Karolina Słotwińska-Pełka

Domesticating the Flâneur : Colson Whiteheads "Zone One"

Kultura Popularna nr 1 (55), 48-55

2018

Karolina Słotwińska-Pełka

Domesticating the Flâneur: *Colson Whitehead's* Zone One

DOI: 10.5604/01.3001.0012.0571

Writing of Walter Benjamin's unfinished magnum opus on the nineteenth-century arcades, Susan Buck-Morss notes that Benjamin provided posterity with "a historical lexicon of the capitalist origins of modernity, a collection of concrete, factual images of urban experience" (99). One of the most striking images of such experience was the flâneur, an observer of the city crowd relegated to the arcades by the encroachment of industrialization. As a liminal figure standing "on the threshold—of the metropolis as of the middle class" (Benjamin 2002, 10), the flâneur illustrated the fantasy of being able to know the life of the city through passive observation. The crowd was for such observer "the veil through which the familiar city [beckoned] to the flâneur as phantasmagoria—now a landscape, now a room" (Benjamin 2002, 10). In this way, the flâneur was an early avatar of the alienated city dweller and the consumer of looks—an attitude that, as Buck-Morss notes, has come to define the general modern experience of mass consumption (Buck-Morss 104). Despite the supposed obsolescence of the figure, the flâneur has been recently theorized, for instance, as "a methodological tool for investigating literary representations of [twenty-first] century American masculinity" (Ferry 49). It is then perhaps not surprising that we discover a distinctly flâneurian quality in a contemporary American writer's étude on a postmodern metropolis, namely Colson Whitehead's *The Colossus of New York* (2003). A revision of E.B. White's *Here is New York* (1948), *Colossus* strives to reproduce the hectic pace of the city, relishing in the kaleidoscopic progression of faces as observed at bus stations, airports, on park benches, bridges, or subway. These spaces emerge as the new arcades where the resurrected flâneur can once again know the city. Propelling this project is Whitehead's striking declaration of what it means to live and belong in a metropolis such as New York: "[y]ou are a New Yorker when what was there before is more real and solid than what is here now" (Whitehead 2003, "City Limits"). The remark pinpoints the precariousness of urban experience, while proposing that it can be only grasped through the flâneurian fantasy of knowing.

Perhaps such admission of urban ephemerality is all the more necessary in the case of the city marked by the trauma of the September 11 attacks. Indeed, if *Colossus* aims to celebrate the rhythms of the city, leaving unspoken the tragedy looming over it, *Zone One* (2011), Whitehead's later novel on New York, sounds an elegy for the metropolis frozen in the shock of an apocalypse. As such, *Zone One* is situated within trauma literature that emerged in the wake of the September 11 attacks, as it grapples with the inassimilable experience of the catastrophe by returning to the ravaged cityscape, which can now only be known through the intrusive memory traces of what was there before. This narrative gesture translates onto the literary realm the repetition compulsion that Sigmund Freud locates at the heart of psychological trauma, which manifests itself in insistent dreams or hallucinations of sufferers, aiming to allow for a retroactive assimilation of the traumatic event (609). In cultural and literary studies, the need to fully comprehend the repercussions of the traumatic event is conceptualized in terms of an ethical "witnessing," which Ann Kaplan recognizes as one of the key contributions of literature to the process of working through the collective or cultural trauma such as the September 11 attacks (22–23). Yet at first glance, Whitehead's *Zone One* does not fit easily within such rhetoric of "witnessing" as it employs the fantastic framework of a zombie apocalypse to talk about both the contemporary urban experience and, specifically, about the experience of living in New York City in the aftermath of 9/11. As I argue, in his meticulously crafted novel,

Karolina Słotwińska-Pełka graduated from the University of Warsaw, Institute of English Studies, where she is now teaching Practical English and working on her PhD. Her research focuses on the politics of apocalypse in American speculative fiction after 2000. Her interests include posthumanism, zombie studies, and race studies. She has contributed to a collection of essays, *Po humanizmie* (WN Katedra, 2015), and has written for *Polish Journal for American Studies*.

Whitehead reclaims the ruined city as a home by transforming his earlier flâneurian optics of the observer (as expounded in *Colossus*) and assuming a more involved and ethical attitude. The novel can thus be seen as outlining a paradoxical process of domestication in which the flâneur is transformed from an obsessed outsider into a "man of the crowd"[1] that belongs in the city streets and among its masses, regardless of the pain such belonging implies. This transformation is visible at the level of both the plot and the narrative style in the shift from predominantly phantasmatic treatment of metropolis echoing modernist literature to the action-driven narrative of a zombie novel emphasizing active involvement in the change in the urban fabric.

Fittingly for a story of urban fascination, *Zone One* opens with the as-yet unnamed protagonist's admission that "[h]e always wanted to live in New York," which he could admire during his childhood visits to one Uncle Lloyd, a resident of Manhattan (Whitehead 2011, "Friday"). Those earliest memories of the city where the boy's family would take photographs mark the protagonist as an outsider, integrated in the fabric of the city only through the screen of the camera. Throughout the first part of the novel, the boy's perception of the city is in fact continually mediated by various screens, such as the TV screen, or windows of skyscrapers. His childhood fascination with the city skyline—as viewed from behind "smoky anti-UV glass, nineteen stories up"—is in his initial memories of the city conflated with another obsession, namely monster movies (Whitehead 2011, "Friday"). Crucial in this conflation is the boy's continued alienation from the objects of his fascination and the ensuing possibility to project fantastic images onto these objects. Consequently, he does not see people inhabiting the city, but from his uncle's Manhattan apartment observes mere "pieces of citizens on display in the windows . . . the splayed pinstriped legs of an urban golfer; half a lady's torso . . . a fist" (Whitehead 2011, "Friday"). The gruesome piecemeal imagery marks the boy as a mere seeker of thrill, conjuring out of the "pitiless and blank" buildings "an uninhabited city, where no one [lives] behind all those miles and miles of glass… The city as ghost ship on the last ocean at the rim of the world" (Whitehead 2011, "Friday").

The vision of the ghost ship-Manhattan proves especially apt as the narrative moves from childhood memories to the post-apocalyptic present, in which both New York City and the entire US have been overrun by zombies, or "skels." The protagonist has survived the outbreak and managed to get to Chinatown, renamed Fort Wonton, an enclosed human outpost. Despite the raging zombie apocalypse, for the protagonist, now called Mark Spitz, the Manhattan high-rise buildings still constitute screens for his fantastic projections, even as he is deployed in a ragtag team of sweepers, consisting of himself—a black middle-class man, Gary—a redneck, and Kaitlyn—former Secretary of the Student Council. This team's job is to eliminate any skels remaining in the Manhattan skyscrapers after the recent marine corps purge of the area, and to gather statistical data. Sweeping the former offices of highest profile corporations, Mark Spitz is thus roaming the post-apocalyptic arcades, observing the human stubs he encounters, and dreaming of living in the reclaimed Manhattan once the restoration is complete.

1 Although the term "man of the crowd" is frequently treated as a synonym of the flâneur, Lauster explains this as a mistake originating in Benjamin's misreading of Poe's short story "The Man of the Crowd" (144). "The man of the crowd" is in this short story in fact a mere object of flâneur's fascination.

In spite of the perceived proximity of his object of fascination, Mark Spitz remains an outsider to Manhattan—both as a human survivor in a world overrun by skels and a sweeper in a world run by the remnant capitalistic central government (located in Buffalo) intent on restoring the old order. His situation is reflected in the fact that he and other survivors living in militarized Chinatown are deployed to menial but dangerous duties, and kept under the spell of the central government's massive PR campaign to restart the US. Furnished with merchandise, whose trademark is a cartoonish armadillo,[2] and fed the stories of folk heroes such as the porn star-turned-politician, or triplet babies surviving the apocalypse against all odds, the denizens of the walled Fort Wonton carry out the campaign of reclaiming Manhattan, despite not knowing whether they will be allowed to live there. The survivor's strong adherence to their old habits and their willingness to submit to the fantasy of reclaimed consumerism mark them all as shell-shocked in this new zombified reality.

Although typically reclusive, Mark Spitz turns out to be the perfect survivor, "[possessing] a strange facility for the mandatory" (Whitehead 2011, "Friday"). Prepared by the life of mediocrity as a corporate employee responsible for "[nurturing] feelings of brand intimacy" using social media, Mark Spitz navigates alienation easily, proving to be "a natural at ersatz human connection and the postures of counterfeit empathy" (Whitehead 2011, "Saturday"). His aptitude in detachment, undying and morbid fascination with New York City, as well as his middle-class background render him a fitting consumer of post-apocalyptic vistas. Trapped in a surreal detachment from his fellow survivors, he still yearns for the abstract city life as he strolls the corridors of Manhattan skyscrapers in a sort of daze, incapable of seeing it as anything other than a grave:

> All he wanted was a shred of uptown. He tried to orient himself: Was he looking north or south? It was like dragging a fork through gruel. The ash [from the incinerator] smeared the city's palette into a gray hush on the best of days, but introduce clouds and a little bit of precip and the city became an altar to obscurity. He was an insect exploring a gravestone… (Whitehead 2011, "Friday")

This disoriented reverie ends suddenly when Mark Spitz is assailed by four skels, once human resource employees, which figure as a violent reminder of how unattainable Manhattan remains for him. Interestingly, Mark Spitz's attitude even during the attack mirrors his fascinated observation of the city dwellers prior to the apocalypse. He straggles into a disjointed investigation of the physiognomy of each attacking skel, and the reader is trapped in a play of comparisons between the skels and people from Mark Spitz's past rather than being allowed to follow the action. Description of the zombies as "a thin membrane of meat stretched over bone" is here supplemented with a catalogue of shriveled commodities defining people: brand panties, the actress-inspired hairdo, torpedo bras (Whitehead 2011, "Friday"). Overburdened with such accumulation of remnants of the past, action jams and freezes in a still frame, which is punctured only by another hallucination of a lofty aim:

2 The armadillo is known to be a vector for leprosy, and is thus an apt symbol in the times of the plague.

> It happened every so often that he recognized something in these monsters, they looked like someone he had known or loved. Eighth-grade lab partner or lanky cashier at the mini-mart, college girlfriend spring semester junior year. Uncle… He hadn't decided if conjuring an acquaintance or loved one into these creatures was an advantage or not… [P]erhaps these recognitions ennobled his mission: He was performing an act of mercy. (Whitehead 2011, "Friday")

As Mark Spitz tries to justify his fetishization of physiognomies as humanizing rather than commodifying, his musings are violently stopped as reality interferes and he finally needs to shoot the skel attacking him. This scene becomes a self-referential comment on the narrative's stunted progression until this point. Mark Spitz's multiple musings and reveries, while befitting the flâneur, are reminiscent of modernist stream of consciousness technique rather than the action-driven zombie genre. As a result, the protagonist's attempt at mystifying and elevating his position brings to the fore the narrative conflict at the heart of *Zone One*: the clash between thematizations of urban experience in exclusive high literature and inclusive popular fiction. Thus instead of only thinking of Mark Spitz as the flâneur-focalizer, we need to point out the flâneurian optics structuring the story through multiple surreal deviations from action, disturbed chronology of events, and extended flashbacks, which disorient the reader. Such intrusively retrospective narrative style, while amplifying the dream-like quality of post-apocalyptic urban existence, prevents the plot from progressing and the reader from fully comprehending the reality of the post-apocalyptic city.

The sense of entrapment in stillness is reflected by the mental state of the human city dwellers, all of whom suffer from PASD, or Post-Apocalyptic Stress Disorder. Interestingly, the list of PASD symptoms is in fact so inclusive as to be ultimately useless as a medical definition, and covers for instance:

> feelings of sadness or unhappiness; irritability or frustration, even over small matters; loss of interest or pleasure in normal activities; reduced sex drive; insomnia or excessive sleeping; changes in appetite leading to weight loss, or increased cravings for food and weight gain . . . (Whitehead 2011, "Friday")

For Mark Spitz, PASD constitutes not so much a "diagnosis but an abstract of existence itself," employed to predispose survivors all the more in favor of the central government's campaign of restitution of the past (Whitehead 2011, "Friday"). PASD is in a way another illusion that exonerates the inability to enter into real relationships and reinforces passivity.

Yet the most poignant illustration of the standstill narrated in the novel is the atypical zombie, the straggler. Stragglers do not bite or attack humans, but only stand immobilized, frozen in grotesque tableaux vivants in places they formerly visited. Whether struck by an office copy machine in official attire, or by a helium tank in a gorilla costume, stragglers offer themselves as social *types* whose past lives are to be deciphered by the post-apocalyptic flâneur. Fittingly, the favorite pastime of Mark Spitz's team of sweepers is "Solve the Straggler," a game in which everyone tries to offer the most fantastic

explanation for a given straggler's haunting presence at the place where they are found. Fantasy is here once again used to mediate the traumatic experience the urban life in the ravaged metropolis. To Mark Spitz, however, encounters with stragglers prove invariably and weirdly disconcerting, as he is found weeping after one straggler is killed, and later asks his team to spare another. The stragglers' disturbing immobility along with their close resemblance to living people reveals to Mark Spitz his own ultimate entrapment and makes him question the viability of past habits and optics in a radically changed world.

The many parallels between the shell-shocked survivors and the stragglers become increasingly obvious, especially after the evocation of Mark Spitz's dreams in the second part of the novel. As the reader learns, following his settlement within Fort Wonton's walls, Mark Spitz dreams scenes of everyday life peopled by fully functional, but nonetheless dead skels. The epigraph to this part of the novel, taken from Ezra Pound's *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* and reading "The age demanded an image of its accelerated grimace" (Whitehead 2011, "Saturday"), invites the reader to interpret these dreams as defining the post-apocalyptic urban experience, characterized by the inability to process the catastrophic change that has reshaped the city.

From desolate vistas and phantasmagoric stillness of the first part, the narrative moves in the second part to initially hesitant exploration of human interactions. While the early post-apocalypse encounters with other groups of survivors are recounted and dismissed as ephemeral, one meeting cuts through the shell of Mark Spitz's isolation. Miriam Cohen Levy, once a mother of three, met in a desolate toy store, becomes for Mark Spitz the only woman whom he has not demonized, but has actually loved (Whitehead 2011, "Saturday"). That relation with another human being, taking place already in the post-apocalyptic reality, is the first in a line of encounters that disturb Mark Spitz's isolation, making him think of "[o]ther people in their surprises, the different social outcomes in the new world" (Whitehead 2011, "Saturday"). In this way, he is increasingly forced out of his sense of detachment, a movement that is reflected in his descend from the glass skyscrapers onto the actual streets of the city (Whitehead 2011, "Saturday").

In keeping with this changing narrative trajectory, Mark Spitz's mediocrity gives place to the striking new fantasy of invincibility. This is underscored in the story of the origins of his nickname as told to his team members, Gary and Kaitlyn, in the second part of the novel. Before he became a sweeper, the reader learns, Mark Spitz was deployed as a wrecker, a member of a team that—instead of clearing Manhattan skyscrapers—would clear the roads of remaining car wrecks and skels. During an ordinary assignment on interstate I-95, when clearing a bridge, his team was assailed and immediately overwhelmed by a large group of skels. Everyone saved themselves by jumping into the river, but not Mark Spitz, who decided that in this mediocre world where survival was all that mattered, he simply could not die and thus in a heroic fashion did in fact kill all the skels.[3] When asked why he had not jumped into the water, he told his wrecker team that he could not swim, despite noting in an aside that it was the epiphany regarding his own invincibility and not his inability to swim that had guided his actions. But the remark, fitting so perfectly with the "black people cannot swim" stereotype, struck the team as hilarious, and thus the hero was mockingly nicknamed after white Olympic

3 This superhero moment, when recounted by Mark Spitz, is undermined only by the curtness with which it is summed up (Whitehead 2011, *Saturday*).

gold-medalist Mark Spitz (Whitehead 2011, "Saturday"). Although intended as an affront (even though initially not understood by the protagonist), this nickname is reclaimed by Mark Spitz and turned into his proper name in the post-apocalyptic world, a superhero pseudonym of a kind. Although marking him, yet again, as the outsider to both the group of wreckers, the interstate I-95 incident is also one of the watersheds in the transformation of the flâneurian optics of the narrative toward a more involved, active attitude.

This shift in the attitude is also reflected in the increasingly action-oriented narrative style, which reaches its apogee in the third part of the novel. This part begins with the fall of the wall protecting Fort Wonton from the hordes of skels. The former settlement is turned into a terrordome, as the epigraph from Public Enemy warns: "Move as a team, never move alone: Welcome to the Terrordome" (Whitehead 2011, "Saturday"). Yet despite the menacing sound of the term "terrordome", the original Public Enemy's message is one of black activism and the power of communal action, which suggests a more optimistic interpretation of the last part of the novel. The fall of the wall can be thus interpreted as the lifting of illusions, one of which is the cultural barrier separating modernist literature on the universalized urban experience from pop-cultural and post-colonial productions relating the life in the city. Thus in this last part of the novel, the isolated flâneur transforms into the black man of the crowd that refuses to see reality through a veil.

We find a confirmation of this transformation in Mark Spitz's team's last encounter with a straggler—a fortune teller—whose hand Mark Spitz's friend, Gary, takes in jest, while playing "Solve the Straggler." The second Gary breaks contact with the creature, he is bitten, revealing that the illusion of the immobile stragglers has also been lifted. It is then, as his friend is dying from the bite, that Mark Spitz tells Gary and Kaitlyn not only the story of his nickname, but also the story of the leader of his former wrecker team. An Indian woman, the Quiet Storm is recalled by him as being very particular about the arrangement of the cars they would clear off the interstate. This, he says, he did not understand until he saw the patterns she carved from above: "While the other wreckers, indeed all the other survivors, could only perceive the wasteland on its edge, the Quiet Storm was in the sky, inventing her alphabet and making declarations" (Whitehead 2011, "Sunday"). Asked by dumbfounded Gary what this story means, Mark Spitz replies by emphasizing the need for "paying witness" to the changing world, the changing city (Whitehead 2011, "Sunday"). This is then a declaration of new ethics geared not toward phantasmagoria, but toward real human relations and willingness to tell stories to others, to act and influence the world.

The city itself is consequently freed from the play of projections as Mark Spitz reconfigures his childhood obsession:

> He'd always wanted to live in New York but that city didn't exist anymore. 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. There were no intersections with the avenues of Buffalo's shimmering reconstructions, its boulevards did not cross their simulations and dioramas of futurity. It refused the shapes Mark Spitz conjured in his visions of reinvention in the big city. (Whitehead 2011, "Sunday")

It is only fitting that the constructors of this new city should be the new transformed masses of skels overrunning the streets. It is also fitting that the story of the flâneur should end with him plunging in the new crowd overflowing the streets. But it is crucial to discern that through this gesture, through his willingness to risk being jostled or killed in the streets, the flâneur actually transforms into something new himself—a beacon of activism. *Zone One* thus juxtaposes the attitude that seeks to neutralize the shock of any catastrophe through a play of mirrors with a stance that accepts the aftermath of such catastrophe and turns observation into an ethical act of witnessing. As Kaplan explains, witnessing "involves a stance that has public meaning or importance and transcends individual emphatic or vicarious suffering to produce community" (23). A ragtag community is not only something Mark Spitz ultimately becomes a part of—be it when he shares personal stories with his team, or when he steps into the sea of skels—but also something the text itself builds by utilizing different perspectives on dealing with urban catastrophe, especially the flâneurian optics and popular horror imagery, on one hand, and the dialectic of passivity and activism, on the other hand. In this way, the horrors of catastrophe are "worked through", and the ruined city becomes once again a home for the transformed flâneur.

In this light, Whitehead's novel may be situated among other literary works dealing with the trauma of 9/11 attacks by offering a reconfiguration of the shock of the catastrophe and providing an alternative to the disjointed spectacle of catastrophe in the form of ethical focus. Thus, the post-catastrophic reality may begin to be accepted as calling for shared witnessing, which would "[prepare] us to take responsibility for preventing future occurrence" of injustice (Kaplan 23).

WORKS CITED

Benjamin, Walter. *The Arcades Project*. Trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002.

Buck-Morss, Susan. "The Flâneur, the Sandwichman and the Whore: The Politics of Loitering." *New German Critique* 39. Second Special Issue on Walter Benjamin (1986): 99–140.

Ferry, Peter. "Reading Manhattan, Reading American Masculinity." *Culture, Society & Masculinities* 3.1 (2011): 49–61.

Freud, Sigmund. "Beyond the Pleasure Principle." *The Freud Reader.* Ed. Peter Gay. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1989. 594–626.

Kaplan, E. A.. *Trauma Culture: The Politics of Terror and Loss in Media and Literature*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2005.

Lauster, Martina. "Walter Benjamin's Myth of the 'Flâneur.'" *The Modern Language Review* 102.1 (2007): 139–156.

Poe, Edgar Allan. "The Man of the Crowd." *Poestories.com*. 10 Jan. 2016.

Pound, Ezra. *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley*. *Project Gutenberg*, 2007. 10 Jan. 2016.

Whitehead, Colson. *The Colossus of New York. A City in Thirteen Parts*. New York: Anchor Books, 2003. Kindle file.

—. *Zone One. A Novel*. New York: Doubleday, 2011. Kindle file.