

Introduction
Sucking in the Seventies

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One day in the spring of my sophomore year of high school, my social studies teacher, Mr. Houvenin, confiscated my copy of the latest Rolling Stones record. I had bicycled to the record store during my lunch period to buy it and was showing it off to friends at my locker when the stern, imposing faculty member, fresh to us from a Marine stint, seized the LP from me. As I was informed, my purchase would be returned after the final bell – in a paper sack.

This intervention in my record collecting seemed rather unnecessary. The year was not 1971 and the record *Sticky Fingers*, with its Andy Warhol-designed crotch-shot cover of an enviable erection beneath an actual working zipper. Nor was it 1976 and the album *Black and Blue*. That one was controversial for its advertising campaign featuring a model roped up spread-eagle and made up to appear battered and bruised from a round of sadomasochistic sex. Rather, the year was 1981, roughly five months after the election of Ronald Reagan and the murder of John Lennon, and even the Stones' most recent provocation – their racist “tribute” to the supposedly unquenchable libidos of African American women on *Some Girls* (1978) – seemed a distant memory to a quickly maturing sixteen-year-old. As I tried to plead with Mr. Houvenin, taking offense at a record this late in rock 'n' roll history seemed absolutely absurd. Both of my parents, after all, were younger than either Mick Jagger or Keith Richards. Unpersuaded by this line of argument, my teacher tapped at the title on the jacket cover and shook his head.

Sucking in the Seventies, the record was called.

Had I been a better debater in those days, I might have argued that the title was an admission on the Stones' part that their output in the 1974–1980 period that this compilation commemorated hardly ranked, except for the *Some Girls* cuts, among their best work. I did not think Mr. Houvenin was interested in debating the merits of such erratic albums as *Goats Head Soup* or *Emotional Rescue*, however. Had I been a savvier grammarian I might

have pointed out that the verb “to suck” can be intransitive as well as transitive and therefore did not require dirty minds to insert a direct object to complete the image. Had I been a historian with foresight I might have tried to convince him we were poised almost exactly at the midpoint when this offensive expression would be ameliorated into a commonplace one. Because he came from a military background, Mr. Houvenin might have known that one of the earliest public uses of the phrase was Michael Herr’s 1968 *Esquire* article “Hell Sucks,” which by then had become a central chapter of Herr’s Vietnam chronicle *Dispatches* (1977). Had I had some prescience I might have told him there would come a day in 1990 when a truly terrible TV show called *Uncle Buck* would attempt to distract from its awfulness by kicking off its premiere episode with a seven-year-old telling her brother, “Miles, you suck!” – a landmark moment in opening the floodgates to crude language in the public airwaves.¹ (As I write this, the governor of the state in which I live and pay taxes has just ignited a firestorm of controversy by declaring in a press conference that our education system “sucks,” a crude assessment unbefitting an elected official, but one for which the gentleman refuses to apologize.)

Back in 1981, though, I was simply a teenager with a mild but unfulfilled hunger for rebellion. I knew the innuendo in the Stones’ title was not designed for polite company. Mr. Houvenin was equally aware I was testing him. Only two years earlier a kid at my junior high had been sent home for sporting a T-shirt with the infamous “Disco Sucks” legend stenciled on the chest. I was probably feeling a little cocky that my indiscretion did not rise to that level of punishment. So as Mr. Houvenin strolled away with my record, ready to stuff it into the brown paper bag he probably kept handy for just such a moment, the smart aleck in me could not help but press my luck just a little further: “Well, you know . . . the 1970s,” I assured him, “they really did *suck* . . .”

Cultural commentators might not have stated it so coarsely, but few would have challenged that perception. Most decades wear out their welcome by the time the calendar prepares to flip to a new one, but the ten years that saw the United States suffer through Watergate and the near impeachment of Richard M. Nixon, the defeating end of the Vietnam War with the fall of Saigon, recession and stagflation, the energy crisis, the effects of the sexual revolution on divorce rates and the constitution of the nuclear family, and an endless series of gaudy fads and eye-rolling trends struck observers as more enervating and exhausting than usual. Perhaps most perniciously, the era seemed tainted by a tackiness that made even these upheavals seem as tasteless as anarchic. Only weeks before the

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era officially ended and the 1980s ushered in a new age of homiletic conservatism, Norman Mailer diagnosed why the times felt so vacuous:

The '70s was the decade in which people put emphasis on the skin, on the surface, rather than on the root of things. It was the decade in which image became preeminent because nothing deeper was going on. If there is nothing happening in the depths, then people pay a great deal of attention to the surface. The human energy that is grounded in curiosity must attach itself to something. If nothing is going on down below, we will look very carefully at the skin of things. That is why skin flicks and pornographic magazines have been so successful.²

One could argue that deeper transformations were indeed occurring in the 1970s – most significantly, the economic downturn responsible for halting the prosperity middle-class Americans had enjoyed almost unabated since the end of World War II. Yet, digging to the root of these changes required more historical perspective than the moment provided. From the vantage of 1979, it was hard not to agree with Mailer that superficiality had infected the cultural mindset, rendering events that should have prompted grave responses absurd if not outright silly. This was the age when the government informant most responsible for bringing down Nixon – FBI associate director Mark Felt, whose identity was only publicly confirmed thirty years later in 2005 – adopted his pseudonym from the first pornographic movie to lure mainstream audiences to adult theaters. Just to hear Johnny Carson make *Deep Throat* jokes in 1974 while reading Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein's revelations of Nixon's malfeasance from *their* *Deep Throat* in *All the President's Men* created the sense that not only was the United States in decline but that it would not even be allowed to go down – either literally or metaphorically – with dignity. In many ways, assessments like Mailer's that the 1970s were surface- rather than root-oriented served as a prophylactic measure against this widespread infection of sleazy flippancy. End-of-the-decade assessments echoed Mailer and insisted that the past ten years had been a veritable waste of time. "The perfect Seventies symbol was the Pet Rock," wrote Howard Junker in *Esquire*, referring to the novelty gift item that allowed consumers to pretend they raised a polished stone as if it were a dog or cat. "[It] just sat there and did nothing."³ Former Yippie leader Abbie Hoffman – who spent most of the decade on the run from a cocaine conviction – called the 1970s "one long inhale" and insisted "about the best thing you can say of [them] is that they didn't happen." The cultural thrust of the 1980s was largely directed at acting as if they never had – or, at the very least, to paying for the sins of the 1970s by reembracing

conservative values and returning the USA to its mythical golden age. Most commentators in the Reagan era did not have to agree with Hoffman's politics to agree tacitly with his assessment: "It's hard to imagine the historians of the next century getting worked up about this decade."⁴

A funny thing happened on the way to the dustbin of history, however. By the early 1990s, signs suggested an unexpected nostalgia for this fiercely dismissed age of malaise and inanity. Interest in the decade perhaps should not have been surprising. Nostalgia tends to run in twenty-year cycles; the 1970s themselves had witnessed a curious fascination with the 1950s, from hit television programs like *Happy Days* (1974–1984) to the popular "all oldies-but-goodies" radio programming adopted by various FM radio stations around the country. Music was, in fact, the medium through which 1970s nostalgia was first audible. In 1990 two beleaguered yuppies, Craig Balsam and Cliff Chenfeld, founded a mock organization called the Seventies Preservation Society and began marketing mail-order compilations of 1970s radio hits with clever TV commercial campaigns. Their first collection, *Those Fabulous '70s*, sold 100,000 copies by stirring memories of the Partridge Family's "I Think I Love You," Terry Jacks's "Seasons in the Sun," and the Bay City Rollers' "Saturday Night." At its early 1990s peak, the Seventies Preservation Society boasted membership of 130,000 and operated a 1-800 phone line for consumers to call in to learn 1970s trivia.

Movies soon joined in to accelerate the revival. In 1992 director Quentin Tarantino scored a gruesome torture scene culminating in a severed ear in his debut film, *Reservoir Dogs*, to the tune of 1973's "Stuck in the Middle with You" by the long-defunct Stealers Wheel. From there it was a short hop to movies actually set in the 1970s, such as Richard Linklater's *Dazed and Confused* (1994) and Paul Thomas Anderson's *Boogie Nights* (1997). Both of these highly praised films ignited a trend in the 1990s for depicting the denim and polyester heyday of Led Zeppelin and Linda Lovelace as a time of winsome, free-spirited innocence soon to be lost to the crushing epidemic of AIDS and the soullessness of yuppie greed. By 1998 the decade even had its own television sitcom, *That '70s Show*, which managed to run all the way to 2006, eight seasons that lasted almost as long as the 1970s themselves. (A spin-off called *That '80s Show*, by contrast, was cancelled after thirteen episodes.)

But it wasn't just the entertainment industry that was 1970s-obsessed. As early as 1991 the *New York Times* reported on the phenomenon of nightclubs across the country sponsoring Disco Retro nights.⁵ These theme evenings invited revelers to boogie-oogie-oogie in thrift-shop-salvaged leisure suits and platform shoes to a wall-to-wall soundtrack of Donna

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Summer, Chic, and KC and the Sunshine Band. Attendees at such faux-Studio 54 bacchanals sometimes scratched their heads in amazement at the sight of friends doing the hustle or the bump or the soon-to-be-ubiquitous Village People “YMCA” dance. A mere twelve years had passed since the night on July 21, 1979 when a promotional stunt called Disco Demolition Night staged in between a Chicago White Sox doubleheader at Comiskey Park sparked a riot at which thousands of angry (and drunk) rock music fans rushed the field to hurl, burn, and stomp copies of the *Saturday Night Fever* soundtrack and other hit disco records. More than any other event, this Dionysian outburst of hatred for an otherwise innocuous fad symbolized the combustive impatience with the culture of the 1970s that smoldered and fumed by the decade’s end.⁶ To hear suddenly revelers only a dozen years later expressing their admiration for the genius of the Bee Gees or the charisma of John Travolta – both widely mocked and disparaged as has-beens throughout the 1980s – was to realize the rapidity with which nostalgia can redeem even the most loathed of cultural symbols after only a short interregnum.⁷

Given the breadth and visibility of the 1970s revival, it was inevitable that the decade would catch the eye of pop culture sociologists. In 1994 the zine creator and novelist Pagan Kennedy published *Platforms: A Microwaved Cultural Chronicle of the 1970s*. Beneath its breezy celebrations of *The Brady Bunch*, Blaxploitation movies, and eight-track tapes, the book explained, as the *New York Times* had pondered in its Disco Retro article three years earlier, why people reembraced a time “pockmarked” by bad taste and anomie when “a relived decade is supposed to recall a golden age, a time when life was more prosperous, innocent or spiritually fulfilling” (C3). As Kennedy (b. 1963) argued, the 1970s were the decade that the first wave of the post-baby boom generation passed from childhood into their teen years. Now, as she and her peers began to emerge from the extended adolescence of their twenties into the uncertain adulthood of their thirties, they found themselves drawn to the cultural detritus of the Nixon/Carter era to understand how the uncertainties and attitudes of that period had stamped their character. *Platforms* belonged to a series of books published in 1991–1994 marketed specifically to readers born in the 1960s that emulated the format of the recent bestseller that gave the cohort its name and briefly made it an object of media inquiry, Douglas Coupland’s *Generation X: Tales for an Accelerated Culture* (1991). With the central text offset with columns of marginalia, interpolated cartoons, charts, graphs, and blurbs, the unusual design of these books that Coupland made trendy was meant to evoke the fanzines that the hipper of this demographic might have grown up with in

the mid- to late 1970s. In that time, the underground press of the 1960s gave way to the DIY or “Do It Yourself” aesthetic of punk rock, which in turn informed the alternative scene of this cohort’s 1980s college years. Less remarked upon is the fact that not only the format of books like *Platforms* but their oversized 7" × 9" size also harked back to such 1970s classics as *Our Bodies, Ourselves* (1973) and *The Whole Earth Catalog* (1968–1972). If the content of these texts encouraged readers to take 1970s culture seriously, their look and even shape reinforced that persuasive impetus by emulating comforting touchstones of Gen Xers’ childhood.

By the turn of the millennium, historians proper embraced the 1970s. The year 2000 saw the publication of David Frum’s *How We Got Here: The Seventies, the Decade that Brought You Modern Life – For Better or Worse*, followed the next year by Bruce J. Schulman’s *The Seventies: The Great Shift in American Culture, Society, and Politics*. Despite different political orientations (Frum is a conservative, Schulman a liberal), both scholars agreed that, far from a temporal dead zone, the 1970s marked a period of intense change responsible for the political divisiveness and cultural fragmentation plaguing present-day America. Nixon’s Southern strategy and the naming of the Silent Majority, the population migration from the Rustbelt to the Sunbelt, the industrial move away from heavy manufacturing toward high tech, the rise of ethnic pride and identity politics, and the normalization of irony and sardonicism as the dominant tone in entertainment and the media all planted the seeds for the United States as lived in thirty and forty years later. Reviewing both books in the *New Yorker*, Louis Menand implicitly agreed with Kennedy in *Platforms* that the 1970s resuscitation was generationally driven. Yet he shrugged off claims that the period was anything approaching epochal. The “decade business,” as Menand put it, is “a complete distraction.” In a marvelous bit of circular reasoning, he argued that the 1970s were transformational only to people who were transformed during them:

When we are talking about the nineteen-seventies as some sort of reasonably discrete historical entity, what we are really talking about is something that exists mainly in the heads of the cohort that reached adulthood at some point in that decade, the people who between 1970 and 1979 were at the time of life when the mind is soft enough to take an impression yet firm enough to retain it. These people carry the cultural imprint of the period with them for the rest of their lives.⁸

The argument makes sense when one realizes that Frum (b. 1960) and Schulman (b. 1959), like Kennedy, came of age in the late 1970s. Yet

Menand was perhaps too dismissive and failed to consider other reasons for the fixation with the decade: the maligning it had suffered throughout the 1980s made it ripe for reevaluation, perhaps even encouraging inflated claims for its importance to counteract its neglect; the utter garishness of its fashions and the risibility of its more self-absorbed trends – the multifarious self-help fads that drove Tom Wolfe to dub it “the ‘Me’ Decade” in 1976 – tempted commentators to drill for unmined profundity beneath the surface frippery;⁹ and the supposed splintering of the social fabric, whether blamed upon rising divorce rates or multiculturalism, held out the counter-vailing promise for historians of coming up with unifying theses that could render the chaos rational. Menand’s review was intended as both a caution and a corrective against demarcations of history by decade and generation. Yet, it did nothing to discourage the intrigue with the 1970s among Frum and Schulman’s peers – or even to lead them to moderate their claims for its importance. The better part of another decade may have been required for their interest to reach print, but by the early 2010s a slew of 1970s histories began to appear. Will Kaufman’s *American Culture in the 1970s* (2009), Jefferson Cowie’s *Stayin’ Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class* (2010), Francis Wheen’s *Strange Days Indeed: The 1970s: The Golden Days of Paranoia* (2010), Judith Stein’s *Pivotal Decade: How the United States Traded Factories for Finance in the Seventies* (2010), *The Hidden 1970s: Histories of Radicalism*, edited by Dan Berger (2010), Thomas Borstelmann’s *The 1970s: A New Global History from Civil Rights to Economic Inequality* (2012), Rick Perlstein’s *The Invisible Bridge: The Fall of Nixon and the Rise of Reagan* (2014), and Ron Jacobs’s *Daydream Sunset: The 60s Counterculture in the 1970s* (2015) are just a few salient titles. In a review essay on many of these works, the team of Barbara Keys, Jack Davies, and Elliott Bannan suggested the 180-degree turn in the decade’s reputation could be measured by contrasting two titles published nearly a quarter-century apart. In 1982 the historian Peter Carroll called his assessment of the 1970s *It Seemed Like Nothing Happened*. In 2006 Edward D. Berkowitz named his revisionary take *Something Happened*.¹⁰

In addition to pop culture and history, the 1970s were also happening in literary circles. The same year that Kennedy’s *Platforms* appeared, Rick Moody published *The Ice Storm*, a satire of suburbia set in 1973. It was not the first retro-1970s novel to capture major attention. That distinction probably belongs to Jeffrey Eugenides’s *The Virgin Suicides* (1993). Eugenides did not pack era signifiers into his descriptive passages, however – that would have to wait for Sofia Coppola’s wan 1999 movie adaptation. Instead, he employed a communal “we” as a narrative

perspective to intone a sense of generational reckoning with the legacy of 1970s disaffection. Moody, by contrast, directly confronted one of the more derided fads associated with the era, the phenomenon of “swinging” – or, to use the more sexist term, “wife swapping.” The topic had been treated in several period works, most notably in John Hawkes’s *The Blood Oranges* (1971), John Irving’s *The 158-Pound Marriage* (1974), and Gay Talese’s controversial history of the sexual revolution, *Thy Neighbor’s Wife* (1980). Moody’s depiction of familial hypocrisy and dissolution – later adapted into a beautifully disturbing 1997 film version by director Ang Lee – supported the general thesis Kennedy advanced that the social liberties of the times had deeply unsettled post-baby boomers. As I have argued elsewhere, the commonplace that children growing up in the 1970s – the “latchkey kids,” as we were called – were exposed to too much too soon occasioned a curious reorientation of adolescent rebellion in the coming-of-age novel itself: rather than protest puritanical conservatism as the Lost Generation or the Beats had, Generation X knowingly or not critiqued the permissiveness of their adolescence and pined for the cozy pieties of hearth and home.¹¹ Beyond theme, though, the main point here is the sheer stamina of the 1970s’ appeal to literary writers. As *The Ice Storm* nears its own (unthinkable) twenty-fifth anniversary, contemporary fiction has produced a profusion of novels set in the period that shows no sign of abating: Tom Perrotta’s *Bad Haircut: Stories of the Seventies* (1994), Scott Phillips’s *The Ice Harvest* (2000), Michael Collins’s *The Keepers of Truth* (2000), Jonathan Lethem’s *The Fortress of Solitude* (2003) and *Dissident Gardens* (2013), Lauren Groff’s *Arcadia* (2012), Rachel Kushner’s *The Flamethrowers* (2013), and Darcey Steinke’s *Sister Golden Hair* (2014) are just a handful of notable examples. Nor is this trend limited to authors born in the 1960s. T. Coraghessan Boyle’s *Drop City* (2003) and Thomas Pynchon’s *Inherent Vice* (2009) are meticulously detailed, almost archeological excavations of the 1970s by two highly celebrated authors. The dense texture of historical reference common among these works is present as well in Philip Roth’s *American Pastoral* (1997), which climaxes amid a fractious dinner party where discussions of *Deep Throat* and Watergate spark life-changing revelations of adultery and hypocrisy. The literary fascination with the decade would seem to have climaxed in 2015 with Garth Risk Hallberg’s *City on Fire*, a 927-page evocation of pre-gentrification New York City that shocked publishing observers by earning a seven-figure advance. Undoubtedly, Hallberg capitalized upon the nostalgia for days when Manhattan and Brooklyn were grimmer and still hospitable to bohemians, before housing costs outpriced

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all but the wealthiest of hedge-fund managers and media moguls. This nostalgia had been stoked a half-decade earlier by Patti Smith's National Book Award-winning *Just Kids* (2010), the punk-rock poet's affectionate tribute to her pre-stardom life in the Big Apple with photographer Robert Mapplethorpe.

Reviewing Groff, Kushner, Steinke, and others in the intellectual journal *n + 1*, Nicholas Dames makes the interesting argument that “Seventies Throwback Fiction” does not just scratch a nostalgic itch but offers a new type of nostalgia. Rather than pine for a lost past of possibilities – the sort of wistfulness that characterizes novels that grapple with the 1960s, for instance – 1970s “historical pastiche” settles into the peculiar indirection and stasis for which the decade was dismissed in its own day and embraces the “constant bewilderment” of social and economic decline. Recreating this anomie, novelists take shelter in the downbeat withdrawal, finding in the drift not “confinement but a kind of freedom; the aimlessness can seem like spaciousness, a shambling kind of grace . . . a wisened-up recognition of limits, of narrowed horizons – but once those limits are accepted, what freedoms exist! Particularly the freedom to not have to not be depressed.” Dames's closing paragraph argues for the revisionary power of looking back to “diminished expectations” rather than lost or squandered potential:

What if one could imagine a nostalgia that didn't idealize, that in fact celebrated a past moment's stubborn resistance to idealization, that coexisted with anhedonia? The twist of these novels . . . is that they aren't yearning for any belle époque – but they yearn nonetheless. Their nostos is that short moment of open dissolution, not yet needing to be denied, that now feels locked away. Why miss it? Because it was something to be trusted. Being nostalgic for it is a way of recognizing that it now seems too much to ask.¹²

The argument is elliptical and abstract with its “something”s and “it”s, but what Dames seems to be saying is that 1970s nostalgia offers an escape from the relentless idealism mandated by the American ethos – “freedom,” as he puts it, “from strenuous optimism.” Although he does not mention F. Scott Fitzgerald, a contrast to *The Great Gatsby* (1925) might be apt. If most nostalgia tends to place us in those fabled “boats against the current” where we beat on, “borne back ceaselessly into the past,” poignantly believing tomorrow “we will run faster, stretch our arms further,” the 1970s aura of “retrenchment” provides a humbler, more stoic, perhaps even more realistic, perspective on how we move forward. Instead of believing in the green light and “the orgastic future that year by year recedes before us,” we

assume the stance of the R. Crumb cartoon/catchphrase that was ubiquitous on T-shirts, belt buckles, and jean patches throughout the 1970s: we just Keep on Truckin'.¹³

If one cultural arena has remained stubbornly resistant to 1970s nostalgia, though, it is literary history. For all the contemporary novelists that have looked back upon the decade, their attention has not sparked any concomitantly noticeable surge of interest in novels, poems, and plays actually published during the period. To be sure, one can list any number of works that demonstrate the 1970s' literary vibrancy: James Dickey's *Deliverance* (1970), Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Sula* (1973), and *Song of Solomon* (1977), Ursula K. Le Guin's *The Lathe of Heaven* (1971), David Rabe's *The Basic Training of Pavlo Hummel* (1971) and *Streamers* (1976), Thomas Pynchon's *Gravity's Rainbow* (1973), William Gaddis's *J R* (1975), Marge Piercy's *Woman on the Edge of Time* (1976), Tim O'Brien's *Going After Cacciato* (1978), Joan Didion's *The White Album* (1979), and Norman Mailer's *The Executioner's Song* (1979) are just a small sample of 1970s achievements. That is not to mention the prolific output of John Updike, Philip Roth, Kurt Vonnegut, Audre Lorde, Alice Walker, and Adrienne Rich, among many others. So, too, several period works enjoy a cult reputation among popular audiences: one thinks of such initiation-rite reads as Hunter S. Thompson's *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas* (1972) or Robert M. Pirsig's *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* (1974). Yet, despite these examples, the 1970s have never inspired the type of scholarly love letters other decades routinely receive, such as Philip D. Beidler's *Scriptures for a Generation: What We Were Reading in the '60s* (1994) or Ann Douglas's *Terrible Honesty: Mongrel Manhattan in the 1920s* (1995). Perhaps the closest we have yet come to a comparable effort is the latter portion of Frederick R. Karl's *American Fiction, 1940–1980: A Comprehensive History and Critical Evaluation* (1983), a study that, as its subtitle suggests, is less concerned with the peculiarity of the 1970s than with the general development of post-World War II American writing.

One reason the literary developments of the 1970s have been overlooked is the overall suspicion toward periodization in the humanities since – well, since the late 1970s. Once upon a time literary historians such as Frederick J. Hoffman or Warren G. French produced studies with titles like *The Twenties: American Writing in the Postwar Decade* (1955), *The Forties: Fiction, Poetry, Drama* (1969), and *The Fifties: Fiction, Poetry, Drama* (1970). Yet, for nearly forty years now, literary studies has exhibited a conscientious aversion to totalizing history – a resistance to too tidily summing up the sweep of any flux of events – that, rightly or wrongly, makes the