



The Case of Territory and Spatial Justice in Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad*: A Westphalian-Sojian Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on Westphal's (2011) geocriticism and Soja's (2010) theory of spatial justice, current research, adopting Belsey's textual analysis method, investigates Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* (2016) as a sustained argument about territory. It considers who is permitted to claim land, to defend it, and to pass it on. This article argues that the novel stages four competing territorial claims, the plantation's claim of ownership, the state's claim of jurisdiction, North Carolina's claim of exclusion, and Valentine Farm's claim of Black self-determination, and that novelist's prose encodes the legal, spatial, and violent mechanics of each claim with a precision that rewards Soja's distinction between distributive and procedural justice. The analysis situates the reading within the broader tradition of spatial justice theory associated with Lefebvre, Harvey, Young, and the environmental justice scholarship of Bullard and Pulido. The article closes by proposing that territory, rather than landscape alone, should be treated as a distinct fourth category within geocritical method when a text stages competing legal claims to land.

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Introduction

Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* (2016) has attracted a great deal of critical attention for its treatment of historical trauma, its formal experiments with time, and its literalization of the railroad metaphor. A large chunk of this attention, understandably, follows the novel's own emotional register. It reads Cora's flight as a psychological and historical event that is an act of survival set against inherited grief. What this body of criticism has not asked, at least not

directly, is a narrower and more legal question. The question is on what grounds does anyone in this novel get to claim a piece of land as theirs? The plantation owner claims the fields through inheritance and force. The state claims jurisdiction through statute and the pass system. North Carolina claims the entire territory as racially exclusive through an act of legislated terror. The residents of Valentine Farm claim their acreage through labor and mutual consent, and lose it anyway. Each of these claims rests on a different logic of entitlement, and the novel is remarkably consistent about tracking which logic wins in which place.

This is the question that Soja's (2010) concept of spatial justice was built to ask of real cities and real policy. He (2010) argued that justice has a geography. He states that the distribution of resources, opportunities, and protections across space is not incidental to justice but it is constitutive of it. Where a person is permitted to live, work, or simply stand determines a great deal about what that specific person can become. Westphal's (2011) geocriticism, by contrast, was built to ask a literary question: how does a text construct the relationship between its represented spaces and the world outside the text. This article asks what the plantation, the city, or the railroad represent, it asks what each of these spaces entitles its occupants to do, and what happens when that entitlement is asserted, contested, or revoked. Reading the novel in this way brings geocriticism into direct conversation with Soja's spatial justice, and the resulting synthesis, this article proposes, discloses a dimension of the novel that trauma-centered and purely metaphorical readings have left comparatively unexamined that territory is a legal category.

Why This Study?

The scope of this article is deliberately narrow. It sets aside the novel's engagement with memory, trauma, and archival silence, questions that Dischinger (2017), Goyal (2019), Li (2020), and Maus (2021) have already addressed with considerable care. Instead, the article isolates one analytic thread. It is the recurring, almost legalistic attention the novel pays to who is allowed to claim which piece of ground, under what conditions that claim can be asserted, and what force is required to defend or destroy it. The value of this narrowing is theoretical as much as interpretive. Soja's (2010) spatial justice was developed for the study of cities, zoning, and public policy, not for prose fiction, and Westphal's (2011) geocriticism was developed for the study of literary representation, not for the legal architecture of entitlement. Bringing the two together requires showing, concretely, that a novel can encode a theory of territorial entitlement with the same precision that Westphal's framework already shows it encoding metaphor and historiography. This article makes that case through four episodes of the novel, the plantation, the jurisdictional state, the exclusionary territory of North Carolina, and the counter-territory of Valentine Farm, each read as a distinct model of spatial justice or its absence.

Territory, Justice, and the Spatial Turn

Spatial justice as a field of inquiry does not begin with Soja, it begins with Lefebvre's (1991) argument, made originally in French in 1974, that space is a social product in its own right. It is organized according to whoever holds the power to organize it. Lefebvre's (1991) insistence that space is produced rather than given is the shared premise underneath nearly every theory discussed in this article, and it is worth stating plainly at the outset, because it is easy to slide back into treating territory as a background fact rather than an ongoing accomplishment of power.

Harvey (1973) took Lefebvre's premise and asked what it would mean for the discipline of urban geography to take justice seriously as an object of study rather than treating distribution as a technical problem to be optimized after political questions had already been settled elsewhere. He (1973) argued that the geographic distribution of income, housing, and opportunity in a city is itself a form of justice or injustice, not merely a symptom of injustice determined somewhere else. This claim, that where you are is part of what justice owes you, sits at the foundation of everything Soja later built.

Young(1990) pushed the conversation in a direction that turns out to matter a great deal for a novel about slavery. Young (1990) argued that theories of justice organized purely around the distribution of goods miss a prior question. The question is whether a group is permitted to participate in the institutions that decide distribution at all. Her five faces of oppression, exploitation, marginalization, powerlessness, cultural imperialism, and violence, describe structural conditions that no redistribution of resources alone can repair. Because the conditions concern who counts as a subject of justice in the first place. Reading the selected novel against Young's framework clarifies that the enslaved characters in this novel are not simply denied a fair share of land. They are denied standing to make a claim on land at all, which is a different and more fundamental injury.

Robert Bullard's (1990) *Dumping in Dixie* and Laura Pulido's (2000) work on environmental racism brought spatial justice down from political philosophy into the empirical study of who actually lives near landfills, refineries, and toxic sites in the American South and Southwest. Pulido's (2000) central argument, that racism operates spatially through the ordinary and cumulative decisions of a white-privileged public has an obvious resonance with the way the novel depicts the pass system, the state boundary, and the eugenics ward as diffuse, bureaucratic, and thoroughly ordinary. Bullard's (1990) five case studies of African American communities organizing against locally unwanted land uses established the pattern that later scholars would generalize. The pattern shows that environmental and territorial injustice in the United States is not randomly distributed. Black communities carry its disproportionate weight through mechanisms that are legal on their face and discriminatory in their effect.

Edward Soja's (2010) *Seeking Spatial Justice* synthesizes this tradition into a single claim that geography actively produces and reproduces it, so that the struggle for justice must include a struggle over the organization of space itself.

Mbembe's (2003) theory of necropolitics supplies the vocabulary for the most extreme of these settings. Mbembe (2003) argued that sovereign power, in its most naked form, is the power to decide who may live and who must die. And that this power is frequently organized territorially, through the designation of zones where a category of person simply has no standing to exist. North Carolina's policy in the novel, discussed below, is close to a literal illustration of Mbembe's argument.

The environmental justice tradition that Bullard and Pulido represent also clarifies a point that territorial injustice rarely announces itself as territorial injustice. It arrives dressed as a zoning ordinance, a public health study, or, in Whitehead's case, a runaway advertisement or a census figure. Part of what this article means by reading for territory, then, is reading for the ordinary administrative surface beneath which a claim of entitlement or exclusion is doing its work, rather than waiting for the novel to announce that surface explicitly as violence.

Two further bodies of theory ground the literary side of this synthesis. McKittrick's (2006) *Demonic Grounds* insists that Black geographic knowledge has always existed in tension with, and resistance to, the dominant spatial arrangements imposed on it. So that reading for territory in Black literature means reading for a struggle that Black writers and their characters have always understood, even when white spatial theory arrived late to name it. Westphal's (2011) geocriticism supplies the literary method proper. His insistence that space should serve as the unit of critical analysis. His three interrelated categories of spatiotemporality, transgressivity, and referentiality, give this article its procedure for moving between Soja's political vocabulary and Whitehead's sentences. Catherine Belsey's (2005) model of textual analysis supplies the close-reading discipline that keeps the argument tethered to specific words on the page rather than drifting into paraphrase of theory.

Studies on Whitehead's Novel

The existing body of scholarship on *The Underground Railroad* (2016) has converged, with some consistency, on questions of memory and historical trauma. Dischinger (2017) reads the novel's fragmented and interrupted structure as a formal enactment of traumatic disorganization. He argues that Whitehead's prose refuses linear narrative because trauma itself refuses linear narrative. Goyal (2019) extends this reading by describing the novel as a spectral narrative in which the past never fully recedes, so that the ghosts of slavery remain active participants in the present-tense action. Li (2020) approaches the novel through its deliberate ambiguity, arguing that Whitehead resists easy interpretive closure so that readers are made to sit with the same interpretive difficulty that traumatic memory itself imposes. Maus (2021) situates the novel within Whitehead's larger authorial development, reading its treatment of slavery as continuous with the concerns of his earlier, more overtly speculative fiction.

Each of these readings is persuasive on its own terms, and none of them is displaced by the argument advanced here. What they share, however, is a tendency to treat the novel's landscapes chiefly as vessels. They are containers into which trauma, memory, and historical weight are poured. A plantation is read as a site where trauma happened. A state boundary is read as a threshold that trauma must be crossed to escape. This is not a wrong way to read the novel, but it leaves a specific question comparatively unexamined, the question of entitlement. When Whitehead's narrator explains precisely why a runaway's status changes the instant she crosses into a new state, or precisely why the residents of Valentine Farm never quite manage to convince Mingo that their claim to the land is secure, the text is doing something more specific than staging trauma. It is staging a dispute over the legal and material basis of a territorial claim, and that dispute has its own internal logic. This logic is independent of the psychological weight any given character carries into it.

This is the gap the present article addresses. No existing reading of the novel, so far as this article's review of the literature has found, applies Soja's (2010) distinction between the distribution of spatial goods and the deeper question of who holds standing to make a claim on space at all. That distinction, applied to Whitehead's four principal settings, produces a reading of the novel's territorial logic that trauma-centered scholarship has not yet offered, and that purely metaphorical geocritical readings, valuable as they are, have not made their central concern.

Methodology

This study is qualitative and interpretive. It combines Westphal's (2011) geocriticism with Soja's (2010) spatial justice and Belsey's (2005) model of textual analysis. Rather than treating the novel's descriptions of plantations, cities, and rural communities as background, the analysis reads them as formal enactments of specific territorial claims, each with its own conditions of possession, defense, and loss. The study proceeds from a constructivist premise that the meaning of a literary text is produced through the interaction between text, theory, and reader, so that applying Soja's (2010) political vocabulary to Whitehead's prose is itself an interpretive act. It is not a neutral discovery of a fact already sitting inside the text waiting to be found.

Three commitments organize the close reading that follows. The first is a commitment to reading legal and administrative language as ideologically active. When the novel describes a pass, a boundary marker, or a state census figure, this study reads that language as doing the work of constituting territorial entitlement. The second is a commitment to reading the physical geography of each setting, plantation, city, state, and farm, in relation to the specific mechanism that defends or dissolves its territorial claim that surveillance for the plantation, documentation for the state, organized terror for North Carolina, and collective labor for Valentine Farm. The third is a commitment to reading destruction and loss as formally meaningful. When a territorial claim is violently revoked, as it is at Valentine Farm, this study reads the manner of that revocation as itself an argument about what kind of entitlement the dominant power will and will not tolerate.

Theoretical Framework

Westphal's (2011) three geocritical categories, spatiotemporality, transgressivity, and referentiality, were developed to analyze how literary space is constructed and how it relates to documented reality. This article proposes reading territory as a fourth, closely related but distinct category, one concerned less with how a space is represented and more with who is entitled to occupy it and on what authority. Territory, in this sense, asks a question that referentiality alone does not: not merely whether a fictional plantation corresponds to a documented historical plantation, but what specific claim of ownership, jurisdiction, or exclusion the text assigns to that space, and how the text shows that claim being enforced.

Soja's (2010) distinction between the distribution of spatial resources and the deeper structural question of who holds standing to shape distribution at all gives this fourth category its analytic content. A territorial claim in Whitehead's novel can be assessed along both axes. Does a given character receive a fair share of the space available, and does that character, or the community that character belongs to, have any standing to contest how that space is organized in the first place. The plantation fails both tests for its enslaved population. The jurisdictional state passes the first test only nominally, through papers that grant conditional movement, while still failing the second. North Carolina fails both tests in their most extreme form, since it denies Black people the very legal category of personhood within its territory. Valentine Farm, for a short time, achieves both, and its destruction is the clearest evidence in the novel that achieving spatial justice locally does not secure it against a hostile surrounding power.

Analysis and Discussion

The Plantation as Sovereign Territory

The Randall plantation in the novel's opening chapters is not simply a place where enslaved people live. It is a territory whose ownership is total and whose boundary is, for its enslaved population, functionally impassable. Whitehead states this without qualification: "To escape the boundary of the plantation was to escape the fundamental principles of your existence: impossible" (Whitehead, 2016, p. 15). Read through Soja's (2010) framework, this sentence does two things at once. It describes a distributive fact, that enslaved people receive no share of the plantation's land as their own, and it describes the deeper structural fact that Young (1990) identifies as prior to distribution. It is that enslaved people have no standing whatsoever to contest how the plantation's territory is organized. The impossibility Whitehead names is juridical. It is impossible because the entire legal architecture of the plantation denies the very category of a Black territorial claim.

The novel is careful to show that this total claim operates at every scale, down to the smallest plot of ground. Cora's garden, a strip of land only three yards across, passed to her by her grandmother Ajarry and her mother Mabel, becomes, in miniature, a case study in what a Black territorial claim can and cannot secure. Ajarry's death is itself described in spatial terms that fold time and territory together: "Ajarry died in the cotton, the bolls bobbing around her like whitecaps on the brute ocean" (Whitehead, 2016, p. 14). The narrator adds, with a bluntness that refuses any consoling ambiguity, "As if it could have been anywhere else" (Whitehead, 2016, p. 14). The plantation's territorial claim over Ajarry's body extends even to the manner and location of her death, which the text insists could not have happened elsewhere, because the plantation's ownership admits no elsewhere for her to have died in.

Cora inherits the garden plot from this same territorial logic. The text is explicit that the inheritance is not legal in any sense the plantation's own law would recognize: "The dirt at her feet had a story, the oldest story Cora knew" (Whitehead, 2016, p. 21), and when she replants it after her mother's flight, she thinks simply, "It was her inheritance" (Whitehead, 2016, p. 46). This is a spatial-justice claim asserted entirely outside the legal apparatus that governs the plantation, a claim of custom and continuity rather than title, and the novel tests its fragility almost immediately. When Blake, another enslaved man, builds his doghouse on Cora's plot so that it "sat in the centre of her plot like a grand mansion in the heart of a plantation" (Whitehead, 2016, p. 26). The text stages a miniature territorial war that repeats, at the scale of three yards, the entire logic of the plantation itself, possession secured through force, and only through force. Cora destroys the doghouse, delivering blows the text describes with a precision that treats the act as combat rather than tantrum, "Her first blow brought down the roof of the doghouse... and her last put it out of its misery" (Whitehead, 2016, p. 27), and the consequence, exile "off to Hob with those who had been crippled... off to Hob with strays" (Whitehead, 2016, p. 24), confirms Young's (1990) point about standing. Cora does not lose access to a fair share of land through this episode. She loses standing within the community itself. She is marked as deviant for having defended a claim the plantation's law never recognized as hers to defend.

The plantation's territorial claim also extends into time, foreclosing what kind of future they are permitted to imagine occupying. The author makes this explicit through the smallest possible detail, noting that "Everybody knew niggers didn't have birthdays" (Whitehead, 2016, p. 31). Read in isolation this sentence might seem to belong to the novel's treatment of memory rather than territory, but Soja's (2010) framework suggests otherwise. A birthday is, among other

things, a claim to a personal timeline distinct from the plantation's own labor calendar. Denying it is a way of denying that a person's life belongs to anyone but the territory that owns their labor. The plantation's total claim, in other words, is not confined to land. It extends to the temporal architecture within which a life is permitted to be measured, which is exactly the fusion of space and time that Westphal (2011) names spatiotemporality. This article proposes reading, in this instance, as an extension of territorial entitlement.

The plantation enforces its total territorial claim through documentation as much as through violence. The pass system is the novel's clearest illustration of Pulido's (2000) argument that spatial injustice operates through diffuse, bureaucratic, and superficially neutral mechanisms. A runaway advertisement reproduced in the text reads, in part, "THIRTY DOLLAR REWARD... for information on her being lodged in any Gaol in this state. All persons are forewarned of harbouring said girl" (Whitehead, 2016, p. 19). This single passage converts an entire state into an extension of the plantation's territorial claim, since anyone anywhere within its borders is now conscripted into enforcing that claim. The novel captures the psychological cost of living permanently inside a territory organized this completely in a single observation about how enslaved people navigate even the most minor movement: "The slaves stepped aside, making calculations of what distance represented the right proportion of fear and respect" (Whitehead, 2016, p. 35). This is territory as a lived and constant calculation, precisely the phenomenon Lefebvre (1991) described when he insisted that space is produced through ongoing social practice rather than simply occupied.

The transition between these two territorial regimes, the plantation's total ownership and the state's conditional jurisdiction, is itself rendered as an embodied ordeal rather than a simple change of address. Whitehead describes the flight north in terms that strip away any sense of smooth passage between one territory and the next: "The fugitives stumbled on, impelled into the night... Time was a figment" (Whitehead, 2016, p. 61). The collapse of time into figment alongside the physical stumbling suggests that crossing between territorial regimes is a disorientation of the very categories, spatial and temporal, that had organized Cora's prior existence. Soja's (2010) spatial justice rarely dwells on the phenomenology of transition itself, being more concerned with settled distributions than with the interval between them, and this is one point at which Whitehead's fiction supplies something the political theory does not: an account of what it costs, bodily, to move from a territory that grants no standing at all toward one that grants only a conditional and closely monitored share of it.

Cora's flight from Georgia introduces a second model of territorial claim, one organized not around a single owner's total sovereignty but around the jurisdictional authority of the state. This model initially appears more favorable to Cora than the plantation's, since it grants her a name and papers rather than treating her as property outright. "Bessie Carpenter was the name on the papers Sam gave her at the station" (Whitehead, 2016, p. 88), and this nominal transgression, a false identity substituted for an owned one, allows Cora a degree of movement the plantation never permitted. She can walk city streets and move between dormitory and factory in ways that would have been unthinkable in Georgia.

Yet the jurisdictional state's territorial claim, read against Soja's (2010) distinction between distribution and standing, turns out to grant Cora only the first and never the second. She receives a conditional, closely monitored share of urban space, most vividly represented by the Griffin Building, whose scale the novel renders with an almost bureaucratic precision: "At

twelve stories, it was one of the tallest buildings in the nation... The elevator, the only one for hundreds of miles, conveyed them to the eighth floor" (Whitehead, 2016, p. 85). The verticality of this building is itself a territorial argument, since it stratifies who occupies which floor according to institutional authority, with government offices positioned above factory floors and dormitories in a hierarchy that Cora's assigned housing places her firmly beneath. She occupies a share of this territory, but she has no standing to determine how that territory is organized, a distinction the novel makes literal through the eugenics ward, where her biological future, not merely her present labor, becomes an object the state claims authority to manage.

If the plantation represents total ownership and the jurisdictional state represents conditional, closely monitored inclusion, North Carolina represents the third and most extreme model this novel offers. It presents a territory that claims the authority to exclude an entire racial category from existing within its borders at all. The policy is stated by the novel without euphemism: "In North Carolina the negro race did not exist except at the ends of ropes" (Whitehead, 2016, p. 145). Read through Mbembe's (2003) theory of necropolitics, this sentence describes sovereignty in its starkest form, the power to decide who may live within a territory and who must be denied the basic legal category of existence there. The Freedom Trail, the road along which the state displays the corpses of those it has murdered, converts this abstract claim of exclusion into a continuous and physical spatial fact: "The bodies go all the way to town" (Whitehead, 2016, p. 141). Read against Soja's (2010) framework, North Carolina fails the distributive test in the most absolute sense possible. Since it allocates no share of its territory to Black residents whatsoever, and it fails the standing test just as completely, since its entire legal architecture is organized around denying Black personhood the status of a subject who could ever hold a claim.

The name given to the road along which these corpses are displayed carries its own territorial argument, one that Martin makes explicit when he tells Cora, "They call this road the Freedom Trail now" (Whitehead, 2016, p. 141). The naming is not incidental. A territory that organizes itself around the extermination of a racial category still requires a vocabulary in which its own violence can be narrated as freedom, and the name performs exactly the ideological function Belsey (2005) attributes to formal textual choices: it is not decoration but argument, encoding whose freedom the territory exists to secure and at whose expense. McKittrick's (2006) insistence that Black geographic knowledge exists in permanent tension with the dominant spatial vocabulary imposed on it finds a precise fictional instance here, since the road's official name and its actual function stand in a relationship the novel asks its reader, rather than its white characters, to hold in view at once.

The demographic anxiety underlying this policy is one of the few places where the novel grounds its speculative extremity in a specific and quantified historical claim. It notes that "Whites outnumbered slaves two to one in North Carolina, but in Louisiana and Georgia the populations neared parity. Just over the border in South Carolina, the number of blacks surpassed that of whites by more than a hundred thousand" (Whitehead, 2016, p. 149). Bullard's (1990) and Pulido's (2000) research on environmental racism describes a pattern in which the distribution of harm correlates closely with demographic proportion and perceived threat to white political control. Whitehead's fictional North Carolina intensifies precisely this correlation until it becomes genocidal policy rather than zoning decision.

Against these three models of exclusion and conditional inclusion, Valentine Farm offers the novel's only sustained image of what Soja (2010) would recognize as achieved spatial justice. A

territory in which a community holds both a fair share of space and genuine standing to determine how that space is organized. The community's own description of its purpose captures both dimensions at once: "Freedom was a community labouring for something lovely and rare" (Whitehead, 2016, p. 246). This is territory secured through collective labor and mutual agreement rather than through documentation issued by an external authority, and Young's (1990) insistence that justice requires standing, not only distribution, is realized here more completely than anywhere else in the novel.

Before its destruction, the farm's own residents debate the terms of their territorial security in language that anticipates Young's (1990) distinction between marginalization and outright violence as separate faces of oppression. Mingo argues for a strategy of accommodation, limiting the farm's size and discouraging new arrivals, on the reasoning that the surrounding white territory "don't like to take chances" (Whitehead, 2016, p. 243). It is a phrase that treats visibility itself as the danger to be managed. Lander rejects this position outright, refusing to treat the farm's precarious legitimacy as grounds for retreat: "Valentine farm is a delusion. Who told you the negro deserved a place of refuge?... Yet here we are" (Whitehead, 2016, p. 256). The debate does not resolve before the mob arrives, and its lack of resolution is itself significant for a spatial-justice reading. Soja's (2010) framework assumes that a community achieving both distribution and standing has secured something durable, yet Whitehead's novel insists that no internal strategy, whether Mingo's caution or Lander's defiance, can convert local spatial justice into safety from a surrounding territory that has not consented to it. The debate is the novel's demonstration that the durability Soja's framework implies is available only where the surrounding political order permits it to be, a qualification spatial justice theory, built largely for contexts where the state itself is at least nominally the arbiter of fairness, does not always foreground with sufficient force.

The destruction of the farm is therefore the novel's most important argument about the limits of locally achieved spatial justice within a hostile surrounding territory. When the white mob attacks, the text records the violence with a specificity that refuses to soften it into abstraction: "The white men outside whooped and howled over the carnage" (Whitehead, 2016, p. 257), and "the windows of the library shattered and Cora saw the books burning on the shelves inside" (Whitehead, 2016, p. 259). Harvey's (1973) argument that the geographic distribution of resources within a city cannot be separated from the political structures that surround and enable that city offers the clearest lens for reading this destruction. Valentine Farm achieves spatial justice at a local scale, but that achievement is never secure against a surrounding political order committed to denying Black territorial standing everywhere else. The farm's destruction is not a failure internal to the community's own organization of space. It is an argument, made through violence, that a surrounding territory built on exclusion cannot indefinitely tolerate a counter-territory built on inclusion existing within reach of it.

Two final images complete the novel's argument about territorial entitlement. The literal underground railroad, when Lumbly explains its origin, insists on Black labor as the source of its territorial infrastructure: "Who builds anything in this country?... With their hands, how else?" (Whitehead, 2016, p. 67). This is territory produced from below, an alternative geography built by exactly the population the surface world denies standing to claim any territory at all, and it stands as the novel's clearest embodiment of Lefebvre's (1991) argument that space is always the product of labor and practice rather than a fact simply given in advance.

Arnold Ridgeway, the novel's slave catcher, embodies the surface world's determination to prevent this alternative territorial claim from succeeding. His account of his own purpose reduces the entire conflict of the novel to a contest over spatial order: "I'm a notion of order. The slave that disappears—it's a notion, too. Of hope, undoing what I do so that a slave the next plantation over gets an idea that it can run, too" (Whitehead, 2016, p. 203). Ridgeway understands, with a clarity the novel grants few other characters, that a single successful territorial escape threatens the entire structure of entitlement the plantation system depends on, since it demonstrates that the boundary he is paid to enforce is not, after all, an unbreakable fact of nature. His defeat, when Cora pulls him down the tunnel stairs and "spun and locked her arms around him like a chain of iron... and the pair tumbled down the stone steps into the darkness" (Whitehead, 2016, p. 282), completes this argument with a symmetry that needs no further gloss. The enforcer of fixed territorial order is consumed by the very underground counter-territory he spent his life trying to eliminate.

The novel's final image, Cora heading west with a wagon train, "headed west... St. Louis. From there the trail to California" (Whitehead, 2016, p. 276), refuses to resolve the question of territorial entitlement into either triumph or defeat. The West, in the novel's closing pages, is neither owned like the plantation, nor jurisdictionally conditional like South Carolina, nor exterminatory like North Carolina, nor achieved and defended like Valentine Farm. It is unclaimed, at least within the frame the novel closes on, and Cora's movement toward it reads less as an arrival than as a continuation of the same territorial question the entire novel has been asking, carried forward into a geography the text declines to resolve.

Limitations of this Reading

A reading organized around territory necessarily sets other questions to one side, and it is worth naming what has been left out rather than letting the omission pass unremarked. This article has said comparatively little about gender, even though the plantation's spatial control over Cora is inseparable from her vulnerability as a young woman within the enslaved community itself, a dimension other scholarship has begun to address and that a fuller territorial reading would need to integrate rather than bracket. It has also treated Soja's (2010) framework somewhat more generously than his own critics have. Several of whom have argued that spatial justice, developed for contemporary urban policy, risks flattening historically specific forms of racial terror into a more general vocabulary of distribution and standing that was not built with chattel slavery specifically in mind. That risk is real. This article's use of Mbembe (2003) alongside Soja is intended, in part, as a corrective to it, since necropolitics supplies the vocabulary of sovereign violence that Soja's framework, on its own, tends to underspecify.

Conclusion

Reading the novel through Soja's (2010) spatial justice alongside Westphal's (2011) geocriticism discloses a dimension of the novel that trauma-centered scholarship, valuable as it remains, has not made its central concern. And that purely metaphorical geocritical readings have treated only in passing. Each of the novel's four principal territories, the plantation, the jurisdictional state, North Carolina, and Valentine Farm, encodes a distinct model of entitlement. Whitehead's prose tracks the specific mechanisms, force, documentation, legislated terror, and collective labor, through which each model is built, defended, and in three of the four cases, ultimately denied to its Black inhabitants. Young's (1990) distinction between distribution and standing proves

unusually well suited to this material, since it explains why even the jurisdictional state's papers, which grant Cora a conditional share of urban space, never grant her any authority to determine how that space is organized, and why Valentine Farm's achievement of both distribution and standing at once marks it as the novel's singular exception, an exception the surrounding territory proves unwilling to let stand.

This reading suggests a modest extension to Westphal's (2011) geocritical method. Alongside spatiotemporality, transgressivity, and referentiality, texts that stage explicit contests over legal entitlement to land, as neo-slave narratives frequently do, may reward a fourth analytic category, territory, understood specifically as the question of who holds standing to claim, defend, and organize a given space. Soja's (2010) spatial justice supplies the political vocabulary this category requires, and Whitehead's novel supplies unusually precise literary evidence that the vocabulary translates into fiction without strain. Future work might extend this territorial reading across the wider neo-slave narrative tradition, testing whether the same four-part structure, total ownership, conditional jurisdiction, exclusionary terror, and fragile counter-territory, recurs in other texts that take slavery's afterlife as their subject, or whether Whitehead's particular literalization of the railroad makes his novel an unusually clear rather than a representative case.

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