Rough Notes to Erasure

Dolsy Smith

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Introduction

In writing this para-academic work, I wrestled for a long time with a false problem. Without the academic credentials appropriate to the kind of book that I wanted to write (a monograph in the humanities), I imagined that writing such a book had to be a solitary, even a solipsistic, act. For my lack of credentials seemed to imply a lack of expertise. And that, in turn, suggested an absence of legitimate purpose and, therefore, of a community of readers to which I could address my work. Stuck on this dilemma, I dwelt on my fear that my career in letters up to this point (the point of this writing) amounted to failure. And as I wrote, I became invested in that failure. Or perhaps it’s fair to say that I was already invested: that I had learned to inhabit failure as a structure of feeling that can be self-imposed. My writing had become the tortuous space of that inhabitation, a tangle of fear and desire, pride and envy. Writing sentences that didn’t want to resolve themselves, writing paragraphs that refused to stay focused, writing pieces that I never knew how to wrap up, that I didn’t dare consider finished. The conviction of failure didn’t stop me from writing, but it kept me from sharing what I wrote — which is the wager without which a talent may be a measure of possession but will hardly become a gift. Having invested, moreover, in the idea of failure as the inevitable condition of the sorts of texts that I sought to produce, I strove
to align my work in progress with an intellectual tradition that celebrates writing, not to mention thought itself, as an exercise in negativity and erasure (from Hegel to Blanchot, the early Foucault, and Derrida). I imagined myself in that “labyrinth” invoked by Foucault to describe the “trouble” and the “pleasure” of writing, where fascination, in the folds of anonymity, becomes freedom:

I am no doubt not the only one who writes in order to have no face. Do not ask who I am and do not ask me to remain the same: leave it to our bureaucrats and our police to see that our papers are in order. At least spare us their morality when we write.¹

Here Foucault is Theseus on the trail of the Minotaur, and also the Minotaur himself, and also Daedalus. Hero, monster, and architect merge in the avowed facelessness of the European intellectual—white, male, and a member of the professional elite—whose papers are already, for the most part, in order. And I am the child poring over D’Aulaires’ Book of Greek Myths, with its star-struck Phaethon on the cover.

But I am hardly faceless when, over drinks one night with colleagues, these flesh-and-blood readers want to know, Who is your audience? I wish the beer bottle’s lip could hide the answer that I will botch. That’s just it: that’s my problem. I try to explain how I’ve been writing an academic book from a position of deep ambivalence about academic writing. Feeling as though the suit doesn’t fit, though at the same time refusing to leave off this prolongation of the sartorial No. Finally, I confess: I’m afraid that no one will want to read it, that in fact I’m writing for nobody. My colleagues assure me that they get my ambivalence; they’ve felt it, too. And they would, indeed, read such a book. But somebody there wants to know, What are you trying

to say in this book? That I don’t know what I want explicitly to say; that I am writing in fidelity to that ignorance, as well as out of resistance to the demand, normative in academic writing, for maximal explicitness, and for critical explication as the function (at least in the humanities) of formally sanctioned expertise: none of that answers the question. Somebody who was there before, but without my seeing them, lets me know, I’m not writing for them. Generous and brave, their question broaches a truth that, up to now, I have managed to dodge, both in my writing and in my thinking. And that is my investment in the dominant subject-position of academic writing and expertise. The fact remains that as a white cishet man, I always already enjoy the privilege of understanding—even when I disclaim it. I encounter nearly everywhere, if not the satisfaction of my desires, then their legibility, their endorsement. Look at you looking at you, the TV chirps and the billboard booms, Looking good! And in academia, too: You, says the library in its susurrus of dead white male voices, This is you.

I made him turn red! she said with a laugh. I blamed it on the beer, which was, of course, a lie. What makes the white man show his true colors? Shame, of course. Shame and anger. Or like the cover of a book of myths, my baffled face declared my investment in the ruses of patriarchal white supremacy. The great waffler Thomas Jefferson—as Tavia Nyong’o reminds us—adduced as evidence for the superiority of whites their “capacity to blush.”2 But racialized shame, as Nyong’o argues, refuses to stay put. If shame appears in the performances of moral refinement that can signify belonging to the white bourgeoisie, its weaponized deployment bears down on those marked by their exclusion from whiteness’s folds.3 And as I explore in

2 Tavia Nyong’o, The Amalgamation Waltz: Race, Performance, and the Ruses of Memory (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 86–87. Provocatively, Nyong’o claims that “race emerges in its modern form only when it becomes possible to be ashamed of it” (90).
3 Jefferson’s remarks contributed to an intellectual arsenal aimed at justifying, for an “enlightened” European audience, the perpetuation of
a later chapter, anger, too, runs deeply through the embodied textures of racialized and gendered status, hierarchy, and power. In Jefferson’s racist imagination, a blush, testifying to a capacity for shame, justifies the white subject’s possession of liberty and fraternal citizenship. You might say that as a political emotion, shame indexes the susceptibility of the subject to the demand for justification. (As a writer, I blushed at having to justify myself to hypothetical readers. As a white man, I blushed at being asked to explain my motives to somebody who is not white.) By justification, I mean an act of making explicit how the self measures up within hierarchical orders of value. What are you trying to say? The question can shame, because while the value judgments at play are frequently rendered as totalizing abstractions, with an appeal to categories like “a good scholar” or “a good person,” any possible response begins and ends with the flesh, flush and perplexed and lousy with partiality. Likewise, these orders of value matter because they rest on material supports. They recruit and organize, even as they are disrupted by, forms of labor, violence, and power. Often an agent of the state compels such a performance, bringing down the hammer of grammar on the stake of one’s indexical self. Hey, you! shouts the cop in the Althusserian scene. But the important point is that the police don’t hail everyone the same. Despite explicit chattel slavery. After Emancipation, racialized shame remained part of the “burdened individuality” imposed on an emancipated but still politically and socially subordinate population. See Saidiya V. Hartman, Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010). Nyong’o’s work demonstrates how the rhetoric of shame was deployed by abolitionists like David Walker as an ambivalent tool in the counter-discourse against white supremacy (The Amalgamation Waltz, 89–91). In a different but closely linked register, “the language of Indian savagery,” as Robert A. Williams, Jr. notes, has “helped organize the West’s will to empire on a global scale, and its deep imprints on the American racial imagination are even more profound” (Like a Loaded Weapon: The Rehnquist Court, Indian Rights, and the Legal History of Racism in America [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005], 34).
commitments to equality, the institutions of North American society continue to insist that white people — especially white cishet men who have normative bodies and own (or could own) property — are worth more than everyone else. The obligation to say what we’re up to and to know what we’re saying, with or without credentials, falls more lightly on people who look like me. Where the cop might hail me with words, for many others his baton performs this office, or his gun. And a great many are those whom our institutions conspire in telling, time and again, that they have nothing worthwhile to say at all.

The lightness of the world’s demands on me has everything to do with my idea of failure as a personal possession, as something that I have freely, if foolishly, chosen. The white man is at liberty to be a fool. Part of the folly he enjoys consists in his conviction that everything about him is of his own doing. (Only as long as it suits him, of course. He’s also generally allowed to blame others for any shortcomings in himself.) The social and political dominance of whiteness, and especially of white cishet masculinity, depends on the sanctity of this optical illusion: that the figure cut by these properties is at once distinct by virtue of its superiority to all others and at the same time boundless, universal, and hence no figure at all. 5 Inspired by feminist and anti-racist traditions, for decades scholarship in the humanities has sought to correct this illusion, making explicit our complicity in structures of domination. As an heir to these hopes, this book represents my own efforts to reckon with my composition as a subject of white male privilege and power. Its writing has offered me the chance of coming to terms with my own complicity. However, if such a reckoning is to take root in active dispositions — dispositions that can prepare me to resist the ways that I

aid and abet patriarchal white supremacy, in order that I might become a better ally in the resistance to structural violence and oppression—then it must, this reckoning, be both critical and therapeutic. I use therapeutic in Wittgenstein’s sense: as a kind of counterpoint to the explicit. The philosopher’s healing gesture is not about coddling the self. Rather, it responds to the limits of critique as understood in the Kantian tradition. Or of the limits of explication as a practice by which subjects come to understand the conditions of their own subjectivity. It is not enough, for Wittgenstein, to rest our understanding on a set of propositions: propositions that supposedly translate private experience into public discourse. Such propositions may parade the virtues of clarity, precision, and apodictic certainty. But their inadequacy lies in hiding from us just how much those virtues eclipse. For Wittgenstein, we have to tarry with our language-games. In doing so, we prepare ourselves, not for the moment when doubt turns to insight, but for what the philosopher calls the “dawning” of a new aspect. As when the drawing you took at first for a rabbit now, suddenly, discloses a duck. It’s critical to the idea of aspect that the rabbit doesn’t disappear, even if it’s not possible to see (i.e., to identify) both figures at the same time. In other words, when a new aspect dawns, it doesn’t transform the viewer, unlocking some heretofore latent capacity or converting passive receptivity into active, reflective thought. Nor is it a matter of replacing a set of false beliefs with a true and justified set, thereby qualifying me for my status as the subject of knowledge. I’m not trying to say that now I know better.


7 The example of the duck-rabbit confounds classical philosophical treatments of the relation between knowledge and belief, according to which knowledge is a belief that is both true and justifiable. (By definition, such knowledge must be capable of being made explicit.) In the case of the aspect-shift, my knowledge of what the picture represents (once I know that it depicts both animals) can never be commensurate to my moment-
I’m drawing on Wittgenstein’s discussion of aspect in the service of a more relational approach to social structure, power, and domination. Here I’m following Alexander Weheliye’s move (which follows the lead of Black feminist theorists) to think about how the categories of race and gender, through their mutual inflection, trace the shifting contours “that apportion and delimit which humans can lay claim to full human status and which humans cannot.”

Whiteness or white cishet masculinity does not stand on its own as a thing, though as we shall see, defending against the threat of one’s own thinghood remains central to the subject-positions of those who identify as white men. For now, it bears repeating that whiteness refers to one side of an interface between domination and subordination, possession and dispossession. In an effort to think it, I imagine the chalk outline at the scene of a crime, or the cartographic lines that to-moment experience of it. This is unlike, for instance, learning that you have misidentified the animal in the backyard. In that case, perhaps it suffices to say that the warrant of empirical knowledge — gleaned by going up to the window for a closer look — banishes your mistaken belief to the bestiary of analogy. You might say, having corrected yourself, that the duck appears very rabbit-like, etc. When confronted with the duck-rabbit, on the other hand, it would sound odd or nonsensical to say of the rabbit, when you’re attending to the latter aspect, that you might almost believe it was a duck.

8 Alexander G. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 3. Fred Moten recruits Wittgensteinian aspect to different, albeit related, ends in his book *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 88–93. For Moten, the idea of seeing (or hearing) aspect gestures toward a theory of the ensemble in its excess of what can explicitly be said about it: “Perhaps it is the supplement of description that allows description; for description of the phenomenon or experience of ensemble is only adequate if it is also itself the phenomenon or experience of ensemble” (92). For Moten, the ensemble offers a way of opening Western philosophy to an aesthetics of Blackness whose lessons that philosophical tradition has repeatedly foreclosed (thereby mistaking the direction of the debt). Occurring, you might say, only in that special, fugitive light of the dawning of an aspect, the ensemble’s phantom fullness has also something “to do with utopian aspiration and political despair” (90).
designate, with sovereign but arbitrary precision, the boundaries of a territory. And yet, these metaphors suggest something more fixed and indifferent than the fluid practices by which the body identified as white, and *a fortiori* as white and male, moves through its milieu. This body apportions space as the medium of its inalienable rights of possession. It unspools its thoughts in time as the unbroken line of development toward the promise of a future in which personal, national, and civilizational achievement coincide. But this is a development anchored in the world that stolen labor built, and which terror, neglect, and discrimination sustain, upon stolen lands.9 It is hardly sufficient to the projects of racial justice that this body should become conscious of its privilege. Not so long as consciousness remains


introduction

synonymous with the entertainment of propositions or intentional representations whose meanings can be made explicit. This model enshrines the Western prejudice against the flesh, seeking through moral reason to break the lease of its contingency, to consecrate a kingdom on its parcel of earth.\(^{10}\) In other words, the explication of privilege remains bound up with the conditions that privilege explication as a vehicle for what Sylvia Wynter calls the “overrepresentation” of the white Western subject, by which “Man” becomes a universal figure for the human being.\(^{11}\) By this catachresis, which the white Western subject defends as his unique entitlement, the latter figures himself as transcendent to his body and its milieu, including the racialized and gendered signifiers that determine which bodies are entitled to indulge in such fantasies, forgetting shared history and collective destiny.\(^{12}\) On the other hand, and because of this history, as Denise Ferreira da Silva argues, it does not suffice to insist on the particularity of whiteness or white masculinity.\(^{13}\) Whiteness is not one ethnicity among others, as some strains of multiculturalism, desperate to placate a deeply American hypocrisy, maintain. Permitted to ignore the particular ways in which my race and gender entitle me to lands, goods, opportunities, and protections denied to others, I may regard myself as one of the “good white people” of whom Shannon Sullivan

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\(^{10}\) As Saba Mahmood observes, Western moral philosophy has a tendency to suppose “that a moral act could be moral only to the extent that is was not a result of habituated virtue but a product of the critical faculty of reason. The latter requires that one act in spite of one’s inclinations, habits, and dispositions” (Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005], 25).


\(^{12}\) In Black and Blur (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), Fred Moten writes that “blackness isn’t a people problem. It’s the problematization of the people” (202). And whiteness is the “solution” in which the people disappear, leaving only oblivious individuals.

\(^{13}\) Denise Ferreira da Silva, Toward a Global Idea of Race (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007).
writes: while *consciously* attending to the effort not to let racial prejudice seep into their thoughts, they shunt onto others the demanding emotional, intellectual and physical labor of standing up for racial justice. They can do so because forms of violence like police brutality, as well as more structural harms like lead in the water, don’t infringe on their mundane white worlds. These worlds are populated by good white people like themselves (and perhaps a few people of color for good measure). Though living on stolen land and stolen time, the closure of these worlds under conditions of white supremacy and settler colonialism appears to ratify their distance from the latter. It’s as if those things only occurred where white people weren’t. As if one could sever, by force of will or practice of neglect, the rabbit from the duck. My point is that this closure is compatible with the entertainment of explicit propositions that denounce racism. It is compatible even with those propositions that describe racism in institutional and structural terms.

Once it occurs, of course, the aspect-shift that Wittgenstein describes remains easy to reverse. As we look at the image, duck and rabbit lap and displace each other endlessly. But I need a notion of aspect that involves all the senses, including the affects. A sort of deep aspect, if you will. The dawning of deep aspect, if durable, will represent a long and arduous process. Perhaps

14 Shannon Sullivan, *Good White People: The Problem with Middle-Class White Anti-Racism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2014). Indeed, as Sullivan suggests, the limited cognitive and emotional labor that “good white people” do to temper the racism in themselves yields its own psychological wage, in the form of a feeling of superiority vis-à-vis those “other” white people who are explicitly racist, and who appear, in the middle-class white imaginary, uniformly working-class, i.e., “white trash.”

15 In his trenchant critique of liberal strategies as applied to the political struggles of trans and gender nonconforming people, Dean Spade notes that “the anti-discrimination/hate crime law strategy relies on the belief that if we change what the law says about a particular group to make it say ‘good things’ […] and not ‘bad things’ […] then those people’s lives will improve” (*Normal Life: Administrative Violence, Critical Trans Politics, and the Limits of Law* [Brooklyn: South End Press, 2011], 29).
an interminable one. And this process implies a pedagogy, one addressed to the senses as the terrain of those sociogenic forces by which race and gender cement themselves in the modern psyche.16 George Yancy argues for the utility of “a form of writing that is not meant to be simply cerebral, but to impact the body and to weave a narrative that captures something that is profoundly familiar and intensely mundane.”17 The deep aspect of my privilege lies in what it means, for me as a white cishet


17 Yancy, Black Bodies, White Gazes, 17. Yancy’s treatment of “the elevator effect”—his phenomenologically rich description of his encounter, as a Black man, with a white woman on an elevator—offers a model for academic writing that moves beyond the “cerebral” in order to elicit an awareness of racism in its deep aspects. Yancy’s attention to “the white bodily repertoire” conveys a sense of how the infra-personal force of prejudice disfigures Yancy himself: feeling this woman’s reaction to his proximity, he feels simultaneously reduced to his existence as a racialized body (“Black presence”), and somehow atomized or aerosolized (“omnipresent within that space, ready to attack from all sides”) (21, emphasis in the original). The white woman’s perhaps unconscious, but nonetheless performative, bias weaponizes Yancy’s body against them both. And yet, as his essay recounts, many white readers identify with the woman. Although she is a figure of argument, rather than an actual, named person, they feel compelled to come to her defense. This visceral identification breeds discomfort, and as a white reader sympathetic to Yancy’s argument, I find that this discomfort is not easily absorbed by the good fit between the argument’s propositional content and what I already know about race and white supremacy. There remains a kernel, a nub, that proves difficult to digest. A figure that disturbs what I am content to see. That I am not entirely comfortable with Yancy’s depiction of the woman in the elevator, that I want to think that he’s exaggerating, maybe just a bit, alerts me to a reserve of defensiveness within myself, confronting me with my own desire to be a “good white” and with the work that I have to do on my own dispositions.
man, to have a body and to regard it as my inalienable possession. It lies in my embodiment of those “possessive logics” that, as Aileen Moreton-Robinson writes, are “underpinned by an excessive desire to invest in reproducing and reaffirming the nation-state’s ownership, control, and domination.”

A deep aspect, because the excessiveness of this summons to investment, rising with a flush to the cheeks, might be felt only in certain instances. Such as when those whose presence or experience I have learned to deny, neglect, or misrecognize refuse, in Sylvia Wynter’s words, to “make [themselves] into a fact of negation.” For it is the social and political erasure of people of color “which alone enables the experience of being white.”

Just as the objectification of women, white or otherwise, enables the experience of the white cishet masculine subject. But the erasure of subjects as a means of subject-formation remains rough work. (You can’t very well rub out the rabbit without deleting the duck.) Taking a cue from Hortense Spillers, let’s say that these “hieroglyphics of the flesh,” by which political relations make physiology signify, always operate in excess of what the subject can avow or the body can bear.

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18 Moreton-Robinson, *The White Possessive*, xii. As Moreton-Robinson explains, “to be able to assert ‘this is mine’ requires a subject to internalize the idea that one has property rights that are part of normative behavior, rules of interaction, and social engagement” (114). Situating the “normative behavior” of the possessive in the context of the settler-colonial seizure of Native and Indigenous lands serves to unnerve, perhaps, some of its self-evident and unexceptional naturalness, reminding us how “property rights” (over lands, over other people) have been the prime vehicle for the violence of modern empires, carving out the Western nation-state as the state of exception and of the exceptional (the subject who produces himself out of what he takes from others).

19 Wynter, “Towards the Sociogenic Principle,” 42.

20 These processes are not to be understood as analogous, but as complementary: in the cut of their complementarity, they trace the seam or suture of the dominant subject. On the suture of whiteness, see Yancy, *Black Bodies, White Gazes*, 256–58. On “the cut,” see Moten, *In the Break*.

the ‘body’ there is the ‘flesh,’ that zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse or the reflexes of iconography.” Spillers anchors this distinction in the facts of circum-Atlantic captivity and enslavement: the enslaved, being brutally cut off from the modern state’s guarantees of bodily autonomy and integrity, were condemned to this “zero degree” as the living hell on top of which global capitalism rose to its Babelian heights. She writes: “If we think of the ‘flesh’ as a primary narrative, then we mean its seared, divided, ripped-apartness, riveted to the ship’s hole, fallen, or ‘escaped’ overboard” (ibid).

For them, the “zero degree” sits like a live charge beneath the surface of liberal discourse and legal iconography, waiting to be triggered by the varieties of state-sponsored and state-tolerated violence that sustain patriarchal white supremacy. On the other hand, whiteness (and a fortiori white cishet masculinity) are grammars for making the flesh signify as a body that, to different degrees (depending on a host of other social inflections), escapes vulnerability. And these grammars are the grain within or against which I think and feel. I blush not only at being the unmarked subject suddenly “marked,” but also because certain kinds of anger and shame decline the self in its ascension to whiteness and masculinity. They suture my flesh to performances of domination.

Durability of this suture suggests that critical explication alone cannot prepare us for the improvisatory work that freedom and justice require. As James Baldwin and Patricia Hill Collins would remind us, the experience of being Black, or of being a Black woman, carries and transmits a knowledge of whiteness that whites themselves cannot possess. The attachment to acts of possession renders us as whites incapable of such knowledge, which is more like an intimate praxis of resistance and survival, of surviving this world by making another, than the knowledge you carry like cash in your wallet, ready to present it as the price of entry to where you believe you belong. This other knowledge requires immeasurably more courage, fortitude, and intellectual intensity than that.25

Along with this introduction, the three chapters in this book sketch failures of explication with respect to deep aspects of privilege and domination.26 The first chapter, “The Promise of


25 James Baldwin, “The Devil Finds Work,” in Collected Essays, ed. Toni Morrison (New York: Library of America, 1998), 477–576; Patricia Hill Collins, Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment, 2nd edn. (New York: Routledge, 2009). As Collins argues, the specific contours of Black women’s knowledge about whiteness derive, in part, from the vantage point of the kinds of labor that Black women have historically been required to do in the US: “Domestic work allowed African-American women to see White elites, both actual and aspiring, from perspectives largely obscured from Black men and from these groups themselves” (13).

26 These pieces do not offer anything like a concrete program of practices with which to supplement those of explicit critique. This failure on my part may disappoint readers committed to institutional and public pedagogies for dismantling the white supremacist patriarchy. And their disappointment will be well founded: the development of these pedagogies is among our most urgent tasks, and we desperately need good recipes for them. The recipe is a genre in which explicit statements convey what has become for others tacit knowledge, i.e., a matter of habit and reflex, a durable part of the body’s perceptual and dispositional field. This book aims less at recipe than at experiment, an activity without guarantee, suspending epistemic certainty, opening the field. In these pieces, I have
Composition,” explores the optimistic pedagogy of liberalism, wanted to see how one might write *against* the grain of explication in a genre that prizes the explicit as both method and end, the academic critical essay. Undertaking this project, I drew inspiration from the epistemic modesty and the close attention to the implicative side of language cultivated by the “ordinary language” philosophers (chiefly J.L. Austin, Wittgenstein, Gilbert Ryle, and Stanley Cavell). I found myself gravitating toward those moments in their work that suggest a forsaking of professional abstraction for the itinerant richness of the concrete and the amateur, the by-ways along which the speaking and acting body of anybody travels in the course of its liaisons with the world. At the same time, this body of work tends to fall short in its chronic inattention to the social position of the body that, in the guise of the philosopher, is actually speaking (i.e., white, middle-class, cishet, male). More attentive to these matters is a rich vein of recent scholarship on affect, which challenges — thematically, if not always formally — the priority given to discursive reason in academic critical theory. These writers seek to trace across time and space the unpredictable career of affects, which spread from person to person through a rich culture of practices, swarming, transforming, and multiplying. And like many of these same scholars, I draw inspiration and borrow insights from robust traditions of feminist, queer, anti-racist, decolonial, and feminist/queer of color writing from within, outside, and on the margins of the academy, a daring literature that dislodges the “juridical machine” of form, genre, and discipline in order to make room for what Alexander Weheliye calls “the plenitude of our world” (*Habeas Viscus*, 131).

which vests hope in the composition of good citizens and ethical subjects through critical self-reflection. Such subjects appear in the liberal imaginary with the trappings of middle-class whiteness, and the reflection that composes them is imagined as

an explicating practice, as bringing features of the self and the world into consciousness through the rehearsal and production of propositional content. This practice, in turn, is supposed to reveal the sovereign agency latent in the subject, their power (as university marketing departments everywhere put it) to change the world. But these subjects occupy a place marked by an irreconcilable tension. For the agency of the subject is supposed to derive from its capacity for a certain kind of interiority; the self is sovereign (on this view) because it follows the dictates of moral reason, which are transparent to introspection and unclouded by material conditions or external circumstances. And yet, the economic, political, and cultural hierarchies of liberal, capitalist societies recognize as agents only atomic individuals identified by their possession of, or dispossession from, the explicit signs of privilege (money, whiteness, pedigree, etc.). Moreover, the sovereignty of the liberal subject, like that of the modern nation-state, remains an artifact of settler-colonial occupation and expropriation.\textsuperscript{27} Or as Denise Ferreira da Silva puts it, the commitment to transparent interiority that appears to justify the white Western subject’s dominance requires the violence that sustains its global “others” in affectable exteriority — i.e., in a vulnerability to the force of circumstance that strands them on “the horizon of death.”\textsuperscript{28} Thinking about how the global reach of neoliberalism and empire sends ripples through the ordinary moments of a privileged pedagogical scene, my essay stages a distension of that privileged ordinary in both space and time. For those ripples have shaped a distinctly modern pedagogy, the sentimental. The genres of the sentimental express the friction between the abstract summons to become a citizen-subject


\textsuperscript{28} Ferreira da Silva, \textit{Toward a Global Idea of Race}, 25.
and the embodied, relational facts of being (as mother, sister, worker, lover, teacher, student, etc.). Such facts reveal our vulnerability to forces that are anything but transparent in operation or effect. Forces at play upon the flesh itself, which inure us to domination and orient our desires toward the commodity-form. Like the blush that is one of its hallmark performances, the sentimental suggests an excessive investment, but in this investment, it lies perilously close to another genre—the critical—that is supposed to remedy those excesses. My essay explores the aspect-shift between the critical and the sentimental, treating both as vexed modes of agency that the modernity of capital and empire bequeaths its subjects.

In my second chapter, “Composition as White/Mansplanation,” I explore the more desperate side of this patrimony. Here the animating tensions are the same, but the polarity is reversed. Taking as its occasion instances of anonymous hate-speech, this essay argues that the extreme violence of white cis/het male rage and resentment—far from being the rot of a few bad apples, or the cry of those left behind by social and economic progress—proliferates in the soil prepared for it by the transparent rule of reason associated with bureaucratic capitalism. A pedagogy of oppression, bureaucratic capitalism organizes relations of domination and subordination in order to harness the energies that these relations produce. Explication furnishes the ruse of this exploitation, as in the wage that makes explicit the worker’s worth on the market, while masking the surplus value that their labor produces. But explication is a kind of labor,

29 I am using explicatio here in a sense close to that of reification in the Marxist tradition, so perhaps a word or two is in order to explain my unorthodox choice. Like explication, reification presents a slice or aspect of the world as though it were a whole and complete picture, thereby blocking access to those aspects that refuse the transformation. Thus, the “dead labor” of the worker, congealed in the commodity, obscures the “living labor” of the production process. The vital and creative energies of the worker drop out of our experience of the value of the commodity qua thing, so that we don’t stop to consider how other human beings have benumbed their senses and exhausted their bodies for the sake (to use
too. Those privileged to hold positions of bureaucratic authority take credit for the work that their subordinates do, just as those privileged in virtue of their assigned race and/or gender reap benefits from the labor of feeling and imagination that marginalized bodies and voices regularly perform. In both cases, those in dominant positions stand exempt from the work of explication on which their dominance depends. The boss isn’t bound to explain himself to those he employs, or at least not with the same degree of coercion that his employees face. And this asymmetry lends support to a possessive model of meaning, i.e., a possessive attitude toward the bodies and labors of others, mediating a possessive model of the self. This “narrative self” is “solipsistic,” as Hortense Spillers notes, because on this model, the occupant of a dominant role — the expert, the executive, the white American cishet man, etc. — enjoys a monopoly on the meaning of his role. He is not liable to be called to account. Enshrined in

Ruskin’s example) of some glass beads. But as a term of critical discourse, *reification* may belie the kinship of this process, so fundamental to capitalist accumulation, with the wider array of explicative practices by which the modern Western episteme constitutes itself. Indeed, it may seem as though making explicit reification’s remainder should form the aim and goal of critique itself. But if what is ordinarily tacit and implicit in our experience, or some portion thereof, escapes between the slats of discourse (including what remains implicit in discourse itself); and if our concern is specifically with that not-to-be-specified, fugitive portion, or with its “singular and unverifiable” trace; and if, in relation to this trace, we cannot avoid the choice of a necessarily dis-figuring figure (being obliged to name either the rabbit or the duck, knowing that the name allows the other to slip away) — if this knot of conditionals, themselves unverifiable, amounts to something like an ethic, disclosing the possibility of re-training our desires, then perhaps we have less to learn from the patent power of language to surface, unravel, organize, and analyze, than from the power of language to plunge us into that very gap. (On the humanities as an ethic of “learn[ing] from the singular and unverifiable,” see Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Terror: A Speech After 9–11,” boundary 2 31, no. 2 [Summer 2004]: 109.)

30 Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” 211. The monopoly in question is not universal, insofar as everyone in a position of dominance is (or can become) the subordinate in a different setting. The boss, of course,
modernist theories of information and bureaucratic rationality, this model forgets the mutual implication of self and other in acts of becoming. That is, it forgets (to follow the trail blazed by Spillers) the flesh. Taking cues from what Fred Moten calls “the black radical tradition,” this chapter reads and listens to a handful of literary and musical texts — by Claudia Rankine, Dionne Brand, Tracie Morris, and Julius Eastman — that offer ways of re-training our senses to attend to the present’s dense layering of multiple histories and destinies. Texts that encode and care for traditions of resistance to the possessive model of meaning as well as to the violence of white supremacy. Texts that usher us toward a view of the senses as both personal and social, and of discourse as the involution of language into the flesh. My interest here lies less in overturning or undoing the so-called linguistic turn than in following it through, following it out, bringing it back around to the flesh that “speaks, conjures, intones, and concocts sumptuous universes” (the resonant cavity, the impertunate hands, the clamoring tongue) in concert with others, in suffering and pleasure, beginning with the breath.31

In these chapters, my analysis aims to unsettle the equation of white cishet male privilege and power with a certain “dominant fiction” of interiority.32 A consequence of this equation, which denies full humanity to others, is to refer the search for the sources of racism, misogyny, homophobia, transphobia, etc., to the crypt of the self. We white cishet men tend to demand respect for our beliefs and desires as inalienably private posses-

31 Weheliye, Habeas Viscus, 121.
32 For the “dominant fiction” as the vehicle by which ideology secures our attachments, see Kaja Silverman, Male Subjectivity at the Margins (New York: Routledge, 2016), 15–17.
introduction

sions, even as we routinely fail to grant others the same respect. In the book's third and final chapter, “Confusions of a White Man/qué,” I imagine the cryptic self as the site of a haunting, of sensation’s haunting by the otherness that it tactically excludes. This piece is the inside-out sleeve of the preceding essays. Here I use critical, philosophical, and psychoanalytic discourse to frame an intimate narrative of my own embodiment of whiteness and cishet masculinity. But what is the story I have to tell? To acknowledge that the story does not belong to me means listening to the stories of others, stories that the terms of my embodiment would silence or efface. It means acknowledging that I should amplify those voices that I tend to appropriate instead as citational supports for my own white melancholy. It means taking seriously the idea that this work, the work of acknowledgment, demands the undoing of my own seriousness and its wages in the seriality of an erasure that can claim no purpose (at least, not in the way that purposiveness is conscripted to the cause of enclosure). My turn to personal narrative in the book’s final chapter is intended to resist the enclosure of the scholarly essay. I offer it as way, not of owning the story, but of exposing the teller, outside the refuge of critical distance and control. For these things, in the hands of the white male critic, no matter how smart his analysis, tend to bracket or defer the question of the writer’s flesh.

The story of this book is, in a way, about my failure to tell a story. Beyond the see-saw between explication's push and implication's pull, writing has meant, for me, a commitment to deferring the question. Refusing to show my work, I have opted instead to write my own writing, i.e., the fact of my having written, into erasure.33 This program testifies to how I have

33 The first part of my book's title — “Rough Notes to Erasure” — is a quotation, under partial erasure, from Alan Turing's seminal essay on computability, which furnishes part of the theoretical foundation for the digital and computational revolution of the twentieth century. Turing's eponymous machine, as described in that essay, represents an apotheosis of Enlightenment models of the mind, a “universal” machine that can
sought to “earn” my own privilege (including the opportunity that a white man with a middle-class upbringing and education enjoys to land jobs that don’t leave him too poor or exhausted for unremunerated pursuits, like writing this book, in the off-hours). Or it testifies to my desire to earn an exemption from the subordination to waged work that is even the white man’s lot. At any rate, though never quickly enough to stop time’s passage through the flesh, I’ve sought to earn something that I both do and do not have, seeking to prove myself exceptional in one domain (as a writer). And I’ve preferred to keep that effort private rather than expose myself to the risk of failure. But this failure, the failure that I have been afraid to risk, is really the failure of the project or promise itself. I mean the promise that one’s whiteness or white masculinity can mean more than the violent pursuit of possession through the erasure of others’ potential,

perform an infinite set of possible operations, provided that the steps involved in each of these operations (the machine’s “instructions”) can be made explicit. Turing’s machine is also a machine that works by writing, by literally inscribing symbols, drawn from a fixed set, on a length of tape. In fact, the machine generalizes the labor of the human beings who performed the extensive calculations required by modern science and industry before the advent of the digital computer. These were often white women and women of color with high levels of mathematical ability but denied professional status. It is their “rough notes” that are “liable to erasure” in Turing’s description, intermediate steps in the calculation that do not appear in the final output, like the rough edges of the laboring flesh that vanish behind the products of mechanical production (“On Computable Numbers, with an Application to the Entscheidungsproblem,” in The Essential Turing: Seminal Writings in Computing, Logic, Philosophy, Artificial Intelligence, and Artificial Life: Plus the Secrets of Enigma, ed. B. Jack Copeland [New York: Oxford University Press, 2004], 60). Explication, for my purposes, is this scriptural process that erases as it produces, erasing the trace of its own process. And it does violence in order to reveal, like the social inscription of the categories of race, gender, sexuality, class, etc., which makes bodies more manageable, visible, divisible, and disposable. The asymmetry of this process sustains the unequal distribution of wealth, power, and security in modern liberal societies. Much like the power enjoyed by the men in charge of the “human computers” in the background of Turing’s proof: men who did not, presumably, have to show their work, in rough notes or otherwise.
more than one’s complicity in the erasure of one’s own potential for the sake of another’s profits. The fiction of interiority expresses a desire to close off the self from those histories, personal, national, and global, that challenge one’s claims to such potential. But this attempt to escape from the folds of history is bound to fail, fracturing one’s relations to others and to oneself. And yet, far from being a cause for reckoning, such failure can become something that the subject clamps down on, as if failure could serve as its own justification, assuming mythic proportions in the stories we tell ourselves, stories about the minotaur we harbor in our breast. In this way, the white man is manqué: like the poet manqué, for whom the profession of failure, internalized, becomes a vocation in itself.

But through every piece of writing, you can trace threads that are the gifts of others. And while the academy increasingly plays host to a discourse that links practices of citation to the regime of private property, we might imagine citation’s kinship with other traditions, other ways of thinking through, rather than deferring or effacing, the commons. One might think about, for instance, the “black Atlantic” compositional traditions of the mix, the sample, and the improvisational text or score.34 I’m on the terrain here of a debt that I cannot hope to acquit, even as I must acknowledge, following Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, that “the black aesthetic is not about technique, is not a technique.”35 It’s a way of folding space and time. Of seeing what happens when one aspect gets articulated through the grain of another, in a texture that pulls against itself, neither one being the shadow or reflection of the other, but together displacing form even as they produce it. Failure or not, my writing exposes my debt to those, living and dead, in the grain of whose works and days I become what I am, and whose aspect my selfhood

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34 On the “black Atlantic” and the aesthetic practices, vital to modernity, that we owe to it, see Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (London: Verso, 2007).
numbs me to. In writing this book, I’ve tried to quicken my senses to that debt, without making a sideshow of the modern world’s profound reserves of suffering and pain. And I’ve come back, again and again, to the grain of the sentence and the phrase, trying to improvise with (not improve upon) the brilliance of those whom I cite. For as Moten suggests, “phrasing, where form — grammar, sound — cuts and augments meaning in the production of content, is where implication most properly resides.”

Phrasing is the spool whereby, fool that I have been, I can find my way back to you.

At times, no doubt, I’ve entangled my tongue in nonsense, or given vent to enthusiasms that a composed scholarly voice is supposed to disavow. But what would it take to entertain the leporine leap of blood into the cheeks as something other or more than a loss of composure? Or to welcome that loss as the advent of a new rhythm, a syncopation that, instead of putting the present to flight, brings it closer? To pursue my own acts of composition into the moments where composure falters? To falter is not to fail as final, irreducible act. Faltering, rather, can mean the price of admission into ways of working and being that prize openness, vulnerability, and improvisation. It can trace an opening onto what Moten calls “the ensemble.” The members of an ensemble collaborate; they riff off one another; they renew their sense of the possible in fresh configurations of the sensible. Their art flourishes in that zone of indetermination where what waddles or hops might burst into a run or flight, quickening us in its wake. Moten deploys the ensemble as a dis/figure for forms of experience that court the disruption — what he calls, following Nathaniel Mackey, “the cut” — out of which meanings emerge. The cut interrupts the chiastic structure (or suture) of the same with itself, parsing it out into space or spac-

ing it out into time. Like the white space between words, or the wet and buzzing points of friction in the mouth and throat that produce phonemes, or the rests between musical tones that constitute rhythm. But Moten’s work tarries with the cut in a deeper sense (a deeper aspect) than that abstract vantage point from which critical thought glimpses its dispersal behind a deceptively univocal meaning.\(^{39}\) The cut evokes the eruption, within the dominant practices of modernity, of the matter of the flesh and its history, which is the matter of spirit. And in particular, the spirit of the Black radical aesthetic, including Black feminist theory and poetics, embodying creative resilience in an unredeemed time of terror and pain. To exploit this aesthetic, as in to capitalize on it, is not the same as to draw strength from it. To write within a history of privileged appropriation, as a subject identified with that privilege, is perhaps necessarily to fail or fall short before Moten’s invitation. I announce this fact at the outset: not in order to absolve myself of responsibility, but in the hopes of tracing the cut of it through what is to come.

In the remainder of this introduction, I propose a partial theory of racialized and gendered privilege, hoping to show its participation in what Jacques Rancière calls “the explicative order.”\(^{40}\) As a way of phrasing in theoretical, historiographic terms the questions and concerns that motivate this book, this introduc-

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39 You might think of “the cut” as what traces the contours of aspect, cutting what is sensed into what makes sense, where that making leaves a remainder whose aporetic and atopic play we only gesture toward in talking about the tacit, the implicit, the dispositional, etc. In a phenomenological vein, we might liken it to what Maurice Merleau-Ponty describes as the infra-personal process of sensation, which is a field saturated by absence and opacity: “Between my sensation and myself, there is always the thickness of an originary acquisition that prevents my experience from being clear for itself” (Phenomenology of Perception, trans. Donald A. Landes [Abingdon: Routledge, 2013], 224, emphasis in the original).

tion situates dispositional approaches to the dismantling of patriarchal white supremacy alongside critiques that attend to the latter’s articulation in and through the dominant Western episteme. But why privilege? If we acknowledge the role that ordinary performances of whiteness/white cis hetero masculinity play in structures of domination — structures, moreover, with an unprecedented capacity for causing harm on a global scale — can’t we dispense with the more genteel term privilege altogether? Has it not exhausted its productivity for feminist and anti-racist critique? Hasn’t it lost its critical edge on migrating into the dominant idioms of corporate-mediated mass culture, where “wokeness” becomes yet another bespoke commodity, along with pour-over coffee and a hot-towel shave, for good white dudes? Doesn’t the term’s overuse in fact dampen our feeling for the violence, mundane, ongoing, and terrible, that props up the prevailing order of things? Patriarchy and white supremacy are ugly words. They look and sound as though they leaked from some petty bureaucrat’s pen or burst, with phlegm and spit, from the maw of a demagogue. Privilege, however, has a sheen on which we’re still soft. We say, “it’s a privilege to have known him,” etc. We love Downton Abbey and, shame-facedly, Real Housewives. But I would argue that our ambivalence toward the idea of privilege derives from its role as the suture between identity and hierarchy. Not only do the interwoven hierarchies of race, gender, sexuality, class, national origin, and physical ability identify subject-positions as relatively dominant or subordinate. Not only do those hierarchies mark some bodies as valuable and others as disposable. But hierarchy also operates, in ways both tacit and explicit, within the enclosure of identification itself. In other words, some good white dudes have more power, prestige, wealth, and opportunity than others. And this fact, as W.E.B. Du Bois recognized, is not devoid of consequences for the tenacity of patriarchal white supremacy in an aggressively capitalist
A form of subject-formation that precedes the liberal social contract, privilege ramifies through the ravages of capitalism and colonialism, multiplying the hierarchical, perturbing the modernity of those who consider themselves to have left the past behind. But we hold its vile edge close.

Privilege: the etymology suggests a privatization of the legible, or the legibility of the private. The oxymoronic nature of this suggestion (as Wittgenstein wants to know, can a “private language” be considered a language at all?) reveals, in fact, a double entitlement, like the recto and verso of a text. On one side, which is legible only by the interior, private light of what has been called reason, the text blazons its universality in terms that elevate the soul. On the other side — the public side — it spells out, in print no less indelible for being fine, the invidious terms of corporeal difference as the signifiers of social worth. Both sides, having the apparent finality of law, divide the senses from their openness to difference and to the richness of multiple futures that such openness, which is the radical destiny of the flesh, implies. But the fixity of the text is an illusion. In modernity — where the resources available for composing selves and inventing communities proliferate at a speed that mirrors the growth of capital itself — the legibility of privilege blots and bleeds under pressures from within and without. As a name for these pressures that suggests their kinship with practices of verbal composition, I have lit on the term enthusiasm. Enthusiasm designates the drive to express or make explicit what lies buried within. But it designates, too, explication’s remainder: what escapes the grip of a logic that deals only with what is, or can be made, explicit. Enthusiasm might serve as a figure for the

fate of the senses and the affects under capitalist, settler-colonial modernity, but it is a disfiguring figure. It hearkens to a way of embodying the forces of estrangement, disruption, and devastation, forces that everywhere attend modernity itself. The sections that follow trace enthusiasm’s career within and against the ruses of privilege, gesturing toward a history whose resonance I am, strummed by what I struggle to hold a stranger to myself.42

private property and the sense(s) of privilege

At the root of the many crises of modernity lies a crisis of the senses. In the Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts, Marx registers this crisis with great clarity:

Private property has made us so stupid and one-sided that an object is only ours when we have it — when it exists for us as capital, or when it is directly possessed, eaten, drunk, worn, inhabited, etc. — in short, when it is used by us. Although private property itself again conceives all these direct realizations of possessions as means of life, and the life which they serve as means is the life of private property — labour and conversion into capital.

In place of the physical and mental senses there has therefore come the sheer estrangement of all these senses — the sense of having.43

42 My aim in this introduction is not to produce a coherent historical narrative. Rather, with Alexander Weheliye, I propose to follow certain “folds” or “hiccups” in “historicist” time, with an ear for “singularities” that disrupt the seemingly inevitable succession of moments that inscribes the future as the replication of the present and the erasure of the past. See Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 79–80.
43 Karl Marx, Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844, trans. Martin Milligan (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1932), 87 (emphasis in the original).
I return to Marx because he reminds us (he reminds me) of the stakes of having privilege. It means more than the moral inconvenience of having to check my knapsack at the door. More, indeed, than the shame of not knowing that I had a knapsack to begin with. Rather, the stakes are stultification; a numbing of the senses, moral and physical; a kind of chronic anesthesia. Of course, Marx does not use the word privilege. In this passage, he locates the sources of alienation in the conflation of what is for us with what is for our use. Utility appears inseparable from those “possessive logics” that characterize the dominant modalities of social and political life in the modern nation-state. These logics estrange our senses and affects, collapsing the multiple vital destinies that bind us to the world into a single sense, the “sense of having.” By contrast, what Marx calls the “emancipated” senses would “relate themselves to the thing for the sake of the thing, but the thing itself is an objective human relation to itself and to man, and vice-versa.” Under the regime of private property, our lives are dominated by a unitary and exclusive relation, one in which I, as an owner, construe an object’s po-
tential as exhausted by my use. This relation displaces an openness crossed by a multiplicity of paths to others by way of things (e.g., in which things serve as signs, projects, provocations, adventures, gifts), where each object serves as a sort of nexus of nature, a place where nature meets itself in the complex sensory and affective traffic of human (and non-human) beings.\(^{47}\)

You might say that the stultification of which Marx writes begins in practices not of use, but of domination. His mention of the “emancipated” senses both evokes and forgets the circum-Atlantic trade in stolen life underwriting nineteenth-century capitalism, just as the phrase “the life of private property” conceals capital’s undead aspects, beginning with the afterlife of plunder and genocide that constitutes the haunted existence of both the settler-colonial and the modern European nation-state. The concept of race, as well as the modern categories of gender and sexuality that racializing logics saturate, carries the trace of this violence, but refracted, as Katherine McKittrick observes, through “multiscalar discourses of ownership.” These discourses, McKittrick argues, “are, in part, narratives of displacement that reward and value particular forms of conquest.”\(^{48}\) What Alexander Weheliye calls “the restricted idiom of personhood-as-ownership” solidifies the self through the displacement of

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\(^{47}\) On the moral, political, and epistemic roles of the gift in Native and Indigenous communities, which remain irreducible to the concept of reciprocity as understood by Western anthropologists, see Rauna Kuokkanen, *Reshaping the University: Responsibility, Indigenous Epistemes, and the Logic of the Gift* (Vancouver: UBC Press, 2007), 74–96.

\(^{48}\) Katherine McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 3. As Hortense Spillers movingly writes, “The European males who laded and captained these galleys and who policed and corralled these human beings, in hundreds of vessels from Liverpool to Elmina, to Jamaica; from the Cayenne Islands, to the ports at Charleston and Salem, and for three centuries of human life, were not curious about this ‘cargo’ that bled, packed like so many live sardines among the immovable objects. Such inveterate obscene blindness might be denied, point blank, as a possibility for anyone, except that we know it happened” (“Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” 210, emphasis in the original).
others (from their lands, from their homes, from the enjoyment of self-determination in relation to their own bodies). Property remains the index of an unequal struggle in which the rules are written by the winners, and where the application of disparate force displaces the “means of life” onto the “life of private property.” And the life of property not only feeds on living labor, but it also needs and sustains those institutions that, targeting subjugated populations, enforce real and social death. Following Moten, Weheliye, and Spillers, we might posit the commodity as a category haunted by the flesh.

Private property haunts our bodies. Its charge accumulates in loins, limbs, and tongue. The senses are their own ghosts. Consider again the closed worlds of middle-class, majority-white suburban America: the leafy streets, clean and quiet; the large and well-appointed and air-conditioned houses; the neighbors’ encountering each other on a morning jog, in line at Starbucks, or in the aisles of the grocery store, where plump local produce vies with more exotic varieties, conducive to a cosmopolitan palate and a body kept both sated and at the peak of health. Such a world has not banished pain, but what pain there is presides over the private dominion of home, car, and cubicle. The public spaces, meanwhile, seem designed to reproduce a vision of communal life as aggressively docile and polite (if sorely attenuated by the pressure of private obligations). But this is America, and pain sponsors such places: the pain of broken bodies, broken families, stolen wages, stolen chances. The sense of docility and


50 It’s important to note, however, that the “sense of having” is inflected by race, gender, sexuality, class, and disability in ways irreducible to one another. McKittrick reminds us that “black geographic ownership is coupled with repossession and displacement rather than easy, fulfilled acquisitions” (*Demonic Grounds*, 151, emphasis in the original). And Aileen Moreton-Robinson points to the vastly different “ontological relationship” that land ownership entails for many Native and Indigenous peoples, involving “the intersubstantiation of ancestral beings, humans, and land,” such that belonging to the land becomes not only a means of life but “a form of embodiment” (*The White Possessive*, 12).
politeness rests on the greed that buttresses such a place and the racist aggression that serves as a rampart against a guilty conscience. In one of the vignettes in her book *Citizen: An American Lyric*, Claudia Rankine describes a scene where a couple, having asked a friend to babysit, comes home to find that their neighbor has called the police on their friend, who had been talking on the phone outside while Black:

Your friend is speaking to your neighbor when you arrive home. The four police cars are gone. Your neighbor has apologized to your friend [for calling the police] and is now apologizing to you. Feeling somewhat responsible for the actions of your neighbor, you clumsily tell your friend that the next time he wants to talk on the phone he should just go in the backyard. He looks at you a long minute before saying he can speak on the phone wherever he wants. Yes, of course, you say. Yes, of course.51

Rankine’s prose has a powerful way of ratcheting up tension through the very flatness of its reportage. The threat of violence in this scene remains implicit; the friend’s encounter with the police is not described. But the hovering potential of that threat, ominous as the sound of planes in wartime, constant as cicadas in the summer heat, is, I take it, Rankine’s point. Nor does she instruct us how to picture the neighborhood in which this scene occurs, though “common sense” all too readily furnishes something not unlike the description above. But here common sense betrays its production by the dominant arrangements of race and property, time and place. The “long minute” in which “your friend” registers the compounded injustice of the situation and formulates his response, like his claiming the right to talk on the phone “wherever he wants,” attests to the long history of what McKittrick calls “black spatial struggles.” As does the second-

person narrator’s response, if we imagine the narrator, too, as Black: inhabiting the double-consciousness of how whiteness structures, even as it undermines, the social contract; how it divides good intentions against themselves. Wanting both to acknowledge the wrong done to their friend, and to protect him from further harm, the narrator is forced to embody that division, even if they themselves, as a person of color, remain beyond the pale of what whiteness protects. But in fact, Rankine doesn’t specify whether “you” are white or not. In its ambiguity, the pronoun highlights the work of what Alexander Weheliye calls “racializing assemblages,” because Rankine’s work both provokes and frustrates our desire to map the boundaries of race onto the narrative and figurative terrain of her text. Rather, race appears there as the unstable force of macro- and micro-aggressions that mark the flesh for mistreatment in ways that are at once predictable and, at the same time, powerfully violent because of their capacity to rattle the frame of sense. (In this scene, it might be the case that the narrator’s position as property owner momentarily locates the narrator and their friend on opposite sides of the blue line. Then again, perhaps not.)

The fragile cage of what makes sense in a predominantly white, middle-class (or aspiringly white and middle-class) community speaks to the ways in which social privilege accumulates across generations. It accumulates through habits and tastes, opportunities and prospects, property and possessions. While its career may appear as tidy and inevitable as the fall of dominoes, it spreads with the tenacity of kudzu. At the same time, the

52 With a nod to Marx, Weheliye writes, “race is a mysterious thing in that the social character of racializing assemblages appears as an objective character stamped upon humans, which is presented not in the form of sociopolitical relations between humans, but as hierarchically structured races” (Habeas Viscus, 51).

53 As McKittrick notes, “black geographies, ostensibly, do not make sense in a world that validates spatial processes and progress through domination and social disavowal” (Demonic Grounds, 8–9).

54 For an account of how whiteness multiplies political and economic advantages over time, see George Lipsitz, The Possessive Investment in
vital field of propinquity between world and flesh remains enclosed. Beyond the enclosure, traditions of solidarity and collective resistance sustain communities for which political neglect, economic exploitation, social segregation, and aggressive policing reproduce the conditions that make life in public a daily struggle. When Fred Moten insists that “black art neither sutures nor is sutured to trauma,” his insistence addresses the cut of an aesthetics and an episteme that refuse, openly or surreptitiously, the bargains demanding estrangement from every alternative as the conditions of existence. Refusing that bargain, these alternatives have been invented by “the Others within the nation” time and again. But in the Faustian bargain basement of white bourgeois culture (which, it’s worth repeating, exists both everywhere and nowhere, being more a phantasmic attachment and a project of emulation than an achievement held in common), it proves too easy to reiterate these truths without feeling them. Not feeling them enacts a flight from my debt to others, a flight whereby I know myself as a subject. But I ought to demand a reckoning of myself and the dominant culture. I ought to demand to know why these forms of knowing and feeling, of sensing and sustaining the commons, do not count as worth understanding to those of us privileged by our identification with whiteness. Which is not to say that they are not worth something to the dominant culture, for they are worth consuming by imitation and appropriation, but in deracinated fashion, pulled from the grounds of reciprocity and entanglement that

Whiteness: How White People Profit from Identity Politics, rev. and exp. edn. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2006). As one example, Lipsitz notes that “the suburbs helped turn Euro-Americans into ‘whites’ who could live near each other and intermarry with relatively little difficulty. But this ‘white’ unity rested on residential segregation, on shared access to housing and life chances largely unavailable to communities of color” (7).

55 Moten, Black and Blur, ix.
are the only foundations of an ethical life. Must we remain so stupid and one-sided?

**privilege and the paradoxes of explication**

Like the predominance of the property relation, the privileging of explication over other forms of knowledge and understanding distorts sense. Unequal access to the means to make the truths of experience explicit allows those who benefit most from histories of conquest and domination to treat their particular experiences as universally valid. And the compact between explicitness and power requires this distortion as the condition, in modernity, of truth itself. If the modern subject can be said to be the sole proprietor of their body and its labor — “this,” as John Locke wrote, “nobody has any right to but himself” — then experience becomes the subject’s private property. Participation in civil society depends on the subject’s willingness and ability to make some socially necessary portion of that experience explicit, i.e., available for introspection by others. But this nobody remains nobody if they cannot command a price for their labor sufficient to convert it into the ownership of other things. Or if they are denied even the modicum of dignity involved in disposing of their body as they see fit. Vine Deloria, Jr. argues that “the lack of property […] makes the individual person completely defenseless and vulnerable” on the unspoken terms of the modern social contract. Locke’s “nobody” marks the spot where the explicit terms hide what has been erased from the account that


common sense gives of itself. One can, and one routinely does, assert a right to lands and to their fruits that was never formally ceded by the original owners and inhabitants. One could, and under certain conditions (e.g., if one is the state) one still can, assert a right to another’s living body. And in the lacunae of the law’s text, where its violence operates, one finds the “burdened individuality” endured by members of those populations that have been remanded to a state of excessive vulnerability, a vulnerability that proves politically and economically advantageous to the governing elite. In this way, self-proprietorship is the optical illusion at the center of the social contract, flickering into view precisely at the point where the excessive investment in private property overflows the narrow bed of liberal rights and responsibilities, and the individual with rights vanishes into a population that can be managed, manhandled, and, as necessary, disposed of.

On the side of the ones and the one percent, common sense has the job of justifying this excess. In her account of the modern idea of race, Colette Guillaumin argues that the European bourgeoisie, starting in the seventeenth and eighteenth centu-

59 On “burdened individuality,” see Hartman, Scenes of Subjection, 115–25. In his reading of Justice Rehnquist’s majority opinion in Oliphant v. Suquamish Indian Tribe, Robert A. Williams provides a strikingly literal illustration of how the law relies on complex strategies of explicitness and erasure in the production of common sense. In Oliphant, “one of the most important Indian law decisions issued by the Supreme Court in the post-Brown era,” Rehnquist employs a tissue of citation and elision that allows him and his colleagues to invoke as valid precedent, “in color-clueless fashion,” the overtly racist logic of nineteenth-century US Supreme Court cases in order to perpetuate “the inherent limitations on Indian rights imposed on tribes under the doctrine of discovery” (Like a Loaded Weapon, 97, 110). Through a clever use of ellipses, Rehnquist quotes a key passage from Ex parte Crow Dog, a passage full of the tropes of “Indian savagery,” and presents it as an enduring model of judicial restraint and common sense.

60 As Dean Spade puts it, “at the population level [...] power works differently and individual behavior is not the target of intervention, nor can it prevent vulnerability” (Normal Life, 121).
ries, sought to deck out their political and social ambitions in the mantle of moral and intellectual distinction. “In the absence of coats of arms, titles, and great houses,” she writes, the bourgeoisie “invented ability, aptitude, merit.” These new symbols for the “sense of having,” albeit abstract, need their anchors in the world of bodies, land, and things. As the linchpin of “an auto-referential system, centered on the Self,” the feudal aristocracy described by Guillaumin lived in a world where acts of power, condensed into spectacle, clung to a web of familial bonds and intimate relations of dependence. Their “coats of arms, titles, and great houses” served as lures for love and fealty, fear and envy. And race, in this system, designated the purity of the aristocratic bloodline, as sustained by the rites of marriage and the inheritance of title and real property. It’s not as though our lives are no longer governed by the suture between race, property ownership, and heteronormative genealogy. If anything, the suture is only tighter. But the tightness alerts us to a basic instability. An instability at the root of modernity, defining new relations to the flesh. As Spillers writes,

“family,” as we practice and understand it “in the West” — the vertical transfer of a bloodline, of a patronymic, of titles and entitlements, of real estate and the prerogatives of “cold cash,” from fathers to sons and in the supposedly free exchange of affectional ties between a male and a female of his choice — becomes the mythically revered privilege of a free and freed community.

62 Ibid., 50.
64 Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” 218.
The white, middle-class, and heteronormative concept of family, for Spillers, names the site of a rupture barely contained by its scare quotes, a scarred terrain divided between those who are “free” and those who are not, who bear unfreedom’s stain. In other words, Guillaumin’s bourgeoisie could do without titles and great houses because they could count on a seemingly endless supply of land for the taking and a maximally subjugated, disposable labor force. As for the peoples displaced from that land and/or disappeared into that labor force, their abilities and aptitudes could be exploited without considerations of merit so long they could be excluded from the emerging imaginary circle of national or ethnic belonging. As Sylvia Wynter has shown, the rhetorics of European science and philosophy, seeking to explicate the essence of human nature, came to the aid of the colonial enterprise by relegating these dispossessed bodies to a discursive space outside the human altogether.65 “Natural Reason” displaced “Noble Blood” as the fictive attribute that could justify material and social privilege and the sanguinary crimes necessary to shore it up.66

“Mythically revered,” the privilege of the European bourgeoisie and their etiolated descendants requires excessive investments in part because it is detached from the body’s intimate mutual figuration with peers and kin. The abstractions of “ability, aptitude, merit” mean something only insofar as they

65 Or as Andrea Smith puts it, “the project of aspiring to ‘humanity’ is always already a racial project” (“Queer Theory and Native Studies,” 42).
can be embodied by bureaucratic documents of certification, and what's more important, by money and monetary forms of credit. The latter allow social value and social power to travel through far-flung, impersonal networks. And yet, as Spillers puts it, “the social mechanism at work here is difference in, and as, hierarchy, although ‘race’ remains one of its most venerable master signs.”

Access to social power requires explicit signs of success. While wealth and capital function as such signs, the very dependence of hierarchy on the flows of capital exposes the elite to “antagonisms and power relationships which disturb the [...] organization of society.”

The instability of privilege under capitalism is a problem partially addressed by the projection of one set of abstractions — the aforementioned “ability, aptitude, merit” — onto another: the “master signs” of race, gender, sexuality, class, and physical ability. And these signs mutually inflect one another. Race and gender, in particular, represent the patrimony of modern privilege, its link to the feudal past. Unlike the virtues that they come to symbolize, these signs admit of being assessed at a glance. Or you might say, to be so assessed is their function. To borrow a term from Jacques Rancière, these categories partition the sensible. By forming salient divisions within the field of the human being, they mark subjects for their differential share of what is held in common. In this respect, the somatic markers of privilege represent the fine print underneath the promises of the liberal public sphere. They allow Guillainmin's “new elite” to designate a priori the particular bodies that can gain entry — just as, per Spillers, these markers allow those in power to designate which bodies matter as bodies, deserv-
ing the basic rights of bodily integrity and self-determination.71 This exclusion, even when practiced tacitly, encloses a field. Within the enclosure, those admitted cultivate more explicit judgments — judgments of ability, aptitude, and merit — which become the vocation of those so admitted, and the explicit sign of their right to belong. What sounds at first like an epochal break — between titles and talents, coats of arms and letters of credit — is better described as a complex fold.

The modern sense of racialized privilege, according to Guillaumin, involves an “occultation of the Self […]; there is no sense of belonging to a specific group, so the group itself always remains outside the frame of reference, is never referred to as a group.”72 While the rhetorical and narrative canons of white supremacy belie this assertion, it is true that as a child, I learned to see race by reading it off the bodies of others, others who were not white. Whiteness, you might say, remains inseparable from certain habits of vigilance about the flesh, about the otherness of the flesh. It is the enclosure that projects the other as a threat. Hence the “spurt of psychic energy” that accompanies the white subject’s reading of race, which becomes a thing that is, as it were, too explicit.73 Perhaps the white subject’s self-possession

71 Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe.” As Patricia Hill Collins, Black Feminist Thought, reminds us, “This larger system of oppression works to suppress the ideas of Black women intellectuals and to protect White male interests and worldviews. Denying African-American women the credentials to become literate certainly excluded most African-American women from positions as scholars, teachers, authors, poets, and critics. Moreover, while Black women historians, writers, and social scientists have long existed, until recently these women have not held leadership positions in universities, professional associations, publishing concerns, broadcast media, and other institutions of knowledge validation” (7).

72 Guillaumin, Racism, Sexism, Power and Ideology, 50. In her analysis of acts of white supremacist terror, Robyn Wiegman provides a striking reminder of how this occultation occurs: “the perpetrators of dismemberment and murder were ritually veiled and acted not in the service of a lone sovereign but for a now-homegenized, known-but-never-individuated, power” (American Anatomies, 39).

73 Spillers, “Psychoanalysis and Race,” 379.
requires the “occultation of the Self” because the selfhood it entails is never more than a dangerous supplement to a social position established by violence that both founds and rends the terms of the modern social contract. You might say that racialized privilege needs explication as the resource for forgetting its own foldedness, its implication in practices of othering that signal an “already fatal internal differentiation.”74 Interiority, as a resource for the coherence of the self, can be sustained only by the violent production of an exterior. This exterior is occupied by those who, by definition, lack a proper interiority. As Ferreira da Silva explains,

the knowledge arsenal, which now governs the global (juridic, economic, and moral) configuration, institutes racial subjection as it presupposes and postulates that the elimination of its “others” is necessary for the realization of the subject’s exclusive ethical attribute, namely, self-determination.75

The “proper” subject, enclosed by the limits of human reason, enjoys the capacity for coherent representation of what is exterior to itself, where representation glides perilously close to ownership. Kant gives the subject of private property its most concise gloss: “The ‘I think’ must be able to accompany all my representations.”76 Unlike the Cartesian motto, which melds subjectivity and being in the solvent of grammar, Kant’s formula insists on the mutual exclusivity of centers of experience as the condition of understanding. (You might even say, it demands their violent displacement.) My thoughts must be mine and mine alone, not another’s. It follows that understanding others and ourselves requires that we interrupt the ensemble of the senses, and the dispositions that improvise there, in order to

75 Ferreira da Silva, Toward a Global Idea of Race, xiii.
consider — with the precision of the surveyor’s art, or the navigator’s, or the ballisticsian’s — each subject’s singular perspective, the sight-lines that human reason, lacking an omniscient perspective, traces through an exterior, lifeless, and fundamentally irrational matter. That we account for, as Hume puts it, each subject’s “peculiar point of view.”77 This nobody has a right to but himself. And to make explicit to oneself, either at moments of crisis or in the thrashing of fancy and desire, that others occupy vectors of perspective, hence centers of experience, different from one’s own: that appears to the modern subject as its “peculiar” burden. In return, the liberal episteme allocates to the individual qua individual his peculium (Latin: “private property”) as his privileged access to himself, unique and inviolate, which serves as his token of inclusion in a universal human nature.78

When it comes to representations of the human body, the explicit describes the objectification in the other’s flesh of the subject’s desire. The subject makes a bid for their integrity as a subject via the device of another’s objectification. But this process becomes the site of a fundamental failure — a failure that founds the subject — through the latter’s encounter with what Moten calls the “resistance of the object.”79 The Atlantic crucible of modernity — the genocide practiced against Native peoples and the transoceanic, transcontinental trade in stolen life — intensified, if it did not in fact unleash, relational energies that Europe’s customary modes of knowledge and belief could not contain.80 They beat the hedges, and flocks darkened the skies.

79 Moten, In the Break. In a similar vein, Rizvana Bradley describes Black femininity as “a fold of that outside” (“Living in the Absence of a Body: The (Sus)Stain of Black Female (W)holeness,” Rhizomes: Cultural Studies in Emerging Knowledge 29 [2016]: para. 10).
80 As Paul Gilroy writes, “Modernity might itself be thought to begin in the constitutive relationships with outsiders that both found and temper a self-conscious sense of western civilization” (The Black Atlantic, 17).
At the level of abstraction pursued by liberal social theory and moral philosophy, it appears that only private property — what Cheryl I. Harris calls the “unfettered right to exclude” — can vitiate this relational excess. And yet, to imagine the world without the constraints of private property is not necessarily to imagine a state of war. Or perhaps that imagination is made possible precisely because the bellicose state of nature already lurks in the stock exchange and the coffee-house and the bookseller’s stall. In the belly of Leviathan, every man is a wannabe leviathan if, as Hobbes wrote, “Every man is in the market for power.” If the property relation, as transformed by the liquidity of capital, can “engulf” (Ferreira da Silva’s term) the violent intimacy of physical and sexual enslavement, rendering the enslaved equivalent to any other commodity — that is, rendering the enslaved not just a “thing,” but a thing potentially equivalent to any other thing, which is how the commodity functions for capital — then the property relation cannot partition the human being (as a thing indelibly self-sovereign) from the rest of the natural and material world (which stands open to the exercise of that sovereignty). Just as such putative sovereignty, located in a property claim to land already belonging to others, cannot secure the subject from future incursions upon “his” land or person. This problem engenders a supplement. That supplement is the modern “fact” of racialized difference (projected along the axes of gender, sexuality, and social class). As Ferreira da Silva writes, this supplement “produces […] the affectable (subaltern)

might complicate this argument with Silvia Federici’s claim that the new European elite defined itself also in relation to the outsiders in its midst, i.e., the European peasant and urban working-class populations, and especially peasant and working-class women, from whom this elite sought to differentiate itself even as it developed new intimacies of domination and exploitation (Caliban and the Witch [New York: Autonomedia, 2014]).

82 Quoted in MacPherson, The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism, 38.
subjects that can be excluded from juridical universality without unleashing an ethical crisis.83

As the possessive that is supposed to render one self-possessed, privilege negotiates an uneasy compromise:

If property is nothing more than what it evokes on the most intimate and subjective levels, then the inherence of its object is denied; the separateness of the thing that is property must be actively obliterated in order to maintain the privately sensational pleasantry of the mirror image. A habituated, acculturated blindness to the inherent quality of the people and things around us grows up, based on our safety from having to see. Our interrelationships with these things are not seen; their reasons for being are rendered invisible.84

Rather than “stultification,” the subordination of our senses to the single sense of having might be better described as involu-tion or implication. I use the latter term in its more literal acceptance, signifying an entwining or entanglement. For the property relation is supposed to abet our interiority under the figure of our radical, absolute separateness from the external world of things that have properties and that can be possessed. And yet, as Patricia Williams suggests, separateness itself “must be actively obliterated” in the act of enjoyment. Profit and pleasure


cross in a cut that, obscuring the material and mutually constituting character of our “interrelationships” with other people and things, torques the senses into a narcissism that feels its entanglement with others and otherness as interiority itself. Thus, the (non)sense of having privilege becomes an instrument of extreme sensitivity. The modern subject is taught to measure his position vis-à-vis other subjects according to their relative distance from a shared norm or ideal. And on the streets of major cities and college towns, on radio and television as well as in the most isolated pockets of social media, in the grumbling of sectors of a newly precarious middle class that harmonizes with the rhetoric of those in the highest echelons of power, we find ourselves in the midst of a virulently renewed enthusiasm for the explicit location of privilege in visible anatomy. This enthusiasm centers on whiteness and masculinity, not just as marks of privilege, but as marks bearing the significance of a reason, a rationale. This enthusiasm suggests that the sense of privilege is a kind of negative subjective energy, an (occulted) self-knowledge that knows only its innate superiority. Or only the desire thereof. It is not only a fragile, stupid, and one-sided knowledge,

85 Spillers, linking the sexual violation of enslaved Black women to the dominant imaginary’s continued displacement of Black paternity (and the degradation, in that same gesture, of Black maternity), quotes Frederick Douglass on the slaveholders’ project to “make a gratification of their wicked desires profitable as well as pleasurable” (“Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” 221).

86 I have borrowed (albeit liberally) this image of the modern subject from René Girard, Deceit, Desire, and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010); and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, Between Men: English Literature and Male Homosocial Desire (New York: Columbia University Press, 2016). Robyn Wiegman, American Anatomies, describes modernity’s project of “locating in the body an epistemological framework for justifying inequality” (2).

87 A renewed enthusiasm, but by no means a new one. The violent mobilization of an explicit ideology of patriarchal white supremacy to buttress the latter’s tacit power has been a feature of modern Western societies for a very long time. For a survey of how this strategy has shaped American history, see Ibram X. Kendi, Stamped from the Beginning: The
but also a dangerous one. It is a knowledge estranged from the senses that gave birth to it, searching for the conditions of conviction, tirelessly expanding, even as it plumbs, the vacuum of itself.

_enthusiasm, or the labor of breath_

The sense of privilege demands of others an explicitness to which it does not submit itself. The institution's or the culture's sanctioned explicators stand ready to silence a challenge to their privilege by condemning another to that very gap over which their own words glide. Heresy, hysteria, nonsense, madness, sedition, the noise of brutes: the other must be spoken for or barred from speaking altogether. Even when she tries to justify herself on their terms, the explicators, like the Puritan elders confronting Anne Hutchinson, can shut down her efforts by fiat. For the circuit that links them runs only one way:

*Definitive History of Racist Ideas in America* (New York: Nation Books, 2017). The strategy forms a significant part of the “psychological wage of whiteness” (and white manhood) noted by W.E.B. Du Bois, *Black Reconstruction in America*. As Dana D. Nelson succinctly observes, “The advantage of whiteness for men […] perhaps more immediately than the cultural capital it entailed in the marketplace of democracy, was the disavowal and projection of internal fragmentation that it allowed” (*National Manhood: Capitalist Citizenship and the Imagined Fraternity of White Men* [Durham: Duke University Press, 1998], 100). On the recent history of white power movements as a paramilitary force operating in the United States with relative impunity, see Kathleen Belew, *Bring the War Home: The White Power Movement and Paramilitary America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018). In a sentence that powerfully invokes these currents, Fred Moten writes, “the sociopaths who call themselves the mainstream have produced an image of themselves as a thing in and for itself manifest as trained and regulated plenitude when what they are, in fact, is nothing but an always already transgressed boundary, or limit, both instantiated, finally, but also figured as (white) skin” (*Black and Blur*, 260).
Mrs. H. [...] —Do you think it not lawful for me to teach women and why do you call me to teach the court?
Gov. We do not call you to teach the court but to lay open yourself.
Mrs. H. I desire that you would then set down a rule by which I may put them away that come unto me and so have peace in so doing.
Gov. You must shew your rule to receive them.
Mrs. H. I have done it.
Gov. I deny it because I have brought more arguments than you have.88

The elders compel Hutchinson to “show” the “rule” that justifies her practice (of practicing theology as a woman, usurping the ministers’ authority). They demand that she ground her knowing-how on a knowing-that. But only they, the elders, know how, i.e., possess the institutional power, to judge whether her explanation is sufficient. Being a function of power, this know-how cannot be made explicit. Its ultimate justification lies in what Jacques Rancière calls the “material aggregation of consent.”89 That aggregation appears in the physical, political, and economic power of the men confronting Hutchinson as a united body. A body in which divergent or even opposed personal interests, filtered through the commitment to a hierarchy that situates Hutchinson beneath them all, require them to close ranks. They act against her individual body in order to suppress the inspiration in her flesh. The Governor says, “I have brought more arguments than you have,” but what he has really brought are more bodies, more power. No amount of explication can prevail against them, for the elders have decided that they already know what Hutchinson’s testimony is supposed to reveal. Onto her ap-

89 Rancière, Ignorant Schoolmaster, 82.
peals to fairness and justice, they project their own image of her interiority: “her Judgment is one Thing and her Expression is another.”90 And yet, as a pedigreed Englishwoman who became a spiritual leader in her settler-colonial community, Hutchinson is granted — rhetorically, at least — what most women in such situations would have been denied: the capacity for judgment. Unlike, for instance, those accused of witchcraft, Hutchinson’s community service and spiritual practice do not mark her as an empty vessel of the flesh, a vessel whose imagined violation by the devil authorizes her real violation by upright Christian men. Nonetheless, when the Governor locates Hutchinson’s sin in the discord between interiority (“her Judgment”) and exteriority (“her Expression”), he shows us what her “sin” signifies: the social discord threatened by a woman’s having claimed the mantle of political and theological authority for herself. And so, Hutchinson’s recantation, performed during her trial, fails. For her crime is expression: her giving voice to an inwardness that only “Man” (the trousers of the capital letter hitched high) is supposed to possess.

Silvia Federici describes various forms of femicide in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries as a circum-Atlantic phenomenon, one gathering steam in exchanges between Old World and New, reflecting the very resistance that provoked it. But as Sylvia Wynter admonishes, we must be mindful of the differential terrain of this resistance, of how “the partial liberation of Miranda’s hitherto stifled speech” rests on the “new […] silenced ground” of “the majority population-groups of the globe — all signified now as the ‘natives’ (Caliban’s) to the ‘men’ of Prospero and Fernando.”91 As the shifting grounds of

90 Hall, “A Report of the Trial of Mrs. Anne Hutchinson before the Church in Boston,” in The Antinomian Controversy, 386.
subject-positions that refuse to stay put, resistance and subjugation get mixed up in what Tavia Nyong’o calls the “circum-Atlantic fold,” a metaphor that complicates our understanding of these exchanges, even as it deepens our conception of exchange itself.92 I have quoted from the record of Hutchinson’s trial in part because of how this fragment might evoke, through the silences that populate it, the vast field of expression — verbal, gestural, postural, musical, rhythmic, haptic — that has never left its trace in print. Or perhaps the traces of such expression cut the text, between the lines of interrogation and response. Even the question, perfectly legitimate from an editorial point of view, as to whether this particular text constitutes Hutchinson’s “own words” is cut by other questions: What does it mean to own words? How can acts of ex-pression possibly requite the possessive impulse, and at who’s ex-pense?

mode of privilege unique to her, that of being the metaphysically invested and ‘idealized’ object of desire,” in relation to which European cum white men triangulate their own desires as evidence of inwardness, subjectivity, or spirit. I say triangulate because they do so only in relation to the place occupied by a third party. In this context, that third party is the colonial Other, the racialized man (Caliban) and/or the racialized woman. For Wynter, the latter’s absence from the Shakespearean text further testifies to her role in the structure as a figure accumulating catachresis, excess, and displacement. But Zakiyyah Iman Jackson notes how “Wynter’s term ‘Caliban’s woman’ runs her right into the problem of heteronormativity [that] her discussion of a particular ‘ontological absence’ wants to trouble, particularly as this ‘ontological absence’ functions in the eugenic production of gender, desire, and reproduction” (“‘Theorizing in a Void’: Sublimity, Matter, and Physics in Black Feminist Poetics,” South Atlantic Quarterly 117, no. 3 [July 2018]: 639).

92 Nyong’o, The Amalgamation Waltz, 19. On the connections between political and religious dissenters in Europe and the New World, sailors and other transient free laborers, indentured servants, and the enslaved, see Peter Linebaugh, “All the Atlantic Mountains Shook,” Labour / Le Travail 10 (1982): 87–121. Linebaugh argues that these exchanges provided the crucible in which the abolition movements in England and North America were formed, writing of “the oceanic generalization of the theory and practice of antinomian democracy” (113).
We might imagine this field in terms of a circum-Atlantic circulation of the breath, of the desire for breath. Among prophecy; rebellion; mutiny; the manifold practices and rituals of healing and council otherwise labeled *witchcraft*; a million mundane forms of insurrection, including the endlessly repeated resistance to bondage, forced labor, torture, harassment, and rape; ranting and raving; vagrancy and vagabondage; frauds, dodges, close cuts, and narrow escapes; strikes and boycotts; utopian visions, plans, fictions, and otherwise unspoken convictions carried in at the base the spine; and what Saidiya Hartman refers to as the fugitive forms of redress pursued by the enslaved...among these things, I am asserting not a genealogy, but a certain family resemblance. One marked by disjunctions, cuts, and the fugitivity of origins. A field of exchange not founded on equivalence, but productive of singular and collective strategies for survival and flourishing in the face of the violence of equivalence and its enclosure of the world and the flesh. A spacing of the breath. Of prophetic breath, which is the lungs working before and beyond profit. If I call it *enthusiasm*,

93 In a book that I did not discover until late in the process of preparing this manuscript for publication, that is to say, belatedly, breathlessly, I read Ashon T. Crawley’s claim that

“Blackpentecostalism belongs to all who would so live into the fact of the flesh, live into this fact as a critique of the violence of modernity, the violence of the Middle Passage and enslavement, the violence of enslavement and its ongoing afterlife, live into the flesh as a critique of the ongoing attempt to interdict the capacity to breathe. The aesthetic practices cannot be owned but only collectively produced, cannot be property but must be given away in order to constitute community. Blackpentecostalism—and those that would come to describe themselves as such—is sent into the world; it is an aesthetic practice that was sent and is about being sent: ‘to be sent, to be transported out of yourself, it’s an ecstatic experience, it’s not an experience of interiority, it’s an experience of exteriority, it’s an exteriorization’” (*Blackpentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility* [New York: Fordham University Press, 2017], 4, emphasis in the original).

94 Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 76–78.

95 On prophecy, see Harney and Moten, *The Undercommons*, 42.
I do so in order to invoke the history of the affects themselves as modes of politics, *emotion* (in English) having originally been a term meaning “political agitation, civil unrest.”

In the improvisation of life beyond the closed domains of elite reason and debate, enthusiasm refers us to “the possible survival of [...] autonomy [...] outside the head.” Derrida’s figure suggests the unsettling, indeterminate spread of expression beyond the judgment that is supposed to have produced it. It echoes, too, the topos according to which sovereignty resides in the head of the social body, while the limbs execute the head’s commands. And it returns us to Marx, whose critique of the “phantom-like objectivity” of value depicts tables and chairs as conversing, dancing, and testifying on their own behalf. In their phantasmic guises, these commodities have bewitched the economists, who fail to understand value as a figure for the relations among men, mistaking it for a concrete property of the things themselves. But the commodified, disposition flesh — marked as less than “man,” but on whose labor the achievements of modernity rest — did, and does, speak. This testimony, per Moten, demands that we

think the possibility of an (exchange-)value that is prior to exchange, and [...] think the reproductive and incantatory assertion of that possibility as the objection to exchange that is exchange’s condition of possibility.

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This exchange-ability without measure I read as the voice or motion of affectability itself. Or the fold thereof, where matter encounters itself as at once continuous and different, in an intimate or impossibly proximal otherness that spells both resistance and vulnerability at the same time.\textsuperscript{100} The flesh feels, it suffers. In the throes of prophecy, it dreams of other worlds, and this conviction of the possible runs to seed. It sheds spores that in their dispersal, through songs, rumors, gossip, arguments, and daydreams; whispered from mouth to ear or written down and passed from hand to pocket; in the corners of the marketplace and factory, around a fire at the wooded margins of the fields, and wherever else the wind howls, ruffling the owl’s feathers with the summons to flight, can engender the dawning of a new aspect, and turn estranged senses newly strange. “[I]t stands on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas.”\textsuperscript{101} As Saidiya Hartman writes, “the dispossessed body of the enslaved is surrogate for the master’s body since it guarantees his disembodied universality and acts as the sign of his power and dominion.”\textsuperscript{102} Autonomy’s “survival […] outside the head” would include how the limbs of the social body communicate ideas and practices to one another, speak up for themselves and for one another, and lend each other a hand.

Troubling differences between the autonomous, the autonomic, and the antinomian, enthusiasm is a labor of breath. The breath that impassions song; the breath that incarnates prophecy and jeremiad; the breath that powers the pen of critique.

See Mr. Caldwell’s intended blessings for us, O! my Lord!! “No,” said he, “if they must remain in their present situation,

\textsuperscript{100} Glossing Moten here, too, who writes of choreography that “[o]penness to the embrace moves against the backdrop of exclusion and the history of exclusion, which is a series of incorporative operations. This is how openness to being affected is inseparable from the resistance to being affected” (\textit{Black and Blur}, 175).

\textsuperscript{101} Marx and Engels, \textit{Capital}, 1:163–64.

\textsuperscript{102} Hartman, \textit{Scenes of Subjection}, 21.
keep them in the *lowest state of degradation and ignorance.* The nearer you bring them to the condition of brutes, the better chance do you give them of possessing their *apathy.*” Here I pause to get breath, having labored to extract the above clause of this gentleman’s speech, at that colonizing meeting. I presume that everybody knows the meaning of the word “*apathy,*” […] I solicit the attention of the world, to the foregoing part of Mr. Caldwell’s speech, that they may see what man will do with his fellow men, when he has them under his feet. To what length will not man go in iniquity when given up to a hard heart, and reprobate mind, in consequence of blood and oppression?103

David Walker’s *Appeal* became a crucial anti-slavery tract and “for a time, the most notorious publication in North America.”104 Walker’s tract is also a profound critique of the ruses by which patriarchal white supremacy seeks to justify itself. In his impassioned text, prophetic speech (“O! my Lord!!”) and critical explication (“that they may see what man will do with his fellow men”) interanimate one another. Dissecting Elias Caldwell’s address to the American Colonization Society, Walker exposes the perverse irony by which “this benevolent man” offers, as a crumb of redress to the enslaved, the very apathy that buttresses the greed and sadism of the slave-holding classes. The ruses of capitalism justify exploitation by denying the capacity for autonomy to those whose autonomy capitalism would remove by force. Locked into the status of affectable things, the exploited are then denied even the capacity for feeling; they are denied, that is, the minimal right to *be affected* by what affects them, in order that feeling, and the inwardness that it appears to signify, may remain the sole privilege and property of their exploiters.

104 Sean Wilentz, introduction to ibid., vii.
In a society where humanity is galvanized by performances of ownership, Caldwell’s discourse suggests that the dispossessed are so utterly dispossessed that the sole hope left for them is to possess “their apathy,” i.e., their non-being, the systematic erasure of their humanity.

Turning the tables on this logic, Walker’s text flings the charge of apathy back upon white society. And unlike much of the abolitionist literature by white authors, which appealed to the virtues of that very society to redress of the plight of the enslaved, Walker’s text is addressed to “the Coloured Citizens […] of the United States of America.” Beginning with its title, his tract performs its revolutionary, emancipatory intent. If, as Michelle Wright puts it, “whiteness […] signifies an ability to transform words into deeds,” Walker’s tract claims this ability for its primary audience no less than for itself.105 And we can easily imagine the threat that it posed to the antebellum body politic. Not only does it agitate for the immediate (and therefore violent) overthrow of slave-holders by the enslaved. Not only does it predict, by appeal to divine warrant, the imminence of this overthrow, citing the hypocrisy of those who profess to reconcile slavery with Christian morality: “I tell you that God will dash tyrants, in combination with devils, into atoms, and will bring you out from your wretchedness and miseries under these Christian People!!!!!!”106 Beyond all this, Walker’s text cultivates a conviction in the improvisatory power of the speaking (and writing) and suffering flesh. Communicating its power to others, the flesh channels grief and anger into a force that unsettles the sense of what can and will be.

Rhetorically and orthographically, Walker’s Appeal registers the radical force of the flesh. Interjections and exclamation points pile up with an energy that the regulatory circuits of grammar and rhetoric cannot contain. This is affect that exceeds the sayable, affect batten down by the condition of

105 Wright, Becoming Black, 64.
106 Walker, David Walker’s Appeal, 71.
enselavement itself. In the same breath, Walker’s painstaking critique of Caldwell’s speech strains the writer’s composure, as the author struggles to wrest from the knowledge of “blood and oppression,” and from the grip of the oppressor’s hypocrisy, the stamina to write: “I pause to get breath, having labored to extract the above clause of this gentleman’s speech.” The Appeal is a complex text, and I cannot do justice to it here. But I appeal to its affinity with traditions of enthusiasm because much of what received that label during the early modern period was the work of men and women who dared lay claim to the authority to interpret and contest divine and secular discourse without the sanction of privilege or (what would come to be called) expertise. And though many, perhaps, did so in pursuit of those...

107 As Saidiya Hartman points out, any form of self-expression was extremely dangerous for the enslaved (Scenes of Subjection, 54–56).
108 Tavia Nyong’o, for instance, reads Walker’s Appeal as performing a kind of masculine shame: as exhorting his Black male readers to “vindicat[e] their race” in the face of the degradation of slavery and the insults of white supremacist thinkers like Thomas Jefferson (The Amalgamation Waltz, 90–95). Following this reading, and quoting Denise Ferreira da Silva, we might say that Walker “occupies the affectable (outer-determined) position in the racial text and the transparent (self-determined) one in the patriarchal text” (“Hacking the Subject: Black Feminism and Refusal beyond the Limits of Critique,” PhiloSOPHIA 8, no. 1 [2018]: 24).
109 I would like to think that Walker’s spirit might keep company in the circum-Atlantic fold with all sorts of troublemakers, among them Ranters like Abiezer Coppe. Coppe’s seventeenth-century pamphlets championed the cause of “poor creeples, lazars, […] rogues, thieves, whores and cut-purses,” advocating for a truly radical revolution that would cast down the “Great Ones” and liberate the oppressed. Coppe’s texts target both the hereditary nobility and the Puritan middle classes eager to replace them in their pursuit of “Honor, Nobility, Gentility, Propriety, Superfluity,” which (writes Coppe) “hath (without contradiction) been […] the cause of all the blood that ever hath been shed, from the blood of righteous Abell, to the blood of the last Levellers that were shot to death” (Selected Writings [London: Aporia Press, 1987], 24). Coppe is a hymnist of the flesh, and he imagines his own compositional practice in visceral terms:

“And behold I writ, and lo a hand was sent to me, and a roll of a book was therein, which this fleshly hand would have put wings to, before the time. Whereupon it was snatch out of my hand, & the Roll thrust into my
bloodless idols, “ability, aptitude, merit,” many also did it out of fidelity to that collective compact between the senses and the imagination by which alone we might learn, coming to know it together, what it means to live.

The labor for breath, tracing its cut through interlocking yokes (chattel slavery, indentured servitude, debt-peonage, lynching, low-wage labor, incarceration, prostitution, military conscription, segregation, discrimination, isolation, deprivation, sexual and domestic violence, etc.) in search of other modes of being and becoming, gave and gives vent to what Marx calls “the sensuous outburst of […] life activity.”

This ventilation sustains the creativity of social and collective life. It can be found, at the turn of the twentieth century, in the close, crowded quarters of the slums where young Black women embarked on “beautiful experiments” in desiring freedom, as chronicled by Saidiya Hartman. Queer or otherwise living outside the enclosure of middle-class gender roles, poor, and frequently crim-

mouth; and I eat it up, and filled my bowels with it […] where it was as bitter as wormwood; and it lay broiling, and burning in my stomack, till I brought it forth in this forme” (18).

Coppe testifies to a gestation in the bowels that proves necessary before he can transmute into words what he has seen and felt. Nor is the voice that commands Coppe to write any sort of Kantian weighing and accounting of perspectives. If the voice of conscience, then conscience is a harrowing of the senses and a revolt in the gut. In the folds of this affective history, voices like Walker’s and Coppe’s hook up with those whom Harney and Moten celebrate in The Undercommons:

“These other ones carry bags of newspaper clippings, or sit at the end of the bar, or stand at the stove cooking, or sit on a box at the newsstand, or speak through the bars, or speak in tongues. These other ones have a passion to tell you what they have found, and they are surprised you want to listen, even though they’ve been expecting you. Sometimes the story is not clear, or it starts in a whisper. It goes around again but listen, it is funny again, every time” (68).

Marx, Economic and Political Manuscripts, 77. Moten writes of a “spirit manifest in its material expense or aspiration” (In the Break, 18), and Christina Sharpe takes up the theme of “aspiration” in her consideration of the “wake work” of Black ethical and aesthetic practices (In the Wake: On Blackness and Being [Durham: Duke University Press, 2016], 112–13).
nalized, these unsung women sang themselves in pursuit of what the dominant order told them, time and again, could not be theirs. And which they knew could not belong to them, but for a different reason from what those with so much more than their share of everything else could understand. For beauty does not belong to you. Only in giving yourself, can you, in moments of longing and drift, belong to it:

It’s hard to explain what’s beautiful about a rather ordinary colored girl of no exceptional talents, a face difficult to discern in the crowd, an average chorine not destined to be a star, or even the heroine of a feminist plot. In some regard, it is to recognize the obvious, but that which is reluctantly ceded: the beauty of black ordinary, the beauty that resides in and animates the determination to live free, the beauty that propels the experiments in living otherwise. […] Beauty is not a luxury; rather it is a way of creating possibility in the space of enclosure, a radical art of subsistence, an embrace of our terribleness, a transfiguration of the given. It is a will to adorn, a proclivity for the baroque, and the love of too much.\footnote{111}

Of these young Black women, we might say, as Fred Moten writes, “they renovate sequestration.”\footnote{112} Just as Hartman renovates what has too often been the sequestration of social history by writing beautifully, boldly, and with great care of what escapes the archive. Of what cuts the archive with the rawness of an exposed site, from which the healing, desiring, and flourishing powers of the flesh have long since fled. But if the social history of Black lives too often resembles an overexposed photograph, where nuance and detail are lost in the obliterating whiteness of the image itself, Hartman attends to how flight

haunts these sites with the “glimmer of possibility […] the ache of what might be.” Writing “a love letter to all those who had been harmed,” she writes waywardly, and this waywardness expresses a double movement, a doubled becoming that, in overcoming the confinement of the urban “wards” where her subjects fought to thrive, confounds the difference between interior and exterior (like all the plans concocted, the loves pursued, and the knowledge of life, at times beautiful, at times terrible, consecrated in the hallways, in the embrace of a vestibularity that most middle-class social critics and reformers, Black and white, could only read as signs of a moral and cultural deficit that the white world both had the right to impose and the duty, somehow, to remedy).

Beyond the shallow paradigms of uplift that reflect only patriarchal white supremacy’s exhausting search to recover its own good intentions, Hartman’s book — and the currents of Black feminist and Black queer thought that nourish it and that it nourishes — renovate my own white man’s sense, morally, aesthetically, and intellectually, of the possible. Including my sense of what language, as an instrument of longing and struggle, yes, but also mutual comfort and pleasure, might make room for. For obsessively policing the boundaries of its fantasized superiority (which is a thin film glossing the realities of hierarchy and exploitation that harm white lives, too), whiteness fears the breath that animates language. Fears it as a source of contagion. Breath roots us in our commonality with others as flesh; as such, it expresses the radical capacity for feeling together that we might call compassion. But sutured to the labor of its own sep-

115 See Crawley, Blackpentecostal Breath, who writes of the “breathed critique” of Black aesthetic and religious practices in their opposition to the “totalizing force” that encloses Black lives; these practices “mak[e] evident the incompleteness, the incompletion, of the project of white supremacy” (46). Crawley also notes that “[s]hortness of breath from thinking the very
Arateness-as-self-possession, whiteness names an intimacy with failures of compassion. Like that of the white middle-school teachers in Kiese Laymon’s memoir *Heavy*, who take their Black students to task for what the teachers perceive as the students’ inattention to proper hygiene:

Worse than any cuss word we could imagine, “gross” existed on the other side of what we considered abundant. And in the world we lived in and loved, everyone black was in some way abundant. We’d all listened to grown-folk spade sessions on Friday. We’d all dressed in damn near our Easter best to watch the pregame, the game, and, mostly, the halftime show of Jackson State vs. Valley, Valley vs. Alcorn, Alcorn vs. Southern, or Grambling vs. Jackson State on Saturday. Saturday night, we’d all driven back home in the backseats of cars, listening to folk theorize about the game, Mississippi politics, or why somebody’s auntie and uncle were trying to sell their child’s World’s Finest Chocolates in the parking lot after the game. Sunday morning, we’d all been dragged into some black church by our parents and grandparents. And every Sunday, we hoped to watch some older black folk fan that black heathen in tennis shoes who caught the Holy Spirit. But outside of stadiums and churches, and outside of weekends, we were most abundant. While that abundance dictated the shape and movement of bodies, the taste and texture of our food, it was most apparent in the way we dissembled and assembled words, word sounds, and sentences.\(^{116}\)

I quote this passage at length because Laymon’s figure of “abundance” traces the ethical and aesthetic dimensions of what I have tried to summon, in its fugitive resistance to modernity’s capacity of Others breathing the same air, it seems, was a vivifying force of racial mob and lynching violence” (68).

violent reconfiguration of social privilege, under the heading of enthusiasm. And because the abundance Laymon describes breathes through his prose, too, fanning the contours of what we might call ordinary lives. Except that ordinariness suggests an ordering, an enclosure the violence of which this abundance troubles with its heathen holiness, its non-stop pursuit of renovation and invention. In its un-ordinal seriality, abundance refers us to a multitude of insurgent sites where messages pass to and fro, on frequencies outside the narrow range of a racialized visibility, elliptically, conspiratorially, compassionately, with the radiance of possible worlds.\(^{117}\)

\textit{acknowledgments}

Prurient interest, scholarly or otherwise, would penetrate such sites in order to exploit what they shelter from the metrics of exchange. And guilt is only the other side of prurience. But gratitude, by which I try to name the impropriety of a response that always exceeds and falls short of its object, gratitude is felt as excessive in the moment of falling short. Perhaps because through it, this feeling, you are brought up short on the incompletion of your flesh, radical and pre-possessive. Or perhaps because gratitude is fugitive, and the feeling too soon goes away. At any rate, gratitude gathers the rest of what I have to say, by way of introduction and acknowledgment. I’m after a manner of reaching for trust in the body and the body’s buried knowledge: the search, determined or desperate, for time’s tackle coiled in the flesh, which modern discipline has unraveled, tallied up, and translated into an inventory of formal rules, procedures, and mechanisms. To live estranged from this trust is to suffer that

\(^{117}\) In addition to the work of Fred Moten, I am thinking here of Laura Harris’s deployment of the concept of the “sociality of blackness” in “What Happened to the Motley Crew? C.L.R. James, Hélio Oiticica, and the Aesthetic Sociality of Blackness,” Social Text 30, no. 3 (2012): 49–75.
alienation that so many writers have attributed to modernity. But to cling to that estrangement, in the name of one’s own “ability, aptitude, merit,” is to double down on alienation as though it were the very ground of trust. James Baldwin writes, “The person who distrusts himself has no touchstone for reality — for this touchstone can be only oneself.”\footnote{Baldwin, “The Fire Next Time,” 312.} Baldwin suggests that the habits and emotions by which white people defend their privilege — especially their fear, anger, and indifference toward those who have borne and continue to bear the consequences of the white greed for land and cheap labor — have severely enclosed whites’ ability to know, hence to trust, themselves. “Such a person,” Baldwin writes, “interposes between himself and reality nothing less than a labyrinth of attitudes.” Baldwin’s metaphor beautifully describes the persistence of privileged dispositions in history and their role in the construction of subjectivity and intersubjective life. They are not imaginary, these attitudes, at least not like vapors that can be brushed away. For they govern the movement of bodies as well as the arrangement of physical space. To picture it precisely, we would have to imagine multiple labyrinths, layered one on the other in N dimensions. Each of us has such a labyrinth, and we invite others into our labyrinth by how we treat them: how we try to love them or refuse them love; how we envy or despise them; how we nurture the good in them or goad them toward the terror in themselves. My sense of having privilege consists, perhaps, in a feverish enjoyment of such powers of bondage and refusal. Seduced by them, I aspire to a petty architecture of Babelian proportions, following and reinforcing the endless turns of invidious contrasts (dark and light, weak and strong, dirty and clean, dumb and smart, brutish and sensitive, ugly and beautiful, fat and thin, poor and rich, foreign and native, mad and sane, ill and hale, stranger and friend (one passage leading only into another, where the walls are flesh and blood (as Saidiya Hartman writes, “the denigrated and deprecated, those castigated and saddled by varied corpo-
real maledictions, are the fleshy substance that enable the universal to achieve its ethereal splendor”), and the monster at the center, only what, in the course of my pursuit, I have become (only myself)).\textsuperscript{119}

As Baldwin says, these attitudes “do not relate to the present” in that they substitute relations fixed in the past for an openness to the achievement of solidarity that is the present’s unending gift.\textsuperscript{120} To turn away from the flesh we share, and to substitute the shuffle of value judgments, as though the senses were so many sliding panels we might rearrange in order to construct clear passage to the freedom we have been promised…weaving in and out of one another’s path…striving to distinguish ourselves as individuals by the actions that we collectively invent…refusing to feel how, beneath us, the ice grows thin and is already breaking up. This is an image of society as the aggregation of self-possessive individuals. An image of society as haunted by that “impartial spectator” each person patches together out of the value judgments that they have learned to attribute to others, feeling desperate to measure up.\textsuperscript{121} My description is not meant to elicit sympathy for the fragility of such a figure, nor in any way to excuse this figure from a reckoning with the history that their attitudes reproduce. For if attitudes, habits, and dispositions lend a person’s acts, moment to moment, that always

\textsuperscript{119} Hartman, \textit{Scenes of Subjection}, 122.
\textsuperscript{120} Baldwin, “The Fire Next Time,” 312.
\textsuperscript{121} Adam Smith, \textit{The Theory of Moral Sentiments} (Indianapolis: Liberty Classics, 1982), 110. But the impartial spectator is really an imp of partiality. For the logic of invidious distinction demands that the judgments of another (of any particular other) confer value only insofar as that value retains its deferred and promissory power. In other words, the other’s judgment matters as a measure of what I \textit{might} be worth. It’s my potential that’s at stake, vis-à-vis a generalized market of exchange, rather than my actual entanglement with this other person. Therefore, as Merleau-Ponty puts it, “at the moment my value is recognized by the other’s desire, the other person is no longer the person by whom I wanted to be recognized: he is now a fascinated being, without freedom, and who as such no longer counts for me” (\textit{The Phenomenology of Perception}, 170).
partial consistency we call a self, then in pursuit of such consistency, the privileged subject relies on the emotional, imagina
tive, and critical labor of others. Thus, men, especially cis
et men, lean on the enthusiasm for them shown by the women in
their lives. And white lives would be barren without the inven
tions of Black, immigrant, and Native/Indigenous cultures, just
as heteronormative society needs the creative energies of queerness to renovate its tunnel vision of the future. My sense of hav
ing privilege has the shape of a series of cuts against the matter of the world, cuts that part the self from others. Deep cuts felt as anger, fear, and shame. But if I hope not to explicate my sub
ject (cutting off the reader at the pass with my expertise), but
to do something else, something other (something that others myself), how do I name it? And how do I know when I have at
tained it? What does it look like, sound like, feel like?

Perhaps what I am after might be called exposure. Exposure can certainly feel different from, even if it resembles, explication. If the latter is a means of possessing one’s subject (matter), the former suggests a loss of possession, a losing it or having lost it. We usually apply the term to what befalls someone (as in, being exposed to a bad turn of fortune). And in the moral domain, exposure signifies an unwilled unveiling, like what undoes the liar, the hypocrite, or the fraud. In what might exposure consist, as an ethical condition purposely sought (if not exactly an intentional act)? I behave toward others, each of whom is never merely an
other but none other than this other, whose becoming otherwise frustrates the compass of my knowledge, in ways that do not fail to expose the shape of me. They expose not only what I know, but also what I believe and desire, what I have been and what I might become. For your being someone worth my concern and care (i.e., your being a someone for me) is not a property that it lies in your power to disclose, as if I might demand it of you. Rather, you have the right to demand it of me. This demand exposes me, one way or the other. In my refusal, as Stanley Cavell would say, I stand exposed as someone who lacks the motive, or
has lost the capacity, to care. But in such a reckoning, I feel the rub within myself between the singularity or particularity of my attitudes or dispositions, and their generality or commonality. I mean the idea that these things are, in the same breath, mine and not mine. Mine, in that these things do not just happen to me, but they commit me to who I am vis-à-vis others, and their performance yields my most salient internal trace. Not mine, in that the presence within me of these attitudes or dispositions registers my implication in orders outside of myself. I am exposed because I stand liable for the consequences of my actions, feelings, and judgments, and because those consequences are something I must own up to but that I do not possess. They may lie beyond my power to control, but they are not beyond my responsibility. If, as Cavell suggests, “acknowledgment goes beyond knowledge,” it is because acknowledgment engages the limited positive freedom with which dispositions are endowed, the freedom to syncopate, to pivot, to dwell in a pause, to pick up or drop a thread, a beat, etc., in the interest of introducing a new drift into the pattern itself. To quote Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, “a way of feeling through others, a feel for feeling others feeling you,” acknowledgment returns us to our affectable being. It entails a feeling for the other’s being affected by me, which is also my being affected through the other’s feeling and suffering. Even when I am not (when I affect not to be) affected

122 My thinking about exposure, like my use of the term “acknowledgment,” draws heavily on Stanley Cavell, The Claim of Reason: Wittgenstein, Skepticism, Morality, and Tragedy (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009). There Cavell argues that “Being exposed to my concept of the other is being exposed to my assurance in applying it, I mean to the fact that this assurance is mine, comes only from me. The other can present me with no mark or feature on the basis of which I can settle my attitude. I have to acknowledge humanity in the other, and the basis of it seems to lie in me” (433).

123 Ibid., 428. As Saba Mahmood writes, “the outward behavior of the body constitutes both the potentiality and the means through which interiority is realized” (Politics of Piety, 159).

124 Harney and Moten, The Undercommons, 98.
by it. Acknowledgment exposes me, not when I explain myself to you, but when I attend to my lapses in attention to the cut of our commonality, which constitutes our mutual separateness (the separateness of our flesh) as what we share, what we have in common. In that cut, wayward ever, we might improvise a new embodiment together, without any sort of guarantee.

Acknowledgments: a book strums the writer’s debt to those, living or dead, whose intimacy vibrates across those dispositions on which the writer draws. The range of vibration is indefinite, and manifold are the opportunities for distortion. Or as Rauna Kuokkanen observes, “to recognize someone is always to misrecognize others and render them and their works invisible.” The privileges I have enjoyed in writing this book, including the leisure time and institutional support, not to mention the material comforts in which I was ensconced and access to the land on which I wrote, rest on the lives and labor of others, and yet, the work’s pretention to success as a work implies their erasure. To call the work a failure cannot repair the rift, no more than my own (shamefaced) desire for anonymity can mitigate the misrecognition I prolong. But the least I can do, groping my way through the labyrinth of false equivalences, is to acknowledge that this work does not stand (or fall) on its own merits (merely in consequence of the writer’s aptitude or talent). The least I can do is to expose, however partially, the network of support on which it rests. (Randi Kristensen, whose friendship and conversation over the past decade have been a kind of tutelary genius for this piece. And Zak Wolfe and the rest of the fellowship of ranters gathered at the sign of the Fox and Hounds). Might such exposure prepare me for the work of acknowledgment? (Rachel Riedner, who first encouraged my ideas for this book, refusing to hear the excuses I made about not having the expertise.) Might my lack of expertise make room for a more capacious sense of my senses? Our parity begins there, where the senses, yours and mine and theirs, bring it forth. (The pa-

125 Kuokkanen, Reshaping the University, 91.
tient readers in the “works in progress” group of the GW University Writing Program, including Sandie Friedman, Shonda Goward, Kathy Larsen, Derek Malone-France, Gordon Mantler, Danika Myers, Pam Presser, Michael Svoboda, and Phil Troutman, who talked me through early versions of this project. And Bro Adams, Debra Bergoffen, Jane Flax, Gayle Salamon, and Gail Weiss, who welcomed me into their Merleau-Ponty reading group, where I enjoyed conversations that have left traces throughout this text.) Can we compare acknowledgment to enthusiasm? Are they not both ways, however hedged round by dangers, of projecting ourselves into an “improvisation in the disorders of desire”?126 (Cathy Eisenhower and Ken Jacobs, dear friends whose improvisatory gusto in art and life never fails to inspire me.) Under their tutelage, might writing become the raveling of deep aspect, threading the world’s lures with their scriptural trace? (Brian Casemore, a fellow critical traveler along the by-ways of white southern masculinity, whose scholarship and conversation breathed new life into my sense of what this book might do.) As the indisposition of my dispositions, the shear of composing against composure? (Bob Mondello, Carlos Schröder, and the rest of the folks around Bob and Carlos’s table for the monthly night of ñoquis, a haven for conviviality and wit.) Writing, I have to hope, has more to offer than a mere figure for the ineffable, like the picture of a kettle boiling that we would not say is itself boiling, or a coat as a vessel for the value of some linen that is not in the coat. (Those whose teaching and mentorship motivate me still, especially Brad Richard, Pam Alexander, Tim Scholl, and Carl Phillips.) Or if a figure, then of the sort that Wittgenstein evokes when he claims that “the human body is the best picture of the human soul,” or when he writes that “my soul, with its passions, as it were with its flesh

and blood, must be redeemed, not my abstract mind.”127 (Garth Greenwell, whose practice of art and friendship has been my best picture of what those things might be.) Perhaps writing, in moments of what I could describe as erasing your expectations, offers a figure for how our bodies themselves breach the envelope of self-possession; how they thresh us into a space and time in which the flesh ceases to belong to you or me. (Leah Richardson, whose enthusiasm for this project helped sustain it in the home stretch. And Keturah Solomon, whose compassion as a reader and a friend reminded me what this is all about.) A liminal zone, rife with trauma and strife but also transformation, where our beliefs about the other can yield to our belief in them. (Hannah Sommers and Peter Cohn, who, believing in me, made the professional space for me to finish this project.) A space and time of entanglement, of mutual indebtedness, which can, under the right conditions, give birth to our belief in us, or maybe I just mean love, though never without the risk of failure. (Eileen Fradenburg Joy and Vincent W.J. van Gerven Oei, whose agreement to take on this book and its risks remains a gift that exceeds my powers of gratitude; and whose commitment to the creation of new publics — critical, utopian, enthusiastic, and necessary — is matched by their belief in the productive errancy of writing, its eccentric paths toward truth.) It goes without saying that, for all the companionship I have enjoyed, the errors in this book are my responsibility. And yet, they are hardly mine to own. Writing about the soul in despair, Kierkegaard likens it to an “error [that] slipped into an author’s writing and […] became conscious of itself.”128 ‘The error seeks to expose its author: “I refused to be erased; I will stand as a witness against you, a witness that you are a second-rate author.” One cannot be a first-rate au-


Author as long as the error stands. Yet erasing the error would ruin the “whole production.” What if error, resisting its own erasure, might yield an errancy that works against (authorial) privilege? What if the exposed failures of thought might become the joists to support other structures of feeling? (My mother, Marguerite Hoffpauir, whose love and wisdom have never failed me. My younger brother, Kant Smith, whose creative partnership I cherish no less than his generous and steadfast friendship.) It is not the invisible activity of thought that provides the warrant for the work’s truth, but the hidden labor, coiled within it, of parents, children, teachers, students, editors, colleagues, neighbors, friends, and lovers. (My father, Ashton Smith, who did not live to see this project come to fruition, but whose fierce belief in me is a bequest I have yet to learn the right way to use.) These attachments represent the braid of artistry, experience, and care (and occasionally, enmity and sabotage) that have brought a work, sometimes in spite of itself, to fruition. (And Natalie Prosin, who — it goes without saying, only because I cannot find the right words — has nurtured this book and its writer in ways that I could not have imagined, that I cannot hope to deserve. But with whom every day I learn more deeply how to love.) Cryptic co-authors, their presence in the work rehearses its life among those strangers who, as its readers in the wide world, are the work’s co-authors to come.