Each and Every Iteration: Violence and Raciality in the Global Present

by

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ABSTRACT

‘Each and Every Iteration: Violence and Raciality in the Global Present’ considers how raciality anticipates structural violence against non-white subjects. I suggest that to describe violence as an iteration, or a ceaseless guarantee, might prove a disruptive mechanism in the capacity for raciality to function as both an authorising force and the conditions of existence. My dissertation comprises three chapters. Chapter One examines the work of Denise Ferreira da Silva, Stefano Harney and Fred Moten who collectively, I suggest, break with ethical interpretations of violence sustained by the individual subject. I argue these scholars expose how phenomenology’s preoccupation with interiority prevents it from challenging raciality’s ethical coherence. In Chapters Two and Three, I attempt to describe violence without the subject by examining incidents of state violence and their representation in contemporary works of literature and art. In Chapter Two, I consider an ‘inverted object,’ or an object that captures the symbolic excess of violence ordinarily mapped onto the subject. In Chapter Three, I take up Alexis Pauline Gumbs’s 2018 volume of poetry M Archive: After the End of the World as a devastating confrontation with the very image of the subject. I conclude by arguing that bringing about the dereliction of whiteness is required for any meaningful reformulation of the ethical program. This dissertation expands on existing scholarly work that identifies manifold failings in post-enlightenment thinking and its tethering of racial subjugation to selfhood, sovereignty and agency. Through the mode of description being put forward here, I demonstrate why ethical interpretations of violence consistently fail to identify its authorising force, raciality.
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INTRODUCTION

2.6 seconds passed between the first shot and the second shot. 0.53 seconds passed between the second shot and the third shot. The second and third shots were fired at a distance of no more than 5 cm from the deceased. Either the second or the third shot was fatal. […] However, the defence says that there is a factual dispute about what the police body-worn cameras recorded and the defendant’s state of mind when he fired the second and third shots. […] The Crown accepts that when the defendant entered House 511 to arrest the deceased, he genuinely believed he was exercising the power of arrest under the Police Administration Act, and also there is a temporal connection between the defendant entering the house to arrest the deceased and the discharge of the second and third shots.

—The Queen v Rolfe (No 5) [2021] NTSCFC 6

In the rush of bodies, it is difficult to make sense of what unfolds in House 511 in Yuendumu, a small town in Australia’s Northern Territory. Then, a sudden flash. A white police officer raises his weapon at a 19-year-old Aboriginal man and shoots. 2.6 seconds pass, another bullet, then another. Count the moments between these collisions. The centimetres. Statement of facts: the Aboriginal man stabbed the defendant with a pair of surgical scissors. He was resisting arrest. He was a threat. There is footage from body-worn cameras. But no matter what we see take place in House 511, the defendant may have experienced these events differently. This is to say, he may have been juridically and ethically required to kill Kumanjayi Walker at his family home at 7:22pm on November 9, 2019. Just as a jury was required to acquit the defendant on all charges, thereby establishing his authority—and that of anyone else in his position—to execute Walker. How to
even begin to make sense of these events? How to describe what takes place in between the first and second shots? To be sure, there is a temporal connection between these two moments. We know as much because the juridical architecture uses these moments, their brevity, to ethically resolve a deployment of total violence that would otherwise be unconscionable: in this case, it was decided the police officer could not have established murderous intent in such a short span of time.\footnote{Here I follow a distinction Ferreira da Silva makes between ‘total violence’ in the form of arrests, shootings, torture and abuse, and ‘symbolic violence,’ such as debt-saddling, income discrimination and other means of exploitation and expropriation. Denise Ferreira da Silva, Unpayable Debt, London: Sternberg Press, 2022, 26.} And yet, Walker’s execution is only comprehensible in time, in seconds, because the scene’s authorising force—raciality—has no temporal connection to those moments.

Raciality is defined here in terms of its capacity to delimit ethical notions of humanity, thereby authorising discriminate deployments of violence. As Denise Ferreira da Silva writes, raciality ‘constitutes an effective tool precisely because of the way its main signifiers—the racial and the cultural—provide an account of human difference, an account in which particularity remains irreducible and unsublatable.’\footnote{Denise Ferreira da Silva, Toward a Global Idea of Race. New edition, vol. 27, Minneapolis; London: University of Minnesota Press, 2007, xix.} While its origins can be found in the events of violence—primarily, the bloody trail left by colonisation and Atlantic slavery—that have shaped racial and cultural differences over the past 500 years or so, ‘the arsenal of raciality functions so well as a political operator precisely because it is not a referent of linear time.’\footnote{Denise Ferreira da Silva, ‘DENISE FERREIRA DA SILVA Negative Accumulation: The Racial Event or That Wich [sic] Happens Without Time,’ YouTube, uploaded by Fondazione Gramsci Emilia-Romagna, July 7, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PVodP3z3nec&ab_channel=FondazioneGramsciEmilia-Romagna.} This is to say, Walker’s execution was not only authorised but guaranteed by raciality’s capacity to act as a fissiparous figuring of human difference that remains uninterrupted by historical progress.\footnote{As Frank B. Wilderson III reminds us, ‘The social and political time of emancipation proclamations should not be confused with the ontological and epistemological time of modernity itself, in which Blackness and Slaveness are imbricated ab initio.’ Frank B. Wilderson III, Red, White & Black Cinema and the Structure of U.S. Antagonisms, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010, 339-40.} No matter the defendant’s ‘state of mind’ when he shot down Walker, the trouble in describing this event lies in

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that it cannot be understood as an aberration—a stain on the record of liberalism—but rather as essential to our present order of things; that each and every Black death in custody or community serves, in the words of Frank B. Wilderson III, as ‘a finger that points to humanity as being deserving of destruction because of its very being and not just its actions.’

This dissertation considers violence as a figuring of excess, in that, as an iteration guaranteed by raciality in the global present, it is irreducible to any given deployment. I suggest that to describe violence as a ceaseless iteration might prove a disruptive mechanism in the writing of raciality as the hallowed ground of post-enlightenment thinking. Thus, I consider violence through an analytics that seeks to bring about an epistemic break with the capacity for raciality to make ethical sense. Unlike in mathematics and computer science, where iterative methods are used to produce conclusive solutions to problems, ethical interpretations of violence (for instance, in the adjudication, verdict or other juridical moment where human difference appears axiomatic) do not appear to yield any interruption in their occurrence. No matter how many times we run the code, violence seems an inexorable part of the global present and a crucible for the modern subject. What kind of shift in the thinking of existence would be required to dislodge raciality as the authorising force in global systems of anti-Black violence? The apparent congruence in the liberal imagination between these systems and ethical notions of humanity makes the urgency of this question increasingly apparent. How is it, Ferreira da Silva allows us to ask of Walker’s execution,

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that this violence ‘does not unleash the ethical crisis expected by those who argue that racial subjection contradicts modern ethical principles’?\footnote{Ferreira da Silva, Global Idea of Race, 175.}

The ethical program of which the acquittal of Walker’s killer is exemplary rather than exceptional underscores how racial violence is tethered to, and inextricable from, the conditions of existence. For this reason, as Ferreira da Silva elucidates in her 2022 book, Unpayable Debt, post-enlightenment thinking consistently fails to identify raciality as the authorising force:

Not surprisingly, despite the gigantic library about how raciality configures the post-Enlightenment global context, economic dispossession and juridical subjugation of black persons and populations are explained in terms of subjective (moral) attributes and not (to proceed with the operating dichotomy) the objective (economic and juridical) conditions of existence. [….] existing critical tools, which are assemblages of the interpretive episteme, are useless for designing an intervention that describes how raciality operates in modern representation.\footnote{Ferreira da Silva, Unpayable Debt, 141.}

Any attempt to interrupt the conditions that raciality anticipates is impossible from within the subjective realm precisely because, as Ferreira da Silva writes, violence and the epistemes that make sense of it do not presuppose individual agency. It is Ferreira da Silva’s thinking that anchors this dissertation because she analyses violence ‘in the moment of justification,’ rather than its occurrence.\footnote{Ibid., 13.} When the ethical grounds for violence always precede and, therefore, anticipate subjects’ essential subjugation, raciality can be understood as ‘a juridico-economic structure that
yields a symbolic order mapped onto the captive body.' Violence emerges, then, not as a calculable and ethically discernible act in space and time, but a ceaseless guarantee of raciosity.

An Anywhere Story

The nationwide rallies in protest of Walker’s killing that swept Australia in 2019 instantly recall those following the 2013 acquittal of George Zimmerman, the neighbourhood watch leader who shot dead 17-year-old Trayvon Martin, a moment that helped spark Black Lives Matter. As a global movement calling attention to violence against Black people by state and citizen alike, Black Lives Matter makes clear the failure of equality and liberty as ethical descriptors to disrupt raciosity. For, when raciosity is understood as an ethically delimiting force that survives abolition, enfranchisement and so on, such political freedoms no longer hold any explanatory purchase. The ceaseless iterations of white-on-Black killings such as Walker’s—and, just as constant, how people must take to the streets in protest time and again—underscore what Sylvia Wynter calls ‘our unbearable wrongness of being.’ No disciplinary field like black studies has shown so convincingly that ‘the racial is the single most important ethico-juridical concept in the global present,’ providing states the means to maintain hierarchical notions of human difference and justify their attendant global crises. Raciality’s provision of an ethical framework for the modern subject has allowed it to go unparalleled as, in Aníbal Quijano’s words, ‘the most effective instrument for domination that […] serves as the universal classifier in the current global model.

10 Ibid., 33.
Thus, black studies sets the stage for Black Lives Matter to reach well beyond policing and carcerality in the United States, and toward the racial economics configuring the state of the developing world, environmental pollution, war, climate change, migration and the spread of infectious diseases. While black studies is concerned with the Black experience and the socio-political relations that underwrite racial difference, it also provides a meaningful critique of modernity and all its unmet promises. As Alexander Weheliye writes, ‘the theoretical and methodological protocols of black studies have always been global in their reach, because they provide detailed explanations of how techniques of domination, dispossession, expropriation, exploitation, and violence’ result from the entrenchment of human difference.

In taking up a description of violence as excess, as I do here, I am, again, not concerned with the actual grounds for any given occurrence. The facts of the matter, the circumstances that lead to each and every iteration, are largely set aside in this dissertation. Other than the Walker case, which I take to be exemplary of how raciality functions as the authorising force, I do not consider the social, political, economic or otherwise context—as important as these surely are—of any given deployment of violence. I am, instead, interested in what we might call, in the words of the Aboriginal (Martu) writer Karen Wyld, an ‘anywhere story.’ An anywhere story could take place on a slave plantation in Maryland, 1819, in the stairwell of a run-down apartment building in 1920s New York, or aboard the rickety boats dredging for sand along Cameroon’s riverbanks. An anywhere story could take place at many of these settings at the same moment. An

14 Weheliye, Habeas, 3-4. See also Jared Sexton’s claim that, ‘All thought, insofar as it is genuine thinking, might best be conceived of as black thought.’ Jared Sexton, ‘People-of-Color-Blindness: A Lecture by Jared Sexton,’ YouTube, uploaded by UC Berkeley Events, Oct 28, 2011, www.youtube.com/watch?v=qNVMj3oiDal&ab_channel=UCBerkeleyEvents
anywhere story asks us to consider the onto-epistemological presumptions that sustain ethical interpretations of violence. Increasingly, as Black Lives Matter shows there is no part of the world, no place in time where antiblackness is not a constitutive element of political life, we need an anywhere story. That is, we need a story capable of mounting what Wilderson calls an ‘unflinching critique of Human capacity,’ a story that makes no distinction between white subjects’ discriminatory actions and their existence, that offers no possibility of ethical absolution on the basis of subjective claims, and that strives to expose how humanity sustains whiteness as a parasite in the flesh of the world.¹⁶

I use Chapter One to sketch a methodology for a description of violence whose interpretive ground is not sustained by the individual subject. To do this, I read through the work of Ferreira da Silva, Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, who collectively, I suggest, understand violence as a structural anticipation imposed on political subjects. By following the work of these scholars, I consider how the failure of post-enlightenment thinking to interrupt global systems of violence is sustained by the limits of phenomenology and its preoccupation with the individual subject. If violence can only be comprehended through the subject and their internal experience, temporality and spatiality emerge as obstructions to describing racuality’s function as an authorising force situated outside spacetime. Yet when the subject is extricated from a description of violence, I suggest it opens up a dialectical analysis—a description that, in moving between each and every moment, interrupts racuality’s coherence as an authorising force.

In Chapter Two, I engage what I am calling an ‘inverted object,’ that is, an object that captures the symbolic excess of violence ordinarily mapped onto the subject. By adapting Hortense

¹⁶ Here I am following a distinction that Wilderson maintains between the ‘unethical and/or discriminatory acts performed’ and ‘human capacity,’ the latter of which directs our critique toward how white subjects’ ‘cultural coherence […] is the problem.’ Wilderson and King, ‘Black Study,’ 57.
Spillers’s notion of ‘flesh’—an extra-corporeal layer that carries racial subjugation through time—I track this transference through the object as an extension of the scene of violence. I consider three distinct examples of an inverted object: Jason deCaires Taylor’s 2006 underwater sculpture artwork, *Vicissitudes*, whose ghostly forms cannot but recall the memory of Atlantic slavery; the monies signifying the economic dispossession of the Younger family in Lorraine Hansberry’s 1959 play, *A Raisin in the Sun*; and, finally, fentanyl particles and other objects implicated in modern policing that are used to authorise state violence. In each case, I consider these objects as focal points in themselves, rather than as they circulate within their respective settings. I suggest these objects, like the flesh, yield an excess that might allow us to write what Spillers calls ‘a radically different text,’ for violence in the global present.

In Chapter Three, I take up Alexis Pauline Gumbs’s 2018 volume of poetry, *M Archive: After the End of the World* as a roadmap for describing violence as simultaneously now, already and not yet. *M Archive* recounts the events contained in a journal unearthed by archivists after a future apocalypse. Yet these future archivists, as the narrator describes, are also ‘you beyond you,’ ghostly figures through whom we might better understand ‘the realities we are making possible or impossible with our present apocalypse.’ I explore how, by collapsing distinctions between subjects and temporalities, *M Archive* allows us to pose questions of ethical humanity that do not take for granted human difference in time. Drawing on Ferreira da Silva’s notion of ‘difference without separability,’ I suggest *M Archive*’s narrative might ‘break apart’ the spatiotemporal boundaries of the subject, exposing the uncertain conditions of existence.

In the dissertation’s Coda, I shift my attention to whiteness as an ontological formation whose existence is incompossible with any ethical notion of justice because it requires Black death

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to sustain any claim to selfhood. To do this, I consider how, given the violence that underwrites white subjectivity depends on neither discriminatory ideology nor act, bringing about the dereliction of whiteness is necessary to any meaningful reformulation of the ethical program. Among the materials I examine are a series of news reports I wrote in 2021 revealing New Zealand’s military involvement in Yemen’s civil war, Wynter’s 1992 essay, ‘No Humans Involved’ and the Iranian-American writer Solmaz Sharif’s poem ‘Look’. By opening a conversation with and between these materials, I couple the dissertation’s task of interrupting raciality’s ethical coherence with exposing how white subjectivity is sustained by violence.

To be sure, we do not yet have the means to describe violence in such a way that would interrupt raciality as both its authorising force and the conditions of existence. The task remains ongoing, unfulfilled, if not unthinkable. As Frantz Fanon reminds us in his *Black Skin, White Masks*, it will require an imaginative leap that cannot yet be comprehended: ‘I should constantly remind myself that the real leap consists in introducing invention into existence. In the world in which I travel, I am endlessly creating myself.’\(^{18}\) In keeping with the work of Fanon and other thinkers in the Black radical tradition, this dissertation argues that violence can, and should, be brought to bear against the very architecture that would claim it as its exclusive domain.

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I.

Totems, Symbols: Notes Concerning Violence

If there were a place at which to begin an inquiry into violence and raciality, by many accounts it would be found in one of slavery’s most gratuitous scenes, as described in Frederick Douglass’s 1845 book, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass: An American Slave*. Douglass’s record of his Aunt Hester’s beating at the bloodied hands of her enslaver has been taken up widely in black studies to demonstrate the violence exercised by those participant and complicit in the slave trade. Saidiya Hartman, Christina Sharpe, Fred Moten, Aliyyah Abdur-Rahman and others’ citation of this incident reflects its persistence in critical approaches to slavery and its afterlives. In her 1997 book, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*, Hartman writes that Douglass’s eye-witness account is ‘one of the most well-known scenes of torture in the literature of slavery,’ marking ‘an inaugural moment in the formation of the enslaved.’ Aunt Hester’s beating and its constitutive formation of what Douglass terms the ‘blood-stained gate, the entrance to the hell of slavery, through which I was about to pass’ functions ontologically as the enslaved person’s origin story, and paradigmatically, in that it is one of the primary accounts through which the historical narratives of slavery are understood. Yet Aunt Hester’s beating also generates a point of tension between description and the reification of racial subjugation through which violence emerges as a problem for thought.

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As both event and afterlife, racial violence troubles any attempt to place it within an analytical framework. Hartman’s citation of Aunt Hester’s beating is deliberately sparing to emphasise ‘the consequences of this routine display of the slave’s ravaged body.’ Her partial omission of the beating demonstrates the trace violence reproduced in its description, and the impossibility of fully excising this account from broader descriptions of racial violence. This double-bind leads Moten to point out that Hartman’s omission is ‘illusory’ as ‘it is reproduced in every scene of subjection the book goes on to read.’ In this sense, Hartman’s refusal to cite at length from Douglass’s account does not constitute an intervention into its structural violence, but rather a gesture to the ethical limitations of its description. Similarly, Sharpe extends the bearing and problematic of Douglass’s Narrative beyond its explicit citation when she writes of ‘the hold it [Aunt Hester’s beating] continues to exert on the contemporary reader and on narrative and social structures that continue to be produced and reproduced into the present.’ What we are dealing with is, on the one hand, the difficulty of describing events of violence without reifying the differential and hierarchical relations that underwrite them, and, on the other hand, the knowledge that these events are always already imbricated with ongoing systems of violence. Thus, we could reasonably question the possibility of placing a subject in a social or historical context without reinscribing their violent subjugation. Yet at the same time, I suggest that such a description is required to disrupt the state’s ‘monopoly of violence.’

Taking Aunt Hester’s torture as constitutive of a problem where, as Katherine McKittrick writes, ‘historically present anti-black violence is repaired by reproducing knowledge about the

22 Hartman, Scenes, 3. Hartman also refuses to engage with Douglass’s account to draw attention to the ways that the violence of slavery covertly enacts itself through slaves’ ‘sentiment, enjoyment, affinity, will, and desire.’ Ibid., 5.
23 Moten, In the Break, 4.
24 Sharpe, Monstrous Intimacies, 2.
black subjects that renders them less than human,’ my task in this chapter is to consider a
description of violence whose interpretive ground is not sustained by the individual subject. By
following a Black radical tradition, particularly as it is found in the work of Ferreira da Silva, Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, I am trying to find a way to describe violence that does not take for granted its totalising function as that which, as Moten puts it, is ‘visited upon the figure.’ I argue that Ferreira da Silva, Harney and Moten’s work exposes how human difference is made comprehensible through individuation, an arm of self-consciousness that forecloses on questions that could be posed of violence in the global present. Rather than concede subjectivity as an interpretive ground that indexes human difference in space and time, these scholars apprehend raciosity as a symbolic order that anticipates the subject’s emergence in the scene of violence—and, thus, that is irreducible to the spatiotemporal grounds pronounced to authorise it.

To understand why the individual subject is a problem for any attempt to disrupt global systems of violence, we need only look to Aunt Hester’s torture. Such events linger beyond the moment of their occurrence because they symbolically inhabit the global contemporary conditions that figure blackness as a constitutively negative ontological formation. By this I mean that racial violence—police brutality, mass incarceration, offshore detention, debt saddling, for example—situate political subjects in what Sylvia Wynter calls the ‘totemic signifying complex’ under whose reign whiteness only confers value to subjects by policing the racial borders of a ‘fully human’ status. The conditions that whiteness indexes—liberty, self-determination, prosperity and other sovereignties offered up by the liberal imagination as attainable universal ideals—cannot be

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sustained without maintaining, as Ferreira da Silva puts it, the absolute dereliction of subjects ‘placed on “the Other” (cultural) side of humanity.’

To retain a global pecking order that metes out discriminate assaults on life, to make sense of a world where race, as Wynter notes, ‘functions to systemically pre-determine the sharply unequal re-distribution of the collectively produced global resources; and, therefore, the correlation of the racial ranking rule with the Rich/Poor rule,’ raciality must draw from violence as a potent wellspring for human difference. Alexander Weheliye tells us that political violence ‘simultaneously serves to create not-quite-humans in specific acts of violence and supplies the symbolic source material for racialization.’ Violence, then, can be understood as a figuring of excess in that its symbolic contaminants have been welded to the human’s biological contours. The governing systems of domination, exploitation and expropiation extend specific acts of violence beyond the moment of their occurrence through the repetition of their attendant socio-political conditions. Therefore, a scene such as the one that Douglass describes in his Narrative ‘actually “transfers” from one generation to another, finding its various symbolic substitutions in an efficacy of meanings that repeat the initiating moments.’ This transference can be seen in the phenotypes informing biocentric understandings of race—skin tone, eye colour, and so on—that are symbolically charged with socio-historical narratives (racial slavery and colonisation being the primary examples). In tandem, cultural difference, which brings the hoodie, ghetto and so on into

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31 Weheliye, Habeas, 28.
33 Biocentric knowledge systems reify constructions of race, gender, physical ability and so on as purely biological and, therefore, detached from their production in socio-historical narratives. Katherine McKittrick, Dear Science and Other Stories, Durham: Duke University Press, 2021, 2.
the symbolic fold, becomes a turnkey system for authorising discriminate deployments of violence against non-white persons.

Violence remains a problem for description because while the circumstances and socio-political conditions of any given deployment differ from another, the authorising force—raciality—remains fundamentally the same. The singularity of any given event obscures the totemic means by which the position occupied by non-white subjects cannot but anticipate their emergence in the scene of violence.34 As well, ethical interpretations of violence risk overshadowing how these occurrences are not aberrations, but rather essential to making sense of a world in which people’s social, political and economic freedoms are sharply unequal. How, then, might we describe violence as a ceaseless guarantee of our present order of things? I suggest the work of Walter Benjamin offers a critical point of departure from ethical interpretations of violence sustained by the individual subject.

**Violence and Law**

‘My wound becomes the Law.’

—Jackie Wang, *The Sunflower Cast a Spell to Save Us from the Void*, 2021

Benjamin wrote his 1921 treatise, ‘Critique of Violence,’ in response to the deadly use of military force against the Spartacist uprising in Berlin in 1919, a workers’ strike that sought to overthrow the German government. State violence cast in this light, he writes, is ‘explained not by the

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34 See also Jared Sexton when he writes that the ‘singularity of slavery is the prerequisite of its universality.’ Jared Sexton, ‘The Social Life of Social Death: On Afro-Pessimism and Black Optimism,’ in *Time, Temporality and Violence in International Relations*, 1st ed. Routledge, 2016, 71.
intention of preserving legal ends but, rather, by the intention of preserving the law itself. Benjamin’s first move is to expose how the state authorises violence in accordance with self-preservation, rather than any ethical notion of justice. It then becomes possible to upend an interpretation of violence as concerned with the event (as cause) and its adjudication (as effect): for, when violence always already acts in preservation of legal ends, these ends become the cause of the means. Or, as Moten puts it, ‘violence is a regulatory brutality that is imposed upon something that, for lack of a better word, was already there, and that anticipates the structural brutality that is already imposed [by the state].’ The anticipatory nature of what Benjamin calls ‘law-preserving violence’ captures violence as constitutive, rather than symptomatic, of our present order of things. No matter how an ethical interpretation might figure violence in the juridical moment—namely, as an occurrence that can be situated in space and time—the law is, in Jacques Derrida’s words, ‘always to come, always promised, because it is immanent, finite and so already past. Every “subject” is caught up in this aporetic structure in advance.’ Law-preserving violence, then, can be understood as a force that extends global systems of socio-economic exploitation, expropriation and dispossession, precisely because that is the law’s essential function. The law is, as Ferreira da Silva would have it, the ‘horizon of death.’

Yet while, for Benjamin, ‘all violence as a means is either law making or law-preserving,’ because violence is only made available to subjects through the law, ‘its mere existence outside the law’ represents an existential threat to the state. Benjamin calls violence without means ‘law-

35 Benjamin, ‘Critique,’ 239.
36 Harney and Moten, ‘On Violence.’
37 Benjamin, ‘Critique,’ 241.
40 Benjamin, ‘Critique,’ 239.
He considers how a nonbloody revolutionary strike might, as Derrida puts it in his analysis of Benjamin’s essay, ‘transform the relations of law […] and so to present itself as having a right to law.’ It would do so because, again following Derrida, ‘Violence is not exterior to the order of droit [law]. It threatens it from within. Violence does not consist essentially in exerting its power or a brutal force to obtain this or that result but in threatening or destroying an order of given right and precisely, in this case, the order of state law that was to accord this right to violence, for example the right to strike.’ That is, violence without means constitutes an upheaval not in its actual occurrence, but rather in its suspension of the ethical and legal grounds for its occurrence. In this sense, law destroying violence exposes the myriad contradictions at play in any presumption it is separable from the conditions that anticipate it.

Benjamin’s distinction between law-preserving and law-destroying violence interrupts the state’s claim to violence as an ethically discernible act. For, when violence is always structured in relation to the law, as either its essential instrument (violence with means) or an existential threat to its coherence (violence without means) the circumstances of any given event have very limited bearing on its ethical determination. Subjects in the scene of violence, as actants in a structural antagonism essential to securing the conditions of existence, are anticipated by an ethical framework that forecloses on individual agency. In this sense, violence as a relation of the law allows us to push back against what Eric Stanley identifies as ‘the idea that all forms of violence are interchangeable […] which] renders minoritized defense as equal to the mechanisms of the settler state.’ Hannah Arendt’s critique of the global 1960s student uprisings exemplifies this

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41 Ibid., 249.
42 Derrida, ‘Force of Law,’ 35.
43 Ibid., 34.
troubled equilibrium. In her 1970 book *On Violence*, she argues the unrest reinforced the false notion that ‘violence in the shape of war and revolution may appear to constitute the only possible [historical] interruption.’ Yet Benjamin’s essay allows us to ask, against Arendt, whether ethical interpretations of violence sustained by the individual subject—be it the revolutionary or the warmongering politician—foreclose on understanding how violence secures raciality as the conditions of existence. In other words, Benjamin allows us to ask whether any given deployment of violence merely exposes the brutality that is already there.

**Beyond Brutality**

The description of violence I am interested in, then, does not presuppose subjects with individual agency, but rather exposes raciality as a horizon that anticipates their positions before the state. In this sense, I suggest the German for violence, *gewalt*, provides a more useful scope because, as Derrida notes, it ‘signifies, for Germans, legitimate power, authority, public force.’ With this in mind, *gewalt* loosens the state’s grip on violence as an interchangeable (universal) ethical given, and exposes its self-preserving (determinative) function. In attempting to retain *gewalt*’s denotation to consider how raciality anticipates structural violence against subjects, I am also following a correlation that Moten and his interlocutor Harney draw between brutality and individuation. During a joint lecture on violence the pair gave in Berlin in 2022, Moten explains:

> Brutality is a function of the ontological presumption […] of an individual subject who has internal experience, who has knowledge of the world and knowledge of its objects and

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whose existence is separate from those objects in a way that allows for that knowledge to occur, and that knowledge, which one could think of in a certain kind of philosophical vernacular English as “grasp,” is inseparable from possession. […] The interiority of that subject, which phenomenology presumes, only fully comes into its own when that interiority has a possessive relation to the world and its objects.47

By distinguishing brutality from violence, Harney and Moten expose the former as foundational to the subject and its attendant knowledge systems. Phenomenology falls within their crosshairs as a philosophical program that interprets violence through the individual subject, even when the grounds for subjectivity are determinative correlates for that violence. The presumption of self-knowledge charted through interiority yields a closed loop, whereby individuation requires difference (uniqueness) to make sense of selfhood, which then paves the ethical grounds for violence deployed in the name of that difference. In this sense, phenomenology, which ‘attends to the tactile, vestibular, kinaesthetic and visual character of embodied reality,’ can act as a linchpin for making violence against non-white groups comprehensible (ethically discernible).48

If violence can only be comprehended through the subject—the relation between its body and the world—self-consciousness emerges as a bodily inscription. Fanon gives us one such example in Black Skin, White Masks: ‘Below the corporeal schema I had sketched out a historic-racial schema, […] provided] by the other, the white man, who had woven me out of a thousand details, anecdotes, stories.’49 Fanon directs our attention to a sunken, symbolic layer of the Black man as an affectable subject/thing through which the white gaze announces ‘a new type of man, a

47 Harney and Moten, ‘On Violence.’
49 Fanon, Black Skin, 91.
new species. A Negro, in fact!’\(^{50}\) In this sense, Fanon captures the brutal logic by which, as Frank B. Wilderson III writes, ‘White and non-Black subjectivity cannot be imbued with the capacity for self-knowledge and intersubjective relationality without anti-Black violence.’\(^{51}\) By exposing humanity as an ethico-symbolic ground determined by the intersubjective recognition of particularity—‘Look, a Negro!’—Fanon’s task is to ‘shut off the circuit’ of the autopoietic collective unconscious, or what Wynter later extrapolates as the sociogenic code—the neurobiological means by which antiblackness is *experienced* as extra-humanly ordained, an experience that is only possible because the social order enacting it remains, at present, outside subjects’ conscious awareness.\(^{52}\) Fanon again: ‘The only way to break this vicious circle that refers me back to myself is to restore to the other his human reality, different from his natural reality, by way of mediation and recognition.’\(^{53}\) In other words, he asks us to seek out, through cognitive rupture, a world in which raciality does not provide the objective conditions of existence. According to Fanon, this would require detaching from reality the schema by which subjects can only make sense of themselves through the (racialised) Other.

Yet in keeping with Harney and Moten’s use of brutality—a structural form of violence anticipated by the state, and that announces subject formation—I suggest the pair deviate from Fanon’s phenomenological foundations. Given that Harney and Moten break with the subject and its ‘internal experience’ of the world, they can be read alongside Ferreira da Silva’s observation

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\(^{50}\) Ibid., 95.


\(^{53}\) Fanon, *Black Skin*, 191.
that post-enlightenment thinking is underwritten by the subject ‘as an interior/temporal thing along
with statements that elaborate on the separation—between the self-positing mind and world—that
sustains Human uniqueness.’\(^{54}\) In other words, the presumption of possessive self-knowledge
among subjects is inseparable from the mechanisms for authorising violence against them in
accordance with human difference. Yet when we break with the presumptions that Ferreira da
Silva, Harney and Moten trace to the thinking tools that phenomenology makes available—
namely, how interior knowledge presumes both temporal and spatial separation between subjects
and objects, and a subject who has individual agency or will—it becomes possible to expose
raciality as a force that makes no ethical sense without the subject. As Rizvana Bradley writes,
‘blackness marks phenomenology’s constitutive negation.’\(^{55}\)

What Ferreira da Silva, Harney and Moten are interested in, then, is an interruption in the
ethical program that can only occur when violence is described in excess of the individual subject.
They ask us to view violence as always entangled with the means to resist the systems of
knowledge that render this violence comprehensible: as Moten puts it, while ‘brutality produces
individual subjects, violence messes individual subjects up.’\(^{56}\) This distinction between violence
and brutality, then, skirts past the discursive fusing of the subject with their violent subjugation, à
la Foucault. Much like Benjamin’s invocation of ‘law destroying violence’ as the suspension of
the juridical grounds determining the right to strike, when the subject is extricated from the frame
of our thinking, we can consider how the grounds for subjectivity emerge from that moment and
every other like it. Such a description underscores how interpreting violence through the individual
subject cannot but substantiate the impossibility of any ethical notion of justice. This move away

\(^{54}\) Ferreira da Silva, *Unpayable Debt*, 90.
\(^{56}\) Harney and Moten, ‘On Violence.’
from individuation, then, does not presume the subject and its interiority: that is, a subject who is separate from the world in which they are ‘naturally’ ordered in accordance with human difference, or where the modality of sovereignty is only made available when the subject’s uniqueness can be measured against the ‘Other’. Instead, this description of violence exposes the myriad negations of raciality. We might call this, by way of Valentino Desideri and Ferreira da Silva, an ‘ethics with/out the subject’.57

‘The Racial Event’

What becomes possible when we describe violence without the subject? In Ferreira da Silva’s 2022 talk, ‘The Racial Event,’ she punches through violence as a state of exception, identifying it as an iteration, not as an instance that can be located temporally or spatially:

the racial event […] as always already a composition or a decomposition or recomposition and always as a moment that is a single assembling of that which constitutes what has happened and also what is yet to happen. So, the moment and movement of occurrence as distinguished from the site and cause for the occurrence, it becomes a composition that necessarily becomes composed of the same elements, similar to other possible compositions, meaning what has happened and what has yet to happen.58

58 Denise Ferreira da Silva, ‘Denise Ferreira da Silva: The Racial Event,’ YouTube, uploaded by CLASBerkeley, March 5, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Jo9MF7Y8sE&ab_channel=CLASBerkeley
What concerns Ferreira da Silva is that, while the ethical programs that accord human rights have secured enfranchisement over time (suffrage, marriage equality and anti-discrimination laws, for instance), raciality defies linear movement. Thus, the racial event as a ‘single assembling’ exposes how raciality has not changed and remains deeply embedded in post-enlightenment thinking, namely in its renderings of space and time and their privileging of historicity. What the racial event accounts for—and that could not emerge from a juridico-political interpretation—is a description of violence that makes zero distinction between the now, already and not yet (I take up this description further in Chapter Three through Alexis Pauline Gumbs’s speculative poetry). If only because, the presumption of separation between these elemental compositions extends the subjugation of particular groups into the global present: for, any ethical notion of justice becomes incomprehensible when raciality is understood as an authorising force that anticipates violence’s justification. In this sense, Ferreira da Silva exposes linear historicity as an interpretive ground that obscures racial subjugation across time by excepting it from the conditions for existence.

When the subject, as a figure who indexes temporality and spatiality through self-consciousness, is extricated from the frame of our thinking, it becomes possible to attend to violence as a ceaseless guarantee in the global present. As Benjamin writes, ‘the tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the “state of emergency” in which we live is not the exception but the rule.’ In Ferreira da Silva’s racial event we are looking at something similar to what Benjamin calls the ‘dialectical image,’ where ‘what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words, image is dialectics at a standstill. For while the relation of the present to the past is a purely temporal, continuous one, the relation of what-has-been to the now

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is dialectical: is not progression but image, suddenly emergent." The dialectical image, like the racial event, interrupts linear conceptions of time to expose how they secure the social, economic and political conditions of modernity—conditions that are then taken to be immovable, caught in the gears of a monadic history. The dialectical image allows us to do this because it does not index (an image of) a subject or event bound to the same spatio-temporal ground that sustains ethical interpretations of violence. Rather, by moving through and between each and every moment—a descriptive mode that I take to be akin to what Karen Wyld calls an ‘anywhere story’—this image allows us to apprehend that which is irreducible to time, namely raciality.

With neither subject nor event acting to index human difference in time, ethical interpretations of violence begin to lose their explanatory purchase. Benjamin’s dialectical image turns on historical time and its claims to universality in order to yield the conditions of possibility. As he writes in his 1940 essay, ‘On the Concept of History,’ ‘The same leap in the open air of history is the dialectical one, which is how Marx understood the revolution.’ Benjamin’s ‘now-time’ (jetztzeit) suspends linear historical movement to bring the tools of capitalism, namely accumulation, to bear against itself, and to draw out the possibility of locating a revolutionary moment within the present. We can read Benjamin’s ‘leap’ in conversation with what David Marriott, drawing on Fanon, calls ‘the leap beyond history,’ for ‘that very separation between history and invention, is not simply to counter the ways in which history has been used to justify

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61 In both the dialectical image and the racial event, Benjamin and Ferreira da Silva call into question the underlying presumptions of historical materialism. As black studies theorists from Cedric Robinson to Ferreira da Silva have shown, racial subjugation consistently disappears in the original historical materialist account because its analysis is rooted in wage labour that renders non-Western societies outside the bounds of History. Ferreira da Silva writes: ‘The original presentation of historical materialism is determined by the formulation of labor—namely, “wage labor”—that has a quantitative (time) and a qualitative (liberty) aspect, both of which are (historically) specific to the historical (social) conditions it was designed to explain.’ Ferreira da Silva, *Unpayable Debt*, 187.
62 Benjamin, ‘Concept of History,’ 395.
63 Ibid., 395.
supremacist claims and effects, but to escape the normal teleological form of its writing, and so refigure life as event. As an analytical device, now-time, as the time of the dialectical image, allows us to expose raciality as an authorising force irreducible to historical time. And, when this is read in conjunction with a description of violence without the subject, it becomes possible to pose questions of existence that run counter to, as Ferreira da Silva puts it, ‘the assumption that the historical constitutes the sole ontological context.’ By extricating the individual subject from a description of violence, we might yet reimagine the onto-epistemological totality by which raciality provides the objective conditions of existence.

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65 Ferreira da Silva, Global Idea of Race, xii.
II.

The Inverted Object: Symphony in Three Movements

To produce his 2006 artwork, *Vicissitudes*, the British sculptor Jason deCaires Taylor moulded 26 mostly identical images of children out of cement and lowered their figures to the seafloor not far off the coast of Grenada. The visual transformation of *Vicissitudes* after breaching the ocean is striking: coral polyps burst from each ghostly figure in strange and vibrant colours, disfiguring and augmenting the outer layer of concrete into a second skin. Untethered from their original plastered forms, these children turn from barren clones into a series of eruptive formations that blur the boundaries between the environment and the corporeal. And yet, by virtue of the work’s eerie resemblance to the fate of many making the Middle Passage (as Édouard Glissant writes, ‘it was easiest just to lighten the boat by throwing cargo overboard, weighing it down with balls and chains’) its visual beauty is interrupted by a figuring of violence that does not require raciosity’s primary signifiers. For, even in the absence of human difference marked racially or culturally, such a scene cannot but recall—at least for the Black Holocaust Museum, who mistakenly named it as a memorial, only to later apologise for the error—the drowning of enslaved people along the Atlantic slave route. The formative moment of *Vicissitudes* is not, then, the transformation of these figures into mossy beings, but rather their lowering to the sea floor. For, where coral polyp meets concrete, a fleshy doubling has already taken place in the symbolic layer required to make sense of these figures as representing enslaved people.

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Consider that the artist, deCaires Taylor, did not intend *Vicissitudes* to be a memorial to Atlantic slavery, but rather to serve as an example of how ‘we are inscribed and formed by the nutrients we absorb’;\(^68\) or, that despite deCaires Taylor’s framing, it was nonetheless interpreted as such a commemoration by the Black Holocaust Museum, a narrative that was disseminated through viral social media posts for several years after its installation.\(^69\) Is the viewer to make sense of this artwork as one that elides the violence of the Middle Passage, or one that inadvertently indexes this event by finding itself ensnared in slavery’s *longue durée*? My reading of *Vicissitudes* pays particular attention to this moment of ‘mistaken’ recognition because it exposes an oscillation between matter and meaning, subject and object, human and thing, that underwrites raciality in the global present. In considering this work as an ‘inverted object,’ I seek to describe violence through an object situated outside the biological contours of the subject.

To be clear, what I am calling an inverted object is assuredly more a gesture to Hortense Spillers than *Tenet* (2020, dir. Christopher Nolan).\(^70\) I take this to be an object, exemplified by the figures in *Vicissitudes*, that yields the fleshy script of raciality in ways that disrupt its claims to subjectivity. Reading through Spillers’s notion of flesh, itself a form of symbolic excess found in

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\(^68\) Installed as part of the Molinere Bay Underwater Sculpture Park, which deCaires Taylor claims to be the first of its kind in the world, the artwork allowed local marine life to recuperate in the wake of 2004’s devastating Hurricane Ivan. According to his website, deCaires Taylor, a vocal environmentalist with hundreds of similar artworks to his name, uses underwater installations to ‘encourage environmental awareness and lead us to appreciate the breathtaking natural beauty of the underwater world.’ (He uses a pH-neutral cement to avoid any contamination). Jason deCaires Taylor, *Jason deCaires Taylor, Biography*, https://www.underwatersculpture.com/about/biography/

\(^69\) The news agency *AFP* found in 2019 that, more than a decade after the artwork’s installation, social media and blog users were continuing to spread false claims online that the statues honour enslaved people who were thrown overboard during the Middle Passage. Amanuel Neguede, ‘These statues were not intended as a tribute to drowned slaves — but the artist is glad they are “stimulating debate.”’ *AFP Ethiopia*, December 19, 2019, https://factcheck.afp.com/these-statues-were-not-intended-tribute-drowned-slaves-artist-glad-they-are-stimulating-debate

\(^70\) In *Tenet*, objects and subjects can have their entropy (the degree of disorder in measurable systems) decreased, or ‘inverted’ by moving through a set of metal turnstiles. Given the laws of thermodynamics dictate entropy will only increase as time progresses forward, these ‘inverted’ subjects and objects move backwards against the temporal current of their world. Yet what Spillers names as the flesh does not progress linearly, either backwards or forwards, for the inversion is what carries the symbolism of racial violence outside spacetime itself. Christopher Nolan, dir. *Tenet* (Warner Bros. Pictures: 2020).
how racial slavery wounds the Black female subject, I attempt to shift the frame of her thinking to the object. By this I mean, how an object that is inverted, or that carries the racial and cultural (as political operators) through specific acts of violence, might expose how raciality provides the conditions of existence. As will become clear, one of the many contradictions in post-enlightenment thinking that blackness exposes is the co-constitution of objects and subjects, that their boundaries are tenuous at best. Yet by thinking with an object that is inverted, I am seeking to expand the work of Chapter One by advancing a description that remains outside the subject as an ethical channel for authorising deployments of violence. In this sense, I consider the inverted object as a point of excess through which we might interrupt raciality’s coherence.

This chapter makes three distinct movements, each taking a different example of an inverted object. I consider each example—an underwater sculpture, an insurance pay-out and fentanyl particles—as focal points in themselves, rather than as they circulate within their respective settings. While, collectively, these objects make for something of a motley arrangement, I suggest this disparateness allows us to consider raciality’s reach as a force that inverts matter and meaning to maintain the conditions of existence. In this sense, these objects exemplify a symbolic order that anticipates subjects and objects in the scene of violence. I first consider how *Vicissitudes* stages the residual violence of slavery through an aesthetic encounter between viewer and artwork. I then use a scene in Lorraine Hansberry’s 1959 play, *A Raisin in the Sun* to explore how racial violence structures the global economic order. Finally, I consider how drugs and other objects become symbolically implicated in deployments of police brutality.

**From Flesh to Object**
To make sense of the inverted object, it is necessary to first set off with Spillers, by way of her famous 1997 essay, ‘Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe: An American Grammar Book.’

These undecipherable markings on the captive body render a kind of hieroglyphics of the flesh whose severe disjunctures come to be hidden to the cultural seeing by skin color. We might well ask if this phenomenon of marking and branding actually “transfers” from one generation to another, finding its various symbolic substitutions in an efficacy of meanings that repeat the initiating moments? […] This body whose flesh carries the female and the male to the frontiers of survival bears in person the marks of a cultural text whose inside has been turned outside. The flesh is the concentration of “ethnicity” that contemporary critical discourses neither acknowledge nor discourse away.71

For Spillers, the symbolic and ideological transference of violence takes place through its attachment to racial and cultural differences that survive the wounds sustained by the subject. The body can be understood as an inscription of culture insofar as the modern state maintains its enfleshment within a ‘symbolic order’ to justify deployments of total violence.72 As a sticky mythological attachment, the flesh cannot be fully incorporated into the corporeal realm, nor that of the spatiotemporal. The flesh’s capacity to register at the level of the symbolic—racial and gendered differences marked in such a way that sustains these wounds—means that it ‘remains grounded in the originating metaphors of captivity and mutilation so that it is as if neither time nor history, nor historiography and its topics, shows movement.’73

72 Ibid., 68.
73 Ibid., 68.
The flesh exists in the interstices between subject and object. As Ferreira da Silva writes in her analysis of Spillers’s essay, ‘this tension [between human and thing] yields an inversion: a human that is property, that exists as a thing (with productive capacity).’74 Hartman gestures to this paradox in *Scenes of Subjection* when she writes of how this ‘dual invocation’ (of subject and object) does not constitute an ethical quandary, so much as it indexes the enslaved person as ‘an expression of the multivalence of subjection.’75 Thus, Hartman explains, ‘the figuration of the humane in slave law was totally consonant with the domination of the enslaved. The constitution of the slave as person was not at odds with the structural demands of the system, nor did it necessarily challenge the social relations of the antebellum world.’76 In other words, the same ethical framework that vaulted with ease ‘the divide that separates slavery and “freedom”’ also renders any notion of humanity, simultaneously, as an expression of violence.77

In this chapter, I am asking if the inversion found in Spillers’s notion of flesh—the subject as ‘a cultural text whose inside has been turned outside’—can be extended to the object as a symbolic and ethical channel for violence. In this sense, the inverted object closely follows Moten’s ‘resistant object,’ which he takes to be an enslaved subject whose speech exposes Marx’s inability to comprehend a commodity with ‘the power to speak and break speech.’78 As Moten writes at the opening of his 2003 book *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*, ‘The history of blackness is testament to the fact that objects can and do resist.’79 Yet where Moten takes up the (enslaved subject-as-) object’s resistance phonically and musically, I am interested in

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75 Hartman, *Scenes*, 93.
76 Ibid., 93-4.
77 Moten, *In the Break*, 6.
78 Ibid., 17.
79 Ibid., 1.
how objects—those capable of neither speech nor scream—might interrupt an interpretation of violence charted through the individual subject.

**Violence and Aesthetics**

What are the stakes of *Vicissitudes* as an artwork that inadvertently recalls the Middle Passage? Given that, as Bradley and Ferreira da Silva write, ‘it is by way of the aesthetic that the ontological ground on which we are said to stand becomes experience,’ I suggest this recollection of the Atlantic slave trade allows us to consider how raciality gains its purchase in the world. Three decades ago, Wynter called for a ‘rethinking of aesthetics’ as a determinative ground for human cognitive functions, specifically those that allow for racial subjugation to be experienced as the natural result of bio-instinctual responses to human difference. Thus, aesthetics emerges as an inroad into the ‘psychical economy’ that provides raciality with its ethical coherence in the world. I turn to Bradley and Ferreira da Silva’s joint essay, ‘Four Theses on Aesthetics,’ to consider how aesthetics might work through an inverted object:

If the poethical artwork is no longer preoccupied with the perils of departing from the onto-epistemology of modernity, and its rendering of existence through the certainties of being, then how might aesthetic considerations start from and stay with the “object”—which is at

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82 Ferreira da Silva, ‘On Exhaustion: A Reading on Psychical Economy | ICLS Conference Keynote by Denise Ferreira da Silva,’ Youtube, uploaded by ICLS Columbia, April 23, 2022, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9mdjNxe1wRk&ab_channel=ICLS_Columbia
the same time “thing” as well as “commodity” and “other”—without returning to Man or the Subject, the Human or Humanity, the Ego or Subjectivity.83

Bradley and Ferreira da Silva help in bringing Spillers’s thinking to bear on an artwork that, while it does not sustain bodily wounds, inhabits global conditions that secure structural violence against affectable subjects. The oscillation the pair identify between thing, commodity and other mirrors the logic of raciality as a force that discriminately makes humanity un/available to subjects: for, non-white subjects are consistently expunged from (executed) and enfolded into (held accountable) the category of the human in order to maintain their essential subjugation. And yet, because the object—as Bradley and Ferreira da Silva allow us to think about it—marks a departure from the subject and its attendant onto-epistemological ground, it does not presume static understandings of violence. That is, the object neither ties a description of violence to the individual subject, nor pronounces the human differences that are arranged as interpretive tools to make sense of actants. Rather, the object allows us to ask if the aesthetic might, in Bradley and Ferreira da Silva’s words, ‘as thematized in and as black existence, as a radically disruptive ethical orientation, stage a devastating confrontation with modern philosophy that ultimately targets its aesthetic, theoretical, and ethical ground?’84 By departing from how this ground provides the unassailable conditions for subjectivity, the object allows us to describe violence without the prevailing philosophical presumptions that allow raciality to retain its ethical sense. For, as Bradley and Ferreira da Silva write, this movement marks a departure from sense: ‘Black Aesthetics is an utterance that, in its immanent derangement of modernity’s grammar, marks and is marked by the

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83 A poethical reading is an analytical tool similar to Benjamin’s dialectical image that functions to fracture or ‘recompose’ any given subject of inquiry. Bradley and Ferreira da Silva, ‘Four Theses.’
84 Ibid.
art of passage without coordinates or arrival, the art of life in departure.” Thus, in following ‘Four Theses on Aesthetics,’ my reading of Vicissitudes is interested in how it might refuse and disarrange—or, to borrow again from Moten, ‘anarrange’—raciality.

In the ghostly figures comprising Vicissitudes, I find a description of violence staged through an encounter between viewer and artwork. Without human difference marked racially or culturally the viewer can only recall Atlantic slavery through geographic (the Caribbean) and environmental (a sea floor) cues mapped onto the artwork. While these cues are visual, they disarrange and defamiliarise those exhibited by the artwork’s transformation into sea life; the work’s interpretation as a memorial to Atlantic slavery renders these outer layers extraneous precisely because they are not required to make sense of it. According to the artist, deCaires Taylor, it takes three to four weeks for algae to form on the figures, and around one to two years for coral.

Yet the Black Aesthetics that is recalled through Vicissitudes takes place in the initiating moment in which the figures are lowered to the sea floor—a moment in which matter and meaning are inverted, but that never returns the viewer to the realm of the subject proper. We might contrast this reading with recent scholarship on Vicissitudes that emphasises the transformative potential of underwater environments to situate it in an emerging field of ‘critical ocean studies.’

Elizabeth DeLoughrey, for example, writes that the figures’ wraithlike forms disrupt anthropocentric frameworks of time, moving the viewer toward ‘multispecies sequences’; similarly, Inez Blanca van der Scheer argues that they evoke ‘multispecies climate futures outside the legacy of

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85 Ibid.
86 Moten, In the Break, 1.
History.' Without discounting these possibilities, I suggest that, as an inverted object, 
*Vicissitudes* does not index temporal or ontological movement, but stillness. As a cultural text 
situated firmly in the aesthetic, the symbolic entrapments of an onto-epistemological totality 
impressed onto post-slavery subjects are nonetheless on full display. *Vicissitudes* allows us to 
consider how the mechanisms of human difference operative in ethical interpretations of violence 
are symbolically mapped onto objects. Strikingly, this emerges from an artwork seeking to disrupt, 
if not dissolve, the boundaries between the human and Nature—instead, the residual violence of 
Atlantic slavery apprehends any ‘posthuman’ movement by staging the racial particularity of these 
figures’ presumed historical context. This apprehension, staged through the aesthetic, reminds us 
that, as Alexander Weheliye writes, ‘at the moment in which blackness becomes apposite to 
humanity, “man’s” conditions of possibility lose their ontological thrust, because their limitations 
are rendered abundantly clear.’ Thus, when deCaires Taylor installation is read as an inverted 
object, neither artwork nor memorial, object nor subject, it exposes an inversion of matter and 
meaning that is essential to raciality’s ethical coherence.

**Economies of Flesh**

“‘THAT MONEY IS MADE OUT OF MY FATHER’S FLESH!’”

Lorraine Hansberry, *A Raisin in the Sun* (1959)

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Having been cheated of much of his father’s life insurance monies by a trusted business partner, Walter Younger’s grief and rage knows no bounds. Living in a cramped and run-down two-bedroom apartment on Chicago’s South Side, Younger is determined to make his way in the world by any means necessary, even if that involves staking it all on a dubious investment. Now, with the funds nowhere to be seen and the business partner gone to ground, is the family condemned to spend its days confined to South Side’s Black quarter? Walter to his demeaning job driving wealthy white people around in a limousine? How will his younger sister Beneatha pay her way through medical school? Walter’s dual invocation of capital and flesh—“THAT MONEY IS MADE OUT OF MY FATHER’S FLESH”—recalls the Global Financial Crisis (GFC) of 2007 and 2008, during which wealthy bankers weaponised subprime mortgages against poor Black and Latinx people, communities that then emerged in many ideological narratives as the cause of the economic collapse. Ferreira da Silva calls the financial crisis, prior to the election of Donald Trump to the U.S. presidency in 2016, ‘the most important racial event of this century’ because it exposed how the victims ‘function as financial instruments and not as persons.’91 When raciality is operative in the global economic system, its capacity to delimit the ethical reach of humanity figures (financial) scarcity as potential value to be extracted. Poverty becomes a resource for whiteness. Similarly, in the fallout of the market crash, the government and judiciary channelled bailouts and legal immunities to financial institutions and bankers, rather than the communities they exploited. An economic interpretive ground cannot expose the mechanisms of expropriation that made the GFC possible because, as Ferreira da Silva writes, ‘the racial, as a colonial mechanism, remains anterior to global capital itself.’92

92 I note that the Reserve Bank of Australia does not make a single mention of the GFC’s racial dimensions in its explainer. I suggest that because linear temporality historicises racial subjugation, the racial is never understood as
While Walter Younger’s outburst in the epigraph does not make economic sense, I suggest it captures how raciality functions to secure the sharply unequal distribution of wealth through global systems of violence. Raciality survives the temporal gap between the Younger family’s narrative setting in the 1950s and the GFC precisely because its signifiers—race and culture—translate into new economic structures. As Jackie Wang notes in *Carceral Capitalism*, ‘Not only does the credit system reinforce racial inequality, but moneylending itself is a racializing process, for it marks certain subjects as suitable for expropriation.’93 Or, as Moten puts it, ‘In the United States, whoever says “subprime debtor” says black as well.’94 Thus, it is not the absence of financial security that has condemned the Youngers to their South Side apartment, but the fact that they provide this very security to a global economic system through which whiteness is parasitic. The family’s predicament can come as no surprise because it is required by every instrument of dispossession they encounter: Walter’s employer, their landlord and the white communities who police the racial borders of Chicago’s housing market. The positions that these deputised subjects occupy—and, too, ‘the regimes of property and propriety to which the metaphysics of individuation are inextricably bound’—are maintained through the violence deployed against the Younger family.95 As Moten and Stefano Harney write, this perverse logic is essential to subject formation: ‘deputies fix others, not in an imposition upon but in the imposition of selves, as objects of control and command, whether one is posited as being capable of selfhood or not.’96 As the

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95 Bradley, ‘Black Aesthesis,’ 37.
fleshy foil to whiteness, the Younger family’s home marks out a space where ‘life building and
the attrition of human life are indistinguishable.’ There are no white subjects in the room when
Walter claims money as his father’s flesh, though one can imagine their incredulity at the
suggestion their wealth—and, indeed, all wealth that has entered the global market over the past
500 years—constituted nothing less than this. Yet when raciality is understood as the conditions
of existence, Walter’s claim makes perfect sense.

How might the inverted object—in this case, the funds comprising Walter’s father’s life
insurance monies—expose the perverse logic underpinning the Younger family’s predicament?
What can be said that Walter did not already encapsulate in his injured pride and fury? I am
interested in this scene in _A Raisin in the Sun_ because it describes the violence of intersubjective
relationality that has resulted from raciality’s infiltration of the global economic order. While a
linear interpretive ground would necessarily isolate racial discrimination in the 1950s and the GFC
to their respective temporal settings, an inverted object exposes how raciality survives these limits.
In this sense, I follow Ferreira da Silva in (thinking with and through Spillers and) wondering
‘whether the wounding and the marking, as inscriptions of colonial (juridico-economic) power,
remain in later juridico-economic formations and tools, such as subprime loans, coffee, cotton,
sugar, and commodities that become money.’ The money that was stolen from Walter—and that
marked a financial lifeline for the Younger family in an escape route from their apartment—yields
an inversion of matter and meaning that lies at the heart of raciality. That this object constitutes
both capital and flesh, an insurance pay-out and the violence that Walter’s father sustained as a

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97 Lauren Berlant is writing here about her notion of ‘slow death,’ which ‘refers to the physical wearing out of a
population and the deterioration of people in that population that is very nearly a defining condition of their
experience and historical existence.’ Lauren Berlant, ‘Slow Death (Sovereignty, Obesity, Lateral Agency),’ _Critical
98 Ferreira da Silva, _Unpayable Debt_, 46.
Black man living and working in the wake of Emancipation and all its unmet promises, is the guiding paradox of the liberal imagination. *A Raisin in the Sun* exposes raciality not as a set of economic and other disparities that could be corrected by the state and its economic policies, but rather as a force that requires these disparities to maintain the flow of capital. Put differently, Hansberry anticipates the underlying structures of the GFC nearly 50 years before its occurrence. For, at the very moment Walter invokes flesh as capital, he shows us how raciality guarantees each and every iteration of violence in the global present.

**Policing an ‘Inverted Reality’**

‘[F]ear attaches to something equally slippery: fentanyl particles lurking in the air, or even just a few specks on a police uniform, blamed for one officer’s “overdose” in Ohio. [...] These viral “exposure” videos have a way of inverting reality.’


The fentanyl crisis in the U.S., in which the deaths of tens of thousands of people are guaranteed because they occupy an economic and racial underclass, exemplifies the policing of a reality in which raciality retains its ethical coherence. Fentanyl, highly addictive, cheap to make and 50 times more potent than heroin, is now the most common drug linked to overdoses. In Los Angeles, fatalities increased 1,280 percent from 2016 to 2021, with Black residents accounting for 17 percent of fatalities despite only making up 8 percent of the population. And yet, in response to

99 In the U.S., nationwide ‘fatalities linked to synthetic opioids such as fentanyl increased from 58,000 in 2020 to 71,000 in 2021.’ Sam Levin, ‘Fentanyl deaths in Los Angeles county rose 1,280% from 2016 to 2021 – report,’ *The
the national health epidemic—which is also creeping into the rest of the world through global supply chains—a media narrative has emerged in which drug users are blamed for inadvertently exposing police officers to dangerous levels of fentanyl when these drugs are inspected or seized. In one case the journalist Zachary Siegel draws our attention to in a 2022 article for the *New York Times Magazine*, a video released by police to media shows an officer lying splayed on the ground. The officer is breathing heavily and gasping for air after, apparently, coming into contact with fentanyl while ‘inspecting pills stashed inside a piece of crumpled paper.’\(^{100}\) This is despite the fact that, as Seigel points out, ‘brief contact with fentanyl is not sufficient for it to enter the bloodstream and cross the blood-brain barrier to cause such a rapid overdose.’\(^{101}\) And, even if someone overdosed on the drug, their symptoms would show slowed or stopped breathing. As Siegel writes, these false narratives, if unchallenged, can escalate criminal charges laid against drug addicts and discourage police and civilians from providing medical assistance to people in need. The facts of the matter are, however, insufficient to dislodge raciality as a force that anticipates the positions of subjects in the global present—in this case, police as executioners—by tethering raciality to their physiological well-being.

Siegel goes on to explain:

> It’s not that the symptoms seen on video are feigned. Some psychologists suggest a kind of “mass psychogenic illness” is afoot, or a form of conversion disorder — neurological symptoms without a clear physical cause — or, potentially, simple panic attacks. Police

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\(^{100}\) *Guardian*, December 1, 2022, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2022/nov/30/fentanyl-deaths-los-angeles-county-surge-report


\(^{101}\) Ibid.
officers have been told, by authorities including the Drug Enforcement Administration, that microscopic amounts of fentanyl can be deadly; they are taught to fear this substance. Their bodies may react accordingly, exhibiting symptoms, like rapid breathing, that are indicative of distress and panic. 102

My focus here is not so much in how law enforcement distorts victim narratives to authorise deployments of state violence. Rather, I am interested in the synergies between, on the one hand, the symbolic inversion of an object (in this case, a drug substance) required to experience it as a threat; and, on the other hand, how the same bio-instinctual mechanisms—which, in effect, invert reality—are used consistently to conjure up Black people as threats, while also imbricating blackness with disposability and fungibility. The fentanyl exposures recounted time and again by police officers yield an inversion of matter and meaning that enshrines these subjects’ claims to subjectivity. Put differently, these officers are required to believe they are being exposed to a threat because, in the absence of that threat, their very being—and that of the subjects whose deaths they are ensuring—would cease to make sense. This same inversion—for Siegal, the slippery attachment of fear to matter, and for Spillers, the flesh—lies at the heart of antiblackess.

As Katherine McKittrick writes in her analysis of Wynter’s work:

[…] psychic and affective negative feelings about blackness—feelings that are so often experienced as though they are truthful bio-instinctual responses—are implicit to a symbolic belief system of which antiblackness is constitutive. Antiblackness informs neurobiological and physiological drives, desires, emotions—and negative feelings—

102 Ibid.
because it underwrites a collective and normalized, racially coded, biocentric belief system wherein narratives of natural selection, and the dysselection of blackness, are cast as, and reflexively experienced as, common sense.\textsuperscript{103}

By considering as an ‘inverted object’ the particles of fentanyl that trigger a police officer’s panic attack, I am trying to draw out what McKittrick calls the ‘symbolic belief system’ through which racinality makes ethical sense precisely because it is experienced as essential to intersubjective relationality. I suggest that by engaging this through an inverted object—in this case, a drug substance that presents no actual threat to a police officer—it becomes possible to describe violence without figuring the subject as a racialised threat. Antiblackness can be understood as operative in these scenes of violence, in that, without fear as a bio-instinctual response, the police officers cannot make sense of a narrative in which the ethical reach of humanity is delimited. The inverted object, the particles of fentanyl in the air, allows us to stress test notions of biological vulnerability in police narratives: on the one hand, the drug user is constructed as the cause of their own death, that is, their death must be explained away by socio-economic drivers that fail to identify how these disparities sustain white subjectivity; on the other hand, the vulnerability of disenfranchised communities to lethal substances is \textit{displaced} to make way for the police officer’s vulnerability, and with it their claims to sovereignty, the right to arrest, execute and otherwise deploy violence. In other words, this inversion of reality is required to authorise racism, which Ruth Gilmore Wilson names as ‘the state-sanctioned or extralegal production and exploitation of group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death.’\textsuperscript{104} In the fentanyl seizures, we can see how,

\textsuperscript{103} McKittrick, \textit{Dear Science}, 156.

even in the absence of a subject acting as an ethico-symbolic channel for authorising violence, the object yields bio-instinctual responses. In this case, these responses construct a physiological threat that maintains the absolute dereliction of drug addicts and enshrines the claims of police officers to self-defence—claims that rear their ugly head each and every time an officer is acquitted for executing a Black person they perceived as a threat. As an inverted object, then, the fentanyl particles expose how raciality ethically resolves violence that would otherwise be unconscionable. And, in doing so, it becomes possible to, as Moten puts it, ‘subject this unavoidable model of subjection to a radical breakdown.’

That is, it becomes possible to pose questions of violence in the global present that yield the fleshy script of raciality without figuring the individual subject as an index for human difference.

To extend the inverted object beyond the scene of a drug seizure, I now turn to the objects implicated in police shootings, whether as instruments of violence or the purported reason for its deployment. One need only think of how police routinely execute Black people after conjuring up objects in their possession, that is, objects that are not materially present: Tamir Rice was 12 years old when he was shot dead by officers while carrying a replica toy gun; Stephon Clark, 22 years old, had only a mobile phone in his hand when he was shot and killed. In these encounters and countless others between law enforcement and BIPOC civilians, raciality is at least channelled through the object, if not extended to the object itself. As Ferreira da Silva writes, even in the absence of an ‘actual (spatiotemporally registered) threat’—the weapon—such deployments of total violence render ‘the person killed the cause of their own killing.’ (Here we can see the perverse affinities with the GFC, where the exploited Black and Latinx communities were also

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105 Moten, *In the Break*, 5.
blamed as the *cause* of the crash).\textsuperscript{107} While, as Ferreira da Silva points out, this inverted logic is ‘produced by the sight of black skin color’ coupled with the translation of this visual element into a political constitution, I suggest that the object, too, is pulled into such a hermeneutic field.\textsuperscript{108} For, even in the absence of an actual threat, objects are made, symbolically, to produce the evidential grounds for ethically resolving the executions of unarmed non-white persons. If modern policing activates a racial grammar that draws its symbolic fuel from what, as Spillers reminds us, is extra-epidermal, which is to say irreducible to the subject, we might ask if this grammar can also be found in objects.\textsuperscript{109} By declining to charge the officers responsible for executing Rice and Clark, the juridical architecture reasserts that the racially charged object was actually present: matter and meaning are inverted. What I suggest we are dealing with in the inverted object, then, is not the thing itself, but an immaterial excess that is generated through deployments of violence. The symbolic transference that Spillers harnesses in the flesh can be seen when a sticky immaterial layer is attached to a toy gun or cell phone—or, even in the absence of the object, say a person that law enforcement see ‘reaching’ for a gun that is not there (Amadou Diallo, 23-years-old when he was shot dead while retrieving a wallet from his jacket). Contrary to an ethical framework that consistently orbits the subject, the object exposes how raciality functions to guarantee systems of violence through an inversion of matter and meaning that is irreducible to visible human differences, racial, cultural or otherwise.

\textsuperscript{107} Ferreira da Silva also makes this connection between the GFC and police brutality: ‘In that global-economic-crisis [GFC] discourse, I found, the tools of raciality performed as perversely as they do in justifications for what is never treated as the juridical crisis it is, namely, police shootings of unarmed black persons—an explanation that attributes the undesirable outcome to a moral failing caused by racial or cultural difference.’ Ibid., 14.
\textsuperscript{108} Ibid., 124.
\textsuperscript{109} Here I am using grammar in the sense that Spillers refers to in ‘Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe’: ‘The symbolic order that I wish to trace in this writing, calling it an “American grammar,” begins at the “beginning,” which is really a rupture and a radically different kind of cultural continuation.’ Spillers, ‘Mama's Baby,’ 68.
‘A Radically Different Text’

Towards the end of ‘Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,’ Spillers contemplates the possibility of rewriting the racial grammar that remains central to systems of anti-Black violence in the global present.¹¹⁰ She considers this through ‘the captive female body’ whose natal alienation renders her both ‘mother and mother-dispossessed.’¹¹¹ In doing so, Spillers asks if the flesh, as ‘a moment of converging political and social vectors’ on the subject, ‘might rewrite after all a radically different text for a female empowerment.’¹¹² In other words, she asks us to consider whether the relegation of the African American woman outside the symbolic fold of humanity and its matrilineal nucleus marks the conditions of possibility for a rewriting of gender and power relations writ-large. In turning from the flesh to the inverted object, whose movements I have been tracing across this chapter, I, too, want to consider a parallel convergence—an inversion of matter and meaning—that takes place through the object. What, for instance, if we took seriously the aesthetic ground of the artwork as an ontologically determinative force, one that, in Wynter’s words, because “‘decipherable’ […] now, consciously and consensually alterable”?¹¹³ What if we understood capitalism and its necessary conditions of exploitation, expropriation and dispossession as constitutive of, rather than complementary to, raciality? That the sharply unequal distribution of resources across the world cannot be maintained without raciality as that which makes sense of the cruel logic of capital? And, what if the cognitive disconnect in police encounters between objects and any material threat allows us to push past the foreclosures of policy reform—the idea that racial subjugation could be corrected by governance when the latter represents what Moten

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¹¹⁰ Ibid., 75.
¹¹¹ Ibid., 80
¹¹² Ibid., 80.
¹¹³ Wynter, “‘Aesthetics’”, 239-40.
and Harney call ‘the extension of whiteness on a global scale’?\textsuperscript{114} I suggest that through these openings of critical inquiry, the inverted object allows us to pose ‘a radically different text’ for violence. Namely, a description that does not presuppose subjects with individual agency, but rather exposes how raciality welds itself to the conditions of the world, and inverts matter and meaning to delimit humanity’s ethical reach.

\textsuperscript{114} Harney and Moten, \textit{Undercommons}, 56.
III.

Breaking the Subject: Entanglement at the End of the World

In Alexis Pauline Gumbs’s 2018 book-length poem, *M Archive: After the End of the World*, an apocalyptic future unfolds across a narrative strewn with remnants of present and past. *M Archive* is presented as a journal that is unearthed by archivists after the world-ending events it recounts. The textual archive in the book is detached from its function as a repository for history, becoming instead a proleptic account where waterways are poisoned and people forced underground. The survivors of these events, the future archivists, as ‘witnesses to the realities we are making possible or impossible with our present apocalypse,’ are also ‘you beyond you.’ As *M Archive*’s narrator makes clear at the outset, these eventualities are guaranteed only by our collective inability to comprehend them: ‘this is how the story we had used to justify the full-scale destruction of the world outgrew itself at last. but was it too late?’ (15). Flitting through an archive of time, *M Archive* collapses the distinctions between the historical subject, the future archivist and the present reader. It does so by absenting any identifiable subjects, who are instead referred to by the collective pronouns ‘we’ and ‘they,’ a ‘you’ that encompasses the reader and/as the future archivist and a ‘she’ that signifies a Black woman who stands at the centre of this looming apocalypse. In this sense, *M Archive*’s narrator undercuts the limits of subjectivity: ‘she knew they would recycle the names. […] she stopped needing numbers and names in order to know herself. they became arbitrary’ (88). She knew, too, ‘that time and language were as changing as air and water […] they cannot name me. she sang in the languages of wind and DNA. i come to take names. i come to break names apart’ (88).

This chapter considers how *M Archive*’s nameless figures, as a descriptive tool, might ‘break apart’ the subject, thereby rendering raciality incomprehensible. Given that *M Archive* does not observe the temporal and spatial parameters by which violence is made ethical sense of, it breaks with raciality as essential to our present order of things. As Gumbs’s explanatory note to the book proposes, ‘This book offers a possibility of being beyond the human and an invitation into the blackness of what we cannot know from here’ (xi). In this sense, the account put forward in *M Archive* allows us to consider, in Fred Moten’s words, if ‘political upheaval is in the nonlocatability of discontinuity.’\(^{116}\) When the unnameable enters the frame of thinking, when names are broken apart, it becomes possible to look beyond the systems of violence that seem an inexorable part of the global present. By deploying Gumbs’s book as a theoretical roadmap, I suggest its subject/s, both present self and future archivist, reflect a state of uncertainty—one in which the end of the world is simultaneously now, already and not yet. I consider this alongside Denise Ferreira da Silva’s notion of ‘difference without separability,’ a means of disrupting the ethical coherence of raciality in scientific understandings of the world.

Much of Ferreira da Silva’s recent scholarship takes up particle physics and, in particular, dark matter experiments to disrupt raciality and its infiltration of post-enlightenment thinking—that is, she considers how social and scientific knowledge has been produced with the same mechanisms that render human difference and antiblackness comprehensible.\(^{117}\) In her 2016 essay, ‘On Difference Without Separability,’ Ferreira da Silva harnesses the ‘counter-intuitive results’ of these experiments—their capacity to violate measurable understandings of the world and its atomic components—to resist biocentric knowledge systems. Specifically, how these knowledge systems

\(^{116}\) Moten, *In the Break*, 69.

\(^{117}\) There are several articles and talks on this topic but the focus here is on Ferreira da Silva, ‘On Difference.’
rehearse cultural difference to justify ‘deployments of otherwise unacceptable total violence onto those placed on “the Other” (cultural) side of humanity.’

Ferreira da Silva writes that post-enlightenment thinking and its reliance on a scientifically coherent ‘Ordered World’ composed of separate parts has, in effect, foreclosed on the capacity for knowledge of this world to interrupt deployments of violence: ‘Precisely because they too are specimens of modern thought, the available critical tools cannot support an ethico-political intervention capable of undermining cultural difference’s capacity to produce an unbridgeable ethical divide.’

These limits are apparent when, for example, Western states use terrorism and poverty as cultural descriptors to justify the violence committed against refugees fleeing the Middle East, Africa and other parts of the Global South. In these events, which Ferreira da Silva describes as ‘iteration[s] of the modern text’—that is, as symptomatic of post-enlightenment thinking)—the presumption of (visible) cultural differences between groups rides shotgun with the separation that is imposed between things and events so they can be understood. The state security apparatuses that respond to these flows of people authorise violence on the basis of cultural differences located historically in time (‘the relation of the present to the past [as] a purely temporal, continuous one’) rather than an ethical delimitation of humanity outside time.

To escape these temporal limits, Ferreira da Silva puts forward an ‘entangled world’ where ‘sociality becomes neither the cause nor the effect of relations involving separate existants, but the uncertain condition under which everything that exists is a singular expression of each and every actual-virtual other existant.’ While similar to Karen Barad’s idea of ‘intra-action,’ in which

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118 Ibid., 57.
119 Ibid., 57.
120 Ibid., 61.
121 Benjamin, Arcades, 263.
122 Ferreira da Silva, ‘Difference,’ 65. The term ‘entangled world’ arises from quantum entanglement, which occurs when the properties of particles, even those separated by large distances, are correlated to the point of being indistinguishable from one another. This allows the measurements of one particle to instantaneously provide those
individual agents yield mutualised elemental constitutions and ‘are only distinct in relation to their mutual entanglement,’ Ferreira da Silva’s use of entanglement specifically targets how separability and determinacy sustain the ethical coherence of raciality in the global present. As Ferreira da Silva writes, ‘Without separability, difference among human groups and between human and nonhuman entities, has very limited explanatory purchase and ethical significance.’ Thus, she shows how, when violence is not figured through a subject situated in linear space and time, it becomes possible to imagine a notion of difference that is not an ethically delimiting force. Difference, at the level of subatomic particles, opens up a relationality that collapses the social-scientific grounds for tying white European attributes to universal notions of humanity and relegating non-white people outside this sphere by way of racial particularity. Rather than stage an assault on racism as an ideological construction, or on the symbolic mechanisms—race and culture—that sustain it, entanglement interrupts the epistemological scaffolding of raciality that emerges from the Western philosophical canon.

I turn to M Archive as a descriptive tool that might allow us to bring about what Ferreira da Silva calls an ‘ethical opening’ in the world, such that difference as we understand it is no longer operative. How, for instance, might the book’s speculative subjects, who both witness the end of the world and index our present selves, recast intersubjective relationality across space and time? How might this narrative, and its refusal to describe violence through the individual subject,

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124 Attributing both to Kant’s school of thought, Ferreira da Silva names separability as ‘the view that all that can be known about the things of the world is what is gathered by the forms (space and time) of the intuition and the categories of the Understanding (quantity, quality, relation, modality)’; while determinacy is ‘the view that knowledge results from the Understanding’s ability to produce formal constructs, which it can use to determine (i.e. decide) the true nature of the sense impressions gathered by the forms of intuition.’ Ferreira da Silva, ‘Difference,’ 61.
125 Ibid., 65.
126 Ibid., 65.
expose the uncertain conditions of existence? What kind of ethical questions can be posed of humanity when the contours that sustain selfhood can no longer be grasped? And, when we yield the subject to a paradigm that is simultaneously now, already and not yet?

**An Archive Without the Subject**

*M Archive*’s first section, ‘From the Lab Notebooks’ traces the end of the world to a dispute between ‘the fake scientists who, of course, had never understood dark matter’ and ‘the real scientists marooned to their asylums’ (25). These fake scientists, armed with the efficacy that grounds human difference, ‘specified how different they were from each other until they could extrapolate and find god’ (22). In doing so, they resolve the problem of ‘not knowing where one person ended and another began’ (17). *M Archive*’s narrative, in which those scientists who understand quantum physics’ capacity to violate the norms of cause and effect are outcast, underscores an epistemic struggle over scientific determinacy as it provides the ethical props for racial subjugation. In this sense, the book asks us, without the subject acting to index space, time and causality, how could violence allow us to imagine differently of difference?

In *M Archive*, an answer arrives when the distinctions between the future archivists and our present ‘selves’ are troubled by shifting tenses and pronouns, as in the following passage:

> when we started to find the imprints it was almost time. scattered around the planet (like we were) the shapes of our exact elbows our pressed cheekbones indented like fossils showed up on the ground and in the walls of caves as if by the chance (and the very unlikely chance at that) that we would find them.
were they left as messages? who left them? us? time started to match itself up, not so long after we started wandering everywhere to dig. when had we, the selves who became archeologists, decided to prove to ourselves that we had been time travelers first. and what would we do with the signs that were ourselves? (27)

The beginnings of an archaeological dig evoke memory as an exercise grounded in the historian’s traditional tools. David Scott tells us that recovery of the past ‘will depend upon the construction of an archive, and the distinctive labor, therefore, of an archaeologist.’¹²⁷ And, it was the historian Arturo Schomburg, the founder of the first substantial Black archive in the U.S. in 1925, who writes in his famous essay ‘The Negro Digs Up His Past’ that ‘the American Negro must remake his past in order to make his future.’¹²⁸ Much of the work by Schomburg and other Black scholars can be seen as responding to the limits of settler-colonial archives, where silences and gaps reinforce racialised, gendered and other divides, a problem that has lent much theoretical fuel to the recent ‘archival turn.’¹²⁹ As David Marriott writes, a subject who falls outside Western history ‘only restates the difficulty of locating it substantially (rather than allegorically or metaphorically), since how does one tell the story of what falls outside of time?’¹³⁰ Following Marriott’s question, M Archive can be read as a provocation: given that post-enlightenment thinking requires raciality to make sense of violence, what if the latter’s excess—that which falls outside time—renders it

¹²⁹ Scholars are divided as to when a turn toward the archive as a subject of inquiry itself took place: many credit Derrida’s influential 1995 title Archive Fever, while Margarita Soto notes that a ‘Black archival turn’ prompted by Schomburg’s work occurred several decades before. Margarita M. Castromán Soto, ‘Schomburg’s Black Archival Turn: “Racial Integrity” and “The Negro Digs Up His Past,”’ African American Review Vol.54.1-2 (2021): 73.
incomprehensible? My reading of Gumbs’s book, then, is less interested in its capacity to ‘recover’ history than it is in its capacity to tell a story without time.

In *M Archive* the traditions of archiving are complicated by the book’s differing temporal registers: who, for instance, is ‘we,’ ‘our selves,’ and ‘ourselves’? Where do these textual subjects end, and their reader-referents begin? If archival memory ‘is always memory-in-the-present,’ how might we interpret a memory from an uncertain future? These future archivists unearth an account of the end of the world that simply does not make sense from within the bounds of post-enlightenment thinking, namely in its rendering of events in linear spacetime. How could ‘we,’ the future witnesses to this catastrophe, be reading about it now? How could we find, embedded in the dust and grit of an archaeological dig site, ‘the signs that were ourselves’? I suggest this scene in *M Archive* depicting an archaeological dig is only comprehensible when violence is understood as a ceaseless guarantee of raciosity. Given that subjects are always grounded in ‘linear temporality and spatial separation,’ when we do not distinguish between each occurrence of violence, we can consider violence in excess of the individual subject. In the moment when ‘we’ find ourselves in Gumbs’s narrative ‘indented like fossils,’ it becomes possible to look beyond the interpretive tools for violence that secure raciosity’s ethical coherence by tying it to the conditions of existence. This archaeological scene in *M Archive* recalls the work of Jayna Brown who, in her 2021 book *Black Utopias: Speculative Life and the Music of Other Worlds*, uses utopia ‘to signal the (im)possibilities for forms of subjectivity outside a recognizable ontological framework, and modes of existence conceived of in unfamiliar epistemes.’ Taking utopia as the ‘condition of being temporally estranged,’ Brown suggests we ‘let go of the idea of subjectivity as a stable and

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131 Scott, ‘Black Memory,’ vi.
essential component of freedom and selfhood."\textsuperscript{134} If we read \textit{M Archive}’s setting as such a utopia, instead of delineating between self/archival subject, the encounter between self/self tracks toward a description of violence that looks beyond the spatiotemporal ground pronounced to authorise it.

\textbf{Imagining Differently of Difference}

\textit{M Archive}’s narrative traverses seven sections, four of which are tied to an elemental thematic (dirt, sky, fire and ocean). The book is part of an experimental triptych of poetry titles by Gumbs, each of which takes as inspiration and cites extensively a black studies scholar or book. \textit{M Archive} is written in conversation with M. Jacqui Alexander’s 2005 \textit{Pedagogies of Crossing: Meditations on Feminism, Sexual Politics, Memory, and the Sacred}, while \textit{Dub: Finding Ceremony} (2020) takes its inspiration from Sylvia Wynter, and \textit{Spill: Scenes of Black Feminist Fugitivity} (2016) from Hortense Spillers. As Gumbs writes in an explanatory note, \textit{M Archive}’s subtitle, ‘After the End of the World,’ (a reference to a Sun Ra song) fosters further links with Black scholarship and creative practice: ‘After and with Audre Lorde. After and with Toni Cade Bambara. After and with Barbara Christian […] After the end of the world as we know it. After the ways we have been knowing the world’ (xi). Describing these thinkers as having ‘a chemical impact’ on her work, Gumbs takes up a form of citational practice that, in soldering creative practice to scholarly inquiry, muddles the book’s authorship as much as its subjects (x). As Katherine McKittrick writes in a chapter on Black citational methodologies from her 2020 book \textit{Dear Science and Other Stories}, ‘in a world that despises blackness the bibliography—written or sung or whispered or remembered or dreamed or forgotten—ushers in, or initiates, or teaches, or affirms.’\textsuperscript{135} In this

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{134} Ibid., 8; 9.
\item \textsuperscript{135} McKittrick, \textit{Dear Science}, 27.
\end{itemize}
sense, *M Archive*’s bibliography resists the efficacy of scientific determinacy—something further evidenced by the appearance of fragmentary periodic tables throughout the book. In the first table, for example, every element is redacted (4). To cite *M Archive*’s narrator once more, we can say that these elements ‘became arbitrary.’

While Alexander names Kitsimba, an ancestral figure she finds in the archives of slavery who is ‘shuttled from the old Kongo kingdom to the Caribbean, circa 1780,’ as an imagined interlocutor for Alexander’s *Pedagogies of Crossing*, Gumbs extends this collaborative writing process in *M Archive* to ‘the survivors, the far-into-the-future witnesses’ (xi). These future selves forge ancestral connections of their own when they ‘remembered that they were their own great-great-great-grandmothers and they started to think of their grandmothers and mothers’ (102). This vision, which is both proleptic and historical, captures how the symbolic transference of violence does not observe linear (horizontal) movement, but rather repeats itself vertically. What Spillers elucidates as an historical stillness in which ‘“actants” are wholly generated, with neither past nor future,’ interrupts any conception of a selfhood separate from the structural violence that raciality anticipates.

If we follow Spillers in exposing how ethical interpretations of racial subjugation ‘inscribe “ethnicity” as a scene of negation,’ one that ‘in this case freezes in meaning, takes on constancy, assumes the look and the affects of the Eternal,’ violence emerges as an iteration secured under the symbolic auspices of human difference. Yet when raciality is no

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136 These appear on pages 4, 32, 72, 91, 106, 138, 164 and 186 of *M Archive*.
138 As an Afrofuturist work, *M Archive* reflects the genre’s concerns with violence as a structural anticipation. As Kodwo Eshun writes, ‘Afrofuturism […] is concerned with the possibilities within the dimension of the predictive, the projected, the proleptic, the envisioned, the virtual, the anticipatory and the future conditional.’ Kodwo Eshun, ‘Further Considerations on Afrofuturism,’ *CR: The New Centennial Review* (East Lansing, Mich.) 3.2 (2003): 287.
139 Spillers, ‘Mama’s Baby,’ 66.
140 Ibid., 66.
longer ‘perceived as mythical time,’ or a fixed and irreducible point in human history, it becomes possible to consider it as an assemblage, that is, as an authorising force that concatenates events of violence spread over vast space and time.\(^{141}\) Given that raciality cannot be apprehended through the subject and its interior experience, the collaborative authorship of *M Archive* and their vertical movement between generations allows us to pose ethical questions that do not yield subjectivity as an interpretive ground. Rather than resolve violence, we might describe it in excess of the thinking tools that consistently explain it away.

*M Archive* contains 175 footnoted references to Alexander’s *Pedagogies of Crossing*, which are loosely drawn on or appear unquoted and paraphrased—textual echoes in the book’s narrative. For instance, the section in *M Archive* depicting an archaeological dig, cited above, references a passage from *Pedagogies of Crossing* in which Alexander uses a slogan from migrant and refugee justice demonstrations—‘we are here because you are there’—to trouble the borders of the modern nation state (218).\(^{142}\) Alexander writes, of our global interconnectivity forged through global capital, colonisation, refugee displacement, war and death, that we require new ‘ways of being and of relating, modes of analyzing, and strategies of organizing in which we […] see ourselves as part of one another, even in the context of difference.’\(^{143}\) Much as Wynter draws our attention to the ‘ecosystemic and global sociosystemic “interrelatedness” of our contemporary situation,’\(^{144}\) Alexander pushes back against the rehearsal of cultural difference through frameworks of comparison that cannot but establish existent hierarchies as productions of culture, rather than a symbolic order—raciality—that is inscribed onto political subjects. This

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\(^{141}\) Ibid., 66.
\(^{142}\) Alexander, *Pedagogies*, 287.
\(^{143}\) Ibid., 289.
interrelatedness must always be denied in order to make sense of a world in which raciality acts as an ethically delimiting force in interpretations of violence. For instance, once we comprehend that a white judge occupies their position precisely because, and in determination, of the position occupied by a BIPOC defendant, any ethical notion of justice would lose all sense.

If human difference appears as a self-evidencing protocol in judgements, statements of facts, criminal records, medical reports and the like, consider the moment when *M Archive*’s narrator recounts how ‘they,’ the people who both brought about and witnessed the end of the world ‘were all, in their origin, maintenance, and measure of survival more parts black woman than anything else’ (7). And that, in spite of these origins, ‘they hated the black women who were themselves. a suicidal form of genocide. so that was it. they could only make the planet unbreathable’ (7). In *M Archive*, the disappearance of the sovereign self exposes how raciality guarantees systems of violence through intersubjective relationality. As a force that requires the subjugation of non-white subjects in order to sustain whiteness and its supremacist claims, raciality does not presuppose individual agency. Rather, as the objective conditions of existence, raciality secures the pollution and mass extraction of natural resources—and with them, an unbreathable world—that seem essential to the global present, and it does so by tying claims to selfhood to a violent nexus of human difference. Any concession on the part of global capital, as that which guarantees the destruction of the Earth in pursuit of whiteness *ad infinitum*, is, therefore, unimaginable without the interruption of raciality. In *M Archive*, however, the narrator does not concede the individual subject to a paradigm in which white people require the figure of the Black woman and her absolute dereliction to make sense of the world. Rather, by dissipating separation between subjects—‘the black women who were themselves’—the book breaks with ethical interpretations of violence that consistently write human difference as anterior to social, political
and economic systems. For, once white subjects are understood as sustained by the violence that their very being anticipates, difference begins to lose its grip on the subject. Instead, raciality emerges as a symbolic apparatus that always defines and resolves the sovereign self through its Others. As Rizvana Bradley writes, ‘the womb of the black feminine is not one form (of abjection) among many, but rather the vestibule through which all forms must pass, even if ostensibly shorn of the traces of passage.’

Thus, the future witness in *M Archive*, a Black woman who is ‘ourselves’ represents excess: what has never been and what can never be comprehended through the available critical tools that render each and every instance of violence an iteration. And, when we can no longer distinguish between subjects, when we realise that ‘they were none other than each other,’ raciality becomes incomprehensible (107).

**Alterable Paths / Touching Maps**

Returning to the subjunctive question posed in *M Archive*, ‘what would we do with the signs that were ourselves?’ how might we consider the book’s utopian promise? How might the speculative setting of *M Archive*, in decoupling raciality from the conditions for existence, imagine other ways of being? As Ferreira da Silva elucidates, ongoing events of violence in the Mediterranean—the drownings, economic ruin and brutality suffered by migrants at the hands of Western state security forces—and elsewhere reflect how difference has been embedded into the social-scientific tools for understanding the world. Given these limitations, a description of violence that breaks apart raciality would have to, in Ferreira da Silva’s words, ‘unleash the imagination’s radical creative

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146 Here I am following Ferreira da Silva’s notion of ‘the wounded captive body in the scene of subjugation,’ who cannot be captured by the systems oppressing her because these are products of post-enlightenment thinking. Ferreira da Silva, *Unpayable Debt*, 275-6.
capacity and draw from it what is needed for the task of thinking The World otherwise.'

Here Ferreira da Silva’s work can be placed alongside José Esteban Muñoz’s notion of ‘queer utopian memory,’ which posits longing as having ‘world-making potentialities.’

As he writes in his 2009 book *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, ‘We have never been queer, yet queerness exists for us as an ideality that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future.’

Whereas empirical cognition requires causality in the Kantian program, such ‘evidencing protocols,’ Muñoz writes, ‘often fail to enact real hermeneutical inquiry and instead opt to reinstate that which is known in advance […] and thus] nullify the political imagination.’

*M Archive*’s account of the end of the world also offers an ideal—a Jamesonian future imagined from within the present—from which we might intervene in the systems of violence that secure this eventuality. Following Ferreira da Silva and Muñoz, Gumbs’s book can be read as a description of violence—whether against queer, BIPOC or other groups that fall outside the racially-policed pulpits of fortress Man—that seeks to both interrupt the knowledge systems that prop up the global present and imagine a world beyond it.

*M Archive*’s narrator invites this form of utopian speculation in the form of dreamscapes, which first appear when the narrator recounts how ‘they,’ the future archivists who are also our present selves, stumble on ‘the dream rooms and body doubles’:

> imagine touching your hand to your hand and knowing that you and the whole world that you can perceive are the projection of a dream machine made out of the sleeping minds of

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147 Ferreira da Silva, ‘Difference,’ 59.
149 Ibid., 1.
150 Ibid., 27.
people whose bodies look just like yours. *what happens when they wake up?* you have to think. *what and when am I really?* you must wonder. *how did their dreams make rooms to dream in? whence their peaceful bodies, whence their instantly activating minds?* (26)

Here, the absence of subjectivity is marked by the uncertain register of pronouns that render respective subjects inseparable from one another. The reader as the future archivist encounters the reader as the present self in this clasped/collapsed moment when ‘your hand’ meets ‘your hand.’ The timeline between these figures torques into a Möbius strip, looping one self into another. As Frank Ocean would have it, the dreamer in *M Archive* is ‘dreaming a thought that could dream about a thought / That could think of the dreamer that thought.’151 The future archivist/present self’s fugitive questions in *M Archive*—*what happens when they wake up? […] what and when am I really?*—does not presuppose an individual subject in space and time. Rather, the metaleptic movement between ‘your hand and your hand,’ detaches the archivist and/as the future self from their respective settings and subjectivities. As Gerard Genette explains, metalepsis constitutes ‘a shifting but sacred frontier between two worlds, the world in which one tells, the world of which one tells.’152 In *M Archive*, violence—the end of the world—emerges as a point of rupture between two worlds: the global present, in which raciality retains its ethical purchase through the scientific trump card of human difference; and what Wynter calls a ‘demonic ground,’ a liminal realm of

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152 Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: an Essay in Method*, Ithaca, N.Y: Cornell University Press, 1980, 236. In practice, metalepsis (from the Greek μετελήψις, meaning alteration or participation) involves a character or narrator being implanted into a world in which they do not ‘belong.’ As Debra Malina argues in her 2002 book, *Breaking the Frame: Metalepsis and the Construction of the Subject*, metalepsis also has the potential to ‘test out’ other frameworks of subjectivity: ‘Because it traverses an ontological hierarchy, metalepsis has the power to endow subjects with greater or lesser degrees of “reality”—in effect, to promote them into subjectivity and demote them from it.’ Debra Malina, *Breaking the Frame: Metalepsis and the Construction of the Subject*, Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2002, 3;4.
resistant possibility on the outskirts of present conceptions of the world.\textsuperscript{153} It is this latter world that \textit{M Archive} moves the reader toward when the archivist ‘asked the self that might have been listening, looking at the slightly moving eyelashes of her beautiful double. \textit{i mean what if she changes her dream?’} (26).

What if she changes her dream? What might these shadow twins, who flit between dream and reality, future and present, self and archivist, describe that we cannot yet begin to imagine? In the tear in space and time where the speculative narrative of \textit{M Archive} collides with the parameters of post-enlightenment thinking, I suggest it becomes possible to expose raciality as a force that entangles, rather than separates, subjects in the scene of violence. The dreams of a future archive would have us, present selves and future subject(s), embrace the end of the world as we know it, if only to imagine otherwise.

This utopian promise reappears later in \textit{M Archive}, when one of the survivors stumbles on a surreal map of the world made of ‘sand floating on water’:

for a moment, she had a strange thought. what if this really was a world, with tiny beings on it. and she (outside of it) could topple mountains, cause tsunamis, blow down civilizations. she laughed and the water rippled her reflection.

she decided not to touch the map again. (120)

Yet she is already touching the map: she touches the map when she moves between future and present, violating the norms of cause and effect; when she refuses to be named or confined within the bounds of an individual subject; when she both announces the end of the world and refuses it by stripping the knowledge systems that secure this eventuality of any ethical coherence. All of these manoeuvres describe violence as simultaneously now, already and not yet. And, in doing so, they break apart raciality as the conditions of existence.
Coda: Toward the Dereliction of Whiteness

‘And in this debasement and definition of Black people, they debased and defamed themselves. And have brought humanity to the edge of oblivion: because they think they are white. Because they think they are white, they do not dare confront the ravage and the lie of their history.’

—James Baldwin, ‘On Being White and Other Lies’

‘I just need you to recognize that this shit is killing you, too, however much more softly, you stupid motherfucker, you know?’

—Fred Moten, The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study

‘Let it matter what we call a thing.’

—Solmaz Sharif, Look: Poems

Once racaility is understood as both the authorising force for global systems of violence and the objective conditions of existence, questions of individual agency have very limited application to interpreting any given deployment of violence. Intersubjective relationality cannot but pre-determine violence as that which secures the positions of white subjects and those relegated outside the symbolic fold of humanity. Despite liberalism’s claims to historical progress, political and legal gains necessarily disappear from a description of violence that exposes how racaility delimits the ethical reach of humanity and figures whiteness as a parasite in the flesh of the world. Baldwin’s description in the epigraph of white people’s false existence, which requires the
‘debasement and definition of Black people,’ then, does not isolate racial subjugation to a discriminatory act. Rather, Baldwin allows us to consider how whiteness and white subjectivity are sustained by an essential antagonism that has ‘brought humanity to the edge of oblivion.’

This distinction Baldwin allows us to draw between, on the one hand, an ethical interpretation of violence and, on the other, the question of human capacity would blindside me as a journalist working in Aotearoa/New Zealand two years ago. If only because, I could not grasp that the apparent paradoxes flaring between language and flesh, capital and life, are the kernel of the liberal imagination. I could not fathom that the outcome of a review into the country’s export controls regime—triggered by revelations that weapons from New Zealand were being sent in support of Saudi Arabia and its coalition’s military intervention in Yemen—had already been determined. Not by a political architecture firmly in the pocket of the global necropolis that is racial capital (though, this was nonetheless true). Weapons would continue to flow into the forever wars on the other side of the planet, not because their economic value trumped the cold calculations made of human life, but because such violence is required to make sense of a world in which raciality is constitutive. The very fabric of political life depends on this violence; without it, any ethical notion of humanity would cease to make sense.

A tranche of documents I obtained under New Zealand’s Official Information Act, revealing the export of military technology and weapons systems to Saudi Arabia and its coalition partners in Yemen, merely provided an interpretation of violence: they could not hope to expose how raciality underwrites notions of humanity. The documents, whose contents I reported in 2021 for RNZ (Radio New Zealand), showed mortar targeting systems and weapons suppressors sold by private military firms in New Zealand were being approved for export by the country’s Ministry
of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MFAT). This is despite the fact that Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates have committed widely documented human rights abuses in Yemen. The Saudi coalition’s support of the Yemeni government has entrenched a civil war with the Houthi rebels that has killed at least 100,000 people since 2015, displaced millions more and pushed the country to the brink of famine. The support of Western nations like New Zealand in providing a reliable flow of arms to the coalition has been critical to sustaining the conflict, now in its eighth year. In the days following my reporting, MFAT’s deputy chief executive of policy Ben King was hauled before a parliamentary select committee and questioned by the Green Member of Parliament, Golriz Ghahraman. When asked whether the weapons systems could be used to execute civilians in Yemen, King laughed. He assured Ghahraman they could not. (Additional documents showed that even King’s colleagues believed prior to approving the exports they could not rule out their deployment in Yemen). The findings of an independent review tasked with reassessing the weapons exports later that year would clear the ministry of any wrongdoing. The story dried up, I moved on.

At the heart of the framework guiding MFAT’s decision—a framework that is more concerned with limiting reputational damage than preserving human life—is an essential antagonism that sustains whiteness through ceaseless iterations of violence. The willing participation by New Zealand’s political architecture in the killings of tens of thousands of

155 Ibid.
Yemenis cannot be understood as an aberration that could be corrected within a paradigm that is constitutive of that violence. In other words, there is no ethical paradox in MFAT’s decision to approve these exports, no quandary in need of resolution. Guaranteed from the outset, the ethical absolution provided for a deployment of violence that would otherwise be unconscionable—that is, if its victims were white subjects—draws on the same grammar that acquits white police officers for executing Black people in the U.S. time and again. When I hear King laugh, I hear ‘N.H.I.’ trickle out from under the static of an LAPD radio: no humans involved. And I follow Sylvia Wynter in asking, ‘Where did this system of classification come from?’

In her 1992 essay, ‘No Humans Involved,’ Wynter addresses revelations at the time that the LAPD had been using N.H.I. when responding to incidents of violence whose victims were Black. Written in the form of an open letter, she calls on her academic colleagues to expose the ‘classificatory logic’ of N.H.I. and change the order of knowledge that made it comprehensible. That is, she charges them with rupturing the limits of understanding that have paved the ethical grounds for justifying the state-sanctioned murder and dispossession of Black people in the U.S—what Spillers calls ‘the laws of American behavior that make such syntax possible.’ How was it, for instance, that a police officer could even begin to comprehend a world that announces the fungibility and disposability of blackness, and with it, the authority to shoot and kill? Wynter argues the same order of knowledge that made the acronym N.H.I. possible underwrites global systems of violence. In this sense, raciality can be understood as a symbolically codified structure that, due to the limits of knowledge, is unconsciously experienced as if it were pre-determined by bio-evolutionary selection. As an iteration of violence in the global present, N.H.I. follows the

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158 Wynter, ‘No Humans,’ 1.  
159 Ibid., 3.  
160 Ibid., 3.  
161 Spillers, ‘Mama’s,’ 79.
same logic that maintains the sharply unequal distribution of wealth, the deliberate drownings of migrants in the Mediterranean, the mass incarceration of Black people in the U.S., the West’s military invasions of countries in the Middle East and other crises underwritten by what Wynter terms ‘our now globalized cultural epistemological model.’\footnote{Wynter, ‘No Humans,’ 7.} Taking up the 1992 LA uprising in the wake of Rodney King’s beating at the hands of the police (and the acquittal of the white officers involved) as an expression of political necessity by the only means then consciously available, Wynter calls for an epistemic shift in the academy that ‘generates conscious change in all subjects, by exposing all the injustices inherent in structure.’\footnote{Ibid., 14.} Only then could we see, just as those people who were caught up in the rage of 1992 could at the level of affect, that ‘the beating, and the verdict, as well as in the systemic condemnation of all the Rodney Kings, and of the global Poor and Jobless, to the futility and misery of the lives they live, [are] the price paid for our well-being.’\footnote{Ibid., 15.}

What kind of well-being can only be secured by global systems of violence? In ‘No Humans Involved,’ Wynter exposes how these systems underscore a collective failure to interrupt raciality and its provision of an ethical framework. As Russia wages its brutal invasion of Ukraine, as white people armed with automatic assault rifles enter nightclubs and massage parlours in the U.S. to execute queer, trans, Asian and other victims of supremacist claims, as police shootings in BIPOC communities ripple across the Western world, marked out not by the availability of justice and peace for the victims but by the unrealised and impossible demand for it, how might we find the means to describe violence? This is also to ask, how can we interrupt the knowledge systems that made it possible for those white police officers to dream up N.H.I. and to use it to sustain their
own life force? What would it take to understand that, when Ben King laughed, he was laughing at the suggestion people living in the Global South could be brought into the symbolic fold of humanity; to understand that their lives were the price paid for the state to retain its claims to authority; that their lives were the price paid, in blood, for his?

I turn now to the contemporary Iranian-American poet Solmaz Sharif’s 2019 poem, ‘Look,’ to consider how violence and raciality sustain the ‘well-being’ of whiteness in such a way that renders its existence incompossible with any ethical notion of justice. My intention here is not to gain a better understanding of events like MFAT’s decision to approve weapons exports, but rather to consider how white subjectivity requires and is structured by global systems of domination, exploitation and expropriation. Sharif’s poem, ‘Look,’ is particularly useful for this undertaking because it moves fluidly between deployments of violence in the global present to obstruct any ethical interpretation that would see the authorising force—raciality—as anything less than the conditions of existence. At the same time, ‘Look’ demonstrates how the claims of selfhood, sovereignty and agency that sustain the subject also underwrite racial subjugation.

‘Look,’ from Sharif’s eponymous volume of poetry published in 2016, collages fragments of racist abuse, an interview transcript from a U.S. army veteran who served in Iraq, passages from the Bible and terms found in the U.S. Department of Defense’s Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms (these latter entries appear in bold).

It matters what you call a thing: Exquisite a lover called me.

Exquisite.

Whereas Well, if I were from your culture, living in this country,

said the man outside the 2004 Republican National
Convention, *I would put up with that for this country*;

Whereas I felt the need to clarify: You would put up with

**TORTURE**, *you mean* and he proclaimed: *Yes*;

Whereas what is your life;

Whereas years after they **LOOK** down from their jets

and declare my mother’s Abadan block **PROBABLY**

**DESTROYED**, we walked by the villas, the faces

of buildings torn off into dioramas, and recorded it

on a hand-held camcorder and I said *That’s a gun* as I

trained the lens on a rusting **GUN-TYPE WEAPON** and

*That’s Iraq* as I zoomed over the river;

Whereas it could take as long as 16 seconds between

the trigger pulled in Las Vegas and the Hellfire missile

landing in Mazar-e-Sharif, after which they will ask

*Did we hit a child? No. A dog*. they will answer themselves […]\(^{165}\)

By beginning with a lover’s comment—is ‘exquisite’ careless or adoring? A passing thought or considered flattery?—Sharif situates violence in language, which is to say in the fabric of political life, in what Spillers calls an ‘American grammar.’ The same grammar that enacts pleasure and

desire, as Saidiya Hartman shows so convincingly in *Scenes of Subjection*, is entangled with the racial terror that is consistently disavowed and yet ethically absolved by the liberal imagination. Raciality undergirds an ethical framework that, while it emerges 500 years ago on the first slave plantations, extends into the systems of violence that are inextricable from whiteness and its self-preservation in the global present. How else to make sense of a man who, using the same grammar that supplies the lover’s ‘exquisite,’ tells the poem’s persona her torture is required to maintain U.S. democracy and, by extension, his very being as a political subject?

In the poem, the persona’s subjectivity (‘*your culture*’) functions in the white imagination as a cultural text whose absolute dereliction is required to make sense ideas of nationhood, sovereignty and freedom (‘*this country*’) that, in turn, sustain white subjectivity. We might well ask whether any notion of culture and country can be extricated from the American grammar at play, given that both yield an antagonism constitutive of white and non-white subjectivity. That is, these notions actually stand in for a claim to selfhood that can only be sustained through cultural difference. ‘Look’ also exposes how whiteness is always preoccupied with bringing about its ethical absolution; it does this by moving from a man earnestly believing the persona’s torture is required, to the American pilots firing a missile into the Afghan city of Mazar-e-Sharif: ‘*Did we hit a child? No. A dog,* they will answer themselves.’ Sharif’s poem shows how violence makes ethical sense at the level of language, whether in the unfortunately chosen words of the lover, or the pilots who tell themselves they have not killed a human—a child—but an animal. Each ‘whereas’ in the poem, but perhaps most stunning of all, ‘Whereas what is your life,’ serves as a finger that points to there being no ethical paradox between this violence and the liberal imagination authorising its deployment. By holding in relation each discriminatory act, ‘Look’
exposes them as constitutive of human capacity, as ‘the price paid for our well-being’—an ‘our’ that signposts a humanity whose delimited ethical reach violently buttresses whiteness.

How to break out of this world? How to, as Sharif puts it, ‘let it matter what we call a thing’? As the ceaseless events of violence rippling across the world stand testament to, we do not yet have the words to describe violence—at least, in a way that would allow us to interrupt raciality as an essential political instrument. Wynter’s call to look beyond the limits of knowledge—limits that not only led to the possibility (comprehensibility) of N.H.I., but that guaranteed its extension into the global present—makes this task all the more pressing. Sharif’s ‘Look’ is a poem about people who, like the persona, are relegated outside the symbolic fold of humanity through the discriminate assaults on their being. Yet it is also a poem about whiteness as the cleric of a classificatory logic that bleeds into every inch of political life and that roams free from the ideological realm of the subject; it is about a particular way of being in the world which, without violence, would cease to make sense. Thus, to expose each and every iteration of violence as a ceaseless guarantee of raciality is to embrace the dereliction of whiteness as that which could never be sustained.
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