***Opening***

***.******break .dance*** is an ongoing research pocket opened by **Marisa Parham,** with support from the **irlH** team.

A pocket is a place; it is also a position. A pocket is a place for experimentation in form and content. It is also a kind of space, a thing behind a thing, the thing you hold on to, just in case. It is the ephemeral non-space between thought and its elaboration or instrumentation, a tiny universe of intellectual possibility.

*.break .dance*is a time-based web experience opened in response to xxx and xxx, thinking about “Slavery in the Machine.” In thinking through and against the machineries of commercial interface efficacy, this pocket intentionally shows its material and discursive seams. Rooted in a sense of anarchival play, it is designed for multiple engagements, changes over time, and assumes no one will take the same path through. **This pocket was last updated on 3/8/2019.**

In honor of the many ways Black diasporic peoples use memory, performance, and speculative prayer to recode time and space, *.break .dance* begins with a cosmogram of Kongo origin, *tendwa kia nza-n’ Kongo*, the four movements of the sun. Cosmograms are two-dimensional figures that tie the cardinal directions to the sky’s map— sun, moon, stars. The **tendwa** reminds us of how our simplest navigational moments are always multi-dimensional: one foot in front of the other can also mean face toward the wind, a turn east toward the sun, or following the North Star to freedom.

#

**Instructions**

As a series of interlocking machines moving toward a state of flux, *.break .dance* surfaces its own work, your work as you read. Many of its features are time based, and there are places that cannot be accessed until some time has passed on a page. Because it is hypertextual, branching, and interlocking, it is reasonable to expect that every user will not read the same thing. Indeed, to highlight this there are also pages where it does not matter which direction you read, and others where you can move the argument, or use Twitter to add your own lines. If you are worried that you have waited too long for a page to finish, check the title. **The titles turn to fuchsia when the page is complete.**

Sometimes *.break .dance* asks the reader to move forward, from one staging to the next, for instance from theory to illustration.

There are also arrows to indicate how to move backwards. Please note that if you return to page, its timer is reset to 0.

Sometimes *.break .dance* tempts the reader to look around, to notice how there might be more than one good example, that the best word is not always clear, even as intention hinges on the word. The play on word and example intimates the multiverse of inquiry. I mark these places with a bit of glitched text, so that the reader can see if something they read on the screen has since changed. Because things change. I allow the screen to glitch a bit on those places.

Sometimes *.break .dance*invites the reader to look underneath the text, to see what lies underneath thought, the other place a thought comes from and to glimpse what it might mean to launch to elsewhere. I use tendwa symbols to show where these places currently are. Based in Congolese cosmology to denote porosity between ancestral timespaces and the known world— dimensionality— a tendwa invites you to listen for what is thrumming on the lower frequencies.

*.break .dance* also asks readers to look behind the project, to notice citation and origin. Citation is always in process, because I have been learning how I do not always know where things are coming from. I have switched my citational practice into a meditative practice, so those pages are always growing out by growing back. **You can read a bit about the background for the project here.**

**⇢**

**⇠**

**All that you touch**

**You Change.**

**All that you Change**

**Changes you.**

**The only lasting truth is Change.**

**⇠**

#

To identify a pleasure is to ask an unanswerable but necessary series of questions—What do I love? What brings me joy? What and how do I feel or want to feel? Subsumed in those questions is a recognition of self, as if to engage each of those questions is to first admit that there must be a 'me' there, something undeniable and complicated, something other than the world might know. The possibility that these questions might have definite answers is not what makes them potent; indeed the agency is in the asking, in the pursuit.

— Kevin Quashie

Speculative thought is important, and unless you are doing speculative thought you are not doing any thought at all.

— C.L.R. James

#

**:: Show your work / an organization of voices / a choreo-essay**

**:: Show your work / an organization of voices / a choreo-essay**

“break .dance” began with a map or, more specifically, a chance encounter with a data visualization. And while my experience of that map soon became the kernel of a larger project about space, temporality, and ecological disaster— [*Black Haunts in the Anthropocene*](https://blackhaunts.mp285.com/) — that feeling of random and digital encounter stayed with me. What I initially experienced as a complex intermingling of comprehension, apprehension, and agency in internet navigation resonated with what in *Haunting and Displacement* I previously characterized as the haunted dimensionality of Black diasporic life. For even as the larger orientation of the *Black Haunts* project is about water and wind and earth, about varieties of backwater blues and parable tales, the experience that transited me to those considerations was about blackness, space, and time, about glitches—errors that reveal structures, and breaks—uncomfortable emergences of pasts and their affects and their rearticulations.

*Water, place, glitch, break*: This is not a matter of multiplying metaphors. Each term conceptualizes the futures that arise from such seas, from the Atlantic and its slave histories, the ongoing and multiple imbrications of digital technological development with human wage enslavement, and also the digital dimensionality of Black diasporic experiences after the Middle Passage, what I describe in “Sample, Signal, Strobe" as experiences of rupture that bring an algebraic quality to life after the break, as

*Al-Jabr*, the breaking of the bones— movements, disjunctures, and migrations become sites of renewed emergence; moments become touchstones for larger cycles of losing and remaking meaning, of transformation without restoration, the impossibly fluid flow of the popping and locking body, the DJ using two turntables to disaggregate songs into discrete soundbytes so that they might be used *as if*they were digital, isolating out samples and breaks so that old texts could be made newly resonant with always present futures. Black lives hearken to the digital because black diasporic existence is a digitizing experience. Transfer, migration, metonymy: the break and the remix persist as both witness and feature of the multiple and continual experiences of forced migration endemic to Afro-diasporic life in the Americas— the Middle Passage, the auction block, the Great Migration— “the digital.”

From reading for the cotton gin and its aftermath, to listening for the strike of John Henry’s hammer, or situating Ralph Ellison’s technical obsession with sound technologies, the analyses we make in regards to and by virtue *of*those technologies are beholden to intersectional histories of race, labor, and gender negotiation.

—Column—

The work of the following series of provocations and meditations is to think about how theorizing Black diasporic digital experiences offer new entry points into conceptualizing language, space, and blackness. As Daniel Shore has noted, via N. Katherine Hayles and others, the etymology of the prefix “cyber” itself bespeaks seafaring and its attendant autonomies, the responsibilities that come with navigation, deriving “from the Greek *kubernetes*(pilot, steersman). It was first used to denote self-governing feedback systems and later came to refer broadly to the technological extension and modification of human capacities.” Further, as Jeffrey Moro’s thinking about Marlene Nourbese-Philip’s *Zong*elucidates,

Digital media have long taken up oceanic and navigational metaphors. We *surf*the internet and manage *floods*of information. Web browsers trade on the exploratory, whether in name (Internet *Explorer*, Netscape *Navigator*, Apple *Safari*) or branding… Even as the oceanic blends with more terrestrial formations like “a series of tubes” or “the information superhighway,” the digital carries a breadth, depth (as in the “Deep” or “Dark” web), and an aqueous turbidity. Like the sea, the digital is vast and unknowable, though traversable if one takes along the right tools. Movement across, under, or through both requires mediating technologies that simultaneously mark out space and propose epistemologies.

—Column—

In *Zong,* Nourbese-Philip mines the two pages of text that constitute the 1783 legal case brought by the owners of the slaver Zong in a bid to be renumerated for the money lost when their cargo of newly enslaved men, women, and children was cast overboard in a bet that more money could be recovered through insurance than if the sick and dying enslaved were brought to market. In drawing our attention to the linguistic resonances embedded in popular descriptions of internet use, and staging them as precipitates of social, economic, and juridical processes that have historically resolved into a series of decision points that are described as hyper-rational— the cold facticity of the law that we must somehow accept as only describing the sheer mundanity of Black death—Moro highlights the deep materiality literally undergirding digital experience itself. The absolute materiality of infrastructure, for instance the undersea cables that carry the vast majority of the world’s internet data, operates in conceptual tension with a user’s sense of the digital as synonymous with the ephemeral or immaterial, that it is whispering and fleeting, more cloud than rain, more oceanic than ocean.

What therefore is the nature of this space? What kinds of epistemological orientation are made possible at the intersection between the obdurate materiality of infrastructure and the aqueous turbidity of racialized experience? In this queered dialectical motion, Cuban tresillo rhythms break metronomic reason, and glitched sentences still complete thought, made dimensional in the moment of emergence, the break, born digital.

One might think here of Katherine McKittrick, who offers a vital distillation of why it is critical to  hold simultaneously the histories of material confinement and the oceanic nature of Black diasporic experiences:

The imperative perspective of black struggle is undermined by the social processes and material three dimensionalities that contribute to the workings of the geographies of slavery: the walls of the ship, the process of economic expansion, human objectification, laboring and ungeographic bodies, human-cargo. The “where” of black geographies and black subjectivity, then, is often aligned with spatial processes that apparently fall back on seemingly predetermined stabilities, such as boundaries, color-lines, “proper” places, fixed and settled infrastructures structures and streets, oceanic containers. If space and place appear to be safely secure and unwavering, then what space and place make possible, outside and beyond tangible stabilities, and from the perspective of struggle, can potentially fade away.

#

**::** **Spaces of impossibility**

**:: Spaces of impossibility**

*Break, dance, glitch, break*: working in resonance with Sylvia Wynter, Keguro Macharia offers a précis for the why and what of speculative scholarship as an entry-point into reconfiguring inquiry around the known and experiential presences of selves otherwise dropped from dominant narrations:

“the ‘speculative’ becomes part of the asymptotic narration, the gap in representation—the gap in the archive, the gap in the lie, the gap that is the lie—through which and into which black life finds an “origin story” within life-unmaking blackness. Speculation, or the speculative, might be a method that reads into and past the data-affirming archive to see what black life forms might emerge, what acts of making and unmaking, what ways the human might emerge and undo the regime of Man.”

In aligning the variable and unknowable with the infinite— the asymptotic narration— Macharia adds conceptual contour to what Fred Moten has rendered as “the break.” Both theorists forefront the historical stakes of what it means to work with, through, against and despite carrying an identity that is socially and historically indexed to the Middle Passage. And both writers rightfully attend to the space of loss before loss — the loss of loss— as a generative albeit painful site. Impossible pasts become futures of possibility. Sometimes windows open.

#

**:** **Spaces of possibility**

**:: Spaces of possibility**

*Break, dance, glitch, break*: When CLR James claims that “unless you are doing speculative thought you are not doing any thought at all,” he is asking scholars to remember that inquiry pushes, that it can do more than only respond and that what constitutes inquiry itself must be questioned, if we are to take seriously the extent to which thinking about Black lives always risks revealing the *a priori* coercions embedded in academic discourse.

Speculation, the work of socially and historically informed imagination, becomes a way of accounting for lives and experiences that resist assimilation back into circuits of knowledge and being — practices and institutions— founded alongside slavery itself. Speculation is also, as Keguro Macharia frames it, a mode of being present where one is impossible.

#

**::** **Stars in my pocket**

**:: Stars in my pocket**

In riffing off of Antonio Benítez-Rojo in “Breaking, dancing, making in the machine: Notes on *.break .dance*,” I describe polyrhythmic sound and movement as a kind of harnessed glitching made visible as a function of time, the layering of asynchronic parts to elicit a new wholeness. Asymmetry, Meanwhile, names the glitch as a function of flow, when the parts of things don’t quite fit together, and the seams show. An easy figure for using kinds of sound that are exactly right because they’re just a bit off easy patterning is the rhythmic strategy exemplified in the Cuban tresillo.

In “Characteristics of Negro Expression,” Zora Neale Hurston describes asymmetric movement as the embodiment of interruption in the service of larger, meta, continuity. Acts of breaking, of breaking it down, offer glimpses into enlarged apprehensions of connection and continuity. Breaking it down, common to dance and music, can thus be said to demonstrate one of the many strategies Black diasporic people leverage against being both literally and figuratively broken by slavery and imperialism’s machineries.

Taken together, we come to what Kwame Dawes describes as “stop time,” which is the rhizomatic cultural precipitate of “African-based syncopations in music.” Stop time, as Dawes explains, refers to “tend to seduce us and enliven us with the illusion and reality of how rhythm can be manipulated.” The act of manipulation, again, for instance, the three in the two, opens whole worlds of possibility.

In *.break .dance*, I use a figure of a tendwa map to denote the kinds of passages across time and space made available by cultural engagements that let us tap into this power and possibility: the *tresillo*, the pop and lock, the ringshout. The tendwa is not a map to a lost home; this is not a story about nostalgic return. But “stop time” is mandate, invocation, and description.

Dawes continues:

“Stop Time, like the seeming off-kilter of reggae’s rhythm, for instance, or the irresistible ‘pockets’ in dancehall rhythms and the clave patterns of the rumba, is often the basis of the swoop and sway of the dances that it creates. I have been fascinated by the way in which stop time is a beautiful and persistent piece of luggage Africans have carried with us even without knowing it is there, and in the poem the church becomes the place where it finds sacred power—a metaphysical moment of helplessness that relies on faith—the gap, the absence, the separation—before the bridge of faith that spans the gap and brings us safely home.”

In mining gaps, intersubjective spaces between intuition and groove, it becomes more clear how the things we carry with us can also be honed into powerful acts of decryption, into strategies for joy and resistance, the dance against the break.

An error occurred.

[Try watching this video on www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YwlwvKpzdXc), or enable JavaScript if it is disabled in your browser.

#

**::** **a flash of awareness / a pocket universe / glimpsing freedom**

From a technical / media materialist perspective, a familiar encounter with visual stop time is the kind made possible by a camera’s flash. The flash of light captures motion in the interval, extracting a single moment from a continuous motion across time, isolating an object in motion in ways an eye never could, stopping time as it were.

In his *Infinite Essence* series, visual artist [Mikael Owunna](https://www.mikaelowunna.com/infinite-essence#8) uses his background in engineering to produce photographs that use ultraviolet light to reveal the energy forces that emanate from all living things, the chi energy that in Igbo cosmology marks our existence on a spiritual plane, and that in biological terms is expressed the trace of the electricity that flows through us all, making haptic electronic experience possible, for instance the swipe of the screen, the tap of the touch pad. Drawing his series title from Chinua Achebe’s descriptions of Odinani, a traditional Igbo spiritual tradition, Owunna explains how:

“With this series, I’ve set about on a quest to recast the black body as the cosmos and eternal. I hand paint the models’ bodies with fluorescent paints, and using my engineering background I have augmented a standard flash with an ultraviolet bandpass filter, to only pass ultraviolet light. Using this method, in total darkness, I click down on the shutter – ‘snap’ – and for a fraction of a second, their bodies illuminate as the universe. We view the beauty of the soul and our deeper cosmic connections communicated through them.”

*Infinite Essence* also reflects Owunna’s larger concern with offering some remedy toward the ubiquity of images of dead and dying Black people in the Americas. In “Sample | Signal | Strobe,” a companion article to*.break .dance*, I am thinking about how to conceptualize the Black digitality in relation to digital social media. I use the figure of the body under a strobe light to think about the kinds of reasonable paranoia that one experiences as a Black person navigating in the wake of the other Black people’s deaths:

“The light was causing me to jerk, each flash responded to like a too loud or startling noise. My physical response was an effect of the shifting light but it was also of course paranoia, a really particular kind of dread at being pulled over. I could tell myself this because I knew that the flash was just an effect of light coming through the trees as I drove down the highway. But the flash of sun through my windshield, reflected on my arms; the uneven lighting speeding up and slowing down the appearance of my body, reduced me to a stop motion parody: I experienced my own body as a kind of time based media, as the flashes focused and froze me, focused and froze me, simultaneously inscribing me, capturing me, transforming me into a play of light, animating me. Sometime you don’t just get it; sometimes you get got. This is when your body is getting it, with or without you.

In each duration I experienced the light’s inscription as an eruption of dread, as a consummation, the deeply rooted fear of flashing blue lights, interpellation. Algebraic—*Al-Jabr*, the breaking of the bones— my movement across space invites renewed interdicton by the state, the risk of transformation without restoration, the impossible stillness of the surveilled body.”

In thinking about the flash, the suddeness that in critical theory is so often aligned with shock and trauma, Owunna’s images offer us a sense of meaning and potential that stands in sharp contradistinction to the pain of our social worlds It is not that we are more than flesh, but as the trail of electricity left by a finger gliding across a touch screen shows us, flesh itself is more than we think.  In *Beloved*, this sense of accessing a universe carried within is at the center of Baby Suggs’ ringshout service in the Clearing. In *Infinite Essence*, the snap, the flash, offers a glimpse of the freedom we hold.

Mikael Owunna, *Infinite Essence*

#

**::** **Stop motion, meaning made in gaps**

The flash stops time, revealing the continuous flow of a moving figure as in fact the compendium of millions of smaller movements. The opposite of this phenomenon occurs in analog animation, wherein a series of discrete images are made to appear as if they are part of a single motion.

[Try watching this video on www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6GJwJ7X9La4), or enab

le JavaScript if it is disabled in your browser.

In early analog animation, what a viewer perceives as the movement of a figure is actually the presentation of a series of separate frames.

Representational continuity, in other words, is actually an illusion. A human eye cannot keep up with transitions between discrete images, and the rapidity of signals that eyes cannot process creates the illusion of smooth movement, as the brain fills the gaps by inserting continuity, a kind of speculation based on reasonable projections regarding an object’s movement across space. It is the work of technology to keep the duration of the gaps below the minimum threshold of perceptibility.

At the intersection of psychic expectation and corporeal experience, meaning is made in the gap, as the mind handles the processing that transforms the discrete instances into unified movement. It is an imaginative act that at the moment of apprehension is experienced as informational; it is believed to have been seen. What the eye cannot see, in other words, becomes an occasion for the onlooker’s participation as the critical cog in a mechanical process.

But because the viewer’s experience comes as a precipitate of expectation, any temporal disruption of this procedural illusion produces an especially unsettling uncanniness. In this example from director Dikayl Rimmasch’s video for Beyoncé’s “Sorry,” manipulating the temporal gaps between movements produces visual discomfort and intrigue. The temporal shift, the asymmetrical time base, also contributes to a sense of corporeal fragmentation. But rather than conveying loss, dismemberment, the effect is instead additive, producing a sense that one is glimpsing hidden power and possibility, a moment of affective access into Keguro Macharia’s sense of the “asymptotic narration, the gap in representation—the gap in the archive, the gap in the lie, the gap that is the lie.”

#

**::** **Becky is a haint**

**:: Becky is a haint**

It is important to note that, in “Sorry,” this sense of untapped power is elicited in the service of naming the protagonist’s sense of having been wronged by a cheating spouse, and that this is as much embedded in the song’s sound and lyric as it is in the video’s visual presentation. Her decision to reveal what she knows transforms the power held by her spouse; she can no longer be played as a fool. On the level of lyric, this power is expressed in the the expression of this power plays out in the contrapuntal play of the gentle and melodic singing out of “Sorry,” set against protagonist’s flatly uttered “I ain’t sorry.” This interplay demonstrates how asymmetry can be used to name power and to reorient the center of discourse.

Indeed the assertive assuredness of the “I ain’t sorry,” is further strengthened by the metrically asymmetrical “Nigga naw,” which is delivered in staccato, always a step off the song’s beat. In this way the song is able to subvert the historical asymmetry of male power in heterosexual relationships, as the nigga in “nigga naw” does the work of calling out the antagonist, an act of “I see you” met by the sonic stutter carried on the first syllable of “nigga,” which also evokes a ghost utterance, “no,” which strengthens the negation in the “naw.”

In sonically exposing the asymmetry of power in a relationship, the song opens up a space in which other asymmetries might also be exposed. Indeed, in the song’s final movement, a sonic break that includes the image above, the staccato beat of the song’s constitutive negation becomes its sonic center. The protagonist’s dancing immediately mirrors this change, itself becoming a stop motion. Confirmation of the song’s intent on calling out its antagonist and in so doing reorienting power by taking its name comes in the song’s closing utterance, which delivers a sequence of insights rooted in negation and delivered in a Black woman’s code: her observation that “he only want me/ when I’m not there/ he better call Becky with the good hair.”

To frame this as an encoding is to highlight the linguistic gap between those closing utterances. Who is Becky? There is no Becky. “Becky” ciphers an intersectional insight into multiple systems of capital: the colorism embedded in a name that easily codes away from Black; the power held by a spouse who is able to make or break women’s careers; and the invocation of “good hair,” that apex signifier of beauty in Black communities around the world after colonialism. At the same time, “Becky,” the name quick and staccato, also bespeaks a kind of disposability that, on the one hand, feels empowering to name but, at the same time, also bespeaks a zero sum game underlying notions of women's value.

And in case you miss it, if you do not indeed know to hear it, she repeats it. Even if you cannot fully unlock the code, you can nevertheless begin to discern that there is something else there, a space to which we all carry differential access. It is shocking, for the song as it ends grooves and, for all its asymmetry, Beyonce’s stop motion movement is not unfamiliar; break motion allows you dig into, grind to, a song's rhythm. Indeed, one could argue that even as the stop motion effect is jarring, the motion itself feels organic when experienced through one’s own dancing body. The song’s melody, though staccato and broken off from the rest of the song, lulls you in to the movement. So when those final lines arrived, I remember my entire body stopping and snapping to attention. For even as bodies *do* move like that, no one speaks such secret knowledge aloud, and this speaking from the gap between the those closing sentences ultimately roots the protagonist’s power. And in case you miss it, if you do not indeed ot unfamiliar; break motion allows you dig into, grind to, a song's rhythm.

break

dance

#

In thinking about the persistence of the break, the remedial work of the glitch, and the force and hope of the conjure, I also hear Dalton Anthony Jones hitchhiking across Upper America in the backseat of "a Van Gogh blue Oldsmobile Cutlass Supreme,” thinking about what it means to navigate the world as “Precarity in the face of a predator as exotic and insufferable as Man forces one to hear with the eyes and see with the ears; to touch with the mouth and taste through the very pores of the skin.” I think of Beyoncé in her black hat in the "Formation" video, looking like someone who owns someone. Jones also points us to the epistemological possibilities of form, even as being itself is a kind of form: "Like jazz, a black sound emerging from the contradictions and barbarities of a slave democracy, our-selves, our identities, our desires and aspirations, our wounds and our scars, walk across the plane of language with an improvised disregard for the rules of conduct. As the universal “disappearing subject” of discourse, I am the inability to locate textual authority. I am the measure and value of goods on the market: a black hole on the white face of modernity, my body is the demystification of the mystification of value."

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**An Open Letter to My Sister, Miss Angela Davis**

[**James Baldwin**](https://www.nybooks.com/contributors/james-baldwin/)

[JANUARY 7, 1971 ISSUE](https://www.nybooks.com/issues/1971/01/07/)

*November 19, 1970*

*Dear Sister:*

One might have hoped that, by this hour, the very sight of chains on black flesh, or the very sight of chains, would be so intolerable a sight for the American people, and so unbearable a memory, that they would themselves spontaneously rise up and strike off the manacles. But, no, they appear to glory in their chains; now, more than ever, they appear to measure their safety in chains and corpses. And so, *Newsweek*, civilized defender of the indefensible, attempts to drown you in a sea of crocodile tears (“it remained to be seen what sort of personal liberation she had achieved”) and puts you on its cover, chained. [iframe window, continue]

**:: Born digital, born crazy**

**:: Born digital, born crazy**

Black intellectual traditions are not just about content; they also carry method, constant shifting between ways and reasons, between histories and memories, itself becomes both poetry and practice, one that takes as its ground zero the postulation that very idea of the human is itself a compromised category, aligned as it has been for centuries with what Sylvia Wynter characterizes as the the Regime of Man. As Jeffrey Ferguson notes, engaging academic work in the Americas almost always requires “remembering the uncomfortable and often repeated fact that our most cherished American principles have as one of their most important sources the minds of slavemasters and slave traders." Ferguson’s simple yet devastating observation resonates with Fred Moten’s sense of Blackness as that which is both subject to the resurgence of this past but that which also transforms sand to stars. In asking us to think about what it means to live in worlds where the symbolic force of the worst of our histories might emerge at any moment as a present reality gives us a use sense of what it means to be simultaneously resilient and vulnerable.

One might think here of Dalton Anthony Jones’s articulation of scale as both a problem of criticism, how to elaborate the innumerable machineries and impacts of enslavement, and also of course as a problem of Black beingness itself, of the navigation and survival of multiple “meta-dispoitifs of power”:

“The first challenge one confronts when trying to develop a theory and practice of black study is the problem of scale… Elaborating the slave’s capture and subordination, establishing the relationship between the violence entailed by this process and the most essential and seemingly inessential formations of the modern… is itself enough to test the most stable psychology and blackness, we must remember, is born just a little bit crazy.”

One might think here of Marlene Nourbese-Philip’s account of making poetry out of the legal, historical, psychic, and spiritual archives ebbing and flowing in the wake of the Zong incident, in which a slaver chose to drown his human cargo in hopes of securing their monetary value through an insurance claim. “At times,” Philip writes, “I too approach irrationality and confusion, if not madness (*madness is outside of the box of order*), of a system that could enable, encourage even, a man to drown 150 people as a way to maximize profits— the material and the nonmaterial.”

In *Slavery at Sea*, Sowande’ M. Mustakeem distills the stakes of transforming human life into commodity status, describing those transformations as a “human manufacturing process,” which “more concretely centers how this intercontinental enterprise contributed to the construction of a black labor force and the calculated terrain of brutal experiences bondpeople confronted prior to their landed displacement into the Americas.”

This transition from human to machine is historically encapsulated in the figure of the slave breaker, he who is charged with transforming humans into slaves. In a 1974 series of talks, “Lectures on Liberation,” Angela Davis set forth an interpretation of Frederick Douglass’ rendition of his encounter with a slave breaker in Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass. In her reading, Davis elicits from Douglass’ text an antiphony thrumming inside the text’s multiple slavery to freedom narratives. She frames it thusly breaks it down:

Black people have exposed, by their very existence, the inadequacies not only of the practice of freedom, but of its very theoretical formulation. Because, if the theory of freedom remains isolated from the practice of freedom or rather is contradicted in reality, then this means that something must be wrong with the concept…

Indeed, as Eric Williams, Ian Baucom, Sowande’ M. Mustakeem, and others have demonstrated, the conditions that shape Black diasporic life share myriad systemic origins with numerous and foundational economic, technological, and ideological institutions of the Americas. That enslavement was such an extensive financial, technological, and ideological enterprise still today presents immense challenges for anyone interested in thinking about what freedom should look like in the Americas.

 This means that even as we celebrate the infinite varieties of Diasporic ingenuity and remixture after the Middle Passage, glorying in the Brazilian vatapá yellow that is also Oshun and that is also the “Hold Up” yellow of Beyoncé’s *Lemonade*, the feeling of disruption and potential catastrophe never fully dissipates. Smiling love holding a baseball bat: this is the complicated freedom of adaptation without acquiescence, of riding high upon circumstances over which you have no structural control. That yellow can also burn, the “hot thing” that in *Beloved*Toni Morrison casts as the center of the inchoate and potentially totalizing experience of the slave hold and its aftermaths, that is Beyoncé atop a police car, sinking into the New Orleans’ floodwaters in “Formation.”

— column set 2 —

In *Slavery at Sea*, Sowande’ M. Mustakeem distills the stakes of transforming human life into commodity status, describing those transformations as a “human manufacturing process,” which “more concretely centers how this intercontinental enterprise contributed to the construction of a black labor force and the calculated terrain of brutal experiences bondpeople confronted prior to their landed displacement into the Americas.”

This transition from human to machine is historically encapsulated in the figure of the slave breaker, he who is charged with transforming humans into slaves. In a 1974 series of talks, “Lectures on Liberation,” Angela Davis set forth an interpretation of Frederick Douglass’ rendition of his encounter with a slave breaker in Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass. In her reading, Davis elicits from Douglass’ text an antiphony thrumming inside the text’s multiple slavery to freedom narratives. She frames it thusly breaks it down:

Black people have exposed, by their very existence, the inadequacies not only of the practice of freedom, but of its very theoretical formulation. Because, if the theory of freedom remains isolated from the practice of freedom or rather is contradicted in reality, then this means that something must be wrong with the concept…

By pivoting us to what the slave understands about their situation, which requires their own foray into a kind of speculative realism, Davis is able to highlight how the very terms from which one might distill hope are themselves undifferentiable from the terms of one’s constant destruction:

 For the master feels himself free and he feels himself free because he is able to control the lives of others. He is free at the expense of the freedom of another. The slave experiences the freedom of the master in its true light. He understands that the master’s freedom is abstract freedom to suppress other human beings. The slave understands that this is a pseudo concept of freedom and at this point is more enlightened than his master for he realizes that the master is a slave of his own misconceptions, his own misdeeds, his own brutality. his own effort to oppress.

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**[****These paragraphs are written to be read in any order, so as snips]**

At the end of Melina Matsouka’s video for “Formation,” Beyoncé lays atop a New Orleans’ police car, sinking into what we can only assume are the floodwaters of Hurricane Katrina. As the song’s lyrics come to a close, non-diegetic sounds of people witnessing Hurricane Katrina are overlaid with sounds of rain and thunder as Beyoncé goes under. While on the one hand it is easy to read those closing lyrics as empowering, “always stay gracious/ best revenge is your paper,” it is difficult to reconcile the immense gap between the capitalist triumphalism of the lyric and the imagery’s symbolic presentation of the profound civic, economic, and infrastructural failures that Hurricane Katrina exposed and amplified.

This constant interplay between power and vulnerability is of course at the center of *Lemonade* itself. One could even argue that this ambivalence undergirds the some of the most sonically brash moments on *Lemonade* in general, as Beyoncé’s “Formation” delivery, both in the elevation of her accent onto the surface of the song and also the grit generated by her vocal fry, sonically resonates with “6 Inch” and the vocoder-driven “Don’t Hurt Yourself,” two songs that can be read as (rightfully) survivalist responses to profound vulnerability. Indeed, “6 inch” shares its final vocal crescendo with the fullest emergence of Isaac Hayes’ epic version of “Walk on By” out of the song’s sonic tapestry, lyrically breaking finally into a quiet, “come back.” Indeed, as Candace Marie Benbow and others have noted, *Lemonade* is at core an album about striking individual and community balances between strength, vulnerability, loss, and intimacy.

When the bolero figure first appears in “Formation,” the men are still like statues as she jerks her head up and down in what can only be described as hyper-responsiveness of a marionette, the effect heightened because the figure's eyes are never exposed, magic or trance. The stillness of her body matches that of her retinue, but the head flies up and down, paced a sliver ahead of the song's beat, marking yet somehow also missing the song's time. Throughout the song this ever so slightly off beat movement continues with these scenes, and it is particularly notable because so much of the video's choreography is danced expressively on the song's notes, which is to say that the timing is clearly and intentionally impeccable. Much as the scenes of Beyoncé dancing on the street are made to ghost like old VHS recordings, the jerking head's movement ghosts the beat. Indeed, much as the video version of the song reboots itself every time it samples Messy Mya or Big Freedia’s voice, Matsoukas introduces multiple instances of glitched representation, interrupting the smooth continuity of pop performance with an intimation of technological failure shifts, out which emerge increasingly resonant possibilities.

Visually, the closing scenes of the sinking police car in “Formation” are interspersed with one of the more historically mysterious guises in which Beyoncé appears over the course of the “Formation” video during the *Lemonade* visual album. In a long black dress, hair in two braids, eyes occluded by a black bolero and standing on the front porch of a plantation manor, layers of silver necklace cover the figure's neck and bodice. Rather than sparkle, they smolder, their highlights muted by the polarizing filter, which foregrounds depth of hue over highlight, producing a sense of antique wealth. She is accompanied by a small retinue of Black men, dressed in black formalwear. As with other scenes in "Formation," this filtering is as effective at producing genre as costuming, with this figure highlighting the troubling uncanniness of the video's visual iconography. The camera circles the porch in a counterclockwise motion, a spatialization that is experienced as resonant with a temporal orientation.

The second time the bolero figure appears it is in a photograph, preceded by a yellow solar flare effect that pulses over the photograph with blood red splotches. The red splotches bespeak both flare, the unexpected cut of light across a camera’s lens, and also a photograph’s aging, the decay of its constituent technologies. Matsoukas carries the effect across several scenes, namely scenes featuring “real life” in New Orleans. This on the one hand contributes to a sense of documentation, but the aura of technologies that cannot sustain representation also ages the contemporary, overlaying the scenes with a sense of unspoken loss or sadness.

“**So they forgot her. Like an unpleasant dream during a troubling sleep. Occasionally, however, the rustle of a skirt hushes when they wake, and the knuckles brushing a cheek in sleep seem to belong to the sleeper. Sometimes the photograph of a close friend or relative--looked at too long--shifts, and something more familiar than the dear face itself moves there. They can touch it if they like, but don't, because they know things will never be the same if they do.”**

In one of the video's final movements, Matsoukas gives us a young boy dancing. Like the bolero figure, he too is clad in black, but this black is also mirrored in the black riot gear of the heavily armed police line he faces. The dance is defiant, a flash of red tee shirt pokes from under his black hoodie, at once evoking Trayvon Martin and Eleggua, the orisha who stands at the crossroads between the material and spiritual worlds, between the present and everything waiting before and after, between life and death.

The flash of red from under the boy’s black hoodie is also mirrored in director’s visual styling of the porch scene, in the red fez of her right-hand man and in the red lipstick that is so especially striking on this face with no eyes. At one point the figure crosses her arms, flashing threes on each hand, a numerical code for Eleggua. What is earlier in the video experienced as an uncanny glitch movement is thus ultimately revealed as invocation, as the underside of the video’s iconography, a decoding.

**Zora Neale Hurston’s descriptions of asymmetry—of mining and projecting across spaces between self and other— strengthens how we make conceptual movements between the different kinds of knowing that in fact shape both our inquiries and the experiences of the world that drive that work. Algorithmic, every rhythm contours an epistemology of Relation, a minimally contrapuntal structure of the self and another, a quantum clockwork of gears exerting no mutual force. Meaningfulness is continually re-encoded as anticipation is experienced itself as a kind of knowledge, surfing between dreadful and delicious, break dancing is a non-binary computational state.**

**Black glitch aesthetics names moments when code runs its own potential rupture. When the delicious turns dreadful without warning, even as the potential of the dreadful was always also embedded in the structure itself. When Jay-Z channels Ike with a smile. When Beyoncé, in “Formation” channels power from the porch of a plantation house. The songs will always move this body, but there is a flare, a splotch. Something shifts, and in the space of the glitch we are made to see why we can’t have our cake and eat it too.**

Once the video decodes iteself, for a brief moment the bolero figure’s movement resonates with the VHS dancers. It is not a synchronization; it is a vernacular inheritance.

She exhorts us to stay gracious best revenge is your paper yet the car, in the next scene, sinks nonetheless. In the video’s closing voiceover we hear people witnessing Hurricane Katrina.

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**::** **an assembly / a dance / an orchestration of voices / a spaceship**

In thinking about the symbolisms of dominion in “Formation,” I am reminded of some earlier writing on Toni Morrison’s *Beloved*. It came out of a moment in class when I was trying to get students to think about Sethe and Baby Suggs as locked in an ideological conflict that Baby Suggs ultimately loses, and how we characterize the tragedy of Baby Suggs being broken by Sethe’s attempt to save her children from the slave master’s dominion by enacting that same dominion. To explain how Baby Suggs and Sethe could be locked in a conflict but not “in conflict,” I gave the example of Baby Suggs and Sethe as gears in a clock, working together but ultimately moving in opposite directions.

For Baby Suggs, black life *is* matter. Flesh. Without a singular focus on the fact of living, we are left only to utter #blacklifematters when a life has been lost, when the flesh is gone and mourning begins. Even the most personal mourning is almost always a media event, as flesh is transmuted into a million artifacts, memory, photograph, anecdote, a flash memory of sweetness, a sudden bitterness in the mouth, a morning trace on a pillowcase. Compressed and reconstitued in wrong times and places, the inherent digitality of a ghost offers a conceptual entry point into thinking about the haunting affectivity of the phenomenon Sethe describes as “rememory,” the reverberations of past events that are decompressed, triggered, by one’s presence. Fundamentally traumatic in the asymmetry of its spatial and temporal structure— like a haint, the experience of a rememory in the present is an experience of time out of place. The other or underside of Glissant’s notion of relational clairvoyance, and unmoored from the specificity of individual ownership, a rememory is how one knows without knowing, and also how one might live life bound to pasts that never pass, still waiting for justice.

The containment or instrumentalization of rememory is the conjure, the work of Baby Suggs’s sermons. In her sermons in the Clearing, the erstwhile broken body of the still unfree becomes the ground zero for healing. If we return to the image of the clock, Sethe marches forward, the clockwise turn of the gear. Baby Suggs also marches forward, the counterclockwise turn of the gear. It is the counterclockwise motion that allows for the assimilation of the past into the forward movement of human temporality. It is work of the shout, further enervated as the ringshout, perhaps one of the earliest artifacts of the afro-futurist impulse in post-Middle Passage Black life. Insofar as slavery was part and parcel of the dominant financial, mechanical, academic and political machineries of the Americas, then the ringshout is the pulse that disrupts the machine. It is the shock and it is the break. For indeed, following Moten, the shout is the irruption, that which erupts by pulling the self more deeply into the self. It is the infinite space of an interiority that is experienced as outside and beyond captivity. In her sermons in the Clearing, Baby Sugg’s enables her parishioners to access this place. In gathering her community into a shout, Baby Suggs is able to organize their discrete interiorities in a collective space.

In Jonathan Demme’s film version of Morrison’s scene, Baby Suggs’ affective orchestration is also a mechanization of forces, moving the parishoners counter-clockwise, a spatialization of the healing set in an explicit symbolic relation to their temporal predicament. They cannot return to a past before enslavement; however in exteriorizing otherwise private sufferings, they are freed to reclaim the body that constitutes their present inhabitation.

If we return to Dalton’s blue cutlass, we are left with renewed opportunity for engagement to survive the same truth differently.

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**::** **the un-homeliness of digital disanimation / a break / a dirge / fly away home**

If Baby Suggs’ sermon in the Clearing is about the present time of the flesh, and about the psychic transportations and transformations made possible through the loving of that flesh, Hiro Murai’s video for Flying Lotus’ “Never Catch Me” is about the everpresent untimeliness of blackness, the digitizing and unmooring asynchronicity of black death, the glitched vicissitudes that Moten describes as anarrangement. If the Clearing is about individual pieces— stomps, cries, laughs, and shouts— coming into transcendent orchestration, then Murai’s video is about the nadir, the complete disintegration of family, hope, and community.

It is also beautiful. Its beauty, like the closing lines of Morrison’s *Song of Solomon*, “If you surrender to the wind you can ride it,” cloaks the violence that is fact the raison d’être of its utterance, in this case the death of children here remediated as an ecstatic animation.

In Murai’s video, the visual effect of the dancers is that of bodies moving in a timeframe distinct from the background against which they appear. As far as I can tell, this is an element of the video that looks like a technical special effect, but it may in fact be generated by affect, by the deep distance between the setting, a funeral for children, and the joyous celebration embodied in their movement. Dancing at a tempo incongrous with the setting, they are, literally, operating on another level.

We can tell that Murai is trying to draw attention to the effect. Inside the church, the flickering parlor lights at the beginning of the video, the coffin in front of the blinds, almost like static, and then the clapping of the choir, which is synced to the track, matches the childrens’ movement but, backlit, they are more like angels than congregants.

 Outside, Murai forces us to experience the dancers’ moving amongst other children who are also in motion– though clearly in a different way.

If we return to the image of Baby Suggs’ sermon, we can see how the diffusion of feeling across the congregants makes their service bearable: #blacklifematters. In the Flying Lotus video, the dancing children transmit every position, joy and sorrow. Now transcendent, their dance, from the Lindyhop to the cabbage patch, carries the viewer backward then forward across the generations. But unlike the ringshout, pressing painful pasts into the ground to release the body’s future, even with their smiles and joyful dance the mourned children in “Never Catch Me” are catastrophically out of sync with our sense of sadness in their demise, hope’s glitch. As Andre Brock has noted, “Never Catch Me” shows us what comes after the break. Indeed, even thought the video’s scenes are not shot in first person, the childrens’ radical joyness forces us out of our own positionality. The children’s joy is the audience’s sorrow. We dip in to the break to see them and to remember them, but in that same space, they dance. In this way Murai gives us two simultaneously evocations of the break.

When children die in the violence that has overtaken so many communities, we say that they were in the wrong place, at the wrong time.

*If you surrender to the wind you can ride it.*

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