

Notes on Differential Circulation

Seb Franklin

Cameron Rowland's *Encumbrance* (2020) comprises mortgages for four mahogany doors and a mahogany handrail in the Grade I listed Regency building at 12 Carlton House Terrace, London. That building is leased by the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) from the Crown Estate, a semi-independent body that has managed land owned by the British monarchy since 1760. Encumbrance Inc., an entity created by Rowland to produce these works, loaned the gallery £5000 to purchase the five mahogany pieces for the artist's 2020 exhibition at the ICA. The institute will not repay these loans. Consequently, Encumbrance Inc. will retain a security interest in the building for as long as the mahogany remains therein. As Rowland puts it in the accompanying text, "An encumbrance is a right or interest in real property that does not prohibit its exchange but diminishes its value."¹ The lender's retention of a security interest in the property purchased with their funds distinguishes the mortgage from other types of credit—and this distinction is central to Rowland's use of that type of loan. As a means of financing the competition-driven expansion of capitalist operations, mortgages were central to the plantation economy. There, the exchange value of enslaved people rendered as commodities, or the projected output of their labor, was used alongside the property they produced and maintained as collateral for raising loans.² The prospect of losing collateral functioned in concert with the permanent threat of falling behind rival capitalists to ensure that plantation owners constantly sought to expand and rationalize production and to more closely integrate their operations into global networks of production and circulation.

The objects to which Rowland's mortgages pertain are equally significant. Mahogany, felled and worked by slaves in Jamaica, Barbados, and Honduras, was first used by the Spanish and British for the construction and repair of ships deployed in colonial expansion, commodity shipping (including the transport of slaves), and commercial wars. Later, it was used in Britain in "a wide variety of architectural applications and furniture, characterizing Georgian and Regency styles."³ For these reasons, mahogany reticulates the processes of extraction, circulation, and financialization that animated Atlantic slavery and continue to resonate through its afterlives.⁴ In large part because of the market for antique furniture and the tendential rise of property prices, especially in London, it is "one of the few commodities of the triangular trade that continues to generate value for those who currently own it."⁵ The *Encumbrance* works constitute a form of "reparation" that functions by taking value out of circulation rather than reallocating it.

Like the failure of a single device that makes the scale and the fragility of digital media infrastructures momentarily legible, Rowland's *Encumbrance* works bring into focus a complex of abstractions, relations, and forces whose historical and ongoing mobilization of bodies and things in service of capital accumulation both vastly exceeds and invests with fractal significance the £5000 of loans, the four doors, and the handrail that the work itself comprises. In these brief remarks, I want to consider how the cycles of value disclosed and impeded by those works—the circulation of certain renderings of life in and as commodity forms—impel the logistical turn in media studies to accommodate the racializing logic of value-mediated social relations.

Logistical media, John Durham Peters writes, are those technologies that "arrange people and property into time and space."⁶ More than mere carriers of content, they constitute systems and structures that establish thresholds of legitimate content and allow the latter to circulate. They are both "prior to and form the grid in which messages are sent."⁷ In addition to the calendars, clocks, and towers through which he defines them, Peters counts among the logistical media "maps, names, addresses, archives, museums, census, stamps and seals, compasses, astrolabes, the shofar, and money."⁸ The last of these, he concludes, "is perhaps the paradigm case."⁹ Much of the most compelling recent work in media theory and history follows Peters in emphasizing the technical infrastructures that make the circulation of goods and data possible. But the social relations that subtend those infrastructures—and that are gestured to but not fully accounted for by Peters's "paradigm case," money—remain largely outside the purview of studies examining media and

mediation.¹⁰ The same year that Peters defined logistical media, Stefano Harney and Fred Moten wrote that modern logistics, with its fantasies of frictionless circulation and scale-free accumulation, was “founded in the Atlantic slave trade” and is thus “marked, branded, seared with the transportation of the commodity labor that was not.”¹¹ Harney and Moten argue that histories of containers, ships, cables, software, spreadsheets, sensors, supply chains, and labor management cannot be separated from those of the barracoon, the hold, the coffle, or the auction block. Rowland’s *Encumbrance* shows how these histories are animated not only by the demand to organize the circulation of property and persons (or persons rendered property), but also, and more fundamentally, by a logic of value-mediation that sets in motion distributed networks of property and allocates higher or lower productive and reproductive capacity to certain bodies as a condition of those networks’ continued function. Manifesting and interrupting the extended operations of this complex, Rowland’s work asks how the study of circulation might come to terms with the differential integration and wearing down of life that is encoded in what circulates.

The “great merit of classical economics,” Marx wrote in the third volume of *Capital*, was its dissolution of the “autonomization and ossification of the different social elements of wealth vis-à-vis one another.”¹² By defining interest as a part of profit, presenting the circulation process as a “metamorphosis of forms,” and locating the source of value in labor, classical political economy had overcome the artificial division of those phenomena.¹³ But “even its best representatives remained more or less trapped in the world of illusion their criticism had dissolved.”¹⁴ Overcoming the separation of these categories came not through identifying each as a mystification of value-mediated social relations, but rather through their reticulation. And the content of that reticulation was value imagined as a more or less “real” substance, a property of things rather than an encoded outcome of social relations. If value was a product of labor, it was so as an absolute substance borne by laborers, not as the result of specific, market-mediated relationships between labor, capital, and the means of social reproduction.¹⁵ Circulation really was a metamorphosis of forms, a transmission of the value borne by labor through goods and services, money, prices, rent, and interest. Interest really was a natural expansion of that value. This notion of value as a transmissible content, able to assume different forms in different moments and to expand by itself, is foundational for the financial and logistical technologies Rowland foregrounds, many of which have been of concern to media and cultural theory in recent years.¹⁶ And both classes of technology—

finance and logistics—are informed by a value relation that comes to appear the neutral basis and content of relationality as such.

I want to suggest that this relation is informatic in character. A given commodity's exchange value reflects not the specific concrete labor that went into its production, but rather a social average, the "labor-time socially necessary for its production."¹⁷ The individual commodity "counts here only as a sample of its kind."¹⁸ So although value might appear subsequent to labor—the content of a transmission that passes from laborer to commodity to financialized forms in which it expands all by itself—it is in practice a virtual or "phantom-like" register that is actualized through exchange but which determines all the preceding moments of market-mediated relation: the determination of the value of labor power, the contract, the production process, and so on.¹⁹ This virtual register gives rise to a common "content" for a range of disparate practices and social positions, which come to appear as forms. In so doing, it facilitates the synthesis of functional circuits of accumulation from those practices and positions. But this informatics of value does not simply produce social form through transmission. It is instantiated and sustained by the ostensibly independent activities of actors engaged in commodity production and exchange under conditions of generalized market dependence—which means conditions of indirect or abstract domination. It is the latter that animates capitalism's production of a general social form and its positioning of individuals in relation to that form. The distributed and apparently self-equilibrating processes of regulation, aggregation, and quantization that distinguish capitalism from other modes of social organization both require and intensify the mobilization of masses of capital, "free," and slave labor. And it is in the coordination of the two registers—the frictionless circulation, metamorphosis, and expansion towards which value tends, and the concrete extraction and exploitation of labor and other resources that impede this tendency—that technologies of logistical management are mobilized.

The networks of circulation produced by capital's quasi-autonomous mobilization of persons and things are exemplified in John Perlin's description of the eighteenth century "trade loop" connecting North American lumber merchants to planters in the British West Indies, slave traders in Africa and Europe, and manufacturers in England. Between 1771 and 1773, Perlin writes:

Woodsmen had to cut far in excess of 240,000 trees to provide the West Indian market with the lumber. In exchange for the wood,

Yankee traders, mostly Quakers and Puritans, obtained 3 million gallons of rum. With their cargoes of liquor, they headed to Africa to trade the rum for slaves or sell it to European slave merchants. They then returned to the West Indies with their human freight, and they bartered the slaves for sugar. The New Englanders shipped the sugar to England and traded it for manufactured goods which they sold in America. The money earned from those sales went to purchase more timber for another round in this trade loop.

Yankee traders also bartered timber for thousands of gallons of molasses to ship to Boston, where they were distilled into spirits “of the American proof.” Traders exchanged the American-made rum for pelts from Native Americans. Furs brought a high price in England and New Englanders came home with a bevy of manufactured goods to sell in their province and the rest of the colonies.²⁰

Timber turns into rum. Rum turns into slaves or cash. Slaves turn into sugar. Sugar turns into manufactured goods, which turn into cash, which turns into more timber. Or, timber turns into molasses, which turns into spirits, which turns into fur, which turns into cash, which turns into manufactured goods. What kinds of life cycles are nested within this network? Perlin says nothing of the labor arrangements nor the conditions of dispossession that subtend the metamorphoses of form he depicts. Each exchange presupposes both the concrete deployment of labor and capital and a general equivalent, socially average labor, which is sometimes expressed as money and at others as the direct exchange of one type of commodity for another. But not all of the exchanged goods are produced by the same kind of labor. Perlin’s cycle mobilizes “free” waged labor, slave labor, and non-capitalist (or non- or indirectly-value-mediated) modes such as that which produced furs. In other words, the circulationist fantasy of the “metamorphosis of forms” masks not only the exploitation but, more specifically, the racialization of labor—which is to say, its differential valuation.

Perlin’s sketch also hints at how differential valuation functions as an essential technology for ensuring the productive synthesis of capital and labor. In so doing, it shows how that function cannot be separated from finance and logistics. The “free” labor mobilized in the course of Perlin’s “trade loop” is subject to value-mediation through the wage contract, and its deployment in the production process makes possible the objectification of units of socially average labor into commodities and services. The ostensibly

non-capitalist mode of production is integrated into the exchange network through trade based both on value-mediated equivalence and on settler-colonial domination. And, as several of the “transformations” in Perlin’s loop show, both value-mediated forms—wages and commodities—become functionally interchangeable with enslaved persons, who could either be bought for cash or exchanged for other commodities. Furthermore, enslaved persons were effectively treated as fixed capital in so far as their purchase value was calculated against their projected productivity and incrementally passed on to the value of the products of their labor until they were consigned to a state of unproductive debility.²¹ This synthesis of distinct forms of racialized labor into a single circuit, nominally via their output but also through combinations of concrete and abstract domination, is central for maintaining accumulation across uneven geographies and under conditions of waning profit. And it is inseparable from the racialized, gendered, and debilitating technologies of ascription that are too often regarded as distinct from capital’s core abstract-concrete processes. As Marx writes in a section on the role of foreign trade in countervailing the tendential fall in the rate of profit, “capital invested in the colonies...yields a higher profit” firstly because a “lower level of development” leads to workers being allocated lower reproduction requirements and thus lower wages, and secondly because of the intensified “exploitation of labor” made possible through the use of “slaves and coolies, etc.”²²

So, the functional interchangeability of goods and labor encodes processes that cannot be reduced to the circulation of commodities, living or otherwise. But this irreducibility does not mean that such processes are secondary to those of commodity circulation. As Sylvia Wynter has argued, the encoding of living labor as value entails a gradated devaluation of which racialization—and thus coloniality and Atlantic slavery—represents a basal mechanism. Atlantic slavery, Wynter writes, was “only the first form,” the “first mechanism” by which Black labor and Black humanity were devalued, not by ideology but by “economic infrastructure.”²³ In developing this analysis, Wynter recounts how Portuguese slave traders used *pieza* (piece) for “the African who functioned as the standard measure” of optimal labor productivity, “the general equivalent of physical labor value against which all the others could be measured—with for example three teenagers equaling one *pieza*, and older men and women thrown in a job lot as refuse.”²⁴ The *pieza* denoted not a single person but a unit of socially average capacity tallied to specific bodily characteristics. The social average is shown here to function not only as a virtualization of labor but also as a means of devaluing

that labor—that life—in advance of its deployment in production in order to optimize the extraction of surplus value. This process rests on a near-identical mechanism to that which continues to organize the uneven distribution of imputed labor value through the wage relation.²⁵

What I am trying to show here is that commodity circulation—and thus all of the technologies that support it—entails the circulation of techniques for the differential integration and valuation of life.²⁶ The history of these techniques, which connects without rendering analogous the valuation of “free” and violently coerced labor and the concomitant distribution of personhood and prospects, is carried within and shapes their most recent forms. Recognizing this historical continuity may allow the analysis of technologies for arranging property and persons into time and space to encompass the abstract-concrete dynamics through which property and persons are made.

Notes

- 1 Cameron Rowland, *3 & 4 Will. IV c.73* (2020). The title of the exhibition and accompanying text is the citation for the Slavery Abolition Act of 1833, “An Act for the Abolition of Slavery throughout the British Colonies; for promoting the Industry of the manumitted Slaves; and for compensating the Persons hitherto entitled to the Services of such Slaves.” As Rowland notes at the start of the text, this Act “preserved the property established by slavery.”
- 2 “The property relation of the enslaved included and exceeded that of chattel and real estate. Plantation mortgages exemplify the ways in which the value of people who were enslaved, the land they were forced to labor on, and the houses they were forced to maintain were mutually constitutive...Slaves simultaneously functioned as collateral for the debts of their masters, while laboring intergenerationally under the debt of the master.” Rowland, *3 & 4 Will. IV c.73*. Walter Johnson explains the centrality of slave mortgages to antebellum circuits of accumulation in the following terms: “In the antebellum period, the vast majority of collateralized loans in East Feliciana Parish, Louisiana, involved mortgages on human beings. The mobility and saleability of slaves—the fact that there was a ready spot-market in human beings on the steps of every courthouse in the Mississippi Valley, that slaves could be moved from place to place to cover distant debts, and that their families and communities could be broken down into small lots to back specific transactions in a way that land could not—rendered them the most ‘liquid’ form of capital in the Mississippi Valley. Even when they had not been legally pledged—even though their name may not have been recorded on the same piece of paper as their owner’s promise to pay and the legal rate of interest—slaves served as ultimate guarantors of the loans that banks made to merchants and that merchants made to planters. They were the human hosts for the speculative loans that haunted the cotton trade.” Walter Johnson, *River of Dark Dreams: Slavery and Empire in the Cotton Kingdom* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2013),

- 279.
- 3 Rowland, *3 & 4 Will. IV c.73*.
 - 4 In a 1917 report, C.D. Mell writes that “[t]he earliest recorded use of mahogany was between 1521 and 1540, when Spanish explorers employed the wood for making canoes and for ship-repair work. Mahogany was again used in 1597 in repairing Sir Walter Raleigh’s ships in the West Indies...The first true use of mahogany for cabinet work was in 1724 in England. It was probably the first wood of the Western Continent to attract the attention of European timber dealers. Some idea of the enormous consumption of mahogany in England alone may be had from the fact that as early as 1846, when the wood was still valued chiefly for shipbuilding, approximately 85,000,000 board feet were shipped to English ports.” C.D. Mell, “True Mahogany,” *United States Department of Agriculture Bulletin* 474 (1917): 9.
 - 5 Rowland, *3 & 4 Will. IV c.73*.
 - 6 John Durham Peters, “Calendar, Clock, Tower,” in *Deus in Machina*, ed. Jeremy Stolow (New York: Fordham University Press, 2013), 41.
 - 7 Ibid.
 - 8 Ibid.
 - 9 Ibid.
 - 10 See, for example: Nicole Starosielski, *The Undersea Network* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015); the essays in *Signal Traffic: Critical Studies of Media Infrastructures*, edited by Starosielski and Lisa Parks (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2015); Tung-Hui Hu, *A Prehistory of the Cloud* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015); Ned Rossiter, *Software, Infrastructure, Labor: A Media Theory of Logistical Nightmares* (New York: Routledge, 2016).
 - 11 Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (Wivenhoe: Minor Compositions, 2013), 92.
 - 12 Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 3, trans. David Fernbach (London: Penguin, 1981), 969.
 - 13 Ibid.
 - 14 Ibid.
 - 15 The “wiseacre,” Marx writes, “transforms value into something absolute, ‘a property of things,’ instead of seeing in it only something relative, the relation of things to social laborer, social labour based on private exchange, in which things are defined not as independent entities, but as mere expressions of social production.” Karl Marx, *Theories of Surplus Value*, pt. 3, trans. Jack Cohen, ed. S. Ryazanskaya and Richard Dixon, (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1972), 130.
 - 16 Another of the pieces shown in Rowland’s ICA show emphasizes the imbrication of finance, logistics, and slavery: for *Mooring* (2020) the artist rented AB-001-013, a mooring at the Albert Dock, Liverpool formerly used by the timber company William Rathbone and Sons—the precursor to the still-operating investment firm Rathbone Brothers, plc—who imported timber felled and milled by slaves in the West Indies and supplied materials for the construction of slave ships. The mooring was rented for the purpose of not being used.
 - 17 Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy*, vol. 1, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1976), 129
 - 18 Ibid., 130.
 - 19 Ibid., 128.
 - 20 John Perlin, *A Forest Journey: The Role of Wood in the Development of Civilization* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 266.

- 21 Marx describes this process vis-à-vis fixed capital as follows: “The mortal remains of machines, tools, workshops etc., always continue to lead an existence distinct from that of the product they helped to turn out. If we now consider the case of any instrument of labour during the whole period of its service, from the day of its entry into the workshop to the day of its banishment to the lumber room, we find that during this period its use-value has been completely consumed, and therefore its exchange-value completely transferred to the product. For instance, if a spinning machine lasts for ten years, it is plain that during that working period its total value is gradually transferred to the product of the ten years.” Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 311.
- 22 Marx, *Capital*, vol. 3, 345. On the racialized devaluation of labor via imputed levels of development, also see Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, 275.
- 23 Sylvia Wynter, *Black Metamorphosis: New Natives in a New World* (unpublished ms, n.d.), 33.
- 24 Sylvia Wynter, “Beyond the Categories of the Master Conception: The Counterdoctrine of Jamesian Poesis,” in *C.L.R. James’s Caribbean*, edited by Paget Henry and Paul Buhle (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1992), 81. Also see: Wynter, *Black Metamorphosis*, 29 (“over 40 they were sold as ‘refuse’ at cut rate prices”); Sylvia Wynter, “On How We Mistook the Map for the Territory, and Re-Imprisoned Ourselves in Our Unbearable Wrongness of Being, of *Désêtre: Black Studies Towards the Human Project*,” in *Not Only the Master’s Tools: African-American Studies in Theory and Practice*, eds. Lewis R. Gordon and Jane Anna Gordon (London: Routledge, 2016), 165n7.
- 25 As Chris Chen puts it, the “increasingly intricate typology of race” begins with “plunder, enslavement, and colonial violence” and, after the mid-twentieth century shapes both “economic subordination through racialised wage differentials and superfluousness” and “the racialising violence and global reach of the penal and national security state.” Chris Chen, “The Limit Point of Capitalist Equality,” *Endnotes* 3 (2013): 209, 203.
- 26 Marina Vishmidt identifies this connection in Rowland’s work, astutely noting how the inclusion alongside the *Encumbrance* works of an iron used to brand enslaved people with marks of ownership on the Codrington plantations in Barbados (*Society*, 2020) and an electronic monitor used as a condition of probation, parole, home detention, and release from immigrant detention (*Behavioral Intervention*, 2020) resonates with the earlier *Handpunch* (2014-15), a series of photographs of biometric time clocks. Marina Vishmidt, “Cameron Rowland, ICA – Institute of Contemporary Arts, London,” *Artforum* 58, no. 8 (2020).

Seb Franklin is Senior Lecturer in Contemporary Literature at King’s College London. He is the author of *The Digitally Disposed: Racial Capitalism and the Informatics of Value* (2021) and *Control: Digitality as Cultural Logic* (2015).