1. Reading the Past, Writing the Future: *The Intuitionist*

The Intuitionist ends with a scene of a new beginning. After Lila Mae Watson, the novel's protagonist, has revealed her antagonists and solved the mystery that initially propelled the plot, she sits down and starts to write. She has moved into "a new room" and attempts to complete volume three of the late James Fulton's *Theoretical Elevators*. For one thing, she encounters the "problem" of "nailing Fulton's voice." Yet, while the latter "left instructions," Lila Mae is aware that "she is permitted to alter them according to circumstances," for "[t|here was no way Fulton could foresee how the world would change" (254).[1] That is to say, the challenge Lila Mae faces—that which renders this new beginning problematic—is both to continue writing in Fulton's tradition and to acknowledge a historical break that prohibits the simple continuation of this tradition.

What is she working on anyway? Fulton wanted to create the "perfect elevator." By the final pages of *The Intuitionist* attentive readers have gathered that there are much more complex issues than mere mechanical vertical transportation at stake. The novel's language shifts to a well-nigh eschatological register when it speculates on the device's affordances. The cities of the present, Lila Mae thinks, are "doomed anyway" by the coming of the perfect elevator, which "she will deliver to the world when the time is right" (254). Yet, her act of deliverance does not exclusively portend destruction; a properly utopian device, the perfect

1 All parenthetical citations in the text refer to Colson Whitehead, *The Intuitionist* (New York: Doubleday, 1999).

elevator promises a "second elevation" in the "city to come." At the novel's conclusion Lila Mae optimistically anticipates that she will be able to "make the necessary adjustments" to what shall be the infrastructure of a New Jerusalem. The city of the future "will come" (255). In other words, redemption from the "cities we suffer now" (61) is imminent.

But then, what is the nature of this suffering inflicted upon urban dwellers? Who are the "we" Lila May mentions? And when is "now"? Before she withdraws to her room to write the perfect elevator, Lila Mae works as a municipal elevator inspector in the "most famous city in the world" (12). After the sudden crash of an elevator she had just recently inspected, she is suspected of sabotage and struggles to clear her name. Soon she finds herself in the midst of a web of intrigue in the snake pit that is the world of elevator inspection. Representatives of rival philosophies, Empiricism and Intuitionism, vie for the position of guild chair. The top Empiricist, whose ties to the mob are an open secret, sends goons to ransack Lila Mae's apartment. She belongs to the Intuitionist camp, which offers her protection. Eventually, she finds out about some notebooks that Fulton, the founder of Intuitionism, left behind and which contain plans for the perfect elevator. In her search Lila Mae finds an unexpected ally. Yet, betrayal is imminent, and—as if to affirm the old Marxist line about economic base and ideological superstructure—the "real players" are revealed to be elevator manufacturers competing for market shares (207). Against all odds, however, Lila Mae manages to obtain the notebooks, and the novel ends with her attempt to continue and complete Fulton's life work.

This short and deliberately clichéd summary should make clear that *The Intuitionist* heavily leans on the generic conventions of detective fiction, as most commentators have noted. The novel is set in an "urban gothic landscape,"[2] which evokes "a mood of dread, danger, and intrigue" reminiscent of film noir.[3] The perfect elevator, repeatedly referred to as

2 Saundra Liggins, "The Urban Gothic Vision of Colson Whitehead's *The Intuitionist* (1999)," *African American Review* 40, no. 2 (2006): 360.

3 Derek C. Maus, *Understanding Colson Whitehead: Revised and Expanded Edition*, (Columbia: U of South Carolina P, 2021), 22.

a "black box" (61), has been called a "McGuffin" meant to hold the reader's interest, and its literary progenitors range from Hammet's "Black Bird"[4] to Pynchon's "*schwarzgerät.*"[5] But even though her last name alludes to another famous detective's companion, Lila Mae Watson is not your average detective, for she is black, or, in a word compulsorily repeatedly throughout the novel, "colored." More precisely, she is the first "colored woman" (14) in her department, where she remains in near total isolation. As a black woman who adheres to Intuitionist principles, she is "three times cursed" (20), for the Elevator Guild is currently controlled by Empiricists.

In the course of her detective work, however, Lila Mae makes a sensational discovery. James Fulton was "colored," too. Suddenly, the cause of the elevator's crash seems insignificant. Indeed, she learns that it was an entirely arbitrary "catastrophic accident" (227). Thus, the deeper Lila Mae's investigation gets, the more the novel abandons the conventions of detective fiction. If a detective novel narrates the story of both an "investigation" and a "crime" which is covered up,[6] the detective in *The Intuitionist* must discover that no crime has actually taken place. Unlike a classical detective who retraces the events of a prior narrative, "thus uncovering and constructing the meaning and the authority of the narrative,"[7] Lila Mae learns that the story of the crashed elevator remains "without meaning" (227). What she unearths instead is Fulton's blackness, a stand-in, according to one critic, for the "dark, abiding, signing Africanist pres-

4 Jeffrey Allen Tucker, "'Verticality is Such a Risky Enterprise': The Literary and Paraliterary Antecedents of Colson Whitehead's *The Intuitionist*," *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 43, no. 1 (2010): 152.

5 Maus, *Understanding Colson Whitehead*, 29. Whitehead comments on Pynchon's influence in "Going Up," interview by Laura Miller, *Salon*, January 12, 1999, https://www.salon.com/1999/01/12/cov_si_12int/.

6 Tzvetan Todorov, *The Poetics of Prose*, trans. Richard Howard (Oxford: Blackwell, 1977), 44.

7 Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot: Design and Intention in Narrative* (Cambridge, MA/London: Harvard UP, 1984), 244.

ence" that Toni Morrison influentially detected in American literature.[8] Consequently, Lila Mae commences a rereading of Fulton's texts to reveal their hidden racial meaning in order to reclaim his oeuvre for the tradition of African American letters which she, as the executor of Fulton's literary estate, will subsequently continue. Or so it seems, at any rate.

Literary Tradition and Racial Community

It does not take a (Lila Mae) Watson to recognize that elevators serve as the vehicle for a metaphor of racial uplift in *The Intuitionist*. A *Time Magazine* review celebrated it as "the freshest racial allegory since Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* and Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye*," a quip that was subsequently used as a blurb on the novel's paperback edition.[9] In an article that traces how the reception of Whitehead's early novels as well as the recognition he received from "award-granting institutions"[10] have shaped his trajectory in the literary field, Howard Ransby points out that these accolades positioned Whitehead "on a plane with two literary giants."[11] This positioning "entices potential buyers into believing a connection exists between Whitehead's work and two renowned black literary artists."[12] Ransby's use of the verb "to entice" is suggestive, for it implies an uncertainty about whether the judgment is apt or merely a

8 Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*, (New York: Vintage, 1993), 5. See Alexander Manshel, "Colson Whitehead's History of the United States," *MELUS* 45, no. 4 (2020): 31.

9 Walter Kirn, "The Promise of Verticality," review of *The Intuitionist*, by Colson Whitehead, *Time*, January 25, 1999, https://content.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,990080,00.html.

10 Howard Rambsy, II., "The Rise of Colson Whitehead: Hi-Tech Narratives and Literary Ascent," in *New Essays on the African American Novel: From Hurston and Ellison to Morrison and Whitehead*, ed. Lovalerie King and Linda F. Selzer (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 237.

11 Ibid., 233.

12 Ibid., 234. While Ransby uses terms such as "field" or "capital," the article contains no reference to Bourdieu's field theory.

marketing ploy designed to trick readers into seeing a connection where there is none. Other critics have unhesitatingly asserted *The Intuitionist*'s closeness to the African American literary tradition by emphasizing the tropes it employs: "double consciousness [sic], masks, and invisibility,"[13] "passing,"[14] or "literacy and freedom."[15] This litany's last entry once more directs critical attention to the possible relationship between literary production and emancipation.

Before Lila Mae can complete Fulton's manuscript, she needs to learn how to properly read it with an eye for its racial dimension. In the second volume of Fulton's *Theoretical Elevators* she reads: "*The race sleeps in this hectic and disordered century.* [...]. *They are stirred by dreaming. In this dream of uplift, they understand that they are dreaming the contract of the hallowed verticality, and hope to remember the terms on waking. The race never does, and that is our curse*" (186, emphasis in original). The passage is followed by an insight into Lila Mae's mind. "The human race, she thought formerly" (ibid.). Her newfound knowledge of Fulton's blackness makes her rethink who the referent of the personal pronouns might be. Was the man engaging in a "double-voiced discourse," as Henry Louis Gates might put it? To Lila Mae, "it all meant something differently now" (155), so she must "teach[] herself how to read" again (186); that is, she learns "to read, like a slave does, one forbidden word at a time" (230). For Linda Selzer, Whitehead's novel thereby asserts "the transgressive possibilities of black educational empowerment" thematized in many slave narratives.[16]

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13 Kimberly Fain, *Colson Whitehead: The Postracial Voice of Contemporary Literature* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 22.

14 Michelle Elam, "Passing in the Post-Race Era: Danzy Senna, Philip Roth, and Colson Whitehead," *African American Review* 41, no. 4 (2007): 762.

15 Tucker, "Verticality," 150.

16 Linda Selzer, "Instruments More Perfect Than Bodies: Romancing Uplift in Colson Whitehead's *The Intuitionist*," *African American Review* 43, no. 4 (2009): 685. A paradigmatic example is Frederick Douglass's discovery of "The Columbian Orator," narrated in all three of his autobiographies. Literacy provided Douglass with "a bold and powerful denunciation of oppression, and a most brilliant vindication of the rights of man" Frederick Douglass, *My Bondage and My Freedom*, in

In a Gatesian reading of *The Intuitionist*, Alison Russell recognizes in Lila Mae a distant relative of the Yoruba trickster figure Esu-Elegbara, the functional equivalent of the literary critic, who has to "interpret the divine will of Ifa," the functional equivalent of the text, which is provided by Fulton's writings.[17] Only after Lila Mae has "mastered his hand" (205) can she "become[] "the voice of textual authority" and, thus, replace him.[18] According to Russell, the "value of literacy" that bestows significance upon Lila Mae's endeavor in the first place is guaranteed by the novel's "extensive portrayal of racism."[19] This correlation of literary production and the struggle against racism relies on a key passage in *The Signifying Monkey*, where Gates argues that "the production of literature was taken to be the central arena in which persons of African descent could […] establish their status within the human community."[20] Tasked with representing black humanity, the "individual text," consequently, assumed the function of embodying a "collective black voice"; and the individual writer that took on the role of representing an entire "race."[21]

This is precisely how Kimberly Fain reads *The Intuitionist*, claiming that

> [t]he reader knows that the social implications of Lila Mae's vindication are not only personal but communal as well. The community has a collective interest in the success of individuals who are pioneers in their fields. Ultimately, Lila Mae's success or failure will determine the progress or the regression of an entire race.[22]

Autobiographies, ed. by Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: The Library of America, 1994), 226.

17 Alison Russell, "Recalibrating the Past: Colson Whitehead's *The Intuitionist*," *Critique* 49, no. 1 (2007): 47.

18 Ibid., 58.

19 Ibid., 54.

20 Henry Louis Gates, Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1988), 129.

21 Ibid., 131.

22 Fain, *Colson Whitehead*, 5.

This imposes quite a burden on poor Lila Mae. In Fain's account, the shared condition of oppression produces a situation in which the "collective interest" is best served not by collective practice, but by the actions of those talented individuals best suited to publicly represent this interest. Anyone familiar with recent discussions about the fate of African American literature will know that this view has not gone uncontested. I would like to hold off discussing this issue for a moment, however, to show how *The Intuitionist* performs an immanent critique of the notion of a homogeneous black community whose collective interests can be represented by individuals. Again, the question of Lila Mae's literacy becomes relevant, but this time the text to be deciphered is provided by the novel's other black characters. When it comes to reading them, however, Lila Mae turns out to be "the worst reader in the novel."[23] Reading through the lens of "racial expectations"[24]—that is to say, reading in substantialist fashion instead of reading relationally—turns out to be precisely the wrong way of reading.

Embodying History

This raises the question where Lila Mae learned to read in the first place. Put differently, it raises questions about the origin of the schemes of perception, appreciation, and action which inform her practice. By juxtaposing passages in the narrative's present with analepses which provide insight into Lila Mae's upbringing, *The Intuitionist* makes visible the ways in which the system of dispositions that guides her actions and thoughts has been acquired through an incorporation of the structures organizing the world of her childhood. Due to the dispositions' embodied state, Lila Mae cannot simply shake them off once she leaves this world. Race, then, functions as a principle of vision and division that affects Lila Mae

23 Mitchum Huehls, *After Critique: Twenty-First Century Fiction in a Neoliberal Age* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2016), 112.

24 Selzer, "Instruments," 693.

precisely insofar as she cannot but rely on "a *corporeal knowledge* that provides a practical comprehension of the world quite different from […] intentional acts of conscious decoding," in Bourdieu's words.[25] That is, she engages the world with the help of embodied dispositions which are the product of historically specific social structures. But as Lila Mae herself points out at the end of the novel, the world has changed. Thus, it might be precisely her own embodied dispositions that she needs to overcome to complete Fulton's project.

It is relatively uncontroversial to suggest that, while remaining unnamed, the world's most famous city that provides *The Intuitionist*'s setting is New York City. Periodization poses bigger problems, however.[26] The narrator mentions "last summer's riots" (23), and large-scale riots did occur in New York in both August 1843 and July 1964. Neither date sits well, however, with Lila Mae's observation of a photograph of "the famous reverend […] who is so loud down South" (248). The narrator's choice of words suggest that the novel is set after the 1956 Supreme Court ruling banning segregation on buses in Montgomery, Alabama, for it was then that Martin Luther King (and who else should the referent be in this instance) became the "charismatic symbol" of the Civil Rights struggle.[27] Yet, by 1964 King did not restrict his noise to the South any longer. Moreover, Daniel Grausam mentions that other events which would signify a 1960s setting are absent.[28] Lila Mae also claims that there are "highrises that are a hundred stories tall" in Downtown (168), but in the mid-1950s the only building of that size was the Empire State Building, which is not located in Downtown Manhattan. Grausam thus concludes that Whitehead is interested in a "multi-temporal now," defined by an abundance

25 Pierre Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, trans. by Richard Nice (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000), 135, emphasis in original.

26 For a survey of attempts to date the novel's events, see Manshel, "Colson Whitehead's History," 25.

27 Manning Marable, *Race, Reform, and Rebellion: The Second Reconstruction and Beyond in Black America, 1945–2006* (Jackson: U of Mississippi P, 2007), 40.

28 Daniel Grausam, "The Multitemporal Contemporary: Colson Whitehead's Presents," in *Literature and the Global Contemporary*, ed. Sarah Brouillette, Mathias Nilges, and Emilio Sauri (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 121–22.

of reference to historical "objects and events" that remain conspicuously inconsistent.[29]

What is clear is that *The Intuitionist*'s setting is contemporary with the emergence of the Civil Rights movement. As mentioned before, the novel is highly invested in the designator "colored," so invested that one critic concludes that it is set in "the time of burgeoning integration, the time of 'colored.'"[30] Readers find out that "[t|he times are changing" due to the "increasingly vocal colored population" (42). Yet, the narrator also explains that "[t]hings are happening too fast" for Lila Mae, who believes that one can "understand the muck of things, accept it, live in it," but still run into trouble when "that muck change[s] so suddenly and dramatically" (36). The multi-temporality of Whitehead's debut novel, its almost inconsistent accumulation of periodizing signifiers, ultimately serves to draw readerly attention to the problem of the asynchronicity of subjective dispositions and social structures in moments of historical transition.[31]

One reason for Lila Mae's anxiety in the face of change is that New York is so radically different from the place she is from, that is, the segregated South. A later chapter provides insight into the conditions of existence that have shaped her habitus by way of narrating a visit to a movie theater in the "colored town" where she grew up. The narrator's sober language reflects Lila Mae's state of mind when she and her friend "walked around the side of the Royale to the stairs that led to the entrance reserved for colored patrons. Walked up the stairs to the balcony seating reserved for colored patrons, up to nigger heaven" (129). The unexcited tone of the entire passage indexes the self-evidence that segregation possesses for the two. The repetition of the phrase "reserved for colored patrons," like the repetition of the term "colored" which appears no fewer

29 Ibid., 121.

30 Manshel, "Colson Whitehead's History," 26.

31 For a gloss on the relationship between "'transitional' moments of cultural revolution" and a Blochian "*Ungleichzeitigkeit*," see Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (London/New York: Routledge, 2002), 83.

than five times on this page alone, is meant to highlight that the spatial constriction of blacks is the dominant principle structuring the organization of physical space in this southern town. Lila Mae has grown up in this place and gone to the segregated movie theater "plenty of times before" (128). Consequently, the racialized division of the world appears as self-evident to her.

Bourdieu's concepts are well-suited to disentangle the relationship between race, space, and practice articulated in this passage. For the sociologist, the acquisition of the dispositions of the habitus is a function of existing in the world as a corporeal being

> The world encompasses me, comprehends me as a thing among things, but I, as a thing for which there are things, comprehend this world. And I do so […] *because* it encompasses me and comprehends me; it is through this material inclusion […] and what follows from it, the incorporation of social structures in the form of dispositional structures […] that I acquire a practical knowledge and control of the encompassing space.[32]

Thus, the spontaneous experience of the social world as immediately self-evident is possible. "The world is comprehensible, immediately endowed with meaning," writes Bourdieu, "because the body […] has been

32 Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, 130, emphasis in original. Bourdieu's grasp of the body as a "thing among things […] for which there are things" recalls Merleau-Ponty, who writes that "my body is not only an object among all other objects […], but an object which is *sensitive to* all the rest." Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London/New York: Routledge, 2002), 275, emphasis in original. A more direct line from Merleau-Ponty's 1945 book to the issue of racialized embodiment can be traced via the fifth chapter of Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, 2008), 88, where he describes the "suffocating reification" of being reduced to "an object among other objects." For an intriguing discussion of racism as "bodily habit," which draws on Merleau-Ponty, Fanon, and Bourdieu (who is seen as too determinist, however), see Helen Ngo, *The Habits of Racism: A Phenomenology of Racism and Racialized Embodiment* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2017).

protractedly (from the beginning) exposed to its regularities."[33] Through repeated encounters with the "materialized system of classification"[34] that is the Jim Crow South, Lila Mae acquired a habitus that allows her to practically apprehend this world without having to consciously reflect on it. This is why the novel can narrate her movements through physical space—up the stairs, through the entrance, and up to the balcony—without reproducing what she thinks and feels when navigating segregated space. This is no longer possible when Lila Mae finds herself in a new environment.

After an interlude at the Institute for Vertical Transport, where Lila Mae is trained in the art of elevator inspection, Lila Mae relocates to New York City. In a 1986 essay occasioned by a strikingly similar experience, Ralph Ellison uses the apt expression of moving physically while staying in place psychologically. In the essay, which revolves around his move from Tuskegee Institute to New York City in 1936, Ellison carefully observes and meditates on the relationship between structures and habitus, as the following passage shows: "I had discovered, much to my chagrin, that while I was physically out of the South, I was restrained—sometimes consciously, sometimes not—by certain internalized thou-shalt-nots that had structured my public conduct in Alabama."[35] Social structures that were experienced in the past are incorporated (as internalized constraints) in the form of dispositions which generate practice in the present (structuring conduct) in an often unrecognized manner, which makes for the overlapping of temporalities: "the past itself continued to shape perceptions and attitudes."[36] Bourdieu, too, comments on the past's peculiar presence in the present, writing that "*habitus* […] structures new experiences in accordance with

33 Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, 135.

34 Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, trans. Richard Nice (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1990), 76.

35 Ralph Ellison, "An Extravagance of Laughter," in *The Collected Essays of Ralph Ellison*, ed. John F. Callahan (New York: The Modern Library, 2003), 619.

36 Ibid., 628.

the structures produced by past experiences."[37] This is precisely Lila Mae's problem when she, like Ellison, leaves her alma mater and settles in the North, carrying along a set of internalized dispositions.

Sometimes these "thou-shalt-nots" are the results of the mute compulsion of segregated space, attesting to the fit between the history inscribed in "bodies" and the history inscribed in "things"[38] that is largely fabricated "invisibly and insidiously through insensible familiarization with a symbolically structured physical world."[39] Sometimes they arrive in the form of explicit injunctions. Here is what Lila Mae's father tells her before she leaves for the Institute: "It's not so different up there, Lila Mae. They have the same white people up there they got down here. It might look different. It might feel different. But it's the same" (234). Readers at this point might remember an earlier moment when Lila Mae recalls when "her father taught her that white folks can turn on you at any moment" (23). On the one hand, the world of her childhood tacitly dispositioned Lila Mae to use classification schemes based on racial difference; on the other hand, her father, who continually experienced racism throughout his life (162), explicitly advises her to be watchful of white people. When she encounters spaces that are not segregated, then, Lila Mae cannot but feel endangered.

The Intruitionist only grants readers an insight into the past conditions in which Lila Mae's habitus was acquired in its second half. Yet, long before telling readers about the origins of her dispositions the novel shows them in action in the narrative's present. To find out about the elevator crash, Lila Mae enters O'Connors, the elevator inspectors' favorite haunt. A third-person narrator quotes her father's warning that "white folks can turn on you," which is why she "fears for her life" in the bar (23). The narrator has access to events in Lila Mae's life as well as her conscious feelings at the moment. But several lines later the narrator glides into Lila Mae's mind and the narration repeats the warning, but this time in

37 Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, 60.

38 Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, 150.

39 Pierre Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2001), 38.

the form of free indirect discourse: "They can turn rabid at any second" (ibid.). The perspective shift, thus, reveals that Lila Mae has internalized her father's words which now tacitly inform her own thoughts.

Several lines of direct speech, spoken by her colleagues, announce Lila Mae's entrance into O'Connor's. These are followed by another passage in free indirect discourse: "The first thing a colored person does when she enters a bar is look for other colored people" (25). The indeterminacy of the terms—"a colored person" rather than Lila Mae; "a white bar" rather than O'Connor's—reveal this not to refer to an action performed only once, but rather one repeated in similar situations. The personal pronoun "she," however, indicates that it is Lila Mae, who is the acting individual alluded to here. But the phrasing does not present an action deliberately chosen and executed. Instead, the sentence's indeterminacy reveals it to be an action performed habitually. Lila Mae's habitual glance for the reassuring presence of other black patrons cannot be understood exclusively in the context of the present. The gesture tacitly mobilizes her past in order to practically anticipate the future that this particular present might hold in store,[40] that is to say, potential anti-black violence. Lila Mae's fear amounts to a "quasi-bodily *anticipation*" of the situation's "immanent tendencies."[41] In two simple sentences that remain, however, divided by almost one page of text and, thus, have to be actively related by the reader to yield their full meaning, Whitehead represents the dispositions of a habitus in action.

Indeed, literature can be extraordinarily useful in revealing dispositions in action. As Bourdieu writes,

> [t]he dispositions that [practical sense] actualizes—ways of being that result from a durable modification of the body through its upbringing—remain unnoticed until they appear in action, and even then,

40 On the relationship between the "mobilization of the past" and the "anticipation of the future" possible in a given present, see Pierre Bourdieu and Loïc J. D. Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (Chicago: The U of Chicago P, 1992), 138.

41 Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, 130, emphasis in original.

> because of the self-evidence of their necessity and their immediate adaptation to the situation.[42]

Literary texts have at their disposal perspective techniques that, if handled well, can introduce a distancing-effect that shatters this apparent self-evidence. Moreover, the use of a non-linear chronology can afford narratives with the power to provide information about the "durable modification of the body" during earlier phases of socialization, thus placing readers in a position to reconstruct the genesis of the habitus' generative principles.

According to Bourdieu, dispositions are lastingly inscribed in a social agent's body which thereby serves as a "memory pad."[43] *The Intuitionist* acknowledges that habits—and habitus, embodied history—are hard to discard: "it is difficult to shake old habits. Habits clamp down on the ankle and resist all entreaties, no matter how logical" (16). Yet, despite the oft-repeated allegation that his relational sociology is overly deterministic, Bourdieu allows for the possibility of "countertraining" to counteract the effects of symbolic violence.[44] *The Intuitionist* devotes several passages to representing Lila Mae's efforts to hide an outward show of her feelings. She has a face that is "good […] for telling lies" (37). The novel insists that this face is deliberately put on, rather than being an involuntary bodily reaction, by having the third-person narrator inform the reader that Lila Mae "has no doubts about the efficacy of her games face" (125). Another analepsis provides insight into the work that was necessary to train her body:

> She puts her face on. In her case, not a matter of cosmetics, but will. How to make such a sad face hard? It took years of practice. […]. She did it by lying in her bed, feeling and testing which muscles in her face pained under application of concerted tension. To choose the most extreme pain would be to make a fright mask. A caricature of strength. (57)

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42 Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, 139.

43 Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice*, 68.

44 Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, 172.

A mask, Roland Barthes writes, is "what makes a face into a product of a society and its history."[45] Lila Mae's mask, fabricated in a painful process of "countertraining," suggests synecdochically that her entire hexis, that is, her "way of bearing the body, of presenting it to others,"[46] is an artifact that bears the traces of the history of racialized domination. Racialized bodies, the novel suggests, must engage in a performance; race requires "theater" (56).

Racialized Domination and Theatricality

Few studies of the longue durée of anti-blackness in the United States are as attentive to the role of performances in producing, reproducing, and challenging racialized domination as Saidiya Hartman's influential *Scenes of Subjection*. The book, especially its first half, can be read as a capacious examination of the eponymous scenes in which subjugated subjects were constituted in such a way that "relations of domination" are disguised "through euphemism and concealment"[47]—what Bourdieu, whom she quotes, calls symbolic violence. Slave performances simulated the "slave's consent and agency" in order for displays of the "exercise of will" and "contented subjection" to coalesce and thus to naturalize domination.[48] At the same time, Hartman emphasizes that these performances were "enactments of social struggle" in which the meaning of blackness was contested. Various tactics allowed the enslaved to turn these enforced performances "against their instrumental aims," and "small acts of resistance" could be cloaked beneath the veils of "masquerade, subterfuge, and indirection."[49] *The Intuitionist*, published

45 Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981), 34.

46 Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, 65.

47 Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1997), 42.

48 Ibid., 53. At the same time, Hartman insists that the "performance of blackness" was always backed up by the "brute force" of anti-black terror (58).

49 Ibid., 57, 8.

two years after *Scenes of Subjection*, is similarly interested in masking and theater. Instead of using chattel slavery as a historical backdrop, however, Whitehead turns to the theatricality of relations of racialized domination in his ambiguous mid-twentieth-century setting.

A chapter set at the Funicular Follies, the elevator inspectors' annual gathering, condenses the novel's articulation of race and theater. While two inspectors in blackface perform a minstrel show on stage, Lila Mae is searching for clues about the elevator crash. "No one recognizes her" (148), however, because she is wearing a server's uniform that was mistakenly handed to her. Lila Mae takes advantage of white people's habitual employment of schemes of perception and evaluation according to which a black woman must be a menial worker. The narration once more employs free indirect discourse: "They do not see her. The colored help brings the food and clears the tables, the white waiters refill the drinks. […]. They see colored skin and a servant's uniform. […]. In here they do not see her. She is the colored help" (153). The focalization is flexible, and readers can never be entirely sure whose thoughts are being shared. But perhaps that is precisely the point, and the passage discloses the "presuppositions of common sense"[50] shared by everyone in attendance. To move undetected among the white crowd, Lila Mae exploits her awareness of the schemes of perception they will employ.

Lila Mae's invisibility in the eyes of whites and her simultaneous ability to see herself through their eyes evoke two "standard tropes" often found in African American literature.[51] The latter is a moment of W. E. B. Du Bois's double-consciousness, famously characterized as the "peculiar sensation […] of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others."[52] Du Bois thereby anticipates Bourdieu's theory of symbolic violence. In the context of a discussion of masculine domination, the French sociologist writes that "[t]he dominated apply categories constructed from

50 Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, trans. Susan Emanuel (Stanford: Stanford UP, 1996), 323.

51 Tucker, "Verticality," 150.

52 W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk*, in *Writings*, ed. Nathan Huggins (New York: The Library of America, 1986), 364.

the point of view of the dominant to the relations of domination, thus making them appear as natural."[53] In both accounts, members of dominated social groups cannot but make use of dominant schemes of perception to apprehend themselves and the world. However, both Du Bois and Bourdieu grant dominated individuals the chance to understand the dominant better than they do themselves. Lila Mae benefits from this "special perspicacity"[54] which allows her to exploit the white attendees' ignorance in order to move about unbothered.

Most of the time, however, Lila Mae herself remains blind to the way in which other black characters' actions are informed by the performative requirements of race. Linda Selzer notes that *The Intuitionist* mobilizes the tropes of "minstrelsy and role-playing" to illustrate how "racial codes and social scripts […] direct individual performance." Lila Mae's uniform is "partly theater, a costume for the public performances that structure her relationships with others."[55] While the novel's plot seems to revolve around the crashed elevator—but frustrates the readers' desire to conclude with a meaningful resolution—Lila Mae is repeatedly confronted with the puzzle of other characters' performances. And yet, rather than interpreting their actions as theater, that is, as deliberate performances based on the necessity of navigating a social world structured by racial domination, she is deceived by appearances. Again and again she completely misreads other black characters' hexis, their way of

53 Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, 35.

54 Ibid., 31. On the "positive connotations" of Du Bois's double-consciousness, see Winfried Siemerling, "W. E. B. Du Bois, Hegel, and the Staging of Alterity," *Callaloo* 24, no. 1 (2001): 326. My point is not to negate the specificity of the experience analyzed by Du Bois, but merely to note the similarity of his and Bourdieu's accounts on a certain level of abstraction. Abstraction from the texts' immediate concerns might be necessary in both cases. Shamoon Zamir argues persuasively that Du Boisian double-consciousness should not be understood as expressing the experience of all blacks, but rather as the "historically specific and class-specific psychology" of "the Talented Tenth in crisis." Shamoon Zamir, *Dark Voices: W. E. B. Du Bois and American Thought, 1888–1903* (Chicago: The U of Chicago P, 1995), 116.

55 Selzer, "Instruments," 689.

presenting themselves and their bodies to the world. As a consequence, she falsely suspects one black man to be her antagonist and allows another to manipulate her by pretending to be her friend.

Lila Mae feels a particular aversion toward her only black colleague Pompey. Readers first become aware of the man at O'Connor's, where Lila Mae habitually looks for other black patrons:

> There is only one other colored person besides Lila Mae who [patronizes the bar], and that's Pompey, who's here tonight, elbows on the bar, sipping whiskey daintily as if it were the Caliph's tea, the cuffs of his shirt bold out of sad and comically short jacket sleeves. (24)

The lines are focalized through Lila Mae, and her perception of Pompey as a sad but comic type inform the narrator's choice of words. Compared to Lila Mae's anxiety in the white-dominated environment, Pompey's body language registers as an index of contentment and relaxation. "Bodily *hexis*," in Bourdieu's sociology, refers most pertinently to "the way [the body] is 'carried,' deportment, bearing" and "is assumed to express the 'deep being,' the true 'nature' of the 'person'."[56] Lila Mae interprets Pompey's hexis as an expression of an essential servility. Since the reader initially cannot but perceive Pompey except through Lila Mae's condescending gaze, her preconception goes unquestioned.

The rest of the paragraph relates a story about Pompey circulating among the inspectors; a story, the narrator notes, "that's true or not true: it doesn't matter" (24). This phrase, while easily overlooked, is significant, as it emphasizes that everyone's judgment of Pompey rests on a tale whose veracity no one cares to examine. In other words, the Pompey is introduced as a character whose meaning is entirely determined by the way others perceive him; his "being (*esse*) is a being-perceived (*percipi*)."[57] In the story Pompey, "the first colored elevator inspector in the city," is called to his superior's office and offered a cigar. Pompey

56 Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, 64.

57 Ibid., 66.

> expected confidences; Holt told him he was going to kick him in the ass. Pompey laughed […] and went along with the joke, even after Holt told him to bend over. Which he did. Pompey continued to chortle until Holt kicked him in the left ass cheek. […]. The next day a small memo appeared on Pompey's desk informing him of his promotion. (25)

For a story told by a narrator who has just admitted ignorance as to its truthfulness, it is oddly specific, including information about which ass cheek Pompey was kicked in. In fact, it reads like a tale repeatedly shared within a group of peers that is slightly revised in each iteration. The story is focalized collectively and reproduces the shared perspective of all inspectors including Lila Mae. The point is that it produces and circulates an image of Pompey as a man whose bent posture signifies an "appallingly obsequious nature" (25).

Like the other inspectors, Lila Mae engages in a substantialist reading of Pompey which ascribes motivations for his actions based on her spontaneous perception of him. And yet, when she subsequently confronts Pompey about his role in the elevator crash she is forced to reevaluate him. In his neighborhood she encounters a loving father and husband with close relations to his community.[58] After she accuses him of sabotage, he explicates himself:

> I got two boys. One five, the other seven. I was raised in this neighborhood. It's changed. […]. You see them kids play ball? Ten years from now half of them be in jail, or dead, and the other half working as slaves just to keep a roof over they heads. Ten years from now they won't even be kids playing ball on the street. Won't be safe enough even to do that. […]. My kids won't be here when that happens. I need money to take them out of here. (194)

In this encounter Pompey ceases to be a flat character. A picture of Pompey as a social agent who is aware of the way his social position constrains

58 For a reminder of the violence hidden "behind smiles" in this community, which is not simply romanticized in Whitehead's novel, see Sean Grattan, "I Think We're Alone Now: Solitude and the Utopian Subject in Colson Whitehead's *The Intuitionist*," *Cultural Critique* 96 (2017): 135.

his possibilities emerges: "What I done, I done because I had no other choice. This is a white man's world. They make the rules" (195). His actions are not the outward signs of an innate servility; instead, he has weighed his chances and decided to suffer humiliation and cater to white people's expectations. Lila Mae, who similarly plays a role and dons a mask when navigating a racist world, cannot see beyond the mask in Pompey's case. She, who repeatedly insists that she is "never wrong" (9, 255), is entirely wrong about her colleague. But, as Dorrit Cohn points out, free indirect discourse "[u]sed iteratively" can be a device that highlights a character's "mental rigidity."[59] Lila Mae reads "according to type."[60]

The same rigidity prevents Lila Mae from correctly assessing the ulterior motives of another black man, who initially presents himself as an ally. Natchez introduces himself as a porter working at the Intuitionist House, where Lila Mae finds refuge. Again, one of the first pieces of information which the reader conceives concerns his hexis. His "mouth is quick to smile." Whereas Lila Mae regarded Pompey as a sad and comic creature, Natchez registers as "a strong man" (49). Moreover, the novel uses divergent techniques in characterizing Pompey and Natchez. The former has hardly one line of direct speech until late in the novel, whereas Lila Mae's first meeting with the latter is rendered in the

59 Dorrit Cohn, *Transparent Minds: Narrative Modes for Presenting Consciousness* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1978), 132.

60 Selzer, "Instruments," 688. Whitehead uses another textual strategy that requires seeing relationships rather than isolated objects. The tale told by the elevator inspectors recalls an episode in a famous intertext, Richard Wright's autobiography *Black Boy*, in which Wright remembers a black co-worker—an elevator operator of all people!—who allowed white men to kick him for a quarter. Yet, Wright points out that his colleague Shorty was "[h]ardheaded, sensible, a reader of magazines and books" and "proud of his race and indignant about its wrongs." In fact, he only played "the role of clown" when "in the presence of whites." Wright's autobiography, thus, serves as a prior representation of the ways in which racialized domination forces individuals to engage in performances to make the best of a degrading situation. As Shorty puts it, "my ass is tough and quarters is scarce." Richard Wright, *Black Boy (American Hunger)*, in *Later Works*, ed. Arnold Rampersad (New York: The Library of America, 1991), 217–18. See also Liggins, "The Urban Gothic Vision," 368, n. 5.

form of a friendly conversation; a conversation whose pleasant nature is retroactively emphasized by way of a juxtaposition with the ensuing chapter, in which Lila Mae is rudely reminded of her status as a "colored" elevator inspector (53) during her final exam at the Institute for Vertical Transport. Finally, whereas Pompey's name signifies obsequiousness by evoking slave names, the name Natchez exudes feelings of community. It is the name of the town "where [his] mama's from," he tells Lila Mae, who replies that she is "from down South, too" (78).

The sense of a shared origin is further reinforced by the way Natchez's clothes appeal to the schemes of perception and appreciation which Lila Mae has acquired in the past. Natchez "wears a light blue suit of plain cut, the kind of suit she associates with the men of colored town, a church and wake suit, probably the only one he owns" (187). Natchez's demeanor and appearance remind Lila Mae of the world "down South" in which she grew up and thus "trigger the dispositions that the work of inculcation and embodiment has deposited."[61] Meeting a man who seems to emanate from this very world, she spontaneously perceives him as familiar and a potential "ally," as they both "come from the same place" (58).

As the man who confides in Lila Mae that Fulton had been passing for white, Natchez plays a crucial role in the novel's plot. Trying to enlist her help in the search for the blueprints of the perfect elevator, he explicitly appeals to her racial solidarity. Fulton's invention, he claims, is "the future of the cities. But it is our future, not theirs. It's ours. And we need to take it back. What he made, this elevator, colored people made that. And I'm going to show that we ain't nothing. Show them downstairs and the rest of them that we are alive" (140). Natchez motivational speech mirrors Henry Louis Gates's account of the political affordances of African American literature, discussed in a previous section. To wit, Gates argues that the function of black writing is to serve as evidence of black humanity, an ambition Natchez articulates as the desire "to show them that we ain't nothing." Since the perfect elevator so far exists only in the pages of Fulton's journals, that is to say in written form, Natchez's demand can also

61 Bourdieu, *Masculine Domination*, 38.

be read as a desire to reclaim a piece of writing as black writing. Then, the individual achievement turns into proof of collective potential.

It turns out, however, that Lila Mae, who initially accepts their shared racial mission, is deceived again. Natchez is, in fact, one Raymond Coombs who is on the payroll of Arbo, one of the two rival elevator manufacturers which are the "real players," as an investigative journalist puts it (209). He was sent because Arbo correctly assumed that Lila Mae would "trust one of her tribe" and "his story of correcting the injustices done to her race" (230). Eventually she confronts him in his office on the eightieth floor of the Arbo building, where he dismisses the significance of Fulton's racial identity.

> The rank and file in the industry won't believe [Fulton was black], and those who know care more about his last inventions. His color doesn't matter once it gets to that level. The level of commerce. They can put Fulton in one of those colored history calendars if they want—it doesn't change the fact that there's money to be made from his invention. (250)

At this level commerce trumps race; the consequences of the discovery of an "Africanist presence," which as per Morrison haunts American literature, turn out to be questionable.[62] To be sure, this in no way suggests that racism is absent from the world of *The Intuitionist*. What it does suggest, however, is that the novel's scrambling of temporalities functions to represent a world in which various relations of domination overlap in sometimes contradictory ways. In its "multi-temporal now"[63] the corporate world is happy to include individual blacks while others, even a vast majority, continue to be excluded on racist grounds. The ideological trick Natchez/Coombs tries to pull off by invoking the idea of a "racial population that is organically integrated and that operates as a collec-

62 Hence Lee Konstantinou argues, convincingly I think, that *The Intuitionist* is a "satire" of *Playing in the Dark*. "Critique Has Its Uses," *American Book Review* 38, no. 5 (2017): 15.

63 Grausam, "The Multitemporal Contemporary," 121.

tive subject"[64] is to represent his own success as a collective victory for the entire African American population.

The End(s) of African American Literature

All of this is to say that *The Intuitionist* is set during a moment when class divisions within the African American population are becoming more pronounced. Pompey's lay-sociological account of the transformations of his neighborhood bears this out. It used to be "a mixed block," he tells Lila Mae, but has become racially homogeneous (195). The French sociologist Loïc Wacquant distinguishes the "communal ghetto" of the first half of the twentieth century from the "hyperghetto" of the late twentieth century. The latter is characterized by deindustrialization, unemployment, and the "depacification of everyday life." Moreover, he points out that the class composition of the ghetto became extremely homogeneous, as the black middle class left urban ghettos. Pompey's desire to raise money to enable his family to leave their neighborhood is part of a broader trend of this class fraction of upwardly mobile blacks, often employed in the public sector.[65] Natchez/Coombs must obscure this emerging rift within the African American population when appealing to Lila Mae's solidarity, however, for otherwise his actions could not appear to serve collective ends.

If the problem of Fulton's lost notebooks is reframed in this way, it becomes apparent that *The Intuitionist*, published in 1999 and written

64 Adolph Reed, Jr., *Stirrings in the Jug: Black Politics in the Post-Segregation Era* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1999), 134. Natchez serves as a second allusion to Richard Wright or, more precisely, the Mississippi town close to which Wright was born. The first chapter of *Black Boy* does not provide a romantic image of southern black life but recounts how Wright was beaten unconscious by his mother after accidentally having set his grandparents' house on fire. Wright, *Black Boy*, 8. Shorty's actions suggest that submissive behavior can be strategic; Natchez problematizes the notion of an organic racial community.

65 Loïc Wacquant, "Deadly Symbiosis: When Ghetto and Prison Meet and Mesh," *Punishment & Society* 3, no. 1 (2001): 107, 104.

in 1996 or 1997,[66] anticipates the central argument of Kenneth Warren's much-discussed 2011 book *What Was African American Literature?*[67] Its thesis is as simple as its provocative: What turned African American literature into a collective project, as opposed to an aggregation of individual works, was the regime of Jim Crow segregation. Working in the confines of a system justified by the assertion of black racial inferiority, each work of literature by a black author would operate as counter-hegemonic "evidence of black achievement and excellence."[68] And yet, it follows from Warren's account that the "conditions" under which African American literature could figure as a collective project "no longer obtain" since the end of de jure segregation in the 1960s.[69] The end of African American literature, however, is not a cause for "lament" for Warren. After all, the world that provided its conditions of possibility is one "that black Americans did not want then and certainly don't want now."[70]

At this point I am not interested in assessing the accuracy of Warren's thesis, for I believe that his contribution lies not so much in the realm of

66 Colson Whitehead, "Tunnel Vision," interview by Daniel Zalewski, *The New York Times*, May 13, 2001, https://www.nytimes.com/books/01/05/13/reviews/010513.13zale.html.

67 Kenneth W. Warren, *What Was African American Literature?* (Cambridge, MA/London: Harvard UP, 2011). Upon its publication the book sparked discussions in prominent venues such as *African American Review*, *PMLA*, and the *Los Angeles Review of Books*.

68 Kenneth W. Warren, "A Reply to My Critics," *PMLA* 128, no. 2 (2013): 405. The indexical strategy of treating literature as evidence of human quality is reminiscent of Gates's account. The latter wishes to define black writing on formal grounds alone but must tacitly rely on a "racial basis" when assigning individual works. Otherwise non-black writers who employ "black" textual strategies could be said to have produced black literature. See Christopher Douglas, *A Genealogy of Literary Multiculturalism* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 2009), 317. Warren avoids this problem by arguing that the tradition's coherence was solely a function of a "politico-historical relation." "A Reply," 404.

69 Warren, *What Was African American Literature*, 9.

70 Kenneth W. Warren, "Does African American Literature Exist?" *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, February 24, 2011, https://www.chronicle.com/article/does-african-american-literature-exist/.

literary history, but in its critique of cultural politics. That is, rather than engaging in a *Universalienstreit* over whether the entity African American literature has existed, still exists, and will continue to exist, the (nominalist) question—What is at stake politically when using the same term to talk about literature produced by African Americans under Jim Crow and after its demise?—is more promising. Warren writes,

> [t]he key fact is that black literature's collective social and political relevance was a function of Jim Crow and the fight against it. To insist that writings by black Americans should count as African American literature is to take what was (even under the Jim Crow conditions that lent it plausibility) a problematic assumption of race-group interest, and to attempt to renew that assumption at a time when the grounds for asserting black identity and black solidarity are ever more tenuous.[71]

The assumption is "problematic," he elaborates, because of the "antidemocratic" assumption that talented individuals were best suited to represent the race: "the black literary voice could count for so much because, in political terms, the voice of black people generally counted for so little."[72] Conditions of general disenfranchisement made it possible and, as Warren concedes, somewhat plausible that exceptional individuals could represent the collective interest.[73]

Warren takes his cues from the way Adolph Reed, a frequent collaborator of his, characterizes black politics under Jim Crow. The southern black population, writes Reed, was externally managed through violent terror and the near total exclusion from the public. At the same time, there existed an "internal stratum" of black elites who mediated between the white power structure and the black population.[74] The position of

71 Warren, *What Was African American Literature*, 110.

72 Ibid., 146.

73 For an account of the anti-democratic ways in which, "[i]n politics as in art," the "dispossession" of the many correlates with the professionalism of the few, see Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, trans. Gino Raymond and Matthew Adamson (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), 175–76.

74 Reed, *Stirrings in the Jug*, 61.

this leadership stratum is structurally homologous to that of the literary elites in Warren's account. Reed also admits that this elitist model may have been inevitable, given the "ideological justification" of racist domination on the ground of an alleged "black incapacity," which could be "empirical[ly] refut[ed]" by black achievement. Yet, he is convinced that increasing intra-black class stratification has exploded the notion, so foundational for the older political approach, that there are collectively shared racial interests. Consequently, Reed accuses black elites who claim to speak in the name of the community as exploiting "shared racial status" as a means of representing their class-specific interests as "authentic group interest."[75]

This is why the reflex to use Michelle Alexander's bestselling book *The New Jim Crow* to ward off Warren's thesis slightly misses the point.[76] Warren does not deny that racism continues to structure the "sociopolitical landscape" of the United States,[77] but the onus would be on his critics to show that contemporary crises such as mass incarceration and police brutality are best met by a politics organized around race, in which political elites—and elites engaged in literary production at that—can act as representatives of the collective. Warren denies this. While Jim Crow "affect[ed] all blacks regardless of their class status,"[78] the metaphorical

75 Ibid., 31, 4.

76 Indeed, few of the responses to Warren fail to mention Alexander's book. See Marquis Bey, "Pitch Black, Black Pitch: Theorizing African American Literature," *CR: The New Centennial Review* 18, no. 1 (2018): 115; Russ Castronovo, "Trains, Plains, and *What Was African American Literature?*" *African American Review* 44, no. 4 (2011): 581; Marlon B. Ross, "This is *Not* an Apologia for African American Literature," *PMLA* 128, no. 2 (2013): 398, n. 1; Gene Andrew Jarrett, "What is Jim Crow?" *PMLA* 128, no. 2, (2013): 389; Sonnet Retman, "What Was African American Literature?" *PMLA* 128, no. 2 (2013): 394. Others argue similarly without name-checking Alexander, see Soyica Diggs Colbert, "On Tradition," *African American Review* 44, no. 4 (2011): 578. The question whether an appeal to Alexander is helpful for the project of criticizing Warren is raised by Avram Alpert, "Epochs, Elephants, and Parts: On the Concept of History in Literary Studies," *diacritics* 42, no. 4 (2014): 34.

77 Warren, *What Was African American Literature*, 5.

78 Warren, "Does African American Literature Exist?"

use of Jim Crow to name and condemn current forms of oppression is a means of "*rhetorically*" identifying the interests of black elites with those of black prison inmates—a position that not only Warren finds untenable.[79]

In Whitehead's *The Intuitionist* the rhetorical identification of blacks across class lines is the essence of Natchez/Coombs's appeal to Lila Mae's solidarity by way of his expressed ambition to use Fulton's writings indexically. The novel shares Warren's skepticism when it comes to using individual black writing as a means in the struggle for collective liberation. What does it mean, then, for Lila Mae to complete Fulton's project of creating the perfect elevator? One critic proposes to read the elevator as a symbol for

> the plight of the black race. Blacks can ride up and down but they are forever boxed in, enclosed, trapped by the racist ideals of an unchanging society, ensnared in a horizontal environment. The black box realizes America's vertical race hierarchy. The novel's black characters are restricted to horizontal movement.[80]

Apart from the slightly confusing contention that blacks are able to "ride up and down," while being "restricted to horizontal movement," this misses Raymond Coombs position in an office on the eightieth floor. At

79 Kenneth W. Warren, "Response," *African American Review* 44, no. 4 (2011): 590, emphasis in original. For another critique of the New Jim Crow thesis which insist on the significance of class divisions, see James Forman, Jr., "Racial Critiques of Mass Incarceration: Beyond the New Jim Crow," *New York University Law Review* 87 (2012): 101–46. The Endnotes editorial collective provides a detailed analysis of the cycle of anti-police struggles which began in 2012 and culminated in the Movement for Black Lives, asking whether these struggles could cohere around the notion "blackness" only to conclude that they did not. Endnotes, "Brown v. Ferguson," *Endnotes* 4 (2015): 10–69. See also John Clegg, "Black Representation After Ferguson," *The Brooklyn Rail*, May 2016, https://brooklynrail.org/2016/05/field-notes/black-representation-after-ferguson.

80 Isiah Lavender, III., "Ethnoscapes: Environment and Language in Ishmael Reed's *Mumbo Jumbo*, Colson Whitehead's *The Intuitionist*, and Samuel R. Delany's *Babel-17*," *Science Fiction Studies* 34, no. 2 (2007): 193.

"that level," he explains to Lila Mae in almost vulgar Marxist fashion, "color doesn't matter" as long as there is "money to be made" (250). The discovery of Fulton's blackness does not solve the puzzle of the perfect elevator, which is why the latter is best not read as a "racial allegory."[81] But what is it?

Elevatorness and Objecthood

Eventually, the ambition to discover the perfect elevator can be deciphered as a decidedly utopian ambition in the novel's organizing logic. *The Intuitionist* explicitly raises the question of this elevator's ontology by way of reproducing the elevator inspectors' discussions of Fulton's invention. According to a male Intuitionist, Fulton was engaged in "a renegotiation of our relationship to objects," which is confirmed by Lila Mae who quotes Fulton's demand that the "elevator" be separated "from elevatorness." It must possess some intangible quality that transcend its physical properties. Empiricists falsely "imagined elevators from a human" perspective, which remains an "inherently alien point of view." The "elevatorness" that separates the perfect elevator from the world of mere objects can only be grasped "from the elevator's point of view" (62). That is, its perfection is not contingent on its relationship to empirical individuals. Instead, it is a function of its separation from existing humans; in short, of its autonomy.

At the same time, an elevator cannot exist in a world apart from humans. *The Intuitionist* reproduces a classroom discussion that revolves around the elevator's status in the absence of a passenger. The students discuss the question "where the elevator is when it is not in service." One suggests that it "does not exist when there is no freight, human or otherwise" (101). Lila Mae adds that elevator and passenger "need each other"

81 Huehls, *After Critique*, 115. Ramón Saldívar similarly remarks that the issue of Fulton's passing is "the least interesting aspect of this story." "The Second Elevation of the Novel: Race, Form, and the Postrace Aesthetic in Contemporary Narrative," *Narrative* 21, no. 1 (2013): 10.

(102). All of this is to say that the novel places irreconcilable demands on the perfect elevator (which is why it remains a utopian object): On the one hand, it cannot be a mere object but must possess a quality—that intangible "elevatorness"—that transcends its physicality, a quality that cannot merely be registered empirically from the human perspective; on the other, it needs empirical humans to exist. Like a work of art, it strives for autonomy but remains condemned to be part of the world.[82]

As such, as an object that must not be a mere object but cannot not be an object, the perfect elevator is, Lila Mae admits, a "supreme fiction" (232). The wording is reminiscent of Michael Fried's influential account of the work of art according to which the belief that art inhabited a different realm amounts to "the supreme fiction that the beholder did not exist."[83] In his study of eighteenth-century French painting and criticism Fried analyzes "the primordial convention that paintings are made to be beheld."[84] Like Fulton's perfect elevator, painting necessitates a human audience; yet Denis Diderot, who serves as the critical authority for Fried, remained committed to art which "negat[ed] the beholder's presence." A successful work of art would have to be "hermetic, in that the structure that results is self-sufficient, a closed system, which in effect seals of the space or world of the painting from that of the beholder"—perhaps just like a "black box." The work's self-sufficiency is established by a commitment to "*pictorial unity*,"[85] which itself is a product of the "structure of relations"[86] that constitutes the work.

Fried's much-discussed 1967 essay "Art and Objecthood" revolves around a similar problem. It criticizes Minimalist art as practiced by Donald Judd, Robert Morris, Tony Smith, and others, whom he rebukes for producing "nothing more than objects." A successful work of art

82 For a discussion of the "double character" of art, see Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Continuum, 2002), 225.

83 Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (Chicago: The U of Chicago P, 1980), 103.

84 Ibid., 93.

85 Ibid., 103, 64, 76, emphasis in original.

86 Michael Fried, "How Modernism Works: A Reply to T. J. Clark," *Critical Inquiry* 9, no. 1 (1982): 233.

must instead "defeat or suspend its own objecthood." This it does by being "relational," insofar as its "individual elements bestow significance on one another precisely by virtue of their juxtaposition."[87] The relationship between the work's moments, thus, establishes its unity by exceeding its "singleness" as an object.[88] The latter, however, is precisely what the Minimalists strive for, suppressing "relationships within the work,"[89] which is why Fried concludes that the Minimalist object fails to transcend its mere objecthood and, hence, fails to be art.

In the 1967 essay, Fried's name for the "espousal of objecthood" is "theater."[90] His 1980 book on French painting also pursues a critique of theatricality via Diderot, who used the term "the theatrical" to express his aversion to painting that openly acknowledged the beholder. The painterly representation of strong emotions, such as a woman's grief, which are intentionally meant to affect the beholder produces, Diderot claims, a "*grimace*."[91] Now is the time to remember that *The Intuitionist* knows theater and grimaces as well: Lila Mae relies on "theater" to "be among other people" (56) and, consequently, transform her face into a "fright mask" (57). Finally, then, the relevance of this detour through Michael Fried's art history and criticism becomes comprehensible. In the world of Whitehead's novel, theater is required because of the social relations of racialized domination which compel Lila Mae to wear a mask in public—and Pompey, Natchez/Coombs, and Fulton also engage

87 Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood," in *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago/London: The U of Chicago P, 1998), 151, 150, 164. Throughout the essay Fried uses the term "literalism" to refer to Minimalism. For a discussion of Fried's relational conception of the work of art, see Marlon Lieber, "Art and Economic Objecthood: Preliminary Remarks on 'Sensuous Supra-Sensuous' Things," *REAL – Yearbook of Research in English and American Studies* 35 (2019): 68.

88 Fried, "Art and Objecthood," 150.

89 Robert Morris, "Notes on Sculpture 1–3," in *Art in Theory, 1900–1990: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992), 818, quoted in Fried, "Art and Objecthood," 150.

90 Fried, "Art and Objecthood," 153.

91 Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality*, 100, 97.

in public performances when navigating this world. The world of theater, in short, is the world of anti-black racism. As a novel committed to envisioning the utopian possibility of a world beyond anti-black racism, *The Intuitionist* rejects theatricality.[92]

The analogy between the perfect elevator and the anti-theatrical work of art can be taken further still by way of attending to the role of embodied dispositions sketched in an earlier section of this chapter. While the successful work of art seals itself off from the beholder, the Minimalist work is experienced as "an object in a *situation*—one that, virtually by definition, *includes the beholder*," which means, Fried stresses, "the beholder's *body*."[93] A work of art committed to pictorial unity, despite its supremely fictional ambition to be completely autonomous from the world of humans, requires a beholder able to grasp the way in which the relations between individual elements bestows meaning upon the whole—in short, it requires a relational thinker. The Minimalist work, on the other hand, addresses an individual qua body and thus, I venture, an individual as a bearer of embodied dispositions. But in *The Intuitionist* these dispositions are precisely the site of the incorporation of the social and its relations of domination.

Here is, finally, the utopian significance of Fulton's demand to separate "elevator" and "elevatorness." The perfect elevator has to exceed its status as an object which addresses only bodies who are the bearers of the history of racialized domination. In a passage alluded to before, Bourdieu writes:

> The principle of action […] lies in the complicity between two states of the social, between history in bodies and history in things, or, more precisely, between the history objectified in the form of structures and mechanisms […] and the history incarnated in bodies in the form of

92 For an alternative account of Fried, theatricality, and blackness, see Fred Moten, *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 2003), 233–39.

93 Fried, "Art and Objecthood," 153, 155, emphases in original.

> habitus, a complicity which is the basis of a relation of quasi-magical participation between these two realizations of history.[94]

The perfect elevator explodes the complicity between bodies and things. It literalizes the "supreme fiction" that one could create an object unable to activate the "history incarnated in bodies in the form of habitus." The perfect elevator would, in other words, have to be an object that does not objectify the history of racialized domination that weighs like a nightmare on the bodies of the living. As such it could no longer communicate with bodies which have incorporated the same history.[95] And, indeed, in the course of *The Intuitionist* Lila Mae begins to learn no longer to rely on her body when reading elevators.

When the reader first observes Lila Mae in action, her Intuitionist method of elevator inspection works by establishing a material connection to the elevator by "lean[ing] against" its walls (5). Lauren Berlant, thus, regards Intuitionism as "a school of thought that teaches people to take on the sensual perspective of the object […] in order to read its health" through corporeal contact.[96] Fulton's teachings, however, demand that one "communicate with the elevator on a nonmaterial basis" (62). Later in the novel, Lila Mae only "*imagines* her hand extending out to the unyielding solidity of that dead elevator's walls" (226, my emphasis). Unlike some critics, I do not believe that *The Intuitionist* privileges embodied knowledges,[97] for the novel treats the habitual schemes of perception and appreciation that are thoroughly embodied as a problem

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94 Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, 150–51.

95 Sean Grattan argues in a similar vein when he points out that the perfect elevator could only address humans possessing "new appendages, new organs, and new ways of being." "I Think We're Alone Now," 142. Souleymane Ba proposes that the perfect elevator prefigures "a proleptic posthuman and postracial world." "Afrofuturism in Contemporary African American Literature: Reading Colson Whitehead," *Black Studies Papers* 2, no. 1 (2016): 53.

96 Lauren Berlant, "Intuitionists: History and the Affective Event," *American Literary History* 20, no. 4 (2008): 853.

97 See Spencer Morrison, "Elevator Fiction: Robert Coover, Colson Whitehead, and the Sense of Infrastructure," *Arizona Quarterly* 73, no. 3 (2017), 115; Selzer, "Instruments," 696.

rather than a solution. To be sure, nor does the novel suggest that these embodied dispositions could be overcome. In the diegetic world of the novel, knowledge remains irreducibly situated.[98] This is why the perfect elevator must remain a utopian object in a literal sense: there is no place in the novel's world for it to exist. It only exists in the pages of Fulton's notebooks, that is, in the form of writing.

The perfect elevator, then, serves not as a vehicle in a racial allegory; its function in the novel is that of an allegory for cultural production.[99] Lila Mae's work of detection must lead her to the conclusion that she is not the protagonist of a detective novel, but of a *Künstlerroman*. "In writing the black box," Sean Grattan writes in a lucid account of the novel's utopian dimension, "Lila Mae writes something beyond new habits; she writes the potential for another world."[100] At the very end, she retreats to her room to write the perfect elevator which might just as well be the perfect work of (literary) art that prefigures a world beyond racialized bodies and things. As in Kenneth Warren's account of African American literature, Lila Mae's endeavor has an "instrumental" function,[101] even an

98 See Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (1988): 575–99.. Haraway disparagingly calls the ambition "of seeing everything from nowhere," that is, of a perception not reducible to an embodied standpoint, the "god trick" (581). In the conclusion I will show that Whitehead's *Zone One* remains ambiguously committed to literature that demands to be read from a god-like perspective.

99 My pairing of Bourdieu and Fried may appear unwieldy at first. The French sociologist is well-known for his critique of the "pure aesthetic." See Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgment of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA/London: Harvard UP, 1984). In his lectures on Manet he twice calls Fried an "iconologist gone mad." Pierre Bourdieu, *Manet: A Symbolic Revolution*, trans. Peter Collier and Margaret Rigaud-Drayton (Cambridge: Polity, 2017), 237, 337. It would amount to a grave misunderstanding, however, to believe that Bourdieu rejected the aesthetic per se; instead, his sociology leads to the demand to "universaliz[e] the conditions of access" to art appreciation. Bourdieu and Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*, 88.

100 Sean Grattan, "I Think We're Alone Now," 146.

101 Warren, *What Was African American Literature*, 10.

anti-racist one. The perfect elevator anticipates a future in which objects no longer bear the traces of racism. Yet, as her encounter with Natchez/Coombs has made clear, her project can no longer be that of an individual author writing African American literature in the service of a collective project. Hence, the problem with which I began this chapter: Lila Mae must both continue Fulton's work and take historical transformations, such as the increase of class divisions within the African American population, into consideration and invent new modes of writing. This, Whitehead's debut novel seems to say, has been the predicament of the black writer ever since the ambiguous, uneven, and inconclusive end of Jim Crow.