



PROJECT MUSE®

---

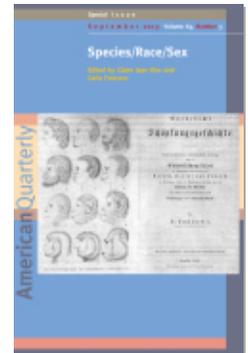
## The Flesh of Amalgamation: Reconsidering the Position (and the Labors) of Blackness

Tryon P. Woods

American Quarterly, Volume 65, Number 2, June 2013, pp. 437-446 (Article)

Published by The Johns Hopkins University Press

DOI: [10.1353/aq.2013.0021](https://doi.org/10.1353/aq.2013.0021)



➔ For additional information about this article

<http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/aq/summary/v065/65.2.woods.html>

# The Flesh of Amalgamation: Reconsidering the Position (and the Labors) of Blackness

Tryon P. Woods

*The Amalgamation Waltz: Race, Performance, and the Ruses of Memory.* By Tavia Nyong'o. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009. 230 pages. \$67.50 (cloth). \$22.50 (paper).

*Amalgamation Schemes: Antiblackness and the Critique of Multiracialism.* By Jared Sexton. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008. 345 pages. \$67.50 (cloth). \$22.50 (paper).

The story that cannot be told must not-tell itself in a language already contaminated, possibly irrevocably and fatally. . . . And only in not-telling can the story be told; only in the space where it's not told—literally in the margins of the text, a sort of negative space, a space not so much of non-meaning as anti-meaning.

—M. NourbeSe Philip

In the postscript to her indomitable poetic treatise on black life and death in the making of the modern world, M. NourbeSe Philip writes of the ongoing mutilation of black humanity through the language of the legal text. She finds, for example, no word for recovering the millions of Africans buried in the “liquid grave” of the Middle Passage: “I find words like resurrect and subaquatic but not ‘exaqua.’ Does this mean that unlike being interred, once you’re underwater there is no retrieval—that you can never be ‘exhumed’ from water?” In the face of this historical cataclysm, Philip uses her poetry to foment a disorder of her own, in search of yet another site of maroonage from what Saidiya Hartman terms slavery’s *afterlife*. To “release the story that cannot be told,” Philip mutilates the text herself, seeking to “literally cut it into pieces, castrating verbs, suffocating adjectives, murdering nouns, throwing articles, prepositions, conjunctions overboard, jettisoning verbs.”<sup>1</sup>

I find it compelling to consider how Philip’s meditations might extend to the contemporary study of race. Is there an imposition of meaning perpetuating a similar kind of violence on the black subject of critical race studies?

Within the American studies community, for instance, there seem to be parallel discussions on race. The primary distinction between these two tracks hinges on what to make of racial blackness, a splitting reminiscent of “the presence of excised Africans” explored by Philip (199). Is blackness but one among a diversity of subjectivities and, historical particulars notwithstanding, essentially no different from these other positions, identities, and experiences in terms of authorizing analyses of suffering and struggle? Or is the rupture that blackness represents so essential to the formation of the social itself that any analysis of violence or injustice that is not centered in, derived from, or accountable to the suffering of African-descended peoples risks missing the crux (as opposed to the totality) of the social formation?

Tavia Nyong’o’s *Amalgamation Waltz* and Jared Sexton’s *Amalgamation Schemes* offer answers to these questions that might discomfit many American studies scholars. Indeed, perhaps their interventions into the matter of racial blackness and its place within the various analytic frameworks of American studies scholars has something to do with their heretofore quiet reception. While both books have been duly reviewed in a handful of journals, thus far they have enjoyed only scant critical engagement from American studies scholars. American studies has become a scholarly community that takes pride in its activist bona fides, that foregrounds its commitment to progressive politics, and that positions social justice as central to its avowed *raison d’être*. With this in mind, I am wondering if this reluctance to engage indexes Philip’s description of “slavery—the story that simultaneously cannot be told, must be told, and will never be told” (206).

In the June 2012 issue of *American Quarterly*, this two-track discourse on race was on full display. Dylan Rodríguez wrote a gentle indictment of the response to the public spectacle of state violence on November 18, 2011, at the University of California, Davis, when campus police pepper sprayed students engaged in nonviolent civil disobedience as part of the Occupy movement. Rodríguez rightfully contrasts the outrage and moral indignation from left-liberal quarters, which was both national and international because of the viral spread of video footage from the incident across social media, against the UC Davis police with what he calls “a broader, commonsense conspiracy of silence” about the larger logic of racist state violence, for which policing is the most visible and fundamental expression.<sup>2</sup> Rodríguez is careful to include brown with black in the category of the racially profiled and presumed guilty, as well as to note that the form of policing differs depending on who is targeted. His basic points about policing and racist state violence ultimately emanate from two bodies of knowledge: first, from studies of black history and struggle, and

second, from work on how settler-colonial societies and imperial states function. Indeed, Rodríguez expresses ideas fundamental to the black studies archive across the better part of the past century, and articulated most cogently in recent years by Joy James, Steve Martinot, Jared Sexton, and Frank Wilderson. In short, at the heart of Rodríguez's analysis is an assessment of antiblackness as constitutive to state power in a manner distinct from other racisms. The violence to which black people are subjected is gratuitous—wholly apart from any actions they may or may not have committed—and registers their position outside the structures of human filiation, hegemonic consent, and the social contract through which civil society is composed.

By contrast, the students at UC Davis had to go and *do* something in order to receive their pepper spray treatment. This is contingent violence: it may have been unjust, but it was occasioned by a transgressive act—nonviolent civil disobedience—rather than simply by ascriptive status, as has been the case with blackness. It is on these terms that Rodríguez levies his criticism against the critics of the UC police: it would be more ethical, he is saying, to be outraged not simply at the exceptional spectacles of violent policing (the pepper spraying of college students) but rather at the everyday mundane acts of policing *as* violence. Rodríguez's analysis, then, implicitly recognizes both the distinct positionality of blackness *and* the necessity to center blackness for an accurate account of any form of state power (in this case, policing).

Alternatively, in the lead book review essay of the same issue of *American Quarterly*, David Roediger illustrates the other discourse track, which recognizes blackness only as part of a chain of equivalent racialized positions. Roediger champions what he calls the “cutting edge” of American studies, ethnic studies, and critical race, gender, and sexuality studies, lauding recent books from Chandan Reddy, Grace Kyungwon Hong and Roderick A. Ferguson, and Jodi Melamed.<sup>3</sup> Certainly Reddy, Hong and Ferguson, and Melamed, as well as the other authors collected in the Hong–Ferguson edited volume, not to mention Roediger himself, help us understand the complexities of racial rule in the era of neoliberal global capital. However, despite the “cutting edge” accolade bestowed by Roediger, from the vantage point of black studies, the texts under review appear to offer simply an updated iteration of long-standing antiracist discourse operating within the confines of the multiculturalist paradigm—by which I refer to the almost-compulsory move during the post–civil rights period away from a black–white binary toward anti-essentialist notions such as “racial formation.” A signal feature of this paradigm is the idea that racial formation obtains in and as the color line between whiteness and nonwhiteness, rather than between blackness and nonblackness. The authors working within this

paradigm overstep racial slavery to situate ontic relations in the emergence of capitalist society, resulting in a comparative methodology that necessarily relies on a rubric of exploitation and alienation as the lingua franca of suffering. Within this paradigm, then, racialization is essentially a form of alienation that all racialized subjects experience (albeit not all in the same manner), and historical specificity is understood empirically in terms of lived experience, identification, or consciousness—but not in terms of positionality within the ontological structure of humanity, wherein whiteness defines the Human, racialized subjects are construed as lesser-Humans, and the status of non-Human is reserved for blackness. Consequently, their analytic framework is authorized not by the fungibility and accumulation of the enslaved black body but by the exploited and alienated worker of the capitalist system. The structure of the capitalist political economy, with the exploited and alienated worker as its synecdochal other, then, is extrapolated to explain social hierarchies of all kinds. This framework flies in the face of much of the black studies archive and, in my estimation, contributes to the general disappearance of the black body in pain, performing with respect to blackness precisely the elision these authors interrogate regarding the racism of antiracist, multiculturalist, and neoliberal discourse. The “cutting edge” of ethnic studies, then, in its commitment to *cut through* what it experiences as a confining black–white binary, has *cut out* the “heart of blackness” against which all racialized subjects implicitly take their bearings as human beings.

A forthright dialogue across these two parallel discourses about racial blackness—one stressing its singularity, the other its equivalency to other forms of marginalization—is long overdue. In this endeavor Nyong’o’s *Amalgamation Waltz* and Sexton’s *Amalgamation Schemes* are poised to make invaluable contributions. Were the American studies community to pay closer attention to Nyong’o’s and Sexton’s insights, the discourse on race would not need to sacrifice blackness in the way I have suggested it does above. It has become de rigueur in the post–civil rights academy, especially in feminist, queer, and race studies, to speak in terms of “intersectionality,” the simultaneity of identities and oppressions along lines of race, sex, gender, class, ability, and nation (and so forth). Yet such work muddies as much as it clarifies when it does not proceed from what Elizabeth Alexander has termed “a ‘bottom line blackness’ with regard to violence” as the point of departure: there can be no adequate understanding of the multiple, shifting, and heterogeneous articulations of any of the various couplings of power and difference, without first positing the terms of antiblackness.<sup>4</sup> Nyong’o and Sexton, on the other hand, explore how feminist, queer, and race studies might be resituated in the study of blackness, and in so doing, how these fields might pursue a viable “intersectionality.”

*Amalgamation* as a term derives from metallurgy where an amalgam is a substance formed through the reaction of mercury with another metal. The term has played a prominent role in US society's self-conception, referring to the coupling or interbreeding of races or ethnicities, and thus subtending the "melting pot" concept so basic to the US imaginary. For Sexton, amalgamation is a *scheme* because he sees the discourse of multiraciality arising from, and in turn obscuring, the historical structures of antiblackness; Nyong'o, meanwhile, attends to the performance of blackness within these structures and their historically situated notions of mixture and hybridity that, consistently across different eras, pose the multiracial figure as fearful specter of, or hopeful salvation from, the dreaded blackness that haunts the social. Both authors emphasize the vacuity of contemporary discourse on race, and especially the marginalization of black radicalism within it. Nyong'o's work, however, has been well received in queer and performance studies, even as they have generally elided how his study of blackness levies a probing critique of these fields; and Sexton's study has come off to some readers less like a masterful surgical technique and more like an old-school bloodletting.

Nyong'o's reading of the case of Peter Sewally, alias Mary Jones, "the Man-Monster," from antebellum New York City, which animates the center of *The Amalgamation Waltz*, ought to become a classic moment in black, queer, and American studies. Sewally was a free black man who at night would dress as a female prostitute. In the summer of 1836, in the aftermath of anti-abolitionist and anti-amalgamationist riots across the city a mere two years prior, Sewally drew the scorn and fascination of white New York after he was arrested and prosecuted for stealing the wallets of the men whom he serviced as Mary Jones, revealing in due course Ms. Jones's male genital anatomy. Nyong'o writes that the press of the day was obsessed with a phenomenon that still fascinates people about queer and transgender bodies: "how did Sewally *do it*?" (98). Of course, as Nyong'o goes on to explain, the monstrosity of Sewally's body also lay in his evident race. Indeed, given the fact that Sewally himself claimed that his "cross-dressing persona" (100) was accepted without ridicule or contention in black New York and that drag balls in urban black centers were popular into the early twentieth century, the case raises two significant implications.

First, it seems likely that Mary Jones's male genital anatomy was not as secret as the sensationalist panic of the press purported. What was indisputably desirable/abominable was her blackness: was she desirable to some white johns as a presumptive black woman with female genitalia *and* to others as a black transgendered woman or as a black cross-dressing man? For Nyong'o, excising the possibility of same-sex and cross-racial desire in the historical

record produced a loss that *Waltz* aims to register (101). Second, the story of the “man-monster” has been told in relation to the history of prostitution in New York City, and it has featured in the historiography of same-sex desire and acts between men. But despite the many fine and detailed histories of early black New York, writes Nyong’o, Sewally’s story has been omitted from African American history.

Nyong’o deploys the case to call attention to how antiracism marshals sexuality in problematic ways: “A rhetoric of violated, feminized blackness served the abolitionist movement at a moment when it was crucial to respond to and resignify the moral panic around practical amalgamation” (101). *Waltz* records the heterosexist constraints imposed on the black subjects of slavery’s trauma. As a number of scholars remind us, the sexual violence of slavery targeted black men as well as women; this is why slavery decomposes *all* gender categorization as it applies to black bodies, not just putatively female bodies.

Registering the importance of the Sewally case to black history, and thus revealing the heterosexist conceits of its archive and of the mainstream antiracist tradition, Nyong’o also uses the story to mark an “affect attached to social asymmetries of dominance and exploitation parasitically, reiterating and theatricalizing those asymmetries” (101). Sewally was accosted and prodded by a raucous mob as he appeared in court to enter a plea of not guilty. For Nyong’o, acknowledging “the dignity that Sewally sought to draw around himself” (102) resists the objectification and fungibility of black bodies. Nyong’o has revisited his own analysis in recent years to further mine this aspect of Sewally’s story, which he refers to as the “fugitive sociality of blackness.”<sup>5</sup> Here Nyong’o helps us see performance as an index of how the derogation of blackness in the modern world is always troubled by the reality of black humanity—or, as Nyong’o writes, “performance as ambivalent actualization of a troubling potential” (15). Nyong’o’s analysis intervenes in cultural and performance studies—and the heft of queer studies production that relies on these two fields—by showing that the instability of domination and of racism itself is due not to the shifting targets or meanings of racist tropes but to the erotically imbricated relations between the freedom moves of black people, on the one hand, and the violent desire of nonblack society for black bodies, on the other. Nyong’o’s points about the fungibility of heterosexuality, marriage, and human reproduction for constructing racial hierarchy and difference are already abundantly taken up by scholars of race and sexuality, but these latter tend to leave behind the foundational context on which *Waltz* insists: namely, the performance of blackness at the heart of amalgamation, its “fugitive sociality,” as Nyong’o puts it, from the social death that is its condition of enunciation.

For this reason, *Waltz* demonstrates why performance studies must ground itself in black studies' assertion that the modern world was and is produced through the construction and apprehension of blackness.

While *Waltz's* critique of the fungibility of black sexuality for racial regimes echoes *Amalgamation Schemes's* exposé of multiracialism's political project, Sexton is less sanguine about the political efficacy of performance. His project is to expose how ostensibly progressive political movements harbor antiblackness. At stake here is nothing less than the hallowed ground of "coalition politics." Coalition is the functional application of the "intersectionality" imperative to movements for social justice. Coalition and intersectionality thus serve as two sides of the same progressive coin, a sanctified and unassailable currency for historical change. Sexton demonstrates that, despite having become compulsory in antiracist and multiculturalist circles, coalition politics have time and again subordinated black needs and demands to others' interests. In other words, more often than not, coalition itself has been antiblack, even while its moral authority is borrowed from the signs of the black freedom struggle or acquired through analogy to black history.

This critique of coalition has a long and robust, if at times contradictory, life within black studies and black movements. For instance, the martyred South African freedom fighter Steve Biko once observed, "The biggest mistake the black world ever made was to assume that whoever opposed apartheid was an ally."<sup>6</sup> And Kwame Ture and Charles Hamilton levy an appraisal of coalition in their classic 1967 study *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America* that would be canonical for organizers and educators alike were it not for the tendency in the multicultural academy to minimize the insights of black radicalism in the post-civil rights era. Though Sexton has directly confronted the problematic of multicultural coalition in his more recent and current scholarship, *Schemes* does not fully treat coalition as the object of analysis; rather, we might behold *Schemes* as a theoretical exercise for deconstructing the problematic of the coalition in multiculturalist times.

If we read *Schemes* in this light, then we begin with Sexton's assertion that any ethical account of the historical context would necessarily reveal the centrality of violence to black existence in the West—and as such, direct relations of force must be accounted for in any supposition of coalition, or the "relations" between black and nonblack:

To return historicity to race is to understand it as a production of bodily (not biological) difference at the nexus of violence and sexuality; where the heuristic difference between the latter terms is often difficult to retain at the level of experience. That is to say, racial differ-

ence issues from direct relations of force—the scales of coercion—and it is only elaborated or institutionalized within relations of power—the scales of consent. What establishes race, what positions one within racial formation, is the relation one suffers and/or enjoys with respect to the state-sponsored social organization of violence and sexuality. (9)

This violence plays out in the “multiracial political problematic,” as Sexton terms his object of study, as a gross rewriting of the historical record of slavery. This erasure of the coercion intrinsic to the production of blackness reproduces the white supremacist lore of the plantation romance that seeks to rewrite the terror of enslavement and its code of sexual subjection as black *consent*. The multiracial movement’s preoccupation with black *sexual* consent turns out to be a pathway for the condemnation of contemporary black *political* consent in which blacks are portrayed in multiracial discourse as stuck in the past, fixated on the injuries of a bygone era. Such discourse posits whites, meanwhile, as having transcended their past and, along with other nonblacks who have taken full advantage of the post–civil rights period of “leveling out,” now rightfully expect their *moral* deliverance from historical (and hence contemporary) culpability with antiblackness (87–90).

Sexton’s rigorous rethinking of racial logic shows how lazy most of us engaged in racial theorizing have been: if “race” occurs in the modern world only as an expression of direct relations of force, and if, moreover, “race” derives in the first instance—historically, ontologically—from racial blackness, then there is no ethical accounting of racial politics that leaves violence by the wayside. *This* is the intersectionality that matters. “There is no interracial sexual relationship,” Sexton riffs on Jacques Lacan’s famous aphorism: since blackness signifies nonhumanity, there is no *relationship*, just objectification; since there is no human relationship, only a juxtapositioning of subjects and objects, sexuality itself, and in particular human *desire*, must be disciplined to the moral register of reproduction; and since actual sexual practices and the irreparably fractured historical libidinal body are conceptually quarantined, racial categorization is reified in the name of racial mixture and transgression (54).

It is curious to find folks whose business is (or ought to be) deconstructing discourse criticizing the deconstructive move itself, such as the masterful one described above. Some readers want to read Sexton as being too negative and casting too broad a net. This reaction manifests as abandoning ship: reviews of *Amalgamation Schemes* have acceded the persuasiveness of Sexton’s arguments about multiracialism’s historical revisionism, but they find the contemporary implications of his study vexing, if not outright offensive. Does he mean to say that *all* interracial sex is violent and mired in negrophobic fantasy? Or is he

advocating bigotry against multiracial individuals or couples? Or is he saying that there is no such thing as a “healthy” interracial union? Sexton makes it clear that he has no quarrel with interracial sexuality per se. Rather than sex acts or the people involved, he is targeting what he calls the *event* of miscegenation. This event, he writes, refers to “what cannot be represented, conceptualized, or apprehended in either the interracial sexual encounter or the multiracial personality, but rather is that which prevents either appearance from attaining a discernible image or a fixed and stable meaning, whether as object of desire or aggression or both” (194). He notes that interracial sex acts or the focus on existing multiracial people are lures, fictions, and refractions of racial whiteness—comforts of racist reason that his reviewers cannot seem to set down. In short, Sexton shows how the ineffable remains quarantined precisely because of an animosity on the part of civil society toward black political claims.

Does the ineffability of the “event of miscegenation” represent another “liquid grave” for the body of blackness within critical studies of race and sex? The two books under review here open this unspeakable conversation through a forthright confrontation with what has made us what we are but cannot be named through the language we have become. In this regard, Nyong’o and Sexton may have unintentionally registered the distance we have yet to go before the critical study of race is ready to grapple with the “flesh” of amalgamation, as Hortense Spillers encapsulated slavery’s institutionalization of bodily rupture—the articulation of sex, violence, and use that structurally precludes black people from forming bodies.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps the historical and literary criticism likewise remains, to return to M. NourbeSe Philip’s formulation, “unable to not-tell the story that must be told” (207).

*Water parts*

*The oba sobs (59)*

#### Notes

1. M. NourbeSe Philip, *Zong!* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan, 2008), 193, 201. Hereafter cited in the text.
2. Dylan Rodríguez, “Beyond ‘Police Brutality’: Racist State Violence and the University of California,” *American Quarterly* 64.2 (2012): 305.
3. David Roediger, “Freedom Breaks,” *American Quarterly* 64.2 (2012): 337–43.
4. Elizabeth Alexander, “Can You Be BLACK and Look at This?,” in *Black Male: Representations of Masculinity in Contemporary Art*, ed. Thelma Golden (New York: Whitney Museum, 1994), 95.

5. Tavia Nyong'o, "'The Man-Monster': Reading Race, Gender, and Sexuality in History, Memory, and Visual Culture," paper presented at the Reading Race Today Symposium, Brown University, Providence, Rhode Island, April 15, 2011.
6. Steve Biko, *I Write What I Like* (London: Bowerdean, 1978), 63.
7. Hortense Spillers, *Black, White, and in Color: Essays on American Literature and Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).