



*DREAMS ARE COLDER THAN DEATH* (DIRECTED BY ARTHUR Jafa, 2013), FRAME GRAB.



# "The Water is Waiting": Water Tidalectics, and Materiality<sup>1</sup>

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In order to speak about the legacy of the Transatlantic Slave Trade and plantation slavery, and the ways they drift into and affect the present, Black and Africana studies discourses often use hauntology, a series of signals, and a discursive turn that deploys the language of hauntings, specters, and ghosts. Hauntology claims that blackness—with its variances and contradictions, incompleteness and impermanence—remains imbued with slavery's uncertain and ambiguous presence. This set of symbols becomes deployed to discuss certain phenomena appearing in self-conceptions of blackness—namely, the presence of the past. Vestiges of slavery appear spectrally today and are present, uncontained by the passage of time. While this collection of signals and figures has proliferated, there are limitations to their power when we attempt to apply this minimally material, liminal,

and ambiguous presence in the present to the concrete realities of blackness, and particularly, to the matter and mattering of black lives. Any epistemic or ontological schema we use to talk about the presence of the past must be able to address not only the matter of black life, but also the meanings and implications of the continued un-mattering of black life. If these spectral symbols fail to account for the materiality of black death and life, how can we talk about this presence in a way capable of addressing the concreteness of black existence? And if our commonly accepted symbols and signals cannot account for this materiality, then we need to mobilize a new discursive tool. Rather than hauntology, a potential remedy to this problem emerges through Kamau Brathwaite's tidalectics. In what follows, I work through this "presence of the past," its materiality, and the limitations of hauntology as an explanatory tool,

while granting its representational power to address psychic life. Finally, I will turn my attention to water and tidalectics as both representation and explanatory tool, in an attempt to make the first steps of working out a tidalectical materialism.

Black and Africana discourses encompass several ways of understanding the “presence of the past.” This essay draws attention to the inextricable *material* effect of the past on the living. Referring to something both more apparent and subtler than references to the past by authors and academics in their works, this essay focuses on the myriad ways these past conceptions, remembrances, practices, and policies come to actually *do work* in the present. Dionne Brand signals this presence of the past as she writes, “You are constantly overwhelmed by the persistence of the spectre [*sic*] of captivity.”<sup>2</sup> At work in all the

authorial, artistic, and academic ways mentioned above, this essay’s focus on the presence of the past also includes the way it writes itself upon the black body and into black lives—both through self-identification and also the external regulatory gaze that remains unaccounted for. Moreover, this understanding of the presence of the past encompasses the way the past is alive and working in state, ideological, and economic structures committing violence against black lives—violence that repeatedly demonstrates that black lives do not matter and that threatens black matter *itself*.

There is no way for the “enormity of the breach instituted by slavery and the magnitude of domination” to remain behind the temporal walls of the past.<sup>3</sup> Instead, this breach continues to have material effects on the black body in the forms of poverty, hyper-sexualization, illness,

incarceration, intra-community and state violence, and so on. These are written into the material world on black bodies and black communities through various external and self-policing apparatuses. They are produced and reproduced as they are lived and experienced. The material reality of the presence of the past becomes known through many channels, including the restructuring of plantation slavery in late capitalism, the carceral system of criminal justice, the ongoing systematic damaging and destruction of black kinship structures, the sexual violence perpetrated against both trans- and cis-gendered black women, and the seemingly perpetual executions of black people by the police. In these ways, and alongside many more, the past breaks through the walls claiming to confine it to do work in the present.

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As indicated in Brands' words above, in order to talk about the unspeakable “tear in the world” that began with the opening of the Middle Passage, a regimen of ghosts and specters is usually deployed.<sup>5</sup> In Black and Africana studies discourses, the world becomes haunted by the opening of the Middle Passage, by the plantation, by lynchings, and so on. Additionally, the status of post-Emancipation freedom remains ambivalent as “the roots of [it] were located in

slavery and the meaning of freedom was ascertained by its negation.”<sup>6</sup> This disastrous inversion, as Saidiya Hartman identifies, has resulted in perpetual threat and danger to black material lives despite Emancipation, Civil Rights struggles, and the Black Lives Matter movement. A hauntological schema, however, cannot account for these threats in a material way. The vestiges of these “dead and not-quite-gone” remain, carried forward, as constitutive elements of the present at constant

work.<sup>7</sup> These remains, these material and ideological holdovers, shape and form the language used, and the ways in which blackness is understood. The legacy of slavery weighs upon the mind, and more importantly, the body of the present black subject, breaking through the supposedly stable walls erected to hold historical times apart and separate. The Middle Passage is “not...terminal but originary,” a constitutive beginning.<sup>8</sup> None of this devalues or discourages the



deployment of ghosts, spirits, or ancestors as something other than metaphor in a personal way, but rather reveals the ways in which the discursive activity configured around ghostly signals cannot account for the ways in which the temporal instability of the legacy of the Slave Trade and its effluvia works itself out materially in the present.

Working through the ways in which Martha and Bruce Lincoln divide haunting typologies, the limits of this methodology become apparent. Taking cases of “primary” or conventional hauntings, the authors classify present beings that are active and potent, and that come into the present to “confront the living in direct, non-mediated, and even menacing” ways.<sup>9</sup> While this presence certainly can mean harm—both psychic and physical—they do not hail the living in order to right the wrongs of improper



FIGURE 1  
LORI DELL, *INDIGO SEA*, 2015,  
MIXED MEDIA ON CANVAS, 12x12 IN.  
COURTESY OF LORI DELL.

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burial or ritual failure. Blackness is not hailed by this presence of the past in narrow or uncritical ways, as Martha and Bruce Lincoln suggest typifies this form of haunting. If the claim is that blackness and black people experience primary haunting, then following this line of thought presents a problem if the aim is to reckon with the materiality of black life. Those apparatuses, structures, and systems that ensure black life is constantly under threat—like police forces, prison systems, and so on—

would be the minimally material beings that had been improperly consigned to the past and a peaceful afterlife. Moreover, in order to be finished with this primary haunting, it would be a matter of righting the ritual wrongs and performing some kind of “proper” burial in order to contain these spirits in the past. However, this is not the case, as these past configurations are constantly reproduced in the present, enacting material violence upon black lives. In this way, primary

haunting cannot encompass the ways in which the present is affected in its material by the past.

Secondary haunting is the more critical configuration of hauntology considered by Lincoln and Lincoln, and the one with the most direct bearing on what this essay targets. This is the form that hails a wider, less personally responsible audience, and is mediated by an author or researcher. They argue these mediators work to “keep the memory of those [atrocities] alive as a means

to transform the moral and political climate of the present and future.”<sup>10</sup> Fredric Jameson likewise discusses this form of haunting when he writes about the domestication of ghosts through their deployment as representations of a Hegelian Spirit.<sup>11</sup> The remains of a horrific past translated into language—made into ghosts and specters lurking between words—perform this memory work. However, blackness is not only called upon to do such work. Rather, these remains are the infrastructure threatening black lives now. Gazed upon by ideological, political, and economic apparatuses of the liberal democratic state, blackness and black lives remain conceived of in the ways the past has brought forth, namely, as the slave—that is, the living implement that can be owned and operated for the purpose of capital accumulation.

When it comes to analyzing the function of capital in plantation, industrial, and late capitalist economies, a slippage into hauntological language often occurs. Capital itself appears as a ghostly figure able to transgress political, spatial, and temporal boundaries. However, particularly when it comes to the material effects of capitalism on black lives, a grammar of ghosts and specters cannot account for the ways these powerful economic constellations work themselves out materially. The ways in which the black body became insurable machinery—and as such, a form of capital subject to the reach of an ascendant white monopoly under the forced migration of the Atlantic Slave Trade—were utterly material in the first instance, and indeed, are made an analogue for Marx’s conception of machinery.<sup>12</sup> This instrumentalization of bare life into insurable machinery for the accumulation and protection

of capital is bound to the black body. While the “wounded, suffering human body [is] incessantly attended to by an equal sign and a monetary equivalent,” it is never fully replaced and made into a minimally material or immaterial ghost.<sup>13</sup> Black bodies and black lives persist materially, but live under constant threat of the past and its exchange of the black body into a means of production for capital. This connection across the oceanic chasm, however, is not simply a thing of the past. Time accumulates, as Ian Baucom claims, but not as benign specters that threaten and frighten but ultimately do no harm. Rather, Baucom’s work engages with the materials and materiality of the past in order to work through the ways history builds upon itself and returns in the present. His work acts as a scaffolding for a tidalectical materialism—an idealist infrastructure that undergirds Braithwaite’s tidalectics. The aim here is to begin



FIGURE 2  
LORI DELL, *BIG  
WATER*, 2015,  
MIXED MEDIA ON  
CANVAS, 60x48IN,  
COURTESY OF  
LORI DELL.



the labor of building around this scaffolding in order to break with the hauntological methodology Baucom uses in order to pull out the full force of his arguments, particularly when it comes to the materiality of this intensified, expanded, and accumulated history at work in the present.<sup>14</sup> In this essay, Baucom's work is asked to do its opposite in order to reckon with the ways the configuration of a present filled with an accumulated past has concrete effects, pushing the logic of his work more firmly towards the materiality of black lives.

In order for hauntology to be a useful tool for discussing the ways in which the legacies of slavery play out in a concrete sense now, it must reckon with the material that is at stake. It has to be able to think of and through the matter of black life, and explain the perpetual reproduction of the *un-mattering* of black life in death. It

must be able to account for not only the ways these so-called present ghosts leave material impressions inscribed in the flesh, but also the production and reproduction of political and economic frameworks that allow for the various forms of violence that work themselves out on black communities, and finally, for the ways these forms are legitimized as a result of this ongoing presence. A framework capable of addressing and working through the materiality of blackness and the ways this material enters into relations with a “labyrinth of forces at work...where violence is built into structures and institutions...implemented by persons of flesh and bone,”<sup>15</sup> is required. This tool must be able to work through the visor effect, the material behind the material animated by the spirit in which “the inside of the outside is only another outside.”<sup>16</sup> This spirit, indicated by Achille Mbembe, is

that which would not be present if it did not inhabit a material form.

Hortense Spillers writes, “African persons in the ‘Middle Passage’ were literally suspended in the ‘oceanic.’”<sup>17</sup> Indeed, it is the contention of this essay that persons of African descent have never stopped being suspended in the oceanic. The Middle Passage, rather than haunting us, is still open (perhaps not to the trade of slaves, but to the flows of capital, certainly), with water flowing forth in a constant, violent rush. While this cyclic rush of water may initially appear as only a metaphorical representation of the back-and-forth flow of Brathwaite’s tidalectic, it in fact can do more. In the final and critical instance, it offers a way of directly addressing the various ways the opening of the oceanic chasm that is the Middle Passage continues to live in the present.<sup>18</sup> It is a layering of time, of worlds, of recordings,

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## **“THE MIDDLE PASSAGE, RATHER THAN HAUNTING US, IS STILL OPEN...WITH WATER FLOWING FORTH IN A CONSTANT, VIOLENT RUSH.”**

a “trans-oceanic movement-in-stasis.”<sup>19</sup> While Brathwaite’s geopoetic tidalectics are primarily about islands, specifically the Caribbean, they can and should be extended beyond these terms. Tidalectics can apply to the tri-polar spaces of the Atlantic Slave Trade in its present nation-state configurations.

Like a dialectical progression held in irreconcilable tension, tidalectics resist the Hegelian telos of progress through the negation of negation only to arrive at a final synthesis.<sup>20</sup>

Black matter is unambiguously present in the tidalectical relation, as foundational ideologies, policies, and systems “weave together, reshape, separate, flow back, and come forward again.”<sup>21</sup> These ideas make themselves known in the present, and inscribe themselves onto bodies and into lives, with material consequences. Responding to Mark Fisher, it is tidalectics, not hauntology, that can signal lives and bodies “stained by time, where time can only be experienced as a

broken fatal repetition.”<sup>22</sup> Hauntology, while it can be useful in talking of the psychic effects of broken and repeating temporalities, fails when it is called upon to account for the material effects of the past in the present. While the present is indeed “stained,” as hauntology maintains, it is not so much by a ghostly presence, but by an ongoing process of drawing material and flesh into a drowning cycle, crushing the black body. Black matter gets caught in the irresistible strength of a tidal pull,

either settling on the alluvial floor as a sea tangle or floating to the surface as a dead thing.<sup>23</sup> The tides are never precisely the same, but the fact of their repetition is. They turn and return, not perfectly cyclical, but with an accumulation of time, of material, and of water. In Lori Dell's *Shaman's Smoke*, the black body is caught under the movement of the tides—present but worked over by the force of these historical waters (Figure 3).

Tidalectical materialism can be deployed as a historiographical and methodological tool that speaks to the failure of a conception of an uncomplicated present when it comes to discussing and addressing the lasting and material effects of the Slave Trade. It introduces a relation not only of sea and land, root and route, but also of capital and power to material blackness in a present still stained by the Middle Passage, its epistemic schema, and the ontologies



FIGURE 3.  
LORI DELL, *SHAMAN'S SMOKE*, 2015,  
MIXED MEDIA ON CANVAS, 60x48IN,  
COURTESY OF LORI DELL.

flowing from it. The tidalectic “advances a notion of overlap and repetition” to communicate the ways ideas and images combine and recombine continually, and the ways in which these re-combinations—in which residues of the past include “eras wash[ing] over eras”—do not improve upon the past so much as demand a rethinking of it.<sup>24</sup>

Tidalectical materialism acknowledges that which lies outside of black lives, yet continues to press down upon them. Even beyond acknowledgement, this outside conceptual space—of the nation-state and its institutional and economic frameworks—constitutes the tidalectical relation. For example, the tidalectical relation demonstrates itself at work when we are confronted by black death and brutality at the hands of police, and the failure of the state to indict, which further legitimizes and entrenches the

functions of the structure itself. The vestiges of slave patrols and laws protecting the murderers and brutalizers of black bodies are not mere ghostly reminders, neither ambiguous nor immaterial. Moreover, the wounded, dead, or mourning black body is not just haunted; it is crushed by violence and its legitimation. The re-combinations of past structures and institutions fill up the present. Like the waters of the tides, these structures crush black bodies in the sweep of their violent movement. Blackness and black lives occupy a unique position in this reading of the present. We are caught in the water of the tides as they flow and crush, create and destroy the social seascape.<sup>25</sup> Blackness is tangled in this liquid relation. Like water, it cycles, flows, and washes, while also carrying with it the destructive force of hurricanes, flash floods, and riptides. It cleanses and purifies, putrefies and rots.

Water here functions as a metaphor for the action of tidalectics, with its own materiality, flow, and crush.

Tidalectical materialism grants the psychic experience of slavery as accurately described through the language of hauntology, but it also, and importantly, acknowledges how this legacy affects so much more than psychic life. This essay has intended to mobilize a way of conceiving this experience that is capable of addressing the question of a mechanism of social death that comes to life (and death) in the material world. In this configuration, social death occurs through the figure of drowning, as the presence of the past works itself out materially. Working through Édouard Glissant’s poetics of relation, Baucom writes, “The slave trade refuses to detach itself from slavery itself, nor the slave ship from the plantation, nor the plantation from the ghetto and the



shantytown.”<sup>26</sup> The “refusal to detach” plays into the social death of the black body and is part of this ongoing tidalectic action—the back and forth, present and past, entangled, overlapping, fatally attached.

Finally, as tidalectics is an obvious troubling of Hegelian dialectics, tidalectical materialism is an equally obvious critique of Marxist dialectical materialism. Frank Wilderson has noted how the political project

of Black liberation is a more catastrophic event than the Marxist-Leninist political project can account for.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, the inability of Marxism-Leninism to address the slave in a comprehensive way is critical to this problem. Marxism can only deal with the worker as the generic category of its project, thus granting that the black body, as underwritten by the history and legacy of slavery, cannot become

a worker so much as a machine. In other words, in a tidalectic present filled up by the past, black lives cannot access the movement of a dialectical materialism. If the violence of slavery as negation of humanity cannot be resolved, then any dialectical movement of history is foreclosed. The tension and torsion of the contradiction crushes blackness beneath its tides. The march of history means nothing underwater. ■

**“THE MARCH OF HISTORY MEANS NOTHING UNDERWATER.”**

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- <sup>1</sup> Kamau (Edward) Brathwaite, *The Arrivants* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973).
- <sup>2</sup> Dionne Brand, *A Map to the Door of No Return* (Toronto: Random House Canada, 2001).
- <sup>3</sup> Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 52.
- <sup>4</sup> Asatar Bair, *Prison Labour in the United States: An Economic Analysis* (London: Routledge, 2007).
- <sup>5</sup> Brand, *A Map to the Door of No Return*, 5.
- <sup>6</sup> Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 72.
- <sup>7</sup> Martha Lincoln and Bruce Lincoln, "Towards a Critical Hauntology: Bare Afterlife and the Ghosts of Ba Chúc," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 57, no.1 (2014), 191–220.
- <sup>8</sup> Ian Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005), 313.
- <sup>9</sup> Lincoln and Lincoln, "Critical Hauntology," 191–220.
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>11</sup> Fredric Jameson, "Marx's Purloined Letter" in *Ghostly Demarcations*, ed. Michael Sprinker (London: Verso, 1999), 26–67.
- <sup>12</sup> Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy Volume 1* (London: Penguin Classics, 1992).
- <sup>13</sup> Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic*, 7.
- <sup>14</sup> Ibid., 21.
- <sup>15</sup> Achille Mbembe, *On the Post Colony* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 175.
- <sup>16</sup> Warren Montag, "Spirits Armed and Unarmed: Derrida's *Specters of Marx*" in *Ghostly Demarcations*, ed. Michael Sprinker (London: Verso, 1999), 68–82.
- <sup>17</sup> Hortense Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987): 64–81. Emphasis is Spillers'.
- <sup>18</sup> Anna Reckin, "Tidalectic Lectures: Kamau Brathwaite's Prose/Poetry as Sound Space," *Anthurium: A Caribbean Studies Journal* 1, no. 1 (2003): 1–16.
- <sup>19</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>20</sup> Brathwaite, "Caribbean Culture: Two paradigms" in *Missile and Capsule*, ed. Jurgen Martini (Bremen: Universität Bremen, 1983), 42.
- <sup>21</sup> Elaine Savory, "Wordsongs and Wordwound / Homecoming: Kamau Brathwaite's Barabajan Poems," *World Literature Today* 68, no 4 (1994): 750–757, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40150620>.
- <sup>22</sup> Mark Fisher, "What is Hauntology," *Film Quarterly* 66, no 1 (Fall 2012): 16–24.
- <sup>23</sup> Brand, *A Map to the Door of No Return*, 85.
- <sup>24</sup> Winfried Siemerling, *The Black Atlantic Reconsidered: Black Canadian Writing, Cultural History, and the Presence of the Past* (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2015), 349.
- <sup>25</sup> Elizabeth M. DeLoughrey, *Routes and Roots: Navigating Caribbean and Pacific Island Literatures* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2007).
- <sup>26</sup> Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic*, 313.
- <sup>27</sup> Frank Wilderson, "Irreconcilable Anti-Blackness and Police Violence," interviewed by Jared A. Ball, *i Mix What i Like*, 1 October, 2014.

## Author's Note

While writing “The Water is Waiting,” I struggled to find images to compliment the essay. I considered many options and shot each one down. I thought about including J. M. W. Turner’s *The Slave Ship*, or images of the spaces and materials of slavery, including the different iron instruments of control and violence. I considered an image of the door of no return in Senegal. I considered images of Sandra Bland, Alton Sterling, Philando Castile, Abdirahman Abdi, Eric Garner, Mike Brown, Tamir Rice, Eric Harris, Walter Scott, Freddie Gray, Trayvon Martin, and others from that ever growing list. None of this was acceptable to me. I could not watch these spectacles of violence for another moment, and I would not be part of instrumentalizing these deaths. While my essay is deeply concerned with the fact of material violence and the matter of black lives, I could not show these lost faces again—digital reminders, remainders, and vestiges of lives taken away by white supremacy, state violence, and a monstrous capitalism put into motion hundreds of years ago on the backs of African slaves. So, I chose a different route entirely.

To give a little background, my mother was a hairdresser for many years, a labor that lends itself well to developing close relationships with clients. Lori Dell was one such client. She and my mother became friends a number of years ago. Many of my memories of my last years in Toronto

involve Lori. Dinner parties on tree-lined Toronto streets, raccoons prowling through yards and over wooden fences. Watching the water on worn-out green boats, Brazilian jazz playing in the background. Smokey studios, factory lofts, show openings at soon-to-be-gentrified Leslieville with wine in brittle plastic cups on cold, misty nights. Lori’s prints and paintings hung in these places and in my mother’s various flats, along stairways, in windows, and above beds. In writing the essay, I came back to Lori’s abstract paintings, particularly (and fittingly) her two series: *Water* and *Fluid*. Her various series never offer explicit commentary. Much of her work is concerned with material structures: ruins, indigenous or classical architecture, the body. While there is a difference between architecture and water, I find in her work a preoccupation with the material infrastructure of the world. The *Water* series is no different. The movement of water near her home on Lake Ontario inspired the chosen paintings and they communicate the power and force of water. Lori describes their creation as her need for fluidity, and as an attempt to capture the sublime beauty of water. It was in the word “sublime” that I really came to these images. There is something violent and powerful in sublimity, such a forceful negation. Not so much a giving over, but being taken over by force, by the beauty and the horror of the waves. “Big Water”

and “Indigo” showcase this power. The water appears to roil and toss with a suggestion of the land in the background. In both paintings, the depth and darkness of the blues hint at a certain malevolence in the movement suggested in both.

Unlike the other paintings in the *Water* series, “Big Water” and “Indigo” evoke open water, not the shallows. The dark flows and waves of “Indigo” speak to the crush of the tides. This is not the ocean you hear when you bring a conch shell to your ear, but the dangerous water of red flags on beaches. It is the water wrecking ships, pulling bodies away from the relative and contentious safety of land or vessel. I see the violent water of the Middle Passage in these paintings, even if the waters of Lake Ontario rather than the Atlantic inspired them.

The third image, “Shaman’s Smoke,” is an outlier in the *Fluid* series. While the others are bright, using almost primary colors, this image is mainly earth tones, streaked with reds and whites. A figure appears underwater. While “Big Water” and “Indigo” are concerned with capturing the powerful movement of water, this third painting is where I locate the black body. While Lori by no means tried to convey this in her image, it is nonetheless what I see. The black figure crushed beneath the waters of history flowing around it.