

# The Contemporary Disposition of the Novel

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Insofar as they show readers what capitalism does to their daily lives, novels have always been contemporary.<sup>1</sup> In the last several decades, however, so many novels are pushing the so far beyond this commonsense meaning that they call for a more specialised definition of the term “contemporary.” Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go* (2005), W. G. Sebald’s *Austerlitz* (2001), Tom McCarthy’s *Remainder* (2005), and Colson Whitehead’s *Zone One* (2011) are among an increasing number of Anglophone novels that address their readers as constitutionally incapable of understanding what distinguishes ours from all previous moments. Their protagonists invariably invoke the kind of individual in whom we could have recognised ourselves, only to demonstrate that this is no longer a self we can imagine ourselves to be. In thus updating the novel, these novels introduce a break in the history of the novel to imply that we live in exceptional times. Why now?

Because capitalism no longer relies on labor for the production of capital, recent political theory describes ours as a time like none before. Well over a century ago, Karl Marx understood that industrial capitalism was on the way to bringing any and all traditional forms of work under

the wage-labour system. He foresaw that once capital had succeeded in mechanizing production to squeeze more value from less labour, it would expand the wage-labour system from productive to non-productive forms of labour and eventually absorb all social practices in that system. A tautology — whereby technology appears to be the source of economic value, and capital, being the source of technology, becomes the condition for producing capital (1053) — has come to pass.<sup>2</sup> The move from “formal” to “real subsumption” marks what Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri describe as a major turning point in the developing relationship of capital to technology (264-300). Today’s most important novels reject a sympathetic reading, I am convinced, in order to tell today’s readers that they are among the last to feel the impact and understand the implications of this change.<sup>3</sup> Among recent novels, Tom McCarthy’s *Remainder* offers a blunt account of what happens to an individual when an unlimited accumulation of capital controls his or her story.

McCarthy’s narrator is nothing if not a barely anthropomorphised agent of capital that shows how current economic conditions require him to transform the social practices once presumed to provide the basis of literary realism. To make this point, McCarthy drops a chunk of London’s crumbling infrastructure out of the sky and onto the novelist’s head, destroying the part of his neurological circuitry responsible for long-term memory. Funded by interest earned by the compensation he receives in damages, he sets about to rebuild his personal memory. But as his capital accumulates faster than he can spend it, the protagonist discovers that he has only to imagine a situation that gives him the sensation of an authentic experience and his money can materialise it.

The first thing he does is “to buy a building, and decorate and furnish it in a particular way” (83). This way in particular does not provide a familiar place where the protagonist can live and gradually retrieve his long-term memory. To the contrary, the process of memory retrieval widens the gulf between past and present, as that process transforms every aspect of social life into an artificial reconstruction of a fictional past. “I have precise requirements, right down to the smallest detail,” he tells the enigmatic Naz, who plays the majordomo in charge of

materialising the narrator's intuitive sense of what feels like something he experienced directly. "I want to hire people to live in it," he says, "and perform tasks that I will designate. They need to perform these exactly as I say, and when I ask them to" (83). Insofar as these performances reenact sensations he might have experienced before, they turn the apartment building into an archive of mechanically reproduced information.

From its inception, this archive displays a sinister capacity to spread metonymically from the home site: "I shall probably require the building opposite as well, and most probably need it to be modified. Certain actions must take place at that location too" (83). By this same associative logic the protagonist continues to transform a succession of lived environments into the site of artificial performances. The result is a set of loosely linked small worlds — a home, a workplace, and a savings bank of the most generic sort — paid to repeat their daily motions until the parts wear out. Once the site of some form of labour, these worlds are now inhabited by actors paid to reenact that labour, while the interest on the narrator's capital does the work. His story, as a result, quickly turns into an account of the increasing range and sophistication of his control.

McCarthy, I am suggesting, uses the infrastructure of late capitalism to repurpose the novel's traditional narrative. He transforms the traditional home, workplace, and financial institution into a sequence of reenactments that intensify his demand for other and more complex transformations.<sup>4</sup> The narrative that results is not one that organises the information of the world around a subject who consequently regards that information as "his" experience. Instead, McCarthy's narrative objectifies that intelligence in progressive stages of abstraction, from the gathering and classifying of data, to the complex interaction of various categories in a single machine, to its final abstraction as the static pattern of a world system. Each of the novels I shall proceed to discuss develops a strikingly different but equally outrageous form of infrastructure to expose the invisible form of control limiting the novel's ability to imagine an alternative future.

*Toward a contemporary theory of the novel*

To account for the novel's unprecedented focus on infrastructure, we might begin by imagining how we might update Mikhail Bakhtin's well-worn notion of the "literary chronotope," a theory of the novel that lends itself to spatial analysis. "In the literary chronotope," Bakhtin proposes, "spatial and temporal indicators are fused into one carefully thought-out, concrete whole. Time . . . thickens, takes on flesh, becomes artistically visible; likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history." Rather than the purely cognitive operation it was for Immanuel Kant, the conjuncture of space and time as a literary chronotope is — in Bakhtin's scheme of things — "the most immediate reality." The chronotope materialises the formal limits of what authors and their readership could imagine at different moments in literary history. Bakhtin identifies each such moment with a narrative form — folklore, romance, the adventure story, and so forth — that observes specific limits. Earlier literary chronotopes provide "the materials" that novels reorganize around the figure of the modern individual and the time of its development.

Bakhtin is not nearly so clear, however, on exactly what formal limits the novel itself must observe in order to unfold such an account. He credits the first of François Rabelais' Gargantuan narratives with introducing "the completely unrestricted, universal chronotope of human life . . . fully in accord with the approaching era of great geographical and astronomical discoveries" (242). Rabelais rejected the "other-worldly [Medieval] vertical axis along which the categories of a spatial and temporal world had been distributed and had given value to its living content." This afforded future novelists "an utterly new way of seeing and of portraying time," "pav[ing] the way for the novel's appropriation of the world" (166). By the time Bakhtin has arrived at the epoch of the novel, however, he is already halfway through the one hundred and forty pages of the 1938 version of the essay.

Although Rabelaisian materialism created the literary environment in which the modern novel could emerge, when it did so, the novel altered that environment. Rather than the growth of "the whole world," as Rabelais had imagined it, the novel devoted itself to "the evolution and

completion of man as an individuum.” The novel most clearly carries out this splitting off of the subject world from the world of objects in the *Bildungsroman*, where, he observes, the education of the individual destroys “all previous human relationships (under the influence of money), love, the family, friendship, the deforming of the artist’s creative work and so forth” (235). Only in the last dozen or so pages added some thirty-five years later does Bakhtin directly address the question of the novel’s chronotope.

Here, he outlines what remains to be done if we want to account for the novel’s “artistic unity in relationship to an actual reality” (243). Casting about for a way of specifying the formal infrastructure of the novel — whether a road, a parlor, a public square — Bakhtin finds nothing that, in itself, distinguishes the novel from earlier literary chronotopes. The novel differentiates itself from all previous literary chronotopes as it uses those chronotopes as “the organizing centers for the fundamental narrative events . . . where the knots of narrative are tied and untied” (250). Just what knots can be tied and how a given novel ties them will determine the perspective we attribute to its “author-creator,” whether he sees the world “from the point of view of a hero participating in the represented event, or from the point of view of a narrator, or from that of an assumed author” (255, 256).

All such points of view within the novel are distinct from the perspective that forges the relation between novel and reader. Like any other literary work, the novel “*faces outward away from itself*, toward the listener-reader, and thus anticipates possible reactions to itself” (italics original, 257). Bakhtin’s novelist consequently faces both inward toward the world he or she creates, and outward toward the space in time that he or she cohabits with his or her readership. If this perspective begins in the world the novelist shares with his or her readers and pulls them with him or her into the world of the novel, then the novel will establish formal continuity between its literary chronotope and the readers’ moment in time. In doing so, the novel makes it possible for readers to participate vicariously in that moment. To reconfigure the infrastructure of literary realism for the contemporary moment, McCarthy destroys this continuity and disallows that vicarious experience.<sup>5</sup>

His protagonist pays an old woman to fry liver several hours each day and then carry it out in garbage bags. He pays a piano teacher to occupy another apartment, where he repeatedly corrects the same mistake of the same student. For all intents and purposes, these actors produce nothing. That they are paid is the only difference between them and the cats purchased to crawl out an attic window across the courtyard and sun themselves on the roof. This evacuation of anything remotely resembling what John Locke called “property in one’s person” carries over to the protagonist himself. As the agent of subsumption, his own desire and will cannot be distinguished from enactments that his damaged brain mysteriously compels him to carry out. Directed by a sensation evocative of authentic experience, this protagonist devotes his apparently limitless capital to reproducing the exact combination of sensations that promises to put him in touch with his past. The process by which he turns human labour into something like an objectified memory widens the gap between the perspective we share with the novelist and the perspective of a protagonist who endeavors, like his traditional forebears, to organize a world of experience around himself as its central intelligence.<sup>6</sup>

Keller Easterling’s adaptation of Foucault’s concept of “*dispositif*,” or social apparatus, offers an explanation as to why a widening gap between these two perspectives marks the novels of our present moment.<sup>7</sup> Since 1945, Easterling observes, technologically sophisticated infrastructure has rapidly insinuated itself between individuals and their respective national governments to the point where that infrastructure now exercises a potentially boundless form of economic control over both. In the spaces it dominates, such infrastructure makes certain things likely to happen and to happen in a certain way, while ensuring that other things are just as likely not to happen. In our own time, infrastructure that once organised daily life to accommodate the wage-labour system has given way to infrastructure that replaces labour with capital as the precondition for the production of more capital. No less the infrastructure that accompanied earlier phases of capitalism, today’s infrastructure gives rise to stories about its purpose that, in Easterling’s

view, quickly “become ossified or enshrined as ingrained expectations . . . that can often be difficult to escape” (93).

Easterling’s analysis of contemporary infrastructure space is of a piece with McCarthy’s novel in calling attention to this phenomenon. Like McCarthy, she assumes that the ubiquitous form of multinational capitalism that controls the global economy depends to a large degree on controlling strategic spaces and making sure that what happens there will accommodate the unlimited production of capital. So long as “the most consequential political outcomes of infrastructure space remain undeclared in the dominant stories that portray them,” Easterling insists, this world system will remain largely invisible to the individuals subjected to its infrastructure. As I will demonstrate, were we to patch in her model near the end of Bakhtin’s account of the ‘chronotope,’ we could make strides toward finishing what he started—and perhaps even discover political outcomes that remain undeclared in the dominant stories of contemporary infrastructure space.<sup>8</sup>

### *The infrastructure novel*

To convey a sense of the signature virtuosity with which novelists think with contemporary infrastructure, I will look at three more novels. Two are, like *Remainder*, already established classroom examples of contemporary Anglophone fiction — Kazuo Ishiguro’s *Never Let Me Go* and W. G. Sebald’s *Austerlitz* — and the third, a more recent contender for that status, Colson Whitehead’s *Zone One*. I plan to show how one or more forms of imaginary infrastructure take over the narrative and actively reorganise the field of characters. As for the political significance of this formal behavior — that will depend on whether these novels can imagine another way of living within infrastructure space. Have these novelists, as Easterling claims, “uncover[ed] accidental, covert, or stubborn forms of power — political chemistries and temperaments of aggression, submission, or violence — hiding in the folds of infrastructure space” (75)?

Set in 1990’s England, the narrative of *Never Let Me Go* is confined, with two notable detours, to a system of roads, cottages, and clinics in

Norfolk known as “England’s ‘lost corner’” (66). After the successful cloning of Dolly the sheep, the British — we are never sure exactly who — developed the infrastructure for raising human clones and harvesting their organs as replacement parts. The humane intention to perpetuate the lives of individuals eligible for organ transplants was countered some years later by an equally humane intention to allow a selection of clones to experience, on a temporary basis, an idyllic childhood before they entered the system designed to harvest and distribute their vital organs. Hence Hailsham, an institution for raising clones.

For the narrator, known as Kathy H, a life regulated by the system of roads and cottages that lead inevitably to the donation clinic begins at Hailsham. To go by the pride with which she identifies herself as a product of the school, one has to think that her training, however limited, is what authorizes her, as someone subjected to this infrastructure, to report on that experience. As with McCarthy’s narrator, one can tell right away that something is not right with Ishiguro’s. The specialised vocabulary that infiltrates her use of vernacular English implies that something has interrupted the process of individual development afforded by a proper boarding school education and groomed the Hailsham student for transportation on a just-in-time basis to donation clinics (See Armstrong 452-460). Indeed, it is not until the last chapter or two of the novel that Ishiguro fills in the missing information as to why Hailsham was opened in the first place and then, a few years later, closed down. As Madame explains to Kathy, “Make no mistake, my child . . . [w]e’re all afraid of you. I myself had to fight back my dread of you almost every day I was at Hailsham. . . . But I was determined not to let such feelings stop me from doing what was right” (269). To this point, the reader has only Kathy H’s specialised vocabulary and whatever rumor and hearsay she has found instructive to explain what the limits of her education keep her from including in her report.

As a social experiment in artificial biological reproduction, Hailsham develops just enough of the psychological texture in the clones it produces to give them a childhood worth remembering as they care for one another through the “completion” of the donation process. Kathy takes pride in her abilities as a “carer.” But the Hailsham education she



so values paradoxically deprives her and her cohort of the sense of themselves as one-of-a-kind individuals born with the right to self-ownership. Ishiguro suggests that they need this sense of self not only to resist the process that turns them into body parts for other people, but also to imagine reproducing themselves in future generations.

Sterilised in infancy, the adolescent Kathy tries out sex at first to satisfy the curiosity provoked by “nineteenth-century stuff by Thomas Hardy and people like that” and movies that “had sex in them, but most scenes would end just as the sex was starting up” (99). Convinced that her adolescent urges indicate she was cloned from a prostitute, Kathy finds them cause for the acute embarrassment that she tries to conceal from her best friend Ruth. Love is another thing. Though free to intermingle promiscuously, the Hailsham students lack an inclination to do so. Rather than a community of couples, they form the fraternal ties of a cohort accustomed to sharing unschooled thoughts and feelings. This unusual form of intimacy forms a basis for the later bond between organ donors and their clone carers.

Indeed, if individuals could be said to emerge from within the narrator’s cohort at all, they do so on the basis of how well they internalise the story that rationalises the infrastructure controlling their collective narrative — namely, that because they are products of the Hailsham experiment, they are in some sense privileged, more human perhaps than the majority of cloned children who are not. Where her friend Ruth comes by this route to consider herself exceptional in class terms, the clone of an office worker perhaps, there is no way of following in her “possible” mother’s footsteps. From the beginning, Kathy H’s beloved Tommy feels that the Hailsham factor is a grand deception, and the reason why, to the frustration of many, the clones do not revolt. After all, there is nothing save the limits of their own thinking to prevent them from deciding at any time to take a turn in the road that diverges from the route that funnels them into the donation centers.

In her double role as the last “carer” of her cohort and the chronicler of their history, Kathy H simultaneously raises this question and puts it to rest. Having little more than old magazines, tape recordings, movies, and novels to go by, she has gathered her sense of

the world beyond the organ donation system from the popular media. By undertaking, at Ruth's prompting, the only escape route that even the enterprising Ruth could entertain under these circumstances, Kathy H demonstrates how completely the novel's imaginary infrastructure controls those subject to it without recourse to overt coercion. Rumour has it that "some Hailsham students in the past, under special circumstances, managed to get a deferral." "If," the rumour goes, "you were a boy and a girl, and you were in love with each other, really, properly in love, and if you could show it, then the people who run Hailsham . . . sorted it out so you could have a few years together before you began your donations" (153).

The domestic future envisioned by the nineteenth-century novels she reads at Hailsham collaborates with the infrastructure that invisibly guides Kathy's thirty-year-old body to the donation clinic. As the ideal Hailsham student, she is also susceptible to the fantasy of selfhood that only those capable of sexual reproduction have a reasonable hope of fulfilling. Her belief that this is the only alternative to organ donation has made Kathy H so docile a subject that any alternative is ruled out from the beginning by what Easterling calls "the multiplier." Among the "active forms" of infrastructure, the multiplier is the one that Ishiguro adopts for purposes of ruling out the older and now defunct infrastructure of the marriage plot. With Levittown, Pennsylvania as her model, Easterling attributes the explosion of post-war American suburbs a method, designed to produce 1,000 houses as modifications of the same basic design: "The site was effectively an assembly line separating the task of house building into smaller activities [e.g., pouring slabs, erecting frames, roofing, and so forth] that could be applied across the entire population of houses in sequence" (73). Levittown "made some things possible and some things impossible," perhaps most obviously building a house that strayed too far from the template (73). The Levittown house regulated daily life within and between those 1,000 houses and synchronized that life with the demands of the urban workplace.

Were we to think of Hailsham as the Levittown of fabricated human beings, it makes perfect sense that Kathy and her schoolmates are constitutionally incapable of forming family ties. On the other hand, it

is not at all difficult to see how the technology of cloning might eventually displace heterosexuality as a means of ensuring a future for individuals that do form such ties. When Ishiguro personifies the multiplier and then gives her an incomplete name and assigns her the responsibility of narrating the story of her life as a clone, he backhandedly suggests an alternative way of imagining life in relation to others. Reading between the lines, one might even see the advantages of a society of reciprocal caretakers over one based on defending private property.

This possibility has nothing to do with the palliative effect of Kathy's account of Hailsham days on the organ donors whom she helps to die. What one such boy wanted, she recounts, "was not just to hear about Hailsham, but to *remember* Hailsham just like it had been his own childhood" (original italics, 5). Insofar as each child is quite literally replaceable, however, Kathy's story of her privileged cohort is every child's story in the way that no individual story could ever be. Kathy's very lack of individuality, her compulsion to adhere to the ideological limits of her Hailsham upbringing, also compels her to tell the story of her own life in terms that memorialise her cohort, terms that call Walter Benjamin's storyteller to mind.

What prevents individuals from forming reciprocal relations, Ishiguro suggests, is nothing more nor less than an inability to rethink the infrastructure that buttresses individuality by confining intimate relations to the reproductive couple and immediate family ties. To change this pattern of behaviour would require some kind of a switch. According to Easterling, this active form of infrastructure is only too familiar to us as the means of adjusting the direction and speed of the flow of goods, people, energy, and information by way of train tracks, bureaucracies, power grids, and internet routers. As they invisibly alter the flow of clones into the clinics that harvest their organs, switches regulate their possible social intersections and impact later on and at other places down the line. In that each embodies an active form of infrastructure and shows what happens when that form takes over the account of an individual's life, we can think of W. G. Sebald's protagonist as being to switches what Ishiguro's protagonist is to multipliers.

Austerlitz tracks his phantom identity through the maze of switches that had, during his childhood, broken up and dispersed his identity along with the Jewish community of Prague. As he thus exposes the infrastructure that dismantled that community, sent its members into a system of concentration camps, and then redistributed their property through the black market, Sebald is not intent on exposing the diabolical nature of the Nazi plan. That is a given. Here, though, Sebald is primarily interested in how that now obsolete infrastructure broke off the past and exiled entire populations in a present whose social character resembles that of a waiting room.

Indeed, the narrator recalls first noticing the protagonist in 1967 in the *Salle des pas perdus*, the waiting room of the Antwerp Station, where Austerlitz was taking notes for an architectural history of the capitalist era. This architecture displayed, in his view, “a compulsive sense of order and the tendency toward monumentalism” that repeated itself “in law courts and penal institutions, railway stations and stock exchanges, opera houses and lunatic asylums, and the houses built on grid patterns for the labor force” (33). During that encounter and one or two that followed next, the narrator “found it almost impossible to talk to [Austerlitz] about anything personal,” with the result that “neither of us knew where the other came from” (31). The narrator is similarly condemned to wander from one public waiting room to another, because he, too, “has never known who [he] was.” This self-negating quality of the two men is the delayed effect of a switch that threw the infrastructure of the capitalist era into reverse and caught the two of them in a single narrative.

Before he explains why Austerlitz’s search for his personal history has suddenly acquired new urgency, Sebald makes sure we feel the damage done by the disconnections that severed both men from a personal history they might have shared. Halfway through the narrator’s account of Austerlitz’s solitary peregrinations, he again encounters Austerlitz in the crowded saloon of the Great Eastern Hotel in London. At last ready to get personal, Austerlitz had just been “telling himself he must find someone to whom he could relate his own story, a story which he had learned only in the last few years and for which he needed the kind of listener [the narrator] had once been in Antwerp” (43). In the hope

that the narrator will fill this role, Austerlitz explains his sudden urge to share experience.

On wandering into an antiquarian bookshop in London, as he recounts this pivotal event, he could barely hear the voices of two women on a scratchy radio, each recalling how she had been sent “on a special transport” to England in the summer of 1939. One of the women’s description of a nighttime train ride through Germany and the Netherlands to the Hook of Holland switches on a dormant section of Austerlitz’s memory, so that he can see himself “waiting on a quay in a long crocodile of children lined up two by two” to board the ferry *Prague* for England many years ago. To trigger further recollections, he repeats the train ride through Germany to Holland where, as children, they had switched from train to ferry and from there to homes throughout Great Britain. This second train ride reformulates his account of aimless wandering as an account of navigating in reverse the detours that once detached him from his past, his family, his community.

The radio transmission provides a switch that turns the lethal infrastructure that identified, dispersed, and exterminated the Jews of Prague into the infrastructure of recollection. Sebald reverses the temporality of Nazi infrastructure to rewrite the traditional *Bildungsroman* as his protagonist’s attempt to reunite with the “invisible twin brother.” Even as a child living with his adopted family in Wales, Austerlitz felt this twin “walking beside me, the reverse of a shadow” (55). He proceeds to track this *ignis fatuus* through government records, personal recollections, old photographs, museums, objects marooned in flea markets, and records lost in the labyrinthine library catalogues. This quest for his childhood self effectively unravels the formula of full personhood that shaped the traditional *Bildungsroman*.

Asked by an interviewer how he personally feels about recollection, Sebald acknowledges its allure: “even if you redesign [the past] in terms of tragedy, because tragedy is still a pattern of order and an attempt to give meaning . . . to a life or a series of lives. It’s still,” he insists, “a positive way of looking at things that . . . might have been one damn thing after another with no sense to it at all” (Wachtel 58). Futile though his effort to resurrect the dead through documentary evidence

may be, Austerlitz's narrative nevertheless achieves something at least as promising as Ishiguro's. Once he relives his exodus from Prague on the *Kindertransport*, he hunts down each scrap of information that remains having to do with his parents, much of it of dubious authenticity.

Just as his train trip through Germany as an adult switches his story onto the same track, so to speak, with those exchanged by the two women on the radio, so his encounter with his former governess in Prague multiplies the forks in plotlines of that story. More hypothetical than fictional, his narrative consequently moves along the interface where documentary disappears into the abyss of personal forgetfulness, rumour, and speculation. In doing so, Austerlitz's story creates a network of similarly dislocated kindred spirits who step in, as the narrator does, to keep his story moving whenever the principal character succumbs to acute depression. His failure to resurrect the kinship system dismantled by Nazi infrastructure provides Sebald's means of assembling what is a distinctively contemporary community.

### *Being in the zone*

Has it become conventional, then, for today's novelists to make ingenious use of contemporary infrastructure? What, after all, is the narrative of David Mitchell's epic *Cloud Atlas* if not a concatenation of stories in the dominant narrative form of their respective epochs, each generated and cut short by infrastructural disasters? Ian McEwan's *Atonement* offers another formal twist on a similar record of infrastructural failures. From his early *Dusklands* through *Elizabeth Costello*, *Foe*, *Disgrace*, and *Diary of a Bad Year*, J. M. Coetzee proved the master at simultaneously exposing and transforming the novel into a process that subjects the familiar field of major and minor characters to the logistics of contemporary infrastructure. What Peter Boxall says of Don DeLillo's post-millennial fiction can thus be said of contemporary novels generally: if "the approaching realities both of eco-catastrophe and of technological transformation are to be survived, these late works suggest — if the lowering horizons of our age are to open onto a revitalization, a leap out of our biology — then we must find a way to give

expression to a consciousness that is already moving beyond the terms in which we recognise and humanise ourselves.”<sup>9</sup>

The intrusion of contemporary infrastructure in the course of human events keeps us from looking at the present moment in either utopian or dystopian terms. Novels that speak to our moment understand it as one in which human life hovers on the edge of an artificial existence in whose ultimate realization, for all we know, the devastating turn in economic relations is simply another transitional phase. Colson Whitehead's *Zone One* puts us in such a state of suspended animation in order to bring us to the imaginary threshold of a new moment in human history. Whitehead's novel restarts the clock of history with an event that the narrator calls “the ruin,” “the catastrophe,” or the “disaster.” This event came about when any number of seemingly small and unrelated events culminated in what the narrator calls the “Last Night transforming them all” (31).

Here, time apparently opened out onto an endless present in which economic infrastructure no longer exercises control. Those infected by a plague of unknown origin continue to outnumber the uninfected until they overrun the island of Manhattan, and presumably the rest of the world, save for a few modern cities. The novel is an account of an attempt on the part of a mysterious Corporation located in a grimy, post-industrial Buffalo to seize on the opportunity presented by plague conditions to restore the infrastructure of its glossy twin on the Eastern Seaboard.

In the first few pages of the novel, Whitehead offers one of very few backward glances at Manhattan before the plague rid it of its prominent residents, including the narrator's Uncle Lloyd. The narrator remembers how, as a child, “things used to be, the customs of the skyline... Yesterday's old masters, stately named and midwived by once famous architects, were insulted by the soot of combustion engines and by technological advances” (6). Although, to the young protagonist, “[h]is uncle's apartment resembled the future, a brand of manhood waiting on the other side of the river,” on rainy day visits “the boy [nevertheless] conjured an uninhabited city, where no one lived behind all those miles and miles of glass, no one caught up with loved ones..., and all the

elevators hung like broken puppets at the end of long cables" (7). The narrator, Mark Spitz, returns to a devastated Manhattan as a member the Omega unit sent in to clear the city for an urban renewal project that proposes to restore Manhattan's dysfunctional infrastructure.

As part of that project he is at once an outsider looking in at the private bubble of subjectivity he once dreamed of occupying and an insider looking out at the plague-infected hoard trying to get in. From his position in the high rise he happens to be clearing of casualties of the epidemic, he can see that "shapes trudged like slaves higher and higher into midtown" (9). His exceptional mediocrity has immunised him to the hypnotic ideology of urban renewal, allowing him to concentrate instead "on how to survive the next five minutes" (32). In this capacity, he collects the data that will allow Buffalo "to extrapolate the whole city from zone one" and then dispose of the "stragglers," infected humans who remain at their workstations condemned to go through the motions of some now obsolete bureaucracy (41-42). On the premise that a gentrified Manhattan will do to the geopolitical configuration of modern nations what Levittown did to post-war suburban America, the Corporation designated Manhattan Zone One.

As Easterling explains in a chapter titled "The Zone," the space so designated is a space of exception to the nation's economic regulations. The zone has, in recent decades, undergone "wild mutations [that] only make it seem penetrable to further manipulation" by extranational interests (25). At once inside the host state and outside its legal restrictions, these zones have multiplied according to a pattern that Easterling, like Whitehead, invites us to think of as a contagious disease. Businesses seek out tax-free spaces and lobby the home state for exceptions that will allow them to negotiate favourable trade agreements with other states. As a result, the zone becomes "a natural interstice in the networks of transfer-pricing games in which corporations inflate the prices of items moved internally to hide profits or take advantage of currency differentials." Indeed, "over half of all bank assets, and a third of foreign direct investment by multinational corporations, are routed" through these extranational zones (quoted in Easterling, 60). Zones free up businesses like Walmart to violate the laws that regulate the



workplace elsewhere in the nation. Zones interbreed with other enclave formats within and across national boundaries and consequently mutate into science parks, technoparks, educational campuses, tourist sites, and, most recently, global cities. Throughout the world, these cities double and ultimately rival their more heavily regulated counterparts (39-40).<sup>10</sup>

Though introduced as a means of invigorating the national economy, zones actively insinuate an independent layer of economic regulations between individuals and their national governments where it exercises relatively unexamined control over both. This is obviously what the Corporation in Buffalo had in mind in declaring Manhattan “zone one” and rebranding the “survivors” what else “but the ‘American Phoenix,’” or “pheenies” for short (99). Like any utopia, this dream of a world technologically controlled by corporate infrastructure requires conditions of environmental and biopolitical catastrophe to materialize. Taking place on the last three days of history as we know it, Whitehead’s novel is plotted to capture and reverse the machinery of global capitalism. Rather than restore Manhattan to the paradise once inhabited by Uncle Lloyd and the pheemies, the apocalypse ushers in a new form of human life, barely recognizable as such, that displays a remarkable capacity for self-organization.

Soon after introducing himself as Mark Spitz - so named because, by contrast to the Olympian, he cannot swim - the narrator knows that “skels” and not stragglers pose the greater obstacle to restoring Manhattan’s infrastructure. Even though “[t]he marines had eliminated most of this variety before the sweepers arrived,” Mark Spitz encounters occasional pockets of skels throughout the city. He knew from the very first such encounter that skels “came to eat you — not all of you, but a nice chomp here or there, enough to pass on the plague” (60). Despite the Corporation’s claim “to search for a cure,” he figured out that the “plague [had] so transformed the human body that no one still believed [the skels] could be restored.” The fact was that once the Corporation shifted its “priorities to *infrastructure*,” the demand for “fresh skels” as experimental subjects “did not exist” (my italics, 77-78).

Based on the mistaken assumption that the number of skels would necessarily diminish, as with any pathogen, as they ran out of healthy bodies to infect, the Corporation's shift in focus onto infrastructure over and above either a cure or some means of immunisation has lethal consequences. Even before Mark Spitz hears about the change in policy, he senses that the Corporation has failed to understand the problem posed by skels. Adept at navigating infrastructure, he observes, "they could turn a doorknob, hit a lightswitch — the plague didn't erase muscle memory." Although higher "[c]ognition is out . . . once [the virus] overwrote the data of self," the skel's muscle memory is no arbitrary set of reflexes that can easily be outwitted by those still capable of cognition. Whenever skels chanced upon an uninfected human, the narrator recalls, "like ants who received a chemical telegram about a lollipop on the sidewalk . . . each grabbed a limb or convenient point of purchase while he screamed. They began to eat him, and his screaming brought more teetering down the street. All over the world this was happening: a group of them hears food at the same time and they twist their bodies in unison." Mark Spitz wraps up this particular anecdote with an observation that becomes increasingly ominous as the novel progresses: "They didn't fight over the old man. They each got a piece" (24). Indeed, as he discovers, the virus not only wipes out what is usually meant by "the self," but also reformats standard-issue zombies for a political economy unrecognisable for what it is to those of us wired to survive through competition.

He has a keen sense that the skels are capable of strategic thinking and collective action: "No one he hooked up with seconded his observations, but he was unswayed. They were clotting together, the dead: he spied idiot cliques or duos rather than singletons, and they stuck to the roads and manmade routes feeding into towns" (210). When the military first rescued and recruited him as a sweeper, Mark Spitz had taken temporary refuge with a hippie family in a New England farmhouse, where the behavior of the skels confirmed what he already suspected, namely, that "the things knew why they had gathered there" (233). Rather than aimlessly wander past, a few began to cluster around the barricaded farmhouse, their numbers doubling every hour, much like

the birds in Hitchcock's film by that name, until they simply overwhelmed the barricades. Even when put down and incinerated, the skels manage to distribute themselves "everywhere." Their ash infiltrates the pores of the protagonist's skin, enters his bloodstream with each breath he takes, and populates his dreams with the phantoms of Post Apocalyptic Stress Disorder (233). As the number of skels continues to rise exponentially, it becomes apparent that the virus has rewritten its own genetic code. When a spokesperson for the Corporation from Buffalo admits that two of the East Coast settlements have fallen to the multitude of skels, we know that what she calls "the density problem" causing the gates to be "breached" was not, as she claims, "human error," but a problem endemic in the infrastructure of the zone itself (278).

Easterling points out that while "the zone offers a clean, relaxed, air-conditioned, infrastructure-rich urbanism" that often exists in striking contrast to its host country, the apparent freedom within the zone "turns very easily to evasion, closure, and quarantine." Indeed, because "it only receives or recycles compatible information in closed loops," it is also "capable of carrying messages that unravel the zone formula itself" (68).<sup>11</sup> The degree to which the Corporation and its employees have underestimated the skels' ability to hack that formula becomes shockingly apparent during an encounter between the leader of the Omega unit and a Gypsy fortuneteller whom he mistakes for a straggler and dares to predict his future. Her response unleashes a "ferocious psychic current" that convulses his body while "engraving a tiny smile" on her otherwise impassive face. Although Gary assures his unit that "*they* say that everything is going to be all right" (my italics 282), the fortuneteller proves otherwise, as she "grabbed his hand and chomped deep into the meat between the index finger and the thumb" (284). As a member of the unit promptly shoots her in the head, the smile on her face broadens — as if she knew that her biogenetic information lives on in Gary. The biological body has obviously become the semiotic turf on which the battle is to be fought between those maintained by the Corporation's infrastructure and those on whose exclusion the zone depends for its exceptional status.

Unique among sweepers, Mark Spitz has long sensed that the skels are not monsters but men and women he might have known before they became infected, a recognition he must suppress when called upon to shoot one in the head. Compounding the observation he takes away from Gary's encounter with the Gypsy fortuneteller ("If one skel broke the rules, there were more" [301]) is his equally ominous observation that zones cannot sustain the difference between those outside the enclave and those barricaded within. He is consequently the first to understand that "[t]he barrier was about to fail. It was falling down, as it always did" (298). As for what came next, "he didn't know if the world was doomed or saved, but whatever the next thing was, it would not look like what came before."

What came before was a product of the numerical gap between those who still enjoyed cognitive control of their bodies and those transformed by the plague, a biological realisation of the economic division of the population into rich and poor, protected individuals and multitude. The narrator describes "what came next" as a tsunami of liquefied and blended humanity that took advantage of the infrastructure engineered to keep it out to pour down streets, through subways, and across rivers to obliterate what remains of the internal divisions that maintain the value of Manhattan real estate: "These were the angry dead, the ruthless chaos of existence made flesh. These were the ones who would resettle the broken city. No one else" (321). If there is any affirmative potential to be discovered in this flood of putrefied human flesh, it would reside in the Rabelaisian resurgence of a single, limitless biological body.

By contrast to the hyper-vital body whose biological functions, in Bakhtin's account, overwhelm the vertical thinking of Medieval culture, the body that pours over the barricades surrounding Manhattan is no longer crisscrossed by the natural systems of ingestion, digestion, copulation, and defecation that have so many functions of a hungry mouth. If this body was, as Bahktin claims, the plastic plane on which the figure of an individual once emerged as the central intelligence of the novel distinct from its material environment, then it is fitting that today's novelists feel obliged to challenge the fantasy of infrastructure control.

It strikes me as especially fitting that what returns to overwhelm the infrastructure maintaining the artificial image of the autonomous subject is the degraded figure of the continuous biological body, “the angry dead.” Caught in the crosshairs of this problematic, the narrator is no longer an individual insofar as he or she has encountered the limits of individuated consciousness and felt the fragile envelope of selfhood burst open. Like those of McCarthy, Ishiguro, Sebald, and so many others, Whitehead’s narrator puts us in the impossible position of looking in at what we imagine ourselves to be from a position where we have become something else. This is what it means to be contemporary.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> This claim originates in Georg Lukács’s argument to the effect that a novelist’s view will always be based on the ideology of his group and moment, or *Weltanschauung*, which underlies “the style of a given piece of writing. Looked at in this way, style ceases to be a formalistic category. Rather . . . it is the specific form of a specific content” (19). I think of this relationship between a novel’s form and its subject matter as what Jacques Rancière describes as a “mode of intervention in the carving up of objects that form a common world, the subjects that people that world and the powers they have to see it, name it and act upon it” (7).

<sup>2</sup> Marx’s encapsulation of this concept appears in the chapter published in German and Russian in 1933 and appended to the English translation of *Capital*, Volume One in 1977. Here, Marx argues that the imposition of wage labour on preexisting forms of labour, or what he calls “formal subsumption,” gives rise to “the constant development of *new forms of work*,” which in turn bring about “the progressive division of labour in *society as a whole*” (italics original, 1034). “On this foundation,” he observes, “there now arises a technologically and otherwise *specific mode of production—capitalist production*—which transforms the nature *of the labour process and its actual conditions*” (italics original, 1035). With the “real subsumption of labour under capital, production itself, its scale and quality, aims at turning out products that “contain as *much unpaid labour as possible*, and this is achieved only by *producing for the sake of production*” (italics original, 1038).

<sup>3</sup> In a paper presented at a special session of the 2018 meeting of the Society for Novel Studies in Ithaca, New York, Sianne Ngai pointed out that within the context of capitalism, the “transparent will ‘to ideas’” is not a difficult relation to parse: “Such an intimacy arguably comes to the fore in a culture that increasingly relies on slogans like ‘knowledge work,’ ‘cognitive capitalism,’ and ‘semio-capitalism’ to characterize its de-

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industrializing present. . . . In addition to being a device, the gimmick *is* an idea" (1). Thus, she suggests, the intrusive presence of economic theory in contemporary novels invites us to read them as novels of ideas "about late capitalist magic, which is to say, [novels] about the transparent and equivocal form of the gimmick itself" (5).

<sup>4</sup>If, as Fredric Jameson explains in reference to *Remainder*, "subsumption means turning heterogeneities into homogeneities, subsuming them under abstractions (which are by definition idealisms), standardizing the multiplicity of the world and making it into that terrible thing that was to have been avoided at all costs, namely the One as such," then McCarthy's novel certainly carries out this theory (119). As small worlds, accordingly, the narrator's reenactments transform very different social practices into what amounts to production for production's sake and therefore repetitions of the same.

<sup>5</sup>Lukács accuses modernism of conflating the viewpoint that novelists attribute to their readers with the viewpoint that unfolds within the novel, at the cost of reducing the tension between the novel's inner and outer worlds to a tautology: "To modernists . . . phenomena in the outer world, governed by their own immanent laws, exist outside human consciousness. But the human subject plays a part in the understanding of particular phenomena and in the perception of their interrelatedness. As Hegel said, 'He who looks at the world rationally, finds in it a rational pattern: the two process are one'" (72). To come away with a pretty good idea of what a novelist like McCarthy does with this tautology, we need only replace the term "rational pattern" in Hegel's statement with "recent economic theory."

<sup>6</sup>Paul Virilio explores the relationship between contemporary infrastructure and what he calls "*intrastructure*," a concept that acknowledges "biotechnology's physiological intrusion into, or insemination of, the living organism," one, he claims, that "has today resulted in the gradual colonization of the organs and entrails of man's animal body" (99-100). Sooner or later, he forecasts, "the class distinction between inside and outside will go out the window," and we will lose all sense of ourselves as "a gravicentric mass" (106), "eliminating the very idea of the environment." It is as if what the architect Le Corbusier held has proved true, "that *outside is always inside!* For the specialists of neuroscience, *inside is always outside* from now on! Internal space lies open like a town about to be destroyed by invaders" (127).

<sup>7</sup>In "The Confessions of the Flesh," Foucault describes the ideological apparatus he calls a *dispositif* as "a thoroughly heterogeneous ensemble consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions—in short, the said as much as the unsaid" (194). In a collection titled *Michel Foucault, Philosopher*, Gilles Deleuze carries this concept into the present moment, on the principle that "the newness of an apparatus in relation to what has gone before is what we call its actuality. The new is the current. The current is not what we have been but rather what we are becoming [thanks to the *dispositifs* in which we work and think]. . . . In each apparatus [*dispositif*] it is necessary to distinguish what we are (what we already are no longer), and what we are becoming: *the historical part and the current part*" (164).

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<sup>a</sup>See Armstrong and Leonard Tennenhouse on the continuing influence of E. M. Forster's formalist description of "the aspects of the novel," based on his Clark Lectures at Cambridge in 1927. Here, Forster sequesters only the best novelists in an imaginary reading room where they place their novels in conversation with one another, a conversation he consequently removes from the larger field of discourse, especially political economic theory. This anthropocentric and formalist model of the novel's inner world obviously bears little resemblance to the late twentieth-century infrastructure that controls the writing, publishing, marketing, and reading of novels (108-112).

<sup>b</sup>This statement comes from the concluding paragraph of Peter Boxall's essay, "A Leap Out of Our Biology: History, tautology and biomatter in DeLillo's later fiction," which the author generously shared with me in manuscript form.

<sup>c</sup>"Not only has the zone become a city," Easterling points out, but major cities and even national capitals are now engineering their own doppelgangers—their own non-national territories in which to create newer, cleaner alter-egos, free of any incumbent bureaucracy." Hence, the City and Industrial Development Company of Maharashtra, operating under the motto "We make cities," "is making Navi Mumbai the double of Mumbai," so that "[t]he world capital and national capital can now shadow each other, alternatively exhibiting a regional cultural ethos, national pride, or global ambition" (48-49).

<sup>d</sup>A recent article by Masha Gessen in *The New Yorker* begins with a sentence that caught my attention for suggesting that the infrastructure of that global city can indeed be reappropriated by its inhabitants: "Barcelona is the heart of a new global political phenomenon known as municipalism. Last weekend," she explains, "municipalist activists from North America, Europe, and Africa met in New York City for the third Fearless Cities summit." Gessen cites a report on Spanish municipalism that characterizes those determined to democratize city space as consisting "mainly of a young, urban and precarious 'cognitariat': academics, artists, and journalists, among others," and on this basis contrasts the municipalist trend to "the right-wing populist movements in Europe and the United States." The difference is an emphasis on public space, the idea being that if city planners minimize the amount of private space, they will have more public space and public services, which should not only encourage tourism, Barcelona's most important industry, but enable local management of space and resources as well. Barcelona is now launching a publicly held energy company that will supply energy to municipal buildings. While the practice of returning control of urban infrastructure to the people who live under its control does, as Gessen claims, present a striking contrast to right-wing populism in the US and Europe, I consider municipalism more important as a counter to zone ideology.

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