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Ramón Saldívar

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The Second Elevation of the Novel: Race, Form, and the Postrace Aesthetic in Contemporary Narrative

A new generation of minority and ethnic writers has come to prominence whose work signals a radical turn to a “postrace” era in American literature. Like Virginia Woolf ironically identifying the beginning of the modern era “on or about December 1910,” Colson Whitehead, in an Op-Ed piece in the *New York Times* in 2009, marked the anniversary of the election of the first black man to the presidency of the United States by proclaiming that “One year ago . . . we officially became a postracial society.”¹ I will return to Whitehead momentarily, especially in reference to three of his novels, *The Intuitionist* (1998), *John Henry Days* (2001), and *Zone One* (2011). For the moment, however, I wish first to set the context for my appraisal of what I am calling here a “postrace aesthetic” in contemporary narrative.

The Meaning of Race in the “Postrace”

In undertaking this investigation into the inauguration of a post-postmodern, post-Civil Rights era in American fiction, I wish to make one thing clear about my use of the term “postrace”: race and racism are nowhere near extinct in contemporary America. Far from it. W. E. B. DuBois’s momentous pronouncement in 1901, that

Ramón Saldivar is Professor of English and Comparative Literature and holds the Hoagland Family Professor of Humanities and Sciences chair at Stanford University. In 2007, he was the co-winner of the Modern Language Association Prize for best book in the area of US Latina/Latino and Chicana/Chicano Literary and Cultural Studies for his book, *The Borderlands of Culture: Américo Paredes and the Transnational Imaginary* (Duke, 2006). In 2011, Professor Saldivar was awarded the National Humanities Medal by President Barack Obama. He is currently working on a new project, tentatively titled “Race, Narrative Theory and Contemporary American Fiction.”

“The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color line” could not have been a more accurate assessment of the fate of race during the twentieth century (354). DuBois’s conception of “the strange meaning of race in the dawning of the *twentieth century*” was internationalist, expansive, and global in its concern with the status of race “in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea.” That is, “concern with the matter of race” was a matter not defined by US racial politics and racial formations alone but one of salience to a broader global community undergoing the psychosocial processes of racial positioning. A hundred years after DuBois, in the first decades of the twenty-first century, race remains a central matter of American and global modernity. It does so, however, with a very different valence, as views are changing from formerly held essentialist notions of biological races to more complex understandings of race as an element of human experience based on ancestral group characteristics, shaped by psychosocial patterns, and institutionalized into political and economic structures of inequality.

In this regard, Paula M. L. Moya and Hazel Markus are certainly correct in proposing that while racism persists in contemporary America, the notion of race should not be understood as an attribute of personal identity but rather as a complex set of personal and social actions, a structure of *doing*, by which race is enacted and racial injustice perpetuated as “social, historical, and philosophical processes . . . actions that people *do*” (4; italics original).² Not based simply on random acts of individual intentions, the “doing” of race “always involves creating groups based on perceived physical and behavioral characteristics, associating differential power and privilege with these characteristics, and then justifying the resulting inequalities” (Moya and Marcus x). Moreover, focusing on the “doing” of race emphasizes the multiplicity and heterogeneity of *multi-racial* formations at play in contemporary society. How so?

According to various social scientists, what characterizes the nature of race and processes of racialization today are *post civil rights racial apathy, color-blind racism—racism without racists, or new racialized ethnicities*.³ In this context of post-civil rights racial apathy, color-blind racism, and newly racialized ethnicities, what then does the idea of “race” mean at the dawning of the *twenty-first century*? What are the mechanisms of what Moya and Markus have called the “doing” of race? What are the necessary conceptual shifts in our understanding of the meaning of race, and as a consequence of racism, in our times that allow the introduction of the notion that we have now entered into a “postrace” era? The novels I discuss in this essay address these questions.

To signal the continuing importance of race as a category of analysis, racism as an undiminished fact of contemporary American life, and white supremacy as the unacknowledged ideology of our times, along with a concomitant and untrammelled persistence of the desire for the transcendence of race and racism in the literature of the post-Civil Rights era, I use the term “postrace” as Colson Whitehead and other writers have suggested that we do: under erasure and with full ironic force. This formulation is useful for literary analysis because it helps identify the historical contradictions in the justification of racial injustice, discrimination, and oppression in terms that can then be related to the form and language of the literary text.

Whitehead is hardly alone in his ironic regard of a “postrace” America. In addition to all the talking heads, bloggers, pundits, and right-wing media types who are uncritically hailing the advent of a post-racist America, some very reputable writers, scholars, and public intellectuals have been raising the matter of the inauguration of a post-Civil Rights era in contemporary American society. Touré’s recent volume, *Who’s Afraid of Post-Blackness?* (2011), and Kenneth Warren’s *What Was African American Literature* (2011) both propose, albeit in different ways, that “in the aftermath of the Civil Rights movement, the most obvious expressions of segregation and discrimination give way to more covert but equally pernicious manifestations of racism” (Warren 5, n. 5, citing Smith ix).

In addition to Whitehead and Touré, a host of other writers are also exploring a post-postmodern, post-Civil Rights moment in American racial formations. I refer to writers such as African Americans Percival Everett, Dexter Palmer and Darieck Scott; Asian Americans Karen Tei Yamashita, Sesshu Foster, Charles Yu, and Larissa Lai; Native American Sherman Alexie; Latinos Salvador Plascencia, Junot Díaz, Michelle Serros, Yxta Maya Murray, and Marta Acosta. A case can be made for including Michael Chabon, Gary Shteyngart, and Jonathan Safran Foer’s recalibrations of Jewish and Yiddish ethnicity.⁴ An interesting set of these writers is represented in the June 4 & 11, 2012, summer issue of the *New Yorker* magazine dedicated to “Science Fiction” and the contemporary rise of “genre fiction” to represent and mediate the crises of the contemporary.

This cohort of authors insists on the urgency of the matter of race in the twenty-first century. They do so by creating a new aesthetic to deal with the meaning of race in our supposedly postrace era. I take Colson Whitehead’s novels *The Intuitionist* (1998) and *John Henry Days* (2001) as primary textual instances of these relations among racial history, form, and literary language. I also discuss *Zone One* (2011) in terms of the representation of historical contradictions of domination and in relation to the form and language of the literary text. In these novels, the *multi-racial* realities characteristic of the racialization of ethnicity in the United States are represented as an active *doing* that creates social structures and discourses that articulate a dialogical narrative of American social life based on multiplicity, heterogeneity, and difference, all of which then become rigidly hierarchical states of social and political fact. Twelve years into the new millennium, thirty years since the heyday of postmodernism, and nearly forty-five years since the emergence of racial, sexual, and political counterculture movements worldwide, it is time to explore, critique, and seek to understand the new aesthetic that I am calling the “postrace” aesthetic.

Focusing on the topic of race and narrative theory in relation to what I am calling “speculative realism” to characterize the narrative features of this aesthetic allows me to explain why it is the case that twenty-first-century US ethnic writers have initiated a new stage in the history of the novel. Taking my cue from Walter Scott’s generic mix of history and romance to invent the genre of historical romance from out of the global turmoil occasioned by Napoleonic world war, I propose the term “speculative realism” as a way of getting at the revisions of realism and fantasy into speculative forms that are seeming to shape the invention of new narrative modes in contemporary fiction.

Features of a New Aesthetic

I describe four features of the postrace aesthetic. While this outline is by no means comprehensive, it points out that the characteristics these authors share are not incidental or insignificant.

1) *Postrace aesthetics is in critical dialogue with the aesthetics of postmodernism.* A shared generational history among writers of the postwar era leads to a *dialogical relation* between postmodernism and US ethnic literature. Rather than seeing the rise of postmodernism and ethnic literature in the postwar era as two distinct and unrelated phenomena, viewing both within the domain of a shared aesthetic matrix allows us to see how postmodern and ethnic fiction were shaped by the same institutional histories and practices of creativity.⁵ Here we are in the context of *literary history*. Seeing postmodernists and ethnic minority writers within a dialogic context allows us to raise questions such as: Why has postmodernism and the study of contemporary narrative, with very few exceptions, been so unconcerned with minority literature? Or, put differently, why have minority writers, again with a few exceptions, found postmodernism such an inhospitable domain for their representations of contemporary social conditions? Junot Díaz's *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007), Salvador Plascencia's *The People of Paper* (2005), and Percival Everett's *Erasure* (2001) are exemplary instances of this dialogic and critical relation between contemporary ethnic fiction and postmodern metafiction. The key point in emphasizing this shared history, however, is that it allows us to identify a *dialogical relation* between postmodern aesthetics and the practices of a broad cohort of contemporary minority writers.

2) *Postrace aesthetics draws on the history of genres and typically mixes generic forms.* The cohort of the contemporary authors share a second feature that, like the first one above, also reflects a historical dimension, but in a different context, namely, that of *genre history and the mixing of generic forms*. The turn within ethnic narrative that I am describing here parallels a development that occurred at the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth centuries. In the midst of the revival of Romance from the mid-eighteenth to the early nineteenth century, writers like Walter Scott and James Fenimore Cooper invented a new narrative form as a reaction against neo-classical, anti-romantic strains of fiction, in favor of the Sublime, the Imaginary, and Gothic strains of magic, enchantment, and wonder. In his contribution to the *Encyclopedia Britannica* on the topic, Walter Scott defined Romance as "a fictitious narrative in prose or verse, the interest of which turns upon marvelous and uncommon incidents" (qtd. in Dekker 21). Conversely, he argued, a novel is "a fictitious narrative, differing from the Romance, because the events are accommodated to the ordinary train of human events, and the modern state of society." Scott adds: "there may exist compositions which it is difficult to assign precisely or exclusively to one class or the other; and which, in fact, partake of the nature of both." Thus, the emergence as a distinctly historical and generic phenomenon, of historical romance as a mixed genre. Scott himself, and Cooper certainly, give us exactly that kind of mixed genre, crossing the characteristics of fairy tale and romance, the uncommon and otherworldly, mixed with the ordinary train of everyday events. How might or-

dinary life be interrupted by uncommon incidents, and how might the manners of preceding centuries be juxtaposed against modern ones? As one prominent critic of the American romance form has noted, "Calling a novel a 'historical romance' [was] therefore to direct attention to its extraordinarily rich, mixed, and even contradictory or oxymoronic character" (Dekker 26). The mixed generic modes that we see appearing in countless ways in contemporary narrative mirror this historical phenomenon, but with a curious twist. Now the mixing of genres includes not just the canonic paradigms of classical, neoclassical, romantic, realist, and modernist origin, but also their outcast, lowbrow, vernacular, not to say kitschy varieties of what has come to be known as genre fiction, including the fantasy, sci-fi, gothic, noir, and erotic speculative writings of the postwar era. Of numerous possible instances of this feature of contemporary minority fiction, Dariack Scott's *Hex: A Novel of Love Spells* (2007), Sesshu Foster's *Atomik Aztex* (2005), and Michael Chabon's *The Yiddish Policemen's Union* (2007) (mixing historical fiction with sci-fi alternative history), and Sherman Alexie's *Flight* (2007) and Larissa Lai's *Salt Fish Girl* (2002) (blending myth and fantasy with elements of the traditional *bildungsroman*), all raise as formal and thematic concerns the very nature of genre itself in relation to matters of racial identity. I will return to this issue momentarily, but for the present: feature number two, therefore, concerns the contradictory and oxymoronic blending of history and the speculative genres.

3) *Postrace aesthetics is invested in speculative realism.* The third aspect concerns the end product of the historical impetus of the first two and leads to a return to the topos and form of "realism" and the Real in literary production, literary studies, and philosophy itself, but in the revised form of what I want to retain as "speculative realism" as a hybrid crossing of the fictional modes of the speculative genres, naturalism, social realism, surrealism, magical realism, "dirty" realism, and metaphysical realism. That is why I find myself fascinated by the "weird realism" emerging from the group of contemporary philosophers that includes Alain Badiou, Ray Brassier, Quentin Meillassoux, and Graham Harman.⁶ The relationship between philosophical "speculative realism" and literary explorations of a return to realism as an aesthetic mode is far from precise or direct. Nevertheless, I find that in their exploration of a line of inquiry that refuses the hegemony of postmodern metaphysics, the authors I refer to here align themselves with a kind of critical realism that I term speculative realism. Prominent in the writings of Junot Díaz, it is a form that is also pervasively present in Yxta Maya Murray's *The Conquest* (2002), Colson Whitehead's *John Henry Days* (2001), Charles Yu's *How to Live Safely in a Science Fictional Universe* (2010), and Gary Shteyngart's *Super Sad True Love Story* (2010).

4) *Postrace aesthetics explores the thematics of race in twenty-first-century America.* For this generation of writers, born for the most part in the 1960s and '70s, the heroic era of the struggle for Civil Rights is not a personal memory but a matter of social history. At the beginning of the twenty-first century, a changing relationship between race and social justice, race and identity, race and history now requires American writers of color to invent a new "imaginary" for thinking about the nature of a just society and the role of race in its construction. While all of the authors I have referred to emphasize this specific aspect of the aesthetic I am describing, Junot

Díaz's works, Percival Everett's numerous novels, including especially *Erasure* (2001) and *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* (2009), Karen Tei Yamashita's *Tropic of Orange* (1997), and Colson Whitehead's novels do so with the particular aim of reconfiguring the thematics of race.

I wish to account for these four aspects common to the writings of contemporary American writers and the defining aesthetic that results from a new racial imaginary that is being forged around us. As a cohort, these authors share these characteristics, not as a merely contingent and random assemblage of features common to a vaguely defined spirit of the age but as matters that go to the heart of their aesthetic projects and a new racial imaginary.

To get at what the elements of such a new imaginary might be, I want to focus on the topic of race and narrative theory in relation to the question of literary form and history. This focus will allow us to see why it is the case that twenty-first century US writers, especially writers concerned with matters of racial identity, have initiated a new stage in the history of the novel. We will want to see how the traditional forms of the American novel, including its realist, protest novel, and *Bildungsroman* forms, as well as the historical novel, the magical realist, and the postmodern metafictional novel are altered in the context of the contemporary drive to represent a new stage in American fiction, racial politics, and the aesthetics of its symbolization.

How do these forms adjust the traditional modes of literary realism to represent the experiences of decolonization, modernization, and postmodernity in the Americas from the nineteenth to the twenty-first centuries? I address questions such as the poetics of genre and the generative power of generic hybridity in classic narrative forms. I do so to show how versions of aesthetics as well as conceptions of history linked to the historical novel and the *Bildungsroman* in their modern and postmodern versions are being fundamentally reshaped by contemporary American writers working in the mode of "speculative realism."

Case Study: Colson Whitehead

My case study for addressing these matters is Colson Whitehead's 1998 novel, *The Intuitionist*. I will then turn very briefly to Whitehead's 2001 novel, *John Henry Days*, and will conclude with an even briefer excursus into Whitehead's most recent work, the 2011 novel *Zone One*.

In turning to Colson Whitehead's remarkable trajectory of novels, I remind us of where I began: namely, with the suggestion that Whitehead belongs to a cohort of writers I characterize as "postracial" and is not simply an anomalous feature of the postmodern. As a product of the post-Civil Rights Movement era, Whitehead speaks about the struggle for racial justice in America not from the perspective of a participant in the Civil Rights struggles of the 1940's, '50's and '60's—not from the position of memory, in other words—but from the position of someone for whom that struggle is an element of history, a distant history whose heroic days seem, sadly, to have passed. Along with this social-historical difference from earlier generations of

minority writers comes a literary-historical one. Whitehead, like all the other authors I named earlier, writes in the wake of postmodernism.

In a compelling reading of *The Intuitionist*, Lauren Berlant asks: “why are so many novels so quickly written, these days, about the intimate experience of disasters such as 9/11, and how does the aesthetic rendition of emotionally complex sensual experience articulate with what is already codified as ‘knowledge’ of a contemporary historical moment? How is it possible for the affects to sense that people have lived a moment collectively and translocally in a way that is not just a record of ideology?” (846). While Berlant is entirely convincing in her attention to *affect* in Whitehead’s novel, I point to something else in Whitehead’s not-quite-steampunk, alternative history of the future. Namely, an impulse to answer the question: How can one write the history of the future? What are the conditions of a style appropriate to representing futures that do not and may never exist?⁷

As Berlant notes, *The Intuitionist* complicates the impossibility of this goal “aesthetically through the use of a wildly freestyle indirect discourse that veers around all knowledge worlds, including consciousness and real and imaginary times and spaces” (849). The end result of this narrative style is the forcing upon readers of a kind of distant reading or, perhaps better, what Paula Moya has called “a distancing reading.” In contrast to “close reading,” “surface reading,” and “distant reading,” a distancing reading describes the kind of critique that attempts to remain immune to the logical and rhetorical traps and dead ends that its own analysis reveals.⁸

PERFECT ELEVATION: A DISTANCE READING

“A screaming comes across the sky.” With that opening sentence Thomas Pynchon’s *Gravity’s Rainbow* exploded the trajectory of modern allegorical narrative that led from *Moby-Dick* through *Ulysses* to *Absalom, Absalom!*. Colson Whitehead’s first novel, *The Intuitionist* (1998), imagines a new trajectory for narrative beyond the temporal imperative of the x-axis to something else—the finite-state verticality of UP/DOWN in the spatial dimension of the y-axis—figuring with it the brilliantly quirky conception of imperiled elevation as “the boldest new racial allegory since Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* and Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye*” (cover blurb).

The opening sentence of *The Intuitionist* reads: “It’s a new elevator . . . and it’s not built to fall this fast” (1). With straight-faced deadpan simplicity, we enter a satirical, fantasy world that is frighteningly familiar in the banality of its postwar white supremacy and its regimes of casual terror—the history of a society caught in impending free-fall, seeking the elevation that will uplift America from four hundred years of racial morass into the achieved *Aufhebung* of racial equity and social justice.

The Intuitionist is a novel that falls into a mixed set of genres, inventing a category we might call, broadly speaking, *Afrofuturism*, or simply *black speculative fiction*, offering an *alternate Americana* of a past that was not quite this one but which is linked inexorably to a historical future that can never quite come to be. Evoking a grim mid-century American urban life that could have been taken in tone if not substance from the noir comic books of Ed Brubaker or Warren Ellis, *The Intuitionist* is part urban

thriller, part alternate history, part fantasy meditation on race, technology, and the imagination, all filtered through the visionary metaphor of “elevation.” Poised between irony and sincerity, the metaphor of vertical transport drives the narrative up and down between the narrational levels of the naturalistic protest novel of race and the metafictional postmodern imaginative novel of ideas.

“What does the perfect elevator look like, the one that will deliver us from the cities we suffer now, these stunted shacks?” [asks the narrator early in the narrative]. “We don’t know because we can’t see inside [the black box that will drive the perfect elevation]. It’s something we cannot imagine, like the shape of angels’ teeth. It’s a black box” (61).

As a point of historical fact, in 1852 American inventor Elisha Otis demonstrated at the New York exposition in the Crystal Palace a freight elevator equipped with a safety device to prevent falling in case a supporting cable should break. Otis thus proved elevator travel for passengers was safe. While Otis did not actually invent the first elevator, he and his brakes made skyscrapers and the modern metropolis a practical reality.

The Intuitionist transforms this fact of modern technology into the basis of fable and allegory: “If Otis’s first elevation delivered us from medieval five- and six-story constructions,” states the narrator, “the next elevator, it is believed, will grant us the sky, unreckoned towers: the second elevation. Of course they’re working on the black box; it’s the future” (61). “But who can resist the seduction of elevation . . . those stepping stones to Heaven, which make relentless verticality so alluring?” (16). *The Intuitionist* is thus a novel in which the main character’s experiences involve—and are made possible by—the specific technology of the elevator.⁹ This technology becomes not only the trope of a special mode of knowing, but also the locus of a peculiar spatial and temporal chronotope, the enclosed trajectory, which will trace a history of the future.

Moreover, with the novel’s tight focus on the mechanical engineering of vertical conveyance comes something else: a narrative about the intuitive nature of utopian thinking embedded in the structure of modern urban technology. The question I wish to pose in relation to *The Intuitionist* is, then, to what extent is this technology at the heart of the narrative also a determinant of the representational aesthetic it offers? This is significant because, as the narrator tells us early on in the novel: “Why hold truck with the uppity and newfangled when Empiricism has always been the steering light of reason?” (27).

Lila Mae Watson, the African American protagonist of *The Intuitionist*, is the first woman of color to be admitted to the exalted guild of vertical transport. She is an elevator inspector, an Intuitionist, not an Empiricist, a partisan of one of the two warring factions in the Department of Elevator Inspectors that vie for dominance in this skewedly familiar metropolis. Opposing the Intuitionists are the Empiricists, staid, plodding flat-earthers who go by the book to check the structural and mechanical integrity of elevators the old-fashioned way and look to the *materiality* of their machinery and the laws of the physical universe for an understanding of the functioning

and malfunctioning of elevators. The Intuitionists depend on something different—meditation and instinct, the mystical sensorial communion of mind with matter—to vouchsafe the integrity of elevation.

Derided by Empiricists as “swamis, voodoo men, juju heads, witch doctors” (57), Intuitionists bypass “the messy business of human communication” by translating the thingy-ness of the world intuitively into “geometric forms” and “helical buffers” (6), into “excreted chemicals, understood by the soul’s receptors and translated into true speech” (87). If Empiricists work under the mandate of *Mimesis*, guided by their representations of the laws of nature, Intuitionists do so through *Poeisis*, with a vengeance. In the conceit of the novel, Intuitionists have a ten percent higher accuracy rate than Empiricists (58).

Lila Mae Watson, a devout Intuitionist with the highest accuracy rate in the department, stands at the center of the turmoil between Empiricists and Intuitionists when an elevator in a new municipal building has inexplicably, catastrophically failed and crashed on her watch, fanning the flames of the Empiricist-Intuitionist feud. Compelled to go underground to investigate and solve the incomprehensible mystery of the cause of the crash, Lila Mae is on the lam. For the remainder of the novel, as she endeavors to clear her name and restore her record of having never been wrong in her safety inspections, she becomes entangled in a noir parable and fantasy of intrigue, romance, and disillusionment that leads to a secret that will alter the course of history in the novel.

In the indeterminate historical present of the novel’s temporality, the narrative opens sometime well before the heyday of the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s, probably even well before the heroic struggles of the 1940s and ’50s culminating in the school desegregation decision of *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954. As a black woman in a white-supremacist America, Lila Mae exists at the “zero point,” a pinpointed spot “as the locus of the metropolitan disaffection” (4). Lila Mae understands that she has been set up. But by whom, and for what reason? Her search for the answer to the question—what really happened?—will hinge on the alternative Empiricist and Intuitionist accounts, particularly on Lila Mae’s understandings and revisions of both.

Instead of “stoop[ing] to check for tell-tale striations on the lift winch and seize upon oxidation scars on the compensating rope sheave . . .” as the Empiricists would (57), Lila Mae, as one of the “sullen detective-philosophers of vertical transport” (55), assumes empirical knowledge of the elevator’s constituent parts and functions but trusts in a different kind of knowledge.

Lila Mae realizes that surface is always only mere surface. She is after the *experience of elevation*, hypertentative to the emanations of its movement through space and time, in its transitions from stasis to up or down.¹⁰ In *Theoretical Elevators* she had learned that “*horizontal thinking in a vertical world is the race’s curse*” (151; italics original). Now, finding herself the target of political and personal assaults from *both* Empiricists and Intuitionists after conceiving that neither Empiricist nor Intuitionist discourses account for the catastrophic elevator failure, Lila Mae is forced to reinterpret the paradigms by which she has led her life after a “conversion experience” (59), following her first reading of the first volume of James Fulton’s magisterial tome, *Theoretical Elevators*, the originary text of the Intuitionist theory.

As Lila Mae delves into Fulton's manuscripts in the archives of the Institute of Vertical Transport, she discovers something astonishing that the plot has not prepared either her or us for: namely, that Fulton, mystical master of the technology from which the novel's modernity has risen, was actually a black man passing for white. Moreover, Fulton's *Theoretical Elevators* was an elaborate hoax, "a doctrine of transcendence that [was] as much a lie as his life" (241). A hoax, a satire, "a joke . . . he invented to parody his enslavers" (241).

But this is not a narrative of passing; in fact, passing is the least interesting aspect of this story. Instead, the point is that Fulton's successful passing as white in the regimes of white-supremacy America were always only attempts to belie Empiricism. "White people's reality is built on what appears to be—that's the business of Empiricism" (239), says the narrator. Describing Fulton's deceptions, "his lie of whiteness" (239), and his ability to pass, his black lover and one-time housekeeper admits to Lila Mae: "They were all slaves to what they could see. But there was a truth behind that they couldn't see for the life of them" (239). "He was trying to tell them something and they wouldn't hear it. Don't believe your eyes" (240). And what is more, she adds: "*There is another world beyond this one*" (240; italics original).

Having forsaken the arid academic voice and "diffuse generalities of Volume One" in the aimless mystic voice of Volume Two, Fuller invents a world "to parody his [white] enslavers" while also expressing a desire for "a perfect elevator that will lift him away from here" (241). From "original satire" to utopian desire, to a lie made, not exactly true, but at least belied: "*The elevator world will look like Heaven but not the Heaven you have reckoned*" (241; italics original). With this discovery, Lila Mae can now read the double meaning inscribed in the second volume of Fulton's *Theoretical Elevators*. Her exegetic victory gains her a kind of translation that Gayatri Spivak has called "telepoesis," that is, an utterance that expresses singularly—*d'un mot*—a singularity that encompasses multiplicity and contradiction.¹¹

At the novel's conclusion, Lila Mae assumes the role of "keeper" (255), designer, creator, and writer of the perfect elevator, conducting a perfect elevation, as she "writes the elevator" (252) of the future, preparing "for the second elevation" foretold in Fuller's mystical texts (255). Electing to continue the hoax, elaborate the joke, prepare for the "second elevation," Lila Mae at novel's end is now "a citizen of the city to come" (255).

This elevation to keeper of the hoax is far from the reconciliatory *Aufhebung* a romantic reader with a utopian heart might have desired. Like symbolist poet Stéphane Mallarmé's spectacularly unachieved "*Livre*," always becoming and never achieved, a permanent iteration without original, Lila Mae's desire to be a harbinger for and citizen of the city yet to come, pointing to another world beyond this one, transports her elsewhere. It turns out that "the city to come" is none other than the one that already exists hidden in its negation as "the true cult of the modern."

In formulating his conception of literary language as anti-realist and distinct from everyday experience, Mallarmé had written: "I say: a flower! and outside the oblivion to which my voice relegates any shape, insofar as it is something other than the calyx, there arises musically, as the very idea and delicate, the one absent from every bouquet" (76). What the everyday use of language steps over to make use of the

idea, literature remains fascinated by, the absence that makes it possible. Literary language, therefore, is a double negation, both of the thing and the idea. It is in this space that literature becomes possible where words take on a strange and mysterious reality of their own, and where also meaning and reference remain allusive and ambiguous.

Lila Mae's translation of Fuller's double negation in *The Intuitionist* takes a related, yet different, form from that of Mallarmé's symbolist one. Here, the black box that will make the machinery of ideal elevation run is not the negation of a thing nor of the idea of elevation itself, so much as of the very grammatical laws of genre themselves. Told as a narrative of the familiar and known past, *The Intuitionist* is formally akin to historical fiction. Yet, *The Intuitionist* offers something different from either traditional historical fiction or postmodern metafiction: it is instead a noir, steampunk-like version of E. L. Doctorow's *Ragtime* world, sifted through parody to give us the inverse of the postmodern. Beyond the universal powers of empirical rationality underpinning all historical narratives lies the catastrophic anomaly of disastrous accident, the outlying anomaly beyond statistically predictable rationality, "instructing the dull and plodding citizens of modernity that there is a power beyond rationality" (Whitehead, *Intuitionist* 231). The noir, detective plot of the novel reveals one aspect of this anomaly as the racialized depiction of Utopian desire raised to a second degree, represented by the invention of a new form, a *black noir*, open to the vagaries, not of history, but of fantasy. The mixing of genres, evident and predominant a topos as it may be, definitively is not the point here. Instead, the point is what this mixing of genres allows for the justification of Utopia, in the face of all evidence to the contrary.

Alternative history, steampunk fantasy, detective noir fiction, and even old-style protest social realism function here as they do in the narrative of another contemporary genre-bending noir writer, Walter Moseley. That is, the hybrid narrative forces upon us the false historicity of the integrationist narrative that will drive the course of events through mid-century. It is a false historicity because northern integration turns out only to shift the nightmarish intimacy of the southern white-supremacist world. As Lila Mae's father had taught her: "white folks can turn on you at any moment. . . . They can turn rabid at any second: this is the true result of gathering integration: the replacement of sure violence with deferred sure violence" (23).

SPECULATIVE REALISM, BLACK NOIR, AND THE DOUBLETAKES OF PARABASIS

The narrative turns on this joke. But not a one-liner; nor the funny double-take of the bizarre generic juxtaposition of, say, zombies and Jane Austen, or cowboys and aliens. I am suggesting something of a completely different order of comedy, more like the comedy of Aristophanes, or of *commedia dell'arte*, or of Friedrich Schlegel's incomprehensible irony, or the doubled consciousness of Baudelaire's "l'essence du rire." Decidedly *not* postmodern parody, satire, or play, then, but the double-edged sharpness of the *racial* joke drives the narrative. In this case, a joke forcibly coupled to a black noir revision (as an intentional redundancy with a difference) of the detective story, grafted onto the epic of the Great Northern Migration, and then to stories

of racial passing and utopian projections of a second elevation to a future “*Heaven but not the Heaven you have reckoned.*” Whitehead’s joke is double-edged because it is the kind of joke that turns you on your head even as you laugh at its implied violence because you can never be certain that perhaps laughter is exactly the wrong response to the joke, like the idea of “postrace” itself.

In fact, it is probably more accurate to say that *The Intuitionist* takes us through the tragic arc of the racialized joke to the limits of postmodern satire and parody, into a new kind of realism, expanding it into what I have termed elsewhere the trope of parabasis, enacted as a new kind of realism (see Saldívar). Like the functioning of the trope of parabasis in Old Greek comedy or in Renaissance *commedia dell’arte*, the implications of irony are here unleashed from their usual domain of simply saying one thing and meaning its opposite. Once the turn of irony is set in motion, parabasis makes its defining endpoint almost impossible to attain. Friedrich Schlegel termed the deliciously complex and menacingly mysterious play of this trope, “*eine permanente Parekbase*,”¹² a permanent parabasis, where the turn from illusion to reality and back again is not stilled but revolves perpetually. When placed in the context of social protest and critical race representations, the ironic comedy of Whitehead’s racial joke is no longer Romantic, nor modern, nor postmodern but something that can only be described as postracial parabasis. The fantasy-based realism that undergirds the narrative of *The Intuitionist* is what I am describing as “speculative realism”: a parabasis of *constant* and *complete* rupture between delightfully comic psychic façades that bar the way to memories of a traumatic past and the equally persistent ironic impulses toward utopian desires that remain impervious to the real. This double impulse toward and against history and utopia is what marks postrace fictions as transformative rather than merely different from previous kinds of ethnic literature even as they try to retain the force of the real in the object world. That is, in postrace fiction neither literary realism nor modernist estrangement nor postmodern play nor magical-realist wonder can suffice as *formal* stand-ins for the concrete *content* of justice.

The trope of parabasis plays out in others of Whitehead’s novels as well. In *John Henry Days* parabasis turns folklore and the historiography of folklore inside out. Analyzing, depicting, and performing all of the vernacular folk legends, narratives, ballads, and case studies of the figure of the black man who challenges both white dominance and the supremacy of machine technology, *John Henry Days* is a tour de force of historical, narrative, ethnographic, and case study production. Folklore and historiography are not just the themes of the novel but structure its formal narrative. Whitehead there takes the myths, legends, dreams, histories, and illusions of vernacular knowledge to their wildest ends precisely to question and revalue their validity by asking, what kind of knowledge is available through each of these forms? How do these forms of narrative shape our understanding of “race”?

In his most recent novel, the spectacular *Zone One*, “hope” is the point of the parabolic allegory and parabasis of irony. Incapable of conceptualizing utopian desire, the novel uses “hope” as a marker of the empty space of human possibility in the post-apocalyptic city. While the rest of the countryside, the surrounding suburbs, and all of uptown are infested with zombies, the space named “Zone One” designates the portions of New York City south of Canal Street that remain the last refuge of and

possibility for humanity. The homing instinct of the afflicted zombies marks them as shadow denizens of contemporary life and competitors for this space, their un-death compelling them to repeat the life-destroying patterns of urban modernity, all the while causing them to desire only the lifeblood of the few humans who remain alive. In the face of death on spectacularly unimaginable scales, the survivors retreating into this final stronghold absurdly maintain hope for survival and the recreation of modern city life. With the near-total annihilation of humanity has come as well the near elimination of racial difference and of racial strife, as if only a complete and total destruction of contemporary life will allow for the end of the color line. The audacity with which the novel's protagonist, known only by an inside joke as Mark Spitz, maintains the possibility of hope, even in the face of the near total destruction of all of humanity, is certainly an ironic reference to Barack Obama's "Audacity of Hope."¹³

With its own ambivalent construction of a utopian democratic future for the US, Obama's 2004 speech and 2006 political autobiography offered a blueprint for an America that had not yet come into being. In full parabasic irony, *Zone One* is a memoir of a future America in ruins. The near total leveling of difference that occurs among the surviving humans on the verge of apocalypse and on the fulcrum of mediocrity with the victory of the living dead drives the power of hope in *Zone One* toward a posthuman world. Only here, in a country populated by the living dead who nostalgically linger among the ruins of their former lives, might we finally, unequivocally, encounter a "postracial" era. As an aesthetic mechanism of fear management, the representation of apocalypse thus becomes for Whitehead a way of containing and processing a world too close to our own for full comfort in hope. In the end, Whitehead proposes that it may well be necessary first to imagine the end of the world before we may imagine the historical end of racialization and racism.

SPECULATIVE REALISM AND THE SUBSTRATUM OF THE REAL

As an aesthetic mode, we might term the remediations enacted in these novels *speculative realism*, that is, a hybrid amalgam of realism, magical realism, meta-fiction, and genre fictions, including science fiction, graphic narrative, and fantasy proper. The operative term here is *realism*. But the conjunction of realism with the "speculative" is what makes the term an oxymoron. A bit like "historical romance," in other words. Because "Metaphysics is usually thought to be concerned with wild, speculative sorts of ideas, and speculation is not usually considered a form of realism," the idea of "speculative idealism" is not so strange (Harman in Brassier et al. 368). "Speculative realism," however, definitely is. For, in what sense can realism be speculative?

Speculative realism is an emerging movement in contemporary philosophy that defines itself loosely in its stance of metaphysical realism against the dominant forms of post-Kantian philosophy.¹⁴ If science, through materialism, is wedded to the notion of a universe (rather than nothing), then a speculative realism need not be, probably shouldn't be, wedded to the notion of *a* totality, or of *a* reality, or even of *a* universe. Is there a smallest particle that can be identified? The largest universe? Many physicists

doubt both of those extreme possibilities. Instead, there might be only objects as far as you look, without end.

In response to the question of whether we are closed up in our representations—whether conscious, linguistic, or historical—with no access to an eternal reality independent of our specific point of view, or whether there exists instead a non-thinking reality independent of our access to it, speculative realism seeks to know whether a rational procedure to discover specific properties of the Real may be conceived. Producing a procedure of this sort is one of the main challenges of a contemporary realism (Brassier et al. 435). A full elaboration of this idea would take us further down the path of metaphysics than is appropriate in this context.

But at the very least, this attention to the narrative possibilities of realism as a late twentieth and early twenty-first century concern amounts to a radical reevaluation of the trajectory of the development of narrative form. That is, by returning to the real in its heterogeneous forms, we notice that realism acquires a different quality than literary history has assigned it over the last forty years. Instead of conceiving of a timeline that takes us from naïve realism to plodding social realism, to triumphant modernism and demystified parodic postmodernism, something else results: When placed within a horizon that includes naturalism and realism, social realism, surrealism, magical realism, and perhaps speculative realism, Realism emerges as the substratum of narrative that has never been superseded entirely within the history of narrative forms. The aesthetic and political implications of this revision of literary history are immense and yet to be fully explored.

In the cases of the novels to which I have referred, whether fantasy can effect access to the Real, say in the form of real political change or not, is ultimately beside the point and in fact part of the misapprehension concerning the working of fiction that contemporary authors like Whitehead are attempting to address. Instead, in these novels what matters is that speculative realism is not merely a phantasmal depiction of deep ideological mystifications or misapprehensions of metaphysics. Instead, it works in a different direction than would a naïve sort of realism toward a critical realism that would posit the knowability of phenomena, even if we can't know the thing-in-itself. A core of contemporary authors has tapped into this area of speculative knowledge to construct the possibility of a weird kind of realism that posits the speculative possibility that we may be able to imagine the conditions under which the thing in itself and its phenomenal form might coincide. One way in which this speculative realism appears is allegorically, as a basis for recognizing and understanding the construction of the new political destinies we may witness taking shape among diasporic groups in the US today.

What makes these new theorizations concerning speculative realism and the “doing” of race so useful for literary analysis is that they help define the historical contradictions in the justification of racial injustice, discrimination, and oppression in terms that can then be related to the form and language of the literary text. This understanding of race allows us to see how the economic and racial politics of our time are enmeshed with *the form and language* of the literary texts that describe the processes of racialization in the contemporary American social world. For these reasons, the post in “postrace” need not signal a chronological superseding of the continuing

fact of racism. It refers instead to the consequences of racism. The “post” of “post-colonial” did not mean the end of imperial power or signal the end of the struggles for decolonization. Similarly, in thinking about Form and History in relation to changing notions of race, narrative theory, and the novel, it is necessary to focus anew on racial symbolism. How are life experiences such as migration, diaspora, the history of economic, social, and legal injustice, constant surveillance, and access to safe living and working conditions in the Americas represented in fiction? Such focus allows us to get at why the promise of a “postracial” tomorrow has seemed to appear on the horizon, even while racial inequity, injustice, and prejudice continue to crowd the foreground of contemporary experience.

Speculative realism as the mode of a “postrace” aesthetic indicates desires for forms of representation that will validate our utopian desires for kinds of social belonging. It is a symbolic way of linking the realm of public political life to the mysterious workings of the heart’s fantastic aspirations for substantive justice, social, racial, poetic, or otherwise. For this reason, the reality of this new hybrid fantasy is not simply gratuitous, nor merely virtual; it might well be quintessentially postmagical, post-postmodern, and postracial.

Endnotes

1. In the November 3, 2009, *New York Times* Op-Ed, Colson Whitehead writes sardonically about our collective “Year of Living Postracially.”
2. In the immediate aftermath of the 2008 presidential election, the hope for a new “postrace” era became the most overt expression of the enigma of race in contemporary America. The most significant new work on the contemporary meaning of race is the work of Paula Moya and Hazel Markus.
3. See Bonilla-Silva and Forman. On the idea of “post-race,” and “racialized ethnicities,” see also Ali 9–16.
4. Marta Acosta, *Happy Hour at Casa Dracula* (2006); Sherman Alexie, *Flight: A Novel* (2007); Junot Díaz, *The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao* (2007); Percival L. Everett, *Erasure: A Novel* (2001) and *I Am Not Sidney Poitier* (2009); Yxta Maya Murray, *The Conquest: A Novel* (2002); Salvador Plascencia, *The People of Paper* (2005); Michelle Serros, *Honey Blond Chica* (2007); Touré, *Soul City* (2005) and *Who’s Afraid of Post-Blackness?: What it Means to be Black Now* (2011); Colson Whitehead, *The Intuitionist* (1998), *John Henry Days* (2001), and *Zone One* (2011); Charles Yu, *How to Live Safely in a Science Fictional Universe* (2010).
5. In his characterization of the post-1945 era of fiction writing in the US as one shaped in significant ways by the rise of creative writing programs, Mark McGurl argues for a necessary critical realignment of the relationship between postmodern fiction and the so-called ethnic, minority American fiction.
6. See Brassier, et al.
7. See Jameson in *Archaeologies of the Future* on the semiotic rectangle, and particularly, the neutral term, not present in his use of Greimas in *The Political Unconscious*.
8. Berlant’s version of this process: “The narrator is a voice in the head of the book in a way that sublates the realist and the avant-garde without being surreal. The referent reappears explosively and inhabits virtuality and vice versa, remaking contemporary historical time into something lived and stretched out” (849).

9. John Johnston makes this point about the technology of vertical transport (861).
10. The metaphor of “surface” and “depth” implicit in the elevating processes of the novel can be seen in relation to the current debate in literary critical theory concerning “symptomatic” reading. See, for example, the discussion initiated by Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus.
11. See Spivak, “Forum” 492. The word and concept “telepoesis” is from Derrida 32; translation modified. See also Spivak’s use of the concept in “Harlem” 116. And see Scheiner.
12. See Schlegel, *Kritische Friedrich-Schlegel-Ausgabe*, “Fragment 668”; “On Incomprehensibility.” See also de Man, *Aesthetic Ideology* 300–301; *Allegories of Reading* 178–79. On “parabasis,” see Chaouli.
13. “[N]ot blind optimism . . . [but] the hope of slaves sitting around a fire singing freedom songs; the hope of immigrants setting out for distant shores; . . . the hope of a skinny kid with a funny name who believes that America has a place for him, too. Hope in the face of difficulty. Hope in the face of uncertainty. The audacity of hope!”
14. Speculative realism takes its name from a conference held at Goldsmith College of the University of London in April, 2007. The conference featured presentations by Ray Brassier of American University of Beirut, Iaian Hamilton Grant of the University of the West of England, Graham Harman of the American University in Cairo and Quentin Meillassoux of the Ecole normale supérieure in Paris. Credit for the name “speculative realism” is generally ascribed to Brassier, though Meillassoux had already used the term “speculative materialism” to describe his own position. See Brassier; Meillassoux; Harman.

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