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(Re)Framing the Undead: Zombies as Disability Metaphors in Colson Whitehead's *Zone One* and the Near-Future Apocalypse

The essay examines the intersection of disability and the representation of zombies in Colson Whitehead's *Zone One* (2011) through the theoretical frameworks of disability studies. Beginning with an exploration of the biomedical implications of zombification and the ongoing pathologization of illness associated with zombies, and the trope's origins in Haitian folklore and Voodoo rituals, the essay traces the evolution of zombies from their cultural roots to their contemporary depiction as symbols of terror, anxiety, and the unsettling 'other' within the apocalypse. The second section of the essay focuses on the portrayal of "skels"—physically impaired and mutilated zombies—in *Zone One*. This analysis reveals how the novel inscribes both models of disability onto the zombie body, which subsequently becomes a trope for societal attitudes toward disability. Ultimately, the essay demonstrates how zombies in post-apocalyptic fiction serve as metaphors for people with disabilities, encapsulating societal fears and complex emotions such as pity and repulsion toward non-normative bodies.

Keywords: zombie; disability; Colson Whitehead; illness; abject bodies

Resurrecting the Past: Zombies, Medicine, and the Permanent Pathologization of Illness

The presence of zombies in literature and popular media (including film and television) has experienced a significant resurgence over the past fifteen years, with the zombie myth reclaiming a prominent place in contemporary storytelling and futuristic settings. This renewed fascination reflects deep-seated cultural anxieties and evolving social paradigms. Indeed, the zombie is a central figure in future-oriented scenarios and, from a literary standpoint, it becomes one of the main threats in apocalyptic,

dystopian, and speculative fiction, where it serves as a powerful metaphor for societal anxieties about the near future.¹ In dystopian narratives, such as *World War Z: An Oral History of the Zombie War* (Max Brooks, 2006) and *Zone One* (Colson Whitehead, 2011) – which will be the focus of this analysis – the zombie represents the breakdown of social, political, and ecological systems, embodying fears of unchecked capitalism, institutional collapse, and environmental catastrophe. Set within futuristic contexts, the zombie serves as a vehicle for exploring themes of contagion, adaptation, and survival, emphasizing the fragility of human civilization and raising ethical dilemmas. Despite its many configurations, the zombie’s connection to illness persists, remaining central to its imagery even when projected into futuristic scenarios. As a recurring figure in future-oriented storytelling, the zombie not only signals dystopian decline but also raises questions about transformation, resilience, and disability, particularly in how it embodies fears of bodily difference through an ongoing cultural impulse to eradicate zombies’ non-normative bodies. In light of these considerations, the second part of this essay engages with disability studies as its theoretical framework to offer a critical rereading of Colson Whitehead’s *Zone One*. This analysis brings to the fore the representation of the zombie as a metaphor for disability and social stigma, showing how the novel reframes narratives of bodily otherness and abjection, in a near-future apocalypse.

Once rooted in folklore and primarily depicted in the twentieth century as mere reanimated bodies, the zombies’ metaphorical flexibility in contemporary American culture serves as a powerful vehicle for examining widespread concerns, including consumerism, pandemics, fears of contagion, and a pervasive sense of alienation. These themes, primarily explored within the frameworks of horror, dystopian, and post-apocalyptic genres, facilitate a nuanced interrogation of modern cultural and existential dilemmas. Still, to critically reassess the zombie through the lens of disability studies, it is essential to first explore its origins and historical evolution. In American culture, the origins of the zombie can be traced to Haitian folklore, with Haiti frequently depicted in American cultural discourse as “[t]he dark side of the Caribbean” (Cagliero and Ronzon 10, my translation). Following the 1915 US invasion, aspects of Haitian culture, particularly those tied to perceived primitivism, were re-contextualized in American imagination, contributing to Haiti’s exoticized

¹ For a recent theoretical overview on zombies in futuristic scenarios, from literature to media, see Simon Bacon’s *Zombie Futures in Literature, Media and Culture* (2024).

and racialized image. The zombie, central to the Voodoo religion, became a key figure in this cultural construction, strengthening Haiti's role as the birthplace of the zombie myth in the US imagination. Therefore, for the purpose of this analysis, it is mostly relevant to examine the alleged relationship between the zombie and medicine, a connection that invites a deeper exploration of the intersections between the supernatural and medical practices within Haitian culture, offering valuable insights into the cultural and historical context in which the zombie myth evolved. As this essay seeks to demonstrate through an analysis of *Zone One*, in speculative post/apocalyptic fiction, disability plays a central role in the construction of the zombie's body as non-normative, reinforcing fears tied to illness and medicalization.

The zombie's decayed, disfigured, or impaired form mirrors societal anxieties about bodily difference, while its movements often evoke neurological or motor disorders. Through the pathologization of illness, zombies become symbols of contagion and medicalized 'otherness,' reflecting how disabled bodies are often framed as threats to normalcy. This reinforces the idea that deviation from what is targeted as physically abled is something to be feared, contained, or cured, rather than accepted as part of human diversity. That said, the second part of this article will explore how the zombie's body, as depicted in speculative and post-apocalyptic fiction – specifically in Colson Whitehead's *Zone One* – functions as a representation of social and medical pathologization, highlighting deviance and disease. This analysis will draw parallels between the framing of disability in both medical and social contexts and the portrayal of the zombie's body as a physical, psychological, medical, and social marker of dis-ability.

The relationship between zombies, medicine, and the pathologization of illness gained prominence through ethnobotanist Wade Davis's work, *Passage of Darkness* (1988),² where he first theorized zombification as a biomedical process. Davis connected ethnobotany and medical anthropology, explaining zombification as both a cultural and biological procedure. In Haitian Vodou, a "zombi" was an individual controlled by a sor-

² Davis's study sparked significant controversy in the United States regarding the reliability of the information he gathered. While his book included actual testimonies and documented cases of zombification, many anthropologists argued that the phenomenon of zombification in Haiti is more rooted in folklore than a tangible, verifiable process. This perspective, which contrasts with the American fascination stirred by Davis's work, suggests that Davis may have overstated or misinterpreted the phenomenon, extending beyond its true

cerer (*bokor*), with their spirit captured while their body remains under external control. Davis's biomedical explanation focuses on tetrodotoxin, a potent neurotoxin from pufferfish, which, when combined with datura extract, induces a catatonic, death-like state. After burial, the individual is exhumed and remains under the control of the bokor, living in a disoriented condition – later described as a “zombified” state.

At this point, a key question arises: How did the zombie evolve from Haitian culture to become a prominent figure in Western media? Dorothea Fisher-Hornung and Monica Mueller argue that modern zombies, unlike the Haitian version, are often seen as aggressors and “people-eating ghouls” (5). Today, the zombie has transcended its original setting, becoming a transnational symbol in horror and apocalyptic futures. This cultural shift also involved ‘whitening’ the zombie, starting with the film *White Zombie* (1932), which depicted the monster as largely white. Over time, the zombie has been transformed into a supposedly universal, largely white figure, obscuring its Afro-Caribbean roots. Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* (1968) – which contributed to shaping the portrayal of zombies as mindless, flesh-eating creatures and introduced the idea of the undead as a metaphor for societal fears – further detached the zombie from its racial context.³ The racial dimension of the zombie will not be explored further because it falls outside the scope of this analysis, which from now on focuses on the disability framework. However, it is import-

cultural and ritualistic context. For a compelling elucidation on Wade Davis's claims see Inglis Davis's essay “The Zombie from Myth to Reality.” Nevertheless, even today, medical research continues to explore the physiological and pathological implications of zombification. For more on this, see Hans M. Boudoin's “Is tetrodotoxin intoxication the cause of ‘Zombie voice’ in Haiti?” Wade Davis's research in Haiti was not the first to explore the zombie theme. In the early 1930s, writer and anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston studied Vodou practices in Haiti, which she later detailed in her autobiographical work, *Tell My Horse: Vodoo and Life in Haiti and Jamaica* (1938).

³ In his analysis on the origins of monsters in popular culture, *La grande scimmia* (1979), Alberto Abruzzese argued that monsters emerge in times of crisis, serving as cultural reflections of societal fears, the unknown, and the ‘other.’ They are closely tied to issues of identity, morality, and the boundaries of humanity. As he further maintains, the zombie in particular symbolizes the loss of individuality and agency, representing a world where individuals are reduced to mere bodies, devoid of consciousness and autonomy.

ant to note here the representation of the zombie's body, which functions in many respects as a marker of disability and non-normativity.⁴

In contemporary media, there is an insistence on the portrayal of the zombie as a harbinger of illness, spreading through contagion. In television series such as the widely acclaimed TV series *The Walking Dead* (2010-2022), zombies are visualized as decaying, relentless entities that facilitate the spread of a viral infection, underscoring the pervasive fear of contagion and the disintegration of social order. Similarly, films like Danny Boyle's *28 Days Later* (2002) utilize the image of a rapidly transmitted virus to drive the apocalyptic narrative, positioning zombies as infected vectors that exacerbate the existential threat of pandemic and societal breakdown. Additionally, in video games like *Resident Evil*, the zombie is further explored as a mutated figure, representing both the fear of infection and the loss of humanity. In these media, the zombie serves as a potent visual and symbolic representation of contagion, survival, and the fragility of civilization, highlighting the intersection of biological threat and social decay.

Today, the visual representation of the zombies emphasizes the disfigurement of their bodies, which, as we will later discuss, challenges normative assumptions. Zombies are frequently depicted with decayed bodies, impaired mobility, and disoriented behavior, representing clear forms of physical and mental impairment. Their desire to infect others reflects a biological mechanism of illness and contagion, which, from its Haitian origins, has persisted in contemporary representations. In contemporary, futuristic, and apocalyptic narratives, such is the case of *Zone One*, the zombie becomes both a metaphor for a pathology, such as the transmission of the virus, and an agent of contagion, as infection strips individuals of their humanity. That said, the following analysis will explore how Colson Whitehead's *Zone One* functions as a critique of ableism by examining the zombie's body within both medical and social disability frameworks, enhancing the intersections between disability, illness, and the zombie in speculative fiction.

⁴ For a preliminary theoretical overview on disability, see Lennard J. Davis's *Enforcing Normalcy: Disability, Deafness, and the Body* (1995) and *The Disability Studies Reader* (1997); and Tobin Siebers' *Disability Theory* (2008). For an analysis of literature and disability, refer to Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* (1997) and Alice Hall's *Literature and Disability* (2015).

Bodies, Illness and Disability: Reconsidering the *Zombie in Zone One*

Departing from their Haitian origins evolving into a distinct and autonomous cultural archetype, the contemporary zombie is frequently situated within apocalyptic narratives to embody the collapse of social order and the fragility of civilization. As the zombie takes a prominent place in the pantheon of twenty-first-century monsters, it “[b]ecomes the grim view of the apocalypse” (Bishop 11). Fictional apocalypses thus encompass not only the presence of zombies and the looming threat of violent death but also a post-apocalyptic landscape marked by the resurgence of survivalist fantasies and the anxiety surrounding other human survivors (Bishop 19). Such is the case of Colson Whitehead’s *Zone One*, a zombie/post-apocalyptic novel set in a near-future devastated by a zombie pandemic,⁵ where a viral outbreak has decimated much of the global population. Whitehead’s speculative fiction is marked by its fusion of literary and genre traditions, using dystopian, futuristic and alternative historical frameworks to engage in nuanced social critiques. Although Whitehead’s works resist easy categorization due to their fluid shift between genres, “[h]e has walked a fine line between avant-garde experimentalism and formulaic popular fiction” (Maus 1). His novels thus function as hybrids, shifting between speculative fiction – sometimes aligning with Afrofuturism, as seen in *The Intuitionist* (1999) – and other times engaging with slave narratives and historical fiction, as exemplified by *The Underground Railroad* (2016) and *John Henry Days* (2001). For many critics, *Zone One* appeared as a significant departure within Whitehead’s body of work. However, as Derek Maus observes, the novel’s post-apocalyptic and futuristic setting brings Whitehead closer to the realm of popular fiction (111).

It must be noted, however, that in *Zone One*, Whitehead subverts conventional zombie narratives, replacing the typical fast-paced horror structure with a meditative exploration of trauma, memory, and survival in a futuristic post-apocalyptic New York. In this context, the novel employs the zombie as an allegory for ableism and neoliberal survivalism, situat-

⁵ The novel has gained increasing attention after the Covid-19 pandemic due to its surprising relevance to the global health crisis, despite having been written ten years prior to 2020. The virus that devastates the world in Whitehead’s novel, in fact, anticipates the pandemic in certain respects. Some recent editions of the book, such as the Italian one published by Mondadori and reprinted after 2020, feature an image of a face mask on the cover, an emblematic symbol of the health crisis.

ing the undead within broader medical and social disability frameworks. Through his dense, lyrical descriptions of the zombie's body and a clear focus on their marginalized position within the narrative, Whitehead challenges dominant images of normalcy, productivity, and exclusion, positioning *Zone One* as a critical intervention in both speculative fiction and contemporary discourses on disability.

Zone One follows Mark Spitz, a civilian worker on a team tasked with eliminating the remaining infected zombies in lower Manhattan, now referred to as "Zone One."⁶ Employing a dual narrative, the novel shifts between Mark Spitz's current role as a "sweeper" in post-apocalyptic New York, and his memories of the outbreak's early days, offering a nuanced portrayal of his character and the transformed world. From the outset of the narrative, it becomes evident that the zombie serves as the primary antagonist – a figure that embodies terror, incites fear of infection, and, most critically, threatens the very essence of humanity, leading to its eradication. As the narrator states, "[t]he semblance of normalcy permeated the first true accounting of the horror" (249). It is important to note, however, that Whitehead powerfully conveys the need to eliminate the zombie and the horror it evokes through its body, which generates repulsion, fear of infection, and is consistently described as anti-human and carrier of infection and disease. As Derek Maus observes, "Whitehead has indicated that his motivation for writing *Zone One* was not to imagine the practical details of the apocalypse but rather how zombies reflect the world as it already is" (113).

Whitehead's depiction of the zombie invites a reading of the novel through the lens of disability, as the apocalyptic setting becomes a space where an image of diversity toward non-normative bodies is constructed, ultimately serving as the driving force of the narrative. As Catherine Pugh claims, "[z]ombies can often be resituated within frameworks of *illness*,

⁶ The novel contains numerous references to 9/11, a fact that is underscored by its publication in 2011, precisely a decade after the tragedy. "Zone One" itself evokes imagery of "Ground Zero," reinforcing the novel's connection to the events of September 11. Furthermore, the depiction of the urban apocalypse in which Whitehead situates the narrative draws upon the post-9/11 landscape, encapsulating the disorienting and fragmented sense of urban collapse in the aftermath of the attacks. In view of this, the novel is frequently categorized within the broader genre of post-9/11 fiction.

disability, and *mental illness*,⁷ simultaneously embodying traumatized subjects and carriers of a potentially liberating post-human existence” (125). In *Illness as Metaphor* (1977), Susan Sontag asserts that the problem lies not in illness itself, but in the ways it is used as a metaphor (3). This concept can be applied to the zombie, whose decayed body encompasses societal anxieties surrounding disease and contagion. This is confirmed by Spitz when he refers to zombies as “rabid *infected*” (58). The zombie’s condition metaphorically reflects the breakdown of physical and mental boundaries, as the zombie embodies not just physical illness but also its broader social and psychological implications, aligning also with Sontag’s critique of how illness is culturally represented and understood. In fact, in *Zone One* zombiism is overtly treated as an illness representing what for Pugh “complicates not only the binaries of human and monster but also the integrity of identity and the normative body” (136), as the zombies in *Zone One* who become proxies or scapegoats for undesirable human conditions. In fact, the novel highlights “[h]ow they [zombies] can walk around for so long just feeding their own bodies. Why they don’t bleed out. The plague converts the human body into the perfect vehicle for spreading copies of itself” (Whitehead 119). Aligning in part with these considerations, Jamie McDaniel has emphasized that

[i]n their collective images most representations of zombies seem to fall within what David Mitchell and Sharen Snyder have called “narrative prosthesis.” The concept of narrative prosthesis suggests that literature and film have historically and frequently depended on disability for two purposes: as a routine characterization tool or as an optimistic metaphorical device. (423)

As observed, considering that disability is often defined as a deviation from normative standards of physical, cognitive, or affective function, it

⁷ In her essay “The Living Dead? The Construction of People with Alzheimer’s Disease as Zombies,” Susan Behuniak, argues that cultural representations of individuals with Alzheimer’s disease often draw on zombie imagery, framing them as ‘living dead.’ As such, Behuniak identifies multiple characteristics that reinforce this metaphor, such as loss of identity, mindlessness, and social isolation. She additionally contends that this dehumanizing portrayal fosters fear, disgust, and marginalization, contributing to the stigma and exclusion faced by those with Alzheimer’s. She warns that such rhetoric has real social and political consequences, shaping public perception and policy in ways that undermine the dignity and rights of affected individuals. Likewise, Stefano Tani, in *Lo schermo, l’Alzheimer, lo zombie* (2014) considers the zombie and Alzheimer’s disease as interconnected metaphors of the twenty-first century.

becomes evident how the zombie's body challenges conventional definitions of 'normal' or 'average.' Common to the horror and apocalyptic genre is the image of the physically deficient bodies of the undead. From this perspective, scholars have suggested that zombies have emerged as a recurring trope that connects disability and deviance in popular culture, as literature and film explore how aspects of ability are normalized (McDaniel 424–425). Nevertheless, as Barbara Jackson highlights, the categorization of disability as tied to monstrous bodies and monstrosity “[c]ame from dramatic representations of deficient bodies, for example, *Frankenstein*, *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* to distance normal from abnormal and where death must be preferable for the dis-abled” (42).

Indeed, the sweepers in *Zone One* are tasked with restoring a ‘fully’ ableist society. Through their efforts to eliminate zombies from downtown Manhattan, they aim to clean up the city and return it to a state of exclusively ‘normal’ social order. The relationship between disability and deviance, as well as the seemingly ‘natural’ response to bodies that do not conform to an unattainable ideal, forms the foundation of numerous approaches in the field of disability studies – a consideration that will similarly serve as the basis for analyzing Whitehead’s novel. As a recent critical study observes, “[t]he fictional zombie is often used in novels today, especially when placed in post-apocalyptic and futuristic scenarios, as representative of people’s fears and biases towards people with (a) disability” (Jackson 7).

Zone One is cluttered by two types of zombies: skels and stragglers. Skels represent the archetypal, aggressive undead, “conventional shambling corpses in search of fresh meat” (Maus 117) whose bodies are visibly damaged by the virus, exhibiting significant motor impairments, and who are feared to infect the remaining survivors. Their bodies are mutilated due to the viral infection, closely resembling the zombies from Romero’s film and, more recently, those depicted in the well-known TV series *The Walking Dead*. These reanimated corpses exhibit the classic traits of mindless, violent creatures driven purely by instinct. They pose the primary threat in the novel, attacking survivors on sight and displaying erratic, dangerous behaviors. Skels are frequently described as decomposing, disfigured beings, whose grotesque bodies are defined by their destructive nature. As the narrator reports,

[m]ost skels came to eat you – not all of you but a nice chomp here or there, enough to pass on the plague. Cut off their feet, chop off their legs, and they’d gnash the air as they heaved themselves forward by their splintered fingernails, looking for some ankle action. (Whitehead 59)

In contrast, stragglers are characterized by more passive behavior. Often found aimlessly wandering, they are trapped in repetitive actions or appear in trance. Unlike skels, stragglers do not actively attack survivors, instead embodying a more unsettling, inert peril. It is evident that the distinction between the two types of zombies offers a reinterpretation of disability and the non-normative body, mostly in the case of the skels that will serve as the basis for our analysis through the lens of disability in the following pages. As this essay seeks to demonstrate, the skels epitomize societal anxieties surrounding decay and vulnerability, functioning as grotesque representations of human fragility. This characterization aligns them with stigmatized perceptions of disability, further reinforcing their role as symbols of marginalization and fear.

In *Zombie Theory*, Jenn Webb and Samuel Byrmand insist on considering the body of the zombie as a trope on which several aspects are inscribed. Although the zombie's visible alterations often categorize it as non-human, it is crucial to remember that, before its transformation, the zombie was once a human being. Despite its mindless state, the zombie still retains a human component as "zombies are humans; beings in a human body without respect for life as they eat and infect as many people as possible" (Webb and Byrmand 117). The human aspect of the zombie in the novel is highlighted when the narrator observes traits or behaviors that suggest remnants of the humans zombies once were: "The plague [on the zombie's body] had finally, inevitably exhausted what the *human* body could endure" (Whitehead 139).

This duality effectively blurs the boundary between human and non-human, compelling readers to confront the unsettling closeness between the living and the undead. Additionally, in an interview about the novel, Whitehead declared that, "[i]n comparing the uninfected survivors with the infected stragglers and skels, I'm trying to break down the divisions between the two, to figure out what is dead about the living, and what is still living in the dead" (Naimon). As the narrative progresses, the inhuman condition of the zombie is reinforced through its association with creatures or monsters. The narrator, in fact, asserts that "Spitz marveled anew at how his comrade was in better shape than the *creatures* they were meant to eradicate" (27) and "[t]he skel's foot swished back and forth like the tail of an animal dozing on a concrete zoo" (26).

The recurrent distinction between zombies and humans, along with their terrifying otherness, links them to an ongoing classification as 'Others' targeted with marginalized deviance, as they exemplify the darker side of human identity. If we consider, as Anna Mae Duane does, that

America tends to divide society “into what’s normal and then place everything else in all-purpose bin called ‘other’” (237), the zombie is inherently part of this subclassification. Moreover, the concept of otherness in disability studies suggests that dis-abled bodies are often framed as incomplete, deficient, or dysfunctional, in relation to an idealized and able-bodied standard. This framing reinforces stereotypes and contributes to social exclusion, positioning disability as a marker of difference rather than diversity. Tania Titckosky additionally explains how non-disabled and abled people experience disability mostly through their cultural perspectives. As she further notes, “[d]isability is simply and obviously a bodily phenomenon” (16).

For Lennard J. Davis, a physical deficiency refers to a biological, cognitive, sensory or psychological variation, whereas disability arises from society’s negative response to such difference. As he further maintains, “[i]mpairment only becomes disability when the ambient society creates an environment with barriers – affective, cognitive, sensory or architectural” (Davis, *Enforcing Normalcy* 6). Within the interdisciplinary field of disability studies, theorists have drawn a critical distinction between the medical model and the social model of disability. The medical model conceptualizes disability as an individual issue stemming from mental, physical, or sensory impairments. Within this framework, disability is regarded as a deviation from the norm that necessitates correction. In contrast, the social model frames disability as a result of societal barriers and exclusion rather than inherent impairment. In this case, disability arises from discriminatory practices and cultural attitudes that fail to accommodate diverse needs. While the medical model emphasizes individual deficits and aims to ‘correct’ the disability or impairment, the social model, in contrast, focuses on systemic barriers and societal structures that enhance the experience of disability. Moreover, as Lennard J. Davis contends “[t]he problem is not the person with disabilities, the problem is the way normalcy is constructed to create a problem of the disabled person” (*Enforcing Normalcy* 24).

As Spitz explicitly argues, in post-apocalyptic New York, there is no possibility of accommodating the zombie, which suggests no intention of correcting their impairments, as the medical model would imply. This view in the novel is reinforced by the use of the term “defenestration” (Whitehead 74) – a word employed by sweepers, including Mark Spitz, to designate the condition of the zombie. As the narrator later implies, “[n]o one used the word ‘cure’ anymore. The plague so transformed the *human* body [into zombies] that no one still believed it could be restored” (78).

While the narrative predominantly portrays zombies as symbols of social exclusion, it also incorporates aspects of the medical model by emphasizing the language of infection and disease inscribed on the bodies of the undead. Confronted with the corpse of a zombie, Mark Spitz reflects on its disfigured form, illustrating how the infection has rendered the body gross, deformed, and non-normative: “The skel was nude, her body mottled with brown plague spots. An apple-sized chunk of meat was missing from her forearm” (Whitehead 64). By putting this image within the disability framework, Whitehead’s description of the zombie aligns with Pugh’s assertion that “[t]he reframing of the zombie as a disabled figure typically exhibits visible physical deformations” (126). In support of this, at some point in the narrative the narrator describes the zombie as a “[s]tandard-issue plague shriveled skel” (28).

As such, Whitehead’s passage underscores how the infection transforms the body into a site of abjection, emphasizing its deviation from socially constructed norms of physical wholeness and acceptability. A considerable body of critical work on disability has emphasized how the visual representation of disability – particularly of bodies deemed non-normative – is often constructed as something requiring correction or care (see Rodan and Ellis; Bacon). However, this notion becomes problematic in light of what Debbie Rodan and Katie Ellis describe as “[t]he naturalized repudiation of non-normative bodies signified by the (continuing) popularity of narratives about reforming, *erasing*, and reclaiming body limitations” (8). In *Zone One*, Whitehead’s portrayal of zombies aligns in part with Rodan and Ellis’s view. The skels, as reanimated yet visibly decayed and dysfunctional bodies, embody a non-normative physicality that needs to be eliminated. The post-apocalyptic and futuristic setting of *Zone One* reinforces this rejection by positioning the systematic eradication of skels as both necessary and inevitable, supporting that narrativization of a naturalized repudiation toward non-normativity. The novel’s emphasis on sweeping operations, which aim to clean urban spaces of these aberrant figures, underscores the impulse to restore a perceived state of normalcy – one that relies on the violent removal of bodies that deviate from normative physical and cognitive standards.

An examination of the skels in the novel reveals that the horror of their marginalization reflects the social exclusion and discrimination often experienced by individuals with disabilities. In this case, society’s inability to accept and/or accommodate their diversity leads to marginalization, isolation and hostility reflecting the failure of a system to create an inclusive environment for those cast as different and thus deviant others. As

Maus observes, “[t]he mindset of survivors like Spitz, is to make the horrifying quasi-death of the world’s population (zombies) into an *inconvenience* that must be cleaned up” (113). As Maus further argues, to a certain extent, Whitehead’s protagonist equates to the protagonist of Romero’s *Night of the Living Dead*, Ben, who is the hero of the story.

Indeed, passages of the novel frequently suggest that zombies embody a view of disability as socially constructed rather than a purely physical condition. Rather than merely focusing on zombies’ diversity as the result of a pathological condition, *Zone One* recurrently explores how their presence leads to a social stigmatization reflecting the dynamics of those who deviate from the normative standard. The presence of zombies in Whitehead’s New York challenges the norms of a proper society as the zombies’ fear-inducing appearance reflects how difference is treated with hostility.

Applying this theoretical framework to the novel, *Zone One* presents a representation of the zombie body that both aligns with and challenges traditional disability models. While, as said, the medical model of disability typically assumes that disability is a pathological condition that can be treated or cured to restore the individual to normative functioning, the zombie condition in Whitehead’s narrative complicates this understanding. The zombies, or skels, are characterized by a condition that is permanent, irreversible, and beyond the scope of medical intervention. The novel’s absence of a cure to the infection challenges the assumptions of the medical model, which typically center on the potential for treatment or rehabilitation.

Unlike traditional disabilities that might be framed as conditions requiring medical care, the zombie’s body in *Zone One* is not one that can be ‘fixed.’ The disfigurement and deterioration are intrinsic to the zombie’s existence, rendering them permanently disabled in both a biological and social sense. In this way, the zombies in *Zone One* represent a form of disempowerment that exceeds physical impairment. Their bodies are not only biologically dysfunctional but are also socially alienated – rendered entirely other and excluded from the possibility of reintegration into the post-apocalyptic society. However, although the medical model of disability is more prominent, elements of the social model of disability can also be identified. The post-apocalyptic society depicted by Whitehead seems to have established a new form of ‘normativity,’ a condition that forces the survivors like Spitz to adapt and endure. Within this new reality, the zombie bodies, marginalized and seen outside the bounds of ‘normality,’ are perceived as equally ‘non-normative’ and ‘dis-abled’ from a social

perspective. Their exclusion from society, and their inability to partake in a ‘normal life,’ positions them as a metaphor for social marginalization and disability.

Moreover, survivors, including Mark Spitz (whose real name remains undisclosed throughout the narrative),⁸ react not only with fear of a biological threat but also with social rejection, viewing the zombies as ‘less than human’ and stigmatizing them as inferior. Much like individuals with disabilities, who face structural barriers and societal exclusion, zombies in the narrative exist on the periphery of society, embodying themes of exclusion and rejection. They are both physically and socially disconnected from the norms of the living world, symbolizing the concrete isolation experienced by marginalized groups. In this sense, the boundaries that restrict zombies from certain areas serve as a physical means of containing and controlling what is perceived as deviant, abject, and non-normative.

The term “abjection” presented by Julia Kristeva in her well-known book *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1982), describes abjection as the inevitable psychological and cultural process that society experiences in relation to what is considered impure and threatening to the established order of the body. In the context of disability studies, as explored in this essay, Kristeva’s notion can be employed to examine how individuals with non-normative bodies as perceived as ‘others’ or ‘outsiders’ in relation to an ideal norm of health and functionality, generating an inevitable reaction of rejection and fear. In this sense, abjection explains how society reacts in stigmatizing ways to what is perceived as non-conforming and non-normal. In *Zone One*, the zombies’ problematic body supports Kristeva’s view on abjection and how their presence trig-

⁸ The nickname Mark Spitz – the name of a famous American swimmer – is ironically given to the protagonist by a group of survivors after he chooses to shoot zombies in order to carve a path for himself, having been surrounded by them and, unable to swim, prevented from jumping into the river to escape. The metaphor of swimming in *Zone One* is intricately linked to race and African American identity, drawing on historical contexts of exclusion and marginalization. Swimming, often associated with freedom of movement, has long symbolized racial barriers, particularly in the United States, where African Americans were historically denied access to public swimming pools and leisure spaces. The choice of the name Mark Spitz – referencing the iconic white American swimmer – adds an ironic layer to the novel, highlighting the tension between mainstream racialized symbols of success and the survival of African American characters within a post-apocalyptic setting. As such, this metaphor emphasizes the struggle for mobility, agency, and survival in a world shaped by systemic racial oppression.

gers intense social repulsion, highlighting the fear of what challenges the boundaries defining human existence.⁹ As the narrative suggests, “[t]here was no point in mocking the skel [zombie] unless you had a witness. Mark Spitz couldn’t isolate the origin of his *distaste* [...]” (Whitehead 280).

Such physical and social repulsion in the novel not only reflects the marginalization of the zombie but also serves as a critique of the societal mechanisms that regulate difference and deviance. In *Zone One* – a narrative in which conformity is constantly enforced – zombies, as deviant others, offer insight into how post-apocalyptic society perceives and controls difference. As the novel constantly demonstrates, a clear distinction is drawn between ‘normal’ human survivors and the ‘othered,’ zombies, who are relegated to the margins of society. According to Anna Mae Duane when the zombie enters the scene in the apocalypse, a powerful dichotomy is established between repulsive decay and physical health: “You are one side of the equation or the other. This the terror of our own treacherous, unpredictable embodiment becomes transferred to monstrous bodies we must eradicate to be safe” (239). As such, by reading *Zone One* on the basis of this assumption, it is clear that the narrative conflates disability with the horror of the zombie presence.

Nevertheless, the open finale of the novel – as Mark Spitz admits that “[t]o walk into the sea of the dead[,] [y]ou have to learn how to swim sometime”¹⁰ (321) as he runs toward zombies – is also significant. The conclusion somehow encapsulates the novel’s critique of societal norms that marginalize difference. This act dissolves the boundary between human and zombie, challenging the exclusionary dichotomy of ‘normal’

⁹ In light of this perspective, the social and physical marginalization of zombies in *Zone One* aligns in part with Foucault’s notion of disciplinary power, where individuals or social groups are isolated, controlled, and disciplined to enforce compliance with social norms. In Foucauldian terms, in such systems, the body is physically confined and subjected to various forms of control, marking those who do not conform to accepted norms as ‘deviant.’ In Whitehead’s novel, this process of segregation, where zombies are relentlessly hunted to be eliminated, mirrors the ways this society isolates and controls individuals it deems abnormal. By segregating the ‘other,’ Whitehead’s protagonist enforces its desire to maintain order through normalization, ensuring that only those who conform to the established norm are permitted to remain within the social fold (see L. Davis; Foucault).

¹⁰ Swimming serves as a recurring metaphor throughout the novel, beginning with the protagonist’s namesake, which alludes to a famous swimmer. This connection not only highlights the protagonist’s identity but also sets the stage for exploring deeper themes. In a brief but significant passage, the protagonist

versus ‘other.’ Through a disability studies lens, this ending suggests an acknowledgment of shared vulnerability as it critiques the societal structures that stigmatize bodies perceived as deviant.

Conclusion

As Colson Whitehead’s novel proves, joining the growing presence in film and television, zombies continue to resonate profoundly with modern audiences. In *Zone One*, Colson Whitehead uses zombies not only as distorted representations of the human but as a metaphor for disability, illustrating the social structures that marginalize and dehumanize those deemed ‘different.’ Zombies, with their decaying, uncontrollable bodies, reflect the societal rejection of the disabled, echoing how disability is framed in terms of weakness, loss of autonomy, and moral failure. This reduces the complexity of disability to a simplistic, negative representation, which is often seen in media and popular culture (McDaniel 424–425).

As Jamie McDaniel argues, zombies in popular culture link disability and deviance by displaying “[r]ecognizably human characteristics that are non-normative and abnormal” (McDaniel 424–425). In *Zone One*, this becomes evident, as the zombies are portrayed as creatures to be eradicated or corrected, emphasizing that only the ‘normal’ body is acceptable (McDaniel 425) and thus establishing an ableist logic that casts the zombie within a non-normative framework. Bill Hughes adds that historically, responses to disability have been focused on elimination or correction (Hughes 17). This view aligns with Duane’s assertion that zombie narratives distill this ableist logic into a moral imperative: “Disability must either be fixed or eradicated” (Duane 239).

In so doing, *Zone One* reinforces ableist assumptions, treating deviation from the normative body as a threat that must be confined and/or extinguished. This binary logic of ‘normal’ versus ‘deviant’ highlighted in the novel reflects broader societal prejudices, especially those concerning disability, where the ‘other’ is feared and marginalized. In *Zone One*, the social model of disability aligns more with the depiction of zombies as

reflects on his African American heritage, touching upon the historical and cultural barriers that have often limited access to swimming for Black individuals. This trope of swimming in the novel thus operates on multiple levels, symbolizing both personal and societal challenges while also revealing the complexities of racial identity and privilege.

representations of alienation. This model highlights how societal attitudes toward difference and disability are reflected in the zombie, offering a critique of exclusionary practices and the cultural perception of marginalized individuals. In contrast, while less central to the novel, the medical model of disability also emerges, particularly through the use of language relating to infection and disease. This medical framework, which views disability as a condition to be fixed, is invoked in *Zone One* when the zombies are treated as contagious, reinforcing the idea of disease and the desire for control over bodies perceived as medically deviant.

As the zombie trope has transcended its presumed American origins to become a deeply global phenomenon (Lauro ix), and its symbolic power continues to grow, in *Zone One*, it effectively serves as a metaphor for both social exclusion and the medicalization of diversity, reflecting societal fears and prejudices surrounding disability and deviance. Whitehead's representation of zombies ultimately demonstrates how cultural perceptions of difference are shaped by exclusionary practices and medical discourses, highlighting the dehumanization of those deemed 'other' or non-normative.

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