

## **“Safe in the Eye of the Storm”**

*A 20th-Century Adaptation of Safe Slave Spaces in Colson Whitehead’s The Intuitionist*

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**Abstract:** This paper analyzes the elusiveness of safety for Black women in Colson Whitehead’s *The Intuitionist*. Through the lived experience of the protagonist Lila Mae, the novel challenges the notion of universal security by demonstrating that safety in America hinges upon gendered and racial qualifiers. To underscore the continued precarity for Black women, Whitehead adapts from the antebellum trend of safe slave spaces. The text associates antebellum buildings with modern bodies and modern buildings with antebellum bodies. Although the novel proposes the black box will solve the city’s social issues, such a solution seems tragically ironic as the black box’s promised resolution relies on the destruction of the body. Ultimately, this paper argues that *The Intuitionist* functions as a crucial critique of the lack of safety afforded Black female bodies in 20th-century urban space.

**Content Warning:** This article contains sensitive content, including a discussion of sexual harassment and discriminatory behavior towards women and racial minorities.

In his debut novel *The Intuitionist*, Colson Whitehead intertwines the body with the city. The inciting incident of the story, an unexplained elevator crash, marks the Fanny Briggs building as the central edifice of the dystopian story. Whitehead constructs an alternate version of New York City where elevators are at the forefront of technological advancement. Women and Black people face widespread exclusion from positions of power, including the most coveted city job: elevator safety inspector. Lila Mae Watson, recently appointed the first Black female elevator safety inspector, faces accusations of responsibility for the Fanny Briggs elevator accident, as she was the last person to sign off on its safety. As Lila Mae sets out to clear her name, she uncovers a larger political conspiracy and becomes involved in the race to find the blueprints of the black box—an elevator promised to revolutionize the industry created by her inspiration, the engineer James Fulton, who readers later learn was a Black man passing as white. Connecting architecture to corporality, Whitehead (1999) notes the reminiscence of the Fanny Briggs building to the body of its namesake, the real Fanny Briggs, a slave who taught herself how to read: “Those looking for a correlative to Fanny Briggs’s powerful, lumpy body and the shape of the building dedicated to her will have to bear in mind the will to squat that roosts in the soul of every city architect” (p. 16). The mention of “a correlative” between the building and the body of the real Fanny Briggs demonstrates that, rather than being neutral, space possesses clear human characteristics that are racialized and gendered. Additionally, because the elevator accident connects Lila Mae to the edifice, the Fanny Briggs building links together an antebellum Black female body (Fanny Briggs the person) and a present Black female body (Lila Mae). Whitehead’s attentiveness to the relationship between building and body demands a reconsideration of urban space and the Black female body. By associating Lila Mae with two subjects that clearly lack safety—a building with structural failure and a fugitive slave in the antebellum era—Whitehead asserts that even the bodies of contemporary Black women are in jeopardy. Through the intersections of the Fanny Briggs building, Fanny Briggs (a female slave), and Lila Mae (“a modern city girl”), *The Intuitionist* recognizes the evasiveness of safety for Black female bodies in contemporary urban space (Whitehead, 1999, p. 189).

The academic discourse surrounding *The Intuitionist* recognizes the ample extent to which the concept of the body shapes the novel. Reading the text as an internet allegory, Martin Japtok (2021) identifies the rejection of the biological body as a consequence of favoring technology. Linda Selzer (2009) similarly observes how the enticement of uplift causes Lila Mae to become “progressively alienated from her own body” (p. 682). Noting a bodily connection to infrastructure, Spencer Morrison (2017) recognizes “bodily sensation” as a pathway toward more inclusive political formations (p. 102). Yet in all these appraisals of bodies, scholars avoid detailed inquiry into how the compounded effects of race and gender threaten the body. This omission in *Intuitionist* scholarship suggests the need for more concentrated attention on how the race-based and gender-based discrimination particularly affects the Black female body within the text. Building on the intersectional movement stemming from the 1980s, recent social criticism has reinforced the disproportionate extent to which the Black female body is unsafe. Studies have found that the rate of homicide for Black women is higher than any other race (Petrosky et

al. 2017) and that BIPOC women “are less likely considered ‘true’ victims and thus less deserving of the protections more frequently available to white, straight, wealthier women” (Belknap & Grant, 2021). Identifying the crux of such inequality, Dagmar Lorenz-Meyer (2022) contends that “African American women are impacted by the dangerous intersections of sexism, racism and other interlocking oppressions that result in higher incident rates of gender-based violence as well as less support from courts, police, governments, social services, and other institutions.” These existing inequalities indicate that safety is already an elusive commodity for the Black female body.

In addition to engagement with bodies, scholars recognize Whitehead’s experimentation with and adaptation of historical African American literary genres. Michael Bérubé (2004) calls *The Intuitionist* a “meditation on the Great Northern Migration” and “an idiosyncratic version of the African-American ‘passing’ narrative” (p. 163). Peter Sloane (2017) supports this notion with specific literary influences, mentioning that *The Intuitionist* is “informed by seminal African-American texts such as Richard Wright’s *Black Boy* (1945), Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* (1952), and Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987)” (p. 222). On the whole, scholars recognize *The Intuitionist* as a variation of postbellum African American texts. While Sloane’s brief mention of *Beloved* lays the groundwork for connecting antebellum influence, as of yet no scholar has deeply engaged with the text’s antebellum motifs.

*The Intuitionist* identifies the antebellum period as the origin of patterned unsafety for the Black female body. While elevator safety ads and safety inspectors at the beginning of the novel promise safety, Lila Mae’s lived experience undermines their assertion, instead indicating that universal security is not a reality. Rather, safety is only guaranteed to those who fulfill gendered and racial qualifiers. To underscore safety’s continued elusiveness for contemporary Black women, Whitehead pulls antebellum elements into his narrative—associating the Fanny Briggs building with a fugitive slave, naming a character after the slave trading city Natchez, and modeling the only safe space in the novel, a dumbwaiter, after historically safe slave spaces. Even the novel’s proposed resolution, the long-awaited black box, cynically offers grim prospects when it comes to safety for Black women; its safety ultimately relies on the body’s elimination. Although *The Intuitionist* does allude to the characteristics necessary for creating a safe environment, as a whole, the novel functions as a damning critique of the lack of safety afforded Black bodies in 20th-century urban space.

### **Assumption of Equal Safety**

To contrast the later reoccurring bigotry, Whitehead orients his novel with an early assertion of safety for every urbanite. Within the first pages of the novel, Lila Mae notices a billboard from the city’s elevator company boldly declaring, “ALL SAFE” (Whitehead, 1999, p. 14). In typical usage, the expression “all safe” functions as a pronouncement of the existence of safety in an environment: “the space is safe.” Although the advertisement only promises safety in elevators, the strategic placement of the billboard along a well-used road seems to guarantee safety for the public. In addition to ascribing safety to the locale, alternatively interpreting the

significance of “ALL” modulates the meaning of the phrase. Taking “ALL” to mean the masses, the phrase shifts from a pronouncement of safety in a space to a statement about the scope of the safety on offer: “everybody is safe.” With this interpretation, the encompassing term “ALL” invites the inclusion of all races and genders. Yet, later variations of this phrase reveal the original slogan’s brittleness.

Contrasting the advertisement, public interactions in Whitehead’s city reveal gendered dimensions of safety. In Whitehead’s parallel reality, Elijah Otis’s 1853 elevator safety demonstration at the New York Crystal Palace lays the foundation for the prestigious elevator safety inspectors of the present day. After demonstrating how his invention prohibits elevator freefall, Elijah Otis announces, “All safe, gentlemen, all safe” (Whitehead, 1999, p. 82). Not only does the patriarchal hailing “gentlemen” set up men as the primary societal protectors, but Otis’s direct address also presupposes safety to be solely a male responsibility. Per his assumption, it is men who possess the requisite knowledge and authority to determine whether something is safe or not. Additionally, although public space seems neutral given the presence of both “ladies and gentlemen” in the crowd, the choice to directly address the men clearly identifies the space as male (Whitehead, 1999, p. 81). With the utterance “gentleman,” the identity of the collective group is clarified, and women are alienated entirely. Daphne Spain (1993) labels the dominance of a certain gender in any given place as “gendered space” (p. 137). Spain (1993) determines the gender of homes, schools, and workplaces primarily by the separation of men and women, yet Otis’s remark indicates that “gendered space” can be recognized by more than just the physical segregation of genders. Men and women mingling together in the public space eradicates the possibility of identifying the space’s gender on physical separation alone. However, verbally privileging the male gender as the norm marks public space as definitively male. Thus, safety is characterized as a gendered concept—something arbitrated by and guaranteed to men but not necessarily to women.

Unfortunately, even female space fails to provide all female bodies with anticipated safety due to a lack of what Virginia Woolf recognizes as indispensable: spatial privacy. Following from Wendy Gan (2009), I read Woolf’s novel, *A Room of One’s Own*, as an indicator of the importance of spatial privacy for women. Protesting that women aren’t granted the luxury of spatial privacy, Woolf (1929/2014) not only advocates for the spatial autonomy of an individual haven but a room with clear protection for the female inhabitant—what she calls “a room with a lock on the door” (p. 76). While a lock may be satisfactory protection for white women, the lock on Lila Mae’s apartment doesn’t offer a similar safeguard. Lila Mae’s locked apartment is ransacked by two white men, Jim and John, looking for clues about Fulton’s blueprints. Immediately, Lila Mae recognizes the home invasion as something that impinges on her safety, calling it a “trespass into her home, her one safe place” (Whitehead, 1999, p. 39). The event signals Lila Mae’s inability to maintain ownership of her space considering that the trespassers access her space without permission or knowledge. Not only is this break-in a destruction of black space by white individuals, but the event also exemplifies an invasion of female space by men. A bodily violation presents itself in the adjective Whitehead (1999)

employs to describe the apartment: “raped” (p. 166). With this personification, Lila Mae’s apartment takes the form of a female body and accentuates the act’s dangerous implications. Rather than simply affecting the privacy of external space, Jim and John’s intrusion suggests violence on the female body and clear disregard for female autonomy. In this case and as a universal principle, unsafety accompanies female space because men assume unchecked authority for the maintenance of safety. Like Otis’s appeal to gentlemen, Jim and John imply safety is a male affair. Acting as if their break-in was benevolent, Jim and John call themselves “watchdogs” (Whitehead, 1999, 39). A witness also seems to reinforce Jim and John’s authority over Lila Mae’s space by addressing the trespassers as “gentlemen” (Whitehead, 1999, 39). Juxtaposing Woolf’s hope for women’s spatial privacy with Lila Mae’s lived experience, safety remains painfully elusive for Black women—threatening not only their physical environment but also their bodies.

The exclusivity of safety is further exacerbated when considering the ways in which racial identity qualifies the level of bodily privacy women are granted. The Funicular Follies—the elevator safety department’s annual gathering—starkly illustrates the gender disparity: a repetition of “All Safe, Gentlemen. All Safe” and a cabaret group ironically called the “Safety Girls” who are frequently subjected to unsolicited groping (Whitehead, 1999, p. 150). One of the main entertainment acts of the night, a minstrel show, makes it especially clear how elusive safety is for Black women. One man in blackface recounts the story about a presumably Black man and woman in an elevator:

Dey dis man in an elevator all by himself, Hambone. De car stop and in step dis beautiful lady wit de long hair and de nice eyes. Two floes later she reach over an push de Stop button. She takes off al her clothes and say to de man what was in dere, ‘MAKE ME FEEL LAK A WOMAN!’ So de man, he take off all a his clothes, throw dem on top of de woman’s clothes and say, ‘Okay, do the laundry!’ (Whitehead, 1999, p. 156)

While the couple is not explicitly labeled as black or white, the reactions of the female Black waitstaff to the joke—“so beaten they cannot speak of the incident”—as well as the embedded allusion to Aretha Franklin suggest the woman is black (Whitehead, 1999, p. 157). Although the bodies of the white women at the Funicular Follies are scantily clad, they are covered by some semblance of clothing, albeit tight and revealing. Like these white women, the body of the Black woman in the story is similarly used for the purpose of entertainment; yet, this Black female body is completely nude, permitted even less spatial privacy than the white women. The joke hinges not just on the sexual exploitation of the Black female body but that the Black female body’s attempt at recognition is ignored. The push and pull between *sexualized* and *subjugated* indicates that the Black female body is constantly endangered because the body is forced to choose between two extremes: hypervisibility or invisibility.

### **The Historico-Traumatic Moment**

To offer Black women a reprieve from gendered, racial pressure, *The Intuitionist* adopts the historical and literary trope of safe slave spaces. In her own analysis, Lauren Berlant (2008)

combines affect and trauma theory to categorize *The Intuitionist*'s inciting event in the Fanny Briggs building as a "historico-traumatic [moment]" (p. 848). While Berlant (2008) recognizes the plot's layout as an "ongoing historical present," the critical conversation stops short of the specificities of what ongoing historical present is taking place (p. 848). Yet, considering Fanny Briggs's history as a slave and the Fanny Briggs's designation as a memorial building situates slavery as a central issue at hand, the historico-traumatic moment that continues to inform the ongoing historical present. Similar to the initiating catastrophic event that brings the issues in the novel, slavery functions as an initiating catastrophic event of American history that has since led to discrimination towards and the stymieing of Black populations.

Barry Jenkins (2021) identifies slavery as *The Intuitionist*'s historico-traumatic event in his television adaptation of Whitehead's *The Underground Railroad* (2016) by including Fanny Briggs as a participating character. In the Amazon Prime miniseries, instead of being alone in North Carolina (as she is in the novel), the protagonist Cora meets a younger runaway slave named Grace. Later on, the audience learns Grace is an alias; Grace's real name is Fanny Briggs. In addition to functioning as an entertaining easter egg for those familiar with Whitehead's work, this textual expansion directly connects the urban contemporary of *The Intuitionist* to the antebellum era in terms of a concern for spatial safety. Jenkins (2021) places Fanny Briggs with Cora in a small attic crawlspace so cramped that the two girls can barely sit up. Fanny Briggs teaches Cora how to avoid the creaky floorboards and use a peephole to glimpse outside. While the two girls enjoy companionship and safety in hostile territory, the confining nature of the space damages their bodies, causing limb atrophy and sickness.

The simultaneous prison and haven-like crawlspace are representative of the greater historical and literary pattern of safe slave spaces. Attics, floorboards, cupboards, barns, boxes, or hidden compartments in wagons often concealed Black bodies. While safe slave spaces permitted fugitives to exist in unsafe spaces, the restrictive nature of such spaces on the body and mind meant oscillating levels of safety and danger for the inhabitant. For fugitives, safe slave spaces were a tool to acquire bodily autonomy. Yet paradoxically, safe slave spaces, the means to receive body autonomy, actually stripped fugitive slaves of their bodily autonomy; the unyielding requirement for the Black body to conform to spatial dictation forced dependence. By situating Fanny Briggs in a safe slave space, Jenkins (2021) supports Whitehead's assertion that the spatial complexity of contemporary cities is similar to that of the antebellum period.

Even more exhibitivite than Jenkins's *The Underground Railroad* miniseries, the text of *The Intuitionist* also recognizes slavery as the historico-traumatic moment that continues to affect the present. Just as the Fanny Briggs building connects a present edifice to an antebellum body, Natchez (a Black man who befriends Lila Mae) connects a modern body to antebellum buildings. When asked about his name, Natchez tells Lila Mae he is named after his mother's hometown: "She didn't like it enough to stay there, but she liked it enough to name me after it. She still wants to hear people say it" (Whitehead, 1999, p. 78). Readers unfamiliar with the history of Natchez the city may miss this subtle symbol of slavery and white male dominance. Natchez, Mississippi is primarily known for its role as a major slave trading city and its lavish antebellum

architecture. A place that memorializes the white economic prosperity that resulted from slavery, Natchez the city possesses inherent danger for Black bodies. Scholars like William Gleason (2011) recognize the antebellum estate as a carefully crafted emblem of power: “For in the antebellum South the *approach* to a plantation was as significant an expression of power and standing as the big house itself” (p. 95). The looming, expansive architecture of the antebellum mansion intentionally exhibits an aura of white dominance. Moreover, another bodily component is attached to Natchez the city beyond Natchez the character; Fulton’s father was “a white man in Natchez. Gran’ma Alice used to clean their houses” (Whitehead, 1999, p. 138). While it is unclear whether the exchange between the white man in Natchez and Gran’ma Alice (a Black woman) was consensual or not, there is a clearly unequal power dynamic. Considering the negative connotations Natchez, the city, carries for Black people, especially Black women, why would Natchez’s mother want to hear people repeat the name? The purpose of repetition is not to celebrate but to warn. Although slavery is past, the presence of the character Natchez in modern times serves as a reminder of the danger experienced by Black women in cities. This relived presence makes such historical danger something perpetual and thus emphasizes the continued need for contemporary safe slave spaces.

### **Contemporary Safe Spaces**

*The Intuitionist* features one successful contemporary safe space, a dumbwaiter, that outlines the scope of protection for the Black body. Marie Claire, Fulton’s housekeeper, manages to hide what everybody has been looking for—the blueprints of the black box. Despite white men’s attempts to infiltrate and tear the house apart, Fulton’s writings with Lila Mae’s name scrawled in the margin are kept protected and unseen by “a dumbwaiter in the kitchen” (Whitehead, 1999, p. 242). The dumbwaiter, like many other safe slave spaces, is what Miranda Green-Barteet (2013) calls an “interstitial space” (p. 54). For Green-Barteet (2013), interstitial spaces function much like “border space, one that exists betwixt and between other more clearly defined spaces” (p. 54). This in-between component of the space transfers onto its inhabitant, marking the hiding fugitive as “neither free nor enslaved” (Green-Barteet, 2013, p. 54). Interstitiality characterizes the function of a dumbwaiter. The contents inside the dumbwaiter are typically situated in-between floors, in-between rooms, not quite above and not quite below. Additionally, the dumbwaiter creates a border space between the antebellum and the contemporary. The dumbwaiter was first invented by Thomas Jefferson to keep slaves out of the dining room and exclude them from overhearing and participating in dinner table conversation, thus banishing their bodies from certain spaces while still utilizing their slave labor. The presence of the dumbwaiter in *The Intuitionist* creates a space historically tied to the antebellum yet, through Marie Claire’s appropriation, divorced from its initial objective and rooted in modern times. An even clearer indicator of the dumbwaiter’s interstitiality is its concealed contents. Inside the modernized safe space is not a whole Black individual but separated, individual parts of a Black person. Fulton’s mind is present via his writing, and Lila Mae’s body is present figuratively via her name, the label intended to represent her physical body. Even more

than this mind/body separation, race and gender are muddled. Fulton's writings render the dumbwaiter's contents not fully Black considering Fulton was a man who was Black but also a man who passed as white. The presence of both Fulton and Lila Mae renders the contents neither entirely male nor entirely female. Because the parts inside the dumbwaiter are individual parts of a Black individual rather than an entirety, *The Intuitionist* asserts that modernized safe spaces only offer partial safety.

With the safety offered by modernized safe spaces incomplete, the shape of the Fanny Briggs building pinpoints the underlying weakness of all safe slave spaces: inhibited mobility. In the first description of the building's appearance, Whitehead (1999) comments, "Those looking for a correlative to Fanny Briggs's powerful, lumpy body in the shape of the building dedicated to her will have to bear in mind the will to squat that roosts in the soul of every city architect" (p. 17). The crouched position of squatting visualizes the physical restriction required by antebellum safe spaces. The text indicates that the will of the architect causing the Fanny Briggs building to squat is contrary to Fanny Briggs's nature; it is a characteristic that is *not* a corollary to her body. During Harriet Jacobs's seven-year stay in the garret, she reminisces, "It was impossible for me to move in an erect position" (1861, p. 117). Instead of moving about freely, she was forced to "sit or lie in a cramped position day after day" (Jacobs, 1861, p. 117). Jacobs's experience was comparable to the experience of many other fugitive slaves; bodily contortions and long periods of inactivity were required to reside in an unsuspecting place. Physical restriction ultimately enabled the space to retain safeness; no one expected a body to fit in such tight or uninhabitable spaces. Yet, as recorded by Jacobs (1861), this bodily restriction in exchange for safety often came at a great cost: "my body still suffers from the effects of that long imprisonment" (p. 153). The Fanny Briggs building, a representative of modern safe spaces, is likewise suffering bodily. A sense of atrophy plagues the inside of the Fanny Briggs building. When visiting the Fanny Briggs building after the accident, Lila Mae notices "blighted panels" have been replaced because the building's "sensitive skin" has reacted poorly to the citywide cleaning agent Scrubbo, suggesting eerie associations to "disease" and "human illness" (Whitehead, 1999, p. 225).

Safe spaces ultimately fail as a sustainable refuge. The Fanny Briggs building imitates the limitation of safe slave spaces in that it fails to provide lasting safety. When appraising the scene of the disaster, Lila Mae verbalizes the defect responsible for the freefall accident: "The elevator pretended to be what it was not. Number Eleven passed for longevous" (Whitehead, 1999, p. 229). With the word "longevous," Whitehead diagnoses the foundational flaw of all safe slave spaces: temporariness. A safe slave space ultimately pretends to be what it is not; its promised safety is in reality a bad check. Either inhospitable conditions or the difficulty of retaining long-term covertness mandates the temporariness of asylum. Safe spaces aren't the solution but instead a temporary fix on the way to ultimate security.

In response to the failure of the Fanny Briggs building, *The Intuitionist* offers a modern alternative to address the failings of antebellum safe space: the black box. Although the specifics of the black box are shrouded in mystery, this new technology will alter the city. The black box



is what “will deliver us from the cities we suffer now, these stunted shacks . . . it’s the future” (Whitehead, 1999, p. 61). When characters speak of the black box, their hushed incredulity emanates a second-coming sort of feeling, the sense that chaos and destruction advent a reversal of social strata. Although most people recognize the destruction that accompanies the black box, “everyone’s working on black boxes” (Whitehead, 1999, p. 61). Although most people may not understand the ramifications of the black box perfectly, it is acknowledged as something beneficial for the city, a progressive innovation worth the upending. But the true purpose of the black box becomes clearer with the discovery that its inventor, Fulton, was a Black man passing for white. Lila Mae is the only one to fully grasp the implications of the black box—its purpose is to upend racial prejudice and enable the uplift of the Black race: “When he [Fulton] gives lectures to his flock, years later, they are not aware of what he’s speaking. *The elevator world will look like Heaven but not the Heaven you have reckoned*” (Whitehead, 1999, p. 241).

On closer consideration, the reader discovers the black box’s bodily cost functions as an extreme critique of 20th-century urban space. Like the garret and the attic crawlspace in *The Underground Railroad*, the Black female body experiences a similar level of decomposition while in the black box. Yet, the extent of decomposition in the black box is exponentially greater. As Fulton’s blueprints detail, “At ninety, everything is air and the difference between you and the medium of your passage is disintegration with every increment of the ascension. . . . Even the darkness of the shaft is gone because there is no disagreement between you and the shaft. How can you breathe when you no longer have lungs?” (Whitehead, 1999, p. 222). In the progressive ascent, the body merges with the black box, thereby eradicating the body. The dissolution of the body revolutionizes the future and resolves all social issues because external factors that often cause divisiveness, such as race and gender, no longer exist. Such bodily merging recalls the conjure tales by Charles W. Chesnutt. These series of tales “abound with black characters—mostly slaves—that are magically transformed into inhuman objects and animals” (Lam, 2018, p. 369). In addition to turning into frogs, birds, wolves, and mules, Chesnutt’s characters transform into inanimate objects; one character, who had been eating clay to prevent starvation, turns into clay as he is smashed into pieces, and another character turns into a tree who is then cut into lumber to build his master’s kitchen. As Joshua Lam (2018) points out, “Taken together, the tales dramatize the dehumanizing process of objectification that turns human beings into commodities or non-human ‘things’” (p. 369). In addition to the deterioration of the Black body into inanimate materiality, the connection between *The Intuitionist* and conjure tales is further strengthened considering the black box and Intuitionism are associated with “voodoo” (Whitehead, 1999, p. 7). Rather than freeing, the black box dehumanizes the individual by stripping away their body. Safety is provided at the expense of the body and all bodily-related identity markers cannot truly be called safety.

Although Lila Mae accepts the ramifications of the second elevation, the black box solution feels more apocalyptic than plausible. The cost exacted on the body is too high. Just as Baby Suggs affirms in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, the Black body is central to the Black experience: “In this here place, we flesh; flesh that weeps, laughs; flesh that dances on bare feet

in grass. Love it. Yonder they do not love your flesh. . . . *You* got to love it. This is flesh I'm talking about here. Flesh that needs to be loved" (1987, p. 103-104). Because the Black body is to be valued, a solution to racial problems cannot come by eroding the body. Through the dissatisfaction of the proposed solution, Whitehead argues that the trajectory of society is not progressive but instead continues to jeopardize the Black female body; 20th-century urban space doesn't offer anything more than antebellum space offered. There is no lasting safe space for Black bodies in urban space, whether in the past, present, or future. Despite the lengths society may claim to have made since slavery, the female Black body still is objectified, deteriorated into a mechanization.

## Conclusion

Despite Whitehead's ironic solution, *The Intuitionist* subtly delineates the needed characteristics to constitute a safe space. When chased by Jim and John who are threatening physical violence, Lila Mae finds safety at the Dime-A-Dance. This kind of establishment, more commonly known as a taxi-dance hall, gained popularity in cities during the 1920s and 1930s. In these halls, male patrons paid women to dance with them. Although the taxi-dance hall wasn't always a safe space for women considering the possibility of unwanted sexual advances, the taxi-dance hall offered an unconventional amount of female power for its time. While observing the taxi-dance halls of Chicago, urban sociologist Paul Cressey (1932/2008) remarked, "The most direct control remains with the group of girls who dominate the life of the establishment and who have evolved certain codes and techniques of control" (p. 38). Cressey (1932/2008) also clarifies that these women "set the immediate standards of conduct for both taxi-dancers and patrons" (p. 38). In other words, in the taxi-dance hall, women hold jurisdiction over the space, governing the safety of both women and men. Like the many female taxi-dancers who reveled in the freedom offered by their position, Lila Mae's experience in the taxi-dance hall reflects women's heightened authority. Initiating the encounter, Lila Mae asks a Black man to dance with her and refuses offered payment. Though accepting money could be seen as female economic empowerment, in this case, Lila Mae's rejection reinforces herself as an agential being, especially when compared to other instances in the novel where decisions made solely by men leave her powerless. Her resolution to go against custom shifts the power dynamic as she maintains autonomy in setting the parameters for the interaction. Twice, Whitehead (1999) highlights Lila Mae's retained sovereignty: "she has taken the lead and now guides her partner's steps" and "she leads" (p. 217). Instead of the antipathy of the body exhibited by the black box, dancing allows Lila Mae to connect with her body as she intentionally moves about the space. Thus, the taxi-dance hall represents the necessary conditions for a safe space for women—unencumbered social authority that facilitates bodily autonomy.

The diversity of the taxi-dance halls also conceptualizes an urban safe space for racially marginalized women. In his writings, Cressey (2008) frequently emphasizes the unprecedented racial mixing for its time in US history: "Chinese and Sicilians, Hawaiians and Scandinavians, Mexicans and Russian, Filipinos and Romanians, Jews and Poles, Greek and American Indians,

Hindus, and Anglo-Saxon Nordics all mingle together” (p. 109). Although elsewhere ostracized, minority groups comprised both patrons and dancers at the taxi-dance hall. As a result, racial groups often mixed and danced together, leading many sociologists to condemn the taxi-dance hall for facilitating mixed-race intimate relations. Yet while the taxi-dance hall allowed mixed-race, Cressey (2008) clarifies, “The American Negro remains the only racial type excluded from the taxi-dance hall” (p. 9). Whitehead recrafts this historical narrative, placing Lila Mae and her black partner as participating members of the taxi-dance hall. While they dance, surrounded by white couples, Whitehead (1999) comments, “It is safe here in the eye of the storm” and another, “It is safe” (p. 217). Similar to the taxi-dance hall being what Lucy Burns (2008) recognizes as a means by “which a racialized immigrant community negotiated its presence in a dynamic public social space,” the undisturbed presence of this black couple offers the possibility of racial space negotiation where black bodies face no hostility (p. 26). Lila Mae’s presence in the space without racial antagonism marks this characteristic as a necessary qualification for lasting safety for black women. The panacea is not the black box where the body is dissolved but a space characterized by the free movement of the black female body.

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