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# Racial uplift in speculative fiction: technological empowerment and the enforcement of black identity in Colson Whitehead's *The Intuitionist* and *John Henry Days*

## Abstract

Following the steps of technological innovation in the US, one can easily notice how technology and its use has been inaccurately and stereotypically reduced to an exclusivism related to a white-Western ideal. However, black speculative fiction has often tried to overtake this concern. In light of this, the aim of this contribution is to examine the relationship between black identity and technology through the lens of speculative fiction, in Colson Whitehead's *The Intuitionist* and *John Henry Days*. The final goal is to demonstrate how Whitehead uses technology as a trope to reinforce or rather empower black identity in what will be eventually defined as a form of "racial uplift," an enforcement of blackness that elevates the African-American putting him in a position of competence and control toward the machine. Delving into the stereotype of technology as a form of racism toward the black community, by way of conclusion the essay considers Whitehead as an "uplift writer" for his illustration of technology as a narrative tool that lifts black identity by subverting the discriminative and racist encodement of African-Americans within technological development.

## Résumé

En suivant les étapes de l'innovation technologique aux États-Unis, on peut facilement remarquer comment la technologie et son utilisation ont été réduites de manière inexacte et stéréotypée à un exclusivisme lié à un idéal occidental blanc. Cependant, la science-fiction noire a souvent tenté de dépasser cette préoccupation. Dans cette optique, l'objectif de cette contribution est d'examiner la relation entre l'identité noire et la technologie à travers le prisme de la fiction spéculative dans *The Intuitionist* et *John Henry Days* de Colson Whitehead. L'objectif final est de démontrer comment Whitehead utilise la technologie comme un trope pour renforcer, ou plutôt pour donner du pouvoir à l'identité noire dans ce qui sera finalement défini comme une forme d' « élévation raciale », un renforcement de la négritude qui élève l'Afro-Américain en le mettant dans une position de compétence et de contrôle vis-à-vis de la machine. En examinant le stéréotype de la technologie comme une forme de racisme à l'égard de la communauté noire, l'essai considère Whitehead, en guise de conclusion, comme un « *uplift writer* » pour son illustration de la technologie comme un outil narratif qui élève l'identité noire en subvertissant l'encodage discriminatoire et raciste des Afro-Américains dans le développement technologique.

**Multilingual e-Journal for Literary Studies**

# RACIAL UPLIFT IN SPECULATIVE FICTION: TECHNOLOGICAL EMPOWERMENT AND THE ENFORCEMENT OF BLACK IDENTITY IN COLSON WHITEHEAD'S *THE INTUITIONIST* AND *JOHN HENRY DAYS*

## Racializing technology: black technophobia and "Jim Code" ideology

Within the broad conceptualization of technology in America, the African-American presence has been largely excluded. In this sense, it is disturbing to note that in the United States, African-Americans have been neglected as participants, workers, and consumers, of technology[1]. In his wide-ranging study on the role of technology in America, Carroll Pursell has explained that "Even a cursory glance at the literature of the history of technology reveals the almost total lack of attention to the matters of race"[2]. Following the theorizations made by Cheryl Leggon it can be said that "One of the major impacts that science and technology had (and continue to have) on African-Americans as a group it is its role in attempting to provide an objective basis for the social construction of 'race' and 'racism'"[3].

However, media scholars rarely consider race and technology as related issues and black technological use has often been misleadingly oversimplified as a deficit of competence or an exclusivism related to specific social classifications. In an article published in *The Atlantic*, Anthony Walton critically observed how the history of African-Americans since the discovery of the New World is the story of their encounter with technology, "an encounter that has proved perhaps immediately devastating to their hopes, dreams and possibilities"[4]. If we draw back to slavery as a primitive form of technology, we see how for African-Americans the engagement with innovation has been another way to implement racialization. Scholars who have studied the social and cultural impact of technology in America explained how technologization has been used to maintain and reinscribe the exclusion of black people within a dominant white culture. Overall, however, the exclusivity and the mastery of technology to the white intelligentsia has mostly ostracized the black community. On this point, Bruce Sinclair cogently claimed that the intellectual accomplishment of innovation and technological competence in America was mentally superior and referenced, per se, to the white elite.[5] In this

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[1] Cheryl LEGGON, "The Impact of Science and Technology on African-Americans", in *Humboldt Journal of Social Relations* 21. 2, 1995, 35.
[2] *Ibid.*, xiii.
[3] *Ibid.*, 38.
[4] Anthony WALTON, "Technology Versus African Americans", in *The Atlantic*, January 1999 Issue, [online], < https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/1999/01/technology-versus-african-americans/377392/>.
[5] Interestingly enough, the figure of the great American inventor has been and still is, by itself, culturally white, see Bruce SINCLAIR, *Technology and the African-American Experience.* Cambridge (MA): MIT Press, 2014. Let us think for instance of Thomas Edison and, more recently, Steve Jobs. Today it is well known that Silicon Valley is a prominently white system of high-tech resources.

sense, Walton further discloses how the disadvantageous situation of blacks vis a vis technology has much to do with issues of class and wealth as it does with race. In a sense, of course, blacks have suffered from what can be defined as "technological illiteracy," that is to say a general inability to use or simply deal with machines. Rather, the fact that African-Americans have always been considered objects and not subjects is a trauma that the black community drags on from the time of slavery and had repercussions, also, in their encounter with technology.

In order to properly frame my argument, allow me first to reiterate the problematic issue of race in its relation to technology to consequently draw on in its contextualization within black speculative fiction. As several critical studies have established, given that race is grounded in society and that technology, to a certain extent, determines a social engagement, its usage in the US has been invoked to provide the empirical basis to maintain inferior or unequal treatments for African-Americans. For instance, in the 1960s, technology created several problems for the black community who was segregated even in the workplace by the impossibility to use new information machines that were exclusively accessible to white users.[6] Overall, however, technology has progressively become another space for black discrimination. Keeping these statements in mind as the basis for my analysis, I will consider the relationship between race and technology through the lens of black speculative fiction showing how Colson Whitehead's novels narrativize racialization through the presence of the machine, at the same time illustrating what I will consider as a "racial uplift", that is to say an enforcement of blackness through direct encounter with technology. Yet, before I expand on the conundrum of considering technology as a source of racial superiority in Whitehead's novels, let me elucidate more deeply the complex relationship between black identity and mechanization within the spectrum of American literature and culture.

In his seminal essay "Technology and Ethos," Amiri Baraka urged black people to rethink their relationship with technological tools. Baraka explained how technology might well represent the discriminative reality of the black community. Among the struggles black people have faced, technology is occasionally part of the discussion if we consider that machines—as Norbert Weiner said—are an extension of their inventors/creators and that the construction and usage of technology per se is associated to a white Western ideal.[7] The problem, as Baraka explains, was the fact that the West wanted to technologize humanity rather than humanize technology. As such, the discrimination toward African-Americans inevitably drew them out of the discussion, and the black community was systematically excluded from technological advancement. This form of segregation, in a weaker meaning of the term, has been a motivating factor for considering technology a prejudicial instrument against the African-American community. Focusing on what he terms "black vernacular technological creativity"—the ways in which black people interact with machines–Rayvon Fouché leveled a critique of technology as a concrete system

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[6] The film *Hidden Figures* (2016), the true story of Katherine Johnson and African-American women working at NASA in the 1960s is an example. Together with Johnson, Dorothy Vaughn became the first black woman to work at NASA is responsible for the introduction of the first computer machine working as a supervisor. The movie depicts the struggle of black women for equality in a world of technological advancement exclusively reserved for the white ideal.

[7] Amiri BARAKA, "Technology & Ethos", in *Raise, Race, Rays, Raze: Essays Since 1965*, 155-157, New York, Random House, 1971, 155.

of oppression for the black community.[8] In his opinion, "technology such as the ships that transported African-Americans to the New World, contributed directly or indirectly to the subjugation of African-American people […], technology silenced African-Americans rendering them defenseless and invisible"[9]. In such an interpretative approach, we can see how America has fueled the unconditional expulsion of black identity from the country's technological improvement. The implications of expelling the black community from the development of innovation in the United States inevitably leads to a discussion about what has become an exclusive black technological experience with the machine, illustrated by contemporary fiction. Likewise, since African-Americans have always been marginalized and excluded from American society it is not a surprise that we talk about a form of "institutionalized racism within technical communities"[10]. As Fouché remarks, what we know of technology and the African-American presence comes from dominant subject positions that tell us more about how black people engage with machines.[11] In so arguing, technology effectively propels that systemic racism that has always plagued American society.

However, in recent years, scholarly interest has grown on the impact of digital technologies and its impact on the black community. Recently, scholars such as Rutha Benjamin and André Brock (2019; 2020) have underscored the importance of technology as a discriminative toolkit, an instrument to enforce white supremacy to the detriment of black discrimination. As Rutha Benjamin makes plain, the role of technology entangles the issue of race constructing an inequity code or, in her words, "a new Jim code".[12] In this sense, Benjamin fosters a shift from previous theories asserting that technologies, especially those of the digital age, act as a form of hidden racism, and the machine, or rather its usage, codifies race. If we consider that computers and communication systems fall along predictable "racial, class and gender lines"[13], Benjamin is mostly correct when she asserts that "Technologies do not just reflect racial fault lines but can be used to reconstruct and repackage social groupings in ways that seem to celebrate difference"[14]. If we consider that race, by itself, is a kind of technology designed to separate and consolidate the many forms of injustice experienced by members of racialized groups, we can assume that the machine becomes a form of racial discrimination. Aligning with this theory, media scholars—such as Manuel Castells—posit that even though technology is often considered neutral, developed outside of social contexts, its impact shapes society and consolidates prefixed social groups.[15] As he further clarifies "The dilemma of technological determinism is probably a false problem, since technology is society and cannot be understood or represented without its technological tools"[16].

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[8] Rayvon FOUCHE', "Say It Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud: African Americans, American Artifactual Culture, and Black Vernacular Technological CreatIbidty", in *American Quarterly* 58, 2006, 639-661, 640.

[9] *Ibid.*, 640.

[10] *Ibid.*, 645.

[11] *Ibid.*, 657.

[12] Rutha BENJAMIN, *Race after Technology, Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code* Cambridge, Polity Press, 2019, 22.

[13] *Ibid.*, 29.

[14] *Ibid.*, 2.

[15] Manuel CASTELLS, *The rise of the network society,* (2nd ed) Malden, MA, Blackwell, 2000, 5.

[16] *Ibid.*, 5.

In this way, the symbiotic relationship between technology and society inevitably entangles the racial issue to the point that today scholars such as Jaqueline Horton speak of a digital divide to refer to the discharge of African-Americans from technology.[17] Following this suggestion, we can see a non-participation of blackness in what is termed "black technophobia"[18], referring to the disquiet concern of associating black identity with machines. As such, once again, the problematic relationship between race and innovation invites to reconsider the technological system as a racist force. As Everett remarks, "Digital media erect new possibilities for concretizing an African digital diaspora capable of enacting a new millennial manifestation of W. E. Du Bois's powerful trope of black consciousness"[19]. This statement proves how in a society drenched in racism, technology becomes a normative model of race reconfigured within the potential of the machine. In this sense, the new Jim code practice is well represented by the stereotype of computer systems that become a form of discriminatory design.[20]

However, André Brock offers an alternative take on the question delving more deeply into the encodement of blackness through current technologies.[21] As Brock implies, if we assume that technological competence and virtual identity have long been conflated with whiteness, we must conclude that "whiteness in itself is a techno-cultural identity"[22]. On this point, Brock further claims that "When scholars first sought to understand information technology use by black folks, the black body was only legible through its perceived absence: absence from the material-technical and institutional aspects of computers and society"[23]. Investigating this issue through the lens of black speculative fiction (a discussion I will further elaborate), Isiah Lavender has remarked how the black body was always seen as a technology "a natural machine necessary for the cultivation of the physical landscape. An essential part of the black identity is lost by conflating race and technology".[24] In

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[17] Recently, films such as the acclaimed, *Black Panther* (2018), have imagined the inclusion of African-Americans within a technological design.

[18] Anna EVERETT, *Digital Diaspora: A Race for Cyberspace*, New York: Suny Press, 2009, 19. See also Anna EVERETT, "The Revolution Will Be Digitized: Afrocentricity and the Digital Public Sphere", in *Social Text*, vol. 20 no. 2, 2002, 125-146. In this article, Everett observes that "The overwhelming characterizations of the brave new world of cyberspace has primarily a racialized sphere of whiteness that confines black people to the low-tech sphere" (133). Additionally, Everett contends that "In the cacophonous rush to judgement by new media technology gurus, academics, politicians, entrepreneurs, and cyberpunk novelists, all strIbidng to outline the eventual contours of the surging information society, concern over issues of racial equity or the growing of the black presence in cyberspace has been conspicuously muted, until recently" (19). For Everett, media technologies and the Internet work to marginalize and exclude the African-American presence online. For more on this see Jessie DANIELS, *Cyber Racism: White Supremacy online and the New Attack on CIbidl Rights*, Plymouth, Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2009. In his analysis, Daniels considers how networked communication simultaneously reinforces a sense of transnational whiteness — a form of white identity not tied to a specific region or nation and reimagined as an identity that is linked via global networks.

[19] *Ibid.*, 34.

[20] BENJAMIN, *ibid.*, 47.

[21] André Jr BROCK, *Distributed Blackness: African-American Cybercultures*, New York, New York University Press, 2020, 1. On this point, Brock further claims that "When scholars first sought to understand information technology use by black folks, the black body was only legible through its perceived absence: absence from the material-technical and institutional aspects of computers and society" (1). However, Brock's analysis focuses mainly on the examination of Twitter as a strategy for constructing or solidifying white identity to the detriment of blackness as a group identity.

[22] *Ibid.*, 1.

[23] *Ibid.*, 1.

[24] Isiah III LAVENDER, *Afrofuturism Rising: the Literary Prehistory of a Movement*, Columbus, Ohio State University Press, 2019, 87.

this sense, drawing on the widespread stereotype that black Americans were technologically deficient, the renewed interest in black cybercultures online has recently investigated the role of blackness in light of current technologies.[25] As I have earlier outlined, assuming that technology per se is associated with a cultural ethos—ideologically white—is to consider the machine as a cultural endeavor, a tool that fuels the stigmatization of black identity. As Toni Morrison (1993) has argued, American culture is deeply rooted within negative stereotypes toward blacks and African-Americans, and in this scenario, technology functions as white mythology, and its usage in America has been a consequence of a white-centric superiority that, even today, limits or rather refuses to include the African-American in any critical discourse on the use of technology. From a more recent perspective, in 2006, Fouché observed how "In the technological realm, creativity by African-Americans is regularly dismissed as cleverness instead of being interpreted as smart, rigorous or innovative"[26]. Overall, however, "Black information technology use highlights black technical and cultural capability while disrupting the white, male, middle-class norms of Western technoculture"[27]. If, as Brock argues, blackness has often been classified as a group rather than an individual identity, a reference to Du Bois and the question of double consciousness seems necessary. Du Bois's theory brought to the fore the essence of blackness considering that the black is present at the same time being absent from American society. In his view, African-American people live with an altered and partial self-perception identifying both their sense of blackness and Americanness as two irreconcilable contradictions whose coexistence turns into a sense of alienation. Recalling Du Bois's statement, I suggest that this mechanism occurs even in the reconceptualization of black identity through direct engagement with the machine. In a sense, of course, we can conclude that the shift between presence and absence encompasses the experience of technology and African-Americans.

## Black Speculative Fiction as "Racial Uplift": the Case of Colson Whitehead

As I move on to examine the liaison between race and technology through the lens of American literature or, to use its correct terminology what is known as Afrofuturism, it is first necessary to consider how the genre reframed the role of blackness through the narrativization of technologies. By calling attention to the experience of African-Americans vis a vis science and technology, recent criticism has broadly defined black science fiction  (SF) as an expression of race along the black and white binary drawing specific attention on discrimination and racial issues

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[25] In his compelling study entitled *Color Monitor's: the Black Face of Technology in America* (2006), Martin Kevorkian observed how since the 1980s, especially on screen, movies have increasingly casted the black man as computer expert. As he further explains, this choice draws from an "American cyberphobia" of African-Americans and technology that, in its association to the black identity, represents a sort of threat toward the exclusIbidsm of computer-knowledge as predominantly, if not seclusively, a white tendency.

[26] FOUCHE', "Say It Loud, I'm Black and I'm Proud: African Americans, American Artifactual Culture, and Black Vernacular Technological CreatIbidty", in *American Quarterly* 58., 2006, 639-661, 647.

[27] BROCK, *ibid.*, 17.

contextualized in futuristic scenarios.[28] To properly frame the history and critical dialogue of Afrofuturism it is significant to note that the genre, "Illuminates the background of science fiction and its history with the concerns of race and technology"[29]. Even though, as seen, the use of technology has been limited to a white exclusivism reenforcing black discrimination, science fiction (speculative fiction) and Afrofuturism, have tried in some ways, to subvert this cultural trend by focusing on black identity in its utopic relationship with the machine.

In the 21st century, African science fiction has become evident so much that Afrofuturism has gained popularity as a powerful culturally cantered analysis of black culture and machines.[30] Without a doubt, Mark Dery's definition of Afrofuturism, referring to the African-American experience with technology, has been useful to set blackness within the context of science fiction. In Dery's words, "Speculative fiction treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of twentieth-century technoculture—and, more generally, African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future"[31]. In a recent critique on what is known today as "AfroFuturism 2.0" Alondra Nelson further reports that "Afrofuturism can be broadly defined as African American voices with other stories to tell about culture, technology and things to come.[32]

Following this interpretation, Adilifu Nama stated that "African-American science fiction has had a history of providing striking portrayals of the future, alternative worlds, sleek rocket ships, cyborgs and time machines".[33] From a broad perspective, "Afrofuturism may be characterized as a program for recovering the histories of counter-futures created in a century hostile to Afrodiasporic projection and as a space within which the critical work of manufacturing tools capable of intervention within the current political dispensation may be undertaken".[34] Overall, in any of its diverging and yet similar interpretations, Afrofuturism reimages new black experiences and identities exploring the implications of technoculture through the aesthetic representation of alternative realities for the black community.

As such, these canonical definitions give us a grasp of the main traits of African-American science fiction—labelled under the umbrella term of "speculative fiction"—considering that the term is often used as a generic definition that includes the subgenres of cyberfiction, fantasy, and dystopia, by black authors. To the extent

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[28] See Isiah III LAVENDER, *Race in American Science Fiction*, Bloomington, Indiana University Press, 2011.

[29] *Ibid.*, 11.

[30] BROCK, *ibid.*, 29.

[31] Mark DERY, *Flame Wars. The Discourse on Cyberculture*, Durham (NC), Duke University Press, 1997, 180.

[32] Quoted in Reynaldo ANDERSON et al., *Afrofuturism 2.0. The Rise of Astro-Blackness*, Lanham: Lexington, Books, 2006, viii. Nelson considers Science fiction and Afrofuturism as interconnected genres, spanned from canonical authors such as Samuel Delany and Octavia Butler to Zora Neale Hurston, James Baldwin, Walter Mosley and Richard Wright. For a recent and broad overview on the genre see Lavender (2019). Moreover, the large spectrum of African-American novelists in contemporary science fiction, such as Percival Everett, Dexter Palamer, Teju Cole and ultimately, Colson Whitehead, signals the salience of race as a prominent theme of contemporary science fiction.

[33] Adilifu NAMA, *Black Space: Imaging Race in Science Fiction Film*, Austin, University of Texas Press, 2008, 10.

[34] Quoted in ANDERSON et al., *ibid.*, viii.

that we read black speculative fiction, one of the essential traits is, as we know, a combination of dystopian futuristic scenarios illustrated by the relationship between African-Americans, machines, and more broadly apocalyptic landscapes. Despite Dery's seminal theorization, for the purpose of this analysis, however, I would like to draw on a more recent, and equally salient, consideration on Afrofuturism. In his latest study, *Afrofuturism Rising* (2019), Isiah Lavender broadly considers Afrofuturism as a sub-genre or a sister genre of science fiction. Lavender's vast criticism is also indicative of how

> Like science fiction itself, Afrofuturism today proves to be extremely difficult to define. Some people see it as an aesthetic genre unto itself: SF written by black people for black people. Others see it as a way of reading that calls attention to the complex relationship between science, technology and race, that always undergirded but are not always more evident in SF. Still others understand Afrofuturism as a cultural phenomenon emerging from the relationship between African-Americans and Western technology, and they appreciate SF's themes of abduction, displacement and alienation, as fitting symbols of black experience.[35]

Such statement suggests that in any of its multiple interpretations, Afrofuturism is a "moment" rather than a movement, as it explores the transformations of techno-scientific forces today in African-American science and speculative fiction. In a more generic sense, today "Afrofuturism can be classified as a colored wave within SF history"[36]. In a broader sense, Afrofuturism as a genre has helped subverting racial identities, polarized along the binary of black and white, by empowering blackness, through the illustration of technology and black identity as combined realities.

Underscoring this point, Anne Balsamo has argued that "One way to investigate the interpretative and ideological dimensions of contemporary cyberculture is to situate cyberpunk mythologies concerning the emergence of a new cultural formation built in and around technology"[37]. Equally important, however, is the fact that those contemporary narratives dealing with the quasi-obsessive relationship with technological tools are understood, "In contiguous rather than oppositional terms.[38] By contrast, blacks do not figure in the literature of cyberpunk, and contemporary African-American authors deal with the issue of technology but their novels are generally classified as Afrofuturist dystopias. Yet, in a more significant sense, in the context of Afrofuturism or afro-centric science fiction, technology is labelled as the heterotopic space of black discrimination.

In his book Mark Dery insists on the position of black science fiction to stress how

> The sublegitimate status of science fiction as a pulp genre in Western literature mirrors the subaltern position to which blacks were relegated

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[35] LAVENDER, ibid., 2011, 1.
[36] *Ibid.*, 186.
[37] Anne BALSAMO, "Feminism for the Incurably Informed", in Mark Dery (ed.), *Flame Wars. The Discourse of Cyberculture*, Durham (NC), Duke University Press, 1994. 125-156, 26.
[38] *Ibid.*, 128.

throughout American history. In this context, William Gibson's observation that SF is widely known as 'the golden ghetto,' in recognition of the negative correlation between market share and critical legitimation, takes on curious significance.[39]

This assertion leads us to consider how, despite a more or less extensive literary output, speculative fiction is a niche within the broad spectrum of contemporary literature. This is true if we consider that the intersection of race and technology in contemporary novels has been marginally explored and has escaped critical attention. This is indeed perplexing, especially in light of the fact that there is a rather vast production of narratives by contemporary African-American authors that tell stories in which technologies defines the black experience.

As I will continue to wrestle these issues in the pages ahead, we will see how the liaison between technology and race in black speculative fiction is not merely limited to texts that illustrate a dystopian future, rather to narratives that disentangle the relationship between black identity and the use of machines addressing the meaning of blackness in contemporary America. These fictions include Colson Whitehead's narrative production which rather than stereotypically excluding African-Americans from the use of machines, functions as an enforcement of black identity. To this end, I will focus on two of Whitehead's narratives; his debut novel, *The Intuitionist* (1999), and his second literary accomplishment, *John Henry Days* (2001). I believe both texts can be included within the canon of speculative fiction lending themselves to afrofuturist interpretations. However, although some of the common motifs of speculative fiction are easily discernible in both works, these novels—as much of Whitehead's fiction—are difficult to classify within a specific genre. Yet, I do not mean to investigate Whitehead's classification in the genre of Afrofuturism, rather my aim is to offer a re-reading of these narratives drawing from the tropes of speculative/black science fiction to examine the author's representation of race and technology through an empowerment of black identity.

Considering the hybridity of his texts, the recent and rather limited scholarship on Colson Whitehead has increasingly highlighted how the author's narrative production is hard to classify as it does not fall neatly into a single, "traditional" and clearly delineated category. Whitehead's production is indeed rich, varied and extremely diversified. On the basis of these assumptions, recent scholarship has argued that as an African-American novelist, Colson Whitehead has conducted experiments with genres that are exceedingly interesting and challenging.[40] After his debut speculative fiction novel, *The Intuitionist*, Whitehead has moved from folk tales such as *John Henry Days*, to non-fiction with an essay collection, *The Colossus of New York* (2003), post-apocalyptic horror novels such as *Zone One* (2011), and more recently, approaching the slave narrative genre with the Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, *The Underground Railroad* (2016)—just to mention some of his major fictional achievements. In what is considered the most salient examination on the growing scholarship on Whitehead, Derek Maus remarks how

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[39] DERY, *ibid.*, 1997, 180.
[40] See Clifford THOMPSON, "Review(ed) works: The Intuitionist and John Henry Days", in *The Threepenny Review* 89, 2002, 8.

critics have mostly seen Whitehead's work as an example of reinvigoration and renewal in the African-American tradition.[41]

In his survey on Afrofuturist narratives in African-American literature, Isiah Lavender has argued that "Whitehead has long dabbled with speculative themes bordering on Afrofuturism in his fiction"[42]. For this reason, given Whitehead's difficult and, as Lavender suggests, elusive placement in the canon of Afrofuturism, in the upcoming analysis I am compelled to follow the thread of technology to show how a reading of Whitehead in the spectrum of speculative fiction might help re-examine his illustration of technology through what can be considered as an uplift ideology. Among the growing scholarship on Whitehead, Kimberly Fain discloses how "In all of Whitehead's works there is the notion that racism exists, yet characters or society can attain the quality of racial irrelevance due to their talents, passing education and/or color blindness of characters toward one another".[43] Underscoring Fain's point, critics have additionally emphasized that "He represents the edge between the marginalized and the mainstream in his fiction".[44] Lavender adds response to this asserting that "While Whitehead might not be a SF writer, in the classic sense, he is indeed an afrofuturist".[45]

Nevertheless, those afrofuturist themes recurrently present in his novels have remained consistent among Whitehead's criticism, and for this reason, the novelist has been recently placed by critics within the category of the so-called "post-black" writers, "authors who are engaged in redefining complex notions of blackness"[46] from a contemporary perspective. In this regard, Sylvie Bauer points out that although Whitehead's characters are generally African-American, his novels enact a social satire that goes beyond the issue of race.[47] What can be consistently found from Whitehead's first novel, is the subversion of a social code-register and the sabotage of clichés toward the African-American community that rebels against the stigmatization of race. Examples are the protagonist of *The Intuitionist* who reasserts herself as the first African-American female elevator inspector, the black hero of *John Henry Days*, and more recently, the protagonist of *Underground Railroad*, Cora, a slave who rebels against the brutal system of slavery in the pre-war South embarking on a journey to freedom. In effect, we can say that novels such as *Zone One* (2012), *John Henry Days* and *The Intuitionist*, offer "the multi-racial realities characteristic of the racialization of ethnicity in the US 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"[48].

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[41] See Derek MAUS, *Understanding Colson Whitehead*, Columbia, University of South Carolina Press, 2021.
[42] LAVENDER, *ibid.*, 191.
[43] Kimberly FAIN, *The Postracial Voice of Contemporary Literature*, Plymouth, Rowman and Littlefield, 2015, xvii.
[44] MAUS, *ibid.*, 191.
[45] *Ibid.*, 193. For a recent afrofuturist/speculative fiction reading of Whitehead's last novel see Isiah Lavender's volume *Afrofuturism Rising: the Literary Prehistory of a Movement* (2019).
[46] Sylvie BAUER, "Voix en Suspense en John Henry Days", in *Revue française d'études américaines* 121, 2009, 50.
[47] *Ibid.*, 51.
[48] Ramón SALVÍDAR, "The Second Elevation of the Novel: Race, Form and Postrace Aesthetic in Contemporary Narrative", in *Narrative* 21. 1, 2013, 3. Emphasis in the original.

By outlining the traits of contemporary science fiction, scholars insist on the need to look at the array of contemporary black novelists, among whom Colson Whitehead, as authors of a "post-race aesthetic" in the wake of what has been defined as "speculative realism"[49], a combination of realism and fantasy grounded on the black experience illustrating the meaning of race. In *What Was African-American Literature* (2011), Kenneth Warren endorses the idea that "After the Civil Rights movement expressions of segregation, oppression and discrimination, gave way to more covert but equally pernicious manifestations of racism".[50] In this sense, Whitehead has been classified among those writers exploring "a post-postmodern and post-Civil Rights movement in American racial formations".[51] In that sense, critics among whom Ràmon Saldívar, have prominently considered some of Whitehead's works as primary textual instances of a new aesthetic treatment of race in postmodern and contemporary American fiction. On this point, he cogently observes that Whitehead goes in the shift of a new aesthetic drawing from Afrofuturist speculative fiction but at the same time orienting toward a combination between ethnic fiction and postmodern metafiction. As such, Saldívar offers an alternative take on the classification of Colson Whitehead within the genre of speculative fiction, suggesting he belongs to that new wave of authors he considers "postracial". However, he further clarifies that "The term 'postrace' does not mean that we are *beyond* race, the prefix 'post' here does not mean a chronological superimposing, a triumphant posteriority. Rather, the term entails a conceptual shift to the question of what meaning the idea of "race" carries in our own times"[52].

This interpretation, that provides a conceptual framework for the classification of Whitehead among the cohort of black authors writing in the spectrum of Afrofuturism, also suggests how he goes way beyond the traditional image of black identity, constructing instead an idea of blackness that is post-racial offering a conceptual shift toward the traditional logic of race unravelling its significance in our current times reworking—as Whitehead does—traditional genres such as folk tales and slave narratives. Yet, despite Whitehead's novels have been often labelled under the canon of black speculative fiction, the relationship between black identity and the machine has largely escaped significant attention by the author's main critical accounts. For this reason, technology in Whitehead's narrative production is rarely included among prominent themes and it is often discarded as a significant trope of his texts. However, it is revealing, in my view, that two of his first novels deal with the question of race as a concept narratively linked to the presence of technology.

With respect to this premise, Colson Whitehead's first novel, *The Intuitionist* (1999), despite its mixed set of genres, belongs to the trend of Afrofuturism or black speculative fiction and it has been recently considered an example of a "noir utopia

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[49] *Ibid.* 3.
[50] Kenneth WARREN, *What Was African American Literature?*, Harvard, Harvard University Press, 2011, 5.
[51] Ramón SALVÍDAR, *ibid.*, 3.
[52] Ramón SALVÍDAR, "Historical Fantasy, Speculative Racism, and Postrace Aesthetics in Contemporary American Fiction", in *American Literary History* 23. 2, 2011, 575.

or black noir"[53]. The plot openly presents the concern of racialization through the direct encounter with technology that in the narrative transforms and redefines the logics of race. As the novel focalizes on the story of Lila Mae Watson, the first black female elevator inspector praised for her keen ability in technological intuition, we see how Whitehead's intention is that of showing how technology reconfigures and "uplifts" African-American identity. Although much of novel hinges on systematic racial discrimination within the technological environment, the reader is presented with a protagonist, a black female elevator inspector, Whitehead prefigures as a symbol of technological progress. In devising Lila Mae, Whitehead centers the story on the quest for the "black box," a perfect elevator, which will deliver the people to the city of the future. As one of the characters' first statements clarifies: "What does the perfect elevator look like, the one that will deliver us from the cities we suffer now, these stunted shacks? […] It's a black box"[54]. The control of the black box implies an acquisition of technological mastery that leads to social integration and consequently to the ascension of black identity. In that sense, the trajectory taken by Whitehead choosing the black box as the focus of the novel "symbolizes the plight of the black race"[55].

The reason of this narrative choice is in part rendered by the use of elevation as a symbol of upward mobility but also of a form of racial visibility through technological competence. The fact that Mae stresses that "Horizontal thinking in a vertical world is the race's curse"[56], is indicative of how blackness is essentially shaped within verticality and this upward movement leads to an uplift ideology of black identity. On one level, as Fain contends, elevation and verticality can be considered as allegories and cultural signs of African-American achievement.[57] Crucially, if—as seen—the use of technology tends to dislocate, marginalize and exclude, the African-American people, its control provides a sense of stability uplifting the individual. Indeed, the elevator as the technology at the core of the narrative, is a determinant theme to rethink about blackness and the machine in contemporary America. Drawing from this statement, critics have come to the conclusion that "This technology becomes not only the trope of a special mode of knowing but also the locus of a peculiar spatial and temporal chronotrope, the enclosed trajectory which will trace a history of the future"[58].

Seen in this light, *The Intuitionist* persistently empowers the black protagonist by presenting a character who owns both technical competence and the world's most powerful secret: how to build the perfect example of elevation technology. In this way, unlike the stereotyped image of black identity systematically stigmatized through the machine use, Whitehead presents an example of black technological empowerment. In her compelling analysis of romancing uplift in *The Intuitionist*, Linda Selzer notes that "The novel's elaborate figurative association of elevators with racial uplift suggests that the second elevation promises not only to transform

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[53] SALVÍDAR, "The Second Elevation of the Novel", 3. Saldivar notes that Whitehead's use of fantasy, technology and social realism recall another contemporary noir and afrofuturist author such as Walter Mosley.

[54] Colson WHITEHEAD, *The Intuitionist*, New York, Anchor Books, 1997, 61.

[55] *Lavender, Race in American Science Fiction*, 193.

[56] WHITEHEAD, *The Intuitionist*, 151.

[57] *Ibid.*, 10.

[58] SALVÍDAR, "The Second Elevation of the Novel", 8.

the city physically but also to reconstruct race relations"[59]. Revealingly, the elevator becomes a signifier for racial aggrandizement as the protagonist represents a positive example of female enhancement and anti-racist ideology for her keen ability to deal with technology. In fact, by carrying technological control, Mae places her faith in technology as an instrument of "progressive social reform"[60].

Whitehead's metaphor for a society divided into classes, "boxes", to quote one of the novel's reference themes, is represented by the division between Empiricists and Intuitionists. In this classification, Empiricists, described as a selective group dedicated to reason and rationality, are contrasted with Intuitionists—to which the black protagonist belongs—considered rationally inferior for their choice to follow intuition. This classification, which somehow reminds of the stereotypical class division between the white community and the African-American one, suggests how the story addresses the issue of racialization through ambiguous references to blackness, considered racially inferior and, as the narrative shows, at the same time uplifted by technology. Still, if one the one hand, there is a movement toward an uplift view of race, blacks are also immobilized within the stereotype of technology as an exclusive white mastery. As reflected in the ambiguity of the black box, the novel provides an elusive image of race, on the one hand conflated with cultural stereotypes and immobilized by technological competence as an exclusive white privilege, on the other, imposing an image of race and technology that subverts its discriminative ethos. Taking up this thread, Lavender highlights that if we look at Whitehead's illustration of blackness and technological use, "The novel challenges us to think 'outside the box'"[61].

The reason for this narrative choice is rendered in the ambivalent descriptions of African-American characters. Besides the protagonist (she is a black woman, technologically competent), the example par excellence of black identity enforced with a sense of exclusivism is illustrated by characters such as James Fulton—the African-American inventor of the Intuitionist school—who is mistaken as white for his aura of reliability and technological expertise. Fulton's passing as white is another subversion of racial stereotypes Whitehead proposes. Following this logic, the novel stages a disruption of racial norms; Mae controls technology as a black woman and Fulton passes as white as he invents a world, that of Empiricism, to mock his white employees. As Sean Grattan has suggested, "The race to discover the black box is one of the central plot devices while simultaneously activating Lila Mae's discovery of a thicker understanding of her own awkward and fraught relationship to forms of community organized around race, sexuality, labor and gender"[62].

These aspects lie deep within the transition of Lila Mae from invisibility to visibility. As the novel opens we are presented with a female protagonist who is essentially invisible, and as she eventually carries the secret of second elevation becomes visible both as a technical expert and as a woman of color. The metaphor

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[59] Linda SELZER, "Instruments More Perfect than Bodies: Romancing Uplift in Colson Whitehead's *The Intuitionist*", in *African American Review* 43. 4, 2009, 681.
[60] *Ibid.*, 696.
[61] LAVENDER, *ibid.*, 194.
[62] Sean GRATTAN, "I Think We're Alone Now: Solitude and the Utopian Subject in Colson Whitehead's *The Intuitionist*", in *Cultural Critique*, 96, 2017, 133.

of invisibility, that in American literature has had its most complete articulation with Ralph Ellison, has been of crucial importance in the African-American experience reflecting the conditions of the black community ignored by the white-centric culture. If we consider that "the black man in America has lived in the midst of a society which has refused to recognize his humanity"[63], the African-American community carries the stigma of an innate invisibility as part of its experience. To parse this in terms of the novel, as they are torn between presence and absence, Whitehead's characters have two souls and technology is what glues them together. In this sense, the racial conflict we witness throughout the narrative turns into a way to re-examine the black experience through the lens of technology. Nevertheless, the cultural discrimination of black identity via technology is present from the very beginning. When the reader is first introduced to the protagonist, she is inspecting an elevator under the hesitant gaze of a white man who claims, "I haven't ever seen a woman elevator inspector before, let alone a colored one"[64]. If carefully read, the novel suggests how technology creates an exclusivism that stereotypically sustains white supremacy. However, as the narrative implies, "The social and cultural possibilities of race in another place and time speaks of the possibilities of improved race relations in society. Lila Mae's presence in this established hierarchy manifests the upward mobility and racial uplift of African-Americans"[65]. In this sense, the complex narratology of the novel subverts the racial paradigm of technology and, as it unfolds, the story is constructed against an exclusive white-centric ideology offering instead a positive "elevation" of the black race. Indeed, the novel's literary frame seems to testify that the protagonist craves an unconscious primacy over technology.

If this statement firmly supports the technological divide and the racialized ethos I earlier outlined, more striking however is that as the plot discloses itself further, this image is frequently challenged by Whitehead's use of technology as an anti-racist and anti-discriminatory trope. Even though the narrative insists on Mae's social and technological control, the stereotypical images of technological racialization are present throughout the course of the novel, pervaded by recurrent allusions to racist biases, even in the workplace. The narrator reports, "When Lila Mae was assigned to Fanny Briggs Memorial Building, she thought nothing of it. It made sense that it would be either her or Pompey, the only two colored inspectors in the Department".[66] In this sense, it would be easy to claim that white people working in the company create social groupings to celebrate racial differences. What surrounds Mae is a racialized community, primarily white, masculine and ideologically opposed to her primacy in elevator's inspection. Pushing this point a little further, Selzer observes that,

> By performing in blackface, white workers distanced themselves from the black Other and identified themselves with a privileged whiteness. In Whitehead's novel, the white male operators are thus entertained by performances that invite them to embrace established forms of social

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[63] Todd LIEBER, "Ralph Ellison and the Metaphor of Invisibility in Black Literary Tradition", in *American Quarterly*, 24. 1, 1972, 86.
[64] WHITEHEAD, *The Intuitionist, ibid.*
[65] FAIN, *ibid.*, 5.
[66] *Ibid.*,13.

power. What white people working in the company see is colored skin
[…].[67]

Within such a scenario, though, throughout the novel we witness the protagonist's achievement of technological talent and, as the Dean of the faculty asserts at the very end of the novel referring to Mae's keen ability in technological competence, "Lila Mae Watson was a credit to her race"[68].

Likewise, considering that verticality—social and technical—is key to the understanding of the relationship between black identity and the confrontation with the machine, the novel can be read as a black ascension to technological control. Considering black characters and their technological aspirations, the new elevator breaks up with the world of technology that existed before proposing instead, through verticality, the achievement of a primacy granted by the African-American people. In his analysis of *The Intuitionist*, Jeffrey Tucker notes that "The novel adds verticality, a third dimension to which race has been linked since the early stages of US history".[69] As he further argues, "As a model of the African-American turn toward the paraliterary, *The Intuitionist* tempers the allure of the hallowed verticality granted by elevators with a critique of hierarchical thinking about both genre and race".[70] In this way, verticality adds significance and meaning to the question of the hierarchical development of race in the US.

Even though whether she builds the perfect elevator is left uncertain by the novel's ending, there is an intention to ensure that technology is controlled by blackness. To this extent, it is not surprising that Whitehead chooses the elevator as that form of perfect innovation illustrating the impasse of colored technophobia. Although the elevator inspected by Mae falls, her professional evolution within the field of technical competence is what enables her to gain racial uplift. As such, the protagonist is "a great lonely person that defends herself by dreaming about the accomplishment of the perfect elevator meant to take the world out of the dark entries".[71] Seen from this perspective, the novel becomes an example of anti-racist ideology toward technological use reinforcing or rather "uplifting" African-American identity through the power to control the machine. That said, I would argue that aspiration to verticality, either in technological competence or in physical ascent, recurrently delineated by the author, becomes a way to illustrate racial aggrandizement. To parse this in terms of the novel, we would rather see the dichotomy between racial enforcement and discrimination. As the following passage demonstrates, Mae as the representative of a category, that of colored people, is discriminated against in her being black and technologically qualified, but she is eventually praised for her ability to gain expertise through the machine.

Yet, in an appropriate symbolism, references to the black as perfect technology reoccurs with insistence throughout the narrative. This is indeed true if

[67] *Ibid.*, 153.
[68] *Ibid.*, 253.
[69] Jeffrey A. TUCKER, "Verticality is Such a Risky Enterprise", in *Novel: a Forum of Fiction* 43.1, 2010, 154.
[70] *Ibid.*, 154.
[71] Clementina MIHĂILESCU, "Transforming the Possible into Action in Colson Whitehead's Novel *The Intuitionist*", in *Moldavian Journal for Education and Social Psychology* 4.2, 2020, 34.

we think that the plot itself revolves around the quest for the "black box"—the perfect technology. As James Fulton's volume reports,

> An elevator is a train. The perfect train terminates in Heaven. The perfect elevator waits while its human freight tries to grab through the muck and find the words. In the black box, this messy business of human communication is reduced to excreted chemicals, understood by the soul's receptors, and translated into true speech.[72]

This quote bears witness to the fact that technological perfection corresponds to black ability, either that of the protagonist, who eventually becomes the best elevator inspector of the company, or that of Fulton, the black leader of Intuitionists able to accomplish the perfect machine.

We shall now move to consider the aesthetic representation of technology in conjunction with black identity in *John Henry Days* (2001), a novel that, among Whitehead's extensive literary production, has surprisingly received very little attention. Exploiting the tension between technology and black identity, the author's *mise en scene* of racial uplift becomes the central focus of his second novel. As it was for *The Intuitionist*, the text lends itself to Afrofuturist examinations as the narrative covers issues such as the intersection between race and mechanical technologies. Generally classified as an Afrofuturist/historical novel, *John Henry Days* focuses on the African-American folk hero, John Henry, working on the Ohio railroad as a hammer man who died beating the new machine-age stream drill in a speed contest. In so doing, Whitehead offers the reader the image of the African-American hero who vanquished the machine with his force winning the competition. As such, the novel's plotting pays tribute to the figure of John Henry who holds a peculiar place as a hero of African-American history. As the narrative demonstrates, this allows Whitehead to create a narrative space in which history and folklore work parallel with the representation of technology as a tool that solidifies the African-American identity illustrating the empowerment of the black race over the machine.

In this way, the trajectory taken by Whitehead offers a fictional space torn between the past, memorialized through the tale of John Henry, and the present in 1996 when the US post office issued commemorative stamps of American heroes, including one on the figure of John Henry. As the plot unfolds, the town of Talcott in West Virginia pays tribute to John Henry becoming a memorial to celebrate and enshrine the African-American experience. However, the space of the novel is confined in the city of Talcott depicted as a small town rooted in cultural prejudice: "The most northern of the southern, the most southern of the northern, the most eastern of the western, the most western of the eastern"[73], as the narrator reports. Overall, however, the figure of John Henry belongs in some ways to an undefined time and space, a fact that, to quote Sylvie Bauer, makes the African-American hero almost a "chimerical" character.[74]

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[72] WHITEHEAD, *The Intuitionist*, 87.
[73] Colson WHITEHEAD, *John Henry Days*, London, Harper Collins, 2001, 21.
[74] Sylvie BAUER, "Voix en Suspense en John Henry Days", in *Revue française d'études américaines* 121, 2009, 51.

Indeed, the role of John Henry within the space of narration is elusive to the point that the African-American hero is seen as a ghost inhabiting the collective memory, a protean figure praised, and glorified for his capacity but who has no voice throughout the course of narration, a stylistic choice that propels the myth of the African-American icon. In her analysis, Sylvie Bauer has explained that it is from the absence of the character and the construction of collective memory that the author builds the mythologizing of the African-American epitome remembered for his ability to "tame" the machine.[75] If we consider Bauer's interpretation, we can see that what moves us further to eulogize the African-American in relation to technology, is indeed a form of black heroism exhibited in fulfilling a high purpose or attaining a noble end. As we read from the very beginning, John Henry was regarded as "A hero of his race".[76] And the narrator further avers, "He was a magnificent specimen of genus homo [...] Whenever there was a spectacular performance along the line of drilling, John Henry was put to the job"[77].

Interestingly, though, in African-American history, black heroism has always held a specific place as a marker of rebellion and social advancement. The dynamics of black heroism within African-American tradition range from antislavery figures such as Nat Turner, to black leaders and advocates of equality such as Frederick Douglass, Malcolm X and Martin Luther King—to mention some of the most relevant—and has been popularized by films such as Tarantino's *Django Unchained* (2012) and recently, *Black Panther* (2018; 2022) and that have embraced heroism on screen as an inspiration for uplift crushing racial adversity proposing a positive and emblematic image of black identity. As a number of critical studies have established, although uplift within the black community still conveys a collective process of freedom and social advancement, the term later came to signify the mere existence of an uplift ideology through heroism as a means of survival against white supremacy. In her analysis on black heroism and Afrocentric values, Barbara Molette observes how "In an Afrocentric framework, the hero's actions and their outcome, must transcend the individual needs of the hero [...] An Afrocentric hero in the United States must behave in a manner that is independent of the expectations of the White establishment".[78] To the extent that we read *John Henry Days* in light of an achievement and accomplishment of black heroism as a form of racial uplift through the man-machine relationship, we can notice how Whitehead's narrative weighs a response to the African-American exclusion from technological competence. Textually speaking, the novel proposes another uplift ideology through the construction of the black folk hero memorialized for his symbolic gesture.

Indeed, if we consider that much of story hinges on collective memory to recall the black African-American hero and his brave gesture to tame the machine, we can see how memory becomes an effective plot device which serves to mythologize the African-American character leading to another example of racial uplift through mechanization. Following this logic, in *John Henry Days* Whitehead uses collective memory and the commemorative event on which the story is set, to

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[75] *Ibid.*, 52.
[76] WHITEHEAD, *John Henry Days,* 6.
[77] *Ibid.*, 4.
[78] Barbara MOLETTE, "Black Heroes and Afrocentric Values in Theatre", in *Journal of Black Studies* 15.4, 1985, 449.

reinforce the position of the black hero as a patron of remembrance paying a tribute to black identity vis a vis technology. In that sense, the dichotomy of history vs memory, I believe, is another key trope to the presence of an uplift ideology of race in the novel. Taking up this thread, in a compelling study on the distinction between history and commemoration, Barry Schwartz held that "Collective memory is a representation of the past embodied in both commemorative symbolism and historical evidence"[79]. Aligning with this statement, one can easily notice how Whitehead builds the prototype of the black character through collective remembrance as another enforcement of African-American identity in relation to history and at the same time providing historical evidence of an heroic gesture of black supremacy and imposition over technology, despite the venture leads to death.

The liminal boundary between history and commemoration is confirmed by Whitehead throughout the novel. As the plot unravels, the author shows how John Henry means much to the people and the town of Talcott. On this point, John Inscoe suggested that "Whitehead creates other seemingly random vignettes that flash back to earlier days and other ways in which John Henry's legacy impacted former generations in equally diverse ways"[80]. Indeed, in the construction of John Henry, Colson Whitehead also takes the effort of searching the origin of the ballad that became popular in the 1920s and since then has had many variations among the black community. Moreover, scholarship has recently suggested that "In *John Henry Days* Whitehead mixes historicity with folklore representing the figure of a black man who once again "challenges white dominance and the supremacy of machine technology".[81] Situating the novel in the classical tradition of the black hero folk tale, Whitehead constructs another example of racial enforcement (even though less evident than the elevator at the core of his previous novel), this time represented by John Henry's control over the machine. By giving centrality to the black hero, Whitehead makes his readers appreciate the man and the myth staging the triumph of the black character over technology.

Following Inscoe it can be said that "The legend represents a parable of man vs machine, of tradition over modernization" (92). This contrast lies also in the opposition of characters like John Henry, the black hero, and J. Sutter, the black freelance journalist, who are respectively products of the industrial revolution and of the digital age. Sutter is the anthesis of John Henry, he comes from the digital age and is rather mundane as a character. In this way, staging a landscape that shifts from 19th-century America to the contemporary age, Whitehead illustrates two opposite examples of black characters directly or indirectly linked to technological use: the African-American hero of the Industrial Age vs the black journalist from the digital world. In so doing, Whitehead achieves the multiplicity of the black male experience by juxtaposing the black hero from the past to the postmodern black man of contemporary America.

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[79] Barry SCHWARTZ, "Collective Memory and History", in *The Sociological Quarterly*, 38.3, 1997, 471.
[80] John INSCOE, "Race and Remembrance in West Virginia: John Henry for a Postmodern Age", in *Journal of Appalachian Studies* 10.1/2, 2004, 88.
[81] Ramón SALVÍDAR, "The Second Elevation of the Novel", 12.

To a certain extent, the parable of John Henry widely recalls a debate that is far from new; the human-machine struggle in a view that is, in this case, decidedly techno-optimistic. John Henry's account is undoubtedly a reference to the issue of work related to the use of machines that only later was criticized as mechanization of the function of the human being increasingly dehumanized in his relationship with working machines. That said, let me step back for a moment and try to look at the narrative from different critical angle. Despite John Henry's popularization as the hero of the novel, the narrative focuses also on the story of a black journalist and media expert, J. Sutter, sent to the John Henry Festival to celebrate the postage and celebration of John Henry's stamp. However, as the plot unfolds, the reader is immediately encouraged to consider John Henry as an icon of technological capacity and black empowerment. Partly aligning with this interpretation of black technological empowerment, Eva Tettenborn observes that "Whitehead encourages the John Henry legend through a complex layering of both realistic and stereotypical depictions of black masculinity"[82]. As Fain observes, at the time when John Henry won the contest, masculinity was measured by physical strength so that John Henry was trying to preserve his manhood in a racist environment.[83] As such, John Henry becomes the symbol of a people, African-Americans, uplifted by his ability to "tame" the machine through physicality and masculinity. In a similar vein, Carroll Pursell explains that if we consider that black people's experience with technology has been extremely ambiguous, John Henry exemplifies the trope of the sheer physicality of the black male reinforced and, I would rather suggest, "uplifted" by his mechanical skills. In one of the many descriptions of the character we read that

> The railroads hired niggers for pennies; you could tell a nigger what to do like you couldn't tell an Irishman, no matter how down and out the immigrant was. In four-color glory, John Henry worked two-handed, crashing down one hammer in a spike while the other swung up in ecstatic arc, sparks erupting in in blasts and gusts of orange and red; he made fire, he left the other workers in the dust as he moved west, ever west, with two unerring compass hammers in his hands. John Henry was always smiling […] (Testifying to an overlooked part of his myth: formidable teeth that overcame the primitive dental technology of his day).[84]

Indeed, for what concerns technology, the power of John Henry as a symbol for African-Americans working on the railroad system lies in the fact that he was able, in the narrator's words, "to beat the machine",[85] at all costs. In this sense, one can easily notice how technology in the novel interweaves with blackness and heroism and eventually masculinity. Despite his ambiguity, John Henry is enshrined as a hero in his ability to impose himself on the machine. The imposition and control over

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[82] Eva TETTENBORN, "A mountain Full of Ghosts: Mourning African-American Masculinities in Colson Whitehead's *John Henry Days*", in *African-American Review* 46.2, 2013, 271.
[83] FAIN, *The Postracial Voice,* 53.
[84] WHITEHEAD, *John Henry Days,* 140. On this, in his book *A Hammer in Their Hands: A Documentary History of Technology and the African-American Experience* (2005), Pursell observes how African-Americans have done a lot to build most of the infrastructures in America after Industrialization. This may appear as a paradox if we consider the extensive exclusion of African-American from the improvement of technology in the US.
[85] *Ibid.*, 163.

technology is indeed an example of racial uplift of the capacity to glorify black identity through technological use.

Using the trope of technology, Whitehead offers an example of how black masculinity and heroism were praised for matching craft skills with industrial mechanization (John Henry was working to build the railroad system, the symbol of American technologization). In this sense, one may consider the folk tale of John Henry an example—in Dinnerstein's words—of "a distinctive African-American inquiry into technoprogress".[86] To this end, "Whitehead constructs a world haunted by the spirits of old railroad workers who labored to carve out a now-defunct train tunnel near the West Virginia towns of Talcott and Hinton".[87] Still, *John Henry Days* takes up the commodification of African-American history.[88] Unravelling the complex and elusive issue of race and technology, Whitehead's choice of turning a black man into a hero for his ability to defeat a technological invention destined to render his labor obsolete, proves how—once again—racial uplift and a sort of anti-racist ideology toward technical inventions comes from black intelligence over the machine use. Unlike his previous novel, *The Intuitionist,* that proposed an example of racial empowerment through the elevator as a form of recent innovation, in *John Henry Days* Whitehead demonstrates how, from a historical perspective, the machine has somehow uplifted black identity through masculinity and manhood, two essential parameters to enforce black heroism and racial achievement. Although the novel spans from the Reconstruction to 1996 offering an analysis of the first railroad construction systems and New York magazines in the Internet age, Whitehead seems to be more interested in the consecration of a black hero of technology instead of focusing on the role of new media in contemporary society. In this light, the choice of constructing a historical novel on a popular black folk hero becomes a narrative strategy to empowering African-American identity in the ability to "tame" and in this case, defeat the machine. That said, illustrating features of black heroism in the novel through physical peril and sacrifice, Whitehead honors John Henry as another remarkable example of black imposition over technology.

At this point, allow me then to conclude by explaining what I mean by the term racial uplift I used to analyze Whitehead's narrative intention to illustrate the dynamics of race and technology. As seen, first in *The Intuitionist* and later in *John Henry Days* Whitehead struggles to articulate a positive image of black identity through the control over the machine. Indeed, both narratives weigh a response to the African-American exclusion from technological innovation offering examples of black characters who are able to dominate technologies, uplifting their discriminated condition. To buttress this claim it is necessary to recall that the use of the term "racial uplift" dates back to the late 1800s. The concept, theorized by Du Bois and later Booker T. Washington, expressed—even though in diverse ways—how the black community should struggle to achieve social and cultural

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[86] Quoted in Carroll PURSELL, *A Hammer in their Hands: A Documentary History of Technology and the African-American Experience*, Cambridge (MA), MIT Press, 2005, xvi.
[87] Peter COLLINS, "The Ghosts of Economics Past: John Henry Days and the Production of History", in *African American Review* 46.2, 2013, 285.
[88] *Ibid.*, 286.

equality uplifting the race.[89] In her recent analysis on racial uplift ideology, Jaqueline Moore has observed how "Washington and Du Bois's philosophies had their basis in earlier ideas about how to improve the race"[90]. Even though the term "racial uplift" lacks a clear and concise definition, the term has been prominently used as a generic term to signify the enforcement and uphold of race in a sort of Pan-Africanism through literature, society and culture. Racial uplifters such as Du Bois, Booker, and Nannie Helen Burroughs advised a form of respectability and praise for the African-Americans. Even though, as Harvey Cohen recently explained, the concept of African-American uplift remains contentious (2013), the term has been mostly used with reference to racial aggrandizement in post-slavery racism. From a more recent perspective, I consider it as a narrative tool to relate to an idea of black empowerment creating an anti-racist view through the presence of technology. Additionally, I suggest that Whitehead's novels belonging to the genre of black speculative fiction use the trope of the machine as a tool to codify race thus encouraging an uplifting ideology. In sum, *The Intuitionist* and *John Henry Days* offer new theorizations concerning speculative realism in relation to issues such as black discrimination, superseding from a literary standpoint the racial stereotype. Both are quintessentially postmodern and post-racial, in Saldívar's definition of the term, offering a new racial aggrandizement through the encounter of blackness with technology.

In light of our previous considerations, among African-American speculative fiction novelists, Colson Whitehead can be classified as an "uplift writer" for his production of narratives that "lift" and I would rather suggest, heroically reinforce the race in response to the discriminatory stereotypes of using technology. As seen, considering that technology in the US is an archetype for black inequity, both novels suggest that the empowerment of black identity through the machine use serves as a narrative strategy to consider technology as an uplifting tool. In this sense, by giving centrality to black characters and their ability to control the machine, Colson Whitehead can be considered as an uplifter of contemporary black speculative fiction. Indeed both Lila Mae and John Henry create a rising pro-black feeling owning a technological control that devises race as a social force in the development of technology. In this way, Afrofuturist/black speculative fiction novels such as *The Intuitionist* and *John Henry Days* become the site to re-examine the relationship between technology and the African-American experience uplifting the black self, as Whitehead illustrates in *The Intuitionist* epitomizing racial uplifting through verticality: "*They are stirred by dreaming. In this dream of uplift, they understand that they are dreaming the contract of the hallowed verticality, and hope to remember the terms on waking. The race never does, and that is our curse*"[91].

Although, to a certain extent, black speculative fiction writers value black identity by devising a dystopian future where black characters are immersed within futuristic scenarios, Colson Whitehead goes one step further shedding light on the

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[89] The concept was also a motivation for educated blacks to lift up their race through a Pan-Africanist ideology. For more on this see Jaqueline Moore's *Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. Du Bois, and the Struggle for Racial Uplift* (2003).

[90] Jaqueline MOORE, *Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. Du Bois, and the Struggle for Racial Uplift.* Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2013, 143.

[91] WHITEHEAD, *The Intuitionist,* 186. Italics in the original.

elevation of race in its direct engagement with technoculture. In a moment where there is the need to put the African-American at the center of public attention, as cinema has recently demonstrated with the celebration of black culture in movies such as *Hidden Figures* (2016), *Get Out* (2017) and *Black Panther* (2018)—just to mention some of the most recent examples—Afrofuturism continues to capture the public imagination.[92] In a similar way, Whitehead's fiction reveals a progression toward a different conceptualization of the black race. The two narrative examples so far analyzed demonstrate how Whitehead's speculative fiction novels celebrate black identity at the expense of technological engagement, demonstrating how technology for African-Americans—albeit at different times—may become a form of racial elevation.

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[92] For a broad discussion on Afrofuturism and cinema see Adilifu Nama's *Black Space: Imagining Race in Science Fiction Film* (2008).