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Where Racial Meets Neuro Diversity: Pondering “Who’s We” in Colson Whitehead’s *The Intuitionist*

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ABSTRACT

This article examines *The Intuitionist* through the lenses of disability studies to complicate prevailing racial readings of the novel. While I do not dispute the undeniable racial inflections of the school of elevator inspection known as intuitionism, I uncover a less visible “neurodiverse” inflection that Whitehead’s careful characterization of his protagonist’s peculiarly different cognitive style intimates. My reading accounts for Whitehead’s idiosyncratic fascination with material objects—in this case, elevators—which I consider beyond their symbolic or representational dimension. As I demonstrate, the elevators’ very material existence and their peculiar relations with intuitionist inspectors are, in fact, instrumental in Whitehead’s complex depiction of neurodiversity. Drawing on autistic memoir and neuroscientific research on the autism spectrum, I argue that Whitehead links racial and cognitive diversity so as to interrogate exclusivist notions of identity.

KEYWORDS

Colson Whitehead; non-human; neurodiversity; intersectionality; post-race

Who knows but that, on the lower frequencies, I speak for you? (Ralph Ellison, *Invisible Man*)

Lobby

What happens when we free thought from its skull prison and imagine it as expanding throughout the body—a body, in turn, free from its skin prison? As soon as we accept such a possibility, cognition is no longer reduced to abstract cerebral operations, but rather is seen in continuity with perceptual and affective processes that are grounded in the concrete experience of the world. Cognitive processes are no longer reduced, that is, to their propositional components. When we move beyond ideals of a normalized rationality, we can begin to embrace forms of thought that differ from our habitual schemas. As soon as we contemplate such a possibility, the all-too-frequent tendency to hierarchize and categorize begins to collapse. Wishful thinking? Perhaps. And yet current neurocognitive research is taking such a possibility very seriously. After an initial period devoted to identifying universally shared cognitive proclivities, it is increasingly turning to individual variation. Far from erasing the neurological, cognitive, and sensory differences between (and within) each “neurotype,” the current interest in “neurodiversity” challenges the pervading normative account that pathologizes difference by writing it off as “lack” or “deficit” without ever considering, as Ralph James Savarese puts it, that “certain challenges become boons in another context” (“I Object” 75).

In this essay I turn to relations with the nonhuman as one such context in which cognitive diversity becomes a boon. Colson Whitehead’s 1999 novel *The Intuitionist* presents a uchronic society inordinately revolving around elevator inspection that provides just that kind of setting where unfamiliar forms of thought may thrive. Of course, there is a catch: even if cognitive difference is accepted or tolerated, it remains a label of Otherness—very much like that other label

of Otherness that the novel's protagonist, the first black female elevator inspector, more visibly wears on her skin. My interest in what follows is, in fact, not restricted to cognition. Rather, my purpose is to explore to what extent cognitive difference may reshape customary notions of identity. Critics have acclaimed *The Intuitionist* as a utopian racial allegory, but it is so much more than that. By depicting a dynamic relationship with the inorganic nonhuman, the novel practices a new kind of intersectional analysis, linking racial and cognitive diversity so as to complicate easy readings of uplift that the image of the elevators stimulates. Its plot rests on the opposition between two contrasting factions within the powerful "Department of Elevator Inspection"—an opposition that is constantly racialized. But there is much more to it: Whitehead capitalizes on such rivalry to thematize diversity in the acquisition of knowledge. The two factions, empiricism and intuitionism, are actually schools of thought, and their antagonism hinges on their contrasting methodological and epistemic approaches to their respective vocation. How does one know what is wrong with an elevator? How does one know what it needs? In the novel intuitionism becomes aligned with—actually seems to spring from—cognitive diversity. As we shall see, different methods or ways of *knowing* are indissolubly associated with different ways of *thinking*.

The novel's inventive conceit assumes the possibility of actively communicating with nonliving, which is to say, nonthinking entities, thus immediately challenging the idea that such entities—elevators—are actually nonthinking. Intuitionism, we might say, embraces what Steven Shaviro calls "discognition," a concept basically synonymous with sentience, which "does not presuppose that mental processes and experiences are rational, nor even that they are necessarily conscious" (*Discognition* 9). Shaviro's neologism reveals the extent to which the very idea of sentience may redefine accepted notions of cognition: "discognition" goes beyond or exceeds cognition at the same time preceding and subtending it. As he argues, "Before thought is *about* anything, there is a thinking process [...] that is nontransitive, without an object" (18; original emphasis). "Discognition" resolves itself into a sort of bodily or affective response that precedes (and prescinds from) propositional thought: "something that happens without, or before, concepts" (17), akin to what that other Whitehead, Alfred North, called "feeling." Even more provocatively, discognition, like the Whiteheadian feeling, is conceived of as a "universally distributed quality" (Shaviro, "Consequences of Panpsychism" 19) in human and nonhuman animals and, crucially, in inorganic entities as well: "a fundamental property of matter itself" (20).

While I am not entirely convinced by Shaviro's radical approach, it allows us to appreciate the reach of cognitive diversity, as it prods us into looking at cognition—that paragon of humanness—differently. To think of the nonhuman as sentient, to recognize some kind of mental activity or *feeling* in inorganic matter, is to blur the dividing line between the human and the nonhuman. Such blurring, however, may be variously achieved. One may boldly affirm that the nonhuman thinks, too, in keeping with versions of panpsychism that challenge the human monopoly on cognition by recognizing a vaguely defined "mind-like quality" or "sentience" (Shaviro, "Consequences of Panpsychism" 20) in all things. At issue is the attribution of traditionally human qualities to the nonhuman, in a more or less explicit anthropomorphism. Yet the question may be reversed: rather than inquire as to whether inorganic matter is sentient, we may complicate human cognition so as to accommodate the alternative forms of thought, or *discognition*, that panpsychists attribute to nonhuman entities. In this way, the very idea of cognition becomes strange, unfamiliar, as it takes in forms that are *also* nonhuman. Rather than anthropomorphize inorganic matter, we may recognize how much "nonhumanness" the human incorporates.

This perspective allows for an even more radical shift in destabilizing the human/nonhuman divide and the presumption of human superiority. As important, it allows us to deconstruct all manner of categorical distinctions and the hierarchies to which they give rise. From the nonhuman it does not take much to move to other categories, or identities, that have likewise been traditionally relegated to the lowest layers of society, and even humanity, on the basis of race, gender, sexuality, class, and disability. But I am less interested in analogies between minorities than I am in the connections, intersections, and overlappings that Whitehead's novel intimates. How to attend to the

multiplicative, as opposed to additive, experiences, as [Nirmala Erevelles](#) and [Andrea Minear](#) explain, of those who are “located at the intersections of difference” (134)? May an alliance between race and disability be a more productive way to challenge the customary vertical mapping of social value? *The Intuitionist* addresses these questions, as we shall see, paradoxically relying on that most vertical of objects: elevators.

First Floor: “Horizontal Thinking in a Vertical World”

The intuitionist of the title is Lila Mae Watson, the first black female elevator inspector in an unnamed metropolis resembling New York City. Indirectly involved in a freak free-fall elevator accident, Lila Mae is dragged into the competition for dominance between the antagonistic factions. The novel’s two-pronged detective plot follows her tribulations to discover who sabotaged the injured elevator. At the same time, both sides vie for her collaboration in searching the so-called black-box, the ideal elevator, on which the incoming election for Guild Chair seems to depend. But I will bracket off the novel’s complex hard-boiled detective plot to focus on those vehicles of “vertical transport” that most critics unsurprisingly consider powerful, although problematic, utopian symbols of racial uplift. Yet in *The Intuitionist*, other than symbols, elevators are, literally, material objects or things that apparently demand but ultimately refuse to be read according to a representational logic. “The elevator,” writes [Mitchum Huehls](#), “carries an essential truth, but it’s an ontological, not an interpretive truth” (116). My interest in ontology is, however, deeply relational. I look at Whitehead’s elevators from what Michel Serres would call a “desmological” perspective; less concerned with how they *are* than with how they *interact*.¹

The background rivalry between empiricists and intuitionists sets indeed the stage for the inventive relationship between humans and machines that the novel exploits. Empiricists see them as mere mechanical objects to be inspected on the basis of close observation and examination of their components. The “business of Empiricism,” Lila Mae says, is “what things appear to be” ([Whitehead](#) 239). Conversely, intuitionism distrusts outward appearances and proposes instead a holistic and affective approach to elevators; a “sensual perspective of the object they investigate” ([Berlant](#) 850). But the opposition, as it has been observed, rather than “between feeling and thinking” is one between different ways of knowing, intuitionism being a method that “dismisses knowledge produced by sight” ([Forsberg](#) 133). Rather than a mere method of inspection, intuitionism amounts to a “doctrine of transcendence” ([Whitehead](#) 241) that complicates and confuses the subject–object divide—a distinction that empiricists ferociously observe. The intuitionists’ cryptic motto, “separate the elevator from elevatorness” (62), subtly conveys the belief that every single elevator is a unique individual rather than an unspecified instance of vertical transport. Elevators are quite simply alive: they are covered by “sensitive skin” (225), they have “will” (101), “soul” (65), and “articulate self-awareness” (229). Intuitionism ultimately regards elevators as sentient beings with which direct communication (between peers, as it were) is possible. Consider what an intuitionist inspection looks like:

[Lila Mae] leans against the dorsal wall of the elevator and listens. 125 Walker is only 12 floors high, and the vibration of the idling drive doesn’t diminish much as it swims through the gritty loop of the diverting pulley, descends down the cables, navigates the suspension gear, and grasps the car. Lila Mae can feel the idling in her back. She hears the door operator click above her in the dark well, and then the door shuts, halting a small degree as the strata of paint chafes. Three Gemco helical springs are standard-issue buffers on Arbo elevators. They wait fifteen feet below her like stalagmites. “Press twelve,” Lila Mae orders the super. Even with her eyes closed, she could have done it herself, but she’s trying to concentrate on the vibrations massaging her back. She can almost see them now. (5–6)

This unconventional inspection is enough for Lila Mae to verify some malfunction in the elevator, much to the dismay of the superintendent of the building, who complains that she has not even “looked at it” (7). Then he understands: “You aren’t one of those voodoo inspectors, are you? You don’t have to see anything, you just feel it, right?” (7). That’s intuitionism in a nutshell.

Even though later in the novel Lila Mae describes intuitionism as “communicating with the elevator on a nonmaterial basis” (62), her inspection bespeaks a material (even carnal) encounter. (Few things are more physical than a back massage!) Intuitionism relies on a sensuous, embodied, affective—or, “discognitive”—relationship with the inert objects of inspection. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that intuitionism questions the very inertness of matter, so as to evoke a “material vitalism” of the sort that [Deleuze and Guattari](#) ascribed to metal, as a vital state of matter “that doubtless exists everywhere, but is ordinarily hidden or covered, rendered unrecognizable” (411). Whitehead’s (metallic) elevators uncover or render recognizable precisely this kind of vitality or Deleuzian “matter-flow.” The elevator’s vibrations “swim through,” “descend down,” and “navigate” through cables, rails, and pulleys, just like a vital fluid, to communicate with Lila Mae.

Now, those unrelenting and interactive vibrations resonate with what [Jane Bennett](#) calls the “vibrancy of matter.” Her “vital materialism” rejects mechanistic notions of matter as passive, inert, or subject to automatism, at the same time resisting the classic vitalist idea that matter is infused with a “vital force,” divine or otherwise. In her formulation, vitality is intrinsic to matter; matter is lively, “active and creative without needing to be experienced or conceived as partaking in divinity or purposiveness” (93). Pushing Lucretius’s and Spinoza’s monisms, as well as Bergsonian vitalism, to the limit, [Bennett](#) affirms that “the vitality of matter is real” (119) because everything, whether organic or inorganic, is made of the same “quirky stuff” (xi). One does not need to agree with her radical monism to grasp the usefulness of her vital materialism to identify the displacement of the (human and normative) subject that Whitehead’s novel performs.

[Bennett](#) posits a theory of distributive agency wherein the nonhuman is conceptualized as “actants,” in Bruno Latour’s definition as “something that acts or to which activity is granted by others” (quoted in [Bennett](#) 9). Actants take part in Deleuzian assemblages, conceived of as “groupings of diverse elements” ([Bennett](#) 23) that are not governed “by any central head” and whose agency is “distinct from the sum of the vital force of each materiality considered alone” (24). The “agency of the assemblage” (24) is not reducible to the sum of the agencies of its members-actants. Human agency, accordingly, loses its traditionally privileged place to become simply one of the many agencies or materialities that dissolve into the assemblage. By thus resisting any human exceptionalism, [Bennett’s](#) formulation clearly disrupts the traditional primacy of human agency. But she does so with a fundamentally democratic move. When she affirms the “very radical character of the (fractious) kinship between the human and the nonhuman” (112), it is not so much that she is simply making a case for the vitality of matter, but her monism gestures to what she calls “an ‘alien’ quality of our own flesh” (112)—that “nonhumanness” the human contains. We are, too, matter, just like the nonhuman: animals, plants, stone, metal, and, obviously, elevators. And it is precisely this shared materiality that allows us to “horizontalize,” as she puts it, the relations between organic life and that “prodigious idea” that [Deleuze and Guattari](#) termed “*nonorganic life*” (411; original emphasis).

[Bennett’s](#) political theory prompts a reconsideration of old categorical distinctions that ultimately demands a more “horizontal representation of the relation between human and nonhuman actants” (97). A demand that chimes nicely with Intuitionism’s own credo: “the elevator and the passenger need each other” ([Whitehead](#) 62). It is, in fact, paradoxical that a novel so intent on detailing the intricacies of “vertical transport” would pursue such a “horizontal” representation of the relation between human and elevator. Intuitionism, as one of its most influential adepts declares, is “a renegotiation of our relationship to objects” (68). The novel indeed effects the dual move that [Bennett’s](#) monism intimates: on the one hand, it endows elevators with sentience and even life; on the other, it highlights the kind of affective and bodily attachment and communication between apparently different ontologies that blurs categorical boundaries. It is for this reason that the elevators in the novel must be seen as material things rather than as mere symbols. Mitchum Huehls is right in suggesting that their main function is to stimulate interpretation, only to frustrate it—but their conspicuous being also draws attention to that symbiotic relationship with intuitionist inspectors that the novel exploits. And yet,

although such relationship “thematizes the way subjects understand objects” (Huehls 111), Intuitionism cannot be considered a mere method of knowing or of inspection. That “materiality that exceeds representation” that, according to Huehls (110), Whitehead’s elevators possess is, as we shall soon see, instrumental to the depiction of intuitionism as rather a “*way of thinking*” (Whitehead 206; original emphasis)—a veritable cognitive style that defies social and cultural verticality.

Second Floor: “Lila Mae Watson Is the One”

The founder of intuitionism is James Fulton, whose two-volume *Theoretical Elevators* revolutionized the conception of vertical transport. Lila Mae discovered his works early during her studies at the prestigious Institute for Vertical Transport, where she was the only black student. Because the Institute “did not have living space for colored students” (Whitehead 43), Lila Mae leads a solitary and segregated life in the janitor’s closet, where Fulton’s innovative work amounts to a “conversion experience” (40). One sleepless night Lila Mae sees a light in the library opposite her closet. That light, together with the shape of an old man holding a lantern, keeps her occasional company during her nights of study, as though the two were “the last people on earth” (46). Lila Mae cannot then imagine that the mysterious figure was James Fulton himself, who one night waves at her in the distance only to be found the morning after, stone dead, on the library floor. Through this almost physical connection between two points of light that chance on each other in the nightly darkness, Colson Whitehead materializes the enigmatic bond between Lila Mae and the founder of her creed that, in many respects, constitutes the main tension of the novel.

The true nature of such a bond becomes apparent later, when it is revealed to Lila Mae that Fulton was (like her) colored, but (unlike her) of a complexion light enough as to allow him to pass as white. As the first and only “colored woman” (Whitehead 14) in elevator inspection, Lila Mae is well aware of the momentous significance of her visible racial difference, but the discovery of “Fulton’s nigrescence” (151) renders master and disciple “secretly kin” (241).² So revolutionary a revelation endows her with a “new literacy,” as though Lila Mae “had learned to read” with new eyes, to the extent that Fulton’s works “meant something different now” (230). Of course, this secret affinity allows for a reading of intuitionism as a utopian ideology of racial uplift. And yet I argue that the affinity between the two is not *only* racial. Throughout the novel Whitehead carefully delineates the contours of a further affinity that ties those two points of light together—a deeper bond that flanks, rather than replaces, their more explicit (though to the eye equally invisible) epidermic affinity.

Such an affinity begins to surface when we attend to the initial stages of Fulton’s dazzling career:

Fulton just appeared at the Pierpoint School of Engineering one day, eighteen years old, slow of speech, tentative and proceeded to astound. [...] It was Fulton’s odd perceptions that made him a technical wiz, his way of finding the unobvious solution that is also the perfect solution. It also allowed him, Lila Mae sees, to pierce the veil of this world and discover the elevator world. (100)

Young Fulton conforms to the now widespread image of a person with a “mild” form of autism or Asperger’s syndrome, such as slowness or difficulty of speech, some clumsiness, and, to complete the stereotype, the brilliance of a genius—Fulton is a “technical wiz,” just like the famous Silicon Valley “Aspies.” Beyond the cliché, however, it is noteworthy that his “odd perceptions” are responsible for his extraordinary ability to come up with the most unobvious but perfect solution. In this respect, Fulton resembles Temple Grandin—professor of animal science at Colorado State University, designer and consultant for cattle slaughter plants, and famously autistic. If Fulton revolutionized the elevator inspection business, Grandin revolutionized the livestock handling industry, on account of her highly visual cognitive style that allows her to adopt the animal’s point of view. “I use my visual thinking skills to simulate what an animal would see and hear in a given situation” (Grandin 168). She explains:

I have hyperacute senses and fear responses that may be more like those of a prey-species animal than of most humans. People often fail to observe animals. Recently I visited a slaughter plant where the cattle were terrified of air that hissed from a pneumatically powered gate. Every time the gate opened or closed, the cattle recoiled and backed down the chute. They reacted as if they had seen a rattlesnake. It was obvious to me that the hissing air scared them, but other people failed to see it. Purchase of a few air silencers solved the problem. With the hissing gone, the animals were no longer afraid of the gate. All it took was a cow's eye view. (180)

Like Fulton's, Grandin's "odd perceptions" allow her to come up with perfectly unexpected solutions, precisely because such perceptions allow her to "pierce the veil of this world," as Lila Mae would have it, and discover the cattle's world—that which the others "failed to see." "All it took was a cow's eye view," she says simply. Grandin has a deep, which is to say "sensory-based" (30), connection with cattle as a consequence of the sensory and cognitive diversity peculiar to the autistic mind. As her professional success makes clear, this sort of neurological difference, which most experts regard as a deficit, is actually a boon.

While Grandin's secret lies in adopting the cattle's perspective, Fulton's intuitionism consists in adopting the "elevator's point of view" (Whitehead 62). He bonds deeply with inorganic objects rather than with nonhuman animals. Yet this kind of connection is typical of autism, too. As Ralph James Savarese has observed, recent neuroscience research suggests that autistics are consistently drawn to nonhuman entities. Savarese refers to a study from 2003 that found a preference for objects beginning in early childhood: whereas a neurotypical child watching a children's television show normally focuses on the characters and their actions, an autistic one is drawn to the inanimate details in the background. What is more, while neurotypical children, according to Savarese, "begin to privilege human sounds in utero" and "learn to privilege human faces" shortly after they are born, "neither of these proclivities appears to be true in autism" ("I Object" 77). Because the affective, empathic, and communicative interests of the autistic child extend to the nonhuman, "the hierarchy governing neurotypical attention breaks down" (79). This "engagement with the more-than human," in the words of Erin Manning and Brian Massumi, yields an "unhierarchized commitment" to experiencing the organic and inorganic world "without discrimination" (4), which is very different from simple indifference or rejection of the human. Fulton seems to favor a similar unhierarchized approach—or, "horizontal," as Bennett would have it—when, in a passage of *Theoretical Elevators* he writes: "We must tend to our objects and treat them as newborn babes" (38).

The convergences between Fulton's intuitionism and autism might appear to be coincidental. And yet reading the former through the lenses of the latter helps account for that total engagement with that more-than-human, material elevator that intuitionism promotes. What is more, Whitehead quite self-consciously revels in these convergences to both strengthen and complicate the established "epidermic" connection between the founder of intuitionism and the fervent intuitionist Lila Mae. As we shall see, her "facility with Fulton's thought" (Whitehead 168) may spring less from the intellectual study of his work than from her own implied neurodivergence. Whitehead seems to suggest, quite literally, that *Intuitionist minds think alike*.

Indeed, Lila Mae shows similar anthropomorphizing and "unhierarchized" or horizontal proclivities: "[Elevators] grow on you," she confesses. "Like people. You never know who you're going to like" (169). Her only genuine display of affection is, in fact, a kiss to the miniature replica of a classic elevator (251). Vertical transport is her only "restricted interest,"³ and we find her "disassembl[ing] elevators in her mind" (160) as if in mock autistic fixation, even in her time off. Her fascination with the nonhuman epitomized by elevators is mirrored by a symmetrical indifference toward the human, which Whitehead inordinately plays up. Consider her detachment toward her colleague Chuck, the only person she can trust but whose face has "the uninteresting flatness of a background object in a photograph" (184). As it has been rightly observed, "Lila Mae can engage more fruitfully with objects than with people" (Grattan 129). The emphasis on her poor social skills sometimes borders on the caricaturesque. As a child, her mother urged her to "be social" (Whitehead 42), an activity that never comes naturally to her. She rehearses facial expressions to display in public, struggles to keep her impolite impulses in check, and opens files on types of social interaction. The coolness with which she

shrugs off a one-night-stand as her “first investigation” into sexuality stuns: she transforms sexual intercourse into a report written in the “lumbering syntax of bureaucracy” (180). Tellingly, she shows no response to the mysterious hand waving from the library in her college years: “nothing, not even a nod, the polite thing to do” (46). Would her response have been different, the narrator wonders, had she known that the hand was Fulton’s? “Probably not,” is the verdict: “That’s the kind of person Lila Mae is” (47).

And, indeed, throughout his novel *Whitehead* seems determined to convince us that his protagonist belongs in a certain category or “kind of person”—a category that loosely corresponds to a stereotypical image of the “high-functioning” autistic.⁴ Toward the end of the novel, Lila Mae visits Mrs. Rogers, Fulton’s black housekeeper, whose place had just been broken into, probably, by the same thugs who were after her and Fulton’s black box blueprints. Or that is at least what Lila Mae infers: “Then they hit the place after she left Ben Urich. When they realized she knew” (235). This simple and everyday cognitive operation of inferring others’ intentions and motives from their outward behaviors, better known as “theory of mind,” is met with surprise: “Lila Mae’s been a practicing solipsist since before she could walk, and the day’s recent events are doing irreparable damage to her condition” (235). The use of the terms “solipsistic” and “condition” echo the popular image of autism as a sort of captivity “in a world of [one’s] own,” as neurodiversity activist Amanda Baggs complains (quoted in *Savarese, “I Object”* 77). As important, both terms are called into question precisely as a consequence of Lila Mae’s engaging in theory of mind, whose lack has been taken as typical of autism ever since the publication of Simon Baron-Cohen’s works in the mid-nineties. Even more interestingly, Fulton seems to have practiced a similar solipsism. As Mrs. Rogers reveals to Lila Mae during that last meeting, there was “no kind of sense at all in his head except his own kind of sense” (236). The bond between Fulton and Lila Mae comes full circle as intuitionism is quite plainly associated with a certain “kind of person” characterized by an assumed tendency to live in one’s own world. It comes as no surprise, then, that the more numerous (typical?) empiricists refer to intuitionists as a whole as “freaks” and “misfits” (72).

Third Floor: “With How She Sees Things”

To be clear, I do not wish to impose autism on the novel, but rather to propose the condition as a valid interpretive key to decode *Whitehead*’s operation in his first novel. Although he never explicitly refers to the autism spectrum, he resorts to (and overdoes) a rather hackneyed image of his protagonist(s) as cognitively atypical. But his constant attention to the intuitionist mind unexpectedly overturns the stereotype: intuitionists turn out to be something more than mere misfits or freaks, to reveal a very particular way of thinking and of engaging with the world. In the intuitionist method, how the elevator vibrantly communicates information is just as important as how the inspector processes it:

This elevator’s vibrations are resolving themselves in her mind as an aqua-blue cone. [...] The elevator moves upward in the well, toward the grunting in the machine room, and Lila Mae turns that into a picture, too. The ascension is a red spike circling around the blue cone, which doubles in size and wobbles as the elevator starts climbing. You don’t pick the shapes and their behavior. Everyone has their own set of genies. Depends on how your brain works. Lila Mae has always had a thing for geometric forms. As the elevator reaches the fifth floor landing, an orange octagon cartwheels into her mind’s frame. It hops up and down, incongruous with the annular aggression of the red spike. Cubes and parallelograms emerge around the eighth floor, but they are satisfied with half-hearted little jigs and don’t disrupt the proceedings like the mischievous orange octagon. The octagon ricochets into the foreground, famished for attention. She knows what it is. [...] No need to continue. (*Whitehead* 6)

Whitehead describes Lila Mae’s mental processing with astounding detail. A cascade of geometrical forms (“an aqua-blue cone,” “a red spike,” “an orange octagon”) leads to a definite conclusion, in a way that uncannily resembles, again, Temple Grandin. “If I’m thinking about a structure I’m working on, all my judgments and decisions about it happen in pictures,” she writes, while words arrive only “*after* I’ve finished thinking it through” (*Grandin and Johnson* 17; original emphasis). As she sums it up: “All my deliberations are in pictures, and only my final verdict is in words” (17). Lila

Mae's cognitive style is equally visual in nature, and only subsequently verbalized: "I'm going to have to cite you for a faulty overspeed governor" (7) is her verbalized verdict, once the imagistic inspection is completed. For both women, mental language—"[their] mind[s]'s own tongue" (Whitehead 226)—is made out of images rather than words, never mind how different (Lila Mae has a penchant for geometrical colored forms; Grandin thinks in realistic, photograph-like images). As Lila Mae puts it, it all depends on how your brain works.⁵

I do not want to overemphasize the affinities between Lila Mae's and Grandin's cognitive styles (although the coincidences are often uncanny!⁶), but such affinities do aptly illustrate Whitehead's operation, as he conjoins a rather stereotypical characterization with a genuine interest in (and appreciation for) a nonverbal cognitive modality. Here, scientific research on the autism spectrum once again clarifies the significance of neurocognitive diversity. As Ralph James Savarese has observed, "Autistics remain obdurately committed to sensory knowing" ("What Some Autistics" 398), a modality remarkably lacking, at least at the outset, in propositional cognitive operations. Savarese quotes a study from 2006 comparing linguistic processing in autistic and neurotypical subjects. While in the case of high-imagery sentences (such as "the number eight, when rotated by 90 degrees, looks like a pair of glasses") the cognitive operations of both groups essentially overlapped, in the case of abstract sentences (such as "18 minus 7 equals 11") the two groups diverged; whereas neurotypicals exclusively activated language centers in the brain, autistic subjects continued to rely on visuospatial areas, as if continuing to visualize. However, crucially, "there was no difference between the two groups in either error rate or reaction time" (398). And yet, as Savarese laments elsewhere, cognitive difference tends to be stigmatized: the authors of the 2006 study "interpreted autistic processing as under-connected and inefficient" (*See It Feelingly* 39). Because not immediately verbal, autistic thinking is considered less. As Laura Otis nicely put it, "[A]ll too often, thought that occurs in an unfamiliar form is mistaken for the absence of thought" (5).

Whitehead's narrator, conversely, does not have any problems accepting, even celebrating, unfamiliar or atypical forms of thought. In the economy of the novel, empiricism is clearly assumed to be the norm from which intuitionism arrogantly departs. Or such is the official version, as voiced by the current Guild Chair, Frank Chancre, an empiricist: "sometimes the old ways are the best ways," he says during a press conference right after the elevator accident, "Why hold truck with the uppity and the newfangled when Empiricism has always been the steering light of reason?" (Whitehead 27). Whitehead does not seem to subscribe to Chancre's position. Even if mocked with exotic (and racialized) nicknames, "swamis, voodoo men, juju heads, witch doctors, Harry Houdinis" (57), the intuitionists' accuracy rate, the narrator clarifies, is "10 percent higher" (58) than the empiricists', and Lila Mae reaches even "100% accuracy rate" (206). The old ways are not necessarily the best ways, Whitehead is saying. And yet in collapsing the accepted hierarchy between schools of thought, *The Intuitionist* refuses to adhere to a reversed hierarchy: it remains, in fact, dubious that the novel sides with the intuitionist "newfangled" ways. Intuitionism ends up being a joke played by Fulton on (white) Empiricists and their "entire way of life" (240)—a revelation that casts a shadow on its transcendental principles. More importantly, the narrator, oscillating between sympathy and condescendence, remains ambivalent toward Lila Mae. Although it is repeated up to the last page of the book that "she's never wrong" (255), the line is clearly ironic. We do know that Lila Mae is often wrong, especially when it comes to discriminating between the good and the bad guys, and her conspiracy theories are finally debunked. Like the elevators themselves, the opposition between Empiricism and Intuitionism demands to be resolved only apparently. While the novel ostensibly asks who "is best equipped to read the truth of an elevator" (Huehls 111), Whitehead's ambiguity places the distinction on a horizontal plane.

Penthouse: "The Second Elevation"

My emphasis on the "Intuitionist mind" (Whitehead 229) does not intend to downplay the racial theme that most critics see at the center of the novel. The racial question is unquestionably, and explicitly, crucial: The novel starts with an elevator accident in the Fanny Briggs Memorial, a building named after an escaped slave, which had been assigned to Lila Mae by Chancre's empiricist administration with

evident window-dressing purposes. Lila Mae “may be an Intuitionist,” the narrator tells us, “but she is a colored woman, which is more to the point” (14). And yet the rest of the novel insistently questions that Lila Mae’s identity as a black woman is really *the* point. Or, put differently, that her black identity is the *only* point. As Margo Natalie Crawford writes, “A black identity crisis is always *on the verge of* becoming the theme of the novel” (70; original emphasis), but it remains, indeed, on the verge: “Whitehead never lets this theme take up more space than the theme of the politics of the elevator industry and the two competing philosophies” (70). In other words, Whitehead forces us to pay close attention to Lila Mae’s racial difference, at the same time distracting us from it by pointing to a different difference. “You have to understand something about Lila Mae,” Chuck tells the Internal Affairs officer that investigates his colleague, “She’s different than you and me.”

“She’s colored.”

“That’s not what I’m referring to, Inspector. With how she sees things.” (Whitehead 111)

Chuck identifies Lila Mae not as predominantly black, but rather as predominantly cognitively diverse—an image that, as I have tried to show, the novel validates. *That*—her peculiar outlook on the world—is, for Chuck, the measure of her difference, while for the Inspector her diversity lays bare on her skin. As the two episodes make clear, she appears as perpetually torn between two different and contrasting identities.

Yet is she? Or, said differently, might she not identify as one *and* the other? In Whitehead’s hands, I argue, Lila Mae embodies what, in the context of the intersectionality of race and gender, Adrien K. Wing called “multiplicative definition of self” (197). “The experience of black women,” writes Wing, “must be seen as a multiplicative, multilayered, indivisible whole, symbolized by the equation one times one, *not* one plus one” (200). Whitehead deftly throws neurodiversity into the equation. Importantly, he does this not by replicating a debilitating association of race and disability that deploys the latter as a metaphor for the former’s own form of oppression (Lukin 311), nor by presenting disability as an added nuance or intensifier of racial prejudice (Erevelles and Minear 128, 131). Conversely, Whitehead’s ingenious move places his protagonist at the intersection between race and disability, but in a subtle, almost undercover way—as if, like Fulton, but in a different context, Lila Mae was, too, passing.

In this way, although “the novel makes it easy to racialize the divide between Empiricism and Intuitionism,” (Huehls 116), the echoes of neurodiversity that Lila Mae (and Fulton) infuse into intuitionism thwart any reading of that primary divide as simply typifying racial relations. True, as many critics note, empiricists wield racially charged nicknames against intuitionists. But it is equally true that the latter also go by epithets, such as “freaks” and “misfits,” which, while racially neutral, line up rather neatly with the kind of slur that a person on the spectrum is used to hearing. Must these different identity inflections that the novel suggests be necessarily in competition? In *The Intuitionist*, Colson Whitehead demonstrates they do not. Through Lila Mae, and through her invisible links with Fulton, Whitehead provocatively interrogates exclusivist notions of identity: what happens if we add cognitive diversity to the more obvious racial diversity? What does it mean for a woman to be black *and* disabled? Importantly, in Lila Mae such differences coalesce to create a complex, multiplicative identity, according to a “one × one,” rather than a “one + one” logic, to borrow from Wing. Lila Mae is never either a “voodoo inspector” or a “freak”: she is always both. Precisely because her implied cognitive diversity is, indeed, never explicitly stated but rather vividly insinuated, it never becomes a label of Otherness to be merely added as an intensifier to, or used as a metaphor for, her racial difference. In this way, Whitehead resists accepted hierarchies of oppression, according to which “some differences gain prominence over others” (Erevelles and Minear 129). In the economy of *The Intuitionist*, no difference is “more to the point.”

But how may intersectionality affect our own reading of the novel? May it interfere with our consideration of Whitehead as a “postracial” author, as Ramón Saldívar suggests—one that is fundamentally committed to “deal[ing] with the meaning of race in a time when race supposedly no longer matters” (Saldívar, “Historical Fantasy” 575)? May not the idea of a multiplicative identity,

at the intersection between race and disability, actually mitigate the “urgency of the matter of race [...] in our supposedly postrace era” (Saldívar, “The Second Elevation of the Novel” 3)? If, as Saldívar rightly argues, *post-race* amounts to a conceptual rather than chronological shift in thinking about race (“Historical Fantasy” 575), I propose that Whitehead’s postracial thinking accommodates a more productive and less privative conception of identity—or, multidirectional, to adapt a category that Michael Rothberg developed in the context of memory studies. Rothberg’s multidirectionality provides a useful tool to “think about the relationship between different social groups’ histories of victimization” (2), rejecting ideas of identity that “exclude elements of alterity and forms of commonality with others” (4–5). *The Intuitionist* refuses precisely that kind of “zero-sum logic” at the root of competitive or exclusivist identities that Rothberg challenges. Let us see how.

Fulton’s passing retrospectively gives his writings an undeniable racial inflection. Or perhaps more accurately, such is the inflection with which Lila Mae reads them, enlightened with her “new literacy” (Whitehead 230). Yet both his published and unpublished works are, as Margo Natalie Crawford puts it, “only abstractly about race and blackness” (70). Only Lila Mae’s sudden knowledge of their common identity prods her to unveil their supposedly hidden racial meaning, thereby concretizing that abstraction. Likewise, *The Intuitionist* seems to be about race and blackness “only” abstractly. As Mitchum Huehls convincingly suggests, at stake in the novel, rather than its meaning as a racial allegory, is the extent to which “race crashes into our attempt to think about the novel” (116). Like the elevators themselves, race conspicuously demands our attention, like them ultimately refusing to be read according to a representational logic. As he writes, the novel “speaks of the subsistence and presence of race, but not necessarily of its meaning” (116). By encouraging further identity inflections, Whitehead complicates this assertion. If *The Intuitionist* is “only abstractly” about race and blackness, it is “only abstractly” about cognitive diversity. Intuitionism as an atypical cognitive style also demands our attention: how might that diverse and “newfangled” way of thinking “crash” into our attempt to read the novel? Like Lila Mae, we might look at, and learn to read, Fulton’s works with a newfound literacy that might help elucidate some hitherto obscure passages:

The conductor paces up and down the platform and wonders why you do not speak. You are a blight on his platform and timetable. Speak, find the words, the train is warming towards departure. You cannot find the words, the words will not allow you to find them in time for the departure. Nothing is allowed to pass between you and your companion. It is late, a seat awaits. That the words are simple and true is only half the battle. The train is leaving. 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 until 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 soul’s receptors and translated into true speech (Whitehead 87)

“For autistics,” write Erin Manning and Brian Massumi, “language comes late” (7). The above extract from *Theoretical Elevators* seems to allude to just that kind of verbal delay: a delay that is typically stigmatized, dismissed as mental retardation, written off as absence of thought: “you are a blight,” says the conductor, in fact. “The way I naturally think or respond to things looks and feels so different from standard concepts or even visualization,” says Amanda Baggs in her YouTube video “In My Language,” “that some people do not consider it thought at all, but it is a way of thinking in its own right” (4:37). A “way of thinking” (like intuitionism) based on a sensory and affective—horizontal, if you will—engagement with all the elements of the environment. “However, the thought of people like me,” continues Baggs, “is only taken seriously if we learn your language” (4:50). “Speak, find the words,” the conductor says in Fulton’s passage, thereby imposing the neurotypical rule that sanctions verbal thought as the only acceptable form of thought. “Language,” in Ralph James Savarese’s words, “is the ultimate marker of the privilege neurotypicals grant themselves” (“I Object” 79).

However, the passage ends in a hopeful note: the vision of a utopian future that makes room for a way of thinking in which verbal language is not necessarily the norm; that relies on a different dynamics of communication: direct, unmediated (“reduced to excreted chemicals”), horizontal. Might *that* be the

utopian future implicit in the intuitionist promise, or hope, that “*there is another world beyond this one*” (Whitehead 240; original emphasis)? Sean Grattan has emphasized the utopian potential of Whitehead’s novel inasmuch as it “strive[s] for utopias without ever reaching an endpoint or realizing [its] utopian potential.” It ends “with the glittering hope for a better world—without solidifying into what that better world might look like” (130). As Matthew Dischinger writes about Whitehead’s last novel, *The Underground Railroad* (2016), we might say that also *The Intuitionist* “helps articulate a new political destiny—even if it does not offer a vivid demonstration of that destiny in the text itself” (96). But what does that “better world” or “political destiny” look like? Does the announced “second elevation” consist in more horizontal racial relations? In a more horizontal communication between different neurologies? Whitehead’s novel authorizes both readings, without ever forcing us to choose.

Mitchum Huehls rightly suggests that the novel thematizes the way subjects understand race or, more precisely, the extent to which race intrudes on, or tints, our interpretation of social relations. But by bringing intimations of neurodiversity into intuitionism, Whitehead further complicates that question: how may any identity inflection intrude on our readings? In this way, the novel imagines a “political destiny” more inclusive and multilayered than Lila Mae’s interpretation of the “second elevation”—one that, to borrow from Michael Rothberg, “has the potential to create new forms of solidarity and new visions of justice” (5). But it remains, indeed, potential, mere possibility.

Toward the end of the novel, Lila Mae likens intuitionism to communication: “That simple. Communication with what is not-you” (241). But in his first novel, Colson Whitehead seems to reject, like Michael Rothberg, the very idea “that there is a ‘we’ and a ‘you’” (4):

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 the hallowed verticality, and hope to remember the terms on waking. The race never does, and that is our curse. (Whitehead 186)

Thus reads an extract from the second volume of Fulton’s *Theoretical Elevators*. “The human race” is how Lila Mae had always interpreted that last line, before becoming acquainted with Fulton’s secret. But her new literacy now prompts her to ask herself: “But now—who’s ‘we’?” (241). *The Intuitionist* invites us to ask ourselves that same question.

Notes

- 1 In conversation with Mary Zournazi, Serres states: “I don’t think it’s an ontology we need, but a *desmology*—in Greek *desmos* means connection, or link. [...] What interests me is not so much the state of things but the relations between them. I’ve concerned myself with nothing but relations for my whole life. Relations come before being” (Zournazi 204).
- 2 I am adapting a quotation referred to Fulton’s housekeeper, to which the same racial affinity with Fulton applies.
- 3 An expression frequently used in autism circles to refer to a kind of attraction limited to a very specific field or repetitive activity, which is considered to be one of the key features of the condition (see Savarese, *See It Feelingly* 64).
- 4 I use this label with reluctance. As Erin Manning and Brian Massumi put it, “All autistics function differently, and this functioning has effect on how they excel in a largely neurotypically inflected world” (153, No. 1). In other words, high (or, low) functioning is defined according to neurotypical standards. Likewise, as Ralph James Savarese points out, in addition to the problem of the definition of “functioning” (is it to be measured against verbalization and language? Or against personal self-care capabilities? Or against the possibility of passing as neurotypical?), one should take into account the question of personal fluctuations over time. In this respect, he registers the words of self-advocate Kassiane Sibley: “I’m talking great now, but tomorrow? Who knows?” (*See It Feelingly* 93).
- 5 Lila Mae’s visual cognitive style resembles even more to Dora Raymaker’s, who, according to Ralph James Savarese, thinks in “visual landscapes” that she translates into language in a second moment. Raymaker’s landscapes, Savarese explains, “weren’t so much representational [...] as filled with complex, 3D shapes, at once abstract and extraordinarily colorful” (*See It Feelingly* 93). Might as well be the uncanny definition of Lila Mae’s “aqua-blue cone,” “red spike,” and “orange octagon.”
- 6 Both have hyperacute senses: Like Grandin, Lila Mae seems to have hyperacusia, to the extent that she has to “shut out the sound of the super’s breathing,” for example. Like many autistics, Lila Mae keeps a sort of “social file” (Grandin 164), to be learned by heart, “cognitively,” which helps her behave “normally” in social intercourse—consider her “investigation into sexuality.” Lila Mae imitates Fulton’s handwriting, we learn, during her initiation

into intuitionism, “as if the mechanics of delivering the idea to the physical world were half the process” (240). Likewise, Grandin admits to having emulated a colleague’s “drawing style” to learn how to draw (13).

Notes on Contributor

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