


FORUM

A letter to Baba

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Abstract

This is a piece of creative non-fiction. The letter from a daughter to a father is an attempt to understand inter-generationally shared histories, experiences, and different orientations. It aims to imagine what decolonial thinking could look and feel like. Interdisciplinary in its orientation, the letter moves between personal stories and the broader scholarly quest to contemplate the embodied racialized violence of the current conjuncture. The letter suggests that embodied racialized violence is powerful and banal. It explores how it can be carried in the ties that bind – the love, minds, bodies, experiences, and stories of – a familial relationship and the people they encounter. It also represents an inversion of scholarly work in which the interactions that hone arguments are thinly noted in brief acknowledgements, and the citationary writing takes centre stage. Here, the interaction is central, and the citationary writing is laid out in footnotes.

Keywords: embodiment; epistle; humanism; imperialism; knowledges; violence

My Dear Baba,

The last time we were together we did not get to talk as much as usual. S was there with his partner. It was a good time, but you weren't feeling well. I wanted to talk with you about what I am doing. I wanted to get your input, not just as a father, but also as a person who has survived in this world. I've been working on an essay about racialized violence and the destruction of worlds. For a year now, I've been thinking about this and what it means for the work I am trying to do. My essay and my thoughts have developed in so many unsatisfying directions. I am struggling with it. I hoped that discussing it with you would help me find a way forward. In the end, we did not have the time or space to talk so I've decided to write to you, to put these thoughts down on paper, to work through them with you like we used to do. I am still coming to you with my angst! I think, though, that you might find this letter heavier than the ones I wrote when I was younger.

This is a dark time. I mean, it is a time that we agree is full of tensions and contradictions. But, Baba, I am trying to find a footing for hope.¹ The older I get, the less clearly I can see, the more my senses are overwhelmed, the less clear an ethical path appears to be. I just keep trying to make sense of what appears before me. Today, out of all the horrors, I am thinking a lot about George Floyd, his family, the people and worlds he touched in life and in his enforced turning away. Does it seem odd to you that I am here using the phrase 'turning away' to describe a physical transition

¹Teju Cole, *Black Paper: Writing in a Dark Time* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2021). Cole's beautiful book of essays is a good place to start thinking about how to do decolonial work. He examines art, interactions, and contemporary politics in order to 'apprehend the latent wisdom in the dark' (p. xi). From him, I learn how to 'read enigmatically'. Samia Khatun, *Australianama: The South Asian Odyssey in Australia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), p. 9. I learn also to invert the scholarly essay that subordinates the personal interactions to the citational literature. Here, the interpersonal is foregrounded.

as a result of a murder, a police killing in the USA, a very public murder, a ‘turning away’ rather than a death? This is a good way for me to try to parse out these thoughts.

So one of the thinkers I am working with, Elizabeth Povinelli, uses the term ‘existents’ in an intentional orientation away from the distinction between life and non-life.² She writes about the narrow space that many existents occupy in our world(s). Existents can turn away, or enter into a different relational form, as a result of various forms of exploitation, but *they don’t cease to exist*. This seems to be a hopeful place to start, for me, someone who grows increasingly heartsick with each new police killing, or the burdens of understanding something of what dies (or turns away) with each destruction caused by the violent system in which we live. But I am not a person who carried him in my heart – the George in his living form before his ‘turning away’. I did not know how his young body swung its long limbs. I never saw the beginnings of a smile in his eyes or on the corners of his lips. His hands never touched my shoulders. His insights never met my care. This is abstract and perhaps troubling, but, Baba, I am gasping and grasping. He touches me now. I want to touch him back. But I am afraid.

Do you remember when we met those lawyers for the civil case after T was murdered? I felt like they traded in hope. The kind one said to me ‘Don’t worry. We will protect the family.’ I remember looking away across the expanse of the grassy space we were in. My gaze returned to lock eyes with his. His eyes were gentle; he meant to be comforting. I was not comforted. They told me that he didn’t know, that he moved in the world unmarked somehow. He couldn’t see that my body was coiled in an irresolvable pain, a pain that is bigger than the body it marked. Our eyes locked together. In another lifetime, another form of interaction might have been possible, but that day I closed my face and said rudely, angrily even, ‘It’s too late. He’s dead.’ I’m afraid of feeling so low again, Baba.

But I cannot look away. I want to understand, to learn how to exist. I am drawn to Povinelli’s idea of existents, but it didn’t seem like enough for this essay I’ve been trying to write. I found myself turning towards Wole Soyinka (of the ‘tigritude’ comment that moved so you when you were young).³ His book, *A Man Died*, collects his notes from a prison that held his body for a time.⁴ I feel like he captures the banality of quotidian violence and the disposability of (racialized and poor) bodies. It is ordinary, and it is enraging.

Several years ago, I asked you if the world seems as terrible now as it did when you were young. I wanted to know if an elder, one with your practice of watching, would have an opinion on whether things are better or worse. Now, I smile wryly at the thought. What a silly question! How can we ever know the answer to a question like that? And, of what value would the answer be? But, you thought about it. You told me again the story of the old woman you went to interview in Chicago’s Cabrini Green Project Housing when you were a graduate student. You told me again that you

²Elizabeth Povinelli, *Geontologies: A Requiem for Late Liberalism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016). We might start to achieve the insight that Cole, *Black Paper*, seeks and put on alternate frames through which to begin our query. For example, Povinelli, *Geontologies*, p. 9, starts with a rejection of the hierarchical distinction between life and non-life that often frames our reading of decolonial struggles. Rather than start with understanding existents in the world, our political theory work tends to privilege life as birth, growth, reproduction, and death over non-life that is available to life as a resource. This framing positions those characterized as living in hierarchical opposition against those characterized as non-life. But, ‘existents’ might be the only universal that I can rely on without flattening particularities. This matters to me because I remain motivated by Siba Grovogui’s comment that ‘There can be no partial public sympathies’ (‘Everyone and no one: Moral solicitude and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights’, London School of Economics, 6 December 2022).

³In response to Negritude, Soyinka famously jostled that a ‘Tiger doesn’t proclaim its tigritude, it pounces’, in what is both a critique of the emphasis on that particularity and an emphasis on the work of being, in *Time* magazine 17 November 1967.

⁴Wole Soyinka, *The Man Died* (London: Rex Collings, 1972). Soyinka’s exquisite prose similarly rejects the framing of the body as distinct from the (non-living) world it inhabits. Seemingly, without the intent to debunk the living/non-living binary, he writes syntax that attributes agency to sounds, spaces, and inanimate objects. For example, he says that ‘sounds ... beat’ against walls (p. 129), or about how ‘thoughts ... flash through the mind’ (p. 131), or ‘slime hits the grass’ (p. 131) or ‘the winds hurls itself’ (p. 138). Between Cole, *Black Paper*, Povinelli, *Geontologies*, and Soyinka, *The Man Died*, I am prepared to profane hierarchical knowledges.

had telephoned her to let her know to expect you at whatever time you anticipated arriving – the days before cell phones. When you arrived, you learned that she had opened her door to the wrong visitors. Every time you tell me this part of the story, I feel like my heart stops. These wrong visitors beat, raped, and robbed her. You said again, ‘Can you believe it? They did that to an 80-year-old woman!’ And you told me again, ‘She wouldn’t have opened her door if I had not called her.’ The ‘her’ of that last sentence again carried evidence of your emotion in the rising of your voice as you uttered it. I will never forget this story, Baba. It lives in me, the horror you share with every iteration of your telling it. Of course, my heart did not stop, for I am still here trying to find my footing – trying to ‘turn towards’.

I don’t know if you came home and told Mama, or if you sought solace in S’s and my arms, or those of your grad student friends. I only know that the horror lives in you, the complicity you couldn’t possibly have anticipated when you called her. The world seems worse today, you said.

In that book I was reading in Cairo last time, the one I said I was afraid to teach because I thought it would be too hard, Povinelli writes from the epistemological, spatial, and emotional vantage point of a group of Australian Aborigines in the Northern Territories of Australia. She shows how they are discursively bound into the position of the Animist, a position that can be incorporated in order to be dismissed.⁵ She shows how logic, even the logic that underpins critical theory – an emancipatory approach that seeks to address questions of social violence – cannot gently accommodate ‘other’ ways of being human, or what a writer I admire calls the ‘horizon of humanness.’⁶ This means, Baba, that other modes of being are destroyed outside the frames of violence that the cry ‘why does no one care about what happens to us?’ interrupts. George Floyd was disposable until he cried for his mother, a cry that humanized him, right? Maybe this recognition makes the question of racialized violence an impotent one unless I start from the voices of those who are rebuilding repeatedly destroyed worlds. Baba, I am drawn to make sense of those borders or boundaries or limits, like the ones I think you’d want to reject. I reasoned that you want to reject them because they represent so powerfully painful an idea that has such brutal consequences. The consequences are so brutal that sometimes we can only muster a twisted laugh at the disgustingness of the ideas that mark many people’s bodies, lives, deaths, and imaginations. As I am writing this, though, it dawns on me that you might have rejected them *for* me, to protect me, to urge me to negotiate a middle path so that the rage that they inspire wouldn’t paralyse me or burn up my insides. For you ran at them too. Didn’t you? You know how they can break a person, enforce a ‘turning away’. Have you been afraid *for* me?

Still, Baba, I am asking, how should I think of or write about how racialized violence destroys?⁷ Perhaps I can start by thinking about how analyses of that violence foreclose specific conversations. Or how our worlds protect, or even prevent, specific people from interacting with destroyed worlds. Maybe I can attack the refusal to recognize and respond to racialized violence, even though it destroys worlds and supports other worlds, even though the violence itself shapes our lives at this particular conjuncture. The racial imaginary constitutes the global order.⁸ I hesitate to diagnose the colonial imprint on your life, but, Baba, I think this explains some of the most insidiously painful of

⁵ Povinelli, *Geontologies*, p. 28. Mahmood Mamdani, *Neither Settler Nor Native: The Making and Unmaking of Permanent Minorities* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2020). Without the damning of the system itself, Povinelli suggests that marginalized positions, or Mamdani’s ‘permanent minorities’, are forced to occupy ever more narrow spaces and regimes of intelligibility. Damn the system!

⁶ Himadeep Muppidi, ‘Who Forms the Mass of Mass Destruction?’, *Review of International Studies* (2023)

⁷ Kathryn Yusoff, *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2018). This is another example of the rejection of arguments that the destruction of the world is normal or produced by humans. Rather, Yusoff shows that specific modes of being human are destructive. We might posit, as do many of my interlocutors in this piece and elsewhere, that other modes of being human might then be instructive for thinking about decolonial openings.

⁸ Alexander Barder, *Global Race War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2021). Barder presents a detailed examination of the (white supremacist) air that we breathe. The question that remains is: what other stories can oxygenate our challenges to this dominant one? We face no shortage of interlocutors for this task.

your experiences of being a young man wandering the world with a dying language in your heart. In some ways, you are still the boy sent away to school, whose body received a beating with each utterance of your Mama's tongue. Isn't that how they destroy worlds, by destroying knowledge (in children, especially)? But you remember, don't you? You still work in Nubian.

Since I was little, you've spoken of humanism, and of the idea that human beings treat human beings terribly, of the idea that we need to recognize the humanity in all people. You talked of evolution and your hope that things will change. I don't remember if I told you that I have come to abhor those kinds of arguments. I understand evolution for you has been about framing an opposition to a religious fundamentalism that claims this world is born of God and then Adam. I find, though, that I do not have that particular starting point. So, when I read Christina Sharpe posit that she is done with making claims that Black people are human, I saw the opening that I thought I had been seeking.⁹ She hails a traumatic ambient violence in her examination of Blackness, a trauma that you danced around as your curiosity placed you in relations from which to study being Black in different spaces, in Lebanon, in America, in England, and everywhere you travelled.

Sharpe starts with the death of her sister, the last living relative in her birth family. The fact of her total orphaning allows her to tell a story about anti-Blackness and inherited traumas. It's an orphaning that I don't know if you can appreciate, since you have been grounded in a village that survived colonialism in some shape that connected it to the before-times. But, this writer, Baba: she takes her analysis to the Mediterranean Sea and the piles of bodies lost in migration (often at the cruel hands of people smugglers, you'd say). She draws links between the anti-Blackness that sweeps over a racialized world order today that encompasses even those who are not direct descendants of people trafficked in the Middle Passage. That's us, Baba. I could see in so many of your jokes that you already knew this, but that it was painful knowledge. You'd retreat to the safety of the village and its stories, even though the 'state' that encompasses it is so destructive that it keeps you away from home. But, I wonder, can the boundaries of the human be so painful that I can only accept the offering that leaves the human to Renaissance Man?

No! I take back the word 'angst'. I am not angry! I am angry! If I am afraid, as I said, I think I am afraid of my own rage. It makes me want to leap into this pain ... mine, not yours. I didn't want to stop at jokes that aim to recognize and then protect us from the pain. I am not saying that you did stop there. But you always pushed me to ignore the boundaries and insist on occupying space (in your role as a parent, perhaps). I grew hesitant to tell you: I wanted to investigate the edges, even if I were in danger of losing myself! It seemed so noteworthy to me that her study directs Sharpe away from making a claim for humanity. Her answer to the cruel violence rejects the oft-repeated claim that the conjuncture in which we exist dehumanizes human beings and destroys our coexistents. I cannot know for sure without asking her, but she seems to reject it because the claim carries with it the liberal assumption that 'claims to humanity' will shame violators into contrition or stake some claim to a higher moral ground, as if liberal presumptions about the world exclude a racial imaginary. Shame the violators?! Damn it! We already know that many forms of coloniality incorporated versions of Eurocentric humanism. The ordinariness of civilizational righteousness and superiority precludes any transformative possibilities that a sense of shame might otherwise encourage.

Still, my rage feels reactionary. I know you will feel it in your heart when I say it: who cares about humanity?! I want to be gentle here. You and I have watched people interviewed on news channels crying out: Why does the world not care what happens to us? We have heard some version of this question so many times that I actually associate it with you. It is a brutal, horrible cry, and we know the answer, right? The world does not care because you are Black (or some version of

⁹Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), p. 116. Humanism is implicated in the white supremacist, capitalist racial order. Sharpe says '...the category of the "Human" misunderstood as "Man" [and] languages of development ... [along with] the material conditions that they re/produce continue to produce our fast and slow deaths'.

savage). You are Black (or some version of savage) because the world does not care what happens to you.¹⁰ Yet, Baba, you continue to watch carefully and insightfully with the hope that ‘the world system’ will do something different. You notice any small change in orientation and keep track of the most-obfuscated indicators of change. I know you are disappointed. More than disappointment though, Baba, I think I am succumbing to this rage. I find myself whispering: we also know that other modes of being exist and other modes of being human exist. And then shouting: other modes of being human exist!

In the face of biological explanation, in the face of a world predominantly organized around a global racial imaginary, in the face of the already-destroyed or disqualified ways of being¹¹ and the knowledges that animate them, the violence enrages me. In such a world, what could violence ever be but racialized, classed, and gendered? Along what pathways could violence between economic classes be anything but racialized and gendered? These are some of the questions that our conversations raise for me and what I wanted to share with you when we were together. Most often, I think these pessimistic thoughts and write dark notes. This time, I feel desperate to try something different. I’d like to move against the depression, the inertia, reactions that are – I keep reminding myself – probably quite normal in light of what I see when I look, when I hear, when I feel, when I face young people who anxiously struggle to see futures, or older colleagues and friends who anxiously wonder how they will pass into their old age, many who are aware of what is being done in their name to people whose whole worlds are being destroyed.

You said George Floyd’s murder is not new or surprising. Nor is it something to theorise in the abstract. It is, rather, more actual evidence of lived experience. Centring my gaze, I think, from the perspective of stories that make sense of Black terror (in the USA specifically), this murder is just one more piece of evidence of the destruction of worlds. It is evidence of the continued attempts to destroy world rebuilding where it happens. From this perspective, the police officer who murdered George Floyd represents not simply a murderer, not simply one more criminal in a world of good people. The police officer represents one more monster in a monstrous system that terrorizes Black people and forms of Black life in America. But that can’t be the end of story, can it? Baba, mustn’t we somehow puzzle together another ending outside of the monstrosity that we have created and cultivated with our own breath and our own stories? Mustn’t we reckon with the monstrosity of the systems that order our world. Mustn’t that be the luxury, the duty of the living? It doesn’t feel luxurious, but I can’t turn away just yet.

I can feel the emotions that are driving this letter in so many directions, Baba. I don’t know if I am making sense. Making sense, ha! I am carrying the tensions of worlds you shared with me and other contradictory worlds I inherited from other places. At the risk of giving you whiplash, I will change direction here. If you’ll allow me some room, I’ll try to think about how luxurious the work of puzzling is, what a luxury it is to face filth, violence, and treachery, the goriness that results in the piles of bodies, like those that first jarred me into the ‘we’, we who destroy, we who are destroyed. I know that you don’t remember that photo book of the massacre in Lebanon that I got when we lived just off Shari’al-Farazdeq in Riyadh. I wish you did because the ‘how’ of how I found it in my possession represents the first time my life was upended. I think this stance has to be my starting point, it feels less hopeless to me, a less hopeless way to make sense.

These emotions started to seep out when we were last together. After you went to sleep, I would stay up reading Sinan Antoon’s stories about the collateral damage of war.¹² I started connecting

¹⁰Jackie Wang, *Carceral Capitalism* (South Pasadena, CA: Semiotext(e), 2018), p. 263. She cites Frank Wilderson: ‘the cop’s answer to the black subject’s question – *why did you shoot me?* – follows a tautology: “I shot you because you are Black; you are Black because I shot you”. Blackness comes to occupy a narrow space in a regime of intelligibility. Damn the system!

¹¹Khatun, *Australianama*, p. 15. Khatun points out that other forms of knowledge and the ways of being they support were ‘disqualified from the late 18th century’ as irrelevant and premodern. The idea of disqualification can orient the decolonial thinker.

¹²Sinan Antoon, *The Book of Collateral Damage*, trans. Jonathan Wright (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2019). Antoon reanimates these disqualified modes by showing how they have been subject to destruction and the worlds that they might have witnessed.

things I was reading with aspects of my life and the rage that is building in me. The connections made me feel less alienated. This writer places together in a frame the destruction of sense (the production of confusion and senselessness) and the destruction of the material objects that form part of the sense-making endeavour. He moves between the narrative written in the first person and the first-person reflections of the items that are collateral damage in war: carpets, walls, trees, etc. I thought about how his story reflects on how our lives, the sense that we make of our lives, and the material structures of our lives can be collateral damage when worlds are destroyed. Our stories about ourselves can also be destroyed. The selves that we have understood us to be can go missing or become fragmented. These are tensions and contradictions that are a consequence of living in colonial relations. I started to wonder: isn't this our experience? Baba, I wanted to ask you: how do our responses tell us something about how colonialism writes over how we love, how we live, and how we do so in the wake of an extermination that has become more than thinkable?

I know it is not radical for me to say that the fragmentation of the self is a result of colonial violence. I know that the turn to violence in response to colonial violence is to be expected. But perhaps we should not confuse this response with the redeeming violence of political action, should it occur in the process of anti-colonial resistance. We have talked about how Frantz Fanon's thoughts on the violence enacted on bodies, on spaces, and especially on modes of being emerged within his work as a healer, from his attempts to treat those suffering psychologically as a result of that violence.¹³ Like Antoon, he made no distinction between ontological, epistemological, and material destruction, for all three – and more – weave intricate relations in the lives that people live. The destruction lives as embodied pain and terror in the people who cannot escape it.

Your friend Adel couldn't escape it, could he? Hopeful about the results of the Iraq war, he sought to return to Baghdad with his family in the 2010s. Do you remember when you told me? His wife, who'd been employed in a bank in Kuwait, lost her job after Saddam Hussein invaded. For more than a decade, they were forced to move to places that accepted their status as refugees from Iraq. The hope of return, the hope of citizenship – these abstractions – motivated Adel. He began to take trips to Baghdad to set up house. Suroor and the two boys waited in Cairo. Do you remember when you told me? Your voice broke once again. Adel was killed in a car bomb. Suroor and the boys were relocated to the American South, still as refugees. They couldn't escape it, could they? I promised to find them, but I failed. As I write this, I sit next to the side table graced with the intricate doily that Suroor crocheted and gifted to me. They still rest in my heart even if they do not know it. Too many of these kinds of losses live too painfully in my chest, Baba.

I keep thinking, though, how you had told me since I was a teenager that I needed to find a way to live doing something that gave me purpose. Now I understand that life isn't so optional; living isn't so choice-driven. We are caught in stories not of our own making. Perhaps you were planting seeds in case they would grow and orient me. I found many people who offer orientations that serve a similar, grounding end, some of whom I share with you in this letter. You know that Soyinka wrote that, '[W]e will never reach a destination. There is none to reach.'¹⁴ This heartens me, for it directs me to seek companions rather than end. We are on a journey, dear Baba. I am grateful for you. Your searching orients mine. While you might not put it this way, I hear your rage through my friends when we ask: Who can afford to think of decoloniality as a purely epistemological question? Who can afford to think of epistemology as something disembodied with all that that entails?¹⁵

¹³Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (New York: Grove Press, 2004). The destruction that Antoon and others point towards is evident in Fanon's writings about how it produces a reaction that must be similarly violent in order to be audible, but he tells us that they need to develop from a reaction to a politics. Damning the system must be a political project.

¹⁴Soyinka, *The Man Died*, p. 125. Since there is no destination to reach, the development of a political project must accommodate the disqualified knowledges and modes of being that Khatun, *Australianama*, highlights, that is, if it is to carry a decolonial imaginary.

¹⁵Nelson Maldonado-Torres, 'A questionnaire on decolonization', *October Magazine*, 174 (2020), pp. 73–8. Maldonado-Torres says that 'liberal institutions prefer bodies of colour who utter the "correct" words and who relativize, minimize, domesticate, and potentially eradicate or keep at bay the wrong ones' (p. 76). Importantly, he tells us that a much-needed

I once wrote a paper on the politics of knowledge called ‘Why Orientalism Still Matters’.¹⁶ In that essay, I worked to show how one scholar was reading a special issue of a journal in which her foreword appeared. She was supporting another’s argument in that issue, and I wanted to explicate the logic of why that particular argument was the most politically forward of all of them. The others performed, as far as I could see, forms of casual forgetting of the politics that places different people in different relations of power. My essay, I think, must be read as an argument in political theory, not just Saidian, but in the vein of Fanon, who used his knowledge of Hegel and others to adopt an overtly political stance ... a stance in opposition to the obscuring of politics for the sake of getting along. Rage redirected, as it were.

I bring this up here, Baba, because at the time I was making an argument for politics. I can extrapolate now that I meant to make space for a politics of remembering, a politics of violence, a politics of racial violence. That paper ends with a comment on what is at stake. There are things I would change if I wrote it again, but I suppose if I need to find a footing, I may find it there. For I remain as invested in and I hope as aggressively focused on what is at stake. Shouldn’t I, Baba, even when my heart feels like it is racing to a stop? The existence of many existents is at stake, isn’t it? The George Floyds and their families are at stake, right? Non-imperial modes of being are at stake, right? Hope is at stake, right?

Now that I’ve got this far in my letter to you, I think I know how I will write my essay. I struggled with the academic format, which, as you know, requires a sort of distance. It cannot accommodate the emotions or the aliveness of racialized violence. It helps facts to grow devoid of their meanings.¹⁷ The elisions make space for white supremacy’s violent imaginaries.¹⁸ It seems that my wandering thoughts have brought me back to your lessons. Is it odd for you to hear me explain how I have heard you? The first lesson is that talking things over helps me find my voice, even if the talking takes the form of a letter. We cannot work over these topics by ourselves or on our own, I hear you say. Thinking with you and through your stories, the stories that in part animate my life, ground me, and help me centre the Shiera that is connected to you and the world beyond me. It reminds me that objectivity is not my goal, that I want to show how racialized violence is both lived and embodied, and transmitted or inherited. I think I can do this now, for I now see that you’ve already given me what I need.

The second lesson: you often remind me that we must care about people, that living in the heart of empire distances one from others. This lesson pushes against the complacency that ‘first world problems’ support. So, maybe I am wrong about dismissing the ‘human’ as simply as idea that is too colonized for redemption. Maybe I was too hasty when I told that lawyer, it’s too late; my heart has already died; we are already colonized. Maybe my heartbreak and my anger had me draw too hard a line. If I hear you right, you have taught (are still teaching) me that there is still work to be done, that the refusal of Renaissance Man represents an acceptance of another query: what do we

‘decolonial maturity includes the realization that the exploration of colonialism, decolonization, and related terms often provokes anxiety and fear’ (p. 75). This fear (and the pain it can yield) exposes the decolonial thinker to the problem as one of politics, the problem of a system that works very hard to maintain itself by determining the field of intelligibility. Damn the system!

¹⁶Shiera S. el-Malik, ‘Why Orientalism still matters: Reading “casual forgetting” and “active remembering” as neoliberal forms of contestation in international politics’, *Review of International Studies*, 41:3 (2015), pp. 503–25. It is the political that matters, a form of the political that comes without guarantees because we cannot foreclose the future. Asad Haider, ‘Politics without guarantees’, *The Point Magazine* (August 2021), available at: <https://thepointmag.com/politics/politics-without-guarantees/>

¹⁷Muppidi, ‘Who Forms the Mass of Mass Destruction?’, p. writes ‘to rip apart the meaning of facts while leaving the facts intact – what form of historical writing achieves that?’

¹⁸Ben Meiches, ‘Dreams of Atomic Genocide: Racism, Weaponry, and the Bomb’ (2023) points to white supremacy as creatively violent. While he writes about bombs and nuclear weapons, I keep thinking about the depiction in C. L. R. James’s *Toussaint Louverture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012), pp. 52–3, of a creative murder: bury a slave to the neck, lather their head with honey and molasses, and let ants and flies kill them slowly.

do now?¹⁹ Is this what you wanted me to understand: that, from my location, ‘turning towards’ can only be a political stance? A ‘human’ imaginary might be colonized, but other imaginaries have not been eradicated. Are you directing me to ‘turn towards’ so that we also won’t cease to exist, so that the ways of being and the stories that animate them remain as existents in the world available to all the seekers of other ways to be? Rather than shame those who talk out of both sides of their mouths about human rights, I hear you encouraging me to wade into the fight, to refuse Renaissance Man’s ownership of the category of the human. What kind of world can we build out of this mess, Baba?

I love you with all the pieces of my being,
Shiera

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¹⁹Sylvia Wynter, ‘No humans involved: An open letter to my colleagues’, *Forum N.H.I.: Knowledge for the 21st Century*, 1:1 (1994), pp. 42–73.