

Continuities and Reminders, or Writing in the Afterlife of Slavery

I am much less interested in the discontinuities that the most recent presidential election performs, and much more interested in the continuities held in suspension by official periodization. I do not mean to suggest that the death toll resulting from state-sponsored murder will not increase. Quite flatfootedly, the only way to continue steadfast in hope is to continue discounting undocumented and closeted life among the living. But that is precisely my starting point, our starting point. To discount Black life from the living, to not count Black life among the living, is nothing new. If anything, the distinction whose difference will have been theoretically profound for us here today is whether we will write knowing that we remain in the wake. In the wake, on the slave ship, being, tethered to the cargo hold—this accumulation, this montage of metaphors does not bespeak a methodological imprecision, nor does it pose as a mere rhetorical flourish. Rather, these words—in the wake, in the ship, in the hold—speak around a dense and grave truth: the afterlife of slavery. What, therefore, is writing in the afterlife of slavery? What is our writing, on religion and on race and on sexuality, in the afterlife of slavery? It seems to me that if we abide in the knowledge of this question, if we inhabit the question, then and only then will we have come into a position to interest ourselves in discontinuities—be they ominous or propitious.

By opening my response to the panel's prompt in this way, I set my words within a particular critical pessimist style of Black feminist writing. This style does not take "the subject"—be it Hegelian or Lacanian—as an analytic given. Rather, it insists on the negation of "the subject," and that this negation is not past, but ongoing, or more precisely that its past is ongoing, akin to the life of the undead. Perhaps in this sense this critical pessimist style of Black feminist writing is not distinct from some other styles of writing labeled "queer" or "postcolonial." However, this style of Black feminist writing, in its refusal of "the subject," does not rush to a celebration of deconstructed categories, a celebration that redraws the line of progress between those who are beyond gender, beyond race, beyond nation, and those who are not. After all, deconstruction is construction. Instead, this critical pessimist style of Black feminist writing remains suspended in its refusal, precisely because deconstruction is construction.

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Remember Hortense Spillers, who, in her 1987 essay refuses gender as an analytic given. And her refusal is not made within the logic of an abstract system, but from a position under gratuitous violence to which the slave was subjected. She reminds us that stolen bodies packed into the cargo hold of the slave ship were not marked and organized along lines of male or female, but as differently sized and weighted property. "Under these conditions," she writes, "we lost at least gender difference in the outcome and the female body and the male body become a territory of cultural and political maneuver not at all gender-related, gender-specific."

How can it be that 12 year-old Tamir Rice, a Black boy with a toy gun in a recreation center, is shot dead within seconds by police, while 21 year-old Dylan Roof, who kills nine people during a prayer service in an African Methodist Episcopal Church, is unassumingly apprehended, given a bulletproof vest, and fed Burger King by police? How can it be that Tamir is labeled by the concerned caller as “a male with a pistol,” “a juvenile,” by the police dispatch as a “male Black,” and by the grand jury as one whose death is the result of a “great storm of human error?” Meanwhile, Dylan is simply, according to federal prosecutors, “self-radicalized,” one led astray by “personal associations with white supremacist groups.” It should come, then, as no surprise that the police officer who killed Tamir was not indicted with any crime by the grand jury. Whereas Dylan is afforded the narrative that begins with “once upon a time,” depicted as a character in a “before and after” story whose fall into waywardness we are meant to sympathize with, Tamir is temporal fixture embodied. The anti-black order of this world makes his young life impossible. Tamir’s was not the death of a young boy, but the record of property thrown overboard during a “great storm.” At sea, no one dies of old age.

Let us not forget that the insurance of property thrown overboard is secured, and oftentimes more valuable than the prospect of return of investment in emaciated chattel.

Remember Saidiya Hartman, who, in 1997, opens her monograph by refusing to reproduce Frederick Douglass’ account of the beating of Aunt Hester. She refuses the monstrous intimacy between the bearing witness and the consuming spectator that familiarity with Black suffering sustains. Consider how Andrew Caldwell, a young Black man who testified at a COGIC convocation that God had delivered him from homosexuality—how his body yet again became contested territory, a stretched parchment on which both his sympathizers and his critics furiously wrote out their thoughts on religion, race, and sexuality. Caldwell’s body pinned to the whipping post; each line of commentary, the snapping of a whip’s lash, revealing not concern for the young Black man in question but a compulsion to instrumentalize his dialect and his gait, or worse still, to atone for instrumentalization with rituals of concern.

The think pieces nourished by the stiffened muscles and settled blood of Puerto Rican, Black, undocumented, closeted, queer bullet torn bodies strewn across a silent dance floor; the news columns about supposed cultures of underdevelopment built on the bodies of Haitians drowned by hurricane and by cholera; opinion editorials about so-called cultures of superstition wrung out from the bodies of Puerto Ricans like mopping towels starved and denied medical services—food for thought; ante-thought; that without which thought cannot be sustained but which is never counted as thought itself.

“Sharks always trail in the wake of the ship.”

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Junot Díaz’s *Oscar*, Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*, James Baldwin’s *Rufus*, Mario de Andrade’s *Macunaíma*—Black death, which is Black afterlife, has financed affective networks, political economies, and aesthetic forms since this world was first conceived in the hold of ships named “Comfort,” “Care,” and “Amistad.” It is the mundane and quotidian demeanor of this terror—that casualness with which we view and discuss and profit from Black life in the wake of death,

under the weight of death, against the spate of death, beyond the grate of death—that is the focus of critical pessimist Black feminist writing. If I have anything to offer you today, it is to remind us of the continuities. To remind us that while the most recent presidential election records a moment of extremity in national history, Black life has always been subject to that history’s extremities, the undead straddled “between nothingness and infinity.”

We must, as Christina Sharpe writes, remain in the wake, bound up in staying with, in defending the undead. To refuse the world’s material and symbolic demand for Black blood and breathe. To aspire to a memory of writing that has been the only other source of breath for those of us who can no longer breathe. This is wake work.