The Limits of Rational Knowledge:

New Materialism as an Ontological Reframing in *The Intuitionist*

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You could never build a building like a martini glass, Lila Mae observed to herself, widening as it got higher like that, it would topple over, foolish (Whitehead 176).

In *The Intuitionist*, Colson Whitehead depicts an imaginary city, much like New York City, around the 1940s within a parallel universe that is obsessed with elevators[^1^]. The main character, Lila Mae Watson, is a Black female Intuitionist; she inspects elevators by intuiting their status and feeling the elevator’s wellbeing based on the intangible signs that it presents to her. While technological development is a top societal priority, social progress resides at the bottom of societal importance as misogyny, racism, competition, and corruption saturate the city and its outermost suburbs.

Lila Mae believes that the black box and the second elevation will bring new buildings, new elevators, and a new city in which there is a democratizing effect making more room at the top for more people—“a building like a martini glass, [...] widening as it got higher.” She believes that if she succeeds as an elevator inspector, then she can help discover the black box and bring about a change in the way the world is viewed. In this sense, the black box is believed to be a new piece of technology. Lila Mae’s parents and the white male hegemony teach her that if she can learn to understand the world according to a normative reading strategy, then she can individually uplift to enter and succeed in the white patriarchal capitalist system. It seems that this promise of individual uplift is viable as Lila Mae achieves admission to the Institute for Vertical Transport, becomes the first female Black elevator inspector, and as she is given the monument of the Fanny Briggs municipal building for one of her first inspections. However, following the free fall crash of an elevator in the Fanny Briggs building that Lila Mae declares to

[^1^]: The setting of the novel taking place in the 1940s before the development of the internet and modern technology demonstrates the applicability of this fictional alternate reality to current society.
be in working condition, she is dragged into a dangerous underworld in which she learns that the true opposition to a democratizing reorientation of understanding is not Empiricism but the corporate interests that co-opted Intuitionism and Empiricism serve.

In Lila Mae’s pursuit for the true cause of the elevator crash, she is exposed to the fragility of knowledge that stems from positivism and vertically oriented modes of understanding. Lila Mae develops a sense of community and an emotional connection to Natchez, but he is revealed to be an Arbo executive manipulating her for corporate interests; she is also exposed to the affective dimension of life in the city through places like the Happyland Dime-A-Dance. Through these experiences, Lila Mae explores the affective dimension and learns to read beyond the limits of empirical and rational knowledge. She realizes that her previous normative reading strategy was only valued because it reinforces material reality in terms that support the capitalist mobocracy. Once Lila Mae considers the actual people who live in the city, she notices the “foolish” structural integrity of a martini glass shaped building and its incompatibility with their highly competitive and output driven society. By retraining her intuition, Lila Mae realizes that it is the current mode of understanding and the capitalist system that is incompatible with her idealist pursuit of racial and individual equality—her disinterested knowledge that is not tied to commodified technology. Eventually, the black box becomes a promise of a new ontology that evades the demands of vertically oriented society and a radically different way of understanding both the humans and objects around her.

In the capitalistic and mob-run environment that favors the corrupt and fosters extreme competition, the obsession with the upward movement of the elevator implies an unquestioning faith in the inevitability of individual, social, and technological progress. Lila Mae develops a reading strategy that takes her beyond rational logic to view objects as more than they appear and
horizontally reorient her understanding of the world through the deep affective dimension. Through her reading strategy, she becomes aware of the larger assemblages around her and her own limits in communicating with the elevator and achieving social progress within the current way of knowing. Rather than pursue the fantastical martini-glass shaped city through a passive deferral to technological advancement, Lila Mae continues Fulton’s work to push back on empirical knowledge as a closed circuit with an awareness that it is the current corporate and profit driven society that continues to halt the true second elevation.

“Even My Conditioning has been Conditioned”: Investment in Individual Uplift

Capitalism is based upon the privatization of ownership and when combined with the hierarchical and racist ideology that is ingrained into the systems of socioeconomic organization, Black and marginalized identities are excluded from participation. In response to economic exclusion, society uses the ideology of individual uplift to inspire others and themselves to work hard and learn the ways of society to succeed individually—creating cutthroat competition and devaluing collaboration. American culture constantly promises that to move up in society and be successful you must ‘pull yourself up by your bootstraps’; it promises that success is based on individual work ethic.

At first, Lila Mae does not recognize the potential for the black box to be a new way of being in the world or a radical horizontal reorientation of the way humans interact with each other and with objects. The black box represents different ideas to different people at different times. The corporate players want to control it the same way they currently control elevators and

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2 A quote from the independent movie, Chameleon Street. I am using this quote to reference the way that marginalized identities are conditioned to be excluded and exploited in the capitalist system, but then also conditioned through individual uplift ideology to still attempt to assimilate to the hegemony.

3 The black box communicates through what Manuel DeLanda identifies as affordances, the ability for assemblages to communicate without linguistic signs as land communicates an ability to walk or a cliff the ability for a bird to fly (DeLanda). The black box communicates to Fulton, eventually Lila Mae, and thinkers like Erlich, the ability to point
keep the profits within a small homogenous minority by perpetuating the vertically oriented socioeconomic organization. Common to all beliefs about the black box is that it holds the future of elevators and therefore of the city, and everyone is eager to get their hands on it. Because of the immensity and looming nature of the second elevation, each daily task becomes even more important, and the competitive nature of society is exacerbated. While Sandra Liggins identifies racial uplift as implicated in the future that stems from the black box and demonstrates the incompatibility of Lila Mae’s individual uplift with her prescribed role in society, the black box also implicates an alternative present and adds the layer of technological determinism to the motivations of individual uplift (Liggins). Daily tasks are no longer just for normative material success, but for a change in the nature of the city and its opportunity for all people: “the next elevator, it is believed, will grant us the sky, unreckoned towers: the second elevation” (Whitehead 61). It is the technology that is holding society back from “the sky” and the development of technology is what needs to be focused on over social equality. However, the promise of individual uplift often glosses over systemic barriers that limit an individual’s ability to succeed based on hard work, and places success in the hands of the system. The capitalist system rewards those on top while excluding marginalized identities and exploiting them through the promise of economic assimilation. Early in her life, Lila Mae’s father is completely excluded from ever entering the capitalist system, while she is indoctrinated into the current mode of reading in order to pursue her own upward mobility. However, the normative fast-paced and mechanistic approach that Lila Mae learns ends up perpetuating the system she is attempting to enter, as even Intuitionism, which promises to be an alternative mode of knowledge, is co-opted by the elevator companies for profit.

out the fragility of what is known and society’s widespread blindness to the limiting socioeconomic system in which they live.
Technological determinism promises that technology is the gateway to social progress, so working to improve the living conditions of communities at the ground level and working to point out the blindness ingrained in social systems is pointless as once technology is developed then social reform will follow⁴. Individual uplift places profit driven and hierarchical relationships over symbiotic ones, and technological determinism limits the view of valuable work to those that advance the technology of the current age. Lila Mae believes that before the introduction of the black box and the move to the second elevation, they will need to “raze the city and cart off the rubble” (Whitehead 198); however, this sentiment has two potential meanings whether in the context of before or after Lila Mae’s second realization of the true meaning of the black box: 1) before, she believes that horizontally working to reorient social relationships through communal action will only be destroyed with the second elevation; 2) after, she believes that the current ontology must be destroyed or else the next machines will only continue to mirror the profit obsessed positivist social structure⁵. A horizontally oriented world would lead to less profit for the executives and the white dominated society, hence why they use individual uplift and the guise of technological determinism to devalue collaboration. However, just as with the martini glass shaped building, Lila Mae is also realizing the way that the second elevation, when seen as a democratizing strategy for making life better for more people, cannot be supported with the current mode of understanding and social organization. Eventually, when Intuitionism and the black box are seen to be co-opted by the capitalist system and the corporate world, the democratizing ability of the second elevation will be realized to be forever distant.

⁴ Within technological determinism, Heilbroner identifies the historic trend that especially in societies of high capitalism or low socialism (of which The Intuitionist represents the former) the social policy guiding technological progress is often rudimentary—leading to the common combination of social exploitation with technological progress (Heilbroner 345).

⁵ Without reorienting horizontal relationships, the output driven mode of understanding will continue to permeate societal interactions: “the machine will reflect, as much as mould, the social relationships of work” (Heilbroner 342).
Without the realization that it is the current way of knowing that must be destroyed, society will be saturated with the feeling of being a ‘cog in a machine’ that not only affects self-perception, but also the way that fellow citizens are viewed.  

The misplaced faith in technological determinism in *The Intuitionist* can be seen as Lila Mae and the other characters buy into the ideology that vertically working with the cards they are dealt will lead to individual upliftment. At first, Lila Mae believes that the North is different from the rest of America, and that her race will not limit her ability to succeed or perform whatever activity she pleases: “Of course they let colored people stay here. This is North” (Whitehead 175). Lila Mae’s dream of a world beyond this one holds on to the possibility of race equality, but her striving towards equality as a future that can be reached and her focus on elevation limits her motivation for collective action. Although she moves horizontally to a new city, she views it as moving “up” and towards her own assimilation (Whitehead 175). The elevator becomes a metaphor for her own ambition. Lila Mae describes how the Black community is conditioned to accept the terms of vertical opportunity they are given—to use what is available in the vertical world rather than trying to reorient themselves horizontally: “But we take what jobs we can get, Lila Mae thinks. Whatever we can scrabble for” (Whitehead 49). The deferral of true communal uplift to the moment of arrival of the second elevation creates a focus on what is practically rather than theoretically possible. With her “new badge, new job” and “new city,” Lila Mae thinks that she is “welcome” and breaking the ceiling imposed on her identity. She constantly touches her badge to remind herself of who she is and to tell herself that she is different from everyone else; however, Lila Mae’s initial entry into the white male sphere

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6 Miller describes the feeling of being a ‘cog in a machine’ and the way that technological progress can lead to this alienating feeling when the system’s rewards are not distributed evenly (Miller 308).

7 Lila Mae’s badge also references her uniformity with the system she is attempting to subvert (Selzer).
of influence is an example of the incomplete nature of Black success in the face of racism, and also an example of the co-optation and empty promises that always accompany a vertically arranged society.

Uplift demands a literacy that Lila Mae knows well, but her literacy is tied to her investment in daily tasks for vertical mobility; she is unaware of the larger plot of the elevator companies as she has conflated her own personal goals with the vertical goals of the hegemony. In contrast, the subway system acts as a trope for horizontal networks and demonstrates the way the hegemony labels staying in the present moment as primitive and pointless. Lila Mae initially “chastised herself” for not knowing the subway system and calls her geographical confusion a “ridiculous mistake.” She spent an entire Sunday “decoding the subway map,” and yet she loses her way when she tries to find the right stop—calling the “distasteful” and “atavistic” subway transportation “horizontal mandering about” (Whitehead 171). Here, the subway map represents horizontal thinking that would reorient the way in which people and objects are valued, and Lila Mae describes it as primitive and not even understandable because of its outdated nature. Lila Mae has no trouble fictionalizing about a future through technological advancement. Once she begins to fictionalize about an alternate present—the crossing paths of the subway lines—her vertically oriented mind is lost, and she cannot put into practice what she has been fictionalizing. “Atavistic” is used to describe the subway system as well as Lila Mae’s inclinations to want to fight against the world that she lives in: “She is mistress to her personality

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8 In the beginning, Lila Mae cannot see the possibilities for fabulation, poesis, or fictionalization that the black box and the second elevation promise. Fictionalization offers stories of where the world might be going and cannot be judged in terms of likelihood because it does not intend to predict what will happen or apply a cause to a past event, but to help society linger in the present moment and direct efforts for the future (Skiveren). Especially with events of trauma or crisis, future problems cannot be solved until they are made imaginable by fabulation or poesis—reorienting the future in ways other than the status quo. Fictionalization involves worlding, or creating worlds that challenge complacent notions of ontological viewing. Rather than moving completely past the present, through praxis and poesis, alternatives must be imagined through a futurity that takes into account the present—fictionalizing a way to stay with the trouble and formulate potent responses (Boscagli).
and well accustomed to reminding her more atavistic inclinations that the world is the world and
the odd punch or eye-gouge will not make it any other way” (Whitehead 56). Lila Mae is
“mistress” to her personality as she must control and have authority over her wants that seem
counterproductive to the vertical imperative, and she is “well accustomed” to redirecting these
instances as her intuition is often inclined to think horizontally. As we will see in later
discussions, the messiness of communal interactions in the affective dimension like those seen in
the Dime-A-Dance or with her confrontation of Pompey are labeled as an “odd punch” or “eye
gouge” as if to reference them as one-off events and underhand or cowardly. The hegemony
labels them as such to limit their efficacy and distance them from other enactments of horizontal
community building. All of this occurs while Lila Mae is still invested in the promise of
verticality, but her belief in individual uplift and the ideology it supports is later challenged as
she begins to understand the limits of valuing vertical movement.

Buying into individual uplift ideology and dealing only with what is possible creates
cutthroat competition between Black characters as they must secure for themselves the limited
opportunity available. Lila Mae and Pompey are pitted against one another and resent each other
as they strive to move upward alone. Raymond Coombs is the final piece of the puzzle that Lila
Mae confronts, and yet he only begins to “‘follow up every lead’” because that was what “‘the
guys upstairs wanted’” (Whitehead 248). Raymond Coombs’ office is elevated in a high rise,
where he sits at his desk in front of a wall of windows as if only the air of the city lay behind
him. Raymond has achieved both the positive and negative goals of individual uplift: he has
worked hard with the cards he was dealt to increase his status within the current system and has
knowingly perpetuated the way the hegemony views him as a tool for profit—even if it means
that he betrays other Black people. Lila Mae is initially unaware of the larger co-optation of her
intuition and the larger corporate entities that use her to reproduce social hierarchies, yet Raymond chooses to continue to value his vertical position over true horizontal community building. Raymond Coombs is a personified version of co-opted Intuitionism; he presents himself to be an aid and companion, but reinforces the current system of racial hierarchy. The revelation that Natchez is in fact Raymond Coombs unravels the knot that Lila Mae has been entangled in since she was a young girl, as she finally realizes the true misleading, inadequate, and exploitative nature of the ideology in which she is invested.

Fulton is also motivated by uplift as he dreams of a world where no one speaks, and no one knows where he came from—rejecting his racial heritage as he leaves behind his sister and mother. Fulton knows that the second elevation is a radical and transcendental new way of seeing, yet he also knows that the current mode of understanding would only value the black box for its output. Fulton grows frustrated with his own race and with the system he lives in that continues to use the same promises of assimilation to knock down and co-opt his strivings to build an alternate dimension. Initially, Intuitionism is created as a radical alternative to Empiricism, as a joke that Fulton hopes will lead to different truths. By the time Lila Mae is introduced in the narrative, Intuitionism is completely working for the goals of commercial capitalism, and Fulton has gone rogue and hidden the plans for the black box until society is ready and the current ontology has been ousted as fragile and incomplete. In Volume Two of

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9 Not only is Raymond subjugated and seen as an object by the hegemony, but he accepts this label and knowingly sacrifices communal connection for individual uplift in which he begins to “see himself as an ‘object,’ as a ‘thing’ stimulated […] without his consent” (Miller 307).

10 Fulton’s theory of Intuitionism could be compared to a form of Signifyin(g) as he attempts to indirectly reference something outside of the denotive meaning and play a joke on those who miss its true meaning (Gates). While Linda Selzer sees Lila Mae’s recreation of Fulton’s voice at the end of the novel as a form of minstrelsy and that the elevator is actually in control of her, Fulton also created Intuitionism as a joke or a form of Signifyin(g) to indirectly point out the blindness of Empiricism. Fulton’s voice is in and of itself a form of performed minstrelsy as Intuitionism is not the solution to breaking down the current way of seeing, and Fulton is well aware.

11 Fulton is beginning to see how the elevator has begun to control his own writing as he now serves his creation (Selzer). His feelings towards his creation provide a counter argument to the thought that “outside a factory system
his writings, Fulton describes his frustration and the repeated problem that continues to halt true horizontal thinking:

_The race sleeps in this hectic and disordered century. Grim lids that will not open. Anxious retinas flit to and fro beneath them. They are stirred by dreaming. In this dream of uplift, they understand that they are dreaming the contract of hallowed verticality, and hope to remember the terms on waking. The race never does, and that is our curse_ (Whitehead 186).

The “disordered century” directly implies that the vertical orientation of hierarchies is incorrect and there is a better way to view relationships. The use of “hectic” also calls upon the constantly questioning and hyperactive culture that values progression over staying in the messiness of the present moment. Jeffrey Allen Tucker identifies that Fulton’s use of “race” is first believed by Lila Mae to be a reference to the human race, but after the discovery of his Black ethnicity, the use of “race” clearly refers to the Black community (Tucker). Fulton describes how the race “sleeps” in this century giving agency to the “grim lids that will not open” as a choice rather than a condition. Similar to how Lila Mae defers true racial equality to something beyond the horizon of the known and only brought about by technological invention, the race is “stirred by dreaming.” While this dreaming occurs, “anxious retinas flit to and fro beneath them” much like, how we will later see, the affective dimension that lives beneath each confrontation within the hegemonic world. “Dreaming” for the future is a soothing alternative to the “anxious” and undeclared terms of the present. Lauren Berlant describes how Fulton attempts to state that his description of another world beyond this one is not a reference to the future, but a reference to the recognition of an alternate spatial present that could exist now (Berlant). Fulton directly

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no man feels as if his tools are controlling him, but rather that they are subservient to his wishes” (Miller 302). Even as he is writing in his journals, Fulton is unable to control his own writing as he writes Lila Mae’s name without even intending to do so, his racial identity and affective body taking over as if being controlled by the elevator that has its own animated energy of hiding and survival (Bennett). There are, in fact, situations in which objects are in control of citizens, a specific warning coming from the gothic influence against urban landscapes in general and their threats towards Black people’s sense of self (Liggins). The factory system extends into situations in everyday life where people are treated as objects.
highlights his critique as against the "dream of uplift" that continues to promise “hallowed verticality.” Verticality is “hallowed” to the current white capitalist mobocracy as it keeps their power centrally located within their own homogenous group, and it is “hallowed” to minorities and marginalized identities because it superficially promises that they can one day assimilate to a higher level. However, the “contract” of verticality makes clear that true upliftment is not possible in the current socioeconomic organization and that horizontal restoration is the only true path for equality. The race “never does” remember the terms of the contract “on waking” and that is “[their] curse.” The curse is the constant cycle of dreaming of verticality, realizing the truth and then waking and forgetting this realization. However, the novel also suggests that there is a way to escape this curse as Lila Mae pushes back on her conditioning and establishes a counter-hegemonic strategy for reading.

**Reallocation Blindness & Learning to Read Assemblages**

The ramifications of learning to read for Lila Mae and the other characters is threefold as they must attempt to understand the world logically, ideologically, and ontologically. Learning to read involves more than just taking meaning from words on a page but constitutes everything from the way that people read each other’s body language to the way that they gather information from events and interactions. Even from Lila Mae’s first elevator inspection that the narrator describes, the building manager attempts to bribe Lila Mae with “sixty bucks” and she lets him place the money in her pocket, yet she does not “change her report” of the elevator’s faulty overspeed generator (Whitehead 8). From this interaction it seems that Intuitionism works with elevators, but that “something is always lost when it comes to human beings” as the super calls upon his own experience of white privilege and profit driven society to conclude that Lila Mae and her report can be bought (Whitehead 214). Empiricists look at the physicality of the
elevator, but their preference to only “[look] at the skin of things” is also representative of the larger mode of reading that judges people and objects by their capacity to generate further profit (Whitehead 239). However, after the crash is discovered to be an accident, even Lila Mae’s intuition with elevators is skewed by the limits of what is known. Neither Empiricism nor Intuitionism consider the possibility of the accident—refusing to admit the fragility of the current mode of understanding and that something could occur outside of human control. While Intuitionism and Empiricism initially seem to coexist, Lila Mae realizes after reading Fulton’s writing that they actually cannot wholly exist in the same realm as Empirical motivations parallel society’s investment in technological progress and true Intuitionism requires horizontal thinking to unlearn established modes of thinking and social hierarchies. While Intuitionism completely undermines the Empiricist mode of understanding prevalent in society, ironically, society is at least half or superfluously invested into Intuitionism’s implementation due to its results (Intuitionists having a 10% higher accuracy rate than Empiricist inspectors) (Whitehead 58). The co-opted Intuitionism used to inspect elevators incidentally perpetuates vertical thinking—as Intuitionism is only used to improve elevators and creates only the façade of unlimited potential. By learning to read differently, Lila Mae comes to see that genuine Intuitionism is the ability to create value and communicate both with humans and objects beyond being driven by expectations of output. She clearly sees the incompatibility of her fictionalizations about the second elevation with her actual present and delves into the messiness of counter-hegemonic reading to finally soothe her “anxious retinas” that “flit to and fro.”

The young Lila Mae’s learning to read with her father demonstrates the normative empirical mode of reading—looking for something familiar and attempting to glean, from what can be seen, a meaning that has already been established. Lila Mae’s father constantly battles
with the regret of his own failings to enter into the white sphere of influence, and he wants Lila Mae to learn the ways of the world so that she can do what he could not—earn the badge of elevator inspector. Lila Mae’s father tells her to “listen to your teacher and learn what she tells you”, emphasizing his investment in the current system of knowledge and his belief that if she is disciplined by what is available then she can succeed (Whitehead 120). Lila Mae’s father is directly excluded from economic participation in the hegemonic structure. He is dismissed by the Huntley’s manager, dismissed by the elevator inspector who boards his car, invisible to the passengers that use him as a tool for navigating the endless floors of merchandise. It is not until Lila Mae successfully enters the corporate system that she realizes the limits the hegemonic system always imposes on her race and gender—luring her and her father with the façade of endless opportunity.

Analyzing a moment when Lila Mae was first learning to read with her father, the reader sees her conditioning to only pay attention to what is available to be known in the current ontology, but the reader also notices moments that foreshadow her second realization of what learning to read truly means. Lila Mae has been learning to read since she was a young girl—learning to read what little opportunity is available to her in the white, capitalist, and homogenous world that she lives in. Her reading strategy begins with looking for “reassuring words she did know,” yet finding “them scattered around” (Whitehead 119). The unfamiliar creates a sense of panic and discomfort in Lila Mae as she directly confronts the system of knowledge that designates right and wrong modes of reading. When Fulton first learned about elevators, he was on his own and free of an authoritative influence over his natural inclinations. Even though he did not know what was signified by the words of elevator theory, there was no designation of known and unknown as he was able to intuit the possibilities represented by
elevators. Even though Lila Mae is conditioned to read empirically, her description of a word as a drawing and her ability to fictionalize its relation to “her mother’s loom” demonstrates her inclination to read affectively (Whitehead 119). Lila Mae’s initial attempt at reading is also not yet completely vertically oriented as she sees how “starting one place was the same as any other place” and she sees value in moving horizontally throughout the page and does not yet have allegiance to the logical process of beginnings and endings (Whitehead 119). However, rather than delving into the deep affective imaginary to fictionalize the multiplicity of meanings, Lila Mae is conditioned to only pay attention to what her teacher requires of her, what is familiar, and what can be seen.

Lila Mae’s realization of her conditioning to read empirically comes later in her quest as she begins to question whether the “white space” on the page only truly represents “the end of the word” (Whitehead 120). Inherent in the process of seeing and gaining insight is blindness; something must be ignored in order for something else to be discovered. Logically, the white space favors signification over significance as it signifies the end of meaning to the empirical world. The white space concentrates attention on the black marks and what is available to be seen in contrast to the white background. Ideologically, the white space denotes areas of blindness that limit society’s ability to explore what is beyond knowable in the current ontology, or their ability to enact useful ignorance\(^\text{12}\). Ontologically, the white space offers Lila Mae a way to see the nature of things and people that exist in the world differently. A focus on the white

\(^{12}\) Useful ignorance is an alternative way of knowing the world presented by Henry David Thoreau in his book *Walking*. He posited this ontology as an alternative to the creation of a Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge which “robs us of the advantage of our actual ignorance” (Thoreau 28). He states that there is an equal need for a Society for the Diffusion of Useful Ignorance. Also called recognized ignorance, or positive ignorance (Thoreau 28).
space brings an understanding that there are things and events beyond human comprehension, and there are objects that push back on anthropocentric notions of cause and effect.

Lila Mae’s re-learning how to read allows her to understand the world on a more horizontal level and see objects as distinct from the humans who use them, identifying what Jane Bennett calls “entelechy” and “assemblages.” Inherent in Empiricism is vitalism—prioritizing human consciousness as the pinnacle of development over objects that are seen as dead or inanimate. The separation between matter and life normatively ignores the vitality of matter and the ways that matter actively interjects into larger assemblages to affect human life and courses of events. Material vibrancy is not established by a soul, but a nonidentity or negative aspect that cannot be fully known beyond its presence—described as entelechy. The negative aspect reminds society that there is always an aspect of the world that exceeds human control, and vital materialism is a potent strategy for confronting and accepting the limits to human agency. Assemblages are made up of both human and nonhuman actants. Objects are always acting in the present moment as they cannot foresee their future interactions with actants. Each actant has emergent properties that are exposed in the exchange of the assemblage as a whole, but the result of the assemblage cannot be applied to simply one of the actants (DeLanda). In this case, the assemblage of the elevator—the different parts of the elevator, the passenger and inspector, the electricity—all interact to create the circumstances that result in the crash. The cause of the crash cannot necessarily be applied to one of the actants, but the assemblage’s reverberatory relationship is what substantiates the event. The empirical mode of reading focuses on the cause and outcome of the crash and applies the crash to a human act of negligence that does not

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13 Bennett acknowledges that even this theory of new materialism is developed by humans, and that observing the difference between objects and humans in everyday life is required for survival. However, as we apply human characteristics to matter, we can be more aware of the way that humans both are and are not the same as objects and can better prepare ourselves for externalities or effects that are not in our control.
successfully control the machine. It does not take into account that the entelechy of objects does not always follow the logical path of cause and effect that is assumed by human conceptions of knowledge. The narrator of *The Intuitionist* professes: “(Who cries for Number Eleven? So preoccupied is she with how the accident impacts her that Lila Mae never gives a thought to the bereaved, the sobbing assembly line who has lost one dear, who never had a chance to say goodbye.)” (Whitehead 197). Whitehead carves out space in the narrative for the actual elevator to be considered as a victim in the crash—one that is ignored by everyone except the narrator. Before Lila Mae retrain her reading strategy, she, the human Intuitionist inspector who felt the elevator’s presence, is ignorant to the fact that it has suffered alongside her, while the “assembly line,” something monotonous and impersonal that seemingly embodies the inanimate aspect of machinery, is described as “sobbing” after they “lost one dear”—emphasizing that each object is understood to contribute actively to the assemblage.

When Lila Mae is indoctrinated in normative reading strategies, she misses the full entelechy of elevators as she learns from Fulton and he must parse his theory in order for it to be even considered in the empirical and corporate sphere of influence. While Fulton attempts to push back on the empirical and logical approach to elevators, he does not deal with theorizing about elevator accidents because he understands their incompatibility with the current ontology or ideology and that his work would be dismissed like the Frenchman Erlich. Even as Fulton’s theory is full of “anthromorphism,” he “never dared breach the unknowable” of discerning the catastrophic accident and does not define the elevator to have “articulate self-awareness” as Erlich once posited; the Frenchman’s theories “wilt on the shelves” (Whitehead 229). The

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14 Anthromorphism is the applying of human traits to nonhuman actants, and it can tell the reader more about the object as it is compared to humans, but it can also tell the reader more about humans as the object is compared to them.
current architecture is unready and incompatible with the insight that Lila Mae begins to understand. The Frenchman’s theory is a true intellectual pursuit rather than a pursuit for material success and it is too far beyond the wants and needs of the corporate entities, so it has no effect and sits on shelves in the back corner of a library. Yet, Erlich’s theory, while seemingly absurd and beyond real, would disrupt the philosophical foundations of vertical arrangement. Erlich provides a horizontal reorientation that provides practical insights as Lila Mae ponders the very question of elevator self awareness following her exposure to the fragile nature of knowledge in the current way of thinking. After Lila Mae’s second realization, she realizes that there was “no way [Fulton] believed in transcendence” as “the men who run this place do not want redemption,” but want to “be as near to hell as they can” (Whitehead 240). “Transcendence” in this context alludes to the realization of utopian possibilities because of the physical output of the black box and the future discoveries it enables. Lila Mae then realizes the intertwined nature of the second elevation and the current mode of understanding, and she begins to see that “the men who run this place” would not allow for a future in which the black box has a democratizing effect. Instead, Lila Mae realizes that Fulton believes in an alternate present in which society has become compatible with “transcendence”—realizing itself the fragility of what it knows and the limits of a vertical arrangement. Relearning to read allows Lila Mae to understand that the second elevation has nothing to do with social arrangements, architecture, or objects, but presents a new way of knowing, seeing, and experiencing the world. Fulton’s theory does not attempt to provide an actual insight or future to pursue, but he attempts to provide an alternative framework of understanding that points out blindness. The capitalist world then co-opts his alternative present and proposes it as a future to ideologically control society. Working towards such a future without working communally and horizontally to reorient society first will
only recreate the current social arrangements, architecture, or objects in the supposed utopian future.

In exploring Lila Mae’s gradual discovery, Whitehead adopts features of the detective novel. While Jeffrey Allen Tucker discusses the intertextuality of Whitehead’s work with detective stories and its similarities to the form, there are also connections to the attention and process that Lila Mae uses to relearn how to read. All of the information required to solve a detective novel is at hand before the big reveal, yet the reader struggles alongside the detective to organize the clues and solve the case. In *The Intuitionist*, Colson Whitehead uses the formal features of the detective novel—a wrongful accusation, a mystery, mobocracy, a quest to clear one’s name—yet he uses this form to arrive at a realization of blindness rather than revealing an insight. Initially, Lila Mae sees her detective quest as a journey to a tangible truth and is constantly relying on her half-baked intuition to complete the task ahead. Theodore Martin identifies that a common aspect of detective novels is a never-ending search; similarly, each time that Lila Mae seemingly nears the answer and justice she is seeking, another piece of information comes up that throws her off her course: “answers are no longer endpoints but only momentary interruptions of the endless process of questioning” (Martin 179). Throughout the initial events of the novel, Lila Mae is directed by her clues to blame Pompey and the Empiricist mob. The clues emphasize the logical trace that prevents her from discovering the exploitative plot of corrupt capitalism. Twice in the beginning of Lila Mae’s indoctrination into the mystery of Elevator Number 11, the narrator states, “She doesn’t know yet” (Whitehead 9 & 15). On the surface it seems that the narrator is referencing Lila Mae’s ignorance of what happened to the elevator, but it also references blindness to the larger plot beyond what is made available to her and beyond the obtainable facts of the elevator investigation. Whitehead creates a layering of
detective stories as Lila Mae traces empirical clues to eventually detect the shortcomings of her own process of understanding. She eventually learns that the way she reads the world is tied up with the underlying exploitation of humans and objects in the positivist world in which she lives and that her understanding is limited by its reliance on logic, ontology, and ideology. By always turning the normative clues of Lila Mae’s quest on their head and pointing out their shortcomings in identifying the deeper blindness of what is unknown, Whitehead offers that perhaps something can be learned from the object world—a sense of patience and diligence to understand and deal with the present before dismissing it as dispensable and reaching for a distant future. The random and accidental nature of the elevator crash shows Lila Mae the significance of viewing elevators as assemblages of the human and non-human. Rather than applying a logical cause based on the effect that is seen, Lila Mae employs useful ignorance to read what the elevator is telling her with an awareness that there are happenings beyond human control. The fact that no cause is found fully confirms Lila Mae’s understanding that her newfound knowledge has no place in the current system and that it has allowed her to come thus far and will allow her to go no further.

The detective novel is not truly valued for its revelation and achievement of closure at the end of the novel, but for its ability to force readers to pause in the present as they attempt to put together the full story. Whitehead’s detective novel, through the revelation of normatively useful clues as distracting and superfluous, emphasizes that “reading as a long wait rather than an inevitable revelation is to hold off the false promise of the future in order to linger in the time of the present” (Martin 181). In actuality, the elevator crash was completely aleatory, yet neither Empiricism nor Intuitionism can admit this as even a possibility because it would oust the fragility of their mode of understanding and undermine their confidence that they are in control.
The crash creates a seemingly counter-progressive necessity to “linger” in the time of the present. Whitehead’s use of the detective novel creates a motivation to stay in the present and to think horizontally in order to look past the short-term answer to notice the underlying blindness of the city’s ideology. Whitehead pushes back on the normative connection between reading and the future as Lila Mae and Fulton are learning to read about the present. A focus on the present more pointedly emphasizes the shortcomings of technological determinism as the current social structures are incompatible and unable to support an alternative present that promises equality for all.\(^{15}\)

Lila Mae first describes the second elevation physically as an actual piece of technology that will create a new elevator; however, it becomes clear as Lila Mae nears the end of her quest that the second elevation is not a physical space or structure but a new way of being, a new way of seeing: “At ninety, everything is air and the difference between you and the medium of your passage is disintegrating with every increment of the ascension” (Whitehead 222). The first floor is described as “dirt” and as new heights are reached, the “idiocy” of the ground level is eventually placed alongside the “rationality” that has “fallen away floors ago” (Whitehead 221-222). The comparison of “idiocy” and “rationality” with the lower floors demonstrates the extensive knowledge that lies beyond rationality, yet Empiricists claim that all there is to know can be seen through empirical evidence. Empiricisms’ denial of the actual meaning of the second elevation is a refusal to acknowledge the limits of their own system. The second elevation for the empirical corporate structure is conceived of in terms of material success and output, while, after

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\(^{15}\) Living in the present moment is not desirable in the fast-paced society as it markedly halts hasty progress, but objects push back against this constant striving for the future as they create a physical sense of weight always pulling the citizens down: “In Huntley’s Department Store the people need and need less once they leave. […] Exhausting, all that baggage, now is what makes it heavy, all that invisible now-freight at the bottom of the pillage-sacks, next to receipts of purchase and coupons for the next reduced populuxe pleasure” (Whitehead 159-160).
Lila Mae’s second realization, the genuine Intuitionist second elevation becomes a transcendental new way of seeing that is invested in bettering the actual lives of real people. Lila Mae breaks the cycle that Fulton describes between constantly dreaming and waking to forget the dream as she grows to become literate in the deep affective imaginary. The lessening of the distance between “you” and “your medium of passage” is then seen as the loss of rationality, a movement away from anthropocentric and positivist ideology towards a more horizontal and symbiotic approach to tools normatively regarded as inanimate. Empirical thought emphasizes controlling what is not-you, while Intuitionism emphasizes “communication with what is not-you” (Whitehead 241); the “[idiotic]” rationality of normative anthropocentric cause and effect is replaced with humility and the acknowledgment of useful ignorance that there is more to events, people, or objects than meets the eye.

**Removing the Mask: Deep & Felt Affective Communication**

Whitehead uses Lila Mae to demonstrate the danger of ignoring the affectual imaginary—even as moving past affect is necessary for surviving in the patriarchal and white supremacist world. Lila Mae, through her second realization and relearning to read, also demonstrates the physical aspect of reading that the reader can use to glean the full meaning of Whitehead’s work. Lauren Berlant has theorized about affect theory and its implications for calling upon a shared history in distinct present moments (Berlant). Affect theory not only deals with bodily responses to registering the intensities of converging temporalities, but it goes further to also include the converging of place and memories associated with place. Especially in a historic novel, readers are thrown into stories attempting to describe a present that has already passed while also attempting to understand their own present (Berlant). A traumatic event breaks the mundane movement towards the future as each present moment feels emergently historic and
the deeper affective level tied to place and traumatic experience is more felt in everyday interaction. In this case, the elevator crash completely upends Lila Mae’s life when she is implicated as an inadequate inspector or as a corrupt saboteur, and she cannot go to work or even live safely in her own apartment. As the black box’s coming is also layered into the narrative and lies beyond the horizon of what is known, the significance of the affective environment in the city is then multiplied. Both the elevator crash and the coming of the second elevation offer a moment to pause and notice the fragility of the current way of knowing.

While Lila Mae’s place in society as a Black woman subjects her to many situations in which her affective response would allow the history of white patriarchal society to overtake the present, Lila Mae, along with many other characters, use their mask as both a weapon and shield to dilute the deep and troubling affectual response to focus on a more immediate and simpler affect. Before Lila Mae leaves the house, she stands, “dressed,” “in front of the mirror,” but her preparation is not as concerned with the appearance of her clothes as it is with her face itself (Whitehead 57). The image of Lila Mae’s face becoming an “eroded rock” in her old age references a surface which has been weathered down by passing winds and water. The weathering down is similar to the way that oncoming emotions and bodily responses brush past her face to stay beneath the surface (Whitehead 235). Lila Mae first forms her mask while in her “janitor’s closet” at the Institute for Vertical Transport—when she has just entered the system of white empirical knowledge (Whitehead 57). Even from her hidden and miniscule room, Lila Mae is now fully exposed to the white gaze and must align her performance and her ambition with the goals of society. While Lila Mae cannot completely dismiss her affectual responses, she uses her mask and her machine-like calibration to dwell in the upper level of her imaginary without

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16 Mr. Reed, for instance, applies his own mask when discussing his plans for Lila Mae: “Then the lines of consternation in his brow relax: he puts his game face on, parrying Lila Mae mask for mask” (Whitehead 58).
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delving into the deep and troubling present moment. Lila Mae prefers “a register of pain a few inches below the high-tide mark of real pain” to feeling out of control when the present moment is elongated—even as the discomfort is not specific to her jaw or eyebrows, but runs all across her face (Whitehead 57). When she finally finds the mask that “makes her sad face hard,” it is not a recognition of the way it looks, but she knew “she’d hit it” based on the way it felt. Lila Mae is able to feel the success of her mask because it is protecting her against feelings that would influence her to pause and think historically. When she goes on her quest to the bottom of the crash, she continues to wear her mask because she knows that this level of pain will keep her grounded in her pursuit to clear her name and uncover the second elevation. Lila Mae’s affective mask allows her to pass between the Intuitionist mode of inspecting elevators and the Empirical mode of understanding everyday interaction.

The mask that dilutes affective communication is slowly removed as Lila Mae utilizes the affective aspect of reading to work through Fulton’s journals after her second realization. She “tumbles down” and “decodes that scratch” traversing through “its slopes and sudden cliffs” (Whitehead 205-206). Specifically in The Intuitionist, the reader themselves can also experience the affective aspect of reading through Whitehead’s nonlinear presentation of the narrative and the free indirect discourse of the narrator. Throughout the novel, the omniscient narrator describes scenes and thoughts of Lila Mae, but the reader is unaware if these are registered by Lila Mae herself. For example, before recapping a story from Lila Mae’s youth, the narrator states: “Lila Mae has forgotten this incident. But no matter. It still happened” (Whitehead 116). Especially in the beginning of the novel before Lila Mae’s second realization, it becomes hard to tell the difference between the commentary of the omniscient narrator—who is aware of the narrative layering—and simply the thoughts of Lila Mae. Through the omniscience of the
narrator, the reader is exposed to the deeper feelings of Lila Mae’s affective responses even if she herself stays in its surface level interjection, and the reader is immersed into the deeper historical feeling that Lila Mae sacrifices. While Lila Mae and Mr. Reed speak about the aftermath of the crash and their plan for the immediate future, the smell of rain interjects into their conversation: “This slow debate about the rain: it’s not about rain at all, but the fragility of what we know. We’re all just guessing. The second elevation, she thinks. The new cities are coming” (Whitehead 64). The “fragility of what we know” is juxtaposed directly with Lila Mae’s following thought of “the second elevation” as she definitively defers questioning the present moment to a distant future that is not currently possible. However, Lila Mae also pauses to notice the current shortcomings of her reading strategy and that something needs to be changed, but at this point in the novel she is invested in the black box as the key to unlocking a martini-glass shaped building. Occurring just after the elevator crash crisis, the affective aura that is present adds a shared inclination to pause and elongate the present moment as “we’re all just guessing.” The emphasis on pausing in the present moment connects to Marco Caracciolo’s discussion of slow narrative which is marked by three different aspects: an uneventful plot, a sense of detachment from the human world, and a focus on the textural material of objects and landscapes (Caracciolo). The novel is not full of action and adventure as the plot ensues in the aftermath of a catastrophic event, the people in society are often described in a distanced nature that downplays their humanity, and the narrator often focuses on describing the city landscape in addition to the novel’s central role of elevators. Slow narrative emphasizes deep attentional viewing that is counterintuitive to the hyper attention that stems from the subject object binaries of the Western world. The introduction of too many concepts can blind the viewer from the perceptual richness to see matter as lively and active. The sense of incoming rain is not lost on Lila Mae, but she is
taught and conditioned to forgo exploring unknown and deeper affective feelings. The deeper aspect of her affective perception is still prevalent, yet it is not recalled in terms of her own conscious thinking. The masks that result from attempting to limit the effects of prejudice against race, gender, or ideology negate the characters from fully participating in the affective dimension. In the first part of the quote, the narrator uses “we” twice to include the reader in these statements that “we” really are just “guessing.” Directly following the next thought is, “she thinks”—not including the reader and limiting the thought to Lila Mae. The proximity yet conflicting nature of these pronouns gives the reader a chance to practice slow and mindful reading to affectively feel the historical present and that things are not as they seem.

While Lila Mae works to stay within the simpler and more upper octave of her affect, inherent in affect is the ability for it to interject without the awareness of the subject. The memories that form perception of the present (memories associated with place) are not the ones normatively used to explicitly communicate the past, but rather they inform deeper and more intimate scenes that are unknowingly called upon in experiencing new environments. However, as she enters the Dime-A-Dance, Lila Mae feels a sense of place beyond just the safety and respite she feels from fleeing the pursuit of the Arbo mob. The room is described as a “bubble floating in dark murk” and is constantly referred to as a “shelter” that is “warm” and “safe”—demonstrating a true displacement from the unyielding city that is constantly full of cold shoulders and fear (Whitehead 217). Affective thought can do more than just provide the mask that Lila Mae wears for protection, but can help to create an embodied aspect of time, a physical reference of experience for memory to recall. Berlant describes the ability of affective information to guide protagonists and help them process the unfolding of the present through “being in it, touching, tasting, overhearing, and tracking how we are responding to it” (Berlant
The Happyland Dime-A-Dance becomes a turning point for Lila Mae as she is immersed into affective connection and converging temporality. The Happyland Dime-A-Dance is transactional at its base level as men offer a dime to dance with women. However, from the moment Lila Mae begins to lead an elderly man around the dance floor, the transaction is seen to be more than just monetary. The men are looking for their “wife, [their] daughter, that old sweetheart” (Whitehead 216). Edward Casey identifies two different bodies that interact in the present; the “remembering body” is the physical body of the present, but the “remembered body” is the customary body (Casey 192). The customary body can move back and forth from different temporalities to re-experience certain places. Remembered bodies interject remembering bodies, negating the assumption that memories are simply in the past. In terms of affect, an uncontrolled bodily emotion can cause the body to react uncontrollably, and in these instances the past is re-interjected into the present. On the dance floor, the man’s body is pushed back to remember people he had deep emotional connections with and places he had danced in before. The man to Lila Mae is “a ghost” that remains unnamed and anonymous—indicating her own turning point in her journey as she enters the liminal affective space that she has been conditioned to resist. Although in a physical sense Lila Mae is still obviously Lila Mae, the narrator asks, “who is she now to him”—that “now” in this exact moment in this exact room there is a transformation occurring beyond rationality (Whitehead 216). By completely reliving past places in the present, remembering bodies become one with the remembered body, and there is a loss in sense of time itself. There is no telling how long this diversion from normative temporality will take as it is only described as a “reprieve” for those “here tonight” in the Dime-

17 We see here an allusion to individual uplift as “blistered feet” directly preempt “down payments on better futures” as the women push their bodily limits to create opportunity for themselves wherever they can (Whitehead 216).
18 Places are placed in contrast to sites, as sites denote that everything is in a fixed position. While place memory limits linear recollection, it also builds bodily memory for re-experiencing the past in the present (Casey).
A-Dance—demonstrating the specific aspects of temporality and place that are tied to the building of affective connection. The “news said a little rain,” but there is a “storm” outside; the comment on the rain is again referring to the fragility of what is known when things come “unexpectedly” (Whitehead 217).

Lila Mae is following the influence of her new reading strategy that communicates through affective experience rather than empirical knowledge, and the difference in her approach is represented by the change in the way she looks for clues. When she returns to the site of the crash one final time to re-intuit the events of the crash, she does not even touch the elevator. Linda Selzer states that Lila Mae not even touching the elevator dangerously leaves her more open to the influence of ideology and pedagogy (Selzer). However, an inspector touching the elevator represents that the inspector controls and summons the signs from the elevator, but Lila Mae simply stands and waits. The “signals the genies may or may not have dispatched” that went “through her darkness […] unread” during her inspection of the elevator prior to the crash were the signals that did not require touch, and they were the signals that went beyond the rational logic in which she was invested (Whitehead 231). While the felt aspect of affective connection is important in scenes like the Happyland Dime-A-Dance that allow Lila Mae to feel the present moment, there is an aspect to physically feeling an object that could limit the ability to see it as alive and imposing its own agency. Jane Bennett describes that an object’s entelechy cannot be always constantly considered as there are too many reminders and cultural connections to seeing objects as inanimate that society needs in order to survive. However, developing a reading strategy for questioning vitalism that can easily be called upon can point society in the direction of horizontal reorientation and recognize when experiences go beyond something that can be controlled (Bennett). In the case of the elevator, touching and feeling its walls exacerbates the
reminder that there is a difference between humans and objects, while in other cases it reminds society of emotional connection or is a medium for the interjection of the past into the present. Not only does her new affective reading strategy affect the way she interacts with elevators, but the way she interacts with people as well.

As Lila Mae returns to Mrs. Rodgers house the second time, Lila Mae’s new horizontal reading strategy is in ultimate effect as she no longer feels loyalty to abide by the rules of her profession or fulfill the expectations of society. Lila Mae gives up her belief that she will gain social status and be able to pursue her intellectual mission within the existing literacy and social system of the city. Mrs. Rodger’s attachment to the porcelain horses that were broken and dashed to the floor when the Arbo mob ransacked her home illustrates what Lila Mae stands to gain from her new knowledge. Mrs. Rogers has figurines that are a physical representation of a reel of stop motion photography as the narrator describes how “fifteen ceramic horses stand on the mantle above the fireplace, in poses ranging from mid-gallop to pensive graze” (Whitehead 89). Each movement is captured in the present and then displayed so that viewers can directly see what is occurring. The figurines were a breakdown of a horse galloping, and now that breakdown has itself been broken. Before, the horses were something continuous and satisfying, but now they are messy, confusing, and almost hopeless. Empiricism broke the elevator down into its parts to physically see what was wrong with the elevator, and now that breakdown has been broken down as the elevator crash uncovered the true fragile nature of empirical knowledge. Mrs. Rodgers belief and investment into her ability to put the horses back together demonstrates her awareness that there is knowledge beyond what is normatively seen. She does

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19 Stop motion photography takes an action and breaks it down into snapshots that capture each step; the way that humans understand a horse galloping is because of stop motion photography’s ability to capture each movement as it is completed.
not find each piece and immediately look to see how they fit together to give her an answer, but she feels each piece in her “rough palm”—demonstrating her established affective communication and her viewing of the horses as an assemblage in which she is only one distinct part (Whitehead 236). Just as Fulton’s journals required a sense of intuition and a deep affectual awareness to be found, so do the horses, and so does horizontal thinking to reorient the vertically arranged system of high capitalism.

Through the racial allegory of the elevator-obsessed world in *The Intuitionist*, Whitehead points out the absurdity of only looking at the skin of things and the shortcomings of high capitalism in curating social progress as it perpetuates a focus on a deferred future rather than an alternative present that accurately supports a transcendental new way of seeing. The novel ends with Lila Mae holding the plans for the black box, which in this case is not designs for a new elevator, but her experience in coming to find out the limits of her own mode of understanding. She no longer has allegiance to the city and is no longer invested in vertical mobility as she is even willing to move around to other cities if this one never realizes the limits of its anthropocentric and positivist ideology. Lila Mae’s pursuit for the black box connects her to all the people who have come before her and pursued a path for changing the current system of exploitation and exclusion, and it pulls her into the present moment to begin to think horizontally about her relationships to other people and objects. Lila Mae continues what Fulton started, continuing to push back on empirical modes of understanding by theorizing about elevators—always moving closer and closer toward an Erlich approach that addresses the elevator accident and acknowledges the full assemblage of actants both human and object.
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