Writing the Future in the Work of Colson Whitehead

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Abstract

This thesis is focused on the idea of writing the future in the work of Colson Whitehead, with a particular focus on three novels: *Zone One* (2011), *The Underground Railroad* (2016) and *The Nickel Boys* (2019). I argue that Whitehead's work is consistently interested in the ability of reading and writing to open up paths towards radical futures beyond the racist structures of capitalist modernity. Whitehead's writing establishes a dialectical relationship between Afropessimistic claims around the foreclosure of black futures and Afrofuturist investments in articulating and producing black futures via aesthetics. His texts, despite their relentless critique of racist capitalism's dehumanisation of black people, hinge on moments of utopian reading and writing that gesture towards as yet unknowable futures. The reinscription of historical narratives is key to Whitehead's project of forging paths towards radical futures via written aesthetics. His work eschews linear historical time in favour of a temporality in which past, present, and future constantly overlap and correspond. This leads to novel strategies, such as his deployment—as I argue—of the trickster-like 'underground' narrator Homer in *The Underground Railroad*. Whitehead's work is richly intertextual, particularly in its readings and re-inscriptions of important texts in African American literary history, from the antebellum slave narratives through to the novels of Ishmael Reed, Ralph Ellison, and Toni Morrison, but also in its intermedial use of music, painting, and film. Through close readings, I explore Whitehead's intertextual and intermedial signifying; his writing highlights ways in which formal innovation is among the defining attributes of African American literature, and his writing borrows material from the African American literary tradition to create gestures towards radical futures. I argue that Whitehead's political investment in aesthetic strategies that lead towards utopian black futures is an important and unifying feature of his work

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Author's Declaration

I declare that this thesis is a presentation of original work and I am the sole author. This work has not previously been presented for a degree or other qualification at this University nor elsewhere. All sources are acknowledged as references.

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Writing the Future in the Work of Colson Whitehead

Introduction: “She wrote her way into the future”

In Colson Whitehead’s *Zone One* (2011), the Quiet Storm, enabled by her job as a wrecker clearing the interstate in apocalyptic New York, uses the uniquely elevated perspective afforded by her tablet, stylus and map to create an “alphabet” and “grammar” from the abandoned “hatchbacks” and “sport-utility vehicles” that litter the urban landscape. She is not writing for her fellow survivors but for the future: “What readership did she address? Gods and aliens, anyone who looks down at the right time, from the right perspective” (233). In his essay, “Further Considerations on Afrofuturism” (2003), Kodwo Eshun interweaves scholarly analysis of the relationship between Afrodiasporic subjects, their culture, and the future with an Afrofuturist fictional narrative:

> African archaeologists from the future—some silicon, some carbon, some wet, some dry—excavating a site, a museum from their past: a museum whose ruined documents and leaking discs are identifiable as belonging to our present, the early twenty-first century (287).

Eshun’s archaeologists are analogous to the Quiet Storm’s imagined readership—aliens or posthumans who are literate in ways we cannot yet conceive. By a tentatively utopian logic, the text implies its own readership and this readership implies the existence of a future beyond the epistemological frame of the present. This is a future that can be imagined but never apprehended.

This thesis argues that Whitehead’s work consistently addresses this contingent future in which utopian writing might be legible. His writing operates as compelling capitalist critique, that inches towards the capitalist realist position epitomised by Fredric Jameson’s comment that “it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism” (quoted in Fisher 2009, 2). Whitehead’s critical edge is aligned, however, with the creative

project of finding ways to bring utopian hope into his writing. This address to the future often takes the form of near-illegibility to escape the trap of eternally reproducing the past, or, more precisely, takes a form that leaves the near-illegible visible to the reader as something like the negative space around an image. His writing conveys the idea that that historical text is ubiquitous, inscribed across cities, institutions, and anywhere else people have lived and organised, and that writers can interfere with that text in order to form an address to an otherwise inaccessible future.

Reading the Past in the Present

In *Beloved* (1987) Toni Morrison conveys the enduring existence of history in the present through her concept of "rememory", explained as follows by the novel's protagonist Sethe: "Where I was before I came here, that place is real. It's never going away [. . .] and what's more, if you go there—you who never was there—if you go there and stand in the place where it was, it will happen again" (43-4). For Morrison, African American history, even if unwritten and even unspoken, still exists. Whitehead brings the past into the present in a different though connected way, using his writing to draw attention to the textual records that are inscribed everywhere—and to their meaningful absences. In this way, writing also possesses the hermeneutic power of reading, since it renders history legible. Whitehead's writing constantly reads the world; it is also full of instances and figures of reading. For example, in the opening pages of *The Nickel Boys* (2019), which I analyse in Chapter Three of this thesis, archaeologists begin the work of uncovering bodies in the "secret graveyard" (1). Whitehead writes that "The white concrete X's that marked the graves caught the sunlight on bright afternoons" (2). The 'X' symbolises legibility and illegibility at the same time: it marks the burial site itself but also marks the failure to say anything specific about the person buried there, who is erased by the universality of the sign. This condition of failed representation is intensified by the way that the X

is not legible in whatever way one encounters it, but only when the sun, whose movement mirrors the act of reading—left to right across the page, east to west across the sky—is in the right place in the right conditions. The line reads both illegibility and partial comprehension into the world. The revelation of these crosses is also a revelation that something is not disclosed, that something remains illegible.

The illegibility of erased black histories in the United States is crucial to the way we understand the relationship between the past and the present. Commenting on the increased profile of African American history in mainstream cultural discourse, Julian Lucas writes in the *New Yorker* that "the African American past has never been more visible" (par. 1). Yet a significant body of twenty-first-century writing by black Americans suggests that increased visibility does not necessarily equate to legibility. In his novel *Open City* (2011), for example, Teju Cole's protagonist Julius comes across Manhattan's African Burial Ground National Monument, which marks the location of the eighteenth-century 'Negros Burial Ground' (220). Over four hundred coffins containing human remains were unearthed by preparations to build a new office building for the United States General Services Administration. Julius struggles to identify the "curious shape" he initially perceives at the site: "sculpture or architecture, I couldn't tell right away". The monument is ostensibly a making-legible of the past: from the air it even looks like a linguistic sign. On its inside wall is the Nsbidi symbol, a character from the oldest form of African writing after Egyptian hieroglyphics, and a Bakongo cosmogram that depicts the interaction of the world of the living and the world of the dead. According to Alexander Greer Hartwiger (2016), Julius's encounter with the memorial exemplifies how his walks through the streets of New York enable a "deep historical look at the city"; these walks are "palimpsestic exercises that expose histories that have been erased and written over" (8). However, what Julius truly encounters is not the hitherto buried histories of those who were interred at the African Burial Ground but rather the fact of those histories' erasure. Julius ultimately fails, "from the point of view of the twenty-first century, to fully believe that these people, with the difficult

lives they were forced to live, were truly people" (221-2). Cole's irony here is that the African Burial Ground dead were not considered "truly people" by the racist society of colonial New York in which they lived and died, either. Although Julius finds this textual inscription into the present surface of New York nigh on illegible, unable to connect him to those buried there, he does make a different kind of physical connection to the dead when he bends down to lift "a stone from the grass and, as I did so, a pain shot through the back of my left hand" (222). Julius cannot connect to the dead of the African Burial Ground through language, yet the sharp pain he feels momentarily collapses the past into the present.

Julius notes that the bodies that were exhumed from the African Burial Ground bore the physical marks of the violence done to them; their skeletal remains are, in a necessarily limited way, legible indexes of pain: "blunt trauma, grievous bodily harm. Many of the skeletons had broken bones [. . .]. Disease was common too: syphilis, rickets, arthritis" (221). Elaine Scarry, in *The Body in Pain* (1985), describes how pain and language are antithetical to each other: "Physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned" (4). Scarry explains that the reason that pain destroys language is that pain has no object, "no referential content. It is not *of* or *for* anything" (5). The shot of pain that Julius feels at the African Burial Ground monument is a reminder that history has not spoken for these dead persons and that their lives can be apprehended in the present only through the anti-linguistic medium of pain. *Open City* was published in the same year as *Zone One*, a novel in which the African Burial Ground features more obliquely but no less importantly. As I discuss later in this thesis, its existence just below the 'real' world surface of New York city and the text of *Zone One* bolsters the reading of the novel's zombie plague as the irruption of historical suffering into a present whose stability is predicated on the negation of that pain.

Whitehead's work explores the relationship of historical suffering—and its representation—to the present; indeed, a significant feature of Whitehead's writing is its concern with the discourse and imagery of historical pain. His writing translates not pain but its near inexpressibility in language, making that failure of communication visible. I qualify inexpressibility here because my point is that Whitehead's writing suggests that the crucial point is not whether pain is expressible in language, but that it cannot be as long as capitalism is the dominant political and economic paradigm, since capitalism is inimical to the true expression of historical pain. Its economic systems, infrastructure and institutions are built on a tyranny of pain. I argue in this thesis that Whitehead's work seeks ways of making writing work to break this seemingly incessant cycle of repetition through the reinscription of historical texts in order to open up radical new paths to the future.

In exploring the relationship between historical suffering and contemporary identity, Whitehead (and Cole) participate in and extend the African American tradition of what Toni Morrison calls "literary archaeology", in her essay "The Site of Memory" (1987, 92). Morrison describes literary archaeology as a method of adding "the act of imagination"—which Julius finds so ineffective in *Open City*—to the archaeological practice of journeying "to a site to see what remains were left behind and to reconstruct the world that these remains imply" (92). Morrison's approach is about repairing the present by enacting the (partial) reconstitution of the past in the present through memory. Whilst Whitehead's writing sometimes engages in this kind of reparative literary archaeology, his orientation, even in *The Underground Railroad* (2016) which is his entry into the "neo-slave narrative" (Rushdy, 1999) genre and the subject of the second chapter of this thesis, is to the future. The collective refusal to countenance the past, to read history in the surfaces of our present, forecloses the future.

I argue that any one of Whitehead's books would illustrate this point, but *Apex Hides the Hurt* (2006), Whitehead's third novel, makes the relationship between pain and language its

central metaphor. In *Apex*, a black “nomenclature consultant” (22) is hired by the small American town of Winthrop to help choose a new name, having previously come up with the appellation “Apex” for a brand of sticking plasters that come in a range of skin colours to cater to the “great rainbow of our skins” (89); “School nurses of integrated elementaries could order special jumbo variety packs, crayon boxes of the melanin spectrum, to serve diversity” (89). The Apex tagline—“Apex Hides the Hurt” (108) becomes a cultural meme, appearing on novelty T-shirts and in late-night talk show punchlines (109). Advertisements position the brand as a metaphor for a postracial society, in which the language of racial equality can compensate for histories of pain: “United in polychromatic harmony, in injury, with our individual differences respected, eventually all healed beneath Apex” (109). The protagonist receives an injury of his own whilst working in Winthrop, stubbing his toe: “The toenail tilted up out of a murk of thick blood, cotton lint, and gashed flesh” (131). This sentence zooms into the details of flesh like a video camera in one of the splatter horror films he grew up watching, which he describes in his *New Yorker* article “A Psychotronic Childhood” (2012). Rich ‘t’, ‘l’, ‘c’, and ‘sh’ alliteration create a sense of hyperreality in contrast to the lobbying discussions the protagonist has with the various interested parties in Winthrop, whilst the absence of assonance—“murk of thick blood”; “cotton lint”; “gashed flesh”—makes the image lurid and unnatural. The reference to cotton, the commodity most strongly associated with slavery, anchors the protagonist’s toe as a metaphor for all African American historical suffering, with the bathetically diminutive image of a toe hinting at the inadequacy of the contemporary apprehension of that suffering. Over this microcosmic history he places an Apex plaster, matched closely to his own skin colour. Assessing his chances, he decides that it “could go either way [. . .]. He didn’t care. He put on an Apex” (131). By the end of the novel, his toe has deteriorated to “a strange, rotten-apple pulp of red and gray, and there was no community on Earth that might be served by the Apex that corresponded to that colour” (163). The toe is also a parody of historical legibility, with the “red and gray” implying print media; the use of “pulp” also recalls textuality and writing. The next day,

a doctor tells him he has developed an "Advanced State of Necrosis" (200) which requires an amputation. The novel's final line is: "As the weeks went on [. . .] he had to admit that actually, his foot hurt more than ever" (212). The protagonist has been defeated by the history that language has failed to apprehend, but he does manage to choose a new name for Winthrop:

> They will say: I was born in Struggle. I live in Struggle and come from Struggle. I work in Struggle. We crossed the border into Struggle. Before I came to Struggle. We found ourselves in Struggle. I will never leave Struggle. I will die in Struggle. (211)

The alternative names suggested by Winthrop's elite— "Winthrop" is preferred by a conservative aristocrat, "New Prospera" by a new money entrepreneur, and "Freedom" by the black mayor Regina Goode, in honour of the name chosen by the free black people who founded the town— speak to competing historical narratives and future projections. "New Prospera" might seem to be solely orientated towards the future, but the "New" reflects a wishful belief that the past can be erased leaving a "blank slate", another of the novel's writing metaphors. In reality, "New" is a reminder that the last attempt failed. "Struggle", however, is not retrospective or projective, but cyclical and repetitive; struggle is "the point past which we could not progress" (210). It describes an eternal present to which the past is irrelevant and the future unthinkable. The use of "struggle" to represent the eternal repetition of the present becomes "survival" elsewhere in Whitehead's fiction, whether in the survival horror of *Zone One*, for example, in which Mark Spitz ultimately makes the radical decision to give up on survival and join the zombie hordes, or in *The Nickel Boys*, in which Elwood's bildungsroman gives way to survival horror to the extent that, in my analysis, it becomes a kind of prequel to *Zone One*.

In *Apex Hides the Hurt*, the nomenclature consultant is the perfect perspective from which to read the world as a textual surface, a crucial aspect of Whitehead's career-long exploration of the relationship between writing and the world. Late in *Apex*, the protagonist is found:

> In front of a newsstand, looking up at the sky as if it were a vast eternal mirror, he saw all the logos and names, and saw himself as some brand of mite lost in the pages of the musty encyclopaedia of the world. (181-2).

The line implies both surface—"mirror"—and depth—"encyclopaedia"—whilst the latter also implies institutionalised archival or historical knowledge. In this metaphor, the encyclopaedic world is a closed system: it *is* the world. Literary archaeology can take us into the past, but, Whitehead's work asks, how can it help us to escape from epistemologies of, for example, racial difference that close off access to the future? The use of "musty" is also reminiscent of the "dust" and "ash" that define the apocalyptic New York cityscape of *Zone One*, in which a strikingly similar image of being subsumed in a textual world occurs:

> The ash smeared the city's palette into a gray hush on the best of days, but introduce clouds and a little bit of precip and the city became an altar to obscurity. He was an insect exploring a gravestone: the words and names were crevasses to get lost in, looming and meaningless (8).

Mark Spitz is "lost" in language, unable to escape the grooves that direct his movement. This is the opposite perspective to the aerial one from which he perceives the Quiet Storm's writing late in the novel; he is so immersed as a reader that he is part of the text.

The Futures Industry and Benjamin's Angel of History

The ability of writing to intervene in what Eshun calls the "futures industry—defined here as the intersecting industries of technoscience, fictional media, and market projection" (290), is, I argue, a driving concern of Whitehead's fiction. Eshun's term highlights the integrated way that future capital is assured by the continual reproduction of the structures—epistemological, ideological, financial—that uphold it. He argues that:

> The powerful employ futurists and draw power from the futures they endorse, thereby condemning the disempowered to live in the past. The present moment is stretching, slipping for some into yesterday, reaching for others into tomorrow (289).

"We Make Tomorrow!", proclaims the American Phoenix in *Zone One*, but tomorrow is only today again, carrying with it the historical ideologies that have created and sustained. As Weber Lopes Góes argues, "it is under capitalism that slavery became intimately intertwined with racism to become a fundamental tool for the rise and reproduction of capital" (63). Toni Morrison remarks in an interview with Paul Gilroy that "modern life begins with slavery" (1993, 178), her present tense insistent that slavery remains intrinsic to modernity. Likewise, Whitehead's novels unearth buried or obfuscated traces of African American suffering, illustrating how the structural violence that built modernity continues to play its part in the system.

The epigram to *Zone One*'s opening chapter provides a clue that helps to illuminate Whitehead's approach to temporality in modern capitalism. Slightly adapted from Walter Benjamin's 1927 essay "Dream Kitsch", Whitehead's version reads: "The gray layer of dust covering things has become their best part" (1). On the complex and ambivalent status of dust in Benjamin's Arcades Project, to which "Dream Kitsch" was an immediate predecessor, Teresa Stoppani (2007) explains that dust is a marker of modern stasis "associated with greyness, obsolescence, and boredom" (544), what Susan Buck-Morss calls "history's motionlessness" (1989, 228). This sense of stalled modernity is captured in Benjamin's "Thesis IX" in "Theses on the Philosophy of History", first published posthumously in 1942. The ninth thesis takes as its subject Paul Klee's famous oil transfer watercolour monoprint, 'Angelus Novus' (1920). O. K. Werckmeister outlines the exegetical history of the image as "an icon of the left", asserting that through its critique of Marxist teleological progress it "has become a meditative image [. . .] for a dissident mentality vacillating between historical abstraction and political projection, between

despondency and defiance, between assault and retreat" (1996, 242). I reproduce Benjamin's ekphrastic reading in Thesis IX in full because it speaks powerfully to the way Whitehead deals with temporality and history:

> A Klee painting named 'Angelus Novus' shows an angel looking as though he is about to move away from something he is fixedly contemplating. His eyes are staring, his mouth is open, his wings are spread. This is how one pictures the angel of history. His face is turned towards the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing in from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such a violence that the angel can no longer close them. The storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress (257-58).

Unwillingly propelled into a future he cannot encounter, Benjamin's angel is compelled to spend eternity contemplating the "single catastrophe" of history, the accumulated and still accumulating suffering of the dead. For the angel of history, the Marxist promise of socialism after capitalism is a fantasy and progress is impossible.

Despite this, as Stoppani elucidates, the dustiness of modernity's stasis also harbours great generative, creative potential, which Whitehead seeks to take advantage of; Benjamin's dust:

> preserves and constantly re-enacts the ambiguities and multiplicities of time. It becomes the material and also the agent for the project, an unstable construction that uncovers and unearths objects and spaces, reactivating them in new relationships of tension between fragments (544).

I argue that the instability of what Benjamin called kitsch is of crucial importance to the thread of utopian writing that runs throughout Whitehead's work. His writing highlights the ways in which the detritus of modernity, those objects and structures whose novelty have worn off, can be repurposed against the system that produced them. For Whitehead, as I now set out, this principle is built into his approach as a writer.

Zone One's Quiet Storm shares her name with a 1999 track by rap artist Mobb Deep. This was also the year Whitehead published his first novel, *The Intuitionist*. Mobb Deep's "Quiet Storm" was released on the eve of the Millenium, a moment which was greeted by world leaders as an opportunity for the symbolic shedding of history's viciously scarred skin. In a speech given at the Lincoln Memorial minutes before the expiration of the twentieth century, President Bill Clinton honoured the innumerable masses who "worked and marched, who fought and died" for the "triumph of freedom", a phrase he reiterates four times (par. 3). "We celebrate the past" and "We celebrate the future, imagining an even more remarkable twenty-first century" (par. 1), he declares. The Millennium becomes a symbolic break in history, an opportunity to start anew: "As powerful as our memories are, our dreams must be even stronger" (par. 3). Clinton's progressive rhetoric sees him gesture towards the violence and death that characterised the twentieth century and quote Martin Luther King, yet also frame those horrors within a narrative of inexorable progress. King's optimistic philosophy of love becomes a central feature of *The Nickel Boys*, in which it is opposed to an Afropessimist horror narrative. Crucially, Clinton emphasises that in order to cash in on the progress made in the twentieth century, the new millennium:

> will require us to share—with our fellow Americans, and, increasingly, with our fellow citizens of the world, the economic benefits of globalization: the political benefits of democracy and human rights; the educational and health benefits of all things modern,

> from the Internet to the genetic encyclopedia, to the mysteries beyond our solar system. (par. 4)

Clinton presents the United States and the watching world with a utopian vision of continued technological progress allied with a greater commitment to redistribution of the fruits of capitalism, which is fundamentally a top-down, conservative vision, a sales pitch for the status quo. In contrast, Mobb Deep in “Quiet Storm” is less optimistic that the events of the twentieth century have provided the foundation of a better future:

> Done been through it all, man
>
> Blood, sweat and tears, niggas is dead and shit
>
> What the fuck else can happen, yo? (1-3).

Mobb Deep looks back over the past and sees an accumulation of violent death so great that it seems to exhaust the future: “What the fuck else can happen?”. Like Public Enemy’s “Welcome to the Terrordome” (1990), which provides the epigraph to the third section—“Sunday”—of *Zone One*, Mobb Deep associates blackness with a kind of apocalyptic temporal dislocation, whereby a long history of racial violence and oppression has left black people in a post-historical, futureless world. But Mobb Deep, like the Quiet Storm in the novel, evokes the idea that writing might be a subterfuge against this condition: “I put my lifetime in between the paper’s lines” (9). In *Zone One*, the sincerest articulations of a future beyond capitalism’s “dreamscape of American prosperity” (63) are in the Quiet Storm’s large-scale writing and in protagonist Mark Spitz’s epiphany that: “the world wasn’t ending: it had ended and now they were in the new place” (257-8). In this new place, the potential for the space between the lines—the negative space—to become the source of meaning comes to fruition: “Let the cracks between things widen until they are no longer cracks but the spaces for new things” (257). This line works as a serviceable formal description of sampling in hip-hop, where the drum break in

popular funk and soul songs becomes the material of new creation. If musical form can be so exploded, Whitehead posits, then why not writing too? The analogy to hip-hop also suggests that the material of resistance is already available within the medium, in the cracks and negative spaces.

In *Uncreative Writing* (2011), Kenneth Goldsmith argues that the internet age, with its "unprecedented amount of available text" (1), calls for us to abandon traditional notions of "originality and creativity" (15). In its place, he suggests, "the digital environment fosters new skill sets that include 'manipulation' and 'management' of the heaps of already existent and ever-increasing language" (15). Writing, he posits, could become "mimetic and replicative, primarily involving methods of distribution, while proposing new platforms of receivership and readership" (15). Crucially, Goldsmith identifies that in the digital age, perhaps counterintuitively, language has a heightened materiality: it is "a substance that moves and morphs through its various states and digital and textual ecosystems" (34). His point is not that everything is text, but that the more digital we become, the more material text becomes, flowing, changing states, and becoming stored like "water" in an "ecosystem" (28). For Goldsmith, uncreative writing is "imbued with celebration, its eyes ablaze with enthusiasm for the future" (4). Although the Quiet Storm's writing is undoubtedly more tentatively utopian, Goldsmith's concept speaks directly to her literary methods; her huge mosaic of writing is an exercise in the manipulation, management, and distribution of what already exists in her environment. Although it would be a stretch to describe Whitehead as an "uncreative writer"—he is far from experimenting with making algorithmic writing machines—Goldsmith's concept is useful both in understanding Whitehead's use of genre and in explicating the formal ways in which Whitehead is able to generate his own utopian future address.

Whitehead's Genres

Critics frequently seek to analyse Whitehead in terms of his "genre-hopping style", to borrow a phrase the author himself uses in an interview with *Literary Hub* (2019). He is often referenced as an exemplar of the "genre turn" in twenty-first century literature, whose origin Andrew Hoberek traces to Jonathan Lethem's hard-boiled detective noir novel *Motherless Brooklyn* winning the 1999 National Book Critics Circle Award for Fiction (2017, 63), incidentally the year Whitehead was first published. Whitehead has written fiction in genres ranging from a zombie novel in *Zone One* to a neo-slave narrative in *The Underground Railroad* to a series of crime novels in *Harlem Shuffle* (2021) and *Crook Manifesto* (2023). His non-fiction includes *The Colossus of New York* (2003), a series of interconnected essays on his home city and a memoir about his participation in the 2011 World Series of Poker, *The Noble Hustle* (2014). In his *New York Times* article "What to Write Next" (2009), Whitehead satirises the tendency among contemporary writers to wear "genre drag", as he refers to it in an interview with *Guernica* (2013, par. 30). In "What to Write Next", Whitehead provides a partly tongue-in-cheek litany of genres for writers to try, including established literary genres like "Allegory" (par. 12) and "Social Realism" (par. 22) and coinages of his own such as the "Southern Novel of Black Misery" (par. 18) and "About a Little Known Historical Fact" (par. 8). Most of these genres apply to Whitehead's own novels; a postscript to the article makes this clear: "Colson Whitehead's novels include 'The Intuitionst' (-Ist) and 'John Henry Days' (encyclopedic)" (par. 25). Some of these descriptors even predate Whitehead's use of them; *The Underground Railroad* is a clear candidate for Southern Novel of Black Misery—"Slip on your sepia-tinted goggles and investigate the legacy of slavery that still reverberates to this day" (par. 18)—and *The Nickel Boys* is a good fit for "About a Little Known Historical Fact", a genre that calls on writers to "find a little-known atrocity and claim squatter's rights" (par. 8). Lee Konstantinou (2017) finds it contradictory that Whitehead would write *The Underground Railroad* having "once written an

editorial mocking the very notion that he might write a novel about slavery" (15), but "What to Write Next" does not mock genres per se, but rather their uses, the way they crystallise ways of writing—often the most marketable and commercially successful ones—that come with huge discursive and ideological baggage. In any case, it is worth noting, Whitehead was already working on *The Underground Railroad* when he penned the article.

There are important and meaningful differences between Whitehead's books, but this thesis aims to explore the ways in which Whitehead imbues his writing with an urgent inquiry into the value of his own medium and its potential to imagine and carve out space for African American futures. One scholar who has tried to unify Whitehead's work is Derek C. Maus in *Understanding Colson Whitehead* (2021). Maus reads Whitehead under the "lenses" of "historiographic metafiction and the postsoul aesthetic" (2014, 7). The former term originates with postmodern theorist Linda Hutcheon, who states that "historiographic metafiction works to situate itself within historical discourse without surrendering its autonomy as fiction" (1989, 4). In other words, this specific type of postmodernist text implicitly claims "historical veracity" whilst simultaneously calling its own claims into question and foregrounding the constructed nature of historical texts, whether fictional or not. Nelson George, who like Whitehead worked as a critic at the *Village Voice*, is the origin of the term "post-soul", using it to distinguish a new generation of African Americans who, with the Civil Rights movement in the rear-view mirror, were no longer invested in the idea of collective Black identity, or at least not one built upon the pillars of Christianity, positive racial uplift, and, of course, soul music.:

> I came up on the we-shall overcome tradition of noble struggle, soul and gospel music, positive images, and the conventional wisdom that civil rights would translate into racial salvation. Today I live in a time of goin'-for-mine materialism, secular beat consciousness, and a more diverse, fragmented, and even postmodern black community (1992, par. 1).

In order to explain the 'aesthetic' part of 'post-soul aesthetic', Maus turns to Trey Ellis, who writes in his influential article "The New Black Aesthetic" (1989) that: "My friends and I—a minority's minority mushrooming within the current black bourgeoisie boom—have inherited an open-ended New Black Aesthetic from a few Seventies pioneers" (234). Maus makes the argument that the main principle of post-soul aesthetics is freedom of expression for black artists, a freedom *to* experiment that is also a freedom *from* the artistic gatekeeping of Black Power and the Black Arts Movement. He argues for Whitehead's affiliation with this position, citing the author's declaration in an early interview with *BOMB* magazine that: "Coming out of the post-Black Arts movement, and having blackness being reaffirmed in literature and drama, I think the young black writers of my generation have the freedom to do what we want" (2001, par. 32). However, if "post-Black Arts" is broadly synonymous with "post-soul", Whitehead is making the point here that he is part of a generation that is *coming out* of the post-Black Arts movement, adding another 'post' prefix to post-soul. Maus's approach also entrenches analysis of Whitehead in the generational tension between the Civil Rights generation and those who came after it. Whilst he is clearly deeply interested in the history and literature of this period, Whitehead is also part of the generation whose 'post-soul' proclivities have since run into the postracial rhetoric around Barack Obama's presidency and the resurgence of explicit racism from the highest sections of society with the 2016 election of Donald Trump.

There is an irony in the fact that *The Underground Railroad*, Whitehead's entry into the African American prestige genre of the neo-slave narrative, earned him more critical and commercial success than any other of his books to date, winning the 2016 National Book Award, the 2017 Arthur C. Clarke Award, as well as the 2017 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. The novel was chosen for Oprah's Book Club and appeared on then President Barack Obama's summer reading list for 2015. A series directed by Barry Jenkins based on the novel was released by Amazon Prime in 2021. The consensus of mainstream reviews was that the errant postmodernist had finally come home to roost in the home of African American literature. The

headline of Michiko Kakutani's review of the novel for the *New York Times* tacks dangerously close to Whitehead's phraseology in "What to Write Next", declaring: "'Underground Railroad' Lays Bare Horrors of Slavery and its Toxic Legacy" (2016). Ron Charles, reviewing the novel for *The Washington Post*, praises Whitehead for modulating the "soaring arias of cleverness" that characterised his earlier books (2016: para. 2). This phrase deserves attention for the concise way in which it admonishes Whitehead for reaching (note the pejorative tone of "cleverness") for the apex of high culture, which Charles characterises as implicitly white through the reference to opera. An absence of cleverness was also expected of the authors of the antebellum fugitive slave narratives. Whitehead's approach to genre is deeply rooted in the history of African American literature, including its inaugural genre.

The Antebellum Slave Narratives: Whitehead in the African American Literary Tradition

The fraught relationship between writing and resistance goes right back to the slave narratives. These were autobiographies by fugitive slaves who had taught themselves to read and escaped from their masters, often via the Underground Railroad, to the relatively safe North where their stories became a crucial tool of the abolitionist movement. The vast majority of these narratives were published in the few decades preceding the American Civil War, such as Harriet Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself* (1861), Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave, Written by Himself* (1845), and Henry Box Brown's *Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown, Written by Himself* (1851). Despite their rootedness in and performance of freedom from slavery, these autobiographies were pulled into seeming uniformity by the gravity of the genre, whose characteristics were often determined by the demands of the abolitionist movement and its

publishers. The genre's strictures are visible even in the titles listed above, in their explicit declaration of their autobiographical writing. This was the first element in a long list of ways in which these authors had to manage the awkward and contradictory demand that they simultaneously prove their competency to write the stories that would be offered as proof of African American equal humanity and disavow their ability to tell them in any way other than via naïve realism. In other words, they had to deny any artistic skill at the same time as deploying it to argue for their humanity and deserving status as full citizens of the United States. This led to "episodic" narratives (James Olney 1985, 150) notable for their sentimental appeal to a white Christian readership. The first African American writers, then, despite the crucial role of literacy in their achievement of freedom from slavery, were compelled to write their autobiographies—simultaneously their proof of humanity—in the straitjacket of the slave narrative form. Nevertheless, the uniformity of these narratives has been overstated, and one of the aims of this thesis is to explore the ways in which Whitehead's work encourages us as readers to reexamine texts from African American literary history, including the slave narratives, and look for ways in which their authors resisted and exploded the conventions of genre. There is creative potential in the paradoxical demands of the slave narrative genre.

Resistance to white supremacy is baked into African American Literature, but that resistance has always been mediated—and resisted—by whiteness. Kevin Quashie, in his book on black interiority and its suppression in contemporary discourse, states that "resistance [. . .] is the dominant expectation of black culture" (3). He sets out the ways in which "public expressiveness and resistance are definitive of black culture" because "of the role the public sphere has played in making, marking, and policing racial difference" (11). He makes the important point that: "One result of this dynamic is a quality of self-consciousness in black literature, a hyperawareness of a reader whose presence—whether critical or sympathetic—shapes what is expressed" (4). This is useful in understanding Whitehead as he makes this hyperawareness a central feature of his writing; he is hyperaware of his hyperawareness, as it

were. This might be why he insists in interviews that he writes for himself and is not directed by a sense of duty or responsibility to blackness, telling *Slate*, for example, that “in fact, I’m not supposed to be doing anything” (2012, par. 16). At the same time, he has at times been explicit in affirming his commitment to writing in the African American tradition. For example, near the beginning of his career, he stated to the *New York Times* with uncharacteristic straightforwardness that: “I am working in the African American literary tradition. That’s my aim and what I see as my mission” (2001 par. 6). I think we can explain these contradictory pronouncements through Quashie’s concept of hyperawareness, which for Whitehead relates to the audience and market expectations that surround “America’s Storyteller”, as he was anointed on the front cover of *TIME* magazine in July 2019. Whilst mainstream cultural expectations of prominent black authors such as Whitehead in the twenty-first century differ from those placed on the authors of the antebellum slave narratives, pressure remains on black writers to represent blackness, educate white people on the horrors of racism—often through emotive writing—and to provide political resistance to white supremacy. Yaa Gyasi (*The Guardian* 2021), discussing the rise in sales of her novel *Homegoing* (2016) following the racist murders of George Floyd and others, writes:

> I make my living off my imagination, but this summer, as I watched *Homegoing* climb back up the New York Times bestseller list in response to its appearance on anti-racist reading lists, I saw again, with no small amount of bile, that I make my living off the articulation of pain too. My own, my people’s. It is wrenching to know that the occasion for the renewed interest in your work is the murders of black people and the subsequent “listening and learning” of white people.

Authors of slave narratives in the antebellum period such as Douglass, Jacobs, and Brown had to find a way of writing that served their genuine and urgent desire to combat slavery, but also had to mediate that desire through the vast and rigid formal structures of white

supremacy that governed the medium of their self-liberation. It is hard to imagine a more complex, public, and restrictive position from which to write one's way to freedom—from which to write one's way into the future. Yet, these authors managed to rescue themselves from the homogenising force of genre in ingenious ways. I argue that Whitehead chooses to write in established genres precisely because they contain these fault lines, places where form has become fixed enough to be exploded, to be repurposed. In mathematics, Gödel's theorem proves that every mathematical system intrinsically produces proof of its own incompleteness. A literary genre does not claim access to a priori truth in the same way as a mathematical system, but it is a way of knowing and perceiving the world. A genre is an epistemological system. As Heather Murray writes, "there is no dividing line between 'literacy' and the knowledge of textual conventions" (2009, 201); therefore, the conventions of genre are like very legible surfaces, surfaces that advertise their own legibility.

One issue here is that genres themselves are necessarily unstable categories, even if critical "border policing" of the "ever-shifting ecology" of genre (Frelik 2011, 40) tries to convince us otherwise. In discussing genre, I do not want to reify the opposition of genre and literary fiction. For one thing, many of the genres to which Whitehead turns are considered 'literary', such as the neo-slave narrative, or the realist bildungsroman (*Sag Harbour*, 2009). Genres almost never appear alone but rather in "genre systems" in which different genres interact. Genres begin when writing reaches a certain elusive point where it tends powerfully towards the conventional—when forms of expression, storytelling, narrative style and innumerable other elements of writing collect around the gravitational centre of convention. To return to Benjamin's "Dream Kitsch", taking the "dream" in Whitehead's imagination to loosely correlate to the American Dream of meritocratic consumer capitalism, genre is language "worn through by habit and garnished with cheap maxims. The side which things turn towards the dream is kitsch" (236). Whitehead treats genre like kitsch: as an instance of language that is both dead, in the sense that its meaning is diminished, and alive in the immanent sense of having "turned

towards the dream". It is also important to note that genre is not just a writing practice but a reading one; how a reader understands the genre of a text affects how it is read.

This thesis explores Whitehead's attention to the political uses of the medium of writing, especially in regard to the question of whether writing can bring about change in the world, and, if so, how. I root Whitehead's approach in his profound critical and imaginative investment in African American literature and culture—critical because Whitehead's work is constantly 'reading' other texts; the slave narratives, Ralph Ellison, and Toni Morrison feature heavily, for example. My aim in this thesis is also to suggest that Whitehead's work—his fiction and his non-fiction—have a tight thematic unity that does not detract from his individual texts but rather advances something like a theory of resistance through writing. A tentatively utopian thread runs throughout his work, suggesting that through the explosion of familiar materials, a means of accessing a future ostensibly foreclosed by capitalism's continual self-reproduction might be opened up. Through this analysis, I hope to contribute to our critical understanding of Whiteheadand the reception and use of African American literature in contemporary writing. I hope to contribute to contemporary debates around the viability of black futures under capitalism in an era when black Americans probably have greater freedom to create, consume, and receive the financial rewards of mainstream culture than ever before, but racial inequality persists and, according to Nazgol Ghandnoosh for *The Sentencing Project* (2023) "one in five black men born in 2001 is likely to experience imprisonment within their lifetime" (par. 1). Ghandnoosh affirms that "the United States remains fully in the era of mass incarceration" (par. 3) and that "progress in reducing racial disparity in the criminal legal system is incomplete and at risk of stalling or being reversed" (par. 2). In the context of such carceral futures and the re-election of Donald Trump, Whitehead's writing offers a powerful statement of belief—however heavily caveated—in the idea that art can, and must, change the world.

I use the lower-case adjective "black" throughout this thesis, unless the upper-case version is more apt to the specific historical circumstance under discussion, mainly because Whitehead himself uses it in his own non-fiction. Whilst acknowledging that the last five years or so have seen a resurgence in the use of the capitalised "Black", I think that as a white writer myself it is important not to make political choices that contradict Whitehead's own. Whilst Whitehead has not to my knowledge discussed his use of the lower-case 'b', I suggest that he would likely have some sympathy with Minna Salami's concern that when it comes to the capitalised 'B', "stylistic changes simply show how the conversations about race are circular and repetitive. Even when they are in favour of black liberation, they still inadvertently narrow the black experience" (*The Guardian* 2021, par. 4). Salami asserts that "it should not be in the hands of institutions and their guidelines to dictate what is best for black people at large: it is the individual author who should make their choice" (par. 6). For this reason, I follow Whitehead's own preferred usage.

In Chapter One, I explore Whitehead's use of the zombie genre—as much a film genre as a literary one—in *Zone One* to create the apocalyptic conditions that allow capitalist modernity, epitomised in the city of New York, to be erased. This erasure raises the question of what comes next. The novel stages the futile attempt to resurrect the pre-apocalyptic system, but it becomes clear that the zombie erasure will eventually be complete and the old world is unrecoverable, and the novel suggests via the Quiet Storm's mosaic that the most viable route to a future is through an aesthetics that facilitates its imagination. The novel, as pessimistic as its view of capitalist modernity's apocalyptic nature is, ultimately makes a powerful argument for the importance of artistic innovation in the ongoing project of trying to imagine a future after capitalism.

In Chapter Two, I make the argument that in *The Underground Railroad*, Whitehead affirms the power of writing to make incursions into the future through his deployment of an

'underground' narrator in the character of Homer. Critics have rarely commented on Homer's role in the novel and tend to assume that an extradiegetic third-person narrator tells the story, perhaps encouraged by a perceived straightforwardness in comparison to Whitehead's previous work. Homer, as the narrator of *The Underground Railroad*, is a kind of Afrofuturist trickster, a reader and a writer who is so often the device through which Whitehead explores the potential of writing to reinscribe the past to open up paths that lead to potential futures. By remaining 'underground', he is able to use his literacy not to prove his humanity, as the authors of antebellum slave narratives were expected to do, but to advance the cause of African American freedom. Homer represents and enacts the African American tradition of using literacy for subterfuge, as a tool of liberation that can foster the creation of an aesthetics that can address radical futures. Through the novel's complex web of intertextual allusion and its reinscription of genre, channelled through Homer's subversive narration, Whitehead affirms and reinscribes the African American tradition of stealthily gesturing towards the contours of the future.

In Chapter Three, I argue that *The Nickel Boys* is a kind of prequel to *Zone One*, advancing a buried horror narrative that works in dialectical opposition to the bildungsroman that is established through the character of Elwood. This horror narrative sustains the familiar Whitehead themes of the return of history's dead and the failure to progress beyond repetitive cycles of capitalist modernity that enshrine racist structures. *The Nickel Boys* makes the argument that despite the commitment and bravery of, for example, exponents of the Civil Rights movement, American history remains a horrific repetitive cycle whose dependence on racism leaves it spiralling towards apocalypse. However, as in *Zone One* and *The Underground Railroad*, Whitehead invests in the liberatory power of writing to gesture towards radical futures, creating a scene of utopian reading that transcends the novel's Afropessimistic horror narrative. Written under the first presidency of Donald Trump, this utopian thread is more submerged in *The Nickel Boys* than in Whitehead's previous work; nevertheless, the author continues his

commitment to aesthetics, and writing in particular, as the most viable route out of the cycles of racial oppression upon which capitalist modernity depends.

Chapter One: Writing in the Dust: Colson Whitehead's *Zone One*

In the Introduction to this thesis, I discussed Cole's depiction in *Open City* of the past's illegibility in the present through protagonist Julius's encounter with the African Burial Ground in New York. Cole's portrayal of the tension between, on the one hand, the endless regeneration of the city from the materials of its own history and, on the other, the pain and suffering of the enslaved African Americans whose labour built New York—which stands metonymically for America itself— leaves open a question which is at the heart of Whitehead's *Zone One*: if the present is generated from the reconstituted material of the past, and that past speaks to the present in screams of pain, what kind of future is it possible to imagine, and how are we to begin imagining it?

This chapter explores how Whitehead seeks answers to this question in *Zone One*. The work of Walter Benjamin is important both to the aesthetics and philosophical considerations of Whitehead's novel. Benjamin's preoccupation with the relationship between urban modernity and time helps Whitehead to theorise how the racism that underpinned slavery in the United States has continued to structure not only the present, but also the possible futures that are generated from that present. Whitehead uses the zombie apocalypse genre to thrust the reader into a world in which every institution of twenty-first-century capitalist society is threatened with extinction. At the same time, Whitehead's apocalypse is less about enacting a severance from contemporary time—a temporal break in human history—and more about the revelation of the apocalyptic logic that has been instilled in capitalist modernity since its inception. Dan Sinykin (2020) argues that the "long downturn" in American economic history, that is, "from the end of the postwar boom" in the United States up to the present, "led to the betrayal of civil rights by the government's failure to pursue economic justice" (1). Sinykin states that, "Apocalypse is a political literary form. During the long downturn, writers adopted it in an

attempt to resolve what felt like insurmountable crises for political agency" (2). The issue with this narrative is it fails to account for the apocalyptic logic of modernity itself. Apocalypse can stand for both the imagined collapse of civilization and the horrific nature of modernity itself when considered from an African American point of view. The failure to deliver on the legal promise of Civil Rights after 1964 is significant, but also just one more such failure.

Understood in this polyvalent way, the apocalyptic mode produces the urgent question of whether and how humanity can interrupt the apocalyptic trajectory of contemporary time—in other words, whether we can resist the urge to respond to the apocalypse by simply renewing our implication in the structures that have led us to the brink of destruction by subordinating human beings, through racial slavery, for example, to the interests of capital. In *Zone One*, the zombies may represent only a different kind of continuity for an already zombified society, but they also provide the opportunity for an authentic break since their waves of destruction are absolute. This chapter explores how Whitehead uses the zombie apocalypse to carve open the space for a genuine futurity by turning to the act of artistic creation as the only viable means of access. His textual New York is constructed to interact with, to become part of, the real city, to break down its ossified structures and find new forms of language among the ruins. Whitehead's novel makes the powerful argument, in favour of the value of art, that writing in the dust of capitalist modernity's obliteration is the only way out of its grip on our lives and desires.

One of the most convincing ways in which Whitehead constructs this argument is through *Zone One*'s intertexts. Whitehead's textual New York is built from, and participates in, other textual New Yorks. His own non-fiction work *The Colossus of New York* (2003, hereafter *Colossus*) and Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), which is deeply embedded in the other novels I analyse in this thesis too, are crucial intertexts. By shifting back and forth between these and *Zone One*, this chapter not only illuminates Whitehead's novel but also demonstrates that the interactions of textual cities—the layering and building up of fictional real estate—plays

an important part in the way real cities are lived in and experienced. As well as *Colossus* and *Invisible Man*, I also examine *Zone One*'s relationship to the zombie films of George Romero. Film plays a vital role in informing *Zone One*'s aesthetics, since it mediates between world and text; a film is created by people interacting with the physical world and acting their parts, but the finished product is a two-dimensional fictional projection. Finally, I interrogate *Zone One*'s evocation of layered urban histories, arguing that the novel's complex deployment of surface and depth—its space-time dimensionalities, as it were—complicates scholarly binaries often framed as surface and depth (or suspicious) reading, or critique and postcritique, that have been arenas of recent academic debate around the politics of literature.

The African Burial Ground was an eighteenth-century cemetery for New York's mostly enslaved black population. Human remains had been found on the site before, but it was rediscovered in 1991 when the US General Services Administration (GSA) tried to build an office block there and uncovered human remains. In 2009, the official archaeological report, *The New York African Burial Ground: Unearthing the African Presence in Colonial New York*, eventually commissioned following protests and legal interventions by the local African American community, estimated that despite only just over four hundred burials being excavated at the site, fifteen thousand Africans and their descendants were likely to have been interred there (Jackson et al., 70). The monument that now stands at the Burial Ground was designed by architect Rodney Leon and made a National Historic Landmark in 1993. From an aerial perspective, it looks textual, like an architectural hieroglyph. The inside walls of the monument evoke a range of the textual cultures of those buried beneath it. There is the Nsbidi symbol, representing the oldest form of African writing after Egyptian hieroglyphics, for example, and a Bakongo cosmogram that depicts the interaction of the living and the dead.

Mark Spitz, the protagonist of Whitehead's *Zone One* (2011)—published in the same year as *Open City*—has his own encounter with the African Burial Ground. Walking down

"unruined" Duane Street, which marks its northern boundary, Spitz sees no signs of the ongoing zombie apocalypse: "From time to time Mark Spitz happened upon these places in Zone One, where he strolled down a movie set, earning scale as an extra in a period piece about the dead world" (64). Whitehead fuses pre-apocalyptic, apocalyptic, and historical time through this single image, as the "dead world" stands for the world that has died and is evoked in the unreality of a movie set, the world of the novel's present now populated by the walking dead, and the dead interred in the African Burial Ground.

Whitehead's work is characterised by this complex, layered way of representing time. Daniel Grausam argues that *Zone One*, along with *The Intuitionist* (1999) and *The Underground Railroad* (2016), is structured by a "multi-temporal present" (2017: 118). For Grausam, this temporal mode "frustrate[s] any clear notion of a chronotope" (117) in the novel. The apocalyptic time experienced by Mark Spitz is essentially a reiteration of the past from which it emerged. Apocalyptic and contemporary time—as in the reader's pre-apocalyptic present—are represented as mutually constitutive. In the opening pages of the novel, as Spitz recalls visiting his Uncle Lloyd in New York as a child, when the city was a dream of the future to him, the reader is confronted with a pre-apocalyptic temporality that is already saturated with its own zombification. Passersby are "lurching specimen[s]" displaying "cow-eyed vacancy" (3). Mark Spitz's parents' hands lie "dead on his shoulders, year after year" in the family photograph, which is "always the same composition" (4). Likewise, pre-apocalyptic time persists after the zombie hordes have overrun New York. Gary, Spitz's fellow sweeper, tasked with clearing zombies from abandoned Manhattan buildings, "was scarcely in better shape than the creatures they were sent to eradicate" (22). His "granite complexion, gray and pitted skin" are complemented by "permanently sooted" eye sockets and "scooped out" cheeks which all suggests to Mark Spitz a "subcutaneous harrowing" in Gary caused by long exposure to the stresses of survival in an apocalyptic nightmare (22). However, "the same ill demeanor" (22) was just as present in a photo of Gary taken on his sixth birthday; nothing has changed.

For Grausam, as well as critics like Leif Sorensen (2014), *Zone One*'s conflation of pre-apocalyptic and apocalyptic time—and indeed Whitehead's treatment of temporality more generally—boils down to a form of economic critique. Whilst valuable, this perspective is ultimately reductive and binds Whitehead's fiction too tightly to a critique of specific economic histories, which in turn risks bypassing *Zone One*'s positive engagement with political aesthetics. Grausam finds across Whitehead's career in fiction a "critique of the privatization of public life" (126) and a "critique of the effects of Reagan-era deregulation" (130). Sorensen's argument centres on *Zone One* as a novel defined by its "commitment to narrative closure" (569). The zombies prevail and Mark Spitz elects to join their number rather than continue working to prop up the American Phoenix project to which he had been an initial subscriber: "The city could be restored. When they were finished it could be something of what it had been. They would force a resemblance upon it [. . .] in increments until it was the old skyline again, ingenious and defiant" (102-3). The American Phoenix project, located in Buffalo, is described on three separate occasions as a "reboot" of the pre-apocalyptic world (35, 64, 79). For Sorensen, Whitehead positions *Zone One* "against the late-capitalist fantasy of a future that consists of an endless reproduction of the present" (561). Mark Spitz eventually concludes that the old New York will not return:

> He didn't know if the world was doomed or saved, but whatever the next thing was, it would not look like what came before. There were no intersections with the avenues of Buffalo's shimmering reconstructions, its boulevards did not cross their simulations and dioramas of futurity (257).

This realisation effectively ends the novel, which has been generating narrative tension from the possibility that Mark Spitz and the wider American Phoenix project will succeed in their mission to reinstate normality. As Carl Joseph Swanson points out, "the characters' diegetic struggle to survive is also an ultradiegetic struggle to maintain the existence of narrative as

such" (2013, 386). Satirically playing on the trope that black people cannot swim, *Zone One* ends with Mark Spitz choosing the "inhuman scroll" of the zombies "as an argument" (246) ultimately more compelling than the language of "rebranding survival" (79): "You have to learn how to swim sometime. He opened the door and walked into the sea of the dead" (259).

This "commitment to closure," as Sorensen sees it, is "a powerful expression of dissent from the commitment to futurism" (561) that "encourages us to question the logic of deferral" that is the hallmark of late-capitalist futurism (590). "Sometimes", Sorensen concludes, "the end does come" (590). There is no doubt that Grausam and Sorensen are right that *Zone One*—and indeed Whitehead's fiction more generally—takes aim at the hollowing out of human experience that is symptomatic of the novel's contemporary economic moment, whether it be termed neoliberalism (Grausam) or late-capitalism (Sorensen). However, I argue that the scope of Whitehead's project in *Zone One* extends beyond economic analysis in important ways. Through its rich engagement with Walter Benjamin, with African American history and literature—especially the apocalyptic tradition—and with depictions of artistic creation within the novel, *Zone One* makes a powerful argument that the creation of art is the most viable way of accessing a future that exceeds the terms of the present in a meaningful way. Moreover, by reading *Zone One* as a text that interacts with the city of New York, in part by representing the city itself as a text, it becomes clear that Whitehead is making the case that writing itself can generate futurity. Admittedly, this optimistic affirmation of the power of creation in *Zone One* exists in constant dialectic opposition to the sense that artistic incursions out of the present will buckle under the crushing weight of history. Nevertheless, beneath *Zone One* is a profound affirmation of the power of writing and artistic creation. It is a novel that searches for revelation—both of untold, unsettled histories and of possible futures—in the apocalyptic.

Walter Benjamin and Kitsch: Modernity's Best Part

The unattributed epigram to the first section of *Zone One*, "Friday", is adapted from a 1927 essay of Walter Benjamin, "Dream Kitsch", in which he wrote gnomically, "No longer does the dream reveal a blue horizon. The dream has grown gray. The gray coating of dust on things is its best part" (1). Whitehead's version emphasises spatial depth by substituting *layer* for *coating* and condenses Benjamin's view of dustiness as a specific condition of modernity into the present perfect of *has become*: "The gray layer of dust covering things has become their best part" (1). Considering the complex and ambivalent status of dust in Benjamin's Arcades Project, to which "Dream Kitsch" was an immediate predecessor, Teresa Stoppani (2007) explains that, on the one hand, dust is a marker of modern stasis, "associated with greyness, obsolescence, and boredom" (544)—what Susan Buck-Morss calls "history's motionlessness" (1989, 228)—but, on the other, dust also has vast generative potential. As Stoppani suggests, dust:

> Preserves and constantly re-enacts the ambiguities and multiplicities of time. It becomes the material and also the agent for the project, an unstable construction that uncovers and unearths objects and spaces, reactivating them in new relationships of tension between fragments (544).

As both a marker of stasis—the grinding to a halt of history under modernity's technological paradigm—and a creative resource of enormous power, dust is more significant for the way it "reveals and exposes, knowing no boundaries" (545) than its covering of things.

The significance of dust is established in the novel's opening pages, which describe Mark Spitz's visit to his Uncle Lloyd's apartment as a child, which is stuffed with "the latest permutations in home entertainment" (4). Uncle Lloyd is the ultimate modern citizen, committed to technological novelty: "The televisions were the newest, the biggest, levitating in space and pulsing with a host of extravagant functions" (4). But Whitehead makes clear that

each iteration of new technology is really a *re*iteration. Obsolescence is always just around the corner; Uncle Lloyd “maintained a mausoleum of remotes” (4). The young Mark Spitz is attracted to the dustiness that is emblematic of this cycle of novelty and obsolescence: “He dragged a finger down their dark surfaces and then huffed on them and wiped the marks with his polo shirt” (4). In “Dream Kitsch”, Benjamin sees dust as emblematic of an object’s acquisition of obsolescence, when “technology consigns the outer image of things to a long farewell” (236). “It is then”, Benjamin writes, “that the hand retrieves this outer cast in dreams and, even as they are slipping away, makes contact with familiar contours” (236). Through this process of retrieval, the object returns as kitsch. Notably, Whitehead echoes Benjamin’s vocabulary here in *Zone One*, describing the popular feeling that things could return to normal as “the contours of the new optimism” (35). As Benjamin puts it, “the side which things turn towards the dream is kitsch” (236). This recycling of objects into kitsch at “their most threadbare and timeworn point” (236) is symptomatic of the temporal inertia of modernity, in which futurity is foreclosed by a failure in the present to bring it into being.

In the apocalyptic New York of *Zone One*, the dust that is mostly figurative in Benjamin is represented by the literal ash that gusts “in turbulent flakes across downtown” (187) from the fleet of mobile incinerators that “burned the bodies of the dead with uncanny efficiency” (187). Like dust, the ash displays the logic of concealment and revelation: “The ash smeared the city’s palette into a gray hush on the best of days, but introduce clouds and a little bit of precip and the city became an altar to obscurity” (8). The familiar city is obscured, but the ash suggests a new configuration of the urban geography to Mark Spitz: “He was an insect exploring a gravestone: the words and names were crevasses to get lost in, looming and meaningless” (8). Here the textual city is overwhelming and disorientating, too large and close to be apprehended. The depiction of city streets as words engraved on a tombstone suggests the stasis of their signification, their death. This in an image of language itself at its most “threadbare and timeworn point” (236). New York is revealed by the “dead weather” (189) of ash as a city built

upon death, a necropolis. The ashen city is engraved, but Mark cannot read it from his street-level perspective. Just as Achille Mbembe argued in *Necropolitics* (2019) for the necessity of finding a language that can "return to life what had been abandoned to the power of death", one which is able to "reopen access to the deposits of the future" (2019, 6), *Zone One*'s falling ash, the "gray layer of dust covering things", works to reveal New York's potential as a space in which this language can evolve, precipitated by the zombie apocalypse.

Originally published with the subtitle "Gloss on Surrealism" (236), "Dream Kitsch" is concerned with the ways in which Benjamin's contemporary surrealist poets and artists found creative methods of generating meaning beyond the repetitive logic of modernity. As Benjamin saw it, surrealism aimed to "blaze a way into the heart of things abolished or superseded, to decipher the contours of the banal as rebus" (237). As Jeremy Tambling points out, Sigmund Freud used the rebus as a symbol of the linguistic nature of dream images (2009, 160). The rebus, for Freud in *The Interpretation of Dreams*, is "a picture-puzzle" whose solution is linguistic: "Now a dream is such a picture-puzzle, and our predecessors in the art of dream-interpretation have made the mistake of judging the rebus as an artistic composition" (1997, 170). He argues that "The dream-content is, as it were, presented in hieroglyphics, whose symbols must be translated, one by one, into the language of the dream-thoughts" (169). As Tambling concludes, then, the rebus is ultimately "a form of writing" (160). Thus, for Benjamin, kitsch objects retrieved from obsolescence have the potential to function, through written creative analysis and interpretation, as rebuses.

Most important for my purposes here is the way Freud informs Benjamin's, and in turn Whitehead's, approach to artistic creativity, especially in relation to the notion of futurity. Whitehead's interest in Benjamin's struggle with the production of futurity under modernity—whose fundamental logic of repetition Whitehead represents as continuous from Benjamin's twentieth-century Europe to his own contemporary New York—is evidenced through his

engagement with thesis IX of Benjamin's "Theses on the Philosophy of History", first published posthumously in 1942. The ninth thesis takes as its subject Paul Klee's famous oil transfer watercolour monoprint, 'Angelus Novus' (1920), which, as O. K. Werckmeister (1996) notes, Benjamin had owned, thought about, and written about since 1921 (242). Werckmeister outlines the exegetical history of the image as "an icon of the left", asserting that through its critique of Marxist teleological progress it "has become a meditative image [. . .] for a dissident mentality vacillating between historical abstraction and political projection, between despondency and defiance, between assault and retreat" (242).

Unwillingly propelled into a future he cannot encounter, Benjamin's angel is compelled to spend eternity contemplating the "single catastrophe" of history, the accumulated and still accumulating suffering of the dead. For the angel of history, the Marxist promise of socialism after capitalism is a fantasy. This same sense of futurity foreclosed by history is manifested in *Zone One*. When a Lieutenant repeats to Mark Spitz what is presumably an American Phoenix slogan, "'The mighty Phoenix shall spread its wings'" (93), the parallels with Benjamin's angel are clear. The implication, of course, is that the American Phoenix project is merely an attempt to restore the angel of history to, as it were, his back to the future position. Even the "stragglers" (33)—mysteriously passive zombies who simply stand fixated, "foul and oblivious. Caught in a web" (96)—seem to emulate the angel of history. They are "weeping angels and sooted cherubs, standing over their own graves" (86).

Whether what has been smashed can be made whole is an open question, but Whitehead is able to do one thing that the angel of history cannot—he can awaken the dead. Jessica Hurley (2015) points out that, "In the figure of the zombie, the material body itself sediments national history onto its surface, as the rotting and peeling skin of the creature holds in tension the processes of racialization and the disavowal of America's racist histories" (314). Hurley's argument is that *Zone One*'s zombies are the "nightmare" resulting from "the

contemporary fantasy of the postracial" (330). Ramón Saldívar (2013) makes a similar point in that, only "in a country populated by the living dead who nostalgically linger among the ruins of their former lives, might we finally, unequivocally, encounter a postracial era" (13). Grace Heneks (2018), in her cultural history of the zombie figure, also focuses on Whitehead's satirically ironic take on postracialism, asserting that:

> Whitehead uses a historically racialized trope that America has appropriated (and whitewashed) as its own—the zombie—to both understand and come to terms with the dominant society, not to assimilate, but rather to speak to the ways in which post-racial thinking hurts everyone (76).

For Hurley, the zombies are the refutation of a white supremacist biopolitical regime that sustains itself through "resolute ahistoricism" (330). She concludes that the "relentless presence of the disposed-of Other" (330) is *Zone One*'s offering of hope for the future: "The nightmare called history might yet be a line of resistance against the intolerable present" (331). However, while Hurley is right that we should read the zombie presence as a return of history with a vengeance to the present, I argue that this element of the novel—which emphasises the destructive power of the nightmare of history let loose—functions in dialectical relation in *Zone One* to a hope of futurity that emerges from the act of artistic creation.

Because of this optimistic belief in the power of artistic work to produce routes to alternative possible futures, I argue that Whitehead—perhaps counterintuitively given his reputation for irony and the interrogation of political blackness—can be aligned with the futurism, if not the typical aesthetics, of Afrofuturism. As I discuss in the introduction to this thesis, it is not easy to summarize the heterogeneous and often contradictory goals expressed by those who identify as Afrofuturists or express a stake in the movement. However, few would argue with Kodwo Eshun's assertion in his essay "Further Considerations of Afrofuturism" (2003) that the movement "aims to extend that tradition [of countermemory] by reorienting the

intercultural vectors of Black Atlantic temporality towards the proleptic" (289). Eshun's essay is also instructive here because it combines critical analysis with creative writing, weaving in an italicised exercise in posthuman science fiction that asks the reader to "*Imagine a team of African archaeologists from the future—some silicon, some carbon, some wet, some dry—excavating a site, a museum from their past*" (287). Finding "*ruined documents*" and "*leaking discs*" (287), Eshun's future archaeologists are "*touched by the seriousness of those founding mothers and fathers of Afrofuturism, by the responsibility they showed towards the not-yet, towards becoming*" (289). Like Whitehead after him, Eshun ultimately places the most politically meaningful form of prolepsis in the hands of the artist.

An immediately striking way in which *Zone One* makes an artistic gesture to futurity is through the character known as The Quiet Storm, who baffles Mark Spitz and her other wrecker subordinates—tasked with clearing New York's highways of abandoned vehicles—with her obsession over the placement of recovered cars. Dissimulating that she is simply following orders, The Quiet Storm progresses her own artistic project single-mindedly, only occasionally hinting at its existence: "'I need some cars," the Quiet Storm told Mark Spitz. 'It's coming together in my mind'" (144). "The Quiet Storm", Mark Spitz observes, "favored patterns divisible by five, and grouped them by general size and occasionally by color, sometimes even towing a car for miles to fulfil her conception" (142). The narrative hints at the linguistic nature of her creation: "The Quiet Storm consulted her tablet, skittering the stylus over the computer maps, effecting hieroglyphic notations" (142). Only later, from the elevated perspective of a helicopter, does Mark Spitz see her project for what it really is—written language addressed to: "Gods and aliens, anyone who looks down at the right time, from the right perspective" (233). The linguistic nature of her creation is clear: "While the other wreckers [. . .] could only perceive the wasteland on its edge, the Quiet Storm was in the sky, inventing her alphabet and making declarations in a row of five green hatchbacks parked perpendicular to the median" (232). "The grammar", Mark Spitz realises, "lurked in the numbers and colors, the meaning encoded in the spaces between

the vehicular syllables, half a mile, quarter mile" (232). The Quiet Storm's language remains illegible to Mark Spitz, who remarks, "'We don't know how to read it yet. All we can do right now is pay witness'", but he recognises it as written art with a proleptic purpose: "She wrote her way into the future" (233). In contrast to the American Phoenix's "machinations and narratives of replenishment" are "people like the Quiet Storm, who carved their own pawns and rooks out of the weak clay and deployed them across the board, engaged in their own strategic reconstructions" (233). *Reconstruction* is what the *Zone One*'s authorities, based in Buffalo, call their efforts to restore technological modernity to New York, but it also references the years immediately following the American Civil War (1861-65), during which Abraham Lincoln's Gettysburg Address promise that "this nation, under God, shall have a new birth of freedom" slowly withered on the vine. As John David Smith affirms, "By the mid-1870s, the successes of Reconstruction already had begun to flicker and Jim Crow had begun to flame" (2016, 38). Readers of *Zone One* are thus reminded that reconstructions of the past have not meant revolutionary change, but the reconstruction of what came before, that is, racism and the laws, institutions, and cultural practices that sustain it. In a tone of nostalgia for an extinguished utopian hope, W. E. B. Du Bois lamented in 1935 that "we should be living today in a different world" (708). *Zone One* makes it clear that that world has still not arrived.

Hoberek recognises the significance of this passage of the novel, reading it as a "utopian" gesture (2012, 412). Reading *Zone One* alongside T.S. Eliot's poem *The Waste Land* (1922), Hoberek affirms that the Quiet Storm is the artist who "shores her fragments [. . .] not to defend an imagined past, but rather to speak to a future we have yet to visit" (413). Hoberek's reading isolates the Quiet Storm's covert artistic operations as a moment of utopian hope, an embryonic gesture to futurity that makes the argument that "the goal of art" is the "bodying forth of the new forms that might emerge from the breakdown (however painful) of the old" (413). Hoberek's analysis here is analogous to Benjamin's assertion in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" that: "It has always been among art's most important functions to

generate a demand for whose full satisfaction the time has not yet come" (2009, 252). Alexander Moran (2019) makes a claim parallel to Hoberek's, asserting that the Quiet Storm's artwork is a "micropolitical act" (239). Moran mobilises John Fiske's contention that, in contrast to popular art, "there is little historical evidence to suggest that any form of radical art has produced a discernible political or social effectivity" (2010, 151). For Moran, the Quiet Storm's intervention on the highway is an act of resistance because it is "formed in negotiation and dissent with the demands of power structures" (239). He argues that this is indicative of Whitehead's own critical deployment of genre. Just as the Quiet Storm's "messages represent her making do with what she has", Moran contends, "popular forms such as genres are [. . .] reflective of negotiations and resistance within power structures that are the product of the art of making do" (239). The relationship between the writer and generic forms in Moran's model is akin to that between the dream and kitsch in Benjamin's essay.

Whitehead's approach to genre in *Zone One* can thus be understood as the attempt to grasp, in Benjamin's phrasing, "the side worn through by habit and garnished with cheap maxims" (236); the dusty "familiar contours" (236) of genre are those through which the tools to challenge hegemonic discourses can be found. Hoberek and Moran both suggest that we pay critical attention to the ways in which Whitehead centres the revolutionary potential of writing and artistic practice. Hoberek places Whitehead squarely in a modernist tradition by reading *Zone One* through *The Waste Land*, whereas Moran emphasises the way that "popular cultural products, like genres, are shaped and determined by power structures" (230). By using genre to make this point, Moran contends, authors such as Whitehead not only inaugurate new approaches to writing genre, but also necessitate "a different type of *reading*" (230, italics in original). I would go further: *Zone One* does not only argue for the creation of new forms, but is itself, in Hoberek's terms, such a "bodying forth". We can read the Quiet Storm's creation as not merely a representation of a genuinely new way of writing, but also as an exhortation to read *Zone One* itself differently. In other words, what if the way out of the novel's central problem—

that the future is foreclosed by the process of continually burying the past in order to reconstitute the present under a late-capitalist or neoliberal paradigm—is contained within the novel itself? In Benjamin's ninth thesis, the "storm blowing in from Paradise" prevents the angel from awakening the dead and progressing historical time, but the Quiet Storm in *Zone One* has a very different role. She is the force that compels the reader to aspire to the perspective of "Gods and aliens".

Cole also imagines this perspective on New York in *Open City*. In the opening pages of the novel, Julius watches migrating geese and "wondered how our life below might look from their perspective, and imagined that, were they ever to indulge in such speculation, the high-rises might seem to them like firs massed in a grove" (4). Julius fixates on birds throughout *Open City* and they frequently remind him of the perspective of God: "The birds in flight were proof that we, too, were under Heaven's protection" (181). God is the ultimate guarantor of meaning, of human purpose, of futurity, so simply knowing that the aerial perspective exists and is experienced by birds provides solace to Julius. When he finds himself on a plane, he thinks about "the numberless dead, in forgotten cities, necropoli, catacombs" (94). But like the angel of history—Cole cites Benjamin as a writer "who shaped my sensibility" (2019, para. 4)—he can only ever contemplate, never access these dead, and the aerial perspective is interrupted by the return to the present: "As we broke through the lower bank of clouds, I saw the city spread across the low landscape" (94). The novel ends with a disturbing account of the deaths of large numbers of birds in 1888 as a result of disorientation by the Statue of Liberty's flame, the same one that "guided ships into Manhattan's harbor" (258). 1888 falls during the so-called Gilded Age, in which America rapidly industrialised due to the immigration of unskilled labourers from Europe. At the same time, African Americans had seen the promises of Reconstruction evaporate as Jim Crow laws came into force and wealth inequality grew. Indeed, Julius remarks on how the powerful American Dream symbolism of the Statue of Liberty and Ellis Island has arisen predominantly from a white European experience of entering the United States: "Ellis

Island was a symbol mostly for European refugees. Blacks, 'we blacks,' had known rougher ports of entry" (57). Cole connects the deaths of Manhattan's birds, and thus their privileged perspective, to industrial modernity and the establishment of the modern United States, which is contextualised by colonialism and racism throughout the novel. He also invokes the discourse of scientific rationalism, telling of Manhattan's military commander Colonel Tassin, who "undertook a government system of records" so that any birds that happened to die in the future [. . .] would be retained in the service of science" (259). The novel ends with the line: "On the morning of October 13, for example, 175 wrens had been gathered in, all dead of the impact, although the night just past hadn't been particularly windy or dark" (259). The narrative of *Open City* is therefore bracketed by the rise of modernity, which comes with its logic of death, as Julius observes watching people descend into the subway system early in the novel: "I felt that all of the human race were rushing, pushed by a counterinstinctive death drive, into movable catacombs" (7). When he learns about the dead wrens, Julius is like Benjamin's angel, a powerless observer of the accumulating pile of debris that is history's dead.

"That Expired Calendar": Whitehead's Textual New York

Whitehead has always been interested in reading and writing cities, specifically New York, in ways that destabilise our sense of what they are and how they work. Derek C. Maus suggests the continuity of Whitehead's New York writing by classifying *Zone One* alongside the non-fiction essay collection *Colossus* and *Sag Harbour* (2009) as his "New York Trilogy" (2021, 89), and more recently, his 2021 novel *Harlem Shuffle*. *Colossus* is a crucial intertext for *Zone One* because it establishes the particular way that he understands the modern metropolis. Firstly, both *Colossus* and *Zone One* not only seek to *represent* New York, but to *participate* in it. They both make the argument that to write about a city, to make it textual, is to interact with it and contribute to it, to inscribe a layer of text on its surface. Whitehead suggests that cities are

inherently textual, and that textual cities like *Colossus* and *Zone One* can occupy actual space, that they have an architecture and four-dimensionality that, whilst not real in the sense that a building is real, can affect how we read and understand the physical urban environment. The written city thus becomes an interactive part of the actual city. It is assimilated into its production of meaning and experience. This aspect of Whitehead's city writing is intimately connected to his conception of modern metropolitan temporality. *Zone One*'s narrative moves seamlessly back and forth between its characters' mental projections of New York and the actual city, so that the imaginary and the real become part of the same medium. Modern New York, *Colossus* and *Zone One* both reveal, is a monstrous machine, or a mechanistic monster, made up of its sedimented dead and sustained by its citizens' mental projections of it. This image of the modern city conscripts all its organic matter, inorganic matter, text, and the mental experiences of its citizens into the shared medium of the monster, whose true form is visible by its presence in a zombie novel.

Whitehead's textualised, shifting cities have often been misunderstood by critics. Stephanie Li (2008), for example, criticises *Colossus* for Whitehead's perceived failure to properly countenance the political significance of the 9/11 attacks on the United States (94). But Whitehead, however, develops in *Colossus* a methodology for writing cities that reappears fully-fledged in *Zone One*. Li observes that the defining characteristic of New York as represented in *Colossus* is its "mutability" (82). Whitehead makes clear in the opening essay, 'City Limits', that constant change is the hallmark of the modern metropolis. Alluding to the conspicuous absence of the Twin Towers from the New York skyline after 9/11, Whitehead writes:

> It is hard to imagine that something will take their place, but at this very moment the people with the right credentials are considering how to fill the craters. The cement

> trucks will roll up and spin their bellies, the jackhammers will rattle, and after a while the postcards of the new skyline will be available for purchase. (10)

For Li, Whitehead's insistence on New York's mutability constitutes an abandonment of political purpose, allowing him to "gloss over entirely the political complexities of a post-9/11 world" (94). She asserts that *Colossus* "ultimately forecloses discussion about the political consequences of the attacks" (95). If the city is always changing, Li contends, the loss of the Twin Towers is no "irrevocable rupture with the past" (94) but merely "part of New York's natural inclination toward mutability" (97). She concludes by calling for what she perceives as lacking in *Colossus*: "the courage of deliberate transformation required in the aftermath of our national tragedy" (97). Part of Li's argument rests on the removal of all but one direct reference—which refers to an unspecified time in the past—to the Twin Towers in 'City Limits', whereas Whitehead does mention them by name on numerous occasions in 'Lost and Found' (2001), the *New York Times* article that Whitehead adapted slightly for the first section of *Colossus*. Li reads this as an editorial decision on Whitehead's part, as if he decided that the piece worked better without direct mention of the Twin Towers or the attacks. But what changes if we read 'City Limits' by the logic of mutability Li herself identifies in *Colossus*?

Novelty, even following great loss, soon becomes normality in the New York of *Colossus*. Indeed, even new constructions are already on the way to becoming kitsch—a postcard—from the moment they are built; the engine of capital keeps generating new configurations that imply their own obsolescence on arrival. For Whitehead in *Colossus*, this means that New York is generated from the aggregate subjective experiences of its citizens, or rather that the city and its subjects are mutually generated: "There are eight million naked cities in this naked city—they dispute and disagree" (6). Every citizen's "private New York" (4) is a negotiation between what she sees and what she has seen: "you are a New Yorker the first time you say, That used to be Munsey's, or That used to be the Tic Toc Lounge" (3); "You are a New Yorker when what was

there before is more real and solid than what is here now” (4). This temporal slippage, by which every inhabitant of the metropolis is lagging behind the present moment, which is itself projected only from the overlapping pasts that constitute it, makes ghosts of everyone. Whitehead, describing the layered history of a storefront, which changes every few years with new ownership, writes: “Thousands of people pass that storefront every day, each one haunting the streets of his or her own New York, not one of them seeing the same thing” (7). To paraphrase Whitehead, you’re a New Yorker the first time you say “that used to be ‘Lost and Found’”. The final paragraph of ‘City Limits’—an addition not present in ‘Lost and Found’—begins, “What follows is my city” (11).

Whitehead frequently blurs the lines between city and text in *Colossus*, with the effect that the two also blur in the reader’s imagination. The title itself makes various allusions, one of which is to the Colossus of Rhodes, a statue of Helios, the Greek sun-God. Li describes the association between the Twin Towers and the Colossus of Rhodes as “jarring”, since the Colossus of Rhodes was destroyed by an earthquake and therefore ignores the active, politically motivated way in which terrorists destroyed the Twin Towers (94). Notwithstanding that the remains of the statue may or may not have been melted down and sold by Mu’awiyah I after his forces occupied Rhodes in 653 (Woods, 2016), it is notable that the Colossus of Rhodes is also a landmark with a textual afterlife in which its original appearance has been transformed. In William Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar*, Cassius says: “Why man, he doth bestride the narrow world / Like a Colossus, and we petty men / Walk under his huge legs and peep about / To find ourselves dishonourable graves” (1.2.226-229). This image of the Colossus of Rhodes astride the mouth of the harbour—an impossible and therefore imaginary feat of engineering—also appears in “The New Colossus” by Emma Lazarus, the 1883 poem mounted on a plaque inside the Statue of Liberty in 1903. Lazarus’s poem begins: “Not like the brazen giant of Greek fame / With conquering limbs astride from land to land” (2002, 233). Lazarus seeks to differentiate the Statue of Liberty from the Colossus of Rhodes—a beacon of hospitality as opposed to an image

of domination—yet the Colossus she invokes is more textual than material. Whilst the Colossus of Rhodes' material afterlife remains uncertain, its afterlife in writing has seen it leak irrevocably into the textual surface of New York.

Colossus often renders New York as a textual surface, a place constituted textually as much as physically. When Whitehead writes that, "Somewhere in that fantastic, glorious mess was the address on a piece of paper, your first home here" (4), he deliberately constructs the sentence so that readers struggle to distinguish the physical home from the address, its textual representation. In the chapter called "Brooklyn Bridge", he refers to "the syllables that built this city" (99) and to the eponymous bridge as taking "a while to get to the heart of its argument" despite its "exemplary rhetoric" (100). In the chapter called "Rain" he describes how "the new rivers along curbs shove newspaper and grit to gutters" (62). The newspaper, an emblematic metropolitan print commodity, begins as language and ends as grit, a substance analogous to dust, part of the raw substance of the city. Text and physical matter are presented in a relationship of equivalence once again.

Colossus frequently invokes a sense of Benjaminian kitsch, such as in the line, "Advertisements that meant nothing to you last week are now your last hope" (51). In an ominous prefiguration of *Zone One*'s chronotope, in which the future is the resurrected past, Whitehead states that "Our streets are calendars containing who we were and who we will be next" (9). The New Yorkers of *Colossus* are as subject to modernity's determinism as those of *Zone One*. The modern metropolis is a death trap; "Buildings get taller, burying us deeper", Whitehead writes (146). Notably, the image of the calendar, a two-dimensional textual representation of standardised time, also appears in *Zone One*, in the scene when Mark Spitz walks on Duane Street by the African Burial Ground: "It was any city block on a normal day of that expired calendar, five minutes before dawn" (64). This line bears the influence of George Romero's *Day of the Dead* (1985), the opening scene of which features protagonist Sarah,

played by Lori Cardille, sitting on the ground in a bare breezeblock room, staring at a calendar whose gridded depiction of time creates a visual rhyme with the concrete wall on which it hangs. Below a creepy image of a pumpkin field, each day of October is crossed out in red. As Sarah gets up to turn the page, dozens of zombie hands suddenly shoot through the wall; calendar time has given way to apocalyptic time. Whitehead tells Joe Fassler in an interview in *The Atlantic* that he grew up "devouring horror comics and novels, and being inspired to become a writer because of horror novels, movies, and comic books" (para. 4). He became "demonically attached" (para. 10) to George Romero's original trilogy of *Night of the Living Dead* (1968), *Dawn of the Dead* (1976), and *Day of the Dead* (1985): "I always knew I was going to write a horror novel. And it seemed about time" (para. 4).

The status of *Colossus* as the urtext to *Zone One* is not only evident from its chronotope and the mutual seepage of city and text into one another, but also from the way it establishes New York's bass note of horror, which becomes explicit in *Zone One* (and is also palpable in *The Nickel Boys* [2019]). The metropolis in *Colossus* is consistently portrayed as a monstrous body made of living flesh, such as when "the skyline first roused itself into view" (4), or when Brooklyn Bridge is described as "that jaw at the foot of the island and its hungry teeth" (107). This principle of monstrosity seeps into every constituent part of New York in *Colossus*: its architecture, its vehicles, its citizens, its weather. Cement trucks "spin their bellies" (10); there are "goblins" beneath street grates and "under low stone bridges trolls are invisible" (41); in the subway, passengers "shudder and lurch together to the car's orchestrations" (57). This is New York as a flesh monster from a horror film, with its every element working in concert to sustain the metropolitan body.

Yet the flesh monster is also relentlessly mechanistic; Whitehead's New York in *Colossus* is a living, breathing hybrid of meat and machine that consumes everything that enters it and processes it into urban modernity. This principle is epitomised in the first

paragraph of “Morning”, as Whitehead describes garbage trucks as “twelve-ton gluttons [that] chew the curb and burp up to windows in mechanical gusts” (25). These huge machines that process the vast swathes of waste produced by modern city living are repulsively teratoid in nature, but are governed by the logic of mechanical process, even in their burps. Whitehead makes it clear that the monstrous body of New York is locked in the mechanised temporality of modernity: “Where’s a rooster when you need one. Instead hydraulics crow [. . .] All this metal grinding, this is the machine of morning reaching out through cogs and gears to claim and wake us” (25). To be woken is to be claimed: “Down there they deliver and pick up. We each have routes we keep to keep this place going” (25). One of these routes is Broadway, which knows that “every footfall is its heart beating, that we keep its heart beating, that it needs suckers and citizens to keep its blood flowing” (84). Whitehead’s use of epistrophe here to emphasise “heart beating” makes the lines embody what they describe. The dactylic structure of the final clause, after the irregular rhythms of the previous two, mirrors the successful production of blood flow and creates the disquieting feeling that the monstrous city, characterised as parasitic on its citizens, is natural and right. Here is a vision of the modern city in which individual freedom is almost non-existent, crushed by the unconscious imperative to keep the flesh-monster in perpetual motion.

An almost identical scene takes place in the early pages of *Zone One*, as the young Mark Spitz observes the city from his Uncle’s apartment window, not unlike Whitehead in *Colossus*, whose “first city memory is of looking out a subway window as the train erupted from a tunnel” (5); both encounter New York for the first time through a two-dimensional surface, and therefore *as* a two-dimensional surface. Mark Spitz is in a state of “giddy” (4) excitement from exposure to the promise of the American Dream’s spiritual home: “He’d always wanted to live in New York” (3). Whitehead writes, “he liked to watch monster movies and the city churning below” (5), leaving it ambiguous whether Mark Spitz is playing monster movies on Uncle Lloyd’s television or whether the city churning below *is* the monster movie. He sees “massive central-air units that

hunkered and coiled on the striving high rises" (5) and "ancient water towers lurking atop obstinate old prewars" (5). From his high vantage point, Mark Spitz can sense the mechanistic nature of the monster:

> He was a mote cycling in the wheels of a giant clock. Millions of people tended to this magnificent contraption, they lived and sweated and toiled in it, serving the mechanism of metropolis and making it bigger, better, story by glorious story and idea by unlikely idea. How small he was, tumbling between the teeth (4).

Whitehead blends the language of flesh and machine as he does throughout *Zone One*, frequently flickering between the two registers within a sentence, such as in the line, "The building was a totem sheathed in blue metal, a changeling in the nest of old walk-ups" (6). Crucially, though, he also fuses the novel itself into his vision of New York. Mark Spitz feels like a "mote" confronted with the sheer scale of the metropolis, but he is also a mote cycling in the narrative wheels of the novel, serving its mechanism. Benjamin compares the mechanism of the novel itself to a clock in his essay "One-way Street", commenting: "As a life-clock ticking away the seconds like mad, the characters in a novel have, hanging over them, the page number" (2009, 83). Whitehead deploys a remarkably similar image in *Colossus*, writing in the "Subway" chapter that "the platform is a clock: the more people standing dumb, the more time has passed since the last train. The people fall from above into hourglass dunes. Collect like seconds" (50). Marshall McLuhan wrote in 1964 that, "In our electric century the mechanical time-kept city looks like an aggregation of somnambulists and zombies, made familiar in the early part of T. S. Eliot's The Waste Land" (1973, 161). In Whitehead's version, the metaphorical becomes literal, so that it becomes difficult to separate the signifier and the signified. In Benjamin's formulation, people's lives are governed by modern clock time; in Whitehead's, they are indistinguishable from it, part of a space-time mechanism organised around the image of the wheel (movement through space) and the clock (movement through time). The city itself

grows not only with new buildings and skyscrapers, but swells "story by glorious story" (4); its architecture is unmistakably textual. To serve the city of New York is indistinguishable from serving its textual narrative. Later in the novel, working as a "sweeper" tasked with clearing Manhattan of its remaining zombies building by building, Mark Spitz once again "pushed his forehead to the glass as if he were at his uncle's, rearranging the architecture into a message" (8). Whitehead writes: "The towers emerged out of smudged charcoal, a collection of figments and notions of things. He was fifteen floors up, in the heart of Zone One, and shapes trudged like slaves higher and higher into midtown" (8). The city in this image is insubstantial, blurry, mutable, and constructed from mental processes rather than concrete materials. The journey upwards inside the towers that Mark Spitz sees is nothing to do with capitalism's promise of social elevation, which Whitehead also explores in his first novel, *The Intuitionist* (1999) and, epitomised by the first sentence of *Zone One*, everything to do with the way capitalist desire allows its arrested futurism to persist—"He always wanted to live in New York" (3).

Working as a sweeper, Mark Spitz finds himself fully assimilated into the mechanism of the flesh-monster of metropolitan New York. He and his colleagues clear the cospses of "skel" zombies from a building:

> Per custom, they lugged, pulled, and kicked them down the stairwell, panting their way through the cinder-block intestine [. . .] After a few floors, the muffled thump of skel heads bouncing against the stairs was replaced by a dull thud [. . .] the sweepers felt the corpse's mulch squish through the plastic (61).

This scene, in which the violent disintegration of human beings into "mulch" is emphasised by comically excessive onomatopoeia, sees Mark Spitz in a state of total conscription to the monstrous metropolitan body. He is a catalyst in the biological process of digestion. This is the job of the acolytes of the American Phoenix, those infected by the "pandemic of pheenie

optimism" (13) who unthinkingly sacrifice individual freedom for the sustenance of the monster that promises the technological trappings of modern life.

However, the absurd comedy gore of this scene also functions as an allegory of the way in which violence against African Americans is a structuring principle of capitalist modernity. Whilst it is important not to overdetermine the zombie figure as exclusively representative of blackness—*Zone One*'s zombies are "every race, color, and creed" (243)—it nonetheless carries the symbolic weight of what Sarah Lauro (2015) calls the "zombie myth", the "accumulated historical meaning" of the zombie from its Haitian origins (via West Africa) as a figure of slavery (4). Eliminating the *e* from the American spelling of *zombie*, Lauro and Karen Embry write in "A Zombie Manifesto" (2008) that: "In its origins and in its folkloric incarnations, the zombi is quite literally a slave, raised by Voodoo priests to labor in the fields" (90). Whereas this historicised zombie is not a universally accepted figure, with critics such as Toby Venables asserting that the "rootless" modern post-Romero zombie "has been entirely severed" from its origins in Haitian Vodoun (2014, 208), *Zone One* demonstrates what Lauro and Embry call the "semiotic fecundity" (9) of the zombie figure, which allows its cultural history to encounter its modern significations dialectically. It also calls into question those definitions of modernity that regard slavery as a premodern phenomenon or, as in Benjamin's case, those which seek the origins of modernity in the early twentieth-century metropolis. Elizabeth McAlister recognises the zombie as a "complex and polyvalent Other" uniquely placed to address "the nightmarish aspects of modernity" (461). The zombie, she writes, "represents, responds to, and mystifies fear of slavery, collusion with it, and rebellion against it" (461). The zombie, then, cannot be separated from its origins outside the margins of Western culture, nor its ability to energise the dialectical encounter of enslavement and rebellion—nor is it reducible to either of these features.

In this same stairwell scene, Mark Spitz's colleague Gary describes his idea for "an instrument for neutralizing skels" (62), a "skel-catcher" which he plans to call "the Lasso" (61).

"Skel-catcher" echoes "slave catcher", the term for those who were paid to track and capture fugitive slaves. The instrument is described in language that collapses the temporal gap between slavery and neoliberalism:

> The latest iteration involved a long rod with a ratcheted collar at the business end. The collar, in turn, was attached to a mesh bag, made of the same tear- and tooth-resistant material as their fatigues. When you came across a skel, you manipulated the collar around its head, then jerked back. The collar cinched tight like handcuffs, detached from the rod, 'And voilà: Skel in a Bag'. The captured monsters couldn't bite through or see. They were neutralized. You could do what you wanted with them (62).

Linda E. Merians (2011) explains that the antebellum slave collar was "among the cruelest kinds of physical torture and punishment slaves had to endure" and was "most often used to punish slaves who tried to escape or as a punishment exacted on their family members" (438). Essentially, it was a method of quashing any person or behaviour "judged to be especially dangerous to the owners' maintenance of control and domination" (438). In the description of Gary's "Lasso", a term which conjures the romantic associations of the Old West, the verbs—*attached*, *manipulated*, *jerked*, *cinched*—emphasise the violence of the instrument; they also suggest the bodily detachment of its operator, leveraging technology to inflict violence. Indeed, for Gary, the function of his innovation is mingled with its moral justification, since it is tied to "the dreamscape of American prosperity" (63). Despite the ongoing apocalypse, Gary wants to patent his invention and tells his friends, "I'm going to be rich" (63). Tim Armstrong argues that "because of the historical proximity of slave and machine, we cannot easily think about machinery without slavery; without questions of subordination, labour replacement, and the presence of the human body, which have so often derived from slavery" (99). Gary's desire for control of zombie bodies—"you could do what you wanted with them"—evidences Armstrong's point. Whitehead also makes clear in the description of Gary's skel-catcher that this logic

persists under the contemporary neoliberal paradigm, in stark contrast to the idea that the free market will iron out historical prejudice due to the latter's friction against the flow of capital. In other words, neoliberal futurism is predicated on postracialism. The use of "business end" lays a euphemistic veil over the instrument's violent design at the same time as linking that violence inextricably to the economic order in which it has been conceived. Likewise, the phrase "'And voila! Skel in a Bag" subsumes the practice of violent restraint within the blandly self-congratulatory language of modern convenience. The phrase connotes ready meals, as in 'boil in the bag', underlining the sense that the modern city digests its dehumanised population as meat. In designing his skel-catcher, Gary enlists Mark Spitz and another colleague, Kaitlyn, "into the only extant focus group on the planet" (62), testing out alternative names for it, which include "Lasso", "You-Grab-It", "Grabber", and "the Gary" (62).

The way that the language of corporate branding can both hide and reveal the logic of death that Whitehead perceives at the heart of capitalism is also explored in his 2006 novel *Apex Hides the Hurt* (hereafter *Apex*) in which the narrative mirrors the necrotic trajectory of the novel's unnamed protagonist. A "nomenclature consultant" (22) tasked with rebranding the town of Winthrop, he is still struggling with the increasingly painful symptoms of an infected stubbed toe he suffered in a previous job. Ironically, he has neglected to care for his toe because the incipient infection was disguised by the brown colour of the Apex branded plaster, the "multicultural bandage, which so efficiently permitted the illusion of a time before the fall" (130). The protagonist's necrotic foundation is mirrored in the town itself, despite its ambitions of revived affluence: "In between the new stores, the remaining old establishments hung in there like weeds, with their faded signs and antiquated lures. Dead flies littered the bottom of the ancient window displays, out of reach of arthritic hands" (10). Beneath every modern and technological surface in *Apex* death lurks like the monstrous presence it is in *Zone One*; coffee machines make a "staccato gurgling. It was black gold bubbling from the Earth's crust" (37). The image evokes the Gold Rush, and like Gary's Lasso in *Zone One*, binds death to capital; the

latter flows from the former. *Apex* also depicts a Benjaminian modernity, in which futurity is merely the resurrected past. One of the protagonist's colleagues, who has proposed "New Prospera" (49) as Winthrop's name, has perfected the art of reanimating the kitsch, though in the form of language rather than object: "Albert Fleet's schtick consisted of resurrecting old nomenclature motifs just before they were about to come back into vogue. Old hound dog sniffing, he had a nose for incipient revival" (51). To return to Benjamin's "Dream Kitsch", Albert Fleet's hand reaches out for the "familiar contours" of language at its "most threadbare and timeworn point [. . .] worn through by habit and garnished with cheap maxims" (236). Ironically, it is novelty itself that he finds: "If Albert was lugging New back onto the scene, you better brace yourself for a full-blown renaissance. New was new again" (51-2). Ultimately, the protagonist of *Apex* is unable to escape—to use Gerry Canavan's term for "the endlessly rehearsed landscape of death and disaster that dominates contemporary visions of the coming decades" (2014, 2-3)—capitalism's "necrofuturism" (3). Seeing blood run from his infected toe in the shower, he imagines that it "had developed an abuse pathology, and kept returning to the hurt as if one day it would place the pain in context, explain it. Give it a name (139). I read this hurt as historical suffering, a similar kind of accumulated pain to that which Benjamin's angel of history sees from its horrific perspective and the same pain Julian accesses in *Open City*. No amount of surface polishing can prevent the death narrative from playing out: "Underneath the Apex, the grim narrative continued apace" (161). *Apex* ends with the assertion that the "Advanced State of Necrosis" (200) that has taken hold of the protagonist's toe will persist and worsen, leading eventually, one could say, to the outbreak of generalised necrosis that is *Zone One*: "He had to admit that actually, his foot hurt more than ever" (212).

Whitehead's satirical take on capitalist nomenclature connects it to Ellison's 1952 novel *Invisible Man*, which invokes the apocalyptic mode that is implicit in *Apex* and explicit in *Zone One*. The novel's narrator, nameless like the protagonist of *Apex*, has "been hurt to the point of abysmal pain, hurt to the point of invisibility" (467). Invisibility is a condition akin to existential

death—a revised version of what Orlando Patterson, referring to slavery, calls "institutionalized marginality, the liminal state of social death" (1982, 46)—but it also enables the narrator to access a kind of apocalyptic truth. In his basement bunker, he fights his "battle with Monopolated Light & Power", siphoning off the energy to feed "1,369 lights [. . .] the entire ceiling, every inch of it" (10). He asserts that, "I have been boomeranged across my head so much that I now can see the darkness of lightness" (10). Nevertheless, he declares, "The truth is the light and light is the truth" (10). The dark truth that he sees is the logic of death that underpins American society and is latent in every implicated person:

> There's a stench in the air, which, from this distance underground, might be the smell either of death or of spring. But don't let me trick you, there *is* a death in the smell of spring and in the smell of thee as in the smell of me. And if nothing more, invisibility has taught my nose to classify the stenches of death (468).

The brown sticking plasters of *Apex* are an ironic inversion of the "Optic White" paint manufactured in the Liberty Paints factory in *Invisible Man* (164). The paint factory scene provides a satirical take on the one-drop rule, the specifically American conception of whiteness according to which if a person had any black ancestry whatsoever, he or she was precluded from whiteness regardless of skin colour. Lucius Brockway, the black man who has made himself indispensable to the factory through his expert running of the paint mixing machines, tells the narrator in language evocative of racial violence that: "Our white is so white you can paint a chunka coal and you'd have to crack it open with a sledge hammer to prove it wasn't white clear through!" (177). Like the protagonist of *Apex*, Brockway is a nomenclature consultant of sorts, having "helped the Old Man make up that slogan. 'If it's Optic White, It's the Right White', he quoted" (177).

In *Zone One*, Gary's invention is destined to fail whatever its carefully chosen name, since in a zombie apocalypse the object of the instrument's violence is also the cause of its

obsolescence: "the market for fresh skels did not exist [. . .]. No. The only thing to do with a lassoed skel was to put it down. As soon as possible" (62-3). Eventually, of course, Mark Spitz realises that New York's remaining uninfected population is equally as condemned to death as its zombies, that the death-world is an inevitable consequence of the apocalypse. But whilst *Zone One*'s plot sees the world of the novel edge ever closer to the necrofuturistic death-world the zombies promise, Whitehead generates an alternative temporality that extends ultimately from language. *Zone One* is an attempt to reshape the fabric of space-time, or rather to repair it where it has become knotted and begun to loop back on itself. As Hoberek notes, Whitehead makes his most explicit "utopian" (412) statement towards the end of the novel: "Best to let the broken glass be broken glass, let it splinter into smaller pieces and dust and scatter. Let the cracks between things widen until they are no longer cracks but the new places for things" (257). However, I argue that more than merely offering a utopian gesture, Whitehead is suggesting to his readers that they strive to read between the cracks in *Zone One* itself, to seek the perspective of gods and aliens that renders an address to the future legible. The novel's plot ends abruptly by plunging Mark Spitz and the rest of the planet into a death-world, but the zombified city Whitehead has built from language remains in readers' imaginations, interacting with and changing "your private New York" (*Colossus*, 4), or indeed, the landscape of any readers' modern cities, which, as Whitehead makes clear in *Colossus*, are as much built on dreams and stories as they are steel and concrete.

Cracks, negative spaces generated by violent change, offer the promise of new meanings throughout *Zone One*. Mark Spitz, for example, "became a connoisseur of the found poetry in the abandoned barricade," seeing meaning in the "miniscule, hardscrabble wedge of space between the piled-up furniture and the apartment door" (134). These moments where language flowers in the gaps between things function in direct contrast to the representation of text as a process of repetition yoked to the monstrous body of the metropolis. Stragglers, as opposed to the more conventional skels, are ostensibly benign zombies locked in perpetual

repetition of a familiar action from their lives before infection. Mark Spitz finds one such straggler, whom he christens "Ned the Copy Boy", bent over a photocopier in a vacated office: "The copy machine dominated the back room, buttons grubbed by fingerprints, paper tray sticking out like a fat green tongue" (80). Ned the Copy Boy "peered into the glassed-off guts of the machine, as still as the dust, bent paper clips, overnight-mail packaging" (80). This is a clear image of textual repetition in stasis, a microcosm of capitalist modernity's pathological chronotope, figured as a constituent part of New York's monstrous body. Later, when it seems inevitable to Mark Spitz that the zombies will not be stopped, he observes that "their mouths could no longer manage speech yet they spoke nonetheless, saying what the city had always told its citizens [. . .]: I am going to eat you up" (244). But the reproduction of text that a photocopier symbolises stops when apocalyptic temporality kicks in. The excreted slew of copied text, along with the paraphernalia of textual production—paperclips and mail packaging—is halted and spaces for new textualities, with potential meanings beyond "I am going to eat you up", appear. In apocalyptic New York, the spatial arrangements of elements of the city leave it constantly on the threshold of becoming language. When bullets meant for zombies strike the windows of New York's institutions, including "banks, churches, condos, and franchises, every place of worship a city has to offer", Whitehead's depiction of the horror of destruction shifts into an image of the beauty of creation: "Exquisite glass panes crashed down in their music, manufacturing geometric shapes that had never before existed in the history of the world, which in turn sharded into newer shapes and brilliant white dust" (75). The sibilance of this sentence—which is continued in the next one as "Shell casings danced and skipped on the asphalt like tossed cigarette butts" (75)—echoes the shattering of glass, creating the effect of a slow-motion camera shot and compelling readers to linger on the image, lending it the gravity of a moment of pure aesthetic creation. Even the touch of Mark Spitz's girlfriend, Mim, contains the promise of language: "Her fingertips drew letters on his scalp. Words? A name? Her kids' names?" (198). This image is a microcosm of the Quiet Storm's mosaic, in which an

address to futurity is tentatively inscribed on a physical surface—here the body rather than the city, though *Zone One* constantly blurs the boundaries between the two.

Conclusion

Whitehead's critique of the stalled chronotope of capitalist modernity is an important facet of *Zone One*. However, what is really at stake—underpinning *Zone One*'s critical project—is the capacity of language to generate a futurity beyond the racist and ultimately necropolitical parameters of the present. Despite scholars' attention being overwhelmingly drawn to the novel's critical endeavours—what Swanson calls "an encounter with the limits of survival and life as objects of value" (575)—I read *Zone One* as a creative address to the future to match the Quiet Storm's own. Whitehead's critical project breaks down the "grid" (159) which demarcates and delimits space-time in the novel. As a sweeper, Mark Spitz experiences Manhattan as "grid after tedious grid" (159). The image is mirrored in the description of the subway system's extension "through the savage city, neighborhood by neighborhood, line by line" (209). Echoing the adjective Frank Kermode (2000, 5) uses to describe apocalyptic time, the grid's "rectilinear logic" extends not just across New York, but "anywhere human activity and desire needed to be tamed and made compliant" (34). Time, too, is measured by the demarcated intervals of the grid, evident in phrases such as "grids ago" (50) and "together for one grid" (29). The apocalyptic zombie hordes are Whitehead's answer to the powerful virality of consumer capitalism's homogenising force, which threatens to re-establish its contours under the American Phoenix project: "The city bragged of an endless unravelling, a grid without limit [. . .] If they could reboot Manhattan, why not the entire country?" (34). Mark Spitz senses the zombies' power to nullify the superstructure, initially feeling a sense of dread at its ongoing collapse as he navigates the subway system: "He didn't like walking in the rut, where the bilge seeped into his boots, so he

jumped from tie to tie like a kid in a hopscotch grid" (209). He is "paranoid about the niches cut into the wall", anxious that "each black hole harbored a skel" (209). Marines in the service of Buffalo's attempt to resurrect New York "cradled the tubes of blueprints and schematics of the metropolitan systems under their armpits" (78), the verb "cradled" suggesting that the soldiers' care for the maps of the grid is parental, imbuing the documents with all their hope for the future.

The zombies are a viral contagion, but they are also the antidote to the grid's own virality. They are represented as a liquid when massed, associated with water in particular throughout the novel. Towards the end of the novel, in a passage that describes the zombies' destruction of the barriers that had given hope to surviving New Yorkers, Mark Spitz observes that "the ocean had overtaken the streets [. . .] Except it was not water that flooded the grid but the dead" (243). The zombies "bubbled and frothed", they "sloshed", "impelled one another in a current, spread in hungry rivulets east and west" (243). They are a reservoir of death that has burst from its containing vessels, such as the "ancient water towers" (5) whose threat is no longer "lurking" as it had seemed to Mark Spitz as a child, but fully realised. When Mark Spitz "reads" the zombies' "inhuman scroll as an argument" (246), then, the zombies become legible as critique. They are not advancing an argument, but simply embody one as they move. Their destructive power is simply the negative image of the centuries of history that have traded their lives for power and capital, finally released into the sphere of discourse that is Whitehead's novelistic New York. Benjamin's angel of history can only contemplate the suffering of history's oppressed dead, but *Zone One*'s readers can watch them write their way into the present, bringing with them apocalyptic destruction of a superstructure that had seemed immovable.

Zone One's critique of capitalism's stranglehold on society and discourse aligns it with what Mark Fisher calls "capitalist realism" (2009)—although Whitehead's novel seeks ways out

of the bind that Fisher describes. In Fisher's influential *Capitalist Realism* (2009), published just two years before *Zone One*, he writes:

> We are inevitably reminded of the phrase attributed to Fredric Jameson and Slavoj Žižek, that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism. That slogan captures precisely what I mean by 'capitalist realism': the widespread sense that not only is capitalism the only viable political and economic system, but also that it is now impossible even to *imagine* a coherent alternative to it (2).

Fisher describes a fizzling out of the utopian impulse as capitalism's grip on human society and culture intensifies (7). As I have outlined, Whitehead dramatises the way capitalism, both the means and end of the colonial project, has itself colonised our intellectual and affective faculties to the extent that even when its infrastructure lies in ruins, we retain its hollow, repetitive, monstrous form of futurism in our minds and will attempt to reconstruct it ad infinitum. As Fisher argues, "capitalism is what is left when beliefs have collapsed at the level of ritual or symbolic elaboration, and all that is left is the consumer-spectator, trudging through the ruins and the relics" (4). Mark Spitz appears to embody this idea, sharing, through his "only expertise [. . .] his cockroach impersonation", capitalism's "infinite resilience" (165). Of course, Spitz finally manages to shed the mental carapace of capitalism as he accedes to the liquid argument the zombies make, joining their "sea" (259), yet this comes at the huge cost of self-annihilation. Mark Spitz buys his life with his death when he realises that the former has been so debased by the latter that it is worthless.

As he builds up to this decision, Mark Spitz contemplates a tourist photo of Corsica that the late Gary had been carrying with him, "carefully ripped from a magazine" (254), his dream of a future. The photo is a nostalgic vision of Mediterranean leisure in which "a slim alley pullulated with men and women mid-errand, perhaps around noon" (254). The scene also shows a "trinket store", which "hawked postcards on long wire racks, azure rectangles featuring more pictures of

the island” (254), creating an image of infinite regression into a nostalgic past in which “a couple enmeshed fingers at a small table outside a café” under the “red and white and brown logo of the espresso distributor” (254). Mark Spitz thinks about Gary’s torn magazine page in markedly Benjaminian terms, reflecting that the kitsch photograph is what the world would look like if “the stragglers were the dead majority, not an aberrant faction”: “The entire population snared in bygone moments, entranced by a world that no longer existed. Mesmerized by the outline of a shadow cast by a phantom that had made them happy once” (254). Gary’s photo is, as Benjamin writes in “Dream Kitsch”, the dusty “outer cast” (236), the “last mask of the banal, the one with which we adorn ourselves, in dream and conversation, so as to take in the energies of an outlived world of things” (238).

Moments such as Mark Spitz’s contemplation of Gary’s Corsica photo provide a reminder of *Zone One*’s transmediality. The novel contains frequent depictions of photographs and other media. A straggler, for example, is drawn to a “party-supply store” by a photograph which “captured a burly man surrounded by smiling children who nipped at the bag of candy he held an inch out of reach” (51-2). This imagery reflects “Dream Kitsch’s” account of capitalist desire, as the children reach out transfixed by the object of desire. The physical photograph, to which the straggler has been drawn—Mark Spitz speculates that the straggler might have been the burly man’s wife or an employee of the store (52)—is also an object of desire, a frozen image of a preapocalyptic past in which it was possible to transact money for fleeting gratification. The party-supply shop itself is a theatre of kitsch, populated by “dusty costumes” hanging “as if on meat hooks”, as well as “cowboys and robots from chart-busting sci fi trilogies” and “Kingdoms’ worth of princesses and their plastic accoutrements, stamped out on the royal assembly line” (51). There is “the requisite Naughty Nurse suspended in dead air” (51). Tired film genre stereotypes and reiterations of familiar clichés inhabit a dusty environment that had already been hollowed of cultural value before the apocalypse. The film set quality of the party-supply shop leaks into *Zone One* itself, as Mark Spitz notes that the straggler is wearing the wrong

costume—a gorilla—that “draped off her shoulders, deflated on her shrunken form” (52) and missing its head. Whitehead, then, leans heavily on these transmedial moments to place his characters and their actions within a theatre of capitalist desire which the zombies threaten to destroy.

Fig. 1: “Sodas”, by Cristiano Volk.

Zone One’s transmedial aesthetic places it in dialogue with other artistic work that critiques capitalism’s stalled chronotope through a lens of Benjaminian desire, ultimately finding humanity to be irretrievably ensnared in a zombified present. For example, Cristiano Volk’s photograph “Sodas”, from his book *Laissez-Faire* (2022), has a remarkable thematic and aesthetic affiliation with the scene in *Zone One* in which young Mark Spitz stares enthralled by the Manhattan skyline through the window of his uncle’s apartment. Volk’s photograph (see fig. 1) shows a close-up image of a drinks refrigerator filled with neatly arranged plastic bottles of

Coca-Cola, Fanta, and other popular brands. The bottles themselves are blurry and indistinct through the condensation on the refrigerator door, in which what are presumably the smudged impressions of human fingers are visible. Varying in height and shape slightly, whilst all obeying the same basic topology, the bottles resemble a skyline, and thus both the hollow promise of desire fulfilled and the vanishing point for desire itself at the horizon of capital. In an interview with LensCulture, Volk cites the influence of both Fisher's *Capitalist Realism* and the work of Benjamin, noting of the latter that although his work on "how technology and capital have combined to change the way we perceive the world" is "a century old, it still feels extremely current" (para. 9). There is an irony in Volk's invocation of Benjamin's century-old writings to understand the contemporary moment. The photographer risks that his images themselves become kitsch objects, their critical edge blunted—despite their sincere protest against capitalism's curtailment of human futures—by their own implication in the cycles of empty desire and repetition that they critique. This raises the question of whether *Zone One* is also compromised by this kind of irony, since it describes the relationship between capital, desire, and human futures in such similar terms. However, Whitehead subordinates the novel's critical project to the overarching question of how human beings might imagine futures beyond the strictures of a language and culture in which capital is so deeply ingrained. Critique is the tool that prises open space for a more creative intervention in the future imaginary.

Zone One wrestles with precisely these questions about the space for, and viability of, critique. Since Paul Ricouer, in his book *Freud and Philosophy* (1970), identified Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud as the three pillars of the "school of suspicion" (32), scholars have contested the perceived absolutism of critique in literary analysis. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, in her influential essay "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading" (2003), argued that paranoia had become the defining note of criticism: "In a world where no one need be delusional to find evidence of systemic oppression, to theorize out of anything *but* a paranoid critical stance has come to seem naïve, pious, or complaisant" (125-6). Rita Felski, in *The Limits of Critique* (2015),

seeks to decentralise Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud in the analysis of "critique as a genre and an ethos—as a transpersonal and widespread phenomenon rather than the brainchild of a few eminent thinkers" (3-4). Fredric Jameson, in *The Political Unconscious* (1981), makes the case that "detecting the traces" (2002, 4) of a history of class struggle through "interpretive categories or codes" is indeed the task of all literary criticism (ix). By identifying the "symptoms" (10) of class struggle that are legible "in however disguised and symbolic a form" (3) in every text, Jameson argues that the critic can restore "to the surface of the text the repressed and buried reality of this fundamental history" (4). Yet as Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus (2009) point out, "the assumption that domination can only do its work when veiled, which may once have sounded almost paranoid, now has a nostalgic, even utopian ring to it" (2). Over a decade later, in the wake of Trump's first Presidency and the midst of Russia's Putin-led expansionist war against Ukraine—and Trump's re-election in 2024—this feels truer than ever. As Elizabeth S. Anker points out, "In our contemporary post-truth, post-facts political era, petty authoritarianism daily demonstrates the ease with which critique and suspicion lend themselves to manipulation" (2017, 9). Trump, for example, mobilised the far-right QAnon conspiracy theory to bolster his power and attack his political enemies, ultimately leading to the attack on the Capitol Building in Washington in January 2021.

Even after a decade, *Zone One* has a major contribution to make to these debates around how we read. As I have argued, *Zone One* is, in one way, a highly critical text—itself a suspicious excavation of buried histories of racial violence. On the other hand, the novel is also, to paraphrase Felski, an assertion of critique's limitations. Whitehead makes the critical strategy of returning the repressed past to the surface literal in the form of zombies, which does irreparable damage—in the novel at least—to the hegemony of capitalism but does nothing for the future imaginary. Nevertheless, *Zone One* reveals the ways in which racism has been structured into modernity from its origins and cannot be excised by subscription to a wishful postracialism whose discourse is intimately linked to the interests of capital. As Steven

Pokornowski insists, in his essay on zombies and vulnerable life, the power of the zombie figure "drives home just how dangerous the proliferation of postracial and posthuman discourses can be if they serve to elide historical limitations about the highly political determinations of just who is quite human" (2016, 1). Thus, *Zone One* has an ambivalent relationship to the negative function of its "ambassadors of nil" (245). Critique has the power to corrode structures that would otherwise stand indefinitely, but, Whitehead suggests, it lacks the creative impetus to move beyond the ruins. As Best and Marcus write:

> Symptomatic readings also often locate outright absences, gaps, and ellipses in texts, and then ask what those absences mean, what forces create them, and how they signify the questions that motivate the text, but that the text itself cannot articulate (3).

As I have outlined, *Zone One* is a text obsessed with the gaps between things, the opportunities they provide to generate futurity. Rather than gaps providing the way *into* the text, then, by indicating the nature of its political unconscious, *Zone One* shows us that they can offer a way *out*, a way towards the invention of a language that is more than a mere index of suffering. What the text cannot articulate is not that which it has repressed, but that which is inexpressible in a language that has evolved as a tool of oppression. Ideology critique remains part of the answer, but art and writing must do the work of making that critique cannot do.

Zone One, then, is profoundly engaged with the question of whether fictional writing can access the future imaginary—a task that the novel suggests is not simply one of dismantling the status quo, but one of making new modes of expression that can address a future beyond the necropolitical logic of capitalism. As I have argued, the promise of a postracial capitalism cleansed of historical prejudice—with the implication that the angel of history can simply avert its eyes from the suffering of history's dead—is an empty one. As David Theo Goldberg (2015) outlines:

> Rather than expressing the end of racism, [postraciality] conceals within its conceptual erasure of race the driving mode of contemporary racist articulation. Racisms [. . .] express themselves anew in the name of racial disappearance, disavowal, and denial. Racisms proliferate in the wake of the supposed death of race (152).

Whitehead's zombie novel, then, is part of an important tradition in African American literature in which authors have repurposed forms inherited from a culture whose social and linguistic institutions are constructed to reinforce racial hierarchies in order to imagine radically different futures. The apocalyptic mode is one of these forms and has a vital and underexamined role in African American literature going back to the antebellum fugitive slave narratives. The authors of these autobiographical texts had to invest written language and its transformative potential with a degree of radical optimism, even when the medium had been used almost exclusively to underpin racial slavery. Written English has historically been, to a greater or lesser degree, an ambivalent, hostile medium for African Americans, and the authors of slave narratives frequently drew attention to this. The powerful final lines of *Life of William Grimes, The Runaway Slave: Written by Himself* (1825) make the relationship between race, history, futurity, and the written word starkly apparent:

> If it were not for the stripes on my back which were made while I was a slave. I would in my will, leave my skin a legacy to the government, desiring that it might be taken off and made into parchment, and then bind the constitution of glorious happy and free America. Let the skin of an American slave, bind the charter of American Liberty (68).

Grimes' lines conjure an image of a utopian future America—"glorious happy and free"—but one rendered purely conjectural by the dystopian present in which he is the mere object of writing. Grimes' literacy and ability to construct a narrative stand in direct contrast to the violent inscriptions made by white slaveowners and overseers on his back. Grimes makes clear that

the future must be written into being, but that the very medium of writing has been so compromised by a history of racial oppression and slavery that the act of writing the future is almost unimaginable. Yet in his final line, Grimes chooses to abandon the conditional mood for the imperative. It is unlikely that Whitehead is thinking of Grimes specifically when he deploys the utopian imperative himself in *Zone One*, “Let the cracks between things widen until they are the new places for things” (257), but it does suggest a shared faith, however embryonic, in the possibility of a different future. The imperative mood here for both authors is akin to prayer. For Grimes, writing in the slave narrative form in which the expression of Christian faith is a prerequisite, God is the assumed addressee. For Whitehead’s narrator, the addressee remains undefined, although, in a way that unites Whitehead with his artist-writer the Quiet Storm, it might also be “Gods and aliens, anyone who looks down at the right time, from the right perspective” (233). Through the narrator’s free indirect discourse, Mark Spitz reads the imperative form of prayer into the Quiet Storm’s mosaic: “To Anyone Who Can Read This: Stay Away. Please Help. Remember Me” (233). Whilst the Christian God provided the authors of slave narratives with a structure for addressing a utopian future beyond the oppressive discourses of antebellum society and language, Whitehead’s act of faith in *Zone One* is to express belief, however tentatively, in the power of artistic writing to imagine possible futures, and in the active role readers must play in making radical futures possible. The apocalyptic mode, as well as providing authors such as Whitehead with the critical tools to lay bare the inequities of society, also allows them to explore perspectival shifts in how we read histories and futures into the cities we live in. Whitehead’s novel about the return of history ultimately turns towards art—and writing in particular—as the remedy for the zombification of the world. As Kodwo Eshun warns, “the vigilance that is necessary to indict imperial modernity must be extended into the field of the future” (288). *Zone One* makes the magnitude of this task abundantly clear.

Chapter Two: "A Black Boy Has No Future, Free Papers or Not": Writing the Future in Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*

Zone One addresses the future from the speculative register of the zombie apocalypse genre. In *The Underground Railroad* (2016), Whitehead brings the speculative tools of genre to the African American literary canon's prestige genre, the slave narrative. Like all contemporary invocations of the slave narrative, *The Underground Railroad* is also in dialogue with the "neo-slave narrative" genre (Rushdy 1999), in which authors such as Toni Morrison and Ishmael Reed reimagined the possibilities of the antebellum form. In the quotation in the title of this chapter, Whitehead suggests that freedom is not worth the paper it's written on when freedom is defined within the narrow discourse of nineteenth-century abolitionism and, consequently, the United States that emerged from that discourse. The words are spoken by the slave-catcher Ridgeway about his driver Homer. They convey a sense of black futures foreclosed and the absence of forms of writing that can forge pathways out of the bind of racist discourse. Such moments in *The Underground Railroad* constitute a framing of urgent questions about the viability of black futurity under capitalist modernity and the forms of writing it fosters. This, as well as the antebellum slave narrative's conventional first-person narrator, should make us attend closely to the novel's narrative voice. Who is writing and organising this text? Who is responsible for its unconventional—Afrofuturist—use of space and time? If, as I argue in this chapter, it is the ten-year-old Homer himself, what are the consequences for the way the novel takes on the problem of writing the future? I contend that reading Homer as the narrator has a profound effect on the way we understand both the novel's reading of history and the form of its future address.

There is an unchallenged critical assumption that *The Underground Railroad* has a disembodied limited third-person narrator focalised through the novel's protagonist, fugitive slave Cora. Paula Martín Salván, in her article on the narrative structure of *The Underground Railroad* (2020), asserts that: "Although it is not told in first person, the narrator focalises her

[Cora's] point of view" (12). Madhu Dubey (2019) identifies an "omniscient narrator" (122) of the novel. Stephanie Li (2019), despite the close attention she pays to *The Underground Railroad*'s use of its source genre, the slave narrative, does not once discuss the narrator. It is to some extent understandable that the identity of the narrator goes unquestioned in criticism of *The Underground Railroad*—although notable that critics appear to somewhat disagree on the degree of omniscience the narrator exhibits—given that the overwhelming majority of the novel is indeed narrated in the third person. However, relatively late in *The Underground Railroad*, in the ninth of the novel's twelve chapters, "Caesar", a brief paragraph consisting of four short lines of first-person narrative appears: "I was born on August 14th. My mother's name is Lily Jane. My father is Jerome. I don't know where they are" (232). No explanation is offered for this first-person intrusion, nor does it happen again anywhere in the novel. Upon first encountering this paragraph, with its mysterious shift in voice, it seems possible that it functions as an example illustrating the preceding line, "Half these folks didn't know their mothers and fathers" (232), but close examination renders this explanation less plausible, on the basis that no quotation marks surround the first-person lines and the information conveyed is so specific and lacking in further explication of any kind that it makes little sense as an illustrative example.

The logical next question, then, is: who is the speaker of these surprising lines of first-person narration? In this chapter I argue that the speaker is the slave catcher Ridgeway's ten-year-old wagon driver and accomplice Homer. Scholars tend to ignore Homer completely in their analysis of *The Underground Railroad*. I contend that it is a deliberate effect of the novel on Whitehead's (and Homer's) behalf to disguise the narrator's identity. As, in my view of him, a slave narrative author, Homer's "underground" status as narrator allows him to weave and manipulate the telling of his fugitive tale without facing the potential consequences of committing himself—*his self*—to writing. By *not* inscribing himself, Homer also leaves his identity contingent, constantly open to a kind of feedback from the speculative future the novel tentatively projects. The authors of antebellum slave narratives were expected to prove their

humanity through their command of literacy; their desire for freedom had to be expressed in an ever-rigidifying genre. This need to prove one's humanity in the language of the oppressor had the effect of bolstering white supremacy, since, as Dickson D. Bruce Junior (2007) argues, it implies "that the people who most deserved freedom were those who were willing" and able "to risk their lives for it" (41). Homer refuses and subverts this imperative by hiding his authorship. His trickster narrative, in which he appears to be something completely other than what he is, is not addressed to white readers as proof of any African American's humanity, but is rather a demonstration of literary subterfuge. As I argue in this chapter, his narrative is akin to a Trojan horse, aimed at attacking the house of white supremacy from within. The obfuscation of Homer's status as narrator allows Whitehead to perform various 'underground' acts of literary subterfuge that correspond to and perform his technique of exploding existing forms. Few critics of the novel address this crucial character and those that do tend to understand him as a severely traumatised child who has allied himself to Ridgeway, the embodiment of white supremacy, whether in search of a father figure or merely to survive. Min Peng (2022), for example, states that Homer, alongside Moses and Mingo, "blindly adulate[s] white people" (159). The very few who recognise his subversive potential, such as Laura Dubek (2018), who notes that Homer is a "bookkeeper and scribe" and speculates that he might "like the writer who created (and named) him, turn these stories on their head, challenging the myths of his country" (77), do not apply their conclusions to *The Underground Railroad* itself. I argue that we should take Homer's subversive potential very seriously, not least because of the huge amount of textual evidence that points to Homer's narration of the novel. It makes textual, thematic, and structural sense that Homer narrates *The Underground Railroad* and that the whole novel is his address to the future, or rather the vehicle for that address. Heneks (2020) is the only other critic to consider Homer's potentially subversive status, citing Dubek's argument but concluding that Homer's "subversive status as a writer and watcher proves to be a delusion" (145). Dubek, who dedicates more attention to Homer in her article than any other scholar, stops short of

considering him as *The Underground Railroad*'s narrator, asserting that "his subversive activity lies beyond the scope of the novel" (77). Curiously, Dubek's assertion chimes with Whitehead's own continually expressed idea that radical novelty, the kind of writing that speaks to the future, does indeed lie beyond the scope of his novels; he reiterates in his work across his career, as I argue throughout this thesis, that the future cannot be addressed directly from our present situation, but rather only gestured towards. *The Underground Railroad* uses the tools of the present, not least the literary legacy of the slave narrative alongside mechanisms of genre such as the fantastical railroad itself, to make such a gesture.

In the first part of this chapter, after introducing *The Underground Railroad*, I set out the considerable evidence for Homer as narrator. I then consider the primary implications of this discovery for our understanding of Whitehead's novel in the contexts of writing the future. If Homer is the narrator of *The Underground Railroad*, our interpretation of Whitehead's use of genre—most notably, but far from exclusively, the autobiographical slave narrative—shifts significantly. Taking Homer as the narrator also compels us to reconsider *The Underground Railroad*'s approach to the medium of writing itself. This is exemplified by the scene towards the end of the novel in which Cora journeys in the literalised Underground Railroad for the final time, 'reading' the tunnel walls and finding there a potential utopian text. Initially, this moment appears to be the direct equivalent of Mark Spitz apprehending the Quiet Storm's mosaic from above in *Zone One* (2011), providing a glimpse of the utopian potential of writing in a seemingly inescapable hegemonic system. However, recasting Homer as the novel's narrator also allows us to see the whole novel as the work of a trickster intent on dismantling the system from inside, a dynamic that not only suggests powerful new modes of resistance but also offers a radical reading of Whitehead's source texts, the antebellum slave narratives. Reading *The Underground Railroad* as Homer's slave narrative compels us to realise that no genre can truly silence an artful voice; rather, a restrictive genre can be fuel on the fire of resistance, if we look at it "at the right time, from the right perspective", as Mark Spitz speculates in *Zone One* (233). Through

Homer, Whitehead reanimates the subversive potential of the slave narratives, operating as much in the tradition of Ishmael Reed's *Flight to Canada* (1976) as he is in that of Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987)—or rather synthesising the two into something new.

My approach, as I outline in the Introduction to this thesis, is digressive and intertextual. This is necessary in order to write about as allusive an author as Whitehead, particularly in the case of *The Underground Railroad*, with its anachronistic representation of history. I hope that by following Whitehead down the intertextual paths that reflect the novel's interposition with a great variety of texts from African American literary history and beyond, I can reflect some of the richness of the author's engagement with the potential writing has to carve open routes into the future. This is an urgent issue for the descendants of enslaved people still metaphorically and literally incarcerated in the United States and beyond. In order to demonstrate how the novel brings insights from African American literary history and Afrofuturist critique to bear on the discourse of slavery in contemporary society, I close read the text as often as possible, searching for traces of other texts and for Homer himself, the trickster narrator who spends the novel in the constant act of veiling his own status.

I close the chapter with a Postscript intended as a pertinent and informative adjunct to my argument that speaks to *The Underground Railroad's* powerful contribution to our understanding of how the discourse of slavery operates in the contemporary literary marketplace, and how that discourse does not necessarily help to escape slavery's persistent structural logic. *The Underground Railroad* is a novel intent on finding ways of addressing an ostensibly foreclosed future through the subversive potential of writing. Its 'underground' narrator and its close attention to the way texts function and can be manipulated to determine culture are aimed at figuring the contours of a radical future. Whitehead's proliferating intertextual paths, which particularly draw on African American literature of the past that has also been concerned with the relationship between writing and futurity, helps us to think

through and understand the author's interest in the potential of a radical written aesthetics that is yet to be born.

The Reception of *The Underground Railroad*

The mainstream reception of *The Underground Railroad* has generally been extremely positive, evidenced by the swathe of awards and media attention the novel has garnered for Whitehead. *The Underground Railroad* won the National Book Award for Fiction (2016), the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction (2017), the Carnegie Award for Excellence in Fiction (2017) and even achieved crossover success, winning the Arthur C. Clarke Award (2017), awarded to fantasy and science fiction novels. *The Underground Railroad* was also selected by Barack Obama to appear on his summer reading list and was chosen by Oprah Winfrey to feature on her Book Club, virtually guaranteeing its commercial success. The novel became the first of Whitehead's to be adapted for the screen in the Amazon Prime series *The Underground Railroad* by Barry Jenkins (2021), the Oscar-winning director of *Moonlight* (2016). I return to this adaptation of the novel below to analyse the series' diametrically opposite reading of Homer to my own.

The consensus of mainstream reviews of *The Underground Railroad* was that the errant postmodernist Whitehead had finally matured and come home to roost in the prestige genre of African American Literature, the autobiographical slave narrative. Ron Charles, for example, reviewing the novel for *The Washington Post*, praises Whitehead for modulating the "soaring arias of cleverness" that characterised his earlier books (2016: para. 2). Winfrey, in her Book Club interview on *The Underground Railroad* with Whitehead, namechecks Morrison's *Beloved* and praises him for finally tackling "race or slavery head on" (par. 10). Winfrey's positive reception of what she characterises as a "head on" take on slavery is linked to what Trysh Travis (2007) suggests is the "hypercapitalist nature of her undertaking" (1017). Travis contends that in

1994, Winfrey "made a pronounced and quite conscious turn toward the spiritual", a move that, however sincere, nonetheless represented "a successful strategy for 'brand enhancement'" (1019). Whilst, as Travis argues, there may be value in the "affective energy" that Winfrey cultivates, *The Underground Railroad* (perhaps in contrast to its author) resists being read 'head on', deploying multiple narrative strategies to complicate its own relationship to its readership—not least via its 'invisible' narrator, Homer. *The Underground Railroad*'s ostensible—not actual—conformity to the expectations of an African American writer may make the book more palatable to a mainstream readership, and therefore more commercially viable, but it does not follow that Whitehead has jettisoned the narrative and linguistic complexity of his earlier works; the 'head on' effect is precisely that: an effect, designed to mislead the reader.

Criticism of *The Underground Railroad* tends to present the novel as a pivot in Whitehead's career. Lee Konstantinou (2017), for example, perceives in *The Underground Railroad* a shift in Whitehead's approach to representing history, arguing that whilst the author's earlier works highlighted the representational gap between history and the present, in *The Underground Railroad* "history doesn't so much revisit the present, as never depart in the first place" (15). This amounts, in Konstantinou's view, to a critical failure on Whitehead's behalf. Konstantinou complains that in "What to Write Next" (2009), Whitehead's satirical article for *The New York Times*, the author mocks "the very notion that he might write a novel about slavery" (15). However, if anything, the presence of the "Southern Novel of Black Misery—"Slip on your sepia-tinted goggles and investigate the legacy of slavery that still reverberates to this day"" (par. 18)—in that editorial is evidence that Whitehead was interested in the potential uses of the genre. Emphasising the way the media processed this radical novel through the familiar tropes of popular slavery discourse, Michiko Kakutani's review of the novel for *The New York Times* bore the headline "Review: 'Underground Railroad' Lays Bare Horrors of Slavery and its Toxic Legacy" (2016) and contains the line, "Mr. Whitehead communicates the horrors of slavery and its toxic legacy rumbling on down the years" (par. 13). This sentence uses a phraseology

that veers uncomfortably close to Whitehead's satirical take on the genre. That the review appeared in the same publication as "What to Write Next" adds a further level of irony to Kakutani's headline.

By contrast to the mainstream and critical consensus, I argue in this chapter that in casting Homer as the narrator, *The Underground Railroad* tacks far closer to Whitehead's previous work than has been recognised. Whitehead as author and Homer as narrator work to erase traces of the narrator's identity at the same time as offering occasional revelations throughout the novel. By disguising Homer's status in this way, *The Underground Railroad* is able to retain distance from its critical reception and work in subtle ways to undermine the discursive hegemony of racist modernity. Carra Glatt (2021) argues that the novel is:

> as much a subversion of the neo-slave narrative as it is of that genre's nineteenth-century counterpart. In place of the neo-slave narrative's implicit advocacy of alternative ways of knowing and telling, *The Underground Railroad* offers a more radical rejection of not only the traditional slave narrative, but narrative itself (39).

By contrast, I argue that *The Underground Railroad* is an assertion of the power of writing to accommodate competing narrative versions of history, and a recognition of the way African American writers have used this feature of the medium to weave subversive narratives into their writing even when genre appears to have a stranglehold on their expression. Indeed, Whitehead speaks to a history of formal ingenuity and literary resourcefulness—represented in physical form by his literalised Underground Railroad—by which African Americans have reclaimed and repurposed genres as tools of liberation. Audre Lorde famously wrote the essay "The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House" (1984), insisting that only novel forms of art have revolutionary potential. *The Underground Railroad* suggests that by exploiting the weak points of a structure, revolution might be generated from reinvention after all.

Homer as the Narrator of *The Underground Railroad*

The short paragraph of first-person narration that begins “I was born on August 14th” (232) erupts into the text of the novel and abruptly disappears, perhaps having a similar effect on other readers to that which it had on me: that is, to deposit the vaguely unsettling feeling that I was missing something until I was swept up once again by the third-person narrative voice. I argue that Whitehead and Homer work to erase or disguise the traces of evidence that point to Homer as narrator, with the effect that the novel never makes its most subversive intentions explicit. This is consistent with Whitehead’s approach in earlier novels such as *Zone One* and, I contend, the author’s approach to writing generally: that insidious breaches of discourse can be more powerful than explicit statements of intent since they allow cracks to develop into crevasses undisturbed. In a consumer capitalist world, that which can be apprehended can be commodified and neutralised.

Whitehead’s nomenclature is not arbitrary. Naming is a central theme in *Apex Hides the Hurt* (2006) and often reveals webs of intertextual reference at play in his texts, such as in the case of the Quiet Storm in *Zone One*. Homer’s name immediately recalls the Ancient Greek poet, whose name, country of birth, and status as the author of much of the work attributed to him, as Barbara Graziosi (2016) details, remain the subject of scholarly disagreement (7-13). Especially pertinent to Whitehead’s narrator, as I read him, is the suggestion “that it was only a nickname which meant ‘blind’, or ‘hostage’, and referred to a traumatic incident in the poet’s life” (7). Whilst Ridgeway does not forcibly keep Homer hostage, the slave catcher does point out that the boy has little choice but to stay with him (202), as I discuss in detail below. In common with the African American literary tradition’s intertextuality and oral influences, Homer’s most famous poems “represent only the final outcome, a fixing by writing, of a long-standing art of oral performance and composition” (Andrew Ford, 1). Ford also outlines how the

epic form, which Homer's most famous works, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, take, is grounded "in magic and enchantment rather than rhetoric or history" (6-7). Epic, Ford asserts:

> forecloses certain aesthetic and rhetorical questions. In particular, the relationship between the audience and the work of art is transformed into a relationship between the present and an invisible past evoked (7).

As I argue in this chapter, *The Underground Railroad*'s investment in the fantastic is rooted in a particular approach to history, informed not least by Afrofuturism, in which this fantastical logic supersedes that of historical realism. *The Iliad*, with its famous story of the Trojan Horse—an apparently harmless artefact but in fact the container of revolutionary power—and *The Odyssey*, with its tale of the hero's non-linear journey through various discrete environments—have clear resonances with *The Underground Railroad*.

In keeping with Whitehead's style of fusing high and low cultural forms, Homer is also inescapably a reference to Homer Simpson, probably the most iconic representative of the consumer capitalism Whitehead's novels consistently targets. Rather than dilute Homer's identification with the Greek poet, however, Homer Simpson is another mask by which Homer-as-narrator conceals his true nature to the novel's readership, but (also typical of Whitehead's technique) a mask that reveals as well as disguises. Whitehead, who details his childhood and adolescent obsessions with budget horror films in his *New Yorker* article "A Psychotronic Childhood" (2012), would likely have also been familiar with John Schlesinger's Hollywood-based horror film *The Day of the Locust* (1975), a controversial film that, as Julia Prewitt Brown (2017) writes, "scrutinizes the phenomenon of spectatorship and the destructive impact of the Hollywood movie industry (stardom, fandom, glamour) without undercutting the medium of film" (par. 2). This line, with a few substitutions, can be applied to *The Underground Railroad*. The film stars Donald Sutherland as Homer Simpson—who, like Whitehead's narrator, is an accountant—and is based upon Nathaniel West's novel *The Day of the Locust* (1939), which

Matt Groening (2012) has spoken of as the source (along with his own father's name) of the Simpson patriarch's name (par. 4).

In *The Underground Railroad*, the circumstances of Homer's acquisition of literacy are revealing in terms of his identity as the narrator and his trickster-like skill with language. The slave catcher Ridgeway purchases him from a butcher who "had held no strong opinions on the subject of colored education and had permitted the boy to study with the children of some freemen" (202). This vague declaration elides the exercise of agency that Homer must have used in order to make this happen. Similarly: "Out of boredom, Ridgeway helped him with his letters" (202). Whilst not entirely implausible, it seems out of character for the single-minded slave catcher forged in his father's blacksmith: "a window into the primitive energies of the world" (73). Elsewhere in the novel, Ridgeway's attitude towards African American literacy is uncompromising: "Get them off the plantation and they learned to read, it was a disease" (79). Nonetheless, "Homer maintained the business accounts and recorded Ridgeway's stories in a small notebook he kept in his coat pocket" (202). Like the Quiet Storm in *Zone One,* other characters struggle to understand the motive or reason behind what Homer chooses to record in his archive: "What made this or that utterance from the slave catcher worthy of inclusion, Cora could not discern. The boy preserved worldly truism and observations about the weather with equal zeal" (202). The narrative encourages us to believe that Homer's writing is a mere reflection of the reality he encounters, much like the authors of antebellum slave narratives lead readers to believe that they performed a kind of transparent realism. As narrator, Homer lets it be assumed that his literacy is, if not a by-product of his upbringing, an inconsequential aspect of his personality, an unthreatening and useful quirk that allows him to keep notes and accounts for Ridgeway—although Ridgeway fails to comprehend the moral accounting his driver is also carrying out.

“I Was Born”: Homer’s Reinscription of the Slave Narrative Form

Whitehead is committed to finding ways of repurposing texts, forms, and figures from African American literary history in order to think through ways of producing the agency that can inaugurate a future beyond the racist terms of capitalist modernity. Crucial to this aim in *The Underground Railroad* is his reworking of the slave narrative form. In the first-person intrusion in *The Underground Railroad*’s narrative with which I began this chapter, it is significant that the first of the four sentences is: “I was born” (232). This phrase, in part due to James Olney’s landmark essay on the autobiographical slave narratives—“‘I Was Born’: Slave Narratives, Their Status as Autobiography and as Literature” (1985)—has become the genre’s metonymic calling card. Dubey notes that *The Underground Railroad* contains a “sly reference” (132) to James Olney; Sam, the abolitionist Underground Railroad operative who helped Cora earlier in the novel, uses the name as an alias to pose as a slave catcher, “prying slaves from jail on the pretext of delivering them to their masters. In “I Was Born”, the real Olney characterises the autobiographical slave narratives as “invariant”, insisting on their “overwhelming *sameness*” (148, emphasis Olney’s) to demonstrate the true extent to which these authors’ agency was inhibited by the genre. Dubey argues that this reference to Olney is part of Whitehead’s project in the novel to “constitute [*The Underground Railroad*] as its own museum of previous works, attesting to the capaciousness of the literary archive and emphasizing the heavily mediated nature of the novel’s representation of slavery” (132). Whilst I agree with Dubey’s analysis of the novel’s critique of the contemporary “museumization of slavery” (130)—with the caveat that it is also crucially Homer’s project—I would add that Whitehead is making a more specific point through the Olney reference. Olney’s analysis of the autobiographical slave narrative genre, whilst accurate to an extent, ironically has the effect of erasing the subtle differences between them, the moments of ingenuity and resistance that their authors manage to weave into their texts. Given that Olney’s name is taken by Sam as an act of subterfuge, this moment in *The*

Underground Railroad is more than a "sly reference"; it functions as commentary on the subversive potential of the genre; in other words, as a critique of Olney on Whitehead's behalf.

The scene in which Ridgeway acquires Homer provides further evidence of the latter's identity as the novel's narrator, since it provides a back story for him that sheds light upon the four sentences of first-person narration in the "Caesar" chapter. We learn that the butcher's "wife's family had given them the boy's mother as a wedding gift" and that he "had sold her during his previous stretch of bad luck" in gambling (202). Homer has been separated from his mother, a commonplace occurrence under slavery. This woman could be Lily Jane. No mention is made of a father, but neither is there any evidence that Homer does not know the identity of his father, who could be Jerome. This supplies Homer with a motive for his attachment to Ridgeway, and for his often violent actions against African American characters in the novel, that has nothing to do with personal affection. We know that Homer is "about ten years old" (187) and that there is every chance his parents, or at least his mother, are still alive in an unknown location. The novel emphasises that freemen were rarely in a much stronger position than enslaved African Americans, in that they were forced to live in constant fear of violence or kidnap back into slavery, even if they made it to the relative safety of the North. This point in itself reminds us that as much as freedom and slavery are oppositional concepts, freedom from slavery is not the same thing as freedom. Solomon Northrup recounts in *Twelve Years a Slave* (1853) the experience of being drugged, chained up and "robbed of liberty [. . .] It could not be that a free citizen of New-York, who had wronged no man, nor violated any law, should be dealt with thus inhumanly" (19). *The Underground Railroad* echoes this state of affairs, such as in the reference to "the blackbirders, the Five Points gangs who hog-tied freemen and dragged them south for auction" (78). Given this environment, it is understandable that a traumatised yet astute ten-year-old boy in search of his parents would stick to the one person who could protect him from such a fate at the same time as providing him with a means of travel almost unheard of for an African American in the South. What safer or more efficient way to travel could be

imagined than in the company of the most powerful and effective of slave catchers, Ridgeway? Echoing the subversive ironies detectable beneath the surface of the antebellum autobiographical slave narratives, Ridgeway's true function in *The Underground Railroad* is as a figure that signifies and actually mobilises African American freedom.

Reading Ridgeway as the ironic butt of a joke helps to counter a criticism of the novel concisely expressed by Kathryn Schulz. In her review of the novel via an account of the discursive uses of the Underground Railroad throughout American history for *The New Yorker* (2016), Schulz makes the point that Ridgeway is a "supervillain" who is "irrationally committed to the hunt" and "privately and demonically obsessed with tracking down specific fugitives" (par. 41). This is evident in the novel. Ridgeway "suffered the brazenness [of fugitives] as a personal slur" (81) and acquires a superhuman reputation as a slave catcher: "The slave mothers said, Mind yourself or Mister Ridgeway will come for you" (81). Notably, despite presenting him thus, the narrator also describes him as "extraordinary, not supernatural" (82), but Schulz nevertheless concludes that by creating this almost mythologically powerful and single-minded villain, Whitehead risks "locating the atrocities of slavery in individual pathology" (par. 41). However, if we understand Homer to be the narrator, it becomes clear that Ridgeway's near-superhuman status is attributable in part to Homer's imaginative construction of him; the more powerful Ridgeway, the more impressive Homer's (and Cora's) feats. In other words, Homer's inflation of Ridgeway, in the context that Homer is using him for his own ends, only serves to bolster Homer's own virtuosity. Ridgeway's physical size reflects his imposing presence, standing "six and a half feet tall, burly and resolute" at fourteen years old (74).

Homer's portrayal of Ridgeway is legible through connected genres of African American braggadocio such as toasts and lying. As Simon Rolston (2013) explains, "Lying—which does not necessarily denote the misrepresentation of facts—has very different rules from autobiography regarding representations of violence and crime" (194). Rolston points out that

the "badman" lying narrator often expresses himself through a discourse of "violent misogyny" (205). Whilst Homer often appears to tolerate and even take pleasure in others' violence towards women and his fellow African Americans, it is important to remember that his entire life with Ridgeway is a performance and also that he is a traumatised child, a fact that muddies the waters of his responsibility and complicity in ways that are rarely recognised by critics. As a narrative strategy, Rolston clarifies, lying "is heavily invested in subverting, playing with, or blurring the line between authentic and inauthentic, truth and fiction, and fact and colorful elaboration" (202). It is this aspect of lying that speaks so directly to Homer's narration of the novel and helps us to understand the extent to which information about Homer is available in *The Underground Railroad*—or, to put it another way, how far *The Underground Railroad* is Homer's unconventional autobiography as well as his biographical account of Cora. Ridgeway's supervillain status, then, has little to do with "individual pathology" as Schulz claims, and is instead a dimension of Homer's narrative style. Ridgeway's driver allows us to read him indirectly through his narrative choices.

My argument in this chapter that Whitehead uses Homer, as the novel's 'underground' narrator, to explore the subversive potential of writing to inaugurate radical futures casts Homer's obsessive retention of runaway bulletins in a different light. Homer "maintained a thorough collection" (204) of these documents; allied to the fact that he does not know where Lily Jane and Jerome are, there is strong evidence that he is searching for information that could help him find his parents. The text of *The Underground Railroad* is interspersed with real runaway slave advertisements and the novel is set just after the passing of the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 that made it legal to re-enslave fugitives even if they had made it to a free state, as well as placing the onus on federal government to assist slave catchers in their efforts. Their status as documents inimical to African American freedom is satirised as Cora uses one "to wipe herself" (223) whilst in Ridgeway's custody, ironically cleaning herself and wiping the bulletin 'clean' of text at the same time. This joke is analogous to (though more explicit than), for

example, Henry 'Box' Brown's wordplay in *Narrative of the Life of Henry Box Brown, Written by Himself* (1851). Brown narrates his escape from slavery in a box "three feet one inch wide, two feet six inches high, and two feet wide" (53). During the journey, Brown overhears two men speculating on the possible contents of the surprisingly heavy box. One of them, Brown writes, "guessed it was "THE MAIL." I too thought it was a mail but not such a mail as he supposed it to be" (54-55). Of course, beneath the play on words that would likely have made Brown's contemporary white Northern laugh, the crux of the joke is that even had the two men known that it was Brown inside the box they were still more likely to consider him "mail" (an object) than "male" (a fully human subject). Brown's layered joke suggests that the authors of slave narratives were able to exceed the restrictions of genre—the box in which they were placed, as it were—and subvert the conditions that put them there in the first place. In making a similar joke, Whitehead, who read numerous antebellum slave narratives in his research for the novel (*Lit Hub* 2016, par. 18), reads subversion into the founding genre of African American literature and suggests that the restrictions of genre contain the tools of their own destruction.

The novel's final bulletin is Whitehead's (or Homer's) own creation and describes "a slave girl called CORA [. . .] possessed of a spirited nature and devious method" (298). Rather than call for her arrest, the bulletin declares:

> She has stopped running.
>
> Reward remains unclaimed.
>
> SHE WAS NEVER PROPERTY (298).

There are different ways in which this bulletin might be interpreted. If we believe the narrator of the novel to be a disembodied third-person voice, essentially a cipher of Whitehead's own, the capitalised declaration on which the 'advertisement' terminates reads as an obvious truism, hardly news to Whitehead's twenty-first-century audience, even the most illiberal of whom

would be unlikely to claim that a person can be the property of another on the basis of race. It is more plausible that the intended audience of this bulletin is the contemporary audience of the novel's setting. Earlier in the novel we learn that "Ridgeway gathered renown for his facility for ensuring that property remained property" (80) and the slave catcher seems particularly animated by the maintenance of this equation. Whitehead has written, in his *New York Times Magazine* article "How 'You Do You' Perfectly Captures Our Narcissistic Culture" (2015), precisely against such tautological "self-justifying constructions" (par. 4). He traces the morphology of "tautophrases", arguing that they are fundamentally conservative in origin, designed to "preserve and burnish the established order" (par. 5). The most logical way to read the presence of Cora's runaway bulletin in the novel, then, is as the work of Homer, directly referring to and scorning Ridgeway's obsession with property.

The presence of Cora's bulletin as a humiliating rebuff to a former master is reminiscent of Raven Quickskill's epistolary poem to Arthur Swille in Reed's *Flight to Canada*. This novel, along with Morrison's *Beloved* are key influences on *The Underground Railroad*. A crude rubric through which to read Whitehead's novel is as a synthesis of the wild and fantastical anachronism of Reed's novel with Morrison's objective, as she describes it in her essay "On *Beloved*" in *The Source of Self-Regard* (2019), to "dig deeply into the interior lives of slaves" (283) to process its "haunting [of the present]—how it is both what we yearn for and what we fear" (284). Both these antecedents of *The Underground Railroad* are deeply interested in writing and literacy. Morrison's novel was inspired by a newspaper clipping about Margaret Garner, a formerly enslaved woman who, as former Underground Railroad President Levi Coffin writes in his memoir (1880), "with one stroke cut the throat of her little daughter, who she probably loved the best" (560) in order to save her from recapture into slavery, by implication a worse horror than death.

Quickskill's poem is based on Frederick Douglass's "To My Old Master," published in *The Liberator* in 1848—though according to *The Liberator* version (149) it was originally published in a no-longer extant edition of Douglass's own abolitionist newspaper, *The North Star*. Where Douglass must tread carefully in his criticism of his former master Thomas Auld so as not to endanger his siblings, who remain in slavery, and to avoid expressing anger beyond the bounds of Christian morality, Quickskill is able to be triumphantly furious. Whereas Douglass writes, "I entertain no malice towards you personally", insisting that "there is no roof under which you would be more safe than mine" (150), Quickskill informs Swille: "That was rat poison I left / In your Old Crow" (5). Taken as Homer's own textual rebuke, Cora's runaway bulletin places *The Underground Railroad* in this specific African American literary tradition that can be traced back to the origins of that canon, through the neo-slave narrative to the twenty-first century. Indeed, one effect of the appearance of this bulletin is that it implies, as I have suggested above in my discussion of Reed's and Morrison's influence on *The Underground Railroad*, a critical distance between the neo-slave narrative of the late twentieth century and contemporary approaches such as Whitehead's own.

A further parallel between *Flight to Canada* and *The Underground Railroad* bolsters the view that Homer is the narrator of the novel. Through the character of Uncle Robin, *Flight to Canada* challenges the Uncle Tom stereotype that has become cemented in the discourse around slavery since the publication of Harriet Beecher Stowe's sentimental anti-slavery novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852). Uncle Robin at first seems to mirror the sycophantic obeisance of his literary forebear, a parody of genuflection, uttering phrases like, "we gets whipped with a velvet whip" (37) and dressing up as a Moorish slave for Swille's amusement (18). But, in an affirmation of the power of literacy and cunning, Uncle Robin ultimately uses his ability to read and write to leave himself Swille's plantation in his will.

Homer, despite his minority status, nonetheless plays a similar role in *The Underground Railroad* to Uncle Robin in *Flight to Canada*, to all appearances the loyal accomplice who aligns his interests completely with a powerful white man. When Royal and his companions ambush Ridgeway's party as they are transporting Cora back to Randall, the hopeful reader might think this is Homer's chance to switch sides and betray his "employer" (302). Homer apparently refuses this opportunity, throwing his "lantern at the man holding the knife" (226). However, close analysis of this passage suggests that there may be more to Homer's actions than initially meets the eye. It is significant that Homer attacks the one member of Royal's party who is not carrying a gun, giving the two gunmen the chance—the necessity, even—to fire at Ridgeway and his white "associate" (187) Boseman. Boseman is killed in the ensuing conflict (227) and the consequence of Homer's action is that Royal's party retain the upper hand. After throwing the lantern, Homer "ran to get a gun" (226), or so the narrative (Homer's) informs us, but he does not return before the end of the scene. When Royal presents Cora with a choice—"If you want, miss, I can shoot him for you [. . .] Though we'd prefer to put irons on them" (227)—Cora reflects: "She wanted every bad thing for Ridgeway and Boseman. And Homer? She didn't know what her heart wanted for the strange black boy, who seemed an emissary from a different country" (227). This passage is typical of Homer's (self-)presentation as an ambiguous figure both deeply involved in and strangely outside of or other to the fictional world of the novel.

Barry Jenkins' depiction of Homer in his Amazon Prime series based on the novel is indicative of how far, in my view, the character of Homer and, by extension, the novel itself has been misunderstood. Jenkins expresses his difficulty with the character of Homer in an interview with Megan Vick for *TV Guide* (2021): "I want to throw a pot of water on his [Whitehead's] face because that's a difficult character to wrestle to the ground. He's such an enigma" (par. 2). Jenkins presents Homer as the embodiment of "self-hatred and internalized racism" (par. 4), adding, "I would never draw this character myself" (par 7). Jenkins dramatizes the extent of what he sees as Homer's "disturbing loyalty to a white supremacist" (par. 6) in the

last scene in which we see Ridgeway's young driver, depicting him sobbing over Ridgeway's dead body like a son who has lost his father. This detail does not occur in the novel, in which the closest Homer comes to expressing any grief over Ridgeway's predicament comes as he "yelped at the sounds his employer made as he fell" (302). The verb "yelped" is typically ambiguous of Homer—though consistent with what I argue is his tendency to simultaneously divulge and obscure his true identity—and might suggest excitement as much as distress. As Ridgeway lays dying, he asks Homer, "Do you have your journal?" and proceeds to dictate some halting pronouncements on "the American imperative" (303). The reversal in status between Homer, who has "leaned his face in" and Ridgeway, lying prone and fatally injured, is clear, ironically emphasised by Homer's repeated address to Ridgeway as "sir" (303). The final mention of Homer comes from Cora's perspective as she begins her final journey on the Underground Railroad (Homer does not attempt to prevent her from travelling and is significantly the only other pro-slavery advocate to have directly seen this station other than Ridgeway): "Cora looked back at Ridgeway and Homer. The slave catcher whispered his address and the black boy recorded his words" (303). Notably, this shift in the focalisation of the narrative—before this final look back through Cora's eyes she is effectively 'out of shot' as Homer and Ridgeway confer—allows Homer as narrator to fade back into the shadows of the novel once again.

Despite recognising to an extent Homer's enigmatic nature in the novel, then, Jenkins nonetheless paints him as a sycophantic, if traumatised race traitor, the unfortunate consequence of a white supremacist society. I have argued that, in the novel, the opposite is the case: Homer is a trickster, a prophet, a reader, and a writer, a character drawn from the African American tradition capable of outwitting even the most fearsome and effective proponents of white supremacy, such as Ridgeway. Homer has Ridgeway, like a bundle of free papers, 'in his pocket' throughout *The Underground Railroad*, making him signify African American freedom in a very material way, allowing Homer to travel around the South in search of his parents. In this

sense, there is an element of loss for Homer in Ridgeway's death after all, since he must now navigate the world without his guarantee of safety.

Cora's first encounter with Homer occurs in the "North Carolina" section of the novel, in which Ridgeway, Boseman, and Homer capture Cora and begin their transportation of her back to the South, after she is reported by Fiona and discovered hiding in an attic nook, "nestled between the rafters as if in the cramped hold of a ship" (168). This nook is based on the "very small garret" in the roof of her grandmother's shed (173) that Harriet Jacobs describes hiding in for seven years in her autobiographical slave narrative *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* (1861). The passage is focalised through Cora's perspective and takes place during a "Friday Festival" (184)—an organised public lynching:

> A little colored boy, about ten years old, drove a wagon up the street through the crowd, shouting at the two horses. On any other occasion the sight of him in his tailored black suit and stovepipe hat would have been a cause of bewilderment. After the dramatic capture of the sympathisers and the runaway, his appearance nudged the night into the realm of the fantastical. More than one person thought what had just transpired was a new wrinkle in the Friday entertainment, a performance to counter the monotony of the weekly skits and lynchings (187).

Homer is described in terms that cast him outside the logic of normal human relations in the novel. He both draws and deflects attention by "shouting" and dressing outlandishly for his status, whilst at the same time being able to come across as a mere "wrinkle". The passage hints at his directorial role by using the language of theatre ("dramatic"; "entertainment"; "performance"), both mirroring the gruesome theatre of lynching that is occurring in the scene and suggesting Homer has control of the action at a higher level—he is capable of shifting the mood into the "fantastical" with a nudge. Elsewhere in the novel, he is described as a "strange little creature" (270) and an "odd little imp" (200). "Wrinkle" is a term often used to describe

slight anomalies in the spacetime continuum, further indicating that Homer possesses unusual or even supernatural powers. If we posit Homer as the narrator of this passage, the way we read it is complicated further; this is Homer hinting at, whilst also veiling, his own control of the narrative.

Understanding that Homer has this privileged access to the fantastical helps to refute a potential objection to my hypothesis that he is *The Underground Railroad*'s narrator, that is: if the narratorial voice is to be regarded as belonging to a character in the novel, how is that character able to know the future? *The Underground Railroad* exhibits an anachronistic narrative frame by which events that occurred at various points between the 1850 setting and Whitehead's contemporary era are mapped onto the same chronological plane. For example, the events that take place in the "South Carolina" chapter of *The Underground Railroad* are based on the Tuskeegee Syphilis Study, which took place between 1932 and 1972. As James H. Jones describes in *Bad Blood: The Tuskeegee Syphilis Experiment* (1993), "for forty years the United States Public Health Service (PHS) had been conducting a study of the effects of untreated syphilis on black men in Macon County, Alabama" (1). As Jones details, the study was "a nontherapeutic experiment, aimed at compiling data on the effects of the spontaneous evolution of syphilis on black males" (2). Jones details that "as many as 100 men had died as a direct result of complications caused by syphilis" during the experiment (2), for which no informed consent was obtained by the PHS (13). Dr. Bertram, in the "South Carolina" section of *The Underground Railroad*, is involved with a similar study, in which "his [black] patients believed they were being treated for blood ailments", whilst in fact being nonconsenting "participants in a study of the latent and tertiary stages of syphilis" (121). As *The Underground Railroad*'s 'underground' narrator, then, Homer is able to travel, trickster-like, through time and space. This allows him both to refuse the idea that African American suffering is merely historical and create correspondence between the present and the past that helps to open up paths into the future.

The Underground Railroad and Afrofuturist Time

This ability to mesh past, present, and future into a single narrative resembles the temporal fluidity found in Afrofuturist theory and aesthetics, as I now discuss. Homer's knowledge of the future is not an impediment to his role as the narrator of *The Underground Railroad*. On the contrary, in the light of the novel's participation in Afrofuturist discourse, the anachronistic narration provides a strong argument for his status as the narrator. Melanie Masterson Sherazi's analysis of William Demby's *King Comus* (2017) helps us to understand the temporality at play in *The Underground Railroad* and the role of Homer as the trickster-like source of its anachronistic narration. According to Sherazi, *King Comus*, published after the author's death by Ishmael Reed, deploys an Afrofuturist "ecstatic temporality, a dynamic commingling of the past, present, and future" (208). The effect of this ecstatic temporality is to create a "beckoning horizon that ever pulls us into the future" (207). In Demby's novel, the future is "open-ended but always already in dialogue with the past" (209). Sherazi makes a clear statement about the significance of this dialogue that is extremely useful in understanding the powerful effect of the Afrofuturist narration of time:

> We cannot ever be entirely extricated from what has already been; the future, in other words, exists in a refashioning of the world that is never outside of Time but that can press upon its limits, and on into new worlds by reaching toward horizons of possibility (209).

Through the "ecstatic" representation of the past, as exhibited in Homer's narration of the *Underground Railroad*, paths to the future that traditional linear ways of representing historical time foreclose begin to proliferate; novel futures can be imagined. However, it is important to note that Whitehead does not commit wholeheartedly to the notion that the future can be

generated from the disruption and realignment of historical time; rather, *The Underground Railroad*, in line with Whitehead's other work, promotes *hope* in the potential for this to happen. *The Underground Railroad*'s futures are intangible, legible only in their outlines.

Scholars such as Dubey and Derek C. Maus have analysed *The Underground Railroad*'s representation of historical time. Maus, in his recently updated book *Understanding Colson Whitehead* (2021), seeks to unpack the novel's "satirically historiographic perspective through [Cora's] encounters with numerous forms of storytelling" (124). Dubey similarly contends that *The Underground Railroad* seeks to "eschew the revisionist historical aims of earlier neoslave narratives and probe instead the affective investments and representational legacies that help make slavery legible in the present" (134). By contrast, Li argues that in *The Underground Railroad*, "by confusing history with fantasy, [Whitehead] is complicit in fictionalizing racialized violence" (11). An exploration of Whitehead's investment in Afrofuturist temporality in *The Underground Railroad* is crucial for understanding his aesthetic choices in the novel's representation of history and the relationship of those choices to the inauguration of African American futures.

Whitehead tells *The Sydney Morning Herald* that *The Underground Railroad* is concerned with "the truth of things, not the facts" (2017, par. 11), emphasising that the novel has little investment in realist modes of representation. Ytasha L. Womack, in her book *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture* (2013), explicates the African American tradition of anachronistic time (in which Reed's *Flight to Canada* also participates):

> There's something about African American culture in particular that dictates that all cultural landmarks and personal evolutions are recast in a historical lineage. Whether it's the concept of prophesy and speaking into the future or tropes of the past shadowing the present, whether by need or by narrative, many speak as if the future, past, and present are one (153).

The formal quality of "speaking into the future" that Womack describes can be traced back to the Middle Passage. In his article on black music for *The Wire* magazine, "Loving the Alien: Black Science Fiction" (1992), Mark Sinker writes:

> The ships landed long ago: they already laid waste whole societies, abducted and genetically altered swathes of citizenry, imposed without surcease their values. Africa and America—and so by extension Europe and Asia—are already in their various ways *Alien Nation* (33).

Sinker's article includes an analysis of Public Enemy's track "Welcome to the Terrordome" (1990), which, as discussed earlier in this thesis, is a key intertext and the source of one of the epigraphs for Whitehead's *Zone One*. As discussed above, Toni Morrison abbreviates Sinker's idea in an interview with Paul Gilroy, stating that "modern life begins with slavery" (1993, 178), her use of the present tense emphasising the continuing presence of the racist logic of slavery in the present. *The Underground Railroad*'s depiction of the Middle Passage also advances this model of the nature of modernity as intrinsically rooted in slavery, rather than, for example, Enlightenment thinking. To the contrary, rationalist accounts of modernity—exemplified by the scientific discourse of the "South Carolina" chapter of *The Underground Railroad* and the narrator's statement that Ajarry "knew that the white man's scientists peered beneath things to see how they worked"—themselves emerge as horrific veils of modernity's brutality.

Kodwo Eshun, in "Further Considerations on Afrofuturism" (2003), explains how this understanding of the origins of modernity plays out aesthetically in African American artistic production. Whilst Eshun is describing musical form, his insights apply equally to writing: "Afrofuturism approaches contemporary digital music as an intertext of recurring literary quotations that may be cited and used as statements capable of imaginatively reordering chronology and fantasizing history" (299). The effect of this, Eshun explains, is "not to question the reality of slavery, but to defamiliarize it through a temporal switchback that reroutes its

implications through postwar social fiction, cultural fantasy, and modern science fiction" (300). This assertion could almost stand as a statement specifically about Whitehead's novel, whose literalised Underground Railroad functions as just such a 'rerouting'. At the same time, Eshun's account of Afrofuturist aesthetics throws light on the legitimacy of Homer-as-narrator's ability to play with linear historical time.

The non-linear narratives that draw on what Eshun calls "temporal switchback" in order to narrate the temporal disjunctions of slavery and racial modernity have been mobilised by various African American authors. The protagonist of Octavia Butler's novel *Kindred* (1979) unwillingly (at first) travels back in time to experience slavery through the perspective of a twentieth-century subject; in doing so she experiences a bleed between her modern consciousness and the point of view of an enslaved woman in the antebellum period, destabilising both. Amiri Baraka's 1996 short story "Rhythm Travel" features a character whose invention of the "Anyscape" allows him to perform the eponymous feat: "You can Dis Appear and Re Appear anywhere and anytime that plays" (2000, 114). Via the prison work song "Take This Hammer", which features the lyric "If he ask you was I runnin' / Tell him I was flyin'", the protagonist time travels to a plantation where:

> I seen some brothers and sisters digging a well. They were singing this, and I began to echo. A big hollow echo. A sorta blue shattering echo. The Bloods got to smilin. Because it made them feel good, and that's the way they heard it anyway.
>
> But the overseers and plantation masters winced at that. They'd turn their heads sharply back and forth, looking behind them and at the slaves. Man, the stuff I seen!

The Anyscape machine—a metaphor of African American technical ingenuity—allows Baraka's protagonist to create a feedback loop between the past and the present, a call-and-response dialogue by which the constituents of both eras are slightly changed by the interaction. This process resonates with Sherazi's discussion of ecstatic time. The "blue shattering echo" that

makes the enslaved African Americans on the plantation smile emerges in the story as a kind of promise from the future, or, from their point of view, a prophetic vision of better things to come.

These ideas of creating resonance between the past and the present are explored in the opening of *The Underground Railroad*. The first chapter of the novel, “Ajarry”, which details Cora’s grandmother’s abduction from her village near Ouidah in modern day Benin, establishes the novel’s transnational framework for understanding the genealogy of both Cora and modernity itself. In *The Colossus of New York* (2003), Whitehead writes that, “Talking about New York is a way of talking about the world” (158) but *The Underground Railroad*’s first chapter marks an almost unique crossing of the United States border in the author’s work, depicting what Paul Gilroy has called “the Black Atlantic” (1993). The description of Ajarry’s kidnap evokes the Afrofuturist way of thinking about the wholesale kidnap of populations for trade and enslavement across the Middle Passage as a kind of alien abduction.

The novel depicts Ajarry’s kidnapping by “Dahomeyan raiders” (3) as an incomprehensible experience similar to an alien abduction. Whitehead writes, “Cora’s grandmother had never seen the ocean before that bright afternoon in the port of Ouidah and the ocean dazzled after her time in the fort’s dungeon” (3). The suffusion of light in this description—“bright”; “dazzled”—not only recalls the bright lights associated with alien abductions; it also emphasises the difficulty of comprehending the image, overexposing it to the reader and representing the shock of the invention of whiteness. The apocalyptic nature of the experience for Ajarry and her fellow villagers is further amplified by the reference to the biblical story of Noah, as the kidnappers are seen “marching them in chains to the sea two by two” (3). The overexposed lighting of the scene then abruptly shifts, as Ajarry descends into “the black doorway” of the *Nanny*, a ship “out of Liverpool” (3). The doorway, with its right-angled geometry, symbolises Ajarry’s entry into modernity’s dark universe, in which nothing will be the same. Despite the horror of the doorway, Ajarry “thought she’d be reunited with her father, down

there in the dark" (3), but she will discover that, "when her father couldn't keep the pace of the long march, the slavers stove in his head and left his body by the trail" (3). The "long march" perhaps provides an ironic echo of Nelson Mandela's famous autobiography, *The Long March to Freedom* (1994).

Whitehead builds his notion of writing the future in part from his intertextual deployment of texts from the African American and Afrodiasporic literary traditions, which come into correspondence with each other and are read and reinscribed by *The Underground Railroad*. The "black doorway" through which Ajarry passes recalls Derek Walcott's epic poem *Omeros* (1990), in which, like Whitehead in *The Underground Railroad*, he recasts the Greek poet, making him signify in the world of slavery and the Middle Passage as well as Walcott's postcolonial contemporary world. As Martin McKinsey (2008) asserts, Walcott in *Omeros* explores the way in which, "If at some point in their history, a people is forced to carry the canon of Empire, sooner or later they will carry off its canon as well" (900). Whereas Whitehead's narrator uses the image of the black doorway to evoke the horror of Ajarry's future of subjugation and death under modernity's racial logic, in Chapter XXVII of *Omeros*, the narrator deploys it to look back at the past, finding death where life had been. Of a village recently raided by slavers, Walcott writes: "Achille walked in the dusty street / of the barren village. The doors were like open graves" (145). Using the same metaphors of dark and light that Whitehead deploys in *The Underground Railroad*, Walcott writes that the enslaved Africans "were the colour of shadows when we came down" (149) and "these shadows are reprinted now on the white sand / of antipodal coasts, your ashen ancestors, from the Bight of Benin, from the margin of Guinea" (149). The textuality of "reprinted" and "margin" make the land itself a site of text, just as Whitehead does so strikingly across his work, such as in the image in *Zone One* of Mark Spitz wandering the streets of New York as "an insect exploring a gravestone" (8). The representation of Africa as a two-dimensional text recalls the map of Africa upon which European powers notoriously inscribed the borders of their colonial possessions at the Berlin

Conference of 1884 to 1885. Making real spaces textual is always a political act; texts like *Omeros* and *The Underground Railroad* work to intervene in historical correspondences between text and place. Like *The Underground Railroad*, *Omeros* constantly interrogates the act and purpose of writing about slavery's violence, of incorporating its illegible, unknowable pain into literary work. Walcott's narrator, like Whitehead's Homer, challenges the reader to consider whether this act of translation into text is legitimate, or whether it reproduces the kidnappings of the Middle Passage to create literary and financial "value".

Ajarry's real and symbolic entry through the doorway into modernity's nightmare is also conspicuously an entry into an underground space, establishing a subterranean journey that Ajarry begins and Cora, on her final trip through the tunnels of the Underground Railroad, ends. This establishes a historical trajectory in the novel in which African Americans are forced by white supremacist society into underground spaces that they must find innovative ways of exploiting and escaping. The construction of the Underground Railroad itself is the first step in this reclamation of the subterranean world, in all its literal and metaphorical senses. This subterranean lineage runs in direct contrast and opposition to what Ridgeway, the embodiment of white supremacy in the novel, describes as "the true Great Spirit, the divine thread connecting all human endeavour—if you can keep it, it is yours. Your property, slave or continent" (80). The development of this subterranean space connects the novel to a long tradition of such environments in African American literature, most obviously Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), which like *The Underground Railroad* is framed by scenes of underground existence. Ellison's novel begins with its protagonist "in a state of hibernation" in a hole "warm and full of light" (9) due to the fact that he has "wired the entire ceiling" with "exactly 1,369" bulbs as "an act of sabotage" against "Monopolated Light & Power" (10). At the end of *Invisible Man*, the protagonist reflects that, "Even hibernations can be overdone", asserting that, "I'm shaking off the old skin and leaving it here in the hole" (468). He declares that up above, "There's a stench in the air, which, from this distance underground, might be the smell either of death or

of spring" (468). In a world that has rendered him invisible, the invisible man wonders whether to risk reading viable futurity into his surroundings or remain isolated and sealed off from society.

Dubey argues for the subterranean world "as the vantage point from which the gap between the promise and practice of American democracy becomes most glaringly visible" (123). The underground is a space for critical reflection on the political iterations of race and capital that Whitehead distinguishes from, for example, the aerial perspective in *Zone One*. Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric* (2014) reproduces Glenn Ligon's artwork *Untitled: Four Etchings* (1992). In one of the etchings, Ligon takes Zora Neale Hurston's famous assertion in her 1928 essay for *The World Tomorrow*, "How It Feels To Be Colored Me", that: "I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background" (216). In another etching, a quotation from *Invisible Man* is rendered barely visible in black text on a black background. Ligon's work makes visible, as it were, in the form of an image, the way that two writers have dealt with the legibility of black citizens in a racist society. Rankine's poem uses Ligon's artwork to reflect her own exploration of the way that race produces illegibility, erasing the person beneath its signification to varying degrees depending on context, bringing this insight to bear on recent histories of racist police brutality and murder in the United States. The "black" slave ship's doorway, passage through which imposes racial blackness on Ajarry for the first time, mirrors the form of Ligon's etchings. Through this re-inscription of Hurston, Ellison, Ligon, and Rankine, Whitehead continues and expands the African American tradition of making legible the erasure of people by race. By linking the "black doorway" to the novel's literalised Underground Railroad, he establishes a space of writing through which African Americans might project a future for themselves beyond race and racism. However tentative this future may be, *The Underground Railroad* suggests that its achievement is intimately connected to writing.

The way Ellison frames *Invisible Man* by beginning and ending underground is reflected in the final pages of *The Underground Railroad*, as Cora, having seen off Ridgeway, makes her final excursion via the Underground Railroad. In an echo of the invisible man's hole, the station from which she departs is described as "The ghost station" (299). Both *The Underground Railroad* and *Invisible Man* represent the importance of the musical rhythm and its expression through the body. In Whitehead's novel, Cora "discovered a rhythm, pumping her arms, throwing all of herself into movement" (303). This musical rhythm propels her forward, priming her for her encounter with what she reads as radical futurist text in the tunnel walls. In *Invisible Man*, music animates the protagonist's negotiation with his own invisibility: "Invisibility, let me explain, gives one a slightly different sense of time, you're never quite on the beat. Sometimes you're ahead and sometimes you're behind" (11). The irregular cadence of these lines reflects the point the protagonist is making and the half-rhyme of "time" and "behind" emphasises it further. If we are in any doubt as to the influence of this passage on Whitehead's own temporal-political aesthetics—most clearly outlined in *Zone One*'s location of utopian possibilities in the "cracks between things" that become "new places for things"—the invisible man finds slivers of freedom in Louis Armstrong's music: "those points where time stands still or from which it leaps ahead. And you slip into the breaks and look around" (11). The formal innovations of hip-hop that Whitehead draws upon enact exactly this process (as I discuss in more detail in the Introduction to this thesis), slipping into the breaks and exploding them to create new forms.

Cora's final escape scene through the tunnels of the Underground Railroad, the culmination of *The Underground Railroad*'s enactment of what Ellison's invisible man calls "the lower frequencies" (469), is a scene of reading: "Cora ran her hand along the wall of the tunnel, the ridges and pockets. Her fingers danced over valleys, rivers, the peaks of mountains, the contours of a new nation hidden beneath the old". In *Zone One* there is the Quiet Storm's mosaic of wrecked vehicles which Mark Spitz views from the vantage point of a helicopter; in *The Underground Railroad* there is the inner surface of the tunnel. The text Cora reads there has

not been written, but it is writing nonetheless; it would not exist without the human architects of the railroad—black labourers. “Who builds anything in this country?”, railroad operator Lumbly offers as a rhetorical response to the question of who built it all. The reference to “the contours of a new nation” that Cora traces in the pitch darkness of the tunnel throws new light on the novel’s refrain, first spoken by railroad operator Lumbly: “Look outside as you speed through, and you’ll find the true face of America” (69). As Cora flees from Ridgeway’s custody towards the ill-fated black-owned Valentine farm, she reconsiders the phrase: “It was a joke, then, from the start. There was only darkness outside the windows on her journeys, and only ever would be darkness” (262-3). Cora’s hope that America’s “true face” might represent a kind of freedom in contrast to the enslavement from which she has fled has turned to abject pessimism. The third instance of the phrase, in which Cora uses physical touch to ‘read’ the tunnel walls in the darkness, synthesises the first two, establishing a tentatively utopian dialectic: the hope of ignorance is met with the crushing realisation that the horrors of enslavement do not end at the borders of the plantation; finally, hope finds an uncertain yet undeniable foothold in the power of writing and reading. This time Cora remarks of the true face of America that she “could not see it but she felt it, moved through its heart” (304).

Although what Cora reads on the tunnel walls is not explicitly ‘written’ there, she alchemises it into text through her reading. The black workers who “excavated a million tons of rock and dirt, toiled in the belly of the earth for the deliverance of slaves like her” (303) may or may not have meant to inscribe a utopian vision, but the courage and imagination they displayed has created a space outside the logic of the white supremacist world where writing that teeters on the illegible can be discerned. The utopian spirit of the ‘writing’ on the tunnel walls at first frightens and disorientates Cora, who is used to things going wrong: “She feared she’d gotten turned around in her sleep. Was she going deeper in or back where she came?” (304). But ultimately it imbues her with the resolution that “She’d find the terminus or die on the tracks” (304). In other words, the act of reading her way through the Underground Railroad

allows Cora to imagine a future by providing a means of countering the racist capitalist telos of suffering and oppression symbolised by her grandmother Ajarry's entry into the "black doorway" of the slave ship.

Whitehead gives Mabel, Cora's mother, a strikingly similar moment in which the act of reading offers a fleeting glimpse into a utopian future. As Cora understands it, Mabel abandoned Cora as a child to the cruelties of plantation slavery to undertake her own fugitive mission North. However, in the chapter immediately preceding Cora's tunnel wall reading scene, the reader learns that Mabel had quickly halted her escape and planned to return to the Randall plantation, armed with the "treasure" of an experience that she could one day relate to Cora, "when she found the words": the promise that "there was something beyond the plantation, past all that she knew" (294). Mabel's change of heart is engendered by the feeling of freedom she has after entering the liminal space of the swamp, a natural environment that, at least for Mabel in this scene, exists outside the logic of white supremacy. There, she eats turnips from her mother Ajarry's tiny plot of land and watches as, "Above—through the leaves and branches of the black-water trees—the sky scrolled before her, new constellations wheeling in the darkness" (294). "Scrolled" evokes written text and the "new constellations" she perceives suggest novelty and creative freedom, also conveyed by the dynamism of the verb "wheeling". Whilst Mabel doesn't explicitly recognise the textuality of her experience, she senses that the formal play of the stars is related to freedom. Caesar, with whom Cora escapes the Randall plantation, "could read stars as well as letters" (57). That this moment of 'reading' in the swamp, the only one in her life in which she has felt free, is what causes Mabel to realise that "she had to go back" (294), is an indictment of how familial love was leveraged as a weapon of confinement by enslavers. But it is also an affirmation of the way small personal victories add up to larger consequences.

The legibility of the sky was more than metaphorical to enslaved African Americans; the North Star, easily located by tracing a line from the Big Dipper, helped fugitives orientate themselves towards their destination. In *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, An American Slave* (1845), Douglass writes: “Away back in the dim distance, under the flickering light of the north star, behind some craggy hill or snow-covered mountain, stood a doubtful freedom—half frozen—beckoning us to come and share its hospitality” (85). The tone of tentative, uncertain utopian projection—“flickering”; “doubtful”; half frozen”—rhymes with Whitehead’s own approach to hope in the modern United States. Douglass would go on to establish his anti-slavery newspaper *The North Star*, literally transforming this symbol of freedom into printed text and emphasising the importance of the night sky as text to enslaved black Americans; literacy in this sense was a life-or-death issue.

Whitehead traces the significance of ‘reading’ to African Americans through Cora and Mabel, further extending this genealogy of literacy to Cora’s grandmother Ajarry, who crosses the Middle Passage from Ouidah and endures multiple relocations as a slave in the United States before eventually ending up at the Randall cotton plantation. There, she establishes a tiny plot of arable land “scarcely three yards sqauare” (14) on which she grows vegetables such as the turnips Mabel eats during her short-lived escape attempt. All three custodians of the land have to fight for it; Ajarry “warned that she would knock open the head of anyone who messed with her land” (19) and Cora has to defend it with a hatchet. Critics tend to view Cora’s plot of family land in the context of land ownership and the fragile nature of generational connections under slavery. Nicole Waller (2022), for example, argues that “Cora’s desperate attempt to retain possession of her garden serves to introduce her world as territorial and to outline the plantation landscape she inhabits” (52). I argue that the plot also embodies a kind of prototypical writing surface through which (an admittedly impoverished) intergenerational communication takes place. Cora perceives the textuality of her plot: “The dirt at her feet had a

story, the oldest story Cora knew" (12). This reading is bolstered by Cora's later epiphany that her plot was:

> A joke [. . .] a tiny square of dirt that had convinced her she owned something. It was hers like the cotton she seeded, weeded, and picked was hers. Her plot was a shadow of something that lived elsewhere, out of sight (179-80).

She compares it to:

> The way poor Michael reciting the Declaration of Independence was an echo of something that existed elsewhere [. . .] Cora wasn't sure the document described anything real at all. America was a ghost in the darkness, like her" (180).

Earlier, she describes Michael's voice as "like an angry phantom" (117). Whitehead maps the Declaration of Independence, with its hollow assertion that "all men are created equal" (*National Archives* 2023), onto Cora's family plot, casting both as texts that represent the absence of what they proclaim. Later, on the Valentine farm, Georgina comments that "The Declaration is like a map. You trust that it's right, but you only know by going out and testing it yourself (240). Ajarry's plot is nevertheless Cora's first hint of the African American underground, the irruption of a site of resistance on America's surface and a link to the subterranean routes that navigate white supremacist discourse.

The Underground Railroad suggests that even in the most restrictive of genres, modes of resistance can be found that, to borrow Hortense R. Spillers' phrase, "slip the yoke" (1989, 56) of discourse. In the "South Carolina" chapter, Cora finds herself reading and rewriting the exhibition at the Museum of Natural Wonders where she works as a feature of the "Living History" exhibit. In her argument, Dubey makes much of the direct and inverse structural correspondences between the exhibit and the Underground Railroad in the novel, arguing that "Whitehead ultimately thwarts the desire for immediacy that inspires Living History approaches

to slavery" (113). The novel makes the relationship between the exhibit and the railroad explicit: "Like a railroad, the museum permitted them to see the rest of the country beyond their small experience" (109). This line highlights the vast difference between seeing and knowing, highlighting how much of the United States exists as, essentially, a fictional text in the minds of its citizens. African Americans—"People like you", as the curator Mr. Field tells Cora (109)—are implicitly incorporated into the category of the "untamed flora and fauna of the North American continent" (109).

But the Living History exhibit, and Cora's negotiation of it, also showcase Whitehead's approach to finding and exploiting the cracks in generic texts to cultivate new forms. Cora works on three dioramas which function as a linear progressive narrative that naturalises and justifies the institution of slavery: Scenes from Darkest Africa, Life on the Slave Ship, and Typical Day on the Plantation (109-10). Cora challenges the latter's pastoral vision of plantation life and is told by Mr. Fields that, "while authenticity was their watchword, the dimensions of the room forced certain concessions" (110). This is an analogy of genre; the room represents generic form, the "concessions" the way that form entails euphemisms, elisions, shorthand and other institutionalised modes of representation that render the exhibition's claims of authenticity false.

Cora develops various ways of resisting and rewriting the narrative, despite, like the autobiographical slave narrative authors, having to conform to the genre's strict codes: "She burned with shame twice a day when she stripped and got into her costume" (110). One of Cora's strategies is to read the exhibit backwards, against the grain of the chronological narrative that endorses slavery: "The Progression from Plantation to Slave Ship to Darkest Africa generated a soothing logic. It was like going back in time, an unwinding of America" (125). Cora's reversed narrative echoes Homer-as-narrator's time-travelling retelling of American history.

Another way in which Cora subverts the genre in which she must participate is to reverse the relationship between the reader and the writing, making the exhibit 'read' its visitors. "She got good at her evil eye. Looking up from the slave wheel or the hut's glass fire to pin a person in place like one of the beetles or mites in the insect exhibits" (126). The visitors, believing the 'text' of the museum to be safe and inert, "always broke [. . .] not expecting this weird attack". *The Underground Railroad* here evokes the concept of "reckless eyeballing", describing the perceived illicit direction of a gaze from a black person to a white person—especially a black man to a white woman—under the Jim Crow laws. The most famous case is perhaps that of Emmett Till, the Mississippi teenager who was lynched in 1955. Later in *The Underground Railroad*, we learn that "one of Valentine's teamsters was strung up and burned for reckless eyeballing", apparently because "a woman was trying to make a paramour jealous" (263). Alluding also to Homer's status within Ridgeway's slave catcher group, the novel continues: "It was a fine lesson, Cora thought, to learn that the slave, the African in your midst, is looking at you too" (126). This inversion of the text-reader relationship suggests a different way of reading what Sherryl Vint identifies in the antebellum slave narratives as "a particular kind of realism based in the author's personal and thus authoritative experience [. . .] invoked as a guarantee of truth" (2007, 243-44). Leonard Black, in his *The Life and Sufferings of Leonard Black, A Fugitive from Slavery* (1847), promises his readers "a plain, simple narrative" (5), for example. This form of realism, by which the signified object is apprehended as if through the glass of a display case—its transparent signifier—protects the reader from being 'read' by the text. Cora's evil eye turns the tables, opening up a void between signifier and signified and forcing the reader into an antagonistic relationship with the text. The slave narratives perform this act of eyeing the reader more frequently than is often suggested. Black writes in his narrative, for example, that: "Men, good christians [sic] in other respects, quietly hold slaves at the south, while their equally guilty brethren of the north assent to it, and participate in its profits" (53-4). Twenty-first-century readers of *The Underground Railroad* are also encouraged to wonder if the "evil eye" is being

directed at us. Significantly, Homer's eyes are "at once feral and serene" (202), adding to his illegibility as a character and as narrator, but hinting at his potential to regard others.

Reading the Futures of African American Literature: *The Underground Railroad*'s Intertexts

The Underground Railroad 'reads' the discourse of slavery through the intertextual allusions that proliferate throughout the novel, reinscribing and reimaging these intertexts. Whitehead's novel creates what Henry Louis Gates calls in *The Signifyin' Monkey* (1989) a "web of filiation" (xxii), placing *The Underground Railroad* in the African American tradition by which "black writers [have] read, repeated, imitated, and revised each other's texts to a remarkable extent" (xxii). Maus points out that one crucial way in which the author creates what he calls "historiographic metafiction" (9) is through intertextual references to his own previously published work. Maus's appellation is adapted from Linda Hutcheon's coinage under which it refers to "novels which are both intensely self-reflexive and yet paradoxically also lay claim to historical events and personages" (1988, 5). Hutcheon insists that historiographic metafiction "always works *within* conventions in order to subvert them" (5). Maus adds the caveat that Whitehead's oeuvre should be understood through an adapted form of historiographic metafiction. He incorporates Madelyn Jablon's insight that: "The narcissism that serves as a cornerstone in Linda Hutcheon's theory fails to explain self-consciousness in black texts" (1997, 54). Jablon argues that "textual self-consciousness" for black writers "is not a by-product of a writer's belief in literature's 'usedupness' but is, instead, an affirmation of boundless creativity" (53-4). In other words, where reflexiveness and intertextuality outside the black tradition (as Jablon conceives it) might be understood as a symptom of a perceived failure of representation rooted in postmodernity, leading to the expression of "negation and nihilism"

(54), many African American writers have seen reflexiveness as an opportunity to encounter and explore their identities: "find out who you are by looking at the people you came from and listening to their stories" (54).

Cora (under the alias of Bessie) intersects with the fictional world of Whitehead's first novel, *The Intuitionist* (1999), during the scene in the "Griffin Building" skyscraper in South Carolina (86), whose mythical name reflects its anachronistic, impossible existence in antebellum America. In the elevator, "Bessie never failed to be both delighted and frightened by its magic, bracing herself with the brass rail in case of disaster" (86). The elevator motif connects the passage with yet another intertext—perhaps the most prominent intertext of *The Intuitionist*—in Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929), with its theme of thwarted African American elevation. The use of the term "magic" operates on multiple levels, referring to the magic of technology from Cora's perspective and the magic of the novel's play with fantastical genres to the reader. In Larsen's novel, the protagonist Irene rides to the top floor of the Drayton hotel in an elevator, describing the experience as "like being wafted upward on a magic carpet to another world" (8), a line that Whitehead is clearly echoing in *The Underground Railroad*.

Cora's alias "Bessie" is likely a reference to Bessie Head, the South African writer, establishing yet another intertext for this line of Whitehead's novel. As Diana Mafe outlines in her comparison of Larsen and Head (2010), both authors "resist their painful histories by forging new and sometimes radical identities through pseudonyms, autobiographical heroines, and fictional 'facts'" (67). The fact that Bessie is an alias amplifies the connection to Head. Given the "South Carolina" chapter of *The Underground Railroad*'s context of unethical and racist government medical institutions, it is especially pertinent that Mafe cites Head's "autobiographical sketch prefacing her 1975 story 'Witchcraft'" (68):

> I was born on the sixth of July,1937, in the Pietermaritzburg Mental Hospital, in South Africa. The reason for my peculiar birthplace was that my mother was white, and she

> had acquired me from a black man. She was judged insane, and committed to the mental hospital while pregnant (quoted in Mafe, 68).

Head only learned of the circumstances of her birth later in life; her incomplete knowledge of the circumstances of her birth mirrors many of the autobiographical slave narrative authors, a similarity strengthened through the phrase, "I was born". Whitehead's reference to this piece of autobiographical narrative indicates a transnational critique of racism, drawing (as does Mafe) a parallel between apartheid South Africa and the history of racist institutions in the United States via the correspondences between Larsen and Head.

The transnational scope of Whitehead's novel stands in opposition to the American exceptionalism advocated most forcefully by Ridgeway in the novel. The slave catcher is preoccupied with "The American imperative", which he defines as, "if you can keep it, it is yours. Your property, slave or continent" (80). This exceptionalism, as Matthew Dischinger points out, functions as "a mystifying fantasy that makes the particular forms and functions of the nation's racial oppression more difficult to locate and understand" (2017, 95). Ridgeway seeks to subsume racial difference beneath the ultimate logic of American freedom, which to him is a kind of radical state-of-nature political economy in which moral authority is simply derived from articulations of power in the present. Whitehead, via Homer as narrator, deploys every narrative strategy available to him to counteract this ideological premise, bringing histories from within and without the United States to bear on Ridgeway and his white supremacist logic.

Whitehead's intertextual "web of filiation" is represented physically in the novel by the library on John Valentine's farm which, according to Royal, "was the biggest collection of Negro literature this side of Chicago" (273). Cora's obsessive reading of the books in the library brings them into conversation with each other:

> Pamphlets of verse by negro poets, autobiographies of colored orators. Phillis Wheatley and Jupiter Hammon. There was a man named Benjamin Banneker who composed

> almanacs [. . .] Cora read the accounts of slaves who had been born in chains and learned their letters. Of Africans who had been stolen, torn from their homes and families, and described the miseries of their bondage and then their hair-raising escapes. She recognized their stories as her own. They were the stories of all the colored people she had ever known, the stories of black people yet to be born, the foundations of their triumph (274).

Like the narrative of the novel itself, the library transcends linear chronological time, writing to the future: “the stories of black people yet to be born”. There is a dizzying sense of anachronism for the reader here in the passage’s almost overwhelming reflexivity, most evident in lines such as “She recognized the stories as her own”. The content of the books exceeds their physical form; they threaten to jump “off the shelves, so many wonders did they contain” (273-4). Yet they also function as a reliable “foundation” of futurity, proven by the book in which they appear together: *The Underground Railroad*.

Valentine’s farm is inevitably revealed to be a false utopia, foreshadowed in the description of the library as one of the farm’s “impossible treasures” (276). Eventually, a violent white mob arrives at Valentine, intent on murder and destruction: “The windows of the library shattered and Cora saw the books burning on the shelves inside” (288). The event confirms the accuracy of what Lander, a Frederick Douglass-like figure, tells Cora: “Here’s one delusion: that we can escape slavery” (285). He adds: “America, too, is a delusion, the grandest one of all. The white race believes—believes with all its heart—that it is their right to take the land. To kill Indians. Make war. Enslave their brothers” (285). But he also affirms the strength of believing in the tentative, as-yet-illegible version of the future—“the contours of a new nation”— that Cora reads into the Underground Railroad’s tunnel walls at the end of the novel: “Sometimes a useful delusion is better than a useless truth” (285). Heneks (2020) argues that Whitehead’s “satire [is] cynical rather than amusing” (148), a point emphasised by the fact that Lander is shot dead by

the mob as he finishes his speech. However, her argument that “Whitehead denies readers any hopeful ending for Cora, fully articulating his own rage at her never-ending pursuit of freedom” (148) is too absolute; Whitehead locates hope for the future, as he does in *Zone One*, not in any known form or structure, but in the hope that not all forms have yet been exhausted and ones beyond what is known in the present may yet be discovered. Homer-as-narrator’s commentary on the final part of Lander’s speech reflects this hope. He projects into a future in which “former residents of the Valentine farm [. . .] told strangers and grandchildren of how they used to live and how it came to an end” (286), speculating that: “Perhaps they were on the verge of some new order, on the verge of clasping reason to disorder, of putting all the lessons of their history to bear on the future” (286-7). As in *Zone One*, the new order is illegible, unidentifiable, but possible.

Homer’s complicated relationship with Cora—he spends the novel on the opposite ‘side’ to her yet in many ways seems fascinated by and almost paternalistically interested in her—adds to the evidence that he is *The Underground Railroad*’s narrator and helps to explain why it is her story that the novel centralises. At one point, Homer gives Cora a dress on Ridgeway’s behalf that the slave catcher wants her to wear because in it she reminds him of her mother, Mabel, whose ostensible evasion of him he takes as a “personal injury” (222). The dress “help[s] me picture her wrapped up like a present for her master” (222). Homer “watched her as she dressed, like a valet who had waited on her since cradle” (217), a typically ambiguous description of Ridgeway’s driver’s behaviour that, when we read Homer as the narrator, would seem to hint at paternal feeling. “I’m caught,” Cora tells him; “You choose to be with him” (217). Homer does not respond verbally but “looked puzzled. He took out his notebook, turned to the last page, and scribbled” (217). What is the source of Homer’s puzzlement here? One possibility is that Homer disagrees with Cora’s distinction and his confusion is caused by surprise that she does not realise he too is caught. Homer is present in the slightly earlier scene in which Cora asks Ridgeway about Homer: “‘If he’s free, why don’t he go?” (202). Ridgeway responds,

"Where? [. . .] He's seen enough to know a black boy has no future, free papers or no. Not in this country. Some disreputable character would snatch him and put him on the [slave auction] block lickety-split" (202-203). This section is evidence that Homer is, in contrast to almost every other character in the novel, fully aware that even documents such as free papers cannot sponsor his future: no form that emerges from white supremacist culture can.

I have argued in this chapter that *The Underground Railroad* is most coherent and makes its most powerful contribution to our understanding of the liberatory power of reading and writing if we understand Homer to be its narrator. Homer is a writer, a hostage, a time-traveller, an enigma, and a trickster. He is often the gateway through which Whitehead builds his intertextual "web of filiation" and the device through which the novel interrogates the radical potential of writing. Given the novel's profound engagement with the politics of narrative production and the contemporary discourse of slavery, not to mention the complex questions of narratorial agency that arise from the antebellum slave narratives that so crucially inform the novel's generic beats, it would be surprising to say the least for the narrator to be a disembodied third-person voice riddled with inconsistencies. My sense that Homer is the narrator of *The Underground Railroad* sprang from the mystifying intrusion of a first-person voice around three-quarters of the way into the novel. This typically 'Whiteheadian' crack in the surface texture of the novel, I argue, is the way into its almost infinitely complex engagement with the relationship between writing and the future that is the hallmark of Whitehead's writing. The "ecstatic temporality" and trickster persona with which Whitehead equips his narrator allows him to slip between the lines of the novel, manipulating its signification unseen. In Whitehead's *The Nickel Boys* (2019), the subject of the next chapter of this thesis, the character of Turner likes to whistle and is at one point described as "fluting a countervailing commentary" (73). Whitehead is interested in the ability of narrative to contain multiple threads of signification, with the most important threads of meaning often buried beneath the surface of the text. Homer is able to function as a kind of subterranean narrator, telling many stories at many times, all at once.

Homer is *The Underground Railroad*'s Trojan Horse, or, *The Underground Railroad* is Whitehead's Trojan Horse; he is a subterranean incursion granting him access to the citadels of the literary establishment only to unleash a ten-year-old time-traveller into its midst. My Postscript to this chapter describes perhaps an early glimpse into the way Whitehead's literary subterfuge might expose some of the myriad contradictions of our contemporary racial discourse.

Postscript: *The Underground Railroad*'s Own Letter of Authentication

I close this chapter by offering the following description of a curious incident in the publishing history of *The Underground Railroad*, which sheds further light on *The Underground Railroad*'s complex signifying on its relationship to its source texts. The incident speaks to the ways in which Whitehead's novel operates in the literary marketplace as a contemporary narrative of slavery and how, in many ways, it is articulated across similar affective and ideological structures to the antebellum slave narratives themselves. It reinforces my argument that *The Underground Railroad's* narrative of slavery is as much about articulations of race under contemporary capitalism as it is about its historical uses and significations

Li (2019) discussesa letter from Whitehead's longtime editor at Doubleday Knopf, William (Bill) Thomas, who appears as the second entry in the Acknowledgements section of *The Underground Railroad* (309).Li notes that William Thomas's letter was published in Advance Review Copies (ARCs) of the first American edition of *The Underground Railroad*, though not in any subsequent editions of the novel (6).

Doubleday Knopf were able to provide me with a photograph of the letter, the full text of which I reproduce below:

> Dear reader,
>
> Having been in this business for twenty-nine years, I've learned the dangers of hype. So usually I try to contain myself.
>
> But Colson Whitehead's achievement is so extraordinary, I can't. I was completely shattered when I finished *The Underground Railroad*. I walked around the neighbourhood in a daze, trying to master the roiling emotions it summoned in me. I am not ashamed to say I wept at several points while reading it. And gasped, and cringed, and clenched my gut in those moments when Cora, our heroine, is in horrific peril as she tries to make her way north to freedom.
>
> To bring novels like this into the world is the reason we all chose this maddening profession.
>
> You may think I am going way over the top in saying all this. I am absolutely certain you will not when you turn the last page.

Li describes how she had initially assumed, on the basis that "the letter appears to signify on the authenticating documents that routinely preceded antebellum slave narratives", that Thomas's letter must have been penned by *The Underground Railroad*'s author himself. "Given his penchant for biting satire," she writes, "Whitehead was no doubt parodying an antiquated literary device" (7). She adds that, "Although Thomas does not explicitly instruct readers to 'weep', 'gasp', 'cringe' and 'clench (their) gut', his admission of having done all these things affirms the visceral experience of his empathy" (7). The "authenticating machinery", as Robert Burns Stepto (1985, 229) calls the documents that appeared prefaced to the antebellum slave narratives, often in great number, shared precisely this goal: to guide the affective response of their white readers and nudge them towards a new or greater commitment to the cause of abolition. The extreme language of "roiling" adds further emotive force to Thomas's letter. The

use of “master” as a verb might also lead one to believe that the letter is intended as satire, in the context of slavery. In pointing out his “twenty-nine years” of experience, Thomas claims authority as a rational commentator to lend legitimacy to his failure to “contain” himself.

Li describes how she “seized on one of Thomas’s closing sentences”, namely: “To bring novels like this into the world is the reason we all chose this maddening profession” (7). She supplies this analysis of what she first believed to be Whitehead’s own words:

> With this sly reversal, Whitehead seems to make his novel the true authenticating document, for it is his text that authenticates Thomas. From this perspective, the novel is the reason for Thomas’s whole career; it gives him purpose and value. Here the black man makes the white man both speak and work. He not only authenticates Thomas, he manages his labor. Touché Whitehead, you contemporary trickster. The satire bites back.

However, what appeared to be a masterstroke of metacommentary on authentication turned out to be a literal modern version of the authenticating document: when the article writer sought out a first edition of the novel in a bookstore, Thomas’s letter was absent. “The letter was not a parody but the real thing”, Li realises: “The authenticating document really was meant to authenticate the novel” (8). It is worth emphasising at this point that Thomas is not any commentator but Whitehead’s editor, a man who would have had close contact with Whitehead during the preparation of *The Underground Railroad* for publication and who had worked with him for decades.

Liargues that the realisation that Thomas’s letter was “sincerely” (8) written by him(self) leaves the text “mired in the demands of the literary marketplace” (2) and infected with “genre trouble” (8). This is because, just like the antebellum slave narratives, *The Underground Railroad* “couple[s] astounding violence with the comforting outcome of the hero’s journey” (20). For Li, Whitehead ultimately caves to the sentimental expectations of his audience—expectations

conditioned by the demands of capital—by offering them "redemptive conclusions that flaunt the realities of antebellum slave life" (20). *The Underground Railroad*, she concludes, offers readers "both an escape from misery and an escape from history" (20).

In contrast, I reaffirm that Whitehead's brief moments of utopian writing are hard earned, and that far from escaping the realities of history, *The Underground Railroad* not only refuses to offer an escape from history through fantasy to its readers, but also recalibrates the reader's relationship to historiographical frameworks that establish distance between history and the present. This is clearer once we have established that Homer is the true narrator of *The Underground Railroad*; Cora's escape, her utopian moment, is Homer's (partial) victory, not so much the culmination of a hero's journey but an affirmation of the way African Americans have found a way through the suffering of history through the development of literary and other strategies of resistance. Homer's self-concealment as *The Underground Railroad*'s narrator is just one of the ways in which Whitehead's novel enacts this very point. Whitehead allows his audience the sentimental response, but the novel also forces the audience to confront the way that their affective response to the horrors of slavery is imbricated with the interests of a capitalist system that commodifies that response.

Thomas's letter is important to our understanding of Whitehead's novel. It raises vital questions around the operation of the novel in the contemporary discourse of slavery and the literary marketplace. All evidence suggests that this apparently minor publishing idiosyncrasy is in fact another of *The Underground Railroad*'s Trojan Horses, one that even the prophetic narrator Homer himself could not have foreseen.

Chapter Three: “Toward Another Dark Planet”: Writing the Future in Colson Whitehead’s *The Nickel Boys*

In *Zone One*’s opening pages, Whitehead establishes the idea that pre-apocalyptic New Yorkers are equally as zombified as the infected skels and stragglers that populate the city after infection has spread:

> The [Spitz family] camera was so backward that every lurching specimen his father enlisted from the passersby was able to operate it sans hassle, no matter the depth of cow-eyed vacancy in their tourist faces or local wretchedness inverting their spines (3).

This passage, in keeping with much of *Zone One*, is marked by an excessiveness that corresponds to the definition of camp expressed by the character of Charles Kennedy in Christopher Isherwood’s novel *The World in the Evening* (1954): “You can’t camp about something you don’t take seriously. You’re not making fun of it; you’re making fun out of it” (125). *Zone One* makes serious fun out of the zombie apocalypse horror genre, for example by exaggeratedly presenting New York tourists as mindless cattle in order to emphasise that individuals have surrendered their agency to the consumerist structures of white supremacist capitalist modernity. Whitehead’s novel *The Nickel Boys* (2019) also turns to the horror genre. The campness is dialled down in *The Nickel Boys*, though still very much present in parts of the novel. I argue that *The Nickel Boys* functions as a kind of prequel to *Zone One*. It makes less fun out of horror than Whitehead’s zombie novel, partly because it is rooted in the real history of the Dozier School for Boys, but it does use the horror genre to bring the United States’ buried history of racial violence to its surface. The novel also emphasises the illegibility of much of this history and how its erasure has led to a United States in which black futures are foreclosed.

Nonetheless, I argue that Whitehead once again includes a utopian scene of writing the future—or rather reading the future in this case—that offers a counterpoint of hope to the novel's critique of capitalist modernity's endless recycling of racial violence.

Like *Zone One*, the opening page of *The Nickel Boys*, which begins with a Prologue set after the eventual closure of the Nickel Academy, features a reference to cows:

> The secret graveyard lay on the north side of the Nickel campus, in a patchy area of wild grass between the old work barn and the school dump. The field had been a grazing pasture when the school operated a dairy, selling milk to local customers—one of the state of Florida's schemes to relieve the taxpayer burden of the boys' upkeep (1).

The local customers—at least one of whom, it is revealed later in the book, has a stack of *Imperial Nighthawk* Ku Klux Klan newspapers in his basement (169)—are overwhelmingly white, like the milk they purchase from the Nickel Academy. The cows that produce the milk are fed on grass fertilised by the black bodies secretly buried in the pasture, establishing a logic of consumption by which this state institution not only tortures and murders the mainly African American children in its care, but it commodifies their dead bodies and sells them to white people as food. As Kyla Wazana Tompkins (2007) asserts, from the point of view of white-authored American literature, "in the violence and ambivalence of American racial politics [. . .] desire and disgust for black bodies commingle intimately" and, "at its most extreme, the connection between food and black bodies emerges in the representation of the black body *as food itself*" (201, italics Tompkins'). This logic reappears frequently throughout *The Nickel Boys*, such as in the description of Elwood's grandmother Harriet as "a survivor, but the world took her in bites" (154). Whitehead further underlines the indelible link between racism and capitalism: "The developers of the office park had earmarked the field for a lunch plaza" (1). To earmark is "to mark (a sheep or other animal) on the ear as a sign of ownership or identity" (*OED* 2023), connoting, in the context of the Nickel Academy's secret graveyard, the branding of slaves. That

the developers plan to turn the field into a "lunch plaza" adds to the sense that this logic of voracious consumption remains fundamental to capitalist modernity.

By representing white locals' consumption of black children murdered in a white supremacist institution through their imbibing of the Nickel Academy cow's milk, Whitehead creates an image in which white America feeds off the labour and death of its black citizens. This image inverts the association of cannibalism and blackness, casting whites as the cannibals feeding off the labour and ultimate death of black people to the point of infantilised dependency. Whitehead makes this horror implicit, suggested but buried beneath the sterile corporate banality that he also produces in this opening paragraph: "developers of the office park"; "relieve the taxpayer"; "occasional event" (1). This opening paragraph makes the point, through the structural layering of the discourses of horror and twenty-first century corporate capitalism, that the latter is struggling to suppress the former. The opening line of the novel states that: "Even in death the boys were trouble" (1), a trouble that *Zone One* brings roiling to the surface in the form of zombies. In *The Nickel Boys*, the suppressed horror of the centuries-long history of violence inflicted on African Americans must remain suppressed, since the novel is set in the real world, alternating between the period leading up to the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the early 2010s. Whitehead's novel reveals this suppressed horror, reflecting it in aesthetic representation much like the press photography he describes in the Prologue: "The footage was unsettling. Shadows crept and trembled at the corners and each stain or mark looked like dried blood. As if every image caught by the video rig emerged with its dark nature exposed" (4).

The capitalist desire to escape from history without accepting its consequences is summarised at the end of the opening paragraph of *Nickel*'s Prologue: "there was no telling when the whole damned place could be razed, cleared, and neatly erased from history, which everyone agreed was long overdue" (1). In this line, "everyone" uneasily attempts to subsume all Americans under its postracial ideology of history-denial, though fails, not least because of the

horror narrative that Whitehead has set in motion beneath the surface. In one of *The Nickel Boys*' many deployments of circular narrative effects, the last page of the novel sees Turner eating in the restaurant in which Elwood's grandmother was once a cleaner and Elwood "liked to read adventure stories in the kitchen" (208). Whitehead makes a chiasmatic allusion to the cattle of the opening paragraph as Turner "looked the menu over and decided on a burger" (208). He is now consuming the meat rather than being consumed as meat, but the logic of consumption—that is also the hallmark of the zombie horror genre—remains intact. The restaurant is called "Blondie's!" (208), reflecting the fact that white supremacist ideology remains embedded in society and culture. The exclamation mark helps to create an atmosphere of mindless cheerfulness characteristic of, for example, the mall setting of George Romero's *Dawn of the Dead* (1978). This is further developed through the presence of "three tilted television sets [that] nattered the same cable news station at different angles" and the "puffy gold script" of the restaurant's name (208). The capitalist desire for the erasure of history is symbolised by the "wipeable green plastic" of the dining room's "contemporary hotel style" (208). The invocation of the zombie horror genre is amplified by the "laughing green skull" on the server's T-shirt and her "slouched" posture, and even potentially hinted at in the "pop song from the '80s [that] blipped from hidden speakers, an instrumental version with the synthesisers out front" (208), which—admittedly a stretch—could well be Michael Jackson's *Thriller* (1982). Turner himself is "tired" and "hungry and they served all day, and that was enough" (208), reflecting the survivor mentality of the zombie horror protagonist, as well as the alimentary fixation of zombies themselves. Whitehead's bookending of the novel with these scenes of latent zombie horror adds to the implication that *The Nickel Boys* is a prequel to *Zone One*, in the sense that it foregrounds the continuity of the white supremacist structures that make the latter novel's apocalyptic unleashing of symbolic black bodies so powerful.

In this chapter, then, I read *The Nickel Boys* as a kind of prequel to *Zone One* in order to emphasise the way Whitehead reads American history as apocalyptic from the start. Whitehead

calls *The Nickel Boys* his “Trumpian novel” in an interview with the *Guardian* (2019, par. 13). The setting of the novel alternates between the early 1960s and the 2010s: the years leading up to the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the inauguration of Trump as President of the United States in 2016 respectively. In different ways, these were both important moments of false promise in African American history; the Civil Rights Movement successfully changed the law but has not delivered racial equality and the Obama presidency encouraged a revival of postracial rhetoric that, as Ta-Nehisi Coates succinctly summarises it in his *Atlantic* article of the same name, led to the reactionary election of “The First White President” (2017). Far from ushering in a postracial future, Obama’s status as the first black American President enabled the election of a President that Whitehead describes as a kind of monster of white supremacy, commenting to the *Irish Times* that “I lacked the imagination to conceive of how terrible he’d be and how he’d outdo many people’s worst fantasies” (2020, par. 9). It was Trump’s election that convinced Whitehead to change tack and write *The Nickel Boys*, which he’d first conceived in 2014. Despite, as he tells *Vanity Fair* (2019), not wanting “to do another heavy book [. . .] I felt compelled to make sense of where we were as a country” (par. 4).

The way that *The Nickel Boys* makes sense of where America is as a country is by enacting a dialectic between a politically Black, Civil Rights activist optimism that racism can be reduced and even eliminated through direct action in society and an Afropessimist emphasis on the inevitable persistence of the essential structures of anti-Blackness at every stage of American (and global) history to the present. The novel’s principle representative of the former argument is of course Martin Luther King himself, whose speeches play an important part in the novel, especially for Elwood, who idolises the Civil Rights leader and, like him, is murdered for speaking out against injustice. The Afropessimist perspective is represented by Turner. As Whitehead puts it in an interview with *Vanity Fair* (2019):

> Elwood and Turner represent two different parts of my personality [. . .] There is the optimistic or hopeful part of me [. . .] that believes we can make the world a better place if we keep working at it. Then there's the pessimistic side, the cynical side [. . .] that says no—this country is founded on genocide, murder, and slavery and it will always be that way (par. 10).

In the interview with the *Irish Times* (2020), Whitehead remarks that "the pessimistic side is winning" (par. 20). Turner repeatedly reminds Elwood that, "I know there's nothing in here [the Nickel Academy] that changes people. In here and out there are the same, but in here no one has to act fake anymore" (79). This line is reminiscent of Whitehead's oft-used explanation for the fascination with zombies that led him to write *Zone One*. As he tells *Salon* (2014): "Part of it is the idea of the zombie as the everyday becoming monstrous; people you love, your family, friends and neighbors suddenly dropping the mask and no longer pretending to be human seemed particularly scary" (par. 8). In other words, the Nickel Academy is not an aberrant anomaly but a microcosm of society where its structures are horrifically visible, at least to its occupants, if not to the surrounding populace. Of course, the irony is that it is Elwood himself who eventually 'changes' Turner, as the cynical individualist reluctantly begins to reflect Elwood's commitment to solidarity.

Before going any further, I want to make some important clarifications around Whitehead's use of—and contribution to—Afropessimist thought. Firstly, there is a distinction to be made between Whitehead's dialectical use of Afropessimism as an antithesis to the reformism of Civil Rights ideology, which leads him, as I argue below, to locate the possibility of black futures in aesthetic innovation and his critique of Afropessimism itself. Secondly, I suggest that, aside from my argument about Whitehead's commitment to the power of aesthetic creativity to address and shape the future, we understand Whitehead's relationship to Afropessimism as an internally critical one that adds to our understanding of the strengths and

limitations of the theory. One of the strengths of critically engaged fiction is that it is able to hold contradictions in play more easily and productively than academic writing, reminding us that theories are fictions—necessarily incomplete ways of describing reality—that occur at the level of language just as much as any other construct.

Contemporary Afropessimism, as Gloria Wekker asserts, is distinct from late twentieth-century uses of the term—often, though not always reliably, distinguished by the use of a hyphen—to refer to the idea that Africa is "one big tragic mess" (88). As Wekker explains, this version of Afro-pessimism originates in "White Western circles" and is a discourse in which "hopelessness about the African continent and neo-coloniality fight for priority" (88). It is also characterised by the "denial of the complete superfluousness and counterproductivity of the development industry" (88). In other words, it is a tool of neo-colonialist projects. When I refer to Afropessimism in this thesis, I refer to what Wekker calls "Afropessimism 2.0". David Ponton III (2022), highlighting the importance of Orlando Patterson's concept of "social death" (1982) to Afropessimism, defines it as:

> A commitment to the historical fact that blackness is a consequence of racial slavery and that blackness is coterminous with the condition of slaveness—that is, the condition of those *Homo sapiens* who are not Human but rather live encumbered by social death (220).

Afropessimists argue, then, that blackness is distinct from all other forms of racial otherness because it is the category against which the idea of the 'Human' is defined. Frank B. Wilderson III states that "colored immigrants exist in an intra-human status of degradation in relation to white people. They are degraded as humans, but they still exist paradigmatically in that position of the human" (2017, 21), whereas: "The slave/non-slave, or the Black/human relation, presents us with a structural dynamic which cannot be reconciled and which does not have a coherent mode of redress" (17).

Whitehead departs from the absolutism of Afropessimism, such as in his comments to the *Irish Times* that:

> Sadly, injustice is a universal human condition, so travelling with The Nickel Boys, I would hear about the Magdalene laundries, the homes for unwed mothers in Ireland, and people would say 'It reminds me of that'. In Canada they had residential schools, where they took indigenous children from their families to teach them white culture, and abuses happened. Sadly, injustice is a universal (par. 24).

The Nickel Boys has a character called Jaimie, whose mother is Mexican, "so they didn't know what to do with him" and he "bounced around" (59) between the white and black sections. "His first day working in the lime fields he got so dark that Spencer had him reassigned" but "Director Hardee [. . .] took a look at that light face among the dark faces and had him sent back" (59). All of this complicates and critiques the Afropessimist distinction between blackness and other forms of non-whiteness.

More significantly, and despite the narrative 'defeat' of the Civil Rights philosophy of nonviolent activism, *The Nickel Boys* affords a measure of power and dignity to the struggles of activists via our investment in Elwood. The Afropessimistic horror narrative ultimately subsumes Elwood's optimistic bildungsroman, though with the caveat that Turner survives to tell the tale, but the novel upholds the value of the Civil Rights struggle and indicts official and societal resistance to it rather than the people involved in fighting for justice. In response to Afropessimist descriptions of antiblack dehumanisation, Devon R. Johnson asks: "How can a human be dehumanized? Does this mean that the subject in question is no longer human after dehumanization?" (5). His answer is that: "Dehumanization does not erase the humanity of the dehumanized; rather, it provides an absurd, perverse, and contradictory existential context through which the subject's humanity must be articulated" (5). I return to the idea that fiction has a special power to make this kind of articulation, to create the environment by which these

contradictory absurdities can be expressed at the same time as critiquing the structures that create them. Whitehead ultimately seeks to resolve—to the extent that it can be resolved—the opposition between optimism and pessimism through aesthetic production; whilst *The Nickel Boys* is an Afropessimistic indictment of the horror of racism's continued articulation in the contemporary, it is also an assertion of the power of creativity, and writing in particular, to create insurgent routes into the future.

I argue, then, that despite the prevailing horror aesthetic that makes *The Nickel Boys* a prequel to *Zone One*'s apocalyptic American future, Whitehead, even in his Trumpian novel, stages an exit from the logic of racist capitalist modernity in the same way that he has done throughout his career and in the books I have analysed in earlier chapters of this thesis: via writing. This chapter explores Whitehead's suffusion of *The Nickel Boys* with texts of all kinds. Sometimes these texts represent the horror of white supremacy directly, such as the Klan newspaper in the local resident's basement. At other times, as in the case of the magazines in which Elwood reads about—and views photographs of—Civil Rights protests, or the archive of crimes at Nickel that he himself produces, these texts offer false hope soon to be thwarted by the horrific nature of reality. Finally, though, I argue that Whitehead leaves a strand of utopian hope that supersedes the novel's horrific conclusions about American history, suggesting that Turner, the novel's cynical pessimist, has a Whiteheadian moment of utopian reading much like Mark Spitz's apprehension of the Quiet Storm's writing in *Zone One*. This moment of reading not only connects *The Nickel Boys* to Whitehead's other work, but also invokes various African American-authored texts (and other media) such as Octavia E. Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (1993) and *Parable of the Talents* (1998) that look for radical utopian hope in apocalyptic conditions—works that are often labelled as Afrofuturist. Whitehead's novels share this production of utopian hope through scenes of reading and writing on the borders of the illegible, beyond the reach of contemporary epistemologies. *The Nickel Boys* is a novel that refuses to locate its optimism for the future in an ethos of reformist change encouraged by protest; nor

does it succumb to a totalising pessimism. Instead, it argues for art as a vehicle for the imagination of radically new worlds.

The Dozier School

The Nickel Boys is explicit about its rootedness in the history of the Arthur G. Dozier School for Boys. As Whitehead highlights in a blogpost on the novel for *Waterstones*, during the Dozier School's history: "They renamed the place a few times, as if a new brand might help" (2020, par. 3). Previously known as the Florida School for Boys, the Florida Industrial School for Boys, and, at its founding in 1900, The Florida State Reform School, the Dozier School was in fact a carceral, rather than educational, institution. The Dozier School was one of many such American institutions established under the liberal ethos of reform: a "lofty notion" (114) as Whitehead puts it in *The Nickel Boys*. Tera Eva Agyepong explains in *The Criminalization of Black Children* (2018) that: "A nonpunitive juvenile justice system was undergirded by the rehabilitative ideal—the notion that children were inherently innocent and entitled to a justice system separate from adults (2). Agyepong suggests that despite the noble rhetoric that sponsored the establishment of juvenile reform schools, "the discourse of rehabilitation and the institutional apparatus of the juvenile justice system were key components in facilitating a process of racialized criminalization" (3). One of the ways that Whitehead's novel explores this process is through the nature of the 'crimes' for which the Nickel Academy inmates are convicted: "They were sent to Nickel for offences Elwood had never heard of: malingering, mopery, incorrigibility" (72). These vague, subjective crimes recall Samuel Cartwright's "Report on the Diseases and Physical Peculiarities of the Negro Race" (1851), which diagnoses the "troublesome practice that many negroes have of running away" as "drapetomania . . . a disease of the mind" (96). Elwood recalls how some of his fellow inmates have elaborated on

their misdemeanours: "*I got busted for sleeping in a garage to get warm. I stole five dollars from my teacher. I drank a bottle of cough syrup and went wild one night. I was on my own trying to get by*" (72). These behaviours are responses to inequality: needing warmth, needing money, needing to escape from reality for a brief period. Whitehead makes clear in *The Nickel Boys* that normal responses to inequality lead to incarceration and further poverty, fostering an entrenched cycle of racist criminalization, a closed, self-perpetuating loop that has existed since slavery.

As Whitehead explains in the Acknowledgements section of *The Nickel Boys*, he drew on journalistic accounts, the official archaeological report by Erin Kimmerle and her team (2016), and first-hand testimony by the White House Boys in order to construct his fictional narrative of the "inmates" (74) at the Dozier School (209). Whitehead uses specific details—such as the name of the "White House" where the official report states that boys were beaten, sometimes to death (2016, 15)—from Dozier and largely recreates its topography in *The Nickel Boys*. In *The Colossus of New York* (2003), Whitehead writes that, "Talking about New York is a way of talking about the world" (158). Similarly, Whitehead makes clear in his *Waterstones* blog post that in talking about the Dozier School he is talking about a world of buried violence, suggesting that *The Nickel Boys* can be read as a transnational critique of institutionalised racial violence that also extends into the novel's contemporary moment:

> If there is one Dozier, there are dozens of reform schools where the same tragedies unfold. Maybe it's not a reform school, but an orphanage. A home for unwed mothers in Ireland. A residential school in Canada, where indigenous children are ripped from their families so that they can be tutored in white culture. Or it's a for-profit incarceration camp on our southern border, where refugee children sleep in cages. It's any place where a culture of impunity reigns, destroys, ruins (par. 9).

But he also emphasises that *The Nickel Boys* is particularly geared to give voice to the stories of the African American boys who attended carceral institutions for children such as Dozier: "Most of the White House Boys who came forward were white, but the majority of the students were African American. I wondered about the black boys, and what a novel inspired by Dozier might look like" (par. 7).

The presence of the Dozier School's specific and still unfolding history in the narrative of *The Nickel Boys* has led some analysts of the novel to overlook its horror aesthetic, such as Roberto Ferreira Junior (2023), who argues that Whitehead reproduces accounts of Dozier "in straightforward realistic fashion" (295). As I have begun to suggest in my reading of the novel's bookended scenes of embedded horror, it is more accurate to say that Whitehead mediates the real through a horror aesthetic in order to accentuate the horrific nature of reality from the perspective of African Americans. An exchange between Whitehead and interviewer Dave Davies on *NPR* (2019) illustrates this distinction. Davies asks Whitehead whether he "felt the need to go" (par. 12) to the Dozier site, to which Whitehead replies that he didn't, because "I had a sense of real physical dread [. . .] I think it's an evil place" (par. 13). Davies pushes the point, asking: "So how did you get the texture of the place to write about it?" (par. 14); Whitehead responds, "You know, I'm not a zombie hunter, or a runaway slave, or an elevator inspector" (par. 15). Whilst this exchange is innocuous enough, it betrays a critical desire to make the novel "about" the specific history of the Dozier School, rather than allow it to make its Afro-pessimist argument about the latent horror of the present.

On the back of the Fleet 2019 edition of *The Nickel Boys*, the publisher has provided ten endorsements, the majority of which are geared towards emphasising the brilliance of Whitehead and of the novel itself, which won him a second successive Pulitzer Prize. The only one of these expressions of approval that offers more specific information on the novel's content is taken from the *Guardian* (2019) and states that *The Nickel Boys* "lifts the lid on the

racist brutality of reform schools in the Jim Crow-era south" (par. 9). This summary of the novel aligns with Ferreira Junior's description of *The Nickel Boys* as "straightforward" and "realistic"; the metaphor of lifting the lid implies looking down from a vantage point and makes the subject matter feel oddly small, as if contained within a vessel. Whitehead painstakingly makes the point in *The Nickel Boys* that the 'lid' on 'racist brutality' has never been fastened down. Elwood's fate hinges on the failure of behalf of Nickel inspectors—whether because of incompetence, indifference, or malice—to see what is in front of their eyes, and subsequent failure to act upon Turner's delivery to them of Elwood's archive of corruption and crime committed by the Nickel Academy. In the Prologue to the novel, Whitehead writes: "All the boys knew about that rotten spot. It took a student from the University of South Florida to bring it to the rest of the world" (1) and: "Plenty of boys had talked of the secret graveyard before, but as it had ever been with Nickel, no one believed them until someone else said it" (3). The *Guardian* jacket quotation and metaphor of a lidded vessel imply that the novel's critique is aimed only at events in the distant, pre-Civil Rights Act past. My inference from this presentation of *The Nickel Boys* by its publisher is that the novel is being marketed most directly at white readers who might be put off if they felt like they might be the target of its critique. This is unsurprising given that, despite pressure to diversify, the publishing industry in the United States remains as populated by white workers as ever, as Alexandra Alter and Elizabeth A. Harris report in the *New York Times* (2024). Whilst *The Nickel Boys* speaks to readers from all racial identities, its jacket speaks most directly to a white readership, promising them (falsely) that they will not be directly critiqued by the novel, but rather edified by their emotional consumption of what is under 'the lid'. This promise is essentially the same one that the authenticating machinery of slave narratives made to white readers in the pre-Emancipation era. Ironically, then, *The Nickel Boys*' own dust jacket makes the very point that the novel's horror aesthetic makes: the racist logic of capitalist modernity persists.

Get Out and Black Horror

Thinking about *The Nickel Boys* as an entry into the horror genre places the novel into intermedial correspondence with the burgeoning genre of black horror, of which perhaps the most eminent exponent is director Jordan Peele. Whilst debate ensued over the correct awards categorisation of Jordan Peele's film *Get Out* (2017), the director tweeted that: "*Get Out* is a documentary" (2017). The film depicts a black American photographer's deception and abduction by a white family who proceed to auction off his body to the highest bidder while his mind is held captive in the "Sunken Place". It emerges that the Armitage family repeats this process on a regular basis. Peele explains in an interview with the *Guardian* that he conceptualised the Sunken Place as an allegory for "the prison-industrial complex" and "the disproportionate number of black men thrown into a dark room for the rest of their lives" (2017, par. 40). As Paula Martín-Salván (2022) argues, *The Nickel Boys*' depiction of the "carceral topography" (205) of the reform school draws on the tradition of the African American prison narrative (204), in which the exploration of "the impact of the penitentiary system on the black population lead[s] inevitably to its historical connection to slavery and racism", especially when "the prison is codified [. . .] as a microcosm of society at large (204).

In his analysis of *Get Out*, Ryan Poll (2018) asserts that: "To be Black in America [. . .] is to be trapped within an unending narrative of racialized terror. For African Americans, horror is not a genre, but a structuring paradigm" (70). Author Tananarive Due states the case even more succinctly in her Foreword to the second edition of Robin R. Means Coleman's genre-defining *Horror Noire: A History of Black American Horror from the 1890s to Present* (2023): "Black history is Black Horror" (X). Black horror, or horror noire, is a genre descriptor that emphasises the realism of horror media for black audiences. As Poll states, "African Americans have developed a sixth sense, one that immediately intuits if a particular geography is marked by horror or an impending horror" (71). Whitehead echoes the idea that horror is the abiding

register of African American history, telling *Vulture* (2011) that films such as George Romero's *Night of the Living Dead* and *Dawn of the Dead* struck him as "documentaries" when he was growing up (par. 4). Whitehead makes clear that despite his status and affluence, his blackness means that he lives with the awareness that horrific racial violence might be visited upon him at any moment: "I carry it within me whenever I see a squad car pass me slowly and I wonder if this is the day that things take my life in a different direction," he tells Mitchell S. Jackson in an interview with *Time* (2019, par. 24). Black horror is in many ways an ideal tool for the critical lens of Afro-pessimism, whose advocates often deploy a horror lexicon to emphasise the monstrous presence of slavery's logic in the present. Frank B. Wilderson III, for example, states that, "The technology of enslavement simply morphs and shape shifts" (2017, 18).

By contrast, definitions of horror that do not take race into account (and tend to implicitly assume a universal white audience for the genre) tend to view horror as the aesthetic representation of unrealised fear, such as in Bruce F. Kawin's *Horror and the Horror Film* (2012): "The material [of horror] is awful, a nightmare no one wants to come true" (2). Sometimes the nightmare constructed for white audiences is allegorically or literally blackness itself, the paradigmatic instance of which is D. W. Griffiths' notorious propaganda film *The Birth of a Nation* (1915)—the first movie to be played in the White House, during Woodrow Wilson's presidency—in which African Americans are portrayed as a monstrous presence in the United States. Richard Brody of *The New Yorker* (2013) points out that the film is "the founding work of cinematic realism, albeit a work that was developed to pass lies off as reality" (par. 3). Peele's description of *Get Out* as a documentary then, is lent a further layer of ironic power by its inversion of Griffith's inauguration of cinematic realism.

If in *The Nickel Boys* horror is a kind of African American realism, the bildungsroman is an African American fairy tale—as "impossible" (171) as Elwood comes to find his early idol Martin Luther King's philosophy of *"Do to us what you will and we will still love you"* (170). The

impossible, fairy tale nature of Elwood's coming-of-age in the racist horror landscape of the United States is prefigured in the Prologue: "In New York City there lived a Nickel Boy who went by the name of Elwood Curtis" (5). Matthew Scully (2023) points to this line as the first clue that Turner, rather than Elwood, survives the escape from the Nickel Academy, stating that the "colloquial expression is unlikely to draw suspicion from most readers" (95). The language in this line is not so much "colloquial", however, as drawn from the fairy tale; the use of "New York City" rather than simply "New York" and the unspecific past tense of "there lived" suggest more than simply clever foreshadowing. Whitehead implicates the reader in the fairy tale of Elwood's bildungsroman; in the false narrative promise that all will end well he echoes the promise of Martin Luther King, as Elwood perceives it, of that "luminous image to come" (10). With strategies such as this, Whitehead compels the reader's ethical investment in Elwood's coming-of-age in order to eventually demonstrate the hollowness of those ethics.

The use of "luminous" recalls Ellison's play with images of light and darkness in *Invisible Man* that I have discussed at length in earlier chapters of this thesis. In the Prologue of *The Nickel Boys*, Whitehead provides an image of how horror is inscribed in reality in a way that can be "exposed" by its aesthetic reproduction:

> Even the most innocent scene—a mess hall or the football field—came out sinister, no photographic trickery necessary. The footage was unsettling. Shadows crept and trembled at the corners and each stain or mark looked like dried blood. As if every image caught by the video rig emerged with its dark nature exposed, the Nickel you could see going in and the Nickel you couldn't see coming out (4).

Even as the narrative details the early years of Elwood's induction into the discourse of Civil Rights, Whitehead leaves the "dark nature" of reality visible through language that signifies differently depending on which generic lens the reader is reading through. For example, when Elwood's grandmother gifts him an LP of *Martin Luther King at Zion Hill* (1962) for Christmas,

Elwood listens to it constantly—"Every scratch and pop it gathered was a mark of his enlightenment" (9)—until those scratches and pops add up to "The crackle of truth" (9). In the surface bildungsroman narrative, this turn of phrase simply evokes the way that King's words are imprinted in Elwood's mind as a guiding philosophy; in a horror narrative, an increasingly loud crackling sound is dreadful and ominous. This dual signification is split into parallel clauses and made explicit in the opening paragraph of Chapter One: "Elwood received the best gift of his life on Christmas Day, 1962, even if the ideas it put in his head were his undoing" (9). The first half of the sentence reminds the reader that we are on the cusp of the Civil Rights Act, suggesting that the promise of a "luminous" future is soon to be realised; the second half of the sentence reverses the sense of forward motion and prefigures the horrific events that will befall Elwood. The LP itself symbolises this circular logic. Though the message of *Martin Luther King at Zion Hill* is that progress is possible through nonviolent activism, the medium of the record symbolises a circular logic that undermines that argument.

Whitehead invokes the "Fun Town" section of King's record, in which he describes telling his daughter Yolanda that she cannot go to a theme park because it is segregated, in order to demonstrate the limitations of King's optimism. King says to Yolanda: "Even though you can't go to Fun Town, I want you to know that you are as good as anybody who goes into Fun Town" (10). For Whitehead and for King, Fun Town stands for the fruits of capitalist modernity, the promise of American capitalism to reward hard work with the satisfaction of desire. Elwood sometimes "saw a Fun Town commercial while visiting his cousins in Georgia" and looks forward to the day "when all those places closed to his race were opened" (10). If we are reading a bildungsroman at this point, Elwood is looking forward to a post-Civil Rights world in which access to Fun Town is desegregated. On the other hand, if we are reading a black horror novel, Whitehead creates here an inversion of carceral space by which white citizens (those deemed fully human by white supremacist discourse) are imprisoned within the necropolitical world they have constructed. King's description to Yolanda of "the segregation system that kept colored boys and girls on the

other side of the fence" (10) proleptically evokes *Zone One*'s Manhattan in which zombies lay siege to what is left of New York. This is underscored in the reference to "lurching rides" (10), in which the adjective functions as it does in *Zone One*'s description of "lurching specimens" (1). Whitehead constantly offers the reader different generic lenses through which to view the same passage of text, "exposing" the horror in the everyday like the press photos of the Nickel / Dozier institutions.

"Scrap Rummaging": The Texts of Frenchtown, Tallahassee

Martin Luther King's speeches are just one of the many texts Elwood encounters during his pre-Nickel Academy years. At age nine he reads "comic books and Hardy Boys" (11) in the kitchen of the Richmond Hotel, while his grandmother Harriet worked as a cleaner there. In the bildungsroman narrative that Whitehead builds for Elwood, the Richmond represents the destiny he must escape. "Mr Parker made it clear he'd hire him as a porter whenever he wanted, smart kid like him", but Elwood isn't keen on the idea: "Adding a fourth generation to the hotel's accounts made him uneasy in a way he found difficult to describe" (11). The Hardy Boys series—whose title echoes ironically in *The Nickel Boys'* own—depicts two white adolescent detectives who enjoy ceaseless adventures, in contrast to Elwood who must sit and wait for his grandmother to finish work. Paul Deane (1989) notes that in the post-war decades, in common with similar series of children's books, older editions of the Hardy Boys stories were revised by the publisher and newer editions contained fewer obvious racial stereotypes, though this often meant that black characters were simply removed and replaced with white versions (155-57). As Deane concludes, "to remove derogatory elements in children's literature is all well and good; to include positive ones would be far, far better" (162). The erasure of the negative

treatment of blackness in the Hardy Boys mirrors the erasure of history at the Nickel Academy and, as at Nickel, the institution (the book series itself) survives through that process of erasure.

Another scene of erasure takes place at the start of Chapter Three, as "the students of Lincoln High School received their new secondhand textbooks from the white high school across the way" (27). The absurdity of the Jim Crow dictum of 'separate but equal' is evident in the contradiction of "new secondhand". To emphasise this racial inequality, "the white students left inscriptions for the next owners: *Choke, Nigger! You Smell. Eat Shit*" (27). Civil Rights activist and Elwood's history teacher attempts to restore dignity to the classroom: "Mr. Hill handed out black markers and told his students that the first order of business was to strike out all the bad words in the textbooks" (27). Yet Whitehead suggests that racism is more baked in than Mr. Hill is prepared to admit, turning to the horror of consumption to make that point: "It was humiliating to open a biology book, turn to the page on the digestive system, and be confronted with *Drop dead NIGGER*" (27). As in *The Nickel Boys*' Prologue, Whitehead represents the logic of the consumption of the black body as a fundamental feature of American history and its institutions. Later, when Elwood is planning to attend the free summer programme at Melvin Griggs Technical College, he speculates that the textbooks "might be new. Unscarred" (38). After his arrest and incarceration at the Nickel Academy, he finds that: "Worse than the secondhand textbooks at Lincoln High, all the Nickel textbooks were from before he was born, earlier editions of textbooks Elwood remembered from first grade" (57), confirmation that not only is Nickel not really an educational institution, but also that he has slipped back in time—to his own early childhood but also to an earlier era. Or to put it another way, there is a logic of temporal regression to the experience of African Americans in American institutions, which are structured to perpetuate racial inequality.

Elwood's first encounter in *The Nickel Boys* with the stunted access to education and knowledge that his race affords him occurs when the staff of the Richmond kitchen run a fixed

"dish-drying contest" (13). Elwood is allowed to win the contest by his opponent, only realising that that he has been pranked when he returns home to find that, apart from volume "*Aa-Be*" (12), "The pages were blank—all of them" (15). With characteristic resourcefulness, Elwood adjusts uncomplainingly to his situation: "Grateful was the teacher rescued by Elwood's contributions when the classroom fell drowsy and he offered up *Archimedes* or *Amsterdam* at the key moment" (29). The narrative also mentions "*Aegean*" and "*Argonaut*" (12) as entries in Elwood's encyclopaedia, emphasising the white Eurocentric epistemological frame of his education. Despite the "disjointed and incomplete" nature of his access to knowledge, "Elwood filled his notebook with the good parts, definitions and etymology" (29). Like Ajarry and her descendants in *The Underground Railroad* (2016), Elwood tends to the small plot that he has been able to acquire. The narrative signals that, presumably after the failure of his attempt to convince the Nickel Academy inspectors of the abuse happening at the school: "Later, he'd find this scrap-rummaging pathetic" (29). This line, a rare flash-forward into Elwood's later state of mind, destabilises the reader's ascription of dignity to Elwood's attempts to educate himself using the very little he has been afforded by his country.

As he "dragged the boxes to the bus stop", the narrative states that: "To see him from across the street—the serious young lad heaving his freight of the world's knowledge—was to witness a scene that might have been illustrated by Norman Rockwell, if Elwood had white skin" (14). This scene takes place just a few years before Rockwell left *The Saturday Evening Post*, for whom he had painted innumerable sentimental and nostalgic scenes of white American family life, to join *Look* magazine, which allowed him greater freedom of subject matter and to engage with the Civil Rights Movement. Indeed, Whitehead's use of Rockwell as a lens through which to view Elwood dragging the symbolic false promise of education and knowledge across the street evokes Rockwell's 1964 painting *The Problem We All Live With*, which depicts six-year-old Ruby Bridges being escorted by United States Marshals, whose heads are out of frame, as she walks to the all-white public school William Franz Elementary at the time of the New Orleans school

desegregation crisis. This followed the decision of the U. S. Supreme Court in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) to rule that racial segregation in public schools was unconstitutional. On hearing the news of this judgement, Elwood's grandmother Harriet "shrieked as if someone had tossed hot soup in her lap" but comments that "'Jim Crow ain't going to just slink off [. . .] His wicked self" (16). Elwood, by contrast, invests hope in the decision of the Court, eagerly awaiting the arrival of a "brown face—a dapper businessman in Tallahassee for business or a fancy lady in town to see the sights" (16) at the Richmond. In three years, neither of these characters arrive, whether because of "his own foolishness or the mulish constancy of the world was unclear" (17). Behind Bridges, who is seen in profile walking from right to left of the frame, the word "NIGGER" is sprayed in red paint, and the viewer can see that Bridges has been narrowly missed by tomatoes, whose unseen white anti-desegregation thrower shares the viewer's perspective.

The description of Elwood in *The Nickel Boys* is clearly meant to evoke *The Problem We All Live With* and offers a critical revision of what Bridget R. Cooks (2019) calls the painting's visual "rhetoric of liberalism that skirts white culpability and ultimately maintains the racial hierarchies that it first appears to redress" (44). Whereas in Rockwell's painting, Bridges is carrying red and blue pencils against the background of a starry notebook, symbolically valorising the American education system and its capability to underwrite racial equality, Elwood arduously drags encyclopaedias he does not know are empty: the message is that the dream is hollow. Cooks points out that: "The most pressing and open-ended questions the painting prompts are: What *is* the problem we all live with? and Who are *we*?" (43). Whitehead's evocation of the painting, which adopts a similar viewing position to the perspective in *The Problem We All Live With*—"To see him from across the street" (14)—takes up these questions and asks them in turn of the reader of *The Nickel Boys*. In another scene, Whitehead inverts the perspective of Rockwell's painting to reimagine it from the perspective of Bridges, through the description of the last time Harriet saw her father, who:

> Died in jail after a white lady downtown accused him of not getting out of her way on the sidewalk. *Bumptious contact*, as Jim Crow defined it. That's how it went in the old days. He was waiting for his appointment with the judge when they found him hung in his cell. No one believed the police's story. "Niggers and jail," her uncle said, "niggers and jail." Two days prior, Harriet had waved to him across the street on her way home from school. That was her last image of him: Her big, cheerful daddy walking to his second job (68).

Whitehead's reversal of perspective undermines Rockwell's choice to elicit white sympathy by focusing on an image of innocence, a primary schoolgirl. In Rockwell's painting, the American government, embodied by the U.S. marshals, hasa paternalistic relationship of care towards itsAfrican American charge; in this passage, by contrast, the police administer brutal institutionalised violence; they are agents of injustice. As in *The Problem We All Live With*, the perspective is low, a child's-eye view of Harriet's "big" father, but this time innocence is leveraged to demonstrate the injustice of the system. The passage places the emphasis on white supremacy's enactment through institutions, rather than aberrant Southern racist individuals.

The Problem We All Live With, *The Nickel Boys*, and *The Underground Railroad* all share a prominent place in the official cultural discourse of the political administration of the United States. *The Underground Railroad* was chosen for "The President's Summer Reading List" (2016) and, post-presidency, Barack Obama selected *The Nickel Boys* as one his recommended books of 2019. Obama hung *The Problem We All Live With* in the White House for a few months in 2011 and, as the Obama Foundation website reports, "every time President Obama walked to the Oval Office, he would walk by the Norman Rockwell painting" ("The Power of Art", par. 7). Pete Souza's official White House photograph of Obama and Bridges viewing the painting after its hanging in July 2011 (Allman 2011) adds a new layer of complexity to the function of spectacle

in the painting. Bridges, already in the painting, adopts the perspective of the viewer, but she is also reframed as the subject by the photograph and enrolled in a liberal narrative of progress under the ethos of the American Dream. In Souza's photo, Obama himself assumes the role of the paternalistic marshals in Rockwell's painting; although he is standing next to Bridges, his position in the foreground and outstretched arm make him appear to enfold Bridges in his perspective. A representative of the Norman Rockwell Museum does not look at the painting but rather at Obama himself, regarding him with awe as he speaks. As much as the hanging of *The Problem We All Live With* in the White House and its viewing by Ruby Bridges herself represent a powerful moment in American history, Souza's photo ironically performs similar work to Rockwell's painting itself, endorsing the ability of existing institutions and hierarchies of power to defeat racism despite all evidence to the contrary. In the character of Elwood, then, Whitehead depicts a notional subject of Rockwell's painting who does not live to become its viewer.

Later in *The Nickel Boys*, Whitehead makes an oblique reference to the encyclopaedia, as the reader learns that the twenty-first-century Nickel survivor assumed to be Elwood "decided to call his company Ace Moving. AAA was taken and he wanted to be at the top of the phone book" (141). The allusion to alphabetical order subtly reminds the reader of the false promise of education represented by the encyclopaedia. The passage continues: "It was six months before he realized he picked the name from his time at the Nickel Academy. Ace: out in the free world to make your zigzag way" (141), "Ace" being the behavioural level required to "graduate" (47) from Nickel. *Ace* to *zigzag* implies the full alphabet, encouraging the reader to imagine that Elwood has symbolically filled in the blank pages of the encyclopaedia. This passage gently shepherds the reader to continue to invest in Elwood's bildungsroman—and by extension the American dream itself—to believe that despite everything he has gone through he has been able to capitalise on the promise that hard work and an entrepreneurial spirit will be rewarded in contemporary America. In a later chapter, Turner-as-Elwood runs into Chickie Pete,

an “old Nickel comrade” who “wasn’t a crackhead” but had that “too-raw thing druggies have when they first get out of jail or a clinic” (160), suggesting a life begun in the Nickel Academy and lived thereafter in other American carceral spaces. When asked what he does for a living, “Elwood felt bad telling him about his company so he cut the number of trucks and employees by half and didn’t mention the new office on Lennox, which he was quite proud of” (162). The reader is led to read modesty into Turner’s behaviour, to partake in his imagined embarrassment and desire to forget their shared traumatic history of incarceration at the Nickel Academy. Likewise, when Turner is reticent to give Chickie Pete his business card because it reads “Mr. Elwood Curtis, President” (165), the reader is steered to believe that this is because of humility, perhaps also because of the association with the horrors of Nickel’s White House. When the reader later learns that twenty-first-century Elwood is in fact Turner, it becomes clear that he is motivated not by humility but by the fugitive desire to hide his true identity; Chickie Pete might remember that he is not Elwood. The narrative’s constant coaxing of the reader to invest in Elwood’s bildungsroman makes the eventual revelation of his murder whilst attempting to escape from the Nickel Academy a more powerful indictment of the falsity of the American Dream.

Elwood’s induction into the Civil Rights Movement begins with his Martin Luther King record and is amplified by his exposure to various news media through his job at Marconi’s tobacconist. There, he encounters *Life*, *Jet*, and *Ebony* magazines, and convinces Mr. Marconi “to pick up *The Crisis* and *The Chicago Defender* and other black newspapers” (22). These publications connect Elwood to the Civil Rights movement, opening up his world beyond his allotted territory: “He knew Frenchtown’s piece of the Negro’s struggle, where his neighbourhood ended and white law took over. *Life*’s photo essays conveyed him to the front lines, to bus boycotts in Baton Rouge, to counter sit-ins in Greensboro” (20). Eventually, Elwood joins a protest at the whites only Florida Theatre in Tallahassee, which is showing the George Englund film *The Ugly American* (1963): “If you had seventy-five cents and the right skin color,

you could see Marlon Brando" (33). *The Ugly American* is based on the bestselling novel by Eugene Burdick and William Lederer (1958), which depicts the failure of United States diplomacy to combat the skill and efficiency of Soviet propaganda in Southeast Asia. As Daniel Immerwahr (2019) states, the book communicates the message that:

> The United States is a friend of freedom, that its ideals are everywhere popular, and that any opposition is just a misunderstanding that will evaporate when people from different cultures clasp hands in a far-off village (18).

In other words, *The Ugly American* is a fairy tale. It has nothing to do with racial equality, but rather addresses the lack of rhetorical efficacy on behalf of the United States as a hegemonic imperialist power. Its presence in *The Nickel Boys* hints that as important as the legal victories of the Civil Rights movements are, they might also be viewed through a darker lens that casts them as proof of white supremacist ideology's ability to shapeshift in response to criticism. After his experience of protest, Elwood resolves to, "Find his place in the busy line of young dreamers who dedicated themselves to Negro uplift" (35). Ultimately, the promise of equality and participation in the American dream that Elwood learns from some of the texts that surround him in Frenchtown proves false.

The Horror Environments of the Nickel Academy

Elwood and Turner's experiences at the Nickel Academy are narrated via a series of horror scenarios. The Nickel Academy is in the constant process of erasing the horror it produces: a process that is itself horrific. Whitehead mirrors this horrific erasure in the novel itself via its use of the bildungsroman form, which suppresses the horror that drives the events of the plot. The University of South Florida report notes that, at the Dozier School: "After the development of the printing department, nearly all paper materials for the State government in

Tallahassee began to be printed at the school. The printing industry at the school quickly generated more than $250,000.00" (28). The Dozier had "a school newspaper called *The Light*" (28) that was renamed *The Yellow Jacket* in 1930 (29). *The Yellow Jacket* "had a circulation of more than 1700 papers and was the primary paper for the region in its earliest years" (29). *The Nickel Boys* reflects this historical fact and folds it into its representation of Nickel as a palimpsestic textual structure, where the production of official texts on its literal surface is part of its attempt to erase history: "Nickel's printing press did all the publishing for the government of Florida, from the tax regulations to the building codes to the parking tickets" (49). It is used to print pamphlets on The Nickel Academy's history in which, "Every boy in every picture was smiling, but even after Elwood's short stay he recognized a kind of Nickel deadness in their eyes" (74). These official texts both conceal and reveal the horrific truth about Nickel, reminding us that as much as the violence of history has been supressed and hidden, evidence of it, like the testimony of the White House Boys, exists on the surface and is wilfully ignored.

Despite Elwood's initial failure to read the Nickel Academy as a horror environment, exacerbated by his optimistic nature, the horror genre is frequently legible in the text. Elwood's first impression of Nickel's "campus" is that:

> It wasn't that bad. He expected tall stone walls and barbed wire, but there were no walls at all. The campus was kept up meticulously, a bounty of lush green dotted with two- and three-story buildings of red brick. The cedar trees and beeches cut out portions of shade, tall and ancient (45).

If the reader is reading through the lens of a bildungsroman, this is broadly encouraging news. But it becomes increasingly difficult to ignore the intrusion of horror into the descriptive language. Even before we learn that "outside was one thing and inside another" (50), Elwood is asked, "You ever worked a field?" (50), evoking the spectre of the antebellum plantation. Around

the Cleveland dormitory buildings, "box hedges [. . .] clawed out of the red soil" (50), an image that draws directly on the zombie horror genre, and inside:

> The warped floors creaked incessantly and the yellow walls were scuffed and scratched. Stuffing dribbled from the couches and armchairs in the recreation room. Initials and epithets marked the tables, gouged by a hundred mischievous hands (50).

The language here is clearly marked by the horror genre, especially in the goriness of the verbs "gouged" and "dribbled"; the wetness of the latter conjures the generic image of a zombie with its guts exposed. The anonymous "hands" also suggest zombies, especially in the context of the box hedges, and Whitehead also plays on the established metonymic use of the word to refer to labourers in order to amplify the evocation of slavery at Nickel. That the surfaces of Nickel—the furniture, in this scene—are marked with "mischievous" writing helps to establish the difference between official and unofficial writing at Nickel.

The first horror environment Elwood encounters at the Nickel Academy is the "White House", the old "work shed" (65) in which Nickel staff punish inmates using "Black Beauty", a leather strap "three feet long with a wooden handle" (67). The most striking way in which Whitehead constructs this scene within the horror genre is through his use of sound. Seung Min Hong (2019) explains that, during the transition from silent films in the 1930s, proponents of the horror genre such as Sergei Eisenstein provided a major innovation in cinematic sound design by experimenting with the "contrapuntal use of off-screen sound" (216). As Hong states, the early use of sound in films was characterised by "sound-and-image synchronization or prior visual establishment" (217). In other words, the sounds played would either match the image on the screen, or the source of the sound would be indicated to the viewer in an earlier scene (217). By contrast, innovators in the horror genre deployed:

> Asynchronous, nonestablished sound in key scenes that highlight the frightening or mysterious sense of the monstrous figures, such as their first appearance in the

> narrative. Sometimes the sounds are heard off screen before the sound source becomes visible, which is opposite to the principle of visual establishment (217).

In *The Nickel Boys*, Whitehead deploys a directly analogous literary technique, as Elwood hears the industrial fan used in the White House to cover the screams of the boys tortured there without knowing what it is or where it is coming from. The nightmarish quality of the sound is emphasised by the fact that Elwood is woken up from sleep by it, “a different roar” that “came from outside, a rush and a whoosh without variation” (52). In this use of asynchronous sound, Whitehead uses onomatopoeic nouns to build a background horror soundscape that moves to the foreground two chapters later when Elwood enters the White House.

Until the end of the second paragraph of Chapter Six, the reader does not know for certain that Elwood will be taken to the White House. Leading up to this revelation—“they got Elwood, too” (64)—Whitehead builds tension through sound as the “boys heard the cars grind gravel outside, the doors open, the thumping up the stairs” (64). This listing of verb clauses to create a sense of narrative pace increases the tension further and forces the reader to experience the events through the boys’ perspective as they lie in the dark. Donald Crafton (1999) notes that “synaesthesia (using one sound to stimulate another” (540) is an important technique in the creation of cinematic asynchronous sound, and *The Nickel Boys* reads: “The hearing was seeing, too, in bright strokes across the mind’s canvas. The men’s flashlights danced” (64). Whitehead here confuses and disorientates the reader’s senses as the synaesthetic claim that “hearing was seeing” gives way to an actual image of (fragmentary) seeing in the flashlights; at the same time, the invocation of synaesthesia leads immediately to a silent activity. The reader is encouraged to attempt to hear the flashlights, which of course do not make a sound, amplifying the horror film-like experience of disorientation.

After it is confirmed that Elwood will be taken to the White House, the narrative briefly flashes back to describe Elwood’s experience of the “heavy pressure of menace and unease”

during the evening before, which is characterised by a sonic hush: “Some boys whispered when he passed” and, “At lights-out, Desmond whispered to Elwood that once it started, it was best not to move” (65). As the four boys including Elwood are driven over to the White House, “Corey made an incantation, ‘I’m-a hold on and be still, I’m-a hold on and be still” (65). When they enter the White House, Whitehead once again merges light and sound as a “single naked bulb buzzed in the hallway” (65). This layering of the White House’s soundscape that begins with the asynchronous sound of the industrial fan in Chapter Four adds to Whitehead’s evocation of the building as a site of horror, leading to Elwood’s revelation that: “This place was why the school had no wall or fence or barbed wire around it, why so few boys ran: It was the wall that kept them in” (65). Until now, the narrative has been zooming in on the enclosed space of the White House, slowly lifting the volume of the horror soundscape as the focus narrows. In this line, however, the narrative suddenly zooms out and the *absence* of walls becomes horrific in itself since it indicates the presence of the White House’s terror not only within the grounds of the Nickel Academy but in every part of society.

Elwood is last to be beaten, which allows Whitehead to further elaborate the scene’s horror soundscape. The fan remains unidentified as “Black Mike” is taken into the room to be beaten with Black Beauty: “The roar began: an even gale” (66). Whitehead’s constant emphasis on the steady regularity of the fan’s noise helps to establish the all-encompassing continuity of the horror soundscape, which is now so potent that “Elwood’s chair vibrated with energy” (66). The fan’s whirring is punctuated by “Black Mike’s screams and the smack of the strap on his body” (66). Elwood begins to count the number of lashes, “on the theory that if he knew how much the other boys got, he’d know how much he’d get” (66), but realises eventually that: “It didn’t make sense [. . .] Maybe there was no system at all to the violence and no one, not the keepers nor the kept, knew what happened or why” (66). In the context of the book’s commentary on modernity’s status as a “Perpetual Misery Machine, one that operated by itself without human agency” (83), this passage reflects a zombified absence of humanity in the

administrators of justice, but Elwood's counting also adds a sense of rhythm to the scene's soundscape. As his attempts to mark that rhythm break down—he "lost his place a few times" (66)—a chaotic, discordant quality is felt in the scene's soundscape.

When Elwood finally sees the "gigantic industrial fan that was the source of the roaring, the sound that traveled all over campus, farther than physics allowed" (67), Whitehead uses the soundscape he has established to evoke an image of hell. The repeatedly used adjective "roaring" recalls fire, an association amplified in the image of the fan's original location in the Nickel Academy's "laundry—in the summer those machines made an inferno" (67). In the context of the scene's horror soundscape, the reader experiences "inferno" synaesthetically through the sensation of heat and as the highest volume of the roaring sound. In contrast to the constant noise, the guards, Spencer and Earl, demand silence from the boys: "Corey began to sob, and when Spencer came back he told him to shut his fucking mouth" (66). This insistence on silence forces the boys to carry the brutal violence of the beatings inside them as a pressurised force, an internal hell. This image picked up in a later chapter when Elwood receives:

> A stack of battered natural-science books that by accident provided a course in ancient forces: tectonic collisions, mountain ranges thrown up to the sky, volcanic bombast. All the violence roiling beneath that makes the world above. They were big books with exuberant pictures, red and orange, in contrast with the cloudy, white-gone-gray of the [Nickel Academy hospital] ward (75).

This sense of released pressure is finally felt, if we read *The Nickel Boys* as a prequel to *Zone One*, as the zombies enact the return of history's dead. The connection is emphasised by Whitehead's colour palette in this passage; *Zone One* represents modernity through the colour grey, as in the line, "The ash smeared the city's palette into a gray hush on the best of days" (8).

When it is Elwood's turn to be beaten, he too is told to: "*Hold on to the rail and don't let go. Make a sound and you'll get more. Shut your fucking mouth, nigger*" (67, italics original). This sudden creation of a central locus of silence at the centre of the horror soundscape of the scene—"There was a weird thing with the acoustics where the fan covered the boys' screams but right next to it you heard the staff's instructions perfectly" (67)—has two effects. Firstly, the silence adds to the palpable horror of the detail—which Whitehead takes from real Dozier School survivor testimony—of the way the leather strap "slapped across the ceiling before it came down on your legs, to tell you it was about to come down, and the bunk springs made noise with each blow" (67). The portrayal of the rhythmic noise of the bed springs suggests the presence of a perverse racialised sexuality to Spencer's violence. Secondly, it allows Elwood's experience of injustice, pain, and violence to emanate through the image of the fan across not only the Nickel Academy campus but the whole United States and beyond—"farther than physics allowed"—as a silence at its heart. The fact that the beatings of Nickel Academy boys take place in the White House further reinforce this point. Through the establishment of a contrapuntal soundscape, then, Whitehead creates a scene of horror whose logic applies beyond the walls of the building, the school, and even the nation.

The Exhaustion of the Archive

Whitehead makes clear in his fictionalised retelling of the archaeological investigations into the Dozier School site that the abuses that occurred there were an open secret: "All the boys knew about that rotten spot" (1). Commenting on the relationship between contemporary African American authors and the archive, Tom Chadwick and Pieter Vermeulen (2020) cite *The Nickel Boys* as an example of the exhaustion of "political capital" (96) available to fiction writers in the digital era, with its "saturated media ecology" (96). Authors such as Whitehead, Chadwick

and Vermeulen argue, cannot claim a “heroic political posture” (96) for their works, since “stories of African American suffering are never absent and instead possess an almost ambient availability” (96). Leaving to one side the question of whether the adoption of a “heroic political posture” or the accumulation of “political capital” are useful ways of thinking about, for example, Morrison’s *Beloved* (which Chadwick and Vermeulen cite), *The Nickel Boys* demonstrates that Chadwick and Vermeulen conflate availability with meaningful understanding and expression. The early pages of *The Nickel Boys* make clear that the availability of such “stories” is irrelevant if they are not heard, or if the official reports and investigations that invoke notions of objective authority are produced to silence them, as occurred throughout the history of the Dozier School.

Even when, finally, the experiences of the Dozier School boys were partially rendered into institutional discourse and a process of belated justice was begun—leading to a judgement in the Florida Senate that the state would compensate some of the Dozier survivors (*Jax Today*, 2024)—a vast archival deficit remains. As the USF report itself makes clear, in contrast to what Chadwick and Vermeulen suggest, the Dozier School archive is characterised by a “lack of [. . .] documentation”, the “incomplete recording of information”, “contradictory findings” (13) and “conflicting information” (14). A “lack of record keeping and absence of grave markers suggest intent to obfuscate the true number of burials located at the School and to hinder later potential investigations” (15). Thus the archaeologists in *The Nickel Boys*, whose strategies of reading are themselves limited as the Prologue to the novel makes clear, must read and interpret a partial, fragmented text. Scientists focus their attention on what can be demonstrated, in contrast to artists and writers who can explore the silences and redactions that exists between the remnants of history. As much as archaeologists wish to reconstruct history from the data they find, often correcting the historical record in the process, the story they tell is ultimately bound by the data they are able to excavate.

Within the remit of the scientific method, the USF report does go some way to filling in the gaps in the historical record of the Dozier School, but scientific discourse is necessarily limited. The Prologue in *The Nickel Boys* documents the way that the archaeologists process the raw material they find at the site into scientific data:

> With stakes and wire they divided the area into search grids, dug with hard shovels and heavy equipment. After sifting the soil, bones and belt buckles and soda bottles lay scattered on their trays in an inscrutable exhibit (2).

Modern technology provides new methods of reading the past as "cadaver-sniffing dogs and radar imaging confirmed" the existence of the "unmarked burial ground" (3). The dogs suggest a degree of authorial unease with the ultimate aims and function of the archaeological team, recalling the use of dogs to track down fugitive slaves and the use of hunting dogs by Nickel Academy staff to catch runaways. As Elwood and Turner make their escape, Turner tells his friend that: "There was no outfoxing the dogs once they were on the trail" (197) and the ten other references to dogs in the novel are all along the same lines. As important as the work of the University of South Florida team is, there remains a sense that they too are consuming the black bodies interred in the Nickel Academy grounds, digesting them into a form of capital, evidenced in lines such as: "The archaeological students needed field credits" (2) and, "Identification [of the bodies] was difficult, but competition between the young archaeologists made for constant progress" (2).

By contrast, Whitehead represents the "support groups, reuniting over the internet and meeting in diners and McDonald's" (4) as archaeologists of a different kind:

> Together they performed their own phantom archaeology, digging through decades and restoring to human eyes the shards and artifacts of those days. Each man with his own pieces. *He used to say, I'll pay you a visit later. The wobbly stairs to the schoolhouse basement. The blood squished between my toes in my tennis shoes*. Reassembling

> those fragments into confirmation of a shared darkness: If it is true for you, it is true for someone else, and you are no longer alone (4, italics original).

This form of archaeological investigation recovers details of experience that radar imaging and DNA analysis cannot. The italicised fragments of memory are visceral and sensory; they take the reader inside subjective experience as opposed to and/or in addition to the objectivity sought by the archaeological team. As a work of fiction, *The Nickel Boys* is in part an effort to carry out the kind of archival work outlined by Tonia Sutherland and Zakiya Collier in their "Introduction: The Promise and Possibility of Black Archival Practice", which precedes a Special Issue of *Black Scholar* (2022). Sutherland and Collier underline the importance of developing practices of "fugitive departure from tamed, disciplinary modes of archivy" (2) that:

> centre Black epistemologies that contend with the anti-Blackness of traditional archives, where the tools and documentation of dispossession, criminalization, oppression, and negation have been appropriated, collected, disrupted, and disordered (2).

The Nickel Boys raises important questions about how far fiction is able to fill in gaps in the historical archive, at the same time as foregrounding the fictional nature of the archive—as in the case of the Dozier School archive—itself. Despite Chadwick and Vermeulen's claims of the archive's political exhaustion, Whitehead demonstrates in *The Nickel Boys* that the work fiction can do with archival information remains vital.

The Danger of an Archive

Throughout this thesis I have returned to Ishmael Reed's image in *Flight to Canada* (1976) of writing as a potential "bloodhound" for African Americans using the medium (13).

Literacy and freedom are inseparable concepts in the African American tradition, but Reed's novel reminds us that writing can also be a way for ill-intentioned readers to map, track, and monitor the writer. In the novel, Elwood begins assembling his own archive of the corrupt activities he witnesses during his time working in the local town with Harper on what Nickel terms "Community Service", but is really an extension of the antebellum culture of slave hiring and the peonage culture that persisted after Emancipation. Harper tells Elwood and Turner how, "Further back, it was more gruesome", in that so-called "graduation" from the Nickel Academy did not equate to freedom (91):

> When you graduated, you didn't go back to your family, you had parole where they basically sold your monkey ass to people in town. Work like a slave, live in their basement or whatever. Beat you, kick you, feed you shit (91).

Realising that the Nickel Academy is selling school supplies—including, in a further reference to *The Problem We All Live With*, "notebooks and pencils" (89)—Elwood becomes an archivist himself, hoping that his accumulation and organisation of information can be a method of insurgency against the school: "Elwood grabbed everything he saw in the free world to reassemble it in his mind later" (94). Turner, before he learns about Elwood's archive, notes that Elwood "read books when he didn't have to, and mined them for uranium to power his own personal A-bomb" (101). Elwood writes everything down: "The date. The name of the individual and the establishment. Some names took a while to fill in, but Elwood had always been the patient type, and thorough" (94). This line ends Chapter Eight, and some fifty pages later Whitehead gives the reader further hope that destroying the Nickel Academy via the justice system will be Elwood's coming-of-age moment. Chapter Twelve is structured around the listing out of "four ways out of Nickel" (143). These are: "One: serve your time" (142); "You could also serve time by aging out" (142); "Three: You could die. Of natural causes even" (143); "Fourth: Finally, you could run. Make a run for it and see what happened" (144). But when Harriet reveals

to Elwood that "the nice, polite white lawyer who'd been so optimistic about Elwood's appeal" (155) was a scam artist all along, he realises "there was a fifth way. Get rid of Nickel" (156). Again, this line ends the chapter, giving structural prominence to the idea that the narrative is moving towards the satisfaction of justice for Elwood.

Turner implicitly understands the dangers of a black person committing protest to writing. When Elwood tells him, "I've been writing everything down [. . .] The yard work and chores. The names of everybody and the dates. All our Community Service" (171), Turner responds: "What do you think they going to do? Put your picture on the cover of *Time* magazine? (171). Ironically, the success of *The Nickel Boys* led to Whitehead himself appearing on the front cover of *Time* with the headline: "America's Storyteller" (2019). Turner tells Elwood that his archiving will lead to death: "They going to take you out back, bury your ass, then they take me out back too" (172). Turner stops speaking to Elwood: "The boy was almost as good as Harriet at the silent treatment [. . .] The silence's lesson? Keep your mouth shut" (175). Elwood decides to present his archive to the school inspectors during their visit, "All in his finest penmanship" (176). He tries to throw off the figurative bloodhounds by leaving his document anonymous: "They'd know he was the snitch, of course, but they'd be in jail" (176). Echoing Rockwell's painting, in which U.S. Marshalls protectively escort Ruby Bridges to school, once again, Elwood allows himself to fantasise: "He saw the National Guard drive through the Nickel gate in a convoy of dark green vans" (178). In Elwood's imagination, no matter whether the soldiers' "sympathies lay with the old order", they nevertheless "had to abide by the laws of the land" (179). In contrast to the horror image of the United States as a "Perpetual Misery Machine" (83) for African Americans, Elwood pictures his country as: "America. A mechanism of justice set in movement by a woman sitting down on a bus where she was told not to sit, a man ordering ham on rye at a forbidden counter. Or a letter of proof" (179). Recalling the "way they lined up in Little Rock to let the nine Negro children into Central High School", Elwood envisions the soldiers forming "a human wall between the angry whites and the children, between the past and the

future" (178-79), not understanding that the Nickel Academy is not an aberrant corner of his country but a typical symptom of its white supremacist ideology.

In the end, when Elwood fails to find the opportunity to give his letter to the inspectors, Turner agrees to deliver it for him, handing it to an inspector whom the boys nickname "JFK" (181) for his resemblance to the President who, like Elwood's hero Martin Luther King, was later assassinated. Turner passes the inspector the letter inside "a copy of *The Gator*" (181), the school newspaper printed on site, a Trojan horse image that recalls Homer in *The Underground Railroad*, as Elwood's "own personal A-Bomb" (101) is hidden within an organ of official discourse. The "A-Bomb" plays on Elwood's truncated encyclopaedia and his attempts to resist white supremacy by using the limited tools available to him, a metaphor that Whitehead continues as Elwood, not knowing how—or even if—his letter has been received, waits for the "reaction, like he was back at Lincoln High School and waiting for the volcano to bubble and smoke in science class" (181-82). Inevitably, though, "the National Guard didn't screech into the parking lot" (182). Instead, the horror narrative returns: "It happened as it ever happened. At night, in the dormitories, flashlights crawling over his face" (182). "Crawling" connotes monstrosity; this time Whitehead uses the sense of touch to accentuate the horror of the flashlights. Later, Turner regrets handing over the letter on Elwood's behalf: "He should have burned it and talked him out of that fool plan instead of giving him silence. Silence was all the boy ever got" (205). He resolves to counter that silence with speech: "To speak about Elwood's story, no matter what happened to him" (207).

Whitehead begins Chapter Sixteen, in which Elwood is detained in a cell after receiving a second White House beating, by juxtaposing legislative progress with real stasis in terms of the violence inflicted on black Americans. Even though, "in a time of high-minded reform", Florida "state outlawed dark cells and sweatboxes in juvenile facilities after World War II" (189), the "rooms waited, blank and still airless" (189-190). The "brutal heirloom" of knowing "how to

keep a slave in line" is knowledge passed down through generations (189). While the Nickel Academy hierarchy wait to see whether Elwood's letter will bring further scrutiny, or whether they can kill him without consequence, Elwood is kept in "a dark cell, a room aloft in darkness, outside time" (189) until Turner initiates the escape attempt nearly two weeks later. The cell is a palimpsest of carceral writing. Beneath the new coat of paint that hid the desperate writing of "the cell's previous inhabitants, the scratches in the darkness over the years" are "Initials, names, and also a range of cuss words and entreaties" (190) that are illegible even to their authors when removed from the immediate state of suffering that engendered them. The "hieroglyphics did not resemble what they remembered putting into the walls. It was all demonology" (190). In *Zone One*, Whitehead uses the term "hieroglyphics" to signify the illegibility of the Quiet Storm's future writing: "[She] consulted her tablet, skittering her stylus over the computer maps, effecting hieroglyphic notations" (142). In Elwood's Nickel Academy cell, the word represents the illegibility of historical suffering. I have discussed Elaine Scarry's idea that pain "destroys" language (1985, 4) earlier in this thesis. In this instance, confinement in the dark—not the kind of pain Scarry means, but a form of extreme suffering—produces a form of writing whose meaning is lost as soon as it is inscribed. It cannot communicate with a future reader, even if that reader is also its author. Novelist J. M. Coetzee, in his essay "Into the Dark Chamber: The Novelist and South Africa" (1986), claims that "the dark, forbidden chamber is the origin of novelistic fantasy per se; in creating an obscenity, in enveloping it in mystery, the state creates the preconditions for the novel to set about its work of representation" (par. 7). For Coetzee, it is the very illegibility of such histories of state violence—epitomised in the relationship between torturer and tortured in his essay—that make them an essential subject of fiction writing. The palimpsestic writing on the cell walls, then, comes to represent the silenced and unresolved suffering of African Americans throughout history, a temporal disjunction that gives the lie to the National Guard's "human wall [. . .] between the past and the future".

It is Elwood's experience in the cell that finally dissuades him of the view that Martin Luther King's philosophy of loving the oppressor can ever inaugurate a future beyond racism in America: "He could not make that leap to love. He understood neither the impulse of the proposition nor the will to execute it" (194). Until this moment, he has been waiting:

> For someone to claim as kin. For others to claim him as kin, those who saw the same future approaching, slow as it may be and overfond of back roads and secret hardscrabble paths, attuned to the deeper music in the speeches and hand-painted signs of protest. Those ready to commit their weight to the great lever and move the world. They never appeared (194).

According to Diodorus Siculus, Archimedes—one of the *A* entries in Elwood's encyclopaedia—said: "Give me a place to stand and with a lever I will move the whole world." (1957, 195). President John F. Kennedy was also reportedly fond of the quotation and used a variant of it in his address to the eighteenth United Nations General Assembly two months before his assassination in 1963. The narrator, focalised through Elwood, also references Archimedes' lever after his first beating in the White House, speculating that "Violence is the only lever big enough to move the world" (83). Later in the novel, Turner associates the lever of violence with the powers-that-be in society: "Cops and politicians, fat-cat businessmen and judges, the assorted motherfuckers working levers" (139). The narrative thus implies that the leverage of nonviolence and love is insufficient to move the world in the face of institutionalised violence.

Turner's Utopian Reading

Ultimately, as I have argued in this chapter, *The Nickel Boys*' horror narrative, which conceptualises historical time as a repetitive circle in contrast to the linear progress of a bildungsroman, prevails. However, just as in *The Underground Railroad* and *Zone One*,

Whitehead in *The Nickel Boys* presents the reader with a scene of utopian reading, an Afrofuturist gesture of optimism, however tentative, that black futures are viable. This moment occurs at the end of Chapter Ten, as Elwood and Turner contemplate the reform school's annual Christmas lights display. At first, the display is marked with horror: "the big Santa at the entrance glowed from the inside with a demonic fire" (128). But as Turner contemplates the scene, he perceives "a rocket" (129) in the way "the lights floated on the *X*'s of the wooden struts, circled the huge tank, sketched the triangular peak" (128). In this depiction, the lights describe a rudimentary grammar, the *X*'s suggest alphabetic marks or hieroglyphs, and the way the narrative traces the trajectory of the lights suggests the syntax of a near-illegible sentence. Mark Spitz in *Zone One* reads the Quiet Storm's "strategic reconstructions" (233), Cora in *The Underground Railroad* reads the "contours of a new nation" (304) into tunnel walls, and Turner reads an unknowable future beyond the epistemic frame of the novel into a Christmas lights display: "There it was before him, pointed at the stars, decked in a hundred flickering lights, waiting for takeoff: a rocket. Launched in darkness towards another dark planet they couldn't see" (129).

The reference to a "dark planet" recalls both Public Enemy's horror-inflected album *Fear of a Black Planet* (1990) and Sun Ra's film *Space Is the Place* (1974), in which the jazz musician teleports black Americans to another planet to build a new utopian world. It also recalls the Earthseed doctrines in Octavia Butler's Parable Series, in which the protagonist creates a new religion in an apocalyptic United States. "The Destiny of Earthseed / Is to take root among the stars", reads one verse in *Parable of the Talents* (1998, 276). Turner's utopian reading describes a rocket "pointed at the stars". Turner's utopian reading, then, enters *The Nickel Boys* into an Afrofuturist tradition of representing black futures via the technology and aesthetics of space travel. This is a crucial yet rarely acknowledged feature of Whitehead's Trumpian novel; it responds to the permacrisis of history's endless looping back on itself to reinstall white

supremacist structures not only with horror but also by making an imaginative leap towards an as yet illegible future.

The Christmas lights display reminds Turner of “that amusement park, Fun Town, from the TV commercials” (128). Earlier in the novel, the narrative informs the reader that Elwood has seen the same commercials for the amusement park as Turner during his early childhood: “Every kid had heard of Fun Town, been there or envied someone who had” (10). Via *Martin Luther King at Zion Hill* (1962), Elwood learns to understand the racially segregated Fun Town as a symbol of his exclusion from the future promised to white children. The Christmas lights at the Nickel Academy are an analeptic reference to both King’s promise of a better future through nonviolent direct action and a figure of capitalism’s (segregated) promise of pleasure through prosperity. In thinking—reading—beyond both these promises, Turner makes *The Nickel Boys*’ most radical gesture to the future. He rejects the “dumb, happy music” (128) of the amusement park, reading instead the contours of an unknowable future into the same ‘text’. As tentative as this moment of utopian reading in Whitehead’s Trumpian novel appears, it nevertheless connects *The Nickel Boys* to Whitehead’s previous work, which characteristically provides moments that gesture towards a future beyond that which language can yet represent. This is hugely significant in a novel in which the horror genre is mobilised to create a sense of abject pessimism in which even the powerful rhetoric and call to direct action of Martin Luther King cannot break free of the stranglehold of racist capitalism. In *The Nickel Boys*, Whitehead once again looks to radical acts of reading and writing to break free of capitalist modernity’s repeating structures.

The Nickel Boys uses the horror genre to highlight not only the extreme violence and dehumanisation that has been visited upon African Americans throughout the country’s history, but also the way that the structures that sanction that violence are reproduced over and over again in a cyclical nightmare. Through Elwood’s foreshortened bildungsroman, Whitehead sets

in motion a narrative of liberal teleology, by which readers of the novel are encouraged to imagine that Elwood will finally find peace in the contemporary United States. Instead, by the end of the novel, it is clear that post-Civil Rights America has simply buried its horror deeper underground under layers of capital investment. The Radisson—once the Richmond Hotel in which Elwood worked—has had “a bunch of floors” added to it and: “The dark modern windows and brown metal siding of the new parts clashed with the red brick of the bottom three stories, but it was better than demolishing the place and starting anew” (207). The bricks of the old hotel were likely some of the “twenty thousand bricks a day” (74-5) produced by the inmate-run machine at Nickel. In *The Colossus of New York* (2003), Whitehead writes about urban development from a more personal, subjective point of view, although the “us/we” he writes of feels fragile and unsustainable. “Our old buildings still stand because we saw them [. . .] They are part of the city we carry around” (10). He also writes, “New York City does not hold our former selves against us. Perhaps we can extend the same courtesy” (10). This “us” is something like the product of a hallucination, sustained by strict adherence to the present. In “Times Square”, the penultimate essay in *Colossus*, Whitehead describes the “dizzy and light-headed” sensation caused by the city’s constant changing—“It’s not even what it was five minutes ago” (143). It is a unity in “sickness” and “dislocation” (143). Much of Whitehead’s work, including *The Nickel Boys*, is about the way that the erasure of history is not really possible; even if the physical traces are destroyed, or buried deep, as in the unmarked Nickel graveyard, history will eventually resurface. In the same essay he reminds us that, “Some things cannot be demolished. Some things reach down and become bedrock” (153).

Writing plays a crucial role in bringing history back to bear on the present. *The Nickel Boys* writes the Dozier boys back into history, and in its close relationship to the Dozier site—its mirroring of the layout, for example—the novel adds their stories to the surface of Dozier’s palimpsest. Turner, “seeing the grounds and the haunted buildings on the nightly news” realises that “he had to go back. To speak about Elwood’s story” (207). He plans to “find Elwood’s grave

and tell his friend of his life"; "tell the sheriff who he was"; "Tell the White House Boys he was one of them"; "Tell anyone who cared that he used to live there" (207). Turner is not content to merely tell Elwood's story, but feels he must return to the site and interweave the telling into the physical place itself. This is when he finds himself back at the Richmond / Radisson, on the verge of an apocalyptic future. Despite its celebration of the bravery and power of the actors of the Civil Rights Movement, then, *The Nickel Boys*, which ends almost in the contemporary present of the novel's publication, presents American history as an apocalypse waiting to happen. Prefiguring *Zone One*, its ending suggests that progress in capitalist modernity is an illusory phenomenon. In this context, *The Nickel Boys* shares with almost all of Whitehead's work a call for a radical aesthetics capable of writing the future.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I have made the argument that Whitehead's work reinscribes American history not merely to counter the white supremacist nature of dominant historical narratives, but in order to 'write the future'. Whitehead's writing is geared towards using his medium to forge paths into the future that hegemonic historical narratives—the products of centuries of racist capitalist modernity—work to foreclose. Crucial to this project is the idea that a radical aesthetics which is by definition as yet unavailable is needed in order to make this future address and bring it into being.

Even as the discourse of African American history becomes increasingly prominent and visible in the mainstream media and public consciousness in the United States, there remains a tendency to, as LaGarrett J. King (2020) states, "seamlessly infuse Black history within the general American history narrative" (335). King argues that the popular axiom "Black history is American history", which is often used to "legitimate [teaching] Black history to the general population" is ultimately "a feel-good phrase because it celebrates and identifies the country's diversity and supposed inclusive mission as a democratic nation" (335). It is a "non-controversial, palatable, and whitewashed discourse that maintains the status quo" and "insinuates a shared historical legacy between white and Black people" (335). In other words, the phrase represents a desire to somehow enfold black history into a liberal democratic progressive narrative of American history, despite the fact that such histories are perhaps themselves the strongest counterargument to that dominant narrative.

Whitehead's work reminds us that history can be told very differently, to a very different end, namely the inauguration of radical futures. Most commonly, he chooses fiction as the medium to explore that history and its historiography. In this thesis, I have explored how the tools of fiction help Whitehead to reinscribe the past in creative ways. He generates his own

lexicon of the past, present, and future, with images such as dust and ash, death and zombies, monstrosity and consumption, to give but a few examples, that recur throughout his work. He creates complex structures of narration, such as in Homer's narration of *The Underground Railroad*. His work as an entirety shares the interrogation of the textual surfaces of the United States and their simultaneous concealment and revelation of the past. Whitehead examines how the ways in which buried histories, once revealed, enter contemporary discourse and how these affect the strategies we use to read the uncovered traces. In *The Nickel Boys*, archaeologists are not able to read the past in the way that fiction can, because fiction is able to speculate about the gaps between what is represented by scientific data.

In Whitehead's most recent novel, *Crook Manifesto* (2023), set around the occasion of the United States' bicentenary, arsonist Leon Drake imagines his 'profession' as a kind of utopian erasure:

> Leon despised every inch, from the grimmest of the grim subbasements to the tips of the bent television antennas piercing the sky. When he walked the streets, he superimposed his own perfect city over the misbegotten one before him, it was a city of ash and cinder heaped hundreds of feet high, emptied of people, wonderfully dead and still (244).

For readers of Whitehead's previous work, the use of ash to symbolise the morbidity intrinsic to capitalist modernity's version of progress, its false futurism that is really a form of continual reanimation of the past, is familiar. The point is reinforced as we learn that Leon's "aspirations lay in ash" (244), which simultaneously refers to his plans to make a living from arson, the burnt-out nature of the American dream, and signifies on the double-meaning of aspiration as 'breath'; ash is the air that citizens of New York breathe, collapsing the apocalyptic time of *Zone One* into the historical time of the 1970s. Drake imagines the city as a palimpsest whose entire textual history is burnt out, creating a blank canvas of sorts, but also a place of nightmarish

death. This is the erased world of *Zone One*'s ending, not the world whose contours Whitehead gestures towards in his scenes of utopian reading and writing. Nevertheless, Drake is a writer who "wrote his name in gasoline" (310), suggesting that his crimes of arson have an autobiographical element, indexing a self forged in an "antagonistic order" (244). *Crook Manifesto* continues Whitehead's perennial theme; racist capitalist modernity's attempts to avoid the apocalyptic consequences of a history of violence by reproducing the present over and over again, and the potential for radical reading and writing to interrupt this logic.

In this thesis, I have addressed the way that Whitehead brings the specific histories he narrates in his work into a larger narrative of American history, one that is imbued with the presence of an apocalyptic temporality that is yet to be fully revealed. *The Underground Railroad* and *The Nickel Boys* address two moments in the history of the United States; *Zone One* is the apocalypse towards which the logic of capitalist modernity is leading us. But Whitehead is not merely a critical political voice, an Afropessimist insisting on the unviability of black futures under the paradigm of the past two-and-a-half centuries. His work also seeks to gesture towards radical black futures through a reticent utopian faith in the aesthetics of reading and writing. Whilst his work doesn't precisely align with the majority of what usually falls under the umbrella of Afrofuturism, he is nonetheless an Afrofuturist in the sense that his writing repeatedly commits to a radical aesthetics. What form that aesthetics might take remains unclear—part of Whitehead's point is that if it is to be revolutionary enough to imagine a genuinely radical future, it is not possible to represent in the language that we have and use now—but he does indicate through his use of genre that the redeployment of existing material and forms is a crucial aspect of creating an address to the future.

Just as hip-hop artists in the 1970s exploded the break in soul songs in order to create an entirely new way of making music, Whitehead suggests that literary genres can be similarly exploded. At the same time, his play with genres often reveals ways in which African American

writers, such as the authors of the antebellum autobiographical slave narratives, have subverted genres themselves. This is most evident in *The Underground Railroad*, in which Homer's 'underground' narration of Cora's journey not only undermines some of the oppressive demands of the source genre—such as the requirement that authors use their writing to prove their humanity to white people—but also creates the conditions by which Cora can eventually read the contours of the future into the irregularities in the wall of the tunnel through which she escapes. Whitehead uses the recurring image of the crack through which to represent the points at which genre might be leveraged towards radical ends; in *The Crook Manifesto*, Leon knew "every crack and corner" of his home turf. This "supernatural acquaintance" (244) allows him to script his fires, as it were. Radical writing in Whitehead's conception of it involves an exhaustive knowledge of convention, not least because his work is always so richly intertextual, constantly signifying on past texts.

The intertextuality and intermediality that is so crucial to Whitehead's work and which I have tried, however incompletely, to map in this thesis, is also exemplified in *Crook Manifesto*. Earlier in this thesis I outlined how Whitehead reworks Norman Rockwell's painting *The Problem We All Live With*, critiquing its message that existing institutions such as the government and the police can bring about racial equality in the United States. In *Crook Manifesto*, in the context of the American bicentenary celebrations, Carney imagines his own version of *The Spirit of '76*, a painting for the United States' first centenary by Archibald M. Willard (1876). Willard's painting depicts three white musicians—a fife player and two drummers—in the foreground of a battle scene. It is an image of sentimental heroism that celebrates the success of American Revolutionary forces in the year of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. Rockwell himself evokes the painting in his own illustration entitled *The Spirit of 1976* for the *Boy Scouts of America* calendar in the bicentenary year. Rockwell's version of the painting eschews the battle scene, depicting boy scouts and their leader carrying the American flag and, as in Willard's painting, two drummers and a fife player. Notably, in Rockwell's version, the fife player

is black, reflecting what Laura Barraclough (2016) describes as the "conservative multiculturalism", framed "within the spirit of liberal individualism, entrepreneurialism, and U.S. global power" (166) that characterised bicentenary celebration media. This is reflected in the prominent waving American flag and the 'colourblind' incorporation of a black fife player within the quasi-military associations of the boy scout uniform and, of course, the reference to Willard's explicitly military painting.

Whitehead's evocation of Willard's painting and—creating an intertextual link to *The Nickel Boys*—Rockwell's reimagination of it, refuses the painting's history of sponsoring institutional ideas of progress under the American Dream. Carney's imagined adaptation of Willard's *The Spirit of '76* is as follows:

> They wanted bicentennial flavor, here goes. Drums, fife, same shell-shocked stubbornness, but the musicians are black. Beat down, skulls full of dead-end thoughts, they keep playing. Preserving the color palette of the original, city gray and smog brown, with a background of three-story tenements, bleak and dark-windowed and 'the pigeons circling around like vultures.' This is their march—folly, fortitude, and that brand of determination that comes from ignoring reality. Up on the wall for all of Harlem to see: This is what we sell in here (314).

Carney notes Willard's original muted colour palette, making the greys and browns represent the colours of urban capitalist modernity. This has the effect of imbuing the original with a proleptic quality, as if predictive of the failure of progress in the twentieth century. The heroism of *Spirit of '76* becomes a "shell-shocked" condition. The musicians of the original image are reimagined as zombified black figures through the description of their "skulls full of dead-end thoughts" and the presence of vultures; the use of "keep" in "they keep playing" suggests the interminable nature of their "march". Carney's death imagery conjures a fugue, a musical form generated from repetitive loops, reflecting Whitehead's emphasis on the cyclical nature of

capitalist modernity. Finally, the American Dream is presented as the persistent refusal to apprehend a reality in which the most that can be hoped for is survival; in other words, Whitehead, via Carney, transforms Willard's painting into a black horror image.

Such self-referentiality reminds us as readers of Whitehead to look for the similarities between his generically disparate works as much as differences. Whitehead creates meaning through the way his work constantly reimagines texts, including his own, and other media, reading as well as writing such intertexts. His work, as I have argued in this thesis, consistently presents the accumulated textual history of the United States as a history of racist capitalist modernity's continual rearticulation and of resistance to it. In reinscribing so many genres throughout his writing career, Whitehead suggests a Benjaminian attitude towards stale forms, seeing them as having a kind of immanent creative potential. It is not so much the genres themselves that are important, though Whitehead creates rich fictions within genres, but the way he is able to repurpose them towards making his trademark gestures towards the future.

I have tried to demonstrate in this thesis that these gestures towards possible futures are the gravitational centre of Whitehead's work. As much as Whitehead's work is dedicated to critiquing and reinscribing history and the narratives it generates, the project of opening up paths to possible futures is what sets his work apart. Whether through the Quiet Storm's mosaic, comprehensible as text only when viewed from above, or Cora's reading of the tunnel walls as she makes her way to freedom via the literalised underground railroad, or through Turner's moment of utopian reading of the Nickel Academy's Christmas lights display, Whitehead presents reading and writing as the most viable way of accessing black futures. Despite a strong vein of Afropessimistic thought that runs through his work, Whitehead ultimately makes a sincere commitment to a futurism rooted in a radical aesthetics of writing.

One tension that I perceive in Whitehead's representation of the radical potential of aesthetics surrounds the question of whether the author's own work enacts the radicalism he

calls for through his depictions of utopian reading and writing. I would argue that further research is needed into the correspondence between Whitehead's theme and his own works. I have attempted in this thesis to go some way towards suggesting an answer to this question through analysis of Whitehead's writing's ability to blur the lines between text and world, with the effect that his texts are designed to act upon the world just as the world acts upon them. I believe that this feature, which we see in the palimpsestic city of *Zone One*, for example, or in the powerful textual metaphors of *The Underground Railroad*, is crucial to Whitehead's commitment to textual aesthetics and their ability to influence actual events in the world. Furthermore, the way that Whitehead's texts are themselves so intricately made, having an architectural quality in which the architecture is built from the texts of the past, helps them to maintain a critical angle on the contexts in which they are consumed.

The clearest example of this is Homer's 'underground' status as narrator in *The Underground Railroad*. This Trojan Horse of a narrator, whose disguise as a sycophantic race traitor is so effective that Barry Jenkins emphasises his malice even more than Whitehead in his television series, operates a subversive critique of the slave narrative form via a submerged trickster-like Afrofuturist narrative. Homer's status as the narrator of *The Underground Railroad* changes its meaning drastically, as well as making us reassess its reception as a 'realist' or less experimental novel in comparison to Whitehead's previous work. In sentimentally consuming Cora's story and ignoring Homer's subversive narrative of it, we are gently coerced as readers into occupying a similar emotional state as the readers of antebellum slave narratives. This throws doubt on the idea that society has progressed since slavery, indicating a level of continuity in the textual dynamics of race. Novels such as *The Underground Railroad* enter into the discourse of race and the history of slavery critically, undermining responses such as sentimentality that prop up the status quo.

These questions over whether Whitehead's writing is as radical as the aesthetics his work sponsors leads into a broader quandary that remains as crucial as ever: what is the relationship between aesthetics and the politics of the future? Can aesthetics be an effective political tool in dismantling destructive, racist capitalist modernity and ushering in radical futures? Whitehead's work, with its admittedly tentative investment in the utopian possibilities of writing, does not offer a firm answer but instead implores us to continue asking this question, whether through critical discourse or through creative responses to our contemporary world.

In the contemporary era, Donald Trump, who at the time of writing is on the verge of his second term as President of the United States, is a potent symbol of the monstrous ability of capitalism to reproduce itself and the racist structures that it entails. In his Republican Convention speech (2024) a week after he survived a shooting at his election rally in Pennsylvania, Trump purveys a futurism rooted in a nostalgic vision of an idealised, though never precisely specified past. He uses the word "restore" five times during this speech, claims that America is "on the cusp of a new golden age", and tells his audience that "here we are tonight, all gathered together, talking about the future, promise and a total renewal of a thing we love very much. It's called America". Trump creates a rhetorical loop that connects an undefined glorious past with an undefined glorious future.

What has become clear to me in researching and writing this thesis is just how useful Whitehead's writing is for theorising the relationship between race, futurity, and aesthetics, in particular the aesthetics of writing, but also of visual and acoustic arts. Whitehead's work demonstrates that fiction is uniquely positioned to hold in play a wide range of concepts in a single text. His work contributes in particular to Afrofuturist and Afropessimist theory, establishing a dialectical relationship between the two. Whilst sharing the Afrofuturist urgency to explore the possibility of black futures, Whitehead's work withdraws from attempting to represent those futures. Instead, he brings a future orientation to the Afropessimist critique of

anti-Blackness, searching for ways of addressing the future from a perspective of near despair around the failure of progress and dehumanisation of black people in the present. Taken as a whole, Whitehead's work presents a theoretical structure that helps us to understand the relationship between history and the future under capitalism.

There has not been space in this thesis to offer an exhaustive analysis of the relationship between writing and the future in Whitehead's work, not least because his work is so richly and consistently engaged with this question. My hope is that I have emphasised and extended the project of understanding Whitehead's complex temporalities and particularly underlined the importance of the attention to the possibilities of his medium that he explores in his work. I have also tried to situate Whitehead firmly in the African American tradition, rather than position him generationally as a "post-soul" author, for example, as Derek C. Maus does. Of course, Whitehead's work is not limited by its entrenchment in this tradition; on the contrary, a key part of Whitehead's project is to explore and represent ways in which African American writers have taken up the future and extend them in novel ways.

Whitehead reads the African American cultural tradition as inherently innovative. This creates a kind of productive paradox, since tradition suggests continuity whilst innovation suggests a break with the past. In his provocative book entitled *What Was African American Literature?* (2011), Kenneth Warren argues that African American literature under Jim Crow "was oriented by the effort to change or repeal the laws that significantly shaped black social and political life from the 1890s through the 1960s", whereas "contemporary black political and cultural inquiry, by its own admission, is not similarly oriented" (95). He contends that "we have to put the past behind us" (84), admonishing those who describe racism "as a problem of how we understand and acknowledge the power of history" (85), since they view colour blindness as "a kind of blindness to the presentness of the past, a refusal to see that people can still be victimized by the past, and that the past can be victimized by the present" (86). By contrast,

Whitehead's work suggests that it is crucial that this correspondence between past and present be kept open, since without it the future is foreclosed by its eternal repetition.

Whitehead's work offers us a theoretical intervention in the attempt to consign African American literature to the past. We recall that Whitehead himself stated to *The New York Times* early in his career that: "I am working in the African American literary tradition. That's my aim and what I see as my mission" (2001 par. 6). Often through the tools of fiction, but also in his non-fiction such as *The Colossus of New York* (2003), Whitehead reads the existence of the past in the present, suggesting that the present is, substantially, the repetition of the past. His work suggests that writing in the African American tradition does not mean being confined to a narrow set of, for example, legal objectives. Indeed, the sense that capitalism constantly reanimates racist structures that exists in Whitehead's work leads him away from addressing specific activist objectives in his work. Instead, what he gleans from and extends in the African American literary tradition is an orientation towards a utopian future against all odds and a belief in the power of writing to gesture towards that future. Whilst for some African American writers of the past that orientation meant calling for legal and societal change, in Whitehead's work it means exploring the relationship between aesthetic innovation and the production of radical futures. His work, as I have argued throughout this thesis, consistently reads and signifies on the African American tradition, positioning his own writing as an extension of a futurism that has always existed within it and pointing to models of innovation in the past. He draws a line, for example, between Ellison's treatment of jazz temporalities in *Invisible Man* (1952), the invention of hip-hop by exploding the breaks in soul tracks, and the future-writing strategies of the Quiet Storm in *Zone One*. This is not a tradition in the sense of preserving the specific forms, structures, or objectives of the past, but rather a tradition in which the very point is innovation with an orientation towards the future.

Whitehead's work suggests that rather than consign the concept of African American literature to history, we recalibrate its definition and understand that it can be simultaneously inhabited and exceeded. *Zone One*, for example, is African American in the sense that it reads the way that African American history is embedded indelibly in the present and in its intertextual signifying on the African American tradition; at the same time, it is rooted in the transnational tradition of the zombie text and the specific horror film tradition of George Romero and Benjamin's critique of modernity. African American literature has a narrow historical definition only if it is defined narrowly. Authors such as Whitehead suggest that far from being an exhausted historical concept, African American literature continues to provide authors with resources for writing the future.

The relationship between reading and writing and futurity, I have argued in this thesis, is fundamental to Whitehead's work throughout his career. Through the explosion of genres, the construction of 'underground' writers who subversively influence the surface text, and through scenes of utopian reading and writing, Whitehead creates texts in which the possibility of a future beyond racist capitalist modernity is gestured towards but never quite attained. The association of freedom and literacy that goes all the way back to the antebellum slave narratives in African American literature becomes an object of both faith and doubt in Whitehead's work. For this reader, the experience of reading novels such as *Zone One*, *The Underground Railroad*, or *The Nickel Boys* gives the sense that through Whitehead's writing, an unknowable future has been glimpsed.

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