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:

---

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, https://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

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

---

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

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

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

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) socioeconomic 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.

---

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.

---

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

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

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

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

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

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*

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."

---

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

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

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.