5. The Masterless Ocean: *Zone One*

Insofar as it is set in a post-apocalyptic United States overrun by flesh-eating zombies, *Zone One* seems to be an outlier in Whitehead's oeuvre. Yet, this trope has been anticipated in his earlier novels. Given Whitehead's professed love for horror fiction, which "inspired [him] to become a writer," the subject matter of his fifth novel seems more like a logical step than a break with previously established modes.[1] What is more, it is possible—and, I believe, plausible—to read *Zone One* as a sequel to *The Intuitionist*, because it picks up precisely where Whitehead's debut left off: with a view from a window over New York City. The novel begins with an extended analepsis, although readers only realize this after several pages when the narrative almost imperceptibly shifts to the post-apocalyptic present of the novel's diegesis. Mark Spitz, its protagonist, remembers family visits to his uncle's place in a lower Manhattan apartment tower from where he frequently watched "[t]he buildings" (4).[2] In the final pages of the earlier novel, Lila Mae Watson also looks out on the city from the room to which she has withdrawn to complete Fulton's theory of the perfect elevator. Seated at her desk, she occupies a space

1 Colson Whitehead, "Colson Whitehead on Zombies, 'Zone One,' and His Love of the VCR," *The Atlantic*, October 18, 2011, https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2011/10/colson-whitehead-on-zombies-zone-one-and-his-love-of-the-vcr/246855/. See also Colson Whitehead, "A Psychotronic Childhood: Learning From B-Movies," *The New Yorker*, June 4 and 11, 2012, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2012/06/04/a-psychotronic-childhood.

2 All parenthetical citations in the text refer to Colson Whitehead, *Zone One* (New York: Doubleday, 2011).

of intellectual labor separated from the world of manual labor outside. The windows "look out on a factory," and she "feels bad for the buildings these days" since "[t]hey're all doomed anyway."[3] Lila Mae senses that the Fordist city will give way to something else.

When Mark Spitz, whose childhood memory must take him back to the turn of the millennium, watches the skyline, he proves her right:

> Yesterday's old masters, stately named and midwifed by once-famous architects, were insulted by the soot of combustion engines and by technological advances in construction. Time chiseled at elegant stonework, which swirled or plummeted to the sidewalk in dust and chips and chunks. Behind the façades their insides were butchered, reconfigured, rewired according to the next era's new theories of utility. Classic six into studio honeycomb, sweatshop killing floor into cordoned cubicle mill. (5–6)

Architectural changes index the shift from a Fordist mode of production, revolving around the manufacturing sector, to a post-Fordist service economy.[4] The history of urban modernization, which Fulton's elevator metonymically anticipated in *The Intuitionist*, is here rearticulated as a succession of violent acts gutting the anthropomorphized edifices.[5]

Another flashback featuring a panoramic view of the remains of large-scale urban industry follows when Mark Spitz, now an adult, remembers "the withered stunts of the old Jersey docks. Remnants of a dead, seafaring era of trade and commerce" (57). Manhattan workshops have been "butchered"; the deserted port brings to mind "rotten teeth in a monstrous jaw" (58). Once more, the history of capitalist urban renewal leaves monstrosities in its wake. The narrator's choice of words,

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3 Colson Whitehead, *The Intuitionist* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 255, 254.

4 For a reading that focuses on New York City's shift from the "fullness of the Fordist city," where jobs in manufacturing were plentiful, to a post-Fordist service sector, see Andrew Strombeck, "*Zone One*'s Reanimation of 1970s New York," *Studies in American Fiction* 44, no. 2 (2017): 262.

5 Many sections of this chapter are resurrected from material published (or buried) in Marlon Lieber, "The Living Dead in the Long Downturn: Im/Possible Communism and Zombie Narrative Form," *Coils of the Serpent* 8 (2021): 143–68.

however, is not gratuitous but motivated by an event which occurred in the diegetic present which triggers the flashback. Mark Spitz recalls the "rotten teeth" of the docks only after he has narrowly averted being bitten by the "broken teeth" of a "skel," which is *Zone One*'s label for the flesh-eating zombies (57). Appropriately enough, this skel is itself an emblem of post-Fordist work. It only attacks Mark Spitz after he kicks down the door of the Human Resources division in an office building he and his team of "sweepers" are tasked with clearing.[6] The city and its residents are both turned into monsters.

Moreover, Mark Spitz remembers simultaneously watching "monster movies on TV" and his uncle's latest girlfriend invariably complaining that they could not "stand these scary stories" (5). This focus on the girlfriend's disapproving attitude might seem irrelevant, unless they are seen as fictional surrogates for contemporary literary critics whose function is to anticipate the latter's hostile judgment. Indeed, multiple reviewers felt the need to emphasize that *Zone One*, the work of a McArthur fellow recognized as a serious literary novelist, transcended the generic limits of zombie fiction.[7] By paying close attention, however, to Whitehead's artful interweaving of butchered buildings, cannibalistic clerks, and monster movies in the opening pages of his novel, it is easy to see that he self-reflexively mobilizes the pop cultural zombie trope to articulate a reflection on long-term socio-economic transformations and their human consequences, all the while insisting on his novel's literariness.[8]

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6 For an analysis of the HR zombie as an "allegory for the corrosion of character in postindustrial society," see Jasper Bernes, "Character, Genre, Labor: The Office Novel After Deindustrialization," *Post45* 1 (2019), https://post45.org/2019/01/character-genre-labor-the-office-novel-after-deindustrialization/.

7 Carl Joseph Swanson quotes several such reviews in "'The Only Metaphor Left': Colson Whitehead's *Zone One* and Zombie Narrative Form," *Genre* 47, no. 3 (2014): 380.

8 The ambition to fuse social critique, literariness, and popular culture is reflected in the epigraphs to the novel's three parts, which consist of unattributed quotes from Walter Benjamin, Ezra Pound, and Public Enemy. For a discussion of the work performed by the epigraphs, see Heather J. Hicks, *The Post-Apoc-*

In the following section, I will look more closely at Whitehead's self-inscription into the history of both zombie fictions and American literature conceived more broadly. Subsequent sections will provide an analysis of the world Whitehead envisions as well as an interpretation of the skels' metaphoric valence. First, I will show that *Zone One*'s numerous intertexts do not exclusively—or even primarily—comprise other zombie narratives; instead, Whitehead inscribes his zombie novel in the history of representations of protests against inequality. This amounts to an extrication of his skels from the history of slavery and anti-blackness that often informs zombie narratives. Consequently, in the inconclusively post-apocalyptic, late-capitalist world represented by *Zone One*, the majority of the global population, regardless of their racial identity, has been transformed into an expendable surplus, mere obstacles on the path to recovery. Yet, even though existing racial categories have been rendered socio-economically irrelevant, Whitehead's novel suggests that they can be reproduced in and through the embodied dispositions of social agents.

Beneath the Zombie Renaissance

Whitehead's skels are fairly standard instances of the trope of the living dead, which first emerged in George R. Romero's genre-defining 1968 film *Night of the Living Dead*. Initially, the director did not think of the monsters as zombies, but referred to them as "ghouls."[9] Unlike the Afro-Caribbean zombie myth that took form in prerevolutionary Saint-Domingue in the context of plantation slavery and its American cultural industrial descendants, Romero's ghouls are not mindless workers

alyptic Novel in the Twenty-First Century: Modernity Beyond Salvage (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), ch. 4.

9 See Mariana McConnell, "Interview: George R. Romero on Diary of the Dead," *Cinemablend*, February 14, 2008, https://www.cinemablend.com/new/Interview-George-Romero-Diary-Dead-7818.html.

who toil in cane fields or sugar mills under the spell of a sorcerer.[10] In *Zone One*, as in most post-Romero zombie fictions, there is no proper explanation for the skels' origin. The novel is set some time, perhaps even one or two years, after the initial outbreak, and the entire globe has been overrun by the living dead. Its minimal plot spans three days, corresponding to the novel's three parts, in which Mark Spitz and his fellow sweepers move through the eponymous zone in lower Manhattan and search for zombies who have withstood a previous attack by US Marines. That is to say, political institutions have not broken down entirely. There is a provisional government that coordinates the effort to reclaim the United States. Eventually, however, the wall protecting the zone from invading skels breaks down—as it must, given generic conventions—and the novel ends with Mark Spitz's decision to join the horde.

Whitehead is not the only literary author who turned to genre fiction in the early twenty-first century.[11] In fact, *Zone One* is not his first work to do so. Derek Maus notes that Whitehead "flirts with genres and their conventions," such as the detective novel in *The Intuitionist*, but "frustrat[es] the easy interpretations they appear to offer."[12] Still, it is fair to say that *Zone One*—"the greatest American novel of the twenty-first century," in Andrew Hoberek's judgment[13]—is the greatest accom-

10 For an invaluable account of the West African and Caribbean roots of the zombie, see Sarah Juliet Lauro, *The Transatlantic Zombie: Slavery, Rebellion, and Living Death* (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2015); for a history of the zombie's adventures in American popular culture, see Kyle Bishop, *American Zombie Gothic: The Rise and Fall (and Rise) of the Walking Dead in Popular Culture* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2010).

11 See Alexander Moran, "The Genrefication of Contemporary American Fiction," *Textual Practice* 33, no. 2 (2019): 230. See also Theodore Martin, *Contemporary Drift: Genre, Historicism, and the Problem of the Present* (New York: Columbia UP, 2017).

12 Derek C. Maus, *Understanding Colson Whitehead: Revised and Expanded Edition*, (Columbia: U of South Carolina P, 2021), 1.

13 Andrew Hoberek, "Living with PASD," *Contemporary Literature* 53, no. 2 (2012): 406.

plishment of the "zombie renaissance" proclaimed by Mark McGurl in a 2010 essay.[14] Ever since, there has been much scholarly attention to the living dead. Given the latter's polysemy, some critics believe that the search for the zombie's meaning is a hopeless endeavor. This is why Tim Lanzendörfer recommends looking at "the worlds into which fictions inscribe them" instead. Whatever socio-cultural anxiety a given zombie narrative articulates,[15] he claims, they require an apocalyptic setting.[16] The world to emerge from the ruins of the old, however, is not formally prescribed. Thus, the "zombie is a figure of possibilities, not of necessary outcomes."[17] Just what kind of possibilities it renders thinkable, Lanzendörfer asserts, "must be interpreted. It […] requires us to know its history, to read the strata of its sedimentation, to recognize the ways in which anything it does or stands for is tied back to the histories of oppression, revolt, and resistance."[18] In this spirit, I will take a look at how Whitehead's novel inscribes itself into the histories of zombie fictions in particular as well as American literature more broadly.

At first glance, there seems to be an answer to Lanzendörfer's prompt that would hold true for all zombie narratives. Given the zombie myth's historical origin, any contemporary use of the figure will inevitably be connected to the histories of the transatlantic slave trade, plantation slavery, colonialism, and their aftermaths. Thus, as Sarah

14 Mark McGurl, "Zombie Renaissance," review of *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, by Jane Austen and Seth Grahame-Smith, *The Zombie Survival Guide*, by Max Brooks, and *World War Z*, by Max Brooks, *n+1* 9 (2010): 167–76.

15 For a useful survey, see Roger Luckhurst, *Zombies: A Cultural History* (London: Reaktion, 2015).

16 The term "apocalypse" is used colloquially here and refers to the cultural representation of a potentially world-ending event; the label "post-apocalyptic," consequently, denotes the aftermath of this event. This is different from apocalypticism proper in both its biblical and secular versions. On the latter distinction, see Lorenzo DiTommaso, "Apocalypticism and Popular Culture," in *The Oxford Handbook of Apocalyptic Literature*, ed. John J. Collins (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2014).

17 Tim Lanzendörfer, *Books of the Dead: Reading the Zombie in Contemporary Literature* (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2018), 18.

18 Lanzendörfer, *Books of the Dead*, 190.

Juliet Lauro argues, it retains the dialectical relationship between enslavement and rebellion. Addressing the pop cultural appropriation of the zombie myth in the early twentieth century, she adds that it is no longer merely a "metaphor for slavery"; it has become a "*slave metaphor*" which was captured and exploited by the American culture industry to express socio-cultural anxieties without having to face the legacies of slavery and colonialism. Lauro entertains the possibility that Romero's monsters are zombies "in name only" and constitute a shift toward a myth that is more germane to late capitalism. Yet, she concludes that the figure's "origins speak despite the myth's reconditioning."[19] Whatever the manifest topical concerns of a given zombie narrative, its political unconscious will bear the traces of enslavement and racialization.

This is certainly how Jessica Hurley, for example, reads *Zone One*. She regards the zombies as "a walking embodiment of past populations that will not stay dead" and highlights the ways in which Whitehead's novel more or less explicitly refers to the history of anti-blackness in the United States.[20] Hurley and other critics note the use of racially coded language such as the choice to call the provisional government's effort to regain control "Reconstruction," thus equating it with the "failed project of black enfranchisement" and the reestablishment of racial hierarchies after the Civil War.[21] On the surface it seems that old racial categories have become meaningless in the world of Whitehead's novel. "There was a single Us now, reviling a single Them," Mark Spitz thinks (231). Yet, such readings assert, the historical allusion implies that anti-blackness is so pervasive that not even the zombie apocalypse suffices to abolish it.[22]

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19 Lauro, *The Transatlantic Zombie*, 9, 99, emphasis in original.

20 Jessica Hurley, "History Is What Bites: Zombies, Race, and the Limits of Biopower in Colson Whitehead's *Zone One*," *Extrapolation* 56, no. 3 (2015): 312.

21 Justin L. Mann, "Black Insecurity at the End of the World," *MELUS* 46, no. 3 (2021): 6.

22 For other readings which emphasize the novel's reference to the history of anti-black violence, see Grace Heneks, "The American Subplot: Colson Whitehead's Post-Racial Allegory in *Zone One*," *The Comparatist* 42 (2018): 60–79; and Beth A. McCoy and Jasmine Y. Montgomery, "'The Sad Aperture of the Dead': Colson

A key turning point in what it might seem to be a post-racial tale is the revelation, delayed until some twenty pages before the novel's end, that Mark Spitz is black. In fact, his name is merely a nickname referring to the white Olympic swimming champion which he received after refusing to jump into a river to escape an assault by skels and based on the stereotype that blacks cannot swim. According to multiple readings, this late revelation changes everything. Hurley calls *Zone One* a "kind of meta-passing novel," in which the blackness that is hidden "on the surface" stands out "[o]n a second reading."[23] Another text mobilizes Toni Morrison's critique of the tacit presupposition that characters in American fiction are white unless explicitly identified otherwise in *Playing in the Dark* to argue that race becomes "omnipresent" when *Zone One* is read a second time.[24] Both refer to *The Intuitionist* as a text concerned with passing; however, neither notes that Whitehead's earlier novel frustrates the expectation that the discovery of Fulton's blackness provide any significant revelations, as I have argued in chapter one.[25] Lila Mae discovered that Fulton's color did not "matter" on the "level of commerce" in *The Intuitionist*[26]; similarly, as I will argue in the following section, *Zone One* is much more concerned with the way class relations are reproduced during Reconstruction.[27]

This is not to say that the critics who highlight Whitehead's frequent allusions to the history of racialized domination in his fifth novel are

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Whitehead's *Zone One* and the Anti-Blackness of the Book as an Object," *Textual Practice* 35, no. 12 (2021): 1957–72.

23 Hurley, "History Is What Bites," 321–22.

24 Paul Ardoin, "'Have You to This Point Assumed That I Am White?' Narrative Withholding Since *Playing in the Dark*," *MELUS* 44, no. 1 (2019): 175. Maria Bose performs a computationally assisted distant reading to quantify how many implicit or explicit racial signifiers can be found in the novel. "Distantly Reading Race in the Contemporary 'Postrace' Novel," *Textual Practice* 35, no. 1 (2021): 39–55.

25 Thus, Lee Konstantinou's claim that it satirized Morrison's *Playing in the Dark*. See "Critique Has Its Uses," *American Book Review* 38, no. 5 (2017): 15.

26 Whitehead, *The Intuitionist*, 250.

27 See Soren Forsberg, "Don't Believe Your Eyes," *Transition* 109 (2012):141.

simply wrong. By way of inscribing itself into US history, it is inevitably also linked to the violent history of anti-blackness which is an irreducible part of this nation's history. But this is not an insight that *Zone One* needs to spend much effort in revealing. Without sharing his commitment to a Latourian ontology, I agree with Mitchum Huehl's claim that Whitehead is not concerned with discovering or rearticulating the "meaning" of race; instead, he envisions a world in which it is present without posing a major "interpretive problem."[28] The late revelation of Mark Spitz's blackness and its relative irrelevance for the novel's plot serves rather to frustrate readerly expectations that *Zone One* has to make a meaningful contribution to the discourse on race by virtue of its generic affiliation.

So, are there other histories sedimented in the text of Whitehead's novel? For one thing, there is genre history. Carl Swanson points out that zombie narratives establish "a pattern of generic emulation, relationships of competitive *imitatio*," which evoke predecessors just to "do […] them one better" by, for instance, creating gorier special effects. He goes on to show the multitude of what he calls "nods" to zombie films by Romero and other directors which provide Whitehead's "bona fides as a genre fan."[29] But Swanson also pays attention to the media specific strategies of attracting audiences used by zombie narratives. Drawing on Tom Gunning's concept of the "cinema of attractions," he claims that zombie films frequently allow their audiences to indulge in scenes in which "the artifice and excess of graphic dismemberments and eviscerations" outweigh the interest in character and plot development.[30] These moments also partake of the game of "competitive *imitatio*," as audiences do not just expect exploding heads when watching a zombie

28 Mitchum Huehls, *After Critique: Twenty-First Century Fiction in a Neoliberal Age* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2016), 126, 108. See also Lanzendörfer, *Books of the Dead*, 171.

29 Swanson, "The Only Metaphor Left," 381–82.

30 Ibid., 389. See also Tom Gunning, "The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde," in *Early Cinema: Space, Frame, Narrative*, ed. Thomas Elsaesser and Adam Barker (London: British Film Institute, 1990); and Adam Lowenstein, "Living Dead: Fearful Attractions of Film," *Representations* 110, no. 1 (2010): 105–28.

film; "they go to see [heads] explode more artfully than last time."[31] But then, graphic descriptions of the violence inflicted by humans on zombies and vice versa are not exactly what draws readers to a zombie novel in the first place. What does Whitehead offer his readers instead?

According to Swanson, *Zone One* employs "a mode of extranarrative stylization of textual spectacle" through exhibiting not the special effect technician's craft but rather Whitehead's proficiency as a wordsmith.[32] To illustrate this strategy he looks at the following passage:

> One day they noticed the ebb. Impossible not to. The grotesque parades thinned. Slaughter slowed. […]. The soldiers steadied themselves atop the corpses in turn and drew a bead. They made hills. Putrefying mounds on the cobblestones of the crooked streets of the financial district. They rid the South Street Seaport of native and tourists alike […]. Snipers crosshaired on swaying silhouettes six, seven blocks crosstown, that sensible age-old grid layout allowing passage for traffic that traveled at the speed of sound. (76)

In addition to prefiguring the controlling metaphor of the skels as a flood wave which will unfold more properly in the novel's third part, the passage contains an "almost euphuistic use of alliterations" and dozens of sibilants which constitutes an "ornamental excess" of stylization.[33]

More than just demonstrating Whitehead's gift of spectacular prose, it can also be read as an intertextual nod to one of the most canonic of all American novels. Consider the following passage:

> It was while gliding through these latter waters that one serene and moonlight night, when all the waves rolled by like scrolls of silver; and, by their soft, suffusing seethings, made what seemed a silvery silence, not a solitude: on such a silent night a silvery jet was seen far in advance of the white bubbles at the bow. Lit up by the moon, it looked

31 Swanson, "The Only Metaphor Left," 395.

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid., 394.

> celestial; seemed some plumed and glittering god uprising from the sea.[34]

This excerpt from a chapter of Melville's *Moby-Dick*, aptly titled "The Spirit-Spout," also contains abundant alliterations ("soft, suffusing, seethings"), assonance ("rolled […] like scrolls"), and sibilants. Whitehead's display of his skills, thus, functions as a self-inscription in the history of (the) great American novel(s).

The allusions in *Zone One* are not confined to the level of style and the use of figurative speech, however. Whitehead's repeated identification of the mass of skels as a "flood" (192) or an "ocean" (243) recall a metaphor frequently used by nineteenth-century authors—the global uprising of ungovernable skels could be aptly summed up with Melville's phrase "the masterless ocean overruns the globe."[35] *Zone One* ends with Mark Spitz's decision to "walk[] into the sea of the dead" (259). The decision to leave his observation post and mingle with the multitude recalls the action of the unnamed narrator of Edgar Allan Poe's "The Man of the Crowd" who enters a "tumultuous sea of of human heads" when he leaves his observation post to follow a particular old man.[36] The thematic point of the aquatic metaphor in both texts is, moreover, to highlight the sheer heterogeneity of the urban masses. Poe's narrator watches a procession of social positions ranging from elites to the destitute pass by the coffee shop whence he observes the crowd. In *Zone One*, Mark Spitz repeatedly stands on top of buildings and surveys the skels:

> The ocean had overtaken the streets […]. Except it was not water that flooded the grid but the dead. […]. The things were shoulder to shoulder across the entire width of the avenue […]. All the misery of the

34 Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick or, The Whale* (New York: Penguin, 1992), 253.

35 Ibid., 299.

36 Edgar Allan Poe, "The Man of the Crowd," In *The Portable Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. J. Gerald Kennedy (New York: Penguin, 2006), 230. To be sure, the metaphorical equation of angry collectives and flood waves goes back much further. See the epigraph by Virgil quoted in Lieber, "The Living Dead in the Long Downturn," 143.

> world channeled through this concrete canyon, the lament into which the human race was being transformed person by person. Every race, color, and creed was represented in this congregation that funneled down the avenue. (243)

Rhetorically this is almost identical with a passage from a book by one of Melville and Poe's contemporaries. In George Lippard's 1851 allegorical novel *Adonai*, the protagonist and his companion

> found themselves suddenly on the borders of an immense multitude, which blackened the plain on every side […].
> It was a multitude of people, gathered from all the nations and tribes of the earth.
> Men and women and children were there, clad all alike in rags, and smitten by disease that had never known relief, and hunger that had never known bread. […].
> And the multitude swayed to and fro, like the waves of an ever restless ocean. […].
> And as they passed on along they beheld the faces of all nations. They saw the faces of all men that people the earth of God.[37]

Whitehead and Lippard write in and about moments of social inequality and anticipate a coming "apocalyptic world revolution."[38] Furthermore, both rely on a trope Julian Stallybrass calls the "spectacle of heterogeneity," which mid-nineteenth-century observers frequently used when discussing urban crowds.[39] Lippard's "immense multitude" as well as Whitehead's "dead multitude" (201) are composed of anyone without regard for their identity. What their members share is merely misery and dispossession.

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37 George Lippard, *Adonai: The Pilgrim of Eternity*, in *The White Banner*, vol. 1, ed. George Lippard (Philadelphia: Self-published, 1851), 83–84.

38 Shelley Streeby, *American Sensations: Class, Empire, and the Production of Popular Culture* (Berkeley: U of California P, 2002), 47.

39 Julian Stallybrass, "Marx and Heterogeneity: Thinking the Lumpenproletariat," *Representations* 31 (1990): 70.

Not remaining content to display his bona fides as a zombie aficionado, then, Whitehead shows in *Zone One* that he can draw on a pop cultural subject while simultaneously being able to write like Melville. If David Reynolds is to be trusted, however, this was already the strategy of Melville and other authors of the American Renaissance. In contrast to the earlier view of the latter as isolated geniuses who rose above the insipid culture surrounding them, Reynolds argues that these writers deliberately drew on popular culture such as popular religion, political pamphlets, sensationalist literature, or vernacular humor. By mixing "cultural codes and strategies" they created a "native idiom."[40] Radical democrat writers like Lippard published texts full of spectacular violence which nonetheless provided canonized authors such as Poe with tropes like the character of the "justified or likable criminal."[41] The American Renaissance authors, Reynolds claims, "immers[ed]" themselves in "the popular" but were able to control this material and used various literary strategies to keep their texts from descending into amorality. Poe's tales, for instance, frequently feature likable criminal characters as well as "enough gore and violence" to remind readers of popular sensationalist texts; yet, he avoids "explicit violence" and instead highlights the detective's quasi-scientific observation of a crime.[42] By drawing on the zombie trope, Whitehead's novel contains a twenty-first-century equivalent of Lippard's multitude. Yet, like the authors of the American Renaissance, he produces "highly polished, formally perfect prose"[43] in order to establish a distance from the violent spectacle of popular zombie films. The popular genre provides him with an idiom, an iconography, and a set of conventions he uses to produce a literary work which deserves to be compared to some of the great works of the canon of American literature.

40 David S. Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2011), 9, 5.

41 Ibid., 200.

42 Ibid., 9, 246.

43 Hoberek, "Living with PASD," 409.

The Living Dead in the Long Downturn

Zone One, a novel about an angry multitude encroaching upon lower Manhattan, was published in early October 2011, just weeks after activists first gathered in Zuccotti Park. Occupy Wall Street drew on the already existing rhetoric of an antagonism between the ninety-nine and the one percent[44] as well as the tactics employed by the "movement of squares" during European anti-austerity protests and the so-called Arab Spring.[45] Thus, Whitehead's novel is an expression of the cycle of struggles which reacted to the 2008 global financial crisis and its management in the subsequent years of economic stagnation. However, by way of its use of the zombie trope as well as its references to mid-nineteenth-century writings, it inscribes itself in a wider history of social inequality and protest. That is, *Zone One* uses the figure of the zombie to express the sense that its own moment is historical; it "make[s] History appear."[46] This phrase comes from Fredric Jameson's description of the purpose of historical novels, although he adds (with a bit of characteristic hyperbole) that due to "our increased historicity today all novels have become historical (when not, indeed, science-fictional)."[47] This is because they cannot avoid reflecting on the "fate of our social system."[48] Contemporary historical novels must be speculative and imagine possible futures not in abstraction but by extrapolating from observable historical tendencies. In fact, at least one reader has proposed that *Zone One* is a kind of historical novel that contains "a

44 See Joseph Stiglitz, "Of the 1%, By the 1%, For the 1%," *Vanity Fair*, March 31, 2011, https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2011/05/top-one-percent-201105.

45 For an account of the movement's (pre)history, see David Graeber, *The Democracy Project: A History, a Crisis, a Movement* (London: Penguin, 2013); on the movement of squares, see Endnotes, "The Holding Pattern: The Ongoing Crisis and the Class Struggles of 2011–2013," *Endnotes* 3 (2013): 12–54.

46 Fredric Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism* (London/New York: Verso, 2013), 262.

47 Fredric Jameson, "War as a Rhizome," *London Review of Books* 44, no. 15 (2022), https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v44/n15/fredric-jameson/war-as-a-rhizome.

48 Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism*, 298.

postapocalyptic future within the narrative of history itself."[49] That is, instead of giving expression to an emergent national identity, this contemporary historical novel imagines the catastrophic decline of an empire.[50]

Zone One is simultaneously a work of speculative fiction and a historical novel[51] insofar as it grasps the present moment (the time of anti-austerity struggles) as a moment in history (the time of capitalist crises in the longue durée) which prefigures the future (the time of the coming insurrection). Once more, Whitehead imagines a present traversed by multiple temporalities,[52] all of which are condensed in the image of the living dead on Broadway. According to Jameson, historical novels need such "figures of the collective" to "certify the presence of History."[53] At the same time, perceived through the prism of prior theorizations of the historical novel, the characterization of Mark Spitz comes to look entirely generic. His most characteristic quality is his mediocrity: he is "*typical*," "*average*" (9, emphases in original), a "mediocre man" who used to lead "a mediocre life exceptional only in its unexceptionality" (148). On the one hand, this makes him the appropriate hero of a tale about monsters, for only a non-exceptional hero can "offer guidance to the (non-exceptional)

49 Kate Marshall, "What Are the Novels of the Anthropocene? American Fiction in Geological Detail," *Amerian Literary History* 27, no. 3 (2015): 530.

50 On the catastrophism of recent historical novels, see Perry Anderson, "From Progress to Catastrophe," *London Review of Books* 33, no. 15 (2011), https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v33/n15/perry-anderson/from-progress-to-catastrophe.

51 For an account of "postracial" writers (including Whitehead) who employ generic forms such as the historical novel in the service of a "speculative realism," see Ramon Saldívar, "The Second Elevation of the Novel: Race, Form, and the Postrace Aesthetic in Contemporary Narrative," *Narrative* 21, no. 1 (2013): 1–18.

52 See Daniel Grausam, "The Multitemporal Contemporary: Colson Whitehead's Presents," in *Literature and the Global Contemporary*, ed. Sarah Brouillette, Mathias Nilges, and Emilio Sauri (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 121.

53 Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism*, 267.

reader."[54] On the other, the unexceptional hero is the hallmark of the historical novel, as per Georg Lukács, who argues that the mediocre hero is part of a character constellation including world-historical individuals and the anonymous collective. Mark Spitz unites all the qualities Lukács lists—"a certain, though never outstanding, degree of practical intelligence, a certain moral fortitude and decency which even rises to the capacity for self-sacrifice, but which never grows into a sweeping human passion"[55]—and manages to scrape by in the post-apocalyptic wasteland until his final sacrifice. The latter, however, occurs not in the service of the nation, but will presumably turn Mark Spitz into a member of the collective. Fidelity to history in the twenty-first century, *Zone One* suggests, requires a commitment to collective insurrectionary action.[56]

Why is that? That is to say, what kind of world is sketched in *Zone One* and why does it call for revolution? Whitehead himself stresses that it is "pretty close to how we are now" and "not a radically reimagined future."[57] It is plausible to call the novel's representation of crisis a "neoliberal apocalypse," which is Dan Sinykin's term for a "political literary form" which emerged in the context of the "long downturn."[58] The latter term has been coined by the economic historian Robert Brenner, who influentially argued that the "long boom" of the post-World War II decades was superseded by a "long downturn" in the late 1960s and early

54 Lanzendörfer, *Books of the Dead*, 173. Here, Lanzendörfer draws on Franco Moretti's well-known discussion of the literature of terror in "The Dialectic of Fear," *New Left Review* I/136 (1982): 68.

55 Georg Lukács, *The Historical* Novel, trans. Hannah and Stanley Mitchell (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1983), 33.

56 On the notion of fidelity to the revolutionary event, see Alain Badiou, *The Rebirth of History*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London/New York: Verso, 2012).

57 In the same interview he claims that it might be set in 2018. See Colson Whitehead, "Colson Whitehead's Brains," interview by Jennifer Sky, *Interview*, October 28, 2011, https://www.interviewmagazine.com/culture/colson-whitehead-zone-one.

58 Dan Sinykin, *American Literature and the Long Downturn: Neoliberal Apocalypse* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2020), 2. See also Sean O'Brien, "Precarity and the Historicity of the Present: American Literature and Culture from Long Boom to Long Downturn" (PhD diss., University of Alberta, 2018).

1970s. He offers a powerful explanation of the systemic reasons for the protracted problems faced by the manufacturing sectors of advanced industrial economies by pointing out that capitalist competition forces individual capitals to improve labor productivity by technical means. Over time, this resulted in global industrial "over-capacity" and, consequently, downward pressures on the manufacturing rate of profit.[59] From the perspective of industrial workers this was experienced in the form of "high levels of job insecurity and intensified competition for falling numbers of decent jobs."[60] In other words, the working class, whose labor-power was no longer needed for the manufacture of goods, faced increasing precarity and the constant threat of unemployment.[61] It was precisely at the historical moment when boom gave way to downturn that Romero's ghouls—creatures who cannot work but still must eat—emerged from their graves, rendering them the quintessential monsters of the long downturn.[62]

The entire Reconstruction effort portrayed in Whitehead's novel relies on a discourse that very explicitly evokes economic recovery. To achieve this goal, the provisional government must first get "rid of the extra population," as Mark Spitz laconically puts it (217). Insofar as this

59 Robert Brenner, *The Economics of Global Turbulence: The Advanced Capitalist Economies from Long Boom to Long Downturn, 1945–2005* (London/New York: Verso, 2006), xx. See also Robert Brenner, "What is Good for Goldman Sachs is Good for America: The Origins of the Present Crisis," Institute for Social Science Research, UCLA, Working Paper Series, October 2, 2009, https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0sg0782h.

60 Brenner, *The Economics of Global Turbulence*, 156.

61 For an excellent Brennerite account of global under- and unemployment, see Aaron Benanav, *Automation and the Future of Work* (London/New York: Verso, 2019).

62 Hence I must disagree with David McNally's claim that the zombies' potential to articulate a powerful critique of capitalism was lost when they no longer appeared as alienated workers but as "mindless consumers." *Monsters of the Market: Zombies, Vampires and Global Capitalism* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2012), 213. For a more extensive discussion of the living dead, the long downturn, and the limits of the critique of consumerism, see Lieber, "The Living Dead in the Long Downturn."

"extra population" constitutes a "new Them," it is no longer identical with an existing racial category such as blackness. Yet, insofar as the society to be reconstructed in *Zone One* remains structured by the material and symbolic separation of a population as expendable and killable, it remains a racial capitalism.[63] The zombie apocalypse figures not as a world-shattering catastrophe but as a mere setback, a temporary apocalypse, if you will, which can be overcome like an economic slump. "We can beat this," the narrator sums up the hegemonic attitude in the novel, "this is just a temporary thing" (145). While Mark Spitz is skeptical of the prospects of the future, the provisional government in Buffalo is committed to a "new optimism" (35) and uses all kinds of ideological techniques to interpellate "survivors, half-mad refugees, a pathetic, shit-flecked, traumatized herd" as members of the "American Phoenix" which will rebuild the country from the ashes (79).[64] Additionally, Buffalo is actively interfering in the remains of the economy and promises future "tax breaks" for those corporations who employ their productive capacities in the service of Reconstruction (39), because "in the days to come" they expect "thriving industries, full of opportunities" (82). Now, survivors who gather in government-run camps get to work "on the assembly lines cranking out ammo day and night" (18). That is, Buffalo oversees a war economy, and their project comes down to "a fantasy of re-industrialization."[65] By thus articulating a strategy of reviving domestic industry and the dehumanizing othering of surplus populations,

63 I am drawing on Ruth Wilson Gilmore's claim that the "racial in racial capitalism" is a function of "group-differentiation to premature death." "Abolition Geography and the Production of Innocence," in *Abolition Geography: Essays Towards Liberation*, ed. Brenna Bhandar and Alberto Toscano (London/New York: Verso, 2022), 494–95. See also Adolph Reed's suggestion that "new race-like taxonomies could come to replace the familiar ones." "Marx, Race, Neoliberalism," *New Labor Forum* 22, no. 1 (2013): 53.

64 On the difference between Mark Spitz's resigned acceptance of a "post-apocalyptic new normal" and Buffalo's desire for a "return to normalcy," see Leif Sorensen, "Against the Post-Apocalyptic: Narrative Closure in Colson Whitehead's *Zone One*," *Contemporary Literature* 55, no. 3 (2014): 562.

65 Bernes, "Character, Genre, Labor."

Zone One anticipates later attempts to "Make America Great Again" in an uncannily prescient manner.

Reviving the economy, however, means that the provisional government must display its monopoly on violence to avert a regression to a Hobbesian state of nature. Zombie fictions such as the long-running TV series *The Walking Dead* frequently imagine a post-apocalyptic world in which social order has broken down entirely.[66] Thereby they provide a contemporary version of the frontier myth, which allows their protagonists to experience the virtuous cycle of "*separation*" from society, "*regression*" to a relatively primitive condition, and the promise of "spiritual regeneration" through the use of violence.[67] At the same time, these narratives posit that the only durable guarantee of social order is the presence of a sovereign who can legitimately employ violence. Often enough, zombie narratives are fantasies of state power. In contrast Whitehead, like Romero, offers a critique of the state which reveals the amount of violence necessary to compel humans to accept social institutions such as work and property.

In fact, *Zone One* shows that the state will use violence against anyone who transgresses the principle of property regardless of whether they are skels or survivors. Mark Spitz and his colleagues are provided with "No-No cards" reminding them to protect the "properties" they sweep (12). Moreover, "anti-looting reg[ulation]s" are in effect, prohibiting individuals "from foraging goods and materials belonging to anyone other than an official sponsor" of Reconstruction (38). Mark Spitz still recalls "those dwindling days before the looting regs went into effect and scavenger crews had routed a den of bandits who had taken over one of the mega-drugstores. Half the bandits died in the gunfight and the other half eagerly took oaths of loyalty to the provisional government upon surrender" (35–36). That is, it is not just the skels who are the targets of state vi-

66 See Dennis Büscher-Ulbrich, "No Future for Nobody? Zombie Riots and the Real of Capital," in *Modernities and Modernization in North America*, ed. Ruth Mayer and Ilka Brasch (Heidelberg: Winter, 2018).

67 Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (Norman: U of Oklahoma P, 1992), 11, emphases in original.

olence. Anyone who illegitimately appropriates goods—"bandits" in the hegemonic terminology reproduced by the narrator—is terminated, too.

Skels and bandits are thus in a structurally analogous position. The provisional government allows its agents to use lethal violence against them, because they neither work in the service of Reconstruction nor respect property rights. The novel is not particularly concerned with the ontological distinction between the living and the living dead, which it will continue to undermine anyway; rather, it is interested in the state's role in enforcing the principles governing the capitalist economy. The only significance of the fact that the bandits remain human is that they can still decide to perform work for the government and become "active servant[s] of the commodity […], whose job is to ensure that a given product of human labor remains a commodity, with the magical property of having to be paid for," as Guy Debord characterized the task of the police during a riot.[68] The bandits remain in control of their ability to perform labor and thus fulfill the Lockean criterion for subjectivity.[69] But then being a subject in the post-apocalyptic wasteland of *Zone One* is equivalent with being a cop. The skels, in contrast, can no longer choose to work. They can neither generate nor protect property, but still they need to consume to keep their undead bodies going. In short, they are a population which cannot be integrated into the recovered economy to come. Consequently, they are hunted down by the human survivors who, whether they like it or not, become deputized as cops who must manage this threatening surplus.

68 Guy Debord, "The Decline and Fall of the Spectacle-Commodity Economy," in *Situationist International Economy*, ed. Ken Knabb (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2006), 197.

69 See John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, ed. C. B. MacPherson (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1980, § 27, 19.

Monstrous Mobility

Within the world of Whitehead's novel, the skels are threatening because they consume the flesh of the living; moreover, as an "extra population" they stand in the way of economic recovery. As Carl Swanson points out, they also constitute a formal threat which needs to be contained in order for the narrative to be possible in the first place. *Zone One*, like all zombie narratives, is structured by the narratological need to enclose the monsters' excessive mobility. All such narratives share a basic structure, which Swanson sums up thus: "a flight from the zombies to a defensible shelter; a siege of that shelter that results in its eventual fall, and then a flight [...] to the next survival space."[70] This survival space, whether it is a farmhouse, a mall, or a walled-in area in a major city, does not merely provide shelter to the characters; it is also a narratological device that allows the narrative to survive.

> [T]he zombie is inimical to the existence of character; its raison d'être is to nullify character, and so any zombie narrative is structured around the struggle to maintain character subjectivity in the face of contagious antisubjectivity. The zombie horde is a collectivity of anticharacters that actively works to negate/subsume all characters, and by extension the zombie threatens to annihilate the narrative itself. If all characters become zombies, how can further narrative exist?[71]

Whatever the topical concerns any zombie narrative expresses, the genre is formally structured by the need to contain the mobility of the antisubjects, which cannot be allowed to exist.[72]

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70 Swanson, "The Only Metaphor Left," 388.

71 Ibid., 386.

72 This is not to say that zombie narratives are by definition in support of the violent containment of movement. In the tradition of Romero's films, Whitehead's novel uses this narrative formula in order to critically show the violence that is necessary to uphold borders which embody the distinction between subjects and antisubjects. Other zombie fictions uncritically affirm the need for such divisions, which they often articulate explicitly as national borders. See, for instance, Johannes Fehrle, "'Zombies Don't Recognize Borders': Capitalism, Ecol-

However, the boarded-up windows, walls, and other devices protecting survival spaces will inevitably fall, forcing survivors to flee and seek a new shelter. Swanson usefully distinguishes between two ways in which they can be transgressed. A "hard breach" amounts to a complete breakdown, which "compromise[s]" the narrative survival space as when the Canal Street wall collapses. A "soft breach," on the other hand, occurs when zombies enter the narrative space without posing an immediate threat.[73] To allow for the latter, *Zone One* contributes the "straggler" to the cast of undead (anti-)characters. Its skels are standard flesh-eating ghouls of Romerian provenance. The stragglers instead remain immobile and "haunt" a specific place without attacking humans (48). "Their lives had been an interminable loop of repeated gestures; now their existences were winnowed to this discrete and eternal moment" (50). Thus, their presence in Zone One constitutes a mere "soft breach"—until Mark Spitz's fellow sweeper Gary is bitten by one. This reveals the "soft breach" to have been a "hard" one all along and shows the futility of the effort to retake New York City, thus prefiguring the collapse of the wall.[74]

So, zombie narratives are about the need to contain excessive mobility. But they simultaneously assert the need for survivors to move prudently. In fact, Gary is only bitten because he plays a practical joke on a straggler and moves carelessly. Hence, another formal feature of zombie narratives: survivors need to refrain from moving excessively, too. Mark Spitz's mediocrity is thus also a quality that makes him the ideal protagonist of a zombie narrative. He is neither prone to reckless actions nor too anxious but remains in deliberate control of his every movement in the face of danger. When the wall falls and he has to shoot his way

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ogy, and Mobility in the Zombie Outbreak Narrative," *Amerikastudien / American Studies* 61, no. 4 (2016): 527–44.

73 Swanson, "The Only Metaphor Left," 396.

74 Ibid., 399. Swanson's reading is more convincing than Hurley's claim that the revelation of Mark Spitz's blackness triggers the collapse. "Zombies, Race, and the Limits of Biopower," 324. Indeed, he only tells Gary about the origin of his nickname—thereby informing readers of his blackness—after his colleague has been bitten. The mischaracterization of the straggler remains the narrative turning point.

through the multitude, he is "will[ing] his rounds into the coordinates above the targets' spinal columns, as if it were possible to mentally steer them" (251). In the novel's language, he is not a good marksman because of his manual dexterity, but because of his willpower.

The structure of zombie narratives, thus, pits the self-regulated movements of rational subjects against the excessive mobility of the irrational crowd. The former are justified in using any violent means necessary to contain the latter. This character constellation mirrors quite precisely the classic conceptualizations of the liberal subject in political philosophy. In *Movement and the Ordering of Freedom*, the political theorist Hagar Kotef shows that liberal thought has long viewed freedom and movement as deeply entangled. Genuinely free movement, however, presupposes the notion of the "autonomous subject" able to "control and self-regulate herself." This subject's identity is constituted by virtue of its difference from the—often racialized—"unruly subjects whose movement is a problem to be managed." Crucially, their management legitimizes "nonliberal moments—and spaces—within liberal regimes."[75] That is, the liberal subject's freedom of movement is inextricably linked with the use of illiberal means to curtail the wrong kind of mobility.

The key figure in Kotef's account is John Locke, for whom it was landed property that served as the material foundation of rational subjectivity. Land held in common amounted to "*waste*" for the author of the Second Treatise since it was not improved by labor.[76] Consequently, any community which did not enclose the land in the service of a "property-accumulating model" could not be considered "free" or "rational."[77] Again, the conceptualization of rational subjectivity required an irrational Other. Locke and his contemporaries imagined Native Americans as nomadic populations which could not possess rationality because

75 Hagar Kotef, *Movement and the Ordering of Freedom: On Liberal Governances of Mobility* (Durham/London: Duke UP, 2015), 8, 5.

76 Locke, *Second Treatise*, §42, 26, emphasis in original.

77 Kotef, *Movement and the Ordering of Freedom*, 105.

they did not improve the land through the use of labor, but merely consumed "fruits" and "beasts" provided by nature.[78] Kotef summarizes:

> [F]irst, the presumed lack of a particular model of agriculture is taken as an indication of both the lack of civilization and the lack of appropriation […]. Second, the tie between movement and rationality or the lack thereof, marks the presumably nomadic indigenous people as irrational, thereby justifying occupation and subjection.[79]

At the origin of the modern liberal subject there is the same antagonistic juxtaposition of free, rational movement and unruly, excessive mobility which needs to be contained that also structures zombie narratives. While the iconography of the living dead reveal their debt to the Caribbean zombie, the narrative form of today's zombie fictions shows them to be functionally equivalent to Locke's Indians.[80]

More precisely, Locke's Indians make up one branch of the contemporary zombie's family tree; another consists of the emerging English proletariat, which was dispossessed at the same historical moment in the process of displacing the agricultural population Marx memorably called "primitive accumulation." Yet, the newly formed "free and rightless proletariat could not possibly be absorbed by the nascent manufactures as fast as it was thrown upon the world." Many were instead forced to roam the countryside only to be targeted by "a bloody legislation against vagabondage."[81] Locke thus observed the formation of another landless and propertyless class which was highly mobile by necessity. While anti-vagabondage laws served to criminalize their mobility, the confinement of paupers in poor houses or working schools was meant to inculcate labor discipline. "The motion of labor—repetitive,

78 Locke, *Second Treatise*, §26, 18.

79 Kotef, *Movement and the Ordering of Freedom*, 106.

80 Contemporary zombie narratives are, thus, versions of what Richard Slotkin calls the trope of "savage war." See *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization* (Middletown: Wesleyan UP, 1985), 51–63.

81 Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1990), 896.

confined, productive—should thus take over the motion of vagrancy and begging."[82] In short, the history of primitive accumulation produced a dispossessed population which roamed in search of food and whose mobility, which was perceived as excessive and dangerous by property-owning elites, was violently constrained.

Today's zombie narratives thus feature a late capitalist revenant of the figures of excessive mobility that emerged in the intertwined histories of colonialism and capitalism. They can neither perform work nor generate property. And yet, they need to eat.

> They had been young and old, natives and newcomers. No matter the hue of their skins, dark or light, no matter the names of their gods […] [n]ow they were mostly mouths and fingers, fingers for extracting entrails from soft cavities, and moths to rend and devour in pieces the distinct human faces they captured, that these faces might become less distinct, de-individuated flaps of masticated flesh, rendered anonymous like them, the dead. (243–44)

Zombification figures here as a process of stripping away all sociological markers until nothing is left but the body parts required to consume food. The skels' reproduction is monstrous not just because the "de-individuated flaps of masticated flesh" used to be human. The rhythm of this phrase with its alternation of multisyllabic terms, which are decisively remote from everyday language, and the monosyllabic alliteration "flaps" and "flesh," at any rate, serves to keep the violence of the image in check. Their mode of reproduction is also monstrous because work plays no part in it.

That is, the excessive mobility that needs to be contained in zombie narratives is not just diegetic (the characters' need not to be eaten to remain characters) or formal (the narrative's need not to be destroyed by anti-characters to remain a narrative); it is also a political-economic excess that needs to be warded off. The orderly motion of capitalist commodity exchange is the sequence commodity–money–commod-

82 Kotef, *Movement and the Ordering of Freedom*, 109.

ity.[83] Individuals who possess their labor-power sell this commodity on the labor market for a wage which they can use to purchase the commodities they need as a means of subsistence. Whitehead's skels, who possess neither the ability to work nor the money to show for it, must consume without reliance on the social forms that normally mediate commodity exchange. They have nothing but—indeed, they are nothing but—"mouths and fingers" and must directly appropriate whatever "hunger-sating use-values"[84] they can lay their hands on. The skels are not just anti-characters because their excessive mobility threatens to negate other narrative-sustaining characters. They are also anti-subjects—anti-personifications of economic relations—because their reproduction exceeds the orderly motion of commodity circulation. In the previous chapter I noted that Whitehead's *John Henry Days* implies that the inability to use money amounts to a loss of personhood. *Zone One* literalizes this possibility by featuring a type of being constitutively excluded from the realm of monetarily mediated exchange. The skels' ghoulish evisceration of human survivors is a hyperbolic representation of the crime of transgressing the ways in which objects are normally transferred in capitalism.[85]

The skels' consumption is, in other words, a metonymic representation of the practice of looting; when they devour human survivors they "pursue a concrete goal," namely "acquiring food."[86] Read this way, the flood of skels can be seen as a figure of proletarian insurrection after the decline of the workers' movement. In recent years, theorists associated with the communization current have argued that this movement

83 See Marx, *Capital*, 200.

84 Evan Calder Williams, *Combined and Uneven Apocalypse* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2010), 95.

85 Drawing on Evgeny Pashukanis's account of the relationship between legal form and commodity form, I have discussed the zombies' status as antisubjects in more detail in Lieber, "The Living Dead in the Long Downturn," 148–49.

86 Delio Vasquez, "The Poor Person's Defense of Riots," in *Taking Sides: Revolutionary Solidarity and the Poverty of Liberalism*, ed. Cindy Milstein (Oakland: AK Press, 2015), 34.

was mobilized around the idea that the expansion of large-scale industry would produce a growing industrial working class which would be forged into an organized collective transcending racial, national, religious, and other separations.[87] As a result of deindustrialization and the decline of the manufacturing share of employment, however, there is today no longer any "hegemonic figure" around which the workers' movement could rally; instead it tends to "decompose into fragments."[88] Communist theorist Joshua Clover consequently observes a transformation of the repertoire of strategies and tactics available in present struggles. He discerns a shift toward "circulation struggles" waged by racialized surplus populations over "reproduction in ways beyond the wage."[89] Participants of these struggles do not share a positive quality, such as their position in the sphere of production, but merely the condition of "dispossession."[90] Whitehead's skels, those utterly dispossessed creatures who have been stripped of everything except the ability to consume food and flood streets and public squares, "resonate" deeply with the increasing significance of circulation struggles.[91] In *Zone One*, this resonance is primarily achieved through the metaphorical reference to the skels as a "flood" (192), an "ocean" (243), a "maelstrom" (246), a "wave of the dead," a "dark tsunami" (248), or a "deluge" (250). The figure of speech liquefies all "identifying particulars"[92] and emphasizes the crowd's identity-defying

87 See Endnotes, "A History of Separation: The Rise and Fall of the Workers' Movement, 1883–1982," *Endnotes* 4 (2015). See also Geoff Eley, *Forging Democracy: The History of the Left in Europe, 1850–2000* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002).

88 Endnotes, "An Identical Abject-Subject?" *Endnotes* 4 (2015): 277.

89 Joshua Clover, *Riot. Strike. Riot: The New Era of Uprising* (London/New York: Verso, 2016), 31, 46. For a discussion of Clover's book, see Dennis Büscher-Ulbrich and Marlon Lieber, "Riotology: A Dialogue on Riots and Resistance," *Society of Americanists Review* 2 (2019–20). Whether I am convinced by Clover's account of what this means for revolutionary strategy and tactics is neither here nor there at this point. What I am interested in here—in a quasi-New Historicist spirit—is the structural similarity between Whitehead's zombie narrative and the historical narrative Clover relies on in his book.

90 Clover, *Riot. Strike. Riot*, 16.

91 Büscher-Ulbrich, "No Future for Nobody," 386.

92 Bernes, "Character, Genre, Labor."

heterogeneity. The riotous mob of decomposing bodies is a symptom of proletarian class decomposition.

It is somewhat tempting, then, to regard the zombie apocalypse as a "symbolic resolution of the contradictions of contemporary life," as Lanzendörfer does when he treats zombies as "figures of possibility"[93] On such a reading, the living dead signify—pace Jameson—that the end of capitalism can easily be imagined as a global insurrection. This is certainly correct, but does it deserve to be called a solution? Attending to Swanson's narratological account is helpful again. Yes, Whitehead's skels can sweep away Buffalo and all vestiges of the old world. Since they are anti-characters, however, the new post-revolutionary world is formally unnarratable. In other words, the zombie apocalypse amounts to a "fantas[y] of the Great Riot at the End of Time; of the primitivist hope for an apocalypse that sweeps the Earth clean."[94] And yet it remains incapable of thinking the post-capitalist world to come. Bini Adamczak shows that this dilemma is constitutive for revolutionary theory as such. If the revolution is to abolish the existing world, it is hard to see how the "humans of today" could still find a place in the "world of tomorrow."[95] Zombie narratives can only provide a pseudo-solution by imagining the

93 Lanzendörfer, *Books of the Dead*, 22, 18. The reference is, of course, to Fredric Jameson's account of the political horizon of interpretation in *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London/New York: Routledge, 2002), 62. Dan Sinykin similarly relies on Jameson when he suggests that "neoliberal apocalypse" provides "imaginary solutions to real world problems." *American Literature and the Long Downturn*, 19.

94 Endnotes, "Error," *Endnotes* 5 (2019): 135. This section once more draws on Lieber, "The Living Dead in the Long Downturn," 162–63.

95 Bini Adamczak, *Beziehungsweise Revolution: 1917, 1968 und kommende* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2017), 49, my translations. To be sure, theoreticians with post-humanist proclivities might argue that this does not constitute a problem but a virtue. According to Sarah Juliet Lauro and Karen Embry, it is precisely the promise of a post-human, post-individualist "swarm" that makes the zombie an attractive figure. See "A Zombie Manifesto: The Nonhuman Condition in the Era of Advanced Capitalism," *Boundary 2* 35, no. 1 (2008): 85–108. For a post-humanist reading of zombie narratives, see Anya Heise-von der Lippe, "'I Keep Saying "Brains"' – Posthuman Zombie Narratives," *Horror Studies* 9, no. 1 (2018): 69–84.

revolution as an ontological transformation, that is, as the substitution of the living dead for the living humans of today. This way, the post-revolutionary society cannot be corrupted; yet, this comes at the cost of rendering the desire for revolution "suicidal."[96] And this is, indeed, what Mark Spitz chooses at the end. *Zone One* concludes by conceding that the skels' excessive mobility can no longer be contained; at the same time the zombie genre reveals itself to be formally incapable of imagining a post-capitalist mode of social intercourse, new ways of producing and distributing goods so that "no-one shall go hungry any more."[97] In the end, zombies are figures of impossibility.

The Apotheosis of Hysteresis

But more than merely sharing the zombie narrative's generic inability to represent the new world, *Zone One* is concerned with the ways in which the past informs the present and limits future possibilities on the level of the individual. Like Whitehead's earlier novels, it focuses on the body as a site of dispositions that serve to practically reproduce past conditioning. The recourse to genre and its principle of "[n]arrative sameness" is appropriate, as writes Theodore Martin, for depicting a late capitalist world that has been objectively "made generic."[98] On the level of subjective practice, sameness is guaranteed by the schemes of perception, appreciation, and action that Bourdieu calls habitus. In the previous section, I have argued that *Zone One* depicts a world in which race has become objectively superfluous, as it were, because it insists that anyone can become part of the surplus population that has no place in the state's plans for a recovered economy. This concluding section will argue that the novel insists that race continues to structure subjective experience as a principle of vision and division even after the apocalypse.

96 Adamczak, *Beziehungsweise Revolution*, 52, my translation.

97 Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London/New York: Verso, 2005), 156.

98 Martin, *Contemporary Drift*, 183, 182.

After Mark Spitz has told Gary about the origin of his nickname, he is surprised to hear that his dying colleague was unaware of the stereotype that black people cannot swim. This triggers a reflection on the fate of "the old bigotries" now that there is "a single Us" pit against "a single Them." Mark Spitz is skeptical and concludes that "they could certainly reanimate prejudice, parking tickets, and reruns." The tacit equation of racist prejudice with minor hassles of modern life in Mark Spitz's mind implies that racism did not constitute a major problem in his mediocre pre-apocalyptic life. Yet, the next sentence is suggestive: "There were plenty of things in the world that deserved to stay dead, yet they walked" (231). Unlike the previous sentence, the narrator does not explicitly characterize this remark (rendered in free indirect discourse) as Mark Spitz's thought. Superficially, it refers to the walking dead, but at the same time, it can be read as a commentary on the embodied presence of the past. That is to say, *Zone One* suggests that embodied dispositions can be more durable than mere "bigotries" or "prejudice."

The motif of habitual action is introduced quite early in the novel. In fact, already in the second paragraph after the opening analepsis that recounts Mark Spitz's childhood visits to his uncle's apartment, the issue of durable habits is raised. That is, as soon as the novel enters the post-apocalyptic diegetic present, it reminds its readers that preexisting habits still structure conduct: "This was the fourth day of rain, Friday afternoon, and a conditioned part of him submitted to end-of-the-week lassitude, even if Friday's had lost their meaning. Hard to believe that reconstruction had progressed so far that clock-watching had returned" (8). Objectively, the division between workdays and the weekend is no longer meaningful; subjectively, the habitual bodily movement of checking one's watch still (or again) prevails. What Bourdieu calls the habitus' "*hysteresis*," its inertia and its resistance to change, ensures the "presence of the past" even after the end of the world.[99]

On the one hand, Mark Spitz acknowledges that he has had to make "recalibrations" in order to deal with the post-apocalyptic world; on the

99 Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1990), 62.

other, he realizes that his "old self made noises from time to time" (14). This old self and its practical schemes is the product of past experiences. In a later instance, Mark Spitz detects "movement across the street" and "slap[s] his arm across [his fellow sweeper] Kaitlyn's chest to stop her, a gesture he'd lifted from his parents, who had lifted it from their parents" (111). The narrator thereby provides insight into the social genesis of the generative principles tacitly structuring Mark Spitz's actions. His bodily *hexis*, "the way he carries himself,[100] is a function of "childhood learning" which has turned his body into a "living memory pad."[101] No matter the scale of the catastrophe that requires recalibrations, Mark Spitz's "old self" remains a persistent presence in the form of habitual actions.

Paradoxically, prior experiences can also equip some individuals particularly well for the post-apocalyptic world. Gary, for instance, possesses a "mastery of technique" when it comes to fighting zombies (22). It is what Bourdieu would call a "practical mastery" which does not require theoretical reflection. He claims that

> the essential part of the *modus operandi* which defines practical mastery is transmitted in practice, in its practical state, without attaining the level of discourse. The child imitates not "models" but other people's actions [like Mark Spitz imitating his parents imitating their parents]. Body *hexis* speaks directly to the motor function, in the form of a pattern of postures that is both individual and systemic, because linked to a whole system of techniques involving the body and tools.[102]

The narrator's description of Gary's outward appearance, which is portrayed through Mark Spitz perspective, focuses on precisely such elements as his posture or the use of tools in producing Gary's bodily hexis.

> Gary had a granite complexion, gray and pitted skin. […]. His eye sockets were permanently sooted, his cheeks scooped out. His preferred

100 Pierre Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001), 65.

101 Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, 68.

102 Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1977), 87.

> gait was a controlled slouch. […]. Gary showed him a picture taken at his sixth birthday party, the same ill demeanor evident even then. […]. Before the world broke, he'd dropped out of school to crank bolts full-time in his father's garage with his brothers, and he stood by this explanation for his appearance even though it had been years since he'd worked on a car or truck. Which left Mark Spitz to opine that what they were seeing was the *original* grime, the very grime of Gary's youth preserved as a token of home. It was what he'd scrapped off the past and carried with him. (22–23, emphasis in original)

Gary's entire physiognomy is an index of his past. The experiences of his childhood and his youth have durably molded his body so much that he literally carries his past around with him. The ironic point of Whitehead's long description of Gary is that he, who "was scarcely in better shape than the creatures they were sent to eradicate" each morning (22), has always already been like the zombies, which is why he is able to instinctively master the situation.

The novel's interest in habitual action is brought to its logical conclusion in the figure of the straggler, appropriately designated as "time-loop zombie[s]" whose existences are defined by "compulsive repetition" in a manner reminiscent of naturalist fiction.[103] Their previous lives consisted of "an interminable loop of repeated gesture"; their present existence has been reduced to exactly one (50). Bourdieu is fond of quoting both Pascal's quip that "we are as much automaton as mind,"[104] and Leibniz, who compares humans to "beasts" who act "based only on the principle of memory" in "three-fourths of [their] actions."[105] He thus insists that the generative principle of human practice is to a large degree withdrawn from conscious intervention. The stragglers represent the limit case of a being entirely dominated by habit. They are nothing but hysteresis.

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103 Bryan Yazell and Hsuan L. Hsu, "Naturalist Compulsion, Racial Divides, and the Time-Loop Zombie," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 20, no. 3 (2020): 24.

104 Quoted in Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, 48.

105 Quoted in Pierre Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, trans. by Richard Nice (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), 162.

The key moment in Mark Spitz's character development therefore has little to do with his nickname or his blackness; instead, it comes when he recognizes himself in the stragglers. This happens when he passes a restaurant full of pop cultural memorabilia which serves the "nostalgia industry" (153). In this nostalgic setting he remembers his own visits to this restaurant chain with his parents, which triggers the sensation of an "elemental horror" along with the realization that "[h]e was a ghost. A straggler" (155). Mark Spitz discovers that he too remains in the past's grip. Significantly, it is the past in the form of the principles of vision and division which he carries along with him that introduce racial stereotypes into *Zone One*. It is, as Lanzendörfer points out, "in fact Mark Spitz himself who introduces the stereotype" of black people being unable to swim when he informs Gary about his nickname.[106] Moreover, Gary's unawareness of "the black-people-can't-swim thing" reveals Mark Spitz's own prejudices: "He found it unlikely that Gary was not in ownership of a master list of racial, gender, and religious stereotypes" (231). That is, he is surprised that Gary, a white working-class man whose lack of formal education is frequently emphasized in the novel, is not a racist. In other words, in *Zone One* the agent who introduces stereotypes based on racial classification schemes is Mark Spitz.

Despite the radical transformation of the objective structures of the world described in *Zone One*, Mark Spitz's subjective dispositions reproduce categories that have lost their meaning. He personifies what Bourdieu calls a "hysteresis effect": his "dispositions function out of phase" because "they are objectively adjusted to conditions that no longer obtain."[107] While his generic mediocrity turns him into the appropriate hero of a zombie narrative since it provides him with the skills necessary to survive, the development his character undergoes in the course of the novel's plot results in his realization that mere survival is not a desirable option when the principles of his actions are not freely chosen. That is, he can be a hero given the narratological constraints of

106 Lanzendörfer, *Books of the Dead*, 171.

107 Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, 62.

the zombie genre, but at the same time, he realizes that he is nothing but a generic character and thus condemned to "a life full of endless repetition."[108] Hence his decision to join the zombies and become an anti-character.

The novel's final lines reproduce Mark Spitz's thoughts before he comes out of his hiding place: "Maybe he should swim for it. It was a funny notion, the most ridiculous idea, and he almost laughed aloud but for the creatures […]. Fuck it, he thought. You have to learn how to swim sometime. He opened the door and walked into the sea of the dead" (258–59). Because he previously assured Gary that he "tread[s] water perfectly" (231), the ambition to learn how to swim expressed here cannot be meant literally. The world in which Mark Spitz cannot swim is a product of his own schemes of thought. The act of learning how to swim thus amounts to leaving the world of racial stereotypes such as "the black-people-can't-swim thing" behind. At the same time, it is an act in fidelity to the zombies' insurrectionary overthrow of a world that remains structured by capitalist social property relations. In Whitehead's novel, the abolition of capital and the abolition of 'race' coincide when the world ends. By walking into the sea of dead, Mark Spitz joins the current of the masterless ocean; he becomes part of a universally dispossessed proletariat that has already cast off its chains and remains without anything to lose. Alas, the generic constraints of a zombie narrative prohibit any speculations about the world that can be won, "but whatever the next thing was, it would not like what came before" (257).

108 Yazell and Hsu, "Naturalist Compulsion," 35.