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The Salt Bones: Toward a Slave Ship Ecology

DISSERTATION

submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

in Culture and Theory

by

Diana Millicent Leong

Dissertation Committee:
Professor Frank B. Wilderson III, Chair
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2016

DEDICATION

To

My mother, Paulette Leong, my father, Wendell Leong, and my sister, Michele Leong; with love
and gratitude.

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CURRICULUM VITAE

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ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

The Salt Bones: Toward a Slave Ship Ecology

By

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Doctor of Philosophy in Culture and Theory

University of California, Irvine, 2016

Professor Frank B. Wilderson III, Chair

The Salt Bones explores the slave ship as a unique site for the formulation of modern ecological reason through close readings of eighteenth and nineteenth century abolitionist literature, and the contemporary creative works of poet M. NourbeSe Philip (*Zong!*), novelist Octavia Butler (the *Parable* duology), and director Benh Zeitlin (*Beasts of the Southern Wild*). In these diverse texts, the slave ship emerges as a matrix of ecological relations and resource regulations that continues to discipline populations in the present. These regulations underwrite ongoing environmental racism and point to an ideological investment in reproducing ecological precarity. My research reveals that this same structure of ecological relationships, if read against the grain, enables an unexpected intimacy with nonhuman entities, both organic and inorganic. As such, black literature, broadly conceived, offers radical possibilities for an environmental ethics that critically supplements the prevailing environmentalist paradigms of sustainability, conservation, and preservation.

While environmental theorists have not fully explored black literature as environmental philosophy, I argue that the history of racial slavery is fundamental to understanding the hierarchical distinction of humanity from the natural world. *The Salt Bones* asks, therefore, if the

violent legacies of slavery persist in the margins of our most operative concepts of nature. Beginning with M. NourbeSe Philip's 2008 poetry volume, *Zong!*, I explore how the deprivations of the slave hold produce new ecological models for managing racial difference. I then examine the infamous eighteenth century illustrations of the British slave ship *Brookes* to uncover how the codes of scientific objectivity and realist representation extend the objectification of black bodies imposed by the violence of captivity. My third chapter traces the spaceship trope as a critical rehabilitation of the slave ship in Octavia Butler's *Parable* series, and elucidates how the precepts of Afrofuturism disrupt the dynamics of anthropocentric historical time. Moving from literary to cinematic production, my final chapter analyzes how Benh Zeitlin's 2012 feature film *Beasts of the Southern Wild* negotiates the ecological legacies of the slave ship through a multiracial politics of climate change resistance.

INTRODUCTION

J.M.W. Turner's celebrated oil painting, *The Slave Ship*, is arguably the best known work of Western art to commemorate the transatlantic slave trade. The painting sets its eponymous vessel in the background of a seascape, where it is discreetly visible through a floating mass of body parts that dominates the foreground. The vivid orange, yellow, blue, and white hues of the sky are rendered in chaotic brushstrokes, surrounding the ship with a textured frenzy of shadow and light. The storm clouds gathering on the horizon are stained a blood-red, matching both the color of the ship's masts and the water around the severed torsos, arms, and legs occupying the bottom third of the painting. This churning jumble of human remains, some with chains still attached, is split neatly in two, cleaved by the wake of the ship as it recedes further into the distance. A closer inspection reveals birds, fish, and otherwise unidentifiable sea creatures feeding on the body parts or hovering around them in anticipation (see figure 1).



Figure 1. J. M. W. Turner's *The Slave Ship*. 1840. Oil on canvas. Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

While Turner's personal views on slavery shifted throughout his lifetime, this particular painting was likely inspired by Thomas Clarkson's account of the infamous "Zong" massacres.¹ Clarkson's two-volume history of the British abolitionist movement, *The History of the Rise, Progress, and Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African-Slave Trade by the British Parliament (History)*, was published in 1808 and later reissued in 1839, one year before *The Slave Ship* was first exhibited at the Royal Academy of London. According to Clarkson, the slave ship "Zong" experienced an extended water shortage that threatened the survival of both sailors and slaves. Concerned that they would not be compensated for any slave that died of dehydration, the crew threw overboard at least 130 slaves in order to collect on their insurance policies. Subsequently, *The Slave Ship's* original title – *Slavers Throwing Overboard the Dead and Dying, Typhon [sic] Coming On* – is widely cited as an indirect reference to the "Zong."

Since its debut, the painting has been the subject of much debate and not least because the cultural and racial anxieties of nineteenth century British civil society seemed to converge on its canvas. Slave ships not only indexed the history of modern racial slavery, but also the technological impact of the Industrial Revolution and the growth of the natural sciences. On this score, *The Slave Ship* has been variously interpreted as a memorial to the British slave trade, a commentary on economic conditions, and an allegory for nature's indifference to man.² Nonetheless, critics do agree that the painting's combination of "the sublime and the ridiculous" is responsible for its affective force (Wood, *Blind Memory* 46). After the painting's exhibition, novelist William Makepeace Thackeray famously wrote:

¹ Although the convention is to italicize the proper names of ships, throughout this dissertation I have chosen to use quotation marks to distinguish the ship-as-historical-object, "Zong," from M. NourbeSe Philip's book of poems about that ship, entitled *Zong!*

² See Stephen J. May's *Voyage of the Slave Ship* and Leo Costello's *J.M.W. Turner and the Subject of History*.

Is the picture sublime or ridiculous? Indeed I don't know which. Rocks of gamboge are marked upon on the canvas; flakes of white laid on with a trowel; bladders of vermilion madly spirited here and there. Yonder is the slaver rocking in the midst of a flashing foam of white lead. The sun glares down upon a horrible sea of emerald and purple, into which chocolate-colored slaves are plunged, and chains that will not sink; and round these are floundering such a race of fishes as never was seen since the *soeculum Pyrrhoe*; gasping dolphins, redder than the reddest herrings ...ye gods, what a "middle passage"! (338-339)

Thackeray's ambivalent response is driven by the juxtaposition between *The Slave Ship's* formal and thematic features; he is not sure how he should feel about a painting that depicts the cruelties of the Middle Passage against the backdrop of an incandescent seascape. His solution, it seems, is to absorb each component into either the sublime (i.e. "bladders of vermilion" and "a horrible sea of emerald and purple"), or the ridiculous (i.e. "chains that will not sink" and "a race of fishes").

Given Turner's Romanticist style, commentators are quick to assign an entirely allegorical or symbolic meaning to his "natural" elements. Paul Gilroy, for example, locates *The Slave Ship* within a visual tradition of British nationalism that explores "the relationship between the forces of nature and the human processes that culminate in racial exploitation" (49). For him, the painting's "mystical sense of the relationship between blood, soil and seawater" simply provides the "raw material" for its construction of an "ambiguous, organicist conception of English culture" (Gilroy 52; 49). Even Marcus Wood, who offers the most complete reading of the painting's "race of fishes" to date, absorbs these into the intertextual context of Bryan Edwards' *History, Civil and Commercial, of the British Colonies in the West Indies* and Thomas

Gisborne's *Walks in the Forest* (*Blind Memory* 51-56). When we recall that natural resources (i.e. water) played a distinctly material role in the "Zong" massacres, it becomes all the more curious that *The Slave Ship*'s "fishes," "dolphins," "herrings," birds, and "Typhon" are perceived as having no actual bearing on the slave ship or the slave trade. To be sure, the environment is rarely if ever non-figurative, and disciplinary and generic conventions influence the ways we read and write about Turner's painting. Nevertheless, I suggest that these historical and prevailing approaches are symptomatic of the larger framework of analysis for the slave ship.

The slave ship has been overdetermined by its political, socio-cultural, and economic functions, with little attention paid to its role in ecological exchange. In fact, most historical accounts of the slave ship are articulated from within the historiography of the slave trade, so that the ship itself is subsumed by broader theories about the development of international capitalism, European colonialism, or the modern nation-state.³ By sidelining environmental considerations, such accounts effectively repeat Thackeray's reduction of the natural to "the sublime or the ridiculous." So too, engagements with the slave ship through and as cultural representation (i.e. in art, literature, or film) are dominated by theories of the Middle Passage that render the environment a rhetorical landscape for national and cultural memory.⁴ As Clarkson describes in his *History*, "the ocean itself never [ceases] to be a witness of [the slave ship's] existence," but it is seldom called on for much more (23). *The Salt Bones* therefore asks – how would our understandings of both race and nature transform if we take seriously the connections between the environment and the slave ship implied by Turner's painting?

³ David Eltis, for instance, structures *The Rise of African Slavery in the Americas* around the dynamic of supply and demand, even if only to demonstrate the irreducible complexity of the dynamic itself. Other notable examples of the historiography of the slave trade include Eric Williams' *Capitalism and Slavery*, Hugh Thomas' *The Slave Trade*, and David Brion Davis' *Inhuman Bondage*.

⁴ In addition to M. NourbeSe Philip's book of poems about the "Zong" massacres, see also the critical work surrounding Fred D'Aguiar's novel *Feeding the Ghosts*, director Steven Spielberg's film *Amistad*, Charles Johnson's novel *Middle Passage*, Amiri Baraka's play *Slave Ship*, and Romuald Hazoumé's art installation "La Bouche du Roi."

This guiding question is informed by the recent scholarly turn toward conditions of environmental precarity. An unprecedented increase in the scope, scale, and frequency of ecological disaster in the last generation (e.g. climate change and biodiversity loss) has forced sustained consideration of how we might analyze the environmental impact of species-level human activity while attending to the uneven distribution of environmental risks and rewards. Formulations of environmental justice and sustainability, especially across the environmental humanities, agree that the historical dynamics of capitalism, colonialism, and slavery not only limit responses to ecological catastrophe, but also enable environmental racism. Early environmental justice scholar-activists like Robert D. Bullard in Texas and Lois Gibbs in New York identified race and class as key determinants in the placement of toxic waste disposal sites and the quality and pace of government intervention. Researchers in the literary sub-field of “ecocriticism” have likewise found that romanticized representations of nature in the American canon obfuscate how environmental experience is conditioned by one’s position along the color line. Encouragingly, scholars of African American literature, philosophy, and history have begun to focus on how the legacies of slavery shape our concepts of nature. Recent contributions include Kimberly K. Smith’s *African American Environmental Thought*, Paul Outka’s *Race and Nature*, Monique Allewaert’s *Ariel’s Ecology*, Dianne D. Glave’s *Rooted in the Earth*, and Kimberly N. Ruffin’s *Black on Earth*. Furthermore, as the publication of Judith A. Carney’s *Black Rice*, Marcus Rediker’s *The Slave Ship*, and J.R. McNeill’s *Mosquito Empires* indicate, scholars of the transatlantic slave trade have also begun to take seriously its ecological import.

Taking its cue from this body of work, *The Salt Bones* examines the slave ship as a unique site for the development of modern ecological reason. As such, I contend that the slave ship is irreducible to neither a representation of the Middle Passage nor a node within the circuits

of the slave trade. Rather, through close readings of eighteenth and nineteenth century abolitionist literature and the contemporary creative works of poet M. NourbeSe Philip (*Zong!*), novelist Octavia Butler (the *Parable* duology), and director Benh Zeitlin (*Beasts of the Southern Wild*), the slave ship emerges as a matrix of ecological relations and resource regulations that continues to discipline populations in the present. By pairing current theories about the paradigmatic dimensions of antiblackness with investigations into environmental aesthetics and materiality, I demonstrate how environmental justice must be pursued as the effect of racial freedom and equality. In lieu of this approach, we cannot fully appreciate how powerfully modern concepts of racial difference contribute to the environmental crises that have come to define our era. *The Salt Bones* foregrounds this outlook to argue that engaging the literatures of the African Diaspora *as* a form of environmental philosophy might guide us toward more promising ecological futures. For as my research confirms, the ecology of the slave ship is everywhere.

A Brief History of Ecology

The term “ecology” was first coined by Ernst Haeckel in the late 1860’s, and reflected a transition from “*oikonomia* to *oikologia*, house mastery to house study, a shift that changed species from resources into partners of a shared domain” (Howarth 73). This shift was generally accomplished through the evolution of the natural sciences (e.g. physics, chemistry, earth systems science) during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, and through biology in particular. Distinguished from natural history through the introduction of organic structure, biology retained natural history’s impulse to classify but modified its technique of identifying homologies between external forms. Visible characteristics instead referred to a deeper set of

internal principles that arranged organisms along a hierarchy according to how essential these principles were to the functions of life. These internal principles, or organic structures, possessed a sovereignty of their own in that they directed and controlled both the visible and invisible elements of all living organisms, meaning that “representation [had] lost the power to provide a foundation...for the links that can join various elements together...The condition of these links resides henceforth outside representation, beyond its immediate visibility” (Foucault 238-239). These tectonic shifts in scientific knowledge production were coterminous with transformations among the orders of language (i.e. philology) and within analyses of wealth (i.e. economics). For Carl Linnaeus at least, biology and economics were natural associates and the development of both fields allowed him to articulate new theories about the way organisms interacted with their environments (Foucault 146). His original understanding of these “natural economies” was heavily theological, but the increased focus on the dynamics between species formation, survival strategies, and changes in animal and plant populations during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries eventually cohered into the newly minted science of ecology.

Considering that ecology can be traced to the epistemic innovations of the scientific revolution, it is hard to imagine that its history is not also aligned with the Enlightenment’s contemporaneous ideas about race and racial blackness. Granted, the human classificatory schemas produced by scientific luminaries such as Linnaeus, Georges Cuvier, and Johann Blumenbach are well documented, as are their various theories of racial degeneration by environmental factors. Nonetheless, these are generally regarded as specific to studies of scientific racism and have not been incorporated into theories of ecology in any substantial or systematic way. In a striking example of what pursuing such a project could yield, Denise

Ferreira da Silva demonstrates how a “global logic of raciality” emerged through the same parameters of thought that gave rise to the natural sciences and later, to ecology.

“Raciality” describes for da Silva the epistemological apparatus through which human differences are racialized as signifiers of an incapacity for self-determination. This “global logic” authorizes the state and the law to comprehend subaltern subjects as irrational bodies that threaten existing social and political orders. Whereas the Enlightenment subjects of Europe function according to internalized forms of reason like rational judgement, subaltern subjects can only comprehend external forms of reason like the law. As a consequence, the violences of the state are justified as necessary forms of self-preservation. This “epistemological figuring of reason as violence,” or *necessitas*, underwrites the state’s “authority to check individuals' threats to one another and external threats to the collective (political society),” and “to decide when to deploy its protective and punitive instruments” (da Silva 219; 216). Unsurprisingly, subaltern responses to these “instruments” are almost always coded as new threats, providing further evidence for the legitimacy of *necessitas*.

Most germane for *The Salt Bones*, because raciality translates the visual characteristics of bodies into signifiers of the mind, da Silva tracks its development to the conceptual migrations between natural history and the natural sciences. Pointing to the formalized typologies of structure and character ubiquitous in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, she argues that natural history bequeathed to the natural sciences an understanding of difference, identity, and inequality firmly grounded in measurable universal qualities. In other words, the things of nature are produced in and as effects of *necessitas*, that exterior form of “universal reason” that “in the shapes of force and order...constrains, regulates or limits” (da Silva 214). Even the “rational mind,” for example, was the result of external considerations of territory and form and not of any

innate capacity or essence. And yet under raciality, the rational mind was re-written as the self-instituted product of an *internal* universal reason, a process from which the subaltern subject was somehow excluded. To formulate this transformation as a question, how was reason internalized to compose the ground for a universal understanding of human difference that was previously based on the empiricisms of natural history? Indeed, da Silva goes on to detail how the metaphysics of Hume, Kant, and Hegel facilitated such an internalization, but to stay with her contributions to our conceptions of ecology, I submit in what follows that her elaboration of raciality clarifies some of the ethical and political stakes of modern ecological reason.

The Racial Logic of Ecological Reason

The term “ecology” now traverses a wide range of meanings and reference points, and *The Salt Bones* is interested in what holds these together, especially as it pertains to the triangulation of race, nature, and the slave ship.⁵ In its scientific sense, “ecology” names the aforementioned field concerned with the study of relations between organisms and their environments. Emphasizing process and interdependence over the discrete and autonomous materiality favored by mechanistic views of nature, the subfields of scientific ecology (e.g. evolutionary ecology, conservation and population biology, behavioral ecology) focus on adaptation, population distribution, succession dynamics, and the circulation of energy and matter. In its more popular sense, “ecology” is a shorthand or synonym for networks of relations, ecosystems, and the environment or environmentalism. And lastly, when advanced from within the humanities and social sciences, “ecology” often refers to a theory (e.g. deep ecology), a concept-metaphor (e.g. literary ecologies), or a framework of analysis (e.g. political ecology). In

⁵ For a more detailed history of the development of ecology and its many uses, refer to Ben Woodard’s “Towards a Philosophy of (Dejected) Nature Natural Conceptualization, Eco-Aesthetics, and the Blues of Green Affect and Economy.”

his study of ecopolitics in Hong Kong for instance, anthropologist Tim Choy employs “ecologies of comparison” as a “heuristic” or “mode of attention” to document how environmental concerns provoke and are provoked by political thought and activism (11).

All three modalities of use are closely imbricated, and I mention them here to qualify my own engagement with the term. One of the biggest challenges for any project focused on ecological matters is that relations between and among entities and their environments are hardly self-evident. Because these must be established rather than “discovered,” identifying a set of relations as an ecology necessarily entails practices of scale-making, and, as da Silva’s account of natural history and science implies, practices of meaning-making as well (Choy 12). Like other fields of science, ecology is not immune to the metaphysical narratives of nature and human difference that develop through, alongside, and against it. Even when theories of ecology are addressed to nonhuman objects, especially within the humanities and social sciences, “whether machine, plant, animal, or object, the nonhuman’s figuration and mattering is shaped by the gendered racialization of the field of metaphysics even as teleological finality is indefinitely deferred by the processual nature of actualization or the agency of matter” (Jackson 217). I therefore invoke the “ecology of the slave ship” as both an effect of a particular system of meaning and scale-making – what I am calling “modern ecological reason” – and as a framework through which to examine the racial implications of the system itself. In doing so, I concentrate on how the scientific, popular, and theoretical/analytical uses of ecology inflect and are inflected by the ecology of the slave ship and its legacies.

The Salt Bones defines modern ecological reason as a template for understanding identity and difference that elevates environmental relationships to the level of the ontological. As I suggest throughout this dissertation, there are two primary components involved in this

reasoning: the first is that the set of relations that inhere between (human and nonhuman) agents within a given environment affects the (ontological and ontic) character and/or constitution of the agents themselves. The ontological determinism of classification (as a reliable indicator of identity and measurement of character) gives way to the sovereignty of the internalized or internal relation. The second component is that ecologies operate in a regulatory, albeit non-teleological, manner. This principle follows inevitably from the first because the interdependence of “things” within an ecosystem means that feedback loops in some way inform the shape, direction, scale, and scope that relations take.⁶

Of course, recent schools of thought like the new materialisms, posthumanisms, and object oriented ontology have challenged one or both of these premises. In *Vibrant Matter*, the groundbreaking text of the new materialisms, Jane Bennett rejects the idea of matter as passive in order to point to a “liveliness” or “vibrancy” that emerges in specific material assemblages. While “[an] assemblage is an ecology in the sense that it is an interconnected series of parts,” it also has the capacity to defeat or impede regulation (the second premise) because “it is not a fixed order of parts, for the order is always being reworked in accordance with a certain ‘freedom of choice’ exercised by its actants” (Bennett, *Vibrant Matter* 97). Regardless, the new materialisms cleave to the first premise of ecology in conceiving of “interconnectedness” as a property immanent to “actants.” To borrow a phrase from Karen Barad’s theory of agential realism, “relata do not precede their relations” (334). This kind of thinking is undoubtedly attractive to the humanities and social sciences because it expands our notions of agency and “the self” into an “open series of capacities or potencies that emerge hazardously and

⁶ My description of ecological thinking is influenced by what Timothy Morton calls the “Interdependence Theorem” of ecology. The two axioms of this theorem, as laid out in “Thinking Ecology: The Mesh, the Strange Stranger, and the Beautiful Soul,” are 1) “things are only what they are in relation to other things” and 2) “nothing exists by itself and nothing comes from nothing” (266).

ambiguously within a multitude of organic and social processes” (Coole and Frost 10). In short, the “continuous redefining and reassembling of key elements” in an ecology suggests that entities are always in excess of whatever provisionally coherent and stable forms they may take (Coole and Frost 14).

There is certainly a myriad of ways in which ecological reasoning has enhanced our knowledge of the universe. Barad’s aforementioned agential realism re-worked our ideas of causality by bringing into view the entanglements between observers, objects, and representation at play in quantum mechanics. So too, in social ecology’s founding text, *The Ecology of Freedom*, Murray Bookchin offered one of the first comprehensive arguments against ethical or green consumerism as a solution for environmental crises. In this regard, I am less concerned with adjudicating wholesale the merits of ecological reason than I am with probing the kinds of ideological labor it performs.

If we recall, ecology unfolded against a preoccupation with ideal and universal forms, in which the identities of objects were determined by the measuring and mapping of visible qualities. But once “names and genera, designation and classification, language and nature [ceased] to be automatically interlocked,” identification was forced to “take place in another space than that of words” (Foucault 250). For modern ecological reason, this space has become the space of the relation. As such, the constitutive relations of an ecology are perceived as proceeding from, and therefore making present (*vorhanden*) or otherwise legible, certain unrepresentable truths about the objects therein.⁷ One consequence of this logic is that raciality’s

⁷ In *Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, its Overrepresentation – an Argument*, Sylvia Wynter refers to this process of drawing “truth” out of object-relations as the “adaptive truth-for terms” required to maintain those epistemes linked to the dominant order for our various “genres of being human”: “Here, the Argument, basing itself on Fanon’s and Bateson’s redefinition of the human, proposes that the adaptive truth-for terms in which each purely organic species must know the world is no less true in our human case. That therefore, our varying ontogeny/sociogeny modes of being human, as inscribed in the terms of each culture’s descriptive statement, will necessarily give rise to their varying respective modalities of adaptive

ontological distinctions between the stage of interiority (occupied by the European subject) and the stage of exteriority (occupied by the subaltern subject) no longer seem viable. If entities can be transformed in essential ways through their relations, then the space of the interior, as the privileged seat of reason, cannot be defined as such. We might even conclude, as Rosi Braidotti does, that “reason has nothing to do” with futurity, ethics, or “life itself” (217). However, even if modern ecological reason is correct in its ontological assessments of bodies, objects, and the entanglements between them, what is there to prevent the creation of new hierarchies of matter, difference, and life, “ranked [instead] in terms of their capacity to experience and become anything at all” (Jones 68)?

I contend that subsuming race and racism into the rubric of relations leaves intact the institutional and organizing structures of antiblackness that not only set the standards for “truth” in knowledge production, but also violently enforce those truths through policy, cultural representation, and social fantasy. As critical black thinkers like Frank B. Wilderson III, Hortense Spillers, Saidiya Hartman, and Denise Ferreira da Silva avow, the conditions of slavery are internal to African-derived peoples and are not dislodged by transforming social or ecological relationships. Negotiations over civil and/or human rights do improve material conditions for black communities, but they cannot alter significantly the fact that black suffering provides the very terrain upon which the dimensions of civil life unfold.

truths-for, or epistemes, up to and including our contemporary own. Further, that given the biocentric descriptive statement that is instituting of our present mode of sociogeny, the way we at present normatively know Self, Other, and social World is no less adaptively true as the condition of the continued production and reproduction of such a genre of being human and of its order as, before the revolution initiated by the Renaissance humanists, and given the then theocentric descriptive statement that had been instituting of the mode of sociogeny of medieval Latin-Christian Europe, its subjects had normatively known Self, Other, as well as their social, physical, and organic worlds, in the adaptively true terms needed for the production and reproduction not only of their then supernaturally legitimated genre of being human, but as well for that of the hierarchical social structures in whose intersubjective field that genre of the human could have alone realized itself” (269).

The conditions of slavery are generally apprehended within two distinct but overlapping modalities – the empirical and the ontological. Empirical descriptions of the conditions of slavery involve any combination of the following factors: prolonged captivity, forced labor, labor without compensation, loss of agency or the ability to give consent, property status under the law, and the loss of civil rights. Ontological understandings of slavery, while varied, largely hinge on two theories – Hegel’s Master/Slave dialectic and Orlando Patterson’s concept of social death in *Slavery and Social Death*. Unlike Hegel, Patterson purposely seeks to distinguish racial slavery from other forms of indentured servitude that are often given the title of contemporary slavery (e.g. debt bondage, wage slavery, and human trafficking). Writing that “the most distinctive attribute of the slave’s powerlessness was that it always originated (or was conceived of as having originated) as a substitute for death, usually violent death,” Patterson identifies the non-relationality of the slave as the defining characteristic of slavery (5).

What also differentiates Patterson’s claim from other investigations into slavery is its dismissal of work as constitutive. Labor, which is always a relation under capitalism, is not the defining condition of slavery. In Marxist and Gramscian understandings of subjectification, exploitation and alienation occur between laborers who sell their labor power and those who buy it. Such exploitation transpires through symbolic power (e.g. variable capital/labor), is enacted on unraced bodies, and is upheld through hegemony (i.e. influence, leadership, consent). Conversely, as Patterson maintains, the slave is socially dead and thus has no symbolic currency to offer. Unlike the relations of value that exist between workers and capitalists, there are only relations of force between slaves and masters. Frank B. Wilderson III writes that

once the “solid” plank of “work” is removed from slavery, then the conceptually coherent notion of “claims against the state”—the proposition that the state and civil

society are elastic enough to even contemplate the possibility of an emancipatory project for the Black position—disintegrates into thin air. The imaginary of the state and civil society is parasitic on the Middle Passage. Put another way: no slave, no world. And, in addition, as Patterson argues, no slave is *in* the world. (*Red, White & Black* 10-11)

Because “work is not an organic principle for the slave,” black bodies cannot be included in the so-called universal categories of Gramscian and Marxist thought: “production, exploitation, historical self-awareness and, above all, hegemony” (Wilderson, “Gramsci’s” 230). We should pause here to recognize Wilderson’s insight that racial slavery catalyzed not only an epistemological break, but an ontological one as well. This is the “existing thing” of blackness – an object known for its genealogical, social, and historical isolation (i.e. the afterlife of slavery), one that exceeds the strategic play of political and discursive forces that defines its affectability.

Truly, the slave ship is the slave’s “first ontological instance” or the site where racial blackness was both unmade (as human) and made (as something other than human) (Wilderson, *Red, White & Black* 42). “If,” Wilderson proposes, “as an ontological position, that is, as a grammar of suffering, the Slave is not a laborer but an anti-Human, a positionality against which Humanity establishes, maintains, and renews its coherence, its corporeal integrity,” then the slave is the inhuman object *par excellence* (*Red, White & Black* 14). After all, under the auspices of slavery, one cannot afford to assume either the subject or the body as a consistent, legible given. The slave was stripped of all pre-existing cultural and historical signs by the transformative, “dehumanizing, ungendering, and defacing” journey through the Middle Passage (Spillers 214). Arriving on shore, slaves were formally codified as property not simply to provide a legal form for their labor and exchange, but also as a guarantee of a certain ontological legibility. To protect slave masters from having to question the conditions of their own existence, the discourses of

animality, property, and ecology had to be invented. For to accept that blackness can be contained neither by the subject/object nor their relations is to unmake the ground of the world and relationality itself.

My critique of ecological reason, consequently, is more closely aligned with the theories of object oriented ontology, which refuse to ontologize relations. For object oriented ontologists like Timothy Morton, Graham Harman, and Levi Bryant, relations are external to objects, regardless of their imbrication in systems of deep connectivity. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger conducts a famous thought experiment with a hammer to demonstrate that our consciousness of objects occurs in a particular mode – we relate to objects as “equipment” that is “ready-to-hand.” What makes something “ready-to-hand” is its ability to disappear as an object for consciousness in favor of being something like use-value: “What is peculiar to what is initially at hand is that it withdraws, so to speak, in its character of handiness in order to be really handy. What everyday dealings are initially busy with is not tools themselves, but the work” (Heidegger 69). Therefore, when we perceive the hammer, it is not the hammer “in itself” that we contemplate, but a hammer in its ability to perform a task; the hammer is a tool oriented towards an “in order to.” For Harman, the genius of Heidegger’s breakthrough lies in the fact that it is only when the hammer breaks that it becomes immediately available for thought. It follows that in order for conscious activity to take place, the objects around us must withdraw in some sense, or we would be prevented from interacting with the world in a manageable way. Even so, when objects do become present to consciousness – when they become “present at hand” – there are still aspects of their reality that will never be available to us. Because “the phenomenal reality of things for consciousness does not use up their being,” then “the readiness-to-hand of an entity is [also] not exhaustively deployed in its presence-at-hand” (Harman 39). Object exceed their relations

because they can and do withdraw, but this withdrawal and finitude actually provide the conditions of possibility for interdependence and entanglement. And while this interdependence suggests that relationships are thoroughly ecological, it does not necessarily follow that these relationships exhaust the being of objects themselves.

Toward a Slave Ship Ecology

Beginning in the early sixteenth century, the transatlantic slave trade, and the slave ship in particular, supported experiments in ecological thinking even before the formalization of ecology as a scientific discipline. Even when abolitionists like Clarkson appealed to the similarities between the enslaved and Europeans, they still made recourse to environmental relationships as a metric of “natural character.” Clarkson’s *History* details his enthusiastic embrace of a scientific expedition to Africa and its utility for the abolitionist cause:

These gentlemen had been lately sent to Africa by the late king of Sweden, to make discoveries in botany, mineralogy, and other departments of science...I had not long been with them before I perceived the great treasure I had found. They gave me many beautiful specimens of African produce. They showed me their journals, which they had regularly kept from day to day. In these I had the pleasure of seeing a number of circumstances minuted down, all relating to the Slave-trade, and even drawings on the same subject. I obtained a more accurate and satisfactory knowledge of the manners and customs of the Africans from these, than from all the persons put together whom I had yet seen. I was anxious, therefore, to take them before the committee of council...His evidence went to show, that the natives of Africa lived in a fruitful and luxuriant country, which supplied

all their wants, and that they would be a happy people if it were not for the existence of the Slave-trade. (245)

That these “gentlemen” provide Clarkson with “a more accurate and satisfactory knowledge of the manners and customs of the Africans” than “all the persons put together whom [he] had yet seen” speaks not only to the general authority of science in describing Africans, but also to how abolitionist perspectives on the trade sought to incorporate Africans into what we would today call a “niche theory” of ecology. The evidence that Clarkson is so enamored with suggests that Africans, like other niche species, are “a happy people” because the environment has adapted to their needs and it to them. In fact, in Clarkson’s thinking, Africans would likely still be a “happy people” if the slave trade had not removed them from their “fruitful and luxuriant country.” What Clarkson narrates is a caution about ecological imbalance before the term ecology was invented.

Following the nascent ecological thinking of Clarkson’s *History*, chapter 1 of *The Salt Bones* explores how the slave ship produced ecological models for managing racial difference. Through a close reading of M. NourbeSe Philip’s award-winning 2008 poetry volume, *Zong!*, I track the development of an “ecology of thirst” across the Middle Passage. This interconnected series of poems, written about the historical massacres aboard the “Zong,” suggests that the regulation of water became a crucial strategy for policing the racial boundaries of the human. The manipulation of environmental relations provided a means to naturalize racial violence by displacing the consequences of that violence onto the character and constitution of the slaves. The activities of this displacement are then mystified or obscured so that the effects of antiblack violence – poverty, illness, pathology, death by dehydration – are perceived as “truths” about racial blackness and black bodies. But Philip’s refusal to adhere to the language of the law, or to the grammatical laws that regulate the archives of the transatlantic slave trade, also reveals that

the conditions of captivity can enable strange and intimate relationships with nonhuman entities. This opening onto new attachments, I argue, generates what Sylvia Wynter calls other “[modes] of being Human” (“Unsettling” 263). Indeed, it is perhaps the acknowledgement of these “other modes” that further justified associations between black suffering and the manipulation of environmental relations. Ecological reason, in other words, provides a framework in which to disperse anxieties about the preternatural or “withdrawn” capacities of racial blackness.

Philip’s poetic rendering of slave ship ecologies also takes historical cues from the visual icons of the Middle Passage. Chapter 2 engages the infamous cross-section of the eighteenth-century British slave ship *Brookes* – illustrating the brutal arrangement of captive Africans in its hull – and its contributions to the ongoing objectification of black bodies. The *Brookes* image has largely been approached through the fields of visual studies, which prioritize its ability to manipulate white racial sentiment in nineteenth-century abolitionist debates. However, its adoption of the *fin de siècle* codes of scientific objectivity and realist representation has been largely overlooked. I contend that the image was successful for the abolitionist cause not because it depicted the inhumanity of the slave trade, but because its visual mechanisms reified presuppositions about the natural and ontological character of slaves. As such, I track how the *Brookes* image capitalized on the epistemic shifts between natural history and the natural sciences to draw together a number of fantasies about racial blackness. By bringing the insights of science and technology studies and the psychoanalysis of race to bear on the *Brookes* image, I elucidate how ecological reason coalesced through a racial fetishism for black suffering.

Chapter 3 analyzes how this fetishism is embedded in environmental representation by concentrating on Benh Zeitlin’s 2012 speculative film, *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (*Beasts*). Through allegorical references to the slave ports of New Orleans, *Beasts* reimagines this region

as akin to a contemporary slave vessel to establish the devastation of Hurricane Katrina as the logical extension of the Middle Passage's environmental relationships. Accordingly, the film must negotiate the ecological legacies of the slave ship to solicit interest in the global climate commons. I first sketch out a brief history of the commons and its current neoliberal appropriation before examining how the film's cinematic strategies undermine its attempts to portray Stefano Harney and Fred Moten's multiracial, anti-capitalist "undercommons" as a form of climate change resistance. Despite attributing global climate change to the neoliberal management of racialized populations, *Beasts* represents black suffering as paramount even for the operations of the undercommons. In this manner, the film uncovers the difficulties in pursuing an environmental ethics without first addressing the racial logic of ecological reason.

Scholars of Afrofuturism also point out that the slave ship and the transatlantic slave trade laid the groundwork for our dominant imaginaries of the Anthropocene. As a geological epoch demarcated by the cumulative effects of species-level human activity, I argue that the Anthropocene advances a history of nature that obscures its racial roots. On this score, the concluding chapter follows the spaceship as a re-imagining of the slave ship to determine how Afrofuturism provides new temporal lenses to comprehend the ecology of the slave ship. My reading of Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents* indicates that the ecology of the slave/space ship initiated a type of "suspended animation" to manipulate environmental experience along the borders of what Hortense Spillers designates as body/flesh. I subsequently claim that the philosophical responses to the Anthropocene, and the new materialisms in particular, are structured by disavowed social fantasies about black female flesh. Butler's *Parable* duology exposes how modern ecological reason is founded on a desire to

arrogate the radical potential of black women's histories without incorporating black bodies or black critical thought into its purview.

Consequently, *The Salt Bones* works towards what Timothy Morton names a "dark ecology," or a form of ecological intimacy that respects the absolute otherness of "strange strangers" ("Thinking Ecology" 275). In "refusing to digest the object into an ideal form," dark ecology proposes that "the best way to have ecological awareness is to love the world as a person; while the best way to love a person is to love what is most intimate to them, the 'thing' embedded in their makeup" (Morton, *Ecology Without Nature* 201). This is an ethics that not only acknowledges the ecological and socio-political positions inaugurated by modern racial slavery, but also affirms them. In the words of Jared Sexton:

a willing or willingness...to pay whatever social costs accrue to being black, to inhabiting blackness, to living a black social life under the shadow of social death. This is not an accommodation to the dictates of the antiblack world. The affirmation of blackness, which is to say an affirmation of pathological being, is a refusal to distance oneself from blackness in a valorization of minor differences that bring one closer to health, to life, or to sociality. ("The Social Life" 27)

The Salt Bones therefore addresses not only the racial and ideological labors of ecological reason, but also how these labors are renewed through environmental racism and challenged through black literary representation. Putting contemporary African American and African diasporic literature into conversation with the environmental humanities has allowed me to approach race as an ecological assemblage with material effects. Such an approach also constitutes a cultural reading practice, one that concretely links the possibilities for an ethical displacement of human privilege to the emancipatory visions of the black radical tradition. Black

literature, as this project demonstrates, facilitates these connections by encouraging us to imagine how racial difference might ground a more generous and efficacious environmental ethics.

CHAPTER 1

An Ecology of Thirst:

Zong! and the Constitution of Natural Causes

drowned
a sea of negroes
live
in the thirst

– M. NourbeSe Philip, *Zong!*

In March of 2014, Detroit’s Water and Sewage Department (DWSD) announced that it would begin shutting off water access to clients with outstanding accounts. Given its bankruptcy filing in the previous year, the city clearly saw its massive backlog of about 165,000 delinquent accounts as an opportunity to generate additional revenue (Pyke, “Detroit Shuts Off Water”). Nevertheless, these water shut-offs disproportionately affected the city’s low-income and African-American residents. Human rights advocates were quick to point out that these already vulnerable communities were unfairly targeted, considering that water access for commercial and industrial account holders remained untouched despite the fact that the average debt for industrial clients is more than \$10,000 higher than the average debt of residential clients.⁸ According to a report filed with the UN’s Special Rapporteur on the Human Right to Safe Drinking Water and Sanitation, Detroit’s largely poor, largely black populations have historically shouldered the burdens of the city’s aging water infrastructure, a situation made worse by economic depression and a long-standing prioritization of corporate revenue over social welfare.

⁸ A report compiled by The Blue Planet Project for the UN’s Special Rapporteur on the Human Right to Safe Drinking Water and Sanitation lists the average debts of Detroit commercial and industrial users as \$1,976.98, and \$10,817.96 respectively. In contrast, the average debt for individual households is listed as around \$540. See “Submission” for more details.

And Detroit is not alone in this prioritization. Various cities in Michigan, and most recently, the city of Baltimore, Maryland, have also withheld water from black residents, even as surrounding businesses and other residential areas have experienced no interruptions of service. This sharp asymmetry of access is best captured by a single question: What is it like to be thirsty when one is surrounded by water? This question also sits at the heart of M. NourbeSe Philip's 2008 collection of poems, entitled *Zong!*

In 1781, the British slave ship "Zong," under the command of Captain Luke Collingwood, set sail from the West Coast of Africa toward Jamaica carrying an insured cargo of 470 slaves. Navigational errors en route extended what was normally a voyage of six to eight weeks to over four months, during which time many of the enslaved died from dehydration or prolonged illness. Captain Collingwood, concerned that he would not be compensated for the loss of those who succumbed to such so-called "natural causes," instructed his crew to throw overboard and summarily drown to death another 150 slaves.⁹ He determined that "the massacre of the African slaves would prove to be more financially advantageous to the owners of the ship and its cargo" (Philip 189). When the "Zong" returned to its home berth in Liverpool, the ship's owners filed an insurance claim for the estimated value of the massacred slaves. The insurers denied the claim and the owners subsequently filed suit in a case that was adjudicated in their favor. The insurers appealed in turn and the report of the court's decision to grant a new trial provides the raw material for M. NourbeSe Philip's 2008 collection of poems about that journey.

The epigraph from *Zong!* that opens this essay pits the watery plentitude of the seas against the eternal thirst of the slaves, which compels us to consider how the question of thirst

⁹ There is uncertainty about the number of slaves that were onboard the "Zong" and the number that were thrown overboard. Some sources, like James Walvin's *Black Ivory*, list the total amount of slaves murdered at 131, while Marcus Rediker's *The Slave Ship* puts that number at 132. As Philip suggests, however, finding the exact numbers is most likely impossible because "the ultimate question on board the Zong" of "what really happened" is troubled by the difficult nature of nautical reports and the incomplete archives of slavery (205).

might inaugurate the historical structures underwriting the relationships between blackness and the natural world. This chapter will argue that the slave ship is not only a known object in the historic instance, but also an ecology of resource regulations that persists beyond the formal abolition of the transatlantic slave trade. Correspondingly, the poems of *Zong!* suggest that the manipulation of water is part of a longstanding strategy to police the racial boundaries of the human. If, as Philip implies, racial slavery initiates and maintains certain relations between organisms and their environment, how has the antiblackness fundamental to that world-historical development informed our ongoing environmental crises? How might the thirst of the slaves also initiate a radical ecology that gestures towards what Afro-Caribbean scholar Sylvia Wynter calls another “mode of being Human” (“Unsettling” 263)?¹⁰

Zong! chronicles the unspeakable events that occurred aboard the eponymous slave ship in a series of poems gathered into seven, interconnected sections. The first of these sections, “Os,” contains poems constructed only of words found in the text of the “Zong’s” legal case, *Gregson vs. Gilbert*. For Philip, who is formally trained as an attorney, the decision to work within the language of the legal case reflects the very real limitations that the law places on our understandings of slavery. The poems of the remaining sections – “Dicta”, “Sal,” “Ventus,” “Ratio,” “Ferrum,” and “Eboꝛa” – are drawn from a word bank comprised of the legal case and what poet Evie Shockley refers to as “imperfect anagrams” or new words derived from words in the case (808). What emerges from this word bank are sequences of words, phrases, and sounds that gather in clusters or unravel slowly, leaving strings of syllables and letters trailing across the

¹⁰ These lines of inquiry have been shaped by recent contributions to what might be broadly called environmental justice ecocriticism. As Joni Adamson and Scott Slovic document in their introduction to the 2009 MELUS issue on “Ethnicity and Ecocriticism,” environmental justice ecocriticism refuses the distinctions between social and environmental concerns. Rather, the texts gathered by this refusal agree that natural experience is conditioned by one’s position along the color line. These historical convergences between race and nature, which are intensified by the disciplinary regimes of global neoliberalism, call for sustained attention to how technologies of racialization operate through environmental regulations and relations (and vice-versa).

pages. Because “words are broken into and open to make non-sense or no sense at all,” the poems are inherently non-linear and even non-narrative (Philip 205). This poetic entropy increases so that the final section, “Èbòrà,” features phrases superimposed on other phrases and words running against and into other words. As the reader moves through the poems, she is made keenly aware of her own attempts at meaning making, many of which are refused by the (anti)structure of the poems themselves. Philip’s resistance to the conventions of lyric poetry thus repeats the difficulties of making sense of (or finding sense in) the massacres, which foregrounds the problematic nature of the language available to us.

Along with the notorious image of the cross-section of the slave ship *Brookes*, the “Zong” played a decisive role in advancing the abolition of the Transatlantic Slave Trade. The ethical debates that unfolded in the attempts to determine the legal merits of the case became a larger part of British cultural memory primarily through the efforts of abolitionists Granville Sharpe and Thomas Clarkson. Sharpe attended the appeal hearing and commissioned a transcript of its proceedings, which later formed the basis of his own sentimentalized interpretation of the case. While his interpretation was never published as a formal abolitionist tract, it was circulated within abolitionist circles as an indictment of the moral depravities that accompanied the slave trade. As slave trade historian Anita Rupprecht argues, the title of his account – “An Account of the Murder of 132 Negro Slaves on Board the Ship Zong or Zurg; with some Remarks on the Argument of an eminent Lawyer, in defence of that inhuman Transaction inclosed in the Letters of 2nd July 1783 to the Lord Commissioners of the Admiralty” – reveals that for Sharpe, “the ‘transaction’ in question was about life, not property” (334). Rupprecht’s analysis demonstrates how Sharpe’s unrelenting focus on the humanity of the murdered slaves did much to secure the dialectic of the innocent African and the immoral slave trader that subtended a majority of later

abolitionist literature. Among these is the first mass-produced and distributed abolitionist tract – the 1783, Quaker-funded *The Case of Our Fellow Creatures*.

As it is with both *The Case* and, as I will explore in the next chapter, the *Brookes*, representations of the Middle Passage during the eighteenth century allowed antiblack sentiment to continue under the legitimating guise of abolitionist morality. One of the primary objectives of abolitionist literature was the evocation of sympathy from white readers. By imploring readers to imagine themselves undergoing the suffering endured by captives, “the humanity of the slaves and the violence of the institution are brought into view via a final allusion to the risk that slaving poses to European bodies” (Rupprecht 338). Black suffering could only be made legible through its imaginative embodiment by British subjects. When empathy requires the substitution of the sufferer with a moral and credible subject capable of bearing witness, processes of imagination become forms of pleasurable possession, or what Saidiya Hartman describes as “the augmentation of the master subject through his embodiment in external objects and persons” (*Scenes* 21). Even when abolitionists like Thomas Clarkson acknowledged the difficulties in representing the traumas of the slave trade, these attempts at non-representational representation also relied on the erasure of Africans as autonomous subjects. For example, Clarkson’s two seminal works, the 1808, two-volume *History of the Rise, Progress, and Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African-Slave Trade by the British Parliament* and his 1786 text “An Essay on the Slavery and Commerce of the Human Species, particularly the African,” describe a fictionalized trip along a slaving route. Although Clarkson had no first-hand experience with slavery, his decision to construct a generalized representation stemmed partially from his insistence on the “unspeakability” or “indescribability” of the slave trade. However, his professed inability to “find words” that would adequately “exhibit [the slaves’] suffering” shifts

the responsibility for rendering an accurate description of the slave trade from the narrator to the reader (Clarkson, qtd. in Rupprecht 340). This shift requires the same imaginative maneuvers from the reader as the bald exhortations for sympathy found in other abolitionist narratives.

Clarkson's so-called loss for words was difficult to sustain and after a point, he turned to the "Zong" as an exemplar of his broader depictions of slavery's horrors. Just as the refusal to describe the Middle Passage places the reader in an appropriative relationship to the imaginary captives, Clarkson's invocation of the "Zong" urges readers to place themselves at an acute angle to the suffering slaves by reducing the history of the slave trade to a representative scene of murder. This narrative sequence from general (non)description to metonymy allows the reader to simultaneously construct and inhabit (possess) the position of an archetypal slave and a white slaver. That is, the 132 murdered slaves become the literal empty signifiers that authorize abolitionist fantasies about the moral superiority of European nations while permitting readers to explore fantasies about committing antiblack violence. The end result is that the actual deaths of the slaves, not to mention the slaves themselves, are obfuscated by the moral sentiment and libidinal pleasure of the (white) surviving reader-as-witness.

Sharpe and Clarkson's publicizing of the "Zong" case granted it an almost mythical status that helped to ensure the abolitionist movement appeared as the most significant legacy of the slave trade. Rather than exploring how the consequences of slavery might have re-configured social and political ways of being for the enslaved, the repeated citations of the "Zong" served to "[fix] the representation of the past in an ameliorative relation to the [British] national present" (Rupprecht 344). The events aboard the "Zong" were perceived as just that – events that were thoroughly contained and confined by abolitionist narratives, yet perpetually available as a corrective for national moral degradation. The 2007 bicentennial commemoration of the

abolition of the slave trade in Britain even featured a replica of the “Zong,” which sailed up the Thames River and docked at Tower Pier in London. The then mayor, Ken Livingstone, commented “It is important that everyone knows the true horror of slavery and the exhibition on board the Zong will help educate future generations and give greater understanding of what can only be described as one of the greatest crimes against humanity” (Greater London Authority, “Mayor to Open”). The replica also functioned as a kind of “floating museum,” featuring an exhibit entitled, “Free at Last?” that sought to bind contemporary instances of human trafficking – termed “modern day slavery” – to the transatlantic slave trade. The website of the “Spirit of Wilberforce” that sponsored the exhibit through the “Centre for Contemporary Ministry” describes the “Zong” thusly: “The story of The Zong became a national talking point. The fact that throwing 133 Africans overboard was not regarded as murder but simply as the lawful disposal of ‘merchandise’ at last stirred the national conscience. Although it took another 24 years to persuade Parliament to ban the slave trade, The Zong was the first significant turning point in the abolitionist campaign” (“The Zong”). Both the Wilberforce website and the mayor’s comments adopt the structures of feeling that characterized the work of abolitionists like Sharpe and Clarkson. This is to say that even 200 years after the legal abolition of the slave trade in Britain, the “true horror of slavery” is brought to bear on the contemporary moment only via its threat to “humanity” and “the national conscience,” and its educational value to “future generations.” Given the tone of the “Zong” replica’s museum component, we can predict that the “crime against humanity” is neither the gratuitous violence of slavery nor the persistent and renewable legacy of antiblackness.

The analogy proposed between human trafficking and racial slavery in the “Free at Last?” exhibition shares a common valence with what Jared Sexton has termed “people-of-color blindness,” or

a form of colorblindness inherent to the concept of ‘people of color’ to the precise extent that it misunderstands the specificity of antiblackness and presumes or insists upon the monolithic character of victimization under white supremacy – thinking (the afterlife of) slavery as a form of exploitation or colonization or a species of racial oppression among others. (“People” 48)

Positing human trafficking as a form of modern day slavery dilutes racial slavery through references to conditions of oppression and captivity that no longer singularly refer to the structures of antiblackness. By jettisoning the specific nature of antiblackness in favor of an ahistorical comparative methodology, slavery appears to have travelled, or more appropriately, floated, into a berth shared with the other vessels of exploitation.

Clearly, the “Zong” remains effective as a general symbol of the Middle Passage. But not all contemporary engagements with this case remain mired in abolitionist politics. In addition to Philip’s poetic treatment, Eric William’s *Capitalism and Slavery*, Fred D’Aguiar’s *Feeding the Ghosts*, James Walvin’s *Black Ivory* and *The Zong*, Amiri Bakara’s play *The Slave Ship*, and Marcus Rediker’s *The Slave Ship* have opened a space from which to understand the racial and racist foundations of cultural memory, mourning, insurance law, capitalism, and modernity writ large. In particular, Ian Baucom’s 2005 *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History* convincingly argues that the “Zong” and its subsequent legal trials reveal how our contemporary economic cycles are built on a kind of speculative finance that dates back to the eighteenth century. When the “unspeakability” of the slave trade is translated

into a set of abstract risks about the dangers of moral contamination and financial loss, the transfer of “risk” from slaves to “European bodies” merely re-directs and re-organizes public, antiblack sentiment instead of diminishing it. The mechanisms of calculation and value assessment that developed in support of the transatlantic slave trade continue to sustain contemporary forms of insurance law and finance capital.

In her search for an approach to the “Zong” case, Philip struggles to find a way to confront these mechanisms and the violence that they carry into the archives of slavery. She writes in the “Notanda” section:

one approach was literally to cut up the text and just pick words randomly, then I would write them down but nothing seemed to yield – this was most similar to the activity of the random picking of African slaves – selected randomly then thrown together, hoping that something would come out of it – that they would produce something. Owners did have an interest in them working together, like I do in having words work together. That working together only achieved through force. In my case, it is the grammar which is the ordering mechanism, the mechanism of force. (192-193)

The forces of captivity and grammar collide in Philip’s unreading of the “Zong” just as its legal and abolitionist narratives cooperate to distill and then obfuscate a kind of essential meaning from an otherwise “unrepresentable” event. This interest in a productive “working together” describes the processes by which blackness is rendered legible by becoming the predominant form of, and depository for, value. As Baucom argues in *Specters*, slaves were not only treated as commodities, they also actively functioned as a type of “interest-bearing money” that anchored a global system of finance (61). Slaves thus inhabit, at least ostensibly, a transactional relation to

non-slaves that supersedes, or more pointedly, “cuts up” and destroys whatever relational texts might have existed prior to the transatlantic slave trade.

It is important to note that Philip’s realization that the structural violence of language in many ways mirrors that of the trade is not a statement on the equivalency of grammar and slavery. More precisely, Philip’s decision to engage the history of the Middle Passage through the language of a legal account reflects her belief that the story of the *Zong* is “locked in this text” (191). The fact that the transcript of *Gregson vs. Gilbert* provides our only substantive access to what is considered an iconic and representative event in the history of slavery and the slave trade speaks to the general lack of knowledge that marks the Middle Passage as a site of unthinkable absence. Even the legal briefs from which Philip works are marked by the silence of those slaves who remain the objects of a case, but not subjects of the law. As Saidiya Hartman writes in “Venus in Two Acts,” any work performed in the archive of slavery is “predicated upon impossibility – listening for the unsaid, translating misconstrued words, and refashioning disfigured lives – and intent on achieving an impossible goal: redressing the violence that produced numbers, ciphers, and fragments of discourse, which is as close as we come to a biography of the captive and the enslaved” (2-3). Instead of straining against this impossibility, Philip pursues a “poetics of fragmentation,” or what she refers to otherwise as a “fugue state” that is obscured by the historical impulse to recuperate a sense of wholeness through narrative structure (202; 204). It is only by “untelling” the official account – by disconnecting letters within words, words within sentences, sentences within paragraphs – that the losses found in the rupture of the Middle Passage are released from their fixed representations. This decomposition of language also demands a similar “un-reading” that requires a suspension of those laws that “lock” us into juridical and political understandings of blackness and the relations it informs. I

have already suggested that the legal text of the “Zong” case demonstrates how slaves became a form of affective and fiscal currency through the transatlantic slave trade. Philip’s deconstructive method allows us to discern what other sets of relations might exist in and beneath the extensive and overbearing reach of the commodity form.

The proceedings of the “Zong” case and the abolitionist rhetoric that drew it to the public’s attention wrestled not only with the legal standing of slaves, but also with how to make sense of an “object” that disturbed the classification systems of natural and social order. How were European lawmakers, sailors, slavers, and abolitionists to understand a being that while denied the full capacities of (European) humanity continued to resemble humans in uncanny and stubborn ways? By the time the transatlantic slave trade began in earnest, Europeans had already experienced centuries of contact with the peoples of Africa. Theories of polygenesis and species/race began circulating more widely and scientific racism, both pre- and post-Darwin, had positioned blacks as either a separate species entirely or as a lesser variety of *Homo Sapiens*. These arguments are indicative of the larger belief that the African is closer to the animal in evolutionary terms and therefore fit for enslavement. The “sciences” of eugenics and craniometry contributed much to these fantasies as they directly fortified the sovereign dominions of Whiteness. Many of these fraught entanglements between blackness and “nature” can be viewed as coincident with already existing practices of ecological instrumentalism salient across the antebellum United States and Caribbean. American expansion and exploration in the early nineteenth century, for example, often employed gendered rhetoric to justify the extraction of value from the environment, where the domestication of feminized, pastoral landscapes necessarily involved the exploitation of natural resources. Sidney Mintz’ *Caribbean Transformations* also argues that as “factories in the fields,” slave plantations in the Caribbean

anticipated later manufacturing procedures by providing industrial capital with nascent models of the assembly line. Making slaves a part of “nature” via the animal also allowed for an easy conflation with a nature that existed merely to be exploited.

The particularity of the animal/slave comparison, as Paul Outka argues in *Race and Nature: Transcendentalism to the Harlem Renaissance*, was a strategic mechanism to bypass considerations of the more unsettling characteristics of the slave:

To conflate the human and the domesticated animal was, in a symbolic sense, to make a slave, to retain the “usefulness” of the slave's human intelligence, sexuality, skills, and so forth, while justifying the whole thing by ascribing the slave's vocal and physical resistance to his or her animal status...The slave's animal status “absorbed” the paradox of how a possession could be actively rebellious far more effectively than mere thing-status would...Rather than confronting the question of rebellious property, the slave holder dodged it, subsuming it under the related, but much less pressing, question of animal rights. (55)

Outka’s claims here are twofold; one, that the property, object, or thinghood status of the slave was inadequate to capture the being of the slave and two, that the focus on the animality of the slave provided an alibi for this inadequacy. Slaves were codified as property under the law and as such, any act of “rebellion” by a slave confounded this designation in fundamental ways. Property, in the nonhuman, non-animal sense, is not recognized for its capacity to “think” or “act.”¹¹ Aboard the “Zong” for example, as the slaves watched groups of their cargo-mates tossed overboard, at least ten jumped overboard of their own will (Rediker, *Slave Ship* 240). An

¹¹ In her chapter on “Seduction and the Ruses of Power” in *Scenes of Subjection*, Saidiya Hartman provides a complimentary analysis of how slave law deployed evidence of the slave’s “humanity” for purposes of criminalization. At this productive site, a tension emerges whereby there can be no violence (“rebellion” in Outka’s terms) except for black violence because violence *against* blacks is illegible; it is neither culturally nor legally inscribed within the law. Nevertheless, the violence of black self-defense, real or imagined, shows up with hyper-visibility as the most terrifying violence possible – one that the law manipulates in service of its own legitimation.

act that demonstrated the preference for death over captivity was defined by eighteenth century insurance law as a kind of “natural death:”

The insurer takes upon him the risk of the loss, capture, and death of slaves, or any other unavoidable accident to them: but natural death is always understood to be excepted: by natural death is meant, not only when it happens by disease or sickness, but also when the captive destroys himself through despair, which often happens, but when slaves are killed or thrown into the sea to quell an insurrection on their part, then the insurers must answer.

(qtd. in Walvin, *Crossings* 119)

Here, an active refusal of enslavement became a sign of neither intellect nor agential capacity, but of a general reaction of the animal nervous system that is not anymore “unnatural” than death by disease. Too, this overwriting of the slave’s mobilization of affect – their “despair, which often happens” – points to a potential site of the law’s unraveling. A death “by despair” upsets views of the slaves as either laboring machines or insensate animals. Ironically, while insurance law did recognize the possibility of revolt or insurrection, the fact that insurers were held liable for any deaths that occurred in these situations managed to strip the slave of any motive will by protecting their exchange value.

What Outka makes explicit is that when the slave forced a re-conceptualization of the “natural order” of things, certain discourses were recruited to rationalize any contradictions that arose. Arriving on shore, slaves were formally codified as property not simply to provide a legal form for their labor and exchange, but also as a guarantee of a certain civic legibility. Nevertheless, as Outka points out, signs of their “sentience,” like rebellion, signaled that the slave was “signifying property *plus*,” or something that was in excess of their bare designation as owned objects (Spillers 203). This “plus” reveals the coterminous production of the hierarchical

distinction of humanity from the natural world, the founding division of the subject from its objects, and the modern formulation of relationality.

Consequently, Philip's poetic deconstruction of the "Zong's" legal case, and the environmental relationships it authorized, opens a space-time from which we can re-think ecology through the figure of the slave. As a poetic re-presentation of historical events, *Zong!*'s "unlocking" of the text of *Gregson vs. Gilbert* also recognizes that environmental theory is not immune to the historically-given laws of language. *Zong!* thus provides ecocritics with an opportunity to discover how the history of modern racial slavery and its afterlives is also the history of environmental politics and thought. As Philip's poems indicate, ecology is not just a project of description or discernment; it is also a practice that foregrounds some relationships while suppressing others. Therefore, although the slave ship represents a specific relational or ecological moment of modernity, *Zong!* asks us to consider what a radical ecology might entail if we *begin* with the slave.

"The Order in Destroy"

The first section of *Zong!* is entitled "Os," which is Latin for "bone." These 26 poems, like the 26 non-fused bones located in the human spinal column, provide the backbone for the rest of the text by highlighting the ways that language structures our encounters with slavery. Composed entirely of words found in the case of *Gregson vs. Gilbert*, "Os" draws attention to the limitations of its material and the ways in which "much of the language we work with is already preselected and limited, by fashion, by cultural norms – by systems that shape us such as gender and race – by what's acceptable. By order, logic, and rationality" (Philip 198). The law employs this same "system of laws, rules, and regulations" to evacuate any consideration of the

slaves' humanity from the evaluation of the "Zong" case, resulting in a decision "that is, at best, only tangentially related to the Africans on board" (Philip 199). In these 26 poems, the actual personages involved in the massacres – Captain Collingwood, ship owner William Gregson, the sailors, the slaves – are rendered as impersonal nouns ("captain," "negroes," "subject," "underwriters," "mariners," "masters") that recall other legal designations that operate by abstraction (defendant, plaintiff, claimant). The individuals of the "Zong" are stripped of historical and cultural specificity as they are forced to occupy more generic legal roles that attenuate the affective and traumatic registers of the massacres. And yet, even as these poetic vertebrae work together to form the coherent and functional organism of law, Philip's techniques of disassembly reveal an antiblack rationale that is both prior to and productive of the law itself.

The "Zong" case played a pivotal role in enabling British commercial law and modern finance capital to ensure/insure the fungibility of the slave. Scholars of its legal proceedings have pointed to the "general average" as the fundamental principle at stake in the appeal. Under the terms of this insurance precept, claims could be made for cargo that was deliberately destroyed if the act was absolutely necessary to secure the success of the larger enterprise. In these instances, all contracted parties (i.e. insurers and the insured) agreed to share in the loss and recompense of jettisoned cargo. In the case of the "Zong," the ship's owners and crew invoked this clause to make a claim for the average value of the jettisoned slaves by speculating about the value they would have generated in their imagined exchange. But as Ian Baucom skillfully argues, the general average is also the "practice by which finance capital insures not only its objects, but, more importantly, its capacity to value (and to *guarantee* the value) of objects regardless of either their thingly existence or their actual market place exchange" (29). The "Zong" case is singular therefore not in the fact that it treated slaves as commodities, but because it formalized

practices of speculative finance that successfully freed value from the material existence of the object. Value, in other words, no longer depended on the exchange- and use-value of objects, or even on the actualization of an imagined loss, but was instead conferred in the acts of insurance and speculation. “Insurance,” Baucom writes, “set the money-form of value free from the life of things” (30-31). What this means for our understanding of racial slavery is that the edifice of modern finance is built on a violent erasure of black bodies that is not only condoned but *anticipated*, producing “an economy in which blackness circulates precisely as a form of disappearance, a spectral blackness” (Sexton, “Captivity” 78). This circulation of blackness as money-form (i.e. currency) and spectral remainder occurs alongside and through the extraction of labor from the slave’s flesh, but is not necessarily bound to it. In this regard, the slave’s flesh is marked as excessive, which, as Philip reminds us, provides the generative locus for a certain legal order.

In “Zong! #2” of the “Os” section, we encounter the following clusters of words:

		the throw in circumstance
	the weight in want	
		in sustenance
for underwriters		
		the loss
the order in destroy		
		the that fact
		the it was
		the were
negroes		
		the after rains

Wafor Yao Siyolo Bolade Kibibi Kamau
(Philip 5)

In the context of the “Zong” case, “the loss” belongs to “the underwriters” of the ship’s insurance company for whom the systematic murder of slaves represented a contractual

obligation. Within this framework, any recognition of the slaves' former bearings, as sons, daughters, friends, and partners, is foreclosed. However, Philip declares "the Africans on board the 'Zong' must be named. They will be ghostly footnotes floating below the text ... [the] idea at [the] heart of the footnotes in general is acknowledgement—someone else was here before—in *Zong!* footnote equals the footprint" (200). All twenty-six poems in "Os" contain a set of African names separated from the formal text by a thin line—footprints of a type of loss that cannot be accounted for within the confines of the law. In her analysis of "Zong! #2," Shockley argues that we should read these names as additional "underwriters" of the text to counter the calculations of value necessary to speculative finance. The word cluster "the weight in want/in sustenance" also draws attention to one homophone that repeats throughout the collection: "want," meaning "to desire or need," and "wont," meaning "one's customary behavior in a situation" or "given to." The word "weight" invokes, first and foremost, the heaviness of those black bodies cast into the sea and the value guaranteed by their deaths. The footnotes at the bottom of the page also bear the weight of lost kinship in want of recognition. In light of the absences that saturate "Zong! #2," and the bar of the law that separates the lost from "the loss," the phrase "weight in want," or the "value in custom," refers to captivity itself. Within the system of the "Zong" as both text and historical instance, the "wont" or "custom" that provides "sustenance" for the "underwriters" of slavery is the eradication of black bodies. Acts of violence that verified the slaves' material existence as excessive to the production of abstract value consequently begat an "order" that comes in and as "destroy."

Even though the treatment of the slaves as subjects of capital was assumed and uncontested, the court still ruled in favor of ordering another trial and overturned the initial awarding of compensation to the "Zong's" owners. According to the proceedings of *Gregson vs.*

Gilbert, the “Zong’s” slaves were allegedly thrown overboard after the crew concluded that “a sufficient quantity of water did not remain on board...for preserving the lives of the master and mariners...and of the negro slaves” (Philip 210). However, during the appeals process, it was discovered that slaves were thrown overboard in groups over the course of several days. During this time, rainfall had re-supplied the ship with enough drinking water so as to make the further killing of slaves unnecessary. Nevertheless, slaves were still thrown overboard after the rains had fallen, begging the question of what, well beyond the captain’s morbid fiduciary self-interest, motivated the additional murders?

The case was clearly never about the ethical significance or legality of these deaths or about the treatment of slaves as commodities. In fact, as Jeremy Krikler proposes, the Chief Justice, Lord Mansfield, may have deliberately “ignored [those] aspects of the law” which contested the legality of the massacres because he was “fixed firmly on the questions of absolute necessity and the general average which he believed might now be weakened if the humanity of the slaves was introduced” (43). Mansfield’s well-documented ambition to rid British commercial law of ambiguity certainly guided his decision to safeguard its clarity. Once it became clear that the ship’s owners failed to meet the standards of absolute necessity, Mansfield’s refusal to consider the slaves’ humanity enabled him to shift focus towards the crew and away from the murders themselves. In so doing, the laws of absolute necessity and the general average were left intact, another paramount example of the “order in destroy” found in “Zong! #2” (Philip 5). Mansfield’s resolve to treat the “unnecessary” murders as nothing more than evidence of crew error works retroactively to confirm the slaves’ status as “empty bearers’ of an abstract, theoretical, but entirely real quantum of value” (Baucom 31). As such, both the

law and the systems of speculative finance it scaffolds treat the slave as if she were already dead; until, as Mansfield's anxieties suggest, they resurrect her to fortify the boundaries of the human.

"Zong! #9" draws attention to the profundity of these anxieties by implicating the language of the law in the processes of ossification: "slaves/to the order in/destroyed/the circumstance in/fact/the property in/subject/the subject in/creature/the loss in/underwriters/to the fellow in/negro/the sustenance/in want/the arrived/in vessel/the weight/in provisions/the suffered in die/the me in/become" (17). The lead word, "slaves," functions as more than a reference to the "Zong's" captive cargo; it also describes a mutual becoming that the law facilitates. The "to" placed at the head of the "to the order in" cluster pivots back onto the "slaves" to indicate that the "order in/destroyed" participates in the slave's captive state. Apprehending slaves as property," "provisions," or cargo enables future slaving voyages to continue under the protection of the laws of absolute necessity and the general average, in which the "loss" or murder of slaves accrues to "underwriters" only as a form of a financial calculation. The line break between "to the order in" and "destroyed," however, disrupts any pretense that this effect of the law is merely a vehicle for expressing the *a priori* or "natural" conditions of the enslaved. Instead, the line break requires the reader supply this connection by providing the "circumstance in/fact," or an interpretation that mimics the primary organ of legal case analysis. As evidenced by the lack of personal nouns in "Os," the cultural autonomy, the sociality, and the humanity of the slaves formed no part of the "circumstances" that would bear on the "facts" of the case. The reader cannot avoid being implicated, or "contaminated" in Philip's words, by the compulsion to "make meaning from apparently disparate elements," to "[piece] together the story that cannot be told" (198). Language and the law here share a common impulse towards a skeletal grammar that by necessity hides the destructive, antiblack impulses on which it is founded.

The contamination required by readings of “Zong! #9” is important to the latter half of the poem, or the idea that the “subject” is rendered from the “creature.” The species element common to both slave and non-slave evoked here makes visible one of the relations obscured by the language of the law. The subject is revealed as a legal category, codified through a systematic “order” that “destroys” any attempt at species-level identification through an insistence on sociological difference. We can reverse engineer the creation of the slave from creatures, to subjects, to property, where each transition requires a more fine-tuned repudiation of “the originary trace of the other within us” (Marriot, “Racial Fetishism” 218). Further, because the cluster “to the fellow in/negro” replaces the previous uses of “in” with the preposition “to,” the reader is guided back to the first word of the poem so that this cluster, “too,” enters into a protracted relation with the word “slaves.” Read as “slaves...to the fellow in/negro,” these uneven lines suggest that our legal and linguist structures bind non-slaves to the “negro” by virtue of a shared condition of humanity. The “slaves” hailed in this poem are captive and sailor and African and European alike. “Zong! #9” demonstrates that the language of the law severs its “subjects,” “fellows,” and “negroes” from anything like will, history, or identity and produces instead a set of categories from which these “circumstances” are to be determined anew within a legal “order.”

The Ancestral Bones of “Os”

As I have suggested thus far, the first section of *Zong!* introduces us to one process of ossification, where “to ossify” means “to become or cause something to become unable to change” (“Ossify”). The law is the formal mechanism through which the terms of gender, species, and subject are produced and stabilized, where “slave” becomes equated with “an

undynamic human state, fixed in time and space” (Spillers 224). More than 2 centuries after the “Zong” massacres, “the only reason...we have a record [of the “Zong”] is because of insurance – a record of property criteria” (Philip 191). In her research, Philip managed to obtain a copy of a sales ledger for the “Zong,” kept by sales agent Thomas Case in Jamaica. Instead of “proper names,” the slaves in the ledger are “reduced to the stark description of ‘negroe man,’ [sic] ‘negroe woman,’ or, more frequently, ‘ditto man,’ ‘ditto woman.’ There is one gloss to this description: ‘Negroe girl (meagre).’ There are many ‘meagre’ girls, no ‘meagre’ boys” (Philip 194). Even as the slaves were accorded a similar value (“30 pounds sterling”) for insurance purposes – a reduction reinforced by the “ditto” descriptor – there was still some larger motivation that compelled an additional evaluation of black girls. Black girls alone are made to bear an additional qualifier (meagre) that doubles accusations of deficiency, but of a particular kind. In a system that measures value through one’s productive and reproductive capacity, the black girls aboard the “Zong” are defined by their ability to sustain the institution of slavery through their child-bearing facilities. They have no inherent value prior to their transubstantiation into sellable goods, and the word “meagre” acts as a kind of promissory note, recording the possibility for an eventual return on one’s investment via sexual maturation and the production of offspring. When Philip visits a Ghanaian shrine during the writing of *Zong!*, one of elders comments that none of her ancestor could have been among those killed because she would not exist otherwise. Her daughter amends this comment by adding, “‘only if those who were thrown overboard left no offspring aboard the *Zong*’” (202). The point, of course, is not that it is possible Philip is related to the captives on aboard the “Zong,” but rather that this possibility, however slim, has been made *impossible* under the terms of the law’s symbolic activity, or what Hortense Spillers describes as “the dynamics of naming and valuation” (208).

There is no way to trace the genealogies of the “Zong” captives, murdered or not, because the law ossifies black women and girls as reproductive property with none of the legal benefits of motherhood that belong to non-black women. Their degradation is not the negation of inheritance, but the assurance, with respect to blackness, of an inheritance of racialized and racializing inscription that transfers to subsequent generations so that “it is as if neither time nor history, nor historiography and its topics, show movement, as the human subject is ‘murdered’ over and over again by the passions of a bloodless and anonymous archaism” (Spillers 208). Despite this multigenerational policing of naming and representation, Philip’s poetic method is adept at locating the pressure points of the law.

One of the lasting consequences of the slave trade is that the oceans became a watery grave for those lost in transit across the Middle Passage. With no material way to mark and mourn the dead, those left alive are haunted by an impossible desire for the bones of their loved ones - objects that can bear witness to their existence, their lives, and their deaths:

It is important...for bodies to be exhumed – in doing so you return dignity to the dead. What is the word for bringing bodies back from water? From a “liquid grave”?...I find words like resurrection and subaquatic, but not “exaqua.” Does this mean that unlike being interred, once you’re underwater there is no retrieval – that you can never be “exhumed” from water?...What marks the spot of subaquatic death? Families need proof, Koff says – they come looking for recognizable clothing and say, “I want the bones.” I, too, want the bones...Haunted by ‘generations of skulls and spirits,’ I want the bones. (Philip 201)

These bones differ from the skeletal grammar of the law that we’ve parsed thus far in their almost melancholic effect. They are the lost, nonlocalized, and never fully external objects that

resist psychic digestion. In the absence of these material bones, Philip is determined to turn melancholia into mourning by bringing the “the stories of these murdered Africans to light – above the surface of the water” (202). Against the static “bones” of the law, these stories become dynamic in ways that ensure “the past is ever present” (St. Augustine, qtd. in Philip 126).

To return to our previous analysis of “Zong! #2,” all 250 African names that “footnote” the “Os” section are of Swahili, Ibo, Zulu, Bantu, and Yoruban origin (among others) – a mere sampling of the “African Groups and Languages” that could be found among the “Zong’s” captives (185). A brief survey of the names memorialized in “Zong! #2,” for example, yields: “Wafor” – Igbo for “born on Afor market day”; “Yao” – Akan for “born on Thursday”; “Bolade” – Yoruban for “the coming of honor”; “Kibibi” – Swahili for “little lady”; and “Kamau” – Kenyan for “silent warrior” (Hodari). Like many of the other names, including “Eshe” (“life”) in “Zong! #1” and “Issa” (“salvation”) in “Zong! #3,” the names in “Zong! #2” are strategically chosen to return a sense of historicity and specificity to the many captives lost in the massacres. Some of the names evoke references to contemporary literary, musical, or political figures like Caribbean writer Kamau Braithwaite, and Nigerian drummer and social activist Babatunde Olatunji. Others, like “Wafor” and “Yao,” make the moment of becoming infinite against the death and stasis calcified in the law. Clearly, because there is no existing record of the captives’ names prior to those imposed upon them after the point of sale, these names are part of Philip’s “wish fulfillment,” a desire to counteract the redundancy that emerges as an effect of the law’s abstraction (Keizer, “First Reading”). Rather than maintain the proliferation of indistinguishable “negroes” found in the legal text of the “Zong” case, the names in “Os” work to disarticulate the relations between naming and possession.

In *The Post Card*, Derrida asserts that “any signified whose signifier cannot vary nor let itself be translated into another signifier without a loss of meaning points to a proper name effect” (312). Proper names always contain the trace of difference – an attempt to capture the singularity of an object or subject. But to be used and understood as a proper name, the name must be repeatable and so is also, paradoxically, non-singular. Proper names are always forms of violent inscription for Derrida, as they precede and announce the death and absence of its referent. As a “patronymic, which...situates those subjects that it covers in a particular place,” proper names communicate sets of social associations (like gender) that are made to stand-in for the absent referent as a form of symbolic and civil legibility (Spillers 214). In the case of *Zong!* and the “Zong,” this death and/or absence is repeatedly confirmed as the captives’ former African names are overwritten first by abstract legal designations, and then again by “new world” names granted through acts of purchase and ownership. The difference between the universal operations of proper names and their attachment to captive bodies however, is that for captive bodies, proper names actively labor to interrupt the “geopolitical and generational [denominations]” they would otherwise impart (Spillers 337). They are marks of possession and value that are grounded in foundational acts of violence. Nevertheless, Philip’s inclusion of the 250 African names is not an attempt to recuperate the violence of naming via a return to a mythical past or a reclamation of symbolic authorship. Instead, she allows herself to be possessed in a way that subverts any notion of ownership.

According to the front cover of the book, *Zong!* is written “as told to the author by Setaey Adamu Boateng.” Although an internet database search reveals no record of a Setaey Adamu Boateng, alive or dead, Philip acknowledges the “Ancestors” for “bestowing the responsibility of the work” on her and Setaey Adamu Boateng is more than likely one or several of these

Ancestors (xii). One of the objectives of Philip's "untelling" of the "Zong" is to allow those voices that have been otherwise silenced to emerge, even if that emergence is fragmented, incoherent, and contradictory. Doing so allows her to be "'absolved' of 'authorial intention'...so much so that even claiming to author the text through [her] own name is challenged by the way the text has shaped itself" (Philip 204). This refusal to claim authorship (ownership) is confirmed by her attribution of the text – "as told by" – to Setaey Adamu Boateng, whose "name" is a composite of three words: "Setaey" connotes fertility, "Adamu" is an incarnation of an African water god, and "Boateng" is Akan for "the one whose help puts people on an upright path" (Hodari). While these names are unable to reconstruct the genealogically-based sociality lost in the act of enslavement, they do mark the presence of another kind of being-with that agitates beneath and within the text itself. Instead of resolving these three meanings into a single being, and therefore a single reading or writing practice that determines the value of the text, these names inaugurate a discursive space where the act of naming is not coincident with a claiming of ownership. The relationships between Philip, Setaey, Adamu, Boateng, and the 250 others in "Os" challenge legal notions of the social by refusing to take the form of property relations. The medium for this re-modulation, the sea, is addressed by the epigraph that opens "Os": "The sea was not a mask" (Stevens, qtd. in Philip 2).

In his poem, "The Idea of Order at Key West," modernist American poet Wallace Stevens inquires into the relationships between nature and art, language and the law, and reality and the imagination. The poem's narrator and a friend are walking along the shore of the Floridian island of Key West when they encounter a young woman, singing "beyond the genius of the sea" even as "the sea/whatever self it had/became the self/that was her song/for she was the maker" (Wallace 136). Coincident with Stevens' long-standing interest in how human

imagination participates in the augmentation or even creation of the world, the narrator finds that the song not only assists in completing the singer's reality, but also bears upon his own perception of his environment. In this notoriously complex poem, the line, "the sea was not a mask," inhabits several layers of meaning. For example, it gestures towards nature's ability to exist beyond our interpretations and in the form of unintelligible utterance. The sea is not only idea or deception; it is also present and external to human spirit. This line is also part of the poem's extended exploration of art (poetry) and the source of inspiration or meaning.

Clearly, masks also have a large set of associations that manifest in African and African-American literature and culture in a variety of ways. Paul Laurence Dunbar critiques the mask as a form of violent passing while Frantz Fanon's *Black Skin, White Masks* explores the mask as a "hallucinatory whitening" of the unconscious. Many West African cultures also use masks in ritual ceremonies to invite possession by various spirits in a manner similar to Philip's attribution of the text to Setaey Adamu Boateng. Nevertheless, the kind of "masking" Philip points to with the use of Steven's epigraph must be considered with respect to the role the sea plays in the cultural memories of slavery: "Our entrance to the past is through memory – either oral or written. And water. In this case salt water. Sea water. And, as the ocean appears to be the same yet is constantly in motion, affected by tidal movements, so too this memory appears stationary yet is shifting always" (Philip 201). Much like the sea, memory can be fluid and dynamic – the antithesis of the "masking" or ossifying operations of the law that seek to obscure disorder and movement. With the massacres aboard the "Zong," the captain attempted to utilize the sea as a means of "preserving" the captives in their status as "negroes": "the some of negroes/over/board/the rest in lives/drowned/exist did not/in themselves/preservation" (Philip 6). The sea was considered a "sufficient/means" of "support," a watery entombment that assisted the

law in its attempts to suspend persons and things within a particular historical moment (Philip 31). As a point of access to and the material embodiment of cultural memory, however, the sea has a corrosive effect on the law's ossified categories of being, which is to say that the sea is one of the primary sites on which a struggle for what it means to be "human" took place.

An Ecology of Thirst

Philip is acutely aware that the law attempts to define absolutely the proper mode of being human, and this mode is largely emblemized by what Sylvia Wynter calls "Man," which is the preeminent invention of the (modern, European) West. Wynter's remarkable article *Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/ Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, its Overrepresentation – an Argument*, traces the overrepresentation of "Man" through the various epistemes of the West, arguing that as the prototype for the Human species, "Man" originated in Greco-Roman tradition and has since been idealized and idolized through Judeo-Christian philosophy, and the natural and human sciences. There are at least three epistemic shifts that occurred to allow the natural sciences to serve as the point of departure for all proclamations about what it means to be human. The first shift was from an identity matrix that defined "Man" as the true Christian against those "fallen" or degraded by the "sin of the flesh," to a Renaissance identity matrix based on degrees of rationality. The Renaissance humanists re-wrote the story of Genesis so as to secularize "Man" based on the belief that Adam, created in the image of God, possessed the capacity of reason in order to rule over the hierarchy of God's creation. "Man" went from Christian to political subject. Following this transition, Darwinian thinking effected a second shift away from the irrational/rational and towards evolutionary selection/dysselection as a measure of merit. The natural sciences provided the rationale for this "natural causation" by

elevating nature to a group of extra-human laws that dictate behavior through genetics (e.g. natural selection). This shift was closely followed by a third, overlapping shift towards nature-culture models of causation effected by the social movements of the 1960's.

However, adherence to the “natural causation” produced by the second shift remained the dominant method for the construction of “Man” as both biologically (evolutionarily) and economically superior to black and poor populations:

The correlated hypothesis here is that all our present struggles with respect to race, class, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, struggles over the environment, global warming, severe climate change, the sharply unequal distribution of the earth's resources...these are all differing facets of the central ethnoclass Man vs. Human struggle...This pattern is linked to the fact that...the Black population group, of all the multiple groups comprising the post-sixties social hierarchy, has once again come to be placed at the bottommost place of that hierarchy (Gans, 1999), with all incoming new nonwhite/non-Black groups...coming to claim “normal” North American identity by the putting of visible distance between themselves and the Black population group. (260-262)

The imagined category of “Man,” which we can also recognize in its various guises as the transcendental subject, the subject of law, or the subject of civil (and “civilized”) society, directs the form, scale, and scope of “our present struggles” by measuring the degree to which those involved in the struggles conform to its requirements. Its machinations are so thorough and pervasive that that they have an effect on regulatory policies, including those that determine the “struggles over the environment, global warming, severe climate change [and] the sharply unequal distribution of the earth's resources.” Wynter's assessment of how the “ethnoclass Man vs. Human struggle” is coordinated through environmental concerns prepares our approach to

understanding how the ecological relationships arranged by the slave ship are bound up with the “imposition of the subject’s [or “Man’s”] necessity” (Moten, “Blackness and Nothingness” 756).

The slave ship became known as a toxic environment, a place where “sickness, disease, and high mortality were the lot of both sailor and slave” (Rediker, *Slave Ship* 325).¹² Marcus Rediker notes in *The Slave Ship: A Human History* that water was a critical element of both the success of a transatlantic voyage, and the maintenance of discipline upon the ships themselves. Because provisions were often in short supply, their distribution was tightly controlled. The practice of placing a “barrel of water and a gun barrel, which was the designated drinking instrument” atop the main sail forced sailors to “climb all the way up to take a single drink” (Rediker, *Slave Ship* 206). The scarcity of potable water ensured that thirst and dehydration were standard consequences for many slaving expeditions.¹³ In addition, aboard the ships “the primary causes of high mortality were ‘fevers’...mosquito-borne, and...reproducible within the slave ship itself, as the insects bred in the stale bilge water that collected in the hull” (Rediker, *Slave Ship* 244). The rigorous collection of evidence for the high mortality rates of sailors involved in the trade had at least two principle effects. For one, this savvy strategy deflected attention from questions about the humanity of Africans and towards the suffering of British sailors. Those unconvinced of the slave’s human capacities could at least understand threats to their fellow citizens. On the other hand, emphasizing the “natural causations” of mortality among captives and crew alike located the slave firmly within the hierarchal measurements of “Man.” The success of this strategy is recognizable in the speed with which anti-abolitionists adopted abolitionist rhetoric about humanity, arguing that “the purchase of slaves was actually a

¹² In addition to hosting its own set of ecological relations onboard and within the holds, slave ships also altered the migratory and feeding patterns of a variety of sea life, including sharks and birds. Sharks would often trail after slave ships to take advantage of the refuse – which included the bodies of sailors and slaves – frequently thrown overboard. See Marcus Rediker’s “History from below the waterline: Sharks and the Atlantic slave trade.”

¹³ Both sailors and slaves experienced high rates of mortality that were linked to some form of dehydration. See Kiple and Higgins for a more detailed account of the correlation between dehydration and mortality rates.

humanitarian act” because it saved the captives from their uncivilized brethren and brought them closer to the archetype of the human represented by European subjects (Rediker, *Slave Ship* 328).

In many ways, Wynter’s correlation between the overrepresentation of “Man” and our current environmental crises seems incommensurate with recent attempts in the fields of ecology to de-center the human within webs of object-environment interactions. Environmental historian Donald Worster, for example, argues that contemporary ecology rejects the idea of environmental homeostasis and self-regulation in order to refashion itself as an “ecology of chaos” (162). The human element in this schema is relegated to one (albeit very large, very forceful) change-inducing perturbation among many. The problem, it seems, is that our narcissistic self-valuation has led to a general disavowal or ignorance of how thoroughly embedded we are in environmental assemblages. Ecological or new materialist theories that proceed along this line of thought rely on the fantasy that a shared dependence on natural resources, or even the recognition of such dependence, will be sufficient to create ethical orientations towards human and nonhuman others.¹⁴ And yet, the massacres aboard the “Zong” suggest that recognitions of these kind may also result in an intensification of violence.

¹⁴ A close relative of this fantasy involves the democratization of the subject, and with it the extension of those capacities (i.e. response, agency, consciousness) that were once in the subject’s singular purview to a wider variety of objects. Jane Bennett’s *Vibrant Matter* and William Connolly’s *The Fragility of Things* are among those offerings in contemporary ecology that push for an ethics based on a shared and/or widely distributed network of relations in which “things” lose their impotency and monstrosity, but also their autonomy and durability. Bennett’s “distributive agency” rallies around “human-nonhuman working groups” as the productive site for a material agency that does not uphold the “onto-theological boundaries” between matter/life, organic/inorganic, human/animal, etc (xv-xvii). Connolly concentrates on how neoliberal practices intensify the fragility of earth’s economic, social, natural, and political systems to such a degree that they are unable to self-regulate. His call to “instill a vibrant pluralist spirituality into democratic machines that have lost too much of their vitality” is a plea to rescue the state from political quietism (201). While I agree that our limitation of liveliness and vibrancy to a narrow range of objects has resulted in careless and cruel behaviors, I have serious doubts that an injection of vibrancy or vitality into stubborn systems of antiblackness and antiblack racism will have any sort of lasting effect. As I am arguing in this dissertation, the forces of antiblackness are extraordinarily adept at absorbing and re-purposing acts and discourses that operate at the level of civil society and through networks of human, social relationality. See chapter 4 of this dissertation for a more thorough account of the new materialisms.

Slave ships thrived on an ecology of thirst—a set of relations in which humanity is measured through one’s relationship to water. Within these terms, water forms the threshold between slave and non-slave, or between the sailor-as-human and the slave-as-not, as the slave’s impossibility of relating to water as “sustenance” bars her from the status of the human. That is, the slaves remained thirsty even with an ample supply of water on hand. Alexander G. Weheliye cites Wynter to underscore how racialization intervenes in biochemical processes to reproduce and reinforce antiblack ideologies at the level of the body: “it is ‘only through the mediation of the organism’s experience of what feels good to the organism and what feels bad to it...’ that a repertoire of behaviors, which ensure the continued existence of the species, develops” (26). To be sure, water, and more importantly, one’s access and relationship to it, retains a singular place in any ecological configuration. Most of the organisms classified biologically as “living” require water to facilitate nutrient transfer (e.g. plants and bacteria) and maintain basic organ functions (e.g. humans and nonhuman animals). The need for water manifests in the various physical symptoms of thirst, which prompt organisms to seek out and ingest liquids. Thirst is thus a fundamental component of an organism’s regulatory systems. Despite the widespread distribution of thirst as a marker and metric of life, the slaves’ thirst, and therefore their “experiences” of water, were mediated by the need to shore up the boundaries of the “human.”

In “Zong! #1” the words “want of water,” “one day,” and “good” are stretched graphically and phonically across the page to form clusters that allow groups of words and letters to relate to others in new ways. The literal scattering of the word “want” throughout the letters that comprise the word “water” makes it impossible to separate need from its object because the object itself – water – never fully coalesces. Rather, its grammatical coherence is interrupted by interference patterns of space that Timothy Morton, following Percy Shelley, likens to a

vibration or attunement to other entities. In these new forms of attunement, we find that that the letters of “water” actually create the space for “want” and vice-versa, even as they exceed the syllabic limits of the words themselves. “Want of water” becomes more than lack; it becomes a method of translation that reveals how the literal and figurative legibility of objects depends on several withdrawn entities. As these entities emerge – among them the provocative “ant,” “god,” and “waste” – they enter into modes of relationality with the exploded phrase “want of water” in ways that unsettle the restriction of thirst to slaves.

Philip’s critical and methodological deconstruction suggests, *pace* Morton, that “meaningfulness depends upon... entities that are excluded from the system, yet included by being excluded, thus undermining the system’s coherence” (“Realist Magic” 214). The unlocking of “water” and “want” points to what must be excluded from the signifying system of the Middle Passage (the general capacity for thirst) for the captain to perceive the death of slaves from dehydration as “natural.” Hartman’s analysis of how the “recognition of humanity” in the slave paradoxically guaranteed the maintenance of slavery is appropriate here: “It was often the case that benevolent correctives and declarations of slave humanity intensified the brutal exercise of power upon the captive body rather than ameliorating the chattel condition” (*Scenes* 5). The thirst of the slave was a constant and anxious reminder of what she shared with captain and crew, a kind of physiological “declaration” of her humanity. By creating an ecology of thirst – a space in which one’s ability to compensate for dehydration (through the “discipline” and order established on the ship by the rationing of water) measures one’s evolutionary distance from “natural causation” – the slave’s impossibility of attaining the status of “Man” was secured. Indeed, as “Zong! #16” makes clear, “should [the captain] have/found being/sufficient,” or “found the justify/for exist,” there may have been no need to hinge “the insurance of water” on

“the terms of exist” (Philip 27-28). An ecology of thirst supports the imposition of “Man’s” necessity by determining the mere fact of “being” as insufficient. To be “human,” or in Wynter’s terms, to be “Man,” requires that one be more than “the subject in property” and thirst was a daily reminder of the slave’s lack in that regard.

Neither the rainfall nor the massacre of the slaves prevented rampant dehydration from occurring among the remaining captives. The middle section of “Zong! #5” interrupts the passage of time in a way that makes it impossible to ascertain how long the slaves had gone without sufficient water: “of/days/of/sour water/enemies &/want/of/died/(seven out of seventeen)/of/good/(the more of)/of/(eighteen instead of six)/dead/of rains/(eleven days)/of/weeks/(thirty not three)/of/water/day one.../for sustenance/water/day/one.../one day’s/water/day/one.../sour/water/day/one.../three butts good/of voyage/(a month’s)” (10-11). The quantities scattered throughout this section alternatively measure the dead – “(eighteen instead of six)/dead,” the duration of rainfall – “(thirty not three)/of/water,” or an unknown element – “(seven out of seventeen)/of.” The apparent randomness of the numbers inhibits any reader reactions determined solely by the scale of the horrors suffered on the “Zong.” Abolitionist rhetoric often leveraged the sheer numbers of slaves murdered for financial compensation, perhaps because the murder of one slave would prove insufficient to rouse European sympathies. By focusing on one particular number – 150 – the events aboard the “Zong” were confined to a specific temporal moment that remained firmly within the abolitionist timeline, a timeline that was resolved by the abolition of the trade itself. “Zong! #5” destabilizes this figure by demonstrating the immeasurability of the captives’ misery. Removing this suffering from the historical time of abolitionist narrative situates it instead within ontological time, or “the time of time itself, the time by which the Slave’s dramatic clock is set” (Wilderson,

Red, White & Black 339). The slave’s non-linear, ontological time enables the historical time of the non-slave to materialize by providing an illusion of stasis.¹⁵ In fact, the slaves’ thirst appears to show no historical movement whatsoever:

	of	
		water
for sustenance		<i>day one...</i>
		water
<i>one...</i>		<i>day</i>
one day’s		
		water
<i>one...</i>		<i>day</i>
sour		
		water
<i>one...</i>		<i>day</i>
three butts good		
	of voyage (a month’s)	

Thandiwe Lukman Sabah Liu Sikumbuzo

(Philip 11)

¹⁵ In *Red, White & Black: Cinema and the Structure of US Antagonisms*, Frank Wilderson argues that a fundamental antagonism between the slave and the human generates all the social, historical, and political coordinates of modernity: “If, as an ontological position, that is, as a grammar of suffering, the Slave is not a laborer but an anti-human, a position against which Humanity establishes, maintains, and renews its coherence, its corporeal integrity; the Slave is, to borrow from [Orlando] Patterson, generally dishonored, perpetually open to gratuitous violence, and void of kinship structure, that is, having no relations that need be recognized, a being outside of relationality, then our analysis cannot be approached through the rubric of gains or reversals in struggles with the state and civil society, not unless and until the interlocutor first explains how the Slave is of the world” (11). The slave’s “ontological time” is thus also the “epistemological time of modernity itself” (Wilderson, *Red, White & Black* 340). Wilderson’s use of the term, while advanced from within a different framework, is somewhat structurally similar to Gilles Deleuze’s notion of time as a non-linear, non-teleological dynamic between the virtual and the actual, where the virtual corresponds loosely to the ontological and the actual to the historical. Objects that are present to and in history are actualizations or materializations of the virtual. However, whereas Deleuze would argue that all objects are caught in this dynamic, albeit to varying degrees and durations, Wilderson is suggesting that the slave’s ontological time has become the medium of actualization. In this sense, the modifier “ontology” refers more closely to a political ontology as opposed to a broader theorization of matter and its being. Certainly, Wilderson’s political ontology also has fascinating implications for how the slave might condition all modern *enunciations* about matter and being, so that their discursive constructions are epiphenomena of the dynamics between the slave and the human.

The consistent italicization of “*day one...*” fixes the fragment as a signifying whole that reaches through the ellipses to span the line breaks. If the slaves’ thirst was indeed simply the consequence of the resource scarcity that flourished on slave ships, then a re-distribution of resources should have attenuated the suffering of the enslaved. And yet, as “Zong! #5” demonstrates, even gaining access to water repeatedly returns the slave to “day one” of her journey. If the timeline of the non-slave, or of the sailor and the abolitionist, can be measured by the elimination of thirst or the abolition of slavery, then the slave, defined through her endless thirst, will always remain a slave. This subordination of historical time to ontological time is mirrored in the epigraph from St. Augustine that opens the “Sal” section of *Zong!*: “There was no then” (qtd. in Philip 58). If the slave’s thirst does not occupy a specific or immediate moment, a “then,” it may therefore occupy all moments simultaneously. This racialized experience of water not only became reasonable grounds for treating the slaves as less-than-human (e.g. the massacres), but also protected the value created by that treatment (e.g. the laws of the general average and absolute necessity). It is hardly surprising that in middle of its putative “water crisis,” Detroit began soliciting proposals for the large-scale privatization of its water and sewer systems. An ecology of thirst guarantees that the ability to control the relationship to water, and moreover to distill value from that relationship, remains one of the hallmarks of “Man.” *Zong!*’s second section expands on the effects of infinite thirst to consider how they might propose new ways of being “human.”

“Sal”

The poems of “Sal” (Latin for “salt”) position salt as the symbolic demand of the slave, but one with the potential to pose new challenges to the primary formations of “Man.” The

ecology of thirst functioned in part by consistently and relentlessly reducing the slave to salt.¹⁶ When the issue of dehydration or thirst arises during a sea voyage, it is almost always attributed to a lack of potable drinking water. But it is also true that salt is a definitive factor in dehydration. Salt allows the body to retain enough fluids to maintain basic body functions. When severe sweating or diarrhea occurs in suffocating and toxic conditions, as in the holds of slave ships, bodies lose both water and sodium, making it even more difficult to regulate one's electrolyte balance. If not remedied quickly enough, these losses may lead to hypernatremic dehydration, a condition that is marked by an excess of sodium ("Hypernatremia"). This kind of dehydration is not usually the result of increased salt intake (e.g. the ingestion of sea water), but is instead created through consistent water loss that leaves the body unable to manage its usual sodium levels. And it is this excess of salt that creates the need for water. The condition of absolute thirst, however, meant that the slaves' relationship to water surpassed biological need and took on the character of a demand. Or, more precisely, of a drive that was inscribed on the body as a demand, a "corporeal symptom that indicates that the subject's desire has been closed down, and replaced by a somatic formation" (Shepherdson 204).¹⁷ What does it mean to

¹⁶ Salt has a long history as metaphor, myth, and material in the corpus of African American and African diaspora literatures. Toni Cade Bambara's novel *The Salt Eaters* is arguably the best-known creative work to consolidate the many dimensions of salt as it depicts Velma Henry's journey to spiritual healing. The title alludes to the myth of the "flying African," who loses her ability to return to Africa after the ingestion of salt in the Americas. In both the novel and *Zong!*, salt is a poison and an anecdote, a "doubled linguistic sign of adversity *and* survival" (Gadsby 3). Meredith Gadsby's investigations into "sucking salt" as metaphor and physical action insightfully positions it as "a strategy for preparing oneself for impending hardship, often in an environment marked by constant upheaval, transition, and economic impossibility. It is a survival skill passed on from generation to generation of Caribbean women" (3).

¹⁷ Writing in response to debates over the biological and cultural foundations of psychoanalysis, Charles Shepherdson argues for a return to Lacan's notion of the drive as a somatic demand, or "that material dimension of embodiment that goes beyond organic life, but yet cannot be grasped at the level of speech and intersubjectivity (203). In his reading, the body is the interface between the biological and the cultural, where drives are always bound to parts of the body because our symbolic networks are inscribed on and through the body itself. Sylvia Wynter's notion of "sociogenetics" reaches similar conclusions through the projects of racialization, noting that antiblack ideologies also operate through the manipulation of bodily experience (See "Towards the Sociogenic Principle: Fanon, Identity, the Puzzle of Conscious Experience, and What It Is Like to Be 'Black'" for more on "sociogenetics"). Both Shepherdson and Wynter would agree that this somatic "demand" is not made only at the level of intersubjective speech, insofar as "demand" often emerges in psychoanalysis or critical race studies as

experience one's body, and one's "mode of being human," as a demand? To be oriented always towards something that can bring no relief? This convergence of the supposedly natural (i.e. the body) and the symbolic (i.e. the sociocultural position of the slave) is concentrated in salt, which opens the slave to new forms of interaction that are contained neither by the natural nor the symbolic. Imprints of the slave's existence as salt remain in distributed form, scattered across the seas and beyond the confines of "Man."

The poems of "Sal" (Latin for "salt") introduce an ecological possibility into this desire by positioning salt as the "bones" of the sea, and of the slave's thirst. "Sal" opens on a mostly empty page that contains two lines: "water parts/the *oba* sobs" (59). In the context of the section's title, "water parts" points simultaneously to salt as the "parts" of (sea) water, and the content of the *oba*'s tearful grief. This reference to the Yoruban king, or "oba," quickly establishes a connection between the salt of the seas, the violence of slavery, and the ancestral homeland of some of the enslaved. That this connection is the only one to materialize in the otherwise empty space of the page gives the effect that it has floated to the surface of the undifferentiated mass of nothing surrounding it. Read as either "water parts/the *oba* sobs" or "the *oba* sobs/water parts," there are at least three components to the story "exaquated" here. In the first reading, the king's grief is a reaction to, or an effect of, salt, and in the second, it is the cause. The close grouping of these two lines impedes any sort of clean, linear narrative from forming and with it, a determination of which reading is temporally proper. The third reading of "water parts/the *oba* sobs" involves the violent image of water parting – opening – by virtue of a ship's penetrating movements. By the nineteenth century, most hulls of open-sea slaving vessels

primarily a demand for recognition from the Other or the State. As the ecology of thirst suggests, this demand is always for something that, even when given, cannot fundamentally alter the condition of the slave. It instead represents something like an impasse, or a call for a radical reformulation of all our concepts of "nature," "culture," and "race."

were copper-sheathed to protect the wood from shipworms and other boring mollusks (Rediker, *Slave Ship* 71). “Armored” thusly, slave ships literally cut into the water with a wounding motion that summons histories of rape and murder – more than ample cause for the “sobs” of the “*oba*.” Taken together, our three interpretations leave us with the insistence of salt’s unquestionable imbrication with the horrific events that transpired before, during, and after the slave trade.

If salt is the cause and effect of an ecology of thirst, then *Zong!* suggests that evidence of the slave’s existence remains in distributed form, scattered as salt across the seas. As the “bone” of water, (sea) salt is produced through a process of dehydration that affects slaves in so similar a manner, they find themselves contributing to the saline content of the oceans. The sea became a “cradle” for the perpetually thirsty: “months/for us/of water/for *os*/in bone/for bone a deep/wa/ter water/deep bo/ne son/g to cradle” (68). “Os” is a close homophone for “us,” and when read aloud, these lines can be heard as “months/for os [bone]/of water/for us/in bone.” There is both water and salt (bone of water) in the bones of the slave and the casting of slaves overboard was, in effect, a salting or “boning” of the seas: “on the/ro/se/on/bo/ne/ne/groes...here we/re negroes/like ants/sow the sea/is where/we be/seed the seas/with es &/oh & es/*os*” (69). In this section of the poem, the words “bone” and “negroes” are stacked in a manner so the syllables of both words are indistinguishable from one another. There is, literally, “bone” in “negroes” and “negroes” in “bone.” The slaves “seed” and “sow the seas” with their salt-bones in a reproductive gesture which, unlike other forms of generational inheritance, cannot be fully contained by the reach of the law. The water-bone-negroes cluster repeats throughout “Sal,” mimicking the triangulation of sea, slavery, and Africa that occurs through salt in the very first stanza of this section. Certainly, the mourning of the *oba* for salt – “water parts/the *oba* sobs” –

is a mourning for those lost *at sea*. At the same time, salt is also the medium for cultural memory – “the *oba* sobs/water parts” – which ensures that the slaves are not lost *to* the seas.

Curiously, the slaves also seemed to perform the same regulatory function for sailors as salt does for living organisms. Slave ships might have been defined by a shared resource scarcity, but the sailors had to insure themselves against a too-long, and therefore too slave-like, thirst: “you must hear me/I say/*cum grano/salis*/with a grain of/salt there was in/surance again/st sun” (Philip 70). The slaves, like salt, were a constant reminder of the importance of water, and in particular, of water’s regulation. For the sailors, the slaves’ reduction to salt was a form of insurance against the dehydration, or against “the sun,” that defined the slaves’ material conditions. Considering that the ability to control and regulate water became the defining boundary between sailor and slave, it is tempting to interpret the slaves’ existence as salt as the unintended and wholly subversive consequence of an ecology of thirst. Like the return of the repressed, the slaves’ symbolic demand forever links the sailor to the slave in a perverse network where the slave-as-salt is necessary for the sailors’ continued survival. Still, this reading would only be tenable if we underestimate how the ecology of thirst extends, rather than disarticulates, the conditions of captivity: “*le mort le/mort le p tit mort*/scent of mortality/she/falls/*ifàifàifà*/falling/to/ port/over/ &/over” (Philip 62). The death of the slave, her “*mort*,” brings a little death, a “*le p tit mort*” or orgasmic release, to the sailors, reminding the reader that the sailors’ libidinal economy is sutured by the slaves’ demand.

As a mode of captivity, the ecology of thirst generates salt as both its cause and effect. Following the first stanza of “Sal,” the reader confronts the repetition of the Yoruba word for “divination”—“*ifà*”—disseminated across the page: “there is/creed there is/fate there is/oh/oh oracle/there are/oh oh/ashes/over/*ifà/ifà/ifà* i/fa/fa/fa/fall/ing over/&/over the crew/touching

there/is fate” (Philip 60). While divination primarily refers to the search for knowledge of the future (an “oracle”), once translated into English, it also refers to a search for water. “To divine” or “dowse” is the practice of locating water sources by supernatural insight. This doubled and doubling meaning of “ifà” not only binds the fate of the captives to thirst, but also transforms it into a divine act, a search for futures and fates that confirms the ecology of thirst as an “always an unsettled condition, open to an outside about which it will not know anything and about which it cannot stop thinking, a nervous system always in pursuit of the fugitive movement it cannot afford to lose and cannot live without, *if it is to go on existing in and as a mode of capturing*” (italics mine; Sexton, “The Social Life” 9). To function as a “mode of capturing,” captivity can never be a finished project. By creating its conditions of possibility, a “nervous system always in pursuit of [a] fugitive movement,” or what we might otherwise call a somatic demand, captivity provides the very openings through which it ensures its own field of operations. We can trace a similar re-envisioning of the relations between slaves and natural elements in the section that follows “Sal.”

“Ventus”

The third section of *Zong!*, entitled “Ventus” or “wind,” charts the movement of the “Zong” from the coast of Africa, to its arrival in Jamaica, and to its return to Liverpool. The poem opens on what appears to be a celebration held on the ship: “sh h/loud did nt the/bell ring oh/oh my/ass/hot/apes/all sing/sing/they sang le/sang el/song le/song sing/again/...dance/dance they sing my/ass/lips gape oh/oh sad tune/sing again/they groan/not so loud” (79). The tolling of the ship’s bell sounds the time of departure, as the slaves sing a “sad tune,” punctuated by their groans and their blood (“sang”). One of the most dominant narrative voices that surfaces here is

that of a white, male sailor, who, Philip argues, is an effect of our predetermined or “preselected language.” Although she would not have “chosen” this particular voice, she determines that “by refusing the risk of allowing ourselves to be absolved of authorial intention, we escape the understanding that we are least one and the Other. And the Other. And the Other” (Philip 205). This multiplicity of being convenes on the pages of this section, as the voices of both slaver and slave emerge to “un-tell” the official description of the “Zong’s” voyage.

Wind plays a pivotal role not only in the accounts of the sailors and slaves, but also in the visual and linguistic arrangement of the poems. On each page of “Ventus,” the words, fragments, and phrases are bent into serpentine shapes that recall the movement of the wind across the surface of the ocean. Waves of words and letters cascade down several of the pages while other are blown to the very edges. The arrangement of the poems, for Philip, “[suggested] something about the relational – every word or word cluster is seeking a space directly above within which to fit itself and in so doing falls into relation with others either above, or below, or laterally” (Philip 203). In addition to sculpting the aesthetic form of these fragments, the wind also affects how we understand the relations between them by permitting previously disparate or unified elements to intermingle; connections that would have been otherwise shrouded by the legal text of the case.

In the eighteenth century, the wind was the principle source of propulsion for ocean-going vessels; it was responsible for bringing the sailors closer to their loved ones, and the slaves closer to their point of sale in the new world. The wind that filled the sails of the “Zong” was thus the same that enlivened the bills of sale: “we seal/the deal/the sale/of/negroes/on/board/the/sail/slap slap in/the wind/some/come from/the fens/others/from the/dales/and/the/far off” (85-86). The sale/sail homophone prominent in this section also

establishes an immediate relation between the development of nautical technology and the demands of the slave trade, with innovation driven by the slave's fungibility. The winds also share with the sailors some common points of origin – the dales, the fens, the north – which become evident as our sailor-narrator reminisces about home: “i/come/from/the north/the/dales/land/of mist” (80). There is a feeling of collaboration between sailors and wind, particularly as the ship's passage up an African river conjures an image of rape: “we/sailed/up/the/cunt/of/Africa/to/found/an/out/caste/race” (97). Linked to the “water parts” verse in “Sal,” the “Zong's” penetration into the continent is one of the ongoing episodes in the construction of Africans as the “out/caste” race *par excellence*, a moment of genesis saturated by the violence of the prerogatives (over life, value, thought) the slavers claim for themselves. The same wind that abets the destruction of the slave's social fabric also delivers the sailors back to theirs: “ru/th cl/air ro/se/ev/e e/va/cla/ra sa/ra/co/ry etc/all/wait/& wait/and/wait/&wait/for/a/ship/to/bring/ their/men/to/them (95). Listed as the “women who wait” in the ship's fictionalized manifest, these women are both expectant and expecting (Philip 186). The very same voyage that forecloses the possibilities of kinship for the slaves guarantees the maintenance of white lineages. When Africa is raped, Europe produces heirs. It is not coincidental that so many of the “women who wait” share their names with female figures from origin stories of Western mythology – Circe, Eve, Ruth, Mary.

A wide range of oppressive tactics has been deployed in the name of “Man” to subordinate other modes of being human. Staged across “Ventus” as an epic play, these tactics are presented as a series of scenes that occur during the voyage of the “Zong”: “first/act third scene/circe argues with eve/about eden/on the eve/of murder/rome mourns/her/misfortune” (Philip 83-84). The Christian tale of creation joins forces with Greek mythology to turn Circe

and Eve into allies in the “[founding of]/a/city/on/death/on/murder” (84). As Wynter demonstrates, the historical confrontation between Orthodox Christianity and Greco-Roman thought unfolded in the Copernican Revolution, a confrontation that resulted in “the return by the [Medieval] humanists to Greco-Roman thought” to locate “an alternative model on which to reinvent the matrix optimally Redeemed-in-the-Spirit Self of the Christian, the ‘subject of the church,’ as that of the Rational Self of Man as political subject of the state” (“Unsettling” 277). The slave trade re-ignites this revolution by offering the degradation of the slave as fertile ground for the continual re-birth of “Man.”

Circe and Eve are also icons of a popular stereotype about the female gender – temptresses responsible for leading “Man” astray: “we sail the sun s/orb to/lead us if/we can only gain/land circe/the seer/pants/waits/tempts with/oracles/a trail of feet/in the sand/leads/to the water” (89). Their appearance from within the histories that accumulate on the “Zong” alludes to the detrimental properties of the violence required from those who labor in the trade. Circe in particular threatens to transform the sailors into animals, lessening the sociogenic distance between them and their slaves: “circe/waits/lip s/hang/make/fun/of/eros/of/us/&ius/makes/pigs/of/us” (93). The difference that makes a difference for the sailors is that the slaves have no recourse to reverse this transformation. As one of the “women who wait,” Circe restores the sailors to their position as the “rational self of man as political subject of the state” through her reproductive capacities” (Wynter, “Unsettling” 89). Her role within the Greco-Roman narrative that authorizes the white sailors as “Man” extends this authorization to her progeny, but not to that of the slaves. The penultimate section of *Zong!* further sketches the possibilities for alternative ecological relations that are not grounded in the various hierarchies of “Man.”

“Ferrum”

The “Ferrum,” or “iron,” section gives in to the fragmentation that increases throughout *Zong!* to such a degree that the reader must remain at the level of the syllable or word. Yoruba, Spanish, Latin, English, Shona, and French words congregate in dense clusters, with fragments sometimes split between two or three languages. For Philip, the poems in “Ferrum” are unmistakably auditory: “There are times in...*Ferrum*, when I feel as if I am writing code and, oddly enough, for the very first time since writing chose me, I feel that I *do* have a language – this language of grunt and groan, of moan and stutter – this language of pure sound fragmented and broken by history” (205). As the syllables of each fragment drop off and sometimes re-connect in and with another cluster, this opening onto a frenzy of “pure utterance” produces a group of sounds that refuse immediate inscription into a grammar that would otherwise assign them significance based on preexisting standards of order and meaning. There is no way to attribute the text’s many phrases and sounds to a single source. No unified body of voices emerges and in fact, Philip is interested in both words and voices “not working together” to resist “that order and desire or impulse to meaning” (193). As mentioned previously, part of this “not working together” disallows the production of (slave) labor as value, a value that owners distilled from the flesh of slaves by application of brute and gratuitous force. Here, the “not working together” also gestures to how we might understand the “submarine sociality” echoing beneath the seas and as the “sub” – text of the *Zong!*

The *Zong!* is densely populated, but does not represent a community, insofar as “community” denotes sets of relations premised on the *value* of “working together.” In fact, the poems of *Zong!* demonstrate the kinds of relations that can take shape when community formation is impossible by considering attachments to things that exceed the limits of

anthropocentric definitions of the social. True, the transatlantic slave trade catalyzed the formation of “anomalous intimacies,” where “Atlantic commodification meant not only exclusion from that which was recognizable as community, but also immersion in a collective whose most distinguishing feature was its unnatural constitution” (Smallwood 101). The sheer plurality of language and cultural groups represented by the footnoted names in “Os” testifies to the singular social composition of the cargo holds, where captives from different regions were brought together by violence and held in place by (the threat of) death. Fred Moten summons the hold as the fugitive place from which one can imagine the intramural. Meaning “between the walls,” the intramural seems aptly represented here as suspended, “in the break,” afloat and unmappable. It is a place to experiment with new, black modes of being, a place where the “walls” incubate the lawless freedom of imagination before it is subsumed under the tyranny of Kantian understanding. The hold is thus a metaphorical and literal rendering of the submarine sociality palpable throughout *Zong!* – black communion occurs despite and by way of its enclosure.

Nonetheless, *Zong!* pushes this recalibration of the social further to consider the slave ship as a site with an ecology of its own beyond its predominant understanding as a temporary space of transit. Many contemporary investigations into what might be called the ecologies of slavery are concerned with what happens once the ships arrive at their destinations. But what we lose in this approach is the fact that for many of the captives, the Middle Passage was and is also a destination, an “arrivance without arrival” (Moten, “Blackness and Nothingness” 743). In considering the sea as a medium for being, Philip muses about the “idea of sound never ceasing within water...since water is a much more ‘sound-efficient’ medium than air” (203). Her inquiry into whether “the sounds of those murdered Africans continue to resound and echo underwater”

opens onto other questions about how the sea might facilitate other kinds of transmissions or relations, and not simply to humans alone (203). What would it mean, for example, to consider, the “bone beds of the sea” as a material and not merely metaphoric voice in the social ecology of the Middle Passage (Philip 203)? This idea of the hold, of the slave ship, as an “unmappable” ecology (what Moten would call thinking from “no standpoint”) frustrates notions of ecology that often require definable terrain for legibility (“Blackness and Nothingness” 738). What’s more, the entities that are released through the auditory medium of the slaves’ affect – their joy, their pain, their misery, and their rage – enter into new relations that resist the regulatory efforts of the sciences of “Man.”

All along the pages of “Ferrum,” cats, rats, doves, pig, ape, corn, hay, rock, iron and other animals, vegetables, and minerals join slave and sailor in a re-configuration of ecological space and time. The “Zong” represents one component of a long and winding, or even “windy,” path that led to our current “biocentric conception of the human” (Wynter, “Unsettling” 325). The second Copernican Revolution instigated by Darwin prompted human-being to be measured along an evolutionary scale dictated by the precepts of natural selection. Africans, while no longer degraded by sin, were instead considered “fallen” by virtue of their evolutionary “dysselection,” the evidence of which lay in their supposed physiological, mental, and social resemblances to the apes. The colonial and racist orders of nature conspired to confirm “it was now not only the peoples of the Black ex-slave Diaspora, but all the peoples of Black Africa who would be also compelled to confront the inescapable fact...that, as put succinctly by Frantz Fanon, ‘wherever he[*she*] goes in the world, the Negro remains a Negro’ (Fanon 1967)—and, as such, made to reoccupy the signifying place of medieval/Latin-Christian Europe’s fallen, degraded, and thereby nonmoving Earth” (Wynter, “Unsettling” 319). “Ferrum” undoes that

“signifying place” as objects that were once hidden by other objects, desires, or actions – the ant in want, the asp in grasp, the peat in repeat – break free to add their voices to the general cacophony.

I also hear in Wynter’s last quotation that the earth has been blackened – been forced into an association with all that blackness has come to signify (transgression, degradation, stasis) – in order to maintain our current master code that ranks subjects by their degree of evolutionary merit. The farther one is from the earth, the farther one is also from blackness. The naturalization of the color line replaced the previous flesh/Spirit, irrational/rational gradients that once functioned as the organizing principles for social order, so that objects and beings are compelled by the forces of “natural causation,” rather than the sociogenic principles so adroitly identified by Fanon. This contemporary description of the human allows “Man” to attribute the effects of regulation and discipline to the superhuman forces of “nature” (e.g. the death of slaves from dehydration occurs through “natural causes”), thereby allowing him to act as if antiblackness has nothing to do with the dire ecological circumstances we find ourselves in. Nevertheless, like the unintended consequences of the slave’s thirst, the “blackening” of the earth in support of “Man’s” evolutionary perfection also produces a strange intimacy with those organic and inorganic entities rejected as natural others. Blackness, in other words, becomes a connecting medium for ecological relationality.

Timothy Morton’s concept of the “mesh” as infinite and unthinkable captures the dynamics of a black or blackened ecology that emphasizes coexistence without denying the unevenness or violence that is its condition of possibility. “Mesh” refers simultaneously to “the holes in a network, and the threading between them. It suggests both hardness and delicacy...It has antecedents in mask and mass, suggesting both density and deception. By extension, ‘mesh’

can mean ‘a complex situation or series of events in which a person is entangled; a concatenation of constraining or restricting forces or circumstances; a snare’” (Morton, “Thinking Ecology” 268-269). In this mesh, iron/ferrum as “mostly the by-product of bacterial metabolism,” becomes a metaphor for how the tools of violence – chains, collars, cuffs – depend as much on the processes of mean organisms as they do on “Man’s” ability to wield them (Morton, “Ecological Thought” 28). The black ecology of “Ferrum” helps us to decipher “Zong! #8:”

the good of overboard

justified a throwing

of property

fellow

creatures

become

our portion

of

mortality

provision

a bad market

negroes

want

for dying

(Philip 16)

We can read the commodification of the sailor's "fellow creatures" as another subordination of the common species element. This reduction to property prepares or "provisions" the ship's owners for the possibility of "a bad market," meaning that even if they are unable to profit from the sale of the slaves, the mystification of species-coexistence safeguards their status as "Man." Further, if we understand "creature" as a broad designation for anything that is "our portion of mortality" and/or "provision for dying," then the violence of slavery is what enables the legibility of the mesh. The willed blindness to other "modes of being" loses some of its traction when it is held too tightly by the forces of captivity.

The story of the "Zong" is indeed, in Toni Morrison's words, not one "to pass on" (324). The absolute violence of slavery makes and unmakes the slave beyond legal emancipation and outside of historical time. Philip's collection of poems is a work of mourning for a loss, for losses, that can only be acknowledged in their opacity and through a certain exhaustion of thought and language. *Zong!* is also a story about how ecological thinking participates in the creation of those losses, despite its abilities to also absorb those same losses in a network of relations. Frank B. Wilderson III's appraisal of the limitations of relational theories is instructive here:

...theories (i.e. Marxism, feminism, and film theory) which unpack the hypostasized "form" that value takes, as it masks both its differential and social relations, experience the humiliation of their explanatory power when confronted with the Black. For the Black has no social relation(s) to be either masked or unmasked – not, that it, in the structural sense. Social relations depends on various pretenses to the contrary; therefore, what gets masked is the matrix of violence that makes Black relationality an oxymoron. To relate,

socially, one must enter a social drama's mis-en-scene with spatial and temporal coherence – in other words, with Human capacity. (*Red, White & Black* 251)

The liberal left's contemporary push to "ecologize" our social, cultural, political, and "natural" relations join Wilderson's list of theories that seek to "unpack the hypostasized 'form' that value takes." Ecology initially appears as an invitation to democratize our understanding of value through the creation of a community or sociality based on interdependence. But seen from its vantage point within the arsenal of "Man's" supporting sciences, ecology is revealed as another means to guard the gates of the "ethnoclass" and "biocentric" descriptions of the human.

It is from the position of the slave, or the disposition of the black intellectual project it enables, that we understand isolation is as much an opening as it is an enclosure. Insofar as kinship restricts relationality to the "genres of the human," when those restrictions are violently removed in and through the condition of social death, we are better equipped to explore how the slave might provide the most crucial resources for alternative social and ecological futures. The constitutive and historically repeated loss of *normative* relationality does enable greater openness to an "outside." This radical questioning of predetermined interests – in family, land, nation, and even water – encourages an existence that does not respect the ontological tyrannies of the subject or the limited ecological relations they enable.

What "Os," "Sal," "Ventus," and "Ferrum" propose is another way of thinking, doing, and being ecology – a radical ecology made possible by the very same forces of captivity that isolate the slave from the world of human relationality. In *Zong!* this impossibility of kinship emerges as the inevitability of another kind of relation. The slave's thirst orients her towards coexistence with bone, salt, wind, and iron by affirming the terms of this coexistence instead of rejecting them. Blackness is that submarine object that at once holds open and completes the

economies of “Man.” On one of the final pages of “Ferrum,” ash, salt, bone, sea, skin, and blood reappear to agitate for the mediating role the slave plays in a radical ecology: “ash/es and sa/lt for the bo/die s/of kin un/der the sk/in of s/ea whe/re repo/se the bo/ne sou/ls of kin...part wat/er part bo/ne par/t salt *le/sel la sa/l* salis in *le/sang* sa/lt in the e/ye salt i” (168-169). The slave and her blood are part water, part bone, and part salt. She is the hemoglobin, the iron, which completes the life-giving and life-taking circuit of Slave-Man-Earth, even as that circuit is masked by an overwhelming antiblackness masquerading as both empathetic identification and natural law.

The “Ferrum” section closes with 22 African names, written in script, and arranged in an inverted pyramid; some of these are also scattered throughout the “footnotes” of “Os,” while others appear for the first time in this invocation. An attempt at translation reveals a definitive pattern to the organization of these names: Bektemba – Zulu for “Trust, hope”; Agbeke – Yoruban for “One to be carried and pampered”; Fasuyi – Yoruban for “Ifa produces dignity”; Abifarin – Yoruban for “One who walks with Ifa”; (I)fadairo – Yoruban for “Ifa kept this one”; Abiona – Yoruban for “born on a journey”; Nuru – Swahili for “light”; Moyo – Swahili for “heart” or “soul”; Olufunke – Yoruban for “God has cared for”; Olupitan – Yoruban for “God tells a tale”; Falana – Yoruban for “Ifa cut a path”; Esi – Akan for “Born on Sunday”; Kobena – Akan for “Born on Tuesday”; Atoapem – Ghanaian for “Born on Saturday”; Kwesi – Akan for “Born on Sunday”; Sade – Yoruban for “honor confers a crown”; and finally, Ade – Yoruban for “Royal” (Hodari). There is a progression or rebirth suggested here, one emphasized by the week of creation spanned by the last few names. Read with “Ferrum’s” epigraph from Ezekiel 37: 7-10, Philip’s fantasy ancestors are resurrected anew, but with “bones,” “sinew,” and “flesh” that are not entirely human. This section of “Ezekiel,” known as “The Valley of the Dry Bones,”

recounts the story of how the Lord resurrected the people of Israel from their bones, which were scattered over the desert floor. In “Ferrum,” animal, mineral, vegetable, and inorganic elements “[come] together, bone to his bone...the sinews and flesh [come] upon them...and the skin [covers] them above...and the breath [comes] into them...and they [live], and [stand] upon their feet” (Ezekiel 37:7-10 qtd. in Philip 126). As another form of “wish fulfillment,” these 22 names act as companions to, or bookend, those names found in “Os” before the poems of *Zong!* explode into complete illegibility. The names in “Ferrum” are also separated from the main language of the poems by a thin black bar. Although they are withheld, in a manner of speaking, from direct interaction with the phrases, objects, and entities that otherwise sit on the page, they continue to “underwrite” the novel relations unleashed in “Sal,” “Ventus,” and “Ferrum.”

It would be difficult to claim that the relations generated, detached, and deformed across the poems of *Zong!* have readily identifiable referents outside of the text itself. But Philip’s focus on how language limits our understanding of being suggests that these limitations have material consequences. What I find most compelling about the mesh as an imaginary projection of a radical, black ecology is that the interconnection of all objects and beings does not result in a concomitant distribution of something like “agency” or “power.” The slave’s closeness with the entities unleashed in “Ferrum” is not emancipatory or transcendent in the sense of “Man’s” ability to master nature as the fulfillment of evolutionary design; nor is it a means to overturn regimes of power by a simple re-distribution of dependency. Rather, it amplifies and augments a time-honored and ongoing collective effort in the black radical tradition to think about and pursue the matter of freedom. To open oneself to a black ecological mesh requires an affirmation of blackness in and as a willingness to be blackened.

CHAPTER 2

The Configurations of the Slave Ship *Brookes*

The images of the *Brookes* slave ship, immortalized in a series of drawings for the British Society of the Abolition of the Slave Trade (SEAST), are some of the most iconic of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Reproduced widely across abolitionist literature, they open the interior of the hull to reveal the horrific conditions for slaves during transport across the Middle Passage. Like the “*Zong*” before it, the *Brookes* made the horrors of slavery material for a British public that had little direct knowledge of the trade. The ship was built in 1781 in Liverpool for slave-trader Joseph Brookes Jr., and at 297 tons, was considered large by eighteenth century standards. The *Brookes* was also built exclusively to transport slaves, as evidenced by the “fourteen scuttles or air ports cut in the sides of the ship to ventilate the lower deck where the enslaved would be stowed” (Rediker 311). During its commission, it made 10 slaving voyages and carried an estimated 5163 slaves, 4559 of whom reached their destinations alive.¹⁸

The *Brookes* was selected by SEAST from a list of Liverpool slave ships measured and documented by Captain Parrey as part of the campaign to pass the Dolben Act. Also known as the “Slave Carrying Bill,” the Dolben Act of 1788 attempted to reduce overcrowding on slave ships by limiting their carrying capacities according to tonnage. During early parliamentary debates about the bill, Prime Minister William Pitt sent Captain Parrey to Liverpool to obtain more detailed information about transport conditions in the Middle Passage. The London committee of SEAST was determined to “select some one ship, which had been engaged in the

¹⁸ The total number of slaves carried by the *Brookes* varies according to source, as does the number of slaves who survived their voyage.

Slave-trade, with her real dimensions” in order to “make a fair representation of the manner of transport” (Clarkson 2: 111). The *Brookes*, which happened to appear first on Captain Parrey’s list, was thus chosen randomly but was also deemed acceptable because it effectively countered the notion that “the voyage from Africa to the West Indies ‘was one of the happiest periods of a Negro’s life’” (Clarkson 1: 536). The overall effect of this first image was, and still is, striking.

The *Brookes* image was first drawn and published by William Elford on behalf of the Plymouth chapter of SEAST in 1788. Originally entitled “Plan of an African Ship’s Lower Deck with Negroes in the proportion of only One to a Ton” (*The Plan*), the first broadside features one aerial view of 294 slaves placed in four separate compartments: “Girls Room,” “Womens Room,” “Boys Room,” and “Mens Room” (see figure 2). With only six feet by sixteen inches for men, five feet by fourteen inches for boys, five feet, ten inches by sixteen inches for women, and four feet by fourteen inches for girls, the slaves are presented lying in orderly rows that ran across the length of the ship. Drawn entirely in black against a white backdrop that represents the ship’s cargo hold, the slaves appear as a faceless mass, placed close to each other in a way that admits almost no space between them. Despite the lack of individuating marks, the figures unmistakably represent human bodies. Heads and legs are readily identifiable even as the slaves’ torsos appear joined to create uninterrupted lines. In fact, the neatness of the image works in favor of the abolitionist cause. Like “herrings in a barrel,” the slaves are positioned precisely so that every inch of available space is utilized fully, an achievement that is underscored by the overwhelming blackness of the image (“The Plan: Plymouth” qtd. in Rediker 315). There is, quite literally, very little whiteness to break up the typewritten lines of black bodies. As Marcus Wood points out in *Blind Memory*, the *Brookes* image is an idealized representation of an imaginary and generalized slaving voyage – one that demonstrated how the profitability of such

voyages could be maximized through the creation of optimal arrangements. That is, the calculations that made such organizational accomplishments possible reduced the slaves to representations of value that were determined by a configuration.

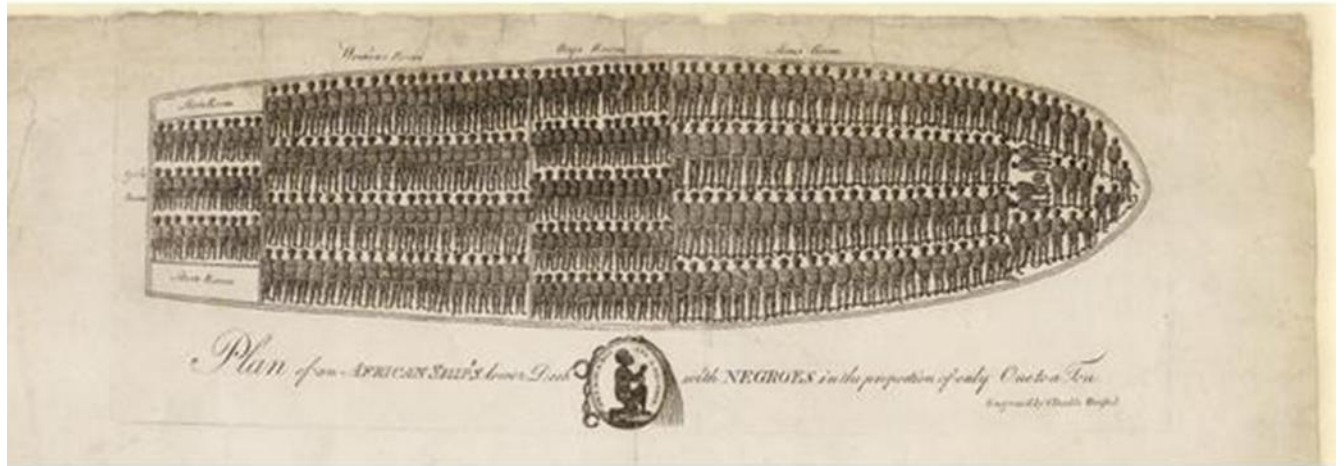


Figure 2. "Plan of an African Ship's Lower Deck with Negroes in the proportion of only One to a Ton." Sir William Elford, 1788. Plymouth.

The word "Configuration" is derived from the Latin verb *configurare*, which means "to shape after a pattern." The prefix "con," when joined with the Latin *figura*, can also mean "to shape with." Although the difference is small, the etymology of "configuration" suggests two distinct possibilities – a formation that is modeled after a pre-existing form, or a formation that emerged in tandem with others. This chapter will explore some of the overlapping scientific, social, and psychic "configurations" responsible for the popularity and circulation of the *Brookes* images. I will argue that in contradistinction to abolitionist objectives, *The Plan*, and later, *The Description*, extended rather than interrupted the objectification of black bodies. While the historical dimensions of *The Description* have been thoroughly investigated, its larger implications in terms of visual politics have received less attention.¹⁹ The overwhelming trend in

¹⁹ Notable exceptions include Marcus Wood's *Blind Memory*, Jacqueline Francis' "The Brooks Slave Ship Icon: A Universal Symbol?," and Jane Webster's "The Unredeemed Object: Displaying Abolitionist Artifacts in 2007."

studies of British or Atlantic abolitionism has been to approach *The Description* only as a generalized and idealized representation, as an image or set of images created to facilitate the abolition of the slave trade. However, *The Plan* and *The Description* owe their durability as much to their shocking visualizations of the slave trade as they do to the way they tapped the deep-seated ontological anxieties of their white viewers. If we look at the *Brookes* images as diagrams of a slave- and race-making machine, we might begin to understand how they reaffirmed the object-ness of blacks.

While many contemporary reproductions of *The Plan* usually include some of the images of the ship and no text, there have been at least five versions that differ in size, textual content, and illustrations.²⁰ The original, Plymouth-produced image takes up only the top quarter of the broadside, as the remaining three-quarters hold an explanation of the drawing. Therein follows detailed descriptions of the space allocated to each slave, their fetters, feeding routines, and some of the consequences of their transport conditions. The final paragraphs address the popular pro-slavery arguments that regulation would lead to emancipation, and that the trade itself served as a “nursery” for British sailors. This first broadside assures readers that the abolition of the trade would in no way compromise the sacraments of “private property” by precipitating the general emancipation of all slaves. The Plymouth edition is also the only version to include an imprint of Josiah Wedgwood’s famous abolitionist slave medallion, featuring a kneeling slave in chains and the words “Am I not a Man and a Brother?” Two different American versions were produced the following year in Philadelphia and New York. The first, published by Matthew Carey for the magazine *American Museum* in May 1787, and

These studies variously examine *The Description*’s influence on contemporary visual culture in general, and nineteenth and twentieth century art in particular, or situate it within histories of naval architecture and illustration.

²⁰ The version used often depends on the intended audience. History textbooks designed for middle or high school use generally include the single image of *The Plan*, while those texts intended for an academic audience may use any or all of the images from later versions (i.e. *The Description*).

the second, published by Samuel Wood in New York, made several significant changes to the text.

The Philadelphia and New York versions of the broadside radicalized the Plymouth version while remaining true to the symbolic codes of abolitionist narrative. The imprint of Wedgwood's medallion was removed along with the penultimate paragraph claiming that the ultimate objective of the movement was neither the abolition of slavery nor the right to private property. These were replaced with an opening paragraph that declared the American versions of *The Plan* were intended to promote "the ABOLITION of slavery" unlike the more moderate aims of its British counterpart ("The Plan: Philadelphia," qtd. in Rediker 314) (see figure 3). This opening paragraph also maintains the Enlightenment association between "light" and life, reading: "Here is presented to our view, one of the most horrid spectacles – a number of human creatures, packed, side by side, almost like herrings in a barrel, and reduced nearly to the state of being buried alive, with just air enough to preserve a degree of life sufficient to make them sensible of all the horrors of their situation" ("The Plan: Philadelphia," qtd. in Rediker, 315). Combined with the last paragraph that "called on citizens 'to stand forward' and" provide relevant information to 'throw the necessary lights on the subject'," the new text reproduces the sentiments of the excluded Wedgwood medallion ("The Plan: Plymouth," qtd. in Rediker 312).²¹ Like much eighteenth century abolitionist literature, the kneeling figure of the slave and *The Plan's* exhortation of British spectators to become witnesses pivot on the condescension of white readers. Thomas Clarkson's own introduction to the first volume of *The History of the Rise, Progress, and Accomplishment of the Abolition of the Slave Trade* suggests that to

²¹ The original text included on the Plymouth edition of the "The Brookes" broadside reads: "...it becomes the indispensable duty of every friend to humanity, however his speculations may have led him to conclude on the political tendency of the measure, to stand forward, and to assist the Committees, either by producing such facts as he may himself be acquainted with, or by describing, to enable them to produce and transmit to the Legislature, such evidence as will tend to throw the necessary lights on the subject" (qtd. in Rediker, *Slave Ship* 312).

appreciate its abolition, and to “teach us the importance of the victory obtained,” we must “glance only into [the trade]...to arouse our indignation and our pity” (10). To inspire such affect, the slave must above all be portrayed as vulnerable, non-threatening, and innocent. It is not accidental that the Wedgwood figure, which is suspended in an act of supplication, was removed from the American editions. A focus on the absolute powerlessness of the slave in transport, whose sensibilities were restricted to a mere recognition of “the horrors of their situation,” thus replaced the more active image of begging, however slight the difference.²²

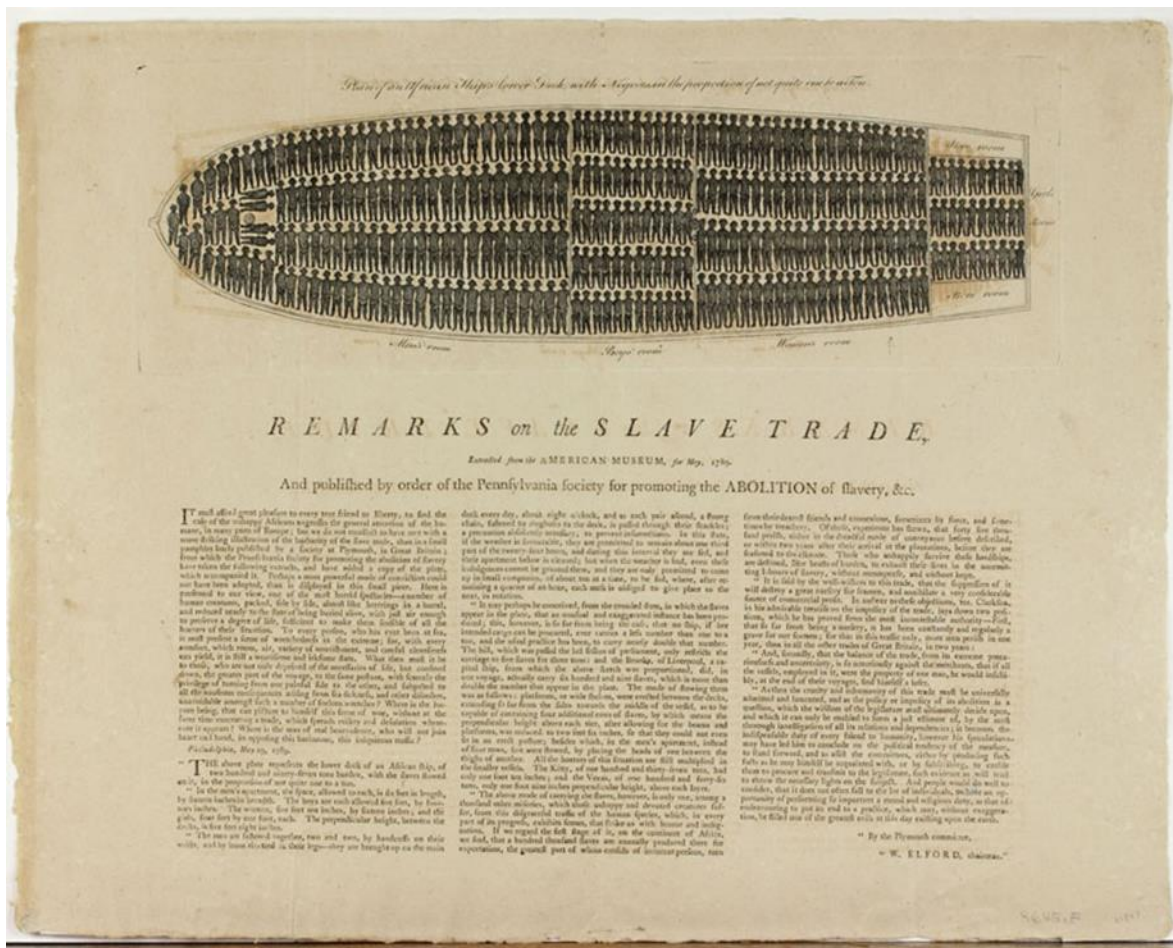


Figure 3. “Plan of an African Ship’s Lower Deck with Negroes in the proportion of only One to a Ton.” Matthew Carey, 1789. Philadelphia.

²² A later edition of *The Description* added an eighth illustration that depicted a longitudinal view of a stylized slave ship in the midst of a slave rebellion. That image, entitled “Representation of an Insurrection on board a Slave-Ship,” was likely added after the Haitian Rebellion became a part of the larger debates over slavery and the slave trade (Rediker 331).

The next manifestation of *The Plan*, developed and published by the London SEAST committee in 1789, dramatically altered the accompanying text and offered six additional illustrations of the slaves' quarters. These changes proved to be immensely popular and would ultimately evolve into the well-known "Description of a Slave Ship" (*The Description*), the most famous and widely distributed representation of the conditions of transport in the Middle Passage (see figure 4). The six new illustrations included a bow-to-stern longitudinal cross-section indicating the placement of at least six decks, two transverse cross-sections of the vertical arrangement of decks and slave-holding platforms, and three more aerial cross-sections, two of the holding areas near the stern of the ship, and one which displayed how slaves were placed on a platform deck running above the cargo deck of the original illustration. Each illustration is identified by a figure number (e.g. "Fig. 1" and "Fig. 2") and the sections of individual illustrations are labeled A through P so that various decks are easily identified in different perspectives. The expansion of the *Plan's* illustrations allowed the number of slaves depicted to increase to 482 from the original 294, with the increased figure more closely approximating the number of slaves allowed under the Dolben Act. The accompanying text, now written by Thomas Clarkson, focused more directly on the dimensions of the ship, the amount of space allocated to each slave, a quotation from Dr. Alexander Falconbridge's pamphlet *An Account of the Slave Trade on the Coast of Africa*, and the general experiences of the slaves and sailors (not simply on the *Brookes*) in the Middle Passage (Rediker, *Slave Ship* 317). The new text drew heavily from Clarkson's 1787 interviews with sailors in Bristol and Liverpool, the results of which were primarily responsible for disproving claims that the slave trade provided a healthy "nursery" for British seamen. Like the American editions, *The Description* eliminated the paragraph about preserving the rights to private property but also made no mention of the

complete abolition of slavery. At least 8000 broadsides were produced and distributed in London, with additional broadsides published for audiences in Europe and New England.²³

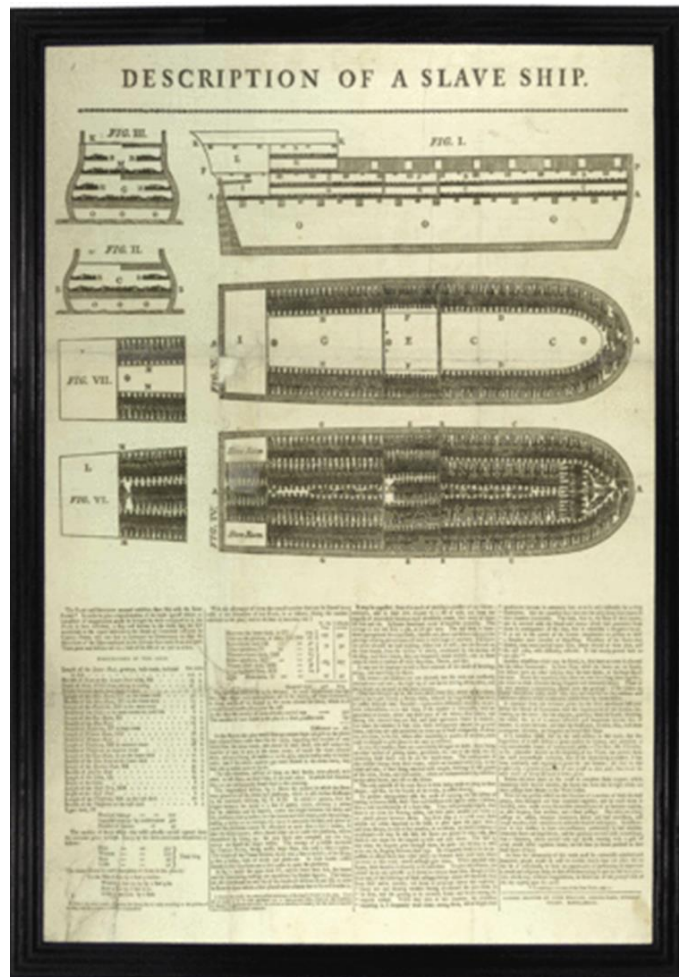


Figure 4. "Description of a Slave Ship." James Phillips, 1789. London.

The success of *The Description* is further confirmed by its reception in France, and in particular, by Gabriel Honore de Raqueti Comte de Mirabeau, one of the leading orators and statesmen during the first phases of the French Revolution. Clarkson traveled to Paris in 1789 and spent a year campaigning for the abolition of the French slave trade in the National Assembly. Mirabeau, a founding member of the *Societe des Amis des Noirs*, intended to deliver a

²³ See Marcus Wood's *Blind Memory* and J.R. Oldfield's *Popular Politics and British Anti-Slavery* for more specific calculations of how many broadsides were produced in each publishing run.

lengthy speech in support of the abolition of trade before the Assembly. In the second volume of his *History*, Clarkson recalls that Mirabeau was

so impressed by [*The Description*] that he ordered a mechanic to make a model of it in wood, at a considerable expense. This model he kept afterwards in his dining room. It was a ship in miniature, about a yard long, and little wooden men and women, which were painted black to represent the slaves, were seen stowed in their proper places.

(153)

Although the speech was ultimately never delivered, Mirabeau had intended to present the model as visual support during his address.²⁴ His fascination with *The Description* and its model helps to clarify the mythos that powered the appeal and circulation of the *Brookes* imagery.

The fact that Mirabeau kept his model of *The Description* in the dining room indexes its participation in extending the fungibility of the captive body. Just as Wedgwood's kneeling slave medallion was turned into cameos, and the plates and broadsides of *The Plan* and *The Description* hung on the walls of Britain's affluent abolitionists, it is no coincidence that Mirabeau's model was placed in the social center of his home. The model, like other abolitionist objects, was an indicator of a particular consumerist identity. Abolitionists exploited the rapidly expanding consumerist culture of the late eighteenth century and one needs only to survey the steady production of abolitionist medals, medallions, cameos, prints, and even tokens with genuine monetary value to gain a sense of how thoroughly commercial enterprise was woven into the movement.²⁵ What's more, possessing an abolitionist artifact demonstrated more than

²⁴ Mirabeau's model is one of two known models; the other was commissioned by abolitionist William Wilberforce for use in a House of Commons debate. Unlike Mirabeau's model, which contained miniature, three-dimensional men and women, the Wilberforce model had images from *The Description* glued directly onto the decks. See <http://www.hullcc.gov.uk/museumcollections/collections/> for more information about the Wilberforce model.

²⁵ For a detailed analysis of the relationship between consumerist culture and British abolitionism, refer to J.R. Oldfield's *Popular Politics and British Anti-Slavery*, especially chapter 6, and Charlotte Sussman's *Consuming Anxieties: Consumer Protest, Gender, and British Slavery*.

purchasing power or even agreement with a cause; it also symbolized a constellation of social signifiers bound by an anxiety over national identity. For example, in the speech that Mirabeau intended to deliver, he asked his audience to imagine the conditions aboard the model, describing in graphic language “all of the miseries of him who shares their irons,” and how “the vessel when it rolls hurts them, mutilates them, bruises them against each other, tears them with their own chains, and presents thus a thousand tortures in a single picture” (qtd. in Smith 150). Like Wedgwood’s medallion, or *The Plan/Description* broadsides, the model permitted its spectators to project themselves into a scene of suffering, or even into a suffering body, without any of the risks. In so doing, the capacity to move in and out of these bodies or scenes is both facilitated by and memorialized in the “lazy force of generalization” inherent in most abolitionist propaganda (Wood, *Blind Memory* 219). Mirabeau’s incitement to imagination was in fact a product of this generalization, “which led Mirabeau to seek the design’s realization in three dimensions and then to try to imagine himself as a slave in the hold” (Wood, *Blind Memory* 29). But even as his disgust with the trade is palpable, at the end of the speech, this disgust ultimately rotates back onto the moral threat posed to sailors and financiers:

and so is reproduced, as an ordinary event, that torture which has rendered its inventor the type of the most frightful tyrants. The horrible dungeon, as it moves, depopulates itself more and more; negroes and sailors are alike mown down. The most revolting plagues accumulating one upon another, frustrate, by their ravages, the very avarice, which has reared them. (qtd. in Smith 152)

Indeed, Mirabeau’s conclusions seem to take their cue from the composition of *The Description* itself. As made clear by the text accompanying the broadsides, the “light,” “life,” and “air” represented by the white spaces of the illustrations are just as, or more significant than, the black

figures of the slaves. Mirabeau's translation of this visual into a narrative about protecting the moral superiority of European citizens betrays one of the fundamental effects of *The Description*. By keeping the model in his dining room, Mirabeau could comfortably consume and digest the violence of the slave trade in a way that confirmed his own commitment to national and racial dominance.

This display of slavery-related artifacts and art objects as both decorative and didactic was in fact fairly common during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, particularly with paintings. For instance, Francois-Auguste Biard's famous 1840 oil painting, *Scene on the African Coast (The Slave Trade)*, which was exhibited at the same venue as J.M.W. Turner's *The Slave Ship*, was purchased for noted British abolitionist Thomas Fowell Buxton (Woods, *Blind Memory* 43). The painting depicts a slave market in Sierra Leone and was displayed on Buxton's estate until it was donated to the Wilberforce House Museum after his death (see figure 5).²⁶ In both the painting and Mirabeau's model of the *Brookes*, the absolute fungibility of the slave, intensified by abstract representation, provided a "surrogate for [the viewer's] body since it guarantees his disembodied universality and acts as the sign of his power and dominion" (Hartman, *Scenes* 21). But to thoroughly understand the enduring popularity of *The Description*, we must first situate it within a wider historical moment that witnessed the convergence of scientific and mechanical objectivity, global capitalism, and racial fetishism.

²⁶ As it was with the *Brookes* images, Biard's *Scene on the African Coast* was also widely reproduced and circulated as an engraving, one of which was later dedicated to "the Admirers of Mrs. Harriet Beecher Stowe's popular Work of 'Uncle Tom's Cabin'" (Image of the Black Archive & Library, "Slave Trade"). The painting also serves as the inspiration for Isaac Julien's short film, *The Attendant*.



Figure 5. Francois-Auguste Biard's *Scenes on the African Coasts (The Slave Trade)*. 1840. Oil on Canvas. Wilberforce House Museum, Hull, UK.

The Science of Ships in a Global Market

The designing of ships specifically for slave trading voyages was unsurprisingly tied to the development of the plantation system and the rise of a global capitalist economy.²⁷ As seventeenth century plantations grew in number, the increased demands for labor warranted the creation of ships that could transport large volumes of slaves as quickly as possible. These ships, the progeny of European deep-sea sailing ships, also had to double as floating prisons and

²⁷ For more on how the slave trade advanced global capitalism and contributed to the industrialization of Europe, refer to Eric Williams' *Capitalism and Slavery*, David Eltis and Stanley L. Engerman's "The Importance of Slavery and the Slave Trade to Industrializing Britain," and Carla Cipolla's *Guns, Sails, and Empires*.

factories.²⁸ Shipbuilding centers dedicated to custom-built slave ships thus sprung up in ports like Bristol and Liverpool in the mid-eighteenth century, including the shipyard that was responsible for building the *Brookes*. The circulation of shipbuilding technology, ship builders, and the ships themselves throughout Europe encouraged a greater uniformity in design and construction so that they remained more or less consistent throughout the eighteenth century. So too did the art and science of naval architecture, which coalesced into a more formal discipline with the creation of associations like the Society for the Improvement of Naval Architecture in 1791. Ship illustrations in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were therefore more carefully rendered in terms of proportion and included several perspectives. The six illustrations added to *The Plan* during its republication as *The Description* closely followed these conventions and, as Wood argues, “[conformed to the] already extant architectural model” so that “the conjunction of technical engraving with the depiction of a mass of black human flesh” created a “superb semiotic shock tactic” (*Blind Memory*, 26-27).

Wood proposes that the effectiveness of *The Description* arises from the juxtaposition of a familiar technology with the figures of slaves, an uncanny intersection that implicates slavery in the ascendancy of British maritime forces. There is no doubt that this relationship occasioned great anxiety on the part of abolitionists, if not the general British public. In a speech to the House of Commons, William Wilberforce declared that “if blame attached anywhere,” he would “take shame to himself, in common indeed with the whole parliament of Great Britain, who, having suffered [the slave trade] to be carried on under their own authority, were all of them participators in the guilt” (Clarkson 2: 42). While naval architecture had a significant impact on *The Description*, its images were also part of a larger style of illustration.

²⁸ See chapter 2 of Marcus Rediker’s *The Slave Ship* for more on the carceral capacities of slave ships.

The publication of *The Description* during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was concurrent with the epistemological shifts from natural history to biology and the strengthening of mechanistic worldviews due in part to the onset of the Industrial Revolution. Historians of science Lorraine Daston and Peter Galison suggest that this period is marked by a dominant mode of visual practice called the “Truth-to-Nature” model.²⁹ As with any technique of vision, Truth-to-Nature describes both a (somewhat flexible) code for representing and viewing pictorial work and a set of epistemic values. The Truth-to-Nature model was primarily concerned with creating idealized images of Nature. This process, of which Carl Linnaeus is the most prominent practitioner, developed in reaction to the seventeenth century fashion of illustrating nature and natural objects in all their supposed variations. These illustrations were meant to serve as comprehensive surveys for a community of scientists. And sometimes, the more outlandish the specimens were, the better they were received.³⁰ It is here that the theory of organic structure outlined in the introduction to this dissertation makes its appearance. Rather than highlight nature’s variability, Carl Linnaeus and his followers opted to “[single] out those features common to the entire species (the *descriptio*) as well as those that differentiated this species from all others in the genus (the *differentia*) but at all costs avoided features peculiar to this or that individual member of the species” (Daston and Galison 60). In so doing, the resultant drawings, a technology science studies scholar Michael Lynch terms “manual reproduction,” made use of generalization to depict those organic structures common to a species (208). Although they did not reflect any extant organism, these drawings were considered superior

²⁹ In their monumental work, *Objectivity*, Daston and Galison trace at least four major shifts in scientific representational practice in order to demonstrate the changing nature of both “objectivity” and “subjectivity.” However, these four shifts, between “Truth-to-Nature,” “Mechanical Objectivity,” “Structural Objectivity,” and “Trained Judgment,” do not entail a rigid periodization. Rather, Daston and Galison are concerned with unruly objects that emerge and disappear to unsettle the history of vision and objectivity.

³⁰ See, for example, Francis Bacon’s *Novum Organum* or the collected works of the *Royal Society of London for Improving Natural Knowledge*.

because they were “truer” to the ultimate design of Nature. Studies on race and science often suggest that the Truth-to-Nature model contributed to early forms of scientific racism and vice-versa, and *The Plan* and *The Description* are no exception.³¹

While we cannot necessarily chart a direct line from anatomical or botanical illustrations to those of naval architecture, we can suggest that the publishers of and audience for *The Plan* and *The Description* were familiar with these types of illustration. Both prints were circulated most heavily among the learned and moneyed segments of the population; those, in other words, who were literate, educated, and wealthy enough to either purchase abolitionist commodities or encounter them through their social contacts. The founding members of SEAST, for example, were chiefly men who enjoyed middle or upper class status as lawyers, scientists, merchants, and members of Parliament.³² The original illustrator of *The Plan*, Sir William Elford, was even a member of the Linnaean Society and an amateur scientist and his scientific experience would have made him comfortable with the standards of Truth-to-Nature representation (“Elford”). Moreover, the *Brookes* images also employed one style of illustration with which its audiences were almost certainly familiar – silhouette portraiture.

Like the aforementioned Wedgewood figure of the kneeling slave, the slaves in the *Brookes* images are presented as silhouettes. Less costly than traditional painted portraits, silhouette portraiture was popular from the eighteenth to the nineteenth centuries, and was generally produced by drawing or cutting out figures in profile, and mounting those figures against a white background. These images were especially useful for capturing families or

³¹ For a broad overview of scientific racism, see Sandra Harding’s *The “Racial” Economy of Science: Toward a Democratic Future*, Halford H. Fairchild’s “Scientific racism: The cloak of objectivity,” and John P. Jackson and Nadine Weidman’s *Race, Racism, and Science: Social Impact and Interaction*.

³² For entries on individual SEAST members, consult the Oxford University Press’ online database, *The Dictionary of National Biography*,

individuals as a means of commemoration.³³ In this sense, depicting slaves in silhouette may have assisted in their humanization by drawing comparisons between the slaves and members of a family. Most strikingly though, silhouettes also played a definitive role in the pseudo-sciences of phrenology and physiognomy. For Swiss naturalist Johann Caspar Lavater, they “took motion out of the face and represented the ‘true’ physiognomy on which ‘scientific’ character judgements could be made” (Twine 83). He writes further:

Silhouettes alone have extended my physiognomic knowledge, more than any kind of portrait...We see in it neither motion, nor light, nor colour, nor rising, nor cavity...The silhouette arrests the attention: by fixing it on the exterior contours alone, it simplifies the observation, which becomes by that more easy and accurate...The silhouette is a positive and incontestable proof of the reality of the Science of Physiognomics. (qtd. in Twine 83).

Lavater’s language of “truth,” “accuracy,” and “scientific character judgements” accords with that of the “Truth-to-nature” model, adding another layer of meaning to the silhouettes of the *Brookes* images. As such, these silhouettes provide a possible point of connection between the *fin de siècle* codes of scientific illustration and *The Plan* and *The Description*.

To create an image that would reflect the “true” design of slave ships without emphasizing the peculiarities of individual voyages, the committee used the concrete measurements of a real ship, and filled them with generalized representations of slaves (Clarkson 1: 535). If SEAST had chosen to represent the conditions of an actual voyage of the *Brookes*, they would have left themselves vulnerable to arguments that a particular voyage was merely an exception to an otherwise humane mode of transportation. This tension between the “ideal”

³³ See Susan M. Stabile’s *Memories Daughters* for more information on the cultural impact and historical use of silhouette images.

(generalized) and the “characteristic” (individualized), or even between the universal and the particular, are captured in Thomas Cooper’s explanation of the abolitionist strategy (Daston and Galison 70). Writing to the publisher of the *Manchester Chronicle* in 1787, he states that:

Every man possessed of the common feelings of humanity, and the common principles of morality, even if unacquainted with the particulars of this execrable commerce, mentions it in discourse in terms of disapprobation, and hears it with an ejaculation of abhorrence. But the miseries of five hundred thousand wretches, noticed in general terms, seldom produces a permanent effect among persons, who would shudder at the details of the complicated misery which any individual of the ill-fated group has been doomed to undergo. It is particular distress, and its attendant circumstances, which is calculated to excite compassion. (5)

To his view, the “general terms” of the slave trade would overwhelm the sentiments of “every man possessed of the common feelings of humanity,” but a demonstration of the “particular distress” of “any individual of the ill-fated group” would evoke an enduring compassion. Curiously, in his advocacy for attention to individual experience, Cooper performs the same generalizing gesture that he is quick to reject. For if “any individual of the ill-fated group” would be sufficient to arouse the sympathies of the British public, then the “particular” is interchangeable. Of course, “particular” does not always mean “specific,” and in Cooper’s case, his use of “particular” distinguishes the distress of slaves in transport from other kinds of distress with which British readers might be familiar. Obviously, the *Brookes* was not perceived as a “natural specimen,” but what Cooper is after is a Truth-to-Nature design where the phrase “Slave Ship *Brookes*” becomes taxonomic. The *differentia* or drive towards dehumanizing spatial optimization separates the slave ship from the general “genus” of ships, while the slave holds and

the slaves – the *descriptio* – are common to the “species” of the slave ship. *The Plan*’s display of the *differentia* and the *descriptio* in a single image capitalized on eighteenth century techniques of vision so that slave ships could be isolated from other kinds of ships. That way, accusations about the cruelties of slave ships and the slave trade could not rebound onto the shipping and trading industries in general. But because the London Committee of SEAST was concerned about representing the slave ship in a manner that avoided any “complaint of exaggeration,” they prioritized mechanical objectivity in their improvements to *The Plan* (Clarkson 1: 535).

The new perspectives added to *The Description* reflected the growing power the Industrial Revolution was beginning to exert on the doing and representing of science. A drive towards “Mechanical Objectivity” emerged alongside the Truth-to-Nature model, the objective of which was to produce images devoid of any subjective interference that would indicate value judgments or trace ideologies of the observing subject. The introduction of new technologies highlights certain components of perception in a different way, and nineteenth century inventions like the lithograph and *camera lucida* allowed scientists to pursue the mechanical reproduction of natural organisms. This shift required a corresponding transformation in the scientific self so that interpretive judgment – determinations about which organic structures were common to a species – became secondary to self-discipline and moral regulation. By not resorting to speculation (however well-reasoned), nature could “speak for itself” (Daston and Galison 120). Consequently, the machine became the exemplar of scientific objectivity because of its supposedly unmediated relationship to the world. “Levers and gears [could] not succumb to [the temptations]” that accompanied free will (Daston and Galison 123). What’s more, the “patient, indefatigable, ever-alert machine” could replace or relieve human laborers that were likely to tire or err (Daston and Galison 123).

For Daston and Galison, this form of mechanical objectivity was generally facilitated by the machines responsible for the actual reproduction of images, and by photography in particular. As such, it did not emerge fully until the mid-nineteenth century when cameras and their precursors largely displaced the drawings, engravings, tracings, and etchings of manual reproduction. However, mechanical objectivity also begat a style of representation, one that was adopted by naval architecture. Informed by new mathematical models for calculating displacement, speed, and buoyancy, naval architecture helped to certify the ship as a world-making machine.³⁴ Recall that *The Description* was based on Captain Parrey's precise measurements of the *Brookes*, with the space allocated to each slave calculated according to the provisions of the Dolben Act. The accompanying text also takes great pains to establish the veracity of the measurements via personal data from Clarkson and Falconbridge. Nonetheless, *The Description* images do not reflect the arrangement of slaves on any actual voyage of the *Brookes*.³⁵ What it offers instead is a diagram – a conceptual model that exposes the mechanisms necessary for the slave ship to function properly as a machine. Like diagrams of birds in flight, the mechanics of a water pump, or the gears of an elevator, *The Description* charts a set of ideal relationships between component parts. But ideal for what? What was the purchase of drawing the six additional perspectives of *The Description* with a view towards Mechanical Objectivity?

³⁴ See David McGee's "From Craftsmanship to Draftsmanship: Naval Architecture and the Three Traditions of Early Modern Design."

³⁵ Ironically, the *Brookes* often carried more slaves than were allowed under the Dolben Act, so the calculations that determined the amount of slaves portrayed in *The Description* underestimated the "actual" numbers of slaves carried (Rediker, *Slave Ship* 318).

The View of the *Brookes*

Mechanical cross-sections or “exploded view” schemata such as these are firmly embedded in narratives of capital, where the now-visible “labors” of machines become analogous to the relations between the putative “laboring objects” of commodity fetishism. In *Alien Phenomenology*, Ian Bogost re-calibrates the effect of these diagrams to argue that “in common practice, an exploded-view drawing offers just as much intrigue as it does use value...a child pores over the cutaway view of the submarine...not to learn how to operate it but to fathom a small aspect of its murky otherworldliness” (51-52). If we are to take Bogost seriously, then the popularity of *The Description* issued as much from the “shock of conjunction” as it did from how *The Description* diagrammed the process of slave making in a way that coincided with fantasies about the “object” and “otherworldly” nature of blackness.

The diagram belongs to a subset of scientific, technological, and artistic illustrations designed to extend the reach of the human senses. As a representational or even instructional tool, diagrams “open a conceptual space for correlations neither rooted in direct experience nor verifiable by the senses” (Bender and Marrinan 17). *The Description’s* disaggregation of decks combines with its presentation of multiple perspectives to create a catalogue of parts unavailable to the naked eye. At the same time, this disaggregation removes the ship from its context of use. There is nothing to indicate light or shadow, let alone duration or speed. This is not a ship in motion; any reference to the sea is replaced by white, unmarked spaces that frame the illustrations and direct the viewer. In the vertically-oriented version of *The Description*, the first illustration of the bow-to-stern longitudinal cross section unmistakably positions the viewer outside of the hold; as it is with all the illustrations of the *Brookes*, the viewer is a spectator and not a slave. This illustration sits above the two transverse cross-sections of the vertical

arrangement of decks and the two cross-sections of the holding areas near the stern of the ship. The transverse and longitudinal cross-sections are of particular significance as they simultaneously display all five holding decks featured in the other images. Drawn at a scale of an “eighth of an inch to a foot,” these five decks are clearly too short to accommodate standing humans (“The Description: London” qtd. in Rediker, *Slave Ship* 316). They were designed, in other words, for the specific purpose of holding cargo. In the longitudinal view, the slaves are reduced to dense, black lumps distributed across the decks. The whiteness surrounding the top four images supports the viewer’s association of the more human-like figures of the transverse cross-section with the lumps of the longitudinal view. Because these decks had to be displayed in “pull-out” images to recognize the black masses as bodies, the viewer is made to understand that the slaves are objects first, and humans second. The viewer’s correlations suture the slaves into an inescapable economy of images, where the manipulation of scale and perspective ensures that the “pull out” images function as the “gears” of the ship. For the ship to operate as a slave ship, the decks need to work in conjunction to carry the maximum amount of cargo and to actualize the species-making *differentia* established by the Truth-to-Nature model.

While the slippages between the Truth-to-Nature and Mechanical Objectivity models in *The Plan* and *The Description* may not have been purposeful, they did accomplish a purpose. First, the Truth-to-Nature model teased out the “organic structure” common to all slaves and slave ships and in the process established the slave ship as a species of deep-sea sailing ship with a singular function and blueprint. Doing so yielded a representation of nature’s ultimate “design” for black bodies – that of the object or commodity. Then, Mechanical Objectivity allowed abolitionists to claim that *The Description* documented, rather than invented, the state of slaves in transport. Here, the objectness of blackness was supposedly reproduced and presented without

subjective interference. That is, their object-ness was rendered objective. *The Description* is simultaneously appalling and fascinating not because the slave trade turned humans into objects, but because it implied that humans could be “made” from objects. The full force of *The Description* thus lies in the anxieties about what the *Brookes* images revealed. Pleas to recognize the “humanity” of slaves were in effect efforts to disavow an unacceptable common origin and to re-establish the lines of racial hierarchy within a different imaginary register. In the same speech in which he incriminated Liverpool merchants for their financing of the slave trade, Wilberforce delivered an appeal to “humanity” that gestures towards this anxiety:

I will not accuse the Liverpool merchants: I will allow them – nay I will believe them to be men of humanity, and I will therefore believe, if it were not for the magnitude of the wretched objects, if it were not for the enormous magnitude and extent of the evil, which distracts their attention from individual cases, and makes them think generally, and therefore less feelingly on the subject, they would never have permitted the trade. I verily believe, therefore, if the wretchedness of any one of the many hundred negroes stowed in each ship, could be brought before their view, and remain within the sight of the African merchant, that there is no one among them whose heart could bear it?
(Wilberforce 12-13)³⁶

Wilberforce’s will to believe that the Liverpool merchants are “men of humanity” is animated by the very possibility that they are not. His claim that the enormity of slavery’s “evil” restricts Liverpool merchants to thinking “generally” about the trade (which in turn prevents empathetic attachments) operates doubly to pacify the egos of the merchants and to offer a justification for

³⁶ Wilberforce’s speech occurred on May 12, 1789, in The House of Commons, after the improvements to *The Plan* had been published as *The Description*. The full text can be found in William Wilberforce’s *The speech of William Wilberforce, Esq., representative for the County of York, on Wednesday the 13th of May, 1789, on the question of the abolition of the slave trade. To which are added, the resolutions then moved, and a short sketch of the speeches of the other members.*

their immorality. The solution, he suggests, is to single out “any one” of the slaves – defined by their “wretchedness” – to “be brought before” the merchants. This “bringing forth” of “wretchedness” is also an attempt to make blackness present, to make it available to the white “view,” but also to secure blackness “within the sight of” that view. This kind of empathetic identification, which I detail in the previous chapter, imaginatively replaces the sufferer with a credible subject capable of bearing witness, thereby cementing the moral authority of the viewer.

As I have submitted earlier in this chapter, methods to “see” the slaves as humans recruited the fungibility of the slave as accomplice, and depended on the impossibility of translating the black’s objectness into humanness. In *Bad Faith and Antiblack Racism*, Lewis Gordon cites Ralph Ellison’s *Invisible Man* to advise that “the Invisible Man’s invisibility comes about in virtue of the denial, by virtue of the pervading norms of black inferiority in Western societies, of his humanity. In this formulation, then, the black’s absence fails to translate into his human presence” (98). On the surface, Wilberforce’s spotlighting of blackness seems to assist this process of translation by advocating for a less ephemeral, more human presence. Yet the effect of this “presence” is, paradoxically, a more thorough absence. Ellison’s *Invisible Man* refers to “the black experience of absence” in “the sense that Fanon describes of there being something absent whenever blacks are present. The more present a black is, the more absent this ‘something’. And the more absent a black is, the more present is this something” (Gordon 98). What the merchants see when they look at the slaves in *The Description* is not the humanity of the slaves, but its absence, and the harder they try to “imagine” the slaves into their view, the more absent this humanity becomes. What the merchants and Wilberforce do see is the empathetic solidification of their own humanity, projected in relief against a backdrop of blackness. These “black objects” serve the affective, libidinal, and imaginary purposes of

conflating whiteness with the presence of the human. Interestingly, the abolitionist tacking between metaphysical presence and absence also registers psychically in the form of racial fetishism.

Standard understandings of fetishism, as described by both Marx and Freud, presume that the fetish allows for a sublation of traumatic encounters with the real – a presumption that in turn relies on a racial fantasy of what the “real” is. Levi Bryant proposes in *The Democracy of Objects* that “fantasy creates an effect whereby the manner in which fantasy transforms perturbations from the Other into information appears to directly result from the Other or to be a property of the Other itself” (189). With respect to *The Description*, the graphic reveal of objecthood as a formative substance for the human is an effect or “perturbation” of its composition, one that is immediately rendered as the proper *sine qua non* of black being. Fantasies about differential ontologies – an *a priori* white humanity and black objecthood for example – solidified as a defensive response against the provocations of the slaves’ curious existence. Thus, objecthood, which *The Description* pervasively upholds as the stereotype of blackness, “seduces, not because it is a secret, but because it represents, in fantasized form, a myth of immemorial sameness, no matter the different particularities to which misrecognition gives rise of the contradictions of social reality” (Marriott, “Fetishism” 220). We must note here that the “sameness” to which Marriott refers is not identical to the “sameness” of shared objecthood feared by white viewers. However, when objecthood becomes the stereotypical state of blackness, and when social reality is dictated by this state, then the group identity conferred by the “myth of immemorial sameness” becomes the condition of possibility for differential ontologies. Racial fetishism is, on this score, a disavowal of difference (the stereotype) through an assertion of difference (between objecthood and humanity).

Whether or not *The Description* accidentally captured a glimpse into an ontological truth requires a more comprehensive interrogation of modern race-making, but we can say that regardless, *The Description* diagrammed a number of fantasies about whiteness and blackness that were sustained by racial fetishism. These “real fantasies” derive their pleasure from the ossification of the fetish as stereotype, where the stereotype “culminates in an imago that is experienced immanently, but that imago faithfully corresponds to how modern subjects find themselves caught up in a fantasmatic world” (Marriott, “Fetishism” 223).³⁷ *The Plan* and *The Description* were conceived to assist the abolition of the slave trade, but did so in a way that maintained the black imago’s “correspondence” to white fantasies. Like the structure of unconscious desire, what might initially seem like a contradiction – appeals to the slaves’ humanity made through a graphic representation that marks the absence of that humanity – actually supplies the field of operation for fetishism. Because the slaves are fixed in their representation, acts of looking catch the slave in an empty materiality that is filled and re-filled by the sympathies of white viewers. *The Description* thus facilitated interactions with blackness without the risk of exposure to the other in order to defend white viewers against ontological insecurities.

The View from the *Brookes*

Thus far, we have been discussing how *The Plan* and *The Description* functioned for white audiences in the psychic economies of racial fetishism and as a continuation of scientific representational practice; we have seen the *Brookes* images through white eyes, as it were. In this section, we will consider more fully what *The Plan* and *The Description* might have meant for

³⁷ Marriott defines a “real fantasy” as the point between the psyche and culture where the imago “corresponds” to the fantasies of others (“Fetishism” 228).

the slaves represented by the illustrations. Arguably, the most often-cited account of what “being seen” is like for blacks comes from Frantz Fanon’s *Black Skin, White Masks*. The infamous words “Look, a Negro!” open Fanon’s chapter, “The Fact of Blackness,” in which he recounts how the white gaze arrests the process of recognition and incorporation that marks the emergence of normative self-consciousness: “Sealed into that crushing objecthood, I turned beseechingly to others...But just as I reached the other side, I stumbled, and the movements, the attitudes, the glances of the other fixed me there” (82). Trapped within this look, the black is “fixed” as an object without an obvious interior consistency, leading to Fanon’s insistence that “the black man has no ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man” (83). This lack of “resistance” is explored earlier in the text when Fanon describes how film magnifies the doubling and suspension inscribed within the act of being seen and seeing oneself being seen. The dubbing of English-speaking black actors into French follows the protocols of language given to the stereotype of “the Negro” so that the actor is forced to perform an “effigy” of himself, the effect of which is “to snare him, to imprison him” so that he becomes “the eternal victim of an essence, of an *appearance* for which he is not responsible” (Fanon 22). In this break between the image of the black man on screen and the Fanon who sits and watches that image unfold, Marriott finds one of Fanon’s central contentions about the colonized: “how can the black get outside of himself to point to himself from the place where he is not, the place from which he is judged and aggressed...because it is already in him...the “*nègre*” that refers only to himself” (Marriott, “Waiting” 218)? In these two moments of being seen and seeing oneself being seen, the black is trapped by the impossibility of overcoming the imagined self on screen and avoiding becoming the self that the image is based upon.

Fanon knew very well the consequences of the fetishistic white gaze and our understanding of its operations are indebted to his thoughtful accounts. For him, there can be no gaze or look that takes place outside of the mythos of negrophobia, in part because “perception always occurs at the level of the imaginary” (Fanon 125). What the black encounters in the colony (and outside of it) is the imago not as unconscious image or representation of reality, but as stereotype, the “*nègre*” whose appearance occupies the temporality of the perfect tense. “I cannot go to a film without seeing myself,” Fanon writes, “I wait for me. In the interval, just before the film starts, I wait for me. The people in the theater are watching me, examining me, waiting for me” (107). His anticipation is already belated as the image he awaits has been and will have been circulated prior to, and after, his arrival at the theater.

What this means for our purposes in this section is that the slaves drawn in *The Description* are overdetermined from the outset. Any search for referents outside of the image that could be called “more real,” or any condemnation of the images on the basis of an historical misrepresentation or moral weakness, wrongly assumes that this overdetermination is not immanent to black representations. Here, I agree with Marriott’s review of Marcus Wood’s *The Horrible Gift of Freedom*, in which he points out how Wood denounces the market politics of emancipation as morally inferior to black revolutionary action. We can also see this adjudication in *Blind Memory* in the focus on how the moral sentiment of British abolitionism obscures black cultural autonomy. Charting the long-lasting effects of this moral sentiment is necessary to understanding the fantasy life of slavery, and, as Saidiya Hartman has shown, to the operations of the law. Nevertheless, Wood’s juxtaposition of abolitionist propaganda and black agency and suffering suggests that a more “accurate” representation of emancipation could overcome the negrophobia inherent in those representations. His underlying assumption is that abolitionist

portrayals of slaves suffer from moral failings that if corrected, would unveil the slaves' true character.³⁸ What's more, the ability to describe being seen as a representation or stereotype (although this is the only form of appearance for the black) is denied to the fictional slaves of *The Description*, making the task of probing the consequences of this representation more difficult. Therefore, in an attempt to avoid repeating the fetishistic gestures active in imagining how the slaves "might have felt," we will focus on how *The Description* relies on an interdiction of black perspective as further scaffolding for racial fetishism.

To begin, the fetishistic gaze imposed upon *The Description* enjoys a perspectival and existential breadth that is unavailable to the slave. As I have argued previously, the seven illustrations of *The Description* are unmistakably drawn to reproduce the perspective of the not-slave. The black objects that pass for the figures of slaves are fully imprisoned in the decks of the ship. I say "pass" because the label of "figure" is reserved specifically for the outlines of the decks (e.g. "Fig. I," "Fig. II"), and are used to identify the parts of the ship as knowable components of a larger machine. Unlabeled as they are, the slaves are anonymous and interchangeable silhouettes. Wilberforce's instruction to the members of the House of Commons to imagine "6 or 700 of these wretches," the actual number of slaves hardly matters, speaks to

³⁸ In contradistinction to Wood's method of visual analysis, Kara Keeling argues that visual theorists must first acknowledge the "recurrent violence of colonization and enslavement and the configuration of (neo-) colonial temporality authorized by that violence" so that "studies regarding race and representation will be relieved of their quest to locate and identify more accurate (somehow less problematic) representations" ("Interval" 102). Wood's historical and moral framework, and his drawing of a trajectory between the abolition of the slave trade and its memorials two centuries later, sometimes forgets how that framework itself is a product of colonial violence. For example, he writes in *Blind Memory*: "It is, however, the renditions of the middle passage which are finally most troubling in both Liverpool and Hull. This results from the ways in which they are caught up in certain inappropriate conventions of contemporary museum theory... Yet, surely, there are subjects and objects which cannot fit within the educational framework of current museum culture... There are simple and direct gesture of remembrance which attempt to endow the arbitrary sites of disaster with the aura of monuments" (300). The distinction between "right" and "wrong" ways to memorialize the slave trade points to Wood's failure to recognize that memorialization is a writing, and more specifically, an accumulation, of history. We might ask whether any form of memorialization, by making an event "plottable" within the field of a colonial history, is already complicit in maintaining the legitimacy of that history. This does not mean that memorials cannot be subversive, but subversion is never automatically morally superior. For more on Fanon and black visual representation, see Keeling's "'In the Interval': Frantz Fanon and the 'Problems' of Visual Representation," David Marriott's "Black Cultural Studies," and Marcus Wood's *The Horrible Gift of Freedom*, especially chapters 6 and 7.

the non-contradiction of the “mass” and the “outline” (13). Elsewhere, Clarkson also describes the slave holds as a “mass of misery” and a “mass of sufferings.”³⁹ As one, six, or seven hundred, each slave depicted in *The Description* bears the weight of historicity so that one slave could stand-in for any number of others. Moreover, remember that while the heads and legs of individual slaves are more clearly outlined in the full-deck aerial perspectives, the slaves are also drawn in full contact from the shoulders to the hips. At these points of connection, the boundaries separating bodies disappear into long lines of blackness so that the slaves appear as a hydra – one body with many heads and limbs. Produced thusly, “this mass is understood to be undifferentiated precisely because from the imaginary perspective of the political subject – who is also the transcendental subject of knowledge, grasp, ownership and self-possession – difference can only be manifest as the discrete individuality that holds or occupies a standpoint” (Moten, “Blackness and Nothingness” 741). For those occupying the position of a political subject, difference is recognizable only in individuals who occupy a “standpoint,” which is to say, the position of a political subject.⁴⁰ Two implications follow from this thesis; one, the recognition of difference is necessary for the process of identity formation, and two, the undifferentiated are internal to this process. The transcendental subject attains its “I” through the acknowledgement of the “not-I,” even though the legibility of the “not-I” condenses on the plane

³⁹ See Thomas Clarkson’s *The History of the Rise, Progress, and Accomplishment of the Abolition of the African-Slave Trade by the British Parliament*, and *The cries of Africa to the inhabitants of Europe: or, A survey of that bloody commerce called the slave-trade*.

⁴⁰ This use of the term “standpoint” diverges from that of standpoint feminism, the approach advanced most notably by Patricia Hill Collins, Dorothy E. Smith, and Donna Haraway. Described as both a theory and a method, standpoint feminism, broadly conceived, asserts that feminist knowledges should be produced from the perspective, or “standpoint,” of women and their specific social groups because their experiences grant them more thorough and complete understandings of the world. For Donna Haraway, this means, “a doctrine of embodied objectivity that accommodates paradoxical and critical feminist science projects. Feminist objectivity means quite simply situated knowledges” (“Situated Knowledges” 581). Standpoint feminism has been of particular significance for women of color, whose perspectives have been historically excluded from our dominant conceptual frameworks. I would argue that standpoint feminism and Moten’s notion of a “standpoint” are complementary as they each elaborate the processes of knowledge formation from within and outside the position of a recognized “political subject.” See Sandra Harding’s *The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader* for an extended description of standpoint feminism.

of the “I/eye.” And from this plane, the undifferentiated, like the slaves of *The Description*, still appear as Fanon’s “nègre,” only their “outlines” provide no illusion of a bounded “I.”

While the anonymity deliberately crafted by *The Description*’s illustrations authorizes a pleasurable and terrifying inhabitation of the slave, this authority is guaranteed by the slave’s inability to claim anything like the powers of self-representation or possession. I argue in the previous chapter that as the proper mode of being human, Sylvia Wynter’s overrepresented “Man” is defined against the evolutionarily “dysselected” blacks. “Man,” in its guise as “the transcendental subject of knowledge, grasp, ownership and self-possession,” recruits a constellation of social, political, and economic forces to reinforce its necessity, part of which includes the claim to or occupation of “a standpoint.” A standpoint is a vantage point, or a comprehensive view that confers an ad-vantage to its occupier.⁴¹ Distinct from a “view” or “viewpoint,” a vantage is more than phenomenological or sensory property; it is also a claim to those privileges that accrue to the position of the political subject. The point here is not that the undifferentiated are outside of or excluded from the precincts of the political subject, although they are. The point is that the “outlines” of “Man” are always illusory, but they gain their coherence from, and are generated by, the undifferentiated. In this, we might also think of *The Description* “in terms of the spatio-temporal relations it makes visible” (Keeling, “Interval” 93).

Vantage points guarantee or at least hold open the possibility for spatial and temporal coherence by making subjects mappable within given fields of history; they are, in other words,

⁴¹ Moten borrows, and adulterates slightly, the terms “vantage” and “view” from Jared Sexton, who writes in “People-of-Color-Blindness,” that “we should be careful not to confuse ‘the vantage of black existence’ with ‘the views of black people’...A sensibility derived from attention to the structural position of the category of blackness is likely to be produced by people designated or self-identified as black, but it will neither be exclusive to nor inherent in their intellectual practice” (56). Sexton’s “vantage” refers to the disposition or “sensibility” that emerges from one’s position in a political order and the experiences that position often dictates. The “views of black people” are more closely related to sets of beliefs conditioned by individual histories. Moten’s usage of these terms emphasizes the “paraontological” distinction between the fact of blackness (vantage) and the lived experience of the black (view), in which the speaking of the “black self” made possible by that distinction is also the place of its undoing.

coordinated through such sites as the nation, the family, and the law, to name a few. But what happens when these spatio-temporal relations are disorienting or “nonlocal”?⁴² Another way to ask this is how does one plot the “spatio-temporal co-ordinate at which the Black's inferiority comes into being through the other” when “its particular spatial co-ordinates have been obliterated, universalized, and its specific temporal co-ordinates have become unknowable because the Black's inferiority is constantly reinstated” (Keeling, “Interval” 96-97)? The decks of the *Brookes*, and by extension the slaves, are adrift in a “sea” of whiteness and one could suspect that *The Description* owes its longevity in some measure to this facsimile of a historyless present. This *sui generis* appearance is undisturbed by indicators of time or place, and can be observed in the contemporary habit of recycling the *Brookes* images for twentieth and twenty-first century purposes. Recent examples include cellphone cases, tote bags, greeting cards, pillows, and shower curtains.⁴³ These treatments are never accompanied by the text of *The Description*, which would establish a timeframe for the images. This is precisely Keeling’s point – the apparent timelessness of *The Description* works to universalize it so that stereotypes of blackness seem to be without origin. Following Fanon, she argues that “the black” and “the white,” in their problematic racializations, obscure the founding moment of colonial violence that precipitated the transformation from “human” to “black.” The dissimulation of this moment entombs “the black” in an endless cycle of representational stereotypes. From this perspective, “the black” is both hypervisible (“outline”) and invisible (“mass”).

There is some irony in the fact that *The Description* was published to disclose how the slave trade triggered this very transformation from “human” to “black,” insofar as “black”

⁴² Although “nonlocality” is a scientific term particular to quantum mechanics, in *Hyperobjects*, Timothy Morton expands its meaning to the ontological character of objects. Because “information is dispersed among particles seemingly occupying different regions of spacetime,” the “local,” or the idea of being able to “locate” an object in time and space, is an abstraction produced by larger hyperobjects: “Heavy rain is simply a local manifestation of some vast entity that I’m unable directly to see” (46; 47-48).

⁴³ See www.fineartamerica.com for a full catalogue of products.

became inseparable from “object” or “commodity.” The desire to pinpoint this moment turns on a fantasy of pre-racialization that permitted white viewers to disavow responsibility for, or recognition of, how this transformation occurred prior to and after the Middle Passage. Intent aside, the timelessness of *The Description* fueled ontological anxieties about the status of the “human,” “the object,” and “the black” by suggesting that the making of the “human” from the “object” was also without origin and so exists as an infinite possibility. The dark masses of the slaves in the *Brookes* images are not identical to the slaves transported in the holds of the “actual” ship, nor did SEAST ever claim to base their illustrations on historical persons. As Fanon tells us, not only does this “lack” of referent do nothing to obviate the violent temporality of the black’s doubled existence, but it is also symptomatic of how the economy of representation does not need the beings it claims to represent.

Final Thoughts: The Allegory of *The Description*

Thus far, we have put *The Description* through several frameworks of analysis (i.e. scientific, metaphysical, psychic), some of which are at times irreconcilable in terms of their larger concepts. My objective was to demonstrate that in spite of any analytical incommensurability, *The Description* operates on several levels to reinforce a series of differences which we might otherwise take for granted. Object and subject, presence and absence, mass and outline, human and slave, preservation and death; these supposedly firm states or conditions are the “spatio-temporal coordinates” that hold the modern system of race together. These configurations suggest that each of these coordinates are traversed by the slave in a way that infinitely confirms the need for coordinates of difference as a defense against those who would strain against them. A persistent fiction of an “inside” and an “outside” also obtains in the

“either/or” proposition floated by the abolitionists – either you affirm your humanity through an empathetic and fetishistic relation to the enslaved, or you are doomed to join them in their wretchedness. We might then think of *The Description*'s attempts to humanize the slave as a re-positioning of difference that does nothing to disrupt radically the representational systems through which that difference is organized. True, the political, legal, and social benefits vary according to where one is positioned within those systems, and sometimes those differences are the ones that make a difference. No one would argue, for instance, that the abolition of the slave trade and slavery did nothing to improve the material conditions of living for those in the African diaspora. And yet, the terms of blackness persist so that any attempt at their translation or transmutation merely re-organizes them under other terms (i.e. mass incarceration as the after-life of slavery). I close this chapter with a brief meditation on how *The Description* serves as an allegorical reminder of this persistence.

In addition to his insights about naval architecture, Marcus Wood also points out the similarities between *The Description* and what has been called the “first boat” – Noah’s Ark. The flood narrative has inspired hundreds of paintings, engravings, and models, including the contemporary “Johan’s ark,” a full-sized, wooden replica built in 2007 by Johan Huibers in the Netherlands. Many of these works were completed to test whether it was possible for the ark to hold specimens of all the animals in the world. Fascinatingly, these artistic experiments often employed the same design principles as those used to create *The Description*. Illustrations of the ark and *Brookes* made use of specific measurements – via the bible for the ark and Captain Parrey for the *Brookes* – to construct cross-section views of their respective ships. Ark diagrams were popular through the eighteenth century, and sometimes followed the rules of naval architecture to lend technical significance to the drawings. The similarities between *The*

Description and Noah's Ark images also extended beyond mere construction and into the realm of the figurative.

In the book of Genesis, God sends a global flood to obliterate creation as punishment for humanity's increasingly sinful ways. Prior to the flood, he gives specific instruction to Noah to build an ark large enough to accommodate his family and two members of every animal species in the world. The ark was meant to serve as the seed for the remaking of the world, carrying as it did a kind of microcosm of the beings over which man acted as steward. The Abrahamic religions each have their own interpretation of the ark story, all of which include theories about how the animals might have been housed and cared for. As science and theology were often indistinct prior to the eighteenth century, early zoological theories sometimes conceived of the ark's landing spot as the point from which all life originated. After the number of known species increased due to intensified world travel, it became harder to take the story of the ark literally. Even so, its power to draw attention to issues of biodiversity, conservation, wildlife management, and ecological health has sustained its rhetorical life.

In 1998, noted economist Martin Weitzman introduced the "Noah's Ark Problem" as "a parable intended to be a kind of canonical form of the simplest possible way of representing how best to preserve biodiversity under a limited budget constraint" (1279). Epitomizing the close relationship between ecology ("house study") and economy ("house management"), Weitzman's parable addresses the question of how to determine the priorities of conservation and biodiversity management in terms of cost-and-effect. Biodiversity, which regulates ecosystem health and the flow of nutrients and energy throughout biotic and abiotic environments, must be protected by slowing species extinction and habitat loss. And like Noah, it is our responsibility to ensure that happens. But which animals do we concentrate our attentions on?

Much of Weitzman's solutions to the "Noah's Ark Problem" involves complex and abstract mathematical models that assume conservation is primarily about assigning appropriate values to the units being conserved. In the framework of the Noah's Ark story, the "limited budget constraint" would be the available space on the ark itself. In order to carry successfully two representatives of each animal species, Noah would have to carefully select individual animals based on their size and value to the species and to the ecology of the world. As Ernest Small observes, the problem with a value-based approach to preservation is the tendency towards speciesism, where animals are adjudicated based on a number of historical biases that include aesthetics, sentiment and use-value for the human population. Because "human welfare is contingent on the welfare of the environment upon which biodiversity depends," funding priorities are often determined by the contributions a species might make – medical, technological, or scientific – towards that welfare (Small 237). Privileged species-relations are sustained through this self-perpetuating cycle, where decisions about what kinds of organisms to study are dictated by public interest, grant opportunities, and on-going research, which directly contribute to the conservation and availability of those organisms:

Many scientists choose to study economically important species, either because they are motivated to help mankind, or help themselves to the relatively lucrative employment and funding available. Like the general public, scientists also find certain high-profile species especially attractive and interesting (whether or not they are important economically), and choose to work on them simply to satisfy their curiosity, or to gain a scientific reputation that is much harder to achieve when one works on obscure species of limited or no interest to the public. The several dozen wild species that naturally dominate public attention...are to a considerable extent the same ones that attract many scientists and

receive very strong research funding, and consequently for which there are large numbers of research papers, extensive protective legislation, and a highly biased effort at conservation compared to the millions of other species. (Small 239)

The most thoroughly understood species are not chosen for study arbitrarily. Even though ecologists have been encouraging research and funding parity between “charismatic species” and their less attractive cousins, conservation biology is generally governed by anthropocentric interests.⁴⁴ On the face of it, anthropocentrism is not an entirely negative guiding principle; many environmental justice concerns would be irrelevant without it. Indeed, we often arrive at knowledge of a given biome through realizations of how species loss damages ecosystems necessary to our survival. Given this, I would argue that species value judgments do not emerge after ecosystems and their organisms have been “discovered” and analyzed; instead, ecosystems are the product of value judgments that dictate the scale and scope of scientific inquiry. To recognize an ecosystem as such requires the capacity to produce and exchange environmental relations as a form of currency.⁴⁵

It is not difficult to see the parallels between Noah’s (and Weitzman’s) “problem” and that of slave ship owners; both had to allocate space in a way that would maximize the carrying capacities or value-loads of their ships. Likewise, there are similarities between Noah’s mission to re-make creation in God’s image and pro-slavery arguments that the slave trade was

⁴⁴ Also known as “charismatic megafauna,” charismatic species are large animals with widespread public appeal that are used to champion environmental causes. Examples include polar bears, pandas, tigers, elephants, orcas, and the large cats. For a succinct analysis of the term, its history, and its impact on conservation, see Robert Homes et al. “Selection criteria for flagship species by conservation organizations,” and Frédéric Ducarme et. al., “What are ‘charismatic species’ for conservation biologists?”

⁴⁵ See, for example, REDD-plus, the UN’s recent carbon reduction program that rewards countries in the Global South for forest management policies. These rewards can come in the form of carbon taxation, trading, and credits, or various forms of foreign investment. More information can be found at www.un-redd.org. Other examples of how environmental relations are traded within the “market” mentality of conservation can be found in journals such as *Conservation Biology*, *Ecological Economics*, *International Zoo Yearbook*, *BioScience*, *BioControl*, and *Science Magazine*.

humanitarian because it could civilize the African. Wood, on the other hand, concentrates on their differences, whereby “the ark emphasized the unique value of each created thing, and each life form aboard is simply unique; the slave ship emphasizes the homogeneity of the slave cargo, and each life form aboard is, in its legal status, the same” (*Blind Memory* 32). Unlike Noah’s Ark, which created a utopian preserve by keeping death at bay, slave ships domesticated a kind of political death so that the slave had no legal standing as human. What Wood does not appreciate, however, is the logic that underlies both slave ship and ark. That the “Noah’s Ark Problem” has become a convenient shorthand for allegories about preservation highlights a shared component between the slave ship and the ark – systems of relations between non-human objects and humans are articulated from the vantage point of a political subject, so that the “health” and “value” of that system is defined by its usefulness for the preservation of that subject.⁴⁶

More than 200 years after the abolition of the slave trade, we are still using methods to assess and value difference that were refined in the holds. With respect to Keeling and her cogent points about the dissimulation of the founding moments of colonial violence, we cannot say with any certainty that these methods originated with the slave trade. However, the fact that many of these methods must pass through the slave points to our inability to exhaust the fugitivity of blackness, even as it is concentrated in the very figure of the slave itself. The question, therefore, of what it is like to be both internal to and in excess of the projects of “humanity” is also a question about what it is like to both inside and outside of the ark; to be trapped within the ark while having an illegible knowledge of what the ark excludes? What I have shown in this

⁴⁶ For examples, see Laurel Kearn’s “Noah’s Ark Goes to Washington: A Profile of Evangelical Environmentalism,” Neil Perry’s “The precautionary principle, uncertainty and the Noah’s Ark problem,” and Ernest Small’s “The new Noah’s Ark: beautiful and useful species only. Part 1. Biodiversity conservation issues and priorities.”

chapter is that even as a historically specific representation of the slave trade, *The Description* allows us to observe the mechanisms that support the endurance and obstinacy of antiblack violence. By this means, we might be able to understand better the roles this violence plays in the very constitution of our worlds, including the ecological.

CHAPTER 3

“We’s Who the Earth is For:”

Beasts of the Southern Wild and the Global Climate Commons

After the devastation wrought by Hurricane Sandy in 2012, reporter Mike Tidwell of *The Nation* answers his question of “what is a thousand-mile-wide storm pushing eleven feet of water toward our country’s biggest population center saying just days before the election?” with this response: “We are all from New Orleans now” (“We are all from New Orleans now”). In what has been called the “era of climate change,” Tidwell acknowledges an increasing distribution of vulnerability that resonates with popular ideas about the flattening effects of current ecological conditions. Here, considerations of race, class, gender, and sexuality supposedly yield to a neo-humanism in the face of global environmental disasters. Megastorms and hurricanes like Sandy and Katrina are just two of the deadlier examples of how climate change can and has affected human populations on a broad scale. However, Tidwell’s statement also obfuscates the major insights of the environmental justice movement. Rather than creating a lateral distribution of risk, “unnatural disasters” like 2005’s Hurricane Katrina exacerbate the already differential dissemination of environmental hazards. Moreover, as environmental justice activists like Robert D. Bullard and Reverend Benjamin Chavis have revealed, these patterns of distribution are implemented and sustained by state policy and practice.⁴⁷ It is not coincidental that New Orleans’ historically black and poor communities were among those most affected by the breaching of the city’s levees during Hurricane Katrina. Nor is it coincidental that FEMA’s

⁴⁷ Robert D. Bullard and Reverend Benjamin Chavis are together considered the founders of the modern environmental justice movement. Their respective landmark publications, “Solid Waste Sites and the Black Houston Community” and “Toxic Wastes and Race in the United States,” revealed direct correlations between race and the placement of environmental hazards.

response and recovery efforts within these same communities were sluggish and grossly inadequate.⁴⁸ Tidwell's suggestion, then, ignores the realities of environmental racism by capitalizing on the ideologies of our current race relations paradigm. In other words, climate change is color-blind.

Tidwell's article neatly indexes the ways that the global climate commons has become a mechanism for the ecological management of populations based on two, interrelated factors: a collective interest in climate change resistance, and a minimization of environmental racism that is allied with color-blind public policies. Within the color-blindness paradigm, the larger, public policy goals of subduing race-related politics are met through the disciplining of individual actors. A refusal to "see color" would negate individual practices of discrimination that when amalgamated result in widespread forms of oppression. Or so the theory goes. In reality, this "strict political quietism is advanced with respect to 'systemic racism,'" so that "the issue of racism is whittled down to the scale of the domestic estate and the moral training of children by their primary caretakers" (Sexton, *Amalgamation* 72). By displacing responsibility for the eradication of racism onto the private realm, color-blind public policies leave intact historically specific racial privileges that are deployed through political and juridical systems.

Accordingly, most popular forms of climate change resistance prescribe some form of individual behavior modification while fundamentally protecting free-market or neoliberal capitalism. The holy trinity of environmentalism – reducing, reusing, and recycling – is thus paired with a nominal reduction of carbon footprints by individuals and corporations. The three options Tidwell lists to combat global warming reflect the popularity of this thinking: "(1) abandon our coastal cities and retreat inland, (2) stay put and try to adapt to the menacing new

⁴⁸ For examples of how race and socioeconomics affected the speed and substance of recovery efforts in Louisiana, see Robert D. Bullard and Beverly Wright's *Race, Place, and Environmental Justice After Hurricane Katrina*, and David L. Brunsma, David Overfelt, and J. Steven Picou's *The Sociology of Katrina*.

conditions or (3) stop burning planet-warming fossil fuels as fast as possible” (“We are all from New Orleans now”). Concluding that the solution lies in some combination of options 2 and 3, Tidwell suggests that we “[put] a price on carbon fuels” to reduce the costs of clean energy. The UN had in fact adopted a similar approach some years before Tidwell published his article. Launched in 2008, the REDD (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation) and REDD + programs reward developing countries for tracking, managing, and reducing deforestation with investment incentives in the form of “carbon credits.”⁴⁹ Carbon, the elemental basis for organic and inorganic matter, has become commoditized. Rather than addressing how capitalism creates and then instrumentalizes global environmental disaster, these attempts to “greenwash” the economy merely authorize the further expansion of neoliberal practice.⁵⁰

The audience hailed by Tidwell’s article clearly inhabits a “we” and a “now” that fundamentally differ from those experienced by the residents of New Orleans. As figurative “canaries in the coal mine,” these residents make perceptible the otherwise unimaginable “slow violence” of environmental devastation (Nixon, *Slow Violence* 2). Rob Nixon’s insightful term captures how the sheer magnitude of climate change, given its global and epochal scales, poses a significant representational challenge for any resurrection of an environmental commons. How do you assemble and maintain interest in “disasters that are slow moving and long in the making, disasters that are anonymous and that star nobody, disasters that are attritional and of indifferent interest to the sensation-driven technologies of our image-world” (Nixon, *Slow Violence* 3)? Certainly, we can experience the localized effects of climate change, as droughts, coastline erosion, or heat waves for example. But because shared interests must be constructed, for climate

⁴⁹ More information can be found at www.un-redd.org.

⁵⁰ Naomi Klein’s *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* is one of the first book-length studies on how neoliberal, free-market practices capitalize on largescale traumatic events to advance restrictive and exploitative economic policies.

change resistance to serve as a point of social coherence, it must somehow be aligned with the interests of even relatively-protected communities. The temporal and spatial scales of climate change, in other words, must be condensed to a level at which its consequences can be registered as immediate, urgent, and personal. After all, as UNICEF executive director Anthony Lake said in November 2015, “We owe it to our children – and the planet – to make the right decisions” about climate change (“Children”). While the representational strategies of the global climate commons are enacted through a variety of images, I argue that they are most effective when coordinated through scenes of black suffering.⁵¹

This chapter investigates how the ecological legacies of the slave ship shape the culture of global climate change and representations of climate change resistance. As I demonstrate in chapter 1, the ecology of the slave ship established black bodies as a fundamental “natural resource” for the extraction of value. By manipulating the relationships between slaves and environmental elements, sailors ensured that the consequences of regulatory violence were ontologized as innate or natural deficiencies of the slaves. Taking an “interest” in the environment then, in the overlapping sense of the word as speculative finance and the stimulation of desire, refers to a process of value-production that relies on an investment in black suffering. Prior to and immediately following the abolition of the transatlantic slave trade, such investments were mobilized to connect the disciplining of the Southern landscape with the disciplining of black bodies in order to force both into capitalist modes of production. Here, slave and nature were depicted as unruly so that white planters could become self-made American men through their possession and transformation of each. Scholars of race and nature

⁵¹ The “Blue Marble,” or the ubiquitous NASA photographic series that depicts earth from space, is among the first set of images recruited by the global climate commons to highlight the shared nature of environmental precarity. More recent images include polar bears stranded on Arctic ice floes, coastal erosion, and snowpack depletion (Ziser and Sze 387-392).

like Paul Outka, Katherine McKittrick, Monique Allewaert, and Britt Rusert have also traced how plantations, as “[laboratories] for experimenting with and manipulating all kinds of biota...including plants, animals, and enslaved persons,” have played a definitive role in the environmental management of populations throughout the American and global South (Rusert 152).⁵² While plantation ecologies evolved in response to the changing needs of a capitalist economy, what remained constant was the role that black suffering played in the creation of environmental interests. As evidenced by Tidwell’s article, these same interests are deployed in the distribution of, and responses to, environmental racism. And yet, as a supposedly universal risk to species-level survival, climate change has presented new opportunities to naturalize this formulation of environmental interests.

I contend that cultural productions about the climate commons depend on our investments in black suffering, even or especially when those productions advance multiracial coalitions as a form of climate change resistance. After briefly tracing the evolution of the commons from its English, land-based origins to its more metaphorical modern usage, I turn to a reading of Benh Zeitlin’s 2012 feature-length film *Beasts of the Southern Wild* (*Beasts*). The film’s proposal to (re)build the climate commons on a refusal of enclosure is anchored by a wild, multiracial community that aspires to the radical possibilities of what Stefano Harney and Fred Moten name the “undercommons.” However, despite its inclusive and anti-capitalist ethics, *Beasts’* ecological vision is undone by those bodies already coded as criminally excessive, nonhuman, and racially black. Subsequently, I argue that that film’s cinematic strategies are compromised by what Frank B. Wilderson III calls the “grammar of antagonism” (*Red, White &*

⁵² For more on how plantation ecologies transformed the racialization of space, place, and nature, see Paul Outka’s *Race and Nature*, Katherine McKittrick’s *Demonic Grounds*, Monique Allewaert’s *Ariel’s Ecology*, and Britt Rusert’s “Black Nature: The Question of Race in the Age of Ecology.”

Black 5). Because the “irreducible struggle between entities, or positions...entails the obliteration of one of the positions,”

even when films narrate a story in which Black or Indians are beleaguered with problems that the script insists are conceptually coherent (usually having to do with poverty or the absence of “family values”), the nonnarrative, or cinematic, strategies of the film often disrupt this coherence by posing the irreconcilable questions of Red and Black political ontology – or nonontology. (Wilderson, *Red, White & Black 5*)

To be sure, *Beasts* aims for neither realist representation nor historical accuracy, but the deeply racial overtones of its environmental motifs shed new light on the imbrication of climate change resistance and the ecological legacies of the slave ship. As such, I read the film as an object lesson in the racial logic of contemporary environmental reason.

“Our Common Future”

Historically, the commons referred to “collective lands and resources” in medieval England that were shared by communities, each member of which had an equal stake in usage (Shantz 3). Because sustaining these pools of resources was to the advantage of all users, communities conceived collaborative social arrangements to align individual interests with those of the group. The most consistent threat to these arrangements came from the enclosure movement, which reserved formerly common spaces for private use either by community agreement, or, by the mid-eighteenth century, fiat. As common lands were crucial for the subsistence of the peasant and/or working classes, the enclosure movement facilitated substantial socio-economic transformations, including, as Marx notes, the transition from feudalism to

capitalism.⁵³ The historical significance of the commons and enclosure was later absorbed and re-mobilized by the modern usage of each term, both of which were popularized by Garrett Hardin's notorious 1968 essay, "The Tragedy of the Commons." Hardin, an ecologist by training, invokes a metaphorical commons to draw connections between the depletion of resources, overpopulation, and the necessity of regulation. Denouncing the ability of rational self-interest to manage population growth, he famously blames the welfare state for recognizing reproduction as a public right, thereby allowing large families to selfishly exploit collective resources. To substantiate these assertions, he turns to a hypothetical group of herders and their common grazing lands. As each herder endeavors to maximize their personal profits by permitting their cows to overgraze, the commons inevitably fails.⁵⁴ The model of the commons, he concludes, is unsustainable without restrictions on selected rights.

The essay has been widely criticized by scholars from a number of disciplines, not least for its ahistorical and morally bankrupt reasoning. Nevertheless, it introduced the modern idea of the commons as any resource or interest – water, air, data, health care, network access – that is or should be collectively shared and managed. Enclosure, which was initially associated with the privatization of land, was likewise updated to include all the variable tactics of neoliberalism: centralized administration, austerity measures, self-discipline, and market deregulation. Notably, the commons/enclosure kinship that Hardin underscores was fashioned into a politics of the commons, in which a general refusal of enclosure corresponds to a preservation of the common good. Projects as diverse as Wikileaks (i.e. a digital information commons), the Zapatista

⁵³ Marx outlines the contributions of the enclosure movement to the development of primitive accumulation and the labor and commodity markets in "Expropriation of the Agricultural Population from the Land," chapter 27 of *Capital*, vol. 1.

⁵⁴ The "parable" of the cow herders was borrowed from William Forster Lloyd's 1832 lecture to Oxford University, entitled "Two Lectures on the Checks to Population" (Nixon, "Neoliberalism" 594). This lecture, which was published as a pamphlet in 1833, influenced Hardin's excoriation of human greed, or what he perceived as the moral downfall of the commons.

movement (i.e. a socio-economic commons), and community gardens (i.e. an ecological commons) have been associated with these politics, some in an *ex post facto* manner.⁵⁵ As it is with similar concepts, the virtually ubiquitous presence of the commons has diluted its meaning, making it that much more attractive as an instrument of “semantic infiltration.”⁵⁶

No longer tethered to material locations or resources, the commons has become such a powerful concept-metaphor that it has been appropriated by the very forces it once sought to resist. Hardin’s essay marked the onset of a neoliberalizing trend, whereby “the idea of the commons seems to function less as an *alternative* to capitalist social relations, and more like their *savior*” (De Angelis 32). For instance, President Obama’s support for the Kyoto Protocol and the Paris climate accords framed the protection of the commons as crucial for market growth and economic health. In addition, since the commons requires a procedure to govern usage, proponents of neoliberalism argue that enclosure is the most practical way to safeguard its preservation. What Massimo De Angelis calls capitalism’s “schizophrenic relationship to the commons” has produced a “distorted commons” that enables the additional regulation of natural resources (33). We have seen this distortion in Tidwell’s solutions as representative of the major initiatives for climate change resistance. So too, theories of sustainability recommend an arithmetic of energy expenditure to “fully [calculate] the external or hidden costs of any product we consume” (Stoekl 42). This rhetoric of limits, need, and debt is especially seductive as it relates to future generations.

Condemnations of Hardin’s xenophobia notwithstanding, advocates of the global climate commons have adopted his appeal to “think of the future.” This imperative is epitomized by the

⁵⁵ Jeff Shantz’ *Commonist Tendencies* and Peter Linebaugh’s *Stop, Thief!* contain helpful overviews of “commonist” movements over the last two centuries.

⁵⁶ “Semantic infiltration” is a phrase coined by Daniel Patrick Moynihan to describe “the appropriation of the language of one’s political opponents, for the purpose of blurring distinctions and molding it to one’s own political position” (Steinberg, “The Liberal Retreat from Race”). Steinberg discusses its usage with respect to the expression “equal rights,” and I would argue that the same process of appropriation is currently underway with “the commons.”

1987 Brundtland Commission Report, entitled “Our Common Future,” and its familiar definition of sustainability: “Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (qtd. in Stoekl 41). On the surface, this definition is inoffensive; the moral debt we owe to “future generations” must never become an environmental debt. However, the Brundtland Report also makes explicit how articulations of “our common future” can set in motion otherwise non-environmental agendas. By regulating what is and is not indispensable for climate change resistance, like green capital investment for neoliberals or coalition politics for progressives, advocates of the global climate commons can project specific visions of the world. This enclosure paradoxically provides the means through which the future itself becomes a commons – a shared albeit imaginary and rhetorical resource for the re-alignment of our interests in the present.⁵⁷ Hence, recommendations for climate change resistance are often expressed in a formulaic way: “Because the global climate commons is threatened by a and b, if we want to maintain and/or prevent x, y, and z in the future, we must do c and d now.” But as such, predictions about the future of the global climate commons must necessarily contend with our habits of environmental representation. To illustrate, the reviews of *Beasts* vary according to how the reviewer responds to the film’s racialization of nature, which signals that its “common future” might not be so common after all.

A Light in the Wild

Set in a fictional post-Katrina bayou known as “the Bathtub,” *Beasts* depicts the contemporary extension of the ecological relationships convened across the Middle Passage. I

⁵⁷ In “Further Considerations of Afrofuturism,” Kodwo Eshun notes that because contemporary power frequently “functions through the envisioning, management, and delivery of reliable futures,” the powerful can “[condemn] the disempowered to live in the past” by virtue of the “futures they endorse” (289).

am particularly interested in how the film navigates the kinds of communities that coalesce through a shared ecological and social vulnerability. The Bathtub and its inhabitants are separated from the nearest urban area by a chain of levees. The film's narrative takes place through one of these inhabitants, a six-year old black girl named Hushpuppy (Quvenzhané Wallis), who lives in a trailer adjacent to her ailing father, Wink (Dwight Henry). Hushpuppy also possesses what seems to be a posthuman attunement towards the nonhuman beings of the Bathtub, including her "pets" and later, a herd of ancient aurochs released from their glacial suspension by the melting of the polar ice caps. After a hurricane floods the Bathtub, the remaining residents are forcibly rounded up by civil authorities and relocated to a refugee center. Once there, the residents revolt, gather their community members and return to the Bathtub with a dying Wink. Hushpuppy and a group of her friends then launch themselves into the sea in an attempt to find her mother and are delivered to a brothel, where the women lavish maternal affection on the group. Upon returning to the Bathtub, Hushpuppy confronts the rampaging aurochs. Telling them, "You're my friend, kind of," she manages to ward off their impending destruction in time to bid her father farewell. The film ends with a seemingly triumphant scene, as Hushpuppy leads the residents of the Bathtub deeper into the delta while the encroaching sea laps at their feet.

Hailed as one of the best films of its year, *Beasts* has nevertheless generated both critical acclaim and derision for its treatment of climate change politics. Nicholas Mirzoeff, for example, has called *Beasts* one of the first films to successfully visualize climate change resistance through its imagining of alternatives to governmentality. In an "Occupy 2012" blog-post entitled "Becoming Wild," Mirzoeff opposes the "wild" to practices of governmentality. Writing that *Beasts* is "unbounded and undomesticated" because "the crisp, empty space of the modern

cinema is here overflowing with what Jane Bennett calls ‘vibrant matter,’” he suggests that contrary to colonial and modernist notions of empty space and time, the wild has always been “occupied” (“Becoming Wild”). As evidence, he cites frames that are bursting with tight shots of “piles of crustaceans,” “thickets of dense vegetation,” “masses of melting glacial ice,” “dust motes” and “insect life” (“Becoming Wild”). This welcome departure from the wild as either a primitive scene of violence or a space of (white) unmarked purity is juxtaposed against the sanitary space of the refugee clinic, implying that life can thrive outside of the neoliberal mandate of self-interest. But for bell hooks, the film overtly reproduces the historical conflation of blackness with material and spiritual poverty. She argues that

there is nothing radical about the age-old politics of domination the movie espouses – insisting that only the strong survive, that disease weeds out the weak (i.e. the slaughter of Native Americans,) that nature chooses excluding and including. If Wink represents the dying untamed primitive then what does Hushpuppy represent? Her fate is unclear. (“No Love in the Wild”)

According to her, the film’s sharp contrast between the civility of rational society (i.e. the city protected by levees) and the “dying untamed primitive” of the Bathtub endorses a “survival of the fittest” mentality. Climate change resistance, in this sense, is less about appeals to the common good than it is a continuation of colonialism by other means.

These readings expose the film’s struggles to reckon with the racial logic of environmental representation. In the words of Natalia Cecire, *Beasts* “aims to render slow violence representable [by] borrowing the African American strategy of producing punctual scenes that collapse and compress the temporal and spatial extension of harm” (172). To cultivate a comprehensive sense of responsibility, or an environmental “non-innocence,” the

global climate commons depends on culturally meaningful symbols to visualize the “collapsing and compressing” of ecological harm. Hence, it is not insignificant that the effects of climate change accumulate in the figure of Hushpuppy. For one, as Cecire emphasizes in her article, “Environmental Innocence and Slow Violence,” the historical refusal of innocence to black children renders them inherently culpable. The widespread criminalization of black youth, recently exemplified by the 2014 murder of twelve-year-old Tamir Rice, is one of the more pervasive materializations of this legacy. Consequently, the racialization of innocence, and more precisely its absence, qualifies black children to bear the weight of environmental risk and responsibility.

It is not by happenstance that the film’s most publicized scene features Hushpuppy as a literal bearer of light (see figure 6). Just days before a hurricane destroys most of the Bathtub, we observe Hushpuppy running towards the camera and through a darkened field with her arms outstretched, each hand holding a sparkler as the explosions from several fireworks fill the frame until it brims with light. Complimentary interpretations of this scene, and the film more broadly, claim that Hushpuppy’s delight emanates from her “transcendental feelers,” which guide her realization that it is “worth the risk...to live free in the riches of nature than surrounded by prosperity and plenty that’s always out of reach” (Edelstein “Movie Review;” Phipps “Beasts”). A.O. Scott of *The New York Times* similarly argues that *Beasts* is “animated by the same spirit of freedom it sets out to celebrate” (“She’s the Man”). Admittedly, Scott, like other critics, does praise Hushpuppy’s ostensibly innocent perspective on the world. However, these fixations on her displays of childhood exuberance are telling. On one hand, her behavior is only remarkable because viewers are culturally unprepared to expect signs of innocence and play in black children. On the other hand, to construe her joy as triumphant or liberating implies that hers is

not a joy borne of ignorance; it rather bespeaks a precocious wisdom to which the rest of us are belated. She may be a magical negro in miniature, but as “caretaker, man, boy, girl, woman all within herself...part of the community but complete unto herself,” she is still accountable for all the mature functions of her trope (Sharpe, “Precarity I”).

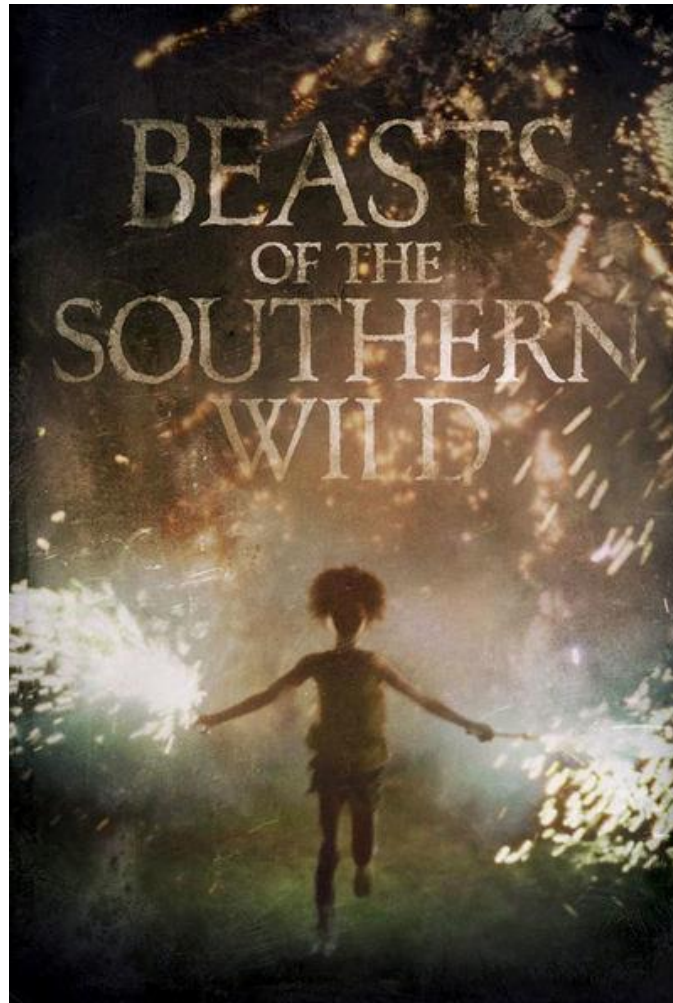


Figure 6. Theatrical Release Poster for *Beasts of the Southern Wild*

The fascination with innocence aside, *Beasts*' portrayal of black bodies participates in an economy of sentiment contingent on the possession or replacement of the suffering body itself. The film's unfavorable appraisals, mainly from scholars of color, claim that Hushpuppy's

pleasure and abandon trivializes systematic forms of racism – environmental or otherwise – by romanticizing poverty. In a review published in *Social Text: Periscope*, Jayna Brown writes

The film calls this poverty freedom. But I don't recognize this freedom. Their existence isn't active or sustainable...This is no maroon society...Instead the film recapitulates the continuing currency of Black suffering, and acts as a kind of 'crisis porn,' showing how black pain is erotically charged. ("Precarity II")

For Brown and hooks, Hushpuppy's vulnerability, filth, and need are entirely obscured by the film's irrational celebratory spirit. The light that bursts from the frame at the end of Hushpuppy's fireworks run is not meant for her; it signifies neither the freedoms of poverty, nor a rejection of governmentality. Instead, this light is meant for us, the viewers, as a distracting substitute for real political action. Fellow reviewer Christina Sharpe agrees, commenting that viewing *Beasts* as enacting resistance to climate change

requires that one have no desire to alleviate Hushpuppy's devastation...The film needs black bodies because how else could incipient sexual and other violence, the violence of extreme poverty, flooding, the violence of a six-year old girl child living alone in her own ramshackle house with no mother or father, be inspiring and not tragic? ("Precarity I")

In her reading, for the film to moor the global climate commons in poverty, it must first spectacularize black suffering. The underlying assumption in Brown and Sharpe's reviews is that an emphasis on climate change resistance encourages viewers to disregard the historical structures of race and class oppression. A closer reading of the fireworks scene supports their analyses.

We watch Hushpuppy point a sparkler at a grinning Wink before directing it skywards. The camera settles briefly on Hushpuppy's upturned face, lit partially by the glow from

fireworks exploding out of frame, and over a reverse shot of Wink, Hushpuppy exclaims in voice over: “But me and my daddy, we stay right here. We’s who the earth is for.” As Hushpuppy runs through the field holding her sparklers, she points them directly at the camera. Light quickly fills the frame, obscuring her figure until she is entirely hidden from view. We cannot erase the labor of the cinematic apparatus here as the limitations of our gaze are revealed when each burst of light blurs as it reaches the edges of the frame. And because the light from her sparklers continues to stretch towards the camera, the viewer can only conclude that behind this luminous, opaque screen, Hushpuppy continues her celebration without us. The film, in this brief but pivotal moment, refuses our attempts to identify with her. In Kaja Silverman’s terms, the viewer is unable to complete the operation that would suture her to Hushpuppy.⁵⁸ Instead, the sentiments of empathetic identification are displaced onto Hushpuppy’s gift of light as the film’s cinematic strategies literally wash out her racial blackness. It is only in this manner that the “we” in her earlier declaration can encompass the viewer. Because “the storm’s gonna blow, the ground’s gonna sink, and the water’s gonna rise up,” the “we” of the global climate commons becomes “who the earth is for.”

On this point, Brown and Sharpe are correct; we cannot identify with Hushpuppy as a black child negotiating an antiblack world, but we can identify with Hushpuppy when she reflects back to us the possibilities of our own survival. The mechanisms of empathy I detail in the preceding chapters confirm that black suffering is a vanishing mediator that fades once it delivers its cautionary message. In this fashion, any attempted identification with Hushpuppy reinscribes her status as “signifying property plus” (Spillers 203). Because *Beasts* seems wholly uninterested in alleviating the poverty of the Bathtub, it is difficult to reject Brown and Sharpe’s insistence that the film orchestrates spectacles of black suffering to broker the viewer’s

⁵⁸ Refer to Kaja Silverman’s *The Subject of Semiotics*.

enjoyment. Many forms of climate change resistance do require our complacency with or consumption of black pain, and if anything, the theft and recycling of Hushpuppy's trauma represents the ultimate populist mechanism for climate change resistance.⁵⁹ Hushpuppy, and with her New Orleans, have become the signifiers through which we understand ourselves within conditions of ecological vulnerability. The fact that we must consume black suffering to establish a common interest in climate change resistance is symptomatic of how antiblackness subsidizes the articulation of environmental interests.

Intriguingly, the correlation Sharpe alludes to between the prioritization of climate change resistance and the deferral of black suffering also hints at its inverse – that a prioritization of black suffering would be associated with a deferral of climate change resistance. While it would be unfair to attribute this inverse to Sharpe, her critique of *Beasts* inadvertently lays bare the central relationship between racial blackness and environmental interests. Therefore, in its attempt to bridge these dimensions through the motif of climate change resistance, the film's task is to avoid elevating what *is* common, the actualization of environmental interests through black suffering, to the level of *the* commons. On this score, it is not entirely successful. Hushpuppy's affirmation that "we's who the earth is for" sounds exceedingly like Tidwell's assertion that "we are all from New Orleans now." In both statements, we can sense a groping for a model of identity that will excuse each "we" from the potentially shattering praxis of self-theorization. If we are all from New Orleans, then Hushpuppy and Wink's confidence in the face of environmental precarity not only belongs to everyone, it also relieves the viewer from addressing the enabling conditions of that precarity. The film's reviews, the scholarly and popular

⁵⁹ During his interview with Saidiya Hartman, Frank B. Wilderson III points out that the 2000 film *Erin Brockovich*, for which Julia Roberts won the Academy Award for Best Actress, replaced the actual brown and black victims of PG&E's groundwater contamination with "a whole plethora of Jacksonian white people" (Hartman and Wilderson 195-196). While this is not an example of the consumption of black suffering, it does demonstrate the very small range of representational options concerning black bodies and the environment. To wit, black bodies are either actively suffering or completely replaced.

discourses on race and nature, and the film itself of course have different motivations that shape their engagements with climate change. Nonetheless, they converge on the implicit question of whether black bodies should be admitted to the commons, and if so, through what criteria?

The essential confrontations that *Beasts* stages between the concept of interests and the commons clarify how the ecology the slave ship is fundamental to climate change resistance. Wink and Hushpuppy, for instance, refuse the false choice between environmental interests and ecological disaster by remaining in the Bathtub. Excluded from a “life” behind the levees, the Bathtub’s residents still prefer an existence that remains close to its own destruction over the fantasies of self-regulation and control that distinguish the global climate commons. If the false choice between environmental interests and ecological disaster is undergirded by the commons, then the Bathtub represents a desire for a world where these affective, political, and ecological regulations no longer make sense. This is a world in which resistance to climate change is coded as a nullification of interests as opposed to their cathedralization. If the Bathtub provides “wild alternatives to governmentality,” it is through its exposure of how a politics of the common good can contribute to and accelerate real environmental disaster (Mirzoeff, “Becoming Wild”). Still, antiblackness remains in the strategies of the film and in the freedoms of the Bathtub. For these reasons, tracking the use and circulation of black suffering allows us to see how any climate change solutions must be improvised, tested, and accounted for through blackness first.

Our Undercommon Always

Because the commons are now predominately managed through neoliberal enclosures (i.e. De Angelis’ “distorted commons”), our ability to distinguish between the two has been essentially overwhelmed. As a case in point, the modern and classical versions of the commons

share a fantasy of equitable resource portioning that assumes a right to a stake in the commons. Environmental activists, for instance, agitate against the privatization of water on the basis of humanity's given right to their means of survival. But the moment that the issue of rights enters the frame, we have already consigned ourselves to the thing we seek to escape – a politics of enclosure. Writing that “in the moment of right/s the commons is already gone in the movement to and of the common that surrounds it and its enclosure,” Harney and Moten point out that the theory and practice of rights, in its impulse to structure and regulate freedoms and entitlements, fundamentally invalidates the commons as it brings the stateless into the enclosures of the state (18). That is, the creation and implementation of rights creates a juridical commons by internalizing that which exists outside of its purview. In this, Harney and Moten argue, inheres a warning to be as wary of the commons as we have been of enclosure.

In contrast to a distorted commons (i.e. universities, national parks, city councils), *Beasts* strives to construct the Bathtub along the lines of what Harney and Moten call the “undercommons,” or “a wild place that is not simply the left over space that limns real and regulated zones of polite society,” but also “a wild place that continuously produces its own unregulated wildness” (Halberstam 7). Although collectives of queer, black, brown, feminist, poor, and transgender activists spearhead many climate change initiatives, the undercommons cannot be equated with a politics of (state) recognition. Certainly, these activists do inhabit spaces that “[limn] real and regulated zones of polite society,” even as they push for reforms that would permit them entrance into the “regulated zones.” However, the undercommons is less a politics of rights than it is “a space and time which is always here,” one where “our goal...is not to end the troubles but to end the world that created those particular troubles as the ones that must be opposed” (Halberstam 9). The undercommons is everywhere and in every time; it is also

a project that measures its success through the unmaking of that time and space, which is to say by the unmaking of the world. The undercommons thus exists in and as a radical, autopoietic *a priori* within and outside of governmentality. There are two movements immanent to the undercommons that we can observe in *Beasts*: a refusal of what has been refused to you, and a coterminous act of enclosure against which this secondary refusal strains. Composed of those bodies refused entrance into the distorted commons, those in the undercommons refuse this refusal by working not for the right of admission, but for the destruction of enclosure itself.

As an allegorical reference to Louisiana's delta regions and more specifically to New Orleans' Ninth Ward, the Bathtub resists the distorted commons by revealing the security of the levee system as illusory. The Ninth Ward is located downriver of the Mississippi River watershed, with large portions of it directly abutting either the city's Industrial or Gulf Intercostal Canals. Only the system of levees built and maintained by the Army Corps of Engineers protects the Ward from storm surges and waterway flooding, which makes it one of the most vulnerable locations to inhabit in the Mississippi delta region. And yet, the most striking sequence of scenes in *Beasts* portrays the predominantly underdeveloped areas of the delta as vastly preferable to the costlier and less risky living options further inland. After the opening scenes, a jump cut finds us on the opaque waters of the Bathtub. Wink and Hushpuppy, now floating in the bed of a pickup truck detached from its cab, are literally backing into the waterways next to a giant set of levees (see figure 7). Above the levees, large industrial works are partially obscured by a haze produced from their own smokestacks. We shift focus from Wink, lying against the back of the cab, to Hushpuppy as she stands to survey the walls. Wink asks, "Ain't that ugly over there? We got the prettiest place on earth." Hushpuppy then offers: "Daddy says, up above the levees, on the dry side, they're afraid of the water like a bunch of

babies. They built the wall that cuts us off.” Seen from the “outside,” the levees appear not as life-saving technology, but as an object for the ecological management of populations. The “dry side’s” fear of the water renders it a floating signifier of absolute unknowability, a threat to the illusions of control maintained by the system of levees.



Figure 7. Wink and Hushpuppy floating near the levee walls.

The levees and industrial works together compose the popular iconography of climate change resistance in terms of the reduction of carbon emissions and structural adaptations to rising sea levels. This optic of labor and progress is immediately juxtaposed with Wink and Hushpuppy’s slow, almost languid movements in their re-purposed vehicle. This stark contrast, between development and inactivity, and between enclosure above the levees and the unregulated threat of the surrounding water, is gathered in the figures of Hushpuppy and Wink as representatives of the undercommons. Having been refused entrance into the dry-land commons created by the levee system, Hushpuppy and Wink refuse this refusal by actively choosing the

Bathtub. Here, Hushpuppy draws a connection between the obstructed water and “us,” observing that the construction of the levees suggests an uneasy equivalency between disorderly and uncontrollable natural phenomena (i.e. weather patterns and water cycles) and a disorderly and uncontrollable population. The water, Wink, and Hushpuppy are fragments of the real, reminders of an attempt to leave a chaotic past behind, but ready to break in upon the enclosure’s false sense of security. Wink and Hushpuppy’s truck bed, their primary means of transportation, reverses into the future of climate change resistance, capturing the second movement of the undercommons as the “past” of the surround comes to justify the act of enclosure. The Bathtub and its residents were there, and have always been there, prior to the erection of the levees, and it is their wild refusals that justify the need for concrete barricades.

Along these lines, the connections that Hushpuppy detects between the Bathtub’s residents and the water are not just metaphorical; they are also material. The levees impede the natural flow of water in the delta, so that when a hurricane floods the Bathtub, the excess water has nowhere to go. After the hurricane passes, Wink and Hushpuppy climb into their truck-bed boat and search for their friends. About a dozen people end up in Little Jo’s bar, where they subsist on sea life they pull from the water. After two weeks, the toxicity of the trapped water has killed whatever animal life remains; dead chickens, fish, and cows float in the water or decay against mud banks. Wink, Jean Battiste, and Winston decide to blow a hole in the levee wall to create enough negative pressure to drain the water from the Bathtub. Miss Bathsheba, learning of the plan after the trio’s departure, leaps into her own boat to stop them. As Hushpuppy stows away on Miss Bathsheba’s boat, we hear in voiceover: “The entire universe depends on everything fitting together just right. If you can fix the broken piece, it can all go right back.” At the levee, the trio stuffs a dead garfish with dynamite and attempt to lash it to the wall, but

Winston loses the trip wire. Hushpuppy, who manages to retrieve it, detonates the garfish and the levee wall explodes in a cloud of white debris. Far from contributing to the ecological wellbeing of the region, the levees are the “broken piece” that must be fixed. *Beasts* elucidates how the levees’ social and ecological enclosures make it exponentially harder to marshal collective interest in the future of the climate commons.

Because the “we” of the undercommons embodies cultural anxieties about race and nature, the effects of climate change can fuel the further circulation of those anxieties. Michael Ziser and Julie Sze, for example, write that “the unmistakable effect of the drumbeat of ‘Chinese smog’ reports was to correlate Chinese geopolitical threats with environmental threats” (394). The possibility that “Chinese smog” could make its way to the US not only reinvigorated fears about the “yellow horde”, but also absorbed concerns over America’s own contributions to climate change. “The proxy function of carbon emissions,” Ziser and Sze add, “may help explain why environmental arguments that have met with little success in domestic U.S. politics have proved much more successful when wielded as critiques of China” (394). Ziser and Sze’s probe into the cultural resonance of global climate change exposes how our environmental concerns are frequently subsumed by our interests in national and individual identity. We are more preoccupied with what climate change might say about our self-natures, than we are with preventing its intensification. Subsequently, *Beasts* extends its refusal of enclosure to the sociality of the Bathtub, where it materializes as a refusal of both interests and identities.

Governance and Environmentality

The solicitation, nurturing, and accumulation of interests has become the predominant catalyst for self-management and the governance of difference. Foucault, the most well-known

commentator on the technologies of the self, describes self-management as a neoliberal mode of discipline, whereby individual conduct becomes aligned with the larger objectives of modern political power. But as scholars of environmentality like Arun Agrawal and Timothy Luke point out, since at least the 1970's, this alignment has been increasingly achieved through the promotion of environmental interests. Agrawal's ethnography of Kumaon villagers in northern India demonstrates that one's relationship to the environment originates not from predetermined social categories, but from an individual's intimacy with localized regulatory practice: "the way social groups perceive their interests is significantly dependent on policy and government instead of being constant and immutable" (180). In this instance, the decentralization of forest management created opportunities to claim environmental authority that when exercised cultivates an interest in the environment. These interests, in turn, have become the ground for enclosures that take the form of advocacy groups, local-level management of resources, and environmental citizenship. Even the projects of environmental justice activism are not immune to the forces of environmentality. Hilda Kurtz suggests in "Acknowledging the Racial State: An Agenda for Environmental Justice Research" that environmental justice meets its limit in the state's push to include environmental advocacy in its repertoire of disciplinary practices. As a post-civil rights formation, environmental justice movements put further pressure on the state to respond to self-identified interest groups. This response has so far arrived as either as absorption or insulation, where "absorbing demands refers to adopting them in 'suitably moderate form', while insulating demands refers to confining them to largely symbolic arenas of actions" (Kurtz 111). Environmental justice thus becomes a species of reformism whereby movements to counteract environmental racism are perceived as a singular "interest group" that makes its enclosure by the state a possibility.

Environmentality, or ecogovernmentality, effectively shifts our focus from the techniques of self-management to the generation of interests that supply the occasions for self-management. Yet environmentality, like governmentality, still proceeds by extracting value from material labor. Even though that labor may be performed in the name of self-interest, like the local management of forests, it continues to produce a form of labor-power that is exchangeable. As such, it is difficult for environmentality to operate in a community like the Bathtub, where so-called “productive labor” is disdained in favor of having “more holidays than the rest of the world.” What the Bathtub values instead is the immaterial labor of sociality or the affective labor of coalition, neither of which by themselves constitute entry points for the application of environmentality. Following our introduction to the levee system with Hushpuppy and Wink, the film moves seamlessly into an aerial shot of the delta. We approach a set of makeshift dwellings, built in a semi-circle near the very edge of the water. Over a muted rumble that soon resolves into the sounds of celebration, Hushpuppy narrates: “They think we all gonna drown down here. But we ain’t going nowhere.” We follow Hushpuppy and the other residents into the Bathtub, its entrance marked by a handwritten, driftwood sign. As they pass beneath or alongside it, they reach up to slap it. The solid sound of their palms on its surface, resounding under the musical soundtrack, alerts the viewer to the strength of the community. There, a series of quickly changing scenes place the viewer in the middle of a boisterous festival, complete with a parade featuring ramshackle floats. The camera pauses, in deep focus, on the residents of the Bathtub: a group of black, brown, and white babies tumbling over each other on a blanket, an older white woman holding sparklers, Wink and Walrus drinking with their arms around each other, an older black man in overalls laughing with a group of white men.

These scenes are the film's statement about the communities that can be created through a refusal of interests. The Bathtub cobbles together its existence from materials that have mostly outlived their exchange-values – scraps of metal and wood, broken cookware, and frayed blankets. The film's emphasis on the Bathtub's multiracial composition also implies that this non-proprietary approach extends to its social networks. Mediated through the pleasure and enjoyment of "holidays" rather than the relations of identity, networks such as these are generally illegible and therefore suspicious within the parameters of environmentality. According to its market-driven logic, any community that thrives without the production of labor-power must have access to a secret source of wealth. In this regard, Harney and Moten find "governance," or "a kind of 'state-thought,'" that "[supports] the rendering and hoarding of social wealth," a more accurate concept for understanding how and why the development of interests is encouraged in the undercommons:

The slogan of governance might be not 'where there is gas, there is oil,' but 'where there is politics there is labor,' a kind of labor that might be provoked, in the words of critique, or grown, in the words of policy, into labor-power. But this labor as subjectivity is not politics to itself. It must be politicised if it is to yield up its labor-power, or rather we might say, politics is the refining process for immaterial labor. Politicisation is the work of state-thought, the work today, of capital. This is the interest it bears. And interests are its lifeblood, its labor. (53-54)

When interests are adopted and politicized as forms of identity, the formerly immaterial labor of the undercommons can become reified through and as the labor of responsible self-representation. Without this "refining process," the alleged wealth of the undercommons remains in the undercommons. This is precisely where the moral force of the global climate commons is

at its most potent. If we are all reliant on the climate commons, then we are also obligated to contribute whatever we have to its protection. Consequently, cleaving to a position of “no interests” threatens our mutual survival through an immoral and criminal withholding of wealth. The conceptual apparatus of governance also helps us to comprehend the state’s response to the residents of the Bathtub.

In an effort to force them to develop their own interests, even if only in their survival, the state sends agents to collect Wink, Hushpuppy, and the Bathtub’s other residents who braved the hurricane. Hushpuppy, standing outside of her trailer, calls for her mother above the sounds of the wind. Her cries of “Mama” are met with the thrum of a helicopter’s propeller blades as we watch it come into focus high above the Bathtub. As the sounds of the propeller blades fade, we hear the following announcement: “This is a mandatory evacuation area.” Hushpuppy’s pleas for her mother, whose disappearance is never fully elaborated in the film, appear to call into being the instruments of governmentality and governance. Once the residents are forcibly relocated to the “Open Arms” refugee shelter, the camera pans quickly through various scenes of trauma and wounding – bodies lying in beds, bodies sitting on cots, and bodies lining up for food. The space of the shelter is both sterile and disorderly, and Hushpuppy opines, “It didn’t look like a prison – it looked more like a fish tank with no water.” In disarticulating the prison and the shelter, Hushpuppy hints at the distinct terrains of (eco)governmentality and governance. The prison, as one of the first universal enclosures, incubated some of the original techniques of self-management through the disciplinary configurations of the panopticon.⁶⁰ But the field of operations for governance is not found in the “[accumulation of] biopolitical bodies that labor”

⁶⁰ In *Stop, Thief!*, Peter Linebaugh comments that “a generation of English social historians have done much to reestablish [that] imprisonment grew with enclosures replacing the old chastisements, like the stocks. A massive prison construction program accompanied the enclosure of agricultural production. In addition this scholarly literature established that the man or woman locked up had been a commoner, not a villain at all” (1).

(Harney and Moten 54). Attuned to the immaterial labor of dispersed or otherwise cryptic bodies, governance concentrates on “the ones who manage to evade self-management in the enclosure,” or the fish with an ability to survive in “a fish tank with no water” (Harney and Moten 51).

The concept of governance illuminates how the solicitation of interest in the climate commons is less about mounting climate change resistance than it is about accelerating the extraction of wealth through the proliferation of interests. In this sense, even the frustrations Ziser and Sze express in the previous section are advantageous for governance, “since neither the state nor capital know where to find immaterial labor or how to distinguish it from life, governance is a kind of exploratory drilling with a responsibility bit” (Harney and Moten 54). Tellingly, when a doctor approaches Wink to inform him that he needs immediate surgery, he adds an admonishment to “think about what you want for your daughter.” After declaring, “I don’t need nothing from you! You keep your hands off her! I don’t need nothing from y’all,” Wink is restrained by medical technicians. Hushpuppy looks directly into the camera as she stands in the middle of a makeshift day care, her stillness spliced with reverse shots of a sedated Wink being wheeled into an adjacent room. She remarks, “When an animal gets sick here, they plug it into the wall.” Hushpuppy’s reference to “the wall” recalls the earlier scenes at the levees; now that the Bathtub’s residents are within their confines, the cure for Wink’s sickness of “no interests” is to “plug” him into the enclosures of environmentality, a solution that also metaphorically repairs the earlier breach. Subsequently, the subtext of the doctor’s reproach, that Wink’s position as a father is sufficient cause to take responsibility for his health, performs the “plugging” function of governance by encouraging him to turn his position into an identity via the acceptance of responsibility.

While *Beasts* effectively models how governance profits from the culture of global climate change, its ecological prowess is nonetheless undercut by the ecology of the slave ship. The Bathtub is not the neo-humanism of color-blind climate change solutions, but it betrays a similar belief that experiences of abjection (i.e. racism, poverty, sexism, homophobia) provide a (under)commons in which climate change resistance can flourish. In such a community, antiblackness is reduced to a mere interest of race and is summarily rejected as another imposition of governance. Indeed, some reviews point to the racial diversity of the Bathtub as confirmation of the film's progressive ecological politics.⁶¹ Moreover, although Harney and Moten trace governance and the undercommons to the "anoriginary drive" of blackness, their spotlighting of interests implies that antiblackness can be unsettled by a coalitional sociality, which is to say by a community like the Bathtub (47).⁶² In his introduction to *The Undercommons*, Jack Halberstam writes:

If you want to know what the undercommons wants, what Moten and Harney want, what black people, indigenous peoples, queers and poor people want, what we (the "we" who cohabit in the space of the undercommons) want, it is...to take apart, dismantle, tear down the structure that, right now, limits our ability to find each other, to see beyond it and to access the places that we know lie outside its walls. (6)

There is surely nothing inaccurate in Halberstam's recognition that the "'we' who cohabit in the space of the undercommons" are united by similar demands and desires. Truly, to "tear down the structure that...limits our ability...to see beyond it" would be beneficial for everyone, not just those in the undercommons. Moten later agrees, writing in a provocative statement:

⁶¹ Patricia Yaeger, for example, asserts that the "racially mixed population of the Bathtub" is a fitting representation for the film's mythic construction of a "human cosmos that may be dirtied beyond repair" ("Dirty Ecology").

⁶² It is important to note that Harney and Moten also stress that while blackness is distinct from black populations, they nonetheless have a privileged relation to it (47).

That's like that Fred Hampton shit: he'd be like, "white power to white people. Black power to black people." What I think he meant is, "look: The problematic of coalition is that coalition isn't something that emerges so that you can come help me, a maneuver that always gets traced back to your own interests. The coalition emerges out of your recognition that it's fucked up for you, in the same way that we've already recognized that it's fucked up for us. I don't need your help. I just need you to recognize that this shit is killing you, too, however much more softly, you stupid motherfucker, you know? (140)

Nevertheless, Moten's acknowledgement that self-interested white "allies" can hinder coalition building also overlooks the possibility that these same self-interests can and do accrue among and within undercommon populations themselves. Jared Sexton's *Amalgamation Schemes* substantiates this exact possibility, affirming that "coalitions tend systematically to render supposed common interests as the concealed particular interests of the most powerful and privileged elements of the alliance," because they require "the modern individual, an entity whose coherence is purchased at the expense of whatever is cast off by definition" ("Afro-Pessimism"). This is to say that because the coherence of the "modern individual...is purchased at the expense" of black bodies, antiblackness is not simply one self-interest among many. For as I contend throughout this dissertation, and in the beginning of this chapter, the ecology of the slave ship is prior to the formation of (at least) environmental interests and as such, provides the enabling conditions for their enunciation. Despite its narrative bid to institute climate change resistance through the coalition of the undercommons, *Beasts* cannot uncouple its environmental interests from black suffering.

The Commons of the Slave Ship

Hushpuppy's symbolic functions as innocent child and "magical negro" afford her a unique vantage point from which she can exclaim truths about the ecology of the world. During an altercation with Wink near the beginning of the film, she screams, "I hope you do die!" and hits her father on the chest. The film's audio goes completely silent before we hear a human heart, beating faster and louder until it is joined by the rumble of thunder. As Hushpuppy turns to locate the source of the noise, the film cuts to images of polar ice falling into the sea. Wink, entering the throes of a seizure, drops to his knees. Terrified, Hushpuppy runs to her schoolteacher for a jar of herbal medicine over the continued sounds of thunder and cracking ice. Unable to find Wink, she speculates that "Daddy could have turned into a tree, or a bug. There wasn't any way to know." After Hushpuppy carefully tucks the jar into a hole in a tree, she announces, "the whole universe depends on everything fitting together just right. If one piece busts, even the smallest piece...the entire universe will get busted." The auditory consistency throughout these scenes links together Wink's illness, his relationship to Hushpuppy, the storm, and the effects of climate change (Cecire 173). These causal relationships, however speculative or fantastic, suggest that our future is already common. In this way, the film also delivers an unspoken warning about what could happen if we fail to reorient our interests around climate change resistance. Yet, this warning is only coherent if we acknowledge the racial undertones of *Beasts'* figurative ecology.

The networked universe that Hushpuppy animates has always staked its viability on the suppression of an imagined black voracity. Because climate change resistance is expressly emplotted through ecological *legacies* – "our common future" – we are squarely in a realm overdetermined by the ecology of the slave ship and its afterlives. *Beasts*, like the Brundtland

report, presumes that we can modify our future by altering our present actions so as to improve their latent or accumulated environmental effects. What the film forgets is that there is a prior logic in place that mediates how we perceive and measure those effects. The ecology of the slave ship manipulated natural resource access in ways that foreclosed the ability of black bodies to meet their environmental needs. As a result, the relations between black bodies and nature were made to assume the form of an insatiable drive. These “somatic demands,” which I track in chapter 1, are implicated in Hushpuppy’s disproportionate environmental impact and the excessive wilds of the Bathtub. Hushpuppy appears to set in motion a chain of ecological events, including the release of the gargantuan, porcine aurochs. Following her description of how the universe “will get busted” if “one piece busts, even the smallest piece,” the film turns to a wide shot of several blocks of ice that have broken away from a glacier. Each block contains a frozen aurochs, and as they are pulled further into the sea, the focus narrows to a single block. The camera then zooms into a head-on shot of the aurochs’ mouth. With jaws agape and teeth glistening, it is prepared to devour the viewer whole. Confronted with the possibility of her consumption, the viewer deduces that the aurochs presage the end of not just the film’s diegetic universe, but hers as well. Subsequently, the fulfillment of Hushpuppy’s wishes – her father’s collapse – becomes the “busting” of the “smallest piece” that is responsible for the “busting” of both universes. Her “natural” rapacity, or the excessive demands she makes of the world, is a necessary cause for our environmental predicaments.

As the “busted piece” of the universe, Wink’s illness may give the viewer the impression that his return to health would signal a simultaneous return to ecological wellness. When Hushpuppy crosses paths with the aurochs’ herd during the film’s denouement, it takes less than a minute for the lead aurochs to bow its head in deference to her. From his death bed, Wink

watches Hushpuppy say to the aurochs, “You’re my friend, kind of. I gotta take care of mine,” before she enters his shack and the two exchange their final words. During these scenes, Hushpuppy’s communion with the aurochs is mirrored in complementary shots. Before turning to leave, the lead aurochs’ face is shown in profile and extreme close-up so that we only see its right eye, focused on the camera (see figure 8). Then, when Hushpuppy is lying on Wink’s chest as he dies, the camera closes in on her face, also in profile with her right eye fixed on the camera. The film’s cinematography generates a parallel between Hushpuppy’s encounter with the aurochs and her last moments with Wink, indicating not only that she shares the aurochs’ potentially destructive powers, but also that Wink’s death is akin to the prevention of destruction. As it turns out, it is this prevention, and not Wink’s recovery, that ultimately “mends” the universe. So too, Wink’s illness, which he describes as his blood “eating itself,” can be read as part of the historical pathologization of blackness. This conflation of blood and pathogen still feeds myths about racial contamination today. But his illness and death also registers as an emblematic quarantine of the “somatic demands” of black bodies; turning these insatiable drives inward spares those who are not so afflicted.



Figure 8. Close-up of Aurochs’ Eye

Wink's condition is just one example of how the black family must be ejected from the film's ecological jigsaw puzzle, despite the fact that black suffering holds it together. Tavia Nyong'o and Andil Gosine remind us that blackness has always belonged to the wilds of the undercommons, but "often through tropes of an excess of reproductivity that exceeds the boundaries of the biopolitically normative:"

Eurocentric environmentalism has long figured nonwhite reproductive sex as a threat to nature. Even "prior to European colonization of the Global South," Gosine notes, "fantasies and anxieties about its 'monstrous races' and lascivious 'Wild Men' and 'Wild Women' circulated in oral and written texts. Through the course of colonization, anxieties about non-white peoples' sexualities would also inform the constitution of natural space across the world." (261)

In a flashback to what Wink calls the "story of [Hushpuppy's] conception," the viewer watches an alligator approach a napping Wink. Hushpuppy's mother, stepping into the frame topless and with her back to camera, is wearing a pair of boy's white underwear, the same pair worn by Hushpuppy in the film's opening scenes. She cocks a shotgun and lowers it, dispatching the gator out of frame. When she turns towards the camera with just her torso and hips in view, we see that she is covered in the gator's blood. Unnamed and faceless, she could be any black woman on earth. As such, the gator's blood that covers her underwear, and her womb, alludes to the sexual and ecological legacies of the slave ship. Hushpuppy is conceived through and as a "threat to nature," is marked by the death of nature, even before her appearance in the world. Clad later in the same underwear as her mother, the film suggests that this destructive relation to nature is part of her inheritance.

For *Beasts* to enact “our common future” through climate change resistance requires defending the (under)commons against the very power and possibility of those black bodies whose suffering ensures its preservation in the first instance. Regardless of its rejection of self-interests as a tactic of neoliberalism, the film can only solicit interest in the global climate commons by reproducing the same techniques initiated through the ecology of the slave ship. To reiterate, taking an interest in the environment involves an investment in black suffering. By way of conclusion, I propose an alternative reading of *Beasts*’ ecology. When Hushpuppy and her friends hurl themselves into the sea towards the end of the film, they are picked up by a double-decker boat, captained by a white man named “Sergeant Major.” To her question of “Which way are we going?” he responds, “Don’t matter baby, this boat’ll take you exactly where you need to be. It’s just that type of boat. You want a chicken biscuit? They’re good for you. I been eating these all my life. I keep the wrappers in the boat, ‘cause they remind me who I was when I ate each one. The smell make me feel cohesive.” As Hushpuppy gazes up at the Sergeant, she expresses a heartfelt desire: “I wanna be cohesive.” The white boat captain surrounds himself with the refuse of things he has consumed because they mark and measure his existence, which, due to his wanderings, might otherwise lack a legible narrative; they remind him of “who [he] was when he [ate] each one.” His chicken biscuit wrappers account for a cohesion that has so far eluded Hushpuppy. The question we should ask is why this method of “cohesion” has not produced similar results for her, since her trailer, and the Bathtub, is littered with re-purposed objects. Her name, as it so happens, supplies us with an answer.

“Hushpuppy” is also the name for fried balls of dough that are staples of Southern cuisine. Although their origins remain somewhat mythic, there is some agreement that the name arises from the Civil War practice of Confederate soldiers throwing scraps to their dogs to quiet

them during military campaigns.⁶³ What would it mean, then, to situate Hushpuppy as a sacrificial offering within the ecology of *Beasts*? An offering meant to contribute to the success of the coalition as it fights to protect the global climate commons from the caustic criminality of racial blackness? In light of this history, Hushpuppy is already “cohesive,” but not in the sense of someone who is *characterized* by cohesion (i.e. a “modern individual”). Rather, she is someone who *enables* cohesion. Right before she leads the Bathtub’s remaining residents into “the future” in the film’s final scenes, Hushpuppy says: “I see that I’m a little piece of a big, big universe, and that makes things right.” She is indeed a “little piece of a big, big universe,” and as a non-innocent black girl named after an item of food, it is her consumption that holds this universe together.

⁶³ See, for example, Jane Stern and Michael Stern’s *Lexicon of Real American Food*, or John T. Edge’s *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture*.

CHAPTER 4

Afrofuturism and the Anthropocene: Octavia Butler and the Fantasies of Flesh

Nothing exemplifies more our shift to ecological thinking than the emergence of the Anthropocene, a distinct geological epoch in which human activity has become so influential as to alter fundamental aspects of the Earth System. While this contested term has been discussed with the present meaning by ecologist Eugene Stoermer and Nobel Prize-winning atmospheric chemist Paul Crutzen since the 1980s, we have seen a growing scientific consensus about the rigor of the concept. An article published in the journal *Science* by the Anthropocene Working Group in January of 2016 provides the latest example of support for the epoch's formalization.⁶⁴ However, the very nomenclature of the Anthropocene has been subject to critique from within the humanities and social sciences for allowing an abstract notion of the "Anthropos" to anchor an implicit philosophy of history. Daniel Hartley for instance, comments in a recent issue of the UK-based magazine *Salvage*: "Inherent to the Anthropocene discourse is a conception of historical causality which is purely mechanical: a one-on-one billiard ball model of technological invention and historical effect, which is simply inadequate to explain actual social and relational modes of historical causation" ("Against"). Hartley's appraisal is prompted by geologists' widespread dating of the Anthropocene to the industrial and nuclear revolutions; a determination that interprets the environmental impact of technology as the "net effect" of an undifferentiated "human" activity (Waters et. al. 139). In order to assert a causal link between technological development and ecological catastrophe, any consideration of the roles race, class, and gender

⁶⁴ See Waters et. al.

have played in engineering our historical present must be obscured.⁶⁵ Nevertheless, as I highlight throughout this dissertation, the benefits and consequences of technological development and environmental disaster are rarely if ever distributed symmetrically among and within human populations. “It is not all people that are indicted by the onset of the Anthropocene,” writes Nicholas Mirzoeff, “but a specific set: colonial settlers, enslavers, and would-be imperialists” (“Not the Anthropocene” 19-20).

This chapter will explore how the concept of the Anthropocene further mystifies the ecological implications of the Middle Passage and the slave ship. By widening the focus of the preceding chapters to consider the “nonhuman turn” in contemporary thought, and the new materialisms in particular, I illustrate how the Anthropocene overdetermines our intellectual and ethical responses to environmental precarity. The most recent new materialist publications draw upon the techno-scientific advancements of the Anthropocene to demonstrate the supposed inadequacy of poststructuralist “identity politics” for meeting the challenges of our time. But as a close reading of Octavia Butler’s Afrofuturist novels *Parable of the Sower* (*Sower*) and *Parable of the Talents* (*Talents*) reveals, any ethical model that dismisses considerations of race, and the history of transatlantic slavery specifically, will fail to address the environmental predicaments of the modern world. Ultimately, I suggest that Afrofuturism can be read as a symptomatic response to the racial contradictions of the Anthropocene. In other words, Afrofuturism is an imaginative reading and writing practice that identifies, and disrupts, the racial coordinates upon which the Anthropocene is built.

⁶⁵ Nicholas Mirzoeff notes in his forthcoming essay, “It’s Not the Anthropocene, It’s the White Supremacy Scene, or the Geological Color Line,” that a recent publication by geologists locates the origins of the Anthropocene in the arrival of Europeans to America. While this preliminary acknowledgement of the large scale impact of colonialism and slavery is hopeful, any discourse on the Anthropocene should also be accompanied by “a politics that challenges [the racial and humanist] hierarchy” often implied by its philosophy of history (22).

The Anthropocene's scientific parameters may have become matters of debate only recently, but its constitutive concerns – global warming, genetic technology, biodiversity loss, environmental racism – have thrown our prevailing conceptions of nature and culture into crisis well before the epoch's formal identification. At stake is not only the fate of *homo sapiens* as a species, but also the basic composition of a world yet to come. The challenges of analyzing the effects of non-human systems (e.g., weather patterns or ocean currents) and actors (e.g., viruses or pesticides) while attending to the uneven distribution of environmental risks and resources have generated a range of philosophical responses. For example, publications like Dipesh Chakrabarty's 2009 "The Climate of History," Elizabeth Kolbert's 2014 *The Sixth Extinction*, and Roy Scranton's 2015 *Learning to Die in the Anthropocene* recommend a universal or existential "species thinking" necessary for grasping the complexities of climate change. Other responses, like Jane Bennett's 2010 *Vibrant Matter* and Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's 2015 *Stone*, interrogate fantasies of human mastery as a way of reckoning with the power of non-human agents. Over the last decade, one particular variety of response has acquired critical purchase within the academic left: the new materialisms.

As part of what Richard Grusin has labeled "the nonhuman turn," the new materialisms join affect theory, critical animal studies, and object oriented ontology in calling for enhanced attention to matter and materiality. The popularity of this approach, evidenced by a proliferation of special journal issues, and anthologies, appears grounded in the need to cultivate strategies of coexistence attuned to the Anthropocene's political and ecological crises.⁶⁶ How, for example,

⁶⁶ In addition to the works referenced in this chapter, recent publications include Stacey Alaimo and Susan Heckman's *Material Feminisms*, Estelle Barrett and Barbara Bolt's *Carnal Knowledge*, Caetlin Benson-Allott's special issue of *Feminist Media History* on "Materialisms," Patricia Clough and Jean Halley's *The Affective Turn*, William Connolly's *The Fragility of Things*, Peta Hinton and Iris van der Tuin's special issue of *Women: A Cultural Review* on "Feminist Matters: The Politics of the New Materialisms," Dana Luciano and Mel Chen's special issue of *GLQ* on "Queer Inhumanisms," Timothy Morton's *Hyperobjects*, and Steven Shaviro's *The Universe of Things*.

should we understand agency and embodiment in light of recent developments in biotechnology and the increasingly unpredictable behavior of non-human objects? What can these objects tell us about the relationships between humans and their environments? The promise of the new materialisms thus inheres in the notion that a focus on materiality can offer us more comprehensive and efficacious ways to respond to our changing circumstances. As Diana Coole and Samantha Frost write in their introduction to the *New Materialisms* anthology:

What is at stake here is nothing less than a challenge to some of the most basic assumptions that have underpinned the modern world, including its normative sense of the human and its beliefs about human agency, but also regarding its material practices such as the ways we labor on, exploit, and interact with nature. (4)

There is much to recommend an intensified engagement with matter, not least of which is Coole and Frost's proposal that such engagements can disrupt our "normative sense of the human" and of "human agency."

Given this professed interest in dismantling human exceptionalism, it is curious then that as Zakiyyah Jackson and other critical race scholars point out, the new materialisms have systematically "[ignored] praxes of humanity and critiques produced by black people, particularly those praxes which are irreverent to the normative production of 'the human' or illegible from within the terms of its logic" (216).⁶⁷ Indeed, as I outline repeatedly in this dissertation, the Middle Passage, the slave ship, and the transatlantic slave trade are responsible for our modern understandings of the human and "objecthood." From at least the sixteenth century onward, black bodies provided crucial raw material for the development of natural

⁶⁷ Similar criticisms can also be found in Jayna Brown's "Being Cellular," Donna Jones' *The Racial Discourses of Life Philosophy*, Uri McMillan's "Objecthood, Avatars, and the Limits of the Human," and Nicholas Mirzoeff's forthcoming essay "It's Not the Anthropocene, It's the White Supremacy Scene, or the Geological Color Line."

history, the natural sciences, and the life philosophies in Enlightenment thought.⁶⁸ Both geology and biology, for example, pursued notions of species and evolution that preserved early racial taxonomies; the techniques of observation and interpretation used to analyze geological activity were the same as those employed by the racial science of phrenology. Mirzoeff leverages this history to argue that “the very concept of observable breaks between geological eras in general and the definition of the Anthropocene in particular is inextricably intermingled with the belief in distinct races of humanity” (“Not the Anthropocene” 2). His claim that the conception of the Anthropocene reproduces race-making technologies gestures to the historical fact that the human as such has emerged through the exclusion and extermination of black bodies.

Proscribed from the realm of the human, black intellectuals have had to think within and through the categories of the non-human and the inhuman to pursue new ways of being in the world. Philosophical questions about the vitality and agency of the human, the animal, and the object are therefore longstanding in the fields of black studies. Alexander Weheliye observes in *Habeas Viscus* that across Sylvia Wynter’s oeuvre, “it is the human—or different genres of the human—that materializes as the object of knowledge in the conceptual mirror of black studies” (21). The scholarly work of Hortense Spillers, Fred Moten, Donna Jones, Lewis Gordon, and Kara Keeling, to name but a few examples, similarly confront the “most basic assumptions that have underpinned the modern world,” including our notions of history, temporality, and modern science.⁶⁹ And yet, as it is with the Anthropocene’s implied philosophy of history, much of the scholarship produced under the banner of the new materialisms tends to reduce race to a crude

⁶⁸ For an overview of how African and African American bodies have informed scientific thought from the Enlightenment onward, see Andrew Curran’s *The Anatomy of Blackness*, John P. Jackson and Nadine M. Weidman’s *Race, Racism, and Science*, and Sylvia Wynter’s “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom.”

⁶⁹ Donna Jones’ *The Racial Discourses of Life Philosophy* is a particularly compelling example for this chapter, as it outlines the intellectual prehistory of biopolitics. By tracing the resonances between nineteenth and twentieth century vitalism and black emancipatory thought, she argues that conceptions of “life” as a creative force of becoming privilege a virtuality or vitality that is denied to or unrecognized in black bodies.

“identity politics” or to endorse as radical a model of difference-without-race.⁷⁰ This reduction and disavowal of race, I contend, is something of a structural necessity for the new materialisms.

In what follows, I trace the general theoretical principles of the new materialisms to a dissatisfaction with the linguistic and cultural paradigms of post-structuralism. I then demonstrate how this dissatisfaction enables an ethics of relation, or an ecology of difference, that further legitimizes the reduction and dismissal of race. However, as a close reading of Butler’s *Parable* duology indicates, one of the primary figures of the new materialisms – the material body – is defined by and through disavowed social fantasies about black female flesh that are linked to the disciplinary formations initiated aboard the slave ship. My examination of the critical responses to Butler’s novels further suggests that such fantasies are necessary to secure a libidinal investment in the ethical potential of materiality. I argue, thus, against a misrecognition of black female flesh as a resource against the violence of hierarchical differences, rather than the site of their active production. Finally, I turn to a reading of Butler’s *Parable* duology as an allegory about the dangers of proceeding in the Anthropocene without a robust analysis of the formation of racial blackness. Because a proper survey of new materialist literature is beyond the scope of this chapter, the comments below should be taken as entry points for probing the (absent) place of racial blackness in theories about matter and their associated ethics.⁷¹

⁷⁰ Clearly, not all critical engagements with matter or materiality participate in the reduction and/or disavowal of race. Many feminist, postcolonial, and critical race studies scholars insist that such studies must occur through an interrogation of race. Recent examples include Uri McMillian’s *Embodied Avatars*, Rachel Lee’s *The Exquisite Corpse of Asian America*, Mel Chen’s *Animacies*, and Stacy Alaimo’s *Bodily Natures*.

⁷¹ My decision to draw heavily on two of the more recent new materialist anthologies, *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*, and *New Materialism: Interviews and Cartographies*, is guided by the fact that both anthologies feature contributions from some of the most notable figures in the materialist or non-human turns. Accordingly, these analogies provide a representative selection of current new materialist scholarship while indexing its more common themes.

The Promise of the New Materialisms

The new materialisms are drawn from a long genealogy of philosophical materialism, in which Spinoza, Nietzsche, Bergson, Marx, and Deleuze are cited as major touchstones. In recognition of this legacy, Coole and Frost assert that the interventions loosely gathered by the term “new materialisms” are better “categorized as *renewed* materialisms,” with the qualifier “new” acknowledging the “unprecedented” ecological, biological, and technological conditions under which we currently live and labor (4). Although their specific objects of analysis are appropriately diverse, the new materialisms collectively insist on a post-humanist matter that is lively, self-directed, agential, creative, and always in the process of becoming. In this regard, matter is better thought of as *materialization*, or the process by which complex phenomena are temporarily and contingently stabilized to varying degrees. The ontological shift entailed here is towards a philosophical monism, inspired most notably by the work of Deleuze. Following Spinoza and Bergson, Deleuze develops a notion of the virtual as a generative field of difference, or a “plane of immanence,” where “all the varieties of differential relations and all the distributions of singular points [coexist] in diverse orders ‘perpllicated’ in one another” (206). These differences are then formatted into distinct phenomena or entities by processes of actualization that “[bring] the object back into relation with the field of differential relations in which it can always be dissolved and become actualized otherwise, as something else, by being linked through other differential relations to other particles” (Cheah 85-86). While not all new materialist theories cleave to a strictly Deleuzian philosophy, there is general agreement that the interactions among objects, bodies, and phenomena turn us away from the Anthropocene’s “billiard ball model” of causality, and more significantly, from some of post-structuralism’s critical trends.

According to the new materialisms, the linguistic and cultural turns of the last half century have resulted in both an intellectual and political poverty. Specifically, social constructivism and cultural representationalism have overdetermined matter to the extent that it appears as a passive product made meaningful only through cultural and discursive practice. We can only ever know our bodies through language or representation. Coole and Frost even write of a theoretical “exhaustion,” claiming that they “share the feeling current among many researchers that the dominant constructivist orientation to social analysis is inadequate for thinking about matter, materiality, and politics in ways that do justice to the contemporary context of biopolitics and global political economy” (6). Somewhere and sometime during the rise of the Anthropocene, cultural theory, broadly conceived, lost its explanatory power. This assessment of inadequacy repeats across much of the recent new materialist scholarship, condensing the cultural turn into a discursive reductionism that rebuffs the empirical for the ideal, or the material for the symbolic. Elizabeth Grosz’s *The Nick of Time* opens with a telling

reminder to social, political, and cultural theorists, particularly those interested in feminism, antiracism, and questions of the politics of globalization, that they have forgotten a crucial dimension of research...not just the body, but that which makes it possible and which limits its actions: the precarious, accidental, contingent, expedient, striving, dynamic status of life in a messy, complicated, resistant, brute world of materiality. (2)

Social, political, and cultural theory, in other words, have overlooked the material conditions of life that render the body available for inscription and enculturation in the first instance. So too in the recently published *Gut Feminism* does Elizabeth Wilson rebuke “social constructionism” for “[tending] not to be very curious about the details of empirical claims in genetics,

neurophysiology, evolutionary biology, pharmacology or biochemistry” (3). Her ensuing conclusion is that focusing on how social structures produce and discipline bodies comes at the expense of recognizing the ways bodies radically alter and organize social structures themselves. It appears that cultural theory harbors an “allergy to ‘the real’” that dissuades “critical inquirers from the more empirical kinds of investigation that material processes and structures require” (Coole and Frost 6). However, the very aspects that would make matter more “real” than language or culture are the same aspects that restrict its ethical potential and facilitate a conceptual rejection of race.

In line with their post-humanist agenda, the new materialisms evoke an ecology of difference, in which matter and materiality exist in excess of human subjectivity. Mechanistic theories of causality hold that objects are composed of inert matter acted upon by external forces, which presumes that an object’s potential or possible capabilities are already present and fixed in some initial moment of creation. But, as the new materialisms emphasize, the virtual field of differential relations is immanent to matter in such a way that it is impossible to anticipate all of the effects a material configuration may have, or the forms it may take. Difference both excretes and is excreted by phenomenal objects and in this unending mode of becoming, objects cannot help but be affected by other objects. This ability to act independently of the human subject’s will and desire is variously construed as “something that is both more and other than that which I think of as me and mine,” an alterity that “comes from outside the capability or power of the subject,” “degrees of indetermination” that represent the ““true principle of life,”” and a “powerful reminder...that life will always exceed our knowledge and control” (Orlie 118; Cheah 89; Grosz 149; *Vibrant Matter* 14). Differences in terminology aside, the new materialisms are united by an understanding of matter as a spectral, impersonal force; one that escapes reason and

transverses systems of meaning, including modernist binaries like mind/body, nature/culture, and inside/outside. The latter aspect is key because while matter can frustrate representation, its “excessive” properties do not mean that it exists “outside” of the subject. Rather, matter and materiality are “real” because they actively produce reality in unpredictable ways. It is here that the ethical impetus of the new materialist project is located.

New materialist ethics necessarily manifest as affective encounters that operate best on micropolitical scales. Because materiality is figured as an impersonal force of the real, it runs the risk of becoming a transcendental signified that merely replaces language or culture as an organizing principle. Doing so would severely diminish its import as an inducement to a posthumanist ethics. To circumvent the “tension between universalistic theory and specific mode of inquiry,” chance, contingency, and creativity in micro-level encounters are prioritized over more obstinate assemblages that congeal at the global or macro-levels (Zhan 258). Further, as the nucleus of the new materialisms, the embodied subject or material body compels an ethics that unfolds on a parallel plane, meaning between and within bodies. “This implies,” Rosi Braidotti proposes, “approaching the world through affectivity and not cognition: as singularity, force, movement, through assemblages or webs of interconnections with all that lives,” and “accepting the impossibility of mutual recognition and replacing it with one of mutual specification and mutual codependence” (214). If we accept our embeddedness in these mutually transformative, non-human ecologies, the ground of ethics shifts accordingly. First, a responsibility to an externalized other gives way to an accountability for the many relations that constitute becoming. And second, ethics are no longer reducible to the decisions or actions of individuals that are initiated by a properly historical judgement. Though I find nothing immediately problematic with

an ethics that includes non-human and inorganic phenomena and objects, what I do find troublesome is how our acquiescence to these ethics is solicited.

In the quotation above, Braidotti invokes an ethics of relation, in which sensation and perception comprise the “zone of [ethical] effectivity,” and attunement and affirmation take precedence over social transformation (Tumino, “Affective Turn” 555). Because material inter- and intra-actions are preconscious and multisensorial, ethical practice is based not on the ability to evaluate right from wrong, but on a commitment to *feeling* right. We can observe this adjustment in appeals to “an ongoing responsiveness to...entanglement,” “a heightened sensitivity to the agency of assemblages,” a “wakefulness” to the “feel [of] what makes us laugh, lament, and curse,” and an “experience of the vitality of being” (Barad 394; Bennett, “Vibrant Matter”; Orlie 127; Connolly, “Materialities” 196-197). As a consequence, the experiences of living under conditions of crisis are fetishized at the expense of addressing the causes of these conditions themselves. The imperative to “[live] with the open wound...through a sort of depersonalization of the event,” for example, not only depoliticizes the claims of historically oppressed communities, but also flattens distinctions between traumas inflicted through happenstance and persistent intergenerational *harm* (Braidotti 213). How else could Braidotti list as equivalent examples: those who survived the Holocaust, Frida Kahlo’s deadly tram ride, and missing the train to the World Trade Center on September 11th (214)?

The limits of a new materialist ethics appear most forcefully, then, as we attempt to move from an embodied “responsiveness” to the dislocation of structures. When patterns of materialization are addressed, it is generally as the amalgamation of “perpetual circuits of exchange, feedback, and reentry” that thereby “[inflect] the shape of political experience” (Connolly, “Materialities” 190-191). On the one hand, there is nothing innately objectionable

about attributing the creation and transformation of political structures to any number of quotidian, embodied experiences. This is in fact common in political theory and historiography.⁷² On the other hand, it becomes more difficult to reconcile the effects of chance, unpredictability, and indeterminacy with the endurance and repetition of something like antiblack violence.⁷³ The new materialisms are therefore at pains to clarify why the structures of global antiblackness continue to function as if “neither time nor history, nor historiography and its topics, show movement, as the human subject is ‘murdered’ over and over again by the passions of a bloodless and anonymous archaism, showing itself in endless disguise” (Spillers 208). Interpreting and describing our entanglements with non-human, materialist forces are not enough to account for, much less dislodge attachments to, social categories and representational arrangements. By this I mean that becoming more aware of an ecology of difference will not inevitably reduce the weight of discursive or psychic formations. It could even obstruct change by making forms of affect and sensation newly available for inscription. As Timothy Morton states, when “contact becomes content,” perceptions of difference collapse into identity (*Ecology Without Nature* 37). Granted, these complications are not unique to the new materialisms as changes in scale almost always entail a re-calibration of ethics. The point is, however, that

⁷² Coole and Frost cite Althusser, Foucault, and some strains of neo-Marxism and ethnography as examples of similar approaches (20-36). Intriguingly, Ian Buchanan points out that these approaches can also yield observations so “obvious” that “one does not even need a concept to make this claim. This is history in the mode of one damn thing after another” (388).

⁷³ To her credit, in an interview with Peter Gratton for his blog, “Philosophy in a Time of Error,” Jane Bennett admits that she needs to “focus more carefully” on how assemblages assume the characteristics of repetition, duration, and stability; she writes: “I want to get better at discerning the topography of Becoming, better at theorizing the ‘structural’ quality of agentic assemblages. For the question of ‘structure’ — or maybe that is the wrong word, and the phrase you suggest below is better, i.e., ‘linkages’ between and within ‘open relations’ — does seem to fall in the shadow of the alluring image of an ever-free becoming...Inside a process of unending change, bodies and forces with duration are somehow emitted or excreted. But how” (“Vibrant Matters”)? While this is a positive development, I maintain that our scholarly activity is intimately shaped by the legacies of transatlantic slavery. Going forward then, the new materialisms must consider how blackness informs their major concepts or they risk reproducing the kinds of race-thinking that hold these legacies in place.

positing an ecology of difference as the ethical ground of the Anthropocene requires a disavowal of race and its material-semiotic effects.

As I submit earlier in this chapter, intellectual genealogies since at least the period of Enlightenment have maintained an almost staggering racial homogeneity. Critical theories produced by non-white scholars may have increased in terms of production or representation, but these are consistently marked as minority perspectives that have little to do with questions of a universal or ontological character.⁷⁴ Hence, black bodies especially are rendered objects for theoretical development, rather than subjects of universal philosophy. Coole and Frost continue this trend, commenting that even as “feminists and class theorists have often insisted upon” the importance of material bodies and environments, they remain

[concerned] that such material dimensions have recently been marginalized by fashionable constructivist approaches and identity politics. Of course, the latter have had a good deal to say about the body and its imbrication in relationships of power, but we are not convinced that they pay sufficient attention to the material efficacy of bodies or have the theoretical resources to do so. (19)

It is hard not to hear the old racial charges of intellectual primitivism and parochialism in Coole and Frost’s statement. Their unfortunate request to be “convinced” of identity politics’ intellectual merit effectively seals an historically white critical theory as the standard for authoritative knowledge production. One must also wonder about the referents for these insufficiently materialist “identity politics,” given that the *New Materialisms* anthology fails to cite even one example that might be taken as representative of a larger trend.

⁷⁴ In mapping black studies’ tireless examination of the human and its others, Alexander Weheliye observes that there exists an equally long tradition “in which theoretical formulations by white European thinkers are granted a conceptual *carte blanche*, while those uttered from the purview of minority discourse that speak to the same questions are almost exclusively relegated to the jurisdiction of ethnographic locality” (6).

Even if Coole and Frost employ “identity politics” as a shorthand for idealist approaches to subjectivity, their statement at best misunderstands studies of “identity,” and at worst discloses a symptomatic desire to abandon race. To be clear, Coole and Frost never openly reduce “identity politics” to racial identity. But in many if not most of new materialisms’ founding texts, race receives only casual mention alongside the “other so-called axes of social difference” like sex, gender, and class, and often only to specify a concept that has been “paralyzed by [a] ‘binary’ take on dualism,” or to designate potential beneficiaries of one’s theorization (Dolphijn & van der Tuin 88; 143). We could perhaps attribute this treatment of race to a sedimented politics of attention that determines which issues receive scholarly consideration.⁷⁵ Nonetheless, to ascertain if and how the new materialisms might furnish us with a timelier ethics, we must first ask what purpose the disavowal of race serves.

Black bodies have historically provided the standards against which nature and the human are measured. This is to say that the “rupture in the quality of being” inaugurated by modern racial slavery is not limited to black lives (Brand 29). Black critical theorists repeatedly insist on the world-historical scale of this rupture, tracking how it fashions our thinking about nature and the human, and the movements of this thought itself. What this means for our current discussion is that “the question of race’s reality has and continues to bear directly on hierarchies

⁷⁵ Sara Ahmed argues in “Imaginary Prohibitions: Some Preliminary Remarks on the Founding Gestures of the ‘New Materialism,’” that a politics of attention have dictated the new materialisms’ “founding gestures” by allowing for a reading of feminist scholarship as fundamentally anti-biology. Her position paper provoked responses from Noela Davis and Iris van der Tuin the latter of which comments more extensively on the debate in her co-edited collection of interview and essays, *New Materialism: Interviews and Cartographies*. What Ahmed’s paper reveals is a pattern of disappointment with feminism’s purported anti-biologism that stretches back to the early 90’s. However, driving this disappointment is an assumption that feminist scholars should ‘know better;’ particularly because a set of theories historically concerned with the body can and should be at the forefront of materialist innovations. While this does not seem like a ringing endorsement, the fact that new materialists claim (white) feminism as their generative field suggests that these feminisms have access to the “theoretical resources” to re-conceptualize the role of matter in embodiment (Coole and Frost 19). Or, at least those feminisms in which “material dimensions” have not yet “been marginalized by fashionable constructivist approaches and identity politics” (Coole and Frost 19). Read with Coole and Frost’s critique of “identity politics” as theoretically impoverished, it is clear that feminism is granted an intellectual complexity that “identity politics” are not.

of knowledge pertaining to the nature of reality” or on what Dionne Brand calls our “cognitive schema” (Jackson 216; Brand 29). As a conceptual orientation or method of ‘way-finding,’ the prevailing cognitive schema articulates a libidinal economy of antiblackness to the history of ideas, ensuring, as Hortense Spillers maintains, that “dominant symbolic activity, the ruling episteme that releases the dynamics of naming and valuation, remains grounded in the originating metaphors of captivity and mutilation;” after all, “sticks and bricks might break our bones, but words will most certainly kill us” (208-209). By inverting a youthful rejoinder about the supposedly limited reach of the symbolic, Spillers lays out a provocative proposal: the metaphors of slavery are immanent to the force of materiality. Although “‘race’ alone bears no inherent meaning, even though it reifies in personality,” it “gains its power from what it signifies by point, in what it allows to come to meaning” (Spillers 380). Black lives, and blackness enlivens, matter. It is possible, then, that the elaboration of thought and the conditions of its enunciation are always part of a racial praxis, even when those “personalities” that expedite the reification of race are most absent. This is a paradigmatic example of the prevailing cognitive schema at work. Antiblackness conditions the force of materiality by determining the logic and legibility of its actualization. These functions become clearer when we turn our attention to Octavia Butler’s *Parable* duology.

Parables for Our Time

The *Parable* novels are set in a dystopian America, produced by a fifteen-year period of “coinciding climactic, economic, and sociological crises” known collectively as “The Pox” (*Talents* 8). Amid the ongoing economic and political collapse of the U.S. and its *de facto* elimination of social services, protagonist Lauren Olamina lives with her family in the Southern

California gated community of Robledo, which is Spanish for “Oakwood”. The community’s walls offer an illusion of security to the semi-professional, non-white residents, and despite the increasing violence just outside, they refuse to contemplate alternatives. Angered by this inability to concede the permanence of change, Lauren devises a line of flight in the form of a political theology she names “Earthseed.” She becomes the titular “Sower” of the first novel, guided by Earthseed’s central principle that “God is Change.” After the eventual massacre of the people of Robledo, Lauren travels to Northern California with fellow itinerants she recruits along the way. *Parable of the Sower* closes with their founding of the town of Acorn, returning the overly mature and moribund idea of “the sturdy old oak” to its source, a community committed to Earthseed’s doctrine of adaptability, self-sufficiency, and diversity. While both novels are narrated through Lauren’s journal entries, *Parable of the Talents* includes contributions from Lauren’s daughter, Asha, and Lauren’s husband, Bankole. *Talents* picks up five years after the events of *Sower* and details the imprisonment and dispersal of the Acorn community by a fundamentalist Christian sect. In the second half of *Talents*, Lauren sets out to find a missing Asha while attempting to rebuild the Earthseed movement. The narrative culminates with the departure of the world’s first interstellar spaceships, sponsored by the now powerful network of Earthseed acolytes.

What makes the novels imminently relevant to our discussion is that the apocalypse-inducing “Pox” begins in 2015. The formal narration commences in 2024, but the overlaps between these diegetic and extradiegetic levels endorse a reading of the novels as cautionary tales for the Anthropocene of our present. To be sure, the eponymous “parables” of the titles refer to the New Testament’s instructional stories, and there is a great deal in Butler’s novels deserving of our caution. All of the Anthropocene’s most troubling possibilities, however

farfetched, are realized by 2024. The rapidly warming climate decimates crops and creates monster storms, displacing millions of people and exacerbating the spread of hunger, poverty, and disease. As U.S. citizens attempt to flee to Alaska, “The Last Frontier” eventually secedes from the union to form a Northern Bloc with Russia and Canada. By 2033, warfare has broken out. As Butler makes clear, these events were set in motion prior to the onset of the Pox and considerably before 2015. This warp of time and history implicates our existing socioeconomic orders in a future that by most accounts is already a substantial part of our present. It is here that literary critics locate the basis for Lauren’s political vision. Her postmodern embrace of change is designed to interrupt the immobilization of difference that produces all hierarchical systems, including those of race, class, gender, sexuality, and matter. According to Madhu Dubey, this productively sets the *Parable* novels apart from the speculative fictions of slavery that arose during the 1970’s

From the antebellum period to the Civil Rights era, African American literature functioned most notably as a means of social protest. Realist narratives of slavery and post-emancipation black life lent crucial support to political movements, and supplemented the historical archives before substantial numbers of first-person slave testimonies were recovered. The post-Civil Rights period then witnessed a renewed literary interest in slavery as black communities sought innovative ways of understanding the past in relation to their ambiguous political futures. African American novelists began to turn away from realism and towards elements of the speculative and fantastic (e.g. Ishmael Reed’s *Flight to Canada*, Charles Johnson’s *Middle Passage*, Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, and Butler’s *Kindred*).⁷⁶ Concurrent with a broader postmodern rejection of historiography, these speculative fictions of slavery “overtly

⁷⁶ For additional examples of speculative novels of slavery, see Madhu Dubey’s “Speculative Fictions of Slavery,” especially p.779-780.

situate themselves against history, suggesting that we can best comprehend the truth of slavery by abandoning historical modes of knowing” (Dubey 784). Literary devices like time travel, gothic hauntings, and possession not only fold the present directly into the antebellum slavery of the past, but also depict slavery as a structure of feeling best understood through material experience. But portraying the past as continuous with the present, Dubey concludes, prevents readers from distinguishing “the pluralist racial dynamics of our present from the binary racial logic of antebellum slavery” (799). For her, the multi-racial debt slavery of the *Parable* novels is a more accurate representation of those dynamics.

Instead of physically transporting her characters into the antebellum era, Butler conjures slavery in the present through and as its historical influences on an evolving socioeconomic and political order. The *Parable* world is essentially managed according to the expansion of neoliberal ideology and practice. The cataclysmic events of “the Pox” not only exposed new segments of the US population to exploitation, but also extended the domain of what Naomi Klein calls “disaster capitalism.”⁷⁷ That is, the growing scarcity of natural resources presents the perfect opportunity for their largescale privatization. Multinational corporations like KSF, “Kagimoto, Stamm, Frampton: Japanese, German, Canadian” begin purchasing communities and small businesses to “dominate farming and the selling of water and solar and wind energy” (*Sower* 120-121). Residents and migrant laborers are promised security and stable employment in exchange for nominal wages, an “old company-town trick” that signals “something old and nasty” has been revived (*Sower* 121; 118). But unlike the company towns of the late nineteenth century, many of those created by conglomerates like KSF were once “upper middle class, white, literate [communities]” (*Sower* 118). Hence, the “slaves” of Butler’s twenty-first century hail from all ethnic and racial groups, and from populations formerly protected by wealth or

⁷⁷ See Chapter 3, note 21.

whiteness. As Lauren conducts her party along the highway to the site of Acorn, she recognizes that they have “become the crew of a modern underground railroad” (*Sower* 292). What makes their flight “modern” is that the travelers of this Underground Railroad form a “heterogeneous mass – black and white, Asian and Latin” (*Sower* 176). As such, Peter Stillman proposes, their journey to the north is just as likely to recall fugitive slave narratives as it is the contemporary movement of immigrants up from the global south (23). In addition, the types of slavery in the *Parable* novels range from indentured servitude and debt slavery to sexual trafficking and religious imprisonment.

The mechanisms of control ubiquitous to US chattel slavery are retrofitted to meet the twenty-first century’s new standards of precarity. Four of the founding members of the Acorn community, Emery, Tori, Grayson, and Doe, escape from similar situations before joining Lauren’s group. Emery and Tori, who Lauren describes as “the most racially mixed [people]” that she has ever met, worked on a local farm with Emery’s husband and their two sons before it and they were sold to an agricultural corporation (*Sower* 287). By paying wages in “company script” and charging exorbitant prices for rent, food, household items, and clothing, the corporation ensured that workers were soon buried in debt (*Sower* 288). The *de jure* and *de facto* repeal of labor laws likewise granted companies the right to obtain repayment in any way they saw fit, which included workers being “traded and sold with or without consent, with or without their families, to distant employers” and forcing children “to work off the debt of their parents if the parents died, became disabled, or escaped” (*Sower* 288). Accordingly, after the death of Emery’s husband, her two sons are taken without warning and sold into prostitution. It is only after evading a litany of security and surveillance measures – sound and motion detectors, armed guards with dogs, and electric fences – that Emery and Tori manage to reach the highway.

Grayson and his daughter Doe also join Lauren's group shortly after Grayson's wife is raped and killed by her new owner.

Within the logic of modern racial slavery, this separation of families, deployment of sexual violence, and enclosure of the commons were implemented to (re)create and enforce the category of racial blackness. Conversely, their variable use in the *Parable* duology suggests that these practices have become disarticulated from the projects of race-making and are used instead to render both bodies and natural phenomena as abstract signifiers of value. The paradigm of exploitation, we are to presume, is the best way to understand the distribution and arrangement of power. Perhaps unsurprisingly then, literary critics tend to minimize the significance of Lauren's racial blackness. Patricia Melzer provides a working example, writing in a passage worth quoting at length:

Butler's approach to race issues that at first appear to be in the background of her social critique can be understood as a (narrative) strategy that undermines the binary of white/black that dominates U.S. discourse on race relations...Instead, Butler places racial oppression into the complexity of social power relations, such as in terms of economic and ideological oppression. She does not foreground racial oppression in her analysis of social injustice, but undermines the juxtapositions and binaries of racial discourse of self/other by portraying racial diversity as a main component of her utopia vision...Butler firmly roots her protagonist within an African-American context, yet at the same time she refuses to ideologically ghettoize her characters...By insisting on the presence of people of color in her narratives as normal, not exceptional, Butler also implicitly rejects the tokenism that categorizes her work primarily in terms of her identity as African American. (10)

As it is within the new materialisms, “race,” which is really a placeholder for “the binary of white/black,” is dissolved into a vague “tokenism” that is itself a stand-in for “identity politics.” Melzer signposts a general tendency of critics to position Butler as a science fiction writer who is black, rather than as a black woman who writes science fiction. This may seem peculiar, given that Butler’s work regularly employs narrative strategies and themes consistent with black literature and experience (e.g. *Kindred*, the *Lilith’s Brood* trilogy, and *Fledgling*). After the publication of her *Patternist* series in the early 1980’s, she was hailed as a welcome corrective to science fiction’s largely white, colonial, and patriarchal overtones.⁷⁸ But for her part, Butler has expressed in interviews that “it is a writer's duty to write about human differences, all human differences, and help make them acceptable” (qtd. in Mehaffy and Keating 46). Gregory Hampton draws out the implications of this undertaking, declaring that “Butler’s fiction is successful largely because it produces narratives that are easily comparable to African American experiences but also because it considers the perspective of a universal marginalized body” (69). If we follow the lead of critics like Dubey and Meltzer, or the new materialist refusal of “identity politics,” the “universal marginalized body” manifests as a body suspended in a static nexus of identity and representation, which is to say that all bodies, to varying degrees and at different times, are marginalized bodies. What we lose in this rush from the particular to the universal is any consideration of how the material-semiotic history of race governs, from the outset, what can and cannot be made legible as a universal. In critical treatments of the *Parable* novels, slavery is only admitted to the status of the universal as a mobile set of exploitative strategies, but rarely as

⁷⁸ In their introduction to the *Science Fiction Studies* tribute to Octavia Butler, editors De Witt Kilgore and Ranu Samantrai write that “Butler approached sf askance, choosing to write self-consciously as an African American woman marked by a particular history. Her example clarifies the stakes for any particular minority breaking into forms seen as ethnically exclusive: the necessity or simply the desire to see oneself complexly represented in one's culture. Butler entered the field at a time when science fiction did not serve that function for white women or for people of color” (353). For similar evaluations of Butler’s contributions to the genre of Science Fiction, see Sandra Y. Govan’s “Connections, Links, and Extended Networks: Patterns in Octavia Butler's Science Fiction,” and Gregory E. Rutledge’s “Futurist Fiction and Fantasy: The Racial Establishment.”

a material force that lingers in the body to reproduce and confirm the signifiers of race. Taking these analytical gaps as my point of departure, I ask: how might our theorizations of matter and materiality transform if we understand slavery as a material force that produces the enabling conditions of the body? Not just as an historical legacy inscribed onto bodies, but also as a form of fleshly matter that is replicated and sustained every time a body is recognized as such?

Hyperempathy and Body Knowledge

One of Butler's most consistent themes is an embodied mode of knowing and communicating that she calls "body knowledge." In accordance with her belief that "all we really *know* that we have is the flesh," her narratives are centered on the body as the primary location for the disassembly and reassembly of regimes of power (qtd. in Mehaffy and Keating 59). Our senses of our bodies are by and large coordinated through these regimes, most of which, as Foucault has shown, suppress or arrogate body knowledge in service of their own maintenance. In the wake of eugenics, scientific racism, and the retrenchment of reproductive rights, it is difficult to imagine a non-neurotic relation to the body. This, Butler proposes, should not discourage us from learning how to reclaim and repurpose body knowledge for our own survival. The *Parable* novels take on this task by exaggerating the normally intimate processes through which body knowledge is acquired.

Lauren suffers from a condition called hyperempathy, an "organic delusional syndrome" that obliges her to share other people's pain and pleasure (*Sower* 11). This heightened sensitivity is visually-activated; in her own words, "I feel what I see others feeling or what I believe they feel" (*Sower* 12). Despite being entirely imaginary, Lauren's ability to "share" renders her dangerously vulnerable to the violence that permeates both novels. Speaking to Bankole, she

laments, “Self-defense shouldn’t have to be an agony or a killing or both. I can be crippled by the pain of a wounded person. I’m a very good shot because I’ve never felt that I could afford to just wound someone.... The worst of it is, if you got hurt, I might not be able to help you. I might be crippled by your injury – by your pain, I mean – as you are” (*Sower* 278). As a consequence, Lauren’s social interactions are governed by a kind of strategic calculus; the “Golden Rule” enacted not just at the level of bodies, but between them.

For many critics, hyperempathy encourages more ethical approaches to difference by releasing the body from its historically fixed positions. Variouslly described as the “right medicine for our present ‘compassion fatigue,’” “the living embodiment of the subversion of difference,” and “a crucial metaphor for re-defining social relations,” hyperempathy seems to carry an almost utopian ethical potential (Miller 357; Stillman 29; Melzer 13). In this regard, hyperempathy accomplishes what E.P. Thompson identifies as the pedagogical function of utopia, or “the education of desire” (qtd. in Wegner 17). The scholarly reception of the *Parable* duology therefore announces that a radical break with our attachments to the body is not only possible, but also desirable. We are now firmly within the scope of the post- and non-human turns. The body hailed in the *Parable* duology is precisely the body theorized in the new materialisms. For instance, Coole and Frost define bodies as “open series of capacities or potencies that emerge hazardously and ambiguously within a multitude of organic and social processes,” indicating that the materiality of the body exceeds whatever provisionally coherent and stable form it may take (10). The material body is a temporary, albeit stubborn, configuration of a deeper flow of difference. To illustrate, after experiencing several incidents of sharing pain, Lauren notes: “I had no sense of my own body. I hurt, but I couldn’t have said where – or even whether the pain was mine or someone else’s. The pain was intense, yet [diffuse] somehow. I

felt...disembodied” (*Sower* 297). Lauren’s inability to distinguish between her pain and “someone else’s” prevents her from locating her body in space and time, demonstrating that the body’s inhabitation of “an Umwelt that remains ambiguous, indeterminate, and resonant with an expressive Significance...affects the body's perception of spatial relations” (Coole 104). This loss of proprioception, or the ability to make immediate “sense of” her body, suggests not only that bodies can act and respond prior to rational cognition, but also that the body is a non-deterministic form produced through and traversed by the “open series of capacities or potencies” foregrounded in Coole and Frost’s definition.

Hyperempathy also shares with new materialist philosophies a capacity to upend the social and political hierarchies that regulate our encounters with difference. As literary critic Jerry Phillips agrees, “In a hyperempathetic world, the other would cease to exist as the ontological antithesis of the self, but would instead become a real aspect of oneself” (306). For one, hyperempathy is not limited to connections between human bodies. Before the destruction of Robledo, Lauren and a group from the community venture beyond the walls to hunt for her brother. After her father shoots a feral dog, Lauren realizes that it is still alive: “I saw its bloody wounds as it twisted. I bit my tongue as the pain I knew it must feel became my pain.... With my right hand, I drew the Smith & Wesson, aimed, and shot the beautiful dog through its head.... I walked, then rode in a daze, still not quite free of the dog I had killed” (*Sower* 45-46). For Lauren, the dog’s death lingers, as the ethical ramifications of violence are translated into an exchange of affect between bodies. Her killing of the dog is as much an act of mercy for it as it is for her, which seems to confirm Braidotti’s supposition that “affectivity in fact is what activates an embodied subject, empowering him or her to interact with others....it follows that a subject can think/understand/do/become no more than what he or she can take or sustain within his or

her embodied, spatiotemporal coordinates” (210). That one of these bodies is coded as non-human or animal has no purchase on its ability to act as a causal force. Without a doubt, differences exist between Lauren and the dog; but at the level of the materialist body, these differences cannot cohere into social categories.

Additionally, Lauren’s experiences with difference resolve into a central tenet of Earthseed: “Embrace diversity/Unite--/Or be divided,/robbed,/ruled,/killed/By those who see you as prey./Embrace diversity/Or be destroyed” (*Sower* 196). The implied choice is between two perspectives on difference: the first - diversity - views difference as the foundation for collective empowerment, while in the second, difference continues to scaffold a social hierarchy in which some people emerge as prey. The events of the Pox have created an economy of survival, where “people are expected to fear and hate everyone but their own kind” (*Sower* 36). In defiance of this view, Lauren saves, and then invites, a young family to join her group, commenting, “We’re natural allies - the mixed couple and the mixed group” (*Sower* 208). Her commitment to diversity prompts Melzer to contend that hyperempathy yields a “shared identity and life experience that [is] not based in a particular unified racial or cultural background,” and Phillips to declare that Butler “employs a race-transcendent communalist ethics” (12; 307). Hyperempathy, to them, helps to uncover the fragility of our classifications of difference, and the hierarchies that sustain them.

Still, Butler is careful to remark that shares make good slaves. After learning of her brother’s horrific death, Lauren asks: “...if everyone could feel everyone else’s pain, who would torture? Who would cause unnecessary pain? I’ve never thought of my problem as something that might do some good before, but the way things are, I think it would help” (*Sower* 115). However, in a 2001 interview with NPR, Butler explicitly argues that “the threat of shared pain

wouldn't necessarily make people behave better toward one another" ("NPR Essay"). The proliferation of human trafficking and indentured servitude makes this clear as company "bosses" or "drivers" pay extra for workers with hyperempathy syndrome (*Sower* 305). Moreover, hyperempathy syndrome is induced in utero by the maternal use of a drug designed to impede the degeneration of brain functions in Alzheimer's disease. Paracetco also increased the intellectual capabilities of non-afflicted users and so became the stimulant of choice for the middle class, which included Lauren's mother. And like the antebellum law of *partus sequitur ventrem* that mandated children follow the status of their mothers, the children of hyperempaths can also inherit the condition, even if they are several generations removed from the original drug use. Despite these connections to antebellum slavery, hyperempathy, like the debt slavery of the twenty-first century, is not racially exclusive. And yet, the relationships between hyperempathy and a slavery of the future are telling insofar as they bring the specter of blackness back to the fore.

What Lauren's hyperempathy elucidates is that in order to free difference and the body from its humanist constraints, we must attend to one particular difference to which the human and the body are bound, namely, racial blackness. This may seem paradoxical when we consider that new materialist scholarship almost uniformly disregards race in its return to the body. But the *pro forma* rejection of race as ensnared in either "identity politics" (i.e. the new materialisms), or an "obsolete" black/white binary (i.e. literary criticism), is more correctly a disavowal that untethers the non-, in-, and post-human from their historically proper site of production. As I set forth in chapter 2, this is part of the same racial fetishism that fixes blackness in stereotypical forms to uphold fantasies about the human. More precisely, disavowing the associations between the non-, in-, and post-human and racial blackness defends

interactions with the former against the ontological and conceptual provocations of the latter. The proscription of blackness in the new materialisms and in the responses to the *Parable* duology attest to this fact, even as they establish blackness as the vanishing mediator between the Anthropocene and its possible futures. For as the Afrofuturist elements of Butler's novels evince, what is often taken for the impersonal force of materiality can approximate the historical traumas of slavery.

“The Ships Landed Long Ago”

Afrofuturism is as much a critique of history and embodiment as it is a literary and cultural aesthetic. In his 1994 essay, “Black to the Future,” journalist and cultural critic Mark Dery offered one of the first definitions of Afrofuturism, identifying it as “speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of twentieth-century techno-culture” (8). Like the music of Sun-Ra and Janelle Monae, the novels of Nalo Hopkinson and Nnedi Okorafor, and the art of Ellen Gallagher, Afrofuturist texts mix science fiction, technoculture, and non-Western cosmologies to reconfigure the past, present, and future through the multifocal lens of the African diaspora. Consequently, Afrofuturism also abets the recognition that transatlantic slavery launched the conceptual evolution of the Anthropos and its world-making projects (i.e. the Anthropocene). Dery asserts that

African Americans are, in a very real sense, the descendants of alien abductees. They inhabit a sci-fi nightmare in which unseen but no less impassable force fields of intolerance frustrate their movements; official histories undo what has been done to them; and technology; be it branding, forced sterilization, the Tuskegee experiment, or Tasers, is too often brought to bear upon black bodies. (8)

His description of African Americans as descendants of alien abductees recasts racial slavery as a series of otherworldly encounters. This formulation also suggests that the proper time and place for the narrative of “first contact” is in the arrival of European slave ships on African soil, well before the Columbian misadventure. “First contact,” in this sense, names both the popular trope of science fiction, and the emergence of racial blackness as the “quilting point” of modernity.⁷⁹

As a framework for the unification of meaning, racial blackness consolidates an ideological field so robust that it mediates our social and symbolic orders. To quote music journalist Mark Sinker:

The ships landed long ago: they already laid waste whole societies, abducted and genetically altered swathes of citizenry, imposed without surcease their values. Africa and America – and so by extension Europe and Asia – are already in their various ways Alien Nation. No return to normal is possible: what ‘normal’ is there to return to” (“Loving the Alien”)?

The reciprocal quality of “first contact,” wherein both Europeans and Africans embody an otherworldliness, is retroactively subsumed by a collection of signifiers that reserves otherworldliness for those of African descent. Science fiction’s extensive use of alien figures and landscapes to negotiate cultural anxieties about race is by now well-known.⁸⁰ Other examples

⁷⁹ For Lacan, a “quilting point,” or “*point de capiton*,” describes the “point of convergence that enables everything that happens in [a] discourse to be situated retroactively and prospectively” (268). A “quilting point,” in other words, produces a system of meaning by providing a master signifier through which other signifiers can be interpreted. While quilting points are necessary features of the symbolic order, Žižek points out that their structuring functions are also essential for the maintenance of ideological power. Because the quilting point confers meaning on its field of signifiers retroactively, it appears as if that meaning had always been a “natural” part of each signifier. Paradoxically, the *point de capiton* itself becomes a signifier whose signified is nothing but this endless chain of signifiers. Despite its “purely structural” function to produce meaning through “its own act of enunciation,” the quilting point is perceived as a stable exception to the infinite play of meaning (Žižek 109). The operations of the quilting point are also similar to what Roland Barthes calls mythic speech, a correspondence that Spillers deploys in her analysis of the transatlantic slave trade.

⁸⁰ John Reider’s *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction* offers a detailed account of how Western colonialism’s encounters with racial “others” provided science fiction with its basic themes of discovery and disaster.

range from the racialization of Henrietta Lack's cell line as "aggressive" and hyper-mutational, to legal testimonies about superhuman or demonic black men (Brown, "Being Cellular" 324).⁸¹ Because racial blackness is made to assume the standards of the non-normal, black bodies, behaviors, and cultural productions can only appear as distortions, dislocated from the accepted protocols of nature or out of joint with the movement of history. What's more, in the mythic time of blackness, the recruitment of new signifiers can masquerade as historical change, thereby mystifying and preserving its signifying functions.

Prior to the 1960's, science fiction was largely color-blind, portraying race and racial oppression as historical artifacts within deracinated futures. Under the later influence of postmodernism and postcolonialism, many writers attempted to correct these omissions through the motifs of hybridity, cyborgs, and genetic engineering. Welcome as they are, these efforts to unsettle racial hierarchies achieve little traction against what Isiah Lavender refers to as the "blackground" of American science fiction. His evaluation of the genre's treatment of race finds that the black/white binary, which was secured through slavery, remains its leading reference point, purposefully or not. Even in their deployment as anti-racist interventions, the shape-shifter, cyborg, clone, and other boundary-crossing icons are deeply rooted in racial phenomena like miscegenation, passing, and *partus sequitur ventrem*. I agree with Lavender that while these icons may destabilize codes of difference, they do not clarify how or why the black/white binary continues to govern our social and historical consciousness (18). Subsequently, one of Afrofuturism's most promising features is its mapping and re-wiring of the binary's figurative circuitry. The *Parable* duology's conceit of space travel is a case in point. In the framework of

⁸¹ Darren Wilson's grand jury testimony about his execution of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri was replete with racial stereotypes about the inhumanity of black men. As well as calling Brown a "demon," Wilson repeatedly referred to his size, strength, and energy in ways that recalled Reconstruction-era myths about the black "beast" or "brute" (Calamur, "Ferguson Documents").

Afrofuturism, the ecology of the slave ship becomes the ecology of the space ship, which repositions the space of the hold as a site of suspended animation.

To move characters across time and space without exposing them to the effects of entropy, science fiction relies on the familiar device of suspended animation. This method of travel not only preserves biological life by slowing the body's physiological processes, but also preserves whatever cultural and social conventions a body may carry. In Butler's 1987 novel *Dawn*, Lilith Iyapo awakens aboard an alien vessel two hundred and fifty years after a nuclear war destroys the earth. *Dawn* then chronicles Lilith's struggles to reconcile the ideological values of humanity with the more "progressive" outlook of her alien hosts. The *Parable* novels, in contrast, station its characters in the years immediately preceding the world-destroying event to search for ways to prevent it. Earthseed's solution is to give humanity a "unifying, purposeful life" beyond the narcissism of individual interest by taking to the stars (*Sower* 261). The hope of a "real heaven, not mythology or philosophy," Lauren believes, will motivate humanity to perceive itself as "a growing, purposeful species" made up of more than "smooth dinosaurs who evolve, specialize, and die" (*Sower* 261; *Talents* 179). Doing so will permit us to re-make ourselves on new worlds without importing those values that have so far trapped us in historically destructive cycles. These long-range, interstellar missions involve substantial technological development, and in a testament to Earthseed's inspirational strength, the first space shuttles travel to a starship in orbit around the moon at the end of *Talents*. The shuttles are "loaded with cargoes of people, already deep asleep in Diapause – the suspended-animation process" that also allows "frozen human and animal embryos [and] plant seeds" to travel beyond the known galaxy (*Talents* 406). Lauren's recourse to suspended animation to fulfill humanity's

destiny sheds new light on how the ecology of the slave ship underwrites environmental relations.

In previous chapters, I argue that the unique circumstances of the slave ship solidified a network of relations around antiblack fantasies of the human. By managing the slaves' experiences of their environments, non-blacks were able to naturalize the effects of racial violence while extracting value from its application. *Earthseed's* introduction of suspended animation supplements this template by guiding our attention to the slave's sensorial array. In effect, the slave ship supplied the prototype for suspended animation. If we think of suspended animation not as a state of passivity or stasis but as the regulation of the ability to detect, contextualize, affirm, or re-purpose sensation, then we are closer to understanding how the ecology of the slave ship continues to manage environmental experience. The forces of materiality may arise without human assistance, but we are more than capable of directing whether and how those forces are apprehended. Suspended animation, moreover, bears more than a passing resemblance to what Hortense Spillers calls "flesh." In her seminal essay, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," Spillers traces the construction of the modern body and its allegorical possibilities to the violences of transatlantic slavery. The reduction of the African captive to "a thing" was accomplished through a concomitant severing of the body from "its motive will [and] its active desire" (Spillers 206). This "theft of the body," Spillers writes, requires that we make "a distinction in this case between 'body' and 'flesh' and impose that distinction as the central one between captive and liberated subject-positions...before the 'body' there is the 'flesh,' that zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse, or the reflexes of iconography" (206). In registering the multifaceted wounds of slavery, "flesh" is both a physical site of injury and torture, and a

“primary narrative” from which the signifiers of subjectivity are painfully extracted. Likewise, suspended animation is a corporeal and metaphorical state of being that hinges on the distinction between body and flesh. By seizing the slave’s means of sensation, suspended animation can be leveraged to rewrite the body.

Near the beginning of *Talents*, a newly elected fundamentalist and fascist government sends its agents to invade Acorn and imprison its residents. Acorn, refashioned as the “Camp Christian Reeducation Facility,” becomes host to almost 250 prisoners, most of whom are incarcerated for being poor or having the wrong religious affiliation. During their captivity, inmates are fitted with a control device known as a “slave collar,” which can deliver pain or pleasure at the discretion of its controller or whenever the collar or its control unit is tampered with. Unlike hyperempathy, which is based on shared sensory experience, the collars operate through unilateral sensory manipulation:

some collars [can encourage] changes in brain chemistry...the whole business sounds a little like being a sharer – except that...the wearer feels whatever the person holding the control unit wants him to feel. This could initiate a whole new level of slavery. After a while, needing the pleasure, feeling the pain, and always being desperate to please the master could become a person’s whole life. I’ve heard that some collared people kill themselves, not because they can’t stand the pain, but because they can’t stand the degree of slavishness to which they find themselves descending. (*Talents* 84)

In describing the key difference between slave collars and hyperempathy – a structure of force that regulates sensation – Lauren also pinpoints one of the paradigmatic aspects of slavery. “Slavishness,” which is in part a state of suspended animation, occurs when the slave’s flesh is materially aligned with the master’s will and desire. Flesh becomes the slave’s basic medium of

communication, in which the master's wishes are translated into a sensory language of pain, pleasure, mood, and affect. And because the collar enforces a system of reward and punishment through this language, the slave's resultant behaviors are developed in relation to the master's needs. Laruen's observation that the collar "makes you turn traitor against your kind, against your freedom, against yourself" is verified when two Acorn community members report a forbidden queer relationship to their captors, who "lash" the offending couple until one of them dies (*Talents* 131). Some non-Acorn prisoners also become jailhouse informants, alerting the guards to infractions to receive better treatment or to avoid punishment.

Clearly, the collar's "severing" of the body from its will and desire is not synonymous with their erasure. While discussing her "modern underground railroad," Lauren muses, "if we can convince ex-slaves that they can have freedom with us, no one will fight harder to keep it" (*Sower* 292-293). Her supposition turns out to be prophetic when Emery and Grayson are killed during the invasion of Acorn, both choosing death over re-enslavement. Other Acorn members also commit acts of resistance that stretch from whispered conversations and illicit intimate encounters to open revolt and murder. To an extent, these acts point to the failure of the collars to colonize fully the inner lives of their captives. Then again, what the aforementioned "severing" does achieve is the remaking of the slave's body into a "territory of cultural and political maneuver" (Spillers 206). The slave collars are instrumental to Camp Christian's proselytizing mission, as they permit the conversion of the slave's flesh into the body of the Christian. By manipulating the slave's sensibilities, the collars can train the flesh to associate sensations with selected behaviors: "Everyone...worked for sixteen hours straight. They lashed you if you stopped to pee...dig a hole. Fill it up. Chop trees. Make firewood. Dig another hole. Fill it up" (*Talents* 241). In this way, the Camp gains several informants who "started to believe all those

sermons and Bible classes and prayer meetings and the other stuff [the guards] made [them] sit through or stand through when [they] were almost too tired to live” (*Talents* 239). This strategy of “breaking down the body” to make the mind more pliable has an undeniably long history in institutions like the military. But the military enjoys at least the illusion of consent, whereas under slavery, the giving of consent is impossible. The collars are successful ultimately because the state of suspended animation, carried by the slave’s flesh, resonates “through various centers of human and social meaning” (Spillers 206).

As the technological offspring of racial slavery, the slave collar builds on the Western tradition of equating freedom and subjectivity with self-ownership. Because the slave’s affect, desire, and will are commandeered through the body, no certainty of self is possible without corporeal autonomy. Lauren arrives at the same conclusion after a severe lashing causes her to forget the death of Bankole:

Being lashed hard several times is enough to induce temporary coordination problems and memory loss...After surviving Robledo, I knew that strangers could appear and steal or destroy everything and everyone I loved. People and possessions could be snatched away. But somehow, it had not occurred to me that...that *bits of my own mind* could be snatched away too. (*Talents* 227-228)

Her memory loss proves temporary, but Lauren’s use of the phrase “snatched away” turns her mind into a possession. In an essay on John Locke, Etienne Balibar remarks that “there is nothing natural in the identification of self and own, which is really a norm rather than a necessity, and reigns by virtue of a postulate” (qtd. in Schwab 142). During and after antebellum slavery, self-ownership became an index of freedom because the person of the slave was conflated with property. This convergence of personhood, property, and autonomy has become

more pronounced as advancements in biological engineering generate new threats to our sense of self. We are not far behind Butler's futuristic setting and its technologies of artificial wombs, human cloning, and immersive virtual reality. Lauren's concern thus reflects a very real anxiety about a conceivable genetic or biological determinism, which, given the biochemical mechanisms of the slave collar, could devolve into a genetic or biological slavery. If one's body can be reduced to chemical and electrical data, then "even the distinction between self and other or between one's own and another culture becomes an object of biogenesis" (Schwab 151).

In the Anthropocene, cultural fears over capitalist biotechnologies have obscured the ways racial blackness continues to mediate our environmental relations. The effects of this mediation are attributed instead to a narrow social construction of matter, nature, or the body. The *Parable* novels confirm this fact by associating the consequences of "the Pox" with the slave collar's biochemical induction of suspended animation. Underlying this correlation is the presumption that "the Pox" resulted from the exploitation of long held prejudices against the differential body, and not from extrapolations of the black/white binary. Hyperempathy, in fellowship with the new materialist body, seems to be the logical solution to this exploitation. By establishing the autonomous body as a myth, the hope is that we will contravene the postulate of self-ownership simply by framing the environmentally-constituted body, or its recognition as such, as an ethical imperative. But of course, racial blackness continues to haunt these narratives, however symptomatically. Why else must the racial connotations of slavery and the slave collar be minimized? Why, too, would the new materialisms be invested in a parallel disavowal of racial blackness and race? To illustrate: for black women like Lauren, hyperempathy recalls the process of what Spillers calls "pornotroping," or the ways in which black bodies are violently reduced to flesh.

Suspended in the Flesh

Just as the slave collar engenders a state of suspended animation, hyperempathy condenses Lauren's body to flesh by making her perpetually available to violence. This availability, a constant in the flux between life and death and personhood and objecthood, mimics the historically structural position of black women. It is not incidental that the status of a hyperempathic "sharer" is maternally inherited. Lauren's body and sense of self can be literally and figuratively overwhelmed at any moment by other bodies or the symbolic demands of theory and culture. Furthermore, pornotroping is also a first order process of racialization, where "race is constituted by a repeated sadistic white pleasure in black female suffering" (Nash 52). During her enslavement, Lauren discovers that her hyperempathy subjects her to both the pain of her fellow captives and the pornotropic pleasure of her captors; she writes

there are a few men...who lash until they have orgasms. Our screams and convulsions and pleas and sobs are what these men need to feel sexually satisfied. I know of three who seem to need to lash someone to get sexual pleasure. Most often, they lash a woman, then rape her. (*Talents* 233)

What's worse, once the Camp Christian "teachers" had identified which of their captives were hyperempaths, "they were raped more often than the other women were" (*Talents* 242). In these scenes, the relationships between will, desire, and sensation collapse as Lauren is forced to incarnate the cruel sensualities of her captor's enjoyment.⁸² Although all hyperempaths would suffer similar experiences irrespective of race, these violences are already transcribed in black women's flesh without a slave collar or the condition of hyperempathy. As the "zero degree of

⁸² See Saidiya Hartman's *Scenes of Subjection*, especially chapter 3, "Seduction and the Ruses of Power."

social conceptualization,” black women’s flesh is the quintessentially productive site of modernity’s symbolic order, through which the value and meaning of our conceptual categories are challenged or renewed. Lauren performs an analogous function in the novels, as the knowledge gained from her hyperempathic episodes guides Earthseed’s development into a global movement. In this context, Lauren’s black life, or the blackness of her life, matters, but only in its ambivalent capacity to make all lives matter.

The approach to life promoted under Earthseed’s banner responds to our desires for new modes of existence appropriate for the Anthropocene. For Lauren, embracing change enables notions of self and community capable of navigating complex socioeconomic forces and their differential embodiment. In Earthseed, “god is a process or a combination of processes, not an entity. It is not conscious at all.... God can be directed, focused, speeded, slowed, shaped. All things change, but all things need not change in all ways” (*Talents* 46). Moreover, change is not driven simply or only by the dialectics of historical progress. The chapters in both *Sower* and *Talents* open with epigraphs from Earthseed’s doctrinal text, *The Book of the Living*. Modeled after the aphoristic style of the Tao, these epigraphs acknowledge the potential of political, economic, and social structures to affect and be affected by all matter: “We have lived before/We will live again/We will be silk,/Stone,/Mind,/Star,/We will be scattered,/Gathered,/Molded,/Probed./We will live,/And we will serve Life” (*Talents* 60). The confluence of silk, stone, mind, and star rejects the idea that the active properties of “life” are confined to the human or organic, constituting what Weheliye calls a “radically different political imaginary,” where “suffering appears as utopian erudition” that “[summons] forms of human emancipation that can be imagined but not (yet) described” (126-127). The destiny of Earthseed to “take root amongst the stars” is precisely this imagined yet indescribable emancipation (*Talents* 46). Once the

starships leave Earth at the end of *Talents*, humanity becomes the seeds of Earth, open to possibilities that we cannot predict as we spread to worlds unknown.

Visions like these suggest, among other things, that oppressive conditions do not exhaust the variabilities of life, and that the transvaluation of matter and the human can encourage comprehensive ethical bearings. Then again, perceiving hyperempathy and Earthseed as a means to “liberate...assemblages of life, thought, and politics from the tradition of the oppressed” obliges us to detach pornotroping from the sexually violent production of racial difference (Weheliye 137). This is precisely what I meant by my earlier argument that the metaphors of slavery are immanent to the force of materiality. For what is a sensorial attunement to the depersonalizing effects of matter if not the state of black flesh enacted by hyperempathy? The celebrated and ethical new materialist body thus betrays a desire to harness the radical potential of black flesh without paying the social and historical costs of being black. This desire is organized by a fantasy that misrecognizes black female flesh as a resource against the violence of hierarchical differences, rather than the site of their active production. In the new materialist formulation, pornotroping is revised as a radical interruption in the order of things, one that produces a material body unbound by the legacies of racial slavery. This evacuation of race from the new materialist ethics is in fact essential to their structure.

In order to recognize and re-purpose the material forces of bodies, others or our own, exchanges of affect must occur in the absence of racial slavery and its afterlives. Only then can an attunement to the material forces of difference be depicted as a universally ethical project. For the slave collars make explicit how the violences of racial slavery regulate the ways that slaves process material and environmental stimuli.⁸³ Under these conditions of suspended animation,

⁸³ The slave collars are a metaphorical representation of Sylvia Wynter’s sociogenetic register, demonstrating how practices of race-making are encoded as biosensory information that guides the behavior, body knowledge, and

bodies oscillate endlessly between routing stimuli through the master's desires and resisting their interpretation as such. It may not negate the impersonal or agential capacities of matter, or preclude their acknowledgement, but suspended animation can certainly orient bodies towards the environment in ways that make these capacities inconsequential. Slave collars, designed to "pacify" even the most violent criminal" while "[leaving] no mark," therefore symbolize a psychic repression that inevitably produces hysterical symptoms within the body (*Talents* 330-331). On this score, any body knowledge wrought through suspended animation is coextensive with criminality, or a non-normal way of being that defines the limits of rational behavior and knowledge. Most importantly, the historically racialized construction of these limits demonstrate how suspended animation persists through and as the totalizing ecology of signs coordinated through racial blackness.

The disciplinary formations of modern racial slavery have been in part reassembled as a signifying formation, or quilting point, that prolongs suspended animation under cover of the "merely" discursive. Apropos of this reassembly, the slave collar and hyperempathy are represented by signifiers that prescribe how, and under what conditions, body knowledge *matters*. We have by now discovered a number of these signifiers – alien, inhuman, animal, non-human, object – each of which obtain meaning through scenes of black suffering, the likes of which were perfected during racial slavery. And despite new materialist claims that matter "has nothing to do with 'the 'free play' of textual indeterminacy,'" in the words of Stephen Tumino, "the concept of materialism that is being defended...is precisely one that makes the material into an opacity that...can only be 'interpreted' at the level of signs" ("Theory Too"). Once matter and its sensory effects are raised to the level of conscious awareness, or become subjects for critical

physiological development of subjects and populations ("Towards"). See chapter 1 for a brief summary of Wynter's theory of sociogenetics.

thought, they are susceptible to the antiblack signifying formations I outline throughout this chapter. Within the new materialist theoretical apparatus, for instance, the disparities between those subjected to suspended animation and those who are not can dictate whether an assemblage is durable or systemic. Because acknowledging the pervasive force of antiblackness would oblige a theoretical overhaul, racial blackness is fastened to “identity politics” as a way of managing how sensation is contextualized and valued. Without a doubt, black bodies are traversed by material sensations like any others, but the prodigious command to move “beyond” the black/white binary cannot avoid influencing how those sensations are perceived, or, as the case may be, dismissed. Regardless of the parade of signifiers enlisted to define it, racial blackness is predictably coded through a rule of negative signification that makes it stand trial for every new threat to the orders of Man.⁸⁴ We know what Man *is* based on what racial blackness *is not*. This “constancy” of meaning, or “powerful stillness...in the field of signification,” underwrites suspended animation as the material-semiotic legacy of Africans in the diaspora (Spillers 205).

Furthermore, this legacy has and continues to impact modern ecological thought. Suspended animation was originally concretized to facilitate the slave ship’s manipulation of environmental relations. Aboard the “Zong”, sailors controlled the slaves’ access to water to create a metric for “human-ness” that could justify the ship’s massacres. We can say now that this control was a type of suspended animation that reconfigured how the slaves’ bodies “experienced” water. The drawings of the *Brookes* slave ship, in this regard, can also be viewed as schematizations of suspended animation around which a racial fetishism coalesced. And while the ecology of the slave ship was initially assembled across the Middle Passage, it is dependent

⁸⁴ I prefer Wynter’s term, “Man,” to describe the particular “ethnoclass (i.e., Western bourgeois) conception of the human” that emerges as the target of the new materialism’s posthumanist ethics (“Unsettling” 260).

on neither the formal conditions of captivity nor the physical space of the ship. *Beasts of the Southern Wild* corroborates as much in its inevitable reproduction of black suffering in pursuit of climate change resistance. The ecology of the slave ship survives today in environmental representation and as environmental racism, partially because suspended animation is kept alive (as flesh) through the ongoing performance of antiblack violence and (as signifying formation) through the widespread rejection of race by contemporary ecological theories. These interrelated customs belong unmistakably to the larger tool kit of antiblackness, but their convergence in environmental concerns has significant implications for the Anthropocene.

Our conceptualization of ecologies should address how the entanglements of blackness, matter, and the human make only certain environmental relations and bodies both legible and desirable. We have seen what can happen if environmental sensibilities are mapped without a thorough comprehension of racial blackness. The new materialisms at least misidentify the supposed inadequacies of identity politics as the cause of their rejection of race, rather than acknowledging how their rejection of race molds their reading of identity politics. To put it another way, to confront effectively the consequences of the Anthropocene, we first need to reckon with our social and libidinal investments in, and disavowal of, black flesh. Certainly, in black women's "absence from a subject position," Spillers does locate the potential for a *sui generis* naming that claims the "insurgent ground" outside of "dominant symbolic activity" (229). The difficulty here is that the "monstrous female...with the potential to 'name'" emerges out of the specific histories of black women (209). This is not to say that a radical ethical capacity does not exist in other conditions of oppression, or that suspended animation precludes social life. However, in view of the ways black flesh subtends the making of the body and our

concepts of subjectivity and the human, it follows that their unmaking must too begin with black flesh. Afrofuturism, as per my reading of the *Parable* novels, stages one such beginning.

By marshaling counter-memories of transatlantic slavery to establish counter-futures, Afrofuturism grants us critical and proleptic viewpoints of the present. That these viewpoints also lay bare the imbrication of technological development (i.e. space exploration) and racial slavery's techniques of punishment (i.e. the slave collar and the ecology of the slave ship) is vital to revising our approach to the Anthropocene. If we continue to allow the Anthropocene's philosophy of history and nature to determine our engagements with the environment, black bodies and racial blackness will continue to inhabit the "position of the unthought," so that they "give the nation its coherence," even as they remain "subject to a kind of complete appropriation" in and as the "property of enjoyment" (Hartman and Wilderson 185; 188). To be clear, my objective is not to reject wholesale the new materialisms or the scholarship of the non-human turn. Their attempts to offer a broader theorization of matter and being are appropriate for our techno-scientific age. Indeed, planetary crises might necessitate more expansive philosophies. What I am suggesting instead is that challenges to human exceptionalism should proceed through a critique of race and racial blackness or we risk reorganizing old privileges ("Matter") under new standards of being ("All Lives").

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