

Nothing ever goes away.<sup>1</sup>

Fred Wilson

Despite the British Empire's formal abolition of slavery in 1834, the legacies of Britain's slave trade and plantation colonies persist in seemingly innocuous domestic forms. I came to understand the colonial context of the objects contained within my own family's home in Australia as an adult, when I learned of a piece of silverware belonging to a distant relative, upon which was engraved a crest showing an enslaved man. The insignia revealed that an ancestor of mine had owned sugar plantations in the Caribbean. The object's continued existence reveals that wealth begotten from slavery and colonization migrates through time and across space, spanning not only the Atlantic but also the Pacific worlds colonized by the British. Traveling down generations in the form of family heirlooms, such objects sequester and transmit wealth begotten from slavery and colonization, even when the fortunes from which they arose seem to have evaporated.

Heirlooms concretize and in so doing convert money into cultural and aesthetic capital; they store and transfer wealth by cloaking the object's value in sentimental and aesthetic significance. The "pricelessness" of the heirloom—with all its stories, filial attachments, and auratic material resonance—censures its sale, and this ensures its place within the multigenerational economic and cultural unit of the family. Dating from the early fifteenth century, the term "heirloom" (ayre lome) means "inherited tool or implement."<sup>2</sup> While it has come to refer to any item of financial, historical, or sentimental significance, an heirloom, in the original sense of the term, is at once a tool and the received skill to use it—the embodiment of a set of movements, agendas, and ideological commitments.

I have sought to document these gestures through speculative reenactment in this visual essay, a version of a short film of the same title,

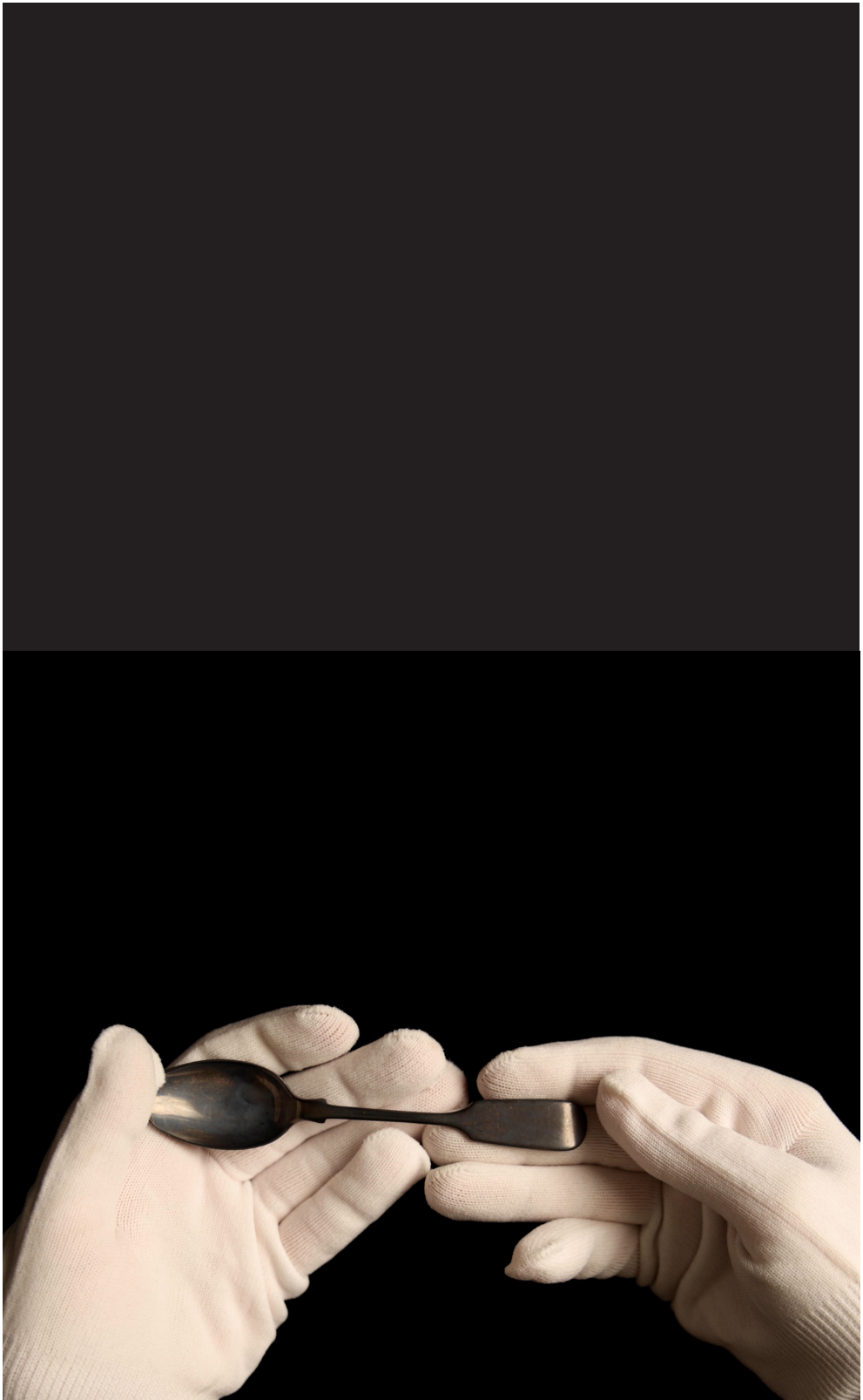
in order to access and understand the somatic register of the heirloom and, in turn, its politics. The captions on black pages throughout are passages from the audio commentary that accompanies the images, in which I attempt to recreate the gestures that such objects have inaugurated and sustained over generations: sifting baking soda into water to make a paste, applying the polish to an engraved surface. In this process of reenactment, I start to dissect the complexity of motion, the bodily memory of conservation and preservation, and the entanglement of caretaking and sense-making that the heirloom carries. To repeat a gesture is to naturalize it—to make it a habit, to inhabit; the somatic grants access to the politics that live in the inarticulate, the habitual knowledge that dwells between the body and the object. This somatic mode of research is inextricable from the material specificity of its object. At the same time, the object at the center of this research is a cipher for countless heirlooms across the anglophone empire that keep the configurations of power and privilege—legacies of enormous violence—alive in the present.<sup>3</sup>

An heirloom is not just an inert object that lives in drawers and cabinets, or that comes to rest in a museum case (in the speculative scenario of the film), but all the actions and ideologies that the object inaugurates, embodies, and transmits. Here the camera spotlights the gestures of my own hands—that is, the gestures that I do without thinking, which are markers and instantiations of social relations. Because these heirlooms come into the fold of the family through slavery and colonial violence, these gestures protect the profits of violence.

In 1838, a group of formerly enslaved children gathered in a churchyard in Jamaica. Staging a symbolic funeral for the institution of slavery, they broke up a whip, smashed a chain and a pair of shackles, and buried them—interring the tools of their subjection. But nobody ever buried the things that were purchased with plantation fortunes. The remnants of slavery are everywhere. The material splendors of the plantocracy remain in bourgeois family homes and museums across the colonized globe.



Objects are familiar, for sure, but familiarity is also about our capacity to use objects, how they are within reach as objects we do things with. To think of this implicit knowledge as inherited is to think about how we inherit a relation to place and to placement: at home, things are not done in a certain way, but the domestic 'puts things' in their place. Whiteness is inherited through the very placement of things.<sup>4</sup>



When I was a child, my grandmother showed me how to dab the “right amount” of polish on a cloth and apply it in a circular motion, working it into the crevices before buffing off the white residue using the same circular motion. I did this work over the summer break to pass the time, but also because I believed it would increase my chances of inheritance.

The Victoria and Albert Museum advises that “There is a difference between removing dirt and dust (cleaning) and removing tarnish (polishing). Polishing uses abrasives, so every time tarnish forms and is polished away, part of the original surface is lost. Repeated polishing may eventually lead to the loss of decorative details, plating, chasing, filigree work or even hallmarks. The ideal treatment is to remove unwanted tarnish or corrosion and then maintain the object in that state. This may mean using an anti-tarnish product.”— chemical treatment that passivates, rendering the surface of metals inert and thus arresting tarnish.

When we polish the family silver, we remove tarnish, and in doing so, we symbolically transmute the profits of slavery into sentimental inheritance. Family silver, seemingly innocent, seemingly innocuous, also sequesters and accumulates wealth. When we take care of such heirlooms, we cultivate and care for whiteness.





The Victorian ideal of womanhood arose in part out of the institution of slavery. Its expectation that white women would devote themselves to spiritual domestic service dictated the expectation that Black women would toil in the fields and serve white families.<sup>5</sup>



If gestures jump body to body and migrate  
with and among us crossing time and space,  
are they open for response at any time?<sup>6</sup>

As Rebecca Schneider writes, the gesture is not contained to a single body, nor is it limited to a single time. Rather, it exists across time in repetition: a gesture made again and again and again. The gestures that are imparted to us are not stable or fixed. Repetition keeps some knowledge alive, but in the process of iteration, a gesture also adapts and shifts to accommodate different needs and changing conditions. Although this does not quite constitute an archive, Diana Taylor calls it a repertoire that is embodied, even if immaterial. “As opposed to the supposedly stable objects in the archive, the actions that are the repertoire do not remain the same,” she explains. “The repertoire both keeps and transforms choreographies of meaning.”<sup>7</sup> The iterable gesture is a paradox: gestures are temporary and yet endure in their repetition. We cannot see the gesture at all times, but this does not mean it is gone.

The body is a repository and transmitter of what Cheryl I. Harris calls whiteness as property.<sup>8</sup> How might we uncover and dissect the gestures of whiteness that heirloom objects index? Through muscular and tactile familiarities. This particular artifact—the fish slice—points toward a series of performative gestures in the dining room, a site where families learn how to conduct themselves: what object to use for what kind of food, how to hold something and at what angle and pressure to apply it, when to rotate the wrist, what to offer and what to receive on one’s plate—and through all of this, how to belong at the table, how to be upper-middle class, how to be female or male. This tacit performance of cultural competence is achieved through years of disciplining.

But the gestures pertaining to this heirloom have changed over time. In trying to retrace and recover the gestural economy attached to it, I’ve found that while it begins at the dining room table, it does not end there.

Heirlooms are typically objects that have fallen out of use. What of their choreographies do they still contain? The gesture has transmuted from the disciplining of nineteenth-century competence to the pernicious labors of care and preservation. Beyond the performative gestures of the dining room are many hours of other kinds of movements—those of cleaning and storing the thing, the domestic labors of care.

Dorothy Roberts contends that white womanhood has been sustained by Black women’s labor, enabling a certain class of white women to perform circumscribed “spiritual” housework without the more demeaning and dirty tasks that menial housework entails. In the nineteenth century, the care of objects would have been performed by the enslaved (in plantation colonies) and “servants” (back in Britain), who would have cleaned and polished silverware.<sup>9</sup> It would have begun with the mistress supervising this labor, a form of domestic surveillance. But in some contexts, this supervisory role would have extended to the cleaning of things that were deemed too delicate or precious to be handled by someone of the servant class.

This particular form of “spiritual” labor reveals that the care of “special” things had a hierarchical imperative, which came to reside in the hands of white upper-class women. This logic remains operational even (or especially) when all that remains of a fortune is the heirloom. There are gestures and practices that maintain heritable objects, keeping their darker histories at bay. Generations of white upper-class women have learned these habits (almost) unconsciously. To take care of things, to treat and keep them in particular ways, and to selectively relay their histories is to maintain the inheritance of systems of slavery and colonization.

Silver was mined across the globe, but much of it came from colonized Central and South America, and was likely extracted from the earth by enslaved people. The raw material was fungible; measured in percentages and weights, it traveled the globe with the expanding colonial violence. Carried in pockets and purses, it would have passed from one hand to another in exchange for rice and cloth, which in turn were exchanged for cowrie shells in Bengal, which in turn were traded for bodies in West Africa, who in turn produced sugar in the West Indies, which in turn was sold in Britain for more pieces of silver currency, which in turn bought pieces of fine silver for dining rooms.

Silver sequestered wealth, capturing it in an arcane object that we don't use today but nevertheless keep in a drawer. British currency was silver, and legislation governed the purity of precious metals to regulate the practice of melting down legal tender. Coins bear insignia that legally demarcate the exchange value of such materials. Pieces of decorative silverware are likewise stamped with hallmarks to authenticate their chemical purity, and with maker's marks to authenticate their provenance.



Why would anyone desire to carve the foot of a black woman at the end of a table leg? Why would anyone find it pleasurable to sit upon a chair whose legs, instead of simple, elegant forms of smoothed wood, ornamented with dahlias and peonies, say, had been sculpted into the shape of four miniature black women, their hands extended high above their heads—four miniature black female chair legs—to hold up the sitter? Which kind of sensation did it create to place the backside of one's body down upon a seat supported by eight wooden brown female hands? <sup>10</sup>

Cultural capital can come in many forms, from the way we dress and speak, to the cultural references we recognize, to the spaces in which we feel most comfortable and exhibit competence, belonging, even mastery. It is what Sara Ahmed describes when she says that whiteness determines what one can reach for. It is not about what is possessed, but the fact of its possession, and how the body is trained in the art of possession.

Heirlooms are part of constellations that orient one culturally. As Ahmed writes, “Orientations are about how we begin; how we proceed from ‘here,’ which affects how what is ‘there’ appears, how it presents itself.”<sup>11</sup> An heirloom may never be sold—may, in fact, be of negligible financial value. But its endurance over generations yields the kind of capital that can be parlayed into privileged positions and forms of soft power.

Arguably, the disinterested cultural and symbolic capital that has been distanced from financial capital is more powerful, because it is hidden and tenacious. As Pierre Bourdieu points out:

*When the only usable, effective capital is the (mis)recognised, legitimate capital called “prestige” or “authority,” the economic capital that cultural undertakings generally require cannot secure the specific profits produced by the field—not the “economic” profits they always imply—unless it is reconverted into symbolic capital.*<sup>12</sup>

Cultural production gathers and retains symbolic capital through a disavowal of its economic ties. Indeed, the economic universe of cultural production runs on “a collective disavowal of commercial interests and profits”

that in no way prevents its participants from gaining economic advantage.<sup>13</sup>

In some ways, the experience of my grandmother’s house presaged my professional life as a curator. A facility with objects and affinity for their care—both conceptually and materially—seemed to come naturally. But this is what Bourdieu might have called a *doxa*—that is, something taken for granted to such an extent that it appears as natural sensibility.<sup>14</sup> My early reverence for objects may have laid the groundwork for me to become a curator, but this individual trajectory parallels a larger history behind the transition from the domestic to the museum space. The museum welcomes and enables whiteness both in those who occupy it professionally and in those who enter it as subjects.

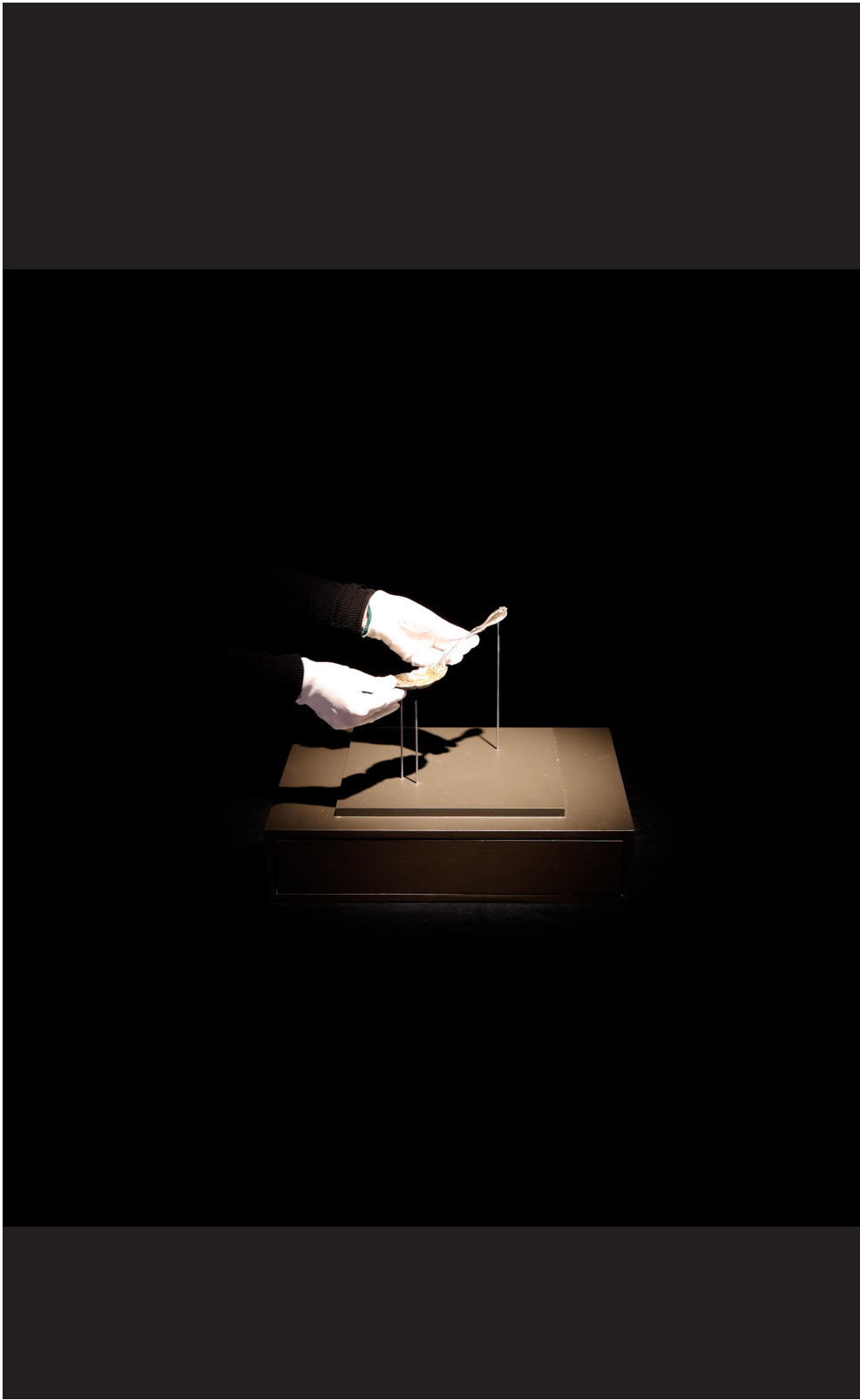
The curator cultivates relationships with potential benefactors, many of whom are heirs and are donating to the museum in their will. These negotiations involve displays of capital in various guises, establishing trust and (in very concrete terms) making bargains that combine economic and cultural capital: promised gifts accompanied by sales, tax benefits, credit lines on object labels, naming rights on wings of museums. Here, cultural and symbolic capital take a particular form that might best be described as “aesthetic capital.” The museum space, which hinges so much on the idea of both beauty and historical significance, creates an atmosphere conducive to appreciating it. Regardless of provenance or politics, things that enter museums are generally thought of as beautiful.



Perhaps the object will enter a museum's collection. It begins with an evaluation. The conservator holds the object in cotton-gloved hands—because fingerprints can contain pollutants, can trigger a process of tarnishing—to assess its condition, its needs, its material stability. The curator examines the object to assess its authenticity, its value, its historical and aesthetic merit. What is its provenance? Where has it been?

The object will be submitted to an acquisitions committee and then to the full board of trustees. It will be accessioned into the collection, allocated a number, photographed, and put into storage or on display. It will be the subject of a contract of sale or a deed of gift; it will trigger lunches with a benefactor and performances of institutional gratitude. It will be put in a vitrine, accompanied by an extended label written in a neutral tone of voice. The museum is a practice of suspension, an attempt to secure the past's meaning, to hold it in its place, to hold it in abeyance.

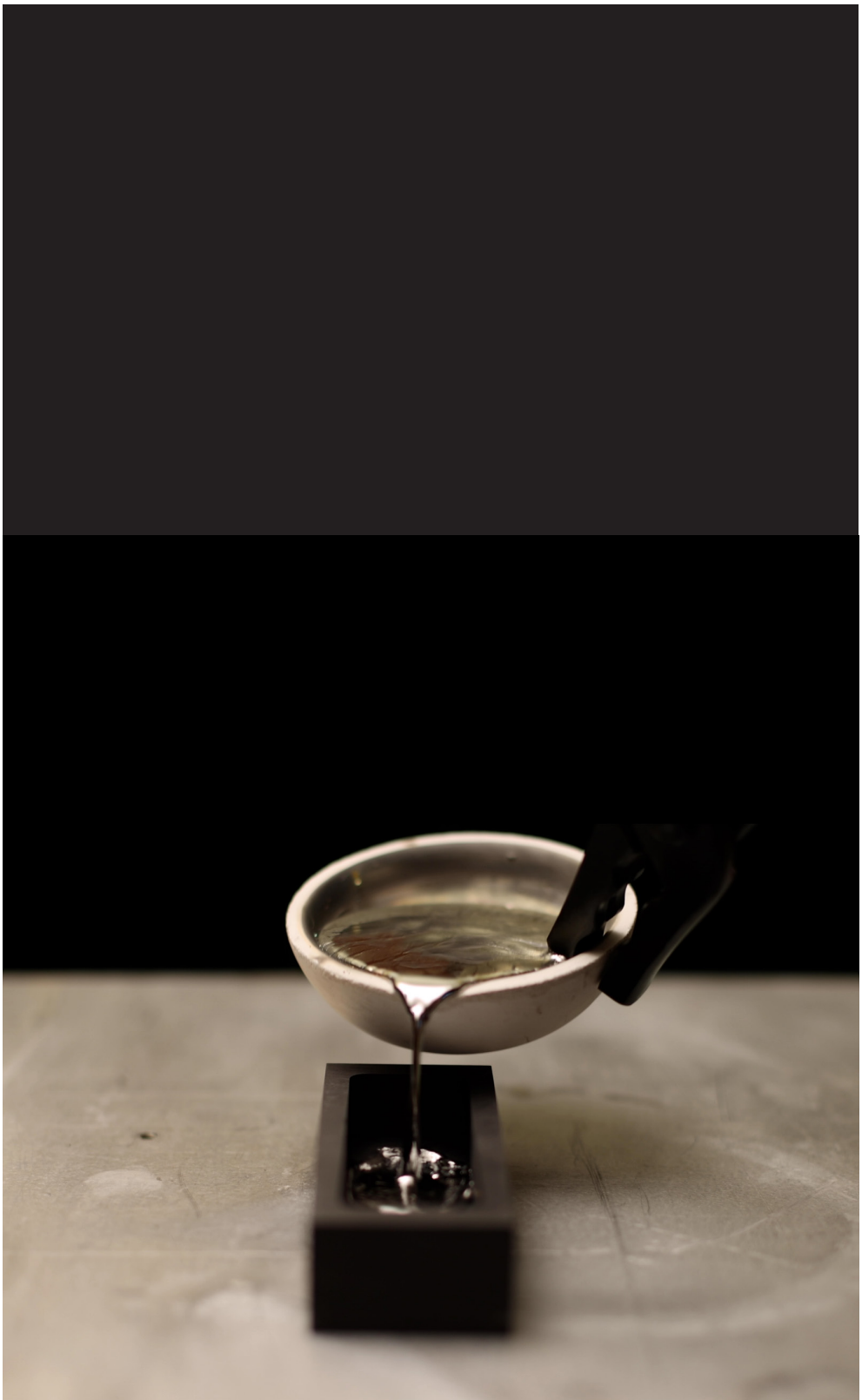
Put on display, the thing appears dormant, marking its history, imparting its meaning, and gathering value. The museum tells us that this history is past. But the object knows better.



What would it take for this object to die?

Perhaps most literally, it could be melted down. Perhaps that obliteration would enact a refusal of slavery's financial legacy, an annulment of the surplus value of things, a refusal of whiteness itself. But despite losing its shape and markings, the substance itself, and its financial value, would not leave the world. The internet is full of tutorials on how to turn flatware into bars of unmarked silver to be sold at the going market rate. Accumulated wealth takes another form.

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Living in the wake means living the history and present of terror, from slavery to the present, as the ground of our everyday Black existence; living the historically and geographically dis/continuous but always present and endlessly reinvigorated brutality in, and on, our bodies while even as that terror is visited on our bodies the realities of that terror are erased.<sup>15</sup>

## Endnotes

1. Fred Wilson, *AfroKismet* (exhibit), New York: Pace Gallery, July 10–August 17, 2018.
2. Harper Douglas, "Etymology of Heirloom," *Online Etymology Dictionary*. Accessed June 2022. <https://www.etymonline.com/word/heirloom>.
3. Britain's abolition of slavery was a staggered process, beginning with the abolition of the trade in 1807 (Slave Trade Act 1807), followed by the abolition of possession of slaves in 1833 (Slavery Abolition Act 1833). This did not, however, end the period of slavery: the condition of slavery was to continue a subsequent few years under what was termed "apprenticeship," during which slave owners sought to maximize their profits from the reparations that the British crown was to pay them on a per capita basis.
4. Sara Ahmed, "A Phenomenology of Whiteness," *Feminist Theory* 8, no. 2 (2007): 155.
5. Dorothy Roberts, "Spiritual and Menial Housework," *Yale Journal of Law and Feminism* (1997): 59.
6. Rebecca Schneider, "That the Past May Yet Have Another Future: Gesture in the Times of Hands Up," *Theatre Journal* 70, no. 3 (2018): 287.
7. Diana Taylor, *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press), 20.
8. Cheryl I. Harris, "Whiteness as Property," *Harvard Law Review* 106, no. 8 (June 1993): 1707–91. Harris says that although we typically think of property as things, the law says otherwise. Despite the fact that whiteness is not a physical object, it is a category of property. However, the practices of inheritance that I am examining here are very much attached to and about things. This is not to suggest that property is inherently material, nor to disavow the immaterial or intangible property that Harris identifies. It is, rather, to acknowledge that things and more abstract properties take shape in the messy, overlapping space between bodies and things.
9. The distinction between the categories of enslavement and servitude was slippery and varied over time. In the British plantation colonies, the law hardened with the increasing codification of slavery as a condition of Blackness. In Britain itself, there was an established white servant class; however, planters returning from the colonies were known to bring enslaved Black people with them. The shift from enslaved person to servant was largely in name only, although the 1772 case of *Somerset v. Stewart* determined that slavery, while legal under colonial laws, was not legal on English soil.
10. Robin Coste Lewis, *Voyage of the Sable Venus* (New York: Alfred A Knopf, 2019), 139.
11. Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects and Others* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), 8.
12. Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 75.
13. Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, 74.
14. Pierre Bourdieu, *The Logic of Practice* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1990), 68.
15. Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016).