Rough Notes to Erasure

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Composition as White/Mansplanation: Bureaucratic Grammars and Fugitive Intimacies

I am quite straight-faced as I ask soberly: “But what on earth is whiteness that one should so desire it?” Then always, somehow, some way, silently but clearly, I am given to understand that whiteness is the ownership of the earth forever and ever, Amen!

The proposition is a lure for feeling.
— Alfred North Whitehead, Process and Reality

A white hunter is nearly crazy.
— Gertrude Stein, Tender Buttons

On December 24, 2015, George Yancy’s “Dear White America” appeared on the New York Times’s blog “The Stone.” In his letter, Yancy exhorts white readers to wake up to their own racism as a step toward dismantling white supremacy. Yancy’s focus in this text is on habits of racism that escape the subject’s conscious awareness. Habits that very well might contradict what such subjects would declare, at that fraught border between consciousness and its occupied territories, as their intentions. For many
whites, racism remains a matter of unreflective habits precisely because whiteness saturates the milieux of those identified as white, like a kind of background noise of embodiment. Against this background, Black lives and the lives of other people of color appear as signals bearing an impossible burden of information, encoding, as it were, a history wrapped in a fantasy wrapped in a fiction.\(^1\) That this history is ongoing and unredeemed, in part because the fantasy persists, motivates the persistence of the fiction. The signals propagated by racism profit white people in part because they—both the signals and the race of those who receive them—need not be recognized as such.\(^2\) Aware

\(^{1}\) For my thinking about whiteness and racism in relation to information theory, I am indebted, albeit belatedly, to Marisa Parham, “Sample | Signal | Strobe: Haunting, Social Media, and Black Digitality,” in *Debates in the Digital Humanities 2019*, eds. Matthew K. Gold and Lauren F. Klein (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2019), ch. 11. The history in question is, of course, that of the expropriation of Black labor and Black lives by acts of organized violence and calculated terror, in concert with the genocide and dispossession practiced against Native and Indigenous peoples, and the exploitation of successive waves of immigrant labor. Such violence and exploitation have secured the political and economic dominance of Europeans and their descendants in the Americas. The fantasy accompanying this history entangles the persecution of others as objects of domination with a relation to those others that construes them as both inviting this domination (through their passivity) and requiring it (through their untamed animality). The fantasy promises to allow the subject who dominates the racialized other to have his cake and eat it, too, by enjoying the pleasures of domination even as he disavows the violence that he practices, locating its source in the dominated other. Gorged on this double pleasure, such a subject, sleeping the sleep of the unjust, can afford not to recognize the acts of resistance to his power offered by those others, which, nonetheless, fracture his own sense of coherence, driving the fantasy deeper into the fissure of the self. Hence the persistence of the fiction, covering over that fractured place, that spells the irrelevance of the suffering and struggles of people of color to the everyday lives of whites.

\(^{2}\) As Yancey writes, “you are part of a system that allows you to walk into stores where you are not followed, where you get to go for a bank loan and your skin does not count against you, where you don’t need to engage in ‘the talk’ that black people and people of color must tell their children when they are confronted by white police officers” (“Dear White America,”
that whites are taught to disavow their roles in white supremacy, Yancy encourages his readers “to listen with love, a sort of love that demands that you look at parts of yourself that might cause pain and terror.” Referencing his own struggle to identify and undo his habits of sexism and misogyny, he models the vulnerability that he asks of his readers: “Please don’t take this as a confession for which I’m seeking forgiveness.” For “confessions can be easy,” presupposing a moment of absolution, a clean break between the past and future. A practice of love, on the other hand, or of loving audition, requires an ongoing struggle. It requires that we first claim as our own, in order to combat, that which we disavow. It requires not only that we make explicit to ourselves the privileges “sutured” to our identity, but also that we learn how to feel their collateral human cost, the lives wasted and destroyed by a system that rewards and protects whiteness. But the spirit of Yancy’s letter is therapeutic. Its author exhorts us to “take a deep breath,” writing, “I can see your anger.” Rather than “wallow in guilt,” which is a performance that centers the privileged subject’s bad feelings, he would have us “make […]”

space” for the other’s pain, the pain that white selfhood prolongs in its possessive drive to dominate.4

The hundreds of comments archived alongside Yancy’s post run the gamut from grateful amplification to gratuitous and fragile outrage. As Yancy anticipates, many white readers make their anger visible. They do so with tautological, pathological insistence, each one registering the same point for themselves, such that the comments thread becomes a piston of grievance and verbal assault. Many seek to deflect the idea that they might be racist back onto Yancy himself:

Just because someone has a skin color doesn’t mean that skin color means anything. Just because you have staked your entire career on that color always mattering, it doesn’t mean that you’re not frequently making fallacious assumptions. Is my skin color white? Sure. I also have brown eyes…a height…and a lot of other things that really tell you very little about me. You presume to sum up the beliefs and attitudes of millions of people you’ve never met largely on the premise of projected stereotypes. […] “white america [sic]”? Racist.5

This commentator weaponizes the liberal pieties that construe racism in atomic terms, as a transaction between two individuals, shorn of the social and institutional contexts of power. As Yancy reminds us, Black folk endure disrespect, degradation, and physical violence at the hands of white people collectively.6

4 White guilt is part of the structure of feeling that sutures whiteness, violence, and power. As Fred Moten writes, “bad conscience is the self’s familiar spirit, accompanying it, as its necessary and irreducible supplement, not merely as a reaction to the self’s enveloping use of force but as, itself, the very force, the very power that animates relation in and as unbridled use” (Black and Blur [Durham: Duke University Press, 2017], 250).
5 Will End, Los Angeles, December 28, 2015, comment on Yancy, “Dear White America.”
6 If I resort to the Du Boisian expression, it is not in order to flaunt my seduction by the monolithic fetish of the other endemic to dominant
The targets of anti-Black racism are intimate and definite (this man, this woman, these children), while white supremacy’s ideological force derives from sedimented material arrangements and a cluster of mythic ideas that, even in the absence of explicit judgments, cloak Black (and Black-adjacent) bodies in an aura of fear, contempt, or disgust. But in calling Yancy a racist, the white commentator insists on a symmetry between anti-Black racism and Yancy's attribution of a single, definite property (i.e., being racist) to “white America” as a collective. Such responses demonstrate, of course, the feints and dodges of white fragility. At the same time, these responses show the tenacity of the white person's, and especially the white cishet man's, commitment to what James Baldwin calls “the tyranny of his mirror.”

Outside the nominal civility enforced by the moderators at the *New York Times*, these performances of aggrieved whiteness turned more violent, disclosing the white supremacist in his true colors. Yancy was subject, in the days and weeks following his letter’s publication, to a barrage of threats and harassment.

discourse. Rather, I mean to appeal to the dignity that Du Bois sought to grant his subjects (including, of course, himself). A dignity to be reclaimed, with each enunciation, from the violence by which the subjects of white supremacy (including, of course, myself) designate those whose designation as others shores up the former's putative humanity.

James Baldwin, “The Fire Next Time,” in *Collected Essays*, ed. Toni Morrison (New York: Library of America, 1998), 341. In that mirror, Blackness appears as “the shadow projected by [the] white subject to produce himself as subject” (Michelle M. Wright, *Becoming Black: Creating Identity in the African Diaspora* [Durham: Duke University Press, 2004], 113). On “white fragility” as the state of susceptibility to “racial stress,” which stems from white people's privileged lack of exposure to such stress, see Robin DiAngelo, “White Fragility,” *The International Journal of Critical Pedagogy* 3, no. 3 (2011): 54–70. As DiAngelo notes, white fragility breeds “a range of defensive moves” in the white person who is unprepared and unwilling to engage with the topic of race or with situations in which white privilege is made explicit or called into question (54).

I quote from Yancy’s sampling of these responses because they shed a sulfurous light on what lurks below the surface of whiteness in its more composed guises. One piece of hate mail, signed “the white guy,” reads,

All your studies have forced me to examine my self image and my white racist mind. You clearly state that no matter what I think, I’m a racist. ok, cool…thank you for clearing that up. Now I am forced to say, because you tell me I can say nothing else […]\textsuperscript{9}

The address then veers into overt hate speech — “designed,” as Yancy observes, “to violate, to leave [him] psychologically broken and physically distraught” — which I don’t reproduce here, not wanting to reiterate harm.\textsuperscript{10} I quote the foregoing in order to consider the logic (if you can call it that) that the writer invokes as though to authorize their use of the expletive and its violence, a violence that their rhetoric suggests is otherwise barely kenneled by the norms of white masculinity, expressing a kind of salivating, frequently murderous impulse. In the grip of this impulse, the privilege to have the last word becomes, perversely, the conviction that one “can say nothing else.” As Yancy’s letter suggests, my white readers and I need to reckon with the idea that such speech-acts are intimate with, rather than anomalous to, performances of whiteness that inhabit the hegemonic space of modern subjectivity.\textsuperscript{11}


\textsuperscript{11} I am entertaining the possibility that the passage in question is not the utterance of a particularly “abnormal” individual, nor even of an open and avowed racist, but rather that it belongs to someone who is in other respects an unremarkable specimen of twenty-first-century white American masculinity.
For doesn’t the slur peek out from behind the word “racist” in the first comment quoted above? Calling a Black writer racist for their calling out whites’ anti-Black racism is a bit like donning blackface. Albeit an angry blackface, a mode of minstrelsy that caricatures Black resistance to white supremacy as the work of charlatans out to defraud the (white) American public. As though white people haven’t, in fact, “staked [their] entire career on that color always mattering.” But as in the second comment, a catachrestic logic collapses Yancy’s address to a generalized, plural you (white America) with a personal address. Indeed, these readers register Yancy’s critique as a personal affront, an offense inviting a deeply visceral response. What aggrieves both readers is the specter of their own racialized particularity, the vulnerability of their white flesh to its inflection by the grammar of another person’s speech-acts. One would like to point out to them, as Yancy has already pointed out, that the bodies of people of color remain vulnerable to particularization by race in ways that white bodies hardly ever are. “[A]ttacked as a black man,” Yancy is remanded, as it were, to the custody of his own body, which is a site marked by America’s dominant institutions for shame, degradation, and trauma, if not incarceration and death. A body coded by white people as an existential threat.

As a white man reading Yancy’s letter, I have a duty to acknowledge that the experience of this kind of embodiment lies beyond my ken, though not beyond my responsibility.

Some (white) people would decry the comments I have cited as evidence of the fraying of civility, or an atavistic eruption of hate that threatens the social contract. Others would rightly point out, as Yancy has done, how they extend and magnify a history of white supremacist violence. The social contract may be fraying, but the affects uttered by such voices do not occupy the fringes of the national imaginary. Nor is a logic of scarcity sufficient to explain the reproduction and circulation of white male rage in all its vicissitudes. Such a logic underestimates the force and ferocity of this rage no less than its strategic goals. Whether behind a badge or on 4chan, on the playground or in the bully pulpit, white boys and men leverage public structures of racist and misogynist feeling in order to defend and consolidate their privilege. Accounts of white supremacy must attend to how these affects move and spread, how they accumulate within the most apparently rational edifices, how they take hold of old forms and structures and reanimate them. They seep under our skin. They distort the haptic bandwidth of human contact. They function as a viscous barrier that teaches us not to feel what we feel. In this essay, I take up Yancy’s invitation to “quiet that


According to the logic of scarcity, uncivil or violent outbursts by otherwise tame liberal subjects stem from lack: a lack of education, a lack of (respect for, exposure to) the facts, or in more materialist terms, a lack of economic opportunity. If we want to talk about lack, we need to account for a lack that functions as a principle of structure and also as that structure’s displacement into the violence of its effects.

On the limitations of “cognitivist frameworks” for understanding white supremacy’s “hegemonic emotional economies,” see Paula Ioanide, The Emotional Politics of Racism: How Feelings Trump Facts in an Era of
voice that will speak to you of your white ‘innocence,’” inflecting his invitation with Christina Sharpe’s powerful question: “What happens when we proceed as if we know this, antiblackness, to

*Colorblindness* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), 12–16. I don’t mean to suggest that white men are the only people who give vent to anger in defense of their privilege, nor do I mean to overlook what a properly intersectional analysis might teach us about the differential consequences of such a defense for people occupying different subject-positions relative to that privilege. White women as a group reap material benefits from the racist elements of institutional white supremacy, if not from its patriarchal and misogynistic features, even though some white women defend it on both fronts. Likewise, men of color can assert patriarchal privileges vis-à-vis women of color (though not, of course, unilaterally), even though in some situations, e.g., when confronted by the police, that masculinity becomes a liability, not an asset.

But the position of “the white guy” in the social hierarchy entails, by default, a resistance to seeing the world in intersectional terms. And if the violence, intimidation, and public terror wrought by white men, especially white cishet men, seems, in the present moment, to have gone off the charts, we would do well to recall the sanguinary history of patriarchal white supremacy in the United States. We would do well to remember the brutality of the slave-holders’ state, the segregationists’ state, and the carceral capitalists’ state that recapitulates them both. And we would do well to remember the role that organized paramilitary groups of white men (e.g., the Ku Klux Klan) have played in extending the state’s power to terrify, maim, incapacitate, and kill. On the violence of enslavement, my understanding is indebted to Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010); and Edward E. Baptist, *The Half Has Never Been Told: Slavery and the Making of American Capitalism* (New York: Basic Books, 2016). A keystone for analyses of slavery in terms of its production of the racialized and gendered body is Spillers’s essay “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe.” On white supremacy and the history of extra-judicial racist terror, I would refer the reader to Ida B. Wells, *The Light of Truth: Writings of an Anti-Lynching Crusader*, eds. Mia Bay and Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (New York: Penguin Books, 2014); Philip Dray, *At the Hands of Persons Unknown: The Lynching of Black America*, rpt. edn. (New York: Modern Library, 2003); and Robyn Wiegman, *American Anatomies: Theorizing Race and Gender* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002). On the latter-day iterations of this history in the white power movement, see Kathleen Belew, *Bring the War Home: The White Power Movement and Paramilitary America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2018).
be the ground on which we stand, the ground from which we attempt to speak, for instance, an ‘I’ or a ‘we’ who know, an ‘I’ or a ‘we’ who care?”¹⁵ But the I and we of Sharpe’s invocation are not automatically, unproblematically available to me if I am to quiet the voice of innocence that plots in me, Iago-like, against the other. White innocence articulates part of white supremacy’s schemes. Its feeling comports with a certain calculating reason.

In what follows, I propose to understand the “ground from which we attempt to speak” as white supremacy in its entanglement with bureaucratic-capitalist rationality.¹⁶ The latter I approach, à la Wittgenstein, as a kind of grammar, productive of ways of picturing the world. This grammar privileges what can be made explicit, in the form of rules, norms, standards, formulae, and procedures. But what disappears from, or remains illegible in, the pictures so produced? At the beginning of the twentieth century, Max Weber defined bureaucracy as the organization of knowledge in the service of domination. By separating the possession of legal and institutional authority from qualities inherent in, or attached to, a person (such as nobility or charisma) — by teasing apart, at least on paper, power’s exercise from its embodiment — bureaucracy makes domination

particularly effective. But in Weber’s picture, we can discern an impulse to disembody domination. The theory of bureaucratic rationality makes domination seem both transparent and devoid of meaning. As a property of reason itself, or a condition of reason’s efficient operation, domination becomes, like one of Kant’s Categories, something the causes for which we cannot seek, the consequences of which we must accept. But relations of domination and subordination are never not embodied. And in the twenty-first-century United States, bureaucratic reason — in the design of economic policy, in the running of schools, in the management of infrastructure and public services, in the administration of prisons and the police — remains intimate with the everyday violence of patriarchal white supremacy. Like the rabbit in Wittgenstein’s account of aspect, such violence functions as the overlooked aspect in the pictures traced by bureaucratic grammars. Trained not to notice it, we who profit from the domination of others ignore the labor they do that sustains domination’s transparency to itself. Just as we ignore the resistance that they mount to their own domination. The latter is a repertoire of fugitive creativity, the gifts of which are so central to modern culture that they can rightly be said to represent modernity’s measure of itself. Meanwhile, this unmeasured ignorance, this innocence born of domination, has an edge: a kind of anger stipples the back of the head; an appetite for others’ suffering bristles at the base of the spine. If the President of the

20 In Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s memorable words, “obtuseness arms the powerful against their enemies” (“Privilege of Unknowing,” *Genders* 1
United States sounds like a schoolyard bully, perhaps it should not surprise us. Perhaps the troll is the technocrat in a different guise.

The link that Sharpe makes between knowledge and care requires, for me, disrupting my sense of innocence. But that shouldn’t mean replacing innocence with a conviction of my own irretrievable fallenness. I mustn’t confuse cynicism for knowledge, or melancholy for care.21 In order to make space for that link and for the voices of those who know and care, I have sought in what follows to leave argument and critical analysis open to what occurs in the interstices of the explicit, via a series of encounters with the work of some poets — Claudia Rankine, Dionne Brand, and Tracie Morris — and the composer Julius Eastman.22 Their work, as I read it, is addressed to fugitive practices of reading and listening. It realizes a labor of critical resistance but also recuperation, drawing strength from multiple aesthetic registers and layered traditions of Black women’s and Black queer survival and flourishing. Borrowing from Morris, I cite these works in the spirit of handholding.23 I take her word to refer to a non-possessive way of holding, an intimacy of entanglement that centers tactility and care. As a gesture between people, handholding suggests a picture of the social that belies the priority given to the metaphysically and anatomically carved out, atomized, and epidermalized modern self.24 As aesthetic practice, these works offer a shifted aspect of the ground from which we speak, a picture that both confounds innocence with

[Spring 1988]: 103).


22 Hortense Spillers describes the interstice, in relation to Black women’s experience, as “that which allows us to speak about and that which will allows us to speak at all” (“Interstices: A Small Drama of Words,” in Black, White, and in Color, 156).

23 Tracie Morris, handholding: 5 kinds (Tucson: Kore Press, 2016). On fugitive reading and listening, my thinking holds hands with Fred Moten’s work in particular. See Moten, Black and Blur; and Moten, In the Break.

24 On epidermalization, see Frantz Fanon, Black Skin, White Masks, xv.
the inevitability of its implication in processes of violence and subjugation, and summons us to the uncertainty of a knowledge that, among the plights of bondage, there exist threads of escape, lines of flight.25

In Citizen, her lyric meditation on the perils and travails of Black being in this white grimace of a nation, Claudia Rankine writes,

The rain this morning pours from the gutters and everywhere else it is lost in the trees. You need your glasses to single out what you know is there because doubt is inexorable; you put on your glasses. The trees, their bark, their leaves, even the dead ones, are more vibrant wet. Yes, and it’s raining. Each moment is like this—before it can be known, categorized as similar to another thing and dismissed, it has to be experienced, it has to be seen. What did he just say? Did she really just say that? Did I hear what I think I heard? Did that just come out of my mouth, his mouth, your mouth? The moment stinks. Still you want to stop looking at the trees. You want to walk out and stand among them. And as light as the rain seems, it still rains down on you.26

The grammar of bureaucratic reason privileges the flat, self-evident locution: “Yes, and it’s raining.” This grammar authorizes statements such as “Not all white people are racist” or even “Yes, racism still exists.” These are statements that presuppose an em-

25 I am wary of calling these works, and the practices that they exemplify, a “counterdiscourse.” For one, that term grants a kind of priority to the discursive that I think these works themselves defy. Moreover, as Alexander Weheliye argues, that label belies “the centrality of […] blackness […] to Western modernity” (Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity [Durham: Duke University Press, 2005], 5). Perhaps they are better considered as participating in an aesthetics and ethics of revision, re-working, re-mixing, a labor of making the modern world a more livable place.

pirical warrant or justification, where what is empirical can be presented, laid out for inspection, made explicit. The empirical participates in the hegemony of the visible, the scopic, and the specular in post-Enlightenment, Eurocentric versions of reason: “[Y]ou need your glasses to single out what you know is there.” But Rankine’s prose focuses on the labor that produces the empirical as such: “[Y]ou put on your glasses.” This labor is physical, intellectual, and affective (“you want to stop looking”) all at once. The vignettes in Citizen render palpable how unevenly this labor is distributed. How the epistemic structures of white supremacy involve an ignorance/innocence that strands people of color in the plight of constantly having to make explicit to themselves and others what white subjects refuse to see. Inexorably recurring, this plight unravels the trust held between the flesh and its world (“Did that just come out of my mouth, his mouth, your mouth?”). But the necessity of experience, figured here as the subject’s inexorable burden, also suggests, or summons, a kind of sensate grammar, a tactile bridge to the world in its fugitive becoming (“as light as the rain seems, it still rains down on you”). In this still-ness of the light rain, fugitivity persists as the freedom of the flesh to be elsewhere than here and otherwise than itself.

white wages and a speaking rage

As W.E.B. Du Bois pointed out long ago, white supremacy amounts to a kind of civil religion for modernity, and the republican norms of rational deliberation and informed consent have never sounded in this country without the background hum of racist (and racializing misogynist) violence. What Du Bois calls the “public and psychological wage” of whiteness encourages

white people to cultivate a sense of superiority to, and dominion over, those who would otherwise be their social equals.\textsuperscript{28} As a wage, whiteness — and more particularly, able-bodied, middle-class, white, cishet masculinity — is experienced as a personal possession. The wage shores up a sense of possessive, transparent interiority. Such a sense of transparent interiority, as Denise Ferreira da Silva argues, remains fundamental to Eurocentric notions of the self, and the possession of whiteness (and its allied norms) is construed as integral to that self-authorizing transparency.\textsuperscript{29} Moreover, the wage teaches us who benefit from it that the meaning of our privilege entails the privacy of its meaning. Whiteness functions as the mirror’s tain, the mirror in whose tyrannical clear glass we are taught to perceive ourselves. That very clarity blocks the development of habits of empathy with those whose image whiteness seems not to reflect. But the function of the wage is not to clear a space, by force of exclusion, for the realization, by those remaining, of freedom and equality.

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\item \textsuperscript{28} W.E.B. Du Bois, \textit{Black Reconstruction in America: An Essay toward a History of the Part Which Black Folk Played in the Attempt to Reconstruct Democracy in America, 1860–1880} (New York: Atheneum, 1977), 700–701. The wage, in the form of white supremacy, grants all whites, irrespective of social class, a degree of license that is withheld from Black folk and others marked as non-white. In addition to access to goods and spaces more or less reserved for white use, and a degree of leniency from the law with respect to infractions for which Black (and Black-adjacent) people are more severely and routinely punished, the wage includes the license to abuse, demean, or actively discriminate against non-whites. In tandem with the privileges afforded cishet masculinity, the white wage serves the white male ruling elite by dividing the working class against itself, while justifying the exploitation of labor on which elite rule depends. For a thorough historical treatment of white supremacy as a lure used by elites to secure the cooperation of the white working class, see David R. Roediger, \textit{The Wages of Whiteness: Race and the Making of the American Working Class} (London: Verso, 2007).
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(The lie of the wage is that freedom and equality obey a logic of scarcity. Believing this lie is the price of its enjoyment.) The wage functions, rather, to justify the saturation of a putatively democratic space by the capillary forces of domination and hierarchy. Polished by racism and its force-multipliers, misogyny, homophobia, transphobia, xenophobia, classism, and ableism, the mirror of whiteness instills emulation, envy, and competition as the body’s destiny. It summons us to a stunted achievement, a *mise en abyme*.

“The dominant know plenty” about their roles in domination, a knowledge that is lodged in the body’s carriage, that flecks the senses, that thrills the nerves. 30 But the wage binds them to a refusal to be held accountable for the consequences of their roles. This is true even when the facts of this consequence are themselves ready to hand, collected and made explicit by the same bureaucratic practices that keep whites’ wages secure. 31 This tactical ignorance amounts to another kind of tacit knowl-

30 Moon-Kie Jung, *Beneath the Surface of White Supremacy: Denaturalizing U.S. Racisms Past and Present* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2015), 23. The enjoyment of embodied social privilege and power is perhaps most often, though certainly not always, present to the subject as a kind of negative liberty, as a freedom from constraints imposed on others. This negative liberty also carries, in virtue of its structural conditions, a negating force. That is to say, its enjoyment is inextricably tied to the deprivation of others’ liberties. Others are followed and discounted and policed because I, qua white person, am not.

31 For instance, Moon-Kie Jung points to the white American public’s general indifference to the systematic underemployment in Black communities—a measure of well-being that is readily recorded in a number of official statistical sources—and compares this indifference to the recurrent panics about unemployment that are triggered whenever the latter afflicts white communities in particular (*Beneath the Surface of White Supremacy*, 141–68). Even when represented as fact, the suffering of the oppressed cannot transcend its facticity in the dominant imagination, cannot become tragedy. Consider by contrast what qualified 9/11 for its role as national trauma. It was an attack on the very heart of elite (white) economic power, and its victims included members of those working-class professions whose iconic masculinity remains closely allied with the powers of the state (firefighters and police). The attack got the nation hot under its
edge, a knowing how not to know. It grants those who inhabit it, especially white cishet men, a wide latitude for interpretive license: the freedom to believe in all manner of good stories about the self and the world. Yet this license belies a fragility, a proneness to the fanaticism that chants, in defense of whiteness, “Amen!” When challenged to justify their privileges, white men’s wage becomes their rage, experienced as justified anger over a violation of their property rights. Aristotle defines anger as a “man’s” desire for revenge against those who have “slighted” the “man himself or one of his friends.”32 The slight in question must be, according to Aristotle, “undeserved,” suggesting that what’s at stake are the goods (the wages) that one expects to receive in respect of one’s social position. And what matters is not only the nature of the slight but the status of the person delivering it, insofar as “men think that they have a right to be highly esteemed by those who are inferior to them.”33 When someone calls the phrase “white America” racist, or when someone identifies with the beleaguered voice of patriarchal white supremacy (“As always, the white guy”), their responses reflect the grievances of the dominant when the oppressed dare address them as equals. The assertion that “[j]ust because someone has a skin color that doesn’t mean that skin color means anything” does not deny the meaning of skin color. It denies the right of another (Yancy) to interpret (to slight) that (white) color’s meaning. In other words, the vehemence of this denial has everything to do with the meaning of Yancy’s skin color, and with what that implies about the latter’s right to pass judgment on white men. For the fragility of the wage is at stake. As if by being made explicit, it is made vulnerable, like a magic charm that works only

white collar, so to speak, as well as the version of its blue collar that white American men still pop with pride.

33 Ibid., 177.
if no one thinks of it as such. Likewise, a verbal challenge from someone without the wage seems to have mythic power, as if Yancy’s words could conjure racism into his white readers: “I am forced to say [a racist epithet], because you tell me I can say nothing else.”

Social and political domination, as Aristotle’s analysis suggests, entails not only a monopoly on physical violence, but also a monopoly on interpretation. The legitimacy of anger is secured by social hierarchy. One is angered (justly) by the judgments of another who is not positioned to pass judgment on one, or whose express judgments do not convey the respect that one is due. As a corollary, “those who do not get angry at things at which it is right to be angry are thought to be foolish, and so are those who do not get angry in the right manner, at the right time, or with the right people.” For Aristotle, there is a propriety to anger that attaches to social position. And yet, if anger regularly afflicts the subjects of social privilege and power, so much so that it seems to be the signature affect of such subjectivity, given anger’s suture to ideas about honor and respect, then anger’s centrality to the practices of domination suggests that the monopoly at their heart teeters on the verge of a violence that undoes its claim to reason. Your typical white guy should be less prone to anger than other people, given his access to the lion’s share of social privilege. But the anger of white guys is not only over the top; it also displays a demonic infelicity, re-


35 Aristotle doesn’t say whether a slave in Athens can, or should, be angry for the perpetual insult that is enslavement, or whether an Athenian woman can harbor rage over her exclusion from the full rights of citizenship.

revealing what the writers claim to deny. Asserting their monopoly on interpretations of whiteness, they reveal the dependence of whiteness on its racialized others. This dependence, with its violently unequal conditions of intimacy, breeds an asymmetry of knowledge and judgment, as James Baldwin, with his usual trenchant poignancy, explains:

[T]here is, thereafter, forever, a witness somewhere: which is an irreducible inconvenience for the makers and shakers and accomplices of this world. These run together, in packs, and corroborate each other. They cannot bear the judgments in the eyes of the people whom they intend to hold in bondage forever, and who know more about them than their lovers. This remote, public, and as it were, principled, bondage is the indispensable justification of their own: when the prisoner is free, the jailer faces the void of himself.

In calling out racism, the witness demands a reckoning from those who make and shake whiteness into a world. A reckoning with the thing that whites must keep mum about. For control over what can be said aloud, written down, or otherwise dragged or coerced into explicitness is one of the enabling conditions of the power to hold others in bondage. As M. Jacqui Alexander writes, the option always stands open to the powerful “to pretend that there was never any locution and to behave as if what was said carried no weight.” But their dominance depends on those who must, at dawn and day’s end and during

all the hours in between, cope with this behavior. Who bear the weight of bondage, not only as a curtailment of their freedom, but also as a form of terrible knowledge, needing to be spoken of in order to be avoided, a thing to which the idea of explicitness is hardly adequate, the “Danger” sign that identifies the sheer drop beyond the cliff’s edge.40 This demand for reckoning, when presented to the white subject as a means of loosening the thing’s hold on them, prompts the latter to make their commitments to that thing explicit in the act of disavowing it. Even as they insist that this thing, whiteness or white supremacy, cannot be made explicit because it does not exist.

There is violence there, unacknowledged by those who carry it in themselves, where it waits, one slip of the tongue or finger’s twitch away from ruining someone’s day or destroying someone’s life. And if those in bondage know their captors better than their captors are known by their lovers, this fact tells us something about the kinds of love that comport with the captor’s place. And it reminds us that bondage, even when “remote, public, and as it were, principled,” remains a deeply embodied relation. In the words of Saidiya Hartman, “the bounded bodily integrity of whiteness [is] secured by the abjection of others.”41 Hate speech is illustrative in this respect. The speech-act produces (by reiterating) the incommensurability of social positions that might otherwise be thought to speak from a shared ground.42 Hate speech, like other racist acts, shatters the chance for reciprocity. Back-and-forth, even of a confrontational sort, becomes untenable. In hurling an epithet or making a threat,

40 As David Graeber observes, “[t]hose on the bottom […] have to spend a great deal of imaginative energy trying to understand the social dynamics that surround them — including having to imagine the perspectives of those on top — while the latter can wander about largely oblivious to much of what is going on around them” (The Utopia of Rules, 81).
41 Hartman, Scenes of Subjection, 123.
42 As Sianne Ngai notes, questions about the range of proper affective responses to acts of racism expose “a symbolic violence in the principle of commensurability itself” (Ugly Feelings [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007], 188).
the speaker ventriloquizes the power of the law and the state in their capacity to declare the state of exception, to carve out the boundaries of bodily integrity that protect some and exclude others from these protections. Even if the target doesn’t feel physically endangered, there is, structurally speaking, no adequate comeback. As Patricia Williams writes, recounting her experience of being turned away from a Benetton in New York by a white clerk, “There was almost nothing I could do […] that would humiliate him the way he humiliated me. No words, no gestures, no prejudices of my own would make a bit of difference to him.” The propriety of anger is open (like the Benetton store) only to members of the dominant group, and the targets of hate speech and other racist acts might be said to suffer from an impropriety that inflects, and infects, every possible response. At least, that is the intended effect of such acts. They seek to render another maximally affectable, i.e., prey to an onslaught of affects (Williams describes feeling “a blizzard of rage”) that forecloses them from a subject position defined by reason’s transparent articulation onto social hierarchy. Thus, Yancy’s attackers in the comments thread and elsewhere seek to disable, rather than refute, his argument, insisting that as a Black person, reason is not his to claim.

And yet, in their bid to claim sovereignty by way of others’ abjection, these movers and shakers and minions and alibis are “forced” to disclose a vulnerability that the other’s abjection is meant to remove. Security by abjection is, we might say, inher-

45 Ibid. On the affectable and the transparent as mutually exclusive positions occupied by racialized subjects, see Ferreira da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race*.
ently unstable, since it requires violence or the threat of violence to sustain it. Between the power of judgment and judgments of power, the chiasmus discloses a chasm. Speaking into/out of this chasm, echoing the redundant and tautological force that speaks him, the subject of white supremacy can “say nothing else,” nothing other than whiteness, which, per Baldwin, is only another name for the “void in himself,” or the raw place that chafes so easily beneath the call for justice because that call exposes the self’s habitual forms of justification as a farce. Admittedly, the temptation of this kind of analysis runs us into the danger of evacuating the other’s agency, too, with the result that the whole scene appears overdetermined, devoid of escape. But for what it’s worth, that’s not my intention. Rather, I am thinking about the other’s agency in these scenarios (Yancy’s agency, or Williams’s) as a kind of (un)originary problem for modernity and for modernity’s most privileged subjects.47 We might posit that resistance to the seduction of another’s agency or judgment constitutes, in general, the hard kernel of a privileged and dominant subjectivity, precisely because without the other’s judgment, the structure (of privilege, of dominance) as such would not exist.48 But where the other’s judgment concerns the justice of privilege itself (and not just the validity of one’s claim to it), we might imagine that this subject, sometimes at least, receives this judgment as a shock. In such moments, even someone packed tightly into his white cishet masculine flesh, corroborated from crown to toe, might feel the stink of the moment as their stink,

47 See Chandler, “Originary Displacement.” I am thinking also here of Fred Moten’s thinking about Blackness and the Black avant-garde as “the ongoing event of an antiorigin and an anteorigin, replay and reverb of an impossible natal occasion” (In the Break, 14).

48 Resistance to the other’s judgment is different from indifference to it. One might suppose that someone self-assured in either his feelings of superiority to people of color or in his freedom from such feelings would not be bothered by the charge of racism, much less by “white America’s” being so accused. By his resistance, however, the subject shows what he needs — i.e., the deference, if not the approval, of the other — even as he strives to appear above needing it.
and the motions they go through, as the ragged jerk of a marionette: standing their ground, secretly wanting comfort, yet face to face with the desperate, forsworn knowledge that, here and now, there is no there there.

*a cage of speech*

Imagine two anonymous people, A and B. Anonymous, but not unmarked, not without position. For the first is the one in charge (a teacher, a trainer, or a manager) and the second a subordinate (a student or a worker or an apprentice). Their working relationship at this moment answers to an apparently simple division of labor. B “has to write down a series of signs according to a certain formation rule” as furnished by A.49 The rule doesn’t matter, except that it must be explicit. Suppose it is the arithmetic function: $x_n = x_{n-1} + 2$. (The scene is a sort of test, perhaps a qualifying exam, preparatory to B’s being allowed to do a certain kind of task.) After writing down a long sequence, B makes a mistake. They write down the wrong sign: “1004,” instead of “1002.” In exasperation, pointing to the mistake, A declares that B “doesn’t understand” the rule. A insists that they “meant” for B to do otherwise.50 At this stage in Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*, the inquiry concerns the grammar of the words *meaning* and *understanding*. But like many of Wittgenstein’s examples, this one is also about labor and power. It touches on, however obliquely to Wittgenstein’s own intentions (and what, he might ask, do we *mean* by that?), a certain grammar of domination. And this grammar, in its serial, self-evident redundancy, iterates over the asymmetry that sutures understanding to socio-political standing and that binds meaning to acts of possession and the defense of property.

50 Ibid., 63.
“What you are saying, then, comes to this: a new insight — intuition — is needed at every step to carry out the order ‘+n’ correctly.” — To carry it out correctly! How is it decided what is the right step to take at any particular stage? — “The right step is the one that accords with the order — as it was meant.” — So when you gave the order +2 you also meant that he was to write 1002 after 1000 — and did you also mean that he should write 1868 after 1866, and 100036 after 100034, and so on — an infinite number of such propositions? — “No: what I meant was, that he should write the next but one number after every number that he wrote; and from this all those propositions follow in turn.” — But that is just what is in question: what, at any stage, does follow from that sentence.51

The grammar of domination requires that one be prepared to give certain kinds of answers to the question of what follows from a sentence. It requires that one entertain a certain picture of what it means to make, to be authorized to make, a decision. Partaking of that “white managerial masculinity [that] travels everywhere,” A feels that their instructions explicate a rule, and that this explication is both necessary and sufficient to understand B’s role in the process.52 A would endorse Weber’s claim that in bureaucracy, “the management of the office follows general rules, which are more or less stable, more or less exhaustive, and which can be learned.”53 That the rules can be learned does not vitiate the necessity of hierarchy. Following the rules requires mastery, but in relation to the work that they direct and oversee, Weber’s managers must have mastered more general rules, or mastered them more thoroughly, than the people they manage. The rules remain management’s intellectual property.54

51 Ibid., 64.
52 Alexander, Pedagogies of Crossing, 139.
53 Weber, Economy and Society, 2:958 (emphasis in the original).
54 As Pete Richardson concludes, “[m]anagement insists that it is properly in control of the conception, of what work should be done” (“Doing Things with Wood: Builders, Managers and Wittgenstein in an Idaho Sawmill,”
With managerial foresight, A asserts, “I already knew, at the time when I gave the order, that [B] ought to write 1002 after 1000.”\textsuperscript{55} B’s work becomes evident as work—as a thing performed by another person—only in its deviation from A’s rules. In order to lay claim to their authority, the manager must be able to have meant his rule in a different way (a “unique way”, Wittgenstein says) from how their subordinate would be capable of meaning it. And yet, the manager’s meaning must be available to both parties if the work is to get done, i.e., if managerial authority is to succeed. This fugitive parity both underwrites and undercuts the manager’s place.

Jacques Rancière insists that this parity reveals a revolutionary potential latent within the grammar of domination. From the fact that “the inferior has understood the superior’s order,” we can deduce that “the inferior takes part in the same community of speaking beings and so is, in this sense, their equal.”\textsuperscript{56} But following Wittgenstein, we might say that this proposition

\textit{Critique of Anthropology} 29, no. 2 [June 1, 2009]: 173). Bureaucracy, then, exhibits in a fashion internal to itself the features of the modern liberal social contract governing the relationship between state, citizens, and the people. Vine Deloria, Jr. argues that “in the form in which the men who framed the Constitution received it, the philosophy of social contract was oriented wholly toward a certain restricted class of individuals and could neither include any divergent groups nor provide any significant guidance or protection for the mass of people. Its primary virtue was to encourage a clever, established elite to benefit at the expense of others and perpetuate itself” (“Minorities and the Social Contract,” \textit{Georgia Law Review} 20 [1986]: 919).

\textsuperscript{55} Wittgenstein, \textit{Philosophical Investigations}, 64.
\textsuperscript{56} Jacques Rancière, \textit{Disagreement: Politics and Philosophy}, trans. Julie Rose (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 49. In a distinct but related vein, Nahum Dimitri Chandler argues that “[c]ontrol, especially ‘absolute’ control, over someone else’s intention requires recognition of that intention: There is no need to control that intention which has no force” (“Originary Displacement,” 281). Chandler’s attention to force troubles Rancière’s appeal to equality as what characterizes the “community of speaking beings.” Chandler might insist that there is no appeal to equality that is not already (borrowing a figure from Fred Moten) cut by the operation of this force.
is precisely what is in question. How are we to understand this sense of equality, and what might follow from laying claim to, or being cut by, such a sense? And turning the question on Wittgenstein himself, we might ask, what kind of therapeutic engagement does the philosopher pursue in this section of his text, and why does it focus only on A? Why does A need the therapy? Or if their need appears self-evident, why does it trump B’s need, whom the text denies a voice? If A represents the standpoint of the reader to whom the *Investigations* is addressed, or if A represents a version of the philosophical inner voice we are to imagine as in dialogue with the more properly Wittgensteinian one, what does B’s silencing say about the presuppositions of voice and standpoint in Eurocentric modern thought?

Fred Moten remarks on the “fundamental disqualification” besetting the one...

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58 Bureaucratic grammar preaches the centrality of the managerial standpoint, which, like white culture at large, masks the privileges of domination in the homogeneity and boredom of the impersonal. From this standpoint, it requires will and imagination to see what transpires elsewhere, after the order has been given, or in the rifts opened by the official rules. Imagine B, this time hunched over “an unlimited supply of paper,” meticulously performing calculations in accordance with “fixed rules […] supplied in a book” (444). She is a low-wage employee and “has no authority to deviate from [the rules] in any details.” Although the rules vary with the task, they also take up residence in her head and in her fingers. They follow her home at the end of the day. They scramble her dreams. Imagine B fighting the temptation to walk away, to look up, to think about a hundred other, more pressing things (she is trying, after all, to make ends meet on a clerical salary). Imagine the courage it takes to stifle her anger at her boss’s roaming eyes and paws (she has rent to pay and food to buy). Imagine the pride and stamina that lets her master the pain climbing the trellis of her spine (she has been sitting for hours without a break), careful not to make a mistake, since one of the few rewards she manages to eke from her work is the knowledge that she does it better than most of her white colleagues. Imagine A, shirt-sleeves rolled up, supervising her work, keeping a close eye on it, closer, perhaps, than on the other clerks in his office. He is quicker to pounce on her mistakes.
who “speak[s] from the position of the not supposed to speak,” who persists in speaking from the standpoint of having been denied standing.\textsuperscript{59} This speaker, this B-ing, “relinquishes the possibility of thought or of being thought insofar as [they] (merely) provide[e] the material conditions […] for another’s thought and for another’s being thought.”\textsuperscript{60} A’s condition of “being thought” involves the a priori postulate of their thinking (for) themselves.

because B is a woman of color. She is more than qualified, in fact, to do A’s job, but only white men in this department get promoted.

I have extrapolated this example from one of Alan Turing’s seminal papers, in which Turing models the digital computer on something more familiar to his contemporary readers: “the human computer” (“Computing Machinery and Intelligence,” 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], 441–64). In the popular imagination, Turing himself belongs to that pantheon of canny white men who leveraged their tinkers’ pleasure to remake the world. But “the human computer” is the digital computer’s originary displacement: the workers who did the heavy lifting of manual calculation and record-keeping, in fields as diverse as accounting and cryptography, before the advent of their digital surrogates. Performing feats of “intellective skill” by crimp of the hand and crick of the neck, these workers were typically well-educated, highly intelligent women taking advantage of the highest station not barred to them in the ranks of intellectual and academic life.


\textsuperscript{60} Moten, “Preface to a Solo by Miles Davis,” 217.
But this postulate is, as Wittgenstein would say, only a picture. And like any picture, it requires “material conditions” for its production. The picture commits A to the “idea […] that that act of meaning the order had in its own way already traversed all those steps: that when you meant it your mind as it were flew ahead and took all the steps before you physically arrived at this one or that one.”\(^{61}\) Wittgenstein is concerned to show A their mistake, which is to have imagined that the act of delivering a rule, or more precisely, of explicating how they intend the rule, could somehow determine the totality of that particular act’s serial effects. Such a determination or overdetermination is what A means or pretends to understand by the word “meaning.” But this picture is coherent only if meaning resides entirely inside the head. Or more precisely, inside the head of the subject positioned to deliver, rather than (merely) to obey, the rule. But even Wittgenstein, who takes great pains to trace the emergence of meaning in the context of language use, neglects that, strictly speaking, it is B, not A, who “physically arrive[s]” at each step in the sequence. A’s commitment to a possessive model of meaning maps the hierarchical relation between manager and subordinate onto the relation between an invisible mental act and a visibly physical series, thereby rendering B’s labor not only secondary but meaningless, superfluous; not invisible, but opaque. B’s labor exists, for A, only in the lag-time of a supplement to what A always will have meant. And Wittgenstein’s slip or omission confirms this dis/placement, this opacity of a labor and a body that exists only to be absorbed by the finished product or else extruded by the error that halts production. Likewise, the iterable, embodied labor that A performs, in the act of uttering commands and corrections, vanishes into the think-hole of their authority and expertise.

\(^{61}\) Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations*, 64. A’s picture recapitulates what Stefano Harney and Fred Moten refer to as the “fantasy that capital could exist without labor” (*The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* [Wivenhoe: Minor Compositions, 2013], 80–81).
If B’s labor disappears from this picture, even more profound is its refusal of their knowledge. I mean, the knowledge that those who labor have of the conditions of their labor, including, of course, the violence that produces those conditions. This knowledge becomes more acute the closer one stands to the condition of having the kind of body that the prevailing regime remands to the place of the “zero degree” of social being, a being construed to exist only as a source of labor (physical, sexual, emotional, intellectual). Thus, the “sense” of equality among speaking beings cannot lay claim to the transparency of a meaning that becomes available to the subject through a shift in standpoint. For if it rests on the mutual understanding of “inferior” and “superior” (even as it points toward the horizon of hierarchy’s overcoming), we must acknowledge that mutual understanding is, in itself, the continuous outcome of a deeply unequal division of labor, knowledge, and responsibility.

When a woman you work with calls you by the name of another woman you work with, it is too much of a cliché not to laugh out loud with the friend beside you who says, oh no she didn’t. Still, in the end, so what, who cares? She had a fifty-fifty chance of getting it right.

Yes, and in your mail the apology note appears referring to “our mistake.” Apparently your own invisibility is the real problem causing her confusion. This is how the apparatus she propels you into begins to multiply its meaning.

What did you say? 

62 Spillers, “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe,” 206. In “Interstices,” Spillers glosses the kind of knowledge Black working-class women have had to wrest from the rules that governed their movements inside and outside of the workplace: “At the level of analysis and experience, we witness no arbitrary bonding between a signifier and signified so that […] the word, the gesture that fulfills it, and the actual consequences of both converge on a literal moment of time. To lose control of the body is to be hostage to insufferable circumstances; the lack of control is also in the historical outline of black American women often enough the loss of life” (172).

63 Rankine, Citizen, 43.
Not unlike Wittgenstein’s, Rankine’s sense for the “ordinary” attunes us to the infra-political, dispositional forces that rupture and fortify it. Here whiteness plays the alpha role, as the manager of the situation. The second-person narrator’s (presumably) white colleague demands shared responsibility (i.e., mutual understanding) for her own error. Although “you” don’t necessarily work for the other woman, “you” already work on her behalf, bearing emotional burdens, to the imposition of which no adequate response is possible. That “you” do this work as a matter of course testifies to the efficiency of the “apparatus,” which answers to the needs and desires of the dominant, saving them from accountability for their mistakes. Rendering “you” invisible, incredible, and available for exploiting, the apparatus does the dominant this further service: it signals to “you” that it is “your” interpretive labor, “your” knowing-better, and “your” caring that taints “you,” that marks “you” as unsuitable for an equal share.

The violence of the apparatus that “she propels you into” consists, in this case, of the racialized subject’s consignment to a work of enunciation, producing meanings over which the speaker is denied control. The meanings “multiply” along axes of past and present harms, magnetizing memory in the flesh of other aggressions endured, micro- and macro-, and reanimating history as an ever-present threat to the subject’s well-being, if not, indeed, her existence. The apparatus constrains the de-

64 The (white) woman in this scenario might be said to exemplify the dominant standpoint of white liberal feminism, performing a commitment to mutuality that effaces white women’s roles in the oppression of women of color. See Spillers, “Interstices.”

65 On the concept of “interpretive labor,” see Graeber, The Utopia of Rules.

66 On Alexander Weheliye’s reading of Spillers’s work, “flesh, while representing both a temporal and a conceptual antecedent to the body, is not a biological occurrence seeing that its creation requires an elaborate apparatus” (Habeas Viscus, 39). The apparatus Weheliye and Spillers refer to is, in the first instance, that of circum-Atlantic slavery, which has its afterlife in the racializing violence of the prison-industrial complex. Rankine’s work reveals how so-called ordinary language, in
grees of freedom that she has to tell her own story, to record her version of the events. And it seems pertinent that this “mistake” happens in a workplace, where the norms of bureaucratic reason insist on a transparency behind which racism and other forms of prejudice and discrimination find it easy to hide. Bureaucratic language is supposed to be free of implication, but the freedom belongs to those with power, who take credit for the work they direct yet are somehow never around when it turns out that mistakes were made. If the one harmed by this mistake refuses, for instance, to accept her colleague’s specious apology, or if she otherwise presses the issue, she risks her further eclipse by racist stereotypes. If, on the other hand, she acquiesces, she lends her tacit, normalized, but nonetheless painful support to her invisibility as a social subject. Her white colleague’s “fifty-fifty chance of getting it right” mirrors her own double-bind. In either case, the house wins. That Rankine does not spell out this logic amplifies the power of her prose: the piece ends with the weight of a decision hanging in white space: “What did you say?”

We are meant, I think, to feel the embodied grammar of that question, to let its gravity sink in. I’m trying to understand, from the respectful but nonetheless inappropriate (because expropriating) distance of the white space that I occupy, what it means to confront the capture of one’s speech by the apparatus of white supremacy. That this capture is necessarily incomplete does not diminish the regular awfulness of it. For make no mistake: the apparatus yields profit for the “movers and shakers” and their “accomplices,” a surplus-value produced by the work of being and breathing and feeling and thinking in this world:

For so long you thought the ambition of racist language was to denigrate and erase you as a person. […] [Y]ou begin to understand yourself as rendered hypervisible in the face of the bureaucratic contexts of modern life, prolongs the apparatus in a multitude of more subtle forms.
such language acts. Language that feels hurtful is intended to exploit all the ways that you are present. Your alertness, your openness, and your desire to engage actually demand your presence, your looking up, your talking back, and, as insane as it is, saying please.67

Rankine’s challenge to the picture of “racist language” as a negating, nullifying force draws attention to the productivity of its violence.68 In the same breath, Citizen enriches readings of the speech-act that focus on the latter’s illocutionary aspects as vectors for power.69 I want to say that it is not only the case that, in

67 Rankine, Citizen, 49.
69 In his theory of speech-acts, J.L. Austin restricts “meaning” to the classical idea of semantic reference (or reference and sense, in Fregean terms), i.e., that which seems to attach to the proposition qua logical entity, floating free from any particular context. In addition to this dimension of the speech-act as locution, Austin famously posits an illocutionary dimension, wherein the speech-act gathers force by virtue of its engagement with social convention. Thus, the “meaning” of my promise to come tomorrow would be the idea of my coming tomorrow (perhaps a mental image of my arrival on your doorstep), but the “force” of my promise would arise from the product of my ability and my intention to show up. It is in virtue of force, not referential meaning, that as Austin says, “our word is our bond.” The force of the illocutionary is, for Austin, governed by convention. What makes a proposition a promise is our mutual (and generally tacit) expectation that certain kinds of abilities and intentions will accompany its utterance. A promise that fails to satisfy those conditions is, for Austin, not meaningless, but it is “infelicitous.” Finally, Austin posits a third dimension of the speech-act, the perlocutionary, to account for the fact that our use of language is not strictly conventional, but that it achieves practical effects in virtue of its power to recruit feelings and motives. For my promise may or may not persuade you, excite you,
its indefinite repetition, the speech-act must both institute and
displace the conditions of its legitimacy, opening the space for
resistance inside the capture of the performative by governing
conventions.70 For within this schema, it is also the case that the
presence of the other (“[their] looking up, [their] talking back,
and as insane as it is, saying please”) furnishes the speech-act
with what it needs to accomplish its rhizomatic work. Or per-
haps that’s not quite right. Perhaps the emphasis ought to fall
not on the other (which may also, of course, be the self), but on
their presence, which could mean their dis/placement before the
being instituted by language in its use. This presence is move-
ment, enacted (as Rankine describes) in gestures of being pres-
ent. (And I’m thinking also of what Wittgenstein says: “meaning
something is like going up to someone.”)71 In its presence to the
speech-act, the flesh becomes part of the “material conditions
[…] of another’s being,” the conduit or channel by which mean-
ing takes effect.72 And hate speech, like other forms of violence,

frighten you, etc., or all of those at once. Nonetheless, Austin’s focus on
the illocutionary — which has been fruitfully taken up by philosophers in
the Continental tradition like Judith Butler — privileges the conventional
over the affective components of language use. See J.L. Austin, How to
Do Things with Words, eds. J.O. Urmson and Marina Sbisà (Cambridge:
Harvard University Press, 1975); Judith Butler, Excitable Speech: A Politics
of the Performative (New Y ork: Routledge, 1997). My thinking about the
perlocutionary is indebted to Stanley Cavell, Philosophy the Day after

70 Butler writes, “[t]he speaking subject makes his or her decision only in the
context of an already circumscribed field of linguistic possibilities. One
decides on the condition of an already decided field of language, but this
repetition does not constitute the decision of the speaking subject as a
redundancy” (Excitable Speech, 129).

71 Wittgenstein, Philosophical Investigations, 112.

72 This approach to the performative has been developed within traditions of
Black feminist theory. For instance, Zakiyyah Iman Jackson writes, “[b]y
suggesting that representation performs, I mean to imply a doing and an
implementation that forestalls the vertical bifurcation of representation
and matter into respective planes of transcendence and immanence
and, instead, places both on the same plane in the (un)making of being”
propels the flesh into an address designed to sever it from the possibility of redress.\(^73\)

Make no mistake: as an accomplice to patriarchal white supremacy (and its interlocking structures of oppression), I, too, contribute my presence to “the violence of being required to behave as if democracy and reasonableness truly existed, when in truth they do not.”\(^74\) The possession of whiteness and cishet masculinity (and other normative attributes) does not exempt me from this violence, though the wages I receive do allow me to buy something back in the form of bodily integrity, security, and a modicum of autonomy. And yes, in the form, too, of the pleasures of domination, of propelling others into the apparatus of their subjugation. These wages, I want to say, are most days enough to subdue the sense of what else I might have lost (to begin with: of openness, of alertness, of desire). You might say that the apparatus operates without your consent to produce your consent. And yet, how do I, in my complicity, inhabit the space of the “you” addressed by Rankine’s prose? I want to say that the device of this address works to unsettle the transparency of the standpoint that I imagine is mine to occupy. Ordinarily, in virtue of that standpoint, my identification with another’s experience, when the latter is marked by an absence of those possessive attributes that condition my subjectivity, remains deeply qualified. Having a sufficiently well-trained literary imagination, I can perform my understanding of narrative or critical figurations, for example, of Black women’s experience because, as a subject of racial and gendered privilege and power, my identity as a white man remains subordinate to my status as a subject. But I am entertaining the thought (about which I

\(^{73}\) On redress, see Hartman, Scenes of Subjection, 49–58. As David Graeber observes, violence as a mode of communication functions to “[stifle] the possibility of sending any further messages of any kind” (The Utopia of Rules, 102).

\(^{74}\) Alexander, Pedagogies of Crossing, 141.
may be mistaken) that Rankine’s use of the second-person pronoun does something else, outside of the circuits of sympathetic identification. That for the white reader, at least, it repeatedly poses the problem of identification. Which is also the problem of knowing what follows from the other’s words, from my presence to their sentience and their sentences. What did you say? I am neither the subject of this question, nor am I exempt from its address, which is a summons to accountability. Accountability for my words and for my silence, for my acts and my inaction. As Wittgenstein says, “a new decision [is] needed at every stage.” There is no flying ahead of my meaning, no flight from my mistakes. As a part of the apparatus, an apparatchik, I am moved, I am shaken.

composing the withheld page

White America has always catered to “nervous white men.” As Ronald Takaki recounts, Thomas Jefferson fathered a foundational anxiety in his insistence that “men could not live ‘at random’ and [that] all behavior had to be a ‘matter of calculation’ or else the strongest passions would overwhelm the moral sense and rationality.” These passions were and are unleashed by the violence of imperialist accumulation, wage exploitation, and capitalism’s more direct forms of bonded labor, no less than by bourgeois rationality in its suture of competitive acquisitiveness to self-surveillance and a deep distrust of the flesh. But even as the spread of urban, industrial capitalism ramped up the energies of randomness, the transformation of both profit-making and politics into bureaucratic enterprises promised to reduce the dilemma of republican self-governance to an “engineering problem.” This phrase comes from Claude Shannon’s 1948 article inaugurating information theory, a text with nothing explicitly to say about capitalism or bureaucracy. But in its bracketing of

75 Takaki, Iron Cages, 142, 64.
the social aspects of “communication” in favor of a purely formal, mathematical approach, Shannon’s seminal text might tell us a lot about the grammars that dominate modernity. Shannon’s text also hides a kind of Easter egg for the humanist, a glimpse or glitch, amid this technical prose, of the avant-garde:

THE HEAD AND IN FRONTAL ATTACK ON AN ENGLISH WRITER THAT THE CHARACTER OF THIS POINT IS THEREFORE ANOTHER METHOD FOR THE LETTERS THAT THE TIME OF WHO EVER TOLD THE PROBLEM FOR AN UNEXPECTED

Generated, Shannon claims, by algorithmic means, this passage is meant to demonstrate the statistical regularities of the English language. Knowledge of these regularities permits someone with tabulations enough and time to construct, by roll of the dice, an almost not nonsensical approximation of written English. But as I read it, the passage smuggles in, under the cover of scientific

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78 For the curious, Shannon’s procedure can be approximated as follows. Select a large, fairly representative textual corpus — e.g., the works of a prolific author of unexceptionable style. Split the corpus into short sequences of either words or letters, each sequence being exactly \( n \) elements long. (Letting \( n \) equal 3 or 4 tends to achieve the best results.) Next compile a table showing, for each sequence of elements \( 1 \ldots n-1 \) found in the corpus, the probability of transition to any given element in the \( n \)th position. This method, which treats written language as a Markov process, can be used to generate new text by starting with one \( n \)-gram and rolling a weighted die to select the next element (based on the transition probabilities in the table), and so on. Though laborious to do manually, a Markov-chain algorithm can be implemented with a few lines of code in any number of modern programming languages. For a recipe, see Brian W. Kernighan and Rob Pike, The Practice of Programming (Reading: Addison-Wesley, 1999), 62–63.
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illustration, a sly joke. A “frontal attack on an English writer” evokes the very algorithm that Shannon used to compose this passage, purporting to show that potentially meaningful phrases need not arise in a writer’s head. The algorithm is “another method for the letters,” as is Shannon’s “mathematical theory of communication” itself, which extends a venerable tradition (“the time of who ever told”) of thinking about the phenomenon of communication as “the problem” of “an unexpected,” that is, of mapping the overlap of convention and invention, regulation and intuition, expectation and surprise.79

Shannon grounds his theory on the premise that the “semantic aspects of communication are irrelevant” to the design of communication systems, since the messages that these systems relay can be decomposed into their formal, quantitative properties.80 To oversimplify matters: understanding the probability with which certain signals occur in a set of messages displaces, as the proper object of scientific interest and knowledge, consideration of their role as signs that refer to things in the world. This displacement, with its promise that mastery of the signals can render the messiness of messages irrelevant, answers to a powerful modernist fantasy. As Wendy Hui Kyong Chun argues, writing about the history of software and the hubris of the Information Age, “the dream is: the more that an individual knows, the better decisions he or she can make.”81 And yet, in excess of

79 For a thorough and provocative reading of Shannon’s work in the context of twentieth-century Modernist literary experiments (James Joyce’s Finnegans Wake), cybernetics, and psychoanalysis, see Lydia H. Liu, The Freudian Robot: Digital Media and the Future of the Unconscious (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).
81 Chun, Programmed Visions, 8. In a sense, Shannon’s information theory operationalizes Max Weber’s definition of bureaucratic rationality as optimizing “the probability that a command with a given specific content will be obeyed by a given group of persons” (Economy and Society, 1:53). The probabilities in Shannon’s theory describe the content of messages transmitted over a channel, while the probability to which Weber alludes concern the consequences of those messages’ transmission. Both, however,
Shannon’s scientific aims or dreams, the passage above performs a displacement of that displacement, suggesting that the tension or slippage between the meaningful and the mechanical is undecidable. It opens the door to what Aristotle calls *to automaton*, performing the eruption of randomness as meaning inside the apparatus designed to reduce language to a set of a-signifying facts.\(^{82}\) The undecidability of the significance of this passage for the theory that it illustrates (does it bolster or subvert Shannon’s project?) mirrors the undecidability of the status of the phrases that constitute it (are they nonsense or not?).

Shannon’s pseudo-poetic apparatus is also about violence. Typography highlights an aggression signaled by the phrase “frontal attack.” If, in reading this passage, one feels the onset of melancholy, too (identifying, perhaps, with the “English writer” whose relevance is under attack), it’s not a stretch to say that this text has, in addition to its train-wrecked semantic content, a certain tone. Indeed, that it can have such a tone might be the more “unexpected” result of this experiment. For if tone names the torque that speech-acts produce in us, then meaning is, from one perspective, *mostly* about tone.\(^{83}\) Shannon’s text concern the crux of modern capitalism: the reproduction of authority and trust within structures that remain hierarchical, but in which the imperatives of domination and control, spread over space and time, cannot rely on the embodied and implicit repertoires of power between people working face to face. In the modern firm, as in the offices of the modern state, authority may be miles away, emanating from a disembodied source known only through its written protocols.

\(^{82}\) Aristotle, *Physics, Volume I: Books 1–4*, trans. P.H. Wicksteed and F.M. Cornford (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1957), 161. Though more loosely translated as “accident” or “chance,” the Greek term carries the suggestion, surviving in the English loan-word, of that elusive quality Kant called “purposiveness without purpose,” a phenomenon to which it feels irresistible to ascribe agency and intention, though we know (or suspect) that it can have none. See Alison James, *Constraining Chance: Georges Perec and the Oulipo* (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 2009).

\(^{83}\) “What do you *mean* by that?” is a question that typically has little to do with the denotative signification of what was uttered, and a great deal to do with how the utterance was *meant*, i.e., with the consequences that it
might be read alongside any number of twentieth-century literary experiments that recruit the procedural and the aleatory as a means of disrupting the privileged place of authorial intention. Yet more emphatically than these experiments (cordoned off as they are from so-called ordinary language by the conventions governing the reception of the literary text), Shannon's text provokes a serious question. For if meaning remains “irrelevant” to the bureaucratic grammars of modernity, then where does meaning reside? For these grammars have hardly jettisoned the possessive personal, nor have they dislodged from its privileged spot the picture of reason as what transpires in a transparent, autonomous consciousness. Though language may be reduced to a table of probabilities, the Cartesian ego reappears in the guise of the engineer, i.e., he who has mastered the probabilities in advance. This is the fantasy of “a sovereign subject, for whom there is no difference between command given and command completed.”

Like Wittgenstein’s *A*, imagining that the communication may or may not have been intended to produce. That is to say, meaning in language use concerns, above all, the affective information that utterances carry, which is information about the relation between the speaker and the addressee and/or the world. As Silvan Tomkins’s work suggests, linguistic reference would have no traction on us were it not for the affects that motivate our response. Yelling “Fire!” in a crowded theater is not an act of descriptive magnanimity; most uses of language do not (at least, not in any straightforward sense) describe the world. For Tomkins’s information-theoretic approach to the affects, see Silvan S. Tomkins, *Shame and Its Sisters: A Silvan Tomkins Reader*, eds. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank (Durham: Duke University Press, 1996); Silvan S. Tomkins, *Affect Imagery Consciousness: The Complete Edition*, 2 vols. (New York: Springer, 2008), vol. 2. For an extended meditation on the elusiveness of tone in the literary text, see Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 38–88.

It is also worth pointing out that the figurative and tonal aspects of communication accrue particular urgency in situations where speakers and/or listeners do not enjoy the liberty to communicate in the open. Such has been the formative context of many communities of color in the United States. As Marisa Parham writes, the “signals” of Black folk’s discourse “might be understood as protection, as a way of transmitting important information under surveillance” (“Sample | Signal | Strobe”).

mand he had given “had in its own way already traversed” the labor required to fulfill it, but being brought back, again and again, to the gap between intention and action, desire and possession.

The tone of Shannon’s found poem is angry, but to whom is this anger addressed, and where does it come from? A fugitive feeling, it partakes of an impersonality that is nonetheless passionate, or more precisely, impassioned. Within the apparatus, a proposition functions less as form or content than as a lure. It entrains, entrammels, entices, implicates. As another student of meaning’s (ir)relevance once wrote, “A sentence of a vagueness that is violence is authority and a mission and stumbling and also certainly a prison.” It is from the fugitive nature of meaning that speech derives its power to harm. This power makes language the primary vector for human authority. As speakers (or writers), we are missionary and errant and cagey and fenced in by words (by our own and by others’). The apparatus propels now with pain, now seduces with promises of pleasure or redress. But even, or perhaps especially, when one wields words to do harm, the speaker, as Denise Riley imagines, “is dispossessed of his own words in advance. The rhetoric of rage speaks him mechanically and remorselessly.” My intention is not to exculpate the one who causes injury. Nor is my intention to replace the abuser’s magical thinking, which locates agency in the targets of their abuse, with the magical thinking that locates agency in language itself. Rather, my point is that agency occurs

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85 Sianne Ngai argues that “[i]f a literary work’s organizing semblance of feeling cannot be identified entirely with a reader’s response to it, or said to be a feeling represented or signified by the text, it evokes [Brian] Massumi’s description of affect as that which perpetually ‘escapes’ the particular forms or perceptions in which it is ‘captured,’ while also remaining ‘alongside’ them” (Ugly Feelings, 56).


87 Gertrude Stein, Tender Buttons (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2014), 40.

88 Riley, Impersonal Passion, 17.
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in the act (of saying, hitting, spitting, penning the poison letter, pulling the trigger, etc.) and in all the acts that are preparatory and subsequent to it. There is no “inward, spiritual act” that we might hope to isolate prior to all those whose consequences snowball, whose consequences others suffer and endure.89 If our

89 Austin, How to Do Things with Words, 10. When a Black or brown person is accused of a crime, the search for motive does not usually preoccupy the white American public. We whites assume that we know what the causes are, and whether attributed in a spirit of liberal concern (with eyes averted and a sanctimonious shaking of the head) or conservative hysteria (with a righteous wag of the forefinger or drumming of the fist), these attributes depersonalize and dehumanize the accused: it was poverty that made 'em do it, or Black crim/animality. But when a white person commits a crime sufficiently horrific or salacious that the white public is forced to take notice — and especially when a white cishet man commits such a crime — one can observe a contrary hurry to humanize the perpetrator, to plumb the depths of his past for a deeply personal motive. On the one hand, this search for motive shields the rest of us whites from a reckoning. For then it’s not “whiteness” that ambushed worshippers in the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church, or that lay surrounded by emptied magazines on the thirty-second floor of the Mandalay Bay Hotel, or that sits behind the camera on Dateline, fighting back tears of self-pity. On the other hand, this search confirms the perpetrator in possession of his agency, securing his status as the transparent and autonomous subject.

The specter of this subjectivity haunts scenes of “random” mass violence in a particularly perverse way. We might note, with Sally Robinson, that “the fall of white masculinity from the heights of disembodied ‘universality’ into the depths of embodied particularity” can be accompanied by a kind of existential crisis, as well as a kind of sadomasochistic pleasure (Marked Men: White Masculinity in Crisis [New York: Columbia University Press, 2000], 56). (One of Robinson’s examples is the Hollywood film Falling Down.) Perhaps, like the hate-mailer who “can say nothing else” but racializing hate, the perpetrators of such violence desire to exchange rational agency for total compulsion, autonomy for to automaton. That so many white cishet men should feel as though only these two extremes stand open to them attests to their vexed position within a system that demands the reduction of the working body to the conditions of a machine, a system that also affords some workers the privileges of dominating others. It attests, in other words, to the false promise of the wages of domination, which spectacularly fail to recuperate the humanity of the dominator. Likewise, the spectacular pleasure that such men take in the possession and use of firearms (especially automatic
agency is not ours to possess, it is something for which we are responsible, something for which we must take care.

“‘Sine ira et studio’: without hatred or passion, hence without affection or enthusiasm.”90 Thus runs the motto, according to Weber, of bureaucratic reason. Like Weber’s motto, the framing of communication as an “engineering problem” seeks to solve a prior problem by fiat. By muting our words’ affective reverb, bureaucratic or engineering reason prescribes a tonic for subjects caught up in the barrage of contradictory signals that strafe modern life. As Nahum Dimitri Chandler writes, “The system in which […] subordination occurs, because it exists, is analytically presupposed.” Patriarchal white supremacy, alongside other forms of domination, appears as a “preestablished matrix” limiting the subject’s degrees of freedom, just as the tabulated probabilities describing the signals available are supposed to delimit what can be communicated.91 Of course, no one ever said that meaning was in the table, just as no one seriously believes that freedom can be found in the matrix or the ledger or the marketplace. And that is the point. Once banished from the operations of reason, meaning or freedom as shared endeavors can be treated as irrelevant. Such is the lure offered to those who can afford to subscribe: none of that matters outside your head. Your triumphs are your own, as are your failures. The individual, working hard, not just following but intending the rules as his own, is shielded from the downstream consequences of his actions and inaction, just as he is discouraged or forbidden from knowing the structural causes of his pain.92 The ruse is meant

and semi-automatic weapons) owes something to the way that the gun promises to reconcile these contradictions in the subject whose agency it amplifies into deadly force: the shooter becomes, for a brief moment, a dominating machine.

92 The acute dysfunction of bureaucratic reason is only deepened by the increased demand for explicit and intentional performances of emotional labor in the workplace. We are increasingly expected to invest not only our skills, our knowledge, and our time, but also ourselves — or more precisely,
to work, to the degree that it does, for the subject identified as white, cishet male, and middle class. Relevance hinges, for him, on this knowing what not to know.93 For others, the ruse was only ever a cruel joke, and the hinge, whose friction they feel in their bones, swings another way. In the words of Marisa Parham, “it is knowing to know that pivots comprehension toward the unsaid, toward the meaningfulness compressed in a signal.”94 This unsaid meaningfulness is not in the head, though its compression’s force is felt there. But that force also unleashes emancipatory energies.

Dionne Brand’s *The Blue Clerk* imagines this force as splitting the subject of enunciation into two. These halves, speaking by turn in her poetic text, Brand calls “the author” and “the clerk.” As the counterpart to the author’s public persona, the clerk leads, we might be tempted to say, an interior, private, cryptic existence, working behind the scenes. And yet, Brand depicts the clerk’s purview as an exterior and profoundly bureaucratic space:

The bales have been piling up for years yet they look brightly scored, crisp and cunning. They have abilities the clerk is forever curtailing and marshaling. They are stacked deep and high and the clerk, in her inky garment, weaves in and out of them checking and rechecking that they do not find their way onto the right-hand page. She scrutinizes the manifest hourly, the contents and sequence of loading. She keeps account of the cubic metres of senses, perceptions, and resis-

our will to believe, feeding the system with a credulity that it desperately needs to stave off the certain knowledge of prolonged crises, repeated catastrophe, and impending collapse. On the intensification of emotionally performative labor, see Eva Illouz, *Cold Intimacies: The Making of Emotional Capitalism* (Malden: Polity Press, 2016).

93 Wendy Chun describes the abstractions of software engineering as what “both empowers the programmer and insists on his/her ignorance,” since the programmer almost never knows how, exactly, the computer fulfills their commands (*Programmed Visions*, 37).

94 Parham, “Sample | Signal | Strobe” (emphasis mine).
tant facts. No one need be aware of these; no one is likely to understand. Some of these are quite dangerous.

And, some of them are too delicate and beautiful for the present world.95

The clerk works on a wharf or dock, sorting and cataloging “bales” of “left-hand pages,” which represent “what is withheld” from the rectos (the right-hand, the correct) pages produced by the author. The author is, nominally, “in charge” of the clerk, overseeing the latter’s work, which means overlooking, as much as possible, her labor: “I forget the bales of paper fastened to the dock and the weather doesn’t bother me. I choose the presentable things, the beautiful things. And I enjoy them sometimes, if not for the clerk.”96 We might be tempted to regard the clerk as representing the author’s unconscious. But if her labor seems altogether too clerical for Freud, that is because it hearkens to a very different economy of language and representation than what the theory of repression comprehends. The clerk’s tireless scrutiny, her “checking and re-checking,” her “keep[ing] account,” speak to the discursive reality, as adduced by Hortense Spillers, of “the racialized subject”:

his history has dictated that [the] linguistic right to use is never easily granted with his human and social legacy but must be earned, over and over again, on the level of a personal and collective struggle that requires in some way a confrontation with the principle of language as prohibition, as the withheld.97

96 Ibid., 3–6.
97 Hortense J. Spillers, “All the Things You Could Be by Now, If Sigmund Freud’s Wife Was Your Mother: Psychoanalysis and Race,” in Black, White, and in Color, 400–401 (emphasis in the original).
As I read this passage, Spillers suggests that for the racialized subject, confronting and surviving the ledgerization of life, language does more than encode or encrypt a prohibition. Rather, as an engine of that racializing and gendering apparatus by which access to discursive privilege, legal recognition, and rhetorical sovereignty can be foreclosed, language is, in some way, the very thing prohibited or withheld. The clerk’s vigilance in Brand’s text speaks to her “confrontation” with the “principle” that loads speaking with danger, that makes it a matter of life and death. Over and over again, the clerk’s voice returns the text to a figuration of a being-in-the-flesh that, in its inescapable, suffering seriality, exceeds the ruses of abstraction and condensation. And this voice interrupts the Viennese waltz of interiority and exteriority that the aspirational bourgeois subject imagines as her milieu: “If the poet doesn’t do more, the clerk will be inundated by bundles of sheets tightly fastened with gnats and


99 Scott Richard Lyons defines “rhetorical sovereignty,” in the context of Native and Indigenous struggles, as “the inherent right and ability of peoples to determine their own communicative needs and desires in the pursuit of self-determination,” which involves “setting at least some of the terms of the debate” (“Rhetorical Sovereignty, What Do American Indians Want from Writing?” College Composition and Communication 51, no. 3 [2000]: 462). As Spillers maintains, the “right to use” begins with literacy, the “achievement” of which, for oppressed populations, represents “an emancipatory aim” (“Psychoanalysis and Race,” 400). An emphasis on the right to use language, and especially (though by no means exclusively) to use it to assert one’s legal, political, and social relevance in contexts where that relevance has been systematically denied, stands in contrast to those strains of liberal thought and activism that focus on the explicit representation of certain groups or classes in law and policy. To be represented as equal before the law provides no guarantee that one will receive a fair hearing or be granted access to the tools necessary for adequately representing one’s own interests, much less for “setting at least some of the terms of the debate.” On the limits of liberal activism, see Spade, Normal Life.
wire.” The clerk’s task, you might say, lies in accounting for the evidently irrelevant, for the affective and sensuous weight of both action and inaction (e.g., the poet’s not doing more), for all that the withheld pages hold: “The cynical clerk notes, in her cynical English, all the author has elided, the diagonal animosities and tiers of citizenship. The author wants a cosmopolitan city. Nothing wrong with that. But the clerk who orbits her skull has to deal with all the animus.”

In her querulous dialogue with the author, the clerk sustains a certain resonance with Adam Smith’s “spectator in the breast,” the figure by which Smith sought to address the social engineering problem of capitalist modernity. But while Smith’s spectator is an exercise in abstraction, producing the subject in transparency through a synthesis of the hypothetical perspectives of his fellow citizens, Brand’s clerk indexes a kind of surplus or remainder of the flesh. The clerk, in other words, accumulates those aspects of her particular embodiment that the author might prefer to forget: “I am not really in life, the author says. I am really a voyeur. But the part of me that is in life is in pain all the time. That’s me, says the clerk.” For the work of surviving embodiment, which is the labor that conditions the author’s oeuvre, includes the political, social, and economic violence, past and present, that inscribes her flesh within — or more precisely, as the foundation for — “the diagonal animosities and tiers of citizenship.” Hence the dock where the clerk waits and sorts, watching the weather, “expecting a ship.” It is a space haunted by the arrival of the ships bearing stolen life across the Atlantic. This haunting not only marks the author’s identity, but also serially institutes modernity itself, fixing the modern subject — and with particular force, the Black female

100 Brand, The Blue Clerk, 67.
101 Ibid., 23.
103 Brand, The Blue Clerk, 205.
subject — within “a triangular trade of censorship.” Such censorship is not an exercise in abstraction, not the triangulation (as in Adam Smith) of perspectives under the equalizing light of republican reason. Rather, as the author explains to the clerk, it begins, again and again, in “the sirens that are turned on, that come alive whenever we step outside, you and I.” To step outside is to step into the apparatus, to plunge again into a propulsion that powers the economy by a traffic in commodities from which the self, as the flesh’s truncated, anagrammatical fiction, is hardly exempt. 

Brand’s clerk might remind us, too, of another famous thought-experiment: James Clerk Maxwell’s demon, the hypothetical being whose clerical labor keeps a closed system away from the entropy toward which it tends. Maxwell’s demon defies the second law of thermodynamics by sorting faster and slower (i.e., hotter and colder) gas molecules into two sides of a partition within a box. Absent the demon, the gas in the box remains at equilibrium, a uniform average temperature that corresponds to a maximally random distribution of the molecules. In Claude Shannon’s theory, information becomes another name for entropy, making relevance a function, you might say, of maximal bombardment, of the ballistic conditions of exchange. On the standard physical interpretation, the demon’s

104 Ibid., 5, 125.
105 Ibid., 208.
106 My reading is motivated here by Katherine McKittrick’s invocation of the “demonic” in relation to the work of Sylvia Wynter. For McKittrick, the demonic signifies “a non-deterministic schema; it is a process that is hinged on uncertainty and nonlinearity because the organizing principle cannot predict the future” (Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle [Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006], xxiv).
107 The theory represents the signal content of a message as a function of the volume of state-space (probabilistically defined) that its signals can be said to occupy. Thus, a more informative signal (one with higher entropy) is one belonging to a larger space of possible signals. (The least informative signal is the one that occurs with a probability of one; no other signals are
feat remains impossible, because did such a being exist, its own entropy would increase as a function of its need to keep track of which molecules belong here or there: “[E]very […] bringing together of distinct conditions […] can only be accomplished at the cost of a corresponding bringing apart in the demon himself.”¹⁰⁸ Which laws does Brand’s clerk defy by bringing together the left-hand pages, thereby making possible, even as she interrupts, the composure of the authorial voice? What does her impossible labor accomplish at the cost of a “bringing apart” in the clerk herself? As modernity’s more critical students have observed, the disorder of “men […] liv[ing] at random” increases (pace Jefferson) the more that experience becomes “a matter of calculation.” For the requirement of calculability, which is also the imperative of commensurability or equivalence, leads to the transformation of life itself into a field saturated by the logics of surplus value and commodity exchange. In the United States, where capitalism’s imperial ambitions are realized through the vectors of corporate media and information technology, we live in a society dominated by what Silvan Tomkins calls “informational greed.” Ours is a society whose subjects “must have too much information too quickly.”¹⁰⁹ Or as Brand’s author opines: “All information is available, all history is available, all thought is available. Consuming is the obvious answer to life.”¹¹⁰ In Tomkins’s affect theory, “informational greed” is symptomatic of a set of maladaptive personality traits in which anger predominates, anger being (for Tomkins) the affect produced by the unremitting bombardment of any stimulus.¹¹¹ Tomkins’s articula-


¹¹⁰ Brand, *The Blue Clerk*, 110.

¹¹¹ For Tomkins, each distinct affect has its own stimulus profile, answering to a certain evolutionary need of the organism for processing a particular
tion of information theory onto the study of affect invites us to think about economies of signals that circulate neither within nor without, but via the channel of, the flesh. With respect to these signals, the subject is that “affectable thing” (in Denise Ferreira da Silva’s words), the embodied medium through which a labor of being affected produces meaning. In addition to commodities (and information as a commodity), the exchanges that capitalism demands include information about each individual’s value as a commodity in the marketplace of exploitable labor, which is also the market of power and prestige. An impassioned calculation, driven by the impetus to establish one’s worth in a system that denies the stability of value in the kind of information. He describes eight (sometimes nine) distinct affects: startle, anger, fear, shame, distress, disgust, interest/excitement, joy, and a ninth that he calls, on analogy with disgust, “dissmell.” The siren that erupts when you step outside startles you, forcibly re-directing your attention from whatever authorial thoughts to your immediate environment. For someone who knows to know what sirens can mean for people like her, the siren will probably also cause fear, which is the affect profile of rapidly escalating stimuli: e.g., a quickened pulse, an associative rush of images, a frantic search for more information or a plan of escape. The siren’s persistence or recurrence turns fear to anger, as the flesh is wracked by signals that it remains powerless to modulate. Of critical importance to Tomkins’s theory is the idea that each affect “imprints” its physiological response with the same profile as its stimulus, creating a feedback loop that persists until the problem posed by the original stimulus has been resolved. Anger, for Tomkins, is the most dangerous and destructive of the affects, since its painful profile tends to be self-perpetuating. For an insightful analysis of how anger fuels the racializing animus of agents of the white supremacist carceral state, see Ioanide, The Emotional Politics of Racism, 55–80.

112 Ferreira da Silva, Toward a Global Idea of Race.

113 As Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello argue, the self represents the horizon of surplus value, beyond even labor-power (which can be replaced by machines). This self, as they note, is construed as immanently capitalist, in virtue of the fact that the person exploits himself or exploits the contributions of others that go into maintaining the self. The privileged, entrepreneurial self is the commodity into which disappear others’ labor and creativity and care (The New Spirit of Capitalism, trans. Gregory Elliott [New York: Verso, 2007]).
reiteration of every value’s reification, produces the subject as a perpetually angry one.

The subject desperate to fix the signals of whiteness and masculinity into the signs of personal success knows how not to know that on the ground floor, capitalism rests on the power to make human life into a thing that can be bought, sold, and disposed of at will. In other words, his desperation and anger reiterate the forgetting of that violence, and the violence of his forgetting exploits the labor of those who know to know because they cannot do otherwise. With their knowledge, wrought on the edge of a living disposability, they forge the tools to make a different future, another world. Despite the fact that “every aspect of life is an emergency,” in the face of that, on the docks where ships come with their freight in the (choke)hold of modernity, these voices “work to make the world intelligible”: to stave off unreason where unreason insists on its identity as the world’s raison d’être.114 And yet, alongside what profits us in that work, something escapes its capture as profit, something that becomes intelligible only as inheritance or as gift. The clerk’s left-hand pages accumulate the emergency but also “a small present happiness and an eternal hope, even also, joy,” which offer themselves as part of what emerges, radiant strands of what plights one generation to the next.115 They accumulate, those pages, the author’s memories (beginning with her grandfather’s life and work beside the sea). They propagate transformative moments: the music of Mingus, a silence in the desert, the breath of ancestors, and something like an ongoing inventory of the improbable possibilities of language itself:

114 Brand, The Blue Clerk, 208; Alexander, Pedagogies of Crossing, 118. As Hortense Spillers remarks: “It is striking that precisely because black cultures arose in the world of normative violence, coercive labor, and the virtually absolute crush of the everyday struggle for existence, its subjects could imagine, could dare to imagine, a world beyond the coercive technologies of their daily bread […]” (“The Idea of Black Culture,” CR: The New Centennial Review 6, no. 3 [2007]: 25, emphasis in the original).
This is what the clerk thinks: lemon documents, lemon factors, then lemon, watch lemon, lemon nails, wasp lemon, lemon summary, slap lemon, lemon dangers, lemon crevasses, there are a few documents that came, lemon deflections, why allow a certain kind of speech, lemon vines, lemon ankles, distance lemon, knotting lemon, bay lemon, lemon reaches. This is what we have.\textsuperscript{116}

If information theory measures the value of a message as a function of the probabilities that its signals represent, then information is a property available only to the one who, in lieu of the labor of interpretation, decides the assignment of probabilities that govern the field. The \textit{relevant} decision cannot, by fiat of the theory, occur either in the production or reception of the message itself. “What the clerk thinks” defies the grammar of this theory for another kind of enumeration of possibility. A catalog of the unrelieved decisions that living requires, born of an insistence that “a word is not an easy thing, it is not a light thing.”\textsuperscript{117}

Not a thing, in other words, to be trifled with. At the same, the gamble (or gambol) of it “is what we have.” Because the emergency must be lived over and over again, endured anew each instant, its “inventory,” as Brand writes — using a homonym I read in both of its senses — “is agape.”\textsuperscript{118}

Brand’s practice of inventory evokes that custodial love described by James Baldwin: “The custodian of an inheritance, which is what blacks have had to be, in Western culture, must hand the inheritance down the line. So, you, the custodian, recognize, finally, that your life does not belong to you: nothing belongs to you.”\textsuperscript{119} That “nothing belongs to you”: if whiteness, as George Yancy claims, is a “sutured” identity, this thought pulls

\textsuperscript{116} Ibid., 225. For a powerful reading of Brand’s text in relation to “the hold” and “the wake” as figures for Black life in its inflection by circum-Atlantic slavery, see Sharpe, \textit{In the Wake}, 17–19.

\textsuperscript{117} Brand, \textit{The Blue Clerk}, 208.

\textsuperscript{118} Ibid., 61.

\textsuperscript{119} Baldwin, “The Devil Finds Work,” 566.
against the suture.¹²⁰ This nothing is the “cut” that each new performance, every fresh decision, makes in the series that it prolongs and extends. The suture presupposes the cut of which it is a mode, a mask, of forgetting, while the cut makes memory possible. Thinking “in the break” with Fred Moten, we might say that the cut creates rhythm, granting us access to “an experience of meaning,” rhythm being what the flesh endures, the oscillation of pain and pleasure, want and sustenance, dread and desire that quickens us and is how songs live and die in the gut.¹²¹ Or as Harney and Moten write, “the black aesthetic turns on a dialectic of luxuriant withholding,” ensuring that “the trouble with beauty […] is always and everywhere troubled again and again.”¹²² The cut is in-formation, ingress — the world pressing upon the flesh — the world realizing itself in the here and now. And if the organism experiences this pressure as the image of a durable past and an imminent future, it does so because in the present, the shock of becoming overwhelms the being that is, that brims over with “the indefinite complexity of what is felt.”¹²³ That no decision exhausts the decidable, that there is always a residue: this is how the lure of the proposition comes into play, like a wriggle inside knowledge, a fluke in the laminate, a ludic squirm beneath the grammar in which I have learned to say “I am.”

“This information can never be lost, only irrevocably given in transit”: Harney and Moten invite us to the scene of a performance equally tactile and auditory, where messages are passed, not exchanged, in an intimacy that joins us hand to hand.¹²⁴ Lis-

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¹²⁰ Yancy, Black Bodies, White Gazes, 12–13.
¹²¹ Moten, In the Break, 92.
¹²² Harney and Moten, The Undercommons, 48.
¹²⁴ Harney and Moten, The Undercommons, 51.
tening to Julius Eastman’s serial compositions for multiple pianos, I am called to such a scene. Just as Brand’s writing disrupts the grammar that would either lock meaning up in the subject’s head or banish it to irrelevance, Eastman’s music, with its collaborative, improvised sound, renders information as something other than the process by which inert matter receives the imprint of an intentional and transparent form. Eastman’s music gives us a slice of “phonic materiality” in transit.\(^{125}\) Privileging neither melody nor its negation in dissonance, each piece creates a texture of repetition and improvisation, echo and emphasis, in which a musical surface of repeated phrases is roiled by changes in timing and dynamics that occur across multiple instruments in antiphonal arrangement. On the recording I have, four pianos play the score, overdubbing it onto itself in real time. The music pools into momentary equilibrium, only to be dislodged by the eruption of previously heard strains that sweep the piece toward another basin of attraction. The music swarms. On one piece, Eastman’s own voice joins the pianos at regular intervals, clerically counting aloud — “One, two, three, four” — before the pianos redouble their attack.\(^ {126}\) Eastman’s voice performs “the break,” gathering the rhythm, as it were, to unroll it into the next segment, summoning time.

A liminal and long-neglected figure in the history of the twentieth-century avant-garde, Eastman described his compositions as “organic music,” a term that elicits both their use of additive structure, and their dependence on improvisation to realize structure in the act of transformation:

\[\text{The third part of any part (of the third measure or the third section, the third part) has to contain all of the information of the first two parts and then go on from there. So therefore,}\]

\(^{125}\) The phrase is from Moten, *Black and Blur*, 30.
The pieces, which have titles consisting of the words “evil” and “crazy” prepended to the n-word, defy even my citation of them here.
unlike Romantic music or Classical music where you have actually different sections and you have these sections which for instance are in great contrast to the first section or to some other section in the piece...these pieces they’re not...they’re not exactly perfect yet. They’re not perfect. But there’s an attempt to make every section contain all of the information of the previous sections, or else taking out information at a gradual and logical rate.127

Eastman’s aesthetic approach, like James Baldwin’s ethical vision, might be described as custodial. At any rate, it deploys a concept of information that gets itself reformed by the idea of tradition, a carrying forward, handing down, or passing along in which innovation and loss are inevitable but “gradual,” suggesting that the artist as custodian does not rush to seize the material as his own to make anew. Unlike the Markov chains of Shannon’s information theory, Eastman’s version of information is not memory-less. Rather, it describes a practice of memory as an embedding of the past in the present, which involves the placement or disposition of the body itself in space and time.128

The freedom of the composer lies in making space for improvisation, and the freedom of the improviser lies in inhabiting that space, embellishing it without violating it, and making possible its transfer to the next phase of performance. Improvisation, as Moten writes, realizes itself as “sound become dispersive sensuality,” which offers an apt figure for Baldwin’s idea of inheritance, too.129 Aesthetically, this orientation centers the embodied, engaged performer, including the listener or reader,

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128 On the knowledge that the body bears in its spatial orientation, see McKittrick, Demonic Grounds.

129 Moten, In the Break, 47.
who performs the music by absorbing the rhythm in a resonant *habitus* (nodding along, tapping his foot, etc.), or who performs the text by elaborating on its imagery and narrative and following (silently or aloud) the contours of its phonic, sonic, somatic, graphic drift. Rather than the disinterested pleasure in form that entitles one to speak universally, this aesthetics has its (an) originally displaced and therefore fugitive home in a dis-possessive experience of layering and loss. Like affect itself, tradition is — e.g., in the “black radical tradition” described by Moten — a figure for the flesh burdened into time.

Moten’s phrase echoes Eastman’s explanation on being pressed about the scandalous titles of his compositions. Describing slavery as “the basis of the American economic system,” Eastman refigures the primary and persistent signifier of that violence as a name for “that thing which is fundamental [...] that person or thing that obtains to a basic-ness, a fundamental-ness, and eschews that thing which is superficial or, can we say, elegant.”130 The being of Blackness is a radical thing partly because, as Moten argues, its resilient, resistant being (its insistence on being, you might say) unsettles the borders of humanity as policed by that class of beings who exempt themselves from the violence that makes commodities out of everything else in the world. Blackness as the basis of modernity, including its economic systems, but also its aesthetic achievements. The tradition communicates itself, per Moten, via a “soma-sonority

130 Eastman, “Julius Eastman’s Spoken Introduction to the Northwestern University Concert,” *Unjust Malaise*. This anthology features two pieces out of what Eastman refers to, in the pre-concert remarks included on the same album, as a series of fifty-two. This anthology also includes the piece “Gay Guerilla,” the title of which Eastman explains as follows: “There aren’t many gay guerillas, I don’t feel that gaydom has that strength. So therefore I use that word in the hopes that they will. [...] A guerilla is someone who is in any case sacrificing his life for a point of view. [...] If there is a cause, and if it is a great cause, those who belong to that cause will sacrifice their blood, because without blood, there is no cause. So therefore, that is the reason that I use ‘gay guerilla,’ in hopes that I might be one, if called upon to be one.”
that refuses to disavow itself.” It can be heard and felt, not only at the summits of literary, musical, and artistic achievement, but also “beneath speech,” insofar as speech remains the privilege of those who allocate the illocutionary conditions of the human on the basis of skin color and other abusively arbitrary categories.\footnote{Moten, “Preface for a Solo by Miles Davis,” 217. Or as Alexander Weheliye puts it, writing about the radical energy that the flesh communicates in its resistance to capture and control, “[h]ardly anterior to language and therefore the human, these rumblings vocalize the humming relay of the world that makes linguistic structures possible, directly corresponding to how the not-quite- and nonhuman give rise to the universe of Man. […] [T]he flesh engulfs not only Man’s visually marked others via instruments of torture and the intergenerational transmission of hieroglyphics but emanates rays of potential enfleshment through the far-flung corners of Being in the world of Man” (Habeas Viscus, 172).} If the white guy, voiced by this apparatus, “can say nothing else” but this violence, which is the “Amen” of whiteness, then Eastman’s claiming of the hateful epithet, like his counting aloud during performance, enacts “a series of strategies and/or techniques of corporeality” that disturb that field.\footnote{Weheliye, Phonographies, 38. In Weheliye’s words, “the white subject’s vocal apparatus merely serves to repeat and solidify racial difference as it is inscribed in the field of vision” (42).} They demand to count, they demand to matter, they demand accountability from those who hide behind their “Amen,” and at the same time, they refuse to be counted, tallied up, held down, or held in place. Such strategies do not work in isolation, only in concert, like the calls by which guerrillas and outlaws improvise survival, always on the move, imps of probability who outflank your frontal attack.

I hear Eastman’s remark that “they’re not perfect” as more than an admission about his own compositions or about their “finished” state. Because the improvisational work is, by definition, unfinished, i.e., open to (re-)interpretation, it remains a stranger to perfection. Or at least, a stranger to the senses of perfection that connote closure, completeness, comprehensiveness. (An improvised performance might yet be “perfect” in an-
other sense: singular, not admitting of replication, indelible, one of a kind.) This estrangement of perfection applies as much to the moral work (the work of love and care) as the aesthetic one (the work of sense). Love cannot afford to wait on perfect information. Bureaucratic grammars can pretend to such perfection only because the processes that model communication as information are memory-less. They institute the erasure of every particular trajectory in the postulate of a probabilistic, abstract, but still deterministic space. But this erasure has its own particular trajectory. As a frame for political violence and economic exploitation, it underwrites the systematic ruination of lives and the destruction of communities and even entire peoples. While we decry a few spectacular examples of crimes against humanity as bureaucracy run amok, the equally bureaucratic processes that help to produce humanity as a field partitioned against itself touch nearly every aspect of modern life. No wonder, then, that this drive toward erasure should be embodied. It is felt, I would argue, as the demand for mastery over all channels of communication, for complete control of the present as a means

133 On the divisions within the category of the human as a tool of domination, see Sylvia Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument,” CR: The New Centennial Review 3, no. 3 (2003): 257–337; Weheliye, Habeas Viscus; and Ferreira da Silva, Toward a Global Idea of Race. As Dean Spade argues, the “administrative norms” central to bureaucratic rationality (for instance, being allowed or denied the right to register a change of gender on your driver’s license) are frequently “less visible,” in terms of the harms they cause, than “those moments when people are fired or killed or excluded explicitly because of their race or body type or gender […].” Yet administrative norms, whose very explicitness as impartial and impersonal rules seems to shield them from scrutiny, retain the power to “structure the entire context of life” (Normal Life, 24). Especially at the level of populations (rather than individuals), advantages and disadvantages, “security and vulnerability,” opportunity and exploitation, etc., can be distributed in ways that, by appearing not explicitly to exclude anyone, not only perpetuate harm but also function to erase the contexts in which the individual might be said (i.e., by those enjoying said advantages, security, opportunity) to have a legitimate claim to the redress of wrongs done them by the system (117).
of rendering irrelevant the meaning of the past. It is akin, in a way, to the “nuclear scripts” described by Silvan Tomkins, which structure experience as the endless repetition of “good scenes” becoming “bad scenes,” reproducing the chance for perfection as the rehearsal of its failure. The nuclear demand is fundamentally reactionary, not radical or revolutionary. It is insensible to the history wrought by its own repetitions. Thus, it remains committed to an inversion of good and bad as these are experienced by a self for which autonomy remains the gauge. The nuclear script numbs one to the reality of others, to their necessary contribution to the work of changing the conditions of the polarity itself. I don’t want to suggest that whites, or white men, or white cishet men, have a monopoly on maladaptive affect, any more than I wish to center or privilege their feelings as a precondition for understanding patriarchal white supremacy. Rather, it is the very process of centering and polarizing that remains integral to the wages of whiteness and white masculinity, which is a mode of identity premised on the promise of dominance insofar as this dominance can never be durably achieved. Thus, the answer to Du Bois’s question, “What on earth is whiteness that one should so desire it?” is tautological. The answer, indefinitely deferred, is whiteness itself. A love animated by a desire for dominance, by a desire to know the self as dominant in that relation, requires avoidance. Collectively, we white cishet men should stand astonished by the spectacle

134 Locked into a maladaptive spiral, in which some kernel of scenes (e.g., a mother’s affection, a father’s anger) have been “magnified” into mythic images of perfection and its opposite, the personality in the grip of a nuclear script finds, at every turn, that the bad implacably succeeds the good, and such a personality insists on the unconditional reversal of this dynamic. But it is their very commitment to that reversal that drives them, again and again, back to scenes of humiliation, betrayal, etc. In thrall to a nuclear script, “the self victimizes itself into a tragic scene in which it longs most desperately for what it is too intimidated to pursue effectively” (Tomkins, Affect Imagery Consciousness, 806–9).

of what our own desires have wrought. But we turn away, or we redouble the terror we know too well how to produce. (If the white male shooter is only nearly a terrorist, that is because he does not use terror for a political end; he uses terror as an end in itself. His spectacular violence aims to cement a meaning whose vulnerability to change he cannot abide.)

As Baldwin suggests, Black lives not only matter, but they serve as custodians of honesty and compassion in a society premised on self-deception, prejudice, and plunder, wherein the wages of another’s exploitation become the invidious signs of success. A society still organized around forgetting the labor without wages that Black folk and other people of color have done to make the modern world intelligible in spite of itself. Considering the case for reparations, Ta-Nehisi Coates writes, “perhaps no number can fully capture the multi-century plunder of black people in America. Perhaps the number is so large that it can’t be imagined, let alone calculated and dispensed.”

Coates’s point is that the possible failure of the calculable does not absolve us of the work of imagination. Demanding reparations becomes the necessary condition for imagining them, for imagining their necessity. By which I mean, for reckoning with the plunder and the terror and the underhanded dealing by which white success has always consolidated itself in America. Coates, like Baldwin, helps us understand the American nation itself as a kind of epic nuclear script. But one in which the bad scenes keep playing out on the backs of those whose suffering would appear to be what white people’s idea of the good requires, the nation having staked its career on one color mattering more than any other thing. To break the spiral, whites must shake off the lulling sense that the past and its burden of “delinquent debt […] can be made to disappear if only we don’t look.”


137 Ibid. Coates proposes that, with respect to questions about reparations (e.g., to whom, how much, when, how to pay for it, etc.), “wrestling
demand reparations for slavery, Jim Crow, redlining, disparate policing and sentencing, etc. However hard the accounting, it won’t be anything compared to the burdens so many have borne and continue to bear for our collective failure on this account. And we must demand, too, a true acknowledgment and recognition of Native American sovereignty. Only through such forms of reckoning can we hope to find our way to the practices of responsibility that we humans desperately need.\(^\text{138}\) Our collective survival rests on the cultivation of tactics for keeping the future alive in the abundance of being together, tactics that amount to an ethos of love, creativity, and care.

Suppose the past can be reckoned with, suppose it can be dealt with in a reparative way, but only through scripts that disperse affect into processes of compassion and solidarity. Suppose that such processes need not exclude modes of organized, even militant, resistance. But suppose that their very militancy might be grounded in an ethos and an aesthetics that teach one to “act so that there is no use in center.”\(^\text{139}\) Suppose, furthermore, that we supplement Stein’s injunction to dispersively sensuous performance with an invitation to perform a sensuous acknowledgment of, and with, others. The written texts collected in Tracie Morris’s *handholding* are accompanied by audio tracks that consist, for the most part, of recordings of Morris reading aloud. Both textual and vocal performances are meant to accompany pieces by other artists (films, poems, and musical/sonic compositions) to which they respond and on which they riff. Morris’s introduction encourages the reader/listener to “read along/listen along with me and Kubrick, Akomfrah, Stein and Schuit-
ters and Cage."140 But these modes of explicit accompaniment also bring to mind the tacit accompaniment of those others, the traces of whose voices, gestures, touch, and flesh cut against our flesh (like waves against the shore) as we think, speak, write, listen, and think. Morris’s engagement with modernist and post-modernist texts enacts a composing-with as “a poetics of survival, a queer relationality,” an improvisatory relation to cultural materials that serves at once as homage, critique, archaeology, formal experiment, and personal testament.141 These pieces perform a re-membering of what their source texts partially suppress, the real and figurative dismemberment of Black life and Black female life. Like Eastman’s, Morris’s compositions come together like fractals, in which a fragment of experience, a momentary and intimate facet of attention, discloses an array of other facets. Any word may participate in multiple networks of association and affinity (by alliteration, rhyme, metaphor, paronomasia, etc.). And like Stein’s Tender Buttons, which it annotates and accompanies, Morris’s work illuminates ordinary objects, spaces, and occasions as they participate in orders of cultural and economic value.142 With a “basic-ness” these things

140 Morris, handholding, 7.
142 On “annotation” as a method of Black aesthetic/critical practice, see Sharpe, In the Wake, 102–34.

Writing about Stein’s purported “unreadability,” Natalia Cecire argues that this critical stalking-horse responds to the ways in which Stein’s texts insist on foregrounding the gendered taint of the body writing them, a body supposedly fit (in virtue of its assigned gender) only for “unwaged labor, especially repetitive labor including housework and information work” (“Ways of Not Reading Gertrude Stein,” ELH 82, no. 1 [2015]: 303). For Cecire, Stein’s repetitive, paratactic prose, together with its subversion of the reader’s expectations for narrative or grammatical coherence, does more than defy the conventions of both masculinist literature and “women’s writing”; it appears to indulge in a kind of excess that defeats interpretation. And it does so, Cecire suggests, by seeming (at least,
shine in their mattering as the interface between thought and feeling, sensation and abstraction, speech and act, where the texture of language opens us to a dispersal beyond what we can hope to possess: “To add, to adorn is not superfluous, it’s the essence to get at something. To take it in, to complete.”143 Morris’s work, in this sense, provides an essential supplement to Stein’s method, an extended riff on Stein’s claim that “the difference is spreading.”144

The radically beveled vision of domestic space in Tender Buttons remains circumscribed by the fact that Stein’s dispersive attention lacks a history. The objects that populate her text are just there, even if they restlessly gesture elsewhere, toward a horizon now whimsical and humorous, now ominous, now ecstatic. Morris’s “re-viewing” of Stein’s text annotates the latter with a fugitive montage of narrative gestures that themselves “spread” outward into other histories via the lateral logic of image, apposition, rhyme, and pun. In the first section, “If I Re-viewed Her / Objectively” (annotating the “Objects” section of Tender Buttons), Morris imagines a woman moving among the things. She is a bride and then a widow, and her domestic toil ensures that the domestic objects that shine for Stein do not lose their luster:

to many male readers) somehow too embodied. Which is to say, not necessarily undisciplined, but disciplined in “the wrong kind of work,” not the kind of work that produces value in the literary marketplace. “Stein’s unreadability, then, is always ready to risk (and receive) the charges of ‘fraud’ or ‘hoax’; it insists on the value of repetitive labors without presupposing that that value must come on capital’s gendered terms (as wage-eligible ‘hard work’)” (304).

If Morris’s approach to Stein as “handholding” suggests an embrace of the embodied nature of reading as the accompaniment of writing, perhaps it advocates, too, for a different relation to the question of readability. Reading becomes not a matter of interpretation (or its absence), of assigning and registering (or denying) the value of a commodity on the basis of assumptions about the labor behind it, but a labor in its own right, a cooperative mode of engagement that can also function, not as an accounting for value, but as a holding to account.

143 Morris, handholding, 104.
144 Stein, Tender Buttons, 11.
“After all this, heartache, this bruise, she has to do the washing too. After she sits.”145 And the capillary action of Morris’s lyric voice links up such moments with collective histories of struggle and oppression, with life and death on a larger scale. The Triangle Shirtwaist Factory fire, for instance, haunts the tenderness of Stein’s buttons: “She’s a prism. A triangle of a waist. The scythe, the window. The fire.”146 Morris’s work is cut by the knowledge of whose labor produced these objects, and whose flesh, in its vulnerability to violence and exploitation no less than its creative power, sustains the difference celebrated by the poet’s gaze.147 Prompted by Stein’s ruminations on “an ordinary color” in the “Food” section of Tender Buttons, Morris writes/recites,

A regular color is translucent. It’s “unaffiliated.” It’s neutral. It’s “natural.” Everything else isn’t essential. So they say…and most of us mean “we” when we say “they.” It doesn’t make juice, it’s the absence of juice. It’s water. Cocoanut water. Bathwater. Rosewater. Porcelain ablution.148

145 Morris, handholding, 75. Morris’s “re-viewing” of Stein through the figure of a domestic worker resonates with Patricia Hill Collins’s remark that “[d]omestic 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” (Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment, 2nd edn. [New York: Routledge, 2009], 13).

146 Morris, handholding, 76.

147 In a passage that shuttles between the distinct but interlocking forms of violence that are domestic waged labor, settler-colonial occupation, circum-Atlantic slavery, and lynching — and between the strategies of communal survival and resistance by which Black folk and Native and Indigenous peoples have created livable worlds in defiance of white supremacy — Morris makes this point emphatically: “If I had to review her, if I had to rewind, if I had to redo, reuse, renew… I’d think about where those foods come from. She know? I’d wonder how they’d get full. I’d wonder if what we did with pig parts of necessity, they did to us out of luxury. The abundance of us growing in the fields” (ibid., 85).

148 Ibid., 94. As Morris notes in her preface to this work, “[w]hen I went to the ‘food’ however, the text seemed to feel more and more distanced from the source, from Stein. […] My muse is off on her own, talking to other muses
The ordinariness of Stein’s (unspecified) color reflects a posture in which the subject views their own experience as a universal standard, as the neutral transparency against which all others will be judged biased and opaque. Or worse yet, condemned as inessential, i.e., lacking in essence, as an imperfect mixture that violates the rule. But even if “most of us” succumb to the egoism of perspective, the dominant perspective belongs to the color that has no color, to the whiteness that attends my lady’s bath, to the whiteness that promises to absolve how many crimes, to wash away what volumes of blood.

Stein’s next paragraph in *Tender Buttons* deepens the domestic intimacy of this ordinary color, riffing on “a work” that is “dainty and really dainty, very dainty, ordinarily dainty”—although, as is often the case in this text, menace rears its head: “all of that in most violent likely.”149 Tracing a more narrative passage through “bath” and “breakfast,” Morris asks us to acknowledge the intimate violence of the labor that Stein wants only to glance at (can’t keep from glancing at):

There’s this weak-day kind of water that this is. The bath that one takes before getting out there, in the work world, whirling down the drain. You need breakfast before heading out to work. […]

Being late is no excuse. Eating is no excuse. The traffic is no excuse. The transportation is no excuse. Waiting is no excuse. There’s no excuse not to be here. To not exude enthusiasm. To not talk about anything that isn’t work-related. To not re-

like Etheridge Knight’s, my ancestors’ kitchen aesthetics. The way they manifested art in kitchens at home and homes away from home […]. They had a whole other conversation about food that Stein could not enter” (ibid., 71).

Stein’s text reads as follows: “An ordinary color, a color is that strange mixture which makes, which does make which does not make a ripe juice, which does not make a mat” (*Tender Buttons*, 44).

149 Stein, *Tender Buttons*, 44–45.
lated anything to not work is not related. There’s no excuse. There’s no cue. There’s no ex. There’s only cause. The cause is to work one’s way towards it. And by “it” he means “me,” meaning him. Singular.\textsuperscript{150}

In this passage, the one who tolerates no excuses, like A in Wittgenstein’s vignette, asserts his monopoly on the meaning of the other’s work. He, the one in charge, is the “singular” meaning, the sole final “cause,” on account of which one works. Or one works “towards it […] meaning him” because in the grammar of domination, the decisions imposed by those in power represent the alpha and omega of every labor, every process, like a closed-circuit video in which the other appears as a grainy ghost on the screen. Every decision, every meaning, presupposes the radical mattering of the flesh, but this grammar demands the erasure of the relative, the relational, and the real acts of bearing, supporting, and suffering that lie packed against the cut of whatever we decide, calling for their belated (\textit{B}-laden) acknowledgment. As a result, the logic that best serves domination is an incoherent one: “To not related anything to not work is not related.” He who “means ‘me’” clings to a grammar that groans under the weight of its disavowals. But to be clear, it is the other who groans, grimaces, forcing a grin to satisfy the requirement that they “exude enthusiasm”; that they “remain sweet. That’s what everyone said you should do” (see “your saying please”).\textsuperscript{151} The etiolated perspective privileged by patriarchal white supremacy, like the dead labor congealed in the commodities of capitalism, requires infusions of affect and desire by those who shoulder the yoke. (But as Morris reminds us, “When they put the bit in we were not smiling. When they put the yoke on, we were not pastoral.”)\textsuperscript{152} The meaning that the system pays out, a meaning

\textsuperscript{150} Morris, \textit{handholding}, 94.

\textsuperscript{151} Ibid., 95.

\textsuperscript{152} Ibid., 84. If Stein’s “white hunter is nearly crazy,” his whiteness signifies the nearness to a madness that projects its own unreason onto the other’s resistance. This resistance is nothing but the eminently reasonable
that is, to each one of us, though by violently unequal degrees, a belief in their own singular endowment, derives from the very meaning, or meaningfulness, that it stole from us, collectively, taken together in our misery and our strength.

Like the texts of Gertrude Stein (and of many other writers who hark back to her example), Morris’s work expresses a practice of dwelling where meaning and sense emerge in the world’s manifestation as a process of being-affected-by. But here what cuts is also the question, as Dionne Brand puts it, re-encountering the racism evident in Stein, “How many micro-abrasions, as they say, do you think I could take?”

There is an accounting to be had, but not in any sense of what might totalize things, letting any of us off the hook, endorsing my _ergo sum_. Morris holds hands with Stein’s text in order to hold Stein, and us, to account. The vocal accompaniment (intended to support “listening and/or reading both texts simultaneously as legal proofreaders do”) heightens our sense of the phrase, its fraught boundaries, its silent, boundless, bonded freight.

Where Morris slips up or stutters in her recitation, she lets it stand or else re-doubles it, making the “mistake” part of the take, refusing to withhold what can be held-with, but giving the voice over to, spacing it out into, response to a violence that drives reason out of the one who wields it. As with the jailer who keeps prisoners in order to fill the prison he has made out of the void in himself, this violence and this madness mutually suture themselves into the “enlightened” human being, an apparatus that destroys the evidence. As Morris muses in one her text’s most explicit sections,

“I wonder if they ate us. I wonder, if there was another reason we were roasted. I wonder what Leopold hosted? Why’d he burn the evidence? What I’d like to see Conrad write about: the heart, the heartlessness. What did they do with it? How’d it taste? I mean, if we were chattel. If they were cackling. If they were as crackled as the prepackaged snacks in store. Like the scalping, like a head scratched clean off, they said the Reds did, they did against Red. Against red. A contrast. A ghast. I wonder what they ate? I wonder why they talk about Aztecs like that? I wonder if they are saying something again? Something in ink again? Something about Incans? About the spilling” (84–85).

153 Brand, _The Blue Clerk_, 116.

154 Morris, _handholding_, 7.
what Christina Sharpe calls “wake work.” One doesn’t read for proof, but with a clerical precision not at odds with a certain abundance, though the A-men would hardly think to look for it there: “Concepts and intangibles are what. What it means is what it is. We decide and that decision is not a noun it’s a feeling.”

Morris’s work, like that of the other artists, writers, and scholars whose handholding this essay depends on, reminds me of the urgency of deepening a phenomenology of feeling into an ethics of love and care. Without making a spectacle of violence and suffering, that work strives to keep alive for the reader the density of the circum-Atlantic history that, for Black folk, Native and Indigenous peoples, and many other communities of color, remains virtually inescapable in the present-day United States. And that remains, for whites, all too virtuously escapable. The reader encounters this density in the layered resonance of image and idiom, foregrounded by the hesitations and slippages performed by Morris’s recorded voice. These kinks in the chain of association feel less like moments of searching for the “right”

155 Sharpe explains, “I want to distinguish what I am calling Black being in the wake and wake work from the work of melancholia and mourning. And though wake work is, at least in part, attentive to mourning and the mourning work that takes place on local and trans*local and global levels, and even as we know that mourning an event might be interminable, how does one mourn the interminable event?” (In the Wake, 19). Sharpe’s “wake work” shares, as I take it, an ethos and an aesthetics with Baldwin’s idea of tradition as inheritance, and with Moten’s concept of improvisation, which also aptly describes (part of) what Morris is up to in these “sonic, textual engagements.” As Moten claims, “improvisation is the unacknowledged grapho-spatiality of material writing” (“Preface for a Solo by Miles Davis,” 240). In the way of describing Morris’s work, I’m also drawn to what Marisa Parham calls “Black glitch aesthetics.” Morris’s tongue-tripping recitation underscores a phenomenology in which “meaningfulness is continually re-encoded as anticipation is re-experienced itself as a kind of knowledge, surfing between dreadful and delicious, break dancing is a non-binary state” (“.break .dance,” sx archipelagos 3 [July 2019], http://smallaxe.net/sxarchipelagos/issue03/parham/parham.html).

156 Morris, handholding, 113.
word, than an artful handling of strands of meaning that threaten to tie up speech itself:

There’s a crescent moon, a sliver of light from the clouds making a cross on the tree where He’s hanging. There is a sexta-star and it’s all at the same fixed spot. I see it all and still don’t believe it. I believe what I see but nouns are subjunctive, um, subject, er, suspect.157

The hanging figure in this passage evokes, of course, the specter of white supremacist terror that haunts Morris’s text. The tree is also, in context, what a widow sees outside her window, as she stands rooted in a claustrophobic world of domestic waged labor, in a place fixed by both her race and gender, a “lady who was on her way someplace and got something said to.” (In counterpoint to the “Rooms” section of Tender Buttons, this section of Morris’s text is titled “Enclosure.”) The threading of the past, which is always multiple, through the dispositional grammar of action and speech yields the present moment as the lure of our futurity (as the shimmer skipping across the water at which we leap). Stein’s Tender Buttons teaches us how “the sensible decision” loses its luster when we are properly attuned to the actual luster of experience, its variety, its spreading difference, in the light of which the sensible decision is “not even more likely to be pleasing.”158 Stein’s text, at its enigmatic conclusion, even suggests that the errancy haunting each decision — in the cut, you might say, between the sensible and the sensuous — makes possible our wonder at the phenomena that confront us, and that this wonder discloses the only true grounds of justice and care:

The care with which the rain is wrong and the green is wrong and the white is wrong, the care with which there is a chair and plenty of breathing. The care with which there is incred-

157 Ibid., 117.
158 Stein, Tender Buttons, 76.
ible justice and likeness, all this makes a magnificent asparagus and also a fountain.\textsuperscript{159}

Wonder is, for Stein, rooted in the body and its situation (“a chair and plenty of breathing”). In its attention to the texture of wonder and embodiment in Stein’s text, Morris’s work teaches us to deepen this reading by acknowledging how our access to wonder, like our bodies, inherits a history and, as such, summons us to a reckoning. I suppose this is to say that Morris’s work thinks more carefully about the illocutionary and perlocutionary dimensions of poetic language: “The luxury of saying why is there a difference is to be able to ask.”\textsuperscript{160} Or that it takes more care to insist that the alternative to the bureaucratic lure of the “sensible decision” is not poetic license (for they are, after all, two sides of the same coin). The alternative, rather, might feel like dwelling in the decision (not in indecision, but in the cut that accompanies decision), feeling the accumulated weight that each occasion ushers into the present:

Why’s the world’s knowing attached to that one little area of the planet. To the victors go the victims’ gaze, I guess. It’s not exactly translucent, not exactly opaque. More like a veil one could be born with.

The ocean is encircling all things, whatever they mean. The ocean is lapping the tree…

Take care. Take care.\textsuperscript{161}

\textsuperscript{159} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{160} Morris, \textit{handholding}, 112.
\textsuperscript{161} Ibid., 117. Such a reckoning is the gift with which George Yancy’s “Dear White America” concludes: “Take one more deep breath. I have another gift. If you have young children, before you fall off to sleep tonight, I want you to hold your child. Touch your child’s face. Smell your child’s hair. Count the fingers on your child’s hand. See the miracle that is your child. And then, with as much vision as you can muster, I want you to imagine that your child is black.” The gift of care for another, of a care that exceeds the nuclear confines of family and the political and economic conspiracies of race, gender, class, etc., is not reciprocal in the restricted
The weight of our history, like the encircling ocean, does not only burden things. It sustains them. Just as what sustains us is not being loved and cared for, but the imperative to love, to take care.

sense of what closes the loop of an exchange. Rather, as Rauna Kuokkanen writes, inviting us to make space for the forms of knowledge and praxis that Native and Indigenous worldviews communicate, “gifts are not given primarily to ensure a countergift later on, but to actively acknowledge kinship and coexistence with the world; without this sort of reciprocity, survival — not just of human beings, but of other living things — would be impossible” (Reshaping the University: Responsibility, Indigenous Epistemes, and the Logic of the Gift [Vancouver: UBC Press, 2007], 43–44). A gift that deepens the breath and the breadth of the world. A gift of, in, and with the flesh, which is “the loophole of retreat, the liminal space, and the archipelago for those revolutions that will have occurred but remain largely imperceptible within Man’s political and critical idioms [...]” (Weheliye, Habeas Viscus, 135).