Who is There?:
Revisiting Michael Brown’s Autopsy Report and Reassessing
Conceptual Poetry Two Years after “Interrupt 3”

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PART I

In March 2015, the best known of North America’s conceptual poets gave a keynote reading, titled “The Body of Michael Brown,” at the “Interrupt 3” conference.
With Brown’s high school graduation photo projected on a large screen behind him, Kenneth Goldsmith gave a recitation of the deceased’s autopsy report from the past August.
Goldsmith’s poetry involves appropriation; for example, his long poem *The Day* is a “retyping, without [...] semantic alteration, [of] an entire day of the *New York Times* (Stephens 5-6)."
Yet his recitation changed the report, resituating the description of Brown’s genitals—so that Goldsmith’s final utterance was their characterization as “unremarkable” (“Racial Controversy” Brown U newspaper). Immediately the Guardian, Huffington Post, Art in America, Art News, Hyperallergic, the New Republic, the Rumpus, the Quietus, the Poetry Foundation’s Harriet Blog, Jacket2 and other media reacted; eventually the New York Times weighed in, and there would be a long feature in The New Yorker.
Already a media darling, Goldsmith had given a poetry reading at the White House in May 2011.
A factoid about his Brown reading has gone unreported, but for my mention of it in a 2016 forum published at the *Argotist Online*.\(^2\) The painter Larry Rivers’ “eulogy” at Frank O’Hara’s funeral in 1966 consisted of reading of his autopsy report, just as it was written.\(^3\) Goldsmith began his career as a RISD-trained sculptor. He’s someone who absorbs everything around him; and he’s tuned into our condition of information overload. He might well have known of Rivers’ graveside reading.
The conversation within the wider liberal world in the fall of 2015 was dominated by the blockbuster memoir, *Between the World and Me*, by Ta-Nahesi Coates, which won the National Book Award. He’d received other prizes. He, too, was a media darling.
His article “The Case for Reparations” was *The Atlantic’s* cover story a month after Goldsmith’s White House appearance. When the book was rolled out commentators like Charlie Rose and Brian Lehrer, however, sought to unpack its key term, *the black body*—a novel concept in the mainstream although, two decades before, Dorothy Roberts’ study, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty*, had appeared.
And in 2000 Spike Lee’s *Bamboozled*—a piercing essay on the hegemony of American racist culture, which posed as a comedy-drama—arrived in theatres.
Coates’s book begins as a letter to his adolescent son:
Son,

Last Sunday the host of a popular news show asked me what it meant to lose my body. 
[...]
That was the week you learned that the killers of Michael Brown would go free. The men who had left his body in the street would never be punished. [Y]ou know now, if you did not before, that the police departments of your country have been endowed with the authority to destroy your body. (5)

Lee’s film examined the fabric of America’s racist culture—its language, artifacts, sense of humor. As if picking up where the film left off, Coates observes that “all our phrasing—race relations, racial chasm, racial justice, racial profiling, white privilege, even white supremacy—
serves to obscure that racism is a visceral experience[...]” (12). Lee’s cultural take had focused on minstrelsy.

In a 2013 Key and Peale comedy skit, attendees at a Black middleclass funeral are scandalized
by the screening of a recovered film montage
in which a younger version of their dearly departed

plays now unimaginably demeaning Hollywood roles.
In our history the black body has been under physical threat, derision leading to violence.
The great Billie Holiday song *Strange Fruit* (written by a Jewish communist high school teacher from the Bronx) fails to mention a conspicuous fact of many Jim Crow lynchings: the mutilation of their male victims’ genitalia, often after death, which James Baldwin dwells upon.
Coates’s terminology evokes the European commodification of human beings. Commercial disputes in the transatlantic slave trade were inscribed in American law. M. NourbeSe Philip’s 2011 poem titled *Zong!* responds to the ill-fated voyage of the slave ship Zong whose human
cargo was thrown overboard due to a deficient supply of water. The ship’s captain was sued in 1781 for negligence. Legal judgment went against the ship’s owners; the judgment’s language, codifying slave commercialization, also opened a protracted discussion on human rights.

PART II

Four years before Goldsmith’s White House visit, Coates’s *Atlantic* article and Philip’s poem, all in 2011, seven years after Lee’s film, another film, which Wikipedia calls a “biographical musical
drama,” was released. About Bob Dylan (though he doesn’t appear in it), *I’m Not There* anticipates the Brown reading and its blowback in cyberspace, then in RL—real life—taking the
form of death threats against Goldsmith, cancelled appearances, etc.
One character in *I’m Not There* features a young Marcus Carl Franklin at about the age of Trayvon Martin.
A year before the Brown reading, Claudia Rankine’s award-winning book of poetry and art
titled *Citizen: An American Lyric* had been published, on its cover the image of a hoodie created by the conceptual artist David Hammons. I doubt Goldsmith was unaware of either Rankine or Hammons.
In *I’m Not There* Franklin’s character “[calls] himself Woody Guthrie; freight hopping through
the Midwestern United States, he carries a guitar case bearing the slogan ‘this machine kills
fascists’, plays [the] blues [...] and sings about outdated topics such as trade unionism [—an]
African American woman advises him to sing about the issues of his own time” (Wikipedia 7
Mar17).
When I think of the objectivizing of the black body by privileged white citizens, I wonder if Franklin’s character escapes the legacy of Jim Crow minstrelsy, despite the issues of social and racial justice Dylan himself has always championed, and for all the wit in this film.
In Uncle Tom’s Cabin, the young servant Harry is commanded to entertain his Kentucky owner and a visiting slave trader:

"Hulloa, Jim Crow!" said Mr. Shelby, whistling, and snapping a bunch of raisins towards him, "pick that up, now!"

The child scampered, with all his little strength, after the prize, while his master laughed.
"Come here, Jim Crow," said he. The child came up, and the master patted the curly head, and chucked him under the chin.

"Now, Jim, show this gentleman how you can dance and sing." The boy commenced one of those wild, grotesque songs common among the negroes, in a rich, clear voice, accompanying his singing with many comic evolutions of the hands, feet, and whole body [...].
Harriet Beecher Stowe may have known that the term *Jim Crow* originated with Thomas Dartmouth “Daddy” Rice who, a white man in the 1830s, performed blackface minstrel routines as the fictional “Jim Crow,” a “caricature of a clumsy [...] black slave,” after Rice heard a slave singing “a tune called ‘Jump Jim Crow’ in Louisville [...]” (Wikipedia 7 March 2017).

Back to the present.

The year Rankine’s *Citizen* is published, documenting racial micro aggressions in academe, the
exploitation of the female *black body* is made the subject of Kara Walker’s conceptual art installation titled *A Subtlety, or the Marvelous Sugar Baby*, which debuted in the abandoned
Domino Sugar factory in Brooklyn. Walker’s site-specific sculpture, Roberta Smith wrote in the

*New York Times,*
runs the gamut in its effects. Dominated by an enormous sugarcoated woman-sphinx with undeniably black features and wearing only an Aunt Jemima kerchief and earrings, it is beautiful, brazen and disturbing, and above all a densely layered statement that both indicts and pays tribute. [Walker combines] reality and metaphor with a great gift for caricature, [demonstrating] unequivocally that America’s “peculiar institution” was degrading for all concerned. (11 May 2014)
In *The New Yorker* Hilton Als discussed that “peculiar institution,” praising what he called the
sugar sphinx, who
couches in a position that’s regal and yet totemic of subjugation—she is “beat down” but standing. [S]ugar is brown in its “raw” state. [T]here was a tradition] where royal chefs made sugar sculptures called subtleties. Walker was taken not only with […] stories [such as this] but with the history of the slave trade [in which sugar cane was a staple in the triangulated shipping routes—from Europe to Africa to America to Europe]: Who cut the sugar cane? Who ground it down to syrup? Who bleached it? Who sacked it? (8 May 2014)

**PART III**

It’s possible that Walker is not aware of the second best known conceptual poet, Vanessa Place,
though their names are often linked in avant-garde art or poetry worlds. Their respective works purportedly push back against racism from two very different locations; yet they both have
been drawn to Margaret Mitchell’s novel, *Gone with the Wind*, for similar reasons. I’ll guess, even so, that when Walker created the sugar sphinx she didn’t know of Place’s activities.
The Rolling Stones’ song “Brown Sugar” was a hit in 1971, when Place was three and Walker two, and it still is. The Black Lives Matter movement began in 2013 after George Zimmerman
murdered Martin. In 2009, Place’s *Gone with the Wind* Twitter project was first conceived—six years before the Goldsmith scandal in which, for him, conceptualism and white privilege would intersect, six years before Place began to be attacked for this same Twitter activity.
Two years before Martin’s death, three years before Walker’s “sugar sphinx,” Place starts tweeting passages from Mitchell’s novel; along with its text, Place includes what has been
called the “Aunt Jemima iconography” and alternatively, per her reference to the woman who
played Mammy in the book’s film version, a publicity photo of Hattie McDaniel, which substitutes for Place’s Twitter profile picture.
AWP 2017 Panel (left to right: Chimamanda Ngozie Adichie, E. Ethelbert Miller, and Ta-Nehisi Coates)

Some of the initial outrage aimed at Goldsmith morphed into a grievance on the part of Black authors who were not getting their due of publishing opportunity, critical attention, and/or of
academic largesse. Within the recent AWP conference in and on the streets of DC, demonstrations advocated greater opportunity for writers of color. I attended a panel of young, non-white writers of various gender identities, moderated by an equally young...
white woman who—echoing infighting prior to the Women’s March—ended the session by volunteering that this was a time for white writers to stop and listen.

I want to situate Place’s work within the matrix of these cultural formations and reformations, but first I need to say a bit more about Goldsmith. Criticism of him, until the Brown debacle, had to do his brand of conceptualism. Goldsmith fell victim to his ego. Contemplating this fall,
Duchamp’s first readymade, titled “Bicycle Wheel,” 1913

to compare his conceptual practices with those of Place, might first take us back to Marcel
Duchamp’s Modernist readymades. Conceptual practice is a dangerous seduction for the
mediocre artist or poet; the prospect of it may seem deliciously obvious. Some recent, and
Duchamp’s readymade, titled “Prelude to a Broken Arm,” 1915

great, conceptual art works prompt me to think of how game-changing Duchamp’s readymades were. Poetic works, some by Goldsmith, hold their own. I think he blundered, however, a result of his self-creation, one that has been integral to his artistic/literary activities. I also think his fall from grace has had to do with his immersion in digital information and media.

Another moment in 2011 was the publication of Robert Archambeau’s often cited article, “Kenneth Goldsmith, or the Art of Being Talked About.” “I like thinking
about the idea of Goldsmith's books,” Archambeau says. “I don't like reading them, but as he himself has said in ‘Being Boring’, reading them isn't really the point. They're a bit more like Duchamp's ‘Fountain’, which exists less to be looked at than to spark thought and to be discussed.”4
Goldsmith’s claimed lineage starts with Duchamp, running through the self-promoting Andy Warhol to himself, omitting mention of the great appropriation artist Sherrie Levine, whose

Sherrie Levine, Fountain (after Marcel Duchamp: A.P.), 1991
bronze urinal was first shown in 1991. “I don't share what I take to be [Goldsmith’s] Oedipal
desire for prominence,” Archambeau continues, “but I don't think that desire makes him less
interesting or valuable. As for the embracing of the career as a medium for art: I like it. But I'm
a bit skittish about the particular form his embrace of the medium seems to take. He’s not
boring as a presence. He's got the art of being talked about down[.]

Archambeau points to Goldsmith’s interest in Warhol as “self-fashioner, working the art scene
around him as an artistic medium and creating ‘Andy Warhol, Art Star’ as his main work. [I]f
anyone is ubiquitous in the little world of poetry lately,” Archambeau notes, “it's [Goldsmith].
He's not writing sonnets, [...] he's being a poetry presence. [...].”

On the other hand, Archambeau concludes, “in Goldsmith [there’s no] indication that he's at all
interested in using the career-as-artistic-medium with any kind of critical edge regarding things
like status, fame, or cultural capital. Even when he says that some people might consider
career-obsession ‘a silly game’, he doesn't suggest that this might be the case because the
pursuit of reputation is for chumps, a mere expression of the vanity of human wishes, or a kind
of complicity with the logic of the marketplace.”

In that Argotist forum I mentioned, participants were asked if they agreed with Archambeau’s
statement that Goldsmith “often seems to believe in a linear, progressive version of artistic and
literary history [...].” My answer was that
it’s fruitless to find fault with Goldsmith’s striving for fame, popularity, “success,” which has been linear pretty much. [...] [The Brown reading] knocked him off his self-professed, artistic, self-evolutionizing arc, [...] his derailment [due to] a lack of [...] “emotional intelligence.” [What really is] significant is the betrayal of his own praxis, as evinced in his tweaking of the [...] autopsy report [...]. Not fully conscious during the modern Civil Rights struggle, Goldsmith was being far too cute for his own good. [I] accept his excuse that he meant well. Yet he [...] revealed a remarkable shallowness of character.5

I would just add that Goldsmith came into his own with the age of digital communication, and I wonder if Michael Brown ever existed for him as anything more than an image or data point. In any case, our highly media-ized environment does not excuse his Brown reading. Amy King compared him with the now ignored Andrew Dice Clay, seeing Goldsmith as, in describing Clay, “calculated in his selections, [yet] his material required very little effort or creativity; one might even say his jokes were ‘uncreative’, as they seemed to be lifted or ‘appropriated’ straight from the backlash culture around him.”6
So, must we view Vanessa Place like Goldsmith or Clay? In her article “Why a White Poet Should Not Be Attempting to Reclaim the ‘N-Word’” Aminah Shakhur writes that

“[a]s a white artist, Place cannot reclaim [the racist] words or [...] images as she says [in a Facebook post and elsewhere] she is trying to do. Her attempt to hold up a mirror to her fellow white contemporaries has failed. In identifying herself as a ‘collaborator’ in racism she should be able to see how instead the project simply comes off as a reification of the racism in [Gone with the Wind].”

After my Argotist Q&A, Place replied to the same prompts. Her response to the question “To what extent do you think conceptualism sees itself as a serious poetic art form?” is as follows.

Someone once asked me why I was so mean to poetry, as poetry had been fairly good to me. I said that poetry wasn’t someone at a party sporting a quivering lip and air of self-harm for whom I had to adopt a position of feeling concern, at least publicly. Conceptualism is a poetic practice, and hardly capable of seeing itself.

At the 2010 AWP conference, Place’s quip that “conceptualism wants to put poetry out of its misery” drew a roar of laughter from a very large crowd. When the Argotist inquired about Goldsmith’s, and her own, “expressed [...] disinterest in poetry as having any sort of political dimension” she replied: “Being, for the moment, Vanessa Place, I believe I have said, and certainly have written, that all aesthetics has an ethics, and all ethics, an aesthetics. This would imply a certain amount of politics, given the way people tend towards aggregation.”

Another approach to Place’s Twitter project might be to juxtapose what Paul Stephens maintains in his study The Poetics of Information Overload: “Avant-garde poetry may have a
small role to play in our understanding of global information flows,” yet, he argues, “the avant-garde has always aspired to be predictive [...] From Dada to photomontage to hypertext poetry, avant-garde methodology has been deeply concerned with remediation and transcoding—the movement from one technological medium or format to another” (xv). So, as I think again of the film I’m Not There, I wonder if Place may not have been posing as Hattie McDaniel—a dedicated actor who could land only racist, demeaning roles, whose dignity in the public realm has been restored. A larger point—one embracing Goldsmith and Place—might have to do with the emptying out of significance when images and people are interchangeable.
Ah doan know nutin’ ‘bout bringin’ babies.

Notes:
Taken from Prissy’s famous scene in the movie version of Gone with the Wind, Place phonetically transcribes the “unreliable” slave’s words, which are then set in Miltonic couplets. Through the simple act of transcription, Place inverts our relationship to Margaret Mitchell’s best-selling and beloved American epic by prioritizing the formal aspects of language over Mitchell’s famous narrative. With this deconstructive move, Place illuminates the many subtexts embedded in the text concerning plays of power, gender, race, and authorship. By ventriloquizing the slave’s voice as well as Mitchell’s, Place also sets into motion a nexus of questions regarding authorship, leading one to wonder: who is pulling whose strings? Source: Poetry (July/August 2009)

Place’s Twitter project emerged in 2009 out of an invitation from Poetry Magazine. She came to it from a background different from that of Goldsmith. In a published artist’s statement she says, “There are [now] two book versions of Gone With the Wind by Vanessa Place. One [...] gleans
the racist language and imagery of the original. The other simply reproduces the entire book[,?]
such that there are two complete volumes of Gone With the Wind in WorldCat, [...], one by [...]
Mitchell, one by [her].

[Furthermore, the Mitchell] Estate [...] is notoriously litigious [...].” An attorney, Place’s day job
is doing appellate work in behalf of indigent sex offenders. Unlike Goldsmith’s Brown
performance, her targeting of Mitchell’s book is subtle and complex; it’s not thoughtless, and
perhaps not without empathy. “By isolating the appearance of blackness in the first [Gone With
the Wind] book,” she has insisted, she “invited [the estate] to sue to recover the ‘darkies’ she
claimed ownership of[.]”

In other words, Place’s self-defense is a socio-legal explication. “[B]y reproducing the entire
book,” she adds,

I invited suit for wholesale theft of intellectual property. The question was whether the State would uphold Mitchell's right to profit from her appropriation against my appropriation of her.

I have always been careful to state that these works are not parodies i.e., not protected by fair use or other copyright exceptions. I am stealing the material from Mitchell because I believe she stole it first. Neither of us has any right to the matter (as in the lives) therein: the only difference between Mitchell and me is that I already know I am guilty. [...] I am very familiar with representing the guilty, and with being the white body that serves as both the defense against the State and as its emblem.⁹
I have come to feel that to equate Place with Goldsmith is to be glib at best. She recognizes Twitter as “a visual and textual platform” in which, she maintains, she “literalized the blackface of the original by substituting the image of Mammy for the more familiar iconography of Rhett
and Scarlett as my profile picture extending this association through use of a similar image from sheet music for ‘Jemima's Wedding Day’, a coon song from 1899.” Place also points out that “[w]hite women were one of the most popular performers of coon songs, particularly praised for their ability to deliver a convincing performance of genuine blackness: in the song, Jemima is praised as ‘just the babe for me’. Both babe and Mammy are examples of what I call radical mimesis, direct representation of the thing itself.”

Moreover, Place says, “These works are cruel. It is a cruelty to display these images.” Yet, she continues, “[i]t is also a cruelty to insist that only people of color be responsible for the articulation or the embodiment of race, to bear the burden of my history as well as the history of that oppression. Blackface is white face. I cannot speak of the pain of having the image put upon me, but I can speak to the culpability of its imposition. [....] I embody the perpetrator, historically and currently. That is my condition, and its effects are my responsibility. I am not interested in maintaining a position of rhetorical silence that would permit me to preserve either the precepts of individual property or the conceit of white Integrity. I have been fed the same poison as the rest of my kind, and I vomit it up for forensic analysis and the dog’s dinner. It may also get on your shoes” (“Artist’s Statement”).

PART IV, a Brief Nonconclusion:
When the AWP removed Place from its planning committee for its 2016 conference in LA—after dis-invitations such as from NYC’s MoMA—I was casting a vote at the national AAUP convention in DC over whether or not the University of Illinois should be censured for rescinding its offer to hire Steven Salaita with tenure. Salaita had made a slew of incendiary, anti-Israel comments on Twitter. Many people got up to speak. All were in favor of censure, including a number of Jews and scholars of Judaic Studies. The vote was unanimous but for one ballot cast by a member of that university.
NOTES

4. The essay has appeared more than once, including on the Harriet blog, but perhaps the earliest iteration is on Archambeau’s *Samizdat* blog (9 April 2011), reproduced here: http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/goldsmith/Archambeau-Robert_Goldsmith-Being-Talked-About.pdf.
5. Tom Fink’s phrase, in a 2015 conversation with me about the Brown reading.
8. Vanessa Place’s responses to Jeffrey Side’s questions in that same Argotist forum; http://www.argotistonline.co.uk/Vanessa%20Place.htm.