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HOPE AND SURVIVAL IN ZOMBIE POST-APOCALYPSE ENVIRONMENTS: *WORLD WAR Z & ZONE ONE*

ABSTRACT

The recent popularity of zombie apocalypse narratives across various media highlights their deep engagement with social, cultural, political, and environmental issues. These narratives often use zombies as allegorical figures to explore contemporary problems, such as ecological neglect and societal collapse. The emergence of a zombie-creating virus in contemporary fiction mirrors fears of biological and ecological disasters, framing zombie culture as a reflection on environmental degradation in industrial-capitalist societies. By highlighting the potential consequences of ecological destruction, zombie post-apocalyptic fiction underscores how the collapse of social order exposes internal conflicts—such as fear, mistrust, and selfishness—that obstruct collective survival efforts. This narrative device suggests that while environmental and biological threats are significant, moral and social cohesion are equally crucial for overcoming crises and ensuring survival. Despite the grim scenarios presented, zombie narratives also offer hope by showcasing the importance of collective action, adaptability, and the rebuilding of social units. Thus, this paper argues that the portrayal of hope and survival goes beyond simple thematic analysis in both Max Brooks' *World War Z* (2006) and Colson Whitehead's *Zone One* (2011) since human ingenuity and resilience are innate qualities, as demonstrated by how societies recover and rebuild following a zombie apocalypse. This claim challenges the conventional view of post-apocalyptic societies as inevitably doomed, instead emphasizing their potential for progress and renewal, not only for the betterment of humanity but also for the preservation of planet Earth.

Keywords: Hope, Survival, *World War Z*, Zombie Post-Apocalypse, *Zone One*.

POST-APOKALİPTİK ZOMBI ORTAMLARINDA UMUT VE HAYATTA KALMA: *WORLD WAR Z & ZONE ONE*

ÖZET

Zombi kıyameti anlatılarının çeşitli medyalarda son zamanlarda kazandığı popülerlik, bu anlatıların sosyal, kültürel, siyasi ve çevresel meselelerle olan derin ilişkisini vurgulamaktadır. Bu anlatılar, zombileri genellikle çevresel ihmal ve toplumsal çöküş gibi güncel sorunları ele almak için alegorik figürler olarak kullanmaktadır. Çağdaş kurguda zombi yaratan bir virüsün ortaya çıkışı ise, biyolojik ve ekolojik felaketlere dair korkuları yansıtmakta ve zombi kültürünü endüstriyel-kapitalist toplumlardaki çevresel bozulmanın bir yansıması olarak ifade etmektedir. Zombi post-apokaliptik kurgu, çevresel yıkımın potansiyel sonuçlarını vurgulayarak, sosyal düzenin çöküşünün korku, güvensizlik ve bencillik gibi kolektif hayatta kalma çabalarını engelleyen iç çatışmaları nasıl ortaya çıkardığının altını çizerek. Bu anlatı aracı, çevresel ve biyolojik tehditler önemli olsa da, ahlaki ve sosyal uyumun krizlerin üstesinden gelmek ve hayatta kalmayı sağlamak için eşit derecede önemli olduğunu öne sürmektedir. Sunulan korkunç senaryolara rağmen, zombi anlatıları aynı zamanda kolektif eylemin, uyum becerisinin ve sosyal birimlerin yeniden inşasının önemini göstererek umut vermektedir. Dolayısıyla bu makale, hem Max Brooks'un *World War Z* (2006) hem de Colson Whitehead'in *Zone One* (2011) adlı eserlerinde umut ve hayatta kalma tasvirlerinin basit tematik analizlerin ötesine geçtiğini, zira zombi kıyametinin ardından toplumların nasıl toparlandığı ve yeniden inşa edildiğinin gösterdiği üzere, insan yaratıcılığı ve dayanıklılığının doğuştan gelen nitelikler olduğunu savunmaktadır. Bu iddia, kıyamet sonrası toplumların kaçınılmaz olarak ölüme mahkum olduğu şeklindeki geleneksel görüşe meydan okumakta, bunun yerine sadece insanlığın iyiliği için değil, aynı zamanda Dünya gezegeninin korunması için de ilerleme ve yenilenme potansiyellerini vurgulamaktadır.

Anahtar kelimeler: Umud, Hayatta Kalma, *World War Z*, Zombi Post-Apokaliptik, *Zone One*.

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Introduction

The popularity of the zombie apocalypse across various media has drastically increased in recent decades and always excites curiosity due to its inherent social, cultural, political, and environmental messages. Zombies are generally considered an allegorical representation of contemporary problems and disasters threatening human society, especially during social upheaval and fear (Drezner, 2011; Orpana, 2017). The zombie genre takes on a new theme with the dawn of the 2000s: a zombie-creating virus. Thus, in contemporary fiction, we now witness mysterious zombie pandemics stemming from biological warfare, which results in a virus or ecological collapse. Analogically speaking, zombie popular culture can easily be seen as a site of environmental narrative shaping and framing the audiences' understanding of ecological systems and their destruction by societies mainly situated in industrial-capitalist countries (Abel & Stephen, 2008). In line with this notion, the decomposing zombie body is philosophically and physically similar to how the environment is deteriorating. Therefore, the themes of collapse, survival, security, resilience, human responsibility, and resource shortage dominating the zombie narratives can be found at the center of nearly all contemporary environmental debates (Murphy, 2017). Moreover, the current cultural fascination with the hypothetical zombie apocalypse, which reemerges with unprecedented frequency, can be seen as a symptom of the widely recognized struggle to envision solutions for real-world environmental degradation (Stevenson, 2014).

The lack of a picture of a habitable future in post-apocalyptic texts due to several reasons, such as ozone layer depletion, destruction of rainforests, extinction of species, and poisoning of water and air, the decline of biodiversity along with overpopulation usually reinforces a sense of hopelessness and inaction in the readers. Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) and other classics of environmental literature have effectively communicated the urgency of environmental issues by projecting the terrifying consequences of inaction. In her famous Davos speech, the climate activist Greta Thunberg calls for urgent, decisive action to address the climate emergency: "*I don't want you to be hopeful. I want you to panic. I want you to feel the fear I feel every day. And then I want you to act. I want you to act as you would in a crisis. I want you to act as if our house is on fire. Because it is*" (2019). Her powerful message with a force of panic and fear about the climate crisis aligns with the term "eco-miserabilism," which describes a fatalistic view of climate change, believing it is too late to prevent severe consequences (Thaler, 2023, p. 318). The discourse of environmentalists is dominated mainly by apocalyptic pictures of approaching catastrophes, including climate change, mass extinctions, and resource depletion, which are echoed in the grim portrayals of societal collapse and survival struggles in zombie literature (Thompson, 2019; Wallace-Wells, 2019). However, to save the world from ecological destruction, people must acknowledge their relationship with the Earth and each other and work collectively to encourage environmental advocacy and sustainability (Martin, 2010).

By drawing attention to the potential consequences of environmental neglect, zombie post-apocalyptic narratives not only reflect environmental concerns and inspire people to adopt a more proactive stance toward ecological conservation (Gordon, 2012; Baker, 2018) but also underscores the theme of "remaking the world after the catastrophic collapse of modern society" (Kaup, 2021, p. 84), which often requires collective action and rebuilding. In this context, despite the overwhelming nature of the situation in zombie post-apocalypse environments, there is still hope for humanity since collective action is presented as the only goal, thereby enhancing the need for

survival skills, adaptability, and the strength of human connections (Perry, 2015). While collective survival and adaptability are crucial for navigating the harsh realities of a zombie apocalypse, these traits alone are not enough to guarantee humanity's future, as the breakdown of social cohesion and moral integrity poses an even more significant threat than the zombies themselves. Without a shared sense of trust and ethical responsibility, communities are left vulnerable to internal collapse, as individuals prioritize their own survival over the group's well-being. The collapse of social order in many post-apocalyptic narratives reveals that humanity's greatest challenge is often its own internal conflicts—fear, mistrust, and selfishness—that obstruct collective survival efforts rather than external threats like environmental destruction or a zombie-creating virus (Berger, 1999). This moral decay highlights the fragile nature of human society, suggesting that social cooperation and ethical responsibility are just as critical as resilience in rebuilding after catastrophe.

In other words, true resilience and adaptability are most powerfully demonstrated in collective efforts—where communities come together to rebuild and sustain each other rather than individual survival alone. This perspective aligns with Caren Irr's observations, which emphasize how recent post-apocalyptic fiction highlights "collective life" and the formation of "new sustainable" social units that are small, nomadic, and flexible (2004, pp. 171-172). This communal resilience emphasizes the importance of cooperation, empathy, and shared resources, showing that humanity's strength lies in individual perseverance and its capacity to foster relationships and work collectively toward a common goal. These qualities are innate, wired into our biology and psychology, shaping how we adapt and survive in the face of adversity. This thematic focus is exemplified in works such as Max Brooks' *World War Z* (2006) and Colson Whitehead's *Zone One* (2011), which illustrate the crucial role of collective resilience in overcoming apocalyptic challenges and underscore the importance of hope for humanity's salvation and ecological preservation. This paper argues that resilience and ingenuity are fundamental to human nature, as evidenced by how communities adapt and rebuild in the aftermath of a zombie apocalypse in both novels. This assertion challenges the traditional portrayal of post-apocalyptic settings as inherently doomed, instead highlighting the capacity for renewal and progress for human societies and the planet.

Brooks' Survivors Against Solanum: The Zombie-Creating Virus

In his zombie-apocalyptic novel *World War Z: An Oral History of the Zombie War* (2006), American author Max Brooks presents a collection of survivor reports conveyed by an agent from the United Nations Postwar Commission after an outbreak of zombies. Tim Lanzendörfer (2014) argues that the novel employs the zombie apocalypse to expose several cultural, political, and economic fears in the early 2000s. These fears include concerns about governmental incompetence, military overreach, and the vulnerability of social structures in the face of catastrophic events. On the other hand, Johannes Fehrle asserts that Brooks' novel combines anxieties of an ecological disaster and migration by using the epidemic narrative to highlight "a fresh feeling of a global capitalism problem" (2016, p. 529). In this sense, ecology and migration are intertwined with capitalism and its systemic exploitation of both human and non-human resources, leading to unfair income distribution and ecological catastrophe (Fehrle, 2016). Thus, the novel can be interpreted as an allegory for environmental degradation and its devastating effects on human well-being, and the "new viral zombie," described by Sarah Juliet Lauro (2011,

p. 235), represents the novel's environmental concerns. As a viral entity, the zombie represents the unstoppable spread of ecological damage and its widespread impact on human societies. This allegorical interpretation implies that the novel's zombies are not just monsters but also representations of the environmental crises that threaten the planet's future.

To understand the roots of this environmental zombie outbreak, we must focus on Brooks' first book, *The Zombie Survival Guide* (2003), an essential prequel to *World War Z*. *The Zombie Survival Guide* offers a rational explanation for the new viral zombie: Solanum, a virus that kills the host, contaminates the brain, and turns it oxygen-independent, enabling it to function without the assistance of a body. Moreover, the virus is spread through fluidic contact, turns its victims into mindless zombies in 24 hours, and creates irrational, unthinking undead whose only goal is to assault breathing human beings to spread the infection. This description makes a terrifying scene as the virus quickly takes control of the infected people, causing them to attack and devour their human victims at high speed while spitting blood and grotesque vomit from their dead bodies. The rapid transformation and grotesque behavior of the infected underscore the visceral horror associated with the loss of human agency and the relentless spread of the virus. In this sense, as Erik Larsen argues, "*In the age of mass zombie culture, the zombies are conspicuously unhealthy*" (2022, p. 180), thereby directly expressing "*our fears of endemic health crisis, genetic susceptibility, chronic disabling conditions, and infectious outbreaks in a globalized world*" (2022, p. 181). Hence, given the high degree of concern about contagious diseases, lethal flu viruses, and even biological warfare that would employ diseases as weapons in our modern global environment, it is plausible to suppose that Brooks' work is a metaphor for the genuine, contemporary phobia concerning illness and infectious disease.

The Zombie Survival Guide also cautions readers not to dismiss any sections as fictitious because every lesson is grounded in historical reality, establishing a connection between zombie narratives and real-life events. Accordingly, the novel's final chapter, which recounts human history, makes the following claims about the possible causes of zombie outbreaks: Egyptians dissecting the brains out of their mummified bodies (Brooks, 2003), the disappearance of Viking communities in Greenland (Brooks, 2003), the elimination of the Roanoke colony in Virginia (Brooks, 2003), the demolition of the Knudhansen Party on the trail to California in a manner reminiscent of the Donner Party (Brooks, 2003), experiments carried out by the Japanese Imperial Army in Manchuria in 1942–1943 (Brooks, 2003), and several other more recent events happening worldwide. Brooks' novel and the real-world events could prove that nature can turn against humanity in retaliation for human greed and error in exploiting the environment, like mindless zombies. When discussing what to anticipate regarding public fear during the early phases of the COVID-19 pandemic, Brooks provides the following information in an interview: "*Unfortunately, that [mass panic] happens in many crises. People lose their minds, and they do irrational things, and they hurt each other*" (Wilkinson, 2020). As is evident from this statement, unfortunately, humans cannot foresee the repercussions of their irrational behavior and ignore that behaving in harmful ways to the planet leads to the destruction of others and themselves. Human beings have proved to be capable of surviving in the face of extreme events and natural disasters such as unanticipated floods, tsunamis, earthquakes, and volcanic eruptions, as well as infectious disease outbreaks — significant epidemics and pandemics such as plague, cholera, influenza, and coronaviruses (Piret & Boivin, 2021). Despite these challenges, the resilience and adaptability of

humans provide a glimmer of hope for overcoming even the direst circumstances, as is also exemplified in Brooks' *World War Z*.

At the beginning of the narrative, Brooks portrays the nature of the new zombies when the agent of the United Nations Postwar Commission reports an encounter with a twelve-year-old in a Chinese village, later known as "*patient zero*" (2006, p. 5). According to this record, the boy is a source of fear not only for the villagers but also for the agent himself:

The boy's skin was as cold and gray as the cement on which he lay. I could find neither his heartbeat nor his pulse. His eyes were wild, wide, and sunken back in their sockets. They remained locked on me like a predatory beast. Throughout the examination, he was inexplicably hostile, reaching for me with his bound hands and snapping at me through his gag. His movements were so violent I had to call for two of the largest villagers to help me hold him down. (Brooks, 2006, p. 7)

Described as a predatory beast, this new-millennium zombie is diagnosed by the Chinese doctor as a victim of a viral infection and requires collective force to be kept under control. This infected boy can mirror the more significant issues humans face during global crises, such as the threat of death, the lack of resources, and the conflict of the social and interpersonal strife that arises under stress. Thus, these challenges can be addressed collectively rather than individually, as in the case of holding the boy down during his examination. However, in the novel, when the Chinese government attempts to cover up the infection and suppress information, they cause the rapid and uncontrolled spread of the virus, resulting in mass casualties, the fall of cities, and the eventual collapse of the Chinese government. One can conclude here that Brooks underscores the dire consequences of prioritizing secrecy over collective action in times of global crisis.

In *World War Z*, Brooks openly advertises collective readiness and strategic action for any possible threat of destruction, either natural disasters or human-caused destruction. He provides numerous examples of collective preparedness as a survival strategy to combat the global zombie invasion. Creating safe zones where people can live without concern for zombie attacks is one example of collective preparation. Even if these zones are far from ideal, they offer hope for salvation despite the bleakness of the future. To illustrate, according to one of the reports, Paul Redeker, a South African politician, devises a contentious plan to sacrifice a sizable percentage of the populace to save the rest, arguing that "*trying to protect everyone would stretch the government's resources to the breaking point, thus dooming the entire population*" (Brooks, 2006, p. 63). Redeker's plan sounds harsh and controversial, but it exemplifies the willingness to go to any length to ensure the survival of humanity in the face of extreme adversity. This plan also indicates that practical and collaborative survival strategies can require difficult decisions for the greater good and that organized, collaborative action can lead to survival even in dire circumstances. Although his plan makes "*Paul Redeker one of the most hated men in South Africa,*" it saves a significant portion of South Africa's population from destruction (Brooks, 2006, p. 63). The cold-blooded nature of the Redeker plan in the narrative illustrates the physical, psychological, and ethical challenges individuals and societies could face during times of global outbreak.

Another example of collective preparation as a survival strategy presented in the novel is the "*Road to New York*" campaign from the United States (Brooks, 2006, p. 185). When the zombie outbreak starts, the country cannot avoid widespread chaos and panic, which leads to noteworthy

casualties and loss of control over large areas. However, once military and civilian authorities collaborate, a crucial aspect of the campaign, they could develop a more organized strategy to reclaim and secure the previously lost territories. As in his report, Todd Wainio from Denver, Colorado, relates: “*The grand strategy was to advance as one across the Great Plains, across the Midwest, then break off at the Appalachians, the wings sweeping north and south, shoot for Maine and Florida, then grind across the coast and link up with A.G. Center as they slogged it over the mountains*” (Brooks, 2006, p. 185). As a part of this organized strategy, people are relocated to defensible areas, specifically in the Rocky Mountains, where safe zones are established, and supply chains such as food, medical supplies, and ammunition are secured. Over three years, three leading Army Groups witness the horrors of the global zombie invasion: “*The ones infected early in the war, they were starting to get pretty grody, all deflated, parts of their skulls starting to show, some bone poking through the flesh*” before they could “*sanitize the battlefield*” (Brooks, 2006, p. 186). Through this campaign, the novel highlights themes of cooperation and resilience and illustrates how collective preparation and strategic action are essential for survival in the face of a global catastrophe. By doing so, one can argue that the conventional view of post-apocalyptic societies as inevitably doomed is challenged, presenting instead a vision where human ingenuity and collaboration lead to renewal and progress.

What makes Brooks’ novel so significant is the clarity of the message that its post-apocalyptic vision undoubtedly includes enhanced communitarianism as one of the survival strategies for human societies. The post-war humanity depicted in the novel “*has established a coherent system of international cooperation and a restructured but resilient capitalist economic system and has obtained a clearer appreciation of private, communal cooperation*” (Lanzendörfer, 2014, p. 117). For example, the final chapter of the novel titled “*Good-Byes*” offers insights into how the latest technology has reduced the world’s dependency on fossil fuels, replaced global economies with local ones, and emphasized international collaboration (Brooks, 2006, p. 193). This transition not only promotes environmental sustainability but also strengthens regional communities by providing them with reliable and self-sufficient energy sources. North Korea’s early detection and information sharing about the zombie outbreak via its intelligence networks exemplifies such practical international cooperation. As Hyungchol Choi, deputy director of the Korean Central Intelligence Agency, asserts, “*No country was better prepared to repel the infestation than North Korea*” (Brooks, 2006, p. 117). Thus, the North Koreans help other countries to realize the seriousness of the threat, catalyzing global awareness and action against the zombie-creating virus. This effort demonstrates the critical role of international collaboration in managing and mitigating environmental crises, such as the fatal zombie outbreak in *World War Z*, defying conventional views of post-apocalyptic environments.

Along with the themes of enhanced communitarianism, international cooperation, and restructured economic systems for survival, Brooks offers a way to keep hoping by setting his book ten years ahead following a zombie apocalypse. In this post-apocalyptic world, the story of Jesika Hendricks and her family represents the importance of perseverance and the human capacity to adapt and survive despite extreme conditions. After the initial outbreak, Jesika Hendricks and her family retreat to Canada’s remote wilderness, thinking, “*Once the temperature dropped and the undead froze, some us might be able to Survive*” (Brooks, 2006, p. 73). Her survival demonstrates the enduring hope and determination of individuals facing life-threatening challenges. Another example can be given from The U.S. military’s initial failure at the Battle of

Yonkers when the military forces are entirely overwhelmed by the zombies' sheer numbers and unrelenting progress. In his report, Todd Wainio from Denver, Colorado, describes the Battle of Yonkers as a “catastrophic failure of the modern military apparatus” since they cannot biologically “shock and awe” the enemy (Brooks, 2006, p. 61). The failure of this battle against the undead leads to a complete reevaluation and restructuring of military tactics, such as creating more mobile, adaptable units. The military's transformation, thus, represents hope through learning and adaptation: the capacity to overcome early setbacks and create new, effective strategies shows the strength of positive change and resilience in the face of a common enemy. Brooks illustrates how, even amidst chaos and devastation, humanity can find ways to adapt and evolve, offering a vision of perseverance and renewal in post-apocalyptic settings.

Although Brooks' *World War Z* voices the pressing concerns of the contemporary reader, human victory over zombies is achieved, and the remaining population eventually survives the horrifying zombie war. In other words, while the outbreak of zombie infection has scourged the whole world, humanity has learned to adapt and collaborate more effectively, restructured its economic systems to be more resilient and equitable, and used technological advancements to create a sustainable future. Cuba, for instance, has become a financial powerhouse while other nations develop new technologies and sustainable practices to reduce their reliance on fossil fuels (Brooks, 2006). These rebuilding efforts in the narrative highlight the possibility of renewal and growth following a disaster. The global shift toward more sustainable practices and the emphasis on local economies offer hope for a better, more resilient future. By emphasizing these themes, Brooks conveys a hopeful message about the power of collective action to overcome even the most daunting challenges of post-apocalyptic environments. Hence, there is hopeful regeneration for humanity and the Earth's ecological systems, as this interference with the natural order of life and death warns people against the potential destruction of the environment.

Whitehead's Sweepers Versus Skels and Stragglers

Using zombies as a cultural metaphor, one can better grasp present-day national, racial, and political-economic concerns. In line with this notion, Colson Whitehead's *Zone One* (2011) establishes itself in a long line of zombie literature that provides the reader with the “system of expectations which drive our interaction with texts” (Frow, 2006, p. 104). Following the novel's release, commentators have discussed how the story offers a unique critique of corporate capitalism (Sollazzo, 2017), imagines a restricted post-racial utopian world (Saldivar, 2013), and explores racialized biopower (Hurley, 2015). Despite bestowing the reader with a temporally critical perspective, the post-apocalyptic environment of the novel can also serve as an allegorical portrayal of contemporary contagious diseases. On the one hand, the zombie outbreak portrayed in the novel, similar to real pandemics, serves as a commentary on the anxieties about unchecked disease spread and societal collapse (Lanzendörfer, 2015). On the other hand, in an era of globalization, whether an actual disease or the spread of migrants is the concern, outbreak scenarios transform worries about losing control over the living and non-living world into an awareness of the growing unpredictability of borders, whether they be national, physical, or social (Fehrle, 2016). Therefore, *Zone One* can also be seen as a literary representation of urban decay and the repercussions of environmental degradation since the zombie universe in the novel is a portrayal of nature recovering the planet through the dichotomy between the pure as survivors and the contaminated as Skels and Stragglers.

In his zombie novel, Whitehead presents a post-apocalyptic world in which one of the few survivors, Mark Spitz, the limited third-person narrator, takes the reader to a dystopian New York City. In this gothic urban nightmare, the Earth has already been infected by a plague that transforms humans into two kinds of zombies: Skels (active zombies) and Stragglers (zombies in a catatonic state). The Skels are contagious creatures aggressively trying to infect living people by biting them and so turning them into fellow Skels: “*They came to eat you — not all of you, but a nice chomp here and there, enough to pass on the plague*” (Whitehead, 2011, p. 60). Contaminating and invading the city, *Skels* are violent and blood-thirsty, which makes them representative of the classic zombies from the zombie genre. As the narrative relates, to survive, “*If it was a skel, he’d kill it; he didn’t see any others around. That was the rule: Don’t leave them around to infect other people if you can get away with it*” (Whitehead, 2011, p. 60). In this sense, the movement of these zombie hordes seems to resemble a blizzard sent to avenge the environmental damage humans have caused. Whitehead expresses concerns about the potentially disastrous effects of climate change, specifically global warming, by describing the zombie apocalypse as either a drizzle or blizzard, depending on the nature of the zombies inhabiting this new environment. Thus, like in Brooks’ novel *World War Z*, the barren, post-apocalyptic landscape in *Zone One* reflects the devastating impact of unchecked environmental destruction, mirroring the damage caused by the zombie plague.

As opposed to the Skels, the Stragglers are much more gloomy creatures, forever haunting whatever locality held significance for them in their previous, non-zombie existence. They decompose until survivors shoot them: “*Their lives had been an interminable loop of repeated gestures; now their existences were winnowed to this discrete and eternal moment*” (Whitehead, 2011, p. 47). As stragglers freeze in time, they look like drizzles, indicating a connection with the ecosystems of planet Earth. Moreover, they become increasingly biological as their dangling limbs, rotted flesh, open wounds, and dripping fluids show that they are formed of bone, ligament, and flesh. By doing so, they also exhibit the biological composition of the human organism in their features, thereby contributing to Sarah Juliet Lauro’s “*eco-zombie concept*” (2011, p. 57), which has emerged due to rising environmental panic. These zombies are not resurrected corpses but rather biological beings categorized as “*the uninfected and the infected, the living and the living dead*” (Whitehead, 2011, p. 3), who seek the destruction of humanity and human civilization. Hence, one can see zombies and their relationship to the metaphor of infectious disease differently if one starts reimagining them “*as organisms that are a balancing force of a linked biological world striving toward homeostasis*” rather than as a dreadful degradation of humankind (Cassity, 2018). However, despite this terrible reality, there is a more profound hope for reestablishing equilibrium and building a sustainable future, evident in the survivors’ meticulous efforts to drive out these zombies and recover their surroundings.

Instead of focusing on the virus outbreak, similar to Brooks’ novel *World War Z*, Whitehead prefers to deliver the story of the survivors, the sweepers, who roam the streets of New York City to make the city inhabitable again. As a survival strategy, hope seems to be one of the leading forces that drives these survivors despite the bleakness of their world. Working as a team, Mark Spitz and two other survivors, Kaitlyn and Gary, are the Omega Unit members, one of several three-person sweeper teams in this post-apocalyptic environment. The Omega Unit is tasked with sweeping out all Skels and Stragglers from a small area of Manhattan called Zone One to enable the resettling of the living within the region, thereby gradually “*rebuilding civilization under*

orders from the provisional government based in Buffalo” (Whitehead, 2011, p. 3). While the emphasis on securing safe zones represents an optimistic shift toward more effective defense strategies, the gradual nature of their work underscores the slow and challenging aspect of the rebuilding process, which requires persistence and determination. Over three days, the Omega Unit, armed with artillery and combat weapons, journeys through lower Manhattan, detailing the horrific realities of the Skels and Stragglers they encounter. The survivors’ ability to adjust to their new reality demonstrates human ingenuity and resilience. Therefore, even in the face of overwhelming situations, their continued efforts and adaptability indicate a belief in the possibility of a better future. Despite the approaching end of the world, the sweepers never give up the dream of one day seeing the world return to normal, thereby underlining the human desire to survive in the face of worst-case scenarios such as a virus-related zombie outbreak.

Despite the pervasive decay and constant threat of the undead, the characters’ struggle for survival becomes a testament to their enduring hope and determination to reclaim their world. In this sense, the Omega Unit and the sweepers highlight the novel’s exploration of collective survival and micro-community formation in this post-apocalyptic world. By emphasizing the significance of acting together, Whitehead demonstrates that survival is a communal effort requiring mutual dependence and support. To illustrate, when a fortune teller straggler grabs Gary’s hand, she “*chomped deep into the meat between the index finger and thumb. Blood sprayed, paused, sprayed again with the exertions of his heart*” (Whitehead, 2011, p. 193); the team immediately helps and tries to save him from the skin’s bite, underscoring their mutual dependence. This incident illustrates their willingness to risk their lives for one another, reinforcing the theme of collective survival. The final chapter’s subtitle in the novel also encapsulates the core survival strategy in *Zone One*, “*Move as a team, never move alone: Welcome to the Terrordome*” (Whitehead, 2011, p. 186). While these words emphasize the importance of unity and collective action in the face of adversity, the term “*terrordome*” evokes a sense of fear and danger, reminding the reader of the hostile environment of the survivors and the need to be constantly in a state of heightened alertness. In a zombie-infested Manhattan, “[*Sweepers*] *don’t need to be feared. Just understood*” (Whitehead, 2011, p. 43), which implies that survival lies in comprehending and adapting to the threat rather than succumbing to fear. Ultimately, like Brooks in *World War Z*, Whitehead underscores that humanity’s survival depends on fostering collective resilience and adaptability amidst the challenges of a post-apocalyptic world.

The novel relies heavily on flashbacks woven into the ongoing story of Mark Spitz’s present-day survival efforts. He takes the reader from one memory to another while fighting and eradicating zombies. Throughout the novel, Mark Spitz recalls his life before the plague, proclaiming himself as a mediocre person who has learned to get by in school, work, and form relationships with minimal effort. Nothing sounds inspiring or extraordinary about his life before the plague — he had few friends: he lived with his parents before “*the time of Last Night*” (referring to when society collapsed) (Whitehead, 2011, pp. 53-60). However, after the collapse, by killing Skels and Stragglers as a sweeper, Mark Spitz adjusts to the changing needs of his new environment to survive. Now, he belongs to the apocalyptic world of zombies, and his averageness makes him the perfect plague survivor. Having experienced enough pre-plague modern society, he can detach himself from its loss and memories. To survive, as the narrative relates, sweepers need to disassociate themselves from stragglers and force themselves to disconnect from their past lives so that they can dehumanize stragglers. In moments when he does recall his past, such as

memories of his parents or mundane pre-apocalyptic activities, Mark Spitz quickly shifts focus back to the present — knowing that survivors who cling too close to the past end up dying. His emotional detachment and his compartmentalization — a coping strategy to mentally divide opposing ideas, feelings, or experiences to prevent the unease that comes with a contradiction — of memories are examples of coping strategies that help him survive mentally.

According to the narrative, the sweepers and stragglers also have a direct and hazardous connection. It is not easy to distinguish the stragglers from those who suffer from PASD (Post-apocalyptic stress disorder) as both move in a catatonic state, dwelling on the past and reminiscing on the good times. One example can be given from the Marines who lose their way while eliminating the outside stragglers. When memories gradually overcome them, these marines quickly become vulnerable and fall prey to the zombies: “*Some of the marines died. Some of them didn’t hear the warnings until too late for all the gunfire. Some of them lost their bearings in the macabre spectacle, drifting off into reveries of overidealized chapters of their former lives, and were overcome. Some of them were bit, losing baseballs of meat from their arms and legs*” (Whitehead, 2011, p. 71). The military initially sweeps through Manhattan after the plague; many civilians and soldiers like the marines above are bitten and transform into Skels. Whitehead’s narrative emphasizes the fatal consequences of nostalgia and portrays it as a dangerous distraction, an ongoing struggle to move beyond past traumas. Through the sweepers’ experiences, Whitehead delves into the psychological impact of their monotonous yet dangerous work in such a dystopian landscape. The contrast between the characters’ internal struggles and the external physical threats illustrates the necessity for emotional detachment and mental resilience to survive in post-apocalyptic environments.

Towards the end of the narrative, when the border wall barricading Zone One from the rest of Skel-ridden Manhattan starts to fail, Mark Spitz is aware that all walls will eventually fall, and all hiding places are ultimately found. He does not panic; instead, he embraces the situation with a fatalistic acceptance. The novel ends with him walking into an invading swarm of zombies like “*an overflowing river,*” suggesting a deepened connection with nature: “*You have to learn how to swim sometime. He opened the door and walked into the sea of the dead*” (Whitehead, 2011, p. 217). This metaphor also suggests that he has come to terms with the chaotic, uncontrollable aspects of existence, and swimming in the sea of the dead implies a necessary adaptation to the new reality. It can also be construed that there will be no order, a final destination, or sanctuary for Mark Spitz and his fellow sweepers in this dystopian world. Instead, he will always be on the move, striving to save his life, which emphasizes a nomadic existence as the resolution for survival. In other words, Mark Spitz realizes the precarious nature of human existence in this apocalyptic universe and even on this planet. In an earlier scene, Spitz comments on the temporary existence of humanity with these words: “*By the time you hear about a place, it’s gone*” (Whitehead, 2011, p. 169). In the same scene, a fellow sweeper, Mim, also acknowledges the significance of being constantly on the move for survival: “*Have to keep on moving, honey. You stay in one spot, you’re just another straggler*” (Whitehead, 2011, p. 169). One must continuously be on the move to fight against this apocalyptic world’s violence, disillusion, and decay. This nomadic existence stresses the futility of seeking permanence and underscores the necessity of adaptability in a perpetually unstable environment.

To conclude, the zombie apocalypse can be used as a complex metaphor in Colson Whitehead's *Zone One* to address current social issues such as racialized biopower, post-racial ideals, corporate capitalism, and metaphorical allusions to pandemics and globalization. (Lanzendörfer, 2015; Pedretti, 2022). Whitehead's portrayal of a post-apocalyptic world is a stark reminder of the environmental consequences of uncontrolled human activity. The desolate landscapes and crumbling infrastructure in *Zone One* reflect the potential future of our cities if the necessary precautions are not implemented to prevent the catastrophic breakdown of human civilization. Mathias Thaler poignantly observes, "*Human civilization ... has not only come under threat of destruction; it is, in some sense, already dead*" (2024, p. 319). In this sense, *Zone One* offers a commentary on the vulnerability of the human condition and, by extension, the critical necessity for a paradigm shift towards sustainable living and environmental stewardship. In other words, in the face of ecological degradation and the deterioration of urban environments, one must learn to adapt to new realities and work together to restore civilization for survival. Therefore, the themes of impermanence, adaptation, mental strength, and constant motion in *Zone One* resonate beyond the zombie apocalypse genre, reflecting existential concerns about stability, security, and the nature of life itself.

Conclusion

Modern zombie culture obviously mirrors a range of contemporary issues, such as the devastation of the environment, capitalism, neoliberalism, racial inequality, and the economy (Fehrle, 2016). Furthermore, the evolution in the fiction of the zombie-creating virus and its variations throws into relief our fears of epidemics such as SARS, H1N1, MERS, Ebola, and recently COVID-19, emphasizing the global character of ecological concerns. Scott Slovic and Paul Slovic make the case that such writers and artists who act as "*sensory translators*" turn abstract information about climate change "*into viscerally, experientially meaningful discourse*" and "*trigger in audiences the impulse to act individually or collectively*" (2015, p. 219). Hence, the two-way relationship between zombie culture and endangered nature in Max Brooks's *World War Z* and Colson Whitehead's *Zone One* invites the readers to reflect on themselves and their real-world anxieties about survival in an unpredictable and often hostile environment. One can conclude that the survival of humanity depends on its adaptive ability and collaborative skills, especially in the face of the climate crisis. Therefore, these two zombie apocalypse texts can be read as allegories of ecology narratives, which can serve as a platform to protect ecosystems and reinforce ecological sensibility and responsibility for sustainable futures. Ultimately, such narrative texts raise awareness about pressing environmental issues and inspire proactive engagement in addressing them.

Natural disasters are never purely natural but instead always have political, social, economic, and cultural causes and consequences. Therefore, humanity risks annihilation unless it makes a concerted effort to survive, as these different zombie apocalypse-narratives demonstrate. As the global zombie pandemic spreads, humanity finds itself stranded amidst uncertainty and upheaval, which simultaneously leads to hope and despair. While the personal accounts of the survivors of *World War Z* describe the hazardous changes in the social, political, religious, economic, and environmental systems, the survivors in *Zone One* never give up on the idea that the Earth would one day reach a new equilibrium, thereby signifying hope for survival despite the catastrophic failures of the past. Through their detailed depictions of survival and rebuilding,

Brooks and Whitehead offer a more optimistic view of the post-apocalyptic world, underscoring the enduring strength of the human spirit. This hopeful perspective challenges the conventional portrayal of post-apocalyptic worlds as inevitably doomed, instead suggesting that such settings can be arenas for renewal and progress. In other words, in both texts, belief in the possibility of survival points to an overall hopeful message not only for the amelioration of humanity but also for the salvation of planet Earth. This persistent hope is a vital source of strength, showing that the human spirit can envision and work toward a better future even in the most hopeless situations.

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Declaration of Conflict / Çatışma Beyanı: Çalışmada kişi ya da kurumlar arası çıkar çatışmasının olmadığı beyan olunur. / It is declared that there is no conflict of interest between individuals or institutions in the study.

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