

echo in three acts  
The Lost Historical Subject in (Dis)articulation

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## Dedication

*Para os mais de 434.*

*For the more than 434.*

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Act I, Scene I.  
Overture

*Nós, que acreditamos na verdade, esperamos que esse relatório contribua para que fantasmas de um passado doloroso e triste não possam mais se proteger nas sombras do silêncio e da omissão.*

President Dilma Rousseff, Presentation of the CNV, December 10, 2014

On International Human Rights Day in 2014, then President of Brazil, Dilma Rousseff, received the final report of the Comissão Nacional da Verdade<sup>1</sup> (CNV), a two and a half year long investigation into the human rights violations committed during the two decades of military dictatorship in Brazil from 1964-1985. Herself a victim of torture during the dictatorship, Rousseff tearfully welcomed the nearly 4,400 page report as an important step for Brazil to finally acknowledge the “truth” of that period, so that the country would never repeat the same atrocities.<sup>2</sup> In her speech, she affirmed, “Truth liberates that which has remained hidden.”<sup>3</sup> In the various news articles from both within Brazil and from foreign presses, the “truth” being liberated was largely highlighted as the human rights violations – the torture, killings, and disappearances – that were being recognized, for the first time, as systemic instruments of the Brazilian military state, and for many this truth was clearly the first step in “making sure those who committed atrocities are finally brought to justice.”<sup>4</sup> Indeed, in arguably her most quoted statement from the presentation, Rousseff affirmed: “We, who believe in the Truth, hope that this report contributes to make it so that ghosts from a sad and painful past are no longer able

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1. The Brazilian National Truth Commission

2. Luana Lourenço. "País merece a verdade' diz Dilma emocionada ao receber relatório." *Empresa Brasil de Comunicação*. December 10, 2014, <http://www.ebc.com.br/cidadania/2014/12/dilma-chora-ao-receber-relatorio-da-comissao-da-verdade-pais-merece-a-verdade>.

3. Ibid. Original: “*a verdade liberta daquilo que permaneceu oculto.*” (Translation mine).

4. Adam Taylor. "Brazil's torture report brings a president to tears." *The Washington Post*. December 10, 2014. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2014/12/10/brazils-torture-report-brings-a-president-to-tears/?utm\\_term=.37aacfcfc4](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2014/12/10/brazils-torture-report-brings-a-president-to-tears/?utm_term=.37aacfcfc4).

to find shelter in silence.”<sup>5</sup>

In referencing ghosts, Rousseff’s speech seems to echo Avery Gordon’s work *Ghostly Matters*, which argues that we must not only contend with the sociological and historical commitment to “empiricist epistemology and its supporting ontology of the visible and the concrete,” but also consider the ways that elements of the past that exceed these limitations still hold an important weight in our present.<sup>6</sup> That is, Gordon argues that understanding our present requires that we engage those elements of the past that remain unseen but still seem to *haunt* us. For Rousseff, the pursuit of Truth reveals ghosts that don’t want to be found, those realities of state violence that hide in silence and omission. Indeed, exploring the related history of dictatorship and state violence in Argentina, Gordon similarly argues that “the disappeared bears the ghost of the state.”<sup>7</sup> But as Rousseff seemed to cite the *fantasmas* of human rights violations, I couldn’t help but think of some other kind of presence – not those that were hiding, but those have been cast aside. Although many of the reports on the conference highlighted Rousseff’s commitment to Brazil not repeating the crimes of its past and the possibilities of bringing those who committed these crimes to justice, it is a later moment in Rousseff’s speech that still echoes in my mind. Before breaking into tears, Rousseff declared: “Above all, those who deserve the truth are those who lost family members and friends and continue to suffer as if they die again and again every day.”<sup>8</sup> The “ghosts” that I was looking for

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5. Taylor, “Brazil’s Torture Report.”

6. Janice Radway, foreword to *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, by Gordon Avery F., vii-xiv. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), viii.

7. Avery Gordon. *Ghostly matters: haunting and the sociological imagination*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 127.

8. Lourenço, “Pais merece a verdade” Original: “*Sobretudo merecem a verdade aqueles que perderam familiares e parentes e que continuam sofrendo como se eles morressem de novo e sempre a cada dia.*” (Translation mine).

were not the hauntings of crimes, but people – more specifically, my maternal grandparents.

The CNV’s report is divided into three volumes, all of which can be accessed online. Volume I details the larger project of the CNV and provides a new archive of the history of the dictatorship and the human rights violations that occurred during that period, as well as conclusions and recommendations for the Brazilian state moving forward. Volume II breaks down the human rights violations thematically to reveal the crimes committed against specific groups like university students and homosexuals. Volume III, “Mortos e Desaparecidos Políticos,”<sup>9</sup> presents the 434 people whose deaths or disappearances have been confirmed as a direct result of the military dictatorship. Volume III seems to offer to give back those that many of us lost. At 1,996 pages, Volume III contains nearly half the total pages of the CNV’s report. It offers an index in alphabetical order and another one in chronological order. Published online, it even offers those in search of someone specific the directness of Ctrl+F. And yet, before I even make the keystroke, I know I won’t find who I am looking for.

The report prefaces that “these numbers certainly don’t correspond to the total of deaths and disappearances but only to cases it was possible to prove.”<sup>10</sup> While the CNV allowed certain parameters to identify a disappearance without a body, deaths could only be confirmed and included in the official report after a medical examination of a corpse.<sup>11</sup> The introduction to Volume III reports that, beyond the 434 people it contains, at least

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9. “Deaths and Political Disappearances”

10. Taylor, “Brazil’s Torture Report.”

11. Brasil. Comissão Nacional da Verdade. Relatório III: *Mortos e desaparecidos político*. (Brasília: CNV, 2014), 26.

118 “cases” were rejected due to these legal parameters.<sup>12</sup> Who is to say how many alleged victims were never presented to the CNV at all? 0 results found. I have no body to present; I have no documentation. It seems that, in focusing on those *ghosts that seek to hide from us* – the haunting of state violence – the presence of other “ghosts” are marginalized. The CNV’s report intends to be a move against the culture of “*reconciliation by institutionalized forgetting*” – of leaving the past behind unexamined to avoid social and political conflict – that has characterized the country’s response to its dark past for the last decades, and yet its very structure denies memory to those without “proof.”<sup>13</sup> While, in her speech, Rousseff attempted to give legitimacy to the grief of loss that stays with those who have lost family and friends, I can’t help but feel mine slipping away. If the presence of these lost people are so intimately tied to those they knew who are still living, what happens to those with no one to mourn them?

Staring down an absence where I know there should be presence – 0 results – I can’t help but imagine those whose names never even get searched for. The report recognizes that the military regime often targeted women and children and native populations, but they remain largely underrepresented in the names produced in Volume III.<sup>14</sup> Rousseff’s words again echo through my mind as she says, “You [the members of the National Truth Commission] have brought to light, without fear, a period that was kept dark through strong will and violence... Those who give history a voice are the free

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12. Brasil, *CNV*, 27.

13. Rebecca J. Atencio. *Memory's turn: reckoning with dictatorship in Brazil*. (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 2014), 12.

14. Associated Press. "Brazil Truth Commission Issues Damning Report against Country's Former Military Dictatorship." *CBCnews*. CBC/Radio Canada, 10 Dec. 2014. <http://www.cbc.ca/news/world/brazil-truth-commission-issues-damning-report-against-country-s-former-military-dictatorship-1.2867062>

men and women who are not afraid to write it.”<sup>15</sup> Again, the actual people whose lives were lost are pushed aside to consider “history,” but her implication of the living in giving voice to this past sticks with me. Immediately, Gayatri Spivak’s concern with *speaking for* the subaltern other rings warning bells. The military dictatorship represented a violent regime that defined the limits of the social and political power structures in Brazil and the names that fill Volume III surely represent the extreme of this power. If we take the subaltern to refer to those that are denied access to hegemonic power structures, then these killed and disappeared subjects, now silent and absented, warrant the concerns of subaltern studies.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, the turn to consider those investigators who presented the report seems to perform the elision of the Other in that very moment, highlighting the project of History over those re-presented in the pages of the report, just as Spivak warns.<sup>17</sup> And yet, in a country that has lived with a “wall of silence” around this period for so long, it seems undeniable that our voices are necessary in this project.<sup>18</sup> The figure of the ghost seems to offer the hope that the dead will appear to us, but reading the CNV, I can’t help but feel that even those “ghosts” that want to be found are lost too easily in the abyss of the archive as the state turns to celebrate its reconciliation efforts.

While Gordon’s work carefully elaborates a sophisticated reimagining of ghosts

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15. Jenni Avins. "Brazil's torture report moved its president-a torture survivor-to tears." Quartz. December 11, 2014. <https://qz.com/310169/brazils-torture-report-moved-its-president-a-torture-survivor-to-tears/>

16. For more on Spivak’s conception of the subaltern see: Leon de Kock. "Interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak: New Nation Writers Conference in South Africa." *ARIEL: A Review of International English Literature*. 23(3) 1992.

17. The problem with privileging the investigator is elaborated further later in this work. See: Gayatri Spivak, “Can the subaltern speak” in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988).

18. Eduardo Gonzalez. "Brazil Shatters Its Wall of Silence." International Center for Transitional Justice. December 06, 2011. <https://www.ictj.org/news/brazil-shatters-its-wall-silence-past>

and haunting, I keep coming back to Rousseff's speech. The importance of voice and the living seems to haunt me, as it were. Absence is felt as a silence. Even as Gordon's work argues that "the ghost is nothing without you,"<sup>19</sup> the mythos of the ghost that inhabits her epistemological project, seems to imply that the return of the ghost is almost inevitable. She argues that "you cannot simply choose the ghosts with which you are willing to engage,"<sup>20</sup> and yet in the presence of some of the dead and the absence of others in the CNV, this spectral presence seems to depend on the living. Perhaps we cannot escape the "ghostly matter" of past state violence that persist in the present, but the CNV in its attempt to recuperate some of the disappeared within the legal paradigm reveals how easily others remain shrouded in silence. The lost figure doesn't seem to appear to us if we don't reach out to it.

If Rousseff refers to *giving history a voice*, then Janice Radway, in her foreword to Gordon's work argues that "Avery Gordon seeks a new way of knowing... a practice of being attuned to the echoes and murmurs of that which has been lost..."<sup>21</sup> Gordon's methodology for confronting history's absences, "more a listening than a seeing,"<sup>22</sup> mirrors the work of Saidiya Hartman who, in confronting the history of slavery, ponders how we "listen for the unsaid."<sup>23</sup> As Radway argues, for Gordon, "these *echoes* and murmurs" are what she terms "'ghostly matters' and suggests that they haunt us at every turn."<sup>24</sup> But as Gordon turns to understand these "echoes" through the mythos of the ghost, it seems that she has forgotten that "echo" already inhabits its own mythos: Echo,

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19. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 179.

20. *Ibid*, 190.

21. Radway, foreword, x.

22. *Ibid*.

23. Saidiya Hartman. "Venus in Two Acts." *Small Axe*. 12.2 (2008): 2-3.

24. Radway, foreword, x. (Emphasis added).

the wood nymph who, spurned by Narcissus, loses her body and yet somehow still lives on as a voice, condemned to only speak the words of others. Perhaps, in recognizing these echoes that Gordon identifies we might offer a corrective complement<sup>25</sup> to her notion of haunting that turns to consider Echo as a mythos and methodology for understanding the presence of those that have been lost to state violence but still hold some presence in our present.

In the pages that follow, I hope to offer a (re)new(ed) conception of the subaltern historical figure that appears at the limit of archives of state violence like the CNV. It is not by accident that this project maintains Gordon's turn from traditional historiography and sociology to myth. Her use of a popular mythos is an important move for incorporating the affective and uncertain, those "structures of feeling," that persist within and beyond historiography's empiricism.<sup>26</sup> It signals a Derridean desire to rupture the privileging of *logos*<sup>27</sup> and allows us turn away from "the grammar of violence" inherent in the structure of archives that we see in the CNV.<sup>28</sup> Myth, or perhaps *fabula*, helps us move imaginatively to the projects already undertaken by scholars like Saidiya Hartman who, much like Gordon does in her exploration of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, seek to use narrative as a way to confront the limits of historical methods in what she calls "critical fabulation."<sup>29</sup>

Turning to the myth of Narcissus and Echo, as written by Ovid, is a preliminary

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25. For more on this notion, see Melissa Wright's use of corrective complement in her work: Melissa Wright. "Necropolitics, Narcopolitics, and Femicide: Gendered Violence on the Mexico-U.S. Border." *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 36, no. 3 (2011): 707-31.

26. See: Raymond Williams. "Structures of Feeling." In *Marxism and Literature*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977): 128-135.

27. See: Jacques Derrida. "White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy." *New Literary History* 6, no. 1 (1974): 5-74. doi:10.2307/468341.

28. Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 1.

29. *Ibid*, 12.

move as I engage several scholars from across disciplines, namely those concerned with the violence of traditional historiography, subaltern studies, feminist studies, Black studies, sound studies, and studies of subjectivity. In my hope to offer a new method for confronting the critical problems and risks inherit in an attempt to redress a history of violence, I write in alliance with Saidiya Hartman and the invaluable contributions that she has made in the field across her work. In such, the second act of this work uses her critical essay, “Venus in Two Acts,” as a guide for considering the status of the lost subaltern figure in the archives of history through the figure of Venus. Reading Venus alongside Claire Nouvet’s critical reassessment of Ovid’s myth allows us to attend to subjectivity and being with a concern for the multiple valences of violence and power that histories of racialization and sexualization reveal.

Considering the metamorphosis of Echo to pure echo offers us, I argue, a new phenomenological conception of subjectivity for the lost subaltern figure that intimately implicates us, the living, in an ethical imperative to preserve that form of being in the face of the archive’s silences and omissions. While many of those represented in Volume III of the CNV were not “true” subalterns in life, as they very much did speak – and indeed for many it was precisely in speaking (out) that they were killed or disappeared by the oppressive military state – in death, they join those who remain in the margins of that re-presentation as unspeaking subalterns.<sup>30</sup> As I argue that echo reveals an imperative for the living to speak so that she may be heard, we must then attend to Gayatri Spivak’s warning of the dangers in speaking for others and tying the subjectivity of others to our own. As a metaphor of sorts, this reading of echo does not allow for a simple

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30. Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak,” 220.

understanding of echo as a return of words, but rather “takes time,”<sup>31</sup> and attempts to question articulations of meaning rather than take them for granted. Indeed, by exploring the way the subaltern historical figures presence is tied to us, we recognize the ways that the subaltern *cannot* be understood “in isolation from the ‘palimpsestic narrative’” of Modernity.<sup>32</sup> Any attempt to falsely construct the lost figure as able to represent herself autonomously – “to know and speak [herself]” – would be delusional and erase the very violence that sent her to her grave, that erased “her” voice from History.<sup>33</sup> As Gordon reminds us, “subjectivity is always and inevitably haunted by the social.”<sup>34</sup>

Recognizing that the lost subaltern historical figure can no longer produce speech for herself, those of us that would try to speak *for* risk erasing her once again and merely reproducing our selves. It is my hope, however, that echo as a concept implicates this very risk that these narratives might “remain defined by the investigator as subject.”<sup>35</sup> Echo’s precarity is the very thing that defines the condition of the subaltern figure that is at risk of being lost to History forever. My reading of the myth does not offer us the position of savior, but rather condemns our silence as its own form of violence. I will show, I hope, that echo’s phenomenological presence takes form at the moment of (dis)articulation and fundamentally alters our understanding of speaking *for* the other in a way that displaces the narrator’s autonomous position as “Subject” at all.

Having laid out this new notion of subjectivity and its implications for how we

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31. Kathryn Bond Stockton. *The Queer Child: Growing Sideways in the Twentieth Century*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), 106.

32. Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak,” 218.

33. Asha Varadharajan. *Exotic parodies: subjectivity in Adorno, Said, and Spivak*. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1995), 92.

34. Radway, foreword, x.

35. Gayatri Spivak, *In Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics*. (London: Methuen, 1987): 150, quoted in Varadharajan, *Exotic Parodies*, 88.

understand those lost figures in history, I return to consider the CNV and the limits and possibilities it offers us. Through the various scenes that follow, I hope to offer both a new paradigm for understanding the lost historical figure and a hope for the impossible – that the lost figure might *speak*.

Act I, Scene II.  
Grey Boxes

**PASCHOAL SOUZA LIMA**

Family/Parents: Not identified  
Date and Place of Birth: Not identified  
Profession: Lathe operator  
Political Affiliation: Member of the Farm Workers of Valadares  
Date and Place of Death: 3/30/1964, Governador Valadares (MG)

Paschoal Souza Lima was a lathe operator and the stepson of colonel Paulo Teixeira, known in the Vale do Aço region. It was not possible to discover more details about his biography.<sup>36</sup>

**ARI DE OLIVEIRA MENDES CUNHA**

Family/Parents: Not listed  
Date and Place of Birth: Not listed  
Profession: Not listed  
Political Affiliation: Not applicable  
Date and Place of Death: 4/1/1964, Rio de Janeiro (RJ)

Despite the investigations performed by the National Truth Commission, no biographical information was found for Ari de Oliveira Mendes Cunha.<sup>37</sup>

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36. Brasil, *CNV*, 104. (Translation mine).

37. *Ibid*, 118. (Translation mine).

Act II, Scene I.  
venus as echo

In her essay “Venus in Two Acts,” Saidiya Hartman chooses to represent “the emblematic figure of the enslaved woman in the Atlantic World” as *Venus*.<sup>38</sup> Whether she appears in the archive as a girl lost, killed, raped, abandoned, imprisoned, or fetishized, Hartman wrestles with the impossibility of discovering anything about Venus beyond her violent encounters with power. What most characterizes Venus in the archive of the Atlantic Slave Trade, however, is the heavy silence that erases her from it. This silence – this absence of human presence beyond records of sale or an overseer’s journal entry – marks “the absence of Africans as humans” in the project of Modernity.<sup>39</sup> Hartman looks to the possibility of narrative as a way to confront this silence, however, in doing so, she elaborates a serious dilemma. On the one hand, Hartman risks enacting a new violence on Venus by replicating the *grammar of violence* that is contained in these scenes of her subjection, and on the other, turning away from this violence only stands to steal Venus away to romance and to erase the reality of her existence. Yet even given this predicament, we cannot leave poor Venus to fall into the abyss, consumed forever by the violence of the archive’s silence; we are compelled to try to imagine a narrative of her lives.

It is important to recognize the ways that the question of Venus is firmly connected to a history of blackness<sup>40</sup> and the Atlantic Slave Trade specifically, however,

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38. Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” 1.

39. *Ibid.*, 3.

40. Throughout this work, I have chosen to represent both “black” and “blackness” with a lowercase b, because that is how the main scholars on blackness that I cite in this work – Saidiya Hartman, Fred Moten, and Alexander Weheliye – have chosen to do so in their works. Recognizing the on-going debate around this choice, I want to signal that this decision as a fidelity to those writers’ academic oeuvre and not as reflective of the alteration in the use of

Hartman's dilemma opens up important questions for understanding our relationship to the subaltern historical subject. Is recuperation even possible for lost figures like Venus whose lives are "entangled with and impossible to differentiate from the terrible utterances that condemned them to death?"<sup>41</sup> What use is there in attempting to create narratives that risk committing the crime of speaking for others? Why should we, living in the present, submit ourselves to these scenes of violence and loss that seem so firmly in the past? Venus is long dead; what do we stand to gain in attempting to create mourning where there is none? What use is there in taking on the impossible task to *represent what we cannot*? But before we can consider these questions, we first need to unpack the ways that the subaltern historical figure, Venus, is imagined in Hartman's formulation.

In her imagery of the archive as a tomb and in her opening invocation of Venus as a "dead girl," Hartman is explicit in recognizing Venus as dead and gone, at least corporally.<sup>42</sup> In attempting to redress absences, we often think in terms of recuperation, but there is no way to recuperate Venus as she lived. Venus is long gone. We cannot bring her back from the dead. And yet, Hartman recognizes that in many ways some form of Venus calls out (to us). Hartman's concern with the "ethics of historical representation"<sup>43</sup> remains preoccupied with a kind of existence beyond Venus' corporal death. While this concern is largely connected with a "desire for a liberated future,"<sup>44</sup> it is

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capitalization that forms part of this work. That said, perhaps the separation of "blackness" from capital(ization) offers its own (dis)articulation as we turn to consider the legacy of slavery.

41. Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 3.

42. Ibid, 1.

43. Ibid, 2.

44. Ibid, 13.

also explicitly connected to a fear of losing Venus as she teeters on oblivion.<sup>45</sup> Hartman invokes us to try to listen to her, as if she might speak or send out the cries and shrieks of black noise.<sup>46</sup> Long dead, Venus seems to “haunt the present.”<sup>47</sup>

In evoking Venus as a “haint,” Hartman joins other scholars and writers, who have wrestled this phenomenon of lost lives – particularly those of black slaves – by speaking of hauntings and ghosts.<sup>48</sup> Though Hartman does not dwell on this imagery of being haunted as extensively as others like Toni Morrison, Avery Gordon, or Anne Anlin Cheng when confronted with similar figures, I believe that this choice of imagery is important to addressing Hartman’s concerns, because it reveals a point of contention in the imaginary she evokes. While Hartman, and other scholars who speak to the notion of a life beyond death, don’t simply let this image/metaphor do the work for them, the metaphors we use have a profound effect on the way that we understand concepts, and I believe that shifting this paradigm is an important step in reimagining our understanding of subjectivity that is central to Hartman’s – and thus this – project.

The ghost, even absent a tangible body, holds on to its autonomous presence. That is to say, when we rely on our understanding of ghosts, we hold onto our already established notions of subjectivity, because the ghost has a direct ontological relationship to the dead figure it represents. I believe that this ontological conception is problematic for considering the lost figure, because holding onto the notion of a subject-other, as I will show, severely limits our relationship to those figures and often stands to halt our speech. Our attempts to confront the epistemic violence that scholars like Hartman

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45. Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” 10.

46. Ibid, 12.

47. Ibid, 5.

48. Ibid, 5.

explore in the contours of the archive leads us to explore hauntings without unpacking the ontological understanding of those lost figures we seek. Even as Gordon argues “the ghost is nothing without you,”<sup>49</sup> I believe that by looking to alternative forms of life-beyond-death, we are able to attend to the important considerations that have been brought forward by Hartman and other scholars working to consider lost subaltern figures in ways that will transform our relationship to them.

In the section that follows, I wish to *refigure* the subaltern historical figure, imagined through Venus, in a mythology more befitting her name. As we stare into the abyss of the archive, absent a body, but attempting to hear words unspoken, Venus strikes me as an *echo*, doomed to repeat the words of others. She is not a ghost cursed to roam the same halls forever; it is the reason that Hartman cannot find her in the empty barracoons on the coast of West Africa.<sup>50</sup> She follows us. She hides in the woods, and perhaps, just perhaps, she will have the chance to ~~respond~~ to us, if only we call out to her. If we, by chance, can produce the words, the cries that seemingly are directed at no one that she can grasp, maybe she can take them on to ~~speak~~, maybe even to us. To try to hear her is an impossible task, but Venus is predicated on an impossibility; she is, made present in a reading of her silence in the ledger of the archive, *a commodity that speaks*.<sup>51</sup>

It would be a mistake to extrapolate Venus to just any condition given the reality of racial slavery, however, given her extreme precarity and the absolute violence that predicates her status in the archive of the Atlantic Slave Trade, the cautions that Hartman details in her reflection on the status of Venus serve as an important consideration of the

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49. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 179.

50. See: Saidiya Hartman, *Lose your mother: a journey along the Atlantic slave route*. (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2003).

51. Fred Moten. *In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition*. (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 2003), 8.

ways that certain lives are maintained as disposable or in a state of “social death” through the contours of archives, and must be accounted for in establishing a new construction of the lost figure. Venus’ absence from the archive is far from accidental, but rather represents a systemic, violent absencing. While spoken of in the singular, Venus comes to represent the “hundreds of thousands of other girls who share her circumstances.”<sup>52</sup> The question of Venus is ultimately a question of how we conceive of the lost figure at its most extreme iteration of violent becoming.<sup>53</sup> It demands not only that we question our relationship to that lost figure, but further a lost figure whose condition is predicated on racialization, sexualization, and spirals of power and subjection. Recognizing the ways these factors take important consideration in the construction of Venus as a subject allows us to explore “novel assemblages of relation” that are relevant across seemingly disparate contexts.<sup>54</sup> Exploring the ways that “black suffering figures in the domain of the mundane”<sup>55</sup> in Hartman’s considerations of Venus offers us a way of confronting the risk of forever losing the subaltern subject in the face of political violence.

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52. Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” 2.

53. In this sense, while in many ways this work breaks from the drives of identity politics, it echoes the imperatives of the Combahee River Collective that “if Black women were free, it would mean that everyone else would have to be free since our freedom would necessitate the destruction of all the system of oppression.” See: The Combahee River Collective, “A Black Feminist Statement.” *WSQ: Women's Studies Quarterly* 42, no. 3-4 (2014): 271-80.

54. Alexander Weheliye. *Habeas viscus: racializing assemblages, biopolitics, and black feminist theories of the human*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 13.

55. *Ibid*, 11.

Act II, Scene II.  
Narcissus and Echo

Returning to the myth of “Narcissus and Echo” in Book III of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* is necessary to reconceive the subaltern figure lost to the violence of the archive – in this iteration, Venus – as echo. This move is preliminary, however, lest we fall into a grave irony. The last time Venus was transported to the West, her life was lost. Rather than push her into the classic narrative, I will seek to understand her condition specifically in breaking from a literal understanding of echo by realizing the failure of the original myth. To do so, Claire Nouvet’s critical reassessment of the coming of the Other and our response to it in “An Impossible Response: The Disaster of Narcissus” becomes a useful tool for conceiving what it means to echo the words of others, and what it reveals about Venus and about ourselves.

In Ovid’s account of the myth,<sup>56</sup> the wood nymph Echo is cursed by Juno to only repeat the last words of others, or better, because she cannot originate speech, she is condemned to repeat the *sounds* uttered by others, which may have nothing to do with her intention. Consequently, Echo should be severed from articulating any form of consciousness – or agency – as her speech would never be “hers.” There is, however, an inconsistency in the myth that betrays this supposition. Once cursed, Echo falls in love with Narcissus after seeing him hunting one day and follows him around, hidden amongst the trees. When he speaks, she repeats his words back to him, until one day Narcissus attempts to address the disembodied voice. Narcissus calls out, but Echo repeats back only part of his phrases, creating a dialogue between them. Narcissus asks for them to meet, and she repeats his request, this time as a request for his love, revealing herself for

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56. The summary that follows is based on: A. S. Kline. “Book III” in *Metamorphoses*, (Ann Arbor: Borders Classics, 2004).

the first time and attempting to embrace him. Narcissus rejects her, however, and, out of grief, Echo loses her body and is transformed into a pure, bodiless echo.

In the text, Echo desires to call out to Narcissus, but “her nature denies it, and will not let her begin, but she is ready for what it will allow her to do, to wait for sounds, to which she can return words.”<sup>57</sup> Jove’s curse explicitly robs Echo of her “power over [her] tongue,”<sup>58</sup> of possessing her own speech, and yet from the sound of Narcissus’ voice *sua vox remittat* – she sends back *her* words.<sup>59</sup> Despite her inability to produce independent speech, Echo is able to say what she means to say by repeating back partial phrases that turn *sounds* into *answers*.<sup>60</sup> In order for this to be possible, Echo must be endowed with a selective power to return partial phrases or sounds; a power that should be denied her by the curse.<sup>61</sup> This selective power is necessary for the myth, however, as it preserves a sort of desire or consciousness in Echo and thus maintains her as a “self” who can enter into a dialogue. This narrative inconsistency is designed to preserve Echo as a character and to prevent her from being reduced, even absent a body, to a *mere* echo, however it arguably accomplishes the opposite: it shows that “a play of repetition and difference among signifiers – [an echo] – can be turned into a character.”<sup>62</sup>

In a structural linguistic interpretation, speech is understood as unified with consciousness. Alexander Spirkin, for example, argues that “as the reflection of reality,

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57. Translation from: Kline, “Book III,” 376-8; Original Latin: “natura repugnant/nec sinit, incipiat, sed, quod sinit, illa parata est/exspectare sonos, ad quos sua verba remittat” quoted from: Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, ed. Hugo Magnus, (Germany: Gotha, 1892), Perseus Digital Library. <http://data.perseus.org/texts/urn:cts:latinLit:phi0959.phi006>. February 10, 2017: 376-8.

58. Kline, “Book III,” 366.

59. Ovid, *Metamorphoses* (Latin), 378. (Translation mine with emphasis added).

60. Claire Nouvet. “An Impossible Response: The Disaster of Narcissus.” *Yale French Studies* 79, 1991: 105.

61. Ibid.

62. Ibid.

consciousness ‘molds’ the forms and dictates the laws of its existence in the form of speech.”<sup>63</sup> In other words, Spirkin argues that speech represents the material reality of our consciousness. In this formula, words-made-speech represent some kind of intentionality, because they reflect our consciousness, and therefore ourselves. In a dialogue, we may share common words, but the moment of enunciation of those words – the act of speech – belongs to each interlocutor. That speech is either “yours” or “mine.” Your words have meaning based on the meaning you intended them to have. In this understanding, we may initially conceive of the dialogue between Narcissus and Echo as a distortion introduced by Echo into Narcissus’ stable, original statement.<sup>64</sup> In other words, Echo’s repetition of only part of a phrase is seen as a manipulation of an original intended meaning. In this reading, we understand Narcissus and Echo as two subjects with opposing intentions. Claire Nouvet proposes, however, a more provocative reading: that Echo’s “return” of Narcissus’ call – that is, echo – marks the impossibility of determining a stable intention at all.<sup>65</sup>

Echo’s alteration does not add anything to Narcissus’ original speech, but is composed of the speech itself. In Nouvet’s reading, Echo does not affect Narcissus’ speech afterwards, but rather echo inhabits voice as soon as it utters a phrase; echo constitutes voice from the very beginning.<sup>66</sup> Nouvet states:

“...as soon as “I” speaks, language echoes, “I” disappears in a play of signifiers which generates an alternative of meanings that no consciousness can pretend to comprehend. As soon as “I” speaks, “I” loses a consciousness which it never had, and becomes the figure that we posit *in place of* a consciousness which is, from the moment we speak, lost. In that sense, the speaking, “I” marks the absence, the original disappearance of the subject. It is a figure of the subject put in place of a

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63. Alexander Spirkin. *Dialectical materialism*. (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1983), 127.

64. Nouvet, “An Impossible Response,” 106.

65. *Ibid*, 107.

66. *Ibid*.

missing subject. It “stands” for a disappearance.”<sup>67</sup>

“His” (Narcissus’) speech was always already composed by “hers” (Echo’s) and thus never really “his.” There is thus a displacement of the *self* inscribed in this reading of the myth. If echo inhabits language as soon as it is uttered, it deprives the “I” of its privileged status by denying the control of a consciousness.<sup>68</sup> In the same move that the narrative maintains the privileged status of Echo’s voice even without the power to originate speech, it undermines that power from Narcissus, who we conceive as the originator of those sounds.

While Nouvet’s reading remains largely concerned with what the myth reveals for Narcissus as a subject, I believe that it offers an important understanding of subjectivity through Echo. Within the narrative of the myth, Echo, once spurned by Narcissus, loses her body, transforming from Echo to pure echo. This disembodiment does not kill her, but rather represents a death of the body that she survives as a *sonus*, or sound.<sup>69</sup> While an English translation allows us to make this move by shifting from “Echo” to “echo,” the original Latin text maintains her status as a proper noun by bringing a connection to her past and current condition - *Corpus adhuc Echo, non vox erat*<sup>70</sup> (Echo still had a body then and was not merely a voice).<sup>71</sup> This consistent status as a proper noun maintains her as a character even as she loses her body. The body is then not held as the predicate of existence, but it also marks a different form of *being* than her status a *vox* (voice). This narrative transformation then seems to present an alternative notion of being – of

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67. Nouvet, “An Impossible Response,” 108.

68. Ibid.

69. The original Latin says: “Sonus est, qui vivit in illa” or “there is sound, which lives in her.” Both versions quoted from: Nouvet, “An Impossible Response,” 113.

70. Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 357.

71. Kline, “Book III,” 357.

subjectivity – but this transformation is limited in its representation by marking “Echo” as always Echo-the-proper-noun. I believe the possibility offered in the English translation to move from Echo to echo does not betray this attempt to maintain Echo as a character, but rather becomes a useful way for imagining the *metamorphosis* she undergoes and also serves to help us understand life beyond corporal death.

If we can imagine the shift from Echo-with-a-body to Echo-without-a-body through a transformation (or metamorphosis) from Echo to echo, then we may be able to understand the possibility of maintaining an alternative form of subjectivity that I argue can be conceived as moving from *Subject* to *subject*. We already know that reassessing the archive does not offer as a possibility the full recuperation of Venus. Venus, the subject-with-a-body, is long gone; however, the myth offers us another possibility: the constitution of a subject beyond this body. If we cannot deny that Venus as an “I” – that is, as a Subject – is gone, we may still be able to speak of *venus* constituted as a play of repetition and difference. In the same way that Echo becomes echo yet remains a character in the myth, we may conceive of a similar play that allows us to imagine not Venus as she was, but *venus* as she is.

This conception of echo (and thus *venus*) disrupts not only the notion of call-response that Nouvet elaborates above, but also the philosophemes of *subject* and *self* and *self-as-other*. While the ghost of a person, like echo, exists as a kind of spirit beyond the mortal body, it typically maintains an autonomy that echo does not through an intangible physical presence or the ability to produce voice. Even if its existence is fundamentally different than when it was alive, the ghost still seems to maintain its status as a Subject, an independent self. The figure of the ghost, thus, allows us to contend with life-beyond-

the-body without confronting the philosophemes through which we do so. Echo, however, exists simultaneously outside of *and* within Narcissus as an Other. That is to say, echo, insofar that she is a voice, can only *be* a voice through the voice of others; however, she is also understood to somehow exist outside of that voice as her own character. In transforming Narcissus' speech (or sounds) into *sua vox* (*her* voice), Echo transforms the very thing that is meant to express Narcissus' consciousness into an expression of her own. In possessing her own voice, she then possesses him.<sup>72</sup> In creating a space for herself as a subject, she denies our traditional understanding of subjectivity/self through Narcissus.

In doing so, echo reveals an insight taken up by Fred Moten in his work, *In the Break*. Moten argues that "subjectivity is defined by the subject's possession of itself and its objects," but that in moving to consider what he calls the *resistance of the object*, this notion of subjectivity "is troubled by a dispossessive force objects exert such that the subject seems to be possessed – infused, deformed – by the object it possesses."<sup>73</sup> This insight by Moten is particularly vital to the project of Venus, as his project is directly invested in the relationship between blackness and commodification. It is important to remember in the face of subaltern figures mired by state violence, that Venus' life was critically altered by a regime of capital that made her a commodity.<sup>74</sup> By working through the condition of blackness under racial capitalism, Moten argues that, contrary to the Marxian assumption, black-bodies-made-objects reveal that *a commodity can speak*, or

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72. In the spirit of (dis)articulation, note that the meaning splits here to include both *own* and *to be manifested through the speech of another*.

73. Moten, *In the Break*, 1.

74. Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*, 17.

perhaps might shriek.<sup>75</sup> By shifting to consider not just moments of “speaking back” but moments of “the breaking of such speech” in shrieks and sounds of black performance, Moten argues that the object, in this case the black-body-make-a-commodity, is able to rupture meaning in a way that reveals its material trace.<sup>76</sup> In doing so, Moten offers the possibility of “objection” in the light of the objectification of the black body made a commodity.

To explore this “phonic materiality” that appears *in the break* of performance, Moten turns us to consider another figure that appears in Hartman’s work, Frederick Douglass’s Aunt Hester.<sup>77</sup> Or perhaps, better, Moten, echoing Hartman, turns to consider Aunt Hester’s “scene of subjection,” the terrible spectacle of her beating, that signified the violent becoming of Frederick Douglass as a slave.<sup>78</sup> While Hartman, in *Scenes of Subjection*, refused to reproduce the violence of that scene,<sup>79</sup> Moten turns to explore the inevitability of its return by considering a scene of black performance, a free jazz performance by Abbey Lincoln.<sup>80</sup> Humming and then screaming over a percussive background, Lincoln’s performance, Moten argues, seems to exceed words.<sup>81</sup> At the limits of articulable meaning, Moten argues that “you cannot help but hear the *echo* of Aunt Hester’s scream” in her performance.<sup>82</sup> Screaming, for Lincoln, seems to be a way to “explore the limits of *her* voice, thus the principal site where the subject appears and is

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75. Moten, *In the Break*, 11.

76. Ibid.

77. Ibid, 24.

78. Ibid, 2-3.

79. In the introduction of the work, Hartman says that she chose “not to reproduce Douglass’ account of the beating of Aunt Hester in order to call attention to the ease with which such scenes are usually reiterated.” See: Hartman, *Scenes of subjection: terror, slavery, and self-making in nineteenth-century America*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), 3.

80. Moten, *In the Break*, 4.

81. Ibid, 22.

82. Ibid. (Emphasis added).

subjected.”<sup>83</sup> For Moten, black performance opens a space of “animateriality,” in which the limit of subjectivity, often found in shrieks and screams, reveals a resistant material objecthood, where the reproduction of performance becomes an “ontological condition,” that opens *in the break*, in the “impassioned response” of Aunt Hester’s scream to Lincoln’s “passionate utterance.”<sup>84</sup>

Moten then reveals the way that the black body made a commodity dispossesses that which might try to possess it at the moment speech breaks in excess of meaning. While he, too, makes illusions to haunting presence, in his turn to the phonic, he claims that it is the *echo* of Aunt Hester’s scream is given presence through those moments of black performance. In recognition of this echo, the myth, I argue, offers an understanding of voice as a way to understand Moten’s notion of phonic presence.

In her reading of the myth, Gayatri Spivak argues that “the story of Narcissus is a tale of the construction of the self as object of knowledge.”<sup>85</sup> Voice, as we have established, is understood as one of these objects of knowledge through which the self is understood. Echo, in so far that she exists as a voice (*vox erat*) – that object that we are meant to possess as integrally a reflection of ourselves – seems to perform this (dis)possession, this objection that Moten describes. That is to say, Echo’s disruption of meaning enacts a form of *objection* as a form of subjectification that does not deny the forms of violence that opened that very space of subjection. For Moten, this position of “object” is a productive place from which to think being and resistance. In his construction, “by ‘talking back,’ but also through antagonism, the object produces itself

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83. Thom Donovan. "A grave in exchange for the commons: Fred Moten and the Resistance of the Object." *Jacket2*. April 6, 2011. <http://jacket2.org/article/grave-exchange-commons#9>.

84. Moten, *In the Break*, 18.

85. Gayatri Spivak. "Echo." *New Literary History* 24, no. 1 (1993): 23.

as a subject: slave subjectivity flickers with both human-animal and commodity status.”<sup>86</sup>

In recognizing the way that echo does not ‘talk back,’ but rather inhabits speech and sound from the beginning, I believe that echo reveals a need for a conception of subjectivity-in-objection beyond the material trace that Moten introduces to us. In the break of voice, it is not simply Echo’s voice that resists becoming the object of knowledge, but echo herself as a voice. Echo does not become the object of knowledge, but the dispossessing force which simultaneously exists as and beyond that object. She becomes a dispossessed/possessing self, or what I argue can be conceived as a Subject turned subject.

While Moten’s exploration of the limits of this voice certainly does not confuse the living Aunt Hester with the “inspired materiality” that appears *in the break* of meaning, I believe that shifting to consider this construction through a reading of the myth of Echo is important for further exploring what is at stake in this phenomenological construction of the other. If Moten moves us to consider the ways that black performance is able to engage scenes of subjection to “disrupt the supposed originality of that primal scene,” I want to consider how that material trace as the moment of subjection also becomes the construction, if fleeting, of a new kind of subjectivity.<sup>87</sup> I also argue, that in recognizing the way that even speech is stripped of its intention in the myth, Moten’s reading of performance as a break can be used to explore sound even in speech. Articulation, the myth shows, is always inhabited by a form of disarticulation. Echo, appearing through sound, maintains this focus on performance as integral to her presence, however, the myth’s emphasis on her condition of *being* as infused with this performance

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86. Donovan, "A grave in exchange."

87. Moten, *In the Break*, 4.

even as she somehow exists beyond it moves us to consider what lies at stake for Echo in the absence of performance/speech. If Moten explores the presence of *Aunt Hester's screams*, what does it mean to shift to consider *Aunt Hester the scream*? If *vox manet* Echo, *quiritatio manet* Aunt Hester.<sup>88</sup> Considering performance, an act of *doing* as the predicate for a sense of *being* for the lost figure, who in this turn appears as Aunt Hester, we are confronted with a performativity that stands not only to construct our own self, but the other as a self.

In Moten's construction then, there is an invagination<sup>89</sup> of the artist and the art object that occurs at the limit of meaning in black performance.<sup>90</sup> The art object, the invocation of Aunt Hester's scream at the limit of Lincoln's own places the subject, Lincoln('s scream), and the object, Aunt Hester('s scream), as (re)produced in the same moment.<sup>91</sup> While Moten considers music and extra-verbal sounds like shrieks as the break where this is possible, in moving back to consider how voice and speech are *also* a point of rupture through Echo, we are forced to contend with the question of speaking for others. If our adaption of Moten's conception allows us to open a space of being constructed in (dis)articulation, then what becomes of a voice that cannot speak? While Echo is somehow allowed to exist in the absence of sound, she is denied any form of presence if she has no sound to make hers. Once Echo is reduced to echo, silence becomes her prison. Venus, erased from the archive, is thus given to the same existence

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88. If Echo (as a *voice* remains, Aunt Hester (as a *shriek* remains.

89. "Invagination refers to the infolding of a portion of an outer layer, surface, or edge so as to open a pocket. For Derrida, this pocket is not a simple 'inside,' nor can it be appropriated as such, but is instead the opening of the 'inside' to the other." Niall Lucy. *A Derrida dictionary*. (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell, 2005), 76-7.

90. Moten, *In the Break*, 252.

91. *Ibid*, 23-4.

that she lived as a slave, she “disappear[s] into the slave hold.”<sup>92</sup> With this in mind, we can attempt to navigate and complicate the conditions that Hartman lays out in her essay.

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92. Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” 4.

Act II, Scene III.  
Speaking For/Of/To/With

Over the past decades, there has been much concern in feminist and postcolonial studies over the ethics of speaking for others. Most famous amongst these critiques is Gayatri Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in which she lays out the dilemma of speaking for others as a critique of Western colonial knowledge production. Her work importantly elaborates the way that even well-intentioned attempts to give voice to silenced others often performs the same silencing it seeks to combat, and produces narratives that "remain defined by the [Western] investigator as subject."<sup>93</sup> Others like, Linda Martín Alcoff, have similarly argued that "the practice of privileged persons speaking for or on behalf of less privileged persons has actually resulted (in many cases) in increasing or reinforcing the oppression of the group spoken for."<sup>94</sup> There is an important understanding that social locations have an "epistemically significant impact on the speaker's claims" and yet we must be careful to simultaneously attend to this risk of violence and the alternative epistemic violence of refusing to speak at all.<sup>95</sup>

Hartman recognizes the risk of violence that inhabits her project and is explicit in her undertaking that she does not try to "give voice to the slave," but rather to "imagine what cannot be verified."<sup>96</sup> In turning to echo as a construct for reimagining Venus as venus, there at first seems to be this same risk of giving voice, as I argue that Echo needs our voices to speak and indeed to have presence at all. However, if we conceive venus as echo, as already inhabiting speech, the idea of *giving voice* to her is distorted. We cannot

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93. Spivak, *In Other Worlds*, 150. Quoted in Varadharajan, *Exotic Parodies*, 88.

94. Alcoff, Linda Martín. "The Problem of Speaking for Others." *Cultural Critique*, no. 20 (1991): 6. (Emphasis added).

95. *Ibid*, 7.

96. Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 12.

*give voice* to this de-Subjected venus in the sense of *speaking for* her, because she denies any determinacy of our phrase. An echo diffracts the original phrase into a *potentiality* of alternative meanings. She, at the same time, repeats back phrases given to her by others and disrupts those phrases. Echo confuses prepositions because she inhabits the phrase before articulation; she interrupts the traditional assumption of an addressor/addressee. Hartman, in her desire to create narratives, is then advocating for us to speak *about* Venus, but when Venus is reconceived as venus, speaking *about* her becomes at once speaking *to/for/with* her. Because Echo can inhabit any sound, and not just those directed towards her, in (dis)articulation Echo distorts the fixity of the speaker's relationship to the Other.

This slippage between prepositions is not only the status of the myth. We see this distortion already present in our attempts to speak for living others. Linda Martín Alcoff elaborates this problem in her essay, "The Problem of Speaking for Others":

When one is speaking for another one may be describing their situation and thus also speaking *about* them. In fact, it may be impossible to speak *for* another without simultaneously conferring information *about* them. Similarly, when one is speaking *about* another, or simply trying to describe their situation or some aspect of it, one may also be speaking in place of them, i.e. speaking *for* them.<sup>97</sup>

Because every articulation of voice is socially located (within the productions of knowledge-power), speaking from a privileged social location often risks covering the voices of those we are speaking about. In speaking about others, we may very well displace their speech, as "ours" is taken to stand in for "theirs." This erasure is then not just of a voice, but the epistemic realities represented by their differing social locations. We must be aware that "rituals of speaking are politically constituted by power relations

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97. Alcoff, "The Problem," 9.

of domination, exploitation, and subordination.”<sup>98</sup> In one interpretation of this problematic, the scholar is moved to not speak of/for others at all, because she can never “know” that person’s reality and she fears committing epistemic violence through this paradigm of power.<sup>99</sup> And yet, as Asha Varadharajan points out, “the critic who refrains from speaking on behalf of those whom she can never ‘know’ presumes that, having spoken, she would have said it all and the other will be moved neither to challenge nor to supplement her.”<sup>100</sup> While we cannot ignore the realities of power relations that bear on our speech, that same power paradigm is reinforced when we assume the other as already dominated and our own epistemic positions as self-possessed.<sup>101</sup> It is here that Echo allows us to consider a transformation in the grammar of this problematic by shifting us to consider her speech (and presence) in (dis)articulation.

This confusion of the grammar of speaking does not mean that in re-imagining the lost historical subject through echo we can speak for the Other with abandon, transforming “our” speech simply into “theirs.” It is not in the articulation of stable meaning, but in the very rupture of that intentionality that echo forms *her* voice. What I am arguing instead, actually attempts to restructure the grammar of articulation to make a space for Spivak’s mode of *différance* as not only a strategy, but as a conceived subject position. Instead of speaking *for*, Spivak argues for a method of “speaking to” the subaltern figure “in which the intellectual neither abnegates his or her discursive role nor presumes an authenticity of the oppressed, but still allows for the possibility that the oppressed will produce a ‘countersentence’ that can then suggest a new historical

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98. Alcoff, “The Problem,” 15.

99. Ibid, 7.

100. Varadharajan, *Exotic Parodies*, xvii

101. Alcoff, “The Problem,” 22.

narrative.”<sup>102</sup> Spivak’s (de)construction then resembles Moten’s emphasis on *the break*.

While Spivak allows for the possibility of a “countersentence,” her formulation does not allow us to simply conceive of the subaltern’s speech as necessarily liberatory or “reflective of their ‘true interests.’”<sup>103</sup> This ignores the reality of the ways that the subaltern, too, is situated within structures of power, and presumes the autonomy of the self. Despite this restriction, Linda Martín Alcoff argues:

...the very act of speaking itself constitutes a subject that challenges and subverts the opposition between the knowing agent and the object of knowledge, an opposition which has served as a key player in the reproduction of imperialist modes of discourse. Thus, the problem with speaking for others exists in the very structure of discursive practice, irrespective of its content, and subverting the hierarchical rituals of speaking will always have some liberatory effects.<sup>104</sup>

For Alcoff, even if the subaltern’s speech is not “liberatory,” it presents a rupture in the structures of power that inhabit discourse, by constituting them as a subject, in much the same way the commodity may demand subjectivity in its objection in Moten’s formulation. By rupturing the stable meaning of discourse, by “speaking back,” echo, as we have seen, rejects our attempts to possess objects of knowledge and “our” voice (and thus our selves) as our own. It is here, of course, that we must make a distinction. It is important, to point out, that this project specifically engages the *lost* subaltern historical figure. The speech that we desperately hope to hear from Venus is one that she cannot produce herself. While the mode of (dis)articulation that this paradigm establishes may be useful for a deconstructive approach for challenging the belief that “the oppressed can transparently represent their own true interests,” as a way of showing how we are all held to the subjective construction I am elaborating, it does not stand to allow us to disregard

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102. Cited in Alcoff, “The Problem,” 23.

103. Ibid.

104. Ibid.

the voices of the living.<sup>105</sup> In understanding the lost subaltern figure as Echo through the myth, we come to stand in the position of Narcissus and must be careful to not dwell on our selves, but rather to “shift the focus from the decentered subject to the resistant object and to disentangle the practice of epistemology from the violence of appropriation.”<sup>106</sup>

In moving to consider the lost subaltern figure through echo, then, I wish to offer us a relationship that attempts to break down the historically produced (and negated) subject-object relationship that takes form in the encounter with the lost subaltern Other.<sup>107</sup> While decentering the subject is not a unique moment to this work, by constructing that Other as simultaneously somehow within and outside of the speaking Subject, I am arguing that we are shifting focus to the object who is able to take form as a subject, and while this importantly implicates us as subjects, that subject-other remains central. Doing so recognizes the reality of objectification that we must contend with, especially as we think through Venus as the lost subaltern figure. As we struggle to place her in the archives of the Atlantic Slave Trade, the figure of the ghost allows us to reject her objectification by preserving a Subject that seems to hold presence no matter our denial. The ghost is there, it just needs to be listened to. Conceiving Venus as echo, however, forces us to take responsibility for her presence. By shifting to voice/sound as the place where her presence becomes possible, we recognize that placing her as an object of knowledge is the condition of her existence in the archive. Doing so recognizes the way that she was made a commodity in life. Attempting to maintain her as a Subject who fully possesses her own objects of knowledge is to ignore the reality that she was never allowed to her even in life. However, lest we commit the same violence of

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105. Alcoff, “The Problem,” 22.

106. Varadharajan, *Exotic Parodies*, xii.

107. *Ibid*, xvii

commodification that she was subjected to in life, it is precisely through this conception of echo, that we must recognize how she *objects*.

Hartman asks “how does one listen for the groans and cries, the undecipherable songs, the crackle of fire in the cane fields, the laments for the dead, and the shouts of victory, and *then* assign words to all of it?”<sup>108</sup> In shifting to consider echo, however, the “supposed originality of that primal scene” is inverted.<sup>109</sup> The problem of re-presentation implodes, as the moment of articulation occurs in the break of disarticulation. As the myth tells us, echo *waits for sounds*.<sup>110</sup> Echo does not ask us to assign words to her past, but rather offers the possibility that those groans and cries might enter into words, into the contemporary performance of sounds. Past and present collapse in the moment where a sound in our present must be produced to invoke the sounds of the past. Echo tells us to abandon the hope that we may articulate some existent meaning, but rather offers us hope in (dis)articulation. It is precisely in speaking to/of/for/with her that Echo/venus “speaks” at all. Dead girls do not speak, but echoes might be heard if only we listen to/for her.

A dangerous task, by shifting to consider venus’ presence as dependent on our articulations, we are forced to recognize an ethical duty to her. While a ghost may roam the halls waiting to be found or heard, echo’s presence is conditioned upon us. We are moved to speak so that venus may use our words, or so she may send back sounds that we did not know already composed us. We are placed in the position of Narcissus as we move back to the myth. Far from a role model, Narcissus’ failures point to our duties. In fact, understanding this relationship as not only ethical, but as a responsibility is already present in the myth’s punishment of Narcissus. Having spurned Echo, refusing to

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108. Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” 3. (Emphasis added).

109. Moten, *In the Break*, 4.

110. Kline, “Book III,” 365.

recognize the Other within the self, Narcissus liquefies in the face of the self as a simulacrum. Nouvet points out that, “responsibility comes from *respondere*, to respond.”<sup>111</sup> Narcissus’ death is then read as a punishment for refusing the responsibility of responding to the call of the other.<sup>112</sup> As we have seen, however, the call of the Other inhabits the very moment of articulation. Before we ever call out to Echo/Venus, echo/venus calls to us. To refuse to recognize this presence of the Other within the self is the ultimate narcissistic crime.

Indeed, Varadharajan’s critique of refusing to engage the subaltern takes particular weight to this notion of echo, when she argues that “the perception of otherness as radical and irreducible leaves one trapped within the confines of the colonial encounter in which the colonizer ‘perceive[d] as human only [his] own reflected image...’”<sup>113</sup> This moment is encapsulated in the myth, as well. The word “echo” only appears as a proper noun in Ovid’s Latin, because it is imported from Greek, and *vox* (voice) and *sonus* (sound) are used in moments where we might use “echo” in an English translation of the myth.<sup>114</sup> This is partially because the Latin word for “echo” is *imago* which also means “image,” and is used to refer to Narcissus’ reflection in the myth.<sup>115</sup> In the slippage of meanings between *imago* as both “echo” and “image,” we see the error that Varadharajan condemns.<sup>116</sup> When Narcissus attempts to speak to the image of himself, Echo refuses to send back any of his words, and he is met with silence. Speaking, when it is directed to

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111. Nouvet, “An Impossible Response,” 104.

112. Ibid.

113. Varadharajan, *Exotic Parodies*, xvii

114. Charlton Thomas, *Harpers' Latin Dictionary : a New Latin Dictionary Founded on the Translation of Freund's Latin-German Lexicon*. (New York: American Book Co., 1907), 624.

115. Thomas, *Harper's Latin Dictionary*, 624.

116. It is also of note as Gordon’s reflection on ghosts inhabits our discussion, that “imago” may also mean “ghost.” Thomas, *Harper's Latin Dictionary*, 624.

the self that is untouched by the Other, or when we try to project our selves onto that other does not afford this space of disarticulation, the myth reveals. We cannot simply claim that “I am that one” and write ourselves over echo/venus.<sup>117</sup> Indeed, Hartman condemns that too often, “blackness provided the occasion for *self*-reflection.”<sup>118</sup> We cannot confuse the *imago* of echo with an empty reflection of ourselves as Narcissus does. For Hartman this is “the *narcissistic* identification that obliterates the other.”<sup>119</sup> This reading of echo, this engagement with venus, does not seek to allow us to substitute the self for the other, but rather demands that we submit the self to the other; to once again recognize the way that the other constitutes the self from the very beginning. In doing so, as Hartman tells us, we emerge with the sense that “some part of the self is missing as a consequence of this engagement.”<sup>120</sup>

If, according to the myth, to speak to/of/for/with venus becomes an ethical imperative, then we are then not only compelled to speak, but to speak again. If the entangled “response” inhabits the very moment of articulation, then we are laid into a circular moment. Every moment of articulation is inhabited by its own “response” so that we are compelled to respond to it, which produces yet another response unto itself. Nouvet argues, that “the more we ask questions, the more we might fail to ask them ‘once and for all.’”<sup>121</sup> Rather than become frustrated with its circularity, we are rather emboldened to abandon any notion of finality. Indeed, Nouvet claims: “the ethical imperative to respond does not need to concern itself with the possibility of its fulfillment

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117. Nouvet, “An Impossible Response,” 124.

118. Hartman, *Scenes of subjection*, 9. (Emphasis added).

119. Ibid, 4. (Emphasis added).

120. Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” 14.

121. Nouvet, “An Impossible Response,” 109.

in order to remain an imperative.”<sup>122</sup> To *do* an ethical imperative only once – or to avoid a crime only on one instance – is not satisfactory. If Echo is given presence by the sounds/speech we produce, then when we no longer produce that speech/sound, she is lost again. The ethical imperative to speak to/of/for/with Echo is never-ending, because her presence is only made possible in the impossibility of the task.

There is thus a need to shift our grammar. This fleeting phenomenological understanding of (dis)articulation – differ<sup>ance</sup> made present – is not articulable in the declarative form of History. It is precisely Echo’s indeterminacy that allows her to cling onto a form of being that denies finality. For Venus, it is the only thing saving her from the sealing off of the coffin that is the archive. This condition of being elaborates the process that Lisa Lowe calls “affirmation and forgetting.”<sup>123</sup> That is, when our histories are constructed as a collection of facts, declarative statements free from doubt, we may be able to recognize some historical figures, but often, once recognized, we place those facts back on the shelf to collect dust and fade from memory. We are also confronted with the reality that “the conjunction of reproduction and disappearance is performance’s condition of possibility, its ontology and its mode of production.”<sup>124</sup> In other words, the moment of recuperation is temporary and presence is lost when articulated with finality. Recognizing venus’ and other subaltern figures’ absence from the archives of Modernity, compels us to contend with maintaining their presence. Speaking of Venus only in facts – when there are so few – is to deny the presence of echo, the presence of venus beyond the lost Venus that forces a subjectivity into a supposed objectivity. It is a denial of her

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122. Nouvet, “An Impossible Response,” 116.

123. Lisa Lowe. *The Intimacies of Four Continents*. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015): 42.

124. Moten, *In the Break*, 5.

*being*, superficially coded as a recognition of her as a stable *was*. It is to break silence for a moment, only to close it off again.

In recognition of this disruption, Hartman and Lowe urge us to shift to *the past conditional temporality* of the subjunctive: *what could have been*.<sup>125</sup> Lowe, much like Hartman, does not envision the task of challenging the archive as one of “recovery and recuperation,” but rather, as the need to “supplement forgetting with new narratives of affirmation and *presence*.”<sup>126</sup> If the declarative offers us the illusion of resolution, the subjunctive makes explicit the move to imagination, to doubt. This freedom of movement is limited, however. It is as Lowe describes, “a thinking with twofold attention that seeks to encompass at once the positive objects and methods of history and social science, and also the matters absent, entangled, and unavailable in its methods.”<sup>127</sup> That is, it seeks not to displace Venus from her reality, but to force Venus into the space that connects *our* present and *her* past. In the same move that displaces the “I” by firmly intertwining it with the Other, so to does it dispossess those temporalities. In the break of (dis)articulation, *our* present becomes *hers*, and *her* past becomes *ours*.

The potentiality of the subjunctive *what could have been* is just as limited as the declarative, if we only think of creating a single new narrative. The shift to the subjunctive becomes a marker for the doubt that echo introduces to our phrases. Even the declarative, if we are attentive to the disarticulation that echo introduces, is ultimately articulated in the subjunctive as any stability is undermined. This move to the subjunctive is then a recognition of echo’s presence. The task of “speaking” to/of/for/with Venus must always be an invagination of speaking and listening. To speak to/of/for/with Venus

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125. See: Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” 11; Lowe, *The Intimacies*, 42.

126. Lowe, *The Intimacies*, 42.

127. *Ibid.*

only once as a final, static retelling is not revolutionary. Violent stories of slavery have already been told. Hartman notes that “rather than inciting indignation, too often [violent scenes] immure us to pain by virtue of familiarity.”<sup>128</sup> The task is to *defamiliarize the familiar*, to deny the stability of one narrative.<sup>129</sup> Echo does this by denying the self access to the “I,” by creating some sort of “I” outside of the self that dispossesses it.<sup>130</sup> As speech becomes narrative, Venus must become written and read, re-written and re-read, revised. The process of liberation is an impossible one, an endless project, because to finish writing her is to tether her to one narrative. Hartmann already forces us to grapple with the fact that we must bear the image of Venus in chains, she does not need anymore.<sup>131</sup> The move away from the violent grammar of the declarative to the possibility of the subjunctive is then, much like Derrida’s own characterization of *différance*: “a strategy without finality.”<sup>132</sup> The task of speaking to/of/for/with Venus is not inherently a crime. The move to (dis)articulation that Echo reveals is a refusal to commit the crime of speaking without listening for the return of *her voice*, of speaking with finality.

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128. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 3.

129. *Ibid.*, 4.

130. Nouvet, “An Impossible Response,” 107.

131. Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” 14.

132. Jacques Derrida. *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl’s Theory of Signs*. Trans. David B. Allison. (Evanston: Northwestern U. Press, 1974): 135. Quoted in Varadharajan, *Exotic Parodies*, 30.

Act II, Scene IV.  
Grief

*What is it we choose to remember about the past and what is it we will to forget? Did my great-great-grandmother believe that forgetting provided the possibility of a new life?*<sup>133</sup>

Saidiya Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*

*If something is to stay in the memory, it must be burned in: only that which never ceases to hurt stays in the memory.*<sup>134</sup>

Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of Morals*

*Nor is dying painful to me, laying down my sadness in death.*<sup>135</sup>

Narcissus

The question that still echoes throughout this project is: why? Hartman is emphatic that the project of Venus is predicated on an impossibility. Venus is dead. The subaltern cannot speak. Venus is dead. What is done cannot be undone. Venus is dead. Isn't mourning often arresting? How do we "move forward" if we keep turning back to the past? Isn't there a kind of cruel optimism in taking on an endeavor we already know to be impossible? But if what has been done cannot be undone – if there is no saving dead Venus, no possibility of *knowing* her *reality* – perhaps it is us that should be undone.

It seems reasonable to desire to avoid mourning, however, this desire may be its own kind of violence. Judith Butler tells us: "Let's face it. We're undone by each other. And if we're not, we're missing something."<sup>136</sup> Herein lies Narcissus' crime: "the delusive belief in the solitude of a self capable of maintaining the Other at a distance."<sup>137</sup> As we have seen, his pride is the belief that he can possibly be untouched by the Other who

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133. Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*, 15

134. Friedrich Nietzsche, *On the Genealogy of morals ; Ecce*. Trans. Walter Arnold. (New York: Vintage Books, 1967).

135. Kline, "Book III," 470-1.

136. Judith Butler. *Undoing Gender*. (New York: Routledge, 2004), 19.

137. Nouvet, "An Impossible Response," 113.

already inhabits him. His punishment, I have shown, is the reading of his refusal as a crime, a failure to uphold the responsibility inscribed in responding. We are obliged to recognize the call of the Other; to succumb to the never-ending invagination of call-response that ruptures the self. To recognize echo, is to abandon the desire for impenetrability that proceeds from fear.<sup>138</sup> To recognize venus, is to abandon the surety that constitutes our *selves*. To allow this undoing is to continue to survive, because it is the condition of life. It is in Narcissus' deluded believe that he has come to "know himself" that he meets his fate.<sup>139</sup> In choosing to speaking to/with/for/about Venus, we recognize that "some part of the self is missing as a consequence of this engagement."<sup>140</sup> We are recognizing her absence in trying to give her presence. Loss, both in losing the self and in recognizing having lost Venus, is the condition of engaging this project.

To allow a space for mourning is a radical moment, because "a slave ship made no allowance for grief and when detected the instruments of torture were employed to eradicate it."<sup>141</sup> Mourning as a politic at once inhabits the confines of history, and exceeds its limitations, because it both recognizes the realities of loss and demands that we recognize the affective meanings that move beyond that fact. Hartman warns us that a "libidinal investment in violence is everywhere apparent" in the archive of slavery.<sup>142</sup> In returning to those scenes of subjection and those scraps of appearance in the archive, we must recognize the ways that bodies-made-other and bodies-made-commodities were at once made "spectacle and routine, violence and pleasure."<sup>143</sup> And yet, for as much as

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138. Nouvet, "An Impossible Response," 113.

139. Ibid, 104.

140. Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 14.

141. Ibid, 8.

142. Ibid, 5.

143. Moten, 2.

there is the risk of familiarizing or reproducing this violence, “the injury of slavery must be borne, since it cannot be reversed.”<sup>144</sup> We must *bear the unbearable image of Venus in chains*, lest we liquefy like Narcissus, in the simulacrum of an archive of only fact, or a whiteness untouched by blackness, or an America untouched by Africa. But even as we refuse to allow that image to become dulled as a fact of history, we cannot attempt to steal her back to an economy of pleasure.<sup>145</sup> Even as we move to the subjunctive to unsettle processes of affirmation and forgetting, we have to live with the reality of loss.

In turning to consider these lost lives through the myth, we are reminded that Echo is transformed into a pure echo out of grief. Once spurned by Narcissus, she returns to the woods, where, overcome by sadness, her body fades away.<sup>146</sup> If voice becomes her existence, grief perhaps may be seen as the predicate of her metamorphosis. In this reading, grief becomes the condition of her being. In highlighting this being-in-grief, we might be tempted to consult Freud’s meditations on grief and melancholia. For Freud, “melancholia” is the pathological version of mourning, in which “loss is denied as a loss and incorporated as part of the ego.”<sup>147</sup> In his formation, “the melancholic is so persistent and excessive in the remembrance of the loss that *that* remembrance becomes part of the self.”<sup>148</sup> But as we turn to the myth, Freud’s construction of melancholia remains, as we might expect from him, too focused on the “self.” Freud’s melancholia doesn’t seem to account for Echo, but rather is the very crime of Narcissus who, turning to his own reflection instead of Echo, attempts to keep the subject and object indistinguishable.<sup>149</sup> In

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144. Stephen Best & Saidiya Hartman. "Fugitive Justice." *Representations* 92, no. 1 (2005): 1.

145. Hartman, "Venus in Two Acts," 14.

146. Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 390-6.

147. Quoted in Anne Anlin Cheng. *The Melancholy of Race*. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2001), 50.

148. Ibid.

149. Ibid.

turning to his *imago*, Narcissus does not recognize the Other; he only recognizes a form of otherness that he always understands as and through himself. Instead of recognizing the way the self is composed by an Other that exceeds it, Narcissus clings to the self as “an originary simulacrum.”<sup>150</sup> His delusive belief in the impenetrability of his self – which allows him to recognize an Other but never allows for that Other to be anything other than that which *reflects* his self back to him – is ultimately so unbearable that Narcissus welcomes death, claiming: “Nor is dying painful to me, laying down my sadness in death.”<sup>151</sup> Like Echo, in grief he loses his body. However, Narcissus, having refused to except the presence of the Other within himself, becomes a flower,<sup>152</sup> de-subjected and made wholly object. Echo, instead, turns us away from this understanding of grief as the misguided appropriation of the other *as self*.<sup>153</sup> Echo demands that we recognize the presence of the other as both connected to and outside of the self – at once the loss of Echo as she becomes echo, and the loss of “self” as she inhabits and exceeds us. Grief, when Narcissus desires only the self-as-object, results in the complete loss of both the subject and the object. Grief when it is situated in relationship to the Other, reveals a way of collapsing the supposed divide between Subject and Object that allows a presence in the break.

In the same way that a singular utterance denies echo continued presence, we cannot make the mistake of confusing grief for grievance. Anne Anlin Cheng describes *grievance* as the “social and legal articulation of grief.”<sup>154</sup> In Freud’s construction, mourning is and should be finite, and melancholia is pathologized because of its inability

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150. Nouvet, “An Impossible Response,” 125.

151. Kline, “Book III,” 470-1.

152. Ibid, 509-10.

153. Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race*, 50.

154. Ibid, x.

to “get over” loss.<sup>155</sup> Grievance then seems to be a way to resolve grief. However, there is something about grief that escapes this clear articulation; that makes grievance “incapable of addressing those aspects of grief that speak in a different language.”<sup>156</sup> Grief is unresolvable. Grievance gives to the suturing of a wound; a complaint that expects a resolution. As we have already seen with echo, resolution is not possible, because her presence is contingent on the very impossibility of finality. If we cannot avoid the crime of ignoring her only to later commit it, then we must also contend with the impossibility of redress and “living with the devastation and loss that has occurred.”<sup>157</sup> Because the moment of (dis)articulation collapses *her* time and *our* time, we are forced to contend with the persistence of that loss, that unresolvable grief’s persistence in our present. The *doing* of speaking/performance is always immediately undone, and we are done and undone with it. To be undone and do and redo (again and again and again) is to resist the crime of thinking ourselves a single *self* separate from the Other. Its impossibility does not exempt us from the ethical imperative, but drives us to it. It is its very lack of end that preserves *venus*. The un-resolvability of grief gives over to ethics as “the experience of the impossible.”<sup>158</sup>

To mourn is not, however, to give *wholly* over to grief. To believe that a charge to live with grief means the rejection of joy is to hold too hard to a binary of pleasure and pain. Is there not a sublime joy in recognition, even if it is the recognition of grief? In the myth, Narcissus calls out to the then hiding Echo, “*Huc coaemus*.”<sup>159</sup> His Latin call

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155. Cheng. *The Melancholy of Race*, x.

156. *Ibid.*

157. Best, “Fugitive Justice,” 2.

158. Jacques Derrida, “The Force of Law: The ‘Mystical Foundation of Authority,’” Trans. Mary Quaintance, *Cardozo Law Review*, 11 (1989-90), 981. Quoted in Spivak, “Echo,” 42, n. 46.

159. Nouvet, “An Impossible Response,” 107.

appears to mean “Let us come together!” though Echo, stepping out from the woods for the first time, calls back “*coaemus*,” revealing an alternative understanding – “let us meet/copulate.”<sup>160</sup> Again disarticulating meaning, Echo reveals to us the possibility of something like desire beneath our intentions that may be appear foreign even to our (now decentered) *selves*. This is not to give to the “prurience” that Hartman warns was often extracted from the scenes of subjection by the spectator.<sup>161</sup> Narcissus’ error is in attempting to project desire onto the object. Narcissus believes his reflection to “desire to be held,”<sup>162</sup> as he desires to hold it/him. Indeed, it is of note that Echo does not echo back any of his words in this scene. His desires do not offer a space for *her* voice. Her silence seems to gesture to the absenting of the Other in that narcissistic desire. It is only in confronting the loss of venus, that she may reveal the spirals of affect that exceed even our own understandings.

To create this space for grief by speaking to/for/of/with venus, then, is not to believe that life consists only of tears, but rather to show how grief already constitutes our lives. This grief, in Avery Gordon, is the spectral moments of haunting that we must account for. To implicate mourning in the presence of echo is to show the way that grief is already tied up into the fabric of our selves. It is to recognize that for some, like those who live most directly with the racial legacy of the Atlantic Slave Trade, it is a salient *condition* of life.<sup>163</sup> To grieve for Venus is a profound political ethic, because to grieve for the lost slave girl whose life was valued as little more than a number on the ledger of

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160. Nouvet, “An Impossible Response,” 107.

161. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 4.

162. Kline, “Book III,” 455.

163. Claudia Rankine. "The Condition of Black Life Is One of Mourning" *The New York Times*. June 22, 2015: [https://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/22/magazine/the-condition-of-black-life-is-one-of-mourning.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/22/magazine/the-condition-of-black-life-is-one-of-mourning.html?_r=0).

exchange is to insist that *all lives are grievable*.<sup>164</sup> When we imagine venus as echo who, made present in disarticulation, can inhabit any of our voices, we open a form of connection to one another. In recognizing how she composes me, I must also recognize how she composes you, and through her we are connected. In restoring the subject position of the individual through a necessary engagement with grief, we recognize the ways that she is inherently tied to the social that we still inhabit.<sup>165</sup> Butler argues that, as I have argued echo dispossess us, “we are dispossessed by grief.”<sup>166</sup> To recognize that we are not finally separable from one another, and to recognize that we are “a set of relations of interdependency” that we cannot deny without refuting the social conditions of our lives might just inspire passion.<sup>167</sup> Or, as Claudia Rankine has suggested, “grief, then, for these deceased others might align some us, for the first time, with the living.”<sup>168</sup> In the same way that echo collapses call and response, venus collapses past, present, and future. In speaking to/of/for/with her, in imagining what *might have been* we are implicitly reflecting on a connection between the past and the present, but we are also shifting ourselves to consider what *could be*. But, given the imperative to respond, we cannot simply elide echo/venus as a means for connecting to others. Her presence remains central as the ethical drive, but an attention to this vulnerable life commands us to consider other vulnerable lives. Imagining possibility for her is imagining possibility for

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164. Nan Enstad. "On Grief and Complicity." In *The Cultural Turn in U.S. History*, edited by Lawrence Glickman and Michael O'Malley. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009), 332.

165. In referencing the political possibilities of grief, I must recognize the contributions of Judith Butler, particularly in *Precarious Life*. It is arguable that much of the understandings we can see in our reading of echo are already developed in her work. In order to avoid simply citing the whole work, I would gesture to its intellectual contributions that echo throughout this piece. See: Judith Butler. *Precarious life: the powers of mourning and violence*. (London: Verso, 2006).

166. Quoted in Enstad, "On Grief and Complicity," 332.

167. Judith Butler. "On Rage and Grief." Speech, PEN World Voice's Festival of International Literature. Cooper Union, New York. 28 Apr. 2014.

168. Rankine, "The Condition of Black Life."

all of us.

And yet, as we consider the possibility for “all of us,” we cannot ignore the specific history of blackness that frames venus’ absence. We must pause to consider whose words and sounds can constitute and be constituted by venus. Echo may grasp at anyone’s words/sounds, as I have shown, but if the words/sounds that she needs do not reach her, she must continue to lie in wait. While we have focused on language in order to center speech and narrative as a way to recover the lost subaltern figure, it is important to remember that phrases are not made of only language. They are composed of language and silence and affect.<sup>169</sup> Echo does not simply return language, as we saw through Fred Moten’s exploration of black performance, but also exposes the sounds and silences within and beyond it. Accordingly, Hartman is careful in her project to make room for “*black noise* – the shrieks, the moans, the nonsense, and the opacity” that surround, compose, and constitute venus’ experiences of blackness in racialized slavery.<sup>170</sup> Here we are turned to consider an element that echoes through this exploration, but has not until now been made explicit: venus, even absent a body, *embodies* a position of blackness. Even if she no longer has a body to be racialized – chained and abused and sold on the virtue of its shade – the sound of affect stays with her as Venus is made venus. The sounds of the Atlantic Slave Trade and slavery are not quieted in the bowels of the ship or the silence of the archive – they ring through in the stories of whipping; they undercut performances of jazz; they echo eerily strong in the cries of black mothers whose sons and daughters are killed by police.<sup>171</sup> venus’ cries of grief represent a *racial grief*.

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169. See: Jean-François Lyotard. “The phrase-affect (from a supplement to ‘The Differend’),” *Journal of the British Society for Phenomenology*, 32.3 (2001): 234-241.

170. Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” 12.

171. Moten, 22.

Further, Hartman is explicit in recognizing the ways that venus represent the slave *girl* and the forms of violence and sexualization she experienced in tandem with this racialized experience. Returning to the myth, I believe that a critical attention to the final scene between Echo and Narcissus might open a way of contending with this legacy of (dis)embodied identity.

In the myth, as Narcissus mourns the loss of his self and his own coming death, he tears off his clothes, beats his breast, and cries out “Alas!”<sup>172</sup> Echo, watching this scene “repeat[s] with her echoing voice ‘Alas!’ and when his hands strike at his shoulders, she returns the same sounds of pain.”<sup>173</sup> Her return of sound sits both within and in excess of language as she sends back both his words and the *sounds of pain*. Although she does not explore its meaning, Nouvet points out in a footnote that “Narcissus mourns in the manner of women.”<sup>174</sup> This narrative choice is interesting in the myth, because it reveals an important element when confronting the realities of lost lives. In mourning “in the manner of women,” Narcissus offers the possibility for an embodied, gendered form of expression to Echo. While Echo can manipulate words to become her own, the possibility of returning the sounds of this ritual are limited in them being produced around her. Even though Narcissus is a “boy” (*puer*),<sup>175</sup> this “feminine” act allows the bodiless echo to (dis)articulate a bodily expression that would have been denied her if Narcissus did not perform it. That Narcissus, a male figure in the myth, is the one who offers Echo this moment of feminine articulation opens a several readings. This scene allows us to consider the importance of forms of expression that are connected to the body that Echo

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172. Nouvet, “An Impossible Response,” 125.

173. Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 494-8.

174. Nouvet, “An Impossible Response,” 125, n. 12.

175. Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 350.

is denied unless “given” to her. We are reminded that Echo is not only an other by virtue of being a separate “self” in the myth, but also by her gender. It points our attention to the need to account for the ways that certain expressions, especially as we move to consider those that already exist beyond articulation in words, are necessary for turning sound into *her* voice. Echo’s return of not just Narcissus’ cry but also the sounds of his gendered performance reveal the need for those with some form of similar experience or relationship to Venus’ material existence to offer sound and thus presence to venus.

In Moten’s formulation, it is *black* performance that holds the essence of Lincoln’s ability to evoke Aunt Hester’s screams.<sup>176</sup> Moten is interested specifically in exploring “the reproduction of blackness in and as (the) reproduction of black performances(s).”<sup>177</sup> It seems that a related move is happening in the myth as Echo’s sounds backs a gendered performance. It would, of course, be a mistake to simply collapse race and gender, however. Black feminist scholars have importantly argued that the equation of the two ignores the ways that they intersect and are constructed through one another.<sup>178</sup> I do not wish to compare or substitute one for another, but rather to argue for the possibility of this moment in the myth as an opening to explore the *relationality* of embodiment.<sup>179</sup> Following Alexander Weheliye, “it is necessary to think through the commonalities and disparities between these two spaces without awakening the demon of comparison.”<sup>180</sup> I do not believe that we can simply replace race for gender in this scene.

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176. Moten, *In the Break*, 7. (Emphasis added).

177. *Ibid*, 14.

178. See, among many others: Kimberlé Crenshaw. "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color." *Stanford Law Review* 43, no. 6 (1991): 1241-299. doi:10.2307/1229039.

179. For more on the distinct grammars of comparison and relationality, see Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus*, 12-13.

180. *Ibid*, 72.

Arguably, race is markedly absented in the move to consider the black slave girl Venus through a Greek myth. However, I believe that this (dis)articulation of a gendered form of grief opens a site for considering the relationship between grief and the formations of identity, especially through a consideration of racialization in Anne Anlin Cheng's notion of "racial grief."

Anne Anlin Cheng argues that racial grief is "not only the result of racism but also a foundation for racial identity."<sup>181</sup> That is to say, this form of grief is not simply an expression of an embodied experience of race, but is (also) formative to the process of racialization. Racialization, Weheliye reminds us, should not be understood as "a biological or cultural descriptor but as a conglomerate of sociopolitical relations that discipline humanity into full human, not-quite-humans, and nonhumans."<sup>182</sup> As we consider the slave girl made a commodity in life, *we must bear the unbearable image of Venus in chains*. But in recognizing the reality of this embodied experience of race, we cannot simply invert forms of abstraction where the flesh of the racialized body is obscured to give back a "metaphysical body."<sup>183</sup> Venus' body in chains must be wrestled with, but at the same time, it is the very absence of a body that characterizes the countless uncounted in the archives of the Middle Passage. Echo made echo reveals a way of contending with the loss of a body that still holds a connection to bodies.

The moment where Echo is made echo in the myth is also the first time that Echo reveals her body to Narcissus. Except for the moment of her dispossession, Echo inhabits the text only through her voice even before being reduced to it. It is only at the point of

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181. Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race*, xi.

182. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus*, 3.

183. *Ibid*, 119.

rejection that she is, to Narcissus' knowledge, a body at all.<sup>184</sup> Nouvet suggests that this appearance may then be read as an *embodiment* of the otherness that seemingly originates in the self of Narcissus.<sup>185</sup> In the absence of a gendered or racialized reading of the myth, this embodiment then simply comes to stand in as the otherness that inhabits language.<sup>186</sup> However, as we turn to consider Venus as a gendered and racialized subject, we might instead recognize the way myth reveals a relationship to the absenting of the Subject's body that the subject must negotiate.

While Jove robs Echo of "her tongue," the myth seems to ignore the possibility that she may produce other *sounds* until she becomes a pure echo with no way to produce them at all. Hiding in the woods, but still with a body, there is no mention of the sounds produced by Echo's body as she inhabits the world. Even when spurned by Narcissus, she does not immediately lose her body, but her "sad form" wastes away.<sup>187</sup> One might expect to hear the sounds of mourning, the crunch of leaves, something. In returning the sound of Narcissus beating his breast in mourning, Echo alerts us that these extra-linguistic sounds are absent. Echo's return of Narcissus' mourning thuds as her own signals the narrative's failure to account for the way her body could do the same. In exploring the black-body-made-a-commodity, even in accepting that the subaltern cannot speak, we must, as Moten and Hartman do, figure in the presence of the noises that exceed words – "black noise." Even as the move to consider Venus as echo shifts away from the biovisual markers of race,<sup>188</sup> echo's ability to encompass the sounds of bodies still attends to phonic materiality of bodies beyond their material presence.

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184. Nouvet, "An Impossible Response," 111.

185. Ibid.

186. Ibid.

187. Kline, "Book III," 396-7.

188. Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus*, 68.

In attending to the sounds of the body, Echo writes on to Narcissus' body her own embodiment. That is, her (dis)articulation of his performance (dis)possesses not only his voice but his body. Her now absent body is made present at the moment of (dis)articulation through his. Because the body may also produce the sounds that echo can return, it signals both the absence of her body in her current state and the reality of her past body. In the gendered performance of the myth, this (dis)possession reveals the very performativity of the gendered expressions of the body at the same moment that the body is refigured as important to the project of echo. That is, that "mourning in the manner of women" is already a performance written *on* bodies.<sup>189</sup> Echo allows us to give importance to the body without falling into the trap of essentialism. The male Narcissus is able to produce the gendered feminine performance that Echo returns. But, once again, we must remember that she alters the sounds that become hers. It is not that Narcissus produces that perfect feminine performance, but that in gesturing to the feminized expression, Echo is able to return a sound that demands we account for her lost body, and recognize this ethereal presence as feminine. This new form of subjectivity, in its objection is able to demand recognition of its past status as Subject.

And yet, we must be careful to attend to the varying forms of bodies. This possibility in performance does not give to universalism, but rather highlights the very alterity of bodies and bodily performances. It neither blindly embraces a humanism that ignores the material realities of how certain bodies are labeled as not-quite-human or non-human, nor does it reify those distinctions. In both the return of a performed representation of her body and the refusal to echo Narcissus' voice when it does not suit

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189. For a more in depth discussion on the construction of gender through performativity see: Butler, *Undoing Gender*.

*her*, Echo reminds us that she always exists in (dis)articulation. If we turn to consider “black noise,” it is not necessarily that black bodies are inherently able attend to venus’ needs. This belief too quickly resumes Spivak’s warning that the privileging of the “native informant” in colonial operations ultimately seeks to homogenize oppressed groups of people.<sup>190</sup> It is rather, through recognizing the way that racialization is written upon bodies, that we recognize an increased likeliness that those *subjected* to similar processes will produce the sounds she seeks. Even if Venus made venus sits outside of the *biovisual* regimes of racialization once absent a body, Venus did not, and those who live within those same structures might readily allow her to remind us of that history. In the same move that those who share similar conditions with her don’t inherently articulate her voice, those who live different existences are not inherently separated from her. Lowe argues that this attempt to separate out the human into distinct categories is precisely the operation of Modernity that took Venus from the world.<sup>191</sup> We must simply be careful to recognize that differing experiences might be needed to do the impossible and approximate the sounds that echo/venus is waiting to turn into her own.

If we follow bell hooks in the understanding that oppressed groups - in this case, particularly those defined by the marking of blackness - are pushed to the margins of our society, then it is simply that some of us may have a certain closeness, on the margins by the woods that hide echo/venus.<sup>192</sup> Following this understanding, venus may potentially find her voice through anyone who gives enough care to try. It requires those who would move to the margins to try and approach her. She cannot come to us, because she is already a part of us, but we must move ourselves, decenter ourselves, so that we can

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190. Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?,” 222.

191. Lowe, 7.

192. bell hooks. *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*. (Cambridge, MA: South End, 2000).

recognize this connection. But, again, Hartman's project is defined by restraint. Butler tells us that within the need to preserve even the wretched bonds, we must "[guard] against those forms of destructiveness that take away our lives and those of others beings, and the ecological conditions of life."<sup>193</sup> One's speech and sound cannot become overpowering to others; it cannot slip into the trap of the declarative realm of certainty. This is simply a replication of the violence of the archive. Lowe assures us that "silence and withholding [are] not the same as forgetting."<sup>194</sup> We have sought to understand a collapsing of (dis)articulation, but one may need to hold their tongue, to leave space in narrations where black noise cannot be captured. venus does not need to be captured again; there is a certain respect in allowing for the buzzing space of silence for some, so that they can try to hear the faint cries of others that inhabit them. That is not to leave her in silence, as we have said, but to recognize that others may speak to/of/for/with her and that we must consider the ways in which our silence allows others to speak. In speaking, we must also pause so that echo may be heard as she returns.

The project of venus is all of ours, though it is one that must be undertaken with much care to respect that of Venus. venus is incredibly susceptible to violence, and saving her from the silence of the archive does not mean that she can be freed from chains or that we can be freed from doubt. We will fail; we must fail. This project, caught between myth and "fact," finds its possibility in its very impossibility. Butler reminds us that for some "possibility is not a luxury; it is as crucial as bread."<sup>195</sup> Venus' life is gone, but venus may live on, if only we dare to speak to/of/for/with her, by imagining how she *might have* lived. Through echo, the subaltern historical figure just might be heard.

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193. Judith Butler. "On Rage and Grief."

194. Lowe, *The Intimacies*, 154-5.

195. Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 29.

Act III, Scene I.  
8 Blank Pages



Relatório III “Mortos e Desaparecidos Políticos”<sup>196</sup> of the Comissão Nacional da Verdade is 1,996 pages long. 8 of those pages are blank.

434 victims cases fill its pages. The formulaic presentation of each case promises to offer a biography and a culprit; to give a name and a face to each victim.

58 cases have grey boxes instead of faces. 58 times a presence was recognized even if impossible to reproduce.

434 is the number of victims that the Comissão Nacional da Verdade recognizes. 434 cases with citations and “proof” that the government of Brazil was responsible for their death or disappearance. 434 victims turned cases because they have documentation.

2 names and 2 faces are not there. Meus avós.<sup>197</sup> The CNV’s digital publication makes it easy to hit Ctrl+F and common last names offer fleeting moments of false hope, but I never expected to find them there. There are only 434 victims and fear and fire have assured that there is no case file.

And yet, tears still come, trying to obscure the ‘0 results’ for my search for Ana Caterina. In my searching, she seems to try to appear in details that could be hers – Lebanese, Minas Gerais, mother, disappeared – but her name isn’t one of the 434 and her face isn’t one of the 376.

How many others don’t even have a grey box, much less a name? How many others don’t have a grandson to search for them?

Relatório III “Mortos e Desaparecidos Políticos” of the Comissão Nacional da Verdade is 1,996 pages long.

8 of those pages are blank.

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196. Volume III: “Political Deaths and Disappearances”

197. My grandparents





Act III, Scene II.  
The Brazilian National Truth Commission

*What is at issue here, starting with the exergue, is the violence of the archive itself, as archive, as archival violence.*<sup>198</sup>

Jacques Derrida, "Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression"

In December 2014, the Comissão Nacional da Verdade (CNV) presented an official report on the human rights violations committed by the Brazilian State between 1946 and 1988. Of particular importance to this report was the period of military government rule in Brazil from 1964 to 1985. During these two decades of dictatorship, the military-run state, justified by the "Doctrine of National Security," adopted nationalism and conservative economic development strategies.<sup>199</sup> To do so, they stifled freedom of speech, restricted the constitution, and systematically exiled, tortured, killed, and disappeared political dissidents.<sup>200</sup> These crimes were always what Avery Gordon describes as "a public secret" – one that is hidden yet always discernible enough to incite the fear necessary to maintain authoritarian control<sup>201</sup> – however, despite knowledge of the atrocities committed by the military government during this period, there has long been a "wall of silence" around that time period in Brazil.<sup>202</sup> Although a relatively recent history, Rebecca Atencio has described the larger cultural and political responses to the dictatorship in Brazil as a "slow turn to memory."<sup>203</sup> Seen as the path of compromise to avoid polarization and social conflict, Atencio argues that the years between democratization and the establishment of the CNV can be understood as "*reconciliation*

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198. Jacques Derrida. "Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression." *Diacritics* 25, no. 2 (1995): 9.

199. Gonzalez, "Brazil Shatters Its Wall of Silence."

200. Ibid.

201. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 126.

202. Gonzalez, "Brazil Shatters Its Wall of Silence."

203. Atencio, *Memory's Turn*, 26.

by institutionalized forgetting.”<sup>204</sup> An Amnesty Law, signed during the dictatorship and upheld by the Brazilian Supreme Court, which stood as a kind of “institutional amnesia” that at once allowed exiles to return to Brazil and protected government actors from persecution for any human rights violations<sup>205</sup> and a lack “proof” of the systemic but clandestine crimes during the time period have left these killings and disappearings largely unexamined on a national level until now.<sup>206</sup>

The CNV’s report is divided into three *relatórios*<sup>207</sup>, the last of which details 434 deaths or disappearances and cites some 377 perpetrators of this state violence.<sup>208</sup> Volume III of the CNV tries, for the first time, to give a face and details like name, family, and political affiliation to the victims.<sup>209</sup> And yet, despite this attempt to present the people-made-victims during this period, absence fills the pages of the report. Of those 434 entries, 58 have a grey box in place of a face, and the words “unidentified” and “it was not possible to discover more details about his/her biography”<sup>210</sup> repeat throughout the pages of Volume III. These limits are partially due to the fact that many of the military’s records were destroyed,<sup>211</sup> but there is also a kind of violence that fills the pages, or is rather absented from the report, by its very structure.

In part, the choice to present the CNV’s findings in a public forum and to publish the report online was a symbolic move to show that its efforts were the “result of a

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204. Atencio, *Memory’s Turn*, 12.

205. *Ibid*, 5.

206. Associated Press. “Rousseff in tears as Brazilian report details junta's killings and torture.” *The Guardian*. December 10, 2014. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/dec/10/rousseff-tears-brazilian-report-details-torture-killings-military-regime>.

207. “Reports,” though I refer to them here as “volumes,” which is also used.

208. Brasil, *CNV*.

209. *Ibid*.

210. Original: “*não identificada*,” “*não foi possível apurar mais detalhes sobre sua biografia*.” *Ibid*, 104. (Translation mine).

211. Associated Press, “Rousseff in tears.”

decision made by the Brazilian State and not just the government.”<sup>212</sup> For the first time, the state has recognized that the human rights violations committed in Brazil during this time period were systemic,<sup>213</sup> and this collaboration is meant to mark a turn to public memory. In naming the crimes of a violent past, the CNV is also arguably meant to show that the government presenting the report does not represent the same authoritarian government that committed the atrocities it details. Yet, even as Rousseff, herself a victim of torture, was presented with the report, it bears remembering that Brazil’s return to democracy was orchestrated by that same military regime.<sup>214</sup> Even though the CNV represents an effort between citizens and the government, as a truth commission sponsored by the government and published on the government’s official website, the CNV was held to a legal grammar of articulation. As a result, the report was only able to present those cases that can be “proven.”

In the same move that we might applaud the report’s attempt to present the names and lives of the 434 victims instead of just an “official number,” those people are turned into cases. While the truth commission does make a valiant effort in many regards in their attempt to tell the stories of those that are included in its pages, the uniform format of each entry belies this individualization. The biographies lend themselves less to the individuals they describe than to the larger structure of indictment. Each case attempts to cite a culprit and lays a charge for each victim, an attempt to establish a case, not a person. Even as the CNV attempts to give back a face and name and even a family to

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212. Original: “o trabalho da CNV foi para as interferências e que é resultado de uma decisão do Estado brasileiro, e não apenas do governo.” Lourenço, “Pais merece.” (Note that the use of “state” here refers to the state as a nation or the people composing it. Translation mine).

213. Associated Press, “Rousseff in tears.”

214. Isobel Coleman and Terra Lawson-Remer. *Pathways to freedom: political and economic lessons from democratic transitions*. (New York: Council on Foreign Relations, 2013).

those for whom it seems “possible” to do so, the presence of the dead and disappeared in Volume III of the CNV seems to lend a figurality to a larger trial. Indeed, as Martha Minow argues, “trials focus on perpetrators, not victims. They consult victims only to illustrate the fact or scope of the defendants’ guilt. Victims are not there for public acknowledgement or even to tell, fully, their own stories.”<sup>215</sup> Even as there is a recognition of the systemic nature of the human rights violations that characterized that time period, the need to indict specific human rights *violators* seems to rearticulate the existing focus on specific actors in a move to exempt the State and the general public from culpability.<sup>216</sup>

Further, the uniform structure of each entry in Volume III seems to support the existing narratives of the dictatorship. Dates and locations of birth mark relatively typical data points in recognizing the lives of people, but other information like profession and political affiliation lend themselves to the larger narrative of the period. While it is important to recognize the way that certain groups were targeted by the regime, the recognition of this persecution as a template for those lives seems limited. “Not applicable” under political affiliation in the biography of Ari de Oliveira Mendes Cunha and others,<sup>217</sup> seems to mark the insufficiency of this rubric. The uniformity of this category highlights the repression of political dissidents but seems to privilege this narrative. What about those who were killed or disappeared for other reasons? What about those whose death represents not “a goal of its own but just a by-product of

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215. Martha Minow. “The Hope for Healing: What Can Truth Commissions Do?” In *Truth. v. Justice: The Morality of Truth Commissions*, ed. Robert I. Rotberg, and Dennis Thompson. (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 244.

216. Associated Press, “Rousseff in tears.”

217. Brasil, *CNV*, 118.

commerce?”<sup>218</sup> Even as the CNV’s opening statement to Volume III signals the need for a continued investigation into the repression of indigenous populations, the violence committed against them is not articulable when we only account for politically articulable subjects.<sup>219</sup> Many of these peoples did not have the government documentation or political affiliations that the report relies on and therefore remain impossible to account for in Volume III.<sup>220</sup> At every “not identified” under *filiação* (family), we are reminded that “the most universal definition of the slave is a stranger.”<sup>221</sup>

In articulating lost lives in tandem with an indictment, we are moved to consider each entry as a form of grievance, a demand for reparation against those that committed the crime. While this has its place for the families of the lost in some ways, it also establishes that lost life as compensable. Once recognized, their histories affirmed, those lost lives can be forgotten.<sup>222</sup> As Cheng reminds us, the move to grievance inherently signals an attempt to “move on.”<sup>223</sup> The CNV remains accessible through its online presence, but also threatens to slip away in the pages of the Brazilian Federal Government’s website. After the initial news articles announcing the presentation of the CNV, the report has made little resurgence in public discourse except in sparing articles that note that in the just over two years since its publication, none of the 377 culpable

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218. Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*, 31.

219. A 7,000-page report by Jader de Figueiredo Correia on the systematic killing, rape, and seizure of land from native peoples was produced in 1967, but immediately hidden from public. See: While the CNV has since recovered and examined that report, it has not been made public. (Jonathan Watts. "Brazil's 'lost report' into genocide surfaces after 40 years." *The Guardian*. May 29, 2013. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/may/29/brazil-figueiredo-genocide-report>). A report on crimes against the indigenous is presented in Volume II of the report, but they remain largely represented in numbers and make little or no appearance as individual lives in Volume III of the report.

220. *Ibid.*

221. Hartman, *Lose Your Mother*, 5.

222. Lowe, *The Intimacies*, 42.

223. Cheng, *The Melancholy of Race*, 50.

have been brought to trial.<sup>224</sup> Again, the oppressors have occluded the oppressed.

For all that the CNV's report attempts to articulate lives, the grammar of the Truth Commission is the same "grammar of violence" that structures the lives of those beholden to the state violence that put them there. Although the declarative form of fact has long been denied to these victims of state violence as that history was denied or repressed, it also fixes cases which can be resolved, and denies the presence of those that are not articulated in that same grammar. It is important to note that I am not arguing that we abandon fact. It is rather that we must contend with what lays beyond articulation in the declarative grammar of fact. Hartman's "critical fabulation" and Lowe's attention to the *past conditional temporality* is structured by those elements of the past we can affirm. Especially for Brazil, where the realities of state violence lay hidden for so long, and indeed much of it still does, we cannot allow this shifting grammar to erase the reality of that time. To explore what could have been is not to deny the what did happen, but rather to push beyond those limits. That is to say, the burden of proof makes it so that those who do not meet it are denied any presence at all, and even those who do appear in the ledger of Volume III are fixed figures to be referenced in an indictment. The CNV opens spaces and silences within an established history to that lets us ask who might not be present, what might be left unsaid, but those possibilities cannot be articulated within its limits.

In such, I would argue that we must bring our considerations of echo to bear on both the lost lives that are represented in the CNV and those that exceed it. This new archive of the military regime is still structured by those same limits that (re)enact the violence of erasure and circumscribed humanity. People have again been decentered to

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224. Marcelo da Fonseca. "Comissão da Verdade completa dois anos sem punições." Estado de Minas. December 19, 2016. [http://www.em.com.br/app/noticia/politica/2016/12/19/interna\\_politica,833640/comissao-da-verdade-completa-dois-anos-sem-punicoes.shtml](http://www.em.com.br/app/noticia/politica/2016/12/19/interna_politica,833640/comissao-da-verdade-completa-dois-anos-sem-punicoes.shtml).

attend to a larger history of state violence. Even as the CNV gestures towards injustices against groups like the indigenous in Brazil,<sup>225</sup> they disappear as quickly as they appear. Moving to consider those figures as echo, allows us to return to the notions of grief and of speaking that we have already explored.

An attention to echo (dis)articulates this move to grievance to recenter the importance of grief in maintaining the centrality of the lost historical subject. Hartman, alongside Stephen Best, has argued that in shuttling between grief and grievance, there exists the possibility to “demand justice in light of that which he cannot describe or convey, fully cognizant that what has been destroyed cannot be restored.”<sup>226</sup> There is a need for the structured form of investigation that the CNV was able to accomplish, but we must be careful in tying those lives to a notion of “justice.” Justice too easily slips to be legally defined or to be constructed through “the administering of deserved punishment or reward.”<sup>227</sup> The myth of Echo shows instead an ethical imperative towards the lost historical subject. In recognizing echo and her articulation through grief and sound, we can allow ourselves to abandon the need to “wipe the slate clean” and instead embrace the muddiness that allows presence.<sup>228</sup> An attention to echo does not simply refuse the information provided by this new archive, but rather disarticulates our surety that we understand fully the meaning we assign to that past. Echo, we have seen, collapses the past with the present, and in shifting away from the legal grammar of the CNV, we might imagine new ways of speaking to/of/for/with (again and again and again) the lost historical figures that inhabit and exceed it.

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225. Brasil, *CNV*, 25.

226. Best, “Fugitive Justice,” 2.

227. “Justice.” Dictionary.com. <http://www.dictionary.com/browse/justice>.

228. Best, “Fugitive Justice,” 2.

Act III, Scene III.  
Coda

*We begin the story again, as always, in the wake of her disappearance and with the wild hope that our efforts can return her to the world.*<sup>229</sup>

Saidiya Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts”

In Portuguese we have a word that is rather difficult to translate into English: *saudade*. It doesn't offer a direct translation, but attempts to translate it usually result in something like: “longing, melancholy, nostalgia.”<sup>230</sup> However, its meaning exceeds the usual connotations of these words. *Saudade* encompasses a feeling of loss, but often for things we love or things we fear we will lose. A.F.G. Bell described it as:

a vague and constant desire for something that does not and probably cannot exist, for something other than the present, a turning towards the past or towards the future; not an active discontent or poignant sadness but an indolent dreaming wistfulness.<sup>231</sup>

In this wistfulness, it cannot be given over wholly to sadness, but is often something that we live with. The Oxford English Dictionary even goes so far to call it “a supposed characteristic of Brazilian temperament.”<sup>232</sup> As I turn back to consider my own entrance into the archive of Brazil's dictatorial past – searching for someone I know I won't find – the word hangs on me. And yet, as I have explored how grief can be productive and reveal elements of ourselves that lay beyond our intention, a smile squeezes the welling tear out of my eye. *Saudade*, as a word and concept, often works its way into Brazilian popular music and art, forms of production that demand re-listening and re-producing; interpretation and reinterpretation. It seems there is already an opening into the

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229. Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts,” 14.

230. Shirlee Emmons and Wilbur Watkin. Lewis. *Researching the song: a lexicon*. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

231. Quoted in *Ibid*.

232. Quoted in *Ibid*.

productive realms of grief and (dis)articulation that Echo embodies in our so-called “Brazilian temperament.” Perhaps we just need to listen for the echo of those that we didn’t even realize already inhabited this feeling of *saudade*.

The room I am in is silent, save the tapping of my keyboard. Staring down 0 results, I break the silence with a return to my grandparents’ tongue: *Tenho saudades de vocês*.<sup>233</sup> There is no sound, and yet, perhaps in blind hope, in that sensation of *saudade*, in that ringing silence at the edge of my words, comes back *saudade de vocês*. I imagine that the return is a lost grandparent that misses me, too; but there is something else. In the splitting of echo’s return, *vocês* (plural “you”) is turned back to me. This *saudade*, this feeling of missing(ness) comes back and collapses “me” with a third person plural. As I reach out to my grandparents, echo replaces “me” with “you all” and I have to wonder, if maybe, just maybe, it means there are others waiting unseen for their chance to “speak.”

And so, with tears in my eyes and a grin on my face, I speak again.

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233. While the most normative translation would be “I miss you (all),” a more literal translation is: “I have *saudade*/missing(ness) of you.” In expressing this form of nostalgia, it marks both a moment of loss and a state of being.

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