
Epistemic Injustice and the Politics of Knowledge in Colson Whitehead's *The Intuitionist*

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Abstract:

Colson Whitehead's *The Intuitionist* interrogates how professional institutions regulate knowledge and deny epistemic authority along racial and gendered lines. This article argues that the marginalisation of Lila Mae Watson within the elevator inspection department is epistemic rather than merely professional. Her intuitionist method is not discredited but because the institution refuses to recognise her as a legitimate knower. Empiricism functions as a gatekeeping mechanism that preserves institutional authority rather than pursuing objective truth. The concealed racial identity of James Fulton, the Black founder of intuitionism, exposes how racialised knowledge is selectively accepted only when its origins remain invisible. Drawing on Miranda Fricker's theory of epistemic injustice, Sandra Harding's feminist standpoint epistemology, Jennifer Nagel's account of testimony and Charles Mills's racial contract theory, this study demonstrates that credibility and professional authority are shaped by race, gender and power rather than by neutrality. The article shows how Whitehead's novel reveals the broader politics of knowledge operating within racially stratified institutions. Furthermore, Lila Mae's continued practice of intuitionism functions as an act of epistemic resistance. Her persistence challenges the institution's claim to objectivity. It also exposes how professional knowledge systems are built on racial exclusion rather than on neutral evaluation.

Keywords: Credibility, Empiricist, Epistemic injustice, Testimony, *The Intuitionist*,

Introduction

Colson Whitehead is a prominent contemporary American novelist whose oeuvre ponders race, power and social institutions. His fiction typically interrogates how systems claim neutrality while producing inequality. Whitehead blends realism with speculative elements to expose hidden structures of control. His debut novel *The Intuitionist* represents a significant engagement with questions of knowledge and authority within modern institutions. The novel is set in a city where elevator inspection governs movement, safety and authority. The narrative focuses on Lila Mae Watson, the first Black woman elevator inspector. From the outset, her presence draws institutional attention. When a white man confronts her with “I haven’t seen a woman elevator inspector before, let alone a colored one, but I guess they teach you all the same tricks” (Whitehead 8). The novel immediately signals that her authority will never be evaluated on professional grounds alone. After a major elevator accident, suspicion falls on her professional judgement. The dispute between empiricism and intuitionism becomes a conflict over credibility and authority. It begins to examine trust, legitimacy, race and gender within a professional system.

Most existing scholarship on the novel concentrates on technology, bureaucracy or postmodern form. Several studies read elevators as symbols of infrastructure or urban power. However, limited attention has been given to how knowledge itself is regulated and denied. This article treats Lila Mae’s marginalisation as epistemic in nature. She is discredited not because her knowledge fails but because the institution refuses to accept her as a credible knower. The novel reveals how professional authority is shaped by race and gender rather than by evidence alone.

The purpose of this article is to analyse *The Intuitionist* through the lens of epistemic injustice. It examines how credibility, testimony and authority function within the narrative. The study employs close textual analysis informed by epistemic injustice theory, feminist standpoint epistemology, social epistemology and race theory. This approach demonstrates how Whitehead criticises institutional knowledge systems and exposes the limits of supposedly neutral expertise.

Literature Review

Scholarly engagement with Colson Whitehead’s *The Intuitionist* has grown steadily since its publication. Existing studies examine the novel from multiple critical perspectives. Each contributes valuable insights yet none addresses the novel’s epistemic dimensions through the combined lens of testimonial injustice, standpoint epistemology and racial contract theory. This article examines this research gap.

R. Gibbson Henry and R. Princee apply Kimberlé Crenshaw's intersectionality theory to the novel. Their study maps how race, gender and class overlap to multiply Lila Mae's oppression. They demonstrate the compounded nature of her marginalisation. This intersectional reading captures the compounded nature of her marginalization. The article focuses on social identity and resistance rather than on the specific mechanisms through which professional knowledge is denied and discredited.

Clementina Alexandra Mihăilescu approaches the novel through George Kelly's personal construct theory. Her analysis maps Lila Mae's psychological processes, her anticipations, recollections and construction of events. This is a detailed and original reading that places Lila Mae's intuitionism within a socio-psychological framework. However, the focus remains at the level of individual cognition. It doesn't account for how the department systematically controls which forms of knowledge receive recognition and which do not. Evette Graves-Swinney situates the novel within Ramón Saldívar's postrace aesthetic. He argues that Whitehead uses sardonicism and genre mixing to critique white institutional racism in the post-Jim Crow era. His reading highlights how the novel mocks systems of oppression without openly denouncing them. This is a strong contribution to understanding Whitehead's literary politics. However, it addresses epistemic exclusion is not its central concern. The focus remains on narrative form and racial satire rather than on the politics of knowledge production within the institution itself.

These existing studies illuminate important dimensions of the novel. But none directly examines how credibility is assigned, testimony is dismissed and knowledge authority is racially structured within the elevator inspection department. This article addresses this gap using Miranda Fricker's epistemic injustice theory, Sandra Harding's feminist standpoint epistemology, Jennifer Nagel's account of testimony and fundamentally epistemic. This insight provides the basis for the present analysis.

Theoretical Framework

To examine how knowledge and credibility functions in the novel *The Intuitionist*, this study employs epistemic injustice theory, feminist standpoint epistemology, social epistemology and racial contract theory. The primary framework for this study is epistemic injustice. Epistemic injustice refers to a type of harm done to individuals specifically in their capacity as knowers. As Miranda Fricker explains this harm occurs when a person is wronged in her capacity as a knower (20). This primary concept is key to understanding Lila Mae Watson's position within elevator inspection department. Even though, no concrete evidence proves failure, her professional competence is repeatedly questioned. The injustice is epistemic in nature.

Fricker argues that credibility judgements are influenced by social identity. Fricker notes that “such a judgement of credibility must reflect some kind of social generalization about the epistemic trustworthiness... of people of the speaker’s social type” (32). This dynamic is visible in Lila Mae’s case. Lila Mae’s race, gender and intuitionism conjoin to subordinate her credibility within the institution. Epistemic injustice thus exposes how prejudice functions silently within professional evaluation.

Sandra Harding’s feminist standpoint epistemology strengthens this analysis by challenging claims of institutional impartiality. Harding argues that the central problem is not limited to biased individuals or isolated errors. “The problem was not prejudiced and biased individuals, or other kinds of cases of ‘bad science’, as the Liberal, empiricist (or ‘positivist’) philosophies of science proclaimed. (Not that such individuals and cases didn’t exist—alas.) Rather, it was a different kind of obstacle that these researchers encountered” (Harding 4). In the novel, the elevator inspection department itself is objective. This argument clarifies how institutional objectivity is constructed rather than substantiated.

Jennifer Nagel’s work on testimony support this article further. Nagel argues that “testimony remains a distinct way of knowing something, just as reasoning is distinct from pure sensory perception” (Nagel). Lila Mae’s intuitionist method operates through trained perception and professional experience, yet the institution treats it as inferior to empirical measurement. The scepticism targets the knower rather than results. Charles Mills adds a racial dimension to this analysis. Mills observes that “Being its primary victims, nonwhites have, ofcourse, always been aware of this peculiar schism running through the white psyche (96). The elevator Guild operates within this schism. White inspectors and official accept empiricism as the standard that aligns with their authority. Mills shows that knowledge systems are shaped by racial power structures. Together these frameworks clarify the epistemic nature of Lila Mae’s struggle. The institution denies her right to be recognised as a knower.

Institutional knowledge and Credibility in *The Intuitionist*

The word “intuition” may suggest some mystical power of insight, but intuitions about knowledge are a feature of everyday life (Nagel). The conflict between empiricism and intuitionism in *The Intuitionist* is not presented as a technical disagreement. Instead, it reveals how institutions determine whose knowledge is credible. Lila Mae Watson is a competent and disciplined inspector whose professional record remain strong. Yet the elevator inspection department never fully accepts her as a legitimate authority. This lack of acceptance shapes her position within the department.

The elevator accident marks the first major disruption in Lila Mae's professional standing. Before the incident, she avoids social visibility. Her work records remain clean. When the suspicion falls on her, the institution begins to examine her credibility rather than the structural failure or empiricist oversight. "Even if they don't believe her, they can't discipline her unless she was negligent, and Lila Mae will not allow the possibility that she was negligent (37). This response reflects institutional suspicion rather than evidentiary evaluation. As Dotson defines, epistemic violence in testimony is a "a refusal, intentional or unintentional, of an audience to communicatively reciprocate a linguist exchange owing to pernicious ignorance (238). She is dismissed through suspicion. As Mills observes in "White Ignorance", "Even when such fears are not a factor, and blacks do feel free to speak, the epistemic presumption against their credibility remains in a way that it does not for white witness" (33). Her knowledge is evaluated through her social position rather than her performance. Miranda Fricker explains that someone can be "wronged specifically in her capacity as a knower" (20). This is precisely what the institution does to Lila Mae. The accident does not create the doubt. It simply makes the existing doubt visible. Empiricism functions as the official standard of institutional measurement. It depends on instruments, visible evidence and recorded data. Lila Mae's institution is never proven wrong. Yet it is never trusted. This pattern reflects epistemic injustice.

As the first Black woman inspector, Lila Mae occupies a precarious position within a white male dominated institution. Her presence already disrupts expectations of authority. When conjoined with intuitionism, her position becomes even more unstable. The institution treats her gender and race as evidence of unreliability. Fricker argues that credibility judgements reflect "social generalization about the epistemic trustworthiness of people of the speaker's social type" (32). Years of institutional culture shaped the department's credible inspector. Lila Mae faces this burden at every stage of her professional life. Her competence is not questioned because of her results. It is questioned because of what she represents within the institution's social imagination.

The institution legitimises that predilection through the routine application of its own standards. As Fricker demonstrates, epistemic injustice operates through the quiet normalisation of prejudice within professional structures. The credibility of Lila Mae is denied was never genuinely available to her within this system. Her presence exposes the institution's foundational investment in maintaining hierarchies of knowledge. The novel makes clear that professional systems do not simply reflect social inequality.

Testimony, Authority and the Limits of Empiricism

Institutional power is governed by the validation of specific types of knowledge, such authority depends on institutional standards. In *The Intuitionist*, the discord between

empiricism and intuitionism is a contest over whose method of knowing carries institutional weight. Despite its accuracy, intuitionism is treated as inferior. The novel itself undermines this institutional bias when the narrator acknowledges that “No one can quite explain why the Intuitionists have a 10 percent higher accuracy rate than the Empiricists” (Whitehead 58). This authority is institutionally constructed.

Jennifer Nagel argues that testimony is a distinct way of knowing different from both reasoning and sensory perception (Nagel) and Lila Mae’s intuitionism exemplifies this form of knowing. Intuitionism produces knowledge that the institution cannot fully contain, verify to reinforce its own authority. Lila Mae’s method threatens institutional control over what counts as valid professional knowledge. Sandra Harding argues that the problem facing marginalised knowers is not simply biased individuals or flawed methods. “It was a different kind of obstacle that these researchers encountered” (4). The obstacle arises from existing structural condition. The institution has built its authority around empiricism not because empiricism is more reliable but because it is more controllable. It locates knowledge within the inspector’s trained perception rather than within an external instrument. The institution dismisses this form of knowledge because it cannot control or regulate it.

Sandra Harding’s feminist standpoint epistemology argues that knowledge is always produced from a particular social position. White male inspectors operate comfortably within empiricist standards because those standards were built around their ways of working and knowing. Lila Mae operates from a different standpoint. Her intuitionist method emerges from a different relationship to the institution, one defined by exclusion, careful observation and internal professional judgement. The institution doesn’t recognise this standpoint as valid. It reads difference as deficiency and margin as error. Empiricist failures are treated as impersonal. When Lila Mae’s inspection is followed by an accident, her entire epistemic framework is put on trial. This double standard exposes the politics embedded within institutional evaluation. Empiricism is protected because it belongs to the dominant group. The limits of empiricism in the novel are political rather than technical. Empiricism functions as a gatekeeping mechanism that determines whose knowledge enters the official record and whose is excluded. The institution controls decision using empiricism not to pursue truth but to preserve authority. Lila Mae’s intuitionism exposes this use of empiricism as a means of protection rather than evaluation.

The conflict between empiricism and intuitionism is never solved through evidence. It is managed through power. The institution refuses to engage with intuitionism on its own terms and denies it the conditions required for assessment. As Dotson argues, “Intentions and culpability do not determine epistemic violence in testimony. Reliable ignorance, harm,

and the failed linguist exchange itself determine epistemic violence (242). This refusal constitutes an act of epistemic injustice not by disproving Lila Mae's knowledge but by denying it serious consideration. Eventually, the novel presents empiricism as a politics of exclusion that operates through the language of objectivity.

Race, Epistemic Exclusion and White Ignorance

Knowledge systems are historically contingent. They are inevitably shaped by the specific social and political landscapes from which they emerge. In the novel *The Intuitionist*, the elevator inspection department functions as an institution shaped by racial hierarchy. This hierarchy structures evaluation and professional recognition. As a result, Lila Mae's exclusion from epistemic authority is fundamentally racial rather than methodological or gendered. As Festa observes, the fact that African-Americans have always been considered objects and not subjects is a trauma that the black community drags on from the time of slavery and had repercussions, also in their encounter with technology (175).

The department preserves white epistemic dominance through institutional standards rather than open discrimination. This becomes evident after the Fanny Briggs elevator accident, when suspicion quickly falls on Lila Mae Watson and her inspection is treated as unreliable despite her professional competence. Charles Mills explains this dynamic through what he describes as a split within white institutional consciousness, where nonwhite individuals are acknowledged but not fully recognised (96). This division allows institutions to include nonwhite workers while denying them epistemic authority. Lila Mae is employed, visible and professionally present yet her knowledge never receives the same legitimacy as that of her white colleagues. The institution records her presence but refuses her authority. This pattern reflects what Mills terms the racial contract. The racial contract is not a formal agreement but an unspoken structure through which white institutions maintain control over knowledge, authority and recognition. Within the department, this contract operates through empiricism. Although presented as neutral, empiricism functions as a racial standard shaped by exclusionary traditions. Lila Mae's intuitionism threatens this structure because accepting it would require the institution to revise the terms of its racial order.

Mills's concept of white ignorance helps explain how this system is sustained. White ignorance is not characterized by an absence of data but rather by a systemic, socially sanctioned resistance to any knowledge that destabilizes the racial power structure. The department's officials ignore Lila Mae's competence not because they are unaware of it but because recognising her authority would disrupt the racial hierarchy from which they benefit. This ignorance allows the institution to maintain the appearance of neutrality while continuing to produce unequal outcomes.

The Fulton files deepen this critique of racialised knowledge. James Fulton, the Black founder of intuitionism concealed his racial identity throughout his career. The institution accepted his ideas only because his Blackness remained invisible. The novel make this devastatingly clear,

She understood that the library would be empty if these scholars knew Fulton was colored. No one would have worshipped him, his books probably would never have been published at all, or would exist under a different name, the name of plagiarizing white man Fulton had been fool enough to share his theories with (Whitehead 151).

This dynamic exposes the conditions under which Black knowledge is accepted. It accepts such knowledge only when it can be separated from its Black origin. The dynamic extends beyond the institutional walls of the department. As Kim observesIt is the epistemological contemplation of invisibility and being through which the mystery of Number Eleven and the coded scripts of the dead Fulton play on the issue of black invisibility, racial passing, and African American ontology in the colorblind culture of 1960s (159).

This invisibility is an institutional condition imposed on Black knowledge. The racial contract therefore governs not only who is excluded but also under what conditions inclusion becomes possible. Lila Mae understands this reality. She recognises that the institution will never evaluate her knowledge apart from her identity. She continues to practice intuitionism as a deliberate challenge to institutional authority. Her persistence functions as an epistemic act that insists on the validity of her knowledge despite systematic denial. The novel presents this persistence not merely as resistance but as a form of epistemic struggle that exposes the racial foundations of institutional knowledge itself.

Conclusion

Colson Whitehead's *The Intuitionist* is the novel extends beyond professional rivalry. It is a sustained interrogation of how knowledge systems produce and protect inequality. Through Lila Mae Watson's experience, the novel exposes the mechanisms through which institutions control epistemic authority. The novel asks a fundamental question who is allowed to know and on whose terms is that knowledge accepted.

Fricker's theory clarifies this injustice. The institution does not challenge her results through evidence. It challenges her credibility through identity. Her race and gender function as disqualifiers within a professional system that presents itself as objective. The two forms of epistemic injustice Fricker identifies, testimonial injustice and marginalisation are both visible in Lila Mae's experience. She is disbelieved and she lacks the institutional resources to make her experience fully intelligible within the dominant framework.

Nagel's account of testimony serves as a distinct form of knowing supports the novel's defense of intuitionism as a legitimate epistemic practice. Lila Mae's method is not mystical or unreliable. A knowledge practice developed and embodied by a Black woman inspector cannot be permitted to challenge the authority of empiricism within a racially ordered institution. Harding's feminist standpoint epistemology exposes the structural conditions behind this refusal. The institution's preference for empiricism is not a neutral choice. It reflects the standpoint of those who built the system and those who continue to benefit from it. Lila Mae operates from a different standpoint, one shaped by exclusion and careful professional judgement. Harding's framework makes clear that this reading is not objective assessment. It is the exercise of epistemic power by those who control the terms of professional knowledge. Mills's racial contract provides the broadest frame for understanding Lila Mae's situation. The department operates within an unspoken racial arrangement that protects white epistemic dominance. As Mills defines, White ignorance operates as a political practice. It is active and politically motivated. The institution's administrators do not fail to recognise Lila Mae's competence out of simple oversight. This is most clearly visible in the Fulton files. Black epistemic authority is acceptable only when its racial origins are concealed.

Together these frameworks demonstrate that Whitehead's novel is a work of epistemic fiction. It uses the world of elevator inspection to model the broader politics of knowledge in racially stratified societies. Although unresolved, her struggle remains significant. The racial contract doesn't dissolve but Lila Mae's persistence carries its own significance. She continues to insist on the validity of her knowledge. The novel captures this resolve when Lila Mae recognises that "if she does not trust the Intuitionists, perhaps she will trust one of her tribe, his story of correcting the injustices done to her race" (230). Its production, recognition and suppression are all acts of power.

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