

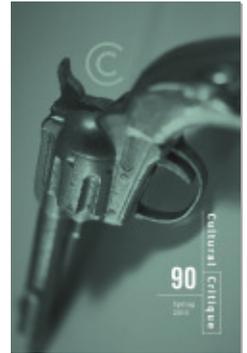


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In the Conjunction

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IN THE CONJUNCTURE

Conjuncture: from the Latin *conjungere* (to bind together, to connect, to join). A combination of circumstances, a convergence of events, an intersection of contingencies and necessities, a complex, overdetermined state of affairs—usually producing a crisis, leading to a breaking point, driving to a historic crossroads . . .

“In the Conjunction” is a new thematic section of *Cultural Critique*, consisting of short pieces meant at once as soundings, interventions, and provocations regarding a cultural and political phenomenon of urgent and topical interest. Straddling the seldom-crossed border between critical-theoretical scholarship and op-ed journalism, this section will focus, each time, on a singular historical conjuncture, whose salient features may resonate with other situations elsewhere, and whose aftershocks may be felt rippling across the global terrain. In this section, we invite public intellectuals to write in the conjuncture.

The editors welcome proposals for this thematic section, which should be addressed to *Cultural Critique*, Department of Cultural Studies and Comparative Literature, 235 Nicholson Hall, 216 Pillsbury Drive S.E., University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN 55455, U.S.A., or via email to cultcrit@umn.edu.

FOR MICHAEL BROWN

The pieces gathered here were written shortly after Michael Brown was killed in Ferguson, Missouri, on August 9, 2014. The grand jury in Missouri had not yet declined to indict Officer Darren Wilson, nor had Officer Pantaleo been exonerated in the killing of Eric Garner on Staten Island. The phrase “I can’t breathe” had not yet gathered the immense symbolic weight that it would in the coming weeks, as communities

across the nation would join in protest against a catastrophic depletion of oxygen. Nevertheless, it was already apparent that the task of wrestling with this depletion, of questioning, assembling, and narrating its history, was at once urgent and stupendously daunting.

In our invitation to prospective contributors we wrote, “We are especially concerned to thematize how the Brown killing belongs specifically to a ‘post-racial’ America, but invite contributors also to think the inter-related dimensions of race, policing, militarization, legality, and biopolitics as they converge in this event.” Each essay that we received responds to this invitation by linking the death of Michael Brown to other deaths: not only the deaths of Trayvon Martin, Ezell Ford, and other black men killed by the police or vigilantes during the tenure of America’s first black President, and not only the deaths of the African slaves thrown overboard the infamous British slaver, the *Zong*, in 1781, but more fundamentally, to the peculiar and perhaps deathless death to which a modernity born with and of the slave trade has condemned the racialized other.

In doing so, these essays attempt to identify constitutive elements of the fatal logic that continues to shape and structure the political imaginary of the nation. Juxtaposing the sudden violence of Michael Brown’s death with the slow violence of legal history and economic policy in the United States, and particularly in St. Louis, George Lipsitz rethinks the foundational impact of the lie that claimed separation can be a form of equality. If Michael Brown’s death cannot but resonate as repetition, the very recurrence of the repetition also registers as unbearable shock: the dismal realization that despite so many creative and valiant struggles, the criminalization of destroyed black lives remains unshaken. Mining a similar archive, Rod Ferguson traces a link between the current racial geography of Ferguson, Missouri, and the failure of the Pruitt-Igoe housing complex in St. Louis more than sixty years ago. This failure reflects, he suggests, the colossal failure of American cities to mark a break from the racialized division and consolidation of space, power, and wealth.

Paula Rabinowitz considers continuities in the visual history of antiracist protest and juxtaposes this archive against that of counterinsurgency. She reminds us that though the widespread ability to record photographic evidence appears to empower those whom the law has consistently marginalized or opposed, access to technology does not,

by itself, open a path toward justice. The same photographic archive may be dissected, framed, and read in entirely contradictory ways, as was the case with the home videotape of the beating of Rodney King in 1991. A dense prior narrative of race and the racialized body skews the light so as to dramatically alter what at first appears as indisputable “evidence.” King’s body anticipates, as it were, and merges with Brown’s in the legal inscription of the two events.

Reaching further in an attempt to understand the complex inheritance of raced violence, Eric Youngquist urges us to remember the trial of the *Zong*, where, despite the arguments of the abolitionist Granville Sharpe, the jury agreed that “Absolute Necessity” dictated, and hence exonerated, the drowning of 131 slaves in order to save the remaining crew and “cargo.” Drawing on the work of Giorgio Agamben and Ian Baucom, Youngquist identifies Absolute Necessity, lethal threat, and juridical abandonment as “catastrophic worldly truths” that decisively asserted themselves in the *Zong* trial and continue to remain operative today.

Jared Sexton takes his initial cue from a question posed by Omar Ricks in *The Feminist Wire*, “How can we be ethically opposed to some forms of violence while being in favor of others?” Closely weaving his own reflections and provocations with those of other allies, including Frantz Fanon, Dionne Brand, Hortense Spillers, and David Marriott, Sexton probes the fantasies activated and sustained by the libidinal economy of negrophobia. Responding implicitly to the thesis (voiced in this section by Lipsitz and Ferguson) that the course of American democracy had condemned Michael Brown to death decades before he was even born, and explicitly to Marriott’s even stronger claim that the very essence of blackness might lie in the right to a death without transcendence, Sexton returns us to Fanon’s powerful characterization of black revolutionary violence as perhaps the only force capable of redeeming such a death.

Even while these essays speak of the urgency and necessity of critique, they nevertheless appear to be, at times, haunted by the specter of its futility. Fearing that historical or philosophical critique may turn out to be nothing but “consolation for the loss of a life unsung,” several turn, revealingly, to poetry and parable—as if in desperate quest of a language that may offer a belated shroud to the prone, unprotected body of Michael Brown.