

# Facing the Crises



Facing the Crises:  
Anglophone Literature in the Postmodern World

Edited by

Ljubica Matek and Jasna Poljak Rehlicki

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**P U B L I S H I N G**

Facing the Crises: Anglophone Literature in the Postmodern World  
Edited by Ljubica Matek, Jasna Poljak Rehlicki

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We dedicate this book to Anja, Fran, Nora, Igor and Vlado  
who have been our support and inspiration.  
Lj. M. and J. P. R.



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## INTRODUCTION

LJUBICA MATEK  
AND JASNA POLJAK REHLICKI

This book comprises a selection of papers delivered at the international conference in celebration of the 35th anniversary of English studies at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences in Osijek, Croatia. The event took place on the 15th and 16th October 2012 and brought together a number of participants from Croatia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia and the UK. It was divided into three sections: methodology, translation studies and linguistics forming one group, Anglo-American literature and culture the other, and postgraduate research in English as the last section.

The papers collected in this book are a product of the Anglo-American literature and culture section and deal with new approaches to Anglo-American literature and English studies as well as the impact of Anglo-American culture on English studies both in Anglophone and Non-Anglophone countries. Owing to diverse research interests of the scholars, the papers produced a varied picture of the current approaches to Anglo-American literature and culture in the scope of English studies. Literary issues therefore covered a variety of relevant topics such as satire and the academic novel, post-feminism and chick-lit, literary thematizations, avant-garde and decadence, simulacra, minimalism and short stories, and were connected to contemporary cultural studies like race, ethnicity, and genre, war, ideology, history, economy, capitalism, cinema, and pop-culture.

Understanding Anglophone literature requires a deeper understanding of current cultural, economic and social processes in the globalizing and globalized culture of the West. Literature is not only read and interpreted for its own sake, but it becomes a means of understanding our existence in the postmodern world. In light of recent burning discussions on the crisis of humanities as “non-profitable” sciences, this book ventures to show that humanist research is indispensable and crucial for understanding the human condition. Therefore, we believe this book of essays to be a relevant addition to the contemporary discussion of literature and culture and a starting point for further discussions and research.

The first part of the book is titled “IN THE FACE OF CRISES” and brings together articles that deal with literary representations of various crises. It seems that crisis is the key word of contemporary Western culture. Our fast-paced, technology-laden and materialist-oriented existence brings about the need to rethink our human identity putting into perspective our relationship with and to technology, the impact of capitalist economy and colonial past as well as consequences of constant warfare. Prevailing in the papers is the implicit or explicit idea of a crisis between the real and the simulated suggesting that one of the major issues for the contemporary man is how to deal with the virtual or with the “absence of the real”, of what was once an undisputed authority but is now being revealed as obsolete or impossible.

“Surviving Utopia in *Zone One*” is the title of the essay by Sven Cvek (University of Zagreb). In his paper, Cvek offers a reading of Colson Whitehead’s novel *Zone One* (2011) in the context of contemporary speculative fictions of crisis. Following the tradition of “Gothic Marxism” the article focuses on the figure of the zombie in its contemporary, early twenty-first century articulation. Cvek focuses on the common recurrence of the zombie metaphor in descriptions of today’s capitalist economy and contends that Whitehead’s zombies function as morbid symptoms of the inability to imagine alternatives to the monstrosity of the existing reality. Next, the author comments on the fact that the zombie metaphor is used to speak of the human consequences of capitalist development, thus enriching the repertoire of Gothic Marxism with this colonial image of enslavement. In this context *Zone One* appears as “capitalist realism” but also makes a resigned step beyond its boundaries in that it argues that the economics of capitalism does not work, and depicts the consequences of existing capitalist relations as entirely destructive.

Stipe Grgas (University of Zagreb) deals with the figure of the financier in Dreiser’s and DeLillo’s novels. The departure point of the article is the contention that the present economic crisis demands a rethinking of the priorities of the agenda of literary studies and a rereading of the canon. Relying on the basic assumptions of what has come to be known as “new economic criticism” the author focuses on the portrayal of the financier in Theodore Dreiser’s *The Financier* and Don DeLillo’s *Cosmopolis*. The author’s main goal is not to merely describe these fictional characters but to show their differences, which in his opinion exemplify the difference in the sameness of capital on its historical trajectory. In his conclusion he contends that both authors thematize an epistemological blockage regarding the conceptualization of capital which transcends its literary thematization.

In the paper titled “Indigenous Australian Image and Text: Mad Bastards ‘write life in every stroke’”, Iva Polak from the University of Zagreb states that the international audience has been missing a series of Australian Indigenous films from the late 1990s onwards. She goes on to discuss the movie *Mad Bastards* (2010, dir. Brendan Fletcher) that offers a realistic depiction of the contemporary life in a remote Indigenous community. Her paper argues that the poem “Unreceived Message”, written in prison by the late Indigenous poet Robert Walker (1958-84), shows what happens when the lyrical subject of the poem gets released from prison, and walks into Fletcher’s film some 25 years later as the protagonist in order to rebuild what is left of his pride, identity and fatherhood. It is argued that even though violence and abuse as shown in the film can be easily attributed to the long-lasting consequences of colonial disciplining of Indigenous body, the film does not even attempt to contribute to the ongoing debate of blaming others for what is known in Australia as “Indigenous disadvantage”. Rather, it shows how tormented individuals as well as communities can painstakingly heal from within, without the governmental “do-gooders”, thus giving the film an uneasy but realistic closure.

Jelena Šesnić (University of Zagreb) writes about Franz Kafka, Paul Auster and the end of the American century. Her reading of Kafka’s *Amerika* (1927) and Auster’s *Sunset Park* (2010) evolves within the purview of the argument that the twentieth century was the American century, whereas the twenty-first century witnesses the demise of the American hegemony on the global scale. Both texts work with and produce a “semiotics of America”, a fantasy projection sustained by the mythic narratives of avant-garde and decadence. Whereas Kafka renders “Amerika” as a complex cultural construct and fantasy formation, ambivalently dedicated to the idea of relentless progress, development and modernity, the myth of decadence is used by Auster to second-guess the present national moment ushered in by a confluence of factors, ranging from 9/11 and its reverberations, the economic depression and the election of Barack Obama as a screen against which to consider both a personal and national trauma. Šesnić contends that the myths driving literary and cultural representations are always in excess of specific historical situations manifested by contemporary American fiction to the extent that it deserves to be considered as offering a whole new national semantics and indicating a serious shift in national self-perception.

Ljubica Matek (University of Osijek) proposes in her paper that the concept of human identity is increasingly being influenced by the inevitable interaction and connection with modern technologies, rather

than direct human contact. According to Philip K. Dick's 1968 novel *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?* human contact is necessarily mediated or facilitated by machines. Dick's novel explores hyperreality, one of the most crucial issues of the twenty-first century, by looking at androids and cyborgs both of whom are epitomes of the concept of hyperreal. As opposed to the original anxiety and shock caused by the development of the nineteenth- and early twentieth-century industry and science, postmodern world is marked by the acceptance of the ambiguity of the difference between natural and artificial, mind and body, self-developing and externally designed. Due to advances in technology and medicine (especially aesthetic and reconstructive surgery), not to mention the demands of beauty industry, the boundary between physical and non-physical has become blurred. In this, we are moving toward a society that is both "posthuman" in its attempt to move beyond the traditional concept of "human nature" towards one that can more readily adapt to the contemporary technological and scientific knowledge, and "transhuman" in its attempt to use the available technologies in order to enhance human physical, intellectual and psychological abilities. By focusing on the purpose and the significance that the electronic devices have for Dick's protagonists, the paper proposes to show that "mood organs" and "empathy boxes" represent not only an extension of the protagonists' human bodies and minds, but also the very proof that they are human.

This section ends with the identity crisis of an American soldier in the Persian Gulf War as well as with crisis of a traditional warfare in the face of modern combat. In her paper "The Mirage of War in Anthony Swafford's *Jarhead* (2003)" Jasna Poljak Rehlicki (University of Osijek) analyzes and interprets numerous similarities between Jean Baudrillard's controversial essay "The Gulf War did not take place" in which he questions the reality, that is virtuality of modern war and combat, and Anthony Swafford's *Jarhead: A Marine's Chronicle of the Gulf War and Other Battles* published twelve years after the war. A close reading of the memoir attempts to illustrate that Swafford's first hand action is indeed similar to Baudrillard's idea of a virtual war with virtual enemies and victories. Nevertheless, Poljak Rehlicki concludes that even virtual wars and victories have an identical (disillusioning) impact on a soldier as any other "real" war.

The second part of the book, titled "NEW PERSPECTIVES ON LITERARY GENRES", explores forms, topics and styles in literary texts belonging to specific, sometimes marginalized, genres. Literary analyses in this section also seem to touch upon the idea of crisis: be it the crisis of understanding and redefining a particular genre, or a crisis that is inherent

in the controversial topic or form of the text, such as a crisis between patriarchy and feminism, old and new, male and female, literary minimalism and its immoderate opposite as well as a tension that results from literary treatments of race and ethnicity.

In the paper titled “Satire and the Academic Novel” Jadranka Zlomislić (University of Osijek) explains that the terms “campus novel”, “university novel”, and “college novel” belong to the same sub-genre of the academic novel, a contemporary fictional form that began in the United States in the 1950s. Through analysis of Mary McCarthy’s *The Groves of Academe* and Randall Jarrell’s *Pictures from an Institution* Zlomislić shows how these two novels engage in shaping the public awareness of the inadequacies of public education as they mirror the discourse of the 1950s by exposing the fallacies of progressive education as well as the witch-hunt of intellectuals and the cut-throat “non-ethics” of survival. Ideally, the academic discourse should be based on seeking the truth in pursuit of knowledge but both the selected novels, the author concludes, as well as the non-fictional contemporaneous materials, revealed it to be corrupted by the Cold War rhetoric.

In her paper “*The Sisters Brothers* Pack Heat: or How the Sisters Fared in the West” Vanja Polić (University of Zagreb) analyzes Patrick deWitt’s novel *The Sisters Brothers* (2011) with respect to its adherence and deviation from the cowboy western genre. The article starts with the explanation of the Wild West myth that observes the American West as frontier and no-man’s land but also as a process that created the American civilization as separate and independent from the imperial European civilization. Polić goes on to analyze the novel’s place within the cowboy western genre that stretches but does not break the generic confinements. For example, the novel’s paradoxical title, self-reflexivity where the first person narrator creates his own legend, protagonists who are villains but also sensitive cowboys, unexpected ending, introspective narrator, ironic and humorous style of narration sympathetic to the brothers, as well as the only possible exceptions to the genre, uncanny elements such as visions and witches. Polić concludes that the novel is a contemporary reinvention of the cowboy western.

Selma Veseljević Jerković (University of Tuzla) deals with the presentation of women in chick-lit. In her paper “‘Because I deserve it!’ Fashion and Beauty Industries in the Service of Patriarchy: The Tale of Chick-Lit” the author argues that although patriarchal authority is confronted with the problem of preserving dominance in the time of global capitalism, the patriarchal discourse has been replaced by the beauty industry, fashion industry, woman’s magazines and chick-lit that have

become authorities for women. By creating dissatisfaction with the physical appearance, fashion and beauty industries directly address the woman from whom they demand to perfect her appearance in order to accept herself and be accepted by the society. Veseljević Jerković states that the presentation of women in chick-lit is positioned within the dominant discourse of disciplined bodies, whereby the female body is susceptible to historical conditions and controlling mechanisms that construct and shape it. However, the presence of hidden deviations in the texts opens up the space for alternative readings as chick-lit and postfeminism have succeeded in making contemporary young women aware of the ongoing difficulties that still exist in their everyday lives. Despite chick-lit's patriarchal messages, by showing examples of how society still places pressure on women, the genre exposes that equality has not been attained, subtly criticizing women's assumption that the struggle is over.

Vladislava Gordić Petković (University of Novi Sad) starts her paper "The Limits of Minimalism: Ann Beattie's Narrative Walks With Men" by reminding us that in 1983 the British literary magazine *Granta* announced the birth of minimalism – a new realistic style in American writing, which depicted the dark side of contemporary America, and the lives of ordinary people with apparent indifference, objectivity and reticence. Minimalism became the most frequent label for these textual tendencies and strategies in American writing. Ann Beattie has been the best representative of the minimalist fiction written by women and the paper focuses on her short stories and her novel *Walks with Men* (2010). Being protean in its manifestations, literary minimalism is also tightly connected to the visual aspects of the narrative, and in Beattie's work, this plays out mostly by contrasting her male and female characters and their understanding of failures in private and professional life and mixing pleasures and fears with a mixture of empathy and irony.

In the paper "A relatively warm and easy intermingling of races': Reading Race and Ethnicity in Tennessee Williams' Plays", Biljana Oklopčić (University of Osijek) examines the (de)construction of the concept of ethnicity in Tennessee Williams' plays *The Rose Tattoo* (1951) and *A Streetcar Named Desire* (1947), and the screenplay of his *Orpheus Descending* (1957) – *The Fugitive Kind* (1959). After a brief theoretical excursus, Oklopčić discusses the mirroring of the actual in the fictional, that is, how Tennessee Williams has brought into being the three generational structure of ethnicity in the characters of Serafina and Rosa Delle Rose, Stanley Kowalski, and Lady Torrance. Her paper concludes that the discourse of ethnicity is not only an essential part of Williams'

literary rhetoric but a surrogate used to deal with the issues that had to be left unsaid in his oeuvre.





**PART I**

**IN THE FACE OF CRISES**

# CHAPTER ONE

## SURVIVING UTOPIA IN *ZONE ONE*

### SVEN CVEK

#### **Abstract**

In this article I offer a reading of Colson Whitehead's novel *Zone One* (2011) in the context of contemporary speculative fictions of crisis. Following tentatively the tradition of "Gothic Marxism" the article focuses on the figure of the zombie in its contemporary, early-twenty first century articulation. My argument is twofold. First, I focus on the common recurrence of the zombie metaphor in descriptions of the state of today's capitalist economy. In this context, Whitehead's zombies function as morbid symptoms of the inability to imagine alternatives to the monstrosity of the existing reality. Second, I comment on the fact that the zombie metaphor is used to speak of the human consequences of capitalist development, thus enriching the repertoire of Gothic Marxism with this colonial image of enslavement. Considered in the context delineated above, *Zone One* appears "capitalist realist" in that the presence of zombies in the novel constantly precludes the possibility of any future-oriented action, and gives form to the contemporary failure of utopian imagination. The novel also makes a resigned step beyond the boundaries of capitalist realism, in that it argues that the economics of capitalism does not work, and depicts the consequences of existing capitalist relations as entirely destructive.

Keywords: zombie, utopia, capitalist realism, Colson Whitehead, *Zone One*.

In 1982, Franco Moretti wrote that "The fear of bourgeois civilization is summed up in two names: Frankenstein and Dracula." These, he argued, are "the two horrible faces of a single society, its extremes: the disfigured wretch and the ruthless proprietor. The worker and capital ..." (67). This

dialectical image is effective, and, appropriately for the nineteenth century context Moretti is writing about, remains wed to a productivist understanding of capital. The present-day obsession with another monster, the abject figure of the zombie, might be taken as a symptom of an economy in which the dominant financial logic of capital accumulation appears not to require laboring bodies at all, and simultaneously governs the lives of vast populations, reducing precarious existences to day to day survival. The post-apocalyptic future the popular zombie dystopias imagine is a time in which any vision of the future seems to be annihilated by the violent character of the existing reality. I would like to suggest that the contemporary obsession with the speculative formula of the zombie apocalypse, which keeps reappearing throughout the cultural field with in a historically unprecedented degree, can be understood as a symptom of that often lamented inability to imagine an alternative to actually existing capitalism. Darko Suvin once argued that it is possible to consider mutations in SF visions of the future in the context of the transformations in political economy. While previously the alternative world was “located in a space existing alongside the author’s empirical environment,” in the eighteenth century:

SF turns increasingly to a time into which the author’s age might evolve. A wished-for or feared future becomes the new space of the cognitive imagination, no doubt in intimate connection with the shift from the social power of land to that of capital based on labor sold and profit gained in that time which – as the new slogan said – is money. (Suvin 256-57)

Expanding on Suvin’s remark, which connects the staging ground of the future in SF with the dominant logic of capital accumulation, I would like to propose that today’s post-apocalyptic narratives remain permanently stuck in the present, and cannot imagine anything beyond its present moment, due to the future being colonized by “bad money,” as Kevin Phillips put it: derivatives, securitized credit, CDOs, etc – a utopia of finance capital that as soon as it is laid to rest, rises again through “government intervention,” and, bailed out, reels on indefinitely.

Of course, the image of the zombie has often been evoked in critical accounts of the present moment, in attempts to describe a perpetually dying and reviving capitalism and its outfalls. Peter Paik echoes a common articulation of the financial crisis through the zombie metaphor: “The global financial crisis has resulted in the transformation of banks into zombie institutions that have been reduced to minimal functions and are kept going only by infusions of government funds” (7). Thus, the post-apocalyptic inclination of contemporary US culture and the recurrent

image of the zombie might be understood as speaking of the historical moment in which the present has been taken over by the barely intelligible forces beyond the reach of any individual agency; namely, the forces of financial speculation, largely responsible for the disastrous state of the empirical reality the contemporary zombie narratives are reflecting on.

Here, I would like to offer a reading of Colson Whitehead's (b. 1969) *Zone One* (2011) in the context of contemporary speculative fictions of crisis, and in particular their futuristic and apocalyptic offshoots. Antonio Gramsci's observation on crisis resonates powerfully with this interest. Crisis, Gramsci wrote, consists "precisely in the fact that old is dying and the new cannot be born: in this interregnum, morbid phenomena of the most varied kind come to pass" (276). Apart from the classical zombie movies of George A. Romero, which Whitehead cites as a direct influence, fictions of crisis could also include the more mainstream Hollywood movies such as the dystopian *In Time* (2011), in which economic inequality is turned into disparity in longevity, the vampire apocalypse of *Stake Land* (2010), which takes place in uncannily familiar, de-industrialized and deserted urban American landscapes; or the surreal domestic drama of *Take Shelter* (2011), probably one of the most articulate cultural symptoms of the existential anxiety brought about by the subprime mortgage crisis. The latter, together with Sam Raimi's *Drag me to Hell* (2009) and, to an extent, Romero's own *Land of the Dead* (2005), importantly foregrounds the centrality of real estate in the current crisis, and is in that respect also sympathetic to the theme of *Zone One*.

There is a more general proposition behind this reading. I think these fictions could be seen as forming a loose genre in which symptoms of the current transitional moment in the history of capital can be detected. The transition in question can be framed variously, for example by the conceptual frameworks of world-system theory, where financialization marks the move to a new hegemonic center of capital accumulation, or neoliberalization, by which we might consider the present moment as a high point in the longer process of capital's destabilization of the Keynesian compromise, starting in the 1970s. My working assumption, based on which a more consistent argument should be developed, is that the moment of transition engenders a loosening of generic boundaries, and an infectious diffusion of the speculative and the fantastic throughout the cultural field. In addition, the titles listed above also suggest that in these cultural articulations the economic process is experienced and encoded as the Gothic: a threatening, mysterious, and formative force. This is not a novelty. Considerable literature on "Gothic Marxism" insists that Marx's analysis of the workings of capital was fundamentally influenced by a

Gothic imaginary. By looking at such narratives in general, and *Zone One* in particular, I would like to explore the idea that today, the representational modes which embrace the fantastic and the speculative seem to be extremely receptive to the issue of economic inequality and the social processes that support it and stem from it.

Speculative fiction has recently come in the focus of critical interest in the field of American Studies, and is often read in a similar key. Ramón Saldivar has proposed the terms “Historical Fantasy” and “Speculative Realism” to describe the work of “a new generation of minority writers” interested in “thinking about the nature of a just society and the role of race in its construction” (574). Formally, Saldivar’s “historical fantasy/speculative realism” is a “hybrid amalgam of realism, magical realism, metafiction, and genre fictions such as science fiction, graphic narrative, and fantasy proper” (Saldivar 585). For this occasion, I would like to set aside Saldivar’s insistence on the ethnic aspect of this representational paradigm, and focus instead on his claim that:

in these fictions, fantasy compels our attention to the gap ... between the ideals of redemptive liberal democratic national histories concerning inclusiveness, equality, justice, ... and the deeds that have constituted nations and their histories as public collective fantasies. (Saldivar 594)

Although Saldivar includes Whitehead’s previous work in this paradigm, *Zone One* appears to undermine what Saldivar calls “ethnic literature’s utopian allegiance to social justice” (585). In terms of its political disposition, *Zone One* is closer to what Mark Fisher called “capitalist realism,” or simply the “sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to imagine a coherent alternative to it” (Fisher 6). This would mean that the basic tone of the novel is anti-utopian; a stance that I think should be related to the disastrous failure of the contemporary utopia of finance capitalism.

The position that “there is no alternative” to capitalism has been articulated countless times. I would like to briefly consider a formulation of this position by Irving Kristol, since it is uncannily close to the subject of this text. In a 1979 article from *Encounter*, the original neoconservative and a vocal opponent of state’s welfare provisions celebrates the historical supremacy of the “bourgeois culture” but, at the same time, mourns the spiritual bankruptcy of “liberal capitalism.” It has, according to him, lost its ethical basis:

Meanwhile, liberal capitalism survives and staggers on. It survives because the market economics of capitalism does work – does promote economic growth and permit the individual to better his condition while enjoying an unprecedented degree of individual freedom. But there is something joyless, even somnambulist, about this survival. (Kristol 24)

Kristol's description of liberal capitalism – at a time when the United States, in response to the crisis of stagflation, turns to economic and social policies later described as neoliberal – brings to mind the fictional figures that were becoming increasingly popular at the time of his writing. Like liberal capitalism in Kristol's description, zombies also "survive" and "stagger on," but, unlike Kristol, without any hope in the ability of the system "to better the human condition" (the phrase is Adam Smith's) or guarantee "individual freedom." Today, this implicit and hesitant invocation of the "living dead" finds its historical conclusion in commonplace contentions that explicitly describe the capitalist economy itself as zombified. So, in a typical gesture, Paik claims that the zombie "reflects the fears of a stagnant or contracting economy which has become incapable of the expansion necessary to support widespread prosperity and a social safety net" (7).

Others have resorted to the zombie metaphor to speak of the human consequences of capitalist development, enriching the repertoire of Gothic Marxism with this colonial image of enslavement. Arguing that "the most Gothic description of Capital is also the most accurate," Mark Fisher repeats Marx's famous reference to capital as a vampire, and goes on to conclude: "Capital is an abstract parasite, an insatiable vampire and zombiemaker; but the living flesh it converts into dead labor is ours, and the zombies it makes are us" (15). Similarly, for Amedeo Policante,

the appearance of the zombie signals the horizon of a world fully inhuman, i.e., a world where the human subject himself is made by and for the capital-vampire," with the living labor reduced to the "zombie-like condition of variable capital. (Policante 12-13)

Considered in the context delineated above, *Zone One* appears "capitalist realist" in that the presence of zombies in the novel constantly precludes the possibility of any future-oriented action, thus giving form to the contemporary failure of utopian imagination. The novel also makes a resigned step beyond the boundaries of capitalist realism, in that, unlike Kristol, it argues that "the market economics of capitalism" does not work, and depicts the consequences of existing capitalist relations as entirely destructive. In *Zone One*, the zombie metaphor carries multiple

connotations, and refers equally and simultaneously to degrading historical change, the inability to break away from existing imaginative and political-economic structures, the self-perpetuating logic of contemporary capitalism, and the social divisions implicit in its functioning. All of these meanings move between two basic ones, briefly delineated above: today's capitalism is zombie-like, and creates zombies. The referential scope of the zombie figure in the present moment seems to be both ambivalent and totalizing. Referring simultaneously to the undead logic of capital and the masses of its subjects, it becomes shorthand for the state of the contemporary world.

This development represents yet another twist in the long cultural history of the zombie. As David McNally reminds us, in its original Haitian context the zombie is "a figure of extreme reification – a living laborer capable of drudgery on behalf of others, but entirely lacking in memory, self-consciousness, identity and agency" (211). In her 1938 ethnography of Jamaican obeah and Haitian voodoo, *Tell My Horse*, Zora Neal Hurston describes the zombie as "set to toiling ceaselessly in the banana fields, working like a beast" (457) for its owner. In the 1930s, the zombie enters US culture as an image of commodified and dehumanized labor. In the first American zombie film, *White Zombie* (1932), zombies are forced to work as slaves in a sugar factory. McNally claims that "This image of alienated, crushing, mindless labor in capitalist society resonated powerfully in a US wracked by unemployment, poverty and class resentment" (260). However, in the 1960s, "the idea of the zombie as a living-dead labourer was displaced in American cultural production ... by that of the ghoulish consumer" (260). George Romero's *Dawn of the Dead* (1978), in which American zombies wander aimlessly around a post-apocalyptic shopping mall, is especially pertinent in this context.

Romero's success in defining a whole new genre has undoubtedly got to do with his ability to contain current social anxieties within the formulaic plot of the zombie invasion narrative, starting with the now classic commentary on contemporary racial tensions and the violence taking place both in Vietnam and at home in the *Night of the Living Dead* (1968). The human/zombie binary allows Romero to speak clearly, if always potentially reductively, about various social conflicts. His 2005 installment in the living dead series, *Land of the Dead*, draws this conflict along unmistakably class lines. When one of the movie's protagonists decides to die after being bitten by a zombie, and, consequently, to join the mass of the living dead, he reflects on his fate by saying: "I always wanted to know how the other half lives." The reference to Jacob Riis' photo-journalistic study of poverty among the immigrant underclass in late-

nineteenth-century Manhattan obviously positions Romero's zombies in class terms. This is an important thing to remember because it speaks of a particular articulation of class – in terms of a monstrous remainder – in contemporary US political imagination. It is an articulation, I would like to add, very close to that found in Whitehead's *Zone One*.

Another general point is worth emphasizing here. As Kyle Bishop persuasively argues in his *American Zombie Gothic*, the contemporary, globally popular image of the zombie is a result of cultural amalgamation. This element of Haitian folklore was assimilated into the American tradition of the Gothic, albeit in the popular cinematic form of B-movie horror. The American Gothic, as defined by Eric Savoy, "can be conceptualized as the attempt to invoke ... the specter of Otherness that haunts the house of national narrative" (quoted in Bishop 149). It "reveals the limitations of American faith in social and material progress" and "suggest[s] the attraction and repulsion of a monstrous history, the desire to 'know' the traumatic Real of American being and yet the flight from that unbearable and remote knowledge" (Savoy 167-197). American zombies, in their culturally most productive articulations, indeed point to the irresolvable contradictions in "American being" and give them bodily, material, and historical grounding, as Romero's work most explicitly demonstrates. Still, the encounter of the zombie with the Gothic tradition brought about a significant disappearance. What is palpably absent from the post-folklore US zombie narratives is the equivalent of the *bokor*, the voodoo magician responsible for zombification. Instead, in his place we find some vague reference to a mysterious epidemic, a pharmaceutical or military experiment gone wrong. The process of zombification is thus not only never fully explained, but also detached from any specific site of agency or origin: despite the fact that it produces bodily monsters who feed on human flesh, it appears disembodied, spectral in its origin.

Colson Whitehead called *Zone One* a "horror novel" that "takes off from various entries in the zombie apocalypse genre" (Naimon). The story takes place in an undefined future after the world has barely survived an unexplained attack of the living dead. The novel's hero, Mark Spitz, is a "sweeper," i.e., member of a civilian team working for the military with the task of eliminating the remaining zombies hiding in the buildings of lower Manhattan. The heavily militarized operation is planned by the provisional US government located in Buffalo. The government's plan is to gradually make everything below Canal St ("Zone One") inhabitable again, and, starting from there, to re-populate and rebuild the country. As in every horror story, the novel's ending is marked by the return of the monstrous and failure of hope. Beside a few stock action scenes typical of



the genre, the plot is virtually non-existent, and we mostly follow Mark Spitz's musings on his past life – which is soothing and familiar – and the present state of the world – which is horrifying and familiar. The apocalypse functions as a point of suture in the novel, connecting the historical past and the fantastic present. Although arguably both speculative and Gothic, *Zone One* is firmly rooted in present-day American reality, extrapolating its material from it, and giving it a figurative, hyperbolic, ironic, or satirical twist. Whitehead explained in an interview that *Zone One* is:

not so much about blowing up monsters' heads but about how to survive in a changed world, negotiating the before and after. Whether you've encountered a big disaster in your life, a communal one, or a private one, how do you make the change, navigate this new landscape and remain intact. (Naimon)

As in other zombie apocalypses, in *Zone One* the reason for the appearance of the zombies and the end of the world remains unknown. However, the fact that the novel was published soon after one of the biggest collapses of the financial system in US history, which started with the subprime mortgage crisis of 2008, makes the “change” and “survival” Whitehead mentions easily related to the worsening living conditions of millions of Americans after the real-estate market crash and the ensuing crisis. The fact that the basis for the novel's post-apocalyptic economy is supposed to be precisely real estate, adds support to such a contextualization.

Importantly, the first thing we find out about Whitehead's main protagonist, the African-American called “Mark Spitz,” is that “he always wanted to live in New York,” and that he “daydreamed about living in his [uncle's] apartment” in New York City (3). This dream of upward mobility, however, is not to be, and the reality from which Mark Spitz recovers these nostalgic memories seems to show how any such daydreaming will remain forever unfounded. For Mark Spitz, the “strategies of city planning” (35) the military is involved in are nothing new. Right at the beginning of the novel, we are presented with Mark Spitz's reflections on the relentless force of capital that is shaping the city before “the plague”: “The new buildings in wave upon wave drew themselves out of rubble, shaking off the past like immigrants” (7). In the process of urban development, the buildings are “butchered,” their “bones ... melted down to help their replacements surpass them” (6). When Mark Spitz looks at buildings in “the city churning below,” through the windows that look like “voids in a punch card” he sees:

Pieces of citizens ... on display ..., arranged by a curator with a taste for non sequitur: the splayed pinstriped legs of an urban golfer putting into a colander; half a lady's torso, wrapped in a turquoise blazer, as glimpsed through a trapezoid; a fist trembling on a titanium desk. (Whitehead 6)

Images of mutilation, which are literalized in the novel's zombie-infested present, are both pervasive and inseparable from the workings of capital. Above, Whitehead's suggestive language weaves together bodily mutilation and capitalist production through reference to real-estate development (the re-purposing of buildings) and evocation of corporate workplace (the buildings as punch cards). The persistence of such imagery also points to strong continuities between the "before" and "after" the apocalyptic event. The fact that what is left of the US government, working hand in hand with what is left of the corporate world, attempts to use urban development as the springboard for national recovery after the destruction of the entire political-economic infrastructure is an obviously ironic commentary on utopian projections about progress and economic growth.

In an early scene, we follow Mark Spitz and his team of volunteers who are cleaning a building from zombies. As a para-military force, they are required to follow strict orders: on the very top of their list of priorities is to keep property intact. On the top of the instruction card which they carry is a crossed-out window (15), a clear reference to the "broken windows theory," which provided the basis for, among others, Rudi Giuliani's "zero tolerance" urban policy in New York City in 1993, and went hand in hand with gentrification. That a renewed version of old urban spatial divisions is intended to accompany plans for economic recovery is clear to Mark Spitz: "The officers spread out, homesteading. Manhattan was empty except for soldiers and legions of the damned, [he] noted, and already gentrification had resumed" (35). As we learn, the real estate that the sweepers are taking care of needs to be kept in good shape for "future tenants":

Buffalo had not yet divulged who was going to get resettled in Manhattan once the sweepers were finished, but Gary [Mark Spitz's colleague] had long been skeptical that he would be among them. "You think we're going to end up here? We ain't special. They're going to put the rich people here. Politicians and pro athletes. Those chefs from those cooking shows." ... "They're going to put us on Staten Island." (Whitehead 89)

This scene immediately positions Mark Spitz and the rest of the sweepers as the labor force preparing the ground for future government and corporate investments, from which they will not in any way benefit.

Moreover, like the zombies they are sent out to eliminate, they too are undesirable inhabitants of Zone One. In other words, the “grand design” of the provisional government is a familiar one: it is not simply to house a homeless nation, but to increase the value of real estate by populating it with the more affluent social classes. The aim, once again, is to provide a “spatial fix” for the next cycle of capital accumulation, to employ David Harvey’s useful term. When situated in the immediate historical context of the novel, where the falling prices of real estate after 2006 lead to the subprime mortgage crisis and put an end to the utopia of infinite growth, the zombie-like logic of the provisional US government’s endeavor becomes clear: they are repeating what had already failed. American capitalism, Whitehead suggests, does not learn from its failures.

The first (although clearly not the only) victim of such political-economic logic is the labor force, for whom the threat of zombification is an integral part of their job. Since the world has ended, and the enclaves of safety are few and far between, the sweepers’ labor is literally about their own survival. Mark Spitz and his colleagues are paid in clothing, sweets, sodas and such, but their actual work is indistinguishable from survival. To paraphrase Tocqueville, they work because of “the need to live” and not because of “the desire to improve the conditions of life” (Kristol 1971). With the distinction between living and working eliminated, what is left is bare instinctual life. But the sense of vulnerability that defines the existence of Mark Spitz and his fellow countrymen is not at all new. For example, we learn that Mark Spitz was “a survivalist even at a tender age ... In his mind, the business of existence was about minimizing consequences. The plague had raised the stakes, but he had been in training for this his whole life” (10-14). The precarious living conditions of Zone One belong as much to the historical before, as to the speculative after the apocalypse. This is why the zombie metaphor allows Whitehead to speak of the increasing economic and social insecurity of the American middle-class to which his protagonist used to belong. In his previous life, Mark Spitz “worked in Customer Relationship Management, New Media Department, of a coffee multinational” (184). Now, we find him degraded from a white-collar job to that of low-level military labor, which is in American society a preeminently working-class experience. In this sense, *Zone One*, along with many other contemporary American post-apocalyptic narratives, represents the high-point of the longer process that began in the 1970s, namely, the end of the “postwar [economic] boom” and the demise of “the redistributive policies of the mid-century welfare state” (Hoberek 5). As Andrew Hoberek writes, these two processes resulted in “white-collar workers’ new vulnerability to the sorts of

workplace exploitation traditionally associated with those who work for a living” (6).

Although work and life are for sweepers basically indistinguishable, the mere fact of their integration into the fragile economic and social infrastructure of post-apocalyptic America is what sets them apart from the zombies. What follows from my reading of *Zone One* is that the living dead act in the first place as an insurmountable obstacle for the not-really-new process of accumulation. As those who need to be removed from the picture for economic growth to resume, they function as an indivisible remainder that cannot be subsumed under the logic of the market. Let me add that in other recent zombie narratives options other than extermination do appear. In Junot Díaz’s “Monstro,” a short story announcing his forthcoming novel, those infected with a zombie-like virus are put in concentration camps. At the end of the British horror-comedy *Shaun of the Dead* the zombies are eventually pacified and used as shackled labor for no-skill jobs. Significantly, in *Zone One* the harmless zombies, or “stragglers,” remain stuck in a repetitive action that is often related to their past workplaces. Mark Spitz sees “The former shrink ... The pock-faced assistant manager of the shoe store ... The vitamin-store clerk ... The owner of the plant store ...” (60-61). These different situations, in which the zombies can be recognized as immigrants or refugees, the unemployed or the homeless, suggest that beneath the apparently uniform mass of the living dead there lies the heterogeneity of forms and experiences of economic deprivation and social exclusion. Understood in this way, as an obstacle to normal circulation and limit to accumulation of capital – an element that needs to be either violently eliminated or economically integrated – the zombie metaphor posits abject human life as the other of capital. That would also mean that the fluidity of the zombie figure does not allow for a more analytical or systemic insight into the mechanisms of oppression. Whitehead’s novel diverges slightly from this general premise in that its articulation of the economic and the monstrous speak of the processes of social exclusion that accompany the workings of American neoliberalism. Here, the zombie figures for those socially destructive excess that are both the product of the system and the point of its destabilization.

Read in this key, the ending of the novel, when “the angry dead, the ruthless chaos of existence made flesh” (321) finally show that they “were the ones who would resettle the broken city,” (321) seems almost like containing a grain of poetic justice. The monstrous collectivity, the “sea of the dead” (322) that Mark Spitz finally walks into, is after all showing resistance to their removal from, for better or worse, their current home.

The apparent pessimism implied in the failure of government's plan for economic recovery should be re-thought in the light of Whitehead's re-articulation of the zombies' monstrosity. This monstrosity should be understood as a "capitalist realist" signal of the impossibility to think historical change without the movement of capital as its fuel. In that sense, this is a true post-historical novel, in which the end of history in *Zone One* is not brought about by the victory of contemporary capitalism, but its socially destructive logic.

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