What is Discovered in the Post-Black Wasteland? Black Agency and Identity in Colson Whitehead's *Zone One*

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Abstract

This article explicates the disparate affects displayed by the African American protagonist Mark Spitz within the particular spaces of Colson Whitehead's 2012 novel *Zone One*. Why are these affects felt and what effect do these shifting affects have on his agency and identity? The article selects three prominent spaces in *Zone One* and inspects the affective identities produced in these spaces with an emphasis on how they influence the agency of Mark Spitz. It will be argued that the fluctuations in Mark Spitz's agency throughout his journey are linked/displayed through his abilities (or lack thereof) to act within specific situations. This action/inaction is fuelled by certain affects brought about by some racialized aspect within the space. Furthermore, this will be linked to Colson Whitehead's own ideological perspectives as it pertained to African American literature and African American identity at the time of *Zone One*'s writing.

Keywords: affect; post-Black identity; affective identity; race.

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Kathleen Stewart (2007) describes affect as "an animate circuit that conducts force and maps connections, routes and disjunctures;" it is "a kind of contact zone where the overdetermination of circulations, events, conditions, technologies, and flows of power literally take place" (3). Within this "contact zone" agency "live[s] through a series of dilemmas," and is "frustrated and unstable and attracted to the potential in things" (86). Stewart's map-like descriptions of affect and agency extend her ideas about the "potential in things" to a "potential in spaces." According to Marie-Laure Ryan, Kenneth Foote, and Maoz Azaryahu (2016), the "abstract notion of space" can be viewed as a container, which presents space "as a bounded environment that encloses the subject" and can "stand either for security and attachment to one's surroundings, or for passivity and entrapment" (19). Accordingly, the other way space can be considered is as a network—"a dynamic system of relations that allows movement, and that is often actively created by the subject" (19). Hence, the ideology of a space has the potential to either enforce or subjugate a subject's agency by exacerbating or soothing any "dilemmas" in a space or even be the cause of the "dilemma" itself.

To these connections between agency and space one can add the concept of affective identities. Combining affect and identity, "affective identities" spell out how affect could foster one's point of view and sense of the world. Indeed, affect creates a unique form of identity that is grounded not as much on rationality as it is on emotion. For subaltern groups,[1] affective identities are particularly important because the rationality of the spaces they occupy often actively attempts to quell their agency. According to Tyrone S. Palmer (2023), affect "affirms life, resistance, futurity, mobility, capacity, openness, and in the simplest of terms, existence" (122). Linking back to Stewart, affect affirms action in the face of the dilemmas through which agency lives (2007, 86). Therefore, one of the functions of affective identities is to reinforce and rouse the agencies of subaltern groups in spaces that suppress their autonomy. This can also be tied to the idea of embodied space, which emphasizes that bodies merge with a space and have paths, along with "time- and space-specific goals and intentions that are personally, culturally, and politically directed" and bring "greater agency" to "individual and collective bodies and their movements" (Low 2017, 94).

Colson Whitehead's *Zone One* (2012) is a post-apocalyptic zombie novel that tells the story of Mark Spitz, an African American man who works for the volunteer armed forces as a "sweeper." A person who clears up any remaining infected zombie stragglers in New York after a plague has devastated the planet. The story takes place over three days as the reader follows Spitz and his team through the city while, at regular intervals, Whitehead expands upon Spitz's backstory via a set of flashbacks explaining how he was able to survive the initial zombie epidemic and reach New York. Each flashback to his backstory functions as a short vignette, placing him in a different space with a different set of challenges. In the novel Spitz moves between a multiplicity of American spaces within each of which his agency shifts. In other words, the fluctuations in Spitz's agency throughout his journey—what Ryan, Foote, and Azaryahu refer to as "movements" (2016, 19)—are displayed through his body's ability to act within specific situations presented in the novel. This article argues this agency is fueled by certain affects which may be brought about by some racialized aspect within the space, creating the dilemmas to which Stewart refers. Furthermore, these notions will be linked to Colson Whitehead's ideological perspective on African American identity at the time of the novel's writing.

Colson Whitehead was recognized as a late member of the New Black Aesthetic (NBA) at the beginning of his career in 1999, which sought "to displace rather than complement and expand African American middle-class satirical tropes that privilege individualism" and use African American characters to reconstruct the African American struggle with individuality and the quest for "authority, authenticity, and agency" (in

[1] The term "subaltern group" refers to people in specific cultures or societies marginalized because their race, gender, physical ability, or sexuality differs from that of the majority.

Bell 2004, 303). With the NBA as a clear precursor to the extremes of the post-Black movement,[2] by the time of *Zone One*'s publication in 2012, Whitehead had extended his post-Black credentials further, with the novel eschewing the majority of the traditional outward tropes of canonical African American literature (dealing with the topics of African American slavery and discrimination, and the resultant cultural trauma thereof) and instead displaying the author's own individual authentic authorial identity. Whitehead maintained his distinctive choices as a writer, insisting he had his "own perspective that [he's] putting out there" and he didn't "have to follow someone else's idea of how you write a novel or how you approach a subject" and hoped "that people will come to [his] books assuming that [he's] doing something different" (in Baden 2019, 79).

The most evident way in which Whitehead's *Zone One* (2012) evades African American literary tropes is by eliminating virtually all mentions of race. The first time Spitz's race is mentioned is near the end of the novel, revealed when fellow "sweeper" Gary questions the origin of Spitz being nicknamed after a famous white American Olympic swimmer who won a total of nine gold medals throughout his sports career in the 1970s and 1980s:

> [He] explained the reference of his sobriquet to Gary, adding, "Plus the black-people-can't-swim thing."
> "They 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 how to swim sometime."
> "I can tread water perfectly." (231)

When Whitehead indifferently reveals his protagonist's racial identity it is through the naming of the protagonist via the ironic use of a racist stereotype. Whitehead emphasizes the (outward) irrelevance of race in the novel by having Spitz profess that he would not challenge Gary's ignorance of racist stereotypes because "there was a single Us now, reviling a single Them," (231) suggesting that in the post-apocalyptic zombie infested world racism and racial distinctions no longer exist.

The proposition in this statement—that the zombie apocalypse stands as a symbol of a post-race world—has been a major point of interest surrounding critical readings of the novel. Grace Heneks (2018) equates the novel's post-apocalyptic government's (named "American Phoenix") propaganda and falsehoods about their victory over the zombie apocalypse to the mistaken belief that America is currently living in a post-racial world. Jessica Hurley (2015) infers that the zombies in *Zone One* stand as a symbol "of a repressed history of racial trauma in which biopower operates increasingly under the

[2] The post-Black movement, led by critics such as Touré (2011) and bell hooks (2013), argued that despite racism still being present in the United States, Black writers and critics should promote an African American literature in which characters can have subject positions and experiences that are not solely defined through their race.

sign of the 'postracial'" (2015, 311). One of the latest "postrace" readings of the novel comes from Maria Bose (2021), who focuses on *Zone One*'s vocabulary and how Whitehead's language purposefully avoids "explicit racial signifiers" and limits its use of "implicitly racializing terms" to "formalize race's conceptual instability and political mystification in a supposedly 'postrace' era through the careful deployment of genre-fiction lexicon" (44). Bose investigates how Whitehead uses genre fiction to comment on "the language of 'postracial' racialization" via his substitution of typical racial signifiers with invented and coded genre fiction signifiers (44), concluding that despite postrace proponents' attempts to employ "race-neutral terminologies" they still "exert ideological force" (52). This begs the question: what ideology is Whitehead purporting in *Zone One*?

At the time of *Zone One*'s publication, most interviews with Whitehead suggested he was interested in writing his own stories and was not really concerned with conforming to the traditional tenets of African American literature.[3] This rejection is emphasized in the novel via Whitehead's refusal to signify Spitz's race as his defining identity. Rather the quality Whitehead underscores the most is Mark Spitz's ordinariness, the "Most Likely Not to Be Named the Most Likely Anything" with his aptitude laying "in the well-executed middle, never shining, never flunking" (2012, 10). Whitehead deliberately ignores the *one* thing that distinguishes Mark Spitz as *not* ordinary—his race. According to Nick Mansfield (2000), "the politics of race revolve around the endless play of visibility and invisibility, emphasizing …the *visible* markers of racial difference" with "ethnicity seen to exist only in those minority groups that bear visible markers of difference" (119; emphasis mine). Thus, with Whitehead purposefully ignoring Mark Spitz's race, he also removes any ethnicity, stripping him of any group identity or specific feeling. To explicate, Michael Ryan (2010) describes ethnicity as "a genetic inheritance that embodies itself physically; but it is also a sign with cultural meaning that links to emotions such as fear and anger and actions such as lynching and genocide" (72). By removing the racial signifier, the reader has no preconceived emotional or motivational connotations of Spitz as a character. This posits him as free of racial fundamentalism, defined by Michael Eric Dyson (2011) as viewing race in terms of "narrow, literal tenets of racial identity and struggle" that adheres to "rigid tests of authentic Blackness" with "little tolerance for more nuanced, less literal, more complicated readings in Black identity" (xviii). Ergo, by expunging Spitz's race, Whitehead is also removing any identity formations via the traditional literary edicts of African American racial struggle and trauma. This renders Spitz believable as a "*typical* … the *most* … *average*" American citizen (9).

[3] Refer to *Conversations with Colson Whitehead*, edited by Derek C. Maus (2019), and the interviews Whitehead had with Robbie Baden, Rob Spilman, and Nancy Smith discussing his writing influences around the time of *Zone One*'s publication.

Throughout the novel Spitz celebrates his ordinariness, arguing that being unremarkable is an asset that allows him to survive in the post-apocalyptic world:

> His aptitude lay in the well-executed muddle, never shining, never flunking, but gathering himself for what it took to progress past life's next random obstacle. It was his solemn expertise. Got him this far. (10)

Whitehead elects to de-emphasize Mark Spitz's race by choosing this description of mediocrity to exert the ideological force of post-Blackness. The most typical and average identity in America is a Caucasian heterosexual male, and by celebrating this, Whitehead is suggesting that to survive in a postrace and post-apocalyptic world, Spitz needs to ignore his Blackness. Mansfield (2000) describes postmodern identity as "doubly disoriented" because it "wanders in a world it cannot accurately conceptualize, and its own interiority has lost its sense of intense feeling and meaningful place" (165). Spitz's wanderings across the United States disconnect him from any intense feelings or true sense of belonging, experiencing a "disorientation that affirmed his utter unmooring from all things" (101). Asserting Spitz's "mediocrity" as an asset and rejecting what makes him unique (his Blackness) generates a disorienting point-of-view. If one couples this with the structure of novel—Spitz wandering in a post-apocalyptic world which he no longer recognizes and is unable to find meaning or connect with his true emotions—Spitz can initially be viewed as a protagonist with a combined postmodern and post-Black identity.

An initial reading of *Zone One* presupposes a postrace world and a protagonist with a postmodern and post-Black identity who will act based upon postmodern and post-Black "rationality." Yet, Spitz's "rational" interpretations and decisions about the spaces he occupies are often proven to be incorrect or detrimental. Thus, when attempting to understand how he acts and why he sometimes cannot sense the racialized "truth" of a space. Both the affective atmosphere of the space as Spitz understands it and how this understanding may be incorrect needs to be clarified. In what follows three specific spaces from the novel will be examined wherein Spitz acts in particular ways that may be counterintuitive to his initial identity position. This will be linked to the affects which induce or counter Spitz's actions. The spaces and sections chosen are ordered chronologically according to the action timeline of the novel. By ordering them in this way, one can conclude how his identity and agency change throughout the novel and whether these changes are an indication of Whitehead's more implicit meanings in the novel.

1. Absent Anxiety on the Farm

The first space is a farm community in rural Massachusetts that Spitz comes upon while travelling across the United States prior to him joining the government-funded "sweeper" operation. The farm vignette demonstrates the failure of post-Black ideology via Spitz's absence of anxiety—an emotion Spitz should experience as a Black man within this rural setting. If Spitz's racial identity is known when one reads the farm section of the novel,

there are certain signifiers which become racially coded drastically changing one's reading of these events. First, the rural American countryside in Massachusetts is described as "the wastes" and Connecticut as "loathsome" by Spitz, which stresses his aversion for rural areas (169). However, Spitz's trajectory through the landscape has taught him that even though "there had existed an equivalency of peril between rural areas and the city," out in the countryside "the density [of zombies] was lower" with "few sightings, few attacks, fewer withdrawals from his reservoir of last-minute escapes" (169). Furthermore, when Spitz arrives on the farm, we are told the original owners of the farmhouse were an upper-middle-class lesbian couple (a professor and an artist) who fled the city (172). There are two conflicting extrapolations about the farm space one can draw from the previous owners and Spitz's sentiments about the countryside. First, when there is mention of upper-middle-class people "fleeing the city" there is racial subtext. Referred to as "white flight," many White people left the cities for the suburbs and countryside beginning in the 1950s in the United States because of the increased migration of Black people into urban areas (Dines 2020, 10). These newly formed majority-White suburban and rural areas enforced racially exclusionary housing practices to prevent any Black people moving in, which White people saw as decreasing their property values and bringing in more crime. This racial subtext is further emphasized by the character of Jerry, one of the farmhouse residents. Jerry is a real estate agent who sold the farm to the original owners and is described as a "tall, ruddy-faced man with a country-sheriff scowl, his buzz cut glowing an unnatural orange from salvaged dye" (2012, 172). Thus, if Spitz's race is known, Jerry's description and his attitude toward Spitz appear discriminatory. He is a real estate agent, so his disapproval of Spitz is suggestive of racist real estate agents and their historical use of racially exclusionary housing practices. Furthermore, the visual description of Jerry as a country-sheriff alludes to a very particular US American literary and film trope: the racist smalltown sheriff.[4] When Spitz arrives at the farm, Jerry is the most oppositional to him staying on the farm, insinuating he will attract more zombies to their haven. If one makes use of Heneks and Hurley inferences regarding zombies as a symbol of traumatic racial histories and the way Black people face subjugation in the United States, Spitz as a Black man entering the farm space is seen as a threat to the White people already staying there and will possibly attract more "undesirables" like him because as Spitz noted, rural areas are safer because there are fewer zombies.

Spitz's initial impressions of Jerry are inflected with race-based undertones, referring to him as a "cowboy right-winger" who wants to shoot "vermin" and "cretins" (181). Furthermore, his negative sentiments toward the rural communities can also be viewed

[4] Examples include the characters of Bill Gillespie in the novel and film adaptation of *In the Heat of the Night* (1965), Sheriff Ray Stuckey in the film *Mississippi Burning* (1988, dir. Alan Parker) and Sheriff J.W. Pepper in the film *Live and Let Die* (1973, dir. Guy Hamilton).

as racially motivated. The historical reason so many Black people migrated to northern cities in the early 20th century was because of the racist policies still being enacted in the American South, where, according to Isabel Wilkerson (2010), Black people's "every step was controlled by the meticulous laws of Jim Crow … [which were] the violently enforced codes of the southern caste system" (9–10). Again, if the reader is aware of Spitz's race, his allusion to the failure of Southern reconstruction, his distaste for the countryside, and his life-long dream (reiterated throughout the novel) to move to New York are all racially coded. Thus, if one focuses on these signifiers, the farm space is cyphered as racially exclusionary and, upon entering the space, Spitz as a Black man should be expected to feel anxious. However, at this point in the novel his racial identity has not been disclosed and when he enters the space he feels confident and "devil-may-care" (2012, 169), which negates the affective atmosphere one can read into the space using these race-based signifiers.

What is it about the space that gives Spitz a "devil-may-care" attitude? The possible reason (and converse extrapolation about the farm) is because Whitehead is presenting the farm as a postrace space—a space which has "transcended the logics of race and racism" (Valluvan 2016, 2242). Whitehead codes the original owners of the farm as liberal—they are an eco-conscious same-sex couple, one was an artist, the other was a literary theory university professor. The original farm owners' professions and political inferences imply people who are much less likely to be racist and more understanding and welcoming of diversity. Furthermore, Tad and Margie, the other residents of the farm, are coded as progressive peace-loving hippies. They are immediately hospitable to Spitz and claim, "You can see he is harmless," all the while ignoring Jerry's "protestations any mind" (2012, 172–73). Even Jerry's initial objections to Spitz joining them in the farmhouse quickly fall away, a "performance for Mark Spitz's benefit, to show him [the farm] wasn't as slapdash an operation as it appeared" (173) with Jerry admitting "their complimentary talents and temperaments made for a convivial household" and it was nice to have a fourth for hearts" (176). Spitz's attitude appears to align with these ideas as he displays no anxiety about joining the group on the farm, "he was trapped in this house and he couldn't think of where else he would rather be" (181). Thus, despite the initial warning signs one might read into the space, the opposite appears true, suggesting people can productively co-inhabit a space wherein there is no race-based negative affective atmospheres.

Spitz's "devil-may-care" attitude and lack of race-based anxiety when entering the farm space emphasizes it as a post-Black space since his relaxed frame of mind indicates the farm is free of the logics of race and racism. However, if the reader is made aware of Spitz's race, the speed at which any potential danger is negated pushes the reader to feel anxious on Spitz and the other farm residents' behalf. Stanley Rachman (1988) describes anxiety as the "tense anticipation of a threatening but vague event" or a feeling of

"uneasy suspense" (2–3), while Martin Heidegger (1962) characterizes anxiety as something which threatens from "nowhere" (231). Sara Ahmed (2004) uses these definitions to demarcate anxiety as lacking a definitive object, extending her idea of anxiety as follows:

> One's thoughts … [moving] quickly between different objects, a movement which works to intensify the sense of anxiety … the detachment from a given [definitive] object allows anxiety to accumulate through gathering more and more objects, until it overwhelms other possible affective relations to the world. (66)

The reader senses an imminent threat, they just do not know when or where the threat will come. Will it come from the ever-increasing zombie horde that began surrounding the house following Spitz's arrival or will the danger come from possible hidden racial tensions within the house?

The inside/outside dilemma can be linked to Sianne Ngai's ideas surrounding anxiety. Heavily influenced by Heidegger, Sianne Ngai (2005) asserts that anxiety is spatio-temporal, with the "distinction between 'here' and 'yonder' on which the experience of threat depends, [depicting] anxiety less as an inner reality which can be subsequently externalized than as a structural effect of spatialization in general" (212). Spitz's lack of spatial awareness, his "unmooring from all things" (2012, 101), precludes him from experiencing anxiety at this point in the novel. Furthermore, for Ngai, "anxious subjectivity" is indicative of "knowledge-seeking subjects" and the "representation of anxiety as an anticipatory structure explicitly linked to a male subject's quest for interpretive agency" is "dependent on spatial grammar and vocabulary" (2005, 215). Again, Spitz's identity is based upon mediocrity— "He was their *typical*, he was their *most*, he was their *average*" (9). He seeks no knowledge that will make him stand out. Because a post-Black space no longer contains the "logics of racism" (Valluvan 2016, 2242), no knowledge about the dangers of racism can be gained from it. Spitz is thus not knowledge-seeking and will not experience "anxious subjectivity" or agency. Despite anxiety described as a threat that has no identifiable object, by applying Ngai's claims this is only true if signifiers of subaltern prejudice are removed from space. Subaltern groups, given knowledge as Ngai claims (2005, 215), will be able to recognize the object of anxiety and thus derive agency from it. In *Zone One* the reason anxiety would be useful to Spitz is because it would help him identify sources of threat and thus understand and safeguard himself and his surroundings better. If Spitz acknowledges and uses his Black identity he would mistrust *all* potential sources of danger that are present for Black people in American space and act upon them.

Spitz's enthnoracial identity, however, is not acknowledged at this point in the novel. Whitehead presents the farm as a post-Black space, ultimately proposing, despite any racial signifiers that may be present, that there is no danger from within the house. Yet, it is from this house that the destruction of the farm originates. It is Margie who snaps first, with Spitz admitting that she was the last person he would have suspected of losing

her composure first and if the other two residents had snapped he "had decided to save [her] if possible" (2012, 181). When Margie's breakdown causes the house to be invaded, Spitz's subjectivity immediately shifts: "His mechanism clicked and stuttered. Once again in a stranger's house" (2012, 182–83). Spitz recognizes the people in the farmhouse are unknowable to him and "he couldn't save these strangers any more than they could save him." Spitz questions "why these yokels build a house there when they know it's a flood zone, why do they keep rebuilding? … because this disaster is our home. I was born here" (183). When Spitz refers to the farmhouse as a "disaster" and states "I was born here," the farmhouse stands as a synecdoche of the United States. Spitz is conscious (albeit momentarily) of the true limits of post-Black discourse and the reality of race in the United States. Spitz's experiences as a Black man will always separate him from the White majority and, notwithstanding moments when African Americans feel safe and "beyond their race," the United States as a country is still struggling to overcome its racist foundations. The farmhouse is a testament to this.

As Spitz attempts to escape from the farmhouse he also contemplates "the forbidden thought"—choosing to "die" by submitting himself to the zombie horde, "a recommitment to annihilation" (255). Through his experience on the farm, he realizes for the first time he has another choice: to join the zombie swarm instead of remaining human. However, before he can fully process this option he is rescued by the military and taken to a safe camp where he is encouraged to join them as a "sweeper," steering him closer to his ultimate destination: New York City. Spitz, although driving himself towards autonomy, still allows himself to be removed from the farm situation without exerting any kind of opposition. Spitz chooses to return to passivity because "[American Eagle] are specialists. They will not let him perish" (185). Spitz's choice to remain under their protection (and control) renders his previous "forbidden thought" moot.

The farm incident momentarily rouses Spitz out of his impassivity when he realizes the anxiety that would typically be present in certain spaces for African Americans *still* exist and are *still* valid. Spitz's "spell of [post-Black] projection sputter[s]" and he fleetingly acknowledges that the farm is a stronghold "made of straw" (2012, 181). The reader is given the sliver of a suggestion that Spitz's experiences are shifting him toward a different identity position, one wherein he has more control.

2. Fear on the Bridge

Between the farm and New York another important affective event for the protagonist occurs on a highway bridge that pushes him further toward complete autonomy. The vignette on the bridge is central to *Zone One* because it is the event that overtly racializes Spitz for the first time. Chronologically, the story is told near the conclusion of the novel. However, in terms of narrative sequence, the story is conveyed at the half-way point of the novel, following a long passage of Spitz patrolling the now desolate streets of New

York. While patrolling, Spitz contemplates the pre-plague plans he had for his future, which had him ultimately fulfilling his dream of moving to Manhattan. Spitz concludes that the reason he never made it to the city when things were "normal" was because of fear, since the city required one to engage and fight for space on the sidewalk or joust for a vacant subway seat and he only "knew how to dogpaddle and that was it" (2012, 131). Now that he finally made it to the city it is devoid of the things he originally dreaded. Instead, as he patrols the streets he becomes "a connoisseur of the found poetry in the abandoned barricades" contemplating the choices people made to survive (134).

What connects this preamble to the bridge story are the issues of fear and survival that drive Spitz and the choices *he* needs to make to survive. After Spitz was rescued from the farm by the military and sent to "Camp Happy Acres" he applies for work as a "wrecker team" clearance operative (139). Spitz is assigned lookout duty, killing any zombie "skels" that approach or are trapped in the vehicles on the highway (2012, 139). Spitz's recollections of his time clearing highways appear therapeutic, giving him some sense of purpose having "been put forth, tested, amended, debugged over a lifetime of tiny trials and contests, evasions of dangers big and small, social, symbolic, and, since the plague, lethal" (143). Again, there is a postrace-based reading of this excerpt. Using Heneks's (2018) interpretation of Mark Spitz as a "Black everyman whose survival becomes allegorical for the lived experiences of Black men in the U.S. today," the "trials and contests" Spitz refers to could signify all forms of racism (every day and aberrational) that he faced prior to the "plague"/post-Black era—"that which would destroy him" (62). Now, if one includes Hurley's argument that zombies signify the painful racist history experienced by people of color, then what Spitz is metaphorically doing by shooting zombies is eradicating the issue of race to survive in the new post-Black world. This action of elimination and clearance fuels "the alchemy of reconstruction," which Spitz compares to the transcontinental railroad (143). The true proponents of post-Black/post-apocalyptic world are the ones that help to connect all of America together again— "a single Us" eradicating the division of the past, producing a successful "reconstruction" that the United States was unable to do before. Spitz viewpoint while doing this work suggests he has forgotten his realization on the farm about the true state of America, construing his work along the highway corridors as a "measurable progress, visible mileage into the new world" (141). However, when the incident on the bridge occurs, fear jolts him out of this amnesia.

Ahmed (2004) describes fear as something which "does not simply come from within and then move outwards toward objects and others" but rather "[it] works to secure the relationship between those bodies" (62–3). Ahmed is inferring that fear is formed through the specific reciprocal relationship between the subject and object of fear. She further argues that "fear involves relationships of proximity" and racialized fear involves "the repetition of stereotypes" (63). The entire bridge incident plays off Spitz's fear of

stereotypes. When Spitz's clearance unit is overrun by an opened truck trailer that contains a massive horde of zombies they become trapped on a bridge and are forced to jump off into the water below. All other members of his unit jump off into the water twenty feet below the bridge, but Spitz freezes: "Instinct should have plucked Mark Spitz from the bridge and dropped him into the current by now. But he did not move" (2012, 143). After the incident he informs his team members that the reason he did not jump was because he could not swim, for which they jokingly bestow him the nickname "Mark Spitz." However, Spitz claims the reason he did not jump was not out of fear of the water, but "because he knew he could not die" (148). The stereotype that reveals Spitz's racial identity in the novel—that he cannot swim—is the subliminal source of his fear and the true reason he does not jump from the bridge. Despite acknowledging he had "dependable comrades down there [in the water]" and "he knew a few strokes," Spitz instead chooses to face off against the overwhelming zombie horde that is descending upon him, "[leaping] onto the hood of [a] late-model neo-station wagon and … firing" (147).

Ahmed (2004) argues that fear creates fantasies which imagine "the Other as a danger not only to one's self as self, but to one's very life" (64). Ahmed's context applies to the majority of society using fear to justify violence (especially against minorities); thus, Ahmed views the use of this fear as negative. However, her proposal can be reinterpreted as positive when used by Black people and other minorities. Spitz (as a Black man) imagines he exists in and is fighting for a post-Black world. Spitz is given the option of jumping off the bridge and affirming the stereotype that "black people cannot swim" (2012, 231). This revelation will make Spitz vulnerable, marking him as Other and unequivocally confirming his "distinctions" as a Black man, proving the existence of his post-Black world false. Spitz's overwhelming fear of his team explicitly viewing him or treating him differently because of his Blackness is what drives him to opt for taking his chances against the zombies. Spitz's belief in himself as "mediocre" or "normal" will be destroyed if it is shown that he fits the stereotype of a Black person who cannot swim.

Ahmed (2004) explains how "vulnerability involves a particular kind of bodily relation to the world, in which openness itself is read as a site of potential danger, and as demanding evasive action" (69). For Spitz, exposing his Otherness and perceived stereotypical weaknesses as a Black man is the true source of potential danger to him, with his evasive action having him choose to turn and face the zombies. Ahmed continues that fear involves readings of "openness" as perilous, with the "openness of the body to the world" containing a feeling of danger which a body "[anticipates] *as a future pain or injury*" (69). The "future pain or injury" that endangers Spitz is the subjugation he expects from this exposure. Indeed, this is what happens when they mockingly name him Mark Spitz, a label that stays with him for the rest of his journey. Spitz's choice, based on emotion rather than cognition, to face the zombies over jumping off the bridge appears illogical. However, because this is the first time Spitz does something through his own

emotional volition and not based on American societal and cultural superstructures, he realizes making this choice exposes his Blackness as something special:

> He *was* a mediocre man. He *had* led a mediocre life exceptional only in the magnitude of its unexceptionality. Now the world was mediocre, rendering him perfect. (2012, 148; emphasis mine)

This is the moment in the novel when Spitz first fully fathoms the centrality of his racial identity to his subject position and agency. This newfound agency presents a shift from what occurred on the farm wherein absent anxiety prevented him from viewing any potential danger and making any decisions to act for his own self-interest. Here his fear—a fear enacted by his Blackness—gives him autonomy to make his own decision. This choice, albeit initially out of fear and desperation, sparks him to newfound life, "rendering him perfect" (148).

3. Willfulness in the City

The final space Spitz enters in *Zone One* is New York City. Whitehead uses Spitz's time in New York as the historical present of the novel from which Spitz recalls his past experiences. All this leads up to the novel's climax when the city's protective barriers collapse, and it is overrun by zombies. At the novel's close Spitz does not choose to be rescued (as he was on the farm), nor does he choose to fight (as he did on the bridge). Instead, Spitz walks into the zombie horde, with no indication that he will resist them. Throughout the novel living in the city is always presented as his ultimate life goal and destination. *Zone One*'s opening line is "He always wanted to live in New York" (2012, 3), and Whitehead describes Spitz's original passion for the city as emanating from visits he had to his uncle's apartment in New York when he was a child. For Spitz, the city originally stood as a symbol of self-actualization, a "magnificent contraption" tended to by "millions of people who "lived and sweated and toiled in it" (4). Spitz initially believes that by living in and contributing to the functioning of the city he will achieve complete self-fulfillment and throughout his journey toward New York this desire is consistently highlighted. In the farm vignette, when the group are discussing their plans once the crisis is over, Spitz states his plan is to "move to the city" (181). While his team opt to stay on the highway corridor, he chooses to move to "the Zone"—New York City (232). New York is promised as the first place to be restored and brought "back from the dead" (168), further asserting it as a "magnificent contraption" wherein Spitz can serve to make the city and himself bigger and better (4). Thus, upon Spitz's arrival at Zone One and throughout his journey to reach New York he still believes in the promise of the government to restore order back to how life was before the plague.

However, as one follows Spitz's movements through the city over the three days the story takes place, one becomes aware of his increasing ambivalence toward the space and the government's attempts to restore it to normal—a substitute term for the past, a

striving for "the unbroken idyll of life before" (65). As Spitz journeys across the city, he acknowledges that his previously held beliefs in returning the city to its former glory no longer hold true— "To think that there had been a time when such a thing meant something: the signifiers of one's position in the world" (131). When, near the end of the novel, Spitz reaches his uncle's apartment—a symbol that was the progenitor of his pre-plague aspirations—it is no longer the same building: "it had been replaced" and is now "alien and unnerving" (204). Spitz's past aspirational signifiers no longer functioning the same in the present. Instead, the present has now become "a series of intervals differentiated from each other only by the degree of dread they contained" (65). And so, instead of optimism Spitz now just feels dismay, concluding that no enlightenment awaits him in the city nor his uncle's New York apartment: "What did his uncle know now that he hadn't known before the cataclysm? … Nothing [he] hadn't already discovered in the wasteland" (226). All the past "wasteland" experiences that Spitz recalls as he moves through the city play an active role in altering his identity position.

Spitz's recollections of his past experiences across the United States while moving through the city allows him to fathom the futility of government reconstruction. Spitz becomes more attracted to the city space itself and its present state of abandonment, finding the potential for beauty and existence as it exists now and not how it existed in the past (132). He now focuses more on the potential of the space as a critique of the past, and his function as someone to "explain it all to the skeptical world after the end credits" (135). The city stands as a symbol of the wantonness of the past and the impossibility of it to return to the way things were. Spitz progressively begins to identify, not with the living, but with the dead, in particular the straggler zombies who do not act violently but instead find a nexus of association to a space and remain there, "inhabiting its perfect moment" and finally finding where they belong (158). Now when Spitz looks at the zombies as they overrun the city "he read[s] their inhuman scroll as an argument: I was here, I am here now, I have existed, I exist still. This is our town" (246). This potential form of new existence becomes the most viable option as he nears the end of his journey across the city space as "the death of the afterlife was not without its perks" because it spared him "an eternity reliving his mistakes and seeing their effects ripple, however briefly and uselessly through history" (227). And so, at the story's conclusion, this is what he chooses: to concede to the "forbidden thought" and join the "sea of the dead" (259).

Because Whitehead's writing seems to toe the line between critiquing post-Black ideology and disseminating it, the possible meanings behind Spitz's decision to submit himself to the zombie hoards at the end of the novel is ambiguous at best and confusing at worst. Heneks, for example, argues that Spitz stands as a symbol of the lived experiences of Black men in the US today, with American Phoenix as the mechanism of propaganda attempting to convince them they exist in a postrace world. However, throughout the novel the goal of American Phoenix is to return the world back to how it was before,

which, if we are to follow Heneks's argument, would imply a return to a world that concedes race as an inhibiting factor. Given the circumstances, does Spitz choose to become a zombie so that he can remain in a postrace world? Kimberly Fain (2015) claims *Zone One*'s conclusion suggests "the plague-free spaces in Manhattan … facilitate[s] a sustainable future for the entire human race" which "matter[s] far more than the shade of Black skin adorning the mediocre yet heroic face of Mark Spitz" (150). Therefore, by joining the zombie hoard and eventually being removed to achieve a "plague-free space," is Spitz rejecting postrace ideology? Furthermore, Hurley (2015) makes claim for the zombie as a symbol of racialized slavery, "depicting both the process of racialization and the failure to attempt to hide or repress the zombie's origins in racialized slavery" (318). Hurley then asserts Spitz's journey as running parallel to this comparation:

> Mark Spitz is originally Black before being resurfaced as White and then revealed to have been Black all along; his surface, like the zombie's, betrays both a history of whitening, of postracialization, and the failure of that history successfully to banish race from the visible surface. (321)

This would imply that Spitz's joining the zombies at the end of the novel is symbolic of him embracing his Blackness and the trauma of racialized slavery and thus acknowledging the importance of this history on his subject position and rejecting the idea of post-Blackness. Each of these critics extract a contrary implication from Spitz's final decision in the novel as it relates to post-Black ideology.

Zone One's ending is more a product of Whitehead's mindset at the time he authored the novel than an explicit critique of post-Blackness. In many interviews prior to 2016 he stressed the importance of his individual freedom as a writer over the expectations placed on him as an African American writer. Whitehead makes a claim for individual freedom and not having to "follow someone else's idea of how you write a novel or how you approach a subject" (in Baden 2010, 79). Moreover, Whitehead views his writing choices as no longer being beholden to African American writing styles of the past and now considers himself "just a writer trying to figure out his next book" (Spillman 2019, 73). There appears to be a certain level of willfulness in Whitehead's rhetoric, an ardent desire to choose his own path as a writer despite (or *to* spite) what others may argue he is expected or required to do. This can be connected to Spitz's character, with Whitehead showing a lot of concern with Spitz being able to make autonomous decisions based on his own individual experiences and not what others have told him to do. Whitehead wants Spitz's final choice *not only* to be read as a commentary on the failure of post-Blackness per se, *but also* a willingness for an individual character to choose his own path and make his own decisions. Spitz's journey, agency, and fate is informed by his race. Thus, it will be argued that Spitz's (and Whitehead's) willfulness is a reaction to Spitz's (supposedly unacknowledged) othering as a Black man.

In *Willful Subjects* (2014), Ahmed moves through various definitions of willfulness, beginning with the negative connotation of it as a "diagnosis of the failure [of a subject] to comply with those whose authority is given" and results in something that is "compromising; it compromises the capacity of a subject to survive" (1). Ahmed then shifts the understanding of willfulness to something more positive, as "persistence in the face of being brought down, where simply to 'keep going' or 'keep coming up' is to be stubborn and obstinate [with] mere persistence … an act of disobedience" (2). This implies a non-rational act since it could result in the loss of survival. Ahmed then defines "will" as being "part of a moral and affective landscape" and "the capacity to say or enact a 'no' to what has been given as instruction" (14–15). Ahmed finalises willfulness as a judgement that "tends to fall to those that are not compelled by the reasoning of others" and "what we do when we are judged as being *not*" (15). Furthermore, for Ahmed, willfulness can be deemed an affect because it presents itself as unreasoned, "not compelled by the reasoning of others," and thus irrational (15). According to Ahmed, this willfulness is brought about when the subject senses they are not "meeting the criteria for human" (15). These criteria are established by the rationality of the status quo that stems from the interpellated and hegemonic culture and history that dehumanizes people based on differences in their race, gender, physical ability, or sexuality (15). Hence, the experiences of subaltern people emotionally charge them to willfully push against established rationality despite the dangers it presents.

The willfulness that drives Mark Spitz's final choice is informed via all the past experiences he recalls while traversing through the city over the three days the story takes place. The incidents on the farm and the bridge are all pre-empted with realizations that what he has believed throughout his journey, that which directed him to the city, are not applicable to him and now identifies more with the dead than the living. Spitz no longer believes he meets the "criteria of human" as expected from American Phoenix, the people on the farm, his coworkers on the bridge. His missing anxiety prevented him from seeing true danger, his fear on the bridge pushed him to make a choice that was not rational but still saved him and induced in him an incredible sense of euphoria (2012, 250). Now as the city walls collapse around him and the zombies overrun the city he understands where he belongs, and it is his choice alone to make. He has a newfound willfulness that overpowers all his other emotions, recognizing "it was not the dead that passed through the barrier, but the wasteland itself" and he embraces it and slides inside (250). Spitz decides to join the dead because for him it is the only way to feel alive. This singular individual choice comes from *his* proficiencies alone. It is *his* lifelong "unrivaled mediocrity and the advantages this adaptation conferred in a mediocre world" (259) that has brought him to this.

4. What is Discovered in the Post-Black Wasteland?

Although it was previously argued that Spitz's mediocrity signifies a rejection of his Blackness, at the conclusion of the novel his mediocrity no longer blankets his racial identity but rather works with it to make an identity wholly his own. To recall Stewart and Palmer, it is within these affective wasteland "contact zone[s]" and "dilemmas" of the farm, bridge and city, that Spitz ultimately discovers his power to claim agency as a Black man (Stewart 2007, 3), affirming *his* "life, resistance, futurity, mobility, capacity, openness, and existence." (Palmer 2023, 122). This is what is learned in Whitehead's post-Black wasteland.

Indeed, Derek C. Maus (2019) also noted this, claiming that at the time *Zone One* was published Whitehead had reached a point in his writing in which he was willfully able to embed his Blackness "within an overarching 'weirdness' that [freed] him to write about race—and everything else—however he [saw] fit" and "by becoming ordinary in regard to the ostensible significance of his race, Whitehead [felt] at liberty to let his freak flag fly" (xiii). And so, just like Whitehead, Spitz's Blackness—that "which he was [keeping] at bay" — is a part of what has led him here now "everyone was drowning" and as he walks into the "sea of the dead" it is *his* choice, he decides "Fuck it, you have to learn how to swim sometime" (2012, 259).

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