In his 2001 poetry collection *Execution Poems*, George Elliot Clarke narrates the story of George and Rufus Hamilton, two black brothers hanged for the murder of a cab driver in 1949. In his re-narration of the events leading up to their execution, Clarke does not condemn the brothers for their crime. Instead, he illuminates the systematic violence inherent in the social structures that purposefully render the brothers as unintelligible within the social confines of the nation. By narrating the lives of Rufus and George, two bodies deemed non-human and thus ungrievable by interpretative frameworks, Clark seeks to present readers with their undeniable existence. This paper explores Clarke's depictions of the brothers' desire for recognition of their humanity within a white dominated community that sees them as Other. By applying the theories of Frantz Fanon and Judith Butler to *Execution Poems*, this paper traces the movements and actions of Rufus and George, as they turn away from objectivity towards subjectivity in their pursuit of a new humanity. *Execution Poems* forces its readers to recognize the brothers as subjects worthy of grief.

In *The Wretched of the Earth*, Frantz Fanon argues that the white colonial world is a Manichean world, a world of segregation and compartmentalization. The colonist’s sector is easily identifiable with its “lights and paved roads,” its white occupants enjoying luxurious amenities (*The Wretched of the Earth* 4). By contrast, the black sector is characterized by limited space and famished inhabitants, “hungry for food, bread, meat, shoes, coal and light” (4). We see Fanon’s Manichean society at work in Clark’s poem “1933”: the speaker observes, “white gentry promenading in elongated mansions / while black folk pray in taut shacks” (13-14). The sectors are distinguished by racial and economic disparity. Whites enjoy luxurious
living conditions, whereas, blacks are restricted to cramped units, hardly recognizable as homes. Clarke reinforces the divide between whites and blacks by describing their dwellings on separate lines. He also alludes to the racial hierarchy inherent in society by figuring whites at the top, and blacks at the bottom. Whites “promenading” about aggrandized estates suggest a sort of carefree lifestyle, one that affords freedom of choice (13). Blacks, on the other hand, “pray,” suggesting desperation (14).

Clarke articulates the depravation of the black people of Nova Scotia by stressing their poverty. The mention of hunger serves as a poetic refrain throughout Execution Poems. In “Ballad of a Hanged Man,” Geo proclaims that he “ain’t gonna hear” his “child starve” (8). A stanza later he reiterates his statement, saying “my child was hungered” (16). He then poses the question, “Have you ever gone in your life, going / two days without eating” (17-18). In “Childhood I,” Rue declares that his “only real emotion was hunger” (21). The hunger of the black brothers, on the brink of starvation is starkly contrasted against the excess of food enjoyed by the white population.

“Haligonian Market Cry” presents the white sector as a sector of excess. A gaze of “lust” and “envy” is cast in the direction of the white sector (Wretched 5). This lustful gaze informs the desirous language in “Haligonian Market Cry.” The black speaker observes,

Luscious, fat-ass watermelons!-plump pears!-big-butt corn!
La gusta este jardin? \(^1\)
Come-and-get-it-cucumbers-hot-to-trot, lust-fresh cucumbers!
Voulez-vous coucher avec moi? (“Haligonian Market Cry” 2-5). \(^2\)

The language of desire used to describe the food shows the extent to which the oppressed longs for sustenance. The seductive vegetables tease the on-looker. The use of Spanish and French enforce a division, suggesting that the goods are unobtainable for some.

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\(^1\) You like this garden?
\(^2\) Will you sleep with me?
The black man not only longs for the master’s goods but desires to become master himself. Fanon argues that the colonized dreams of “sitting at the colonist’s table, and sleeping in his bed, preferably with his wife” (*Wretched*) 5). George is somewhat able to fulfill his desire by transferring his longing for the master’s wife onto a white sex worker. He comments on the sex worker’s skin, looking much like “white wine,” and her hair is “deliberately blonde” (“Georgie’s Hit” 3-4). The sex worker’s physical characteristics enable her to pass for the bedmate of the master. Elsewhere in *Execution Poems*, Rufus notices the smell of “white money,” that emanates from the bodies of sex workers. This observation further substantiates the claim that sex workers can become a substitute for the master’s wife, as those who sleep with him can be expected to reek of his money.

The sex worker may also be interpreted as the object that comes between the bondsman and the lord in Hegel’s Master-Slave dialectic. For Hegel, the lord demands the production of an object, in which the bondsman crafts of his own two hands. Through its formation, the bondsman inscribes his signature upon the object, and as a result, experiences a temporary satisfaction and an ephemeral sense of autonomy (*The Psychic Life of Power* 38). When the object is received by the lord, the mark of the bondsman becomes effaced, and is replaced by the lord’s signature, for he is its rightful owner. The prostitute, understood as a sexual object, receives George’s mark through licking of the “Sodom of her lips” and the lapping of the “Gomorrah of her snatch” (“Georgie’s Hit” 5-6). He scrawls his name upon her lips with his “rat’s paws” (9). George, in turn experiences satisfaction and autonomy exclaiming that “her body good” (2). However, George realizes that the object is not his own as sleeping with her entails risk. He likens intercourse with her to “claspin wasps” to his “chest,” recognizing the danger in taking the master’s object as his own property (7). The temporal aspect is stressed in

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3 Because it was the lord who commissioned the object’s production, the object rightfully belongs to the lord.
his expression of desire. He says, “I want nothing more but / to go laughin into her blue house” (10-11). His longing implies that he no longer possesses the object, for desire signifies a lack.

Fanon argues that the presence of military and police “keep the colonized in a constant state of rage” (*Wretched* 17). Finding no appropriate outlet, his rage is internalized, and his muscles grow tense. Due to his internalized rage, the Oppressed expresses “aggressive vitality” in fantasy (15). Rue asserts his desire to “muck up their little white paradise” (“Public Enemy” 13). Conceiving of no possible way to act upon his desire, we see Rue’s muscle tension manifest itself physically: Rufus exclaims that his hand is “twitchy” (“The Killing” 25). Geo too experiences his “mind, / shaking” (“Ballad of a Hanged Man” 15). Fanon argues that the colonized individual will often exert his “aggressiveness sedimented in his muscles against his own people” (*Wretched* 15). We see this in the case of Rufus’ and George’s father who beats his wife mercilessly. In “Childhood I,” the brothers recalls how,

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Pops beat Ma with belts, branches, bottles,
Anything left-handed. Anything at all.
He’d buck Ma onto the bed, buckle his hips to hers.
Slap her across her breasts, blacken them.
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Rue: Her terrorized and tear-shaped breasts.

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He thought her being a Mulatto
Was mutilation (1-7).
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Spousal abuse serves three functions in the poem “Childhood I.” Firstly, George’s father lives out a fantasy of vengeance by beating his “Mulatto” wife (6). By concentrating on his wife’s semi-white skin, he is symbolically punishing white people for the role they play in his oppression. Secondly, he is able to deny the reality of his own oppression. Finally, he takes the place of the master by oppressing a black person.
I will now turn to Freud’s discussion of the death-drive in order to explain the second function, and his explication of the Fort-Da game in order to explain the third function. For Freud, the death-drive is an attempt to reduce tension towards zero, in other words, it is “a powerful tendency to restore a prior state” (Freud 166). We see the death-drive functioning within George and Rufus’ father. By beating his wife, he disavows the existence of his own oppression by returning to a state where his only enemy is his wife. The death-drive manifests itself through repetition compulsion.

Repetition compulsion is best demonstrated in the example of the Fort-Da game. While observing his young grandson Ernst, Freud notices that the boy never cries when his mother leaves him for hours at a time. Freud realizes how this is possible when he witnesses the child playing a strange yet fascinating game. Ernst is playing with a wooden reel with some string tied around it. He repeatedly throws the reel over the railing of his crib, while gripping the string. Each time the reel disappears, Ernst makes “a long drawn out ‘o-o-o-o’ sound” which according to his mother stands for “fort” or “gone” in English (140). He then pulls the string, and the reel reappears. He greets the reel with an expressive “Da!” meaning here (140). It is obvious that the reel is symbolic of his mother, and each time Ernst throws it away, he is replicating her absence. When he pulls it back, he is replicating her return. For just about any child, separation from its mother is an immense source of pain. Ernst is able to deal with his mother’s absence by becoming an active agent in her frequent disappearance by throwing the reel. To apply this to *Execution Poems*, Rufus and George’s father is replicating his own oppression by beating his wife. In doing so he gains autonomy over his trauma by becoming an active agent in it. He becomes the active aggressor, as opposed to the passive victim.
For Fanon, the colonist enforces and maintains his dominance over the colonized by continually fabricating the being of his inferior (*Wretched* 7). *Execution Poems* opens with “*Le nègre* negated,” asserting the way the white man has robbed the black man of his personhood (“Negation” 11). The oppressed is made zero by the master’s definition. The master also creates a man “reduced to the state of an animal” (*Wretched* 7). In “Identity II,” Rue hears himself compared “to a pig, a cow, a monkey,” utterly dehumanized by the master’s definition (14). The oppressor creates a being that is perceived to be nothing more than a colour. The oppressed possesses a “face that makes a mess of light / …like a splinter lancing snow” (“Identity I” 3-4).

It is important to note that this quotation is extracted from a poem entitled “Identity I.” Clarke is aware of the way the master’s definition of “blackness” constitutes the very being of the oppressed in negation. The master creates a man who considers his colour a poison infecting a “pure” and white world.

For Fanon, a point arises at which the colonized will no longer allow himself to be dominated. The colonized seeks to eradicate the colonist by violent means. Replicating the violence of the oppressor, the colonized comes into being, paving the way for a “new generation of men” (*Wretched* 2). This inevitable violence is implicit in Clarke’s work as well. The inevitability of violent action is demonstrated in Rue’s recognition that his “destiny was always murder” (“Identity II” 17). The inevitability is less explicity portrayed through the imagery of crucifixion found in “Hard Nails.” Geo says,

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Hard nails split my frail bones
Hard nails gouge my tomb from stone.
Hard nails pierce my feet and hands.
Tack me down so I can’t stand (1-4).
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This poem can be read as symbolic of oppression. The master, speaking the “language of pure violence,” forces the oppressed into stasis (*Wretched* 4). The subjugated are nailed down into
the confines of their “famished sector,” starved and humiliated like Christ on the cross (4).

“Hard nails” are the master’s violent instruments used against the oppressed (“Hard Nails” 1). The same “Hard nails” become the mechanism by which the oppressed gains freedom (1). The tomb gouged from the stone is reminiscent of Christ’s resurrection. Just as Christ resurrects in the New Testament, George and Rufus rise up, giving birth to a “new generation of men” (Fanon 2).

Inevitable violence occurs differently in *Execution Poems* than it does in *The Wretched of the Earth*. Fanon argues that it is the arrest of the party leaders, those speaking out against the oppression of the colonized subjects that mobilizes the subordinate group (32). There are no spokespersons present in *Execution Poems*. It is the threat of death that causes George and Rufus to resort to murder. For Hegel, in order to exist as an independent being, one requires recognition from another self-conscious being. In situations of domination and submission, one party refuses that his being is dependent upon the recognition of another. This party resorts to enslaving the other in order to receive the other’s recognition without having to return it. In turn, the slave unwilling to risk his life in order to gain recognition from the master necessarily submits. Through enslavement, the master robs the slave of “independent consciousness” and “becomes enmeshed with a dead, non-conscious being” (Benjamin 53). It is at this moment, that the slave realizes that he has already lost his life that he agrees to fight for the death to regain his self-consciousness. Returning to *Execution Poems*, we have seen the way in which the dominant’s definition of the black man has essentially negated his being. This negation is the motivation for violent uprise. The brothers are hungry to exist in the world as self-conscious beings.
Fanon states that through violent uprise, “the ‘thing’ colonized becomes a man” (Wretched 2). Likewise, Rufus says, “I’m negative but positive with a knife” (“Identity II” 2). His assertion shows the way in which his humanity has been negated through repressive forces, but is restored through violent resistance. He “becomes a man” the moment he decides to fight for his life (Wretched 2). The poems that take place after the murder of the cab driver are littered with the pronoun “I.” In “Trial I,” for example, “I” appears a total of ten times. The repetition of the pronoun shows how the object of oppression has become the subject of resistance. The self is asserted, and a new humanity is born.

It may be argued that the brothers have not achieved a new humanity, insofar as they have not received recognition. This lack of recognition is evident in their execution that occurs at the end of the collection. It cannot be denied that Rufus and George do not receive recognition, but that is not to say that violent action means nothing. For Fanon, what is important is not so much attaining recognition, but desiring recognition. Fanon writes, through risk “I ask that I be taken into consideration on the basis of my desire. I am not only here-now, locked in thinghood. I desire somewhere else, and something else” (Black Skin, White Masks 193). Fanon’s words could have been easily uttered by Rufus or George. In the moment that they are willing to risk life, they are asserting their own humanities, which is a necessary precondition for obtaining recognition. George and Rufus become new humans precisely because they believe in their own humanity. The brothers reject negation in favour of self-assertion.

George and Rufus’ new humanity posited above depends upon the ability to distinguish between the violence committed by the brothers, and the meagre and neurotic violence committed by the father. An investigation of the victims and an appeal to psychoanalytic thought may enable such a distinction. In the case of the father, the violence is directed against
his kin. He accomplishes nothing by beating his wife, for his aggression is nothing but a
manifestation of his will to disavow his subordinate position. George and Rufus, however, have
identified their “real enemy” (Wretched 20). In “George & Rue: Pure, Virtuous Killers,” the
speaker lays stress on the fact that murder victim’s cab is “black” (12). A white man driving a
black cab becomes a white master driving a black slave.

The uprise also brings about an important revelation that is reminiscent of the
psychoanalytic talking cure. In his early theoretical work, Freud recognizes the inability of a
patient to express an instance of trauma in a comprehensible manner. The trauma becomes
repressed and is manifested in symptoms. Analyses of these symptoms enable the analyst to
interpret them in such a way that lends meaning to the trauma, which in turn allows the
analysand to make a coherent story of what is incoherent. This is essentially a repetition of
trauma, but it is “not a repetition of sameness, but of difference,” insofar as this repetition allows
for understanding (Felman 319). To apply this to the murder of the cab driver, the brothers’
repeat violence in such a way that lends coherence to their experience of trauma. This is
indicative in the following statement uttered by Rue, “The blow that slew Silver came from two
centuries back. / It took that much time and agony to turn a white man’s whip / into a black
man’s hammer” (“The Killing” 36-39). The repetition of violence in the case of the father is
incoherent as his actions are incomprehensible to the children and presumably to himself. In the
case of Rufus and George, Rue is able to lend meaning to his action, in other words, he makes
the incomprehensible coherent by attributing the source of his violent action to the atrocities
afflicted upon blacks from whites in the form of slavery.

Butler argues that interpretive frameworks seek to render certain lives “ungrievable”
(Frames of War xix). Those bodies that are in accordance with the norms maintained by such
epistemological frames count as lives, whereas those outside are seen merely as threats to life (42). The latter constitute the “ungrievable,” and Rufus and George may be said to occupy this category (xix). Towards the end of the collection, Clarke includes an anonymous letter from a resident of New Brunswick who writes the Governor General of Canada with the intent to quash the brothers’ attempts to evoke mercy in their prosecutors. This letter best demonstrates the extent to which the brothers are misrecognized according to the interpretative frames. The author repeatedly misspells the brothers’ names. As we consider our names important significations of our identities, failure to articulate these titles constitute a misrecognition of our beings. The author refers to Rufus as “Rudy” several times, and George as “Georges,” and “jeorge” (“To Viscount Alexander of Tunis, Governor-General of Canada” 7, 17, 1, 14, 34). Through the misspelling of George and Rufus’ names, the author fails to register their beings because they fall outside of the norms of intelligibility.

The letter also portrays the brothers as threats to life as opposed to living beings. The author shows great sympathy for the cab driver, claiming that,

……he got a wife and sept children and this citizen was well-thought of and was earning a pure living fore to keep his family he was not let any chance to defend him self…(20-24).

The author does note that George has a family as well, and committed robbery and murder in order to pay his wife’s hospital bills (15). However, George is viewed as unworthy of sympathy, and “must hang” showing that he is perceived as nothing more than a threat (36). Because the brothers’ lives are “not conceivable as lives within certain epistemological frames” their lives “were never lived nor lost in the full sense” (“Survivability, Vulnerability, Affect” 1). As the
brothers’ lives are essentially ungrievable, due to their misrecognition, their execution is completely justifiable.

Butler argues that the interpretive frames also seek to govern our affective responses to death; because certain lives are ungrievable, we will respond to the death of these lives with apathetic coldness (36). Poetry, depicting the lives of ungrievable subjects, poses a direct threat to the frames, as they narrate the irrefutable beings of those rendered unintelligible. In giving voice to Rufus and George, through the writing and publication of Execution Poems, Clarke provides the brothers with one last chance at achieving recognition. A stress on the systematic violence that has left Rufus and George impoverished, evokes sympathy in readers. Clarke’s rhetorical skill forces an affective response that challenges the epistemological frames that render the protagonists ungrievable. Recognition is attained through the very act of narrating the lives of undeniably human beings, worthy of grief.

Through my analysis of Execution Poems, I expose the ways in which Rufus and George move from a state of non-being to one of being by asserting the self through an act of violence directed against an appropriate source. When a hierarchy is constructed based on racial difference, the white hegemony assumes the position of the colonist, pushing the subordinate to the margins. The dominant then robs the subjugated of humanity in order to enforce and maintain power. This negation of Rufus and George’s subjectivity, however, is not seen as murder. The white oppressor is also the legislator, the police officer, the judge and jury. Due to the all-pervasive power of the white man, the black man can only exert his freedom in fantasy, while simultaneously disavowing his subjugated position by employing defense mechanisms. The oppressed cannot deny his situation long, for hunger grows within him. Faced with his impending death, the subjugated takes the master’s violence for his own, and drives a
hammer through the skull of the white man. The humanity achieved through this act is short lived, as the brothers are refused recognition upon execution. However, Clarke’s narration forces an affective response that renders them intelligible as human beings, worthy of grief. It is this response that constitutes a recognition necessary for the restoration of self-consciousness. The publication of this work proves Marcuse’s point that “Beauty has the power to check aggression: it forbids and immobilizes the aggressor” (Clarke). Marcuse’s quotation not only serves as an epigraph to *Execution Poems*, but also functions as an epitaph, commemorating the lives of Clarke’s cousins forever memorialized through the publication of this collection.
Works Cited


