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MIKE BROWN'S BODY: NEW MATERIALISM AND BLACK FORM

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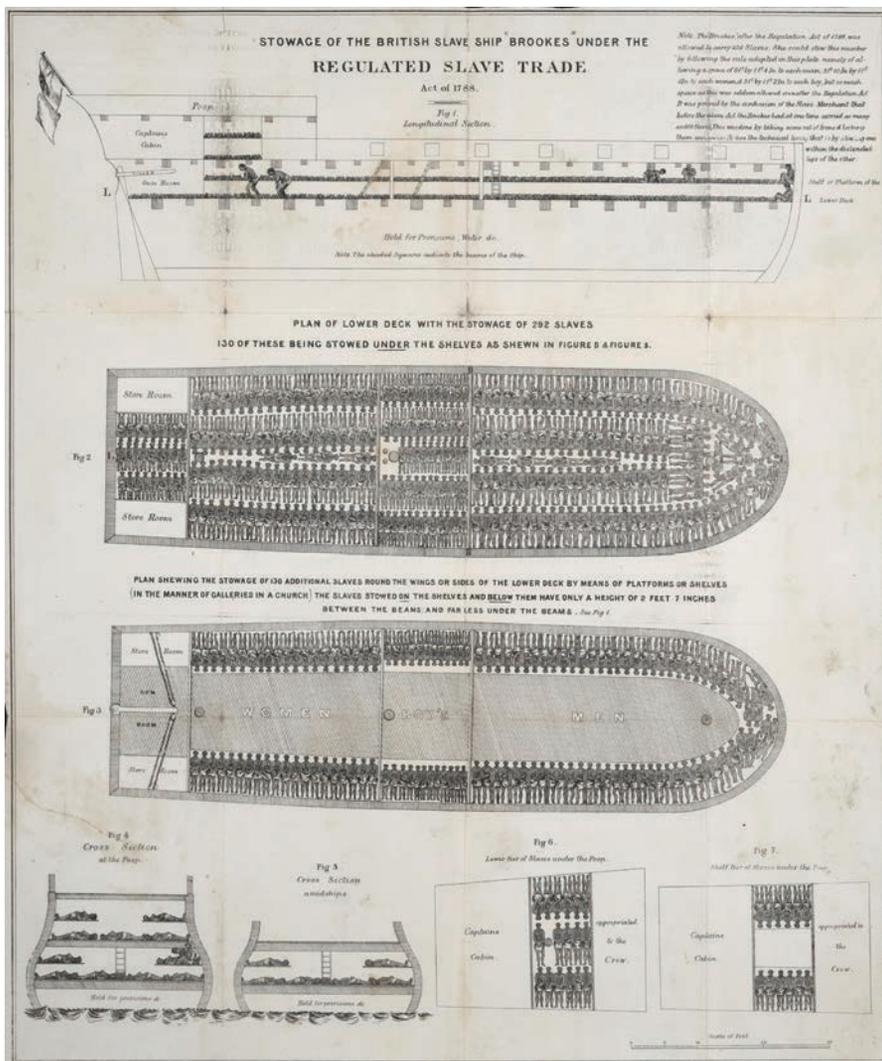


Figure 1. Stowage of the British Slave Ship Brookes Under the Regulated Slave Trade Act of 1788, Library of Congress Prints & Photographs Division, digital ID cph.3a34658.

“Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country.”

—President John F. Kennedy, Inaugural Address, 1961

Is colorblindness a queer form?

There is something Black about spatial practices of incarceration and perishment that dehumanize living matter.¹ The *Brookes* (fig. 1) is a figure for the flesh. The flesh is pressed into the *Brookes* and the *Zong*. The flesh becomes knowledge through art: Barbara Chase-Riboud’s *Echo of Lions* (1989) and Djimon Honsou’s performance in *Amistad* (1997); the illustration above and its reproductions; M. NourbeSe Philip’s poetry and Amma Asante’s film *Belle*. To the putative owners, speculators, and underwriters of these ships, the flesh was only so much precious metal temporarily suspended in a perishable state. Posterity, the potential for power to reproduce itself and its world through the flesh, spilled out of the hold of those ships.

Out of the hold of those ships, the lonely, uncovered flesh of Michael Brown spilled out into the street. Millions of eyes to swarm around him spilled out of the hold. The uninvited ghost of Renisha McBride spilled out onto Theodore Wafer’s porch. Olaudah Equiano, as he was pressed into the service of making a new world for others, recalled his own flesh being “hurried away even amongst the uncircumcised” and swept up into the hold along with “a people who did

not circumcise, and ate without washing their hands.”² He would meet distant peoples who cooked in iron pots and sharpened their teeth; he would worry over whether he would be killed and if his flesh was “to be eaten by those white men with horrible looks, red faces, and loose hair.”³ Elsewhere I have written about how Black skin and Black hair form the substrate for a variety of commercial and scientific practices that assign them quantifiable value even as they engender intimacy. Our skin and hair belong to us without determining the limits of our belonging because we are more than flesh. Our captors insist we have always been flesh, so we can be left to perish like Michael Brown and Renisha McBride. Like Equiano, we try to remember when we were pressed into the hold. Adapting the new materialism to the task of reckoning with the flesh demands a critique of form, and the work of Sylvia Wynter, Hortense Spillers, and Alex Weheliye articulates this demand in inspiring fashion.⁴

This work is all the more urgent in the wake of what Ian Haney López terms “reactionary colorblindness,” which he traces to the backlash against affirmative action and the contemporary “renewed penchant for the racial formalism which in an earlier and ignominious version helped defend Jim Crow oppression.”⁵ This doctrine finds expression in legal reasoning that equates affirmative action with reverse discrimination, “positing whites as black to justify heightened review, but blacks as white to deny the persistence of racial hierarchy.”⁶ In the name of colorblindness, a perverse (queer)

return to disenfranchisement proceeds by enabling the faceless majority to “reconfigure the existing political process in a manner that creates a two-tiered system of political change, subjecting laws designed to protect or benefit discrete and insular minorities to a more burdensome political process than all other laws.”⁷ Supreme Court Justice Sonia Sotomayor scrutinizes the form in which a concern for Equal Protection gets articulated in this new moment by meeting it with a timely critique of her own: a rarely cited “political-process doctrine.” While the ahistorical claims lodged in the name of a strange (queer) resurgent formalism seek to unmake the humanity of racial minority subjects, the political-process doctrine comprises a new, materialist mode of vigilance toward the ruses of form. Attention to the processes by which Blackness loses its human form, as well as to the processes that enable the human to take on a Black form—historical processes—compels us not to abandon the human or the historical while so many possibilities remain “unvoiced, misseen, not doing, awaiting *their* verb.”⁸ What forms of life might be attainable for Black bodies in these unspeakable times? Christina Sharpe does not answer this directly, but instead she calls attention to the continuity between the way “the Black body” is debased in death and the way it is made susceptible to debasement in its living form: as the flesh.⁹ Her attention to “the quotidian unmaking of being that is everyday blackness, the ease with which fungibility and killability mark black life forms,” suggests a divergence between Black and queer forms of life.¹⁰ Keguro Macharia cites Sharpe

to mark a contrast: Black queer studies is not so troubled by death. He finds “much black queer scholarship on the contemporary focuses on strategies of livability—on love, on kindness, on ecstasy, on community, on resistance, on agency, on possibility.” Yet he dwells on the disposability of the Black body in order to “think with:about impossible figures, unmade figures, unbeing figures, with the fleshed and unfleshed, with the thing that desires,” because those are the forms of Black life.

To ask what forms of life might be attainable for Black bodies, we have to think about what it takes for us to live as well as why we die. Cathy Cohen raised the provocative question, “Do Black Lives Matter?” in the aftermath of the death that occasioned the title of this essay.¹¹ This occasion was also characterized by the life of CeCe McDonald: a life that she maintained through self-defense. At once a testament to Black trans women’s capacity to survive and a protest against the reduction of Black bodies to dead flesh, Cohen’s question exposes a fault line underlying the apparent alliance between Black and queer politics. She makes a distinction between the “performative solidarity” with anti-racist endeavors that is professed by some LGBT/queer advocacy organizations and the substantive solidarity required to curtail the continual violence done by neoliberalism. Her address resonates with the dilemma that Sara Ahmed has called the “Non-Performativity of Anti-Racism.” Speech acts that proclaim anti-racist aims while declaring whiteness fail, she writes, because “declaring whiteness, or even ‘admitting’ to one’s own racism, when

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A critique of form that militates against white ignorance must call the conventions that countenance epistemic and material violence against Black bodies by their names.

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the declaration is assumed to be ‘evidence’ of an anti-racist commitment, does not do what it says.”¹² As an alternative to the (infelicitous) performative register in which anti-racist discourse takes place, Cohen’s gesture to the “substantive” and Ahmed’s demand for a “*form* of action that we could describe as anti-racist” are gestures to the *material* dimension of racism and anti-racist praxis. Living Black human beings take such action by demanding to go on living.

In the wake of unrelenting “group-differentiated vulnerability to premature death,” it is astounding to witness the persistence of what Charles Mills has called white ignorance.¹³ Unironically, Mills identifies white ignorance as the specific form of an “epistemology of ignorance”:

modern mainstream Anglo-American epistemology was for hundreds of years from its Cartesian origins profoundly inimical terrain for the development of any concept of structural group-based miscognition. The paradigm exemplars of phenomena likely to foster mistaken belief—optical illusions, hallucinations, phantom limbs, dreams—were by their very banality

universal to the human condition and the epistemic remedies prescribed—for example, rejecting all but the indubitable—correspondingly abstract and general.¹⁴ Maintaining the functional coherence of advantaged (white) positions in knowledge systems permeated by hierarchical race thinking permits and even necessitates specific habits of miscognition. How else can a system of thought conceptualize the hanging deaths of Sandra Bland and Lennon Lacy in terms so disconnected from lynching that they can name them suicide?¹⁵ How else can stylistic conventions abide phrasing like “the shooting death of black teen Trayvon Martin by George Zimmerman” and “the death of black teen Michael Brown by police officer Darren Wilson,” when the declarative constructions “George Zimmerman killed Trayvon Martin” and “Darren Wilson killed Michael Brown” cut to the quick?¹⁶

A critique of form that militates against white ignorance must call the conventions that countenance epistemic and material violence against Black bodies by their names. “Turning a blind eye to history,” in Neil Gotanda’s

words, the disconnected formalism of colorblindness observes racial inequality in the present but ascribes its persistence to causes other than white supremacy. Because race consciousness insists on taking the form of historical consciousness, I read the following new materialist tableau, inspired by Latour's *We Have Never Been Modern*, with something just short of object terror:

On most days our money has not vanished, our spouse has not left us, our job has not ended, our name has not changed, and our country has not collapsed into civil war. This is not because humans themselves are inherently stable, but because we lean on nonhuman objects—more durable than we are—to provide the stability for us. Uniforms, contracts, wedding rings, passports, bridges, tunnels, and private dwellings are among the thousands of entities that prevent the slide of humans into a baboon-like cosmos of permanent social anxiety.¹⁷

Coming to terms with the productive ignorance toward racial specificity in this formulation is a heady task. It requires a critique of the form in which philosophy disclaims the exceptional quality of being human. Losing our money, spouse, job, name, and country have been necessary preconditions for the fashioning of Black bodies into nonhuman objects for others to lean on. Becoming human, for us, has involved redressing this dispossession rather than relying on it.

Sharon Holland points to one endeavor to seek redress in an account of contemporary queer of color critique. She identifies Ernesto Martínez's *On Making Sense: Queer Race Narratives of Intelligibility* with the hypothesis that "the continued skepticism toward the humanist project evinced in queer work and the wishful thinking of a race-blind . . . theory of being in critical studies leads to a continued obfuscation of queer of color contributions to theories of sexuality."¹⁸ The critique espoused by Martínez and others lodges objections to the way a flight from the merely human enacted by contemporary theories, including those brandishing the sigil of queer, takes the form of white flight. Like Roderick Ferguson in *Aberrations in Black* and Amber Jamilla Musser in *Sensational Flesh*, Martínez dwells on the maligned and misrecognized body of queer of color knowledge—sometimes, specifically Black and Latinx queer knowledge—to reanimate the human relation to itself.¹⁹ Indigenous humanisms and spatial practices, like those of Zoe Todd and Juanita Sundberg, likewise "concede that there are elements of post-humanism, cosmopolitics and the Ontological Turn that could potentially be promising tools in the decolonial project, if approached with an attention to the structural realities of the academy."²⁰ Doing reparation to structures in the academy can involve taking subjugated knowledges as the point of departure for epistemological transformation. An example in a First Nations context might be the transition from a reliance on the maligned and misrecognized term "berdache" to a strategically pan-Indigenous

praxis employing the form “Two-Spirit.”²¹ No such reckoning is possible, however, in a space that relies for its stability on nonhuman objects fashioned out of human flesh.

The problem posed by the continued proliferation of anthropomorphic epistemologies is not that they render too sharp a distinction between “us” and nonhuman objects. The problem is that performative utterances such as “us” and “we”—like “our money,” “our spouse,” “our job,” “our name,” and “our country”—interpellate a narrow “us” for whom the dissolution of nature/culture is novel. Yet some of us never became human in the exceptional sense; our flesh was sublimated from nonhuman object into the “baboon-like cosmos of permanent social anxiety” in the fatal sweep of Enlightenment modernity. “It has largely gone unnoticed by posthumanists,” Zakkiyah Iman Jackson writes, “that their queries into ontology often find their homologous (even anticipatory) appearance in decolonial philosophies that confront slavery and colonialism’s inextricability from the Enlightenment humanism they are trying to displace.”²² It remains concerning that the turn away from the human is so dramatic and the materialisms are so “new” when, as Kyla Wazana Tompkins points out, “these are epistemologies and ontologies that can hardly be said to have recently been invented but rather are familiar to, among others, First Nations and Indigenous peoples; to those humans who have never been quite human enough.”²³ Jackson reminds us that when Black thinkers such as Wynter and Lewis Gordon called the premises of the posthuman

turn into question, “what they aspired to achieve was not the extension of *liberal* humanism to those enslaved and colonized, but rather a transformation within humanism.”²⁴

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My inclination is to ask not what form can do to enable or open itself to queerness, but to ask whether form will let Blackness live.

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As if the constant risk of death were not enough, the persistent whiteness of the ignorance that enjoins us to let go of the human before we are done with it makes me reluctant to articulate the queer forms through which I might enact livability, agency, and resistance in terms that are not explicitly Black and human. I know that objects can and do resist, but the reason I know this—my epistemological ground—is that my ancestors were objects. I am wondering what queering the relation between the human and other forms of life, queering the relation between life and non-life, or undoing the sovereignty of relation altogether, will mean for the Black body. My inclination is to ask not what form can do to enable or open itself to queerness, but to ask whether form will let Blackness live.

According to Holland, “missing in Martinez’s work is some kind of attention to the ways

in which the white critics he mentions—especially Donna Haraway—might have investments against *language* or its universality because of their commitments to the animal world, or to something other than that which might be considered human.”²⁵ Martinez is not alone in according language a second chance over the protestations of new philosophies. In a gesture to current scholarship in the field, Tompkins also expresses reservations about “the ongoing citation of ‘the power of language’ or ‘representationalism’ as a problem that is corrected by new materialism.”²⁶ Language and representation, and literature in particular, are close to my heart. But Blackness is also “something other than that which might be considered human,” and I am mindful of the violent severability of my Blackness from language and humanity. In deference to the complications introduced to feminist, queer, and new materialist critiques by Holland, Martínez, Sharpe, Haraway, Tompkins, Vanessa Agard-Jones, and Zoe Todd, among others, I do not want my relationship with the human to end just yet. The body is still warm.

/ **Notes** /

¹ Sharon Holland, “(Black) (Queer) Love,” *Callaloo* 36, no. 3 (2013): 667.

² Vincent Carretta has cast doubt on the veracity of Equiano’s account of his African birth and upbringing in *Equiano the African: Biography of a Self-Made Man* (New York: Penguin, 2007). But the story is still his.

³ Olaudah Equiano, *The interesting narrative of the life of Olaudah Equiano; or, Gustavus Vassa, the African, written by himself*, vol. 1, London [1789], 66-

72. *The Making Of The Modern World*, proxy.library.upenn.edu:2535/mome/infomark.do?&source=gale&prodId=MOME&userGroupName=upenn_main&tabID=T001&docId=U3602195584&type=multipage&contentSet=MOMEArticles&version=1.0&docLevel=FASCIMILE.

⁴ See Alex Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014); Sylvia Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being/Power/Truth/Freedom: Towards the Human, After Man, Its Overrepresentation—An Argument,” *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3, no. 3 (2003): 257–337; Hortense Spillers, “Interstices: A Small Drama of Words,” in *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

⁵ Ian F. Haney López, “‘A Nation of Minorities’: Race, Ethnicity, and Reactionary Colorblindness,” *Stanford Law Review* 59, no. 4 (April 2010): 1061.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 1051.

⁷ Sonia Sotomayor, *Schuetz et al v. BAMN*, 572 U.S. 2014, 33.

⁸ Hortense Spillers, “Interstices,” 153.

⁹ Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham: Duke University Press), 2016.

¹⁰ Keguro Macharia, “Black Queer Studies Now,” *Gukira*, personal blog, August 19, 2014, gukira.wordpress.com/2014/08/19/black-queer-studies-now.

¹¹ Cathy Cohen, “#DoBlackLivesMatter? From Michael Brown to CeCe McDonald: On Black Death and LGBTQ Politics,” public presentation, Annual Kessler Award Lecture, CLAGS: The Center for LGBTQ Studies, New York, NY, December 12, 2014.

¹² Sara Ahmed, “Declarations of Whiteness: The Non-Performativity of Anti-Racism,” *Borderlands* 3, no. 2 (2004): www.borderlands.net.

au/vol3no2_2004/ahmed_declarations.htm.

¹³ Ruth Wilson Gilmore, *Golden Gulag: Prisons, Surplus, Crisis, and Opposition in Globalizing California* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007), 28.

¹⁴ Charles Mills, "White Ignorance," in *Race and Epistemologies of Ignorance*, ed. Shannon Sullivan and Nancy Tuana (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2007), 13.

¹⁵ Victor Blackwell, "N.C. teen's hanging ruled a suicide; mother says it was a lynching," CNN, December 15, 2014, www.cnn.com/2014/12/15/justice/north-carolina-lennon-lacy.

¹⁶ Alex McKechnie, "#BlackLivesMatter Panel Discussion at Drexel During Black History Month," *Drexel NOW*, February 19, 2015, drexel.edu/now/archive/2015/February/Black-Lives.

¹⁷ Graham Harman, "Demodernizing the Humanities with Latour," *New Literary History* 47, no. 2-3 (2016): 250-51.

¹⁸ Sharon Holland, "The Practice of Discipline: Disciplinary Practices," *American Literary History* 26, no. 4 (2014): 808.

¹⁹ Amber Jamilla Musser, *Sensational Flesh: Race, Power, and Masochism* (New York: NYU Press, 2014), 29.

²⁰ Zoe Todd, "An Indigenous Feminist's Take on the Ontological Turn: 'Ontology' is Just Another Word for Colonialism," *Journal of Historical Sociology* 29, no. 1 (2016): 9.

²¹ Chelsea Vowel, "All My Queer Relations: Language, Culture, and Two-Spirit Identity," *Indigenous Writes: A Guide to First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Issues in Canada* (Winnipeg: Portage and Main Press, 2016), 108.

²² Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, "Animal: New Directions in the Theorization of Race and Posthumanism," *Feminist Studies* 39, no. 3 (2013): 681.

²³ Kyla Wazana Tompkins, "On the Limits and Promise of New Materialist Philosophy," *Lateral* 5,

no. 1 (2016): csalateral.org/wp/issue/5-1/forum-alt-humanities-new-materialist-philosophy-tompkins.

²⁴ Jackson, "Animal," 672.

²⁵ Holland, "Practice," 808.

²⁶ Tompkins, "On the Limits," n.p.

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