Excerpt from
THE INHUMANITIES
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CATEGORIES OF MATTER

Geology is a category and praxis of dispossession. It has determined the geographies and genealogies of colonial extraction in a double sense: first, in terms of settler colonialism and the *thirst* for land and minerals, and second, as a category of the inhuman that transformed persons into things. This pincer movement of geology displaces territory as earth and the territory of subjective possession. This is the filiation of “red earth, blood earth, blood brother earth.”

GEOLOGY AS THE SPACE OF TRANSACTION

Laws of property a) a thing belonging to someone, things, belonging, goods, chattels. b) an attribute, quality or characteristic of something.

PROPERTY RELATIONS

Slave capture and ownership were initially instigated to mine for gold in the New World. Both enslaved, land and ecologies became subject to encoding as inhuman property, as a tactic of empire and European world building. Gold and silver extracted from mines in the Americas flowed to buoy up European markets. The property lines of empire instigated and marked Blackness as both a consequence of labor requirements and a possibility of capital accumulation through geologic extraction. As Wilderson suggests, “one could say that the possibility of becoming property is one of the essential elements that draws the line between blackness and whiteness.” (Hartman 2003, 188) The historic confluence of the science of recognition, identification, and extraction of geologic materials and the establishment of a color line that policed the border in claims to human freedom organized the language of geology beyond the realms of a material science. As Catherine Hall (2014, 28) puts it, “black racial identity marked those who were enslaved. White marked those who were free.” Blackness was named as a property of “natal alienation” (which is also genealogical and geographical isolation) and its continuance in social and sexual orders through the enclosure of property relations across all binds of relation. It “had its counterpoint in the naming of whiteness as a different kind of property—access to public and private privileges, the possibility of controlling critical aspects of one’s own life rather

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than being the object of others' domination. A set of assumptions, privileges and benefits were attached to being white in colonial society that became legitimated, affirmed and protected by law.” (28) Blackness was a legal code and an epidemiological mode of identification that fixed a body politic of Blackness as transportable property to be continuously dis-placed across different geographies and psychic registers across the “door of no return.” (Brand 2001; Hartman 2007) Moreover, Whiteness became established as a right to geography, to take place, to traverse the globe and to extract from cultural, corporeal, and material registers.

While the accumulation from planter capital was one register of extraction, the accumulation from the violence of taking place across multiple registers of belonging was another. The very fungibility of the commodity allowed Blackness to become mobilized as an ontological possibility within inhuman categories, but conversely, the carceral logic of geologic grammars renders Blackness as flesh, matter, and subject position. The fantasy was to assert commodity value of persons through the rendering of a nonagentic materiality (flesh) to generate surplus value, thereby disfiguring the black subject. Hartman argues that the slave is the essential subject as object, an object to whom anything can be done. The first step in this process of dehumanization is the metamorphosis of human into inhuman thing. The discipline of geology is intrinsic to this structural inscription of subjects into matter-objects or property. Compartmentalization and categorization of matter produce the fungibility of the slave as “thing” and the grammar of “thingification.” In a Kentucky slave pen, reconstructed in the National Underground Railroad Freedom Center in Cincinnati, Ohio, an iron ring hangs from the central beam, the one feature in an otherwise empty space. A video playing outside says that the iron ring was “the only human thing in there.” The ring formed by a human hand from the inhuman earth, beaten into shape in the forge, maintained in violence by free human hands, hooked so many into inhuman bondage—a bondage that ricochets across the Middle Passage, through so many inhumanities, in infinite arrears. “Here, walls ate skin, footsteps took the mind.” (Brand 2001, 224) This fungibility, Hartman argues, is both the breach in natal possibility that leaves subjects unable to access any positionality outside of the codification of Blackness as inhuman property and what organizes the possibility of the interchangeable exchange as a set of properties.
PROPERTIES

Both the enslaved and minerals are recognized as possessing certain properties or qualities, namely, energy, reproducibility, and transformation. As Hartman (1997, 26) argues, “the fungibility of the commodity, specifically its abstractness and immateriality, enabled the black body or blackface mask to serve as the vehicle of white self-exploration, renunciation, and enjoyment.” The properties of the enslaved “are ontologized as the innate capacities” of the slave property. These innate capacities are properties to be worked and channeled, likened to the band of iron that made the ring that held the slaves. These properties for extraction and labor are also tied to the social reproduction of Whiteness; through forced reproduction and rape of the enslaved (or, in Hartman’s words, subjection to desire without consent); and in the use of extracted energy for generating the organization of economies of valuation. The instigation of slavery was prompted by a recognition of the so-called properties of African physiology, where indigenous Indians were viewed as not robust enough for mining and plantation work. What is apparent is that the slave and the mineral are recognized in regimes of value, but only so much as they await extraction (where Whiteness is the arbiter and owner of value).

Both these modes of extracting value—as property and properties—generate surplus. It is the grammar of geology—the inhuman—that establishes the stability of the object of property for extraction. The process of geologic materialization in the making of matter as value is transferred onto subjects and transmutes those subjects through a material and color economy that is organized as ontologically different from the human (who is accorded agency in the pursuits of rights, freedom, and property). The codification of Blackness through the inhuman meant that “there was no relation to blackness outside the terms of this use of, entitlement to, and occupation of the captive body, for even the status of free blacks was shaped and compromised by the existence of slavery.” (Hartman 1997, 24) While Hartman argues that property was how the color line was drawn, what is important about her argument is the way in which she demonstrates how the black body becomes a “property of enjoyment” as well as of labor, violence, energy, and so on. The actual body of the slave as an object of identification is always being made to disappear, whether through the optics of pleasure, empathy,
or violence, in much the same way as the black or brown body does
in the “point and erase” stories of the Anthropocene.

Thus geology was ontologically configured long before the
pronouncement of the Anthropocene that designates a “new”
geologic identity for humanity. Identification of properties of value
and the recognition of property relations to substantiate that theft
were the primary drivers of profitability in the colonial context.
At the heart of this enterprise was geology as an epistemological
discipline and a technology for extraction, settlement, and displace-
ment. The organization of matter and subjects within descriptions
that served as a mode of containment produced the very idea of
a standing stock of gold, energy, and slaves, organized, as they were,
as concomitant categories on a bill of sale. Blackness is rendered
as an empty signifier, like gold, silver, and other precious minerals,
where the valuation of exchange is established through descriptive
markers and subjects are considered as a set of properties
(exchange value = type [sex, size, age] + properties [skill, future
surplus]). Rights of property are established as a configuration of
what is identifiable as value and a mode of possession. As Spillers
(2003, 208) argues, “the captive body, then, brings into focus a
gathering of social realities as well as a metaphor for value so
thoroughly interwoven in their literal and figurative emphases that
distinctions between them are virtually useless.” Objectification
is enacted to deaden subjectivity (and relationality to place). This is
how the inhuman as a mode of categorization and a monstrous atti-
tude toward the enslaved contains, regulates, and subjugates bodies.
The classification of the inhuman as inert, ahistorical, nonpolitical,
inorganic, is both a division of matter that is biopolitical and a regime
of ordering matter that separates spheres of politics and agency—
or, biopolitics achieved through geologic means.
WORKS CITED


