

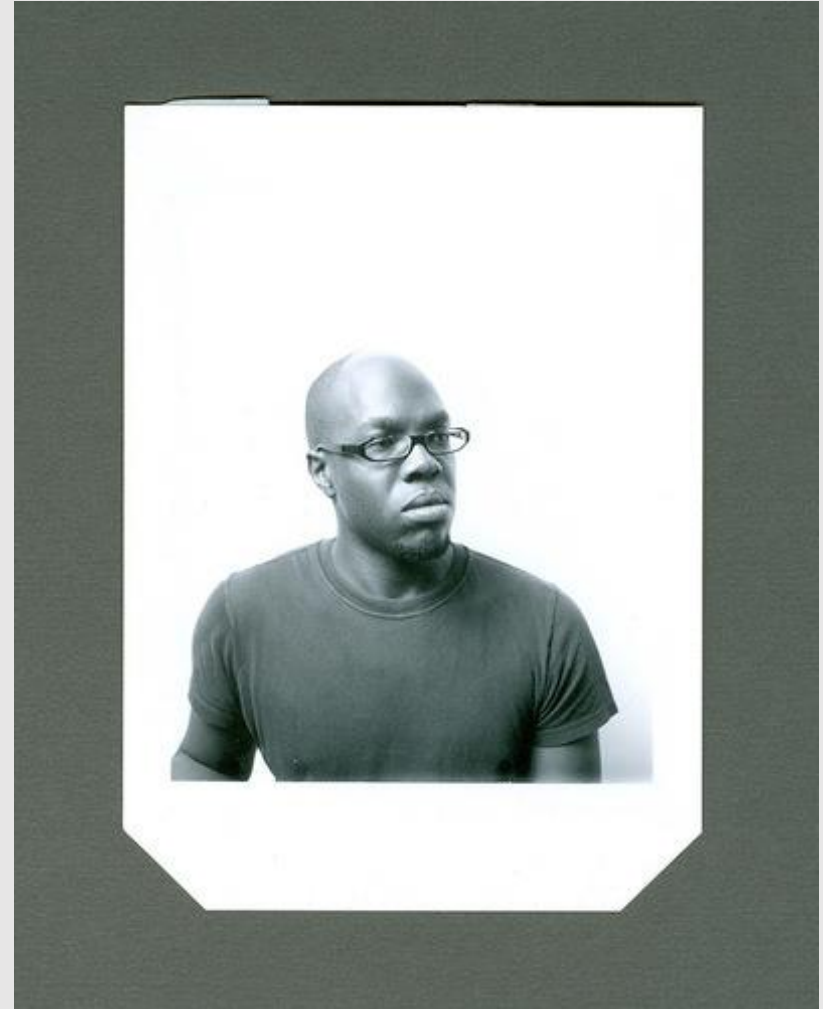
Huey Copeland

HUMN2001 – VIDEO LECTURE – WK6B
M. Curtis Allen

Copeland's Biography

Huey Copeland (? – present)

- Copeland is living art historian, critic and theorist.
- He currently teaches Art History at U Penn.
- His work details configurations of Blackness in the Western visual field from the 18th century on, but focuses on contemporary art production of recent Black artists.



Copeland's Biography

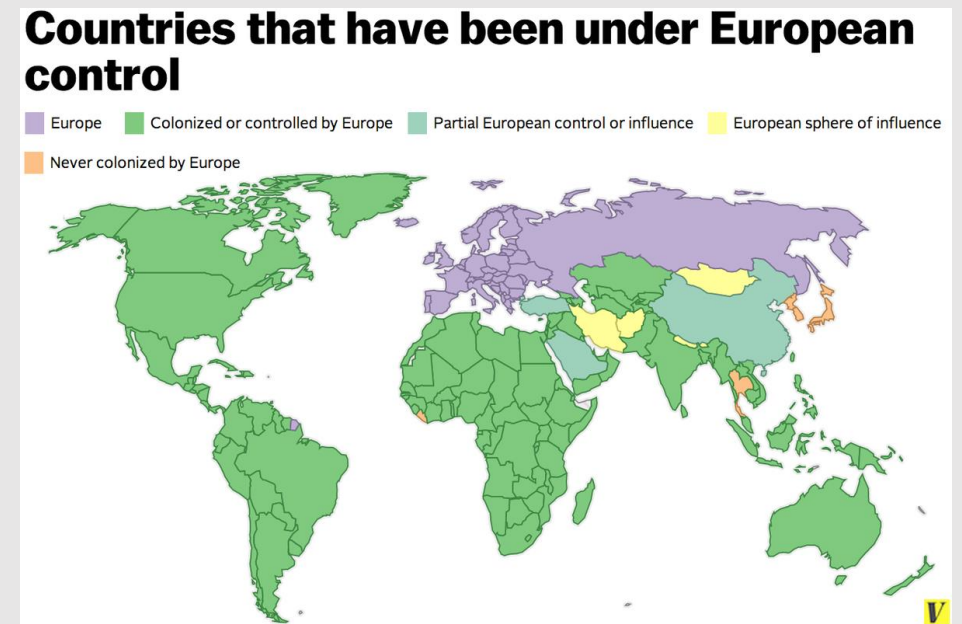
Huey Copeland cont.

- He aligns himself with what Cedric Robinson (and many after him) call 'the Black radical tradition' within which it's thought that the imbrication of the racial codification of Blackness plays an essential (but elided) role in the reproduction of Western societies and social hierarchies on economic, symbolic, racial, and ideological grounds.



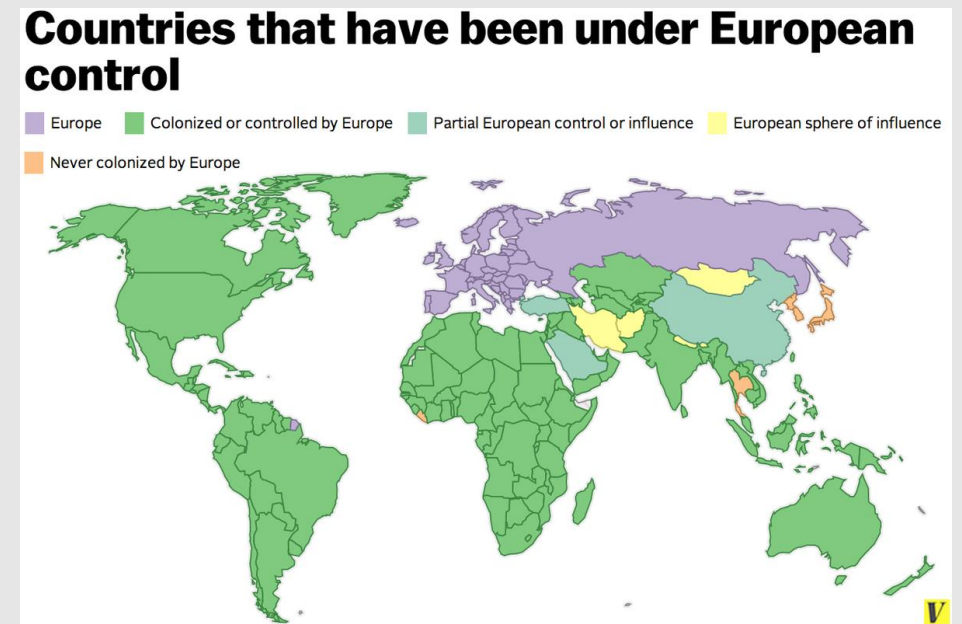
Modernity: Colonialism, Capitalism, Globalization

- The project of **modernity** was once construed as the project of the progressive development of political, intellectual, and economic freedom through out the world and initiated in Europe.
- It is now widely understood by scholars across many disciplines **NOT** to be chiefly the product of a putatively voluntary, emancipatory and democratic politics enacted by an Enlightened Europe, but rather the product of the interwoven historical processes of colonialism, capitalism, and globalization
- Processes which began in the 15th century, but escalated dramatically in the 18th and 19th centuries.



Modernity: Colonialism, Capitalism, Globalization

- These coincide with the birth of our modern racial categorizations and social hierarchies, through which white male bourgeois supremacism (Western hegemony) is enacted and projected on populations the world over in the interests of the maintenance of the social relations through which that control was gained.
- These processes have deep implications and are woven into even the most diffuse fibers of our contemporary social being.

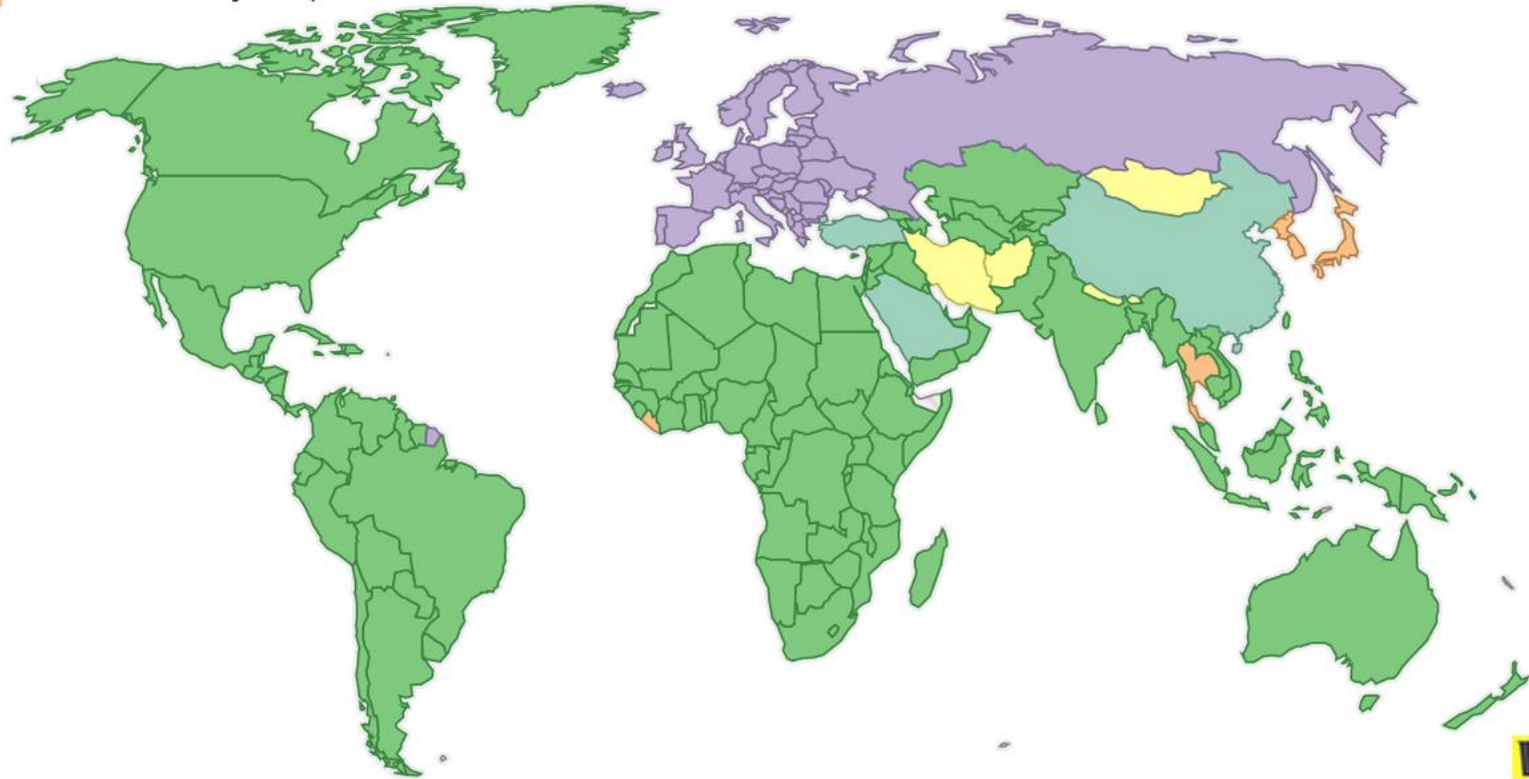


Modernity: Colonialism, Capitalism, Globalization

Countries that have been under European control

Europe Colonized or controlled by Europe Partial European control or influence European sphere of influence

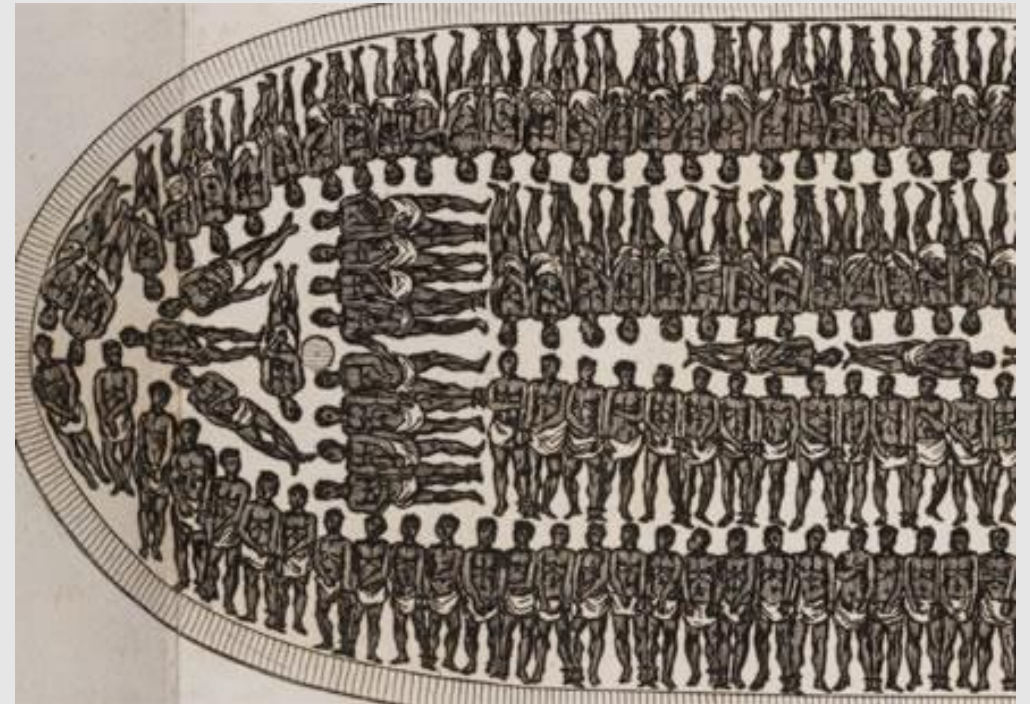
Never colonized by Europe



Origins of Trans-Atlantic Slavery

Origins and Timeline

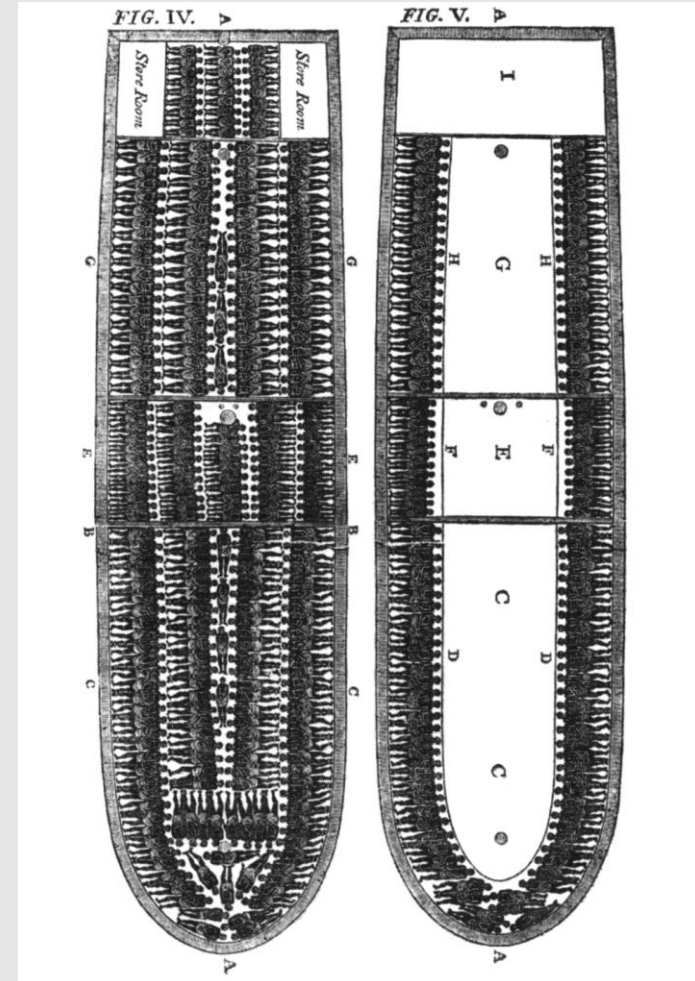
- While forms of premodern chattel slavery existed, and in some parts of the ancient world played an essential economic role in society (e.g. Greece and Rome), modern chattel slavery takes on an unprecedented form.
- This is due to the ramifications of the legal pseudo-natural racial codification of people of sub-Saharan African decent



Origins of Trans-Atlantic Slavery

Origins and Timeline

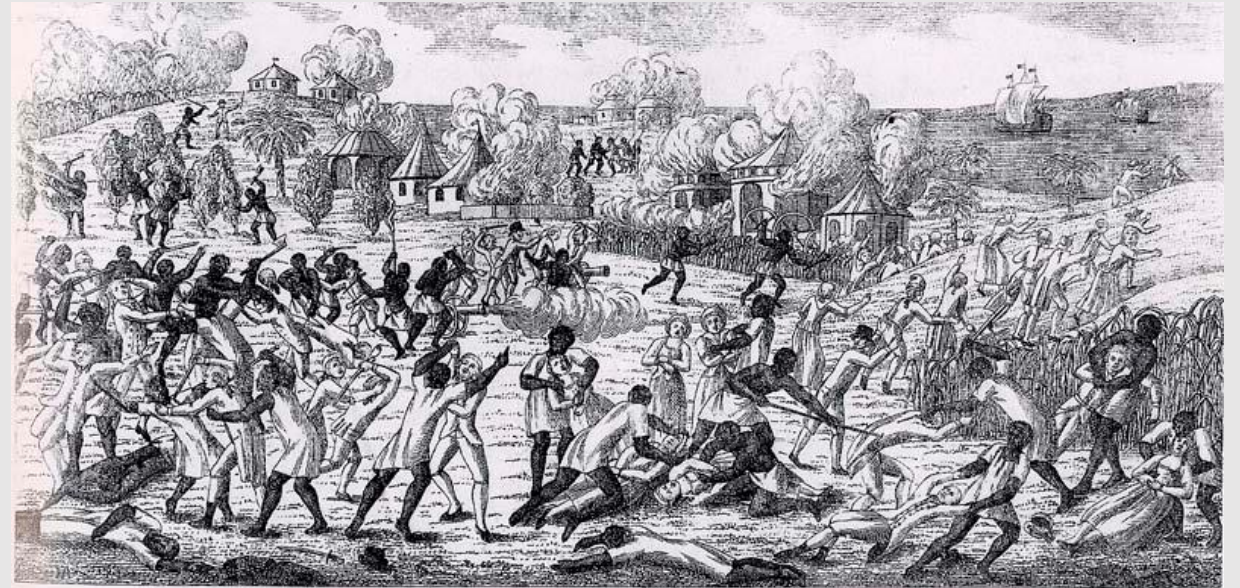
- This codification effectively sought to establish an ‘ontological’ difference between African and European.
- This was used as a justification for:
 - the heritability of slavery;
 - for the *in-principle* enslavement of an entire race of people;
 - the idea of white supremacy



Origins of Trans-Atlantic Slavery

Origins and Timeline

- The first African Slaves arrived in Hispaniola (the island shared by present day Haiti and the Dominican Republic) in 1501 (only nine years after Christopher Columbus set sail).
- Around 1640 the legal and symbolic codification surrounding Black slaves started to take the form of modern chattel slavery, through which it was held that a person who committed no crime could be held captive for life, with no possibility of legal appeal for freedom. This made them chattel property and this applied to their offspring as well.



Vorstellung der auf der Französischen Colonie St. Domingo von denen schwarzen Slaven eingeübete Französischen demokratische Freiheit, welche selbige durch unerhörte Drausamkeit zu erwerben gedachten. Sie ruinirten viele hundert Löss- und Zucker-Montagen und verbrannten die Mühlen, sie metzelden auch ohne Unterschied alle Weise die in ihre Hände fielen, dabey ihnen ein weises Kind zur Fahne diente, schändeten Frauen und schlepten sie in elende Befangenheit, 1791. allein ihr Vorhaben wurde zu nichts.

Racial Categorization and Structural Antagonism

Racial Categorization

- Racial categorization was used to ‘subtract’ the Black slave from the abstract sphere of rights which comprise the concept of the Human in modernity.
 - Institutionalization of subjectivity.
- Because the slave is ‘subtracted’ from the structure of legal subjectivity, and thus from the category of Human, the African slave is configured as sub-human, and thus effectively as an object.



Racial Categorization and Structural Antagonism

Racial Categorization

- This produced the slave (and in consequence, Blackness) as the essential, but repressed, negative image at the origin of the modern liberal legal subject, or the Western hegemon (e.g. White, property owning, etc.).
- The slave is thus essentially disenfranchised or ‘naturally alienated’ (Hartman) both in the legal and political sphere of right, and through its concomitant structure of property relations.



Jacob Lawrence, from the series *The Life of Toussaint L'Ouverture*, tempura on panel, 1938

Racial Categorization and Structural Antagonism

Structural Antagonism

- Such a categorization is considered by certain Black studies theorists (such as Frank B. Wilderson III) as an ‘ontological’ structural antagonism. This means the racialization effectively constructs the *being* of the (Black) slave, as well as that of the (white) master as a transcendental opposition which structures the existence of Western society down to its core and is expressed in the cornerstone institutions of modern society.
- It is also clearly responsible in part for the peculiar brutality of modern slavery and the trauma which marks collective black life to this day.

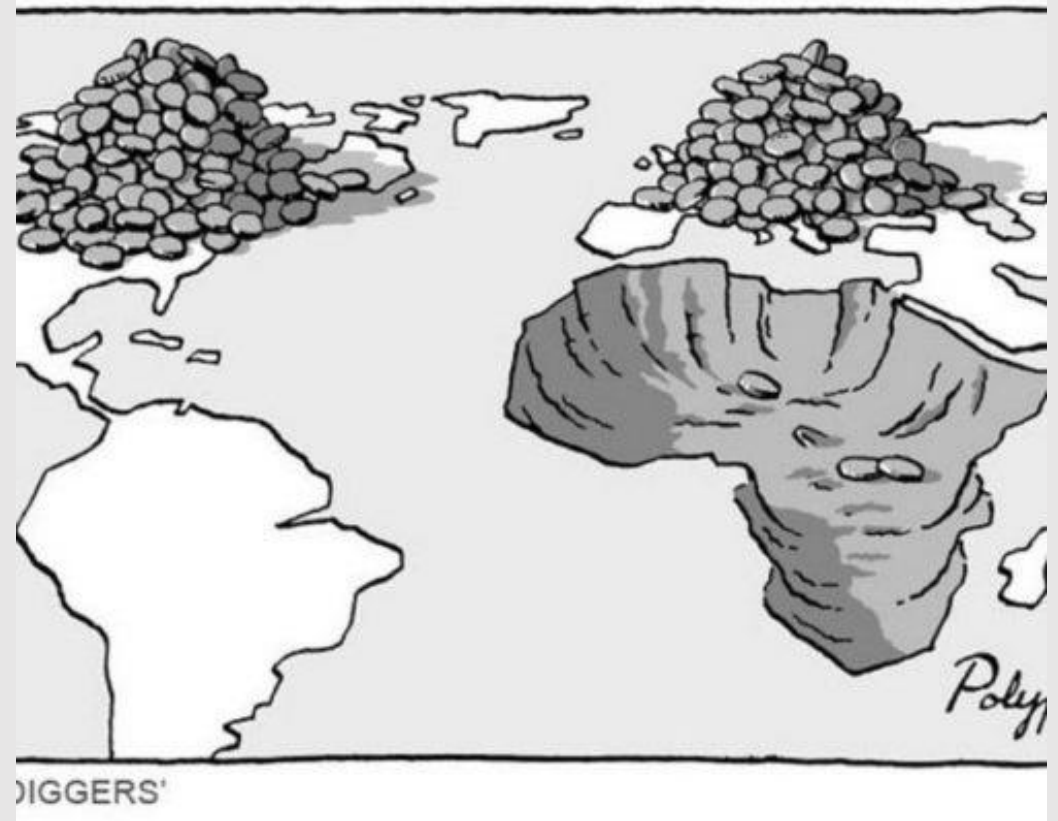


Jacob Lawrence, from the series *The Life of Toussaint L'Ouverture*, tempura on panel, 1938

Primitive Accumulation and the Origins of Capitalism

'Primitive' or 'Original' Accumulation

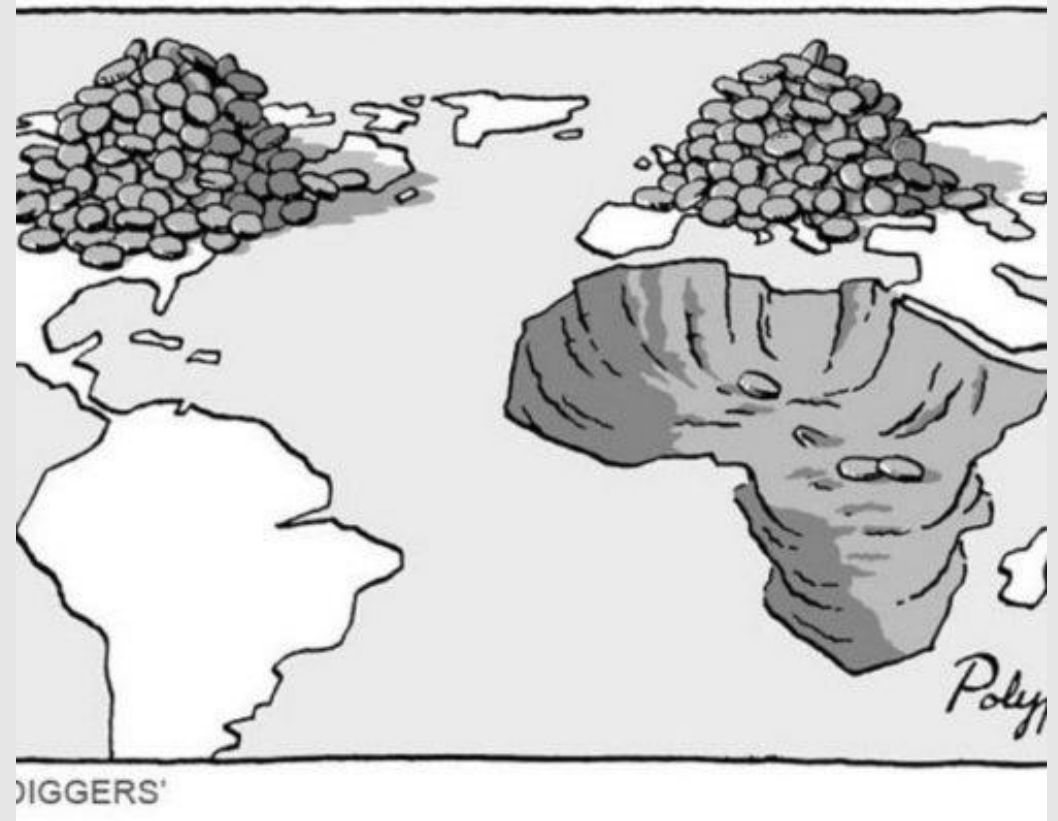
- In Marx's theory of the origins of Capitalism, the wage system is implemented as the form of exploitation of the 'voluntary' labor of the worker, and the extraction of surplus in the form of profit.
- In order for this to happen though, the Capitalist originally has to extract a differential of wealth through the direct and involuntary appropriation of value through forced labor and through territorial expropriation of natural resource.



Primitive Accumulation and the Origins of Capitalism

'Primitive' or 'Original' Accumulation

- These take the form of:
 - **chattel slavery**, and the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade on the one hand;
 - and **colonization** on the other.
- Taken together, these form the basis of the disparity between the owners of the means of production in capitalism, and those who must enter the market solely with their own labor. In other words, those who are exploited via the sphere of human right, rather than those whose exploitation is excluded.
- In the interim before abolition, the **slave** is configured as perpetual source of labor and as herself a **commodity**, an **object** in the market.



Some Consequences of Slavery For Black Existence

A people without origin

- What Fred Moten calls the ‘anoriginality’ of Black life, which at once haunts and animates the relation of Black subjects to the traces of their absent past.
- This is because Black lives were forcibly stripped of their relationship with their African roots, and often even from their own familial relations, because as property the slave had no claim over the maintenance of their own kinship structures.
 - Hortense Spillers develops the theme of the unique kinship relations of Black Americans at length in here “Mama’s Baby, Papa’s Maybe”.

Subject and object at once

- The slave is clearly a subject (*de facto*) by virtue of their behaviours and capacities; but by virtue of their codification as property they are also objects (*de jure*) in a circuits of commodity exchange.

Essential ‘Non-Being’ in the symbolic and political-economic structuration of modernity.

- I.e. the slave is the figure of an essential disavowal. At once necessary in order to substantiate the myth and functioning of modern liberal subjectivity (without which it would have not real institutional existence), but also NOT includible in the very structure that at its origin was predicated on the institution of slavery.

Some Consequences of Slavery on North American Society

- Because of the positionality of Blackness in relation to the construction of Western settler colonial societies in N. America (and, for that matter, of global capital as a whole), the figure of Blackness, in the ‘primal scene’ of the anti-black violence of slavery, represents what I would call a ‘transcendental’ or ‘unconditioned’ trauma for those societies, a trauma that Black folks are forced to embody and live according to the status that binds them together—this is how I take Copeland’s and others’ understanding.
 - ‘Unconditioned’ here does not mean ‘uncaused,’ but rather speaks to the trauma of an event which, because of its nature, exceeds its initial conditions by virtue of the ontological/transcendental dimensions of sociality it produces. These being the racial categories in this case, in all their historical, symbolic, material, institutional, and normative inertia.
- Importantly for the Black radical tradition, this trauma cannot be exorcized by reparation or reform, so long as our societies are in continuity with the origin of the racial constructions responsible for justification of racialized slavery, and *a fortiori* the emergence of modern liberal subjectivity, economy, law, and government.
- Such ‘unconditioned’ traumas (of which settler colonialism in relation to Indigeneity is another) call for a radical reevaluation of our shared history, and for hitherto unthought solutions to future collective political life.

Reading Copeland's "The Blackness of Things"

On "The Blackness of Things"

- In *Bound to Appear*, Copeland explores the relationship between the three interconnected phenomena: transatlantic slavery; the configuration of Black American existence; and the site of the production of contemporary art in 'multicultural' America in the late '80s through the early '90s through the work of four Black artists (Fred Wilson, Lorna Simpson, Glenn Ligon, Renée Green).



Lorna Simpson, *ID*, Diptych, gelatin silver prints, plastic plaques, 1990.

Reading Copeland's "The Blackness of Things"

On "The Blackness of Things"

- In "The Blackness of Things" Copeland focuses on a common thread between them, the use of physical objects, and installations of material culture that operate as indices of slavery and its relationship to Black experience.
- This in turn marks a specific, and deliberate eschewing of direct representation of the suffering of the slave and the events of slavery by resisting the fetishization of that suffering, instead implicating slavery as a material institution which is structurally embedded into the fabric of American life in general, and of Black life in particular.



Lorna Simpson, *ID*, Diptych, gelatin silver prints, plastic plaques, 1990.

Reading Copeland's "The Blackness of Things"

On "The Blackness of Things"

- In doing so, Copeland argues that these artists call upon the most extreme consequences of the institution of slavery for the categorization of blackness. For example, the putative substitutability of the Black subject with the Slave as object. It is in part because of this substitutability, and its traces in the construction of Blackness, that the use of 'things' rather than figures becomes all the more potent as an indirect evocation of the figure of the slave.



Lorna Simpson, *ID*, Diptych, gelatin silver prints, plastic plaques, 1990.

Reading Copeland's "The Blackness of Things"

Key Questions

- What is the Black radical tradition?
- How has does the figure of the slave configure the cultural landscape of Black experience in the era of 'multiculturalism'?
- What is the relation of Black culture to its history (and its separation from history)?
- What is the relationship between trauma and reproduction?
- What is the meaning of art in relation to embodiment and suffering?

Reading Copeland's "The Blackness of Things"

“The novel’s [*Beloved*] protagonists, then, are doubly haunted: by the threat of reenslavement and torture within the belly of capital and by the infant Beloved herself, whose presence indexes those disturbing ‘haints’ that exist both because and in excess of Western reason, which, in ordering the world, necessarily suppresses and deforms it.” (Copeland, BTA, 3).

Reading Copeland's "The Blackness of Things"

“...[H]ow did visual artists figure the “peculiar institution” as a cultural and political fact? In so doing, upon what materials—whether historical, textual, vernacular, or artistic—did they draw, and why? ... How did visual practitioners reckon with the slave’s position as a form of sexed and gendered property located at the nexus of Western civilization’s material, aesthetic, and phantasmatic economies? Was art about slavery meant to point up or offer an escape from the continuing effects of white supremacy for black subjects on the ground, in representation, and within aesthetic discourse? Ultimately, what visions of the modern era come into focus when refracted through the lens of artistic meditations of slavery, especially given the institution’s profound repercussions for our understanding not only of how blackness looks and functions but also of how human life is lived and felt?” (Copeland, BTA, 4).

Reading Copeland's "The Blackness of Things"

“For both the philosopher and the novelist, the modern was hardly ‘post’ and history—despite the claims of neoliberal ideologues to the contrary—was far from over: in fact, it mattered and structured more than ever with the putative ending of the Cold War and the emergence of a globalized spectacular culture, in which blackness circulates ever more widely.” (Copeland, BTA, 7).

Reading Copeland's "The Blackness of Things"

“What seems to me most remarkable, however, is that in confronting slavery head-on, each artist in his or her own way turned to objects, substituting actual things for absent bodies. This move simultaneously gave form to the political-ontological position of black subjectivity and foiled the kinds of imaginative projection, which, as theorist Frantz Fanon foundationally showed in *Black Skin, White Masks*, are central to the construction of race. In the artists' projects, the enslaved are imbued with the corporeal wholeness and obdurate materiality of the commodity, demonstrating how value continues to be extracted from blackness, regardless of the form it takes. As such, none of the works require that the black body appear once more as lacking, amputated, or inferior, what psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan might term “a body in pieces,” a riven spectacle that everywhere bears the marks of its violent construction.” (Copeland, BTA, 10).

Reading Copeland's "The Blackness of Things"

“In every instance, texts, archives, voices, and above all, things, were the salient markers required to telegraph the status of the enslaved, to bracket the retinue of overdetermined associations unleashed whenever the black body appears, and to underscore how Western habits of consumption and display are inextricably bound to the historical construction of African diasporic subjectivity. Whether pieces of fabric or jars of rice, the materials featured in the installations foreground the fact that the economies of slavery haunt the texture of capitalism and the lives of its subjects, regardless of race.” (Copeland, BTA, 10).

Reading Copeland's "The Blackness of Things"

“‘In Africa today,’ he [Clement Greenberg] writes, ‘we find that the culture of slave-owning tribes is generally much superior to that of the tribes that possess no slaves.’ In these lines, racialized barbarity and aesthetic discrimination go together, underlining how dark figures have been mobilized as linchpins of a modern metaphysics that not only demarcate the limits of culture and humanity within Western discourse, but that also effectively trouble the visual, epistemological, and historical categories that structure so-called white civilization...

To think in such structural terms is not to essentialize what are historically contingent practices and identities, but to position them in relationship to a centuries-old antiblack global hierarchy, which darkens the marginal, the fugitive, and the socially dead wherever they appear.” (Copeland, BTA, 10-11).

Reading Copeland's "The Blackness of Things"

“In conflating sculptural objects and enslaved subjects, their practices accent the inability of figurative modalities of representation alone to address the structural logic of slavery and its ongoing effects.” (Copeland, BTA, 14).

Reading Copeland's "The Blackness of Things"

“If the scholarly work laid out a field of possibilities for navigating slavery as a site of cultural production, then Butler’s novel provided a telling instance of how it might be brought into the present: not via traumatic recall or progressive narrative but through a radical conflation of temporal frames in which the past suddenly erupts to become contiguous with the present. Both of these tendencies brought home the relative paucity of archival sources for describing the life of the slave and underlined the centrality of imaginative projection for any attempt to do so.” (Copeland, BTA, 17).

Reading Copeland's "The Blackness of Things"

“In the work of Ligon and his peers, the enslaved subject is posited as an impossible object who can never be fully pictured, but whose aporetic position— between life and death, person and property, thing and human—can be materially plotted. To put it another way, these artists took the meaning of slavery out of the figure and made it a function of the viewer’s relationship to the world.” (Copeland, BTA, 17).

Reading Copeland's "The Blackness of Things"

“Not dissimilarly, Green’s, Ligon’s, Simpson’s and Wilson’s projects allow for a reconsideration of what is perhaps twentieth-century art’s profoundest innovation—the readymade object—in light of slavery’s structuring principles. Long before the genre’s originator, Marcel Duchamp, turned a urinal into a work of art through a series of enunciative acts in 1917, black bodies were subject to even more arbitrary and binding shifts in their categorical status, ready-mades *avant la lettre*.” (Copeland, BTA, 18).

Reading Copeland's "The Blackness of Things"

“The slave emerges as a thing-that-is-not-one, a form of readymade that not only challenges the status of the artwork, but that also intersects with and so reframes theorizations of the “thingly”—the commodity, the sculptural, or the material itself—within Western cultural discourse.” (Copeland, BTA, 19).

Reading Copeland's "The Blackness of Things"

“At their best, these projects encourage us to reimagine the world from blackness up, to question the categorical division between subjects and objects, and to critique the model of humanity on offer within neoliberal capitalism.” (Copeland, BTA, 19).