

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

Race and the Forms of Knowledge: **WHITE WRITING IN CRISIS**

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Dialogues in Dance Studies
The Ohio State University

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Acknowledgment

The United Kingdom owes its existence to ongoing colonial and extractive relations around the world. The rights of the peoples colonised by this country, to live and work freely here and to participate in the determination of its future, remain uncanceled.



🕒 This article is more than 5 months old

New Zealand MPs who performed haka in parliament given unprecedented punishment

Te Pāti Māori co-leaders and youngest member to be temporarily suspended from parliament after performance protesting controversial bill



MP rips up bill, leads haka as NZ parliament erupts over Waitangi treaty bill - video

Three **New Zealand** MPs who performed a haka in parliament will be temporarily suspended, in what is believed to be the harshest ever penalty issued to parliamentarians.



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=atm4eeWUZeU>

Hungry Listening

Resonant Theory
for Indigenous
Sound Studies



Dylan Robinson

As many of this book's case studies demonstrate, foundational differences between Indigenous and settler modes of listening are guided by their respective **ontologies of song and music**. Western music is largely though not exclusively oriented toward aesthetic contemplation and for the affordances it provides: getting through our work days, setting and focusing moods, and creating a sense of home (DeNora 2000). **Indigenous song, in contrast, serves strikingly different functions, including that of law and primary historical documentation.** A striking example of this clash between Western aesthetic and Indigenous "functional" ontologies of song is apparent in *Delgamuukw v. the Queen* (1985), a land claim trial in which Gitksan and Wet'suwet'en sought jurisdiction over their territories in northern British Columbia, Canada.

2020

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The meaning of the book form inheres in its linearity, its cohesion as a stable and reproducible object, but also in its very letters, its alphabet. Perhaps the strongest articulation of an anticolonial critique of writing was expressed by oglala lakota activist Russell Means, who does not mince words:

I detest writing. The process itself epitomizes the European concept of “legitimate” thinking; what is written has an importance that is denied the spoken. My culture, the Lakota culture, has an oral tradition and so I ordinarily reject writing. It is one of the white world’s ways of destroying the cultures of non-European peoples, the imposing of an abstraction over the spoken relationship of a people.¹⁰

physical and cultural genocides that followed, “alphabetic writing, in complicity with the language of the state and the printing press, overpowered linguistic diversity and established a linguistic hierarchy largely supported by the power of national languages and their inscription in alphabetic scripts.”²²

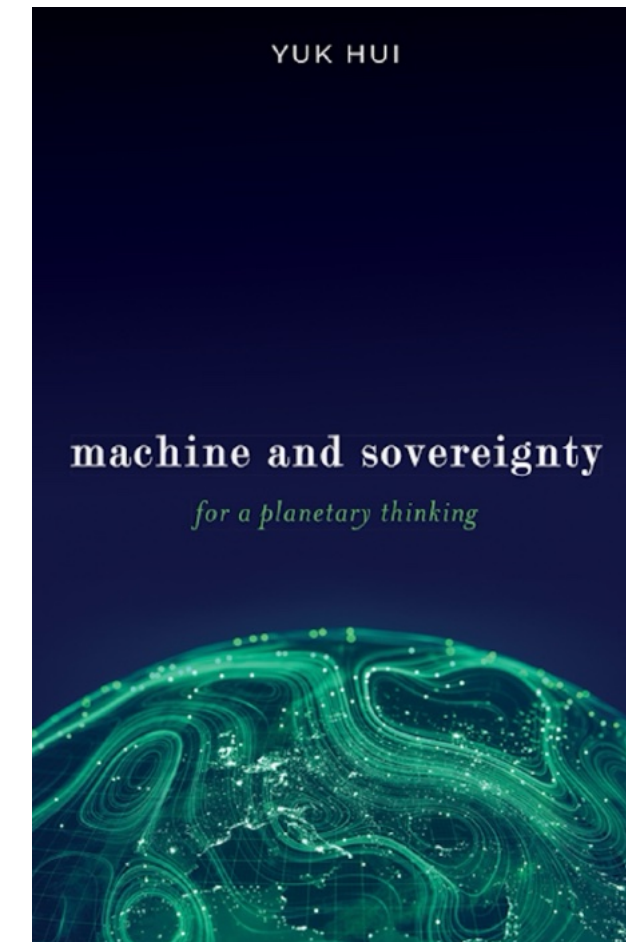
Colonialism as writing; writing as colonialism.

Birgit Brander Rasmussen further explains:

As Europeans began to develop a sense of themselves as different from those they colonized, that difference became not only racialized but also linked to the possession of writing, defined narrowly as alphabeticism. The persistent use of the possessive in discourse on writing is notable. Eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century writers repeatedly stressed that Europe *had* history, writing, and literature, that others did not *possess* it. This possessive investment in writing eventually came to underpin white racial identity, particularly in North America, where it was elaborated through anti-literacy slave codes. As Europe and its descendants in the Americas claimed exclusive possession of writing and linked the possession of this technology to a hierarchy of humanity, “writing” became a maker and marker of racial difference.²³

The more precisely we can specify the technique of writing that is mutually constituted with white identity, the better we will be able to understand the racial implications and decolonial potential of alternative techniques and technologies, including new media forms. It is therefore worthwhile to dig deeper into the media ontology of alphabetic and phonetic writing in order to grasp how white writing is not merely the worship or reification of writing in general, but the colonizing dominance of a highly specific technique and technology that continues to structure institutionality in the present. By the same token, to avoid the reductive idea that technologies of phonetic or alphabetic writing can only be white and colonial, it is important to explore this connection not only in terms of the most obvious technical characteristics but also in less evident, underpinning layers of technique. For it is not only phoneticism and alphabeticism that make (some) writing white; whiteness is also to be found in the choice of words, the rhythm of sentences, the style of development, and other qualities.²⁵ Recognizing this allows us to invoke, alongside alternative scripts and literacies, alternative modes and styles of writing that may use the same alphabetic script to voice a different technique of thought.

A core technique of whiteness is thus founded on the principle that truth, presence, transparency, thought, rationality, and other such phenomena must take the form of linear sequences of words, for no reason other than that this is what (white) writing can transcribe. As a technological fact, it is obvious and indeed tautological that writing can only transcribe what writing can transcribe. Yet, as da Silva ironically understates, “the transparency thesis has been rather powerful.”⁴² Not only do entire fields of analytic philosophy and logic continue to pursue truth and ethics through the formal manipulation of written statements, but institutionality itself, including that of nation-states, is almost universally understood to be necessarily founded on written statements of this kind. Writing in the narrow sense, as Derrida shows, is so pervasive and constitutive of the social today that it is difficult even to imagine how what we confusingly call “nonverbal” aspects of life could ever rise to the level of knowledge or thought. But while there may be no immediately obvious alternative to writing as a basis for institutionality, the rise of digital and especially audiovisual media allows us to decenter, in new ways, the core assumptions of linearity and transparency that define white writing. To see this destabilization in action, it is sufficient to undertake a deflationary reading practice in which every term associated with *logos*—thought, knowledge, reason, rationality, consciousness, mind, logic, cognition, law, philosophy, and many others—is replaced by the word “writing.”



A question asked of philosopher Yuk Hui:
*What is the relation between the current
“discovery” of non-human intelligences in plants
and animals and the development of AI?*

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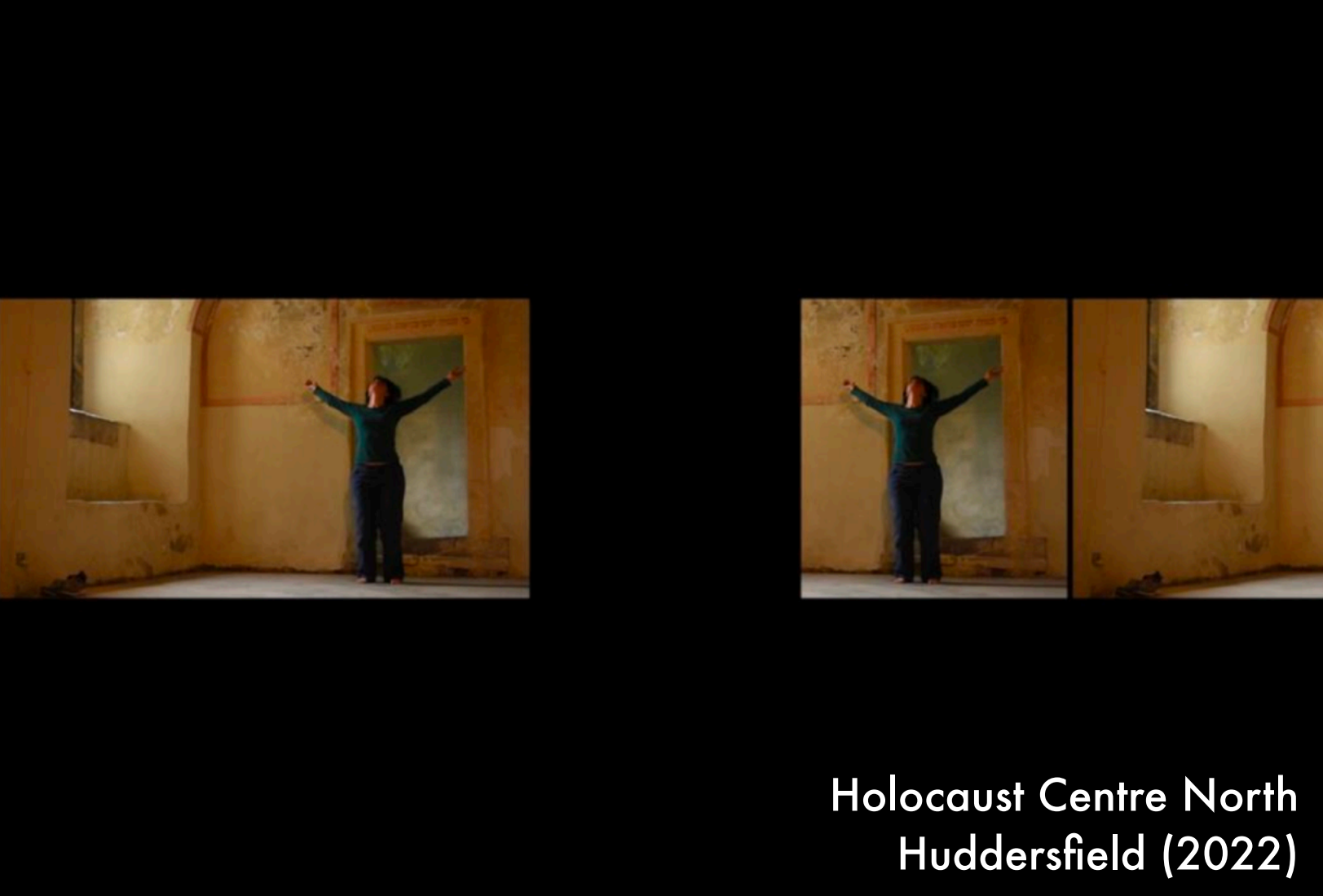
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Temporary Contemporary Gallery
Huddersfield (2019)

Holocaust Centre North
Huddersfield (2022)

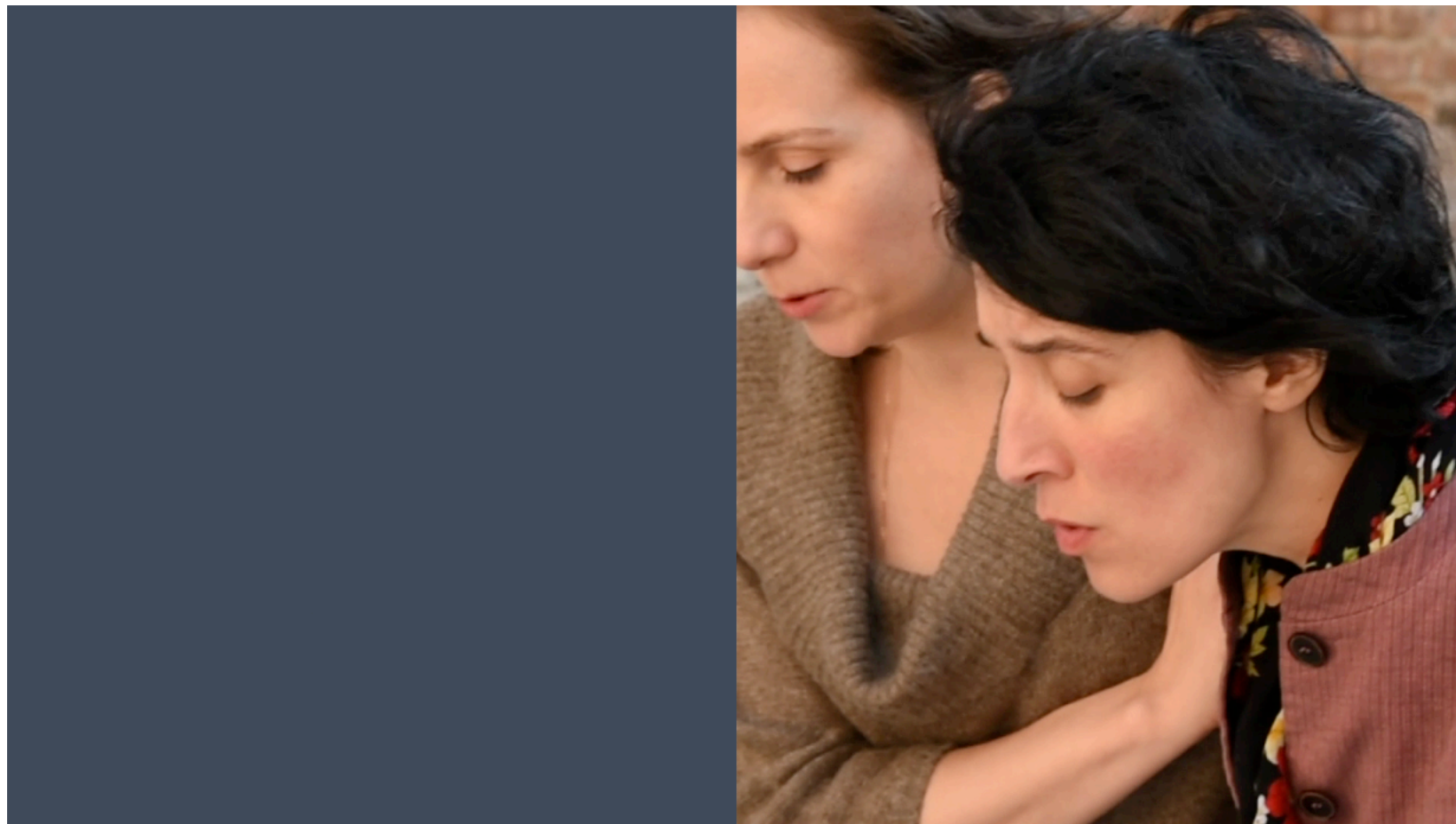


"Diaspora." Judaica Project. *Global Performance Studies* 2.1 (2018).

Judaica Project



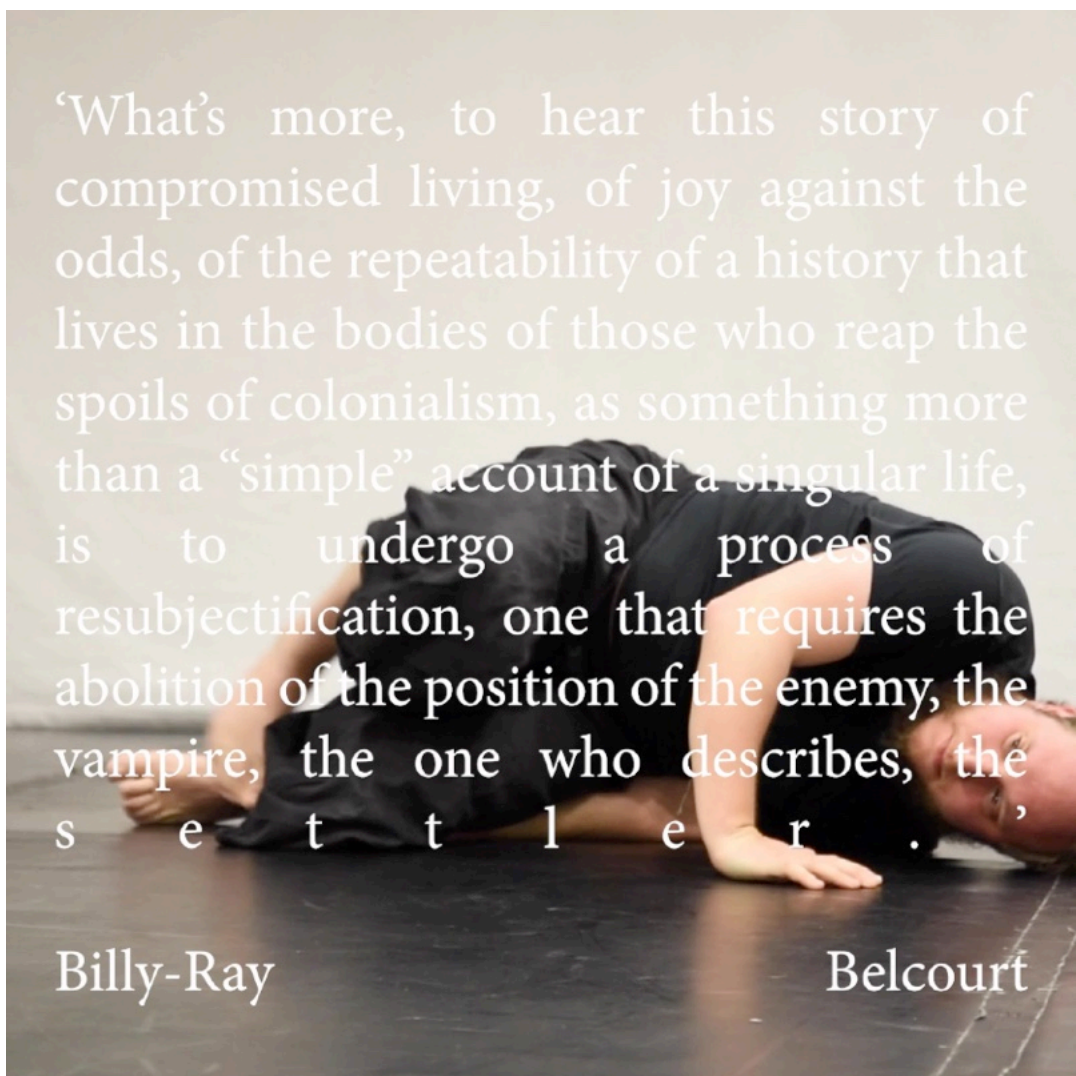
"He Almost Forgets That There is a Maker of the World." Judaica Project. *Journal of Embodied Research* 4.2 (2021).



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



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

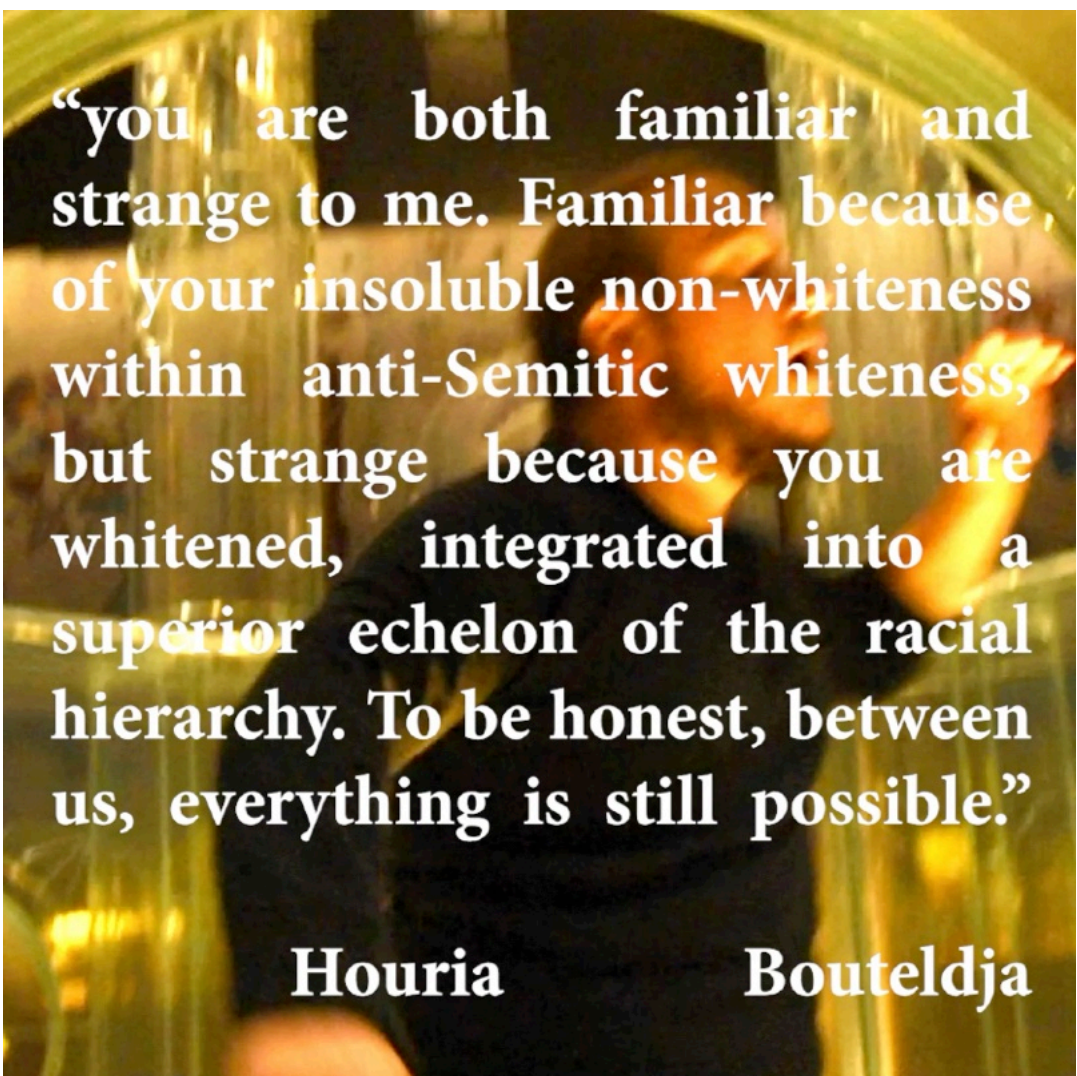


‘What’s more, to hear this story of compromised living, of joy against the odds, of the repeatability of a history that lives in the bodies of those who reap the spoils of colonialism, as something more than a “simple” account of a singular life, is to undergo a process of resubjectification, one that 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

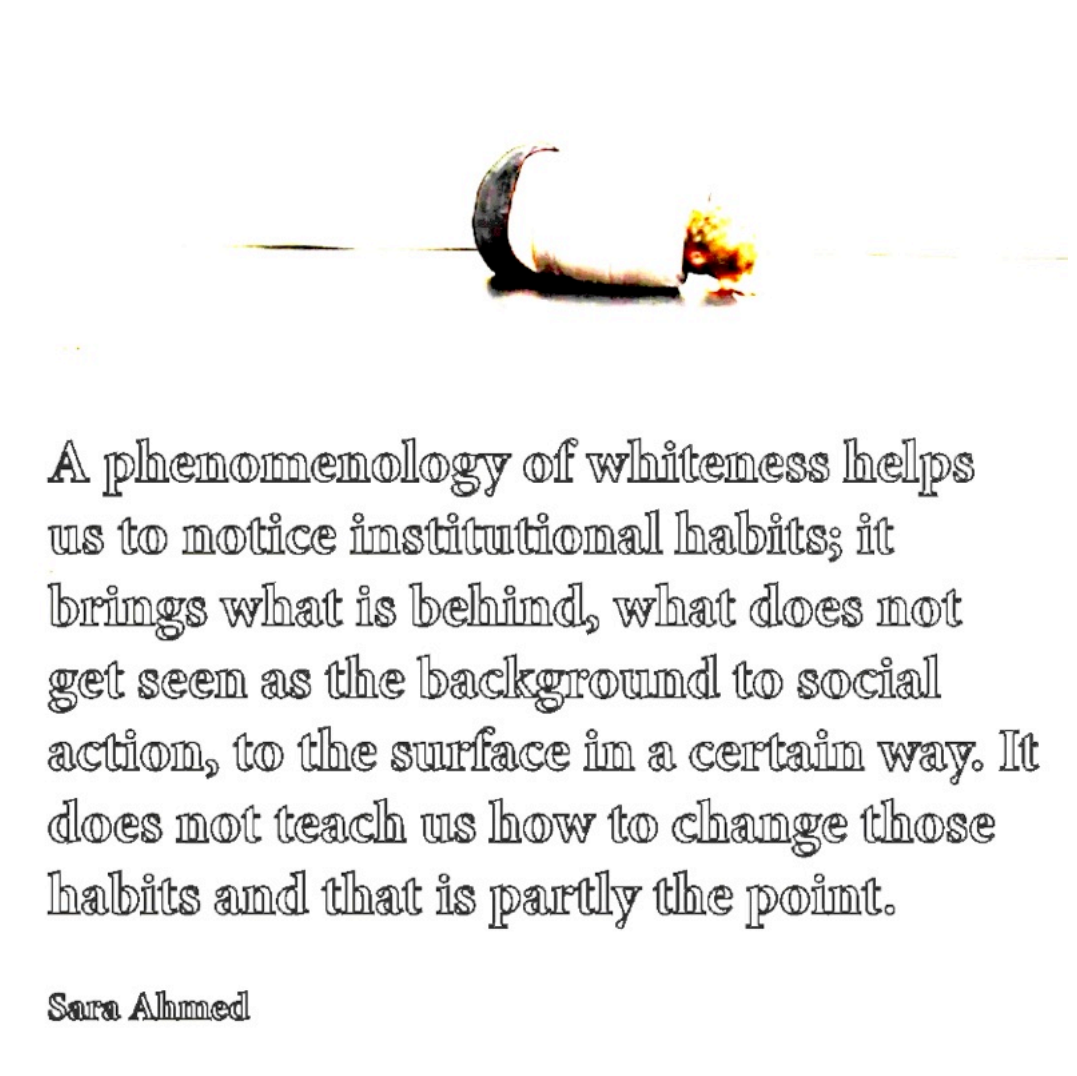


“you are both familiar and strange to me. Familiar because of your insoluble non-whiteness within anti-Semitic whiteness, but strange because you are whitened, integrated into a superior echelon of the racial hierarchy. To be honest, between us, everything is still possible.”

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



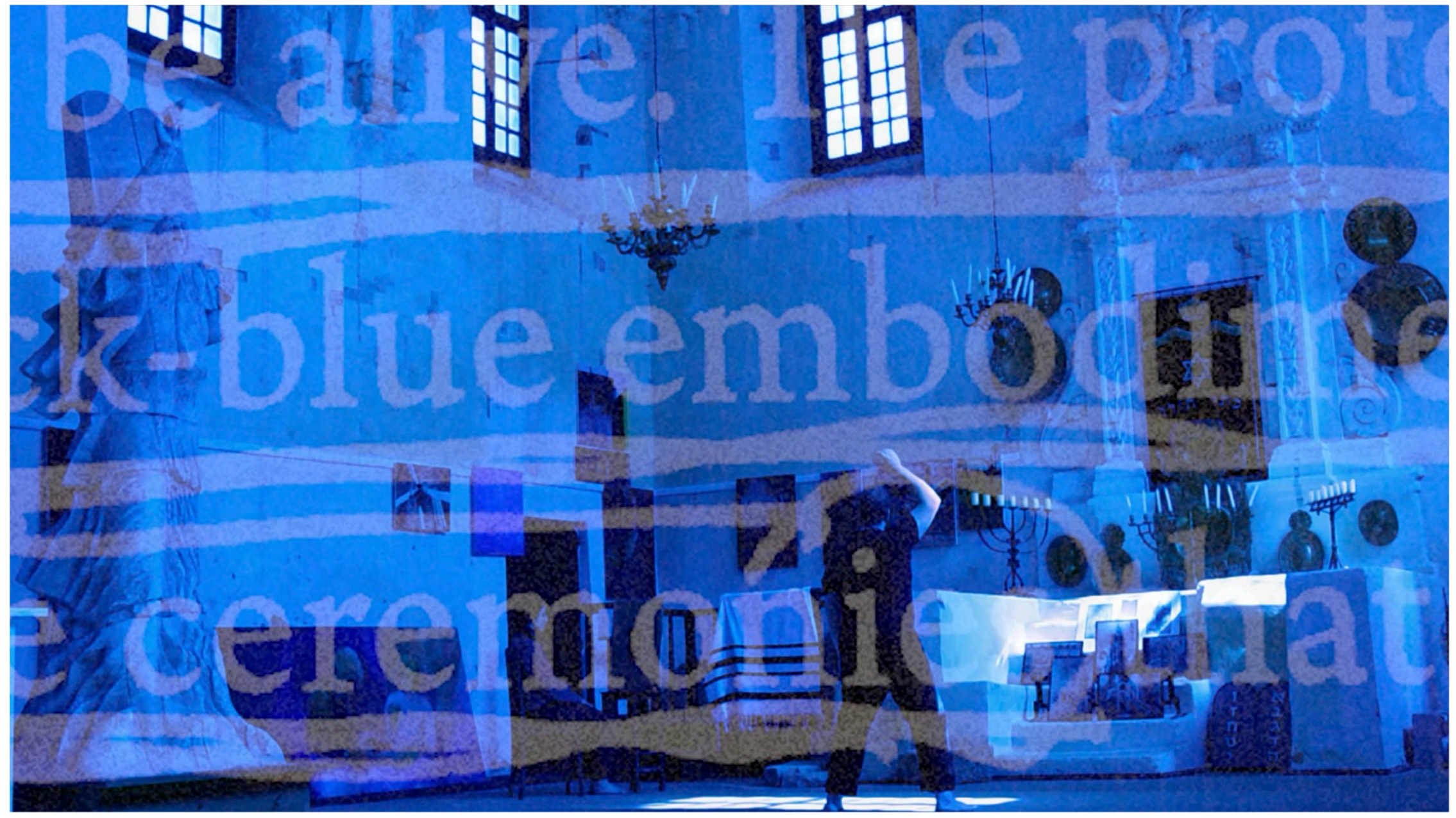
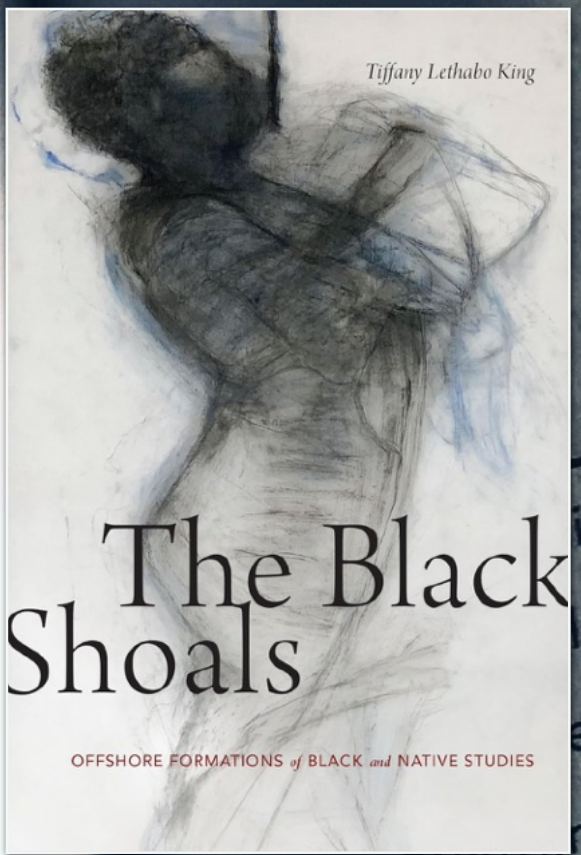
that somehow the act of singing is speaking to the increase of climate chaos, speaking to the need to radically deconstruct the white ontologies and what we know that have locked us into a death spiral in

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ourselves and our roles in the violence
 knowing that the ways that we make claims to and perform our
 humanity often — and more than likely — requires the death of the other.

The #BlackLivesMatter ceremony in chapter 1 disrupted the aesthet-
 ics, logics, and genre of the conquistador human that require anti-Black
 and anti-Indigenous regimes of violence. In chapter 2, ceremonies of Black
and Indigenous resistance produce geographies of life that counter the
violence of settlement, as well as the cartographic subject and its map of
conquest. In chapter 3, rituals of caressing, caring for, and acknowledging
Black embodiment and its pores and points of connection to life marked as

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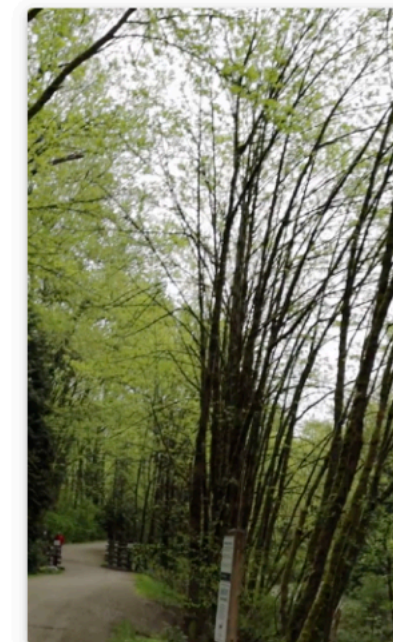
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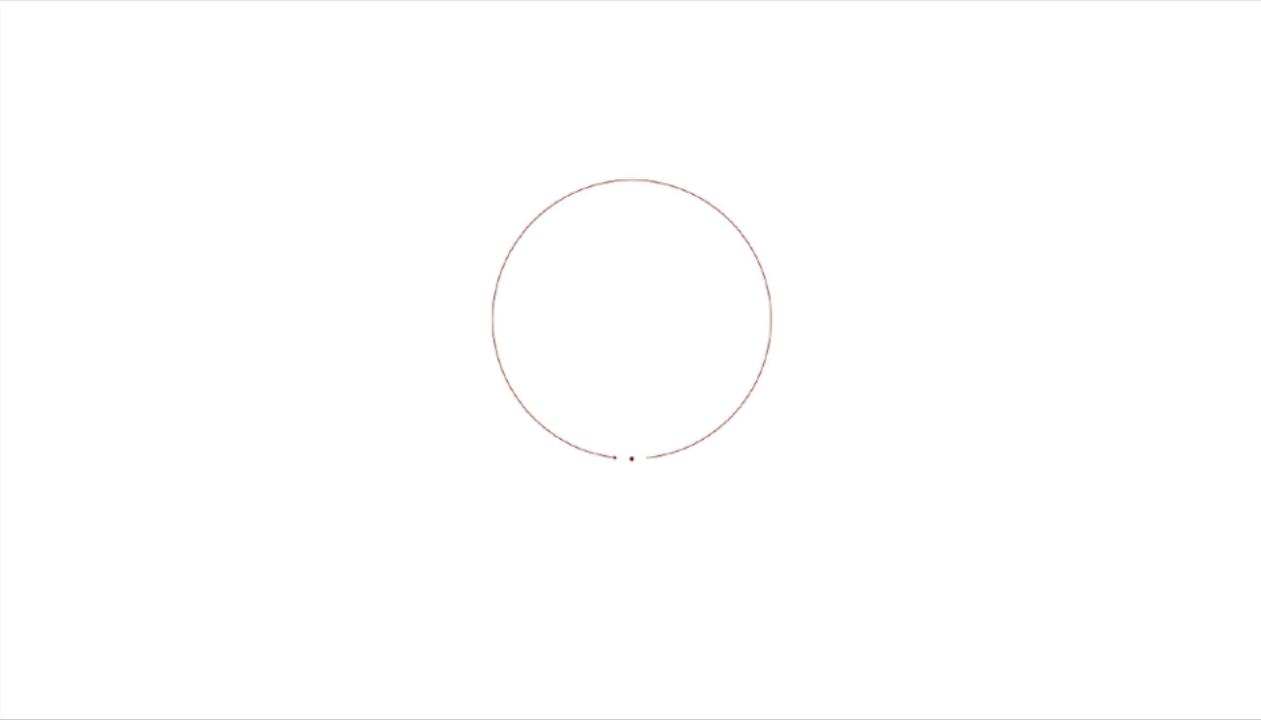
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Focused or concentrated?



Melissa da Silva Ferreira et al in JER 4.1 (2023); Graziela Corrêa de Andrade et al in JER 8.1 (2025); Annette Arlander in JER 1.1 (2018); Jürgens and Fernandes in JER 1.1 (2018); Sarah Pini in JER 2.1 (2019)

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