

*Inhabiting the Now: Purpose and the Present Moment in Zone One and Station Eleven*

Both Zone One and Station Eleven depict central characters who are detached from their surrounding communities: Mark Spitz and Miranda, in turn. Each character's detachment is a product of his or her lack of interest in the future; both Spitz and Miranda recognize intrinsic value in the moment at hand, a capability that is in tension with the restless, future-oriented mindsets of the people around them. Colson Whitehead and Emily St. John Mandel use these characters to highlight the restlessness of humans and call into question traditional notions of "purpose" as solely linked to future success.

Though he works as one of many "sweepers" who spend their days clearing out zombies from buildings in post-apocalyptic Manhattan, Mark Spitz, the protagonist of Zone One, does not think in the same way as those around him. While the other survivors are focused on the future—they are unified under a new government, the Phoenix Republic, characterized by the slogan "We Make Tomorrow" (32)—Spitz does not think beyond his immediate circumstances. Rather, he has come to believe, "if you weren't concentrating on how to survive the next five minutes, you wouldn't survive them" (32). Because of his resistance to hopeful, future-oriented thought, Mark Spitz is an outsider in the post-apocalyptic world of Zone One.

Mark Spitz's resistance to the forward-looking mindset that surrounds him is mirrored in the stragglers, the small percentage of zombies that do not become

killers. Pondering the existence of these creatures, Spitz's boss, the Lieutenant, says, "the plague converts the human body into the perfect vehicle for spreading copies of itself." However, the stragglers are "mistakes," who "don't know what they're supposed to" (120). In contrast to the skels—the majority of zombies, who are reproductive machines—the stragglers are stuck and confused. The Lieutenant's description suggests that while the existence of the skels revolves around a central purpose, that of the stragglers is misguided and pointless. The distinction between skels and stragglers mirrors the relationship between Mark Spitz and the other survivors. The other survivors, like the skels, are driven by the goal of reproducing and expanding their population. Mark Spitz, on the other hand, is driven by nothing besides immediate necessity. Like the stragglers, there is no forward momentum to his existence, whereas the people around him, like the skels, are always pushing forward, pushing *towards* something.

Miranda, a central character in *Station Eleven*, mirrors Mark Spitz in that she is similarly detached from the future-oriented mindset that characterizes her environment. In contrast to the people that surround her, who are consumed by thoughts about the future, Miranda is perpetually wrapped up in a project—a series of comic books about a futuristic planet called Station Eleven—from which she derives immediate pleasure. The people around her cannot relate to her motivation for working on this project. Her boyfriend, Pablo, asks, "I don't even understand your project. What are you actually going for here?" (87). Years later, after she marries Arthur, a dinner guest asks her if she plans on publishing her work, to which she responds, "It's the work itself that's important to me...not whether I

publish it or not.” When the guest probes, “What’s the point of doing all that work... if no one sees it?” she responds, “It makes me happy. It’s peaceful” (95).

The conversations between Miranda and the people around her about her work depict a disconnect between her values and those of the majority of society. Pablo asks her what she is “going for;” the dinner guests asks her “what’s the point.” These questions imply a necessary motivation for creative work that goes beyond the individual and the moment at hand. According to the people around her, since Miranda is not planning to publish her comic books, the process of doing the work is devoid of purpose. These people do not understand the concept of doing work for the sake of the process, for the sake of oneself. Miranda’s desire to work on Station Eleven because it brings her happiness and peace sets her apart from the people around her, and highlights the success-driven mentality of the society she inhabits.

The tension between Dr. Eleven and the other characters in the Station Eleven project reflects Miranda’s relationship to the people around her. Dr. Eleven, the hero of the series who resembles Miranda in many ways, is in conflict with the people of the Undersea. They are stranded together on the planet of Station Eleven after an alien invasion of Earth, and the people of the Undersea long to leave this planet and return home (83). Dr. Eleven does not relate to their longing; in one scene, his mentor, Captain Lonagan, says, “You should try to understand them. All they want is to see sunlight again” (83). Dr. Eleven’s inability to relate to the people of the Undersea reflects Miranda’s disconnect with other people on Earth.

The characters and storyline of Miranda’s comic books become lenses through which she looks at the places and people around her. While daydreaming at

work about her project, Miranda imagines that the people of the Undersea are “aware at all times of the fathoms of ocean above them, resentful of Dr. Eleven and his colleagues who keep Station Eleven moving forever through deep space. They are always waiting, the people of the Undersea. They spend all their lives waiting for their lives to begin” (86). In Miranda’s mind, the people of the Undersea are restless and perpetually aware of an existence beyond the one they are currently experiencing. They view their current existence as a sort of nothingness, devoid of tangible indications of time and space—they are in “deep space,” and will be there “forever.” Their only preoccupation is with the future—they are perpetually “waiting for their lives to begin.” The notion that their lives have yet to begin further highlights their conception of the present moment as a limbo, predating meaningful time that will come in the future.

Miranda’s perception of the people of the Undersea indicates an interpretation of the people around her on Earth. The people of the Undersea are fixated on what will come next, and associate their current existence with purposelessness. They do not understand Dr. Eleven’s complacency, just as the people around Miranda do not comprehend her peaceful, moment-by-moment existence. Through the lens of her comic book, Miranda interprets the people around her as existing restlessly in a state of limbo, leading a life of perpetual waiting.

The restlessness of the people of the Undersea and their earthly counterparts corresponds to the restlessness of the survivors around Mark Spitz in Zone One. Aware that his perspective is divergent from the norm, Spitz muses about the

people around him, “Why else were they in Manhattan but to transport the old ways across the violent passage of the calamity to the safety of the other side?” (59). Spitz recognizes the prevailing notion of the current era of New York as a “passage,” across which the survivors are trying to “transport” their pasts. This image strips the present moment of any intrinsic value: it is an era of transition, to be passed over quickly, rather than a desired state of existence. Spitz’s conception of the current moment as a “passage” mirrors the state of limbo that Miranda envisions in Station Eleven. Like the people of the Undersea, who are stuck waiting for what is to come, the people in Zone One cannot stop fixating on their visions of the future.

Just as Miranda and Dr. Eleven are unable to comprehend or relate to the restlessness around them, Mark Spitz cannot wrap his head around his future-obsessed environment. He poses the question to himself, “If you don’t believe [in this prevailing mindset]...why are you here?” (59). Mark Spitz does not buy into any visions of a future thriving society, and though he recognizes the restlessness and longing that characterizes the people around him, he cannot relate to these emotions. In a fashion similar to Miranda and Dr. Eleven, Mark Spitz inhabits the present moment, and performs tasks with no future goal in mind.

At first glance, Mark Spitz, like the stragglers, leads a purposeless existence because he is not working *towards* anything. However, Whitehead challenges this association between purpose and future success by offering an alternate conception of purpose that is linked to a moment’s intrinsic value. The Lieutenant makes this proposal when he says about the stragglers, “they know what they’re doing. Verve and a sense of purpose. What do we have? Fear and danger.” He goes on to say that

the straggler is “always inhabiting it’s perfect moment. They’ve found it—where they belong” (196). In this passage, the Lieutenant’s perspective on the stragglers flips from what it had been in the past. While he previously referred to them as “mistakes” because they do not demonstrate the same purpose shown by the skels, he is now saying that they possess a purpose that the skels, and that most humans, lack. He defines this sense of purpose as a sense of belonging—the stragglers are always completely wrapped up in the moment that they inhabit. By extension, the Lieutenant suggests that a future-oriented existence, such as that of the skels, does not necessarily imply purpose.

The final scene of Zone One further asserts the problematic nature of a future-oriented existence. After countless days of rebuilding, the work that the survivors have put into the future is rendered insignificant, as the zombies overcome the barricade and slowly take over Manhattan. However, in this moment, Mark Spitz finds himself “smiling because he hadn’t felt this alive in months” (311). He then realizes, “Of course he was smiling. This is where he belonged” (312). In this scene Spitz reflects the Lieutenant’s description of the stragglers—just as they eternally occupy their perfect moments, Spitz has found the moment in which he feels happiest, in which he belongs. Ironically, Spitz’s discovery of his own purpose corresponds with a disintegration of the imagined purposes of the rest of the Pheonix Republic. Through this backwards correspondence, Whitehead satirizes the hopeful, future-oriented mindsets of the other survivors.

The juxtaposed lives and deaths of Miranda and Arthur Leander parallel the divergent endings of Mark Spitz and the other survivors in Zone One. Miranda, who

never looks forward but is always at peace with her work, lives a life of contentment. She repeats the mantra “*I repent nothing*” (89), and her death seems to live up to this statement—infected with the plague, she dies on the beach, “smil[ing] at the thought that there were people in this reeling world who were safe” (227). Arthur, whose character embodies restlessness and movement—he repeatedly marries and divorces, and is rarely content with what he has—finds himself at the end of his life “a man who repented almost everything, regrets crowding in around him like moths to a light” (327). Because he was always fixated on the future, the moments in Arthur’s life are rendered meaningless, like the moments experienced by most of the apocalypse survivors in Zone One, who were always looking forward and striving for a different, better future. Miranda and Mark Spitz, in contrast, end their lives as they lived them: content and at peace with their past and present existences.

Colson Whitehead and Emily St. John Mandel complicate traditional notions of purpose, and suggest that a restless, constant preoccupation with the future strips human life of meaning. They propose, through the characters of Miranda and Mark Spitz, that purpose and meaning can come out of contentment in the present moment. This proposal is in tension with the American preoccupation with the future: we strive to constantly reproduce, to publish, to succeed and to build. The American identity is shaped by notions of progress, of what is to come, but these texts push us to question what we are missing out on when we enter into this mindset.