In the wake of colonial violence, how do we come to terms with its event while refusing the power exercised by these very terms? If race is an organising grammar upon which we must draw in articulating the very realities to which it consigns us, then what recourse does it leave us in disarticulating and remaking these realities? This article is a meditation on these questions in the context of the massacres at two Christchurch mosques, and the raced discourses which they occasioned. In exploring these discourses as raced, the emphasis here is on their temporal qualities: on race as the coding of the time and the place (or non-place) in history where its subjects belong. Against the legibility and transparency with which race interpellates its subjects, is there a magic in the opacity and poetics of speech through which we can rewrite our 'destinies' and reinvent ourselves?

Reading Our ‘Destiny in the World We Have Made’: Inscriptions and Incantations of Race in the Wake of the Christchurch Massacres

FAISAL AL-ASAAD

The necessity to narrate

The poster was quite unassuming, juxtaposing in simple design a short description of the advertised-event details against a generic stock image which can be found in a Google search of ‘world peace’.[1] In the subtitle, it read quite simply: ‘coping with trauma workshop for Muslim rangatahi’. The description continued in this vein, providing little more than the where and when, except for a minute and vague itinerary of planned activities, which included the promise of a ‘discussion on topical issues impacting rangatahi Muslims’. At the bottom there was a courteous reminder that morning tea and lunch would be provided, and below that an email address for contact.

Several months after the Christchurch terror attacks of 15 March, this poster made its humble appearance on social media. Organised by a Muslim-led charitable trust in Hamilton, the event advertised was one of a few similar though uncoordinated workshops that had taken place over the course of the year, each seeming to have been a generous but isolated effort at the provision of a space for collective reflection and commiseration. Beyond these,

1 The author would like to acknowledge the Capturing the Diversity Dividend of Aotearoa New Zealand (CaDDANZ) program for providing funding in support of this research.

and the similarly disparate though likely to be unremarked efforts within the Muslim community, there has been little in the way of an organised response to the horror visited on the collective unconscious on the day of the attacks. To this extent, 'coping with trauma' seems not only apt but salient, insofar as it points at the doubling of violence through its disavowal in the cultural mainstream. What is trauma if not the experience of something as significant and overbearing precisely because it goes on being unremarked, illegible, and non-symbolisable?

All the same, there is something quite telling about the framing or bracketing of such spectacular violence as trauma. In the euphemistic, nondescript syntax of the poster, one gets a sense of how sheer and grotesque horror becomes unspeakable, but therein is also an implicit evasion (perhaps even refusal) of the usual terms to which one might defer in this context. Rather than deploying the lexicon that gained purchase in the wake of attacks—hate, terrorism, colonialism, racism, white supremacy, etc—the use of trauma as placeholder would seem to preserve a space for the unnameable that is otherwise obliterated by these terms. This is no doubt possible given the semantic plasticity of the term itself, a quality developed over decades in the English-speaking world, where the concept has steadily acquired not only scholarly but also colloquial purchase. Indeed, as observed by Lauren Berlant:

> in critical theory and mass society generally, 'trauma' has become the primary genre of the last eighty years for describing the historical present as the scene of an exception that has just shattered some ongoing, uneventful ordinary life that was supposed just to keep going on and with respect to which ordinary people felt solid and confident.[2]

Writing in the context of a global pandemic, this passage resonates with a striking pitch. Noteworthy, though, is its implicit recognition that this flourishing cultural genre has acquired a life of its own, perhaps independently of the condition of normality, of uneventful ordinary life, to

2 Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 10.

which it might have once necessarily alluded. In other words, and insofar as it may be conducive for a genre, being shattered, rather than solid and confident, may still be grounds for its own kind of speech and action.

Put differently, the use of the term would seem to signpost a kind of reckoning with colonial violence and the shattering and fragmentation that follows in its wake. There is perhaps a considered attunement, not so much to the turgid beat of historical and ideological metanarratives as to the noise and 'steady hum of liveable crisis ordinariness'.[3] This is significant in a context far removed from the one in which Edward Said once considered the problem of the 'permission to narrate'.[4] The situation faced by Aotearoa New Zealand's Muslim community in the wake of the Christchurch massacres is one in which a racialised group is made to tarry with what might be called the necessity to narrate. An interpellative mode of address, this can perhaps be understood as a felt demand to petition one's own humanness and viability as a subject at the moment in which it comes under question, and to do so in the terms of sanctioned legibility.

Of course, this is crucial to what has been called, most notably from within its critique by Indigenous studies, a politics of recognition.[5] Under conditions of 'late liberalism', particularly in settler-colonial states undergoing protracted crises of legitimacy, and striving to manage various regimes of social and racial difference, this mode of interpellation becomes particularly efficacious.[6] It effectively enlists those bearing the marks of racial otherness in the service of discursively articulating and substantiating settler colonialism through the very process of narrating and historicising their place in it. In other words, and through a kind of ideological ventriloquism, racialised collectivities come to enact and perform the address of the settler-colonial state, whose own appeal to legitimacy is refracted as a demand for

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3 Berlant, *Cruel Optimism,* 196.

4 Edward Said, 'Permission to Narrate,' *Journal of Palestine Studies* 13, no. 3 (1984): 27.

5 Joanne Barker, *Native Acts: Law, Recognition, and Cultural Authenticity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 27; Glenn Coulthard, *Red Skin, White Masks: Rejecting the Colonial Politics of Recognition* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2014), 25.

6 Elizabeth Povinelli, *Economies of Abandonment: Social Belonging and Endurance in Late Liberalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2011), 25.

the other's narration. In the process of responding to this injunction for a particular kind of speech and visibility, such collectivities thus partake in the cultural nexus of recognition by which settler-state sovereignty is itself recognised and cathected. The performance and rendition of certain forms of social belonging and authenticity are, of course, notable examples of this process. Notable, but not exclusive.

I would suggest that the necessity to narrate relates not just to those practices, politics, or performatives that often go under the catch-all of identity politics. Taken more holistically and capaciously, it also names a demand that partakes of a more general mode of articulation: what Saidiya Hartman critically names a 'sense-making project', the symbolic predicate of which is the 'imposition of legible speech'.[7] A project geared towards reading, rendering, and reproducing our lived worlds and worldly relations through terms that are legible, recognisable, and intelligible within hegemonic frameworks and epistemes, this is necessarily a colonial project that works not simply through erasure, but through incorporation. To this extent, it is not just notions of belonging and authenticity which submit to the necessity to narrate, but all discourses which aspire to legibility, not least those that turn on practices of documenting and petitioning exclusion, violence, and oppression.

This becomes all the more pressing when colonial violence takes place in a so-called 'post-racial' context. The necessity to narrate appears therein as a double demand: to explain and account for race; and to render its extra-discursive and irrational basis in terms which make it comprehensible, and to do so in a context in which it is entirely disavowed. Where violence is symbolically and subjectively shattering, this double demand for articulation and legibility weighs most heavily on those who are subjects of this violence. In the aftermath of the Christchurch attacks, this demand to narrate became palpable in the appeal to render and articulate the violence by amplifying voices, having conversations, and sharing perspectives. More importantly, though, nowhere was this set of prerogatives more resoundingly a narratorial and historicising one than in characteristically anti-racist

7 'Poetry is Not a Luxury: The Poetics of Abolition,' *Silverpress*, 2 September 2020.

discourses. The racialised quality of the demand to narrate and historicise was more immediately obvious in more or less mainstream 'calls to foreground the voices and perspectives of our Muslim community in the days following the Christchurch attacks'.[8] In this space, discussions of racism, colonialism, and white supremacy found unusual, if temporary, sanction.

There is something rather suggestive, then, about the poster's ambiguous grammar and the space opened up by the workshop that it advertised. Whether intentionally or not, and quite exceptionally in comparison to other forums that took place in the wake of the attacks, the space seemed to be evacuated of any demand to address the massacre or its historical causes. In fact, it was an expression of a distinct lack of demand for any particular kind of address. What trauma achieves, or rather performs, as a vacant placeholder in this instance, is to displace the injunction to narrate, and to invite speech; speech experienced as neither demand nor as prohibition.

When invited to reflect on his involvement in facilitating the workshop, a Muslim mental-health professional noted that, since the time immediately following the attacks, he had become increasingly alienated by invitations to discuss Islamophobia. In particular, he expressed disillusionment with what he saw as a specific kind of performative address, and a specific kind of affected disposition: 'I don't want to be that angry guy who is constantly yelling about racism. I want to help with healing'. Then, and struggling to describe his experience of the workshop, he finally and tentatively opted for one word: 'magical'. When further asked about his hesitation to use this word, he explained that he didn't want to seem overly dramatic or 'airy-fairy' in describing an engagement of painstaking but otherwise open, unframed, and unexaggerated discussions grounded in the quotidian experiences of those involved.

That one so disillusioned with the conventions and norms of (anti-) racism's discourse should become so enchanted by the unremarked and unrestricted character of the trauma workshop, and its prerogative for healing, is informative. How does race, what Hortense Spillers describes

8 'Hear their words: Muslim voices on the Christchurch attacks,' *The Spinoff*, 19 March 2019.

as the 'perfect affliction' and the 'deadliest fiction', come to disenchant the subjects of its speech, even as it persists in itself as an unrelentingly '"enchanted" order of discourse'?[9] What does healing from this affliction entail when it is an affliction that 'not only shapes [the subject's] view of things but demands an endless response from him'?[10] If the socio-symbolic fabric and affective tethers of race are shored up and sutured by strong narratives and 'strong theories' about the world of the subject, what recourse does the latter have to weaken these tethers and widen the gaps in this fabric?[11]

To be clear, the meditations below are concerned with neither trauma nor healing, at least not in any conventional sense of these terms. Rather, the attention here is on how, in the wake of colonial violence, something, maybe a self or a sense of self, is unmade and remade through different modalities of its inscription and reading as raced. What makes it raced, specifically, is more than the way it is articulated through the discursive medium of race and its 'organising grammar'.[12] As a medium, race is also an oracular means of divination, and of discerning and divining one's place and destiny in the world. If there is magic in the displacement of the conventional, recognisable, and legible terms of race, it lies in the refusal to submit to the fixed destiny to which one is consigned by its occult augurations. Where race is understood as an enchantment that disenchants and dispossesses us of the possibilities for our own 'invention' as subjects, we don't need to demystify or to render it, and ourselves in it, more sensical.[13] Rather, we might instead seek to disarticulate its 'spells of power' through incantations

9 Hortense Spillers, '"All the Things You Could Be by Now if Sigmund Freud's Wife Was Your Mother": Psychoanalysis and Race,' *Critical Inquiry* 22, no. 4 (1996): 78; Sylvia Wynter, 'On Disenchanting Discourse: "Minority" Literary Criticism and Beyond,' *Cultural Critique,* no. 7 (1987): 241.

10 Hortense Spillers, 'All the Things,' 78.

11 Eve Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2002), 131.

12 Ann Laura Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire: Foucault's History of Sexuality and the Colonial Order of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1995), 27.

13 David Marriott, 'Inventions of Existence: Sylvia Wynter, Frantz Fanon, Sociogeny, and "the Damned,"' *The New Centennial Review* 11, no. 3 (2011): 45.

of our own, 'in order to tame this sorcerer and conjure otherwise'.[14]

Fateful inscriptions

It wavered at first, a low but deep hum reverberating tentatively, hardly daring to leave the source of its emission. Caller and nearby listeners both reached for it, grasped for it, like an invisible and ever-so-delicate thread, its acoustic tip gently and intimately stitching together the empty space between us. Before long, though, it began to hover, its line wearing thin. Just as it was about to break into silence, its delicate timbre ready to sink into the vacuum of its space, the lonesome note was joined by others. Coming to its rescue, a melody of voices converged at the place of the initial call, their cadence forming not so much a response as a resonance, making it hard to distinguish the callers. Their convergence soon reached a crescendo, the initial call replicated, inflated, and lifted to a sonorous pitch that reverberated out into the open field, and received its echo as if the distant line of trees had joined in lamentation. Those present were soon not so much listening to the mournful song as enveloped by it, an auditory korowai draped over us. On air so heavy with grief, the polyphonous cry of the karanga took easy flight, a flock of notes bearing no weight in the world but carrying its own life all the same, carrying the worlds of those living and dead.

Their lament still resounding in the air above the Auckland Domain, contouring a gathering of strangers into a communion, the kaikaranga stepped back, permitting the vigil's proceedings to unfold. The organisers were nothing if not prompt in facilitating the line-up of speakers, which was rolled out with unceremonious efficiency. Speech after speech, including mine, issued into the microphone on stage, the speakers booming across the pitch and blasting the gathered crowd with a salvo of entreaties, appeals, demands, even reprimands. The antiphony of the karanga's call was quickly succeeded by a cacophony of call-outs, the gentle shroud laid

14 Avery Gordon, *Haunting and the Sociological Imagination* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 28.

on those gathered, connecting them, holding them, now lifted, leaving us open to the impersonal and imperious address of our speech, exposed to it, exposed to each other. From the blissfully unindividuated, nameless mass hailed by the karanga, we resurfaced as interlocutors, naming ourselves and each other in the terms by which our suffering is experienced. Attendees were soon leaving, an initial trickle turning into a steady stream. In the twilight of dusk, the call to *maghrib* prayer brought the vigil to a solemn close, the dark mantle of night giving succour to both the exhausted and the exasperated.

'Was it a vigil, a political rally—or both?' read the first line of a news article, appearing on the weekend following the Friday event.[15] It continued: 'Speeches calling out racism, colonialism, and white supremacy at an Auckland vigil for victims of the Christchurch mosque attacks had some attendees leaving early, saying it was "too soon" for such discussions'. To discuss such things is too soon; the discussion of racism is untimely. This verdict is echoed in responses to those bemoaning the untimeliness of discussion: 'it was actually "too late" to be having these conversations. . . . People are already dead, it is too late'. To invoke racism, colonialism, and white supremacy is either too soon or it is too late. To narrate violence as a thing of race is always untimely, as are we, those of us who would invoke race to name ourselves and the history of our making. We are, in that sense, out of time, just as we are out of place. What discussions we impose, and what terms we resort to, are so many devices with which to inscribe ourselves back into place and time. We recollect and write ourselves back into the history from which we have been cast out, or so we try. If there is anything, strictly speaking, that determines us as subjects of trauma, or that gives trauma its specifically raced quality, it is this: our banishment from time, and our striving to recover and represent ourselves as a presence therein.

'People are already dead, it is too late'. If the event of violence is traumatic, it is so because it is the thing that has always already happened. But it's also that which we keep returning to, and the return of which we

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15 Michael Neilson, 'Christchurch vigil or political rally? Why some people walked out of Auckland Domain event,' *NZ Herald,* 24 March 2019.

keep anticipating. If only we had anticipated it prior to its happening. It was '"too late" to be having these conversations'—conversations that might have prevented the violence, and which might have averted the course of the history they now rehearse and reinscribe. Return and repetition: such is the structure of trauma, as we know. To the extent that they repeat the violence in words, give it symbolic and narrative form, and go over it again and again, repeated invocations of racism, colonialism, and white supremacy are therefore symptomatic of temporal capture. They are telltale symptoms of the cause, as well as tellingly mimetic of it. Indeed, such invocations effectively reveal that what appears as trauma, in this instance, is simply the logical extension and culmination of colonial violence, insofar as it 'intensifies our attachment to the perceptual grid constructed by its practices'.[16] Through our repetition, the violent event has always already happened, but in its retelling we can anticipate its blow, lessen its impact, and anticipate its brutal inevitability by exercising symbolic mastery over it. Effectively, we turn the non-fungible weight of its pain into words for exchange and bring the immensity of our untimeliness to heel through narrative.

Bringing our place in the world under question, unspeakable violence is a potent catalyst for speech, calling for rigid temporalities as substitutes for our untimeliness. If the horrors of racism and colonialism are unforeseeable, dispossessing us of foresight, then in their narration we become omniscient again. Our gaze scans history's terrain, wherein there must be no contingencies, and 'there must be no bad surprises'.[17] In this sense, our narratives, the readings and inscriptions of the world and ourselves in it, become structurally paranoid. In her well-known discussion of paranoid reading practices, of which the critical and the counter-hegemonic are often characteristic, Eve Sedgwick uses paranoia to describe, in and amongst other things, 'a distinctively rigid relation to temporality, at once anticipatory and retroactive, averse above all to surprises'.[18] Sedgwick also notes its 'extraordinary stress on the efficacy of knowledge per se',

16 Marriott, 'Inventions of Existence,' 55.

17 Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 130.

18 Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 146.

asking whether 'that's why paranoid knowing is so inescapably narrative'.[19] For those bereft of a certainty of place in history, a sense of the unknowable and the unforeseeable can be allayed by the having always known. 'No time', Sedgwick observes, 'could be too early for one's having-already-known, for its having-already-been-inevitable, that something bad would happen'.[20] What makes our historicising narratives, important and critical as they may be, paranoic is their stretching of the event into a potentially infinite 'temporal progress and regress'.[21] If violence took us unaware and by surprise, its retroactive suturing to a history of racism and colonialism makes of us a presence at the site of our own undoing.

'How does a heart break?', asks Anjum Rahman, beginning her sobering reflections after the attacks: 'Does it shatter into a million pieces? . . . Does it break with a low keening wail or an earth-shattering scream of pain?'[22] Representing the unwavering and amply vocalised stance of the Islamic Women's Council since the attacks, Rahman's widely circulated account testifies to a pressing and collective sense of expectancy. It is presented as a ledger: an archive documenting the expectancy which found its tragic consummation in the horrors of 15 March, and which shaped a five-year campaign during which the council took concerted and painstaking action to bring urgency to bear on the issue of the community's safety. 'We begged and pleaded, we demanded. We knocked on every door we could, we spoke at every forum we were invited to', Rahman intones, describing the ordeal. Pleas and demands for a systemic response are met with institutional neglect and a repeated failure by those in power to take heed, and, five years down the line, 'here we are'. Here we are, the point at which the present force of our narrative of the event acquires strength from its past inadequacy to prevent its happening. This is the same juncture at which surprise becomes impermissible. Having been asked, 'time and again', whether or not she was

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19 Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 138.

20 Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 131.

21 Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 130.

22 Anjum Rahman, 'Islamic Women's Council repeatedly lobbied to stem discrimination,' *RNZ,* 17 March 2019.

surprised by the attacks, Rahman ends with a definitive: 'No, New Zealand media, we are not surprised. Why would we be?' We were there, after all, and we knew, all along.

Why would we be surprised? How would we dare to be surprised, when to be surprised is to have entertained the possibility of things having been different, and when our very narratives now appear as testimony to this impossibility? Indeed, how can we be surprised when our narratives become contingent for their articulation on this very impossibility? Here, the legibility and rigid temporality of our inscriptions crystallise the violence they narrate. Language displays its complicity with the extra-discursive facets of race, which transform an arbitrary calculus (the determination of life unworthy of life) into destiny, enlisting the very subjects of its violence in rendering it so. What testimonies, inscriptions, and *incantations* do we resort to in order to re-write that destiny to which we are consigned by the determinations of race, in order to escape 'the waiting room of history'?[23]

Anthropologists have long observed that where the symbolic instantiates its 'intimate criminality' with violence, 'delivering being to a radical loss of shelter and protection', it is often those instances of 'feminine grief' that, enacting a 'gesture of mourning that renounces narration', once again shelter 'the exposure of being under a mantle of silence'.[24] Where would our narratives be without the 'the low keening wail', the 'earth-shattering scream', or the mournful cry, that gives form to 'unspeakable things unspoken'?[25] If speech is a quintessential marker of the core category of racism (the human), then what is the latter's relationship to that limit-space where speech begins and ends, and where we find the acoustics of the 'human-animal-alien'?[26] Acoustics and, it should be added, poetics more

23 Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincialising Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 8.

24 Stefania Pandolfo, *Knot of the Soul: Madness, Psychoanalysis, Islam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018), 62.

25 Toni Morrison, 'Unspeakable Things Unspoken: The Afro-American Presence in American Literature,' The Tanner Lectures on Human Values, The University of Michigan, 7 October 1988.

26 Julietta Singh, *No Archive Will Restore You* (California: Punctum Books, 2018), 64.

generally. If these find common ground in what is called a 'song', it is in their shared quality of having 'a sense that does not make sense'.[27]

Reading our destinies in the world we have made

Before returning to the workshop to explore its magic, it is worth briefly pausing to explicate (at least in very broad and schematic terms) the basic conceptual distinction I've been drawing between sense-making in narrative speech and the sense of its poetic other, and to do so by centring its relationship to race. In philosophy, psychoanalysis, and critical theory more generally, it is no secret that language, discourse, and the symbolic are a privileged site for the analysis of power, to the extent that grasping the latter's social effectivity is quite unimaginable otherwise. This is so because language is the principle ground upon which social reality is constructed, defined, and delimited. Franco Berardi suggests that when we talk about language, we are referring to the means of organising 'time, space, and matter in such a way that they become recognizable to human consciousness'.[28] In this sense, language is world-building, submitting the prelinguistic matter of the cosmos to a particular order in which social thought and action can take place.

But there are different ways of organising cosmic matter and different forms of world-building, and so further qualifications are required. Where poetry is concerned, Berardi notes that we often use this to name those semiotic processes through which we exceed and transgress the very definitions and limitations we impose in the creation of shared existence. Through irreverent play with established patterns of meaning and relation, the poetic opens up new horizons of possibility, and since language is a manifest expression of world-building, the poetic opens passageways or windows into different worlds. This can be contrasted to the way that code works, as a function of language, to constantly digest and incorporate

27 Jean-Luc Nancy, *Listening* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2007), 64.

28 Franco Berardi, *Breathing: Chaos and Poetry* (Massachusetts: University of Minnesota Press, 2018), 20.

excesses of meaning into its algorithm. In this sense, the paranoiac structure and tendencies of narrative are also an expression of code, insofar as they aim at the temporal and affective capture of contingencies and surprises.

Overly conceptual and abstract as it may seem, this particular notion of language and its different world-making possibilities, actualised through different semiotic and discursive processes, is useful for understanding why a quotidian space like the trauma workshop can be experienced as quite profound. But here I would like to make some further observations that specify the purchase of this idea in relation to race. Spillers's formative essay on the subject is worth quoting at length:

> To speak is to occupy a place in social economy, and, in the case of the racialized subject, his history has dictated that this 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 . . . what must be emphasized here is the symbolic value of the subject's exchanges with others, and it is within the intersubjective nexus that the inequalities of linguistic use and value are made manifest – what one can do with signs in the presence and perspective of others – and it is only within those circuits that a solution can be worked out.[29]

In addition to the observation that race is actualised and contested discursively, what is noteworthy about the work of race theorists like Spillers is the way it highlights the coding effects of race. There is something about race that strives to encompass its subjects in a temporally absolutist way, enveloping them in what is then experienced and lived as the overbearing and over-determining weight of historical narrative.[30] This is why, quite

29 Spillers, 'All the Things,' 108–109.

30 Marriott, 'Inventions of Existence,' 52.

aptly, Spillers describes race as 'destiny in the world we have made'.[31]

This evocatively describes the kind of symbolic capture I tried to describe earlier, whereby it seems that we become (dis)possessed by the very stories we tell. How is it that the latter come to exercise their hold as if from the outside? Or, rather, how is it that a space emerges externally to the intersubjective nexus of language, where people come to languish in the waiting room of history? One important way of grasping this, particularly in the context of race, is by understanding the significant role played by the body in realising a metaphysics of interiority and transparency.[32] There is no space here to delve into the historical and epistemic conditions of this metaphysics, which has often been key to understanding the production of subjectivity and subject-effects under colonial modernity.[33] It is perhaps sufficient to gesture at the centrality of the visual in both consolidating and understanding its reality-effects. Under the hegemony of signs, subjectivity becomes contingent on discursive technologies and apparatuses of observation, a primary effect of this being the appearance of reality as a split between the observer's internal and external worlds. This particular way of grasping subjectivity has been indispensable for theorists grappling with the realities of race more generally, but also and in particular with its peculiarly potent and arguably unique capacity to have extra-discursive effects. By this is meant the consistent way that, regardless of how much one attempts to historicise it and demonstrate its socially and historically contingent production, race nevertheless exerts a powerful and trenchant hold as an organising principle of social difference. In other words, and even in epistemic formations where it isn't attributed to nature, it is able to naturalise itself, seeming to exist as an essence beyond its symbolic and discursive construction. For thinkers like Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks, this extra-discursive effect can at least in part be attributed to the 'regime of looking' through which the signifiers of race become installed at the

31 Spillers, 'All the Things,' 78.

32 Denise Ferreira da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race* (London: University of Minnesota Press), 4.

33 Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992), 39.

structural core of our subjectivity.[34]

As Seshadri-Crooks is eager to clarify, this regime of looking does not simply imply that race takes effect when we happen to see certain markers of racial difference (skin colour, for example). Rather, it refers to a broader psycho-phenomenological dimension of social life under colonialism, wherein visibility, signification, and affect converge to secure our unconscious investment in race, as well as to anchor it in the psyche as something like a belief structure that sustains our subjective and psycho-affective integrity. What makes that thing we call identification seem so intractable is the fact that it is embedded in this structure whereby those semiotic, contingent, and very abstract processes of world-building mentioned earlier become an all-too-concrete reality. This is how race acquires its naturalistic quality, and the corporeal plays a crucial role therein. In this regard, what is important is not just the fact that social difference (whether consciously signified as natural or cultural) becomes 'embodied', with actual bodies substantiating race's 'grid of intelligibility'.[35] There's also the fact that the corporeal becomes at one and the same time the place from which to perceive this grid and map it out, as well as the means of locating one's self on it. In this way, 'destiny becomes inscribed as anatomy', and the body becomes its 'outward sign'.[36]

Visual and cartographic metaphors aside, it is worth reiterating that this process is not played out in the world of conscious perceptions and certainly not only in an ocular economy. It is, put simply, a way of describing how a sense of self in relation to others can be acquired under colonial modernity and within its organisation of history as universal. Race describes that peculiar arrangement between the corporeal and the semiotic that makes it possible for its subjects to experience their reality as a product of this history as well as the grounds for being a particularity, if not an anomaly, in it. The importance of the 'signifying strategies' of race,

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34 Kalpana Seshadri-Crooks, *Desiring Whiteness: A Lacanian Analysis of Race* (London: Routledge, 2000), 2.

35 Stoler, *Race and the Education of Desire*, 53.

36 Seshadri-Crooks, *Desiring Whiteness*, 56; Patrick Wolfe, 'Race and Racialisation: Some Thoughts,' *Postcolonial Studies* 5, no. 1 (2002): 52.

therefore, lies in what they affect as their 'outside': something that doesn't appear discursively constructed, and which isn't itself part of language but can only be acquired or conveyed through it.[37] This thing, which is more affectively cathected and viscerally felt in the body, is the aim of what Spillers describes as the 'intersubjective nexus' of recognition, and the thing to be 'worked out' through 'signs in the presence and perspective of others'. Thus, race plays a crucial role in the consolidation of worlding and its reality-effects. This means that we become dependent on language, but not in the immanent sense of it being a means of communication and self-expression. Rather, we are beholden to it because it allows us to have the very semblance of being in the world and restores to the latter its consistency of sense when this is threatened.

This brings us back to the element that specifies the idea of race as I understand it here. In contrast to more specific and contingent practices commonly designated under racism and racialisation, race is a totalising project of imaginative capture and sense-making premised on its capacity to signify an opaque yet essential quality of the subject. To have a sense of one's self beyond the determinations of the social totality in which we find ourselves, we paradoxically lay claim to the very narratives and signifying strategies available therein. This problem, wherein we become attached to the very discourses that delimit the world of possibility, is, of course, a classic one in critical theory, and affect has been one of its key conceptual denominations. Through inquiries in various traditions of critical thought, it has become widely accepted that affect plays a crucial role in reproducing relations of power and subjugation, and in sustaining our attachments to narratives, fantasies, and norms established in the process.[38] Accordingly, it is also understood as an indispensable site for interventions that loosen and shake up these attachments so that subjectivities could be oriented

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37 da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea*, 10.

38 Berlant, *Cruel Optimism*, 1–23; Wendy Brown, *States of Injury: Power and Freedom in Late Modenrity* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1995), 52–77; Gibson-Graham, *A Postcapitalist Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 1–52; Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 3–49.

towards alternative possibilities for social identification, co-operation, and relation. In other words, paying attention to the ways that people create their affective ties and are moved by them through different practices and in different spaces is important since it can elucidate alternative projects of sense making.

Before returning to discuss the afore-mentioned workshop, it is worth making a final note about these concepts vis-à-vis the thought of the philosopher Walter Benjamin, who not only took quite seriously the notion of magic, but also explicitly addressed it in relation to the visibility–signification–affect nexus I've explored here. If there is an account of identification in Benjamin, it could perhaps be found in his famous ideas of the mimetic and the similar. Practices of representation and embodiment have at their core a primordial impulse to substantiate shared being through sensuous similarity. Indeed, for Benjamin, 'seeing similarity is nothing but a weak rudiment of the formerly powerful compulsion to become similar and also to behave mimetically'.[39] However, this sensuous kind of similarity is something that moderns do not possess, except as it is carried and mediated in language, which subsumes into itself these older forms. Through language, we have access to 'an archive of non-sensuous similarities or non-sensuous correspondences', which in a way also implies that what we refer to as recognition is how we give symbolic form to similarity.[40]

To say nothing of its imaginative and conceptual versatility, I find the speculative reading of similarity offered by Benjamin to be useful because of its heuristic import. Through it, we can see how what may usually appear as a contradiction between the discursive and the extra-discursive is altogether consistent. Understood via the conceptual lens of similarity, the process whereby the system of meaning and signification produced by us comes to exert an enchanting and even disempowering hold over us is elucidated. Indeed, for Benjamin, what we do with language and signification is analogical to what ancient astrologers did with celestial

39 Walter Benjamin and Knut Tarnowski, 'Doctrine of the Similar,' *New German Critique,* no. 17 (1979): 69.

40 Benjamin and Tarnowski, 'Doctrine of the Similar,' 68.

bodies: read and make sense of our fates and destiny. It is worth quoting at length his evocative discussion of 'clairvoyance' here:

> If, in the dawn of humanity, this reading from stars, entrails, coincidences represented reading per se, and further, if there were mediating links to a newer kind of reading, as represented by the runes, then one might well assume that the mimetic faculty, which was earlier the basis of clairvoyance, quite gradually found its way into language and writing in course of a development over thousands of years, thus creating for itself in language and writing the most perfect archive of non-sensuous similarity. Language is the highest application of the mimetic faculty: a medium which the earlier perceptive capabilities for recognizing the similar entered without residue, so that it is now language which represents the medium in which objects meet and enter into relationship with each other, no longer directly, as once in the mind of the augur or priest, but in essences, in their most volatile and delicate substances, even in their aromata. In other words: it is to writing and language that clairvoyance has, over the course of history, yielded its old powers.[41]

Elsewhere, Benjamin describes this clairvoyance as magic. Attuned to romanticism as well as early colonial ethnographies and ethnologies at the turn of the century, Benjamin borrows the designation from accounts of 'potent transfer' in practices and rituals wherein a sense of something—whether we call it being, meaning, or even power—becomes manifest and exchanged without symbolisation.[42] Eluding and escaping language, 'sense' is magical when 'the inexpressible can occur or become apparent' without it being 'necessarily present or representable'. The experience of magic alerts us not of 'what one can do with signs in the presence and perspective of others', but of what one can do without signs, or in spite of them. In this way, magic is a means of describing a breach in the limits of language, which undoes the chains of signification by which the subject is bound. To

41 Benjamin and Tarnowski, 'Doctrine of the Similar,' 68.

42 Kathrin Busch and Mary O'Neill, 'The Language of Things and the Magic of Language: On Walter Benjamin's Concept of Latent Potency,' *translate*, December 2006.

engage in magic, then, is to transform people's relationship to the world of meaning and possibility created through discourse, which so often comes to exercise its power on the very subjects who created it. In reverse, the relationship allows people to assume the active role of co-creating their shared world of meaning and, with it, the shared world of possibility.

Magic, or a sense of one's own vitality

I struggle to recollect all the words, which quickly gathered on the whiteboard in an absurd and disorderly constellation. 'Spongebob', 'biryani', 'love': if there was anything in the way of a cross-referentiality, it was lost on me, and the bursts of laughter greeting the suggested entries in this haphazard lexicographic exercise told me it was lost on everyone else, if it was there at all. The facilitator, a poet and educator, welcomed the frivolity, encouraging the increasingly riotous group of attendees to throw at him the first thing that came to mind, which he promptly added to the ballooning mess of phrases. It was only after several minutes that, with great finesse, he dammed the collective stream of consciousness, bringing the excited deluge of suggestions to a close. He then retrieved his phone, and momentarily a nearby speaker came to life. To the awe of the small crowd, the facilitator proceeded to rap over the slow, steady beat, composing in freestyle a song using the cluster of phrases on the board. After the rapturous applause that greeted his performance, he then instructed the attendees to give it a try on their own, reminding them not to overthink the exercise and to give free expression and free association their proper due. By the end of the session, the hall-room of a refurbished boatshed had become an acoustic playground, with music and the recitations of poetry reverberating in the modest space between its low walls. As the full-day workshop for Muslim youth finally drew to a close, an attendee approached to thank me for organising it, saying, 'it was so magical, I don't know how else to describe it'.

There it was again, that expression of uncertainty and uncertain expression, invoked in lieu of one more concrete, an enigmatic cipher coming to the rescue when language fails us. Does it fail because it is bound

to, the cascade of signifiers crashing against its own limits, or because we struggle to make it account for the event, and to find in it the means to register and recognise what just happened? Is there something in this failure that is antithetical, or perhaps just adjacent, to narrative? Perhaps something contenting and resigning us to the constitutive insufficiency of the word, rather than consigning us to the endless search for the right one, that one which will finally reveal the self as it really is, at its core, in the contours of the innermost kernel of our being? For the raced subject, dispensing with the need for the right word in the right order and the right form of expression engenders a refusal. This is a refusal of linguistic, discursive necessity, what I've called the necessity to narrate, and under its disguise in the contingency and opacity of the poetic, being can find rest and shelter, safeguarded from exposure and the worlding prerogatives of language.

Refusal for the subject of race, and reprieve for the subject of violence, the poetic skirts the demand to bear one's soul and its lacerations 'in the presence and perspective of others'. After all, what does this exposure of our suffering affect, in its enactment and inscription, if not the age-old colonial tradition of interrogating the soul of the other, examining and parsing through it to extract a trace of self as shared humanness? For the empathetic spectator of violence, what is the other's suffering if not the site at which 'we feel ourselves into those we imagine as ourselves'?[43] In the libidinal economy of race, 'the presence and perspective of others' with whom the racialised subject's speech is negotiated is also the exchange by which is realised the 'violence of [empathetic] identification'.[44] In the medium of this exchange, where we become the conduit for the other's affective realisation of self, we are moved, again and again, to the very forms of speech which fix us in place: to have conversations and to tell our stories *ad infinitum,* in the recursive and repetitive narration of the event of violence.

As against the violence of identification and its obliteration of difference, what does the poetic offer if not those incantations and invocations by which we seek, not so much to bear our souls as to cast

43 Jonathan Boyarin in Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 19–20.

44 Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 20.

out evil spirits? 'To live and be cured'; to cast off that 'deadliest affliction' that is race 'is to move away from any fusion and to catch evil at its own game, that is, identification'.[45] To live and be cured, to do the work of healing so endearing to the workshop's facilitator, is to move and be moved differently, by way of another form of identification. Beginning as it did with a solemn recounting of the event in the presence and perspectives of one another, giving shared sense to our speech and the space which it mandated, the workshop moved past it, and in moving towards the opaque, non-sensical sense of the poetic, allowed those present to be moved differently, and therefore to move into a different space. Taken outside of the sense which gathered us together, we were gripped by a different sense and sense of self. We met ourselves and each other otherwise, not in and through signification and speech but *out of* it, in the non-sense wherein the inexpressible becomes apparent without being present or representable. If there was anything by way of shared identity or identification, it could no more be anticipated than it could be signified.

Released from the signifiers by which it is contoured as a sign of destiny, the body becomes the site not of temporal capture but of escape: the 'escape of affect' as it introduces the subject to its own potentiality.[46] The poetic is nothing less than this 'affective escape' put into words, 'nothing less than *the perception of one's own vitality,* one's sense of aliveness, of changeability . . . a continuous, nonconscious *self-perception* (unconscious self-reflection)'.[47] Moving us and moving through us, it is not simply e*motion,* since it is not a movement in any one body but in between, in a space anterior as well as interior. In this case, '[t]his movement across an interior space demarcates the discipline of self-reflection, or the content of a self-interrogation that "race" always covers over as an already-answered'.[48] In the presence of others, and in the unfolding of 'words, words, words', 'another question is

45 Marie-José Mondzain and Sally Shafto, 'Can Images Kill?' *Critical Inquiry* 36, no. 1 (2009): 27–28.

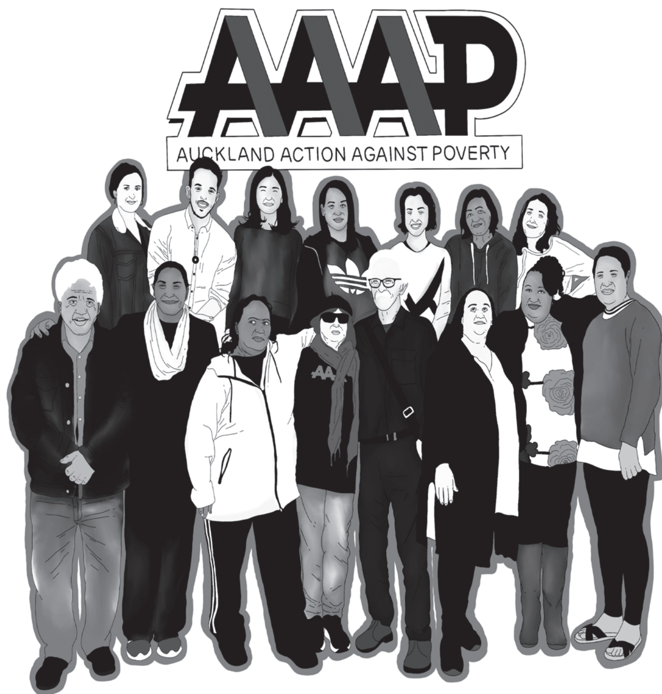
46 Brian Massumi, 'The Autonomy of Affect,' *Cultural Critique,* no. 31 (1995): 97

47 Massumi, 'The Autonomy of Affect,' 97.

48 Spillers, 'All the Things,' 118.

posed: What might I become, insofar as . . . ?'[49] Insofar as we are here, in the virtual where we are not answerable to the verdicts of destiny, and where the event of colonial violence has yet to exact its discursive toll, what might we still become, and what might we still make of that which frustrates the full disclosure of its meaning? In the remaking of sense, we may yet be surprised by ourselves and the possibilities of our speech.

49 Spillers, 'All the Things,' 118.



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