Marlon Lieber

READING RACE RELATIONALLY

Embodied Dispositions and Social Structures in Colson Whitehead's Novels

[transcript] Lettre

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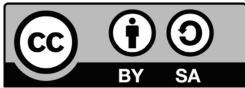

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Introduction: Reading | Race | Relationally

One of the characters who populate the post-apocalyptic wasteland that is the United States of America in Colson Whitehead's 2011 novel *Zone One* is a woman nicknamed the Quiet Storm. She is the leader of a team tasked with clearing a stretch of I-95 by towing cars abandoned along the highway. As such, she decides how her team members, including the novel's protagonist, a man called Mark Spitz, park the cars. This she does in seemingly idiosyncratic fashion.

> Sometime the Quiet Storm's directives did not inspire conjecture as to her motives; equally as often her orders contravened intuition. […] Mark Spitz noticed that the Quiet Storm favored patterns divisible by five, and grouped them by general size and occasionally by color, sometimes even towing a car for miles to fulfill her conception. […]. It wasn't until later that he saw the truth of it.[1]

Readers of *Zone One* only find out what this truth is some ninety pages later. At this earlier point the Quiet Storm seems to be acting without rhyme or reason. She is introduced as "one of the new skinheads," whose shaved heads are meant to "commemorate their deprivations," and her reticence lends an air of mystery to her actions. While the narrator acknowledges that the Quiet Storm is "more functional than most," readers cannot shake the suspicion that survivors like Mark Spitz regard the new skinheads as mentally unstable, to say the least.[2]

1 Colson Whitehead, *Zone One* (New York: Doubleday, 2011), 142.

2 Ibid., 141.

Much later, when Mark Spitz resumes telling another survivor the rest of this story about the Quiet Storm, he reveals the "truth of it," or, more precisely, he reveals what position one must assume to be able to grasp it. He recounts seeing the interstate from a helicopter and realizing that there was a meaning to the patterns ordered by the Quiet Storm, even if he cannot decipher it. From above, he sees that the Quiet Storm was

> inventing her alphabet and making declarations in a row of five green hatchbacks parked perpendicular to the median […]. The grammar lurked in the numbers and colors, the meaning encoded in the spaces between the vehicular syllables, half a mile, quarter mile.[3]

While this description of a large-scale arrangement of vehicles that is only visible from a distance is reminiscent of land art installations,[4] the narrator's choice of words—alphabet, grammar, syllables—suggests that the Quiet Storm is primarily a proxy for Whitehead himself. Indeed, the narrator comments that "[s]he wrote her way into the future." This is because—at least in the novel's diegetic world—there is no appropriate "readership" that inhabits the "right perspective" yet.[5] Why this is so will only become clear in this book's conclusion. I begin my study with a discussion of the Quiet Storm's automobile writing because it contains an important lesson that illuminates how Whitehead's entire literary oeuvre demands to be read. That is to say, this episode from *Zone One* implies that meaning does not reside in isolated elements (e.g., the Quiet Storm's "vehicular syllables") but rather in the relationships set up between elements. So, whatever may be specifically required to assume the "right perspective," what is indispensable is a reader capable of registering relations rather than things—a relational reader.

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3 Ibid., 232.

4 See Shouhei Tanaka, "Fossil Fuel Fiction and the Geologies of Race," *PMLA* 137, no. 1 (2022): 146.

5 Whitehead, *Zone One*, 233.

Racial Ideology and Literary Criticism

Whitehead's *Apex Hides the Hurt* and its reception serve to demonstrate what reading relationally entails. The novel's protagonist is a consultant whose job is to make up names for all kinds of things, from simple commodities to entire towns. The plot revolves around a Midwestern town in need of a rebranding, and the protagonist is brought in to help the members of the city council find a name that better expresses the spirit of the times. The mayor, a black woman named Regina Goode, proposes "Freedom," and readers soon discover that this was the name originally chosen by a band of freed slaves who founded the settlement in the 1860s. The mayor's choice seems to honor their history, which was erased when the town was later renamed by a barbed wire manufacturer. Stephanie Li argues—rhapsodizes, really—that this evinces Regina Goode's "powerful connection to community and racial identity." The protagonist, however, remains indifferent and is consequently diagnosed with lacking a "corresponding source of support and identity."[6] He is black, too, it should be noted. In other words, in Li's account of Whitehead's novel, racial identity serves as a yardstick by which the respective characters' actions are assessed.

As I will show in chapter two, there are quite different motivations for both characters' actions, motivations which have a lot more to do with the characters' respective positions in networks of social relationships and a lot less with their racial identities. In other words, the reader who does not attempt to grasp these relations and instead reduces the protagonist and the mayor to their blackness will fail to understand why they act as they do. This tacit reduction of "virtually everything people of African descent do, think, or say" as being "racial in nature" is, according to the historian Barbara Fields, an "absurd assumption." She offers a severe critique of the tendency to take race for granted as a classifying principle that individuals and institutions self-evidently employ to make sense of the social world. Such assumptions can result in mystification,

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6 Stephanie Li, *Signifying Without Specifying: Racial Discourse in the Age of Obama* (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2012), 91

Fields claims, as when chattel slavery is falsely conceived of "as primarily a system of race relations—as though the chief business of slavery were the production of white supremacy rather than the production of cotton, sugar, rice, and tobacco."[7] In short, Fields charges those who treat race as an immediate explanation for other social phenomena rather than as an object that warrants explanation itself with confusing cause and effect.

Therefore race and racism cannot be apprehended "in abstraction from other social relations" or their "specific historical contexts," as Stuart Hall argues. Using the language of Althusserian Marxism, he stresses the necessity of showing how "racism is reorganized and rearticulated with the relations of [...] modes of production" and warns against treating it as a "unitary, transhistorical, or universal" phenomenon.[8] Fields's analysis focuses on precisely such a historically specific context when she examines the relations of production on American plantations and shows how race gradually came to naturalize the enslavement of Africans and their descendants. Accordingly, it is possible to define race as "*a symbolic category, based on phenotype or ancestry and constructed according to specific social and hierarchical contexts, that is misrecognized as a natural category*."[9] Historically it functioned as a "means of explaining slavery to people whose terrain was a republic founded on radical doctrines of liberty and natural rights." The need to justify the "anomaly" of bondage, however, only emerged once most Americans "could, in fact, take liberty for granted."[10] Racial ideology, however, did not disappear with the formal abolition of slavery. Indeed, what Saidiya Hartman has expressed pithily as the "afterlife of slavery," that is "skewed life chances, limited access to health and education, premature death, incarceration,

7 Barbara J. Fields, "Slavery, Race, and Ideology in the United States of America," in Karen E. Fields and Barbara J. Fields, *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life* (London/New York: Verso, 2012), 116, 117.

8 Stuart Hall, "Race, Articulation and Societies Structured in Dominance," in *Selected Writings on Race and Difference*, ed. Paul Gilroy and Ruth Wilson Gilmore (Durham/London: Duke UP, 2021), 235, 234.

9 Matthew Desmond and Mustafa Emirbayer, "What is Racial Domination?" *Du Bois Review* 6, no. 2 (2009), 336, emphasis in original.

10 Fields, "Slavery, Race, and Ideology," 141.

and impoverishment," has continued to structure social relations in the United States.[11] Yet, how exactly the legacy of chattel slavery does so remains to be concretely shown. According to Fields, Americans—inside and outside the academy—continue to confuse cause and effect and commit what she elsewhere calls "the substitution of 'race' for 'racism.'"[12] That is, she argues that race is falsely conceived of as a property that individuals self-evidently possess; instead, she calls for an analysis of social relations of domination which (re)produce and (re)articulate race as a category.[13]

What Fields calls racial ideology serves as a tacit presupposition for a great deal of literary criticism both inside and outside the academy. Ever since Whitehead published his 2016 neo-slave narrative *The Underground*

11 Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), 6.

12 Barbara J. Fields, "Of Rogues and Geldings," in Karen E. Fields and Barbara J. Fields, *Racecraft: The Soul of Inequality in American Life* (London/New York: Verso, 2012), 96.

13 Some may balk at the compatibility between Fields and Hartman suggested here. Those who value the former for her historical materialism might denounce the latter for conceptualizing blackness as "a flattened, pure-and-simple metaphysic outside the scope of history, and outside of materialist or Marxist explanations," as José Sanchez puts it. "Against Afro-Pessimism," *Jacobin*, June 13, 2022, https://jacobin.com/2022/06/afro-pessimism-frank-wilderson-socialism-flattening-racism. As much as I am in sympathy with the spirit of Sanchez's Marxist critique, I do not think that it does Hartman justice. For her own definition of blackness "in terms of social relationality rather than identity," see Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997), 56–57. Put differently, I will not deny that some have read Hartman's work as suggesting that race, or more precisely anti-blackness, was a more or less transhistorical cause (and indeed Afropessimism might be a case in point); however, I do not think that this is a very good reading. Hartman's account of the reproduction of racialized domination and the rearticulation of blackness in the postbellum period offers a model for precisely the kind of historically specific scholarship that historical materialism should strive for. In other words, Marxists interested in the long history of so-called primitive accumulation would do well to read Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection*.

Railroad to great critical acclaim, winning both the Pulitzer Prize and the National Book Award, it seems difficult to imagine that, at one time, he was regularly admonished for not taking race seriously enough. Oprah Winfrey, who selected *The Underground Railroad* for her Book Club when it was published, summed up this sentiment when she remarked in an interview with Whitehead that "[n]one of [his] previous books tackle race and slavery head on."[14] While it is true that none of the previous novels contains a direct engagement with slavery, it is less convincing to say that they do not "tackle race," at all. They do, in fact, although not in a way readers in thrall to racial ideology may have expected. In a *Washington Post* review of *Zone One*, Ron Charles highlights that the protagonist is a "young black man," only to note that this "element of his identity" is "strangely" missing. Even though he praises Whitehead's writing, Charles's review operates on the assumption that race must define a black man's identity—even after civilization has all but collapsed in a zombie apocalypse.[15] Kimberly Fain, the author of the second scholarly monograph devoted to Whitehead's work, similarly laments that Whitehead's zombie novel fails to "address race in a meaningful and in-depth manner," mentioning *Apex Hides the Hurt* in the same breath.[16] What is more, Fain recommends that a more meaningful engagement with race would have allowed Whitehead to avoid sketching only "superficial characters."[17] But then, a character such as the nameless protagonist of *Apex*

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14 Colson Whitehead, interview by Oprah Winfrey, *Oprah*, August 2016, https://www.oprah.com/oprahsbookclub/oprahs-interview-with-colson-whitehead.

15 Ron Charles, "Zombies Abound," review of *Zone One*, by Colson Whitehead, *The Washington Post*, October 19, 2011, https://www.washingtonpost.com/entertainment/books/zone-one-by-colson-whitehead-zombies-abound/2011/10/09/gIQAGrMMvL_story.html.

16 Kimberly Fain, *Colson Whitehead: The Postracial Voice of Contemporary Literature* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 153. Fain's book seems to have suffered from lack of an attentive copy editor. In addition to its sometimes incomprehensible style, which makes the reconstruction of her arguments a daunting task, it gets fundamental facts about Whitehead's life and literary output wrong, such as the year of his birth (128) or the publication date of *John Henry Days* (74).

17 Ibid., 154. Fain suspects a "literary angst with [sic] racial subject matter" and charges Whitehead with playing down race in order to curry favor with the "lit-

can only be judged as superficial if one presupposes that he must have a specific relationship to history by virtue of his racial identity.

This is not to deny that criticism of Whitehead's work has universally condemned him as an author who evades race altogether, even before the publication of *The Underground Railroad* and *The Nickel Boys* (2019), another Pulitzer Prize-winner which very explicitly addresses the history of racist terror. Derek Maus, who wrote the first monograph on Whitehead, offers a nuanced analysis of the author's fictional and non-fictional work which highlights Whitehead's strategies of engaging with race.[18] Maus situates Whitehead's novels in the context of recent influential accounts of black cultural production in the post-Civil Rights era and uses the notion of a "postsoul aesthetic" as one of the "interpretive 'lenses'" through which to explore them.[19] Others have similarly employed the idea of "post-blackness" in reference to Whitehead's *Sag Harbor* (2009).[20] Since chapter three will address the latter in more detail, for now I merely want to briefly comment on the post-soul aesthetic.

The post-soul aesthetic, elaborated by Mark Anthony Neal in his 2002 book *Soul Babies*, presumes that the (real but limited) successes of

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erary establishment." The almost universal admiration expressed for *The Underground Railroad* gives the lie to this claim.

18 See Derek C. Maus, *Understanding Colson Whitehead: Revised and Expanded Edition*, (Columbia: U of South Carolina P, 2021), initially published in 2014. The revised edition contains a new chapter on *The Underground Railroad* and *The Nickel Boys*. Maus's book is everything Fain's is not: it is lucidly written and reveals its author's intimate familiarity with the subject. While it will become clear that I do not exactly share Maus's view that the "postsoul aesthetic" and "historiographic metafiction" can serve as the most appropriate heuristics through which to approach Whitehead's work, his book provides a very valuable survey of it nonetheless. Maus has also published a volume of interviews with Whitehead. See Derek C. Maus, ed., *Conversations with Colson Whitehead* (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2019).

19 Maus, *Understanding Colson Whitehead*, 9.

20 Touré, "Visible Young Man," review of *Sag Harbor*, by Colson Whitehead, *The New York Times*, May 1, 2009, https://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/03/books/review/Toure-t.html.

the Civil Rights movement introduced a generational rift in the African American population. Whitehead, who was born in 1969, certainly qualifies as a member of the post-soul generation and, thus, it is not unreasonable to assume that he shares some aesthetic and political concerns with others of the same cohort. Unlike the soul aesthetic, which had arisen, as Neal claims, in response to "the prevailing logic of white supremacy and segregation" by strategically appealing to a quasi-essentialist notion of blackness, the post-soul aesthetic allows for a critical reappropriation of "the full complexity of African-American life and culture," including, for instance, non-heteronormative sexualities, in the socio-political context of increasing freedom. Still, Neal's approach remains wedded to racial ideology as defined by Fields. Reflecting on responses to the racist "terror" of the "Reagan and Bush (Sr.) years," he prescribes a distinct political function to the "post-soul intelligentsia": "We are, perhaps, the black community's best intellectual hope to bridge the widening gap between yesterday's civil rights marchers and today's hip-hop thug."[21] Neal explicitly rejects the strategy of enforcing middle-class norms of propriety on the latter and, thus, the focus on racial uplift that characterized earlier hegemonic black political projects. And yet, he treats the "black community" as a collective which might be internally heterogeneous but still shares common interests that can be served by elite representatives—a group which conveniently includes himself. Acknowledging political scientist Adolph Reed's sharp critique of this model of political representation, Neal argues that "access to the engines of mass culture" can help to overcome the division between the black community and its representatives[22]—ironically missing Reed's explicit repudiation of the reliance on popular culture to transcend class divisions.[23] Or, to be more precise, Neal demands the "reconstitution

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21 Mark Anthony Neal, *Soul Babies: Black Popular Culture and the Post-Soul Aesthetic* (New York/London: Routledge, 2002), 4, 9, 104.

22 Ibid., 119.

23 According to Reed, the notion of a "black community" juxtaposes "an undifferentiated mass to a leadership stratum representing it" which results in a conflation of the interests of black elites, from which the leaders are usually recruited, with the interests of all American blacks so that the former's promo-

of community" under the aegis of the post-soul intelligentsia.[24] This is just to say, however, that he treats race as the self-evident basis of political action, thereby treating race as a cause—even if only a temporary and ineffective one that needs to be called upon to reconstitute the community—rather than an effect of historically specific relations of domination. Whitehead, to anticipate an argument that runs through the first three chapters of this book, consistently highlights the (class) divisions within the African American population that render these forms of politico-cultural representation problematic.

In an interview, Whitehead himself remarked that he is "dealing with serious race issues," though not "in a way people expect."[25] For my purposes, this means that race is an irreducible element of the worlds Whitehead invents in his fiction. In other words, Whitehead is not a post-racial writer, a notion he satirized in a 2009 *New York Times* op-ed piece.[26] At the same time, it is not at all clear from the outset what this

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tion into positions of political power comes to appear as an achievement for the latter. Adolph Reed, Jr., *Stirrings in the Jug: Black Politics in the Post-Segregation Era* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1999), 67. He rejects the use of mass culture as a means of validating the authenticity of intellectuals in "'What Are the Drums Saying, Booker?': The Curious Role of the Black Public Intellectual," in *Class Notes: Posing as Politics and Other Thoughts on the American Scene* (New York: The New Press, 2000), 87. Madhu Dubey similarly asserts that "the postmodern intellectual assumes the vernacular voice of the cultural interpreter […], in the hope that this strategy will more accurately represent the black urban masses. But the continued silence of the 'natives' is a precondition for the intellectual's attempt to speak for them." *Signs and Cities: Black Literary Postmodernism* (Chicago: The U of Chicago P, 2003), 39. For a reflection on the limits of "racial representation" in the context of the cycle of struggles associated with the Movement for Black Lives, see John Clegg, "Black Representation After Ferguson," *The Brooklyn Rail*, May 2016, https://brooklynrail.org/2016/05/field-notes/black-representation-after-ferguson.

24 Neal, *Soul Babies*, 120.

25 Colson Whitehead, "Going Up," interview by Laura Miller, *Salon*, January 12, 1999, https://www.salon.com/1999/01/12/cov_si_12int/.

26 Colson Whitehead, "The Year of Living Postracially," *The New York Times*, November 3, 2009, https://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/04/opinion/04whitehead.html.

means.[27] His novels might be set in worlds that bear the marks of the long history of racialized domination in the United States, yet they do not treat race as a category that immediately serves to explain characters' motivations or the structures of the novels' plots—race is not the essence that determines other phenomena in a system of "expressive causality," as it were.[28] Rather than treating race as a substance, it needs to be approached as a category which is constituted by social relations. That is to say, what is necessary is an approach that can shed light on the social genesis of the classificatory schemata which inform the actions and thoughts of social agents.

Thinking Relationally

It is precisely such an approach that can be found in the extensive work of the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. What unifies his research is a commitment to the "*primacy of relations*."[29] This amounts to a rejection of the

> substantialist mode of thought, which characterizes common sense—and racism—and which is inclined to treat the activities and preferences specific to certain individuals or groups in a society at a certain moment as if they were substantial properties, inscribed once and for all in a sort of biological or cultural *essence*.[30]

Interestingly, racism is the prime example Bourdieu uses to illustrate the pitfalls of substantialist thought. To avoid the latter, sociologists need to study the genesis of social systems of classification in order not to

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27 See also Mitchum Huehls, *After Critique: Twenty-First Century Fiction in a Neoliberal Age* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2016), 109.

28 See Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London: Routledge, 2002), 13.

29 Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc J. D. Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (Chicago: The U of Chicago P, 1992), 15, emphasis in original.

30 Pierre Bourdieu, *Practical Reason: On the Theory of Action*, trans. Randal Johnson et al. (Cambridge: Polity, 1998), 4, emphasis in original.

uncritically reproduce the "everyday opinions" or "prenotions" that individuals employ spontaneously.[31] Bourdieu conceptualizes society as a constituted whole structured by relationships which can be objectively mapped. In the 1960s and 70s, Bourdieu's writings drew heavily on structuralist thought, the novelty of which he claimed was

> the introduction into the social sciences of the structural method or, more simply, of the relational mode of thought which, by breaking with the substantialist mode of thought, leads one to characterize each element by the relationships which unite it with all the others in a system and from which it derives its meaning and function.[32]

Society, in other words, is best grasped as an ensemble of relations which exists "independently of individual consciousness and will," as Bourdieu puts it in language echoing Marx's famous preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy.*[33] Therefore, a "methodical break with primary experience" is a necessary first step so as not to mistake the spontaneous knowledge of individuals for a scientific account of society.[34] Otherwise one runs the risk of merely reproducing what Bourdieu calls "*doxic* experience," which takes social reality, its divisions, and hierarchies as self-evident.[35]

Yet according to his dialectical presentation of forms of sociological knowledge, the structuralist, or "objectivist," position is not sufficient on its own terms either. Society is not merely a constituted whole; it needs

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31 Pierre Bourdieu, Jean-Claude Chamboredon, and Jean-Claude Passeron, *The Craft of Sociology: Epistemological Preliminaries*, trans. Richard Nice (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1991), 13.

32 Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1990), 4.

33 Bourdieu and Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, 97; see also Karl Marx, *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Salo Ryazanskaya, in *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels: Collected Works*, vol. 29 (New York: International Publishers, 1987), 263.

34 Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, 14.

35 Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1977), 3, emphasis in original.

to be continuously reproduced—or transformed—in practice by social agents. The latter's actions cannot be grasped as the quasi-mechanical application of a rule (as structuralism assumes) but as strategies which depend on and mobilize a practical knowledge of the social world based on their social position. Thus, Bourdieu calls for a methodological "return to practice."[36] His name for this approach, which treats social structures as both objectively given and subjectively reproduced, is "*praxeology*":

> First, we push aside mundane representations to construct the objective structures (spaces of *position*), the distribution of socially efficient resources that define the external constraints bearing on interactions and representations. Second, we reintroduce the immediate, lived experience of agents in order to explicate the categories of perception and appreciation (*dispositions*) that structure their action from the inside.[37]

Arguably, Bourdieu's decade-spanning project to establish and refine a praxeological approach represents a methodically sophisticated attempt to derive a sociological research program that heeds the young Marx's reminder not to treat the object of study only contemplatively but as "*sensuous human activity, practice*."[38]

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36 Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, 19, 52.

37 Bourdieu and Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, 11, emphases in original.

38 Karl Marx, "Theses on Feuerbach," in *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels: Collected Works*, vol. 5 (New York: International Publishers, 1976), 3, emphasis in original. The first thesis on Feuerbach serves as an epigraph to the first book in which Bourdieu provides an account of his theory of practice: *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, originally published in 1972. The same methodological commitments still inform one of the last books Bourdieu completed before his death in 2002, in which he once more paraphrases Marx's first thesis: "one has to construct a materialist theory which is [...] capable of taking back from idealism the 'active side' [Marx's words] of practical knowledge that the materialist tradition has abandoned to it, [...] while recalling that this capacity to construct social reality, itself socially constructed, is not that of a transcendental subject but of a socialized body." *Pascalian Meditations*, trans. by Richard Nice (Cam-

In order to make sense of the relationship between positions and dispositions, Bourdieu needs a concept that can mediate between structure and practice. This is why he introduces the concept of habitus, which designates a system of dispositions including schemes of perception, appreciation, and action. To speak of dispositions implies the existence of more or less unconscious—or, using precise psychoanalytical terminology, preconscious—inclinations to think and act in specific ways. Moreover, to speak of a system of dispositions implies that these inclinations are not arbitrary but systematically structured so that the relative uniformity of individuals' practices is guaranteed.[39] Dispositions are acquired in practice beginning in early childhood. Thus they are the product of "conditionings associated with a particular class of conditions of existence," such as an individual's class position—but also other categories that serve to position social agents such as gender, nationality, or race. Acquired early, these dispositions are extremely durable and cannot be changed at will. They are "structured structures" which represent the internalization of social constraints; at the same time they act as generative principles which underlie social agents' practices. As such they function as "structuring structures."[40] Because individuals tend to feel like "fish in water" in situations which resemble the conditions of existence in which their habitus was established, this concept primarily serves to make sense of the reproduction of social structures.[41]

It is important to avoid understanding these dispositions as exclusively mental schemata. Instead, Bourdieu's sociology, drawing on Maurice Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology, stresses the importance of the body and bodily knowledge.[42] A habitus is acquired not by way of understanding explicit instructions but through corporeal learning, which

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bridge: Polity Press, 2000), 136. The contemplative attitude of (non-historical) materialism/structuralism/objectivism is, Bourdieu claims, a function of an unreflected "social separation" or detachment from practice (189).

39 See Hans-Peter Müller, *Pierre Bourdieu: Eine systematische Einführung* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2014), 37.

40 Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, 53.

41 Bourdieu and Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, 127.

42 See Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, ch. 4.

results in an inscription of the social order "in bodies" that consequently play the role of a "memory pad."[43] Bourdieu writes:

> The world is comprehensible, immediately endowed with meaning, because the body […] has been protractedly (from the beginning) exposed to its regularities. Having acquired from this exposure a system of dispositions attuned to these regularities, it is inclined and able to anticipate them practically in behaviours which engage a *corporeal knowledge* that provides a practical comprehension of the world quite different from the intentional act of conscious decoding that is normally designated by the idea of comprehension. In other words, if the agent has an immediate understanding of the familiar world, this is because the cognitive structures that he implements are the product of incorporation of the structures of the world in which he acts; the instruments of construction that he uses to know the world are constructed by the world.[44]

The corporal dimension of the habitus, which is expressed physically, is what Bourdieu calls "*hexis*." Social agents use techniques of the body that express a way of relating to the social world in which their past and present position in social reality is reflected. It is, in short, "the incorporation of social structures in the form of dispositional structures" which allows social agents to have a "practical knowledge" of social reality.[45]

Embodied dispositions, Bourdieu stresses, are highly resistant to attempts of transforming them through conscious interventions. The sociologist speaks of the habitus' "*hysteresis*" or inertia, which explains the relative stability of social structures.

> The *habitus*, a product of history, produces individual and collective practices—more history—in accordance with the schemes generated by history. It ensures the active presence of past experiences, which, deposited in each organism in the form of schemes of perception,

43 Ibid., 141.

44 Ibid., 135–36, emphasis in original.

45 Ibid., 144, 130.

> thought and action tend to guarantee the 'correctness' of practices and their constancy over time.[46]

Present practices mobilize dispositions shaped in the past; in other words, novel situations are apprehended through the lens of schemes of thought and action which were formed in response to determinate social conditions in the past. Bourdieu claims that this explains why individuals seek out social situations which feel familiar and often fail to act in the socially appropriate manner in conditions that do not resemble the ones they know. Thus mediating between structure and practice, the habitus accounts for the ongoing reproduction of social structure in and through the actions of social agents.[47]

How does Bourdieu conceive of social structures, though? For the purposes of this brief survey of his work, it will suffice to say that when speaking of contemporary societies he distinguishes between "social space" or a society's class structure and relatively autonomous spheres which he calls "fields." That is to say, he combines a "theory of inequality" and a "theory of differentiation."[48] Following E. P. Thompson's assertion that classes need to be made and "embodied by real people and in a real context,"[49] Bourdieu's class theory rejects what he believes to be the

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46 Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, 54.

47 At the same time it is important to keep in mind that the concept does not posit that practices are mechanically determined. "Being the product of history," Bourdieu writes, the habitus "is an *open system of dispositions* that is constantly subjected to experiences, and therefore constantly affected by them in a way that either reinforces or modifies its structures. It is durable, but not eternal!" Bourdieu and Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, 133, emphasis in original. His sociology might be probabilist; it is not determinist.

48 Müller, *Pierre Bourdieu*, 46, my translations.

49 E. P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* (New York: Vintage, 1966), 9. G. M. Tamás might respond that Bourdieu thereby reduces class to "caste" and emphasize the need to keep the two dimensions analytically separate, if only for the reason that "*the abolition of caste leads* [merely!] *to equality; but the abolition of class leads to socialism.*" "Telling the Truth About Class," *Socialist Register* 42 (2006): 245, emphasis in original. It is certainly true that the political horizon of Bourdieu's sociology—as well as of his explicit political interventions

conflation of analytically constructed and politically mobilized classes. A shared habitus, based on shared conditions of existence, can facilitate political mobilization which, however, remains an ineluctable necessity for any attempt to turn a "class-on-paper" into a "real" class.[50] To become socially real, class must be made visible, hence Bourdieu's focus on the processes of distinction in his eponymous 1979 study of French society. Bourdieu's interest in the relationship between "the space of life-styles" and the "space of social conditions"[51] and his determination to conceptualize class in terms that are not exclusively economic lead him to distinguish between distinct material and symbolic resources whose distribution structures the space of social positions. More precisely, his proposed "general science of the economy of practices" is meant to treat practices which are not "objectively economic" as if they obey an economic logic. To be socially viable, however, their economic dimension has to be repressed.[52] In addition to economic capital there is cultural capital, which exists in incorporated, objectified, and institutionalized form, and social capital, which consists of networks of acquaintances and friendships that can be mobilized. Since access to economic capital makes possible the acquisition of other forms of capital—by, for instance, enabling individuals to prolong the time they

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of the 1990s—is characterized not by the abolition of capital, class, and state but by more reformist goals. See the conclusion to Anselm Jappe, *Les Aventures de la Marchandise: Pour une Nouvelle Critique de la Valeur* (Paris: La Découverte, 2017). See also Dylan Riley, "Bourdieu's Class Theory: The Academic as Revolutionary," *Catalyst* 1, no. 2 (2017): 107–36. Still, whatever political conclusions one may draw, Bourdieu's assertion that there is a distinction between a structural position (the proletariat) and a mobilized collective actor (the workers' movement) can hardly be denied; see Endnotes, "A History of Separation: The Rise and Fall of the Workers' Movement, 1883–1982," *Endnotes* 4 (2015): 70–192.

50 Bourdieu, *Practical Reason*, 11; see also Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, trans. Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), 231.

51 Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA/London: Harvard UP, 1984), 126.

52 Pierre Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital," trans. Richard Nice, in *Readings in Economic Sociology*, ed. Nicole Woolsey Biggart (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002), 281.

spend in institutions of higher learning—it remains central.[53] In later writings, Bourdieu highlighted the significance of symbolic capital, which consists in the "recognition" of an individual's resources granted by others.[54] Social struggles are not merely waged over the distribution of economic resources; instead, there exist social universes which revolve around access to other goods.

These social universes are what Bourdieu calls fields. Products of histories of specialization and social differentiation, fields constitute relatively autonomous social microcosms. What all of them share is that they are sites of "*conflict and competition*"; that is, each field revolves around specific "*stakes*" (forms of capital) and follows specific "rules" (strategies agents can legitimately employ which need not be explicitly codified). Moreover, action in a field necessitates an "*investment in the game*" that Bourdieu calls "*illusio*," without which social agents would not feel their participation is worth the effort. Whether social agents are willing, consciously or unconsciously, to make this kind of investment depends once more on the dispositions of their habitus. Conversely, discordance between a habitus and the logic of a specific field can account for a kind of pre-emptive self-exclusion which transforms social necessity into virtue and, often unwittingly, adapts subjective expectations to objective chances, expressed by phrases such as "this is not for the likes of us." Fields are structured by the distribution of the form(s) of capital over which participants struggle and the possession of which

53 See ibid., 281–88. Ironically, many scholars charge Bourdieu with failing to grasp the specificity of economic capital itself. Amir Mohseni argues that the French sociologist uses the term in a "reified" manner when treating capital as a thing (a sum of money, for instance) rather than as a process (money in motion, as it were). "Sozialstruktur vs. Formanalyse: Zum Kapitalbegriff bei Pierre Bourdieu und Karl Marx," in *Methoden der Geisteswissenschaft: Eine Selbstverständigung*, ed. Dirk Hartmann et al. (Weilerswist: Velbrück, 2012), 173, my translation. Riley, thus, concludes that Bourdieu, despite talking about capital, "has never theorized capitalism." "Bourdieu's Class Theory," 124. As I will argue in chapter four, I agree with this assessment; however, in my opinion, this is not sufficient cause to shed either Bourdieu's theory of practice or his relational method.

54 Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, 166.

determines their own relative position. The latter afford the "position-takings" or actions which social agents can perform and the strategies they can pursue.[55]

Throughout his career Bourdieu studied several fields, such as the French literary or academic universes, in detail. More generally, it is possible to distinguish material and symbolic fields. In the former, one can freely express that one has interests, whereas fields of cultural production are characterized by the need for actions to appear disinterested. This "chiastic structure" is the product of history.[56]

> Only at the end of a slow evolution tending to strip away the specifically symbolic aspect of the acts and relations of production was the economy able to constitute itself *as such*, in the objectivity of a separate universe, governed by its own rules, those of self-interest calculation, competition and exploitation [...]. But, conversely, it was only by means of a break tending to repress the economic aspect of the specifically symbolic acts and relations of production into the lower world of the economy that the various universes of symbolic production were able to constitute themselves as closed, separate microcosms in which throughly symbolic, pure and (from the point of view of the economic economy) disinterested actions were performed.[57]

Bourdieu's essentially Polanyian account of a historical process in which the market becomes "disembedded" from the web of social relations[58] may understate the mystifications which continue to hold sway over those forced to participate in the monetarily mediated exchange of privately produced commodities.[59] At this point it is important to note that

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55 Bourdieu and Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, 17, 98, 130, 105, emphasis in original.

56 Müller, *Pierre Bourdieu*, 85, my translation.

57 Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, 19, emphasis in original.

58 See Karl Polanyi, *The Great Transformation: The Political and Economic Origins of Our Time* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2001); see also Bourdieu, *Practical Reason*, 105.

59 See Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1990), ch. 1. See also Samuel E. Chambers, *There's No Such Thing as "the Economy": Essays on Capitalist Value* (Goleta: Punctum, 2018), 114–20.

symbolic fields are also spaces of competition for Bourdieu. Participants may fight over recognition and the very classification schemes used to evaluate cultural products, for example. Their relative autonomy is, however, neither complete nor secure. In other words, fields of cultural production remain always threatened by heteronomous forces such as the market, which attempts to subordinate them to its own logic.[60]

To bring this brief survey of the key concepts of Bourdieu's oeuvre to a close, I want to sum up the concerns that animate his thought. When he conceives of society at large as well as individual fields as spaces of social struggle, it is not just material and symbolic resources that are at stake. Significantly, the classificatory principles individual and collective social agents use to apprehend social reality are also quite contentious. The praxeological commitment to restoring the subjective perspective of these agents means treating "[s]ymbolic systems" not just as "instruments of knowledge" but also as "*instruments of domination*."[61] That is to say, schemes of perception, thought, and action—such as race—are both constituted by and reproduce social relations of domination—such as racism.[62] The most powerful actor in this regard is the state, which holds not just the monopoly on physical violence but also the "monopoly of legitimate symbolic violence" required to enforce collectively shared forms of thought.[63]

60 See Bourdieu and Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, 110. See also Pierre Bourdieu and Hans Haacke, *Free Exchange*, trans. Randal Johnson and Hans Haacke (Cambridge: Polity, 1995); and Nicholas Brown, *Autonomy: The Social Ontology of Art Under Capitalism* (Durham/London: Duke UP, 2019).

61 Bourdieu and Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, 13, emphasis in original.

62 The most ambitious effort to theorize race which draws on Bourdieu's relational sociology can be found in Mustafa Emirbayer and Matthew Desmond, *The Racial Order* (Chicago: The U of Chicago P, 2015). See also Desmond and Emirbayer, "What is Racial Domination?"; and Anja Weiß, "Racist Symbolic Capital: A Bourdieuian Approach to the Analysis of Racism," in *Wages of Whiteness & Racist Symbolic Capital*, ed. Wulf D. Hund, Jeremy Krikler, and David Roediger (Berlin: Lit Verlag, 2010).

63 Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, 186. At the same time, the state should not be understood as a homogeneous entity but rather as the site of conflict itself. See

> As an organized structure and as an authority regulating practices, it exerts a permanent action of formation of durable dispositions [...]. In particular, in reality and in people's minds it imposes all the fundamental principles of classification—sex, age, 'competence,' etc.—through the imposition of divisions into social categories [...] which are the product of the application of cognitive 'categories,' which are thus reified and naturalized.[64]

The state does not just (re)produce the social order through physical violence, but also through its power to classify, which is to say, to enforce the symbolic forms that social agents use in their everyday practice. In "the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death," which is racism, according to Ruth Wilson Gilmore,[65] material and symbolic power go hand in hand.

In fact, Loïc Wacquant characterizes the entirety of Bourdieu's sociology as a "materialist anthropology of the specific contribution that various forms of symbolic violence make to the reproduction and transformation of structures of domination."[66] The concept of symbolic violence is Bourdieu's contribution to the tradition of ideology theory, which poses the question why relations of domination and conditions of inequality and suffering can usually be reproduced without the continual use of physical violence.[67] While he emphasizes the "complicity" of

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Pierre Bourdieu, *On the State: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1989–1992*, trans. David Fernbach (Cambridge: Polity, 2014). For an account of the restructuring of the bureaucratic field in the United States and the rise of mass incarceration, see Loïc Wacquant, *Punishing the Poor: The Neoliberal Government of Social Insecurity* (Durham/London: Duke UP, 2009).

64 Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, 175.

65 Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (Berkeley: U of California P, 2007), 28.

66 Bourdieu and Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, 14–15.

67 Bourdieu himself rarely speaks of ideology in his later works, because he believes that ideology theory unduly privileges the role of ideas. See Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, 181. For a comprehensive survey of theories of ideology, including Gramsci's notion of hegemony and Althusser's discussion of ideolog-

social agents in their own domination, Bourdieu does not insinuate that submission to power is voluntary. Instead, it is a function of "a power, which is durably inscribed in the bodies of the dominated, in the form of schemes of perception and dispositions." Since the same history is inscribed "in bodies" (as disposition) and "in things" (as a systematic structuring of social and physical space) the way the social world is structured is often apprehended as if was self-evident and natural.[68] Because social agents, dominated and dominant alike, can hardly avoid employing categories which are products of existing relations of domination, the historicity of these relations is misrecognized; consequently domination is recognized as legitimate.[69]

This incorporation of the relations of domination in the form of embodied dispositions presents an obstacle for the project of abolishing domination.

> The passions of the dominated habitus [...], a somatized social relationship, the law of the social body converted into the law of the body, are not of a kind that can be suspended by a simple effort of will, founded on a liberatory awakening of consciousness. [...]. The condi-

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ical state apparatuses, which acknowledges Bourdieu's contribution, see Jan Rehmann, *Theories of Ideology: The Powers of Alienation and Subjection* (Leiden: Brill, 2013), especially ch. 8.

68 Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, 171, 150.

69 On the relationship between "recognition" and "misrecognition," see Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, 168. Dilan Riley notes that Bourdieu shares with Althusser the assumption that "the misrecognition of the social world is a precondition for action." "Bourdieu's Class Theory," 120. The conceptual couple already appears in Marx's (then unpublished) writings of the 1840s in which he charges Feuerbach with the simultaneous "acceptance" [Anerkennung] and "misunderstanding" [Verkennung] of reality. Karl Marx and Frederick Engels, "The German Ideology: Critique of Modern German Philosophy According to Its Representatives Feuerbach, B. Bauer and Stirner, and of German Socialism According to Its Various Prophets," trans. W. Lough et al., in *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels: Collected Works*, vol. 5 (New York: International Publishers, 1976), 58.

> tions of [the] efficacy [of symbolic violence] are durably inscribed in bodies in the form of dispositions.[70]

Despite sounding extraordinarily pessimistic, Bourdieu offers several suggestions as to how symbolic violence can be challenged. First of all, since it works by misrepresenting social relations of domination as natural and eternal, the work of "historicization" can initiate a "critical break with primary self-evidences." Secondly, the chances for success of counterhegemonic political projects increase in times of social "uncertainy and crisis." Finally, Bourdieu proposes that a "thoroughgoing process of countertraining" might succeed in transforming, if only gradually, the embodied dispositions that allow symbolic violence to work.[71]

Reading Relationally

In fact Bourdieu's sustained interest in cultural production could perhaps be explained by the fact that it allowed him to discover instances of successful revolutions, if only "symbolic" ones.[72] Among Bourdieu's studies of individual fields, his account of the emergence of the French literary field in *The Rules of Art* ranks as one of the most expansive and celebrated. There he reconstructs the establishment of a relatively autonomous literary field as an effect of a "symbolic revolution through which artists free themselves from bourgeois demand by refusing to recognize any master except their art."[73] This resulted in the conditions of

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70 Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, 179–80.

71 Ibid., 182, 236, 172.

72 See Pierre Bourdieu, *Manet: A Symbolic Revolution*, trans. Peter Collier and Margaret Rigaud-Drayton (Cambridge: Polity, 2017). See also the essays collected in Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, ed. Randal Johnson (New York: Columbia UP, 1993).

73 Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, trans. Susan Emanuel (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1996), 81.

possibility for a new literary style to emerge. According to the field-theoretical approach, the strategies writers and institutions have at their disposal reflect their position in their given field. The latter shapes "their perception of the possibles offered by the field and their 'choice' of those they try to make into reality."[74] By thus situating the possible position-takings afforded to writers via their position in the literary field, Bourdieu attempts to avoid both an "internal interpretation" that treats literary texts as effectively autonomous and an "external explanation" which merely derives the work's meaning from the author's class position.[75] In scholarly assessments of Bourdieu's value for literary studies it is his field-theoretical approach that has received the most attention.[76]

My book proceeds in a different direction. It is part of a series of studies, most of which initially started out at Goethe-Universität Frankfurt under the mentorship of Christa Buschendorf, which propose to use the conceptual framework of relational sociology in order to analyze representations of the interrelations between social structures and subjective dispositions in works of literature and film.[77] Bourdieu

74 Ibid., 206.

75 Ibid., 181.

76 See for instance the contributions to Jeremy Ahearne and John Speller, eds., *Bourdieu and the Literary Field*, special issue of *Paragraph* 35, no. 1 (2012); see also John R. W. Speller, *Bourdieu and Literature* (Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2011).

77 For publications by scholars who have been involved with this project, see the contributions to Christa Buschendorf, ed., *Power Relations in Black Lives: Reading African American Literature and Culture with Bourdieu and Elias* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2018). For a programmatic statement, see Christa Buschendorf and Astrid Franke, "The Implied Sociology and Politics of Literary Texts: Using the Tools of Relational Sociology in American Studies," in *American Studies Today: New Research Agendas*, ed. Winfried Fluck et al. (Heidelberg: Winter, 2014); see also Astrid Franke, Stefanie Mueller, and Katja Sarkowsky, eds., *Reading the Social in American Studies* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2022); Nicole Hirschfelder, *Oppression as Process: The Case of Bayard Rustin* (Heidelberg: Winter, 2014); Luvena Kopp, "Satirizing Satire: Symbolic Violence and Subversion in Spike Lee's *Bamboozled*," in *Post-Soul Satire: Black Identity After Civil Rights*, ed. Derek C. Maus and James J. Donahue (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2014); Stephan Kuhl, *Crude*

himself compares the task of the sociologist to "that of the writer or novelist" insofar as both "provide access to" or "explicate experiences, generic or specific, that are ordinarily overlooked or unformulated." It is Bourdieu's methodological commitment to the "lived experience of agents" and "the categories of perception and appreciation (*dispositions*) that structure their action from the inside" that motivates his interest in the ways that novels allow their readers to gain insight into subjective experience.[78] The book *Masculine Domination*, for instance, contains a brief reading of Virginia Woolf's 1927 novel *To the Lighthouse*. In this text, Bourdieu credits Woolf with having provided an "incomparably lucid" account of the "female gaze," emphasizing her productive utilization of "the indeterminacy of indirect free speech" as well as a "fade-in fade-out technique" that allows the reader to access the experiences of characters who assume distinct positions in social space, including both the perception of dominant agents by the dominated and the self-perception of members of the dominant group.[79]

Bourdieu's interest in the experiences and perceptions of literary characters account for his interest in perspective techniques. What he calls indirect free speech, a mode of third-person narration also known as free indirect discourse or narrated monologue, lends itself particularly well to readings of literary texts which stress the articulation of social structures and subjective experience in a relational spirit.[80]

Psychology: Richard Wright's Literary Practice (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, forthcoming); Nicole Lindenberg, "'What If Movie is Bliss's Own Life?': The Symbolic Violence of the Movie in Ralph Ellison's Unfinished Second Novel *Three Days Before the Shooting…*," *Literature of the Americas* 5 (2018): 116–31; Stefanie Müller, *The Presence of the Past in the Novels of Toni Morrison* (Heidelberg: Winter, 2013); and Wibke Schniedermann, *Masculine Domination in Henry James's Novels: The Art of Concealment* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

78 Bourdieu and Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, 206, 11, emphasis in original.

79 Pierre Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001), 69, 72, 74.

80 Anna Kornbluh has recently argued that free indirect discourse is usually either seen as a technique which provides an "unprecedented intensification of interiority" or as an "exteriorization of perspective" that reproduces the forms of

According to Dorrit Cohn, this technique "superimpos[es] two voices," that of a character and that of the narrator, thus producing an "indeterminateness" that situates it "between the immediacy of quotation and the mediacy of narration." Free indirect discourse produces a "two-in-one effect," she writes, by "weav[ing] in and out" of characters' minds and "fusing outer with inner reality."[81] Franco Moretti similarly characterizes the technique as placed "halfway between social *doxa* and the individual voice."[82] Arguably, this renders it compatible with the praxeological insistence on a break with spontaneous experience, which could be reproduced via direct quotation, without withdrawing to a detached objectivism, which a third-person narrator might provide. Therefore, Buschendorf argues that the fusion described by Cohn makes free indirect discourse "the ideal point of view for rendering the interrelation of a character's position in social space and the person's habitus."[83] As the readings of his novels in the following chapters will show, Whitehead makes ample use of free indirect discourse and frequently uses shifts in perspective in order to juxtapose a character's subjective experiences in the diegetic present with an objectivizing account of past conditions

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"discipline" policing subjects. She draws on psychoanalysis to transcend this dualism and claims that free indirect discourse offers an "impersonal consciousness at once socially collective and psychoanalytically astute." "Freeing Impersonality: The Objective Subject in Psychoanalysis and *Sense & Sensibility*," in *Knots: Post-Lacanian Psychoanalysis, Literature and Film*, ed. Jean-Michel Rabaté (New York: Routledge, 2019), 35–36. While I do not rely on psychoanalytic theory, (post-)Lacanian or otherwise, I share the belief that free indirect discourse tends to articulate the (dialectical) relation between objectivity and subjectivity.

81 Dorrit Cohn, *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1978), 105, 106, 112, 103.

82 Franco Moretti, "Graphs, Maps, Trees: Abstract Models for Literary History–3," *New Left Review* 28 (2004): 57.

83 Christa Buschendorf, "Narrated Power Relations: Jesse Hill Ford's Novel *The Liberation of Lord Byron Jones*," in *Civilizing and Decivilizing Processes: Figurational Approaches to American Culture*, ed. Christa Buschendorf, Astrid Franke, and Johannes Voelz (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011), 236.

of existence in which they acquired the schemes of thought and action that shape their experience and practice.

Yet attending to perspective techniques and modes of narration is not the only approach Bourdieu uses in the readings of literary works that punctuate his books. *The Rules of Art* contains a brief analysis of William Faulkner's short story "A Rose for Emily," which focuses on the "*sjužet*," that is, on the order in which the narrative discourse presents events.[84] By initially appearing to confirm the spontaneous presuppositions of the reader, Faulkner creates an "effect of the real."[85] This, however, is precisely what the narrative discourse goes on to undermine. According to Bourdieu it

> would be no more than the well-crafted plot of a realist narrative if it did not appear retrospectively that Faulkner, by a skillful manipulation of chronology, has constructed his tale as a trap enlisting the assumptions of ordinary existence and the conventions of the novelistic genre to encourage an expectation throughout the story of a *plausible meaning* which will find itself brutally belief at the end.[86]

For this reason, "A Rose for Emily" requires a "reflexive reading" which traces how its readers are led astray. It is only on a rereading that the story manages to reveal the "clues" which are initially overlooked. According to Bourdieu, the effect of Faulkner's presentation of the story "call[s] into question the shared *doxa* which is the basis of doxic experience of the world and of the novelistic representation of the world."[87] A reflexive or relational reading, as I have called, ideally teaches readers to reflect on their own dispositions, on the schemes of thought they tacitly use to apprehend social reality; in other words, it affords a critical

84 See Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1984), 12.

85 Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art*, 323.

86 Ibid., 324, emphasis in original.

87 Ibid., 326, 324.

perspective on reality which, ideally, can be another means of resisting symbolic violence.[88]

Chapter Overview

The following chapters offer relational readings of literary texts which demonstrate how the readers' doxic presuppositions are evoked only to be superseded by the way Whitehead organizes his narratives. More precisely, I will show that he consistently rejects substantialist notions of race and racial identity. The first two chapters will show how Whitehead addresses certain tropes and strategies often found in African American literature, all while challenging their apparently self-evident valences and meanings. Most pertinently, I show how he emphasizes that it has been the historical process of increasing class differentiation within the African American population that renders problematic some common assumptions which tacitly presuppose a relatively homogeneous black community.[89] In chapter one, I discuss Whitehead's debut novel, *The Intuitionist* (1999), which at first glance appears as an allegory for racial

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88 Interestingly, Bourdieu engaged in a public conversation on literature with Toni Morrison in 1994. They discussed the precarious position of black writers whose work is reduced to being a "document" of racial oppression (Bourdieu) and who are consequently regarded merely as "witness[es]" (Morrison). The novelist defended the political affordances of literature which, however, cannot be disarticulated from its "aesthetic preoccupations." Ultimately she claimed that she strives to provide readers with a "gaze permitting her to see as she never sees." A French transcript of the conversation, which saw Bourdieu speaking French and Morrison English, was published in 1998. I rely on an English translation provided by Geoffrey Mead. "'To See as We Never See': Dialogue Between Pierre Bourdieu and Toni Morrison," *Medium*, May 10, 2019, https://medium.com/@geoffreme/to-see-as-we-never-see-dialogue-between-pierre-bourdieu-and-toni-morrison-aec8c6b55c78.

89 Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor goes so far as to call the rise of a black elite whose politics are often directly antagonistic towards the interests of working-class blacks the "most significant transformation in all of Black life over the last fifty years." *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2016), 15.

uplift. This, however, misses the fact that the novel (which is set during the period of desegregation) explodes the notion of a racial community that can be represented by individual leaders, thus anticipating Kenneth Warren's controversial thesis regarding the end of African American literature by a decade. The novel requires its protagonist to discover that a shared racial identity does not guarantee shared interests. At the same time, it shows that she fails to adequately read the motives of other characters based precisely on her own embodied dispositions which she acquired in the legally segregated South. Thus, *The Intuitionist* provides insight into the social genesis of schemes of thought and action that durably shape practice. The chapter ends with a reading of the utopian significance of the perfect elevator the protagonist of the novel strives to complete as a metaphor for the perfect work of art. The latter is utopian precisely because it would transcend its audience's bodies, which the novel regards as the site of the dispositions which reproduce existing symbolic categories such as race.

The third chapter focuses on the role of history in *John Henry Days* (2001) and *Apex Hides the Hurt* (2006). Both novels feature black middle-class protagonists who are confronted with the history of racist violence in the Reconstruction period. Engaging critics who argue that the past self-evidently provides a source of shared racial identity, I argue that Whitehead insists that history can only be accessed in highly mediated ways. This, both novels show, makes it possible for social agents in positions of power to manipulate representations of the past in order to further their present goals. To challenge the abuses of the past, the protagonists have to perform the work of historicization which, as Bourdieu argues, is a means of counteracting symbolic violence.

While the first two chapters thus reject the substantialist assumption of the black community as a relatively homogeneous collective with shared interests, chapter three functions as a transitionary chapter which anticipates the more explicit engagement with the problem of class in later chapters. In this chapter I discuss Whitehead's semi-autobiographical novel *Sag Harbor* (2009). I disagree with most critics who have read it as a *Bildungsroman* or a coming-of-age novel. This is because the novel is not particularly interested in processes of character

formation or education; instead it describes a social world inhabited by a particular class fraction, which is why I argue that it makes more sense to treat it as a novel about the manners of the black upper middle class spending their summers in the Hamptons. Without a doubt, *Sag Harbor* is committed to showing the border separating the black and white parts of the eponymous community, thus revealing race to be a symbolic category which has the power to structure social and physical space. But at the same time the novel highlights the processes of distinction through which members of the black bourgeoisie separate themselves from the black proletariat.

Chapter four revisits *John Henry Days* and *Apex Hides the Hurt* in order to examine Whitehead's representation of a social reality increasingly dominated by the structures of commodity exchange. Both novels feature protagonists involved in fields of symbolic production—journalism and advertising, respectively—which are subject to unfettered economic domination. Drawing on Bourdieu's field theory, I show how *John Henry Days* narrates the subjective experience of entering a field in the process of being transformed by the logic of the market. In subsequent sections I rely on Marxist critical theory to analyze Whitehead's account of the ways the commodity form subsumes and distorts creative activity, thereby evacuating it of meaning. The chapter ends with a consideration of alternatives. Whereas *John Henry Days* remains able to imagine the protagonist's reappropriation of the capacity to tell meaningful stories, *Apex Hides the Hurt* suggests a near-total subjection of life to capitalism's abstract domination.

Chapter five goes on to imagine what becomes of life under the conditions of Whitehead's *Zone One*, and concludes that it becomes a sort of living death, which is indeed apropos for a zombie novel. The chapter begins with a discussion of Whitehead's self-inscription into the history of the living dead and argues that he is well aware of what it means to employ the conventions of a popular genre as a recognized literary novelist. I show how he uses the possibilities afforded by this generic form to place *Zone One* in the tradition of canonical American literature and not just in the lineage of zombie fiction. While its setting situates the novel in the context of the cycle of anti-austerity struggles that erupted after the

2008 financial crisis, Whitehead's wide-ranging intertexts serve to place his zombies in a more capacious history of anti-capitalist insurrection. *Zone One* sketches a world experiencing catastrophic collapse as well as the desperate efforts of what is left of state power to reconstruct normality, which here means containing the excessive mobility of the living dead that threatens the principle of property. The effort fails, however, and the novel suggests that the only way out lies in an insurrectionary proletariat which has transcended the racial principles of classification that used to divide it. At the same time, embodied dispositions return with a vengeance, as it were, for Whitehead shows that the schemes of thought and action acquired before the zombie apocalypse continue to inform the protagonist's practice. That is to say, Whitehead seems to say that as a principle of vision and division inscribed in bodies in the form of habitus race will be reproduced even after it has become objectively irrelevant.

While Whitehead's first five novels had already been published to great critical acclaim (including the reception of a MacArthur "Genius" Grant in 2002), it was the publication of *The Underground Railroad* in 2016 which underscored his role as one of the United States' most significant living authors. In addition to the praise he received from Oprah Winfrey, Whitehead ended up winning the National Book Award for Fiction in 2016 as well as the Pulitzer Prize for fiction in 2017. At first glance, *The Underground Railroad* differs greatly from Whitehead's previous novels: it is a neo-slave narrative that addresses the history of racism head-on and literalizes the eponymous metaphor in order to narrate the terror of slavery and its afterlives. I do not devote an entire chapter to a comprehensive analysis of Whitehead's sixth novel—which has already been the subject of almost two dozen journal articles and book chapters, more than any other of his works with the exception of *Zone One*. Instead, I make a case for reading *The Underground Railroad* in continuity with Whitehead's previous novels in the conclusion.[90] In fact, he does not deviate from the attitudes toward race or history that informed his earlier work but in fact

90 In this study I do not discuss Whitehead's two subsequent novels, *The Nickel Boys* (2019) and *The Harlem Shuffle* (2021). Nor do I provide readings of his two

emphasizes how the violent defense of property that *Zone One* narrates in the generic form of a zombie novel has structured American racial capitalism and settler colonialism from the beginning. What *The Underground Railroad* offers, however, is the possibility of narrating an escape from the regime of property. Unlike the zombie narrative, which is formally prohibited from providing a glimpse of the world after the revolution, Whitehead's use of the neo-slave narrative allows him to focus on a fugitive protagonist who eventually escapes the armed representative of property relations. In this sense, *Zone One* and *The Underground Railroad* are both concerned with the possibility—and necessity—of a revolutionary abolition of the conditions in which products of labor and people can be someone else's property.

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non-fictional books, *The Colossus of New York* (2003) and *The Noble Hustle: Poker, Beef Jerky & Death* (2014).

1. Reading the Past, Writing the Future: *The Intuitionist*

The Intuitionist ends with a scene of a new beginning. After Lila Mae Watson, the novel's protagonist, has revealed her antagonists and solved the mystery that initially propelled the plot, she sits down and starts to write. She has moved into "a new room" and attempts to complete volume three of the late James Fulton's *Theoretical Elevators*. For one thing, she encounters the "problem" of "nailing Fulton's voice." Yet, while the latter "left instructions," Lila Mae is aware that "she is permitted to alter them according to circumstances," for "[t]here was no way Fulton could foresee how the world would change" (254).[1] That is to say, the challenge Lila Mae faces—that which renders this new beginning problematic—is both to continue writing in Fulton's tradition and to acknowledge a historical break that prohibits the simple continuation of this tradition.

What is she working on anyway? Fulton wanted to create the "perfect elevator." By the final pages of *The Intuitionist* attentive readers have gathered that there are much more complex issues than mere mechanical vertical transportation at stake. The novel's language shifts to a well-nigh eschatological register when it speculates on the device's affordances. The cities of the present, Lila Mae thinks, are "doomed anyway" by the coming of the perfect elevator, which "she will deliver to the world when the time is right" (254). Yet, her act of deliverance does not exclusively portend destruction; a properly utopian device, the perfect

1 All parenthetical citations in the text refer to Colson Whitehead, *The Intuitionist* (New York: Doubleday, 1999).

elevator promises a "second elevation" in the "city to come." At the novel's conclusion Lila Mae optimistically anticipates that she will be able to "make the necessary adjustments" to what shall be the infrastructure of a New Jerusalem. The city of the future "will come" (255). In other words, redemption from the "cities we suffer now" (61) is imminent.

But then, what is the nature of this suffering inflicted upon urban dwellers? Who are the "we" Lila May mentions? And when is "now"? Before she withdraws to her room to write the perfect elevator, Lila Mae works as a municipal elevator inspector in the "most famous city in the world" (12). After the sudden crash of an elevator she had just recently inspected, she is suspected of sabotage and struggles to clear her name. Soon she finds herself in the midst of a web of intrigue in the snake pit that is the world of elevator inspection. Representatives of rival philosophies, Empiricism and Intuitionism, vie for the position of guild chair. The top Empiricist, whose ties to the mob are an open secret, sends goons to ransack Lila Mae's apartment. She belongs to the Intuitionist camp, which offers her protection. Eventually, she finds out about some notebooks that Fulton, the founder of Intuitionism, left behind and which contain plans for the perfect elevator. In her search Lila Mae finds an unexpected ally. Yet, betrayal is imminent, and—as if to affirm the old Marxist line about economic base and ideological superstructure—the "real players" are revealed to be elevator manufacturers competing for market shares (207). Against all odds, however, Lila Mae manages to obtain the notebooks, and the novel ends with her attempt to continue and complete Fulton's life work.

This short and deliberately clichéd summary should make clear that *The Intuitionist* heavily leans on the generic conventions of detective fiction, as most commentators have noted. The novel is set in an "urban gothic landscape,"[2] which evokes "a mood of dread, danger, and intrigue" reminiscent of film noir.[3] The perfect elevator, repeatedly referred to as

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2 Saundra Liggins, "The Urban Gothic Vision of Colson Whitehead's *The Intuitionist* (1999)," *African American Review* 40, no. 2 (2006): 360.

3 Derek C. Maus, *Understanding Colson Whitehead: Revised and Expanded Edition*, (Columbia: U of South Carolina P, 2021), 22.

a "black box" (61), has been called a "McGuffin" meant to hold the reader's interest, and its literary progenitors range from Hammet's "Black Bird"[4] to Pynchon's "*schwarzgerät*."[5] But even though her last name alludes to another famous detective's companion, Lila Mae Watson is not your average detective, for she is black, or, in a word compulsorily repeatedly throughout the novel, "colored." More precisely, she is the first "colored woman" (14) in her department, where she remains in near total isolation. As a black woman who adheres to Intuitionist principles, she is "three times cursed" (20), for the Elevator Guild is currently controlled by Empiricists.

In the course of her detective work, however, Lila Mae makes a sensational discovery. James Fulton was "colored," too. Suddenly, the cause of the elevator's crash seems insignificant. Indeed, she learns that it was an entirely arbitrary "catastrophic accident" (227). Thus, the deeper Lila Mae's investigation gets, the more the novel abandons the conventions of detective fiction. If a detective novel narrates the story of both an "investigation" and a "crime" which is covered up,[6] the detective in *The Intuitionist* must discover that no crime has actually taken place. Unlike a classical detective who retraces the events of a prior narrative, "thus uncovering and constructing the meaning and the authority of the narrative,"[7] Lila Mae learns that the story of the crashed elevator remains "without meaning" (227). What she unearths instead is Fulton's blackness, a stand-in, according to one critic, for the "dark, abiding, signing Africanist pres-

4 Jeffrey Allen Tucker, "'Verticality is Such a Risky Enterprise': The Literary and Paraliterary Antecedents of Colson Whitehead's *The Intuitionist*," *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 43, no. 1 (2010): 152.

5 Maus, *Understanding Colson Whitehead*, 29. Whitehead comments on Pynchon's influence in "Going Up," interview by Laura Miller, *Salon*, January 12, 1999, https://www.salon.com/1999/01/12/cov_si_12int/.

6 Tzvetan Todorov, *The Poetics of Prose*, trans. Richard Howard (Oxford: Blackwell, 1977), 44.

7 Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Cambridge, MA/London: Harvard UP, 1984), 244.

ence" that Toni Morrison influentially detected in American literature.[8] Consequently, Lila Mae commences a rereading of Fulton's texts to reveal their hidden racial meaning in order to reclaim his oeuvre for the tradition of African American letters which she, as the executor of Fulton's literary estate, will subsequently continue. Or so it seems, at any rate.

Literary Tradition and Racial Community

It does not take a (Lila Mae) Watson to recognize that elevators serve as the vehicle for a metaphor of racial uplift in *The Intuitionist*. A *Time Magazine* review celebrated it as "the freshest racial allegory since Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*," a quip that was subsequently used as a blurb on the novel's paperback edition.[9] In an article that traces how the reception of Whitehead's early novels as well as the recognition he received from "award-granting institutions"[10] have shaped his trajectory in the literary field, Howard Ransby points out that these accolades positioned Whitehead "on a plane with two literary giants."[11] This positioning "entices potential buyers into believing a connection exists between Whitehead's work and two renowned black literary artists."[12] Ransby's use of the verb "to entice" is suggestive, for it implies an uncertainty about whether the judgment is apt or merely a

8 Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, (New York: Vintage, 1993), 5. See Alexander Manshel, "Colson Whitehead's History of the United States," *MELUS* 45, no. 4 (2020): 31.

9 Walter Kirn, "The Promise of Verticality," review of *The Intuitionist*, by Colson Whitehead, *Time*, January 25, 1999, https://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,990080,00.html.

10 Howard Rambsy, II., "The Rise of Colson Whitehead: Hi-Tech Narratives and Literary Ascent," in *New Essays on the African American Novel: From Hurston and Ellison to Morrison and Whitehead*, ed. Lovalerie King and Linda F. Selzer (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 237.

11 Ibid., 233.

12 Ibid., 234. While Ransby uses terms such as "field" or "capital," the article contains no reference to Bourdieu's field theory.

marketing ploy designed to trick readers into seeing a connection where there is none. Other critics have unhesitatingly asserted *The Intuitionist*'s closeness to the African American literary tradition by emphasizing the tropes it employs: "double consciousness [sic], masks, and invisibility,"[13] "passing,"[14] or "literacy and freedom."[15] This litany's last entry once more directs critical attention to the possible relationship between literary production and emancipation.

Before Lila Mae can complete Fulton's manuscript, she needs to learn how to properly read it with an eye for its racial dimension. In the second volume of Fulton's *Theoretical Elevators* she reads: "*The race sleeps in this hectic and disordered century.* [...]. *They are stirred by dreaming. In this dream of uplift, they understand that they are dreaming the contract of the hallowed verticality, and hope to remember the terms on waking. The race never does, and that is our curse*" (186, emphasis in original). The passage is followed by an insight into Lila Mae's mind. "The human race, she thought formerly" (ibid.). Her newfound knowledge of Fulton's blackness makes her rethink who the referent of the personal pronouns might be. Was the man engaging in a "double-voiced discourse," as Henry Louis Gates might put it? To Lila Mae, "it all meant something differently now" (155), so she must "teach[] herself how to read" again (186); that is, she learns "to read, like a slave does, one forbidden word at a time" (230). For Linda Selzer, Whitehead's novel thereby asserts "the transgressive possibilities of black educational empowerment" thematized in many slave narratives.[16]

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13 Kimberly Fain, *Colson Whitehead: The Postracial Voice of Contemporary Literature* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 22.

14 Michelle Elam, "Passing in the Post-Race Era: Danzy Senna, Philip Roth, and Colson Whitehead," *African American Review* 41, no. 4 (2007): 762.

15 Tucker, "Verticality," 150.

16 Linda Selzer, "Instruments More Perfect Than Bodies: Romancing Uplift in Colson Whitehead's *The Intuitionist*," *African American Review* 43, no. 4 (2009): 685. A paradigmatic example is Frederick Douglass's discovery of "The Columbian Orator," narrated in all three of his autobiographies. Literacy provided Douglass with "a bold and powerful denunciation of oppression, and a most brilliant vindication of the rights of man" Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, in

In a Gatesian reading of *The Intuitionist*, Alison Russell recognizes in Lila Mae a distant relative of the Yoruba trickster figure Esu-Elegbara, the functional equivalent of the literary critic, who has to "interpret the divine will of Ifa," the functional equivalent of the text, which is provided by Fulton's writings.[17] Only after Lila Mae has "mastered his hand" (205) can she "become[] "the voice of textual authority" and, thus, replace him.[18] According to Russell, the "value of literacy" that bestows significance upon Lila Mae's endeavor in the first place is guaranteed by the novel's "extensive portrayal of racism."[19] This correlation of literary production and the struggle against racism relies on a key passage in *The Signifying Monkey*, where Gates argues that "the production of literature was taken to be the central arena in which persons of African descent could [...] establish their status within the human community."[20] Tasked with representing black humanity, the "individual text," consequently, assumed the function of embodying a "collective black voice"; and the individual writer that took on the role of representing an entire "race."[21]

This is precisely how Kimberly Fain reads *The Intuitionist*, claiming that

> [t]he reader knows that the social implications of Lila Mae's vindication are not only personal but communal as well. The community has a collective interest in the success of individuals who are pioneers in their fields. Ultimately, Lila Mae's success or failure will determine the progress or the regression of an entire race.[22]

Autobiographies, ed. by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: The Library of America, 1994), 226.

17 Alison Russell, "Recalibrating the Past: Colson Whitehead's *The Intuitionist*," *Critique* 49, no. 1 (2007): 47.

18 Ibid., 58.

19 Ibid., 54.

20 Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1988), 129.

21 Ibid., 131.

22 Fain, *Colson Whitehead*, 5.

This imposes quite a burden on poor Lila Mae. In Fain's account, the shared condition of oppression produces a situation in which the "collective interest" is best served not by collective practice, but by the actions of those talented individuals best suited to publicly represent this interest. Anyone familiar with recent discussions about the fate of African American literature will know that this view has not gone uncontested. I would like to hold off discussing this issue for a moment, however, to show how *The Intuitionist* performs an immanent critique of the notion of a homogeneous black community whose collective interests can be represented by individuals. Again, the question of Lila Mae's literacy becomes relevant, but this time the text to be deciphered is provided by the novel's other black characters. When it comes to reading them, however, Lila Mae turns out to be "the worst reader in the novel."[23] Reading through the lens of "racial expectations"[24]—that is to say, reading in substantialist fashion instead of reading relationally—turns out to be precisely the wrong way of reading.

Embodying History

This raises the question where Lila Mae learned to read in the first place. Put differently, it raises questions about the origin of the schemes of perception, appreciation, and action which inform her practice. By juxtaposing passages in the narrative's present with analepses which provide insight into Lila Mae's upbringing, *The Intuitionist* makes visible the ways in which the system of dispositions that guides her actions and thoughts has been acquired through an incorporation of the structures organizing the world of her childhood. Due to the dispositions' embodied state, Lila Mae cannot simply shake them off once she leaves this world. Race, then, functions as a principle of vision and division that affects Lila Mae

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23 Mitchum Huehls, *After Critique: Twenty-First Century Fiction in a Neoliberal Age* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2016), 112.

24 Selzer, "Instruments," 693.

precisely insofar as she cannot but rely on "a *corporeal knowledge* that provides a practical comprehension of the world quite different from [...] intentional acts of conscious decoding," in Bourdieu's words.[25] That is, she engages the world with the help of embodied dispositions which are the product of historically specific social structures. But as Lila Mae herself points out at the end of the novel, the world has changed. Thus, it might be precisely her own embodied dispositions that she needs to overcome to complete Fulton's project.

It is relatively uncontroversial to suggest that, while remaining unnamed, the world's most famous city that provides *The Intuitionist*'s setting is New York City. Periodization poses bigger problems, however.[26] The narrator mentions "last summer's riots" (23), and large-scale riots did occur in New York in both August 1843 and July 1964. Neither date sits well, however, with Lila Mae's observation of a photograph of "the famous reverend [...] who is so loud down South" (248). The narrator's choice of words suggest that the novel is set after the 1956 Supreme Court ruling banning segregation on buses in Montgomery, Alabama, for it was then that Martin Luther King (and who else should the referent be in this instance) became the "charismatic symbol" of the Civil Rights struggle.[27] Yet, by 1964 King did not restrict his noise to the South any longer. Moreover, Daniel Grausam mentions that other events which would signify a 1960s setting are absent.[28] Lila Mae also claims that there are "highrises that are a hundred stories tall" in Downtown (168), but in the mid-1950s the only building of that size was the Empire State Building, which is not located in Downtown Manhattan. Grausam thus concludes that Whitehead is interested in a "multi-temporal now," defined by an abundance

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25 Pierre Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, trans. by Richard Nice (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), 135, emphasis in original.

26 For a survey of attempts to date the novel's events, see Manshel, "Colson Whitehead's History," 25.

27 Manning Marable, *Race, Reform, and Rebellion: The Second Reconstruction and Beyond in Black America, 1945–2006* (Jackson: U of Mississippi P, 2007), 40.

28 Daniel Grausam, "The Multitemporal Contemporary: Colson Whitehead's Presents," in *Literature and the Global Contemporary*, ed. Sarah Brouillette, Mathias Nilges, and Emilio Sauri (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 121–22.

of reference to historical "objects and events" that remain conspicuously inconsistent.[29]

What is clear is that *The Intuitionist*'s setting is contemporary with the emergence of the Civil Rights movement. As mentioned before, the novel is highly invested in the designator "colored," so invested that one critic concludes that it is set in "the time of burgeoning integration, the time of 'colored.'"[30] Readers find out that "[t|he times are changing" due to the "increasingly vocal colored population" (42). Yet, the narrator also explains that "[t]hings are happening too fast" for Lila Mae, who believes that one can "understand the muck of things, accept it, live in it," but still run into trouble when "that muck change[s] so suddenly and dramatically" (36). The multi-temporality of Whitehead's debut novel, its almost inconsistent accumulation of periodizing signifiers, ultimately serves to draw readerly attention to the problem of the asynchronicity of subjective dispositions and social structures in moments of historical transition.[31]

One reason for Lila Mae's anxiety in the face of change is that New York is so radically different from the place she is from, that is, the segregated South. A later chapter provides insight into the conditions of existence that have shaped her habitus by way of narrating a visit to a movie theater in the "colored town" where she grew up. The narrator's sober language reflects Lila Mae's state of mind when she and her friend "walked around the side of the Royale to the stairs that led to the entrance reserved for colored patrons. Walked up the stairs to the balcony seating reserved for colored patrons, up to nigger heaven" (129). The unexcited tone of the entire passage indexes the self-evidence that segregation possesses for the two. The repetition of the phrase "reserved for colored patrons," like the repetition of the term "colored" which appears no fewer

29 Ibid., 121.

30 Manshel, "Colson Whitehead's History," 26.

31 For a gloss on the relationship between "'transitional' moments of cultural revolution" and a Blochian "*Ungleichzeitigkeit*," see Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London/New York: Routledge, 2002), 83.

than five times on this page alone, is meant to highlight that the spatial constriction of blacks is the dominant principle structuring the organization of physical space in this southern town. Lila Mae has grown up in this place and gone to the segregated movie theater "plenty of times before" (128). Consequently, the racialized division of the world appears as self-evident to her.

Bourdieu's concepts are well-suited to disentangle the relationship between race, space, and practice articulated in this passage. For the sociologist, the acquisition of the dispositions of the habitus is a function of existing in the world as a corporeal being

> The world encompasses me, comprehends me as a thing among things, but I, as a thing for which there are things, comprehend this world. And I do so […] *because* it encompasses me and comprehends me; it is through this material inclusion […] and what follows from it, the incorporation of social structures in the form of dispositional structures […] that I acquire a practical knowledge and control of the encompassing space.[32]

Thus, the spontaneous experience of the social world as immediately self-evident is possible. "The world is comprehensible, immediately endowed with meaning," writes Bourdieu, "because the body […] has been

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32 Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, 130, emphasis in original. Bourdieu's grasp of the body as a "thing among things […] for which there are things" recalls Merleau-Ponty, who writes that "my body is not only an object among all other objects […], but an object which is *sensitive to* all the rest." Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London/New York: Routledge, 2002), 275, emphasis in original. A more direct line from Merleau-Ponty's 1945 book to the issue of racialized embodiment can be traced via the fifth chapter of Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2008), 88, where he describes the "suffocating reification" of being reduced to "an object among other objects." For an intriguing discussion of racism as "bodily habit," which draws on Merleau-Ponty, Fanon, and Bourdieu (who is seen as too determinist, however), see Helen Ngo, *The Habits of Racism: A Phenomenology of Racism and Racialized Embodiment* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017).

protractedly (from the beginning) exposed to its regularities."[33] Through repeated encounters with the "materialized system of classification"[34] that is the Jim Crow South, Lila Mae acquired a habitus that allows her to practically apprehend this world without having to consciously reflect on it. This is why the novel can narrate her movements through physical space—up the stairs, through the entrance, and up to the balcony—without reproducing what she thinks and feels when navigating segregated space. This is no longer possible when Lila Mae finds herself in a new environment.

After an interlude at the Institute for Vertical Transport, where Lila Mae is trained in the art of elevator inspection, Lila Mae relocates to New York City. In a 1986 essay occasioned by a strikingly similar experience, Ralph Ellison uses the apt expression of moving physically while staying in place psychologically. In the essay, which revolves around his move from Tuskegee Institute to New York City in 1936, Ellison carefully observes and meditates on the relationship between structures and habitus, as the following passage shows: "I had discovered, much to my chagrin, that while I was physically out of the South, I was restrained—sometimes consciously, sometimes not—by certain internalized thou-shalt-nots that had structured my public conduct in Alabama."[35] Social structures that were experienced in the past are incorporated (as internalized constraints) in the form of dispositions which generate practice in the present (structuring conduct) in an often unrecognized manner, which makes for the overlapping of temporalities: "the past itself continued to shape perceptions and attitudes."[36] Bourdieu, too, comments on the past's peculiar presence in the present, writing that "*habitus* […] structures new experiences in accordance with

33 Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, 135.

34 Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1990), 76.

35 Ralph Ellison, "An Extravagance of Laughter," in *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, ed. John F. Callahan (New York: The Modern Library, 2003), 619.

36 Ibid., 628.

the structures produced by past experiences."[37] This is precisely Lila Mae's problem when she, like Ellison, leaves her alma mater and settles in the North, carrying along a set of internalized dispositions.

Sometimes these "thou-shalt-nots" are the results of the mute compulsion of segregated space, attesting to the fit between the history inscribed in "bodies" and the history inscribed in "things"[38] that is largely fabricated "invisibly and insidiously through insensible familiarization with a symbolically structured physical world."[39] Sometimes they arrive in the form of explicit injunctions. Here is what Lila Mae's father tells her before she leaves for the Institute: "It's not so different up there, Lila Mae. They have the same white people up there they got down here. It might look different. It might feel different. But it's the same" (234). Readers at this point might remember an earlier moment when Lila Mae recalls when "her father taught her that white folks can turn on you at any moment" (23). On the one hand, the world of her childhood tacitly dispositioned Lila Mae to use classification schemes based on racial difference; on the other hand, her father, who continually experienced racism throughout his life (162), explicitly advises her to be watchful of white people. When she encounters spaces that are not segregated, then, Lila Mae cannot but feel endangered.

The Intruitionist only grants readers an insight into the past conditions in which Lila Mae's habitus was acquired in its second half. Yet, long before telling readers about the origins of her dispositions the novel shows them in action in the narrative's present. To find out about the elevator crash, Lila Mae enters O'Connors, the elevator inspectors' favorite haunt. A third-person narrator quotes her father's warning that "white folks can turn on you," which is why she "fears for her life" in the bar (23). The narrator has access to events in Lila Mae's life as well as her conscious feelings at the moment. But several lines later the narrator glides into Lila Mae's mind and the narration repeats the warning, but this time in

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37 Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, 60.

38 Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, 150.

39 Pierre Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001), 38.

the form of free indirect discourse: "They can turn rabid at any second" (ibid.). The perspective shift, thus, reveals that Lila Mae has internalized her father's words which now tacitly inform her own thoughts.

Several lines of direct speech, spoken by her colleagues, announce Lila Mae's entrance into O'Connor's. These are followed by another passage in free indirect discourse: "The first thing a colored person does when she enters a bar is look for other colored people" (25). The indeterminacy of the terms—"a colored person" rather than Lila Mae; "a white bar" rather than O'Connor's—reveal this not to refer to an action performed only once, but rather one repeated in similar situations. The personal pronoun "she," however, indicates that it is Lila Mae, who is the acting individual alluded to here. But the phrasing does not present an action deliberately chosen and executed. Instead, the sentence's indeterminacy reveals it to be an action performed habitually. Lila Mae's habitual glance for the reassuring presence of other black patrons cannot be understood exclusively in the context of the present. The gesture tacitly mobilizes her past in order to practically anticipate the future that this particular present might hold in store,[40] that is to say, potential anti-black violence. Lila Mae's fear amounts to a "quasi-bodily *anticipation*" of the situation's "immanent tendencies."[41] In two simple sentences that remain, however, divided by almost one page of text and, thus, have to be actively related by the reader to yield their full meaning, Whitehead represents the dispositions of a habitus in action.

Indeed, literature can be extraordinarily useful in revealing dispositions in action. As Bourdieu writes,

> [t]he dispositions that [practical sense] actualizes—ways of being that result from a durable modification of the body through its upbringing—remain unnoticed until they appear in action, and even then,

40 On the relationship between the "mobilization of the past" and the "anticipation of the future" possible in a given present, see Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc J. D. Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (Chicago: The U of Chicago P, 1992), 138.

41 Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, 130, emphasis in original.

> because of the self-evidence of their necessity and their immediate adaptation to the situation.[42]

Literary texts have at their disposal perspective techniques that, if handled well, can introduce a distancing-effect that shatters this apparent self-evidence. Moreover, the use of a non-linear chronology can afford narratives with the power to provide information about the "durable modification of the body" during earlier phases of socialization, thus placing readers in a position to reconstruct the genesis of the habitus' generative principles.

According to Bourdieu, dispositions are lastingly inscribed in a social agent's body which thereby serves as a "memory pad."[43] *The Intuitionist* acknowledges that habits—and habitus, embodied history—are hard to discard: "it is difficult to shake old habits. Habits clamp down on the ankle and resist all entreaties, no matter how logical" (16). Yet, despite the oft-repeated allegation that his relational sociology is overly deterministic, Bourdieu allows for the possibility of "countertraining" to counteract the effects of symbolic violence.[44] *The Intuitionist* devotes several passages to representing Lila Mae's efforts to hide an outward show of her feelings. She has a face that is "good […] for telling lies" (37). The novel insists that this face is deliberately put on, rather than being an involuntary bodily reaction, by having the third-person narrator inform the reader that Lila Mae "has no doubts about the efficacy of her games face" (125). Another analepsis provides insight into the work that was necessary to train her body:

> She puts her face on. In her case, not a matter of cosmetics, but will. How to make such a sad face hard? It took years of practice. […]. She did it by lying in her bed, feeling and testing which muscles in her face pained under application of concerted tension. To choose the most extreme pain would be to make a fright mask. A caricature of strength. (57)

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42 Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, 139.

43 Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, 68.

44 Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, 172.

A mask, Roland Barthes writes, is "what makes a face into a product of a society and its history."[45] Lila Mae's mask, fabricated in a painful process of "countertraining," suggests synecdochically that her entire hexis, that is, her "way of bearing the body, of presenting it to others,"[46] is an artifact that bears the traces of the history of racialized domination. Racialized bodies, the novel suggests, must engage in a performance; race requires "theater" (56).

Racialized Domination and Theatricality

Few studies of the longue durée of anti-blackness in the United States are as attentive to the role of performances in producing, reproducing, and challenging racialized domination as Saidiya Hartman's influential *Scenes of Subjection*. The book, especially its first half, can be read as a capacious examination of the eponymous scenes in which subjugated subjects were constituted in such a way that "relations of domination" are disguised "through euphemism and concealment"[47]—what Bourdieu, whom she quotes, calls symbolic violence. Slave performances simulated the "slave's consent and agency" in order for displays of the "exercise of will" and "contented subjection" to coalesce and thus to naturalize domination.[48] At the same time, Hartman emphasizes that these performances were "enactments of social struggle" in which the meaning of blackness was contested. Various tactics allowed the enslaved to turn these enforced performances "against their instrumental aims," and "small acts of resistance" could be cloaked beneath the veils of "masquerade, subterfuge, and indirection."[49] *The Intuitionist*, published

45 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 34.

46 Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, 65.

47 Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997), 42.

48 Ibid., 53. At the same time, Hartman insists that the "performance of blackness" was always backed up by the "brute force" of anti-black terror (58).

49 Ibid., 57, 8.

two years after *Scenes of Subjection*, is similarly interested in masking and theater. Instead of using chattel slavery as a historical backdrop, however, Whitehead turns to the theatricality of relations of racialized domination in his ambiguous mid-twentieth-century setting.

A chapter set at the Funicular Follies, the elevator inspectors' annual gathering, condenses the novel's articulation of race and theater. While two inspectors in blackface perform a minstrel show on stage, Lila Mae is searching for clues about the elevator crash. "No one recognizes her" (148), however, because she is wearing a server's uniform that was mistakenly handed to her. Lila Mae takes advantage of white people's habitual employment of schemes of perception and evaluation according to which a black woman must be a menial worker. The narration once more employs free indirect discourse: "They do not see her. The colored help brings the food and clears the tables, the white waiters refill the drinks. [...]. They see colored skin and a servant's uniform. [...]. In here they do not see her. She is the colored help" (153). The focalization is flexible, and readers can never be entirely sure whose thoughts are being shared. But perhaps that is precisely the point, and the passage discloses the "presuppositions of common sense"[50] shared by everyone in attendance. To move undetected among the white crowd, Lila Mae exploits her awareness of the schemes of perception they will employ.

Lila Mae's invisibility in the eyes of whites and her simultaneous ability to see herself through their eyes evoke two "standard tropes" often found in African American literature.[51] The latter is a moment of W. E. B. Du Bois's double-consciousness, famously characterized as the "peculiar sensation [...] of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others."[52] Du Bois thereby anticipates Bourdieu's theory of symbolic violence. In the context of a discussion of masculine domination, the French sociologist writes that "[t]he dominated apply categories constructed from

50 Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, trans. Susan Emanuel (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1996), 323.

51 Tucker, "Verticality," 150.

52 W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, in *Writings*, ed. Nathan Huggins (New York: The Library of America, 1986), 364.

the point of view of the dominant to the relations of domination, thus making them appear as natural."[53] In both accounts, members of dominated social groups cannot but make use of dominant schemes of perception to apprehend themselves and the world. However, both Du Bois and Bourdieu grant dominated individuals the chance to understand the dominant better than they do themselves. Lila Mae benefits from this "special perspicacity"[54] which allows her to exploit the white attendees' ignorance in order to move about unbothered.

Most of the time, however, Lila Mae herself remains blind to the way in which other black characters' actions are informed by the performative requirements of race. Linda Selzer notes that *The Intuitionist* mobilizes the tropes of "minstrelsy and role-playing" to illustrate how "racial codes and social scripts [...] direct individual performance." Lila Mae's uniform is "partly theater, a costume for the public performances that structure her relationships with others."[55] While the novel's plot seems to revolve around the crashed elevator—but frustrates the readers' desire to conclude with a meaningful resolution—Lila Mae is repeatedly confronted with the puzzle of other characters' performances. And yet, rather than interpreting their actions as theater, that is, as deliberate performances based on the necessity of navigating a social world structured by racial domination, she is deceived by appearances. Again and again she completely misreads other black characters' hexis, their way of

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53 Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, 35.

54 Ibid., 31. On the "positive connotations" of Du Bois's double-consciousness, see Winfried Siemerling, "W. E. B. Du Bois, Hegel, and the Staging of Alterity," *Callaloo* 24, no. 1 (2001): 326. My point is not to negate the specificity of the experience analyzed by Du Bois, but merely to note the similarity of his and Bourdieu's accounts on a certain level of abstraction. Abstraction from the texts' immediate concerns might be necessary in both cases. Shamoon Zamir argues persuasively that Du Boisian double-consciousness should not be understood as expressing the experience of all blacks, but rather as the "historically specific and class-specific psychology" of "the Talented Tenth in crisis." Shamoon Zamir, *Dark Voices: W. E. B. Du Bois and American Thought, 1888–1903* (Chicago: The U of Chicago P, 1995), 116.

55 Selzer, "Instruments," 689.

presenting themselves and their bodies to the world. As a consequence, she falsely suspects one black man to be her antagonist and allows another to manipulate her by pretending to be her friend.

Lila Mae feels a particular aversion toward her only black colleague Pompey. Readers first become aware of the man at O'Connor's, where Lila Mae habitually looks for other black patrons:

> There is only one other colored person besides Lila Mae who [patronizes the bar], and that's Pompey, who's here tonight, elbows on the bar, sipping whiskey daintily as if it were the Caliph's tea, the cuffs of his shirt bold out of sad and comically short jacket sleeves. (24)

The lines are focalized through Lila Mae, and her perception of Pompey as a sad but comic type inform the narrator's choice of words. Compared to Lila Mae's anxiety in the white-dominated environment, Pompey's body language registers as an index of contentment and relaxation. "Bodily *hexis*," in Bourdieu's sociology, refers most pertinently to "the way [the body] is 'carried,' deportment, bearing" and "is assumed to express the 'deep being,' the true 'nature' of the 'person'."[56] Lila Mae interprets Pompey's hexis as an expression of an essential servility. Since the reader initially cannot but perceive Pompey except through Lila Mae's condescending gaze, her preconception goes unquestioned.

The rest of the paragraph relates a story about Pompey circulating among the inspectors; a story, the narrator notes, "that's true or not true: it doesn't matter" (24). This phrase, while easily overlooked, is significant, as it emphasizes that everyone's judgment of Pompey rests on a tale whose veracity no one cares to examine. In other words, the Pompey is introduced as a character whose meaning is entirely determined by the way others perceive him; his "being (*esse*) is a being-perceived (*percipi*)."[57] In the story Pompey, "the first colored elevator inspector in the city," is called to his superior's office and offered a cigar. Pompey

56 Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, 64.

57 Ibid., 66.

> expected confidences; Holt told him he was going to kick him in the ass. Pompey laughed […] and went along with the joke, even after Holt told him to bend over. Which he did. Pompey continued to chortle until Holt kicked him in the left ass cheek. […]. The next day a small memo appeared on Pompey's desk informing him of his promotion. (25)

For a story told by a narrator who has just admitted ignorance as to its truthfulness, it is oddly specific, including information about which ass cheek Pompey was kicked in. In fact, it reads like a tale repeatedly shared within a group of peers that is slightly revised in each iteration. The story is focalized collectively and reproduces the shared perspective of all inspectors including Lila Mae. The point is that it produces and circulates an image of Pompey as a man whose bent posture signifies an "appallingly obsequious nature" (25).

Like the other inspectors, Lila Mae engages in a substantialist reading of Pompey which ascribes motivations for his actions based on her spontaneous perception of him. And yet, when she subsequently confronts Pompey about his role in the elevator crash she is forced to reevaluate him. In his neighborhood she encounters a loving father and husband with close relations to his community.[58] After she accuses him of sabotage, he explicates himself:

> I got two boys. One five, the other seven. I was raised in this neighborhood. It's changed. […]. You see them kids play ball? Ten years from now half of them be in jail, or dead, and the other half working as slaves just to keep a roof over they heads. Ten years from now they won't even be kids playing ball on the street. Won't be safe enough even to do that. […]. My kids won't be here when that happens. I need money to take them out of here. (194)

In this encounter Pompey ceases to be a flat character. A picture of Pompey as a social agent who is aware of the way his social position constrains

58 For a reminder of the violence hidden "behind smiles" in this community, which is not simply romanticized in Whitehead's novel, see Sean Grattan, "I Think We're Alone Now: Solitude and the Utopian Subject in Colson Whitehead's *The Intuitionist*," *Cultural Critique* 96 (2017): 135.

his possibilities emerges: "What I done, I done because I had no other choice. This is a white man's world. They make the rules" (195). His actions are not the outward signs of an innate servility; instead, he has weighed his chances and decided to suffer humiliation and cater to white people's expectations. Lila Mae, who similarly plays a role and dons a mask when navigating a racist world, cannot see beyond the mask in Pompey's case. She, who repeatedly insists that she is "never wrong" (9, 255), is entirely wrong about her colleague. But, as Dorrit Cohn points out, free indirect discourse "[u]sed iteratively" can be a device that highlights a character's "mental rigidity."[59] Lila Mae reads "according to type."[60]

The same rigidity prevents Lila Mae from correctly assessing the ulterior motives of another black man, who initially presents himself as an ally. Natchez introduces himself as a porter working at the Intuitionist House, where Lila Mae finds refuge. Again, one of the first pieces of information which the reader conceives concerns his hexis. His "mouth is quick to smile." Whereas Lila Mae regarded Pompey as a sad and comic creature, Natchez registers as "a strong man" (49). Moreover, the novel uses divergent techniques in characterizing Pompey and Natchez. The former has hardly one line of direct speech until late in the novel, whereas Lila Mae's first meeting with the latter is rendered in the

59 Dorrit Cohn, *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1978), 132.

60 Selzer, "Instruments," 688. Whitehead uses another textual strategy that requires seeing relationships rather than isolated objects. The tale told by the elevator inspectors recalls an episode in a famous intertext, Richard Wright's autobiography *Black Boy*, in which Wright remembers a black co-worker—an elevator operator of all people!—who allowed white men to kick him for a quarter. Yet, Wright points out that his colleague Shorty was "[h]ardheaded, sensible, a reader of magazines and books" and "proud of his race and indignant about its wrongs." In fact, he only played "the role of clown" when "in the presence of whites." Wright's autobiography, thus, serves as a prior representation of the ways in which racialized domination forces individuals to engage in performances to make the best of a degrading situation. As Shorty puts it, "my ass is tough and quarters is scarce." Richard Wright, *Black Boy (American Hunger)*, in *Later Works*, ed. Arnold Rampersad (New York: The Library of America, 1991), 217–18. See also Liggins, "The Urban Gothic Vision," 368, n. 5.

form of a friendly conversation; a conversation whose pleasant nature is retroactively emphasized by way of a juxtaposition with the ensuing chapter, in which Lila Mae is rudely reminded of her status as a "colored" elevator inspector (53) during her final exam at the Institute for Vertical Transport. Finally, whereas Pompey's name signifies obsequiousness by evoking slave names, the name Natchez exudes feelings of community. It is the name of the town "where [his] mama's from," he tells Lila Mae, who replies that she is "from down South, too" (78).

The sense of a shared origin is further reinforced by the way Natchez's clothes appeal to the schemes of perception and appreciation which Lila Mae has acquired in the past. Natchez "wears a light blue suit of plain cut, the kind of suit she associates with the men of colored town, a church and wake suit, probably the only one he owns" (187). Natchez's demeanor and appearance remind Lila Mae of the world "down South" in which she grew up and thus "trigger the dispositions that the work of inculcation and embodiment has deposited."[61] Meeting a man who seems to emanate from this very world, she spontaneously perceives him as familiar and a potential "ally," as they both "come from the same place" (58).

As the man who confides in Lila Mae that Fulton had been passing for white, Natchez plays a crucial role in the novel's plot. Trying to enlist her help in the search for the blueprints of the perfect elevator, he explicitly appeals to her racial solidarity. Fulton's invention, he claims, is "the future of the cities. But it is our future, not theirs. It's ours. And we need to take it back. What he made, this elevator, colored people made that. And I'm going to show that we ain't nothing. Show them downstairs and the rest of them that we are alive" (140). Natchez motivational speech mirrors Henry Louis Gates's account of the political affordances of African American literature, discussed in a previous section. To wit, Gates argues that the function of black writing is to serve as evidence of black humanity, an ambition Natchez articulates as the desire "to show them that we ain't nothing." Since the perfect elevator so far exists only in the pages of Fulton's journals, that is to say in written form, Natchez's demand can also

61 Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, 38.

be read as a desire to reclaim a piece of writing as black writing. Then, the individual achievement turns into proof of collective potential.

It turns out, however, that Lila Mae, who initially accepts their shared racial mission, is deceived again. Natchez is, in fact, one Raymond Coombs who is on the payroll of Arbo, one of the two rival elevator manufacturers which are the "real players," as an investigative journalist puts it (209). He was sent because Arbo correctly assumed that Lila Mae would "trust one of her tribe" and "his story of correcting the injustices done to her race" (230). Eventually she confronts him in his office on the eightieth floor of the Arbo building, where he dismisses the significance of Fulton's racial identity.

> The rank and file in the industry won't believe [Fulton was black], and those who know care more about his last inventions. His color doesn't matter once it gets to that level. The level of commerce. They can put Fulton in one of those colored history calendars if they want—it doesn't change the fact that there's money to be made from his invention. (250)

At this level commerce trumps race; the consequences of the discovery of an "Africanist presence," which as per Morrison haunts American literature, turn out to be questionable.[62] To be sure, this in no way suggests that racism is absent from the world of *The Intuitionist*. What it does suggest, however, is that the novel's scrambling of temporalities functions to represent a world in which various relations of domination overlap in sometimes contradictory ways. In its "multi-temporal now"[63] the corporate world is happy to include individual blacks while others, even a vast majority, continue to be excluded on racist grounds. The ideological trick Natchez/Coombs tries to pull off by invoking the idea of a "racial population that is organically integrated and that operates as a collec-

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62 Hence Lee Konstantinou argues, convincingly I think, that *The Intuitionist* is a "satire" of *Playing in the Dark*. "Critique Has Its Uses," *American Book Review* 38, no. 5 (2017): 15.

63 Grausam, "The Multitemporal Contemporary," 121.

tive subject"[64] is to represent his own success as a collective victory for the entire African American population.

The End(s) of African American Literature

All of this is to say that *The Intuitionist* is set during a moment when class divisions within the African American population are becoming more pronounced. Pompey's lay-sociological account of the transformations of his neighborhood bears this out. It used to be "a mixed block," he tells Lila Mae, but has become racially homogeneous (195). The French sociologist Loïc Wacquant distinguishes the "communal ghetto" of the first half of the twentieth century from the "hyperghetto" of the late twentieth century. The latter is characterized by deindustrialization, unemployment, and the "depacification of everyday life." Moreover, he points out that the class composition of the ghetto became extremely homogeneous, as the black middle class left urban ghettos. Pompey's desire to raise money to enable his family to leave their neighborhood is part of a broader trend of this class fraction of upwardly mobile blacks, often employed in the public sector.[65] Natchez/Coombs must obscure this emerging rift within the African American population when appealing to Lila Mae's solidarity, however, for otherwise his actions could not appear to serve collective ends.

If the problem of Fulton's lost notebooks is reframed in this way, it becomes apparent that *The Intuitionist*, published in 1999 and written

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64 Adolph Reed, Jr., *Stirrings in the Jug: Black Politics in the Post-Segregation Era* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1999), 134. Natchez serves as a second allusion to Richard Wright or, more precisely, the Mississippi town close to which Wright was born. The first chapter of *Black Boy* does not provide a romantic image of southern black life but recounts how Wright was beaten unconscious by his mother after accidentally having set his grandparents' house on fire. Wright, *Black Boy*, 8. Shorty's actions suggest that submissive behavior can be strategic; Natchez problematizes the notion of an organic racial community.

65 Loïc Wacquant, "Deadly Symbiosis: When Ghetto and Prison Meet and Mesh," *Punishment & Society* 3, no. 1 (2001): 107, 104.

in 1996 or 1997,[66] anticipates the central argument of Kenneth Warren's much-discussed 2011 book *What Was African American Literature?*[67] Its thesis is as simple as its provocative: What turned African American literature into a collective project, as opposed to an aggregation of individual works, was the regime of Jim Crow segregation. Working in the confines of a system justified by the assertion of black racial inferiority, each work of literature by a black author would operate as counter-hegemonic "evidence of black achievement and excellence."[68] And yet, it follows from Warren's account that the "conditions" under which African American literature could figure as a collective project "no longer obtain" since the end of de jure segregation in the 1960s.[69] The end of African American literature, however, is not a cause for "lament" for Warren. After all, the world that provided its conditions of possibility is one "that black Americans did not want then and certainly don't want now."[70]

At this point I am not interested in assessing the accuracy of Warren's thesis, for I believe that his contribution lies not so much in the realm of

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66 Colson Whitehead, "Tunnel Vision," interview by Daniel Zalewski, *The New York Times*, May 13, 2001, https://www.nytimes.com/books/01/05/13/reviews/010513.13zale.html.

67 Kenneth W. Warren, *What Was African American Literature?* (Cambridge, MA/London: Harvard UP, 2011). Upon its publication the book sparked discussions in prominent venues such as *African American Review*, *PMLA*, and the *Los Angeles Review of Books*.

68 Kenneth W. Warren, "A Reply to My Critics," *PMLA* 128, no. 2 (2013): 405. The indexical strategy of treating literature as evidence of human quality is reminiscent of Gates's account. The latter wishes to define black writing on formal grounds alone but must tacitly rely on a "racial basis" when assigning individual works. Otherwise non-black writers who employ "black" textual strategies could be said to have produced black literature. See Christopher Douglas, *A Genealogy of Literary Multiculturalism* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2009), 317. Warren avoids this problem by arguing that the tradition's coherence was solely a function of a "politico-historical relation." "A Reply," 404.

69 Warren, *What Was African American Literature*, 9.

70 Kenneth W. Warren, "Does African American Literature Exist?" *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, February 24, 2011, https://www.chronicle.com/article/does-african-american-literature-exist/.

literary history, but in its critique of cultural politics. That is, rather than engaging in a *Universalienstreit* over whether the entity African American literature has existed, still exists, and will continue to exist, the (nominalist) question—What is at stake politically when using the same term to talk about literature produced by African Americans under Jim Crow and after its demise?—is more promising. Warren writes,

> [t]he key fact is that black literature's collective social and political relevance was a function of Jim Crow and the fight against it. To insist that writings by black Americans should count as African American literature is to take what was (even under the Jim Crow conditions that lent it plausibility) a problematic assumption of race-group interest, and to attempt to renew that assumption at a time when the grounds for asserting black identity and black solidarity are ever more tenuous.[71]

The assumption is "problematic," he elaborates, because of the "antidemocratic" assumption that talented individuals were best suited to represent the race: "the black literary voice could count for so much because, in political terms, the voice of black people generally counted for so little."[72] Conditions of general disenfranchisement made it possible and, as Warren concedes, somewhat plausible that exceptional individuals could represent the collective interest.[73]

Warren takes his cues from the way Adolph Reed, a frequent collaborator of his, characterizes black politics under Jim Crow. The southern black population, writes Reed, was externally managed through violent terror and the near total exclusion from the public. At the same time, there existed an "internal stratum" of black elites who mediated between the white power structure and the black population.[74] The position of

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71 Warren, *What Was African American Literature*, 110.

72 Ibid., 146.

73 For an account of the anti-democratic ways in which, "[i]n politics as in art," the "dispossession" of the many correlates with the professionalism of the few, see Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, trans. Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), 175–76.

74 Reed, *Stirrings in the Jug*, 61.

this leadership stratum is structurally homologous to that of the literary elites in Warren's account. Reed also admits that this elitist model may have been inevitable, given the "ideological justification" of racist domination on the ground of an alleged "black incapacity," which could be "empirical[ly] refut[ed]" by black achievement. Yet, he is convinced that increasing intra-black class stratification has exploded the notion, so foundational for the older political approach, that there are collectively shared racial interests. Consequently, Reed accuses black elites who claim to speak in the name of the community as exploiting "shared racial status" as a means of representing their class-specific interests as "authentic group interest."[75]

This is why the reflex to use Michelle Alexander's bestselling book *The New Jim Crow* to ward off Warren's thesis slightly misses the point.[76] Warren does not deny that racism continues to structure the "sociopolitical landscape" of the United States,[77] but the onus would be on his critics to show that contemporary crises such as mass incarceration and police brutality are best met by a politics organized around race, in which political elites—and elites engaged in literary production at that—can act as representatives of the collective. Warren denies this. While Jim Crow "affect[ed] all blacks regardless of their class status,"[78] the metaphorical

75 Ibid., 31, 4.

76 Indeed, few of the responses to Warren fail to mention Alexander's book. See Marquis Bey, "Pitch Black, Black Pitch: Theorizing African American Literature," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 18, no. 1 (2018): 115; Russ Castronovo, "Trains, Plains, and *What Was African American Literature?*" *African American Review* 44, no. 4 (2011): 581; Marlon B. Ross, "This is *Not* an Apologia for African American Literature," *PMLA* 128, no. 2 (2013): 398, n. 1; Gene Andrew Jarrett, "What is Jim Crow?" *PMLA* 128, no. 2, (2013): 389; Sonnet Retman, "What Was African American Literature?" *PMLA* 128, no. 2 (2013): 394. Others argue similarly without name-checking Alexander, see Soyica Diggs Colbert, "On Tradition," *African American Review* 44, no. 4 (2011): 578. The question whether an appeal to Alexander is helpful for the project of criticizing Warren is raised by Avram Alpert, "Epochs, Elephants, and Parts: On the Concept of History in Literary Studies," *diacritics* 42, no. 4 (2014): 34.

77 Warren, *What Was African American Literature*, 5.

78 Warren, "Does African American Literature Exist?"

use of Jim Crow to name and condemn current forms of oppression is a means of "*rhetorically*" identifying the interests of black elites with those of black prison inmates—a position that not only Warren finds untenable.[79]

In Whitehead's *The Intuitionist* the rhetorical identification of blacks across class lines is the essence of Natchez/Coombs's appeal to Lila Mae's solidarity by way of his expressed ambition to use Fulton's writings indexically. The novel shares Warren's skepticism when it comes to using individual black writing as a means in the struggle for collective liberation. What does it mean, then, for Lila Mae to complete Fulton's project of creating the perfect elevator? One critic proposes to read the elevator as a symbol for

> the plight of the black race. Blacks can ride up and down but they are forever boxed in, enclosed, trapped by the racist ideals of an unchanging society, ensnared in a horizontal environment. The black box realizes America's vertical race hierarchy. The novel's black characters are restricted to horizontal movement.[80]

Apart from the slightly confusing contention that blacks are able to "ride up and down," while being "restricted to horizontal movement," this misses Raymond Coombs position in an office on the eightieth floor. At

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79 Kenneth W. Warren, "Response," *African American Review* 44, no. 4 (2011): 590, emphasis in original. For another critique of the New Jim Crow thesis which insist on the significance of class divisions, see James Forman, Jr., "Racial Critiques of Mass Incarceration: Beyond the New Jim Crow," *New York University Law Review* 87 (2012): 101–46. The Endnotes editorial collective provides a detailed analysis of the cycle of anti-police struggles which began in 2012 and culminated in the Movement for Black Lives, asking whether these struggles could cohere around the notion "blackness" only to conclude that they did not. Endnotes, "Brown v. Ferguson," *Endnotes* 4 (2015): 10–69. See also John Clegg, "Black Representation After Ferguson," *The Brooklyn Rail*, May 2016, https://brooklynrail.org/2016/05/field-notes/black-representation-after-ferguson.

80 Isiah Lavender, III., "Ethnoscapes: Environment and Language in Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo*, Colson Whitehead's *The Intuitionist*, and Samuel R. Delany's *Babel-17*," *Science Fiction Studies* 34, no. 2 (2007): 193.

"that level," he explains to Lila Mae in almost vulgar Marxist fashion, "color doesn't matter" as long as there is "money to be made" (250). The discovery of Fulton's blackness does not solve the puzzle of the perfect elevator, which is why the latter is best not read as a "racial allegory."[81] But what is it?

Elevatorness and Objecthood

Eventually, the ambition to discover the perfect elevator can be deciphered as a decidedly utopian ambition in the novel's organizing logic. *The Intuitionist* explicitly raises the question of this elevator's ontology by way of reproducing the elevator inspectors' discussions of Fulton's invention. According to a male Intuitionist, Fulton was engaged in "a renegotiation of our relationship to objects," which is confirmed by Lila Mae who quotes Fulton's demand that the "elevator" be separated "from elevatorness." It must possess some intangible quality that transcend its physical properties. Empiricists falsely "imagined elevators from a human" perspective, which remains an "inherently alien point of view." The "elevatorness" that separates the perfect elevator from the world of mere objects can only be grasped "from the elevator's point of view" (62). That is, its perfection is not contingent on its relationship to empirical individuals. Instead, it is a function of its separation from existing humans; in short, of its autonomy.

At the same time, an elevator cannot exist in a world apart from humans. *The Intuitionist* reproduces a classroom discussion that revolves around the elevator's status in the absence of a passenger. The students discuss the question "where the elevator is when it is not in service." One suggests that it "does not exist when there is no freight, human or otherwise" (101). Lila Mae adds that elevator and passenger "need each other"

81 Huehls, *After Critique*, 115. Ramón Saldívar similarly remarks that the issue of Fulton's passing is "the least interesting aspect of this story." "The Second Elevation of the Novel: Race, Form, and the Postrace Aesthetic in Contemporary Narrative," *Narrative* 21, no. 1 (2013): 10.

(102). All of this is to say that the novel places irreconcilable demands on the perfect elevator (which is why it remains a utopian object): On the one hand, it cannot be a mere object but must possess a quality—that intangible "elevatorness"—that transcends its physicality, a quality that cannot merely be registered empirically from the human perspective; on the other, it needs empirical humans to exist. Like a work of art, it strives for autonomy but remains condemned to be part of the world.[82]

As such, as an object that must not be a mere object but cannot not be an object, the perfect elevator is, Lila Mae admits, a "supreme fiction" (232). The wording is reminiscent of Michael Fried's influential account of the work of art according to which the belief that art inhabited a different realm amounts to "the supreme fiction that the beholder did not exist."[83] In his study of eighteenth-century French painting and criticism Fried analyzes "the primordial convention that paintings are made to be beheld."[84] Like Fulton's perfect elevator, painting necessitates a human audience; yet Denis Diderot, who serves as the critical authority for Fried, remained committed to art which "negat[ed] the beholder's presence." A successful work of art would have to be "hermetic, in that the structure that results is self-sufficient, a closed system, which in effect seals of the space or world of the painting from that of the beholder"—perhaps just like a "black box." The work's self-sufficiency is established by a commitment to "*pictorial unity*,"[85] which itself is a product of the "structure of relations"[86] that constitutes the work.

Fried's much-discussed 1967 essay "Art and Objecthood" revolves around a similar problem. It criticizes Minimalist art as practiced by Donald Judd, Robert Morris, Tony Smith, and others, whom he rebukes for producing "nothing more than objects." A successful work of art

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82 For a discussion of the "double character" of art, see Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Continuum, 2002), 225.

83 Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (Chicago: The U of Chicago P, 1980), 103.

84 Ibid., 93.

85 Ibid., 103, 64, 76, emphasis in original.

86 Michael Fried, "How Modernism Works: A Reply to T. J. Clark," *Critical Inquiry* 9, no. 1 (1982): 233.

must instead "defeat or suspend its own objecthood." This it does by being "relational," insofar as its "individual elements bestow significance on one another precisely by virtue of their juxtaposition."[87] The relationship between the work's moments, thus, establishes its unity by exceeding its "singleness" as an object.[88] The latter, however, is precisely what the Minimalists strive for, suppressing "relationships within the work,"[89] which is why Fried concludes that the Minimalist object fails to transcend its mere objecthood and, hence, fails to be art.

In the 1967 essay, Fried's name for the "espousal of objecthood" is "theater."[90] His 1980 book on French painting also pursues a critique of theatricality via Diderot, who used the term "the theatrical" to express his aversion to painting that openly acknowledged the beholder. The painterly representation of strong emotions, such as a woman's grief, which are intentionally meant to affect the beholder produces, Diderot claims, a "*grimace*."[91] Now is the time to remember that *The Intuitionist* knows theater and grimaces as well: Lila Mae relies on "theater" to "be among other people" (56) and, consequently, transform her face into a "fright mask" (57). Finally, then, the relevance of this detour through Michael Fried's art history and criticism becomes comprehensible. In the world of Whitehead's novel, theater is required because of the social relations of racialized domination which compel Lila Mae to wear a mask in public—and Pompey, Natchez/Coombs, and Fulton also engage

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87 Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," in *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago/London: The U of Chicago P, 1998), 151, 150, 164. Throughout the essay Fried uses the term "literalism" to refer to Minimalism. For a discussion of Fried's relational conception of the work of art, see Marlon Lieber, "Art and Economic Objecthood: Preliminary Remarks on 'Sensuous Supra-Sensuous' Things," *REAL – Yearbook of Research in English and American Studies* 35 (2019): 68.

88 Fried, "Art and Objecthood," 150.

89 Robert Morris, "Notes on Sculpture 1–3," in *Art in Theory, 1900–1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 818, quoted in Fried, "Art and Objecthood," 150.

90 Fried, "Art and Objecthood," 153.

91 Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality*, 100, 97.

in public performances when navigating this world. The world of theater, in short, is the world of anti-black racism. As a novel committed to envisioning the utopian possibility of a world beyond anti-black racism, *The Intuitionist* rejects theatricality.[92]

The analogy between the perfect elevator and the anti-theatrical work of art can be taken further still by way of attending to the role of embodied dispositions sketched in an earlier section of this chapter. While the successful work of art seals itself off from the beholder, the Minimalist work is experienced as "an object in a *situation*—one that, virtually by definition, *includes the beholder*," which means, Fried stresses, "the beholder's *body*."[93] A work of art committed to pictorial unity, despite its supremely fictional ambition to be completely autonomous from the world of humans, requires a beholder able to grasp the way in which the relations between individual elements bestows meaning upon the whole—in short, it requires a relational thinker. The Minimalist work, on the other hand, addresses an individual qua body and thus, I venture, an individual as a bearer of embodied dispositions. But in *The Intuitionist* these dispositions are precisely the site of the incorporation of the social and its relations of domination.

Here is, finally, the utopian significance of Fulton's demand to separate "elevator" and "elevatorness." The perfect elevator has to exceed its status as an object which addresses only bodies who are the bearers of the history of racialized domination. In a passage alluded to before, Bourdieu writes:

> The principle of action [...] lies in the complicity between two states of the social, between history in bodies and history in things, or, more precisely, between the history objectified in the form of structures and mechanisms [...] and the history incarnated in bodies in the form of

92 For an alternative account of Fried, theatricality, and blackness, see Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2003), 233–39.

93 Fried, "Art and Objecthood," 153, 155, emphases in original.

> habitus, a complicity which is the basis of a relation of quasi-magical participation between these two realizations of history.[94]

The perfect elevator explodes the complicity between bodies and things. It literalizes the "supreme fiction" that one could create an object unable to activate the "history incarnated in bodies in the form of habitus." The perfect elevator would, in other words, have to be an object that does not objectify the history of racialized domination that weighs like a nightmare on the bodies of the living. As such it could no longer communicate with bodies which have incorporated the same history.[95] And, indeed, in the course of *The Intuitionist* Lila Mae begins to learn no longer to rely on her body when reading elevators.

When the reader first observes Lila Mae in action, her Intuitionist method of elevator inspection works by establishing a material connection to the elevator by "lean[ing] against" its walls (5). Lauren Berlant, thus, regards Intuitionism as "a school of thought that teaches people to take on the sensual perspective of the object […] in order to read its health" through corporeal contact.[96] Fulton's teachings, however, demand that one "communicate with the elevator on a nonmaterial basis" (62). Later in the novel, Lila Mae only "*imagines* her hand extending out to the unyielding solidity of that dead elevator's walls" (226, my emphasis). Unlike some critics, I do not believe that *The Intuitionist* privileges embodied knowledges,[97] for the novel treats the habitual schemes of perception and appreciation that are thoroughly embodied as a problem

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94 Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, 150–51.

95 Sean Grattan argues in a similar vein when he points out that the perfect elevator could only address humans possessing "new appendages, new organs, and new ways of being." "I Think We're Alone Now," 142. Souleymane Ba proposes that the perfect elevator prefigures "a proleptic posthuman and postracial world." "Afrofuturism in Contemporary African American Literature: Reading Colson Whitehead," *Black Studies Papers* 2, no. 1 (2016): 53.

96 Lauren Berlant, "Intuitionists: History and the Affective Event," *American Literary History* 20, no. 4 (2008): 853.

97 See Spencer Morrison, "Elevator Fiction: Robert Coover, Colson Whitehead, and the Sense of Infrastructure," *Arizona Quarterly* 73, no. 3 (2017), 115; Selzer, "Instruments," 696.

rather than a solution. To be sure, nor does the novel suggest that these embodied dispositions could be overcome. In the diegetic world of the novel, knowledge remains irreducibly situated.[98] This is why the perfect elevator must remain a utopian object in a literal sense: there is no place in the novel's world for it to exist. It only exists in the pages of Fulton's notebooks, that is, in the form of writing.

The perfect elevator, then, serves not as a vehicle in a racial allegory; its function in the novel is that of an allegory for cultural production.[99] Lila Mae's work of detection must lead her to the conclusion that she is not the protagonist of a detective novel, but of a *Künstlerroman*. "In writing the black box," Sean Grattan writes in a lucid account of the novel's utopian dimension, "Lila Mae writes something beyond new habits; she writes the potential for another world."[100] At the very end, she retreats to her room to write the perfect elevator which might just as well be the perfect work of (literary) art that prefigures a world beyond racialized bodies and things. As in Kenneth Warren's account of African American literature, Lila Mae's endeavor has an "instrumental" function,[101] even an

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98 See Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988): 575–99.. Haraway disparagingly calls the ambition "of seeing everything from nowhere," that is, of a perception not reducible to an embodied standpoint, the "god trick" (581). In the conclusion I will show that Whitehead's *Zone One* remains ambiguously committed to literature that demands to be read from a god-like perspective.

99 My pairing of Bourdieu and Fried may appear unwieldy at first. The French sociologist is well-known for his critique of the "pure aesthetic." See Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA/London: Harvard UP, 1984). In his lectures on Manet he twice calls Fried an "iconologist gone mad." Pierre Bourdieu, *Manet: A Symbolic Revolution*, trans. Peter Collier and Margaret Rigaud-Drayton (Cambridge: Polity, 2017), 237, 337. It would amount to a grave misunderstanding, however, to believe that Bourdieu rejected the aesthetic per se; instead, his sociology leads to the demand to "universaliz[e] the conditions of access" to art appreciation. Bourdieu and Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, 88.

100 Sean Grattan, "I Think We're Alone Now," 146.

101 Warren, *What Was African American Literature*, 10.

anti-racist one. The perfect elevator anticipates a future in which objects no longer bear the traces of racism. Yet, as her encounter with Natchez/Coombs has made clear, her project can no longer be that of an individual author writing African American literature in the service of a collective project. Hence, the problem with which I began this chapter: Lila Mae must both continue Fulton's work and take historical transformations, such as the increase of class divisions within the African American population, into consideration and invent new modes of writing. This, Whitehead's debut novel seems to say, has been the predicament of the black writer ever since the ambiguous, uneven, and inconclusive end of Jim Crow.

2. Ab/uses of History: *John Henry Days* and *Apex Hides the Hurt*

In *The Intuitionist*, the presence of the past in the form of embodied dispositions was a problem for Lila Mae Watson, who brought the history of Jim Crow segregation with her to New York City as part of her habitus. Whitehead's following two novels are different, insofar as both feature narratives of black men born after the demise of de jure segregation. Moreover, whereas Lila Mae has a rural working-class background, the later two protagonists are members of an urban professional class stratum. That is to say, neither *John Henry Days*' J. Sutter nor the nameless consultant of *Apex Hides the Hurt* share Lila Mae's history in any immediate sense. Nonetheless, both novels are interested in the past. The difference is that whereas Lila Mae had an immediate personal experience of Jim Crow segregation, the two later protagonists only have access to the past in a mediated manner. Here, the term *mediated* is meant literally, as these characters rely on media such as film or writing to learn about the past. Both novels end up suggesting that this mediated relationship to the past turns it into an object that can be appropriated and manipulated to serve the interests of present-day power struggles.

The last chapter argued that Whitehead's debut novel anticipated Kenneth Warren's theses about African American literature. The latter, to wit, suggested that the notion of African American literature as a collective project that advanced the interests of all American blacks after Jim Crow cannot be sustained. One attempted solution to this dilemma that Warren notices is a turn toward the past in writing by African Americans. Numerous texts, he claims, reject "discrete periodizations" and

instead proclaim historical "continuity."[1] This retrospective tendency has an identity-building function, he avers.

> When racial identity can no longer be law, it must become either history or memory—that is it must be either what some people once were but that we no longer are, or the way we were once upon a time, which still informs the way we are. [...]. To make a poet black (to paraphrase Countee Cullen) is to bid her sing her past as her identity. (96–97)

Warren takes his cues from Walter Benn Michaels's account of "historicism," which revolves to a large extent around a reading of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. The Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, Michaels argues, uses the past in the service of "the constitution of identity."[2] Both critics bemoan that historicist novels draw on the past as a solution to the problem of establishing black racial identity in the absence of legalized segregation. This commitment to identity amounts, in their assessments, to a mystification of the more pressing concern of economic inequality.[3]

In an essay on the figure of the "ancestor," Morrison has invoked the past as a source of identity in non-fictional form. She argues that "the presence or absence of the figure determined the success or the happiness of the character." The ancestor embodies an affirmative relation to the past which (re)establishes a communal bond after allegedly organic rural communities have been thrown into "disarray" by urbaniza-

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1 Kenneth W. Warren, *What Was African American Literature?* (Cambridge, MA/London: Harvard UP, 2011), 84.

2 Walter Benn Michaels, *The Shape of the Signifier: 1967 to the End of History* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2004), 139.

3 For a reading of Morrison that does not share the view that it is "an attempt to bolster racial pride," see Samuel Cohen, *After the End of History: American Fiction in the 1990s* (Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 2009), 117. For a reading of *Beloved* and several other of Morrison's novels which draws on Bourdieu's relational sociology, see Stefanie Müller, *The Presence of the Past in the Novels of Toni Morrison* (Heidelberg: Winter, 2013).

tion.[4] Madhu Dubey submits Morrison's essay to a thorough critique and laments that "Morrison's towering presence as both a novelist and a literary critic" has meant that her pronouncements are generally applied without any critical qualifications in African-American literature as a whole."[5] Indeed, the reception of Whitehead's work can serve well as a case in point. In the reading of *Apex Hides the Hurt* already addressed in the introduction, Stephanie Li paraphrases Morrison when she claims that "self-fulfillment is only possible through reconciliation with" an "ancestral figure." She discovers the latter in the person of the black bartender Muttonchops. The protagonist, however, does not warm to the man, which Li can only diagnose as a case of "racial anxiety."[6] J. Sutter also fails to reveal sufficient veneration for his racial ancestors in the eyes of some critics. Hence, the solution: he must "commemorate" steel driving legend John Henry.[7] In this chapter I will argue that neither of the two novels propose ancestor worship as desirable. In fact, in a 2009 *New York Times* essay titled "What to Write Next," Whitehead made fun of the "Historical Novel [...] cutting between the past and present" to reveal to the narrator "some ancestor's role in things," as well as the "Southern Novel of Black Misery," investigating the legacy of slavery and Reconstruction through "sepia-tinted goggles,"[8] which alone should suggest that, in Whitehead's view, his two previously published novels do not turn to the past for sustenance. These novels instead stress that any

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4 Toni Morrison, "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation," in *Black Women Writers (1950–1980): An Evaluation*, ed. Mari Evans (Garden City: Anchor, 1984), 343, 340.

5 Madhu Dubey, *Signs and Cities: Black Literary Postmodernism* (Chicago: The U of Chicago P, 2003), 237. In the first chapter of this book Dubey anticipates Warren's thesis in less provocative terms.

6 Stephanie Li, *Signifying Without Specifying: Racial Discourse in the Age of Obama* (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2012), 90.

7 Éva Tettenborn, "'A Mountain Full of Ghosts': Mourning African American Masculinity in Colson Whitehead's *John Henry Days*," *African American Review* 46, no. 2–3 (2013), 277.

8 Colson Whitehead, "What to Write Next," *The New York Times*, October 29, 2009, https://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/01/books/review/Whitehead-t.html.

attempt to establish a version of remembering the past is intricately involved in social struggles of the present.

It is (Not) Always Mississippi in the Fifties

It is odd that critics accuse J. Sutter of not being aware of the past in the first place. One writes that he "is hardly the traumatized victim of history that [*Beloved*'s] Sethe is. Indeed J.'s problem may be that he is not traumatized enough by the past,"[9] as if there could be a desirable amount of historical trauma. But in fact, like Ralph Kabnis, another northern black professional who travels to the American South in Jean Toomer's *Cane*, J. experiences "an unreasonable fear of being lynched."[10] Far from being unaware of history, from the minute he sets foot on West Virginian soil, J. is convinced that he is doomed. A freelance journalist sent to Talcott, West Virginia, to cover the inaugural John Henry Days festival celebrating the legendary black steel driver who allegedly challenged a steam-powered drill to a contest which he won, only to collapse and die on the spot, J. experiences his trip to the South as a veritable katabasis, a descent into an American underworld, although in the end the novel is inconclusive as to whether he will make it out again.

Right after landing at the Charleston airport, J. thinks "[f]orget the South. The South will kill you" (*JHD* 14).[11] The narration in free indirect discourse glides into J.'s mind and "adopt[s]" his "inner language"[12] only to glide out again to contextualize his assumption by making explicit the

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9 Peter Collins, "The Ghosts of Economics Past: *John Henry Days* and the Production of History," *African American Review* 46, no. 2–3 (2013): 285.

10 Nathan Irvin Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007), 185, in reference to Kabnis. On Whitehead's admiration for Toomer, see Colson Whitehead, "Going Up," interview by Laura Miller, *Salon*, January 12, 1999, https://www.salon.com/1999/01/12/cov_si_12int/.

11 All references to Colson Whitehead, *John Henry Days* (New York: Doubleday, 2001) will hereafter be cited parenthetically in the text as *JHD*.

12 Dorrit Cohn, *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness* (Princeton: Princeton UP; 1978), 117.

schemes of perception and appreciation he mobilizes. "He possesses the standard amount of black Yankee scorn for the South, a studied disdain that attempts to make a callus of history." His attitude is shared among black northerners and consists of "sophisticated contempt, a healthy stock of white trash jokes, things of that nature, an instinctual stiffening to the words County Sheriff" (ibid.). The use of multiple perspectives allows the novel to situate J.'s experience in his social position as a "black Yankee." Moreover, the classificatory principle informing his thoughts involves his entire body. Some words can produce an "instinctive stiffening," and history is likened to a "callus," a modification of bodily tissue caused by repeated irritation or pressure.

Whenever the novel is presented through J.'s perspective, readers must thus remember that his perception, thoughts, and actions are informed by his embodied dispositions. At the airport,

> He has arrived at a different America he does not live in. The undiagnosed press toward the gate waiting for kin. Placed hip-to-hip, the rivulets and shadings of their acid-washed jeans describe a relief map of blighted confederacy. Powerline kids suck fingers. Between the hems of oversized shorts and lips of polyknit athletic socks sally bright red lobster flesh and craggy knees, dumb and unashamed things, seabottom tubers uncataloged by any know system of biological taxonomy. (ibid.)

This passage, which naturalizes J.'s feelings of revulsion and disparity, is followed by a parenthetical remark which provides another relativization of J.'s thought: "(None of this is true, of course, but perception is all [...].)" (*JHD* 14–15). Parenthetical commentary is one of Whitehead's favorite textual strategies in *John Henry Days* to denaturalize doxic experience. But readers learn early on that the novel's representation of the South is filtered entirely through J.'s perception.

Thus, the novel admits at the outset that it is only interested in the South insofar as it is imagined by its protagonist. Or, more precisely, the plot of J.'s narrative is propelled by a tension articulated by the poet Zyrae Van Clief-Stefanon: "The South is an imaginary place where real things

happen."[13] J.'s imaginary West Virginia—populated by "cannibals, all of them"—enables him to look down at the locals. Waiting for a driver who picks him up at the airport, he expects "a red pickup truck with a bunch of chickens in the back spitting feathers" (*JHD* 15). By contrast, J. thinks of himself as a "sophisticated black man from New York City" (*JHD* 77). His perception and appreciation of the South relies on what Edward Said calls "imaginative geography," which contains "lenses" that "shape the language, perception, and form of the encounter" with the Other. In *Orientalism*, Said analyzes fantastical representations of the Orient and its irrationality as a means to bolster Western identity, noting a "universal practice of designating in one's mind a familiar space which is 'ours' and an unfamiliar space which is 'theirs.'"[14] By devalorizing the unfamiliar space—"a different America [J.] does not live in"—the dominant culture can "intensify its own sense of itself."[15] That is, the greater the distance J. puts between himself and the country bumpkins of his imagination, the more his self-image of urban sophistication is reinforced.

At the same time, J. feels constantly threatened. "It's always Mississippi in the fifties," he tells a colleague (*JHD* 127), a statement which syntactically mirrors Beloved's thought in Morrison's eponymous novel that "it is always now."[16] The continuity of racism in both cases cancels out historical developments, and in J.'s imaginary South time seems to have been at a standstill ever since the antebellum period; the temporality is that of the "timeless eternal."[17] For J. the "notoriously racist state"

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13 Quoted in Kevin Young, *The Gray Album: On the Blackness of Blackness* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2012), 306. Young dedicates the book to "Colson Whitehead, my brother." The two met as undergraduates at Harvard University. See Colleen Walsh, "Kevin Young and a Unified Theory of Black Culture—and Himself," *The Harvard Gazette*, November 10, 2020, https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2020/11/kevin-young-92-discusses-new-role-as-museum-director/.

14 Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 2003), 58, 54.

15 Ibid., 55.

16 Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987), 210.

17 Said, *Orientalism*, 72. For sophisticated accounts of the continuity of the anti-black racism in the United States, see Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America* (New York/Oxford:

of Mississippi[18] figures as a synecdoche for the entire South, absorbing West Virginia. Apprehending the local population as uncivilized brutes amounts to an attempt by J. to exert control over them.[19]

This tension between exerting control over the locals and feeling threatened by them is what drives the narrative forward in the novel's first part. While the "trope that governs [J.'s] perceptions" is that of a "colonialist explorer venturing into a jungle of savage whites,"[20] the latter might prove too dangerous to control, after all. Hence, J.'s sense of impending doom: "The South will kill you." In the taxi, he feels a

> burp of paranoia: what if Caleb [the driver's name is Arnie] here is driving him up into the mountains, down to the creek, out to the lonesome spot where his family performs rituals. Boil him up in a pot, ritual sacrifice helps the crops grow. […]. Boil him up in a pot while they watch wrestling on TV. He figures even the most remote shack has a TV these days. The cable carrier in this region serves a special clientele, entire public access shows devoted to dark meat recipes. (*JHD* 21–22)

At this point, J. is still able to keep his paranoia in check. "I'm a real city boy," he thinks, "I'm a real jaded fuck" (*JHD* 22). Later, he loses control over his imagination and fantasizes about getting dragged out of a car and lynched by a mob chasing him in "the red pickup truck of his nightmares." Initially, the pickup truck carried chickens; now, it is "filled with crackers" (*JHD* 50). The southerners of J.'s imagination quickly turn into a murderous threat.

J.'s paranoia returns with a vengeance at a dinner on the eve of the John Henry Days festival with almost fatal consequences. While J. is struggling to swallow a piece of prime rib stuck in his throat he

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Oxford UP, 1997); and Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 64–81.

18 David Brown and Clive Webb, *Race in the American South: From Slavery to Civil Rights* (Gainesville: UP of Florida, 2007), 309.

19 See Said, *Orientalism*, 59.

20 William Ramsey, "An End of Southern History: The Down-Home Quests of Toni Morrison and Colson Whitehead," *African American Review* 41, no. 4 (2007): 781.

once more imagines himself as the victim of a lynching. The narration reproduces a stream of consciousness which amalgamates lines from the "Ballad of John Henry," allusions to southern history, and J.'s present experiences:

> No oxygen for me, thanks, I've had enough. [...]. I'm a sophisticated black man from New York City and I'm going to die down here. [...]. [...]. Who wants to be the blue guy in the choking picture on the wall of a cheap restaurant? Where is this place's sign? There must be laws about the placement of signs [...]. Federal law, but then maybe they vary from state to state. States' rights! States' rights, these people love their fucking states' rights, signs on fountains, back of the bus Rosa Parks. This place will fucking kill him [...]. He jumps out of his seat. My eyes must be popping out my head like some coon cartoon. [...]. All these crackers looking up at me, looking up at the tree. Nobody doing nothing, just staring. They know how to watch a nigger die. (*JHD* 77–79)

Thus ends the first part of *John Henry Days*, and it takes the reader some forty pages until it is revealed that J. was rescued by a fellow diner.

The prime rib is a device that allows the novel to stage in which a J. imagines himself as the victim of a lynching while at the same time experiencing the sensation of choking. He does not encounter racist terror, but suffers, in Bourdieu's terms, from symbolic violence nonetheless. His body "reproduce[s]" a relationship of domination "by miming it."[21] It is as if his trip to the South triggers something in his body that has predisposed him to recognize himself as a target of racist violence. His "imaginative geography" of the South is like a "stage" on which "figures whose role it is to represent the larger whole from which they emanate"[22] make an entrance. These are the County Sheriff, the cannibalistic redneck family, the white mob, and, ultimately, the antithetical pair of

21 Pierre Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, trans. by Richard Nice (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), 171.

22 Said, *Orientalism*, 63.

"crackers" and "niggers." J.'s fatalistic sense of doom presents what Bourdieu calls "*amor fati*" or "love of destiny, the bodily inclination to realize an identity that has been constituted as a social essence and so transformed into destiny."[23] J.'s conviction that the South will kill him prescribes a social essence that is appropriated and realized by his body against his will.

However, J. does not experience any racist encounters in West Virginia in the novel. Whatever the contents of his imaginary South—and regardless of whether the empirical South is more racist than other parts of the United States—the people J. meets in *John Henry Days* do not constitute a threat. Of course, there is the possible exception of Alphonse Miggs, the philatelist who shoots and kills two visitors of the festival, possibly including J. But there is no indication that racism motivates his act; moreover, it is he who saves J. from choking at the dinner. Whence J.'s paranoia, then? The novel adds a further level of meaning to southern history via a set of intertextual references that reveal just how mediated J.'s perception and experience of the South is.

In the past, traveling to the South often functioned in the service of "immersion narratives" in African American literature. Robert Stepto characterizes these as "ritualized journey[s] into a symbolic South, in which a black protagonist seeks those aspects of tribal literacy that ameliorate, if not obliterate, the conditions imposed by solitude."[24] But whatever J. finds in West Virginia, it is not "tribal literacy." In a lucid analysis of the significance of the old mill, in which the dinner during which J. almost chokes takes place, William Ramsey shows that the South in Whitehead's novel subverts the idea of a "fecund black essence" that could sustain J. (as a sort of geographical ancestor figure). The mill cannibalizes past architectural styles—"colonial, antebellum, and

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23 Pierre Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001), 50; See also Christa Buschendorf, "Narrated Power Relations: Jesse Hill Ford's Novel *The Liberation of Lord Byron Jones*," in *Civilizing and Decivilizing Processes: Figurational Approaches to American Culture*, ed. Christa Buschendorf, Astrid Franke, and Johannes Voelz (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011), 247.

24 Robert B. Stepto, *From Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative* (Champaign: U of Illinois P, 1991), 167.

modern"[25]—in a historicist manner.[26] Extending Ramsey's reading, one could argue that the South as experienced by J. the first part of *John Henry Days* likewise draws on references to southern history as well as on pop cultural representations of the rural South that ultimately do not add up to a historical essence—the eternal 1950s Mississippi—but to a postmodern pastiche.

Indeed, pop culture is a primary lens through which J. perceives the South. The novel creates a threatening atmosphere during the journey that takes J. from the airport to his hotel and subsequently to the dinner at the old mill by relying on intertextual references to films that were popular in J.'s childhood (a later chapter reveals that J. was eighteen years old in 1984). In the cab, J. is engaged in "a cool contemplation of the eighteen-wheeler chasing their rear bumper. A plastic sheet detailing the Confederate flag dominates the truck's front grill. He can't see the driver" (*JHD* 18). It is not the flag alone that turns the truck into a threat, because J. elsewhere judges visual emblems of the Confederacy as mere "kitsch" (*JHD* 42) or has no reaction to them at all, as when he comes across Confederate flags and t-shirts sporting the flag at the festival (*JHD* 267). But an anonymous driver in a truck chasing a man in a smaller vehicle reiterates the character constellation of Steven Spielberg's 1971 film *Duel*, and J.—a freelance writer on popular culture—can identify as the chased party in this instance.

More generally, his entire journey draws on the conventions of the "urbanoia film," a genre that according to Carol Clover, who coined the term, includes 1970s horror films such as Tobe Hooper's *Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, Wes Craven's *The Hills Have Eyes*, or John Boorman's *Deliverance*.[27] A commonality of these films is that they revolve around the experiences of urbanites in a rural setting where they recognize

25 Ramsey, "An End of Southern History," 770, 781.

26 On postmodern historicism in architecture, see Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke UP, 1991), 18.

27 Carol J. Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2015), 126. The last of these is, she admits, not exactly a horror film, but "the influential granddaddy of the tradition."

that the locals are "not like us." These abject Others—often cannibals or incestuous families—are ciphers of a life "beyond the reaches of social law" in terms of their demeanor, their appearance, and their actions. Beneath the cultural difference that materializes in the "city/country split," there is the difference of "social class."[28] Time and again, educated, well-off city-dwellers (well-off at least in relation to the local population) visit rural regions only to feel the wrath of the victims of capitalist dynamics radiating from the metropolis: in *Deliverance* a local ecosystem is about to be transformed by a dam, whereas the cannibals in *Texas Chain Saw Massacre* are former slaughterhouse workers left behind by deindustrialization.[29]

Clover's discussion of urbanoia film serves as a useful heuristic to see how J.'s paranoid fantasies in rural West Virginia are informed by the same class resentment. J. a "*sophisticated* black man from New York City" (*JHD* 77, my emphasis) is convinced that the Appalachian "mountain people" (*JHD* 18) are essentially different from him in terms of intelligence, hygiene, and habits. In his eyes they are, after all, cannibals waiting to devour him in a lonely hut—an imaginary scene drawn straight from the archive of urbanoia film. That is to say, when he arrives in West Virginia, J. carries with him a set of pop cultural representations—mostly images mobilizing the conventions of 1970s horror films—which function as schemes of perception and evaluation which allow him to endow his journey with a specific meaning: "The South will kill you." In short, urbanoia films are the modality through which J. experiences race in *John Henry Days*.[30]

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28 Ibid., 124, 126, 125.

29 See Robin Wood, "An Introduction to the American Horror Film," in *American Nightmare: Essays on the Horror Film*, ed. Andrew Britton et al. (Toronto: Festival of Festivals, 1979), 21. For a brilliant reminder that the "hinterland" cannot in fact be disentangled from the capitalist economy, see Phil A. Neel, *Hinterland: America's New Landscape of Class and Conflict* (London: Reaktion, 2018).

30 Daniel Grassian, too, argues that "media images of prejudice and discrimination against African Americans" have made J. "hyperconscious of racism." *Writing the Future of Black America: Literature of the Hip-Hop Generation* (Columbia: U of South Carolina P, 2009), 77. This is certainly true, and J.'s fantasy of being

To be sure, *John Henry Days* does not suggest that anti-black violence is no longer present in the South or elsewhere; a later chapter (discussed in chapter four) revolves around the shooting of Eleanor Bumpurs by New York City police officers in 1984 which enrages seventeen-year-old J. But, to conclude this section, the novel challenges a type of thinking about the importance of the past in writing by African Americans that often goes unquestioned. In the beginning of this chapter I alluded to critical discussions of Whitehead's novels which reproached his protagonists—and, implicitly, through guilt by literary creation, the author himself—with being insufficiently aware of and connected with their past. Far from endorsing the belief that blacks had an immediate relationship to African American history, *John Henry Days* emphasizes the mediated nature of the past. Unlike in Morrison's *Beloved*, in which someone "who never was there" is able to remember something that happened to another person in the past, J. does not "bump into" a "rememory."[31] His experience of the South is informed by "pop images and simulacra of […] history."[32] But the novel also shows that the images J. conjures up articulate a racial and a class perspective on the South; J. is a black man, but he is also a sophisticated New Yorker and both positions account for his paranoia.

But *John Henry Days* narrates J.'s descent into this mediated South to dramatize another issue with the past. According to Michaels, one function of historicist novels is to submit that individuals can remember past events they never experienced as part of their history, "thus mak[ing] the historical past a part of [their] own experience."[33] History, in other words, provides identities. Whitehead's novel, however, does not present such a relationship to the past as desirable; imagining oneself as a lynching victim because of the past's weight does not solve any of J.'s present

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dragged from a car and lynched is a case in point. My contention is, however, that the entire narrative structure of the novel's first part relies on the conventions of urbanoia film.

31 Morrison, *Beloved*, 36; see Warren, *What Was African American Literature*, 98.

32 Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 25.

33 Michaels, *The Shape of the Signifier*, 137.

problems in the novel's plot. Instead, it represents the risk of "drowning" in the past, as James Baldwin expressed it in *The Fire Next Time*.[34] In a discussion of *John Henry Days*, Astrid Franke similarly argues that the encounter with history staged here is not "cathartic, healing, or empowering," but ultimately "a sobering, insulting, and sickening, ultimately disempowering experience."[35] But what does the novel suggest could be a better attitude toward the past? Does it, as Warren once wrote, demand that we "put the past behind us"?[36]

L'invention du temps perdu

The short answer is, I believe, no, it does not. To be sure, *John Henry Days* does not suggest that black Americans possess a preternatural bond with the past that has to be affirmed; nor does it promote the establishment of a shared racial identity on the basis of racist terror as exactly desirable (although perhaps it does portray it as inevitable). Yet, the novel does not at all suggest that one should ignore the past. Instead, it is itself involved in an investigation of what present-day issues are at stake in the writing of history by vested interests. To channel Baldwin again, it shows how an "invented past" can be abused.[37] The reason for J.'s trip to West Virginia—the John Henry Days festival—provides an object lesson that emphasizes the importance of knowing about history in order to see through the ways that it is used and abused by individuals and institutions to legitimate their interests in the present.

Whitehead's novel has been called an example of "historiographical metafiction," which Linda Hutcheon characterizes as a type of postmod-

34 James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, in *Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York: Library of America, 1998), 333.

35 Astrid Franke, "'The Death of the Sixties?' Afroamerikanische Geschichte in Colson Whitehead's *John Henry Days*," in *Von Selma bis Ferguson – Rasse und Rassismus in den USA*, ed. Michael Butter, Astrid Franke, and Horst Tonn (Bielefeld: transcript, 2016), 166, my translations.

36 Warren, *What Was African American Literature*, 84.

37 Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 333.

ern historical fiction committed to showing that the past can only be accessed "through its textualized remains."[38] Frequently, historiographical metafiction evokes history by including historical events and persons in the diegesis only to trouble literature's ability to narrate the past accurately. *John Henry Days* utilizes numerous strategies that can be easily described by Hutcheon's concept. The prologue introduces fourteen brief accounts of the historical John Henry, some of which are taken from sociologist Guy Johnson's 1929 book *John Henry: Tracking Down a Negro Legend* or other studies (as a look at the novel's paratext reveals), many of which contradict each other wildly. In addition, many of the novel's numerous short chapters include portrayals of historical persons such Johnson or Paul Robeson. Most significantly, the eponymous festival that provides the novel with its setting has been an annual event held during the second weekend of July since 1996, when the novel's events take place. In his narrative rendering of the festival, however, Whitehead has altered some important details, inventing, for instance, a deadly shooting on the festival's final day. His reliance on metafictional devices in the prologue and elsewhere remind readers that the novel is not engaged in a naïve representation of John Henry as a historical figure. Instead, it highlights the mediated nature of historical knowledge which enables social agents in powerful positions to create representations of the past that serve their interests.

The John Henry Days festival, in addition to "revitalizing the economically downtrodden area,"[39] celebrates the release of a series of commemorative postage stamps honoring "America's best-loved folk heroes" (*JHD* 16). A US Postal Service representative explains "that community events such as this [...] were a small but significant means of getting the people involved with their government again" at a moment when low "voter turnout was only one example of a widespread public disaffection with the national apparatus" (*JHD* 293). The festival thus exploits John Henry's

38 Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 119. See Derek C. Maus, *Understanding Colson Whitehead: Revised and Expanded Edition* (Columbia: U of South Carolina P, 2021), 41–42.

39 Maus, *Understanding Colson Whitehead*, 47.

legacy to inculcate a sense of national unity and purpose. Seen from the perspective of a federal agency such as the USPS, the meaning of the legendary John Henry's story is irrelevant; what is important is that it can affect an audience in a particular way. Once more, paying attention to the novel's use of perspective techniques can reveal how narrative renderings of history are tailor-made to resonate with the schemes of perception, appreciation, and action held by social agents.

Supplementing Max Weber, who famously defined the state as the sole possessor of the monopoly of violence in its territory,[40] Bourdieu insisted that the state must, as a matter of fact, hold the "monopoly of legitimate physical *and symbolic* violence."[41] This includes the power to define the meaning of the nation's past—although this power can and will be contested. "In modern societies," Bourdieu writes

> the State makes a decisive contribution towards the production and reproduction of the instruments of construction of social reality. […]. Through the structuring it imposes on practices, the State institutes and inculcates common symbolic forms of thought, social frames of perception, understanding or memory, State forms of classification or, more precisely, practical schemes of perception, appreciation, and action. […]. The state thereby creates the conditions for an immediate

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40 See Max Weber, "Politics as a Vocation," in *The Vocation Lectures*, ed. David Owen and Tracy B. Strong, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett, 2004), 33.

41 Pierre Bourdieu, *On the State: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1989–1992*, ed. Patrick Champagne et al., trans. David Fernbach (Cambridge: Polity, 2014), 4, emphasis in original. Dilan Riley argues that Bourdieu's state theory fails to properly account for the United States, as the latter "has never exercised a monopoly over symbolic power," because Washington, D. C., is merely a "bureaucratic power center" that lacks the "concentrated symbolic power" of Paris. "The New Durkheim: Bourdieu and the State," *Critical Historical Studies* 2, no. 2 (2015): 268. Be that as it may, the point of the John Henry Days festival, as explained by the USPS representative, is to (re)accumulate symbolic power at a moment of "public disaffection" toward the federal state (*JHD* 293), not necessarily to exert an already existing symbolic power.

> orchestration of habitus which is itself the foundation for a consensus on this set of shared self-evidences which constitute common sense.[42]

However, the symbolic power engaged in the project of creating common sense works best when it "preaches to the converted": those, who are "predisposed" to "take in" the state's message.[43]

At the dinner in honor of John Henry, another USPS representative gives a speech on the significance of Talcott, the West Virginia town that hosts the festival. Shortly after beginning, he interrupts himself: "Did I say *y'all*. I'm sorry […]. Must be my Southern roots acting up" (*JHD* 66, emphasis in original). Using what Bourdieu calls a "strategy of condescension" in which a speaker with proper "linguistic competence" pretends to negate the distance between himself and those who speak a dialect,[44] the man pretends to express his commonality with the audience to gather symbolic capital. That the strategy works is shown by the laughter that follows.

After thus having positioned himself as someone who shares a regional identity with his addressees, the speaker goes on to praise the contribution their ancestors made when building the railroad "in a great moment of our nation's growth." The intention of the Post Office's decision to issue commemorative stamps representing John Henry and other folk heroes is in part to recognize this often forgotten toil. The steel driver's tale is, however, thoroughly deracialized in the rest of the speech:

> John Henry was an Afro-American, born into slavery and freed by Mr. Lincoln's famous proclamation. But more importantly, he was an American. He helped build this nation into what it is today, and his

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42 Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, 175.

43 Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron, *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*, trans. Richard Nice (London: Sage, 1990), 25.

44 See Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, trans. Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), 68–69. Ultimately, this strategy reinforces the hierarchical distinction between those who are able to speak the language required in a formal context and those who cannot.

> great competition with the steam drill is a testament to the strength of the human spirit. The USPS is proud to honor such an American. (*JHD* 66)

John Henry's experience of building the railroad is rhetorically equated with the work of the audience members' ancestors, who are, however, almost exclusively white. J., who is present during the speech, observes everyone and concludes that he and Pamela Street are "the only [black] folks in the room" (*JHD* 59). Everything that could remind the white audience of the significance of John Henry's race and what it meant in the world of the post-Reconstruction South is suppressed.[45]

But *John Henry Days* adds its own critical commentary on the postal worker's address. After the latter's sly allusion to his "Southern roots," a new paragraph begins. "Like a pro he waits for the chuckles to subside" (*JHD* 66). The next sentence reveals this observation to be that of Alphonse Miggs, a philatelist who has traveled to the festival from outside of West Virginia. As an outsider he is not "predisposed" to be swayed by the speaker's instrumental use of a southern vernacular and recognizes the performance that tries to resonate with the audience's dispositions for what it is. Later, the speech is once more interrupted by Miggs's thoughts: "Is this man talking about a stamp or taking the beach at Normandy" (ibid.). By gliding into Miggs's mind again, the novel reveals the speech's pathos.

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45 The festival's web site tells the tale of John Henry's legendary contest with a steam drill and concludes that "[t]he man and his feat is an inspiration to workers worldwide—to those that are diligent to become the best while considering the well-being of their fellow workers." "The Legend of John Henry," *John Henry Historical Park*, n.d., https://www.johnhenryhistoricalpark.com/the-legend. That is to say, it represents John Henry as a worker who worked himself to death quickly so that his "fellow workers" could have the dubious privilege of working themselves to death slowly. In other words, here proletarian death is celebrated as a necessary contribution to nation-building. On the dangers of the kind of work allegedly performed by John Henry and other railroad workers at the time, see Scott Reynolds Nelson, *Steel Driving Man: John Henry, the Untold Story of an American Legend* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2006).

By rhetorically equating the audience members' ancestors with John Henry—and obliterating racial difference in the process—the speech elevates them to the rank of American heroes, if unsung ones. The narrative strategies Whitehead uses, however, problematize this orchestrated performance by introducing a character, Miggs, who fails to "take in" the message. The locals' laughter shows that their embodied dispositions have been triggered; Miggs in contrast remains unaffected, thus revealing to the reader the comic aspects of the speaker's performance. Drawing on Henri Bergson's theory of laughter, Christa Buschendorf and Astrid Franke write:

> The disclosure of the ludicrous aspects of a ceremony depends on point of view, namely on isolating any ceremonial elements from the content. Focusing on the ceremonial aspects of a social action reveals its presumptuousness or, in Bourdieu's terms, its symbolic violence. Once uncovered as arbitrary, symbolic violence becomes comical and loses its power.[46]

Miggs's perspective is employed to isolate and ridicule the elements of this ceremony and, thus, lays bare the USPS representative's attempt to "construct[] reality," which is what symbolic power does.[47]

The novel pursues a similar textual strategy, formally and thematically, when J. recalls the time he first encountered the tale of John Henry in a cartoon he watched as a fifth-grader. The film is introduced by the teacher as "a film about a great American hero who helped build America" (*JHD* 137). Once more a supplementary perspective is introduced to cast doubt on the hegemonic narrative. This time, J.'s childhood recollections are interrupted by (often parenthetical) passages presented through adult J.'s perspective that relativize the earlier viewing experience. Remembering the abundance of food the cartoon John Henry enjoys, adult J. emphasizes the material conditions of existence of slavery: "(J.

46 Christa Buschendorf and Astrid Franke, "The Implied Sociology and Politics of Literary Texts," in *American Studies Today: New Research Agendas*, ed. Winfried Fluck et al., (Heidelberg: Winter, 2014), 82.

47 Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, 166.

wondering […] where did they get that food. |John Henry] was born a slave. His parents were slaves. […])" (ibid.). But the adult narrator also makes sense of the students' willing suspension of disbelief by noting that their familiarity with narratives of "Greek gods" prepared them to accept representations of the supernatural. The cartoon, by depicting John Henry as a superhuman figure, speaks a language the fifth-graders already know. Thus, they accept a sanitized version of the mid-nineteenth century in which all references to chattel slavery, Reconstruction, and anti-black racism are missing. The John Henry they see has been "domesticated" and turned into a symbol of America.[48]

This passage and later comments on the absence of slavery (*JHD* 139) or the distortion of working conditions for blacks in the Reconstruction era, like the speech during the dinner at Talcott, show that the way John Henry is remembered in political discourse and popular culture transforms him into a generic instance of the class of workers who "fulfilled their nation's destiny" (*JHD* 140), but remains silent on the super-exploitation of blacks after the end of slavery.[49] These benign narratives give rise to what cultural scholar Aleida Assmann calls "functional memory," which

> provides a foundation for collectives ranging from small social groups to large units such as nations and states. It is created with the aid of different symbolic media (e.g. texts, pictures, buildings, rituals). Through common points of reference in the past and a shared fund of cultural traditions, such collectives establish their own we-identity.[50]

48 Nelson, *Steel' Driving Man*, 166.

49 On Reconstruction, see W. E. B Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860–1880* (New York: The Free Press, 1998); Eric Foner, *America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863–1877* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2014). On the peculiar "double freedom" of former slaves, see Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scnees of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America* (New York/Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997), ch. 4.

50 Aleida Assmann, *Introduction to Cultural Studies: Topics, Concepts, Ideas* (Berlin: Erich Schmidt, 2012), 189.

In *John Henry Days*, symbolic media both minuscule (the stamp) and large (the festival) work to invent a memory of John Henry as a proud, raceless American worker. The novel does not provide any explicit reasons for the "public disaffection" with the state Whitehead mentions; in the 1990s, however, several American intellectuals expressed anxiety that the disappearance of the communist bloc as an external enemy meant that ethnoracial divisions threatened the nation's internal cohesion. Again, an appeal to the past was seen to hold the solution for an identity seemingly in crisis. For Arthur Schlesinger, for instance, the construction of a shared memory became a "means of defining national identity."[51] Hence, the attempt to downplay John Henry's blackness and the emphasis of his "willing[ness] to die" in the service of the "imagined community" that is a nation makes a lot of sense in the context of the 1990s.[52]

As I argued in the previous section, *John Henry Days* rejects the idea that one should seek a salutary encounter with history in the service of constituting identities in the present—especially when the past consists of racist terror. Yet, at the same time the novel forcefully rejects the idea that a historiography that deliberately made the role of race and racialized domination in American history invisible was any better. Indeed, it highlights the necessity of knowing history. Without historical knowledge it would be impossible to see the way the cartoon representation of John Henry as a superhuman distorts the realities of slavery and Reconstruction or the way the heroic portrayal of the construction of railroads uses pathos to obscure the super-exploitation of racialized workers. For Whitehead knowledge of the past is indispensable for recognizing the ways that history is used to legitimate hegemonic political projects in the present. As Bourdieu puts it, there is "no better weapon [...] than historicization [...] to neutralize the effects of naturalization."[53] Whitehead's novel may reject historicism as defined by Michaels; however, it remains

51 Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., *The Disuniting of America* (New York: Norton, 1992), 20.

52 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London/New York: Verso, 2006), 7.

53 Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, 182.

committed to historicization as a weapon against the effects of symbolic violence.[54]

A Tale of Three Names and One City

Apex Hides the Hurt once more sends a black New Yorker to another part of the country and stages a confrontation with Reconstruction history. This time a nameless "nomenclature consultant" travels to the midwestern town of Winthrop which is primed to be renamed. Its present name stems from Sterling Winthrop, a nineteenth-century barbed-wire manufacturer. In the narrative's present, presumably the early twenty-first century—deindustrialization has set in. Lucky Aberdeen, a local software developer, thus proposes to change the town's name to "New Prospera," a name seemingly more apt in the age of a new economy.[55] According to Maria Bose, the change of the town's name trace the shift from a Fordist to a post-Fordist mode of production and the correlative changes in race relations: "Winthrop-brand barbed wire elaborates the racial characteristics of a white-dominated nineteenth-century economy," whereas Lucky's "New Prospera" connotes an immaterial economy

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54 I do not wish to discuss Whitehead's own version of John Henry's tale, which can be gathered from multiple short chapters. Suffice it to say that Whitehead's John Henry does not sacrifice his life for a greater cause, whether the nation or the working class. Instead, he merely makes sure that his wife Abby will receive the wages he saved (*JHD* 385). Nor is he a "representative of people who are not supposed to exist: rugged African American individuals." Tettenborn, "A Mountain Full of Ghost," 273. *John Henry Days* characterizes John Henry as a man dependent on others, such as his friend L'il Bob or a literate worker named Adams who writes his farewell letter to Abby. The novel thus also demystifies the figure of the superhuman hero qua individual.

55 For a smart reading of the novel's use and critique of the "utopian lexicon" that originated in Silicon Valley, see Mark A. Tabone, "Branded Communities: Colson Whitehead's *Apex Hides the Hurt* and the Struggle for Utopia in the New Millenium," *Configurations* 29, no. 3 (2021).

and "cultivates the image of race's illusionary transcendence."[56] The latter version of a post-racial but multicultural present is contested, however, by Regina Goode, the town's black mayor. Initially supportive of Lucky's plans, she eventually introduces "Freedom" as an alternative name. This, the protagonist learns, was the town's original name when it was founded by a group of former slaves in 1867. In the face of a gridlocked town council, the consultant has been brought in to choose a name.

At stake in this three-way tug of war is the construction of social reality. Apropos the significance of names Bourdieu writes:

> By structuring the perception which social agents have of the social world, the act of naming helps to establish the structure of the world [...]. There is no social agent who does not aspire, as far as his circumstances permit, to have the power to name and to create the world through naming.[57]

Being able to name, then, amounts to possessing symbolic power. The three members of the town council, Regina, Lucky, and Albie Winthrop, are locked in a power struggle over the meaning of the town's past, present, and future. Using Bourdieu's terminology, it is possible to treat the council as a field; a diminutive field, perhaps, but still a "*space of conflict and competition*." The "strategies" that the contestants have at their disposal "depend on their position in the field, that is, on the distribution of the specific capital."[58] The resources they can mobilize, in other words, shape how they go about reaching their goal.

Lucky, a personification of the charismatic Silicon Valley entrepreneur, was involved in the economic field before returning to Winthrop. In this field, "social agents can admit to themselves and

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56 Maria Bose, "Allegories of 'Postracial' Capitalism: Colson Whitehead and the Materials of Twenty-First-Century Black Cultural Authorship," *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 60, no. 4 (2019): 423–24.

57 Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, 105.

58 Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc J. D. Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (Chicago: The U of Chicago P, 1992), 17, 101, emphasis in original.

admit publicly that they have interests"[59]—material interests, that is. Thus, Lucky shows little hesitation when he justifies his plan. "New Prospera" is a name that signifies "business opportunities" (*AHH* 17).[60] A reporter, who acts as a mere mouthpiece for Lucky, elaborates what "opportunities" Lucky means here: "What I find so interesting is the world of opportunities that a wonderful name like New Prospera will bring to the town […]. Big businesses looking for a tax-friendly haven, young people who want a fresh start" (*AHH* 106). Moreover, a man who explores the prospects of moving to the town explains to the protagonist that an acquaintance who already made the move "[a]dded 30 percent to his workforce and at a fraction of what it would have cost back west" (*AHH* 48). In short, Lucky's plan is to turn the town into a neoliberal haven complete with both low taxes and low wages.

If Lucky wants to leave history behind, Albie Winthrop is committed to the past in almost comically pathological manner. As the heir to a business engaged in the seemingly outmoded activity of manufacturing things, he lacks both the economic capital that Lucky possesses and the political capital that Regina Goode holds as mayor. What he (desperately) clings to is his social capital, that is, the resources which he can mobilize by drawing on a network of "mutual acquaintance and recognition."[61] His self-image is that of a benevolent employer who cares about the personal lives of his workers and their children. "That's old Frank's son," he tells the protagonist, adding that Frank "[n]ever worked anywhere else" (*AHH* 65). This last phrase encapsulates all the difference between Lucky and Albie. The former is committed to the mobility of labor and capital; Albie desires stability, yet he knows he is fighting a losing battle and laments his fellow council members' attempt "to take away something that means something" (*AHH* 82).

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59 Pierre Bourdieu, *Practical Reason: On the Theory of Action*, trans. Randal Johnson et al. (Cambridge: Polity, 1998), 105.

60 All references to Colson Whitehead, *Apex Hides the Hurt* (New York: Doubleday, 2006) will hereafter be cited parenthetically in the text as *AHH*.

61 Pierre Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital," trans. Richard Nice, in *Readings in Economic Sociology*, ed. Nicole Woolsey Biggart (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002), 286.

What's in the name Winthrop for Albie? Despite acknowledging that the town was founded by blacks, he tells the consultant,

> Winthrop *means* something. Goode's people, sure, they were the ones first settled here, sure. Can't dispute that even if I wanted to, it's a historical fact. But it was nothing 'til my great-great-granddad opened up the factory here. Just a bunch of trees until there was a Winthrop name to say: This is here. It's tradition. (*AHH* 81, emphasis in original)

That is to say, it was his ancestor who turned "nothing" into something, into a "here." This statement negates that the black settlers created something that could become a "tradition"; it denies that blacks can produce "historical fact[s]."[62] As the last living relative of the original pater familias, Albie perceives the town's present inhabitants as kin: "I'm everybody's uncle" (*AHH* 65). If the town was renamed, he would lose his figurative progeny, his social capital, which remains all he has left after his wife divorced him and "took everything" (*AHH* 71). But then, the novel's point is not exactly to provoke the reader to empathize with this ailing patriarch.

As a matter of fact, *Apex* challenges the Winthrop version of history using the same strategies that *John Henry Days* employed to critique the way the steel driver's legend was being abused for present purposes. The protagonist comes across a written town history, which he discovers to be a "corporate pamphlet" commissioned by the Winthrops (*AHH* 59). As an "expert in marketing" himself, he easily sees "through the techniques used to create impressions."[63] Accordingly he is able to point out how this piece of corporate historiography distorts the facts. But more than that, the protagonist's reading of the text also shows that the socio-economic functions Lucky and Sterling Winthrop serve have not been so different, after all:

> Where others saw untamed wilderness, [...] Sterling [Winthrop] saw endless bounty and prime opportunities. [...]. After winning over the

62 See Maus, *Understanding Colson Whitehead*, 80–81.

63 Buschendorf and Franke, "The Implied Sociology," 94.

> area's main inhabitants—a loose band of colored settlers—Winthrop opened his factory and started producing his famous W-shaped barb [...]. Grateful for this fresh start, they passed a law and named the town Winthrop. (*AHH* 61)

The novel uses the same terms—"opportunities" and a "fresh start" to characterize their respective projects; hence, the protagonist later designates Lucky's plan as "Winthrop 2.0" (*AHH* 174). Lucky's desire to rename the town "New Prospera" merely bespeaks the old act of "creative destruction," or, in more prosaic terms, the dynamics of capitalist competition.[64] In any case, the corporate town history rhetorically equates the black settlers with nature in a similar way and denies that their actions are part of the town's history proper. Accordingly, Regina's desire to rename the town "Freedom" amounts to a gesture of historical justice. The name alone encapsulates a counterhegemonic historical narrative that highlights the contribution of black Americans, which Regina promises will do right by Winthrop's black inhabitants. Or so it seems.

Family Matters

So, why does the protagonist care so little about Regina's plan? After all, he is black, too. This section will engage with the claim, expressed by several critics, that the nameless consultant lacks a sense of racial identity which is evinced, for Derek Maus, by his reluctance to let a "shared past [...] register with him."[65] This tacitly presupposes that the protagonist and Regina share a past in the first place. In similar fashion, Stephanie Li chides the protagonist for refusing to accept his racial identity as a "source of support and identity."[66] In the introduction, I have drawn on Barbara Fields's critique of American racial ideology which holds that

64 See Joseph A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism & Democracy* (London/New York: Routledge, 1994).

65 Maus, *Understanding Colson Whitehead*, 81.

66 Li, *Signifying Without Specifying*, 91.

the thoughts and actions of black Americans are inevitably "racial in nature."[67] This presupposition underpins the assessment of the protagonist's lack of interest in racial solidarity as pathological. Yet, like *The Intuitionist* (as I argued in the previous chapter) and *Sag Harbor* (as I will argue in the next one), *Apex* undermines the notion that "ideas of race can forge shared identities across the chasm of class," as Christopher Leise puts it.[68] Indeed, once more the appeal to a shared identity becomes a strategy which primarily benefits elites.

The role that class difference plays in *Apex* becomes most visible in the strained relationship between the protagonist and his hotel's bartender, a black man he christens Muttonchops. Despite his emphasis on the "chasm of class," Leise finds it "baffling" that they do not warm to one another.[69] Bourdieu's theory of habitus, however, is able to explain why they do not get along. Sharing a habitus means apprehending the social world through the same schemes of perception, appreciation, and action. The sociologist terms this an "*implicit collusion*" shared by those "who are products of similar conditions and conditionings."[70] Habitus, in other words, is always already class habitus, shaped by the conditions of existence of social classes. And, despite both being black men, Muttonchops and the protagonist embody diametrically opposite positions in social space.

When they first meet, Muttonchops explains that he has "worked here ever since I was a boy. Used to have a shoeshine stand over in the men's and that's where I got my start. Like my father and his father. And then they moved out here, behind this bar [...] and now I'm here, too" (*AHH* 24). This brief autobiographical account demonstrates the social trajectory shared by Muttonchops and his paternal ancestors.

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67 Barbara J. Fields, "Slavery, Race, and Ideology in the United States of America," in Karen E. Fields and Barbara J. Fields, *Racecraft: The Soul of Ideology in American Life* (London/New York: Verso, 2012), 116.

68 Christopher Leise, "With Names, No Coincidence: Colson Whitehead's Postracial Puritan Allegory," *African American Review* 47, no. 2–3 (2014): 291.

69 Ibid.

70 Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, 145, emphasis in original.

They moved from the shoeshine stand to the bar, which is just to say that they did not move at all. Physically, they remain stuck in Hotel Winthrop; socially, their place remains the service sector of the working class (which is also the class to which Muttonchops's wife, a housekeeper at the hotel, belongs[71]). The principle organizing the family's trajectory is that of staying in place.

How different is the protagonist who, as the reader learns, grew up with the conviction that he was made to expect greatness? As a high school student he attends the "African American Leaders of Tomorrow conference" (*AHH* 70), where he first learns about Quincy University, a fictional stand-in for Yale.[72] Degrees from this university are comparable to "royal degrees" (*AHH* 69), which is to say they constitute what Bourdieu calls "institutionalized" cultural capital. The latter attests its holders' "cultural competence" but is not contingent on their actual intelligence or skill.[73] *Apex* narrativizes the power of cultural capital to function as "symbolic capital"[74] when it recounts the protagonist's interview for his current job. After a brief glance at an aptitude test the protagonist had to take, his future employee merely "nod[s]" and declares "[y]ou're a Quincy Man" (*AHH* 28). His actual performance is secondary; as a "Quincy Man" the protagonist only has to be who he already is to "fit right in" (*AHH* 29).[75]

What this means is that Muttonchops and the protagonist are products of entirely different histories and, consequently, of entirely different possible futures. The bartender has inherited the social verdict to stay in place; the consultant, on the other hand, received "two syllables," Quin-

71 She remains a "comically threatening spectre" of "mostly invisible working-class labour," according to Adam Kelly, "Freedom to Struggle: The Ironies of Colson Whitehead," *Open Library of Humanities* 4, no. 2 (2018): 11.

72 Leise, "With Names, No Coincidence," 286.

73 Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital," 285.

74 This is Bourdieu's term for a form of capital socially recognized as extraordinarily valuable. See *Pascalian Meditations*, 166.

75 On the need for holders of "titles of cultural nobility" to "only have to be what they are," see Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA/London: Harvard UP, 1984), 23.

cy, which "opened doors" (*AHH* 71). He possesses symbolic capital that enables almost unlimited social mobility and, almost unwillingly, ends up in a position socially appropriate to a "Quincy man." Initially, he dislikes his job as a "nomenclature consultant." This is because he feels unlike the "[j]ocky white guys" (*AHH* 79) with whom he works. Li thus downplays the consultant's racial identity by claiming that his professional success is a function of "masquerade" and an adaptation to the new environment.[76] The protagonist, however, finds out that he does not need to adapt since he has unwittingly chosen the right job. In other words, *Apex* makes a point about how class reproduction works—the protagonist is an "inherited inheritor, appropriated by his heritage" and unknowingly "do[es] and say[s] nothing that is not appropriate."[77] It is not a novel about the racial drama of selling one's "birthright for a mess of pottage," as James Weldon Johnson's nameless ex-colored man expresses it.[78] Instead, Whitehead's nameless name-brand consultant and black bartender merely realize the quasi-destiny that their class background has held in store for them. In this, they are entirely alike and thus entirely different from one another, making it hardly surprising that they do not get along.

Unlike the protagonist, mayor Regina Goode seems to be in touch with the town's history, explaining to the former that the memory of the original settlers' trials and tribulations fills her with strength when she feels down (*AHH* 166). Li thus detects "a powerful connection to community and racial identity" fueled by Regina's awareness of an "ancestral presence."[79] As long as Regina's commitment to renaming the town is seen as merely "racial in nature," she seems to act on behalf of the black

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76 Li, *Signifying Without Specifying*, 79.

77 Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, 152.

78 James Weldon Johnson, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (New York: Library of America, 2011), 127. That is, the protagonist does not need to "buy into" a world whose values "depart from [...] his own," as Maus suggests. *Understanding Colson Whitehead*, 72. He ends up where he belongs regardless of the superficial difference between him and the "[j]ocky white guys."

79 Li, *Specifying Without Signifying*, 91. Her reading does not take into account that Regina admits that she left Winthrop to attend college and only returned after

residents' collective interest. However, as a matter of fact, the protagonist finds out that Regina's choice is also based on an act of historical erasure that obscures conflict among the first generation of settlers. Reading the town history, he realizes that the band of former slaves had two leaders, Abraham Goode and William Field or "[t]he Light and the Dark" (*AHH* 95).[80] His research is aided by the town librarian who locates the original manuscript of the town history, which was not "ass-kissy enough" for the Winthrops (*AHH* 134). In this manuscript he discovers that the town council had voted on the name change from Freedom to Winthrop, with Goode voting alongside Winthrop and against Field, his fellow former slave. Abraham Goode, Regina's ancestor, in other words, established what Adolph Reed would call a "regime of race relations management," assuming the role of an "internal management elite" representing the interest of the community, thereby "delegitimiz[ing] any divergent position"[81] such as Field's. If Muttonchops has inherited a working-class habitus and the protagonist that of the upwardly mobile black professional class section, Regina's ancestors have transmitted to her the habitus of the "black management stratum,"[82] and this informs her present ambition to name the town "Freedom."

Her plan represents a strategy which is based on her position in the local power struggle. She reflects on her role in the town in a conversation with the protagonist:

> People look at me and they see what they want to see. Black people see me as family, because my name goes way back. The white people

a divorce (*AHH* 113). Her communal connection is, then, partly the result of a failed marriage.

80 Their names and characters allude to Malcolm X's polemical distinction between "house Negroes," who lived, dressed, and ate "good," and "field Negroes," who "caught hell" but remained "intelligent." Malcolm X, "Message to the Grass Roots (Detroit, November 10, 1963)," in *Malcolm X Speaks*, ed. George Breitman (London: Secker & Warburg, 1966), 9–10.

81 Adolph Reed, Jr., *Stirrings in the Jug: Black Politics in the Post-Segregation Era* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1999), 121, 69.

82 Ibid., 69..

> know what the Goode name means in this community—tradition […]. And the new people know that I agree with a lot of Lucky is trying to do and that he and I have been a team, in terms of trying to bring this place into the twenty-first century. (*AHH* 114)

As mayor, Regina wants to appeal to all constituencies. "Freedom" is meant to resonate with Winthrop's black inhabitants, but Regina admits that she, like Lucky, wants to win over the "new people," viz. those who come to town because of the "business opportunities." When she says that she agrees with Lucky's plans, she reveals her commitment to the same neoliberal values that are meant to make the town attractive. The novel itself shows, however, that Winthrop's black inhabitants will be disproportionately affected by the proposed transformation of the town into a post-Fordist haven. On a drive through what "is still mostly a black part" of town, Regina tells the protagonist that "a lot of the new people" are moving in there (*AHH* 126). While the novel makes a point to say that the "new people" are not exclusively white—they are a "multiculti crew" (*AHH* 85)—, Regina's politics nonetheless result in a displacement of the town's existing black population, who believe her to be "family." Renaming the town "Freedom" would thus rhetorically promise justice by commemorating the contribution of the original black settlers while actively harming black people in the present. It is an empty symbolic gesture that would allow Regina to accumulate political capital while enforcing a reactionary politics.

Regina's strategy, far from pursuing a commitment to "racial identity" or an "ancestral presence," does not actually provide an alternative to the shallow celebration of diversity embodied by Apex, the brand of "multicultural adhesive bandages" (*AHH* 87) which provide the novel's title and an occasion for Whitehead to use "comic and even flippant irony" when describing their ostensible healing power.[83] As nearly every critical account of *Apex* points out, the recognition of difference promised by the bandages which come in twenty different colors is merely "superfi-

83 Kelly, "Freedom to Struggle," 13.

cial"[84]: it hides the hurt, but cannot heal it. As such, the novel positions the bandages as the latest incarnation of the history of race relations in the United States, which *Apex* narrates in allegorical form via the history of Ogilvy and Myrtle, the company which produces Apex bandages. Founded in 1896, the year in which the doctrine of "separate but equal" was sanctioned in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the company obtained a military contract during the first World War, which was when "[t]hings picked up" (*AHH* 76), referring to the integration of blacks into the industrial workforce during the war.[85] In the 1950s, the brand was "relaunched" (*AHH* 78) just in time for the challenge to Jim Crow segregation embodied by the Civil Rights movement. Yet, the company remains unpopular and is kept alive only through state contracts (*AHH* 79), alluding to the role of the public sector as an employer of African Americans.[86] After a period of setbacks,[87] in the early twenty-first century, the company succeeded with the introduction of multicolored adhesive bandages that embody the spirit of "neoliberal multiculturalism."[88] Apex bandages, in other words, merely reproduce racial hierarchies while—slowly and unevenly—integrating the black population as workers and consumers.

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84 Li, *Signifying Without Specifying*, 84; see also Kimberly Fain, *Colson Whitehead: The Postracial Voice of Contemporary Literature* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 77–78; Grassian, *Writing the Future*, 88; Maus, *Understanding Colson Whitehead*, 73; Tabone, "Branded Communities," 344. Whitehead makes the same point in an interview, see Linda Selzer, "New Eclecticism: An Interview with Colson Whitehead," *Callaloo* 31, no. 2 (2008): 396.

85 See Melvyn Dubofsky and Joseph A. McCartin, *Labor in America: A History* (Chichester: Wiley, 2017), 195.

86 See Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2016), 80–81.

87 On the racist "reaction" of the 1980s, see Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 113–14.

88 On the ways in which "neoliberal multiculturalism" obscures how "neoliberalism remains a form of racial capitalism," see Jodi Melamed, *Represent and Destroy: Rationalizing Violence in the New Racial Capitalism* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2011), 42.

Another hurt that Apex cannot heal is economic inequality. By recognizing differences in skin color, the adhesive strips recognize diversity, but they cannot address a form of inequality which is not dependent on visible differences in the final instance—even though, no doubt, specific social groups will disproportionately suffer from poverty and related ills.[89] But the novel reminds its readers that the neoliberal policies of recent decades—as well as the bursting of the dot-com bubble—have produced a world of inequality: a world in which boomtowns go bust and hospitals are underfunded, as an excursus on a Lego-like toy emphasizes (*AHH* 118–20). In her reading, Li acknowledges that the multicultural celebration of diversity the novel satirizes obscures "more destructive and persistent inequalities of class."[90] However, she believes that Regina's commitment to "community and racial identity" presents a desirable alternative. If my reading of Regina's plan as a strategy in a local power struggle is correct, however, this is not at all true. In light of the neoliberal recoding of the notion of freedom under the Reagan presidency, her ambition rings hollow.[91] Her attempt to reinstate "Freedom" as the town's name is just another superficial solution that abuses the past in the service of her present political interests and will result in increasing inequality and, ironically, more black suffering.

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89 On the distinction between the "forms of appearance" through which social categories such as the proletariat are first perceived and the underlying "class relation," see Surplus Club, "Trapped at a Party Where No One Likes You," *Surplus Club*, April 8, 2015, https://surplus-club.com/2015/04/08/trapped-at-a-party-where-no-one-likes-you-en/. On racial disparity discourse, see John Clegg, "A Class Blind Spot? Anti-racism in the United States," *Global Labour Journal* 7, no. 3 (2016); and Adolph Reed, Jr. and Merlin Chowkwanyun, "Race, Class, Crisis: The Discourse of Racial Disparity and Its Analytical Discontents," *Socialist Register* 48 (2012).

90 Li, *Signifying Without Specifying*, 85. Li draws on Walter Benn Michaels's critique of diversity in *The Trouble With Diversity: How We Learned to Love Diversity and Ignore Inequality* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2006).

91 On the ironies of the notion of freedom, its neoliberal appropriation, and Whitehead's novel, see Kelly, "Freedom to Struggle," 9–10.

The History of Struggles

Both *John Henry Days* and *Apex Hides the Hurt* are skeptical when it comes to appeals to the past, remaining all too aware of the ways in which history can be used and abused by the powerful to legitimate their interests in the present. While the former novel focuses mostly on the state's attempt to appropriate and recuperate the legacy of John Henry, a legendary steel driver whose tale used to circulate among radicals as a warning of the "dangers of overwork,"[92] the latter shows that not even a seemingly "shared past"—shared along the lines of racial identity, that is—can prevent the exploitation of history by political elites. *Apex*, like Whitehead's debut novel *The Intuitionist*, represents the black population as internally heterogeneous because of class and rejects the notion that individuals—whether cultural producers or politicians—could represent the interests of the collective. But to reiterate, neither *John Henry Days* nor *Apex* turns its back on history. As a matter of fact, both novels revolve around nineteenth-century histories of racist super-exploitation and terror that their respective protagonists—black professionals from New York City born after the end of Jim Crow—have not experienced. Whitehead's novels, however, do not imagine ways in which these protagonists could immediately experience history—something that "rememory" in Morrison, time travel in Octavia Butler, and an alcohol-fueled vision in David Bradley provide.[93] While the latter's *The Chaneysville Incident* culminates in its historian protagonist's decision to rid himself off the tools of his trade,[94] *Apex*'s nameless consultant hunts down documents that reveal to him historical facts which help him to reject both Albie Winthrop's and Regina Goode's ideological versions of the town's history. However, as in *John Henry Days*, access to the past

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92 Nelson, *Steel' Driving Man*, 31.

93 For Morrison, see above, footnote 36; see also Octavia Butler, *Kindred* (London: Headline, 2018); and David Bradley, *The Chaneysville Incident* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1990).

94 For a reading of this incident, see Warren, *What Was African American Literature*, 100–02.

comes only in mediated forms. Neither of the two novels naïvely suggest that one can simply represent how things really were, and yet they remain committed to the significance of "historicization,"[95] which reveals the uses and abuses of the past for what they are.

By way of conclusion, I want to address the concept of history that emerges in *Apex*. In his research on the town's past, the protagonist discovers that William Field initially wanted to call the settlement "Struggle." He finds this name admirable and speculates what Field could have been thinking when choosing it:

> [Field] understood the rules of the game, had learned them through the barb on the whip, and was not afraid to name them. Let lesser men try to tame the world by giving it a name that might cover the wound, or camouflage it. Hide the badness from view. The prophet's work was of a different sort.
>
> Freedom was what they sought. Struggle was what they had lived through. (*AHH* 210)

Unlike the multicolored adhesive bandages or Regina's desire to name the town "Freedom," the notion of struggle does not promise false solutions. It is, the protagonist believes, "the anti-apex" (ibid.).

What the protagonist thus learns is a decidedly relational lesson. The story of William Field teaches that social fields, such as the novel's town council, are always "*space*[*s*] *of conflict and competition*."[96] Field may have expected racial solidarity from Goode after they led a group of former slaves from Georgia to the Midwest in search of freedom. Yet, his partner decided instead to team up with Sterling Winthrop, who promised the black settlers jobs in his newly-built factory. The protagonist's assumption that Field knew the "rules of the game" suggests that he learned to recognize social relations as power relations. In the end, it is this perspective—the standpoint of someone who lost a historical power struggle—and not that of the victors such as Winthrop, Regina, or Lucky that

95 Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, 57.

96 Bourdieu and Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, 17, emphasis in original.

the protagonist comes to embrace when he decides to name the town "Struggle."[97] Their sanitized versions of history retroactively eliminate the historical role of struggle and thereby naturalize past and present distributions of power and resources. Yet, the protagonist can no longer accept this. Struggle, he thinks, may not be "the highest point of human achievement," but it remains "the point past which we could not progress" (*AHH* 210).[98] Once more, Whitehead emphasizes the necessity of historicization as a weapon that makes possible resistance to the attempt to exploit the past in the service of elite interests. The protagonist's research into the town's history enables him to discover the complex and messy nature of social life which cannot be concealed behind inspiring slogans that obscure conflict. The history of all hitherto existing class societies, he discovers, is the history of power struggles.

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97 On historiography that refuses to "sympathize with the victor," see Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," trans. Harry Zohn, in *Selected Writings Volume 4, 1938–1940*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 2003), 391.

98 Tabone is reminded of Frederick Douglass's assertion "if there is no struggle there is no progress." Quoted in Tabone, "Branded Communities," 350. Adam Kelly points out that the novel's conclusion, however, remains ambiguous over whether the final naming, another "symbolic action," really does constitute progress. "Freedom to Struggle," 15.

3. (Post-Black) *Bildungsroman* or Novel of (Black Bourgeois) Manners? *Sag Harbor*

At first glance, struggle seems to be absent from Whitehead's fourth novel.[1] This has vexed critics such as Stefan Beck, who calls *Sag Harbor* "a remarkably and sometimes soporifically benign book." One reason is that the stakes in this semi-autobiographical tale set in the summer of 1985 seem so much lower than in the earlier novels. On Whitehead's Long Island, there are no perfect elevators ready to redeem urban humanity; nor will the rediscovery of a previously lost episode of black history be an issue for Whitehead's fifteen-year-old alter ego Benji Cooper. For he and his adolescent friends are much more concerned with things such as beer, BB guns, or girls. Beck misses a more meaningful engagement with racial issues, arguing that Benji's position "straddling the black and white worlds" is what is least interesting about the novel.[2] Derek Maus objects, writing that it is precisely the fact of being the "definition of paradox: black boys with beach houses" (57) that provides the novel's

1 An earlier, abridged version of this chapter was published as "(Post-Black) *Bildungsroman* or Novel of (Black Bourgeois) Manners? The Logic of Reproduction in Colson Whitehead's *Sag Harbor*," in *Power Relations in Black Lives: Reading African American Literature and Culture with Bourdieu and Elias*, ed. Christa Buschendorf (Bielefeld: transcript, 2018).

2 Stefan Beck, "Caveat Emptor," review of *How to Sell*, by Clancy Martin, *Lowboy*, by John Wray, *Sag Harbor*, by Colson Whitehead, and *How it Ended*, by Jay McInerney, *The New Criterion*, May 2009, https://www.newcriterion.com/articles.cfm/Caveat-emptor-4080.

central problem.[3] In a sense, both critics have a point. Maus's insistence that Benji experiences his social position as paradoxical is a useful reminder that the novel is not just a benign beach read. However, I tend to agree with Beck that the question of "straddling" racialized cultures is not exactly what is most interesting about *Sag Harbor*. Instead, the following reading will show that Whitehead's novel is about cultural difference insofar as the latter is based on class difference. To anticipate my argument, *Sag Harbor* is more interested in telling the story of Benji as a member of a class fraction rather than as an individual. In genre terms, then, I will propose to treat the novel not as a *Bildungsroman* but as if it were a novel of manners, a novel about differences between classes that must be made visible in the realm of culture.

Post-Black, Post-Class?

As in all of Whitehead's novels, the use of pop-cultural references in *Sag Harbor* is telling. Consider the following passage: fifteen-year-old Benji Cooper and his friends are listening to Afrika Bambaataa and Soulsonic Force's 1982 song "Planet Rock." His friend Marcus calls it "a classic joint," which prompts Benji to provide the information that the hip-hop pioneers sampled a song by the German electronic music band Kraftwerk. However, Benji is not using these words; what he says is, "You know they bit that off Kraftwerk." Biting—as adult Ben, no longer the adolescent Benji, who narrates the novel, points out—was considered "a major crime" in 1985. Thus Marcus angrily replies, "Afrika Bambaataa didn't steal anything. This is their song." (61) Today—with the assistance of web sites such as WhoSampled.com, which meticulously records the samples used by hip-hop artists—it is easy to determine that Benji is right, for "Planet Rock," that "polycultural pastiche," does use a

3 All parenthetical citations of the novel refer to Colson Whitehead, *Sag Harbor* (New York: Doubleday, 2009). See Derek C. Maus, *Understanding Colson Whitehead: Revised and Expanded Edition*, (Columbia: U of South Carolina P, 2021), 100–01.

Kraftwerk sample.[4] But Marcus remains scandalized and accuses Benji of betraying black culture: "I forgot you like that white music, you fuckin' Siouxsie and the Banshees-listenin' motherfucker." (62) Ironically, it is Marcus who gets hip-hop wrong, for adult Ben emphasizes that it has always been a syncretistic art form drawing on heterogeneous sources. "Funk, free jazz, disco, cartoons, German synthesizer music—it didn't matter where it came from, the art was converting it to new use." (61) In other words, it is necessary to know "that white music" to experience and acknowledge the full range of hip-hop's creativity.

While not all literary critics might be familiar with the practice of sampling, they will certainly know about "intertextuality" or "heteroglossia"—related concepts that similarly posit that texts are characterized by the influence of and quotations from earlier texts, which is to say, by a plurality of voices. In fact, the teenage boys' discussion of "Planet Rock" can be read as a metafictional commentary on Whitehead's own literary ambitions[5]; the novelist has pointed out that the range of influences on his work include both "high-brow" literature and popular culture, both white and black authors.[6] The exchange between Benji and Marcus suggests that Whitehead is aware that some of his readers might go so far as to accuse him of betraying his race.[7] If Whitehead is analogizing his position in the literary field with that of Benji among his friends, it is

4 Jeff Chang, *Can't Stop, Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation* (London: Ebury Press, 2007), 172. More precisely, Afrika Bambaataa and his producer Arthur Baker used a synthesizer and a drum machine to recreate the sound of the Kraftwerk record rather than actually sampling it. See Marc Hogan, "Kraftwerk Win Bizarre Sampling Lawsuit in Germany: 'Planet Rock' for All," *Spin*, December 20, 2012, https://www.spin.com/2012/12/kraftwerk-lawsuit-germany-planet-rock/.

5 See Richard Schur, "The Crisis in Authenticity in Contemporary African American Literature," in *Contemporary African American Literature: The Living Canon*, ed. Lovalerie King and Shirley Moody-Turner (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 2013), 248.

6 See Colson Whitehead, interview by Suzan Sherman, *BOMB Magazine* 76 (2001), https://bombmagazine.org/article/2419/colson-whitehead.

7 For a reading accusing Whitehead of "tiptoe[ing] his literary footprints [sic] around black themes," see Kimberly Fain, *Colson Whitehead: The Postracial Voice of Contemporary Literature* (Lexington: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 120.

possible to suspect that he feels misunderstood because of others' facile juxtaposition of black and white cultures as homogeneous and distinct entities.

This is remarkably similar to what writer and TV host Touré diagnosed in his 2011 book *Who's Afraid of Post-Blackness?*, in which he chastises "self-appointed identity cops,"[8] who believe that "there is a correct or legitimate way of doing Blackness," and demands "for every Black-American to have the freedom to be Black however he or she chooses" in order to destroy "the bankrupt, fraudulent concept of 'authentic' Blackness."[9] Previously, Touré had favorably reviewed *Sag Harbor* in the *New York Times* and praised its "unapologetic" reshaping of the "iconography of blackness." He lauded Whitehead's semi-autobiographical tale of a summer spent in an upper-middle-class black Long Island community for its refusal to give in to normative demands about how blacks should act. In Touré's words, "Post-Blackness sees blackness not as a dogmatic code [...] but as an open-source document, a trope with infinite uses." No longer "stamped inauthentic and bullied into an inferiority complex," blacks such as those represented by Whitehead are free to "do blackness their way." Touré ends the review with a call for "more post-black stories," such as Whitehead's about "black boys with beach houses."[10] Since 2009—and also with reference to novelists such as Paul Beatty, Percival Everett, Mat Johnson, and others that seem to fit the bill—there has been continued scholarly interest in the phe-

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8 Touré, *Who's Afraid of Post-Blackness? What It Means to Be Free Now* (New York: Free Press, 2011), 7.

9 Touré, *Who's Afraid of Post-Blackness*, 11.

10 Touré, "Visible Young Man," review of *Sag Harbor*, by Colson Whitehead, *The New York Times*, May 1, 2009, https://www.nytimes.com/2009/05/03/books/review/Toure-t.html.

nomenon of post-blackness.[11] However, as I have argued elsewhere,[12] Touré's account is deeply flawed, because it tacitly universalizes the experiences of (upper-) middle-class blacks through its neoliberal focus on "choice" and "identity options" that are allegedly "limitless," as well as its commitment to individual "Black success." While Touré acknowledges that success in the corporate world can be a function of knowing how to behave in a socially expected manner, he treats this knowledge as a purely intellectual operation as if it was a choice that each and every black person was able to make irrespective of their class position. Thus, he reproduces clichés about the American Dream, claiming that Barack Obama's election provided proof "that believing in yourself and in the country can lead to towering rewards […]. And for those who opt to hate America and refuse to play the game and reject it before it rejects you, there are no rewards." An autobiographical chapter sheds light on where Touré learned to "play the game," namely in a Boston private school whose alumni include Robert Kennedy and T. S. Eliot. He additionally spent time in a "culturally black and ghetto tennis club," and it was the combination of "preppy school" and "ghetto club" that taught him to do "rapid cultural 180s"[13] to successfully move in both "white" and "black" environments.

By arguing that success was a consequence of "[t]he way you walk—the grammar, articulation, and diction you choose to employ,"[14] Touré reveals that he fails to reflect on his privileged class position. His

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11 See Bertram D. Ashe and Ilka Saal, eds., *Slavery and the Post-Black Imagination* (Seattle: Washington UP, 2020); Houston A. Baker and K. Merinda Simmons, eds., *The Trouble With Post-Blackness* (New York: Columbia UP, 2015); Christian Schmidt, *Postblack Aesthetics: The Freedom to Be Black in Contemporary African American Fiction* (Heidelberg: Winter, 2016); Paul C. Taylor, "Post-Black, Old Black," *African American Review* 41, no. 4, (2007).

12 See Marlon Lieber, "Being Afraid of Post-Blackness: What's Neoliberalism Got to Do With It?" in *African American Culture and Society After Rodney King: Provocations and Protests, Progression and 'Post-Racialism,'* ed. Josephine Metcalf and Carina Spaulding (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015).

13 Touré, *Who's Afraid of Post-Blackness*, 68, 12, 11, 200, 77, 88.

14 Ibid., 184.

emphasis on deliberately choosing how to act and speak reveals that he cannot grasp that social agents "have not chosen the principle of their choice," that is, what Bourdieu calls "habitus."[15] Earlier chapters have shown that habitus is acquired in childhood and primarily a product of a social agent's position in a society's class structure. Speech—or the capacity to produce "an infinite number of sentences really appropriate to an infinite number of situations"[16]—is an important part of a habitus, and what Touré cannot see is that "access to legitimate language is quite unequal, and the theoretical competence liberally granted to all by linguists is in reality monopolized by some."[17] Thus, the skill Touré calls "Black *multi-linguality*"[18] is also a result of having acquired sufficient cultural capital to be able to speak the appropriate language in various social situations. When Touré envisions "Black success" in "the game"—which is nothing but the labor market—he similarly ignores that, in order to succeed, social agents must first possess a "feel for the game."[19] Touré's paean to "post-Black rugged individualism"[20] knows only habitus-less individuals and remains blind to structural constraints that limit the number of choices actually available to them.[21]

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15 Pierre Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, trans. by Richard Nice (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), 149.

16 Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1990), 32.

17 Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc J. D. Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (Chicago: The U of Chicago P, 1992), 146.

18 Touré, *Who's Afraid of Post-Blackness*, 11, emphasis in original.

19 Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, 66.

20 Touré, *Who's Afraid of Post-Blackness*, 8.

21 Touré's post-black individuals, who are free to do blackness their way, are, like a Sartrean subject, "condemned to be free." Jean-Paul Sartre, *Being and Nothingness: A Phenomenological Essay on Ontology*, trans. Hazel E. Barnes (New York: Pocket Books, 1978), 553. Bourdieu rejects Sartre's transformation of "each action" into "a sort of unprecedented confrontation between the subject and the world" that ignores "anything resembling durable dispositions." Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1977), 73.

So, what about *Sag Harbor* then? If it really is a post-black novel, would this not imply that it proposes a vision of a neoliberal society, a vision of (rugged) individuals who are not constrained in their actions by an embodied class habitus? Walter Benn Michaels seems to thinks so, writing that it is a hallmark of the "neoliberal novel" to substitute "cultural difference for [...] class difference." Quoting Touré's words of praise for *Sag Harbor*, he polemically asks "if the crucial thing about rich black people is that they offer new ways of performing race rather than the old ways of embodying class."[22] While I am sympathetic to Michaels's critique of neoliberal culture, I do not think that his brief remarks do *Sag Harbor* justice.[23] The novel, I argue, is fully committed to the (Bourdieusian) idea that individuals possess embodied dispositions that tacitly shape the manner in which they perceive the world and think and act in it. Because the novel is narrated from Benji's perspective, we can reconstruct the influence of his habitus—and this habitus is that of a member of the black upper middle-class. Yet, unlike Touré he struggles with making "cultural 180s" and proves inept when it comes to "performing race"—and this is precisely because he has "embod[ied] class" in the form of dispositions, to draw on Michaels's phrase once more. Ultimately, the difference between the two texts, *Sag Harbor* and *Who's Afraid of Post-Blackness?*, is also expressed generically, many critics'

22 Walter Benn Michaels, "Real Toads," in *The Imaginary and Its World: American Studies After the Transnational Turn*, ed. Laura Bieger, Ramón Saldívar, and Johannes Voelz (Lebanon: Dartmouth College Press, 2013), 184, 185.

23 Daniel Grausam provides an incisive reading of the novel's critique of neoliberalism. He reads the lack of "parental regulation" in the black families' summer homes as a periodizing reference to 1980s deregulation; moreover, the perils of a deregulated economy are dramatized by a rotting soup pot. "The Multitemporal Contemporary: Colson Whitehead's Presents," in *Literature and the Global Contemporary*, ed. Sarah Brouillette, Mathias Nilges, and Emilio Sauri (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 130–32.

claims notwithstanding,[24] I argue that Whitehead's novel is best not read as a *Bildungsroman* or coming-of-age story. Rather than focusing on a (black) individual's process of maturation, Whitehead has created a novel about a particular class fraction and their manners.

Putting the Black Bourgeoisie on the Map

The Cooper family keeps the *Guide to Sag Harbor* in their summer home. This book includes "a nice map of the village," a map which is, however, incomplete: "we knew where our neighborhood began because that's where the map ended." If there should remain any doubt as to who this "we" is, the next sentence makes it explicit: "The black part of town was off in the margins" (18). In his classic study of the black bourgeoisie, E. Franklin Frazier pointed out more than half a century ago that there are "summer resorts where the black bourgeoisie gather to display their wealth."[25] But in Whitehead's novel this piece of information regularly comes as a surprise to white people, who to tell Benji that they were unaware that "black people went out there" (109). This is the condition of possibility for the adult narrator—an alter ego of Whitehead himself, who used to spend summers in Sag Harbor[26]—to produce an account of the summer of 1985 in which he can show that black people, contrary to widespread belief among whites, did go "out there."[27] Both narrator and author emphasize their familiarity with the eponymous Long Island community. Ben claims that he has "retraced all [his] old routes to make

24 See Adam Dawson, "'It Was the Last Time We'd Start the Summer that Way': Space, Race, and Coming of Age in Colson Whitehead's *Sag Harbor*," *Contemporary American Studies* 17, no. 3–4 (2020), 356; Fain, *Colson Whitehead*, 132; Maus, *Understanding Colson Whitehead*, 98.

25 Franklin E. Frazier, *Black Bourgeoisie: The Rise of a New Middle Class in the United States* (New York: Collier Books, 1962), 110.

26 See Maus, *Understanding Colson Whitehead*, 2.

27 For a Lefebvrian account of the representation of space in *Sag Harbor*, see Margarida São Bento Cadima, "The Production of Space in Colson Whitehead's *Sag Harbor* and Edit Wharton's *Summer*," *RSA Journal* 30 (2019): 163–78.

sure what [he] know[s] is plausible" (81); Whitehead has supplemented the novel itself, at least in its original edition, with a map detailing the streets of Sag Harbor—including the "black part." Moreover, he also produced an additional map of the community for the *Wall Street Journal*.[28] Thus, readers get the sense that the real subject of *Sag Harbor* is less an individual than a place; a place that is situated in both physical and social space.

For Benji and his younger brother Reggie, this place represents a certain amount of protection from the racism they encounter during "the rest of the time," when they live in Manhattan (4). This is something that does not happen in Sag Harbor, or, as Benji explains, "[w]e fit in there" (5). Yet the place where they "fit in" is sharply delineated, and a "frontier" separates "black" and "white" spaces (28). However, there are some places in Sag Harbor that Benji and his friends have learned to avoid, such as the "shabby green house where the pickup truck with the Confederate-flag bumper sticker parked, forcing us to say 'Fuckin' rednecks' whenever we passed it" (82). Moreover, the community is surrounded by woods which "were the domain of good old boys and their good-old-boy inclinations," where the black teenagers discover signs of "older kid/redneck presence" such as "shotgun shells" (128). There, they imagine the Ku Klux Klan to be "lurking in the shadows"—even though Benji acknowledges that "it was unlikely that they were patrolling on horseback, in full getup, complete cracker regalia" (28). But this also shows that Benji has not yet figured out how to tell "bona-fide persecution from perceived persecution, the this-is-actually-happening from the mere paranoid manifestation" (7). The Klan never shows up, but fantasizing about the "Hooded Menace" allows the teenagers to boast "how they were going to outrun the KKK," thereby asserting both their masculinity and their recklessness. It is easier, then, for them to beat the Klan in the medium of fantasy than to transgress the border separating these racialized spaces. At the same time, this shows that they disavow the truth of what they perceive as a frontier. They stay within the boundaries of "their" space, because they

28 See Lauren Mechling, "Mapping Out a Novel," *Wall Street Journal*, January 2, 2009, https://www.wsj.com/articles/SB123085382009947537.

fear physical violence that never occurs; thus, what affects them is symbolic violence.

Another way to put this is to say that, rather than physical—or "true" (28)—frontiers, what is significant in *Sag Harbor* is what Bourdieu calls a "magical frontier." Instead of treating the way members of dominated groups perceive the world as a form of false consciousness, the sociologist argues that "the work of repression and the more or less fantastical constructions that it produces are part of the truth, with the same status as what they seek to disguise."[29] The fact that Benji and his friends tacitly recognize different parts of the town as belonging to either whites or blacks is expressed by the narrator's recurrent use of terms indicating property relations. Hence the possibility for "mini race wars" to be fought "over loitering rights" between black and white kids (16); hence also the possibility for Benji's friend NP to scream "[t]hat's trespassing," when he sees a white couple walking along the beach (34). The black-owned part of the beach, however, ends at "Barcelona Neck, aka the Point, and beyond that maps failed" (37). The ignorance of spaces ascribed to another race is thus symmetrical. The map the Coopers keep in their house, which reproduces the dominant classificatory schema, fails because it excludes the black part of Sag Harbor. But we now learn that Benji and his friends are similarly ignorant about what lies outside of their part of town. For that is where "maps failed."

The continuation of this passage reveals that the space beyond "the Point" is provided with content in Benji's imagination:

> Even the animals changed, so extreme the border between Sag Harbor and East Hampton. Who knew what kind of fauna lurked around the bend of Barcelona Neck? Pterodactyls wearing ascots and sipping gin and tonics, trust-fund duck-billed platypuses complaining about "the help." It was all hoity-toity over there. (37)

As in *John Henry Days*, where J. Sutter encounters the US South through the prism of an imaginative geography, Benji treats the space beyond "the Point" as a "mythic space," that is to say, a "space defined less by maps

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29 Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, 169, 190.

and surveys than by myths and illusions, projected fantasies, wild anticipations, extravagant expectations."[30] The space where Benji's "maps failed" is, indeed, populated by fantastical creatures. In fact, his unfamiliarity with this space goes so far as to make him imagine it to be the home of an extinct species. To be sure, the novel—which remains committed to a realist mode throughout—does not want us to believe that there are actual Pterodactyls "lurking" (the same term the narrator uses to refer to the imaginary Klansmen in the forest) beyond Barcelona Neck. Rather, Benji's fantasy of a natural boundary actually conceals another sort of boundary, which is to say, a social boundary. In other words, Benji naturalizes and thus misrecognizes the social frontier by recognizing it as a biological one. Benji, a "Sag Harbor baby" who has "been coming out here since birth" (81), has been familiarized with a (physical) world (symbolically) structured according to the division between blacks and whites for all of his life.[31] Accordingly, he treats the spatial divisions as entirely self-evident and natural.

A second look at the passage, however, shows that the racialized division of space is not the only relevant distinction which informs Benji's speculations. For what characterizes the imaginary world beyond Barcelona Neck is not whiteness, but a kind of affluence that exceeds the capacities of Benji's imagination. That is, he does not only naturalize racial difference, but also class difference. The Coopers might be relatively wealthy, but their white Hampton neighbors are even better off. Other passages reveal that it is specifically the seemingly excessive amount of wealth and Benji's unfamiliarity with the lifestyles of the super-rich that fuels his fantasies. At the beach on the "white side of the island" (51), Benji discovers that the houses are not "bunched up all over one another" as they are in Sag Harbor, and that the properties are bigger in size. He wonders: "who knew what was between these houses, Olympic pools and tennis courts. Croquet arenas where the players swatted human skulls across the grass" (65). Again, as in Benji's

30 Richard Slotkin, *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization* (Middletown: Wesleyan UP, 1985), 11.

31 See Bourdieu and Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, 168.

ruminations about the "fauna" beyond Barcelona Neck, the words "who knew" initiate a passage in which the narrator reproduces the fifteen-year-old's fantasies about an unfamiliar space.

Finally, when Benji is describing the customers of the ice cream parlor where he has landed a summer job, his naturalization of class difference culminates in a fantasy of

> creatures of such affluence that I cannot even speculate about their day-to-day, outside of the fact of their sweet tooths. [...]. I imagine steaming mud and hairless reptilian creatures swooping down low from between fanlike prehistoric leaves. Beings emerge from the gray muck, raising their great eye-domes above the silt, flicking tongues. The exact shape of their bodies, the number of gills in their neck and suckers on their mottled digits, I cannot say, because in order to mingle with Earth people they needed to wear human-flesh costumes, for only then could they walk among us. (113)

In all three instances, the level of affluence that Benji is unfamiliar with is articulated in the form a fantasy of monstrous difference. He repeatedly admits ignorance—by opening his accounts with the words "who knew" and "I cannot even speculate," respectively—and subsequently goes on to let his imagination run wild. He lacks the schemes of perception to imagine what the lives of the super-rich might be like, and thus he must transform them into a different species.

To conclude in a more precise way, however, it is possible to discern different imaginaries at work for different class fractions. "Inhabited space," Bourdieu argues, is a "materialized system of classification" and thus "reinforces the principles of the classification which constitutes the arbitrariness of a culture."[32] By reproducing Benji's experiences of different spaces, *Sag Harbor* allows its readers to see how the categories he employs to make sense of social reality turn several arbitrary—which is to say, socio-historically constituted—differences into seemingly necessary divisions. On the one hand, there are rednecks, good old boys, and crackers "lurking" in the forest or in run-down houses. These white,

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32 Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, 76.

working-class men appear, first and foremost, as the embodiment of a physical threat. On the other hand, there are the super-rich. Their lives seem so alien from Benji's perspective that he imagines them not just as having more money but as a different species altogether.

This latter "magical frontier" is not exactly a function of race, however. After all, if affluence is the determining factor, the black residents of Sag Harbor could acquire similar luxuries once in possession of sufficient economic capital. Indeed, there is one "real Hampton-style modern house" in the black part of town belonging to the owner of R&B radio stations who is "pretty loaded." Again Benji wonders what this place might look like, thinking about handymen performing "who knew what upgrades and installations inside" (79). Once more, the words "who knew" signify the limits of Benji's imagination when it comes to extreme wealth, although his flights of fancy do not take a turn for the monstrous this time. By attending to the representation of Benji's lifeworld in *Sag Harbor*, it becomes clear that Whitehead is engaged in a careful mapping of both physical and socio-symbolic distribution of spaces in the eponymous community. The latter is shot through with borders both material and magical on which one cannot simply superimpose the racialized distinction between black and white, however. Instead, the way race is experienced in Whitehead's novel—the paradoxical experience of being "black boys with beach houses"—is a function of class.

Delinking Fate

"Black success" for Touré means having "a shot at becoming the CEO or a vice president of the company" or at least "a powerful entrepreneur."[33] By definition, this is limited to the few—for there can only be so many CEOs. Given the exorbitant difference between CEOs' salaries and workers' wages, it is hard to see how this could count as a desirable ambition—unless one accepts the logic of "linked fate" according to which

33 Touré, *Who's Afraid of Post-Blackness*, 184.

"the welfare of the race" depends on the success of individual blacks.[34] In chapter one, I discussed Kenneth Warren's argument that African American literature has historically relied on this model of representation. If black authors continue to follow this model after the end of Jim Crow segregation, it is because they "need to distinguish the personal odysseys they undertake to reach personal success from similar endeavors by their white class peers."[35] For *Sag Harbor* to have the kind of significance that Touré imagines it possesses, it would need to represent Benji's experience as having some sort of positive effect on "the welfare of the race."

The black adults who summer in Sag Harbor, black men and women who experienced the U.S. before the end of de jure segregation, are committed to the idea of "linked fate." On Labor Day the Sag Harbor community is listening to what Ben calls "the black national anthem," that is, the song "Ain't No Stoppin' Us Now" by R&B duo McFadden and Whitehead (259). The narrator focuses on two lines from the song's first verse ("There've been so many things that held us down—check. But now it looks like things are finally coming around—check" and reflects on the song's significance: "Whether the association was civil rights triumph, busting through glass ceilings in corporate towers, or merely the silly joy of gliding around a roller rink […], the song addressed the generations." (259–60) Thereby, the narrator conflates collective achievements (civil rights legislation) with individual ones (success in corporate America). In the minds of the Sag Harbor bourgeoisie, the progress made by some blacks—like themselves—thus signifies progress for all.

However, as readers learn in the course of the novel, the younger generation of blacks does not share this commitment. By telling the story through fifteen-year-old Benji's perspective, *Sag Harbor* suggests that his post-Civil Rights Movement generation is in the process of delinking its fate from that of "the race as a whole."[36] The novel expresses the confla-

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34 Kenneth W. Warren, *What Was African American Literature?* (Cambridge, MA/ London: Harvard UP, 2011), 138–39.

35 Ibid., 139.

36 Whitehead's handling of the generational split, then, does not mirror the shift from "soul" to "post-soul" discussed by Mark Anthony Neal, who treats the wel-

tion of individual and collective success articulated by "linked fate" ideology in the form of the phrase, "If they got in, it was like all of us getting in" (196). Benji is not referring to the corporate world here, but to Bayside, a local music venue. *Sag Harbor* dramatizes the unsustainability of "linked fate" in narrative form by recounting the plans Benji and his friends Bobby and NP make to attend a concert. When only Benji and NP end up getting in, this no longer figures as a collective triumph, but rather triggers the "resentment" (216) of those left outside. Similarly, once inside, Benji no longer feels solidarity with his friends who were turned down at the door but instead feels a new sense of belonging with crowd of dancers at the club, among whom are "older white people" (218). At this point he has already given up on the idea that individual success in making it past the bouncer "was like all of us getting in" because NP and Bobby, in their attempts to secure places on the guest list, made it clear that they did not care about him. Benji concludes: "Now that the day [of the concert] had arrived, I wasn't going in for that if-one-of-us-gets-in crap. I was pissed at the thought of them inside and me standing outside the club like a fucking jerk." (212–13) By assuming what Benji—who is used to not "getting in"—elsewhere calls his "outsider's perspective" (80), the novel shows that that notion of "linked fate" is only attractive for those on the inside.[37]

The black upper-middle class, in other words, is shown to be a class fraction whose members compete for desirable positions, whether it is a

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fare of the black community as being contingent on a "post-soul intelligentsia." *Soul Babies: Black Popular Culture and the Post-Soul Aesthetic* (London/New York: Routledge, 2002), 104.

37 Cameron Leader-Picone, too, relies on Warren's discussion of the "linked fate" thesis and similarly argues that the generational difference in the community articulates a transition away from a sense of collective fate "toward an emphasis on racial individualism." "Post-Black Stories: Colson Whitehead's *Sag Harbor* and Racial Individualism," *Contemporary Literature* 56, no. 3 (2015): 432. His attention is, however, focused on the teenagers' individualist and performative relationship to blackness, while I argue that *Sag Harbor* does more than represent the transition. It also contains a critique of the notion of "linked fate" in the nightclub episode.

spot in a nightclub or a particularly attractive street sign (258). *Sag Harbor* spends much more time, however, in clarifying this class's relationship to the black proletariat. The flipside of the "if-one-of-us-gets-in" rhetoric is expressed by Benji as follows: "When they failed [to get into Bayside], we accepted our portion of shame" (196). While the success of individual blacks reflects positively on "the race as a whole," individual failure serves as a source of collective "shame"—this "*pars pro toto* distortion" cuts both ways.[38] Thus, the inhabitants of Sag Harbor sharply distinguish themselves from what they euphemistically call "those of our race who possessed a certain temperament and circumstance"; or, phrased more explicitly: "There were no street niggers in Sag Harbor" (31). In fact, both statements are made by the narrator, which shows how the principles of the Sag Harbor "classification system" (204) serve as generative schemes that inform Benji's word choice. The language he uses is that of his father, who displays a dismissive attitude toward what he also calls "corner niggers" (162). The use of the n-word in itself does not necessarily express class hostility, for the Sag Harbor adults also use it "in its familiar comradely sense" (31). When it is used to denigrate lower-class blacks, it is always brought up in connection with spatial referents such as "corner" or "street." Those places serve as a shorthand for "a vast, abstract plane of black pathology" (87) in the eyes of Benji's father. "[A]ll the divisions and distinctions of social space," writes Bourdieu, "are really and symbolically expressed in physical space appropriated as reified social space."[39] The terms used by Benji's father are thus precisely a way of turning physical space into an index of a position in social space. That Benji tacitly applies the same principles of vision and division as his father becomes clear when he sees his friend Nick wearing a large gold chain and imagines hearing his father—who is not actually present—exclaim: "Where does he think he comes from, the Street?" (ibid.). As a child of the black

38 See Norbert Elias and John L. Scotson, "Towards a Theory of Established-Outsider Relations," in *The Collected Works of Norbert Elias*, vol. 4, ed. Cas Wouters (Dublin: U College Dublin P, 2008), 5.

39 Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, 134.

bourgeoisie, it is not surprising that Benji has acquired its habitus and attendant classificatory schemes.

Through the character of Benji's father and his ideas about black "pathology," the novel makes explicit the class condescension hidden under the surface in Touré.[40] As the German sociologist Norbert Elias explains, the self-image of "established" groups—such as that of the Sag Harbor black bourgeoisie—is "modelled [...] on the minority of its 'best' members," whereas their perception of "outsider" groups—such as the black proletariat—is based on "the 'bad' characteristics of that group's 'worst' section."[41] In *Sag Harbor* the former is embodied by the community's "founding fathers" and "their ideas of how proper black people should act" (221). Benji's father sees the "worst section"—that is, stereotypical representations of the black proletariat that were popular in the 1980s, such as "Welfare Moms" (180)—on the news daily. At the same time, the inhabitants of Sag Harbor are outsiders vis-à-vis the white elites that live in the adjoining Long Island communities. Consequently, they must fear being judged by the same standards as the black proletariat by whites. Benji's father, and everyone else committed to the Sag Harbor "classification system," understands that "systems of classification constitute a *stake in the struggles* that oppose individuals and groups."[42] This is why they so desperately try to distinguish themselves from the black proletariat (all the while holding on to the belief that their own success constitutes progress for "the race as a whole") or from those of their own who "fell in with the wrong crowd" (256), such as Benji's uncle Nelson. The latter is actually told by his father to never "set foot in my house ever again" (221). Whoever threatens the black bourgeoisie's self-image must be banished from the community.

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40 See, for instance, the discussion of a black working-class man's misunderstanding of a performance staged in Tompkins Square Park by the artist William Pope.L in Touré, *Who's Afraid of Post-Blackness* 26–28.

41 Elias and Scotson, "Towards a Theory of Established-Outsider Relations," 5.

42 Bourdieu and Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, 14, emphasis in original.

One of the ways the novel thematizes this is by having the narrator call his family "a Cosby family, good on paper." He goes on to explain what this means: "Father a doctor, mother a lawyer. Three kids, prep-schooled, with clean fingernails and nice manners" (160). That is, Benji's parents pursue the same occupations as Cliff and Claire Huxtable on NBC's highly successful *The Cosby Show*. The comedian Bill Cosby was at the height of his fame in 1985, playing the lead role in a show that has been described as both "colorless"[43] and "proudly bourgeois."[44] Nelson George claims that Cosby was—along with President Ronald Reagan—a "surrogate father" for the American nation at the time.[45] While this may have expressed the "affection and admiration" the public felt for Cosby in 1985 (161), today the comedian is no longer a desirable father figure. Taking *Sag Harbor*'s narrative structure into account, it is clear that adult Ben, who narrates the novel, must be aware of the scandals Cosby was involved in later in his life. The narrated events take place in the summer of 1985. However, the narration itself must be situated in 1997 or later, for the narrator refers to alterations made to the 1997 rerelease of George Lucas's *Star Wars* trilogy (157)—as a matter of fact, this appears only three pages before the term "Cosby family" is used, as if to remind the reader of the significance of evaluating the Cosby reference with the benefit of hindsight. *A New Hope*, the first part of the trilogy, was released in U.S. movie theaters on January 31, 1997, less than two weeks after Cosby was publicly accused of having fathered a daughter in an extramarital affair[46]; hence, readers can assume that Ben knows about the troubles that

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43 Mel Watkins, *On the Real Side: A History of African American Comedy From Slavery to Chris Rock* (Chicago: Lawrence Hill Books, 1999), 505.

44 Nelson George, *Post-Soul Nation: The Explosive, Contradictory, Triumphant, and Tragic 1980s as Experienced by African Americans (Previously Known as Blacks and Before That Negroes)* (New York: Penguin, 2004), 98.

45 Ibid., 99.

46 See David W. Chen, "Bill Cosby Was Target of Extortion," *The New York Times*, January 21, 1997, https://www.nytimes.com/1997/01/21/nyregion/bill-cosby-was-target-of-extortion.html.

the real Cosby family experienced[47] when he uses the term "Cosby family"—all the more so, since he elsewhere admits that his perception of the 1980s is informed by his later experiences (236). In short, the point of Benji's use of the term might precisely be to show that his family is good exclusively "on paper."

Most importantly, however, Benji's father embodies the same class condescension as Cosby himself, who went on an infamous rant about the black proletariat in a 2004 speech, in which he blamed what he called the "lower economic people" among American blacks for their allegedly "self-destructive behavior" in typical neoliberal fashion.[48] Mr. Cooper is similarly committed to individual responsibility, claiming that the black poor "need to get off their asses" (180). While fifteen-year-old Benji often unwittingly applies the same "classification system" as his father, the fact that the novel is narrated by adult Ben introduces a distancing effect. Thus, the class perspective is reproduced and mediated by Ben's narration. After performing a class-based ventriloquism by using his father's idiom when stating that "[t]here were no street niggers in Sag Harbor," the narrator adds "No, no, no" (31). The threefold repetition of the word suggests that Benji has repeatedly heard his father underscore that all kinds of behavior associated with "the Street" contradicts the norms of respectability laid down by the "founding fathers"; but it also suggests that he—just like his friends—is tired of hearing it, thus mocking his father's repeated attempts to transmit and embody the values of the black bourgeoisie. While the manners of black bourgeois life have been inculcated in their minds for all their lives, this younger generation, in fact, finds much that is desirable in "the Street."

47 This includes the murder of Cosby's son Ennis two days before his illegitimate daughter was arrested for extortion. See Chen, "Bill Cosby Was Target." Cosby has since been accused of and convicted for sexual assault, though the conviction was later overturned by the Pennsylvania Supreme Court. See Charlie Savage, "Bill Cosby's Release From Prison, Explained," *The New York Times*, July 1, 2021, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/01/arts/television/bill-cosby-conviction-overturned-why.html.

48 Quoted in Michael Eric Dyson, *Is Bill Cosby Right? Or Has the Black Middle Class Lost Its Mind?* (New York: Basic Civitas Books, 2005), xi, xiii.

Cursed Grammar

The question remains whether the upper-middle-class habitus depicted in *Sag Harbor* does not create an unsurpassable distance between the characters' own lives and those of the black proletariat, however attractive they may find "the Street." Benji sums up the teenagers' predicament as follows:

> According to the world, we were the definition of paradox: black boys with beach houses [...]. And if it messed with your head, got under your brown skin, there were some typical and well-known remedies. You could embrace the beach part—revel in the luxury, the perception of status, wallow without care in what it meant to be born in America with money [...]. You could embrace the black part—take some idea you had about what real blackness was, and make theater of it, your 24–7 one-man show. Folks of this type could pick Bootstrapping Striver or Proud Pillar, but the most popular brands were Militant or Street, Militant being the opposite of bourgie capitulation to The Man, and Street being the antidote to Upper Middle Class emasculation. Street, ghetto. Act hard, act out, act in a way that would come to be called gangsterish [...], knowing there was someone to post bail if one of your grubby schemes fell apart. (57–58)

While this passage implies choice, it is also made clear that the ability to choose is contingent on material preconditions—on being born "with money." At the same time, the designation of possible choices as "popular brands" suggests that they are not expressions of "real blackness" but rather the commodified expressions of 1980s urban culture. The teenagers attempt to buy into this lifestyle through sneakers and gold chains popularized by rap artists. However, Benji had already deconstructed the idea of hip-hop's "real blackness" through his insistence that "Planet Rock" was based on a Kraftwerk sample.[49] It is adult Ben

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49 Richard Schur discusses *Sag Harbor* as an articulation of the "authenticity crisis in African American literature." "The Crisis in Authenticity," 251. My own reading is not interested, however, in whether or not Whitehead "redefin[es] the terms

who can verbalize this more precisely, when he relates that his fifteen-year-old self "didn't understand [...] why Marcus was hassling" him (61), because he thought "that it was okay to like both Afrika Bambaataa and Kraftwerk" (62). Yet far from embodying the "unapologetic" commitment to post-black freedom perceived by Touré, Benji seems less self-assured. If "embrac[ing] the contradiction" is what post-blackness requires, this does not come easy for him. And this is again a matter of habitus, because, unlike Touré, who learned to do "rapid cultural 180s" by spending time in a predominantly white private school and a "black and ghetto tennis club," Benji is unable to connect with the "black and ghetto" lifestyle that his friends engage in (or try to, at any rate) due to what he calls his "strong dork constitution" (43). In other words, once more the issue of an individual's practical sense or the embodied dispositions that make up a habitus arises.

Habitus, according to Bourdieu, are "systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures, that is, as principles which generate and organize practices and representations." These dispositions are themselves structured by the objective conditions under which they were acquired, and "[e]arly experiences have particular weight." At the same time, the habitus also acts as a "structuring structure" insofar as all subsequent "thoughts, perceptions and actions," in a word, all forms of "practice", are structured by the its schemes.[50] The latter enable social agents "to adapt endlessly to partially modified contexts," that is, they serve as the basis for the practical rationality of their actions in new situations.[51] In short, individuals incorporate the objective structures of the social world they experience early in their lives, and these structures are embodied in the

of racial identity" (ibid.)—not necessarily because I object to the specifics of Schur's account, but rather because this framework might, despite Schur's claim that the "ways [...] to perform a black identity" and "socio-economic status" are related (246), reinforce the idea that what is at stake in *Sag Harbor* is primarily "black identity" rather than a specific conjuncture of racial blackness and upper-middle-class status.

50 Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, 53, 60, 55.

51 Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, 139.

form of subjective dispositions that guide—but do not mechanically determine—subsequent practice. Yet the adaptability of dispositions is limited, since the range of possible practices always remains constrained by the conditions under which the habitus has initially been acquired. Due to what Bourdieu calls its "hysteresis," the habitus is slow to adapt to a radically changed context.[52] This causes individuals to potentially feel embarrassed because of their lack of access to the means of producing the correct practice—and this is often expressed in "the form of *bodily emotions*" such as "shame, humiliation, timidity, anxiety, guilt."[53] Thus, Benji the "dork" falters when it comes to his encounters with "black slang and other sundry soulful artifacts [he]'d missed out on in [his] 'predominantly white' private school" (29). This refers primarily to complex handshake routines and the "grammatical acrobatics" (41) of the ritualized strategies of insult that his friends—some of whom do not attend private schools, which shows that the Sag Harbor set is itself internally stratified—introduce to the community. Benji cannot transcend his "outsider's perspective" which only allows him to provide detached descriptions of their actions without being able to acquire a "practical mastery"[54] of the logic of their practice. His habitus has been decisively shaped by his upbringing in "predominantly white" Manhattan. Thus, he struggles with and ultimately fails to perform "cultural 180s" à la Touré.

Consider the description of a handshake routine performed by Benji's friends Marcus and Bobby: "Slam, grip, flutter, snap. Or was it slam, flutter, grip, snap? I was all thumbs when it came to shakes." Benji, who only perceives "a blur of choreography" reasons: "I had all summer to get it right, unless someone went back to the city and returned with some new variation that spread like a virus, and which my strong dork constitution produced countless antibodies against." In short, Benji admits that his efforts to learn the new handshakes remain mere "fumbles" (43). Bourdieu's theory does not deny that individuals can deliberately

52 Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 83.

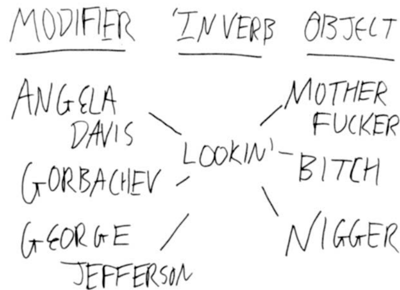
53 Pierre Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001), 38, emphasis in original.

54 Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 19.

adopt new forms of practice; Benji tries to learn but realizes that this takes time ("all summer") and still remains imperfect ("fumbles"). Benji's class habitus indexes his class difference from the working-class boroughs of New York City where he imagines the latest handshakes to be "[d]evised in the underground soul laboratories of Harlem, pounded out in the blacker-than-thou sweatshops of the South Bronx" (43). His failure to thus perform a version of blackness—a commodified version, to be sure—is experienced as shameful.[55]

When it comes to the "grammatical acrobatics" of the insults, Benji's "outsider's perspective" on the logic of practice stands out even more clearly. He explains (41):

> The trend this summer, insult-wise, was toward grammatical acrobatics, the unlikely collage. One smashed a colorful and evocative noun or proper noun into a pejorative, gluing them together with an 'in-verb […]. Like so:



55 Benji's uncomfortable position between the (white) super-rich and the (black) proletariat, neither of which he has access to except in the medium of the imagination, is reiterated when he refers to the former as "secret-handshake groups" (110). From Benji's "outsider perspective" it seems as if all groups that embody a desirable position in social space (desirable for various reasons, though) possess their rituals that he is excluded from.

Benji points out that the addition of a "'You fuckin',' as in 'You fuckin' Cha-Ka from *Land of the Lost*-lookin' motherfucker,'" could serve "as a rhetorical pause, allowing the speaker a few extra seconds to pluck some splendid modifier out of the invective ether" (41–42). And he finishes thus:

> True masters of the style sometimes attached the nonsensical "with your monkey ass" as a kicker, to convey sincerity and depth of feeling. Hence, "You fuckin' Kunta Kinte-lookin' motherfucker … with your monkey ass." You may have noticed that the 'in-verbs were generally visual. The heart of the critique concerned what you were putting out into the world, the vibes you gave off. Which is what made them so devastating when executed well. (42)

Despite the passage's ironic tone, the attention to detail creates the appearance that Benji is intimately familiar with this practice. However, he is in fact speaking from the position of an observer, not a practitioner. His observations are entirely a product of a "theoretical view of practice" that Bourdieu distinguishes from a "practical relation to practice." Significantly, not once in the novel does Benji utter a phrase of this sort himself. In Bourdieu's terms, adult Ben can produce an account of the theoretical logic of the insult in the manner of a "grammarian," but teenage Benji cannot produce actual insults in practice as an "orator" would.[56] The former speaks from the standpoint of "an 'impartial spectator' who seeks to understand for the sake of understanding" and possesses "mastery of the code"; the latter possesses "mastery of [its] appropriate usages" (32). To be a "[t]rue master of the style," as Benji puts it, one would have to be an "orator." He is not one of them and observes his friends from the position of a "grammarian," because he does not master the insults in practice.

By having adult Ben narrate the novel Whitehead introduces a break with the "primary experience" of teenage Benji which is similar to the first of the two "epistemological break[s]" Bourdieu insists on.[57] The

56 Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, 81, 31.

57 Ibid., 26, 14.

novel's protagonist, fifteen-year-old Benji, remains excluded the logic of practice of the "grammatical acrobatics." Ben, its narrator can describe their logic from the distance of adulthood. Whitehead himself states as much:

> I knew that it had to be an adult looking back on his childhood because I would get bored out of my skull if I had to have a fifteen-year-old's voice for three hundred pages. [...] My narrators generally have a certain kind of critical faculty. They're analyzing what the characters are doing in larger social structures. So I wanted to have an adult voice looking back upon teenage years with that kind of critical distance. You know, being able to break down their cursing grammar.[58]

This "critical distance" effects a first break. But a second one is missing. This would entail a critical reflection on his own position which would enable Ben "to objectify the objectifying distance and the social conditions that make it possible."[59] Thus, he does not critically interrogate his own (class) position, which is the ultimate reason why he can "break down" his friends' "cursing grammar" but remains unable to employ it in practice himself.

Through justifying his inability to master the rituals that signify blackness to fifteen-year-old Benji on account of his "strong dork constitution," Ben naturalizes his class-based detachment from practical mastery. The diagram form, used in *Sag Harbor* to visualize the grammar of the curse, represents an objectivist "break with primary experience" as practiced in Lévi-Strauss's structuralist anthropology. Bourdieu points out that it produces a "synchronization effect" that is alien to the actual logic of the practices the diagram purportedly represents.[60] This is because practice by definition occurs in time and because social agents,

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58 Quoted in Jeremiah Chamberlin, "Who We Are Now: A Conversation with Colson Whitehead," *Fiction Writers Review*, May 30, 2009, https://fictionwritersreview.com/interview/who-we-are-now-a-conversation-with-colson-whitehead-interview/.

59 Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, 14.

60 Ibid., 10.

rather than mechanically following a "rule" suggested by a diagram, engage in a "strategy" that allows for symbolic profits to be reaped based on the use of time.[61] Ben is tacitly aware that the diagram cannot represent the full truth of the insult, for otherwise he could not speak of insults that are "executed well"—which implies that it does not suffice to produce just any combination of "modifier," "'in-verb," and "object." He also explicitly evokes the role of time by pointing out that "You fuckin'" can provide a "rhetorical pause" that makes it possible to come up with a better insult. However, he cannot explain his own ineptitude to execute a successful insult except by self-deprecatingly calling himself a "dork."

This is because Ben fails to objectify his class position, which keeps him at a distance from the "grammatical acrobatics" of black vernacular. His class privilege means that he is relatively "free from necessity," which is what allows him to assume the "detached, distant disposition" of the observer who treats the world as "an object of contemplation, a representation, a spectacle"[62] that can in turn be represented in a diagram. However, while Benji as an individual struggles with understanding how his class position shapes his actions and thought, the novel itself insists on the fact that social agents' ways of acting in the social world are not a matter of choice alone but are decisively determined by the (embodied) dispositions of (class) habitus.

Bildung vs. Manners

What kind of novel is *Sag Harbor* then? As indicated at the outset of this chapter it is commonly classified as a *Bildungsroman*. Whitehead himself has used the related term "coming of age novel" to describe his fourth work of fiction.[63] Adam Dawson elaborates that this genre convention-

61 Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 9, emphases removed.

62 Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, 17, 51.

63 Colson Whitehead, "Each Book an Antidote," interview by Nikesh Suhkla, *Guernica*, April 24, 2013, https://www.guernicamag.com/colson-whitehead-each-book-an-antidote/.

ally narrates "a teleological journey from an unstable adolescent self to a stable adult self."[64] As indicated before, I do not think that this characterizes Whitehead's novel very well, as the author himself qualifies his statement by saying that he was "avoiding certain expectations of plot and a certain kind of narrative satisfaction" in order to produce his "own kind of version" of a coming of age novel.[65] Indeed, a look at the minimal plot reveals that there is neither a process of *Bildung* nor a coming of age. Adolescent Benji's journey toward maturation is deferred, and *Sag Harbor* remains silent on how the insecure fifteen-year-old becomes the adult narrator.

In fact, the novel first raises and then frustrates the desire to narrate the story of a meaningful step toward adulthood. Benji starts the summer by planning to establish a "New Me," basking in the "early-summer dream of reinvention" that should result in a "refurbished self" (23). But on the second-to-last page of the novel, just before returning to Manhattan, he must conclude that "[i]t didn't work out the way I had envisioned." Although no doubt "some stuff happened," it is hard to argue that "some stuff" is the stuff a successful *Bildungsroman* is made of. In the end, the desired "reinvention" is deferred: Benji resolves to sketch a "new plan" (272), now "sure" that "it is going to be a great year." However, the novel's two very last sentences—"Isn't it funny? The way the mind works?" (273)—imply that the near future will not go according to Benji's "new plan" either. Instead of revolving around a linear journey along the path of maturation, the plot of *Sag Harbor* is circular: at the end of the novel Benji remains in the same place as he was at the beginning.

The plot of a *Bildungsroman* can be discovered, however, in Touré's *Who's Afraid of Post-Blackness*, which contains an autobiographical chapter that revolves around just the kind of "stuff" readers would expect from a *Bildungsroman*. Walter Benn Michaels argues that the popularity of this cultural form in the current neoliberal period is a consequence of its insistence that "that there are only individuals." He accordingly treats

64 Dawson, "It Was the Last Time," 356.

65 Whitehead, "Each Book an Antidote."

the difference between fictional memoir and autobiography as secondary, because they both celebrate individuals overcoming obstacles through "the right choices, individual determination, and hard work."[66] To be sure, this precisely the lesson of Touré's journey toward "post-Black rugged individualism." His autobiography sees him defy anyone, whether white or black, who attempts to constrict the free expression of his post-black individuality. Touré's sense of personal triumph over adverse circumstances is reinforced by the chapter preceding his autobiography, in which the "fall" of black comedian Dave Chappelle who was allegedly "scared […] to death" by the "freedom of the post-Black era" is recounted as a cautionary tale that individuals who are not determined enough will fail. In contrast, Touré's suppression of his "inner Sharpton"[67] signifies that success comes to those individuals who work hard enough and never give up, social structures be damned.[68]

Sag Harbor, on the other hand, remains an endlessly forestalled *Bildungsroman*. Instead of following Benji as he truly comes of age, the reader watches him stay in place. He does not undergo what the narrator calls a "[c]ommon rite of passage" among the Sag Harbor youth, namely leaving behind the world of his parents. This option is represented by Benji's older sister Elena, who no longer comes to Sag Harbor because she has had "[*e*]*nough of this bourgie shit*" (234, emphasis in original). She even exhorts her brother to "get out when you can" (237). A story about getting out both literally (no longer spending summers in Sag Harbor) and figuratively (breaking with the black "bourgie" class) could be the stuff of a *Bildungsroman* or coming-of-age novel; but *Sag Harbor* is not interested in telling such a story. Instead, it is a novel about a particular space, again both literally (a physical location) and figuratively (a position in social space). Moreover, it is a novel committed to

66 Michaels, "Real Toads," 183, 179.

67 Touré, *Who's Afraid of Post-Blackness*, 74, 113.

68 On the *Bildungsroman's* reliance on "hope" and "disillusion" as the poles between which individual journeys play out, see Franco Moretti, *The Way of the World: The* Bildungsroman *in European Culture*, trans. Albert Sbragia (London: Verso, 1987), 248, n. 5.

a circular rather than linear temporality. When summer ends, Benji thinks, "[w]e plotted and planned and next year came around and we were in the same place" (259), and observes younger children that will be the "replacements" (261) of his circle of friends. What is important is not Benji's individual trajectory but the fact that he embodies a position in social space which can and will be occupied again. In other words, the logic of *Sag Harbor* is one of reproduction not of change.

This is why it makes more sense to treat *Sag Harbor* as if it were a novel of manners, a genre interested in making class differences visible in cultural differences.[69] Manners, according to Lionel Trilling, are part of

> that part of a culture which is made up of half-uttered or unuttered or unutterable expressions of value. They are hinted at by small actions, sometimes by the arts of dress or decoration, sometimes by tone, gesture, emphasis, or rhythm, sometimes by the words that are used with a special frequency or a special meaning. They are the things that for good or bad draw the people of a culture together and that separate them from the people of another culture.[70]

As my reading of *Sag Harbor* has shown, the novel is committed to revealing the ways by which members of classes distinguish themselves from others—willingly or unwillingly, explicitly or implicitly. And few theorists have a better sense for such distinctions than Bourdieu with his insistence on the processes by which "[s]ocial subjects, classified by their classifications, distinguish themselves by the distinctions they make [...], in which their position in the objective classifications is expressed or betrayed."[71] The novel's interest in the way social distinctions are

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69 See Richard Godden, *Fictions of Capital: The American Novel from James to Mailer* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1990); and Walter Benn Michaels, *The Shape of the Signifier: 1967 to the End of History* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2004), 150–51.

70 Lionel Trilling, *The Liberal Imagination* (New York: New York Review Books, 2008), 206–07.

71 Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA/London: Harvard UP, 1984), 6.

culturally negotiated goes so far as to reproduce fifteen-year-old Benji's fantasy that the super-rich belong to a different species: "reptilian creatures" wearing "human-flesh costumes" or "[p]terodactyls." Their lives—and manners—seem so radically different from what he knows that he cannot imagine their essential human sameness any longer. This recalls, for exampke, Undine Spragg's perception of Peter Van Degen as possessing a "grotesque saurian head" in Wharton's *The Custom of the Country*.[72] Monstrously, the irreconcilably antagonist structure of class society lurks underneath the surface show of manners. Unlike Touré's account of post-blackness, however, Whitehead's *Sag Harbor* remains aware of the monstrous nature of class society and the logic of its reproduction.

72 Edith Wharton, *The Custom of the Country*, in *Three Novels of New York* (London: Penguin, 2012), 285.

4. Money, Abstraction, Cultural Production: *John Henry Days* and *Apex Hides the Hurt* Revisited

This chapter turns once more to *John Henry Days* and *Apex Hides the Hurt*, two novels that are in fact deeply engaged in parsing the monstrosities of capitalist society. However, whereas *Sag Harbor* mostly represents processes of social reproduction as they occur on the surface of class society, Whitehead's previous two novels dig deeper, as it were, and interrogate how cultural production fares under the spell of the commodity form. Again, the novels are strikingly similar. While chapter two discussed their tales of urban black professionals who must confront Reconstruction-era history on their travels to non-metropolitan regions of the United States, this chapter looks at the two protagonists as participants in fields of cultural production: freelance journalism and "nomenclature" consultation. Both J. Sutter and the nameless "nomenclature consultant" of *Apex* do things with words: the former writes puff pieces for whoever pays; the latter thinks up names for products. That is to say, they both use words to sell commodities; or, more precisely, they use words to convince people to buy commodities. Drawing loosely on Lukács's path-breaking assertion that all problems that arise in the totality of capitalist society "lead back" to "the riddle of the commodity-*structure*,"[1] I will argue that Whitehead's novels provide sophisticated

1 Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge, MA: The MIT P, 1971), 83, emphasis in original.

representations of how value and its forms—most notably, the money form—encroach upon the forms of thought available to participants in capitalist society. Value's abstraction from an object's particular qualities in the service of commensurability, however, does not just affect the novels' protagonists' relationship to their creative faculties. More than that, their ability to relate to other human beings as well as to nonhuman nature suffers in Whitehead's novelistic reflections on damaged life.[2]

Mercenaries in the Marketplace

In the world of *John Henry Days*, almost all social interactions are shaped the principle of competition. On the plane taking him to Charleston, the narrator relates a comically petty contest between J. and a fellow passenger. Since J. the character whose perspective is privileged in this passage, the narrator's words reproduce J.'s schemes of perception and appreciation. Thus, as Whitehead writes, the woman sitting next to J.

> wins the first round by lifting the armrest that divides her seat and the middle seat into discreet [sic] pens. She folds her jacket in half and pats it down in the empty seat. Beats him to it. J. tells himself to wake

2 The protagonists' "alienation" is often noted. Preston Park Cooper, *Playing With Expectations: Postmodern Narrative Choices and the African American Novel* (New York: Peter Lang, 2015), 143. Usually, critical accounts focus on the commercialization of culture. For example: J. is "enmeshed in a material, superficial, and fleeting culture" (Derek C. Maus, *Understanding Colson Whitehead: Revised and Expanded Edition*, Columbia: U of South Carolina P, 2021, 44); he illustrates "postmodern man's being enmeshed in the virtual cyber-realities of a technological world" (William Ramsey, "An End of Southern History: The Down-Home Quests of Toni Morrison and Colson Whitehead," *African American Review* 41, no. 4 (2007): 783); or life is defined by "pop" (Michael K. Walonen, "'This Making of Truth is Violence Too, Out of Which Facts Are Formed': Colson Whitehead's Secret History of Post-Reconstruction America in *John Henry Days*," *Literature & History* 23, no. 2 (2014): 75). This chapter offers a reading of Whitehead's two novels which underlines that they have a more precise understanding of what it means to say that culture has been transformed by commerce.

> up. He is going to need all of his skills this weekend; this woman is a civilian, a minnow compared to all those other pilot fish he'll be competing with over the next few days. (*JHD* 12)[3]

J. reminds himself to be on guard, that is, to be a good neoliberal competitive subject.[4] At the same time, his metaphorical substitution of his human competitors with species of fish indicates that he naturalizes the state of permanent competition. When his seatmate puts her leftovers on the middle seat's tray, J. regards this as a show of military strength: "Sending the gunboats to Cuba" (*JHD* 13). Now warfare serves as the vehicle for a metaphor identifying interpersonal relations with warfare.

As a matter of fact, military metaphors permeate all parts of *John Henry Days* concerned with J. and his fellow journalists, much to the chagrin of James Wood, who called for an "armistice on the war metaphors."[5]

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3 All references to Colson Whitehead, *John Henry Days* (New York: Doubleday, 2001) will hereafter be cited parenthetically in the text as *JHD*.

4 Studies of neoliberal subjectivation often draw on Michel Foucault. See, for instance, Foucault's February 7, 1979, lecture in *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978–79*, ed. Michel Senellart, trans. Graham Burchell (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008); see also the account of *homo oeconomicus* as a competitive subject in Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (Brooklyn: Zone Books, 2015); and Pierre Dardot and Christian Laval, *The New Way of the World: On Neo-Liberal Society*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London/New York: Verso, 2014). Here I am not particularly interested in in-depth discussions of the genesis of neoliberal subjectivity. Some accounts of neoliberalism read as if they merely register with horror that the economic principles that always already characterized capitalism begin to affect "the lives of a group—white, educated, upper middle-class citizens of the developed world—formerly protected from them," as Annie McClanahan puts it in a trenchant review of Brown's book. "Becoming Non-Economic: Human Capital Theory and Wendy Brown's *Undoing the Demos*," *Theory & Event* 20, no. 2 (2017): 512. I use the term neoliberalism, thus, merely to refer to the period after c. 1980 without thereby implying that it constitutes an essential transformation of the capitalist mode of production.

5 James Wood, "Virtual Prose," review of *John Henry Days*, by Colson Whitehead, The *New Republic*, August 6, 2001: 30.

The critic's taunt misses the significance of the trope of warfare in Whitehead's novel, however. More than a mere rhetorical flourish, it expresses the principle governing a society in which competitive behavior has become second nature. The novel's controlling metaphor is that of the mercenary, which is the name the freelancers have given themselves. Their self-designation shows they regard their work as a service to be sold to the highest bidder. Using a less martial analogy, Lucien, the man behind the mysterious "List" that seems to determine the mercenaries' fate, is reminded of "day workers who crowded the farmer's truck every morning for pennywork" when he thinks of them (*JHD* 297). He declares the truth of their line of work's precarity. They suffer from "insecure working and living conditions" which allows for their "flexploitation."[6] But flexible employment, far from figuring as a means of escaping the drudgery of old, underlies the introduction of extreme existential insecurity in the mercenaries' lives.

Yet J. perversely immerses himself in this precarity, even going so far as to hand over control of his basic reproductive needs to the market. The journalists euphemistically discuss how J. is "going for the record" by exclusively eating and drinking at publicity events, thus avoiding paying for a single meal. When J. arrives in West Virginia, he has been on this "jag" for three months already (*JHD* 29). His surrender of the power to eat on his own schedule means that his very existence has become entirely contingent on the decisions of publicists who schedule press junkets. Under capitalism the nearly all human beings are separated from the means to secure their own reproduction, which is why they are dependent on the owners of the means of production to pay them a wage in exchange for the sale of their labor-power.[7] The wage mediates be-

6 Marianne Pieper, "Prekarisierung, symbolische Gewalt und produktive Subjektivierung im Feld immaterieller Arbeit," in *Symbolische Gewalt: Herrschaftsanalyse nach Pierre Bourdieu*, ed. Robert Schmidt and Volker Woltersdorff (Konstanz: UVK, 2008), 219, my translations.

7 I paraphrase Søren Mau's recent discussion of the proletarian condition in *Mute Compulsion: A Marxist Theory of the Economic Power of Capital* (London/New York: Verso, 2023).

tween work and reproduction because it provides a means to purchase the means of subsistence. As a freelance journalist, however, J. does not receive a regular wage; he only writes about few of the events to which he is sent by Lucien's "List" (discussed below) and mostly just enjoys the free food. In the absence of a wage, work (going to events) tends to become identical with reproduction (consumption of food). By allowing the List to decide when, where, and what to consume, J. willingly subjects his existence to an abstract social force.

The List is a figurative device that makes capitalism's peculiar form of abstract social domination narratable. Indeed, frequently characters speak of the List as if it possessed its own agency, and one of the novel's innumerable short chapters does in fact feature the List as a protagonist. By transforming the List from a mute object into a subject with "a will and a function" (*JHD* 55), the novel uses a trope Alberto Toscano and Jeff Kinkle call "materialist prosopopoeia," which dramatizes abstract social forms that "determine, in generally overpowering ways, the actions of individuals and collectives."[8] J. has submitted to the List's power and, even more, seems to emphatically welcome the determination by abstract social force when he actively goes for the record. Bourdieu's notion of "*amor fati*" accurately captures this embrace of a social "destiny."[9] As Christa Buschendorf elaborates, in Bourdieu's hands the concept transforms the "force which in ancient tragedy is called fate" into an effect of social relations.[10] In this sense, the List is as capricious as a Greek God; yet, it

8 Alberto Toscano and Jeff Kinkle, *Cartographies of the Absolute* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2015), 43. That is also to say, the novel is not interested in the agency of nonhuman entities as such à la New Materialism; for a critique of the latter's notion of agency, see Andreas Malm, *The Progress of This Storm: Nature and Society in a Warming World* (London/New York: Verso, 2018).

9 Pierre Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001), 50.

10 Christa Buschendorf, "Narrated Power Relations: Jesse Hill Ford's Novel *The Liberation of Lord Byron Jones*," in *Civilizing and Decivilizing Processes: Figurational Approaches to American Culture*, ed. Christa Buschendorf, Astrid Franke, and Johannes Voelz (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011), 247.

is nothing but a symbol of the abstract domination that individuals are subjected to in capitalist society.[11]

John Henry Days uses figures of speech and rhetorical devices to give literary form to the power of markets; it also grants the reader insight into J.'s subjective experience of capital's abstract domination. As a mercenary whose very existence has become dependent on the List's whims, his sense of the spatio-temporal distinction between work and life collapses. Because he has neither a regular work schedule nor any stable workplace, he is potentially always working everywhere. To be sure, he is not engaged in work-related activities 24/7. The novel explains how he goes about writing an article. The first thing he does is go on a walk; later he watches television. This continues "until eleven o'clock, when the faint angel of professionalism perched on his shoulder" whispers, and he starts to write (*JHD* 302). J. no longer needs an external "temporal discipline,"[12] since he has thoroughly "internalized" the habits demanded by flexible neoliberal working conditions.[13] Today's cultural workers, writes Maurizio Lazzarato, have to be "active subjects" who are "responsible for [their] own control and motivation."[14] The novel uses the metaphor of the "faint angel of professionalism" to show how J.'s embodied dispositions—the angel is seated on his shoulder, after all—actively serve to remind him that work needs to be done regardless of any circadian rhythm.

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11 On abstract domination, see Mau, *Mute Compulsion*; Moishe Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx's Critical Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2003); William Clare Roberts, *Marx's Inferno: The Political Theory of* Capital (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2017).

12 David Harvey, *The Conditions of Postmodernity: An Enquiry Into the Origins of Cultural Change* (Cambridge, MA: Blackwell, 1990), 228.

13 Astrid Franke, "'The Death of the Sixties?' Afroamerikanische Geschichte in Colson Whitehead's *John Henry Days*," in *Von Selma bis Ferguson – Rasse und Rassismus in den USA*, ed. Michael Butter, Astrid Franke, and Horst Tonn (Bielefeld: transcript, 2016), 171, my translation.

14 Maurizio Lazzarato, "Immaterial Labor," trans. Paul Colilli and Ed Emery, in *Contemporary Marxist Theory: A Reader*, ed. Andrew Pendakis et al. (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 80.

And yet, the demands introduced by the neoliberal spatiotemporal regime have been emphatically welcomed by some. The sociologist Richard Florida, for instance, celebrated the so-called "creative class" in a bestseller which was published only shortly after *John Henry Days*. He begins by assuming the perspective of a fictional visitor from the past who is surprised that people are "always working and yet never working when they were supposed to."[15] According to Florida, humans are naturally bearers of creativity which they like to put to work in the service of perpetual innovation. The latter, he stresses, can be a "*decisive* source of competitive advantage."[16] The sociologist thus gives his game away: competition is the principle organizing the social world. Moreover, there is no tension between economic pressures, such as the ones exerted by the wage-relation, and creative labor in Florida's eyes.[17] Ultimately, he believes that "new ideas, new technologies, and/or new creative content" can bring about a liberation of a potential previously stifled.[18]

John Henry Days is much less sanguine about the value of "content." J. Sutter, for one, thinks that it "sounds so honest. Not stories, not articles, but content" (*JHD* 21). In the final section of this chapter I will argue that the challenge J. has to overcome in the novel's plot—though the outcome remains uncertain—is to cease producing content and start writing stories. Here I want to highlight that the novel goes on to satirize the notion of cultural production reduced to content creation by way of the journalists' heated discussion of what the narrator calls the "Anatomy of Puff":

15 Richard Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class. And How It's Transforming Work, Leisure, Community and Everyday Life* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 3. Florida has since retreated from his earlier celebratory account; see Sam Wetherell, "Richard Florida is Sorry," *Jacobin*, August 19, 2017, https://jacobin.com/2017/08/new-urban-crisis-review-richard-florida.

16 Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class*, 5, emphasis in original.

17 See Sarah Brouillette, "Creative Labor," in *Contemporary Marxist Theory: A Reader*, ed. Andrew Pendakis et al. (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2014), 443.

18 Florida, *The Rise of the Creative Class*, 8.

> [W]hile all puff is tied by a golden cord to a subject, be it animal, vegetable or mineral, the pop expression of that subject can be reduced to three discrete schools of puff. For the sake of clarity, the Bull [the journalist who established the system, that is] christened the archetypal subject Bob, and named the three essential manifestations of Bob as follows: Bob's Debut, Bob's Return, and Bob's Comeback.[19] Each manifestation commanded its own distinct stock phrases and hyperbolic rhetoric. (*JHD* 70)

The point of "puff," a term for the formalization of journalistic practices shaped to the demands of the market, is to offer fixed forms under which each possible subject can be subsumed. The puff piece is an "ossified" (*JHD* 73) or reified manifestation of an eternally returning same. "Bob," thus, fulfills the role of the "schema" in Horkheimer and Adorno's account of the culture industry.

> The active contribution which Kantian schematism still expected of subjects—that they should [...] relate sensuous multiplicity to fundamental concepts—is denied to the subject by industry. It purveys schematism as its first service to the customer. [...]. For the consumer there is nothing left to classify, since the classification has already been preempted by the schematism of production.[20]

The Frankfurt School Critical Theorists bemoaned the impoverishment of experience that occurred when the consumer of culture industry products passively received preformed—or deformed, as it were—articles. However, *John Henry Days* is less interested in the consumer's experience; instead, it reveals the journalists' self-conception or, in other words, the

19 The elaboration on the three versions of Bob that follows in the novel suggests that the career of Bob Dylan could have provided their template. Yet, Whitehead could also have in mind Edgar Allan Poe's short story "The Literary Life of Thingum Bob, Esq.," an earlier satire of writing for pay which revolves around a whimsical poem devoted to the "Oil-of-Bob." In *Edgar Allan Poe: Sixty-Seven Tales* (New York: Gramercy Books, 1990).

20 Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford UP, 2002), 98.

"generative principle" of their work, their "*modus operandi*."[21] By pounding any subject—"animal, vegetable or mineral"—into a schema, they abstract from everything that cannot be subsumed under a version of "Bob," a category Kant did not anticipate.

Field Work

John Henry Days, thus, reveals "content" as the product of an operation of abstraction that turns the multiplicity of subjects into a strictly delimited set of potential templates able to subsume everything without doing justice to anything. This is the state of the journalistic field as satirized by Whitehead's novel. But it also goes on to narrate an episode in the transformation of a field that used to be protected from the market's imperatives into one governed by money. That is, the novel combines synchronic and diachronic perspectives on the social universe in which the freelance journalists move. Again, it relies on J.'s perspective to show how these objective shifts in the structure of the field were subjectively experienced, thus insisting on a materialist explanation for J.'s feeling of "alienation."[22] To wit, *John Henry Days* extensively employs a series of martial metaphors as vehicles for representing a world dominated by the principle of economic competition. That no social sphere is secure from being, thus, turned into a battlefield, as it were, is similarly highlighted by way of metaphor. The "war was peculiar. It would not end, it discovered new markets every day, the fighting spilled over into new demographics each day, none could remain neutral" (*JHD* 225). In fact, J. had experienced such a spillover himself as an apprentice journalist.

Like many other sociologists, Bourdieu regards modern society to be differentiated into spheres which are, at least in theory, relatively autonomous, which he calls fields. There is a key distinction to be made, though, as I have indicated in the introduction. According to Bourdieu,

21 Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1990), 12.

22 Cooper, *Playing With Expectations*, 143.

there are fields in which power and resources can be openly pursued and others in which social agents' actions must appear disinterested. The field of journalism, ideally, is an instance of the latter category. An outsider might believe that the self-conception of journalists has something to do with objectively revealing truths about society, that is, without being motivated by an interest in material profits. To be sure, further differentiation into various sub-fields of the journalistic field might yield counterexamples.[23] By and large, however, the field seems to be an "economic world reversed,"[24] whose participants do not adhere to the logic of the market.

It is precisely this belief that J. clings to when he first enters the journalistic field as an intern; by way of juxtaposing his youthful idealism (or naïveté) with the detached attitude toward his work he later exhibits, *John Henry Days* is able to shed light on the way the objective transformation of social structures affects subjective practices through the mediation of the habitus. That is to say, Whitehead's novel refuses to naturalize present-day J.'s attitude, but rather reveals it to be the determinate product of the incursion of the logic of the market economy into the journalistic field. His transformation—or, more precisely, his adaptation to the field's reconfiguration—is narrated in a non-chronological manner; that is, readers first encounter a middle-aged J. who is already, in his own words, a "jaded fuck" (*JHD* 22). The disillusioning process of entering a field in flux only comes 150 pages later. Readers thus need to

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23 For a discussion of television and the constraints experienced by cultural producers in this sub-field which lead to the homogenization and depoliticization of the news, see Pierre Bourdieu, *On Television*, trans. Priscilla Parkhurst Ferguson (New York: The New Press, 1998); for Bourdieusian analyses of the journalistic field, see the essays in Rodney Benson and Erik Neveu, eds., *Bourdieu and the Journalistic Field* (Cambridge: Polity, 2005). For an account of the internal differentiation of fields of cultural production into relatively autonomous and relatively heteronomous spheres, see Pierre Bourdieu, "The Market of Symbolic Goods," trans. R. Swyer, in *The Field of Cultural Production: Essays on Art and Literature*, ed. Randal Johnson (New York: Columbia UP, 1993).

24 Pierre Bourdieu, *Practical Reason: On the Theory of Action*, trans. Randal Johnson et al. (Cambridge: Polity, 1998), 110.

retroactively reevaluate J.'s behavior and relate it to the socio-economic processes described only subsequently in order to reconstruct the genesis of J.'s habitus.

In the later chapter, seventeen-year-old J. has just started interning at the *Downtown News*, a not-too-subtly disguised version of the *Village Voice*, for which Whitehead himself used to write after graduating college.[25] As a young man, J. is not at all jaded but passionately interested in politics, as a conversation with his parents concerning the police killings of Eleanor Bumpurs and Michael Stewart illustrates.[26] J. anticipates more recent terms used at anti-police protests when he denounces a "police state" in which "black people don't matter" (*JHD* 174). However, his middle-class parents remain unperturbed, which reinforces J.'s desire to become a journalist to tell the "real stories" that matter (*JHD* 175). He is not interested in what the novel calls "content," that is, prepackaged narratives to be sold to unthinking audiences; he wants meaningful stories. J. thus possesses what Bourdieu calls "*illusio*" or a "fundamental belief in the interest of the game."[27] J. feels being a journalist is a worthwhile endeavor precisely because it allows him to speak truth to power.

A lay sociologist in his own right, J. distinguishes between two positions in the journalistic field: "the papers his parents read," such as the *New York Times* (*JHD* 171), and counterhegemonic publications such as the *Downtown News*. After having read of the Bumpurs killing in the former, he informs his new boss so that their paper can present a more truthful rendering of the event.[28] Having done so, he feels pride.

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25 See Maus, *Understanding Colson Whitehead*, 3.

26 On the killings of Bumpurs, a mentally unstable black woman who was shot during an eviction, and Stewart, a graffiti artist who died after having been beaten in custody, see Jeff Chang, *Can't Stop, Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation* (London: Ebury Press, 2007), 194–98.

27 Pierre Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, trans. by Richard Nice (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), 11.

28 The *New York Times* published a brief report the day after the shooting, which mostly relies on statements of the police officers involved. See Leonard Buder, "Police Kill Woman Being Evicted; Officers Say She Wielded a Knife," *The New*

> J. felt he had discovered the outrage for the paper, he had contributed his first thing to the *Downtown News*. [...]. This was the kind of work he wanted to do, J. thought [...]. J. felt part of the Bumpurs piece, he had turned Kramer [his boss] on to it, and though it was a small step it was his first, and that's how you learned to walk. (*JHD* 174–75)

And, indeed, J. learns to walk, but not in the manner he anticipated.

The mood of the chapter is entirely one of disappointment. Its first sentence, delivered in free indirect discourse but through J.'s perspective reads: "Every day in that place reduced his notions" (*JHD* 169). This is because he experiences the offices of the newspaper, which he imagined to be a hotbed of countercultural radicals, as "[d]ownright corporate" (*JHD* 172). This atmosphere is the product of the paper's purchase by a liquor company, which forced them to move into a new building; in short, it is a result of the influx of corporate money into independent publishing. The biggest disappointment comes, however, when J. attends an editorial meeting on the Bumpurs article. The meeting is almost entirely reproduced in direct speech as the editors shout possible headlines, each one more sensationalistic than the last. What J. discovers—and what proves a disenchanting experience—is that the writers he reveres seem not to care about the "real" story of Eleanor Bumpurs but only about "keep[ing] the newspaper's audience angry, and thus buying," as one critic phrases it.[29] As with the iterations of "Bob," the proposed headlines—some of which repeat the titles of well-known novels or essays such as "The Executioner's Song," "In Cold Blood," or "The Fire This Time" (*JHD* 178)—merely subordinate the event to a preconceived but empty form. *John Henry Days* then reinforces J.'s shock on the formal level. After almost all of the chapter is told exclusively through J.'s perspective, it ends with a line directly spoken by one of the editors without giving the reader any glimpse of

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York Times, October 30, 1984, https://www.nytimes.com/1984/10/30/nyregion/police-kill-woman-being-evicted-officers-say-she-wielded-a-knife.html.

29 Peter Collins, "The Ghosts of Economics Past: *John Henry Days* and the Production of History," *African American Review* 46, no. 2–3 (2013), 293.

what goes through J. mind. The experience of disillusionment—the discovery that his "*illusio*," his belief in the significance of the field, was misplaced—leaves him stunned.

x Words = y Dollars, or, a Value-Form Theoretical Excursus

Through its use of figures of speech, such as the controlling metaphor of the "mercenary" and related military metaphors, *John Henry Days* reflects the freelance journalists' subjective experience of their work; effecting the kind of "epistemological break" with primary experience discussed in the previous chapter,[30] the novel's non-chronological presentation of events shows that their disaffection, their jadedness, is a function of objective transformations of the field's structure. Here, I will go further and argue that Whitehead's novel shows J.'s activity as a writer is affected by the mediations that traverse capitalist society at the deepest level—that is, the logic of value and its appearance in the form of money. It goes further, in other words, than suggesting that writers feel jaded when they realize that they are only in it for the money; nor does it merely tell a tale of the market's incursion into other social spheres. Rather, *John Henry Days* traces how the value-form affects the meaning of the written word itself and ends up concluding that, stripped of meaning by value's abstraction, what is written for money amounts to excrement.

The reader does not find out too much about what happened to J. between 1984 and 1996, but it is easy to see that he has adapted well to the demands of the marketplace; so much so, in fact, that he explicitly thinks of his work in purely monetary terms. On the plane to West Virginia J. reflects on his line of work and reveals the generative principle which informs his writing habits: "J. feels he works more efficiently if he does not think of his audience [...]. He likes to keep his obligations to meeting the word count, a number readily verified by a feature on a pulldown menu of his word processing program" (*JHD* 12). The point of writing for J. is not—or is no longer, as the chapter on his reaction to the Eleanor

30 Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, 26.

Bumpurs killing shows—to write "real stories" that are relevant to real audiences; instead, he merely feels obliged to producing the number of words demanded by the publication that pays him, a number that translates into a sum of money at the rate of, say, "two dollars a word" (*JHD* 13).

That is, J. freely admits that he has material interests and thus ignores the "taboo of making things explicit" that normally holds sway over fields of cultural production.[31] Instead, he willingly acts as a participant in an "economic economy" which, according to Bourdieu, is a "type of game, whose principle is the law of material interest" so that "the law of exchange of exact equivalents becomes the explicit rule."[32] Despite providing a powerful account of the ways in which habitus—embodied dispositions—mediate between structure and practice; and despite its significant contribution to an understanding of the reproduction of relations of domination through the theory of symbolic violence, Bourdieu's sociology is comparatively weak when it comes to grasping the significance of the exchange of equivalents. This is because it treats money as a form of economic capital, "as a resource (that is, a form of wealth) which yields power," but not as a "form of mediation."[33] To highlight what is at stake when human activities are mediated by money—for instance, by

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31 Bourdieu, *Practical Reason*, 110.

32 Ibid., 105.

33 Craig Calhoun, "Habitus, Field, and Capital: The Question of Historical Specificity," in *Bourdieu: Critical Perspectives*, ed. Craig Calhoun, Edward LiPuma, and Moishe Postone (Chicago: The U of Chicago P, 1993), 69, 84. In Bourdieu's writings, money functions as economic capital which is used to "directly acquire" goods. *Pierre Bourdieu, Language and Symbolic Power*, trans. Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), 241. At the same time, it is the "goal" of economic activity. Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, 117. Finally, it can serve as a "naked force" which enables its possessor to wield power over others. Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, 172. These functions correspond to money's use as means of circulation, its role in the process of capital accumulation, and its materialization of "universal social power." Karl Marx, "The Original Text of the Second and the Beginning of the Third Chapter of *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*," trans. Yuri Sdobnikov, in *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels: Collected Works*, vol. 29 (New York: International Publishers, 1987), 431. Yet, money

equating one word with two dollars—I draw instead on Marx's form-analytical account of capitalism.[34]

J.'s commitment to the word count is another way of saying that, for him, only individual words count; and they only count if they can be equated with money. As a journalist, he does not feel obliged to produce articles that are coherently unified by their meaning—for instance, the "real stories" they tell. Instead, his commitment to words as equivalents of money means that the articles he writes rely on an additive logic which explodes the notion of the article as a unified whole. To be sure, J. still needs to string together individual words in sentences and respect the rules of syntax and grammar. More pertinently, by all appearances J. is a proficient writer who possesses a sense for what an article needs to be convincing: "he could always use a quote to round things out" (*JHD* 59). And yet, "round[ing] things out" merely means creating a product that successfully affects readers and entices them to purchase whatever commodity J. has been tasked to write about. After all, when J. thinks about the need to "round things out," it is because of the requirement to write "[n]ine hundred to twelve hundred words," based on "market research" on potential readers' "attention span" (ibid.). He is engaged in what Kant called "*Lohnkunst*"—suggestively rendered by one translator as "mercenary art"[35]—that "is attractive only because of its effect (e.g. the remuneration)."[36] The purpose of the article remains externally imposed by

as a "universal social nexus" that makes capitalist commodity production and exchange possible (ibid.) remains undertheorized in Bourdieu's oeuvre.

34 For critical accounts of Bourdieu from Marxist perspectives, see Mathieu Hikaru Desan, "Bourdieu, Marx, and Capital: A Critique of the Extension Model," *Sociological Theory* 31, no. 4 (2013): 318–42; and Amir Mohseni, "Sozialstruktur vs. Formanalyse: Zum Kapitalbegriff bei Pierre Bourdieu und Karl Marx," in *Methoden der Geisteswissenschaft: Eine Selbstverständigung*, ed. Dirk Hartmann et al. (Weilerswist: Velbrück, 2012).

35 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1987), 171.

36 Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, ed. Paul Guyer, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2002), 183. This translation renders "*Lohnkunst*" more literally as "remunerative art."

the commissioning party, as does its length and thus everything that determines the shape of the whole. J. is able to produce well-rounded article-commodities, but the primary reality for him remains the individual word, since it is the latter that determines his pay.[37]

In fact, Marx's monetary value theory clearly explains why money has the peculiar power to grant object status to products of labor—including, for my purposes, products as immaterial as words entered into word-processing software.[38] Contrary to the "substantialist" misreading, which attributes the notion that the magnitude of value is determined by the amount of human labor embodied in it,[39] Marx asks why labor must assume the form of value in capitalist society in the first place.[40] In other words, value theory does not supply an answer to the quantitative question of how much a commodity is worth (Marx grants that the classical political economists had already grasped this); instead, it constitutes an attempt to account for the most elemental structures of cap-

37 "The sentiment comes easily at 50 cents per word," quips Waldo Lydecker (played by Clifton Webb) in Otto Preminger's 1944 film noir *Laura*, thus emphasizing that one can convincingly simulate sentiment in order to produce successful article-commodities while still being in it for the money one receives per word. I am grateful to Johannes Völz, who read and commented on an earlier version of this chapter, for compelling me to clarify my argument.

38 On Marxian value theory as a monetary theory of value, see Patrick Murray, "Money as Displaced Social Form: Why Value Cannot be Independent of Price," in *The Mismeasure of Wealth: Essays on Marx and Social Form* (Leiden: Brill, 2016). My understanding of Marxian value theory has been decisively shaped by Michael Heinrich, *Die Wissenschaft vom Wert: Die Marxsche Kritik der politischen Ökonomie zwischen wissenschaftlicher Revolution und klassischer Tradition* (Münster: Westfälisches Dampfboot, 1999).

39 For a good discussion of substantialist readings of Marx, see Frederick Harry Pitts, *Value* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2021), 18–28. The following presentation of Marx's value theory condenses my discussion in Marlon Lieber, "Money Form and Master Painting, or, When Warhol Wanted to Paint the Universal Equivalent Form," in *U.S. American Culture as Popular Culture*, ed. Astrid Böger and Florian Sedlmeier (Heidelberg: Winter, 2022), 485–89.

40 Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1990), 174.

italist commodity production and exchange: "the goal is to reconstruct the *specific form of sociality* under capitalism."[41] All societies in which a social division of labor prevails, as Marx notes in a letter to his friend Ludwig Kugelmann, encounter the problem of distributing total social labor "in specific proportions," but the "*specific form*" in which this occurs is historically variable. Under capitalism there is "no conscious social regulation of production,"[42] no plan which coordinates production ex ante, and independent private producers enter into social relations only when they exchange their products on the marketplace. How much privately expended labor is validated as part of the total social labor only becomes apparent retrospectively, that is, when a product is exchanged for money.[43]

This is why money possesses the unique role of being the social form that enables all products of labor to express their value. In addition to having a use-value, each commodity has an exchange-value which is determined by the amount of another product that can be obtained in exchange. More precisely, each commodity has multiple exchange-values because it can be exchanged for many others; thus, the exchange-values must be the "form of appearance" of a "shared content" that makes them exchangeable—and this is what Marx calls value.[44] He goes on to analyze the forms value assumes and—to cut a series of complex deductions short[45]—concludes that one commodity must be excluded for all others to consistently express their value. This is what Marx calls the "universal equivalent," and in practice the universal equivalent form is identi-

41 Christian Lotz, *The Capitalist Schema: Time, Money, and the Culture of Abstraction* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2014), 27, emphasis in original.

42 Karl Marx, "Letter to Ludwig Kugelmann, 11 July 1868," in *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels: Collected Works*, vol. 43 (New York: International Publishers, 1988), 68, 69, emphasis in original.

43 See Roberts, *Marx's Inferno*, 80–81.

44 Marx, *Capital*, 127.

45 However, see Michael Heinrich, *How to Read Marx's* Capital: *Commentary and Explanations on the Beginning Chapters*, trans. Alexander Locascio (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2021).

cal with the money form.[46] In short, any commodity can be exchanged for, or purchased with, money. Thus possessing "the form of immediate and universal exchangeability," money is able to retroactively validate privately expended labor as part of the total social labor; it is able to retroactively validate commodities as valuable.

In an innovative reading of Marx's value theory, Christian Lotz has reflected on what could be called the ontological and epistemological ramifications of money's central role in commodity production and exchange. Products of labor, he claims, need a price to count as economic objects. Or, to put it the other way around, a price bestows economic objecthood on things. Expressed from the standpoint of those caught up in capitalist society, then, the "sensuous multiplicity" of things only register as economic objects because of the medium of money. Lotz deliberately draws on Horkheimer and Adorno's discussion of the culture industry's "schematism" and argues that the "sameness" the Critical Theorists deplore[47] is "posited in and *as* money." The latter provides the "capitalist schema" which "controls and frames all relationships and object references in a social totality."[48] Lotz's book stresses that the Marxian critique of political economy is not to be understood as a contribution to political economy (or, worse, to economics); instead, it is a critical theory of society which analyzes the way objectivity and subjectivity are mediated.[49] As such, it pursues a method Bourdieu calls "*social praxeology*," which consists of moving beyond common-sense perceptions of the world in order to conceptualize a society's historically

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46 Marx, *Capital*, 161, 163.

47 Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 106.

48 Lotz, *The Capitalist Schema*, 45, 46, emphasis in original.

49 If it were not for the sometimes inflationary use of the word, one might be tempted to call this relationship dialectical. This way of reading Marx has been substantially influenced by Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*; see also Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination*. The latter appreciatively invokes Bourdieu's theory of practice and its similarity with Marx's Critical Theory "as a theory of the mutually constituting relationship between social structure and everyday forms of practice and thought" (42; see also 135, n. 51).

specific social structures and to reintroduce "categories of perception" that "structure" practice "from the inside."[50]

On this note, I want to return to J., who thinks of the written word through the medium of money. While he gets paid a lump-sum for the articles he writes, this price is, strictly speaking, not a payment for an article as a whole, but for a concatenation of words at the rate of two dollars. By way of expressing their value in the form of money, the words obtain economic objecthood for J. His work as a freelance journalist thus consists of bringing these objects, the products of his cultural labor, to market. As Marx writes, the market is where commodity owners must mutually recognize each other "as persons whose will resides in [the] objects" they exchange.[51] J.'s "will" is embodied in each and every word-commodity: it must be exchangeable. The same holds true for the entire article-commodity for which J. is ultimately remunerated. But this means that his work does not register as intrinsically meaningful, as the telling of "real stories" would. This is because his word's usefulness is externally determined by the buyers—who either pay J. for the article or send a kill fee (*JHD* 234) if it does not meet their expectations. The use-value of the cultural commodities J. produces is determined by others.

In a defense of the autonomy of works of art in the face of the market's encroachment upon the sphere of cultural production, Nicholas Brown usefully distinguishes between the meaning of a thing produced for one's own use and a thing produced for the market: "If I make a bowl for myself, it is a bowl because I wanted to make a bowl. [...]. Intention will be inscribed in the thing itself [...]. If I make a bowl for the market, I am primarily concerned with one attribute, its exchangeability." This kind of work becomes about successfully anticipating "other people's

50 Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc J. D. Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (Chicago: The U of Chicago P, 1992), 11, emphasis in original. Marx's critique of the fetish-like character of the commodity constitutes a break with common-sense perceptions; his value theory, which was (incompletely) unfurled in all three volumes of *Capital*, tries to grasp the core structure of the capitalist mode of production; finally, attempts by Lukács, Postone, Lotz, and others draw on Marx to conceptualize how the structure of capitalism mediates experience.

51 Marx, *Capital*, 178.

desires."[52] The latter precisely describes J.'s work. He can relate to the products of his labor only through the prism of their exchange-value, but their use-value is externally determined. When J. thinks of using quotes "to round things out," his intentions are exclusively directed at the way his pieces are perceived by readers who demand a well-rounded product.[53] Brown writes that "from the standpoint of the commodity owner [...] his commodity is qualitatively different from all the others in that his alone has no qualities. To be more precise, his has only one quality that matters, namely its lack of qualities—that is, [...] its exchangeability."[54] By writing for the market, J. must undertake a process of abstraction from the meaning his words and stories could have for himself; they are reduced to being commodities whose only meaning is to find a buyer. The representation of freelance journalism in *John Henry Days* insists that, under the spell of the money form, all cultural production tends to become meaningless.

When the act of writing no longer figures as an externalization of meaning in the form of texts that tell "real stories"—which is what *John Henry Days* calls writing that is inherently purposive—, the question remains as to how it is subjectively experienced by writers. The narrator provides insight into J.'s mind: "Twelve hundred words—he can excrete

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52 Nicholas Brown, *Autonomy: The Social Ontology of Art Under Capitalism* (Durham/London: Duke UP, 2019), 7.

53 Which is to say, pace Adorno, that cultural creation for the market does not "destroy use value." Theodor W. Adorno, "On the Fetish Character in Music and the Regression of Listening," in *The Culture Industry: Selected Essays on Mass Culture*, ed. J. M. Bernstein (London: Routledge, 2001), 39. Lacking a use-value, a product of labor would not be a commodity; the point is that the use-value is not determined by the producer but by the marketplace. A good writer, like J., successfully anticipates what customers will find useful. See Marlon Lieber, "Art and Economic Objecthood: Preliminary Remarks on 'Sensuous Supra-Sensuous' Things," *REAL – Yearbook of Research in English and American Studies* 35 (2019): 70–73.

54 Brown, *Autonomy*, 3. J. is not a wage-laborer; he is not employed by someone who subsequently sells his products. As a freelance journalist, he is an independent producer who sells his articles directly to publishers; that is, he enters the market as a commodity owner.

that modest sum in two hours no sweat" (*JHD* 59). Relating to his articles as accumulations of two-dollar words, J. likens them to piles of dung, as his profession no longer consists in creation but in excretion. As Lukács wrote in 1923,

> This phenomenon [the alienation of mental workers from their capacities] can be seen at its most grotesque in journalism. Here it is precisely subjectivity itself, knowledge, temperament and powers of expression that are reduced to an abstract mechanism functioning autonomously and divorced both from the personality of their "owner" and from the material and concrete nature of the subject matter in hand. The journalist's "lack of convictions," the prostitution of his experiences and beliefs is comprehensible only as the apogee of capitalist reification.[55]

Lukács' account captures J.'s reified existence rather well. More than merely diagnosing J.'s jadedness as collateral damage of the world of superficial pop culture, Whitehead's novel, as I have shown, is engaged in a sophisticated investigation of how the most elementary structures of the capitalist mode of production inform—and degrade—human subjectivity. The problem posed by the novel's plot—which I will address in this chapter's final section—is whether J. will be able to rediscover the redemptive power to tell a real story in the end.

Finally, let me note that it is not only the subjectivity of the cultural producer which is degraded to being a producer of filth. *John Henry Days* insinuates that the subject's very existence is endangered when money becomes the nexus that holds society together. For Lotz, objects only exist socially in capitalism by the grace of money. The flipside of his argument is that the same goes for subjects. He claims that "*only because of money* is it that a person exists as a *social* individual," for otherwise their

55 Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness*, 100. Using Georg Simmel's terms, one could also argue that J. evinces the "blasé attitude," which is a consequence of "the reduction of the concrete values of life to the mediating value of money." *The Philosophy of Money*, trans. Tom Bottomore, David Frisby, and Kaethe Mengelberg (London/New York: Routledge, 2011), 274.

desires cannot become socially valid as they lack the means to satisfy them via commodity exchange.[56] J. reminisces:

> One time he forgot his ATM number and he became less than human, see-through, he waved his hands in the faces of other people but they could not see or hear him. This was how he felt. He wandered the streets for a few hours without currency or an identity until his ATM number returned to his recall as suddenly as it had disappeared. It had been something of an existential dilemma and troubling but it hadn't happened since. (*JHD* 232)

The passage revises the text it so obviously alludes to, Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*. Here invisibility is not caused by racist "people refus[ing] to see" a black man.[57] Instead, the loss of "identity" is a function of no longer being able to obtain "currency."[58] In the world of *John Henry Days*, precarity runs so deep that each individual's existence is perpetually in danger of being negated through exclusion from the realm of the universal equivalent. In *Zone One*, Whitehead will use the zombie trope to imagine a world in which masses have, indeed, become "less than human." In his 2001 novel, the "existential dilemma" of becoming surplus only beckons menacingly in J.'s recollections.

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56 Lotz, *The Capitalist Schema*, 83, emphases in original. See also Karl Marx, "Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844," trans. Martin Milligan and Dirk J. Struik, in *Karl Marx and Frederick Engels: Collected Works*, vol. 3 (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1975), 325.

57 Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man* (London: Penguin, 2001), 3.

58 In a review, Jonathan Franzen contends that Whitehead's novel is about a "crisis of manhood." "Freeloading Man," review of *John Henry Days*, by Colson Whitehead, *The New York Times*, May 13, 2001, https://www.nytimes.com/books/01/05/13/reviews/010513.13franzt.html. In his own *The Corrections*, published only months after *John Henry Days*, one of the novel's protagonists lacks the money to buy dinner and steals a salmon filet. The fish which he stuffs down his pants feels "like a wide, warm slug," symbolizing the man's lack of masculinity. Jonathan Franzen, *The Corrections* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2001), 98. But what is at stake in Whitehead's novel is personhood, not manhood. Not having money makes you "less than human," not less of a man.

Adam in Commodity Paradise

At one point in *John Henry Days*, Lucien, the master of the List, expresses his ambition to find names that express the "truth" of objects destined to be sold (*JHD* 195). In *Apex Hides the Hurt*, Whitehead's next novel, naming becomes the chief occupation of the nameless protagonist. In chapter two, I discussed the constellation of characters involved in renaming the town of Winthrop. While the search for an appropriate name constitutes the issue around which the novel's plot revolves, *Apex* repeatedly presents events in the protagonist's career as a "nomenclature consultant" (*AHH* 27),[59] who also expresses a deep commitment to finding the true names of things:

> Isn't it great when you're a kid and the whole world is full of anonymous things? [...]. Everything is bright and mysterious until you know what it is called and then all the light goes out of it. All those flying gliding things are just *birds*. And etc. [...]. What he had given to all those things had been the right name, but never the true name. For things had true natures, and they hid behind false names, beneath the skin we gave them. (*AHH* 182; emphasis in original)

Language, he believes, abstracts from the particular qualities of things, hiding the truth beneath the artificial shell of the signifier. What the protagonist bemoans, in other words, is the irreducible gap between concept and reality. And yet, a man can dream: "A name that got to the heart of the thing—that would be miraculous. But he never got the heart of the thing, he just slapped a bandage on it to keep the pus in. [...]. What is the name for that which is always beyond our grasp? What do you call *that which escapes*?" (*AHH* 183; emphasis in original) But then, his job consists in thinking up names for commodities—be they material or immaterial, animal, vegetable, or mineral. And has not the preceding analysis shown that this class of objects has no inner truth, no hidden essence, except for the qualityless quality of their exchangeability?

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59 All references to Colson Whitehead, *Apex Hides the Hurt* (New York: Doubleday, 2006) will hereafter be cited parenthetically in the text as *AHH*.

The desire to provide objects with names which express an inner truth reveals the novel's nameless protagonist to be a revenant of the biblical Adam, according to Walter Benjamin's theory of language. But while it was the Fall that resulted in the loss of the "paradisical language" in Benjamin's account,[60] *Apex* offers an entirely secular explanation. "God's creation is completed," when Adam gives names to the creatures, claims Benjamin.[61] To do so, however, the divinely-inspired nomenclature consultant must be "attentive to nature's inner tendency."[62] *Apex*'s protagonist, an unnamed Adam roaming a paradise which appears as an immense collection of commodities shares a secularized version of this desire as evinced by his desire to find the "true names" that do justice to the "heart of the thing." Alas, both the protagonist and Benjamin believe that there are merely words—"false names," even the "right names," but never the "true name"—which do not capture an object's essence in all its true particularity but merely serve as a means to the end of communication. As such, it amounts to a "bourgeois conception of language" in which the relationship between word and things is "accidental."[63] Now, after the Fall, words are unable to "recapture the concrete knowledge of the particular provided by the name."[64] The world of *Apex* is fallen, too,

60 Walter Benjamin, "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man," trans. Edmund Jephcott, in *Selected Writings Volume 1, 1913–1926*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 1996), 71.

61 Ibid., 65.

62 Eli Friedlander, *Walter Benjamin: A Philosophical Portrait* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 2012), 15.

63 Benjamin, "On Language," 65, 69. What Benjamin calls a "bourgeois conception" comes close to Ferdinand de Saussure's theory of the sign. The latter's *Cours de linguistique générale* was published in 1916, the same year that Benjamin penned his essay. According to Anson Rabinbach, Benjamin discovered the Swiss linguist's work only later in his life. See "Between Apocalypse and Enlightenment: Benjamin, Bloch and Modern German Jewish Messianism," in *Walter Benjamin: Critical Evaluations in Cultural Theory*, vol. 3, ed. Peter Osborne (London: Routledge, 2005), 157, n. 126.

64 Susan Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and the Frankfurt Institute* (New York: The Free Press, 1977), 88.

if for other reasons. Hence, the novel need not imagine a prelapsarian state of linguistic fullness, but can focus its attention on the profane causes of language's flaws. Again, as in *John Henry Days*, it will be the use of words in the service of the commodity that provides the key.

Whatever the protagonist's self-representation, in other words, whether he thinks that he is involved in the search for true names or not, what he actually does is name objects to be sold. As demonstrated in the previous section, he must thus ignore all the objects' qualities except for their exchangeability. The nomenclature consultants have only given various names to products; the point is to sell them. Thus, the protagonist wonders "what was a name […] if it didn't move the product" (*AHH* 109). Moving the product—like rounding things out—is another way of saying that his creations must appeal to an audience of potential customers. The protagonist cannot actually care about getting to the heart of the products; he can only care about the effect his names might have on others. Or, in his words, rendered in free indirect discourse, the names must "set up a vibration in the bones of potential customers" (*AHH* 177). Once more, Whitehead's novel emphasizes that the question of a commodity's use-value is settled in the marketplace.

Far from getting to the "heart of the thing," the protagonist employs language to abstract from the object's particularity. His task, he reasons, is to "make things more compact," to "[s]queeze down the salient qualities into a convenient package" (*AHH* 6–7). His anxiety over the inadequacy of his names, then, reacts not to the Fall; neither, however, is Whitehead's novel motivated by highlighting language's inevitable shortcomings à la poststructuralism. Instead, when he turns products into "convenient packages" through a name that triggers resonance in customer's bodies, he merely linguistically enacts the abstraction that turns a commodity into a commensurable object (qua value) that elicits the customers' desire to buy it (qua use-value). The protagonist's namelessness, then, is appropriate not because of his weak ties to "family and [racial] community,"[65] but because he is nothing but a "personifica-

65 Stephanie Li, *Signifying Without Specifying: Racial Discourse in the Age of Obama* (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2012), 74.

tion[]" of an "economic categor[y]"[66]: his names merely mediate between production and consumption by facilitating acts of exchange.

This he does extraordinarily well; that is, he proves to be fluent in the language of commodity exchange.[67] His major success is Apex, the multicolored adhesive bandage. Not only is Apex a merely superficial solution to the problem of racialized domination that, moreover, cannot address social ills that are not reducible to skin color, as discussed in chapter two. It is also possible to see that it uses the power of abstraction as a means of producing the very differences it promises to recognize in the service of profit. The bandages also transmute the "salient qualities" of human bodies into a "convenient package"—literally a package of "multicultural adhesive bandages" that come in twenty colors (*AHH* 87). The sensuous multiplicity of bodies is subsumed under a preconceived schema—not quite Lotz's "capitalist schema," but something closer to Fanon's "epidermal racial schema"[68] but imposed through the multicolored patch rather than the white gaze. The manufacturer, readers learn, "devised thirty hues originally, later knocked them down to twenty after research determined a zone of comfort. It didn't have to be perfect, just not too insulting" (*AHH* 89). Racial difference is reified in and through an arbitrary classification system distinguishing between shades such as "# A12" or "# A25," which stand for "white" and "black," respectively (*AHH* 108). Rather than doing justice to actually existing bodies, humans are assigned to a circumscribed set of possible subject positions based on Apex's product offerings. In other words, by purchasing and using an Apex bandage, customers abstract from the particularity of their bodies and assign themselves to one of twenty racial (sub)groups. But this classification scheme does not get to the heart of things, either; it has been

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66 Marx, *Capital*, 92.

67 For an intriguing account of all languages as "dialects of the universal commodity-language," see Werner Hamacher, "Lingua Amissa: The Messianism of Commodity-Language and Derrida's *Specters of Marx*," trans. Kelly Barry, in Jacques Derrida et al., *Ghostly Demarcations: A Symposium on Jacques Derrida's* Specters of Marx, ed. Michael Sprinker (London/New York: Verso, 2008), 174 et passim..

68 Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2008), 92.

created with the intent of selling "colors" to a "clientele" (*AHH* 89) which is itself a product of the logic of commodity exchange.[69]

In the world of *Apex*, then, bodies are subsumed by the commodity form and pressed into a profit-driven classification scheme. But the body persists. Whitehead's novel interweaves two narratives starring the same protagonist. One of them, set in the novel's present, is about his task of renaming the town of Winthrop. The other is about his previous career as a successful nomenclature consultant. The latter ends with a "misfortune" that sends the protagonist into hiding at home for months; his exit from self-imposed hibernation to travel to Winthrop is what sets off the former narrative (*AHH* 6). Later, readers find out that he also repeatedly stubs his toe, resulting in a wound which, covered with an Apex bandage, begins to fester.

At the "Identity Awards," a ceremony celebrating the most creative name-givers, his inflamed toe causes him to lose sense of reality. The narrator reproduces the protagonist's feverish perceptions: "bodies disappeared and people were reduced to white name tags levitating in the air" (*AHH* 168). In this hallucinatory state, a "physical manifestation of his conscience,"[70] he sees the power of abstraction exerted on individuals who become mere name tags; tags which reduce their wearers to being a "LIAR" or a "BED WETTER" (*AHH* 170). The scene comes to a climax when the protagonist wanders toward Times Square, where he sees "all the logos and names" as if they were floating around him (*AHH* 181) and

69 Because Apex abstracts from the sensuous multiplicity of human bodies in practice and not just in thought, it is tempting to call its operation a "real abstraction." For the distinction between real and thought abstractions, see Alfred Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labour: A Critique of Epistemology*, trans. Martin Sohn-Rethel (Leiden: Brill, 2021). For an account of race as a real abstraction, see Brenna Bhandar and Alberto Toscano, "Race, Real Estate and Real Abstraction," *Radical Philosophy* 194 (2015): 8–17. For a useful discussion of the concept's history, see Chris O'Kane, "The Critique of Real Abstraction: From the Critical Theory of Society to the Critique of Political Economy and Back Again," in *Marx and Contemporary Philosophy: The Philosophy of Real Abstraction*, ed. Antonio Oliva, Ángel Oliva, and Iván Novara (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020).

70 Maus, *Understanding Colson Whitehead*, 86.

realizes that their referents are "imprisoned as *products* […] on the shelves of supermarkets" (*AHH* 182; emphasis in original). In this "epiphan[y]" (*AHH* 198) the protagonist comes to realize that the names are nothing but commodity names. It is the insistence of his body—a "gnawing and poisonous tooth of bodily pain" in "that spot," his toe[71]—that the material world cannot be spirited away entirely by way of abstraction that allows him to reflect on his own role.

Out of This World

Both novels present a world under the spell of the commodity. But also is either one able to envision an escape route? At the beginning *John Henry Days*, J. Sutter is three months into his attempt at "going for the record." That is, his bodily needs—the need for food and drink—have been subordinated to the requirements of his work, that is, to the List's whimsies. In other words, he has been dispossessed of control over his life's elementary functions—or, more to the point, has willingly transferred control of them to the market. His existence is governed by a heteronomous force, and this makes it extremely precarious. In this regard, it makes sense to compare J., as one critic does, to another literary character who is known by only a single letter: Kafka's K.[72] In fact, Bourdieu devotes a section of his *Pascalian Meditations* to a reading of *The Trial* and contends that the latter presents "the model of a social universe dominated by such an absolute and unpredictable power, capable of inducing extreme anxiety by

71 The line appears in *The Scarlet Letter* in reference to the constant pain that ultimately causes Dimmesdale to confess his complicity in Hester Prynne's transgression of Puritan social codes. Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Scarlet Letter* (London: Penguin, 2003), 130. The protagonist's vision of name tags announcing people's flaws recalls Hester's "new sense" which allows her to believe that "if truth were everywhere to be shown, a scarlet letter would blaze forth upon many a bosom" (79). For a discussion of Puritan motives in *Apex*, see Christopher Leise, "With Names, No Coincidence: Colson Whitehead's Postracial Puritan Allegory," *African American Review* 47, no. 2–3 (2014).

72 Cooper, *Playing With Expectations*, 143.

condemning its victims to very strong investment combined with very great insecurity."[73] For K. to experience the latter due to being entirely at the court's mercy, he must come to believe in its significance. Over the course of *The Trial*, he develops an interest in the game and desires to beat the court on its own terrain; only thus can the institution wield its symbolic power over K. In other words, Kafka's novel does not just represent the court as an alien social force that crushes the individual; it also reveals the tacit complicity that is necessary for the relationship of domination to be continually reproduced. *John Henry Days* does something very similar by narrating J.'s trajectory from his youthful commitment to "real stories" to his cynical investment in the world of puff. One of his colleagues at one point tells him "[t]he days will come when you don't care that you don't care" (*JHD* 336). But not caring, paradoxically, amounts to caring a lot. Not caring about anything other than "two dollars a word" amounts to precisely that "fundamental belief in the interests of the game"[74] that is required from a mercenary journalist.

Thus, the question arises: what does it take to stop caring about this game and start caring about something else? J., as I have argued in a previous section, has internalized the temporal discipline required by his line of work. He lives not according to his own schedule, but is, as Kafka's protagonist (according to Bourdieu), "condemned to live in a time oriented by others, an alienated time."[75] In response, a "self-appropriation of time" is necessary to combat the experience of alienation.[76] Whitehead's novel employs a well-tested textual strategy to narrativize an alternative experience of time that affords J. the ability to consider retaking control of his life by using the tropes of pastoralism. Upon waking a day after his almost fatal choking incident, J. decides to take a walk to get breakfast. Enjoying the scenery, "[h]e feels good." The experience of serene nonhuman nature, reinforced by the novel's attention to the sounds J. hears, corresponds to a feeling of repose: "This is the country,

73 Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, 229.

74 Ibid., 11.

75 Ibid., 237.

76 Pieper, "Prekarisierung," 228, my translation.

it is safe" (ibid.). The West Virginia landscape that J. crosses on his walk does not trigger the paranoia discussed in chapter two[77]; instead, it is the occasion for pastoral motifs to structure J.'s experience. On the one hand, it is not an encounter with wilderness, since there remain reassuring "sign[s] of civilization" such as railroad tracks (*JHD* 151). On the other, J. can forget the social forces that normally control his life; he has entered the "middle landscape" of the pastoral imagination which, according to Leo Marx's classic study, is located "somewhere 'between,' yet in a transcendent relation to the opposing forces of civilization and nature."[78] Here J. relaxes, since he experiences "[t]ime out of the world" (ibid.).[79]

It is precisely the experience of time not being governed by the logic of exchange that makes it so redemptive. Another term the narrator, who reproduces J.'s perceptions and thoughts in free indirect discourse, uses to characterize the temporality that prevails in the West Virginia countryside is "receiptless span of time" (ibid.). In J.'s everyday life, receipts are prized possessions because they promise reimbursement. When the reader first encounters J. waiting to board the plane to Charleston, he spots a stray receipt on the floor and anthropomorphizes it: "It taunts him, vibrates flirtatiously." It thus tempts him because J. "is hungry and the next best thing to an actual sandwich is the paper trail of a sandwich" for which he can submit for reimbursement (*JHD* 9). In other words, J.

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77 More precisely, J. is able to keep it in check. When a car approaches on a road, he "fights the vision his paranoia prepares for him" (*JHD* 150).

78 Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden: Technology and the Pastoral Ideal in America* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1964), 23. It is ironic that J. considers the visible presence of the railroad as a benign symbol of civilization's advantages, as it has traditionally played the role of a "counterforce" (25) violently encroaching upon the pastoral idyll. However, now that the railroad has been "made inefficient by technical advances" (*JHD* 285–86) it appears as a nostalgic reminder of simpler times.

79 At this point I am not interested in discussing the question of whether or not the West Virginian countryside is best grasped under the rubric of nature in the first place. It certainly is not a pristine landscape that could figure as society or culture's Other; but it fulfills the function of nature qua "middle landscape." For a brief discussion of the concept of nature, see re:articulate, ""Nature/Culture," *Cultural Studies*, n.d. [May 2022], https://www.cultural-studies.org/current-issues-in-cultural-studies/nature-culture. See also Malm, *The Progress of This Storm*.

plans to pretend to have engaged in an act of reproductive consumption in order to—potentially—receive a sum of money that would allow him to consume actual food. His present need for nourishment goes unsatisfied, however. This is to say that the time of receipts is a time of radical existential uncertainty, of precarity with a vengeance, because whether or not J. will be reimbursed at some point will be decided by an unknown person. Receiptless time, then, allows for the self-appropriation of time.

Consequently, J. feels that he is "[o]n his own itinerary" during his walk and momentously "decides he will pay for his own breakfast when he gets into town" (*JHD* 149). This would constitute an interruption of "the unbroken line of events" (*JHD* 388) that J. has been attending on his streak and, as such, a matter of beginning to wrest control over his life and away from the alien social force he has submitted to before. Yet, *John Henry Days* does not reveal whether or not J. pays for his food. After he has finished his breakfast he thinks, "I'm going for the record" (*JHD* 189). In the end the reader does not find out whether J. has paid, but the apparently character-transforming power of the pastoral interlude is relativized nonetheless.

During breakfast, J. first has a conversation with Pamela Street, and it is her family story that eventually awakens his desire to tell a real story. She is New Yorker whose late father ran a museum commemorating John Henry from his apartment, a museum that never had a single visitor. Pamela later asks J. to help her find the steel driver's burial site, where she wants to bury her father's remains. Afterwards, the following passage describes how this experience presents "new possibilities" and a "new inscriptive practice" to J.[80]

> She asked him on the way down if he got his story. J. Sutter said yes. He has a story but it is not the one he planned. Before he had been kidding about the story in order to get close to the woman. He had put on paper some of the things she had said the day before bur now he thought what happened today was the real story. It is not the kind of

80 Ezra Dan Feldman, "The Describer's Nightmare: Touching Form in Colson Whitehead's *John Henry Days*," *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 52, no. 3 (2019): 458.

> thing he usually writes. It is not puff. It is not for the website. He does not know who would take it. The dirt had not given him any receipts to be reimbursed. He does not even know if it is a story. He only knows it is worth telling. (*JHD* 387)

A story "worth telling" is precisely what J. could not conceive of as long as he was thinking only of "two dollars a word" (*JHD* 47). It is J. himself who judged Mr. Street's story valuable, which makes it radically different from the articles he normally writes, as they are commissioned by others. In fact, J. explicitly rejects the idea that he would write this story for anyone else to "take it." Previously, his writerly practice consisted of anticipating his customer's preferences: he was "round[ing] things out" so that someone would "take," that is, pay for, his pieces. Now he has found a story that is inherently meaningful and deserves to be told as an end in itself. This is because it is the story of a man who devoted his life to an idea that he found significant enough to drive both his marriage and his store into ruin.[81] The example of a commitment that defies the demands of the market inspires J. to rediscover his belief that "real stories" are the ones that are "worth telling," not worth selling.

But then, the reader never gets to find out whether J. lives to tell the tale. Various intercalary chapters include references to a deadly shooting that takes place on the final day of the festival, and J. might be among its victims. *John Henry Days* provides no closure, however, and refuses to tell its readers whether J. decides to return to New York City with Pamela before the shooting takes place or whether he stays But maybe it is not all that important. What matters is, as Derek Maus puts it, J.'s "story *has*

81 Thus, in contrast to Evá Tettenborn, I do not believe that J. is inspired by Mr. Street's interest in celebrating John Henry as a symbol of African American masculinity which has been erased from history. See "'A Mountain Full of Ghosts': Mourning African American Masculinity in Colson Whitehead's *John Henry Days*," *African American Review* 46, no. 2–3 (2013), 273. In fact, J. derides what he believes to have been Mr. Street's "nationalist fever" and the idea that one should remember "the steeldriver as an ideal of black masculinity in a castrating county" (*JHD* 189). There is no reason to believe that J. suddenly starts seeking ancestor figures.

been worth telling."[82] The story told by Whitehead is that of how capitalism turns cultural production into excrement and renders human existence precarious, but it also insists that there is an alternative.

Five years later, in *Apex Hides the Hurt*, this is no longer as apparent. Its protagonist also spends some time in nonhuman nature while on a team-building exercise. Unlike J., however, it reminds him of an alternative to the world of naming commodities; quite the opposite, it merely reinforces the principles of this world. When the nameless protagonist goes for a walk to escape his colleagues, the novel almost lures the reader into believing that it also relies on the tropes of pastoralism:

> At first it was quiet. Such was his frame of reference that he likened it to the deep silence that follows when a refrigerator stops humming. [...]. He continued down the path, which terminated at the lip of a gloomy, mottled marsh. He heard the words of the woods. Animals, insects, small branches disturbed by unseen creatures. (*AHH* 152)

At first, he can merely make sense of nature's silence through the lens of a modern technology. But the registering of the woods' sounds suggests that he might be in for a transformative experience. Not so, however. He thinks of the sounds as the "sales pitch of nature" (*AHH* 152) and continues:

> *Nature* is a strong brand name. Everybody knew that. First thing. Nomenclature 101. Slap *Nature* on the package, you were golden. Those words on the package promise ease from metropolitan care, modern worries. [...]. That fruit has splendid packaging, it has solid consumer awareness and is an animal favorite. Its seeds will be deposited in spoor miles away and its market dominance will increase. [...]. Natural selection was market forces. In business, in the woods: what is necessary to the world will last. (*AHH* 153, emphases in original)

Nature is thus also subsumed by the "capitalist schema" and reduced to little more than a slogan that can vibrate the bones of potential

82 Maus, *Understanding Colson Whitehead*, 62, emphasis in original.

customers. Even more, the protagonist's thoughts naturalize market practices by attributing competitive agency to nonhuman animals and plants. In *John Henry Days* nonhuman nature at least promised a glimpse of a life lived "out of the world" of capital. However, in *Apex* there is no longer an outside. J. Sutter experiences the subordination of writing to the market's demands as a transformation of his activity into excretion. In *Apex*, the protagonist's nature walk ends when he stumbles and finds himself standing "up to his ankles in pig shit" (*AHH* 154). In the final instance, Whitehead's novel suggests, nature subsumed by the commodity form is reduced to filth.

It is this incident that causes the protagonist's toe to go from bad to worse. When he eventually removes the adhesive bandage, his "toe had turned a strange, rotten-apple pulp of red and gray, and there was no community on Earth that might be served by the Apex that corresponded to that color" (*AHH* 162). Indeed, in the world of *Apex*, with its recognition of exactly twenty reified communities, none would fit. The color of the protagonist's putrefied toe anticipates a position constitutively excluded from all the communities which mingle in civil society—the part of no part, as Jacques Rancière might put it.[83] Whitehead's fifth novel will revolve around precisely the community he might join, after all. His toe has turned "putrid" (*AHH* 161), and he walks with a limp; in short, he is slowly becoming a zombie.

83 See Jacques Rancière, *Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy*, trans. Julie Rose (Minneapolis/London: U of Minnesota P, 1999), 11.

5. The Masterless Ocean: *Zone One*

Insofar as it is set in a post-apocalyptic United States overrun by flesh-eating zombies, *Zone One* seems to be an outlier in Whitehead's oeuvre. Yet, this trope has been anticipated in his earlier novels. Given Whitehead's professed love for horror fiction, which "inspired [him] to become a writer," the subject matter of his fifth novel seems more like a logical step than a break with previously established modes.[1] What is more, it is possible—and, I believe, plausible—to read *Zone One* as a sequel to *The Intuitionist*, because it picks up precisely where Whitehead's debut left off: with a view from a window over New York City. The novel begins with an extended analepsis, although readers only realize this after several pages when the narrative almost imperceptibly shifts to the post-apocalyptic present of the novel's diegesis. Mark Spitz, its protagonist, remembers family visits to his uncle's place in a lower Manhattan apartment tower from where he frequently watched "[t]he buildings" (4).[2] In the final pages of the earlier novel, Lila Mae Watson also looks out on the city from the room to which she has withdrawn to complete Fulton's theory of the perfect elevator. Seated at her desk, she occupies a space

1 Colson Whitehead, "Colson Whitehead on Zombies, 'Zone One,' and His Love of the VCR," *The Atlantic*, October 18, 2011, https://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2011/10/colson-whitehead-on-zombies-zone-one-and-his-love-of-the-vcr/246855/. See also Colson Whitehead, "A Psychotronic Childhood: Learning From B-Movies," *The New Yorker*, June 4 and 11, 2012, https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2012/06/04/a-psychotronic-childhood.

2 All parenthetical citations in the text refer to Colson Whitehead, *Zone One* (New York: Doubleday, 2011).

of intellectual labor separated from the world of manual labor outside. The windows "look out on a factory," and she "feels bad for the buildings these days" since "[t]hey're all doomed anyway."[3] Lila Mae senses that the Fordist city will give way to something else.

When Mark Spitz, whose childhood memory must take him back to the turn of the millennium, watches the skyline, he proves her right:

> Yesterday's old masters, stately named and midwifed by once-famous architects, were insulted by the soot of combustion engines and by technological advances in construction. Time chiseled at elegant stonework, which swirled or plummeted to the sidewalk in dust and chips and chunks. Behind the façades their insides were butchered, reconfigured, rewired according to the next era's new theories of utility. Classic six into studio honeycomb, sweatshop killing floor into cordoned cubicle mill. (5–6)

Architectural changes index the shift from a Fordist mode of production, revolving around the manufacturing sector, to a post-Fordist service economy.[4] The history of urban modernization, which Fulton's elevator metonymically anticipated in *The Intuitionist*, is here rearticulated as a succession of violent acts gutting the anthropomorphized edifices.[5]

Another flashback featuring a panoramic view of the remains of large-scale urban industry follows when Mark Spitz, now an adult, remembers "the withered stunts of the old Jersey docks. Remnants of a dead, seafaring era of trade and commerce" (57). Manhattan workshops have been "butchered"; the deserted port brings to mind "rotten teeth in a monstrous jaw" (58). Once more, the history of capitalist urban renewal leaves monstrosities in its wake. The narrator's choice of words,

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3 Colson Whitehead, *The Intuitionist* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 255, 254.

4 For a reading that focuses on New York City's shift from the "fullness of the Fordist city," where jobs in manufacturing were plentiful, to a post-Fordist service sector, see Andrew Strombeck, "*Zone One*'s Reanimation of 1970s New York," *Studies in American Fiction* 44, no. 2 (2017): 262.

5 Many sections of this chapter are resurrected from material published (or buried) in Marlon Lieber, "The Living Dead in the Long Downturn: Im/Possible Communism and Zombie Narrative Form," *Coils of the Serpent* 8 (2021): 143–68.

however, is not gratuitous but motivated by an event which occurred in the diegetic present which triggers the flashback. Mark Spitz recalls the "rotten teeth" of the docks only after he has narrowly averted being bitten by the "broken teeth" of a "skel," which is *Zone One*'s label for the flesh-eating zombies (57). Appropriately enough, this skel is itself an emblem of post-Fordist work. It only attacks Mark Spitz after he kicks down the door of the Human Resources division in an office building he and his team of "sweepers" are tasked with clearing.[6] The city and its residents are both turned into monsters.

Moreover, Mark Spitz remembers simultaneously watching "monster movies on TV" and his uncle's latest girlfriend invariably complaining that they could not "stand these scary stories" (5). This focus on the girlfriend's disapproving attitude might seem irrelevant, unless they are seen as fictional surrogates for contemporary literary critics whose function is to anticipate the latter's hostile judgment. Indeed, multiple reviewers felt the need to emphasize that *Zone One*, the work of a McArthur fellow recognized as a serious literary novelist, transcended the generic limits of zombie fiction.[7] By paying close attention, however, to Whitehead's artful interweaving of butchered buildings, cannibalistic clerks, and monster movies in the opening pages of his novel, it is easy to see that he self-reflexively mobilizes the pop cultural zombie trope to articulate a reflection on long-term socio-economic transformations and their human consequences, all the while insisting on his novel's literariness.[8]

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6 For an analysis of the HR zombie as an "allegory for the corrosion of character in postindustrial society," see Jasper Bernes, "Character, Genre, Labor: The Office Novel After Deindustrialization," *Post45* 1 (2019), https://post45.org/2019/01/character-genre-labor-the-office-novel-after-deindustrialization/.

7 Carl Joseph Swanson quotes several such reviews in "'The Only Metaphor Left': Colson Whitehead's *Zone One* and Zombie Narrative Form," *Genre* 47, no. 3 (2014): 380.

8 The ambition to fuse social critique, literariness, and popular culture is reflected in the epigraphs to the novel's three parts, which consist of unattributed quotes from Walter Benjamin, Ezra Pound, and Public Enemy. For a discussion of the work performed by the epigraphs, see Heather J. Hicks, *The Post-Apoc-*

In the following section, I will look more closely at Whitehead's self-inscription into the history of both zombie fictions and American literature conceived more broadly. Subsequent sections will provide an analysis of the world Whitehead envisions as well as an interpretation of the skels' metaphoric valence. First, I will show that *Zone One*'s numerous intertexts do not exclusively—or even primarily—comprise other zombie narratives; instead, Whitehead inscribes his zombie novel in the history of representations of protests against inequality. This amounts to an extrication of his skels from the history of slavery and anti-blackness that often informs zombie narratives. Consequently, in the inconclusively post-apocalyptic, late-capitalist world represented by *Zone One*, the majority of the global population, regardless of their racial identity, has been transformed into an expendable surplus, mere obstacles on the path to recovery. Yet, even though existing racial categories have been rendered socio-economically irrelevant, Whitehead's novel suggests that they can be reproduced in and through the embodied dispositions of social agents.

Beneath the Zombie Renaissance

Whitehead's skels are fairly standard instances of the trope of the living dead, which first emerged in George R. Romero's genre-defining 1968 film *Night of the Living Dead*. Initially, the director did not think of the monsters as zombies, but referred to them as "ghouls."[9] Unlike the Afro-Caribbean zombie myth that took form in prerevolutionary Saint-Domingue in the context of plantation slavery and its American cultural industrial descendants, Romero's ghouls are not mindless workers

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alyptic Novel in the Twenty-First Century: Modernity Beyond Salvage (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), ch. 4.

9 See Mariana McConnell, "Interview: George R. Romero on Diary of the Dead," *Cinemablend*, February 14, 2008, https://www.cinemablend.com/new/Interview-George-Romero-Diary-Dead-7818.html.

who toil in cane fields or sugar mills under the spell of a sorcerer.[10] In *Zone One*, as in most post-Romero zombie fictions, there is no proper explanation for the skels' origin. The novel is set some time, perhaps even one or two years, after the initial outbreak, and the entire globe has been overrun by the living dead. Its minimal plot spans three days, corresponding to the novel's three parts, in which Mark Spitz and his fellow sweepers move through the eponymous zone in lower Manhattan and search for zombies who have withstood a previous attack by US Marines. That is to say, political institutions have not broken down entirely. There is a provisional government that coordinates the effort to reclaim the United States. Eventually, however, the wall protecting the zone from invading skels breaks down—as it must, given generic conventions—and the novel ends with Mark Spitz's decision to join the horde.

Whitehead is not the only literary author who turned to genre fiction in the early twenty-first century.[11] In fact, *Zone One* is not his first work to do so. Derek Maus notes that Whitehead "flirts with genres and their conventions," such as the detective novel in *The Intuitionist*, but "frustrat[es] the easy interpretations they appear to offer."[12] Still, it is fair to say that *Zone One*—"the greatest American novel of the twenty-first century," in Andrew Hoberek's judgment[13]—is the greatest accom-

10 For an invaluable account of the West African and Caribbean roots of the zombie, see Sarah Juliet Lauro, *The Transatlantic Zombie: Slavery, Rebellion, and Living Death* (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2015); for a history of the zombie's adventures in American popular culture, see Kyle Bishop, *American Zombie Gothic: The Rise and Fall (and Rise) of the Walking Dead in Popular Culture* (Jefferson: McFarland & Company, Inc., 2010).

11 See Alexander Moran, "The Genrefication of Contemporary American Fiction," *Textual Practice* 33, no. 2 (2019): 230. See also Theodore Martin, *Contemporary Drift: Genre, Historicism, and the Problem of the Present* (New York: Columbia UP, 2017).

12 Derek C. Maus, *Understanding Colson Whitehead: Revised and Expanded Edition*, (Columbia: U of South Carolina P, 2021), 1.

13 Andrew Hoberek, "Living with PASD," *Contemporary Literature* 53, no. 2 (2012): 406.

plishment of the "zombie renaissance" proclaimed by Mark McGurl in a 2010 essay.[14] Ever since, there has been much scholarly attention to the living dead. Given the latter's polysemy, some critics believe that the search for the zombie's meaning is a hopeless endeavor. This is why Tim Lanzendörfer recommends looking at "the worlds into which fictions inscribe them" instead. Whatever socio-cultural anxiety a given zombie narrative articulates,[15] he claims, they require an apocalyptic setting.[16] The world to emerge from the ruins of the old, however, is not formally prescribed. Thus, the "zombie is a figure of possibilities, not of necessary outcomes."[17] Just what kind of possibilities it renders thinkable, Lanzendörfer asserts, "must be interpreted. It [...] requires us to know its history, to read the strata of its sedimentation, to recognize the ways in which anything it does or stands for is tied back to the histories of oppression, revolt, and resistance."[18] In this spirit, I will take a look at how Whitehead's novel inscribes itself into the histories of zombie fictions in particular as well as American literature more broadly.

At first glance, there seems to be an answer to Lanzendörfer's prompt that would hold true for all zombie narratives. Given the zombie myth's historical origin, any contemporary use of the figure will inevitably be connected to the histories of the transatlantic slave trade, plantation slavery, colonialism, and their aftermaths. Thus, as Sarah

14 Mark McGurl, "Zombie Renaissance," review of *Pride and Prejudice and Zombies*, by Jane Austen and Seth Grahame-Smith, *The Zombie Survival Guide*, by Max Brooks, and *World War Z*, by Max Brooks, *n+1* 9 (2010): 167–76.

15 For a useful survey, see Roger Luckhurst, *Zombies: A Cultural History* (London: Reaktion, 2015).

16 The term "apocalypse" is used colloquially here and refers to the cultural representation of a potentially world-ending event; the label "post-apocalyptic," consequently, denotes the aftermath of this event. This is different from apocalypticism proper in both its biblical and secular versions. On the latter distinction, see Lorenzo DiTommaso, "Apocalypticism and Popular Culture," in *The Oxford Handbook of Apocalyptic Literature*, ed. John J. Collins (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2014).

17 Tim Lanzendörfer, *Books of the Dead: Reading the Zombie in Contemporary Literature* (Jackson: UP of Mississippi, 2018), 18.

18 Lanzendörfer, *Books of the Dead*, 190.

Juliet Lauro argues, it retains the dialectical relationship between enslavement and rebellion. Addressing the pop cultural appropriation of the zombie myth in the early twentieth century, she adds that it is no longer merely a "metaphor for slavery"; it has become a "*slave metaphor*" which was captured and exploited by the American culture industry to express socio-cultural anxieties without having to face the legacies of slavery and colonialism. Lauro entertains the possibility that Romero's monsters are zombies "in name only" and constitute a shift toward a myth that is more germane to late capitalism. Yet, she concludes that the figure's "origins speak despite the myth's reconditioning."[19] Whatever the manifest topical concerns of a given zombie narrative, its political unconscious will bear the traces of enslavement and racialization.

This is certainly how Jessica Hurley, for example, reads *Zone One*. She regards the zombies as "a walking embodiment of past populations that will not stay dead" and highlights the ways in which Whitehead's novel more or less explicitly refers to the history of anti-blackness in the United States.[20] Hurley and other critics note the use of racially coded language such as the choice to call the provisional government's effort to regain control "Reconstruction," thus equating it with the "failed project of black enfranchisement" and the reestablishment of racial hierarchies after the Civil War.[21] On the surface it seems that old racial categories have become meaningless in the world of Whitehead's novel. "There was a single Us now, reviling a single Them," Mark Spitz thinks (231). Yet, such readings assert, the historical allusion implies that anti-blackness is so pervasive that not even the zombie apocalypse suffices to abolish it.[22]

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19 Lauro, *The Transatlantic Zombie*, 9, 99, emphasis in original.

20 Jessica Hurley, "History Is What Bites: Zombies, Race, and the Limits of Biopower in Colson Whitehead's *Zone One*," *Extrapolation* 56, no. 3 (2015): 312.

21 Justin L. Mann, "Black Insecurity at the End of the World," *MELUS* 46, no. 3 (2021): 6.

22 For other readings which emphasize the novel's reference to the history of anti-black violence, see Grace Heneks, "The American Subplot: Colson Whitehead's Post-Racial Allegory in *Zone One*," *The Comparatist* 42 (2018): 60–79; and Beth A. McCoy and Jasmine Y. Montgomery, "'The Sad Aperture of the Dead': Colson

A key turning point in what it might seem to be a post-racial tale is the revelation, delayed until some twenty pages before the novel's end, that Mark Spitz is black. In fact, his name is merely a nickname referring to the white Olympic swimming champion which he received after refusing to jump into a river to escape an assault by skels and based on the stereotype that blacks cannot swim. According to multiple readings, this late revelation changes everything. Hurley calls *Zone One* a "kind of meta-passing novel," in which the blackness that is hidden "on the surface" stands out "[o]n a second reading."[23] Another text mobilizes Toni Morrison's critique of the tacit presupposition that characters in American fiction are white unless explicitly identified otherwise in *Playing in the Dark* to argue that race becomes "omnipresent" when *Zone One* is read a second time.[24] Both refer to *The Intuitionist* as a text concerned with passing; however, neither notes that Whitehead's earlier novel frustrates the expectation that the discovery of Fulton's blackness provide any significant revelations, as I have argued in chapter one.[25] Lila Mae discovered that Fulton's color did not "matter" on the "level of commerce" in *The Intuitionist*[26]; similarly, as I will argue in the following section, *Zone One* is much more concerned with the way class relations are reproduced during Reconstruction.[27]

This is not to say that the critics who highlight Whitehead's frequent allusions to the history of racialized domination in his fifth novel are

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Whitehead's *Zone One* and the Anti-Blackness of the Book as an Object," *Textual Practice* 35, no. 12 (2021): 1957–72.

23 Hurley, "History Is What Bites," 321–22.

24 Paul Ardoin, "'Have You to This Point Assumed That I Am White?' Narrative Withholding Since *Playing in the Dark*," *MELUS* 44, no. 1 (2019): 175. Maria Bose performs a computationally assisted distant reading to quantify how many implicit or explicit racial signifiers can be found in the novel. "Distantly Reading Race in the Contemporary 'Postrace' Novel," *Textual Practice* 35, no. 1 (2021): 39–55.

25 Thus, Lee Konstantinou's claim that it satirized Morrison's *Playing in the Dark*. See "Critique Has Its Uses," *American Book Review* 38, no. 5 (2017): 15.

26 Whitehead, *The Intuitionist*, 250.

27 See Soren Forsberg, "Don't Believe Your Eyes," *Transition* 109 (2012):141.

simply wrong. By way of inscribing itself into US history, it is inevitably also linked to the violent history of anti-blackness which is an irreducible part of this nation's history. But this is not an insight that *Zone One* needs to spend much effort in revealing. Without sharing his commitment to a Latourian ontology, I agree with Mitchum Huehl's claim that Whitehead is not concerned with discovering or rearticulating the "meaning" of race; instead, he envisions a world in which it is present without posing a major "interpretive problem."[28] The late revelation of Mark Spitz's blackness and its relative irrelevance for the novel's plot serves rather to frustrate readerly expectations that *Zone One* has to make a meaningful contribution to the discourse on race by virtue of its generic affiliation.

So, are there other histories sedimented in the text of Whitehead's novel? For one thing, there is genre history. Carl Swanson points out that zombie narratives establish "a pattern of generic emulation, relationships of competitive *imitatio*," which evoke predecessors just to "do […] them one better" by, for instance, creating gorier special effects. He goes on to show the multitude of what he calls "nods" to zombie films by Romero and other directors which provide Whitehead's "bona fides as a genre fan."[29] But Swanson also pays attention to the media specific strategies of attracting audiences used by zombie narratives. Drawing on Tom Gunning's concept of the "cinema of attractions," he claims that zombie films frequently allow their audiences to indulge in scenes in which "the artifice and excess of graphic dismemberments and eviscerations" outweigh the interest in character and plot development.[30] These moments also partake of the game of "competitive *imitatio*," as audiences do not just expect exploding heads when watching a zombie

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28 Mitchum Huehls, *After Critique: Twenty-First Century Fiction in a Neoliberal Age* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2016), 126, 108. See also Lanzendörfer, *Books of the Dead*, 171.

29 Swanson, "The Only Metaphor Left," 381–82.

30 Ibid., 389. See also Tom Gunning, "The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde," in *Early Cinema: Space, Frame, Narrative*, ed. Thomas Elsaesser and Adam Barker (London: British Film Institute, 1990); and Adam Lowenstein, "Living Dead: Fearful Attractions of Film," *Representations* 110, no. 1 (2010): 105–28.

film; "they go to see [heads] explode more artfully than last time."[31] But then, graphic descriptions of the violence inflicted by humans on zombies and vice versa are not exactly what draws readers to a zombie novel in the first place. What does Whitehead offer his readers instead?

According to Swanson, *Zone One* employs "a mode of extranarrative stylization of textual spectacle" through exhibiting not the special effect technician's craft but rather Whitehead's proficiency as a wordsmith.[32] To illustrate this strategy he looks at the following passage:

> One day they noticed the ebb. Impossible not to. The grotesque parades thinned. Slaughter slowed. […]. The soldiers steadied themselves atop the corpses in turn and drew a bead. They made hills. Putrefying mounds on the cobblestones of the crooked streets of the financial district. They rid the South Street Seaport of native and tourists alike […]. Snipers crosshaired on swaying silhouettes six, seven blocks crosstown, that sensible age-old grid layout allowing passage for traffic that traveled at the speed of sound. (76)

In addition to prefiguring the controlling metaphor of the skels as a flood wave which will unfold more properly in the novel's third part, the passage contains an "almost euphuistic use of alliterations" and dozens of sibilants which constitutes an "ornamental excess" of stylization.[33]

More than just demonstrating Whitehead's gift of spectacular prose, it can also be read as an intertextual nod to one of the most canonic of all American novels. Consider the following passage:

> It was while gliding through these latter waters that one serene and moonlight night, when all the waves rolled by like scrolls of silver; and, by their soft, suffusing seethings, made what seemed a silvery silence, not a solitude: on such a silent night a silvery jet was seen far in advance of the white bubbles at the bow. Lit up by the moon, it looked

31 Swanson, "The Only Metaphor Left," 395.

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid., 394.

> celestial; seemed some plumed and glittering god uprising from the sea.[34]

This excerpt from a chapter of Melville's *Moby-Dick*, aptly titled "The Spirit-Spout," also contains abundant alliterations ("soft, suffusing, seethings"), assonance ("rolled […] like scrolls"), and sibilants. Whitehead's display of his skills, thus, functions as a self-inscription in the history of (the) great American novel(s).

The allusions in *Zone One* are not confined to the level of style and the use of figurative speech, however. Whitehead's repeated identification of the mass of skels as a "flood" (192) or an "ocean" (243) recall a metaphor frequently used by nineteenth-century authors—the global uprising of ungovernable skels could be aptly summed up with Melville's phrase "the masterless ocean overruns the globe."[35] *Zone One* ends with Mark Spitz's decision to "walk[] into the sea of the dead" (259). The decision to leave his observation post and mingle with the multitude recalls the action of the unnamed narrator of Edgar Allan Poe's "The Man of the Crowd" who enters a "tumultuous sea of of human heads" when he leaves his observation post to follow a particular old man.[36] The thematic point of the aquatic metaphor in both texts is, moreover, to highlight the sheer heterogeneity of the urban masses. Poe's narrator watches a procession of social positions ranging from elites to the destitute pass by the coffee shop whence he observes the crowd. In *Zone One*, Mark Spitz repeatedly stands on top of buildings and surveys the skels:

> The ocean had overtaken the streets […]. Except it was not water that flooded the grid but the dead. […]. The things were shoulder to shoulder across the entire width of the avenue […]. All the misery of the

34 Herman Melville, *Moby-Dick or, The Whale* (New York: Penguin, 1992), 253.

35 Ibid., 299.

36 Edgar Allan Poe, "The Man of the Crowd," In *The Portable Edgar Allan Poe*, ed. J. Gerald Kennedy (New York: Penguin, 2006), 230. To be sure, the metaphorical equation of angry collectives and flood waves goes back much further. See the epigraph by Virgil quoted in Lieber, "The Living Dead in the Long Downturn," 143.

> world channeled through this concrete canyon, the lament into which the human race was being transformed person by person. Every race, color, and creed was represented in this congregation that funneled down the avenue. (243)

Rhetorically this is almost identical with a passage from a book by one of Melville and Poe's contemporaries. In George Lippard's 1851 allegorical novel *Adonai*, the protagonist and his companion

> found themselves suddenly on the borders of an immense multitude, which blackened the plain on every side [...].
> It was a multitude of people, gathered from all the nations and tribes of the earth.
> Men and women and children were there, clad all alike in rags, and smitten by disease that had never known relief, and hunger that had never known bread. [...].
> And the multitude swayed to and fro, like the waves of an ever restless ocean. [...].
> And as they passed on along they beheld the faces of all nations. They saw the faces of all men that people the earth of God.[37]

Whitehead and Lippard write in and about moments of social inequality and anticipate a coming "apocalyptic world revolution."[38] Furthermore, both rely on a trope Julian Stallybrass calls the "spectacle of heterogeneity," which mid-nineteenth-century observers frequently used when discussing urban crowds.[39] Lippard's "immense multitude" as well as Whitehead's "dead multitude" (201) are composed of anyone without regard for their identity. What their members share is merely misery and dispossession.

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37 George Lippard, *Adonai: The Pilgrim of Eternity*, in *The White Banner*, vol. 1, ed. George Lippard (Philadelphia: Self-published, 1851), 83–84.

38 Shelley Streeby, *American Sensations: Class, Empire, and the Production of Popular Culture* (Berkeley: U of California P, 2002), 47.

39 Julian Stallybrass, "Marx and Heterogeneity: Thinking the Lumpenproletariat," *Representations* 31 (1990): 70.

Not remaining content to display his bona fides as a zombie aficionado, then, Whitehead shows in *Zone One* that he can draw on a pop cultural subject while simultaneously being able to write like Melville. If David Reynolds is to be trusted, however, this was already the strategy of Melville and other authors of the American Renaissance. In contrast to the earlier view of the latter as isolated geniuses who rose above the insipid culture surrounding them, Reynolds argues that these writers deliberately drew on popular culture such as popular religion, political pamphlets, sensationalist literature, or vernacular humor. By mixing "cultural codes and strategies" they created a "native idiom."[40] Radical democrat writers like Lippard published texts full of spectacular violence which nonetheless provided canonized authors such as Poe with tropes like the character of the "justified or likable criminal."[41] The American Renaissance authors, Reynolds claims, "immers[ed]" themselves in "the popular" but were able to control this material and used various literary strategies to keep their texts from descending into amorality. Poe's tales, for instance, frequently feature likable criminal characters as well as "enough gore and violence" to remind readers of popular sensationalist texts; yet, he avoids "explicit violence" and instead highlights the detective's quasi-scientific observation of a crime.[42] By drawing on the zombie trope, Whitehead's novel contains a twenty-first-century equivalent of Lippard's multitude. Yet, like the authors of the American Renaissance, he produces "highly polished, formally perfect prose"[43] in order to establish a distance from the violent spectacle of popular zombie films. The popular genre provides him with an idiom, an iconography, and a set of conventions he uses to produce a literary work which deserves to be compared to some of the great works of the canon of American literature.

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40 David S. Reynolds, *Beneath the American Renaissance: The Subversive Imagination in the Age of Emerson and Melville* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2011), 9, 5.

41 Ibid., 200.

42 Ibid., 9, 246.

43 Hoberek, "Living with PASD," 409.

The Living Dead in the Long Downturn

Zone One, a novel about an angry multitude encroaching upon lower Manhattan, was published in early October 2011, just weeks after activists first gathered in Zuccotti Park. Occupy Wall Street drew on the already existing rhetoric of an antagonism between the ninety-nine and the one percent[44] as well as the tactics employed by the "movement of squares" during European anti-austerity protests and the so-called Arab Spring.[45] Thus, Whitehead's novel is an expression of the cycle of struggles which reacted to the 2008 global financial crisis and its management in the subsequent years of economic stagnation. However, by way of its use of the zombie trope as well as its references to mid-nineteenth-century writings, it inscribes itself in a wider history of social inequality and protest. That is, *Zone One* uses the figure of the zombie to express the sense that its own moment is historical; it "make[s] History appear."[46] This phrase comes from Fredric Jameson's description of the purpose of historical novels, although he adds (with a bit of characteristic hyperbole) that due to "our increased historicity today all novels have become historical (when not, indeed, science-fictional)."[47] This is because they cannot avoid reflecting on the "fate of our social system."[48] Contemporary historical novels must be speculative and imagine possible futures not in abstraction but by extrapolating from observable historical tendencies. In fact, at least one reader has proposed that *Zone One* is a kind of historical novel that contains "a

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44 See Joseph Stiglitz, "Of the 1%, By the 1%, For the 1%," *Vanity Fair*, March 31, 2011, https://www.vanityfair.com/news/2011/05/top-one-percent-201105.

45 For an account of the movement's (pre)history, see David Graeber, *The Democracy Project: A History, a Crisis, a Movement* (London: Penguin, 2013); on the movement of squares, see Endnotes, "The Holding Pattern: The Ongoing Crisis and the Class Struggles of 2011–2013," *Endnotes* 3 (2013): 12–54.

46 Fredric Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism* (London/New York: Verso, 2013), 262.

47 Fredric Jameson, "War as a Rhizome," *London Review of Books* 44, no. 15 (2022), https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v44/n15/fredric-jameson/war-as-a-rhizome.

48 Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism*, 298.

postapocalyptic future within the narrative of history itself."[49] That is, instead of giving expression to an emergent national identity, this contemporary historical novel imagines the catastrophic decline of an empire.[50]

Zone One is simultaneously a work of speculative fiction and a historical novel[51] insofar as it grasps the present moment (the time of anti-austerity struggles) as a moment in history (the time of capitalist crises in the longue durée) which prefigures the future (the time of the coming insurrection). Once more, Whitehead imagines a present traversed by multiple temporalities,[52] all of which are condensed in the image of the living dead on Broadway. According to Jameson, historical novels need such "figures of the collective" to "certify the presence of History."[53] At the same time, perceived through the prism of prior theorizations of the historical novel, the characterization of Mark Spitz comes to look entirely generic. His most characteristic quality is his mediocrity: he is "*typical*," "*average*" (9, emphases in original), a "mediocre man" who used to lead "a mediocre life exceptional only in its unexceptionality" (148). On the one hand, this makes him the appropriate hero of a tale about monsters, for only a non-exceptional hero can "offer guidance to the (non-exceptional)

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49 Kate Marshall, "What Are the Novels of the Anthropocene? American Fiction in Geological Detail," *Amerian Literary History* 27, no. 3 (2015): 530.

50 On the catastrophism of recent historical novels, see Perry Anderson, "From Progress to Catastrophe," *London Review of Books* 33, no. 15 (2011), https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v33/n15/perry-anderson/from-progress-to-catastrophe.

51 For an account of "postracial" writers (including Whitehead) who employ generic forms such as the historical novel in the service of a "speculative realism," see Ramon Saldívar, "The Second Elevation of the Novel: Race, Form, and the Postrace Aesthetic in Contemporary Narrative," *Narrative* 21, no. 1 (2013): 1–18.

52 See Daniel Grausam, "The Multitemporal Contemporary: Colson Whitehead's Presents," in *Literature and the Global Contemporary*, ed. Sarah Brouillette, Mathias Nilges, and Emilio Sauri (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 121.

53 Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism*, 267.

reader."[54] On the other, the unexceptional hero is the hallmark of the historical novel, as per Georg Lukács, who argues that the mediocre hero is part of a character constellation including world-historical individuals and the anonymous collective. Mark Spitz unites all the qualities Lukács lists—"a certain, though never outstanding, degree of practical intelligence, a certain moral fortitude and decency which even rises to the capacity for self-sacrifice, but which never grows into a sweeping human passion"[55]—and manages to scrape by in the post-apocalyptic wasteland until his final sacrifice. The latter, however, occurs not in the service of the nation, but will presumably turn Mark Spitz into a member of the collective. Fidelity to history in the twenty-first century, *Zone One* suggests, requires a commitment to collective insurrectionary action.[56]

Why is that? That is to say, what kind of world is sketched in *Zone One* and why does it call for revolution? Whitehead himself stresses that it is "pretty close to how we are now" and "not a radically reimagined future."[57] It is plausible to call the novel's representation of crisis a "neoliberal apocalypse," which is Dan Sinykin's term for a "political literary form" which emerged in the context of the "long downturn."[58] The latter term has been coined by the economic historian Robert Brenner, who influentially argued that the "long boom" of the post-World War II decades was superseded by a "long downturn" in the late 1960s and early

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54 Lanzendörfer, *Books of the Dead*, 173. Here, Lanzendörfer draws on Franco Moretti's well-known discussion of the literature of terror in "The Dialectic of Fear," *New Left Review* I/136 (1982): 68.

55 Georg Lukács, *The Historical* Novel, trans. Hannah and Stanley Mitchell (Lincoln: U of Nebraska P, 1983), 33.

56 On the notion of fidelity to the revolutionary event, see Alain Badiou, *The Rebirth of History*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London/New York: Verso, 2012).

57 In the same interview he claims that it might be set in 2018. See Colson Whitehead, "Colson Whitehead's Brains," interview by Jennifer Sky, *Interview*, October 28, 2011, https://www.interviewmagazine.com/culture/colson-whitehead-zone-one.

58 Dan Sinykin, *American Literature and the Long Downturn: Neoliberal Apocalypse* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2020), 2. See also Sean O'Brien, "Precarity and the Historicity of the Present: American Literature and Culture from Long Boom to Long Downturn" (PhD diss., University of Alberta, 2018).

1970s. He offers a powerful explanation of the systemic reasons for the protracted problems faced by the manufacturing sectors of advanced industrial economies by pointing out that capitalist competition forces individual capitals to improve labor productivity by technical means. Over time, this resulted in global industrial "over-capacity" and, consequently, downward pressures on the manufacturing rate of profit.[59] From the perspective of industrial workers this was experienced in the form of "high levels of job insecurity and intensified competition for falling numbers of decent jobs."[60] In other words, the working class, whose labor-power was no longer needed for the manufacture of goods, faced increasing precarity and the constant threat of unemployment.[61] It was precisely at the historical moment when boom gave way to downturn that Romero's ghouls—creatures who cannot work but still must eat—emerged from their graves, rendering them the quintessential monsters of the long downturn.[62]

The entire Reconstruction effort portrayed in Whitehead's novel relies on a discourse that very explicitly evokes economic recovery. To achieve this goal, the provisional government must first get "rid of the extra population," as Mark Spitz laconically puts it (217). Insofar as this

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59 Robert Brenner, *The Economics of Global Turbulence: The Advanced Capitalist Economies from Long Boom to Long Downturn, 1945–2005* (London/New York: Verso, 2006), xx. See also Robert Brenner, "What is Good for Goldman Sachs is Good for America: The Origins of the Present Crisis," Institute for Social Science Research, UCLA, Working Paper Series, October 2, 2009, https://escholarship.org/uc/item/0sg0782h.

60 Brenner, *The Economics of Global Turbulence*, 156.

61 For an excellent Brennerite account of global under- and unemployment, see Aaron Benanav, *Automation and the Future of Work* (London/New York: Verso, 2019).

62 Hence I must disagree with David McNally's claim that the zombies' potential to articulate a powerful critique of capitalism was lost when they no longer appeared as alienated workers but as "mindless consumers." *Monsters of the Market: Zombies, Vampires and Global Capitalism* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2012), 213. For a more extensive discussion of the living dead, the long downturn, and the limits of the critique of consumerism, see Lieber, "The Living Dead in the Long Downturn."

"extra population" constitutes a "new Them," it is no longer identical with an existing racial category such as blackness. Yet, insofar as the society to be reconstructed in *Zone One* remains structured by the material and symbolic separation of a population as expendable and killable, it remains a racial capitalism.[63] The zombie apocalypse figures not as a world-shattering catastrophe but as a mere setback, a temporary apocalypse, if you will, which can be overcome like an economic slump. "We can beat this," the narrator sums up the hegemonic attitude in the novel, "this is just a temporary thing" (145). While Mark Spitz is skeptical of the prospects of the future, the provisional government in Buffalo is committed to a "new optimism" (35) and uses all kinds of ideological techniques to interpellate "survivors, half-mad refugees, a pathetic, shit-flecked, traumatized herd" as members of the "American Phoenix" which will rebuild the country from the ashes (79).[64] Additionally, Buffalo is actively interfering in the remains of the economy and promises future "tax breaks" for those corporations who employ their productive capacities in the service of Reconstruction (39), because "in the days to come" they expect "thriving industries, full of opportunities" (82). Now, survivors who gather in government-run camps get to work "on the assembly lines cranking out ammo day and night" (18). That is, Buffalo oversees a war economy, and their project comes down to "a fantasy of re-industrialization."[65] By thus articulating a strategy of reviving domestic industry and the dehumanizing othering of surplus populations,

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63 I am drawing on Ruth Wilson Gilmore's claim that the "racial in racial capitalism" is a function of "group-differentiation to premature death." "Abolition Geography and the Production of Innocence," in *Abolition Geography: Essays Towards Liberation*, ed. Brenna Bhandar and Alberto Toscano (London/New York: Verso, 2022), 494–95. See also Adolph Reed's suggestion that "new race-like taxonomies could come to replace the familiar ones." "Marx, Race, Neoliberalism," *New Labor Forum* 22, no. 1 (2013): 53.

64 On the difference between Mark Spitz's resigned acceptance of a "post-apocalyptic new normal" and Buffalo's desire for a "return to normalcy," see Leif Sorensen, "Against the Post-Apocalyptic: Narrative Closure in Colson Whitehead's *Zone One*," *Contemporary Literature* 55, no. 3 (2014): 562.

65 Bernes, "Character, Genre, Labor."

Zone One anticipates later attempts to "Make America Great Again" in an uncannily prescient manner.

Reviving the economy, however, means that the provisional government must display its monopoly on violence to avert a regression to a Hobbesian state of nature. Zombie fictions such as the long-running TV series *The Walking Dead* frequently imagine a post-apocalyptic world in which social order has broken down entirely.[66] Thereby they provide a contemporary version of the frontier myth, which allows their protagonists to experience the virtuous cycle of "*separation*" from society, "*regression*" to a relatively primitive condition, and the promise of "spiritual regeneration" through the use of violence.[67] At the same time, these narratives posit that the only durable guarantee of social order is the presence of a sovereign who can legitimately employ violence. Often enough, zombie narratives are fantasies of state power. In contrast Whitehead, like Romero, offers a critique of the state which reveals the amount of violence necessary to compel humans to accept social institutions such as work and property.

In fact, *Zone One* shows that the state will use violence against anyone who transgresses the principle of property regardless of whether they are skels or survivors. Mark Spitz and his colleagues are provided with "No-No cards" reminding them to protect the "properties" they sweep (12). Moreover, "anti-looting reg[ulation]s" are in effect, prohibiting individuals "from foraging goods and materials belonging to anyone other than an official sponsor" of Reconstruction (38). Mark Spitz still recalls "those dwindling days before the looting regs went into effect and scavenger crews had routed a den of bandits who had taken over one of the mega-drugstores. Half the bandits died in the gunfight and the other half eagerly took oaths of loyalty to the provisional government upon surrender" (35–36). That is, it is not just the skels who are the targets of state vi-

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66 See Dennis Büscher-Ulbrich, "No Future for Nobody? Zombie Riots and the Real of Capital," in *Modernities and Modernization in North America*, ed. Ruth Mayer and Ilka Brasch (Heidelberg: Winter, 2018).

67 Richard Slotkin, *Gunfighter Nation: The Myth of the Frontier in Twentieth-Century America* (Norman: U of Oklahoma P, 1992), 11, emphases in original.

olence. Anyone who illegitimately appropriates goods—"bandits" in the hegemonic terminology reproduced by the narrator—is terminated, too.

Skels and bandits are thus in a structurally analogous position. The provisional government allows its agents to use lethal violence against them, because they neither work in the service of Reconstruction nor respect property rights. The novel is not particularly concerned with the ontological distinction between the living and the living dead, which it will continue to undermine anyway; rather, it is interested in the state's role in enforcing the principles governing the capitalist economy. The only significance of the fact that the bandits remain human is that they can still decide to perform work for the government and become "active servant[s] of the commodity […], whose job is to ensure that a given product of human labor remains a commodity, with the magical property of having to be paid for," as Guy Debord characterized the task of the police during a riot.[68] The bandits remain in control of their ability to perform labor and thus fulfill the Lockean criterion for subjectivity.[69] But then being a subject in the post-apocalyptic wasteland of *Zone One* is equivalent with being a cop. The skels, in contrast, can no longer choose to work. They can neither generate nor protect property, but still they need to consume to keep their undead bodies going. In short, they are a population which cannot be integrated into the recovered economy to come. Consequently, they are hunted down by the human survivors who, whether they like it or not, become deputized as cops who must manage this threatening surplus.

68 Guy Debord, "The Decline and Fall of the Spectacle-Commodity Economy," in *Situationist International Economy*, ed. Ken Knabb (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2006), 197.

69 See John Locke, *Second Treatise of Government*, ed. C. B. MacPherson (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1980, § 27, 19.

Monstrous Mobility

Within the world of Whitehead's novel, the skels are threatening because they consume the flesh of the living; moreover, as an "extra population" they stand in the way of economic recovery. As Carl Swanson points out, they also constitute a formal threat which needs to be contained in order for the narrative to be possible in the first place. *Zone One*, like all zombie narratives, is structured by the narratological need to enclose the monsters' excessive mobility. All such narratives share a basic structure, which Swanson sums up thus: "a flight from the zombies to a defensible shelter; a siege of that shelter that results in its eventual fall, and then a flight [...] to the next survival space."[70] This survival space, whether it is a farmhouse, a mall, or a walled-in area in a major city, does not merely provide shelter to the characters; it is also a narratological device that allows the narrative to survive.

> [T]he zombie is inimical to the existence of character; its raison d'être is to nullify character, and so any zombie narrative is structured around the struggle to maintain character subjectivity in the face of contagious antisubjectivity. The zombie horde is a collectivity of anticharacters that actively works to negate/subsume all characters, and by extension the zombie threatens to annihilate the narrative itself. If all characters become zombies, how can further narrative exist?[71]

Whatever the topical concerns any zombie narrative expresses, the genre is formally structured by the need to contain the mobility of the anti-subjects, which cannot be allowed to exist.[72]

70 Swanson, "The Only Metaphor Left," 388.

71 Ibid., 386.

72 This is not to say that zombie narratives are by definition in support of the violent containment of movement. In the tradition of Romero's films, Whitehead's novel uses this narrative formula in order to critically show the violence that is necessary to uphold borders which embody the distinction between subjects and antisubjects. Other zombie fictions uncritically affirm the need for such divisions, which they often articulate explicitly as national borders. See, for instance, Johannes Fehrle, "'Zombies Don't Recognize Borders': Capitalism, Ecol-

However, the boarded-up windows, walls, and other devices protecting survival spaces will inevitably fall, forcing survivors to flee and seek a new shelter. Swanson usefully distinguishes between two ways in which they can be transgressed. A "hard breach" amounts to a complete breakdown, which "compromise[s]" the narrative survival space as when the Canal Street wall collapses. A "soft breach," on the other hand, occurs when zombies enter the narrative space without posing an immediate threat.[73] To allow for the latter, *Zone One* contributes the "straggler" to the cast of undead (anti-)characters. Its skels are standard flesh-eating ghouls of Romerian provenance. The stragglers instead remain immobile and "haunt" a specific place without attacking humans (48). "Their lives had been an interminable loop of repeated gestures; now their existences were winnowed to this discrete and eternal moment" (50). Thus, their presence in Zone One constitutes a mere "soft breach"—until Mark Spitz's fellow sweeper Gary is bitten by one. This reveals the "soft breach" to have been a "hard" one all along and shows the futility of the effort to retake New York City, thus prefiguring the collapse of the wall.[74]

So, zombie narratives are about the need to contain excessive mobility. But they simultaneously assert the need for survivors to move prudently. In fact, Gary is only bitten because he plays a practical joke on a straggler and moves carelessly. Hence, another formal feature of zombie narratives: survivors need to refrain from moving excessively, too. Mark Spitz's mediocrity is thus also a quality that makes him the ideal protagonist of a zombie narrative. He is neither prone to reckless actions nor too anxious but remains in deliberate control of his every movement in the face of danger. When the wall falls and he has to shoot his way

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ogy, and Mobility in the Zombie Outbreak Narrative," *Amerikastudien / American Studies* 61, no. 4 (2016): 527–44.

73 Swanson, "The Only Metaphor Left," 396.

74 Ibid., 399. Swanson's reading is more convincing than Hurley's claim that the revelation of Mark Spitz's blackness triggers the collapse. "Zombies, Race, and the Limits of Biopower," 324. Indeed, he only tells Gary about the origin of his nickname—thereby informing readers of his blackness—after his colleague has been bitten. The mischaracterization of the straggler remains the narrative turning point.

through the multitude, he is "will[ing] his rounds into the coordinates above the targets' spinal columns, as if it were possible to mentally steer them" (251). In the novel's language, he is not a good marksman because of his manual dexterity, but because of his willpower.

The structure of zombie narratives, thus, pits the self-regulated movements of rational subjects against the excessive mobility of the irrational crowd. The former are justified in using any violent means necessary to contain the latter. This character constellation mirrors quite precisely the classic conceptualizations of the liberal subject in political philosophy. In *Movement and the Ordering of Freedom*, the political theorist Hagar Kotef shows that liberal thought has long viewed freedom and movement as deeply entangled. Genuinely free movement, however, presupposes the notion of the "autonomous subject" able to "control and self-regulate herself." This subject's identity is constituted by virtue of its difference from the—often racialized—"unruly subjects whose movement is a problem to be managed." Crucially, their management legitimizes "nonliberal moments—and spaces—within liberal regimes."[75] That is, the liberal subject's freedom of movement is inextricably linked with the use of illiberal means to curtail the wrong kind of mobility.

The key figure in Kotef's account is John Locke, for whom it was landed property that served as the material foundation of rational subjectivity. Land held in common amounted to "*waste*" for the author of the Second Treatise since it was not improved by labor.[76] Consequently, any community which did not enclose the land in the service of a "property-accumulating model" could not be considered "free" or "rational."[77] Again, the conceptualization of rational subjectivity required an irrational Other. Locke and his contemporaries imagined Native Americans as nomadic populations which could not possess rationality because

75 Hagar Kotef, *Movement and the Ordering of Freedom: On Liberal Governances of Mobility* (Durham/London: Duke UP, 2015), 8, 5.

76 Locke, *Second Treatise*, §42, 26, emphasis in original.

77 Kotef, *Movement and the Ordering of Freedom*, 105.

they did not improve the land through the use of labor, but merely consumed "fruits" and "beasts" provided by nature.[78] Kotef summarizes:

> [F]irst, the presumed lack of a particular model of agriculture is taken as an indication of both the lack of civilization and the lack of appropriation [...]. Second, the tie between movement and rationality or the lack thereof, marks the presumably nomadic indigenous people as irrational, thereby justifying occupation and subjection.[79]

At the origin of the modern liberal subject there is the same antagonistic juxtaposition of free, rational movement and unruly, excessive mobility which needs to be contained that also structures zombie narratives. While the iconography of the living dead reveal their debt to the Caribbean zombie, the narrative form of today's zombie fictions shows them to be functionally equivalent to Locke's Indians.[80]

More precisely, Locke's Indians make up one branch of the contemporary zombie's family tree; another consists of the emerging English proletariat, which was dispossessed at the same historical moment in the process of displacing the agricultural population Marx memorably called "primitive accumulation." Yet, the newly formed "free and rightless proletariat could not possibly be absorbed by the nascent manufactures as fast as it was thrown upon the world." Many were instead forced to roam the countryside only to be targeted by "a bloody legislation against vagabondage."[81] Locke thus observed the formation of another landless and propertyless class which was highly mobile by necessity. While anti-vagabondage laws served to criminalize their mobility, the confinement of paupers in poor houses or working schools was meant to inculcate labor discipline. "The motion of labor—repetitive,

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78 Locke, *Second Treatise*, §26, 18.

79 Kotef, *Movement and the Ordering of Freedom*, 106.

80 Contemporary zombie narratives are, thus, versions of what Richard Slotkin calls the trope of "savage war." See *The Fatal Environment: The Myth of the Frontier in the Age of Industrialization* (Middletown: Wesleyan UP, 1985), 51–63.

81 Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1990), 896.

confined, productive—should thus take over the motion of vagrancy and begging."[82] In short, the history of primitive accumulation produced a dispossessed population which roamed in search of food and whose mobility, which was perceived as excessive and dangerous by property-owning elites, was violently constrained.

Today's zombie narratives thus feature a late capitalist revenant of the figures of excessive mobility that emerged in the intertwined histories of colonialism and capitalism. They can neither perform work nor generate property. And yet, they need to eat.

> They had been young and old, natives and newcomers. No matter the hue of their skins, dark or light, no matter the names of their gods [...] [n]ow they were mostly mouths and fingers, fingers for extracting entrails from soft cavities, and moths to rend and devour in pieces the distinct human faces they captured, that these faces might become less distinct, de-individuated flaps of masticated flesh, rendered anonymous like them, the dead. (243–44)

Zombification figures here as a process of stripping away all sociological markers until nothing is left but the body parts required to consume food. The skels' reproduction is monstrous not just because the "de-individuated flaps of masticated flesh" used to be human. The rhythm of this phrase with its alternation of multisyllabic terms, which are decisively remote from everyday language, and the monosyllabic alliteration "flaps" and "flesh," at any rate, serves to keep the violence of the image in check. Their mode of reproduction is also monstrous because work plays no part in it.

That is, the excessive mobility that needs to be contained in zombie narratives is not just diegetic (the characters' need not to be eaten to remain characters) or formal (the narrative's need not to be destroyed by anti-characters to remain a narrative); it is also a political-economic excess that needs to be warded off. The orderly motion of capitalist commodity exchange is the sequence commodity–money–commod-

82 Kotef, *Movement and the Ordering of Freedom*, 109.

ity.[83] Individuals who possess their labor-power sell this commodity on the labor market for a wage which they can use to purchase the commodities they need as a means of subsistence. Whitehead's skels, who possess neither the ability to work nor the money to show for it, must consume without reliance on the social forms that normally mediate commodity exchange. They have nothing but—indeed, they are nothing but—"mouths and fingers" and must directly appropriate whatever "hunger-sating use-values"[84] they can lay their hands on. The skels are not just anti-characters because their excessive mobility threatens to negate other narrative-sustaining characters. They are also anti-subjects—anti-personifications of economic relations—because their reproduction exceeds the orderly motion of commodity circulation. In the previous chapter I noted that Whitehead's *John Henry Days* implies that the inability to use money amounts to a loss of personhood. *Zone One* literalizes this possibility by featuring a type of being constitutively excluded from the realm of monetarily mediated exchange. The skels' ghoulish evisceration of human survivors is a hyperbolic representation of the crime of transgressing the ways in which objects are normally transferred in capitalism.[85]

The skels' consumption is, in other words, a metonymic representation of the practice of looting; when they devour human survivors they "pursue a concrete goal," namely "acquiring food."[86] Read this way, the flood of skels can be seen as a figure of proletarian insurrection after the decline of the workers' movement. In recent years, theorists associated with the communization current have argued that this movement

83 See Marx, *Capital*, 200.

84 Evan Calder Williams, *Combined and Uneven Apocalypse* (Winchester: Zero Books, 2010), 95.

85 Drawing on Evgeny Pashukanis's account of the relationship between legal form and commodity form, I have discussed the zombies' status as antisubjects in more detail in Lieber, "The Living Dead in the Long Downturn," 148–49.

86 Delio Vasquez, "The Poor Person's Defense of Riots," in *Taking Sides: Revolutionary Solidarity and the Poverty of Liberalism*, ed. Cindy Milstein (Oakland: AK Press, 2015), 34.

was mobilized around the idea that the expansion of large-scale industry would produce a growing industrial working class which would be forged into an organized collective transcending racial, national, religious, and other separations.[87] As a result of deindustrialization and the decline of the manufacturing share of employment, however, there is today no longer any "hegemonic figure" around which the workers' movement could rally; instead it tends to "decompose into fragments."[88] Communist theorist Joshua Clover consequently observes a transformation of the repertoire of strategies and tactics available in present struggles. He discerns a shift toward "circulation struggles" waged by racialized surplus populations over "reproduction in ways beyond the wage."[89] Participants of these struggles do not share a positive quality, such as their position in the sphere of production, but merely the condition of "dispossession."[90] Whitehead's skels, those utterly dispossessed creatures who have been stripped of everything except the ability to consume food and flood streets and public squares, "resonate" deeply with the increasing significance of circulation struggles.[91] In *Zone One*, this resonance is primarily achieved through the metaphorical reference to the skels as a "flood" (192), an "ocean" (243), a "maelstrom" (246), a "wave of the dead," a "dark tsunami" (248), or a "deluge" (250). The figure of speech liquefies all "identifying particulars"[92] and emphasizes the crowd's identity-defying

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87 See Endnotes, "A History of Separation: The Rise and Fall of the Workers' Movement, 1883–1982," *Endnotes* 4 (2015). See also Geoff Eley, *Forging Democracy: The History of the Left in Europe, 1850–2000* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2002).

88 Endnotes, "An Identical Abject-Subject?" *Endnotes* 4 (2015): 277.

89 Joshua Clover, *Riot. Strike. Riot: The New Era of Uprising* (London/New York: Verso, 2016), 31, 46. For a discussion of Clover's book, see Dennis Büscher-Ulbrich and Marlon Lieber, "Riotology: A Dialogue on Riots and Resistance," *Society of Americanists Review* 2 (2019–20). Whether I am convinced by Clover's account of what this means for revolutionary strategy and tactics is neither here nor there at this point. What I am interested in here—in a quasi-New Historicist spirit—is the structural similarity between Whitehead's zombie narrative and the historical narrative Clover relies on in his book.

90 Clover, *Riot. Strike. Riot*, 16.

91 Büscher-Ulbrich, "No Future for Nobody," 386.

92 Bernes, "Character, Genre, Labor."

heterogeneity. The riotous mob of decomposing bodies is a symptom of proletarian class decomposition.

It is somewhat tempting, then, to regard the zombie apocalypse as a "symbolic resolution of the contradictions of contemporary life," as Lanzendörfer does when he treats zombies as "figures of possibility"[93] On such a reading, the living dead signify—pace Jameson—that the end of capitalism can easily be imagined as a global insurrection. This is certainly correct, but does it deserve to be called a solution? Attending to Swanson's narratological account is helpful again. Yes, Whitehead's skels can sweep away Buffalo and all vestiges of the old world. Since they are anti-characters, however, the new post-revolutionary world is formally unnarratable. In other words, the zombie apocalypse amounts to a "fantas[y] of the Great Riot at the End of Time; of the primitivist hope for an apocalypse that sweeps the Earth clean."[94] And yet it remains incapable of thinking the post-capitalist world to come. Bini Adamczak shows that this dilemma is constitutive for revolutionary theory as such. If the revolution is to abolish the existing world, it is hard to see how the "humans of today" could still find a place in the "world of tomorrow."[95] Zombie narratives can only provide a pseudo-solution by imagining the

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93 Lanzendörfer, *Books of the Dead*, 22, 18. The reference is, of course, to Fredric Jameson's account of the political horizon of interpretation in *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London/New York: Routledge, 2002), 62. Dan Sinykin similarly relies on Jameson when he suggests that "neoliberal apocalypse" provides "imaginary solutions to real world problems." *American Literature and the Long Downturn*, 19.

94 Endnotes, "Error," *Endnotes* 5 (2019): 135. This section once more draws on Lieber, "The Living Dead in the Long Downturn," 162–63.

95 Bini Adamczak, *Beziehungsweise Revolution: 1917, 1968 und kommende* (Berlin: Suhrkamp, 2017), 49, my translations. To be sure, theoreticians with post-humanist proclivities might argue that this does not constitute a problem but a virtue. According to Sarah Juliet Lauro and Karen Embry, it is precisely the promise of a post-human, post-individualist "swarm" that makes the zombie an attractive figure. See "A Zombie Manifesto: The Nonhuman Condition in the Era of Advanced Capitalism," *Boundary 2* 35, no. 1 (2008): 85–108. For a post-humanist reading of zombie narratives, see Anya Heise-von der Lippe, "'I Keep Saying "Brains"' – Posthuman Zombie Narratives," *Horror Studies* 9, no. 1 (2018): 69–84.

revolution as an ontological transformation, that is, as the substitution of the living dead for the living humans of today. This way, the post-revolutionary society cannot be corrupted; yet, this comes at the cost of rendering the desire for revolution "suicidal."[96] And this is, indeed, what Mark Spitz chooses at the end. *Zone One* concludes by conceding that the skels' excessive mobility can no longer be contained; at the same time the zombie genre reveals itself to be formally incapable of imagining a post-capitalist mode of social intercourse, new ways of producing and distributing goods so that "no-one shall go hungry any more."[97] In the end, zombies are figures of impossibility.

The Apotheosis of Hysteresis

But more than merely sharing the zombie narrative's generic inability to represent the new world, *Zone One* is concerned with the ways in which the past informs the present and limits future possibilities on the level of the individual. Like Whitehead's earlier novels, it focuses on the body as a site of dispositions that serve to practically reproduce past conditioning. The recourse to genre and its principle of "[n]arrative sameness" is appropriate, as writes Theodore Martin, for depicting a late capitalist world that has been objectively "made generic."[98] On the level of subjective practice, sameness is guaranteed by the schemes of perception, appreciation, and action that Bourdieu calls habitus. In the previous section, I have argued that *Zone One* depicts a world in which race has become objectively superfluous, as it were, because it insists that anyone can become part of the surplus population that has no place in the state's plans for a recovered economy. This concluding section will argue that the novel insists that race continues to structure subjective experience as a principle of vision and division even after the apocalypse.

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96 Adamczak, *Beziehungsweise Revolution*, 52, my translation.

97 Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London/New York: Verso, 2005), 156.

98 Martin, *Contemporary Drift*, 183, 182.

After Mark Spitz has told Gary about the origin of his nickname, he is surprised to hear that his dying colleague was unaware of the stereotype that black people cannot swim. This triggers a reflection on the fate of "the old bigotries" now that there is "a single Us" pit against "a single Them." Mark Spitz is skeptical and concludes that "they could certainly reanimate prejudice, parking tickets, and reruns." The tacit equation of racist prejudice with minor hassles of modern life in Mark Spitz's mind implies that racism did not constitute a major problem in his mediocre pre-apocalyptic life. Yet, the next sentence is suggestive: "There were plenty of things in the world that deserved to stay dead, yet they walked" (231). Unlike the previous sentence, the narrator does not explicitly characterize this remark (rendered in free indirect discourse) as Mark Spitz's thought. Superficially, it refers to the walking dead, but at the same time, it can be read as a commentary on the embodied presence of the past. That is to say, *Zone One* suggests that embodied dispositions can be more durable than mere "bigotries" or "prejudice."

The motif of habitual action is introduced quite early in the novel. In fact, already in the second paragraph after the opening analepsis that recounts Mark Spitz's childhood visits to his uncle's apartment, the issue of durable habits is raised. That is, as soon as the novel enters the post-apocalyptic diegetic present, it reminds its readers that preexisting habits still structure conduct: "This was the fourth day of rain, Friday afternoon, and a conditioned part of him submitted to end-of-the-week lassitude, even if Friday's had lost their meaning. Hard to believe that reconstruction had progressed so far that clock-watching had returned" (8). Objectively, the division between workdays and the weekend is no longer meaningful; subjectively, the habitual bodily movement of checking one's watch still (or again) prevails. What Bourdieu calls the habitus' "*hysteresis*," its inertia and its resistance to change, ensures the "presence of the past" even after the end of the world.[99]

On the one hand, Mark Spitz acknowledges that he has had to make "recalibrations" in order to deal with the post-apocalyptic world; on the

99 Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1990), 62.

other, he realizes that his "old self made noises from time to time" (14). This old self and its practical schemes is the product of past experiences. In a later instance, Mark Spitz detects "movement across the street" and "slap[s] his arm across [his fellow sweeper] Kaitlyn's chest to stop her, a gesture he'd lifted from his parents, who had lifted it from their parents" (111). The narrator thereby provides insight into the social genesis of the generative principles tacitly structuring Mark Spitz's actions. His bodily *hexis*, "the way he carries himself,[100] is a function of "childhood learning" which has turned his body into a "living memory pad."[101] No matter the scale of the catastrophe that requires recalibrations, Mark Spitz's "old self" remains a persistent presence in the form of habitual actions.

Paradoxically, prior experiences can also equip some individuals particularly well for the post-apocalyptic world. Gary, for instance, possesses a "mastery of technique" when it comes to fighting zombies (22). It is what Bourdieu would call a "practical mastery" which does not require theoretical reflection. He claims that

> the essential part of the *modus operandi* which defines practical mastery is transmitted in practice, in its practical state, without attaining the level of discourse. The child imitates not "models" but other people's actions [like Mark Spitz imitating his parents imitating their parents]. Body *hexis* speaks directly to the motor function, in the form of a pattern of postures that is both individual and systemic, because linked to a whole system of techniques involving the body and tools.[102]

The narrator's description of Gary's outward appearance, which is portrayed through Mark Spitz perspective, focuses on precisely such elements as his posture or the use of tools in producing Gary's bodily hexis.

> Gary had a granite complexion, gray and pitted skin. [...]. His eye sockets were permanently sooted, his cheeks scooped out. His preferred

100 Pierre Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001), 65.

101 Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, 68.

102 Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1977), 87.

> gait was a controlled slouch. […]. Gary showed him a picture taken at his sixth birthday party, the same ill demeanor evident even then. […]. Before the world broke, he'd dropped out of school to crank bolts full-time in his father's garage with his brothers, and he stood by this explanation for his appearance even though it had been years since he'd worked on a car or truck. Which left Mark Spitz to opine that what they were seeing was the *original* grime, the very grime of Gary's youth preserved as a token of home. It was what he'd scrapped off the past and carried with him. (22–23, emphasis in original)

Gary's entire physiognomy is an index of his past. The experiences of his childhood and his youth have durably molded his body so much that he literally carries his past around with him. The ironic point of Whitehead's long description of Gary is that he, who "was scarcely in better shape than the creatures they were sent to eradicate" each morning (22), has always already been like the zombies, which is why he is able to instinctively master the situation.

The novel's interest in habitual action is brought to its logical conclusion in the figure of the straggler, appropriately designated as "time-loop zombie[s]" whose existences are defined by "compulsive repetition" in a manner reminiscent of naturalist fiction.[103] Their previous lives consisted of "an interminable loop of repeated gesture"; their present existence has been reduced to exactly one (50). Bourdieu is fond of quoting both Pascal's quip that "we are as much automaton as mind,"[104] and Leibniz, who compares humans to "beasts" who act "based only on the principle of memory" in "three-fourths of [their] actions."[105] He thus insists that the generative principle of human practice is to a large degree withdrawn from conscious intervention. The stragglers represent the limit case of a being entirely dominated by habit. They are nothing but hysteresis.

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103 Bryan Yazell and Hsuan L. Hsu, "Naturalist Compulsion, Racial Divides, and the Time-Loop Zombie," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 20, no. 3 (2020): 24.

104 Quoted in Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, 48.

105 Quoted in Pierre Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, trans. by Richard Nice (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), 162.

The key moment in Mark Spitz's character development therefore has little to do with his nickname or his blackness; instead, it comes when he recognizes himself in the stragglers. This happens when he passes a restaurant full of pop cultural memorabilia which serves the "nostalgia industry" (153). In this nostalgic setting he remembers his own visits to this restaurant chain with his parents, which triggers the sensation of an "elemental horror" along with the realization that "[h]e was a ghost. A straggler" (155). Mark Spitz discovers that he too remains in the past's grip. Significantly, it is the past in the form of the principles of vision and division which he carries along with him that introduce racial stereotypes into *Zone One*. It is, as Lanzendörfer points out, "in fact Mark Spitz himself who introduces the stereotype" of black people being unable to swim when he informs Gary about his nickname.[106] Moreover, Gary's unawareness of "the black-people-can't-swim thing" reveals Mark Spitz's own prejudices: "He found it unlikely that Gary was not in ownership of a master list of racial, gender, and religious stereotypes" (231). That is, he is surprised that Gary, a white working-class man whose lack of formal education is frequently emphasized in the novel, is not a racist. In other words, in *Zone One* the agent who introduces stereotypes based on racial classification schemes is Mark Spitz.

Despite the radical transformation of the objective structures of the world described in *Zone One*, Mark Spitz's subjective dispositions reproduce categories that have lost their meaning. He personifies what Bourdieu calls a "hysteresis effect": his "dispositions function out of phase" because "they are objectively adjusted to conditions that no longer obtain."[107] While his generic mediocrity turns him into the appropriate hero of a zombie narrative since it provides him with the skills necessary to survive, the development his character undergoes in the course of the novel's plot results in his realization that mere survival is not a desirable option when the principles of his actions are not freely chosen. That is, he can be a hero given the narratological constraints of

106 Lanzendörfer, *Books of the Dead*, 171.

107 Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, 62.

the zombie genre, but at the same time, he realizes that he is nothing but a generic character and thus condemned to "a life full of endless repetition."[108] Hence his decision to join the zombies and become an anti-character.

The novel's final lines reproduce Mark Spitz's thoughts before he comes out of his hiding place: "Maybe he should swim for it. It was a funny notion, the most ridiculous idea, and he almost laughed aloud but for the creatures [...]. Fuck it, he thought. You have to learn how to swim sometime. He opened the door and walked into the sea of the dead" (258–59). Because he previously assured Gary that he "tread[s] water perfectly" (231), the ambition to learn how to swim expressed here cannot be meant literally. The world in which Mark Spitz cannot swim is a product of his own schemes of thought. The act of learning how to swim thus amounts to leaving the world of racial stereotypes such as "the black-people-can't-swim thing" behind. At the same time, it is an act in fidelity to the zombies' insurrectionary overthrow of a world that remains structured by capitalist social property relations. In Whitehead's novel, the abolition of capital and the abolition of 'race' coincide when the world ends. By walking into the sea of dead, Mark Spitz joins the current of the masterless ocean; he becomes part of a universally dispossessed proletariat that has already cast off its chains and remains without anything to lose. Alas, the generic constraints of a zombie narrative prohibit any speculations about the world that can be won, "but whatever the next thing was, it would not like what came before" (257).

108 Yazell and Hsu, "Naturalist Compulsion," 35.

Conclusion: To Escape the Fundamental Principles of Your Existence

My previous chapter on *Zone One* asked whether Whitehead's zombie novel was an outlier in his fictional work only to answer in the negative. This question is all the more relevant when it comes to his next novel, since it appears as if Whitehead had thrown all his aesthetico-political concerns overboard while writing *The Underground Railroad*, the 2016 novel that won him a Pulitzer Prize for Fiction, a National Book Award, and other prestigious prizes, and cemented his place as a major contemporary American novelist. Among its many celebrants was Oprah Winfrey, who selected it for her Book Club in August 2016 and praised the author for finally "tackl[ing] race and slavery head on." Winfrey prefaces her interview with Whitehead with five paragraphs that interweave autobiographical reminiscences of discovering Sojourner Truth's words as a teenager and her experiences reading Whitehead's neo-slave narrative. The novel's first sentence "got [her] heart pumping right away," Winfrey writes, and as she read on, she "found [her]self feeling what Cora [the novel's protagonist] feels, being horrified all over again by slavery, and then marveling at the grace and kindness of strangers."[1]

Winfrey's reading of *The Underground Railroad* accurately illustrates what Rachel Greenwald Smith has termed the "affective hypothesis," which holds that "literature is at its most meaningful when it represents and transmits the emotional specificity of personal experience"

1 Colson Whitehead, interview by Oprah Winfrey, *Oprah*, August 2016, https://www.oprah.com/oprahsbookclub/oprahs-interview-with-colson-whitehead.

and affords readers the chance "to feel what others feel."[2] All of this seems benign enough, but in *Affect and American Literature in the Age of Neoliberalism*, Smith goes on to make a compelling case that the affective hypothesis is not just compatible with but founded on the same values as neoliberal capitalism: "Neoliberalism imagines the individual as an entrepreneur; the affective hypothesis imagines the act of reading as an opportunity for emotional investment and return."[3] In short, the type of reading criticized by Smith—and practiced by Winfrey—is adequate for neoliberal subjects.

To be sure, Oprah Winfrey, a television host and producer whose net worth exceeds three billion US dollars, might not care too much about being accused of having made an entrepreneurial reading. If my account of Whitehead's novels in the previous chapters is worth its salt, however, this is not way his novels need to be read. While he did not want to "pull a Franzen on Oprah" and claims to appreciate her appraisal,[4] the aesthetic commitments required by the affective hypothesis stand in deep contrast to the aesthetic orientation of Whitehead's earlier fiction. To wit, in both *John Henry Days* and *Apex Hides the Hurt*, the two of his novels which most explicitly reflect on the fate of cultural production in contemporary capitalism, Whitehead depicts cultural production that strives to viscerally affect others as an acting out the imperatives of the commodity form:

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2 Rachel Greenwald Smith, *Affect and American Literature in the Age of Neoliberalism* (New York: Cambridge UP, 2015), 1.

3 Ibid., 2. On the place of affect place in neoliberal aesthetics, see also Walter Benn Michaels, *The Beauty of a Social Problem: Photography, Autonomy, Economy* (Chicago: The U of Chicago P, 2015).

4 Colson Whitehead, interview by Goodsreads, *Goodreads*, September 6, 2016, h ttps://www.goodreads.com/interviews/show/1169.Colson_Whitehead. Rachel Greenwald Smith recounts how Jonathan Franzen managed to get himself disinvited from Winfrey's show after having reacted negatively to her selection of his 2001 novel *The Corrections* for her Book Club. But Smith also shows that the "Contract model" of literature that Franzen espouses serves to conflate literary experience and "the logic of economic investment." Smith, *Affect and American Literature*, 33–36. That is to say, his rejection of Winfrey leads not so much to an alternative to her neoliberal aesthetics but simply to another version of it.

successful names "set up a vibration in the bones of potential customers" eliciting acts of purchase.[5] As mentioned previously, Winfrey begins her account of reading *The Underground Railroad* for the first time with the assertion that Whitehead's writing "got [her] heart pumping." Is Whitehead's novel, then, merely a glorified cultural commodity?

Moreover, the idea of enabling a black billionaire to identify with a runaway slave is also hardly compatible with Whitehead's consistent rejection of the notion of a racial community that transcends class difference. Winfrey's identification with Cora obscures the fact that the novel explicitly criticizes the notion of property ownership, thereby rejecting the capitalist ethos Winfrey represents.[6] What is more, in a 2009 *New York Times* essay Whitehead himself satirized the idea of writing a "Southern Novel of Black Misery" that would put on "sepia-tinted googles" to investigate the ongoing "legacy of slavery," as several critical accounts of *The Underground Railroad* have highlighted.[7] This raises the question of whether Whitehead has traded in his critique of historicist literature to instead mine the past for ancestor figures after all?

In short, the answer to the two questions posed at the ends of the previous paragraphs must be no. After recapitulating the themes that permeate Whitehead's oeuvre, this conclusion will provide a brief analysis of *The Underground Railroad* that will show precisely to what extent there is a continuity between this novel and its predecessors. It is true that *Zone One*'s occupation of lower Manhattan by the living dead was an allusion

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5 Colson Whitehead, *Apex Hides the Hurt* (New York: Doubleday, 2006), 177.

6 On the ways the stories told by Winfrey and other "prophets of capital," represent capitalism as the best of all possible worlds, see Nicole Aschoff, "Oprah is Not Your Friend: A Q&A with Nicole Aschoff," *Dissent*, August 18, 2015, https://www.dissentmagazine.org/blog/oprah-is-not-your-friend-a-qa-with-nicole-aschoff.

7 Colson Whitehead, "What to Write Next," *The New York Times*, October 29, 2009, https://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/01/books/review/Whitehead-t.html. See Grace Heneks, "'What Race Problem?': The Satirical Gaze of (White) History in *The Underground Railroad*," *MELUS* 45, no. 4 (2020): 133–54; and Stephanie Li, "Genre Trouble and History's Miseries in Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*," *MELUS* 44, no. 2 (2019): 1–23.

to Occupy Wall Street, whereas the explicit focus on anti-black terror that pervades *The Underground Railroad* is apposite to the Movement for Black Lives and the cycle of anti-police struggles which has been "waxing" since 2012, just as the Occupy movement was "waning."[8] Nevertheless, I will demonstrate in this conclusion that *The Underground Railroad* fits quite well in the historical sequence laid out by Whitehead's novels without constituting a major shift in the way the novelist thinks of American society.

The Right Perspective

"Once you go bleak," Whitehead writes in his non-fictional recollection of participating in the World Series of Poker, "you never go back."[9] Indeed, the ending of *Zone One* does not exactly radiate hope, and this despite the fact that it regards the world of late capitalism as entirely worthy of collapse. Given the narratological constraints of the zombie narrative, however, the novel has to remain incapable of showing an alternative way of organizing society. Moreover, as far as race is concerned, Whitehead's zombie novel suggests that the embodied dispositions that inform the thoughts and actions of individuals endure even when societal transformation renders racial principles of vision and division obsolete. However, in the previous chapters I have already indicated that Whitehead's novels are interested in the utopian possibilities afforded by literature or art more generally. Lila Mae Watson, the protagonist of *The Intuitionist*, ends up becoming a writer who retreats to her room to complete—via the medium of writing—the perfect elevator, which I read as a metaphor for the creation of a perfect work of art that would transcend the embodied dispositions of its audience. But the notion that artistic creation can

8 See Endnotes, "Brown v. Ferguson," *Endnotes* 4 (2015): 12. See also Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2016.

9 Colson Whitehead, *The Noble Hustle: Poker, Beef Jerky and Death* (New York: Doubleday, 2014), 160.

be too advanced for human bodies, which remain imperfect by definition, is brought up more explicitly earlier in the novel. On the run from corporate goons, Lila Mae escapes to a dancehall, and the narrator characterizes the musicians thus:

> They do not look at the dancers either, at their languid movements, the inevitably perverted manifestations of their work. For they understand that the dancers are flesh and weak and can never live up to what the musicians deliver from their gravid instruments. Understanding that something is always lost when it comes to human beings.[10]

The flesh is weak, Whitehead suggests, and humans cannot rise to meet the challenge of art.[11]

At least already existing humans must fail, which is why Lila Mae feels that she lacks an audience when she begins the project of completing Fulton's perfect elevator. "They are not ready," she thinks, "but they will be."[12] However, in *Zone One*, set roughly half a century after the events of Whitehead's debut novel, the character whose role is to self-reflexively thematize the writer's task is still waiting. This is the Quiet Storm, one of the zombie novel's minor characters, who "wrote her way into the future" in a "manuscript" written on the surface of I-95 with which

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10 Colson Whitehead, *The Intuitionist* (New York: Doubleday, 1999), 214.

11 Linda Selzer writes that this "devalues the imperfectly human in comparison to an ideal that can only be achieved by instruments more perfect than bodies." For her, this is a problem Lila Mae needs to overcome by "recaptur[ing] a sense of her own body" when she dances with an older black man. Linda Selzer, "Instruments More Perfect Than Bodies: Romancing Uplift in Colson Whitehead's *The Intuitionist*," *African American Review* 43, no. 4 (2009): 691, 692. The elderly man reminds her of the "colored" community of her childhood, but he is "thin and disappearing," so that eventually she "take[s] the lead from her partner and now she guides the steps." Whitehead, *The Intuitionist*, 215, 217. That is, the episode is about a break with tradition rather than the need to recapture something that already exists. Sean Grattan also criticizes Selzer's attachment to "community no matter the costs" when discussing Lila Mae's relationship with Pompey. "I Think We're Alone Now: Solitude and the Utopian Subject in Colson Whitehead's *The Intuitionist*," *Cultural Critique* 96 (2017): 137.

12 Whitehead, *The Intuitionist*, 254.

I opened this book.[13] Whereas the male writers who appear in Whitehead's fiction—J. Sutter or the nameless nomenclature consultant—represent the corrupting influence of commodification on cultural production, Lila Mae and the Quiet Storm symbolize the utopian power of writing to transcend that which exists. From a helicopter, Mark Spitz observes that the cars the Quiet Storm had them line up form a script only she could read. "We don't know how to read it yet," he tells his mortally wounded friend Gary. "All we can do right now is pay witness." The narrator shares the question which Mark Spitz ponders: "What readership did she address? Gods and aliens, anyone who looks down at the right time, from the right perspective."[14] What distinguishes gods and aliens from mere mortals is their lack of human bodies. Hence, they cannot have embodied the principles of vision and division which structure and are structured by actually existing social reality, and it is this that allows them to assume the right perspective.

Mark Spitz, on the other hand, cannot decipher the meaning of this text; he merely senses that there is a meaning, that there must be something to be understood if readers were just to get the perspective right. And this requires, as I have claimed in the introduction, some distance and the capacity to read relationally: the "meaning" of the Quiet Storm's writing is "encoded in the spaces between" the individual cars, that is, in the relations between its constituent parts.[15] Diegetic characters remain incapable of ascending to this position, but that does not

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13 Colson Whitehead, *Zone One* (New York: Doubleday, 2011), 233, 232. Heather Hicks notes that the Quiet Storm is the name given to a 1970s radio format "featuring smooth R&B and ballads performed by black artists [...] and directed mainly at a female African-American audience." *The Post-Apocalyptic Novel in the Twenty-First Century: Modernity Beyond Salvage* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 134. There is no indication that the Quiet Storm is black herself, but her nickname alludes to the historical setting that begins to emerge in *The Intuitionist*, as the radio format addressed the black middle class that had emerged after desegregation. Eric Harvey, "The Quiet Storm," *Pitchfork*, May 15, 2012, https://pitchfork.com/features/underscore/8822-the-quiet-storm/.

14 Whitehead, *Zone One*., 233.

15 Ibid., 232.

mean that Colson Whitehead's readers cannot. The challenge posed by the Quiet Storm—the challenge of making sense of the meaning of her script—cannot be met by any of the novel's characters; rather, it is directed at its readers. In a similar spirit, Christa Buschendorf and Astrid Franke assert that *Apex* "interweave[s] two or more narrative strands and create[s] complex layers of text that make us search for connections." When a reader discovers and maps, these narrative strands, they are able to "develop a consciousness beyond that of the characters."[16] In the following section, I want to demonstrate and comment on the connections between recurrent subjects in Whitehead's work when it is read as a whole.[17]

Social Structures and Embodied Dispositions

I am not the first critic to try to extrapolate a historical sequence from the pages of Whitehead's fictional works. Alexander Manshel, for instance, finds "a kind of single-author syllabus of American history" which "chronicles nearly two hundred years of American history."[18] While he stresses Whitehead's references to literary history, I want to draw attention to the interrelation of objective transformations and

16 Christa Buschendorf and Astrid Franke, "The Implied Sociology and Politics of Literary Texts: Using the Tools of Relational Sociology in American Studies," in *American Studies Today: New Research Agendas*, ed. Winfried Fluck et al. (Heidelberg: Winter, 2014), 91, 100.

17 I do not want to treat Whitehead's oeuvre "as an *opus operatum* […] torn from the time of its composition," however. See Pierre Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), 54. That is to say, the relations between the recurrent motifs in his work are not static; nor do I suppose that Whitehead already anticipated in 1999 that the doomed Fordist city of *The Intuitionist* would provide a foil for the post-apocalyptic post-Fordist city of *Zone One* in 2011. Instead, he revisits, revises, and rearticulates the meanings of specific motifs which appeared in earlier novels when he returns to them.

18 Alexander Manshel, "Colson Whitehead's History of the United States," *MELUS* 45, no. 4 (2020): 24, 23.

subjective experience, that is, to the interrelation between social structures and habitus. Maria Bose, who similarly claims that Whitehead's novels can be "[r]ead as a whole," names one of their central features when she argues that they often revolve around the ironic story of technological innovations that produce new forms of racialized domination and labor discipline.[19] This provides a useful vantage point from which to begin a discussion of Whitehead's vision of history.

In *The Intuitionist*, technological innovation seems to be inextricably wedded to historical progress at first. Technological modernization, the US vice president announces at the "Exhibition of the Industry of All Nations" in 1853,[20] will help humans "to accomplish that great end to which all history points—the realization of the unity of mankind." The driving force or "stimulus" that propels the "powers of production" forward are "competition and captial [sic]" in the vice president's version. While still a student, Lila Mae shares the belief in historical "linearity" exemplified by technological progress, although she expects market competition and private property to become irrelevant in due course and at one point expresses her belief that the future will be "cooperative and patentless."[21] By the time of the novel's end, however, she has lost her technological optimism, in part because she realizes that the rhetorical equation of technological progress with social progress in the form of racial uplift is merely an ideological conceit used by the representatives of capital to adorn the search for new sources of profit.

Whitehead's two follow-up novels continue to probe the relationship between productive technologies, the exploitation of labor, and the pursuit of profit. In one of the numerous intercalary chapters of *John Henry Days*, the president of the C&O Railroad Company waxes

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19 Maria Bose, "Allegories of 'Postracial' Capitalism: Colson Whitehead and the Materials of Twenty-First-Century Black Cultural Authorship," *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 60, no. 4 (2019): 421.

20 Christopher Leise points out that, in fact, there was no vice president in 1853 after the previous one had died in office. See "With Names, No Coincidence: Colson Whitehead's Postracial Puritan Allegory," *African American Review* 47, no. 2–3 (2014): 289.

21 Whitehead, *The Intuitionist.*, 80, 81, 98.

philosophical about the potential of the railroad to unify the nation. At the same time, the novel exposes the underbelly of the narrative of technological progress by reminding its readers that the labor required to build the infrastructure uniting the nation is performed by a super-exploited racialized workforce, "Chinamen" or "Irish paddies," and of course African Americans.[22] Moreover, it shows that labor becomes superfluous as soon as it becomes possible to replace it with cheap machines. John Henry's legendary competition with the steam drill literalizes Marx's assertion that the mechanized instrument of labor "becomes a competitor of the worker himself."[23] Indeed, the steel drivers in Whitehead's novel are aware that the steam drill's advantage is that it "didn't need food and worked twice as fast as a man."[24] But *John Henry Days* is not primarily interested in labor conditions of the past; instead, it features numerous characters competing with—and losing to—machines in the twentieth century.[25] The most apt modern-day analogue of the steel driver is in fact not J. Sutter, but Pamela Street, whose experiences as a "temporary" worker for a "content-driven interactive information provider" are related in a short chapter of the novel. As long as "the Tool," an algorithm automating the activity of classifying the content of web sites, is still in development, the company "would need all the bodies they could get." As soon as it is completed, the workers are let go.[26] Capital, the novel insists, needs living labor-power only as long as it is profitable, and the workers to whose bodies the ability to perform

22 Colson Whitehead, *John Henry Days* (New York: Doubleday, 2001), 119.

23 Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1990), 557.

24 Whitehead, *John Henry Days*, 357.

25 See Astrid Franke, "'The Death of the Sixties'? Afroamerikanische Geschichte in Colson Whitehead's *John Henry Days*," in *Von Selma bis Ferguson – Rasse und Rassismus in den USA*, ed. Michael Butter, Astrid Franke, and Horst Tonn (Bielefeld: transcript, 2016), 167. These characters include a Tin Pan Alley songwriter in danger of being replaced by a player piano and a blues musician who fears that his singing and guitar-playing will not be needed anymore when listeners can buy records.

26 Whitehead, *John Henry Days*, 287, 288.

labor is inextricably connected are thrown onto the street as soon as they cease to be a source of surplus value.

John Henry Days thus provides "vignettes"[27] from various historical moments which show that the historical dynamic of capital accumulation consists of phases of absorption and repulsion of the working population, depending on its demand for human labor.[28] These processes, Whitehead shows, are thoroughly racialized: the most dangerous activities are performed by ethnic and racialized populations. Yet, at the same time, his first four novels trace the increasing integration of black Americans into the middle class in the twentieth century: Raymond Coombs with his office on the eightieth floor; J. Sutter's grandparents who lived on "Strivers Row" in Harlem and forbid his mother from listening to "gutter music" or to convene with "good-for-nothing" blacks from the street,[29] thus anticipating the rhetoric and strategy of sociocultural distinction exhibited by Mr. Cooper in *Sag Harbor;* or, finally, the nameless consultant in *Apex*, sent to a university whose name bespeaks unlimited social mobility—all of them index the emergence and growth of a black middle class, and Whitehead time and again crafts his plots and designs character constellations in order to subvert the notion of a homogeneous racial community.

Zone One concludes the historical arc established in Whitehead's previous fictions. Here, capital's tendency to integrate previously excluded populations has gone into reverse, and the novel mobilizes the zombie trope to speculate on what happens to bodies that have become surplus. Doing so, it does not quite suggest that this post-apocalyptic world is also post-racial; the living dead remain a quasi-racialized, abject population from which human survivors distinguish themselves categorically. But in the world of *Zone One*, racialized exclusion no longer revolves

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27 Colson Whitehead, "Post Office to Unveil Colson Whitehead Stamp," interview by Dave, *PowellsBook.Blog*, October 10, 2006, https://www.powells.com/post/interviews/post-office-to-unveil-colson-whitehead-stamp.

28 On this see Endnotes, "Misery and Debt: On the Logic and History of Surplus Populations and Surplus Capital," *Endnotes* 2 (2010): 20–51.

29 Whitehead, *John Henry Days*, 270, 278, 279.

around already existing racial categories but has been reduced to the simple opposition between the living and the living dead which the novel articulates as a division between those who can still work and "global surplus humanity."[30] If the conditions of disposability and social death have long been assigned to blacks, Whitehead's zombie novel suggests that in the early twenty-first century the entire world, regardless of phenotype or ancestry, is potentially experiencing this fate, as Achille Mbembe has argued more recently. "If yesterday's drama of the subject was exploitation by capital," he writes, "the tragedy of the multitude today is that they are unable to be exploited at all."[31] The fate of this unexploitable multitude is to be kept behind walls or exterminated.

But then, as I pointed out in the final section of the previous chapter, Whitehead's novels also insist that (subjective) embodied dispositions do not keep pace with these transformations of (objective) socio-economic structures. That is, the habitus of social agents which contains schemes of thought and actions organized around the racial distinctions that evolved in the course of US history remains resistant to change after all. In *Zone One* this is emblematized by the stragglers, those creatures who are "completely stuck on who they used to be even though the situation on the ground has changed."[32] The motif of an asynchronicity of subjective dispositions and objective structures was, however, already introduced in *The Intuitionist*: "it is difficult to shake old habits," the narrator states. "Habits clamp down on the ankle and resist all entreaties, no matter how logical"[33] In other words, Whitehead insists on locating habits—and thus habitus—on the level of the body—the synecdochical ankle—where they are not susceptible to reasoning.

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30 Chris Chen, "The Limit Point of Capitalist Equality," *Endnotes* 3 (2013): 214.

31 Achille Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason*, trans. Laurent Dubois (Durham/London: Duke UP, 2017), 3. This line echoes the opening of Michael Denning's "Wageless Life," *New Left Review* 66 (2010): 79.

32 David Naimon, "Q and A: Colson Whitehead," *Tin House*, September 21, 2012, https://tinhouse.com/q-and-a-colson-whitehead/.

33 Whitehead, *The Intuitionist*, 16.

Apex Hides the Hurt comes closest to a theorization of race among Whitehead's novels. In my discussion of the multicolored adhesive bandages in chapter four, I did not mention that the novel features two different kinds of band-aids. Before Apex, there was the "clear strip" made from transparent material. This was a commercial failure, however, because it is effectively "raceless" by not reproducing reified racial categories in the way that Apex does.[34] "The people chose themselves [...]. In pharmacies you started to see *that motion*—folks placing their hands against the box to see if the shade in the little window matched their skin."[35] Apex, in contrast, is successful because it addresses always already racialized individuals who use the bandage to reaffirm their sense of identity. However, despite seeming to equate racial identity and skin color and thereby naturalize race, *Apex* instead treats it as a product of social domination. "The great rainbow of our skins" is metaphorically likened to "a terrain so far uncharted. Pith helmets necessary."[36] For one thing, this means that the actual range of skin tones is not divided into discrete categories by nature; this is what it means to call it "uncharted." On top of that, the reference to pith helmets evokes the history of European colonization in order to remind readers that this charting and categorizing of humans proceeded only violently.[37] The racial taxonomy reified by Apex is a product of domination.

With the multicolored adhesive bandages, Whitehead has found a symbol that perfectly captures the reproduction of racial ideology. The boxes in which they are sold materialize the principle of vision and division that is race. They are well received because they harmonize with the schemes of perception, appreciation, and action that social agents have internalized in the form of their habitus' embodied dispositions.

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34 Whitehead, *Apex Hides the Hurt*, 90. Daniel Grassian confuses the clear strip and Apex when he calls the latter "raceless." *Writing the Future of Black America: Literature of the Hip-Hop Generation* (Columbia: The U of South Carolina P, 2009), 87.

35 Whitehead, *Apex Hides the Hurt*, 109, emphasis in original.

36 Ibid., 89–90.

37 See Stephanie Li, *Signifying Without Specifying: Racial Discourse in the Age of Obama* (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2012), 83.

This confluence of objectivity and subjectivity results in actions—"*that motion*"—which constantly reproduce race in practice. Or, as Bourdieu puts it in a passage I have repeatedly made reference to before:

> The principle of action [...] lies in the complicity between two states of the social, between history in bodies and history in things, or, more precisely, between the history objectified in the form of structures and mechanisms [...] and the history incarnated in bodies in the form of habitus, a complicity which is the basis of a relation of quasi-magical participation between these two realizations of history.[38]

The conceit offered by *Zone One* is to imagine a post-apocalyptic world in which the category of race is no longer inscribed in things, while ultimately concluding that it remains present in bodies because embodied dispositions will endure even in the zombie apocalypse. The novel's ending, which must deny the reader a sense of closure, seems to be an admission that a world beyond capitalist social structures and embodied racial principles of vision and division exceeds the representational capabilities of the (zombie) novel.

A Ruthless Engine

Now I want to suggest now that *The Underground Railroad* can be read as an attempt to solve the representational dilemma with which *Zone One* ends. It does so by featuring a protagonist whose practice transcends the systematic logic that defines her position: Cora, the runaway slave. However, unlike a zombie, her actions remain narratable. *Zone One* is a speculative novel that envisions a possible future on the basis of a deep sense of history, both social and literary. *The Underground Railroad* also combines an interest in both history and the speculative when it returns to the nineteenth century to dramatize the entanglement of racial capitalism, chattel slavery, and settler colonialism. Both novels emphasize

38 Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, 150–51.

the violence needed to make sure that property stays property. In Whitehead's zombie novel, the survivors kill everyone—skel or bandit—who disobeys the law that use-values must not be directly appropriated under capitalist social property relations. *The Underground Railroad* returns to an earlier conjuncture in which humans figure as property and narrates Cora's attempt to escape the slave catcher Arnold Ridgeway, who wants to make sure that she remains enslaved. That is to say, the two novels are set in the same universe, and when Cora thinks that "[o]ne day the system would collapse in blood" (172),[39] readers would do well to recall Whitehead's previous novel, which already depicted bloody systematic collapse.

The Underground Railroad is a neo-slave narrative or, better yet, a "speculative fiction of slavery" which uses "non-realist literacy devices" in its representation of the peculiar institution.[40] In addition to mining a range of intertexts for characters and plot lines—*Gulliver's Travels*, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, *The Diary of Anne Frank*, or *Blood Meridian*[41]—the novel is structured by taking the metaphor of the underground railroad literally. Cora boards actual trains to escape captivity. These take her not merely to another state, however, but to different historical moments which are all permeated by versions of anti-black

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39 All parenthetical citations in the text refer to Colson Whitehead, *The Underground Railroad* (New York: Doubleday, 2016).

40 Madhu Dubey, "Speculative Fictions of Slavery," *American Literature* 82, no. 4 (2010): 780. On the neo-slave narrative, see Ashraf H. A. Rushdy in *Neo-Slave Narratives: Studies in the Social Logic of a Literary Form* (New York: Oxford UP, 1999).

41 Cora's journey recalls Lemuel Gulliver's travels, and Jonathan Swift's novel is explicitly mentioned in *The Underground Railroad* by a character who is currently reading it (235). In North Carolina Cora hides in an attic, directly recalling the experience of Harriet Jacobs, although Whitehead has remarked that he also thought of Anne Frank when crafting this episode. See Colson Whitehead, "Write the Book That Scares You Shitless," interview by John Freeman, *Literary Hub*, November 23, 2016, https://lithub.com/write-the-book-that-scares-you-shitless-an-interview-with-colson-whitehead/. On the similarity between Arnold Ridgeway and Judge Holden in Cormac McCarthy's *Blood Meridian*, see Adam Kelly, "Freedom to Struggle: The Ironies of Colson Whitehead," *Open Library of Humanities* 4, no. 2 (2018): 26.

racism.[42] After escaping Georgia, Cora first ends up in South Carolina where the corporeal discipline of the cotton plantation has given way to a paternalistic biopolitical regime where blacks are subjected to forced sterilization and medical experiments recalling the infamous Tuskegee experiment.[43] In North Carolina, Cora's next stop, the white population has decided to replace the enslaved workforce with cheap immigrant labor, banishing blacks from the state and killing all those who remain. After being captured by Ridgeway, Cora is forcibly taken through the burned wasteland of Tennessee, where she is eventually rescued by free blacks who bring her to a black-owned farm in Indiana. Ridgeway catches up with her once more, but Cora finally manages to defeat the slave catcher and escapes to a region called simply "The North" in the novel's final chapter.

The railroad thus not only allows for travel from state to state; it is also an "infrastructural time machine" which affords Whitehead with the possibility to craft a "speculative historiography in which the past and future are enfolded into the geographies of the nineteenth-century narrative present."[44] Madhu Dubey terms this "paratactic mode" which consists of placing "distinct layers of time […] side by side on the fictional plane."[45] Whitehead once more creates an ambiguous setting in which multiple temporalities coexist which results in deliberate anachronisms, such as the presence of skyscrapers, elevators, and factories using conveyor belts in mid-nineteenth-century South Carolina.[46] One effect of

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42 On the resonances between the places Whitehead invents and the history of racialized violence in the United States, see Matthew Dischinger, "States of Possibility in Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*," *The Global South* 11, no. 1 (2017): 82–99.

43 See Heneks, "What Race Problem," 146.

44 Shouhei Tanaka, "Fossil Fuel Fiction and the Geologies of Race," *PMLA* 137, no. 1 (2022): 47.

45 Madhu Dubey, "Museumizing Slavery: Living History in Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*," *American Literary History* 32, no. 1 (2019): 125.

46 Derek C. Maus points out that Whitehead thus alludes to his previous novels. *Understanding Colson Whitehead: Revised and Expanded Edition*, (Columbia: U of South Carolina P, 2021), 125.

this is a subversion of the idea that historical sequence equals a narrative of progress. While the railroad at first seems to be a technology that symbolizes racial emancipation, much like Fulton's perfect elevator, Whitehead once again refuses to treat technological development as an index of progressive linearity.

This temporal ambiguity cuts both ways, however. By reminding the reader that Cora remains threatened with being captured by Ridgeway despite having left the place and time of chattel slavery behind, *The Underground Railroad* insists that the "afterlife of slavery" continues to haunt the United States.[47] At the same time, it depicts chattel slavery as an always already modern institution structured by capitalist rationality. This is significant because the novel's tacit treatment of the abolition of slavery as a "nonevent"[48] that did not fundamentally transform black subjection makes an Afropessimist reading of the novel somewhat attractive. I do not think that *The Underground Railroad* conceptualizes slavery in the same way as Frank Wilderson and other Afropessimist theorists, however. This is because the novel does not grant primacy to the "libidinal economy of slavery," centering the institution's political economy instead. While Wilderson argues that the desire to accumulate black bodies "regardless of their utility as labourers" structured chattel slavery,[49] *The Underground Railroad* highlights the slaves' role as workers. What is more, the novel suggests that acting exclusively on the

47 Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother: A Journey Along the Atlantic Slave Route* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2007), 6.

48 Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997), 116.

49 Frank Wilderson, III, "Gramsci's Black Marx: Whither the Slave in Civil Society?" *Social Identities* 9, no. 2 (2003): 239, n. 4, 229. See also Frank B. Wilderson, III, *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms* (Durham/London: Duke UP, 2010), 13–17. My argument does not require me to reject Wilderson's arguments as such; it merely asserts that Whitehead's novel understands slavery differently. For an account that pays attention to both libidinal and political economies, see Iyko Day, "Afro-Feminism Before Afropessimism: Meditations on Gender and Ontology," in *Antiblackness*, ed. Moon-Kie Jung and João H. Costa Vargas (Durham/London: Duke UP, 2021).

basis of a "despotic irrationality"[50] while neglecting capitalist rules of reproduction proves economically ruinous.

This is because *The Underground Railroad* conceives of chattel slavery as a mode of production in which plantations are dependent on markets which compel them to increase labor productivity and realize profits at the threat of bankruptcy.[51] In fact, references to the cotton trade, banks, speculators, and debt abound in the novel, and it employs the trope of generational change to narrate the integration of plantation owners into the capitalist world-system. Cora is a slave on the Randall plantation, and little is known about Old Randall except that he "had been a revered member of planter society" (43) evoking the traditional view of the slave South as essentially premodern and precapitalist while embodying an "aristocratic, antibourgeois spirit with values and mores emphasizing family and status," as the historian Eugene Genovese puts it.[52] The old planter was, however, "the first in the region to switch to cotton" (43) replacing "dependable indigo" with a more profitable crop. Accordingly he "made new contacts in New Orleans, shook hands with speculators backed by the Bank of England" with the result that "money came in as never before" (13). While Old Randall is thus a transitional figure caught between southern society organized by kinship and the anonymous world market, his sons "cut off social ties with their father's peers and protégés" after the latter's death. His oldest son James is left with "business partners on paper" but "few friends" (44).

In order to figure the compulsion exerted by market dependence, Whitehead personifies cotton itself. The crop frequently appears as a grammatical subject that possesses agency: "King Cotton crowded the countryside with slaves" (74) and "birthed communities" (76). This

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50 Wilderson, "Gramsci's Black Marx," 231.

51 Ellen Meiksins Wood offers a powerful account of what it means to see markets as sources of compulsion which dictate the imperatives of "competition, accumulation, profit-maximization, and increasing labour-productivity." *The Origin of Capitalism: A Longer View* (London/New York: Verso, 2002), 7.

52 Eugene D. Genovese, *The Political Economy of Slavery: Studies in the Economy & Society of the Slave South* (Middletown: Wesleyan UP, 1989), 28.

is because the "ruthless engine of cotton required its fuel of African bodies" as laborers (161). The need to "feed the world's insatiable demand for cotton goods" (47) compels plantation owners to transform the labor process. Not only is "every [cotton] picker's daily quota [...] increased," but Terrance Randall, who becomes the sole owner of the plantation after his brother James's death, also announces to his slaves that the "field will be reorganized to accommodate a more efficient numbers of rows" (47). *The Underground Railroad* thus does not posit a fundamental difference between slave labor on the plantation and the industrial labor performed by Cora's accomplice Caesar in a South Carolina machine factory, which is reorganized by a "labor theorist" (103). The novel's use of anachronism serves to bring twentieth-century labor conditions—signified by the reference to a conveyor belt first used in a factory by Henry Ford and based on Frederick Winslow Taylor's principles of scientific management—into the nineteenth century and emphasize the continuity between labor regimes.[53]

Whitehead's materialist emphasis on the capitalist nature of chattel slavery has led Adam Kelly to call *The Underground Railroad* the novelist's "most Marxist novel yet and one of the most Marxist novels in the mainstream literary landscape."[54] In fact in the Acknowledgments section of the novel, Whitehead explicitly mentions the historian Edward Baptist, whose study *The Half Has Been Told* the writer praises elsewhere for providing "a fleet, persuasive take on the materialist underpinnings of the 'peculiar institution'."[55] Baptist—who is not a Marxist—is one of

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53 David Roediger and Elizabeth Esch have shown that the scientific management of slave labor was attempted in the antebellum period. See "'One Symptom of Originality': Race and the Management of Labor in US History," in *Class, Race, and Marxism* (London/New York: Verso, 2017),115-55. For an account of the attempt to instill temporal discipline on the plantation, see Mark M. Smith, *Mastered by the Clock: Time, Slavery, and Freedom in the American South* (Chapel Hill: The U of North Carolina P, 1997), 120–21.

54 Kelly, "Freedom to Struggle," 29.

55 MJ Franklin, "10 Books That Helped Colson Whitehead Write 'The Underground Railroad'," *Mashable*, October 31, 2016, https://mashable.com/article/colson-whitehead-underground-railroad-book-recommendations.

the so-called New Historians of Capitalism with whose scholarship *The Underground Railroad* very clearly resonates.[56] Baptist's book decidedly rejects the view, expressed by Eugene Genovese, that US chattel slavery operated outside of the boundaries of the modern capitalist economy, and historians such as Sven Beckert and Walter Johnson emphasize the thorough integration of US slavery into global financial markets.[57] Unlike Robert Fogel and Stanley Engerman, who emphasized slavery's modernity but downplayed its brutality in their controversial *Time on the Cross*, the New Historians, however, forcefully argue that violence is an intrinsic part of capitalism.[58] And despite its emphasis on slave labor as "fuel" for the "ruthless engine of cotton," Whitehead's novel reminds its readers of this violence throughout.

At the same time, violence in *The Underground Railroad* is not primarily the gratuitous sort or in the service of libidinal economy, as theorized by Afropessimists.[59] Baptist stresses that the whip was used as a means of

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56 Both John Clegg and Charles Post provide Marxist critiques of the New Historians whom they accuse of ironically failing to understand the historical specificity of their object, capitalism. See John J. Clegg, "Capitalism and Slavery," *Critical Historical Studies* 2, no. 2 (2015): 281–304; and Charles Post, "Slavery and the New History of Capitalism," *Catalyst* 1, no. 1 (2017): 173–92. Clegg shares the New Historians' conviction that slavery was indeed capitalist, while Post argues that it rested on noncapitalist social property relations.

57 See Edward E. Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 2016); Sven Beckert, *Empire of Cotton: A Global History* (New York: Vintage, 2015); and Walter Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (Cambridge, MA/London: The Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 2013). See also Sven Beckert and Seth Rockman, eds., *Slavery's Capitalism: A New History of American Economic Development* (Philadelphia: U of Pennsylvania P, 2016).

58 See Clegg, "Capitalism and Slavery," 288–95. See also Robert Fogel and Stanley Engerman, *Time on the Cross: The Economics of American Negro Slavery* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 1995). On the role of violence in capitalism, see also Heide Gerstenberger, *Market and Violence: The Functioning of Capitalism in History*, trans. Niall Bond (Leiden: Brill, 2022).

59 See Wilderson, *Red, White & Black*.

"violent labor rationalization"[60] A slave's value as an "asset," in the novel's language (5), also serves to limit the slaveowner's brutality.[61] In South Carolina, Cora remembers being starved by an overseer on the plantation. But "cotton," again personified as an agent, "demanded the punishment be brief" because work had to continue (144). When Cora is later informed of the fate of Terrance Randall, the novel illustrates what happens when a slaveowner acts irrationally.

> From all accounts, the slave master's preoccupation with Cora and her escape only deepened over time. He neglected the plantation affairs. His day to day on the estate consisted of conducting sordid parties in the big house and putting his slaves to bleak amusements, forcing them to serve as his victims in Cora's stead. (269)

At Valentine Farm Cora finds out that Terrance Randall has died. His death suggests that his actions, which neglected the capitalist "rules of reproduction" compelling market-dependent plantation owners to increase the productivity of labor and to reinvest profits for the sake of accumulation, have resulted in the loss of his position.[62] Randall's irrationality, his subjection of slaves to gratuitous violence for the sake of amusement, his waste of money and labor, turns out to be incompatible with the demands of capitalist slavery.

To Escape the Fundamental Principles of Your Existence

In fact, the one state in which violence is meted out gratuitously is North Carolina, which "abolished slavery" by abolishing blacks (164) only to replace them with Irish and German immigrants working in conditions approaching indentured servitude. The novel reserves some of its most

60 Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told*, 135.

61 See Clegg, "Capitalism and Slavery," 292.

62 For this account of slavery's rules of reproduction and, more generally, the capitalist character of plantation slavery, see John Clegg, "A Theory of Capitalist Slavery," *Journal of Historical Sociology* 33, no. 1 (2020): 80.

gruesome incidents, such as the weekly lynchings Cora has to observe from her attic and the "Freedom Trail" of mutilated bodies hung from trees, for the North Carolina chapter. But here blacks are subjected to genocidal violence precisely because their labor-power is no longer demanded by plantation owners assigning them to the position occupied by skels in Whitehead's zombie novel, that is, as a surplus population that needs to be exterminated. *Zone One*, however, was formally incapable of treating the living dead as "agential subjects,"[63] which is why the novel had to end with Mark Spitz's presumed suicide by zombie. The challenge faced by *The Underground Railroad* is to overcome the generic limitations of its predecessor and render the attempt to escape a system using violence to make sure that property remains narratable. The peculiarity of slavery, its "quirk," is "that people were things" (6), as the narrator puts it when recounting the tale of Cora's grandmother Ajarry in the novel's first chapter. This chapter ends with her premature death in a cotton field and the narrator's bleak pronouncement that "[t]o escape the boundary of the plantation was to escape the fundamental principles of your existence," which is "impossible" (10). Cora must thus prove that it is possible for a "thing," an object of property like any other "tool" (6), that is also a subject to escape after all. She must, in other words, steal herself; *The Underground Railroad*'s telos is the self-abolition of property.[64]

That is to say, Whitehead's sixth novel inverts the generic formula of the zombie narrative in order to narrate movement in excess of prevailing property relations not as a threat to life, limb, and narrative that has to be contained, but as a movement toward freedom. Once more, *The Underground Railroad* refuses to accept a clear boundary separating the time of slavery and its afterlife. While the mobility of slaves was restrained for obvious reasons, Saidiya Hartman and others point out that the containment of free black movement with the goal of ensuring that black labor

63 Carl Joseph Swanson, "'The Only Metaphor Left': Colson Whitehead's *Zone One* and Zombie Narrative Form," *Genre* 47, no. 3 (2014): 386.

64 On slaves "stealing themselves" and the ambiguities of property stealing property, see Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, ch. 2.

would continue to accumulate white wealth continued after emancipation.[65] The "sheer capacity to move" consequently figured as "the only palpable evidence of freedom" for many ex-slaves.[66] There are, however, two ways in which free movement figures as a problem for Cora. Or, more precisely, the novel features two obstacles that must be overcome for free movement to become possible in the first place. For one thing, the novel picks up Whitehead's longstanding interest in the way embodied dispositions make future-oriented practice a function of past experiences, which can prove limiting. In other words, the novel suggests that Cora must discard her "*hexis*," as Bourdieu would call it, her "way of bearing the body, of presenting it to others,"[67] which among other things threatens to reveal her status as a runaway slave to others. But this is not the novel's primary interest. More pertinently, the novel makes unequivocally clear that Cora only will have a chance to move freely when she gets rid of the representative of the property relations that demand her continued immobility.

That is to say, the novel does not ignore the symbolic violence "exerted on bodies [...] on the basis of the dispositions deposited, like springs, at the deepest level of the body,"[68] but instead shifts its focus on the physical violence sustaining relations of domination.[69] Yes, *The Underground*

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65 Hartman notes that, after the Civil War, public discourse depicted freed slaves as dependent and idle and hence in need of training that would turn them into disciplined and docile wage-laborers. This expressed fear of the former slaves' "mobility," which exceeded the principles of property and labor. *Scenes of Subjection*, 127. See also Eric Foner, *Reconstruction: America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863–1877* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2014), 81. On the establishment of vagrancy laws or the convict lease as "modern means of immobilization" of freed blacks, see Aaron Carico, *Black Market: The Slave's Value in National Culture* (Chapel Hill: The U of North Carolina P, 2020), 39.

66 Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 150.

67 Pierre Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001), 65.

68 Ibid., 38.

69 Bourdieu, it can be noted, is not ignorant of these and stresses that his analytic focus on symbolic violence is not meant to "minimize the role of physical violence." Ibid., 34.

Railroad spends some time addressing Cora's attempts to "maste[r] posture" (94); and it does liken a free black woman who appears like she had "been made to bend and will bend no more" to a "walking spear" (244), suggesting that unconstrained movement in the face of white supremacy is a weapon. But while it once again relies on the ankle, which served as a synecdoche for the body on which "[h]abits clamp down" in *The Intuitionist*, now this body part is the target of a different sort of capture. In *The Underground Railroad* there are "shackles for ankles" (65), when Cora is discovered in her North Carolina hideout her capturers are "snatching her ankles like irons" (184), and "shackle[] her ankles" in a wagon (187). As if to revise the earlier emphasis on the reproduction of the relations of domination by tacitly activating the schemes of thought and action that are "durably inscribed in bodies in the form of dispositions,"[70] this novel stresses the physical violence that serves to keep the dominated in place.

The omnipresent threat of violence also thwarts an alternative route to freedom, namely, black land ownership. In the previous chapter I discussed John Locke's belief that the rationality that enables subjects to be free required landed property.[71] *The Underground Railroad* investigates the limits of this horizon on two scales. On the Randall plantation, Cora own a "plot" of land measuring three square yards which she inherited from her mother who received it from her mother in turn (11). To be sure, she has no title of ownership in her name, but still "considers this parcel her own."[72] The plot promises an "area of escape from the plantation," as Sylvia Wynter puts it in her discussion of slaves' plots in her unpublished study "Black Metamorphosis." Here the earth figures as a "source of sustenance" and labor as an activity satisfying human purposes.[73] Yet,

70 Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, 180.

71 See Hagar Kotef, *Movement and the Ordering of Freedom: On Liberal Governances of Mobility* (Durham/London: Duke UP, 2015), 105.

72 Julia H. Lee, *The Racial Railroad* (New York: New York UP, 2022), 188.

73 Sylvia Wynter, "Black Metamorphosis: New Natives in a New World," unpublished manuscript, n.d., IBW Papers, Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, New York, 53, 63. On this text, see Derrick White, "Black Metamorphosis: A Prelude to Sylvia Wynter's Theory of the Human," *The CLR James Journal*

lacking formal ownership, Cora cannot prevent another slave from destroying her garden by erecting a dog house. In retrospect, Cora sees her plot "as the joke it was—a tiny square of dirt that had convinced her she owned something" (179), a mere "shadow of something that lived elsewhere" (188).

One contender for this "something" to be found "elsewhere" is Valentine Farm, a black-owned farm evoking nineteenth-century utopian communities on which Cora stays during the Indian section of the novel. In this setting, cooperative agricultural labor is a "means of pleasure" that "unite[s] folks" (274). At first it seems to manifest the promise embodied by Cora's plot on a larger scale and on more secure footing.[74] Adam Kelly points out that Whitehead's novel draws on the trope of the "journey to self-ownership as well as property ownership" found in many narratives about slavery. Yet he concludes that the novel does not treat this as a viable "horizon of possibility."[75] In the final instance this is again due to Ridgeway, who eventually assaults the farm with the help of a white mob and forcibly captures Cora. As long as property rights prevail, as long as whites believe that "it is their right to take the land. To kill Indians. Make war. Enslave their brothers," as the character Lander, a black activist reminiscent of W. E. B. Du Bois, puts it moments before being shot, Valentine Farm will remain a "delusion" (285). In other words, *The Underground Railroad* regards the strategy of gaining freedom through property ownership in the context of capitalist social property relations as delusional.

16, no. 1 (2010). On the plot, see also Sylvia Wynter, "Novel and History, Plot and Plantation," *Savacou* 5 (1971): 96–97.

74 According to W. E. B. Du Bois, the former slaves' desire for land indeed recalled the "faint beginning of industrial freedom" afforded by plots under slavery. *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860–1880* (New York: The Free Press, 1998), 123.

75 Kelly, "Freedom to Struggle," 21. On the aspiration to land ownership and independent production, see also Foner, *Reconstruction*, 103–04; and Charles Post, *The American Road to Capitalism: Studies in Class Structure, Economic Development and Political Conflict, 1620–1877* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2011), 268.

To potentially win non-delusional freedom, Cora must thus face her adversary, that is, Arnold Ridgeway. This son of a blacksmith who "made tools" sees it as his mission to "retrieve them" (76), thereby "ensuring that property remained property," be it the labor stolen from blacks or the land stolen from indigenous populations—a philosophy he dubs the "American imperative" (80).[76] However, even though Ridgeway is the representative of property relations sanctioned to use violence in their defense, *The Underground Railroad* requires Cora to overcome her habitual way of using her body in order to defeat him. One "recurrent theme" is her refusal to dance since it would trigger the memory of being raped by fellow slaves as a young girl.[77] Yet in her final confrontation with Ridgeway, Cora "hesitate[s]" while standing on the top of a flight of stairs leading down to an underground railroad station:

> On Randall, on Valentine, Cora never joined the dancing circles. She shrank from the spinning bodies, afraid of another person so close, so uncontrolled. Men had put a fear in her, those years ago. Tonight, she told herself. Tonight I will hold him close, as if in a slow dance. […]. She waited until the slave catcher was on the third step. She spun and locked her arm around him like a chain of irons. […] [S]he held him close like a lover and the pair tumbled down the stone steps into the darkness. (302)

The fall leaves Ridgeway battered and bloody—and possibly dying—while affording Cora the possibility of finally escaping. That is, like Mark Spitz, who realizes that, in a world of racist stereotypes, his embodied dispositions restrain him and consequently chooses to "learn how to swim,"[78] Cora must overcome her embodied fear of dancing. The

76 On the novel's emphasis on the dual expropriation of black labor and indigenous land characteristic of settler colonialism, see Nicole Waller, "Marronage or Underground? The Black Geographies of Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* and Ta-Nehisi Coates's *The Water Dancer*," *MELUS* 47, no. 1 (2022): 53. On the specificity of settler colonialism, see Patrick Wolfe, *Traces of History: Elementary Structures of Race* (London/New York: Verso, 2016).

77 Waller, "Marronage or Underground," 56.

78 Whitehead, *Zone One*, 259.

dance constitutes a "meaningful movement beyond flight" and makes possible "other forms of movement" no longer under threat of being captured.[79]

Without the Interference of Men

Zone One placed its hopes in the power of writing to address a readership of the future that is no longer marred by the present. In this way, writing could stand in for a utopian moment that transcends what already exists. Now, in the final pages of this book, I want to return to literature's affordances and the question of the right perspective with which this conclusion began. To wit, I argued that Oprah Winfrey praised *The Underground Railroad* for making both an affective and an identitarian offer: it got her heart pumping and enabled her to feel what Cora feels. That is to say, she did not see an alternative to this world but only rediscovered herself in the slave girl—an extension of empathy which, as Hartman shows, precisely requires Cora to be property, a fungible commodity, which makes her "captive body an abstract and empty vessel vulnerable to the projection of others' feelings, ideas, desires, and values."[80] As I have argued above (and shown in more detail in chapter four), Whitehead has repeatedly rejected such writing in previous novels. But then, so does *The Underground Railroad* and in quite explicit terms. What is more, in this novel it is decidedly non-fictional texts which stand in as models for successful writing.

Cora encounters literary writing in the shape of the poetry which is regularly recited on Valentine Farm. She is dismayed, however, by a speaker who cares too much about "the effect of his performance."

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79 Waller, "Marronage or Underground," 56; on the significance of movement, see also Gabriella Friedman, "Unsentimental Historicizing: The Neo-Slave Narrative Tradition and the Refusal of Feeling," *American Literature* 93, no. 1 (2021): 138; and Nihad M. Farooq, "'A Useful Delusion': Valentine Farm and the Flight for Freedom," *Utopian Studies* 30, no. 1 (2019): 95.

80 Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 21.

> Versifying left her cold. Poems were too close to prayer, rousing regrettable passions. Waiting for God to rescue you when it was up to you. Poetry and prayer put ideas in people's heads that got them killed, distracting them from the ruthless mechanism of the world. (251)

Conversely, she prefers texts that do not rouse passions but instead provide a better understanding of the world's "ruthless mechanism," an expression that echoes the "ruthless engine of cotton" that devoured land and labor as fuel. This she finds in the almanacs she discovers in the attic. Cora "adore[s]" these texts which "contai[n] the entire world" because they explain processes that "proceeded without the interference of men"—in other words, like a ruthless mechanism or engine. As such they cannot "be shaped into what they were not," such as the poems that manipulate and distract their listeners. Finally, the almanacs provide "instructions," such as accounts of the lunar cycle, that can be used for emancipatory ends such as assisting slaves in their escape (183).[81] While narratives can be shaped into "faux-progressive" tales, such as the notion that freedom can be obtained through property ownership, the almanacs offer "sequence without story."[82] More generally, they stand in for a form of writing best exemplified by the books of the New Historians of Capitalism, who offer materialist accounts of the world's ruthless mechanism which also span the entire globe.

The ambition to represent the political economy of slavery as a ruthless mechanism informs Whitehead's style, which "veils Cora's interiority" and thus disinvites the reader from identifying vicariously with

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81 Molly Geidel and Patricia Stuelke claim that the almanacs reinforce Cora's search for freedom in "bourgeois heterosexual domesticity" by allowing her to learn how "to care properly for boots and chickens, property of her own." "Infrastructural-Innovation Realism in an Age of Collapse," *American Literary History* 33, no. 1 (2020): 113. This ignores that the paragraph immediately succeeding the evocation of boots and chickens mentions an abolitionist's use of the "almanacs to plan for the full moon" to help slaves escape.

82 Carra Glatt, "Anti-Narratives of Slavery in Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*," *Cambridge Quarterly* 50, no. 1 (2021): 50.

her.[83] Throughout the novel, she observes the cruelties to which others are subjected in a detached manner. Even her fellow fugitive Caesar finds her "lack of response" to the information that she has likely killed a twelve-year-old boy during their flight "conspicuous" (63). Generally, the novel relies on "unadorned [...] dry, hard facts in the apparently neutral language of the market," as Adam Kelly puts it.[84] Pace Winfrey, then, the best critical discussions of Whitehead's novel agree that *The Underground Railroad* decidedly reject the idea that novels about history should offer readers an "affective immersive experience." This distinguishes it from the "*sentimental historicizing*" typical of the genre of neo-slave narratives, which "incite[s] the reader" to "relat[e] to the past through affective, vicarious experience," as Gabriella Friedman explains.[85] That is, *The Underground Railroad* refuses to privilege an immediate affective encounter with the past, a point the novel drives home in an episode set in the "Museum of Natural Wonders" in South Carolina, where Cora performs the role of a slave in a series of tableaux vivants. While her employer suggests that it is preferable to "see" the "truth of the historic encounter," the point the novel makes is that one has to "know" historical truth first (116).[86] In a brilliant reading of this episode in the context of contemporary "Living History" exhibition practices, Madhu Dubey argues that the novel "promotes a distancing rather than immersive approach," since the latter tends to "fetishize concrete particulars of the past" at the expense of grasping "abstract, systemic forces."[87] But it is precisely the latter ambition—thematized self-reflexively by the almanacs Cora reads—that distinguishes Whitehead's novel.

That is to say, *The Underground Railroad*'s model for successful writing is no longer found in the realm of literary writing always susceptible to rousing distracting passions; instead, the novel holds up a more

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83 Friedman, "Unsentimental Historicizing," 126.

84 Kelly, "Freedom to Struggle," 23.

85 Friedman, "Unsentimental Historicizing," 133, 117, emphasis in original.

86 See Lee Konstantinou, "Critique Has Its Uses," *American Book Review* 38, no. 5 (2017) 18.

87 Dubey, "Museumizing Slavery," 126, 132.

detached, scholarly form of writing as its ideal. What it thus tries to achieve—perhaps not entirely successfully given the way Winfrey and others read it[88]—is to be a work of fiction which comes close to being a materialist theory of society. In some respects, this radicalizes the strategy Whitehead pursues in *Zone One*, whose employment of more the emphatically non-realist zombie trope might obscure its critical interest. Nevertheless, by virtue of its focus on a system based on the violent defense of capitalist social property relations as well as its interest in thinking of ways to escape the conditions that determine the existence of individuals, *The Underground Railroad* must be seen in continuity with Whitehead's previous works of fiction, specifically *Zone One*. Unlike the zombie novel, however, which is formally incapable of continuing the narrative once all human characters have been killed or absorbed by the living dead, Whitehead's reliance on the generic conventions of the neo-slave narrative enables him to tell the tale of a successful escape—at least up to a point. After escaping Ridgeway, Cora uses a handcar and later her feet to cross a tunnel from which she emerges as a "new person" (304) in "The North," eventually joining another black man on the way to California.

But then, *The Underground Railroad* does not quite suggest that Cora's self-abolition as property amounts to an abolition of the social property relations that rely on "[s]tolen bodies working stolen land" (117); that is, she frees herself but does not quite throw a wrench into the gears of the "ruthless engine." What this means is that *The Underground Railroad* only solves *Zone One*'s representational dilemma—how to narrate unconstrained movement in excess of property—by ending up with its own predicament. Its form enables it to narrate such movement but limits

88 Stephanie Li recounts that she received an advance copy of *The Underground Railroad* which contained a letter by Doubleday editor-in-chief William Thomas, who professes to being "completely shattered" and having "wept at several points" (quoted in "Genre Trouble," 6). Upon the publication of Whitehead's novel, the editor's letter was no longer included, which is understandable since the editor's letter uses evaluative criteria the novel itself rejects.

the novel to an individualist perspective. A collective, even global, revolution against property the success of which can no longer be represented (*Zone One*), or an individual act of abolition which cannot be scaled up (*The Underground Railroad*): this seems to be the real contradiction that Whitehead's fifth and sixth novels cannot symbolically resolve. In the end, they offer "torn halves of an integral freedom, to which however they do not add up."[89] Yet perhaps what *The Underground Railroad* is saying is that it was a mistake to look for symbolic resolutions to social contradictions in works of fiction in the first place, and it is advisable to read this novel for the instructions it contains, just like Cora reads her almanacs. Learn about history, it seems to say, abolish property, and fight those who defend it.

89 Theodor Adorno, "Correspondence with Benjamin," trans. Harry Zohn, *New Left Review* I/81 (1973): 66.

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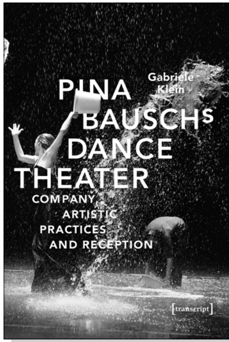

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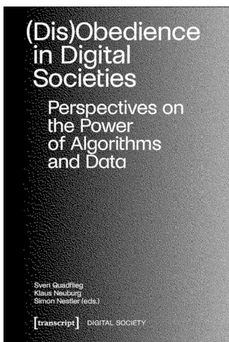

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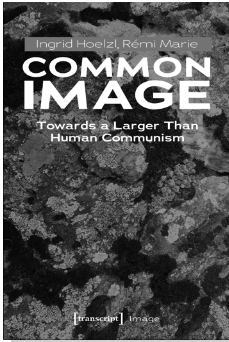

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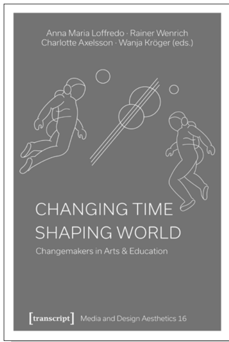

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