

# WHAT IS (NOT) THE BODY?

## Thinking embodiment across disciplines

**Ben Spatz**

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Embodied Research Methods in Music & Sound  
Study Day @ City St. Georges, University of London  
Wednesday 11 June 2025





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JER

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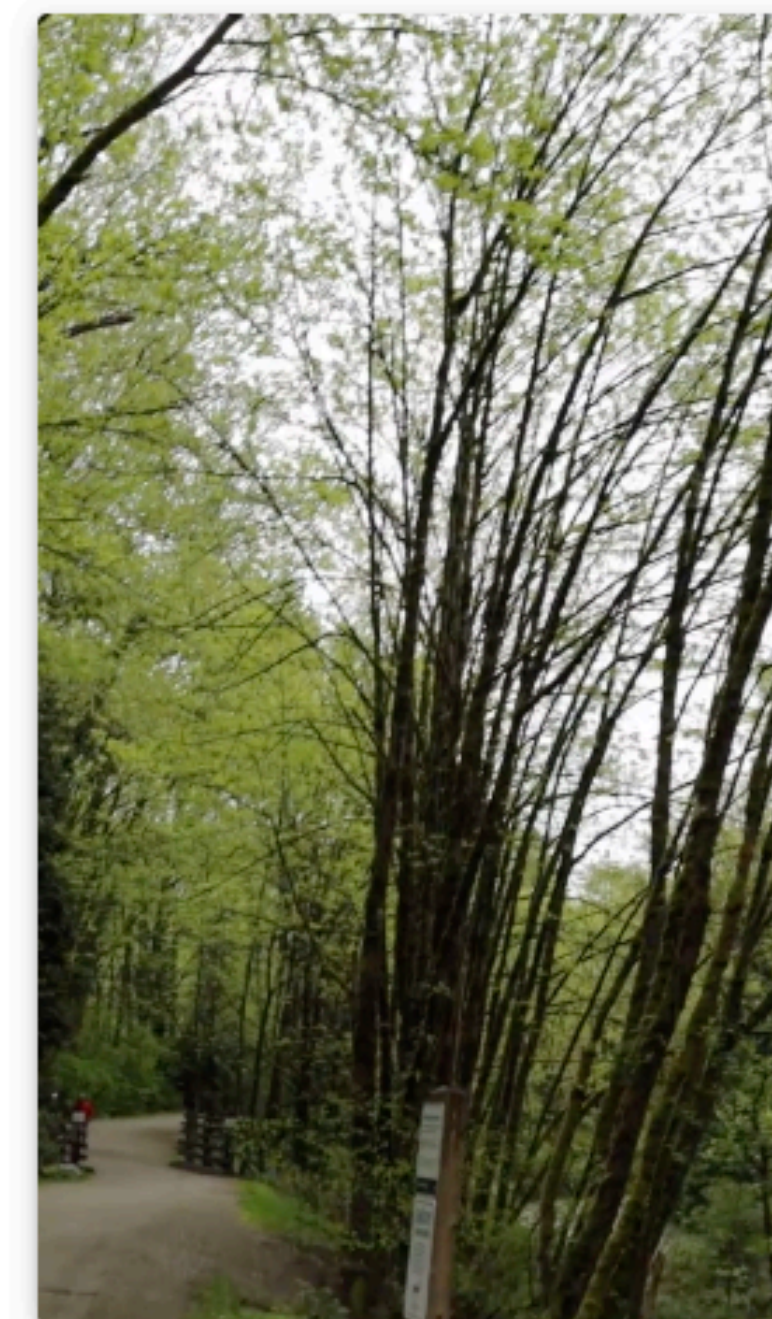
Volume 7 • Issue 2  
• 2024 • Ecologies  
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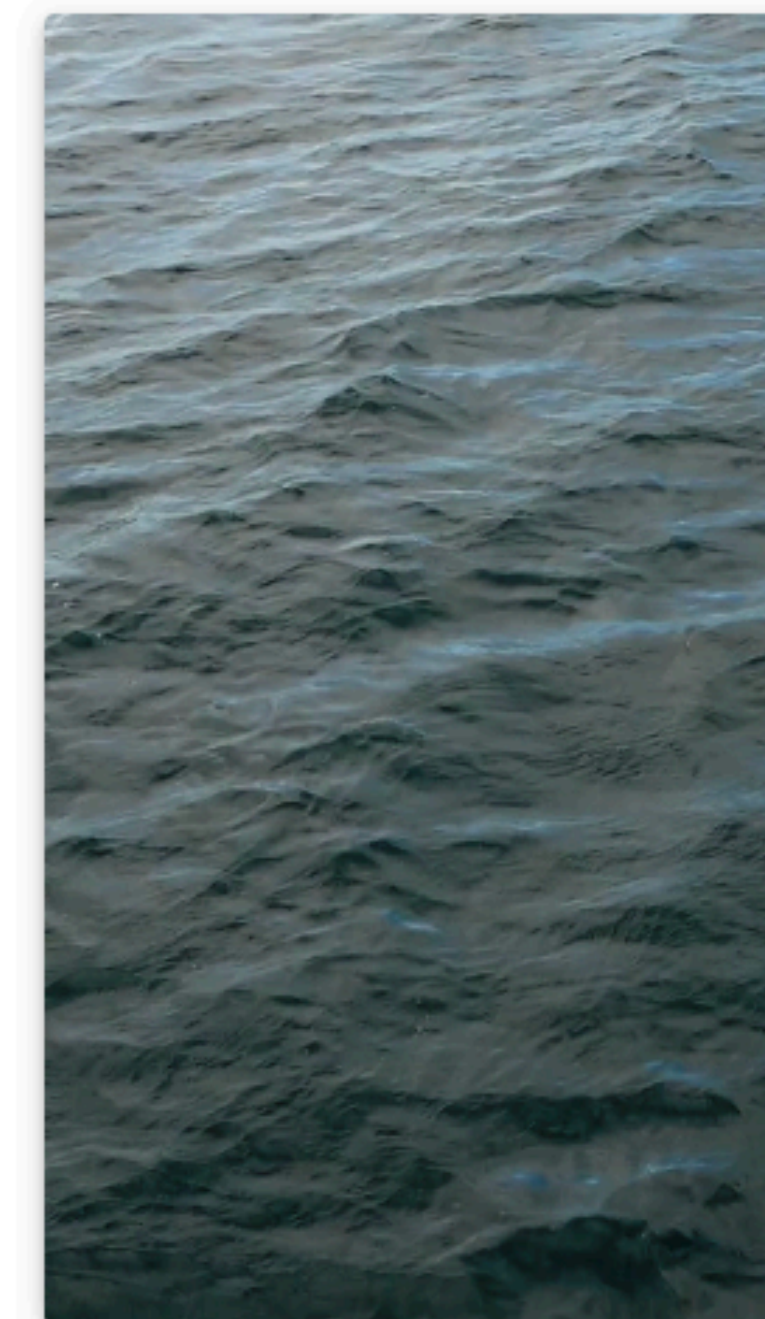
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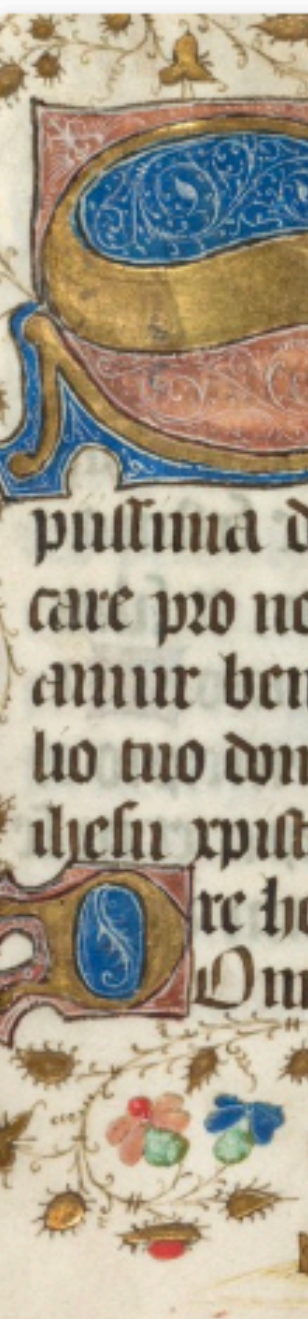
Volume 5 • Issue 2  
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of Embodiment  
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VIEW ISSUE



Volume 5 • Issue 1  
• 2022  
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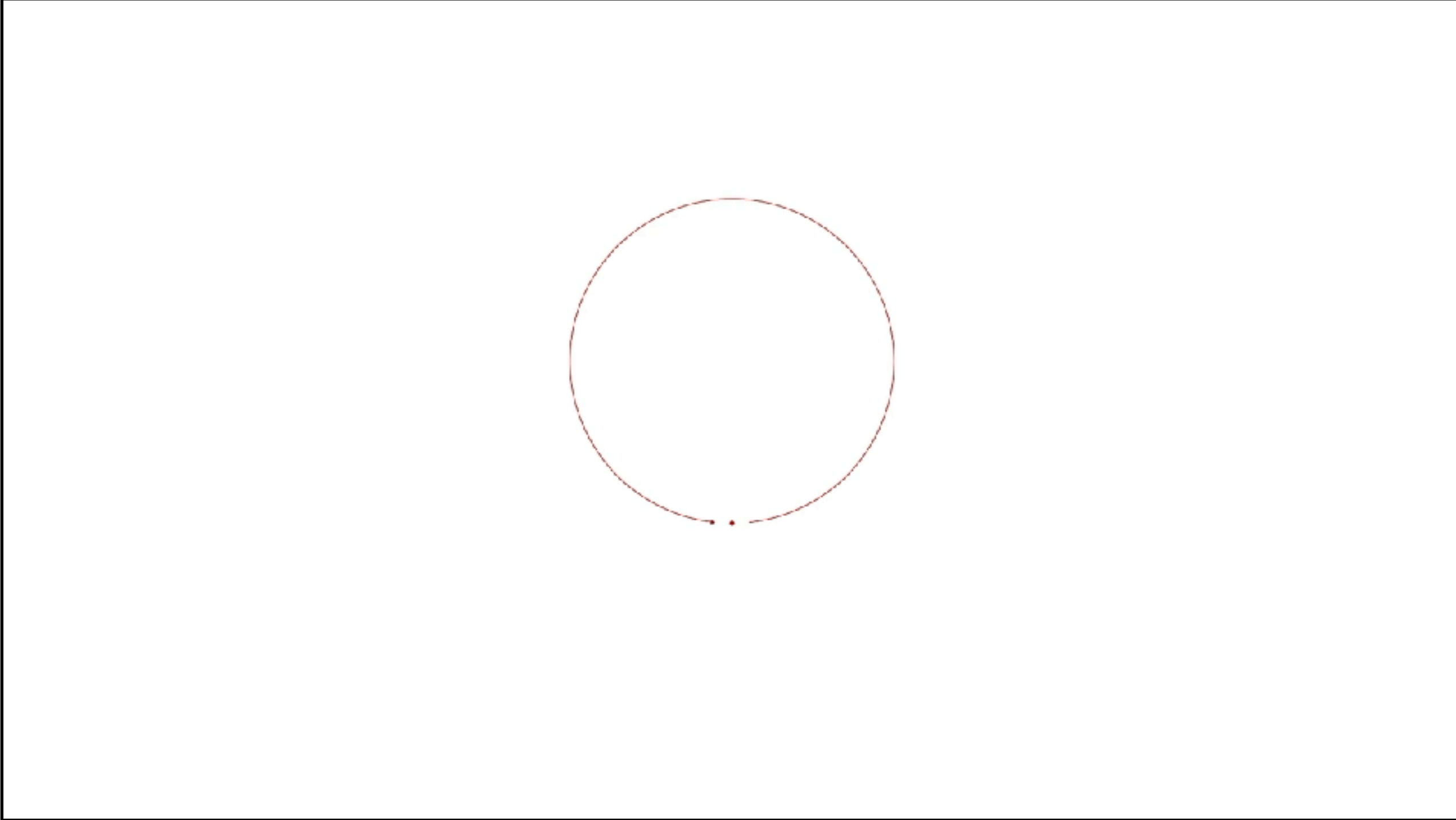


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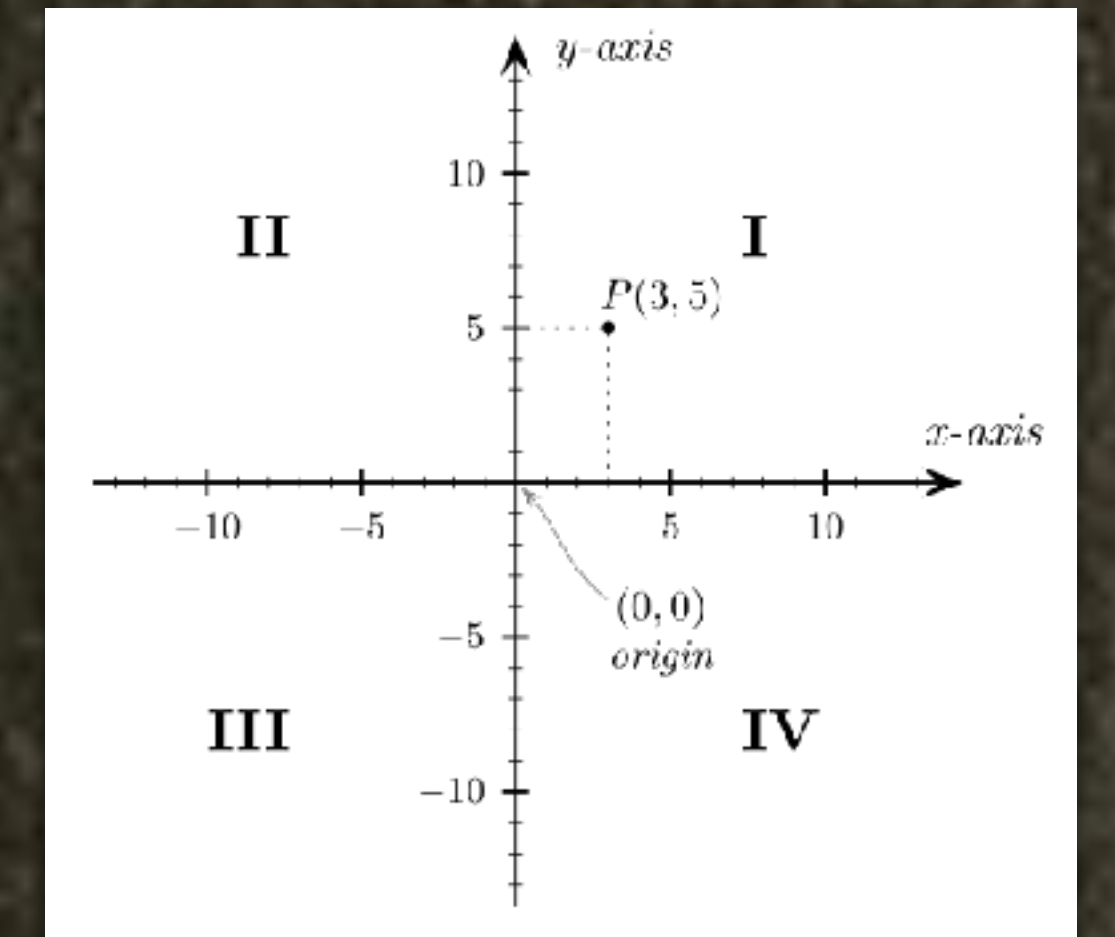
Pavel Prokopic in JER 5.1 (2022); Sarah Pini in JER 2.1 (2019); Annette Arlander in JER 1.1 (2018); Jürgens and Fernandes in JER 1.1 (2018); Falk Heinrich and Thomas Wolsing in JER 2.1 (2019).



The villain?

**René Descartes**  
(1596–1650)

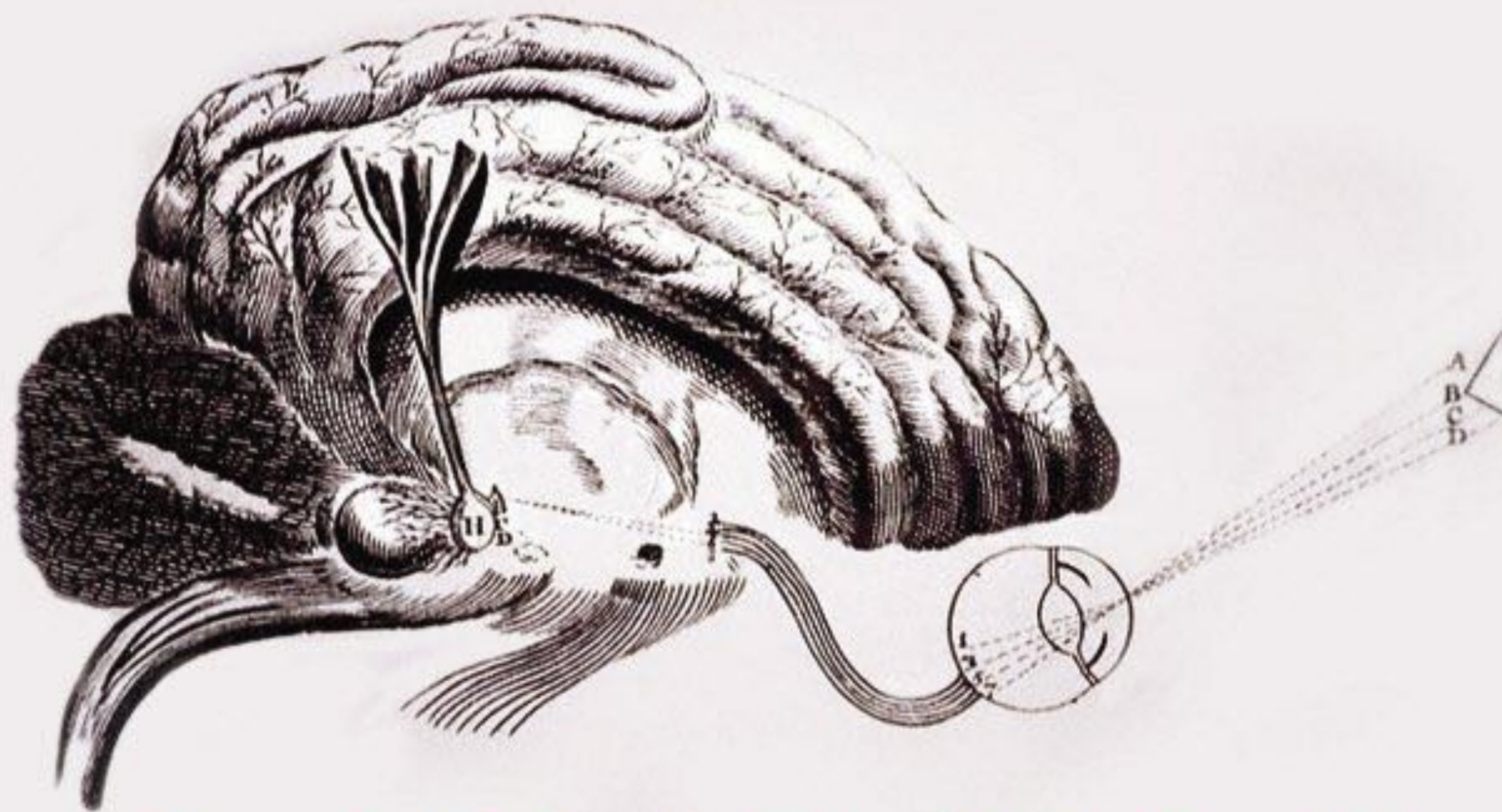
body | mind





*'IDIOSYNCRATIC AND ENGAGING'*  
*THE TIMES*

# DESCARTES' ERROR



**ANTONIO  
DAMASIO**

*'A TOUR DE FORCE OF SHEER REFLECTIVE IMAGINATION'*  
*TIMES LITERARY SUPPLEMENT*

REVISED EDITION WITH A NEW PREFACE

VINTAGE

This is Descartes' error: the abyssal separation between **body and mind**, between the sizable, dimensioned, mechanically operated, infinitely divisible body stuff, on the one hand, and the unsizable, undimensioned, unpushpullable, nondivisible mind stuff; the suggestion that reasoning, and moral judgment, and the suffering that comes from physical pain or emotional upheaval might exist separately from the body. Specifically: the separation of the most refined operations of mind from the structure and operation of a **biological organism**.

1994

body | mind



OXFORD

# ENACTIVIST INTERVENTIONS

## RETHINKING THE MIND

SHAUN  
GALLAGHER



Is cognition *in the head or in the world*, or in some mix of brainy and worldly processes? Continuing research on embodied cognition in philosophy of mind and the cognitive sciences has motivated numerous debates about questions such as this. There's a strong tradition in both philosophy of mind and cognitive science that takes cognition to be a fully in-the-head event. In this introductory chapter I'll discuss a few of the more recent versions of this view. I'll then begin to sketch the contrasting view of enactivism, an embodied cognition approach that has roots in phenomenology and pragmatism.

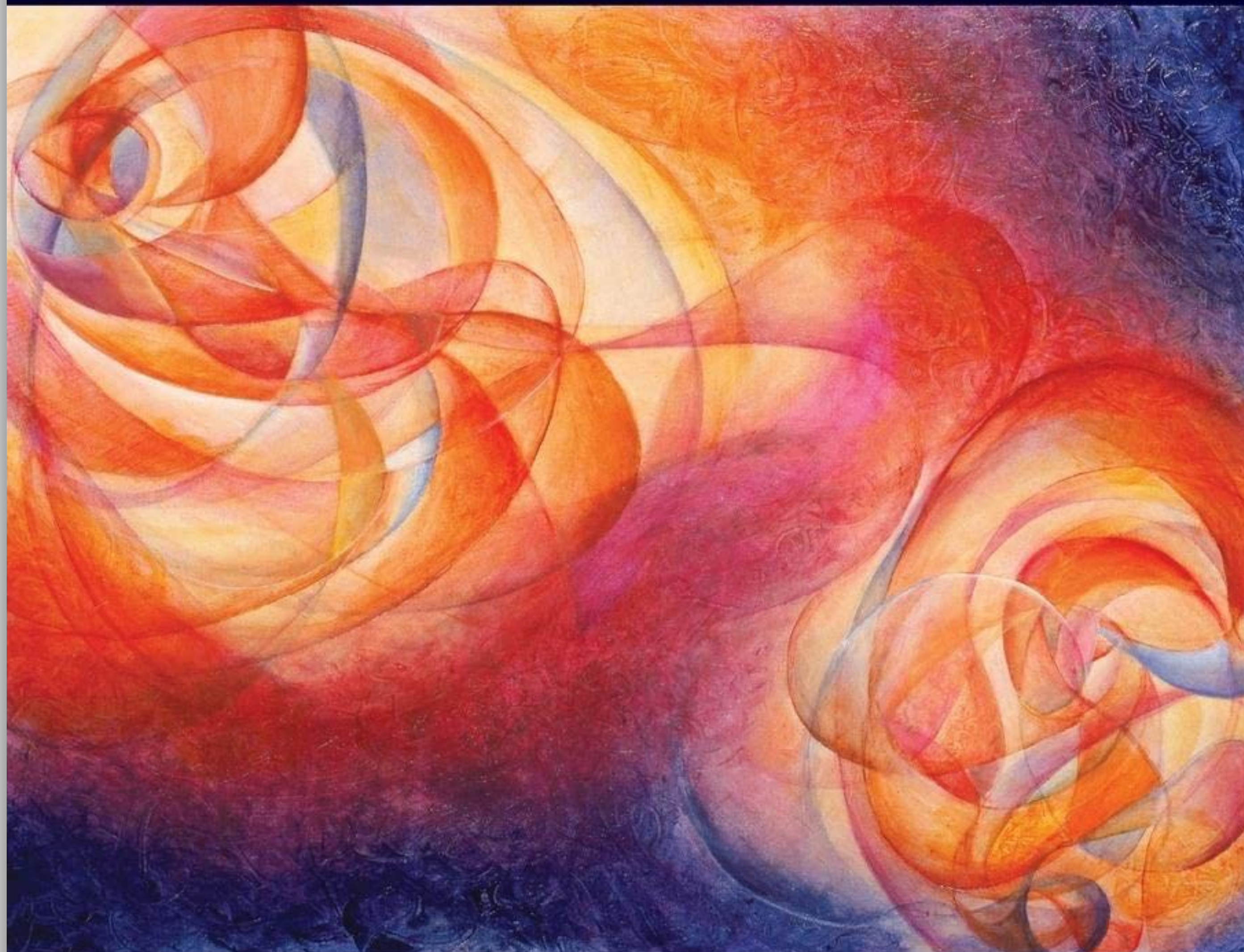
Enactivist approaches to cognition suggest that, at least in basic (perception- and action-related) cases, cognitive processes are not just in the head, but involve bodily and environmental factors. This view clearly poses a challenge to what has been the standard science of cognition, especially to cognitive neuroscience, and to any science that claims to provide full and exclusive explanations in terms of one factor, e.g., neural processing. If cognition is not reducible to brain processes, or to any other single factor, and if indeed it does involve many other aspects of embodiment and environment, then how precisely should a scientific study of the mind proceed? Can there be an enactivist science of mind? In sketching out an answer to this question, a number of issues, involving intentionality, representation, affect, agency, and so on, come into focus and I address these issues more fully in subsequent chapters.

2017

body | environment



# MEETING THE UNIVERSE HALFWAY



quantum physics and the entanglement of matter and meaning  
KAREN BARAD

world. Some people think that the fact that  $h$  is very small means that the world is just as Newton says on a macroscopic scale. But this is to confuse practical considerations with more fundamental issues of principle. No one would suggest that because atoms are too small to see with the naked eye, we are therefore entitled to deny their existence and their relevance to our everyday lives (although we do at times successfully ignore their existence). The entity in question may be small, but its consequences may be quite profound. This is indeed true of the existence of the fundamental discontinuity. As we will see from the analysis that follows, the key point is the very existence of the essential discontinuity, not its size. To the best of our knowledge,  $h$  is a universal constant. In particular, as far as we know, it is not zero anywhere: or under any circumstances. (For example, there doesn't seem to be any cutoff point beyond which  $h$  is strictly equal to zero.) And this is the point. Bohr's analysis does not depend on the size of  $h$ , only the fact that it is nonzero.

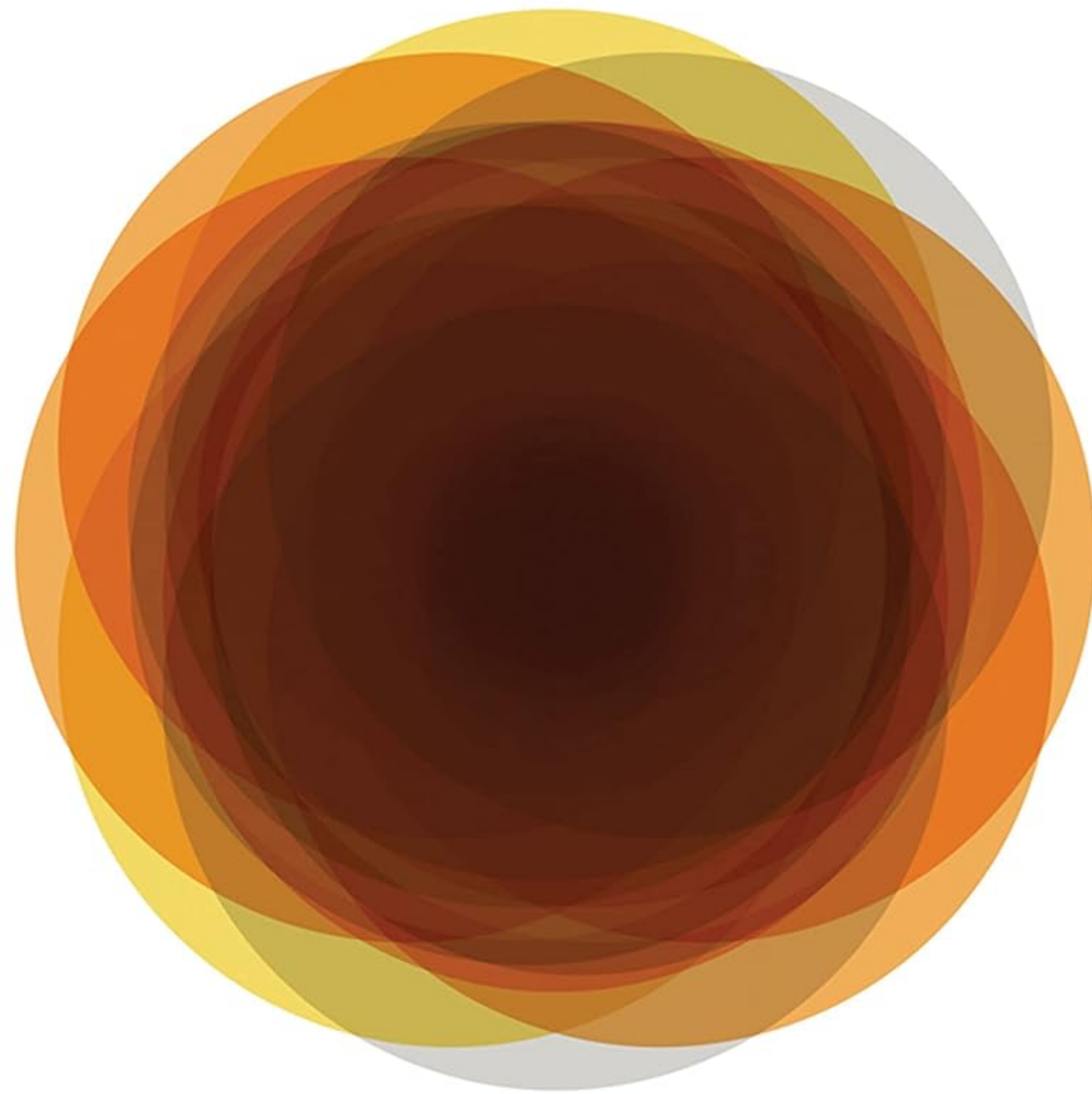
This point, which has so often been misunderstood, bears repeating. The fact that  $h$  (Planck's constant) is small relative to the mass of large objects does not mean that Bohr's insights apply only to microscopic objects. It does mean that the effects of the essential discontinuity may be less evident for relatively large objects, but they are not zero. To put it another way, no evidence exists to support the belief that the physical world is divided into two separate domains, each with its own set of physical laws: a microscopic domain governed by the laws of quantum physics, and a macroscopic domain governed by the laws of Newtonian physics. Indeed, quantum mechanics is the most successful and accurate theory in the history of physics, accounting for phenomena over a range of twenty-five orders of magnitude, from the smallest particles of matter to large-scale objects.<sup>21</sup> Quantum physics does not merely supplement Newtonian physics—it supersedes it.<sup>22</sup> The key point is this: Bohr's analysis of the nature of measurement interactions and the epistemological implications of his analysis are completely general (as far as we know). In particular, they are not limited to the microscopic domain.

2007

body | apparatus



# Cosmopolitics I



1. The Science Wars
2. The Invention of Mechanics
3. Thermodynamics

ISABELLE STENGERS

TRANSLATED BY ROBERT BONONNO

The reversible change of state invented by Carnot “mimics” a dynamic evolution, but mimics it the way a puppet mimics the spontaneous movement of a living thing. Conversely, with the equations of motion formulated by William Rowan Hamilton,<sup>1</sup> dynamics would come to share in the perfection of the ancient cosmos, of the circular movement of the stars conceived as free, spontaneous, and perfectly determined and intelligible. In

and deformed reflection of a primordial mathematical truth that provides movement with its luminous and intelligible simplicity. Forces would then be merely phenomenological, determined by our point of view of phenomena, and it is the syntax itself, the language that articulates the different points of view, that could alone lay claim to the value of an obligating truth.

A new type of realism here becomes possible, without which twentieth-century physics is incomprehensible. Lagrange’s

2010

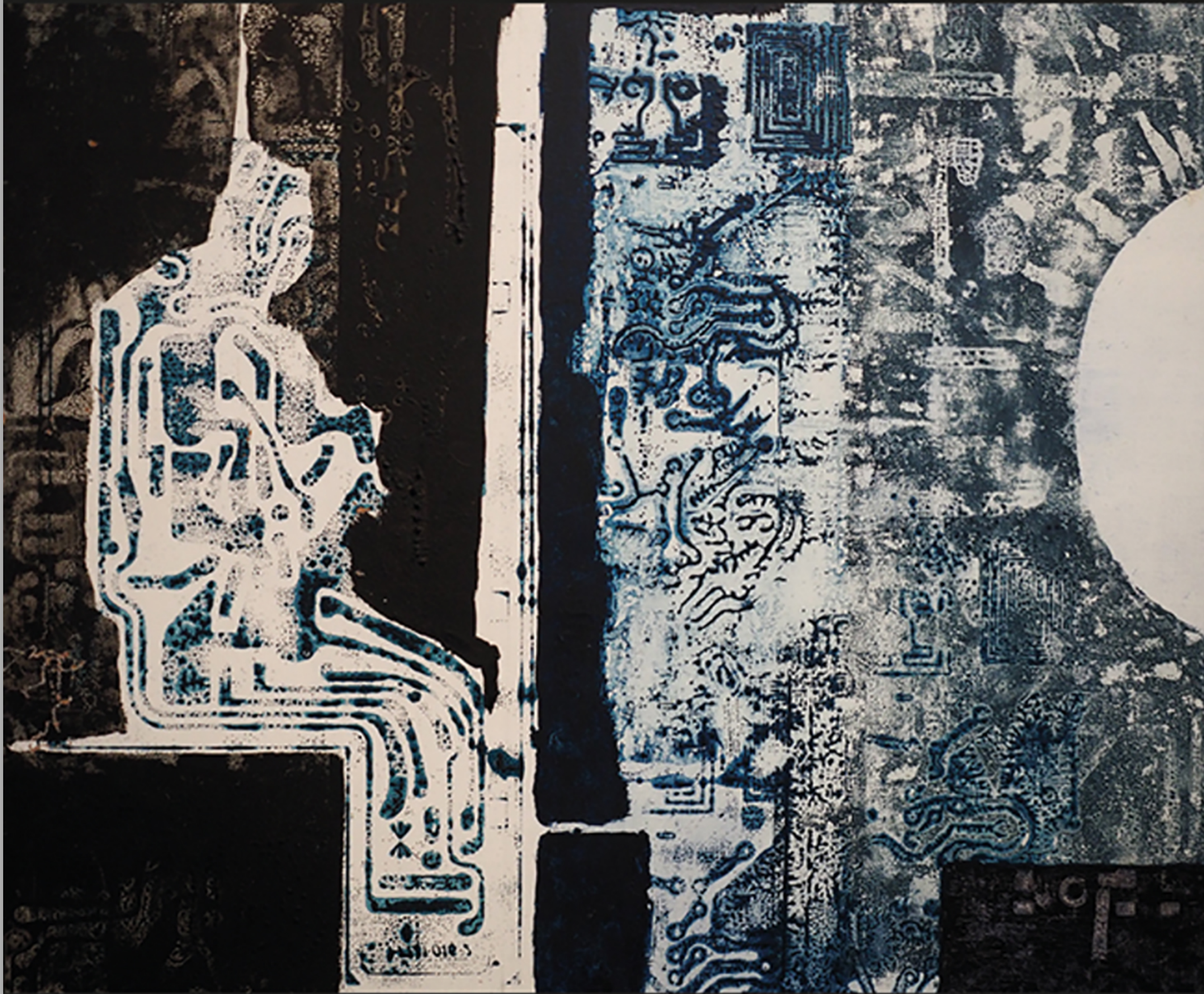
Why is the representation in terms of cyclical variables so important? For two distinct reasons. On the one hand, it creates new beings of such great simplicity, such elegant autonomy that it is difficult not to be tempted by the idea that the transformation is *veridical*, that it gives expression to a “pure” reality, unshackled by the contingencies of our mode of understanding. The physicist then becomes a kind of Platonist: having left her cave and her distorting games with shadow and light, she contemplates a finally reunited beauty and truth. But cyclical



Ben Spatz

# Blue Sky Body

Thresholds for Embodied Research



ROUTLEDGE

Because cognitive studies cannot get away from the primacy of cognition—even if cognition is more than rationality, more than representations, more than neurons, more than the brain—it inevitably treats embodiment as a single field, a phenomenal interface between cognition and world, rather than a primary affordance out of which cognition and many other capacities arise.<sup>19</sup> This is evident in how Gallagher approaches culture and affect, which he treats as additional elements or layers that must be added to embodiment in order to explain cognition.<sup>20</sup> Of course, it is the prerogative of cognitive science and neuroscience to take cognition and neurons as their methodological starting points. What must be rejected is an implicit hierarchy of knowledges according to which the phenomena discovered and constructed by these sciences would be positioned as underlying, underpinning, or ontologically prior to the messier and less reliable matters with which embodied practices grapple. The trouble with brain scans and quantitative measurements of embodied processes is not that they tell us nothing, but that, within the current onto-epistemological order, they tend to overwrite more nuanced and sophisticated fields with their own coarser terms—for example, by zeroing out the differences between areas of technique. Even if something like drawing or playing the piano could be localized in the brain, this would tell us little about the differences between them, to say nothing of the differences between styles of drawing or techniques of playing. Why then do we continue to respond to neuroscientific evidence as if it proves the validity of what we as practitioners already know?<sup>21</sup>



# Hungry Listening

Resonant Theory  
for Indigenous  
Sound Studies



Dylan Robinson

## ETHNOGRAPHIC REDRESS, COMPOSITIONAL RESPONSIBILITY

2020

For impressiveness nothing approached the song of Skateen, the Wolf head-chief of the Nass River tribe. The lament of the mourners rose plaintively and fell in descending curves, like the wind in the storm. It was the voice of nature crying out. For Modernity it went beyond the moderns. The intervals sounded strange, at times like quarter-tones. I heard Dr. MacMillan say, when he was trying to transcribe it from the phonograph: “Those things can’t be written down on our stave, they simply can’t.” But they could, our stave being a rack upon which to pin down sounds and rhythms whatever they are, at least approximately.

—Marius Barbeau, “Songs of the Northwest,” 1933

Barbeau’s description of the five lines of the musical stave as a rack upon which to pin down sounds is not simply an evocative metaphor; it is consistent with the Western system of zoology aimed at capturing, “preserving,” and categorizing specimens. As the capture of “nature calling out,” of “the wind in the storm,” the history of gathering Indigenous songs by ethnographers is a history of “pinning down” that which is alive, like the wings of butterflies. In 1929 Barbeau writes: “Indian songs from every part of Canada are . . . heavily represented in our national collection; about three thousand of these are filed away at the museum.” Important song repatriation initiatives have been initiated by Trevor Reed (Hopi) and Aaron Fox, who lead the *Hopi Music Repatriation Project*; Robin Gray (Ts’msyen/Mikisew Cree) with her community of Lax Kw’alaams, and Kathryn Bunn-Marcuse who leads the project *Kan’s hi’ile (Making It Right)* with members of the Kwagu’l community including Yakawilas Corrine Child, Musgamdzi Kalerb Child, and



Date: Sun, 1 Jun 2025 16:42:12 +0100  
From:  
Subject: WHEN MUSIC COMES TO MIND: EMBODYING THE PERFORMER'

WHEN MUSIC COMES TO MIND:\* \_\_ \*

EMBODYING THE PERFORMER

We are delighted to announce that the London International Piano Symposium will hold a one-day symposium hosted by the Royal College of Music on the 25<sup>th</sup> October 2025. And, we are honoured also, to have Prof. Alison McGregor from Imperial College, University of London as our keynote speaker.

The objective of this symposium entitled ‘When Music Comes to Mind: Embodying the Performer.’ is to encourage a transformational way of thinking that will dispel the concept of the mind/body dualism/modus operandi/ — which has been, and continues to be, the most trenchant and resistant problem within musical education — by inviting researchers from the musical, medical, and scientific communities, to contribute papers that show that performance is not just a process of the mind, but maybe shaped also by the body; crucially, by the somatosensory system: a term that describes the sensing of the soma, or body, with its combination of several subsystems, i.e. the visual, the visceral, the vestibular, the muscular-skeletal and fine-touch divisions, each of which conveys signals to the brain about the state of very different aspects of the performer’s body during learning and performing the music.

We hope also, to collate and disseminate the findings to wider audiences — such as the conservatoires and institutes of higher musical education — with the aim of encouraging them to consider introducing changes to their curriculum, so that both pedagogues and their students may come to realise that adopting an embodied approach to performance will not only enhance their musical skills, but will also improve their health, wellbeing and satisfaction.

Suggested topics will be welcomed, but not confined to:

- 1. The historical reasons for the separation of the mind/body in musical education
- 2. Neuroscientific evidence on the ‘brain to body loop’.
- 3. Biomechanics —muscular skeletal issues concerning the performer’s body.
- 4. Biofeedback for neuromuscular re-education.
- 5. Moved by emotion: the auditory factor.
- 6.The state of embodied learning in musical education.



PROFESSOR

**Alison McGregor, PhD**  
**MSc MCSP**

0000-0003-4672-332X

BIO

Alison McGregor is a Professor of Musculoskeletal Biodynamics in the Department of Surgery and Cancer, where she manages the Human Performance Group. She trained as a physiotherapist at King’s College Hospital qualifying in 1989 and then went on to study Biomedical Engineering at Surrey University which led to a PhD project in spinal mechanics and low back pain at the Royal Postgraduate Medical School.

Research

Her research focuses on the musculoskeletal system with respect to:

mechanisms of injury;  
effects of injury on function and  
injury management.

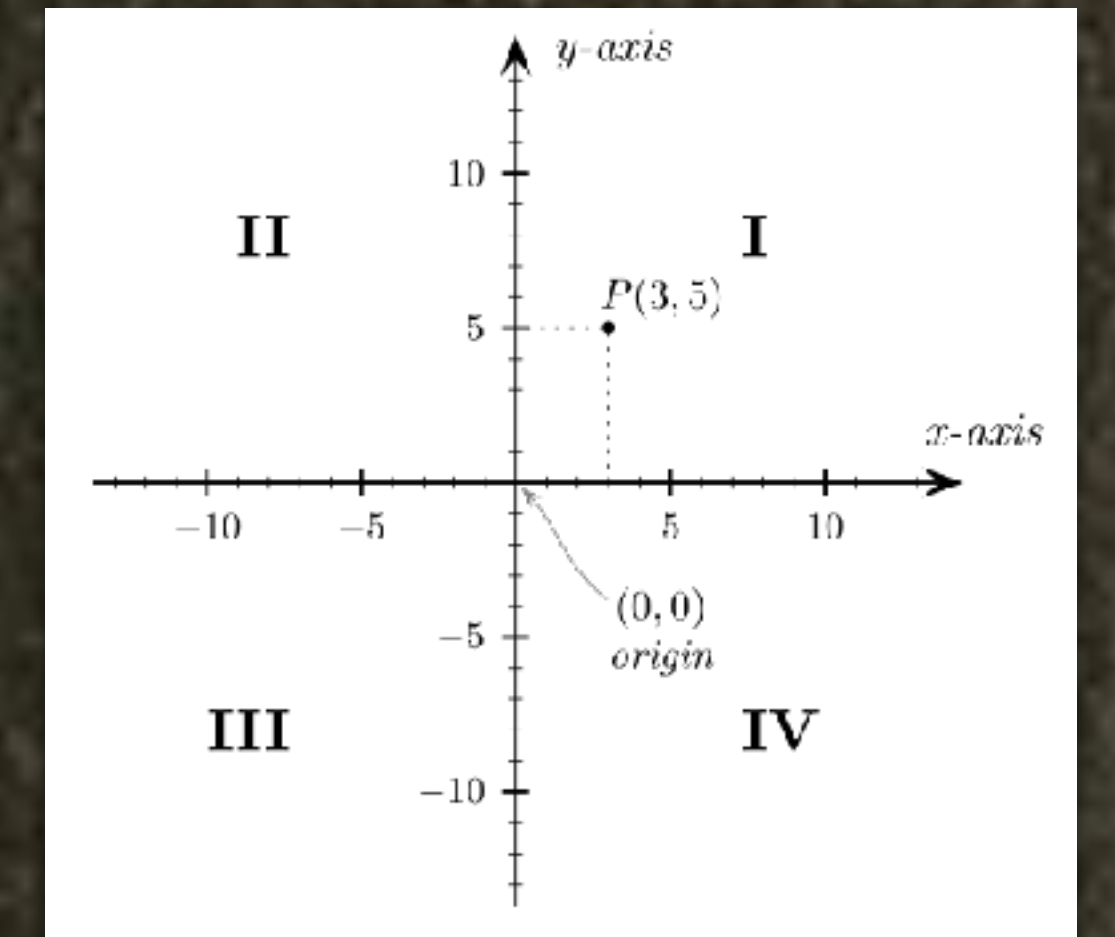
To date her work has largely focused on the lumbar spine by considering its function to be a composite of interacting systems including a:



The villain?

**René Descartes**  
(1596–1650)

body | mind





The villain:

**Christopher Columbus**  
(1451 – 1506)



body | flesh



SYLVIA WYNTER

# 1492: A New World View

1995

Therefore, in our new world view of 1492, both Columbus's and later Copernicus's "root of expansions of thought" would, within the wider context of the political and cultural revolution of humanism, in time make possible that mutation at the level of human cognition that led to the rise of the natural sciences. This in turn led to the autonomy of such cognition (that is, outside its earlier role as an imperative function of verifying each order's mode of "subjective understanding") with respect to the earth and physical reality in general. However, if the winning of this autonomy would gradually displace the notions of a nonhomogeneous earth and universe, both of whose *nec plus ultra* lines (*habitable/uninhabitable, celestial/terrestrial*) had served to encode the physico-spiritual notion of order on whose totemic "categorical models" the feudal order had mapped both the role allocating mechanisms of its order and the representations that served to stably induce the mode of interaltruistic symbolic conspecificity that integrated it, the new order of the secularizing modern state would map its own role-allocating mechanisms and unifying code of symbolic conspecificity onto a new notion of order. This new notion was to be based on a *by-nature difference between Europeans*, on the one hand, and peoples of indigenous and African descent, on the other. That difference was represented as having ostensibly been ordained by God's intentions, as reflected in the Book of Nature, and specifically, in the ordered differential design of the organic species, from which, however, rational man was, as the effect of a separate divine creation, unbridgeably divided.

body | flesh



# MAMA'S BABY, PAPA'S MAYBE: AN AMERICAN GRAMMAR BOOK

1987

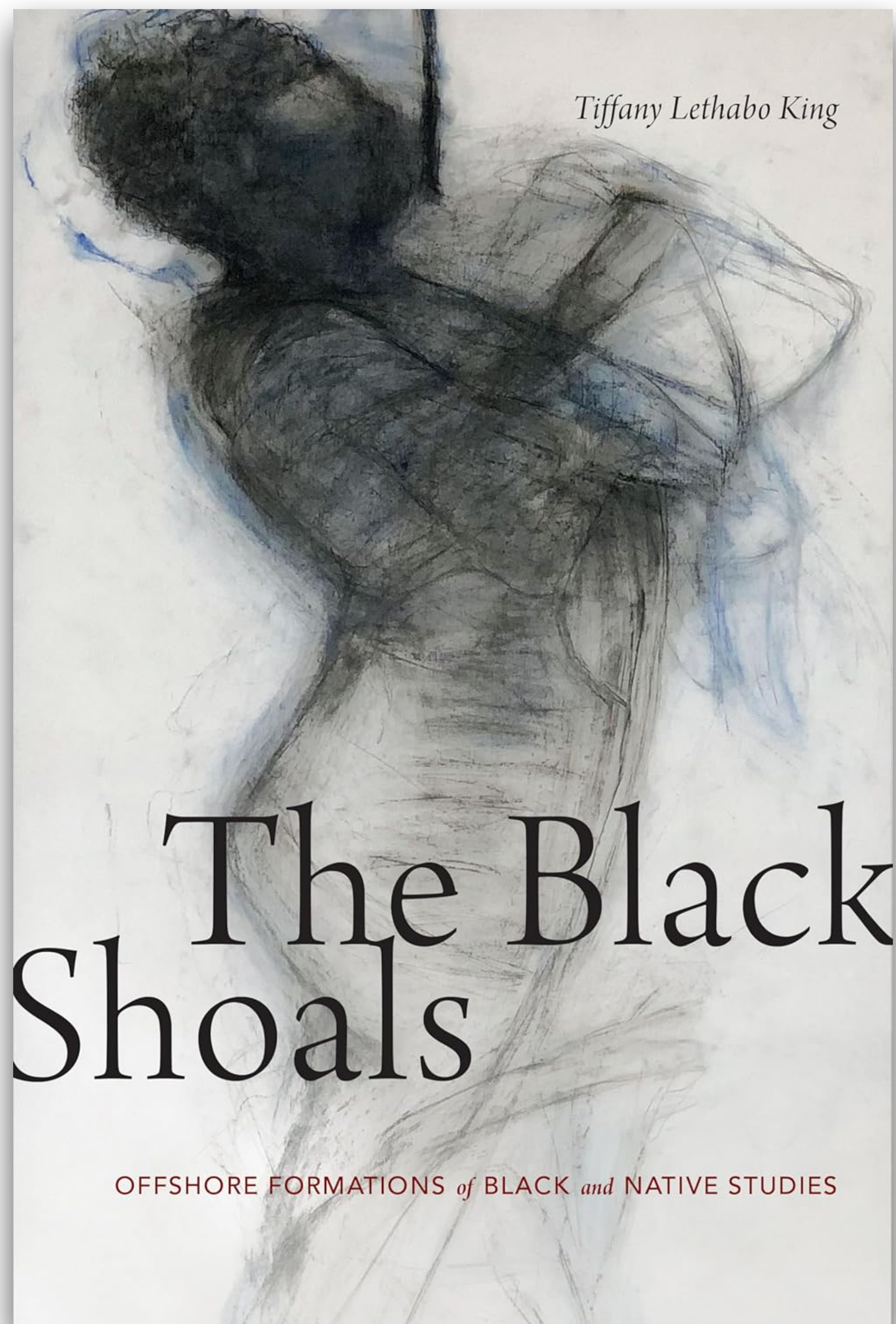
HORTENSE J. SPILLERS

Though among the most readily available “whipping boys” of fairly recent public discourse concerning African-Americans and national policy, “The Moynihan Report” is by no means unprecedented in its conclusions; it belongs, rather, to a class of symbolic paradigms that 1) inscribe “ethnicity” as a scene of negation and 2) confirm the human body as a metonymic figure for an entire repertoire of human and social arrangements. In that

But I would make a distinction in this case between “body” and “flesh” and impose that distinction as the central one between captive and liberated subject-positions. In that sense, before the “body” there is the “flesh,” that zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse, or the reflexes of iconography. Even though the European hegemonies stole bodies – some of them female – out of West African communities in concert with the African “middleman,” we regard this human and social irreparability as high crimes against the *flesh*, as the person of African females and African males registered the wounding. If we think of the “flesh” as a primary narrative, then we mean its seared, divided, ripped-apartness, riveted to the ship’s hole, fallen, or “escaped” overboard.

body | flesh





Spillers's notion of Black flesh is an important touchstone because of how it helps this book elaborate that Black fungible flesh is a "[territory] of cultural and political maneuver" that can be arranged and rearranged infinitely under relations of conquest in the Americas.<sup>73</sup> As a Black fleshy analytic, I argue, Black fungibility can denote and connote pure flux, process, and potential. To be rendered Black and fungible under conquest is to be rendered porous, undulating, fluttering, sensuous, and in a space and state at-the-edge and outside of normative configurations of sex, gender, sexuality, space, and time to stabilize and fix the human category. Black fungibility is an expression of the gratuitous violence of conquest and slavery whose repertoire has no limits or bounds. It operates both materially on the body and produces Blackness (as idea and symbol) as a discursive space of open possibility.

2019



# Notes for Decolonizing Embodiment

Ben Spatz

2019

## Decolonizing White Bodies

White bodies pose a specific problem for decoloniality. For revolutionary decolonization, outright war against whiteness in the form of the colonial state seems justified. But for more thorough processes of decoloniality, the complexity of embodiment demands an engagement with the impossibility of neatly categorizing bodies.<sup>48</sup> The problem of whiteness cannot be solved through military or political action alone. On the one hand, white bodies incarnate coloniality. Their constructed whiteness is the fortress around which other bodies are subjugated and oppressed. On the other hand, white bodies are also *bodies*, and from the arguments cited above it is clear that processes of racialization cannot account for the fullness of lived embodiment. No bodies are entirely white; there is no body that has been fully saturated (drained? bleached?) by whiteness. This is not because whiteness is located at the surface of the skin with something else hidden inside or underneath—it is not—but because whiteness infuses bodies as knowledge, culture, and technique: fractal veins that permeate but never entirely fill embodiment, never fully determining what a body can do.<sup>49</sup> It follows that there are differing degrees, levels, and qualities of whiteness, and this raises the question of how to unearth the nonwhiteness of bodies that have been racialized as white. The famous “knapsack” of white privilege is not one that can be taken off at will, because like all racializations it is strapped on by others through entrenched social systems.<sup>50</sup>



SPATZ

Race and the Forms of Knowledge

NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY PRESS

# RACE and the FORMS of KNOWLEDGE

Technique, Identity, and Place  
in Artistic Research

BEN SPATZ

I have tried to show in this section how a line of flight via critical whiteness studies might be complemented by embodied and somatic practices of critical whiteness that trouble the very identities of “white people.” In applying the concept of critical whiteness to certain fields of knowledge—such as white critical theory and poststructuralist philosophy, white somatics, and white artistic research—my aim is to productively deflate these fields (bringing them down from an assumed universality to a situated relation to whiteness) without collapsing them (implying that they therefore have little value). Critical whiteness in this understanding is valuable and important, but only to the extent that it is not positioned as universal or transcendent of racial histories and politics. In this sense, critical whiteness practice seeks to rejoin the world, which it imagined—in part through the technology of writing—it could transcend, but instead merely violated. Those operating from and within whiteness cannot rejoin the world through that whiteness, but neither can they fully escape it. From an embodied or somatic perspective, critical whiteness aches and yearns to draw near to others (to its own specific others and to “the” other), but it also knows that it must not and cannot do so in ways that colonize and devour—for example, by ignoring the wishes of those others who proclaim an ethical need and desire for separation and distance.

2024



# Hungry Listening

Resonant Theory  
for Indigenous  
Sound Studies



Dylan Robinson

## ETHNOGRAPHIC REDRESS, COMPOSITIONAL RESPONSIBILITY

2020

For impressiveness nothing approached the song of Skateen, the Wolf head-chief of the Nass River tribe. The lament of the mourners rose plaintively and fell in descending curves, like the wind in the storm. It was the voice of nature crying out. For Modernity it went beyond the moderns. The intervals sounded strange, at times like quarter-tones. I heard Dr. MacMillan say, when he was trying to transcribe it from the phonograph: “Those things can’t be written down on our stave, they simply can’t.” But they could, our stave being a rack upon which to pin down sounds and rhythms whatever they are, at least approximately.

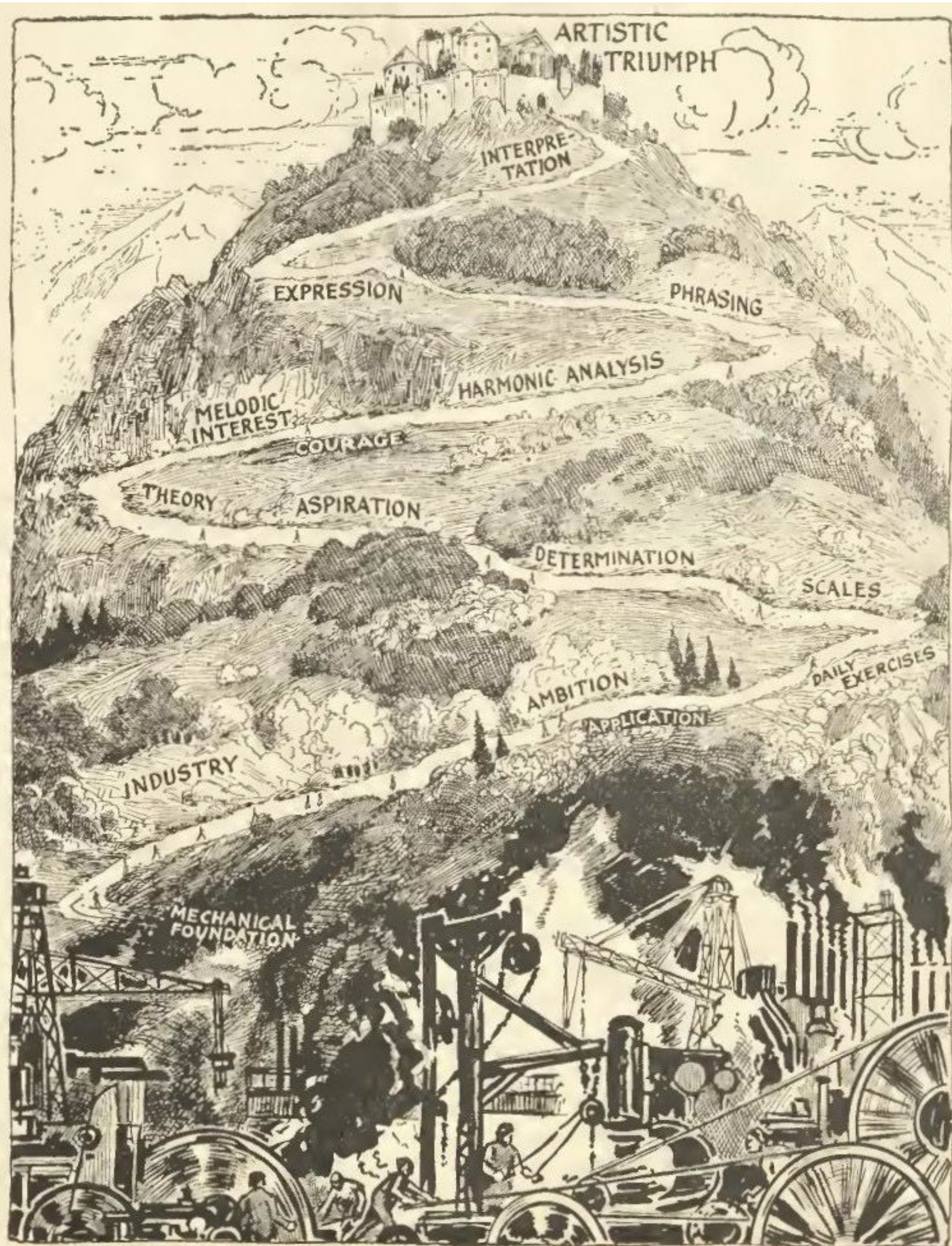
—Marius Barbeau, “Songs of the Northwest,” 1933

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Colin Tucker [artist]

Null Point is a musical research group



## Mapping the Aesthetic's Complicities with the Plantation

in-person talk

Monday, June 2, 2025, 2:40-4:10pm

[Environmental Studies Association of Canada \(ESAC\)/](#)

Congress of Social Sciences and Humanities

George Brown College, St. James Campus

Building A ("SJA"), Room 613, 200 King Street East,

Tkaronto/Toronto, occupied land of the Wendat Confederacy, Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation/Three Fires Confederacy, and Haudenosaunee Confederacy

I will present a talk focused on how Black study analytics radically contest the purported political neutrality of hallowed principles of Aesthetic discourse, technical training, and funding. This talk is the first public outing of a **new scholarly-artistic research project** focused on often unmarked racializing-enslavist relations embedded in discourses and protocols of concert music performance.

**Abstract:** While the humanities has widely considered how art's subject matter (e.g. landscape) has enabled and contested racializing-enslavist regimes of extraction, scholars have yet to engage at length with how art's discursive and institutional underpinnings relate to these regimes. My paper asks how Aesthetic discourse and institutional practice is founded on and has reproduced enslavist, extractive plantation ontologies. First, I trace how plantation relations are foundational to the Aesthetic: by reading, through Black study analytics, writings on and visualizations of art music performance by CPE Bach and Aubertine W. Moore, respectively, I show how these sources secure the interiority of a self-determined Aesthetic (performing and listening) subject by displacing the exteriority of technique onto the Black(ening) figure of the Slave. I then trace how similar racializing-Blackening notions of "transcending technique" ground paradigmatic figures of the Aesthetic: the singing Voice, the Virtuoso, the Genius, and Art-in-the-Singular. Second, I map how, conversely, the Aesthetic is foundational to the reproduction of plantation relations: by interpreting late 18th century British plantation "owners" art patronage through analytics of "artwashing," I demonstrate how Aesthetic practice has played an integral role in reconciling the violence of the plantation with European imperial metropolitan society's alibi of Civility. I argue that a Black study-grounded analysis of seemingly marginal discursive and institutional underpinnings of the modern Western Aesthetic can reveal destabilizing and unprecedented insights about the Aesthetic's enslavist, extractive entwinements for artists, arts workers, and social movement organizers alike.



SPATZ

Race and the Forms of Knowledge

NORTHWESTERN UNIVERSITY PRESS

# RACE and the FORMS of KNOWLEDGE

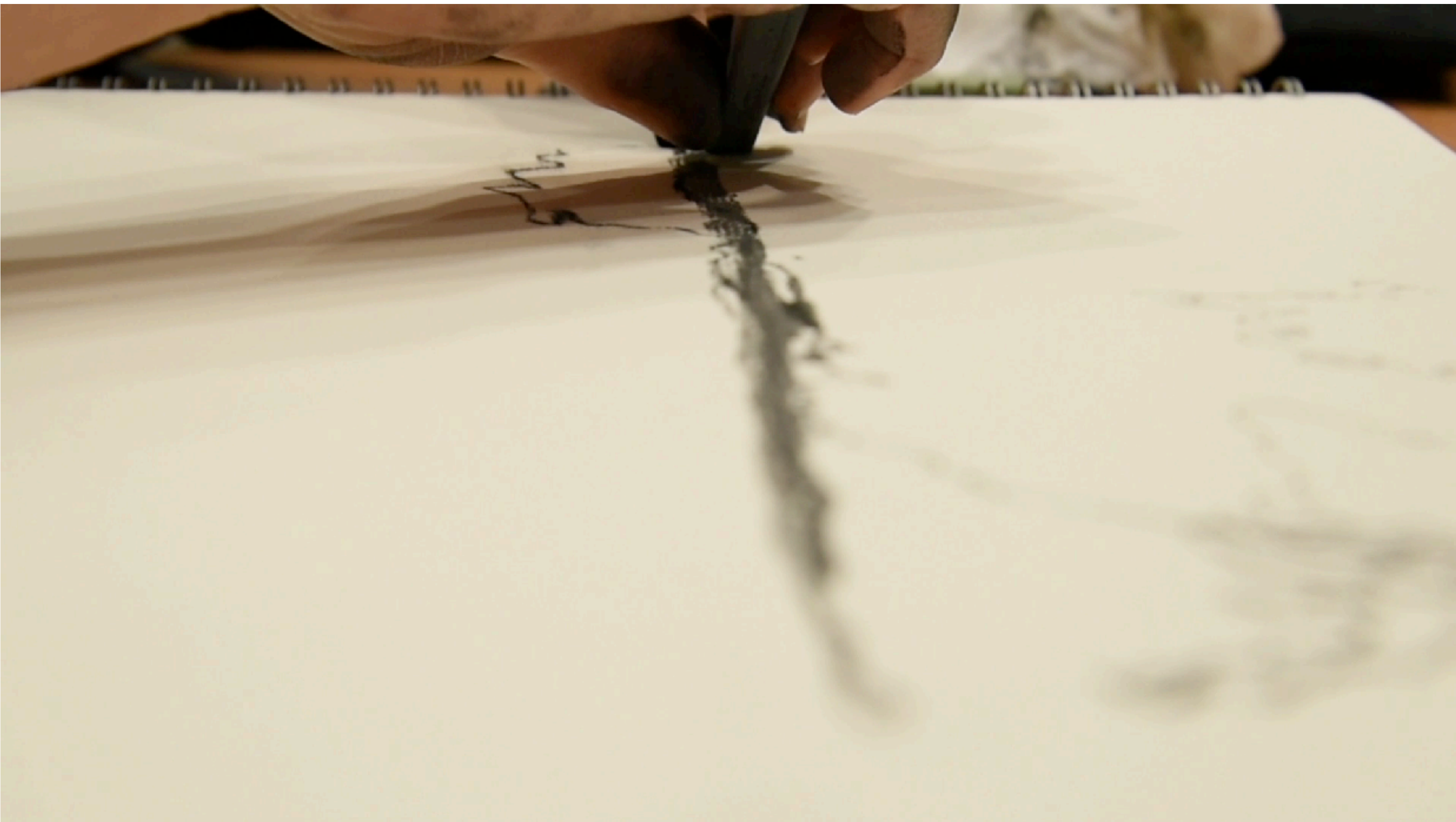
Technique, Identity, and Place  
in Artistic Research

BEN SPATZ

It is increasingly recognized that part of the work of dismantling whiteness must involve bringing forward the precolonial and noncolonial roots of those bodies and identities that have been racialized as white. As one of the most recently absorbed identities, whose hairpin turn from racialized victim of genocide to white supremacist colonial power is a hinge of twentieth-century history, the role of jewishness in decoloniality requires much further investigation. In saying that, I do not mean to dismiss the substantial histories of radical jewish politics that others have traced. My aim is rather to expand the frame so that it might include, alongside jewish politics, techniques and strategies of political jewishness that have yet to be imagined. Perhaps more than other posteuropaean identities, diasporic jewishness has the potential to disentangle itself from whiteness and to demonstrate what that means. To do so, it will need to commit to a radically interdisciplinary intersectionality, learning deeply from black and indigenous approaches to knowledge and power.

2024





“Diaspora.” Judaica Project.  
*Global Performance Studies* 2.1  
(2018).



“He Almost Forgets That There is a Maker  
of the World.” Judaica Project. *Journal of  
Embodied Research* 4.2 (2021).

# Judaica Project

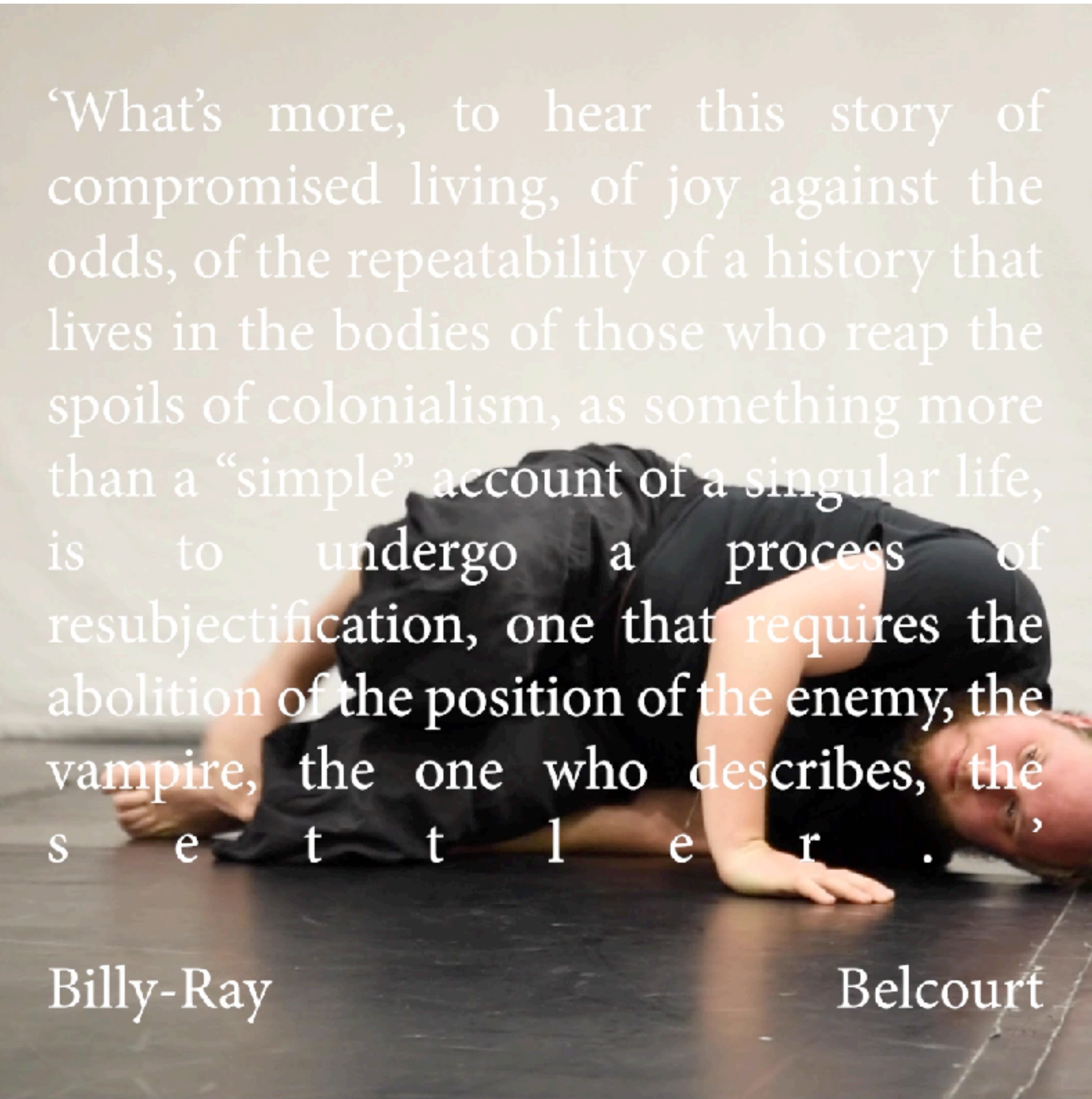


“Działoszyce” by Nazlıhan Eda Erçin. 1st International  
Ecoperformance Festival, São Paulo (2021).



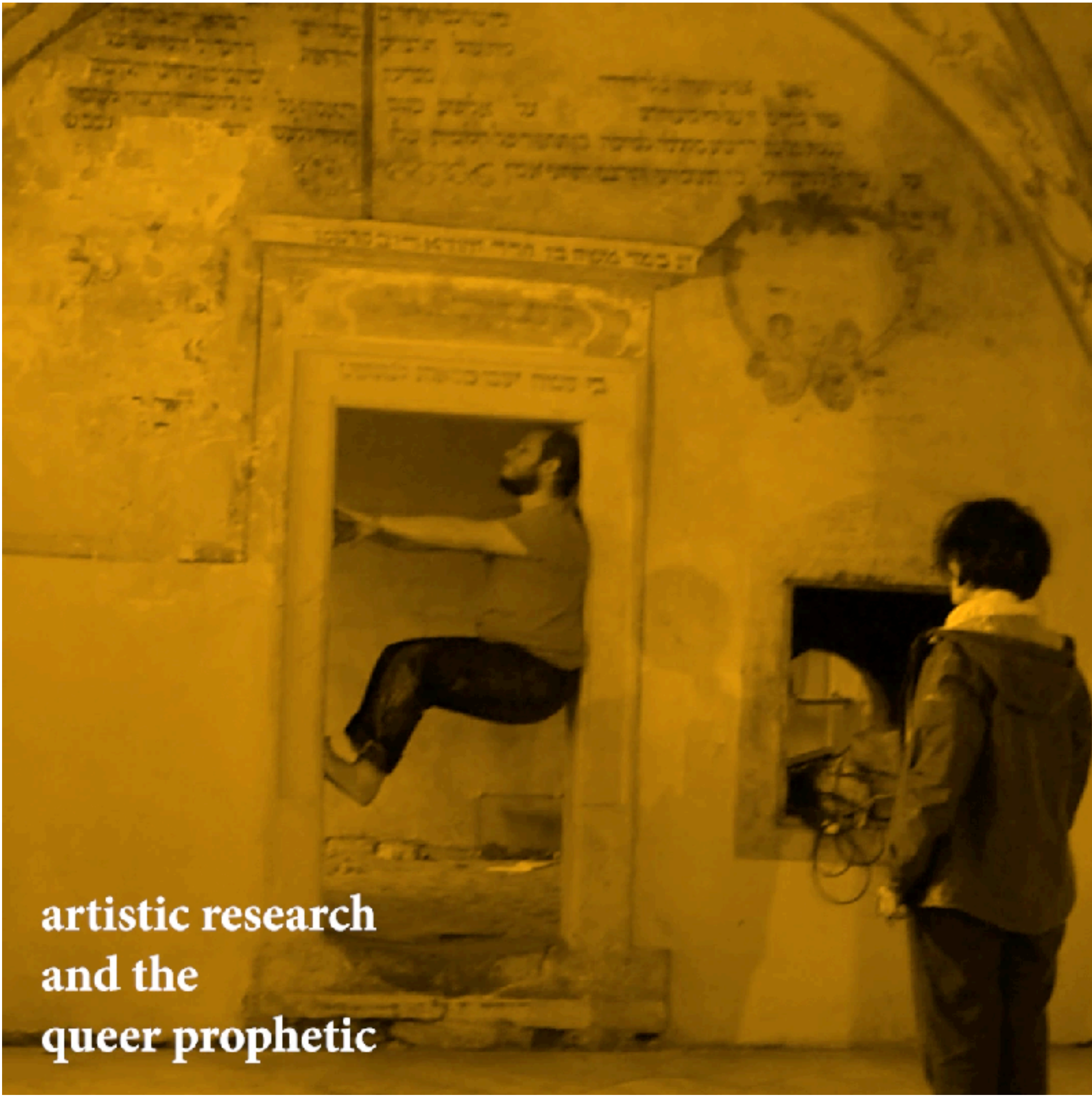
“whiteness” by Ben Spatz with Ilona Krawczyk.  
*Performance Philosophy* 7.2 (2022).



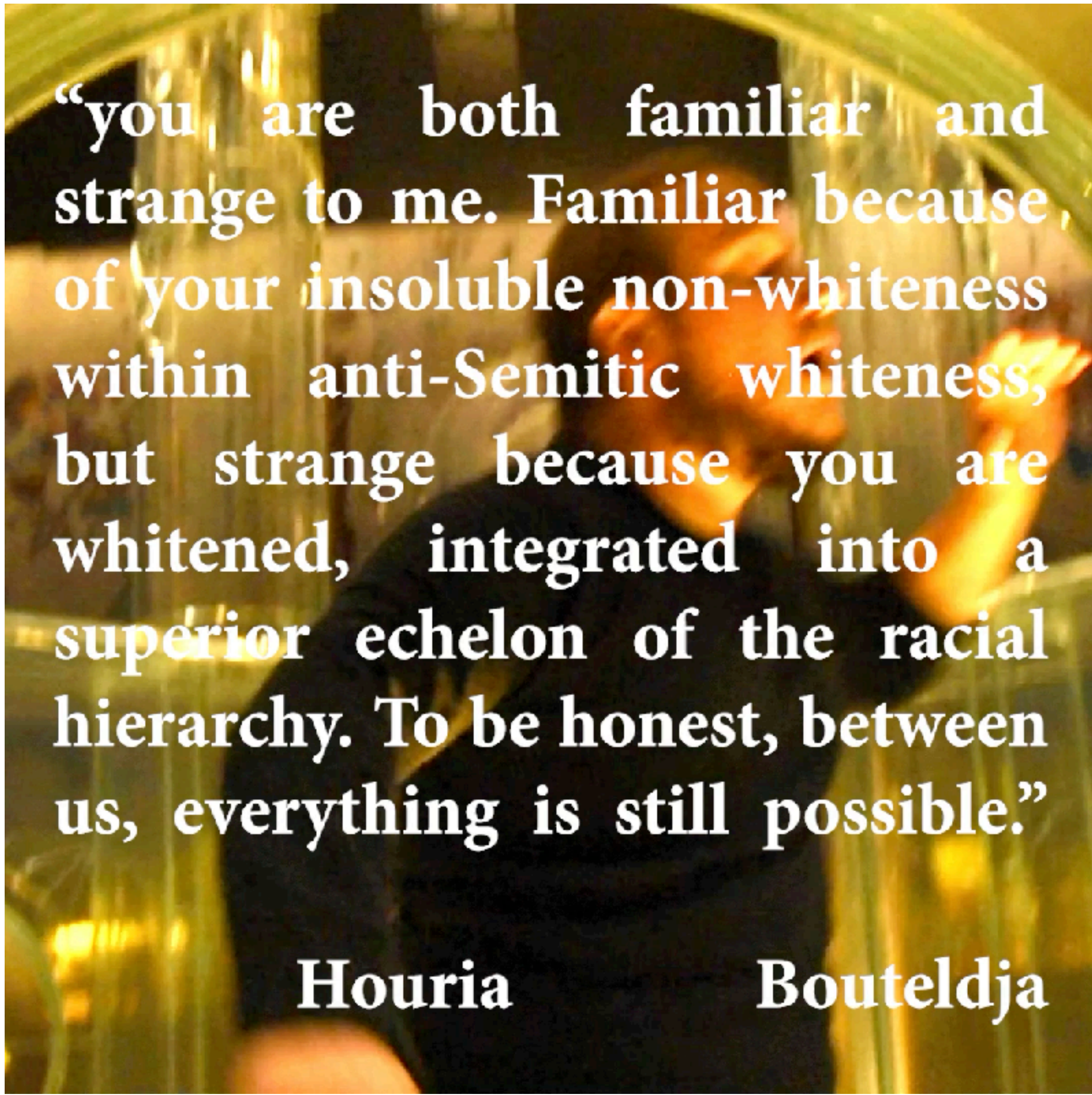


‘What’s more, to hear this story of compromised living, of joy against the odds, of the repeatability of a history that lives in the bodies of those who reap the spoils of colonialism, as something more than a “simple” account of a singular life, is to undergo a process of resubjectification, one that requires the abolition of the position of the enemy, the vampire, the one who describes, the s e t t l e r .’

Billy-Ray Belcourt



artistic research  
and the  
queer prophetic

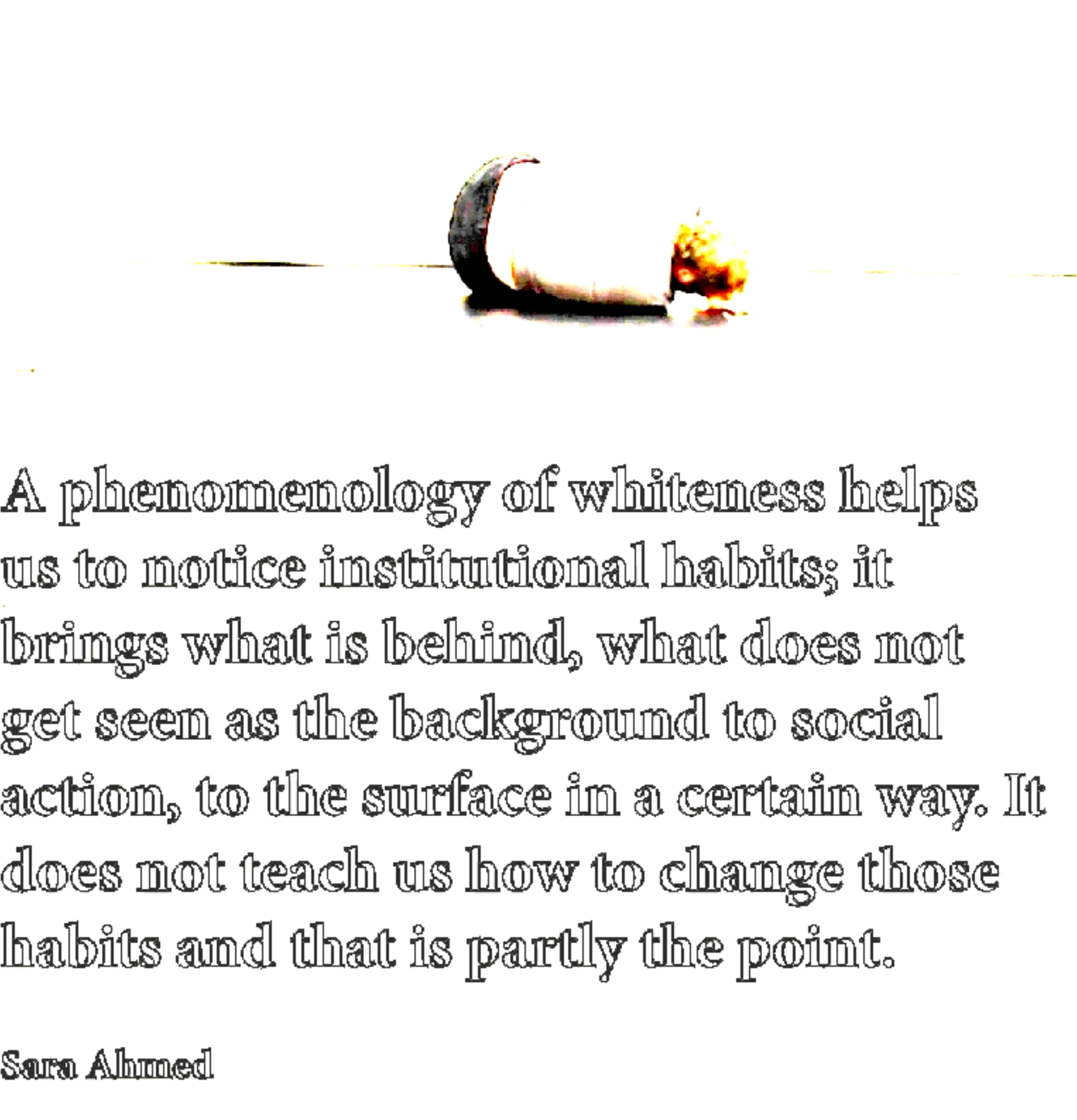


“you are both familiar and strange to me. Familiar because of your insoluble non-whiteness within anti-Semitic whiteness, but strange because you are whitened, integrated into a superior echelon of the racial hierarchy. To be honest, between us, everything is still possible.”

Houria Bouteldja

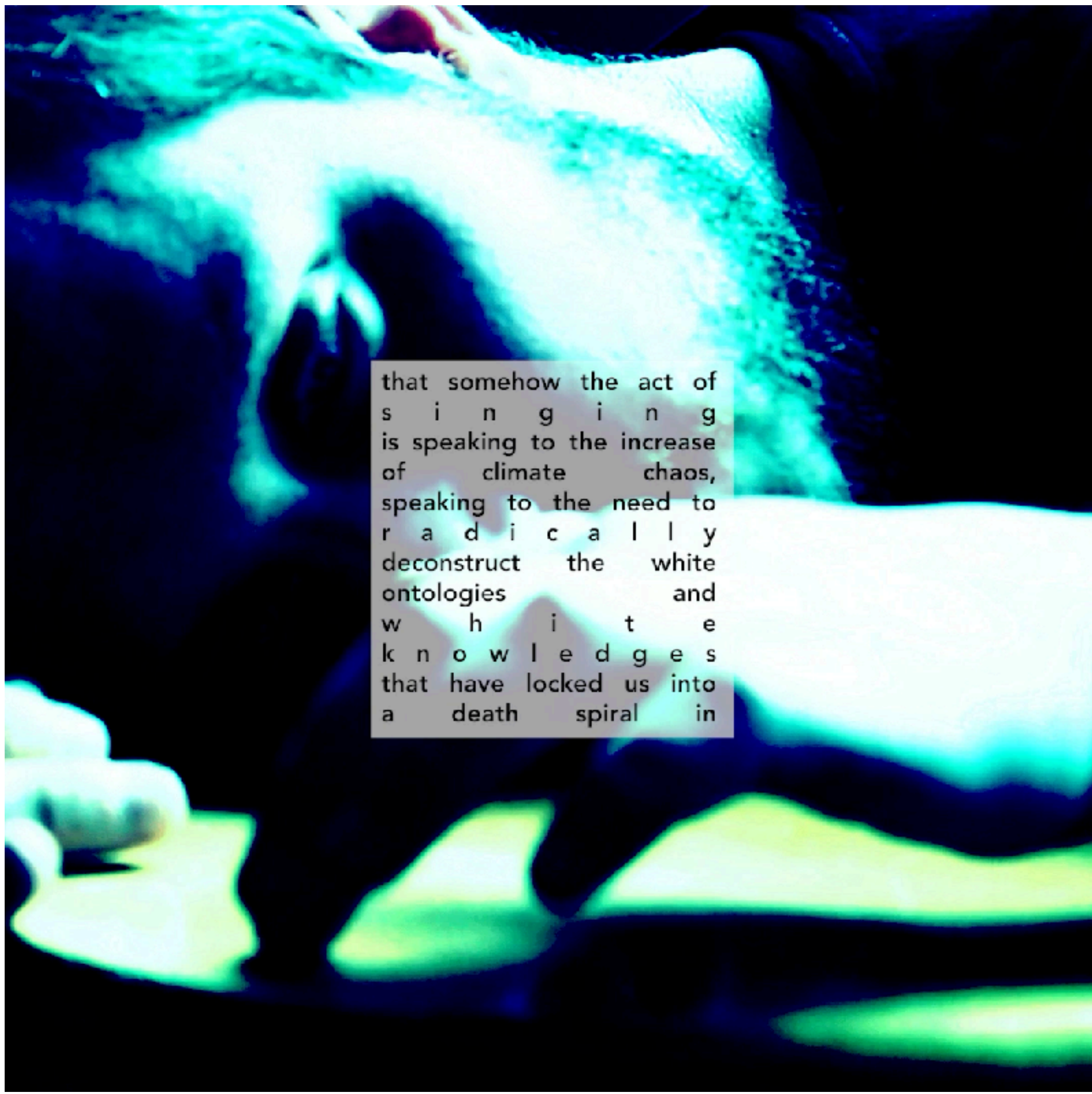


Diasporic literacy signals ways of being and ways of living (memories, imaginations, mnemonics), that we know and share in order to collectively struggle against suffocating racial logics. Like sorrow songs. Like freedom dreams. Like erotic. Like flying cheek-bones. S T O R Y



A phenomenology of whiteness helps us to notice institutional habits; it brings what is behind, what does not get seen as the background to social action, to the surface in a certain way. It does not teach us how to change those habits and that is partly the point.

Sara Ahmed



that somehow the act of singing is speaking to the increase of climate chaos, speaking to the need to radically deconstruct the white ontologies and what we know ledges that have locked us into a death spiral in







## **Colonial Epistemologies**

Christopher Columbus (1451–1506)

René Descartes (1596–1650)

## **Cognitive Studies & New Materialisms**

Antonio Damasio

Shaun Gallagher

Karen Barad

Isabelle Stengers

## **Decolonial & Black Feminist Theory**

Dylan Robinson

Sylvia Wynter

Hortense Spillers

Tiffany Lethabo King

## **Artistic Research Projects**

*Journal of Embodied Research*

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Judaica Project

