

Adriano Elia, Serena I. Volpi ***Blacknology. Black Literature, Culture, and Technology***

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Review of Elia, A.; Volpi, S.I. (2025). *Blacknology. Black Literature, Culture, and Technology*. Limena: Libreria Universitaria, 137 pp.

As one of the rare academic endeavors to tackle Black Studies in Italy, the volume presented here stands out as a successful effort to provide scholars and students with a comprehensive overview of the cultural production by the Black diaspora. And it does so, as indicated on the book cover, by exploring the intersection between Black culture and technology – hence the title, *Blacknology* – in a wide array of texts, cultural movements, media productions, and literary genres, across a time span of forty years, from the early 1980s up until today. In a time when digital technology is rapidly morphing from an advantageous tool in the hands of humans into a “potentially threatening” (8) power structure owned by just a handful of individuals, reading and understanding how the Black community sought to appropriate historically repressive technologies, own them, and transform them into emancipatory cultural productions is of capital importance. In this sense, Adriano Elia and Serena I. Volpi’s efforts successfully provide the reader with a diachronic and synchronic overview of their object of study, offering a comprehensive, rich, and detailed view of it. The volume consists of four chapters, the first two written by Adriano Elia, the last two by Serena I. Volpi.

Chapter One, titled “Race, Techno (logy), Literature: *The Third Wave* and *The Parable of the Sower*” is a compelling journey through the complex layers of Afrofuturism, with its ties to techno music and



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literature. Aptly defined as “an interdisciplinary cultural movement” (11), Afrofuturism ultimately succeeded in utilizing speculative fiction as a tool to challenge the prevailing narratives about race in the Black Atlantic. Elia’s chapter investigates how the roots of techno as a music form and as a cultural movement in Detroit lie deep into futurologist Alvin Toffler’s work, and particularly into his concept of technocracy as “a societal or governing structure guided by a privileged group of technical specialists who establish production frameworks for a predominantly unskilled consumer class” (14). In this sense, the pioneering of techno as a music genre by the Black community in Detroit constitutes a form of rebellion against the misuses of technology, particularly in its dangerously antiecological developments. What is of interest here is how Black DJs and music producers, as early as 1980, demonstrated an ecological concern, expressing it through the creative use of the same technological tools and language that, in their view, posed a threat to the human-environment equilibrium. This renegotiation of meaning is one of the overarching themes of the whole book, and a strategy that Black culture has always put upfront to affirm its identity: from the reappropriation of the n-word, to the daring experimentations with media language in newer, cutting-edge creative agencies such as Dave Free’s and Kendrick Lamar’s PgLang, which is an acronym for Program Language.

In Chapter 2, Elia continues to explore the ties that bind technological advancement and music by exploring Hip Hop as a technological form of enfranchisement and its connections with literature. Convincingly, Elia ties the formal aspects of rap music to the concept of secondary orality by Walter J. Ong, underlining how hip hop culture, “as a fusion of oral, written, and digital modes of communication, epitomizes Ong’s notion of postliterate orality [...] a contemporary version of African diasporic oral traditions” (39). In this sense, Elia sees sampling as the natural evolution of such oral traditions when they handle technological innovations; just like rhymes, storytelling, and verbal battles, the manipulation of musical texts by the isolation and reworking of breakbeats contributes to enhancing the process of meaning-making within the culture, in a manner that is in perfect continuity with the improvisational deconstructions of jazz. On the verbal side of the hip-hop spectrum, the chapter explores the contributions of Gil Scott-Heron and the Last Poets group to the emergence of the culture.

Serena I. Volpi’s section opens with Chapter Three, titled “Slaves and Robots: Narratives of Progress, Scientific Racism, and Their Legacies”, where the scholar aims at contextualizing “contemporary discussions around technology within a history in which scientific progress and technological advancements, presented as exclusively Western traits, are often not considered in relation to the notions of race and civilization” (56). Volpi’s anthropological lens offers a compelling view on the history of the racialization of technological

progress as white exclusivity, and in doing so, the author revisits the argument from the 1800s, when World Fairs would often concur in building such a narrative, frequently resorting to the dehumanization of colonized people. She then reviews Franz Boas and W.E.B DuBois's anthropological theories and their respective stances towards modernity and technology, to then tie their criticism towards uses of technology "that was of detriment to the human" (70) to *Genetic Automata* (2019-2023), a series of video installations by British artists Larry Achiampong and David Blandy. In her analysis, Volpi productively focuses on how the work poses questions on the tight link between eugenics, transhumanism, and racial exploitation for scientific advancement, as was the case with the subject of *Genetic Automata II* and Nnedi Okorafor's 2015 novel *The Book of Phoenix*, namely Henrietta Lacks, "an African-American working-class woman affected an aggressive form of cervical cancer whose cells were taken without consent at Johns Hopkins Hospital in Baltimore" (77).

Finally, Volpi dedicates the last and final chapter to Benjamin Zephaniah's literary work as *Bildungsromane* tackling the relationship between music and technology against the backdrop of young adult literature. She highlights how different technological forms in Zephaniah's novel take center stage in the narrative dynamics depicting the protagonists' struggle with their racial identity: "from music, hip hop in particular, to the media, from social networks to cyber-protests, passing through literacy itself as a form of technology" (103).

Before concluding this brief and, in fact, incomplete overview, it is necessary to acknowledge that conveying the vastness of the ground covered by Elia and Volpi in their work is a challenging task for a reviewer. Yet, it is indeed possible to identify a few research avenues and groundwork questions that the book opens up for subsequent works to explore. But before isolating those, we have to give a note of merit to the authors for having struck the perfect balance between readability for students and research innovation for scholars. In this sense, the presence of QR codes linking up to actual playlists and multimedia for the works cited in the books is undoubtedly innovative, enriching, and original. Even more so when the book ends up addressing topics such as the connection between the Black body, robots, and slavery; alterity and identity as redefined by technological advancements and the appropriation of those by marginalized communities; and, therefore, culture as a technological form but also as a disguising mechanism to unlock the depotentiation of colonial discourse. In this sense, and with all the necessary cautions and typological differences, resorting to sci-fi, aliases, costumes, absurdist narratives, and spiritual imagery can be seen as a common denominator not just for the representation of the Black experience, but also as a conceptual thread uniting the cultural practices of self-affirmation sought out by many marginalized communities.

