

Онтический дрейф: амфибийные руины между культурными техниками и не-существованием

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«Если бы медиатеория имела грамматику, то агентность находила бы выражение в объектах, занимающих позицию грамматического подлежащего, а культурные техники выступали бы в роли сказуемого», — пишет Корнелия Фисман о продуктивном поджанре медиатеории, известном как «культурные техники» (Kulturtechniken). Культурные техники пытаются подойти к медиа не как к онтологическим объектам, а через условия их репрезентации как сети операций — через их так называемую онтичность. Примечательно, что они стремятся учесть множественные кросс-культурные описания становления человека, или гоминизации, в пространстве между сушей и морем. Здесь корабль выступает как первичный объект анализа: например, тезис Бернхарда Зигерта о том, что миф о летающих ведьмах в морском обществе Тробриан обуславливает технологическую мореходность каноэ. Таким образом, человеческое возникает из нечеловеческого. Вслед за Фисман автор исследует «грамматику» культурных техник посредством сравнительного анализа другой грамматики — той, что Хортенс Спиллерс называет американской. Ее работа «Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book» предлагает альтернативное понимание основополагающего потенциала моря, помещая символический порядок Америки в контекст трансатлантической работорговли. В то время как изучение культурных техник часто движется от мифа к историческому анализу, автор исследует, что

происходит, когда доместикация человеческих тел на борту невольничьего корабля является результатом истории — но так и не завершается обретением человеческого статуса. Под этим исследовательница подразумевает, что раб, ставший движимым и взаимозаменяемым товаром, так и не обретает статуса личности по законам суши. В этом сравнительном исследовании случаев становления-нечеловеческим культурно-техническая интерпретация работы «Мама's Baby» перенаправляет медиафилософию к проблеме *не-существования* — невозможного онтологического статуса, не утраченного, но переосмысленного в повороте к условиям репрезентации. Проследивая этот дрейф, автор также обращается к движению ленд-арта XX века, анализируя два случая, которые аналогичным образом маркируют насильственное, технологическое взаимопроникновение суши/моря, письма/забвения и человеческого/нечеловеческого.

Preface: To Become Or Not To Become

CULTURAL TECHNIQUES (KULTURTECHNIKEN) has an object problem. Cornelia Vismann famously wrote of this German media philosophy: «If media theory were or had a grammar, that agency would find its expression in objects claiming the grammatical subject position and cultural techniques standing in for verbs»¹. Here she foregrounds the attempt to approach media no longer as ontological objects, but instead turn to their conditions of representation as a network of operations. Strikingly, cultural techniques attempts to account for multiple cross-cultural accounts of the making of man, or hominization, in the space between land and sea. As such, objects like ships, doors, and files become privileged points of analysis: this holds in Bernhard Siegert's exemplar claim that in maritime Trobriands society, a myth of flying witches produces the technological seaworthiness of the canoe. Ships are only as important inasmuch as they produce what we come to know as the human, a creature capable of transcending its landlocked nature. This is the the ontical turn of cultural techniques, which privileges *becoming* over Being, thus repudiating the idea that ontological distinctions between objects, such as the traditional media technologies like cinema or the radio, come first. However the ship becomes a problem for cultural techniques, when it is assumed that it will

¹ Vismann C. Cultural Techniques and Sovereignty // Theory, Culture & Society. — 2013. — Vol. 30, no. 6. — P. 83.

in turn produce the human. It is my conceit that ontical operations do not necessarily become ontological distinctions, in and as those distinctions are representational. To state plainly, using the primary object of this article: A slave ship is machine where humans go in, and come out as nothing.

The ship thus becomes a privileged site of what I call the *ontical* drift. In Siegert's case, the ship is a cultural technique of human self-referentiality inasmuch as it helps us transcend humanity's land-boundedness. Here, the amphibious status of the human opens us up to potentiality in a chain of ontical becoming: the inhuman (the ship) makes the human. Yet what happens when there are multiple, *comparative* grammars or even «cultures» within cultural techniques? In what follows, I take up Vismann's invocation of examining cultural techniques' «grammar» with a comparative study of another grammar—what Hortense Spillers claims to be an American one. Spillers' essay «Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book» provides me with an alternate formulation of the sea's foundational potential, where the symbolic order of America begins at the scene of the Atlantic slave trade. While the study of cultural techniques usually begins with myth and turns into a historical condition in a media object, I foreground what occurs when the domestication of human bodies aboard the slave ship both results from a historical condition, yet never arrives at the human. That is, the African slave never arrives at personhood under landed law either, made chattel and fungible. As a case study, my cultural technical engagement with the slave ship redirects media theory towards non-being (*n'est pas*), articulating that this impossible ontological status that does not simply fall away in the turn towards conditions of representation.

While cultural techniques and contemporary black philosophy — especially the framework of Afropessimism, which takes as its analytical objects social death and racial slavery — may appear like vastly distinct schools with little to no overlap, I align them in their ontical ambitions: one through the speculative and one through the historical becoming of the inhuman through technological means². Albeit black studies has tacitly engaged with media philosophy, inasmuch as Afropessimism delineates

² By «black philosophy» I am referring here to a school that is based in the US and Europe, known more famously for Afropessimist thought in the vein of Frank B. Wilderson III, Jared Sexton, David Marriott, and Ronald Judy — as well as those who have participated in dialogues with but are not themselves Afropessimists, such as Fred Moten, Saidiya Hartman, Kara Keeling, and many more. Their work has shifted thinking on chattel slavery from a historical domain that belongs in the past and is specifically rooted to the Transatlantic region, into an ontological question about the human and life itself. I borrow the phrase «afterlife of slavery» from Saidiya Hartman. I also follow here David Marriott's proposition that blackness as *n'est pas* or non-being cannot be subsumed or reproduced under Dasein, and thus any eidetic attempts to reveal it are

a series of scholarly objects that apparently resist representation, the latter field is usually dismissed in that same vein — as representations of blackness always fail in their capture. My argument is that the slave ship dramatizes a shared site of these fields' respective failures: An unmaking of the subject is still the result of a series of ontical operations, namely inscriptions of the slave's flesh that in turn create the symbolic order of America. That said, my intention is not to be comprehensive in charting all the possibilities of modes of resistant objects and whether they fit into and correspond to cultural techniques. Nor is the point to debate whether cultural techniques is «problematic» by comparing it to black studies. Instead I hope here to expand the scope of each respective field's analytic in and as they sharpen the media philosophical rendering of conditions of *impossibility*. An ontical drift occurs when the inhuman technological conditions resulting in the human (in all its representational legibility), are the same as the ones producing the slave (in its resistance to representation).

As such, I follow a cultural technical method in bookending this article with two cases that disclose an ontical drift between a speculative inhuman and a historically anchored one. I begin with an analysis of Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*, a land art sculpture that demonstrates the import of the cultural technical by staging the former: the human becomes inhuman as *amphibious* and *referential* to an originary emergence of technology. Then, I conclude with an analysis of another land art piece, Beverly Buchanan's *Marsh Ruins*, traditionally read as a monument to the American history of slavery. Reading with and against cultural techniques, I show how historical anchors of slavery refer to a lack of origin that effaces the technological registers of amphibiousness and referentiality that we have become used to in describing the human. It is not paradoxical to say that the human both floats and drowns.

Amphibious Origins

*Smithson's art is «the art of becoming inhuman»³.
Bernhard Siegert*

Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty* (1970), a sculpture as well as a film that documents the sculpture's construction, stages an encounter between

moot. See: Marriott D. *Of Effacement: Blackness and Non-Being*. — Redwood City: Stanford University Press, 2023. — 410 p. — ISBN: 978-1503628786.

³ Siegert B. *From Landscape to Mapscape: Robert Smithson's Maps // DMJournal—Architecture and Representation, Issue 1: The Geological Imagination / Forster K., Dorrian M. (eds.)*. — 2023. — P. 13.

technology and a prehistoric origin story that is captured in the documentary footage of Smithson's run atop the jetty. This earth sculpture coils outwards from the shore of Utah's Great Salt Lake, the spiral structure allowing land and water to meet at its every turn. Smithson underscores this convergence of earth and water in the film, his voiceover repeating «mud, salt crystals, rocks, water» over birds-eye views of the sculpture. Smithson himself professes to have chosen the location for his piece based on the blood-red color of the water, the result of micro-bacteria that live on its surface. He claims that «chemically speaking our blood is analogous to the primordial seas» and once we walk along the spiral, «we return to our origins» as we become «a floating eye adrift in an antediluvian ocean». With this triple reference to a time of oceans before the human, Smithson provides a sense of the ocean prior to anthropocentric conceptions. In reference to the Great Salt Lake as remains of a prehistoric ocean, oceans are no longer planes for modes of transport that have been the means for knitting together a capitalist world, but instead a prehistoric marsh from which life emerges. What is crucial is that *Spiral Jetty* functions as a monument to life *after* the human for the same reason: in its status as an amphibious monument subject to the coming and retreating of the lake's water, the jetty anticipates its own ruination. As Smithson describes of the withered landscape of the Passaic in a different context, his jetty is also a «ruins in reverse»⁴.

Technology, in Smithson's view, is then no longer an extension of the human but an aggregate of «raw materials of the earth», that are brought together through a set *techniques* that have preceded and will outlive the human⁵. These earthen materials are a method of formalizing the interplay of nonorganic and organic materials in (and as they later become) *media*. Bernhard Siegert emphasizes how Smithson's work plays with its own form as a map that leads one from «site to nonsite»⁶. Because *Spiral Jetty* is a locale where map coincides with territory, Smithson uses the nonsite to point to «land masses buried in geologic deep time», in which our access to the inhuman emerges⁷. A classic move of cultural techniques, this way of thinking emphasizes the unity between (among its other objects) land

⁴ Smithson R. The Monuments of Passaic // Artforum. — 1967. — Vol. 6, no. 4 — P. 54.

⁵ Ibid., p. 101. See also: Parikka J. A Geology of Media. — Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015. — ISBN: 978-0816695522. — P. 5.

⁶ Siegert B. From Landscape to Mapscape: Robert Smithson's Maps // DMJournal—Architecture and Representation, Issue 1: The Geological Imagination / Forster K., Dorrian M. (eds.). — 2023. — P. 7.

⁷ Ibid., p. 13.

art, the observer, and the artist — where the land art appears both prior to and after the human. As such, decentering the human is a *temporal operation*. The cultural technical claim to avoid anthropocentrism, and by default ethnocentrism, is only carried out through the way in which media force us to think a world that anticipates and succeeds human landedness.

Since the 2000s, the turn to cultural techniques has attempted to deconstruct oppositions between Anglo-anthropocentric cultural studies and Germanophone technophilic media studies. Indeed, what characterizes post-Kittlerian media theory, according to Friedrich Kittler himself, the eccentric doyen of German new media studies, is an attempt to deconstruct the above apposition by «driv[ing] the human out of humanities». Cultural techniques inherits this impetus but, as mentioned above, decenters the human by determining what processes recursively modify and formalize human practices in a larger network of human and non-human components. In this reorientation toward posthumanism, cultural techniques are divided by Siegert into first- and second-order techniques; where the second order are properly cultural in a «pragmatics of recursion» or self-referentiality of symbolic work. «Culture» is then redefined in reference to its cognates, «cultivate» and «culturing», which emphasize human epistemological relations with ecology and environment⁸. In this sense, *Spiral Jetty* is an *ur-case* of the methodology of cultural techniques itself: curling in on itself as it mediates between primordial red water and civilized Utah land, *Spiral Jetty* dramatizes cultural techniques' fascination with origins and the fact that their condition of access to these origins *before* the human are only accessible through a reflexive framework referring to a time *after* the human.

In the eponymous film, the sculpture is shot from an aerial perspective. At first we see Smithson run the jetty, till he arrives at its interior curl — or perhaps it arrives at him. As Smithson stands at the final jumping off point between the jetty and the red water of the lake, the helicopter holding the camera flies upward so that he disappears into the spiral. A lens flare cuts off the center and emanates outwardly, so that we can imagine the spiral continues on, recursively looping into itself forever (Figure 1). But this unseeing eye of the flare is uncanny: as it is implied that the spiral goes on backwards ad infinitum, it ultimately arrives at a caesura created by the interaction of sun and camera. For Smithson, this caesura is a step outside of human history but it is likewise a practice that can only be achieved after one has been unmoored from the both earth and sea. One must take flight.

⁸ Geoghegan B. D. After Kittler: On the Cultural Techniques of Recent German Media Theory // Theory, Culture, and Society. — 2013. — Vol. 30, No. 6. — P. 77.



Figure 1. Author's screenshot from *Spiral Jetty* (1970), directed by Robert Smithson.

Consider another nonsite of Smithson's that is anchored in human landedness: one year before *Spiral Jetty* was built, Smithson staged another land art piece entitled *Hypothetical Continent in Shells: Lemuria*. Named after the mythological island of Lemuria, a «cradle of civilization» that sunk into the sea, Smithson sculpted a pile of shells along the coast of Sanibel Island, Florida. In a sketch that maps this piece, he creates his own mythology, in which he populates the island with shells and inscribes beneath the title, «the geography of the Eocene period». Contrary to this periodization, he maps this hypothetical continent as an island off three coasts labeled «Africa», «Arabia», and «India». These real continents provide historical anchors for his mythological one, even as they're supposed to be accessible through some «deep time» beyond the human. These nonsites are therefore produced in reference to sites that came *after* them: from Africa, Arabia, and India, to Florida. They are therefore the products of anachronism: past and present human are threaded together by an inhuman filament. Nonsites can only emerge out of historical anchors, despite the speculative project.

In its temporal operation of *becoming*, a cultural technical engagement with Smithson's work demonstrates an optical drift away from the human: the inhuman is a site of desire and infinite possibility that the human must take flight towards. However, its anchoring to the human assumes a shared speciation of what it means to *be*, of the ontology that the optical either departs from or moves toward. The problem is that the inhuman has a history of emerging from humanity, whereafter the category of the human becomes a site of a similar recursive return in its unattainability. In the section to follow, we see this in another nonsite: the slave ship.

Body Into Flesh, or Caught Between Two Seas

*Culture then recurs as an edge: no matter in what form*⁹.

Roland Barthes

«What is a ship»? This is Bernhard Siegert's query, repeated twice, as he introduces what he calls «the cultural techniques of seafaring»¹⁰. He glosses a few answers: In the idiom of physics, a ship is a body that displaces its weight in liquid and thus floats; a ship is also a colonial and scientific war machine; according to Michel Serres, «a ship is always a perfect summary of space as it is»; but then again, according to Foucault, it is the perfect summary of space that is not — a heterotopia, exceeding topos and summary by incessantly connecting and then severing man from the world¹¹. Siegert proposes these multiple definitions in grappling with the «ontology of ships». However, the purpose of his question isn't only to arrive at an agreed upon definition, but to show how the ship engenders the human in transcending their domain as a landlocked creature. The point of his adjudication is that focusing on the ship as a cultural technique *par excellence* is also to focus on *how* a ship becomes what it is in relation to the network of agents and objects to which it mereologically belongs. The ship therefore makes the human, rather than the reverse.

A primordial domain for cultural techniques, Siegert's study claims that seafaring results in the anthropological itself. Following Sophocles, Siegert delimits the anthropological as a type of subject constitution, formed on the originary division between land and sea¹². The ship is thus a technique that allows man to uncannily transcend his own species' status. The cultural techniques of seafaring constantly self-references the entwinement of its territorial, mythical, and juridical functions. Siegert thus highlights the ship as a case to show us how these operational references are forms of *self-reference* — functions that follow from its origin story. This is an origin story of the making of man (hominization) as a species distinct from others (domestication).

⁹ Barthes R. *The Pleasure of the Text*. — New York: Hill and Wang, 1975. — ISBN: 978-0374521608. — P. 7.

¹⁰ Siegert B. *Cultural Techniques: Grids, Filters, Doors, and Other Articulations of the Real*. — New York: Fordham University Press, 2015. — ISBN: 978-0823263769. — P. 68.

¹¹ This is a translation of a phrase Bernhard Siegert borrows from Michel Serres's «Turner traduit Carnot». Ibid.

¹² Ibid., p. 16.

The entwined poles of hominization and domestication both refer to some primordial origin story (supposedly locatable in the sea) and defer the basis of those very origins (since they are origins that are not locatable at all). In this section, I will show that this ontical drift enables a veering away from a humanist politics, but only by means of endlessly cordoning off an inhuman from *within* the human. Therefore, I take up Spillers' essay «Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book», which provides me with an alternate formulation of the sea's foundational potential. To adumbrate, my reading of Spillers draws out the latent ontological commitments in a cultural-technical understanding of the world that proposes to turn away from ontology towards onticity. Namely, if there is no primary origin to the radical technical distinction between the human and inhuman (what an «ontic» claim implies), then why do ubiquitous references to the origin of the human (anthropo-genesis) and the inhuman (techno-genesis) seem to persist in an account of cultural techniques despite being absent in an account of onticity, as we have seen with the case of *Spiral Jetty*? Spillers' account shows us that the ship is not merely another (resistant) case study for cultural techniques to grapple with, but rather demonstrates that the norms established by cultural techniques' already extant cases requires a deconstruction of how media can first come to appear as cultural techniques. This deconstruction of the requirements undergirding the cultural-technical case — their conditions of possibility — show us that a turn to the conditions of possibility in creating representation is always already a turn to their foreclosure simultaneously. To restate, my point in using Spillers is not that Transatlantic slavery is an object that cultural techniques hasn't already accounted for, nor is it a matter of merely applying one field's lens to another field. Rather, a cultural technical engagement with black studies fissures open an epistemological problem in the turn to studying what could be called media's conditions of possibility.

Moreover, if Spillers' account of the slave ship transcends its own status as a case for cultural techniques, it is because her origin story stages a movement between myth and history that Siegert would like to deemphasize in his aim to decenter the human. If these aforementioned origin stories persist in a cultural-technical reading of history, how does that (im)possibilize our ability to address problems interior to human boundedness? If cultural technical origin stories are *anterior* to our understandings of human interiority and territory, how are the latter troubled by the grafting of the former onto history, where the latter

inform the former? To begin answering these questions, let us return to the ship.

Smithson has already shown us through his aerial perspective of the spiral's disappearance that to account for the space between land and sea is vastly different than accounting for the sea as a nonsite between lands. The promise of a cultural technical origin story must occur by incorporating a third element: the air. It is thus no coincidence that Bernhard Siegert's origin story of cultural techniques writ large begins with the Trobriands' myth of flying witches. It is myth, according to Siegert, that produces the technical seaworthiness of the ship as the original medium inscribed in and available to history. Strikingly, then, Siegert's very definition of cultural techniques simultaneously creates and elides an answer to how myth reproduces itself as history — how the grammar that media are become the grammar that they have. Because of this convergence of landedness, seaworthiness, and flight, Siegert's account consequently implies that hominization is an interminable project. The making of man is given in an unending return to myth that, for this same reason, never arrives on land and is never fully inscribed within history.

In the inception of space and the law infused with and embodied in the ship — a medium which carries man, allows him to «found» colonies, and so forth — Siegert paradoxically rejects occidental culture's ability to provide a satisfactory answer to what a ship is. He continues that, «because the oldest European literary and archaeological evidence presupposes the topical contrast between ship and ocean», the effacement of this topical contrast and subsequent references to it, are what formalizes man's distinction from other species¹³. It is thus no coincidence that Bernhard Siegert's origin story of cultural techniques writ large is arrived at vis-à-vis anthropological accounts of the myth of flying witches that allow Melanesian sailors' ability to suffuse ship and ocean, and thus culture with technology. Siegert's foray into Trobriand nautics begins with anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski's study of a ring-exchange ceremony (*Kula*) and the outrigger canoes involved, which are central to 1920s maritime society of the Trobriands. The canoe not only is central to seafaring, but is a machine that «produces» both the Kula exchange and also the maritime society of

¹³ While the Greek Argonauts only offer «hints of the original coupling of ship and sea», Siegert's study of Melanesian sailors—that later results in him claiming them as «Trobriand Argonauts» — are apotheosized in their being situated as a primordial example of cultural techniques. This is because Bronislaw Malinowski indicates a «definite connection» between the sea and the Trobriand canoe vis-à-vis witchcraft. Ibid., pp. 71, 76.

¹⁴ Ibid., p. 73.

the Trobriands as a whole¹⁴. Despite this being a historical case study, we must be attentive to Siegert's retelling of this origin story: his point is not only how the canoe has operated historically but how it has created man mythologically.

The Trobriands canoe is depicted as a network of many heterogenous elements, especially as it operates as the object of incessant observation of witch-sirens from the shore who send avatars of flying witches, or *mulukwauasi*, to sea. It is the force of these flying witches that both threatens the ship and manifests it to be seaworthy in the first place, incorporating the magic of *mulukwauasi* to render the ship invisible to the sea's dangers. The mythological ability of the flying witch is transmuted into historical artifact, where Trobriand shields, apotropaions, and canoes are imbued with the witches' gaze. Accordingly, in Siegert's reading of Malinowski, Kula magic transfers the ability of the *mulukwauasi* to fly to the canoe and, as such, the goal of the Kula ceremony identifies the canoe with a flying witch. In other words, not only do the evil and horrors that threaten the ship emanate from witches, but the seaworthiness of the ship originates in the witches' magic: the ship *becomes* the witch¹⁵. And the men inside the ship? He concludes: «Thus the voyages of the Trobriand Argonauts unfold and illustrate the Sophoclean notion of seafaring as a primary cultural technique [...] Insofar as seafaring is an unceasing deferral of the shipwreck, seafaring is an anthropotechnique. Humans do not turn into sailors by setting out to sea; rather, the sailor, that most uncanny of all seafaring beings, is "d'homesticated" by the ship»¹⁶. Not only does seafaring then trouble the topical relationship between land and sea as it embodies both, but seafaring is an unceasing deferral of the shipwreck at the same time it is an «anthropotechnique» because the function of myth is also the perpetual deferral of landedness. Note here the promise of onticity, which defers ad infinitum a terminus in which man will have become man.

This myth then reproduces itself in the history of the Trobriands as the artifact of the ship. The sailors' «d'homestication», partially by the mythological erotic gazes of sirens on land, partially by the avatars of these women having now produced the cultural technique of the ship, hence appear as historically situated. Siegert does not elaborate further on this intriguing but obscure neologism, d'homesticate, that forwards the crux of his argument about the ship. In my attempt at part faithful reading and part extrapolation, I have taken d'homestication to

¹⁵ Ibid., pp. 73–74.

¹⁶ Ibid., p. 76.

be a portmanteau of domestication and of (*d'*)hominization. These dual concepts are foundational for the theoretical intervention of cultural techniques: hominization, or anthropogenesis, is vital in constructing a human that no longer exists independently of humans *as such*, buttressing cultural techniques' shift in focus from ontology to the realm of onticity. Domestication is thought by cultural techniques as intimately implicated with hominization. Referring to both human and animal, domestication is thought to serve both the creation and attrition of anthropological difference: by eroding the boundaries between human and non-human, Siegert claims that domestication is a «technologically oriented decentring» of the human that results in its cultural technicity. Situated this way, Siegert warns against the danger of using domestication to conflate ethics with a political project: as a cultural technique, it ultimately aims not to grant rights to animals, for example, but instead foregrounds the «radical technicity of this distinction»¹⁷. If Siegert's mythological sailor is *d'*homesticated by the ship, seafaring is then an anthropotechnique that *hominizes* and *domesticates*. No mere primordial origin story bound to the Trobriands, the ship's cultural technical function — its creation and decentring of man — is historically recursive, but mythologically genetic. In other words, the historical appearance of the ship always already refers back to its fictive genesis of *d'*homestication. The ship as a cultural technique sets sail from the coast of history and flies to myth.

This optic of hominization and domestication, bound up in a technology of unmaking and remaking the human, problematizes itself as mythological origin story in nonetheless arriving at the very distinctions between human and animal, land and sea, that follow the same humanist hermeneutic cultural techniques eschews. In this way, hominization misses what is properly human once domestication is defined in terms of species with a common origin. *D'*homestication runs the ground without ever arriving on land. In approaching the human by foregoing liberal humanist subjectivity, cultural techniques holds sway in arguing for the «cultural» as a formalized human practice that perpetually curls back on itself in terms of species. In other words, the cultural aspect of cultural techniques, in referring to cognates like cultivation and culturing, cannot foreclose its reference to a multiplicity of cultural orders competing to define the human. I contend that in turning to a cultural technical approach to ontological claims, the project already assumes what a human is not (technologically speaking)

¹⁷ Siegert B. Cultural Techniques: Or the End of the Intellectual Postwar Era in German Media Theory // Theory, Culture & Society. — 2013. — Vol. 30, No. 6 — P. 56.

in order to decenter the human. However this technological inhuman also results in an intra-human cultural difference, as a human non-being. Although Siegert should not arrive at the human based on his flight away from it in the ship, the ontical drift of species has floated cultural techniques to a species divided. Despite «the sea» being a site for human-creation, there are multiple seas within the same bounded space: a nonsite that enables flight, and a nonsite that is a place between two coasts. Origins are always a plural, grammatically and temporally a constellation. And we shall soon see how the primordial technique of an origin for non-being is not necessarily primary nor original.

Spillers' essay «Mama's Baby» scrutinizes what Siegert would call an occidental ship, namely the slave ship, which violently attaches culture to technique in a techno-logic of racial slavery¹⁸. In her analysis of the slave's desubjectivation in the Middle Passage, Spillers distinguishes between captive «flesh» that is the precursor to «body». For Spillers, the flesh designates a «zero degree of social conceptualization» and a «ripped-apartness, riveted to the ship's hole, fallen, or "escaped" overboard»¹⁹. While body, and its resulting legal personhood, are traditionally seen as bestowed to a human *after* they are flesh, Spillers's reversal here shows how that bodily status can be stripped down into pure materiality. Flesh refers to a slave's fungibility as an object among other objects. No longer human tissue, the flesh can be altered, whipped, and all manner of rupture is no longer seen as harm done to another human. With this lacerated «hieroglyphics of the flesh», Spillers designates a «cultural vestibularity», corporeal markings that are the concentration of ethnicity and colonization²⁰. The recursivity of this particular desubjectivation is no doubt generative of later cultural and technical developments in that cultural vestibularity lies in the very fact that flesh is the site where a culture of sanctioned violence must pass through for state apparatuses to later reinforce and collude with the torture of a people unmade, and now inured to suffering. This is perhaps why these hieroglyphics can easily be read as a case for cultural techniques: writing is a cultural techniques of

¹⁸ Spillers H. J. Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book // Diacritics — 1987. — Vol. 17, no. 2. — pp. 64–81.

I borrow this descriptor of Spillers's «techno-logic» from Neferti Tadiar. See: Tadiar N. Domestic Bodies of the Philippines // Sojourn: Journal of Social Issues in Southeast Asia — 1997. — Vol. 12, no. 2. — P. 162.

¹⁹ Spillers H. J. Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book // Diacritics — 1987. — Vol. 17, no. 2. — pp. 67.

²⁰ Ibid.

subject constitution. However, Spillers' very notion of cultural vestibularity troubles not only subject constitution as a series of ontic formations that arrive at ontology, but also the continuity of that very chain of operations.

Flesh is a «primary narrative» for Spillers, where its hieroglyphics are necessarily recursive as the symbolic markings carry over from one generation to the next²¹. In an American grammar, one must already conceive of human body *before* one can speak of flesh, which enables the thrust of Spillers' argument: she reads into a historical outline of dominance the retrojection flesh, so that flesh becomes primary. This already becomes a problem for cultural techniques, where we assume the chain of ontic operations that is d'homestication always already arrives at the human. The Middle Passage is a site of social death, that creates an origin after the fact of birth — in which a non-being or slave is «born»²².

Captive flesh aboard the slave ship is a cut in the Barthesian sense, that holds two edges of culture together. Language's redistribution for Barthes is «always achieved by cutting» where two edges are created; culture and its destruction, thus allowing culture's reformation²³. The cut's force is no clearer than in language's materiality as grammar in Spillers' essay. She writes:

The symbolic order that I wish to trace in this writing, calling it an «American grammar», begins at the «beginning», which is really a rupture and a radically different kind of cultural continuation. The massive demographic shifts, the violent formation of a modern African consciousness...which open the Atlantic Slave Trade... interrupted hundreds of years of black African culture²⁴.

Operatively, the cut implies that there is culture on both sides even if it makes the prior culture (the canonical one, Barthes calls it, or the one Spillers calls «black African culture») completely inaccessible: the captive can never return. Along the other edge of the cut, after the ship, the slave can also never arrive at personhood. «She» cannot land a second time once «she» has been made fungible and chattel. This is an unsettling position for cultural techniques, where the study of becoming or onticity

²¹ Ibid.

²² I borrow «social death» from the historian Orlando Patterson's famous text, *Slavery and Social Death*. See: Patterson O. *Slavery and Social Death: A Comparative Study*. — Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1982. — 511 p. — ISBN: 978-0674810839.

²³ Barthes R. *The Pleasure of the Text*. — New York: Hill and Wang, 1975. — ISBN: 978-0374521608. — P. 6.

²⁴ Spillers H. J. *Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book // Diacritics*. — 1987. — Vol. 17, no. 2. — P. 68.

simultaneously departs from being as such and never arrives at it. Because of this second «origin» (that is social death), the cultural technical schema can no longer claim to account for colonization as ontical, when colonialism itself poses this ontological quandry.

But this problem is not only attached to the moment of colonization and the Middle Passage: Spillers has also created an origin story that becomes recursive in its ability to adhere to history, and occurs again and again. Like Siegert's mythological onticity, Spillers' origin story lays the groundwork for later what becomes landed law, that encapsulates the body *qua* legal personhood. Contrary to cultural techniques, Spillers' origin is where history becomes myth, but myth continues onward awash with historicity: she cites the maxim of civil law *partus sequitur ventrem* («that which is born follows the womb»), among other aspects resulting in the current condition of black American life, as the repetition of this «beginning». That is, after landing in the slave ship, the law states that the «child follows the mother» in inheriting «her» legal status as slave. The condition of flesh is sedimented as positionality later *qua* law, which even after its abolition confers a mark on black life²⁵.

When Alexander Weheliye calls racial slavery the «biopolitical nomos of modernity» in his reading of Spillers' essay, he tethers flesh to positionality²⁶. The qualifier of biopolitical to nomos deals with a disposable population as a problem of power and sovereignty, and positionality inherently as its object. Spillers' nomological aspect for Weheliye is already attached to territory and sovereignty once the flesh is linked to concepts like biopolitics and bare life. In my view, a cultural technical reading of «Mama's Baby» redirects us to take apart these concepts, so that the problem of sovereignty can be situated as a point of departure *from* rather than the proving ground *of* being and becoming.

A cultural technical investigation into the slave ship also rethinks the implications of *d'homestication* alongside *domesticity*. Insofar as I've been using the scare quotes around «she» to describe the «female» slave after Spillers here, it is because of the ontological implications resulting from the author's careful theorization of the material disparity of sex, after body is made flesh:

I would suggest that «gendering» takes place within the confines
of the domestic, an essential metaphor that spreads its tentacles

²⁵ Ibid., 65.

²⁶ Weheliye A. G. *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human*. — Durham: Duke University Press, 2014. — ISBN: 978-0822357018. — P. 38.

for male and female subject over a wider ground of human and social purposes. Domesticity appears to gain its power by way of a common origin of cultural fictions that are grounded in the specificity of proper names, more exactly, a patronymic, which in turn, situates those persons it «covers» in a particular place. Contrarily, the cargo of a ship might not be regarded as elements of the domestic, even though the vessel that carries it is sometimes romantically (ironically?) personified as «she». The human cargo of a slave vessel... offers a *counter*-narrative to notions of the domestic. Those African persons in «Middle Passage» were literally suspended in the «oceanic»... as an analogy for undifferentiated identity... these captive persons... were in a movement across the Atlantic, but they were also *nowhere* at all²⁷.

The interplay of two determinations of «domestic» are crucial for me here to think through: the first refers to gendering and its percolation into what could be called the private sphere, the second refers to a boundary that negotiates between the internal (domestic) and external (foreign). Spillers eschews both in her description of the ship, the lack of their mutual designation resulting in that of *ungendering* and unmooring. In examining this cultural fiction of domesticity, Spillers calls attention to its irony (the ship is sometimes ironically personified as female) as an emphasis of dissimilitude. The irony in the personification of a ship as female lies in its conjunction with the dehumanization of «her» cargo, where one exists suspended in the «oceanic» and the other exists in countervailance or «*nowhere* at all» — a real nonsite. Here I address Weheliye's welding of *nomos* and territory with a rejoinder; *nomos* as a spatial configuration here precedes and enables the territorial configuration but is not necessarily given within it. The ship is «nowhere» first and facilitates the domestic in and as it *und*(*h*)omesticates.

This metaphysical gesture in Spillers culminates in what she calls the slaves' *ungendering*, the creation of a formal equivalence in being reduced to flesh and property, that effaces the distinction between slave *as such* and slave *as a thing with reproductive capacity*. Her claim here is fascinating: while reproduction endures among the captive, it does not do so within the logic of gender. So when this *ungendering* persists amongst chattel slaves, it does so forwarded by the material distinction of reproductive capacity²⁸.

²⁷ Spillers H. J. Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book // *Diacritics*. — 1987. — Vol. 17, no. 2. — P. 72.

²⁸ This material distinction underlies the entirety of the juridical framework which replaces the patronymic of the father with that of the slave owner.

I use the concept of ontical drift to describe the impossible aesthetics of this ungendered being, which still retains its reproductive capacity; in order to underscore that while these movements don't arrive at being, they still perform a recursive function in forwarding non-being²⁹. This ontical drift is played out in the metaphor of the sea and ship suspending and reorienting its human cargo. The gesture is unremarkable in the sense that it results in *nothing* that is all made indistinguishable in the form of fungible chattel, but the drift becomes the driving force behind the formation of a material dissimilitude in the form of a reproduction of that nothing.

So far we have dealt with the ontical drift between two poles: The first an account of hominization and domestication that induces a species turn to the inhuman without a priority between the two; the second an intra-human d'homestication that necessarily arrives at an inhuman subordinate to human hierarchy. The latter results in a category in which slave is unmoored from human, and moreover persists with race as its mode of appearance when incorporated back into liberal American subjecthood. My point in laying these out in the same architecture is that the former pole already anticipates the latter. Read with a cultural technical notion of seafaring's d'homestication of the sailor, the process of ungendering aboard the slave vessel as a counter-narrative to domestication obliges a re-examination of how the former identifies a promise and potentiality in becoming inhuman. There is indeed a «radical technicity of [the] distinction» between human and inhuman that should be foregrounded, but this technicity is not purely a speculative nonsite for geologic time when it has already been cut through by flesh's history-becoming-myth as an alternate time of the inhuman.

The turn to the ontic is fraught when we assume it operates on a continuous chain that arrives at ontology: the turn to conditions of possibility must account for that possibility's severing having been embedded in its conditions to begin with. While for Spillers, the determination of non-being aboard the slave ship is an abyssal «origin» that then recurs again and again in its lasting historical effect — an anaphoric technics — for Siegert the origin of cultural techniques — an origin projected backwards that *then* makes the human — are basal in a completely different sense. The second is without place; as when one tries to locate it, it's deferred. No historicism sticks.

²⁹ Fred Moten, in his article responding to Frank B. Wilderson III and Jared Sexton's work on Afropessimism, has called this positive instantiation of non-being «the facticity, of the nothingness that is». See: Moten F. Blackness and Nothingness (Mysticism in the Flesh) // The South Atlantic Quarterly. — 2013. — Vol. 112, No. 4 — P. 774.

To draw a conclusion, the media philosophical obsession with an inhuman that makes the human and remains afterwards, put into dialogue with the black philosophical turn to the human that makes the inhuman, meet one another in the nonsite that is the ship. Ontical operations therefore don't always result in ontological distinctions, but instead strip a subject down to its flesh, a subject that then never arrives. An ontical drift names the irreconcilable movement that neither confirms the human nor makes it anew positively, as a site of infinite becoming. Instead, a promise of infinite becoming in the ship is founded on its reproduction of the condition of non-being. As such, the slave ship is not another object for the analytic of cultural but a limit case that undoes the promise that the amphibious transcendence of species boundaries and their recursion yield subjecthood. On the other hand, I have shown how black philosophy's perpetual return to objects like the ship that, paradoxically, demonstrate the unrepresentability of non-being are already media philosophical in its result. If *Spiral Jetty* performs the speculative ecstasy of becoming inhuman, the slave ship demonstrates how that becoming can instead sediment a form of ontological foreclosure. The cultural technique of the ship thus contains two irreconcilable seas: one that transports the human into mythic self-becoming, and one that suspends the human in a space of unmaking. The drift between them is neither myth nor history alone, but a recursive structure of amphibious negation — a ruin whose nonsite can only be grasped by attending to its refusal of arrival.

Coda: Amphibious Ruins, Redux

The undecidability of myth and history survives in narratives of the 1803 Igbo Landing. A ship (conflicting narratives call it either the *York* or the *Moravia*) bound for St. Simons Island in the US state of Georgia held a captive group of 75 Igbo slaves to be sold to plantations. By all accounts, the group incited a rebellion and sunk the ship. By differing accounts, the slaves either walked into the water to commit suicide in an act of collective defiance — or, they took flight and flew back across the Atlantic to Africa. Their exact site of landing is contested, but most historical records note that it remains unmarked.

However, between a highway and a tidal salt marsh that trails off into the Atlantic on St. Simons Island, there are what appear to be three innocuous boulders arranged in a triangular formation. When the tide is low in the high summer, they are mounds, peaking out above the tall, cord-like grass. At high

tide, they fluctuate from appearing like cetaceous domes partially surfacing for air, to full submergence. These are Beverly Buchanan's *Marsh Ruins* (1981), built on the site a black policeman helped her find of the mythical location. Buchanan, like Smithson, is known for for her environmental sculptures (or earthworks or land art), her work in recent years enjoying a posthumous popularity not unrelated to combatting the «white male» remoteness of the land art movement³⁰. Here, I would like to propose that both sides of Buchanan's reception — those that would like to rescue her work from the annals of history as well as those who have overlooked her in the first place — have missed one main import of the work in situating this land artist mostly through the present's political dimension.

The amphibious nature of *Spiral Jetty* foregrounds its *technique* as a jetty: it brings the human out to sea and in doing so parts the waters. However, the jetty will eventually lose its unity as the sculpture ages, its technological register as a bridge withering along a preprogrammed trajectory of ruination. The amphibious nature of *Marsh Ruins*, like a true set of fragments in ruins, retains no such register. Its only ambitions towards wholeness are, paradoxically, a partial one: Buchanan constructed the piece by mixing and layering concrete into nearly five-foot boulders, then encasing the concrete in an oyster shell-tabby. Such tabby is a water, sand, lime, and aggregate that was most infamously used in the same area in the 18th and 19th centuries on plantation buildings, including as material for the quarters of the slaves that built them³¹. The final layer Buchanan applied was a brown acrylic stain. Since the installation of the piece, the acrylic stain has weathered away so that the boulders are bleached, the tabby encasing has chipped, and the concrete cracked and exposed. Caught between the saltwater's drowning and the sun's bleaching, the *Marsh Ruins'* amphibious status only serves its eventual erosion, submergence, and eventual obscurity. The water and earth are unified in their ecosystemic negation of its layers, rather than being part of its organizing principle, like with Smithson's bridging of earth and sea. While both are in ruins because of their refusal of a final form, the amphibious site of *Marsh Ruins* is technically oriented through the erosion of its layers rather than an arrangement into a spiral, territorial mapping.

³⁰ Groom A. Beverly Buchanan: *Marsh Ruins*. — London: Afterall Books, 2021. — 96 p. — ISBN: 978-1846382185.

³¹ Buchanan detailed how her visit to a slave hospital on one of these plantations gave her the idea to make the piece strong. For more information on tabby's history: Idowu J. Tapia, Tabbi, Tabique, Tabby [Web resource]. — Available at: 2024. — <https://placesjournal.org/article/tabby-concrete-black-indigenous-history/>. (Accessed: 16.06.2025).

Unlike Buchanan's previous *Ruins and Rituals* (1979), concrete blocks in a museum's arboretum cast to look like above ground, cubic tombs with sarcophagal lids, *Marsh Ruins* indicates no corpses within. Even as a posited gravemarker for the Igbo landing, this is a poor one: there is no engraving nor description of any historical event, save Buchanan's signature in a concrete lump embedded in and nearly overtaken by the muddy ground. But, the art historian may protest, the sculpture has the historical anchor of this tabby layer. The oyster shell material's architectural function, as the encasing of a domicile, might invite one to inquire within. While the crumbling of the ruin intervenes on a timespan in the afterlife of a tragedy, this revelation is defunct as we cannot go back for archaeological inquiry. There are no answers within its concrete layers. If the ruins are ruined from the start, it's because we search inside their layers for embedded history, and yet only receive nothing.

Smithson and Buchanan shared that they were playing with the idea of the monument as «ruins in reverse». However, Buchanan's ruins are anti-monumental: Multiple writers of the ruins have detailed stories in which they've called to inquire park rangers in local Brunswick about the sculpture and were told that it no longer existed³². No aerial unseeing eye needs to hover over Buchanan's documentation of the ruins: their unity as a set of fragments — already in multiple — share no shape, nor any surficial qualities other than their material crusts that belie nothing. They are not a classical media infrastructure, despite having been sandwiched between a highway and a marsh, the point is not to traverse the ruins. This environmental negation of land and sea is also a mythical unity.

If the monument says «remember me», then ruins are mute. But there is another command to ruins constructed in the process of ruination that aim to become mute: Its utterance is «forget me», but it cannot shed itself of its mythical unity even as its historical crust loosens and falls away. While ruination indeed «demands an absence of care» in that it engenders an eventual forgetting, it begins with that demand³³. What is so uncanny about this demand is that it covers over the lack of speech from which the ruins mimic. It is sequential and jussive in the Derridean sense of the

³² MacArthur and Burris, detailed in Groom's Beverly Buchanan. Also see: Campbell A. «We're Going to See Blood on Them Next»: Beverly Buchanan's Georgia Ruins and Black Negativity // *Rhizomes: Cultural Studies in Emerging Knowledge*. — 2016. — No. 29. — <https://doi.org/10.20415/rhiz/029.e05>.

³³ Campbell writes in «We're Going to See blood on Them Next», «...ruination occurs because of a consistent and collective forgetting. Ruination demands an absence of care—neither an iconoclastic drive to destroy, nor a caregiver's promise to keep. Ruination is an effect of thoughtlessness and inattention». See: *Ibid*.

commandment that proceeds out of the *arkhe*, yet like Buchanan's ruins it contains nothing. Our memory has been effaced from the outset.

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Ontical Drift: the Amphibious Ruins between Cultural Techniques and Non-Being

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«If media theory were or had a grammar, that agency would find its expression in objects claiming the grammatical subject position and cultural techniques standing in for verbs», writes Cornelia Vismann of the prolific subgenre of media theory known as cultural techniques (*Kulturtechniken*). Cultural techniques attempts to approach media not as ontological objects, but through their conditions of representation as a network of operations — their so-called onticity. Strikingly, it seeks to account for multiple cross-cultural accounts of the making of man, or hominization, in the space between land and sea. Here, the ship emerges as a primary object of analysis: for example, Bernhard Siegert's claim that in maritime Trobriands society, a myth of flying witches conditions the technological seaworthiness of the canoe. As such, the human emerges from the inhuman. I take up Vismann's invitation to examine cultural techniques' «grammar» through a comparative study of another grammar — what Hortense Spillers names an American one. Spillers' «Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book» provides an alternate formulation of the sea's foundational potential, locating the symbolic order of America at the scene of the Atlantic slave trade. While the study of cultural techniques often moves from myth to historical analysis, I interrogate what happens when the domestication of human bodies aboard the slave ship results from history — yet never culminates in the human. By this I mean that the slave, made chattel and fungible, never arrives at personhood under landed law. In this comparative study

of cases of becoming-inhuman, my cultural-technical engagement with «Мама's Baby» redirects media philosophy toward *non-being*, an impossible ontological status not lost but re-articulated in the turn to conditions of representation. In tracing this drift, I draw also on the 20th century land art movement, through two cases that similarly mark the violent, technological infusion of land/sea, inscription/forgetting, and human/inhuman.