The post-apocalyptic zombie narrative has experienced an astounding resurgence of popularity in the last fifteen years. This is in part due to their symbolic flexibility, as they are often mobilized for cultural critique. According to editors of *Zombie Culture: Autopsies of the Living Dead* (2008) Shawn McIntosh and Mark Leverette, the contemporary zombie's adaptability to the shifting cultural zeitgeist is indeed one of its defining features. However, tellingly for this project, they find that zombies often reflect cultural interest or underlying anxiety in contagion and the Other. Indeed, a backdrop of racial politics shapes many texts of the “zombie renaissance” (Hubner 2014). Despite the post-race narrative common to these post-apocalyptic depictions, several scholars have pointed to the anti-Blackness structuring their often racialized presentation.¹

If “post-racial” describes a condition where race no longer matters because racism no longer persists, it, in other words, denotes the state of being beyond race. Of course, the idea of the post-racial exists as a fantasy, both in the colloquial understanding of the word fantasy as the opposite of reality but also in the sense that, to some, ceasing discussions on race and ending social movements and policy geared towards creating equitable futures is something to be fantasized about. Many zombie renaissance narratives enact the post-race fantasy, projecting into their visions of the future their desire to consign racial issues to the past. Exploring undead narratives from the eighties to the aughts, Annalee Newitz writes that these narratives “are preoccupied with the way anachronistic race relations exist alongside those of the present day, like zombies among the living” (91). Caravan points out an even greater degree of racism in contemporary zombies. Noting that open violence upon the zombie is justified as it is a threat no longer considered as human, he argues that these narratives can function as a means for white-dominant cultures to exercise fantasies about doing violence against the racial other (439).

**The Post-Race Utopian Fantasy and the White Utopian Reality**

Some contemporary zombie narratives reflect the naive progressivism of their authors who use the zombie apocalypse trope to imagine a more equitable future, imagining essentially a post-race utopia-within-dystopia. In *Zombies, Migrants, and Queers: Race and Crisis Capitalism in Pop Culture*, Camilla Fojas casts this post-race fantasy as an important constituent element of what she terms the “Postcrisis zombie narrative.” Many zombie television shows and films after the 2007–2008 financial crisis, she notes, manifest fantasies about the end of late-stage capitalism. These zombie stories “explore race relations through the lens of capitalism, as both a function of it while signaling a reprieve from its onslaught” (62). At best, post-racial narratives—whether
it be the belief that we are a post-race society, the belief that the end of racism is nearing, or the projection of a naive desire for the end of racism into the world-building of fictional futures—are still dangerous, reflecting an ignorance towards the anti-Black violence and micro-aggressions Black people experience and witness everyday. Though one may be more malicious, these two camps, so to speak, of people touting post-racial narratives equally participate in obscuring the scope and depth of racism in American history, likewise ensuring it will continue in the future, Moreover, even well-intentioned post-race zombie narratives at best fail in creating a post-race utopia-within-dystopia, as Canavan points out, contemporary zombie narratives often reinforce white dominion over minority groups.

Justina Ireland’s alternate history novel *Dread Nation* (2018), in which zombies rise from the dead in the midst of the Civil War, remixes the zombie narrative trend, calling upon the zombie not only to foreground the historical abuses faced by Black Americans but also the legacy of systemic racism in the present. Reading the novel in the context of contemporary zombie narratives highlights the erasure of both historical and contemporary anti-Blackness inherent in post-racial discourse. Particularly focusing on the novel’s white supremacist utopia, a small frontier town called Summerland, I argue that *Dread Nation* undermines the post-race utopian ideal common to post-crisis zombie narratives and in fact magnifies the failure of such an ideal to come to fruition. The post-race fantasy and fallacy are reflected in the structure of their communities in—and moving across—space. The real utopian fantasy here is the maintenance, if not the enhancement, of white heteropatriarchal status quo. Summerland models the homogenizing function of America’s race-centered utopian ideal. It exemplifies how perceived threats to the prevailing social order engender the creation of reactionary utopias intimately tied, in various forms, with apocalyptic projections.

*Dread Nation* follows protagonist and first-person narrator Jane McKeene, who is saved from her fate as a slave when the zombies (called “shamblers” in the novel) rise shortly after her birth, effectively ending both the war and chattel slavery. The novel’s legal novum, however, establishes a new form of forced labor. After the Years of Discord, the chaos period following the initial outbreak, a restructured United States government passes the Negro and Native Reeducation Act which “mandates that at twelve years old all Negroes, and any Indians living in a protectorate must enroll in a combat school ‘for the betterment of themselves and of society’” (Ireland 116). Seventeen years after the outbreak we find Jane at Miss Preston’s Combat School for Negro Girls in Baltimore. This white-run school teaches Jane and her cohort combat skills such that they may one day “work” as Attendants for aristocratic white women, essentially serving as body guards and “protectors of virtue” (Ireland 10).

We then move to Summerland, where Baltimore’s mayor, Abraham Carr, sends Jane as punishment after she steps out of bounds one too many times. Summerland is organized around the ethos of the Survivalist party, which promulgates rhetoric on racial difference and amasses a following through the promise of safety and greatness. This segregated town is run by Sheriff Snyder—a former plantation overseer in South Carolina—and his pastor father. They force Jane
and other Black captives to patrol its outer walls and exterminate any zombies attempting to breach. The importance of the wall in Summerland and the novel’s references to “greatness,” an invocation of Trumpian rhetoric, make it quite clear that *Dread Nation*’s alternate history also reflects and critiques material and socio-political realities of the present.

Summerland may appear as a foil to the world presented in post-crisis zombie narratives wherein multi-ethnic groups move freely across previously policed spatial and social boundaries. However, we may in fact read Summerland as a magnification of the ethnoscapes inherent in the post-crisis narrative as characterized by Fojas. In these narratives:

> Race and ethnic differences are surmounted and absorbed into a primitive and utopian community formation that is outside any social ordering and institutions but remains fundamentally patriarchal, heterosexual, and white. This community is a refuge from the predations of the dead and represents the remaking of institutions, reforming and revising them to more conservative, autocratic, and morally rigid formations. (Fojas 62, emphasis added)

In creating a literal utopia that is governed by white-supremacist Christian fundamentalists through Summerland—one that is indeed built upon the reinstallation of conservative and morally rigid institutions—Ireland’s novel magnifies the fact that the communities in post-crisis narratives, and the real world from which they are derived, fail to reflect a post-race society. She likewise highlights the fallacies inherent in the post-race fantasy, a goal as Ramón Saldívar and Cameron Leader-Picone both point out, is common to many Black authors today. As the government in *Dread Nation*, like the zombie itself, rises from the dead after a period similar to the post-crisis zombie narrative world and proceeds to cooperates with racist communities such as Summerland, Ireland suggests that the world in these shows is always liable to return to previous forms of oppressive rule.

**The American Small Town: A Case Study in the National Ideal**

Utopian narratives are ingrained in the national imagination, and after John Winthrop’s infamous “City on a Hill” speech, the New World’s utopian promise became centered on small towns and communities. As this narrative developed in social discourse and literature, the small town came to represent the embodiment of American ideals and a model to emulate. This model undoubtedly was (and is) white and heteropatriarchal, a homogenizing force. Historically, small towns have been intentionally created on frontiers and in heterogeneous pockets in order to enforce such an ‘ideal’ (Poll). *Dread Nation* dramatizes this reality, highlighting the racist foundation of the American utopian ideal. If not already clear in the town’s name, Mayor Carr has clearly been inculcated in the American utopian fantasy and its promise of safety. He tells Jane: “Imagine it, a utopia on the Western plains, safe enough to withstand any shambler attack. . . . America, as it should be, once more . . . a city on a hill, a place where people can raise their families without worrying about any of this nasty shambler business” (Ireland 181). He thus co-opts Winthrop’s language, positioning Summerland as a model for other towns to emulate.
Ireland’s speculative utopian small town is a distinctly fruitful example of America’s race-centered utopian project because it is situated in a virological zombie narrative: utopia, in its pursuit of perfection, is by necessity built upon exclusion and eradication in both an ideational and material sense. An individual or group that conflicts with the norm, or that represents ideologies that go against the norm, are treated as contagions that must be homogenized or eliminated through various means. The virological zombie thus serves as a parallel for this practice. Moreover, Summerland, and the novel as a whole, reflects how this exclusion and fanaticism are built upon fears of cultural annihilation, literalizing such fears in its apocalypse setting and through the apocalyptic rhetoric of its reactionary characters, as this paper will later explore. The project of assimilation and eradication in the American utopian ideal is best reflected in its model, the utopian small town, which reveals how this project is enacted through scapegoating and through creating geographic and temporal isolation.

Ireland’s project here aligns with many SF authors of color who highlight how SF tropes and figures reflect their own experience. In her exploration of contemporary SF by authors of color Joy Sanchez-Taylor coins the term “double estrangement,” linking Darko Suvin’s concept of “cognitive estrangement” with W. E. B. DuBois’s “double consciousness” (7). As many SF authors of color are “more likely to identify with the alien other,” SF offers the opportunity for cultural critique, to “presen[t] the unfamiliar as familiar” (Sanchez-Taylor 7). Moreover, “altering established SF tropes,” Sanchez-Taylor writes, SF authors of color also turn this critique inwards, drawing attention to and combating SF’s white normativity (7). Dread Nation’s context and intertextuality bring to light the ways in which fears of contagion and annihilation are intertwined with racism and/or racial anxiety both in the diegetic world of contemporary zombie narratives and in the culture and contemporary moment that shape them and drive their production. In other words, fears of social change lead to apocalyptic imaginings and utopian fantasies that reinstall, as evidenced in their community dynamics, the white hetero-patriarchal norm.

Summerland’s racist impetus reflects the fears of the “annihilation” of a racialized order in the face of societal changes. In Summerland’s church, Jane meets an unnamed white man who tells her: “‘We have no need for Attendant companions to live alongside our fair blossoms, no matter what Mayor Carr has instituted in those heathen cities of the east. Here, we have worked to reestablish the Lord’s natural order’” (Ireland 229). Its homogenizing project is further on display in that Jane is barred from entering the church for “bearing the Curse of Ham” (228). The racist and heteropatriarchal ideals of the town are channeled through religious symbology and terms. The term “Curse of Ham” was used to cast Black people as moral contagions, which are contrasted here with a symbol of white (female) purity, and this language is then weaponized here to police Jane’s movement, pushing Black people out of spaces central to the town.

Ireland translates pre-existing Christian-supremacist rhetoric into her speculative world. This then informs Pastor Snyder’s sermon to the population of Summerland within its segregated mess hall. He attributes the zombie apocalypse to God’s punishment for the Civil War and the abolitionists who “unleashed the Sinners Plague of the Dead” (Ireland 254). He claims that they
are a violation of “God’s order” and “God’s plan,” which is specifically racialized as he condemns thoughts of racial equality—and implicitly Black people—saying, “It was hubris to think we are all equal in His eyes, friends. Not in this world . . . For failing to understand this law,” Snyder goes on, “He has unleashed His wrath upon us” (Ireland 246). He thus scapegoats anyone believing in racial equality for this apocalyptic epidemic. Snyder’s scapegoating—and its foundation in pre-existing racialized religious rhetoric—reveals how projections of apocalypse relate to social structures; fears of annihilation amount to perceived threats to an existing social order. Such fears are then mobilized to scapegoat Black people and allies which is essential in the maintenance of his utopia, as it becomes a mechanism to reinscribe white supremacy and normativity.

The relationship between scapegoating (an ideational apparatus to control the community) and geographic isolation (a material and spatial enforcement of control) becomes clear in this scene. After his sermon, Snyder pointedly looks to the space in the mess hall—far removed from where he stands amongst the tables of aristocratic supremacists—reserved for Black captives and other people perceived as (or actively) threatening the social order. His gaze in this context not only reinforces this scapegoating and exerts his control, it demonstrates how scapegoating works in tandem with the town’s spatial logic, seemingly authorizing their segregated place at the periphery. The mess hall is indeed a microcosm of the town, as the Snyders drive Black people and other “social deviants” to the margins. The utopian ideal in small towns is often situated in the center, typically around a Main Street or town square. Progressive movement away from this center marks a shift in population ranging from the “less than ideal” to the social outcast to the sub-human Other. The position Black people occupy at the extreme limit of Summerland patrolling the outer wall serves as a reminder that they must adhere to the community’s racist regulations, as they are always vulnerable to being cast beyond the wall. In fact, we learn that the Sheriff has done just that with dissidents, pushing one of Jane’s older classmates from Miss Preston’s over the wall, defenseless, to be attacked by zombies.

This project of segregation and isolation also occurs on a broader scale. Summerland falls in line with other utopian towns and communities in literature that rely on geographic isolation—evident here in its frontier position and its walled structure—and temporal isolation. This town’s social order is permitted by its distance from what we’ve seen the unnamed man in the church refer to as the “heathen cities” of the East. Such a characterization of cities, in fact, reflects the interrelationship between geographic and temporal isolation as it pertains to the homogenizing project. In reading the small town as a source and function of national identity, the locus of dominant narratives, Ryan Poll posits in Main Street and Empire that the small town symbolizes the past, a foil to the “modern” city. Cities emerging in the nineteenth century were places where black and white people frequently crossed paths, sharing social spaces unmediated by plantation politics, and, as a result, became places with comparatively (I say this lightly) more progressive politics. In the white supremacist mindset, “city” was synonymous with racial mixing, with dangerous and contagious ideas. When read alongside Mayor Carr’s framing of Summerland as restoring order by way of “going back,” this comment on “heathen” cities shows that the
geographic isolation of and within this small town is also a temporal project—fighting against the modernizing cities by reinstating, and attempting to spread as model, the plantation society past. The rejection of modernity in this backward-gazing small town engenders a crisis of futurity for Black people quite literally, reflecting, as GerShun Avilez has pointed out, the distinctly spatial element of injury to the injury-bound subject.\(^\text{14}\)

Both within the diegetic world of the novel and the (zombie) apocalypse narrative mode that it evokes, *Dread Nation* highlights the function of apocalyptic rhetoric/apocalyptic projections in this spatio-temporal isolation, serving as a mechanism in the maintenance of white supremacist utopia. Apocalypse, in other words, can serve as a homogenizing force that is intimately tied with the production of space and conceptions of time. *Dread Nation* dramatizes a particularly Southern way of thinking that Anthony Hoefer terms the “Southern Apocalyptic Imaginary” (SAI). Part of the South’s eschatological obsession stems from the white evangelical protestant conception of Biblical apocalypse—the rhetoric of God’s judgment was (and still is) discharged as a threat against those challenging the prevailing social order. Hoefer argues that religious apocalypse plays a large role “in the production of southern spaces and places, particularly the never-ending discursive work necessary to assert and reassure the division between black and white” (12). This results in assumptions that God sends punishments to the earth when “divine” (read: white heteropatriarchal) order on Earth is threatened. “Within the cosmology of southern evangelical Protestantism,” Hoefer writes, “cataclysmic consequences are often ascribed to any violation of the radically bivalent order” (23). We’ve seen this rhetoric on display in Snyder’s sermon wherein the zombie plague is cast as an apocalyptic consequence of the moral, material, and ideational “illness” or “contagion” of free Blacks, racial integration, and racial equality. Despite the ubiquity of racism across the United States, these fears manifest in apocalyptic discourse specific to the American South, consequently informing the creation of Summerland and its isolationist spatial logic. The South’s racist eschatological fixation in turn shapes the spatial organization of Summerland; it informs the hegemonic mechanisms of control dominant in the utopian small town.

**Temporal Logics in Post-Race Discourse and Apocalypse**

Whether it be the white supremacist utopia in Summerland or the false post-race/post-capitalist utopia-within-dystopia of many zombie renaissance narratives, the construction of these spaces and communities is deeply informed by conceptions of temporality. It goes without saying that as a literary mode, apocalyptic texts—be it the Book of Revelation or contemporary post-apocalyptic SF—revolve around the creation of a new time. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, apocalypse issues a new order, a new time after a great Revelation of absolute truth, and many zombie renaissance narratives maintain this formal concept of apocalypse in creating a radical break in time.\(^\text{15}\) This is evidenced in the portrayal of clock time as anachronistic as well as in the characters’ conception of time based on “before” and “after” the apocalyptic event. In these contexts, apocalypse as a literary and discursive mode falls within a long history of exclusionary practices that reinforce white dominion over the perception of temporality, specifically here within what historian Lloyd Pratt identifies as the historical desire to create “homogenous, empty time”
Matthias Nilges highlights the racial implications of this “aim to singularize and unify time” historically and in our present moment in How to Read a Moment: The American Novel and the Crisis of the Present. He illustrates how it “emerges particularly strongly in the context of the tension between diversity and racial and national identity” (135). The creation of such identity, of course, is the American utopian ideal, historically built upon racial exclusion that is manifest and modeled in the utopian town/community.

Such temporal homogenization is reflected today in the narrative of contemporaneity that divorces our moment from the past, or, in other words, from the history of racism, anti-black violence, and systemic oppression. “The singularization of the contemporary,” Nilges writes “serves as a central mechanism . . . of the homogenization of our social and racial imagination, and as such it is directly bound up with mechanisms of racial segregation, cultural exclusion, and historical erasure” (126). Creating this gulf between the long now and the way back can thus enable discourse that social difference based on race is or can be “resolved.” Applying this history to apocalypse studies, I argue that the temporal logics common to the apocalyptic mode mirror the conception of history and time central to the rhetoric of post-racialists; initiating a new time through the apocalypse provides the necessary conditions for, and can be seen as a form of, temporal homogenization. Manipulating temporality through the use of apocalypse therefore fosters the contemporary zombie narrative's historical erasure, allowing for the post-racial conceit common to them. Indeed, we may even see apocalypse as the literalization of the discourse of contemporaneity. It is completely divorced from the past yet, because post-apocalyptic landscapes are often presented as wastelands, is not associated with movement towards the future: it is the embodiment of the “long now” which defines contemporaneity.

If post-crisis zombie narratives are driven by a naive desire for a society free of social and economic constraints, this desire is paradoxically enacted through a literary and discursive mode that has historically been used to maintain white heteropatriarchal power and to control Black bodies. Creating a fictional apocalypse may thus reflect a desire to bury racism in a distant pastness. The consequences of such desire, wherever it manifests, is that it silences Black voices and obscures anti-Black violence. Dread Nation, on the other hand, resists the temporal logics of the post-apocalypse genre—Ireland refuses to authorize this kind of work by creating a zombie “apocalypse” that does not resemble the same rupture in time found in Abrahamic religious apocalypse or the post-crisis zombie narrative. Though we associate the zombie with the apocalypse genre, Ireland’s novel could better be seen as an epidemic narrative, as the relative similarities in the world before zombies and those after undermine the notion of a radical break, and the resurgence of the government promotes instead a cyclical perspective as it pertains to hegemony, further undermining the linear logics undergirding the post-race progressive narrative. Jane’s daily procedures at Miss Preston's and later at Summerland, for instance, are fully regimented by clock time. Disallowing a full apocalypse, therefore, contributes to the novel’s political work and its criticism of post-racialism, as apocalypse authorizes the post-race fantasy underlying these narratives. Ireland continues this work by subverting past/present/future divides
altogether, pushing readers to rethink conceptions of history by putting the slave narrative in conversation with the contemporary virological zombie and by marrying nineteenth century racist discourse with MAGA doctrine, a counter-hegemonic move common to the neo-slave form.  

The myriad racial anxieties inherent in many contemporary zombie narratives makes it a useful lens through which to explore how they appear in other forms of cultural production, political discourse, social narratives, and the like. They variously reflect fantasies of violence on the racial Other, frustrations or concerns with current racial realities—be it the belief that racial tensions are anachronistic, fears of disruption to the white status quo, naïve desires to imagine a world free of capitalism and racism, or the desire to disconnect the present from the burden of our fraught past. The zombie narrative proves especially fruitful in examining those societal anxieties and social discourse, as it literalizes underlying fears of contagion and annihilation while simultaneously enacting what lies at the heart of the post-race fantasy: a complete and total divorce of the present from the past. The zombie narrative exemplifies the ethnoscapes common to so many SF tropes, creating a perplexing reality for SF authors of color who have both found a home in and been alienated by the genre. Authors like Justina Ireland rise to this challenge, turning SF on its head to highlight the science fictional experiences of people of color and to make the genre more inclusive, critiquing along the way the ethnoscapes inherent in SF and the Eurowestern society from which they are born. Ireland creates a speculative past with an overtly racist white supremacist utopia not to show us how far we've come, but how much is still the same. *Dread Nation* reveals how the American utopian ideal is ostensibly white and heteropatriarchal, how this ideal was and is maintained through discursive and material mechanisms from policing the movement of bodies to controlling perceptions of temporality, our conceptions of history and of the present. And while these realities are deeply ingrained, the zombie bites back in *Dread Nation*.

**Notes**

1. For a history of the cultural appropriation of the zombie in the United States and its racialization in pop culture from the 1930s to today, see Sarah Lauro’s *The Transatlantic Zombie: Slavery, Rebellion, and Living Death*.

2. For more on white-supremacist utopias and the role of race in the American utopian imagination, see Patricia Ventura and Edward Chan’s collection *Race and Utopian Desire in American Literature and Society*.

4. Justina Ireland is not the only Black American author using the zombie apocalypse trope to levy this critique. Colson Whitehead’s Zone One (2011) also features the resurgence of the national government as well as large corporations, and he similarly undermines the post-race conceit.

5. For my argument on the crossover between the utopia and the small town, I am deeply indebted to the research of Zachary Perdieu, Ph.D. candidate at the University of Georgia.

6. While theorists such as Frederic Jameson have developed compelling and fruitful theories on utopia such as considering utopia as praxis, the concept of utopia I am working with here is utopia in the static form, in the early concept of utopia as both good place (eutopia) and no place.

7. For more on the rhetoric of contagion and its relationship with group belonging, see Priscilla Wald’s Contagious: Cultures, Carriers, and the Outbreak Narrative.


9. Jane is actually a double threat to the social order, as her bi-sexual identity goes against the heterosexual “norm.”

10. For more on this, see Ryan Poll’s Main Street and Empire.

11. For example, Herland (1915) by Charlotte Perkins Gilman, Islandia (1942) by Austin Tappan Wright.

12. The Time Machine (1895) by H.G. Wells, Looking Backward (1888) by Edward Bellamy. Some narratives taking place in outer space such as Ursula K. Le Guin’s The Dispossessed: An Ambiguous Utopia (1974) can be seen as both.

13. Melissa Stein expounds upon this in “Nature is the Author of Such Restrictions: Science, Ethnological Medicine, and Jim Crow.”


15. For additional study on Judeo-Christian apocalypse and its role in twentieth century cultural production, see James Berger’s After the End: Representations of Post-Apocalypse.


Works Cited


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