

“Futures Possible”:

Reading for Realism in Contemporary Literary Genre Fiction

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by

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The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School, have examined the
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certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

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ABSTRACT:

This thesis reads three contemporary novels, Colson Whitehead's *Zone One*, Thomas Pynchon's *Inherent Vice*, and Lydia Millet's *Mermaids in Paradise* in relation to literary realism. What is so novel about this approach is that all three of these novels are, to varying degrees, genre texts. Whitehead's novel is a post-apocalyptic zombie novel, Pynchon's is a stoner detective pastiche, and Millet's is a fantasy novel about a newly discovered cadre of mermaids. The point, simply put, is that these novels are not easily understood as literary realism—and with (somewhat) good reason. Despite the obvious genre elements, however, all three of these novels deny genre in service of a more “realistic” (my quotations) approach to their material. These novels, then, leave room for interpretation via a model of literary realism. The goal of this thesis is to understand how contemporary writers deploy genre and realism to both image a possible future and sketch the limitations of such a project.

Chapter 1: Introduction

This thesis reads three contemporary novels, Colson Whitehead's *Zone One*, Thomas Pynchon's *Inherent Vice*, and Lydia Millet's *Mermaids in Paradise* in relation to literary realism. What is so novel about this approach is that all three of these novels are, to varying degrees, genre texts. Whitehead's novel is a post-apocalyptic zombie novel, Pynchon's is a stoner detective pastiche, and Millet's is a fantasy novel about a newly discovered cadre of mermaids. The point, simply put, is that these novels are not easily understood as literary realism—and with (somewhat) good reason. Despite the obvious genre elements, however, all three of these novels deny genre in service of a more “realistic” (my quotations) approach to their material. These novels, then, leave room for interpretation via a model of literary realism.

The model I propose to do so is perhaps an equally puzzling theoretical framework. In her book *The Order of Forms*, Victorianist Anna Kornbluh charts a new, radically all-inclusive definition of literary realism that I hope to apply to contemporary literary genre fiction. In keeping with the post-structuralist move away from the truly mimetic quality of any literary text, Kornbluh emphasizes the act of building inherent in any text and argues that literary critics often “exalt unmasking and unbuilding” (1). A critical approach that recenters the act of building, Kornbluh argues, allows us to see the way the literary text, especially those we understand as literary realism, “models futures possible” and allows us to imagine worlds and social formations that are fundamentally different from our own (32). For Konbluh, the act of imagining alternative social formations discloses the contingency of the ones that currently exist, while also providing the framework for something different and better.

This reformulation in how we read and analyze literature, along with adopting the understanding of literary realism that see it as a form that is precisely concerned with how

societies organize themselves, allows us to understand what Fredric Jameson calls our “ineradicable drive towards collectivity” that has its theoretical roots in Aristotle and Marx (*Reification* 148). As for Jameson and other Marxist critics, literary realism for Kornbluh becomes the primary manifestation of this impulse, as it is the terrain on which literature grapples with the tensions in bourgeois society. Where Kornbluh departs from a great deal of her Marxist influences, and where this thesis picks up, in its decidedly positivist approach to literature and culture. Unlike many other Marxists, who take a rigidly deterministic attitude towards authors under capitalism, Kornbluh allows for and champions the individual author as a worker creating a model of the world that both foregrounds the contingency of reality under capitalism and charts a way out of it.

The thing most valuable about Kornbluh’s work in this field, and the facet which leads me to its application in this thesis, is the way her theorization of realism allows it to be quite applicable outside the bounds of Jamesian, 19th century literature. Her new formulation of literary realism does not set up a clear, articulate boundary for what does and does not qualify. A more cynical reading might contend that this is a fatal flaw of her work; this, however, would miss the point. Since Kornbluh’s entire aim is to encourage critics to build and create new understandings, it is entirely appropriate to view these moments of critical ambiguity as openings as opposed to fissures. It seems completely apt to take this approach a step further by bringing Kornbluh’s work into an entirely new context and moment. In making her case in *The Order of Forms*, Kornbluh takes several unconventional Victorian novels (*Wuthering Heights* and *Alice in Wonderland*) as her examples of literary realism; it seems, then, that we can approach this as license to do the same.

In taking a decidedly Marxist approach, this thesis will also account for the very meaningful differences between Victorian England and the United States in the first decades of the 21st century. Exploring this disjunction is actually one of the primary aims of this project. In what is no doubt the most famous (and infamous) account of late-stage capitalism, Jameson argues that the postmodern subject is unable to contend with history and historical thinking. He argues that, due to this shift, our culture has lost a “sense of history,” as we are no longer able to understand our particular historical situation, and instead, we experience history and the past as a series of disconnected images that form a “series of perpetual presents” (*Postmodernism* 174). Kornbluh’s scholarship focuses on the 19th century, a moment in history where the development of capital allowed for a much easier imagining of possible futures. If we take Jameson’s critique seriously, contemporary culture, in its inability to think historically, is also unable to adequately imagine the future, as we think of both only in terms of the present. Thus, the postmodern subject is doomed to reify the present, no matter where they look. While I do not actively disagree with Jameson, I want to start from his premise to consider the ways some contemporary writers complicate this very broad statement. The corpus of this thesis, I argue, comprises novels that both disclose the difficulty of imagining a better world in the contemporary and try to do so anyway.

The other major project pursued by this thesis is the congealing of literary realism and a certain kind of literary genre fiction. In the *Antinomies of Realism*, Jameson attempts to understand the differentiation between literary realism from its peak period (the middle of the 19th century) and various forms of genre fiction. For Jameson, the distinction comes to hinge on the tension between affect and narrative, with literary realism being the genre of the ineffable affect and genre fiction being that which tries to contain them within “codified narrative

structures” (Jameson 138). The issue that Jameson encounters is that there is something inherently structured about the novel itself, as the novel is always engaging in the process of providing form to affect. As he says in his conclusion, “it becomes paradoxically clear that realism’s ultimate adversary will be the realist novel itself” (Jameson 162). The difference between realism and genre is thus always one of degrees, and this understanding helps us understand the tensions present in these novels. What they do is productively play with and exercise the potential and limitations of both realism and genre to ask the questions that Kornbluh reminds us are the foundation of literary realism. To use Jameson’s word, one cannot be “dissol[ved]” into the other because they are being deployed simultaneously and to the same goal (Jameson 162).

In this thesis, I argue that Colson Whitehead’s *Zone One* presents the zombie genre novel with a decidedly psychologically realist aesthetic to contend how the novel eschews a utopian imagining of a post-apocalyptic scenario to instead illustrate that late-capitalism as a social form is far more persistent than one may think. In my reading of the novel, however, I state that the novel’s ambiguous conclusion gestures towards a space that does allow for organization outside from or beyond the social form of capitalism. Then, I turn to *Inherent Vice* to argue that Pynchon deploys historical realism in the same way Whitehead does psychological realism. In the novel, Pynchon shrouds his literally hazy detective pastiche in real history to trace the evolution of new ways of knowing and learning about that world to consider how this evolution is in fact a limit placed on how we might imagine a new world going forward. In doing so, he posits the novel and its detective protagonist as a counter to these limits on imagination. Finally, I read *Mermaids in Paradise* as a fantastical novel that uses domestic and social realism to discuss how, after a magical, world changing event, such new possibilities are immediately limited and co-opted.

Though the novel offers a somewhat incidental conclusion that denies agency to its protagonists, Millet's interest in the forming of spontaneous collectivities of otherwise disconnected people allows us, again, to imagine how we might combat that which is limiting our stance towards the future. As I conclude, I consider how all of these novels present themselves as either following or depicting epochal change to consider how they both foreground the limitations of the future while also still offering a way forward.

Chapter 2: “The Creatures They Had Always Been”: Realism in Colson Whitehead’s *Zone One*

At first glance, it would seem rather uncontroversial to class Colson Whitehead’s *Zone One* as a genre novel. The novel follows Mark Spitz, a nickname given to the otherwise anonymous protagonist, as he navigates a post-apocalyptic cityscape. Specifically, the world of Whitehead’s novel is one populated with flesh-devouring zombies, and the narrative tracks the attempts made by groups of non-zombified humans to reestablish a society while avoiding zombification and clearing the titular *Zone One* of remaining zombies. It is important to note that the zombies that populate *Zone One* are presented as entirely real within the world of the novel. They are not understood as the product of ambiguity or uncertainty, nor can they be read as a metaphor within an otherwise faithful picture of the “real” world; the reader encounters them as a fact of the text. Simply put, *Zone One* is a zombie novel, and it is one that comes out during the height of the early 21st century zombie cultural boom. Leif Sorensen’s work on the novel’s engagement with the tropes of post-apocalyptic fiction (which this paper will also attend to) reads the novel partially in relation to Max Brook’s *World War Z* and Robert Kirkman’s graphic novel series *The Walking Dead* (560,569). I say all of this because it is necessary to firmly establish that Whitehead’s novel is, by any available metric, a novel about zombies, and as such, it is quite literally a genre novel.

Why, then, does *Zone One* not *feel* like a zombie novel? Put differently: is *Zone One* a “bad” genre novel? While the subject of the novel is almost exclusively that of the undead, the novel appears to go out of its way to avoid or complicate the tropes of “typical” zombie fiction. With the exception of the concluding pages, the text rejects the visceral, bloody pleasures of the average post-apocalyptic zombie novel. Andrew Hoberek notes that the novel rather drastically departs from the conventional zombie novel at the level of style, as “each sentence....is as

meticulously crafted as the larger plot structure,” and that the novel as a whole bears more of the hallmarks of a Colson Whitehead novel (which is to say, a work of distinctive literary fiction) than it does of the average zombie novel (408-9). Instead of merely reproducing the norms of the zombie novel, Whitehead is most interested in performing a “metafictional reflection on apocalyptic narrative conventions,” a move the reader can see through the frequent references to zombie and monster films and narratives (Sorensen 559). Hoberek notes that Whitehead’s deployment of genre tropes is a move Whitehead and other contemporary authors (namely Junot Diaz, Michael Chabon, and Jonathan Lethem) make in order to “explore the genre tropes of their youth” in an otherwise high literary context (409). As Hoberek points out, however, Whitehead’s novel is stylistically quite different and more complex than those by the above listed writers, as his is a text written in “highly polished, formally perfect prose” that is not easily metabolized within the context of a novel about zombies (409). There is, then, a discontinuity between the form and the content of the novel that appears fundamental to its construction and overall effect. Though it is undeniably a novel about zombies, *Zone One* formalizes these concepts using the qualities and aesthetic of typical literary fiction. In the end, Whitehead produces what could perhaps be called a “literary fiction zombie text” that attempts to marry artfully crafted prose with a subject that is typically the fodder of pulp fiction. Though Whitehead’s novel is perhaps a departure from the novels Kornbluh reads directly (all the potential “non-realistic” elements in her corpus can be explained away as being non-literal or representational), its formal qualities still allow us to approach it as a realist text, zombies notwithstanding.

Following Kornbluh, we can think about how the novel engages with form and the acts of creating, shaping, and formalizing. These processes, which are the foundational concern of realism for Kornbluh, are at play in the novel from the very beginning. As the novel opens, the

reader is given a complicated (if at times vague) understanding of the post-apocalyptic moment of Whitehead's novel. We learn that the novel, the present tense of which takes place over three days, is set during the "reconstruction" period following a cataclysmic breakdown of society caused by the introduction of a zombifying virus (8). This term, rather obviously, is meant to echo the reconstruction effort of the post-Civil War period in the United States, and Whitehead's invocation of the term sets in motion the novel's intricate engagement with racial politics in the 21st century. My interest in this term, however, is less specifically related to the issue of race, although that is of primary concern in the novel. Whitehead deliberately sets the novel in a moment of post-apocalyptic "reconstruction," and doing so complicates the notion of the zombie outbreak as a truly apocalyptic event that signals the finality of humanity as such. When the novel begins, we are already encountering a world that has begun to rebuild and reassemble itself. The narrator even notes that, for Mark Spitz, it is "[h]ard to believe that reconstruction had progressed so far that clock-watching had returned," implying that pre-apocalyptic forms of social organization are, in the novel's present tense, beginning to reemerge; the action of the text is to then imagine and understand how this happens (6).

The form of the novel makes this even more explicit; split into three sections, the text is divided into parts labeled "Friday", "Saturday", and "Sunday" (1, 105, 220). The narration even calls attention to this organizational method, noting that the stabilization of the zombie virus and the resulting period of reconstruction had led to renewed feelings of "boredom" and the concept of a work-week (26). One of the novel's primary projects is to illustrate the kind of boring manual labor that would have to go into rebuilding the United States after the spread of a deadly virus, so these terms underscore the way that relationship will always be (in some sense) continuous with the kinds of relationships that existed pre-outbreak. As such, the time of the day

in this post-apocalyptic world is already being reorganized into a familiar form (namely the work week). Mark Spitz is one of many cleaners tasked with clearing out the titular section of New York so that the American Phoenix project, a governmental organization, can truly begin the task of reconstituting society. The form of the novel thus takes a similar tact, as it is organized into a linear progression of days that do not depart from how they are currently organized.

More broadly, by structuring the novel this way, Whitehead deliberately imposes form onto a subject (a zombie apocalypse) that is typically thought to be formless and anarchic. Of course, one of the very things Kornbluh wants to attune us to is that form should be understood as a necessary precondition for humanity as such. She argues against the “lure of formlessness” to affirm the axiomatic notion (that once again has its origins in Marx and Aristotle) that there are “[n]o effects without causes, no details without events, no individuality without sociality, [and] no agency without determination” (4,47). This is to say that this seemingly non-realist text has, at the level of its very formal construction, the central components of realism as outlined by Kornbluh. Whitehead is very evidently and consciously imposing form onto a world superficially defined by its formlessness, while also calling attention to that very act by never truly allowing the reader to encounter the world of *Zone One* without some kind of formal structure. The glimpses we do get of the pre-reconstructed past are all done via flashbacks, a technique which foregrounds their contingency within a larger historical arc of rebuilding. Additionally, the post-apocalyptic genre form is itself already complicated in this regard. It at once tries to represent a world that is ostensibly no longer governed by form while still imposing a very obvious generic model onto the narrative.

Building on this idea, we can see ways the novel’s temporal formalism is expressed even further within the actual sentence itself. Hoberek highlights that much of the novel has an

“elaborately nested” approach to sentence structure, whereby the text often moves back through time to tell Mark Spitz’s story while using language that obfuscates the relationship between the pre and post-apocalyptic periods (407). He notes that this occurs frequently throughout the novel--perhaps most notably during Mark Spitz’s “Last Night” story, wherein he mistakes the zombification of his parents for oral sex--and that it is a marked feature of Whitehead’s formal style wherein the past is described using metaphors that parallel the present (407). This is a pattern that occurs throughout the novel, which gives a great deal of space to portraying Mark Spitz’s internal life and pre-apocalyptic past. For example, towards the end of the second section, as the novel has already flashed back to tell us about Mark Spitz’s relationship with a woman, Mim, in a toy store during the early days of the virus outbreak. The narration, reflecting Mark Spitz’s own thoughts, says:

In the time before the flood, Mark Spitz had a habit of making girlfriends into things that were less than human. There was always a point, sooner or later, when they crossed a line and became creatures: following a lachrymose display while waiting in line for admission to the avant-garde performance; halfway into a silent rebuke, when he underplayed his enthusiasm about attending her friend’s wedding. Once it was only a look, a transit of anxiety across her eyes in which he glimpsed some irremediable flaw or future betrayal. And like that, the person he had fallen in love with was gone. They had been replaced by this familiar abomination, this thing that shared the same face, same voice, same familiar mannerisms that had once comforted him. To anyone else, the simulation was perfect. If he tried to make his case, as in his horror movies, the world would indulge his theory, even participate in a reasonable-sounding test, one that would not succeed in convincing them. But he would know. He knew where they failed in their humanity. He would leave.(Whitehead 194).

There is, of course, something deeply strange about an ostensible zombie novel pausing for this long to ponder the rather complex inner-workings of its protagonist’s romantic life; the novel is not, for instance, about Mark Spitz pinning for a lost or forgotten love interest from the past. This

is a moment of pure characterization in a novel inhabiting a genre not typically known for such depth.

What I argue is most interesting about this passage, beyond its apparent strangeness, is the way it evokes language that is equally applicable in Mark Spitz's post-apocalyptic present. We see that in his relationships, Mark Spitz taught himself to see his partners in explicitly non-human terms. During the dissolution of a relationship, his partners would "become creatures" and his beloved would be "gone." In his eyes, his partners are nothing but a "familiar abomination" by the end of his relationship. There are even hints of both temporal ambivalence and rigid determinism in the idea that he could, in seeing a flaw in his partner, detect either a "irredeemable flaw or future betrayal," gesturing towards either an irresolvable issue in the past or a problem lurking around the corner. Mark Spitz, inevitably, performs the same response: running. Formally, this passage unequivocally echoes the zombie sections of the novel, as the language the narrator uses can just as easily be understood in reference to the undead monsters that Mark Spitz avoids. Phrases like "creatures" and "familiar abominations" no doubt remind the reader of the zombies that haunt the rest of the novel, and the narrator's invocation of the phrase "last nights" in reference to the final nights of the Mark Spitz relationships fortifies the connection between this trip into his past (which is housed within another flashback sequence) and the main action driving the narrative (Whitehead194).

Whitehead's complicated use of language comes to bear on how we understand the novel in relation to genre and realism. The narration frequently invokes metaphoric language to describe Mark Spitz's rather realistic past (and the past of the United States pre-outbreak) ties it directly to the zombie swarm that categorizes most of the novel. Doing this makes it impossible to untangle the novel's allegiances to both genre and literary realism, and it is this complication

that is my primary concern. We are not able to see the zombies as either an entirely literal fact of the novel, though they are, or an entirely metaphorical projection of other social trends, which they also are for Whitehead. This connection is fortified later in the novel when the narrator remarks that people in their pre-zombified state “were the real monsters,” and it was the virus that revealed them “as the creatures they had always been” (176). They are both metaphor and actuality, and this is a relationship that Kornbluh explains at length. Abstract, metaphoric language, far from obfuscating social reality, is one of the means by which the world actually comes into being; it is, in other words, one of the ways we impose form and intelligibility onto what is otherwise formless to actually *make* the world around us. What is so interesting is that Whitehead’s novel embraces this while also complicating it. He allows the language of zombie and apocalyptic fiction to inform his engagement with Mark Spitz’s past to disclose how these dehumanizing tendencies actually infect human social interactions; at the same time, the text also invests a literal dimension to the idea of zombification and dehumanization. *Zone One*, I argue, is thus an amplified version of Kornbluh’s veneration of metaphor, as metaphoric language in the novel is both perfectly intelligible as abstract language while also being fully real in a material sense. The text, then, is imagining a world where zombification is both *possible* and already a fact of social life, and the language of the complicates any clear linearity between what has and has not already happened to this effect. Zooming out, genre becomes the expression of the novel’s interest in the social dynamics typically explored in literary realism.

One could say, however, that *Zone One*’s relatively limited point-of-view disrupts how we think about its rather radical approach to metaphor. The passage I quoted above, and the many, many others like it throughout the novel, are all focalized from Mark Spitz’s subjectivity; the reader’s access to these metaphors that build the world of the novel are thus always

understood specifically through Mark Spitz and his experiences, feelings, and psychology. There is a case that these metaphors then come to build a world that mirrors Mark Spitz's internal subjectivity, not a larger social reality. This notion echoes Gyorgy Lukacs' differentiation between realism and modernism that causes him to favor the former over the latter. Lukacs argues that modernist literature has an "obsession with the pathological" that causes it to probe the internal psychology of its characters in such a way that it ignores and obfuscates larger social realities (30). Modernism, for Lukacs, ignores the way one's internal, psychological reality is a product of the material realities that exist outside the individual subject; it is for these reasons that he prefers literary realism, as realism is interested in tracing the exact inverse of this relationship to disclose how the individual is defined by their part in a larger social whole. Clearly, a great deal of Whitehead's metaphoric flourishes in the novel come as a result of focalizing the narrative through Mark Spitz, and this leaves open a site of ambiguity regarding whether we interpret this as a commentary about the social world of late capitalism or a commentary on the otherwise unknowable, monster-movie obsessed Mark Spitz.

While one can definitely understand the charge that Whitehead's novel succumbs to Lukacs' critique of modernism (a charge that, I should add, would in no way diminish its quality as a novel), I think there is an important aspect of Mark Spitz's characterization that, like the novel's approach to metaphor, deepens and complicates how we understand the way Whitehead aims the narrative. Though we know little about Mark Spitz--even his moniker is a no more than a racist nickname given to him in the early days of the outbreak--there is one thing that the narrator reminds us of over and over again: his almost superhuman mediocrity. Though he had weathered "the obstacles attendant to a law degree" (a wonderfully obfuscating phrase), the narrator goes through great pains to point out that Mark Spitz's "solemn expertise" is his

average-ness (9, 10). During the pre-plague years, Mark Spitz was master of the “American checklist,” and while his marked unremarkability has suited him well in his post-apocalyptic present, the implication is that he was, prior to the outbreak, an entire average American (Whitehead 9). As such, I argue that this should inform how we understand how the narrative works in relation to Mark Spitz. Though this notion of Mark Spitz’s mediocrity is challenged later in the novel, it would seem that this crucial facet of his character allows us to understand him and his thoughts as being in some sense emblematic of the larger American public in the 21st century. We are to understand Mark Spitz precisely in terms of his anonymity, and as such, the narrative focalization can be read as indicative of a larger pattern within contemporary American life. As it pertains, then, to the novel as a whole, this leaves open the reading that the insistence with which the narrative frames the pre-apocalyptic past in post-apocalyptic terms is a comment on the blood-thirsty structure of late capitalism as a whole. Even though these metaphors are partly born out of Mark Spitz’s love of horror movies, these movies and their narratives are not a function of *just* his psychology, but are instead a part of the ambient culture that is produced during this moment in history.

I pursue the subtle nuances of these distinctions not only because they inform how we understand what the novel is doing at the level of language (which is one of the defining features of *Zone One*) but also because it can be expanded out to how we understand the relationship between realism and genre in the novel. As I have argued, Whitehead’s novel is interested in sketching out forms of human social organization through these rather elaborate metaphors, while at the same time actualizing these metaphors within the novel itself. All of this is to say that mimetic, believable realism and genre tropes live side-by-side in the novel to do the same work. What is most important, at this stage, is that these seemingly opposing conventions are

intimately related in how the novel is constructed. The only thing that is not “believable” about *Zone One* is that it is about zombies, but these zombies are no doubt a fact of the novel. Of course, my discussion of *Zone One* has, to this point, only focused on how the novel imagines its past and present. The narrator, partially through Mark Spitz, has imposed kinds of order and form onto the narrative through metaphor and deliberate structural moves that mean we encounter this novel about ostensible societal collapse as always already formed, shaped, and (re)constituted. Given the subject, we are also invited to see the very contingency of these methods of construction and formation, as we encounter them in a text that imagines their very collapse. At a meta-level, we the reader are asked to consider certain things (late capitalism, a society-annihilating pandemic) through the specific form of the zombie story, though it also interested in complicating our relationship with the zombie story as such to foreground its thematic concerns. What is of primary concern, however, as the novel proceeds is how the text imagines a truly reconstituted, *post-apocalyptic* future.

Both Leif Sorensen and Grace Heneks read the novel with specific attention to the way Whitehead plays with the implications of being “post” something; Sorensen attends to the *post-apocalyptic* dimensions of *Zone One* while Heneks works through the novel’s engagement with the notion of a *post-racial* society after the election of Barack Obama in 2008. For Sorensen, *Zone One* comes to be about the anxieties of “explor[ing] the unthinkable possibility of a crisis so severe that it might not have a future at all” to ultimately reveal that to be “post” something is to be in a state of “transition” as opposed to finality while also contending with the idea that “sometimes the end does come” (590). Heneks argues that Whitehead’s multilayered zombie narrative “combines elements of postmodernism, genre fiction, and speculative fiction to explore race in the twenty-first century (61). She reads the novel as being specifically engaged with the

incredibly optimistic politics of the Barack Obama campaign in 2008, and it is this optimism that in part leads her to the insidious idea of post-racial politics.¹ These two readings are both invested in the novel's vision of "post"-something imaginings as being deeply complicated. They also, rather crucially, both point to the competing visions of reconstructed society in the novel as being especially important to this discussion. Both critics contrast Mark Spitz's ambivalence about the possibility of national rebirth with the grandiose optimism of the American Phoenix project. These examinations both pay special attention to the final section of Whitehead's novel, and with that, I want to move to this rather chilling section to understand what can be said in light of Sorensen, Heneks, and most especially Kornbluh.

The "Sunday" section of *Zone One* begins with a passage that we could easily imagine Kornbluh herself reading if *The Order of Forms* included a chapter on contemporary American fiction. Whitehead begins the final section of the novel, which sees the failure of the American Phoenix project as it exists in New York via a breach of a major wall keeping the zombies at bay.

The narrator says:

When the wall fell, it fell quickly, as if it had been waiting for this moment, as if it had been created for the very instant of its failure. Barricades collapsed with haste once exposed for the riddled and rotten things they had always been. Beneath the facade of stability they were as ethereal as the society that created them. All the feverish subroutines of his survival programs booted up, for the first time in so long, and he located the flaw the instant before it expressed itself: there" (221).

Without exaggeration, I argue that this may be perhaps the most important stretch of writing in Whitehead's novel. The elaborately folded prose the novel deploys throughout is here allowed to fully pay off; in a wonderfully dialectical turn, the narrative reminds us

¹ Heneks draws her definition of post-racial politics from the work of Catherine Squires, which includes the crucial idea that post-racialism entails both a desire to get past the idea of race as a meaningful category, but also "a desire to be healed of racism and all it entails" (64).

here that the moments of creation located in the past are inevitably tied with future moments of destruction. This is, I argue, what Whitehead appears to get at with the constant parallelism between the novel's late capitalist past and post-apocalyptic present. Once more, this entropic process is inevitable because that is all these structures have "always been": destructible and contingent. I say that Kornbluh would no doubt attend to this moment because this is *precisely* the concern that animates *The Order of Forms*. The "wall" separating the humans from the zombies, along with the reconstituted society that built it, is not permanent and imminently fallible. These structures, both physical and social, are "as ethereal as the societ[ies] that created them" and there is no master narrative or code that can supersede these structures or lend them metaphysical legitimacy.

This cracked, imperfect wall is an incredibly simple, but powerful representation of the novel's concerns with reconstructing the world, as it is a very basic representation of societal structure that is nonetheless always susceptible to decay and degradation. If we follow Kornbluh, this passage takes on an added layer of significance and complication. Given the context of this passage, we see that these structures, though incredibly weak, are also incredibly vital. Kornbluh reminds us that "humans cannot exist without forms that scaffold sociability, even though the particular forms that human sociability takes are not fixed", and it is this dichotomous relationship that is at play during the start of *Zone One's* final section (5). Whitehead's investigation of the evanescence of the social structures and society itself finds its expression here in a wall that is keeping out a hoard of flesh-devouring zombies. As such, the beginning of the end of the novel makes us confront the idea that even though these structures all contain a

“flaw,” they are also all we have. Again, it is this failing wall that sets the limits and dimensions of Zone One, and its failure to hold is representative of the inevitable failing of social structures more broadly.

The need to look towards flawed yet necessary social structures becomes all the more relevant as the novel concludes. After the wall is breached, one of Mark Spitz’s Zone One cleaning companions, Gary, is bitten by a zombie and slowly turned non-human. Mark Spitz then runs towards the breached wall and realizes that there is a “sea of the dead” approaching the now unprotected Zone One (259). He realizes that his chances of survival are practically non-existent, but opts to try to “move on to the next human settlement” and to keep doing so until he cannot survive (257). In his moment of terror at facing down the hoard of zombies, Mark Spitz comes to accept, in an that echoes of the beginning of the “Sunday” section, that “[t]he world [isn’t] ending: it had ended and now they were in the new place”; and it is with this in mind that he thinks “[f]uck it” and advances forward (257-8, 259). We never learn Mark Spitz’s fate after this moment, and it is with this refusal of narrative closure that the novel ends. It is rather appropriate, then, that both Zone One and *Zone One* end because of the collapse of this barrier. Once this structure has been breached, the novel must end.

Sorensen and Heneks both read this moment as an instance of resignation and failure. Heneks explicitly categorizes Mark Spitz’s decision to face down the zombies as an act of “suicide by zombie hoard” brought about by the irresolvable contradictions of racism in American life that are still present even after an apocalyptic event (75). Likewise, Sorensen understands the ending as being designed to get us to “question the deferral at the heart of futurism,” as it carries with it the implication that Mark Spitz--and

the rest of humanity--may have finally reached the end of the line (590). These readings thus frame the whole novel as one that interrogates the limits of imaginative ruptures of the contemporary order, as they both conclude that the novel's dower and ambiguous finale is one that cancels the possibility of a future for Mark Spitz and the rest of American Phoenix without imagining a possible alternative. The ending of *Zone One* is no doubt startling in its ambiguity and refusal of narrative closure.²I understand the ambivalence with which Heneks and Sorensen read the ending of the novel, and the textual ambiguity assuredly allows for this takeaway. These readings imply that the novel's ending is either a critique of the imagining of possible futures or a warning about the likelihood of such an endeavor. While I agree that *Zone One* is no doubt skeptical about what a possible future might entail, I want to propose an alternative to these markedly pessimistic readings of the text to think about how we might say something slightly more affirming.

Of the major studies of *Zone One*, Heather Hicks articulates one of the few optimistic readings of the novel's conclusion. Hicks reads *Zone One* in as being concerned--like all zombie fiction--with the possibility that "the reconstruction of modernity" may no longer be possible (Hicks 135). While Hicks, like Sorensen, notes that the first two sections suggest that a reconstructed society will likely mirror that of which came before, the novel's conclusion complicates this understanding; however, despite the more nihilistic readings one could draw from this ending, Hicks leaves open the possibility that things could be different for Mark Spitz and humanity as a whole. She locates this potential in the novel's preoccupation with kitsch, which is implied not just in

² It is also worth briefly saying that this section is all the more shocking becomes it comes after one of the few sustained sections of zombie-novel style action and violence.

the content of the text, but also in the epigraph from Walter Benjamin. Turning to this final moment, Hicks sees Mark Spitz as being “in his element” amongst the zombie hoard besieging him in the final pages, and that his embrace of potential death (or worse?) at the hands of the zombies as being representative of “the excitement of the sublime” (133, 134). Additionally, Hick calls our attention to the character of the Quiet Storm, whose quasi-avant garde’ artwork made from hollowed out cars on the highway “suggests some more revolutionary or utopian vision might be possible” by repurposing and rebuilding the detritus and debris of late capitalism and modernity into something entirely new (135).

The emphasis Hicks places on *building* in her account of the novel’s conclusion is incredibly relevant to how I am hoping to understand the text. The implication of this reading, and the novel as a whole, is precisely centered on this Kornbluhian centering of the necessity and importance of building to how we understand human social relations, and I argue that it one can productively put them in conversation to understand the novel’s ending. Though it is bleak, the narrator at the ending of the novel frequently calls our attention to the “human settlement[s]” that might await Mark Spitz should he survive, and this move allows us to consider different, alternative forms of organization outside Zone One (258). There is always a “next thing” awaiting humanity after the end of the world, because the end of the world does not signal the end of humanity as such, but instead merely the forms and structures that humans have created (258). Even if Mark Spitz does not survive, there is nothing in the text that forecloses the possibility of other forms of human sociability persisting after the fall of Zone One; actually, it is quite the opposite. The point, as Mark Spitz thinks as he awaits the not-so-quiet storm of zombies

awaiting him, is that these forms and structures are always crumbling, and it is the drive of humanity itself to always “[l]et the cracks between things widen until they are no longer cracks but the places for new things” (Whitehead 257). What *Zone One* allows us to see is that even when it appears like the world has ended (because maybe it actually *has*), and our protagonist does not survive his foray into a slew of oncoming zombies (because maybe he doesn’t) this ostensible ending is always an opportunity to imagine and rebuild a new future through the shattered pieces of what came before it.

There is still a lingering question about the relationship between realism and genre fiction in Whitehead’s novel. I began this chapter by questioning whether *Zone One* is a “bad” genre novel, because it so frequently and consistently denies the thrills of zombie fiction; we do not even get an especially well-defined, heroic protagonist to root for throughout the narrative. Whitehead’s novel is much more interested in performing and depicting the rather boring, uneventful work that goes into building and rebuilding a world than it is giving the reader a blood-soaked chronicle of zombie fighting. Having said that, the novel’s invested in the work of literary realism (which is, per Kornbluh, the work of building and imagining possible futures and structures) cannot be extricated from its deployment of genre tropes. It is both literary fiction and genre fiction, to the detriment of one, the other, or both.

Thus, Whitehead is writing a novel that both asks us to imagine the end of the world and what comes next while also asking us to look towards our present to see the seeds of apocalypse in the contemporary moment of late capitalism, and the tensions between what is plausible and not in the novel are then entirely the point. The novel depicts the (failed) attempts to rebuild a world in light of a collapse, and it does so by

imagining a society that tries to use the remnants of the past to build the future. Of course, *Zone One* performs this move on a meta-level. Whitehead constructs a novel that uses the shell of the zombie story with all its attendant tropes and anxieties to perform the work previously reserved for the realist novel. Appropriately, he uses zombie tropes and styles to build a new kind of novel that can address contemporary concerns. While it may be an oversimplification to draw a comparison between *Zone One* and the artworks created by The Quiet Storm, there does seem to be a shared impulse to salvage the parts of old, outdated forms—realism and the zombie novel—to arrange them into something new and durable

Whitehead allows realist and genre elements to come together in such a way that they work together to ask the same kinds of questions and make the same kinds of comments about what is possible and impossible about imagining a possible future in the contemporary moment. In looking to the present using metaphor and the future using an almost documentary style approach that depicts both a non-mimetic zombie apocalypse and the work of building a new world after a crisis, Whitehead is asking us to look at the ingredients for a global crisis that we encounter every day. In doing so, he also asks us to see this as a condition that is entirely continuous with and necessary for what will come next—even if it is simultaneously familiar and unimaginable.

Chapter 3: “To Evade a History That Seemed Dark Whichever Way He Turned...”: Genre, History, and the Future in Thomas Pynchon’s *Inherent Vice*

The relationship between Thomas Pynchon’s 2009 novel, *Inherent Vice*, genre, and realism is at once obvious and subversively complicated. Deemed a “slightly spoofy take on hardboiled crime fiction” by Louis Menand, the novel is quite literally a detective novel, a point that is worth emphasizing given Pynchon’s literary style. Eric Sandberg catalogs Pynchon’s frequent deployment of the detective mold throughout his oeuvre, as most of his novels are “structured around attempts to solve mysteries” (125). Though his more canonized *The Crying of Lot 49* definitely engages with the tropes of the detective novel (it is, after all, a novel about a single person on a quest for knowledge that is instigated in the initial few pages), *Inherent Vice* is Pynchon’s first novel to feature a detective at its center. Unlike many other Pynchon novels, where the narrative literally and figuratively disperses across several characters, points-of-view, locations, and decades, *Inherent Vice* is firmly, rigidly locked-onto the private investigator Larry “Doc” Sportello and his venture in 1970 to uncover the whereabouts of Mickey Wolfmann, the boyfriend of his long-lost ex-girlfriend, Shasta Fey. What reviews like Menand’s call attention to is that *Inherent Vice* is shamelessly and obviously a detective novel, in the same way that *Zone One* is shamelessly a zombie novel. Since this is Pynchon, the detective elements are not presented entirely without irony; Doc is perennially high, and the novel gets a good deal of mileage out of contrasting the epistemic certainty promised by a detective novel and the decidedly nonsensical notion of a counter-cultural private investigator.

David Cowart argues that the novel’s unabashed embrace of detective tropes represents an “attenuation” of the kinds of quest narratives that drive all of Pynchon’s novels (123). Moreover, Cowart suggests that Pynchon’s deployment of genre form in *Inherent Vice* is

partially ironic, claiming that Pynchon “deliberately blurs the boundary between genre fiction and the art novel, both subject already to ironic postmodern manipulation” (124). This marks a point of departure between Pynchon’s novel and Whitehead’s, as I have argued that Whitehead does not create an outright pastiche of the zombie novel in *Zone One*, but instead rewrites it in a markedly realist form. With all that said, Pynchon still presents these elements with a relative degree of mimetic viability; we can imagine a shaggy-haired detective traipsing around southern California in the 1970 talking to a vast array of eccentrics and reactionaries. The fact that this is to date the only novel of Pynchon’s to be adapted into a film is, perhaps, evidence to its emphasis on believability and character. It also, I would argue, foregrounds its relationship to genre, as the film can be, and often is, read as being in league with other detective pastiches. Though Whitehead is less interested in “sending up” the zombie novel, it is this comparative emphasis on realism that joins the two. As with *Zone One*, it’s not just that Pynchon deploys (and possibly mocks) certain genre tropes, it’s that he does so with an oscillating degree of fidelity to the “real” world.

The emphasis on the “real” world is where I want to begin thinking about the relationship between genre and realism in *Inherent Vice*. Though I have thus far spoken about *Inherent Vice* as a detective novel, which it is, both at the level of literary form and marketing, it is also rather clearly a historical novel, in that it is attempting to trace a continuity between its diegetic setting and the time of its creation. Set, as I have said, in 1970, Pynchon’s novel details the waning days of the counter-cultural movement in light of an increasingly militarized police force and Post-Manson suspicion. The novel takes place at the end of the “prerevolution” of the late 1960s and actively questions whether such a thing was ever possible or if it was “doomed” from its very moment of inception (130). Bill Millard highlights the importance of the novel’s 1970 setting by

contrasting it with the novel's epigraph, which is a reference to the 1968 Paris student revolutions. Millard writes that "*Inherent Vice* is set not in 1968 but in the spring of 1970, after Altamont, after the Manson Family killings", and the novel's distinct invocation of occurring *after* a real moment of potential historical change is key (66). Pynchon indexes everything from obscure pop songs to playoff basketball games and steeps the text in period details that create a faithfully rendered portrait of 1970. Having said this, Pynchon sets the novel in the fictional Gordita Beach, a location that stands in for a variety of Southern California beach towns.

The novel's fetishistic historical fidelity and Pynchon's subsequent departure from it is notable in how we think about the way the novel allows genre and realism to intersect. Nick Levey reads the novel in relation to the encyclopedic potential of the internet, and as such, attends to Pynchon's reliance on actual history. He argues that these historical details can be both beneficial, as they "teac[h] us things we might not have otherwise known" and distracting in their constant assertion of authorial mastery (44). Likewise, Cowart reads all of Pynchon's novels as ultimately being about history, with *Inherent Vice* specifically being of a piece with *The Crying of Lot 49* and *Vineland* in its evocation of California as both the "terminus" of the mythic American frontier and the most pronounced representation of the country's "failure" to imagine and create a better world (134). Thus, what I want to call attention to is not that *Inherent Vice* is also a novel about history, as doing so is redundant and obvious. Instead, I want to highlight how the abundance of historical detail in the novel—something that is admittedly present in all of Pynchon's work—grounds the novel's genre tropes in an identifiable world. In Kornbluh's terms, Pynchon sets historical detail and fictional against one another to reveal the process of formation in the novel itself.

Formally, the novel is primarily invested in thinking through the intersection of realism (through a self-consciously nostalgic sense of history and questioning of the contingency of certain social forms) and genre. The central “mystery” of *Inherent Vice* concerns the apparent disappearance of Mickey Wolfmann, a fictional California land developer. As Doc works his way through 1970s California, he discovers that Wolfmann’s disappearance is related to a drug-induced change of heart. After a particularly potent experience with LSD, Wolfmann pledged to build a commune “someplace out in the desert” humorously called Arrepentimiento, which is roughly translates to “sorry about that” (248). Evidently, Wolfmann’s desire to build the commune is based in a need to atone for his position as a wealthy land developer whose entire income is based on owning and charging for land. Arrepentimiento stands in direct contrast to other Wolfmann owned and developed properties in the novel. For instance, early in the novel, Doc drives past a series of signs for Channel View Estates, a new development marketed as “Mickey Wolfmann Concept” (19). While driving, Doc sees a group of apparently dispossessed Black pedestrians and wonders if they are “also looking for the old neighborhood, for rooms lived in day after day, solid as the axes of space, now taken away into commotion and ruin” (19). Channel View is later described by Doc’s main antagonist (and foil) Christian F. “Bigfoot” Bjornsen as “a future homesite where elements of some wholesome family will soon be gathering night after night,” and is thus a space that definitionally excludes certain classes (namely “hippie scum” like Doc and other marginalized groups) and serves as a haven for the those who can afford it. (22).

I call attention to these two ideas for property because they are central to the novel. Wolfmann’s disappearance is predicated on his change of heart about his wealth and how it is used in the world. They also provide insight into how the novel is thinking about competing

versions of both the past and what is possible in the future. In one sense, we get a fairly obvious vision of a wealthy California land developer using said wealth to build new properties at the expense of marginalized communities. Millard reads Channel View Estates serves as an important cite in the novel regarding how we think about how the novel is looking towards the futures. Describing the scene I discuss above, he writes that “Channel View Estates is a construction site and does not yet exist as a set of residences; it has no history” (Millard 69). He also ties this into the real suburbanization of the Southern California in the late 1960’s and early 1970’s. Channel View is both a site of future building, but one whose actual future is not yet written. Likewise, its contrast with Wolfmann’s other, deeply benevolent real estate venture, which Millard suggests is directly “antithetical” to the values implicit in real estate speculation, suggests that it is one of several possible developments (Millard 78). The central imaginative act of *Inherent Vice*, then, is to think through this contrast and ask us what might happen if such a figure were to abandon the values of capital in favor of a more equitable distribution of wealth, resources, and property. Why might something like this happen, and what would it mean? As the novel unfolds, the question for Pynchon becomes less about how such a thing would happen, and more about what might *stop* such a thing from occurring.

As I have already argued, Whitehead’s *Zone One* offers its own pessimistic vision of imagining future possible futures in the contemporary moment. Similarly, *Inherent Vice* is interested in articulating the difficulty of imagining possibilities beyond late stage capitalism. As we move through the novel, we learn of the existence of “The Golden Fang,” which is Pynchon’s chosen organizing abstraction, somewhat akin to the more benevolent Tristero in *The Crying of Lot 49*, and its centrality to Wolfmann’s disappearance. We first hear of the Golden Fang when Doc is handed a mysterious note from Jade, an escort working at a pop-up club at the

Channel View Estates construction site, telling him to “Beware the Golden Fang” (Pynchon 77). Jade later tells Doc that his investigation into Wolfmann’s disappearance is occurring in “Golden Fang territory,” a phrase which implies a kind of land ownership or control comparable to that of Wolfmann himself (Pynchon 84). Rather quickly, Doc learns that the Golden Fang is the name of a boat that “[b]rings stuff in and out of the country” and that “nobody wants to talk about what exactly” (Pynchon 87).

These initial murmurings about the Golden Fang disclose that Pynchon is doing something quite complicated. This shadowy group, which quickly becomes the central mystery around which the novel’s noir plot organizes itself, is at once an abstract organization, implied by Jade’s warning about conducting an investigation in territory they control, and a physical vessel. When Doc sees the boat, he learns that it typically sails out of the famously mysterious Bermuda Triangle (Pynchon 90). The narrative also carefully details Doc’s thoughts upon seeing the ship itself:

Doc regarded the elegantly swept yet somehow—what would you call it, *inhuman* lines of the *Golden Fang*, everything about her gleaming a little too purposefully, more antennas and radomes than any boat could possibly use, not a national origin in sight, weather decks of teak or maybe mahogany, not likely intended for relaxing out on with a fishing line or can of beer (90).

Doc’s thoughts about the physical structure of the *Golden Fang* reveal how the ship is both an actual boat and an abstraction. The “inhuman lines” and mysterious origins suggest something beyond the purely material boat that sits in front of him. They also ask us to imagine that this boat represents something that exists almost *outside* the bounds of purely expressed human autonomy. Doc’s description also implies a clear intention and purpose for the ship, and his cataloging of the “antennas” and “radomes” situates the ship as being a specifically high-tech, futuristic vehicle. Thus, the *Golden Fang* boat is able to stand in as an ambiguous physical

representation of some larger entity that, due to its marked technological superiority, gestures towards the future.

Thinking about the *Golden Fang* both in its 1970 context and for the future Pynchon is looking towards and writing from, the complicated relationship between the vessel itself and what it represents might be thought through in terms of the continued abstracting of the global economy. Starting in the late 1950s, the advent of global shipping and containerization “create[d] a way in which cargo could be shifted seamlessly from trucks to ships to trains, without loss or delay” (Levinson). As Marc Levinson highlights, this shift meant that “[m]anufacturers and consumers half a world away would be drawn together” in a highly organized process of product creation and distribution. In bringing together and further mechanizing the global economy, the relationships that actually allow that economy to function become all the more abstract. Thus the *Golden Fang*, which stands as both a literal shipping container and an abstraction, represents both the material reordering of the economy and the resulting dissolution.

We get an even better sense of this as the novel progresses. As the mystery continues to unfold, Doc realizes what is already quite obvious, namely that the *Golden Fang* is not merely a boat, but one whose history is “an exercise in mystification” (91). We learn that the ship starts its life under the moniker *Preserved* and was used “on some spy mission against Fidel Castro” (95). Most importantly, however, is the revelation that the ship was used to traffic drugs for the United States government and has ties to both Mickey Wolfmann and Shasta Fay (95). That Doc gets this information from his proto-computer wonk friend, Fritz, and his access to the digitized files through the Hoover library is crucial and will come to bear on how I want to discuss further my discussion of the novel; however, the complicated and reactionary history of the vessel is

incredibly important. Though I have yet to fully elaborate this point, Pynchon establishes the Golden Fang to both be an abstraction and a physical entity. Adding to this, then, is the idea that the ship is not just a ship, but it is a ship whose very history *as a ship* is also quite metaphysical. The ship's name has changed throughout history, making a rather unstable physical representation of the larger abstraction. Its history, though more clearly understood, points to a string of politically conservative, staunchly anti-communist undertakings. Thus, we can already begin to see its connection and opposition to Mickey Wolfmann's disappearance and the dissolution of his acid-tinged possible future.

As is expected from the novel's self-conscious invocation of detective and noir genre tropes, the more Doc investigates, the more complicated the "mystery" of the Golden Fang becomes. In his adventures across Southern California (and a humorous aside in Las Vegas) Doc learns that the Golden Fang is, in addition to being a boat, is everything from, in Millard's words, a "a building, a tax scheme, and a kind of mafia" while also being a wholly abstract "psychic archetype" that acts as a unifying center for all the countersubversive forces the novel illustrates (79). Crucially here, these various manifestations of the Golden Fang are alternatively *physical* bodies (a boat, a dentists' office) and abstractions (a money laundering operation, a general paranoid vibe). What they all have in common, however, is that they are all tied to the disappearance of Wolfmann himself. During the novel's final confrontation, Doc talks with Crocker Fenway, a former client and representative of the Golden Fang. Fenway reveals, in some many words, the Fang's involvement while also highlighting their motivations for kidnapping Wolfmann. Surprisingly, it is Mickey's involvement in both Arrepentimiento and Channel View that caused him to be briefly kidnapped. When Fenway gives Doc a nonsensical answer about

their opposition to the Channel View, Doc responds by challenging him, claiming that it is all about “property values” (347). Fenway menacingly tells Doc:

It’s about *being in place*. We...we’re in place. We’ve been in place forever. Look around. Real estate, water rights, oil, cheap labor, all that’s ours, it’s always been ours. And you, at the end of the day what are you? one more unit in this swarm of transients who come and go without pause here in the Southland...We will never run out of you people. The supply is inexhaustible (347).

Here we get a full sense of what Millard means when he calls the Golden Fang a “psychic archetype” (Millard 79). They are a classically Pynchonian organization whose hold on the world and all its facets is so broad that they always “in place.” Even an ostensibly nonthreatening operation like Channel View is cause for concern—and violence. They are both archetype and architecture, as they control the very limits through which the world is imagined and built.

One could say that Pynchon’s characterization of the Golden Fang in these moments overly mystifies power and power relations, and doing so rips them out of a clear sense of history and makes capitalism appear more metaphysical than material. Pynchon imagines the Golden Fang as an organization that has seemingly always existed throughout history, and such a move perhaps abstracts the Golden Fang away from specific power relations and instead renders power as an ahistorical phenomenon that is not tied to specific modes of production. Such a charge flies in the kind of Marxism that serves as the foundation for my arguments. While this is a valid concern, I argue that Kornbluh’s slightly unorthodox Marxism allows us to see what is at work in the novel. Coming to the novel with an emphasis on the imaginative act of fiction writing allows us to see that the Golden Fang is rather self-aware manifestation of how difficult it is to actually concretize and imagine power in this way. Much of my discussion has focused on how difficult it is to actually pin down what the Golden Fang *is*, and this is doubtlessly intentional. They are anything and everything, everywhere and somewhere. That we get a personalized representation

of the Golden Fang in the form of Fenway is rare for Pynchon³, yet it also speaks again to how difficult it is to actually imagine power. Having said that, emphasizing imagination also allows us to understand that that is actually what is at stake. The Golden Fang serves not just as a hindrance to certain real estate developments, but also to the ability to think towards anything new.

We learn about the Golden Fang through the novel's genre architecture, since they are at the center of the mystery Doc is commissioned to solve in the initial pages. Beyond thinking about issues of imagination and futurity *through* genre, the novel also thinks about these concerns in direct relation *to* genre. As I outlined, Doc begins to learn about the Golden Fang through his acquaintance, Fritz and his very primitive access to computer archives and the developing, pre-Internet structure of the ARPANET. Towards the end of the novel, Doc tells Fritz that he better start learning about computers and the internet, or he will "be obsolete" (365). Fritz reassures Doc that computers are not at a "capacity" quite yet to fully outpace a private investigator like Doc, but of course, the reader knows that these developments will no doubt come to pass (365). Returning to Levey, we can see that Pynchon pits the differing kinds of "knowledge work" done by Doc (and the genre he embodies) against that of a computer (Levey 54). The ramshackle epistemology of the single private investigator is contrasted with and threatened by that of the burgeoning super computer. Of course, the internet also represent another physical and abstract entity in the novel. It is the product of actual, material computers, while also forging connections that are almost entirely non-physical. Like the Golden Fang, the internet is something that is shown to tie everything together for Doc, and it is the very instrument that enables the act itself. Considering the novel's instance on looking ahead as it

³ If we think back, again, to *The Crying of Lot 49*, the narrative famously defers the moment of confrontation between Oedipa and any representative of the Tristero.

closes (again, Doc's remarks come right as the novel is concluding), what we see is that, like with the Golden Fang, the ways that knowledge is coordinated and arranged is going to fundamentally change because of an entity that given is almost impossible to entirely pin down.

This is, perhaps, why Pynchon chooses—for the first time—to give us an *actual* detective as his protagonist. The closest analog to Doc in Pynchon's oeuvre, Oedipa Maas from *The Crying of Lot 49*, is equally defined by her quest for knowledge, but she is not explicitly a detective. If anything, *Lot 49* gets a great deal of mileage out of playing on the ironies of a conservative Southern California housewife turning into a paranoid knowledge-seeker. In *Inherent Vice*, Pynchon makes his protagonist a professional private investigator, so while Doc's quest may be very similar to Oedipa's, it is one of professional obligation. As such, the epistemological questions Pynchon raises become in *Inherent Vice* a crisis of employment and genre stability. Centering an actual detective in this narrative, then, asks us to consider the specific epistemic and imaginative problems raised by the development of the internet as a force that guides human relationships and understanding. On that note, it is worth noting that the other Pynchon novel that explicitly deals with the internet as we currently know it, *Bleeding Edge*, also features a professional knowledge, fraud investigator Maxine Turnow, as its protagonist. For Pynchon, it seems apt to conclude that though they may be imperfect, there is something about these professional individual agents that can stand up to and oppose the impersonal ones and zeroes of the World Wide Web.

The consolation that Pynchon offers us in *Inherent Vice* is, rather appropriately, all about how we imagine alternatives to the world the novel points towards as it ends. During a conversation with his lawyer, Sauncho, Doc questions how much good they did throughout the novel. Sauncho replies by rhetorically asking “Yeah, but suppose we hadn't come out. There'd

be only the government story then...”(359). Sauncho’s remark highlights the importance of these alternative kinds of knowledge, predicated on imagining and thinking through power and possibility, as the only available site of resistance to the totalizing forces posited by the novel. The very last scene of the novel sees Doc driving alone towards an ambiguous fog, waiting “[f]or the fog to burn away, and for something else this time, somehow, to be there instead” (Pynchon 369). This ending asks us to question both the fog and what can be there instead. Levey reads this moment, in concert with the previous contrast between Doc and the computer, as a valorization of an all too human sense of intellectual “insufficiency” that contrasts with a system that “has no use for souls” (Levey 55, Pynchon 359). Levey beautifully writes that “fog doesn’t allow for demarcations, separations, activities allowed for by knowledge”, and Doc’s embrace of the fog is an embrace of a wonderfully uncertain future that, due to its uncertainty, allows him to “help others along the way” (54).

While I think Levey is correct in a lot of his thinking about the novel’s ending, I would argue that the novel’s ending is also about the hopes for imagining the future. The entire novel is interested in sketching out the developing and consorting forces that limit might limit our ability to imagine possible features. Despite this, the novel ends with Doc thinking and hoping that if he drives long enough and far enough, the future might offer him something “instead” of the feature that appears all but certain (369). Pynchon creates a world where the *only* way we appear to be able to imagine and think about the future is through a stoned detective, with the implication, then, that it is partially through this genre form that we are able to both access the world and think towards something new. Sauncho’s reply to Doc takes on profound significance, as the (genre) novel Pynchon is writing gets to push us towards thinking through alternatives, even if it is also invested in highlighting all that stands in our way.

Chapter 4: Mermaids and Murder: Genre as Crisis and Change in Lydia Millet's *Mermaids in Paradise*

Lydia Millet's *Mermaids in Paradise* has the most complicated relationship to genre of the three novel discussed in this thesis. Unlike *Zone One* and *Inherent Vice*, both of which wholly integrate genre elements into their worlds, *Mermaids in Paradise* operates by using genre as an exogenous force on an otherwise plainly realist text. Though we get flashbacks to a pre-zombie world in *Zone One*, we never encounter Whitehead's diagesis devoid of genre content. The same can be said of *Inherent Vice*, as the novel is focused solely on a private investigator, and the central mystery is set up in the first few pages. In stark contrast, *Mermaids in Paradise* begins with a lengthy section depicting the novel's narrator, Deb, and her fiancé, Chip, planning and attending their own wedding and honeymoon. It is not until the novel is well underway that the twin genre elements, the supernatural discovery of mermaids and an ensuing murder mystery, are introduced.

Having said this, almost all the critical attention for *Mermaids in Paradise* is interested in the bizarre intrusion of genre on Millet's Delillo-esque social satire. Writing a review for *Entertainment Weekly*, Melissa Maerz highlights the "absurd" premise and Millet's satire regarding "the human need to classify everything" (Maerz). Likewise, Nicole Williams notes that the novel contains "fantastic elements" serve to satirize the attitudes of her characters, most of whom are out-of-touch to varying degrees (Williams). Perhaps the most succinct summation of this tendency in the novel comes from Rene Steinke's review in *The New York Times*, wherein she says that Millet "make[s] mermaids the center of a grown up story" (Steinke). As Steinke goes on to say, Millet novels tends to intersperse "wonderfully strange" into "the very fabric of the mundane" to inform our engagement with the world (Steinke). These comments suggest an

awareness of the relationship between the genre elements, denoted by notions of the fantastical and absurd, and the novel's otherwise realist satire. Steinke's remarks get the closest to where I would like to begin, namely with how the novel posits the supernatural as a disrupting force definitionally changes that which follows.

Even before the novel properly begins, Millet's organization of the four sections speaks to the way genre acts as a disruptive force that necessitates change. The novel is organized into four sections: 'Newlyweds,' 'Honeymoon,' 'Murder Mystery,' and 'Glorious Revolution.' (Millet). As with Whitehead, the novel's organizational structure can tell us a great deal about its deployment of form in relation to genre and realism. The first section, 'Newlyweds' is the part of the novel most devoted to a realist social satire. Genre elements are then introduced in the following section, 'Honeymoon,' which also naturally follows on from a section titled 'Newlyweds.' Then, the novel's third section, 'Murder Mystery,' wholly gives itself to another genre category, as Deb and company investigate the ostensible murder of marine biologist, Nancy. Though its title is no doubt satiric, the final section, 'The Glorious Revolution' implies the brought about the (generic) action of the novel. The novel's formal structure is thus highly reactive, as it charts a progression and change put into motion by introduction of genre content into the quotidian world.

As Steinke's review points out, the novel is deeply invested in working through the relationship between the fantastical and the mundane. Though I have posited that the fantastical, when actually introduced, is a disruptive agent in the novel, it also provides a sense of structure and retreat for the Millet's characters. As Deb recounts the moments before her honeymoon, she considers the way fantasy interacts with reality for her and her husband. For her new husband, Chip, he holds a "nostalgia for a fake medieval wonderland of magical beings" informed by an

already well cataloged love of fiction and role-playing games (56). Chip mentally retreats to these fantasy worlds when faced with the tacky remnants of modernity, embodied in this scene by the “cattle-car” like the aircraft they are taking to their honeymoon (56)⁴ Deb contrasts this with her own memories of air travel as a child, which she notes are grounded in “what many would call reality,” but still concludes that Chip’s distaste for air travel, which is grounded in fantasy, has a profound resonance (56). Obviously, Deb’s sardonic phrase “what many would call reality” foreshadows the highly improbable and unrealistic discovery of mermaids awaiting her and her husband on their honeymoon, but it also sets up a dichotomy between notions of the real and unreal. That Deb goes on to say that these ideas of the world, be they “invented or cut from whole cloth,” are portals to “[another] world of wonder and possibility” indicates that these imaginative feats are a way of remaking or rethinking the world around her (56). These complicated notions of reality are also both deeply nostalgic, as for both Deb and Chip, a truly idyllic, happy place is located in the past, be it medieval or modern. The distinctly backwards looking approach to the world will become important as the novel progresses.

Upon arriving to their resort, Deb and Chip encounter another highly imaginative version of “paradise”: the resort hotel. Deb immediately begins to grapple with the guilt associated with patronizing a resort hotel that functions on several layers of exploitation. She sees the ritualistic overindulgence inherent to the hotel resort as being akin to that of the “kings and queens” of previous centuries, and also ponders the ways that wealth distribution in America has complicated notions of decadence and indulgence (61). Eventually, she considers the following:

⁴ We might even say that Chip’s oft-remarked upon infatuation with the Midwest and Midwesterners, another example of Millet’s subtle satire, is partially a product of this nostalgic impulse. He sees Middle Americans as an impossibly “resolute” type of person due to their choice to live in “that vast featureless space, that oddly irrelevant no man’s land” (3). Chip’s posture towards Middle Americans, who he rather obviously infantilizes, also betrays his nostalgic, pastoral idea of a “perfect” world, as he admires Middle Americans precisely because they live in what is for Chip an oddly pre-modern, desolate landscape.

“I wanted to ask Chip if he thought the fact that the whole world doesn’t look like a resort was just a question of money–grinding property v.s. repugnantly excessive wealth. Was it just money, or was money not really the main problem? For instance, I often hear it said that people don’t starve because there’s not enough food in the world, they starve because the food’s not always in the right places. Is it the same way with beauty? Is there, in fact, plenty to go around?” (61)

Deb’s suggest what is no doubt quite obvious to the workers of the resort her and her husband are visiting, namely that the world under capitalism is not one of scarcity but enforced inequality. Her reverie shows an awareness of the way the world *actually* functions, while also underscoring the contingency of the way the world is organized. She recognizes that a crisis like global hunger, which can stand in for innumerable other issues like it, is an issue of organization of resources, not the resources themselves. While at this Caribbean resort, she recognizes that the resort as a location gives the lie to the myths that propagate capitalism and her understanding of how she, as a middle-class American, benefits from it. Millet punctuates this moment with characteristic irony by having Deb shuffle away from this would-be revelation and return her attention to thoroughly enjoying her honeymoon. The joke, it seems, is that, even as Millet’s decidedly middle-class protagonist gets close to an understanding of the world she and her husband inhabits, she brushes it off to return to drinking and honeymooning.

It is this precise dynamic, which is one grounded in a sharply satiric domestic realism, that the novel is interested in testing once the titular mermaids are introduced. Though Deb and Chip first chalk up the novel’s first mermaid sighting to Nancy being “delusional” (or under the influence of drugs), they, along with the novel’s other characters, begin to accept the reality of mermaids living and swimming in the reefs that surround their ostensibly Edenic resort hotel (84). Despite accepting the reality of the mermaids, Deb still acknowledges the highly fantastical, improbable nature of finding real living, breathing mermaids. When her and Chip

begin to search for the mermaids, she again reminds the reader that he “enjoys the land of make-believe,” and that this impacts his personality (91). Deb’s narration centers the unbelievability of finding mermaids, while still grounding them in the domestic realism that characterizes the novel’s initial pages. The fantastical generic elements, then, exist as an outside force that penetrate the carefully curated, highly ironic realism, and the novel becomes about examining this exact effect.

Formally, the novel invokes this with the inclusion of small “photographs” periodically throughout the narrative. In her review, Steinke highlights that these photos are actually illustrations, but that they “evoke blurry photographs,” and that the reader does not encounter them as ‘evidence’ of the supernatural elements, but instead as “small staged fictions themselves.” Steinke’s point here is well put, but I feel it is important to push back slightly on the idea that the pictures are not meant to function as evidence within the novel. While their composition often goes unremarked upon, there are instances where the action of the novel aligns with the presentation of the photograph to the reader as Deb reflects on or gestures towards the composition of the photo. During the novel’s climax, Deb references that she did not have her cellphone, but that Rick, a fellow resort patron, does. Immediately following this remark is a blurry photo of a sea creature being held up with barely visible fingers that frame the edges of the photo itself (271). Given the novel’s insistence on documenting all aspects of the goings-on at the resort, the inclusion of this picture, and others like, is meant to document the reality of the strange situation the novel depicts. We see this play out in the novel itself, as Deb remarks that, upon discovering the mermaids, an Australian tourist scrambles to use “his camera” to capture a picture of the mermaids (104). Of course, where Steinke is correct is in the

highly staged and artificial nature of the photo. The photographs that the reader sees are just illustrations, and the reality they represent is entirely fictitious.

The slippery relationship between reality and fiction as it relates to photograph is famously rather fraught. Walter Benjamin elaborates the ways that photography, with its use of a mechanical lense to capture an image, can create representations that “escape natural vision.” Additionally, for Benjamin, there is something wholly unnatural about the process of photography, as there is nothing original or unmediated about the photographic image. He writes that it “makes no sense” to worry about finding an original print of a photograph, because the photograph is wholly mechanical and one can never access an “authentic” original (224). Moving back to Kornbluh, the mediated nature of photography (and architecture and the novel form itself) “invite[s] reflection on social composition, lavishing their mediations beyond the bounds of immediate phenomenal experience” (6). The photograph, like social relations themselves, is a highly detailed representation of the world that nonetheless features within itself the call to consider the formal components inherent to its composition. For Millet in *Mermaids in Paradise*, the photographs serve as artificial evidence of the reality of the novel’s plot while also underscoring the process of its composition. That we see fingers holding the photographs—most likely Deb’s—further this idea, as we are made even more aware that what we are seeing is a representation of the world that is, within the novel’s diagesis, several steps removed, while also being entirely constructed in the first place.

Beyond speaking to the constructed nature of social relations, this emphasis on proof also gestures towards the way the novel is interested in using genre to introduce a crisis in the quotidian world of domestic realism to force new arrangements. Throughout the novel, Deb

makes references to the ways their discovery of mermaids has (justifiably) caused something of an epistemic paradigm shift for everyone at the resort. In recounting her thoughts, Deb says the following:

“What shocks me the most, in retrospect, is that in the next few days I would assimilate the mermaids handily. One moment, they were impossible, the next they were everyday, in my view of the world. Like moon landings or cell phones. They went from *of course not* to *of course*. By the second day I was not only not *disbelieving* in mermaids but thinking of them as a given. A quirk facet of natural history. Oh the *mermaids*, I would register casually when they were mentioned.” (105).

In this rather brief section, Millet seemingly encapsulates the majority of the novel’s chief concerns. In reflecting on the shock of discovering mermaids, Deb’s narration belies the way the seemingly impossible is quickly assimilated into the everyday. To Deb’s mind, the world historic discovery of mermaids will quickly become akin to the bygone novelty of space travel and smartphones, in that they will just be a part of the social fabric that we all take for granted. This section and the many others that echo a similar sentiment throughout the novel, suggest that the line between the possible and the impossible is quite porous.⁵ Though mermaids are thought to be impossible, they become real upon discovery, and once they are within the realm of the possible, they become a part of the daily world. More broadly, the novel indicates that these changes come both at the physical and idealistic level. Upon encountering the physical fact of mermaids, our ideas about the world change, and the world is thus reordered as a result. A change or disruption in the physical shows the entirely contextual nature of the idealistic and epistemic.

That Deb conflates the mermaids, which she notes are a part of “natural history” with technological developments like the cell phone or rocket, is crucial for how the rest of the novel

⁵ The confused syntax of this section helps make this point at the level of style. Phrases like “not only not *disbelieving*” underscores the messiness by mirroring the confusion in Deb’s sentence construction.

develops. After discovering the mermaids, corporate forces descend upon the resort to construct a “mermaid tourism company” that will be called *The Venture of Marvels* (155). Additionally, the other major generic element, the murder mystery, is introduced when Nancy is seemingly killed to claim possession of evidence of the mermaid’s existence. The novel’s supernatural element, the discovery of mermaids, triggers both another generic plot development and one based wholly in realism. Even more, the two are related, as Deb and the other resort goers assume that the multinational forces beyond the *Venture of Marvels* are also blamed for Nancy’s murder. Thus, I return to the relationship between the technical and the natural. These mermaids, who exist in the novel as part of the natural world, are immediately brought into the technological world of the resort theme park. As Pynchon articulates in *Inherent Vice*, highly organized corporate capital is positioned as the impediment to imagining a more habitable future for the mermaids. Chip even calls attention to this when he remarks that Nancy wanted to build a “national park” for the mermaids in the ocean that would ostensibly keep them safe and would be a space “set aside” for their preservation (160). These reactions to the discovery of the mermaids speak to two possibilities upon the discovery of something new: benevolent preservation or exploitative extraction.

What Millet’s novel understands is that even a method that prizes the preservation of the natural world is one that necessarily requires the thinking through new forms of organization. The novel immediately points this out, as Thompson, another resort goer and mermaid defender, says that a mermaid preservation park is a “political deal” that has “nothing to do with us” (160). When a different patron suggests that they “sign a petition,” Deb and her crew momentarily resign themselves to despair before realizing that they must use television and media to draw attention to their cause (160). This section highlights how this novel, like *Zone One* and *Inherent*

Vice, thinks through both the imagining of new possibilities and the impediments that imaginative exercise in the present moment. The mermaid park, while not necessarily their idea, would represent a new possibility for the ways the world is organized and resources (and life itself) is preserved. Thus, it requires the thinking through of a political solution and means of mobilization. The problem, as Millet highlights, is that many of the novel's central characters are markedly *depoliticized* vacationers. Early in this chapter, I referenced a moment wherein Deb comes very close to a new kind of understanding of the world before quickly eschewing it in favor of her vacation. While not identical, we can see something similar in this section. As the resort patrons try to organize themselves, they realize that they do not know how, and beyond that, they question the efficacy of doing so in the first place. They recognize, then, that using media is the only available form to counter the incoming corporate mermaid monopoly. When that fails, they realize that they must lead the kind of "glorious revolution" the novel's fourth section hints at with its title.

Millet's irony-tinged skepticism about her would-be middle class revolutionaries becomes even clearer when the novel concludes. Even after deciding to fight against the corporate tourism company, it is not the efforts of the humans that free the mermaids; instead it is a band of almost mythical blue whales. At the conclusion of the confrontation, Deb remarks that the blue whales had "come to the rescue as the nets were closing in and the hordes were descending with their burning swords. They'd come to claim their own and taken the mermaids far from the armada—far from the Venture of the Marvels" (273). The deployment of whales as the means of mermaid survival forces us to read the novel's conclusion as at least partially ambivalent about the possibility of *human* collectivity as a means of salvation. Though the resort goers attempt to construct new forms and ways of organizing—either through a brief flirtation

with traditional politics, media manipulation, or violent confrontation—none of these are what actually free the mermaids. Deb notes this contrast in that same section when she says that “[t]hey saw what we were, those whales, and wanted nothing to do with it” (273). Deb’s comment draws a sharp distinction between the humans and the whales, and rather sharply implies that the solutions to the exploitative cultivation of the mermaids is one that exists distinctly *outside* the realm of the human. The novel’s central crisis, which is precipitated by the introduction of seemingly impossible fantastical elements, is positioned as one that humans cannot solve. Even worse, Millet wants us to consider the ways that human social relations are not just incapable of addressing these concerns, but actually culpable for their perpetuation.

Millet complicates this even further when, later in the novel’s conclusion, Deb begins to ponder—in a somewhat delirious stupor—what might separate humans from the natural world. She remembers asking Chip when humans developed the capacity to talk, and he says that, to his knowledge, it took humans around five million years to develop language. Deb takes this and considers the ways “writing gave us everything all of a sudden, then nothing forever” (281). She condenses all human history into a series of (frequently violent) technological escalations by remarking that, after the development of writing, “we got electricity, nukes, commercial air travel, trips to the moon” (281). The callback to the earlier mention of the moon landing asks us to think about the relationship between novelty, imagination, and catastrophe, as the Deb often thinks about the ways the new is immediately brought into the quotidian before leading to some kind of catastrophe. Deb’s stance at the end of the novel gets us to consider the ways that human imagination, far from be a liberatory agent of change, is actually a source of great destruction and the cause of all the problems it tries to solve. The conclusion Deb arrives at stands in stark contrast to the kind of Marxist theorizing Kornbluh venerates. Deb wants to think through the

limits of human language, imagination, and civilization by denouncing the whole enterprise by contrasting it with a more primitive image of the human being. The limits of human imagination and sociability are not just found in the systems humans create, but are fundamental to human social organization. This leads Deb to consider whether the whole project is worth pursuing.

While this is what Deb comes to conclude, the novel approaches her point of view with a great deal of irony. For instance, the section that ends with Deb denouncing the value of human language and technical development is immediately followed with her reading a text message upon waking up the following morning (290). Likewise, the novel's final sentence makes another reference to the "whiskey touch[ing]" Deb's lips as she once again embraces the momentary pleasures afforded by her last night at the resort (290). The point, I would argue, is that Deb is once again unable to seriously follow through on her musings. She has moments of insight, but quickly shies away from their implications. It is this tendency, not human social organization as a whole, that is the actual impediment to imagining a different, better world in the novel. Time and again, Deb comes to the precipice of understanding only to take a step back. It is not that these kinds of imaginative, creative formations are impossible, but for Millet, they are quite difficult in a modern, middle-class milieu that allows for constant distraction from that which "really" matters.

Before taking one last drink to end the novel, Deb also thinks back to Chip's idealization of middle Americans. She says that she recognizes now that Chip's idealization is at least partially born out of contempt for his perception of their "ape denial" for science and forward societal progress (285). She sees an almost irrevocable "fault line" between those like herself (ostensibly well-educated, coastal Americans) and those who occupy the Heartland and "worship" the "village idiots" of contemporary society (285). Once again, Deb is bemoaning the

limitations of human civilization, but here, her issues are less to do with the inherent troubles brought about by the development of our intellectual capacity and more to do with our inability to recognize our full potential. That her thought is once again cut off, this time by Chip asking her about her injured leg, suggests that we should not fully endorse her reading of Chip's thoughts. The issue is not to do with a specific group of people like those from the American Heartland, though they are no doubt part of the larger problem. Instead, the novel asks us to think, very generally, about the difficulty of imagining a possible future because we are unable to fully commit to an awareness of the problem.

Of the three novels in this thesis, *Mermaids in Paradise* gives us perhaps the clearest picture of imagining new possibilities for human social organization, while simultaneously showing us in real time how those might not be enough. In literary terms, the novel is about a crisis of realism caused by the intrusion of the generic and the attempts of those affected to organize themselves and solve the problem. This is not unlike what we see in *Zone One*, as Whitehead is committed to sketching out what a post-zombie world might look like in its realist form, and that world is shockingly similar to the world that predates the collapse. Conversely, *Mermaids in Paradise* sees these attempts to respond to crisis as ultimately futile, as it is not the efforts of the central human characters that save the mermaids, but an equally exogenous, "mythical" force. The "conclusion" the novel provides us, in the form of Deb's narration of her own thoughts, is an ultimate distrust of the possibility of human organizational capacity. She ends up agreeing with her perpetually cynical friend Gina, that "when it [comes] to the future" she will proceed as if everything will be fine and embrace momentary pleasures (289). Deb's profound distrust of the viability of positively organizing in favor of restructuring the world echoes Kornbluh's summary of the anarchism exemplified by Giorgio Agamben. She writes that

the anarcho philosophical stance sees the alternative to the rigidity of social formation in “destituent chaos, the flow of vitality without constitution, structure, order, or flow” (2). For Agamden, “[l]ife is not in itself political” because the necessity of political comes as a result of the formation of human civilization itself (qtd. in Kornbluh 2). Deb’s conclusion seem to align with this notion, as she views human social relations as failed from the start, as they are responsible for all the problems we encounter and cannot be properly corralled to fix them.

Despite Deb’s conclusions, Millet gives us plenty of space to take some distance from these ideas. *Mermaids in Paradise* definitely affirms the difficulty in forming effective political bonds, but the novel still allows us to see them as a possibility. In sketching out a crisis by asking us to consider the results of discovering a previously unaccounted for species, Millet forces us to consider our relation to the possible and our responses to it. That she gives us a narrator who reaches the wrong conclusions appears to be entirely the point. Deb is frequently unable to question her own place in the world she inhabits or to take her thoughts to their conclusions. She sees the resort as paradise, while never fully considering the highly formed, rigidly constructed apparatus that sustains an island hotel. Likewise, she correctly sees humans as being at fault for a great deal of the ills visited upon the natural world, but she instead of simply trying to reimagine or think beyond the given, she abandons the hope of a positive attitude towards the future. Having said that, the novel does give us an illustration of the almost instinctive capacity of humans to band together to try and address a crisis—even if it too is brought about by human collectivity. The resonances with something like impending climate catastrophe are fairly obvious, as it is a man-made problem that, in order to be fixed, will require a man-made solution. The novel reminds us that this enterprise is often difficult, especially for those who already

benefit from the system exists, but it is still possible. Even if we cannot successfully rethink the world in the immediate, the tools and capacity to do so always exist and always will.

Chapter 5: Conclusion

As I conclude this thesis, We might now consider what these tensions between realism and genre in these three novels allow us to say about the divergence between contemporary genre-inflected realism and the 19th century realism study by critics like Jameson and Kornbluh. As I articulated in the introduction to this thesis, though some Victorian fiction discussed in *The Order of Forms* has generic elements, it is ultimately explained away or complicated by the realist elements of the text. Part of my argument in this thesis is that this kind of disavowal is not possible with novels like *Zone One*, *Inherent Vice*, and *Mermaids in Paradise*. As such, Jameson's notion about the subtle, incremental difference between realism and genre fiction is shown to be more complicated when looking at the novels that form my corpus. The elements of literary realism are not able to outweigh or obscure the strange, speculative genre elements at work in these texts. This is an important distinction to make, as it is often the way critics distinguish between literary fiction (almost always associated with a degree of realism) and genre fiction.

The question then becomes about what we can say about contemporary fiction given this reading. Of course, one cannot draw very grand conclusions by simply reading three novels; however, these novels do allow us to understand the complicated relationship between realist and non-realist texts. Is there perhaps something in the contemporary moment that is unrepresentable using traditional literary realism? These novels suggest that this might be true. All three texts use genre to force us to imagine a world different than ours, while simultaneously contending with how difficult it is to imagine something *truly* different. It is not incidental that all three novels depict, to varying degrees, some kind of seismic change in the world they represent. For Whitehead, this change is a world inhabited by zombies; for Pynchon, it is an

opaque, paranoid post-Manson, pre-internet Southern California; for Millet, it is an ocean with newly discovery, yet already cultivated mermaids. In their own way, all three texts ask us to think about how history and our future to forecast just how difficult it is to look ahead and create something new. Having said that, all three novels are also deeply invested in making space for the potential of creating something new despite the obstacles and barriers of late-capitalism. Again, while I cannot advance any of the broad, era-encompassing claims that theorists like Jameson make, these novels help us understand the very specific forms and structures that make imagining a new, reorganized world so difficult. Still, even if it is located in re-arranged cars, the account of a potentially unreliable detective, or in a spontaneously arranged collective of vacationers, we are not able, but bound to continue to imagine something different, new, and novel for the world ahead.

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