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**Abstract:** In this post-civil rights era, racial relations are highly complex: racism has not disappeared, but a discourse on postracialism has emerged. Colson Whitehead's fiction explores the vertiginous vortex that represents the complexity of the contemporary problematic relationship between blackness, the future, and technology. This paper shows how race is represented in an "Afrofuturistic" America by highlighting Afrofuturist aspects in Whitehead's *The Intuitionist* and *Zone One*, where the representation of race feeds on the postracial discourse. What may be the implications of representing a post-apocalyptic world? Are racial distinctions still relevant in the context of "critical posthumanism"? Is the future postracial?

**Keywords:** Afrofuturism, post/humanism, race, identity, slavery

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# Afrofuturism in Contemporary African American Literature: Reading Colson Whitehead

*Souleymane Ba*

The world wasn't ending: it had ended and now they were in the new place. (Whitehead, *Zone One* 12)

The moniker Afrofuturism has recently emerged, representing and interpreting blackness in what some have controversially deemed a postracial American society. Mark Dery coined the term in 1994, defining it as follows: "Speculative fiction that treats 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 – might, for want of a better term, be called 'Afrofuturism'" (180). According to Dery, Afrofuturism appeared in various genres performed by famous African American artists. In painting, Jean-Michel Basquiat caught Dery's attention; in movies, he mentioned John Sayles's work; in music, Sun Ra's jazz records were a good source; in black drawn comics, the company Milestone Media released four issues – *Hardware*, *Blood Syndicate*, *Static*, and *Icon* – in which Dery picked out multicultural superheroes; and finally in literature, he singled out Samuel Delany's pioneering work (181).

At bottom, Afrofuturism raises the problematic of race and temporality: how is blackness defined and understood in the past, present, and future? Or, better, as Dery asks: "Can a community whose past has been deliberately rubbed out, and whose energies have subsequently been consumed by the search for legible traces of its history, imagine possible futures?" (180). It might sound legitimate to ask such a question, given the Civil Rights Movement and continuing racial discrimination. However, in the post-Civil Rights era, racial relations have changed and many African American novelists are now more concerned with the present and the future than with their past.

Paul Beatty, for instance, writes in *Slumberland*: “The Negro is now officially human. We are *as* mediocre and mundane as the rest of the species. The revolutionaries among us can lay down the guns. The war is over” (3). The mediocre and mundane Negro corresponds to the end of the “Black American narrative,” based on the ideology of racial pride that Charles Johnson disregards in his provocative essay, published in the same year: “The End of the Black Narrative” (2008).

Along with these eschatological works, Colson Whitehead presents a post-apocalyptic American society in his latest novel, *Zone One*,<sup>1</sup> in which racism has temporarily disappeared. In this post-apocalyptic world, human divisions into categories of race, class, and gender do not have the same significance in the characters’ lives as they usually do in our society:

Every race, color, and creed was represented in this congregation that funneled down the avenue. The city did not care for your story, the particular narrative of your reinvention; it took them all in, every immigrant in their strivings, regardless of bloodline, the identity of their homeland, the number of coins in their pocket. (243)

Such a representation plays with the notion of colorblindness without empowering it in the plot, but also nourishes the debate on postracialism.

In this paper, I argue that Whitehead’s representation of blackness in contemporary American society proposes a new image that could fit in the folder that other black writers like Percival Everett and Paul Beatty present, but Whitehead’s particularity is that his approach downplays the importance of racial solidarity and ultimately leads to community disintegration. Afrofuturistic aspects are traceable in *The Intuitionist* and *Zone One*. Both novels locate their black characters in proleptic debates on the importance of racial identity formation in the future. In the former, Fulton’s passing (Intuitionism) proposes an ethics of alterity. And in the latter, the protagonists, Kaitlyn, Gary, and Mark Spitz are placed in a dystopian world in which race, class, and gender are deprived of their political meanings. Old communities distinguished by race are disintegrated; there is now only one community: the human community. The “plague,” as featured in *Zone One*, for example, does not discriminate, therefore the collective response must not discriminate:

All the misery of the world channeled through this concrete canyon, the lament into which the human race was being transformed person by person. [...] Nor did this plague discriminate; your blood fell instantly or your blood held out longer, but your blood always failed in the end. They had been young and old, natives and newcomers. No matter the hue of their skin, dark

or light, no matter the names of their gods or the absences they countenanced, they had all strived, struggled, and loved in their small, human fashion. (243)

As repeated in this passage, in the aftermath of the apocalypse, there is only the human race. There is no room for racism or discrimination. Yet, in contemporary America, this is still a different story. The killing of Trayvon Martin and Michael Brown point to the gap between fiction and reality.

As a novelist, Whitehead responds, ironically, to the postracial hypothesis by contributing an Op-Ed to the *New York Times* on November 3, 2009, mocking some ideas that are often taken for granted. Amusingly, the opening lines of his article claim: "ONE year ago today, we officially became a postracial society. Fifty-three percent of the voters opted for the candidate who would be the first president of African descent, and in doing so eradicated racism forever". The solemnity of such a statement and the naivety of claiming the end of racism because of the outcome of the presidential election—in contrast to the continuing signs of racism in the United States—reveal the irony of Whitehead's wordplay. He then applies for a position of "secretary of postracial affairs," noting that "I like postracial czar, but czars have been getting a bad rap lately" (Whitehead, "The Year"). Whitehead constantly manipulates irony in his writings, be they fiction or nonfiction—as he often speaks tongue-in-cheek. In his novels, Whitehead plays with the idea of racial identity and its meaning, putting into perspective historical, current and future constructions of blackness.

To begin with, in Whitehead's first novel, *The Intuitionist*,<sup>2</sup> Elisha Graves Otis (1811–1861), a historical figure, is a character who has invented and manufactured the first elevator with a safety device in 1853: "[Lila Mae] read about Elisha Graves Otis, the cities he enabled through his glorious invention. She was learning about Empiricism but didn't know it yet" (44–45). As signaled here, Otis is not a character who interacts with other characters in the present of the novel. Rather, he is alluded to or present either in the description of the omniscient narrator or in the discourse pronounced by different characters. Moreover, we learn that Empiricism, created by Otis's invention, was the first theory on elevation. That theory was then countered by Intuitionism, founded by James Fulton, who passed for white. In terms of vertical transport, Empiricism and Intuitionism propose antagonistic epistemologies.

These two theories are described as two inimical epistemologies which postulate discourses on science that foreground the reference to technology, placing race in the foreground: "'They looked at the skin of things,' Lila Mae offered. White people's reality is built on what things appear to be—that's the business of Empiricism. They judge them on how they appear when held up to the light" (Whitehead, *The Intuitionist* 239). As ex-

emplified in this quotation, the science that enables elevation or upward mobility, when read backward, signifies a discourse on race. In other words, after Lila Mae Watson discovers Fulton's passing for white, she teaches "herself how to read" his metaphorical writing (186). During her investigation on the causes of the accident at the Fanny Briggs Memorial building of an elevator she was the last inspector to visit, she becomes a detective who tries also to reveal Fulton's coded message in his scattered pieces of his manuscript that will enable the Second Elevation (61, 182). At the Intuitionist House, hiding from her enemies, Lila Mae is described decoding Fulton's figurative language:

In her room at the Friendly League Residence, she reads *Theoretical Elevators, Volume Two, Reads*, The race sleeps in his hectic and disordered century. Grim lids that will not open. Anxious retinas flit to and fro beneath them. They are stirred by dreaming. In this dream of uplift, they understand that they are dreaming the contact of the hallowed verticality, and hope to remember the terms on waking. The race never does, and that is our curse. The human race, she thought formerly. Fulton has a fetish for the royal 'we' throughout *Theoretical Elevators*. But now – who's 'we'? She is teaching herself how to read. (186)

In a sense, Fulton anthropomorphizes the elevator. Uplift means both racial social mobility and passenger/freight transportation. Fulton's language is like a double-sided coin, each side conveying the same image, but depending on the perspective of the beholder/reader, the meaning changes.

The Empiricists also use language in the same anthropomorphic way. Competing against Intuitionist theory, they employ specific words to describe their opponents. Early on, during one of her inspections, the super of 125 Walker is puzzled to witness Lila Mae inspecting the elevator without using tools or touching the machine. He is confounded: "you aren't one of those voodoo inspectors, are you? Don't need to see anything, you just feel it, right? I heard Jimmy make jokes about witch doctors" (7). The terms "voodoo" and "witch" reveal the colorful language the Empiricists use to describe the Intuitionists. The theme of anthropomorphism is best exemplified when the narrator enumerates the names Empiricists call Intuitionists: "Some nicknames Empiricists have for their renegade colleagues: swamis, voodoo men, juju heads, witch doctors, Harry Houdinis. All terms belonging to the nomenclature of dark exotica, the sinister foreign" (57-58). In an article titled "'The Robot Voodoo Power' Thesis" (2008), J. Griffith Rollefson notes that "tropes of voodoo magic" connote "a supposed retention from the 'dark continent'" (85).

Voodooism refers to the black religious cult “practiced in the Caribbean and the southern US, combining elements of Roman Catholic rituals with traditional African magical and religious rites” (Merriam-Webster online entry). This definition sheds light on the word “voodoo;” it echoes Rollefson’s take on Afrofuturism: “Afrofuturism is a way to critique the reified distance between racialized fictions of black magic and white science – often in satirical and even playful way” (85). It is noticeable that the Intuitionist satirizes the Western worldview based on the scientific discourse of Rationalism by opposing it to Intuitionism, based on communication with someone else. From the onset, Empiricism is presented as a true scientific discourse, whereas Intuitionism oscillates between science and myth. After the accident, the head of the Empiricist school and Guild Chair, Chancre, organizes a press conference. Responding to questions asked by journalists, he boasts about his success as Chair: “The old ways are the best ways. Why hold truck with the uppity and newfangled when Empiricism has always been the steering light of reason?” (Whitehead, *The Intuitionist* 27). It is worth noticing that “uppity Negro” has been used historically to refer to Blacks who supposedly don’t know “their place” in society.

As if science and technology are a business that must be an occupation exclusively reserved to whiteness. And blackness must be confined to myth and witchcraft. In an interview, Samuel R. Delany makes a statement that resonates with such a cliché: “They signaled technology. And technology was like a placard on the door saying, ‘Boys Club! Girls, keep out. Blacks and Hispanics and the poor in general, go away!’” (Dery 188). Delany seems to mix up race, gender, and class under the banner of discrimination, but most importantly, he critiques the white supremacist standpoint that justifies it.

Fulton passes for white; if he were publicly perceived to be a black character, his theory on the elevator wouldn’t have been received as a scientific discourse. In the process of dismantling Fulton’s figurative language, Lila Mae ponders on the confusion between blackness and the machine. After solving various mysteries (Natchez’s performance and Pompey’s role as Uncle Tom), to reach closure, she faces the last puzzle:

But there is still this matter of Fulton and Intuitionism. She thinks, what passing for white does not account for: the person who knows your secret skin, the one you encounter at that unexpected time on that quite ordinary street. What Intuitionism does not account for: the catastrophic accident the elevator encounters at that unexpected moment on that quite ordinary ascent, the one who will reveal the device for what it truly is. The colored man passing for white and the innocent elevator must rely on luck, the convenience of empty streets and strangers who know nothing, dread the

chance encounter with the one who knows who they are. The one who knows their weakness. (231)

The discourse on blackness is not juxtaposed with the discourse on the machine. The two discourses are intricate, intertwined, and combined together. The narrator uses the same words with a slight variation. The preliminary phrases “what passing for white does not account for” and “what Intuitionism does not account for” stress similarities shared by two separate entities (the machine and the black body). The analogy conflates the two entities in the same discourse.

But the conflation between race and the machine is a risky business. Fulton is sometimes described as an outsider, an alien on the enemy’s territory. Indeed, during her secret investigation, spying on the Empiricists, Lila Mae compares herself with Fulton: “Fulton [is] a spy in white spaces, just like she is. But they are not alike. She’s colored” (139). The use of the comparative “like” and the contrast “but” establishes an analogy in principle and a difference in reality. Both Fulton and Lila Mae are racialized in these sentences. Such an entanglement of comparison and contrast reestablishes the ongoing importance of race in U.S. American society.

While the text thus points to the relevance of race, it also seems to present a sense of racial transcendence. Fulton’s theory tries to go beyond humanism. Discussing the future elevator that Fulton designed in his black box with the current head of the Intuitionist school, Mr. Reed, Lila Mae doubts the feasibility of the Intuitionist theory: “‘I mean from an engineering standpoint. At its core, Intuitionism is about communicating with the elevator on a nonmaterial basis. ‘Separate the elevator from elevatorness,’ right? Seems hard to build something of air out of steel’” (62). With time, Lila Mae learns more about the theory and its inventor. Thus she elaborates on her definition: “Lila Mae thinks, Intuitionism is communication. That simple. Communication with what is not-you” (241). In the same way, blackness and whiteness have to communicate on the ground of mutual respect. Racism sets up a system that works upon one social group believing its members to be superior to another group. Intuitionism, by proposing a more balanced relationship between the machine and the human passenger, opposes Empiricism’s white/human dominated interaction.

In their dialogue on interpreting the ultimate implications of Fulton’s theory, Mr. Reed does not share Lila Mae’s doubts. He believes that human beings can transcend their egocentrism and reconsider their relationship with the Other: “Mr. Reed withdraws a cigarette from a silver case. ‘They’re not as incompatible as you might think,’ he says. That’s what Volume One hinted at and Volume Two tried to express in its ellipses – a

renegotiation of our relationship to objects. To start at the beginning” (62). In order to force his readers to reshape their relationship to objects, Fulton writes satirical sentences: “Horizontal thinking in a vertical world is the race’s curse” (151), “there is another world beyond this one” (63) and finally, “the elevator and the passenger need each other” (101–102). Fulton’s theory is then an attack on Western epistemology, based on control and domination. To correct such an abusive relationship, he proposes a theory of integration. When “the perfect elevator” (223) arrives, the external world divided mainly into blackness and whiteness will be transcended, “even the darkness of the shaft is gone because there is no disagreement between you and the shaft. How can you breathe when you no longer have lungs? The question does not perturb, that last plea of rationality has fallen away floors ago, with the earth” (222). Reason appears to be the cornerstone on which Empiricists have based their theory. The novel thus seems to confuse Rationalism with Empiricism. It uses the term Empiricism to present a theory that is based on reason, whereas in Philosophy, it is quite the opposite: Rationalism is the theory in which reason rather than experience (for Empiricism) is the foundation of certainty in knowledge.<sup>3</sup>

Fulton’s Intuitionist theory goes hand in hand with the Afrofuturist movement. Rollefson argues that Afrofuturism “reflect[s] an oppositionality and a historical critique that seeks to undermine the logic of linear progress that buttresses Western universalism, rationalism, *empiricism*, logocentrism, and their standard-bearer: white supremacy” (84, emphasis added). In other words, the Intuitionist theory and the Afrofuturist project aim at a theory of Posthumanism. After centuries of an egocentric philosophy (humanism), we can note a paradigm shift. A system centered on the notion of a rational and autonomous self is called into question. What Fulton calls “the vertical imperative” disputes the humanist project, based on such a notion (Whitehead, *The Intuitionist* 101). Indeed, Lila Mae remembers her undergraduate course with Professor McKean, who taught Intuitionism for the first time (99).

In that class, Prof. McKean gives his students an assignment in which they should explain the implications of the ““The Dilemma of the Phantom Passenger”” (101). The general idea is formulated into a question: ““what happens when the passenger who has engaged the call button departs, whether he changed his mind and took the stairs or caught an uptending car when he wanted to go down because he did not feel like waiting. It asks what happens to the elevator he summoned”” (101). After a long discussion, Lila Mae offers an explanation: ““Fulton is trying to trick the reader. An elevator doesn’t exist without its freight. If there’s no one to get on, the elevator remains in quiescence. The elevator and the passenger need each other”” (101–102). But Prof. McKean inquires, ““and if

we set up a film camera [...] what would we see when we developed?" Lila Mae responds to this challenge, "'by leaving the camera there, you've created what Fulton calls 'the expectation of freight.'" The camera is a passenger who declines to get on the elevator, not a phantom passenger. The film would record that the doors open, the elevator waits, and then the doors close'" (102). In short, the relationship between the elevator and the human passenger is changed into a relation of mutual respect and re-consideration of how to view alterity. Such a perspective of considering life outside of the human condition is only suggested in *The Intuitionist*, but it is extensively represented in Whitehead's latest novel, *Zone One*. Afrofuturistic elements in Whitehead's *Zone One* (2011) enable the reader to perceive a proleptic posthuman and postracial world. In a sense, race has become less important and racism does not seem to be part of the characters' lives when they have to fight non-human creatures: "History has come to an end" (47).

Like *The Intuitionist* (1999) and *John Henry Days* (2002), *Zone One* takes place over the weekend. The book is divided in three parts, which are entitled according to the day actions are narrated: "Friday" (1-103), "Saturday" (104-217), and finally "Sunday" (218-259). The apocalypse has taken place through an invasion of zombies. The invasion of the "plague," referred to as "Last Night," catches the population by surprise and is compared to slavery as the population is described to be "like slaves who didn't know they'd been emancipated" (39). Therefore, like many slaves suffered from trauma, many survivors of the apocalypse are struck by "Post Apocalypse Stress Disorder" (PASD). A conversation between two survivors runs:

'What happened,' mark Spitz asked, 'he get bit?'

'No, it's his past,' he heard the comm operator say. The recruit moaned some more.

'His past?'

'His P-A-S-D, man his P-A-S-D. Give me a hand.' (55)

Such a situation of cacophony, reinforced by the chaos in the aftermath of the apocalypse, points to a narrative structure that is highly dependent on a three-party temporality: the past through flashbacks, the present when the characters strive to regain a normal or safe condition previously enjoyed, and the future through prolepses.

"Last Night" causes some to die and others to get infected and become zombies. Those infected are highly contagious if they bite. They are either "skels," fast-moving zombies, targeted by the marines or "stragglers," slow zombies, targeted by civilians' units (52). In the aftermath of the "plague," Mark Spitz, Gary and Kaitlyn are a three-people civilian unit of

“sweepers,” working for the reconstruction of the city. Buffalo, New York, has become the government sanctuary, after Cleveland (123). Reconstruction involves the disposal of the zombies and planning the future of the city. In this new world, humans fight together against non-humans. Characters are located between childhood experiences and optimism for the future, but their lives are also interspersed with glimpses of the horror of the present.

But most importantly, human life, as it was known in the old world, tends to disintegrate, disappear: “The world was divided between the wasteland [Mark Spitz] roamed for so long and this place, loud and rude, cool and industrious, the front line of the new order” (90). The place that is antithetical to the wasteland is Zone One, a safe place, inaccessible to zombies. The previous quote is followed by two more sentences that end the paragraph: “[Mark Spitz] put aside his petulance over his meager welcome. This was chicken soup” (90). We find later that “soup” has a symbolic function: “The word ‘soup’ had stayed with him, after one of the denizens of the wasteland had told him the story. People were becoming less than people everywhere, he had thought: monsters, soup” (230–231). In other words, more and more people are being contaminated and becoming transformed into zombies.

In addition to these physiological mutations, we notice a radical change of attitude concerning the human survivors. Social units, family for instance, become obsolete concepts. The Lieutenant of Zone One who welcomes Mark Spitz in his team asks him if he has any family. Mark Spitz responds, “I don’t know” (98). Then the Lieutenant rejoices: “Mostly joking with that one. I’ve been thinking about how in the old days, we had these special-ops dudes who did all the batshit stuff [...] these batshit killing machines were always single guys, single men and women, no families,” before rhetorically asking: “What do they have to lose, right? But who has a family anymore?” And finally adding: “Everybody’s dead. Now we’re all batshit killing machines, could be a mutherfucking granny wielding knitting needles” (98). The necessity to sweep the city off the zombies is depriving the survivors of their humanity, making them comparable to killing-machines.

Indeed, the sweepers’ actions have become so mechanical and unemotional that “for the first weeks they tossed the bodies [of dead people] out the windows. It was efficient” (60). The sweepers proceed in this way because they deem the bodies to belong to monsters and not humans. Later, the officials forbid such an indignity, saying that: “Defenestration was disrespectful. It was unhygienic. Frankly, it was unpatriotic” (98). The carelessness of the sweepers for the value of the human body, even dead, is understandable through the process of analogy. As mentioned above, the text frequently draws on the analogy between slavery and the plague.

Indeed, Mark Spitz, an African American, reflects on the act of defenestration when he notes: "If the beings they destroyed were their own creations, and not the degraded remnants of the people described on the things' driver's licenses, so be it. We never see other people anyway, only the monsters we make of them" (214). Similarly, during slavery, the master narrative needed to dehumanize and demonize the African subject in order to enslave him.

In the novel, zombies are dehumanized and demonized so that they can be destroyed without guilt. Mark Spitz, Gary and Kaitlyn come across people who have fun with it: "Skel mutilation was another popular amusement, although not on Kaitlyn's watch, not that Mark Spitz was so inclined. He assumed that Gary had indulged in abhorrent Connecticut, where it was a local custom" (81). Coincidentally, Connecticut is said to be the southernmost state in the northern region. Thus, this reference to Connecticut can be read as echoing practices of lynching in the history of the United States, particularly during Jim Crow laws in the South, when lynching used to be a 'popular amusement' guaranteed by 'local custom.'

*Zone One* makes another comparison with racism, a feeling that is at the foundation of slavery. After the invasion, Gary is described as killing zombies: "He bashed their heads in with a baseball bat of course; he'd quickly cottoned on to their harmlessness, but didn't know back then if they'd suddenly awaken at some inner cuckoo chime and start the chase" (85-86). Then, extrapolating from the new knowledge Gary has acquired, the narrator comments: "The plague didn't let you know its rules; they weren't printed on the inside of the box. You had to learn them one by one" (86). In fact, he implicitly points to racism in society; for racism never lets one know its rules. In fact, the text here establishes an analogy between the plague and racism to show that the latter requires people to learn to play by its rules in order to survive – rules that are unwritten.

Nevertheless, even though references that establish an analogy between the plague and racism/slavery are numerous in the text, *Zone One* presents a postapocalyptic world in which racism is not explicitly incorporated. One event involving the character called Mark Spitz symbolizes the disappearance of racism in the postapocalyptic world of *Zone One*. Mark Spitz is a nickname in the novel; his real name is never revealed. Mark Andrew Spitz (1950-) is the actual name of a *white* American former swimmer, nine-time Olympic champion, and former world record holder. There is a cliché saying that Black people *cannot* swim, so it is ironic to give this particular nickname to a *black* protagonist.<sup>4</sup>

On the last day of the adventure, on Sunday, Gary asks him: "Why do they call you Mark Spitz?" (Whitehead, *Zone One* 135). Mark Spitz does not give a direct answer to this question, but the narrator comments that,

at Happy Acres, the army's camp, people gave him this nickname: "the signage proclaiming the new name was fresh and white and fragrant. And perhaps Mark Spitz was being repositioned as well, from scarred and hollow-eyed wanderer into contributing actor of the American Phoenix" (135). As if, in order to contribute to the American rebirth, the African American character has to have a name associated with whiteness. But we also learn that Mark Spitz was on a mission with wreckers, they were attacked by skels. Mark Spitz was on the bridge, Richie shouted to signal the danger. "Instinct should have plucked Mark Spitz from the bridge and dropped him into the current by now. But did not move" (147), for the simple reason, as Mark jokingly told the wreckers later, he couldn't swim. Thus: "When he told them later he couldn't swim, they laughed. It was perfect: from now on he was Mark Spitz" (135).

In the same scene, after Mark Spitz helps Gary escape the skels' attack, Gary's question is repeated again: "'Why do they call you Mark Spitz?' he asked" (230). This time Mark Spitz explains in detail "his nicknamesake had been an Olympic swimmer in the previous century, a real thoroughbred who'd held the world record for the most medals in one game, [during the] Munich Games" (135). And then he adds: "'the black-people-can't swim thing'" (231), which refers to the racial stereotype. But Afrofuturist readings propose a fresh reinterpretation of such a stereotype. In "Further Considerations of Afrofuturism," Kodzo Eshun argues that in 1997, "Drexcia, the group of enigmatic producers published their CD *The Quest* [in which they] proposed a science-fiction retelling of the Middle Passage" (300). In that retelling, "Drexcians" are water-breathing, aquatically mutated descendants of 'pregnant American-bound African slaves thrown overboard by the thousands during labor for being sick and disruptive cargo" (135). The aquatic milieu in which the Drexcians evolve signifies on the stereotype that holds that Blacks cannot swim. And by locating them permanently under water as their natural milieu, the authors reverse not only such a stereotype, but as Eshun argues, they engage in "the aesthetic of estrangement" (300). In other words, racism in society estranges African Americans as the water may estrange the Drexcians.

In *Zone One*, the "black-people-cannot-swim-thing" adds a different layer to the stereotype. Mark Spitz's interlocutor seems unaware of such racial categorizations. Gary appears puzzled when Mark Spitz mentions the stereotype: "'They can't? You can't?'" (Whitehead, *Zone One* 231). Mark Spitz informs him: "I can. A lot of us can. Could. It's a stereotype," but Gary advises him kindly: "I hadn't heard that. But you have to learn how to swim sometime" (231). The final sentences of the novel signify on Gary's remark with the use of the sea in the proper and figurative meaning: "Fuck it, [Mark Spitz] thought. You have to learn how to swim sometime. He opened the door and walked into the sea of the dead" (259). The

protagonist is convincing himself that one needs to “take the plunge,” as the idiom says. This expression applies metaphorically to Mark Spitz: he finally takes the decision of coming out of his shelter to step on the heap of dead bodies. Yet, on a symbolic level, Mark Spitz seems to think that the stereotype of swimming does not need to be reversed, but it must be considered with more humility: one should overcome one’s own shortcomings; race should not have anything to do with that personal effort.

The relation and conversation between Mark Spitz and Gary reveal how both characters respond to this racial stereotype. The narrator describes Mark Spitz’s surprise at Gary’s innocence with regard to racial prejudices: “He found it unlikely that Gary was not in ownership of a master list of racial, gender, and religious stereotypes, cross-indexed with corresponding punch lines as well as meta-textual dissection of those punch lines, but he did not press his friend” (231). Because as he remarks: “Chalk it up to morphine. There was a single Us now, reviling a single Them” (231). The context changes the logic of the game. Instead of opposing Blacks to Whites, the text opposes humans to zombies. On the one hand, it presents who has survived of the human race and, on the other, there are modified humans, zombies.

Placing the human body in an environment in which it is opposed to other non/post-human forms of life corresponds to what Pramod K. Nayar calls critical posthumanism. It treats “the human as co-evolving, sharing ecosystems, life processes, genetic material, with animals and other life forms; and technology not as a mere prosthesis to human identity but as *integral* to it” (8). The last part of Nayar’s remark takes us back to Fulton’s Intuitionist project of *integration* of the machine, whereas Empiricism exercises control over the machine. However, race becomes a subcategory that has to be dismissed when it comes to fighting for the survival of the human, as it is the case in *Zone One*.

In conclusion, the United States’ political context in which Whitehead produces his fiction features as a site for the debate on race and postracialism. Significantly, *The Intuitionist* and *Zone One* dramatize such a debate with a particular focus on the meaning of race in a futuristic setting. As highlighted, James Fulton’s Intuitionism contradicts Empiricism, based on Western epistemology claiming that all knowledge is derived from sensory experience. At any rate, in the past of the novel, Fulton’s passing for white satirizes the race-based policy of Empiricists who have barred African Americans from occupying a position of elevator inspector employed by the Guild. In the present of the narrative, Frank Chancre, empiricist leader and chair of the Department of Elevator Inspectors (33), shows openly to Lila Mae Watson that he prefers old ways based on racial hier-

archy but envisions a gradual integration of Blacks. He threatens Lila Mae and tells her that the Intuitionist policy on immediate racial integration is wrong: “I’m not like the rest of the fellas, though. I’m all for your people. You might not think so, but I am. I’m all for colored progress, but gradual (Whitehead, *The Intuitionist* 115). Overall, Intuitionism, initiated by Fulton and inherited by Lila Mae, two African Americans from different time periods, postulates reconsideration of the relation between the human passenger and the elevator. This theory recommends a rapport engaging communication and integration between human beings and the machine on the ground of mutual respect. Symbolically, as described in *The Intuitionist*, Whites need to adopt the same attitude towards Blacks. Because of the urge of such a paradigm shift, futurism in *Zone One* does not portray the impact of technoculture on the lives of characters; rather it depicts a post-apocalyptic universe in which classic definitions of humanism have become outdated. The invasion of zombies ushers in a new era for the survivors who have supposedly transcended racial and gender differences. Yet, the protagonist fears that if “they could bring back paperwork” and “parking tickets,” old bigotries could be reborn as well (Whitehead, *Zone One* 231). In other words, race may be as important and determinant in the future as it used to be and it continues to be in current U.S. American society.

### Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Colson Whitehead, *Zone One* (New York: Doubleday, 2011). All other references to this novel are made from this edition and will be indicated in the text with the page number.
- <sup>2</sup> Whitehead, Colson. *The Intuitionist* (London: Granta Book, 1999). All quotations from this novel are taken from this edition.
- <sup>3</sup> In Western philosophy, these doctrines have been opposed. The word Empiricism comes from the philosopher and physician Sextus Empiricus (II-III century AD), who practiced medicine by strictly considering symptoms. But later, the concept became a philosophical doctrine to study the origin of knowledge or concepts. Francis Bacon (1561-1626), John Locke (1632-1704), and David Hume (1711-1776) are the most appealing supporters of Empiricism. At the same time, Rationalism regards reason as the chief source and test of knowledge. Among rationalists, we can name: Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz (1646-1716) and René Descartes (1596-1650). See [Britanica.com](http://Britanica.com). Please add this reference to the list of works cited!
- <sup>3</sup> I have used a capital letter “B” to indicate that Black refers to the race and a lowercase “b” when it underlines the color of the character.

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