

# Transforming the Possible into Action in Colson Whitehead's Novel "The Intuitionist"

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**Abstract:** The XXIst century, known among others as a "culture of empiricism," is a time of accelerated technology and engineering feats, on the one hand and of controversial race problems, on the other. For approaching Colson Whitehead's novel "The Intuitionist," where the writer is travelling back and forth between "the naturalist novel of race" and "the imaginative novel of ideas," George Kelly's Personal Construct Theory will be employed as a methodological device to decode its intricate meaning. Kelly's socio-psychological theory incorporates vectors of action and perception meant to reveal how the individual construes the world, in Whitehead's case, how Lila Mae Watson, the city's first black female elevator inspector, construes herself as the follower of James Fulton, another black person, father of Intuitionism and promoter of vertical thought, meant to give rise to the perfect, new generation elevator in a city marked by pain and the stoicism of black people who look for the ultimate elevator that will take them "up and out." Kelly's concept of motivation will be also turned into account through his argument that people act not because of "motive forces," but because of alternative perspectives that better suit them. Motivation will also grant to Lila Mae Watson the ability "to transform the possible into action and create values" (Alfred Whitehead, qtd in Lavelle, 1997: 146) and it will be commented upon as a prestigious educational device meant to ensure a greater understanding of the communication context present in Whitehead's novel.

**Keywords:** *Whitehead, Kelly, Personal Construct Theory, The Intuitionist, Bachelard, motivation, novel of race, novel of ideas.*

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## 1. Introduction

Whitehead's novel *The Intuitionist* was written in 1999 and it ranges among the writer's best achievements, together with his contribution *The Underground Railroad*, awarded with the Pulitzer Prize in 2017. *The Intuitionist* was granted Quality Paperback Book Club New Voices Award and was finalist at PEN/ Hemingway Award. Its success is due to the brilliant intermingling between the characteristic features of the dark novel and the considerations on topics related to race and society, well harmonized, that grant it the twofold character of thriller and philosophic novel. With this palpating background in mind, we can take a further step and draw our attention upon the objective of the paper which consists in applying various methodologies doubled by our elaborated analysis on Whitehead's novel to reveal the fact that he has created both a harmonious and disturbing perspective on modern humanity in order to teach us a significant lesson regarding how we can develop as public selves within a pluralistic society.

## 2. The Body of Analysis

To meet this demand a concise presentation of the novel is of utmost importance. *The Intuitionist* is an aesthetic attempt at revealing various degrees of awareness regarding architectural and social verticality, elevators being the representation of the vertical ideal for modern humanity. Lila Mae Watson, the city's first black female elevator inspector, is the embodiment of the symbol of upward mobility. It is the going into deadly free-fall of the elevator Number Eleven from the newly constructed Briggs Memorial Building just a few hours after Lila Mae has checked and ascertained its safety using the controversial 'Intuitionist' method that generates the whole plot of the novel. Determined to bring the set-up to the surface and exonerate herself in an election year, Lila Mae comes across the lost writings of James Fulton, father of Intuitionism and his plan for the perfect next-generation elevator. She is determined to accomplish it herself, despite the conspiracy that involves government spies and double agents.

## 3. Methodology

Given the fact that the characters of *The Intuitionist* are elevator inspectors that live and carry out their daily activities in a fictitious town, during an indefinite period, but which closely resembles New York, we consider that Bachelard's phenomenology might be an instrument for decoding its intricate meaning. Bachelard suggests that *topo-analysis*, defined

as “the systematic psychological study of the sites of our intimate life” (2003: 7, our translation), aims at tackling our intimate dimension without eliminating “the exterior geometry of space” (7). Siding with Bachelard’s opinion that the value of intimacy is “ontologic” (7), we strongly hold that this value facilitates the thorough going study of our existence and of the most varied social, political or racial issues.

The decoding of the intimate meaning of Lila Mae Watson, the colored female intuitionist, is directly related to different citadine symbols. From the very first pages, we learn the reason of her anxiety and the investigation undertaken by her and the authorities because an elevator recently brought into operation and thoroughly verified by her “has fallen” (10). She quickly recalls the names of all the elevator inspectors of the last decade that are still members of the inspector association. Her basic concern aims at James Fulton and Frank Chancre, considered capable to transform “the game into reality” (13). The former is an Intuitionist, the latter an Empiricist. Her recalling their names is related to the technical checking of the elevator from the Fanny Briggs building, that has fatally and groundlessly fallen. In order to highlight the activity of the elevator inspectors and their relationship with the administrators of the buildings provided with elevators, the novelist describes the checking undertaken by Lila Mae of the elevator from Walker 125, how she discovered the dysfunctional speed limiter and fined the administrator in spite of his attempt to bribe her.

Returned to her car, she listens to the news broadcast by WCAM, focused on the falling of the elevator from Fanny Briggs Memorial Building. Lila Mae recalls her high school oral presentation of Fanny Briggs, a slave that “taught herself how to read,” who made her escape North, who became “one of the negroes’ heroines,” reaching the conclusion that it was only natural in a city “with an increasingly vocal colored population-who are not above staging tiresome demonstrations for the lowlier tabloids, or throwing tomatoes and rotten cabbages during otherwise perfectly orchestrated speeches and rallies-it only makes sense to name the new municipal building after one of their heroes” (12). The novelist’s conclusion runs natural regarding the fact that the building was assigned to Lila Mae to be systematically checked: “it made sense that it would be either her or Pompey, the only two colored inspectors in the department” (13).

For correctly interpreting the information regarding the evolution of Lila Mae’s professional status, after the falling of the elevator in Fanny Briggs building from the perspective of the sociology of knowledge and its educational connotations and, for setting it in relation to the dynamics and possibly to the diabolical mind of the one that generated the fall, we will

consider The Theory of Personal Constructs elaborated by the American sociologue George Kelly. Analysing Kelly's fundamental postulate, we learn that "a person's processes are psychologically channelized by the way he or she anticipates events" (in Hall, et.al. 2002: 420). To anticipate events demands making suppositions or expectations regarding what will happen if one acts in a particular way.

A series of eleven corollaries, all meant to facilitate "the comprehension of expectations based on experience" (420), namely those of construction, organization, fragmentation, the individual corollary, those of choice, commonality and sociality, can satisfactorily contribute to decoding the types of interpersonal relationships present in Whitehead's novel. The methodology that relies on the sociology of knowledge rests on activating the corollary of fragmentation based on the assumption that a person can successively use a series of subsystems of the mental construction that prove to be incompatible with one another and the individual corollary, built on the argument that a person chooses a certain alternative in a dichotomous construction due to the way in which he or she anticipates the most favourable possibility of extending and defining his own system of ideas. These corollaries interrelate with that of commonality, which implies the fact that altruism and empathy in one's relation with another person can be identified when there is a similitude as concerns their psychological processes. They also intermingle with the corollary of sociality which points out that the extent a person comprehends the mental construction of another person contributes to assuming a social role "in a social process involving another person" (Kelly 1963: 90).

We hold that each corollary can represent a key for decoding the mystery related to the falling of the elevator from Fanny Briggs Memorial Building. The image of the elevator groundlessly fallen causes anxiety both to Lila Mae and to the modern reader eager to face mystery and genuine situations. The Kellian corollary of fragmentation is that methodological lens meant to facilitate the comprehension of the way in which a person, or several people, those around the main character respectively, can employ a variety of "construction subsystems that are inferentially incompatible with each other" (Kelly 1963: 83). The main character's recollection of the moment when she was assigned to check the group of eleven elevators from Fanny Briggs Memorial Building and the mental correlation of the event with the elections organized for choosing the president of the elevator inspectors lead us towards a first construction subsystem of the basic reasons that are incompatible with each other. The novelist claims that Lila Mae was aware that the assignment was meant to distract the attention in the

election race regarding the opponent of Chancre, the liberal Orville Lever “who apparently thinks that only Intuitionists are capable of building coalitions, shaking hands with fundamentally different people, etc.” (14).

The incompatibility between Lila Mae and Chancre emerges from the note left on her desk by his secretary, mentioning the fact that: “your good service won’t be forgotten after the election” (14). Profoundly troubled by his speculations that she can be bribed “with the vague promise of promotion, probably a lie” (14), Lila Mae ponders over the political circumstances related to elections and reaches the conclusion that her assignment as inspector of the elevators from Fanny Briggs Memorial Building had taken place before her finding it out: “And the word came down; the colored gal gets the job. Not any of them, not Pompey. There are no surprises in election years, just a bit more static” (14).

The sacred motto of the company is: “All safe” (15). “The corporate vanity” (15) during the election period can be also noticed all over the city where “the elevator industries advertisements line park benches, adorn the buses and subways of the city’s transit system, brace the outfield walls of baseball stadiums, bright non sequiturs” (15). As regards Lila Mae, she thinks that “her role in the campaign is limited to window dresses” (15). The novelist’s comment reveals how incompatible her way of thinking is compared to that of those involved in the election: “She doesn’t know yet” (15).

The Kellian corollary of experience is meant to correctly place Lila Mae in her approach to elevator issues, through facilitating her mental sub-construction system to vary while she is successfully achieving successive interpretations of events, without taking refuge in the fixed standardized patterns previously created. This corollary validates itself in relation to the corollary of choice that stipulates the fact that a person chose within a dichotomous construction that alternative meant to help him or her anticipate the most favourable possibility of extension and of defining his or her system if values.

These two significant corollaries will help us understand Lila Mae’s life philosophy. She is eager to find out the truth regarding the falling of the elevator from Fanny Briggs building, where she cannot recall any mistake to have been made and concludes that she needs a plan. On the way to her office, she realizes that all the inspectors are listening to the radio news regarding the accident instead of gathering evidence at the place of the accident.

The test of solidarity among Whitehead’s characters reveals the fact that, at one extremity, there is Lila Mae, whose precarious position in the city

made "her train her dread to keep invisible in its ubiquity, like fire hydrants and gum trod into black sidewall spackle" (24). We would expect Pompey, another colored inspector to take a place in the proximity of Lila, due to their similar status. The novelist informs us that Pompey preferred timeserving, which ensured him "promotions, plum assignments, keys to better sedans" (25). Being informed by Chuck about his tricky behaviour, Lila Mae still wonders whether "he resent her for presenting them with a more exotic token, thus deluding their hatred towards him, the hatred that had calcified over time into something he came to cherish and savor as friendship: or were his haughty stares and keen disparagements his attempt at a warning against becoming him, and thus an aspect of racial love?" (26).

At the other extremity of the test of solidarity, there are her inspector colleagues. Getting closer to that part of building where the inspectors are gathered and listen to the radio news regarding the elevator accident, Lila Mae hears part of their conversations and notices that the reporter's focus is on her being an "Intuitionist." The Intuitionist methods are described as "heretical and downright voodoo," being regarded as having possibly "played a part in today's crash" (26). On the other hand, Chancre pleads in favour of the conservatory Empiricism, regarded as "the steering light of reason" (27), whereas the unhappy accident is regarded that it "can happen when you kowtow to the latest fashion from overseas" (27).

Chancre's threat that he is going to get "to the bottom of this" (27) materializes in sending John and Jim, two paid "agents for searching Lila Mae's apartment, hoping to find a clue regarding her involvement in the accident. And it was very likely for them to have found something disreputable regarding her Intuitionist way of thinking if they had found the safe behind "the somber painting of haystacks," where she keeps "all of her important things" (32). They are caught by Lila Mae "lurking about her apartment" and all that John said was: "you're the little lady" (33). Following Bachelard's aestheticism, we can assert that the syntagm "we read a house," extended into "we read a district," the one Lila Mae is living in, through the fact that both the house and the district are "psychological diagrams" (2003: 69, our translation), they can offer valuable clues regarding the intimacy of the colored people living in such an environment.

Her modest but tidy dwelling is a "prefiguration of the solitude of her mind and dream" (Bachelard 2003: 70, our translation), related to Intuitionism and her preoccupation of finding out the truth concerning the groundless fall of the elevator from Fanny Briggs building. Her dwelling is tackled in antithesis with the district about which John claims: "I wouldn't live in this neighborhood if you paid me" (29). The reason of his choice is

synthetically rendered by the novelist via the word “tidal,” followed by the explanation “receding and dilating according to the exigencies of the city” (29). More specifically, where once were the pig pens and goats the “speculators assembled dreary and sturdy tenements and directed immigrants’ inquiries north to the new territory” (30). We further learn that that the respective “neighborhood named itself, created a persona: optimistic, scrabbling, indebted to the grand new country of which it was merely a small and insignificant part. Then the coloreds surged and dreamed of the north too” (30). Further on, the novelist ironically argues that “the neighborhood retained its old name, but it means something very different...Now the neighborhood is changing again. Its meaning blurs at the edges as white people return obeying the city’s rules of teeming density and insidious rents. Only the real estate agents, who understand that the meaning is elastic, know the borders of the neighborhood for sure, modulating their sales pitch to reassure their clients that they are not moving into the colored neighborhood, but into the farther reaches of the adjacent white neighborhood” (30).

If this ironical description places us within a rather uncomfortable place, for Lila Mae, a great lonely person that defends herself by dreaming about the accomplishment of the perfect elevator meant to take the world out of the “*dark entries*” (Bachelard 2003: 161, our translation), it stands for “the neighborhood-fortress” (2003: 161, our translation), meant to protect her against the intruders who dislike settling in here. But the true “*dark entries*” (161) do not symbolically refer only to the area populated by the colored people who are of a majority. Those dark entries symbolically acquire a “troubled profoundness” (161), when the novelist repeatedly resorts to the *lait-motif* of the fallen elevator, another type of “*the dark entry*” into the recent history of the city described in the novel.

Chuck is the binder between the two extremes. On the one hand, he interrelates with the paradoxical reality of being “under the protection of a color,” the color dark grey of the neighborhood, detested by the white population (see John’s opinion), accompanied by the Lila Mae’s wish of “dissimulating under similitude” (Bachelard 2003: 162, our translation). On the other, there is the fear of the *dark entrance* into the area of an uncomfortable truth. Chuck is an Empiricist inspector, determined “to park himself at the Department desk job for a while and then pack it up to teach escalators at the Institute” (21). Lila Mae’s discussion with Chuck, after the departure of the two intruders from her apartment, reveals precious information regarding the accident. Her firm conclusion is that: “Total freefall is a physical impossibility.” Her arguments relate to the fact that the

respective building is "outfitted with the new Arboantlocks. Plus the standard reg gear" (35) and the fact that she has thoroughly inspected it herself. Chuck's suggestion that she should talk to the "IAB guys" (36) is vehemently rejected by her, accompanied by her request, addressed to him, of mentioning to them that he has not seen her lately.

The suggestion of going and talking to the "IAB guys" is also made by Mr. Reed, the secretary of the Intuitionist Orville Lever, Chancre's opponent. The latter has purposely sent Reed to contact Lila Mae to protect her, being convinced that the fall of the elevator has been staged to incriminate her. For further highlighting the Intuitionists' position, the novelist alternates past and present events of her life, mostly those referring to the college period when she was living in the campus. We learn that the admission of colored students to the Institute for Vertical Transport "was staggered to prevent overlap and any possible fulminations or insurrections that might arise from the overlap" (44). From her little room, before her exam on "the changing concepts of governmental attitudes toward elevator inspection," Lila notices James Fulton, walking with a cane, in the Fulton Hall small library, who waved to her, while she was totally unaware of the fact that the event will mark her career.

Kelly's postulate premises that "a person's processes are psychologically channelized by the way he or she anticipates events" (in Hall, et. al. 2002: 420). Lila Mae is preoccupied to anticipate events, formulating hypotheses regarding what will happen, relying on past experiences, in accordance with the corollary of construction. The corollary of experience that will be also employed in our analysis stipulates that the construction system of a person varies "as he or she successfully construes the replications of events" (Kelly 1963: 72).

The two corollaries will help us follow Lila Mae's mental itinerary from a different perspective. Recalling and anticipating go hand in hand. As the Intuitionists have offered her a room on Second Avenue 117, known under as the Intuitionist Building, Lila Mae recalls the visit paid to Fanny Briggs building. The recalling is interrupted by Natchez, the boy charged with the room service, who offers her a tasty breakfast, informing her that the one who usually performs the service is ill. Another recollection is focused on the exam regarding the changes of the legislation and of the government's attitude towards the elevator inspectors. She is deliberately asked whether she knows how many colored people exist in the elevator industry and how many actually work in the respective field. Her paradoxical affirmation through negation: "I don't know. Less than twelve" brings about



the examiner's conclusion that she does not know everything and that she will be graded only the following week.

We will approach Lila Mae as "a center of being," characterized by Bachelard through the association among place, time and action (2003: 168, our translation). Due to her interest for Intuitionism, she seems to become paradoxically aware that she is eager to "escape space" (168, our translation), namely that of Empiricism, pragmatism and materialism. For escaping this space, she has to "windowdress" her mental construction. To accomplish it, she is "armed. She puts her face on. In her case, not a matter of cosmetics, but will" (57).

Through successive recollections, Lila seems to escape "her own sphere as if she got out of a hole" (Bachelard 2003: 169, our translation). She ponders over the Empiricists' procedures, who are nervous because the Intuitionists possess a greater accuracy than they do. The Empiricists nickname the former: "swamis, voodoo men, juju heads, witch doctors" (57). The Intuitionists' counter-names for the Empiricists are: "flat-eaters, ol' nuts and bolts, stress freaks" (58). The animosity that exists between them reveals the multiple facets of multiculturalism, through the difference that exists between the Empirical materialist culture and the Intuitionist one, with profound spiritual connotations. Anticipating, in a Kellian manner, the resources of Intuitionism, Lila Mae continues her training started at the Institute for Vertical Transport. Both her fascination with Intuitionism and that of Mr. Reed, who benefited from a similar training at the Institute, reaches culmination with Fulton's first volume *The Theory of Elevators*, regarded as a real "conversion" (59) for many Intuitionists.

Reed's systematic involvement with the promotion of Intuitionism made him appear in the eyes of Lila as a "vulture, a calculating scavenger. A soldier" (60) and as one "capable of pulling off the elections for the Intuitionists" (60). Her temporary living in the Intuitionist Building facilitates her to take part in different stages of the campaign, in hot debates applied on the topic of "the perfect elevator," meant to "grant us the sky, unreckoned towers: the second elevation" (61), and whose secret is related to the "black box" (61). We also learn from Lila Mae that: "There have always been rumors that Fulton was working on a black box. But most of the evidence shows that Fulton was devoting his energies to the Intuitionist theory, nor engineering" (62). Mr. Reed completes the picture, asserting that "the diary shows that he was working on an elevator, and that he was constructing it on Intuitionist principles. From what we can tell from his notes, he finished it. There's a blueprint out there somewhere" (62).

Since the perfect elevator equates the "black box" and, the fact that the most famous Intuitionist built it on Intuitionist principles, the natural question would be "What does that do to Empiricism?" The answer is ironically rendered by Mr. Reed: "Now Chancre's up for reelection. There have always been rumors about Fulton's black box and suddenly comes this new variable-it does exist, and it's Intuitionist. Not only do you lose the election, but everything else, too. Your faith. You have to embrace the enemy you've fought tooth and nail for twenty years" (63). Lila Mae's judgment, related to finding the black box and the truth whether it really exists, logically comprises the conclusion that the fall of the elevator was the "preventive blow" (64), meant to destroy the Intuitionists. Reed soothes her and promises that he will talk to James, the counsel of the Intuitionist House, who will talk to those from the Internal Affairs to "back off," because they are all convinced that she has done her job properly. Informed that she can go back to her dwelling on Monday, she answers that she does not want to, her only concern being to find the "black box" (65).

Another controversial character is Ben Urich, a journalist at a prestigious newspaper, who returns to his office on Saturday night for the article focused on the black box. The presence of "the flash of red" in the paper makes him realize that something was wrong, in the sense that his article had been taken out. In his office, he is attacked by one of Johnny Musles' gorillas who demands that he should not pursue his story about the black box. His refusal brings about the unhappy experience of having his index finger broken. Harnessed and frightened, Ben Urich finally promises that he will "back off the story" (76).

Kelly's corollary of construction perfectly overlaps Lila Mae's life philosophy, through the fact that it relies on the recommendation that events, either in isolation or in a sequence, should be interpreted from the perspective of altruism and the need to discover the truth, on condition that the discovery should not involve any reward for the one concerned with it. It closely interrelates with the individual corollary, which stipulates that people differ from one another in their construction of events. The corollary of choice rests on the assumption that within a dichotomous construction the individual should anticipate the most favourable possibility for extending and defining his system of values. Lila Mae is different from those people around her, firstly, because she is colored and, secondly, because she is an Intuitionist elevator inspector. Intuitionism seems to her the best alternative for professional accomplishment. The corollaries of sociality and commonality are those valuable methodological lenses, with educational connotation, meant to help us understand her behavior. The former

stipulates behavioral similitude in similar constructions of events, whereas the latter highlights the fact that through one's understanding of the emotional and mental processes of an individual, one can play a role in the social process that involves another person.

While investigating the truth regarding the accident and the black box, Lila Mae infers some behavioral similitudes with other colored people such as Nachez, who manages to win her sympathy and trust through his polite manner of making her feel comfortable in the Intuitionists' House. On the other hand, Fulton's colored maid servant is also regarded useful for her investigations. Reed himself considers Lila Mae the "ideal person to talk to her" (90), because Fulton's maid refused to talk to the other people that contacted her. The Intuitionists' interest consists in having all Fulton's documents in their own archive. Fulton had previously delivered some of his documents to the Institute for Vertical Transport in exchange of the guarantee that his maid will be allowed to live in his campus house as long as she intends to. Mrs. Rogers pretended that Fulton had delivered almost everything, that some documents had been destroyed by him in a fit of anger and that what remained had been stolen on his funeral day.

The spiritual valences of Fulton's discovery are repeatedly brought into bold relief by Lila Mae who keeps on reading from the second volume of *The Theory of Elevators*. Many quotations are focused on the value of communication among people, which is in tune with Kelly's corollary of sociality. This corollary is turned into account in Lila Mae's conversation with Fulton's maid. Her refusal to talk about Fulton's private life and his scientific activity diminishes when Lila appeals to the feeling of friendship and trust that characterized their relationship. Mrs. Rogers assures her that she has never betrayed Fulton, not even in the Court of Justice, when she had to swear that she had delivered to the authorities all that he had in his office. Mrs. Rogers is fully suspicious even if Lila is a colored person, asks her why she has come and concludes the conversation with the remark: "He is not the man you think he is" (94). Reed is informed about her visit to Fulton's house and demands that she should continue to investigate other sources as well.

The social role, intricately related to the corollary of commonality, that Lila is supposed to play in relation to the truth regarding the perfect elevator invented by Fulton arises from both her direct descriptions and recollections. Pondering over the black box, Lila finds herself in the proximity of Fulton's way of thinking, his writings being regarding as "technical, esoteric investigations" of the mechanism of "vertical transport" (100). The description of Fulton's genius includes the allusion to "his odd

perceptions that made him a technical wiz, his way of finding the unobvious solution that is also the perfect solution" (100). The conclusion of Futon's book refers to the fact that "he described a world, a world that needs inhabitants to make it real. The black box is the elevator-citizen for the elevator world" (100).

Closely related to the corollary of commonality, there is the corollary of fragmentation, based on the incompatibility of judgments. It is obvious in the conversation between Chancre and Lila Mae. On page 115, there is a radiography of these two strong, but totally different personalities. Chancre tries to anaesthetize Lila Mae's suspicions and contempt, caused by his Empiricist thinking. On the one hand, he ironically hints at the fact that the Intuitionists have got her "into a leap of trouble," and, on the other, at what they did to Pompey "to break him in," whereas "she has been spared from such troubles." He reaches the climax of their conversation arguing that he is all for colored people, "for colored progress, but gradually. You can't do everything overnight-that would be chaos." He further claims that he wants to make her an example of "what your people can achieve. That's what makes you, right? To prove something?" Lila Mae says: "In exchange for what?" "I want Fulton's box," claims Chancre. Demanding to know what will happen to her if she refuses, Chancre accusatorily argues that "because no one cares about a nigger. Because if you don't, you'll talk to one of the slush boys, and they are never misunderstood" (116).

Lila Mae can also sense the manipulatory spirit in the Intuitionists' House, where Natchez welcomes her with some sort of false enthusiasm encapsulated in the retort: "Did you miss me?" Her encounter with Lever, the Intuitionists' candidate, represents another significant moment charged with paradoxical attitudes and contradictory mental states. She is asked about the article from the *Lift*, about Fulton's black box, her meeting with Fulton's housemaid. On the other hand, Reed recommends her to stay "out of sight." His suggestion makes her even more reluctant, being followed by her remark: "Perhaps he is trying to get her out of the way, now that she has served her role as their colored liaison to Mrs. Rogers" (127).

A short-lasting love affair with Grandy junoir, a former childhood friend, occasions other references to the white/colored dichotomy, via the allusion to a cinema, where they had to go round the building up "to the stairs that led to the entrance reserved for colored patrons" and, further, to the "balcony seating reserved for colored patrons, up to the nigger heaven" (129). The fact that Grandy wanted to become a dentist highlights the aspirations of the colored people: "But first he had to go the college, which was not a problem because he was a nice boy, and industrious, and the

colored college in the capitol was eager for boys like him. The future of the race” (129).

As concerns the issues related to Intuitionism, she claims that she is an Intuitionist, but “not a fan of the new additions to Fulton’s work that come from overseas, debated in the rooms below her by Intuitionism’s epigonic practitioners.” She concludes that she prefers “her own extrapolations,” convinced that they resemble “the spiritual side of Fulton’s works” (133). The fact that she spent her night in her old apartment made Reed speculate she might have made a “deal” with Chancre. Moreover, Reed’s demand that some Intuitionists were given Lila’s address, being asked to go there and bring her back to the Intuitionists’ House, makes Natchez consider that such issues are related to the black box, about which he let the impression that he knows a lot, because he claims to be Fulton’s nephew.

The corollary of fragmentation, focused on subsystems of construction of incompatible judgments, suits the most spectacular part of the novel, where it clearly appears that Natchez, although he has the features specific for the white people, is a colored person, exactly as Fulton, his uncle. Natchez’ rhetorical questions were related to Fulton’s behavior when the others “acted white,” whether he would speak about the “colored problem” and how it is their duty “to help the primitive race get in step with civilization. Out of darkest Africa. Or did he remain silent, smile politely at their jokes. Tell a few of his own” (139). The psychological reality depicted in this paragraph is further expanded upon in the next paragraph: “They always take from our people. I don’t know if they know he is colored, but if they do you know they ain’t going to tell the truth. They would never admit that. Then downstairs would never say that they worship a nigger” (139). Lila Mae’s comment sounds equally ironic: “Fulton a spy in white spaces, just like she is. But they are not alike. She’s colored” (139). Objectivity is further highlighted by Natchez’ comment: “When I hear them talk about his invention, they always saying it’s the future. It’s the future of the cities. But it’s our future, not theirs. It’s ours. And we need to take it back. What he made, this elevator, colored people made that. It’s ours. And I’m going to show that we ain’t nothing. Show them downstairs and the rest of them that we are alive” (140).

The second part of the novel starts with the party organized at the Funicular Follies, where Lila Mae is under cover, bringing in the food, clearing the tables and watching her colleagues’ reactions. To establish a connection between the two parts, the novelist inserts some passages and describes her during the morning of the respective day, in the library of the

Intuitionists' House, reading Fulton's "magic" book. She realizes that the library would be empty if they knew that Fulton was colored. She has access to one of Fulton's maxims: "*horizontal thinking in a vertical world is the race's curse*" (151). The natural sequence to this assertion is her own maxim: "Blood is destiny in this land, and she did not choose Intuitionism, as she formerly believed. It chose her" (9151). The moment of maximum intensity of the party acquires sinister connotations. Chancre's speech, meant to be the climax of the event, is interrupted by his accident on the stage, because the "spring did not bite into the notches along the inside rails" (159).

Of course, everybody assumed that the Intuitionists were to blame for the accident. As concerns Lila Mae, she decides to take a few days off to find the best strategy and the black box. Lila Mae's investigation hints at Pompey, the colored inspector, and his involvement with the falling of the elevator. Her discussion with Pompey, analysed from the perspective of the corollary of fragmentation, proves that her judgments are incompatible with one another. The photos taken of Pompey while he was getting out of one of Musles' buildings make Lila assume that he is loyal to mafia and Chancre. The pathetic way in which she accuses Pompey that he has sabotaged the lift so that she should be blamed for that and manipulated during the elections, makes Pompey exculpate himself and invoke financial reasons related to his family needs. She invokes the fact that he laughed at her with them, "most times you laugh harder." To explain his connection with the white people, he invokes the fact that he was the first colored person who became an elevator inspector. His arguments are filled with dramatic connotations when he says: "They made shit of what I wanted and made me eat it. You had it easy, snot-nose kid that you are, because of me. Because of what I did for you" (195).

Back to her hotel where she has taken shelter to avoid being identified, Lila Mae continues to leaf through Fulton's copy books, where he "phenomenologically" (Bachelard 2003: 134) describes the perfect elevator, beginning with the ground floor. The nineteenth floor gives the illusion that the walls and the ceiling are deprived of "their solidity in verticality... Everything is bright and all the burden and cares were gradually dropped being no longer burden and cares, but light" (220). Her intense need to find the truth brings her to number 14, a building that was in the vicinity of Fanny Briggs, endowed with a similar lift. She recalls the entire checking procedure, trying to entirely reiterate the technical verification from number 11. She cannot identify any deficiency to make her suspect that the accident was provoked by an ill-meant person. Her conclusion is clear and firm: "and if nothing and Chancre are telling the truth (she now believes he is, mistrust

now as useless as trust), then this was a catastrophic accident. That is what remains will up to Forensics' latex probings: nothing" (227). Page 227 contains another defining statement for Lila Mae: "What her discipline and Empiricism have in common: they cannot account for catastrophic accidents." Lila recalls another freefall in Ucraina, "traced to an inept contractor's failure to properly install the progressive brakes in the under carriage" (228).

Her conviction was that "even Fulton stayed away from the horror of the catastrophic accident: even in explaining the unbelievable he never dared broach the unknowable" and, that happens "out of fear" (229). Her inner striving acquires dramatic connotations when she grows aware of the fact that the Intuitionists have used her, that they employed Nachez to lure her. For a moment she even doubts that Fulton was colored, because Natchez' blood relation with him "proved to be another one of his lies" (229).

Getting back to the Kellian corollary of experience which situates us on the line of successive interpretations, we are inspiringly driven towards Lila Mae's epiphany: "No, Fulton was colored. She understands that luminous truth. Natchez did not lie about that: she has seen it in the man's books, made plain by his new literacy. In the last few days, she has learnt how to read, like a slave does, one forbidden word at a time" (23). Two pages later she concludes: "He was colored. In his books the hatred of the corrupt order of the world, the keen longing for the next one, its next rules. He was the perfect liar the world made him, mouthing a supreme fiction the world accepted as truth. In constant fear of that shadow, the shadow of the catastrophic accident that would reveal him for what he was. The shadow that envelops and makes him dark" (232). The visit paid to Fulton's house maid confirms her that Intuitionism has been a "prank" (238). Fulton's house, the place of his "vehicular epiphanies" (234), is again devastated after they abandoned Ben Urich, convinced that Lila Mae knows the truth, being a "solipsistic practican" (238). The keywords uttered by Mrs. Rogers are: "farce, and white/black," present in the quotation: "She hated her place in the world. Fulton's hatred of himself and his lie of whiteness. White people's reality is built on what things appear to be-that's the business of Empiricism" (239).

#### **4. Results and conclusions**

We, as readers and interpreters of this exceptional novel, find ourselves in the position of tackling Lila Mae's problems from the perspective of anticipations, imagination, transcendence and the possible, all

encapsulated within the following quotation: "Now she could see Fulton for what he was. There was no way he believed in transcendence. His race kept him earthbound...There was no hope for him as a colored man because the white world will not let a colored man rise and there was no hope for him as a white man because it was a lie" (240). If, so far, the meaning of the novel relies on the paradoxical affirmation through negation, on page 241, there is the surprise. If, formerly, Fulton created a doctrine of transcendence which is a lie, something significant occurs on his mental level: "Something happens that makes him believe, switch from the novel but diffuse generalities of Volume One to the concrete Intuitionist methodology of Volume Two. Now, he wants the perfect elevator that will lift him from here and devises solid method from his original satire" (241). He used to claim in his speeches that the world of elevators will look like Heaven, but not the Heaven people "have reckoned" (241). Embracing this conviction and methodology, Lila Mae pays several visits: to Fulton's house maid, who takes his texts out of a "shallow dark hole" (242) and hands them out to her, then to Natchez, alias Raymond Coombs, to whom she offers them.

Lila Mae's gesture is a genuine surprise for the readers. And yet, the series of surprises continues. The fact that Fulton started to believe in the perfect elevator when it was too late for him to accomplish such a project, has been the embryo that has set Lila Mae's positive-intuitive energy in motion. Fulton has "thought it through as far as he can see. It will be up to someone else to execute the plan" (252). Fulton's written message in the margin of his notebook: "Lila Mae Watson is the one" (253), is emblematic. She is aware that she needs "reason and will" (Bachelard 2003: 105, our translation). Reason tells her that she must "recalibrate" and fill in "the interstitial parts that Fulton didn't have time to finish up. She knows his handwriting. The most important parts are there. They just need a little something to make them hang together. Seamlessly" (254). Lila Mae's last thoughts are meant to show the fact that Fulton's dream can come true through action: "She returns to her work. She will make the necessary adjustments. It will come. She is never wrong. It's her intuition" (255).

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