

“WE ARE THE WALKING DEAD:” ZOMBIE SPACES, MOBILITY, AND THE  
POTENTIAL FOR SECURITY IN *ZONE ONE* AND *THE WALKING DEAD*

A RESEARCH PAPER

SUBMITTED TO THE GRADUATE SCHOOL

IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS

FOR THE DEGREE

MASTERS OF ARTS

BY

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MUNCIE, INDIANA

MAY 2012

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“I didn’t put you in prison, Evey. I just showed you the bars” (170).  
—V, *V For Vendetta*

The zombie figure is an indispensable, recurring player in horror fiction and cinema and seems to be consistently revived, particularly in times of political crisis. Film is the best-known medium of zombie consumption in popular culture, and also the most popular forum for academic inquiry relating to zombies. However, this figure has also played an increasingly significant role in written narratives, including novels and comic books. Throughout its relatively short existence, no matter the medium, the zombie has functioned as a mutable, polyvalent metaphor for many of society’s anxieties, with zombie film production spiking during society’s most troublesome times, including times of war, the height of the HIV/AIDS epidemic, and, more recently, 9/11.<sup>1</sup>

In *Shocking Representations*, Adam Lowenstein describes the connection between historical events and cinema by first describing how history is experienced collectively. Lowenstein describes historical traumas as “wounds” in the sense that they are painful, but also in that they continue to “bleed through conventional confines of time and space” (1). Film is one medium in which these “wounds” are most explicitly represented. As Lowenstein describes, film takes on an allegorical sense or contains what he calls an

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<sup>1</sup> Monsters in general often serve this purpose, with vampires also becoming a consistent metaphor for the “other,” spiking during the AIDS epidemic.

“allegorical moment” which is “a shocking collision of film, spectator, and history where registers of bodily space and historical time are disrupted, confronted, and intertwined” (2). Here, the “past and present collide” (8) in order to expose and confront these “wounds” and provide an externalized image of repressed trauma. Though this “allegory cannot be fully psychologized or interiorized; it also insists on the exteriority of the corpse” (15) which is why horror has become one of the primary means of conveying trauma and why the zombie plays such an essential role in horror narratives. Traumatic representation, in the sense that Lowenstein describes, is present throughout the spectrum of the horror genre, but zombies have held a specific place within it for decades as a consistent signifier of trauma and social upheaval.

The zombie, though now ubiquitous in culture and academia, was largely ignored by horror critics for much of its early time in cinema. The new field of zombie studies has redressed this balance somewhat.<sup>2</sup> The insights of zombie studies have been succinctly outlined by Cory James Rushton and Christopher Moreman in *Race, Colonialism, and Evolution of the “Zombie”*: 1) The zombie originated in Haiti, 2) it reveals “Western” fears about contact with the colonized other, 3) George Romero “redirected zombies in a fundamental way in...*Night of the Living Dead*,” 4) it was re-imagined yet again in *Dawn of the Dead*, and 5) the zombie is the only modern myth (Kindle Location 38). More recently, though, critics have extensively examined this monstrous figure both within and beyond these “truisms” as they explore the mechanical, the post-human, the non-human

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<sup>2</sup> See Kyle William Bishop’s *American Zombie Gothic: The Rise and Fall (And Rise Again) of Zombies in Popular Culture* for a comprehensive historical overview, Kim Paffenroth’s work on Romero, *Gospel of the Living Dead*, or more recent compilations such as *Generation Zombie: Essays on the Living Dead* by Stephanie Boluk and Wylie Lenz.

and the political body. My discussion is focused on the latter mode of symbolic examination: the capability of the zombie to serve as a catalyst for the dissection of safety and security in modern spaces.

I examine the process of zombification through the de-formation and containment of bodies and, more importantly, through an analysis and critique of the disciplinary impact of the violence wrought by sovereign entities on the human body. However, the discussion of security as they relate to governmental spaces and movement within these spaces is one aspect that is missing in the current conversation about zombies. Though contemporary zombie narratives focus primarily on a virus or contagion, they move the discussion of the living dead forward in time as a means of understanding the construction of modern spaces as a means of both controlling and managing the *population* and sustaining notions of *security*. However, these processes of management and sustenance of “life”—what the philosopher Michel Foucault implies by the terms “biopower” and “governmentality”—are shown precisely through their opposite: an absolute breakdown of the invisible and constructed “normal.” Since a Foucauldian approach is central for this paper, let me clarify what I mean by the terms ‘population’ and ‘security.’ For Foucault, the ensemble of security is different from sovereign and disciplinary *dispositifs*.<sup>3</sup> A sovereign space functions in a hierarchical manner, while discipline is built on a binary system where one is either inside or outside. In the past, lepers, for instance, were clearly separated by a boundary of exclusion or, more crucial to this discussion “plague regulations literally involve imposing a partitioning grid”

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<sup>3</sup> Foucault’s work is riddled with tensions about periodizing the *dispositifs* of sovereignty, discipline and biopower. Sometimes he periodizes them in a linear way as if one followed the other; sometimes he suggests that all three exist simultaneously.

(Foucault 10). This involves segmenting a territory into demarcated spaces based on what is happening or has happened (e.g., there is a plague, so we must separate the diseased from the well). Security, on the other hand, functions as a set of mechanisms that must maintain a balance estimated by “probabilities,” where strict disciplinary formations do not necessarily exist. Regarding spatial concerns within these ensembles, Foucault illustrates their distinctions by establishing the structural differentiations between the building and the town. The building is built from the bottom up with peasants, the artisans and the sovereign, respectively, each relying on the other to hold them up and forming a strict hierarchy. The town, on the other hand, is an enclosed space where “circulation” is the crucial element.<sup>4</sup> This space is much more vulnerable to outside penetration, heightening the need for stricter methods of enforcing and regulating security. Rather than discipline or sovereignty as the paradigm of control, security is utilized within the town—a form of power and control exerted upon the entire town’s population. This is seen clearly in the creation of ‘safe spaces’ in *Zone One* and *The Walking Dead*, as I will discuss later.

The changes within *security* rest too within those objects being controlled in these spaces, or rather, how we define those objects being controlled. Within the sovereign town, people function as a collective consciousness, a willing body able to be manipulated physically. However, within a town or a space of security, the “people” are envisaged as a “population,” or a statistically enumerated group that is organized by

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<sup>4</sup> Circulation is described here in a very physical sense in relation to boundaries and movement within a town. The changes in circulation relate directly to opening borders for trade and for health purposes, thus affecting the layout and road structure.

biological concerns related to the physical body and questions of health.<sup>5</sup> In this way, biopolitical measures relating to health (making live and letting die or creating conditions that maximize life for the “healthy” populations while letting other subpopulations “die”) maintain the population as a desired form of the collective in biopolitical dispositifs. The zombie is a biopolitical nightmare in this way because an imaginative outbreak of this sort results in a) the seemingly “archaic” return of repressed sovereign dispositifs, and b) the breaking down of these biopolitical controls through the now problematized limits between “life” and “death.”

However, as I will describe, the assertion (or creation) of boundaries and the subsequent undermining and permeation of these constructs and mechanisms have been the concern and function of the zombie narrative from the beginning, although they have taken on a new avatar in this contemporary era of the security state. As Stephanie Boluk and Wylie Lenz note in their book *Generation Zombie*, “the zombie does not just serve as a metaphor...but that it *is* a metaphor” (10). Metaphor means “to transfer,” implying movement is required. Mobility, thus, is inherent in the zombie metaphor. But zombie narratives in a post-9/11 culture feature nomadic movement<sup>6</sup>--a transfer and movement of populations—thus introducing an additional layer of complexity to the metaphor. Such

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<sup>5</sup> The “people” is the central figure of classical political thought. When we use the term “people,” we usually refer to a conscious agent that is able to act as a unitary collective (eg. national “people”). In other words, the “people” presupposes the primacy of mind or consciousness over body. Foucault’s emphasis on the biologically driven collective concept of the population brings the focus back on the body.

<sup>6</sup> Nomadism, unlike exile or diaspora, does not imply a home of origin or a center, but allows for movement within the space. Everywhere is home. It is this movement, which puts notions of home and stasis into question—as well as the idea of the nation. Characters experience mobility in various ways in post-9/11 film, but eventually find that home is not what or where it once seemed and are thus uprooted from the place in which as viewers see them as originating.

nomadic movements make populations hyper-aware of the apparatuses of security, which keep them knitted within a sense of the “normal.” The attempts to create safe spaces after the breakdown of security regimes result in the relapse to a supposedly archaic model of sovereignty.

The rest of this essay is divided into parts. I will start by describing the history of the zombie figure in more detail before examining three texts from different mediums (novel, graphic novel, and, briefly, television). I will analyze the spaces explored within the zombified societies depicted in my ur-texts *28 Days Later* (dir: Danny Boyle) and Romero’s *Land of the Dead* before closely reading Colson Whitehead’s *Zone One* and Robert Kirkman’s *The Walking Dead*, focusing on the perceptions of security within these narratives. These explorations reveal the evocativeness of the zombie as a metaphor in post-9/11 culture, where it has become a bundle of conflicting signifiers that reveal various modes of political uncertainty.

### **A Small History of the Zombie:**

The zombie began as a colonial, orientalized figure—a means of understanding and fixing the alterity of the colonized in demarcated spaces in colonial Haiti. The first mention of the zombie is commonly said to have been by William Seabrook in his travel narrative *The Magic Island*. In this text, Seabrook states,

I recalled one creature I had been hearing about in Haiti, which sounded exclusively local—the zombie... The zombie, they say, is a soulless human corpse, still dead, but taken from the grave and endowed by sorcery with a mechanical semblance of life—it is a dead body which is made to walk and act and move as if it were alive (93).

Simultaneously fascinated and horrified by this figure, Americans quickly put the zombie into action as a figure in popular culture. In the first phase of zombie cinema, including films such as Halperin's *White Zombie* (1932), fears about corporeal and sexual contact with colonial others become manifest when so-called "safe" boundaries between the colonizers and colonized start to break down. Typically, a white woman was preyed upon by a Voodoo master who then killed her and took control of her body—a trope common in zombie cinema throughout the 1930s and 40s. The threat was a sexual one, but also one that complicated racial binaries and binaries of the Other and the self by asserting questions of allegiance based upon skin color and place of origin. This is exemplified by Bela Lugosi's character in *White Zombie*: he played a Creole, a racially ambiguous man who considered himself a Haitian though he was originally from America. The black and white film even leaves his skin color open to interpretation. The zombie of this era emphasizes human embodiment while at the same time defying corporeal borders. Thus, even in these early years, we already see the zombie making visible the arbitrary boundaries that exist between life and death; the self and the other; inside and outside. As Sarah Lauro and Karen Embry suggest, these binaries exist paradoxically within the zombie figure: "The zombie is opposition held irrevocably in tension" (94). This tension, as well as the horrific nature of the entertainment itself, led to the extreme popularity of the zombie in popular culture, including films,<sup>7</sup> and, later,

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<sup>7</sup> For other films from this first phase see also *I Walked With A Zombie* (1943), *Back From the Dead* (1957), *The Face of Marble* (1946), *The Ghost Breakers* (1940), or *The Incredibly Strange Creatures Who Stopped Living and Became Mixed-Up Zombies* (1964).

novels and comic books.<sup>8</sup>

Comic books of this era took their cues from the medium of cinema. They were eventually deemed controversial due to their horrific nature, but also because comics were thought to be turning children into juvenile delinquents. As Arnold T. Blumberg describes in “Four Color Zombies,” this moral shift occurred just as the threat of communism waned: “[senators] shifted the focus away from the more nebulous threat of communists and onto the slightly more concrete menace of youth crime—and comic books” (37). In April of 1954, the Comics Code Authority (CCA) outlawed the appearance of all zombies and many of the other prominently featured horror figures from this medium by specifying specific subject matter as follows: “scenes dealing with, or instruments associated with the walking dead, torture, vampires and vampirism, ghouls, cannibalism and werewolfism are prohibited” (Blumberg 41). The genre of horror comics was virtually annihilated. However, this would change over time with underground comics—I will describe how, in the third phase of zombie narratives, readers were soon exposed to graphic imagery thought to be well beyond the realm of “traditional” comic books.

Fourteen years after the CCA’s ban regarding the presence of monstrous figures in comic books, George Romero seemingly unhinged the zombie figure from its colonial origins with films like *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), though his contributions to zombie cinema did not erase these implications entirely. He made this leap in two ways: first, by removing the zombie from Haiti and second, by changing the driving force

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<sup>8</sup> Radio featuring zombies was also prominent at this time. See Chris Vials’s essay “The Origin of the Zombie in American Radio and Film: B-Horror, U.S Empire, and the Politics of Disavowal” for more information.

behind the monstrous figure. It is Romero that gave us the zombie figures that we know today: flesh-eating, atrophied, rotting corpses, controlled not by a voodoo master, but now controlled by that part of the brain that allows only for basic survival. Though this uncoupling was by no means a complete act, the colonial origin was not severed as the uncanny essence of the zombie remained.<sup>9</sup> The consuming nature, which was at the base of the Haitian zombie, still exists too, though as Rushton and Moreman note “In a fundamental sense, the Haitian zombi - a symbol of the bokor or master's appetite, for wealth, sugar, white women, what-have-you is not gone, but has rather been invested with that very appetite in its own right” (Kindle Locations 152-153). We see a reallocation of the desire to consume, but also a reappropriation in that the zombie figure, which once represented the master/slave binary, now represents complete nonproductive expenditure: “The Caribbean zombie, it could be argued, has not been replaced at all, only reinscribed, and thereby made more powerful” (Kindle Location 162). This colonial and consumerist reappropriation of the notion of the zombie has evolved over time due to both the change in location, as we see the shift from Haiti, but also through more localized and eventual global movement.

Although the location of the zombie figure had changed, the new location and spatial alterations still played a role in how the metaphorical relevance of the zombie functioned. Spaces depicted in this phase were relatively static ones, with the protagonists surviving in delimited spaces such as graveyards, or malls—in these limited spaces, clear boundaries were created and defended. Additionally, although Romero’s films brought

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<sup>9</sup> We see remnants even in the key films of phases two and three: Ben in *Night of the Living Dead* and Mailer in *28 Days Later...* are racially reminiscent of the early zombie, but consider too their powerless and, in the case of Mailer voiceless positions within each film.

death into the screen at the same time the Vietnam War put death into the social consciousness through graphic images on the television, Romero also explored gender and race constructs alongside consumerism throughout his *Dead* films. These became the prevalent tropes of the second phase of the zombie film.

Comics, not unsurprisingly, also proliferated in this time period, their graphic images multiplying alongside Romero's films and horrific images of the violence in Vietnam. Nonetheless, comics were still continuing their fight with strict guidelines limiting content. Underground markets accommodated the continued desire for horror comics and although the CCA loosened the regulations on comics, zombies were still left out. The CCA regulations stated that: "Scenes dealing with, or instruments associated with walking dead, or torture, shall not be used. Vampires, ghouls and werewolves shall be permitted to be used when handled in the classic tradition such as Frankenstein, Dracula, and other high-caliber literary works" (Blumberg 45). As we know, the origins of the zombie are slightly less literary and somewhat more unsavory, thus they are excluded in this case. Underground comic rings (of which Marvel and DC were part) continued to sell comics containing zombies at this time. The content of comics was similar to the previously discussed aspects of zombie film, as it dealt with themes of war and trauma. In this second phase, we see the zombie figure functioning not just as a walking corpse capable of making visible societal anxiety and fear about war, but as an *invader*: as a figure capable of permeating our boundaries of both the state and of the body, while causing the idea of borders to collapse altogether as they moved into a global economy which serves as the focal point for our third phase of zombie narratives.

As I mentioned earlier, the contemporary zombie, or third phase of zombie fiction, focuses primarily on contagion. As Rushton and Moreman note, “The chemical or viral cause has since become the most common in-text explanation for zombie outbreaks” (Kindle Location 104). Though as they also note, an unexplained outbreak is still more common (This is true of *The Walking Dead*). Here, one becomes a zombie by being bitten or otherwise contaminated through the bloodstream, the same as in the second phase, so infection is immanent in both phases. However, this contagion functions differently in this third phase as it functions on a global level, thus having much more severe implications.

This trope of contagion has an interesting genealogy. As Boluk and Lenz note, “the biological virus itself occupies a liminal position between living and dead” (6). This new zombie poses a threat very similar to those fears expressed in plague writing. Boluk and Lenz write about the place that zombies hold in this third phase as it relates to the plague: “Now that the biological mystery of plague has been solved with the identification of its cause...the zombie appears now to occupy the position of uncontrollable threat that was previously associated with the plague” (6). Fears and uncertainty of modern science’s mythologized capability to solve our problems become manifest as human beings become increasingly terrified of the unprecedented possibilities unleashed by post-human conceptions of “nature.” Steven Schlozman writes that although we do not necessarily understand the zombie outbreak within the realm of modern science, we continue to try to understand it anyway (as exemplified by the group’s continued movement toward the CDC in *The Walking Dead*) (162), but also the fact that everyone is already infected with the zombie virus in *The Walking Dead* and in

the overt reference to the outbreak as the plague in *Zone One*. Though as Boluk and Lenz go on to say, we do in fact have a framework in which to consider the zombie:

A zombie outbreak, much like a plague epidemic, is an event in which the anxieties associated with social connectivity come to the fore—the more boundaries between the self and other are broken down in plague time, the more the contagion spreads...In zombie films, the collapse of barriers and attendant social leveling that takes place is embodied through the piercing of skin and the exchange of infectious fluids, which results in the conversion of all hosts of the infection into a homogenous, undifferentiated mass (7).

In this way, the zombie is a manifestation of contemporary biological fears, not of people, but of the population-as-undifferentiated-mass. It is as if the specter of the plague, which wiped out peoples, uncannily comes back in the figure of the zombie, the annihilator of populations in biopolitical regimes.

Moreover, the zombie as the threat to populations and apparatuses of security is the key feature of the third phase of zombie representations I examine in this study. As with the second phase, it seems as if the zombies have invaded, but the reality is that the zombies actually come from within. Within these constructs, it is generally revealed that the most dangerous figures are not the zombies, but the remaining survivors, as the norm becomes the battle of all against all. Mobility, too, is a key feature of contemporary zombie fictions. As opposed to Romero's earlier movies, where humans were sequestered and defended a particular turf, the trope of mobility becomes fundamental in the third phase as these survivors are moving within a global structure (the whole world has become a zombie space, distinctions between healthy and quarantined spaces have

collapsed) as opposed to a delimited localized spatial configuration. Thus, the trope of nomadism comes back with all its resonant political metaphors. In these works, the state of emergency as defined by Giorgio Agamben as “the preliminary condition for any definition of the relation that binds, and at the same time, abandons the living being to law” (1) seems to be in operation. This condition requires the figures to move between spaces, looking for safety—it is what is revealed here in these in-between spaces that will serve as the basis for the discussion.

I have provided a brief history of the evolution of the zombie narrative in order to historicize my discussion of post 9/11 zombie fictions. I will now turn to a brief exploration of two ur-texts from the post-9/11 period: Boyle’s *28 Days Later...* and Romero’s *Land of the Dead*. This will set up the base for my close examination of the primary texts, Whitehead’s novel *Zone One*, and the graphic novel series *The Walking Dead*. In my analysis, I look closely at how the Foucauldian power apparatuses represented, or their lack thereof, affects depictions of forms of life. In each of my examples, location and boundaries are used as a means of determining safety and security and as a way of defining the self—these spaces are further complicated by the specific medium being used. As in Frantz Fanon’s description of the colonial city (3-5)—a classic regulated space—clear delineations of spaces and bodies exist invisibly in “normal” circumstances, divisions which become hyper-visible when boundaries collapse in states of emergency.

### **Reframing Safety and Society: Boundaries and Post 9/11 Culture**

Films made around or directly after 9/11 reflect what Lowenstein called the “allegorical moment” as they work through forms of power involved in modern society.

But there also was a shift within these films concerning the understanding of spaces in what became much more obviously a global society. Slavoj Žižek notes that although films like *United 93* and *World Trade Center* recreated some of the emotional and literal aspects of 9/11, they failed to include any political commentary (McSweeney Kindle Location 1703). Other films, which I will examine, portrayed catastrophic events in a different sense, but dealt with trauma and the political much more overtly.

A good example is the new genre of the zombie movie. In *28 Days Later...*<sup>10</sup> a contagion has hit Great Britain, turning most of the population into zombies or forcing the residents out of the country. There are a few citizens who decided to forgo the chaos involved in getting out of the country and remain within the city limits. The result is that the living are forced to roam around and eventually leave London, looking for “civilization” elsewhere. Jim, alongside Selene, the female protagonist, encounters fellow survivor Frank and his daughter Hannah, who live in a high-rise apartment in London. Here Jim shaves and “civilizes” himself again, only to promptly discover that the water supply is limited, signifying that the very substance required for life cannot be found. Life can no longer exist in this city—as Selene says, in this new world, “staying alive is as good as it gets.” This band of refugees attempts to travel to Manchester, though they quickly realize this pursuit is hopeless as the city is seen in flames even from the highway in the distance. At this point, there appears to be a reversal of spaces: both of these urban spaces have become wild and uninhabitable, while the wilderness becomes a safe haven

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<sup>10</sup> See Anna Froula’s essay “Prolepsis” where she writes “Since *28 Days Later ...* was made before, during, and after 9/11 (released in the UK on November 1) 2002, and in the USA in January 2003), it does not embody but nonetheless does conjure up the occupation of Afghanistan in the name of the “Global War on Terror,” the still-unsolved anthrax attacks that heightened the American public’s fears of the Bush Administration’s depiction of Saddam Hussein’s “weapons of mass destruction,” and the shocked citizenry submitting to the dismantling of the Bill of Rights.”

with the trees now serving as protective boundaries. One scene that overtly illustrates this theme shows the rag-tag group of survivors getting their best night's sleep in a grassy area amidst deteriorated (albeit beautiful) ruins. Here we see a literal manifestation of the deteriorated boundaries and the return to "nature."

The survivors hear a radio call which beckons them to come to a makeshift government compound. At this point there is hope for a possible society with safety regulations in effect, providing the hope for the possibility that everyday boundaries and security mechanisms will soon be restored. However, movement into these new governmental spaces becomes even more dangerous and violence-prone than the zombie-ravaged spaces where, as in the erstwhile colonies, a war of all against all supposedly rages.

These spaces, the supposedly civilized ones, are almost always revealed to be the most dangerous spaces in which survivors can exist. The city can no longer sustain life, and the agents of governmental power would sacrifice hope and choice for biological life in order to save so-called civilization, exerting biopolitical force to maintain a status quo. This is exemplified by the attempted rape of the women by the soldiers, as women were promised to the men by their commander, Major Henry West. As Anna Froula says of people as exemplified by West's violence: "uninfected humans are as brutal and violent about satisfying their biological appetites as the infected ones are" (Kindle Locations 3151-3152). It is clear that the act put on by the soldiers at the compound, including the formality of dinner and the aprons for cooking, are merely attempts to hold onto the previous social constructs, and are only empty gestures toward civility having nothing to do with what is needed for the society that exists at that time—they are habits completely

unattached to the actual zombie economy. The boundaries between civilized and uncivilized are now barely visible and the actors at the compound seem to walk between each side without realizing they are doing so.

This movement between spaces (between cities, wilderness) is done with personal safety as a primary concern, although safety, when in the hands of a renewed apparatus of sovereign governmentality is often figured as totalitarian. Romero, in *Land of the Dead* (2005), deals directly with 9/11 politics and proto-totalitarian governmental attempts at creating secure zones. This zombie narrative features a capitalist dictator who lives in a high rise while his constituents live below him in poverty. This is Foucault's sovereign edifice in a very literal sense. The zombies live on the other side of a fence and are also separated by water. The leader, Kaufman, constantly reminds the people that he is the one keeping them safe, though the zombies eventually permeate the supposed safe zone and it is the people's rebellion that is the most catastrophic. Similarly, *28 Days Later*, "is an allegory in which the colonial origins of both zombies and zombie movies collide with contemporary neocolonial events" (Froula Kindle Locations 3110-1). We see in Romero's work an "allegorical moment" dealing particularly with 9/11. This director has said on multiple occasions that Kaufman is modeled after George W. Bush, Donald Rumsfeld, and Dick Cheney (McSweeney Kindle Location 1787). These films clearly aim to put the leadership into question, addressing the political concerns missing in other films, but addressing them as they relate to the everyday. As Froula notes: "Though President Bush swore that the War on Terror would rid the world of the evil of terrorism, *28 Days Later* ... insists that the potential for "evil;" that is, acting against American, Western, or, more broadly, imperial interests, lies dormant within each of us" (Kindle

Locations 3178-3180). Humans and our global neighbors are rendered frightening and are presented as capable of harming “us,” as the boundaries between “us” and “them” have virtually disappeared in a globalized security society. Ironically, mechanisms of security are wholly inadequate in this setting. We see that, though some films deal directly with post-9/11 issues, *28 Days Later...* gets at the heart of the matter by illustrating through movement that “we” are not safe and we, not the zombies, are the frightening ones. Nomadic movement through and between spaces reveals the human attempts and failures at reconstructing secure spaces. This is exemplified by Riley and the other survivors in *Land of the Dead* as they leave the once sovereign space entirely despite a victory over Kaufman.

This exploration of the bare bones of humanity is the focus of zombie narratives in a post-9/11 culture. The current political state, a result, at least partially, of 9/11, is one that has allowed for a conversation of fraught national identity in a global scenario, though not in the most productive ways. As Judith Butler notes, “It was my sense in the fall of 2001 that the United States was missing an opportunity to redefine itself as part of a global community when, instead, it heightened nationalist discourse, extended surveillance mechanisms, suspended constitutional rights, and developed forms of explicit and implicit censorship” (xi). What are we missing by not having this conversation? The works that follow initiate some of these conversations for us as they work through our “wounds.” One method of understanding such violence and change, and the first of many to follow, is to look closely at how people function during attempts to rebuild after catastrophe as seen in Whitehead’s *Zone One*.

### **Building *Zone One*: Zombies, Economy, and Hope**

“Give me your poor, your hungry, your suppurating masses yearning to eat”  
 ---The Statue of Liberty in *Zone One*

Colson Whitehead, a prolific contemporary American writer, has authored books about an elevator repairman, summer vacation on Long Island, a nomenclature consultant, and coming of age in America, though one of his most popular works is *John Henry Days*. This text deals with how J. Sutter constructed a racial identity, but also with how we construct national identity in America through stories and memories, as told through tales about, who else, John Henry. So although his 2011 text *Zone One* is seemingly a divergence from the typical works of his oeuvre (or at least how the work is marketed), the subject is really not far from his usual concerns. Whitehead says he likes to defy those genre boundaries in order to best convey his ideas, and zombies were exactly the right fit:

I wrote *Zone One* because I wanted to fulfill my own curiosity—which goes back decades—about the creatures. *Zone One* comes out of me trying to work through some of my ideas about why, for me personally, zombies are scary. For me, the terror of the zombie is that at any moment, your friend, your family, you neighbor, your teacher, the guy at the bodega down the street, can be revealed as the monster they've always been (Whitehead, *The Atlantic*).

Zombie prose is also the least-common narrative form, although *The Walking Dead* is being translated into prose.<sup>11</sup> *Zone One*, thus, represents the first foray by a “serious” writer of prose into the realm of “genre fiction.” As a native New Yorker,

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<sup>11</sup> See the Jay Bonansinga article “A Novelist and a Zombie Walk Into a Bar,” on how he approached translating the comics into prose.

Whitehead had very specific things he wanted to say about his home, and zombies seemed the perfect narrative catalyst for this story. Although Whitehead is exploring his own hometown, New York City is emblematic of America in a way that is easily recognized, especially in a post-9/11 culture.

*Zone One* is set in a post-zombie apocalypse New York City where what is left of the people of America, “The Phoenix,” is attempting to clean and rebuild an iconic American space and start over because “Manhattan was the biggest version of everywhere” (34). *Zone One* is located in the southern part of Manhattan, from Canal Street downward—this space significantly contains Ground Zero from the 9/11 attacks, though it is not specifically mentioned. Whitehead describes the creation of the city, which sounds much like the Foucauldian town, albeit with poor circulation: “They stopped the tunnels and blocked the bridges. They plugged the subways at the preordained stations, every one south of where the wall would stand. The choppers lowered the swaying concrete segments one by one across the breadth of Canal Street” (74-75). Though as Mark Spitz, the narrator, says that now “they” have a zone, the type of zone is clearly one of war and not yet one of safety: “The soldiers landed in the Battery Park staging area, near the Korean War Memorial. The dead poured into the street at the soldiers’ noise. The grunts used themselves as bait, their invectives, war cries, and tunes drawing schools of the dead into their machine gun fire” (75). We see the war initiated from those within, significantly near a war memorial, a symbol of collective and perpetual memory.

The story is narrated by Mark Spitz, who works as a sweeper, a person whose job is to rid *Zone One* of zombies, named skels and stragglers in the narrative, after the city

has been cleared of the bulk of the zombies by the Marines. The sweepers are on the lowest rung of the social ladder, the peasants in the edifice, if you will. Though Spitz's apocalyptic narrative technically spans only three days, his flashbacks span a much larger timespan, encompassing previous events, most significantly those of the Last Night—the night the apocalypse started. Spitz's story of finding his mother eating his father's intestines on the last night mirrors a traumatic scene in his childhood when he walked in on his mother giving his father a blowjob—a repressed memory which Spitz says is due to “that tendency of the human mind, in periods of duress to seek refuge in more peaceful times, such as childhood experiences, as a barricade against horror” (70-71). Note the use of the term “barricade” which obviously failed to separate these traumatic times for Spitz, and in fact allowed his past to permeate his now. This conflation of time expands further, though and encompasses memories and stories including those of Last Night of many of the survivors and evoking remembering on a national level.

The book opens with Spitz's memory of New York City. He presents a nostalgic version of the city, but also sets up the reader to go back and forth between these romantic visions of post-catastrophe New York, and the destruction and annihilation of the now. Whitehead says that he and everyone experiences New York in a similar way: “I'm walking around with my idea of what New York was 30 years ago, 20 years ago. So is everybody else. And we superimpose that ruined city over what's here now. Any street you walk down in New York is a heap of rubble because that's sort of how we see it if we've been here a while” (Whitehead, *NPR*). Time does not function in a linear way in the novel, but as a back and forth movement—the “past and present collide.” Not only does Whitehead describe memories of a past version of New York City affecting the

current perception of the city, but he also implies that the actual spaces haunt the present—this becomes unavoidable, requiring reflection on the implications of such changes, but also evoking Lowenstein’s notion of events bleeding through time and space.

Post-Apocalypse Stress Disorder (PASD), which is phonetically similar to the word “past,” is experienced by all survivors: “Everyone suffered from PASD...In the new reckoning, a hundred percent of the world was mad” (54). The long list of symptoms includes “hallucinations and flashbacks” (54). This continual tendency for time to fall and collapse in on itself continues throughout the other survivor’s stories and is reminiscent of how we continue to remember and re-remember 9/11. It also echoes philosopher Quentin Meillossoux’s notion of “glacial time,” in which the banality of life has rendered the passage of time both never-ending and never-moving. Spitz mentions on a few occasions that time stops or slows in this way, though he gives us reasons: “to grant dread a bigger stage” (16) or “To give those competing factions in him room to rumble, the dark and the light” (20). Spitz later says “There is no when-it-is-over, no after. Only the next five minutes” (59). In this world, time conflates and collides and slows, though as Lowenstein notes, this is to serve the larger purpose of dealing with specific “wounds.”

In addition to regular concepts of time as being complicated beyond “normal” perceptions, other emergent constructs and binaries in the post-apocalyptic scenario are challenged in various ways throughout *Zone One*. There are two types of zombies, including “regular” zombies, or skels, which shamle and bite, but also stragglers, a special type of being which appears less like the living dead and has for some reason returned to work at a previous job or some job—the connections to the spaces to which

they return is unclear and is even used as a means of entertainment by the protagonists. A woman in a gorilla suit in a party supply store prompts a debate about whether she put the suit on before or after she was bitten. We also see a straggler making copies, and one in her chair, waiting to tell us our future. Whitehead says of the stragglers:

I was thinking about nostalgia and sentimental attachment to the past in *Colossus of New York* and *Sag Harbor*. So for me stragglers are another way about dealing with the problem of wrestling with our pasts. They're tied to key moments in their lives, and places that remind them of those moments. And the survivors, too—Mark Spitz and all of his cohorts—are also trying to recreate a fallen world.

(Whitehead, *NPR*)

Although the stragglers evoke nostalgic returns to the past, they also complicate the binary of living and dead further. This humanization of the living dead complicates the strict binary of living and dead even more than a normal zombie narrative does as the straggler exists much closer to the human end of the spectrum. It is much easier for the survivors to identify with these figures. Spitz says, “He hadn’t decided if conjuring an acquaintance or loved one into these creatures was an advantage or not” (16). The stragglers require the sweepers to reconsider the notion of death, as a past imprints itself even upon these seemingly empty, dead figures. For the stragglers, a past is retrieved via location no matter how mundane it seems to the sweepers.

The physical space varies through the stories, although, as the title suggests, the novel is based in Manhattan. Whitehead wrote this novel as a way to deal with his connection to a city he believes to now be dead. Whitehead has said that he views New York City itself as a zombie, a barely shambling version of its former self. If we add this

zombie layer to an already complex system of how we understand the city, we find that Whitehead has fully complicated any idea of an other or even an outside. But the city also becomes a space with closed circulation, dooming it from the beginning. Here the destruction of the city necessarily comes from within, as he believes the city was lost before the catastrophe occurred.

Though we could certainly argue that economics were at the heart of the downfall of humanity as they still remain in our newly reforming culture in the form of sponsors, Whitehead wants us to see that we are the cause of our own destruction and that the cycle of destruction does not end. These two things are not in opposition, though—all of the survivors we see participate in the economic system, recreating a binary of consumer/supplier—Gary is even inventing things (The Lasso—a skel catcher) in this new economy despite the fact that a patent office no longer exists. This innovation is indicative of a drive to participate in a larger economic construct as a member of society. The novel's critique is centered on the need to locate a space on which to focus national security. The Phoenix attempts to create a new nation which will be based on notions of security as created by borders, but to the reader, and to Spitz, the idea of "The Phoenix" seems contrived and thus the notion of safety illusory. The "wounds" present here are personal and national and the discussion is a political one.

The Phoenix motto, "We Make Tomorrow!" (48), is further indicative of time and thoughts on a future in *Zone One*, but also reminiscent of the nationalist dialogue following 9/11. Though they seem to focus on "transport[ing] the old ways across the violent passage of the calamity to the other side," hope and the future relies also on the Tromanhauser triplets who dominated the small amount of news the pheemies (the new

term for Americans) would receive. These triplets were born well into the apocalypse and now live in ICU, but the positive news is unifying and bad news devastating, even more so than news of reconstruction efforts.

There are various threads woven through *Zone One*, many of which I have touched on here, though they can be pursued even deeper in the text than I have room for in this work. However, all evidence of trauma and “wounds” presented here clearly align with post-9/11 society and the concerns of Americans, and perhaps beyond, as we attempt to understand security once all remnants of a functioning democracy are repressed. The government’s quick attempts to rebuild the perception of safety using supposedly “archaic” sovereign strategies, such as the practice of indefinite detention, resulted in a loss of freedoms at an accelerating rate. As Butler writes in her essay “Indefinite Detention,” certain people, particularly those being held indefinitely in Guantanamo Bay, exist in a state in which they are no longer human. She writes, “Indefinite detention<sup>12</sup> not only carries implications for when and where law will be suspended but for determining the limit and scope of legal jurisdiction itself. Both of these, in turn, carry implications for the extension and self-justificatory procedures of state sovereignty” (51). In short, our government has much more power over our everyday lives and civil liberties than we realized. In *Zone One*, we see how this functions in the attempted re-creation of society from the bottom up, as Buffalo is trying to do with The Phoenix and which ultimately fails. The extensive regulations for the

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<sup>12</sup> Although President Barack Obama planned to close Guantanamo Bay and some prisoners were released, as of March 2012, 171 detainees remain imprisoned (Hosenball). Additionally, in December 2011, President Obama signed a bill that allowed for American terrorism suspects to be detained by the military indefinitely and without trial.

sweepers such as requiring them to document their work on pads of paper from sponsors and not loot when they are virtually unsupervised is recognized as absurd even by Spitz. When we see exactly what is required to function as we did, the notion of *security* becomes frightening. This is exemplified when Spitz is standing near the corn crops at Happy Acres and the Lieutenant says “And again, please ignore the scuttlebutt about what they use for fertilizer. What else, my young friends? What else? Supposedly the new incinerator is going to run at double our capacity, so you know what that means” (37). The pheemies are nourished by the dead.

***The Walking Dead: Framed Deconstruction and Catastrophic Humanity***

“We are the Walking Dead!”

---Rick Grimes, *The Walking Dead*

Though Whitehead’s narrative focuses on the concept of rebuilding, and whether or not this is possible, *The Walking Dead* centers more exclusively on a group of individuals navigating the perils of surviving in this world at all. The first issue of *The Walking Dead* comics by Robert Kirkman et al was released in 2003, though the series continues and has only grown in popularity. This story, though, is much less about rebuilding and more about people surviving without the hope of society, although few glimpses of societal structures emerge from time to time only to be brutally dismembered either by zombies or by other humans. In spite of their realization that society as they know it has been lost, the characters of *The Walking Dead* continue to move throughout the catastrophic landscape in search of security. There initially seems to be an inversion of space, as we saw in *28 Days Later*... However, it is the recognition that these

“normal” spaces were illusory constructs that becomes the most frightening element in the narrative.

In *The Walking Dead*, The United States has been hit with a contagion, which has resulted in an as yet unknown devastation to the population. The result is survivors are left to fend for themselves in a place where all social constructs have broken down. This is similar to *28 Days Later...*—the trope is a common one, but in *The Walking Dead*, the devastation is presented as much more severe and complete as it appears to be a global catastrophe.

Echoing the beginning of *28 Days Later...*, the comic series begin with a shootout on page one quickly moving to a hospital via a closure between pages one and two. Here Rick wakes up completely unaware that he is alone, much less the reasons why, evoking the trope of “the last man on earth” that is commonly associated with plague writing. He roams around the hospital, searching for life, finding his first zombie (an already dead one, thankfully) in an elevator, though he soon finds the cafeteria full of the walking dead. As Rick leaves the hospital, moving toward his house, he encounters another zombie which has rotted to the point of being primarily bones and skin, moving Rick to tears out of fear and sadness. This zombie’s inability to move inspires Rick to experience an uncanny recognition of this previously human figure, mourning its experience as a signifier of the destruction of the human race itself. The framing of these sequences indicates a focus on learning about the zombie apocalypse as Rick does. We experience slow movement through the moment-to-moment panels in the hospital and action-to-action panels as he encounters the bare-bones zombie. The proximity and personal

connections these techniques establish with the protagonist, Rick (and even with the zombies) makes these initial experiences all the more horrifying.

The television show based on the comics, AMC's *The Walking Dead* (dir: Frank Darabont), uses similar tactics in order to convey the immediacy and danger of navigating zombified spaces. A short, formal breakdown of the first episode of the show indicates a focus on the personal, emotional aspects as the viewer feels real fear for the besieged human survivors. The show opens with the protagonist, Rick and though we see a single zombie at three minutes into the show's opening, we do not see another one until fourteen minutes after the opening credits, allowing the viewer to get to know Rick and experience his shocking immersion into this catastrophic, post-apocalyptic society. The opening credits feature no zombies, only pictures of the cast in broken picture frames. This emphasis on humanity makes the show particularly horrifying to the survivors and viewer alike. As Rick says upon his encounter with the bare-bones zombie on the show "I'm sorry this happened to you." But the physical spaces in which the survivors live take this further—they illustrate a horror much more definitive. These spaces illustrate a breaking down of reality, which "is nothing but codified abstraction" (Amery 26). However, spatially, while television is experienced inherently in one space, the screen, comics must move as each panel exists in a new space thus pushing time, space and movement in a more physical sense (McCloud 7). In this way, comics lend themselves more directly to the discussion of movement. Because the group is forced to move on the physical page, the mobility within the story feels natural and even necessary for survival.

Atlanta, in the show, initially, serves as the hub of civilization in *The Walking Dead*. It is assumed by Rick to be a safe haven where the government has not only

created a safe space for the survivors, but also where a cure is being administered. Echoing the image of lone rangers from western movies, Rick romantically rides into the city on his horse with complete hope for safety. But he is quickly overcome by the zombie inhabitants that now serve as the majority; though in the show he finds temporary safety in a now defunct military tank. This juxtaposition between idealism and reality mirrors Whitehead's depiction of Spitz's memory of New York versus the reality of the post-catastrophic space. The camera zooms out and up leaving the viewer with a scene of complete hopelessness as we see within the shot that Rick's odds for annihilation are truly overwhelming. Darabont is quick to illustrate that not only is Atlanta uninhabitable, but that the government is dead. In the comics, Glenn comes to save Rick on foot, taking him atop the city buildings where he must leap as if from tree to tree. Escape from this former space of civilization is Rick's only hope for survival. In a later flashback from the show when Shane, Rick's best friend, and Lori, Rick's wife were attempting to get into Atlanta, we see napalm being dropped by government planes onto the city of Atlanta, literally creating a war zone, a state of exception initiated from within.

The non-zombies are the ones who wreak havoc on the city. As Anna Froula describes, in her description of the violence in retaliation to attacks "This visceral portrayal of human violence establishes that to survive the apocalypse and triumph over terror means to kill swiftly and decisively...the response to the threat must be as or more barbaric than the threat itself" (Kindle Location 3084 ). Here humans become destroyers of their home space as they are quick to retaliate against even perceived threats—a frightening prospect considering not only the complete destruction of the city, but the fact that the attempts to clear the city were wholly unsuccessful.

One of the first places of reprieve is Herschel's farm, a conventional homey space, but one with certain significance. Herschel's farm, where another group of survivors have been living in relative safety during the apocalypse, is located only a few miles from a small town where Rick and the others were looking for supplies, though the group is led to the farm only when Rick's son, Carl, is accidentally shot by an inhabitant of the farm and must be given medical attention. This farm is a self-sustaining, enclosed space, which, for the time being, allows the band of survivors to let their guard down while similarly allowing the readers to feel comfort in this homey rural space.

Two things happen which make this space unsafe. First, Herschel is keeping zombies in his barn (though he refuses to call them zombies or walkers or use any of the other terms used for them as he, at the time, believed they were just sick and could one day be cured). Therefore, the threat of an immediate zombie attack literally exists even within this enclosed, supposedly safe space. The barn is prominently featured alongside the characters even before this revelation and, in the show, has qualities like those of a human face, giving it power and purpose. Second, Herschel does not want Rick and his group to stay at the farm, so the constant threat of ejection from this safe haven is a harsh reminder that the world outside of the farm is still a violent, unsafe one. After only a short reprieve, the farm becomes a space much different from what it appears, just as the suburban space of Alexandria later on in the comic series will be complicated through other means.

The first long-term stay happens at a prison they stumble across just before Volume 3 "Safety Behind Bars" (Rick and the survivors have been ejected from Herschel's farm after a barnyard massacre). This space, which once penned criminals in

and now keeps zombies out, serves ironically as a safe haven. Safety is created here primarily by the extensive fences—three layers of fencing with barbed wire atop the inner border as seen in the overhead image as it bleeds over the edges of two entire pages. Zombies are cleared out and people sleep in cells, which serve as further boundaries of safety. Food is found (and eventually grown), and people are given tasks and jobs to do. Those members of the group that serve as guards walk between the outer and middle fences in order to protect, thus disconnecting them from the group and the zombies, though here they also have the ability stab zombies in the head in relative safety. This is reminiscent of the cemetery or the mall-like spaces of the second phase and becomes even more so once they learn they must protect the prison not just from zombies, but from other groups of survivors. It is this other group (one of whom is the Governor, a character much too complex to dissect here) which eventually not only breaches, but destroys the fences in their military tanks, but also kills a large number of group members.

Though this space was safe, sustainable food-wise, and the group stayed here almost entirely for five volumes of the comics, the threat of exterior encroachment was constant even before it was known. Even the stationary survivors cannot maintain strict boundaries between self and other. The stay at the prison is followed by a long period of constant movement, which ends only with a neighborhood that seems to promise normalcy close to that of the world before zombies.

In fact, in this zombie-ravaged world, the survivors experience a sort of hyper-reality when they move into Alexandria later in the comics, an enclosed “civilized” space that now feels absurd to the survivors and readers alike. The safety does not feel real in

this space reminiscent of Foucault's sovereign town, and the survivors cannot abandon the brutal habits they developed in the wilderness. However, their insistence on maintaining the habits they honed on the outside will save their lives, as even this space is eventually rendered inhospitable, mirroring the collapse of the city boundary at the close of Whitehead's *Zone One*.

The survivors arrive in Alexandria after travelling toward the capital after the prison was attacked. This is the fourth neighborhood in the comics, though Rick's neighborhood and Wiltshire Estates were short stays and relatively harmless stops. Woodbury is a recent neighborhood experienced by some of the group. Though the Governor, as I mentioned, is too complex to be examined in this small space, he deserves a few words of explanation here. As the leader of Woodbury, the Governor provides security at a totalitarian price. Everyone has food and shelter in an enclosed space, but he also provides entertainment for "his people" in the form of putting humans and zombies in a ring together to fight until one of them dies (perhaps again). His totalitarian rule is reminiscent of Major Henry West in that the mechanisms of security used are far beyond what would be considered normal outside of a zombie economy—creating an absolutist sovereign state.

In Alexandria, though, the group is greeted by friendly people who seem to be living a normal life inside boundaries where a small city, or town, now exists. People here have jobs, kids go to school and they even celebrate Halloween and go trick-or-treating. Much like the prison, and even Woodbury, fences, jobs, and food create a sense of normalcy, a sense so extreme that, as I mentioned, it makes the group uneasy. The direct similarities with Woodbury, though, force readers to question the differences in the

leaders and their choices. The survivor's experiences attempting to protect the prison and in the small state of exception characterized by Woodbury have engendered in them a deep suspicion of "normality" in the sense preceding catastrophe. This is, essentially, a new "species" of people—different modes of behavior are expected and rewarded, as the society has changed and calls for radical action and constant vigilance. Therefore, Alexandria's attempts to reassert old social norms are (and should be) met with resistance and anxiety. The center, clearly, cannot hold.

Though the zombies are supporting characters in this story, it is the state of exception created due to their presence that has caused "us" to realize that "we" are not safe both from "them" and "us," despite the various security measures taken. The emergency spaces these characters cannot escape from continually remind us of the fragility of security—people can be taken at any time, disaster can strike at any moment. Any attempt to reconstruct supposed safe zones is deconstructed due to zombies or fellow survivors, leaving the survivors and readers struggling to hang on to hope. This is illustrated particularly by the collapse of the boundaries of Zone One, Spitz's decision to walk into the horde or the fact that those people Rick cares for in *The Walking Dead* the most seem to be the first to get killed. It is obvious that the group cannot stay at this farm, this prison, this town and must continue to navigate these catastrophic spaces as nomads in order to find a space in which they can live, if not safely, then with hope for a possible future in which safety is again a part of the everyday. However, this new safe place is not likely to look like what we now consider safe as this "new species of human" now requires something much different from the previously "normal."

**Conclusion: But what Happens Next?**

Whitehead, Kirkman, and even Darabont focus on what happens after catastrophe. The zombie has become, as Kyle William Bishop says, “a floating signifier” capable of evolving with theory in a way that continuously illuminates new ways of examining what it means to be alive, and also post-“human,” in contemporary spaces of security. From being a clear and distinct colonial figure to the monstrous figure that has satiated our culture, the zombie is still an important metaphor. More important though, are the critical conversations that zombies create. In all of my texts, “civilization” as we understand it is gone, with all attempts to reinstate structure on a larger scale failing. What is clear through the struggle seen in these texts is that despite its claims, mechanisms of security are fragile and can easily lapse over into specters of totalitarianism. This horrific realization is why zombie fictions have become so prolific in contemporary culture, why they have refused to die, and why I think they will continue to evolve with societal needs of the future.

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