

“No wonder he laughed”:

Racial Uplift, Double Consciousness, and Black Irony in Colson

Whitehead’s *The Intuitionist*

By Allie Sipe

In Colson Whitehead’s *The Intuitionist*, the Department of Elevator Inspectors is divided into two opposing groups: Empiricists, traditionalists who rely on observations, and Intuitionists, new age thinkers who depend on feelings. The allegory centers on the first black female elevator inspector, Lila Mae. As Lila Mae grows entangled with the factions’ struggle for power and the search for the “black box” – the plans for the perfect elevator, she uncovers the identities of the other black elevator inspectors: Pompey, Natchez, and Fulton. Critics have explored racial uplift in the novel, and they have applied the notion of double consciousness to Lila Mae and Fulton. But no critics have examined the role of double consciousness on the other major characters in the text. Furthermore, critics have not applied the concept of black irony to the characters. Therefore, this paper aims to show how Pompey, Natchez, and Fulton navigate the difficulties of double consciousness and how Pompey and Fulton address this through defiance and black irony.

The Racial Body and Racial Uplift

Alan Hyde, author of “The Racial Body,” explains race as “the construction of a specularized body by a privileged eye” (223). Under this definition, race can be understood as a relationship (223). Because the chancellor’s privileged eye has the ability to make determinations about the body it judges, the eye dominates over the body. In other words, the targeted body is subjected to the status of the Other, creating an us and them mentality (226). This power of the chancellor’s eye to make presumptions about who and what the body is has tremendous consequences on the individual under speculation.

Historically, racial uplift has failed to address the plight of many African Americans. Many have assumed that uplift can be achieved through education or similar means, but these attempts have proved wholly unsuccessful. For instance, DuBois proposed the idea of the Talented Tenth, which involved educating the top ten percent of African Americans. He wrote, “The Negro race, like all races, is going to be saved by its exceptional men. The problem of education, then, among Negroes must first of all deal with the ‘Talented Tenth’” (DuBois). He believed this would lift African Americans from their social conditions. Yet the Talented Tenth approach did not address

institutionalized racism, and it did not recognize the multitude of African Americans' experiences and struggles. The fight for racial uplift is a continued uphill battle, and "the successive strategies embraced by the champions of racial uplift have all encountered their practical and political limits. For the most part these strategies have not so much failed as fallen victim to inevitable exhaustion and diminishing returns" (Foreman 8).

One of the central themes of *The Intuitionist* is this struggle for racial uplift, symbolized through elevators. In "'Verticality Is Such a Risky Enterprise': Class Epistemologies and the Critique of Upward Mobility in Colson Whitehead's *The Intuitionist*," Libretti uses the detective novel as an avenue for exploring the persistent race and class ideologies within the United States. Through detective inquiry, Lila Mae discovers "new possibilities for organizing social relationships and fosters hopes for creating another world beyond this one" (Libretti 204). For instance, Fulton, the founder of Intuitionism, must hide his black identity to succeed: "Fulton commodifies himself as a white man in the political economy of capitalism in order to make his way up the ladder" (214). While Libretti interprets Fulton's identity in terms of verticality and progress, he does not discuss it as an instance of double consciousness.

Double Consciousness

DuBois defines double consciousness as the phenomenon of African Americans experiencing a "two-ness" in identity (DuBois 8). In other words, one must "always look at one's self through the eyes of others" (8). An African American grapples with the dual identities of "an American, a Negro; [one has] two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (8). Because of the difficulties associated with dual identity, DuBois states that African Americans experience a "longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge [their] double self into a better and truer self" (9).

Eze explains the importance of DuBois's work, stating that "DuBois is a guide into the labyrinthine historical processes by which slavery and then emancipation fashioned the black experiences" (880). He applies DuBois's theory to the modern day, noting that "neither the consequences of slavery and colonialism, nor those of racism with which they are intertwined, have been overcome" (Eze 883). This captures what it means to have an identity as an African American in a society that is post-slavery yet continually plagued with racism (Eze 881). DuBois and Eze argue that, despite the challenges of dual identity, the African American individual is not the victim. For instance, "The negro, rather than mere victim, becomes a revolutionary subject: a person with

second sight, a sight that alone could see or bear witness to the truth of a hidden meaning of history” (886). Thus, according to Eze, “DuBois nursed the idea that in the cauldron of African colonialism and American slavery lay the seeds of emergence of a truly universal liberation of the self-of colonizer as of the colonized-from nature” (890).

Critics have not extensively analyzed the role of double consciousness in *The Intuitionist*, but they have considered it. For instance, in "Recalibrating the Past: Colson Whitehead's *The Intuitionist*," Russell determines that “duplicity is at the core of the novel” (48). She applies double consciousness to Lila Mae, through “the ‘doubling aspects of masks’” (51). For example, Lila Mae wears her maid’s uniform, knowing it will make her “invisible” to the men by signifying her as “the colored help” (51). Additionally, when Lila Mae “puts on her face”, she intentionally changes her appearance to be strong-willed and tough (51). Although Russell examines double consciousness and Lila Mae’s resistance to it, she does not apply double consciousness to Pompey, Natchez, or Fulton.

Throughout *The Intuitionist*, Pompey illustrates the DuBoisian concept of “two-ness” (DuBois 8). Early on, Lila Mae holds the chancellor’s eye over Pompey (Hyde 223). Assuming that he sabotaged the elevator on the orders of white supervisors, she sees Pompey as a sellout. To justify her conclusions, she attributes animalistic qualities to Pompey, thinking “Pompey would have jumped at the chance, white foamy saliva smeared across his cheeks” (Whitehead 87). She perceives him as “the Uncle Tom, the grinning nigger” (239). Yet Pompey is fully aware of how others perceive him. When reflecting on Chancre’s manipulation of him, Pompey recalled, “‘Friendship’ he calls it... like I don’t know what’s going on. Like I’m some dumb nigger” (193). Evidently, Pompey understands the duality of his identity: others incorrectly perceive him as dense, and he must ascribe to that while simultaneously maintaining his chosen identity. Pompey’s authentic identity is that of a husband and a father, a man determined to make enough money for his sons to “take them out of here” and find a better life for them (194). Eventually, Lila Mae realizes Pompey’s complexity and her utter misappraisal of him: “She could not see him any more than anyone else in the office saw him” (239).

Like Pompey, Natchez is the subject of Lila Mae’s eye; unlike Pompey, Natchez intentionally deceives Lila Mae with his dual identity. Natchez presents himself as Lila Mae’s ally and romantic interest. Lila Mae notes how Natchez’s “employers are always watching. Everywhere the pair are under cruel gazes from the smoky portraits of men she recognizes from textbooks...” (Whitehead 123). Lila Mae empathizes with the double consciousness that Natchez experiences under the

watchful eyes of others. Additionally, she believes she understands Natchez's complexity, seeing him as a spy on her side of the game (151). He enables this by persuading Lila Mae to help find the black box: "it's our future, not theirs... and we need to take it back. What he made, this elevator, colored people made that. It's ours" (140). The Natchez "disguise" (250) tricked Lila Mae because Natchez promised Lila Mae what she truly wanted: an accomplice in seeking racial uplift. But Natchez, too, Lila Mae has misjudged; Natchez is actually Raymond Coombs, a successful "consultant"... a colored man working in a white outfit" (211). Though he was not Lila Mae wanted him to be, Natchez held a position of power as a result of maintaining two identities.

Fulton embodies the notion of "two warring ideals" (DuBois 8) by assuming the identity of a white man to publish his work and create a name for himself. When Lila Mae discovers Fulton's dual identity, she experiences a separation from the man whose work she had previously idolized: "Fulton is a spy in white spaces, just like she is. But they are not alike. She is colored" (Whitehead 139). In Lila Mae's eyes, by passing for white, Fulton achieves success but denies his true identity (167). Only at the end of the novel does Lila Mae shift the blame away from Fulton and recognize his motives and situation. She understands that "There was no way he [Fulton] believed in transcendence.... 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). Transcendence through racial uplift is fruitless; ultimately, "The colored man passing for white and the innocent elevator must rely on luck" (231), and luck is not enough for true change.

Black Irony

Black irony attempts to reconcile the failures of racial uplift. It recounts and recognizes the pain of the past but also "reclaim[s] the emotional response to... painful images and gain[s] power over them" (Touré 77). Essentially, black irony is "irreverent about blackness" (77). A key component to this is laughter, since "sometimes we need to laugh to keep from having our heads explode" (77). Doing so acknowledges African Americans' struggles in the past as well as the present. It also acknowledges the diversity and complexity of black experiences. Black irony is integral; it allows African Americans to express their own identities in a society where they have historically had no identities acknowledged or had identities superimposed onto them. Furthermore, black irony is about speaking up: "The silence worked for us back then... it's what we had to do in order to live, but now it is literally destroying our community" (145). Thus, black irony offers a voice for many African Americans through the reframing of experiences.

In "The Second Elevation of the Novel: Race, Form, and the Postrace Aesthetic in Contemporary Narrative," Saldívar addresses *The Intuitionist* as speculative realism. He calls it "a parabasis of constant and complete rupture between delightfully comic psychic facades that bar the way to memories of a traumatic past and the equally persistent ironic impulses towards utopian desires that remain impervious to the real" (12). Saldívar interprets the novel as an alternative way of examining black experiences. He also considers laughter as defiance, stating "Whitehead's joke is double edged because it is the kind of joke that turns you on your head even as you laugh at its implied violence because you can never be certain that perhaps laughter is exactly the wrong response to the joke, like the idea of 'postrace' itself" (12). Thus, Saldívar views the entire novel as an example of black irony, but he does not apply black irony to specific characters.

In *The Intuitionist*, Pompey illustrates defiance through laughter. An example of this black irony appears below, where white men at a company party put on an act for the rest of the group that blatantly mocks African Americans:

"For God sake, suh, potect me from dis white man. He be doing nuttin all naht long but tekkin' me upstairs an trowing me down the elevator shaft!"

Even though she [Lila Mae] knows what she will see, she looks over at Pompey. His mouth is cracked open with laughter. He slaps the table and shakes his head.

(Whitehead 155)

In response to this overt racism, Lila Mae is furious and silent. She reflects that "this is the world they were born into, and there is no changing that" (157). Lila Mae believes that Pompey's laughter signifies that he condones the racism, but this is not the case. In the joke, the white man mentions throwing the African American down the elevator shaft. This joke is an analogy to denying African Americans racial uplift. By "laughing so hard he can hardly steady himself" (157), Pompey responds to the joke in the only way he can: by reclaiming the images before him (Touré 77). Rather than remaining silent, Pompey "rub[s] laughter-tears from his eyes" (Whitehead 157), laughing in defiance.

Fulton also maneuvers the difficulties of his position in society through laughter; however, his laughter stems from a joke of his own creation. At the novel's conclusion, Lila Mae realizes that "It was all a big joke" (Whitehead 232) – Fulton created Intuitionism out of irony. When reviewers praised his work, he laughed "like it was the biggest, best joke he ever heard" (238). Lila Mae realizes

that “the gargoyle of his [Fulton’s] mythology shook its stiff, mottled wings and conquered, city by city, whispering heresy, defecating on the robust edifices of the old order” (238). Evidently, Fulton never believed in the transcendence of the elevator. Rather than remain silent, Fulton chose to reframe his experiences and turn the joke on society instead of on himself. Thus, Fulton critiqued society and defiantly found an alternative method to cope with the failures of racial uplift.

Conclusion

Through historical background, critics’ findings, and analysis of the text, it is clear double consciousness played a significant role in the lives of Pompey, Natchez, and Fulton. *The Intuitionist* offers a framework with which to examine the interplay between racial uplift, double consciousness, and black irony. Pompey, Natchez, and Fulton juggled complex identities that often went overlooked by other characters. As racial uplift continued to fail, Pompey and Fulton employed black irony to defy their social positions and defend their identities: “No wonder [they] laughed” (Whitehead 238).

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