

The Divine Thread: Social Minds, Community, and Race in *The Underground Railroad*

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Abstract:

In opposition to individualist readings of the novel, this essay explores the roles of collective psychology and narrative method in Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*. Beginning with a survey of the critical claim that Whitehead's text fails to explore the texture of enslaved life under white supremacy, it proceeds into an analysis of *TUR*'s place within Whitehead's oeuvre and in terms of the neo-slave narrative and speculative realist genres. Having unpacked the differences and continuities between the style of *TUR* and the author's earlier works, the essay then advances its larger claim that Whitehead's attention to group psychology and intermental focalization creates a narrative style to match the "racial logic" of the American slave system. With the ideological and social valences of that "logic" among the novel's white characters in place, the essay then tracks the counterpart representations among the black communities of *The Underground Railroad* and provides an account of how Whitehead employs various forms of irony to anatomize individual and collective life under a white-supremacist system. The piece concludes with a discussion of how this mode of reading bears on the wider genre of speculative realism overall.

Keywords: Colson Whitehead, social minds, cognitive narratology, neo-slave narrative, African American novel, African American literature, speculative realism, race

Introduction

In the years since its publication, Colson Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* has garnered widespread popular and critical acclaim for its imaginative deployment of speculative elements to engage with American history. However, a recent essay by the critic Stephanie Li has leveled an important charge against the novel. Comparing *The Underground Railroad* unfavorably to Morrison's *Beloved*, Li takes Whitehead to task for his novel's generic inconsistency and flatness of character. Over-relying on its anachronisms and lacking a rigidly controlled speculative element, such as Morrison's titular ghost, to elucidate "the traumas of history in multiple ways," *The Underground Railroad*, Li contends, "muddies the critical realism that might elucidate the workings of white supremacy" (Li 2019, 10-11). Citing Jacqueline Rose, Li buttresses this claim

by adding that the novel's fantastic elements erect "walls" around the "inner and outer, psychic and historical...selves" the novel aims to represent (Li 2019, 10). In short, the argument goes, Whitehead, unlike other contemporary writers working in the same narrative mode, fails to represent psychic life under white supremacy in a manner either realistic or fantastic enough to afford critique. Now if this is taken to mean that Whitehead's railroad lacks the condensed gothic power of Morrison's titular revenant, then Li is, of course, correct – and her other readings of the novel's characters rightly point out an individual flatness. But to judge *The Underground Railroad* solely by these criteria would mean overlooking its narrative strategies and how they allow Whitehead to represent those "psychic and historical...selves" in novel ways.

This essay will argue that Whitehead's text does "elucidate the workings of white supremacy," and contains a trenchant realism attentive to the mental lives of those who suffer under that system. But that elucidative realism cannot be unearthed solely from the book's speculative set-pieces or historical intertexts, on which most of the extant criticism has focused.¹ Whitehead's social optic, like his titular railroad, simply covers too much ground. To understand how Whitehead limns life under white supremacy, we must thus adopt an alternative lens for reading character psychology and pay closer attention to narrative voice. This approach will attend less to the depths of individual characters and more to shared attitudes, feelings, and experiences that cascade across groups and shape their decisions. Further, once these group psychologies are laid out, a social minds approach can reveal how they shape not only individual actions central to the plot, but also the novel's overlying dynamics of race—what one character terms its "racial logic." It is this attention to collective experience and narrative voice, I will argue, that makes *The Underground Railroad* distinctive in terms of both Whitehead's oeuvre and two genres within which the novel operates, post-race speculative realism and neo-slave narrative.² But before an account of the novel's innovations can be given, some definitions are in order.

Genre: Speculative Realism

Following the work of Ramon Saldívar, I understand *The Underground Railroad* as falling within the emergent genre of postrace speculative realism. The benefits of this dipartite term become clearer when its components are separated. First, "post-race": This refers not to the popular sense (lampooned by Whitehead) that American racism, following the election of Barack Obama, vanished (Whitehead 2009). Rather, it refers to the post-civil rights era understanding that "the notion of race should not be understood as an attribute of personal identity but rather as a complex set of personal and social actions, a structure of *doing*, by which race is enacted and racial injustice perpetuated" (Saldívar 2013, 2). Adopting this more recent understanding of race, as a set of social actions that translate into institutional reality, helps set Whitehead and his cohort aside from earlier generations of Black American writers, whose writing was, as Warren argues, oriented in response to racism as a legal regime (Warren 2011, 42). "Post-race" thus resembles Mark Anthony Neal's term "post-soul," which refers to the disjunction of racial

experience between writers who lived through Jim Crow and civil rights and subsequent generations who wrestle with a different understanding of race (qtd. in Maus 2014, 12). On this account, “post-race” refers to a conception in which race shifts from a fact of biology, individual attitude, or *de jure* system of discrimination to a more subtle, distributed set of institutions and actions.

The second component, “speculative realism,” refers here not to the recent philosophical movement, but rather an emergent genre of fiction, characterized by a “hybrid crossing of the fictional modes of the speculative genres, naturalism, social realism, surrealism, magic realism, ‘dirty’ realism, and metaphysical realism” (Saldivar 2013, 5). This flexible generic category extends beyond varieties of realism to include elements of metafiction, fantasy, and borrowings from paraliterary genres and media such as film, video games, and comic books (Saldivar 2011, 587). As a result, speculative realism describes fittingly Whitehead’s genre-hopping output, which adopts a new mode in each novel – noir, folklore, satire, bildungsroman, post-apocalyptic fantasy, slave narrative, and others. Yet Whitehead is not unique in this respect; instead, his eclectic methods and social concerns place him alongside other writers including Percival Everett, Charles Yu, Salvador Plascencia, Junot Diaz, and Michael Chabon – all of whom draw upon metafictional and speculative tropes to explore contemporary issues of race and identity in their fiction (Saldivar 2013, 3).³ For Saldivar, these novels’ distinct combination of fantastic and realist elements has a utopian bent – aiming to create “forms of representation that will validate our utopian desires for...social belonging” (Saldivar 2013, 15) – that is, creating representations of community and identity that look forward (or even carve out space for) a more socially just future.

While I cannot endorse his depiction of speculative realism as utopian in its ambitions, at least as it applies to Whitehead (it is difficult, for instance, to see *Zone One* as anything but damningly pessimistic), Saldivar’s emphasis on community – and how low-level social phenomena such as norms or judgments harden into institutional facts – captures a key aspect of Whitehead’s project in *The Underground Railroad*, a concern with social mental life largely neglected by the existing criticism of the novel. To understand how this novel represents race as an active, non-individual phenomenon, we must examine how it evokes the collective experience of that social fact – how race is (collectively) lived and understood under a system of white supremacy. To do that, it is necessary to pay closer attention to Whitehead’s narrative technique.

Whitehead’s Plural Voices

Whitehead has long been noted for his stylistic virtuosity, but *The Underground Railroad* departs from the longer, verbally pyrotechnic sentences of works such as *John Henry Days* or sections of *Sag Harbor*. Whitehead attributes this change to the requirements of his chosen period and genre: “shaping metaphors out of life from the 1850s made...the similes and analogies simpler” (Kachka 2016). Yet the novel’s surface simplicity (along with the author’s deflecting modesty about technique) masks an innovation on Whitehead’s part. The sentences may not be

as long, the metaphors not as complex, but the novel possesses a feature largely absent from the earlier work – a narrative mode for capturing shared thought and experience.

This approach is easy to overlook. Unlike the long, rhythmic sentences of Whitehead's earlier novels, with their complex comparisons and ironic distances, these observations tend to work as punctuation, arriving as blunt statements at the beginning or end of a paragraph or thought. As an example, consider this description of a newly purchased slave on Terrance Randall's half of the family plantation:

Blake was a big oak, a double-ration man who quickly proved a testament to Terrance Randall's investment acumen. *The price they'd get for the offspring of such a stud alone.* Blake wrassled his buddies, and any other comers in a frequent spectacle, kicking up the dust, inevitably emerging the conqueror. His voice boomed through the rows as he worked and even those who despised him couldn't help but sing along. (Whitehead 2016, 17 [emphasis mine])

The collective voice sneaks in, a sentence fragment crouching between two independent clauses in the novel's general third-person mode. Whose perspective is this? The pronoun is a key: to whom does "they" refer? Not Terrance Randall - the plural number ("they") excises that possibility. Perhaps to the Randall family, though it is unclear whether this event occurs before or after the death of their patriarch, after which the farm was divided into independent units by the sons (Whitehead 2016, 23), and the notion of "them" profiting would make no sense. We are left with three possibilities: this perspective belongs to either the Randall family itself (father and sons), to outside observers who share their concerns, or to the entire plantation, including its enslaved population, many of whom "despise" Blake and who have imbibed the Randalls' white supremacist values. And vocal identity aside – indeterminate as it may be – those shared values matter. To borrow Katz's description of a similar technique in *The Colossus of New York*, the narrator in this passage, "demands the reader's participation – to recognize and thus confirm the typicality of the [people] he invokes, and to witness the ephemeral moments of shared community that this...culture establishes" (Katz 2010, 824). The focal voice of this fragment sees Blake as a "stud," or breeding animal, whose "offspring" might produce profit. This sentence fragment, along with many others scattered throughout the text, offers a glimpse into the collective psychologies that govern *The Underground Railroad*, structuring both its narration and Cora's central actions.

But to elucidate fully the complexity of these narrative sentences, more precise conceptual tools are required, this time from cognitive narratology. Most criticism and narrative theory adopt what the philosopher Brian Cantwell Smith terms the "internalist" or "classical" model of mind, in which mental activity is viewed as private, interior, introspective, and individual (Palmer 2010, 8, 39). By contrast, more recent work in cognitive narratology has adopted an "externalist" approach, which emphasizes those aspects of mind that are "outer, active, public, social" and shared (Palmer 2010, 39). My analysis will follow the externalist "social minds"

approach pioneered by Palmer, with particular attention to what he terms “intermental units.” Although cognition, on this approach, may be shared across groups as small as two people, intermental units may spread their shared dispositions, attitudes, and actions across larger collectives: a family, a workplace, or even a much wider social group such as the “society” of Austen’s Bath (Palmer 2010, 48). A key indicator of such shared mental activity is the technique of “intermental focalization,” in which a writer focuses narration around the thought of a group, rather than an individual (Palmer 2010, 84). Others have pointed out the importance of collectives in *TUR*. Lucas compares the experience of reading it to the experience of reading *Middlemarch* “if in every other chapter a character were lynched” (Lucas 2016). This essay, however, will examine in greater detail just how Whitehead’s novel represents mental activity that extends across (and between) pairs and larger groups, even scaling up to the nation itself.

At this point, one might reasonably object: is collective narration so new for Whitehead? Haven’t many of his novels employed a flexible and “wildly freestyle indirect discourse” (Berlant 2008, 848) that would include the effect described here? The answer to both is: somewhat. From *The Intuitionist* onward, Whitehead has included free indirect discourse, and his other books (*John Henry Days* and *Zone One*) involve moments of collective focalization. Yet the minor differences present in *The Underground Railroad*’s method are instructive, and significant. Compare, for instance, this moment from *Zone One*:

The suicides accepted, finally, what the world had become and acted logically. Buffalo was not enamored of the statistics, and ordered Dr. Herkhimer to add a longer Prevention/Understanding Ideation unit to the PASD seminars. Killing yourself in the interregnum was understandable. Killing yourself in the age of the American Phoenix was a rebuke to its principles. “We Make Tomorrow!” – *if we can get that far*, Mark Spitz thought.... (Whitehead 2011, 202-3; emphasis in the original)

Intermental focalization appears, describing the thoughts (“not enamored”) and response of the new American government, for which “Buffalo” stands in metonymically. However, the protagonist’s viewpoint quickly reasserts itself (“if we can...”), undercutting the collective voice. Such intrusions are typical in Whitehead’s earlier novels, where narration of group experience is either generalized, disconnected from the main narrating voice or any plot (*John Henry Days*, much of *The Colossus of New York*) or filtered through an individual perspective, as in *Zone One*. The focalization of other prominent neo-slave narratives takes a similarly restricted scope.⁴ The previous example from *The Underground Railroad*, by contrast, demonstrates both a distinct collective viewpoint and the free-indirect discourse usually reserved for individual protagonists, thus implicating the reader within a community’s collective cognition, values, and sensibilities.

Building A “Racial Logic”

That collective viewpoint allows the novel to unpack its central ideological concern, white supremacy, in a way not available to an individual focalizer or narrator. The sociologist Crystal

Fleming defines white supremacy as a “racial order” that encompasses the “social, political, and economic dominance of people socially defined as ‘white’” (Fleming 2019, 13). Following the coalescence of a stable sense of white identity in eighteenth-century Europe, “the intertwined forces of capitalist oppression, European imperialism, gave rise to a systemic way of structuring society across the globe, as European elites and pseudo-scientists spread the pernicious idea that human groups can be ranked according to made-up ‘racial’ categories, with Northern Europeans on the top, Sub-Saharan Africans on the bottom” (Fleming 2019, 13). Crucially, this “racial order” shapes the operations of capitalism, colonialism, and the value given to individual lives (Fleming 2019, 14). That *The Underground Railroad* describes the mechanisms of white supremacy is plain – yet how the description operates is less obvious.

The brutal slave-catcher Ridgeway, who hunts Cora across several states, serves as an avatar for the white-supremacist system. One critic describes Ridgeway as “less a character than the grim embodiment of what he calls the ‘American imperative’” (Lucas 2016), a combination of white supremacist and imperialist ideals that he also glosses as the “unstoppable racial logic” of white settlement (Whitehead 2016, 80). Yet to focus solely on Ridgeway and his counterpart, Cora, or even on individual characters, would be to miss an important dimension of the novel’s treatment of white supremacist ideology. If we widen our aperture to include the collective dimension, then we see that *The Underground Railroad* is a story about how white supremacy operates not just at the individual level, or between individuals and a wider society (i.e., between whites and enslaved blacks), but also between and within different groups (white and black) and the individuals who comprise (and/or are in tension) with them, shaping racial divisions and individual actions. Taken together with the individual cases, these representations of collective experience track how an ideology such as white supremacy ramifies throughout a given society and hardens into what Gramsci terms “common sense,” the “heterogeneous beliefs people arrive at not through critical reflection, but encounter as already existing, self-evident truths” (Crehan 2016, x). Put another way, this social-minds focus will allow us to track how ordinary racism congeals into Ridgeway’s “racial logic.” In the section that follows, I will trace this process as it surfaces among novel’s main characters and collectives, along with its entanglement in Whitehead’s other narrative techniques.

Narrating Racial Logic

“I actually didn’t research the slave catcher’s point of view. I think the slave catcher’s point of view is probably the default setting on American history.” – Whitehead (NPR)

As noted above, the “default setting” of white supremacist ideology to which Whitehead refers is closely identified with Ridgeway’s voice. A representative scene occurs when the slavecatcher recalls watching European immigrants disembark on his first visit to New York City:

They’d never seen the likes of this, but they’d leave their mark on this land, as surely as those famous

souls at Jamestown, making it theirs through unstoppable racial logic. If niggers were supposed to have their freedom, they wouldn't be in chains. If the red man was supposed to keep hold of his land, it'd still be his. If the white man wasn't destined to take this new world, he wouldn't own it now.

Here was the true Great Spirit, the divine thread connecting all human endeavor – if you can keep it, it is yours. Your property, slave or continent. The American imperative. (Whitehead 2016, 79-80)

Kelly identifies Ridgeway's viewpoint as a "Nietzschean might-makes-right philosophy" parallel to McCarthy's Judge Holden (Kelly 2018, 26). But more historical sources are also evident. Ridgeway's moral code of ownership and references to race, "Jamestown," providence, and capital ownership read like a checklist of antebellum Manifest Destiny rhetoric.⁵ Though Ridgeway serves as focal character for only one chapter, his reflection here provides the overall contours of the novel's white supremacist ideology, shared to some degree by each of the main white societies voiced in the text.

Chronologically, this central white viewpoint appears first on the Randall plantation in Georgia. The perspective varies across time and space, with the South and North Carolinian versions more attuned to the brutalities of their respective states. As Dischinger writes, "Each of these states makes a claim about the real history of the US, in which the novel leverages its speculative satire to move in and out of reality... reminding [readers] that eugenics, lynching, and terror are a part of US racism that extended long beyond slavery" (Dischinger 2017, 92). While I largely endorse his analysis of the novel's historical and political satire, a closer examination reveals an additional layer to the representation of that racism, a layer that "distance" approaches to the novel overlook. The recounting of James Randall's funeral is a useful example: "Longtime residents of the Randall plantation couldn't help but compare the funerals of father and son. The elder Randall had been a revered member of planter society. The western riders commanded all the attention now but it was Randall and his brethren who were the true pioneers, carving out a life in this humid Georgia hell all those years ago" (Whitehead 2016, 43). The attitudes expressed here are clear enough: cotton planters are "true pioneers" over and above colonial white settlers acting out Manifest Destiny in the American West. This same perspective earlier saw Blake as a "stud" promising profitable "offspring" (Whitehead 2016, 17). Yet the certitude of that claim falters from the opening sentence: the "longtime residents" must include those enslaved, which renders the "planter society" viewpoint less univocal, or at least adds a note of irony. The sense is no longer just of collective certainties shared by the Georgia planter class, but also of something dissonant – potentially resistance from those forced to listen.

On the other portions of the Randall plantation, Whitehead provides glimpses of small black communities that serve as intermental counterparts to the majority white voice. Where the totalizing intermental unit of the "Georgia" sections arrogates black and white into its ideological assertions about race and profit (Whitehead 2016, 13, 17, 43), the absorption of black voices within that perspective is, at best, incomplete. Whitehead includes several moments – interspersed throughout the Georgia section – of intermental focalization around smaller social

units of Randall's enslaved population, moments that reveal the complexity of collective psychology under the slave system. The earliest occurs at the start of the "Georgia" chapter, describing reactions to the informal holiday of Jockey's birthday: "Even if you were inclined to forego the extra wages – and no one was so inclined – impossible was the slave impudent enough to tell a white man he couldn't work because it was a slave's birthday. Everybody knew niggers didn't have birthdays" (Whitehead 2016, 11). This excerpt shows the alignment between the enslaved perspective and that of the Georgia planter "society" (Whitehead 2016, 43) whose perspective dominates the narration of the elder Randall's funeral, a filiation signaled using "Everybody" together with "niggers," a conjunction that yokes all perspectives into a single voice while simultaneously invoking racial hierarchy. The examples then become more detached and narrowly focused. Describing two young men wrestling during the party, Whitehead includes the line, "Take it out on each other if you cannot take it out on the ones who deserve it" (Whitehead 2016, 27). This moment glimpses collective slave thought under the Georgia system, at once resigned and violent, displacing aggression from white owners and overseers – so proscribed by the racial hierarchy that the thought of open rebellion can't even be fully articulated ("the ones") – and onto one another. While the next generation watches, indirectly quoted cheers intimate their fated entanglement in this same system: "Get him, get that boy, teach him what he needs to learn" (Whitehead 2016, 27). The "learn[ing]" here refers both to victory in the wrestling match and a lesson of one's place in the social hierarchy of the plantation.

While these ordinary moments of small-to-medium-scale intermental focalization seem a far cry from the novel's more extravagant speculative elements, they nevertheless share an important feature with them. As Saldívar writes, recent theorists of race have defined racism less as an individual attribute and more as a "complex set of personal and social actions, a structure of *doing*," and postrace speculative realist texts such as *The Underground Railroad* can help reveal the "mechanisms" for the "doing of race" (Saldívar 2013, 2). Some of the novel's most acute imaginative moments occur, unusually, at the collective level - in the dynamics of small groups.

One example occurs during Cora's escape. While rushing into the swamp outside Randall, Cora and her companions find that "Their speed made them giddy. The impossibility of it" (Whitehead 2016, 55). While the first sentence is likely focalized around the narrator's perspective, the second, a fragment, voices a shared thought that neither runaway feels safe articulating, the sense of running against the limits of their shared world. This shared sensibility, structured by the slave experience, runs deeper than thoughts of escape logistics. Cora is surprised by the timid Lovey's escape from Randall, but not by the motives underlying it: "[E]very slave thinks about it. In the morning and in the afternoon and in the night. Dreaming of it. Every dream a dream of escape even when it didn't look like it. When it was a dream of new shoes" (Whitehead 2016, 56). These narratorial pronouncements appear at first to be written in the gnomic present tense, which Dorrit Cohn notes is used when "authorial rhetoric addresses itself to the mysteries and verities of the human condition" (Cohn 1984, 28). And yet these

discrete, almost breathless thoughts seem too short to sustain the Olympian pronouncements characteristic of gnomic present. Instead, the syntax stutters, then breaks, one shared fragment after another: “Dreaming of it. Every dream a dream of escape even when it didn’t look like it” (Whitehead 2016, 56). As in the collectively focalized descriptions on Randall farm, the sentence fragments mark the presence of intermental focalization, but this time on a minute scale, as the narrating voice shifts into the service of a more particular viewpoint, the collected interiority of these three characters. Beyond showing the flexibility of Whitehead’s fragment-mediated interior technique, this line reveals another central aspect of the novel’s “racial logic” – that the experience of enslavement is so internalized as to compress and circumscribe their dreams.

As Cora and Caesar’s thoughts suggest while running away, the psychic reach of the slave system obtrudes beyond its physical borders. So, when Cora arrives at the Valentine Farm, a community of former slaves living in Indiana, it comes as little surprise that the influence of the plantation follows. Valentine farm holds a distinct position in the neo-slave narrative genre. As Julian Lucas argues in *The New York Review of Books*, Whitehead’s “quietly radical gesture in *The Underground Railroad* is his replacement of the fugitive individual—wrestling with herself and nature in search of an abstract freedom—with the fugitive community, fighting for an inch of free soil in enemy terrain” (Lucas 2016). While Lucas reads Valentine primarily in terms of the novel’s plot (Cora’s series of escapes to successive black communities and their ensuing destruction by surrounding white mobs), his basic insight can be extended to the farm’s collective psychology.

Much as he does for Cora and the slave community of Randall plantation, Whitehead employs intermental focalization to adumbrate the thoughts, dispositions, and anxieties of Valentine. At first, these display optimism about newfound independence. The farm’s residents marvel at their changed circumstances and the different social arrangements they afford: “Social calls stretched into the evening now that so many colored settlers had put down roots, the advance guard of a great migration” (Whitehead 2016, 247). Whitehead’s proleptic evocation of the twentieth century black exodus from the South suggests a tantalizing possibility. And why not? Surely such mass movement would be less than improbable in a fictional world featuring subterranean railways and skyscrapers in the mid-1800s? Yet this forward-looking sentiment is counterbalanced by a recognition of the social realities of white supremacy: “Even if the adults were free of the shackles that had held them fast, bondage had stolen too much of their time. Only the children could take full advantage of their dreaming. If white men let them” (Whitehead 2016, 247). The speculative technologies of the novel’s diegesis may not obey laws of physics or chronology, but the social milieu, with its constant threat of white violence, is straightforwardly realist.

At its grimmest, the intermental unit of the Valentine farm approaches a bleak fatalism, as when residents imagine the white communities that surround them: “After all, the specter of colored rebellion, all those angry dark faces surrounding them, had stirred white settlers to leave the south. They had come to Indiana, and right next door is a black nation rising. It always ended

in violence” (Whitehead 2016, 249). This moment is illuminating for two reasons. First, the intermentally focalized free-indirect thought of the farm’s residents demonstrates their political and historical viewpoints in greater granularity than the political debate that takes place prior to Ridgeway’s arrival – containing a gradation of perspectives, rather than the simple leave/remain issue debated by Lander and Mingo. And second, that Ridgeway’s “predations” do not merely structure the novel, as Lucas claims – but also that his viewpoint is, in a central way, shared by the Valentine residents. This is not to say that Cora and her community hold Ridgeway’s convictions about whites’ superiority, but that after a lifetime circumscribed by it, they cannot see or imagine beyond that viewpoint. As Bakhtin writes, “When there is no access to one’s own personal ‘ultimate’ word, then every thought, feeling, experience must be refracted through someone else’s discourse, someone else’s style, someone else’s manner, with which it cannot be merged without reservation, without distance, without refraction” (Bakhtin 1984, 202). The narrator’s focalized pronouncement that “It always ended in violence” has the gnomic echo of Ridgeway’s “racial logic,” refracted affectively through the prism of the Valentine residents’ positions as victims of men like him and the white supremacist slave-system they enforce.

This psychic limitation, with its suggestion that the Valentine residents are somehow entrapped by Ridgeway’s Hobbesian logic, bears further examination. In one sense, this moment is evidence for Saldívar’s claim that speculative realist texts such as *The Underground Railroad* “help define the historical contradictions in the justification of racial injustice, discrimination, and oppression in terms that...describe the processes of racialization in the contemporary American social world” (Saldívar 2013, 14). With its paradoxical suggestions of escape and entrapment, as well as an intermentally focalized form that can only exist within fictional narrative, Whitehead’s technique here distills such “contradictions.” However, a more telling explication becomes available through the philosopher Charles W. Mills’ work on white supremacy. For Mills, the “pervasive racialization of the social world that means that one’s race, in effect, puts one into a certain relationship with social reality, tendentially determining one’s being and consciousness” (Mills 2003, 42). On Mills’ definition, the Valentine residents are habituated not only to the “politico-juridical” dimensions of white supremacy (seeing white violence as inevitable and legally authorized), but also its cultural and epistemic aspects, as when they collectively (and accurately) imagine the white viewpoint (“After all, the specter of colored rebellion, all those angry dark faces surrounding them, had stirred white settlers to leave the south”). Mills’ dimensions of white supremacy are valuable not as evidence for how neatly Whitehead’s text corresponds to his theory, but for the layers they reveal in this single moment of intermental focalization.

Whitehead not only gives voice to the varied and contradictory thoughts of an entire freed community, but also provides those thoughts with intersubjective depth by adding what Lisa Zunshine (borrowing from Daniel Dennett) terms “levels of intentionality” (Zunshine 2006, 28) – representations of the farm’s residents as they imagine the thought processes of the hostile white community that surrounds them, all while doing so from within a set of social assumptions

determined by that wider community. The sheer complexity of this collective-psychological portrait, then, makes Li's assertion that Whitehead is uninterested in "mining the mental and emotional traumas of the formerly enslaved" (Li 2019, 9), seem mistaken. Or at least too narrow – the product of a set of psychological and narrative assumptions geared to the individual alone. Once we widen our optic to take account of Whitehead's social psychology, the "internal workings" that Li desires are visible at the collective level. And more importantly, these intermental units saturate the novel's central thematic conflict, which plays out not in the museum or on the rails, but at the level of narration.

Three Moments of Metalepsis

In plot terms, *The Underground Railroad* is structured as an extended chase. Cora escapes from one black community to another, that community is shattered by Ridgeway's metronomic arrival, and pursuit begins again. But the novel's more important, though less overt, conflict occurs at the level of voice or narrating perspective – which pits Ridgeway's "American Imperative" (with its various avatars) against Cora's growing self-awareness, itself mediated by her encounters with different black collectives. At key moments, the clash between these two perspectives grows so intense that it overtakes narration itself, via the trope of metalepsis.

G rard Genette defines metalepsis as a "transgression" of narrative boundaries, an "intrusion of a narrator or character into a frame in which they do not belong" (Genette 1980, 235). Elsewhere he elaborates that metaleptic effects take various forms, all of which produce a sense of "strangeness" that may occasionally be comic, yet which also signals a deeper anxiety, with the suggestion that "the extradiegetic is perhaps always diegetic and that the narrator and his narratees—you and I—perhaps belong to some narrative" (qtd. in Pier 2016). Whitehead's selective use of metalepsis in *The Underground Railroad* often plays upon this ontological anxiety, though not in the directions Genette identifies. In Whitehead's hands, metalepsis works less to induce existential anxiety in the reader than to trace the power of a given perspective.

The most visceral and arresting example of this technique occurs during Cora's period in North Carolina. In the novel, the North Carolinian government has banned black people from its territories, and so Cora must hide, Harriet-Jacobs like, in a secret attic compartment owned by the reluctant station agent, Martin. One night, while Martin tells Cora the story of the state's unusual and genocidal laws, the narrative ruptures:

...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. In effect, they abolished slavery. On the contrary, Oney Garrison said in response. We abolished niggers. (Whitehead 2016, 165)

At first, Martin's embedded narration, in explaining the logic behind the state government's plan, adopts something of its perspective, narrating in a sympathetic third-person voice. But then the

voice of Oney Garrison, the judge whose story is being narrated, punctures the embedding, stepping up to equal footing with Martin, his ostensible narrator (“On the contrary”). That Martin would be able to quote directly from an event at which he was not present seems unlikely, and so the only explanation can be that Oney Garrison’s voice and perspective have taken control of the embedding narration, displaying a greater degree of narrative (and social) power.

This hypothesis is confirmed by the paragraph that follows, where the narrating voice (nominally Martin’s embedded narration) elaborates on the future, as imagined by the North Carolinian government:

A short tour of Bourbon Street forecast the result to any observer: a repulsive mongrel state in which the white race is, through amalgamation with negro blood, made stained, obscured, confused. Let them pollute their European bloodlines with Egyptian darkness, produce a river of half-breeds, quadroons, and miscellaneous dingy yellow bastards – they forge the very blades that will be used to cut their throats. (Whitehead 2016, 165)

Though Garrison’s voice fails to achieve the level of a direct speech report, as in the earlier example, what happens here is more insidious. The narrating voice starts off from the neutral, third-person past-tense perspective of Martin’s narration (“A short tour...any observer”), but then shifts to present tense (“in which the white race is”) and takes on a starkly different tone and set of values. The personalized imperative mood (“Let them pollute”) and floridly racist language (“through amalgamation with Negro blood made stained, obscured, confused”) cannot belong to the mild-mannered and verbally limited Martin. Instead, here we see the perspective of Oney Garrison and the intermental unit to which he belongs (half of the “North Carolina government...which crowded into Garrison’s dining room that night” [Whitehead 2016, 165]) jumping not just to the level of narration but leaching out into the narrating voice itself – coloring its perceptions, values, and perspective.

This uncanny narrative shift induces, as Genette says, a feeling of strangeness – the sense that some narrative boundary has been transgressed. Such self-referential moments are, as Linda Hutcheon notes, commonplace in historiographic metafiction such as the novels of E.L. Doctorow or Ishmael Reed – yet Whitehead’s metaleptic paragraph lacks the “parodic” quality Hutcheon sees as essential to that earlier genre (Hutcheon 1989, 4). This moment of narrative frame-grabbing serves not to remind the reader of the contingency of historical narration, but to index social power. At this moment, in the genocidal regime of North Carolina, the state government’s perspective dominates every discourse that matters - history, law, decisions about life and death. The effect, for Cora (Martin’s interlocutor), and by extension for Whitehead’s reader (placed in Cora’s position by the embedded narration), is chilling. Though Ridgeway’s “racial logic” surfaces more violently elsewhere in the novel, this moment marks its narrative apex – when the social force of this white supremacist perspective nearly overwhelms the novel’s form.

And yet that narrative power is limited in scope, counterbalanced by other forces within the

text that give *The Underground Railroad* a dialectical structure: Cora, too, has her moments of frame-breaking textual force, and these serve as a structural counterweight to the metalepses of the North Carolina chapter. The first occurs during her time in South Carolina, when a white boarding house proctor encourages Cora to overlook the state's practice of isolating and removing mentally ill and disabled black residents from the boarding houses:

“I can decide for myself,” Cora said. “Why can't they? On the plantation, master decided everything for us. I thought we were done with that here.”

Miss Lucy recoiled from the comparison. “If you can't see the difference between good, upstanding people and the mentally disturbed, with criminals and imbeciles, you're not the person I thought you were.”

I'm not the person you thought I was. (Whitehead 2016, 127-8)

This conversation marks a shift for Cora. Until this moment, she has lived either as an oppressed outcast or as a fugitive. In South Carolina, however, Cora has acquired a paid position as a maid, along with the earnings and personal possessions that position affords (“It was the softest bed she had ever lain in. But then, it was the only bed she had ever lain in” [Whitehead 2016, 94]). Adding to these material tokens, her nascent literacy gives Cora the confidence not just to disagree with a white superior, but to compare her present circumstances and community to past ones, thereby questioning governmental decisions and pointing out their coercive analogy with slave plantation practices (“On the plantation...”). As a result, when the metaleptic reported thought arrives (“I'm not...”), it carries a multivalent force. On one hand, this thought-report shows Cora building on the assertions of self she has made earlier in the conversation, reminding (though metalepsis' uncanny level-breaking effect) the reader, and herself, of her agency. On the other, Cora never says this aloud – although the thought reports at the level of narration (and without attribution), the spoken conversation stops after the proctor's remark. While Cora has made progress in her new setting, that growth remains circumscribed by the white society around her.

Cora's second moment of narrative rupture occurs near the novel's conclusion. Having dispatched Ridgeway, she escapes down an Indiana tunnel, uncertain of its terminus. While traveling through the tunnel, Cora marvels at its construction:

She never got Royal to tell her about the men and women who made the underground railroad. The ones who excavated a million tons of rock and dirt, toiled in the belly of the earth for the deliverance of slaves like her. Who stood with all those other souls who took runaways into their homes, fed them, carried them north on their backs, died for them. The station masters and conductors and sympathizers. Who are you after you finish something this magnificent – in constructing it you have also journeyed through it, to the other side. On the one end there was who you were before you went underground, and on the other end a new person steps out into the light. The up-top world must be so ordinary compared to the miracle beneath, the miracle you had made with your sweat and blood. The secret triumph you keep in your heart. (Whitehead 2016, 303-4)

The passage begins with Cora's reminiscence on the recently murdered Royal ("She never got"), yet as her mind wanders back to the railroad's origins (a cognitive move afforded by the structure of the tunnel itself), she recalls and imagines another community with which she has had contact - the builders and operators of the railroad ("the ones who excavated...slaves like her...station masters and conductors and sympathizers"). Sparked by the thought of the physical structure through which she has passed, and the collectives who operate it (with which she, at various points, has connected), Cora's narration slides into metalepsis, taking control of the narration, with the vocative "you" addressing the imagined builders of the tunnel ("Who are you after you finish something this magnificent"), and shifting (pronominally) into a lived identification with them. As she proceeds, the object of Cora's second-person statement takes on an additional valence, reflecting on her situation ("On the one end there was who you were before you went underground"), seeing herself changed by her experiences with the railroad, by the labor she has completed in her own journey ("a new person steps out"). Cora's voice and power of self-definition, glimpsed once in South Carolina, return as she re-writes her story. And yet, liberatory as it may sound, this scene is merely a moment of racial fantasy, a vision of a black community (unlike Valentine Farm) unconstrained by Ridgeway's hegemonic racial ideology. Cora's imaginative identification with the unseen creators of the railway may give her the strength to go on, but she does so alone.

Undoing Racial Logic

If Cora's final, though qualified, victory over Ridgeway is predictable, the psychic path she takes to arrive there is less so, and deeply tied into the ideological competition that plays out between the two characters. Throughout the novel, when Ridgeway pursues Cora relentlessly with physical force and legal authority on his side, the slavecatcher holds the upper hand. And yet when Ridgeway finally captures Cora in the "Tennessee" chapter, the balance begins to shift. At one point, while Cora sits in an outhouse, Ridgeway again lays out his white supremacist cosmology, "American imperative," for which he (as slavecatcher) serves as a "notion of order" (Whitehead 2016, 223). As Kelly notes, this scene invokes and revises Judge Holden's triumphal rant at the end of *Blood Meridian* (Kelly 2018, 26). However, where Holden's performance emphasizes "the victory of his philosophy" over that of his murdered opponent (Kelly 2018, 26), Ridgeway's triumph is, for several reasons, less certain. For one, Cora still lives. And for another, she begins to apply the literacy and critical perspective gained from her time in the Carolinas and on Valentine to her captor's speeches. In doing so, she draws a distinction between true intersubjective communication and Ridgeway's empty soliloquizing, "Couples coming together to hold each other, to sway and twist. That was real conversation...not all these words" (Whitehead 2016, 223). More importantly, though, she also becomes skeptical of Ridgeway's racist ideology: "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" (Whitehead 2016, 223). For

Kelly, this moment shows Whitehead declining to “identify the white man’s power with any metaphysical thesis about the workings of the universe” (Kelly 2018, 26). Though accurate, this reading undersells Cora’s contribution: by reinscribing the slavecatcher’s victory-rant through the ironic image of a man yelling at an outhouse door, Cora levers open the possibility of resisting Ridgeway, rather than simply running from him.

Whitehead builds on this resistance at the novel’s climax. At this point, months after their encounter in Tennessee, Ridgeway and his helper Homer have razed Valentine Farm and forced Cora to reveal the railroad. As she descends into the underground station, Cora feels guilt:

He would not be the first white man to see the underground railroad, but the first enemy. After all that had befallen her, the shame of betraying those who made possible her escape. She hesitated on the top step. On Randall, on Valentine, Cora had never joined the dancing circles. She shrank from the spinning bodies, afraid of another person so close, so uncontrolled. Men had put a fear in her, all those years ago. Tonight, she told herself. Tonight I will hold him close, as if in a slow dance. As if it were just the two of them in the lonesome world, bound to each other until the end of the song....She locked her arms around him like a chain of iron....she held him close like a lover and the pair tumbled down the stone steps into the darkness. (Whitehead 2016, 301-2)

At first glance, this moment reads as merely a personal triumph for Cora, who puts aside her longstanding fear of physical contact to counter Ridgeway’s violence with her own. Yet on closer examination, intimations of the social abound. Cora feels impelled by a social emotion (“shame”) because of her connection to a collective (“those who had made possible her escape”). In justifying her choice, she thinks of other communities to which she has been linked (“On Randall, on Valentine”). Most tellingly, Whitehead’s choice of an intersubjective metaphor (paired dancing for physical attack) invokes, only to revise, Cora’s earlier figuration upon Ridgeway’s “American imperative” soliloquy: “Couples coming together to hold each other...” (Whitehead 2016, 223). Taking this metaphor as her organizing scheme, Cora thus answers the reiterations of Ridgeway’s “racial logic,” converting her silent audition into a dyadic “conversation.” Whitehead’s protagonist converts the ironic perspective (symbolic action) she displayed in the “Tennessee” chapter into concrete personal action – but she does so only after invoking the intermental units to which she once belonged, and which have shaped her.

Yet Cora’s victory here is a qualified one. True, by invoking the memories of black communities to which she has belonged – which have helped shape and develop her subjectivity – Cora draws on wells of knowledge, determination, and skill which permit her to defeat Ridgeway and escape. But the utopian power of those groups ends there. Cora may have the capacity to move on, but the collectives that have shaped her cannot. The black groups that Cora has encountered in Georgia, the Carolinas, and Indiana remain either bound by the slave system or destroyed by white supremacist violence. For all the optimism implied by Cora’s escape at the novel’s end, *The Underground Railroad*’s vision of black collective life in America remains fundamentally

negative. If, as Dubey writes, speculative neo-slave narratives use their fantastic elements to force readers to confront parallels between their present and the slave past (Dubey 2001, 791), then Whitehead's darkest and most clear-eyed message comes through in his treatment of political life. Exceptional individuals – those with the right talents or in the right circumstances – may thrive under white supremacy, but larger social collectives cannot.

Conclusion

Existing criticism of *The Underground Railroad* has, for good reason, focused on the novel's overt features: its speculative elements (Dischinger 2017), engagement with historiography (Dubey 2020; Li 2019), or structural irony (Kelly 2018). However, little attention has been paid to the novel's collective dimension or narrative style. This group focalization – as revealed by the social minds lens – provides a telescoping model of the social to match the physical and temporal compressions made by the novel's fantastic railroad. So, an increased focus on narrative technique has two hermeneutic benefits: First, it uncovers a new layer of the novel's depiction of collective mental life under white supremacy, one largely absent from other neo-slave narratives, and which belies the individualistic reading of the protagonist as underdeveloped. Whitehead provides not only sketches of isolated individuals, but also a global overview of communities striated throughout an entire society as they shape, internalize, and ultimately fail to escape a racial ideology. Second, attending to the role of social minds helps explain Cora's actions, which are inscribed by communities that have formed her. Thus, an attention to the novel's depiction of social minds does not negate readings that focus on individuals so much as augment them, adding another dimension that overlays and inflects character psychology.

Looking beyond exegesis of the novel itself, in terms of genre, much critical attention has been paid to speculative realist texts' deployment of speculative or fantasy tropes – borrowing from contemporary popular genres such as comics and video games (Gantz 2015; Saldívar 2011). But as this reading of *The Underground Railroad* suggests, greater attention to these novels' voice and prose style, particularly their modes of evoking collectivity, may prove a rich vein for future critical work. Among other speculative realist authors, the writing of Karen Tei Yamashita, with its focus on the shared experiences of social groups, seems particularly ripe for such analysis. If the political purpose of post-race such writing is, as Saldívar argues, to help us imagine new “kinds of social belonging,” (Saldívar 2013, 15), then we ought to pay closer attention to how these texts imagine communal mental life.

Endnotes:

1. Li, Heneks, and Dischinger focus on the novel's use of genre tropes and satire, while Dubey fixes on its relationship to history and historiography. Manshel and Konstantinou read *TUR* with respect to recent debates in literary criticism and theory, whereas Kelly emphasizes the novel's use of irony and relation to neoliberalism.

2. In using this term, partly for reasons of brevity, I am loosely following Bernard W. Bell's original coinage, in *The Afro-American Novel and Its Tradition*, which defines "neoslave narratives" as "modern narratives of escape from bondage to freedom" (Bell 1987, 289). Rushdy has a more restricted use of the term, referring only to "those novels that assume the voice of the fugitive slave and employ while deviating from the conventions of the antebellum slave narrative" (Rushdy 2004, 92-3). Arlene Keizer's term, "contemporary fictions of slavery," would apply equally well to the texts I have selected (Keizer 2004).
3. While the genre might also be described as "post-racial post-postmodernism," I hew to Saldivar's coinage to emphasize the speculative elements common across these texts.
4. The few examples of collective-focused narration in Jones' *The Known World*, for instance, reach toward either universal generalization ("It was said by many a slave that a servant's feeling about a master could be discerned on any given day by whether the slave called him 'Master', 'Marse,' or 'Massa' [Jones 2003, 58]) or the narrowly focused thought of an individual character. In *Beloved*, collective focalization does appear, though its use is restricted to one group, the free black community of Cincinnati that surrounds Sethe. Other canonical examples of the neo-slave narrative form tend to involve a more individualist, often first-person, perspective: Gaines' *The Autobiography of Miss Jane Pittman*, Reed's *Flight to Canada*, Bradley's *The Chaneysville Incident*, Johnson's *Middle Passage*, and Butler's *Kindred*. Even Jones' *Corregidora*, which focuses on one woman's relationship to her family's generational trauma, has few moments of such collective focalization in the way outlined here.
5. Amy S. Greenberg provides a helpful summation: "In short, virtually everything about the young nation – from its admirable origins in New England religious settlements through its astounding population growth, miraculous victory over the great British Empire, racial and religious superiority over other residents of the continent, and novel form of government – proved to American that their nation, above all others, was unique and marked by God for a special destiny. This shared belief in American exceptionalism lay at the heart of the ideology of Manifest Destiny" (Greenberg 2012, 5).

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