The Living from the Dead
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In order to betray your race, you had first to imagine yourself as one.
—Saidiya Hartman

On July 9, 2017, a thirty-one-year-old man by the name of Jamel Dunn drowned in a Florida retention pond while five teenaged boys, reportedly between fourteen and seventeen years of age, watched—and video-recorded—the event. The low-resolution smartphone video lasting just two minutes and thirty-five seconds was soon posted to YouTube, circulating globally for a short while (as news cycles go) and generating heated commentary both on and offline. Meanwhile, Dunn’s family filed a missing person report on July 12, unaware that he had died three days earlier. Dunn’s body was recovered on July 14 and funeral services were held on July 29. Scores of online commentators—on YouTube, Facebook, and across various tribute sites, online news sources, and a GoFundMe account set up by Dunn’s sister—expressed incredulity and moral outrage that the teens did nothing to help the drowning man. The boys did not intervene, nor did they alert authorities. Instead, they taunted and mocked him: “We not gonna help yo ass!” And as the man cried to them for help, they laughed, mimicked his cries and cursed him: “Boo hoo!” “Ain’t nobody gonna help you, you dumb bitch, you shouldn’t a got in there!” As the man sank beneath the surface for what would be the last time, one boy remarked, “He not comin’ back up. Damnannn... Buddy not comin’ back up.” And then, calmly, chillingly: “Yeah. He dead. Buddy gone. RIP.”

This chapter curates the (re)mediation of Dunn’s death, the murky details of which suggest the oral cultural dimensions of contemporary digital life: agonistic, postliterate, fragmentary, often contradictory, and sometimes conveying an ethos of fake news. It remains unclear how or why Dunn ended up in the pond on that day. He was reported as disabled, but his disability was not revealed until much
later. And the ages of the teens who recorded his death were inconsistentliy reported across news media.⁴ Indeed, the varying accounts of Dunn’s death— together with a host of online commentaries, some loving, many hateful—blur the boundaries between constative and performative speech/acts, much as the video-recorded event does in its own right. In what follows, I’m less concerned with the disputable “facts” than I am in the media themselves, the messages they hold and their hold on us. That is, I home in on the form of the address rather than its purported content or facticity. Nevertheless, certain facts impose themselves: Dunn was a Black man, and the five teenaged boys who recorded his death were also Black. The news media were consistent in reporting these details, so much so that one might suspect these accounts of exploiting racial tensions, of providing clickbait for a certain scripted and racist reception, while caring nothing at all about the man who lost his life on that day. In this, they virtually reenact the recorded indifference to Dunn’s death, and they contribute to its dissemination. From the boys behind the camera, to the various media accounts, to those of us who shared, “liked,” and otherwise circulated the scene across our various media platforms—it is as if saying and doing become chiasmatic, reversible. At what moment does free speech become hate speech, and how might we disambiguate these within our digital media ecologies where such speech repeats in anonymous algorithmic perpetuity?

Following from prior chapters that variously theorize “resistance” across pandemic politics, prison hunger strikes, and claims to medico-legal sovereignty, this chapter is situated somewhat closer to home in the quotidian, apparently unsacri ficial, and otherwise prosaic media ecologies of making live and letting die. While Mr. Dunn died senselessly at the margins of society, his death nevertheless adumbrates an anatomy of the new digital body biopolitic, its grammars of social existence, and our connective complicity in letting die. That is, Dunn died by neglect, and yet in a torrent of digital speech—discourse carried recursively on and across our digital devices, in and as our recurring biopolitical tropes. The teens speak, their voices digitally looped and reanimated. But does their speech sentence Dunn? His sobbing and their cursing, desperate crying and shameful laugh, coincide in this instant—his, theirs, and ours—turning between life and death and life: an instance of terror together with spree, gesturing to “the precariousness of empathy and the uncertain line between witness and spectator,” to invoke Saidiya Hartman.⁵ We, too, tread this uncertain line. We click and are ensnared in the enduring instant between saying and said. Alongside loving tributes to Dunn, we read online comments that reverberate in racist slurs (and
worse), claiming that what the teens say and do is hateful, that the video itself is hateful, while some say that Dunn’s life does not matter, or that the scene is “proof” of widespread Black-on-Black violence (with the express purpose of undermining Black Lives Matter). This chapter addresses this address—an address without address, we might say, a voice without obvious time or place, a voice carried recursively in and across our contemporary mediascapes.

The conveyances of biopolitics and racism call for a rhetorical and media theoretical approach if we take seriously Alexander Weheliye’s trenchant critique of Michel Foucault and Giorgio Agamben on the biopolitics of race and racism. When it comes to race, Weheliye argues, Foucault exhibits a “truancy” across his oeuvre, while Agamben enacts a “disavowal” and a “philosophical unseeing of racializing assemblages.”

It is in this context that I turn to performative speech/acts, revisiting debates from the 1990s over whether hate speech is illocutionary or perlocutionary—that is, whether hate speech is injurious as such and necessarily so (i.e., an illocution), or whether the injury, rather, follows as a non-necessary consequence or sequel of the speech act itself (i.e., a perlocution). In the late 1990s, according to Judith Butler among others, the distinct promise of the perlocution was that such speech can, at times and in time, be turned back against the speaker to subvert the speech/act and to undermine its injurious force. But as I argue below, times have changed, and renewed debate is exigent today given the increasingly widespread use of the internet and digital social media over the last two decades.

Consider Brexit in the United Kingdom in mid-2016, the global rise of the alt-right and white nationalism, and the burgeoning of racist hate groups—online and offline—particularly since the US election of Donald Trump in 2016. Trumpism itself is a socially mediatized and globalized phenomenon thanks in part to the temporal immediacy of digital media, their effects, and exhortatory affects—particularly in the identitarian social and political compliance they would seem to ordain from both the Left and the Right. In the digital context, without the conceit of a sovereign voice and without a fixed “address,” it is difficult to locate who speaks, where or when, or to whom we might return the injurious trope, whether as subversion or insubordination. When tropes travel in an instant, at the speed of light, and when they replay in an ever-present digital “now,” it is difficult to imagine the time and timeliness of a perlocution. The future is not what it once was; time itself is not what it once was. This chapter builds toward an argument that the master trope of the digital social media interface is chiasmus: the reversal or inversion, perhaps even the indifferent exchangeability, of freedom
and hate, life-making and death-warranting. Rhetorically, I will argue, these ambivalences open onto a question of addressivity (further developed in the Refrain)—the ways in which we hail others and are ourselves hailed and tropologically constituted as popular subjects of biopolitical racism.

Digital social media do not simply mediate the social and the cultural, as if these were independent of their transmission, or as if technologies were simply tools or means to an end. And it is misleading to suggest that the internet is “weaponized” in (re)mediating death. Rather, like language, digital media are sociality, they are contemporary culture, no less real or deadly for their virtuality. The internet does not quite represent the individual’s relationship to society; the internet is society hypostatized—an algorithmic deep state, an under-standing, that makes a social group real to the individuals that comprise it, a “social fact” (to use a term from classical sociology). From the Word of God to the words of human beings and now to technologies that speak—agentic devices, screens, social and political media platforms, robots, but also big data, dataveillant algorithms, intelligent systems, the circuits and switches of transactional capitalism—these, among others, constitute a vast media ecology in our societies of control. They are the incantatory manner in and modality by which we see and speak and act, performed in and as virtual wor(l)ds, according to the gospel of big data, and by means of what Ed Finn has called algorithmic “sourcery.” Indeed, the “management” of modern populations has become inconceivable without digital media, politics impossible without tweets and identity mining and big data. The face-to-face is now, increasingly, interface, and the interface interfaces the face-to-face. Inasmuch as Jamel Dunn’s life matters, it is interfaced as a posthumous matter through recursive online comments that appear in synchrony along with his death-in-replay.

In what follows, the mediatized event of Dunn’s death is read as yet another occasion for digital hate speech, in a refractive and refractory address that allegorizes how our digital media ecosystem stands in a synecdochal relation to the distributed and distributing agencies, the refractile power, of neoliberal biopolitics. In the words of Alexander Galloway, “Today all media are a question of synecdoche (scaling a part for the whole), not indexicality (pointing from here to there).” As racializing assemblages, social media networks are not simply a metaphor for biopolitics, I argue, but are the modality, the interface and protocol, by which neoliberal biopolitics is now propagated and normalized. Biopolitical tropes, software, and hardware—now indispensable to subjectivity—prop up the ruse of a virtual moral and political agency, an illusory “end-user,” an “I” mapped
along the polarizing and reifying coordinates of “race,” “biology,” and “identity.” If, as I have argued, a sham sovereignty is one ruse of biopolitical power, I try to rethink the conditions of moral and political agency, as well as the possibility for a disaffirmation that might permit us to address—and perhaps ultimately begin to redress—the harms of hateful speech/acts, and moreover, the operant conditions for their effective curses and recursions. How might we disaffirm without merely disavowing the propagation of hate—for we must apprehend it—and do so without embracing or impulsively echoing the moral censoriousness of the liberal individual fashioned as unreconstructedly Eurocentric and white? Indeed, I will conclude below that the unreconstructed whiteness of the “I” is the principal address of making live—both its site of (re)production and its phantasmatic destination.

The epigraph that opens this chapter—“In order to betray your race, you had first to imagine yourself as one”—is a line plucked from Saidiya Hartman’s Lose Your Mother, which documents the author’s journey to Ghana and her struggle to reckon with “the afterlife of slavery and the future of the exslave.” Here pressed into service out of its particular context, the epigraph might be read as urging Hartman’s reader (“your . . . you . . . yourself”), and me, to ask self-reflexively, Must I too betray my race, and if so, what would it mean first to imagine myself as one? Are these the conditions for speech and for hearkening, the conditions by which we might begin to address and redress racist speech/acts and racism? To betray means to be unfaithful, disloyal, or to double-cross, but it also means to reveal unintentionally, to expose, to lay bare, or to say. Those who claim that the video of Dunn’s death is evidence of widespread Black-on-Black violence surely invoke betrayal in both senses of this term (i.e., the teens are disloyal to their race, which exposes some essential “truth” about being Black). But before understanding the betrayal of one’s race, Hartman suggests that one must first imagine oneself as “one”—and here again meaning refracts. In the first instance, this could mean of “one race.” But racial identity involves the process of racialization, which is not the work of a categorical self, of a sovereign subject or liberal individual. Race is social, constructed, and imaginary, even as the effects of racializing acts and assemblages are all too real. And in the second instance, one must, if one betrays, imagine oneself as “one”—a word that doubles meaning once again, as both singular and collective “ones”: as a bounded, undivided, and self-same individual, on the one hand, and as a social subject who belongs to and is claimed as one by the collective singularizations of one’s “race” on the other. The racist imaginary seems to ontologize along these intersecting axes.
Hartman’s sentence invites us to reflect on the lived experience of racialization, and occasions as well a reflection on my own written speech/acts, here and now, as a white male scholar speaking in the context of Dunn’s death and in the wider contemporary context of white nationalism and racist hate speech/acts. In the first-person singular, Hartman writes, “I am a reminder that twelve million crossed the Atlantic Ocean and the past is not yet over. I am the progeny of the captives. I am the vestige of the dead.”¹³ But there is no “oneness” to her “I”: it is a reminder, unbounded, multiple, vestigial. What, then, of my text, my speech, that uses “I” in these pages? How might I write so that my speech/acts neither embrace nor echo the oneness of presumed moral agency, sovereign authority, or liberal subjectivity? What sorts of betrayals—of my race, of my oneness—might I vocalize and enact? What sort of doubling of my subjectivity? “Is it possible,” Hartman asks elsewhere, “to tell a story about degraded matter and dishonored life that doesn’t delight and titillate, but instead ventures toward another mode of writing?”¹⁴ The critical race theorist Sharon Patricia Holland poses a similar question, in words that resonate for me: “In the shadow of a resurgence of mostly extremist, sometimes brutal, white masculinity, how does any white man move to speak against a subject position designed for him by the media?”¹⁵

Let us acknowledge that speaking as a white male—and by implication, authoritatively for this set of human beings (or indeed, any other)—is problematic, a paratactical simplification: it is an investment in an abstraction, or for some, an idealization, when in fact I am not one thing, and that oneness is multiple, intersectional, and vestigial. No matter: I’m hailed in this moment as an ethical being, not so much in or as the purported oneness that I am—for I am not—but by the force of this abstraction, or idealization, and the ways that this is mobilized in the subjugation and suffering of others. It is less important that I recognize myself in this mobilization than I recognize the effects of the hateful addresses it realizes through “me.” My ethical responsibility must extend to these effects irrespective of the success or failure of my own self-identification, my own localization or self-critique or resistance. The name need not carry my signature. It is not just I myself I cannot live with, but the effects of this self “designed . . . by the media,” as Holland phrases it.

Reflexively, despite myself, I cannot but conjure the word “complicity,” and others like it, equally damning: “accomplice,” “accessory” (to a crime or simply as an ornament), “compliance,” “collusion,” “abetting,” “collaborating” (literally, working-with). And if silence in the face of injustice is tantamount to complicity, compliance, or collaboration, it strikes me nonetheless that the cherished liberal
vocalization of incredulity and moral outrage also seems scripted, quietistic, and says nothing—a liberal “I” narcissistically preoccupied by its own avowals and disavowals. In Hartman’s words, there is a “pleasure of indignation yielded before the spectacle of sufferance.” But as white male angst spills onto the street and spills blood, carrying tiki-torches with chants of “blood and soil,” as marches and rallies are organized by the KKK, and emboldened white supremacists and neo-Nazis occupy our streets and campuses and legislatures, while some are democratically elected and enact legislation, spreading hate under the guise of free speech and civil liberties—what could it signify, here and now, for a white male—or for anyone—to remain silent? For, while anti-Black racism is a matter of terror and degradation for Black subjects, it is not least the effect of a certain white subjectivity, whether in complicit silent passivity or, more contemptuously, in the postures of white innocence and victimhood, or, more contemptuously still, as a violent counterinsurgency mobilized in defense of “traditional” American values and rights.

If the march of white nationalists implicitly demands white faith and loyalty—and whiteness is destined there as blessing, gift, covenant—is this not the moment for a white male to betray his race, here and now, and to refuse the imaginary by which he is “one”? On the Right, those who march rely, at the very least, on one’s silent complicity. And from the Left, at times, would-be allies also demand a reverent silence, invoking an identity politics according to which one’s speech is unsanctioned on identitarian grounds. In what time, in what place, can one speak and refuse in body and in voice? Late one night I glimpsed a tentative answer of sorts to Holland’s haunting question. I was reading her blog, where critical race theory and personal reflections on the subjugation of Black lives share the screen with some of her favorite family recipes—a juxtaposition I experienced as a generosity peculiar to the informal blog form, an invitation to her table, to break bread and to dialogue. This moved me. In the long shadows of the 2017 marches on Charlottesville, Virginia, there Holland writes, “The voices of the undocumented, the ordinary people living their lives who dreamed and are forgotten to us. The power in resurrecting those unknown to us is life changing. This is perhaps what time at University is for—to place our stories next to those unknown to us.”

The simplest formulation harbors a desolating demand. I struggle to do this in recounting the death of Jamel Dunn, mindful that resurrection is impossible, and mindful too that I cannot quite “tell a story capable of engaging and countering the violence of abstraction.” Nothing sanctions my speech. Nobody could
authorize or grant it. “I” am unaccountable; no identity claim can satisfy the
demand, no politics of life. Speech would emerge from and respond to a certain
nothingness in which I’m undone, and yet I am tethered, unfree to escape into
nihilistic abstraction. I press Hartman’s and Holland’s words into service, I use
them, I use Dunn’s story, and I lay myself open to charges of appropriation, “woke”
grandstanding, liberal self-righteousness and scripted indignation. My intentions
don’t matter: I don’t trust them, nor should you. But my “use” matters because
these stories matter for a shared future that disaffirms racist biopolitics and in
which we are destined to search together, still, for justice and peace.

I wish that I could speak in such a way that my words would betray and
unwork the biopolitical conditions that normally grant their meaning. I wish that
my “use” (chresis) could become catachrestic, to ab-use and ex-pose so much that
is taken for granted (I return to chresis and catachresis in the book’s Refrain).
What follows might be read as a full-frontal and self-reflexive attack on the
liberal-humanist “I” addressed and tropologically constituted by biopolitics as
its ruse. From the ruins of such a subject, “I,” unsovereign, must reply, with Hart-
mann, that I too—from my own particular vantage and advantages—am a
reminder that twelve million crossed the Atlantic Ocean and the past is not over
yet, that I too am the “progeny” of this accursed social order and live by virtue of
the vestigial dead—in moral filiation, damned, and as their “beneficiary.” Jamel
Dunn was unknown to me, and his story unknown. My story I thought I knew,
but it cannot be written without his set alongside my own. There is even a silent
complicity in storytelling, it turns out. And complicity, if this is the right word,
in the story of how his story will end. The ontology of one is always multiple.
Our consociation is biopolitical, his and mine, and it is in and from this cursed
relation that we must speak out, fail, and speak still.

Remediating the Drowning of Jamel Dunn

I watched and rewatched the video of Jamel Dunn’s death. Far too many times.
But isn’t once already too many? I watched even in my sleep. It followed me
everywhere, it watched me watching. And at first, I found myself tempted to
turn away from the teens, to locate myself among those online commentators
who expressed outrage and moral condemnation.19 In this ready-to-hand way,
I might then feel good about feeling bad, 20 and share in their ostensibly humane
sentiments. And yet, a slightly closer reading of what “they” write in online
comments sections—just as with the vile comments found in feeds below digital news media—hardly affords an easy identification. Along with moral outrage one is assailed by no small share of vitriol, hatred, and often shockingly racist and inhumane tirades against these young men, and Dunn himself. Witness to this society of hate and its instrumentalization of the video, I felt I could not simply demonize or dehumanize these teens, and instead I began to imagine my being-with or alongside them—for this is how their video positions me phenomenologically and, as I’ll argue, ethically. This chapter represents that unfinished work toward another mode of seeing and writing. I began to wonder if their calm and cruel indifference—"Yeah. He dead. Buddy gone. RIP"—discloses, for these young men, what it might mean to remain resolute (Entschlossen) in the face of death.

Here, I purposely misinvoke Martin Heidegger, who understands authentic Dasein as “resolute” in one’s own being-toward-death. Heidegger writes, “Resoluteness, as authentic Being-one’s-Self, does not detach Dasein from its world, nor does it isolate it so that it becomes a free-floating ‘I.’” Perhaps it does not matter that the death they attend is not exactly their own; they nevertheless stand in relation to Dunn, their lives entwined with his death, here and now for a digital eternity. Might their resoluteness (if we can use this word) disclose for us the manner in which these young men experience their own everyday being-in-the-world, not as free-floating and sovereign, but as inexorably tethered, embodied, vulnerable? As Heidegger writes, “The Others who are thus ‘encountered’ in a ready-to-hand environmental context of equipment, are not somehow added on in thought to some Thing which is proximally just present-at-hand; such ‘Things’ are encountered from out of the world in which they are ready-to-hand for Others—a world which is always mine too in advance.”

Who speaks, in this scene, and who is addressed, if the video circuits in and through an abiding discursive regime? What kind of world is this being-with, this remediating Mitwelt? It is one I might gladly disavow, and yet it is one I inhabit all the same, mine too in advance. The video is no artifactual Thing, nor are these young men mere Things: “Even if we see the Other ‘just standing around,’ he is never apprehended as a human-Thing present-at-hand, but his ‘standing-around’ is an existential mode of Being—an unconcerned, uncircumspective tarrying alongside everything and nothing.” In an existential reading, then, we might imagine the many ways that these young men are always-already, not unlike Dunn in their video, dehumanized across our media ecologies. We might hearken back to countless other video-recorded scenes tacitly in commerce with
and tarrying alongside this one—a veritable archive of quotidian deaths and kill-
ings, whose bystanders and perpetrators are seemingly unconcerned and uncir-
cumspective, chillingly and violently attesting that Black lives do not matter. As
Susan Sontag has remarked, “to live is to be photographed,” but to die too, for
death is a whole manner of living, and all of life’s a screen.

The interface interfaces the face-to-face, and I don’t just mean high-profile
events and court battles, the murder of unarmed Black civilians by the police,
but also the subjugation in the casual and the commonplace—the heightened
biometric surveillance of Black bodies, racial profiling, slurs, stop-and-frisk,
stand-your-ground, as well as a host of scarcely perceptible gestures in their
(im)plausible deniability. In this Mitwelt, the video itself indexes the unspeakable
origins of a violence that began long before the lives of these young Black men
or the death of this particular Black man, Jamel Dunn, which is witnessed and
video-recorded for a posterity of interminable witnessing and, perhaps, grief. As
a speech act, the video is an event in its own right, akin to the event of death that
it records and reanimates with each click. It “names,” as it were, the lack of origin
of speech, its anarchism an asignifying absence, and it performs this lack as a
repeatable différance, in the (re)iteration of violence and Black death. In this,
the video obviates any clear sovereign agency or accountability, any free-floating
“I”: to say and to do (nothing) become intransitive verbs, just as killing and
letting die become disarticulable as speech/acts. Seeing and seen, the video,
the commentaries, and their digital afterlives gesture to an apartheid that is
not at all apart from me, us; together, testifying with us and against us, the
medium’s message is, in the words of Jacques Derrida, “the archival record of
the unnameable.”

Being-with and alongside these young men is so discomfiting because I must
reorient myself in relation not just to this particular scene—it is and is not sin-
gular—but also as a witness and silent accomplice to those innumerable prior
scenes for which there is no final count or account of Black life and death. The
short video is an accessory to these countless crimes, yet another artifact of what
Hartman calls “the afterlife of slavery—skewed life chances, limited access to
health and education, premature death, incarceration, and impoverishment.”
As I watch the video, I find myself alienated and immobilized at innumerable
turns, asking who sees, who is seen, in this regime of (in)visibility. Mis-en-scène,
I’m haplessly hailed by a drowning man whose cries arrive too late for me and for
him, but also by the young men themselves who speak and who watch, and watch
themselves watching, as we do, silently remediated and filtered through those
prior and enabling scenes of violence both unoriginal and as it were without origin, anarchic, unnamable. I watch these young men watching him, I occupy their gaze as a spectator absent of all but a vain and belated moral agency. Have I truly witnessed a death?

Despite my worldly co-belonging with them I’m aware that my own ethical frame is not universalizable. My ethical frame figures as “universal” only insofar as I inhabit the moral postures of an anonymous “they” (das Man), whoever they may be, on- or offline: it is authentically “mine” only inasmuch as it is “theirs” already in advance. No ethics, this. I begin to grow weary of “framing” discourse. For all I know, had the police been called, the actions of these young men may have been “framed” much differently (I return to “framing” below). It is only in looking away that I’m able to wonder how or why these young men do not share my sense of responsibility for the other’s life, how or why they not only did nothing (can at least one of them swim? make a phone call?) but chose instead to video-record Dunn’s death, finding something in this scene worthy of sharing on social media. It is only in looking away that I might hear some small remorse, some voice of conscience, some slim acknowledgment of guilt: “We saw buddy die. . . . We coulda helped his ass—didn’t even try to help him.” In watching, I’m there, time is gathered in that instant/instance.

And could it be that these young men, rather than failing to identify with Jamel Dunn—as if identification were the measure of ethicality!—identify with him all too much, and in an anticipatory resoluteness see in him their own being-toward-death somewhere between the drowned and the saved, to borrow Primo Levi’s phrase? If they don’t see what they do, could it be that they do—that they are—what they see? This, after all, is an existentialist maxim: “One is’ what one does.” Their cruelty is neither theatrical nor spectacular; its everydayness fashions violence as a virtual nonevent, the signature of a condensed durational field.

Amid their jeers and their taunting laughter, I’m struck most by the way in which this drowning man is already as good as dead to them, his death seemingly banal and unremarkable, not altogether unlike those faceless deaths conveyed in statistics and reports, the collateral damages of yet another war, the unnamed casualties of drone strikes, of gun violence, of COVID-19, or the victims of austerity who go hungry, whose illnesses go untreated, remediated and rent beyond recognizability, as if for some higher purpose, some edifying Truth, some form of nation-building, the consummation of a long-awaited Destiny. Isn’t this, our everydayness, not itself sick and surreal, laughably absurd, singularly revolting? Yes, yes. And so, what then is left for these teens to stage for us or to mock!?
Might they have glimpsed the terrible lie in our pious “culture of life”? And would history serve us to trace dim lines “to the slipperiness and elusiveness of slavery’s archive”: “the manifests of slavers; ledger books of trade goods; inventories of foodstuffs; bills of sale; itemized lists of bodies alive, infirm, and dead”?31

Their video speaks and speaks back to an agency and agencies that are not and never were theirs, exposing the fragility of the social order, unnamable archives, hallowed institutions. It reduplicates unoriginal circuits of specular violence, where the banalization of Black death is no more than another disabling and perishing32 feature of Black life, reflected here in their burlesque enactment. In the stilled time that gathers here, the eternal belatedness of my moral condemnation underscores for me the cursed impotence of my own political agency, and I resist yet cling affectively to liberal moral sentiment so as to reclaim a symbolic distinction (at least) between those who have let a man die and me who has “merely” watched as someone “just standing around.” A vain and vicious distinction, this: liberal postures of incredulity and moral outrage are lifelessly ready-to-hand. Liberal affects, too, betray their normative scripts; identities, their subsumption into the value chains of the neoliberal economy, which white out the black marks of visible, violent erasure. Many on the Left—including increasingly a radicalized alt-left—are so fond of their rituals of public self-recrimination, ceremonials of symbolic purification, cleansing, “I”-saying. We, too, are wounded, they will say. But no. Fuck that. I’d rather my grief yield to cynicism and get the better of me. And it does. I can’t sleep at night. And when I do, I’m watching still.

We are complicit in the remediating Mitwelt, in the biopolitical economies of making live and letting die that inform this video, the conditions of its making, and the recursive ways it makes us and limns in advance our potentialities-for-being across the circuits of moral condemnation as well as the material conditions in and by which Black lives might matter for us. In Foucauldian parlance, the video circumscribes a “conceptual field” or “field of battle”33 in and across which life and death are played out: how life manifests in relation to death, and significantly—but not only—the material distinctions between simple survival and full flourishing. Must we (as we tend to do) embrace a biopolitical life that (we are told) fully flourishes as it supervenes on death, where death is simply collateral damage, solitary and speechless? Or does their video not instead enact a manifest inversion of priority: a life that is solitary and speechless, a life that simply survives despite or even by virtue of death, with death as life’s organizing principle, in its everydayness and proximity? If my use of “we” here is provocative, it is less my desire to interpellate my reader than to confess my own interpolation into this
topology, my own undoing. As Fred Moten writes, “We has no address, no location. We’s general dislocation makes addressability a kind of pretense, a kind of performance, as the relay between enactment, embodiment, and indictment.”

My pretense, my performance, is not to summon my reader in a localizing address, but instead hopes to conjure, somewhere in a frozen moment between call and response, the complexion of neoliberal biopolitics, its unreconstructed whiteness, its epidermalization, where biopolitics is, as Weheliye phrases it, an “alternative term” for racism. The “I” that I conjure is the subject of biopolitics and always-already on the scene of address; my pretense, my performance, hopes to disaffirm the ways that this scene enacts, embodies, and ultimately indict those of us, its popular subjects, who find ourselves there. (I return to the metaphysics of the address in the concluding section.)

Inasmuch as “we” speak in the name of life, I’m arguing here that biopolitics is our historical a priori, and it speaks as the sacred and loquacious site of our (self-)righteous political and moral interventions, “authorizing” that speech/act in advance. As Foucault notes, by historical a priori he means “not a condition of validity for judgements, but a condition of reality for statements”—that is, rhetorical and ontological conditions, rather than epistemological ones somehow added on in thought. The rhetorical and ontological conditions of our speech/acts lend meaning and suture together a Mitwelt and some sick semblance of authenticity. And yet, these conditions cannot validate our judgments under the aegis of any unreconstructed “oneness” or “we.” Recall that biopolitics is the power to make live, but it is consubstantially the power to let die—a death that is implicitly the resoluteness and resolution of biopolitical life. It fashions our consociation with the life and death of Jamel Dunn. Biopolitics is a rhetorical and material power: I refuse to disarticulate these. Words matter, make matter. From a biopolitical perspective, then, within our unreconstructed historical a priori, the video brings us face-to-face with letting die. What escapes our biopolitical grasp and remains inassimilable in this scene is the easy manner, the seeming indifference, with which these young men speak death, and name it—death—as a loquacious force, rather than life. In this naming, life is solitary and speechless, rather than death—an inversion of “our” ontological priority, of addressivity.

If we can suspend for a moment the liberal coordinates of moral authority, rather than judge from this scene a moral failure on the part of these young men, we might instead apprehend the ways that their lives are always-already the waste products of biopolitical power, those disavowed beings who can speak death, as it were, because they have been marked for death, allowed to die, disclaimed as lives
that do not matter, lives that are not quite living. In Hartman’s words, “Waste is the interface of life and death.” Rather than an affirmative and fully flourishing life, then, here we might be compelled to assume a death that is proximate—death as an everyday manner of being-with, and Black life as survivability, as life that resolves to cheat death, to jeer and to laugh at it, to remain on the scene, and not to be apprehended by the police, when the camera stops recording. If we can read in this way, and beyond what the scene itself might “frame” for us (and what we might normatively project there within its borders), the discourse of these young men is less unconcerned and uncircumspective, less a callous transgression of “our” sacred norms, than an opening instead onto a field of battle in which life doesn’t matter, or matters otherwise, because death is proximate and quotidian, anticipated, even normative.

We might glimpse here the deathly economies of biopolitical life. The boys cannot save Dunn inasmuch as he is already unalive and always was; they speak, but, in speech autogenous and unpremeditated, they do not sentence him, they neither name nor pass judgment. Theirs is what Ann Laura Stoler might call a “colonial script,” a repetition, not quite “carnal” in her sense of this term, but virtual, digitally incarnated. And it is this digital biopolitics that concerns me here, as I hope to add obliquely or in a small way to the vast literature that links racialized bodies to (social) death—well established across Black and postcolonial studies, by critical scholars of the prison-industrial complex, of police violence, public policy, history, literature, economics, actuarial science, medicine, and so on. Across our digital mediascapes in particular, the links between life/death and digital networks are not particularly new. Already in the 1950s the early cybernetician Norbert Wiener, in his ominously titled The Human Use of Human Beings, suggests that the organism is a message, and life itself an informational network: “[The] organism is opposed to chaos, to disintegration, to death, as message is to noise.” My concern here is the racist “message” and its strange life. The noise matters—static, interference, outcry—because the network itself conveys—and normalizes—chaos, disintegration, and death. The message is that some organisms will be used and used-up.

I’m advancing an ontological argument—about how it might matter to matter—rather than an epistemological one fixated on conceptual knowledge or judgments. This relocates ethics away from immaterial universals and situates ethics as rhetorical and relational, a question of addressivity. The implication here is that I must distrust my moral sentiments, my affects or “intuitions,” as philosophers are wont to call them (wont, from wonen: to dwell). It will not
do to dwell in (or on) the old Kantian maxim to act always in such a way that our actions be willed as universal, and willfully immaterialized in a kingdom of ends. From death’s other kingdom, I’m privileging here what is existential, rather than categorical. The universal is a ruse, a formal or categorical a priori that is incommensurable with the ways our historical a priori is lived-in and lived-out, subject to recursion and re-vision, and full of deathly noise. These young men are less subjects in an epistemological regime so much as objects of an ontological one. They curse as they are cursed. It is senseless, then, to ask, Why didn’t these young men think like me and do as I would do, what (I think) I would have done? Quite simply, they are not me, and it may well be that they don’t embrace that conceit “we” call our episteme. Indeed, they are the absent presence by which our episteme has been violently affirmed and deployed, recursively, along such intersecting différends as race, culture, socioeconomic status, dis/ability, education, and the moral orthopedics these have fostered. Against the pious positivities of biopolitical life, which constitute the conceptual field of our historical a priori, these young men are disavowed, left for dead—spoken of in the passive voice, mere noise—until such a moment as this, when something unbidden breaks into our horizons of Being, and speech begins after death, becomes death’s work.

The video is a speech/act that begins after death, and a belated means to that end. This is an ontological, rather than simply chronological, claim. The video may well end, chronologically, with the death of Jamel Dunn, but ontologically it takes its orientation and its inception from this end, an incipient death that is never far from a police presence, never far from life-threatening violence, systemic racism, white supremacy. Its inception is prefigured by the reception of other hateful speech/acts—many also captured on video—in which Black lives and Black deaths fail to matter, and where video evidence less pixelated and less ambiguous than this fails to persuade grand juries keen to acquit white police officers of their heinous crimes. We as viewers are accomplices in the viewing, in the circulation and recirculation, of these scenes and their virtual addresses, positioned in some sense (not somehow added on in thought) as ontologically and materially prior, as enabling conditions for the recursion of systemic, racialized violence, and cruel spectatorship. The recursive curse is ours. The media infrastructure is a racializing assemblage, a feedback loop, a dopamine-driven compulsion to repeat. And the event of Dunn’s death does not take place without us watching: according to the choreographies of social media, it is produced for us, reproduced by us.
I submit that these cycles of recursive violence and the digital t(r)opologies of hateful speech/acts constitute the historical a priori of the young men behind the camera, where racist and racializing tropes circulate in and as our digital *topos*. To recall Foucault’s terms, this history is a “condition of reality” rather than a “condition of validity for judgements.” In other words, it is a historical system of traces, disarticulable singularities, and heterogeneities that constitute a racist biopolitical onto-logic, a reality sustained with normative and regulative functions, remediating mechanisms, unnamable archives, and distributed strategies for its reproduction. Beneath the shrill and so often pious biopolitical proclamations that “All Lives Matter!” the Dunn video replays and resituates the resolute violence of biopolitics—a violence that biopolitics constitutively disavows by fixing violent recursions (such as this one) as chronological, rather than ontological, as discrete and aleatory “events” in the past, and as constitutive rather than performative in their power to name, to conjure, and conjure away. In a critical reading, however, the video also tacitly avows and disaffirms as it were this violence as our biopolitical infirmity, our sickness unto death. In this, we might say, the video is thanatopolitical, an irruption of death into the sick and surreal life of biopolitics, and a rupture— with our resolute indifference to death. Heidegger once again: “Resoluteness ‘exists’ only as a resolution which understandingly projects itself. . . . Only in a resolution is resoluteness sure of itself.” Despite the low resolution of the video, in its pixelated and grainy going-under, if we cannot look away might we glimpse, if only briefly, and unsure of ourselves, the resolutions of biopolitics and its resolute devotion to letting die?

**Alt-Free Speech and Hate Speech 2.0**

In watching the video of Dunn’s death, I’m forced to reconstruct the face-to-face as the teens record and verbally interject, glossing Dunn’s death, performing a certain toxic masculinity, we might say, according to the choreographies of social media. I’m forced to conjure a face and a race—to assign agency and blame, as many online commentators do, whether on the basis of a liberal ontology or a racist one—because I never quite see Dunn’s distant and pixelated face, and I don’t see the faces of the boys who video-record him. Nor do I see those countless other scenes of Black death, but I’m left to speculate how these might have informed or directed this scene, as it unfolds, or how these other scenes might have fed into the lived experience of Dunn and the boys behind the camera, as
well as my own subjectivity as I watch them watching. If they “appear” for me, if I can “locate” body-subjects in this refracted and refractory scene of address, much is my own doing, a projective and protective mechanism by which I might easily and implicitly disavow the historicity of this scene and phantasmatically shore up the sovereign agency of the teens, as well as my own sovereignty as someone “merely” watching. But neither their speech nor mine occurs in a vacuum. In the words of the critical race theorist and legal scholar Charles R. Lawrence III, “The racist acts of millions of individuals are mutually reinforcing and cumulative because the status quo of institutionalized white supremacy remains long after the deliberate racist actions subside.”

And today, the status quo of institutionalized white supremacy is increasingly digital, where racist speech/acts don’t so much subside as perdure in their ever-present, sometimes viral, reanimation and replay.

Online speech is notoriously difficult, often nearly impossible, to regulate or contain, to prosecute or punish, let alone to categorize as definitively hateful or injurious. Digital interfaces and devices allow the easy propagation, the remediation, of online content, for the most part globally, while in the United States the First Amendment continues to protect “free speech,” now in a digital world. In 1990, in a text published before the internet age, Lawrence would write, “Much of the argument for protecting racist speech is based on the distinction that many civil libertarians draw between direct, face-to-face racial insults, which they think deserve first amendment protection, and all other fighting words, which they concede are unprotected by the first amendment.”

Lawrence argued that this distinction is problematic, and he drew largely on anti-Black racist speech/acts that take place—still—on university and college campuses. He troubled the liberal presumption that speech redounds on the preexisting identity of the speaker or audience, locating injurious agency in the deep historicity of words themselves. In addition to face-to-face speech, he examined other media forms, including racist leaflets and posters and graffiti, to argue that speech is conduct, that speech acts. This is the case, he argued, due to “the immediacy of the injurious impact of racial insults,” which are “like receiving a slap in the face.” “The injury is instantaneous,” he continued. “There is neither an opportunity for immediate reflection on the idea conveyed nor an opportunity for responsive speech.”

The intended effect of such speech is terror and silence; the rejoinder often figures, if it does at all, as mere noise.

Lawrence’s argument was prescient and warrants renewed reflection today. The instantaneity of ubiquitous digital communication platforms—including
“killer apps” like YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Reddit, and TikTok—pose a distinct and unanticipated challenge for advocates of free speech, while they are a seeming boon to those who propagate hate speech. The collapse of the face-to-face\(^6\) and the rise of the interface leaves civil libertarians in a quandary because a straightforward politics of (preexisting) identity will not suffice to localize intentional agency or map the vectors of injurious speech/acts. Moreover, liberal theorists have little to say about how identity is iteratively constituted in and through such speech acts themselves; quite simply, in online speech it is difficult, indeed, often impossible, to index a prior and consenting subject, a possessive individual or “I” recognizable according to the coordinates of everyday spacetime. Lawrence’s text was published the same year as Judith Butler’s *Gender Trouble*, whose theory of gender performativity offered a groundbreaking vocabulary for understanding the power of performative speech on subjectivation. In an oft-cited passage, Butler writes, “Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being.”\(^7\) Butler’s discussion on gender echoes Lawrence’s understanding of race and racism, its institutionalization, its historicity, and the ways that speech/acts are normalizing and “framing,” reinforcing and cumulative. Much like Lawrence, Butler seeks to deconstruct identitarian forms of gender and race, at times taking issue with the liberal tenets of possessive individualism. Yet Butler will ultimately reject Lawrence’s impassioned call to regulate at least some forms of racist hate speech through legal means.

Perhaps calls for greater regulation were doomed from the start, not necessarily because such regulation would contravene the First Amendment (Lawrence argues that strictly speaking it would not), but because law remains wedded to a liberal paradigm that relies on a presumptive individuality and agency that, with its identitarian logics, is incommensurable with the ways that speech and conduct are coextensive. This is a constitutive failure of law, for if law were to admit the fundamental relation between speech and conduct, its own speech acts (judgments that are themselves conducts) would founder, and its foundational authority would be undermined, caught in a performative contradiction.\(^8\) Law has a constitutive hauntological problem. Indeed, a phantasmatic sovereign authority continues to underwrite the operation and force of law, sometimes anxiously and violently (consider law’s serial acquittal of white police officers who kill unarmed Black civilians—biopolitically “justified” as letting die in defense of life). It is just this state (and police) power that Butler was unwilling to shore up
through the increased powers that come with legislation. And even if these measures were legislated, as Lawrence had advocated, they would be impossible to implement, especially today, in the context of contemporary digital media. This debate as it unfolded in the 1990s could not have anticipated the manner in which digital media would transform the problem of hate speech, obsoleting the subjectivity implicit in the face-to-face and displacing the “total speech situation,” as Austin would say, in and as the interface.49

In 1997, Butler published Excitable Speech, a book-length study on performativity in the context of hate speech, which revisited J. L. Austin’s distinction between illocutionary and perlocutionary speech acts. In Austin’s terms, we might say that Lawrence understands hate speech as illocutionary—it performs or does what it says, a performative that relies on sociohistorical conventions, and, when certain conditions are met, such speech will prove injurious: “in saying x I do y,” to invoke Austin’s formula. Butler, however, takes critical distance from the illocution, theorizing instead some more hopeful way that racist hate speech might be “restaged” or “resignified” (Butler’s words), because it is not unequivocally under the control of a sovereign subject who speaks. Butler reframes racist speech acts as perlocutionary, and echoes Austin: “Whereas illocutionary acts proceed by way of conventions, perlocutionary acts proceed by way of consequences.”50 And Butler is surely correct to distinguish the temporal immediacy of the illocution from the temporal lag of the perlocution. The perlocution relies on a temporal gap or caesura between call and response in which performative “failures” and “faultlines” (Butler’s words again) might be exploited, ushering in the promised future of the perlocution, when hate speech, at times and in time, might be turned back against the speaker to subvert that speech/act and to disrupt its injurious force. A favorite example from gender studies is the resignification or restaging of the word “queer”; in hip-hop culture, a more contentious example is the use of the N-word (where the speaker and the setting continue to be of paramount importance).

As I emphasized in chapter 2, there is no way to guarantee the successful execution of a perlocution precisely because, according to Austin, it often contravenes rather than relies on conventions; its success or failure is situational, sociohistorical, and does not come down to the intentionality or interiority of the speaker (even though Austin himself does not quite relinquish this liberal model of subjectivity). In Butler’s reading, the injurious effects of hate speech are a matter of perlocutionary consequences or sequels, which suggests that these effects are non-necessary, or even non-causal: “by saying x I do y,” to invoke Austin
again. This is much as Hayden White had argued when he wrote that the trope “swerves in locution sanctioned neither by custom nor logic.” The “swerve” (a spatial metaphor) of the perlocution is also temporal, and it potentially subverts the force of the trope because it moves here in uncustomary or illogical ways, which cannot quite be predicted. Whereas Lawrence would emphasize the historical conventions, customs, and institutionalization of hateful speech/acts, deeming them illocutionary, Butler would emphasize the ways that they are also susceptible to perlocutionary redeployment in the right context and if there is time for their restaging and resignification.

But time is the crux of the matter. Given the instantaneity, the re-iterativity, and ubiquitous “now” of the digital interface, the temporality of hate speech collapses and its historicity is gathered in an instant/instance: there is often no wider context, no time and no place for a face-to-face response. This undermines one essential condition for the perlocution—namely, the temporal gap or caesura, the time for an effective restaging or resignification. Hypertextualized and caught in a digital repeat cycle, that subversive future increasingly is foreclosed, while the past becomes increasingly ontologized, condensed and suspended in the ever-present digital now. It is not that digital hate speech is without history; rather, its historicity is gathered in the instant/instance, decontextualized and potentially intensified. I propose calling this its hyperhistoricity, an attention deficit disorder that is constitutive of the digital interface itself and that is often strategically mobilized in digital hate speech. It is the ultimate framing device. Here, we lose sight of the trope’s deep historicity, the wider t(r)opologies of its turns and re-turns, in time and as time.

In the digital context, some twenty-odd years after this heady high theory surrounding free speech and hate speech, I’m therefore much less sanguine about the futures of the perlocution, its liberatory promise, or the fungibility of the racist trope. In the late 1990s, a younger and more idealistic me had felt hopeful for the righteous proliferation of perlocutions—resignifications that might at last spell the end of a sovereign speaker. If the speaker was no longer sovereign over a hateful trope, then in theory that trope could be repeatedly and multiply restaged and subverted. And at this time (just before tech bubbles, dot-com booms, rampant deregulation, and venture capitalism run amok), many of us believed that the internet would play a perlocutionary part in this “democratization,” and perhaps (to echo contemporary parlance), in anti-racist and decolonial tactics. Alexander Galloway summarizes the conception of sovereignty that is transformed by virtue of our digital networks: “Sovereignty and power are defined
in terms of verticality, centralization, essence, foundation, or rigid creeds of whatever kind…. Thus the sovereign is the one who is centralized, who stands at the top of a vertical order of command, who rests on an essentialist ideology in order to retain command, who asserts, dogmatically, unchangeable facts about his own essence and the essence of nature. This is the model of kings and queens, but also egos and individuals.” Vertical models of power, long critiqued by poststructuralism, have been structurally displaced in the digital context. But if the racist trope is no longer vertically oriented, if its power is no longer centralized, if it is networked and rhizomatic, it is for all that no less pluripotent. Quite to the contrary, in our case study the digital distribution of horrific death is played and replayed across YouTube and social media, turning and re-turning across heteronomic fields of spectatorship that are reticulate, networked, anarchic, rather than vertical or centralized or essential. Here, the topology itself—the interface, virtually without time or place—may be incommensurable with conventional conceptions of sovereignty, but far from freeing us it heralds new iterations of racist biopolitics and new tactics of white power.

To apprehend the video of Dunn’s death is always already to have entered into commerce with countless other scenes (its deep historicity), which arrive in *après-coup*—as an aftershock—to choreograph the execution and reception of this digital “event.” We can’t quite say that any of the actors on this scene enjoy a sovereign agency. Their actions are themselves the perlocutionary consequences or sequels of racist tropes, speech/acts that are mirrored and reactivated by each hateful comment post, each click, each “like.” There is no face-to-face, no meeting of ostensibly sovereign subjects positioned to “debate” or “disagree” in the liberal public sphere. And so, the eternal re-turns of Dunn’s death muddy these waters and force us to rethink the sovereign agencies, and the localization—the scene and scenography—of the racist trope.

If the racist trope was once localized and authorized in the sovereign subject’s speech/act, and if that speech/act once constituted the scene—the time and the place—of racism’s conventional execution and uptake, what, then, are the sovereign conceits of the digital racist trope, when execution and uptake are simultaneous, when time and place are constitutively displaced, off-scene, in an address without address? In Galloway’s terms, it is a “reticular fallacy” to assume that “given the elimination of such dogmatic verticality, there will follow an elimination of sovereignty as such.” Sovereignty is no longer vertical: and yet it persists as the ruse of the network itself, a hyperhistorical agency that is now horizontal (but not democratic), crowdsourced, distributed, reticulate, machinic, and molecular.
The racist trope itself retains the sovereign power to name and to harm—but by virtue of the network, which is neither quite localized nor localizing. “I” watch a man drown, “I” watch the boys watching, watch myself watching them watching, and “I” find myself unable to arrest the motion, to locate a sovereign agent or singular doer, in a cruel and recursive spectatorship that is as much mine as it is theirs or his or ours. And if there is anything so fanciful as popular sovereignty in this instance, we are all to blame, each of us, popular agents of aggressive order, aggressive agents of popularity, from curated profiles to memes, the lifeblood of our social media ecologies.

If tropes themselves exercise a sham sovereignty by virtue of the digital scene, if we are subject to them, our participation in these networks merely affords us a sort of sovereignty by proxy, and an illusory self-sovereignty over them. Apprehending a death untethered from its own deeply historical time and place, we perform a sovereign conceit with each click, stopping the motion, fixing the meaning, and resituating ourselves as “merely” watching. It hardly matters if we are “for” or “against” what we see; either way, our sense of self relies on this social network, shored up iteratively and enacted repeatedly, whether we “merely” watch or join in some digital campaign that assents to or dissents from what we see. Our digital platforms become indispensable because they traffic in a phantasmatic sovereignty, where the self-possessed individual, the “I,” is the very ruse by which our connective networks hold sway and cultivate a subjectivity that is docile and easily manipulated. They feed us a profoundly false sense of agency and freedom, which is repeated and validated by our newsfeeds.

Ostensibly sovereign individuals may be unwittingly complicit, or indeed, may intend in this context to do the opposite of what they nevertheless freely do. To offer one example, in her research on white supremacy and the phenomenon of cloaked websites, Jessie Daniels cites the example of several websites that emerged following Hurricane Katrina—websites with domain names such as KatrinaFamilies.com and ParishDonations.com, which appeared to offer a legitimate platform to help victims of the disaster. As Daniels’s research shows, however, web traffic from these particular sites was redirected to InternetDonations.org, which was registered to a member of the neo-Nazi National Alliance, who was sued by the state of Missouri in 2005 “for violating state fund-raising law and for ‘omitting the material fact that the ultimate company behind the defendants’ websites supports white supremacy.’” Without a great deal of sleuthing, and a fair degree of technical skill, those who out of kindness donated to “Katrina victims” via these websites could not have known they were not only doing
nothing for those in need, but were supporting a neo-Nazi and his empire. Writing in 2009, Daniels notes that these particular websites were no longer active, but that this individual "continues to maintain a number of other websites, including the overtly anti-Semitic JewWatch.com and the cloaked site AmericanCivilRightsReview.com." As I write nine years later, the former is still active, while Google searches indicate that the latter was active until recently, and is cited by other websites (some overtly racist) and even as a legitimate source by a handful of peer-reviewed academic articles. Those innocently searching the internet for information on civil rights might until recently have found themselves on a website driven by a very different—and cloaked—ideology.

Cloaked websites, as Daniels explains, are not blatantly racist or hateful, they make no sovereign decree, but instead offer "an alternative way of presenting, publishing, and debating ideas" about race, racism, and racial equality. The stealth sovereignty of the racist trope is built into the interface itself, and it's difficult to account for its perlocutionary sequels and consequences. Another example beyond race, but surely intersecting with it, includes websites that masquerade as legitimate sites about reproductive health but are in fact cloaked sites run by pro-life groups. These represent a veiled form of propaganda conveyed less—or less explicitly—by epistemic content than by rhetorical form, thus concealing their ideological and political purposes. Daniels's use of the term "alternative," above, is chillingly prescient: Donald Trump and his supporters exploited these covert networks, embracing the "alternative facts" that helped propel the alt-white/right. Once-trusted sources of information, including bona fide news outlets, were decried regularly by Trump and his administration as "fake news." And in recent years, cloaking has gone viral with trolls and "sockpuppets"—fake or "bot" accounts on social media platforms, including Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and the like. These accounts appear to belong to real people but are used to spread spam or support political propaganda, often to drown out political dissent or to discourage voter turnout. They were used extensively in the 2016 American election, to support Marine Le Pen in France, Brexit in the United Kingdom, and beyond. This is how propaganda is disseminated—and cloaked—across big data media ecologies in the digital age. And even as I write, these examples are surely quaint and out of date.

Social media on the whole, not unlike the mediatized event of Dunn's death, are highly participatory and demand at least a passive complicity in their propagation. "Consumption" is a misleading term here, for it falsely presumes an agentic consumer, a liberal subject; indeed, subjectivity is produced through the very
process of “prosuming” (producing + consuming) media content and curating one’s digital public self. It is well known that social media platforms, such as YouTube, Facebook, TikTok, and Twitter, produce little to no content of their own: it is user-generated. In this neoliberal business model, with nothing tangible to sell, corporate profits rely on the exploitation of users’ data, which are technologically amassed (big data), monetized, and sold to advertisers and political campaigns. This puts a new spin on what the early media theorist Marshall McLuhan once characterized as “cool” media, where the user is the content. Extending McLuhan’s understanding of “cool” for the age of social media and biopolitics helps us to take account of cool networks, cool content, and our chilling relations with them—relations that are highly participatory and that blur the distinction between active producer and passive consumer.

McLuhan’s distinction between “hot” and “cool” media is deceptively straightforward: “A hot medium is one that extends one single sense in high definition.” In other words, “hot media do not leave so much to be filled in or completed by the audience. Hot media are, therefore, low in participation, and cool media are high in participation or completion by the audience.” Written in the 1960s, McLuhan’s examples of hot and cool media will strike contemporary readers as unintuitive. For McLuhan, television in the 1960s was a quintessentially “cool” medium, a “depth experience,” because early television images were low-resolution: “The mosaic form of the TV image demands participation and involvement in depth of the whole being, as does the sense of touch.” The “whole being” suggests a synesthetic experience, one that marshals multiple senses simultaneously, blending them, even reversing them. Today, our HDTVs are high-resolution, a frenzy of hot visual surfaces, rather than cool depths. However, while they extend the sense of vision, they nevertheless constitute eminently cool networks of (re)production and networked subjectivity, especially given the confluence and interdependency of multiple media technologies and platforms (internet, streaming service, device, app, social media, advertising, etc.).

The “consequence” or “sequel” of an intended perlocution is therefore easily flipped, as we saw with cloaked websites and racist tropes. These “flips” or reversals are a racist tactic of the alt-right and alt-light. They seem to understand the stakes as a battle for identity and affective attachment. McLuhan remarks, “When a community is threatened in its image of itself by rivals or neighbours, it goes to war. Any technology that weakens a conventional identity image, creates a response of panic and rage which we call ‘war.’ Heinrich Hertz, the inventor of radio, put the matter very briefly: ‘The consequence of the image will be the image
of the consequences.” “Hertz’s Law” is formulated as a familiar chiasmus, a media trope that demonstrates the inherent reversibility of all media, here inverting the “image” and the “consequences” to trouble their causal relation, to suspend any certainty over which term is consequent, which antecedent. This intermediation is difficult to grasp, as N. Katherine Hayles writes more recently: “The contemporary indoctrination into linear causality is so strong that it continues to exercise a fatal attraction for much contemporary thought. It must be continually resisted if we are fully to realize the implications of multicausal and multilayered hierarchical systems, which entail distributed agency, emergent processes, unpredictable coevolutions, and seemingly paradoxical interactions between convergent and divergent processes.”

McLuhan’s background in rhetoric, I believe, allowed him to anticipate these structures and to theorize media as a reversible relation between “figure” and “ground.” If the “consequences” of a mediatized image include demonstrable effects and affects, it is no less true that these figures constitute at the same time and in their own right an “imaginary” field, an environment or ground, that in no small way (pre)conditions the meaning and the force of the “consequences.” Image and consequence, figure and ground, stand in the same reciprocal relation as medium and message, because “the ‘content’ of any medium is always another medium” and “because it is the medium that shapes and controls the scale and form of human association and action.”

In the context of digital media, the chiasmus is the master trope. The global electric telecommunication network, as McLuhan called it, is a stunning synecdoche for biopolitics: it permits a diffuse yet immanently connected digital tribalism without individuals, a system in which nobody “acts” as such, and nobody is “acted upon.” The video of Dunn’s death-in-replay is a chilling synecdoche in this regard: life and death play out without us ever seeing the teens or their handheld device, yet their device is that by virtue of which we see, along with our own devices and the digital service networks that join us to them across space and time in an instant. In letting die, nobody, strictly speaking, causes Dunn’s death or kills him; letting die is a social media effect, codes and conventions in commerce with prior and enabling scenes of subjection, refracted through a racializing prism. Digital code, racial coding, and racist “moral” codes and protocols are woven into the interface. Distinct from speech or writing, code is “executable” language and “is addressed both to humans and intelligent machines.” Old binaries are destabilized, even obsolesced: subject and object, active and passive, antecedent and consequent, human and machine. Together, it is this racializing assemblage that calibrates human “agency,” much as it does for those teens whose
viewing and recording practices that day cannot be understood apart from the digital t(r)opologies that situate them in relation to Dunn and to us. It should be said that none of this is to exonerate the teens for what they do and fail to do, but it begins to expose an ontology and a world that we share with them, and by virtue of which the question of our own address must surface in Jamel Dunn’s pixelated going-under.

The Address of the “I”

In one of the conspicuously few texts in which Foucault discusses race and racism, he argues that it is in the early nineteenth century—along with the birth of biopolitics— “that racism is inscribed as the basic mechanism of power, as it is exercised in modern States.” I must leave to the side my concerns with Foucault’s notion of “inscription” here, which has been addressed by other scholars (e.g., if racism is the basic mechanism of biopolitics, then why so little mention of it in Foucault’s oeuvre, and moreover, where did biopolitical racism come from if, as Foucault claims, racism had already been in existence “for a very long time”? ). My interests here are decidedly more rhetorical, focusing on addressivity in the context of racist biopolitics. I would like to home in on what Foucault characterizes as the two “functions” of biopolitical racism.

The so-called first function, in response to the question “What in fact is racism?” is that racism, in fact, “is primarily [d’abord] a way of introducing [le moyen d’introduire enfin] a break into the domain of life that is under power’s control: the break between what must live and what must die.” Racism is thus a breaking mechanism that sets in motion making live and letting die; it is “a way” of operationalizing biopolitics. In the original French text, it is the means or medium (le moyen, also “the average”) “introduced,” here, “finally” or “at last” (enfin), as if biopolitics had long sought the means of mediatizing and propagating itself. And while the word enfin is omitted from the English translation, it is worth noting the symmetry that Foucault’s auditors would have heard, between means and (finally) ends: le moyen and enfin sound very much the same as le moyen . . . en fins, “means . . . into ends.” The homonym suggests that the means of racism are (finally) its ends, that means and ends are reversible or chiasmatic.

Indeed, two short paragraphs above Foucault had introduced a parallel structure, also described as a function, asking “How will the power to kill and the function of murder operate in this technology of power, which takes life as both
its object and its objective?" We might say that, functionally, the object of racism is its objective, means and ends, speech and act, locked in illocutionary im/mediacy. Foucault concludes this paragraph in summary: “That is the first function of racism: to fragment, to create caesuras within the biological continuum addressed by [auquel s’adresse] biopower.”77 The transitive function is figured as rhetorical: an address, and indeed, a racializing address that speaks in and as biopolitical power, and in speaking, fragments and creates caesuras, as if now suddenly it is not biopolitics that had long sought racism as its means or its vocation, but quite the inverse, that racism had finally found its means, its voice, in the performative address of biopolitics. This chiasmatic ambiguity of means and ends, objects and objectives, leaves us unable to grasp any causality or chronology, and Foucault is no help here, whether intentionally or symptomatically.

The address becomes central as we read Foucault’s “second function” of racism. Here his third-person account shifts to appear in the form of a direct address, to a you, spoken first in the second-person plural (the polite vous), and then, abruptly, in the second-person singular, in familiar form (tu): “Racism has a second function. Its role is, if you like [si vous voulez], to allow the establishment of a positive relation of this type: “The more you [tu] kill, the more deaths you [tu] will cause” or “The very fact that you [tu] let more die will allow you to live more [toi tu vivras].” The “positive relation” of making live (more) and letting die, the interface, figures here in quotation marks as a direct and familiar address that cuts across collective will (vouloir: si vous voulez) to suggest a rhetorical meaning-making, a speaking (vouloir-dire). Who speaks with such familiarity, addressing the listener in the intimate singularity of the tu rather than, more politely and conventionally, as vous? And who, moreover, is hailed as the imagined addressee? After stating that the racist relation was originally a relationship of war, Foucault says that its function is now “completely new,” neither military, nor warlike, nor a political relationship, but a biological one—or more precisely, a “biological-type relationship.”78

The “newness” of biologized race suggests yet another caesura, a break with the past, and an ahistoricity (even a nascent hyperhistoricity) in and as the biological body itself. But not for long, and not only. Here the biologized/racialized body is quickly displaced and doubled once again as a distinctly rhetorical function, whose “positive relation” is stunningly assumed, grosso modo, by the “I” in the first-person singular. And so, from the third-person to the second-person address, we now read a truly remarkable and rare self-address—direct speech once again suspended in quotation marks: “The more inferior species die out, the
more abnormal individuals are eliminated, the fewer degenerates there will be in the species as a whole, and the more I—as species rather than individual—can live, the stronger I will be, the more vigorous I will be. I will be able to proliferate.” “I” am hailed and hail myself in the name of biopolitical life. “I” am consigned, licensed to kill. The “I” becomes one with the species or, rather, subspecies or race or population (here also mortifying “abnormal individuals” and “degenerates,” biological threats, threats to my “purity”). We must not forget that this is (in Foucault’s words) a “biological-type relationship” on a “biological continuum” “that appears to be a biological domain.” In this respect it is a cultural racism (also seizing on abnormals and degenerates), the cultural inscription of a reified biology that “appears” and is typologized by the biological imaginary—much as “blood” has always traveled between culture and biology, and as “life” has come to figure as both a molecular and a moral calling, the duplicitous signature of biopolitics, as I have argued throughout.

Whose voice does Foucault apostrophize in these lines? Who speaks in this manner? Who is spoken, hailed? These are perhaps misleading questions, for they presume a sovereign power and vocation, and a sovereign addressee in the frame, a “who.” If biopolitics operates in and as the caesura, it figures here as an ontological gap, rather than an expressly temporal one (as with the perlocution). And yet the racializing caesura is nevertheless constituted rhetorically, in and by an address. My claim here is that biopolitics is a performative speech act, but this speech is not sovereign: it has no clear time or place, and much like discourse within our digital media ecologies, its speech is diffuse, refractile and refractory. Nobody speaks, but rather, life itself speaks in the tropes of timeliness and life-time, from the counterfactual futures of making live. Life as it were instates the regime of addressivity by virtue of which the “I” speaks, ensuring in advance its addressability and its executive power to address, to summon, to sentence, to kill. The ruse of biopolitical power is the “I,” the “one” (to recall Hartman), whose life and whose purity are (or will be) at risk. “I” am addressed biopolitically as a “one” and “oneness,” here and now. “I” speaks “as species rather than individual,” and this “specificity,” this consociation, is, Foucault says, a question concerning technology: “The specificity of modern racism, or what gives it its specificity, is not bound up with mentalities, ideologies, or the lies of power. It is bound up with the technique of power, with the technology of power.”

It is, we might imagine, the abstract voice of biopolitical racism, in which means and ends, antecedent and consequent, matter little in their priority. This voice, and indeed not just this voice, but its addressee, are constituted—un-self-reflexively, technologically, and ontologically—as white. It is precisely
this presumption, this self-evident oneness, that is performed in and as the
address, in and as the voice of life itself, arriving as a projective force, and duping
us into mistaking the effect as the cause. As Moten writes, “What it would be to
have an ontological status, and know it, is what it would be to be a white person.”
Today, the technologies of this biopolitical address could find no better metaphor,
no better mechanism, materially or morally, than our digital networks—racism’s
contemporary means and its medium. To understand this scene of address permits
us to chart the t(r)opographies of white power, by which ontological status is
granted or withheld, and it returns me to myself as a situated subject who speaks
and who writes from this scene.

Powerless as I am, by any means or in any medium, to address Dunn or the
boys who recorded his death, I’m left with the profound question of what it could
mean to apprehend this scene, but also to forbear it—to endure it, and to hold
and hold open my biopolitical consociation with them. In my effort to hold and
hold open, I’m indebted to Fred Moten and Stephen Harney for their theoriza-
tion of “the hold,” in which they invoke the Black activist critic and poet Frank
B. Wilderson III: “Uncertainty surrounds the holding of things and in a man-
er . . . in which the algorithm generates its own critique, logistics discovers too
late that the sea has no back door.” The hold, in an obvious sense, is the hold
of the slave ship—one remediating technology of historical racism, a “container”
governed by logistics in a globalized economy. But perhaps it is also the “hold”
of digital phantasy and projection, and the algorithmic authority of the remedi-
ating tropes in which we are held, apprehended, but also, paradoxically, by which
we are called to hold, apprehend, and through which we are destined: “Modern
logistics is founded with the first great movement of commodities, the ones that
could speak. It was founded in the Atlantic slave trade, founded against the
Atlantic slave.”
I’m indebted as well to Christina Sharpe’s theorization of the
hold, in its multiple historical meanings, which she cites from the Oxford English
Dictionary: “Hold—a large space in the lower part of a ship or aircraft in which
cargo is stowed . . . ; continue to follow (a particular course); keep or detain
(someone); a fortress.”

Sharpe argues that we are held “in the wake” of the Atlantic Slave Trade, and
she reads (and we read) the Middle Passage together with scenes of Black life
and (social) death in contemporary America, alongside the plight of those who
survived the Haitian earthquake of 2010, and alongside the fate of African
migrants who continue to cross the Mediterranean Sea, where human cargo—
once again, ever still—is thrown into the sea, dead or drowned, and where those
who survive the journey face profound hate/speech and a life of extreme precarity
on European shores and beyond. Sharpe does not allow us to forget that history is not relegated to the past, that our globalized economy continues to rely on the fungibility of human lives. These multiple scenes are not for her discrete; they assail us from her text—means and ends, antecedents and consequents, become fluid in the wake. And she asks, "What does it look like, entail, and mean to attend to, care for, comfort, and defend, those already dead, those dying, and those living lives consigned to the possibility of always-imminent death, life lived in the presence of death; to live this imminence and immanence as and in the 'wake'?"

Sharpe’s strategy for “seeing and reading otherwise . . . reading and seeing something in excess of what is caught in the frame” and for care-fully countering a “deeply atemporal” yet abiding racism—involves what she calls “Black annotation and Black redaction,” which she understands as “ways to make Black life visible, if only momentarily, through the optic of the door.” This polyvalent “wake work,” as she calls it, involving its own reversals and anagrammatology, seeks to shift what we might call our frames of reference. In writing, I have been mindful of the risks of reframing violence, only to reduplicate it, in recounting Dunn’s story. Doors also have frames. And as I’m unable to perform Black annotation and Black redaction, I have tried to demonstrate how duplicability is itself an essential element of the digital t(r)opologies of racist hate/speech, part of its deep historicity reenacted across its hyperhistorical instantiations, of which I myself am a part. Thus, any strategy must include temporization—locating oneself in the depths of historicity’s hold—and to counter the hyperhistoricity of digital hate/speech, which is “deeply atemporal” (Sharpe), virtually extemporaneous.

Given my discussion on digital media and the temporality of the perlocution, above, I find myself compelled to argue against contemporary “framing” discourse and against strategies that would “reframe” racist speech/acts. In the digital context, those frames—whether framings or reframings—are all too easily caught in a condensed durational field, a hyperhistorical and hypertextual “now.” The sea has no back door. Consider for a moment the many theorist-activists who turn to a discussion of art and creativity—poetry, song, dance, fine art, literature, etcetera—in an effort to escape the biopolitical enclosure, to see and to read and, indeed, to live otherwise. This turn is a humanizing trope, yet often with little account of the onto-logics or prior politics of humanization. And if this is the work of reframing—annotating and redacting—it seems to place great faith in the power of the perlocution, the promise of another form of address, another means and medium, and a reckoning with irrecoverable loss beyond the labors
of mourning. In Butler’s terms, we “must repeat those injuries without precisely reenacting them.” And, with cautious optimism, Achille Mbembe writes, “If there is one characteristic trait of artistic creation, it is that, at the beginning of the act of creation, we always rediscover violence at play, a miming of sacrilege or transgression, through which art aims to free the individual and their community from the world as it has been and as it is.”

This work is of course vital: I devote my teaching to it, and my students’ engagement with it always teaches me to think otherwise. But with my own words, here, at best I can only hope to begin to unwork, for I’m no artist, no poet, and because I don’t know how to adjudicate the aesthetic, political, or even revolutionary value of art—however brave or beautiful—and to distinguish these works from the digital artifact of Dunn’s death, which holds me close, overpowers me, but which is also variously aestheticized and politicized, streaming as terror and vile entertainment across our digital media. It is crass, I realize, to consider this grisly video alongside works of artistic creation, and I would not wish to negate what Butler calls the “democratic value of being offended” by art that disturbs our scripted and familiar frame(s) of reference. Yet, my worry persists, and I recall Charles R. Lawrence III’s argument: that it is not only old liberal lawmakers or those who defend the First Amendment who disagree on where to draw the thin line between freedom of expression and hate speech. We, too, are at a loss, particularly given the immediacy of a digital culture dominated by memes, social media tropes, and the re-turns (and reenactments) that they convey. If I myself am framed, my power to reframe will never quite escape those wider frames in which I find myself. And these frames are so often, so easily, politicized. For example, does Dana Schutz’s Open Casket—a 2016 portrait of fourteen-year-old Emmett Till’s mutilated dead body after he was lynched by two white men in 1955—reduplicate the violence of racialized terror and death? Does it “merely” trade in the event it depicts? Is it indexical? Or does it promise a critique and open for us an aesthetic space of potential perlocutionary reparation and justice, or even just auspicious rage? Who can say, and with what authority? The same questions have emerged more recently over the presence—and fate—of Civil War and colonial statues. These debates permeate our cancel culture. In the classroom, a fearful silence settles in as some students are afraid to speak, terrified that they will offend, that they won’t invoke the right language, that they’ll be mocked or labeled or “canceled” by their classmates.

The turn to art—which itself is always multiply “framed”—invokes a sovereign power, a “one” (and oneness) who, we must imagine, is sanctioned to see and to
The living from The dead

speak from an authoritative frame of reference (unless of course we embrace a radical relativism). But this begs the question of identity and authority. The line between free speech and hate speech might once have been adjudicated in the courts (recall law’s phantasmatic sovereignty) on the basis of First Amendment protections, as it was in 1999 with Chris Ofili’s Virgin Mary, which was the subject of a racist censorship campaign and lawsuit led by New York City mayor Rudolph Giuliani (who lost his case, thankfully). But such outrage from the Right now seems so long ago, from another time altogether. By sharp contrast, less than two decades later the display of Schutz’s Open Casket at the Whitney Biennial in 2017 was met with outrage this time from the Left—and with demands across social media to take down Schutz’s work on the grounds that it appropriates and exploits marginalized people’s suffering. Should some things remain unseen or ultimately unseeable, unspeakable? And for whom? Today, we are more likely to experience trial-by-media according to a certain digital populism, tweets in the court of public opinion. And more recently, Giuliani has been less likely to engage in court battles and more likely to take to social media to denounce Black Lives Matter as “racist” or speak on Fox News to defend Trump’s egregious lies, collusion, and sociopathic behavior. When questioned about the possibility of Trump’s first impeachment, he declared, “The jury is the public.” This is, I suppose, a form of “direct” democracy. And to his credit, Giuliani has moved with the times; the political Right has to date proven nimbler than the Left.

“Older” conventional forms of racism and the Culture Wars of the 1980s and 1990s have yielded to a strange inversion of identity politics, thanks in large part to the internet and social media. At this moment in history, then, perhaps we must problematize and unwork the a priori “condition[s] of validity for judgments,” to invoke Foucault once again, and, rather than trade in categoricals, to focus instead on the “condition[s] of reality for statements.” Indeed, as we watch and rewatch Dunn’s mediatized death, in the proliferation of competing accounts and commentaries absent of an authoritative frame, without definitive truth, it might be best to refuse the rush to scripted judgments and affectations, and to try to see and speak along other lines. In the classroom, I invoke the poetry of Claudia Rankine: “What if what I want from you is new, newly made / a new sentence in response to all my questions, / a swerve in our relation and the words that carry us, / the care that carries.” We must have these difficult conversations. It is not, then, a question of my power to address—or “reframe”—Dunn or the boys who recorded his death. In the end, this chapter is about their address to me, which calls for me to hold and to account for countless other scenes that
variously summon—and indeed, frame—their addressability alongside my own. A new sentence, a swerve. It is death, not life, that hearkens me from this scene, in the care that carries so many deaths. There is, after all, no possible future, no “reframing,” in which Dunn lives. This, too, must be held.

In the context of digital hate speech, the life that we are given to see is unseeable or is not a life or is not grievable; futurity is colonized, filled with terror, fearful silence. At the nexus of contesting media tropes, it will not suffice to say that the video recording uniquely “frames” the event of Dunn’s death, nor am I in a position to “reframe” this or any other framing—not quite—for this would imply a kind of sovereign (re)interpretation, and my experience of watching devastates any sovereign sensibility I might have enjoyed. I cannot impose a regime of visibility or addressivity: the loss within the frame repeats in après-coup a history of unseeable and unsayable losses without, all returning me to myself and my nonsovereign complicity in their (re)production. In Derrida’s terms, racism’s last word inaugurates “a memory in advance,” poisoning the promise of my perlocutionary reframing. Racism exploits this tense and this tension.

Can we imagine a future life in other than biopolitical counterfactuals? The temporal potency of the subversive perlocution, always yearning for a future or future anterior—a time when this or that word will have been injurious but is no longer—strikes me if not as messianic, then not least as an oblique disavowal of the past, a refusal to find ourselves in the wake, in historicity’s hold, or perhaps even heralds a questionable reconciliation with it, a holding of it in what might well once again be a complicitous form. And it is this that haunts me. For lurking in that promissory subversion, the futures of the perlocution threaten to pervert this history and our ongoing relation with/in it, as it. Dunn’s death is not quite a unique moment for us but turns on and re-turns to those of us who watch. The video is not cinema verité, is neither referential nor indexical, not exactly, but a communicative interaction in the recursive popular mode of reality TV, Facebook Live, Instagram, TikTok, and just as so many narcissistic and incendiary presidential tweets. We cower. We seethe. We participate. It is an address we have grown accustomed to.

In response to unjust and violent deaths—some labeled terrorism, others patriotic sacrifice—we are digitally inducted into the advance affectivity of a recursive self-address, a meme: “Je suis Charlie,” “I am Trayvon,” “I am Neda.” Here, now, the social choreographies of grief follow the circuits of social media with all the pageantry of the prêt-à-porter. “I am . . .,” I identify with the victims, I too am as it were victimized, and I temporarily occupy a position of universal

\[ \text{racism’s digital dominion} \]
victimhood. As Lauren Berlant writes, “Mourning can also be an act of aggression, of social deathmaking: it can perform the evacuation of significance from actually-existing subjects.”\textsuperscript{102} It is worth noting here that two-thirds of Americans get their news via social media—Facebook, Snapchat, Twitter, et cetera—where news is recursively, algorithmically generated by “likes,” subject to a populism that itself is difficult to dislodge from Google’s and Facebook’s news and “trending” algorithms, which not infrequently promote fake news and propagate alt-right messaging by those adept at reverse-engineering and exploiting the artificial intelligence of these algorithmic infrastructures. Across these scenes, Dunn’s death has no address, and the scene’s addressivity is co-opted and colonized as a memory in advance.

Indeed, biopolitically, death is always an address without address, a call without the possibility of response, one that arrives too late and has no ontological status—“I can’t breathe”—because letting die is the condition of possibility for making live, perpetually reinaugurating and sustaining the biopolitical regime of addressivity, the “I,” the “one,” who speaks. And it is this “I” that I must, in disaffirming, betray. Even our mourning is suspect when it “takes place over a distance,” in Berlant’s terms, where distance and (re)mediation help to figure mourning as an act of aggression: “Mourning is an experience of irreducible boundlessness: I am here, I am living, he is dead, I am mourning. It is a beautiful, not sublime, experience of emancipation: mourning supplies the subject the definitional perfection of a being no longer in flux.”\textsuperscript{104} This is yet another sovereign conceit. But there must be another way to mourn from within the violent turmoil of flux, in the wake where shared painful feelings, rather than bolstering identity and self-certainty, would serve to disorient and discomfit, to open rather than to close off into circuits and slogans and disremembrance.

In the biopolitical context, is another address possible, another way of seeing and saying? To recall Hartman once again, who can “tell a story capable of engaging and countering the violence of abstraction”?\textsuperscript{105} What language is to-hand? As Mbembe remarks of colonial violence, its “techniques were at once reticular and molecular. . . . This molecular violence even infiltrated language. Its weight crushed all the scenes of life, including the scene of speech.”\textsuperscript{106} Any perlocutionary “reframing” is liable to have been colonized in advance. I recall Holland’s suggestion as well, “to place our stories next to those unknown to us.”\textsuperscript{107} And yet I’m always-already addressed by biopolitics, held in its deathly regime of addressivity, by which I will be known and have an ontological status, and by which Dunn will go under, in frame, again and again.
How could I address Dunn *otherwise* without first accounting for the ways that my own speech emerges on the same ontological scene as his, my own living with his dying? These frames may seem unrelated, even incommensurable, and yet they are profoundly co-constitutive—and it is this that I am given to hold. If biopolitics constitutes the very “I” I would disavow in these pages, I remain, unable to humanize Jamel Dunn or to claim him, posthumously, in the affirmative rhetorics of liberalism and human rights. But whether I speak or remain silent, his story nonetheless addresses my own addressability on the biopolitical scene, and it is he who claims me, in death, and quickens my sense of one coming undone.