set in Ethiopia, an East African country it deems “at high risk in terms of political, economic, and sociocultural, and health considerations,” determinations made by completing the risk matrix in step one (23). Furthermore, the spread of the virus is imagined to begin with a single person who convinces a border agent that he has malaria and not a hemorrhagic fever (the key symptom of Ebola). This reduces epidemiology to individual action and personal responsibility rather than seeking to engage disease
prevention and treatment at the intergovernmental, international level. This reduction reinforces notions that black irresponsibility causes outbreaks rather than the forces of asymmetrical power that reproduce Africa, in its multitude, as a zone of death. As has been made clear by the overwhelming scale of black death in the United States, in light of administrative failures at almost every level, the excess of black death is a feature, and not a bug, of post-millennial modernity. Indeed, as many have shown, whether in the context of Ebola or, more urgently, in the context of the current COVID-19 crisis, the overinvestment in security does little to abate the massive numbers of infections and deaths.

“Racializing surveillance” (Browne 16) and security practices produce racial orders, and policing is one of the principal technologies responsible for reifying racialized worlds. In the TTX scenario, the failure to restrict disease ingress
occurs at a border crossing, where a customs agent—a police officer by another name—acts in sympathy with a sick man. As Simone Browne and others have shown, the speculative work of policing produces a world of black threat and white safety. The ongoing Wars on Crime and Drugs both have relied on “Broken Windows” policing and extended centuries-old notions of black hyper-criminality with lethal outcomes for black people. This has certainly been true for the juridical order of mass incarceration and has also been the guiding principle that underlays extralegal police murders of black people. In his 2014 grand jury testimony, Darren Wilson recalled seeing Michael Brown as a “demon” (Circuit Court of St. Louis County 225) and used his own misrecognition of Brown’s inhumanity as justification for murdering him. Brown’s transition from person to demon in Wilson’s view speaks to a broader dehumanizing violence that subjects black people, in both the foreign and domestic context, to the illiberal violence of humanism. In the course of his conversation with the state’s lawyers, Wilson was perfectly comfortable attributing anger and aggressiveness to Brown but stopped short of imagining that other emotions might animate Brown, thereby foreclosing his ability to see Brown as a human with a full range of human emotions. He did not entertain, and neither would the grand jury, we must surmise, any of the fears and anxieties that saturate a violent encounter between a white police officer and black person. Wilson describes the moment of Brown’s death as follows: “And when [the bullet] went into him, the demeanor on his face went blank, the aggression was gone, it was gone, I mean, I knew he stopped, the threat stopped” (229; emphasis added). Wilson’s signifying chain, in which Brown shifts from “demon,” to face, to threat, reveals the dehumanizing power of racialized policing: he minimizes Brown’s life and death through the language of threat and danger. In much the same way that the RAND white paper disappears the colonial history of West Africa from its present struggle with Ebola, Wilson erases himself from the narrative of Brown’s death. The bullet “went into” Brown, seemingly of its own volition, ending “the threat” rather than Brown’s life. In his testimony, Wilson describes the area where Brown was shot as a place of “anti-police” sentiment, of gangs, guns, and violence. His own participation in making a world of violence through policing does not figure into his calculus. Indeed, he erects figurative barricades between his own white world and the world of black crime, poverty, and death.

However, those barricades, like their physical counterparts, crumble. Indeed, through its description of collapsing walls, Zone One makes one of its most salient critiques of securitization. Black insecurity appears as a disruptive force to the logics of state-centered survival and retrofits readers’ association to and identification with the nation-state. In so doing, Zone One reorients readers away from a conception of survival that is rooted in the related mythoi of conquest, expansion, and slave labor—forms of survival dependent on the deaths of others. Instead, it reimagines the temporal and scalar qualities of barricades to highlight how, and
in what ways, they expose the hidden false assumptions of securitization. Characters such as Spitz, his Lieutenant, and even the narrator remark on the ideological, political, and cultural work of walls and barricades. While this meditation drains them of their symbolic potential, the conversations collectively produce a different association to the work of meaning in the post-plague world. This second-order process marks the novel’s investments in world-breaking: by constructing meaning in and through the wasted metaphors of security, *Zone One* directs readers to alternative forms of sociality overlooked by those who favor the nation-state.

**Wasted Metaphors**

When Mark Spitz arrives at the Zone after an extended period in the Wasteland, he is greeted by the Lieutenant, a military official who oversees the sweeper operations in the Zone and serves as commander for the denizens living there. In a moment of hopeful honesty, the Lieutenant shares his vision of how the world will be remade: “Maybe it’ll work. The symbolism. If you can bring back New York City, you can bring back the world. Clear out Zone One, then the next, up to Fourteenth Street. Thirty-fourth, Times square on up. . . . We’ll take it back, barricade by barricade.” For the Lieutenant, the wall’s function is linked to its capacity as a material object of protection and symbol of longevity and reconstitution—in short, the wall is a securitizing structure. Its purpose, as the Lieutenant describes, is to expand and grow “on up” from Zone One, throughout the island, and then, ostensibly, from sea to shining sea. The Lieutenant’s hopefulness belies an uncertainty he feels about the destiny of this neoimperial project. Responding to Spitz’s simple, “Sure,” he replies, “that wall out there has to work. The barricade is the only metaphor left in this mess” (Whitehead, *Zone* 121). Life in the aftermath of the plague, the Lieutenant reveals, is devoid of meaning, despite the best efforts of the American Phoenix to superimpose US mythology onto post-plague life. Instead, the wall is the only thing with any symbolic value; as “the only metaphor left,” the wall absorbs and circumscribes meaning per se, reducing life inside the Zone to a meaningless existence that mirrors the lifeworld of the undead skels inhabiting the Wasteland. In the barrenness of this world, the final holdout of meaning is also the last material bastion against the swarm of the undead threatening to overtake the survivors inside the Zone. The emplotment of US military logics, especially those that characterize millennial ideas about occupation and counterinsurgency, dominate in the Zone, and all of the people living there are militarized in one way or another. The Zone emerges as a space of whiteness, one working to preserve a white, liberal, nation-centered order. Meaning, as the Lieutenant expresses it above, is reduced to normativity and is tethered to the ability to return the world to the way it was before the plague.
Although he initially finds comfort in the wall, Spitz comes to see it as something horrid and festering, a sweeping wound scabbed over, more like the “dead” it is meant to ward against than the “living” housed within (238). Spitz’s turn away from the project of Reconstruction mirrors the reader’s dawning understanding that Reconstruction is an impossibility. Where he once “put the rebirth of civilization at even money,” Spitz eventually betrays a certain cynicism about the potential for a return to the pre-plague normal, acknowledging that the wall will do “what all refuges do eventually,” that is, collapse (239), which it does.

The narrative gathers the barricade’s collapse and juxtaposes it against three other significant moments where the rules of the zombie novel break. First, the stragglers—zombies locked in temporal stasis—activate and begin to behave like other skels. Second, while Gary is “joking” around with the straggler in the shop by pretending to read her fortune, she bites Gary’s finger, infecting him with the virus. Finally, while Spitz is treating his wound, Gary asks Spitz how he got his name and Spitz delivers the punchline, “Plus the black-people-can’t-swim thing” (287). These events happen in relatively quick succession in the linear progression of the plot and crescendo to the all-out collapse of the fortification and abandonment of the settlement. Just as the revelation shatters readerly assumptions about the man they have been following, the zombies’ accumulated weight undermines the structural integrity of the wall, and it disintegrates.

Time and temporality play a special role in how the novel narrates black insecurity. The scene of the disclosure, for example, is narrated twice: it is first told in an embedded flashback within a flashforward, during which the reader discovers that someone has been bitten but that the wound had stopped “geysering blood” (166). When Gary asks Spitz why they call him Spitz, the novel shifts from Spitz’s first-person narration of his own “malfuconing,” of bad dreams and strange feelings, to third-person description of his enlistment with a work crew clearing I-95 of parked cars. A horde of skels happens on his team, and most of them jump from the overpass to a small creek below, but Spitz refuses. The text does not account for why, saying only, “instinct should have plucked Mark Spitz from the bridge and dropped him into the current by now. But he did not move” (182). Instead, he fends off the entire horde single-handedly. Later, when asked why he did not jump, he lies and says he cannot swim. Crucially, during this telling, the detail of Spitz’s Blackness is omitted. When the story is retold later, the scene on the highway is foreshortened, and, instead, the punchline dominates.

The novel also prefigures the collapse of the wall in a flashback to an earlier moment where Spitz joins up with a small community occupying a house in the Wasteland: “It always happened quick. One part of the barricade failed, and then it was as if the refuge sighed and everything disintegrated at once. The spell of protection sputtered out, all out of eldritch juice, and the mighty
stronghold was made of straw again” (225). Here, the narrative mobilizes the language of cosmic horror and fantasy by comparing the building of walls and barricades to the casting of spells. Sapped of “eldritch juice”—a Lovecraftian term for the arcane and mysterious force sustaining a charm—the barricade cannot prevail against the accumulating zombies’ material weight. When they breach the wall, they reveal the trick of transmogrifying magic that has turned it from a pile of hay into a fortress: that will, the resolute investment in the wall’s metaphysical capacity to perform its physical function, is all that sustains it. The rapidity of collapse is induced by the metaphysical failure conveyed by the simile as if, suggesting that inadequate will is as much (if not more) to blame for the wall’s failure as faulty engineering. The text thus lays bare the unique capacity of speculative prose: personifying the wall allows the reader to imagine it as an entity with its own sense of desire, belonging, and animus. The collapse, which might otherwise be described in more calamitous prose, instead occupies the tenuous space between ecstasy and bereavement: it “sighs” in its lassitude as it crumbles to the ground. Here, the wall mimics Spitz himself, whose multiple ambivalences the novel tracks as he moves from the comfort of his Long Island home, to the Wasteland, to the Zone, and then beyond it.

The sigh, like the scream, phonetically registers an interior life, one that perhaps defies description even as it insists on being read and understood, a quality that is also mirrored in the skels. Although the novel tells us that it is Spitz’s mediocrity that sets him apart from other survivors, that makes him uniquely suited for life after the end of the world, it also suggests that his ability to read, understand, and interpret the hidden signs that manifest in the broken world enables his survival. As the barricade collapses and the dead surge into the Zone, Spitz comes to understand them differently: “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” (307). This capacity to see and understand the latent meaning in things, whether barricades and walls or the formerly living, emerges from Spitz’s own experiences as a black person and, as the novel emphasizes, exists at a midway point between white and black worlds.

*Zone One* reconceptualizes the relationship between the symbolic and material investment of building walls, how walls relate to security, and what securitization through enclosure says about survival. The novel achieves this reconceptualization by wasting its metaphors. I mean wasting here in two ways. First, the profligate use of meaning-making language and meta-commentary on the significance of the text by characters in the novel erodes the narrative potential from the outset. The Lieutenant, Spitz, and other characters are so keyed in to the heightened importance of metaphor and symbolism in the declining world that they ironically destabilize the discursive power of those very metaphors and symbols. Consequently, these terms are evacuated of their meaning and reveal the world of the novel to be a place not of contested meaning but of
meaninglessness. Yet, perhaps unironically, a second-order chain of signification registers the very erosion of language as a site of meaning-making unto itself. The novel’s meditation on wastedness—of the landscape (the Wasteland), the failed enclosures (the abandoned and broken barricades that reside in the Wasteland), and the very project of survival (the failure of a second Reconstruction and specifically of the self-styled American Phoenix to rise from its own proverbial ashes)—all add up to a resignification of the wastedness of securitization as a project, inviting the reader to reimagine and redefine survival and belonging in the post-millennium. This is all, importantly, mediated through Spitz’s ability to read the message and break the code, as he does when sees the skels crash through the wall.

Thriving at the End of the World

Insecurity is a form of interior life we are told to avoid like the plague. Security is, alternatively, a proper affective disposition, a sensibility about life that subsumes safety into an attachment and orientation to state and parastate infrastructures, police and military operations, and neocolonial war both abroad and, importantly, at home. Yet security and securitization produce insecurity, especially racialized insecurity, and especially black insecurity, in and through the shoring up of the fortifications of white heteropatriarchal domesticity. Moreover, white insecurity entraps black subjects in its ongoing projects of conquest and incarceration, tethering opportunity to service on the one hand, while simultaneously identifying them as the pinnacle of threat to the status quo on the other. This has become increasingly true as military and paramilitary forces have been mobilized to stem Black Lives Matter protests in places including Ferguson, Missouri; Baton Rouge, Louisiana; and, most recently, Portland, Oregon. By shifting focus from securitization to black insecurity, by considering how Blackness registers a rebuttal to security’s false promises, Blackness’s capacity to disrupt, dislodge, and subvert those forces, despite its triangulation within their systematization, becomes legible. Whereas white “unsafety” necessitates the development and proliferation of the security apparatus in order to fend off the coming apocalypse, black insecurity acknowledges that apocalypse is itself an ongoing social and political project, one that began with capture, was elaborated with the slave trade, and sought new forms of terror and obliteration under Jim Crow. In the current moment, the apocalypse is multifaceted, yoking racial violence to environmental calamity and political disenfranchisement. Yet, in highlighting black insecurity, black speculative fiction has shown the many ways that black subjects have navigated a world of violent decline. Interrogating a reprieve Spitz experiences in the midst of the broken world reveals an understanding of the juxtaposition of his thriving against the undead
apocalypse. The spatiotemporal matrix of Spitz’s survival reimagines the temporality of survival itself rather than intimate Blackness as existing in proximity to death. In one of its valences, then, black insecurity names the disposition or sensibility that characterizes the relationship between the black subject and the bi-rhythms of the anti-black world. The novel posits survival as a corollary ontopoetic orientation for Spitz and offers the possibility of a variety of alternative forms of social organization to the nation-state that reimagine the temporality of life.

Midway through the novel, while looking for batteries in a toy store in Connecticut, Mark Spitz meets a woman named Miriam, whom he calls Mim. As Spitz clambers into the back door, he assuages Mim’s suspicions that he is a dangerous monster with the simple phrase, “I’m alive” (150). In the ensuing months, Spitz and Mim settle into a loving relationship the likes of which Spitz has never experienced: “It was the healthiest relationship he’d ever had, and not because they had a lot in common, such as the need for food, water, and fire” (241). Here again, the narrative rejects the trope of survival fiction in which characters’ relationships, whether platonic or romantic, develop out of necessity or the conditions of bare life. Instead, the love between Spitz and Mim reads as genuine and humanizing. “In the time before the flood,” the narrator explains, Spitz “had a habit of making his girlfriends into things that were less than human.” Over the course of this passage, recounted ninety pages after their initial meeting, the narrator erodes the dichotomy between the living and the dead. First, the narrator describes Spitz’s old relationships in terms reminiscent of the undead. They devolve from “creatures” to “abominations.” The language of “last nights,” defined elsewhere in the novel as stories survivors tell each other about their last night in the old world, is also used to describe the final straw in those relationships (241–42). Like the last nights narratives that mark a survivor’s pre- and post-plague life, the last nights of Spitz’s former relationships mark similar diachronic developments. The same logic comes to characterize his perspective on living and working with other survivors in the postdiluvian world of the plague.

Spitz’s time with Mim reframes readerly orientations to the dangers of the post-plague world from the operations of policing to the cultivation of a loving cooperation. When they meet, Spitz experiences an altogether different and ironically “normal” sensibility than that which has characterized his interactions with other people in the Wasteland:

Skull faces had replaced human faces in his mind’s population, tight over the bone, staring without mercy, incisors out front. The stubborn ordinarity of her soft eyes and round, vigorous features were a souvenir. The yellow bandanna tight around her scalp tokened weekend chores, plucking acorns and twigs from the sputtering gutter, scraping last summer’s black residue from the grill. The ancient rites. She was like him, one of the unlikely ones, pushing through. Normal. (156)
In this extended and disrupted comparison, his pre-plague lovers are conflated with the survivors of the post-plague world. Together, they all fall under the sign of the dead. Mim’s “vigorous” features set her apart as a vibrant force of love despite and even because of her ordinariness. Moreover, Spitz recognizes himself in her—she is, “like him,” a survivor. Unlike other reminders of the old world, the “residue” of her former quotidian life evinces rather than subverts their likeness. Spitz, the novel tells us, was “half in love with her before the twilight” (157), and his romance with her and her affection for him is a scarcity. Here, again, the novel bends the apparent proximity between Blackness and death, situating death as exterior to Blackness. Instead, the reader sees Spitz develop a loving relationship, one structured in and through his own insecurity.

The fugacity of their relationship highlights a radically different orientation to the temporalities of survival that indicate a meaningful life. One day a few months into their cohabitation in the toy store, Mim does not return from her mission to “scare up some pepper for the lentil soup.” Spitz waits for her, checking her various “go packs,” which were still in their hiding spots. Despite his search, he finds “no indication of where it happened, and it didn’t matter anyway, did it?” He waits a week before “moving on” (247). Spitz is certain that she has not left but rather that she has been taken by the skels. If Spitz is indeed a cypher for the reader in his growing disregard for the security state, then his time with Mim serves the essential purpose of helping readers draw similar conclusions about the terms of survival. While the American Phoenix is concerned with erecting a renewed US state, Spitz’s experience reconceptualizes the terms of insecurity, showing that it can be a force of cohesion. Spitz and Mim are brought together through the shared condition of collapse surrounding them, yet their relationship comes to exceed those concerns. As the wall collapses and the skels flood the Zone at the end of the novel, Spitz turns to Mim and her advice that “There was no other reality apart from this: move on to the next human settlement, until you find the final one, and that’s where you die. The parable of his journey back to the city. To keep moving, in the Mim Sense” (320; emphasis added).

Mark Spitz’s fate is ultimately ambiguous. The novel’s final moments, which have been put off by frequent dilations, come in quick succession, echoing the tempo of the gunfire that invigorates him. As he contemplates making for the ferry terminal, where the American Phoenix forces are amassing for extraction, he thinks better of it, realizing he has little hope of getting there in one piece. Instead, he decides to try for the Hudson River, laughing as the torrent of mortality laps at the banks of civilization in the midst of its collapse. “Fuck it,” Spitz thinks, almost laughing at the absurdity of the situation he finds himself in, “You have to learn how to swim sometime.” Then, he opens the door and walks into the “sea of the dead” (322).
Rather than suggest that Spitz has succumbed to the forbidden thought, the conclusion instead insists that readers reimagine the meaning of survival. What matters is not that Spitz survives after the final period but rather that he has survived and that he has a “knack for apocalypse” (245) that is equal and opposite to the plague’s “knack for narrative closure” (160). The world in the midst of its breaking directs readers to reimagine and reprioritize the rankings of those things deemed important. Spitz’s return to Mim, his determination to keep moving in her *sense*, is an invitation to reimagine and reframe the very terms of security and survival.

**Notes**

1. For discussions of the zombie novel, see Gerry Canavan, Sarah Juliet Lauro, and Carl Swanson.
2. Colson Whitehead opens the novel with the following epigraph from Walter Benjamin’s “Dream Kitsch” (1927), an essay that describes the relationship between kitsch, nostalgia, and the surreal: “The gray layer of dust covering things has become their best part” (*Zone 1*). While some, including Heather J. Hicks and Theodore Martin, have read the connections between dust and kitsch as indicative of a critique of late capitalism, I see the invocation of dust instead as presaging the uncanny world of the novel. Here, Whitehead announces the surreal aesthetics that will dominate the narrative.
3. For a discussion of the relationship between zombie and survival fiction, see Jessica Hurley and Leif Sorenson.
4. Many use the term *security state* to signify those practices of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century that emerged in the aftermath of the Cold War. Inderpal Grewal, for example, describes securitization as the process through which citizen-subjects “are made fearful through mediated panics about external threats from immigrants and terrorists” (5). As she reveals, securitization is an affective process of the state that works on its white subjects to encourage them to take up the state’s mission of war, surveillance, policing, and incarceration. I use the term here to implicate the range of policies and practices that use various signs (war, defense, homeland security, public health) in the project of securitization. See also Adia Benton.
5. See Kimberly Fain, Hicks, and Ramón Saldívar.
6. Surveillance and security have long been a concern for black feminist scholarship, but inquiries into the relationship between black freedom struggle and security have increased in recent years. See, for example, Simone Browne, Angela Y. Davis, Ruth Wilson Gilmore, Jennifer C. Nash, and Christina Sharpe.
7. See *Black Insecurity at the End of the World* by André M. Carrington, Mark C. Jeng, Sami Schalk, and Michelle M. Wright for scholarly discussions of black speculative fiction.
8. Whitehead jokes in “The Year of Living Postracially” (2009) that, because Americans opted for a black president, we might change the term from “People of color” to “People Whose Bodies Just Happen to Produce More Melanin and That’s O.K.”

9. As Tressie McMillan Cottom explains, “Black expectant and new mothers in the United States die at about the same rate as women in countries such as Mexico and Uzbekistan. The high mortality rate of Black women in the United States has been documented by the CDC, which says that Black women are 243 percent more likely to die from pregnancy- or childbirth-related causes than are white women” (87). See also Cristina Novoa and Jamila Taylor.

10. For examinations of the relationships between disease and Chinese racialization, see Neel Ahuja, Corey Byrnes, and Mel Y. Chen.

11. Here, I follow Priscilla Wald, who argues that “the outbreak narrative is haunted by the unacknowledged legacy of decolonization and its expression in disease emergence; it promotes instead an understanding of communicable disease as a cause rather than an expression of social formations throughout history” (47).

12. As Browne explains, “racializing surveillance” characterizes surveillance as “a technology of social control where surveillance practices, policies, and performances concern the production of norms pertaining to race and exercise a ‘power to define what is in or out of place’” (16).

13. According to George L. Kelling and James Q. Wilson, “Broken Windows” policing is a mode of community surveillance that criminalizes “social disorder”—graffiti, panhandling, transience, and other forms of social behavior the authors presumed would lead to a “breakdown of community control.” In the authors’ view, the degradation of “the link between order-maintenance and crime-prevention,” captured by the process through which one “untended” broken window becomes many, epitomized the “urban decay” of the late twentieth-century city.

14. Here, I echo Wendy Brown’s notion of “waning sovereignty,” in which she highlights the ironic ways walls undermine sovereign power (109, 12–13). More than simply demonstrate a notion of sovereign power in decline, Zone One highlights the ways in which the wall itself is decaying.

15. My understanding of waste is informed by black feminist and queer-of-color theorizations of the relationship between black excess, pleasure, and disposability. See, for example, Evelynn Hammonds, Michelle Huang, Nash, Kathryn Bond Stockton, and Darieck Scott.

16. I draw explicitly on work at the intersection of critical security studies and affect theory. See, for example, Paul Amar, Elisabeth R. Anker, and Brian Massumi.
17. For a discussion of black militarism, see Melani McAlister and Cynthia A. Young.
18. I am drawn to current scholarship in Indigenous studies on apocalypse, including work by Daniel Heath Justice and Kyle P. Whyte.

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