

**They Are Sending Us To Heaven:  
Elevator-Citizenship in Colson  
Whitehead's *The Intuitionist* (1999)**

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*So complete is Number Eleven's ruin that there's nothing left but the sound of the crash,  
rising in the shaft, a fall of the opposite: a soul.<sup>1</sup>*

*-Number Eleven*

## **I. What Is An 'Elevator-Citizen'?**

Colson Whitehead's *The Intuitionist* (1999) ends its first section, titled *DOWN*, with an elevator crash. Number Eleven is an elevator, and its collapse substitutes the role of murder victim in Whitehead's debut detective novel, which trades the traditional police department for the Department of Elevators, or Guild in a 20th century inspired city.

*The Intuitionist* relies heavily on the detective novel and its lineage, owing Raymond Chandler and other hard-boiled detective authors a pretense for the film-noir aesthetics the novel takes its form<sup>2</sup>. Whitehead's novel takes on these detective aesthetics without wholly reproducing its catalogue of tropes and stereotypes, which furthers *The Intuitionist's* attempt at genre intervention. Being Whitehead's first novel, there are a lot of liberties taken with the old formula that allow a renewed vision to emerge from the genre. Elevator inspectors share little in common with police at face value, and Whitehead himself stated in an interview<sup>3</sup> that his initial idea for the novel was crafting a 'fake detective' story that evolved into the novel that was published in 1999. Those two facts do not absolve *The Intuitionist* of its cigar-smoking and skyline-musing that it indulges in from time to time. *The Intuitionist* reflects the detective genre, but is not constrained by it.

Whereas the protagonists for hard-boiled detective novels are usually white male cops, Whitehead seeks to move the narrative focus onto the genre's racialized other. Citizens in

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<sup>1</sup> Whitehead, p.36

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<sup>3</sup>Charlie Rose interviewed Colson Whitehead in 2001 for 60 Minutes (<https://charlierose.com/videos/5009>)

Whitehead's novel are white or colored, and society also maintains itself around these racial habits, much like the actual United States. This reformation of race into the literary sets the thematic tone for the social commentary Whitehead creates. His protagonist is Lila Mae Watson, and she is the first black female elevator inspector in the novel's city. She is the exact opposite of the typical American construction, and within the novel she is also one of two black elevator inspectors in the city. Pompey, the other black inspector, is positioned as the Uncle Tom for his allegiance to Intuitionism's white political rival: Empiricism.

However, Lila Mae Watson is also the only black Intuitionist in the Guild, and intuitionism is seen as distinctly colored and distinctly subordinate to empiricism, which is the dominant school of thought within the Elevator's Guild. Intuitionism acts as the antithesis of empirical maintenance, diagnosing and maintaining elevators through 'true' communication within the elevator rather than using mechanical tools and apparatuses to fix them (82).

Number Eleven was last inspected by Lila Mae Watson, who has a 10% higher accuracy rate than her Empiricist counterparts, before it crashed. The elevator itself resided in the Fanny Briggs building, which was the city's newest municipal building. Fanny Briggs was 'a slave who taught herself to read,' and the building was named in her honor by the city's Mayor after protests by "an increasingly vocal colored population" (12). These initial descriptions of the building already do much to set Whitehead's construction apart from the hard-boiled detective field and create a racial allegory within the two warring elevator factions. The Mayor's concessions are dictated by people and their movement, making elevators and their management a political and economic battleground. The colored population is growing within the cities and the novel imagines the white-dominated political infrastructure as one of anxious preparation for shifting demographics.

The early 1900s leak into Whitehead's simulacrum of New York City, and Lila Mae Watson faces undue amounts of casual and structural racism in the modern metropolis as a result. The ways in which Whitehead combines Watson's experiential narrative with an overarching omniscient narrator invokes what Nadine M. Knight calls the 'prophetic tradition' of black authors at the site of racial crisis<sup>4</sup>. Knight states in her article "'It's a New Day': 'The Intuitionist, The Wire', and Prophetic Tradition" that prophecy "reintroduces a reliance on human voice and interpretation to counteract the technologically driven view of urban that prizes rationality, impersonality, and mechanization," which fully applies to Whitehead's protagonist and her forewarning intuition ( 29). The entire factional warfare between Empiricists and Intuitionists rely on the platforming of this human voice over mechanized rationality, reinforcing the thematic framework of prophecy Knight formulates.

Lila Mae Watson is guided by an overwhelming intuition for her safety and desires, and this trait is over-pronounced as a means of free and direct discourse between author and reader that allows for a much more imaginative space when it comes to description. The third-person narration takes on an almost biblical voice in its musings on elevators and race, which strengthen greatly the overall allegory Whitehead creates. Watson is driven by the prophetic black box, which is supposed to usher in a new era for mankind and transform cities into indescribable new ways of being (82).

However, *The Intuitionist* has something going on below the surface of its seemingly prophetic tradition of resurrection: The anthropomorphism of elevators. Number Eleven is

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<sup>4</sup> "'It's a New Day': 'The Intuitionist, The Wire', and Prophetic Tradition.," Nadine Knight. (29-32) The article reinforces the idea that the prophetic format is a longstanding tradition in black culture, and upholds the idea that this mode was formed by those before Whitehead: James Baldwin, Toni Morrison, Octavia Butler, Frederick Douglass, Martin Luther King, Angela Davis, Malcolm X, Ralph Ellison, and W.E.B. DuBois are just a few of the authors who have invoked this tradition. Whitehead's novel ultimately takes its place in that tradition by its thematic reliance on intuition, or the ability to readily imagine the future.

described as losing its soul when it crashes, implicating a certain human frailty to the vertical technology.

There is the construction of the 'elevator-citizen' within the novel, and it is loosely defined as the perfect elevator for the elevator world (Whitehead 100). The 'elevator-citizen' is a prophecy or proscription for the future cities created by Jame Fulton, the founder of Intuitionism. The elevator-citizen is also an elevator, much like Number Eleven, perceived from the elevator's point of view. The elevator-citizen seeks to synthesize the objectivity of the elevator with the objectification of black people in the urban environment. This idea sits at the center of Intuitionist thought and informs their work and teachings, as it is later seen in Fulton's in-text work *On Theoretical Elevators*. The 'elevator-citizen' is useful, then, in both describing Lila Mae Watson's agency within the city and the elevators as they are personified. Lila Mae Watson stands in contention to the citizenship around her, and her presence starts to upend that very fragile opposition.

Lila Mae Watson is framed for the crash of Number Eleven, inspiring a prophetic-detective plot in which she searches for the blueprints to the perfect elevator, which would ultimately absolve her of blame. While it would be easy to write off the espionage, corporate thugs, and maverick journalism latent in the novel as trope, it is worthwhile to analyze these tropes in the context of the overarching racial space Whitehead has created with the term 'elevator-citizen'. The 'elevator-citizen' is racialized as a colored, or black, citizen waiting for the cities to match their intuitive citizenship. Whitehead's 'elevator-citizen' offers a potential avenue to reconcile with modern racial formations within the city by completely reconstructing what it means to live in that city. If verticality is the enterprise of modern politics and economies, then it necessitates a citizenship designed to only go up.

## II. Building the City: Parallaxes of Urban Citizenship in the Modern Era

Although *The Intuitionist* does not have a stated time period, it is implied by the urban descriptions to be dated and undated by 20th century politics in the northeastern United States. The novel takes place in a timeless, alternate New York City, inviting a historical parallax to the ‘Great Northward Migration’ of the 1920s and the growth of northern cities. Around 6 million black Americans migrated to northern cities over the course of the 20th century and concentrated in cities such as New York City, Philadelphia, Chicago, and others in the Midwest and Northeast.

The Reconstruction of the American South did not deliver on its promises of integrating freed black people into the United States political body, but rather failed and in its wake left reconciliation delegated to the future. Cities acted as the next step in liberation, leading to the mass movements northward in the decades after the war. The protagonist Lila Mae Watson states “this is the true result of integration: the replacement of sure violence with deferred sure violence,” which captures the proximity to violence in all social spaces (23). The city acts as bastions of deferred violence in *The Intuitionist* and an obstacle for potential elevator-citizens trying to construct a new urban space. In other words, the agency of black people was considered outside the realm of politics and therefore subject to a political violence overwriting their actions. Black people were assigned an object status that has persisted centuries after the institution proper was abolished. The idea of a black citizen was antithetical to the laws that constituted the United States political body. The violence of lynchings is the clearest example of this destruction of citizenship. Lynchings forced many people to leave, and this direct threat of violence cannot be understated. The definition of lynching is expansive, and requires us to look past the traditional image of white violence.

Lynchings of all forms were a pandemic in the south that eventually spread to other parts of the country. The 1863 Draft Riot in New York City and the riots that occurred in Chicago in 1905 and 1919 are just a few of the violence enacted upon black people who moved to and lived in the urban centers of the north. The [Plaintalk History project](#), developed in 2017, maps out the history of white supremacist violence against black people from 1844 until the present day<sup>5</sup>, and is a useful resource in visualizing the ubiquity of this violence without looking at the violence itself. New York had relatively few instances compared to any other northern city, but the project makes note that much of the violence seen in the north is characterized by the mob's externalization of political and economic crisis onto the individuals that they lynched. The map starts to reveal the failings of northern integration in the 20th century.

These black migrant movements occurred in the first half of the 20th century, and today around 36% of the black population lives in an urban environment in the United States. Suburban living has taken a slight rise in the 2010s, and now 39%, or the majority of black Americans now live in suburbs outside of major cities<sup>6</sup>. 20th century urban success started with these migrations, but Whitehead's novel intervenes at the established ground level: Northeastern cities were already segregated before arrival<sup>7</sup>, pointing to something else orchestrating the growth of these cities. There was the political construction of the 'citizen' occurring in the construction of the modern northern city.

The construction of the American 'citizen' in the modern city was markedly northern, white, male and Protestant. Whiteness became the signifier for U.S. citizenship as a result of the indigenous genocide and institution of slavery committed by European colonists starting in the

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<sup>5</sup> Plaintalk History Project: <https://plaintalkhistory.com/monroeandflorencework/explore/map2/#3/38/-97.5>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.theatlantic.com/business/archive/2016/10/trump-african-american-inner-city/503744/>

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.city-journal.org/html/great-remigration-13493.html> This short article by Daniel DiSalvo highlights the migrational patterns of black people in the United States over the past century and a half, giving a sourced archive of how the population migrated north to urban centers, and now in the 21st century black people are moving to urban centers in the American south.

15th century. Masculinity excluded women from the realm of citizenship as well, leaving black women doubly targeted by institutional violence. The most emblematic of this construction within *The Intuitionist* is Frank Chancre, the current head of the Elevators Guild. Chancre is an Empiricist and distasteful of Lila Mae and her perfect record. He is described repeatedly as ‘piggish’ and having corpulent features. His characterization is one of greed, and points to an excess of corporate greed that was the impetus for the many real-life equivalents of Chancre.

Again, Whitehead’s choice of protagonist works as an intervention into this greater American political history. Watson’s position signifies a black citizenship that has always been present in the United States, and the novel presents this tension of presence towards the creation of the ‘American citizen’. If white men were considered the top of the societal pyramid in the formation of modernism, then black women would have represented the bottom; Whitehead’s novel overlays this racial hierarchy onto the verticality of the city, ascribing vertical privilege to white masculinity. The position of black women, then, was difficult to codify as they did not fit explicitly into the categories of citizen or non-citizen.

Legislature during the early 1920s was explicitly pro-white, which meant that European immigrants were quickly taken into the fold of citizenship by laws that excluded ethnicities farther from an Anglo-Saxon standard. Black people and other minority peoples were excluded to the realm of integration in terms of policy and bills. American citizenship offered a horizontal cultural exchange in the form of the hyphen, making ‘integration’ was the term for describing the lack of infrastructure for those who could not fit into the categories of citizenship.

*The Intuitionist* accounts for this history returning in the present, and recounts Elisha Otis’ demonstration of the modern safety elevator in 1854. Elisha Otis is considered the father of the modern day elevator, and he presented his invention first at the Exhibition of the Industry of

All Nations. The Exhibition of the Industry of All Nations' was actually hosted at the Crystal Palace in New York, and put on display all of the cultural items from colonized peoples. The intent of these exhibitions were to show the progress of the 'civilized' world, which were the imperial powers of the time. The myth is retold in *The Intuitionist* with intention; Otis' exhibition very well describes a lynching:

“Please watch carefully,” Mr. Otis says. He holds the saw in the air, a golden crescent in the lamplight, and begins to sever the rope holding him in the air. The first time is the best time. It is quiet. The rope dances in the air as the final strands give... The people in the exhibition still have a roar in them, even after all they have seen this day. A Safety Elevator. Verticality is not far off now, and true cities. The first elevation has begun. Mr. Elisha Otis ... says, “All safe, gentleman, all safe.” (81-82)

What would be the concluding message if we were to read the scene in such a way that it allegorizes lynching? We can draw several conclusions: The crowd's response is one of satisfaction, and it is implied that this is Otis' first of many demonstrations. The elevator also mirrors the lynching in its verticality, and absorbs the violence into the urban infrastructural achievement perceived, meaning that the moral view of urban infrastructural achievement depended on immoral view of its human cost. *The Intuitionist* uses the first elevation to describe the reorientation of verticality in the modern era, pointing to the rise in significance of cultural height.

The crowd's reactions are of particular interest; the lines “The first time is the best time,” and “the people... still have a roar in them” evoke images of a mob of spectators (82). The first elevation is emblematic of the first waves of lynching in the southern U.S, which became a public event over time. The public photography and written evidence of the lynchings helped to

codify the white supremacist narrative that justified them in the first place: black people were inherently evil and needed to be erased from society. Lynchings were necessarily public, and the in-text descriptions of the platform ropes are followed by a public uproar. When a black person was accused of a crime, lynching became the quickest mob mechanism to ensure white safety while simultaneously eliminating the presupposed threat. The celebratory mood does not come out of a sense of justice or criminality, but rather the feeling of safety. Elisha Otis receives this same uproar for suspending the elevator in mid-air, and the text makes sure to acknowledge that his success depends on that violent spectacle.

Black people were objectified in the act of lynching; their deaths were overwritten with the imagination of the often white viewer. That is why Elisha Otis exclaims “All safe” at the end; the presence of danger (black people and an elevator crash) is nullified when the elevator itself is suspended up in the air. The scene directly undercuts that notion of progress in its affective proximity to lynching by showing that the height of lynching and violence against black people fueled the change in vertical perspective.

Laws prohibiting violence against black people did not stop the violence from occurring, as it was the lack of safety for urban black lives that guaranteed safety for white lives. Elisha Otis’ safety elevator suspends his body in the air for all to see, and it is in the name of progress. The special mechanism used to suspend the elevator in the air is the very same mechanism that ensures the safety of its occupants. The function of this metaphor dips farther into the prophetic when a re-enactment of the first elevation is performed by Chancre, who is the Chair of the Department and an Empiricist, later in the novel. The first elevation as a metaphor is so powerful then, to indirectly tie that affective terror and violence to the first demonstration of technological progress.

Otis was not the first one to make the safety elevator, but his sons took the story of his demonstration and made it into propaganda to create an empire in technical apparatus manufacturing. *Lifted: A Cultural History of Elevators* (2014) states that Otis' sons founded the Otis Company in 1861, and fabricated the details their father's demonstration of the modern safety elevator in order to gain a near-monopoly of the growing market<sup>8</sup> at the beginning of the 20th century. Elisha Otis did not do anything other than demonstrate "the safety device whose reliability he proved by using himself as a guinea pig" (Bernault 1).

Their myth of invention is deeply intertwined with the politics of American citizenship, and those same exclusionary categories (whiteness, masculinity, Christian) dominated the cultural perception of who were the innovators and inventors. Several other men developed the safety mechanism for elevators, but it was the Otis brothers whose legacy adopted the status of progenitor. Otis Worldwide is currently the largest manufacturer of technical apparatus in the world. The company has manufactured elevators for nearly all of the modern day skyscrapers: the Eiffel Tower, the Empire State Building, the Burj Khalifa, the CN tower, and the original World Trade center. The use of Otis' original spectacle has now guaranteed the company contracts in nearly every international building, and that social construction of dominance is what Whitehead's scene ultimately alludes to with the first elevation. Otis' company appears in *The Intuitionist* as one of the international elevator corporations that is after Fulton's black box, but it is overshadowed for the fictional Arbo Metropolitan and Elevators United corporations.

These two corporations are ultimately behind the politicalization of the elevator crash in the Fanny Briggs building, and do so to increase international sales and stifle the Intuitionist bid for Guild Head in the city. The city is of interest to these international corporations, and having an elevator crash tied to the Intuitionism school would ensure a monopoly on vertical

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<sup>8</sup> *Lifted: A Cultural History of the Elevator*

infrastructure. The political schemes went beyond Chancre, Pompey, and other members of the guild, revealing an international operation in vertical transportation.

Lila Mae Watson finds a lead for the corporations' involvement at the Funicular Follies towards the end of *The Intuitionist*. The Funicular Follies is a party hosted by the Guild every year, and this year it is hosted by Frank Chancre, current head of the Guild. To boost support for re-election, Chancre reenacts the first elevation at the party at the end of several extremely quick minstrel shows. The beginning of his reenactment is described as such: "the elevator is center stage now, wood and divine despite Chancre's perversion" (136). The divinity of the elevator comes out overtly in Chancre's preparation of the first elevation. Chancre's perversion is caused by his embodiment of this constructed citizenship, and ultimately why the platform collapses during his demonstration. Chancre's politics have little use in the world that Fulton's intuitionism calls for. The elevator physically cannot take Chancre and others like him to this next world, and that idea reinforces the religiosity analyzed at the beginning of the essay. Whitehead is constructing a myth of uplift for the urban black citizen, substituting resurrection with elevation, and this can be most clearly seen around Whitehead's descriptions of the black box, or perfect elevator.

### **III. Realizing Uplift in the Black Box**

It is established early on in Whitehead's *The Intuitionist* that vertical transportation is the technological forefront of society and Elisha Otis' 1854 demonstration of the safety elevator is marked as the 'first elevation' of mankind. The black box, or perfect elevator, is said to usher in the 'second elevation' but it cannot do so without the elevator-citizen. We have described the

elevator-citizen as the black experience living through technological advancement and an allegory for the violence of racism. But what is its counterpart, the black box?

The black box as a metaphor serves Whitehead as a device for the deliverance from the current world into the next. The black box is a delegated crisis of faith, reinforcing itself along racial lines. The black box is the signifier of a symbolic change in the order of things, and this is most evident in the way *The Intuitionist* frames progress. Fulton was ultimately describing a reckoning with the color line, and he did so in a religious way. The black box is useful, then as a spiritual framework to analyze the myths of modern progress, and its correlate is the elevator-citizen, who is created from this reckoning.

It is religious in theme and format, and is described most blatantly as a coffin towards the end of the novel. It is developed as more than just a coffin by the time Watson has received his notes. Whitehead's parody of the detective genre is most apparent in this definition of the box; the black box was made up as a joke by the founder of Intuitionism, James Fulton. Fulton was a white-passing black man who moved up from the south into the city when Lila Mae was at university. He wrote his theory in three parts, dying before finishing the third volume. The second and third volume is where we see religiosity take hold in Fulton's theory, and it transitions from parody to prophecy. The third volume goes largely unfinished, but Lila Mae Watson ultimately holds the keys to Fulton's theory being fully realized.

Watson's search for the black box leaves her at the end of Fulton's notes on the third volume, but her search along the way reveals that initial secret of white passing. She describes the situation, stating, "Fulton's hatred of himself and his lie of whiteness. White people's reality is built on what things appear to be—that's the business of Empiricism ... their sacred Empiricism has no meaning when it can be bought" (239). Fulton's theories were complicated by his racial

ambiguity to white people and himself. He came to believe in the elevator-citizen and its world due to the very notion that the modern empiricism was only skin deep. Transcendence in Fulton's mind and third volume refers to the transcendence of the color line in order to create citizenship on completely alien terms. It is Watson that determines this to be the cause of his tone shift between the first and second volumes, and ultimately his genuine uptake of his own theories towards the end of his life.

The creator of the black box, James Fulton, is a white-passing black man who moved up from the south and that echoes the prophetic tradition in an interesting way. James Fulton hid his blackness in order to be accepted by the white society in the northern United States. The wording of the 'second elevation' positions Fulton as parallel to Christ without delving too deeply into the historical nature of Christianity and its use in colonialism.

Whitehead's novel doesn't fully expand upon this connection, but Fulton's teachings are laden with spiritual metaphor and resurrection. Fulton writes "There is another world beyond this one" and makes references to the "perfect elevator terminating at heaven", and the most apparent takes place in his first volume *On Theoretical Elevators*, which states:

There are no mistakes for there is no sentence save the one nature imposes (mortality). You are standing on a train platform. A fear of missing the train, a slavery to time, has provided...the train is always leaving and you have not found your words. Remember the train, and that thing between you and your words. An elevator is a train. The perfect train terminates at Heaven. The perfect elevator waits while its human freight tries to grab through the muck and find the words. In the black box, this messy business of human communication is reduced to excreted chemicals, understood by the souls receptors and translated into true speech. (86)

The black box extends itself past a metaphor for the physical coffin that we are placed in when we die to a fully-fleshed metaphor of movement. “A train is an elevator,” makes an associative gesture and signals a post-structuralist approach to language. Post-structuralism undergirds the entire Intuitionist school of thought, and this can be most plainly seen in the above. Fulton’s description of the perfect train terminating at heaven reinforces his characterization as a modern Christ without directly reinforcing the historical structure of whiteness<sup>9</sup>.

The parable remains, but its formal structure has been revised for a different historical period, much like the other scenes involving Elisha Otis’ invention. Fulton, and Whitehead by authorship, are asking for a renegotiation between objects and people in the post-structuralist vein, and this has a great effect in the metaphor of the elevator. “The perfect train terminates at heaven” allows the realization of the elevator-citizen in partnership with the black box. The elevator-citizen needs the black box to usher the second elevation, implying that one needs the intuitive framework to move beyond the racialized society one lives in.

The black box takes inspiration from the real black box theory, which is an analysis of systems through their inputs and outputs. Examples of black boxes would include the human brain, search engine algorithms, and are not limited by their unknowability: our interactions with televisions and vending machines operate on an input and output level. The black box has been a long standing symbol that is racialized by its unknowability. The Empiricists are after the black box for a reason, however, and that is to commodify it.

The perfect elevator then follows as a metaphor for the transportation of white violence to the social space: Black people are pathologized and treated like a crisis in urban spaces and ultimately political spaces. The black box is quite literally the black box that is used to codify unjust laws and practices that specifically target darker skinned people in the United States.

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<sup>9</sup> Barnes, Andrew . Chapter 2 “Making People” *Global Christianity and the Black Atlantic* (pp.31-54)

Black people are a site of potential crisis, and we will later see how this has formed in modern politics. 'Black' has become a political formation with its own institutions and apparatuses, yet the dominant hierarchy remains due to this disposition to turning individual black people as sites of crisis. *The Intuitionist* argues that this crisis manufacturing is one ultimately of faith. Because the United States legislature ultimately does not have the capacity to consider blackness in full citizenship, the black box will always remain a theory, or potentiality.

The elevator acts as a site of crisis within the novel, as it is an elevator crash that spurs its events. The Fanny Briggs building is black housing within the unnamed city, and one that Lila Mae Watson inspected several weeks before it plummeted twenty stories at the beginning of the novel. It was a catastrophe, but the Empiricists in the Department of Elevators use the accident to delegitimize the Intuitionist school of thought and win the upcoming election. The black box theory can never come to materialize because it has already been dematerialized, deconstructed, or negated as a subject. The black box creates a potential crisis, and the Empiricists specifically want to create contingencies for its creation. In *The Intuitionist*, the role in which the black box acts as a vehicle of crisis is one that has to be intentionally hailed and continuously appears to substantiate itself.

The Intuitionist approach to elevators is to ride in the elevator in order to feel its inner workings. Intuitionists desire to 'design an elevator from the elevator's point of view', which posits itself in contention with the Empirical school of elevator maintenance (61). What does it mean to construct an elevator from its point of view? Intuition asks us to rely on our unconscious, ignoring 'rational' and 'logical' in favor of something much more interior. To learn how to build an elevator from the elevator's point of view enacts a dialectic between elevator and passenger, presumably following that of Hegel.

Hegelian dialectics stems from Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's *Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807) and undergirds the epistemological apparatus in Whitehead's *The Intuitionist* by complicating his initial theory of recognition. Hegel states in his chapter on "Master and Servitude" a theory of recognition that is encoded with racism. Hegel states the process of recognition of the other is a process of self-recognition, but errs in the primacy of subordination. Whitehead's intervention seeks to claim that the initial dialectic relies on that subordination of the other, and undoing that violence is the first step in racial reconciliation.

Lila Mae Watson is in focus as the racial other, but in her agency she is able to deconstruct Hegel's initial white recognition. Empiricism operates off of the very same dialectic that Watson is undermining, and thus can explain Whitehead's reliance on detective-novel tropes. The white men in the Elevator's guild recognize themselves and thus think like the prototypical modern cosmopolitan. Whitehead's detective tropes only reinforce the deconstructive tendency of the plot itself.

The black box as a theory is laden in deconstructive tendencies of the dialectic: James Fulton deconstructs the elevator and its objectivity in order to 'renegotiate our relationship with objects (Whitehead, 101). The quote runs parallel to the politics of representation and essentialism: an idea that black people can be separated from their identity and lived experiences, and its implications that an essential blackness can be observed, quantified, and reproduced. Whitehead sets up the paradigm as a metaphor for race in America: To separate the elevatorness from elevators would be to separate the blackness from black people. Fulton initially realized that a renegotiation of objects would be a renegotiation of how black people are seen and experienced at the beginning of the 21st century. That is why his theory is ultimately prophecy

*and* parody, as it is revealed that he is white-passing when Lila Mae Watson finds the pages ripped out of his last manuscript (256).

Fulton is asking readers to construct blackness from the perspective of a black person, who has been objectified similarly to the elevator. The black box is a question to the subjectivity of the self and how that subjectivity is manipulated as fact or opinion. We can also see here that the black box interrogates the objectivity of objects, asking questions around a technology's capacity for all human experience. Its combinatorial nature as a racialized machine allows for the framework of prophecy to take place at sites of white violence. We can see this nature mid-way through the novel when Lila Mae Watson has a flashback to her university courses on elevators. The conversation is on Fulton's theory of the phantom passenger, which states:

The Dilemma of the Phantom Passenger asks what happens when the passenger who has engaged the call button departs, whether he changed his mind and took the stairs or caught an up-tending car when he wanted to go down because he did not feel like waiting. It asks what happens to the elevator he summoned... Lila Mae cleared her throat and said in a thin voice, "Fulton is trying to trick the reader. An elevator doesn't exist without its freight. If there's no one to get on, the elevator remains in quiescence. The elevator and passenger need each other." (102)

The conversation continues and discussion in the classroom moves to the phantom passenger himself:

"And if we set up a film camera in the hallway to see what would happen, what would we see when we developed the film, Watson?" Lila Mae met his eyes. "By leaving the camera there, you've created what Fulton calls the expectation of freight. The camera is a

passenger who declines to get on the elevator, not a phantom passenger. The film would record that the doors open, the elevator waits, and then the doors close.” (102)

This conversation surrounding the phantom passenger is crucial in understanding the theory of the black box, and thus the black box. Watson states that an elevator does not exist without its freight, forming a dialectic between passenger and elevator. If the black box metaphor holds, then, the crisis inside of the elevator is the body, or phantom passenger. The soul, or phantom passenger is fabrication of the person who did not get onto the elevator. Returning to *The Intuitionist* for its catastrophe allows for an understanding of this hypothetical dilemma as one of crisis.

#### **IV. The Passion of Crisis: Elevators in the 21st Century**

The black box and elevator citizens have been described as necessitating each other, and *The Intuitionist* constructs this in opposition to the urban citizen construction of the 20th century. Crisis, as we have seen, culminates into political decision-making about the lives of its citizens. The Mayor named the new municipal building because he saw the voice of black people as a crisis. This function of the Hegelian dialectic is one of subordination, and we see this play out as institutional violence.

*The Intuitionist* ends with Lila Mae Watson writing the rest of *On Theoretical Elevators Volume III* in Fulton’s stead, and this position leaves us hopeful for the world she is preparing. Watson’s resolution involves a ride in the elevator adjacent to Number 11, which was the catastrophe that sparked the whole investigation. The religious themes of uplift allow *The Intuitionist* to pivot towards a forward-thinking humanistic perspective when Watson revisits the

Fanny Briggs building to talk to the surviving shafts. The novel, and this essay, closes with the meditation on elevators-as-citizens.

Colson Whitehead's *The Intuitionist* finds its place in Gilroy's Black Atlantic, and acts as a meditation on a black modernity. Whitehead's elevator-citizen and black box are tools to reimagine the contemporary crises faced across the diaspora. If Gilroy's mapping was horizontal, then Whitehead's mapping would be wholly vertical. Elevator-citizens reconsider the Hegelian dialectic and ultimately reframe the idea of citizenship in an increasingly global world.

Whitehead wrote *The Intuitionist* over nine months before publishing it in 1999; the themes contained within the construction of the black box offer an honest appraisal of the postmodern, leaving with it the deconstructive tendencies. But the elevator-citizen is necessarily constructed, hoping to be fleshed out in a fully elevated world, asking someone to usher it in.

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