

“TRACKING DOWN A NEGRO LEGEND”: AUTHENTICITY AND THE
POSTMODERN TOURIST IN COLSON WHITEHEAD’S *JOHN HENRY DAYS*

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Introduction

For a novel which is ostensibly concerned with a tourist event---the titular “three-day celebration of railroad history and culture” (16) in Talcott, West Virginia---Colson Whitehead’s *John Henry Days* is remarkably short on one ingredient: the tourists themselves. While they are occasionally seen in their traditional guises as “busy hands” that pick up souvenirs to “envision where these items might go in their households” (267), as “exhalations”, “giddy utterances” and “shutter clicks” of crowds (263), and, most prominently in a descriptive passage which could depict nearly any outdoor festival (245-249), as fairgoers eating concessions, visiting rides and attractions, and buying merchandise---these portrayals are notably synecdochal, nebulous. The tourists are, as Whitehead’s spin-master Lucien notes, like the workings of a “mad happy machine”, “interconnected gears set in motion by the idea of John Henry” (295) whose function is to consume, to power the lucrative tourism mechanism which Lucien, in collaboration with Talcott’s Chamber of Commerce, has designed.

At the same time, Whitehead’s novel calls into question the traditional loci of touristic experience, along with their claims to authenticity. As she considers the statue of John Henry just above Big Bend Tunnel, Whitehead’s Pamela Street finds herself confronted with the aesthetic dilemma of “fitting all that in”---combining “images suggested by her father’s stories” with “her hold of curdled perceptions”, not to say the “thousands and millions of John Henrys driving steel in folk’s minds” (262), and finally concludes that “No one could possibly agree on what he looked like” (262). Her thoughts trouble the notion that any coherent image, artifact, or text could be created out of a corpus so large and varied as the John Henry tradition, and as she continues to study the

statue, an array of heteroglossic possibilities begins to emerge, from the official John Henry “that climbs up on this stone pedestal and gets the plaque” to one that is “open to interpretation” to one that is merely “an artist’s rendering”---an artist, no less, with “politics” and an “agenda” he may be trying to get across (263-264). Pamela is quite consciously breaking the paradigm of what she characterizes as touristic behavior: “with so many people around the right thing to do is come over, pay some quick respects to the monument, mumble a dull observation, and then move off so others can get a proper glimpse” (263).

If Pamela is engaging in tourism, she is clearly a tourist of a different sort; in fact, the novel is full of characters who, if not cogs in the “mad happy machine” of commercial tourism, are something more like artfully “interconnected gears set in motion by the idea of John Henry”, drawn to Talcott and Big Bend Tunnel in search of the John Henry tradition. J. Sutter, for instance, comes to cover the festival as part of the crew of junketeers, itinerant journalists who absorb and (at least forty percent of the time, according to Lucien (298)) process events to generate “puff” journalism. Mr. Street, on the other hand, is driven to Talcott no less than three times in his relentless quest to expand his collection of John Henry memorabilia and lore, and Pamela, as its inheritor, travels down to decide its fate. In the late 1920’s, as Whitehead dramatizes, Guy B. Johnson finds himself in Talcott in an effort to “settle the question of whether the John Henry legend rests on a factual basis” (161). Each of these characters engages in touristic behaviors; Johnson, for instance, is lead by a local guide who familiarizes him to his sources (159), while J. and Pamela visit the festival (262) and follow Mr. Street’s map, an

artifact of his earlier visits and acquisitions, to the secret cemetery (372) for workers killed in the process of carving out the tunnel.

Yet each of these figures---curator, inheritor, and folklorist, and the junketeer in spite of himself---is called to Talcott in order explore an idea which is almost completely elided in the festival and its official touristic portrayal of the John Henry tradition, namely John Henry's blackness and his relationship to the culture of black itinerant workers in which he is, at least in Johnson's time, "a reality, a living functioning thing" (161). They are, in a sense, tourists, yet they complicate what one critic has called the "rhetorical function of tourism" which "enables diverse individuals to imagine their national communities in similar ways as they encounter symbolic experiences" (Clark, 15), in that they, as African-Americans, partake of the "symbolic experiences" sanctioned by the tourist industry in ways that emphasize their difference from, rather than their similarity to, other tourists. Just as often, as professional tourists (for all but Mr. Street are, like the migratory figure they seek, reimbursed for their traveling work), they partake of "symbolic experiences" outside the bounds of what is offered to other tourists. For Johnson, Mr. Street, Jay and Pamela, touring itself becomes a means of re-examining the lost, forgotten, and suppressed past of the John Henry tradition, a way of (sometimes very literally) confronting the whitewashed historical interpretations of John Henry in relation to which they, as African-Americans, are both familiar and estranged. Structurally, their tours are centered around the figure of the fictionalized John Henry, forming a kind of textual parallel dimension in which they exist side-by-side with the object of their quests without ever making contact; yet they are able, through a series of imaginings, experiences, and textual alignments, to reach into the bygone "John Henry days"---as in

the twinned final chapters which place John Henry, who “stood in the work camp with the sledge in his hands” (384) and J. Sutter, who “stands in the parking lot of the Talcott Motor Lodge” (387), in the same configuration with reference to the decisive moments of their respective contests. In short, Whitehead posits a kind of self-conscious tourism in which the *materials* of the touristic gaze---the monuments, landscapes and other texts consumed on the tour---give way in importance to the *methods* of the touristic gaze, the constant negotiation of the relationship between African-American viewers and a landscape and history to which they are, like tourists, in large part strangers. It is through these methods, and through the efforts of figures such as Johnson, Mr. Street, Pamela and J., that Whitehead’s tourists will begin to shape the alternative histories and other forms of cultural knowledge for themselves and those who will follow them into the John Henry tradition.

“Tracking Down a Negro Legend”¹: Guy Johnson and the Problem of Modernity

Throughout the novel, Whitehead’s African-American tourists engage in what might be called a *metatourism* by which they not only search for John Henry as self-conscious tourists, sifting through various historical, popular, and artistic materials of the John Henry tradition, but also seek to create their own interpretations, giving rise to texts as diverse as Guy Johnson’s treatise on John Henry, Mr. Street’s John Henry Museum, and the improvisational ceremony in which Pamela lays her father’s ashes to rest in the secret cemetery for C & O laborers killed in the digging of the tunnel. Each of these renditions (or to borrow from the rhetoric of the John Henry ballad, each of these added

¹ This phrase was taken from the subtitle of Guy Johnson’s study, *John Henry: Tracking Down a Negro Legend*, which will be further referenced in this text. See also works cited.

verses) forms a new touristic site in itself, a place into which others are invited, as in Mr. Street's museum, "to receive John Henry" (383) as a personal and cultural "revelation" (383).

Indeed, read chronologically, the efforts and reinventions of each generation of metatourists can be seen as attempts to respond to the "authoritative"---often specifically white---interpretations of the John Henry tradition throughout the 20th century, as when the mayor of Talcott comments, "this [Talcott] is after all the true home of John Henry" (218). This claim asserts one particular interpretation of historical events as "true" despite the fact that, as Whitehead's text bears out, John Henry's origins---the particular physical and/or cultural spaces which might be called his "true home"---are by no means clear. Whitehead shapes multiple intermingled narratives in which his metatourists, deeply concerned with the ways in which the "authenticity" of the John Henry tradition is constructed and experienced, engage with the larger problems of both uncovering a lost African-American history and giving that history and its cultural forms the authoritative "authenticity" that white histories enjoy. Along the way, these metatourists must respond (variously in their various eras) to what emerges as a central question within the novel: how can the redeemers of a forgotten or foreclosed past create "authenticity" in the postmodern context of multiple, reappropriable authenticities?

Whitehead most clearly dramatizes the problem of making a new African-American history in his chapter concerning the first of those figures I have called the metatourists, Dr. Guy Johnson; Johnson's speculative narrative is doubly intriguing for its resonances with the work of the historical figure upon whom it is based: Dr. Guy Benton Johnson of the University of North Carolina, a scholar of "Negro workaday

songs”² who ventured to Talcott in 1927 to research what would two years later become his book, *John Henry: Tracking Down a Negro Legend*. In his treatise, Johnson sought to establish a historical basis for “the Negro’s greatest folk character” (Johnson, 1). In the chapter, Whitehead seamlessly excerpts large segments of Johnson’s treatise,³ a technique which not only renders Johnson’s personal recollections in a self-consciously academic tone (emphasizing the careful construction of his scholarly identity), but also, in reconsidering the pages from which the excerpts derive, suggests a constant struggle for epistemological purchase in which Johnson struggles to fit his own beliefs and desires regarding the John Henry tradition into the confines of academic discourse and language.

In tracking down his Negro legend, Johnson as portrayed by Whitehead quite consciously places himself in the role of a new John Henry. To John Henry’s famous contest he links his own struggle to establish the “*authenticity* of the John Henry tradition” (Johnson, 45, emphasis mine), to create an authoritative history for African Americans, and to give John Henry, who is, as Johnson notes, “the byword, a synonym for superstrength and superendurance” (Johnson, 1 & Whitehead, 162) the definitive status that white heroes and champions enjoy. Likening his labors to pitting “one man against a mountain of evidence” (Whitehead 155, Johnson 53) or advancing a heading (159), and reminding himself in both his fieldwork and his “daily battle with university intrigue” (163) that “*we make our own machines and devise our own contests in which to engage them*” (163), Johnson structurally and rhetorically echoes the fictionalized John

² Johnson’s first scholarly work, in the opening paragraphs of Whitehead’s chapter, was a collaboration with Howard W. Odum entitled *Negro Workaday Songs* (1926), which featured a chapter on the John Henry tradition.

³ Specifically, the following passages: 1) “John Henry has become a byword...They talk him and sing him as they work and as they loaf.” (Johnson, 1 & Whitehead, 162); 2) “The question of whether the John Henry legend rests on a factual basis...in the folk life of the Negro” (Johnson, 54 & Whitehead, 161); 3) Several of the letters which open *John Henry Days* are actual replies to Johnson’s requests for information about the historical John Henry and can be found in chap. 2 of his text.

Henry, who appears two chapters previously, willing himself to prepare for his own trial (147)---a pairing which, ironically, can never spatially or temporally coincide. Indeed, for all his labor, Johnson's research is confronted on all sides by silences which prevent him from establishing the authenticity of the John Henry tradition: whites "in the grip of Jim Crow" (157) who refuse to speak or accept remittance from a black man, blacks who dodge his questions of "all those old stories" (158), and the elderly interviewees who constantly fall prey to the "abnormalities and errors to which the human memory is subject" (162). He also faces the constant threat of white appropriation of John Henry's historical authenticity.⁴ For instance, the "deplorable safety record" of the C & O Railroad (which might have contained a reference to John Henry) has been destroyed (163), though even that name, as Pamela later notes, is so commonplace among freed slaves as to be obscure, in a historical sense, meaningless in its ambiguity (189).

In his own field, figures such as Milton Reed, whose "research...found confirmation of his ideas about the bestial aspects of the Negro" (161), and Louis Chappell, who would follow Johnson to West Virginia and, as a white man, would have access to information he does not, loom on the horizon.⁵ Indeed, the treatise the historical

⁴ Interestingly, Johnson himself is silent on the question of racially-differentiated responses to his queries---perhaps because it was never an issue he never faced in the field, but more likely because, as Whitehead writes, "A Negro in the world of academia must be twice the scholar, and twice the tactician, of his white colleagues" (157). Any complaint rooted in his true racial identity would shatter the "whiteface of scholarly research" (157)---that which lends "readability" to Johnson's writing, and which he seems obligated to maintain in some sense even among colleagues.

⁵ Johnson's text is, it is worth noting, in some ways more free and in others more reticent about his colleagues; no mention of Reed or Chapell is made, though Chappell was Johnson's contemporary in the social sciences department at the University of North Carolina and was, according to one historical account, not a person who was easily neglected; Wilgus notes the "pugnacious" and "carping" charges Chappell leveled against Johnson for allegedly having stolen some of his unpublished research (398), and elsewhere critiques his failure to supply background and his tone of "combative defense" in his scholarly writings (178). In fact, Chappell opens his own John Henry treatise, *John Henry, a folklore study* (1933), with a chapter-long condemnation of Johnson and his methods, indicating that the two must have worked closely together. Perhaps, then, Johnson's illusive "whiteface" might not have sustained taking on a competitor so near home, for part of maintaining the authority to create "readable" texts depended on a clout which

Chappell would later produce, which, as Pamela also notes, would conclude both that John Henry existed and that his famous contest did in fact take place, drives home a conclusion at which Whitehead's professor has already begun to arrive: the type of historical authenticity which he seeks out in order to enshrine "the Negro's greatest folk character" among other, more historical figures such as, to cite the historical Johnson, "Booker T. Washington" (1), seems for the African-American scholar either lost to the history he would write or stolen by writers of another history.

A key difference between the two professors---Johnson the historical folklorist and Johnson the metatourist of Whitehead's novel---can be found in the passage which contends that "The question of whether the John Henry legend rests on a factual basis is, after all, not of much significance. No matter which way it is answered, the fact is that the legend itself is a reality, a living functioning thing in the folk life of the Negro" (Johnson, 54 & Whitehead, 161). The historical Johnson---or, more accurately, the Johnson portrayed by Johnson himself---seems somewhat less concerned than his fictional counterpart with his ultimate failure to prove the existence of a historical John Henry, pointing out that he lacked merely "evidence of a documentary sort" (54), and not personal belief or anecdotal evidence to prove his propositions. Johnson uses the passage above as his conclusion, whereas Whitehead's Johnson uses it as an amendment, a clarification, and a reassurance to himself against the ever more distant but irrepressible "hope that each new informant will give him the affirmative, irrefutable proof" (161). Yet

Johnson, as a black man, could not, at that time, easily claim or maintain. With more distant scholars, it should be noted, Johnson converses more critically, offering critiques of one scholar's conflation of the John Henry and John Hardy traditions (55-68)---and consequently disavowing John Henry of the drunken, violent, and licentious image, actually belong to the Hardy tradition, printed in Whitehead's fragmentary opening (4)---and of several scholars' claims that John Henry was merely a mutation of the Hardy tradition (Johnson, 5-7).

the concern which each figure demonstrates---or tries to mask---is quite evident, and even the historical Johnson, in the most detached of academic voices, hopes “that this volume will be instrumental in provoking some-one to bring to light what I have failed so far to find” (54). Whitehead, it seems, builds his account of Johnson upon an exploration of the tensions he detects within Johnson’s text, foregrounding not Johnson’s question of how to prove the historical accuracy of the John Henry tradition, but the embedded question of why Johnson would so urgently wish to do so. In other words, in sketching Johnson as a tourist, Whitehead dramatizes both Johnson’s *estrangement* with the academy of which he is a part and with the cultural tradition of John Henry, and his *desire to discover* the sources which will ultimately unite him to both communities.

While the historical Johnson, amid his negotiations of a segregated academy, sought to establish the “authenticity” of the John Henry tradition according to a modernist epistemology which allows for only one authoritative---if elusive---interpretation of any text, he does recognize the *potential* of unofficial discourses which trouble the notion of the singular authority of any one interpretation of history. “The very inconsistency of some of these John Henry tales,” he writes, “makes them alluring. They give us glimpses of the folk mind in the process of creating, enriching, and diffusing an actual legend” (8). Though the conception of a “folk mind” creating a “legend” might still relegate such a “mind” to a space outside academia and its texts, Johnson acknowledges and seems genuinely to admire the variety and generativity of the folk mind’s interpretations. In his retelling, Whitehead dramatizes this shift in the valuation of non-academic discourses in touristic terms: the professor, as a professional tourist in Talcott, allows himself to be led by a guide well-versed in the “folk mind”: a child

somewhat ironically named Herbert Standard (163), without whom “he would be lost” (156).⁶ Moreover, the desire which draws him to the epicenter of the John Henry tradition (that for “enticing discovery” and the “adventure” into which his research grows) is figured in terms which might as easily describe a tourist as a scholar. Indeed, Johnson insists that coming “down here”---directly experiencing and recording the manifold popular accounts of John Henry, rather than combing, as his colleagues do, through version after version of the ballad---is an essential element in his project.

This reliance upon multiple, albeit mutable, personal interpretations over fixed, authoritative interpretations, coupled with the self-conscious desire for “discovery” which Whitehead implies underlies scholarly research, suggests the shift from epistemological questioning to ontological questioning which Brian McHale claims lies at the heart of the movement from modernist to postmodernist thinking (10). In other words, Johnson’s profound “epistemological uncertainty” as to the historical origins of John Henry gives way to the “ontological plurality” (McHale, 11) of the “folk mind’s” productions; likewise, underlying Johnson’s methodological concerns about *how to prove* John Henry was a historical personage is the more pressing question of what John Henry *is, was, and could be* to the African-American cultural and historical tradition to which Johnson wishes to contribute. Indeed, Chappell’s chief criticism of the historical Johnson---that he treats the John Henry tradition too much like “a sacred thing” rather than a “human being, superior of course, but not without the common frailties of mankind” (Chappell, 20)---strikes, perhaps unknowingly, at an important point within Whitehead’s narrative. The novel’s question is ultimately not whether or not John Henry was a “real, breathing

⁶ Herbert Standard was indeed the name of the young West Virginian who lead Johnson around the countryside, introducing him to sources (Johnson, 33). If Whitehead intended a pun on “standard” and “authoritative”, he can now have the triple satisfaction of having stuck to the “official” record.

person” (160), but how, in Johnson’s terms, the “wanderers and laborers” (1) who pioneered the massive task of reconstructing African-American identity after slavery formed a new image of themselves, and how such an image might still be employed, invoked, and revered.

Harlem, Talcott, and Mr. Street: A Tale of Two Museums

One aspect of the John Henry tradition which makes it particularly germane to the metatourists who seek it is its mobility, both in terms of its geographic dispersal via the itinerant workers who bring it along with the railroads and in terms of the reinvention that, as a work song, it undergoes with each new singing. Whitehead, speaking through Johnson, notes that “the Henry songs have been disseminated all over by itinerant Negro workers, who carried the song from construction camp to construction camp; the song traveled the rails with the men who laid the rails” (159). It is at least partially in the nature of the ballad itself, then, that the shift from tourism to metatourism in *John Henry Days* lies, for the very idea of a text which is infinitely interpretable allows vast scope for---even demands by its very nature---the renegotiation of “authenticity” which men like Johnson hoped to accomplish. Whitehead further develops this idea of re-appropriation in the figure of second metatourist: Mr. Street, the curator of a massive assembly of John Henry memorabilia whose collecting culminates in a museum which, I will argue, forms something very like a deliberately postmodern historical document.

Whitehead’s theories of history and historical understanding (and their commodification in the practice of tourism) are generational, evolving with each successive act of tourism from Dr. Johnson’s struggle to achieve and perhaps overcome

the modern paradigm of historical authenticity, to Mr. Street's absorbing project of collecting and documenting interpretations of the John Henry tradition, thereby encouraging others to shape their own interpretations. Each new attempt to explain John Henry meets with a different set of historical circumstances, and accordingly, Mr. Street's collection begins as a touristic experience in a time when the John Henry tradition has already become commercialized (and, in a shift from purely oral or textual representation, visualized), rendering experiences of the tradition which are more varied and ubiquitous, but also less direct, than the eye-witnesses and hammer songs which were already aging in Johnson's day. In an "antique store by the side of the highway" Mr. Street finds "the figure of John Henry layin' the line...surrounded on all sides by small men in red outfits hefting the strange burden of gold rings" (114)---that is to say, a steel-driver among lawn jockeys, or a sign among signs in the vast collage of commercialized interpretations of African-Americans. Jonathon Culler offers a useful insight on this point: in an era of mass production, "The existence of reproduction is what makes something an original, authentic, the real thing---the original of which souvenirs, postcards, statues, etc. are reproductions" (160). In other words, the vast reproduction of the John Henry tradition (in song, broadside, recording, and by this time literature and, for lack of a better word, knick-knacks) has leant the legend, with or without a historical basis, an authenticity which does not necessarily derive from an authoritative historical interpretation, but renders one interpretation as valid as the next. At the same time, given that this founding John Henry was hidden amongst a sea of lawn jockeys---figures whose servile portrayal of African-Americans harkens back to the era of blackface and enduring issues of racism, classism, and labor---it is not unreasonable to read Mr. Street's

obsession as an effort to rescue the figure of John Henry as a potentially heroic image from the multitude of humiliating images, a struggle, not unlike Johnson's, to build an alternative mythology.

His museum, with its encyclopedic collection of music, documents, and artwork composing and surrounding the John Henry tradition, is accompanied by a well-honed speech which was "composed over many years, for each new item required a deep caption to situate it in the collection. Each time his hand touched a new acquisition, a railroad implement, a photograph of the tunnel's inauguration, the speech extended its heading" (382); both his collection and his interpretation are informed by a theory of history which constantly expands to include new items, at once authoritative in its all-inclusiveness and anti-authoritative in its fluidity. Many of the artifacts included are themselves from provenances outside the bounds of the strictly historical---such as the "Yellen & Company Music printed sheet music", the "fat 78s preserving the croaks of bluesmen", or the "very trousers and shirt Paul Robeson wore" (115) in the musical adaptations of Roark Bradford's novel about John Henry (226)---which Whitehead recreates in subsequent pages. The museum functions, then, not simply as an accretion of John Henry phenomena or a demonstration of the vast scope of the tradition, but an encapsulation of the many "John Henry" experiences Whitehead portrays in the text, suggesting that the *method* by which a text such as Mr. Street's museum makes meaning (in this case, by the accumulation of an encyclopedic body of John Henry artifacts) is as crucial to the meaning of that text as any of its *contents*.

The collection, itself intended as a touristic site, invites visitors (were there any, that is) to become "reacquainted with the story they first heard as children...

understanding the legend as he did now, as a lesson that had finally been learned at great cost, moving from room to room in recognition and resignation” (383). Notably, the floor plan of the museum, in which visitors move “from room to room” just as readers of *John Henry Days* move from episode to episode, is based not upon a historical or chronological understanding of the John Henry tradition, but upon the experience of various forms---music, documents, pictures, and statues (382)---which emphasizes the viewer’s (rather than the timeline’s) role in shaping a narrative from the John Henry tradition. Mr. Street’s emphasis on reinvention, on filling in the “gaps” of the forgotten lines of the text of the ballad (“what you put in those gaps was you...what you grabbed from your personal dictionary and stuck in there was you” (373)) over “so-called official versions” of the ballad (373) reflects his own position as a metatourist. Simultaneously consuming and arranging the vast wealth of John Henry documents, images, and artifacts while consciously shaping his own enormous John Henry “speech,” he writes himself and any who would visit his museum (much as Whitehead writes himself and any who would read his novel) into the “gaps” of the tradition by providing a space in which visitors are literally surrounded by it.

Like Johnson, Mr. Street, in his collecting, gives himself entirely over to his effort---puts himself into the gap---not to establish the historical authenticity of John Henry, but to offer to the “jostling hungry throng, whole neighborhoods and clans ready to receive John Henry” (383) of his vision the opportunity to “share the revelation” (383), yet loses his family and his business in the process, his collection literally taking over his home, the sign reading “THE JOHN HENRY MUSEUM” replacing that of his family name by the door bell (380). His odd sacrifice, so like the way in which he might have

read John Henry's in that it entailed a struggle to make and control identity, is another instance of man in self-contrived battle against machine: in this case, as I shall argue, the machine of commercialization that threatens to erase the complexity of John Henry's identity, leaving Pamela to wonder if the "fair, the museum" could have ever occurred "if he was still alive. Or did he have to give up himself for this to happen? The price of progress" (378).

Pamela's questions reflect more general anxieties about ideas of epistemological "progress" in Whitehead's text, for in the postmodern context in which all interpretations are equally valid, "authenticity" is simultaneously multilateral, mutable, and meaningless---here, everywhere, and nowhere. Commercial tourism, epitomized in this text by the events of John Henry Days, involves a renegotiation of hard-won authenticities such as that which Mr. Street strives to beget in his museum. The text most clearly demonstrates commercial tourism creating an official, marketable interpretation of a place in Lucien's idea of "doing a town"---"the trick about doing a small town is making the thing into the idea" (295)---or in the souvenirs littering the caboose-museum: "well-framed shots of the monument and the caboose...a few more black-and-white shots of demolished C & O structures, the construction of the dam, various bucolic minded scenes...Confederate flags in different sizes, T-shirts with said symbol...miniature license plates" and various pieces of John Henry memorabilia (267). These items fit within the modernist paradigm of authoritative authenticity in that they represent the official interpretation of that particular "place" (again, even this lumping together of the New River Dam, the John Henry Monument, and the Confederate flag seems both artificial and anachronistic), and yet Whitehead suggests that tourists consider them in a

both a modern way (as “unimpeachable proof” of authentic experiences) and a postmodern way (as “[t]hey try to envision where these items might go in their households, mantels are conjured, knickknack nooks are reconsidered” (267)). For the tourists for whom John Henry Days was designed, then, tourism is a process of accepting authoritative authenticity and re-interpreting official meanings relative to oneself---a process which, beyond Whitehead’s humor, could extend to something more than arranging souvenirs on a shelf, such as describing one’s experience to friends.

Yet in the context of postmodern reinterpretability, what will become of Mr. Street’s museum if it is rearranged and reinterpreted in the proposed John Henry museum in Talcott? While the mayor proposes that Pamela’s reluctance to sell the collection stems from the fact that, as the old aphorism goes, “you can’t put a price on memories” (217), her hesitancy actually seems to center around the possibility that the museum will *mean* something different in its new form. The fact, for instance, that she first tries to interest historically black colleges and universities such as Tuskegee and Howard in the collection after her father’s death (45) implies her belief that the collection, as an effort to reconstruct John Henry as a black folk hero, should stay, if not in Harlem, then at least within the black community, particularly in an academic community which would, once again, lend the John Henry tradition the kind of authorial “readability” Dr. Johnson had struggled for years ago. However, the fact that her inquiries are never answered (“she got lost in the voice mail, mailed letters...did not receive responses” (45)) along with the fact that no one ever visits Mr. Street’s museum (despite the fact that it is located in Harlem, the world-famous black neighborhood and center of the black cultural renaissance of Johnson’s era, the 1920’s), and that Pamela views the sale of the collection as more an act

of selling her father than of selling John Henry (45)---seems to argue that the days of John Henry as an important black cultural figure are on the wane, or were already waning, and, to borrow a word from Johnson, “diffusing” even as Mr. Street began collecting. One need only recall the crowd of lawn jockeys among which Mr. Street first found his John Henry figurine to understand that the John Henry tradition was already becoming duplicated on a large scale and losing its identity among other “figures” of blackness years before the era of the “John Henry Days” festival.

Mr. Street’s museum, in allowing the multiplicity of interpretations to which Johnson could never quite reconcile himself---and housed not within the relatively stable lines of a scholarly book but at first in an apartment and finally, completely disassembled and boxed within a rented storage facility---made way for new appropriations of the John Henry tradition. In the same way, postmodern historicism has made way for the new interpretation of John Henry which is on the rise in Talcott, and along with it, a highly commercialized brand of John Henry tourism. It is into this context, one in which the John Henry tradition has been equated with “the best of American values” (16) and rolled onto the fronts of millions of postage stamps, that J. and Pamela, as the newest generation of metatourists, now plunge.

John Henry Days: Beyond Postmodern Tourism

In the opening pages of the novel, J. and Pamela enter a Talcott which is profoundly different from the one Dr. Johnson and Mr. Street encounter in at least one respect: it has become, along with its neighbor Hinton, a tourist town. Mr. Street recalls a “tiny” Talcott on one side of the mountain and the “neat little outpost” of Hinton on the

other, “so that on one hand you had nothing and once the mountain was beat you got into a civilization” (374)---itself a fascinating formulation recalling the path of the tunnel and the death of John Henry, who beat the mountain to make way for the train. Yet Pamela encounters a town which can now be portrayed in terms of the kinds of touristic experiences it offers. As viewed from place mats at Herb’s Country Style diner, “bought in bulk and fixing a century of scrabbling human achievement in its just form,” the area is defined by “squiggly indecisive lines worm[ing] among straight, rivers contend[ing] against manmade roads and routes...names are bold on the map, two buildings down from Herb’s the Coast to Coast Offers Free Continental Breakfast” etc. (183). The “place-map” might be read as a demonstration of the authoritative “authenticity” with which this discussion has been concerned in that it designates, in the touristic language of “luxury,” “camping needs,” “adventures,” and local favorites (183) what experiences are appropriate for tourists---which sites, when combined, capture the meaning of Summers County. And yet this “authentic” interpretation is directly and transparently linked to commerce in a way that other authoritative interpretations, like Chappell’s John Henry, are not; Pamela, in other words, knows she is looking at an advertisement.

Moreover, J. and Pamela, unlike Dr. Johnson and Mr. Street, have been *invited* to town to experience John Henry specifically because one of them holds the key to the region’s public image---to establishing the authenticity (read: “marketability”) of Talcott and “one of its famous residents” (16) on the burgeoning information highway---and the other holds the rights to the collection which would solidify the region’s John Henry “authenticity” in material fact. As the inheritor of the post-modern plethora of John Henry images embodied in Mr. Street’s dismembered museum, Pamela is led by a map

which reveals subversive knowledge, a secret burying ground. To give that wealth of images, if not a new shape then at least through a final reinterpretation a decent burial (in her father's grave or in the proposed museum), becomes Pamela's mission.

J., as a junketeer, experiences and interprets the places to which his junkets lead him in a profoundly touristic and postmodern way. He is a "resident" (11) of airports forming one vast and undifferentiated "terminal city" (7), a migrant worker of the public relations industry. Unlike his predecessors Johnson and Mr. Street, J. remains for the majority of the novel either unconscious of or apathetic toward his status as a tourist, consuming junketeer freebies and other delicacies of his various destinations as insatiably as the "busy hands" of the festival-goers fondle souvenirs (267), and producing neither treatise nor collection, but a stream of depthless, preformed "behind the scenes," "triumphant returns," and "inner life of" articles (19). While he is allegorically linked to John Henry (striving to surpass the standing Record of continuous junkets set by Bobby Figgis (109-111) in a contest not of industrial technology, but information technology) he does not begin to awaken as a self-conscious or metatourist of the John Henry tradition until the moment in which he nearly chokes, so to speak, on his own ravenous consumption of prime rib (76-79) while---tellingly---ignoring the powerful John Henry ballad being sung around him. As the song "hacks at primal truth and splinters off words" (75), J.'s panicked visions as he chokes on the meat place him imaginatively in the position of both a lynching victim and a John Henry dying before eager contest-viewers: "All these crackers looking up at the tree. Nobody doing nothing, just staring. They know how to watch a nigger die" (79). J. Sutter emerges as a metatourist first through this moment of identification, and subsequently through the narrative that culminates in J.'s

discovery of the “story” (387) which binds Johnson, Mr. Street, and Pamela in the larger John Henry tradition.

The “authoritative” interpretation of John Henry which J. and Pamela encounter in Talcott is neither a scholarly construction nor a cast-in-plaster cousin of lawn-jockeys, but has, in fact, become part and parcel of a brand engineered by Lucien---“Talcott” and “all things Talcott-related” (195)---a “patchwork idea of the town stitched by pop culture” (192) at the heart of which John Henry signifies “the best of American values” (16). This situation is not, of course, the first instance in which commerce and questions of authenticity have intersected; indeed the tourist industry has always relied on the marketability of authenticity, and most if not all of the items with which Mr. Street tries to create his own authentic John Henry are, as Whitehead’s historical vignettes demonstrate, the result of the buying and selling of different interpretations of John Henry. What is different, however, about a brand as opposed to other authoritative interpretations is the idea of its accompanying trademark, the way in which brands so permeate a culture as to *seem* natural and not, in fact, an interpretation at all---the ultimate in authoritative interpretations.⁷

As the festival unfolds, J. and Pamela emerge as a kind of parody of a tourist couple wandering the booths, with J., sporting sunglasses and “his silly Hawaiian shirt” (264), buying a John Henry figurine “identical to the one her father brought home 25

⁷ The kind of naturalizing effect I describe in the paragraph could apply as easily to brands as to what Roland Barthes calls myths, or mythological signifiers; his prime example of mythologization, the saluting Negro soldier on the cover of *Match* who is transformed into “the very *presence* of French imperialism” (Barthes, 128), resonates deeply with the processes undergone by the John Henry tradition in Whitehead’s text, in which John Henry is transformed from an abject ex-slave into a symbol of all that is great about America. Whitehead may well have had the Negro soldier in mind as he wrote, yet his engagement with Barthes’ “mythical concept” is, as I will demonstrate at the conclusion of this essay, complicated by many factors, not the least of which is the metatouristic perspective he, as an African-American writer in search of John Henry, shares with his characters.

years before. The one that started it” (267) and carrying it around almost as if it were their child. The fair itself is a soup of pop culture, a postmodern space in which images from every corner of American culture---from food, to “celebrities”, to the “latest styles”---crowd the “official map” (which ineffectually tries to sort and classify them) into a semiotic “hubbub” (315). In the same way, the John Henry tradition being endorsed and celebrated has lost something of the meaning with which its previous “tourists” (Johnson in his scholarly account and Mr. Street in his museum) have tried to invest it.

Nowhere can this loss be more clearly seen than in the “Genuine Steel-Driving Exhibition” which constitutes the “main event” (318-319) of the festival. Framed by “red, white, and blue streamers” (318) which frame the contest semiotically as “American,” “two ruddy white men, shirts off, take practice swings with sledgehammers” (318). J., perhaps with the dying John Henry from his elementary school film (and its “ambiguous ending” (142)) in mind, questions the authenticity of this “genuine” event; the crowd, he concludes, “can see for themselves, the way they always do nowadays. Real-time, and they can almost touch it, all participants in this competition, this spectacle” (319). The words J. selects to express the experience---“real-time”, “touch”, “participants”---are familiar to contemporary readers in the era of “reality” television and interactive technologies, redolent with the postmodern privileging of immediate experience and personalized interpretation; yet this event is also a “spectacle”, an act, and J. finds himself wondering “What is at stake here?...What will happen will be entertainment. A few pictures on a roll of twenty-four...And what would it have been like that day in 1872?...Who did they root for before legend and meaning accreted around the competition between man and the device. Progress or the black man” (319). J.’s

questions, while pointing out the elision of John Henry's racial and economic status, of the life-and-death seriousness of the competition he faced (not to mention the machine he faced) in legend, do not necessarily denounce this authorized re-enactment of John Henry's struggle, yet they do seem to privilege a certain epistemology or body of knowledge which understands John Henry first as a black man, and second as a figure of ambiguity, of struggle against notions of "progress" which would shift the ways in which black men could construct their identities. It is an instant in which the post-modern paradigm allows for the appropriation of the John Henry tradition for mass touristic consumption, yet also incites J. and Pamela, following Mr. Street's injunction to "assemble your own John Henry" (373), to look elsewhere for authenticity.

Writing of the touristic experience, Paul Shepard contends that the "most important aesthetic aspect of tourism" is "its reenactment of exploration" (61); the touristic experience lies not in discovering a place for the first time, but in the motions of discovery---the gaping, wandering, handling, and listening---which lead to the discovery of oneself in, or in relation to, a place. In Great Bend Tunnel⁸ (itself a testament to foreclosed history, with "five haphazard and ineffectual slabs...lugged over to block entry, just for show, really" (320) placed next to the modern, functional tunnel "testifying utility" (320)) J. and Pamela figuratively insert themselves in the decaying legend of John Henry. While blocking out the "spectacle" of the steel-driving contest, they engage physically with the muddy ground, "dank basement" smell, "the angry tonnage of the mountain pressing", and "cool blasted walls" (320-322) of the site, each at last confronting his or her personal interpretation of John Henry. Pamela muses: "Standing in

⁸ Whitehead's text uses the name Great Bend, as opposed to Big Bend, at this particular point because that is, in fact the official name of the tunnel. The use of Big Bend over Great Bend is yet another of the hundreds of variations introduced in the circulation of the John Henry tradition.

here now. I thought I would never be here because I hated it all. Listening to the same stories out of his mouth every day. John Henry, John Henry. But being here now “(321). Her simultaneous need to narrate---to interpret her experience in words, and later, to enact aspects of the John Henry legend as she buries her father---and her inability to express her transformation beyond “being here now” suggests a return to a modernist tourism, to the pursuit of an essential experience which is ultimately inexpressible. Similarly, J. envisions an atemporal realm in which his identity merges with that of John Henry, in which, for both men in the act of their contests, “The daily battles that have lost meaning are clearly drawn again, the opponents and objectives named and understood. The true differences between you and them. And it.” (322) Yet the “authenticity” of these moments derives not from any external authority, but from J. and Pamela themselves. The tunnel becomes an *imaginary* space through which J., Pamela, or any other tourist can conceptually or allegorically engage with the myth of John Henry, echoing Mr. Street’s injunction to “fill in the gaps” of the tradition with one’s own words, to write oneself into the *story* of John Henry rather than seek the “authentic” historical figure.

Yet Whitehead complicates these moments of revelation by following them with the final analogy of a “silent movie” in which the steel-drivers and festival-goers, like images in a film, “unspool on the parabola screen of the tunnel mouth...outtakes from the perfect American movie” (322). J. and Pamela “are in the seats” (322)---tourists self-reflexively watching tourists---and “if they did what the audience never does and turned around in their seats, they would see the light of the projector, the white flickering projector that is the light at the other end of the tunnel. A dream projecting itself from the west.” (322). In one sense, the projector is a source, the actual event of a historical John

Henry's life and death from which the festival, through a long history of interpretation and appropriation, projects. Yet the image of a projector as a *source* recalls the postmodern idea that no single authenticity (in this case, the historical event of John Henry's contest with the steam drill) exists; the festival and all the thousands of other interpretations of John Henry evolved from an artifact, a rendering---the ballad itself, which seems to only viable solution, "the light at the end of the tunnel" of the quandary of John Henry's identity. A third level of complexity, however, comes to the analogy in the idea that audiences accustomed to the projected "realities" of the cinema *do not need* to "turn around in their seats" in order to be fully aware that the images playing before them are just that---images, interpretations. Pamela and J., like Johnson and Mr. Street before them, stand outside the "authentic" (in this case spectacular) interpretation of John Henry in the secret space of a forgotten history, trying to make sense of their own relationships to the John Henry tradition, yet irresistibly focusing on the image commercialized, bowdlerized version of John Henry Days at the mouth of the tunnel. Whitehead seems to suggest in this *mise en scène* the ultimate failure of postmodernity as an epistemological framework for an African-American reclamation of a tradition such as John Henry, or in a larger sense for any effort at making meaning of black history and culture. If authenticity can be deconstructed, as Lucien proves himself so consummately capable of doing, then there is always the danger of wealth and influence co-opting interpretation, making "the thing into the idea" (295), branding authenticity---tricking the audience into believing in the world the screen shows them. How, then---if at all---does the postmodern tourist, or perhaps at this point, the post-postmodern tourist, reclaim meaning in a branded space?

Burying Mr. Street

Pamela's solution to the problem of branded space, it seems, is to more fully inhabit both the physical spaces of Talcott which have not yet been claimed by the John Henry Days festival and the internal spaces of the ballad, which, in their intangibility, can never be fully or exclusively occupied---to put herself and her father, as he might have wished, into the lines of the ballad. In one final search for John Henry, Pamela follows her father's map to the secret clearing "where the black workers buried the men who died" in the making of Big Bend Tunnel (376). Her gesture suggests much about the ways in which metatourists throughout the book confront notions of white "authenticity": while privileging the un-toured historical spaces of the John Henry tradition (the graveyard over such sites as the statue or the proposed museum), it also suggests that the interpretive frameworks by which such strategies of resistance create alternative histories, museums, and touristic practices are built on previous frameworks in something very like a narrative---just as Pamela's burial ceremony depends upon her father's map. Accordingly, J. and Pamela go to bury Mr. Street, just as, by extension, his collection will soon be buried in the static confines of permanent museum, and Pamela shapes her interpretation not only from the ballad, but from what her father has taught her of the ballad, incorporating them both within its lines---wearing blue, for instance, to align herself with John Henry's widow and orphaned child (374).

Pamela's "tour" in search of John Henry differs, however, in the conclusions to which it comes. Faced once more with the inability to find or reclaim John Henry, in this case literally because of the "dozen graves scattered across the field...none of them bore

the initials J. H.” (376), Pamela decides simply to stop searching. “They might as well get on with it, she said...She walked out into the middle of the field and without an overlong consideration of where the perfect place would be she stopped and said, Here” (376-377). In the context of the problem of postmodernity and the creation of authenticity, especially as it concerns black history and culture, Pamela offers an intriguing solution which at first seems like resignation, but, as she later explains, is actually a way of thinking beyond the endless interpretation and appropriations of postmodernity:

She said there was another interesting thing about the song. Before it came into ballad form, the men used to sing it as a work song, to keep the rhythm of their strokes. And in those early songs, they’d sing, *This old hammer, killed John Henry, Can’t kill me, Lord, Can’t kill me*. They sang it like a song of resistance. They wouldn’t go out like John Henry. But maybe they were condemning him instead of lamenting him. His fight was foolish because the cost was too high. Are they saying they’re not as arrogant as John Henry, or are they twice as arrogant for thinking themselves safe from his fate. You could look at it both ways. You could look at it and think the fight continued, that you could resist and fight the forces and you could win and it would not cost you your life because he had given his life for you. His sacrifice enables you to endure without having to give your life to your struggle, whatever name you give to it (378).

In this passage, John Henry seems at first to have been mythologized in a Barthesian sense: through deformation into the metalanguage of myth, “John Henry” becomes a sign for, as Whitehead phrases it, the “*hero who sacrificed his life to progress*”---a “concept” whose “fundamental character,” as the novel bears out, “is to be appropriated” (26). Yet as Barthes’ earlier cameo appearance in the novel suggests, John Henry is, in this passage, “a signifier you can’t duck” (337); his significance extends well beyond the realms of pop culture Barthes treats and into the most deeply-held beliefs and identifications for the laborers who first sang him into being---and for all the laboring metatourists who would follow them---whether they wish to accept or defy his tradition. Whitehead’s “mythical concept”---the examination of which each of the intermingled

narratives of the novel pursues---is in essence not a *deconstruction* of belief, but an injunction to continue *constructing* belief, to continue “layin’ the line” (113), be it of steel or of words, into the ever expanding corpus of the John Henry tradition. In the end, Whitehead provides no more of a fixed resolution for the problem of postmodernity in the work of his metatourists than he does a decisive fate for J. Sutter, for the only way out of the tradition is, as for John Henry in the darkness of the tunnel, further in. Through telling the legend again and again, engaging with the parts of the tradition that, despite social, material, and epistemological changes, remain vital to each teller, Whitehead’s metatourists are able to find at the heart of the “myth” a “story,” or as Whitehead phrases it, “a real story” (387), the interwoven pieces of lives and legends that are, for Johnson, Mr. Street, Pamela and J., “worth telling” (387).

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