I approach the question of whither race studies in the context of teaching a first-year seminar here at Duke, “Prison, the U.S., and the Citizen”: a course that has, as part of its curricular mission in Duke-specific institutional terms, ethical inquiry. This course has driven home for me in particular ways the inability of general public discussion—what my students are aware of in abundance but which they understand as “natural”—to accommodate elaborated and unelaborated discourses for cathedected critical engagement, e.g., white supremacy and its connection to prison, the history of the U.S. state, and the idea of the citizen. If those of us who participate in teaching, research, and public intellectualism frequently take as our object of critique the limitations of the liberal bourgeois subject, we must also run up against the difficulty of moving our students from that hegemonic subjectivity to something more specifically critical.

But this semester, I have run into another form of difficulty. Since there seems to be no location for even the much-derided liberal bourgeois subject to exist, the obstacle looms before me of helping to move my students from their internalization of the dominant narrative that explicitly and implicitly structures their active and passive acceptance of the massive carceral state, to a position of awareness: first, that they are living out such a state of affairs; and then, a realization that this state of affairs is in no way natural or inevitable; i.e., I nostalgically long for the simple presence of a liberal bourgeois subjectivity as a starting point in the classroom, as an
on-ramp for empathetic transfer. I am forced, temporarily at least, to work toward generating that liberal bourgeois subject, in order to move my students past it.

What I have in the classroom instead, in large part, can best be described as a fierce (albeit inarticulate) obedient state subject who resists a critique of the state and of prison, a resistance that might be described as white supremacist common sense—individually aestheticized as the right to declare the imprisoned a threat to civilization and, therefore, deserving of whatever carceral systemic horrors they encounter. I have fever-like dreams of longing for the liberal bourgeois subject who can be moved by empathetic transfer to accept a new terrain, a new context, for new learning. [I find myself taking on the challenge of my students’ resistance to occupying the position of the liberal bourgeois subject; because of their resistance to the basics of empathy with regard to mass incarceration, they’ve taken up the position of aestheticized white supremacist subject instead.] This happens in my class even (and sometimes especially) among my black American students.

As I was addressing this difficulty as a matter of pedagogical focus in my re-imagination of the class for third- and fourth-year students, I found that Kamari Clarke’s presentation at the Race Workshop organized by Bayo Holsey and Charlie Piot, “Legal Anthropology, Affect, and Their Relationship to Contemporary Race Analysis,” offered me a means by which to return to that difficulty and to think at the same time of the future of race studies. I see a continuation of what race studies has offered in the past and in the contemporary moment, and that project’s attention to the recycling of white supremacy through the “glamour” of race thought: glamour in the sense of racism-as-thought’s ability to enact a kind of magical capture of the imagination, where racism provides explanatory power that does not have to be articulated. Given its powerful and pervasive history, it exists now as unnoticed, even commonsensical, a suturing together of our collective intellectual and racialized event horizon.

Clarke’s essay provides me with assistance for my course’s refuguration as it becomes “Prison, State, Subject,” while at the same time demonstrating one future for race studies—its contribution to the work of interpretive cultural studies—my field’s—knowledge production. We engage with a diagnosis of the present that is generally predicated on generating increasingly more complicated critical questions (versus, for example, a mapping of a vector by virtue of mathematical formulation or physics); we read the tea leaves of the present with the hope that this moment might raise questions of some utility somewhere and some “when” else. For me, Clarke’s work contributes to an ongoing de-mythologizing of the subject who would be humanitarian within the terms of a necessary—even if insufficient
by itself—critical relationship to the slipperiness of the narrative magic worked by racialization and its imaginary other: the unraced assignment of proper caring.

Clarke’s fascinating and useful attention in her essay to “the emergence of complex subjects, such as the ‘suffering stranger’ (Leslie Butt 2002), the ‘therapeutic citizen’ (Adriana Petryna 2002), or the ‘morally legitimate suffering body’ (Miriam Ticktin 2011) that result from relations between bodies, states, and various forms of international governance and humanitarian intervention” provides me with entrance onto the terrain of affect and its generative work in subjectivity. She writes, “[E]motion can actually be seen as co-producing subjectivity in contexts in which geographies of justice, histories of colonialism, and perceptions of global marginality are at play and create a dual interior and exterior scaffolding that shapes the affective contours of decision-making.” Reading this, my attention, by promiscuous rhetorical gerrymandering on my part, is directed back to DuBois’s language in Black Reconstruction, which addresses the psychological wage of white supremacy. We understand this wage in the present moment, for example, from Cheryl Harris’s “Whiteness as Property”—a wage that is currency both material and affective. DuBois and Harris both outline the hold that white supremacy has on the U.S. national subject, grounded as that subject is in capitalism’s deft fungibility, as well as in what Raymond Williams describes and develops in (1977’s) Marxism and Literature as “structures of feeling.”

Clarke’s work, as it attends to the work of “intellectual silences [as] [those silences] are actually involved in the most powerful crafting of racial subjects—‘the reinforcement of the un-sayable that even through its absence produces a knowable presence’”—offers a charting of both the geography and the history of the liberal subject’s ability to imagine itself virtuous by ignoring the 800-pound gorilla of the history of white supremacy sitting in the room. This inhabitation requires such a powerful effort to ignore it that the afterlife of that effort produces an understanding as potent as it is silent, an insistence that marginalizes, as rude at the very least, any attempt to talk about the big beast, a charge of rudeness that greets explicit attention to the beast as utterance unfit for civil company looking to do the work of international assistance. (I know that I’m being too hard on the almost mythical liberal subject, kicking him/her around for the sake of analysis, but this kicking is offered in the service of raising to the level of spectacle the complicated work of de-familiarizing the knee-jerk and everyday responses of the reinforcement that Clarke addresses.)

It is that kind of necessary present and future elaboration of discourses that marks for me the work that stretches before us in race studies and that takes me to
the selfish part of my interest in Clarke’s essay: my prison course focuses on what the prison and the state have to do with what we are as subjects, as beings constituted by our social order and the state. I organized the course around questions that open out into considerations of the liberal subject—how do we learn to “read” the public texts of the nation, of our cultural imagination, and of the insistence of the law, regularized and enforced in the prison, as aesthetically appealing and scary at the same time? How does prison come to be a site for working out loss and longing, especially racialized, ethnicized, gendered, and sexual loss and longing? The surprise of my encounter with my students’ fervent defense of the state has been astounding as we work through the idea of a carceral imagination.

To that end, I begin with Thomas Paine writing in “Agrarian Justice” that “it is as impossible for an individual to acquire personal property without the aid of society, as it is for him to make land originally”—his argument for the indivisible nature of the individual and society. Paine’s language is my springboard to the constituting of the subject and prison as the terrain for exploring racialization as an ever-expanding event horizon against which to see the glamour of race thinking as compensatory aesthetics: aesthetics that demand the existence of the “scaffolding that shapes the affective contours of decision-making” as Clarke puts it, while falling back on the protocols of civility that work to keep hidden exactly whose subjectivity is falling in love with itself. At the same time, race continues its rough slouch toward everywhere, its hour always come ‘round (apologies to W.B. Yeats for that abuse of “The Second Coming”).

Race studies’ continual unfinished business takes its shape from the specifics, outlined by Clarke’s work, of the continual re-articulation of the un-sayables that constitute its conditions of its possibility, smack-dab in the midst of our structures of feeling . . . or their absences.

[race, prison, subject, affect/affective, white supremacy]