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,

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*

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

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

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

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]

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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-

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

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

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.

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