

SUIT UP!

THE BUSINESS SUIT AS MYTH AND REVOLUTION IN THE INTUITIONIST

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Abstract

The business suit has long been a symbol of American achievement in business, particularly in the twentieth century. Using Colson Whitehead's debut novel *The Intuitionist*, a work of literary speculative fiction, we can see that the suit also carries the weight of being a mythological construction, according to Roland Barthes's definition, as well as the power of what Barthes identifies as Revolutionary speech when the suit is worn with deliberate precision by the novel's protagonist, Lila Mae Watson.

Keywords: *Suiting; Barthes; Mythologies; Gender; Race.*

"Thus, every day and everywhere, man is stopped by myths, referred by them to this motionless prototype which lives in his place, stifles him in the manner of a huge internal parasite, and assigns to his activity the narrow limits within which he is allowed to suffer without upsetting the world."
(Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*)

In Colson Whitehead's novel *The Intuitionist*, protagonist Lila Mae Watson wears a dark-blue suit to her job as an elevator inspector every day. She has five identical business suits, one for each weekday, and a collection of white shirts to wear with them, as well as colorful ties and five pairs of polished wingtips. Her fellow elevator inspectors wear suits, as do the heads of the elevator

companies, the mafia men, a band leader on stage, and the man she dances with in a taxi-dance hall. The suits in this novel do a lot of work: who wears them matters, as does who does not wear them. They even function as a marker for the temporal setting of the story.

At the outset of his essay "Myth Today," Roland Barthes states "that myth is a system of communication, that it is a message. This allows one to perceive that myth cannot possibly be an object, a concept, or an idea; it is a mode of signification, a form" (p. 217). In light of this definition, the suits in *The Intuitionist* carry the force of myth, as the suits become a mode of signification for the characters. In Lila Mae's case, wearing a suit is an example of Barthes's concept of Revolutionary

speech (he capitalizes the concept) in opposition to the myth that serves to maintain the power of the bourgeoisie. Revolution, in Barthes's argument, "makes the world, and its language, all of it, is absorbed in this making." Where myth is merely signification and not an object or idea, "Revolution announces itself openly as revolution and thereby abolishes myth" (p. 259). It is worth noting at the outset that in American English, *bourgeoisie* is often simply used to denote the economic middle class. In French, the term has more nuance. It is a ruling class distinct from royalty; it is the class that rose up against the monarchy in the late eighteenth century. So the French bourgeoisie has more cultural and fiscal capital within the capitalist system than the American middle class, which itself is closer to the idea of the French *petite bourgeoisie*.

It is possible for the business suit to be both the bourgeois myth of the American dream under twentieth-century capitalism and an act of Revolutionary speech in *The Intuitionist*, a duality expressed in Whitehead's novel through the semiological status of this costume.

MYTH

As Barthes writes, "What must be established firmly at the start is that myth is a system of communication, that it is a message" (p. 217). Anything can be a myth, but not everything is inherently a myth. He begins by explaining the linguistic signifier, the signified, and finally the sign, which is the "resulting relation between concept and image." In one example given by Barthes, a pebble can be a signifier, but only when it is given a definite signified meaning—such as a death sentence—does it become a sign. The simple signifier, a pebble, carries the weight of a sign when presenting it in a particular context conveys the death of a human being (p. 222). In the case of the suit, the signified could be the concept of a matching jacket and pants in gray pinstripe wool, the signified the mental (or "acoustic," according to Barthes) image of this costume, and the sign the word *suit*.

This is not a myth; this is first-order language using a signifier, a signified, and a resulting sign to communicate an idea.

Myth takes this basic semiological system and builds its own hollow, metalinguistic structure on top of it, creating a second-order language. The sign, which is the end point in the first system,

becomes the myth's signifier, and it takes on a new signified. Barthes changes the terminology for myth to untangle the first- and second-language systems: the signifier becomes the myth's form, the signified becomes the concept, and the result he calls the signification.

In the case of the business suit, in the first-order semiological system, the costume itself—in this example, two matching pieces of gray pinstripe wool—plus the mental image of the costume result in the sign *suit*. Myth does not stop there.

It cannibalizes the sign to build a bourgeoisie-serving signification. Barthes writes, "The concept appears to me in all its appropriative nature: it comes and seeks me out in order to oblige me to acknowledge the body of intentions which have motivated it and arranged it there as the signal of an individual history, as a confidence and a complicity" (p. 235).

The word *suit*, containing the image and the idea, becomes the basis of myth. The concept is then our cultural context for the suit: who wears it, where do they wear it, and when are suits worn, among other considerations. The resulting signification is the myth of the suit.

The Intuitionist tells the story of Lila Mae Watson, an elevator inspector who relies on her gift as an Intuitionist: someone who uses keen observation and listening skills to diagnose an elevator's health, as opposed to the Empiricist camp, who rely on mechanical knowledge.

Lila Mae is the first Black woman (and the second Black person) to become an inspector. When an elevator crashes, the two camps ramp up their conflict, leading Lila Mae to investigate the incident on her own and off the books.

The novel was published in 1999, as the internet was skyrocketing faster than any elevator.

A few years after its publication, owners of the most influential and valuable internet companies would discard the suit in favor of the hoodies and jeans they had worn as university undergraduates. A suit no longer immediately signaled success; the mythology would move.

Therefore, to determine the myth of the suit in *The Intuitionist*, it is necessary to understand the world of this novel and Lila Mae Watson's place in it, starting with the era of this speculative novel. We begin with the temporal setting because "mythology can only have a historical foundation, for myth is a type of speech chosen by history" (Barthes, p. 218). Most authors will make

the setting of the novel clear, maybe even be so bold (or so obvious) as to include a year for the events taking place between its covers. Yet Whitehead has created a novel both historical and speculative, where the exact moment in history is indeterminate.

But there are clues. The first is the fact that Black people are referred to as “colored,” the term that came to be preferred and widely used in the early twentieth century. It is also notable that Lila Mae’s colleague Pompey is the first colored elevator inspector, and she is the first colored woman elevator inspector. This narrows the likely time frame to the mid-twentieth century, when opportunities for Black people were growing, thanks to the civil rights movement, and women were beginning to reconsider their assigned roles in society as second-wave feminism began to take hold.

Alexander Manshel (2021) notes that *The Intuitionist*’s cultural touchstones span the decades between the Harlem Renaissance and the civil rights movement, writing that it “connotes 1950s-ness, 1960s-ness, and 1920s-30s-40s-ness all at once” (p. 26). Saundra Liggins (2006) settles on the narrower timeframe of the 1950s or ’60s. Lauren Berlant (2008) chooses a year, “around 1964,” as the setting due to the fact that “most professions are still segregated” (p. 850). All of these critics recognize that “[i]n Whitehead’s world, history works differently” (Manshel, p. 25). As an author who has dabbled in several genres since this debut work, including sci-fi, Whitehead might find a kind of literary kinship in another writer who was working in a 1950s-ish milieu: Matthew Weiner, creator of *Mad Men*, which began airing eight years after the publication of *The Intuitionist*. Speaking to an interviewer of his being Jewish and writing a show about WASPs (white Anglo-Saxon protestants, the dominant demographic in the United States), he said:

And, like a lot of artists, I’m an outsider....

In the beginning of the show, I referred to it a few times as science fiction until someone who wrote science fiction said, “It’s not science fiction, it’s historical fiction. Don’t use that.” And I said but I am trying to take you into a world that did exist but didn’t quite exactly. I’m thinking of the *Star Trek* episode where they go back into the quote unquote “past” (Renov, 2017, p. 160).

Mad Men and *The Intuitionist* both use the cultural

power of fashion to demarcate their mid-century settings. There are no riding coats or bustles, nor are there cargo pants or babydoll dresses in Lila Mae’s world. Whitehead lists the items shoppers carry out of Huntley’s Department store:

[N]ew watches equipped with glow-in-the-dark radium dials so you can know the time even in the dark; cinch belts in all the rediscovered pastels from overseas, hot now, get them while they’re hot; Cuban-heel pumps and alligator purses so coarse and smooth in the light, dizzying tactility; hypnotic suggestion girdles and air rifles and foxtail caps (p. 159).

Each of these items would have been available and popular in the late 1950s and early 1960s. This brings us back to the suit. A suit on its own can be a signifier, and this is the foundation of Barthes’s construction of myth. Understanding the suit of the era will lead to its use in bourgeoisie-upholding myth as well as its use as Revolutionary speech.

Now that we have constrained the setting of the book to a decade or so in the middle of the American twentieth century, it is necessary to understand who was wearing suits at this time. The business suit took the shape most people recognize—jacket with lapels, optional vest, trousers—in the early twentieth century, and it was worn exclusively by men. After the camouflaged uniforms of World War I replaced the more colorful military uniforms of the nineteenth century, civilian palettes for men subsequently changed to gray, dark green, brown, and khaki. Small suiting details changed with the seasons and the decades, such as the number of buttons on the jacket or the width of the lapels. When fabric was rationed during World War II, men for the most part stopped wearing vests. And when Jack Kennedy appeared on the campaign trail in a narrow-cut suit that fit his athletic build, suits for the masses followed suit (Gau, 2010). This sharp, narrow-cut suit seems to be the style Lila Mae favors, further cementing the era of this novel as a blend of the late 1950s and early 1960s.

In the 1950s tech sector, a close analog of the elevator inspector work performed by Lila Mae in the novel, companies such as IBM, 3M, and Cargill had unwritten rules suggesting that men should wear a shirt, tie, and jacket. Employees at AT&T knew that they were expected “to conform to the conservative image” (Gau, 2010).

Professional women of the era wore a dark skirt and a light or white shirt. Sometimes a padded jacket was added, creating a skirt suit of the kind Jackie Kennedy would later make famous. The narrow silhouette for women that began in the 1920s continued for decades, and the flat lines that were prized in women's clothing meant there were no pockets that might bulge or gape and ruin the smooth effect of the design. Women in film wore trousers, but even that was controversial: Marlene Dietrich's turn in a tuxedo *Morocco* was titillating and considered sexually deviant; Katherine Hepburn dressed in drag *Sylvia Scarlett* and was punished at the box office for years after. Pant suits would not become acceptable in any office in America until the mid-1960s, with more conservative professions such as politics all but requiring women to wear skirt suits into the 1990s (Warner, 2013).

Men of *The Intuitionist*'s era—particularly white men—were wearing business suits to white-collar jobs. A man in a business suit on a billboard would convey the myth of success, of power, of higher class and status, of making it, of achieving the American dream. A man in a suit is assumed to have power, to have reached a level of achievement and accomplishment, to be deserving of his position. When Lila Mae sees just such a billboard of a besuited Chancre, head of the United Elevator Co., she thinks:

“[E]levator ads probably only register in civilian heads as a dim affirmation of modernity, happy progress to be taken for granted and subconsciously cherished” (Whitehead, p. 14–15).

But there is no elevator on this billboard, as far as the reader knows, only a twenty-foot-tall Chancre with his “arms struts at the tails of his signature double-breasted suit” (p. 14). It is the suit acting as form, the picture of Chancre's success as the concept that appears in civilian minds, and the combination of these as the signification: modernity and happy progress. Chancre in the overalls of an elevator repairman would not have this same signification. Lila Mae is aware of this myth because she lives in this world. As a student, the myth presented itself in the form of a recruiter from Arbo, United's rival: “The tall man from Arbo, in his dark and expensive suit, described the nurturing atmosphere and opportunities for advancement the elevator manufacturing concern could

offer graduates of the most prestigious elevator inspection school in the country” (p. 245–6). His suit is the myth's form, his acknowledgement of the students' capabilities, intelligence, and status as graduates of the Institute for Vertical Transport is the concept, and the myth is again the American dream: through hard work and connections made at university, anyone can reach great heights working in the elevator industry. “Arbo creates the future, he told them, inspectors serve the future” (p. 246). That dark and expensive suit is in service to no one. Every student in the novel tries to deny the lure of this myth at first by becoming elevator inspectors in the city's employ, like Lila Mae, but most soon “return to Arbo and United and the rest, defeated, hats in hand, begging for release and better suits” (p. 246). Notice how here, the words “better suits” are fully weighted with that mythical promise of status, wealth, and as Lila Mae says, modernity and happy progress.

REVOLUTION

As the first Black woman elevator inspector, with only one Black inspector ahead of her, Pompey, Lila Mae is aware that she will be noticed no matter what she does, and probably not in a charitable light. She knows that the white men in her profession wear suits, as most men in white-collar professions do at the time. Though women in professional roles typically wear skirts and blouses, Lila Mae chooses to don the business suit worn by her colleagues.

It is one less marker of difference for a “first” like Lila Mae. She finds a sense of composure, of protection, and even of self in wearing a suit: [S]he doesn't spend her little money on things she doesn't need, but she needs the cut of her suit to see herself. The bold angularity of it, the keen lapels—its buttons are the screws keeping her shut. The tailor seemed to know what she needed, understood the theater Lila Mae needs to leave the house whole and be among other people (p. 56).

The tailor was not wrong to make sure the cut was angular and those lapels keen as blades. In the passage quoted above, she is about to meet Mr. Reed, secretary to the powerful guild chair candidate Orville Lever: “Dressed, she's in front of the mirror. Armed. She puts her face on. In her case, not a matter of cosmetics, but will” (p. 57). This armor is not always as effective as she

intends. When two thugs ransack her apartment, the thug named John finds four identical dark-blue suits and four pairs of shined wingtips in her closet (the fifth, the Friday suit, being on her body at the time). He notes her “pathological affinity for regularity, the constant and true” (p. 28).

This is fair enough, and Lila Mae may even consider the assessment flattering.

But he continues his assessment: “An attempt to fit in that unavoidably calls attention to itself.

It appeases John’s societal schemata that Lila Mae is of the colored persuasion” (p. 28).

Not even a sharply angled suit of woolen armor can protect her—in *absentia*, no less—from the racism of white people. It is notable that John does not object to these business suits being worn by a woman. It is less disruptive to his societal schemata that he is ransacking the home of a Black person and not of a white person who might typically wear a tailored business suit as a uniform. The suit’s mythological power does not extend as far as Lila Mae, no matter how smart and capable she is, no matter where she went to school (where she roomed in a converted janitorial closet due to segregation). As Manshel writes, “Whitehead’s protagonist is not at all ‘middling’ but exemplary: the first black woman to break into her field and a rising hero of new theoretical methods” (p.33–4). Berlant goes further in noting that not only is Lila Mae an expert, but she is an expert in an unexpected body:

She is black, female, poised, reserved, and an expert at something whose expertise is usually associated with a different kind of body, not that of an abstract supremacist elite, but of a white, male, working-class, appetitive subject who enjoys the benefits of the authoritarian personality, with its culture of hierarchy, deference, and pleasure in the torture of outsiders (p. 851).

Wearing a dark suit in imitation of the white men above her on the corporate ladder is the least she can do to elide some of her differences. She is not, however, “passing.” She is not trying to look or act white. She has adopted and made her own the accepted dress code for white-collar white men. This is in contrast to the man Lila Mae considers a beacon of her profession, James Fulton, who created the practice of intuitionism in elevator inspection, an ability to listen and observe carefully when assessing the workings of any elevator. Like many innovators, he is regarded as a visionary

by some and a crank by others, but he is allowed this leeway because he is regarded as white.

As Lila Mae discovers, however, he is a Black man with light skin who is able to pass in white society. At one point in the novel, she is shown two photographs of a young Fulton.

The first is a family photo with his mother and sister, who are Black. But in the second, he is with his graduating class, and “Lila Mae cannot see his eyes at all. He has found his trademark brown trilby, and the brim’s veil of shadow hides his mother’s eyes. He is surrounded by white men in their first suits, which are loose and shy at the wrists, just short of dignified, almost there” (Whitehead, p. 136–137).

Fulton is presumably wearing a suit himself in the photo, or Lila Mae—and everyone else—would have noticed the breach of conformity. The trilby is distinctive but fashionable for his day, and it serves his purpose. Lila Mae notes several times in this passage that it hides his eyes.

Only in middle age, when he has reached a level of power through decades of passing, does he stare into the camera for a photograph: “No more hiding: the better man wins reality” (p. 137).

But he is still hiding, though now in plain sight.

He lived his entire adult life, as far as almost everyone but his sister and his assistant Mrs. Rogers knew, as a white man. He accepts the myth of the business suit—anyone wearing a suit must have power, belonging, access, capability—and the smokescreen it provides. He does not take the risk of its revolutionary potential, unlike Lila Mae.

Though it provides imperfect protection against racism for a woman who is not passing, Lila Mae’s suit is the best resource she has, besides her fierce intellect and devotion to her profession—neither of which can be discerned with a mere glance.

“She did not possess any lucky rabbit’s feet or childhood dolls to ward off the monsters of the adult world. Just clothes” (p. 166).

And she is not the only “exemplary” Black person to adopt the suit’s mythology as armor. “Martin Luther King, Jr. recognized the power of clothing in getting others to listen to one’s message; like other civil rights leaders of the time, he was most often seen in a suit and tie, with a crisp white shirt, so that he could never be fairly turned away from any gathering he might want to enter” (Sims, 2010). And yet for Lila Mae and Dr. King, as for so many other Black people, the suit’s mythology did not protect them from racism any more than

a rabbit's foot would.

Using Barthes's framework for myth, this is because Lila Mae's wearing a suit is not myth; it is Revolutionary speech.

"[M]yth is *depoliticized speech*," according to Barthes (italics in the original). He asserts that political speech describes "the whole of human relations in their real, social structure, in their power of making the world" (p. 255).

Myth does not relay the realness of anything; it builds a second-order linguistic house of cards atop semiological signs to create a fabricated historical quality. This quality is natural in that it seems to go without saying. When Lila Mae sees the billboard of Chancre and connects it with modernity and happy progress, it seems natural. No explanation is needed.

It goes without saying that a twenty-foot tall white man in a navy double-breasted suit has no other signification than the promise of the American dream. As Barthes writes, "Men do not have with myth a relationship based on truth but on use: they depoliticize according to their needs" (p. 257).

It serves the bourgeoisie, in Barthes's calculations, to drain a signifier like a suit of any political power in order to bolster their own worldview, their own mythological system.

In *The Intuitionist*, the bourgeoisie is personified by the leaders of Arbo and United, by the Elevator Guild, and in the end by the wealthy Coombs, who had been masquerading as the servant Natchez to get close to Lila Mae. Barthes argues that the bourgeoisie is "*the social class which does not want to be named*" (p. 250, italics in the original). The bourgeoisie is a "shapeless" class. Through media, including news, movies, and literature, something like the bourgeois representation of an expensive wedding "slowly becomes the very norm as dreamed, though not actually lived, of the petit bourgeois couple" (p. 253).

This is the fate of the suit in *The Intuitionist*.

"Fashion is an expression of capitalism, incorporating its structural inequalities by encouraging people to strive, behavior so critical to creating illusions of success in an unequal society" (Tynan, 2010). All manner of people wear suits in this novel: the reporter Urich wears a powder-blue seersucker suit in an attempt to appear cool and nonchalant. And his eye for fashion helps him figure out that the thugs who assaulted him were not Mob guys, who wear shirts made of cheap blended fabrics; these guys wore the oxford cotton

shirts of Arbo employees.

The suit of the Black man who dances with Lila Mae in the taxi-dance hall is "shiny, returning light in patches on his elbows and knees.

It is an old suit," with the ruby handkerchief in his pocket "an echo of finer times and better circumstances" (Whitehead, p. 215).

The men at the Funicular Follies have bought out-of-fashion tuxes with wide lapels at a discount in an attempt to be dressed appropriately for the affair (p. 146). Pompey, Lila Mae's fellow "first" in elevator inspection, wears a suit that strives for bourgeois respectability yet does not reach it, "the cuffs of his shirt bold out of sad and comically short jacket sleeves" (p. 24).

The myth of the suit, the promise of this facet of the American dream, has filtered down from the bourgeoisie to the middle class, who "[do] not have its basic status and cannot live up to [it] except in imagination" (Barthes, p. 253).

Revolutionary language, however, remains political rather than becoming depoliticized like myth.

"Wherever man speaks in order to transform reality and no longer to preserve it as an image, wherever he links his language to the making of things, metalanguage is referred to as a language object, and myth is impossible" (p. 259).

Lila Mae in her dark-blue suits is transforming reality and acting on the world to make it new. She is not making elevators; that is not the language in question in this argument.

Her language is the suit, which according to bourgeois myth is modernity, progress, and power—the American dream. By being a Black woman in a dark-blue suit working in a white-collar world, this language cannot take on that myth. This is played out time and again in the novel, when she is confronted with her race and occasionally her gender, even when she is performing her job perfectly and wearing the correct costume for doing so. In the very first scene of the novel, the superintendent of the building where she is inspecting an elevator makes a point of letting her know he sees her race and gender, despite her suit and official identification. Mrs. Rogers, the Black woman who worked with the legendary Fulton and is suspicious of Lila Mae's (and everyone else's) motives, also calls her a racial slur and then says insultingly, "Wearing a man's suit like you a man" (p. 94).

Fashion conveys class and gender, "signals that are meaningful to social participation in

modernity.” However, fashion “is also the arena for challenges to fixed identity positions” (Tynan, 2010).

The “pathological affinity for regularity, the constant and true” noted by the man ransacking Lila Mae’s closet belies the challenge that she poses to cultural norms. She is closer to the truth in seeing her suits as armor, though they are imperfect.

“The bourgeoisie hides the fact that it is the bourgeoisie and thereby produces myth; Revolution announces itself openly as Revolution and thereby abolishes myth” (Barthes, p. 259). By armoring herself in a perfectly tailored business suit and Department-reg wingtips, Lila Mae strips the bourgeois myth of the American dream and lays bare the Revolution of an educated, driven Black woman doing exemplary work. The power of the myth of the business suit was already dimming as Whitehead wrote *The Intuitionist* in the late 1990s.

As we pass the first quarter of the twenty-first century, there are fewer realms where suits are *de rigueur* or read as markers of power.

Whitehead chose to place his novel in a speculative mid-twentieth-century America, a setting where suits maintained their mythical power and people like Lila Mae Watson could challenge that power by using the language of fashion to effect Revolutionary speech. Using Barthes’s framework and the example of this fictional text, it is possible to look at the clothing people are wearing in any era, including our own, to project a bourgeois myth of power. We can also consider, then, how that myth could be, or has been, imploded by the use of fashion for political, Revolutionary ends.

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