2. Ab/uses of History: *John Henry Days* and *Apex Hides the Hurt*

In *The Intuitionist*, the presence of the past in the form of embodied dispositions was a problem for Lila Mae Watson, who brought the history of Jim Crow segregation with her to New York City as part of her habitus. Whitehead's following two novels are different, insofar as both feature narratives of black men born after the demise of de jure segregation. Moreover, whereas Lila Mae has a rural working-class background, the later two protagonists are members of an urban professional class stratum. That is to say, neither *John Henry Days*' J. Sutter nor the nameless consultant of *Apex Hides the Hurt* share Lila Mae's history in any immediate sense. Nonetheless, both novels are interested in the past. The difference is that whereas Lila Mae had an immediate personal experience of Jim Crow segregation, the two later protagonists only have access to the past in a mediated manner. Here, the term *mediated* is meant literally, as these characters rely on media such as film or writing to learn about the past. Both novels end up suggesting that this mediated relationship to the past turns it into an object that can be appropriated and manipulated to serve the interests of present-day power struggles.

The last chapter argued that Whitehead's debut novel anticipated Kenneth Warren's theses about African American literature. The latter, to wit, suggested that the notion of African American literature as a collective project that advanced the interests of all American blacks after Jim Crow cannot be sustained. One attempted solution to this dilemma that Warren notices is a turn toward the past in writing by African Americans. Numerous texts, he claims, reject "discrete periodizations" and

instead proclaim historical "continuity."[1] This retrospective tendency has an identity-building function, he avers.

> When racial identity can no longer be law, it must become either history or memory—that is it must be either what some people once were but that we no longer are, or the way we were once upon a time, which still informs the way we are. […]. To make a poet black (to paraphrase Countee Cullen) is to bid her sing her past as her identity. (96–97)

Warren takes his cues from Walter Benn Michaels's account of "historicism," which revolves to a large extent around a reading of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. The Pulitzer Prize-winning novel, Michaels argues, uses the past in the service of "the constitution of identity."[2] Both critics bemoan that historicist novels draw on the past as a solution to the problem of establishing black racial identity in the absence of legalized segregation. This commitment to identity amounts, in their assessments, to a mystification of the more pressing concern of economic inequality.[3]

In an essay on the figure of the "ancestor," Morrison has invoked the past as a source of identity in non-fictional form. She argues that "the presence or absence of the figure determined the success or the happiness of the character." The ancestor embodies an affirmative relation to the past which (re)establishes a communal bond after allegedly organic rural communities have been thrown into "disarray" by urbaniza-

1 Kenneth W. Warren, *What Was African American Literature?* (Cambridge, MA/London: Harvard UP, 2011), 84.

2 Walter Benn Michaels, *The Shape of the Signifier: 1967 to the End of History* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2004), 139.

3 For a reading of Morrison that does not share the view that it is "an attempt to bolster racial pride," see Samuel Cohen, *After the End of History: American Fiction in the 1990s* (Iowa City: U of Iowa P, 2009), 117. For a reading of *Beloved* and several other of Morrison's novels which draws on Bourdieu's relational sociology, see Stefanie Müller, *The Presence of the Past in the Novels of Toni Morrison* (Heidelberg: Winter, 2013).

tion.[4] Madhu Dubey submits Morrison's essay to a thorough critique and laments that "Morrison's towering presence as both a novelist and a literary critic" has meant that her pronouncements are generally applied without any critical qualifications in African-American literature as a whole."[5] Indeed, the reception of Whitehead's work can serve well as a case in point. In the reading of *Apex Hides the Hurt* already addressed in the introduction, Stephanie Li paraphrases Morrison when she claims that "self-fulfillment is only possible through reconciliation with" an "ancestral figure." She discovers the latter in the person of the black bartender Muttonchops. The protagonist, however, does not warm to the man, which Li can only diagnose as a case of "racial anxiety."[6] J. Sutter also fails to reveal sufficient veneration for his racial ancestors in the eyes of some critics. Hence, the solution: he must "commemorate" steel driving legend John Henry.[7] In this chapter I will argue that neither of the two novels propose ancestor worship as desirable. In fact, in a 2009 *New York Times* essay titled "What to Write Next," Whitehead made fun of the "Historical Novel […] cutting between the past and present" to reveal to the narrator "some ancestor's role in things," as well as the "Southern Novel of Black Misery," investigating the legacy of slavery and Reconstruction through "sepia-tinted goggles,"[8] which alone should suggest that, in Whitehead's view, his two previously published novels do not turn to the past for sustenance. These novels instead stress that any

4 Toni Morrison, "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation," in *Black Women Writers (1950–1980): An Evaluation*, ed. Mari Evans (Garden City: Anchor, 1984), 343, 340.

5 Madhu Dubey, *Signs and Cities: Black Literary Postmodernism* (Chicago: The U of Chicago P, 2003), 237. In the first chapter of this book Dubey anticipates Warren's thesis in less provocative terms.

6 Stephanie Li, *Signifying Without Specifying: Racial Discourse in the Age of Obama* (New Brunswick: Rutgers UP, 2012), 90.

7 Éva Tettenborn, "'A Mountain Full of Ghosts': Mourning African American Masculinity in Colson Whitehead's *John Henry Days*," *African American Review* 46, no. 2–3 (2013), 277.

8 Colson Whitehead, "What to Write Next," *The New York Times*, October 29, 2009, https://www.nytimes.com/2009/11/01/books/review/Whitehead-t.html.

attempt to establish a version of remembering the past is intricately involved in social struggles of the present.

It is (Not) Always Mississippi in the Fifties

It is odd that critics accuse J. Sutter of not being aware of the past in the first place. One writes that he "is hardly the traumatized victim of history that [*Beloved*'s] Sethe is. Indeed J.'s problem may be that he is not traumatized enough by the past,"[9] as if there could be a desirable amount of historical trauma. But in fact, like Ralph Kabnis, another northern black professional who travels to the American South in Jean Toomer's *Cane*, J. experiences "an unreasonable fear of being lynched."[10] Far from being unaware of history, from the minute he sets foot on West Virginian soil, J. is convinced that he is doomed. A freelance journalist sent to Talcott, West Virginia, to cover the inaugural John Henry Days festival celebrating the legendary black steel driver who allegedly challenged a steam-powered drill to a contest which he won, only to collapse and die on the spot, J. experiences his trip to the South as a veritable katabasis, a descent into an American underworld, although in the end the novel is inconclusive as to whether he will make it out again.

Right after landing at the Charleston airport, J. thinks "[f]orget the South. The South will kill you" (*JHD* 14).[11] The narration in free indirect discourse glides into J.'s mind and "adopt[s]" his "inner language"[12] only to glide out again to contextualize his assumption by making explicit the

9 Peter Collins, "The Ghosts of Economics Past: *John Henry Days* and the Production of History," *African American Review* 46, no. 2–3 (2013): 285.

10 Nathan Irvin Huggins, *Harlem Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2007), 185, in reference to Kabnis. On Whitehead's admiration for Toomer, see Colson Whitehead, "Going Up," interview by Laura Miller, *Salon*, January 12, 1999, https://www.salon.com/1999/01/12/cov_si_12int/.

11 All references to Colson Whitehead, *John Henry Days* (New York: Doubleday, 2001) will hereafter be cited parenthetically in the text as *JHD*.

12 Dorrit Cohn, *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness* (Princeton: Princeton UP; 1978), 117.

schemes of perception and appreciation he mobilizes. "He possesses the standard amount of black Yankee scorn for the South, a studied disdain that attempts to make a callus of history." His attitude is shared among black northerners and consists of "sophisticated contempt, a healthy stock of white trash jokes, things of that nature, an instinctual stiffening to the words County Sheriff" (ibid.). The use of multiple perspectives allows the novel to situate J.'s experience in his social position as a "black Yankee." Moreover, the classificatory principle informing his thoughts involves his entire body. Some words can produce an "instinctive stiffening," and history is likened to a "callus," a modification of bodily tissue caused by repeated irritation or pressure.

Whenever the novel is presented through J.'s perspective, readers must thus remember that his perception, thoughts, and actions are informed by his embodied dispositions. At the airport,

> He has arrived at a different America he does not live in. The undiagnosed press toward the gate waiting for kin. Placed hip-to-hip, the rivulets and shadings of their acid-washed jeans describe a relief map of blighted confederacy. Powerline kids suck fingers. Between the hems of oversized shorts and lips of polyknit athletic socks sally bright red lobster flesh and craggy knees, dumb and unashamed things, seabottom tubers uncataloged by any know system of biological taxonomy. (ibid.)

This passage, which naturalizes J.'s feelings of revulsion and disparity, is followed by a parenthetical remark which provides another relativization of J.'s thought: "(None of this is true, of course, but perception is all [...].)" (*JHD* 14–15). Parenthetical commentary is one of Whitehead's favorite textual strategies in *John Henry Days* to denaturalize doxic experience. But readers learn early on that the novel's representation of the South is filtered entirely through J.'s perception.

Thus, the novel admits at the outset that it is only interested in the South insofar as it is imagined by its protagonist. Or, more precisely, the plot of J.'s narrative is propelled by a tension articulated by the poet Zyrae Van Clief-Stefanon: "The South is an imaginary place where real things

happen."[13] J.'s imaginary West Virginia—populated by "cannibals, all of them"—enables him to look down at the locals. Waiting for a driver who picks him up at the airport, he expects "a red pickup truck with a bunch of chickens in the back spitting feathers" (*JHD* 15). By contrast, J. thinks of himself as a "sophisticated black man from New York City" (*JHD* 77). His perception and appreciation of the South relies on what Edward Said calls "imaginative geography," which contains "lenses" that "shape the language, perception, and form of the encounter" with the Other. In *Orientalism*, Said analyzes fantastical representations of the Orient and its irrationality as a means to bolster Western identity, noting a "universal practice of designating in one's mind a familiar space which is 'ours' and an unfamiliar space which is 'theirs.'"[14] By devalorizing the unfamiliar space—"a different America [J.] does not live in"—the dominant culture can "intensify its own sense of itself."[15] That is, the greater the distance J. puts between himself and the country bumpkins of his imagination, the more his self-image of urban sophistication is reinforced.

At the same time, J. feels constantly threatened. "It's always Mississippi in the fifties," he tells a colleague (*JHD* 127), a statement which syntactically mirrors Beloved's thought in Morrison's eponymous novel that "it is always now."[16] The continuity of racism in both cases cancels out historical developments, and in J.'s imaginary South time seems to have been at a standstill ever since the antebellum period; the temporality is that of the "timeless eternal."[17] For J. the "notoriously racist state"

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13 Quoted in Kevin Young, *The Gray Album: On the Blackness of Blackness* (Minneapolis: Graywolf Press, 2012), 306. Young dedicates the book to "Colson Whitehead, my brother." The two met as undergraduates at Harvard University. See Colleen Walsh, "Kevin Young and a Unified Theory of Black Culture—and Himself," *The Harvard Gazette*, November 10, 2020, https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2020/11/kevin-young-92-discusses-new-role-as-museum-director/.

14 Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 2003), 58, 54.

15 Ibid., 55.

16 Toni Morrison, *Beloved* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1987), 210.

17 Said, *Orientalism*, 72. For sophisticated accounts of the continuity of the anti-black racism in the United States, see Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America* (New York/Oxford:

of Mississippi[18] figures as a synecdoche for the entire South, absorbing West Virginia. Apprehending the local population as uncivilized brutes amounts to an attempt by J. to exert control over them.[19]

This tension between exerting control over the locals and feeling threatened by them is what drives the narrative forward in the novel's first part. While the "trope that governs [J.'s] perceptions" is that of a "colonialist explorer venturing into a jungle of savage whites,"[20] the latter might prove too dangerous to control, after all. Hence, J.'s sense of impending doom: "The South will kill you." In the taxi, he feels a

> burp of paranoia: what if Caleb [the driver's name is Arnie] here is driving him up into the mountains, down to the creek, out to the lonesome spot where his family performs rituals. Boil him up in a pot, ritual sacrifice helps the crops grow. […]. Boil him up in a pot while they watch wrestling on TV. He figures even the most remote shack has a TV these days. The cable carrier in this region serves a special clientele, entire public access shows devoted to dark meat recipes. (*JHD* 21–22)

At this point, J. is still able to keep his paranoia in check. "I'm a real city boy," he thinks, "I'm a real jaded fuck" (*JHD* 22). Later, he loses control over his imagination and fantasizes about getting dragged out of a car and lynched by a mob chasing him in "the red pickup truck of his nightmares." Initially, the pickup truck carried chickens; now, it is "filled with crackers" (*JHD* 50). The southerners of J.'s imagination quickly turn into a murderous threat.

J.'s paranoia returns with a vengeance at a dinner on the eve of the John Henry Days festival with almost fatal consequences. While J. is struggling to swallow a piece of prime rib stuck in his throat he

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Oxford UP, 1997); and Hortense J. Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 64–81.

18 David Brown and Clive Webb, *Race in the American South: From Slavery to Civil Rights* (Gainesville: UP of Florida, 2007), 309.

19 See Said, *Orientalism*, 59.

20 William Ramsey, "An End of Southern History: The Down-Home Quests of Toni Morrison and Colson Whitehead," *African American Review* 41, no. 4 (2007): 781.

once more imagines himself as the victim of a lynching. The narration reproduces a stream of consciousness which amalgamates lines from the "Ballad of John Henry," allusions to southern history, and J.'s present experiences:

> No oxygen for me, thanks, I've had enough. […]. I'm a sophisticated black man from New York City and I'm going to die down here. […]. […]. Who wants to be the blue guy in the choking picture on the wall of a cheap restaurant? Where is this place's sign? There must be laws about the placement of signs […]. Federal law, but then maybe they vary from state to state. States' rights! States' rights, these people love their fucking states' rights, signs on fountains, back of the bus Rosa Parks. This place will fucking kill him […]. He jumps out of his seat. My eyes must be popping out my head like some coon cartoon. […]. All these crackers looking up at me, looking up at the tree. Nobody doing nothing, just staring. They know how to watch a nigger die. (*JHD* 77–79)

Thus ends the first part of *John Henry Days*, and it takes the reader some forty pages until it is revealed that J. was rescued by a fellow diner.

The prime rib is a device that allows the novel to stage in which a J. imagines himself as the victim of a lynching while at the same time experiencing the sensation of choking. He does not encounter racist terror, but suffers, in Bourdieu's terms, from symbolic violence nonetheless. His body "reproduce[s]" a relationship of domination "by miming it."[21] It is as if his trip to the South triggers something in his body that has predisposed him to recognize himself as a target of racist violence. His "imaginative geography" of the South is like a "stage" on which "figures whose role it is to represent the larger whole from which they emanate"[22] make an entrance. These are the County Sheriff, the cannibalistic redneck family, the white mob, and, ultimately, the antithetical pair of

21 Pierre Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, trans. by Richard Nice (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), 171.

22 Said, *Orientalism*, 63.

"crackers" and "niggers." J.'s fatalistic sense of doom presents what Bourdieu calls "*amor fati*" or "love of destiny, the bodily inclination to realize an identity that has been constituted as a social essence and so transformed into destiny."[23] J.'s conviction that the South will kill him prescribes a social essence that is appropriated and realized by his body against his will.

However, J. does not experience any racist encounters in West Virginia in the novel. Whatever the contents of his imaginary South—and regardless of whether the empirical South is more racist than other parts of the United States—the people J. meets in *John Henry Days* do not constitute a threat. Of course, there is the possible exception of Alphonse Miggs, the philatelist who shoots and kills two visitors of the festival, possibly including J. But there is no indication that racism motivates his act; moreover, it is he who saves J. from choking at the dinner. Whence J.'s paranoia, then? The novel adds a further level of meaning to southern history via a set of intertextual references that reveal just how mediated J.'s perception and experience of the South is.

In the past, traveling to the South often functioned in the service of "immersion narratives" in African American literature. Robert Stepto characterizes these as "ritualized journey[s] into a symbolic South, in which a black protagonist seeks those aspects of tribal literacy that ameliorate, if not obliterate, the conditions imposed by solitude."[24] But whatever J. finds in West Virginia, it is not "tribal literacy." In a lucid analysis of the significance of the old mill, in which the dinner during which J. almost chokes takes place, William Ramsey shows that the South in Whitehead's novel subverts the idea of a "fecund black essence" that could sustain J. (as a sort of geographical ancestor figure). The mill cannibalizes past architectural styles—"colonial, antebellum, and

23 Pierre Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001), 50; See also Christa Buschendorf, "Narrated Power Relations: Jesse Hill Ford's Novel *The Liberation of Lord Byron Jones*," in *Civilizing and Decivilizing Processes: Figurational Approaches to American Culture*, ed. Christa Buschendorf, Astrid Franke, and Johannes Voelz (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011), 247.

24 Robert B. Stepto, *From Behind the Veil: A Study of Afro-American Narrative* (Champaign: U of Illinois P, 1991), 167.

modern"[25]—in a historicist manner.[26] Extending Ramsey's reading, one could argue that the South as experienced by J. the first part of *John Henry Days* likewise draws on references to southern history as well as on pop cultural representations of the rural South that ultimately do not add up to a historical essence—the eternal 1950s Mississippi—but to a postmodern pastiche.

Indeed, pop culture is a primary lens through which J. perceives the South. The novel creates a threatening atmosphere during the journey that takes J. from the airport to his hotel and subsequently to the dinner at the old mill by relying on intertextual references to films that were popular in J.'s childhood (a later chapter reveals that J. was eighteen years old in 1984). In the cab, J. is engaged in "a cool contemplation of the eighteen-wheeler chasing their rear bumper. A plastic sheet detailing the Confederate flag dominates the truck's front grill. He can't see the driver" (*JHD* 18). It is not the flag alone that turns the truck into a threat, because J. elsewhere judges visual emblems of the Confederacy as mere "kitsch" (*JHD* 42) or has no reaction to them at all, as when he comes across Confederate flags and t-shirts sporting the flag at the festival (*JHD* 267). But an anonymous driver in a truck chasing a man in a smaller vehicle reiterates the character constellation of Steven Spielberg's 1971 film *Duel*, and J.—a freelance writer on popular culture—can identify as the chased party in this instance.

More generally, his entire journey draws on the conventions of the "urbanoia film," a genre that according to Carol Clover, who coined the term, includes 1970s horror films such as Tobe Hooper's *Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, Wes Craven's *The Hills Have Eyes*, or John Boorman's *Deliverance*.[27] A commonality of these films is that they revolve around the experiences of urbanites in a rural setting where they recognize

25 Ramsey, "An End of Southern History," 770, 781.

26 On postmodern historicism in architecture, see Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke UP, 1991), 18.

27 Carol J. Clover, *Men, Women, and Chain Saws: Gender in the Modern Horror Film* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 2015), 126. The last of these is, she admits, not exactly a horror film, but "the influential granddaddy of the tradition."

that the locals are "not like us." These abject Others—often cannibals or incestuous families—are ciphers of a life "beyond the reaches of social law" in terms of their demeanor, their appearance, and their actions. Beneath the cultural difference that materializes in the "city/country split," there is the difference of "social class."[28] Time and again, educated, well-off city-dwellers (well-off at least in relation to the local population) visit rural regions only to feel the wrath of the victims of capitalist dynamics radiating from the metropolis: in *Deliverance* a local ecosystem is about to be transformed by a dam, whereas the cannibals in *Texas Chain Saw Massacre* are former slaughterhouse workers left behind by deindustrialization.[29]

Clover's discussion of urbanoia film serves as a useful heuristic to see how J.'s paranoid fantasies in rural West Virginia are informed by the same class resentment. J. a "*sophisticated* black man from New York City" (*JHD* 77, my emphasis) is convinced that the Appalachian "mountain people" (*JHD* 18) are essentially different from him in terms of intelligence, hygiene, and habits. In his eyes they are, after all, cannibals waiting to devour him in a lonely hut—an imaginary scene drawn straight from the archive of urbanoia film. That is to say, when he arrives in West Virginia, J. carries with him a set of pop cultural representations—mostly images mobilizing the conventions of 1970s horror films—which function as schemes of perception and evaluation which allow him to endow his journey with a specific meaning: "The South will kill you." In short, urbanoia films are the modality through which J. experiences race in *John Henry Days*.[30]

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28 Ibid., 124, 126, 125.

29 See Robin Wood, "An Introduction to the American Horror Film," in *American Nightmare: Essays on the Horror Film*, ed. Andrew Britton et al. (Toronto: Festival of Festivals, 1979), 21. For a brilliant reminder that the "hinterland" cannot in fact be disentangled from the capitalist economy, see Phil A. Neel, *Hinterland: America's New Landscape of Class and Conflict* (London: Reaktion, 2018).

30 Daniel Grassian, too, argues that "media images of prejudice and discrimination against African Americans" have made J. "hyperconscious of racism." *Writing the Future of Black America: Literature of the Hip-Hop Generation* (Columbia: U of South Carolina P, 2009), 77. This is certainly true, and J.'s fantasy of being

To be sure, *John Henry Days* does not suggest that anti-black violence is no longer present in the South or elsewhere; a later chapter (discussed in chapter four) revolves around the shooting of Eleanor Bumpurs by New York City police officers in 1984 which enrages seventeen-year-old J. But, to conclude this section, the novel challenges a type of thinking about the importance of the past in writing by African Americans that often goes unquestioned. In the beginning of this chapter I alluded to critical discussions of Whitehead's novels which reproached his protagonists—and, implicitly, through guilt by literary creation, the author himself—with being insufficiently aware of and connected with their past. Far from endorsing the belief that blacks had an immediate relationship to African American history, *John Henry Days* emphasizes the mediated nature of the past. Unlike in Morrison's *Beloved*, in which someone "who never was there" is able to remember something that happened to another person in the past, J. does not "bump into" a "rememory."[31] His experience of the South is informed by "pop images and simulacra of […] history."[32] But the novel also shows that the images J. conjures up articulate a racial and a class perspective on the South; J. is a black man, but he is also a sophisticated New Yorker and both positions account for his paranoia.

But *John Henry Days* narrates J.'s descent into this mediated South to dramatize another issue with the past. According to Michaels, one function of historicist novels is to submit that individuals can remember past events they never experienced as part of their history, "thus mak[ing] the historical past a part of [their] own experience."[33] History, in other words, provides identities. Whitehead's novel, however, does not present such a relationship to the past as desirable; imagining oneself as a lynching victim because of the past's weight does not solve any of J.'s present

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dragged from a car and lynched is a case in point. My contention is, however, that the entire narrative structure of the novel's first part relies on the conventions of urbanoia film.

31 Morrison, *Beloved*, 36; see Warren, *What Was African American Literature*, 98.

32 Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 25.

33 Michaels, *The Shape of the Signifier*, 137.

problems in the novel's plot. Instead, it represents the risk of "drowning" in the past, as James Baldwin expressed it in *The Fire Next Time*.[34] In a discussion of *John Henry Days*, Astrid Franke similarly argues that the encounter with history staged here is not "cathartic, healing, or empowering," but ultimately "a sobering, insulting, and sickening, ultimately disempowering experience."[35] But what does the novel suggest could be a better attitude toward the past? Does it, as Warren once wrote, demand that we "put the past behind us"?[36]

L'invention du temps perdu

The short answer is, I believe, no, it does not. To be sure, *John Henry Days* does not suggest that black Americans possess a preternatural bond with the past that has to be affirmed; nor does it promote the establishment of a shared racial identity on the basis of racist terror as exactly desirable (although perhaps it does portray it as inevitable). Yet, the novel does not at all suggest that one should ignore the past. Instead, it is itself involved in an investigation of what present-day issues are at stake in the writing of history by vested interests. To channel Baldwin again, it shows how an "invented past" can be abused.[37] The reason for J.'s trip to West Virginia—the John Henry Days festival—provides an object lesson that emphasizes the importance of knowing about history in order to see through the ways that it is used and abused by individuals and institutions to legitimate their interests in the present.

Whitehead's novel has been called an example of "historiographical metafiction," which Linda Hutcheon characterizes as a type of postmod-

34 James Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, in *Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York: Library of America, 1998), 333.

35 Astrid Franke, "'The Death of the Sixties?' Afroamerikanische Geschichte in Colson Whitehead's *John Henry Days*," in *Von Selma bis Ferguson – Rasse und Rassismus in den USA*, ed. Michael Butter, Astrid Franke, and Horst Tonn (Bielefeld: transcript, 2016), 166, my translations.

36 Warren, *What Was African American Literature*, 84.

37 Baldwin, *The Fire Next Time*, 333.

ern historical fiction committed to showing that the past can only be accessed "through its textualized remains."[38] Frequently, historiographical metafiction evokes history by including historical events and persons in the diegesis only to trouble literature's ability to narrate the past accurately. *John Henry Days* utilizes numerous strategies that can be easily described by Hutcheon's concept. The prologue introduces fourteen brief accounts of the historical John Henry, some of which are taken from sociologist Guy Johnson's 1929 book *John Henry: Tracking Down a Negro Legend* or other studies (as a look at the novel's paratext reveals), many of which contradict each other wildly. In addition, many of the novel's numerous short chapters include portrayals of historical persons such Johnson or Paul Robeson. Most significantly, the eponymous festival that provides the novel with its setting has been an annual event held during the second weekend of July since 1996, when the novel's events take place. In his narrative rendering of the festival, however, Whitehead has altered some important details, inventing, for instance, a deadly shooting on the festival's final day. His reliance on metafictional devices in the prologue and elsewhere remind readers that the novel is not engaged in a naïve representation of John Henry as a historical figure. Instead, it highlights the mediated nature of historical knowledge which enables social agents in powerful positions to create representations of the past that serve their interests.

The John Henry Days festival, in addition to "revitalizing the economically downtrodden area,"[39] celebrates the release of a series of commemorative postage stamps honoring "America's best-loved folk heroes" (*JHD* 16). A US Postal Service representative explains "that community events such as this […] were a small but significant means of getting the people involved with their government again" at a moment when low "voter turnout was only one example of a widespread public disaffection with the national apparatus" (*JHD* 293). The festival thus exploits John Henry's

38 Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 119. See Derek C. Maus, *Understanding Colson Whitehead: Revised and Expanded Edition* (Columbia: U of South Carolina P, 2021), 41–42.

39 Maus, *Understanding Colson Whitehead*, 47.

legacy to inculcate a sense of national unity and purpose. Seen from the perspective of a federal agency such as the USPS, the meaning of the legendary John Henry's story is irrelevant; what is important is that it can affect an audience in a particular way. Once more, paying attention to the novel's use of perspective techniques can reveal how narrative renderings of history are tailor-made to resonate with the schemes of perception, appreciation, and action held by social agents.

Supplementing Max Weber, who famously defined the state as the sole possessor of the monopoly of violence in its territory,[40] Bourdieu insisted that the state must, as a matter of fact, hold the "monopoly of legitimate physical *and symbolic* violence."[41] This includes the power to define the meaning of the nation's past—although this power can and will be contested. "In modern societies," Bourdieu writes

> the State makes a decisive contribution towards the production and reproduction of the instruments of construction of social reality. […]. Through the structuring it imposes on practices, the State institutes and inculcates common symbolic forms of thought, social frames of perception, understanding or memory, State forms of classification or, more precisely, practical schemes of perception, appreciation, and action. […]. The state thereby creates the conditions for an immediate

40 See Max Weber, "Politics as a Vocation," in *The Vocation Lectures*, ed. David Owen and Tracy B. Strong, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Indianapolis/Cambridge: Hackett, 2004), 33.

41 Pierre Bourdieu, *On the State: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1989–1992*, ed. Patrick Champagne et al., trans. David Fernbach (Cambridge: Polity, 2014), 4, emphasis in original. Dilan Riley argues that Bourdieu's state theory fails to properly account for the United States, as the latter "has never exercised a monopoly over symbolic power," because Washington, D. C., is merely a "bureaucratic power center" that lacks the "concentrated symbolic power" of Paris. "The New Durkheim: Bourdieu and the State," *Critical Historical Studies* 2, no. 2 (2015): 268. Be that as it may, the point of the John Henry Days festival, as explained by the USPS representative, is to (re)accumulate symbolic power at a moment of "public disaffection" toward the federal state (*JHD* 293), not necessarily to exert an already existing symbolic power.

> orchestration of habitus which is itself the foundation for a consensus on this set of shared self-evidences which constitute common sense.[42]

However, the symbolic power engaged in the project of creating common sense works best when it "preaches to the converted": those, who are "predisposed" to "take in" the state's message.[43]

At the dinner in honor of John Henry, another USPS representative gives a speech on the significance of Talcott, the West Virginia town that hosts the festival. Shortly after beginning, he interrupts himself: "Did I say *y'all*. I'm sorry […]. Must be my Southern roots acting up" (*JHD* 66, emphasis in original). Using what Bourdieu calls a "strategy of condescension" in which a speaker with proper "linguistic competence" pretends to negate the distance between himself and those who speak a dialect,[44] the man pretends to express his commonality with the audience to gather symbolic capital. That the strategy works is shown by the laughter that follows.

After thus having positioned himself as someone who shares a regional identity with his addressees, the speaker goes on to praise the contribution their ancestors made when building the railroad "in a great moment of our nation's growth." The intention of the Post Office's decision to issue commemorative stamps representing John Henry and other folk heroes is in part to recognize this often forgotten toil. The steel driver's tale is, however, thoroughly deracialized in the rest of the speech:

> John Henry was an Afro-American, born into slavery and freed by Mr. Lincoln's famous proclamation. But more importantly, he was an American. He helped build this nation into what it is today, and his

42 Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, 175.

43 Pierre Bourdieu and Jean-Claude Passeron, *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture*, trans. Richard Nice (London: Sage, 1990), 25.

44 See Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, trans. Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), 68–69. Ultimately, this strategy reinforces the hierarchical distinction between those who are able to speak the language required in a formal context and those who cannot.

> great competition with the steam drill is a testament to the strength of the human spirit. The USPS is proud to honor such an American. (*JHD* 66)

John Henry's experience of building the railroad is rhetorically equated with the work of the audience members' ancestors, who are, however, almost exclusively white. J., who is present during the speech, observes everyone and concludes that he and Pamela Street are "the only [black] folks in the room" (*JHD* 59). Everything that could remind the white audience of the significance of John Henry's race and what it meant in the world of the post-Reconstruction South is suppressed.[45]

But *John Henry Days* adds its own critical commentary on the postal worker's address. After the latter's sly allusion to his "Southern roots," a new paragraph begins. "Like a pro he waits for the chuckles to subside" (*JHD* 66). The next sentence reveals this observation to be that of Alphonse Miggs, a philatelist who has traveled to the festival from outside of West Virginia. As an outsider he is not "predisposed" to be swayed by the speaker's instrumental use of a southern vernacular and recognizes the performance that tries to resonate with the audience's dispositions for what it is. Later, the speech is once more interrupted by Miggs's thoughts: "Is this man talking about a stamp or taking the beach at Normandy" (ibid.). By gliding into Miggs's mind again, the novel reveals the speech's pathos.

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45 The festival's web site tells the tale of John Henry's legendary contest with a steam drill and concludes that "[t]he man and his feat is an inspiration to workers worldwide—to those that are diligent to become the best while considering the well-being of their fellow workers." "The Legend of John Henry," *John Henry Historical Park*, n.d., https://www.johnhenryhistoricalpark.com/the-lege nd. That is to say, it represents John Henry as a worker who worked himself to death quickly so that his "fellow workers" could have the dubious privilege of working themselves to death slowly. In other words, here proletarian death is celebrated as a necessary contribution to nation-building. On the dangers of the kind of work allegedly performed by John Henry and other railroad workers at the time, see Scott Reynolds Nelson, *Steel Driving Man: John Henry, the Untold Story of an American Legend* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2006).

By rhetorically equating the audience members' ancestors with John Henry—and obliterating racial difference in the process—the speech elevates them to the rank of American heroes, if unsung ones. The narrative strategies Whitehead uses, however, problematize this orchestrated performance by introducing a character, Miggs, who fails to "take in" the message. The locals' laughter shows that their embodied dispositions have been triggered; Miggs in contrast remains unaffected, thus revealing to the reader the comic aspects of the speaker's performance. Drawing on Henri Bergson's theory of laughter, Christa Buschendorf and Astrid Franke write:

> The disclosure of the ludicrous aspects of a ceremony depends on point of view, namely on isolating any ceremonial elements from the content. Focusing on the ceremonial aspects of a social action reveals its presumptuousness or, in Bourdieu's terms, its symbolic violence. Once uncovered as arbitrary, symbolic violence becomes comical and loses its power.[46]

Miggs's perspective is employed to isolate and ridicule the elements of this ceremony and, thus, lays bare the USPS representative's attempt to "construct[] reality," which is what symbolic power does.[47]

The novel pursues a similar textual strategy, formally and thematically, when J. recalls the time he first encountered the tale of John Henry in a cartoon he watched as a fifth-grader. The film is introduced by the teacher as "a film about a great American hero who helped build America" (*JHD* 137). Once more a supplementary perspective is introduced to cast doubt on the hegemonic narrative. This time, J.'s childhood recollections are interrupted by (often parenthetical) passages presented through adult J.'s perspective that relativize the earlier viewing experience. Remembering the abundance of food the cartoon John Henry enjoys, adult J. emphasizes the material conditions of existence of slavery: "(J.

46 Christa Buschendorf and Astrid Franke, "The Implied Sociology and Politics of Literary Texts," in *American Studies Today: New Research Agendas*, ed. Winfried Fluck et al., (Heidelberg: Winter, 2014), 82.

47 Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, 166.

wondering […] where did they get that food. |John Henry] was born a slave. His parents were slaves. […])" (ibid.). But the adult narrator also makes sense of the students' willing suspension of disbelief by noting that their familiarity with narratives of "Greek gods" prepared them to accept representations of the supernatural. The cartoon, by depicting John Henry as a superhuman figure, speaks a language the fifth-graders already know. Thus, they accept a sanitized version of the mid-nineteenth century in which all references to chattel slavery, Reconstruction, and anti-black racism are missing. The John Henry they see has been "domesticated" and turned into a symbol of America.[48]

This passage and later comments on the absence of slavery (*JHD* 139) or the distortion of working conditions for blacks in the Reconstruction era, like the speech during the dinner at Talcott, show that the way John Henry is remembered in political discourse and popular culture transforms him into a generic instance of the class of workers who "fulfilled their nation's destiny" (*JHD* 140), but remains silent on the superexploitation of blacks after the end of slavery.[49] These benign narratives give rise to what cultural scholar Aleida Assmann calls "functional memory," which

> provides a foundation for collectives ranging from small social groups to large units such as nations and states. It is created with the aid of different symbolic media (e.g. texts, pictures, buildings, rituals). Through common points of reference in the past and a shared fund of cultural traditions, such collectives establish their own we-identity.[50]

48 Nelson, *Steel' Driving Man*, 166.

49 On Reconstruction, see W. E. B Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America, 1860–1880* (New York: The Free Press, 1998); Eric Foner, *America's Unfinished Revolution, 1863–1877* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2014). On the peculiar "double freedom" of former slaves, see Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scnees of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America* (New York/Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997), ch. 4.

50 Aleida Assmann, *Introduction to Cultural Studies: Topics, Concepts, Ideas* (Berlin: Erich Schmidt, 2012), 189.

In *John Henry Days*, symbolic media both minuscule (the stamp) and large (the festival) work to invent a memory of John Henry as a proud, raceless American worker. The novel does not provide any explicit reasons for the "public disaffection" with the state Whitehead mentions; in the 1990s, however, several American intellectuals expressed anxiety that the disappearance of the communist bloc as an external enemy meant that ethnoracial divisions threatened the nation's internal cohesion. Again, an appeal to the past was seen to hold the solution for an identity seemingly in crisis. For Arthur Schlesinger, for instance, the construction of a shared memory became a "means of defining national identity."[51] Hence, the attempt to downplay John Henry's blackness and the emphasis of his "willing[ness] to die" in the service of the "imagined community" that is a nation makes a lot of sense in the context of the 1990s.[52]

As I argued in the previous section, *John Henry Days* rejects the idea that one should seek a salutary encounter with history in the service of constituting identities in the present—especially when the past consists of racist terror. Yet, at the same time the novel forcefully rejects the idea that a historiography that deliberately made the role of race and racialized domination in American history invisible was any better. Indeed, it highlights the necessity of knowing history. Without historical knowledge it would be impossible to see the way the cartoon representation of John Henry as a superhuman distorts the realities of slavery and Reconstruction or the way the heroic portrayal of the construction of railroads uses pathos to obscure the super-exploitation of racialized workers. For Whitehead knowledge of the past is indispensable for recognizing the ways that history is used to legitimate hegemonic political projects in the present. As Bourdieu puts it, there is "no better weapon […] than historicization […] to neutralize the effects of naturalization."[53] Whitehead's novel may reject historicism as defined by Michaels; however, it remains

51 Arthur Schlesinger, Jr., *The Disuniting of America* (New York: Norton, 1992), 20.

52 Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London/New York: Verso, 2006), 7.

53 Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, 182.

committed to historicization as a weapon against the effects of symbolic violence.[54]

A Tale of Three Names and One City

Apex Hides the Hurt once more sends a black New Yorker to another part of the country and stages a confrontation with Reconstruction history. This time a nameless "nomenclature consultant" travels to the midwestern town of Winthrop which is primed to be renamed. Its present name stems from Sterling Winthrop, a nineteenth-century barbed-wire manufacturer. In the narrative's present, presumably the early twenty-first century—deindustrialization has set in. Lucky Aberdeen, a local software developer, thus proposes to change the town's name to "New Prospera," a name seemingly more apt in the age of a new economy.[55] According to Maria Bose, the change of the town's name trace the shift from a Fordist to a post-Fordist mode of production and the correlative changes in race relations: "Winthrop-brand barbed wire elaborates the racial characteristics of a white-dominated nineteenth-century economy," whereas Lucky's "New Prospera" connotes an immaterial economy

54 I do not wish to discuss Whitehead's own version of John Henry's tale, which can be gathered from multiple short chapters. Suffice it to say that Whitehead's John Henry does not sacrifice his life for a greater cause, whether the nation or the working class. Instead, he merely makes sure that his wife Abby will receive the wages he saved (*JHD* 385). Nor is he a "representative of people who are not supposed to exist: rugged African American individuals." Tettenborn, "A Mountain Full of Ghost," 273. *John Henry Days* characterizes John Henry as a man dependent on others, such as his friend L'il Bob or a literate worker named Adams who writes his farewell letter to Abby. The novel thus also demystifies the figure of the superhuman hero qua individual.

55 For a smart reading of the novel's use and critique of the "utopian lexicon" that originated in Silicon Valley, see Mark A. Tabone, "Branded Communities: Colson Whitehead's *Apex Hides the Hurt* and the Struggle for Utopia in the New Millenium," *Configurations* 29, no. 3 (2021).

and "cultivates the image of race's illusionary transcendence."[56] The latter version of a post-racial but multicultural present is contested, however, by Regina Goode, the town's black mayor. Initially supportive of Lucky's plans, she eventually introduces "Freedom" as an alternative name. This, the protagonist learns, was the town's original name when it was founded by a group of former slaves in 1867. In the face of a gridlocked town council, the consultant has been brought in to choose a name.

At stake in this three-way tug of war is the construction of social reality. Apropos the significance of names Bourdieu writes:

> By structuring the perception which social agents have of the social world, the act of naming helps to establish the structure of the world […]. There is no social agent who does not aspire, as far as his circumstances permit, to have the power to name and to create the world through naming.[57]

Being able to name, then, amounts to possessing symbolic power. The three members of the town council, Regina, Lucky, and Albie Winthrop, are locked in a power struggle over the meaning of the town's past, present, and future. Using Bourdieu's terminology, it is possible to treat the council as a field; a diminutive field, perhaps, but still a "*space of conflict and competition*." The "strategies" that the contestants have at their disposal "depend on their position in the field, that is, on the distribution of the specific capital."[58] The resources they can mobilize, in other words, shape how they go about reaching their goal.

Lucky, a personification of the charismatic Silicon Valley entrepreneur, was involved in the economic field before returning to Winthrop. In this field, "social agents can admit to themselves and

56 Maria Bose, "Allegories of 'Postracial' Capitalism: Colson Whitehead and the Materials of Twenty-First-Century Black Cultural Authorship," *Critique: Studies in Contemporary Fiction* 60, no. 4 (2019): 423–24.

57 Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, 105.

58 Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc J. D. Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (Chicago: The U of Chicago P, 1992), 17, 101, emphasis in original.

admit publicly that they have interests"[59]—material interests, that is. Thus, Lucky shows little hesitation when he justifies his plan. "New Prospera" is a name that signifies "business opportunities" (*AHH* 17).[60] A reporter, who acts as a mere mouthpiece for Lucky, elaborates what "opportunities" Lucky means here: "What I find so interesting is the world of opportunities that a wonderful name like New Prospera will bring to the town […]. Big businesses looking for a tax-friendly haven, young people who want a fresh start" (*AHH* 106). Moreover, a man who explores the prospects of moving to the town explains to the protagonist that an acquaintance who already made the move "[a]dded 30 percent to his workforce and at a fraction of what it would have cost back west" (*AHH* 48). In short, Lucky's plan is to turn the town into a neoliberal haven complete with both low taxes and low wages.

If Lucky wants to leave history behind, Albie Winthrop is committed to the past in almost comically pathological manner. As the heir to a business engaged in the seemingly outmoded activity of manufacturing things, he lacks both the economic capital that Lucky possesses and the political capital that Regina Goode holds as mayor. What he (desperately) clings to is his social capital, that is, the resources which he can mobilize by drawing on a network of "mutual acquaintance and recognition."[61] His self-image is that of a benevolent employer who cares about the personal lives of his workers and their children. "That's old Frank's son," he tells the protagonist, adding that Frank "[n]ever worked anywhere else" (*AHH* 65). This last phrase encapsulates all the difference between Lucky and Albie. The former is committed to the mobility of labor and capital; Albie desires stability, yet he knows he is fighting a losing battle and laments his fellow council members' attempt "to take away something that means something" (*AHH* 82).

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59 Pierre Bourdieu, *Practical Reason: On the Theory of Action*, trans. Randal Johnson et al. (Cambridge: Polity, 1998), 105.

60 All references to Colson Whitehead, *Apex Hides the Hurt* (New York: Doubleday, 2006) will hereafter be cited parenthetically in the text as *AHH*.

61 Pierre Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital," trans. Richard Nice, in *Readings in Economic Sociology*, ed. Nicole Woolsey Biggart (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2002), 286.

What's in the name Winthrop for Albie? Despite acknowledging that the town was founded by blacks, he tells the consultant,

> Winthrop *means* something. Goode's people, sure, they were the ones first settled here, sure. Can't dispute that even if I wanted to, it's a historical fact. But it was nothing 'til my great-great-granddad opened up the factory here. Just a bunch of trees until there was a Winthrop name to say: This is here. It's tradition. (*AHH* 81, emphasis in original)

That is to say, it was his ancestor who turned "nothing" into something, into a "here." This statement negates that the black settlers created something that could become a "tradition"; it denies that blacks can produce "historical fact[s]."[62] As the last living relative of the original pater familias, Albie perceives the town's present inhabitants as kin: "I'm everybody's uncle" (*AHH* 65). If the town was renamed, he would lose his figurative progeny, his social capital, which remains all he has left after his wife divorced him and "took everything" (*AHH* 71). But then, the novel's point is not exactly to provoke the reader to empathize with this ailing patriarch.

As a matter of fact, *Apex* challenges the Winthrop version of history using the same strategies that *John Henry Days* employed to critique the way the steel driver's legend was being abused for present purposes. The protagonist comes across a written town history, which he discovers to be a "corporate pamphlet" commissioned by the Winthrops (*AHH* 59). As an "expert in marketing" himself, he easily sees "through the techniques used to create impressions."[63] Accordingly he is able to point out how this piece of corporate historiography distorts the facts. But more than that, the protagonist's reading of the text also shows that the socio-economic functions Lucky and Sterling Winthrop serve have not been so different, after all:

> Where others saw untamed wilderness, […] Sterling [Winthrop] saw endless bounty and prime opportunities. […]. After winning over the

62 See Maus, *Understanding Colson Whitehead*, 80–81.

63 Buschendorf and Franke, "The Implied Sociology," 94.

> area's main inhabitants—a loose band of colored settlers—Winthrop opened his factory and started producing his famous W-shaped barb […]. Grateful for this fresh start, they passed a law and named the town Winthrop. (*AHH* 61)

The novel uses the same terms—"opportunities" and a "fresh start" to characterize their respective projects; hence, the protagonist later designates Lucky's plan as "Winthrop 2.0" (*AHH* 174). Lucky's desire to rename the town "New Prospera" merely bespeaks the old act of "creative destruction," or, in more prosaic terms, the dynamics of capitalist competition.[64] In any case, the corporate town history rhetorically equates the black settlers with nature in a similar way and denies that their actions are part of the town's history proper. Accordingly, Regina's desire to rename the town "Freedom" amounts to a gesture of historical justice. The name alone encapsulates a counterhegemonic historical narrative that highlights the contribution of black Americans, which Regina promises will do right by Winthrop's black inhabitants. Or so it seems.

Family Matters

So, why does the protagonist care so little about Regina's plan? After all, he is black, too. This section will engage with the claim, expressed by several critics, that the nameless consultant lacks a sense of racial identity which is evinced, for Derek Maus, by his reluctance to let a "shared past […] register with him."[65] This tacitly presupposes that the protagonist and Regina share a past in the first place. In similar fashion, Stephanie Li chides the protagonist for refusing to accept his racial identity as a "source of support and identity."[66] In the introduction, I have drawn on Barbara Fields's critique of American racial ideology which holds that

64 See Joseph A. Schumpeter, *Capitalism, Socialism & Democracy* (London/New York: Routledge, 1994).

65 Maus, *Understanding Colson Whitehead*, 81.

66 Li, *Signifying Without Specifying*, 91.

the thoughts and actions of black Americans are inevitably "racial in nature."[67] This presupposition underpins the assessment of the protagonist's lack of interest in racial solidarity as pathological. Yet, like *The Intuitionist* (as I argued in the previous chapter) and *Sag Harbor* (as I will argue in the next one), *Apex* undermines the notion that "ideas of race can forge shared identities across the chasm of class," as Christopher Leise puts it.[68] Indeed, once more the appeal to a shared identity becomes a strategy which primarily benefits elites.

The role that class difference plays in *Apex* becomes most visible in the strained relationship between the protagonist and his hotel's bartender, a black man he christens Muttonchops. Despite his emphasis on the "chasm of class," Leise finds it "baffling" that they do not warm to one another.[69] Bourdieu's theory of habitus, however, is able to explain why they do not get along. Sharing a habitus means apprehending the social world through the same schemes of perception, appreciation, and action. The sociologist terms this an "*implicit collusion*" shared by those "who are products of similar conditions and conditionings."[70] Habitus, in other words, is always already class habitus, shaped by the conditions of existence of social classes. And, despite both being black men, Muttonchops and the protagonist embody diametrically opposite positions in social space.

When they first meet, Muttonchops explains that he has "worked here ever since I was a boy. Used to have a shoeshine stand over in the men's and that's where I got my start. Like my father and his father. And then they moved out here, behind this bar […] and now I'm here, too" (*AHH* 24). This brief autobiographical account demonstrates the social trajectory shared by Muttonchops and his paternal ancestors.

67 Barbara J. Fields, "Slavery, Race, and Ideology in the United States of America," in Karen E. Fields and Barbara J. Fields, *Racecraft: The Soul of Ideology in American Life* (London/New York: Verso, 2012), 116.

68 Christopher Leise, "With Names, No Coincidence: Colson Whitehead's Postracial Puritan Allegory," *African American Review* 47, no. 2–3 (2014): 291.

69 Ibid.

70 Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, 145, emphasis in original.

They moved from the shoeshine stand to the bar, which is just to say that they did not move at all. Physically, they remain stuck in Hotel Winthrop; socially, their place remains the service sector of the working class (which is also the class to which Muttonchops's wife, a housekeeper at the hotel, belongs[71]). The principle organizing the family's trajectory is that of staying in place.

How different is the protagonist who, as the reader learns, grew up with the conviction that he was made to expect greatness? As a high school student he attends the "African American Leaders of Tomorrow conference" (*AHH* 70), where he first learns about Quincy University, a fictional stand-in for Yale.[72] Degrees from this university are comparable to "royal degrees" (*AHH* 69), which is to say they constitute what Bourdieu calls "institutionalized" cultural capital. The latter attests its holders' "cultural competence" but is not contingent on their actual intelligence or skill.[73] *Apex* narrativizes the power of cultural capital to function as "symbolic capital"[74] when it recounts the protagonist's interview for his current job. After a brief glance at an aptitude test the protagonist had to take, his future employee merely "nod[s]" and declares "[y]ou're a Quincy Man" (*AHH* 28). His actual performance is secondary; as a "Quincy Man" the protagonist only has to be who he already is to "fit right in" (*AHH* 29).[75]

What this means is that Muttonchops and the protagonist are products of entirely different histories and, consequently, of entirely different possible futures. The bartender has inherited the social verdict to stay in place; the consultant, on the other hand, received "two syllables," Quin-

71 She remains a "comically threatening spectre" of "mostly invisible working-class labour," according to Adam Kelly, "Freedom to Struggle: The Ironies of Colson Whitehead," *Open Library of Humanities* 4, no. 2 (2018): 11.

72 Leise, "With Names, No Coincidence," 286.

73 Bourdieu, "The Forms of Capital," 285.

74 This is Bourdieu's term for a form of capital socially recognized as extraordinarily valuable. See *Pascalian Meditations*, 166.

75 On the need for holders of "titles of cultural nobility" to "only have to be what they are," see Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA/London: Harvard UP, 1984), 23.

cy, which "opened doors" (*AHH* 71). He possesses symbolic capital that enables almost unlimited social mobility and, almost unwillingly, ends up in a position socially appropriate to a "Quincy man." Initially, he dislikes his job as a "nomenclature consultant." This is because he feels unlike the "[j]ocky white guys" (*AHH* 79) with whom he works. Li thus downplays the consultant's racial identity by claiming that his professional success is a function of "masquerade" and an adaptation to the new environment.[76] The protagonist, however, finds out that he does not need to adapt since he has unwittingly chosen the right job. In other words, *Apex* makes a point about how class reproduction works—the protagonist is an "inherited inheritor, appropriated by his heritage" and unknowingly "do[es] and say[s] nothing that is not appropriate."[77] It is not a novel about the racial drama of selling one's "birthright for a mess of pottage," as James Weldon Johnson's nameless ex-colored man expresses it.[78] Instead, Whitehead's nameless name-brand consultant and black bartender merely realize the quasi-destiny that their class background has held in store for them. In this, they are entirely alike and thus entirely different from one another, making it hardly surprising that they do not get along.

Unlike the protagonist, mayor Regina Goode seems to be in touch with the town's history, explaining to the former that the memory of the original settlers' trials and tribulations fills her with strength when she feels down (*AHH* 166). Li thus detects "a powerful connection to community and racial identity" fueled by Regina's awareness of an "ancestral presence."[79] As long as Regina's commitment to renaming the town is seen as merely "racial in nature," she seems to act on behalf of the black

76 Li, *Signifying Without Specifying*, 79.

77 Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, 152.

78 James Weldon Johnson, *The Autobiography of an Ex-Colored Man* (New York: Library of America, 2011), 127. That is, the protagonist does not need to "buy into" a world whose values "depart from […] his own," as Maus suggests. *Understanding Colson Whitehead*, 72. He ends up where he belongs regardless of the superficial difference between him and the "[j]ocky white guys."

79 Li, *Specifying Without Signifying*, 91. Her reading does not take into account that Regina admits that she left Winthrop to attend college and only returned after

residents' collective interest. However, as a matter of fact, the protagonist finds out that Regina's choice is also based on an act of historical erasure that obscures conflict among the first generation of settlers. Reading the town history, he realizes that the band of former slaves had two leaders, Abraham Goode and William Field or "[t]he Light and the Dark" (*AHH* 95).[80] His research is aided by the town librarian who locates the original manuscript of the town history, which was not "asskissy enough" for the Winthrops (*AHH* 134). In this manuscript he discovers that the town council had voted on the name change from Freedom to Winthrop, with Goode voting alongside Winthrop and against Field, his fellow former slave. Abraham Goode, Regina's ancestor, in other words, established what Adolph Reed would call a "regime of race relations management," assuming the role of an "internal management elite" representing the interest of the community, thereby "delegitimiz[ing] any divergent position"[81] such as Field's. If Muttonchops has inherited a working-class habitus and the protagonist that of the upwardly mobile black professional class section, Regina's ancestors have transmitted to her the habitus of the "black management stratum,"[82] and this informs her present ambition to name the town "Freedom."

Her plan represents a strategy which is based on her position in the local power struggle. She reflects on her role in the town in a conversation with the protagonist:

> People look at me and they see what they want to see. Black people see me as family, because my name goes way back. The white people

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a divorce (*AHH* 113). Her communal connection is, then, partly the result of a failed marriage.

80 Their names and characters allude to Malcolm X's polemical distinction between "house Negroes," who lived, dressed, and ate "good," and "field Negroes," who "caught hell" but remained "intelligent." Malcolm X, "Message to the Grass Roots (Detroit, November 10, 1963)," in *Malcolm X Speaks*, ed. George Breitman (London: Secker & Warburg, 1966), 9–10.

81 Adolph Reed, Jr., *Stirrings in the Jug: Black Politics in the Post-Segregation Era* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1999), 121, 69.

82 Ibid., 69..

> know what the Goode name means in this community—tradition […]. And the new people know that I agree with a lot of Lucky is trying to do and that he and I have been a team, in terms of trying to bring this place into the twenty-first century. (*AHH* 114)

As mayor, Regina wants to appeal to all constituencies. "Freedom" is meant to resonate with Winthrop's black inhabitants, but Regina admits that she, like Lucky, wants to win over the "new people," viz. those who come to town because of the "business opportunities." When she says that she agrees with Lucky's plans, she reveals her commitment to the same neoliberal values that are meant to make the town attractive. The novel itself shows, however, that Winthrop's black inhabitants will be disproportionately affected by the proposed transformation of the town into a post-Fordist haven. On a drive through what "is still mostly a black part" of town, Regina tells the protagonist that "a lot of the new people" are moving in there (*AHH* 126). While the novel makes a point to say that the "new people" are not exclusively white—they are a "multiculti crew" (*AHH* 85)—, Regina's politics nonetheless result in a displacement of the town's existing black population, who believe her to be "family." Renaming the town "Freedom" would thus rhetorically promise justice by commemorating the contribution of the original black settlers while actively harming black people in the present. It is an empty symbolic gesture that would allow Regina to accumulate political capital while enforcing a reactionary politics.

Regina's strategy, far from pursuing a commitment to "racial identity" or an "ancestral presence," does not actually provide an alternative to the shallow celebration of diversity embodied by Apex, the brand of "multicultural adhesive bandages" (*AHH* 87) which provide the novel's title and an occasion for Whitehead to use "comic and even flippant irony" when describing their ostensible healing power.[83] As nearly every critical account of *Apex* points out, the recognition of difference promised by the bandages which come in twenty different colors is merely "superfi-

83 Kelly, "Freedom to Struggle," 13.

cial"[84]: it hides the hurt, but cannot heal it. As such, the novel positions the bandages as the latest incarnation of the history of race relations in the United States, which *Apex* narrates in allegorical form via the history of Ogilvy and Myrtle, the company which produces Apex bandages. Founded in 1896, the year in which the doctrine of "separate but equal" was sanctioned in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, the company obtained a military contract during the first World War, which was when "[t]hings picked up" (*AHH* 76), referring to the integration of blacks into the industrial workforce during the war.[85] In the 1950s, the brand was "relaunched" (*AHH* 78) just in time for the challenge to Jim Crow segregation embodied by the Civil Rights movement. Yet, the company remains unpopular and is kept alive only through state contracts (*AHH* 79), alluding to the role of the public sector as an employer of African Americans.[86] After a period of setbacks,[87] in the early twenty-first century, the company succeeded with the introduction of multicolored adhesive bandages that embody the spirit of "neoliberal multiculturalism."[88] Apex bandages, in other words, merely reproduce racial hierarchies while—slowly and unevenly—integrating the black population as workers and consumers.

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84 Li, *Signifying Without Specifying*, 84; see also Kimberly Fain, *Colson Whitehead: The Postracial Voice of Contemporary Literature* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 77–78; Grassian, *Writing the Future*, 88; Maus, *Understanding Colson Whitehead*, 73; Tabone, "Branded Communities," 344. Whitehead makes the same point in an interview, see Linda Selzer, "New Eclecticism: An Interview with Colson Whitehead," *Callaloo* 31, no. 2 (2008): 396.

85 See Melvyn Dubofsky and Joseph A. McCartin, *Labor in America: A History* (Chichester: Wiley, 2017), 195.

86 See Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor, *From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation* (Chicago: Haymarket, 2016), 80–81.

87 On the racist "reaction" of the 1980s, see Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1990s* (New York: Routledge, 1994), 113–14.

88 On the ways in which "neoliberal multiculturalism" obscures how "neoliberalism remains a form of racial capitalism," see Jodi Melamed, *Represent and Destroy: Rationalizing Violence in the New Racial Capitalism* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2011), 42.

Another hurt that Apex cannot heal is economic inequality. By recognizing differences in skin color, the adhesive strips recognize diversity, but they cannot address a form of inequality which is not dependent on visible differences in the final instance—even though, no doubt, specific social groups will disproportionately suffer from poverty and related ills.[89] But the novel reminds its readers that the neoliberal policies of recent decades—as well as the bursting of the dot-com bubble—have produced a world of inequality: a world in which boomtowns go bust and hospitals are underfunded, as an excursus on a Lego-like toy emphasizes (*AHH* 118–20). In her reading, Li acknowledges that the multicultural celebration of diversity the novel satirizes obscures "more destructive and persistent inequalities of class."[90] However, she believes that Regina's commitment to "community and racial identity" presents a desirable alternative. If my reading of Regina's plan as a strategy in a local power struggle is correct, however, this is not at all true. In light of the neoliberal recoding of the notion of freedom under the Reagan presidency, her ambition rings hollow.[91] Her attempt to reinstate "Freedom" as the town's name is just another superficial solution that abuses the past in the service of her present political interests and will result in increasing inequality and, ironically, more black suffering.

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89 On the distinction between the "forms of appearance" through which social categories such as the proletariat are first perceived and the underlying "class relation," see Surplus Club, "Trapped at a Party Where No One Likes You," *Surplus Club*, April 8, 2015, https://surplus-club.com/2015/04/08/trapped-at-a-party-where-no-one-likes-you-en/. On racial disparity discourse, see John Clegg, "A Class Blind Spot? Anti-racism in the United States," *Global Labour Journal* 7, no. 3 (2016); and Adolph Reed, Jr. and Merlin Chowkwanyun, "Race, Class, Crisis: The Discourse of Racial Disparity and Its Analytical Discontents," *Socialist Register* 48 (2012).

90 Li, *Signifying Without Specifying*, 85. Li draws on Walter Benn Michaels's critique of diversity in *The Trouble With Diversity: How We Learned to Love Diversity and Ignore Inequality* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 2006).

91 On the ironies of the notion of freedom, its neoliberal appropriation, and Whitehead's novel, see Kelly, "Freedom to Struggle," 9–10.

The History of Struggles

Both *John Henry Days* and *Apex Hides the Hurt* are skeptical when it comes to appeals to the past, remaining all too aware of the ways in which history can be used and abused by the powerful to legitimate their interests in the present. While the former novel focuses mostly on the state's attempt to appropriate and recuperate the legacy of John Henry, a legendary steel driver whose tale used to circulate among radicals as a warning of the "dangers of overwork,"[92] the latter shows that not even a seemingly "shared past"—shared along the lines of racial identity, that is—can prevent the exploitation of history by political elites. *Apex*, like Whitehead's debut novel *The Intuitionist*, represents the black population as internally heterogeneous because of class and rejects the notion that individuals—whether cultural producers or politicians—could represent the interests of the collective. But to reiterate, neither *John Henry Days* nor *Apex* turns its back on history. As a matter of fact, both novels revolve around nineteenth-century histories of racist super-exploitation and terror that their respective protagonists—black professionals from New York City born after the end of Jim Crow—have not experienced. Whitehead's novels, however, do not imagine ways in which these protagonists could immediately experience history—something that "rememory" in Morrison, time travel in Octavia Butler, and an alcohol-fueled vision in David Bradley provide.[93] While the latter's *The Chaneysville Incident* culminates in its historian protagonist's decision to rid himself off the tools of his trade,[94] *Apex*'s nameless consultant hunts down documents that reveal to him historical facts which help him to reject both Albie Winthrop's and Regina Goode's ideological versions of the town's history. However, as in *John Henry Days*, access to the past

92 Nelson, *Steel' Driving Man*, 31.

93 For Morrison, see above, footnote 36; see also Octavia Butler, *Kindred* (London: Headline, 2018); and David Bradley, *The Chaneysville Incident* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1990).

94 For a reading of this incident, see Warren, *What Was African American Literature*, 100–02.

comes only in mediated forms. Neither of the two novels naïvely suggest that one can simply represent how things really were, and yet they remain committed to the significance of "historicization,"[95] which reveals the uses and abuses of the past for what they are.

By way of conclusion, I want to address the concept of history that emerges in *Apex*. In his research on the town's past, the protagonist discovers that William Field initially wanted to call the settlement "Struggle." He finds this name admirable and speculates what Field could have been thinking when choosing it:

> [Field] understood the rules of the game, had learned them through the barb on the whip, and was not afraid to name them. Let lesser men try to tame the world by giving it a name that might cover the wound, or camouflage it. Hide the badness from view. The prophet's work was of a different sort.
>
> Freedom was what they sought. Struggle was what they had lived through. (*AHH* 210)

Unlike the multicolored adhesive bandages or Regina's desire to name the town "Freedom," the notion of struggle does not promise false solutions. It is, the protagonist believes, "the anti-apex" (ibid.).

What the protagonist thus learns is a decidedly relational lesson. The story of William Field teaches that social fields, such as the novel's town council, are always "*space*[*s*] *of conflict and competition*."[96] Field may have expected racial solidarity from Goode after they led a group of former slaves from Georgia to the Midwest in search of freedom. Yet, his partner decided instead to team up with Sterling Winthrop, who promised the black settlers jobs in his newly-built factory. The protagonist's assumption that Field knew the "rules of the game" suggests that he learned to recognize social relations as power relations. In the end, it is this perspective—the standpoint of someone who lost a historical power struggle—and not that of the victors such as Winthrop, Regina, or Lucky that

95 Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, 57.

96 Bourdieu and Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, 17, emphasis in original.

the protagonist comes to embrace when he decides to name the town "Struggle."[97] Their sanitized versions of history retroactively eliminate the historical role of struggle and thereby naturalize past and present distributions of power and resources. Yet, the protagonist can no longer accept this. Struggle, he thinks, may not be "the highest point of human achievement," but it remains "the point past which we could not progress" (*AHH* 210).[98] Once more, Whitehead emphasizes the necessity of historicization as a weapon that makes possible resistance to the attempt to exploit the past in the service of elite interests. The protagonist's research into the town's history enables him to discover the complex and messy nature of social life which cannot be concealed behind inspiring slogans that obscure conflict. The history of all hitherto existing class societies, he discovers, is the history of power struggles.

97 On historiography that refuses to "sympathize with the victor," see Walter Benjamin, "On the Concept of History," trans. Harry Zohn, in *Selected Writings Volume 4, 1938–1940*, ed. Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard UP, 2003), 391.

98 Tabone is reminded of Frederick Douglass's assertion "if there is no struggle there is no progress." Quoted in Tabone, "Branded Communities," 350. Adam Kelly points out that the novel's conclusion, however, remains ambiguous over whether the final naming, another "symbolic action," really does constitute progress. "Freedom to Struggle," 15.