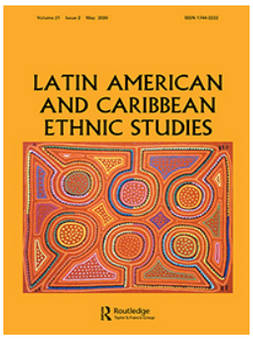

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Tables turning: on the specters of Anthropology, extinction and white futurity

Shane Greene

Department of Anthropology, Indiana University, Bloomington, IN, USA

ABSTRACT

This article departs from ethnographic engagement with a pedagogical performance piece titled 'Taxonomía of a Spicy Espécimen' by the Afro Puerto Rican artist, Javier Cardona Otero. The piece is an embodied critique that 'turns the tables' of history, conjuring up colonial specters that not only haunt Anthropological discourses of racial extinction but speak directly to the current existential crisis of white futurity. I read the performance in conjunction with scenes from Raoul Peck's documentary 'Exterminate All the Brutes' and words from the Khoisan poet, Diana Ferrus, whose elegiac poetry played a decisive role in the repatriation of Sarah Baartman's remains. Through the lens of hauntology, the article critically engages with colonial specters that articulate a core contradiction between the supposedly 'inevitable' extinction of 'savage' races and today's paranoidal far-right politics of 'white extinction.'

KEYWORDS

Race; history of Anthropology; performance; white extinction; Afro-Caribbean; far-right politics

> Would one believe that there is not yet, in any work, a detailed comparison of the skeletons of a Negro and a white? (Cuvier in Stocking 1982, 29)

> The argument the native chooses has been furnished by the settler, and by an ironic turning of the tables it is the native who now affirms that the colonialist understands nothing but force. (Fanon 1963, 84)

The artist and his table

On 26 April 2023, I stood in an anxious crowd – mostly as white as me but not quite monopoly white as is often the case in southern Indiana. We were in the atrium of the Eskenazi Museum of Art, the premiere exhibition space on Indiana University's Bloomington campus. The only object to greet us was a long wooden table. Someone had piled star anise in the middle, giving it the shape of the continental US, and placed a glass of water beneath it. There were exchanges of 'haven't seen you in a while' and other small talk. Mostly, the crowd felt apprehensive, left wondering how a performance piece begins in the absence of the artist.[1]

Someone turned on a speaker and white noise filtered through the air. Seconds later a figure appeared, peering timidly down at us from the top of a spiraling staircase. The

CONTACT Shane Greene lsgreene@iu.edu Department of Anthropology, Indiana University, 701 E. Kirkwood Ave, Bloomington, IN 47405.

two gazes, ours and his, were inversions. The audience's gaze was immediate and locked on, producing a collective stare. He glanced down at us with eyes reticent, as if the space into which he had convoked this audience was the same space he did not call home.

Fixing our eyes onto his was inevitable because no other part of his body was visible. Hair, nose, and mouth were wrapped. Legs were covered. Hands were gloved in white, as if for surgery. Arms and torso were obscured by a bulbous mass of clothing. The reference was unclear. Was it ambulatory mummy or traumatized patient?

We waited, all of us rubbernecking, me wanting to but failing to look away. He first approached the table and made a slow series of finger measurements along its long edge, like the awakened mummy wanted to know its dimensions in hand-lengths or the patient was asking us to fixate on what wooden tables might signify in the traumatizing horrors of world history.

The artist opened a drawer, took out surgical masks, and with a slow movement around the circle of onlookers, tediously passed them out in stunning silence. Covid-19 restrictions had passed but pandemic memories had not. I interpreted this as a request to return to mask-wearing and missed the deeper point until I read the artist's statement. With this piece that he in fact created before the pandemic, he asks, 'Does the audience know for what or for whom they are wearing this artifact? Am I the alien, the virus, or the foreign body within a global body that must be feared?' (Cardona Otero 2022, 244).

Over the next hour the artist transformed the space into a charged emotional exchange few seemed prepared for. The second act was a relentless, at times aggressive, peeling away of a couple dozen layers of clothing: tight-fitting tee shirt on top of tight-fitting tee shirt. After the top layer, every shirt beneath had a printed phrase (Figure 1). Some of them read:

'Lost and Found in Translation'
'Sexualidades e inteligencias periféricas' (Peripheral intelligences and sexualities)
'Decolonize'
'Standardize Me'
'Hierarchy of Knowledges'
'Rabia' (Anger)

I couldn't help but think of Bob Dylan casting aside cue cards to the tune of 'Subterranean Homesick Blues.' But here there was an intensity, a visceral struggle, a desire not to simply drop the phrases casually but to be free of them forever. He was tossing shirts aside, left and right, amid heavy breathing, dribbles of sweat, and contortions of the arms. Liberating himself of labels. Able to finally feel alive.

In the third act, his body stripped to underwear, the artist launched his long legs onto the narrow side of the table (Figure 2). The leap seemed so precarious I thought the table would flip. But it was clear he had a mastery of its physics, or, perhaps, his relationship with the table was one of a vast historical conjuring. I imagined him calling up old ghosts, commanding them to commit no more harm, clarifying who is in charge of the table now. After a dramatic lunge to the far end, the artist briefly posed for the crowd as if a classical statue. He then laid down supine, embraced by the smell of anise. The weight of his body crushed the map of the US as he lied down on the table. And at that exact moment the audio track switched from white noise to the hypnotizing mating call of the coquí, that little tropical frog synonymous with Puerto Rico's longue durée: found in everything from

Figure 1. Cardona Otero peeling away tee shirts (photo by Olga Rodríguez-Ulloa).

precolonial Taino myths and ancient petroglyphs to children's literature and touristy tee shirts. Inserting a pencil into his hair to 'prove' his Blackness, he extracted a measuring tape from the table drawer, wrapped it around his head, and gestured to two white women to hold either end (Figure 3).[2] Their discomfort at being made complicit in this gesture to the history of craniology was hard to watch.

The artist then extracted a tattered piece of paper from deep inside his underwear and looked at it, asking to borrow a pair of glasses – via words or hand gestures I can't honestly recall. Various pairs were on hand. It was the only moment to provoke humor in the entire piece. He tried on glasses of different size, shape, and gendered style, struggling to locate the proper lens through which to view his prepared statement – or to suggest that we were the ones in need of a different way of viewing.

At the time, I assumed the words were his. Later, overhearing his comment to an audience member, I realized he was reading a passage from *Discipline and Punish* about the panopticon, Michel Foucault's haunting metaphor for how otherwise unruly bodies and opaque subjects learn to domesticate themselves via modern forms of self-imposed control:

> This enclosed, segmented space, observed at every point, in which the individuals are inserted in a fixed place, in which the slightest movements are supervised, in which all events

Figure 2. Cardona Otero balancing on table (photo by Olga Rodríguez-Ulloa).

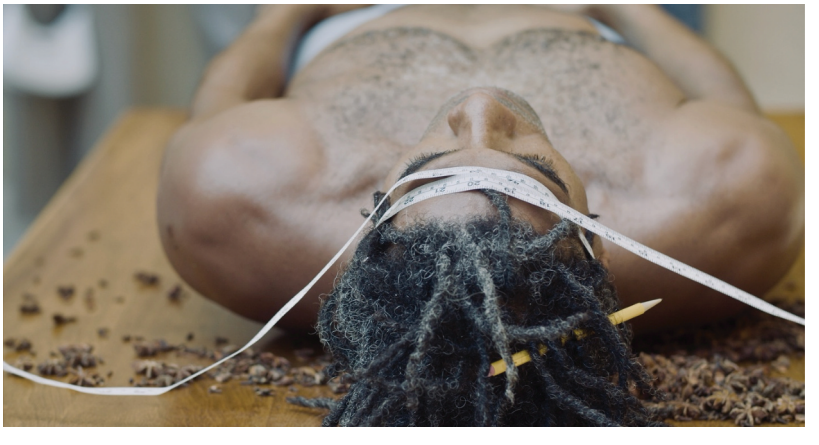

Figure 3. Cardona Otero asks participants to measure his head (still by Elena Guzman).

are recorded, in which an uninterrupted work of writing links the center and the periphery, in which power is exercised without division, according to a continuous hierarchal figure, in which each individual is constantly located, examined and distributed among the living

> beings, the sick and the dead – all this constitutes a compact model of the disciplinary mechanism. (Foucault and Sheridan 1977, 197)

During the performance, his effort was more to intervene into the words than to simply recite them, something I later learned he calls '*malplagio*' (poor plagiarism). The piece of paper was already in tatters, and sweat had made the words harder to decipher. Plus, the entire delivery was disturbed by intermittent bouts of coughing and omission of certain words. Foucault interruptus.

Thirty or more minutes into the performance, an onlooker clarified to the rest of us a crucial detail. Any audience anywhere possesses its own prefigurative power: the ability to break free from the stance of passivity most audience members assume as their inviolable position. Illustrating this, a young woman approached the table, kneeled down, and offered him a drink of water from the glass sitting beneath to help him with his cough. A wave of indignity swept the room as we realized, performance or not, we were watching a man suffer. In clear sight of a solution to mitigate the discomfort, most of us chose to do nothing. Now, there's an embodied metaphor you don't forget.

Then, before he even finished the passage, he literally ate Foucault's words, chewing and swallowing the ragged paper. There's another metaphor for you. Words you shit out in one moment you may find yourself eating in another. Historically speaking, inevitably the tables will turn.

In this case, shitting out and then eating Foucault's panoptical metaphor delivered a mixed message. Foucault's account of modern power is so totalizing it leaves little room for talk of resistance, less still for a path toward liberation. I understood the artist's message to communicate something more evocative of Fanon and his notion that the violent force associated with racialized colonial logics ultimately must be confronted with a decolonizing force of equally visceral proportions. Sometimes reliving historical trauma is the only way to work through it toward a transformed future. Despite his utopian Marxism, Fanon offered many warnings about how transformative politics can go wrong and offered no guarantees of a future without further strife.

In the conclusion, the artist pulled out markers from the table drawer, requested the audience members approach, and asked us to write or draw anything we wished on his body (Figure 4). With few exceptions – I noticed a young Black man write 'no agency' – most of the messages were expressions of empathy, healing, bravery, and overt displays of affection. There was an attempt, perhaps a naïve one, at racial reconciliation on the part of a largely white audience.

For example, I wrote 'I love Javier' on his right arm.

The artist's name is Javier Cardona Otero. He is a well-known Afro Puerto Rican performer who was also a PhD student at Indiana University at the time; this is what allowed me to make his acquaintance and eventually call him a friend. The piece is titled 'Taxonomía of a Spicy Espécimen,' with the use of Spanglish reinforcing the transcultural dimensions of the performance.

In his reflections, Javier remarks on how the performance was inspired by a comment he received when he was new to Indiana: 'You bring the spices!' Despite the intended friendliness, it served as a reminder of intersecting markers of his Otherness within this quaint midwestern college town: his Blackness in an overwhelmingly white space; the colonial status of Puerto Rico vis-a-vis the US' late-stage imperialism; his queerness in

Figure 4. Cardona Otero invites public to write on his body (photo by Olga Rodríguez-Ulloa).

a town dominated by the heteronormativity of 'Greek life' (e.g. fraternities and sororities) and nuclear familied professors (myself included). In the same article, he concludes with the following: 'This, my journey, is part of an act of "disidentification" in which I confront, denounce, resist, and strategically exist and stay alive' (Cardona Otero 2022, 247).

Javier's ending sentiment leads to the questions motivating this essay: Where are the overlaps between an ostensibly natural process of species extinction and the historical reality of a colonial politics of racial extermination? How might we read Javier's performative play as a Spicy Espécimen as an instance of the historical tables turning as the specters of Anthropology and white extinction take on (once again) global proportions? Clearly, invoking specters positions this analysis within a Derridian lineage of hauntology. But if there is any thought that sticks with me from the genealogy of spectral ideas, it is not from Derrida himself (who, after all, was mostly obsessing over what to say of Marx at a particular historical moment when the 'socialist alternative' seemed lost forever) but from Mark Fisher. For Fisher, one way to think of what specters are is to think of what specters do, namely as 'a virtuality whose threatened coming [is] already playing a part in undermining the present state of things' (Fisher 2014, 19). Histories and futures speak to one another via estranged voicings.

Let me address each of these major questions and allow the specters to appear, more or less, of their own accord.

The Anthropologist and his table

A full engagement with all the regional and historical variation in racial thinking, or the many moments in which the contradictions of race science were made transparent

through intellectual dispute, is beyond the scope of a short article. In some contexts, like the US, racial miscegenation was repeatedly the subject of prohibitory legislation and crucial to discourses of civilizational decline. In much of Latin America and the Caribbean, racial mixture was not only built into early colonial taxonomies; it became crucial to post-independence nationalist imaginaries and philosophical speculation (e.g. José Vasconcelos' portrayal of the mestizo as the 'cosmic race' in contrast to the imagined white purity of Anglo-Saxons in the North). Similarly, ideologies of white supremacy and the scientific logics used to justify the brute economic realities associated with Europe's colonial expansion, the genocide and dispossession of indigenous peoples, and the trans-Atlantic slave trade led to different projections around racial futures. Yet, a critical history of racial ideas also reveals an intimate overlap between discourses of natural extinction and colonial extermination precisely because species and race became largely isomorphic at the dawn of evolutionary thought. It is this particular relation between race, evolution, and extinction that I saw in Javier's performance, in part because it also resonates as an implied critique of discourses of racial extinction that have resurfaced with a vengeance in our global political present (the subject of the third part of this three-act essay).

The idea that species represent the essential form of living beings has a much longer genealogy that can be traced to ancient Greece (Wilkins 2011). The *casta* categories, born from the early Iberian conquest of the Americas and rooted in the Catholic Church's pre-existing inquisitional logics of 'pure' Christian versus 'mixed' infidel blood, directly influenced the emergence of a multitude of proto-racial categories during Europe's earliest colonial conquests. The original tripartite logic of 'negros' (Blacks), 'indios' (Indians), and 'españoles' (Spaniards) fed directly into racial discourse (Silverblatt 2004). But it wasn't until the Enlightenment birth of the modern sciences that race and species emerge as deeply intertwined. The former was reinvented as a newly biological and anatomical idea. The latter was rearticulated as the most elemental difference in biological form following the publication of Carl Linneaus' *Systemae Naturae* in the 1730s. Linnaeus' binomial system, still in use by biologists today, became the definitive scientific reordering of the natural world, one that included homo sapiens as just another animal within an exhaustive set of taxonomical categories. This is, in a fundamental sense, *the taxonomy* referenced in Javier's Taxonomía.

Rather than unambiguously categorizing homo sapiens as a singular species, Linneaus specified there were four major 'human varieties' and, though he did not explicitly use the term race, they were clearly rooted in colonial racial constructs that pre-existed this new schema. In early editions, Linneaus stuck to ostensibly descriptive ideas rooted in continental origins: 'European White,' 'American Red,' 'Asian Tawny,' 'African Black.' By the 10th edition he had inserted multiple judgments about physical, moral, and behavioral features that supposedly corresponded to these 'human varieties.' For example, Europeans were no longer just white; they were also 'sanguine,' 'inventive,' and 'governed by religion' whereas Black Africans were listed as 'lazy,' 'neglectful,' and 'governed by choice' (Linnean Society n.d.). Thus, race, culture, morals, and intelligence became inevitably intertwined as the early natural and social sciences developed.

During much of the late eighteenth and nineteenth century, intellectual debates raged between monogenists and polygenists about whether humans of purportedly different races were of a common descent, represented sub-species, or constituted entirely distinct species with separate origins. As Douglass (1854) argued pointedly in July of 1854, taking

on the polygenists of the American School of Anthropology in a commencement speech he gave to a literary society at Western Reserve College in Ohio: 'There was a time when, if you established the point that a particular being is a man, it was considered that such a being, of course, had a common ancestry with the rest of mankind. But it is not so now. This is, you know, an age of science, and science is favorable to division.' As Douglass demonstrates in this remarkable speech, the 'proof' offered by polygenist thinkers was a thinly veiled attempt to justify slavery amid the rise of abolitionism and more environmental explanations for human physical variation. Even well after Charles Darwin's work in *The Descent of Man* solidified the evolutionary case for a common origin for all homo sapiens, ideas of race as an expression of species level difference persisted. They lasted well into the twentieth century as can be appreciated from the assumptions underpinning Madison Grant's *The Passing of the Great Race*, a widely disseminated work from 1916 warning of the dangers of miscegenation amid the waves of immigrants arriving to the US, mostly Jewish and Southern and Eastern European at the time (Stocking 1982). Weaponizing fear against poor and racialized immigrants has been at the heart of US nationalism even when idealized representations of the US as a 'melting pot' and 'nation of immigrants' flagrantly contradict it.

Javier's performative strategy to stay alive while on the table reminds us of this long era in which 'natural history' served as an umbrella category, giving birth to various specialized disciplines across natural and social sciences (Biology, Geology, Anthropology, Eugenics, Genetics, Sociology, Criminology) and novel methodologies (comparative anatomy, craniology, craniometry). Until disturbingly recently – roughly speaking the tide starts to shift in the early to mid-twentieth century – most of these fields took the 'discovery' of race as a fixed biological difference at the level of taxonomic assumption, an object of precise measurement, and predictor of morality, cultural achievement, and intellect. However, as Douglass' speech from 1854 attests, there were critiques of racial thinking all along.

In mapping the human genome, contemporary genetic science has played a decisive role in revealing that the world's dominant racial categories do not map onto human genetic variation in any significant way. In fact, the two are in open contradiction. For example, there is substantially more genetic variation within African populations than in any other human population outside of Africa and genetic diversity declines the greater the geographic distance from Africa (Tishkoff et al. 2009). To group all these people under the racial category of 'Black' is absurd – at least from a genetic perspective.

Before this genetic work, the Harvard paleontologist Gould (1981) wrote a widely celebrated book, *The Mismeasure of Man*, performing an exhaustive intellectual history that revealed just how pseudo the pseudo-science of race was. In it, he picks apart the misguided assumptions of everything from brain size to IQ tests, highlighting the now laughable methodological toolkits race science invented. In public and canonical accounts of early Anthropology, Frantz Boas is routinely credited with having shifted debates about human difference away from the biological fantasy of race to the relativity of culture, in part by demonstrating there is tremendous plasticity in the human form relative to physical and social environment over short timeframes, i.e. a single generation (see King 2020). But one can just as easily go back to 1885, a milestone year for scholarship silenced by the hegemony of US and European academia. That was the year the Haitian intellectual Anténor Firmin wrote an extensive thesis titled, *The Equality of the Human*

Races, as a direct retort to Arthur de Gobineau's infamous mid-century monologue about Aryan supremacy and racial miscegenation as equivalent to civilizational decline. In Firmin's critical anthropology he attacked the then dominant Parisian Ethnological Society, led by Paul Topinard, demonstrating their multiple quantitative errors, misguided formulation of hypotheses, and underlying white supremacist motivations while also drawing on the symbolism and reality of Haiti as the first free republic born directly from a slave rebellion (Firmin and Charles 2002).

So, the critique of race is as old as its invention as an ideological category bound up with the early natural and social sciences. Criticism persists precisely because common sense assumptions about race as meaningful biological difference, feeding discourses about supposedly singular forms of human cultural achievement (e.g. 'Western civilization'), continue to plague the present and form the bedrock of far-right politics. As everyone from contemporary geneticists to sociologists have argued, this is particularly so in the context of a global resurgence of eugenicist thought, paranoid anti-immigration policies, and refusals to let the inane fantasies of racial-cum-cultural purity associated with ideological whiteness die (see Bhatt 2021; Rutherford 2023).

The centrality of race in the birth of the natural and social sciences suggests a different reading of Nietzsche's famous one liner, 'God is dead.' The issue is not that science killed God leaving the world morally bereft, but that science helped Europeans invent ideological whiteness to take God's place. What else could possibly explain the following historical conjuncture? Just as Europe's assorted imperial powers took over military, economic, and cultural control of every major continent in the world there emerged a scientific rationale proclaiming European civilization represents the culminating stage of all human history. Europeas albus, in Linneaus' taxonomy. Europe is white. In one of the more concise explanations of what lies at the heart of ideological whiteness, Du Bois (1920, 30) once wrote, 'I am given to understand that whiteness is the ownership of the earth forever and ever, Amen!' Whiteness is, in short, a claim to entitlement, and as the Amen clarifies, presumed to be given by God. But it is just as central a claim over the future, and this is the point. Whiteness has and still is often imagined as synonymous with futurity, a future that is also interpreted as divine destiny.

Colonial expansion, and in particular the racialized economic logics associated with the plantation system, obviously relied on the reproduction of Black and brown bodies to serve as disposable, exploitable, and enslaved forms of labor. But it was a global system ripe with contradictions. Also central to early intellectual debates that rewrote race as biology while infusing it with culture was a specific evolutionary prediction. The so-called savage races – those Linneaus labelled African Black and American Red in particular – were doomed to the fate of extinction under the wake of Europe's civilizational progress, a cultural formation predicated on its futurity and articulated as the 'natural' outcome of a social evolutionary process in which ideological whiteness was imagined as an invincible, necessary – and everywhere violent – force. This explains why, over the course of several centuries, European colonization was also defined by large-scale genocides, enormous territorial displacement, massive resource extraction, and interoceanic enslavement. Everyone from West African slave raiders to the mestizo capataz (an enforcer in Andean terms) were involved as intermediaries. But it was clear Europe was the beneficiary and the goal was an imagined future of and for global whiteness.

The Swedish writers, Lindqvist and Tate (1996), challenge the commonplace assumption that the rise of Nazi Germany during World War II represents some incomparable historical moment to be recalled in tragically memorializing terms as the global culmination of racialized genocide and full realization of the myth of Aryan supremacy. Recalling Hanna Arendt, he asks: But what about the centuries of European colonialism that preceded it, full of even more staggering statistics? How does one compare any of these grotesque realities? 6 million dead Jews. 12 million enslaved Africans.[3] A demographic collapse due to disease and genocidal military campaigns resulting in as many as 100 million deaths of Indigenous people across the Americas (Stannard 1993). Anywhere between 2 and 12 million people killed during Belgian control of the Congo rubber economy (Stanley 2012). To name a few.

Obsessing over a line from Joseph Conrad's turn of the twentieth century novel, *The Heart of Darkness*, Lindqvist's travel log sums up the colonial mentality with one line: 'exterminate all the brutes.'[4] In an echo of Fanon (Fanon's, 84) conviction that the European colonist understands 'nothing but force,' Lindqvist draws out an underlying ambiguity laid bare by the colonial process and its expressions in scientific reasoning. Sometimes the difference between species extinction and racial extermination is a matter of semantics.

The connection becomes palpable when Lindqvist recalls a series of public lectures, sponsored by London's Anthropological Society, that took place in the 1860s on the topic of 'the extinction of the lower races.'[5] Despite Lindqvist's homogenized account of the views expressed, there was not a singular position. The barrister, Thomas Bendyshe, also translator for the works of the German race scientist Johann Blumenbach, went against the crowd, arguing there was no natural law stating races cannot rebound after demographic collapse. He pointed out that, 'Most, if not all of these countries, on their discovery by Europeans contained a larger number of aboriginal inhabitants than they do at present. Hence it has been concluded, with, I think, some unphilosophical haste, that the numbers of the aborigines must in all these countries continue to decline until none of them are left' (Bendyshe 1864, xcix). This proves prophetic given the story told in part three of this essay. The futurity of whiteness, despite its claim to divine origins, was never guaranteed by the whims of history. It owes its existence more to ideological fantasy than the scientifically real: a future haunted by the specter of its own impossibility. Or, as Bendyshe suggests, a foregone conclusion arrived at only via 'unphilosophical haste.'

Still, the majority thought of 'the extinction of races' as an inevitable outcome of an evolutionary process well underway, citing everything from the massacre of aboriginal Tasmanians to demographic collapse of indigenous Americans due to disease. Alfred Russell Wallace, cofounder of the idea of natural selection alongside Darwin, said plainly: 'Now, it appears to me that the mere fact of one race supplanting another proves their superiority' (Wallace 1864, clxxxiii). This is a notable instance when natural selection was expressly equated to the notion of might makes right. It's also a reminder. Any effort to demarcate a clear line between 'social evolution' (now routinely seen as indefensibly reductive) and 'evolution by natural selection' (still the most basic idea driving evolutionary science) will run up against ambiguous overlaps due to the centrality of race in the history of both.

Lindqvist lingers most on a lecture from 1866 given by Frederic Farrar, whose life is a microcosm of British imperialism. He was born in Bombay because his father was

a chaplain for the Church Missionary Society. Their operations were authorized by the East India Trading Company, the colonial joint-stock venture that played the decisive role in the colonization of India. He returned to England to study comparative philology, served as a pallbearer at Charles Darwin's funeral in 1882, and rose through the ranks to become Dean of Canterbury where he is buried. In his lecture, titled 'Aptitudes of Races,' Farrar departs from Linneaus' subspecies racial categories and shifts from taxonomy to temporality. He argues the world is best divvyed up into savage, semi-civilized, and civilized 'strata or stages of humanity.' This is just one of the many three- or four-stage schemas of social evolution that dominated nineteenth-century thinking.

Farrar's terminology is both linear chronology and hierarchal, hence the equation of strata (a reference to geologic timescales and social ranking) and stage (a reference to the passing of historical epochs). This kind of simplified progressivist thought can still be detected in popular 'big idea' books of our present, for example, Noah Harari's best-selling *Sapiens* from 2011, which reduces tens of thousands of years of the human past into four successive 'revolutions.' In the case of Farrar, he goes on to specify certain humans are 'irreclaimably savage,' and 'had not added one iota to the knowledge, the arts, the sciences, the manufactures, the morals of the world' (Farrar 1867, 120). Most importantly, they are destined to disappear: 'They are without a past and without a future, doomed, as races infinitely nobler have been before them, to a rapid, an entire, and, perhaps for the highest destinies of mankind, an inevitable extinction' (120).

In 2021, the Haitian filmmaker Raoul Peck translated Lindqvist's long-form essay into a provocative four-part documentary series for HBO, combining archival materials, dramatizations of the past, and scathing juxtapositions with the rising fascism in our present. In Episode 3 there is a performative sequence dramatizing Farrar's lecture while an audience of listeners from the present disrupts it. Commanding space over a large hall, several white men from the London Anthropological Society are dressed in Victorian suits as Farrar speaks. Models of five human heads with different skin hues, denoting racial types sit on a table in front of them. Unsettling time and space, a decidedly multiracial, multi-aged, and multi-gendered, public sits in the lecture hall dressed in contemporary clothing – a representation of current global reality. Initially, they are attentive. As Farrar proceeds, and his claims about the 'irreclaimable savages' become more emphatic, discomfort emerges. They twist in seats. Grimaces appear on faces. The climax arrives when Peck's Farrar shifts the focus from the species level to 'one specimen of the 100,000,000 Africans, and that not the most degraded types, Hottentots … but a pure-blooded negro' (Farrar 1867, 121).[6] He steps to another table and abruptly lifts a sheet to expose the cadaver of a Black man. The crowd gasps. A public mutiny ensues.

One man stands and insults Farrar in Arabic, 'How dare you think your heritage is better than mine? Asshole!' (Peck 2021).[7] People begin exiting the lecture in disgust and doors slam in the background. Farrar continues in his convictions. Another man declares in Spanish – 'You're crazy!' – and storms out. A member of the Anthropological Society tries to intervene, 'Please gentleman, ladies, let's be civil. Show some respect. After all, it's just science.'

A Black man stands and declares: 'Fuck you, two times.'[8]

We realize in the following scene that the radical juxtaposition between Victorian Anthropology's commitment to white futurity and current post-colonial reality of racial, cultural, and linguistic heterogeneity is being observed by an actor playing Michel-Rolph

Trouillot.[9] Trouillot, of course, is a central figure haunting contemporary Anthropology, not just due to his untimely death in 2012 following a brain aneurysm (which Peck's scene references) but because he penned one of the most lasting critiques of the field (Trouillot 1991). It rests on the idea that the 'savages' Anthropology speaks of do not actually exist as such. Like the white futurity they are supposed to concede space to, they are mental projections born from the colonial encounter and documenting their supposedly 'inevitable extinction' became Anthropology's raison d'ê·tre.

The specters and their tables (are always turning)

Every time I watch this scene from Peck's visual rendering of Lindqvist's book, I also see Javier taking the place of the anonymous Black cadaver: not as the objectified racial specimen to be examined but as a quirkily invented Spicy Espécimen to be experienced. I see Javier, the performer, taking control of the table on which he performs. I see Javier, the thinker, reflecting from the table where he writes. I happen to know the old wooden table he uses for 'Taxonomía' is the same one he uses at home as a desk. He tells me he got it on the cheap from Indiana University's surplus store. Graduate student stipends don't produce excess income. I know Javier to be a minimalist anyway, unattracted to luxury, more invested in sharing a meal, lying on the beach, laughing at the slightest provocation. Uninterested in pursuing profit, prestige, and all kinds of other useless shit. Honestly, this is where he and I make common ground. When I visualize Javier in Peck's dramatization of Farrar, it's not that I see him as a substitute for the inert, anonymous cadaver placed into Peck's scene for shock effect. I imagine him jumping off the table, circling around it in one of his discardable tee shirts: on and then off. I keep seeing him with the shirt imprinted with the word '*Rabia*,' this declaration of anger that is also an effort to shed it (see Figure 1). As he moves between trauma and transformation in the performance, the table starts to turn.

At different moments Javier's table takes on different meanings. The table is a stage in front of his public and pedestal for his body to be objectified by the audience's gaze. It's also a medical examiner's table, complicit in the latest act of state violence against a Black body that was strategically trying, but not permitted, to stay alive. It becomes an old anatomy table, one of those relics that reveal history as the horror show it is, following centuries of scientific experimentation on racialized and other supposedly unworthy bodies: to prove their subhuman status; to pontificate on their eventual extinction; to measure their precise bodily differences; to subject them to experimental treatments. By the end of the piece, the table has turned so many times, it morphs into a collective altar on which Javier invites others to articulate the possibility for a different future onto his body – though he too, echoing Fanon, offers no guarantees.

This now familiar colloquialism about 'tables turning' is also a product of the nineteenth century, the same 'century of progress' in which modern race science and social evolutionary thinking developed hand-in-hand as the scientific justification for European colonialism, slavery, and the ideology of white futurity. Yet, in contrast to race science, which circulated widely as enlightened intellectual inquiry at the time, the idea of table turning aroused from a decidedly different realm, the occult: specifically, the Victorian craze of holding seances around wooden tables in which experts claimed to speak to the

dead. A bit like a large Ouija board, the tables used in such practices inevitably came alive with the presence of ghosts, spirits, and specters.

While the new spiritualist practitioners came under accusations of chicanery, it's also true their circles routinely overlapped with those on the radical side of history, early socialists of the Fourier variety and abolitionists in particular (Strube 2016). Even Karl Marx, committed materialist and denouncer of all things supernatural, felt compelled to comment on the phenomenon in *Capital Vol 1*. At one level, he says, a table is just a table, made of wood, 'an ordinary, sensuous thing.' But when it becomes a commodity, the table 'stand[s] on its head, and evolves out of its wooden brain grotesque ideas, far more wonderful than if it were to begin dancing of its own free will' (Marx and Fowkes 1977, 163–164). Referencing the table turning phenomenon, Marx's intent was to demystify it and return attention to the hidden duality of the commodity form at the heart of capitalist society: the commodity's everyday utility and the sensuous forms of labor required to make it on one hand; the commodity's exchange value and the abstracted forms of labor capital exploits for surplus to the detriment of those who actually made it on the other.

But a rehashing of Marx is less interesting than asking what other grotesque ideas were born from nineteenth century wooden tables, ones still haunting the contemporary world like the specters of race, Anthropology, and white futurity Javier conjures up and confronts with his Rabia. Some of the most disturbing ideas were born directly from that era's comparative anatomy tables, racial ideas that have not gone extinct and instead transmogrified into equally ugly forms in the twenty-first century. We can start with the table of Georges Cuvier.

Cuvier is a towering figure, a turn of the nineteenth-century intellectual that influenced the entirety of the natural and social sciences, sometimes nicknamed the 'Napoleon' of the Parisian intellectual scene that developed in the chaotic aftermath of the French Revolution. He is still written into Paleontology textbooks in unequivocally laudatory terms as the 'father of comparative anatomy' and debunker of Christian ideas about species permanence in favor of a science that reckons with the 'reality of extinction' (Benton and Harper 2009, 12). He became well known for his lectures contrasting living elephant species to mastodon bones shipped to Paris from Thomas Jefferson's fledgling United States of America. Jefferson was convinced mastodons still roamed the Western plains and expected someone to find evidence, as settlers and the US military pushed further into Native American territory. Through his comparative anatomy, Cuvier began to convince other natural historians that 'lost species' – his preferred phrase – were real despite the teachings of Christian theology that dictated God would never let his precious creations vanish. Even in recent intellectual histories of extinction as a scientific idea, or environmental warnings about the Anthropocene as a 'sixth mass extinction' event caused by anthropogenic forces, Cuvier is routinely factored into the story as an innocent character.[10]

But Cuvier was also the race scientist who dissected Sarah Baartman's body, presented an autopsy report to members of France's Natural History Museum in 1817, and stored parts of her remains in Paris museum collections where they remained until 2002.

Baartman's case is not exceptional in the annals of early science. It is emblematic of just how routine it became for natural scientists to portray racial others encountered in Europe's colonial expansion, people of the so-called Black race in particular, as equivalent

to living fossils, missing links, and objects of scientific experiment. If Linneaus can be seen as the creator of fully biologized racial categories, Cuvier can be seen as the inventor of the science of dissection and experimentation on racialized bodies. So many followed in his footsteps, there are too many to name.[11]

Sarah Baartman was born around 1789 and was Khoisan, an ethnic group native to what is now South Africa. Orphaned, she labored on Dutch European farms and worked as a nursemaid in Cape Town. In 1810 she was trafficked to London, where she became an 'oddity' attraction, and was given the stage name 'Hottentot Venus.' The moniker reflects the racial slur used to refer to the Khoisan, the European obsession with her curvy body type, and reports about her ostensibly abnormal female genitalia. Sold and taken to France, she continued to be on display in Paris until she died in 1815 at which time Cuvier took possession of her body, eager to examine her corpse in comparison to the physiognomy of other primates and confirm reports of her sexual anatomy. His autopsy report openly expresses repulsion at her features, labeling them 'monstrous,' and takes a baboon as the primary point of comparison.[12]

Revisiting the gruesome details of Baartman's story is common in race and gender critical scholarship for obvious reasons. It was almost certainly kicked off by the self-critical work around race and evolutionary thinking by Gould (1981, 85–86) but the accounts of Gilman (1985) and Fausto-Sterling (1995) became canonical. Curiously, these varied accounts that deliberate over Baartman's centrality in the making of race science never make connections to the crucial role ideas of extinction played in this very same history even though Cuvier is the precise connector. The man behind the emergent scientific idea of 'lost species' is the same man who carved up Baartman's body as an object of anatomical study and stored her remains in a museum. To Cuvier, she represented a 'specimen' of the 'Hottentots,' the group systematically represented as the lowest of the 'savage' races (sometimes separate species) during the entire reign of race science. To recall Farrar, they were considered 'even lower' than the 'pure blooded negro' – whatever that was in mid-nineteenth century Anthropology (I presume enslaved populations living in the Americas). Cuvier's comparative anatomy not only constructed Baartman as animalistic and inferior, but also as a living relic: ostensible evidence of a primordial human past facing imminent extinction, never mind her coevalness to Cuvier who only outlived Baartman by seventeen years. She too became a projection within the specter of ideological whiteness, supposedly the fate given to every human future.

How exactly Sarah Baartman saw herself in this early nineteenth-century context is obviously a difficult thing to parse, given the biased nature of the archive, though scholars like Fausto-Sterling (1995) and Magubane (2001) have pondered this dilemma. By contrast, the perspective of Diana Ferrus seems much clearer, and is testament to the fact that the language of poetry can hold healing powers, just like Javier's turning tables open up a host of anthropological emotions.

Ferrus is a contemporary South African poet, and like Baartman, of Khoisan descent. In 1998, she wrote a poem titled 'I've come to take you home.' Though it does not mention her by name, Baartman is clearly the muse to whom this song is sung. The poem followed a series of frustrated diplomatic negotiations between South African President Nelson Mandala and French President Jacques Chirac, when South Africa sought repatriation of Baartman's remains in the post-apartheid era. They had been exhibited as recently as the 1970s and were still stored in the Musée de l'Homme, France's world-famous

anthropology museum and home to innumerable colonial treasures (Haller 2021). In one part of the poem, Ferrus writes,

> I have come to wrench you away,
> Away from the poking eyes of the man-made monster
> Who lives in the dark with his clutches of imperialism
> Who dissects your body bit by bit,
> Who likens your soul to that of Satan
> And declares himself the ultimate God!
> I have come to soothe your heavy heart,
> I offer my bosom to your weary soul.
> I will cover your face with the palms of my hands,
> I will run my lips over the lines in your neck,
> I will feast my eyes on the beauty of you
> And I will sing for you,
> For I have come to bring you peace (Haller 2021).

Ferrus' elegiac healing of this old colonial wound dislodged something in the global zeitgeist. The ultimate God, the God of entitlement, the scientific Authority, the God of ideological whiteness does not own the future after all. In an astonishingly literal instance of poetic justice, her words became actions.

In 2002, the French government passed a law to repatriate Baartman's remains to South Africa directly citing Ferrus' poem, even while circumscribing the language to assure the law applied only to her remains and no other colonially acquired collections. On August 2 of 2002, Ferrus was part of a delegation to receive the body. Baartman now lies in rest on a hilltop named Vergaderingskop – 'meeting hill' in Afrikaans – overlooking the town of Hankey at the confluence of the Gamtoos and Klein rivers. In Ferrus' words, it's a place:

> Where the ancient mountaintops shout your name.
> I have made your bed at the foot of the hill.
> Your blankets are covered in buchu and mint.
> The proteas stand in yellow and white – (Haller 2021)

So, Sarah Baartman is finally home and Ferrus' words possess a divination of global proportions. We can and should dwell on this victory, at least for a moment.

When the moment passes, we look around and notice just how much of the world still clings desperately to ideological whiteness, seeking to seduce into the sadistic prophecies of racial warfare and the specters of racial extinction. Two decades after Baartman found her way home, all around us are forecasts that bespeak a rising darkness, everywhere coded in the color white. Some are cryptic and subcultural, others completely mainstream and politically viral.

> 'Accelerationism.'[13]
> '14/88.'[14]
> 'The Great Replacement.'[15]
> 'Make America Great Again.'[16]
> 'Poisoning the Blood of Our Country.'[17]
> 'You Will Not Replace Us.'[18]
> '6MWE.'[19]
> 'Boogaloo.'[20]
> 'Death, death, death, horrible death, I don't know.'[21]

'Whether you choose violence or not, violence is coming to you.'[22]
'Diversity is a Code Word for White Genocide.'[23]
'Are you a citizen?'[24]

Not poetry. Some are straightforward political slogans, some enigmatic neo-Nazi symbology, some conservative catchphrases rooted in elaborate political philosophy about the desperate need to protect the supposedly unique 'genius' of Western civilization from everything from 'diversity' discourse to the migrant hordes threatening the (white) sanctity of certain national borders. To keep grouping these assorted ideas with the term 'far-right' misses the point. They increasingly occupy the political center everywhere from South Africa and France to the UK and the USA. The politicians, activists, and influencers attached to them don't just push anti-immigrant rhetoric and lament a past 'greatness.' They openly prophesize a future of cataclysmic racial warfare. Indeed, there are foot soldiers already engaged in intermittent random attacks, whether Dylan Roof killing nine Black Baptists in Charleston, South Carolina in 2015 or Brentan Tarrant massacring 51 and injuring nearly 100 in Christchurch, New Zealand, in 2019 (notably, both chose sites of worship to engage in the fantasy of a future large-scale racial war).

As Bhatt (2021) recently argued, the decisive factor in all contemporary far-right and neo-fascist discourse is an absurdist paranoia around 'white extinction,' the specter that gives rise to everything from patriarchal reproductive logics (e.g. 'White people [implicitly, white women] need to have more white children!') to fantasies of a racial separatism born from violence (e.g. a future white ethno-state, cleansed of racial others and immigrant 'problems'). As he says, 'The fear of white extinction … is a driving logic, one not simply predicated on "biology" but a complex metaphysics of "cultural" and "civilizational" decline' (Bhatt 2021, 32). This particular formulation of 'white extinction' is in some ways novel; Bhatt attributes its current iteration to contemporary US far-right activist Greg Johnson (who wrote a PhD on Kant and taught Philosophy at Morehouse College, of all places) from his 2018 *White Nationalist Manifesto*. However, the basic idea is haunted by the old and familiar specter of white futurity and its inevitable contradictions.

There is the more obvious one. Ideological whiteness's dream of achieving a racial-cum-cultural purity has forever been up against the inevitable reality of social intercourse and ideological interdependency with the non-whiteness it constructs, precisely that 'Manichean' duality of which Fanon once wrote when he argued the settler 'needs' the native just as much as the native 'needs' the settler for the colonial world to exist in the first place. The idea of white futurity, as synonymous with white purity, can only exist in direct relation to centuries of anti-miscegenation fear, eugenic campaigns, and anti-immigration policies – which are also a stubborn refusal to acknowledge that humans have been mixing their bodies, genes, and cultures for as long as they have been human.

There are also the more geopolitical and temporal contradictions. Ideological whiteness's claim toward entitlement over the Earth's future has not only been the rationale for genocidal extermination and exclusion but, precisely because of that, it provokes tremendous resistance. This is true not just via literal battles of abolition, rebellion, civil rights campaigns, and movements for sovereignty but on the terrain of art, morals, and scientific ideas. Hence, my original inspiration is the artist and his table and the various ghosts of Anthropology it brings to the fore. To return to Javier's own phrase, those made into

taxonomic objects by the advent of ideological whiteness have always been strategically existing and staying alive.

Ideological whiteness, along with Anthropology, confronts a 'savage' that strategically stayed alive despite attempts at extermination and evolutionary assumptions of racial extinction. From within its historical stubbornness, ideological whiteness struggles to accept that any claim of a monopoly over the future is also a set up for failure. In Darwinian terms, there's nothing more likely to go extinct than a 'species' unwilling or unable to adapt to the inevitability of transforming circumstances. A whiteness committed to purity, isolationism, and rampant historical denial is precisely that.

The point then is not so much that the metaphorical tables have only now turned on ideological whiteness. It is that they were always turning. The futurity of whiteness has always been contradictorily bound to a past imagined for/as Anthropology's savage. To return to Du Bois, if ideological whiteness is a claim of 'ownership of the earth forever and ever' clearly it is going to die hard. Per Fanon, the point is we will have to kill it with a world historical force as yet unknown. If ideological whiteness ever does die, the savage and race itself will have to die with it, such that something else, anything really, might be born. Some ideas deserve extinction.

In the meantime, I sit at a modest wooden table of my own. I sit writing, located somewhere between desperation and hope. I feel transfixed by Javier's performative movements that go back and forth between trauma and transformation: his embodied critique of the colonial past and his creative refusal of its resurgence in the present without foreclosing entirely the possibility of a different future. I have this image of Javier in one of his tee shirts. Beautifully alive. Dancing around his table. Making it turn. I do feel love. *También siento su Rabia*. So, fuck all y'all. *Váyanse pal carajo*. Two more times.

Notes

1. This article is part of a longer book, *Homo Terminus: The Specter of Human Extinction* (Greene forthcoming), a series of speculative essays on human extinction anxieties within current global crises. See: homoterminus.org
2. This is a reference to the 'pencil test,' a method to prove a person has 'Black hair' texture during South African apartheid.
3. For historically sourced statistics on the Transatlantic Slave Trade see the site, Slave Voyages. https://www.slavevoyages.org/
4. The phrase is taken from the character Kurtz in Conrad's novel, an ivory trader working in the Congo who has 'gone native,' succumbing to the supposed African savagery around him but doubles as a metaphor for the savagery of Europe's colonial violence.
5. See Lindqvist and Tate (1996), 132–135). I revisit the debates using original sources.
6. I quote Farrar's text directly. There are slight variations in Peck's documentary.
7. The performer is Zinedine Soualem, a French actor of Algerian descent.
8. The actor is Mahamat-Saleh Haroun, a film director from Chad. Peck (Haitian) chooses to highlight Soualem (French Algerian) and Haroun (Chadian), forming a symbolic trinity of former French colonies. Fanon is implied.
9. The US actor Josh Hartnett, the symbolic embodiment of the 'white man' throughout the series, asks a seemingly random man from Farrar's audience to follow him, ushers him to

a surgical area, and executes him by applying a device to the forehead. When asked, the actor says his name is Michel Rolph-Trouillot. Perhaps Peck is suggesting the aneurysm that disabled and eventually killed Trouillot can be interpreted as the colonial weight he bore.

10. Neither Barrow (2009) nor Kolbert (2014) make connections between Cuvier's fame for introducing the concept of extinction into scientific discourse and his infamous reputation as a race scientist.
11. A shortened list: Robert Knox, the 1820s Scottish polygenist and student of Cuvier who advocated for race-based genocide and perfected the art of grave robbing (see Lindqvist 1996, 129); J. Marion Simms, the 1840s US surgeon who developed gynecological instruments by experimenting on enslaved women (see Staff 2020); Jean V. Cooke and Saxton Pope at UC San Francisco who performed a 1916 autopsy on Ishi, a Native Californian presumed to be the last of the Yahi, and preserved his brain in the Smithsonian (see Starn 2005).
12. See Johnson and Rolls (2023). The decision of white Australian scholars to publish a recent English translation of Cuvier's report is fraught, as is my own decision to read and cite it. It makes a reading possible for anyone with limited French. But the commentary they provide is bizarrely simplistic. They don't deny its importance within scientific racism or Cuvier's dehumanizing treatment. Yet, they also highlight excruciatingly small details to suggest Cuvier sought also to 'humanize' Baartman to some degree (e.g. his description of her shoulders as 'graceful'). Of course, all human beings are complex, including Cuvier, and no one is exclusively a victim, including Baartman. But to rationalize Cuvier in this case (whose reputation is largely intact in the natural sciences) misses the point. For a better critique of the dangers of constructing race as transhistorical category through Baartman's case, see Magubane (2001).
13. White supremacist keyword for those eager to 'speed up' history toward an 'inevitable' race war, ironically coopted from Marxist discourse (see League 2019).
14. A widely used code, often found on tattoos and graffiti, for the '14 Words' slogan that neo-Nazis routinely memorize, thanks to David Eden Lane, the white supremacist leader associated with The Order. 88 is a double reference to Lane's '88 precepts' and symbolic stand-in for the Nazi salute, 'Heil Hitler.' See Anti-Defamation League (n.d. –a)
15. See National Immigration Forum (2021).
16. This is Donald Trump's campaign slogan, with roots in Reagan conservatism, also the primary banner for a contemporary movement that codes racialized messages by 'cleansing' them to appeal to wider audiences. See Melton (2017).
17. Trump used this line repeatedly in his bid for reelection in 2024 in reference to immigrants. While many see it as a direct echo of Nazi ideology, one can draw its roots back to the Iberian colonial origins of 'pure' versus 'mixed' blood in early Iberian colonialism (see Silverblatt 2004). According to some reporting a large percentage of contemporary Americans agree with the sentiment (see Bump 2024).
18. Here is the direct evidence of far-right political philosophy. 'The Great Replacement,' attributed to the French author Renaud Camus, translated into street-based activism. This was the chant used by activists at the 'Unite the Right Rally' in Charlottesville, Virginia, in August of 2017 to protest the removal of Confederate monuments where they were met with counter protestors. As is well known, James Alex Fields Jr. rammed his Dodge Charger into a crowd of counter protestors, injuring more than 30 people and killing Heather Danielle Heyer.
19. This is neo-Nazi code for '6 Million Was Not Enough,' a reference to the Holocaust. It was proudly exhibited by members of the Proud Boys in the lead up to the January 6, 2021, mob attack on the Capitol that was sparked by outgoing President Trump's public lie that the electoral victory of Joe Biden was false. See Kasprak (2020).
20. A term, originally in reference to a mid 1980s film, popularized online as slang for an imminent race war. See League (2020).
21. See (2025). These were the words of President Trump in a widely publicized bilateral meeting on May 21, 2025 at the White House with South African President Cyril Ramaphosa. With Elon Musk present, Trump's reference to 'horrible death' draws from repeated allegations during

the meeting that there is a 'white genocide' occurring in South Africa, a claim Ramaphosa and the international community denounce as propaganda by rightwing actors in South Africa. While Trump uttered the words, he held up a printed photo of forensics specialists excavating a mass grave as 'proof.' Reuters later identified the photo as theirs and clarified it was taken in the Democratic Republic of the Congo; in effect, the claims of a 'white genocide' relied on political appropriation of massacred, Congolese bodies (Reuters 2025).

22. These are the words of Elon Musk, delivered virtually as a rambling fifteen-minute statement, at the massive 'Unite the Kingdom' rally on September 14, 2025, that took place four days after the public assassination of Charlie Kirk, conservative activist and founder of Turning Point USA. The British far-right activist, Tommy Robinson, organized the rally to which over 100,000 Brits attended. Denouncing unspecified crimes the British government is hiding, criticizing immigration to the UK, characterizing the left as the 'party of murder,' and claiming he was speaking to the 'reasonable middle,' Musk insisted racial violence is on the imminent horizon. See APT (2025).
23. The mantra 'diversity is a code word for white genocide' is now global and widespread. It is attributed largely to Bob Whitaker, former Republican aid to Ronald Reagan, an open segregationist and hero to various white nationalist organizations. See Anti-Defamation League (n.d. –b)
24. This is a common question that armed and masked Immigration and Customs Enforcement agents ask while randomly targeting brown and Black persons as they walk down the streets in the US.

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Author contributions

CRediT: **Shane Greene:** Conceptualization, Investigation, Writing – original draft.

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Notes on contributor

Shane Greene is Professor of Anthropology at Indiana University Bloomington. His published books include *Customizing Indigeneity*, *Punk and Revolution: Seven More Interpretations on Peruvian Reality*, and *Punk! Las Américas Edition*. His forthcoming book is titled *Homo Terminus: The Specter of Human Extinction* and will be released by Ill Will Editions in 2026. See: homoterminus.org.

ORCID

Shane Greene http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4883-8489

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