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## FREEDOM AFTER NEOLIBERALISM

# Freedom to Struggle: The Ironies of Colson Whitehead

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This essay explores the changing role played by the idea of freedom in the fiction of Colson Whitehead. I begin by outlining some of the significations of 'freedom' within American culture before and during the period of neoliberal hegemony, placing particular emphasis on trends in the word's provenance for African Americans between the civil rights era and the time in which Whitehead is writing. I then undertake an extended comparison between Whitehead's novels *Apex Hides the Hurt* (2006) and *The Underground Railroad* (2016). I argue that in *Apex*—published against the background of the Bush doctrine and the American wars in Iraq and Afghanistan—Whitehead treats freedom ironically. The novel both pursues and treats critically a postmodern aesthetics that envisages symbolic action on language as the primary ground of politics. *The Underground Railroad*, by contrast, inhabits an African American literary genre—the novel of slavery—that is strongly wedded to discourses of bondage and freedom. This novel, arriving a decade after *Apex*, shows Whitehead responding to changes in American society and culture—particularly the advent of Black Lives Matter and a growing public awareness of the implications of mass incarceration policies for African Americans—that seem to call for a more sincere reckoning with the notion of freedom. I conclude with a discussion of time in Whitehead, arguing that his distinctive engagement with temporality lies at the heart of the vision of freedom after neoliberalism offered by his fiction.

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In a scene one third of the way through Colson Whitehead's 2006 novel *Apex Hides the Hurt*, the story's unnamed protagonist, an African American 'nomenclature consultant' renowned for the successful branding of consumer products, holds a meeting with Albie Winthrop, the scion of an old white family (2007: 22). The meeting takes place in the fictional Midwestern town of Winthrop, named after Albie's ancestors, who had brought much-needed jobs to the town in the late nineteenth century through the construction of a barbed wire factory. Despite this link to a successful industrial past, the continued value of Winthrop as a name for the town has recently been questioned. Lucky Aberdeen, a local tech entrepreneur, believes that the name doesn't reflect the 'new market realities, the changing face of the community' (74). Lucky wants to rename the town New Prospera, and when he brings his proposal to the three-person town council on which he sits, they vote two-to-one in favour of change. But Regina Goode, the African American town mayor who has voted with Lucky, now demurs on the new name. As Albie recounts to the protagonist: 'We sat there deadlocked. Every name—mine, Lucky's, Regina's—had one vote, and no one would budge' (75). The result is that the protagonist, a corporate expert in naming, has been brought in to have the casting vote. Alongside Winthrop and New Prospera, the third name being touted is the original one given to the town by its first settlers, a group of former slaves. This name—Regina's choice—is revealed to the protagonist and the reader as Albie continues:

'It was only a settlement really,' Albie said, 'where Regina's family decided to stop one day. There wasn't any thought to it. They just dropped their bags here.'

'But what was it called?'

'Oh. They called it Freedom.'

Freedom, Freedom, Freedom. It made his brain hurt. Must have been a bitch to travel all that way only to realize that they forgot to pack the subtlety. (76)

'Freedom was so defiantly unimaginative,' the protagonist thinks to himself a few pages later, 'as to approach a kind of moral weakness' (83).

In this essay, I seek to understand and explicate this reaction by the protagonist of *Apex Hides the Hurt* to the name 'Freedom.' The lack of subtlety, lack of imagination, and even moral weakness he attributes to the name says much, I want to suggest, about the aesthetic and ethical values that typify not only his commercial profession but also his specific intersection of class, race, and generation. This class, race, and generation are Colson Whitehead's own: born in 1969, the author is, like most of the protagonists of his novels, an upper-middle-class member of what has been called the 'post-soul' generation of African Americans. Here, 'soul' is associated with the attitude and aesthetics of the civil rights era and the generation of Whitehead's parents.<sup>1</sup> In his book *Soul Babies*, Mark Anthony Neal claims that black Americans born in the generation after civil rights are 'divorced from the nostalgia' associated with the movement and therefore able 'to engage the movement's legacy from a state of objectivity that the traditional civil rights leadership is both unwilling and incapable of doing' (2002: 103). While one might quibble with the word 'objectivity' in this claim, the sense of distance that those who came of age in the generation after civil rights feel from the commitments of the earlier movement is undoubtedly a feature of Whitehead's fiction. While his first and most recent novels—*The Intuitionist* (1999) and *The Underground Railroad* (2016)—are historical fantasias that take place earlier than (or in an alternative reality to) the classic civil rights decades, the four novels in between—*John Henry Days* (2001), *Apex Hides the Hurt* (2006), *Sag Harbor* (2009), and *Zone One* (2011)—are all set in the late twentieth and twenty-first century, yet each features a protagonist whose relationship to civil rights is either ambiguously hazy, broadly ignorant, or instinctively hostile.

In *Apex Hides the Hurt*, this haziness/ignorance/hostility is exemplified in the protagonist's sarcastic and dismissive response to the name 'Freedom'. As Richard H. King argues in *Civil Rights and the Idea of Freedom*, 'the search for freedom' was 'the

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<sup>1</sup> As well as being described as post-soul (Cohn, 2009; Maus, 2014), Whitehead has also been claimed for the competing terms post-black (Touré, 2009) and postrace (Saldívar, 2013). Arguably more important than which 'post' one prefers is the fact that the civil rights era marks the origin point for understanding blackness, race, and soul in all these uses of the prefix.

essence of the civil rights movement,' and no word has come to be more identified with the goals, attitudes, and legacy of the movement (1996: xviii). 'Freedom' offered a unifying banner, King explains, because its significations and connotations crossed religious and secular boundaries. On the religious side, as conveyed most memorably in the rhetoric of Martin Luther King, Jr., 'were two powerful and compelling stories of the move from slavery to freedom,' the Old Testament journey of the children of Israel to the Promised Land and the New Testament story of Christ's spiritual deliverance of man from sin (16).<sup>2</sup> The more secular uses of 'freedom' by black activists and thinkers drew on a wide range of sources, from postwar liberal pluralism to radical Marxism to the thought of Hannah Arendt and Frantz Fanon. In both these senses, religious and secular, 'Freedom Now' underpinned the possibility of collective action. The era saw the advent of freedom songs, freedom schools, freedom rides, and the freedom summer of 1964. Yet in the years immediately following the major legal gains of the movement, and over subsequent decades, the signifying power of 'freedom' for black activists and the broader left—its originally inspiring mix of progressive teleology and open utopian possibility—began to wane, with openness and emptiness coming to seem uncomfortably intertwined. In a preface to the second edition of his book, King notes that with the conservative turn in American political life after 1968, attempts to revive the rhetoric of civil rights—including the clarion call of 'freedom'—came to seem 'counterproductive, mere exercises in nostalgia' (1996: xi).

This essay positions the fiction of Colson Whitehead as an important engagement with ideas of freedom in the wake of both civil rights and the neoliberal turn. In the next section, I examine the post-civil rights period in more detail, juxtaposing developments on the black left with the rise of the neoliberal and neoconservative right, and tracking the role played by discourses of freedom in the US over the final decades of the century. In the section that follows I return to *Apex Hides the Hurt*, exploring in more detail the novel's ironic treatment of freedom in a neoliberal setting. In the final section I turn to Whitehead's sixth and most recent novel, *The*

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<sup>2</sup> For more recent work on Old Testament analogues in the African American tradition, see Hartnell (2011) and Patterson (2013).

*Underground Railroad*, which inhabits an African American literary genre—the novel of slavery—that is strongly wedded to discourses of bondage and freedom. This novel, arriving a decade after *Apex*, shows Whitehead responding to changes in American society and culture—particularly the advent of Black Lives Matter and a growing public awareness of the implications of mass incarceration policies for African Americans—that seem to call for a more sincere reckoning with the notion of freedom. And it is also in this novel that the question of ‘after’ raises its head, since Whitehead’s distinctive engagement with temporality lies at the heart of the vision of freedom after neoliberalism offered by his fiction.

### The Ironies of Freedom

While ‘freedom’ was manifestly the keyword of the civil rights movement, it was also a highly popular term with the rising New Right of the same era. In *The Story of American Freedom*, Eric Foner traces this popularity, conveying the scholarly consensus that the post-1960 period witnessed a rebirth of conservatism in the United States.<sup>3</sup> This was a movement with multiple strands and multiple overlapping appellations. Foner’s taxonomy of 1960s-era conservatism includes the ‘new conservatives,’ who feared the moral decline of the West amid the waning of Christian values; the more intellectually ambitious neoconservatives associated with *Commentary*, *National Review*, and *The Public Interest*; and the “libertarian” conservatives,’ defined by their ‘equation of individual freedom with unregulated capitalism’ (1999: 309–10). This latter strand of conservatism is generally now referred to as neoliberalism, and its ascent to power from the 1970s onwards was a precipitous one.<sup>4</sup> In this ascent, the

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<sup>3</sup> The scholarship on American conservatism, and its revival in the postwar era, is vast. For two influential accounts, see Schoenwald (2002) and Nash (2006).

<sup>4</sup> Foner’s description of neoliberalism as ‘libertarian’ reflects a 1990s scholarly outlook that has since been questioned (Bockman, 2017). As many critics have more recently noted, neoliberals do not argue for a blanket weakening of state power in order to free the individual; rather, they want the state’s role scaled back only in certain areas—welfare provision, defence of labour rights, financial regulation—while boosted in others—law enforcement, defence of property rights, enforcement of contracts. The effect is to free corporations as much if not more than the individual. Neoliberalism is also more philosophically constructionist than classic liberalism or libertarianism: ‘Part of what makes neoliberalism ‘neo’ is that it depicts free markets, free trade, and entrepreneurial rationality as *achieved and normative*, as promulgated through law and through social and economic policy—not simply as

idea of freedom played a catalysing role. In the 1956 preface to his 1944 bestseller *The Road to Serfdom*, the Austrian economist and leading early neoliberal thinker Friedrich Hayek expressed himself ‘puzzled why those in the United States who truly believe in liberty should not only have allowed the left to appropriate this almost indispensable term but should even have assisted by beginning to use it themselves as a term of opprobrium’ (2007: 45). The right’s reclamation project on the terms ‘liberty’ and ‘freedom,’ begun by Hayek, was continued with aplomb by the key American prophet of neoliberalism, Milton Friedman. In his *Capitalism and Freedom* (1962), Friedman argued that ‘competitive capitalism—the organization of the bulk of economic activity through private enterprise operating in a free market’ constituted ‘a system of economic freedom and a necessary condition for political freedom’ (2002: 4). These ideas gained little wider attention at the time of publication—as Friedman himself acknowledged of his 1980 television series *Free to Choose*, in the early 1960s there would have been ‘no significant audience receptive to its views’ (2002: xii). But neoliberal policies began to gain serious influence in the 1970s, when the Keynesianism that had underpinned the postwar management of capitalism proved insufficient to address the stagflation crisis of that decade.

The increasing prominence of neoliberal discourses of freedom after 1970 was also abetted by a change of rhetorical emphasis on the left, with developments in the civil rights movement in the vanguard. One turning point arrived on 17<sup>th</sup> June 1966, when Stokely Carmichael, chairman of the major civil rights organisation, the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), gave a speech to a rally in Greenwood, Mississippi. Released from jail only minutes before, Carmichael announced that the time had come to reject the tactic of peacefully inviting arrest that had defined the movement under the leadership of Martin Luther King. ‘The only way we gonna

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occurring by dint of nature’ (Brown, 2006: 694, emphasis in original). In Foucault’s foundational analysis, the key development in this constructionism is the shift from the liberal conception of *homo oeconomicus* as a partner of exchange to a neoliberal conception of *homo oeconomicus* as ‘an entrepreneur of himself’ (Foucault, 2008: 226). This points to a further way to understand the neo- of neoliberalism: it signifies a combination of the nineteenth-century liberal commitment to freedom with the neoclassical economics that displaced the political economy of Smith, Ricardo, and Marx (Harvey, 2005: 20).

stop them white men from whuppin' us is to take over,' he told the waiting crowd. 'We been saying freedom for six years and we ain't got nothin'. What we gonna start saying now is Black Power!' (qtd. in Hall, 2007: 49). Thus began a shift in the rhetoric of the black left from 'freedom' to 'power,' with the latter term signalling a more militant and separatist political agenda for African Americans. As Daniel T. Rodgers has observed, however, 'power' was a term that was itself beginning to shift in valence in intellectual circles during this period, with its origins, meanings, and languages becoming 'thinner, less concentrated, and more difficult to grasp' (2011: 79). On the neoliberal right, it was axiomatic that power had no bearing upon a 'free market' emerging out of the uncoerced preferences of individual consumers.<sup>5</sup> But the structuralist underpinnings of mid-century conceptions of power—where power was understood to inhere in institutions and to be wielded by certain groups against others—were also destabilized by new approaches emerging from the academic left.

The key figure here was Michel Foucault, for whom the individual was a construct of 'power/knowledge' and for whom power inhered in all actions, while being impossible to pin down using conventional categories of domination and exploitation such as class and wealth. In Foucault's work, 'freedom' was not a synonym for individual or collective emancipation but a tool of government; his late-career lectures on the liberal tradition of governmentality (2007, 2008) foregrounded the idea of a post-Enlightenment subject governed through her freedom. As Rodgers notes, other scholars on the left objected to the slippery and diffuse quality of power and freedom in Foucault's work, the way 'each moment of apparent progress led only to new forms of unfreedom, like stairways in an Escher drawing that folded back upon themselves' (2011: 104). But what is clear is that under a Foucauldian

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<sup>5</sup> By contrast, 'free enterprise'—the phrase that was challenged and eventually replaced in popular discourse by 'free market'—generally signalled that the freedom to participate in the marketplace as a producer could be damaged without strong regulation to curb corporate power. The shift in the neoliberal vision of the market from emphasising the producer to emphasising the consumer is therefore crucial: one effect of this shift is that the problem of monopoly drops out of view, and companies like Standard Oil or Google no longer look in dire need of regulation. For an astute account of the importance of 'free enterprise' in the career of 1970s-era African American author Ishmael Reed, see Donofrio (2017).

dispensation, 'freedom' increasingly shifted in the vocabulary of the left from a collective rallying cry to an object of scepticism, becoming associated with the false promises of a bankrupt liberal tradition.

New genealogies of freedom written during this period thus began to emphasise the embeddedness of enslavement at the root of democratic and liberal cultures (Morgan, 1975; Patterson, 1991; Foner, 1999). The newly minted departments of Afro-American Studies and Black Studies—institutional products of the civil rights and black power movements—took up the question of American slavery with tenacity from the late 1960s onwards. While one trend was to recover the positive forms of agency possessed by enslaved persons on the antebellum plantations (Blassingame, 1972; Levine, 1977), one of the most influential works, Eugene Genovese's *Roll, Jordan, Roll*, drew on Antonio Gramsci's notion of hegemony to argue that strategies of resistance to slavery in fact 'enmeshed [the slaves] in a web of paternalistic relationships which sustained the slaveholders' regime' (1974: 594). Combined with the impact of Foucault's anti-teleological thinking, Genovese's work contributed to a notable shift over the period from highlighting the positive historical trajectory of black American life, in earlier works such as John Hope Franklin's *From Slavery to Freedom* (1947), to more pessimistic studies such as Orlando Patterson's *Slavery and Social Death* (1982) and Saidiya Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection* (1997). This latter body of work was premised on the stark proposition that, as Hartman put it, 'the advent of freedom marked the transition from the pained and minimally sensate experience of the slave to the burdened individuality of the responsible and encumbered freed person' (1997: 117). This grounding claim that slavery lay at the paradoxical heart of freedom—both historically and philosophically—meant that 'freedom' took on a thoroughly ironic tenor in this scholarship.<sup>6</sup>

While this newly sceptical questioning, on the left, of the history and meaning of freedom was in many ways salutary, its longer-term effects remain uncertain. What appears more certain is that the rising New Right of the period could all too easily abjure

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<sup>6</sup> This scholarship on slavery laid the ground for the more pronounced Afro-pessimist turn in black culture of the Black Lives Matter era. See Coates (2015), Sexton (2016), and Sharpe (2016).

or ignore this tainted and ironic conception of freedom in its quest for political and cultural control. The powerful alignment of religious conservatism, neoconservatism, and neoliberalism across the 1960s and 1970s culminated in the 1980s presidency of Ronald Reagan, whose regime of tax cuts, privatization, and deregulation was twinned with attempts to roll back the legislative social gains of the left over the postwar period.<sup>7</sup> All of this was carried out in the name of freedom, a term Reagan used more often than any president before or since, in speeches that performed sincerity for a wide audience in an expert manner.<sup>8</sup> Through these performances, a stark reversal of the earlier situation described by Hayek—where the right ceded ‘liberty’ to the left—took place. As Foner notes, ‘Reagan’s years in office completed the process by which freedom, having been progressively abandoned by liberals and the left, became fully identified with conservative goals and values’ (1999: 321). But the freedom proclaimed by the right over this period was a subtly different kind of freedom to that which had dominated public discussion during the mid-century years of the high Cold War, when ‘freedom’ had been ‘ballasted by and contained within its complements: responsibility, destiny, justice, morality, and society’ (Rodgers, 2011: 17). Reagan’s version of freedom, by contrast, was ‘disembodied, unmoored, imagined’; its ‘deepest enemy was pessimism’ rather than external constraint; it suggested ‘the possibility of slipping free from limitations altogether’ (Rodgers, 2011: 17, 25, 29). This was a freedom that drew on the inspirational language and images of the counterculture alongside the neoliberal idea of the free, disembedded, spontaneously acting, and naturally self-regulating market. The market, conceived no longer as a site of domination and power but as a forum for voluntary and equal exchange, became the much-touted vehicle by which freedom could be attained and instantiated in the life of the individual.

The dominance of this new vision of the market heralded a sea change in economic policy. While in the early 1970s, Richard Nixon had remarked that ‘we

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<sup>7</sup> For an insightful account of this alignment between neoliberalism and neoconservatism around opposition to the new social movements of the left, see Cooper (2017).

<sup>8</sup> On the marketing and televisual techniques used to craft and stage Reagan’s speeches as effective acts of communication, see Rodgers (2011: 28–34).

are all Keynesians now,' by the 1990s, as David Harvey observes, 'both Clinton and Blair could easily have reversed Nixon's earlier statement and simply said "We are all neoliberals now"' (2005: 13). The politics of 'there is no alternative' underpinned the decade on both sides of the Atlantic, and while the prominence of freedom discourse in the United States did not diminish over this period, it became common for artists and intellectuals on the left to be sceptical about its provenance and cultural use. This was as much the case for African Americans as for other groups: describing freedom as 'a word that has been steadily disappearing from the political language of blacks in the west,' Paul Gilroy found himself asking 'why it seems no longer appropriate or even plausible to speculate about the freedom of the subject of black politics in overdeveloped countries' (1994: 55). One answer is that by the end of the century the appeal to freedom had come to look to many like little more than a cover story for a series of ideological projects, alternatively of the left and of the right. In the wake of the Cold War, the Foucauldian turn, the revisionist scholarship on slavery, and the Reagan revolution, speaking sincerely about freedom began to look impossibly naïve. 'Freedom' might still name a noble heritage, but the name had become a brand; while it continued to sound good to many ears, the suspicion for many others was that it sounded good only in the way all advertising sounds good, to the end of feeding desire with consumable and comforting notions rather than any substantial reality. Despite Gilroy's well-founded worry that giving up on freedom might prove a political error, it was irony that now seemed to be called for. It is here, at the close of the twentieth century, that Colson Whitehead enters the scene.

### Freedom Hides the Struggle

All of Whitehead's male protagonists—J Sutter in *John Henry Days*, the nomenclature consultant in *Apex*, Benji in *Sag Harbor*, Mark Spitz in *Zone One*—share an ironic sensibility.<sup>9</sup> In each of these novels, the ironic cool of the main character is

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<sup>9</sup> Whitehead's female protagonists—Lila Mae Watson in *The Intuitionist* and Cora in *The Underground Railroad*—are a different matter; the free indirect discourse in these two novels tends to treat the interiority of these protagonists with less of a satirical flourish, as we shall see with Cora in the next section. This gendered dichotomy in Whitehead's fiction finds support in the comic opening sentence of the only memoir the author has published to date, *The Noble Hustle*: 'I have a good poker face because I am half dead inside' (2014: 3).

inseparable from his background as a member of the black bourgeoisie. This is nowhere more evident than in *Apex Hides the Hurt*. The fictive present of the novel is made up of a series of meetings the protagonist holds with various residents of Winthrop, as he conducts his research into the most appropriate name for the town. Of these characters, the person to whom the protagonist instinctively feels himself most drawn is the white patriarch Albie Winthrop, who shares with him an educational background at Quincy College, the novel's elite stand in for Harvard or Yale. 'There was no secret handshake,' we are told when they first meet. 'The two syllables sufficed. Quincy was a name that was a key, and it opened doors' (2007: 71). But while the protagonist's relationship with a white man of his own class is notably comfortable, his relationships with the two black working-class characters in the novel, the barman and cleaning lady at the Winthrop Hotel where he is staying, are distinctly less so. The protagonist thinks of these people not as his racial brethren but as passengers on a ship he is naming. In response to the bartender—whom he secretly names Muttonchops—telling the protagonist, 'This is my home,' he thinks: 'Already this job was different. Time was, you christened something, broke the bottle across the bow, and gave a little good-luck wave as it drifted away. You never saw the passengers. But there were always disgruntled passengers out there, like Muttonchops. It was simple mathematics' (23). This abstraction of human life to 'mathematics,' a classic move in liberal governmentality and neoliberal thought, is both extended and undermined in the protagonist's relationship with his hotel cleaning lady.<sup>10</sup> Although the protagonist never meets this woman face-to-face she becomes a comically threatening spectre outside his hotel door, a reminder of the mostly invisible working-class labour that allows the protagonist to live his comfortably bourgeois existence. All of this satirical material in the novel anticipates the central claim of Kenneth Warren's much-debated polemic *What Was African American Literature?* (2011): that in the era of neoliberal hegemony, the success of

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<sup>10</sup> For Foucault (2007), the emergence of liberal government in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was tied to a concern with questions of population, with the emergence of statistics becoming crucial for managing large populations. Neoliberal theory, meanwhile, promulgates the extension not only of economic thinking but also of mathematical calculation—for instance of risk—into traditionally non-economic spheres. See Mirowski (2013: 116–29).

what W. E. B. DuBois called the 'talented tenth,' or what Warren calls the black elite, has 'less and less to do with the type of social change that would make a profound difference in the fortunes of those at the bottom of our socio-economic order' (2011: 117). The protagonist's individual freedoms in *Apex Hides the Hurt* make no black life better except his own.

In foregrounding issues of class as well as race, Whitehead's novel alludes to debates in African American intellectual culture that stem directly from the controversy surrounding William Julius Wilson's *The Declining Significance of Race* (1978). Wilson's sociological study was the first book explicitly to make the claim that in the post-segregation era the experience of well-educated members of the rising black middle class was diverging sharply from that of the unskilled black poor, whom Wilson referred to as the 'underclass.' Whitehead's allusion to Wilson may even be direct, since when pressed to offer a solution to the problems he was diagnosing, Wilson claimed that he could only 'suggest programs such as full employment which provide the band-aids and don't really get at the basic fundamental cure' (qtd. Rodgers, 2011: 124). Thus a band-aid that hides but does not heal the hurt becomes the central metaphor in Whitehead's novel. 'Apex,' the coinage that earns the protagonist fame in his field, is the name he gives to a 'multicultural adhesive bandage' that is made to cover wounds on different shades of human flesh (2007: 90). The idea that the invention and commercial distribution of this bandage does not provide 'the basic fundamental cure,' as Wilson put it, but instead merely contributes to a culture of identity-based individualism, is something the novel has persistent fun with. 'The deep psychic wounds of history and the more recent gashes ripped by the present, all of these could be covered by this wonderful, unnamed multicultural adhesive bandage. It erased. Huzzah,' goes one passage (90). 'In the advertising,' reads another, 'multicultural children skinned knees, revealing the blood beneath, the commonality of wound, they were all brothers now, and multicultural bandages were affixed to red boo-boos. United in polychromatic harmony, in injury, with our individual differences respected, eventually all healed beneath Apex. Apex Hides the Hurt' (109).

The comic and even flippant irony in these passages comes at the expense of a ubiquitous multiculturalist discourse that Whitehead evidently sees as hiding rather than healing the present-day inequities that stem from past injustices. Yet in suggesting how we might address these injustices, the novel refuses to endorse a civil rights language of 'Freedom Now.' While the protagonist's sarcastic reaction to the name 'Freedom' can certainly be questioned by the reader, the other names on offer for the town suggest that it is the notion of 'freedom' itself being satirised, and not only the protagonist's views on it. 'Winthrop,' the town's current name, points us to John Winthrop, a leading early Puritan settler in the New World. In an insightful discussion of the allusions to the Puritan context within *Apex*, Christopher Leise argues that 'the term "Winthrop," after the Reagan presidency, has been programmed to trigger American ideals such as "freedom" and the promise that wealth is the reward of hard work, while strategically suppressing the historical Winthrop's faith in the need for class hierarchies to promote a healthy body politic' (2014: 286).<sup>11</sup> 'New Prospera,' meanwhile, has even more the ring of neoliberal branding, both echoing Kennedy's 'new frontier' rhetoric and repurposing it for a Reaganite idea of freedom as prosperity through deserved wealth. None of these names is finally the one chosen by the protagonist, however. While researching the history of the town, he uncovers the forgotten voice of one of its two original founders, whose preference for naming the town 'Struggle' found little support among his people and was set aside in favour of 'Freedom.'

Whitehead's protagonist eventually revises this history by choosing 'Struggle' over 'Freedom' as the new name for the town. In doing so, he divides up a

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<sup>11</sup> Quoting Henry Louis Gates—'To rename is to revise, and to revise is to Signify'—Leise identifies Whitehead's signifying on Winthrop as an important prop in the author's argument regarding class and inequality: 'Rather than citing Winthrop as the progenitor of the "Protestant Ethic," Whitehead argues that America's economic Elect are simply Lucky' (2014: 285). Although Leise fails to mention it, it is worth adding that John Winthrop is widely considered the first American theorist of freedom, with his 1645 'Little Speech On Liberty' often cited as the *locus classicus* of two fundamental meanings of freedom or liberty (King, 1996: 16). Winthrop's key distinction is between natural liberty—'a liberty to evil as well as to good,' shared with animals—and civil or federal liberty, which comes of submitting one's will to authority (2002: 35).

phrase—‘freedom struggle’—that became prevalent with the civil rights movement and has gained prominence once again during the present moment of protest concerning black life in America. *Apex* brings out the inherent tension between these two normally inseparable terms by making them the subject of a recovered debate between the town’s co-founders Abraham Goode ‘The Light’ and William Field ‘The Dark’. This debate is in turn mapped by the protagonist onto a distinction between ‘human nature’ and ‘the human condition’: ‘Given the choice between Freedom, and [Field’s] contribution, how could their flock not go with Goode’s beautiful bauble? Field’s area of expertise wasn’t human nature, but the human condition. [...] Freedom was what they sought. Struggle was what they had lived through’ (2007: 210). Human nature is here associated with optimism—an optimism, the novel implies, that under neoliberal hegemony has become merely ideological, a ‘cruel optimism’ that serves corporate and political interests rather than the interests of all (Berlant, 2011). The human condition, with its echoes of Hannah Arendt (1958), seems by contrast to point to a role for struggle specifically in the realm of political action. Confronting this climactic decision in favour of ‘Struggle,’ it becomes tempting to read *Apex Hides the Hurt* as the story of the protagonist’s developing racial consciousness, his journey from initially identifying with Goode and Field only as ‘a common business pair: a marketing, vision guy teamed up with a bottom-line, numbers guy’ (2007: 143), to asking himself near the end of the narrative, ‘What did a slave know that we didn’t? To give yourself a name is power. They will try to give you a name and tell you who you are and try to make you into something else, and that is slavery. And to say, I Am This—that was freedom’ (206). With an apparently new faith in the meaningfulness of language beyond its manipulative power to attain corporate ends, the protagonist finds himself imagining the effect of his new name on the inhabitants of the town:

As he fell asleep, he heard the conversations they will have. Ones that will get to the heart of this mess. The sick swollen heart of the land. 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)

This passage has an undeniably rousing quality, and it concludes the novel's penultimate scene. But in the short final scene, the reader is brought back to more immediate realities. First we witness the protagonist tipping 'the white guy at the desk' while '[giving] the finger' to Muttonchops, the black bartender, as he leaves the town (211). Then we are reminded that the town's library—'Former library, actually'—is being replaced by an 'OUTFIT OUTLET.' The old sign lies 'cracked over shards of broken bookcases,' while the gigantic new sign 'possessed a certain majesty, and would be visible from even farther away. The next version would probably be visible from space' (212). Finally we are informed that the act of renaming the town has not healed the protagonist's infected toe, which has been covered by an Apex bandage for much of the novel. 'There was a moment a few hours ago, as he was lying in bed waiting for the morning to come, when he thought he might be cured,' the text reads. 'That if he did something, took action, the hex might come off. The badness come undone.' But this has not happened, and in the novel's closing sentence, we are told that it will not happen: 'As the weeks went on and he settled into his new life, he had to admit that actually, his foot hurt more than ever' (212).

With this reminder of the stark limitations of symbolic action—the action of naming and renaming—in a world of class disparity and corporate hegemony, the novel places in ironic relief its own postmodern aesthetics, wherein action on language is conceived as the primary action a text can perform. Throughout *Apex*, the importance of finding the 'true' name for things has been floated as a way of getting beneath an ironic surface, and yet this notion of revealed truth is shown never to escape the ambit of marketing: 'The name was the thing itself,' we learn of the original Band-Aid bandage, 'and that was Holy Grail territory' (87). Whitehead thus suggests that when the name is the thing that is taken to matter most, we can easily overlook the material realities of class, race, privatisation, and even the body—all of which are touched on in the brief closing scene. Acknowledging these limits to the power of naming might in turn lead the reader to question afresh the triumphant

passage just a page before where the protagonist calls 'Struggle' into being. We can now see that ambiguities remain here. What, in fact, is 'the heart of this mess'? What is 'the sick swollen heart of the land'? If *Apex* hides the hurt, then what—more precisely than simply 'history'—is the hurt that is being hidden?

Despite its allusions to slavery and its turn to Struggle at the finale, *Apex Hides the Hurt* refuses to endorse an answer to this set of questions. In an essay on *John Henry Days*, William Ramsey offers both a summary of the ironic method of Whitehead's early novels and a justification for that method:

Because Whitehead gives us bemused skepticism rather than tragedy, and irony not political engagement, he may fail to satisfy readers long accustomed to seeking a solid stance for progressive social action. After all, if one is singing 'We Shall Overcome' while marching on behalf of a civil rights cause, one needs to believe in a fixed, transcendent principle—some grand narrative of higher justice—that explains and indeed impels one's civil protest. Yet importantly, Whitehead's irony does have a vitally progressive potential—namely its radical tendency toward openness, not fixity. (2007: 783)

In Ramsey's view, Whitehead's resistance to constraining narratives—including the 'grand narrative of higher justice' referred to above—offers a liberating postmodern spin on Martin Luther King's resonant phrase, 'Thank God Almighty we are free at last' (2007: 783). But whether freedom from narrative constraint offers a genuinely progressive alternative to King's powerful metanarrative of black and human freedom is a question re-opened in Whitehead's most recent novel. By dividing 'freedom' from 'struggle' in *Apex Hides the Hurt*, Whitehead had found a way to breathe new life into what could seem a tired cliché. But the division between these two terms is ultimately unsustainable in existential and political terms, since freedom depends on struggle and struggle on freedom. In *The Underground Railroad*, Whitehead undermines Ramsey's opposition between 'a fixed, transcendent principle' and 'radical tendency toward openness' by thinking them together. In doing so, he leaves

behind a postmodern concern with naming in favour of a surprisingly direct and substantive political aesthetic.

### Irony Underground

*Apex Hides the Hurt* was Whitehead's first novel written following the attack on the World Trade Center in September 2001.<sup>12</sup> With this in mind, it is perhaps no surprise that it should convey a jaundiced view of 'freedom.' While the decades-long American and African American discourses on freedom, sketched in the second section of this essay, are certainly in play here, a more immediate context is provided by the US government's response to the 9/11 attacks, led by Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan and George W. Bush's repeated claim that 'The advance of human freedom [...] now depends on us' (Bush, 2001). But if this dubious rhetoric of 'freedom' impels the irony of *Apex*, by the time *The Underground Railroad* was published a decade later in 2016, the conversation around freedom in the United States had changed. Two events stand out, both of them bearing significantly on the lives of African Americans. The election of Barack Obama to the presidency in 2008 seemed to many at the time to mark 'the symbolic culmination of the black freedom struggle' (Gates 2009: 2). This moment of promise for black Americans contrasted with the tragic events of the second term of the Obama presidency, events that contributed to the formation of the Black Lives Matter movement. The killings of Trayvon Martin, Eric Garner, Michael Brown, Tamir Rice and numerous other black citizens by white law enforcement officers brought renewed attention to the precarious status of African American lives in US society. This attention supplemented a growing popular awareness—exemplified by the commercial and critical success of Michelle Alexander's *The New Jim Crow* (2010) and Ava duVernay's documentary film *13<sup>th</sup>* (2016)—of the implications for black citizens of the policies of

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<sup>12</sup> Whitehead's first post-9/11 publication was not a novel but a book of short linked prose poems, *The Colossus of New York* (2003). Less a political work than a celebration of ordinary life in the city, *Colossus* alludes to 9/11 only once, when the speaker laments, 'I never got a chance to say good-bye to some of my old buildings. Some I lived in, others were part of a skyline I thought would always be there' (2004: 8).

mass incarceration. Indeed, given that the mass incarceration era is co-extensive and co-implicated with the neoliberal turn—an argument made most forcefully by Loïc Wacquant in *Punishing the Poor* (2009)—the notion of ‘freedom after neoliberalism’ has arguably taken on a particularly urgent and concrete meaning for black citizens of the United States.

This is the context into which *The Underground Railroad* was published in August 2016. The novel tells the story of Cora, who begins life as a slave on a Georgia plantation in what appears to be the mid-nineteenth century, and escapes via an elaborate yet secret system of underground tunnels that have been constructed by black hands. ‘Who built it?’ Cora asks when she is shown an underground station for the first time. ‘Who builds anything in this country?’ is the reply (2016: 67). In subsequent chapters of the novel, Cora continues her flight from slavery—and from the diabolical slave-catcher Ridgeway—through different states, each of which is ‘a state of possibility, with its own customs and way of doing things’ (68). These ‘customs’ include, in South Carolina, a mass sterilization programme for former slaves; in North Carolina, a fierce slaughter of blacks to rid the state of them; in Tennessee, a massive fire that has denuded the landscape and led to several outbreaks of disease; and in Indiana, a potential utopian community on a black-owned farm. Each of these ‘states of possibility’ draws on material from a different episode in black life in the time since slavery: the Tuskegee syphilis experiment of 1932–1972; the KKK lynchings of the late nineteenth and twentieth century; debates about integration and separatism from the civil rights era; and so on. The novel ends with a brief chapter titled ‘The North,’ with Cora still fleeing her captors in what the reader has come to infer might well be an interminable manner.

Whitehead’s reworking of the bondage-and-freedom tropes of the classic slave narrative caught the attention of many reviewers. In the *New York Review of Books*, Julian Lucas observed that ‘in Whitehead’s hands the runaway’s all-American story—grit, struggle, reward—becomes instead a grim Voltairean odyssey, a subterranean journey through the uncharted epochs of unfreedom’ (2016: 56). *The Underground Railroad* thus plays down the trope of negative freedom in favour of ‘the positive

freedom many enslaved people actually sought'; this latter brand of freedom is, according to Lucas, 'less easily assimilable to "universal" narratives of individual striving—stories often said to "transcend race"' (2016: 57). In contrast with this praise for the 'quietly radical' quality of Whitehead's novel, one of the few negative notes was sounded by Thomas Chatterton Williams in the *London Review of Books*. Williams compared *The Underground Railroad* unfavourably with Whitehead's *Sag Harbor* (2009), lamenting that the earlier novel's refusal to repeat the clichés of racial unfreedom, its project to remove 'the contemporary black American experience [...] entirely from the realm of extremes,' had given way in the later book to what Whitehead himself once ironically dubbed the 'Southern Novel of Black Misery' (Williams, 2016; Whitehead, 2009). Alluding to the highly charged social and political context of the novel's appearance, Williams offered at best faint praise for *The Underground Railroad* as 'an accomplished concession to the mandates of wokeness,' granting Whitehead the ironic title of 'Woke Black Artist of the Year.'

Williams overstates the extent to which *The Underground Railroad* represents a new departure in Whitehead's depiction of ongoing racial oppression. In *Apex Hides the Hurt*, for instance, the protagonist finds himself pondering 'one particular issue of singular vexation that was timeless, whether it was the 1860s or the 1960s: how to keep white folks from killing you' (2007: 142).<sup>13</sup> Yet what *has* changed in *The Underground Railroad* is that the mostly flippant and ironic tone of *Apex*—and of Whitehead's earlier novels more generally—has been replaced with a new tone, one for which the term 'irony'—or at least 'postmodern irony'—does not sit altogether comfortably. This change is evident in the novel's treatment of freedom, a word and concept given far more weight in *Railroad* than in *Apex*. Perhaps the most powerful instance of this new weightiness is the moment, in the penultimate chapter of the novel, when Cora's mother Mabel decides to abandon her escape from the Randall plantation and return to her daughter:

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<sup>13</sup> Many critical readings of *The Intuitionist* also emphasise the constant sense of threat to the protagonist Lila Mae Watson that stems from her blackness. Lauren Berlant, for instance, highlights the novel's depiction of 'the nervous system of transracial contact in the era of white supremacy' (2008: 851).

On the bed of damp earth, her breathing slowed and that which separated herself from the swamp disappeared. She was free.

This moment.

She had to go back. The girl was waiting on her. This would have to do for now. (2016: 294)

Part of the power of this moment is that it satisfies the common intuition that freedom is a feeling, an experience or state of psychological plenitude. Moments like this are traditionally crucial to slave narratives—Frederick Douglass’s reaction to his fight with the slave-master Covey is the paradigm example—because such moments are not only vivid for the reader but serve to model the kind of freedom that will flow outwards from the life of the individual protagonist into the collective future of the race. But when we put it this way, we can see that Mabel’s moment works differently. If part of its power comes from a feeling of freedom as full being, the other part comes from the reader’s knowledge—since Mabel never returns to the plantation but is instead bitten and killed by a snake—that her feeling of freedom will not be shared, not with other enslaved persons and specifically not with Cora, who we already know has grown up to hate her mother for abandoning her. Because Mabel’s chapter comes at the end of the novel rather than its beginning—and is folded into a text whose temporal structure seems to refuse at every turn the notion of progress—much of its power stems, in other words, from Whitehead’s ironic depiction of her moment of freedom. Yet the irony here is no longer rhetorical, cynical, or postmodern; it is structural, dramatic, and tragic.

While Mabel’s moment of freedom is not directly shared with any other characters in *The Underground Railroad*, it nevertheless resonates outwards, not only through the novel’s aesthetic infrastructure but also in analogy with the infrastructural project within it, the incredible sequence of underground tunnels built by the work of black hands. Reflecting on the grand and mysterious construction of this network, Cora compares it to the labour of cotton-picking in the fields, labour of which the slave could never be proud because it had been ‘stolen from them. Bled from them’ (2016: 68). Embodied in the railroad itself, therefore, is another vision of freedom

in *The Underground Railroad*: the utopian vision of free and unalienated productive activity in the Marxist sense. This form of free activity is not the overcoming of struggle—after all, building an underground railroad in secret must be no easy task, either physically or mentally—and yet freedom lies in recognizing oneself in the means and ends of the task undertaken. ‘Who are you after you finish something this magnificent,’ Cora wonders to herself towards the novel’s end, ‘in constructing it you have also journeyed through it, to the other side’ (303–304). This ‘other side’ is clearly meant both literally and figuratively, with the figure standing most obviously for the other side of oneself. But it is also a figure, I want to argue, for a wholly other way of life connected to a wholly other mode of production; this gesture towards a utopian future takes Whitehead’s novel beyond even the ‘quietly radical’ concern with positive freedom praised by Lucas in his review.

Whereas Marx (1978: 70–81) placed free productive activity in opposition to wage labour under capitalism, the slave remains a further stage removed from such freedom, existing in the capitalist relation as property rather than as the owner of her own labour power. As a result, the journey to self-ownership as well as property ownership has typically been a crucial trope of the slave narrative and novel of slavery.<sup>14</sup> This trope emerges at various points in *The Underground Railroad* as a goal for figures like Cora and her grandmother Ajarry.<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, the novel also appears at other moments to question whether self-ownership—with its assumption that the language and practice of property rights mark a natural state of autonomous being rather than acting as a support for the capitalist system—should constitute the horizon of possibility for the enslaved person.<sup>16</sup> It is notable that Mabel’s moment of

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<sup>14</sup> The theme is prominent, for instance, in *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass* (1845) and *Narrative of William W. Brown* (1847), as well as in Ishmael Reed’s *Flight to Canada* (1976) and Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987).

<sup>15</sup> ‘She owned herself for a few hours every week was how she looked at it,’ Ajarry reflects as she tends to her small plot of land and ‘glare[s] at anyone planning incursions on her territory’ (2016: 12).

<sup>16</sup> This is not to suggest that the move from slavery to self-ownership does not constitute a significant amelioration in the life of a formerly enslaved person. It is simply to take seriously the historical point—made by Afro-pessimists like Hartman and scholars of the ‘new history of capitalism’ like Beckert—that the continued thriving of capitalism in the nineteenth century was enabled by the absorption of enslaved persons into the system of wage labour and surplus value. The ambiguity of

freedom, for instance, is not conveyed as a moment of autonomous self-ownership, but as a moment of inseparability from nature, when ‘that which separated herself from the swamp disappeared’ (2016: 294). Elsewhere, in the Indiana section, the notion that the black community might be able to move directly from enslavement to a form of utopian socialism is floated in the many debates held on the Valentine farm concerning the future of black freedom. Yet it is also here that the inescapability of the capitalist system asserts itself most tellingly. Not only is the connection between the farm and the surrounding white community mediated through the market—‘Half the white stores depended on [the farm’s] patronage; Valentine residents filled the squares and Sunday markets to sell their crafts’ (265)—but the farm’s operations are shown to be dependent on a broader financial world: ‘John Valentine wanted to take advantage of the big harvest to renegotiate their loan’ (248).

Moreover, *The Underground Railroad* shows this capitalist world to be fully global, and to be underpinned by the cotton trade. Terrance Randall, the owner of Cora’s plantation, ‘made new contacts in New Orleans, shook hands with speculators backed by the Bank of England. The money came in as never before. Europe was famished for cotton and needed to be fed, bale by bale’ (2016: 13). Cotton connects all the characters in the novel: not only masters and slaves, but also professionals such as Cora’s racially enlightened employer in South Carolina, Mr. Anderson, who as a lawyer ‘worked on contracts, primarily in the cotton trade’ (87). ‘Cotton had made him a slave, too,’ Cora thinks to herself at one point (108). Cora’s own first feeling of freedom in South Carolina is the ‘thrill’—darkly ironic for the reader—of wearing a cotton dress (88). ‘As with everything in the south, it started with cotton,’ reads a later passage. ‘The ruthless engine of cotton required its fuel of African bodies. Crisscrossing the ocean, ships brought bodies to work the land and to breed more bodies’ (161). In these passages, Whitehead is entering a debate that, according to Manisha Sinha, ‘still shapes southern and U.S. history: Were slavery and the antebellum South capitalist, precapitalist, or even anticapitalist?’ (2004: 6). The position the novel takes in this

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the word ‘own’ is significant here, as it provides the means through which a capacity to freely lead one’s life becomes conflated with the logic of property ownership.

debate seems very clear.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, Whitehead's emphasis on the crucial role of the capitalist 'empire of cotton' (Beckert 2014) in the advent and maintenance of slavery is evident from as early as the opening scene of the novel.

*The Underground Railroad* begins with the story of Ajarry, Cora's grandmother, a choice that situates the reader not in America but on the African Slave Coast. These opening paragraphs adopt a matter-of-fact narrative tone that highlights the economic underpinnings of the vast global network that allowed (and allows) for the circulation of property and people, and people as property. On her journey to the port, Cora's grandmother was, the reader is told, 'sold a few times' for shells and beads, 'was part of a bulk purchase' for rum and gunpowder, a trajectory that makes 'an individual accounting difficult' (2016: 3). Following this initial sale, we hear that in America she is bought for 'two hundred and twenty-six dollars. She would have fetched more but for that season's glut of young girls' (5). Later again we learn that 'Ajarry was another asset liquidated by order of the magistrate. She went for two hundred and eighteen dollars in a hasty exchange, a drop in price occasioned by the realities of the local market' (5–6), and a few lines later that 'Ajarry spent three months as the property of a Welshman who eventually lost her, three other slaves, and two hogs in a game of whist. And so on' (6). Throughout this lengthy (though not exhaustive) depiction of Ajarry's experience as an object of exchange, Whitehead's prose remains remarkably unadorned. In place of the revelatory truth-telling found in Brown's and Douglass's antebellum slave narratives, or the heightened and poetic register that Toni Morrison brought to the story of slavery in *Beloved*, here we have the recounting of dry, hard facts in the apparently neutral language of the market, the language of price and exchange. Whitehead does not fail to draw attention to the horrific violence that such familiar language typically hides—'The survivors from her

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<sup>17</sup> The novel even goes so far as to suggest in certain passages that white supremacy itself is driven primarily by financial considerations. For instance, the most racist of the states depicted is North Carolina, but the argument put forward at the state council for adopting its tyrannical new race laws is explicitly economic: 'A financial reckoning was inevitable, but come the approaching conflict over the race question, North Carolina would emerge in the most advantageous position of all the slave states' (2016: 165).

village told her 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)—but this 'accounting' too is quite unadorned. Where *Beloved* was driven by 'unspeakable thoughts, unspoken' (Morrison 1988: 199), in *The Underground Railroad* everything can be spoken in the language of the market, something that serves to bring out the horror and alienation of social relations all the more forcefully.

As Ajarry adapts to her new life in the US South, she internalises the market conception of her value, and learns to manipulate it as best she can. 'Ajarry made a science of her own black body and accumulated observations,' the reader is told. 'Each thing had a value and as the value changed, everything else changed also' (2016: 6). In response to the dominance of value by economic factors—'If you were a thing—a cart or a horse or a slave—your value determined your possibilities. She minded her place' (7)—Ajarry becomes what Jane Elliott calls a 'suffering agent': rather than her oppression serving as a total restriction on her agency, her brief narrative shows her as a person for whom 'choice is experienced as a curse without simultaneously becoming a farce' (2013: 84). This quality of suffering agency—for Elliott, a recurring mode in the representation of neoliberal personhood as human capital—is likewise present in Cora's own journey throughout the remainder of the novel.<sup>18</sup> For instance, when Cora and Caesar are about to take the railroad for the first time, the railroad agent presents them with the choice of taking the coming train or the one after, simply saying 'It's up to you' (2016: 68). Since the fugitives and the reader never learn what the consequence of taking the other train would have been, the effect is simply to add to Cora's sense of burdened agency and responsibility. In an earlier scene, Cora and Caesar likewise imagine themselves responsible for the capture of their fellow fugitive, Lovey: 'They didn't speak for hours. From the trunk of their scheme, choices and decisions sprouted like branches and shoots' (60). In *Beloved*, the tree on Sethe's back became a symbol of her pain and her possible redemption through organic healing. In *The Underground Railroad*, by contrast, we have the

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<sup>18</sup> For an outline of human capital theory, see Becker (1962), Foucault (2008: 219–33), and Feher (2009).

decision tree, a neoliberal figure that imagines the chooser as abstractly responsible for all the consequences of their actions, since the calculation of risk is axiomatically understood to be within the province of the rational subject.

In importing the language of a present-day 'market-political rationality' (Brown, 2006: 691) to the novel of slavery, Whitehead is bringing a deliberately anachronistic vision to the reworking of this venerable genre. For Williams (2016), this experimentation with genre precludes taking seriously the author's newfound 'wokeness':

The matter-of-factness of Whitehead's prose allows him to have his Southern Novel of Black Misery and stand ironically apart from it too. One can't avoid the impression that, for Whitehead, the subject matter is always in service of the intellectual and narrative dexterity on the page. It's all so theoretical and cerebral, the book could come with a disclaimer: no author was harmed in the making of this novel.

While Williams's objection is difficult to refute on its own terms—since it rests on assessing the emotional commitment involved in Whitehead's approach to his 'material'—I would suggest that it misunderstands the work on genre undertaken in *The Underground Railroad*. If we understand literary genre, after Fredric Jameson (1981), as the sedimentation of social contradictions, then a self-conscious engagement with genre forms part of the work of reframing those contradictions. Within the broader genre of the novel of slavery that offers *The Underground Railroad* its narrative template, then, each of Whitehead's chapters takes up stylistic and generic material as part of his critical project, signifying on this material in order to make formal arguments that go beyond the postmodern work on language carried out in *Apex Hides the Hurt*.

Perhaps the most striking example of this approach comes in the Tennessee chapter, where the fiction of Cormac McCarthy offers a clear intertext. The burned-out landscape that Cora and the slave-catcher Ridgeway pass through cannot help but bring to mind *The Road* (2006), while the key literary precursor for Ridgeway

himself is the figure of Judge Holden in *Blood Meridian* (1985). Described on his first appearance as 'a man of intense concentration and flowery manner of speech' (2016: 41), Ridgeway is evidently modelled on the villain in McCarthy's bleak epic, with both men embodying a Nietzschean might-makes-right philosophy that Ridgeway dubs 'The American imperative' (80). In the memorable final scene of *Blood Meridian*, the Judge—whose grandiose metaphysical discourses seem consistently to be underscored rather than contradicted by the equally baroque language of McCarthy's narration—emerges victorious. We leave him 'dancing, dancing' and fiddling on stage, having dispensed with his rival, The Kid, in an outhouse behind a saloon (2011: 353). In the parallel scene in *The Underground Railroad* the inflection is significantly different. As Cora uses a saloon outhouse while her antagonist waits outside, the manic fiddling that accompanied the Judge's dance of triumph is replaced by music that is 'slow now. Couples coming together to hold each other, to sway and twist. That was real conversation, dancing slow with another person, not all these words' (2016: 223). Where the Judge's garrulous embrace finally destroys the Kid in McCarthy's novel, emphasising the victory of his philosophy, Cora's perspective on Ridgeway's linguistic excesses affords ambivalence. As he informs her through the toilet wall that he represents 'the name of punishment' and 'a notion of order,' she reflects: 'Maybe everything the slave catcher said was true [...]. And maybe he was just a man talking to an outhouse door, waiting for someone to wipe her ass' (223).

By refusing to underscore Ridgeway's dominance over Cora through either the plot or the narrative voice of the novel, Whitehead declines to identify the white man's power with any metaphysical thesis about the workings of the universe. McCarthy's western is here taken to naturalise such a thesis; Whitehead's rewriting of the finale of *Blood Meridian* suggests that such naturalisation must be overcome before new social relations can emerge. The operative logic throughout *The Underground Railroad* is not metaphysical but materialist: indeed, even the professional slave-catcher is shown to be responsive to economic concerns. When Ridgeway brutally kills the slave Jasper, he 'explain[s] his reasoning' through a detailed cost accounting that is judged 'right' by his black assistant, Homer, after he has 'checked his boss's figures' (212). This thoroughgoing economic focus suggests that, if it is true that Whitehead is

'woke' in 2016 in a way that was not the case in 2006, what he seems 'woke' to is not the ongoing nature of racial oppression, since that reality was never opaque to him. It is in fact the oppressions of capitalism—particularly in its neoliberal manifestation, where the adoption of a market morality replaces questions of right with cost-benefit analyses of interest—that constitute the nightmare to which Whitehead is asking the reader to awake.

What, then, would freedom *after* neoliberalism look like for Colson Whitehead? Despite the contemporaneity of this question, it nonetheless resonates with earlier moments in the black literary tradition when the issue of freedom was placed centre stage. One such moment arrives at the end of Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* (1952), a novel whose influence on Whitehead's fiction has been noted by many critics.<sup>19</sup> 'But what do *I* really want,' Ellison's narrator asks himself as he searches for a conclusion to his story. 'Certainly not the freedom of a Rinehart or the power of a Jack, nor simply the freedom not to run. No, but the next step I couldn't make, so I've remained in the hole' (1995: 575). Ellison's mastery of irony in the depiction of his narrator's struggle to launch black consciousness onto a new stage of freedom has been justly celebrated by critics.<sup>20</sup> But Whitehead's ironic dialectic in *The Underground Railroad* is not that of Ellison, with the latter's Hegelian focus on issues of consciousness and recognition over questions of redistribution and modes of production.<sup>21</sup> Perhaps fittingly, given that Whitehead's primary research for the novel came in reading slave narratives collected in the 1930s, *The Underground Railroad* instead resurrects the Marxist commitments of Ellison's predecessor Richard Wright. In 'How "Bigger" Was Born,' his introduction to his blockbuster novel *Native Son* (1940), Wright outlined his

<sup>19</sup> Leise is among those who compare the unnamed protagonist of *Apex Hides the Hurt* with the unnamed protagonist of *Invisible Man*, adding further that 'both novels undermine the presumption of intraracial solidarity' (2014: 298).

<sup>20</sup> For two important recent accounts of irony in *Invisible Man*, see Stratton (2014: 144–88) and Konstantinou (2016: 59–76). Importantly, and in contrast to the Whitehead of *Apex*, Ellison's irony in *Invisible Man* does not extend to cynicism about the idea of freedom itself, which remains the basis of the narrator's protest and the primary goal of his quest. The question in *Invisible Man* is never whether freedom is a worthy goal but rather what freedom should be understood to mean.

<sup>21</sup> On Ellison's Hegelianism, see Greif (2015: 170–75). For an account of the revisions Ellison undertook to drafts of *Invisible Man*, which removed traces of his earlier Marxist commitments, see Foley (2010).

growing understanding through the 1920s and 1930s 'that the Southern scheme of oppression was but an appendage of a far vaster and in many respects more ruthless and impersonal commodity-profit machine. Trade-union struggles and issues began to grow meaningful for me. The flow of good across the seas, buoying and depressing the wages of men, held a fascination' (2000: 9). Writing from a perspective informed by four decades of neoliberal policy and practice, Whitehead in *The Underground Railroad* has developed a similar fascination with collective struggle and global trade, even if he declines to marry this fascination fully with the naturalist aesthetics that Ellison, along with Wright's other key protégée James Baldwin, would come to criticise in Wright's work.<sup>22</sup>

Whitehead does not refuse such an aesthetics entirely, however; as we have seen, he instead combines a naturalist prose style and naturalist themes with the speculative conceit of bringing together 'states of possibility' from different historical moments into the life of a single fugitive slave.<sup>23</sup> This combinatory project is consistent with Whitehead's earlier novels, but it also develops further his fiction's already distinctive engagement with temporality.<sup>24</sup> Critics have identified the importance of time in the author's writing but have disagreed on how best to interpret it. For Daniel Grausam, Whitehead's depiction of a 'multi-temporal' present is underpinned by

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<sup>22</sup> In 'Everybody's Protest Novel' (1949), Baldwin famously rebuked Wright's naturalism, arguing that Bigger Thomas, the protagonist of *Native Son*, 'accepts a theology that denies him life' and so fails to gain any ironic distance on the categories that contain him (1965: 17). It was only the African American's individual awareness of double consciousness, Baldwin wrote in a later essay, that 'sets him in any wise free and it is this [...] which lends to Negro life its high element of the ironic' (33–34). For Wright, by contrast, individual freedom went hand in hand with collectivist politics. 'It is through a Marxist conception of reality and society,' he wrote in his 1937 'Blueprint for Negro Writing,' 'that the maximum degree of freedom in thought and feeling can be gained for the Negro writer' (2004: 1407). Ellison's own position on Wright's politics and aesthetics changed across his career. See Ellison (2004a and 2004b).

<sup>23</sup> For an analysis of the speculative elements of the novel, see Dischinger (2017).

<sup>24</sup> The consistency with Whitehead's earliest fiction can be glimpsed with reference to Ramon Saldívar's comment on *The Intuitionist*: '[p]oised between irony and sincerity, the metaphor of vertical transport drives the narrative up and down between the narrational levels of the naturalistic protest novel of race and the metafictional postmodern imaginative novel of ideas' (2013: 8). For an account of *The Underground Railroad* that stresses the book's difference from Whitehead's earlier fiction, thus complementing my own approach, see Konstantinou (2017).

the author's understanding of economic shifts rooted in 'the neoliberal revolutions of the Reagan/Thatcher era' (2017: 117–18). For Mathias Nilges, by contrast, Whitehead's fiction explores history and time through 'forms of discontinuity and non-contemporaneity that arise [...] out of the temporal dimension of racism and racialization' (2015: 372–73). The dichotomy between class and race that we saw introduced in Wilson's work of the 1970s is here re-constituted in the critical terrain around Whitehead. Against this background, *The Underground Railroad* can be understood to refuse the choice between a racial analysis and an economic one. By working within the novel of slavery, Whitehead heightens his engagement with race by addressing black American experience through its most prestigious literary genre. This move has been warmly received, as demonstrated by the novel winning both the National Book Award and the Pulitzer Prize and being selected for the Oprah Winfrey Book Club. But Whitehead also brings to the novel of slavery a fresh attention to economic concerns, importing into the literary canon the insights of a recent wave of scholarship on the interweaving of global capitalism and global slavery (Baptist, 2013; Johnson, 2013; Beckert, 2014). Conversely, to this scholarship Whitehead brings the insistence that capitalism continues to produce forms of unfreedom that frustrate any chronological or linear historical account, since the accession to self- and property-ownership that traditionally marks the advent of freedom from slavery is shown to lead only to new forms of unfreedom. Neoliberal thought, which ties human freedom more explicitly than ever before to economic structures, becomes a lens with which we can view the underpinning economic truths of earlier periods. Freedom after neoliberalism, from this vantage point, begins to look possible only as freedom after capitalism. Under cover of the novel of slavery, Whitehead has written his most Marxist novel yet and one of the most Marxist novels in the mainstream literary landscape. The enthusiastic embrace of *The Underground Railroad* by the cultural establishment thus suggests something potentially very interesting about the fragility of both narrowly neoliberal and broadly capitalist freedoms in our present day.

### **Competing Interests**

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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