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**abstract:**

The text is devoted to the economy of abstract map-paintings created by Frank Bowling in the years 1968-1972. Map-paintings are composed of large swaths of colour which are being extended in a space thought by Bowling as a transatlantic space of capital flow and, simultaneously, as expressive of the personal experience of the painter involved in these flows. Global experience requires a two-fold understanding here: it is a shared fate of the black transatlantic community and its abstract cause, that is the decoded flows (Deleuze and Guattari) of the global market. In his map-paintings, Bowling works through these two meanings which remain in the state of permanent conflict. The text concentrates on the economy of history written through Bowling's distribution of paint, the economy of the global and intimate histories of capitalism and their expression in the visual medium of colour.

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## **Turbulent History: The Map Paintings of Frank Bowling and the Flows of the World Economy**

The basis for the image economy retraced below will be the figure of flow – both a polysemous concept straddling the intersection of meaning and matter, and an abstract yet tangible form. Its use here will enable the probing of a certain universe of experience, whose parameters I will briefly map over this essay's course. The polysemous and multidirectional nature of flow will be rendered as a relationship of perpetual exchange between a variety of levels of meaning. In his book *Specters of the Atlantic*, Ian Baucom introduces the concept of the "circum-Atlantic archipelago of flows,"<sup>1</sup> to describe the movement of capital between urban centers spanning different continents and making up the present-day incarnation of triangular trade, and how that flow ultimately reshapes geography. I would like to borrow this figure from Baucom, while treating the archipelago in a more figurative way – as a constellation of semantic fields that I will describe as "fluid planes"; consequently, in the text, flow will be both the figure-object and figure-method.

This approach will lay bare the complex, multidimensional relationship, a fluid interpolation of several separate instances, transpiring in spite of their internal contradictions and mutual incompatibility. The argument underpinning the essay will reveal the unequal exchange between: abstract price flows conceived as market tides; the attendant forced transoceanic passage of people, their memory and experience; the abstract flows of color in Frank Bowling's map paintings, which stand as an expression of pure visual form while also documenting the trans-Atlantic experience of the painter and his community; and the currents driving oceans and air masses, elemental flows that Bowling adopts as matrices for this experience. Flow – the form informing

the method applied in this text – is meant to bring all these planes together, weaving them into a shared space that will reveal itself below as a linguistic and material shell: a theoretical object inside which there will exist an internally contradictory process of circulation linking individual semantic planes. The specific economy of the image will be informed not only by the plane as a whole, as all its constitutive flows contain a crucial visual component, caught up with its counterparts in a complex relationship that I will try to flesh out across the text.

## Economy and experience – on the illiteracy of capitalism

We will begin to unfold the image of this shell, breaking it down in space, with Christina Sharpe, the Black scholar whose poignant book *In the Wake* interrogates the tangled knot of family history and race as a category of classification and domination, a legacy left behind by the capitalist, trans-Atlantic slave trade that ran from the sixteenth to the mid-nineteenth century. The book opens with descriptions of the circumstances surrounding the deaths of Sharpe's various family members, brought about by a toxic tangle of money, race, and class – a legacy of triangular trade that reaches all the way to the present day. Working through these relationships, Sharpe frames her research as a form of theoretical lament, conceiving conceptual tools for the seemingly endless labor of trans-Atlantic grief, which is a struggle against the repeating and repetitive, gloomily consistent gesture of erasing Black experience.

For her primary vehicle, Sharpe chooses the eponymous category "in the wake," whose multiple meanings enable the author to plumb both the forms and strategies of memory, as well as the element of abstraction and violence repressing them. Diagnosing the linguistic difficulties that Sharpe's project deliberately takes on determines to a large extent the scope of

the issue explored below. The figure of flow – whose semantic field overlaps with that of wake, opening out new registers without exhausting others – will enable me to reveal the internal complications of the chronicling practice, which wants to tell of the human experience of the global circulation of capital. Their analysis will allow me to interrogate in the second part of the text the painting practice of Frank Bowling, packed with internal tensions, using his map paintings created at the turn of the 1960s and 1970s.

The cargo hold is one of four spaces – the others being the ship, the ocean, and the weather – that Sharpe conceives as the mediums of the horrifying transformation experienced by a body entering global economic exchange. A body abducted and forced into the flow of universal history. Sharpe describes the hold as the locus of the “calculus of dehumaning started long ago and still operative.”<sup>2</sup> A calculus not figurative, but market driven. The cargo hold is but one space where this is enforced, where the body undergoes a series of transformations, the initial stage of which Sharpe describes by referring to Hortense Spillers:

In *Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book* Hortense Spillers writes that Africans packed into the hold of the ship were marked according to EuroWestern definitions not as male and female but as differently sized and weighted property.<sup>3</sup>

What Spillers and Sharpe are describing here is entry into the realm of commodification and quantification. Recording it in a ledger is only the first in a series of transformations that capitalism forces onto the body. Once it was solely a human body, a specific scope of experience, now suddenly and brutally confiscated. The dimensions and weight that will come to represent it are still empirical data, but they arise through abstraction, the intensifying reductivism that the human being is subjected to by capitalism. These are economic

potentialities, advances on the labor and economic value that the body will provide down the line.

Passage across the ocean is supposed to “liberate” this potential. It is characterized by a grotesque duality – the inconceivable scale of physical violence is harnessed here into service of the process of abstraction. Aboard the ship, according to Ian Baucom, the body was transformed into a price, a sign functioning in the circulation of economic values. It was the domain of a “monetarizing anatomization of the body – the triumph, over the embodied knowledge of history, of something like double entry bookkeeping.”<sup>4</sup> Continuing his dissection of the development of the finance capital that enabled triangular trade, Baucom argues that there emerged

the specter of something else such financial protocols made possible, something the Admiralty would decidedly not have wished to associate with its loyal, suffering, subjects: the specter of slavery, the slave auction block, the slave trader’s ledger book; the specter, quite precisely, of another wounded suffering human body incessantly attended by an equal sign and a monetary equivalent.<sup>5</sup>

The spectral metaphors to which inquiries into the capitalist slave trade incessantly return precisely define the union of violence and abstraction at its core. Slavery is a market institution under which commodification is so absolute that the body is stripped even of its freedom to sell its labor, defined so viciously by Karl Marx. All that remains is freedom from existence – a weightlessness, a state of abstract stasis in the form of a monetary equivalent. Universality devours the body from within, transforming it into an abstract, immaterial particle, and then incorporates it into the global exchange flow.

In its passage across the Atlantic, the body is rendered into capital. From the ship’s hold, it is released into the ocean, albeit an artificial one – where currents are duplicated and

denaturalized by trade routes, which are themselves duplicated and denaturalized by the trans-Atlantic circulation of capital. This transformation into an ocean of flows produces vast amounts of data. These are generated by a market functioning as a relentless process of appraisal, itself a paradoxical cognitive process imbued with the power of bodily transformation. The concept of the market in this specific interpretation will function below. Quantifying a scope of experience and then turning it into labor power makes it possible to incorporate histories unfolding on slave ships into narratives like these:

British sugar production, initially using Dutch capital, began in the middle of the seventeenth century in Barbados, which was transformed from a yeoman farming to a slave plantation society between 1645 and 1667. After that the Barbadian boom petered out. The next major island to be converted to sugar planting by the British was Jamaica, first conquered in 1665. However, Jamaica did not come to rival Barbados in slave population and sugar production until the first decade of the eighteenth century. After that the number of sugar plantations in this larger island increased much more rapidly, and by the early 1770s they were producing ten times more than Barbados. By 1773–1774, Jamaica had over 200,000 slaves on 775 sugar plantations, and a medium-sized sugar plantation would employ some 200 blacks working about 600 acres, of which perhaps 250 were in cane. The total profit to Britain from Jamaica for the year 1773 was estimated at over £1.5 million, of which about one-third came from production for export and two-thirds from profits on trade.<sup>6</sup>

This single paragraph covers a long history of labor (note also the ratio between profits from production and trade, a key index from the perspective of developing finance capital). This history is expressed with indicators and occurs within indicators. One hundred years of human experience and suffering radically reduced and invalidated. The economic space of the ship's hold

spits out data – spectral bodies stripped of substance and spectral history stripped of meaning.

In a system of universal equivalence, market price functions as a purely arbitrary “door of no return”:

To board the sinister ship was, as the Gola warriors discovered, a terrifying moment of transition, from African to European control. Much of what the captives had known would now be left behind. Africans and African-Americans have come to express the wrenching departures through the symbol of the “door of no return,” one famous example of which exists in the House of Slaves on Goree Island, Senegal, another at Cape Coast Castle in Ghana. Once the enslaved were taken beyond the point of no return, transition turned to transformation.<sup>7</sup>

Marcus Rediker paints a poignant picture of leaving experience behind, and capital’s arduous effort to further strip it from the body in order to acquire labor. The “door of no return” is both a specific place, ruled by dehumanized and dehumanizing violence, and a hollow metaphor of space in which the body is initiated (transformed/transposed) into a new framework of meanings. The “door of no return” – an opening encompassing the body, an encapsulating sign, in which movement across space is rendered into a bodily and conceptual transformation, a brutal passage between two incompatible languages. In her research, Sharpe asks: how can we remember the history of global capital and the labor it resettled, the history of human experience that passed through the toothless, inhuman O spanning the entire globe? How do we write such histories if we ourselves exist in what she aptly and penetratingly describes as the “afterlife of property”?

Writing about the specters of the Atlantic, Baucom employs the figure of flow to situate the history of the slave trade in the context of the madness of the finance economy. Drawing on

Giovanni Arrighi's concept of financial cycles, Baucom builds his philosophy of history and economy around the alternating dominance of material and financial modes of accumulation. He focuses on the role played by credit and insurance in the criminal enterprise that was the slave trade, to demonstrate how the circumstances of the trans-Atlantic triangular exchange enabled the emergence of a specific episteme, which would return, in its most mature form, in the second half of the twentieth century, as the hypercapitalist financial market. Like Sharpe, Baucom also examines the consequences of the formation of this episteme on the very ability to write history. He mentions the

departicularizing, degenealogizing mode of speculation which operates by creating a set of equivalences between entities and abstracting from those now-equivalent entities a "general equivalent" which permits their endless and boundless interexchangeability: the general equivalents in these cases being "man" and "money."<sup>8</sup>

Focusing on the peculiar, self-contradictory linguistic form of capital is essential to writing the history of its trans-Atlantic flows. This internal contradiction derives from the fact that the language of capital unravels other languages – understood as systems of encoding time and memory – and their attendant categories describing the historical capacity of experience. It is based on a process that Baucom calls "degenealogization," and which Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari previously defined as "decoding flows." It is, as we will see, a counter-rule to logic and historical circumstance, a self-destructive linguistic form against which Sharpe writes the history of her family and her community.

To retrace these degenealogized, speculative routes, I will employ a method associated with the Marxist deconstructive strategies used by Beverly Best, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, and Susan Buck-Morss. Deconstruction is a method specific to

late capitalism, where finance becomes a wholly illusory yet dominant method of production – a moment that Baucom argues is anticipated by the “ocean-crossing network of loans, debts, bonds, and bills of exchange, an archipelagic eddy of circulating paper money, a circum-Atlantic cycle of accumulation”<sup>9</sup> – an economic system animated by a leveraged and insured ocean of blood, sweat, and tears. An ocean of experience modified from the inside by the degenealogizing mode of speculation.

Using the instruments of literary criticism to interrogate market processes might seem a frivolous exercise – but it’s a methodological choice which examines the relations of production and, like Jacques Derrida in *White Mythology*, sees the capitalist form of value as a variant of the theoretical speculation that deconstruction understands as a sort of fiction. Rather than refute the frivolity argument, I will try instead to lead it to its logical conclusion, and capture this conceptual fiction in action within the realm of social relations, along with all of its gruesome carelessness. The financial market is a systematic fantasy on the production capacity of (conceptual) speculation. To quote Baucom, it “transformed the epistemological by fantasizing it, altered the knowable by indexing it to the imaginable.”<sup>10</sup> Applying deconstructive frameworks enables us to capture the illusiveness of this construct as illusiveness in action. The same will be true for methods of art criticism that I will be drawing on later in the text.

Beverly Best abstracts the essential theoretical intuition of the Marxist critique of capitalism as follows:

If, for Marx, an adequate analysis of capitalist production as a totality requires the demonstration or exposition of its conceptual construction (i.e., if the analysis has a narrative structure), then it follows that a particular process of representation is fundamental to Marx’s method. Marx’s method *entails* a theory of representation. Here, I want to argue that Marx’s labor theory of value functions on two

levels: in a more narrow sense, it is a theory of the (historical and social) construction of economic value in a fully developed exchange economy; in a wider and more general sense, the theory of value is a theory of a specific function of representation that achieves a definitive status in the capitalist mode of production.<sup>11</sup>

Here, Best defines capital as an economy of representation founded upon the obfuscation of social relations of production by the abstract form of value. The production of added value occurs within the representational relationship, which is not a byproduct of accumulation, but defines its extent. It is a form in which the interception of labor by capital takes place, a transcendental part of the production process.

Writing about the matter, Spivak says: "Once the emergence of the material appropriate to the money form permits its transformation into pure (ideal) conventionality, money is form without content, difference rather than identity."<sup>12</sup> This pure conventionality is an arbitrary relationship of reference that the structure of the linguistic sign is based on. The arbitrariness of the relationship of representation is predicated on the mutual incompatibility of the representing and the represented, which hail from different regimes – this, in turn, leads to the emergence of the problem of mediation with the opacity of a medium, a problem as old as language itself. In the process of quantification that the form of value forces upon historical codes, this incompatibility of regimes spells the death of language.

One of the fundamental premises of economy conceived as a structure of representation in its hypercapitalist, neoliberal incarnation, anticipated by the logic of finance instruments developed in the process of trans-Atlantic circulation, is that history allows itself to be described using market language, capable of describing all its contents and modes of existence. This is the gist of the so-called "effective markets hypothesis," itself an especially naïve and, subconsciously, highly advanced

theory of representation. In its infantile belief in the transparency of the linguistic medium, consequently applied to the strikingly opaque logic of quantification, the hypothesis spells out the mechanism underpinning the subconscious of the finance market itself.

The language of information/price flows is a language in which all social relations are treated as immanently quantifiable. The problem is that historical language does not lend itself to such an approach. Thus, capital attempts to quantify history, a process it cannot endure – the complexity of history's codes and the variety of forms of experience it constitutes disintegrate when faced with the radical contraction brought about by price abstraction. This disintegration is itself generative, as it drives the process of objectless and worthless expression that Spivak, informed by Marx, describes as follows:

The constitutive temporality of value – labour-time – is occluded as the material of money becomes its own measure [...]. "Gold is therefore nominally undecipherable, not because it alone expresses an *authentic value*, but because as money it expresses *no value at all*, but merely expresses [...] a determined quantum of its own matter, its own quantitative determination."<sup>13</sup>

Money's linguistic expression is pure, but hollow; and not only that – it dissolves linguistic codes. The market's incessant spewing of language, the worthless overproduction of value – beyond good and evil, truth and falsehood – transpires within the medium of quantification, in which the possibility of representation collapses. In Deleuze and Guattari's analyses, whose theory of capitalism is modeled after the finance market, this collapse takes the conceptually framed and materially affective form of "decoded flows."

"The epic drama unfolded in countless settings over a long span of time, centering not on an individual but rather a cast of millions."<sup>14</sup> Countless settings, long timespans, and crowds of

millions – the passage delineates the socially defined, mobile planes of data generated in the process of decoding. The global circulation of capital plays out on a mass scale and generates wide-ranging phenomena – we will explore the meaning of the term a little later in the essay. “A world-economy is like an enormous envelope,”<sup>15</sup> writes Fernand Braudel in the introduction to the third volume of his *Civilization and Capitalism*. This is a surprising observation, as the picture he paints over the previous two volumes is of uneven historical contingency. To Braudel, capitalism is a panoply of institutions of different sizes, whose spontaneous emergence and, to a significant extent, incidental relations with others, produce a merry multitude, a historical monument to human ingenuity. But then, all of a sudden, a new quality appears in the jolly crowd: the envelope of the world-economy.

Braudel goes on to elaborate on this peculiar entity:

The world-economy is the greatest possible vibrating surface, one which not only accepts the conjuncture, but at a certain depth or level, manufactures it. It is the world-economy at all events which creates the *uniformity* of prices over a huge area, as an arterial system distributes blood throughout a living organism. It is a structure in itself.<sup>16</sup>

The conjuncture is a series of pricing data points which simultaneously signify and arrange themselves in space, and their spatial arrangement forms a vibrating economic surface. The visual economy of capital is the economy of that envelope, of a market expression that spans the whole Earth with its price correlations. It is the economy of flows, which Braudel describes in categories of uniformity, of representations clustering into a mass with a specific texture. Thus, he frames the conjuncture as the fabric of the world-economy.

This evolution of the concept of capital is ushered toward its theoretical conclusion by Deleuze and Guattari. The flows they

schizoanalyze are the medium of liberated market expression, the fervent circulation of capital. The concept of “decoded flow” enables the diagnosis of the paradoxical mechanism of money – a structure of reference, the relation of value to the totality of social relations, which resolves itself through its own mechanism of representation. The authors want to capture this resolution as both a material process and a Hegelian concept. Spivak expresses similar intuitions, believing capital to be a theory developing in space:

As Marx’s notebooks make abundantly clear, that which takes the place of the *Idea* (in the process) for Marx is capital. This is where the genius of Ricardo had failed; he had no clue to the morphology of a concept’s self-determination.<sup>17</sup>

“Writing has never been capitalism’s thing. Capitalism is profoundly illiterate.”<sup>18</sup> The Deleuzian–Guattarian figure of the market is a Hegelian figure in the tradition of Georges Bataille. It embraces contradictions and resolves them in a peculiar speculative dimension, a distorted Hegelian objectivity. Subjected to schizoanalysis, objectivity passes – contrary to Hegel, without reconciliation – into matter. Writing, which deconstruction considers a material vestige allowing the capture of a sliver of experience, here turns against that experience, and implies condemning it to oblivion.

Any analysis of the decoding mechanism is, at its core, an analysis of the grammar of the illiterate writing system of the global market – and its agency. Opening before the reader the envelope of conjunctures, Braudel draws attention to the speculative character of causality that it is imbued with – as a space generated by and mutually generating conjectures. This particular thread is also key for Susan Buck-Morss in the context of discussions surrounding visual representations of capital. “Expanding by parthenogenic division, invisible except to its commodity effects, insensate to human passions, impervious

to human will, the thing-body of 'civilized' society grows, theoretically without limits."<sup>19</sup> Tracing the flows of capital is an inquiry into the causal mechanism behind this parthenogenesis, behind the self-generation of conjuncture, whose structural/grammatical rule involves the destruction of codes, immanent alienation, and a breakdown of social relations within the space of the market sign.

From a diachronic perspective, the market defined using conjunctures is a colossal anti-genealogical machine. It is the plane of oblivion – described using quantitative data, endless flows of information that constitute the price language. Genealogy, a form of value, is produced through abstraction from the historical process and time it emerged in. Conceived as an envelope, this time does not flow insofar as stretches in the shape of a web of connections between data streams spanning the globe, forming an additional layer of market indicators. Braudel's membrane is decoded genealogical substance – a strange, self-destructive linguistic procedure governed by rhythmic fluctuations, the recurrent ebb and flow of indicators. It is quantified and sprawling oblivion – a space of undulation, space-undulation of representation, the ebb and flow of numerical values followed and generated by the relations of production.

Sharpe wants her writing to confront this counter-genealogy in the struggle for the possibility of reclaiming the time that is impossible to reclaim – the time of the soul, the irrevocable and inequivalent exchange of which was explored by Rediker in the passage cited above. Marxist deconstruction, focused on the self-contradictory linguistic operation of the market and the power relations that this contradictory bond generates, enables us to understand how complicated it is to write such histories. Sharpe writes against the illiteracy of capital, defining the medium of this practice as follows: "In short, I mean wake work to be a mode

of inhabiting *and* rupturing this episteme with our known lived and un/imaginable lives.”<sup>20</sup> How do we, at the same time, both write and rupture the history of the element of oblivion? How do we cope with genealogies that both erase and stigmatize – using skin color, mediated through pure expression, to define forms of value, spectralizing the body and the scope of its experience? How do we express “this pain of and in the archive”<sup>21</sup> – how do we draw the pain from/of the illiterate archive of conjunctures constituting the historical chronicle of the market envelope?

### Frank Bowling – trans-Atlantic cartographies and the visual purity of the hue

I will now turn to analyze the trans-Atlantic provenance of Frank Bowling, to lay bare the complicated, multidimensional economy of the abstract map paintings he created between 1968 and 1972. In these compositions, huge swaths of color differentiate internally, generating planes of multiple flows. I interpret them as a space of pure visual abstraction and, at the same time, a space of history carrying the author’s personal story. As he writes in the essay “Critique – Discussions on Black Art,” “What informs black artist’s works is the black experience, which is global.”<sup>22</sup> Here, global experience has a dual meaning – it denotes both the panoply of shared fates and its origin in the history of global capitalism. Bowling processes that unity in his map paintings, in which templates of continents and family photos are inscribed into the colorist compositions.

The transformations in the structure of capital and attendant shifts in the structure of the Commonwealth enabled Bowling to find himself on the banks of the Thames in 1953, where he would briefly study literature and then settle on painting. Entangled in the flows of capital, the story of his transatlantic community accompanied him when, in 1968, he began the four-year journey to create his map paintings, sprawling planes of color overlaying

geographical space – represented by the outlines of continents – and all the while disturbing it. Bowling would use the paintings to interrogate his belonging to the Windrush generation, trying to find the meaning of a “journey that, by 1970, would take more than half a million citizens of the British colonies in the West Indies to Britain, as a great historical shift was reshaping its far-flung empire.”<sup>23</sup> Bowling’s artistic practice in that period would include spatial meditations on the extent of that empire, and the painter and his community’s position within in and toward it. On this issue, Okwui Enwezor writes:

In some ways, the “map paintings” recall J.M.W. Turner, whom Bowling deeply admired. If Turner was the painter of the English sublime, it could be stated that Bowling is the true master of the diasporic sublime. Nawracające refreny dystansu i jego rozpuszczania, iluzjonizmu i liminalności, kosmopolityzmu i diaspory dają nam wgląd w światotwórczą ambicję map-obrazów.<sup>24</sup>

Later in the text, I focus on what Enwezor calls Bowling’s “worldmaking ambition,” combining the quest for pure spatial expression and a form to capture the experience of the Atlantic diaspora. Then, I suggest a methodological experiment using the color flows dynamically resulting from this search. I situate them, for research purposes, into a different theoretical context, asking whether the concept can try to follow a varying hue, trace its rhythms and intensities as it works to interrogate the surface of the market membrane. I would like to raise the problem of the possibility of treating the visual economy of flows in the map paintings as a medium enabling the examination and critique of the visual economy of conjunctures – their abstraction, which, when compared to painterly abstraction, reveals its aesthetic mechanisms and their limits.

Bowling filters the history of the diaspora through abstraction, processing it in the visual medium of color. His map paintings struggle against what Yve-Alain Bois describes as “sociopolitical

blackmail." She defines this as "(the obligation to offer a sociopolitical interpretation of a work of art, recently supplemented by the obligation, for an artist, to make explicit the sociopolitical implications of his work). In our 1977 debate about Greenberg, politics had been the stumbling block, the dividing line: if you were a formalist, you were a reactionary."<sup>25</sup> Bowling, meanwhile, would strike up a long-standing friendship with Greenberg, based, among other things, on a deep, shared theoretical understanding of form and abstraction, a key reference point for his painterly practice.

At the time, Bowling, who did not know the critic in his map paintings period, consistently strove to develop his own abstract idiom. Around that time, he also moved for the first time from London to New York City, places he would shuttle between throughout his life, finding himself in the very center of the debate around the Black Arts Movement. He would take a complex, uncompromising position in that discussion, placing contradictory requirements on his painterly practice. He would stand both for engaged art and for more distance toward the need for immediate politicization and representation that the movement often foisted upon Black artists. Bowling, however, could hardly be accused of combining formalism and reactionary imperialist views. His was a conscious pursuit of abstraction as a person living the "afterlife of property." The map paintings are therefore also a response to a question he asked himself about how a Black painter could make the legacy of the avant-garde his own, a legacy inextricably bound to modernism, which, to his community, is indelibly tied to the colonial past.

In one of the essays on the identity of Black artists, which he regularly wrote for *Arts Magazine*, Bowling defines painting as "through, by, with color to deliver articulate paint on one's canvas."<sup>26</sup> He makes no compromises with representations. The critical dimensions of the map paintings would not be related to reproducing political realities or their diagnoses.

Only a consistent regimen of formal devices, allowing Bowling to develop an articulate medium of paint, for which the map paintings created a space of unrestrained expression, would enable him to undertake the dual effort of “inhabiting *and* rupturing this episteme,”<sup>27</sup> which I have already mentioned as fundamental to Sharpe’s chronicling practice. Sharpe’s argument – that you can use language to write histories of objectively unfolding processes of erasure and abstraction without repeating them on the methodological plane – is not posed by Bowling insofar as it undergoes an artistic shift, becoming a problem of the painterly medium and its ability to fuse abstract formalism with the coding of traces of historical memory in the space of the canvas.

The articulate medium of paint shapes the struggle of the language of historical experience with the non-narrative element of abstraction inhabited and ruptured by Bowling’s practice. This element is an extension of the episteme of trans-Atlantic flows, the process of historical abstraction, where the circulation of capital transpires within the process of decoding. It is this relationship that the critics of abstract formalism would focus on, interpreting the style in terms of the perceptual unification of form, which reproduces the market imperialism that imposes the global episteme of homogeneity and the erasure of the historical experiences of generations brutally incorporated into the capitalist circulation of value. Bowling takes a distinctly polemical position toward these interpretations and, while remaining fully aware of the risk related to the language of painterly abstraction, fights for the possibility of exploring color hue as an autonomous factor, as pure form whose distribution across the space of the canvas unshackles it from external requirements. The style of abstraction inherent to the map paintings would, however, remain speculative. Subjected to the process of purification, the painterly form was supposed to emerge from the other side as a means of expression

for historical experience. And it is this sensitivity to the possibilities of the medium and its relationship between formalism and the expression of memory, rather than the narrowly defined topic of triangular trade, that has prompted me to examine the map paintings in the context of the theoretical considerations explored in the first part of this essay.

In his excellent study on Bowling, Enwezor writes about the relationship between outline and color:

Pracując z poznawczymi i reprezentacyjnymi wariacjami  
 – pomiędzy przepływem i ruchem farby oraz zarysem formy  
 – Bowling dokonał przekształcenia formalnych modeli  
 modernistycznego malarstwa abstrakcyjnego<sup>28</sup>  
 w psychogeograficzne znaczące terenu.

I would like to reflect further on this precise description of the process, sensitive to the navigation of meanings, that we deal with in the case of the map paintings. Continuing my inquiry into the figure of flow, I attempt to interrogate the relationship that emerges between the movement of paint, the outline of the form, and the generation within the map paintings of a geography of memory, struggling against the internal contradictions inherent in the experience of globalization.

Like Sharpe, Bowling, who spent much of his life between London and New York, began to write within the map paintings a history in flow, a sprawling history that brought together the ocean and the weather, the history of the circulation of capital and the counter-histories of the people carried by its currents. Juxtaposing Bowling, mapping the oceans of the postcolonial period, with Joseph Conrad, the chronicler of imperial decline, Enwezor writes: "Różnica polega jednak na tym, że Bowling chce uwolnić terytorium od spekulatywnego realizmu dominacji i w ten sposób zdeterytorializować skolonizowaną przestrzeń."<sup>29</sup> I would like to treat the flows of pigment in the map paintings as a medium of trans-Atlantic history, whose

articulateness stems from prior deconstruction of the map's space of representation. Pictures such as *Penumbra*, *Dog Daze*, or *Marcia H Travels* are large-scale swaths of color, where vibrating membranes of uniform shades crash against one another. Bowling deliberately taps into the power of this format, which allows a more unrestrained distribution of color and its intensive exploration in correlation with the surface. The map paintings create sprawling, internally diverse, contiguous splotches with watery (*Texas Louise*), oily (*Night Journey*, *Polish Rebecca*), or grainy (*Dog Daze*, *Middle Passage*) textures.

*Penumbra* is a study of the spread of bottle green discovering its own depth in navy blue. The hues roll into each other in magnificent waves. Their difference is both deep and impossible to capture spatially, as a border cannot be easily traced between the two. The range of a color patch dictates the rhythm of its flows. The situation is starkly different in *Marcia H Travels*, where the scale precludes any internal tranquility for the composition. Based on stark contrasts – not in color so much as in the space it occupies – Bowling brings together two shades of red. The visible dissonance between them is rooted not in their particular hues, but rather the weight they seem to be throwing against each other, and the vertical organization of the canvas, which only reinforces the impression that the two huge blocks of color are mutually impermeable. Here, the spatial distribution is inextricably tied to the intensity of color saturation. Texture and spatiality are two factors that seem to be caught up in the map



Frank Bowling, *Night Journey* (1969-70), Acrylic on canvas, 212,7 x 183,2 cm. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, USA.  
© The Metropolitan Museum of Art/Art Resource/Scala, Florence

paintings in a state of incessant formal exchange. This is also readily apparent in *Dog Daze*, another painting in the series, which also operates with huge swaths of uniform color. Here, the contrast is expressed explicitly in the palette – angry pink and canary yellow. Their blinding loudness further reinforces the juxtaposition. The painting also hides an interesting relationship between the raging intensity of the colors and the watery, slightly granular and transparent texture. Bowling explores the extent of the color, and the influence that the density of its spatial distribution has on specific shades. Unlike in *Marcia H Travels*, the range in *Dog Daze* does not translate to greater vividness, but instead yields clarity, an evenness of texture that produces the impression of a color of equal strength. The watery texture does not soften the contrast between the tones, but brings it out, rendering it into something akin to blazing heat.

Writing about the behavior of color planes in the map paintings, I draw on the language of Braudel's definition of the conjuncture. As I wrote above, a deconstructive reading of capitalism takes much of its conceptual framework from art and literary criticism. I will seek to demonstrate that Bowling's work presents the opportunity for an even bolder shift in terms of the method used to interpret the aesthetic, composed character of the market construct. The approach toward Bowling's works that this project adopts is not so much interpretive as methodological. I would like to utilize their abstract formalism as an alternative medium for retracing the flows of capital, and to examine and exploit the critical potential of using abstract distributions of color and the formal circulation of shades as an aesthetic model for price circulation forms.

These issues make an appearance in Clement Greenberg's notes on the relationship between shape, plane, and canvas:

Where the painter still tries to indicate real objects their shapes flatten and spread in the dense, two-dimensional

atmosphere. A vibrating tension is set up as the objects struggle to maintain their volume against the tendency of the real picture plane to re-assert its material flatness and crush them to silhouettes.<sup>30</sup>

The map paintings occupy a particular position in the battle for abstraction in painting, whose critical axis is the concept of purity, organizing aesthetic discussions and artistic practices dealing with the problem of abstraction. Discussion on aesthetic abstraction interestingly overlaps with discussion on the finance market emerging, in its mature form, alongside increasingly complex theories of aesthetic abstraction. In both, market hegemony (in the neo-classical interpretation) and the hegemony of abstract expressionism are ruled by the same economy of the image, where purity is the supreme value, conceived as both an aesthetic and epistemological category.

Bowling's map paintings are full of extreme weather. Take, for example, *Polish Rebecca*, a composition split by neon-glowing lightning, the atmospheric discharge of color; the burst of a fuchsia continent-cloud against expanses of canary heat that constitutes the atmosphere of *Dog Daze*; the canary-fuchsia haze of *Middle Passage*, or the sprawling clouds of continents sailing across the surface of *Bartica Born*, somewhere between the hues of dawn and lavender. For Bowling, the elements are matrices for spreading color – his formalism appropriates them and freely processes them through the color medium of the composition.

The effort to map reality along weather lines, along the flows of great air masses, is common ground for Bowling and the aforementioned Turner. Here's how ships, energy, and weather



Frank Bowling, *Marcia H Travels* (1970), Acrylic on canvas, 282,5 x 541 cm. Dallas Museum of Art. Image courtesy Dallas Museum of Art  
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come together in Michel Serres' tale about Turner and Carnot:

Believe me, a ship is always a perfect summary of notions of space and time – of space, of time, of work, as they are at the time – of history. Thus London and the Thames [in Turner's work – eds. note], as well as the steam engine. The conflagration divides the cold canvas in two: half is in the atmosphere and half is reflected in the water. An axis of roaring fire is projected onto a green mass. On the balance sheet: furnace, water, hot and cold, matter in fusion, line abandoned in favor of random matter, without definition, statistically grouped in parcels. On the one hand clouds of ice, on the other clouds of incandescence. Carnot, almost Maxwell, *almost Boltzmann*. Turner understood and revealed the new world, the new matter. *The perception of the stochastic*<sup>31</sup> *replaces the art of drawing the form.*

Serres writes about how modernity learned to work with the elements, conceived in categories of energy, and as such immanently capable of labor that humankind can harness. The ship is the laboratory where that transformation takes place. Fire, water, air, and the energy dormant within them – Serres captures the birth of a new physics and the role it will play in the process of accumulating capital. Baucom also indicates that, around that time, a new type of energy was likewise generated by the finance market, which would also find itself increasingly explained as a complex of stochastic processes, later represented through schematic diagrams. In a similar manner, by precisely measuring the distance and the relationship between the universality of categories and the historical essence, coincidence, and the rules it spawns, Sharpe writes about the atmosphere of racism surrounding the process of producing capitalist labor:

In the United States, slavery is imagined as a singular event even as it changed over time and even as its duration

expands into supposed emancipation and beyond. But slavery was not singular; it was, rather, a singularity – a weather event or phenomenon likely to occur around a particular time, or date, or set of circumstances. Emancipation did not make free Black life free; it continues to hold us in that singularity. The brutality was not singular; it was the singularity of antiblackness.<sup>32</sup>

In all these instances, a certain social abstraction is produced: Turner generates vibrant energies on the canvas, Sharpe – the singularities of the social element of capitalist slavery and its endless repercussions, whereas Bowling – a global envelope in which the conjunctures are not represented, but rather pour across the surface in streams of color, producing their own asymmetries, spatial relations based on parameters other than quantified relations of property and power. Bowling does not paint conjunctures, but paints with conjunctures, with principles of abstract particle diffusion appropriate for his own medium.

Serres continues:

Matter is no longer left in the prison of diagram. Fire dissolves it, makes it vibrate, tremble, oscillate, makes it explode into *clouds*. From Garrard to Turner, or from the fibrous network to the hazardous cloud. No one can draw the edge of a cloud, the borderline of the aleatory where particles waver and melt, at least to our eyes. There a new time is being fired in the oven.<sup>33</sup>

Here, he once again recalls the image of the acrylic coating of the composition, produced by the artist's effort to maintain a subtle balance between coincidence and construction.

Bowling uses weather and color as instruments of problematizing historical memory. This is the second moment in the pulsating sequence of color, where abstract conjunctures morph into the roots of exile, endless wandering, multivalent

movement between continents and meanings. Dionne Baird made this atmosphere the backdrop of the desperate, though not hopeless encounter between the protagonist of *The Blue Clerk* and her gods-ancestors in the deeply poignant *Verso 55*, quoted here after Sharpe:

When I finally arrived at the door of no return, there was an official there, a guide who was either a man in his ordinary life or an idiot or a dissembler. But even if he was a man in his ordinary life or an idiot or a dissembler, he was authoritative. Exhausted violet, the clerk interjects. Yes he was says the author, violet snares. For some strange reason he wanted to control the story. Violet files. Violet chemistry. Violet unction. It was December, we had brought a bottle of rum, some ancient ritual we remembered from nowhere and no one. We stepped one behind the other as usual. The castle was huge, opulent, a going concern in its time. We went like pilgrims. You were pilgrims. We were pilgrims. This is the holiest we ever were. Our gods were in the holding cells. We awakened our gods and we left them there, because we never needed gods again. We did not have wicked gods so they understood. They lay in their corners, on their disintegrated floors, they lay on their wall of skin dust. They stood when we entered, happy to see us. Our guide said, this was the prison cell for the men, this was the prison cell for the women. I wanted to strangle<sup>34</sup> the guide as if he were the original guide. It took all my will.

In these cages, Brand pictures the systems of encoding experiences that the gods personify. She traces the horrifying image of exhausted shadows of practices from the past and the societies they organized. In the same spirit, the narrator in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* writes: "It seemed as if the very soul of the tribe wept for a great evil that was coming – its own death."<sup>35</sup> Color enables the visualization of the process of the disintegration of meaning, the emergence of spectral space, the horrifying archive-cage enveloped by the violet atmosphere;

violet is both the abstract and the specific pain of this archive, both the abstract and the specific bond with ancestors abducted by capitalist degenealogies, and who only now meet the generations that came after. *Verso 55* continues from the passage above:

Yet in the rooms the guide was irrelevant, the gods woke up and we felt pity for them, and affection and love; they felt happy for us, we were still alive. Yes, we are still alive we said. And we had returned to thank them. You are still alive, they said. Yes we are still alive. They looked at us like violet; like violet teas they drank us. We said here we are. They said, you are still alive. We said, yes, yes we are still alive. How lemon, they said, how blue like fortune. We took the bottle of rum from our veins, we washed their faces. We were pilgrims, they were gods. We sewed the rim of their skins with cotton. This is what we had. They said with wonder and admiration, you are still alive, like hydrogen, like oxygen. We all stood there for some infinite time. We did weep, but that is nothing in comparison.<sup>36</sup>

A thread of understanding appears between the narrator and her ancestors, a shared history woven from streams of color flowing through the atmosphere – lemon, blue like fortune. This leads to the emergence of an affective web of experience, where generations living at different moments of the global accumulation cycle co-exist alongside each other. They are linked by lemon and blue threads of survival forever burdened by loss, survival against all odds. The atmosphere of memory that coalesced, accumulated imperceptibly and against adversity, in the stale air of archives/dungeons, and in the map paintings. In Bowling's work, representation dissolves and resurfaces from between the violet registers and records, by way of violet chemistry and through the ritual of violet anointment. History disintegrates in abstraction, only to re-emerge changed out of the other side, to explode in an outburst

of color recalling the painter and his community's heavy burden of experience. Colors, scents, touched surfaces, the taste of tea and rum – all of them aesthetic stimuli, provoking monadic perspectives, specific sensual qualities stimulating social and private contexts of memory. This gives rise to a subtle matter, an atmosphere formed from the traces of the trans-Atlantic community, brutally severed and ruined, but still fighting and rebuilding anew.

- 1 Ian Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic: Finance Capital, Slavery, and the Philosophy of History* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 38.
- 2 Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 73.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 73–74.
- 4 Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic*, 7.
- 5 *Ibid.*
- 6 André Gunder Frank, *World Accumulation 1492–1798* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 120–121. Here, Frank paraphrases a passage from: Richard B. Sheridan, *The Development of the Plantations to 1750: An Era of West Indian Prosperity, 1710–1771* (Barbados: Caribbean University Press, 1970), 41, 101.
- 7 Marcus Rediker, *The Slave Ship: A Human History* (New York City, NY: Penguin Books, 2008), 106.
- 8 Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic*, 56.
- 9 *Ibid.*, 112.
- 10 *Ibid.*, 71.
- 11 Beverly Best, *Marx and the Dynamic of the Capital Formation: An Aesthetics of Political Economy* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), 79.
- 12 Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Speculations on Reading Marx: After Reading Derrida,” in: *Post-Structuralism and the Question of History*, eds. Derek Attridge, Geoff Bennington, and Robert Young (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 32.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 33. The passage cited comes from: Karl Marx, *Grundrisse. Introduction to the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (New York City, NY: Random House, 1993), 133–134.
- 14 Rediker, *The Slave Ship*, 4.
- 15 Fernand Braudel, *Civilization and Capitalism 15th–18th Century, vol. 3, The Perspective of the World* (New York City, NY: Harper and Row Publishers, 1986), 44.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 83.

- 17 Spivak, "Speculations on Reading Marx," 50.
- 18 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 240.
- 19 Susan Buck-Morss, "Envisioning Capital: Political Economy on Display," *Critical Inquiry* vol. 21, no. 2 (1995), 452.
- 20 Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 18.
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 Frank Bowling, "Selected Writings: 1969–1993," in: *Frank Bowling: Mappa Mundi*, ed. Okwui Enwezor (München–London–New York City, NY: Prestel, 2017), 199.
- 23 Okwui Enwezor, "Mappa Mundi: Frank Bowling's Cognitive Abstraction," in: *Frank Bowling: Mappa Mundi*, op. cit., 17.
- 24 Ibid., 37.
- 25 Yve-Alain Bois, *Painting as Model* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), XX.
- 26 Bowling, "Selected Writings: 1969–1993," 212.
- 27 Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 18.
- 28 Enwezor, "Mappa Mundi," 37–38.
- 29 Ibid., 37.
- 30 Clement Greenberg, "Towards a Newer Laocoön," in: idem, *The Collected Essays and Criticism, vol. I. Perceptions and Judgments, 1939–1944*, ed. John O'Brian (Chicago, IL–London: The University of Chicago Press, 1986), 35.
- 31 Michel Serres, *Hermes: Literature, Science, Philosophy*, eds. Josué V. Harari and David F. Bell (Baltimore, MD–London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1982), 58.
- 32 Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 106.
- 33 Serres, *Hermes*, 58.
- 34 Dionne Brand, *The Blue Clerk: Ars Poetica in 59 Versos* (Durham, NC–London: Duke University Press, 2018), 224, as cited in: Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 17.
- 35 Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (London: Penguin, 2006), 187.
- 36 Brand, *The Blue Clerk*, 224, as cited in: Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 17.

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