No Humans Involved: Structures And Systems

*This transcript excerpt has been edited for length and clarity. A recording of the full panel presentation is available on YouTube.

Sampada Aranke (SA): Good morning everyone. I am so humbled to be here today, to be in conversation with Simone and Sable. I'm going to offer some framing notes and then dive right into the conversation.

"Dear Colleagues: You may have heard a radio news report which aired briefly during the days after the jury's acquittal of the policemen in the Rodney King beating case. The report stated that public officials of the judicial system of Los Angeles routinely used the acronym N.H.I. to refer to any case involving a breach of the rights of young Black males who belong to the jobless category of the inner city ghettos. N.H.I. means 'no humans involved'."[1]

So begins the anti-colonial and feminist scholar Sylvia Wynter's May 1992 open letter to her colleagues at Stanford University, penned shortly after the April 29th verdict acquitting the officers responsible for Rodney King's brutal beating.

Wynter, in her rich and dynamic essay, suggests that this police designation points us to a broader historical and theoretical problem that has to do with how the category of humanness is itself vexed. To put it very crudely, Wynter, in a roller coaster of an essay, asks us to reconsider the progressivist logics we assume when we utter the word

[1] Sylvia Wynter, "'No Humans Involved': An Open Letter to My Colleagues," Forum N. H. I.: Knowledge for the 21st Century (Stanford, CA) 1, no. 1 (fall 1994), 42–71.

"human," as the category's roots in Western theories of Enlightenment presume a racial, classed, gendered, and sensorial set of logics that is not always made available to us all. While there are several impactful and insightful passages in Wynter's open letter, the most striking is her insistent return to visibility and perceptibility. She turns our attention to what she calls—extending from Ralph Ellison—the "inner eyes," which constitute the training behind our perception, our subjective ways of seeing. For Wynter, part of the work of understanding the histories, systems, and structures that give rise to conditions like the prison industrial complex, is to engage in a riotous rebellion against these inherited modes of perception, to unlearn those inner eyes that we've inherited and to make them anew.

Surveillance is one of many modes that govern these inner eyes. Simone, in her brilliant book, *Dark Matters*, poetically names "the surveillance of blackness as often unperceivable within the study of surveillance, . . . blackness being that nonnameable matter that matters the racialized disciplinary society."[2] In what is absolutely my favorite chapter of the book, she unpacks New York City ordinances that required black, mixed-race, and indigenous slaves to carry small lamps when unescorted by white people at night. The cover of the night was considered to be a threat for whites precisely because of how the dark inhibits total visibility, thus making it extremely difficult to track the movements of non-white peoples; so it makes disturbing sense to mandate a forced relationship to being seen, so as to make surveillance and policing easier. This history of surveillance calls attention to coerced perceptibility and the expectation to remain

[2] Simone Browne, Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 9.

exposed and visible. This [is] what Wynter might call a scene of instruction for those inner eyes, where our expectation for non-white people is to remain in plain view, to be made available to those surveilling, to those policing eyes.

I think this concern with the perceptible that Wynter and Simone elaborate is why Sable so provocatively suggested we title today's discussion after Wynter's letter. Having had the privilege of writing for her incredible show at the Haggerty, I can say without hesitation that Sable's work asks us to reconsider the ordinary exposures of black life. In her work, structures are broken down into ubiquitous moments, experiences, affects, and senses. It's within these moments of what the artist calls "ordinary violence" that we might begin to see the tenderness of pain, a non-spectacular scene to subjection, a poetic grammar of the everyday, a palpable illumination of the seemingly imperceptible.

Taking Wynter's format of an open letter seriously, I hope that we can turn to dialogue as a mode to trouble the less-visible modes that shape our understanding of the prison industrial complex and its impact on our everyday lives. For today's discussion, I've asked Sable and Simone to present for ten minutes on a thought, provocation, problem, or subject of interest between them. From there, we'll go into a couple of ready-made questions from me and then open it up for a discussion from all of you. Please join me in welcoming Sable to the podium.

Sable Elyse Smith (SES): I've been spending a lot of time thinking about this refrain that I found throughout Simone's book, and especially in the epilogue, which is also its subtitle, "When Blackness Enters the Frame." And maybe I won't once utter the word "prison" on stage, because I think it is also a type of frame, and I'm interested in us

talking about that in depth. And frames are themes or strategies that I think about constantly in my own work and in relationship to an art context. So our work shares this interest in humanity *versus*—or in tandem with—commodity or objecthood. I'm going to paint a couple of pictures here to begin, to think about how language, visible and invisible, begins to structure the narratives that we live by.

Installation view of *BOLO: be on (the) lookout*, a solo exhibition by Sable Elyse Smith, October 28 - December 16, 2018. Photo by Charles Benton. Image courtesy of the artist and JTT, New York, and Carlos/Ishikawa, London

This depicts an installation shot from a recent show that I had. The dominant piece in the foreground is a six-channel synchronized video with sound, which includes a custom-tiled floor and a Benjamin Moore paint titled Timid White. So, Timid White is a container for the piece. The video itself is actually a seventeen-second loop of actress Julie Hagerty reciting a line from Spike Lee's film *Clockers*. The clip that I took was

performed as a comedic bit on a Conan O'Brien show back in 1994, which is when the film sort of debuted. Hagerty recites, "Did I ever tell you the first time I killed somebody?" As she pronounces the words, laughter erupts from the audience. She sighs, she sticks out her tongue, licks her lips, and rocks her head back and forth. So, this image of Hagerty is juxtaposed with the words of the fictional Rodney Little, who is an African American man and drug dealer in the film.

One of the questions that I'm interested in here is how does the swapping of this language from one mouth to another immediately de-escalate the impact of its violence, sort of shape-shifting it into entertainment by O'Brien and Hagerty's design. So, what happens when blackness enters the frame or is performed inside of a frame? Likewise, tucked away to the far left, in the left corner there's a thing that's framed, that you can kind of make out; it's blurred. This is a sixty-by-fifty-inch painting. The printed text in ink, on the bottom of the painting, reads, "Draw your own picture." And then the handwritten text of the painting reads, "To the white lady in Santa Fe who told me she squeezes her white granddaughter's hand every time she sees a big scary black man and then she squeezes my hand because she's compelled to touch me and tells me about volunteering with the kids in Harlem, fuck you, love and mercy, the misgendered artist." So, this is a white page holding the narrative of a white lady surrounded by an antique white paint and white-out or corrective fluid.

In a section from Simone's book titled "Selling Blackness,"[3] she describes an early project by Keith and Mendi Obadike; *Blackness for Sale* is the title of the piece from

[3] Simone Browne, *Dark Matters*, 104-108.

2001. So, Keith Obadike auctions his blackness on eBay. The auction lasted only ten days as surprisingly, to me at least, it was deemed inappropriate by eBay, which I think is also incredibly fascinating to think about. But so, in the listing, there was no picture or no image of Keith; there was just a description of the item, which reads:

"This heirloom has been in the possession of the seller for twenty-eight years. Mr. Obadike's Blackness has been used primarily in the United States and its functionality outside of the US cannot be guaranteed. Buyer will receive a certificate of authenticity." Interesting—I added interesting. "Benefits and Warnings. Benefits: 1. This Blackness may be used for creating black art. 2. This Blackness may be used for writing critical essays or scholarship about other blacks. 3. This Blackness may be used for making jokes about black people and/or laughing at black humor comfortably. (Option 3 may overlap with Option 2) 4. This Blackness may be used for accessing some affirmative action benefits. (Limited time offer. May already be prohibited in some areas.) 5. This Blackness may be used for dating a black person without fear of public scrutiny. 6. This Blackness may be used for gaining access to exclusive, 'high-risk' neighborhoods. 7. This Blackness may be used for securing the right to use the terms 'sista', 'brotha', or 'nigga' in reference to black people. (Be sure to have certificate of authenticity on hand when using Option 7). 8. This Blackness may be used for instilling fear. 9. This Blackness may be used to augment the blackness of those already black, especially for purposes of playing 'blacker than thou'. 10. This Blackness may be used by blacks as a spare (in case your original blackness is whupped off you)." That's one of my favorites. "Warnings." And I'll go through just a couple of the warnings, because I'm sure we can imagine all of them. "1. The Seller does not recommend that this Blackness be used during legal proceedings

of any sort. The Seller does not recommend that this Blackness be used while seeking employment. The Seller does not recommend that this Blackness be used in the process of making or selling 'serious' art. The Seller does not recommend that this Blackness be used while shopping or writing a personal check. The Seller does not recommend that this Blackness be used while voting in the United States or Florida." An interesting distinction. "The Seller does not recommend that this Blackness be used while demanding fairness." Or "demanding" period. "The Seller does not recommend that this Blackness be used in Hollywood." And then, "The Seller does not recommend that this Blackness be used by whites looking for a wild weekend."

So, there are a couple of things that I'm thinking about in relationship to these examples. First is the imaging of bodies, and particularly black bodies, and then to pull again another example, to also paint the richness of the things that are talked about in the nuances that are woven throughout this book. The last example that Simone writes about, which is in the epilogue, is this YouTube video that went viral, titled "HP Computers Are Racist." So, in this example, to reduce the label of the two people who are participating, there are two characters, White Wanda and Black Desi. In front of the computer's webcam, Black Desi states, "I think my blackness is interfering with the computer's ability to follow me," referring to the webcam's apparent inability to pan, tilt, zoom, follow, or detect any of Black Desi's gestures while, alternatively, being able to pick up all of White Wanda's moves. I think the video got somewhat over three million hits and comments, so of course, Hewlett-Packard had to respond. And so they first thanked Black Desi and White Wanda for this video that they made and pointing to this issue, but responded that it wasn't that the computers were racist, but that the technology—this is a

quote—the technology was "built on standard algorithms that measure the difference in intensity of contrast between the eyes and the upper cheek and nose," and that "the camera might have difficulty 'seeing' contrast in conditions where there is insufficient foreground lighting."

So, on the one hand, there's the failure to capture. There is also an erasure, there's a trying on and a sort of always unstable state in which blackness might exist. And what does this sort of subtle language encoding do to reify or diminish these modes? What happens when a body cannot be captured or the rendering of its image [is] refused? Or, as to kind of close it out, Saidiya Hartman, has articulated, "At issue here is the precariousness of empathy and the uncertain line between witness and spectator. Only more obscene than the brutality unleashed at the whipping post is the demand that this suffering be materialized and evidenced by the display of the tortured body or endless recitations of the ghastly and terrible. In light of this, how does one give expression to these outrages without exacerbating the indifference to suffering that is the consequence of the benumbing spectacle or contend with the narcissistic identification that obliterates the other or the prurience that too often is the response to such displays?"[4]

So, how do we picture violence? How can new narratives and images exist outside of the commodifying framework of surveillance? These, I think, are a couple of the nuanced examples to fold back into the Sylvia Wynter text and this idea of no humans being

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[4] Saidiya V. Hartman, Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 4. Cited in Fred Moten, "Resistance of the Object: Aunt Hester's Scream," In the Break: The Aesthetics of the Black Radical Tradition (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), 3.

involved and all the ways that I am thinking about image and language in my own personal work. Thank you.

Installation view of *swear it closed, closes it*, 2018 in *Sable Elyse Smith: Ordinary Violence* at the Haggerty Museum of Art, Marquette University, August 17, 2018 – January 27, 2019.

Simone Browne (SB): Standing at around fourteen feet high and twelve feet across, Sable Elyse Smith's *swear it closed, closes it* is symbolic of the prison's visiting room. It can mark the threshold between inside and out, if only these simple kinds of distinctions can be made in the carceral spaces that mark, make, and subtend our current governing order. *swear it closed, closes it* marks the space of the bodily pat downs and searches. It seems cold, heavy even, like the modular metal tables with their built-in stools found in visiting rooms, bolted together, efficient and durable, but not meant to be comfortable or comforting. Part of the market in prison-grade furniture, sometimes called visitation

station furniture and correctional facility furniture or, as one company that traffics in these objects puts it, justice furniture.

swear it closed, closes it is composed of powder-coated aluminum. Some parts are somewhat cobalt-blue looking. Aluminum is said to be a soft metal. With 1/12th of the earth's crust being aluminum, it is the third most common element after oxygen and silicone for the earth's crust. In a discussion of when metal meets terror, but one of a different object, philosopher Grégoire Chamayou suggests that, to truly understand it, we must start by taking apart the mechanisms of violence. This is instructive, and this is what I think Sable Elyse Smith's piece does. Chamayou says, go and look at the weapons, study their specific characteristics, for the aim here is an understanding that is not so much technical as political. What is important, he cautions us, is not so much to grasp how the actual device works or to wonder whether the end justifies the means, but instead to interrogate what the choice of those means in itself tends to impose.[5] *swear it closed, closes it* makes for an imposing archway, the passageway through which seems hardly welcoming. But, for the artist, it gives us a way to understand the quotidian, the ways that violence is made ordinary.

In an interview with Kat Herriman in *Cultured Magazine*, Sable Elyse Smith had this to say: "If you hear the word violence, you think about the images that proliferate in the media, I'm not pointing to that kind of imagery or narrative. What I'm most concerned with are invisible, quotidian, day-to-day type of violence and what is the accumulation of

[5] Grégoire Chamayou, *A Theory of the Drone,* trans. Janet Lloyd (New York: The New Press, 2015).

those small, miniscule transgressions in the body over time."[6] These miniscule transgressions here speak to the slow-motion, state-sanctioned death that is life in captivity. The day-to-day violence of prolonged isolation, constant exposure to artificial light with its continuous hums, inspection, corporal violence of the uniformed prison guards. The slow-motioned death of incarceration is for those that Sylvia Wynter, from whose 1992 open letter to her colleagues this panel took its name today, states are subject to the status of the narratively condemned.

Last year, I began thinking with Challenging E-Carceration projects. A group of researchers, some activists, some policy makers, some university-affiliated researchers, some formerly incarcerated people, now researchers, and some a combination of all of these. I started to work with them or think with them to think through the work needed to create a broad rejection of electronic monitoring by way of ankle bracelets or other forms of shackles. Rather than seeing electronic monitoring as an alternative to incarceration and an effective means of post-incarceration supervision for people on parole or supervised release, the position of the Challenging E-Carceration project is that these technologies are a means of expansion into people's homes and neighborhoods that sets dehumanizing limits on their freedom and, as such, should be abolished. A report released last month by Challenging E-Carceration and the Center for Media Justice's No Digital Prisons campaign entitled *No More Shackles: Why We Must End the Use of Electronic Monitoring for People on Parole*, and authored by James Kilgore, Emmett Sanders, and Myaisha Hayes, found that electronic monitoring hinders the success of

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[6] Kat Herriman, "Sable Elyse Smith Rewrites the Prison Narrative," *Cultured Magazine*, August 22, 2017. https://www.culturedmag.com/sable-elyse-smith/.

people subjected to it when, for example, jobs like house cleaning, landscaping, construction, and delivery all pose challenges for tracking a person's locations; as such, these types of employments are often not allowed. Or when concrete buildings such as warehouses interfere with the GPS signal or the GPS monitor, forcing people to leave work and go outside to pick up a signal on their phone in order to phone in to their parole officers, thus creating tensions with employers. Or when call center operators are slow to pick up the phone or neglect to record permissions granted for movement.

So, while Martha Stewart was subjected to electronic monitoring, I guess, she was still able to move about her vast estate. Same for Paul Manafort, when he was on home confinement and monitored by GPS. But, for most others on house arrest, short parameters make tasks like picking up children from the school bus stop or emptying garbage or going outside for a cigarette a potential violation of the rules of supervision.

The shackles are also not cost-effective, and, for those that are already financially vulnerable, paying rent for electronic monitoring devices and the cost of having the necessary landline phone are often untenable. On our call last month, one person spoke of being forced to pay over $275 a month for monetary costs associated with the device, with no end in sight.

With Sable Elyse Smith's call that we must be concerned with the invisible, quotidian, day-to-day type of violence, we could look again to the No Digital Prisons report's calls for resources and technology to be put into creating post-incarceration opportunities, rather than increasing electronic monitoring's capacity as a surveillance device by linking it to biometric technology or the idea that these electronic monitoring devices can be used

to gentrify spaces by way of electronic leashes, pointing out where people can and cannot go.

One so-called solution that is sometimes offered up instead of these shackles is a mobile phone, the thinking being "everyone" has a mobile phone anyway. But video-enabled cell phones that could be used by state surveillance and policing agencies to demand verification by way of facial recognition would also lead to the massifying of data that could be held by private vendors who monitor these devices.

Over the last forty years or so, the number of people on probation and parole has quadrupled. Anticipating what abolition, dismantling, and decarceration need to look like for thriving communities requires arts and research that are undertaken with those communities, asking how an object, like electronic monitoring, impacts the lives they want to lead. For me, and many others, it's a question of social imaginaries that are attuned to the specificities of place, people, and objects. Thank you.

SA: All right. Thank you both. Let's get into the good stuff now. Sable, I was really struck by how you framed both your interests and Simone's interests in relation to these three words: humanity, commodity, and objecthood. And in light of Sylvia Wynter's essay, "No Humans Involved," I'm wondering if both of you could think out loud a little bit around how the word human—or how the word humanity—might be helpful and harmful as this kind of big-category bucket that we tend to call upon, like human rights—social justice tends to turn to that—but maybe we could think about how both of you, in your own work, problematize that term or what are some of the trickinesses that exist in that vocabulary?

SES: The impetus for some of the ways that I approach making work about prison-industrial-complex violence is always centering and focusing on humanity. I'm always struck by the issue that some of the ways that the system is allowed to build and perpetuate are because there is a foreclosure of humanity for certain subjectivities. I'm involved in a lot of different types of prison work and conversations, and so I always see that there's a conversation about statistics, there's a conversation about policy, but there is never a conversation about the humanity of individuals or individuals that group into larger conversations that are important, but thinking about statistics or thinking about a kind of large generalization of talking about the swath of a community. And so, for me, it has always been important that individual narratives and thinking about one's own imagination can exist in certain spaces, and the way that the system is functioning to foreclose one's humanity and therefore render one an object or a commodity, if we're talking about prison in relationship to its economic function or if we're talking about it in relationship to the violation of human rights function.

So, because it's not a demanded position in every single one of those conversations, even productive conversations of people who are doing good work, it felt important that it was a space for me to intervene, and always intervene, and always work from that position. Because the position, it's not stated, and I think that it is a part of what Elizabeth [Hinton] was talking about in her keynote last night, asking us to talk about the racist ideologies that exist in the country, outside of just thinking about policy or thinking about better policing, and looking at those side by side. And so, for me, a part of the project is like, okay, here is this narrative that I don't see happening, and we need to talk about—or think

about—this in relationship to all the other narratives or conversations that are happening, and that's why language becomes important to my practice.

SB: That idea of what goes missing sometimes in the work and how you make that intervention and always putting the human to the forefront. I often look at objects and technologies that work in the practice of dehumanization, so it's the subtext, but it's there, and you mentioned, like my work on light. Like something that is just seemingly innocuous could be used as a technology of violence. And so, looking at something as simple as a lantern, that could be used as a kind of supervisory device, the idea of people looking all too human and the system requiring these types of regulations.

You gave an interview where you talked about what I imagine is the same space of the piece that I discussed, where you said the visitation area feels sacred. And for me, those are moments when even the metal steel structure, the kind of security theater that I could imagine goes [on] through the taking off of your shoes, your belts, what Angela Davis calls the "state-sanctioned strip search" that happens in those spaces, but it is still a space for many of community making, of family making. And so, in that sense, the idea of the sacred comes through even when surrounded by these technologies. Through the artist, I feel, is where that work comes through of the sacred and what could be made possible in these spaces. And to bring a structure like that into a museum space allows us, and those who might not go through those spaces or might be involved in the making of the technology of those spaces, art brings out those conversations, recognizing people's humanity in positions of captivity.

SES: Yeah. Absolutely. That sacred or those moments of intimacy or familial exchange and also the idea of love, right, existing in those spaces. I made a work that was super simple, like a changeable letter board with plastic letters, and it says, "My father was a drug dealer and loved me." And the types of conversations that happen around a work like that, and just the fact that it becomes this kind of aha epiphany moment for someone to think that, or to reckon with their own ideology, that oh yes, an incarcerated person can be a father, can love, right?

SB: Yeah.

SES: And so, if this is not a part of how we're thinking about dealing with bodies who exist in these spaces or what an alternative could be, then how are you actually considering or distancing what you allow yourself to think, project, and then do, and then be coerced into agreeing with certain subgroups of people.

SA: Both of you are making me think about this idea of bodily training, the way that, walking through the threshold of the art that's at the Haggerty, you can't help but feel kind of overwhelmed by the scale. You feel so tiny in relation to this giant thing, like your world's turned upside down, and it sheds into all these other kinds of bodily ways that we're overwhelmed by surveillance technologies or the diffusion of policing techniques. And Sable, your work, I'm always taken aback by how something like reading a text, you feel it in your body, it's very visceral. I'm wondering if both of you could talk a little bit around how these things are entangled.

You were prompting me to think about the relationship between the visible, the things that we see that are spectacular or that we can easily identify as part of a state system of

governance, and then these things that are more imperceptible, that are more affective, and how you think those things might work together. Or what the potential is in calling attention to the bodily, what might that do for us in a different vector than just policy change or administrative change; what is calling attention to that to you?

SB: You can think of all of the recent things where you see these kind of cutesy names for articulations of state violence, like "Permit Patty," or someone being asked to leave a dorm room that they're sleeping [in], or selling cookies getting marked as a criminal activity. And so, I think those moments are important also to question our own situatedness and how policing is instrumentalized to render people subject to death or other types of violent kind of interactions.

SES: For me, it's important to always privilege bodily knowledge as opposed to intellectual knowledge, and that doesn't mean that they both don't exist in the work.

Bodily knowledge is important to me because I think that a type of understanding has to be situated in multiple types of bodies, in particular the body of the dominant subjectivity that doesn't have to think about their body daily. And it's easy to distance oneself from a subject intellectually, but when there is a different type of knowledge that registers bodily, that makes it more difficult, and then you're able to recognize or empathize with the humanity and other narrative subjectivity. And that's a type of knowledge that doesn't leave; and that's a type of thing that one has to continuously wrestle with. And it might be slow, but I think it is the accumulation of that type of knowledge in relationship to the intellectual that does a different type of work. The thing that is at stake is that certain people don't have to put their bodies on the line, while certain people's bodies are always

on the line. And so, when your body is not threatened, but your comfort is threatened, you always have the possibility to walk away, right, because it means putting your body on the line to change something. And if you don't have an understanding of that or if you haven't been made to feel that, then where is the kind of friction that propels someone to move a little bit further? That's why it's incredibly important to me, because then it obviously comes back to this idea of humanity, but in case you couldn't see this subjectivity is human, now that you have this bodily experience that you're connecting with the pain or the pleasure or any kind of emotion that the thing or the object might be facilitating, then you're connecting yourself with the "I" subject position that it might be talking about. And then you're confronted with your desire to either walk away or reject it or look away, but it's not just looking at a text or a statistic and walking away. You acknowledge that you're making a decision to walk away now, and there's that small wrestling that feels important to me; it feels like it does a different type of work.

SB: There was another text by Sylvia Wynter called "Rethinking 'Aesthetics': Notes Toward a Deciphering Practice." And when she asked to think of art and creative text—and she's looking particularly at film; I think we could broaden it to think of other things. To have a deciphering practice is not to see what they are signified to mean, but what they can do and what the art can do. And particularly from that status of the narratively condemned that she discusses in the "No Humans Involved" essay or the other ways in which many of us are caught up in a system of deniability of rights or deny people their category of human, but to look at art as the space where it can be put into the work to do things, to change things. And maybe that's the friction that you were talking about, or the possibilities that would, just maybe, not allow you to turn away, but if you choose to turn

away, you're turning away with that knowledge, as you mentioned, of your own complicity in doing so.