Introduction

On Halloween night in 2010, AMC debuted *The Walking Dead*, the first American TV zombie series. The show dramatizes the struggles of bands of survivors who pick up the pieces after a contagion destroys civilization. For the group the show features, the daily grind at the outset of the series involves scavenger hunts back into Atlanta to secure provisions for a campsite that has been established in the Georgia hills. In episode 2, it is while foraging for supplies that Glenn and Rick (two principal characters for several seasons) meet in downtown Atlanta. Before this, in episode 1, Rick had awakened to the apocalypse in a hospital after being shot in the line of duty as a sheriff’s deputy. Soon after leaving the hospital, confused about what had happened to society, Rick was befriended by a man and his son for a few days, before heading to Atlanta in search of his wife and son. Later, on horseback, Rick rode down the wrong street, one packed with “walkers,” people transformed into the undead due to a mysterious virus infecting the brain. He was driven from the horse and took desperate refuge in an abandoned armored vehicle on the streets of downtown Atlanta. Hiding in the tank saved his life. Listening to Glenn’s advice over the tank’s radio saves it again. Having witnessed Rick’s predicament, Glenn instructs Rick over the radio
how to escape by shooting his way into an alley, where they climb a ladder to the roof to join other survivors.

On the roof, Glenn’s group is unraveling. Each bullet Rick put in the brain of a walker as he made his mad dash to Glenn sounded the dinner bell for the nearby undead. The building is now surrounded, and Merle has decided to use his long rifle to pretend he is trying to win a stuffed giraffe at the fair. He is firing indiscriminately downward off the roof into the crowd of walkers. Clearly Merle is having “fun” even though the other people in Glenn’s hunting party beg and curse him to stop. T-Dog, a Black guy wearing a white T-shirt with “Brooklyn” printed in cursive across the chest and a black Kangol cap turned backward, screams at Merle that he is “wasting bullets we ain’t even got!” The scene is tense, exciting, and instructive for us. Glenn is Korean American, and his crew consists of a white woman, a Black woman, T-Dog, and a Latino. The apocalypse, while certainly a bummer, seems capable of yielding a postracial reality, since we are now presumably mainly at war with the living dead. But Merle is not having any of that multiracial cooperation crap:

**MERLE:** It’s bad enough I got this “taco-bender” (points rifle at Latino) on my ass all day, now I’m gonna take orders from you! I don’t think so bro. That’ll be the day.

**T-DOG:** That’ll be the day? You got something you want to tell me?

**LATINO/TACO-BENDER:** Hey, T-Dog man, just leave it.

**MERLE:** You want to know the day? I’ll tell you the day, Mr. “Yo.” It’s the day I take orders from a nigger!

At this point, all parties are obligated, socially and contractually, to fight, which they do. But Merle is far more brutal, savage, and practiced. He beats T-Dog into submission while keeping the others at bay, including punching Rick onto the concrete roof. T-Dog lies on
his back beaten and bloodied; Merle straddles his chest and points a pistol at his face. The camera’s perspective is at Merle’s right shoulder, providing a line of sight down his (white) right arm, to his (white) right hand holding a (steel-gray) gun in T-Dog’s Black face. This threatening image is held in place for several uncomfortable seconds. Etched on the faces of the others is grief, anger, and resentment. They are all on T-Dog’s side. They are T-Dog. Still straddling, Merle spits on T-Dog’s chest (and on T-Dog’s hip-hop East Coast persona?) and howls, “Well, all right!” Not satisfied with the win over T-Dog, Merle asserts his group dominance by demanding to have a “powwow” about who is in charge.³ “I vote me. Anybody else?” Merle raises his hand as if to signal compliance. The camera angle now depicts Merle as a giant; filming from below, Merle stands tall and triumphant against the sky. The others in turn grudgingly play along, until Rick hits Merle in the jaw with his rifle butt and handcuffs him to a pipe.

**MERLE:** Who the hell are you, man?

**RICK:** Officer Friendly. Look here, Merle. Things are different now.

There are no niggers anymore. No dumb-as-shit inbred white-trash fools either. Only dark meat and white meat.

There’s us and the dead. We survive this by pulling together, not apart.

**MERLE:** Screw you man!

**RICK:** I see you make a habit of missing the point. (Rick crouches above Merle and puts his pistol to the crown of Merle’s head.)

**MERLE:** You wouldn’t. You’re a cop.

Rick emphasizes the fact that he would do whatever it takes to be reunited with his family. Merle seems to resign himself to his fate as prisoner. With the altercation temporarily quashed, the group turns its attention to making it out alive.⁴
The Walking Dead was an immediate smash hit. With its gritty realism, tempered by compassionate (sometimes with villains, too) character development, the show detonated a fan bomb not usually seen with horror genres. Its immense popularity throughout most of its eleven seasons testifies to the show’s significance as a remarkable televisual event. My interest here is to use it as a metonym in a broader discursive netting making up the genre of the zombie apocalypse in the popular US cultural imaginary. The show, then, participates in the production of meaning in a greater cultural system and can deliver valuable perspectives on that greater construct. I am not only referring to the increasingly populated generic scene of undead and infected, a landscape with mysterious dangers teeming in the soil, swirling through the air, and perhaps even falling from space. In The Walking Dead, a contaminated planet may be the cause of everyone’s infection. But I also refer here to the tense, acerbic, pessimistic, and bizarre political culture into which the show launched.

It was barely two years earlier that we had elected the first Black man to be US president, number 44, inaugurating the discourse of a so-called postracial America. The phrase describes the potent feeling that the United States was experiencing a remarkable social moment, and so I argue later in this book (see chapter 4) that the Barack Obama era (2008–2016) came equipped with powerful affective currents regarding social change that were captured and vectored through the emergent zombie apocalypse, both providing intense enjoyment for many and reanimating and revising a cultural imaginary about race and culture. For now, we need only understand that the “postracial” often conjures a scene in which former racialized hierarchies get upset or even toppled.

This popular understanding of the end or transcendence of racism has led to dismissive attitudes—that the postracial is a fiction or a lie—regarding a phenomenon that actually indexes a dissensus. Some people anticipate better days ahead, while others grow grim
with visions of desolation on the horizon. (Still others exhibit apathy toward all such globalizing social terms.) These tensions among ideological and affective sensibilities and dispositions are racialized and gendered, taking the form (repeatedly) of culture wars. For example, note the public controversy that followed the launching of the president’s first initiative during the summer of 2009, the Affordable Care Act (often referred to as Obamacare). At that time, political observers were granted a front-row ticket to a series of laughably depressing performances of political theater, the carnivalesque character of anti-Obamacare town hall meetings. It was while reporting on one of those fear-driven, riotous departures from reality that Chris Hayes, then Washington editor of the Nation, opined on MSNBC’s Countdown with Keith Olbermann that the Obama election “broke their brains.” As dissensus, the postracial promises that there is a place beyond race, but such a promise is a threat to white supremacy and triggers anxieties of white identity formation in general. A postracial America, whether because of an election of a Black man or a zombie apocalypse, is also a post-white America.

In the world of The Walking Dead, Merle’s Georgia no longer has a (Black) president nor a functioning government to provide public services in the name of public safety or sanitation. No fire department, no police, and no garbage pickup. No one “official” to tell Merle what to do, including an IRS agent to tell him he must pay taxes. Free to inflate his personhood into the vacancy left by the death of the politicians and the ruin of regulatory agencies, Merle snorts cocaine; shoots off his gun and his mouth; and by beating up T-Dog, brutishly enacts the postracial fantasy of the reclamation of white male sovereignty. Not only does Rick disturb Merle’s fantasy by embodying the “new sheriff in town,” he entertains a different postracial fantasy—one shaped by the need and desire to cultivate smart and competent teamwork in a crisis. For “Officer Friendly,” racial differences have been transmuted into preferences of zombie tastes: “dark meat and
white meat.” Interestingly, both Merle and Rick are experiencing traumatic insight. They each sense—consciously or not—that there is a dreadful and awful opportunity to make a new world before them. Rick’s new world would center on his family and a group of tough but like-minded, that is tolerant, people. Rick’s pragmatism aspires to equitable, color-blind relations. Merle’s new society is the old society stripped of the elaborate pretense of democracy, fairness, or inclusion. Merle dreams of the renaissance of a world where white men like him openly dominate what he calls “niggers,” “sugar tits,” and “taco-benders.” In 2010, TV audiences would have been keenly aware of, if not deeply invested in, these forms and intensities of feelings. It was very difficult to circumvent the tensions gripping the American polity that aligned with Rick’s (and by proxy Obama’s) and Merle’s (and the Birthers’ or the Tea Party’s) points of view. In fact, one week following the premiere of *The Walking Dead*, the Democratic Party leadership might have wondered about being exiled to a zombie wasteland due to the bludgeoning the Republican Party dispensed on the night of the midterm elections. It seemed as though the GOP was not having any of that multiracial cooperation crap either.

Postracial feelings and discourses are not necessarily racist. They prime us for strong affective releases and contractions that, due to our particular political culture, favor fortification of boundaries and borders. I choose in this work, therefore, to focus on the repetition of vicious reactionary forces against any “positive” promises the postracial might tender. The term signifies a breakthrough, fracture, or rupture to the political operations of a society or community. It seeks to communicate the notion that previous stubborn designations like racial categorizations have loosened their grip on our subjectivities and relations. If there is good news with the recent advent of the postracial, it is that such unprecedented happenings as Barack Obama’s presidency have a chance of being strategically
repeated. This structural interruption could set our world on a different course. Against this capacity of the postracial, tradition is leveraged. Old forms of political power are reauthorized. Antiblack police tactics thrive. It is in this vein that scholars decry the postracial as a panacea or myth. Indeed, I contend that the postracial is the most recent label we have assigned to a phenomenon that is repeating, recurring. The postracial (going by different names in various historical moments) signals a disturbance in the symbolic order—like the election of the first Black president—that sponsors potent bodily and ideological responses of joy, elation, terror, and foreboding. When it is asserted that the United States is a postracial country, we have to reconcile this assertion with the scales and forms of antiblack violence that erupt in rejoinder to any felt challenge to the hegemony of whiteness. This racial violence is fomented by the production of blackened biothreat bodies, is cultivated through rituals of securitization, and is enacted as fantasies of the reclamation of white male sovereignty in a new era of political and ecological domination.

This discursive function of contemporary US postracial discourse utilizes biotropes: a fusion of racism’s force on the body with the mechanics of signification. Biotropes inhabit the touched and the toucher, producing “bodies-in-feeling.” In the context of racial ecologies, biotropes index domination, control, and enjoyment. They materialize yearning, desire, and disgust. The key point is that biotropes turn the language inward, downward. Biotropes cut, burrow, metastasize, and ejaculate. As with digital media, biotropes go viral; they “invade,” “colonize,” and “impregnate.” The body’s vulnerabilities, frailties, and capacities are implicated and questioned with some assemblages of biotropes, depending on geographic specificity and historical contingency. Biotropes profess to tell us what we are made of. They can transform people into blackened biothreats, dangerously exciting bare nature. The postracial fantasies I am interested in
treat biotropes like bullets and bombs—and in the zombie universe, also like bites.

To invoke the phrase “zombie universe” is to immediately get oneself into trouble. Although the zombie seems to figure a deficit—of soul, mind, reason, will, consciousness, and body parts—I believe the zombie is actually excessive. It generates extensive volumes of speculative literatures across the academic spectrum. The very idea of an undead has been molded into various forms in Western philosophical and popular literatures. Not surprisingly, as questions about first principles of life percolated in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, tales like Bram Stoker’s Dracula were often the “pop cultural” reference scholars made for the undead. We can easily include Mary Shelley’s Frankenstein as well. At issue, beyond the romantic moralism and anxieties over the reach of the technological and clinical, is what the “monster” can teach us about life and death. Does the vampire, for instance, represent the negation of life and death or their conflation? My point is that the paradox enveloping the undead has been an intellectual attraction for generations. And zombies have sustained a relation to studies of blackness, energized and organized by an emergent antiblack infrastructure in which hegemonic racial orders are negotiated through ecological fantasies of apocalypse. I will get back to this point shortly, but first, why zombies? Why engage race and politics through a putatively fictional figure when we have a wide array of historical figures and examples to consider? What brought the zombie into the forefront of popular global culture during the first quarter of the twenty-first century and into my own research on race?

On Zombies

It was serendipity. I had been pondering for some time the ethos of race—its basic character as an ingenious, heinous idea. I was
“playing” with the notion that race exhibited undead characteristics, that it was like a zombie. After a trek through various bodies of literature about the zombie, zombification, and the zombie apocalypse, it was apparent that sometime around 2010, various scholars in literary theory, sociology, film and media studies, psychoanalysis, and psychology began questioning the significance of the massive eruption of zombie forms in popular culture. One of the more impressive and interesting developments during this episode was the emergence of Zombie Studies. This designation indexes loosely organized clusters of thinkers and writers coming to terms with a wide variety of concerns associated with this surge in zombie narratives and performances. For example, *The Year’s Work at the Zombie Research Center* is a diverse collection of essays ranging across aspects of appearances of zombies, such as “Zombie Physiology” and “Zombie Linguistics.” The work also features categorizations like “Romero zombie” or “Haitian zombie.” Zombie Studies are scattered across disciplinary boundaries and scholastic outlets as distinct as *Historical Materialism* and the *Journal of Popular Culture*. Between 2010 and 2017, several notable collections and monographs were published that gave shape and contour to Zombie Studies.

A pair of companion volumes appeared in 2011 that in some ways inaugurated the label Zombie Studies and helped set the stage and appetite for colorful and insightful analyses of why the zombie matters so much to the contemporary moment. *Zombies Are Us* and its literal bookend, *Race, Oppression and the Zombie*, edited by Christopher M. Moreman and Corey James Rushton, were published in a series called Zombie Studies. Concurrent with these important collections was the publication of *Better Off Dead*, which included one of the earliest and substantive accounts of the place and role of Haitian history and the “malicious black magic” conjuring the undead. These works were quickly followed by volumes seeking to do what Moreman and Rushton hoped to accomplish in their coupled works:
to “get at the inner logic of the genre.” Highlighting geographic uniqueness, *Undead in the West* (2012) and *Undead in the West II* (2013) track and uncover sometimes obscure facets of living dead memories lingering in Western narratives, especially those racist abuses of Native American imagery indelibly stamped on discourses of genocide. In *How Zombies Conquered Popular Culture*, Kyle William Bishop examines zombie films, comic books, novels, games, and TV shows to suggest a deep cultural fixation on the undead. It is evident that scholars of the zombie’s abjection venture well beyond the zombie’s “inner logics” to explore a variety of social and political impacts. *Thinking Dead* (2013), for example, blends essays regarding antisocial tribal violence with chapters contemplating the phenomenological trauma of the living dead.

Elaborating on an organizational scheme embodied by Moreman and Rushton’s “companion” volumes, the scholarship about the zombie can be divided into one of two overlapping categories: first, a focus on the zombie’s (denied) humanity, and second, on its relation to the (global) social order. What follows is a discussion of how philosophies of humanity and their attendant social theories are implicated in postracial fantasies shaping zombie forms. Put differently, the following examination is guided by the recognition that Western humanism is deeply invested in comprehending and containing the necessarily powerful and dangerous forces capable of disrupting its flows of power. Thus, I highlight works of criticism and analysis seeking answers to vexing and often intertwined questions of food insecurity, health care, climate change, and capitalism alongside queries regarding what any or all of this says about us as human beings. I use these works to make the case that postracial fantasies are themselves generic; that is, they manifest repetitive patterns of discourse and economies of feelings. Their reemergences are historically contingent emergencies of coherence of white self-image and of the world erected for white supremacy. And although there is