

“Reconstructing African-American Identity: A Transcultural Reading of Octavia Butler’s *Kindred* (1979) and Colson Whitehead’s *The Intuitionist* (1999)”

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Abstract

The identity formation of African-Americans has primarily been determined by the ethnological white discourse and the stereotypical representation of their long history through its Eurocentric perspective. Against such a discursive hegemony, the leading African-American writers as well as the transcultural critics have tried to open new channels of expression, in order to provide a more authentic version of their own legacy. In connection with this, the present paper proposes an analytic reading of *Kindred*, the time-travel novel of black American, science-fiction writer, Octavia Butler and *The Intuitionist*, the speculative fiction novel of black American novelist Colson Whitehead. Taken as representative works of *avant-garde* writing, both novels presumably reveal how writers and critics, alike, have frequently attempted to reconstruct the Afro-American integrity, via ‘Afrofuturism’ and the ‘Critical Race Theory’. In the process, they have challenged stereotypes and questioned Euro-centric representations, only to offer possible, alternative futures, through science fiction. This study will, consequently, contend that science fiction, as a literary genre, provides not only a redeeming escape for the African-American identity but also a secure refuge, in an age of widespread scientific ventures and extensive technological advancements.

Key Words: African-American Identity – *Kindred* – *Intuitionist* – Afrofuturism – Critical Race Theory - Science Fiction – Stereotypes.

Introduction:

The study at hand employs science fiction as a mode of expression to pursue the reconstruction process of the African-American identity. Both Butler’s *Kindred* (1979) and Whitehead’s *The Intuitionist* (1999) portray the worlds populated by the descendants of the African diaspora as imaginary spaces, inhabited by alien creatures, whose very presence hinders the progress of the whole community. The fictional treatment of such a speculative image of those alien inhabitants and fantastic nations has rendered science fiction as the most adequate literary genre to reflect the African-American experience,

providing, in the meantime, a ray of hope for a more inclusively based future. Thereupon, the science-fiction future is not a make-believe reality, emerging from the existent present; it is, rather, a reflection of a genuinely ‘new’ offshoot of the African-Americans’ veiled racial experiences and indiscernible repressed realities.

To both explore the inherent potentialities of science fiction and exhaust its effective technique in reconstructing the theme of identity, the present study uses ‘Afrofuturism’ and ‘Critical Race Theory’ as tools of analysis. Adriano Elia describes Afrofuturism as “a transdisciplinary cultural movement based upon the unusual connection between the marginality of allegedly “primitive” people of the African diaspora and “modern” technology and science fiction” (*The Language of Afrofuturism*: 83). Ytasha Womack defines Afrofuturism as “an intersection of imagination, technology, the future, and liberation”. She further highlights such an Afro-futurist prospect that conjoins the past, present and future (*The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture*: 9). More firmly, Liza Yaszek contends that through the employment of the language of science fiction, Afrofuturist scholars create new audiences “who might never otherwise learn much about the history of their country” (“Afrofuturism” 47).

Likewise, the ‘Critical-Race Theory’ is an intellectual, cultural, legal and philosophical movement that has emerged to both expose and question this systemic racism, thus gaining ground in post-racial American institutions. It has attempted to seek liberation from the tyranny of whites through an exhaustive consideration of multitudinous cultural contexts, which evidenced the institutional racism exercised on the African-Americans, in spite of the seemingly neutralized politico-cultural American environment. The Critical Race theorists, consequently, venture to expose the inherent racial system of post-racial America and interrogate the entirety of power relations. According to Richard Delgado, CRT “questions the very foundations of the liberal order, including legal reasoning, Enlightenment rationalism, and neutral principles of constitutional law” (3).

In her article “Voices of America”, Marie Matsuda defines Critical Race Theory as “the work of progressive legal scholars of color who are attempting to develop a jurisprudence that accounts for the role of racism in American law” seeking to put an end for all sorts of subordination (1331). Margaret Russel, more precisely, starts from the premise that racism is “a central rather than marginal factor in defining and explaining individual experiences of law” (762-

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3). One can easily trace this attitude through their various literary critique, especially when it comes to such futuristic novels as *Kindred* and *The Intuitionist*.

In *Kindred*, Butler adopts the topic of spatio-temporal migration so as to elicit views upon a historical phase that has long been forgotten and hence misrepresented. Meanwhile, Whitehead uses science fiction in *The Intuitionist* to uncover the contemporary American racial fabrication, portraying characters, who, trapped as they are amidst the American society’s web, strive to regain and preserve their own real identities. No wonder, then, that these two novels have so far received a due critical attention. Womak argues how Butler’s fiction offers the “expectation for transformative change” (42), whereas Kendra Parker points out how her body of writing present “new, complex visions of difference and otherness, complicating standardized belief systems concerning race, gender, and sexuality; and weaving the speculative or the fantastic with her social commentary” (2). Using the time-travel technique, Butler endeavors to unveil the real facet of the African-American diaspora and its past heritage. She explores the African-Americans’ initial racial experience, which necessitate their call for a reconciliation of the past and the present with a view to establishing a better future.

In accordance with this, Whitehead’s fiction, interestingly, represents “the colorblind atmosphere of the modern United States through a ghost-in-the-machine theme” (Kim 158). This is but a concept depicted by Kim as an Afrofuturist method, “with which writers explore limitations of human cognition and the possibilities of unrecognized-yet-existent reality” (158). In *The Intuitionist*, Whitehead exposes post-racial America and proposes a critique of the subtler forms of racism, underlying the so-called anti-racist American society and paying a close attention to the effect of such a social framework in distorting the Africa- American identity.

By applying this theoretical framework on the two novels under study, the present article aims to explain how science fiction, as a literary genre, provides not only a redeeming escape for the African-American identity but also a secure refuge, in an age of widespread scientific ventures and extensive technological advancements. It also aims to reveal the importance for African-Americans to figure out their own past and reconcile themselves with it, by way of delivering a more authentic and inclusive version of their history. This is achieved by designating the need for understanding and preserving one’s real identity for the sake of establishing a solid present and a truthful future. Hence,

the study focuses on the era of African-American literary production, “in which African-American writers began reflecting on shifting racial dynamics caught up in a swirl of industrial and technological changes” (Kim 3). The study further tackles Butler’s *Kindred* (1979) and Whitehead’s *The Intuitionist* (1999) as representative offshoots of the Afrofuturist writing.

Afrofuturism and the Critical Race Theory: A Counter Perspective

“We are black people living in a white world. When we consider that the black man sees white cultural and racial images projected upon the whole extent of his universe, we cannot help but realize that a very great deal of the time the black man sees a zero image of himself”. (Gerald 352)

For long, the African-Americans have been presented through white discourse in a way that blurred their real identities. Most representations of African-Americans have worked on drawing a demarcation line between the past and the present; a method that dealt with the past and its inhabitants as aliens that no longer exist. This Euro-centric delineation of the African-American history has affected their identity construction. That is, the body of literature representing the entire American experience approaches the African-American cultures from a white perspective, and, thus, projects only the white ideology. Afrofuturism has emerged as an attempt to bring forward an image, which the American institution has always been trying to eradicate, calling for a study of the American memory more inclusively, to cover and simultaneously include all the diversities of the American fabric.

American sociologist, William DuBois has noticed, among other transcultural writers, the distortion of the African-American history as well as the exclusion of the black-American voices from their own stories. He asserts, in this context, that the white supremacism has placed African-Americans under a metaphoric veil, leaving the blacks with a sense of double consciousness: “a peculiar sensation of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (*The Souls of Black Folks*: 3). This was but an identity malformation, reinforced by an intentional dismissal, in the contemporary media, of an independent black image. It has led African-American writers and scholars, alike, to explore ways of re-constructing such an image through producing “speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns

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in the context of 20th century techno culture — and more generally, African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future” (Dery 136).

As a cultural philosophy of history, Afrofuturism emerged in the 1990s as an aesthetic movement, challenging “the epistemological tendency where dominant rubrics of Eurocentric imagination have engineered and haunted public imagination” (Kim 1). It sought to reconstruct the African-American identity for the sake of providing “a home for excluded voices without forcing assimilation upon them” (Bould 182). The term ‘Afrofuturism’ was coined by Mark Dery in 1994, in his article, “Black to the Future”, included in *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture*. He used it to describe the body of “speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of twentieth century techno-culture - and more generally, African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future” (180). Nevertheless, the term also “comprises cultural production and scholarly thought...that imagine greater justice and a freer expression of black subjectivity in the future or in alternative places, times, or realities” (English 1).

Still, not only are the Afrofuturist writers concerned with formulating a counter-discourse, by which they declare their independence upon a dominant culture; they are also keen on showing that “the dynamics of technology and race are embedded in a far more complex process, one in which black culture and identity are continuously re-read and re-interpreted” (Kim 3). Being identified with the transatlantic diasporic experience, the Black population has mostly been associated with dystopian scenarios. Places populated by the descendants of the African diaspora have often been portrayed, as imaginary spaces inhabited by alien creatures, whose persisting presence hinders the progress of the whole community. Hence, science fiction becomes the most expedient medium to communicate this feeling of loss and offer hope for utopian futures. Thereupon, the science-fiction future is not a future that emerges from the existent present; it is, rather, a prospect that produces something genuinely ‘new’, expressing, thus, the African-Americans’ unique racial experiences as well as their repressed realities.

Stemming from a cognate thread of thought, the Critical Race theory appeared to question the position of African-Americans in the so-called post-racial America. Despite the constitutional amendments that have, supposedly, put an end to slavery in the United States, the post-racial American institutions

remained racial and the expected social changes did not, by necessity take place. The CRT came into existence in the 1970s because of “realizing that new theories and strategies were needed to combat the subtler forms of racism that were gaining ground” in contemporary America (Delgado 4). Pioneered by Richard Delgado, Alan Freeman, Derrick Bell and others, the Critical Race theory has endeavored to penetrate into America’s social system, exposing and questioning the prevalence and persistence of systemic racism, in an attempt to seek liberation from its dominance. Racialized individuals and groups, in spite of the seemingly neutralized American cultural and political environment, venture this through reading into diverse cultural contexts that prove the institutional racism endured.

Obviously, the Critical Race theorists argue that the concept of race is a purely social construction: “The notion that humankind can be divided along White, Black and Yellow lines reveals the social rather than the scientific origin of race” (Lopez 194). Ian Lopez labels this process of constructing racial discourse and its resultant images as “racial fabrication”. He characterizes it with four major facets:

First, humans rather than abstract social forces produce races. Second, races constitute an integral part of a whole social fabric that includes gender and class relations. Third, the meaning-systems surrounding race change quickly rather than slowly. Finally, races are constructed relationally, against one another, rather than in isolation. (196)

In other words, the concept of fabrication implies the innate intention of deception and manipulation. The assumption that slavery belongs to the past is contradicted by various examples of contemporary slavery that takes various forms as “forced and dehumanizing labor, forced and organized begging, the segregation of women and children, prostitution, forced and early marriages, [and] the exploitation of migrants who are victims of organized crime” (Elia 26).

This cultural and aesthetic movement aspires to re-evaluate the position of African- Americans in the contemporary American world, adopting the language of science fiction to propose a more authentic image and a more inclusive future. The Critical Race scholars challenge the various social and political one-sided suppositions, seeking to “construct a different reality” (Delgado, “Introduction”: xvii). They try to expose and, hence, reject the ways by which racism is culturally and legally constructed. According to them, “storytelling and counter storytelling is powerful because it reveals the racist

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acts people of color face daily while challenging the beliefs universally held by the majority” (Bowman 36).

The Case of Dana Franklin: Time Travel and Cognitive Estrangement

The various cultural manifestations of African-Americans have amplified the conditions from which the Blacks suffer in the American community. The slave loses his/her identity by being torn between being born in one milieu and then planted, unwillingly, in another strange one. He/she feels cut off from his/her past and deprived of a genuinely deserved future. This identity loss equates the state of nonbeing. Science fiction, the genre mostly associated with Afrofuturism, mainly depends on estranging and defamiliarizing the reader with the present to acquire the ability of restructuring the future, by adopting what Fredric Jameson calls ‘cognitive estrangement’. According to Jameson, the technique of cognitive estrangement “sets the conditions for the appearance and political efficacy of the future. These conditions are unapologetically dialectical, making the present and the past both the condition for the future and the horizon of this future’s political action” (xiv). Hence, science fiction can be envisaged as “a literary genre whose necessary and sufficient conditions are the presence and interaction of estrangement and cognition, and whose main formal device is an imaginative framework alternative to the author’s empirical environment” (Suvin 2.2).

Cognitive estrangement is highlighted in Butler’s *Kindred*. It is perceived as a mixture of fantasy and science fiction, where a kind of memory machine uses the time- travel technique to address and investigate socio-political discourses, with the intention of constructing “counter-histories and imagin[ing] counter-futures, reconsidering a series of issues concerning the African-American and Afro-European diaspora” (Elia 22). In this novel, which is Butler’s version of African-American neo-slave narratives, the author envisions old slavery through the eyes of contemporary African-Americans. As remembering history is a crucial aspect of Afrofuturism, Butler adopts the topic of spatio-temporal to address the contemporary world, which has been convinced that slavery finally ended. Butler is considered one of the earliest female Black authors to receive critical acclaim. In her works, in general, and *Kindred*, in particular, she uses the ‘grandfather paradox’, which denotes that changing the past can induce, by necessity, a present change. This visionary masterpiece is the story of a Black woman, who has just got married to Kevin, a

white man. The multiple unexplained time travels they undergo to the antebellum South open the whole complex African- American issue for reviewing.

As a novelist, she deliberately chooses for narrating her story a 1st person, Dana Franklin, which happens to be a contemporary Black female, thus providing a first-hand experience and a more authentic picture of the early days of slavery. Dana is a black civil-rights activist who finds herself forced to face the truth to which she is rendered blind by means of media and other contemporary devices. The sense of alienation Dana experiences by her repeated time travels is exemplary of ‘cognitive estrangement’. These recurrent visits to the past allow her to revisit memory, and rewrite a different version of the African-American dystopian experience. This deliberate technique is intended to emphasize that slavery can never be considered a thing of the past. On the contrary, these experiences have always been and will constantly be intricately related to the present of America and the individuals constructing its fabric.

All throughout the novel, Dana, as narrator and protagonist, takes the reader through a real journey to the antebellum Maryland plantation, where she is trapped and mutated by an estranged history, she has never been taught to imagine. Not only does the novel revisit this memory, but it also seeks to modify it. The readers, together with Dana, experience both psychological and physical pain and traumas that have constituted a major part of the formulation of African-American identity. The protagonist’s encounter with Rufus, her ancestor, and her numerous attempts to save his life and secure her family timeline constitute the building blocks of the narrative and investigate “the amplified effect of old slavery on contemporary people” (Elia 20).

The novel adopts two parallel settings: an 1815 pre-Civil War Maryland plantation and a 1976 Los Angeles one. Depicting Dana’s entrapment within the walls of her own house, the opening of *Kindred* is emblematic of all sorts of people, who find themselves “trapped and maimed by a history stranger and crueler than they have been taught to imagine” (Yaszek, “A Grim Fantasy”: 1053). Dana’s recurrent time travels are intended for her security; they ensure her family line and, as aforementioned, reconcile the contemporary African-Americans with their ancestral traumas. Butler chooses to let her protagonist pass physically through the experience. Dana, for instance, faces her first whipping on her third trip to the past: “Then I was out of the cookhouse. Weylin dragged me a few feet, then pushed me hard. I fell, knocked myself breathless. I

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never saw where the whip came from; never even saw the first blow coming. But it came—like a hot iron across my back, burning into me through my light shirt, searing my skin ...” (*Kindred*: 107). Butler, also, exposes the masculinist bias inherent in commercial modes of memory. On the protagonist’s second trip to antebellum Maryland, Dana stumbles upon a group of white patrollers beating a black slave for sneaking off the plantation to visit his free wife and child:

I could literally smell his sweat, hear every ragged breath, every cry, every cut of the whip. I could see his body jerking, convulsing, straining against the rope as his screaming went on and on. My stomach heaved, and I had to force myself to stay where I was and keep quiet. Why didn’t they stop! (*Kindred*: 36)

The role of contemporary American media in distorting the blacks’ past images is highly touched upon. Psychologically speaking, Dana describes her experience as something she watches on television, by way of distancing herself from being in real contact with the past. This idea is meant to highlight the role of commercial modes that “alienate individuals from history in potentially dangerous ways” (Yaszek, “A Grim Fantasy”: 1059). After getting in physical contact with the pain endured by African- Americans, Dana literally lives in and encounters the atrocities suffered by the early blacks, which she had only seen through media channels:

I had seen people beaten on television and in the movies. I had seen the too-red blood substitute streaked across their back and heard their well-rehearsed screams. But I hadn’t lain nearby and smelled their sweat or heard them pleading and praying, shamed before their families and themselves. I was probably less prepared for the reality than the child crying not far from me. In fact, she and I were reacting very much alike. My face too was wet with tears. (*Kindred*: 36)

Accordingly, after her successive spatio-temporal trips, Dana stops trusting any documentation presented by commercial institutions. She, thus, tries to assemble an alternative historical narrative based on her new discoveries, gathered from multiple channels: the official historical facts she has been brought up to believe, the commercially based-contemporary media, together with her personal time travel experiences.

More precisely, Butler accentuates the impossibility of cutting oneself off from one’s past as well as from cultural memories. Her adoption of neo-slave

narrative technique marks her intention to remind the contemporary world, outside America, that the early African-American experience of slavery is part of history that must be immortalized, and its passive effects being possibly remediable. The more Rufus acts as if Dana were his property, the more Dana pulls away from him. She is reluctant to sacrifice her freedom at any price, under any circumstances. When Rufus ultimately tries to rape her, she kills him in one of the final scenes of the novel: “I could feel the knife in my hand, still slippery with perspiration. A slave was a slave. Anything could be done to her. And Rufus was Rufus—erratic, alternately generous and vicious. I could accept him as my ancestor, my younger brother, my friend, but not as my master, and not as my lover” (*Kindred*: 260). It is in this scene that Dana renounces Rufus as her kin; she dis-connects herself from him and, hence, symbolically cuts their blood ties.

Not only does Butler underscore the need to revive the past as a means of constructing a future, for she, also, even more explicitly, calls for the possibility of transmuting this past. In spite of her traumatic experiences on the Maryland plantation, Dana, together with Kevin, endeavor to act positively within the slave community. They strive to improve the conditions, where they find themselves, by educating the slave children around them, adopting the ‘literacy-identity- freedom’ paradigm, within which “the enslaved person’s acquisition of language skills is the first -and most significant- step toward the acquisition of both psychological and physical freedom “ (Yaszek, “A Grim Fantasy”: 1060). This means that both characters, the black protagonist and her white husband, being emblematic of the contemporary American generation “gamble against history” to reach the best possible condition (Rushdy, “Families”: 154).

Butler’s *Kindred* can, therefore, be seen as exposing a multitude of controversial issues. It is the story of a light-skinned African-American woman, whose marriage to a white man replicates the contemporary American society. Kevin’s sharing the experience with his wife exemplifies the importance of extending the truth and history, equally, to the white people as well. The novel also questions the possibility of altering a fixed image, by actual involvement, acceptance and reconciliation. Dana’s burning the book about slavery, upon which she stumbles, is meant to safeguard the truth, just like her attempt to protect her family timeline by repeatedly saving Rufus’ life. Moreover, through direct participation, Kevin reaches the stage of ‘Knowing’ part of the tarnished truth: “It already happened. We’re in the middle of history. We surely can’t

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change it” (*Kindred*: 100). The six-year period he spends with Dana on the plantation gets him involved in Dana’s story and posits an important role for him to play. The narrative, also, foregrounds the impossibility of relying on historical documentations and contemporary media, opening wide the whole vexed question of history.

Butler’s final call is reconciliatory; all parties must establish a state of acceptance and agreement. As the Dana/Kevin’s marriage proves to be a productive one, accepting the early generations’ struggle has been proved to be a profound threshold that should be passed. Butler herself puts it as explicitly as follows:

If my mother hadn’t put up with all those humiliations, I wouldn’t have eaten very well or lived very comfortably. So I wanted to write a novel that would make others feel the history: the pain and fear that black people have had to live through in order to endure.” (Fox 1)

Still, Dana’s left-arm amputation is meant to emphasize the impossibility of maintaining the wholeness of contemporary African-Americans without losing part of their contemporary being. The antebellum slavery deprived the African people of their wholeness, as Ashraf Rushdy puts it, “Remembering can lead to wholeness but it also carries a risk of loss” (139). Consequently, Butler’s *Kindred* is a manifestation of the Afro-futurist concepts; it confirms the importance of science fiction in establishing a counter African-American discourse and highlighting the state of cognitive estrangement, faced by African-Americans in a contemporary racially-based America.

Contemporary Slavery and Racial Uplift: *The Intuitionist*

As already argued, the Critical Race theorists demonstrate the fact that “racial inequities penetrate all aspects of the American context” (Wing 51) and have been used “to serve the political aims of white supremacy” (Elia 26). Not only has this racial fabric affected the construction of the American society, but it also has, rather more influentially, affected the African-Americans’ psychic and identity formation. In “The Racial Body”, Alan Hyde defines race as “the construction of a secularized body by a privileged eye” (223). The targeted body “is subjected to the status of the Other, creating an us and them mentality” (Hyde 226). Nevertheless, these subjugated individuals or groups undergo continuous struggles for survival, known as ‘racial uplift’; that

is to say, the attempt of the African Americans to find their place in this racist society.

According to DuBois, African-Americans' uplifting can be attained through education and other means of social escalation: "The Negro race, like all races, is going to be saved by its exceptional men. The problem of education, then, among Negroes must first of all deal with the Talented Tenth" (2015). However, contemporary critics argue that such an approach "did not address institutionalized racism...[and] failed to address the plight of many African Americans" (Sipe 1-2). Foreman adds that "the successive strategies embraced by the champions of racial uplift have all encountered their practical and political limits" (8). Emmanuel Eze, similarly, notes that "neither the consequences of slavery and colonialism, nor those of racism with which they are intertwined, have been overcome" (883), since such a racial society is always plagued with racial prejudices that will endlessly affect its inhabitants.

Opposite to Butler's *Kindred*, which exposes the African-American diasporic experience and underscores the persistence of race through going back to the African-American past, Whitehead's *The Intuitionist* uncovers the contemporary American racial fabrication, by portraying characters trapped amidst the post-racial American society's web. With the rise of post-racial discourse, Whitehead's fiction, "explores the vertiginous vortex that represents the complexity of the contemporary problematic relationship between blackness, the future, and technology" (Ba 1). Being composed by a former tech-industry worker, Whitehead's novels, in general, and the novel under study in particular, uses science fiction to "reveal how systems of racial rule ... bring forth less visible modalities of racial classification and discipline within a global labor market whose spatial and social segmentation continues to occur" (Bose 3). The novel, hence, explores new dimensions for racial exploitation which extends to reach all American institutions and continue to underlie the post-racial American community through constructing science-fiction contexts allegorically referring to contemporary America.

The Intuitionist criticizes the American society's structure, which reduces the blacks to static stereotypes, restraining their identities and authentic roles in the society for the sake of maintaining the status quo and ensuring white progress. The cruelty of the condition is even magnified by the characters' own choices to give up their real identities should they desire to rise in such a society. This, unfortunately, renders the blacks at the bottom of their own plight, by accepting to conform to an oppressive system, which seeks to obscure their

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identities. This notion echoes DuBois’s concept of double consciousness, which is “the phenomenon of African-Americans experiencing a two-ness in identity” (1997-8) resulting from looking at oneself through the Other’s eyes and which is tackled in the novel through the idea of the “doubling aspects of masks” (Russell 51).

The Intuitionist is allegorically set in a time of calamity in the Department of Elevator Inspectors in one of the metropolitan cities, which relies on vertical elevators as a means of transportation. The novel is a fantasy that employs the allegory of elevators to signify the African-Americans’ concept of ‘social uplift’. That is, a central *motif* in the novel is the characters’ struggle for uprising in the American community, symbolized by elevators. The time setting of the novel is undefined; it can be one time in a future New York or rather sometime in the recent past. This imaginary setting is meant to enforce the notion of post-racism and the ongoing plight of post-racial African-Americans. Besides, the novel revolves around the *motif* of disguise as being addressed through the three colored protagonists, who choose voluntarily to put on ‘masks’ that would allow them maintain their positions in such a racist world.

It is the story of Lila Mae, the only colored-female inspector in the Department of Elevator Inspectors in charge of the elevating system, who “grows entangled with the factions’ struggle for power and the search for the ‘black box’ – the plan for the perfect elevator” (Sipe 1). The quest she undergoes and her attained self-realization embody Whitehead’s word for a new vision of racial justice and the possible new ‘volume’ of the American future. The society, described in *The Intuitionist*, is a racist one, in which the African-Americans are doomed to pay for their past: “Children are doomed to reiterate the mistakes in their parents’ physiognomies, as if trapped by curses that mark generations and wait for unknowable acts of atonement” (*The Intuitionist*: 31). In such a society grows Lila, who has been taught by her father that “white folks can turn on you any minute” (*The Intuitionist*: 23). In an attempt to find her place in this world, Lila enrolls into the Institute for Vertical Transport, where she suffers from further discrimination by not being allowed a residence, because the Institute “did not have living space for colored students” (*The Intuitionist*: 43). To protect herself in such a racist environment, she has deliberately chosen her own mask; the face of a strong-willed woman, which covers her real identity and true character: “Depressed, she’s in front of the mirror. Armed. She puts her face on. In her case, not a matter of cosmetics, but will. How to make such a sad face hard. It took practice” (*The Intuitionist*: 57).

Thanks to her outstanding inspection record, Lila is given the prestigious task of inspecting the elevators in the Fanny Briggs Memorial Building. On seeing Lila, the superintendent of that building comments: “I haven’t ever seen a woman elevator inspector before, let alone a colored one” (*The Intuitionist*: 8). Shortly after her inspection, Elevator Eleven crashes in a free fall. At this point, the protagonist finds that her world is changing “so suddenly and dramatically, to stumble down to a newer, deeper self” (*The Intuitionist*: 56). From this point onwards, Lila embarks on a quest to discover the truth. She goes ‘underground’ and discovers the unearthed research papers of James Fulton, founder of Intuitionism- one of the two parties responsible for the elevating system. During her process of self-realization, Lila encounters Natchez, the colored man who pretends to be Fulton’s nephew. Her various conversations with him set a basic concept in the novel: “It’s our future, not theirs.... And we need to take it back.... And I’m going to show that we ain’t nothing. Show them downstairs and the rest of them that we are alive” (*The Intuitionist*: 140).

Lila Mae has been a loyal believer in James Fulton, who has long been assumed to be a white man. Fulton passes away prior to the debut of the novel. However, his legacy leaves a great deal to be uncovered, as the events unfold. His identity remains mysterious for Lila as well as for and the readers. In the process of discovering it, Lila attains her own self-discovery. She has mostly been influenced by Fulton’s central message that there is “another world behind this one” (*The Intuitionist*: 63). Uncovering the real identity of Fulton - who proves to be a colored man - provides Lila with a different perspective into his writings and her own life. In spite of condemning his lie at the beginning, she understands that “the library would be empty if these scholars knew Fulton was colored. No one would have worshiped him; his books probably would never have been published at all, or would exist under a different name” (*The Intuitionist*: 151).

Unmistakably, Lila comes to realize that Fulton’s texts were never about elevators. They were but an Aesopian critique on the racial system that forces minorities to suppress willingly their identities should they wish to fit into the larger fabric of success. She finally recognizes that the world of elevators is built upon “a doctrine of transcendence that is as much a lie as [Fulton’s] life” (*The Intuitionist*: 241). She understands that Fulton’s *Volume Two* is a call for a new path; one that requires no such sacrifices. In this volume, Fulton calls for acknowledging and sustaining one’s real identity, as the only way for authentic upheaval, since the real elevation can never result from “communication with

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what is not-you” (*The Intuitionist*: 241). This discovery leads her to reevaluate her own life and position in the elevator world and discover that she has been “utilized shamelessly by the Intuitionists for political gain, as proof of their diverse credentials” (Tyler 1).

In the same vein, Pompey - the second black intuitionist in the novel and “the first colored elevator inspector in the city” - provides another example of an African-American attempting for upraise (*The Intuitionist*: 25). Pompey plays the role of Uncle Tom; he tries to appear as siding with the whites. He is promoted when he accepts to be kicked and ridiculed by his boss. Lila describes him, at the beginning, as the Uncle Tom, whose behavior is responsible for the Blacks’ sufferings. When she confronts him, he answers: “what I done, I done because I had no other choice. This is the white man’s world. They make the rules” (*The Intuitionist*: 195). During the course of events, the reader gets to know that Pompey is quite aware of his double-identity. Pompey maintains the image everyone believes, but fully understands his authentic self. All what he longs for is to make money in order to give his sons a better chance of survival. Hence, after her various moments of illumination, Lila sees Pompey differently; for her now, he is no longer the black cruel idiot, who has shed a blueprint for the colored people, but rather the complex character, wearing the mask required from him in the ‘elevator’ world.

The identity destructive choices, that Fulton and Pompey make, help Lila witness and, hence, gain the power and ability to see beyond “the surface of things” (*The Intuitionist*: 239). Fulton writes in white guise, purposely choosing to sacrifice his identity for the sake of delivering his message to his black kin; a message which seems to be not to “forget the costs of uplift; to resist conformity and to be aware of what they sense in their dreams or institutions” (Hooke 5). Similarly, Pompey acts as the Uncle-Tom figure in order to protect his family, in a world owned by the whites and controlled for their own sake. Lila finds out that she hates her place in such a racist world and that she has been projecting this feeling of hatred on the other black characters around her. With the events’ culmination, she admits to herself that she has always hated the pretentious mask she is wearing. She even identifies herself with the elevator: “It is her accident... The elevator pretended to be what it was not. Number Eleven passed for Longevous. Passed for healthy so well that Arbo Elevator Co.’s quality control could not see its duplicity” (*The Intuitionist*: 229).

Lila’s concluding cognizance of the fact that the blacks “conform to the expectations of their white counterparts, sacrificing their identities for the sake

of fitting into the larger world of progress” (Hooke 2), is but a reflection of Whitehead’s ultimate message, which is metaphoric: The world must be alert to the reality of this elevating system, or, rather, that of uplifting, a system that advocates racism, reinforces stereotypes and oppresses individual identities. Hence, throughout her quest, Lila gains insight and discovers “new possibilities for organizing social relationships and fosters hopes for creating another world beyond this one” (Libretti 214).

DuBois’s concept of double consciousness is concretized through the novel’s characters, who voluntarily choose to suppress their real identities and replace them by ones that comply to the world they inhabit. That is, Whitehead does not take the guilt off the African-Americans; instead, he puts on them a shared responsibility for their own plight. He speaks aloud of the possibility of revising the situation of the Blacks in the American society, but this time through their own eyes and with their own free will. Therefore, Whitehead winds up his novel by Lila Mae sitting alone in a room, attempting obsessively to finalize Fulton’s work of the perfect elevator, in which she has found her name written on a margin. She decides to continue his work with a third optimistic volume; a volume featuring the future design for the perfect elevating system which “takes care of engineering necessity without sacrificing passenger comfort” (*The Intuitionist*: 255), unlike all previous devices which she had devoted her life to that “were weak and would all fall one day like Number Eleven” (*The Intuitionist*: 255).

Conclusion

Remembering history and clinging to one’s roots are two important aspects of Afrofuturism, the aesthetic/philosophical movement that emerged in the 1990s, challenging Eurocentric epistemology and seeking to reconstruct a more inclusively- based African-American future. The two novels studied above are narratives of hope and self-empowerment. The authors call for breaking with the traditional images and stereotypes, associated with slavery, and advocate the role of the African-Americans in creating a unique space for themselves, by preserving their link with their history while recovering and cherishing their own identities. Both *Kindred* and *The Intuitionist* challenge the ‘zero-image’ of the African-Americans, providing them, and the world, with a clearer version of themselves and their history. The characters become aware of

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their own responsibilities in creating a better future. In the case of Butler’s *Kindred*, the characters owe their future to their ancestors, who endured slavery, while in *The Intuitionist* they preserve their unique identity shapes for a better future for not only for the African-Americans but also for the whole contemporary America society.

The fact that the African-Americans have been dealt with as alienated creatures in far-fetched settings has rendered science fiction the most expedient medium, communicating the African-American feeling of loss and the image of imagined utopian futures. Butler adopts the science-fiction genre through her choice of time-travel technique to unveil the real facet of the African-American diaspora and past heritage. *Kindred* explores the African-Americans’ initial racial experience and calls for reconciling the past and present in order to build a better future. On the other hand, *The Intuitionist* is Whitehead’s fantasy that employs the metaphor of elevators to signify the African- Americans’ concept of ‘social uplift’. Whitehead exposes post-racial America and presents a critique of the subtler forms of racism, underlying the so-called anti-racist American society. The novel is allegorically set at a time of calamity in the Department of Elevator Inspectors in one of the metropolitan cities, which relies on vertical elevators signifying post-racial American community.

Hence, both Octavia Butler and Colson Whitehead have authored a type of fiction endorsing complex African-American characters, seeking a better future but from variant angles. By so doing, both novelists have underscored the importance of reconciling with the past, and one’s identity, as the only means of establishing the wished-for future. More importantly, the novelists have not taken the swords off their warriors’ arms; in both works, the protagonists bear equal responsibilities for their own dilemmas and hold the same share of reconstructing their ‘new’ histories.

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