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A Thesis for Honors in the English Major

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by

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Introduction: Zombies Throughout History

Modern culture has transformed the concept of a zombie to reflect the flaws of human nature and society. In particular, Ling Ma's novel, *Severance,* Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah's short story collection, *Friday Black*, and Colson Whitehead's novel, *Zone One,* use the zombie genre in literature as a way of exposing social, racial, and economic inequities in American society. Zombies function as an outlet of societal critique, as they have since they first became popular, and these three authors write contemporary literature with elements of the zombie genre to convey their messages in a similar fashion. Analysis of these texts reveals the way in which fantasy can be utilized as an effective vehicle to engage readers with social, racial, and economic disparities within society. Through specific close readings of passages within these works, the zombie figure and other classic zombie genre tropes, such as the settings of New York City or the shopping mall, are shown to be necessary elements for effective communication of the authors' critical arguments. In order to make direct societal critiques, fantasy elements become necessary to the work to provide a comfortable distance between the readers and these fictional worlds. The zombie apocalypse does not literally exist in our reality, but the societal critiques do. The purpose of utilizing elements of the zombie genre within literary fiction is to engage readers in discussion with social, racial, and economic topics that some audiences may not be willing to engage with otherwise.

It is important to keep in mind that not all texts in the zombie genre address the same issues, nor does all fictional literature utilize elements of the zombie genre and vice versa. For example, the novel and film adaptation, *World War Z,* fit into the zombie, horror, and fantasy genres but do not necessarily make satirical critiques of American capitalism like *Severance*, *Friday Black,* and *Zone One*. The comic and television series, *The Walking Dead*, might fit that

argument because it falls in the category of the zombie genre that creates some critical commentary on social and racial aspects of American society. Yet, the inclusion of other forms of media, such as movies, television shows, and graphic novels, broadens the scope of this thesis to an almost indefinite number of possible texts open to discussion. By keeping the focus narrow on these three texts, deeper analyses on specific concepts rather than the general categories of zombie media or horror novels can be accomplished.

To understand the purpose of utilizing the zombie genre in literature, an analyzation of the historical and social context is necessary. One critic, Mike Mariani, argues that in the zombie genre, "there's no longer any clear metaphor. While America may still suffer major social ills—economic inequality, police brutality, systemic racism, mass murder—zombies have been absorbed as entertainment that's completely independent from these dilemmas" (Mariani). However, *Severance*, *Friday Black*, and *Zone One* prove otherwise, at least as the zombie applies to modern literature. The zombie exists as a metaphor for current issues and struggles plaguing American society, including but not limited to "economic inequality, police brutality, systemic racism, mass murder." Zombies are still very much a form of societal critique, albeit a white-washed one as it has transferred from African-Haitian slave culture to American culture.

The zombie legend originated within the folklore of African slaves in Haiti and has since become modified through film and literature in American culture to become its recognizable version today. The first "zombies of the Haitian Voodoo religion were a more fractured representation of the anxieties of slavery, mixed as they were with occult trappings of sorcerers and necromancy" (Mariani). Over time, the fear-based reality and spirituality of African-Haitian slaves became an American entertainment genre. At first, it reflected American fears of slavery and Voodoo as seen in William Seabrook's 1929 novel, *The Magic Island*, where the author

sensationalized his interaction with African-Haitian slaves and brought to America the first literary zombie account. The first zombie film, the 1932 film *White Zombie,* is based on the novel and influenced the stigma of Voodoo or slave culture's association with evil against the white body, particularly of the white female. Since these early forms of the zombie genre, it has reflected widespread American fears of the "outsider" or unfamiliar cultures. The zombie "represents, responds to, and mystifies fear of slavery, collusion with it, and rebellion against it … This modern monster is a complex and polyvalent Other that points us to art and thought produced out of nightmarish aspects of modernity. In particular, this monster refers and responds to the nexus of capitalism, race, and religion" (McAlister). While this Americanized monster is a key figure in the fantasy, horror genre, it reflects some of the harshest realities of our world. Despite its origins in slave culture, the zombie has become a figure representative of American fears and serves as a metaphor for various societal and global ills.

Throughout its history, the zombie has portrayed a range of realistic fears and issues in a fantastical form. At one point, it reflected post-World War II fears of the Nazi regime and the potential for nuclear war in comics and films such as, *Creature With the Atom Brain*. In more recent times, fears of a pandemic stemming from global viruses such as Ebola, AIDS, and SARS have resulted in zombie media like the video game and movie series *Resident Evil* and the film *28 Days Later*. *The Walking Dead*, where the "post-apocalyptic world is dotted with tribes interested only in their own self-preservation" (Zarracina), reflects societal values produced by competitive capitalism in the American workforce, a theme that *Severance*, *Friday Black*, and *Zone One* address. The short story "Friday Black" transforms Black Friday, a holiday of consumerism, into the zombie apocalypse as a way of discussing social inequities, whereas *Severance* uses the apocalypse to question social structures and human nature as influenced by

societal values. *Zone One* and *Severance* deal with labor systems, nostalgia, and memory through harmless zombies and discussions of mental health. All of these topics – consumerism, capitalism, race, human nature, violence – are grounded in the reality of our world but utilize the necessary zombie elements in order to make those criticisms and discussions palatable to any audience.

In other circumstances, zombie media has served as a tool for a criticism of social and racial issues. George Romero's films are a prime example of this. His first zombie film revolutionized the zombie, bringing it into mainstream media while confronting racism in American society. His follow-up film, *Dawn of the Dead*, "recrystallized the genre as a potent form of social commentary – this time, shifting his target to late-stage American capitalism" (Zarracina) and questioning its impact on the morality of American people. The modern fear of a pandemic that wipes out humanity is often the premise of zombie narratives, and that may continue to be a common apocalypse theme given our current global health crisis with COVID-19. Like the 2003 outbreak of SARS that resulted in anti-Asian racism, COVID-19 has fueled the same kind of prejudiced racial violence, a discussion which Ling Ma points to in *Severance* with the zombie apocalypse disease, Shen Fever, named after its place of origin in Shenzhen, China. Using the zombie figure to make the same critique of racial disparities in America, particularly that of violence against the black body, "Friday Black" underscores normalized violence in a shopping mall representative of broader society. While *Severance* and *Friday Black* make their criticisms of racial disparities explicit, *Zone One* confronts race implicitly through considerations of society as a whole. Zombies in the fantasy genre have been used to portray American fears and used as critical commentary on American society through an easily digestible and accessible medium.

Since becoming a Hollywood entertainment factor taken from Haitian slave culture, zombies have served as a metaphor for American fears as a way of processing concerns through fantastical media in order to engage audiences in difficult or controversial subjects. Ling Ma's *Severance* uses a narration style of past and present storytelling to evaluate and discuss social, racial, and economic disparities in society. Specifically, Ma discusses capitalism and consumerism's impact on humanity, nostalgia, memory, and routine in human nature, and immigrant and outsourced labor systems. Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah's short story, "Friday Black," found in the collection of the same title makes a similar satirical critique. His zombie dystopia presents normalized violence and consumerism in a vicious light as a means of questioning and discussing social and racial ills in American society. Lastly, Colson Whitehead's *Zone One* features Manhattan as the epicenter of both the zombie apocalypse and the revival of civilization. Through his discussions on violence, mental health, labor systems, and nostalgia and memory, Whitehead facilitates a discussion on the realities of social and economic issues in American society. Analyzing and understanding the context of zombie history in relation to the societal critiques made in these three works of literary fiction reflects the necessity of utilizing fantasy through elements of the zombie genre to effectively engage readers in discussions with social, racial, and economic issues.

Chapter 1: *Severance* by Ling Ma

Ling Ma uses an apocalyptic setting for facilitating a discussion on racial, social, and economic inequities in American society, particularly in capitalist labor structures, in her novel *Severance* (2018). Through the protagonist and narrator, Candace, Ma shows the social and racial disparities within American society. Candace tells her story in the present as she navigates the apocalypse as a pregnant woman, and in flashbacks of her past as she works in New York City. Pre-apocalypse, Candace struggles to find familial connections after her parents die. As a child of Chinese immigrants, she also struggles to understand her role in a corporate setting where she facilitates Bible production through outsourced Asian factories for American corporations. Ling Ma criticizes labor structures created by capitalism through Candace's parents working in the U.S. and the factory workers in Shenzhen. In the present, Candace finds herself trapped in a cult-like group by the leader, Bob, who manages the group of survivors through religious principles and social pressures of conformity. Throughout the novel, the concepts of routine, memory, and nostalgia in human nature are questioned and explored through survivors and their social structures and infected members of society, the fevered.

Severance's zombies do not fit the stereotypical depictions of zombies; they are passive in the sense that they do not attack or eat the living. Ma borrows the concept of a zombie and adapts it into a non-violent form to suit her critical analysis of societal issues. The cause of the pandemic is Shen Fever, a disease born from fungal spores that zombifies the living by imprisoning them in nostalgic memories and habitual routines. Candace says, "Shen Fever being a disease of remembering, the fevered are trapped indefinitely in their memories. But what is the difference between the fevered and us?" (Ma 160). This is a question Ma explores throughout the novel. The fevered repeat habitual cycles over and over again until they physically cannot, and in

a way, humans are the same. We carry out daily tasks routinely and often find comfort in the familiar, much like the infected fevered. Ma wants us to question our routines and complacency, and the impact our nostalgia has on our life.

Ling Ma begins her novel, *Severance*, with a prologue in which she envisions a modern apocalypse through the eyes of corporate employees. In the following passage, she illuminates the brutality of human nature through the narrator's depiction of shooting guns after most of modern civilization has collapsed, and the influence of technology on the group's inner character:

> We Googled *how to shoot gun*, and when we tried, we were spooked by the recoil, by the salty smell and smoke, by the liturgical drama of the whole thing in the woods. But actually we loved to shoot them, the guns. We liked to shoot them wrong even, with a loose hand, the pitch forward and the pitch back. Under our judicious trigger fingers, beer bottles died, *Vogue* magazines died, Chia Pets died, oak saplings died, squirrels died, elk died. We feasted. (Ma 3)

Even as civilization collapses around them, Google remains long enough to support their efforts at survival. Eventually, the narrator says, "Google would not last long. Neither would the internet. Or any of the infrastructures" (Ma 4). While technology does not last forever, it outlives most human lives, and the first instinct of survivors is to utilize the internet for answers to their problems, including philosophical ones. Ma suggests that modern society is so intertwined with and reliant on technology that humans cannot completely function without it. Later, as Candace remains in New York City post-apocalypse, she continues to traverse the dead city and take pictures in order to maintain an internet blog, among other reasons. The internet and other innovations meant for making life easier, in the prologue, actually disrupt human independency

by spoon-feeding survivors information on building fires and shooting guns, and giving Candace a reason to remain in a dangerous, empty city longer than she should.

Ling Ma uses specific adjectives such as “liturgical” and “judicious” in order to convey aspects of the groups’ character and emphasize their search for purpose and meaning. The use of the word “liturgical” introduces the group with religious connotations, as if they find religious validation in the act of shooting guns or partaking in a violent action. Instead of fearing the dangers, they revel in the power of guns; they “liked to shoot [the guns] wrong” because the thrill of holding a weapon, correctly or incorrectly, gives them a feeling of control over life and death. The adjective “judicious” when describing their fingers on the triggers emphasizes this. They seem to equate controlling a life-threatening weapon and using it to cause harm to inanimate objects, plants, and animals with authority. Killing non-living things representative of the material world also hints towards the frustration and pain modern society experiences as a result of struggling for wealth and status. Shooting the “beer bottles” and “*Vogue* magazines” could be likened to destroying aspects of the material world that reflect internal struggles, such as drinking problems or body dysmorphia. The progression from killing inanimate objects to plants to larger animals seems to reflect an excitement for destruction, as if non-livings things are not sufficient enough. They have to graduate to killing living creatures in order to satisfy a growing urge for the thrill; they cannot stop at beer bottles but have to progress to bigger kills and higher risks in order to derive the same pleasure. The gradual increase in severity of destruction could also be interpreted as searching for meaning or feeling in a time of almost complete loneliness and collapse of human life and infrastructures. Participating in an aggressive act serves as an outlet of emotional release for acting out violent tendencies or seeking purpose in an empty world.

When they did not find what they were searching for in shooting things, the group again turns towards technology for answers. The narrator continues, "We Googled *is there a god*, clicked *I'm Feeling Lucky*, and were directed to a suicide hotline site" (Ma 4). The result of their internet search reflects their feelings of desperation and loneliness. Google read between the lines to see that they are not simply curious about religion or deities but have reached a level of hopelessness unfulfilled by adrenaline thrills like shooting guns. Their searches for meaning in a meaningless situation and the direction towards a suicide hotline also shows that people need to believe in something bigger than themselves, religious or otherwise, in order to feel a sense of purpose in living.

Using religious subtext in the prologue introduces the group of survivors as an apocalyptic cult with its leader, Bob, set on utilizing the Bible and religion as a foundation for control over his group and a way to fulfill their search for purpose. Candace explains, "The sheer density of information and misinformation at the End, encapsulated in news articles and message-board theories and clickbait traps that had propagated hysterically through retweets and shares, had effectively rendered us more ignorant, more helpless, more innocent in our stupidity" (Ma 31). In this setting of confusion and helplessness, Bob takes advantage of this group of survivors, turning them into a cult of his followers. Bob says, "We're *selected*. The fact that we're immune to something that took out most of the population, that's pretty special … I'm talking about divine selection" (Ma 31). He believes, and leads his followers to believe, that they are part of an ordained plan and have a duty to survive and restart civilization. When the survivors have lost everything, Bob uses religion and his own leadership to guide their group in order to fulfill their need for purpose. However, he takes advantage of their feelings of hopelessness and loss to help him achieve his own selfish goal driven by nostalgic desires.

Through Bob's narration, Ling Ma introduces the concept of zombies and explains mob mentality in a post-apocalyptic capitalist workforce. Bob says, "Let's think about the zombie narrative. It's not about a specific villain. One zombie can easily be killed, but a hundred zombies is another issue. Only amassed do they really pose a threat. This narrative, then, is not about any individual entity, per se, but about an abstract force: the force of the mob, of mob mentality" (Ma 29). The concept of a group massed together under one driving force explains the power or influence that "mob mentality" can have upon an individual. The portrayal of zombies grouping together in the apocalypse narrative critiques human desire for comfort and companionship, and blind faith facilitated through religious and social pressures. In this novel, the fevered do not amass together, but survivors do. Ling Ma seems to criticize this group of survivors for their willingness to abandon morals to prevent loneliness and gain purpose. As Kaitlin Phillips points out, "Ling Ma's debut novel, *Severance*, toggles between a novel about work, in which its protagonist carries out soul-sucking tasks to make more and more money (coerced by the structural requirements of capitalism), and a novel about a cult, in which its protagonist joins a group of zealots (coerced by the opportunity to live in a protective, if creepy, community)." Candace's work experiences in *Severance* show capitalism from the perspective of the so-called worker bees, the people that drive capitalism and consumerism, a concept which Bob's group also exemplifies.

Bob has expectations of his followers to follow his instructions and adhere to his rules in order to maintain membership within the group. Candace narrates a scene where their group has "stalked" or scavenged through a house for supplies. The house, however, is still occupied by fever victims and she explains Bob's reaction:

> He needed both hands to work the MI carbine. This is how Bob shot Mrs. Gower, Mr. Gower, and Gower Jr., one after the other, all in a row. Each sustained a brusque, merciful shot to the head. Like slumbering bears in a fairy tale, one by one they slumped over their dinner plates. Bob turned to me . . . He put his carbine in my hands. It was heavy, still warm, sticky as if he'd been eating candy all afternoon. (Ma 70)

Ma satirically contrasts death and violence with childlike innocence. Candace describes Bob's assault against the family in a mechanical fashion as if he no longer considers the fevered as human. At this point in the collapse of civilization, Bob has shed his own humanity, and to emphasize his immoral character Ma positions his heinous actions against the childish imagery. Using metaphor to liken "slumbering bears in a fairy tale" to the victims of Bob's massacre provides a powerful image of human nature destroying innocence. For Candace, the metaphor of murdering fairy tale characters makes her painfully aware of reality.

Living in New York City, she tried for as long as possible to ignore her circumstances and the collapse of society. When Bob kills the family, Candace sees the fairy tale fall apart, and then Bob forces her to play the role of killer herself. Ma positions the image of a weaponized machine against the sensations of "warm, sticky … candy," connecting violence to sweet confections. The contrast between a violent man and eating candy ironically highlights the grotesqueness of the adult in contrast to the sweetness of a child. In this situation, the corrupted adult, Bob, is innately violent, while Candace, somewhat trapped in the child-like belief that the world will return to normal, embodies the loss of innocence that she and others experienced through traumatizing ordeals as the civilized world ended. Additionally, Ma creates a zombie apocalypse in which the fevered are not dangerous at all and survivors have plenty of supplies to sustain themselves, begging the reader to question why Bob insists on their deaths. He claims the action is humane;

however, killing innocent, non-violent zombie-people only emphasizes Bob's own cruelty. He kills to kill and create excuses to justify it.

Bob's strict rule over the group reaches a destructive pinnacle when Candance and three other members of the group – Evan, Janelle, and Ashley – leave their camp to find Ashley's childhood home. As Candace and her friends discover, someone does not have to be exposed to the Shen Fever fungal spores in order to become fevered. On a trip to stalk her own house, Ashley becomes fevered after going through her room and trying on old clothes: "There was something unbearably private about this, watching her rehearse her sexuality, informed by the most obvious movies and women's magazines, with embarrassingly practiced fluency" (Ma 125). Ashley falls victim to the fever through rehearsed movements influenced by social standards she felt she needed to match in order to fit in. Ashley also disguises the need for her childhood home and nostalgic comfort as a mission to retrieve weed and consequently becomes a victim of Shen Fever and Bob's violence. Once it becomes clear that Ashley is fevered, Candace questions Evan: "Did you find the weed? I asked. Well, I found this. From his back pocket, Evan handed me a Ziploc bag. It was barely anything, just a tiny nugget riddled with twigs and seeds" (Ma 127). The reality of the bag of weed shows very clearly that Ashley's main intention had been to reach her family home, a place of safety and comfort.

Through Ashley, Ma criticizes both social standards for women and provides a new perspective on Shen Fever. The causes of the zombie virus in films and literature are usually unknown, but there is always something the characters can do to avoid becoming a zombie. Most of the time it involves avoiding a zombie bite, a biological transmission from one host to another. In *Severance,* Ma offers something different; people could become fevered through fungal spores, through repetition of habitual routines and or by getting lost in nostalgic memories. There

is no clear answer. Ma seems to create this uncertainty as a way of provoking the reader to wonder about the differences between reality and fictional zombies.

Ma uses a combination of elements from zombie fantasy and reality through Bob's leadership and group conformity to establish her critique of American societal structures as it reflects racial disparities and impacts mental health of group members. Bob's choice to kill both Ashley and Janelle exemplifies the extremity of his cruel nature and reflects the physical and emotional impact that his actions have on the rest of the group. He breaks his own rules: Janelle was not fevered, just protecting Ashley, yet Bob kills her. Killing both a fever victim and a healthy group member undermines any justification for murdering the fevered out of sympathy. It also raises issues of racial violence. While Janelle's race is not specifically defined, one critic, Eileen Ying, interprets her character and death as follows: "[R]ecall Candace's retort to the zombie analogy: *They don't do anything to us. If anything, we do more harm to them.* And then there's Janelle, the novel's only identifiably Black character, shot by her own comrades for defending the fevered Ashley. These details pass us by because they reflect the casually humanist, white supremacist logics that surround us like air, thick and ubiquitous" (Ying). The racial identity of the other survivors is unknown; however, the reader is only aware of Candace's, and possibly Janelle's, race and their sympathies for the fevered. For one to be murdered and the other to suffer alienation and imprisonment points to a racial disparity in their survivor group.

Severance may be ahead of its time both in its setting of a world pandemic and its discussion on racial disparities in the United States. Ma has created a world that parallels our own today where a global disease becomes associated with race. While Ma did not imagine the same kind of racism and race-based violence that our world currently experiences, she does create a

commentary on immigration and prejudice against minorities. In the wake these killings, Candace becomes even more of an outsider. Her sympathies for the fevered contrast Bob's belief that the fevered should be put down. As Ying says, "Candace is racialized through her implicit alignment with the fevered, and it is this *affiliative* Asianness — not the *filial* one she inherits from her parents — that ultimately alienates her from the survivors." The alienation Candace experiences before the apocalypse stems from her lack of attachment to family and culture, while the alienation she experiences during the apocalypse comes from differences in her morals, then her pregnancy explicitly and, perhaps, her race implicitly.

Ling Ma points to Candace's struggle with grief and trauma through events such as this and contrasts it to Evan in a way that shows alienation of the "other" in society. The losses of Ashley and Janelle have the greatest impact on Evan and Candace, but they deal with the trauma differently. Evan wants to overdose on Xanax, but instead chooses to unhappily conform to the group's social standards in order to survive. Candace, on the other hand, begins to realize her reality. In all the trauma she has experienced, she initially does not recognize the shock and fear even as she has physical reactions like shaking. She narrates:

> They thought we were in shock, I realized. They were treating us as if we were in shock. Then: We *were* in shock. Probably. This must be shock … I tried to observe this feeling of shock, to observe its difference, but in fact I couldn't detect any difference from all the other days that blurred together on this road trip. I couldn't point to any deviation from the routine, everyday feeling, which was nothing. I didn't feel anything. (Ma 142)

This traumatic event ultimately allows her to begin processing the emotional toll the end of the world has had on her. At the same time, her experience contrasts with Evan whose differing reaction to the traumatic event enlightens Candace to the dangers for her if she remains with their

group. Evan's response to the trauma is to succumb to order and group rules out of self-preservation. When the group reaches the Facility not long after Janelle and Ashley's deaths, Candace notices the social change Evan undergoes: "Cheers erupted from the group. I cast a dubious glance at Evan, but he was actually clapping, smiling with the rest of them . . . He continued clapping, his eyes straight forward, unblinking" (Ma 161). Even while he disagrees with Bob's decision to kill Ashley and Janelle, he maintains the appearance of conformity to group ideals and behaviors in order to survive. Bob claims that they are not living out the zombie apocalypse narrative, yet his own leadership over the group parallels commonalities in the zombie genre, such as mob mentality, and in civilized life, such as structured rules and routines. In the present apocalypse, Candace's struggle with fitting into the group of survivors highlights social and racial disparities in the context of modern American society.

In a comparison of Candace and Ashley, Ma allows for a discussion of human connections in relation to Shen Fever. Candace struggles to understand why, in a world full of the fevered, she has not succumbed to the same disease of nostalgia and routine. She wonders, "But what is the difference between the fevered and us? Because I remember too, I remember perfectly. My memories replay, unprompted, on repeat. And our days, like theirs, continue in an infinite loop" (Ma 160). Routine is necessary for health and sanity, but at what point does a routine become detrimental? What is the difference between the fevered's routines and Candace's routines? In concept, they are the same: a repetition of actions out of necessity. Candace finds a sense of purpose when she transitions from wandering the city blocks pretending to be a tourist to working in an office. Even as the apocalypse arrives and the city empties, Candace reverts to her wandering, imbued by the new purpose of maintaining the last remaining Internet blog. The difference between the fevered and Candace may be found in her lack of

connections. If Candace is compared to Ashley, for example, the familial and cultural connections differ entirely. After her parents have both passed, the only remaining family she has lives in China, a home life which she has not experienced since she was three years old. Her only connection remains to her boyfriend Jonathan, who does eventually leave her, and memories of her parents. Candace lacks both family and cultural identity. She repeats routines but they are not her routines. Ashley, however, has a strong nostalgic attachment to her family home. Nostalgia and familial attachments may not explicitly be the cause of Shen Fever, but Ma leaves room for the possibility.

Ma also raises questions from the stagnant nature of peoples' lives and their comfort in remaining with the familiar. Shen Fever deals with human nostalgia and the way our memories and memory formation impacts our daily lives and futures. Candace describes a conversation with her boyfriend, Jonathan: "I'm working on a novel about this family in small-town southern Illinois. It's inspired by my family. Well, we're all from there, generations and generations living in this same place. No one ever leaves" (Ma 136). Candace's family in China has also remained there for generations – her parents are the first to leave. What is it that ties people to specific places for their entire lives and for generations? It could be fear of the unknown – not knowing what the world has to offer outside of that space. It could be comfort or lack of desire to see, learn, be more than they are or feeling content in a stagnant life and not having a drive to improve their lives. There are few certainties in life, yet we seek routine every day and become uncomfortable when the routine breaks. Between Candace and Ashley, Ma allows for a discussion of human connections in relation to Shen Fever.

Ma uses Candace to show the natural desire in humanity for habitual routine through her jobless wandering in NYC pre-apocalypse and the habits stimulated by her newfound job. She

moves to the city after the death of mother and struggles to maintain healthy habits or find familial connection. Candace says, “The ghost was me. Walking around aimlessly, without anywhere to go, anything to do, I was just a specter haunting the scene … What I enjoyed, or at least what I felt compelled to keep doing, was the routine” (Ma 41). The perception of normalcy in everyday habits reflected through Candance’s compulsion to follow routine, even when she does not derive pleasure from it, is equivalent to the mindless behavior of zombies. Violent zombies have their singular goal to consume brains through aimless wandering. While they may not wander, the fevered have some compulsory need to complete a habitual task over and over again. For Candace, and for us, meandering through life parallels the life of a zombie: ghostly wandering through life until stumbling upon the right path. Other times, there is no clear purpose to do what we do. Candace works for a company, which profits from a business model with which she does not morally agree, for five years before she stops to consider why. She has a drive to repeat the same daily tasks without question or clear purpose, and the modern workforce of our world looks the same. In her article, “The Business of Survival,” Larissa Pham says:

> [E]conomic anxiety sets the scene for their lives, whether in the foreground or as a sinister background hum. Adrift in their careers, their relationships, or both, these millennial protagonists sleepwalk through life, shaken awake only by cataclysmic events outside of their control: a financial crisis, the illness of a parent, or, in the case of Ling Ma’s debut novel, *Severance*, a global outbreak of disease.

In Pham’s words, Candace sleepwalks through reality after her mother’s death and awakens after Shen Fever destroys the civilized world. Arguably, she continues to sleepwalk even further through the apocalypse with the survivor group until Ashley and Janelle’s deaths really awaken her to the danger and discomfort of her current reality. As Candace maintains comfortable yet

undesirable habits before and after the apocalypse, Ma shows a different kind of zombie: the American worker who thrives, trapped, in the bubbles of their comfort zones and repeats their habits in an endless cycle, like the mindless zombies of fiction. Ling Ma aims to show that the American corporate employee and, in a more generic sense, the average human, are zombies aimlessly wandering through routines and gravitating towards places of nostalgic comfort.

As a way of establishing a connection to her deceased parents, Candace rehearses her mother's routines and attempts to ground herself in Chinese traditions. On a visit to Hong Kong, Candace discovers a stall in a shopping district selling Spirit money and goods, making a connection between those goods and memories of her grandmother's spirituality. She explains, "Spirit money, yellow bills imprinted with gold foil, was tied with red string and shrink wrapped in thick stacks. When I lived in China, my grandmother used to burn it. Once broken down into ashes, she had explained, the money would transfer into the possession of our ancestral spirits … I thought of my mother and father, unhoused and hungry, against a backdrop of hellfire" (Ma 103). The Spirit money, paper symbolizing material goods to be burned by the living for the dead, represents the capitalization of sympathies and grievances for lost loved ones. It also presents the intriguing concept that the dead can still have products marketed towards them. Even in death, people believe that family members have desires for material items like "diamond necklaces and cell phones and Mercedes convertibles" (Ma 104). While the act of burning the paper objects for her parents is therapeutic in nature, it reflects a materialistic system where life and death revolve around products that do not necessarily have any deep or profound meaning. Candace continues by saying:

> I watched the last luxury images burn and extinguish into ash, entering some other, metaphysical realm where my parents feasted. As the fire subsided and the embers

> dimmed, I imagined them combing through the mountain of items, dumbstruck by the dizzying abundance. I imagined that it would be more than they would ever need, more than they knew what to do with, even in eternity. (Ma 106)

This entire statement features "I" statements from her perspective and imagination, showing that this spiritual act helps her to grieve more than it might impact her parents, whom she can no longer help in the physical world. But it shows her connections between memories and spirituality and gives her a new perception of the afterlife.

In one way, Candace purchasing items to burn for her parents to receive in the afterlife seems like a device borne of capitalism, to monetize death for those who are grieving or to take advantage of their grief by convincing them to purchase goods that have no physical value. On the other hand, it reflects the way Candace's view of the world and life versus death has changed. Now, she considers where and what her parents have become in their deaths and the impact her living actions have on their existence. It is also another way of considering the definition of death in the zombie genre, where the "living dead" hover ambiguously between the living world and our interpretations of what comes after. Candace's burning of the paper objects reflects a wider perspective of the capitalized zombie. One scholar, Steven Shaviro, says, "Whereas precapitalist societies tend to magnify and heroicize death, to drive grandeur from it, capitalism seeks, rather, to rationalize and normalize it, to turn it to economic account … Our society endeavors to transform death into value, but the zombies enact a radical refusal and destruction of value" (*Zombie Theory: A Reader*, Shaviro 8). From its origin, the zonbi was a figure of African Haitian slave culture, which has been twisted over years to form the popularized, Americanized version today. The zonbi was a figure representative of this culture's beliefs in afterlife. For it to take on a monetized version in a different society reflects a broader

issue of colonial imposition and disruption of culture. In her article on the cultural significance of zombies, Elizabeth McAlister writes, “zombie narratives and rituals interrogate the boundary between life and death, elucidate the complex relations between freedom and slavery, and highlight the overlap between capitalism and cannibalism” (*Zombie Theory: A Reader*, McAlister). The cultural figure becomes watered down and turned into a profitable product for sale. Zonbis can actually be purchased in Haiti today (McAlister). The monetized zonbi parallels the concept of Spirit money in *Severance* where a cultural belief transforms into a consumer product for the masses to indulge. Shaviro continues, “The life-in-death of the zombie is a nearly perfect allegory for the inner logic of capitalism, whether this be taken in the sense of the exploitation of living labor by dead labor, the deathlike regimentation of factories and other social spaces, or the artificial, externally driven stimulation of consumers” (Shaviro 8), pointing to the metaphorical use of zombies as a representation of life versus death. Candace’s parents are a form of zombie in that they have become the living dead in her memory and imagination of the afterlife. Candace has no strong connections to her family heritage or culture, which presents other issues of identity for her, but she still falls into the baited trap set by those who seek to gain from grief experienced by those who wish to believe in this particular form of death and afterlife. Ma uses Spirit money as a way of criticizing systems of capitalism and their destructive impact on cultural identity.

Candace desperately wants to reestablish a meaningful connection to her family after the loss of her parents. In addition to purchasing and burning Spirit money, she attempts to rehearse her mother’s routines through wearing her dresses, following her soup recipe, and reenacting her skin care regime. As previously stated, a comparison of Ashley and Candace shows that Candace suffers from a disconnection to nostalgia and family. Ashley rehearses her own femineity by

trying on her own clothes, whereas Candace tries to find her mother through her dresses. The death of her mother and unemployment makes her feel purposeless. By wearing her mother's old dresses, she tries to reestablish a connection with her. She says, "All I did that first summer in New York was wander through lower Manhattan, wearing my mother's eighties Contempo Casuals dresses" (Ma 35). She drifts through the city, seeking purpose and human connections by wearing her mother's dresses and having sexual relations with strangers, but it seems to leave her even more unfulfilled. Candace receives a box of her mother's old things, including dried shark fins and a recipe. In another concentrated effort to connect with her mother, Candace and her roommate host an eighties-themed party with shark fin soup as the main course. At the party, she even wears one of the dresses: "I navigated through the rooms in another of my mother's loose, billowy Contempo Casuals dresses, this one black with a white burnout Africana print" (Ma 46) in another attempt to fully embody her mother. However, her efforts do not turn out quite right. She explains, "The rest of us forced the soup down our throats … I wondered if I'd made it wrong" (Ma 52). Candace literally tries to revive her mother through recipes and dresses. By recreating the shark fin soup, she tries to bring to life something long gone, but realizes that it will never be possible, an insinuation that her mother cannot be revived either. Wearing her mother's dresses and recreating her mother's recipes do not fulfill the need for connection to her mother.

In a similar move to embody her mother's routines, Candace purchases skin care products. On the trip to Hong Kong, she goes through the shopping district and notes the fake designer products: "Nowhere else was there such an elaborate gradient between the real and the fake. Nowhere else did the boundaries of real and fake seem so porous" (Ma 100). It seems she is no longer talking about the products anymore but herself and the lack of belonging she feels to

one country or culture. The imitations blend in with the real. She tries to blend in during her visit to Hong Kong. Being born in China but raised in the U.S. raises issues of identity for her; she feels stuck between the culture she was born into and the culture she was raised in, but no matter if she is in the U.S. or in China, people look at her as an outsider. Especially after the deaths of both her parents, she loses any connection she had to that part of her identity. On the same trip, she says, "I remembered, in a sudden jolt of recall, that my mother had traveled to Hong Kong alone, one winter, when I was a teenager. The city was renowned among the Chinese-American communities for expert, cheap cosmetic procedures … I took out my credit card and paid for the cleanser, along with other products that completed the regime" (Ma 101). Candace directly equates the beauty regime, memories of her mother, and the city's reputation with purchasing a number of products in a moment that connects consumerism to identity and nostalgia. Through all of these efforts – the dresses, the soup, the skin care products – Candace grieves the loss of her parents, particularly her mother, and tries to understand her own identity.

During Candace's grieving process, she tries to reconnect with her mother and her family but uncovers residual guilt through memories of her parents. The guilt and burden her mother placed on her to become an accomplished person seems to drive Candace's motivation to continue working in New York City even after the collapse of society. In the article, "On Being a Person of Use," Amy R. Wong writes,

> Working until the end does not make Candace satisfied or victorious. To the contrary: as my students often remarked, Candace bothers us because of her *inscrutability* — and this, of course, gets very complicated given that she is Asian American and a woman. Why, they asked, does Candace work to the bitter end — and beyond, if she knows the history of racial capital? Why isn't she angrier, more guilty, less affectless, more . . . *human*?

> Bracketing for a moment the Asianness that inevitably marks Candace's inscrutability, I'll wager that Candace finds herself stuck.

Beyond being stuck, Candace constantly thinks of all the ways she feels she is wasting her life by not fulfilling her parents' dreams of her and being jobless when her parents worked for her to have a better life. It is possible Candace feels an undying obligation to her parents to continue working hard in the slim chance that the world repairs itself and returns to normal. Wong raises another issue of ambiguity in Candace's self-perceived identity. She is the daughter of Chinese immigrants yet works for a large corporation that takes advantage of outsourced Asian labor. It seems like should be more frustrated, but she realizes on a visit to a Shenzhen factory that her ability to speak the language is fractured. Her uncertainty in her own identity help to criticize the treatment of immigrants in American society.

Ma shows the social and economic disparities that immigrants to the U.S. experience through Candace and her mother. Candace's mother wishes for her daughter "to study hard, grow up, get a job" (Ma 186), which exemplifies the expectations parents, particularly those that have worked hard all their life to reach better opportunities, have of their children. Candace's mother emphasizes the immigrant experience and differences in gender. Candance explains that her mother's first American job was difficult to find due to "her lack of fluency with English and her lack of a work visa" (Ma 173). Her father studies at a university while her mother finds work assembling wigs: "It took thirty to forty hours to assemble an entire wig. Each wig paid eighty dollars in under-the-table cash" (Ma 173). Not only does the capitalist corporation take advantage of cheap labor by outsourcing to Asian countries, but it takes advantage of those people who have left their country for better opportunity and still find themselves employed in the same kind of cheap labor they might have done in their home country. While "Shen Fever

both naturalizes and magnifies racial difference" (Ying) through its origin in Chinese factories, Candace and her mother represent the alienated immigrants in U.S. culture, particularly women, that face higher expectations but often lower rewards for their labor. The capitalist system, therefore, faces racial and gender disparities in its' manufacturing methods abroad and its' at-home treatment of foreigners and their labor potential. Her mother says, "We didn't come to America so you could be homeless. We came for better opportunities, more opportunities. For you, for your father. And for you, I said, trying to complete her thoughts. She shook her head. No, not for me. For you. We brought you here to study hard, grow up, get a job, she continued. So you have no business being homeless" (Ma 186). Her mother's sacrifices for the benefit of Candace and her father reflects residual generational guilt. Candace has been conditioned to believe that she should achieve more and become greater than her family before her. In an effort to achieve this, she stays in New York City as long as she can because she clings to the last hopes her parents had for her.

By emphasizing the memories Candace has of her parents, Ma exemplifies the immigrant experience in American society and considers the impact outsourced production has on other countries. Candace's job as a Bible production coordinator for a firm that outsources inventory production to Asian factories for the cheaper labor costs represents the "capitalist power structures" that Ling Ma aims to critique. She said while writing the novel that "[i]t became clear that the apocalyptic story was really a meditation on work, of its routines and its conciliatory satisfactions in the age of globalism." This reflection on routines stimulated by American capitalism and economic strategy is abundant in flashbacks of Candace's pre-pandemic life. Ma points out the racial disparities in these systems through the outsourced Asian labor, Candace's

parents as they immigrated to the United States, and the shopping mall the survival group travels to during the apocalypse.

Ma creates a disease that originates from China – ironically in outsourced factories that cheaply produce goods for capitalist countries – and infects the entire world. But she uses this irony with intention. She details the origins and scientific conditions of Shen Fever: "The new strain of fungal spores had inadvertently developed within factory conditions of manufacturing areas, the SEZs in China, where spores fed off the highly specific mixture of chemicals" (Ma 210). Using "manufacturing areas, the SEZs in China" as the specific source of a zombie pandemic, points out issues of race in the capitalist system. Outsourcing production to distant countries to take advantage of cheap labor creates a system where "Shen Fever is not just an inevitable byproduct of global racial capitalism, but the productive, itinerant, and indeed infectious *germ* of racialized capital" (Ying). Ma writes that she was inspired by her own experiences in the working world and her "target was the larger system, the capitalist power structures that enabled all of this." Ma reflects her own lived experiences through Candace, showing that capitalism in the real world and the apocalypse disregards human life, and we are conditioned to accept it and partake in it. Specifically, "the reach of capitalism has ramped up to such an excruciating degree that almost everything has become a commodity" (Pham). If we were to consider our own world in comparison to the novel, we would see that we already live in a sort of modern-day apocalypse.

Ma uses the fevered in *Severance* as a reflection of the people we are today, as they repeat habitual cycles until they die. Ying describes her view of *Severance*'s apocalypse and what it says of human nature as it has been influenced by capitalism: "It's not just the presence of ethnically-Chinese subjects that terrorizes — the Asiatic mode of working and living lingers

even in the absence of Asiatics themselves." She points to the mindless work ethic exhibited by Asian workers fueled by a need to make a profit as a means of survival. Ying also points out Ma's societal critiques of racial disparities as a source of outsider fears. She writes, "*Severance*'s most trenchant critique, however, comes from linking the racialized fear of infection with transnational circuits of labor. … It's a disease, as Amy Wong writes, of global capital. Here, US demand for cheap manufacturing seems to activate the prospect of a distinctly Asian doomsday." Like today's fears of COVID-19 or SARS resulting in anti-Asian racism, *Severance*'s Shen Fever portrays a world in which the Asian laborer experiences exploitation for the system of capitalism. Diseases, in turn, create fears of those same exploited labor systems. For Candace specifically, she witnesses or relives her mother's struggles as a Chinese immigrant and feels the pressure to achieve success in order to validate her parents' sacrifices. She even witnesses the downfall of those outsourced labor structures through her job connections to factory workers in Shenzhen in the aftermath of Shen Fever. Fears of contagion from Asian countries becomes magnified by racial and economic disparities both abroad in those factories and at home in immigrant labor systems.

In a discussion between Candace and Jonathan, Ma criticizes the influence systems of capitalism have on the culture and work ethic of American workers. She criticizes the anxieties and pressures associated with following structured educational and career paths. Candace rants at Jonathan about her perception of the capitalist system: "You think it's possible to opt out of the system. No regular income, no health insurance … I used to admire this about you, how fervently you clung to your beliefs – I called it integrity –but five years of watching you live this way has changed me. In this world, money is freedom. Opting out is not a real choice" (Ma 206). She believes there is no alternative to being part of the greater system, or society. Candace likens

following the set structures and orders, such as keeping a job to have steady income, with the hope of a promising future as if she expects to maintain her parents' dreams that working hard results in happiness or freedom. As Ying points out, Ma creates a possible apocalypse that is born and bred through the systems of capitalism in a critique that suggests the corruption or inequalities creates the downfall of the entire system. Candace says, "To live in a city is to take part in and to propagate its impossible systems. To wake up. To go to work in the morning. It is also to take pleasure in those systems because, otherwise, who could repeat the same routines, year in, year out?" (Ma 290). The systems that creature structure to life also create the routines, like the routines of the fevered. Through the nature of Shen Fever, Ma criticizes those systems that began the habitual cycles.

Ma uses the setting of New York City, as many other apocalyptic genres do, because it is the best representation of the American dream as the epitome of economic freedom and opportunity at the same time that it reflects the corruption and inequality in those economic systems. The city itself has been transformed by the romanticized media interpretations, therefore, it has become the best possible setting to play out the possibilities of the end of the world. Just like New York City, the shopping mall is another classic trope found in the zombie genre. In Candace's journey through the apocalypse with the group of survivors, Bob leads them to a shopping mall. Like George Romero's *Dawn of the Dead*, the mall is the ultimate symbol of American capitalism and consumerism. Ling Ma pokes fun at these structures by making the mall the end goal of this group's journey: they travel across the country to reach one specific mall when they have passed by hundreds along the way. Part of the reason they travel to this location is influenced by the nostalgic value it holds for Bob; he is a partial owner. As New York City stereotypically represents the American dream and culture, the shopping mall serves a

similar purpose as the embodiment of capitalism and consumerism. When the group of survivors arrive at the Facility, Candace describes the group's reaction: "I glanced at everyone else. They had to be skeptical too, but no one wanted to be the first to express their doubts. It would break the mood to say, This is just a mall. Did we have to come all the way to the Midwest for this?" (Ma 162). Why does everyone follow him there? The trip to the Facility, which is just a regular shopping mall, gave them a purpose as somewhere to go. While the location is ordinary, journeying to the mall fulfilled the need for purpose that they searched desperately for in the beginning of the novel. Candace also notes, "As we walked on, it occurred to me that maybe the only reason we had come all the way out here was because Bob part-owned this place. Did he think owning this place still mattered?" (Ma 164). For Bob specifically, he still holds into sentimental and societal norms. He spent his childhood wandering through this particular mall. Like Ashley, Bob seeks a place of nostalgic value to find a sense of comfort and belonging, and like her, it ultimately leads him to becoming one of the fevered.

In the mall, Candace is imprisoned for her "safety" until she gives birth to her child. Candace's imprisonment again reflects her alienation from the group. Ma may be pointing to the alienation a pregnant woman might experience in any society with the obvious physical differences. The question of child labor and the status of immigrants also combine with Candace. Her alienation through her race and gender creates disparities for her that reflect wider societal issues. Before her escape, Candace says, "everyone knows how pregnancy messes up your sleep cycles" (Ma 279). She makes this comment almost sarcastically, but in reality, the baby has and will continue to disturb her routines. The baby gives her a purpose for surviving and finding a new home even after the world has ended. Without the baby, Candace has no other attachment; she has no family or friends left, and she has not had a definitive homeland her entire life.

Candace's pregnancy and connection to her mother reach a climax as she finally escapes her imprisonment in the mall and travels to Chicago. Her journey to Chicago is reminiscent of her mission to recreate her mother's routines. Jonathan, the father of her child, used to live in Chicago. Again, Candance tries to embody someone she used to have a connection with in order to find meaning and new routines. She appropriates Jonathan's memories of Chicago and makes them her own in order to give her baby a place to become attached to. In doing so, she does not escape the nostalgia and routines that trap most of the fevered. She finds a new life in them and understands that her baby will be more human with memories and an attachment to a definitive sense of home.

The ending of *Severance* could be seen as unhopeful; it provides another example of the continuous loops present not only in capitalist societies but in human nature as well. However, child labor – not necessarily the labor of birth but the labor in taking care of a child – can also be viewed from a different lens through the perspective of capitalism's labor structures. Wong analyzes this different form of labor as one free of capitalism in comparison to exploited labor systems. She argues, "The singular tether that remains at the end of the novel is umbilical: pregnant, Candace walks the deserted streets of Chicago … it seems important that her baby remains unborn, because reproductive labor — particularly in the form that it takes when the baby is still in the womb — is the only work in the novel that feels outside of capital." More than giving her motherhood, the pregnancy gives Candace another form of work to focus her efforts on. This new job will create routine for her to find comfort in, just as she has done before with her office job, the difference being that child labor functions outside of work labor. Wong continues, "This labor of one body unfolding the programming of another seems as automated and zombified as factory work or the proverbial office job, and yet it can be recalcitrant before

the capitalist ends that define reproductive labor — especially after the apocalypse." Under that interpretation, Ma's novel ends in a hopeful light, one in which the power of motherhood in its unpredictable nature redefines labor and routine.

Chapter 2: "Friday Black" by Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah

In his short story, "Friday Black" from the collection, *Friday Black* (2018), Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah critiques driving forces of the American economy and culture through a zombie-apocalypse portrayal of the shopping holiday, Black Friday. The shopping mall setting of this short story is familiar to the zombie genre. Adjei-Brenyah's mall is full of shoppers who have transformed into Black Friday zombies, obsessed with capturing the best sales deals and willing to kill to get their desired products. The normalized violence present in "Friday Black" reflects a disturbing American reality, yet the zombie-like shoppers are just unrealistic enough for the reader to put comfortable distance between themselves and this dystopian world. The elements of reality and fantasy work together to allow the audience to question the nature of economic-driven culture, where material goods have more value than human lives. Through the zombie-like behaviors and competitive nature of Black Friday shoppers, and normalized violence by mall employees and shoppers alike, "Friday Black" warns us of the vicious realities of consumerism culture.

Within the modern zombie genre, audiences recognize the shopping mall as a familiar setting where reality and fantasy come crashing together. Ling Ma's shopping mall, devoid of life until Candace's survivor group arrives, represents consumerism and materialism on the surface. It also projects, through Bob's insistence to reach the Facility and his subsequent Shen Fever infection, human desire to seek comfort and nostalgia in places, objects, and tasks. For Candace, the mall is a place of imprisonment; she spends most of her time there locked away or guarded for her difference in opinion from group leadership. Because of Candace's sympathies for the fevered and her disagreements, if not hatred, for Bob, her perspective of the mall as a prison could parallel the fevered's perspective of such a place. Nostalgic routines tie the fevered

and other versions of zombies to certain places, like shopping malls, for its significance in their memories.

The best example of a zombie apocalypse shopping mall used as a criticism of American capitalism and consumerism is found in George Romero's film, *Dawn of the Dead*. As survivors arrive at the mall, one woman asks, "Why do they [zombies] come here?" to which another character replies, "Some kind of instinct. Memory of what they used to do. This was an important place in their lives." In a sentiment reflective of Bob's need to journey to the Facility because of its prominence in his childhood memories, Romero's mall draws both the living and the dead, emphasizing the value American society places on symbols of consumerism. In analyzing this 1978 film, Steven Shaviro says:

> The zombies are not an exception to, but a positive expression of, consumerist desire … The infinite, insatiable hunger of the living dead is the complement of their openness to sympathetic participation, their compulsive, unregulated mimetic drive, and their limitless capacity for reiterated shock. The zombies mark the dead end or zero degree of capitalism's logic of endless consumption and ever-expanding accumulation, precisely because they embody this logic so literally and to such excess. (Shaviro 12)

Zombies make the perfect consumers. When they are not attempting to eat people, they wander the shopping aisles like "dazed but ecstatic shoppers" (Shaviro 12). The use of zombies in such a movie creates a fantasy horror version of reality where the only real difference between the living consumers and the dead consumers is what exactly they consume: products versus flesh. Like George Romero's films, *Friday Black* as a collection mixes reality with the absurd in order to make a digestible but critical commentary on American society.

In Adjei-Brenyah's fictional worlds, the familiar twists with the absurd in a manner that critiques society so obviously that if fantasy elements like the zombie were not employed the stories would project reality like a news broadcast. "Friday Black" uses elements of the zombie genre to discuss consumerism and capitalist structures, such as the shopping mall. This short story revolves around the infamous shopping holiday, Black Friday, and starts a satirical conversation regarding the consumers' innate lack of empathy for others and strong attachment to material goods. At one point, IceKing refers to the shoppers in the same way that Romero's characters might describe mindless zombies in the mall: "Most of the customers can't speak in real words; the Friday Black has already taken most of their minds. Still, so many of them are the same" (Adjei-Brenyah 107). Adjei-Brenyah uses the zombie figure to portray Black Friday shoppers as animalistic and unemotional, focused on the single goal of taking advantage of product discounts. The collection as a whole discusses issues surrounding race in America, including police brutality, shootings, and race-related violence and discrimination, which illuminates Adjei-Brenyah's choice to utilize the fantasy genre, especially the zombie-like consumers in "Friday Black." No other story features zombies. While the zombie figure has a fluidity that allows it to cover a variety of issues, connecting zombies to realistic Black Friday shoppers takes no stretch of the imagination. The consumers, in their hunt for the best deals, resemble zombies already.

Adjei-Brenyah leads the reader to question the reason for this zombie portrayal. As one review points out, it "riotously reimagines holiday shopping as the blood-spattered zombie movie you sometimes fear it could be in real life" ("Friday Black"). Zombies only exist in made-up worlds, which produces the feeling that the story in "Friday Black" would never happen in reality, so why use this comparison? In modern media, zombies symbolize a range of public

fears, reflecting social upheaval as it occurs. Historically, "[u]ntil the 1940s, zombies were largely a reflection of the fears of voodooism and blackness" (Crockett and Zarracina). Later, as culture transformed and new fears of world wars, nuclear radiation, and communism sparked in the American public, zombies became a reflection of social change and political fears. Particularly, the 1968 film *Night of the Living Dead* transformed the idea of the modern zombie as a movie that "teems with political undertones that address the nation's turbulent race relations" (Crockett and Zarracina). Considering the themes of racism and violence in modern America found in the same collection as "Friday Black," this connection does not appear to be coincidental. With *Dawn of the Dead*'s "consumers, aimlessly roaming through shops" (Crockett and Zarracina), the zombies reflect the changing American society as one focused on material and consumption. Similarly, Adjei-Brenyah takes this familiarly disturbing holiday and transforms it into one where zombies exist, and they trample children to get a coat. By analyzing the function of a zombie in popularized media and comparing it to the shoppers in "Friday Black," it becomes clear that Adjei-Brenyah seeks to inform his readers through the zombie metaphor of the same social and political fears that are widely present in the zombie genre.

For most of the stories in the collection, the commentary on racial violence and discrimination is clear; however, race is not explicitly discussed in "Friday Black," yet it has the same title as the entire collection. After describing the Black Friday violence, the narrator of this short story, IceKing, says, "It isn't always like this. This is the Black Weekend. Other times, if somebody dies, at least a clean-up crew comes with a tarp. Last year, the Friday Black took 129 people" (Adjei-Brenyah 108). In every other instance he refers to this weekend or shopping holiday as "Friday Black," but here he says, "Black Weekend." Intentionally omitting "Friday" from the phrase drastically changes the meaning from a critique solely on consumerism and

materialism to an argument on normalized, racial violence. IceKing also provides a death toll for the weekend, “129 people,” which subtly points to violence against Black Americans as being normalized by statistics. IceKing also says that even on weekends when the shopping holiday cannot be used to justify causalities, “at least a clean-up crew comes with a tarp,” suggesting that violence is still normalized outside of the mall.

The normalized violence portrayed through zombies in this short story resembles our current social environment on issues of police brutality. In the way that the early zombies of American entertainment served as representations of cultural fears, zombies have also been used in news media in a similar fashion. An article written on the 2012 “Miami Zombie,” explains the way media and state both capitalized on the popularized zombie figure in order to explain police violence: “Violent street crimes, even those hidden within the so-called zombie apocalypse, are a convenient and durable symbol that stirs middle-class social anxieties that are in many ways analogous to those brought on by the rising inequalities and precarity of late capitalism” (Linnemann, Wall & Green 333). The normalization of “Black Weekend” with its violence and victims reflects a criticism of a society capable of using the zombie figure in real cases to dehumanize and disregard unnecessary violence. The “zombification effectively depoliticizes the act of killing and obscures the ways in which violence secures bourgeois social order” (Linnemann, Wall & Green 346). The justification for violence ultimately emphasizes Adjei-Brenyah’s message throughout his collection of racial disparities in American society. While “Friday Black” does not explicitly point to racial violence, contextual evidence of the collection as a whole and analytical evidence of the cultural function of zombies shows that Adjei-Brenyah uses the zombie shoppers to critique normalized, racial violence in American society.

Black Friday, in reality, resembles a zombie apocalypse with the animalistic desire to claim goods, no matter who or what stands in the way. The short story opens like a zombie movie: “Ravenous humans howl. Our gate whines and rattles as they shake and pull, their grubby fingers like worms through the grating” (Adjei-Brenyah 104). The language of this sentence forces the reader to see the humans as animals; the author chooses to describe them howling, which is typically an action associated with wild animals, and he directly compares their fingers to worms. Because the reader views the shoppers as animals, it dehumanizes them, and allows the comparison to zombies to seem believable. However, that comparison makes the ensuing violence and chaos seem purely fictional as zombies do not exist, leading to the belief that these shoppers would never exist either. The narrator describes the onslaught of shoppers: “Have you ever seen people run from a fire or gunshots? It’s like that, with less fear and more hunger” (Adjei-Brenyah 106). Examples of life-threatening situations where running away would be a natural, fear-driven human instinct become dispelled as the fearless shoppers rush to satisfy their hunger for goods in a store. The goal of the Black Friday shopper is one in the same as a brains-hungry zombie: to consume other peoples’ lives in order to fulfill their cravings. By depicting the Black Friday shoppers as zombie-like, he shows the inhuman brutality of the consumer.

Consumer zombies go hand-in-hand with violence; one cannot exist without the other. One review makes the connection: “The title of the collection is an inversion of our most bloodthirsty, capitalistic annual ritual” (Orange). A zombie’s lack of empathy and remorse leads to their willingness to commit any crime in order to achieve their goal. In “Friday Black,” the shoppers “rush through the gate, clawing and stampeding. Pushing racks and bodies aside” (Adjei-Brenyah 106). For these shoppers, taking advantage of sales means life or death, and their acts of violence emphasize the absence of humanity on this shopping day. But is the violence

necessary to understanding the critique of consumerism? Imagine a zombie plotline like that of *The Walking Dead* without violence. The intrigue comes from the familiarity of the environment contrasted with the horror the viewer experiences witnessing the collapse of civilized life. Adjei-Brenyah once worked in a store during Black Friday and witnessed someone get trampled. In an interview, he wondered, "How did you decide to step on a human being to get a pair of jeans?" The violence is believable because it comes from the author's personal experience. In a review, one scholar said, "His violence is never gratuitous, his ghosts never too chain-rattling to believe" (Meyer). While the reader wants to ignore that the normalized violence in this short story exists in their own world, they cannot deny the obvious similarities. The violence he portrays in "Friday Black," epitomized in his curiosity of these occurrences in reality, leads to a too-familiar world with the only unreal aspect being the customers' zombie-like attributes.

The stereotypical zombie portrayal is one of violence, but *Severance*'s fevered are non-violent. When a zombie tries to kill and consume, the moral decision on killing them first becomes obvious: good versus bad, life versus death, kill or be killed. In *Severance*, the fevered do not cause harm and do not impact survivor resources, so killing them is more clearly wrong than killing a cannibalistic zombie. Ling Ma uses Candace and Evan's emotional distress over the deaths of Ashley and Janelle to show the moral injustice in the murders of fever victims. In contrast to this, the shopper-zombies of "Friday Black" are incredibly violent and willing to commit violent acts for material gain. The death of one of these shoppers has become so normal that mall employees just scoop up the dead bodies and put them in a pile. Where Ma's world a sense of morality or a good versus bad argument to violence still exists, Adjei-Brenyah removes the characters' sense of morality entirely. The murder and violence against family and strangers alike are considered an expected result of extreme shopping sales. What does it mean for the

society to say no difference exists between the death of a loved one versus the death of a stranger? Adjei-Brenyah depicts this selfish violence for material gain as a product of consumerism in an example more extreme than Ling Ma's where she critiques sentimental attachment and flaws of human nature.

The narrator's retelling of his Black Friday experience puts the violently selfish nature of the shoppers on display. The normalcy of the shopping holiday and the assurance that the narrator has the ability to survive through such a violent event becomes dismantled as he explains, "It's my fourth Black Friday. On my first, a man from Connecticut bit a hole into my tricep. His slobber hot" (Adjei-Brenyah 104). The phrase "a man from Connecticut" misleads in its familiarity since the shopper sounds like any normal guy, but it immediately falls apart as he attacks the narrator out of self-interest. Adjei-Brenyah further compares the shoppers to animals in this quote through the act of biting and the use of "slobber," which are characterized by dogs. Dehumanizing the shoppers allows the following violence to seem almost acceptable. The narrator describes a scene where "a woman in her thirties takes off her heel and smashes a child in the jaw with it just before he can grab the fleece" (Adjei-Brenyah 107). The violence of this shopper, whose age is notably provided, shows that even businesswomen have the same violent, animal tendencies within them that everyone possesses. The author's choice to have a middle-aged woman act violently stands out because she uses a heel as a weapon against a child. The heel hints to her career as a businesswoman, which could serve as a metaphor for corporate America literally smashing its views in the face of a young boy and leaving "a heel-size hole in his cheek" (Adjei-Brenyah 107) as a disfiguring reminder of their pursuit of self-interest. Beyond the text, the modern fear we have of each other that shows its prevalence during Black Friday reflects the same message found in *The Walking Dead*, where survivors of a zombie apocalypse

are “interested only in their own self-preservation; all other life is considered disposable” (Crockett and Zarracina). In this same manner, Black Friday shoppers bite and stab others for the chance to buy a jacket on sale. The portrayal of shoppers through the eyes of the narrator resembles society’s fear of one another, resulting in selfish actions to protect oneself.

The acts of violence from the shoppers culminate in Adjei-Brenyah’s message warning of the realities of consumer culture. The narrator wants to win the sales competition so he can give his mother a jacket as a present, which seems like an act of pure selflessness. However, it becomes clear that his intentions are misplaced as he says, “Soon I’ll have a five-hundred-dollar jacket as proof to my mother that I’ll love her forever” (Adjei-Brenyah 108). In an obvious statement, the narrator connects emotions to the price of a jacket in the same way that the zombie shoppers measure love and self-worth with material goods. Going on his break, the narrator describes the mall with “feet poking out of trash bins” in a setting where “Christmas is God” (Adjei-Brenyah 110). In other words, the gift-giving people associate with Christmas time holds more omnipotent power over the masses than religious figures and the self-sacrificing message that Christmas should carry. Most of the shoppers feel as though they cannot achieve certain social statuses without products, connecting goods to the success of others. They “haul their newly purchased happiness home. [While] there are the dead, everywhere” (Adjei-Brenyah 111). Not only do they believe their purchases will bring them happiness, but they ignore dead bodies as if they are furniture. The display of violence seems necessary to drive consumerism and brings about the question of whether Black Friday would be successful without the zombie-esque dedication to buying at all costs, literally and metaphorically.

The normalized violence and desensitization to violence from the mall employees radiates the same feeling: that the violence could exist normally in a dystopic world but never in

reality. Reading about the way an employee "tries to sweep [a trampled girl] onto the pallet jack so he can roll her to the section we've designated for bodies" (Adjei-Brenyah 106) creates a sense of disbelief that an incident of aggression and misplaced malice against a little girl could actually happen. But as Adjei-Brenyah's personal Black Friday experience attests, it does happen, and the consumeristic society lacks the compassion to care about the trampled child because of a great sale on coats. As readers, we do not want to believe it, but "Adjei-Brenyah turns everything inside out to expose our blood and guts and desire and greed and savings." The horrifying treatment of other human beings put so blatantly on display barely resembles the filtered news stories about Black Friday, where snippets of violence are drowned in a sea of other reports (Orange). "Friday Black" and its violent zombies reflect true realities, shocking the reader into wary acceptance of this short story as a possible version of our own world.

The shock experienced by readers towards the mall employees' desensitization to violence is exemplified in the narrator through the retelling of his break, where he describes the remains of the chaotic shopping event. IceKing notices that "[o]ur store has three bodies in the bodies section" (Adjei-Brenyah 108), as if the causalities are unavoidable statistics. A more gruesome interpretation appears through a closer examination of the word "section" in this sentence: the dead have been piled in their own section like any other product that the store sells. Not only does this emphasize the routine nature of stacking dead bodies like product boxes, but it shows that the employees have adjusted to their new reality and experience no remorse for the deaths of unlucky shoppers. Furthermore, IceKing notes that the mall "is bloody and broken, so I can tell it's been a great Black Friday" (Adjei-Brenyah 110). The physical state of the mall and the number of shopper deaths have become measures of the success of the holiday. The greedier consumers become, the more violent they are and the more products they buy, resulting in the

mall employees' recognition of sales success with the level of violence incurred. On his break, IceKing says, "I make it to the food court where the smell of food wafts over the stench of the freshly deceased like a muzzle on a rabid dog . . . I get two dollar-menu burgers, a small fry, and a drink from BurgerLand" (Adjei-Brenyah 111). He switches between describing a violent scene to discussing his meal order as if no difference between the two exists; the violence and death he notices are just as regular as the meal he orders. Again, Adjei-Brenyah likens the dead shoppers to animals when he uses the metaphor of the food smell acting like a muzzle, which serves the same dehumanizing function that his other comparisons do. It takes away from the human qualities of the shoppers, and in this case, makes the reader see the violence through the same desensitized lens as IceKing and other mall employees.

Adjei-Brenyah uses the desensitization IceKing and his coworkers experience as a tool to critique corporate consumerism. Throughout the short story, the death of shoppers results in nothing. As soon as the shoppers die, they become "the dead" or "bodies," never again referred to as people, which serves as yet another means of taking the shoppers' humanity away. Adjei-Brenyah states his opinion on corporations through the narrator: "'Black Friday is a special case; we are still a hub of customer care and interpersonal cohesiveness,' mall management said in a mall-wide memo. As if caring about people is something you can turn on and off" (Adjei-Brenyah 108). This could be his subtle way of expressing that companies only care about people when they are alive to buy products, and once they die, a company can no longer profit off of them, and therefore, no longer cares. An article points out that reading "Friday Black" is like taking a "step out of reality, into a brighter, crueler dimension, a place where our evils [are] not changed but clarified" (Meyer). The reality of this dystopic world becomes apparent through recognition of Black Friday as a tool used by corporations to increase profit, regardless of the

lives that may be impacted. Adjei-Brenyah signals to the reader that the violent and insensitive nature of his short story is one closely based on the world as he sees it.

In a somewhat similar way, *Severance* includes a company message that relays care for all employees while disregarding their overseas labor force. Candace describes a message from her company at the onset of Shen Fever. Her boss Michael says, "As our business relies on overseas suppliers, especially those in southern China, we are taking precautionary measures with this announcement of Shen Fever. We … will keep you abreast of new updates for keeping you safe" (Ma 18). Ling Ma makes the same satirical critique of the corporation that Adjei-Brenyah does. Ma criticizes the way that social anxieties create anti-Asian fears by naming the disease "Shen Fever" – unfortunately comparable to the "Chinese virus" – and the way that corporations like Spectra who utilize outsourced labor to Asian countries both enforce blame and project false compassion. The "crueler dimension" portrayed by Adjei-Brenyah and Ma criticizes corporate America through hypocritical company memos and speeches.

The desensitization to violent behavior in association with the connection between emotion and products reflects Adjei-Brenyah's most poignant critique on consumerism: materialism. A gruesome example of this appears when the narrator encounters a woman during his break who draws a smiley face on a tv box in blood. He learns that both her husband and daughter have died: "'She was weak. He was weak. I am strong,' the woman says as she pets the face on the box" (Adjei-Brenyah 112). Under the Friday Black spell, she felt that acquiring a "family time" television had more importance to her than the lives of her family. The irony is almost laughable. While this seems like an extreme instance of materialism, Adjei-Brenyah considers the implications of craving sales over caring about the wellbeing of family members. What happens when this woman wakes up the next day to realize that she purchased a new

television, but allowed her family to die in order to reach that achievement, and now the television no longer has a purpose? He critiques corporations through this woman as well. If the shopping holiday did not carry the same significance, then the woman's family never would have died over a sale on televisions. Because she has been influenced by the excitement created by corporations, she suffers from an emotional connection to material goods and a lack of remorse towards her involvement in the death of her family.

With such high emotional value placed on material goods comes a competitive violence amongst shoppers and mall employees. In the beginning of the short story, animalistic shoppers clamor for products as IceKing translates each of their desires. He explains:

> White foam drips from his mouth. I use my right foot to stomp his hand, and I feel his fingers crush beneath my boots. He howls, 'SleekPack. Son!' while licking his injured hand. I look him in his eyes, deep red around his lids, redder at the corners. I understand him perfectly. What he's saying is this: My son. Loves me most on Christmas. I have him holidays. Me and him. Wants the one thing. Only thing. His mother won't. On me. Need to feel like Father! (Adjei-Brenyah 106)

The shoppers often acquaint these material goods with emotional and familial connections, as well as work or social prowess. Understanding the desires and intentions of shoppers like this shows Adjei-Brenyah's discussion on issues of consumer culture, including the societal necessity for material to represent status and love. IceKing describes another animalistic zombie-shopper that "while beating his chest" says, "I'm the only one at work who doesn't have a Coalmeister! How can I be a senior advisor without? The only one!" (Adjei-Brenyah 107). The connection between physical appearance or goods and career status is reminiscent of some of *Severance*'s characters. Candace desperately wishes to be part of a work group she calls "The Art Girls, for

they were all inevitably girls—colt-legged, flaxen-haired, in their late twenties, possessors of discounted Miu Miu and Prada … —carried themselves like a rarefied breed, peacocking through the hallways in Fracas-scented flocks" (Ma 22). Both Adjei-Brenyah and Ma seem to wonder about the importance society places on appearance and material wealth, especially in order to achieve certain career statuses. The society that values conformity in appearance will also value particular physical attributes and products necessary to attain certain social statuses. In their greed and desire, these zombie-shoppers reflect social disparities and materialism.

Adjei-Brenyah criticizes the materialistic and competitive mentality engrained in consumer culture through the narrator's insensitive actions. IceKing recalls another sales competition where, "I made it my mission to beat her. And I did. I squashed her" (Adjei-Brenyah 110). The competition that consumerism culture creates results in an environment where each employee feels an intense desire to be able to say, "I'm the greatest goddamn salesman this store has ever seen and ever will see" (Adjei-Brenyah 111), like IceKing. Later, he encounters a fellow employee who tells him, "The coat isn't proof. She knows. You don't need to, bro" (Adjei-Brenyah 113). Duo tries to communicate that material goods lack the ability to convey love in the way IceKing imagines. After this encounter, he faces a decision between giving up the coat for his mother or letting a coworker get attacked. He chooses to save the coworker, but his intentions are unclear. He could have saved Angela because he realized human life is more important than material goods, or he saved her because if she were bitten, then she would be able to understand the shoppers like him, therefore, becoming his competition and threatening his livelihood. It would be more optimistic to believe he had a life-changing realization, but the last paragraph hints otherwise.

Through the ending, Adjei-Brenyah's critique on consumerism becomes clear through his emphasis on violence, normalized violence, and the competitive nature of producers and consumers. IceKing exemplifies this as he fails to learn from Duo's advice and continues fueling consumers' wants for the benefits of corporations. He says, "Some bodies fall and get up. Some bodies fall and stay down. They scream and hiss and claw and moan. I grab my reach and watch the blood-messed humans with money in their wallets and the Friday Black in their brains run toward me" (Adjei-Brenyah 114). In a way, it seems as though IceKing has been infected with a different strain of Friday Black; rather than kill for purchases, he would kill out of competitiveness to be the best. The sales provided by producers instigates the violence shoppers exude, in turn, normalizing this violence for the mall employees, and creating a competition-driven environment for both the shoppers and the employees.

The shoppers and IceKing are reflections of consumer reality where competition fuels violence. The dystopic world becomes distanced from the reader out of their choice to believe "we are not like them." But the cruelly competitive environment is exactly like our own, where compassion and sympathy result in getting trampled by zombie shoppers hunting for the best deals. Adjei-Brenyah wants his audience to consider what it means to place worth on consumerism and materialism, and the moral and ethical implications of doing so. As one reviewer puts it, "the dystopian future Adjei-Brenyah depicts … is bleakly futuristic only on its surface. At its center, each story – sharp as a knife – points to right now" (Orange). Choosing to believe aspects of this reality do not exist would be to ignore Adjei-Brenyah's main message completely: the immoral wrongness that breeds in materialistic worlds influenced by self-interested corporations could be the downfall of society as people kill each other over their obsessive compulsion to purchase goods.

By creating a world in which consumerism rules over people already overwhelmed by greed and competition, Adjei-Brenyah conveys to the readers a critique of American society. He portrays a frighteningly realistic dystopia where Black Friday shoppers have become so immersed in consumer culture that they lose their humanity, and for all intents and purposes, are zombies. Their fascination with and intense desire for taking advantage of sales prices to prove their love to family members or prove their social worth to friends and coworkers reflects a society that does not place worth on human lives. While the violence and nonchalance over dead bodies in “Friday Black” seems far removed from reality, Adjei-Brenyah proves that it already is our reality and leaves us wondering if we have become the zombies we fear.

Chapter 3: *Zone One* by Colson Whitehead

In his novel, *Zone One* (2011), Colson Whitehead uses the fantasy setting of a zombie apocalypse and military efforts to rebuild New York City to explore the realities of human nature and American society. In this world, the military regime known as the American Phoenix tries to reestablish Manhattan, or Zone One, as a center of rebirth for human civilization. The protagonist, Mark Spitz, excels in his averageness and finds his mediocracy a blessing in the apocalypse. He is one of three members of a sweeper unit tasked by the military with clearing non-violent zombies known as stragglers and the occasional rabid, flesh-eating zombies, or skels, out of buildings in Manhattan with the ultimate goal of cleaning up Zone One for survivors to move back in. Similar to Candace's style of narration in *Severance*, Mark Spitz's narrative storytelling details his present-day experience over the course of three days in the apocalypse and in his flashbacks of the past where the reader gets insight into his stories and traumas. Through him, Whitehead discusses violence, mental health, labor structures, race, and nostalgia as a way of considering flaws of human nature and creating critical commentary on the realities of social, economic, and racial disparities in American society.

Elements of race in this apocalypse combine with issues of normalized violence in a similar manner to *Severance* and *Friday Black*. Where Adjei-Brenyah points to normalized violence against the black body through the zombie apocalypse shopping spree, Whitehead's discussion of race is implicit through a few comments made by Mark Spitz about his identity. Whitehead also explores the nature of violence against non-violent, non-competitive beings, the stragglers, like Ling Ma's fever victims. Why kill someone or something that causes no harm to you, or why act violently when there is a non-violent solution? Not so common in the zombie genre is Whitehead's explicit discussion of mental health during the apocalypse. He uses the

acronym PASD, pronounced “past” as a play on words, to capture all the symptoms survivors experience from trauma as a result of the apocalypse. His discussion on mental health continues throughout the novel and fits into different scenarios to express outlets that survivors use to cope, including killing stragglers.

Whitehead both utilizes tropes of the zombie genre and diverges from them as way of incorporating fantasy elements into a real world setting to make his criticisms. The first element he introduces is in the setting: a common apocalypse trope, New York City. Ling Ma’s *Severance* also uses the city as a representation of capitalism, consumerism, and the American dream. Whitehead’s New York City similarly reflects its real-world attributes, such as gentrification and wealth disparities. While Candace’s city becomes devoid of life in the apocalypse, Mark Spitz’s city becomes a battle ground between the living and dead.

The novel is set in the city to represent and reflect upon various issues in American society. Candace and Mark Spitz begin their narrations with very similar lines. Mark Spitz says, “He always wanted to live in New York” (Whitehead 3), and Candance says, “It made me wistful for the illusion of New York more than for its actuality” (Ma 9). Both novels begin with the introduction of New York as the setting for pre- and post-zombie apocalypse because its reputation as a place bordering reality and fantasy functions in the same way that utilizing zombies represents realistic societal issues. No one wants to believe that the place of their dreams, New York City or America, could possibly have flaws. But there are, in fact, many underlying social, economic, and racial issues once the fantasy elements are removed.
Mark Spitz considers its deceptive nature:

> Behind the façades their insides were butchered, reconfigured, rewired according to the next era’s new theories of utility. Class six into studio honeycomb, sweatshop killing

> floor into cordoned cubicle mill. In every neighborhood the imperfect in their fashion awaited the wrecking ball and their bones were melted down to help their replacements surpass them, steel into steel. The new buildings in wave upon wave drew themselves out of rubble, shaking off the past like immigrants. The addresses remained the same and so did the flawed philosophies. It wasn't anyplace else. It was New York City. (Whitehead 6)

The destruction of older buildings to make room for new ones touches on similar ideas in *Severance* where new technologies and younger people or firms overpower the old ones with the expectation of accepting it as society's advancement. Whitehead addresses gentrification in the city with "shaking off the past like immigrants," which points to economic disparities as a broader issue in society. One article points to the function of gentrification before and after the apocalypse being one in the same: "Whitehead also maintains an overarching force of social critique, perhaps most evidently in the continuing theme of gentrification … Whitehead undergirds this illusion with the reality of gentrification and the question of who it pushes out" (Fuleihan). Whether it is the zombies or the economically underprivileged, forms of leadership continue to ignore the populations deemed less valuable in favor of others. New York City even represents the American dream as the first city immigrants came through when entering the US. At the same time, the perfect dream is part of the "illusion" of New York, a concept Candace also discussions. Even after the illusion is broken through issues of class disparities and gentrification, Mark Spitz and Candace still find themselves enamored and attached to the city because of the nostalgic value it holds in their memories. Ma and Whitehead show both its illusions and realities for what they are to present New York City as a place that holds more power through its symbolic nature than its realistic characteristics. This city is a real-life example

of the ways in which nostalgia and fantasy override the harsh reality, precisely the reason these authors choose it as the setting for the end of the world apocalypse.

Zone One begins with Mark Spitz's childhood experiences of family vacations to visit his uncle in New York City to explain his strong attachment to it as an adult. It says, "He always wanted to live in New York. His Uncle Lloyd lived downtown on Lafayette, and in the long stretches between visits he daydreamed about living in his apartment" (Whitehead 3). For Mark Spitz, Uncle Lloyd's apartment holds nostalgic value after his family's repeated routine visits. He continues, saying, "When his unit finally started sweeping beyond the wall–whenever that was–he knew he had to visit Uncle Lloyd's apartment … He hadn't seen his uncle's name on any of the survivor rolls and prayed against a reunion" (Whitehead 8). While the apartment functions as a beacon of childhood happiness that he continues to seek during the apocalypse, finding his uncle would disturb those comfortable memories. Not knowing what happened to his uncle preserves the nostalgic value of the apartment and those family vacations. Mark Spitz continues by describing trips to his uncle's apartment as "terrific and rote, early tutelage in the recursive nature of human experience" (Whitehead 5). As depressing as his view of his childhood seems, it makes Uncle Lloyd's apartment appear as a bright spot.

His uncle with the bachelor pad in Manhattan appears on the surface to be an exciting life with lots of variety, but even the variations begin to take on similarities. Uncle Lloyd always had a different girlfriend when Mark Spitz visited. However, the variety in the different girlfriends becomes part of the routine. He says he watched monster movies at his uncle's and the girlfriends "still standing at the credit roll made it through by dint of an obscure element in their character. 'I can't stand these scary stories,' the girlfriends said before returning to the grown-ups, attempting an auntly emanation as if they might be the first of their number promoted to that

office" (Whitehead 5). By making the word "girlfriends" plural, Whitehead signals that even while the person may be different, they still have elements of the same personalities. Also, through his uncle, Mark Spitz gets the impression that relationships are analogous with office jobs. He uses the phrase, "promoted to that office," likening routine to both personal and corporate life. This could be a subtle critique on corporations and corporate life in New York City, hinting to the audience that business invades every aspect of life including relationships. One critic, Alix Ohlin, observes that the "impulse to escape is utterly absent from these pages, presumably because New York City is still, for Mark Spitz as for Whitehead, the center of the world, and the place he always wanted to live. After all, New York is never what we dreamed it was going to be when we were young, and the zombie apocalypse is just another teacher of that hard lesson." Even in the real world, New York City is a place of nostalgia and a hope that childhood dreams can be realized in actuality. Mark Spitz, and maybe Whitehead as well, like Candace are trapped by the city's illusions that formed through childhood experiences.

In the context of his other childhood memories, Uncle Lloyd's apartment seems the most appealing for Mark Spitz to reminisce on. He says, "His parents were holdouts in an age of digital multiplicity, raking the soil in lonesome areas of resistance: a coffee machine that didn't tell time, dictionaries made out of paper, a camera that only took pictures" (Whitehead 3). He describes his parents' own version of habitual routines, although, in this case, they refuse the improvements of technology, stuck in the past or stuck in familiar comfort. His parents' inadaptability to the little technologies in their lives contrasts Ling Ma's prologue where technology serves as an inhibition against understanding the truth of Shen Fever and a hindrance to survivors after civilization has collapsed. Whitehead chooses to begin his novel with Mark Spitz's nostalgia for routine vacations to New York and his parents' disinterest or distaste for

adapting to improved technologies. Ma argues in the beginning of her novel that dependency on the past is a flaw of human nature, while Whitehead argues that dependency on comfortable routine is a flaw.

Mark Spitz's narration as he makes connections between the past and present shows Whitehead's discussion of nostalgia and memory as an influence on the perception of human experience. For Mark Spitz, his childhood memory becomes intertwined with a traumatizing apocalypse event, showing the impact of memories and the way language characterizes people and zombies as animals to normalize violence. As Mark Spitz retells his experience on Last Night, the end of normal civilization and the beginning of the zombie apocalypse, he connects it to a childhood memory of horror and embarrassment:

> When he was six, he had walked in on his mother giving his father a blow job. A public-television program about the precariousness of life in the Serengeti, glimpsed in passing, had introduced him to dread, and it had been eating at him the previous few nights. Bad dreams. The hyenas and their keening … It was forbidden, but he decided to visit his parents. He padded down the hall, past the green eye of the carbon-monoxide detector, that ever vigilant protector against invisible evil. (Whitehead 87)

Like Adjei-Brenyah, Whitehead makes a connection between animals, in this case, hyenas, and zombies; he incorporates hyenas on the nature television show with the memory of parents as an intentional means of introducing the concept of people as animals. By intermingling these two concepts, nature show and sex act, Whitehead creates the sense that this moment can be read through the lens of a nature show narration. Mark Spitz describes his six-year-old perspective walking down the dark hall to his parents' room "past the green eye of the carbon-monoxide detector," which puts the reader into the shoes of a child and the way their view of the world is

influenced by their environment, and it strengthens the image of Mark Spitz's house as a zombie apocalypse equivalent to the "precariousness of life in the Serengeti." Mark Spitz looks back on this memory of his lost childhood innocence and sees it through the clouded lens of tragic apocalypse life where zombies exist even though the original incident never involved any kind of violence or death. As a child, he equated walking through the dark house and witnessing the sex act to the dangerous life that animals lived on television. Now, the memory is corrupted by the present, and conversely, the present is corrupted by the past to show that he equates life in the apocalypse to life as a hyena in the wild. Mark Spitz continues describing this memory:

> He opened the door to the master bedroom and there she was, gobbling up his father. His father ceased his unsettling growls and shouted for his son to leave … It was, naturally, to that night his thoughts fled when on his return from Atlantic City he opened the door of his parents' bedroom and witnessed his mother's grisly ministrations to his father. She was hunched over him, gnawing away with ecstatic fervor on a flap of his intestine, which, in the crepuscular flicker of the television, adopted a phallic aspect. He thought immediately of when he was six, not only because of that tendency of the human mind, in periods of duress, to seek refuge in more peaceful times, such as a childhood experience, as a barricade against horror. That was the start of his Last Night story. Everybody had one. (Whitehead 87)

Whitehead uses language that characterizes both a sexual act and two people as animalistic, such as "gobbling," "growls," "grisly," and "gnawing." Particularly the words beginning with "g" are used in a stylistic choice of repetition to emphasis the animalistic actions of the parents. These words also serve a fluid purpose to alternatively describe sex and violence to show the way in which Mark Spitz makes the connection between the childhood memory witnessing an

animalistic act of sex with “gobbling” and “growls” to the horrific scene of violence, so gruesome it could only be equal to the violence of hyenas on television. Whitehead even reminds the audience of the initial reason Mark Spitz has to interrupt his parents (because he was frightened by the hyena program) by saying in the same sentence that describes his mother eating his father’s intestines that there was a “flicker of the television,” as if both the childhood memory with the hyena program flickering in his mind keeping him awake is one in the same with his zombified mother eating his father, likely with the same “fervor” that a hyena might enjoy a meal. By characterizing people and the zombies as animals, Whitehead achieves a similar mission as Adjei-Brenyah in *Friday Black*: animalistic language portrays people or zombies as animals, therefore, desensitizing and normalizing violence against and enacted by those people or zombies. The violence becomes normalized both for the audience and Mark Spitz as he equates sex as a normal human experience with the cannibal-like actions of a zombie. Dreams and nostalgic flashbacks of happy and traumatizing events are recurring for Mark Spitz. This provides an early example in the novel of the way he mixes the past and present together through his memories and narration style in a more jumbled manner than Candace in *Severance*.

Mark Spitz’s dreams function as a melting pot of his memories and nostalgia of the past as they twist with disturbing elements of reality in the zombie apocalypse. At one point, he dreams of a memory from his school-age days, but everyone has the appearance of a zombie. He explains the jumbled nature of his memories: “Skull faces had replaced human faces in his mind’s population, tight over the bone, staring without mercy, incisors out front” (Whitehead 156). Adjei-Brenyah and Ma use the zombie figure to portray our reality in a fantastical representation. Whitehead does the same in this moment as Mark Spitz literally envisions humans as zombies, emphasizing his fear that everyone in reality is already a zombie, whether

through the violence of shopper-zombies and skels or the nostalgic routine of the fevered and stragglers.

In the present, Mark Spitz struggles with the human qualities that the zombies still possess by acknowledging both their human and non-human characteristics. Whitehead distinguishes different breeds of zombie: stragglers and skels. Skels, a nickname derivative of skeletons, are the brain-eating creatures widely depicted in the zombie genre. The military has almost entirely cleared Zone One of these violent zombies, leaving Mark Spitz and the sweeper units to dispose of the remaining stragglers, a gruesome task that at one point involves throwing bodies down stairwells or out high apartment building windows. Using a variety of zombies allows for a consideration in the necessity of killing the non-violent stragglers. Mark Spitz describes one straggler as follows: "So she haunts it, Room 1410. Relieved of care and worry, the stragglers lived eternally and undying in their personal heavens" (Whitehead 197). This quote likens the stragglers to ghosts, which by definition are invisible and usually harmless, attached to physical things or places from when they were alive. Stragglers, like ghosts or the fevered, essentially do the same thing. They do not cause harm, they just re-enact their jobs or tasks that they used to do in life, or they remain in places of familiarity, often a place of work. The phrase "personal heavens" seems satirical because remaining trapped in cycles of repetition seems like a personal hell. However, the term "heaven" likening the stragglers to the term "ghost" and toys with the idea of afterlife. The zombies are not alive, and they are not dead, so they exist in an ambiguous purgatory. Mark Spitz's sweeper unit comes across one such straggler that hovers between life and death in a party supply store dressed in a gorilla costume standing attentively at a helium tank used to refill balloons. In this passage, he ponders the stragglers' attachment to certain places: "He went looking for the creature's ID. The general theory contended that

stragglers haunted what they knew. The where was obvious: You were standing in it. But the why was always somewhere else" (Whitehead 64). By referring to the straggler as a "creature," he effectively dehumanizes it, and the gorilla suit artificially points back towards his traumatic association between animalistic behavior and violence with humanity. The ghost language is also reiterated by describing stragglers as "haunting" their particular places of memory. Whitehead uses the terms "ghost" and "heaven" as a way of engaging the reader with questions of afterlife in a setting of such uncertainty and when the lines of life and death become so unclear. At one point, he says, "The death of the afterlife was not without its perks, however, sparing Mark Spitz the prospect of an eternity reliving his mistakes and seeing their effects ripple, however briefly and uselessly, through history" (Whitehead 282). The existence of the living dead, like Candace's deceased parents remaining alive in her memory, disturbs previously held beliefs of what it means to be dead and what exactly happens in the afterlife. Similar to *Severance*, *Zone One* establishes the nature of stragglers as harmless ghosts of habit trapped in nostalgia. The connection between stragglers and the fevered is uncanny: they repeat habitual loops from when they were alive and remain in familiar places until they rot away, or someone kills them. Through a comparison of the stragglers and the fevered, it becomes clear that Whitehead makes the same critique as Ling Ma about the need for repetition and consistency in human life. They both ask with no answer to give: at what point is routine detrimental to living? One reviewer analyzes Mark Spitz's uncertainty towards the stragglers as a distaste for their obvious attachment to material goods, like the shopper-zombies Adjei-Brenyah criticizes. She says, "In the context of this novel, the United States of America would be responsible for establishing standards of mediocracy that are, in the view of the main character, stemming from the materialist culture of a capitalist society. Materialism is scrutinized overwhelmingly by the main

character who appears to be obsessed over this pathetic and pitiful way of living" (Lyon). In considering the nature of the fevered, stragglers, and shopper-zombies, it becomes clear that these authors also aim to critique materialism brought on by cultural values and economic structures of American society. Like Ma and Adjei-Brenyah, Whitehead uses zombies to explore the function of memory in human nature and the fine line between life and death and their strong nostalgic attachment to material.

In a circumstance where Mark Spitz's sweeper unit kills a group of skels, guilt in the aftermath of violence becomes clear as Mark Spitz struggles to define the skels as either animalistic or human. In their state of living dead violence, the skels resemble cannibalistic animals, but once they die, the bodies look human, so there is no distinction between a dead skel and a dead person. Through this ambiguity, Mark Spitz's guilt arises and memories of real people he knew become blurred with reality. While clearing office buildings, he accidentally comes into contact with a group of Human Resource ladies turned zombie, giving them identifying names such as "Marge," based off a popular hairstyle. The gruesome task of clearing bodies from buildings causes Mark Spitz discomfort because he considers their appearance in relation to their life before becoming a zombie. In one passage, a skel's facial features remind him of a childhood teacher before he has to shoot her in the face. He says, "He zipped up the corpse that resembled, under the blood and contorted features, his elementary-school teacher and then he remembered. He looked around and crawled to the copier and retrieved its wig. He unzipped the black bag and dropped it on its face" (Whitehead 70). He often describes skels and stragglers in dehumanizing terms, like "it" or "corpse," yet he remains thoughtful as he considers their lives before being zombies. In this particular instance, the skel's resemblance to someone he knew impacts his current treatment of the body. If the skel had not looked like his old teacher

or if his memories of the past had not influenced his present perspective, it is unclear if he would have had the same consideration for "burying" the body with its wig. Through Mark Spitz's uncertainty of how to regard and treat the living dead, Whitehead wonders about ambiguities of the afterlife and considers the nature of human conscious as it responds to memory. Mark Spitz often hints toward his distaste of his task "sweeping" the city in passages where, for example, "He zipped up the Marge, hastening when he arrived at the bloody mophead of her scalp" (Whitehead 72). The "hastening" as he sees the skel's face implies his discomfort in the task of disposing of bodies. The killing is deemed necessary because the skels tried to eat him, but in the aftermath, he has time to pause and observe them. His guilt comes in consideration of their past lives. The morality of killing a skel has a more obvious answer because of their aggression, unlike the stragglers who more clearly resemble the living in their passive states of mundane repetition. In these instances of uncertainty between human and non-human, living and dead, Whitehead leads a consideration on the realities of human nature and calls into the question the necessity of violence against the zombified humans.

During the same sweep of the office building, the unit comes across a straggler whom they name Ned the Copy Boy. The discovery, killing, and disposal of Ned illuminates the brutality of humanity during an apocalypse and the need for human conscious to lighten the mental weight of such tasks by creating games. Mark Spitz and his sweeper companions, Kaitlyn and Gary, play apocalypse task games as a way of making the day go by faster and taking their minds off the reality of their job. He describes two of the games they like to play:

> Solve the Straggler broke up the day with its meager amusements … The game served another purpose in that it gave the sweepers mastery over a small corner of the disaster, the cruel enigma that had decimated their lives … Solve the Straggler, and you took a

> nibble out of the pure chaos the world has become. It was certainly less bleak than Name That Bloodstain!, another pastime. What do you see?—that kid's cloud game gone wrong. (Whitehead 100)

In this passage, he explains inadvertently the way people cope with trauma and violence. Playing games can help with boredom, but really, they need to distract themselves from the reality of the tasks at hand, killing beings that resemble people so that the living can reinhabit those spaces. This process is the apocalypse version of gentrification. Instead of taking space from economically disadvantaged citizens, they take the lives and spaces of the living dead. The violence against stragglers has become normalized and even deemed necessary in some cases. For example, "Skel mutilation was another popular amusement" (Whitehead 101). But the striking connection between a person at work and an infected straggler makes the violence cruel and necessary. Observing Ned the Copy Boy, Mark Spitz cannot help but question why they have to kill him. In *Severance*, Candace says, "the fevered aren't zombies. They don't attack us or try to eat us. They don't do anything to us. If anything, we do more harm to them" (Ma 29). In the same way that Candace attempts to understand why they kill the fevered if they are not threatening, Mark Spitz says, "What if we let him stay? … He's not hurting anyone" (Whitehead 102). Kaitlyn still kills Ned, and "If they had played Name That Bloodstain!, Mark Spitz would have said, North America" (Whitehead 103). Subtly, Whitehead points to normalized violence and economic disparities in America as Mark Spitz uses an apocalypse game to cope with the horrors he witnesses.

Like *Friday Black*'s discussion of normalized violence with its zombie-shoppers and other dystopian representations of reality, Whitehead shows instances of normalized violence in

the zombie apocalypse as a way of criticizing normalized violence in American society. Mark Spitz explains workplace tasks that are so gruesome yet completely normal to their everyday life:

> For the first few weeks they tossed the bodies out the windows. It was efficient … They awaited the sound of glass smashing into a million fragments and the splash of bodies bursting against concrete in equal measure. It saved time and energy. They belonged to a nation enamored of shortcuts and the impulse persisted. It beat dragging the bodies down twelve flights and then humping back upstairs to resume the sweep. The higher up, the messier, naturally. (Whitehead 74)

Even on the surface level the imagery produced from the lack of emotional language portrays a disturbing reality of normalized death and violence. This scene is similar to *Friday Black*'s disturbingly violent and unemotional descriptions of bodies lying around and being swept away. The language used to describe sweepers in comparison to the bodies employees "sweep … onto the pallet jack" (Adjei-Brenyah 106) is even the same, creating a connection between the two texts. The act of sweeping dehumanizes the zombified bodies and creates a normal action and phrasing for the living to refer to when dealing with the dead.

The desensitization to violence and death from both mall employees and holiday shoppers in "Friday Black" can be likened to Mark Spitz's world, yet he discusses mental health post-apocalypse while IceKing does not. Through emotionless retellings of his past and current traumatic experiences, he relates sleepless nights and odd outbursts to PASD, pronounced "past," which stands for Post-Apocalyptic Stress Disorder. He explains that "[e]veryone he saw walked around with a psychological limp … Anyone with perfect posture was faking it, overcompensating for entrenched trauma" (Whitehead 115). Whitehead's discussion of mental health seems unique for the zombie genre because Mark Spitz points to it so explicitly. He

considers the prospects of a traumatic, apocalyptic life and its impacts on the human consciousness even as the argument could also be made that people are innately violent and uncaring. While Whitehead's discussion of mental health is obvious and clear, that does not mean Adjei-Brenyah and Ma disregard it.

Whitehead does not shy away from the topic of mental health in the apocalypse, although Ma and Adjei-Brenyah touch upon it in a less obvious manner. During IceKing's break, he picks up lunch in the food court from an employee who "has seen so much and had so much caffeine that I have to remind him to take money from me. Even as he takes it, he stares forward, past me, looking at nothing. I sit at one of the white tables in the food court that doesn't have a corpse on it" (Adjei-Brenyah 111). His depiction of the worker behind the counter hints towards the issue of trauma from violence without explicitly stating it. IceKing immediately transitions from describing the shock and trauma of the mall employee to a description of the food court littered with bodies. While the violence has become normal to IceKing, the same cannot be said for others. Even his fellow employee, Duo, who understands the zombie-shoppers like IceKing has to quit because he "couldn't do it, man. That shit is sad" (Adjei-Brenyah 112). While the notion that not all of society feels the same sense of desensitization to violence that IceKing and zombie-shoppers do creates a hope for society as a whole, it also emphasizes a disregard for others experiencing trauma from those events. Adjei-Brenyah and Ma implicitly discuss mental health and coping with trauma and explicitly discuss racial disparities and violence, whereas Whitehead does the opposite. He overtly deals with Mark Spitz's struggle with trauma from normalized violence in the apocalypse, while his critical commentary on race is implied through minor details. Perhaps the implicit discussion in comparison to the explicit discussion is a tactic

Whitehead uses to exemplify stigmas surrounding open mental health discussion as a cultural critique of America.

Two instances of violence against the human-like zombies from *Zone One* and *Severance* show the differences in the way each author depicts how characters handle traumatic experiences in the apocalypse. Mark Spitz describes the normalized violence he witnesses against the stragglers: "The stragglers posed for a picture and never moved again, trapped in a snapshot of their lives. In their paralysis, they invited a more perplexing variety of abuse … They didn't flinch. They took it. And then they were deactivated—beheaded or got their brains blown out" (Whitehead 102). Abuse towards the stragglers, while cruel, has become part of everyday life just as the inhumane treatment of bodies has. He continues by saying, "Although the subject was not mentioned in the PASD seminars Herkimer held with the camp shrinks, it was generally assumed that this behavior was a healthy outlet. Occupational therapy" (Whitehead 102). Like our world today, talking about mental health has stigmas to it, and the zombie apocalypse is no different. The violence towards stragglers becomes accepted, while not spoken of, as an action that helps people cope with the trauma they experience. For Mark Spitz particularly, this quote relates back to the beginning of the novel as he explains his childhood family trips to New York City. He describes strangers taking their family pictures with an old camera: "His family posed … always the same composition. The boy stood in the middle, his parents' hands dead on his shoulders, year after year. He didn't smile in every picture, only that percentage culled for the photo album" (Whitehead 4). Whitehead makes a connection between Mark Spitz and the stragglers as each were forced to pose for pictures taken by strangers. In this moment of connection between childhood memory and present-day normalized violence, Mark Spitz exemplifies the blend between reality and fantasy used to critique the flaws of human nature,

including cruelty and routines. It shows the way trauma impacts memory as Mark Spitz explains throughout the novel in examples like walking in on his parents as a child and walking in on his parents as zombies in adulthood.

The past and present become intertwined much like Mark Spitz's storytelling and for Candace in *Severance*. Mark Spitz says the stragglers "didn't flinch" until they "got their brains blown out" (Whitehead 102). Candace similarly describes a traumatizing moment for her as Bob forces her to kill one of the fevered:

> The third shot hit a place setting, piercing through the porcelain of a salad plate. Paige Gower did not flinch. The fourth shot hit her in the arm, at which point she registered something. Her eyes widened and she started to get up. The fifth shot hit her in the stomach, and the ensuing cries were weak little bays, attempts at protesting more than actual pleading. At this point, everyone was beginning to get impatient … She was probably obediently dead by now, but still I was shooting, past the death barrier and into someplace else, I don't know where. Where else is there to go. I kept going. (Ma 71)

In both quotes, Whitehead and Ma use the same negated word "flinch" to describe the stragglers and the fevered. Ma explains that "everyone was beginning to get impatient" as a way of showing that the violence against the fevered in this world is the same kind of normalized violence that Whitehead's world exudes. While those experiences of killing the fevered or the stragglers is traumatic for Mark Spitz and Candace, the rest of the survivors see it as normal. Mark Spitz describes abusing the stragglers as a form of "occupational therapy." When applied to this instance where Candace shoots and shoots until she cannot anymore, that idea seems to be true. She shoots "past the death barrier and into someplace else," either creating more trauma for herself or engaging in a form of therapy to release the frustrations and anxieties brought on by

the apocalypse. Ma and Whitehead leave the answer to this unclear, perhaps because struggling with trauma and normalized violence are sometimes unanswerable aspects of reality. With all his emotional baggage and the seminars about mental health, Mark Spitz's gruesome task as a sweeper seems to contradict the mission of the post-apocalyptic military and government to create a new world for survivors. Everyone in *Zone One* suffers from PASD and giving survivors an occupation, in theory, could help in their healing process. Although the tasks of killing human-like stragglers and disposing of their bodies seems more detrimental to his mental health. Comparing Mark Spitz's traumas to Candace's, it is clear that each author has differing ways of considering human nature's response to traumatic events. At the same time, Whitehead and Ma present authority figures as the reasons that Mark Spitz and Candace are put into these situations where they have to deal with normalized violence and subsequent trauma.

Whitehead criticizes government bureaucracy as Mark Spitz deals with various commanders and orders from a leadership more concerned about re-capturing a city as a symbol of power and resistance than helping survivors cope. As the sweeper units go through various office buildings, Mark Spitz comments on the lack of compassion he finds in corporate America:

> Mark Spitz felt it the instant they pushed in the glass doors and saw the firm's name hovering in grim steel letters over the receptionist's desk: these guys will crush you … Perhaps they only represented charities and nonprofits, but in that case he was sure their clients out-healed, out-helping-handed, overall out-charitied their competing charities, if it can be said that charities competed with one another. But of course they must, he thought. Even angels are animals. (Whitehead 13)

The world pre-apocalypse was cruel in its competitive nature, like the world Adjei-Brenyah describes. In this quote, Whitehead directly makes a critical commentary on the reality of

American society as influenced by capitalism that values competition and success in all manners of living, including compassionate institutions like charities. Whitehead also makes minor commentary on consumerism similar to those made by Ma and Adjei-Brenyah. Mark Spitz describes mannequins in store windows: "Pieces of citizens were on display in the windows, arranged by a curator with a taste for non sequitur: the splayed pinstriped legs of an urban golfer putting into a colander; half a lady's torso, wrapped in a turquoise blazer, as glimpsed through a trapezoid; a fist trembling on a titanium desk" (Whitehead 6). Through these store mannequins, Whitehead points out consumerism but consumerism of the middle to upper class in a criticism focused on social and economic disparities. The specific attire of "an urban golfer" and "titanium desk" are more representative of upper-class hobbies and occupations, clearly appealing to a wealthier class of people. Like the zombie figure in *Dawn of the Dead*, department store mannequins function as a representation of consumer desires. Shaviro explains:

> The zombies are overtly presented as simulacral doubles (equivalents rather than opposites) of living humans; their destructive consumption of flesh—gleefully displayed to the audience by means of lurid special effects—immediately parallels the consumption of useless commodities by the American middle class. Commodity fetishism is a mode of desire that is not grounded in repression; rather, it is directly incited, multiplied, and affirmed by artificial means. (*Zombie Theory: A Reader*, Shaviro 12)

The commonalities between the living and the dead in their desires for products or flesh create a resemblance magnified by mannequins. The zombies and mannequins are human-like in physical appearance, but ultimately can never be human, while mannequins are also used to portray consumer wants and needs. The act of posing a mannequin and dressing it in clothes is also reminiscent of *Severance*'s Ashley as she poses in the mirror in different outfits like a store

mannequin come to life. Given the comparisons in these instances, mannequins and zombies seem to represent a wealthy class of citizens. Alix Ohlin says, “Zombie motivation is actually fairly confusing, if you think about it. They don’t *need* to kill people to survive, after all — aren’t they already dead? Like viruses and narcissists, they seek only to replicate themselves” (Ohlin). Whitehead only minimally critiques capitalism and consumerism but does so to point towards flaws in society like social and economic disparities influenced by governing structures and leadership, whether from the corporation or government.

Whitehead uses a lot of language reminiscent of the corporate world as a reminder of the kinds of governing structures that gave way to the state of society before and after the apocalypse. For example, Mark Spitz says, “They dragged the body out into the twilight and punched out for the day as Disposal’s bell jingled in the distance” (Whitehead 103). The phrase “punched out for the day” likens their job to a normal job pre-apocalypse, and in turn, how nothing has really changed, especially with the American Phoenix and its headquarters in Buffalo while most of its people are stationed in Manhattan. The similarities to the reality of bureaucracy and the governing structures present in *Zone One* suggest that “However futuristic this fiction may seem, it’s more than anything a portrait of the way we live now” (Ohlin). When Mark Spitz and his unit are throwing bodies out of windows and down staircases, the Disposal teams complain about the mess from it. The issue creates a battle similar to one that might be seen between work departments squabbling about a dispute that results in leadership having to intervene. Mark Spitz describes the bloody but efficient ordeal of throwing body bags of zombies out windows and says:

> In due course Disposal complained to the Lieutenant … Defenestration unduly aggravated their job. It was disrespectful. It was unhygienic. Frankly, it was unpatriotic.

> Everything inside [the body bag] was bullied to a lumpy slime, and the zippers oozed a trail of crimson slush on the street, in the carts, the post-pickup staging areas. And that was when the bags remined mostly intact … The broken windows put an end to the practice. Disposal could whine until doomsday, so to speak, about contamination risk, but Buffalo wanted the city habitable for the new tenants. (Whitehead 75)

Nothing has changed for the corporate world in this scene. The way Mark Spitz explains this scenario, terms like "human resources department" and "marketing department" could be used to replace "Disposal" and "sweeper units." The nature of the argument and the explanation produce the sense that this is a silly workplace dispute. The safety concerns are outweighed by curb appeal and the cost of remodeling smashed windows. Mark Spitz continues: "The new era of reconstruction was forward-looking, prudent, attentive to the small details that will dividend in the years to come. The order came down: No more assaults on the windows of the fair city. The sweepers reconciled themselves to the new regulations. They took the stairs" (Whitehead 75). Leadership solves the dispute by creating new guidelines to appease each complaining party. Whitehead wants the reader to feel a sense of disgust and disappointment in this bureaucracy that cares little for the contamination risk and treatment of human bodies and cares more for the cost of remodeling buildings in the future. This workplace drama begins with disposing of dead bodies, but the original concerns become lost in the mess created by dropping bodies out windows rather than the disconcerting fact that workers are assigned to dispose of human bodies in a gruesome manner.

In the end, the waves of zombies defeat the government and military, and Whitehead reveals the story behind Mark Spitz's nickname as a way of discussing social and racial ills. Gary asks, "Why do they call you Mark Spitz?" Mark Spitz offers a story of how he overcame a

horde of the undead alone rather than jump into a river to swim away. His companions at the time gave him the nickname out of a racial stereotype rather than acknowledge his feat of heroism. Mark Spitz explains in a back and forth dialogue with Gary, "'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 tread water perfectly'" (Whitehead 287). The apocalypse version of him is like a superhero in disguise. He says his averageness is what makes him perfect for the end of the world, so the nickname, even as an original insult, still carries some pride to it. He takes prides in the nickname because to him it represents a moment where he outlasted and outcompeted other survivors, his coworkers. For *Zone One*, Grace Heneks argues in her article that Whitehead uses the zombie to start a discussion on race in American society. She says, "In *Zone One*, Whitehead uses a historically racialized trope that America has appropriated (and whitewashed) as its own--the zombie--to both understand and come to terms with the dominant society, not to assimilate, but rather to speak to the ways in which post-racial thinking hurts everyone." While Ma and Adjei-Brenyah make their critiques of American society and its racial injustices clear and definitive, Whitehead keeps his argument implicit and waits until the end of the novel to reveal the racially stereotyped nickname of the main character. Waiting, as he does, allows the reader to consider other issues of American society that the novel covers throughout, such as mental health and economic disparities, that are not always made as obvious in other works of the zombie genre. Whitehead wants us to consider society as a whole. Mark Spitz wonders about the future of his apocalypse world as Whitehead does the same for our world:

> There was a single Us now, reviling a single Them. Would the old bigotries be reborn as well, when they cleared out this Zone, and the next, and so on, and they were packed

> together again, tight and suffocating on top of each other? Or was that particular bramble of animosities, fears, and envies impossible to re-create? If they could bring back paperwork, Mark Spitz thought, they could certainly reanimate prejudice, parking tickets, and reruns. There were plenty of things in the world that deserved to stay dead, yet they walked. (Whitehead 288)

This passage makes clear that this world is the future looking back on today. The past explained here is really the present-day world we live now where "animosities, fears, and envies" exist; Whitehead has just used this zombie apocalypse to consider what an alternate future might hold. It seems he also wants to believe in a future that does not collapse under the weight of positive changes, but rather can move forward and not look back. Mark Spitz's last lines are hopeful as he faces certain death with a new look on his mediocre life: "Fuck it, he thought. You have to learn how to swim sometime. He opened the door and walked into the sea of the dead" (Whitehead 322). Mark Spitz rejects his complacency and his mediocracy, particularly in his nickname in this moment as he quotes Gary. Whitehead suggests in this hopeful but uncertain ending that even while he considers himself ordinary, Mark Spitz is anything but. There is hope that humanity can learn to swim and overcome the waves of societal issues plaguing our streets like the undead plaguing Manhattan in Mark Spitz's world.

Conclusion

These works of literary fiction, *Severance*, “Friday Black,” and *Zone One*, illuminate the necessity and usefulness of utilizing elements of the zombie genre is clear. Where Ling Ma uses the zombie-like figure to portray the fevered in a non-violent, human state of nostalgic entrapment, Colson Whitehead uses the zombie figure to explore in a similar manner the function of memory and nostalgia in human nature. Ma and Whitehead aim to understand the complexities of the human conscious with discussions of a number of possible interpretations of the afterlife and ambiguities of the “living dead.” Whitehead provokes questions of mental health in coping with traumatic that Ma and Adjei-Brenyah touch upon though do not explicitly discuss. While Whitehead rightly points to mental health in a clear and thorough manner, his commentary on racial issues is minimal. In contrast to Adjei-Brenyah and Ma who make clear arguments towards injustices and violence against Black Americans and Asian Americans. In light of recent national events, future readings of these texts might feature a heavier discussion on the connections between fiction and reality, particularly as they relate to racial violence. In each text, however, topics of capitalism, consumerism, corporations, and materialism are addressed in criticisms of American society. Overall, Ling Ma, Nana Kwame Adjei-Brenyah, and Colson Whitehead successfully use fantasy in literary fiction to depict social, racial, and economic critiques of reality. Their portrayals of the zombie apocalypse offer glimpses into alternate realities where our societal issues are reflected through the living dead.

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