Literary Fiction as Art and Activism: Colson Whitehead, Post-blackness, and the Trumpian Novel

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Abstract

How can we hear the voice of American civil society in works of art? Civil society relies on solidarity—but when artistic expression becomes overly bound to solidarity's demands, it may risk losing aesthetic complexity and collapsing into activist moralizing. How does contemporary American literary fiction navigate this tension? This article explores the question by combining a cultural sociological perspective on civil society with a close reading of Colson Whitehead's work and his trajectory as a writer. I trace two transformations—of both the writer and his literary aesthetic—situating them in the broader social and political context, particularly the rise and fall of the symbolism of Post-blackness. Through an interpretive analysis of *The Intuitionist*, *The Underground Railroad*, and *The Nickel Boys*, I show how Whitehead's increasing moral engagement paradoxically silences the very voice of civil society he seeks to amplify. This aesthetic shift reflects wider developments in the contemporary relationship between art and activism: as the public court of opinion falters—most visibly during Trump-era politics—art is increasingly compelled to abandon disinterestedness and assume a direct, urgent civil voice.

Keywords

Literary Sociology; Sociology of Morality; Civil Sphere Theory; Colson Whitehead; Civil Society; Race and Literature

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Introduction: The Demands of Civil Society and a Missed Great Heist

Colson Whitehead loves a great heist. His writing originates from an artistic take on the noir detective story, and he repeatedly claims in interviews how narrating a great heist is what he enjoys most. Even if they are not all straightforward whodunits, Whitehead's novels have an intuitive appeal to that genre. It is visible in his debut, *The Intuitionist*, successors such as *Zone One*, and again in his newer ones, *Harlem Shuffle* and *The Crook Manifesto*. This is the genre Whitehead feels most

home in, which also connects to the setting, his 'home turf' (Gross and Whitehead 2022): New York, Harlem, dirty streets in receding daylight. These texts demonstrate that Whitehead emphasizes the artistic character in the style of the noir novel. It is a formal calling; the exploration of moral themes comes second. But a conversion to the opposite is visible in the years surrounding the blatant decline of civility in American political culture.

With *Underground Railroad* and the subsequent *Nickel Boys*, Whitehead veered away from genre work to concentrate more on moral themes. This follows a flight from the innate chronotopos to focus on the US South: Georgia and Florida, loosely defined antebellum and Jim Crow eras. Whitehead abandoned the great heist and turned away from ironic form toward straightforward indictments of injustice. This shift marks a swing also in Whitehead's artistry; as if he switched the nuanced, integrated reflection for the frontal emotional accusation, he turned from the work of art that engages civilly toward civil engagement that comes in the guise of a work of art. This is not a binary, of course, rather a shift in emphasis, and it is inherently connected to the audience who performs the same shift. But it is significant in Whitehead's work, and he marks this shift personally. At the end of his acceptance speech for the National Book Award for *Underground Railroad* in 2016, he called for: 'Make art. Fight the power.' (Israel and Whitehead 2019) This is a call to action against a civil backlash in US politics of which the election of Donald Trump was only the most blatant detail and Black Lives Matter only the most viral reaction. Ironically, in the course of this writerly transformation toward a direct articulation of civil concerns, Whitehead's work itself began to focus more and more on a silence of civility. This silence is characterized by a despairing mode of civil discourse—one that critiques failures and leaves no room to celebrate successes or hope.

This is the short version of what I analyze in this article. I reconstruct two transformations that show an ironic, inverse relationship. On the one hand, the writer Whitehead becomes more outrightly engaged with moral concerns. On the other hand, within Whitehead's aesthetic production, the voice of civil society that expresses this morality becomes increasingly mute. Both transformations illustrate the changing impact of the civil sphere on the whole—society, writer, and literary aesthetic. I provide a comprehensive theoretic conception to account for these transformations, building on Civil Sphere Theory. This cultural theory of morality lends itself because it focuses on cultural meaning, while analytically distinguishing between the realms of art and activism. This enables us to find an informed answer to the question of why the prevailing political environment persuaded Whitehead to turn to civil engagement, leading to a silencing of the voice of civility in his works. On the whole, this article resonates with the increased efforts of a

meaning-centered literary sociology.[1] Meaning-centeredness refers to the paradigm of taking symbolic meaning seriously, as developed by the strong program of cultural sociology. By tracing the two transformations of Whitehead, I advance this by showing how a society's symbolic codes impact the aesthetic production of artists and, in turn, how art reflects the discourses that motivate action in society.

I focus on three of Whitehead's novels, *The Intuitionist*, originally published in 1999, *The Underground Railroad*, 2016, and *The Nickel Boys*, 2019.[2] These best illustrate Whitehead's aesthetic transformation which inversely mirrors his writerly transformation. *Intuitionist* is highly ironic and densely allegoric. *Underground Railroad* and *Nickel Boys* contrast *The Intuitionist* in that they are both much more concerned with conveying a moral message; they are unlike the rest of his novels civil engagements that appeal to solidarity. I explore these novels interpretively in the context of Civil Sphere Theory, looking for symbolic codes, narratives, and allegories that reflect notions of ethical we-ness, civil solidarity, and social exclusion. This provides a rich canvas of moral meaning that can be related to the task that the writer sets for himself and that contemporary society perhaps sets for its artistic sphere.[3] Underlying this task is the question of how literary fiction strikes a balance between rich artistry and activist moralizing. This *analytic* binary of art and activism refers to an ideal type that is fruitful to think about literary aesthetics in the context of Civil Sphere Theory. But what does it really mean to differentiate between art and activism analytically? It will be a task of this article to illustrate this.

I will first provide an overview of relevant theory which involves an understanding of civil society, its relation to literary writers and authorship, and a way to think in this context of the binary of art and activism (section A). Next I will reconstruct the transformation of the writer Whitehead within his social and political setting (section B). I will then turn to Whitehead's literary work itself (section C). This is followed by a discussion that draws some conclusions and possible generalizations from these three threads (section D).

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[1] Find, among others, theoretical work on epistemology at the boundary between sociology and literary fiction (Váňa 2025), work on the phenomenology of reading (Knöchelmann 2025a; Thumala Olave 2021), or on authorship and normative orders (Knöchelmann 2024a, 2024b; Želinský et al. 2021). These works are reluctant to be called *literary sociologies*. But, relating to the divide of *cultural sociology* and *sociology of culture*, this term seems more applicable than that of a *sociology of literature*. *Literary sociology* can also mean using literature as a means of social thinking (Knöchelmann forthcoming).

[2] All references are based on the *Anchor Books* US paperback editions.

[3] Mendelson has presented a collection on American literary figures in which they are explicitly placed in the context of moral agency without demonstrating a coherent meaning of that morality; cf. Mendelson (2015). My article presents a counter-example that attempts to connect the moral themes of the work with those of the writer with a strong theoretical underpinning.

A. In Theory: American Civil Society

Key Tenets of Civil Sphere Theory

Civil Sphere Theory is a cultural sociological theory of American democratic society. Its central claim is that the functioning of democracy depends on solidarity, and that all efforts of maintaining social cohesion and morality need to foster a symbolically meaningful we-ness. Sociologically, there is no such thing as a universal morality that abstracts from the meaningful realm of the actors in everyday life. In the perspective of Civil Sphere Theory, morality refers to concrete symbolic persuasion instead of abstract reason: If civil rights activists propose to put an end to racist segregation, they have to *persuade* the public, as Alexander shows in his historical case study (2006, pp. 265–394). This persuasion is a function of fostering solidarity which necessarily precedes processes of social integration. The following incorporation 'points to the possibility of closing the gap between stigmatized categories of persons—people whose particular identities have been relegated to the invisibility of private life—and the utopian promises that in principle regulate civil life' (Alexander 2006, p. 410). Consider also the Jewish people of the early twentieth century: As they desired to be included in the American public sphere, the case for their citizenship and Americanness had to be *made meaningful* in that public sphere. This was hardly a one-way path with a black and white destination, but a complicated track of incorporation where symbolic means repeatedly failed (Alexander 2006, pp. 503–543). Always at the heart of such processes is social solidarity. If one group wishes to convince another of their place in society, of their politics or social situation in a differentiated hierarchy, they have to find a language that communicates a sense of solidarity rooted in accessible values and symbolic identification. This communication of solidarity is an important aspect that functions as an analytical dividing line between artistry and activism, as we will discuss further below.

The program underscoring Civil Sphere Theory is decidedly American. It emphasizes a distinctly American conception of democracy—civic democracy—characterized by values of voluntary association, active citizen participation, and liberty, which serve as its normative foundation. There is, in this sense of civic democracy, a hope that the civility of US society will sustain progress—a progress toward more universal inclusion. Hope here means 'trying to bring what philosophers call a normative dimension into a sociological concept in order to highlight horizontal as compared to (what sociologists usually concentrate on) vertical relationships' (Alexander in Lund and Voyer 2020, pp. 192–193). This is why the notions of incorporation and inclusion, mentioned above, are essential

for empirical reconstructions. Even if such social and symbolic processes are winding roads in empirical reality, the analytical dimension takes this reality's normative horizon serious and maintains that progress toward a more inclusive society is possible via symbolic means. This sense of hopeful utopianism can be seen in recent work on Obama's public performance (Alexander and Jaworsky 2014) as well as in the origins of the theory, the Watergate scandal (Alexander 2003). Empirical work on this crisis led to the establishment of the central thesis that there is a relatively stable culture structure, patterned along binary codes, that represents the discourse of American civil society. The actions now known as Watergate needed to be linked to that structure within the American collective conscience in order for it to become a crisis in the first place. It was neither journalistic action nor actual deceit and abuse of office that brought Nixon down; it was American civil audacity. The liberal notion of a vital center of solidarity that unites politics and the public sphere in times of crisis is also found to be instrumental following Trump's attempt to overturn the 2020 election (Alexander 2023).

Civil Sphere Theory is grounded in historical case studies that focus on the American political and social context. The values and discursive structures that Civil Sphere Theory foregrounds are firmly embedded in the American experience. So even though Civil Sphere Theory maintains to be empirically realistic, it nevertheless establishes a normative worldview of progress based on concrete values. Alexander illustrates this where he claims to be 'advancing a normative argument that is designed also to be realistic.' (Alexander 2006, p. 365) As subsequent applications of Civil Sphere Theory in other social and political contexts, such as Latin America or the Nordic countries, demonstrate (Alexander et al. 2019; Alexander and Tognato 2019), the theory requires substantial adaptation to be effectively applied beyond its original American framework. The fact that Alexander roots the civil sphere in concrete values instead of in abstract-ontological conceptions of norms makes it inevitably also rooted in a specific political and societal context. And this Americanness is important for this article insofar as the Whitehead case, as we will see below, would probably not have developed in the same way in other contexts.

It is this meaningful stability of civil discourse that works as the foil with which actions and actors are judged as good or bad or, in the Durkheimian tradition, as sacred or evil. This cultural stability is the 'we-ness of a national, regional, or international community, the feeling of connectedness to "every member" of that community, that transcends particular commitments, narrow loyalties, and sectional interests.' (Alexander 2006, p. 43) The left-liberal nature of this theory's normativity also comes to the fore where it maintains the positive, progressive potential of capitalism or modern

bureaucracy. Against, for instance, Habermas or Bourdieu, Civil Sphere Theory pronounces a decidedly non-materialist approach; this was the theory's crucial cultural innovation, but also its most contentious liability (Vandenberghe 2008). Capitalistic actors can indeed do good in society; think of philanthropy or enterprises for social change. And if not, there are unions who renew solidarity and push back against materialistic particularism as they 'press their arguments in the "court of public opinion."' (Alexander 2006, p. 92). Civil Sphere Theory in this sense always emphasizes this symbolic dimension over historical and material disadvantages, which limits the theory's reach, especially when it comes to understanding how cultural production responds to conditions of civil breakdown or material inequality.

Lastly, this non-materialist orientation has consequences also for civil society as a whole. For it is not merely a collection of institutions such as NGOs, unions, or media that functions as civil society. To the degree that there is a court of public opinion—a performative manifestation of civil discourse as a continuous public conversation—any individual can become an actor in civil society. This is what Alexander highlights when he talks, backed by the American liberal tradition, about the 'democratic promises of civil society' (2006, p. 237) and the way any individual can realize them. Civil society here does not exist independently of discourse; rather, it is continually shaped and reshaped through public contestation and symbolic persuasion. In a way, civil society *is* discourse—an idealized horizon of symbolic negotiation rather than a fixed set of institutions. While this provides powerful tools for analyzing meaning-making, it has also drawn critique for its idealism, particularly from postcolonial perspectives that foreground structural inequality and material exclusion (Hammer 2020). Nevertheless, in the ways that the symbolic ideals of the discourses of liberty and repression are performatively enacted, we can analytically recognize individuals as potential actors in civil society. The civil *sphere* is thus the binding analytical reference in the sense of an overarching moral and communicative space that enables actors to justify their claims with the ideals of democracy, solidarity, or inclusion—as well as their anticivil counter-claims. The court of public opinion is the functional mechanism within this sphere in which the public determines which movements, narratives, and actors gain legitimacy, and so which civil or anticivil currents gain power.

Literature and Civil Society

It is in the context of Civil Sphere Theory that I talk about Colson Whitehead as an actor in civil society. By means of his literary writing, he submits his vision of ethical we-ness and moral progress

to said court of public opinion. Literature has a concrete function for civil society here. Insofar as civil discourse is fundamental to the language with which literary texts speak to the public, the literary aesthetic acquires its concrete symbolic meaning, which carries an ethical and moral dimension.

Writers, readers, and the facilitators of cultural products in between are *cultural intermediaries* in this sense (Knöchelmann 2024a). There is ample evidence of this; neither "pure" entertainment like the last bodice ripper or pulp fiction nor the most self-referential work of art can refute that they build on some kind of ethical-moral underpinning. Art is always political (Benjamin 2010). Even modern poetry exists in a receptive context that has powerful ethical implications beyond aesthetic pleasure (Knöchelmann 2025a). Nevertheless, some writers are more concerned with foregrounding moral meaningfulness than others. Anyone who has heard of Robert Tressell or Iris Murdoch, or Upton Sinclair and John Steinbeck in the American context, will regard this as a truism. The question is: to what degree does a writer use their craft for moral engagement? For instance, an environmentalist writer such as Richard Powers needs to make nature and its destruction deeply meaningful to his (potential) audience. He can draw on the discourse of civil society here, making use of 'a vocabulary for members to speak graphically about a society's highest values, its relevant groups, its boundaries *vis-à-vis* conflict, creativity, and internal dissent.' (Alexander 1998, 31; italics in original) The cultural intermediation of literary writers can be actively pushing toward exposing cases of injustice or wrongdoing that relate to more generalizable structures; or it means employing the literary form to induce sentiments of hope toward better futures in the sense that writers link their characters, stories, and aesthetic characteristics to concrete ideals of their time. It is crucial to note that literary fiction here provides *concrete* aesthetic cases through which an appeal toward moral betterment speaks. This is the moment of fusion that binds, within the aesthetic experience, authorial voice, reader, and symbolic structure. Figure 1 depicts this complex with its elements and relations in a general outline.

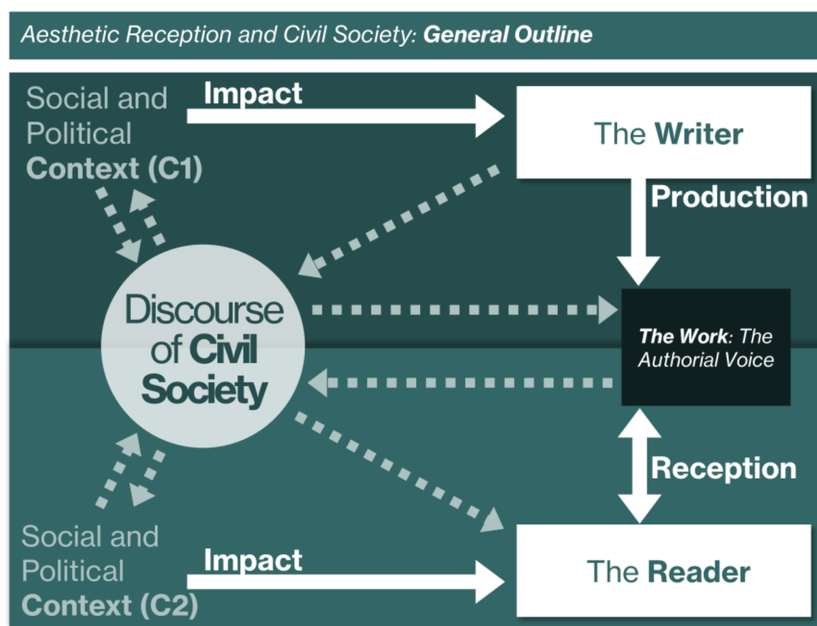

Figure 1: A general outline of aesthetic reception and civil society.

The *work* refers to the work in question—this is speaking with the voice of the *author*. It is essential to note that this excludes all other elements, including the voice of the writer.[4] So when the writer gives an interview, these utterances do not primarily belong to the literary work. They are part of the public context that recursively has an impact on a reader's experience.

The *reader* signifies the concrete personal experience of receiving the aesthetic. A basic function here is the horizon of understanding in a Gadamerian sense, and the ensuing dialogue between reader and object. In a phenomenological perspective, this experience can as such already be iconic (Thumala Olave 2021).

There are two *performative contexts* which each include all sorts of public elements that have an impact on the aesthetic experience of reading as well as on the production of text. This is, first and foremost, the social and political specificity of the community or society that reader and writer are situated in, and that is characterized by a particular public civil sentiment. In times of civil unrest, a politically charging novel is read and written differently. Writers respond to this also in retrospect (as we will encounter below), which might be to say in an interview: "this is a Trumpian novel". This

[4] I build on a strong difference between author and writer (Knöchelmann 2024b, 2025b). The writer is the individual who produces text. The author is the objectified foil that is constructed by readers and its (semi-)public.

utterance might or might not directly reach the reader, which thus might or might not alter the context of the reading experience. This illustrates the relations: an author's utterance in an interview is contextual, it is not part of the literary aesthetic itself. Thus, another crucial element in the performative context is the critical public generally, of which interviews are an element; this public is formed of actors who critically engage with literature and provide interpretations to like-minded readers (Knöchelmann 2024a).

As the figure highlights, the elements are interrelated, materially and communicatively, as the (non-dotted) lines indicate. The complexity arises in the manifold of relations since the symbolic discourse involved can vary substantially, characterized by the dotted lines. That is, in addition to the relations between the elements, each element *in itself* actualizes concretely symbolic meaningfulness in the discourse of civil society. This is a necessary condition to explain that art and civil discourse are not sharply separated domains. They are deeply intertwined which is in the end central to my argument. But the way they are intertwined varies.

So the context of a writer *can* be quite different from that of a reader, which considerably affects the reception. This can be simply a temporal-spatial difference or one of political and social milieu; any difference that affects the application of civil discourse matters in this respect. Likewise, for contemporary works, these two contexts *can* be largely (but not necessarily are) the same: a contemporary citizen of New York City writes for today's left-liberal audience in the US. But if a reader lives in a different context (like South-East Asia) or comes from a different milieu (right-wing conservatism), these contexts have their impact on the way ideals are conceived as well as received. This is crucial to note for when we talk about moral meaningfulness in the context of art. So a Jewish writer can work with strongly wistful symbolism about Jewishness in between a Russian shtetl and early 20th century America (such as Joseph Roth's *Hiob*). A contemporary reader may not be able to relate to the civil idealism of finding a social place, since they are unrelated to this cultural context and cannot relate to its symbolic codes. Of course, that does not mean that *Hiob* cannot be enjoyed for its aesthetic experience as such. But it does imply that a text does not speak for itself; its language is a mediator: 'If most of the members of democratic society accepted the "validity" and "reality" of *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, they disagreed fundamentally over its relevant social application. Radicals and liberals were inclined to see the book as describing the already repressive or at least imminently antidemocratic tendencies of their own capitalist societies; conservatives understood the work as referring to communism alone.' (Alexander 2006, p. 64) George Orwell surely intended his

aesthetic with a language that speaks through one set of symbolic codes; its reception shows that this language can also be translated to an opposing set.

The Work of Art between Artistry and Activism

This brings us to the question of how we can think of the difference of a *highly artistic work* that is signified by aesthetic richness, and an artistic work that has more *ambition as moral activism*. It appears to be a clear binary which it is, of course, not. To speak of it means to speak in terms of analytical ideal types that do not exist as such in empirical reality; this cannot be emphasized enough. In empirical reality, they form a continuum with a vast gray area. Nonetheless, these ideal types can still be identified for analysis. The crucial aspect for doing so is to set the perspective right. For it is never one element in our triangle that prescribes the position on this continuum. All elements need to align in their own way in respect to civil discourse, though it plays out, in the end, on the shoulders of the work.

The *artistic ideal* is characterized by an aesthetic experience of disinterestedness (figure 2).

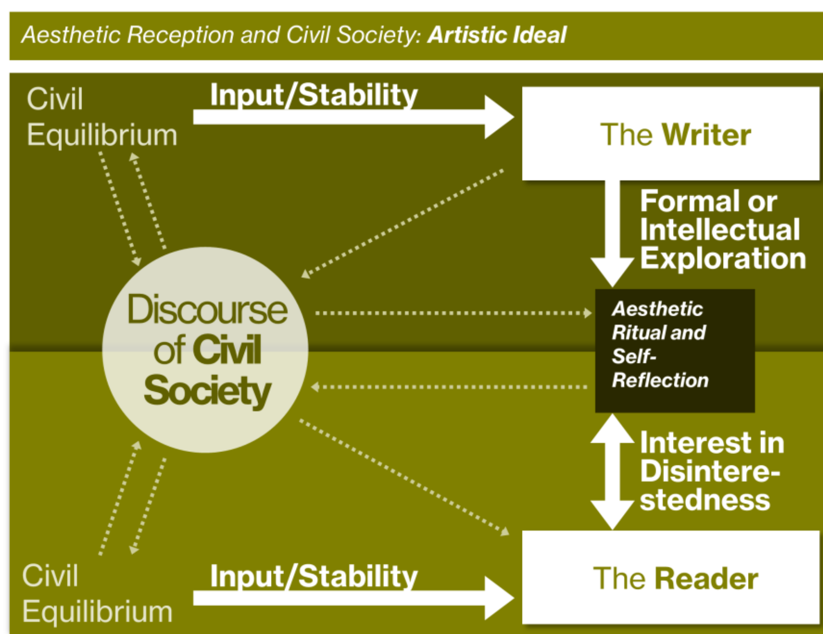

Figure 2: An outline of the artistic ideal of aesthetic reception and civil society. Each element draws only weakly on the discourse of civil society; the relations are characterized by low input, stability, and an aesthetic interest in disinterestedness.

In civilly stable times, disinterestedness and reflective enjoyment are defining features of a constellation of the reception of highly artistic works embedded in a *concrete historical moment*. In other words, it is *not* the work alone that affects a certain reception; it is the constellation of work and historical context that does so.

Following Kant, Jauß conceives of an aesthetic interest in disinterestedness which 'is most easily explained by the fact that as the subject makes use of the freedom it has to adopt a position vis-à-vis the irreal aesthetic object, it can increasingly enjoy both the object which its satisfaction progressively discloses and its own self which in this activity feels released from its daily existence.' (Jauß 1982, p. 32) Disinterest does not prohibit deliberation, and reception is inevitably still bound to civil discourse in one form or another. But the essence of this practice is the dialectical enjoyment of oneself and the object.

The Kantian purposiveness without purpose, a pleasure that is contemplative, not instrumental, is as a philosophical concept unwieldy for a sociological analysis.[5] Jauß historicizes the Kantian universalistic and purely aesthetic conception (Jauß 1970). This historicization means that the meaning of a literary work is not fixed at the moment of its production, nor located solely in its formal-aesthetic features, but is realized and continually transformed through its reception. Jauß marks this shift with the notion of a historical *horizon of expectation* with which he advances Gadamer's *horizon of understanding* (Gadamer 1990). Because readerly engagement is historically contingent, the social and political meanings of a work are likewise variable; they depend on the dominant application of civil discourse. It is culture that makes a work political, not the independent narration and its formal features within a work itself. And it is the writer—just like the audience—who responds to their times with their construction of the aesthetic.

In more stable times, the *work* appears in its aesthetic features less overt in its use of (anti-)civil discourse; it is more self-referential and playful with its own artistic tradition, even if the writer

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[5] Such receptive disinterestedness and its origins in the Kantian theory of judgement remain vital for understanding how aesthetic form and reception function in periods of civil equilibrium, where discourse takes a less agonistic shape. Crucially, disinterestedness here refers not to apathy or detachment, but to a mode of reception that avoids immediate political urgency, accusatory framing, or overt calls for solidarity. While this conception may resemble modernist formalism—with its irony, opacity, or stylistic self-reference—that is not my emphasis. Following Jauß, I foreground reflective enjoyment, and as figure 2 illustrates, I situate such disinterestedness within a specific historical and discursive constellation. This gives the Kantian notion a broader, more sociological and phenomenological meaning: it is not a timeless aesthetic stance, but a historically contingent mode of reception. Political themes—such as racism, in the case of Whitehead—are not excluded by this mode, but are refracted through aesthetic distancing and defamiliarization. In turn, this means that what may initially appear disinterested can, in shifting contexts, acquire new political resonance. As we will see in Whitehead's case, critical and public discourse may initially focus on formal innovation and only later, as the historical constellation changes, reframe earlier works politically. The defamiliarized racism of *The Intuitionist*, once perceived as self-referential, eventually may become legible as part of a continuum that includes the more overt accusation of *The Nickel Boys*.

touches on contentious issues which might give the work a character of commemoration or ritualized remembrance. Thus, a writer may address themes of oppression without making them explicit; formal pleasure is preferred to direct accusation. The writer might take on the subject of racism, but they defamiliarize it almost beyond recognition. In short, the authorial voice does not overtly ask for solidarity among a specific group or for a cause. In such cases, politics seem bracketed for the sake of aesthetic enjoyment. But civil significance remains latent: disinterestedness means the work *could* be politically redeemed, but in the given historical and cultural context, the audience may feel no urgency to do so (just like the writer was not motivated to do so). This *performative context* is defined by quieter times and civil stability; in opposition to times of civil unrest, I call these times a *civil equilibrium*. It means that society is more content; the civil sphere facilitates agreeable input, rather than intrusion.[6] Even works by seemingly activist writers—such as Upton Sinclair or John Steinbeck—can be received with disinterested enjoyment when society rests in such a state of civil equilibrium. We will find the times of Post-blackness (below) as one of such an apparent civil equilibrium, for which Post-blackness itself posteriorly became the defining cultural code.

At the other end of the continuum, we find the work of an *activistic ideal* (figure 3).

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[6] For the modes of input, intrusion, or repair, see Alexander's discussion of functional aspects of the civil sphere, such as sedimentations, contradictions, and boundary relations; cf. Alexander (2006, pp. 193–209).

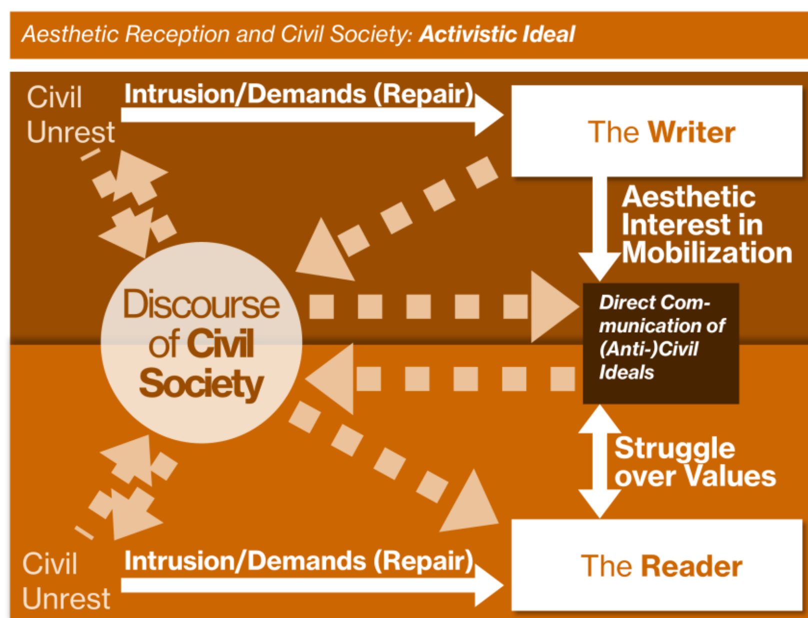

Figure 3: An outline of the activistic ideal of aesthetic reception and civil society. Each element draws strongly on the discourse of civil society; the relations are characterized by high input, struggle, and an aesthetic interest in mobilization.

For the activistic ideal, the mode of production and reception of the aesthetic does not stand in the light of a disinterested enjoyment, but as a means of deliberate communication of (anti-)civil ideals. This is the mode Alexander writes about when he maintains that 'novels mobilized public opinion against polluting threats to the ideals of civil society' (Alexander 2006, p. 79). The notion of mobilization is crucial; I translate this into an aesthetic interest in mobilization on the side of the *writer*. The *reader* similarly demands the communication of ideals. Readership is thirsty for intrusion, correction, or repair. The receiving actor does not recursively find themselves in self-reflecting aesthetic enjoyment. Solidarity is urgently demanded.

This solidaristic urgency is as much characterized by the work as by the performative context. The *performative context* is one of civil unrest or even civil breakdown in which, as mentioned above, a novel is read differently. Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* was so effective because of the civil upheavals of its time; today it endures as a reminder of a moral sentiment about poverty and migration. Similarly, literary aesthetics have contributed to lasting symbolic constructions of ethical solidarity as a class sentiment (Eiden 2017). But this may also mean that a novel that was not necessarily intended to be engaged in civil discourse might eventually be received as such because of the reader and their circumstances. We can find Kafka in this category, whose works are at times read as civil critiques of totalitarianism, legal oppression, or authoritarian rule. Usually, however, this

mode of reception requires a specific authorial voice that is made to speak directly to the ideals of (anti-)civil discourse by a concrete readership. Thus, the aesthetic is, commonly by both the writer (in production) and the reader (in reception), used as a mediator of concrete ideals in a tangibly accusatory, hopeful, or rectifying form. It is employed as a means of mobilization in above mentioned public court of opinion.

Note that the distinction that I propose here is neither empirical nor absolute. It is analytic and provides a heuristic with which empirical cases such as that of Whitehead can be better understood. I decidedly do not argue that literary fiction, or any form of art, is either artistic or political, highly aesthetic or socially integrative. I do not argue that novel X is just artistic and novel Y just activistic. Much rather, my conception highlights that a distinct constellation of work, audience, and society en large is required in order to talk about possibilities of situating a novel analytically as more artistic or more activistic. This comparison of ideal types shows that there is no black and white when it comes to aesthetics alone. The concrete work that is ordinarily being called a highly artistic one can also contain elements of activism. Likewise, and this is crucial for our discussion below, a more activistic work can still be artistic. Perhaps the extreme here proves the point. The fact that society commonly finds it remarkable that artists produce highly sophisticated works in times of civil breakdown suggests that artistic complexity and its corresponding mode of an interest in disinterestedness are often seen as secondary when civil society is urgently needed as a corrective force. This tension between art and activism is evident in figures like Shostakovich, whose *Symphony No. 7*, written under siege in Leningrad, embodies both artistic mastery and civil urgency. Other examples such as Malaparte's *Kaputt*, or Picasso's *Guernica* similarly point to this; civil unrest or even breakdown does not necessarily mean that there is a radical loss of artistic quality; quite the contrary can be the case (Eichler 2024). A subsequent question here is: what if activism *is* indeed the defining aspect of a work of art? In other words, what if society defines art, in an extreme sense, more in terms of moral content than formal innovation? We will come back to this question in our discussion below.

The Authorial Voice

The literary aesthetic has most weight of all elements discussed here. It is the authorial voice that influences the receiving audience most directly, and it is the writer who may fit the aesthetic to this specific audience, its time and civil discourse. The writer *transforms* real world or imagined events into a narrative that gives voice to concrete ideals through its aesthetic. In return, the symbolic 'ethical and moral meaningfulness of literature exists *because of* such aesthetic transformation' (Knöchelmann

2024a, 13; italics original). This—an *aesthetic transformation* that becomes visible as an authorial voice—is one of the transformations that we will encounter in the case of Whitehead. The other is the transformation of the writer himself from one who fits his aesthetic more to the interest in disinterestedness, to one who speaks more activistically through his work. Both these transformations mark, in their own ways, transformations of the relationship to the civil sphere. This is a key characteristic of the Whitehead case. It is marked by an inverse relationship where the willingness of the writer to write more civilly engaged marks the dwindling of the voice of civil society in the aesthetic itself. In both transformations, the differentiated relations to the civil sphere play the crucial role as facilitators of input and intrusion.

The writer, of course, is an ordinary actor; Whitehead has no higher moral vantage point and can fail like the individuals he is depicting. Writers try to make sense of what is going on and provide this learning process as hermeneutic devices to the public, who can fail to identify the ethical-moral dimension just as well. Consider *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, whose civil meaning works differently within today's civil sphere than it did a century and a half ago. The work has not changed, but the audience and its morality have. As a result of this, the novel's civil codes became highly ambiguous. Nevertheless, it had a strong moral impact in its time, and this impact is particularly visible in the backlash that it originally triggered (Pettegree 2023). It is read differently today, by both conservatives and progressives.

This is true for contemporary works just as well. However, there are moments when all elements seem to line up in the right order, which further enhances the impact of their relations. These are, for instance, times of civil unrest in which a progressive public finds a writer who performs as a guide by providing civil orientation—and the writer can position themselves as such a guide of civility both as an authorial voice (in the aesthetic) *and* a writer (in interviews and essayistic writing), suggesting that a voice of civil society really speaks through their texts. Literature here means providing arguments pro or contra solidarity: are you on this or that side of the color line? It is at the core this binding toward solidarity that drove Whitehead's conversion, as we will observe in the next section.

B. The Writer Colson Whitehead in Transformation: Assuming a Voice of Civil Society

In this section, we will follow the trajectory of Colson Whitehead as a writer in his times. This will highlight the relation of writer to social and political context. It will illustrate how the discourse changed in this context, particularly through the rise and fall of the symbol of Post-blackness vis-à-vis political upheavals, which formed the backdrop for Whitehead's own engagement with the discourse of civil society.

Post-blackness, a concept brought into mainstream discourse by Touré Neblett (Touré 2012), emerged from the artistic and literary scene as a response to rigid definitions of Black identity in the America of the late 80ies and 90ies. Touré is a left-liberal voice, and his key concept of Post-blackness carried normative ideas about what it should mean to be Black, emphasizing fluidity and the authenticity of individual experience. Rather than being defined by a singular cultural environment or a fixed set of characteristics, Post-blackness rejected essentialist notions of Blackness. It sought to move Black identity beyond symbolic stereotypes and a sense of inherent otherness—or it tried to destruct otherness in general through new forms of Blackness. While oppression and struggle were acknowledged as part of the Black experience, they should no longer be its defining features, nor should they be central to the lives of Black individuals. Symbolic representations of racial injustice thus receded into the background. To be Black according to Post-blackness would not necessarily mean advocating for solidarity against racism. In the context of the civil sphere, the possibility of a Post-blackness discourse was likely because of the broader civil equilibrium of society generally. (Black) society was more content with the status quo; civil frontlash or backlash were not on the daily agendas.

Focus on the Artistic Noir Novel: Whitehead's Early Career

A shortcut reference to Post-blackness is: racism cannot be denied, but it should not be the defining feature. This relates to both Whitehead's early work and his biographical features. Whilst growing up in a middle-class household in Brooklyn, Whitehead did experience racism, but this experience was neither as strong enough a burden to pave the way for the structural disadvantages that all too often follow racism, nor did it dominate his early art. After his own experiences with Stop and Frisk, Whitehead did not rebel against the police, leading only to more police and more rebellious acts, the potential of a downward spiral heading straight to Rikers Island. Instead, Whitehead went to Harvard to study English Literature and only there chose to write.

Whitehead majored in English Literature but was rejected from a writing course. He therefore emerged a self-taught writer with a specific artistic sensibility. The strongest influence in his youth was not literary fiction or intellectual activism, but pop culture, particularly Marvel comics, Stephen King novels, and John Carpenter movies (Sandhu and Whitehead 2019). Back in New York City, his training consisted of writing reviews for an alternative left-liberal magazine with enormous cultural capital—*The Village Voice*—for which also Touré wrote. Whitehead composed a first novel on the side that got rejected by publishers because of its complete lack of plot. This criticism got him to read detective fiction to learn more about constructing not just an intriguing idea, but executing it in a compelling fashion. One thing led to another, and the idea of *a joke detective novel* was born (Thompson 2006). This would eventually become *The Intuitionist*, and it arranged the signature style of the early Whitehead: a combination of a fast-paced, but complex story tending toward a noir atmosphere with an expansive underlying allegory; in other words, this was a Harvard-style take on the New York noir. In form, this is a reflective narrative that requires an attentive reader. It deals with racism, but in a highly ironic tone. This is no activist art; there is no straightforward urge to be more in solidarity with the anti-racist cause in the authorial voice (as we will see below). In this sense, this early work fits the Post-black sentiment and its civil equilibrium.

This sentiment continued to permeate his next writing projects. The ideals of the civil sphere had only little impact, just as the performative public context remained relatively content. Whitehead even plays with the symbolism of the educated Black writer (that he had become) in his early work by ironically breaking the authorial voice whose identity is fixed in a more solidarity-demanding public imagination. In *Sag Harbor*, an autobiographically inspired novel of a Summer on Long Island, the main character, representing the teenager Whitehead, shows himself to be clueless about famous Black voices of emancipation. Marcus Garvey, Toussaint L'Ouverture, W. E. B. Du Bois—these names are supposed to be unknown to the adolescent memoirist who would nod in agreement if they come up in mundane conversations, and he would silently scold himself that he does not know who they are. This novel is the work that is most drawn away from social criticism of all of Whitehead's works. The memoirist admits about Du Bois that it was only 'later in college I'd read his most famous essay and be blown away' (Whitehead 2009a, p. 18). This impression of being blown away is indeed visible in Whitehead's first novel in which Du Bois lingers in the background, but does not assume frontal stage. All in all, this early work is one of ironic plays that mirror the Post-black sentiment. The more activist, counter expectation—that is: the anti-Post-blackness expectation—of the day to write about race in the South and to accommodate to a certain Black

author identity did not pertain to Whitehead: 'I didn't want to do what I'm supposed to do as a black writer' (Kachka and Whitehead 2016).

Thus, civil equilibrium allowed Whitehead to engage with themes of race without making racial struggle the central focus. The same can be said—and is maintained by Touré—about Obama's presidency; there was a Black president, but the presidency was not defined by a more traditional, solidarity-seeking symbolism of Blackness. *Sag Harbor* was the first of Whitehead's books to be published during this Post-blackness presidency and it reflects the sentiment of avoiding the struggle for justice. The political and social context appeared stable enough for the writer to make only weak engagements with the discourse of civil society. Touré wrote in response to Whitehead's Post-black voice that 'Post-blackness sees blackness not as a dogmatic code worshiping at the altar of the hood and the struggle but as an open-source document, a trope with infinite uses' (2009). This was perhaps the zenith of the symbol of Post-blackness.

The Ambiguities of Post-blackness: Whitehead's Transformation toward Post-postblackness

Post-blackness began to draw criticism from prominent voices (Patterson 2011). Inconsistencies appeared between the normative ambition of the concept of Post-blackness and the everyday experience of individuals. Frustration grew over Obama's unwillingness to make a concrete commitment to racial justice. And moments of civil unrest intensified following the death of Trayvon Martin and the exoneration of the man who shot him, to pick just the most (negatively) iconic case. All this led to increasing doubts about the righteousness or even possibility of Post-blackness; it shifted the civil equilibrium toward unrest. And it is in the light of such rising civil unrest and the symbolic retreat of Post-blackness that Whitehead began to transform as a writer.

A first sign of this is an op-ed, a tart satire in which he heralded the era of postraciality in general. The text shows the intriguing juxtaposition of laugh-out-loud humor based on irony and dormant sadness that is pervasive throughout Whitehead's work. It sweeps over the symbolic shift to counter the idea that this presidency would actually be a redemption. And it gives a foretaste of Whitehead's civil ambition, which would come to fruition later during this first African-American presidency:

> Pop culture is the arena for our hopes, our fears and our most cherished dreams. It is our greatest export to the world. That's why as your secretary of postracial affairs I'll concentrate on the entertainment industry. (Whitehead 2009b)

This text marks the period of transformation for Whitehead, following the quieter times of candid memoir and Post-black individualism. Civil ambition rose during the intensification of debates on

race, which tried to recalibrate Blackness with the means of civil discourse. The Black Lives Matter movement got traction, public protests formed to create salience for a renewed Black cause. At the center of these protests was police violence, mass incarceration, and the way these issues depended on a symbolic framing of Black citizens—much of which we will encounter again in Whitehead's later works. This public conscience developed into a prime example of a civil society in action, attracting a large number of people to raise public awareness for an issue that is represented as morally wrong. It succeeded in moving key issues from the periphery of a putatively minority life to the center of public attention, making it meaningful in the lifeworlds of a majority that had not previously encountered the enormity of the problem (Lebron 2023). Public intellectuals testify to this heat (Coates 2015; Kendi 2021). And it was accompanied by growing, but still tame anticivil backlash, a more exclusive public opinion of we-ness that constructed an opposing symbolism of individual liberty, primordially white citizenship, and self-defense.

This sentiment formed the stimulus that made Whitehead move toward more explicit civil engagement, grappling with the difficult material underlying violence, contemporary modes of discrimination, and their historical roots in slavery. This material, eventually assuming the form of *Underground Railroad*, lay on Whitehead's desk for a long time: 'It took 16 years for me to finish the book' (Gross and Whitehead 2016). The first sentence was written already in the early 2000s, and from time to time Whitehead would turn to the file, but he never actually managed to transform idea and material into a novel. It took the civil sphere and its repeated public manifestations to turn historical material into a statement of solidarity with a concrete cause. The ambition to finally write *Underground Railroad* reflects this growing civil awareness that the fun of postraciality and the nuanced, ironic form of earlier novels was no longer funny if you consider how structural disadvantages prevail, and how easily racist discourse continues to thrive, African-American presidency or not. Whitehead claimed in this respect that the writing was not influenced by a particular killing, but by the temporal eruption of public attention to the structural causes of these killings (Kachka and Whitehead 2016). In other words, this was the moral sentiment of the time speaking. Referring to ambition and additional stimuli seems not too exaggerated, considering that this is the first work in which Whitehead not only turned art and civil engagement into a new balance. It also meant dealing with his own awareness that previously lingered only in the background. For the material was difficult not simply because of its violence and atrocity; it was disturbing for the writer because it was also a book about Whitehead's family history (OWN 2016).

Definite Post-postblackness: The Transformed Writer

Having set a sign in the form of a more activist work of fiction, Whitehead aimed to go back to the noir genre, to continue with his love for the great heist and the streets of New York. Then came Trump and the anticivil backlash that was latent finally erupted. Public opinion became further divided and claims were made that Black Lives Matter was just a communicative distortion of a radical left-wing minority. The civil sphere became fundamentally strained. Postraciality eventually proved to be more than a joke; it was a lived truth for entire (white) communities. In the silence amid opposing civil publics, racism continued to be an obvious burden for many. Whitehead's notion of history turned blunt and indicting, maintaining that 'We sort of make an advance, and then we go back two spaces' (Davies and Whitehead 2019). He started seeing things getting worse, particularly after the hopeful advances of civil awareness, those that allowed him to not confront racism with full force, to focus on the great heists of his early work.

After the election of Trump, Whitehead concluded that his best hope is to at least not experience a major setback during his lifetime. Direct solidarity was needed as a support for this hope, which translates to an aesthetic interest in mobilization. Thus, Whitehead discontinued work on the whodunit material again in favor of *Nickel Boys*, finally getting into the rallying cry that marks his art as fully engaged in civil discourse:

> I originally was going to follow up *The Underground Railroad* with *Harlem Shuffle*, but then after the last election—presidential election, I had to sort out my feelings about being in America. Are we heading in the right direction? Am I optimistic or pessimistic? (Gross and Whitehead 2022)

Nickel Boys is a statement so pessimistic that Whitehead had to force it out of himself: 'I didn't want to. I felt sort of compelled to.' (Davies and Whitehead 2019) It topped the depression he experienced during work on *Underground Railroad*: 'This is the first time I ever had, like, an extreme emotional reaction to working on something' (Simon and Whitehead 2019). Writing *Nickel Boys* 'really demoralized' him (Gross and Whitehead 2022). But he reasoned it was necessary, nonetheless, seeing what was going on in the public as well as the semi-public political elite: 'when I started writing it [NB] in the spring of 2017 I was horrified—the Muslim [travel] ban, an FBI chief being fired, hate crimes on the rise.' (Sandhu and Whitehead 2019) Those people who were not yet persuaded of the importance of Black Lives Matter—notably years before this activism gained the global attention it did in 2020 after the death of George Floyd—were unlikely to be further convinced by protests and informative statements. Perhaps fiction could contribute to more solidarity, and it was Whitehead's task to provide this activist fiction.

This transformation shows how Whitehead, the writer, came from an interest in artistic genre work toward one of civil engagement—a transformation from the highly ironic to the indicting. Whitehead took as an actor in the civil sphere what is available in the public and aesthetically transformed it into a morally meaningful statement of his time, performing in exemplary form as a cultural intermediary (Knöchelmann 2024a). This happened in two ways: in one respect, Whitehead literally fictionalized facts of American history; in another, he transformed the existing attention to injustice and the divided political sentiment into an impetus to create new work with an activist character. The meta-irony is that his novels show a reversed order. The more Whitehead appeals to civil society, the more its voice disappears from the pages. The result, *Nickel Boys*, is a direct, unveiled indictment of the murders of Black citizens and the acquittal of their killers. It is a statement against the fact that 'the guilty go free, and the innocent suffer.' (Davies and Whitehead 2019) For this rather explicit reason, Whitehead calls *Nickel Boys* a *Trumpian novel* (Sandhu and Whitehead 2019). This inverse transformation can be traced aesthetically in three steps, as we will do now.

C. The Aesthetic in Transformation: The Dismantling of the Voice of Civil Society

We will now reconstruct the transformation of the aesthetic that corresponds to the transformation of the writer by determining Whitehead's narrative engagements with the civil sphere directly in the works. This reconstruction focuses on three novels. *The Intuitionist* is primarily artistic; it can be read as a creative play on Du Boisian ideas. We then move on to *Underground Railroad* as an example of the transition toward civil engagement, before finally arriving at *Nickel Boys*. The transformation we are reconstructing here describes an inverse transformation compared to the transformation of the writer. The voice of civil society, which grew in the writer, receded on the pages of the novels.

The Intuitionist: White Lies, Black Lies

The Intuitionist is a story about the possibility of solidarity that is ultimately hopeful. The novel indeed embodies the hopeful sentiment that is also inherent in Civil Sphere Theory. This is marked by key transitions within the story, which turns from the negative (you are better off in the majority, leave the minority if you can) to an opposite, ambivalent but ultimately positive notion of resistance. All this takes place in an alien, futurist yet past present. Lila Mae Watson, the protagonist, works at the Department of Elevator Inspectors in New York in the 1960s, though place and time are never

explicitly stated. It appears obvious what an elevator inspector is, but it remains unclear at first why a novel about it should be captivating.

The clou of the surface story is that there are two warring camps. There are the empiricists, the majority of inspectors who check the technical workings and weak spots of elevators by rational investigation; and there are the intuitionists who are 'communicating with the elevator on a nonmaterial basis' (Whitehead 2005, p. 62). They *intuit* the operation of the elevator by riding it. This minority of inspectors, ridiculed by colleagues, are the followers of James Fulton, founder of both intuitionism and the Institute of Vertical Transport. Watson graduated from this school and is a passionate intuitionist. The accuracy rate of her inspections is, to the dismay of her empiricist colleagues, the highest in the department. The story gains traction when one of the elevators that Watson inspected fails dramatically, making her the core suspect of an investigation.[7] Watson is convinced that the incident is the result of manipulation and that she is merely a victim of greater forces. She begins a search of her own, and a classic whodunit ensues in which deceit and intrigue keep the protagonist on her toes. The greater forces involved are interrelated ones: politics and racism. Frank Chancre, President of the Elevator Guild and a proud empiricist, is running for re-election; and Watson is a Black woman. These forces position the context of civil society for the story: who solidarizes with whom? Will Watson be crushed or will there be, within the Black minority or across the racial divide, solidarity that supports her quest for justice? And yet the compelling drive of the story is not this search for justice but, as seems more justified in the context of Post-blackness conscience, the artistic contrivances of the story itself. It twists and turns, and the reader has to work hard to hold on to the search for justice.

At first it looks as if there is a simple tug-of-war. Symbolism for the impossibility of civil solidarity abounds. We find an aspiring Black woman in a metropolis where cultural code and materiality merge. Verticality leaps out at the reader: upward mobility is the driving social factor. The centers of capitalism would look different without elevators. But this is a white world, and those who remain at the bottom of verticality are said to do so for a reason. The material infrastructure metonymically stands for a streamlining in which *otherness* is doomed. Achievers sit high up in the towers. Black people tend to the cars in the basement. Solidarity appears impossible across the divide. In the words of Fulton, the mythical leader of intuitionism: 'horizontal thinking in a vertical world is the

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[7] Not without reason, the building this elevator is placed in is named after Fanny Briggs, 'a slave who taught herself how to read' (Whitehead 2005, p. 12). Such suggestive symbolism abounds in Whitehead's work.

race's curse' (Whitehead 2005, p. 151). But what race is meant here? It remains unanswered up until the story takes the first major turn, which unfolds the larger allegory that goes far beyond the fact that racism exists, a racism that so far manifested itself through inventive but ultimately generic codes.[8]

The First Turn and its Ironic Distortions of the Quest for Justice

This turn reveals a subtle play on a classic of American race theory, a classic that, as we have seen above, Whitehead turned to only late. The 'history of the American Negro is the history of this strife—this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self.' (Du Bois 2017, p. 7) At first, it seems that this strife is most evident in Watson, ambitious as she is within the symbolist-progressive, vertical world of white capitalism, only to emerge even more clearly in Pompey, a colleague whom Watson—wrongly, as she bitterly discovers later on—accuses of constructing the failure of said elevator. Ultimately, however, it is one of the most unlikely characters with whom readers will identify this strife: James Fulton.

Intuitionism appears to be the result of the work of just another white man. Being white, James Fulton invented this practice without much daring, and bequeathed it to his followers in two tomes of abstract language. Watson knows them by heart, and also knows that Fulton worked on a third work, to complete his lasting imprint. Her admiration for Fulton even goes so far that she learns his handwriting in the archive, writes classwork in his hand. Nevertheless, she must admit to herself (and the reader) that she has never quite deciphered the language behind the writing of this white man, the meaning underlying the towering theory.

This meaning seems to show itself the moment, almost *in passing*, the reader finds out that for Fulton, 'the darkness in his skin sleeps' (Whitehead 2005, p. 138). We dive into this meaning in a remembered scene in which an older Black man recognizes the child James Fulton as a white boy by letting him in front of the line in a grocery store. It is an epiphany for Fulton (and the reader) as they suddenly awaken to the strange life of appearances. Fulton's Blackness was so light that the older Black man believed he is white; of course, it was Fulton's to be first in line then. This is Fulton's

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[8] Such codes on the surface are frequent, but they seem to be meaningless to the drive of the story. Take the moment when Watson remembers that she 'hasn't been in a fight since the third grade, when a young blond girl with horse teeth asked her, *Why do niggers have curly hair?*' (Whitehead 2005, p. 24). Or it is the element of the colored men who are serving the fleet of the dominantly white department, men who are pushed back like modern slaves: 'This space in the garage is what the Department has allowed the colored men—it is underground, there are no windows permitting sky, and the sick light is all the more enervating for it.' (Whitehead 2005, p. 18) Or it is the series of racist jokes delivered by two comedians to an almost exclusively white audience that laughs raucously (Whitehead 2005, pp. 154–156).

beginning to pass as white,[9] and it is the reader's initiation to think in reverse about what Fulton has accomplished because he *got rid of his Blackness.*[10]

In the context of the civil sphere, the trope of *passing as white* is to be understood as an aesthetic play on primordiality. Primordiality is essentializing in that it 'attributes qualities to persons by virtue of their membership in a particular group' (Alexander 2006, p. 195). Contingency allows Fulton to break with this unbreakable attribution of meaning. The possibility of solidarity is no longer denied because of a primordial divide. Instead the story seems to oppose it as this main character appears to have betrayed his people, most of all Watson. Fulton emerges unexpectedly as an ultimate embodiment of a false consciousness, disguising his complexion to make a difference in the white world, challenging it without daring to actually challenge it. In the context of Post-blackness, such a twist seems to demand the ironic—or perhaps cynical—question of whether such a passing as white can be an element of the Post-black experience. It shows how the aesthetic plays with the symbolism of in-/justice rather than directing attention to one side of the moral discourse.

The Next Turn: Solidarity Ironically Restored

The reader is left to reflect again as Watson comes to learn about the even more 'luminous truth' (Whitehead 2005, p. 230), the even deeper strife that binds this story. By pushing him to pass as white, Fulton was denied to 'be *both* a Negro and an American' (Du Bois 2017, 7; emphasis mk). Although he escaped the oppression of the majority discourse in public, he still felt its weight in

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[9] *Passing as white* is a long-time literary theme. A great early literary rendering of it was Nella Larson's novel *Passing*. Noteworthy here is the way in which racial passing is not only a crossing of the color line and the divided identities associated with it, but also a crossing of class and geographic boundaries, showing how these are intertwined. Further, less than a year after the publication of *Intuitionist*, Philip Roth published one of his most lasting works, *The Human Stain*, which also features this theme prominently. Interestingly, the two novels approach passing in very different ways: structurally and individualistically. Roth's main character does not rage against the structural insult that the passing has done to him. Whitehead's Fulton, on the other hand, is not confronted with an individualistic decision situation in the classic tragic way. Confronting these two versions of racial passing reflects a confrontation of white and Black imaginations of a struggle for equity within two different writer identities. The picture becomes even more complex given that Coleman Silk, Roth's character, lives not only as a white American, but as a Jewish white American.

[10] To return once more to Whitehead's play with symbolism, the reader gets in intuitionism a strong sense of cliché as they go through the story, picking up fragments of the writing of the eminent Fulton like reading snippets and proverbs of a modern-day Bible. These are opposed by the actions of empiricists or what Watson thinks of them, of the voices of the civilized majority. Inevitably, the great powers come into play within this meaning-making. The empiricists dominate politics, intuitionism seems reserved for outliers. Once the latter is accused of being voodoo (Whitehead 2005, p. 57), a suggestive connection is being made to African-American religious roots. This again evokes Du Bois: 'The Negro has already been pointed out many times as a religious animal,—a being of that deep emotional nature which turns instinctively toward the supernatural.' (2017, p. 148). This opposition ultimately leads up to the question of whether the challenge to empiricism might be a challenging of science with a new—but initially white—religion: the unquestioned delusion of the modern, rationalist machinery on the one hand, and a metaphysical, indeed intuitively more humane trust of emotional senses on the other; calculating the world versus a resonant being-in-the-world. The question, in the end, is not whether it *is* a religion, but what effect these surface codings have in society, intermediated by the reader before they find out that Fulton actually was Black all along.

private. Taking this as the beginning, not the end, of the allegory, Watson has to realize this new turn step by step of recasting Fulton's identity.

Passing as white allowed Fulton to appear *as if* he succeeded in the majority world. But he never got the personal returns of this success. For the discourse of repression still burdened him, even more so than an *ordinary* member of the Black community. After all this struggle, Fulton found no other way than to make a joke of it, subverting the truth of racist discourse, of the silence of a white civil society vis-à-vis a Black cause. And as Watson (and the reader) must learn, intuitionism was this joke. There is no method, no system behind this school of thought. There was a Black man with a 'hatred of himself and his lie of whiteness' (Whitehead 2005, p. 239), and he turned this hatred into a joke, called it intuitionism, and sold it to the white authority. Yet the establishment believed it and took intuitionism as a serious challenge.

> White people's reality is built on what things appear to be—that's the business of Empiricism. They judge them on how they appear when held up to the light, the wear on the carriage buckle, the stress fractures in the motor casing. His [Fulton's] skin. (Whitehead 2005, p. 239)

It obviously did *not* work on Fulton, Black man passing for white; and the lie of a new method, a lie generated as a joke, passed, too. This proved that white people 'were all slaves to what they could see.' (Whitehead 2005, p. 239) Fulton constructed otherness as a joke, but it became institutionalized and, eventually, integrated into the vertical world.

This is a brilliant twist that takes Du Bois' idea on an artistic journey that ultimately highlights its ambiguities aesthetically. It opens an horizon of disinterested engagement with moral themes instead of thematizing the underlying morality in a directive fashion. We find here an aesthetic transformation that entices a reflection on the layered illusions that drive modern conscience, twisting in irony. Whitehead perfectly mirrors internalized beliefs. He arranges coded patterns that feel natural and unsurprising, leading the reader deeper and deeper into a tunnel at the end of which they find the shards of the oppressive civil discourse of the majority and, reflected in it, some possibility of civil solidarity. This solidarity might be found by overcoming easy binaries, whichever side you stand on. Throughout the story, Watson finds various friends and foes who first appear to neatly fit a predefined binary which often subsequently breaks down. As a result, the novel shows no easy way for how this overcoming of binaries might work. The reader is left with playful questions much more than with definite answers.

This debut marked Whitehead as an artistically highly ambitious writer: the racial allegory guy with a playful treatment of values and its coded nature. Even though Whitehead's voice is critical at its

core, the surface does not directly demand solidarity for a cause. The aesthetic can be enjoyed disinterestedly. Notions of solidary inclusion and exclusion, of honesty and lying, remain in a state of vivid ambiguity that the noir genre requires. And this artistry continued with the following works.

Instead of inventing a myth and hunting for its defective structure, Whitehead appropriated an existing one in *John Henry Days*. This novel is a third longer and lacks some of the fast paced narration of *Intuitionist*, but the handling of racism is again brimming with irony, which prevented attractiveness for a larger audience. Similarly, *Apex Hides the Hurt* lashes out to capitalism and contemporary media culture with a satirical and, again, greatly allegorical story of modern society. It was 'widely considered a disappointment' in the bestselling world, but not so for Whitehead personally, testifying to the way the aesthetic worked from the perspective of the artist (Kachka and Whitehead 2016). *Zone One* gets Whitehead back to the filthy streets of New York and deep into the zombie business, showing again primarily artistic inventiveness. All these works of the early Whitehead are literary underdogs; great in their artistry, but neither suitable for a really large audience nor for a direct condemnation of the dominant civil discourse. Only *Underground Railroad* really changed this.

Underground Railroad: The True Face of America

Underground Railroad is an indicting novel on slavery; it is artistically inventive, but only so to narrate a moral message. Its story juxtaposes multiple forms of slavery to reveal their common structural and enduring imprint: a silence of civil discourse. Nevertheless, there is still hope, even if it is hidden on the surface. The metaphoric-turned-real railroad itself is a manifestation of solidarity. And the novel retains some of Whitehead's signature moves as an artist, including play and irony. But these elements feature much less prominent on the page than in the preceding novels. The civil sphere enters center stage but its engagement is not yet as direct and indicting as it will be with *Nickel Boys*. It is in this sense that *Underground Railroad* performs, relatively, as a work of transition.

Whereas *Intuitionist* builds on a fast pace with its whodunit story, *Underground Railroad* captivates through its fragmented, sequential structure; it performs almost like a mini-series. The railroad hooks together different places and times that each contributed to the history of American evils: slavery on the plantation, medical experimentation, expulsion, capitalist exploitation, lynching. All of these manifestations revolve around the same anticivil binary: the degradation of Black (and Indigenous) people as inhuman, put opposite of enlightened white humanity. And whereas

Intuitionist would have unfolded this structural theme with many ironic twists, *Underground Railroad* exposes it quite blatantly.

The reader follows the heroine, Cora, on her journey from one form of slavery to the next, as if on a journey through the anticivil inflammations of US history. And when Cora (and the reader) is first introduced to the railroad, Lumbly, a sort of stationmaster, explains to Cora how the nation works. The symbolic pattern thereby explicated also serves as a meta-description for the construction of *Underground Railroad* as a whole:

> "Every state is different," Lumbly was saying. "Each one a state of possibility, with its own customs and way of doing things. Moving through them, you'll see the breadth of the country before you reach your final stop." (Whitehead 2016, p. 70)

Whitehead takes the reader on an odyssey that seeks to invalidate myths and assumptions of the kind of: it was not that bad. For a Black (and Indigenous) person, it was. So why not—contrary to Post-blackness—put the legacy of slavery back at the center of the black experience? Solidarity from within the white majority can hardly be expected. The breadth of the country is the breadth of a discourse of repression. Only the railroad and the characters involved form a boundary of solidarity, a we-ness hidden from daylight that sustains civil discourse at least part of the way. The idea of bridging the great divide is denied at each stop of the railroad.

The Underground Railroad: From Metaphor to Allegory

The historical *underground railroad* was a metaphor in the antebellum era. It existed as a symbolic code among slaves and abolitionists to refer to the system of save ways and shelters and, above all, network of trustworthy individuals that reached from the American South up to Canada. Already in its metaphorical existence among denied citizens, indeed among denied humans, this *underground railroad* was a morally charged symbol that went far beyond its descriptive metaphoricism. It represented the last glimmer of civility in a time of its absence. The *undergroundness* of this railroad formed a civil remove from the visible incivility of the American soil where darkness dominated.

This coded language is freed from its metaphorical life by Whitehead. There are stations, tunnels, trains—all that was taking place metaphorically becomes real. Solidarity manifests itself as a pounding, roaring machine. But Whitehead does not overcharge the materiality with an aura of fantasy; the railroad simply exists. This aesthetic simplicity is perhaps most perplexing to the reader. This underground railroad seems to say: there *are* helping hands you can rely on, only they are hidden because of their fragility in light of the railroad above. The symbolism of hope and

inspiration is juxtaposed with the American dream quite explicitly, the dream that only the majority should dare to dream. Lumbly, Cora's first station master, himself a free, white man, goes on to remark (blindly):

> "If you want to see what this nation is all about, I always say, you have to ride the rails. Look outside as you speed through, and you'll find the true face of America." (Whitehead 2016, p. 71)

This is a hint to the reader to connect the railroad underground with the one above, to connect metaphor and reality in their allegorical unity. It is the railroad above, the world is often told, that made the early American nation possible, that allowed the USA to unite in its physical expanse. The railroad is a symbol of freedom in a fundamentally collective sense. By giving slaves a railroad, too, Whitehead mirrors this and broadens the sense of who actually built this nation. The allegory contains both the substratum of Black solidarity and the exclusivity of American freedom. It offers the reader the opportunity to reflect on their understanding of the progress that made America, on the discourse of freedom that has more to tell than its positive notion of progressive mobility and expansion suggests. And yet this ambiguity is repeatedly suppressed by graphic reminders of injustice.

Glimmers of Hope in Despair: The Enduring Complicity in Anticivil Silence

With the allegory of the twofold railroad in mind, the reader travels through states of possibility, partakes through Cora in facets of slavery whose historical realities are uncoupled from their times to generate greater force in the story. This is the key indicting element of the novel for which the political context of the writer provided crucial symbolic means. As accounted for above, the writing of this novel took place in the context of the decline of the symbolism of Post-blackness. *Underground Railroad* itself mirrors this; instead of de-coupling Blackness from experiences of oppression and struggle, they are re-imagined as defining features in a highly concentrated form. And this new concentration ultimately inhibits a broader hopeful sentiment of civil progress. The possibility of civic democracy seems denied at the boundary of the nascent nation.

The railway remains a constant of hope, but on its journey it only seems to deliver more versions of despair. This haunts the reader from chapter to chapter. In between these poles of hope and despair emerges the feeling that, in the absence of solidarity within society, the minority has to maintain its own structures of civility, a counter discourse in the wake of the silence of the majority. At its core, this says without much irony: hide the voice of civil society, silence it in public. Solidarity can only

be achieved in darkness. Cora follows Lumbly's advice on her first ride: she 'looked through the slats [of the carriage]. There was only darkness, mile after mile.' (Whitehead 2016, p. 71)

And the reader can even get the sense of becoming complicit in this silence, of watching where one should not be watching, of remaining silent where there should be a civil uproar. But silence remains, like with the newspaperman who visits the plantation in Georgia, dines with the owners of (human) capital, scribbling down notes in between bites and the screams of Big Anthony's justice. Big Anthony, a slave, tried to flee but was captured again. Now he will be 'whipped for the duration of their meal, and they at slow', and they are only 'spared his screams, as his manhood had been cut off […], stuffed in his mouth, and sewn in.' And on the third day, while the civil superiors enjoy rum, Big Anthony is being 'dosed with oil and roasted' and the plantation owner explains his improvements to production to 'his Africans'; the 'newspaperman opened a fresh diary and resumed his note-taking.' (Whitehead 2016, pp. 46–48) This silence becomes a burden in the aesthetic. Whitehead increasingly employs it, and it anticipates the complete silence of *Nickel Boys*.

***Nickel Boys*: The Utter Silence of Civil Society**

Nickel Boys is about the utter silence of civil society during the Jim Crow-era South, told with the emotional pull of child abuse. This silence is evident where sheer cruelty prevails, and the vast majority looks on in complicity. With this work, Whitehead overcomes the ambiguity of transition that still marked *Underground Railroad*. *Nickel Boys* shows his outright aesthetic interest in mobilization. The primordiality of the coding of Black people that made the slavery of *Underground Railroad* possible is now omnipresent; its immoral consequences are shown with full force. The glimmers of hope that were visible in the aesthetic of the railroad have faded entirely in *Nickel Boys*. The novel's tagline is: the white society said it would behave differently, but their actions betrayed their words. It was a lie so systemic that the structural signification of Trump-era alternative facts makes for an obvious connection.

The Protagonist and the Ridicule of Civil Justice

The narration follows Elwood Curtis who becomes an inmate of a reform school in Tallahassee, Florida, in the early 1960s.[11] It is a narration that is different from *Underground Railroad* in its rigor,

[11] This reform school, called Nickel Academy in the novel, represents the historical Dozier School for Boys in Marianna, Florida. Changing name and place are the few surface variations that Whitehead undertook to mark this story as fiction. Racism, corporeal

and miles away from *Intuitionist* in its blunt criticism. There is neither structural allegory nor artistic subtlety. The content prohibits irony in the form and screams out loud: Post-blackness was a lie all along.

Elwood could be a voice of civil society, related to his idol Martin Luther King. But this connection is ridiculed from the start. Elwood is a diligent boy, eager to soon attend college, even though he is disadvantaged because of his skin color and its consequences. At first, this seems mild. He is abandoned by his mother and without much financial means. His one straw to get him out of this environment sets the story in motion: '*Martin Luther King at Zion Hill* was the only album he owned and it never left the turntable.' (Whitehead 2020, p. 11) Whitehead positions Elwood as a naive personification of King's thought, making him the distinguished bearer of a rising civil discourse that appears to consider Black people to be citizens with full rights. Whatever the hardship Elwood has to endure, he comes faithfully back to King and his sermon. What he can find out about the civil rights movement in magazines and newspapers becomes the north star of his strivings; the movement's leading figure's language becomes Elwood's language. Once he arrives in the reform school, he thinks of King to remind himself of turning 'degradation into action. *It will enrich your spirit as nothing else can.*' (Whitehead 2020, p. 64) Elwood is guided by the principle of non-violence when fellow inmates try to take revenge on one of their oppressors with a risky prank, turning down the offer to participate (Whitehead 2020, p. 121). And even when Elwood is later worn down by cruelty, he incantates King's notion of agape: '*But be ye assured that we will wear you down by our capacity to suffer, and one day we will win our freedom.*' (Whitehead 2020, p. 172)

The Black body, fractured into hundreds of boys in this school, seems to be this capacity, enduring, still breathing, but without light at the end of the tunnel. And though Elwood is shown to the reader to shake his head at the thought of what is asked of them, he continues to believe in the civility that this language draws on. This illustrates the naivety of this discourse being embodied by a single person. It is a naivety that believes in a rationality of the law that is not supported by society's moral sentiment. As when the news of *Brown v. Board of Education* reaches Elwood,[12] and he really believes

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punishment, sexual abuse are all historical fact which Whitehead accounts for openly in the acknowledgements, including his sources. And the narrator sometimes really sounds like Whitehead is simply documenting history rather than writing literary fiction:

> Most of those who know the story of the rings in the trees [which held the Black bodies during punishment and when they died] are dead by now. The iron is still there. Rusty. Deep in the heartwood. Testifying to anyone who cares to listen. (Whitehead 2020, p. 114).

[12] Proof of Whitehead's free handling of historical material is that this judgment dates to 1954; the novel is set in the 1960s.

that 'it was only a matter of time before all the invisible walls came down.' (Whitehead 2020, p. 18) It takes his grandmother, more experienced with the inertia of morality, to laugh at this naivety. Elwood is undeterred, but the reader gets the point. Morality is rooted in everyday actions, even if some larger movement makes it appear that there are new grounds of solidarity.

The Personification of the Binaries of Liberty and Repression

As if in a claustrophobia-inducing cell, Whitehead lets this theme echo through the story, most radiantly once he positions Elwood next to Turner, Elwood's closest companion in the school. They embody two languages: opposing applications of civil discourse. One is guided by a belief in liberty and the right, the other is despondent from the start and claims that there is only repression. Turner was never inspired by King's speeches; he had not heard the calling of a new civil discourse. This marks their difference. Elwood tries to make sense of what is going on at the academy, and the influence of a discourse that invokes a civility at the center is clearly visible:

> Elwood wondered if the viciousness of his beating owed something to his request for harder classes: *Get that uppity nigger*. Now he worked on a new theory: There was no higher system guiding Nickel's brutality, merely an indiscriminate spite, one that had nothing to do with people. (Whitehead 2020, p. 85)

Elwood symbolically moves from an internalized racist self-accusation to a vindication of people, claiming that this violence is more or less a contingent product of itself and not of a systemic disorder of society and the human nature. He truly seems to belief in the civil rights movement and its solidarity. This can be directly juxtaposed by a statement from Turner. When he explains to Elwood what *out back* means—the added level of violence that befalls only Black boys—he is devoid of such vindication, illustrating that the semantic sediment of democratic progress never reached their confines. Beginning also with racism, Turner moves toward accusing the nature of people generally. The disorder is not some autopoietic violence; this disorder *is* the majority society:

> The law was one thing—you can march and wave signs around and change a law if you convinced enough white people. […] You can change the law but you can't change people and how they treat each other. Nickel was racist as hell—half the people who worked here probably dressed up like the Klan on weekends—but the way Turner saw it, wickedness went deeper than skin color. […] It was people. (Whitehead 2020, p. 105)

It is striking that it is Turner who ultimately hands over a letter to external inspectors, written by Elwood, which marks the approaching climax of the story. Elwood lists in this letter all the punishments he had to endure, and it was the spirit of King that allowed him to write it down, like a letter from jail (Whitehead 2020, p. 173). When Turner realizes that Elwood does not have the

strength to hand over the letter to the white school inspectors who might recognize their plight and act accordingly, he delivers it himself. There seem to be two possible readings of this situation. One is that Turner overcomes his reasoning and symbolically conquers his civil dejection. The other is that, in the face of such injustice, only the nihilist can muster the strength to act. The fact that this action eventually brings Elwood, not Turner, *out back*, to another round of violent beatings and ultimately his death, will haunt Turner for the rest of his life.[13] This adds a third possible reading: the victims, whether influenced by civil discourse or not, have to speak for themselves, because no one speaks on their behalf, no one listens to their cause. This signifies the depth of the immorality that Whitehead wishes to convey; it is a silence of civil society that the Black boys themselves cannot break no matter what they try, no matter how hard they believe in solidarity. Elwood's single advantage—of knowing and living the words of King—appears to also be his greatest disadvantage. The white majority has nothing but derision for the symbolism of solidarity and hope.

Moralization Through Moral Despair

This moralizing—in the wake of Trumpian politics and Post-postblackness—really is what Whitehead delivers. In this way, *Nickel Boys* is lean, even elegant; it is an artistic achievement. It is economical in its narrative devices, concentrating on the most urgent items of violence and foregrounding only the most characteristic trajectories of reasoning: naivety and despair, the dark side that marks the silence of civil society. *Nickel Boys* is controlled in this respect. Yet ultimately it is also uncontrolled, even harsh, where the writer's hatred of the material breaks through, and this is the defining feature: Optimism? 'Optimism made Elwood as malleable as the cheap taffy below the register.' (Whitehead 2020, p. 38) Kinship? 'What kind of mother leaves her kid in the middle of the night? One that doesn't give a shit.' (Whitehead 2020, p. 125) Generational improvement? 'Their [white] daddies taught them how to keep a slave in line, passed down this brutal heirloom. Take him away from his family, whip him until all he remembers is the whip, chain him until all he knows is chains.' (Whitehead 2020, p. 191) In a way, this makes *Nickel Boys* a unique thick description of the dominant cultural script of its time. It erects a destitute surface that accounts for the then existing ideals by conveying anticivil discourse. All artistic elements align to carry the moral message.

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[13] The result of this death marks an aesthetic residuum of the earlier Whitehead. That is, there is indeed an ironic twist in the meta-story of *Nickel Boys* in which the story of the reform school is embedded. The reader gets the impression that this meta-story follows Elwood. But only where they learn that Elwood dies, on page 201 of 210, do they also learn that this meta-story in fact follows Turner. This seems ironic. Any yet, it is a very faint smile in the wake of a stupefying narrative. The fact that this little irony is based on the actual death of the protagonist, in whom the reader has placed all hope, only emphasizes the aversion to any kind of civil affirmation.

And where *Underground Railroad* allows some inspiration since solidarity is still there, albeit hidden, *Nickel Boys* is utterly hopeless. Whitehead leaves the narrator's voice no reason to doubt that a belief in civil discourse makes no sense at all given this historical material. His conclusion, placed in Turner's mind as he reflects decades later on the short life of his friend Elwood, exemplifies this despair, the essence of the destructive symbolic pattern that has shaped their lives:

> Silence was all the boy ever got. He says, "I'm going to take a stand," and the world remained silent. Elwood and his fine moral imperatives and his very fine ideas about the capacity of human beings to improve. About the capacity of the world to right itself. He had saved Elwood from those two iron rings out back, from the secret graveyard. They put him in Boot Hill instead. (Whitehead 2020, p. 207)

And in the end, even the railroad re-appears—the metaphor turned allegory of the previous novel. But where it symbolized a hopeful gesture before, this time there may not be a train. The Black body is left on its own:

> Turner, for his part, thought of the train they'd jump, he thought of the north. It wasn't as bad as down here—a Negro could make something of himself. Be his own man. Be his own boss. And if there was no train, he'd crawl on his hands and knees. (Whitehead 2020, p. 200)

Whitehead erects this story of despair over civil society to alert his audience to the structural implications of living in times of civil silence. It is indeed a call to action that says, without much artistic subtlety: speak up, counter the increasing silence of civil discourse, the reigning of its repressive, anticivil counterpart. It is a singular aesthetic foil for learning to judge differently, for cultivating a different empathy, deriving an overarching emotional pull from its surface content. It reads like a documentary whose concluding note does not rest on the particularity of this history but on the universality of the need for solidarity. Whitehead tries to garner empathy for the *afterlife* (Whitehead 2020, p. 189) of this academy that most of the readers have never heard of before. It is an empathy for structural hardship that is widespread in the history of racism, a transformative impact whose dark consequences are felt decades later: the Nickel boys 'had been denied even the simple pleasure of being ordinary. Hobbled and handicapped before the race even began, never figuring out how to be normal.' (Whitehead 2020, p. 166) By playing this out aesthetically before the reader's eyes, those who have neither experience nor knowledge of such a transformative impact are given a hermeneutic device to develop empathy and solidarity, indeed to actively nurture the emotional pull and cognitive strength on which civil society rests.

D. Discussion: Art and American Civil Society in the Bigger Picture

The previous sections illustrate three approaches to civil society: in theory, in the trajectory of a writer, and in this writer's art. All three are ways to reflect on moral meaning-making. Art carves out a meaningful narrative of (im)morality: the silencing of civil society in the novels studied reflects the historical failing of the American society and its structural continuations. The writerly trajectory offers insights into how such continuations turn to motivation; the writer constructs a meaningful persona to both position their work and themselves in relation to it. And the cultural sociological theory provides a framework with which such artistic and empirical realities can be understood. What generalizations can we draw from this tripartite approach? We will first reflect on the inverse function of Whitehead's transformations before trying to draw more general conclusions.

The Inverse Function of Whitehead's Transformations

Whitehead's earlier aesthetic was marked by playfulness, irony, and ambiguity. Even though there was critique of racial structures, *The Intuitionist*, if read politically in the first place, still portrayed civil society as a space where solidarity, positive discourse, and contestation were possible—even if imperfect. His use of allegory and irony allowed for an open-ended reflection on race, solidarity, and moral agency. The reader needed to actively interpret the civil sphere's role within the story, but could also enjoy the aesthetic more disinterestedly. There was no moralizing. And this corresponded to the hopeful sentiment of the American civil sphere generally. The normative standpoint of Civil Sphere *Theory*, rooted in American civic democracy, prescribes this hopeful perspective on civil society. This is the structural coding of Western progress, and there was positive belief in just this original Americanness in Whitehead's early work.

This changed with the development of the American public sentiment during the years of the (late) Obama administration. The early hope of this presidency gave way to despondency. Activism was needed to wake the public to pressing issues. Whitehead in this sense assumed the role of a civil actor whose novels could 'mobilize[…] public opinion against polluting threats to the ideals of civil society' (Alexander 2006, p. 76). We have seen this mobilization in the form of corresponding demands in the political and social context of a rising Post-postblackness. Civil unrest required stronger voices that tried to foster solidarity. And this, as we have also seen, became Whitehead's task, set for himself. He deliberately constructed novels that mobilized the civil sphere. But the discourse that constitutes civil society could not be restored artistically. Direct intervention led to the vanishing of the hopeful sentiment that Alexander normatively attributes to the civil sphere.

Whitehead's writing thus demonstrates that the relative autonomy of culture is indeed far more relative than assumed in theory: the more specific the cultural context, the more differentiated the cultural discourse becomes.

Whitehead's mobilization created a world in which civil society had already failed, where hope for dialogue, reform, or solidarity had been replaced by silence, cruelty, and despair, and he needed to communicate this. In *Nickel Boys*, there is no ambiguity, no open playfulness—the reader is given a world where civil society is silent, complicit, or non-existent, and they can hardly read this narrative disinterestedly. The judgment is direct and not open to much interpretation. *Underground Railroad* stands (analytically) in between these two more ideal types. It retains a sense of allegory and metaphor, which is most tangible in the manifestation of the underground railroad as a real railroad. But it is, particularly in its compression of different forms of slavery, strongly indicting, too. In comparison with other works of Whitehead, it is also relatively less hopeful for civil repair.

This inverse relation is ironic in itself; in a (meta) way, this irony of the writerly transformation replaced the irony of the authorial voice. The more Whitehead's work became a statement of solidarity with civil society, the more the voice of civil society itself disappeared from his novels. By the time *Nickel Boys* reached the American public, amidst the first Trump administration, civil society had largely vanished from the authorial voice, even though the writer intended to be a civil force. This is the meaning of the *Trumpian novel*. It is an aesthetic mobilization that portrays civil society as broken, complicit, or absent, offering no hope for repair but instead generating a moral urgency that draws all attention to civil despair. The *Trumpian novel* says: society has failed social integration. Thus, this kind of artistic mobilization is always also a fundamental critique of the possibility of the civil sphere as such.

The Broader Idea of Activist Art

All this reflects not just Whitehead's evolution as a writer, but a broader cultural and political crisis in which American civil discourse itself seems to be failing. We might, thus, think of these transformations and its inverse function not as an idiosyncrasy of Whithead but as a particular case of a more general development. This would suggest the generalization that, as a writer takes on a more direct, activist role in contemporary American society, their work ceases to depict civil society as a contested but still functional means. Instead, it presents a world where the civil sphere has collapsed, and only individual suffering or isolated resistance remains. The very normativity of the hope of civil discourse is denied.

This is what Whitehead does. But it takes a public sentiment that maintains a correspondingly unambiguous application of civil discourse. It is a (critical) public who says: *this* is civil and *that* is anti-civil, which becomes the unfailing heuristic to judge works of art. Historically, this is not what literary fiction does, especially when it is politically disinterested in a polemical way. Just as the civil sphere gives voice to both civilizing and anti-civilizing currents, any writerly moral imagination in literary fiction is always also an *im*moral imagination. The good and right of one actor is nothing else than the evil and wrong of another. Aesthetic playfulness opens ways of de-centering the putatively clear binary. Yet, from a normative perspective of progressive civility, literary fiction is constructed as a record of error, even if society has made progress toward a more inclusive and democratic state. Literary writers whose texts are praised by liberals or progressives, or conservatives respectively, for their civil engagement transform social progress into an aesthetic whose underlying symbolic pattern says: this was not enough.

It is in this sense that Whitehead's later authorial voice aligns with the dominant critical judgment. The constellation of Post-postblackness works in his favor such that the moral indictment of a *Trumpian novel* becomes a defining feature of cultural production. Rather than calling for solidarity through depicting its presence, Whitehead's later works highlight the absence of solidarity to emphasize said moral urgency. This is why *Nickel Boys* is so stark—it demands civil engagement precisely by showing a world in which civil engagement has utterly failed. This marks the broader convergence of art and activism, which brings us back to the initial question of how literary fiction negotiates the balance between artistic expression and political engagement. Whitehead is just one example, but as one of the most successful literary voices in contemporary America—particularly as a writer from a minority background—he is an instructive case for the American literary scene. The early writer was ambiguous. In later works, the answers are clear. The fact that these later works, rather than his earlier, more ironic ones, attained both critical and material success affirms this convergence between literary prestige and political engagement.

From a traditionalistic artistic perspective, Whitehead lowered the bar with his move toward outright social criticism. He has stepped out of an artistic niche into the limelight, amidst a cultural context in which art and activism are increasingly corresponding with one another. In turn, more traditionalistic criticism identifies Whitehead's transition as only another outburst of wokeness, a subordination of the autonomy of a Black writer to a left-liberal, progressive mass audience. Thomas Williams, for instance, called Whitehead's turn toward mainstream-expected Blackness, 'an accomplished concession to the mandates of wokeness', only to concede that, all the while,

Whitehead's style allowed him to have this utterly woke 'Southern Novel of Black Misery and stand ironically apart from it too' (Williams 2016). In a similar fashion, Whitehead's style in the *Underground Railroad* is said to be marred by *didacticism*.[14] Such accusations are reflections of the shift from reflective enjoyment to activism; the more disinterested aesthetic does not urge the reader didactically—the activist one does. But this reflection is as much one within the work as within society; the critic contributes to the shift since it requires an entire constellation of work, audience, and critical public to comprehend art as an historically-situated, activistic medium. The mainstream-expected Blackness is one that is precisely *not* Post-black, it defies its ideals of fluidity and openness. Mainstream-expected Blackness means dealing with oppression in a way that confronts the reader directly and openly, which is what Whitehead began doing with *Underground Railroad*. Yet, he also achieved to stand apart because of some residual ironic features. Those ultimately left the work in *Nickel Boys*.

Material Indicators of the Success of Activist Art

It *could* in this sense be understood that the desubtilization of Whitehead's civil voice appears to fit the image of a Black writer who feasts on a wave of wokeness, understood in material terms as making good money with the public accusation of racism. Material success seems to confirm this perspective. *Intuitionist* is praised by critics as a highly artistic debut (Krist 1999; Thompson 2006);[15] like the following novels, it is an underdog of sorts without the bestselling hit. The entire early oeuvre thrives on the integration of subtle criticism and artistic niche quality. They are by no means commercial success stories. *Underground Railroad* changed this radically, not least because of the early public attention that triggered an immense uptake. To start with, there was a 16,000 word pre-publication selection in the print edition of the New York Times on Sunday, August 7, 2016. *Underground Railroad* got recommendations from voices such as Barack Obama and Oprah Winfrey.[16] It was even pushed to be published a month earlier, which is unusual in the rigid business of high-profile publishing. But Winfrey's announcement to put the novel on her list got the publishing machine to speed up (Kachka and Whitehead 2016). And yet, *Underground Railroad* was awarded several of the most important literary prizes, among them the 2016 National Book Award for

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[14] 'For all its virtues, "The Underground Railroad" is marred by a tendency to awkward didacticism that a Toni Morrison ("Beloved") or Charles Johnson ("Middle Passage") would never tolerate.' (Cryer 2016).

[15] Find only John Updike's praise of the early work of this 'blithely gifted writer' (Updike 2001).

[16] Cf. whitehouse.gov (2016); OWN (2016).

Fiction and the 2017 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction. This is proof that, even if the style has lost its genre flavor, the writer is indeed an extremely accomplished one. Obama also recommended *Nickel Boys* (2019), again enforcing sales through reliable promotion. Whitehead also got the 2020 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction for *Nickel Boys*, making him the first African-American to receive the prize twice. This critical success only speaks to the convergence of art and activist engagement.

Whitehead's Goodreads ratings add even more depth to this picture.[17] Without determining really what the rating can mean, there is a clear tendency: *Intuitionist* scored a 3.63 average with 14,326 ratings, *Underground Railroad* 4.06, with 397,571, and *Nickel Boys* 4.26, with 241,941. Note that Whitehead's overall rating average is 4.05 (with 794,011 ratings). *Underground Railroad* and *Nickel Boys* are the only books that are above Whitehead's average as well as above 4, meaning, at least, that the many readers who gave their quantifiable opinion saw those two books as the reason Whitehead is the fine author a 4+ rating purports to be. Then again, it is unlikely that readers of the early 2000s, when *Intuitionist* appeared, voted on Goodreads years later, in 2007, and afterward, once the site was up and running. But the image of a quantified public seems already biased for such a discussion. It does not ask what the writer's voice says but projects the horizon of possible answers straight into the question. It shies away from taking seriously the importance of Whitehead's voice, even his explicit concern for the historical material and the civil sentiments of his time. *Underground Railroad* and *Nickel Boys* are harrowing reads; still millions of readers took to them, and this already means a lot. It is this meaning that defines the material, not the other way around.

This shows that readership and critical public appear to be on Whitehead's side where he turns to outright civil accusation. And it confirms the analytic ideal types and the way its different elements line up in a certain convergence of symbolic means and expectations. The far-reaching reaction to Whitehead's later work—also considering that both *Underground Railroad* and *Nickel Boys* are turned into motion pictures—coupled with a broad public discourse on the immorality that is being narrated, demonstrates how society was ripe for direct civil mobilization through the literary aesthetic. For the audience, this was not a question of activism *or* art. The differentiation of civil discourse and aesthetic acclaim is only analytic. But a comment such as Williams, made in one of the most important left intellectual media (the *London Review of Books*), shows how this differentiation is actualized in empirical reality. Williams, as a critic, took on a derogatory symbol, wokeness, to

[17] See Whitehead's Goodreads page: https://www.goodreads.com/author/show/10029.Colson_Whitehead (accessed on February 22nd, 2024).

discuss Whitehead's turn as a writer. This is in itself a statement of symbolic framing in that Williams' perspective was influenced by the discourse of his time, most of all by the failure of Post-blackness. Williams tries to hold on to Post-blackness features as well as to a more traditionalistic idea of artistic disinterestedness, where there should be a proud minority writer who—minority or not—advocates for an aesthetic interest in disinterestedness. The public had progressed, though. And Whitehead felt pressed by this progressive civil sphere to follow suit, to wake his audience up to an artistic call to arms. The result is that he became, in the context of a rapidly evolving civil sentiment, a majority writer who advocates politically. Indeed, as we have heard: 'Make art. Fight the power.' (Israel and Whitehead 2019) Whitehead's later work is still art, but it is supposed to speak up and not let the voice of the oppressed remain unheard. It lodges itself squarely in a public discourse in which art is no longer disinterested.

In the era of Black Lives Matter and Trumpian politics—when civil discourse appears to be in decline—there is little room for art for art's sake or for an aesthetic interest in disinterestedness. Literary prize juries, festival organizers, and critics increasingly act as participants in the civil sphere, amplifying works that explicitly engage with social justice issues. Other leading writers in the contemporary literary scene reflect this shift. Ta-Nehisi Coates (*The Water Dancer*), Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (*Americanah*), or Ocean Vuong (*On Earth We're Briefly Gorgeous*) produce works that are not just literary achievements but direct political statements. Their success suggests that contemporary American audiences and institutions reward literature that aligns civilly meaningful narratives with a public sentiment seeking moral reckoning. In this context, art no longer simply represents society in aesthetic distortions; the aesthetic actively and directly shapes political discourse, mobilizes solidarity, and defines moral boundaries.

Is this a radically new phenomenon? Perhaps not. We find Benjamin as the most forceful analyst of such a convergence. His was a response to the aestheticization of politics almost a century ago. It was an aestheticization that we today might identify in Trumpian politics whose use of facts appears so fictitious that it seems to be hardly more than fiction—if it did not produce so much material suffering.[18] Benjamin clarifies that 'Such is the aestheticizing of politics, as practiced by fascism. Communism replies by politicizing art.' (Benjamin 2010, p. 36) Whitehead is the left-liberal version of this politicization.

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[18] Or, it is so excessive that reality outdoes fiction. As Roth assessed half a century ago, the American reality 'is continually outdoing [the novelists'] talents, and the culture tosses up figures almost daily that are the envy of any novelist.' (1961).

The Next Chapter: Art is Still Possible

To be sure, the reading of moral concerns in this article, in the end, depends on whether we give credit to the possibility of this kind of civil society in the first place. It is a question of whether readers—of both theory and fiction—are embodying this particular language that Don DeLillo emphatically narrated as 'your voice, *American*, and there's a shine in his eye that's *halfway hopeful*.' (DeLillo 2022, 11; italics added) There is potential for renewal, but it is hidden. If we look at morality in a hopeful manner as the progress of a discourse of civil society, we indeed find that art and moral mobilizing can strike an affective balance over time. At a certain historical moment, this might tilt slightly toward one end, pushed by politics. In turn, at every step of our reading, there is a risk that this becomes a liability. Liberal hope demands that a reading of the silence of civil society empowers the individual to question their actions, to learn from a subjective testament of morality, to gain positive aspirations from an archive of the immorality of American society. This collective trust in individuality is the key in which also the *vital center* of American democracy plays.

Thus, whether Whitehead is a woke moralizer or not is already the wrong question. His balance of art and moral message is perhaps best seen as a pendulum that swings back and forth in relation to the authorial self and their political and social context.[19] The novels following *Nickel Boys* are again more ironic works. We are back in New York, the atmosphere returns to noir. Finally, there is the great heist that Whitehead wanted to write all along. And above all, civil society finds a new embodiment, one that bears all the ambiguity that genre literature seems to require. Carney, the protagonist of *Harlem Shuffle* (published 2021), is by no means an ideal personification of the civil rights movement; but the ideals of this movement are again visible in his characterization, grounded in everyday actions and solidarity for the collective. Instead of explaining what these ideals are, as an essayist or indeed an activist might do, Whitehead shows aesthetically what these ideals mean to the ordinary citizen, how they are ambiguous but still meaningful, embedded in the social drama of living on 125th Street in Harlem in the 1960s. Combining lived reality with the larger struggle of a time allows abstraction within a concreteness that many people can identify with. There is a lot to learn from that.

[19] Coda: After Trump's second election as president, Whitehead gave this desperate answer when asked about his hopes for the year 2025: "I have no hopes for 2025. Humanity is disappointing. We killed the Earth. Villains triumph and the innocents suffer. I imagine these trends will continue." Cf. Coy and Whitehead (2025).

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