

BREAKING THE RULES: THREE NOVELS INNOVATING GENRE FICTION

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The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined the [thesis or dissertation] entitled

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## Introduction

It only takes a glance at the New York Time's list of fiction best sellers or a walk through a big-box bookstore to have an idea of what kinds of fiction are selling and being read the most. We see familiar names—King and Koontz, Sparks and Steel—as well as newcomers with only a book or two under their belts. Though the content of these books, their styles of writing, are often radically different, they share the commonality of being identified as popular genre fiction. They are horror novels, science fiction, mystery, harlequin romance, and so on and so forth, books that are read more for their plots than for their characters. These are the books meant to entertain, to get lost in, rather than to convey some human truth.

What we see less often on similar lists of bestselling books are those in which the craft of the sentence is prioritized, fiction meant to be identified as works of art no different than a painting or film. These texts, deemed literary in academic circles, simply do not possess the same selling power as genre fiction. They are books that require more work from the reader, a lucidity often left unnecessary in genre fiction. There are, of course, exceptions to this rule—Anthony Doerr's *All the Light We Cannot See* had a brief stint on the New York Time's Best Seller list during January—but it's the Kings and Steels that reign over these lists. Simply, the majority of readers are looking to fiction for entertainment rather than insight. They want to be scared and romanced and in-awe, they want to travel to impossible places and times, all without the work.

So it might be suggested, then, that contemporary fiction is divided into these two markets: literary and popular fiction. For the sake of this argument, from this point forth, I'll be replacing the term popular fiction with genre fiction, for popular fiction most often relies on genre plots, stereotypical characters, and tropes. This is distinctly different from

literary fiction, which actively avoids these tropes and formulaic narratives, being driven instead by character development. Ironically, however, by trying to avoid genre clichés, literary fiction has developed its own set of overused tropes. For this reason, literary fiction seems just like any other genre, but is often separated, considered its own distinct entity. What I'm considering genre fiction has been called a variety of names, but those among them—"junk fiction," pulp fiction, mass market fiction—do not fit my view of this particular type of writing. Junk fiction, for example, Thomas J. Roberts' title for this type of fiction, implies to me a negative connotation. For Roberts, science fiction or horror are nothing but rubbish, something to be discarded after use. Pulp fiction, on the other hand, suggests short stories, a form that doesn't concern this study, and while all pulp fiction can be considered genre fiction, all genre fiction cannot be considered pulp fiction. Likewise, mass market fiction as a titular term for this body of works makes assumptions, notably that the term suggests a wide readership. While this may be true for certain genres, for example, science fiction or romance, it seems ironic for genres such as high-fantasy or westerns that have a much more limited audience, perhaps even an audience comparable in size to literary fiction. Thus, though some may see all of these terms interchangeably, genre fiction seems most apt for my discussion.

It seems an unwritten rule among scholarly circles that if literary fiction is a high art, then genre fiction is low art. While often popular, works of genre fiction "are rarely if ever touted in academia, and often lack credibility in terms of intellectual merit" (Farnsworth). The existence of such a rule is evident throughout scholarship, ranging from Roberts' less-than-endearing term for genre fiction, to Pierre Bourdieu's idea that "literary fiction is a category of legitimate culture in that it positions itself hierarchically

within the cultural field in opposition to other categories—typically mass-market genre fiction” (as quoted in Norman 38). There are, however, texts that fall through the cracks between literary and genre fiction, and while they may get noticed in one demographic, are ignored in the other. These are the texts I’m interested in, the texts that this study hopes to bring into scholarly conversation.

This thesis applies a close look at three novels that fall somewhere in-between genres. They are character-driven texts that also follow in the traditions of the science fiction, detective, and horror genres. While these novels sometimes did receive literary acclaim, they rarely received any true recognition within their respective genres. An exception to this is Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake*, though Atwood’s pushing of genre boundaries goes relatively unnoticed among science fiction critics. I argue that all three of these novels—Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake*, Brian Evenson’s *Last Days*, and Colson Whitehead’s *Zone One*—are breaking, bending, ignoring, and adding to genre conventions as a way to convey social commentary, and this innovation is going unnoticed by those who study science fiction, detective, or horror fiction. Just as one might argue these texts stand apart from other literary novels, that they are in some way pushing the metaphorical envelope, so too can they be said to be fresh takes on usually dull genres. I argue that critics are missing important textual elements that are showing evolution in these genres, and begin the dialogue myself. This thesis is by no means extensive. Plenty of texts go unnoticed, whether by literary critics or by genre critics, and there are a multitude of novels subverting genre conventions just as successfully, both currently and in the past, but there simply isn’t enough time to name and discuss each and every one. My hope is that these three chapters on three particular novels will prompt a

discussion that allows critics from either camp to see what it is they're missing, and how these texts can be just as important for the evolution of their genre as they are for the literary canon. Before introducing each of these chapters, though, I'd like to briefly discuss the four genres that the novels are working within. In order to understand *how* these writers are being innovative, one must know what's already expected in literary fiction, science fiction, detective fiction, and horror fiction.

All three of the novels I'm choosing to write about can be considered literary fiction, and literary fiction is the genre that holds the most esteem in academia. That being said, it is also the most difficult to define and becomes quite subjective. There are, however, some key characteristics of literary fiction that seem ubiquitous. In her own take on literary fiction, Dr. Sanjida O'Connell suggests four main characteristics: literary fiction should be intellectual, should have depth, should be about character, and should be written with style. Jennifer Ellis provides a much more specific list of differences, suggesting that fiction is literary when it is "[C]haracter arc/Theme/Language driven; not formulaic; provides meaning and cultural value; [has] unique and fresh prose; characters [who] are fully fleshed out humans; etc..." (Ellis). To catalog an extensive list of definitions of literary fiction would be impossible, but from these two alone we get a sense of how literary fiction is defined. Perhaps the most popular definition is that literary fiction is character driven, whereas genre fiction is plot driven (Saricks 177). One problem with this is the dichotomous implication: a work can either be plot-driven and be considered genre fiction, or character-driven and be considered literary fiction. But shouldn't all good books have both, regardless of genre? Or what if a book is character-driven but derives completely from genre conventions? Is it *bad* for a book to

be driven by plot? These kinds of questions further muddy the waters separating literary and genre fiction. In addition, literary fiction is considered to be less formulaic, however, as I noted earlier, this has led to the development of its own conventions and tropes.

Literary fiction places importance on style, unlike genre fiction in which “the prose can be more workman-like if the plot is the driver” (O’Connell). Finally, literary fiction is meant to be seen as something more than just escapism. Literary fiction is, supposedly, art, at least more so than a science fiction novel. The defining and separation of literary fiction is clearly problematic, but as long as critics and academia are employing a hierarchy of fiction, it must be acknowledged.

All of these universal traits of literary fiction are applicable to all three novels this thesis focuses on. They are books driven by singular characters: a fatherly survivor of the apocalypse, an amputee ex-detective, and a sweeper, a man designated with killing leftover zombies after an apocalyptic pandemic. Each narrative spends time in the protagonists’ minds, the protagonists have inner conflicts, and they exhibit some kind of evolution or change as the novels progress. Each novel has depth, with subplots and backstories and complex characters, and takes at least some work from the reader to piece the puzzle together. All three authors employ unique stylish prose. The novels are not clumsily written; the language is carefully chosen. To be sure, some of these novels have prose more poetic than others, but none of the three could be said to have flat writing. However, these novels are also driven by predictable plot points. They utilize genre tropes, and perhaps most importantly, they are exciting, and offer the same sense of escapism as genre fiction. In fact, in all three cases, the authors are using genre tropes

and plot as a vehicle for their social commentary. In short, these novels are literary, but they are also science fiction, or noir, or horror.

Of the three genres these novels work within, science fiction is the most common, and is gaining the most traction among academic circles. It should be noted that Atwood has a strange relationship with her work being labeled as science fiction, which she considers to be far more fantastical than her own definition of speculative fiction. However, this is not to mean speculative fiction as an umbrella term, which includes science fiction, horror, fantasy, and magical realism. Atwood argues that speculative fiction “employs the means already to hand,” as opposed to science fiction which “belongs on books with things in them that we can’t do yet, such as going through a wormhole in space to another universe” (Atwood). This definition is problematic, though, and Atwood is generalizing what science fiction is. Certainly *Oryx and Crake* fits Atwood’s definition of speculative fiction, but for this study I’ve decided to identify the novel as science fiction which, for me, refers to any fiction in which the advancement of science and technology play a major role, no matter how close to reality. Though science fiction has existed much longer, the term was “popularized in the 1940’s [and] has come to refer to a form of genre fiction characterized by the narration of imaginative and speculative alternative worlds . . . typically set in the future or in space” (Herman, John, and Ryan 518). Though early science fiction “tended to emphasize technological progress and was generally positive about innovations and social change . . . Later social sf tends to be darker, moving into dystopian visions and the nightmarish landscapes of inner space” (518-9). Interestingly for this particular thesis, “[S]cience fictional plots tend to center on problem-resolution patterns, manifested in a similar way as detective

fiction (alongside which the genre developed)” (519). And, as is to be expected in science fiction, “[T]echnological and social innovations form the rich background to the imagined world, and it is often one of these aspects or gadgets that operates as a mechanical plot device to engineer a climactic, explosive, or revelatory ending” (519). Like all genres, though, science fiction can be split into subgenres, and it’s there where we will find the tropes and conventions that Atwood is adding to.

Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake* derives from the dystopian and post-apocalyptic subgenres of science fiction, but it’s the former subgenre that she is innovating. The novel uses familiar post-apocalyptic traits: the questioning of what led to the catastrophe; the protagonist who has outlasted the apocalypse, and who must now forage to survive; and biblical undertones. Likewise, we see plenty elements of the dystopic in *Oryx and Crake*: constant surveillance by a government agency, a sharp division between the upper and lower class, and the dangerous evolution of technology. Unlike the other novels in this thesis, though, *Oryx and Crake* is not ignoring genre conventions, but expanding on tropes of dystopian science fiction by creating two new dystopian traits: desensitization to violence and sex, and human trafficking. This suggests an evolution in the genre (and subgenre), as Atwood is avoiding the stagnant trap of *only* using the pre-established tropes of dystopian fiction by developing new ideas about what a dystopia might entail. Because these traits are outside of the norm, however, they go unnoticed. Whether these particular traits will become commonplace in the future of dystopian and post-apocalyptic fiction, I cannot say; however, Atwood is clearly innovating the genre. *Oryx and Crake* did receive attention by literary critics as

well as by science fiction critics; however, these genre critics did not recognize the innovative elements in Atwood's novel, and thus it fell through the cracks of scholarship.

The next genre that this thesis will discuss is detective or crime fiction which, like science fiction, has existed in some form or another much longer than the term.

Detective fiction "refers to a narrative whose principal action concerns the attempt by an investigator to solve a crime and to bring a criminal to justice, whether the crime involves a theft, or one or more murders," and is "comprised by the questions 'Whodunnit?' and 'Who is guilty?'" (Herman, John, and Ryan 103). These questions, however, are not the same, "because the investigation shows guilt to be a more universal phenomenon than crime" (103). Detective fiction also "is grounded in a relationship of complicity between authors and readers that resembles a game played according to a set of rules" (103). In addition, "[F]ictional detectives represent law and order, but they often resort to illegal methods . . . Therefore, the investigation is just as much a probing into an investigator's moral principles as it is a scrutiny of the suspects and their social context" (103). Thus, the basic characteristics of the detective novel are of a morally ambiguous detective who attempts to solve a crime, and a reader who must play along, all the while piecing clues together as well as recognizing that guilt and immorality aren't always criminal.

Detective fiction has—perhaps even more than science fiction or horror—many subgenres, each of which with its own unique tropes and conventions, but Brian Evenson's *Last Days* is rooted in the hardboiled detective subgenre, which, like science fiction, saw a rise in popularity in the 1940s. Hardboiled detective fiction separates itself from other forms of detective fiction by its grittiness. While Golden Age detective fiction kept violence implicit and kept blood to a minimum, the hardboiled subgenre put

violence and darker themes at the forefront. Thus, one of the major tropes of the hardboiled novel is a graphic sense of violence. Another of the subgenre's traits is that of corruption. The guilty in hardboiled detective fiction—not always the criminals—are often corrupt in some way. This usually means corrupt law enforcement, corrupt businessmen, or corrupt politicians. The hardboiled novel is also characterized by its setting, taking place almost exclusively in urban settings, where crime and corruption is most high (Worthington 121-129). Finally, and perhaps most importantly, is the convention of the detective, which is quite different from detectives of other subgenres. The hardboiled detective is:

professional; tough; shrewd; at times callous and hard; durable, surviving assault and injury; is often bound by a rigid, if very individual, moral code, and works in a protective capacity . . . the hard-boiled detective, while paid for his investigations, is alienated from the community and essentially works to satisfy himself and his personal sense of justice. (Worthington 122-3)

Besides being portrayed as far tougher than detectives of other subgenres, another trope in hardboiled fiction is that the detective often deals with some personal conflict, usually in the form of addiction or familial problems.

While Evenson does incorporate some of these tropes and conventions into *Last Days*, he also subverts, or downplays some in order to force the reader's attention on other matters. *Last Days* has characteristics that place it in the detective fiction genre, that is, a detective as a protagonist who must solve a crime, and a narrative that acts as a game played between author and reader. The novel also has various elements of the hardboiled subgenre: grittiness and violence is frequent and never watered down.

Evenson employs corrupt police officers, and certainly features a durable detective with at least some sense of a moral code. On the other hand, though, *Last Days* places less importance on some of these conventions: it takes place in both urban and rural settings; it revolves around a crime that, albeit eventually solved, is only really present during the novel's first half and, even then, infrequently; and the detective's internal conflict is never resolved. Besides these more common tropes, Evenson is also subverting the more specific convention of including a new religious movement in an unusual way. That is, instead of using a conventional society to show the incompatibility and perverseness of cults, Evenson removes the element of a conventional society as a means of directing the reader's attention on *just* the new religious movements. Among critics of the genre, this innovation has gone unrecognized, even though it could easily be seen as pushing the boundaries of hardboiled fiction, propelling an evolution of sorts.

The third genre that this thesis will discuss is horror fiction. The roots of horror fiction can be found in Gothic literature, which “flourished in the late eighteenth- and early nineteenth- centuries,” and which is “a literature of fear and nightmare which shows special interest in the underside of humanity: the evil within the psyche and the disintegration of subjectivity” (Herman, John, and Ryan 2009). Gothic fiction evolved and adapted over time, being used as a medium to address a variety of human anxieties. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, however, authors began creating different kinds of horror fiction, so the gothic novel became just one of many subgenres. There are, though, some basic tropes we can identify as characteristics of all horror fiction. Regarding its popularity, *The Routledge Encyclopedia of Narrative Theory* identifies horror as “a cross-medium genre appealing primarily to young men and women—perhaps as an adolescent rite of passage,

or as a practice ground for the display of socially-sanctioned gender roles” (Herman, John, and Ryan 224). This seems dated, however, and Noël Carroll’s definition seems more applicable to my study: “[H]orror narratives produce an admixture of fear and disgust in audiences through the dangerous, unnatural figure of the monster” (225). The across-the-board characteristic is, of course, a literature based in fear, whether this comes as a result of monsters, the human psyche, or gender.

As might be expected, horror fiction can be split into a variety of subgenres that address each of these anxieties, and Colson Whitehead’s *Zone One* falls into the category of a zombie apocalypse. Zombie narratives have experienced a renaissance of sorts recently, which includes various literary takes on the subject as well as new films and adaptations of popular zombie films from the 70s and 80s, and we can once again identify some of the popular conventions used in the subgenre. Zombie fiction differs from the other subgenres in that many of its tropes are derived from filmic representations of zombies; however, Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* has been considered an early precursor, and zombies have appeared in folklore since at least the 17<sup>th</sup> century (Mariani). Zora Neale Hurston, for example, writes about the Haitian zombie, which is a reanimated corpse used as a slave laborer. Among all of these different versions of the zombie narrative, there are many tropes, but because Whitehead is writing a zombie apocalypse, then it’s clearly the filmic representations that his novel derives from, and thus filmic tropes which we must look for. Even filmic zombies, though, have been further split by scholars into pre- and post- 9/11 zombies (Wetmore).

Perhaps the most obvious trope in the zombie apocalypse subgenre is that of the zombie. The zombie in this subgenre most often comes into existence as a result of some

kind of contagion, or some kind of phenomenon that reanimates corpses. Another trait of the zombie is that it falls under one of two categories, separated as pre- and post-9/11. The pre-9/11 zombie is slow, mindless, easy to evade. While they are threatening if the living are careless, they appear as more of a nuisance than an actual risk. The post-9/11 zombie, on the other hand, is more intelligent, more aggressive, and quick. It is willing and able to be an actual threat to survivors. Another trope of the zombie apocalypse subgenre is that the narrative most often takes place during the early stages of outbreak and/or up until the apocalyptic peak. Additionally, it has been a common convention for the zombie to serve “as a handy Rorschach test for America’s social ills. At various times, the zombie has represented capitalism, the Vietnam War, nuclear fear, even the tension surrounding the civil-rights movement.” Recently, however, though America suffers from the same social ills, “zombies have been absorbed as entertainment that’s completely independent from these dilemmas” (Mariani).

It is apparent that *Zone One* is working within this same framework and with some of these same conventions. Though it’s left unstated in the text, the zombies are brought about by an infectious pandemic. Whitehead’s zombies fulfill the characteristics of both the pre- and post-9/11 zombies, beginning as a low, sometimes zero-risk figure, and ending as an intelligent, hyper-aggressive type of zombie. The narrative, however, takes place during an unusual stage of the apocalypse for the subgenre, being set not in the early stages or even the peak of the zombie uprising, but rather sometime soon after that, when all that remains is infrequent wandering zombies. Whitehead’s zombies aren’t meant as pure entertainment, and while they *could* be metaphorical, they aren’t given a large enough role to make this clear. Instead, the zombies in *Zone One* are made

secondary. As with *Last Days*, the reader's attention is carefully diverted away from these familiar genre tropes to the dangers of capitalism. Whitehead is innovating the subgenre by subverting and ignoring these conventions as a way to highlight a larger societal concern. Whitehead's downplaying of the zombie has led to the novel being much overlooked among horror critics.

This thesis is split into three chapters that correspond to the aforementioned subgenres and novels. Given the time, the study could easily be adapted to include additional chapters on other subgenres going unrecognized by critics and scholars, or on a wider range of texts that are going unrecognized, but as previously mentioned, the thesis is not meant to be exhaustive. Instead, these three chapters are meant to highlight three innovative novels that subvert their respective genres in order to engage in social commentary, novels that, if recognized and taken seriously by certain critics, could lead to an evolution of the genres and perhaps further close the gap between fiction that is and isn't taken seriously. These novels happen to go unnoticed by critics in one camp or the other, usually because of how they avoid or subvert typical genre tropes. The chapters will make arguments on the subversion of genre conventions as follows.

The first chapter of this thesis will focus on Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*. *Oryx and Crake* is rooted in science fiction and, more specifically, the dystopian and post-apocalyptic subgenres. The novel follows a protagonist, Snowman who is believed to be the last full human, the rest of the world being wiped out by a worldwide pandemic brought about by Snowman's best friend, Crake. All that remains is a perfect humanoid species that Snowman must watch over: the Crakers, again, created by Crake. Over the course of the narrative, Snowman embarks on a journey to scavenge food and other

supplies, and, en route, contemplates the course of his life, his relationship with Crake, and his relationship with a sex trafficking victim, Oryx. Like *Zone One*, much of the novel is told retrospectively, and informs the reader of how the apocalyptic setting came to be. Though Atwood doesn't necessarily subvert the subgenres she's working within, per se—many conventions are embraced—she pushes trope boundaries by commenting on different social ills that might lead to a dystopian or apocalyptic world: desensitization of violence and sex, and human trafficking, especially of sex workers. I argue that, while genre critics are recognizing *Oryx and Crake* for its use of traditional tropes, the novel is not being recognized for the innovative way it works outside of the genre box. That is, should science fiction critics recognize that texts such as *Oryx and Crake* offer a wide range of dystopian warnings outside of dangerous technology and a police state, the dystopian genre might continue to evolve.

The second chapter concerns Brian Evenson's *Last Days*. *Last Days* is written in the form of a detective novel. More specifically, though, it is derived from the tradition of the hardboiled detective novel. The novel, split into two parts, follows as protagonist a retired detective named Kline. Kline, who has recently amputated and cauterized his own hand in order to stop a criminal, is forced into solving a crime for a new religious movement that bases holiness on the amount of amputated body parts each member has. After realizing the religion's leader is manipulating him, and after a series of violent altercations, Kline is forced again to amputate more of his arm. In the novel's second narrative portion, Kline is saved by a second but equally perverse new religious movement, which also attempts to use Kline. As with the novel's first section, the second ends with a series of violent altercations. In chapter two I argue that this narrative breaks

a specific trope of detective fiction: how new religious movements are viewed in the hardboiled subgenre. Instead of juxtaposing cults against conventional society, Evenson is placing two new religious movements side-by-side in order to force the reader's attention on them. He is doing this as a way to critique mainstream religions, which often share equally perverse rituals and customs. Because he is downplaying most hardboiled conventions in order to highlight another that he is subverting, Evenson's novel is unrecognized by genre critics. If it was acknowledged as a legitimate piece of hardboiled fiction, it might be taken more seriously, a genre with the allegorical potential of science fiction, which scholars have begun to realize is more than mere entertainment.

Finally, the thesis' third chapter examines Colson Whitehead's *Zone One*. *Zone One* is a horror novel derived from the zombie apocalypse subgenre. The novel follows a protagonist, Mark Spitz, over a weekend span in which he "sweeps" leftover skels—zombies—from a post-apocalyptic New York City, all the while contemplating his past. Often Mark thinks about various factors of capitalism: advertisements, professions, and the living and working spaces of various social classes. In chapter three I argue that Whitehead is subverting the zombie apocalypse subgenre by making both the zombie and the apocalypse secondary. Instead, Whitehead is using the aforementioned capitalist factors as nostalgic triggers. Thinking about jobs he held before the pandemic, advertisements he's heard, and places he's lived—all triggered by things he sees and hears in the present—provides a comfort for Mark. Because typical zombie conventions aren't at the novel's forefront, *Zone One* has gone unnoticed as a genuine and innovative piece of zombie apocalypse fiction that brings to mind George Romero's allegorical

series of zombie films, and what should be seen as a step forward in the evolution of horror fiction.

## Chapter One

### Sex, Snuff, and Human Trafficking: Dystopic Warnings in *Oryx and Crake*

Dystopian and post-apocalyptic fiction, like most other science fiction, attempts to answer variants of the question *what if?* What if we lived in a totalitarian state? What if we continue our interest in and development of technology? What if capitalism ruled and corporatism was at its most extreme? What if the vast majority of the human race was eradicated as a result of a global pandemic? Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*, the first of her Maddadam trilogy, continues the tradition of these science fiction subgenres. So it's unsurprising, then, that scholarship focusing on the novel and its relation to dystopian and post-apocalyptic fiction focuses on these questions, and for good reason. They are these questions that authors like Atwood are hoping we will ask ourselves upon reading these books, questions that might act as warnings to readers: What if we continue the path we are on? More often than not, the answer is nothing good. However, I'd argue that scholars are missing other warnings that Atwood is providing. These warnings, albeit perhaps of lesser importance than the extinction of the human race or the ecological apocalypse we are heading towards, are important nonetheless and point to issues that are either already at hand, or will occur far sooner than other, more extreme traits of the dystopic, for example, human trafficking and desensitization of violent and sexual media as a result of overexposure. It is important to acknowledge these issues both because they are unusual themes in dystopian fiction and because of their prevalence to the real world. Thus, I intend to posit *why* previous scholars have downplayed the importance of these two issues and begin the discourse on them, particularly how Atwood

is pushing the genre past its usual tropes—economic, ecological, and political dystopias, and the dangers of technology—to speak on what I’d consider more immediate concerns.

Much scholarship on *Oryx and Crake* covers typical tropes of dystopian and post-apocalyptic fiction: the dangers of technology and scientific advancement, specifically scientists playing God; the importance of maintaining the environment; the importance of language and the arts; and the dangers of corporate power in a highly capitalistic setting. There is also a variety of feminist readings of *Oryx and Crake*. That isn’t to say that these particular topics aren’t interesting or important, but rather that some of Atwood’s themes are going unnoticed. A short stroll through scholarship on the novel shows this to be true.

Though *Oryx and Crake* does, in fact, comment on gender roles in society and the sciences, it’s a concern much less prominent than in Atwood’s earlier *The Handmaid’s Tale*. The former is told from the perspective of a male narrator, and considers the technological creation of humankind rather than the biological. To be sure, though, *Oryx and Crake* is set in a male dominated world in which highly misogynistic and idealistic ‘50s Americana is romanticized, and women are objectified items for purchase. In her article “Surviving the Waterless Flood: Feminism and Ecofeminism in Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, *Oryx and Crake*, and *The Year of the Flood*,” Karen Stein’s discussion of feminism is far less prominent in *Oryx and Crake* than Atwood’s other two novels. Stein argues that women, like nature, “are manipulated and consumed” (321), particularly as sex objects. Watson Crick, for example, supplies prostitutes to its students as temporary sexual partners. Stein also suggests that despite Jimmy being a “word person,” he still enjoys the privileges of being an upper-middle class male. Stein’s

essay, though, makes more sense when applied to other novels, so the short section on *Oryx and Crake* reads more like an analysis of the technological dangers that Atwood warns against.

It's this warning, regarding the sacrilege of bioengineering, the dangers of misusing science, and the environmental effects of a science and capital driven society that most *Oryx* scholarship covers. One common interpretation of Atwood's novel is as a parallel to Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*, an obvious comparison considering the importance of bioengineering various species. Both Karen Stein and Sharon R. Wilson acknowledge this in two additional articles: "Problematic Paradise in *Oryx and Crake*" and "Postapocalyptic Vision: Flood Myths and Other Folklore in Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* and *The Year of the Flood*." Stein explores Crake as a "trickster scientist," characters who are, "in literature and legend, usually a male, [who] crosses boundaries, disrupts the social order, and embodies contradictions" (Stein 143) This proves true in Crake, who embodies many of the humanistic traits that he abhors, as he greatly disrupts social order by manufacturing an apocalyptic pandemic. Stein continues on to argue that the misuse of science in Atwood's novel is not a result of science itself, but rather driven by the human heart. Thus Crake, who grows up in a sheltered setting, desensitized to violence, and who has access to nearly unlimited technology and funds, is completely lacking in empathy, and so doesn't seem to bat an eye about causing so much death. Albeit more briefly and alongside two additional myths (the Fitcher's Bird, and Faust), Sharon R. Wilson takes an approach similar to Stein, comparing Crake to Doctor Frankenstein. Similarly, though not a direct allusion to Frankenstein, Christina Bieber Lake's "What Makes a Crake," explores how Crake's privileged upbringing and the

societal loss of language and the arts contributed to the end of the world. For Lake, *Oryx and Crake* warns the reader to “empower the arts so that they push us beyond the values of production and consumption, efficiency and control” (Lake 130). Some scholars, however, move away from ethics, like Gerry Canavan and Mark Bosco, S.J., who offer differing views on the possibility (or lack there-of) of hope for both Jimmy and the reader; Calina Ciobanu, who discusses the end of the Anthropocene, that is, the end of mankind and the post-human era to follow; or Katherine V. Snyder, who explores how “[T]he post-apocalypse at once allegorizes and literalizes the psychic mechanisms of trauma, both everyday, systematic, “quiet” traumas and unimaginable yet inescapably real historical traumas” (Snyder 486).

These scholars sometimes briefly acknowledge Oryx’s backstory and how she is sold and passed around as an object. They also mention Jimmy and Crake’s teenaged habits, the games they played, what they watched on the internet. However, each of these warnings or dystopic traits are either tied into other concerns the scholars are writing about, or set aside as unimportant. This, I’d argue, is a large gap in scholarship on the novel. It also suggests a question: why? Why do other scholars either ignore or downplay the importance of these warnings? It’s this question I’d now like to answer. There are, I’d argue, two possibilities as to why these elements of *Oryx and Crake* are not considered: either scholars don’t find them important in the context of other concerns present, or they are not identifying them as potential dystopian concerns at all. To be sure, previous dystopian novels have addressed both desensitization via media as well as human trafficking. Both *1984* and *A Clockwork Orange*, for example, portray a desensitization to violence. Human trafficking, too, has a presence in dystopian fiction

albeit most often in recent young adult takes on the genre. Atwood's take on these topics, however, is novel. Desensitization to violence and sex in *Oryx and Crake* comes as a result of a new type of media: the internet, which was still relatively young at the time of the novel's publication. Not often do classic dystopian texts focus on human trafficking, it seems somewhat new in the genre, and Atwood's novel seems to be an early example of that particular issue being a concern in dystopian fiction.

As for my first suggested possibility, which seems most likely, these particular issues are overshadowed by that of the dangers of science on the environment, the ethics of bioengineering, the shift from political control to a capitalistic society in which corporations have unlimited power, and, of course, the idea of the apocalypse—the end of the human race. To be sure, human trafficking and desensitization pale in comparison to the extinction of an entire species, but then again, so do these other issues scholars *are* writing about—bioengineering and environment and so on and so forth. Still, scholars are discussing the issues because they see them as being contributing factors to the larger, more global concern of apocalypse. I argue that the issues I bring up are just as much contributors, and thus deserving of a critical examination.

Though it seems less likely, I'd also like to consider the possibility that scholars simply don't see these issues as being warnings from Atwood in the same way that she warns about the ethics of bioengineering, etc... This, I argue, is because these particular issues aren't traditional tropes in the genres, and so scholars, who are used to looking for x or y trait glance over an unusual z trait. I'm not sure any fault lies with the scholar for this, but instead a fault in academia's strict classification system of literary genres. Typically, dystopian and post-apocalyptic literature features a range of traits, and these

are what I imagine scholars are most aware of. In his student resource on dystopian fiction, Jeff Mallory lists some of these representative traits: “a hierarchical society where divisions between the upper, middle and lower class are definitive and unbending (Caste system)”; “constant surveillance by state police agencies”; “a nation-state ruled by an upper class with few democratic ideals state propaganda programs and educational systems that coerce most citizens into worshipping the state and its government, in an attempt to convince them into thinking that life under the regime is good and just”; and, most importantly, “The society must have echoes of today, of the reader's own experience” (Mallory). These are just a few of the traits Mallory lists, and he also acknowledges that his list isn't definitive, but we get a sense of dystopian archetypes. And we can see that these traits *do* appear in *Oryx and Crake*: the caste system between those who live in compounds and those who live in the Pleeblands; the CorpSeCorps surveillance on Jimmy regarding his mother; and the coercive ruling upper-class, though in this case the world is not controlled by a political party but rather corporations that act with total political power. Another important trait of dystopic fiction is the dangers of technology. Often, dystopic communities are posed as utopic, and technology is seen as a productive asset. However, the advancement of technology is pushed to the point of the unethical or spirals dangerously out of control. So it's no surprise that these are the kind of topics that scholars on Atwood's novel are writing about, as well as topics expected to be written about on Atwood specifically. These tropes are so engrained, in fact, that scholars gloss over other traits that are just as or more dystopic than the common traits. To ignore Atwood's warnings on human trafficking and the desensitization of violence

and sex in media is to turn a blind eye to the dystopia and, perhaps, apocalypse that could loom on our horizon.

That is why I find these particular elements of *Oryx and Crake* to be worth reading as traits of the dystopic and deserving of more than an aside or being lumped together with another, more typical trait. It seems hypocritical to point out these gaps in scholarship without contributing my own analysis, so the second half of this chapter will analyze these warnings that Atwood is giving and how they are contributing to the novel's dystopian society and leading to the apocalypse.

What follows is a brief but necessary synopsis of *Oryx and Crake's* plot. *Oryx and Crake* follows Snowman, who the reader is led to believe is the last surviving true member of the human race. Told in the present tense, Snowman has been designated by his childhood friend, Crake, as the sole caretaker of Crake's crowning achievement in scientific invention: a fully customizable and perfectly genetically engineered species of humanoids known as Crakers. Snowman is a father figure, teacher, and even a clergyman to the Crakers, creating the mythos of Oryx and Crake, who the Crakers have come to see as the creators of both themselves and the rest of the world. Snowman teaches the Crakers that harming any living creature is a sin against Oryx, though he requires the sacrifice of a single fish each week and explains that this single sacrifice was acceptable as long as the remains of the fish were brought back to the ocean; something that Snowman retrospectively regrets not making more frequent. Otherwise, Snowman lives off of food he can scavenge: mangoes, "a can of Sveltana No-Meat Cocktail sausages, and a precious half-bottle of Scotch . . . and a chocolate-flavoured energy bar" (Atwood 4). Snowman recognizes that his selection is limited, and so decides to embark

on an expedition back into Paradise, the compound he once led the Crakers out of. This short expedition is what most of the novel's present covers, but much of the text is made up of Snowman's contemplation on his life, his relationship with Crake, and how things came to be, thus Snowman's memories become a Bildungsroman of sorts, filling in the gap about what came before and how he came to be. The past and present tenses of the novel are separated into a before and after of the apocalypse, and it's important to note that prior to Crake's pill-spread pandemic, Snowman was called Jimmy. It was only after the apocalyptic event that he renamed himself.

Once he realizes that he's out of food, and that he must leave the Crakers to forage for more, Snowman sets off on his journey. While he walks, Snowman thinks about the events that shaped him as a child and how the apocalyptic world came to be. Snowman's retrospection begins with his earliest memories, "[H]e must have been five, maybe six" (15). Jimmy recalls seeing his father burn diseased sheep, cattle, and pigs on a bonfire. Jimmy's father works as a genographer of OrganInc Farms, one of many major corporations that have developed protected compounds for employees and their families. Jimmy's father had been "one of the foremost architects of the pigoon project," a pig genetically engineered to grow and regrow human-tissue kidneys, livers, and hearts, harvested and frozen for human transplant (22-3). Jimmy and his family live an upper middle-class lifestyle in their compound, separate from the poverty-ridden and dangerous Pleeblands. As Jimmy grows older, as the family moves into a new compound, and as Jimmy's mother leaves the family and compound to join the environment-focused God's Gardeners, he befriends Crake who claims a permanent place in Jimmy's life up until and even after the apocalypse.

Crake is Jimmy's hyper-intelligent polar opposite. While Jimmy is considered a "word person," Crake is a "numbers person," a much more lucrative trait that lands Crake in a top-tier science-based university while Jimmy attends a run-down liberal arts college. If Jimmy is, or at least views himself as, morally upstanding and honorable, Crake is the opposite. Crake has a sense of indifference and coolness that Jimmy is jealous of. As teenagers the boys passed time reclusively, playing death and extinction themed video games, smoking "skunkweed," and surfing the web, watching both the legal and readily available pornographic and snuff films, such as the Noodie News and deathrowlive.com, as well as illegal sites, like the child-pornographic HottTotts. Crake's indifference to this seemingly extreme and explicit content will both characterize and foreshadow his anti-humanistic scientific endeavors which will later cause a near mass extinction of the human race.

As they grow older and graduate from high school, Jimmy and Crake drift apart, keeping in contact infrequently via e-mail, though Jimmy does visit Crake at Watson-Crick, nicknamed Asperger U. Like Crake, all who attend Watson-Crick are "numbers people," and during his visit, Jimmy sees some of the technological advancements being created at Crake's school: chickens that grow twelve breasts or drumsticks at a time, mood-sensing wallpaper, and water-regulating rocks. These students are, Jimmy realizes, the future of science. It's no surprise when, after graduating from their respective universities, Jimmy secures a low-paying job at the less-than-reputable AnooYoo, creating language for advertisements, and Crake is hired by RejoovenEsense, where he quickly works his way up the corporate food-chain, eventually being given enough power to hire Jimmy and to lead his own project: the double faceted BlyssPluss pill. Crake

simultaneously creates a so-called pill that will increase sexual libido while removing all negative aspects of sex, as well as create a genetically perfect race of humanoids, the “floor model” of which are the Crakers. A nihilistic and cynical Crake, however, has ulterior motives, and his BlyssPluss pill also carries a highly lethal virus, the result of which is the near mass-extinction of the human race. Crake has left Jimmy to care for the Crakers, and has left the Crakers to replace what Crake considers an already morally tainted human race.

Based on this brief summary of *Oryx and Crake*, it’s easy to see both common elements of dystopian and post-apocalyptic science fiction, as well as a social commentary on two concerns less common in dystopian fiction: a desensitization to sex and violence, and human trafficking. Because the novel is almost completely told in retrospect, and told from the perspective of a character who, prior to the apocalypse, was exposed to both excessive violence and sex and the desensitization that comes with an abundance of such, as well as being involved with a potential victim of human trafficking, not to mention supporting the exploitation of underage sex-workers by watching HottTotts as a teenager, Atwood allows us to see the effects of both these concerns first-hand.

Though he is perhaps on his way to becoming just as desensitized as is Crake, Jimmy doesn’t seem to have ever been as ethically numb as his friend, so it’s Crake that we turn to as a warning to a new trait of the dystopic. From Crake’s first introduction in the novel, the reader gets a sense of his nonchalance. Before Crake was Crake, he was Glenn, and when Jimmy questions the point of his name, “[T]he two n’s,” Crake tells Jimmy that “[N]ot everything has a point” (Atwood 70). Jimmy describes Crake’s

wardrobe as being “dark in tone, devoid of logos and visuals and written commentary—a no-name look” and his personality as being “the sense of energies being held back, held in reserve for something more important than present company” (72). So when “Jimmy found himself wishing to make a dent in Crake, get a reaction,” we get both characterization of Crake as well as foreshadowing of his desensitization to violence, sex, or a combination of the two. Whether Crake’s internet and gaming habits were already established at this point in his life is left unstated, but we get the sense that he simply isn’t concerned about whatever it is that is going on around him. While this could certainly be a result of Crake having what he believes are more important thoughts, I argue that the lack of concern is also a result of being exposed to an abundance of sex and violence in media, so much so that Crake is desensitized to these seemingly affecting subjects when they happen in real life.

As teenagers, Jimmy and Crake spent their free time doing two things, both of which contribute to Crake’s desensitization and seem to be equally important warnings of a forthcoming dystopia: playing games and surfing the Net. Over the course of the novel, though mostly during the boys’ teenaged years, Jimmy and Crake play three games, each of which being concerned with death in some way or another. The boys play Barbarian Stomp, in which “[O]ne side had the cities and the riches and the other side had the hordes, and—usually but not always—the most viciousness. Either the barbarians stomped the cities or else they got stomped”; then they play Blood and Roses, “a trading game, along the lines of Monopoly” in which:

The Blood side played with human atrocities for the counters, atrocities on a large scale: individual rapes and murders didn’t count, there had to have been a large

number of people wiped out. Massacres, genocides, that sort of thing. The Roses side played with human achievements. Artworks, scientific breakthroughs, stellar works of architecture, helpful inventions (Atwood 78)

And finally Extinctathon, an online game in which players hold a contest akin to Twenty Questions, attempting to guess specific species that had gone extinct (77-81). This series of games offers a timeline of Crake's desensitization by the scale of death in each. Jimmy and Crake begin with a game that is, compared to the other two in the series, concerned with death on a relatively small scale. Barbarian Stomp is limited to the deaths of cities or barbarian hordes. Death in Blood and Roses is taken a step further, increasing from the relatively small populations of singular cities and hordes to larger scale atrocities, which we can assume results in an even larger number of deaths. Finally, the boys play Extinctathon which, while not about the deaths of humans specifically, is based on the deaths of an entire species, foreshadowing that humans, too, could soon join the ranks of extinct species.

The games that Jimmy and Crake play are just one factor that lead to Crake's desensitization, but are an important piece of Atwood's warning for her readers. For the past two decades conservative critics have attempted to prove that playing violent video games can lead to actual violence or aggression in the player, and even before this, the well-known tabletop game Dungeons and Dragons was criticized as being a gateway to Satanism, violence, suicide, and the inability to differentiate fantasy from reality. The warning, then, has long been established since before the publication of *Oryx and Crake*, but Atwood places the blame not on the games but rather on the players. Both Blood and Roses and Barbarian Stomp offer two roles: one violent and one peaceful, one "bad" and

one “good,” if we were to resort to a dichotomy. Unsurprisingly, it’s Crake who most often picks these violent roles, and whether or not that choice is representative of his moral compass, we can at least assume that being placed in these roles—champion of barbarians or atrocities—has greatly lessened the emotional effect of the violence associated with these roles. Likewise, because Jimmy often played the opposite role, he seems far more sensitive to violence and sex.

To be sure, I don’t believe that Atwood has any agenda regarding games, whether video or otherwise. I do, however, see the games that Jimmy and Crake play as important elements figuring into Crake’s total desensitization to violence and sex, which, later in his life, will result in a numb and unconcerned character that will not fret at perpetuating the sex trade or even orchestrating an apocalyptic pandemic. Perhaps more pressing, though, is how overexposure to extreme violence and sex on the internet can lead to younger generations becoming desensitized to these subjects, to the point of participating in similar acts without being vexed.

“When they weren’t playing games,” Atwood writes, “they’d surf the Net”:

They’d watch open-heart surgery in live time, or else the Noodie News . . . Or they’d watch animal snuff sites, Felicia’s Frog Squash and the like . . . Or they might watch hedsoff.com, which played live coverage of executions in Asia . . . Or they could watch alibooboo.com, with various supposed thieves having their hands cut off and adulterers and lipstick-wearers being stoned to death by howling crowds . . . There was an assisted-suicide site too—nitee-nite.com . . . Or they would watch porn shows. There were a lot of those” (81-5).

This is just a brief sample of what the boys watched and, in fact, Atwood spends nearly four pages naming and describing the many legal online programs they viewed, all of which were easily accessible to anyone regardless of age. This list does not include “the more disgusting and forbidden site—those for which you had to be over eighteen, and for which you needed a special password,” such as HotTotts, which “claimed to show real sex tourists, filmed while doing things they’d be put in jail for back in their home countries” (85-9). Just from the usual viewing habits of Jimmy and Crake, we know that if they are online, then they are looking at violence or sex.

Unlike the games the boys play, we don’t see a clear trajectory in how the extremity of violence and sex grows, but if we look a bit closer at some of the sites Atwood describes, especially those that are legal and far more accessible, we get a better sense of just how saturated this fictional Net is with pornography and death. The majority of sites Atwood describes have a focus on violence, whether human or animal, and these sites are broadcast from various countries, suggesting how worldwide this violent exposure is. The victims dying in these broadcasts are criminals, enemies of the people, or the suicidal, but we as readers empathize with how their deaths are becoming a spectacle, even though some of the victims themselves embrace their e-celebrity. The boys, however, and we might assume most other frequent users of the Net in Atwood’s novel, show—in Crake’s case—no empathy, and even find enjoyment in the broadcasts as a form of entertainment no different than a movie.

Also unlike the description of games, Atwood provides more insight into the psyche of Crake and Jimmy on the Net, and this includes how each of the boys reacts to viewing certain things. If we continue with the idea that Jimmy has not let his exposure

to these sites numb his morality, then we again turn to Crake to see how desensitized he has become. One important trait Crake exhibits that shows his desensitization is his inability to identify the broadcasts as reality. Instead, “Crake said these bloodfests were probably taking place on a back lot somewhere in California, with a bunch of extras rounded up off the streets,” or, “Crake said these incidents were bogus. He said the men were paid to do it, or their families were. The sponsors required them to put on a good show” (82-3). Crake seems to have been so overexposed to violence that he can no longer decipher what violence is real and what isn’t. In addition, by theorizing that these broadcasts were filmed in California with extras and noting that they are financed by sponsors, Crake is identifying snuff sites as nothing different than Hollywood films. Crake shows no concern or care, though, about whether or not they are real. Perhaps most disturbing, however, is how Crake reacts to Nitee-Nite: “Crake grinned a lot while watching this site. For some reason he found it hilarious, whereas Jimmy did not” (84). This line is the clearest piece of evidence proving that Crake has been completely desensitized to violence. Crake is a character unfazed by online snuff, enough so to question its legitimacy or to outright laugh at it. Having likely had unlimited amounts of violent websites at his disposal throughout his life, Crake is at a point where no violence, no matter how extreme, can affect his emotions.

Crake’s desensitization becomes even more evident later in the novel, and a youth spent looking at snuff has blunted his ability to be affected by violence and death in reality. When describing the death of his mother, Crake says the following: “‘It was impressive,’ Crake told Jimmy. ‘Froth was coming out’ . . . ‘[E]ver put salt on a slug?’ . . . Jimmy didn’t understand how he could be so nil about it” (177). Jimmy considers that

this lack of concern was an act, but given his previous reactions to death, I do not think it farfetched that this was a genuine reaction from Crake. This seems even more likely when Crake's true plans with the BlyssPluss pill are made clear. Death simply does not affect Crake, no matter whom it takes or in what form. In a world where an unlimited amount of televised deaths are a mouse-click away, Crake has clicked and clicked and clicked until violence became nothing more than a way to pass the time.

The same holds true for pornography though Atwood spends less narrative time describing these sites. Still, if Jimmy and Crake were not watching snuff, "they would watch porn shows. There were a lot of those" (85). The two pornographic sites that Atwood gives any true detail on are the Noodie News and HottTotts. While the latter site will be more applicable to Atwood's second unnoticed warning—human trafficking—I'd like to briefly point out that Crake also became desensitized to sex and women became objects to him. This is most evident in Crake's sexual relationships at Watson-Crick, and in his relationship with Oryx. In an effort to keep student's minds oriented on their studies, the university's Student Services manages a kind of prostitution ring, bringing sex-workers in from the Pleeblands to satisfy student needs. The service is available to all genders and sexual orientations, and Student Services provides "any colour, any age, . . . any body type. They provide everything" (208). Women (or men) are sex objects to be had, a means to satisfy oneself before being discarded. Whether some students dislike the lack of emotion in these encounters, we cannot know, but Crake does not seem to care. Later, Crake seems equally emotionless in his relationship with Oryx. Oryx acts as a sexual relief and as a tool for his plans, but we get no sense of love. Finally, Crake disposes of Oryx as easily as he disposed of the provided sex-workers, or as easily as he

laughed at filmed suicides. After a youth spent browsing a sex saturated Net, the act loses any emotional relevance for Crake, and women are reduced to utilities.

*Oryx and Crake* was published at a time when the internet was still relatively young and its contents not always easily obtainable. Technology moves quickly, though, and while Jimmy and Crake's browsing habits might have seemed impossible or exaggerated in 2003, it is far closer to being true to life now, especially with the rise in the Dark Web and Tor browsing. Tor—The Onion Router—is a network that “disguises your identity by moving your traffic across different Tor servers, and encrypting that traffic so it isn't tracked back to you,” (Klosowski) not unlike how Crake would “construct a winding pathway through the Web, hacking in at random through some easy-access commercial enterprise, then skipping from lily pad to lily pad, erasing his footprints as he went” (Atwood 86). The Dark Web in reality became best known in 2013 when the online black-market Silk Road was shut down by the FBI. With the anonymity that the Dark Web grants, Tor browsing became popular for such illegal activities as viewing and sharing child pornography, buying and selling weapons and drugs, and even the hiring of hitmen. Tor browsing seems only mere steps behind the Net found in *Oryx and Crake*, and with the relevance and growth of technology and the internet, future generations will undoubtedly have easier and easier access to sites that broadcast pornography and snuff, and will thus become desensitized to what once was considered taboo.

Atwood's second concern to go unnoticed in *Oryx and Crake* is one that's already affecting the real world and, if we don't put forth more of an effort to stop it, could be a step toward a dystopian society and apocalypse. I'm referring, here, to human

trafficking, which in the novel is portrayed through the life story of Oryx. It's important to note that much of Oryx's life is a projection of Jimmy's mind. The reader never truly knows if the woman who eventually works for and dates Crake, who eventually begins an affair with Jimmy, is the child seen on HottTotts, or the rescued woman from the news. Whether this is the same person doesn't matter however, because, between these possibly unrelated links and her actual experiences, Oryx represents a universal victim of human trafficking. Oryx's story is told in flashback scenes recalled by Snowman, and she is reluctant to tell it, though Jimmy is eager to know. The rest we are left to fill in based on HottTotts, university endorsed prostitution, and news segments on sex scandals, especially the "wave of adolescent girls found locked in garages" (254).

Oryx's story begins in "[S]ome distant, foreign place," an ambiguous village probably located in Asia. Oryx describes the village as "a place where everyone was poor and there were many children" (115). A common way to make money, then, was the selling of children to a man "who would make the dangerous journey from the city at regular intervals" (117). We are told that the practice is common and does not seem taboo to the villagers. The children sold, in fact, are considered apprentices, and the men purchasing the children are identified not as criminals but as reputable businessmen. Oryx is one of these children, along with her brother, sold to their particular village's man who we come to know as Uncle En. Uncle En takes his bought children to a city—again, ambiguous—and the children are forced to sell roses on the streets, but after a pedophile attempts to hire Oryx as a prostitute, Uncle En begins using her to bait these pedophiles, who he'd then beat up and rob. Eventually, Uncle En is found dead, and a new man takes the children. They are handed from person to person until they arrive at

Pixieland, a building in which the children are forced to live and make pornographic movies. The truth of Oryx's story ends there, but there are certain suggestions that can be made.

First, it is impossible to say whether the girl that Jimmy and Crake see on HottTotts, the girl with the arresting eyes who both boys become infatuated with, is the same Oryx that tells her story. There are similarities—the eyes, for example, and being in broadcasted child pornography—but Atwood never explicitly states whether this girl is one and the same. Next, Crake tells Jimmy that he met Oryx—the Oryx that works for him at Paradise—through Watson-Crick's Student Services: “What I wanted was something that looked like –do you remember that web show? . . . From HottTotts—you know” (310). Again, there is no actual evidence that Oryx is the same girl from HottTotts, but we can assume based on the University's service that there was at least a physical resemblance, albeit of a legal-aged woman. If it *is* Oryx, then the suggestion is that as a sex-worker she moved from place to place, eventually ending up prostituting in nearby Pleeblands. The final piece of Oryx's puzzle is the news segment Jimmy sees on girls freed from garages. Again, the girl Jimmy sees on the news, who said that she used to be in movies, has physical characteristics similar to the HottTott's girl, but when asked about it, Oryx denies that she was the girl Jimmy saw on the news: “Jimmy, why do you dream up such things? I was never in a garage” (315). However, after Jimmy's constant questioning, Oryx plays along and tells the story of her time in the garage. Still, Jimmy “suspected her of improvising, just to humour him; sometimes he felt that her entire past—everything she'd told him—was his own invention” (316). Atwood purposely leaves it ambiguous whether the girl Jimmy identifies as Oryx is the same throughout

every instance, but that isn't the point of incorporating this narrative thread into the novel. What is important is that it's another warning, a trait of a dystopic world that already exists outside of fiction. To be sure, human trafficking has existed for centuries, but its modern form, which Atwood is warning against, seems to have been growing steadily since the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Between 2010 and 2012, for example, there were 40,177 known cases of human trafficking reported (Oster). It's too late to avoid human trafficking altogether, but Atwood is warning us of just how widespread it might soon become, especially with the growth of the internet and the dark web.

The very ambiguity of Oryx's backstory and of the possibility that each Oryx could either be unique or one and the same, suggests Atwood's purpose. Though not all, Atwood is telling multiple possible storylines of human trafficking victims, and she is particularly interested in the ways these victims are brought from one place to the next, passed along from hand to hand, the victim's living circumstances, and how the manipulation of the victim escalates. Because of this, Atwood describes in detail Oryx's journey from the village with Uncle En, and then again when Oryx is brought to Pixieland. In addition, Atwood describes how these victims live, how they are treated, and how they work. By highlighting all of these aspects of human trafficking, Atwood is both characterizing Oryx—building her backstory—as well as warning the reader of a very real problem that exists outside of *Oryx and Crake*.

To conclude, Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake* is, for many reasons, a typical piece of dystopian and post-apocalyptic literature. Unsurprisingly, then, scholars writing on the novel address it as such, considering the genre's more common tropes. While this isn't inherently bad, Atwood is subverting the genre by adding new traits of the dystopic,

new warnings for the reader, and while these may eventually become more frequently used tropes in dystopian fiction, they currently are not. Thus, scholars writing on Atwood's novel do not recognize Crake's desensitization to violence and sex, or Oryx as a victim of human trafficking as dystopian warnings and ignore them outright or lump them together with some other, more common trope. With the constant evolution of technology, the internet especially, violence and sex will consistently become easier to access, and with that abundance will come an inevitable desensitization. Whether this can or will lead to a real life Crake is impossible to say, but it's certainly paving the way. Likewise, modern-day human trafficking has been rising for the past fifteen years and will likely continue if we don't put a stop to it soon. If we don't—and as widespread as it is, we may not be able to—society might similarly be on a path to government endorsed prostitution using victims of the sex trade, or, people will become so accustomed to it that it simply becomes unimportant, a concern too small to think about. Like each of the other chapters in this thesis, Atwood is pushing the boundaries of genre fiction—in this case, science fiction—by developing new dystopic traits and warnings in *Oryx and Crake*, and because they do not recognize these peculiarities, scholars are missing two crucial elements in the novel.

## Chapter Two

### Mutilated: Using and Breaking Crime Fiction to Criticize Religion

*“And if thy hand offend thee, cut it off: it is better for thee to enter into life maimed, than having two hands to go into hell”* (Mark 9:43)

The mention of crime and detective fiction conjures up a variety of images: shadowy men in fedoras and trench coats; smoke filled and cluttered offices, a revolver on the desk and a neon sign glowing outside the window; alcoholic detectives with poor marriages; seedy bars and damsels in distress and femme fatales and murder suspects. These are, of course, the genre’s tropes, but what we see less frequently is the use of detective fiction as a means to comment on religion. That isn’t to say that religion is non-existent in the genre—and, to be sure, new religious movements have oft been used as catalysts by crime authors—just that religion rarely takes a spotlight in the genre. When it does, though, it often takes the form of a demonized cult. Brian Evenson’s *Last Days*, however, subverts this trope by using two new religious movements as a way to comment on real, mainstream religions.

It’s important to note that Evenson has an interesting relationship to genre fiction and that his work has been recognized by critics of genre fiction, however never explicitly for his subversion of the detective novel, and never for *Last Days* specifically. In fact, Evenson writes a series of popular fiction novels set in video game worlds under the penname B.K. Evenson, though they do not incorporate the same subversion of conventions that his more literary novels do. Nor do they provide such insightful social commentary. Evenson’s works, including *Last Days*, have been finalists or winners of various genre fiction prizes: the Shirley Jackson Award (*Last Days*); the International Horror Guild Award; the World Fantasy Award; and the Edgar Award. The two prizes

relevant for my study are the Shirley Jackson Award, which must have “elements of psychological suspense, horror, or dark fantasy to be considered” (Shirley Jackson Awards), and the Edgar Award, which must be a book “in the mystery, crime, suspense, [or] intrigue fields” (Mystery Writers of America). Of the eight novels that have won the Shirley Jackson Award, only one—*Generation Loss*—is listed as crime fiction. The rest of the winning novels are better categorized as horror or dark fantasy. It is impossible to say whether *Last Days* became a finalist because of its horror elements, but the previous winning awards suggest it could certainly be possible. The Edgar Award, on the other hand, is much more explicitly awarded to those writing in the crime or detective genre. A brief stroll through the past winners proves this to be true: Raymond Chandler, James Lee Burke, Elmore Leonard, Dennis Lehane, and James Ellroy have all won various Edgar Awards, and all are categorized as crime writers and, more specifically, writers of the hardboiled genre. Evenson’s *Open Curtain* was an Edgar Award finalist, and also loosely derives from crime fiction conventions albeit not necessarily as much as *Last Days*. So while it’s true that Evenson has received some acclaim for his genre-esque fiction, *Last Days* in particular hasn’t yet been recognized for its innovation of the hardboiled detective novel.

A possible reasoning for this lack of religious focus might come as a result of Carole M. Cusack. Cusack argues that when religion *is* used in contemporary crime fiction, it is an example of a non-mainstream religion (i.e. cult). The “new religious movements are pictured as ‘Other’ to mainstream society” (159). The demonization of these groups is a reflection of “the attitude of the general public” (174). While this argument is applicable to Cusack’s particular choice of detective novels analyzed, it is

not always true. I'd take this one step further and suggest that Cusack's argument also fits Dashiell Hammett's *The Dain Curse*. I argue, however, that Brian Evenson's novel, *Last Days*, rejects the notion that new religious movements are always employed as the other and "as a challenge to the norms of society" (159). Instead, *Last Days* subtracts "normal society" from the equation, forcing the reader's attention on the religious movements present in the text. Likewise, though Evenson works within and pulls inspiration from the crime genre, his deemphasizing of genre tropes continues to hone the reader's focus on the religious movements.

In her influential essay, "Scarlet and Black: Non-Mainstream Religion as 'Other' in Detective Fiction," Carole M. Cusack suggests that:

As organized religion retreated, it became more difficult to believe the theologically-charged notion that good and evil do not go unpunished, and that human life is ultimately meaningful, even when random violence threatens to destabilize both individual and community. The figure of the detective . . . was one possible replacement for the religious confessor in the process of ascribing meaning to the otherwise random *minutiae* of existence. (161)

In a time of secularization then, the idea of God as judge and punisher of evil humans is replaced with the level-headed detective, like Arthur Conan Doyle's Sherlock Holmes, who is "rational, scientific, calculating and infallible" (Phillips 140). No longer relying on the divine to make meaning of the world, western readers turn to the detective, who Elliot L. Gilbert views as 'the apostle of pure reason.' Cusack quotes religious scholar John Wren-Lewis as making the point most succinctly: "The detective emerged as a savior-image as people began to lose faith in those more traditional saviours, the holy

man, the righteous ruler” (qtd. in Cusack 162). A result of the secularization of the western world and of the detective as replacement for holy figures, is that crime fiction “became, inevitably, a conservative genre” (162). Cusack and Wren-Lewis are, of course, thinking of holy figures in mainstream religion, so while Christianity isn’t present in contemporary crime fiction, non-mainstream religion is. Crime authors,

do not seek to understand these communities, but use them as a challenge to the norms of society. The conservative nature of much detective fiction demands that the values of mainstream society are reaffirmed in the plot’s resolution; this frequently results in the demonization and punishment of the minority religion featured. (Cusack 159)

For the texts Cusack focuses on—two novels by Kathy Reichs—her argument is absolutely sound. So, too, can the argument be applied to Dashiell Hammett’s *The Dain Curse*, which I’m choosing to juxtapose alongside *Last Days*. In the case of both Reichs and Hammett, the new religious movements are considered by conventional society to be wholly negative, reflecting the real life speculation of negative effects that new religious movements have had. Cusack quotes John P. O’Donnell’s noting that, “in the wake of the Koresh controversy, charges of ‘brainwashing’, corruption, and intimidation of critics against specific new religious movements further alienate these groups from the large segment of the American populace” (qtd. in Cusack 167). Further, a character in Reichs’ *Death du Jour* describes an archetype for the leader of the new religious movement as:

[A] charismatic individual who promises something. This individual possesses some special knowledge . . . the leader offers to share the information with those who follow . . . These groups use organized psychological and social persuasion

to produce extreme attitudinal changes. As a result they come to exert enormous control over the lives of their members. They are manipulative, deceptive, and highly exploitative. (qtd. In Cusack 168)

Thus, for Cusack's argument, new religious movements in crime fiction are led by conniving, often narcissistic figures and practice perverse rituals that counteract the conventional society in each text. This is true for Reichs' novels that feature new religious movements, and it is true for Dashiell Hammett's *The Dain Curse* as well.

*The Dain Curse* features as detective the ambiguous Continental Op. Split into three parts, *The Dain Curse* focuses on a series of crimes revolving around Gabrielle Leggett, a woman in her early 20s that comes to believe her bloodline to be cursed. By the end of Part One, we learn that the Leggett history is long and troublesome, and, after her mother and father are murdered, Gabrielle comes to believe that her bloodline is cursed. Understandably distressed from the death of her family, and of the revealing of the truth, Gabrielle turns to a new religious movement that she previously had been associated with, the Temple of the Holy Grail, for comfort.

In Part Two of the novel, Gabrielle begins living at the Temple, and the Continental Op is hired to move into the Temple and keep an unobtrusive eye on Gabrielle. During the Continental Op's first night at the Temple, he wakes up to find that Gabrielle has left her room. He searches the Temple, comes across Eric Collinson, and eventually finds Gabrielle, covered in blood and claiming to have killed a man. Gabrielle leads the Continental Op and Eric to an altar where Doctor Riese lies dead. The Continental Op takes Eric and Gabrielle back to her room, leaving them to investigate the murder and the Temple. As he investigates, the Continental Op finds that the altar and

Riese's body has been cleaned up; he inhales poison and experiences a hallucinogenic experience as a result; and is attacked before returning to Gabrielle's room to find her gone. Eric joins the Continental Op's search for Gabrielle, and the two eventually return to the outdoor altar space to see the Temple's leader, Joseph Haldorn, preparing to sacrifice his wife. Joseph and the Continental Op have a conflict in which the former proclaims himself God. The Continental Op shoots Joseph multiple times before stabbing and killing him. In the final chapter of Part Two, the Continental Op explains to Owen Fitzstephan all that happened at the Temple, and how the Haldorn's manipulated the Temple's members.

Part Three of *The Dain Curse* takes place in Quesada, where a newly married Gabrielle is once again surrounded by murders. The novel's final section, however, does not provide any new insight about the Temple of the Holy Grail, and so it's truly Part Two that Cusack's argument is applicable. Once aware of Reichs' argument and of how new religious movements are portrayed in her novels, the same argument and characteristics that Cusack comments on can be seen in Hammett's novel.

Hammett establishes conventional society and its opinion of new religious movements in the novel's first part. Eric Collinson describes the Temple of the Holy Grail to the Continental Op as thus: "[A]nother cult . . . It's the fashionable one just now. You know how they come and go in California. I don't like having Gabrielle there," and then, when questioned further, "It isn't hocus-pocus, really . . . I don't know very much about their creed, or anything like that, but I've been to their services with Gabrielle, and they're quite as dignified, as beautiful even, as either the Episcopalian or Catholic services" (Hammett 223-4). Still, Eric recognizes that something is off about the Temple

of the Holy Grail, and when the Continental Op asks what's the matter with them [the Holy Grail sect], Eric admits that he doesn't know if anything really is.

This attitude, I'd argue, accurately represents how Cusack and O'Donnell say conventional society views new religious movements. Eric acknowledges that the Temple of the Holy Grail may not have any nefarious motives. He acknowledges that their services can be as dignified or as aesthetically pleasing as those of mainstream religions. The Temple's leaders—Joseph and Aaronia—are described by Eric as being cultured, the church's members seemingly many. Still, Eric is not trusting of the Temple, because conventional society has influenced him to consider the movement as a cult rather than a mainstream religion. The Temple of the Holy Grail further proves Cusack's argument by being as sinister as Eric imagines it is.

The Temple of the Holy Grail is as perverse as one might expect, beginning with the lack of locks on member's doors, suggesting a vulnerability of the Temple's members. As the night progresses, things become stranger. When the Continental Op finds Gabrielle for the first time and is led out to the Temple's altar, we begin to trust Eric's intuition about the Temple. The implication of the scene is that the Temple participates in human sacrifice as ritual, which surely conflicts with societal norms. Then, during his investigation, the Continental Op experiences a hallucinogenic vision. In reality, this vision comes as a result of poisoning and special effects, but the Temple's members are led to believe that what they are seeing are true spiritual visions, meant to stay between each member and God. If we place this contextually with a mainstream religion—Christian visions, for example—conventional society would not be distressed. Because the vision is taking place in a non-mainstream new religious movement,

however, it is seen as the very “hocus-pocus” that Eric claims is not taking place. And finally, when the Continental Op returns to the altar to find Joseph, the implication of human sacrifice returns as well as the portrayal of a narcissistic and delusional—thus, dangerous—leader, who claims himself to be God. From the outside, a member of conventional society would consider any of these events to be unorthodox and sinister, and as such would likely demonize the new religious movement.

From the outside, what goes on within the walls of the Temple would be seen as perverse, sinister, unorthodox, and nefarious. This is, in fact, Eric’s opinion of the religion before ever really knowing that his opinion is correct. From the inside, however, the Temple is revealed to be smoke and mirrors, orchestrated by a leader who is manipulative, deceptive, and exploitative. In his discussion with Fitzstephan, the Continental Op reveals the truth about the Haldorns: that they were actors; that it was Aaronia who chose to rig up “a cult that pretended to be the revival of an old Gaelic church”; that the couple had brought along Tom Fink, “who had at one time or another been in charge of the mechanical end of most of the well-known stage magicians’ and illusionists’ acts”; that the Haldorns targeted the wealthy as converts; that the Temple had been rigged by Fink, employing lights and steam and pipes and poison as a way to create the illusion of a holy vision for the Temple’s members (Hammett 278-80). The inner-workings of the Temple further prove Cusack’s argument, conveying that new religious movements are demonized in crime fiction from outside and within. Conventional society expects for the Temple to practice strange and perverse rituals. And they do, though it turns out not to be supernatural but a series of manipulations from the group’s leader.

The most important element of Cusack's argument and of my analysis of *The Dain Curse* is the presence of a conventional society. In Cusack's argument, the opinion is expressed via secondary characters in Reichs' novels. In the case of the Hammett novel this opinion is expressed explicitly from Eric. It is this element around which my argument revolves. What if an author does not include a true conventional society to stand in contrast with the new religious movements? This is precisely what Brian Evenson does in *Last Days*, replacing conventional society with a second and equally perverse new religious movement. To be sure, there is mention of "society" in passing, but never for long enough to intuit some kind of demonizing of the religious movements. Evenson's aim here is to force the reader's attention on these new religious movements, both of which derive from and warp mainstream religions. This is further proven by Evenson's purposeful understating of the detective genre's tropes. I believe that Evenson is employing these authorial choices as a means to force the reader to think critically about these religions and their practices, which seem perverse but perhaps no more so than mainstream religions.

First published as a full novel in 2009, *Last Days* began as a novella, "The Brotherhood of Mutilation." It was years later when Evenson decided to write a second novella, and what would become the second part of the novel, "Last Days." Though they were originally written as novellas, for the sake of my argument I will refer to these sections not as separate entities but of two parts that make up the whole: *Last Days*.

The novel's first section, "The Brotherhood of Mutilation," opens with a biblical epigraph not dissimilar to that which opens this chapter: "And if thy right eye offend thee, pluck it out, and cast it from thee. . . . And if thy right hand offend thee, cut it off,

and cast it from thee” (Matthew 5:29-30), both of which foreshadow what is in store for the novel’s protagonist, a retired detective called Kline—Mr. Kline to various members of the Brotherhood. The novel opens with Kline receiving a mysterious phone call from two men. The men had seen Kline’s face in the newspaper. They are opportunity knocking, the men say. They need Kline’s help, and have purchased a plane ticket under his name. Kline, untrusting, hangs up. Over the course of the chapter the men continue to call, we also learn more about Kline: that Kline lost his hand to the ambiguously named “gentleman with the cleaver,” whom he then shot; that he has no real reason to help the mysterious callers; that he is deeply depressed because of the loss of his hand, enough so that he cannot even leave his apartment to go grocery shopping (Evenson 3-7). The mysterious men continue to call and Kline continues to refuse their offer, until he wakes up to find them at his bedside.

The men, Gous and Ramse, take Kline out of his apartment—they are forcing him to do the job that they offered—and drive him to the Brotherhood’s compound. During the drive, Kline and the reader learn that Gous and Ramse are similar to Kline in that they, too, both have amputated hands. What’s more, Ramse has seven additional amputations. The Brotherhood, Kline learns, uses a hierarchy based on number of amputations.

The following day, Kline is led to Borchert, the leader of the movement, which we may intuit by the title of the novel’s first half, is the Brotherhood of Mutilation. Borchert tells Kline that there has been a murder—their reason for calling Kline—that he’d like the ex-detective to solve. Kline, still resistant, is threatened with death if he attempts to leave, a danger that persists throughout the novel’s first half. The victim—

Aline—is a founding father and prophet of the Brotherhood, a group that Borchert describes as a religion. Kline reluctantly agrees to help, and as a symbol of good faith, Borchert asks Kline to participate in the first of the movement’s perverse rituals: Borchert asks Kline to cut his [Borchert] finger to the top joint.

Kline spends the rest of the novel’s first section investigating Aline’s death and learning more about the Brotherhood of Mutilation. When investigating the crime scene, Kline finds that nothing is quite right. It is, Borchert confirms, just a recreation of the murder scene. Kline’s next step in the investigation is to interrogate suspects, but Borchert will not allow this, for Kline doesn’t have enough amputations to speak with witnesses. Instead, Kline is given a tape-recorder and is told to record his questions, to be answered at a later time without Kline present. Meanwhile, Kline attends another of the Brotherhood’s strange rituals: an amputation party for Gous. The party is festive: streamers fall from the ceiling, music is blaring, and people are drinking and socializing. The ritual itself is far less innocent, however, and soon Kline and the rest of the party-goers crowd around Gous and a doctor, watching as Gous has two fingers amputated.

Kline’s investigation continues the next day, when the tape-recorder is returned, but upon listening, Kline finds that the tape and the answers recorded on it have clearly been edited. In response to his outrage over the recordings, Borchert neither denies nor confirms that the tapes were tampered with. Kline wants to speak with the witnesses directly, and tells Borchert to make the “necessary arrangements” (50), these arrangements, though, are the forced amputation of three of Kline’s toes. Although enraged, Kline finally gets to speak to a witness, Andreissen, directly. Andreissen, however, has clearly been either manipulated to feign ignorance of the crime or simply

did not witness it. At this point in his investigation, Kline has not come any closer to solving Aline's murder, and has consistently been misdirected by Borchert. After a night of heavy drinking with Gous and Ramse, Kline returns to Borchert, accusing him of lying. Borchert agrees to let Kline see Aline's body (or lack thereof) and Kline finds that Aline is still alive. Borchert admits to lying, and yet refuses to explain to Kline why he lied or why Aline is alive unless Kline will sacrifice another limb. That night, Kline realizes he is being framed, returns to Borchert who forces Kline at gunpoint to further amputate his already stubbed arm up to the elbow. The section ends as Kline contemplates what this amputation will feel like.

Part two of the novel, "Last Days," opens where part one left off, with a description of Kline amputating and cauterizing his arm, and then wrestling with and (Kline thinks) killing Borchert, before moving into the section's first chapter. Kline wakes up in what is described by a doctor as the hospital, where he finds that the rest of his arm had been amputated—this time professionally—up to his shoulder, and that he had been shot in the head. Similar to the opening of part one, Kline again receives a phone call, and though he does not answer the call, he realizes the Brotherhood knows where he is.

After some time, Frank, a police officer, arrives at Kline's room asking questions. Frank treats Kline less like a victim than another criminal no different from the rest of the "mutilates." Kline refuses to answer Frank's questions, and the officer eventually departs, leaving a second officer seated outside the hospital room. Again the phone rings. The Brotherhood is coming for him. That night Kline awakes to an unfamiliar nurse. Kline feigns sleep and waits until he can make his move, stabbing the stylus end of a

dentist's mirror into the nurse's face. As he makes his escape from the hospital, he is stopped outside by two armed mutilates, one of which shoots the other.

Kline again wakes up in an unfamiliar bed, a man named Paul beside him. As the night passes, Paul leaves and a similar looking man appears at Kline's bedside, again calling himself Paul. And then a third similar looking man replaces the second, named Paul as well. When asked why, the third Paul explains: "[B]ecause of the Apostle . . . And the other one, the philosopher's brother" (103). They have all, Kline and the reader realize, renamed themselves Paul, though one Paul, referred to by the narrator as "the Paul," acts as a leader for this group, which will henceforth be identified as the Pauls. The Pauls, like the Brotherhood of Mutilation, are another religious group that associate amputation with holiness. The Pauls, though, are far more open with Kline, willing to answer any of his questions and to let him leave at any time.

Kline returns to his apartment and falls asleep, but wakes up to find Frank again. Frank interrogates Kline unethically, pressing the end of a pencil into Kline's wounds before being interrupted by armed Brotherhood members. After a firefight in which Frank is shot, Kline is again forcefully taken back to the Brotherhood compound. En route, Kline learns that the Brotherhood plans to crucify him before Gous forces Ramse to pull the car over and to get out, for Gous is really a Paul. Paul returns Kline to the Pauls' compound and the Paul, who tells his story. The Paul was a founding member of the Brotherhood alongside Aline and Borchert, he parted ways violently, however, when Aline and Borchert pushed the ideology further, making a hierarchy based on number of amputations. And thus the Paul comes to the reason the Pauls need Kline: he believes

that because Kline was able to escape the Brotherhood alive, he is an un-killable messiah. The Pauls want Kline to destroy the Brotherhood.

The final third of *Last Days*' second section follows Kline as he moves methodically through the Brotherhood's compound, killing first Borchert and then member after member, finally meeting with Ramse, and ensuring that he will become the new leader of the Brotherhood. Before killing Borchert, however, the Brotherhood's leader suggests they play twenty questions. Kline learns that the Pauls, too, will crucify their messiah when he finishes his holy mission. Upon leaving the Brotherhood's compound, Kline finds Frank to confess his crimes—or perhaps his sins. After this confession, Kline returns to his apartment, only to find that Gous has again broken in. Gous attempts to force Kline back to the Pauls, but wavers when Kline reminds Gous that he can't be killed, allowing Kline to disarm Gous and gain control over the situation. Kline returns to the Pauls' compound, douses the building in gasoline, and ignites it. Kline locks the door, which will presumably lead to the deaths of the Pauls. The novel ends as Kline first walks, then lopes, then runs away from the burning building.

If we return to Cusack's argument, and to our analysis of Hammett's novel, we can see that the Brotherhood of Mutilation and the Pauls are not very different than the new religious movements in Reichs' novels or than the Temple of the Holy Grail. Both the Brotherhood and the Pauls participate in perverse rituals: the hierarchy based on number of amputations; the various amputation rituals and parties; the Pauls renaming themselves Paul; their consideration of bones as relics; and, perhaps the most perverse of both groups, the use of crucifixion—whether literal or not. Likewise, both Borchert and the Paul exhibit attributes that follow Cusack's argument: manipulation, deception, and

exploitation. Borchert is clearly narcissistic, viewing himself as superior to both Kline and the Brotherhood's members based on how much of his body he's sacrificed for the religion. He is highly manipulative and deceptive to, again, both the Brotherhood's members as well as Kline, blatantly lying to members he's deemed unfit to know the truth, and constantly misdirecting Kline away from the truth. Borchert both manipulates and exploits Kline, forcing him out of retirement by threat of death, while intending all the while to frame Kline for Aline's death. Likewise, the Paul is manipulative and exploitative of Kline, if not other members of the Pauls. To be sure, the Paul comes off as a kinder individual than Borchert, but by the end of the novel it is clear that the Paul is just as manipulative. The Paul manipulates Kline into believing he is invincible, and that Kline would be left alone after doing what the Paul asked. The Paul exploits Kline as a messiah figure, and plans to kill Kline after he completes what the Paul asks. Though these new religious groups and their leaders are portrayed nearly identically to that of Hammett and Reichs, by not including a sense of conventional society to demonize or other the groups, Evenson is directing our focus on the movements themselves.

There are characters that we could consider members of conventional society—gas-station clerks and Frank—but we see them only briefly, or they are proven to be anything but conventional. One such clerk is skeptical about Kline and his blood covered clothes, but doesn't express any particular opinion about the new religious movements. The second clerk, too, is wary of Kline, Gous and Ramse, but we don't get the sense that he is demonizing the groups particularly, just that he recognizes that something is strange. Before he can report anything, however, Gous kills him. Some might suggest that Frank is a member of conventional society, but I would argue against that. To be

sure, Frank passes judgment on the Brotherhood of Mutilation, perhaps even demonizing the group. However, I don't believe him to be an exemplar of societal norms. Frank is just as perverse as the new religious movements that he criticizes. He is unethical, manipulative, and employs his own deviant rituals—the sadistic pencil interrogation technique, for example. So, really, there aren't any true members of conventional society in *Last Days*. Evenson is choosing not to provide conventional society a role in his novel, I'd argue, as an invitation to lend a critical eye to the religions, which might appear to readers to be closer to mainstream religions than they might expect.

Evenson has a history of critiquing mainstream religion, and his personal relationship to religion is perhaps what prompted this recurring theme, and why, I argue, it appears again in *Last Days*. Evenson's parents are "devout Mormons who raised him and his siblings in the Church" (Van Young). They are "great and productive doubters," and Democrats in a state where "the vast majority of people were Republican" (Van Young). It is perhaps this democratic upbringing as well as his father's questioning of truth that contributed to Evenson's own liberalism and critical eye of religion. As he grew older, Evenson became more involved in Mormonism, even teaching at the Mormon owned and operated Brigham Young University. While teaching, Evenson published his first book, *Altman's Tongue*, which received anonymous backlash from the Church and University. In his profile on Evenson, Adrian Van Young notes that "[F]ollowing the book's release, a graduate student complained anonymously to Church leaders about the 'enjoyment' of violence that she felt the book condoned" (Van Young). After the threat of repercussions following further publications, Evenson resigned from

Brigham Young University and, five years later, resigned from the Church itself. It is unsurprising, then, that religion is an oft critiqued theme in Evenson's work.

Besides *Last Days*, Evenson's novels *Father of Lies* and *The Open Curtain* both employ religious themes and commentary. In *Father of Lies*, the narrative "revolves around Provost Eldon Fochs, a powerful elder in a fictional religious sect called the Church of the Blood of the Lamb," and the narrative of *The Open Curtain* concerns:

Rudd, an unstable Mormon teen, [who] becomes obsessed with the (real-life) murder of Anna Pulitzer, at the hands of William Hooper Young, Brigham Young's grandson. The murder may have had something to do with a short-lived, much-debated Mormon doctrine known as 'blood atonement' (Van Young)

We can see, then, that the religious overtones in *Last Days* are not new for Evenson, but are rather an extension of his ongoing critique of religion. In fact, Evenson has this to say on the subject:

'I do steal all sorts of things from the authority of religious discourse,' Evenson said of Mormonism's role in his fiction, 'and from the somewhat stilted way of speaking in religious terms that belongs to the religion I grew up in.' He believes that 'Last Days' and 'Father of Lies' are 'much tougher for Mormons to read because they can sense (sometimes without being fully conscious of it) how the discourse they grew up with is being turned in on itself, made to do something that is, for lack of a better word, profoundly heretical.' (Van Young)

For this reason, I find it both plausible that Evenson would subvert crime fiction's usual demonization of non-mainstream religions, as well as an important and exciting area for literary discourse.

The most obvious hint that *Last Days* is critiquing religion is the title itself, which alludes to the biblical end of times and, more specifically, Evenson's own former religion: of Mormonism. Theologically, the term latter days (last days) means slightly different things for different religions, however all examples seem to refer to the second coming of Christ. For Mormons, the latter days refers to the Last Dispensation, "the final period before the second coming of Christ," in which "the Lord has at least one authorized servant on the Earth who holds the keys of the holy priesthood, and who has a divinely appointed commission to 'dispense' the gospel to mankind" (Mormon Beliefs). Further, "[I]n each gospel dispensation, men have rejected the gospel and as a consequence have sunk into apostasy, debauchery, and darkness" (Mormon Beliefs). When applied to the novel, this brings up some interesting questions: which character(s) is/are the Lord's authorized servant(s)?; and is the narrative set in a time of apostasy, debauchery, and darkness?

One of Evenson's critiques is the impossibility of identifying which religion is the true word of God. Regarding the first question raised—which character(s) is/are the Lord's authorized servant(s)?—two characters could be identified as authorized servants: Borchert, and the Paul. Both of these men see themselves as prophets for their respective sects, and both see themselves as divinely appointed, spreading their particular brands of gospel to mankind. The problem, though is that the beliefs of these prophets differ, so we are left to wonder who the true "authorized servant" is. The leaders of two differing

religions consider themselves to be true prophets, yet at least one must be wrong and, more interestingly, it's likely that both are wrong. The commentary is that although most mainstream religions consider themselves to be the "right" religion, there's no real way to prove it, and that all mainstream religions have their own idiosyncrasies. The absurdity is heightened once we recognize how arbitrary the differences and similarities are. There is no conventional society to turn to, so the reader's attention is forced back and forth between the religions, both of which are equally perverse, and yet both are just as likely to be right—that is to say, not very likely at all. Though Evenson uses exaggeration to make his point, Borchert and the Paul are representative of mainstream religious leaders who identify themselves as prophets, and their religions as the truth.

The second question raised by the novel's allusion to the Mormon idea of the latter days is that of a society of men sunk into apostasy and the like. Again, the lack of a conventional society forces the reader to apply this to the religions themselves. For Mormons, the latter days is a time in which people abandon faith, indulge in sensual pleasures, and act wickedly, but what if it's members of the religion that are acting this way? Members of the Brotherhood, for example, have not abandoned their faith. They follow Borchert, and truly believe they are on the path to heaven. And yet, much of what they do is indulging in sensual pleasure: they drink excessively; fetishize self-mutilation to the point of eroticizing it; and turn spiritual ceremonies into a celebration of the ego. While this is, again, an exaggeration, we see similarities to mainstream religions, whether that be religions capitalizing on spiritual ceremonies, the commitment to perverse traditions, or other forms of debauchery. Likewise, every mainstream religion has

displays of wickedness in some form or another. Perhaps these are the latter days, but the Pauls and the Brotherhood are no different from those outside of their religions.

The next suggestion that the novel is alluding to and commenting on mainstream religion can be found in the Brotherhood's practices, which are both perverse as well as familiar to those of mainstream religions. The first novella in *Last Days*, "The Brotherhood of Mutilation," uses a biblical verse as an epigraph, not dissimilar to the verse that opens this chapter. Both of these verses allude to and foreshadow the Brotherhood's and the Pauls' most important doctrine: the holiness of amputations. At first, the reason that Gous and Ramse are missing limbs is left secular, ambiguous, but a series of rules are established—what we later realize are religious rules: "[A]ccidents and acts of God don't mean a thing, unless they're followed later by acts of will"; the use of anesthetic is frowned upon but not forbidden; a hierarchy of power is decided by number of amputations (Evenson 12-15). As the narrative progresses, Evenson allows us more hints. Kline is given an outfit identical to that worn by Gous and Ramse, "a pair of gray slacks, a white shirt, a red clip-on tie," which brings to mind outfits worn by Mormon missionaries. It is not made explicit that Kline has become involved with a religion until his first meeting with Borchert, during which Borchert acknowledges that "[W]e're a brotherhood. This is a religion" (26). For the Brotherhood, the act of amputation leads to a sense of ecstasy, of Godliness. As the novel progresses, the reader is given an intimate look into one of the Brotherhood's important ceremonies, an amputation party. This party, being thrown for Gous, humorously resembles a Bar Mitzvah. Invitations are sent, music is played, streamers are dropped, and Gous is celebrated for transitioning from a one to a three. The celebration is, Ramse says, "an act of faith" (42). The ritual of the

amputation is told in great detail, and the circling crowd, the altar-like table, and the priest-like doctor all portray the scene as a bizarre and gruesome mass. Later, when Kline's toes are amputated without his consent, there is no such mass, but there still is a sort of ritual involving laced Scotch.

In the novel's first section, then, we can identify more of Evenson's criticisms of religion: that the line separating mainstream religion and perverse new religious movements is a cloudy one, not easily defined. It is impossible to argue that the Brotherhood is meant to represent a single religion, for there are aspects of Christianity, Mormonism, and Judaism, as well as more perverse non-mainstream religions, but the critique becomes easier to spot if we suggest that Evenson is criticizing religion generally. We see, for example, the absurdities of religious politics. To be sure, Evenson has exaggerated these religious politics. For example, mainstream religions often have hierarchies, but never do they revolve around something as strange as amputations. But we can see how infighting and trust within the religion is a possible cause of inter-group conflict. Likewise, we can see how certain ceremonies might be identified as absurd. The amputation party, for example, seems to criticize how religious ceremonies sometimes downplay the religion and seem more so to be an excuse for materialism and egoism. On one hand, the Brotherhood's self-mutilation seems to suggest the strange and sinister acts of the new religious movements that usually frequent crime fiction. On the other, though, the political aspects of the Brotherhood seem to suggest very real Western religions—Mormonism and Christianity, for example, something that is further suggested later when Frank incorrectly calls the Brotherhood The Holy Christian Fellowship of Amputation.

In the second section of *Last Days*, the Pauls offer similar room for criticism. While we still see elements of inner-group fighting, primarily in the splitting of the Paul from the Brotherhood, Evenson is more concerned with the morality of religion as well as how two violently different religious groups can stem from the same seed. While there is an acceptance of violence for the Brotherhood, it is mostly self-harm, and violence to others always seems political. The Pauls differ in this aspect in that they seem to condone violence as a method of spreading the word of God. They have no problem using Kline to wage a kind of crusade on the Brotherhood. To the Paul, Kline was sent to lead their holy war. This acceptance of violence is further critiqued by the absurdity of the Pauls' belief that crucifying Kline is a type of gift, allowing Kline to return to God. The novel's latter half seems to more explicitly allude to Christianity, whether through the Christ-like imagery of Kline or through the group's crusades against the Brotherhood. The final, and perhaps most important, critique of religion is that both of these groups—the Brotherhood and the Pauls—derive from the same founding members with the same founding beliefs. Despite this, conflict within the group has led to schism after schism, eventually resulting in two completely separate religions warring with one another. This is applicable to the three Abrahamic religions—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—which have grown quite different and have often acted violently towards one another.

Besides removing conventional society and thus subverting Cusack's argument on the othering of new religious movements in crime fiction, Evenson also understates tropes of the genre: there is no true femme fatale character; Kline is clearly depressed at the novel's opening, which could be considered the detective's inner-battle, however the depression is quickly forgotten as the narrative progresses, and never quite returns; the

setting of the novel is rather ambiguous, but the Brotherhood's compound is not within city limits; there *is* a corrupt police officer, though he only appears in three scenes, acting as either interrogator or a priest to which Kline can confess; likewise Kline never truly exhibits any knightly qualities. He does, however, seem to favor right over wrong, and to be concerned with his own morality. Evenson either ignores these tropes completely or uses them secondary to the new religious movements, making sure the spotlight is on the Brotherhood and the Pauls, and that there are no distractions for the reader while they think critically about these groups.

Like the other novels considered in this thesis, *Last Days* is derived from a certain genre. Evenson's novel employs tropes and conventions from hardboiled detective fiction, and yet subverts those tropes. In this case, Evenson is subverting the trope of portraying new religious movements alongside conventional society, as a way to show a contrasting effect between the two, which often leads to demonizing of the religions. I argue that, if recognized by critics of the hardboiled novel, this subversion could lead to further progression of the genre. For example, by continuing to make genre conventions secondary, and by subverting tropes, the hardboiled detective novel could increasingly close the gap between literary fiction and so called low-brow genre fiction. Like science fiction, detective fiction could soon evolve into a genre read for more than entertainment, a genre studied seriously for its allegorical potential. If this is going to be the case, though, critics must begin to recognize books like *Last Days*, texts that are taking risks within the genre, unafraid to destabilize the conventions that have come to be expected.

To conclude, Brian Evenson's *Last Days* is, at first glance, a typical crime fiction novel portraying new religious movements. While Cusack argues that new religious

movements are used as a contrast with conventional society, however, Evenson removes society from the equation, proving that non-mainstream religious movements do not have to be demonized in crime fiction, but can be used as a criticism of mainstream religions. As we read the novel, we can also identify influence from the genre, and it's obvious that Evenson wants for us to read this novel as a piece of crime fiction. However, Evenson deemphasizes the genre's tropes as a way to explore the topic of religion more insightfully than has been previously done in crime fiction. By the end of the novel, we can see the absurdities and problems that plague Christianity and new-religious movements. To be sure, one might instead look at *Last Days* as a parody of the genre or any other number of readings, but because of the religious overtones and the lack of a conventional society, it seems much more likely that Evenson is provoking general criticism of religion, and by doing so, subverting the hardboiled detective genre. Despite this innovation, though, Evenson's novel goes unrecognized by detective fiction critics

## Chapter Three

### Haunted Capitalism: Commodity Fetish in Colson Whitehead's *Zone One*

Colson Whitehead's *Zone One* is, at its heart, a zombie novel. And yet it subverts the zombie novel as a genre in more ways than one, and more generally, destabilizes the horror genre in literary terms as well as by breaking genre conventions. What is more, Whitehead moves away from the race commentary undercurrents of the rest of his oeuvre and tackles instead a capitalist theme. It is this theme that I hope to illuminate in the following chapter. Or, to be more specific, commodity and capitalism is present in the novel as a means for the book's protagonist, Mark Spitz, to find nostalgia in a zombie-ridden, post-apocalyptic world. The protagonist fetishizes commodities—specifically advertisements, living and working spaces and furniture, and finally jobs—as a way to stay stable in a drastically unstable setting. I argue that, in the post-infected world, capitalism and consumerism offer a return to normalcy for survivors, a nostalgia for the ad-ridden world of before, and that this very fetishization and Whitehead's de-emphasis of the zombie is an inventive take on the zombie apocalypse subgenre of horror fiction, yet has not been recognized by critics of either literary or horror fiction.

To my knowledge, very limited scholarship has been written focusing on *Zone One* specifically. Whether this is because the novel straddles the line between literary and genre fiction or because the novel is still relatively new, I cannot say. Of the limited amount of scholarship I did find, few articles focused on commodification in the novel. Though he does acknowledge Whitehead's social commentary on consumerism, Carl Joseph Swanson's article, "The Only Metaphor Left," deals more with how *Zone One* fits in and what it adds to the zombie genre. The discussion focuses on the zombie figure and

the barricade, neither of which offer much in terms of commodity fetish or nostalgia. Likewise, Leif Sorenson's "Against the Post-Apocalyptic: Narrative Closure in Colson Whitehead's *Zone One*" acknowledges what he calls the cyclical "late capitalist futurism" (561) in the novel but moves in another direction, focusing on narrative closure. He argues that while zombie narratives usually offer two forms of closure—apocalypse as reversible and post-apocalypse as new normal (562)—Whitehead suggests "a more radical approach, which imagines the zombie apocalypse as the ending of all stories" (562). What is left is a handful of reviews, most of which are only a paragraph or two long, and few of which offer any useful discussion on the book's social commentary. In one such review, T.N. Tobias' writes: "[A]lso intriguing is the way Whitehead tackles American consumerism sidelong. The book avoids the trappings of brand . . . Whitehead instead goes on a several page dissertation on what that brand stands for . . . This reversal of branding gives the reading a social punch that's hard to triangulate but thought provoking nonetheless" (Tobias). While it is true that reviews such as Tobias'—and surely there are more than one—acknowledge Whitehead's discussion of consumerism and capitalism, the dialogue stops there, after a paragraph or two. Thus, what I aim to accomplish paves somewhat new terrain: an *intensive* look at Whitehead's social commentary in *Zone One*, something as exciting as it is daunting, and something that, doubtless, requires additional groundwork.

Before delving into discussion about capitalism I feel it's important to discuss briefly the state of the zombie in literature and film. By understanding how Whitehead is subverting the genre, we can more easily direct our attention to the author's true focus: capitalism and the fetishization of goods and professions. For the purpose of this chapter,

I'll be discussing the horror and zombie genres in cinematic terms. Though *Zone One* is, in fact, a book, Mark Spitz, himself a cinephile, often views his present day self as an actor in a horror film. In fact, we are reminded throughout the book that Mark had a love for monster movies from a young age and had often "convinced himself he'd survive the particular death scenario," and that, "by his sights, the real movie started after the first one ended, in the impossible return to things before" (Whitehead 165-6). Thus, if the "first" movie is a pre-infected world, then the "real movie" must be the post-infected world and, more specifically, a time in which the remaining living attempt to return to "things before," or some kind of normalcy.

Though surely more divisions and subgenres must exist within the zombie narrative, I'm choosing to separate it into the pre- and post-9/11 zombie, as scholars seem to mark this as a turning point in what the zombie is and what fears it represents. And, in fact, it was the latter, the post-9/11 zombie, that I expected Whitehead to be writing, some kind of post-colonial commentary in which the zombie was seen as the other. Given the zombie's roots in African folklore, it seemed a strong possibility. However, if this was Whitehead's aim, it is overshadowed by the consumerism that runs throughout the novel. This is not to say that race plays no role in the novel. In fact, the protagonist's name and the book's closing sentence revolves around a racial stereotype. But it does not seem to be the *point* of the novel, for if it was, why would Whitehead keep Spitz' race from us until the last third of the book? Instead, it would appear that Whitehead's zombie novel takes traits from both the pre- and post-9/11 zombie narrative, but for the most part exists as a major innovation of the genre.

In his collection of essays, *Post-9/11 Horror in American Cinema*, Kevin J. Wetmore describes the pre-9/11 zombie, particularly those featured in George Romero's zombie trilogy, as thus: "Romero's zombies appear sad and are slow moving. They shamble and are slow to react . . . Zombies are only dangerous in larger groups, although if one's incautious one can be bitten by just one and then suffer a horrible death" (159). This seems to be an accurate description of the infected beings, henceforth called by their written name, "skels," in *Zone One*. Split into two groups, the infected take the form of stragglers or regular skels.

The stragglers are unlike any zombies pre- or post-9/11, and do not move at all. Rather, stragglers are a nostalgic sort of skel, returning to some place of comfort or familiarity to them and remaining still for an unforeseeable future. The stragglers do not move, nor do they bite or otherwise attack the living. They are seemingly statuesque, and often the target of sadistic therapy for the living. Normal skels, on the other hand, better fit Wetmore's description of the pre-9/11 zombie. At least for the majority of the novel. Normal skels move relatively slowly, easily picked off by survivors and generally not seen as much of a threat. That's not to say, however, that they pose no threat at all, and two particular scenes of the book prove their danger: once resulting in the near biting and infection of Mark Spitz, and once resulting in the death of an entire team of Sweepers. It is not until the final chapters of the novel that the skels begin to take on traits of the post-9/11 zombie.

Wetmore continues on to define the post-9/11 zombie as "mindless, rage-filled killing machines," quoting Muntean and Payne's description of a "swift, powerful and ferocious predator that makes direct, purposeful beelines towards the living" (159).

While the skels do seem to take on these hyper-aggressive traits at the very end of the novel, they relate more similarly to the pre-9/11 zombie for most of the book: stumbling targets for civilians with rifles. For Wetmore, as well as other scholars, the post-9/11 zombie is metaphor for terrorism and terrorist attacks (160). Given the time of its publication—2011—and the city in which it is set—New York—it is easy to make claims about the skels being terrorists. However, upon reading, what is more obvious is commentary on a variety of capitalist subjects.

Further, Whitehead seems to be drawing influence from another pre-9/11 zombie narratives that act as social commentary on consumerism: George Romero's *Dawn of the Dead*, a film in which survivors and dead alike return to a place of comfort for them: a shopping mall. Perhaps not quite so heavy handed, Whitehead does away with shopping malls, choosing instead to focus on the consumerism of advertisements, furniture and domestic space within a post-apocalyptic setting that relies on a working-class group of people. Still, not even Romero's film offers a clear parallel to the skels. While *Dawn of the Dead* takes place during a zombie-heavy post-apocalypse, *Zone One* takes place one stage further, during a time in which most skels have been killed en masse by marines, and the few that remain are cleaned up by Sweepers like Mark Spitz. In fact, over the three days in which the novel takes place, there are only three attacks that pose any real threat to Mark and his crew. While there are also flashbacks of skel violence, the narrator spends far more time looking into Mark's interiority, and into the economics of a post-apocalyptic New York. This suggests, then, that Whitehead doesn't really want readers to focus on the zombie.

So what is it that Whitehead *does* want us to focus on? Given the themes of his previous books, and based on various reviews of *Zone One*, one might think that Whitehead is returning to the theme of race. However, a much more powerful point in this novel is that even after the apocalypse, Americans live in a capitalist consumer-based society. While certainly dangers exist within this type of society and the upper-class remain privileged, maintaining a sense of capitalism and consumerism seems to comfort those surviving, seems to offer an orderliness that the skels threatened.

In addition to the filmic zombie, I think it appropriate to very briefly note that in folklore, the Haitian zombie is often used as a slave laborer. In her folkloric text, *Tell My Horse*, Zora Neale Hurston tells of a fear among both upper and lower class Haitians in which their “resurrected bod[ies] [were] being dragged from the vault . . . and set to toiling ceaselessly in the banana fields, working like a beast, unclothed like a beast, and like a brute crouching in some foul den in the few hours allowed for rest and food” (Hurston 181). Applied to the novel, it’s seemingly not the skels who are zombies in this case, but the proletariat of Zone One, the Sweepers and so on that mindlessly clear buildings day in and day out, only returning to some resemblance of a place of rest—not a foul den but a repurposed Chinese restaurant—on Sunday evenings. Taking this into consideration, we must then identify the controller of the Zone One “zombie,” and time and time again we are pointed to Buffalo, a safe-haven that houses the 1% of the survivors—the wealthy, the scientists and politicians, the businessmen and women. When, near the end of the novel, we learn that Zone One is nothing more than “a public relations stunt” (Whitehead 311), we see how truly manipulative this overseer is. While

the wealthy are (seemingly) safe and in a place of privilege, the rest of the 99% are set to work in dangerous conditions, simply to boost morale.

Like *Oryx and Crake* and *Last Days*, Whitehead's novel breaks conventions of the horror genre, and what little critical discussion on the novel exists does not recognize the book's innovation. Though it uses some, *Zone One* is also breaking a variety of traditional tropes within the zombie apocalypse subgenre. Typically, the zombie itself has been used as a labor slave. They are blood hungry but can either be quick and intelligent or slow and mindless. As well, zombie narratives are traditionally set during the most climactic points of an apocalypse, that is, the zombie uprising. Instead, Whitehead primarily uses the living to comment on commodity fetish and capitalism. He employs usage of both slow and quick zombies, and even creates his own take on the monster—a zombie unable to move at all. He sets the narrative after the climax of the zombie apocalypse has come and gone, and we are led to believe that the machine guns and gore that we have come to expect from the genre happened before the narrative begins. Most importantly, though, Whitehead makes the zombie itself, and thus these tropes, secondary, instead focusing on how his living protagonist finds nostalgic comfort in the capitalist totems of a pre-skel world.

Now that conventions of the zombie apocalypse have been discussed briefly, and evidence that we as readers are not meant to focus on the skels but rather on the presence of consumerism and capitalism in a skel-ridden world, it can be established just how widespread capitalism and consumerism has become in *Zone One*. As I mentioned previously, the novel takes place during a stage of reconstruction. The streets and buildings of Zone One—one section of New York City—have been, for the most part,

cleared of skulls. Mark Spitz works as a Sweeper, a new-to-the-apocalypse profession in which teams sweep the city, building by building, block by block, eliminating hidden or missed skulls. This stage suggests some kind of calm instead of the chaos that surely came before it, and thus a return to the nine-to-five workweek.

In addition to the undead, the apocalypse has spawned a variety of new jobs: Sweepers, Wreckers, and Disposal teams. Spitz, who once worked in “Customer Relationship Management, New Media Department, of a coffee multinational,” has a drastic change in professions after the apocalypse, working as both a Sweeper and a Wrecker (184). Besides these new lines of work, we see plenty of returning professions: entrepreneurs, scientists, generals and lieutenants, not to mention the unmentioned but necessary service workers to keep Zone One clean, fed, and running smoothly. It is clear, then, that in its first steps towards normalcy, society has once again reinstated economic roles. As a Sweeper, Mark has lunch breaks and weekends off (partially), as well as coworkers. Despite his duties being far from normal, the specifics of the job don’t seem far off from the jobs of a pre-infected world. What is so odd about the post-infection jobs is that there is no talk of pay. It can be inferred, however, that there is some form of payment as the ambiguously named Lieutenant announces the availability of sponsor clothing “with a retail price of under thirty dollars” (Whitehead 47). Whether this means the workers of Zone One are paid in currency or in sponsor goods is left unstated, but it suggests that there is some form of compensation.

The return to a capitalist society does not stop at new and pre-existing jobs for the survivors of *Zone One*. We also see a return to consumerism, especially in the form of sponsor goods. As will be discussed later, the wealthy had the means to survive. Among

this number are upper-level business men and women who, once arrived at a settlement, were moved to Buffalo with the rest of the wealthy where they resumed their respective businesses and produced sponsor goods. Included in these businesses are the aforementioned “juggernaut clothing empire,” which produced four product lines, including an upscale boutique and plus-size lingerie—absurd as it is familiar, sponsor cigarettes, sponsor sneakers, sponsor chewing gum and, perhaps more absurd than a post-apocalyptic lingerie business, the parent company of a children’s cartoon character sponsoring band-aids, notebooks and, later, combat helmets (Whitehead 38, 46). Though the sponsor goods are, in part, used to curb looting outside of the settlement, one cannot help but notice the spirit of capitalism. Too, the government-sanctioned monopolies reek of a familiar corruption:

Buffalo created an entire division dedicated to pursuing official sponsors whenever a representative turned up, in exchange for tax breaks once the reaper laid down his scythe and things were up and running again. (Additional goodies the public would never find out about weevilled the fine print.) (Whitehead 49)

In addition to being potentially unethical in government sponsorship, the official sponsors returned to business as usual—make as much money as possible. The sponsors “put a price cap on their goods or specified a particular product in their brand family, one not too dear.” Though the products might be of low quality (“they were expired anyways”) or not, interpellation would ensure the continued purchase of said sponsor goods.

Whitehead acknowledges as much in a brief passage: “The civilians out in the wild, unaware of the regulations, would be welcomed into the system in time, and they would

obey” (49). In a time when generosity of such companies seems necessary for the survival of mankind, we return to the questionable ethics of big business.

Though the return of a job-based economy and a return of big business most prominently show the post-apocalyptic capitalism in *Zone One*, less pervasive evidence also exists: the importance of the child, and the return to a class based system. Never present in the narrative but always talked about by the characters of *Zone One*, are The Tromanhauser Triplets, freshly released from the ICU as the novel begins. An “irritating number” of survivors were hopeful for the triplets, for the children were “[N]ew life in the midst of devastation . . . Word of the Tromanhausers spread through the Northeast settlements quicker than any uplifting news of this or that reconstruction effort” (Whitehead 49-51). We can also see evidence of the value in a pre-infected world, especially in working class families in which children meant more labor and financial support. In his ethnographic study, *Deep Down in the Jungle*, Roger D. Abrahams notes that “[H]aving children . . . is considered the highest good,” and, “As in rural society, children in the city are looked upon as possible economic assets” (27). While this particular study is on poverty stricken families, I would suggest it works in a similar if not the same way in a post-apocalyptic world. Besides symbolizing new life in a dead world, the Tromanhausers offer six additional hands to work and help with the reconstruction efforts. The Tromanhausers are to *Zone One* as the Crakers are to *Oryx and Crake*; that is, they are hope for a future after an apocalyptic pandemic.

Finally, the clear division in class suggests that capitalism is returning to a post-infected world. The world of *Zone One* is split into three classes, not dissimilar to the pre-infected world: wanderers, the working class, and the bourgeoisie 1% of Buffalo. As

previously mentioned, the Buffalo settlement housed “[A]ll the best and brightest . . . where they got the best grub, reveled in 24-7 generators, and uncurtailed hot showers on command” (Whitehead 43). Not only this, but supplies were handed out on a priority basis, Buffalo, of course, being the first priority. Though Buffalo’s population included scientists and other individuals that might provide actual solutions or help, it also included sponsor businessmen and, very likely, those wealthy enough to buy their way in. The privilege of the wealthy is evident, for even as the plague began, it was the rich who “tended to escape” (162).

Before moving on to more specific examples of commodity fetishism in Whitehead’s novel, I think it appropriate to quickly note that capitalism in science fiction is not a new topic, but less so in horror. What’s interesting is that capitalism is used in dystopian fiction much more frequently than in utopian fiction, a genre which predominantly features socialist societies (Sargent 202). This brings up a new question: is *Zone One* utopic or dystopic? I’d argue that, like most dystopic fiction, the government in the novel believes it to be the former, whereas it’s truly the latter. Halfway through the novel, our narrator tells us this: “The dead came to scrub the Earth of capitalism and the vast bourgeois superstructure . . . return us to nature and wholesome communal living” (153). This seems to suggest a dangerous cycle in which the plague (“the dead”) was a response to capitalist society of the pre-infected world, and as the reconstruction begins we see a return to the dangerous capitalistic society rather than a rethinking of economic systems. The novel is a dystopic commentary on the pitfalls of capitalism. Dystopic as it is, however, capitalism does offer some comfort in such a world.

This brings me to my claim: In the post-infected world, capitalism and consumerism offer a return to normalcy for survivors, a nostalgia for the ad-ridden world of before. This is especially evident in the book's protagonist, Mark Spitz, who fetishizes various capitalistic totems—and I use this word loosely—as a means of comfort, and to spark memories of his past. Karl Marx shares the anthropological definition of fetishism, referring to “the primitive belief that godly powers can inhere in inanimate things (e.g., in totems)” (Felluga). It is this definition that I'm using, and the godly power these totems inhere is the power to provide comfort in an extremely uncomfortable setting—a post-infected New York City. The three totems Mark fetishizes are as follows: advertisements, living and working spaces and furniture, and the jobs themselves, that is, the former and current occupations of both the living as well as the dead.

Before getting into Mark's totems of nostalgia, I would like to establish that even before the plague Mark had a commodity fetish. *Zone One* opens with a memory. Mark recalls a childhood visits to Uncle Lloyd's apartment—a building that will later become totemic. While the adults talked, the narrator tells us:

[T]he boy was down the hall, giddy and squeaking on the leather of the cappuccino sectional and marveling over the latest permutations in home entertainment. He searched for the fresh arrival first thing. This visit it was the wireless speakers haunting the corners like spindly wraiths. (Whitehead 4)

At such a young age it's not possible for Mark to fetishize technology for the same reason he will fetishize it later—nostalgia. Rather he fetishizes these objects because of his parents' unwillingness to participate “in an age of digital multiplicity.” Where his parents had “a coffee machine that didn't tell time, dictionaries made out of paper,” and,

“a camera that only took pictures,” Uncle Lloyd had the newest, biggest televisions, speakers, and furniture. (3-5). Later, we see more examples of pre-infection commodity fetish in Mark: as a teenager, taking the subway to parts “of the city he’d never been before . . . in search of imported sneakers or limited-edition hoodies” (256-7); in the days leading up to Last Night, Mark is gambling “at one of the new boutique casinos . . . [T]he banks of machines trilled and dinged and whooped in a regional dialect of money” (81); as an adult in California, hoping to prove himself as a person successful enough to move to and live in Manhattan. The narrator dwells on and criticizes this past: “To think that there had been a time when such a thing meant something: the signifiers of one’s position in the world. Today a rusty machete and a bag of almonds made you a person of substance” (161). Thus, the fetishization of money and commodity has always been a means for Mark to live with his societal anxieties but provides a slightly different meaning in the post-infected world.

Advertisements, whether real or imagined, appear frequently throughout *Zone One*. First, the reconstruction effort has a theme song and a slogan; later, Mark creates imaginary commercials for the post-infected world: “When You Need to Burn the Dead in a Hurry!; Four Out of Five Uninfected Doctors Agree: Still the Only Antibiotic That Matters!” (157). Even in Mark’s dreams he sees “advertisements lodged just above eye level, airbrushed heads of the dead hawked trade schools and remedies” (133). Thus, even if he is not physically around or seeing actual advertisements, he is thinking about them, even going so far as to create his own. So it is not a stretch, I would argue, that these advertisements are totemic for Mark. While the aforementioned advertisements and slogans are selling the present and future, there are two scenes in the novel that feature

advertisements of the past—these are Mark’s totems and what bring him a nostalgic comfort. In keeping theme with horror conventions, I would also go as far as to say that these advertisements haunt Mark.

The first of these scenes takes place about three-quarters into the novel. To put my discussion into context, the ambiguous leader of the Zone One settlement, the Lieutenant, has committed suicide. Mark and his team of sweepers is holed up with another team inside of a Brazilian restaurant, mourning the Lieutenant’s death. The teams get drunk and, in the background, a radio plays. Our first hint that the radio is symbolic of the past is when Mark realizes that “it was a recording of a radio block from some random afternoon before the disaster” (Whitehead 252). The narrator then describes the radio broadcast as follows: “a ghost transmission of yesterday’s deals on teeth bleaching, ads for movies playing in dead theaters, and last-minute invitations to join class-action suits” (252). Thus, in the wake of the Lieutenant’s suicide, an action that seems to symbolize the growing instability of the post-infected world, Mark is reminded, or more so, literally haunted by a simpler time. Before the plague, one dealt with anxieties like the color of their teeth, what movie he should see, and whether he had been wronged by one company or another, all of these decisions being much more lighthearted than deciding whether to live or die in a post-infected world. These broadcasts, I would argue, are meant to be read as a form of haunting because of two choice words, “ghost” and “dead,” both of which invoke nostalgia in a ghastly manner.

The second advertisement scene appears some forty pages later, even closer to, as Sorenson puts it, “the end of all stories” (562), and likewise haunts Mark. As Mark walks back to the Zone One settlement, Wonton, for the last time, what he notices is:

[T]he dead bargains: the handwritten EVERYTHING MUST GO sign in the second-floor window of a shop of no decipherable purpose, a banner proclaiming the specialty sandwich at the fast-food chain. (Whitehead 298)

Similar to the radio advertisements, Mark sees these advertisements in the wake of his teammate having his finger bit off by one of the infected and, as he'll soon find out, just prior to the siege of Wonton. The narrator notes that, in the distance, "[T]he machine guns fired without cessation," and that Mark had "become so accustomed to the gunfire . . . that he hadn't considered how many men and women such an onslaught entailed" (Whitehead 298-9). Thus, once again, the lighthearted time of liquidation sales and fast-food is haunting Mark by "dead" bargains while, in the meantime, his team member is potentially moments away from becoming infected and the settlement moments away from being overrun. For Mark, at a hugely uncomfortable time, focusing on advertisements of the pre-infected world offers some comfort, as well as pessimistic foreshadowing: *everything* must go.

The second totem, or, totems, that Mark finds comfort in are the living and working spaces he "sweeps" and the furniture within them. The way each of these spaces is furnished represents a hierarchy of social class. That is, prior to the apocalypse, wealth and class could be identified by how a work or living space looked. A law firm whose main demographic is wealthy businessmen, for example, would want potential customers to see that the firm values class and prestige and so would likely outfit its work space with furniture that gave off that notion. On the other hand, those in the working class do not always have the financial means to display their wealth, and their living spaces reflect that: apartments are run down, architecturally bland, and outfitted with cheap furniture.

Thus, social class is tied to how a living or work space looks, from the outside and within. Though there is one particular building that acts as a fetishistic totem for Mark—Uncle Lloyd’s—much more often Mark is thinking about specific rooms. While Whitehead’s language doesn’t evoke haunting in these totems the same way it does in advertisements, it is something that Mark frequently thinks about throughout the novel. Mark is consistently considering the places he’s sweeping: how they are decorated, who might have lived or worked there, and how successful these people were—all nostalgic glimpses into a pre-infected world. Because living and working spaces are littered throughout the novel, I’m choosing to focus on three specific moments: the lawyers’ suite, the big apartment complexes of Battery Park, and the starter-apartment. Each of these spaces reminds Mark of a time when social class—the wealthy, the middle-class, and the working-class respectively—could be identified by where they lived and what kinds of furniture they sat on.

After Mark’s memory of his childhood visits to Uncle Lloyd’s, the lawyers’ suite is where *Zone One* truly begins. Mark’s first thought upon entering the building is as follows: “[T]he attorneys had leased four floors, a sleek warren, and hadn’t been doing too bad for themselves from the extent of their renovation” (12). And then, inside the suite itself:

[T]hey stumbled into a sophisticated grotto, as if the floors had been dealt into the building from some more upscale deck. In the waiting room, their helmet lights roved over the perplexing geometric forms in the carpet that they sullied with their combat boots, the broad panels of the dark zebra wood covering the walls with elegant surety, and the low, sleek furniture that promised bruises yet, when

tested, compressed one's body according to newly discovered principles of somatic harmony. (Whitehead 13)

Mark, who had plans of lawyering before the plague, is not concerned about the dangers that may lie ahead, but rather the flooring, the carpet, the exoticized wood paneling, and the ergonomic furniture. In fact, the only concern about the present that Mark has is the damage their combat boots are causing the carpet. Thus, Mark is not thinking about the present, but rather is nostalgic about the past, and, in this case specifically, about the comforts and conveniences that the upper-class once had and to which Mark once aspired. This style of life, of course, no longer exists in the unstable post-infected world.

The second living space, the apartment complex, reminds Mark of a different but majority class of society—the middle class. Mark's memory of the apartment complex is brought about by a skel who seems to epitomize the middle-class. Mark's description of the complex, of the "identical layouts of the apartments," (71) is as follows:

Windowless office nook or nursery, bathroom on the right, second bedroom at the end of the hall with a coffin-size closet. He recognized the area rugs and sconces and accent tables, for the residents had all shopped at the same popular furniture emporiums the rest of the country shopped at . . . In the D-line apartment on the sixth floor he discovered the plaid ottoman he came across in the A-line apartment on the fourteenth floor, an identical distance from the flat-screen television. (Whitehead 71-2)

Like in the lawyers' suites, it's not the recent skel attack that's on Mark's mind, but rather the living spaces in which the skels might have lived pre-infection. In this case, however, Mark is not thinking of the upper-echelon furnishings of the bourgeoisie

lawyers, but rather the cookie-cutter apartments of the middle-class consumer. These are consumers who follow capitalist trends. They are consumers who “tested the same sofas” and “clicked through the drop-down menus of the same online purveyors” (72). Mark is finding comfort in the absolute architectural conformity of the middle-class.

Finally, the third example of furniture as a nostalgic and comforting totem can be found in what Mark describes as a “starter-apartment rental tower” (253). Mark describes these living spaces as follows: “floor after floor of beige carpet, noise-permeable walls, and fingerprint-smudged doorways” (253-4). He goes on to think that “[H]is friends in the city lived in buildings like that, and the hallways reeked of the dead ambitions decomposing behind the doors. They’d had hopes” (254). The nostalgia and comfort here is evident. For one, given his occupation, had Mark lived in the city and not his parent’s home, he too would have very likely lived in an apartment complex like this. More obviously, though, the apartments remind Mark of a time when people could have hopes, even if those hopes were never fulfilled. This is a stark difference from apartments which, post-infection, “signified the complete eradication of aspiration, all luminous motions” (254). Mark is using a working-class apartment complex to find comfort. He is thinking about hope in a world that has become hopeless.

Finally, we come to the last of the totems that Mark fetishizes: the past and future occupations of people and skulls that he meets. Like the previous totems, thinking and talking about occupations is a way for Mark to return mentally to the comforts of a structured nine-to-five workweek. Though it is not stated explicitly, it seems that the routine of working is what Mark finds most nostalgic, but also perhaps comfort in the familiarity of non-military, non-apocalypse created occupations. That is, though Mark

has been a Wrecker and a Sweeper, though there does exist a multitude of new and exciting occupations in the post-infected world, it is not these that Mark fetishizes, but rather the more mundane occupations. Like living and working spaces, Mark thinks about jobs frequently throughout *Zone One* so, again, I am going to pick a few specific examples: Mark's first office job, Mark's Customer Relationship Manager position, and discussing post-plague plans with Tad, Jerry and Margie.

Mark remembers a comforting memory of his first office job while being attacked in the lawyers' suites. Mark's memories include: "rattling a mail cart down the corridors of a payroll company," his coworkers who "were his age and when his boss shut the door to his office they got a splendid doofus chorus going," and finally, "the ogre head of Human Resources, who'd been relentless about Mark Spitz's paperwork, downright insidious about his W-this, W-that, the proper credentials" (Whitehead 20-1). In the present, Mark has been tackled and pinned by the skels, he has dropped his pistol, and he's alone. But this is not what he thinks about. Instead, Mark finds comfort in these nostalgic memories of his first office job—both the good and the bad—and thus the job becomes a fetishistic totem for Mark.

Mark's Customer Relationship Management job is not the first, but the most recent pre-apocalyptic occupation that Mark held, and it, too, is nostalgic. Also similarly, this memory is prompted while Mark is alone and vulnerable to attack, a time in which he should really be thinking about the present. Mark has this memory en route to Wonton about halfway through the novel. He's left his team with the Bravo team of Sweepers, and passes a lounge where he once met a girl at after work. It is this that prompts the memory of not the girl or the lounge but his job. Mark recalls that "[H]is job hadn't been

unduly bothersome; mostly he hated the commute from the Island and the sense of being becalmed,” and that “[I]t was his job to monitor the web in search of opportunities to sow product mindshare and nurture feelings of brand intimacy . . . This meant, he soon learned, scouting websites and social-media apparatus for mentions of the brand family, and saying hello” (Whitehead 184-5). Like his first office job, Mark’s memories of this job are mostly positive. He recalls entering “into artifice easily . . . a natural at ersatz human connection and the postures of counterfeit empathy,” and that, “[T]wo months after he started, there was a five percent uptick in the corporate site’s traffic” (186). In the present, Mark is more vulnerable while inside his own head, especially after just having seen a stray skel walking the streets. It is an uncomfortable and tense time, and so Mark finds comfort in thinking about the mundanity of his pre-apocalyptic life. So, once again, one of Mark’s past jobs is a totem, a way for him to dwell on a time in which the biggest annoyance was commuting.

Finally, Mark finds comfort, albeit a pessimistic comfort, in the future jobs of wanderers he has met. Though these are totems that allude to a future, they are all a return to the pre-apocalyptic occupations of Tad, Jerry, and Margie. It should be noted that, while these jobs are just as totemic and nostalgic as the previous two I have discussed, Mark is very pessimistic about the future, noting that the act of discussing post-plague plans in their present situation was “[M]ore than a jinx on deliverance, this was straddling reality with a pillow while it was sleeping and pressing down while it bucked and kicked” (Whitehead 222). Mark will go on to tell himself that “[H]ope is a gateway drug” (222). Still, Mark participates. Tad begins, telling the others that before the plague he had been working on a new video game that he plans to resume working

on, noting that “It’ll move a million copies” (222). Jerry goes next, and likewise says “he’d resume selling real estate. Surplus inventory will be a tough nut in every market, but once rightful owners and heirs are sorted out, business will start up again” (223). Margie is last to speak, in response to Tad’s asking if she will continue to make pickles. Referring to the business she had once worked for, Margie says, “[I]f they make it through,” and then, “[M]aybe I’ll start it up again myself” (223). When asked about his own post-plague plan, Mark says: “move to the city” (224). Based on Tad, Jerry, and Margie, though, one wonders if this means that Mark will also return to his former job in the city. But it’s the first three occupations that truly act as totems. These are not newly invented occupations, nor are they new occupations for the characters. Instead, Tad, Jerry, and Margie are planning a return to the comforts and normalcy of the pre-infected world. Though they have the opportunity to potentially reinvent themselves, what they seek instead is a nostalgic familiarity.

And so we come to a conclusion: though he exists in the uncomfortable present, a skel-ridden, post-apocalyptic world, the protagonist of *Zone One*, Mark Spitz, finds comfort in the nostalgia triggered by a variety of fetishistic totems. Each of these totems, whether living and working spaces, whether advertisements, or whether jobs, remind Mark of the capitalistic, consumer-driven society of before the plague. The nostalgia, and social commentary are what make this novel so interesting, especially because Whitehead is subverting a genre he clearly is working within by making more traditional conventions secondary. This isn’t the average zombie apocalypse novel. Whitehead’s social commentary is an innovation on the genre, and once recognized as such, could lead to more experimentation within the genre. A result of this is more complex, allegorically

powerful horror fiction, forced to be taken seriously by literary and genre critics alike. To be sure, zombie apocalypses are flooding the horror market—*World War Z*; *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*; *The Walking Dead*—but none of these texts are taking the risks that Whitehead is and actively unsettling the subgenre. Likewise, Whitehead is not the only author subverting the subgenre—Bennett Sims’ *A Questionable Shape* is another example. This, however, is not the right space for discussion of these other texts. It is simply an example and discussion of a uniquely innovative piece of fiction that subverts the conventions of the genre from which it derives, and that has gone unnoticed by critics of that genre. Instead, we will end as the novel does, and as we began the chapter—with the zombie. Mark may find comfort through nostalgia, but comfort will not help him as he walks out “into the sea of the dead” (322).

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