DIRTY COMPUTERS: EROTIC DATA POETICS

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DIRTY COMPUTER DATA: EROTIC DATA POETICS

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Corporate actors increasingly use networked technology as a storytelling device, drawing on a long federal history of writing citizens through surveillance, data aggregation, and analysis. Social and juridical infrastructures are racing to keep up with the rapid pace of data-based technological development, but existing guardrails around aggregation serve instead to foster an environment of algorithmic data storytelling. In this context, narratives written by data are deemed more truthful than the stories told by the data's subject.

Dirty Computers: Erotic Data Poetics turns to Black womanist poetics to glean an alternative ideological framework for collecting, analyzing, and using data. In this dissertation, I argue that queer womanist writer Audre Lorde's concept of the erotic allows us to think about information capture and analysis as a generative collective poetics rather than institutional datafication and itemization.

In chapter one, "Surveillance States," I explore and contextualize federal surveillance ideology through Black women's surveillance history. In chapter two, "*Zami*: Erotic Data," I analyze Lorde's biomythography *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* as an erotic analysis of her life. The text distills the facts of her young adulthood to their most salient and revelatory elements—largely stories about loving other women—and leaving out that which was not an erotic measure. *Zami* stands in stark contrast to the federal narrative of Lorde's young adulthood as it is captured in her FBI file.

The project then turns to compare the narratives produced by surveillant analytics and erotic analytics. In chapter three, "Data States," I read data analysis company/federal contractor Palantir Technologies against itself, focusing on its contracts with the Chicago Police

Department to analyze CPD surveillance data. In chapter four, "*Riot*: Erotic Analysis," I explore poet Gwendolyn Brooks's analysis of the 1968 MLK assassination riots in her chapbook *Riot*. Though the text predates Palantir Technologies by many decades, they offer an interesting comparison point on the topic of capturing, reading, and writing data. Both work to read and speak data about Black Chicago citizens in crisis, but arrive at critically different ends.

In chapter five, "*Pynk:* Erotic Objects," I conclude my analysis by considering how Janelle Monáe and her contemporary singers negotiate control over their surveillance. The entire project uses Monáe's *Dirty Computer* (2018) and the dirty computer protagonist Jane 57821 as a theoretical starting point to vision escaping surveillance, and this chapter returns here. The mysteriousness of her information narrative ultimately functions as a pathway of escape from the surveillance network. Finally, in the "Return" the project explores the idea of technocultural choreography from two endpoints; the platform company end, and the culturally grounded movement end. Platform companies design technologies that attempt to datafy and predict user behavior in order to influence it, akin to teaching users the choreography of a new dance. However, an exploration of movement choreography through the lens of virtual reality technology elucidates a level of embodied and grounded nuance that cannot easily be algorithmically delimited.

BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCH

Elizabeth Murice Alexander works at the intersection of technocultural criticism and digital media production, centering queer Black and urban Midwestern experience. Originally from West Englewood on Chicago's Southside, Alexander holds a Bachelor of Arts in English and Black Studies from Amherst College, a Master of Arts in Literatures in English from Cornell University, and was awarded a certificate in Full-Stack Web Development from the Northwestern University School of Professional Studies.

to Murice Alexander

who bought me The Bluest Eye when I was ten

to Robert Campbell

who taught me to read

to Everett Alexander Jr.

who taught me to torrent MP3s
but bought Who is Jill Scott? Words & Sounds Vol. I

to my grandmothers
Willie Alexander

who lived to tell the tale

to my brother

who healed himself with philosophy

to my sister

who choreographed a multimedia dance thesis on classified CIA psychedelic testing programs

to my mother

who, in retirement, began writing Black woman detective novels set on the Southside

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am an alumna of Mark T. Skinner Classical Elementary School and Walter Payton College Prep in Chicago, IL, Amherst College in Amherst, Massachusetts, and very soon-to-be an alumna of Cornell University in Ithaca, New York. All of these institutions grow richer by the day on land stolen from indigenous nations through state-sanctioned murder, rape, coercion, dehumanization and fraud. I acknowledge the Council of the Three Fires — made up of the Ojibwe, Odawa, and Bodéwadmi Nations[1] — as the original and ongoing stewards of the land that is now the City of Chicago. I acknowledge the Nonotuck and Algonkian nations as the original and ongoing stewards of the land comprising Western Massachusetts. I acknowledge the Gayogo̱hó:nǫ' of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy formed alongside the Mohawk, Oneida, Onondaga, and Seneca Nations[2] as the original and ongoing stewards of the land now called Ithaca, New York, and all of Upstate New York. I acknowledge the Kānaka Maoli (Native Hawai'ian) and Puerto Rican communities as they resist the ongoing structures and effects of American colonization, and for how folks in those communities have poured into me, my community, and this work.

A basic assumption of my work is that Black women were brought to the Americas from Africa and datafied in service of European and American capital gain, and my central claim is that we have figured out ways to navigate this human data-driven system in order to exploit it and escape it. This also means bringing into the space and conversation all of those erased from or assimilated into the Americas as part of making space for the dehumanization and exploitation

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[1] Tara Kenjokety, "Indigenous Tribes of Chicago" (American Library Association, 2019), https://www.ala.org/aboutala/offices/diversity/chicago-indigenous.
[2] Haudenosaunee Confederacy, "Who We Are," HaudenosauneeConfederacy.com, 2021, https://www.haudenosauneeconfederacy.com/who-we-are/.

of my ancestors.

During Pontiac's Rebellion of 1763, Lord Jeffrey Amherst, the commander of the British Army stationed in the colonies, wrote letters to one of his men "suggesting that Indians be infected with smallpox via contaminated blankets;"[3] those letters are in the Amherst College archives. The town of Amherst, Massachusetts was named after Lord Jeffrey Amherst, and in turn Amherst College and the University of Massachusetts-Amherst were named after the town,[4] a public relations escape route for the institutions. However, the college mascot while I was enrolled was a bighead colonial American man named Lord Jeff, the sports teams were the Lord and Lady Jeffs, and there was a lot of random Lord Jeff themed stuff around campus and the town. In short, he was overrepresented in the information economy surrounding Amherst College. In 2016, after a long and surprisingly bitter battle with the school's alumni, the college stopped using Lord Jeffrey Amherst "in any official capacity".[5] The mascot was changed to the Mammoths, a nod to the Columbian mammoth skeleton housed in the campus geology museum.[6] UMass-Amherst's team name is still the UMass Minutemen; it used to be the UMass Redman.[7] This man's name is all over my curriculum vitae.

Seventy years later in 1833, the Chippewa, Ottawa, and Potawatomi Nations were forced to "cede to the United States all their land, along the western shore of Lake Michigan, and between this Lake and the land ceded to the United States by the Winnebago nation" in the Treaty of

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[3] Philip Ranlet, "The British, the Indians, and Smallpox: What Actually Happened at Fort Pitt in 1763?," *Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies* 67, no. 3 (2000): 427–41.
[4] "Amherst," in *Encyclopedia Britannica* (Encyclopedia Britannica, Inc., September 28, 2011).
[5] Amherst College, "Process History," The Mammoth: Amherst College's Mascot, 2016, https://www.amherst.edu/amherst-story/amherst-pride/mascot/process_history.
[6] Amherst College, "Process History," The Mammoth: Amherst College's Mascot, 2016, https://www.amherst.edu/amherst-story/amherst-pride/mascot/process_history.
[7] Michelle Williams, "Massachusetts Colleges That Retired Native American Mascots," *MassLive.Com*, May 19, 2019, https://www.masslive.com/news/2017/02/massachusetts_schools.html.

Chicago. This coercive land grab was "supposed to contain about five millions of acres".[8] Twenty years later, Paul Cornell would come from his birthplace in Upstate New York to Chicago and purchase three hundred of those five million acres to the south of the city. He named the plot of land Hyde Park Township, modeling it as a high society suburb similar to the posh park in London. Hyde Park Township grew to encompass forty-eight miles before being annexed to the city of Chicago in 1889; on today's map, that is the area east of State St. between 39th and 139th streets.[9] Twelve years later, his cousin Ezra would go on to found Cornell University; the other name all over my curriculum vitae also owned land I was raised on.

Though this project focuses on Black women's interactions with digital surveillance, it goes without saying that Indigenous nations and kingdoms have been just as datafied and policed in ways that led to their cultural destruction and assimilation. Indigenous theory fashions its own relationships to data and our shared environment, but our fights for digital and political liberation are inextricably linked. As an Amherst and soon-to-be Cornell alumna, and in an effort to work against the legacies of the institutions I have been a student at, I want to see the centrality of indigenous thought in our digital practice. Indigenous nations are the original stewards of the land upon which I was born and educated; so too are they the original stewards of the land on which tech companies were formed and server farms housed.

We cannot allow the indigenous land acknowledgments we put in our email signatures and on our websites and say at the beginning of lectures to be the beginning and the end of our work against relentless colonial legacy. No longer can we talk about digital media and technology without talking about land, water, and climate, because technology infrastructure requires the expensive use of natural resources. We cannot talk about land, water, and climate without talking

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[8] "Treaty of Chicago," Treaty 185, 7 Stat. 431 (1833).
[9] Ann Durkin Keating, "Hyde Park Township," in *Encyclopedia of Chicago* (Chicago: Chicago Historical

about the environmentally restorative practices of indigenous nations that have sustained our land for millennia before Facebook and Google existed. I acknowledge the Bay Area Ohlone as the original and continuing stewards of the land we now call Silicon Valley.

The future of technology means growth, and the future of the climate demands that technological growth be ethical for consumers and the environment. As these areas all influence each other, we should center the needs, desires, and knowledge of those most violently encoded by modernist technologies, and the needs, desires, and knowledge of those most committed to healing and preserving our planet. This work cannot exist without actively acknowledging the literal land out of which it grows and the centuries-long politics of that land. My intention is to work away from extractive tech industry business models and toward healing structures that honor and activate the needs and knowledge bases of those most harmed. If the structures must be capitalist, let them be structures that rewrite capital to sustain intellectual and climate futurity by way of healing and restoration. Let them be structures that support the communities originally engaged in that work.

My community, my Zami, will see itself in this work, because they are part of my dataset and therefore my understanding of data. My community of family, friends, and advisors have fed into me without question since this intellectual journey started at Skinner Elementary, and I hope I have returned the favor. They have taught me what it means to create and share transformative information with compassion and grace, what it looks like to build an erotic dataset and to be subversive simply for working in that truth. All I did was write it down.

irLh - NUP - GGE - RAGE
MP - VD - HA - LT - CM - KB - AMJ - KW - IPZ - WH - QY - NH
DP5 - MP - NG
JPB - KV - LYB
JD - KP - CK - DML - AG - PJ

Society, 2005), http://www.encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages/621.html.

DC - KM
DW - KL - KM - MP
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START

"Software is the language of our time…the winners will figure this out."
— Alexander Karp
CEO of Palantir Technologies

"A riot is the language of the unheard."
— Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King

"Too busy watching me, watching me
That you're blind, baby
You neglect to see
The drugs coming into my community
The weapons coming into my community
Dirty cops in my community
And you keep saying that I'm free…busy watching me."
— Jill Scott
"Watching Me," *Who Is Jill Scott: Words & Sounds Vol. I* (1999)

"They started calling us computers."
— Janelle Monáe
Dirty Computer (2018)

Federal Bureau of Investigation dossier No. 12-1720 sits nakedly open, missing the standard FBI cover page. This federal record of blues singer Billie Holiday[10] details her 1949 arrest for opiate possession. According to the FBI, she and her partner "[were] known users of narcotics" and as a result had "been under close observation by [the] Federal Bureau of Narcotics during their tour while in Utah and California." The bureau office in San Francisco carried out an "instant raid" at the "Hotel Mark Twain, three four five Taylor, Room Six Naught Two…Holiday was intercepted by Supervisor [REDACTED] as she attempted to destroy" the evidence.[11] Her short dossier solely comprises documents related to this raid, nine pages of details about her opiate use and subsequent arrest. This state narrative helped to justify tracking and controlling

[10] Billie Holiday, "FBI File 12-1720" (FOIA dossier, US Department of Justice, 1949), <watching.black/files/collections/show/2>.
[11] Billie Holiday, "FBI File 12-1720" (FOIA dossier, US Department of Justice, 1949), 1, <watching.black/files/collections/show/2>.

Holiday. One page openly admits that it was Hoover's practice to publicly shame famous drug users in order to discourage others from using the same drugs,[12] a classic example of how Hoover used information at will to sway public opinions, influence civilian thought and ideally control civilian action.

The file includes a groveling letter from white actress Tallulah Bankhead to then-FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover[13]. It appears from the letter that Bankhead called Hoover about Holiday, perhaps asking for a favor on behalf of her politically connected family, and sent this letter as thanks for his actions. The letter is very vague about what the two discussed but is explicit in Bankhead's assessment of Holiday as she relayed it to Hoover: she has only met Holiday

> "twice in my life but admire[s] her immensely as an artist and feel[s] the most profound compassion for her knowing as I do the most unfortunate circumstances of her background. Although my intention is not to condone her weaknesses I certainly understand the eccentricities of her behavior because she is essentially a child at heart whose troubles have made her psychologically unable to cope with the world in which she finds herself"[14].

Bankhead admits that she has only met Holiday twice; as they were both celebrities, it seems likely that the two met socially. She may well enjoy Holiday's music as she says and feel compelled to help her as a fan, but she likely doesn't know Holiday that well. Yet, from the basis

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[12] Billie Holiday, "FBI File 12-1720" (FOIA dossier, US Department of Justice, 1949), 2, <watching.black/files/collections/show/2>.
[13] Billie Holiday, "FBI File 12-1720" (FOIA dossier, US Department of Justice, 1949), 3, <watching.black/files/collections/show/2>.
[14] Billie Holiday, "FBI File 12-1720" (FOIA dossier, US Department of Justice, 1949), 3, <watching.black/files/collections/show/2>.

of two social encounters Bankhead feels comfortable making the assessment that Holiday is truly a "child at heart" and does drugs because she cannot cope with fame. Given that they are not friends or even really acquaintances, Bankhead appears to base her broad assessment of Holiday on the public information available. Angela Davis makes much the same information argument while discussing Holiday's famous "Strange Fruit" in *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism,* stating that

> "the most common portraits of Billie Holiday highlight the drug addiction, alcoholism, feminine weakness, depression, lack of formal education, and other difficulties unrelated to her contributions as an artist. In other words, the image she has acquired in U.S. popular culture relies on biographical information about Holiday's personal life at the expense of acknowledging her role as a cultural producer, which is, after all, the reason for her enduring importance"[15]

Bankhead paints one such common portrait, pinpointing all of the "bad" data about Holiday's personal struggles while quickly skating past the "good" data about her musical career. Even that is a simplistic framework — as Davis points out, the two sets of information are unrelated. It doesn't really matter to the public whether Holiday had a drug addiction because it is not related to her iconic career as a singer, and it is not our place as listeners to judge Holiday's private life. And yet, it is upon her own external analysis of Holiday's troubled background, rather than a review of her oeuvre as a cultural producer, that Bankhead balanced her appeal and expression of gratitude. That, and an appeal to Hoover's "true humanitarian spirit," based in a loosely spiritual

[15] Angela Davis, *Blues Legacies and Black Feminism: Gertrude "Ma" Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday* (New York: Vintage Books, 1998), 184.

phrase Bankhead's "Negro mammy used to say".[16]

There are many issues with the fact that Bankhead wrote this thank-you note in the first place, and the file is unclear whether her white saviorhood even did anything to help (the actress sort of just assumes that it did, but Hoover doesn't actually confirm this in his reply). However, even in a moment where a white watcher is intervening on her behalf, Holiday is barely mentioned directly, and when she is it is in relation to the elements of her life deemed undesirable and pitiable by the two in conversation. Bankhead mentions Holiday's masterful blues singing career only in passing, and Hoover doesn't even say Holiday's name when he replies. When the file does mention Holiday, it is mostly in newspaper clippings recounting her arrest alongside a short and offensive biography: she is referred to as the "dusky blues singer" and the "chubby Negro songstress"[17] in the same article, and simply "colored singer" in another.[18] On the last page of the file, her name is spelled wrong, and that is largely it. The federal file on one of the most famous Black entertainers of the twentieth century, one of the most important blues singers ever, is a multi-layered analysis of her "biographical information" by white people that did not know her.

I find Holiday's FBI dossier fascinating because it highlights the potential violence of exposure within an institutional data record. Sociologist Ruha Benjamin frames this as "coded exposure," the way in which "some technologies fail to see Blackness, while others render Black people hypervisible and expose them to systems of racial surveillance" as a function of coding visibility. In *Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code*, Benjamin plays

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[16] Billie Holiday, "FBI File 12-1720" (FOIA dossier, US Department of Justice, 1949), 5, <watching.black/files/collections/show/2>.
[17] Billie Holiday, "FBI File 12-1720" (FOIA dossier, US Department of Justice, 1949), 6, <watching.black/files/collections/show/2>.
[18] Billie Holiday, "FBI File 12-1720" (FOIA dossier, US Department of Justice, 1949), 8, <watching.black/files/collections/show/2>.

with the concept of "exposure" and highlights a couple of definitions for the term: "the amount of light per unit area," "the condition of being at risk of financial loss," and "the condition of being presented to view or made known,"[19] among others. Exposure is "artful, scientific, and entangled in forms of social and political vulnerability and risk," and as such "images," and by extension image creation technologies, "have been one of the primary weapons in reinforcing and opposing social oppression…visual technologies and racial taxonomies fashion each other"[20]. Benjamin makes the case for a co-productive relationship between surveillance technologies and the societies that use them because both create and reinforce certain ideas and rules around who is allowed to record, how, and under what circumstances. When actors with certain ideas of what information is important and how it should be written are in charge of creating information technologies, there will be inherent bias. Those that cannot control the means of their production in image and language — data — are always on the losing end of the equation.

Though an FBI dossier is not an image, both record information. A camera exposes light to film, where it is etched onto the surface of the medium; light, in this instance, is visual data. Visual technologies effectively decide what kinds of light-data to allow through and impact the film surface, and Benjamin's chapter goes on to read the development of camera technology through its persistent (through to the digital era) inability to capture the light-data of Black and brown faces. An FBI dossier is the same thing, but in a different medium—tangible data on paper rather than light on film. Both technologies capture and narrativize data for the record. As such,

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[19] Ruha Benjamin, *Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019), 102.
[20] Ruha Benjamin, *Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019), 103.

"failures to capture dark skin" — or dirty data — "aren't a technical issue, they're a choice".[21] Just like it is a recurring choice to train universal visual technologies solely on white faces, simultaneously exposing and erasing those that cannot be read by the visual system, it is a choice to write and act on a surveillance narrative solely out of one set of data.

What first caught my eye about the document is how jarring the exposure is because there is no official cover page. Most FBI dossiers are released with a front page listing the file serial number and various administrative stamps and signatures, and some have another page on top of that listing the terms of the dossier's declassification and public release. Holiday's dossier does not. Much like her biographical data is exposed in letters between actors that did not know her, the state interpretation of her biological data is exposed in the file itself. One just clicks open the document and sees the evidence of an icon in a bad moment, and evidence of the surveillance of Black life and of all life. As a cover, the front page acts like a snapshot profile image rendered from a racist and sexist database through a dehumanizing social algorithm. Holiday's coded multiple exposures are amplified by the file's redactions: the FBI agent who grabbed her has his name redacted, as do at least five other officers who participated in this arrest or the ensuing case. In my research, I've found that informants, officers, and agents routinely have their names redacted from files in accordance with Freedom of Information Act statutes protecting their identities, though I do explore a file later in this project where that is not the case. The instruments and actors of the state are largely allowed to remain invisible while working to render marginalized citizens hypervisible in their invisibility.

In her poem "Canary," poet Rita Dove reads the same information about Billie Holiday as the FBI. Dove's 1989 poem about the singer is short like the dossier, only eleven lines. The lines

[21] Ruha Benjamin, *Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019), 107.

see, record, and collate the same biographical information, in all of its harsh reality. The speaker notes the singer's "burned voice," describing it in terms of its "shadows" as well as its "lights," and comparing the singer's voice to a "mournful candelabra against a sleek piano," the sound a prism of lights and shadows reflecting off of textural surfaces. The speaker also notes the singer's "cooking;" the cooking of her "drummer to bass," and the cooking of her "magic spoon" and "magic needle".

The speaker simultaneously points to the underlying need for such extensive data track and algorithmic recreation. "Women under siege," says the speaker, are an "invention…in the service of myth".[22] Women under siege are an object created for the sake of storytelling. If the title of the poem is an indication, women under siege are sacrificed like coal mine canaries in service of an end goal. Women under siege are trapped in a narrative that is not of their own making, much like Holiday as narrativized by the FBI. The invention of Holiday under siege by Hoover, a data myth perpetuated by Bankhead, operated to cleanse the state of what was perceived to be subversiveness. Holiday wasn't allowed to exist as herself, a landmark cultural producer and a human being with health concerns, in the eyes of the state, instead existing only as a surveillance myth. But "Canary" moves to a different rhythm, and is interested in a different kind of data excess:

> "If you can't be free, be a mystery"[23]

In their emotion picture "I Like That," a music video embedded within the larger *Dirty Computer* emotion picture, Black queer singer Janelle Monáe "revises"[24] Dove's alternative for their own purposes:

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[22] Rita Dove, "Canary," in *Grace Notes* (New York: Norton, 1989).
[23] Rita Dove, "Canary," in *Grace Notes* (New York: Norton, 1989).
[24] Adrienne Brown, "New Formation: Janelle Monáe's Radical Emotion Pictures," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, May 28, 2018, https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/new-formation-janelle-monaes-radical-emotion-

"Sometimes a mystery, sometimes I'm free"[25]

This revision activates Dove's alternative, using chiasmus to highlight the powerful uses of one's mysteriousness. Billie Holiday was confined by stories created about her by white people for white structural purposes. In the state narrative space Holiday can never be free. In Dove's estimation her only alternative is opacity. Of course, Dove's poem was written decades after Billie Holiday passed away. Holiday was not able to choose opacity in her lifetime and suffered greatly under the state's hand. Janelle Monáe, however, can choose.[26]

There is a long history of Black women's resistance to this kind of ideological and behavioral surveillance, particularly as we find ourselves the constant targets of a relentless and shape-shifting dragnet. We write, speak, act, sing, snap, dance, and watch back against this surveillance as a group, tactics effective for the larger citizenry as a whole.

In this dissertation, I argue that queer womanist writer Audre Lorde's concept of the erotic gives us a way to think about data capture and analysis as a generative collective poetics rather than institutional datafication and itemization. As Lorde explains in *Sister Outsider*, poetry is "a revelatory distillation of experience," a data analysis that "has direct bearing upon the product which we live, and upon the changes we hope to bring about".[27] The erotic is "a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings…not a question of what we do," but "a question of how acutely and fully we can feel in the doing".[28] Together, I read poetry as a collection of erotic data, or observations produced by a deeply felt

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pictures/.

[25] Janelle Monáe, "I Like That," *Dirty Computer* (Wondaland Arts Society & Atlantic Records, 2018).

[26] Getty Images, *Billie Holiday Portrait*, April 2021, April 2021, https://graziamagazine.com/articles/billie-holiday-hair/billie-holiday-portrait/.
"10 Years of The ArchAndroid: Revisiting Janelle Monáe's Debut Studio Album," *Transcending Sound Blog*, May 18, 2020, https://www.transcendingsound.com/blog/thearchandroidrevisited.

[27] Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, Revised (New York: Crossing Press, 1984), 36.

structure of looking and recording information about the self and the world.

This discussion begins in "Surveillance States," (Chapter 1) which explores and contextualizes the ideology of the Federal Bureau of Investigation through Black women's surveillance history. In programming, data state roughly names where data is located on the server and how it is used; this chapter considers the states of twentieth-century American state surveillance.

The focus of "*Zami*: Erotic Data," (Chapter 2) Lorde's autobiography *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name* is an erotic analysis of her life, distilling the facts of her young adulthood to their most salient and revelatory elements—largely stories about loving women—and leaving out that which was not an erotic measure. What matters for my purposes is not that the stories depicted her queerness, but rather they depicted her learning how to read and understand the world through her community of women. *Zami* stands in stark contrast to the federal narrative of Lorde's young adulthood as told through her FBI dossier,[29] the result of federal surveillance and interviews resulting from her Communist and Black leftist actions.

The project then compares the narratives produced by data analysis company/federal contractor Palantir Technologies in "Data States," (Chapter 3) and that produced by famed poet Gwendolyn Brooks in her chapbook *Riot* (1969) in "*Riot*: Erotic Analysis" (Chapter 4). Both Palantir and Brooks work to read and speak data about Black Chicago citizens in crisis but arrive at critically different ends. Where Lorde offers erotic data as a framework, Brooks conducts an erotic analysis in theoretical opposition to the work Palantir would become rich for decades later. Brooks's erotic analysis is then read and algorithmically written by poet-scholar Lillian-Yvonne

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[28] Ibid 54.
[29] Audre Lorde, "FBI File 100-NY-122142" (FOIA dossier, US Department of Justice, 1972), <watching.black/files/exhibits/show/audre-lorde>.

Bertram. Bertram's projects *Forever Gwen Brooks*[30] (2018) and *A New Sermon*[31] (2019) use HTML, JavaScript, and Python to encode Brooks' poetic grammar in "The Third Sermon on the Warpland" from *Riot* as a language processing structure. I argue that Brooks and Bertram further elucidate a way to think about erotically reading information in contrast to privatized state actors writing the world with data analyzed in their image.

In *Zami*, Lorde conceptualized the erotic as a counter to surveillance and extraction. Brooks uses erotic analysis to explore and analyze erotic data depths as a counter to the all-seeing stories written by Palantir Technologies in partnership with the police. Finally, in "Pynk: Erotic Objects" (Chapter 5), I explore Janelle Monáe imagination of our future controlled by a Palantir-like state. As governments and corporations get better at analyzing and narrativizing the digital traces the citizenry leave behind, we grow ever closer to the world Monáe depicts, and this chapter thinks about the erotic objects dirty computers produce as tools of escape.

As an underlying theme, this project takes Janelle Monáe's audiovisual investigation of data-based state and social technology as a starting point to explore hacking out. Their meditation on this theme begins with their Cindi Mayweather android alter ego, the protagonist of the *Metropolis: Suite I (The Chase)* EP (2007) and their first two studio albums *The ArchAndroid* (2010) and *The Electric Lady* (2013). Monáe's ideas about surveillance take on new levels of complexity with their 2018 album and emotion picture *Dirty Computer*. *Dirty Computer* is a short film based on the album, cleverly built around music videos for the album singles. However, all the branding and marketing around the film and music videos use the term "emotion picture," a phrase with which Monáe has framed every visual she has ever made for a song or album.

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[30] Lillian-Yvonne Bertram, *Forever Gwen Brooks*, 2018, https://www.forevergwenbrooks.com/about.html.

I use emotion picture throughout when referring to *Dirty Computer* rather than "film" or "album visual" because that is what Monáe calls it, but also because, as I argue, an emotion picture is more than a film or an album visual. One might make a quick comparison between *Dirty Computer* and *Lemonade*, the 2016 visual album created by pop singer Beyoncé to accompany her album of the same name. Both are a visual extrapolation of themes explored sonically in their albums, but I am interested in how Monáe frames their visuals as a picture of emotion — a snapshot of one's embodied interiority that can be shown to others, transported, and saved for later. I think of emotion pictures much in the same way that the invention of the camera produced the radical concept of freezing time (as we experience it through light) and the invention of the phonograph radically produced the concept of freezing embodied energy (as we experience it through sound). These are information frames, and Monáe fashions a third; the emotion picture holds and transports emotion, or erotic data.

In software development, a data object is a way of storing and transporting data, either from the server where it is stored and sourced to your browser window where you use it, or from one program to another. One common example is a JSON (JavaScript Object Notation) object, which borrows syntax from the JavaScript code language to organize the information in the document in a simple way that can be quickly read by humans and programs alike. Like document subject headings, or story chapters, a JSON object organizes "values," or textual information, according to "keys", or headings. There is a very clear pattern within a JSON object like a code story rhythmically revealing itself across the length of the object, and this transparency makes it easy for another coding language to receive, interpret, and apply the dataset (depending, like a story, on how well the object is written).

An emotion picture stores erotic data, data measuring the chaos of our deepest feelings as

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[31] —, *A New Sermon on the Warpland*, 2019, https://a-new-sermon-on-the-warpland.glitch.me.

we embody and express it. The data is still curated and purposefully presented but is expansive even in its curation, much like a poem is "a revelatory distillation"[32] that can "both attend to and exceed the contours".[33] A poem is an emotion picture, an inextricable intertwining of data capture via image and metaphor and data movement, data life, the erotic qualities of data, via rhythm. A dance is an emotion picture, taking in embodied data and processing it through the code of choreography. Emotion pictures, then, are a highly capacious erotic data container, part of a framework that privileges and protects the excesses of embodiedness over extractiveness, and thus a useful frame for escape. In *Dirty Computer*, Janelle Monáe presents a series of emotion pictures capturing the affective depths of being Black American and femme in a surveillance state, presenting analysis that makes space for escape.

The erotic is a metaphor and a methodology. My dissertation came to fruition not with a central question and four texts, but through a series of impulses stretching from my core to the chaotic outer edges of my being. Many of my creative practices appear in this project; the queer Black women at the center of the project are profoundly important to my development as a queer Black woman. The ideas behind an entire chapter came out of late night/early morning conversations with dear graduate school friends; the ideas behind one creative project stem from a twenty-three-year friendship with my collaborator. Lovers and friends who write code, music, and poetry shared information of themselves, setting me on a path back to myself and this project. I impulsively signed up for a code bootcamp in the middle of dissertation writing, a terrible time management decision that irrevocably shifted the way I framed and wrote the entire project. I wrote a section of close reading two dissertation topics ago that needed to sit forgotten

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[32] Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, Revised (New York: Crossing Press, 1984), 38.
[33] Adrienne Brown, "New Formation: Janelle Monáe's Radical Emotion Pictures," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, May 28, 2018, https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/new-formation-janelle-monaes-radical-emotion-pictures/, 6.

for four years before finding its perfect home in chapter 3. I also close read parts of my daily existence.

Since the beginning, I have been fascinated by the ways in which Black women acknowledge and self-critically subvert structures of power without giving themselves over to those structures. I have also been fascinated by the ways in which power crystallizes around technology, particularly technologies of capture and narrative. Though this project does not look like a standard scholarly monograph, it assembles the intellectual, creative, and industrial roads that overlap as I trace a path through this work. I did not set out to write a Lordian erotic reading of codes, data surveillance, and digital technologies, and I do not have a set of UI/UX best practices for erotic digital platform design. I don't even know if I want that—is the answer to Facebook's myriad ideological issues simply an erotically structured Facebook? Rather, I learned through experiencing this project that the best way for me to read, analyze, and understand digital technology was through the erotic. Where the surveillance structure pins down a datalogical answer, I want to locate the excessive context around that answer and see how the narratives compare; there might be.

"They started calling us computers."[34]

The House of New Dawn, the vaguely state-like organization in *Dirty Computer*, uses surveillance robots to locate dirty computers and bring them in for cleaning. A dirty computer is a citizen who does not conform; "cleaning" entails erasing the person's "dirty" memories. New Dawn is never clear on what exact standard these citizens do or don't conform to nor what dirtiness is defined by. Importantly it is never explained why the semantic shift from calling citizens "people" to calling them "computers" (devices tasked with taking problems and

[34] Andrew Donoho and Chuck Lightning, *Dirty Computer*, 2018, 00:00:01.

information in and spitting correct answers out) took place. Not unlike the FBI in the 1950s, the actual guidelines on respectability and clean acceptability are vague and up to the whims of the figurehead at the top. Anything unwanted can be easily framed as subversive and therefore dangerous. The opening sequence narrator, Jane 57821, describes that after this shift, when the cleaning began, people were deemed dirty if they "looked different…refused to live the way they dictated," or "showed any form of opposition, at all"[35]—terms with little chance of escape.

In "Q.U.E.E.N.," an *Electric Lady* single featuring droid soul singer Erykah Badu as Badoula Oblongata, Monáe gives even more context for who could be categorized as a dirty computer. In a 2013 interview with *Fuse*, they describe that "Q.U.E.E.N. definitely is an acronym…its for those who are marginalized…Q represents the queer community, U represents the untouchables, the first E for emigrants, the second E for the excommunicated, and N for "those labeled as negroid".[36] Monáe does not limit their liberatory framework to the Black American femme experience, intersecting their freedom with multiple groups that experience global otherness. America is no exception, a fact that only became more apparent as culture shifted in the years between *The Electric Lady* (2013) and *Dirty Computer* (2018).[37]

Using the Memmotron, a data aggregation, analysis, and deletion platform reminiscent of Palantir Gotham (a powerful surveillance analysis software developed by Palantir Technologies, which it licenses to federal offices and police departments nationwide), New Dawn downloads, aggregates, and scans memory data from dirty computers with the intention of deleting anything dirty. The subject, strapped to a table in an observation theater, is repeatedly treated with a noxious gas called Nevermind in correspondence with a memory's digital deletion. Over time, the person's dirty data is drained from their mind, and they return to society a clean, if blank,

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[35] Ibid., 00:00:23.
[36] Fuse, "Janelle Monae Says 'Q.U.E.E.N.' Is for the 'Ostracized & Marginalized,'" *Fuse TV*, 2013.

computer—running the correct processes and returning the correct information.

Despite being on opposite sides, the FBI and Bankhead work together in Holiday's dossier to paint the picture of a woman ravaged by drugs who needed to be tracked and controlled. This dossier is Billie Holiday's algorithmic identity, as created by the state. As discussed briefly in the introduction, algorithmic identities are a combination of data points assembled via process to create a picture representing us, that may or may not have any tangible tie to who we really are. Institutional narrative identities may not be based in the full picture of us, or maybe be built from an overrepresentation of our data, the output of a code "logic that simply ignores the embodied individuals it affects…the subjective singularities of individuals, their personal psychological motivations or intentions do not matter".[38] All of these factors are at play as Bankhead writes her letter to Hoover, and as Hoover writes back; Billie Holiday is whoever her white benefactor needs her to be in the course of acting on her behalf, sitting multiply exposed as she does on the Bureau file page, and Holiday is whoever her state captors needed her to be, invisible even as she is laid bare in service of the Bureau's ideological ends.

However, Jane 57821, Janelle Monáe's character in the emotion picture, escapes New Dawn and the Memmotron. They free Mary Apple 53, the cleaned and renamed version of their dirty lover Zen (Tessa Thompson), and their lover Ché (Jayson Aaron) before his dirty mind is wiped. Their ability to escape the surveillance state stems from their ability to evolve and live fully, and to remain enigmatic while being watched and named. Their actions in the emotion picture are underpinned by the personal political choice to free themselves and their people through erotic excess, whether aesthetic, political, or sexual, but these choices are read as a kind of obfuscation, "the deliberate addition of ambiguous, confusing, or misleading information to

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[37] Andrew Donoho and Chuck Lightning, *Dirty Computer*, 2018, 00:02:24.
[38] John Cheney-Lippold, *We Are Data: Algorithms and the Making of Our Digital Selves* (New York:

interfere with surveillance and data collection".[39]

As L.H. Stallings argues in *Funk the Erotic: Transaesthetics and Black Sexual Cultures*, Monáe's "video[s] depic[t] one way in which Black women and men have been making themselves into things that feel and taking in things that feel to experientially create an experience that can 'free sexuality from its dependence on the organic'…demonstrat[ing] that the gap created between aesthetics and ethics is one created by work society's construct of time and hu(Man) values, but its oppressive hold lessens when we become things that feel. We also become black art with multiple functions beyond consumption[40]." In my view, an emotion picture is precisely a data object that makes space for the erotic, this feeling data, and in so doing cannot be easily read by dominant structures of watching. Jane 57821 activates this illegibility placed upon them as mysteriousness, which gives them a space to escape surveillance.

New York University Press, 2017), 15.

[39] Finn Brunton and Helen Nissenbaum, *Obfuscation: A User's Guide for Privacy and Protest* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2015), 1.

[40] LH Stallings, *Funk The Erotic: Transaesthetics and Black Sexual Cultures*, The New Black Studies Series (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015), 195.

var = Watching.Black

According to the Memorandum for Heads of Executive Departments and Agencies, issued in March 2009 by the Office of the Attorney General, the "Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), 5 U.S.C. § 522, reflects our nation's fundamental commitment to open government."[41] This act, first passed in 1966, guarantees that all federal agencies will preserve and "make available to the public"[42] information along a selection of categories. The act has been updated since then, perhaps most notably in 1996 when an amendment noted that

> "(2) since the enactment of the Freedom of Information Act in 1966, and the amendments enacted in 1974 and 1986, the Freedom of Information Act has been a valuable means through which any person can learn how the Federal Government operates; (3) the Freedom of Information Act has led to the disclosure of waste, fraud, abuse, and wrongdoing in the Federal Government; …[and] (4) the identification of unsafe consumer products, harmful drugs, and serious health hazards; (5) Government agencies increasingly use computers to conduct agency business and to store publicly valuable agency records and information, and (6) Government agencies should use new technology to enhance public access to agency records and information.[43]

This dissertation references a number of documents released digitally through Freedom of Information Act requests. Some of those files were released directly to the FBI File Vault, the

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[41] Attorney General, "Memorandum for Heads of Executive Departments and Agencies on the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA)," (Memorandum, Office of the Attorney General, 2009), 1.
[42] US Congress, "Electronic Freedom of Information Act Amendments of 1996," Pub. L. No. 104–231, § 552, 5 U.S. Code 8 (1996), 1
[43] US Congress, "Electronic Freedom of Information Act Amendments of 1996," Pub. L. No. 104–231, § 552, 5 U.S. Code 8 (1996), 1

main online repository for digital and digitized dossiers released by the Bureau. This is a vault run by the FBI itself, making its own files available as citizens request them. However, I quickly found the File Vault to be an imperfect archive, and had to cast my net wider to find surveillance dossiers.

In this search I found MuckRock, a "non-profit collaborative news site that gives [users] the tools to keep our government transparent and accountable".[44] MuckRock was an invaluable archive while I was researching. They have amassed a large number of dossiers across subject categories and produced various resources and research aids about FOIA files. I highly recommend their article "How to Read an FBI File: A Beginner's Guide,[45]" written by MuckRock researcher JPat Brown.

To keep track of these files while researching, and then as a reading tool, I began building Watching.Black, a digital database of Black women's surveillance data. This database houses FBI dossiers of Black women I cite, for the sake of understanding what kind of information the state was interested in collecting and storing about its citizens. There is also a collection on the site housing documents that I reference in the project related to Palantir Technologies, so that readers can look at and experience the documents for themselves. All Watching.Black links will be provided in footnotes.

Additionally, I was fortunate to be able to interview JPat Brown about doing investigative journalism work relating to government surveillance, and in particular the process of requesting and releasing poet Audre Lorde's dossier — this discovery was the foundation for my discussion of federal surveillance in this project. Brown was gracious enough to grant me nearly an hour-long interview, the full text of which can be found in the appendix.

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[44] MuckRock, "About MuckRock," Muckrock.com, n.d.
[45] JPat Brown, "How to Read an FBI File: A Beginner's Guide" (MuckRock, September 28, 2018),

Chapter 1 - Surveillance States

In this chapter, I argue that the federal surveillance network is driven by the same impulse toward data-driven behavioral tracking in order to reserve the option of behavioral modification. This becomes clear in an examination of the FBI's surveillance of Black women leftists during the Communist panic era.

Dirty Computer is so striking to me because it locates us in a different space and time, and yet visions our global technoculture. The more interconnected we become, the more we relinquish control over our data and its narratives. At root, data are observations; "any material recorded from empirical research…something immediately presented to the mind".[46] We interpret data for greater insights, and an increasing range of actors and institutions use data to "explain the world we live in, which in turn…create[s] innovations, products, policies, and knowledge that shape[s] how people live their lives".[47] Being alive is constituted by a continuous experience of aggregating, analyzing, and acting on sensory information, and any immediate observations that come to us through the senses are data about the outside world. This is data as poetry. Poetics is an analytical framework for interpreting felt and embodied information—erotic data—into a form others can use for greater understanding.

Datafication is a very fraught enterprise. It is impossible to extricate data aggregation and analysis from oppressive surveillance and tracking. Today, data brings to mind the global experience of being "tracked, profiled, policed, and governed at state borders, in cities, at airports, in public and private spaces, through biometrics, telecommunications technology, CCTV, identification documents, and more recently by way of Internet-based social network

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[46] Daniel Chandler and Rod Munday, eds., "Data, n," *A Dictionary of Media and Communication*, 2016, 1–1.

[47] Rob Kitchin, *The Data Revolution: Big Data, Open Data, Data Infrastructures, & Their Consequences*

sites such as Twitter and Facebook".[48] Even without New Dawn's surveillance robots flying overhead (though police surveillance drones[49] aren't *that* different), we are watched, scanned, downloaded, and analyzed nearly everywhere we go. I use this definition of surveillance from scholar Simone Browne in her foundational text *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* for its comprehensiveness in including social media platforms within the surveillance network.

Though surveillance often carries the connotation of faceless deep state actors watching from a distance, we also contribute a lot of information ourselves. Different technologies collect different types of data, but each point contributes to a whole picture of "you"—a digital being that goes where you go, shops where you shop, orders the food you order, receives work emails and direct messages when you receive them, videoconferences when you do for the same amount of time, works out how you work out, listens to the music you love, follows the internet creators and influencers you follow, researches the questions and topics you research, travels where you travel, sleeps how you sleep, has a heartbeat that matches yours, even schedules their coffeemaker and living room lights to turn on at the exact time you schedule yours. This digital being is not *you* per se, but a collection of observations drawn from various everyday networked and data-based devices and platforms *representing* your habits and interactions and standing in for you in myriad databases—"algorithmic identit[ies]"[50] built of "subjective valuations".[51] These identities tend to be created in accordance with the needs of the institution that created them rather than the way one actually sees and understands themselves.

(Los Angeles: Sage Publications, 2014), 28.

[48] Simone Browne, *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 13.

[49] Shawn Musgrave, "Alameda County Sheriff Seeks Drone for Thermal Imaging, Surveillance," *MuckRock*, October 19, 2012, https://www.muckrock.com/news/archives/2012/oct/19/alameda-county-sheriff-seeks-drone-thermal-imaging/.

[50] John Cheney-Lippold, *We Are Data: Algorithms and the Making of Our Digital Selves* (New York: New York University Press, 2017), 15.

To the extent that an algorithm is simply a "set of defined steps structured to process instructions/data to produce an output,"[52] an algorithm is a rhythmic process all its own. The algorithm itself is a process of reading, analysis, and writing that traces "not to a general norm, but only to a system of eminently evolving relations between various measurements that are not reducible to any average"—the[53] metrics by which the algorithm is fashioned are constantly shifting as new data come into the algorithm, creating new relations as needed — there is no baseline for the surveillance system and its narrative power, but instead it shifts as needed to surround its subject.

I looked down at my own Apple ecosystem (MacBook, iPad, iPhone and Apple Watch) to come up with that list — my algorithmic self is made up of this real-world data about me through the tools and devices I use literally every single day (Google, Google Maps, Amazon, UberEATS, Microsoft Outlook + Teams, Zoom, smart fitness devices, Instagram, TSA, and smart home devices, though I do have Siri on all of my devices and the mic on my Google Home permanently turned off). Some of this algorithmic identity data is visible to us as users, buried deep in privacy and security settings. If you are a Google product user, I recommend visiting adssettings.google.com to read the algorithmic identity Google has constructed for you. Simply by knowing the websites I visit, the things I search for (I used to use Google Chrome on laptop and mobile) and my home address (saved in Google Maps), Google is able to collate topics and themes that represent me. In addition to correctly identifying my age range and gender presentation, as well as the general region around where I went to graduate school, Google identified one of my dream car brands and a community theater near my apartment; it incorrectly

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[51] Ibid. 19

[52] Rob Kitchin, "Thinking Critically About and Researching Algorithms," *SSRN Electronic Journal*, no. October (2014): 1–29, https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.2515786, 2.

[53] Antoinette Rouvroy and Thomas Berns, "Algorithmic Governmentality and Prospects of

labeled me as married and upper-middle class, though my algorithmic identity can dream. Ironically, Google identified Facebook, eBay, and PayPal as major interests, presumably from the search history data stemming from my research.[54]

Increasingly, the lines between social media and surveillant policing are blurred. In September 2021, it was discovered that the Los Angeles Police Department is currently in the practice of asking those it stops in the field for their social media handles and social security numbers[55]. Echoing the FBI's early days in both tactic and justification, the police chief directed officers to fill in "field interview cards" asking for detailed information to be used in "investigations, arrests, and prosecutions"; according to the *Los Angeles Times*, "more than half of the civilians stopped by metro officers and documented in the cards were not arrested or cited".[56] What immediately results is actually a stronger surveillance network, as this information "opens the door for officers to monitor an individual's connections and 'friends' online…a huge expansion of network surveillance".[57]

The Memmotron in *Dirty Computer* uses an algorithmic identity classification to determine who's memories should be deleted, a pre-emptive strike against predicted dirtiness. Government and corporate actors build algorithmic identities to learn how we think in order to predict what we might do next, in the hopes that they might stop or shift that action before it happens to better

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Emancipation," trans. Elizabeth Libbrecht, *Réseaux* 177, no. 1 (2013): 167.
[54] Andrew Donoho and Chuck Lightning, *Dirty Computer*, 2018, 00:14:20.
[55] Sam Levin, "Revealed: LAPD Officers Told to Collect Social Media Data on Every Civilian They Stop," *The Guardian*, September 8, 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2021/sep/08/revealed-los-angeles-police-officers-gathering-social-media.
A note on the field interview card notes that interviewees are compelled to disclose their social security numbers to the police "for use in identification…based on field interview procedures operational prior to January 1, 1975". The card does not specify what those procedures are, and at any rate, a law professor who "previously served on the LA police commission, said she was not aware of any law requiring individuals to disclose social security numbers to the police."
[56] Ibid.
[57] Ibid.

suit their end goal. This happens in our everyday lives, whether it be the Chicago Police Department's "computerized assessment tool…[that] identifies and ranks individuals at risk of becoming a victim or a possible offender,"[58] or spending a morning Googling articles about pet rescue and adoption only to log onto Instagram later and be bombarded with sponsored posts from the ASPCA. TikTok is rather explicit about this. Under the second heading of its US Privacy Policy, "How We Use Your Information," five of the twenty subpoints concern advertising and promotional material. Two subpoints outline a specific aim to build a data profile for each user; the company wants to "infer additional information about you, such as your age, gender, and interests".[59]

Instrumentarian[60] power operates in digital silence. Social psychologist Shoshana Zuboff calls the above examples of "instrumentarian power," an "increasingly complex and comprehensive 'means of behavioral modification'…[that] knows and shapes human behavior toward others' ends".[61] Behavioral modification is the key signal of surveillance capitalism. In *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for A Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*, Zuboff argues that global society is transitioning to a new economic framework in which "human experience [is] free raw material for translation into behavioral data".[62] By reconstructing us in data, government and corporate actors attempt to algorithmically predict our actions and pre-emptively influence them. Internal documents released by Facebook

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[58] Rashida Richardson, Jason M Schultz, and Kate Crawford, "Dirty Data, Bad Predictions: How Civil Rights Violations Impact Police Data, Predictive Policing Systems, and Justice," *New York University Law Review* 94, no. 2 (2019), 208.
[59] TikTok, "Privacy Policy" (TikTok Legal, June 2, 2021), https://www.tiktok.com/legal/privacy-policy-us?lang=en, 7.
[60] Andrew Donoho and Chuck Lightning, *Dirty Computer*, 2018, 00:15:56.
[61] Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism: The Fight for a Human Future at the New Frontier of Power*, First (New York: PublicAffairs Books, 2018), https://doi.org/10.1386/jdmp.10.2.229_5, 15.
[62] Ibid. 15

whistleblower Frances Haugen in October 2021 made it explicit that Facebook built its entire business model on an advertising platform that deploys an algorithm that "optimizes for engagement, whether or not it is real"[63]. Once we do act, those actors can analyze the results of their data hypothesis to understand how we acted, why, and how we can be better targeted next time, sharpening the clarity of our algorithmic identities; this is machine learning in focus.

Surveillance does not begin with the rise of surveillance capitalism and instrumentarian power, it does not really even begin to take on a new shape. In *Dark Matters* scholar Simone Browne makes the case that existing surveillance technologies are refined during transoceanic African enslavement, perhaps because this system is well suited to executing anti-Black oppression. Beginning with the slave ship and ending with predictive policing, Browne argues that "certain surveillance technologies installed during slavery to monitor and track blackness as property (for example, branding, the one-drop rule, quantitative plantation records that listed enslaved people alongside livestock and crops, slave passes, slave patrols, and runaway notices) anticipate the contemporary surveillance of racialized subjects".[64] Many scholars, famously legal scholar Michelle Alexander in *The New Jim Crow: Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*, trace myriad policing ideologies and practices as having roots in enslavement. In *Race after Technology,* sociologist Ruha Benjamin critically outlines how algorithms work akin to oppressive social codes such as those that produced enslavement, particularly as they play out across Black bodies. Data-based technologies "are sold as morally superior because they purport to rise above human bias, even though they could not exist without data produced through

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[63] Jeff Horwitz, "The Facebook Whistleblower, Frances Haugen, Says She Wants to Fix the Company, Not Harm It," *Wall Street Journal*, October 3, 2021, https://www.wsj.com/articles/facebook-whistleblower-frances-haugen-says-she-wants-to-fix-the-company-not-harm-it-11633304122?mod=article_inline.

[64] Simone Browne, *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 23.

histories of exclusion and discrimination".[65] Lest we believe that our technology is colorblind and non-political, scholars remind us that modern data-based technologies are fraught with human oppression and dehumanization as a development sandbox.

Legal theorist and attorney Andrea Dennis goes a step further; in her estimation, "the foundation for today's expansive state surveillance system was built upon the lessons learned from America's history of monitoring Black people in America."[66] Dennis outlines two key elements of how the early surveillance of enslaved Black bodies worked:

> "As early as the seventeenth century, whites were constantly surveilling Black people. [4] Slaves (and free Blacks) were observed closely in order to detect, prevent, investigate, and prosecute Black misconduct, whether serious or minor. Informants policed a wide variety of behavior, but were especially seen as valuable for the prevention and suppression of organized resistance and rebellions. Slave informants spoiled the infamous rebellions planned by Denmark Vesey and Gabriel Prosser, as well as many other lesser-known plans of resistance. Surveillance continued after Emancipation, when Black Codes and Jim Crow Laws were enacted and used to return many Black to another form of slavery — convict labor"[67]

Dennis's "Mass Surveillance and Black Legal History" recounts the history of anti-black surveillance as it transforms into mass citizen surveillance driven by two interconnected factors: data collection (often using informants), and thought policing. Whether participants in or

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[65] Ruha Benjamin, *Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019), 23.
[66] Andrea Dennis, "Mass Surveillance and Black Legal History," *American Constitution Society Expert Forum*, February 2020, 3.
[67] Andrea Dennis, "Mass Surveillance and Black Legal History," *American Constitution Society Expert Forum*, February 2020, 3.

proponents of the slave economy, whites collected data in order to modify free and enslaved Black behavior under the guise of policing "misconduct" and other such unacceptable behavior. Of particular interest was information about planned insurrection, large and small, so that those plans could be foiled. Surveilling whites worked to eradicate radical Black thought by cataloguing and transmitting information about it. Insider informants, critical to this surveillance network, represented a level of adherence to white supremacy—that is to say, flipping informants means the behavior of some Black resistors was successfully modified.

Though not developed solely to police Black citizens, it is impossible to extricate the assemblage of people, institutions, and political ideology that eventually formed the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) from the development of Black political activism. The FBI began not as an institution, but as a loosely-defined directive to the only year-old Department of Justice (DOJ): in 1871, the US Congress earmarked $50,000 to fund "the detection and prosecution of those guilty of violating federal law[68]". The US, having just entered the post-Civil War Reconstruction, needed a legal representative to act on its behalf in lawsuits against the rebuilding country. The DOJ was created to "enforce the law and defend the interests of the United States according to law"[69]. This grant funded a domestic police and detective force to work in support of that goal, but there was no mechanism by which to maintain a permanent

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[68] Ward Churchill and Jim Vander Wall, *Agents of Repression: The FBI's Secret Wars Against the Black Panther Party and the American Indian Movement* (Boston: South End Press, 1988), 17.
I am greatly indebted to the work of Ward Churchill and James Vander Wall in their 1988 book *Agents of Repression: The FBI's Secret Wars Against the Black Panther Party and the American Indian Movement*, for their clear and concise recounting of the creation of the FBI and later bureau efforts to destabilize Black and Indigenous nationalist movements. However, I recognize that Churchill in particular is a controversial figure within academia, largely for the quality of his work and public writing post-9/11. I am not prepared to wade into the larger battle over Churchill's entire career in this footnote. I will grant that *Agents of Repression* tells a particularly radical narrative of FBI history, but it is one heavily supported by direct quotes from those who were present and involved (such as Hoover) and the text of federal legislation itself.
[69] Department of Justice, "About DOJ," Justice.gov, n.d., www.justice.gov/about.

force. Detectives were retained on an ad hoc basis and the force's impermanence made federal crimefighting nearly impossible. The organization became more concrete with the Bureau of Investigation (BoI)'s creation in 1906. The DOJ was able to massively expand its investigation operations with the BoI and its enforcement jurisdiction widened to include everything from "national banking laws" and "antitrust laws" to "post office frauds," "land frauds," and "immigration and naturalization cases".[70]

With the US's 1917 entrance into World War I, the BoI took on greater importance as a political and ideological police force. President Woodrow Wilson enacted the Espionage Act in June of that year, and the Alien and Sedition Act in 1918. Both laws were designed to ensure the American populace was aligned with the war effort by criminalizing "seditious utterances" and "members[hip]" in "anarchist classes".[71] Simultaneously, the BoI amassed a large force of volunteers from the American Protective League. These volunteers, believing it was their patriotic duty to keep the United States clear of dissent in thought and action during international conflict, joined the BoI enforcement effort as Justice Department "auxiliaries". They conducted surveillance, raids, sham trials, and even extralegal murders of anti-war and anarchist organizations including the Industrial Workers of the World,[72] with one goal in mind -- weakening the presence of radical thought and action within the United States.

Under J. Edgar Hoover, then the very young General Intelligence Division (GID) leader, American ideological uniformity became the Bureau's driving force. As Dennis points out, some of the earliest investigation targets were Black intellectuals and revolutionaries; figures such as

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[70] Ward Churchill and Jim Vander Wall, *Agents of Repression: The FBI's Secret Wars Against the Black Panther Party and the American Indian Movement* (Boston: South End Press, 1988), 18.
[71] Ward Churchill and Jim Vander Wall, *Agents of Repression: The FBI's Secret Wars Against the Black Panther Party and the American Indian Movement* (Boston: South End Press, 1988), 18.
[72] Ward Churchill and Jim Vander Wall, *Agents of Repression: The FBI's Secret Wars Against the Black Panther Party and the American Indian Movement* (Boston: South End Press, 1988), 19.

Ida B. Wells, Marcus Garvey, and W.E.B. DuBois were under surveillance as "race agitators".[73] Marcus Garvey's FBI files, for example, reveal an account of BoI research into the growing rift between Garvey and fellow black nationalist Cyril Briggs in order to exploit their tension and weaken the movement. The FBI would use similar tactics on Black organizations well into the twentieth century; through infamous programs such as COINTELPRO, the organization "fomented dissent, engaged in blackmail and coercion, and policed and prosecuted many Black citizens, destroying in the process numerous lives and organizations".[74]

Minimizing Garvey's US presence served the BoI's main goal of keeping the country clean of subversives, and Hoover was more than willing to display the organization's surveillant and juridical power to achieve this goal. This ruthlessness pushed Hoover to the top of the organization, earning him leadership over the entire Bureau of Investigation in 1924. In an effort to consolidate power, he immediately restructured the Bureau of Investigation as the Federal Bureau of Investigation.[75] Nominally elevating the Bureau to the federal level simultaneously elevated the stature of their work. Though it was already a Justice Department subsidiary, this move carved out more space for the Bureau could act autonomously.

Hoover then strengthened the federal surveillance dragnet, drastically broadening FBI data aggregation. In 1930, Congress authorized the FBI to collect fingerprint data from "law-abiding citizens, as well as those of real or suspected criminals". This and similar steps resulted in a General Index of nearly sixty million civilian entries by 1975.[76] The General Index, the bureau

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[73] Andrea Dennis, "Mass Surveillance and Black Legal History," *American Constitution Society Expert Forum*, February 2020, 3.
[74] Andrea Dennis, "Mass Surveillance and Black Legal History," *American Constitution Society Expert Forum*, February 2020, 6.
[75] Ward Churchill and Jim Vander Wall, *Agents of Repression: The FBI's Secret Wars Against the Black Panther Party and the American Indian Movement* (Boston: South End Press, 1988), 25-6.
[76] Ward Churchill and Jim Vander Wall, *Agents of Repression: The FBI's Secret Wars Against the Black Panther Party and the American Indian Movement* (Boston: South End Press, 1988), 27.

system used to track civilians *not* suspected of subversive activity, stored information about persons of general interest alphabetically by subject name and by location. It was intentionally comprehensive in order to enable the FBI to ascertain "the immediate location of anyone it wanted to investigate in the name of national security".[77] In order to conduct any kind of citizen behavioral modification the FBI needed access to tons of subject information, and it needed to be able to update that data in real time. Even if the FBI never actually approached a subject in-person or otherwise brought harm to them, the organization stored enough subject data to give itself the option of acting. Despite this extensive information collection, however, only 611 of nearly 20,000 subversion charges brought against American citizens during WWII actually met the evidentiary standard needed for conviction.[78]

In tandem with the widening surveillance network Congress enacted laws attempting to seriously curtail the speech and actions of its citizens, seemingly an attempt at real life behavioral modification. The Smith Act, named for Virginia House representative Howard Smith and passed in 1940, made it a criminal act to

> "knowingly or willfully advocate, abet, advise, or teach the duty, necessity, desirability, or propriety of overthrowing the Government of the United States or of any State by force or violence, or for anyone to organize any association which teaches, advices, or encourages such an overthrow, or for anyone to become a member of or to affiliate with any such association"[79]

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[77] Ward Churchill and Jim Vander Wall, *Agents of Repression: The FBI's Secret Wars Against the Black Panther Party and the American Indian Movement* (Boston: South End Press, 1988), 29.
[78] Ward Churchill and Jim Vander Wall, *Agents of Repression: The FBI's Secret Wars Against the Black Panther Party and the American Indian Movement* (Boston: South End Press, 1988), 19.
[79] Jesse DeLauder, "The Seattle Seven: The Smith Act Trials in Seattle (1952-1958)," *Communism in Washington State History and Memory Project* (Seattle, 2008).

These laws were passed under the guise of national security, allowing the FBI to circumvent First Amendment protections for the sake of protecting citizens from the faceless threat of subversion. In shaping discourse by outlawing certain types of thought, the government was attempting to modify citizen behavior. Over and over again, as I will explore in the rest of this chapter, one of the most threatening things to for the state is artistic and creative production. Under the broad framework of the Smith Act, acts as non-violent as writing poems and lecturing about poetics could be considered, depending on the subject matter, seditious acts, and any citizen committing such seemingly innocuous acts could suddenly find themselves pulled from the General Index for deeper investigation and possibly reclassification in the Security Index, thus flagging that individual as a potential threat to the stability of the nation. As is the case with the two Black women writers I will focus on in this chapter the files of subversive writers feature extensive and incredibly up-to-date annotated bibliographies, including reviews of talks, meetings, and public presentations. The FBI was very concerned with what leftists and Black thinkers were saying and writing, and to whom.

This mentality carried the FBI through the postwar period into the Cold War, setting the scene for the Red Scare Communist infiltration panic and the massive surveillance network it brought with Hoover at the helm. The Red Scare began with the McCarthy Era, when Senator Joseph McCarthy (R-Wisconsin) rose to prominence for his claims that Communists had infiltrated the government. The power he subsequently amassed led to his being named chairman of the Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations in 1953. From his post, he targeted "alleged subversion and espionage," but his tenure as head was short-lived. The Senate censured him for his crusade the very next year.[80] Even without McCarthy targeting subversion and espionage was

[80] US Senate, "Joseph R. McCarthy: A Featured Biography" (United States Senate, n.d.), https://www.senate.gov/senators/FeaturedBios/Featured_Bio_McCarthy.htm.

at the heart of the Bureau's work, and Hoover continued the crusade against Communism where the disgraced senator left off.

Literary scholar Mary Helen Washington frames the sociopolitical climate pointedly: "[w]hether on the Left or the Right, African Americans were, by virtue of their blackness, subversives in the Cold War".[81] Subversiveness is a framework for otherness, and Black people were among the original American subversives—it had barely been decades since slavery ended and the fact of Black humanity politically affirmed at all, and the Jim Crow Era saw slavery's ideologies enacted through legal and extralegal policing. Despite this inherent alienation from the American capitalist project, Black people were largely written out of the history of American socialism, the Communist Party USA (CPUSA) and the Red Scare. Washington notes that while history remembers "white Diaper babies, white HUAC hearings of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), white Red feminism, and a white blacklist…White people who were called before HUAC found themselves under suspicion for having black friends, or being in an interracial marriage, or listening to black music".[82] Even though the Red Scare was historicized as a white movement, Black people were at its ideological and cultural core by virtue of their political otherness, and many high-profile Black intellectuals during the Cold War were either members of the Party or sympathized with the movement.

As Washington argues in her essay[83] "Alice Childress, Lorraine Hansberry, and Claudia

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[81] Mary Helen Washington, "Alice Childress, Lorraine Hansberry, and Claudia Jones: Black Women Write the Popular Front," in *Left of the Color Line: Race, Radicalism, and Twentieth-Century Literature of the United States*, ed. Bill V. Mullen and James Smethurst (Durham: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 184.

[82] Mary Helen Washington, "Alice Childress, Lorraine Hansberry, and Claudia Jones: Black Women Write the Popular Front," in *Left of the Color Line: Race, Radicalism, and Twentieth-Century Literature of the United States*, ed. Bill V. Mullen and James Smethurst (Durham: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 182.

[83] Washington expands her discussion of the Black Left in her 2015 book *The Other Blacklist: The African American Literary and Cultural Left of the 1950s*. In it, she takes on Alice Childress

Jones: Black Women Write the Popular Front," Black women such as Childress, Hansberry, and Jones were critical figures in Black left history. Not only were Black women active Communists, they developed a particular brand of "feminism that put working-class women at its center".[84] Black women felt pulled to class-based organizing because of the lived experience of racist discrimination. Though based in anti-Blackness, there are countless ways in which racism expresses itself as an inability to access capital or certain spaces of commerce, or as an inherent relationship of exploitation, as a worker and as a consumer. Women struggling to feed and clothe families or achieve independent financial stability felt and still feel the burden of racist structural oppression even more acutely. Black left feminism served as an political orientation by which Black women could make sense of the intersectional nature of racial oppression, class oppression, and gender-based oppression.

Black women leftists used their art as a platform by which to spread this brand of feminism. Prolific playwright and novelist Alice Childress ran a column in *Freedom* newspaper in which Mildred, "a working-class woman with a low-paying job and a knowledgeable political operative," delivered political monologues intended to educate readership about political struggle around the world from an intersectional and international perspective. In the span of four years, Childress wrote "more than thirty columns in which Mildred spoke out against the McCarthy-HUAC hearings, against the arrest of people under the Smith Act, against colonialism in Africa, against assassinations of black militant leaders, and against the growing anticommunism among

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and Gwendolyn Brooks as two of her subjects in a larger discussion of the Black left; I read her 2003 article here instead for its deep focus on the cultural rise of Black left feminism.

[84] Mary Helen Washington, "Alice Childress, Lorraine Hansberry, and Claudia Jones: Black Women Write the Popular Front," in *Left of the Color Line: Race, Radicalism, and Twentieth-Century Literature of the United States*, ed. Bill V. Mullen and James Smethurst (Durham: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 185.

black leaders".[85] Though canonized for her 1959 play *A Raisin in the Sun,* famed playwright Lorraine Hansberry cut her journalistic teeth as a "roving reporter and staff writer" at *Freedom*, writing articles "about women's [liberation] movements in Egypt, Argentina, China, Korea, Brazil, Kenya, and Jamaica…[a]t every opportunity Hansberry foreground[ed] black women's labor issues, advocat[ed] women's equality, and focus[ed] on international women's movements[86]". As is regularly the case, Black women took it upon themselves to develop a critical, inclusive, and gender-equality focused politics and make sure that this politics spread throughout their communities.

This push for non-stop data collection just below the surface is particularly evident in dossier NY 100-107297, Lorraine Hansberry's surveillance record. According to Washington, Hansberry amassed a "three-binder FBI file" for her "activities in the 1950s," including writing plays and articles which were "militantly left-wing, antiracist, anticolonialist, socialist," and "feminist".[87] The file begins with a confidential memo about Hansberry's 1952 article "A Negro Woman Speaks For Peace," published in the *Worker*, "the Sunday edition of the 'Daily Worker'," a CPUSA publication. The memo notes that she also had a history of participating in leftist

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[85] Mary Helen Washington, "Alice Childress, Lorraine Hansberry, and Claudia Jones: Black Women Write the Popular Front," in *Left of the Color Line: Race, Radicalism, and Twentieth-Century Literature of the United States*, ed. Bill V. Mullen and James Smethurst (Durham: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 189.

[86] Mary Helen Washington, "Alice Childress, Lorraine Hansberry, and Claudia Jones: Black Women Write the Popular Front," in *Left of the Color Line: Race, Radicalism, and Twentieth-Century Literature of the United States*, ed. Bill V. Mullen and James Smethurst (Durham: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 193-4.
Washington includes another truly revolutionary fact of Hansberry and *Freedom*'s journalistic style: "But the most creative and ingenious way the paper strengthened its coverage of women — a practice undoubtedly initiated by female staffers—was by inserting photographs of women in articles even when they were mostly about men. For example, in Hansberry's story on the Kikuyu people's anticolonialist struggle against the British, the accompanying photo is not of the men in prison but of the Kikuyu women marching on the prison compound." (Washington 194)

[87] Mary Helen Washington, "Alice Childress, Lorraine Hansberry, and Claudia Jones: Black Women Write the Popular Front," in *Left of the Color Line: Race, Radicalism, and Twentieth-Century Literature of the United States*, ed. Bill V. Mullen and James Smethurst (Durham: The University of North Carolina

events, serving as a delegate to the Montevideo Inter-Continental Peace Congress and planning to attend an American Peace Crusade and New York Peace Institute festival. For these reasons, the FBI Director commanded the Chicago field office to "institute an investigation of the subject to determine whether or not her activities warrant her inclusion in the Security Index".[88]

A reader might think that at nearly one thousand pages long, the file discusses some targeted surveillance programs or plans for some other such harm to befall Hansberry. On the contrary, from my reading it seems that the FBI was less interested in targeting Hansberry and more interested in data collection *just in case* a moment ever arose in which their extensive database could be used against her. Where the state took advantage of Billie Holiday's personal struggles to publicly embarrass and excoriate her, the bureau felt that they could not interview Hansberry because "of the possibility of embarrassment to the Bureau due to the subject's profession as a writer, and her notoriety in the New York press".[89] This is an answer to a form question that appears to be the only response ever given to this question; it seems that what actually protected Hansberry from further targeting was her visibility as the playwright behind *A Raisin in The Sun*.

The fact that the FBI collected one thousand pages of information about Hansberry, meticulously cutting out hundreds of newspaper articles about her and pasting them into her file (and I am also thinking about the women secretaries who likely did that work, only appearing as the sets of initials typed into in the "completed by" box on various cover page forms) only to never publicly interact with her, still illuminates just how important information tracking was to the bureau's greater mission. Hansberry's file shows three bureau fixations in particular: they

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Press, 2003), 194.

[88] Lorraine Hansberry, "FBI File NY 100-107297-2" (FOIA dossier, US Department of Justice, 1965), 2, <watching.black/files/collections/show/4 >.

[89] Lorraine Hansberry, "FBI File NY 100-107297-1" (FOIA dossier, US Department of Justice,

want to maintain up-to-date address information and sniff out a wider radical actor network through location data (perhaps flipping informants along the way), they want to maintain up-to-date bibliographies of what radical thinkers are writing and saying, and in so doing they want to track transformations in radical thought.

When reading individual FBI dossiers released through Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests, one of the most unnerving elements is the consistent interest in maintaining accurate address data. From the first pages of her dossier, the bureau is incredibly concerned with being able to establish where Hansberry actually lives. First in February 1953 is "5936 South Parkway with her mother, Mrs. IRMA HANSBERRY, until approximately one year ago," as well as 124 West 124th St in Harlem where Hansberry is purported to be working. Informants close to the family furnish this detailed information, and they are able to quickly pinpoint locations at which the writer has lived as well as those who lived there with her. This address matches the available qualitative data, which notes that "the subject is now a student at some school in New York City".[90] The last page offers a summary of Hansberry's known associates and their locations:

> "Mother - IRMA HANSBERRY,
> 5936 South Parkway
> Sister - MAMIE L. HANSBERRY,
> same address
> Brother - CARL HANSBERRY,
> 6140 South Rhodes"[91]

Address and associate data rapidly accrete over the course of the file. In March 1953, the New York address of her employer, the Frederick Douglass Educational Center, is pinpointed.[92] In

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1965), 35, <watching.black/files/collections/show/4 >.

[90] Lorraine Hansberry, "FBI File NY 100-107297-2" (FOIA dossier, US Department of Justice, 1965), 8, <watching.black/files/collections/show/4 >.

[91] Lorraine Hansberry, "FBI File NY 100-107297-2" (FOIA dossier, US Department of Justice, 1965), 10, <watching.black/files/collections/show/4 >.

[92] Lorraine Hansberry, "FBI File NY 100-107297-2" (FOIA dossier, US Department of Justice,

November 1953, her family's address at her birth is pulled from her birth certificate.[93] A week later: another New York address, as well as an associate name and address, her father's name, and both parents' birthdates and locations, are added.[94] A month later: the subject name is changed to her married name, Lorraine Vivian Hansberry Nemiroff, to reflect the identification of her husband, their New York address,[95] and the fact that he was also under surveillance for communist activities[96]. This is also the file that recommends Hansberry for inclusion into the Security Index[97], an "administrative aid within the FBI" that "contained information regarding individuals considered potentially dangerous to the United States," defined as "persons who reasonably could be expected to commit, or conspire with others to commit, espionage or sabotage," criteria that later "broadened to include members or affiliates of other revolutionary groups".[98] It appears Hansberry was added to the index because she was identified as being a member of the Communist Party USA. The file does not explicitly say this, but rather provides a set of options to choose from: "Communist," "Socialist Workers Party," "Independent Socialist League," and "Miscellaneous". At the time of this file, these were the groups considered most likely to sabotage the United States, and suspected membership is all that is needed for elevation in the surveillance network.

1965), 15, <watching.black/files/collections/show/4 >.

[93] Lorraine Hansberry, "FBI File NY 100-107297-2" (FOIA dossier, US Department of Justice, 1965), 19, <watching.black/files/collections/show/4 >.

[94] Lorraine Hansberry, "FBI File NY 100-107297-2" (FOIA dossier, US Department of Justice, 1965), 20, <watching.black/files/collections/show/4 >.

[95] Lorraine Hansberry, "FBI File NY 100-107297-2" (FOIA dossier, US Department of Justice, 1965), 24, <watching.black/files/collections/show/4 >.

[96] Lorraine Hansberry, "FBI File NY 100-107297-2" (FOIA dossier, US Department of Justice, 1965), 26, <watching.black/files/collections/show/4 >.

[97] Lorraine Hansberry, "FBI File NY 100-107297-2" (FOIA dossier, US Department of Justice, 1965), 24, <watching.black/files/collections/show/4 >.

[98] Comptroller General, "FBI Domestic Intelligence Operations—Their Purpose and Scope: Issues that Need to be Resolved," (Report to the House Committee on the Judiciary, Comptroller of the United States, 1976), 67.

FBI surveillance is highly networked in this way, reflecting the bureau's general interest in being able to establish a network of influencers. We see this happen across Hansberry's file; as the bureau can establish places where she has been—her location data—she can be connected to other people who have been at those locations. For example, the next file provides evidence for why Hansberry should be included in the Security Index, as "evidence of Communist Party sympathies". One point notes an article that describes how Hansberry spoke on a 1952 panel including a CPUSA leader who was "convicted…for violation of the Smith Act".[99] The file next notes Hansberry's activities with the Montevideo Inter-Continental Peace Congress, the American Peace Crusade, and the New York Peace Institute,[100] and spends the next few pages outlining available bureau information about the American Peace Crusade. Much of it is redacted for reason B1, information related to national defense or foreign policy, but we might imagine that the redacted data connects Hansberry to other members of the Peace Crusade, particularly given that Hansberry's file was declassified in 1988[101] during the Cold War.

The information mentioned above comes from articles in the *Daily Worker*. The FBI cites *Worker* articles over and over again in the files of suspected communists, making it evident that they read, scan, and analyze every issue of the magazine. In the first file, which recounts the results from the bureau's requested security investigation into Hansberry, a "miscellaneous" section offers detailed information about Hansberry gleaned from past issues of the *Daily Worker,* including news of her employment and a brief synopsis of an April 1952 speech she gave

[99] Lorraine Hansberry, "FBI File NY 100-107297-2" (FOIA dossier, US Department of Justice, 1965), 28, <watching.black/files/collections/show/4 >.
[100] Lorraine Hansberry, "FBI File NY 100-107297-2" (FOIA dossier, US Department of Justice, 1965), 28, <watching.black/files/collections/show/4 >.
[101] Lorraine Hansberry, "FBI File NY 100-107297" (FOIA dossier, US Department of Justice, 1965), 1, <watching.black/files/collections/show/4 >.

in New York discussing the Inter-American Peace Congress[102]. From a surveillance perspective the *Worker* is an excellent dataset. Even though the magazine is reporting Communist news after it has happened, it gives the FBI an up-to-date record of which CPUSA members are doing and saying what, when they did it, and with whom; the algorithm gets smarter with each issue.

In fact, it is the *Worker*'s reporting that alerts the FBI to the fact that Hansberry has been traveling internationally to events connected to communist organizations, influencing the location data they begin to gather from her. In the second file of the dossier, the FBI director issues a 1953 request to the "Washington Field Office" to "examine the files of the Passport Division…in an effort to obtain all available background material on the subject, any derogatory information contained therein, and a photograph and complete description of the subject".[103] After a bit of back and forth, Hansberry's passport was located a few months later. How the FBI got Hansberry's passport is unclear; they simply state that it was "picked up by the State Department".[104] Accessing this file gave the FBI access to a trove of location and associate data about Hansberry, as she had written it out in her passport application, to cross-reference against what they already knew: parents and friends names, as well as a growing list of addresses. Her State Department passport application states that she planned to travel to "England, Scotland, France, and Italy for the purpose of vacation," but her passport stamps showed she'd actually traveled to Uruguay and Argentina, as reported in the *Worker*. Following this discovery, Hansberry was recommended for the Security Index.

It also becomes clear from Hansberry's dossier that the FBI likes to stay well read. File

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[102] Lorraine Hansberry, "FBI File NY 100-107297-2" (FOIA dossier, US Department of Justice, 1965), 8, <watching.black/files/collections/show/4 >.
[103] Lorraine Hansberry, "FBI File NY 100-107297-2" (FOIA dossier, US Department of Justice, 1965), 15, <watching.black/files/collections/show/4 >.
[104] Lorraine Hansberry, "FBI File NY 100-107297-2" (FOIA dossier, US Department of Justice, 1965), 15, <watching.black/files/collections/show/4 >.

#100-393031-32 of the dossier is a four-page, single-spaced exegesis of *A Raisin In the Sun*, by Special Agent REDACTED, "at the request of the New York Office".[105] Written after researching reviews and attending a 1959 performance starring Ruby Dee and Sidney Poitier, what amounts to a literary analysis of the play reads the central plot action through the FBI's data interest framework:

> "The play contains no comments of any nature about Communism as such but deals essentially with negro aspirations, the problems inherent in their efforts to advance themselves, and varied attempts at arriving at solutions."[106]

This reading is followed by scans of an entire Playbill, advertisements and all, attempting to create a complete data record of Hansberry and the play. After a bit of back and forth between the Bureau and its New York field office, it is determined that

> "While there is nothing to indicate that the play has any subversive connotation, it should be noted that case files exist on several individual connected with the production. These are as follows: REDACTED"[107]

Even though the Bureau assesses that the play is not a threat, they continue to collect newspaper clippings describing and reviewing the play, perhaps just in case the information could be useful. This scenario may have arisen only years later; as the heightened state of postwar Communist panic gave way to a heightened state of Civil Rights panic, Hansberry was suddenly being

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[105] Lorraine Hansberry, "FBI File NY 100-107297-4" (FOIA dossier, US Department of Justice, 1965), 3, <watching.black/files/collections/show/4 >.
[106] Lorraine Hansberry, "FBI File NY 100-107297-4" (FOIA dossier, US Department of Justice, 1965), 3, <watching.black/files/collections/show/4 >.
[107] Lorraine Hansberry, "FBI File NY 100-107297-4" (FOIA dossier, US Department of Justice, 1965), 29, <watching.black/files/collections/show/4 >.

investigated for her involvement in Black activism. Immediately after the newspaper clipping collection, the dossier includes a 1963 letter requesting that a "memorandum be sent to the Attorney General furnishing information in our files concerning the individuals who met with the Attorney General [Robert Kennedy] and Assistant Attorney General [Burke] Marshall in New York City on 5-24-63 to discuss racial matters".[108] Though the attendees are redacted on this page, an unredacted page later in the file reveals the guest list to be thirteen Black activists, Including Harry Belafonte, Lena Horne, James Baldwin, David Baldwin (James' brother), and of course Lorraine Hansberry.[109] From this point in the file, the surveillance network's attention turns to monitoring and policing Black resistance. Even as the file purports to be tracking Hansberry, in many ways it reveals much more about the Bureau's desire for particular kinds of politically useful information than it reveals about Hansberry.

Despite passing away two years after this meeting at the age of thirty-four, the FBI collected at least seven hundred more pages worth of information and administrative paperwork about Hansberry. What the intensive data collection does reveal about Hansberry is that she continued to do her work as a playwright and journalist regardless of who was watching. In one early *Freedom* article, she found herself in Washington, DC reporting on an October 1951 meeting of the Sojourners for Truth and Justice, a collective of "pro-Communist [Black] women, including Childress, marching in the spirit of Tubman and Truth to demand the death of Jim Crow"[110]. The Sojourners, who called themselves "the wives, mothers, and victims of race hatred," organized themselves around pooling their resources in service of supporting the greater

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[108] Lorraine Hansberry, "FBI File NY 100-107297-4" (FOIA dossier, US Department of Justice, 1965), 31, <watching.black/files/collections/show/4 >.
[109] Lorraine Hansberry, "FBI File NY 100-107297-6" (FOIA dossier, US Department of Justice, 1965), 2, <watching.black/files/collections/show/4 >.
[110] Lorraine Hansberry, "FBI File NY 100-107297-3" (FOIA dossier, US Department of Justice, 1965), 8, <watching.black/files/collections/show/4 >.

good; Hansberry notes that "in New York, young women gave paychecks and new-clothes money to send and be sent as Sojourners[111]". As historian Ashley D. Farmer reminds us, Hansberry was not the only one reporting on the Sojourners; the FBI began surveilling the group in September 1951 as they prepared for their first public action a month later.

In stark contrast to Hansberry's reporting, the FBI wrote the Sojourners as "attempting to 'disguise' the 'true Communist character' of their organization by 'secur[ing] Negro women' who were 'interested only in the betterment of the Negro race' for their subversive causes" and organizing toward "larger plans to incite a 'revolution' among Black people".[112] These Black "wives and mothers" were organizing themselves politically and economically, giving the FBI cause to fear that they were building toward insurrection on the same level as enslaved Black communities mere decades prior. As with Denmark Vesey and Gabriel Prosser then, the FBI did everything in their power to destabilize and weaken the Sojourner movement. The Sojourners, however, were able to collectively resist by using their public platform to speak about the invasive surveillance tactics agents used. For example, one Sojourner "detailed how men in dark suits denied the group entry into their pre-arranged meetings. She also told of how the Sojourners could barely maneuver in and out of buildings because these men followed and photographed them as they moved".[113] Like Hansberry, the Sojourners undercut the oppressive violence of

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[111] Mary Helen Washington, "Alice Childress, Lorraine Hansberry, and Claudia Jones: Black Women Write the Popular Front," in *Left of the Color Line: Race, Radicalism, and Twentieth-Century Literature of the United States*, ed. Bill V. Mullen and James Smethurst (Durham: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 193-4.

[112] Ashley D Farmer, "Tracking Activists: The FBI's Surveillance of Black Women Activists Then and Now," *The American Historian*, no. History for Black Lives (September) (2020), https://www.oah.org/tah/issues/2020/history-for-black-lives/tracking-activists-the-fbis-surveillance-of-black-women-activists-then-and-now/.

[113] Ashley D Farmer, "Tracking Activists: The FBI's Surveillance of Black Women Activists Then and Now," *The American Historian*, no. History for Black Lives (September) (2020), https://www.oah.org/tah/issues/2020/history-for-black-lives/tracking-activists-the-fbis-surveillance-of-black-women-activists-then-and-now/.

surveillance by speaking, writing, and creating, illustrating their inability to be intimidated while also illustrating the power of the federal networks they faced.

Organizational espionage and building informant networks was an equally important destabilization tactic. Inside information was critical for white power structures to stop slave insurrections; the same was true of the FBI and Black left feminist activism. In her article "Tracking Activists: The FBI's Surveillance of Black Women Activists Then and Now," Farmer highlights Black women and Black women's organizations targeted for FBI interference. The Sojourners were targeted for destabilization in the hopes that their subversive grassroots activism would be poisoned; activist Audley Moore was targeted as a federal informant. Moore was a member of the Universal Negro Improvement Association (UNIA), under heavy surveillance alongside its leader Marcus Garvey. The FBI successfully weakened the organization by deporting Garvey, and Moore spent the next two decades organizing with the Communist Party.

Given her network of connections and "wealth of organizing experience," it was clear that Moore was a prime individual target for surveillance. The FBI appears to have respected the amount of information regarding Black activist networks to which Moore was privy; when interrogating her, they asked Moore to "name [her] price" to divulge. However, Moore had a greater sense of morality and justice than could be purchased. According to her FBI files, "agents recorded that 'in nearly all instances…[Moore] entered into a diatribe on the injustices being suffered by the Negro" and "repeatedly queried her interrogators, asking why she 'noticed nothing but White men' employed at the FBI office." Ultimately, Moore declared "that she would not be a witness" and that "she would not discuss these matters again".[114]

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[114] Ashley D Farmer, "Tracking Activists: The FBI's Surveillance of Black Women Activists Then and Now," *The American Historian*, no. History for Black Lives (September) (2020), https://www.oah.org/tah/issues/2020/history-for-black-lives/tracking-activists-the-fbis-surveillance-of-black-women-activists-then-and-now/.

Reading FBI surveillance through their own actions relating to Black women appears to show that the FBI is primarily interested in data collection above action. This is of course not to say that the FBI completely refrained from interfering in the daily lives and institutions of American citizens; it is this action, through programs like COINTELPRO, with which the Bureau is most closely associated, and they made their presence known to the Sojourners in an attempt to intimidate them into political inaction. However, according to former MuckRock researcher JPat Brown, "the simplest answer is that the FBI is basically operating as sort of a Google or a Facebook of the day. [Brown] used to joke about how J. Edgar Hoover was the architect of the modern world, in…the idea that you could just type a name in and all this basic biographical information would come up. In many ways it's what the FBI's real purpose was…It's this idea of record-keeping as something that is both inherently sinister and benevolent at the same time".[115]

Using its information databases, built by a surveillance network powered by and empowering informants and using adjacent legislative powers to its advantage, the state can create and assign a data narrative based on its needs and desires, separate from and above the narrative one might give themselves. In this respect, the state and the House of New Dawn are not that dissimilar. "Dirty computer" is an algorithmic identity delivered by the surveillance institution when the subject in question does not produce the data narrative required and desired. This narrative reading and identification only serves to reinforce that which is ideologically

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[115] JPat Brown, Interview with a FOIA Researcher, February 9, 2021.

Though no longer working in investigative journalism, JPat Brown was the researcher that initially requested Audre Lorde's FBI file and posted the correspondence chain and file on MuckRock. I was able to interview him about FBI surveillance and the process of FOIA requesting files, when he offered this particularly useful assessment of how the FBI functions in relation to present technoculture. An edited transcript of our interview

desirable by the state. Thankfully, we do not actually live in the world *Dirty Computer* depicts, where one can be incarcerated and have their entire memory downloaded and mind wiped at the whims of the state. Nevertheless, it is a matter of civilian safety and sovereignty that the state narrative not be one of violent exclusion.

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can be found in the appendix.

Chapter 2 - *Zami*: Erotic Data

Of the numerous Black women under FBI surveillance over the course of the 20th century, I am particularly interested in womanist poet Audre Lorde because she explicitly writes back against her own surveillance and the surveillance state in her canonical biomythography, *Zami: A New Spelling of My Name*. In the biomythography, a blend of fact and fiction pieced together to construct a life narrative, she recounts the beginning of her life traced through the women she relates to as family, friend, and lover, "recreating in words the women who helped give [her] substance". She calls this network of women Zami: "a Carriacou name for women who work together as friends and lovers".[116] I argue that in *Zami*, she constructs a radical framework for thinking data aggregation that works against oppressive surveillance structures by exploding the coded structures of watching, recording, and analyzing data. Following in her theoretical lineage, I call this erotic data.

NY 100-122142, Audre Lorde's bureau dossier containing nine files spanning about twenty-five years, references her real-world activity and cross-references the files of other radical figures in the Civil Rights and Communist movements. The dossier is publicly available, but not listed in the FBI Records Vault Index despite having been requested by multiple researchers under the Freedom of Information Act. I found her files by chance searching the internet; I came across the MuckRock website, where a team of investigative journalists compile and analyze FBI files and other federal records, and Lorde's file was one of those made public on their website. They also generously provide the chain of correspondence with the National Archives and Records Administration staff in filing their FOIA request for Lorde's files, for a closer look at how such information transactions between citizens and the government take

[116] Audre Lorde, *Zami, A New Spelling of My Name*, 1st ed. (New York: Crossing Press, 1982), 255.

place.

Lorde's dossier contains a series of agent correspondence from the spring of 1957 seeking to recruit her for the Security Informant Program. File 100-122142-5[117] from June 12 of that year records a visit paid Lorde the day before at her New York residence. Two Special Agents interviewed her about her knowledge of and dealings with the Communist Party, and according to the file Lorde

> "was very cordial, invited the agents into her apartment and was friendly throughout the interview…She stated that she believed Communism was evil but the people she once thought were Communists were misguided and would, eventually, see things the American way."

The complete opposite of Audley Moore, agents report Lorde to be a kind and agreeable host. The official narrative states that Lorde listened to agents' questions and affirmed herself to be a good and trustworthy American. And yet, despite this strongly declared nationalist sentiment, agents were unable to flip her:

> "She stated that she disliked Communism but she would be unable to bring herself to the point where she would report on them.…She was asked to give the matter of cooperating with the Bureau further thought and give us her decision at a later date but she said she was sure that she wouldn't change her mind".[118]

Though the official FBI narrative says that Lorde stated herself to be in agreement with agents, it is far more likely that she offered these responses under coercion or in an attempt to get FBI agents to leave her home with as little tension as possible. For one, the files glaringly do not state

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[117] Audre Lorde, "FBI File 100-NY-122145-5" (FOIA dossier, US Department of Justice, 1972), <watching.black/files/exhibits/show/audre-lorde>.
[118] Audre Lorde, "FBI File 100-NY-122145-5" (FOIA dossier, US Department of Justice, 1972), <watching.black/files/exhibits/show/audre-lorde>.

what questions agents asked in order to garner such answers from Lorde, nor how the agents asked them. It is completely logical that Lorde, only twenty-three when agents appear at her door, said whatever the agents wanted her to say in order to end the encounter as soon as possible.

There is precedent for this logic; in her biomythography *Zami*, Lorde provides her counternarrative to the FBI files when she tells the story of FBI agents appearing at her door five years earlier at "the height of the McCarthy Era," looking for a couch-surfing friend of hers; Lorde "knew enough not to let them past [her] door". When agents returned with the woman's mother, Lorde answered the one question "the FBI legitimately could ask" about her knowledge of her friend's whereabouts and "breathed a sigh of relief as [she] closed the door behind them".[119] In those moments, even Lorde implies she is relatively cooperative and forthcoming with answers. She does so despite her wariness and fear, an emotion present in the pages of her narrative yet absent from the FBI file years later.

It is not as though Lorde became a fervent nationalist in the intervening five years—agents felt they had every reason to mark her as a potential informant, rationale given in File 100-122142-4:[120]

> "Subversive Activity: Was an associate of known Communists while attending school for a short time in Mexico in 1954; resided for a short time with Joan Alexander in 1953, an L.Y.L [Labor Youth League] member during 1951 and 1952, 'Worker' subscriber in 1956…there is a statement that Alexander may be a lesbian. Nothing further on this".[121]

Agents felt that Lorde was a useful target simply by her *association* with key subversive groups:

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[119] Audre Lorde, *Zami, A New Spelling of My Name*, 1st ed. (New York: Crossing Press, 1982), 121.
[120] Audre Lorde, "FBI File 100-NY-122145-4" (FOIA dossier, US Department of Justice, 1972), <watching.black/files/exhibits/show/audre-lorde>.
[121] Audre Lorde, "FBI File 100-NY-122145-4" (FOIA dossier, US Department of Justice, 1972),

leftists and lesbians. She existed on the periphery — close enough to be in the right rooms to overhear the right conversations and glean critical information for the state, but not so close as to be deeply politically invested and on the attack as Audley Moore was. Ironically, Lorde *was* deeply invested in black left feminist politics by virtue of her sociopolitical exposure as a black woman from an urban working poor immigrant family, yet she did exist on the periphery political groups for her sexual identity.

Lorde's Black leftist feminist leanings started young, as she began to process and understand racist events she'd experienced as a young girl. The US government and its attendant surveillance networks were waking up to major global political movements— the post-war rise of Communism, and post-war decolonization and civil rights movements. Through Lorde's teenage eyes looking out over

> "the summer of 1948…there was no longer any doubt in anybody's mind that China would soon be Red China, and three cheers for the communists. My revolutionary fervor that had begun with a white waitress refusing to serve my family ice cream in the nation's capital was becoming a clearer and clearer position, a lens through which to view the world".[122]

These revolutionary positions explicitly marked Lorde as anti-American, but she was taught by her mother from a young age that America is a racist and sexist country. She lived and breathed the post-war energy for combatting capitalist greed and anti-black oppression, and was starting to view the world from a leftist and anti-racist perspective.

Her newfound politics were inextricable from the rapidly growing community of women awakening politically around her, enacting radical feminist community building out of a desire to

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<watching.black/files/exhibits/show/audre-lorde>.

[122] Audre Lorde, *Zami, A New Spelling of My Name*, 1st ed. (New York: Crossing Press, 1982), 87.

live big and grow. The apartment where the FBI interviewed Lorde, on Spring Street in Manhattan's SoHo neighborhood, was her first place after graduating high school and moving out; it represented her adult independence and freedom. It also served as a waypoint for young Black and white women in New York City finding themselves as adults and as revolutionaries. Lorde describes "a constant stream of young women in and out of [her] apartment, most of them in varying periods and conditions of distress".[123] The FBI agents were looking for a woman named Bobbi, one of the formerly wounded women Lorde knew from high school who passed through the apartment on her way to California and toward radical self-possession.

Lorde and her community knew they were "a menace to the status quo," and they "defined [their] rebellions as such". This was in sharp contrast to the first set of agents who showed up at her door looking for Bobbi, whom Lorde categorized as "stupid and male and proper and blonde and only a little bit threatening in their buttoned-down shirts and striped ties". The second pair of agents returning with Bobbi's mother Lorde deemed as "indistinguishable from the last…there seemed to be a never-ending supply of slightly stupid-looking, slightly menacing, blonde, blue-eyed gumshoes available in 1952".[124] Even at eighteen, let alone when agents reappeared at her door years later seeking her cooperation, she thought of the surveillance network as a bunch of slightly stupid white male gumshoes. She and her friends were smarter, cooler looking, and more radical than these gumshoes could ever hope to be, and for the most part she paid them and their visits no mind.

Even as her radical activist involvement increased and her community grew, Lorde couldn't shake the feeling of exposure she felt. For sociologist Ruha Benjamin, exposure as a concept denotes how some systems can "fail to see Blackness, while others render Black people

[123] Audre Lorde, *Zami, A New Spelling of My Name*, 1st ed. (New York: Crossing Press, 1982), 120.
[124] Audre Lorde, *Zami, A New Spelling of My Name*, 1st ed. (New York: Crossing Press, 1982), 121.

hypervisible and expose them to systems of racial surveillance".[125] She discusses exposure in the context of race as it plays out through social and scientific technologies. Lorde was inherently exposed in American society and surveillance networks for being Black, but even in the radical leftist spaces where she organized with other women she was exposed for being a lesbian. These feelings of exposure and alienation came to a head shortly after a rally she attended in support of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg, famously convicted of espionage for passing knowledge of American nuclear weaponry to the Soviet Union in 1951. The couple was slated for federal execution barring the intervention of the executive branch, and Lorde and her friends went to Washington, D.C. to plea that the order be overturned. Their efforts were ultimately fruitless and the Rosenbergs were executed two weeks later. Caught in a whirlwind of emotions, Lorde felt that

> "The Rosenbergs' struggle became synonymous for me with being able to live in this country at all, with being able to survive in hostile surroundings…I could imagine [my] comrades, Black and white, among whom color and racial differences could be openly examined and talked about, nonetheless one day asking me accusingly, 'Are you or have you ever been a member of a homosexual relationship?' For them, being gay was 'bourgeois and reactionary,' a reason for suspicion and shunning. Besides, it made you 'more susceptible to the FBI.'..I walked away from the memorial rally in Union Square Park into the warm village night, tears streaming down my face for them…wondering whether there was any place in the world that was different from here, anywhere that was safe and free, not even really sure of what being safe and free could mean. But it did not

[125] Ruha Benjamin, *Race After Technology: Abolitionist Tools for the New Jim Code* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019), 145.

mean being lonely, disillusioned, betrayed."[126]

Coming to terms with the political reality of being American, as a leftist and as a black woman, she found herself forced to explain her queerness at the same time that she was beginning to understand it herself. Her life was influenced by surveillance on many levels — she grew up aware of the constant watch of her mother and teachers, and experienced the surveillance and judgement of her peers as she engaged in political activism. Ultimately, she was seeking a place where she could be herself, live freely and happily, and with stability.

This exposure drove Lorde to uproot and move to Mexico to study for a year, seeking a place where she could be "safe and free" of the repressive scan of her body and actions and the consequences of that scan. She found herself on a plane to Mexico City in 1953, nearing her nineteenth birthday. Shortly upon her arrival she signed up for classes at Ciudad Universitaria, and then traveled south to the city of Cuernavaca to meet Frieda Mathews and her daughter Tammy. She connected with Frieda through a friend of her former New York roommate and comrade Rhea. Rhea had thrown Lorde a surprise going away party before she left New York, and a friend of hers connected Lorde to Frieda knowing her from their wartime work serving with the Lincoln Brigade.

The American expat community in Mexico was largely made up of political exiles driven out. Lorde met "members of the red-baited Hollywood Ten…there were victims of other McCarthyist purges...[they] had in common many of Rhea's friends, and many of the people [Lorde] had met while working on the Rosenberg committee in the years before."[127] The community was diverse yet its members were nearly all connected because of Communism, and many had moved to Mexico to escape further US government antagonism.

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[126] Audre Lorde, *Zami, A New Spelling of My Name*, 1st ed. (New York: Crossing Press, 1982), 149.
[127] Audre Lorde, *Zami, A New Spelling of My Name*, 1st ed. (New York: Crossing Press, 1982), 159.

Lorde was not there because she had been directly targeted by the government, but her general feeling of being an outsider as a gay black left feminist fueled her trip. Despite moving to escape social exposure, Lorde still felt the presence of the FBI in Mexico:

> "There was not the stench of terror and political repression so present in New York; we were 3,500 miles away. But any idea that immunity from McCarthyism might be conferred by borders had been shattered two years before...FBI agents had descended upon Mexico and hustled Morton Sobell, alleged co-conspirator of Ethel and Julius Rosenberg, out of Mexico and right back across the border to stand trial for treason"[128]

Lorde was also presciently aware that surveillance happened in every day interactions—anyone could turn out to be a confidential informants for the FBI or some other such surveillance networks. With so many countries fresh from war, the entire world in the midst of major social change, and the US in the middle of waging a campaign against communism that played out as a war against US citizens, Lorde seems to indicate it is impossible to know who to trust, writing that "caution and fear of newcomers was everywhere, mixed up with a welcoming excitement at any new face". At the same time, she focused in on the fact that she was in a beautiful new city and country, 3,500 miles away from Manhattan, and took in the intimate data of this new place even as it was intermingled with its lurking danger: "Expectation of some new political disaster from the north, as yet unspecified, was also everywhere. So were the ripe luscious bougainvillea with their flame-red voluptuous flowers, and their delicate and persistent showers of jacaranda blossoms, with their small white and pink purple petals, behind which all of these anxieties flourished".[129]

Lorde integrated herself into the expat community, regularly going swimming or dining

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[128] Audre Lorde, *Zami, A New Spelling of My Name*, 1st ed. (New York: Crossing Press, 1982), 159.
[129] Audre Lorde, *Zami, A New Spelling of My Name*, 1st ed. (New York: Crossing Press, 1982), 159.

with Frieda and some of her other friends. It is in this community of women "older and far more experienced"[130] that she met Eudora, an older expat and journalist originally from Chicago. She was but one woman in Lorde's autobiography, but in many ways an paradigmatic example of the intricate ways in which Lorde learns herself and builds community with other women, a process she calls Zami.

When Lorde engages with women through Zami, whether in family, community, work, friendship, or lovemaking, she takes them in as a living, breathing collection of information. The clearest example comes ten pages into *Zami*—Lorde illustrates her mother, Linda Belmar Lorde, as a four-page poetic report on all of the information that Linda knows. This database spans from the island of Carriacou in Grenada, where Linda and her husband Byron were born, to Lenox Avenue in Harlem, where the newlyweds moved in 1924 in search of work. Lorde repeats the phrase "she knew" or a variation of it seventeen times, detailing all of the things Linda knows:

> "She knew about bundling up against the wicked cold. … She knew about mixing oils for bruises and rashes, and about disposing of all toenail clippings and hair from the comb. … my mother knew how to frighten children into behaving in public. She knew how to make virtues out of necessities. … Linda knew green things were precious, and the peaceful, healing qualities of water.[131]

These data points are interspersed with things that "Linda missed," indexed six times:

> "Linda missed the bashing of the waves against the sea-wall at the foot of Noel's Hill … She missed the swift-flying bananaquits and the trees … She missed the music that did not have to be listened to because it was always around. Most of all, she missed the

[130] Audre Lorde, *Zami, A New Spelling of My Name*, 1st ed. (New York: Crossing Press, 1982), 160.
[131] Audre Lorde, *Zami, A New Spelling of My Name*, 1st ed. (New York: Crossing Press, 1982), 10-12.

Sunday-long boat trips that took her to Aunt Anni's in Carriacou"[132]

Not only does Lorde take her mother seriously as a composition of information, one form of an algorithmic body, she privileges her mother's data over data found in mainstream sources. She ends her report on her mother with a précis of the things Linda knew about "home," Carriacou, a wealth of information about "the heavy smell of limes…plants that healed…plants that drove you crazy…trees and fruits and flowers…a place [Lorde] had never been to but knew well out of [her] mother's mouth … How Carriacou women love each other is legend in Grenada, and so is their strength and their beauty".[133] Carriacou is where Zami coalesces and gathers its strength.

She soon learned this was not the state record, the first of many times she clashes with the institutional narrative. Despite being so deeply felt as a place and as a self-orientation, an epistemology even, Carriacou "was not listed in the index of the *Goode's School Atlas* nor in the *Junior Americana World Gazette* nor appeared on any map that [Lorde] could find". She notes in a footnote that "as a partial requirement for a degree in library science, [she] did a detailed comparison of atlases…[the isle of Carriacou] appeared only once, in the *Atlas of the Encyclopedia Britannica,* which has always prided itself upon the accurate cartology of its colonies".[134]

No matter what a grade-school atlas illustrated, knowledge of Carriacou gained through the data of experience was deeply stored and felt within Linda Belmar Lorde and transmitted from mother to daughter. Lorde stored it deeply within her as her own data of place and home and distilled the information into poetry, "a revelatory distillation of experience".[135] A revelatory distillation of experience connotes information about the world broken down for the kernels of

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[132] Audre Lorde, *Zami, A New Spelling of My Name*, 1st ed. (New York: Crossing Press, 1982), 11.
[133] Audre Lorde, *Zami, A New Spelling of My Name*, 1st ed. (New York: Crossing Press, 1982), 13-14.
[134] Audre Lorde, *Zami, A New Spelling of My Name*, 1st ed. (New York: Crossing Press, 1982), 14.
[135] Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, (New York: Crossing Press, 1984), 38.

observable truth within, truths that build up again as new experiential data enters and is distilled again. To think about poetry as data analysis means to take seriously that which we take in to our senses as data, and poetics as a process of analyzing that data. To Lorde, this "is poetry as illumination"; "the quality of light by which we scrutinize our lives [which] has direct bearing upon the product which we live, and upon the changes which we hope to bring about through those lives"[136]. Poetry is an analysis of experience that results in revelation, the uncovering of a transformative and transcendent truth, and then recording that revelation. The quality of this analysis "forms the quality of light within which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action". Furthermore, "poetry is not a luxury, it is a vital necessity of our existence".[137] It is key to our human ability to think and dream big toward revolution and survival that we create poetry, and in so doing take in the data of the world and distill it for the critical underlying truths.

With the data Lorde received from her mother, she "spun visions of sapodilla and mango as a net over [her] Harlem tenement cot in the snoring darkness".[138] Her visions were poetry, created to serve as her anchor in the place her heart called home thousands of miles away from where her body lay. These visions were as deeply felt for her as they were for her mother, augmenting the reality she experienced in her family's tiny Harlem tenement. Lorde's spun visions, her virtual poetry, were erotic: "a measure between the beginnings of [her] sense of self and the chaos of [her] strongest feelings." Faced with coming to learn and understand home through the data her mother gave her, her erotic data poetics centered around "not a question only of what we do" but importantly privileged the "question of how acutely and fully we can

[136] Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (New York: Crossing Press, 1984), 36.
[137] Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (New York: Crossing Press, 1984), 38.
[138] Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (New York: Crossing Press, 1984),13.

feel in the doing".[139] Aggregation and analysis is looking, listening, touching, smelling, and tasting, data condensed into revelation—poetry. Erotic data poetics means understanding that analysis, that revelation, or truth, as a measure of a depth of feeling.

I take the word measure here at its multiple meanings, both as a quantifier expressing an amount and as the container holding the rhythm of poetry or music. Lorde's spun vision of fruit and trees, her poetry, act as an emotion picture holding her mother's information, connecting her to the depths and distances of her ancestry, continuing to refine as new data comes in. Her data set aggregates, and she condenses it into a poem, a tangible data object; the data set of experience aggregates and grows again, she spins it smaller again. This poetic pattern of growth and refinement is a rhythm in itself; indeed, rhythm operates as an "answer to chaos…there is rhythm wherever there is a transcoded passage from one milieu," meaning setting or context, "to another".[140] As information shifts setting—another way of framing data analysis— following an encoded path from one context to the next, it creates a pattern by which the unpredictability of chaotic data aggregation can be navigated.

The chaos of one's strongest feelings is itself algorithmic, given that "the phenomenological behavior of chaos" presents as a "sensitivity to the tiniest changes in initial conditions or seemingly random and unpredictable behavior that nevertheless follows precise rules"—it[141] is an algorithmic sensitivity based on feeling. The rhythm of this poetic data analysis is movement (expansion and contraction) rooted in feeling, the depth of feeling determining the beat of the rhythm. In this sense, rhythm is the erotic—both are a measure of the depth of one's feeling, a measure that may appear random at first glance but upon closer

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[139] Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (New York: Crossing Press, 1984), 54.
[140] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, "1837: Of the Refrain," in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 313.
[141] Robert Bishop, "Chaos," *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 2015, 40–40.

inspection is highly attuned, responsive, and logical, even algorithmic. To the extent that an algorithm is simply a "set of defined steps structured to process instructions/data to produce an output,"[142] an algorithm is a rhythm and a choreography of its own. Thus, the very rhythm of Lorde's spun data vision is erotic, a coded measure of information tracking between the origin of the self and the context in which that self feels her strongest feelings.

Erotic data poetics are a counter-rhythm to the metronomic tone of the "snoring darkness" that enveloped young Audre in her Harlem cot. The snore of darkness has a steady meter of its own but it lacks the quality of contextual shift and transformation. It is "dogmatic, but rhythm is critical; it ties together critical moments…[rhythm] changes direction.[143] Lorde's data visions were a net over her, blowing in a Carriacou wind infused with lush trees and sweet fruit, sensual and multidirectional. This is a rhythm that could not be mistaken for the droning dogma of meter, "the sterile word play that, too often, the white fathers distorted the word *poetry* to mean — in order to cover a disparate wish for imagination without insight".[144] Poetry is experiential information analysis minus sterile word play, sensual and multidirectional instructions for transcoding feeling data and moving it to a new context; an erotic algorithm.

However, the majoritarian data surveillance and policing networks in Lorde's life did not read erotic algorithms. Linda Belmar Lorde knew many ways to make children behave in public—sometimes candy, sometimes coercive force. Despite being Lorde's earliest and perhaps most enduring data base, a download of what it means to be a powerful Black woman, she also acted as the first corrective to Lorde's data erotics. Linda was a watchful disciplinarian, and an equal parenting partner in the Lorde household—punishments in particular were issued as "a

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[142] Rob Kitchin, "Thinking Critically About and Researching Algorithms," *SSRN Electronic Journal*, no. October (2014): 2.
[143] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, "1837: Of the Refrain," in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 313.

mutual and irrefutable judgement". Because Lorde's "parents shared all making of policy and decision," an uncommon family politics in 1940's America, to Lorde's "child's eye, [her] mother must have been *other* than woman"—woman,[145] plus the power to make decisions.

Lorde's child's eye is literally a perspective underneath her mother. From below her mother, she moves through the world partially informed and covered by her mother's data—it is because she looks from underneath the data she seeks that she is able to find the space for movement, rhythm, and play. It is also this looking from underneath that allows Lorde to evade some of the oppression of the surveillance system—looking at the world from underneath a net of her mother's data protects her from the oppressive darkness surrounding her cot. As can often be the case of familial relationships between women, it is a complicating factor that Lorde's mother acts as both the surveillance and policing structure and the space of safety for her. However, I would posit that the rhythm of erotic data analysis accounts for that paradox—Lorde downloads her mother's rules and is also inspired by her mother to ignore those rules and operate according to her own rules, narrativizing the information in between as poetry.

For instance, as a child Lorde "never spoke to DeLois," a woman who "lived up the block on 142nd Street…because [her] mother didn't." DeLois "never had her hair done, and all the neighborhood women sucked their teeth as she walked by". Despite this scan by the local surveillance network of Black women on their front porches, for which DeLois was flagged for erasure, "her crispy hair twinkled in the summer sun as her big proud stomach moved her on down the block." The same child's eye that measured Linda as woman + power and downloaded the instruction not to speak still "watched" DeLois as she "moved…not caring whether or not she was a poem." Lorde's scan, powered by an erotic data algorithm, output love; she "loved

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[144] Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (New York: Crossing Press, 1984), 38.
[145] Audre Lorde, *Zami, A New Spelling of My Name*, 1st ed. (New York: Crossing Press, 1982), 16.

DeLois because she was big and Black and special and seemed to laugh all over," because "hot noon threw a ring of sunlight like a halo on the top of DeLois' stomach, like a spotlight, making [Lorde] sorry that [she] was so flat".[146]

Lorde dedicates her biomythography to the woman she has become, the "images of women" that informed her development guide the path to her narrative, foregrounding looking and watching as a central theme. From her mother onward, women stood for Lorde like "dykes," the bright light separating her from "chaos". Women kept Lorde safe from impending storms, and were the measure of her strongest feelings. Through her girl's eye, positioned to orient herself upward toward women from underneath, she made it her business to look:

> "I was always bending over to tie my shoes, delaying, trying to figure out something. How to get at the money, how to peep out the secret that some women carried under their blouses like a swollen threat, under the gathers of their flowered blouses."[147]

Her girl's view scan, focused up from underneath, registered that a world of new information lay beneath women's blouses. She didn't know what the data was, only that it presented itself to her as a swollen mystery; immediately she began to find ways to suss out the secrets. When DeLois made her way down the block, a counter-rhythm to the repressive scan of Linda Belmar Lorde and the respectable Black ladies of the block, Lorde "tied [her] shoes and tried to peep under [DeLois's] blouse".[148] Her peeping is not only for pleasure, though it originates in her nascent sexual desire. Rather, she scans, analyses, and catalogues women as they come across her path, trying to take full account of the picture they present before her, good or bad, and distill the information into a kind of poetry that moves and guides her. As the images of women reach her, and the somatic data contained within those images impacts her, she is left

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[146] Audre Lorde, *Zami, A New Spelling of My Name*, 1st ed. (New York: Crossing Press, 1982), 4.
[147] Audre Lorde, *Zami, A New Spelling of My Name*, 1st ed. (New York: Crossing Press, 1982), 3.

trying to figure out how, why, and what to do next. These images of women are so impactful to Lorde that she dedicates the woman she has become to them.

As a companion to erotic data poetics I call this framework of looking erotic sousveillance, after Simone Browne's theory of dark sousveillance, a groundbreaking racialized rethinking of sousveillance theory. The term sousveillance is a literal response to surveillance, from the French *sur*, above + *veiller*, to look. Sousveillance replaces *sur* with *sous*, meaning below, to etymologically create space to think an opposite to looking from above. In the context of a panoptic surveillance network seeing all from above, sousveillance was initially figured as a form of "reflectionism," where "technology" can be used to "mirror and confront bureaucratic organizations"[149] from a position underneath the surveillance gaze—essentially, watching the watchers.

Browne complicates the surveillance gaze by placing it in the context of anti-Black surveillance history. Particularly in the American milieu, it is difficult to think data surveillance and not think app developer and police officer and plantation overseer, or think data and not think user data modifying behavior and federal citizen data predictive policing and insurance ledgers informing breathing enslaved bodies thrown off of ships. In this context, escaping the surveillance gaze is a matter of escaping death and dehumanization with one's life and humanity. Enslaved Black people coded myriad processes to illuminate and interrupt white capitalist surveillance from underneath it. These processes are a counter-rhythm, "a reading praxis for examining surveillance that allows for a questioning of…certain surveillance technologies

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[148] Audre Lorde, *Zami, A New Spelling of My Name*, 1st ed. (New York: Crossing Press, 1982), 4.
[149] Steve Mann, Jason Nolan, and Barry Wellman, "Sousveillance: Inventing and Using Wearable Computing Devices for Data Collection in Surveillance Environments," *Surveillance and Society* 1, no. 3 (2003): 333.

installed during slavery to monitor and track blackness"[150] that transforms and distills "the tools of social control" into a form that can be "appropriated, co-opted, repurposed, and challenged in order to facilitate survival and escape".[151] Browne names this rhythm/reading praxis dark sousveillance, "dark" used to connote a sousveillance enacted in opposition to anti-Black surveillance (she specifies that dark sousveillance tactics can be deployed by non-Black individuals) and a sousveillance that obfuscates its presence within the surveillance gaze rather than mirror it.

Lorde is undoubtedly a subject of the anti-black surveillance gaze, and she enacts dark sousveillance when she positions herself in opposition to anti-Black surveillance leftist politics or in her inability to ignore Black women's beauty. In that opposition, she conducts erotic sousveillance of her own. I use sousveillance to indicate looking from underneath literally and metaphorically—she looks at and in turn learns from women from underneath sexually, and aspirationally. As a girl she watches women from underneath trying to glean the secrets of the womanly form and secrets of womanly survival and self sustenance. As a woman, she watches women from underneath as a lover (having solved the mystery of what's under women's flowered blouses), and as a warrior poet still seeking survival and self sustenance. However, erotic sousveillance shifts her position from one of obfuscation to one of transformation. Through erotic sousveillance, Lorde constructs and transforms herself as a person and creates a recording praxis —biomythography—to track the decades-long rhythm of her transformation.

Eudora was the first woman that Lorde ever met that called herself a lesbian; from her lustfully aspirational and position beneath Eudora, Lorde quickly became enraptured with the

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[150] Simone Browne, *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 22.
[151] Simone Browne, *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2015), 23.

tall, silver-haired woman. As the two of them sat in Eudora's Cuernavaca home sharing food and ideas late in to the night, Lorde remarked that Eudora was "the most fascinating woman [she] had ever met".[152] Eudora shared that she was a breast cancer survivor and underwent a mastectomy, leaving her with a slightly different perception of her body; she avoided looking at her scars as much as she could, finding them "hard to take…not dashing or romantic". As the two of them spent more time together, Lorde's desire for Eudora deepened. She once "thought about making love to [Eudora], and ruined a whole pot of curry in [her] confusion".[153]

The older and more experienced woman held heavy feelings around her mastectomy and the way that her body had forever changed, but that did not take away from her knowledge and understanding of how to pleasure another woman; through Lorde, she started to open back up to receiving that pleasure herself. One night, Lorde marched over to Eudora's house at 3:30 in the morning (having just left the residence at 2:00am but finding herself overcome with desire) and declared to her, "I want to sleep with you;" she found herself looking up at Eudora from underneath on that "clear moonli[t]" night.[154] Having taken on this powerful task of awakening and receiving Eudora and her body, taking in her data as it washed over and through her, Lorde writes in the wake of making love of this information:

> "Eudora knew many things about loving women that I had not yet learned. Day into dusk. A brief shower. Freshness. The comfort and delight of her body against mine. The ways my body came to life in the curve of her arms, her tender mouth, her sure body—gentle, persistent, complete." (Lorde 169)

In addition to her expansive knowledge of how to pleasure women's bodies, Lorde was fascinated by Eudora's aggregated data of and about Mexico. Despite being an expat from

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[152] Audre Lorde, *Zami, A New Spelling of My Name*, 1st ed. (New York: Crossing Press, 1982), 162.
[153] Audre Lorde, *Zami, A New Spelling of My Name*, 1st ed. (New York: Crossing Press, 1982), 164.

Chicago Eudora had traveled all over her new home country, and had studied and learned about different unique cultures and cultural traditions within Mexico. The two women's relationship was not confined to bed; they spent hours driving through the southern Mexican countryside while Eudora talked, filling Lorde with the stories and histories of "ancient contacts between Mexico and Africa and Asia that were just now coming to light."[155] Eudora, like Lorde, amassed information — she had collected languages and stories, "folkways and beliefs," through her extensive travel and research. In the car rides with Lorde, Eudora shared with her the historical data she'd collected about "different peoples who had swept across the country in waves long ago, leaving their languages and a small group of descendants to carry on the old ways,".[156] Lorde, in the fullness of erotic data poetics, downloaded Eudora's body and mind.

At the same time, she recognized the fantasy and fantastic within these car ride history lessons. Eudora appears to live as if life was a "story, a little grander than ordinary"; Lorde admits that she hears Eudora's stories "like an answer to [her] grade-school fantasies".[157] Foreshadowing their downfall, Lorde continued to spin visions of Eudora's somatic and cultural data, blending fantasy and reality, and began to act on her fantasies. It is because of Eudora's insistence on their countryside car rides that Lorde see and experience Mexico in order to understand it, that Lorde planned a trip "south, to Oaxaca and beyond, through San Cristobál to Guatemala".[158] Now twenty, having been a student in Mexico nearly a year, she credits Eudora (a Midwestern American woman) with being the key that unlocked Mexico for her, "open[ing] those doors for [her] leading to the heart of this country and its people... show[ing her] the way

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[154] Audre Lorde, *Zami, A New Spelling of My Name*, 1st ed. (New York: Crossing Press, 1982), 166.
[155] Audre Lorde, *Zami, A New Spelling of My Name*, 1st ed. (New York: Crossing Press, 1982), 170.
[156] Audre Lorde, *Zami, A New Spelling of My Name*, 1st ed. (New York: Crossing Press, 1982), 170.
[157] Audre Lorde, *Zami, A New Spelling of My Name*, 1st ed. (New York: Crossing Press, 1982), 169.
[158] Audre Lorde, *Zami, A New Spelling of My Name*, 1st ed. (New York: Crossing Press, 1982), 170.

to the Mexico [she] had come looking for."[159] Mexico, through Eudora's eyes, was a "nourishing land of light and color where [Lorde] was somehow at home"[160] after so much time spent feeling separate and exposed, both comrade/sister and outsider, Lorde began to feel transformed by taking in this nourishing land.

This was the result of how she spun Eudora's stories into new visions, but also the ways Eudora truly immersed Lorde in the Mexican countryside. Lorde planned a trip from Cuernavaca in Morelos state south along the coastline, through Guerrero, Oaxaca and Chiapas before landing in Guatemala, and planned to surf the couches of friends & comrades whose names Eudora gave her. The main point of the trip was for Lorde to see and experience the country, but she secretly yet intensely hoped that Eudora would accompany her on the trip. After months spent together exchanging data, physical, emotional, cultural, and historical data, Eudora presented as the perfect travel guide and companion.

However, Eudora does not accompany Lorde on the trip—their beautiful relationship explodes hours before Lorde is set to leave. Eudora planted the idea in Lorde's head for the sake of Lorde's self exploration, but Lorde secretly hoped the whole time that her fantastical lover and travel guide would explore by her side. When this was not the case, the trip lost its meaning and luster. Because Eudora wasn't coming on the trip, the trip is no longer a significant data point. Lorde was confronting that her love could not overcome all contexts. Despite the exquisite tenderness shared night after night, Eudora had "sent [her] away". Part of a narrative returned by an algorithm designed to process the chaos of the depth of feeling, Lorde doesn't discuss the trip to Mexico. The paragraph in which Eudora sends Lorde away ends with her goodbye; the next chapter begins with Lorde's return to Cuernavaca, with no mention of anything that took place in

[159] Audre Lorde, *Zami, A New Spelling of My Name*, 1st ed. (New York: Crossing Press, 1982), 170.
[160] Audre Lorde, *Zami, A New Spelling of My Name*, 1st ed. (New York: Crossing Press, 1982), 170.

the intervening three weeks.

It is in this chronological absence that Lorde's FBI dossier narrative begins. NY 100-122142-1,[161] the first file in the dossier, is dated September 9, 1954 — weeks after Lorde's summer trip would have concluded. Calling to mind the confidential informants that divulged key information about slave insurrections and black nationalist leaders, the file records information from a confidential informant who encountered Lorde on her trip. The name of the informant is redacted, as confidential sources are absolutely critical to the data trade. The redaction is labeled "FOIA (b)(7)-(D)," indicating that the obscured information was redacted pursuant to FOIA statute guidelines providing for the protection of confidential informants. This is the dirty work of data relegated to the black box of civilian surveillance—we will never know who first snitched on Audre Lorde. The informant, referred to using male pronouns for the rest of the file, was "on an extended road trip in the southern part of Mexico during June, 1954" and

> "contacted LINI MOERKERK STOUMEN, subject of Bufile 101-4782, at Oaxaca, Oaxaca, Mexico. While there STOUMEN introduced the informant to a twenty-year-old negro girl by the name of AUDREY LORDE or LOURDES, who was spending a few days with STOUMEN. The captioned individual told the informant that she resides in New York on or near 7th Street, and that she would be returning to New York in the very near future. She further stated that she had been in Mexico since March, 1954, studying at the Polytechnic Institute in Mexico City. … Subject identified some of her friends as being F. MARTIN (FREDERICA MARTIN, subject of an espionage case in Mexico City, Bufile #100-392576) of Cuernavaca, Morelos, Mexico … Subject added that when staying in Cuernavaca she resided at Humboldt #24 in that city. The files of this office

[161] Audre Lorde, "FBI File 100-NY-122145-1" (FOIA dossier, US Department of Justice, 1972), <watching.black/files/exhibits/show/audre-lorde>.

> reflect that a number of known American Communists have from time to time stayed at Humboldt #24 in Cuernavaca. … The informant further stated that although the subject claimed to not be a member of the Communist party, she did at least give the impression of following the Party line in conversation."[162]

Exactly as Lorde predicted, the FBI managed to place eyes three thousand miles away from New York and watch expats abroad, simply by flipping other members of the community. In this file, Lorde was caught in the McCarthy Era surveillance dragnet. Not even a target for her own radical politics, she is scanned and summarily dismissed by the informant as just a "twenty-year-old negro girl" who inexplicably lived in a Communist expat community, associated with leftists, and carried "the impression of following the Party line" but "claimed to not be a member of the Communist party," enough to at least temporarily satisfy the FBI's standard. From a blend of racism and FBI ineptitude, she remained indexed on the right side of subversive policing; not yet a threat due to a lack of direct subversive data, but enough of a potential threat to index and keep and eye on just in case.

This obvious misreading belies the juxtaposition of Bureau eagerness and ineptitude that appears elsewhere in the file. Most striking is the target's name. The subject of NY 100-122142 is "Audrey Lorde," spelled with a Y; the surveillance filter seeks information about "Audrey", last name either spelled "Lorde" or "Lourdes". I find the specificity of two last name spellings comically ironic because the writer has never used the latter phonetic spelling of her last name, yet she has used an alternative spelling of her first name since she "decided that she "did not like the tail of the Y hanging down below the line in Audrey, and would always forget to put it on…[she] used to love the evenness of AUDRELORDE at four years of age, but [she]

[162] Audre Lorde, "FBI File 100-NY-122145-1" (FOIA dossier, US Department of Justice, 1972), <watching.black/files/exhibits/show/audre-lorde>.

remembered to put on the Y because it pleased [her] mother, and because, as [Linda Belmar Lorde] always insisted to her…No deviation was allowed from [Linda's] interpretations of correct".[163] Lorde's early erotic sousveillance, downloading her mother's instructions about correct spelling and breaking them for her own uses, possibly stymied the FBI's initial ability to surveil her as an adult. The subject name of the dossier never changed, even after documents associated with the writer "Audre Lorde" surfaced and were filed in the dossier. The FBI and Linda Belmar Lorde hold the same stance on the correctness of name-spelling; it is "sterile word play" instead of revelatory distillation, "cover[ing] a desperate wish for imagination without insight";[164] the dogma of meter instead of uncovering critical erotic counter-rhythms.

More critical is the fact that the file exists at all. In *Zami*, Lorde's narrative of the erotic data that comprises her life, there is no data from her trip to Mexico. The fact that federal civilian service data amassed through its confidential informant network fills in this intentional absence is nothing short of paradigmatic — this is the FBI at its best work, for Lorde's capture was one more key node filling out the federally tracked network of Black subversives. And yet, there is power in Lorde's ability to decide to eliminate this trip data. The goal of *Zami* is Lorde writing back against an oppressive surveillance structure using two tactics: erotic surveillance, and erotic data poetics. The vision she spins of Eudora's erotic data for the sake of her life narrative doesn't include the story of that trip, so it is condensed out.

Thus, where the meter of state surveillance data analysis is dogmatic, the rhythm of Lorde's erotic sousveillance data analysis is critical — sensual, multidirectional, and ethical. Eudora knew as well as Lorde that the lovesick young woman spun a fantasy vision of their connection, culminating in the trip south through Mexico; she was more bound by the realities of

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[163] Audre Lorde, *Zami, A New Spelling of My Name*, 1st ed. (New York: Crossing Press, 1982), 24.
[164] Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (New York: Crossing Press, 1984), 38.

their situation. Twenty-eight years Lorde's senior, she could not move with the ease of a college student on summer vacation. For one she "had developed bursitis," a painful inflammation of her joints, “and was often in a lot of pain"—six[165] weeks of couch-surfing and on-the-go eating was no longer a viable option.

More pressing was her alcoholism; Lorde “never saw [her] drinking, and it was easy for [Lorde] to forget". Only three times did Lorde ever find Eudora in the aftermath of a bender. Eudora “would be sad and quiet for a few days. And then [they] would make love. Wildly. Beautifully."[166] Though bursitis forces Lorde to acknowledge the reality that she will be traveling alone, it is with alcoholism that, in a major directional shift, Eudora interrupts their counter-rhythm and shatters Lorde’s visions of the trip, and the fantasy of their relationship. Lorde makes plans to spend her last night before leaving for Oaxaca at Eudora's apartment and catch her bus at sunrise. These plans rapidly fall apart when Lorde arrives to find Eudora lost in the depths of a tequila bottle. When Lorde approaches Eudora in an attempt to hold and comfort her, the hurting drunken woman growls back to "Get out! What makes you think you can come into someone's life on a visa and expect...".[167] Rather than face head-on the pain of this loss, and the acute awareness that her time has been spent helping to spin data visions that would inevitably leave her hurt, Eudora gets sloppy drunk (the first time Lorde has captured Eudora in the act of drinking) and sends her young lover on her way.

In the moment Eudora sends her away, Lorde is tasked with processing all of this new information and confronting the revelation of their fragile connection. She always knew it was based in the fantasy of narratives surrounding their travels and lovemaking, but updating with Eudora’s new experience data completely breaks Lorde’s fantasy. In one moment Lorde

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[165] Audre Lorde, *Zami, A New Spelling of My Name*, 1st ed. (New York: Crossing Press, 1982), 173.
[166] Audre Lorde, *Zami, A New Spelling of My Name*, 1st ed. (New York: Crossing Press, 1982), 173.

"flinch[es] in horror at [Eudora's] tone" ; later, she realizes she is "hurt, but not lost. And in that moment, as in the first night when [Lorde] had held [Eudora], [Lorde feels herself] pass beyond childhood, a woman connecting with other women in an intricate, complex, and ever-widening network of exchanging strengths".[168] The growth and maturity she experiences when she first goes to bed with Eudora elevates when she is forced to leave the same bed, and she feels herself further elevating past childhood at the realization that the commitment to the data flow between them was not enough to sustain their connection across three weeks of separation, let alone Lorde's return to New York on the wishful promise of a reunion in Mexico. At that realization, Lorde feels herself transform, updating her understanding of her maturing self and the real world as she processes this last key bit of information Eudora has fed her. Following a sense of personal ethics, and perhaps information ethics, the recorded narrative does not attempt to rearrange this data into a palatable form—Lorde simply deletes it from her erotic dataset.

Everything about the rest of Lorde's time in Mexico is different. Lorde returns to the US on the Fourth of July, full of Mexico and full of Eudora; suddenly, the "humid" New York "heat was oppressive…firecrackers…sounded thinner and higher than the fireworks in Mexico".[169] The US seems less full and vibrant compared to the country she has just departed. This is partially because of her lustsickness for Eudora surely, but it is also a concrete example of just how different of a person she has become in the previous year and even month. Her dataset for understanding the world and herself in the world has transformed yet again; yet again, New York appears like a dogmatic footnote within her erotic data archive.

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[167] Audre Lorde, *Zami, A New Spelling of My Name*, 1st ed. (New York: Crossing Press, 1982), 175.
[168] Audre Lorde, *Zami, A New Spelling of My Name*, 1st ed. (New York: Crossing Press, 1982), 175.
[169] Audre Lorde, *Zami, A New Spelling of My Name*, 1st ed. (New York: Crossing Press, 1982), 175.

Chapter 3 - Data States

Audre Lorde subverted the state narrative of her activism and time in Mexico in her autobiography. What is at stake when data and its attendant software becomes grammar and lexicon, turning data analysis into storytelling itself? This idea is at the heart of American data analytics company Palantir Technologies and its flagship software Palantir Gotham. In this chapter, I read Palantir Technologies against itself. I argue that to understand Palantir and its operations, we need look no further than its own data epistemology, a framework that plays itself out in its accounts with the Cook County Sheriff's Office and the Chicago Police Department.

Palantir Technologies attempts to solve massive information problems with even more massive amounts of data analysis. It tends toward solving morally weighty problems, operating with the mindset that powerful, well-designed, and well-policed algorithmic analysis is smarter and more capable than the smartest humans could ever hope to be and it is in the best interest of the greater good that those algorithms work toward solving our human problems. Tending toward morality is not performative for Palantir—Karp holds a "Ph.D. in philosophy" from Goethe University Frankfurt[170] and fuses philosophy throughout Palantir's work. It is from this basis of working to understand and improve society that Palantir positions itself to be the software leader of our data future, and this is the argument Palantir makes to its shareholders. When Palantir filed the paperwork for its initial public offering, Karp staked his CEO letter with the opening claim that "our welfare and security depend on effective software".[171]

Conveniently for its shareholders, Palantir's morality actually boosts its bottom line rather than oppose it. The company operates in the public and private sector but its government-

[170] Avery Hartmans, "The Life and Career of Alex Karp, the Billionaire CEO Who's Taking Palantir Public in What Could Be One of the Biggest Tech IPOs of the Year," *Business Insider*, July 8, 2020.
[171] Ari Levy, "Palantir CEO Rips Silicon Valley in Letter to Investors," *CNBC.Com*, August 25, 2020,

contract work has made the company immensely profitable, at one point garnering a valuation of nearly $41B. The company went public in September 2020 and currently sits at a $15B valuation.[172] Where other tech companies "are built on advertising dollars," Palantir licenses "software…used to target terrorists and to keep soldiers safe" to companies whose "technological infrastructure has failed them" in service of this mission.[173] These numbers are an indication that Palantir is ahead of the curve when it comes to implementing software solutions to social problems. In a February 2021 presentation for investors and shareholders reflecting on 2020 earnings, Karp made the argument that Palantir's success derives in large part from spotting this shifting trend years before other companies, creating software that augmented and refined existing workflows instead of creating new ones, and furthermore structured client data around action rather than analysis for its sake. Palantir creates software to help clients best leverage their data. In the same presentation, he pushed his IPO claim even further and argued that "software is the language of our time".[174]

The mentality that software is the language of our time is clear in Palantir's flagship software, Gotham. Gotham represents the government intelligence work for which Palantir has since become infamous. In fact, Palantir Gotham is actually a rebrand of what used to be called Palantir Government, also initialed PG.[175] It may appear that Palantir created the Gotham technology for the sake of innovation and found that it had its best use with government

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sec. Tech, https://www.cnbc.com/2020/08/25/palantir-ceo-rips-silicon-valley-in-letter-to-investors.html.

[172] Trefis Team and Great Speculations, "Up 2.5x Since Its IPO, What Really Changed For Palantir Stock?," *Forbes*, January 21, 2021.

[173] Ari Levy, "Palantir CEO Rips Silicon Valley in Letter to Investors," *CNBC.Com*, August 25, 2020, sec. Tech, https://www.cnbc.com/2020/08/25/palantir-ceo-rips-silicon-valley-in-letter-to-investors.html.

[174] Alex Karp, "Palantir CEO Alex Karp on Software & Society," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PzM0LzybwG4.

[175] Palantir Technologies, "CPD File 16-0614 - PG Quote" (FOIA dossier, Chicago Police Department Office of Legal Affairs, 2015), <watching.black/files/exhibits/show/palantir-ccso-cpd>.

applications, but in reality PG has always been primarily concerned with government-related data analysis. Unlike the majority of American tech companies, this is not something Palantir shies away from. Palantir Gotham (PG) is built with the same technology principles as PayPal. The platform

> "integrates and transforms data, regardless of type or volume, into a single, coherent data asset. As data flows into the platform, it is enriched and mapped into meaningfully defined objects — people, places, things, and events — and the relationships that connect them…As users collaborate and build off one another's work, they create and grow a body of shared intelligence for their organization."[176]

These data objects are the prized output of the PG system, because they transform raw data into a form that non-data scientists can understand and, more importantly, act on. The human brain has a difficult time compiling massive amounts of information, and an even more difficult time compiling when the information is multi-media and needs to be in unified communication. Palantir can take in any information in any form you feed it, find the patterns in the information, and determine what the pattern is and means. From Karp's perspective, this rapid pattern-recognition is the future of how powerful actors will make decisions.

Through Karp's framework, developing PG is akin to creating a new grammar and lexicon. This is not simply an off-hand remark Karp made in an investor's call but truly central to the software. PG is built around a data schema structure called "Dynamic Ontology". Drawing again upon Karp's philosophy background, a dynamic ontology draws upon the philosophical concept of ontology, or the study and analysis of being, to derive a first-level classification system for all data that enters the system. As a Palantir developer explains in a lecture on dynamic ontology,

Palantir's ontological view is that every single observation or piece of information can be classified as an object, a property, or a relationship. This framework is "hard coded" into Palantir, ontology "act[ing] as an interpretation layer that sits above the database and allows the user to interact with it".[177] Before the user ever interacts with a dataset for analysis, everything undergoes an initial ontological classification, a first translation or narrativization of the data.

The user never interacts with data in its raw form, and it is unclear that users ever actually want to. A 2014 review of Palantir's work with the US Marine Corps III Expeditionary Force in Afghanistan, published in the *Marine Corps Gazette,* provides a much more telling definition of dynamic ontology; it is "…the means by which data from multiple sources are transformed and integrated from their raw storage formats into data objects and associated properties that represent real objects in the world — people, places, things, events, and the connections between them".[178] The article goes on to detail ways that Palantir could make the USMC dynamic ontology even better, calling for more data to flow into the platform to create more objects with more properties that can be linked back into existing narratives. Quite literally, the USMC hopes to objectify key elements of its military operations. It seeks to "pin down, delimit, constrain, and enclose"[179] people, places, things, events, and their interconnectedness by framing these things as the representational notions of themselves ("algorithmic identities"), and create an actionable narrative of these objects. PG offers the grammatical structure by which such a narrative can be written.

Thinking about "intelligence" as little more than acting on pattern recognition also means considering how we come to recognize patterns—the epistemological basis behind Palantir's

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[176] Palantir Technologies, "Palantir Gotham," 2018, palantir.com/palantir-gotham.
[177] Asher Sinensky, "Dynamic Ontology," https://www.palantir.com/pt_media/dynamic-ontology/.
[178] William Sapp Capt., "Palantir Integration in III MEF: Fully Exploiting a Capability," *Marine Corps Gazette*, November 2015, 61.

dynamic ontology. What happens if the pattern the machine recognizes is not an accurate representation of reality? What if the ontological classification is wrong? Consider the fate of Afghani civilians who worked with the US, collecting the very data that populates Palantir among other tasks, and who now find themselves stuck in Afghanistan facing a Taliban resurgence as the US military pulls out of the country. The data the Americans needed having been pinned down, the objective accomplished, the real brown bodies involved in data collection fade into the background of their notionally objectified peers.

Worse, those brown bodies become indistinguishable in the mass of data collection, as was the case with Zemari Ahmadi and his family. The location and associated data points of the aid worker's movements as he worked in Kabul on August 29, 2021 added up to the narrative that he was an ISIS-K agent planning an attack against withdrawing US forces, and his vehicle was bombed in a Reaper drone attack as he pulled into the driveway of his family home. As it turned out, his reality was less sinister than the spoken-for data; his white Toyota Corolla matched the description of an ISIS-K vehicle, and is also of the most common cars driven in Kabul. He was seen loading heavy objects into the car's trunk, thought to be explosives, which turned out to be cases of water he routinely delivered to families in need. He pulled into a home suspected to be an ISIS-K safe house, but was actually dropping a laptop off at his supervisor's home.[180] And yet, because of pattern recognition, he and many of his children, nieces, and nephews were killed. The Pentagon, unmoved even to remove the wreckage and remains from the family's courtyard, has simply offered relocation money ("ex-gratia condolence payments")[181] and moved

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[179] uncertain commons, *Speculate This!* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 9.
[180] Matthieu Aikins, "In US Drone Strike, Evidence Suggests No ISIS Bomb," *The New York Times*, September 10, 2021, sec. World, https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/10/world/asia/us-air-strike-drone-kabul-afghanistan-isis.html.
[181] Kanishka Singh, "U.S. Offers Payments, Relocation to Family of Afghans Killed in Botched Drone Attack," *Reuters*, October 16, 2021, sec. Asia Pacific.

on.

And yet — Palantir's clients continue to use these software tactics to pin down narratives, shaping everyone and everything as an object that can be read and planned upon. In *Speculate This*!, an anonymous group of scholars and artists named an Uncertain Commons frames this storytelling pursuit as "firmative,"[182] a kind of speculation that seeks to tell a story of the present in order to predict the future. As the Commons illustrates, this speculative storytelling often boils down to pattern-matching the present in order to create a desired future. Speculation "bridges the epistemic difference between dissimilar and distant objects, abstracting them into general equivalence".[183] This abstraction makes it possible for someone looking at those objects to read and manipulate them, as they are only representations of the real thing, but representations that allow the reader to make real future plans around them. The Commons points to capitalism as the clearest example of how this process takes place; financial firms want to predict the movement of the market in order to plan an investment strategy around it, and they do so by matching future patterns of previous datasets to the current dataset. In many ways, this process turns into its own language—financial risk analysis is a classification based in capitalist ways of inhabiting the world, a way of being that continues even when the assessments turn out to be wrong. The larger point remains—a dynamic ontology, a shifting grammar, makes it possible to write the future story you need no matter what the data is. PG is a tool for surfacing "the outcomes you desire"[184]

Ultimately, language is a technology through which to sublimate and understand the depths of human experience. Software as language means software driven to the same attempts at narrativization; software *as* communication and understanding, rather than software facilitating

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[182] uncertain commons, *Speculate This!* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 9.
[183] uncertain commons, *Speculate This!* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013), 9.
[184] Palantir Technologies, "CPD File 16-0614 - PG Object Explorer" (FOIA dossier, Chicago Police Department Office of Legal Affairs, 2015), 4, <watching.black/files/exhibits/show/palantir-

communication and understanding. Its platforms algorithmically narrativize the lives of its subjects through the data-laden digital and analog ephemera they leave behind. This is what Karp means when he says that software is the language of our time. If language is the tool by which we process our disparate impressions and experiences of the world into a form that others can understand, Palantir is designed to complete this very task at a more precise (and therefore better) level than humans can. Assumptions and bias are not written into the ontology — it is just categorization, akin to grammar.

Given how Karp views surveillance writ large and America's place in it, how do his ethics operate at Palantir? A first clue comes in the name of the software itself — Palantir Gotham.

Though the term "Gotham" was originally an insult meant to call someone a "simpleton," it later came to be used as a nickname for New York City,[185] and is best known now as the fictional urban dystopic home of the billionaire urban vigilante Batman. As far as superheroes go, Batman has no inherent powers of his own — what he possesses, in addition to money, is access to complex high-level technologies that could be used to do harm. However, Batman, like Palantir, chooses to use his capital and data access for the greater good.

While it may be a stretch to claim that Karp and Thiel imagine themselves as the Alfred and Bruce Wayne of our American Gotham, this technology is prized for its ability to knit together disparate data sets in order to create a big actionable picture and is used for its counterintelligence and crimefighting advantages. This kind of deep network analysis is possible because, for this technology to work, it analyzes existing data in its totality: "[s]tructured data like log files, spreadsheets, and tables," as well as "[u]nstructured data like emails, documents, images, and videos. This data is typically stored in disconnected systems," but those who need to

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ccso-cpd>.

[185] "Gotham, n.," in *Oxford English Dictionary*, n.d.,

use this data are after "a way to ask questions about their data and receive answers in a language they understand".[186]

Taking in information in any form is an important part of how PG works, because it enables literally anything to be read and translated through the software. The 2014 USMC review mentioned earlier reveals the inclusion of Artemis, a "simple web form that allows on-the-ground users and first responders to submit data online, even from a smartphone. Simply put, Artemis enables unstructured data input and translates it to a structured entity that can be queried and manipulated in Palantir".[187] Artemis, named for the Greek goddess of hunting, enables users to update the database and refine the analysis in real-time; literally, refining the hunt in real time. From the perspective of unending American militarism, from the start a data-driven enterprise running on fast and highly accurate analysis, it is no surprise that Palantir and the US government found common ground.

Gotham is only one program; the entire company truly orbits around the *palantír*. Readers may recognize this word from *The Two Towers* (1954), the second novel of the *Lord of the Rings* trilogy[188]. *Palantír* is Quenya (Elvish) for "that which looks far away," and the *palantíri* were nine dark crystal orbs used by the kings of Gondor and Arnor to communicate with each other across the expanse of their kingdoms.[189] In chapter eleven, titled "The Palantír," we encounter the main characters of the trilogy on their journey en route to Mordor, an earthly Hell to which they voyage in order to destroy an all-ruling and all-powerful ring. Over the course of the chapter

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http://www.oed.com.proxy.library.cornell.edu/view/Entry/80222?redirectedFrom=gotham&.

[186] Palantir Technologies, "Palantir Gotham," 2018, palantir.com/palantir-gotham.

[187] William Sapp Capt., "Palantir Integration in III MEF: Fully Exploiting a Capability," *Marine Corps Gazette*, November 2015, 61.

[188] It appears Thiel and Karp are huge LOTR fans: offices are named after locations from the novels, such as the Shire and Rivendell, and its yearly company conference is named HobbitCon (Alden 2016).

[189] J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers*, vol. 2 (London: HarperCollins Publishers,

we learn that the *palantíri* were thought lost through war, lead wizard Gandalf the White recovers one along their journey, and it turns out that remaining *palantíri* have been corrupted by evil wizards Sauron and Saruman, the trilogy's main antagonists. Though ostensibly part of the narrative in order to push critical plot action forward, the presence of the palantír opens a complicated network of information access and denial between the hobbits, wizards, and other figures traveling with the group.

The hobbit Pippin, overcome by his desire to know where they are going and why, steals the *palantír* out of Gandalf's robes as he sleeps. He does not exactly know what the object is or does but when he eventually gases into the orb he is nearly taken over and harmed by Sauron using another *palantír.* Because of his great power Sauron is able to manipulate the image Pippin sees and does so in an attempt to trick Pippin into divulging the location of the ring and his acolyte Saruman. Of course, the whole reason Pippin looked into the *palantír* was to gain information, and in his confusion and innocence he is completely overtaken by Sauron's power; when he finally could look into the ball he "became rigid" and "his lips moved soundlessly for a while".[190] Though not killed he is put in grave danger from looking in the *palantír*, forcing Gandalf to come to his rescue. The great wizard later explains that the *palantíri* were used "to see far off, and to converse in thought with one another…each *palantír* replied to each, but all those in Gondor were ever open to the view of [the Osgiliath *palantír*]".[191] Thus, Sauron was using the *palantír* both to see who and what was on the other end and to mentally engage with that person, ultimately in order to manipulate them for his own personal gain.

Between Palantir and Gotham it is apparent that Peter Thiel is a fan of borrowing from

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1966), 779.

[190] J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers*, vol. 2 (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 1966), 773.

[191] J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers*, vol. 2 (London: HarperCollins Publishers,

literature in the creation of his data projects, but I am left wondering what it means to give a company such a name. What is the significance in naming a data analytics company after a crystal ball used to mentally communicate with and potentially harm those seeking information? While I cannot answer for Thiel, Palantir sounds like a metaphorical warning against placing all of one's trust in the totality and transparency of data. Even though Sauron is more powerful than Pippin, they both received incorrect information when they looked into the palantir, and Sauron will be driven to action on the basis of what he believed he saw in the data. As Gandalf explained to Pippin, "perilous to us all are the devices of an art deeper than we possess ourselves".[192]

With great power comes great responsibility. Karp and Thiel buy into the "Californian ideology," an "anti-statist gospel of cybernetic libertarianism…promiscuously combinin[g] the free-wheeling spirit of the hippies and the entrepreneurial zeal of the yuppies".[193] Not only can the capitalist free market solve for most if not all social issues, but high-value tech companies with free market imperatives can solve for these issues more efficiently and with more flexibility than the state can. This is ultimately neoliberalism, but for the Silicon Valley tech bro. They can move fast and break things with little consequence if the company share price stays high; governments, on the other hand, must be genuinely accountable to voters. As a result the state remains in place as a buffer against total democratic collapse, but tech companies drive our economic and social futures, getting filthy rich in the process. This is what PayPal did indirectly, solving what was ultimately a social issue (people and markets not adequately served by traditional brick-and-mortar banking) with technology (digital banking plus data-driven fraud

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1966), 780.

[192] J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers*, vol. 2 (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 1966), 780.

[193] Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron, "The Californian Ideology," *Science as Culture* 6, no. 1 (January 1996): 44.

protection) and garnering massive profits in the process[194]. This is exactly what Palantir does, using the SAAS (software-as-a-service) model to deliver highly complex proprietary software to state actors to solve social issues and get very rich in the process.

This was Karp's main thesis in his presentation, where he explained to new and current shareholders alike why they should trust their investment dollars with Palantir. Despite packaging Palantir with rhetoric based in national security, Karp's pitch is entirely about the economics of playing in the AI-influenced national security space. He attributes the company's high profitability to "several macro trends that [they] got right," namely understanding that "the institutions that survive and thrive and provide benefits to their citizens" are ones that create "output that includes data protection, that mak[e] sure the data is actually preserved in a way that guarantees its veracity, that giv[e] comfort to its citizens, that mak[e] sure that citizens aren't merely a product to be monetized".[195] Though on surface he is making the claim that Palantir's success comes from efficiently and ethically plugging software into the key institutions that need it, this is very convenient language to elide the business model's operational realities. Palantir does not directly monetize citizen data, they directly monetize the *reading* of citizen data. They barely interact with the data itself; even long-term database support is contracted out to IT firms

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[194] Elon Musk is a particularly foreboding example of the Californian ideology as his network of companies engage an infrastructural issue in nearly every level of natural space; there's OpenAI for the data network, SpaceX for aeronautics, Tesla Motors for land travel, The Boring Company for underground travel, and even a donated water filtration system for schoolchildren in Flint, MI. Ever free-wheeling, his line of Tesla vehicles (which jumpstarted the luxury electric vehicle market and thus the entire American electric vehicle market) spell S3XY (SEXY).

ABC12 News Team, "Water Filters from Elon Musk Being Installed, Tested in Flint Community Schools," *ABC12.Com*, October 10, 2019, https://www.abc12.com/content/news/Water-filters-from-Elon-Musk-being-installed-tested-in-Flint-Community-Schools-562721561.html.

[195] Alex Karp, "Palantir CEO Alex Karp on Software & Society," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PzM0LzybwG4.

that specialize in PG support.[196] Like the *palantíri* metaphor, the software is merely a prismatic crystal ball through which to see; everything else is up to the person looking. Palantir simply verifies the user's ontology as part of deployment in a way that "guarantees its veracity," where "veracity" notionally represents "the outcomes you desire" as long as it maps onto the built-in object-property-relationship data schema.[197] As I will explore later in this chapter, the in-app guardrails around who can access and speak this data are rather pliable.

Despite being completely accurate in stating that Palantir Technologies does not turn citizens into its product, there is a very short path from Palantir to the institution doing the data collection and seeking to objectify citizens. That client may or may not be as invested in data security as Palantir, yet finds its data analytics safe underneath the company's moral umbrella. For Karp to proclaim Palantir's stance of inherent goodness in future AI wars while strolling down an alpine path in a picturesque Denver forest, when all the company actually did was pass the ethical buck to its clients and get very rich in the process, would be laughable were it not so foreboding. Because, he is speaking to current and prospective investors; this is the argument Karp is using to convince shareholders that Palantir is a morally stable way to speculate on the future of artificial intelligence.

To be making the argument that software is language, Karp rather ironically plays with language quite a bit, selling this software with an ethics lecture so philosophy-jargon packed it would make Habermas's head spin. I mention the existential philosopher Jürgen Habermas much the same way Karp does in his presentations; a casual namedrop, a subtle way to remind his

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[196] Palantir Technologies, "CPD File 16-0614 - PG Support" (FOIA dossier, Chicago Police Department Office of Legal Affairs, 2015), <watching.black/files/exhibits/show/palantir-ccso-cpd>.

[197] Palantir Technologies, "CPD File 16-0614 - PG Object Explorer" (FOIA dossier, Chicago Police Department Office of Legal Affairs, 2015), 4, <watching.black/files/exhibits/show/palantir-ccso-cpd>.

viewer that he has studied more and knows more than they do. Karp touts himself as a hardcore Frankfurt School philosopher who received his doctorate studying under Habermas. He wrote his dissertation in German, the basis from which he paraphrases Ludwig Wittgenstein's rule-following paradox *in German* during his investor's call while making a point about measuring the impact of software futures. This all looks very impressive in the video and gives Karp enormous amounts of legitimacy to a non-philosopher (whether an investor or a potential client) when discussing software ethics. He seems to bank on the fact that the folks who studied German philosophy enough to find his performative flaws are likely not tuning in to a Palantir Technologies investor's presentation (which is unlisted on YouTube) and those tuning into the presentation are interested in Palantir enough to question him less (if at all).

Thankfully, there is a bit of overlap between those two spheres. I am greatly indebted to "Palantir Goes to the Frankfurt School," Moira Weigel's reading of Karp's dissertation from her perspective as a German-speaking, comparative literature-trained digital media historian. In it she conducts a historicized close-reading of the document, the translated title being *Aggression in the Life-World: Expanding Parsons' Concept of Aggression Through a Description of the Connection Between Jargon, Aggression, and Culture,* to trace the theoretical underpinnings of Karp's current data ideologies. She begins by dispelling Karp's mythos: he does not have a doctorate in philosophy from Goethe University Frankfurt as is sometimes stated in media write-ups about him, but a doctorate submitted to the Faculty of Social Sciences in neoclassical social theory —somewhere between sociology and social psychology. His chair was not Habermas, but was social psychologist Karola Brede.[198] Karp did not study the development of ethics and morality, but people and discourse.

His dissertation, which is indeed written entirely in German, picks up Theodor Adorno's

concept of jargon and attempts to trace an inherent drive toward interpersonal aggression through the use of jargon. To vastly oversimply, Karp deconstructs Adorno's jargon as language creating the illusion of community, "a 'dishonest answer to an honest longing' for subjectivity,"[199] looking for the ways in which aggressive drives can also power the use of communal language. His ultimate goal in the dissertation is ultimately to prove that "the social is constituted through acts of unconscious aggression, and that this aggression becomes legible in specific linguistic interactions",[200] which Weigel reads as a missed opportunity to make a deeper claim about the violence of unconsciously revealing language in its power to organize and shape social interaction[201].

Karp does make the deeper ethical claim about aggression and social structure not in his dissertation, defended in 2002, but two years later as Palantir Technologies. As Weigel notes, the framework of jargon "anticipates the software tools Palantir would develop. By tracing the rhetorical patterns that constitute jargon…Karp argues that he can reveal otherwise hidden identities and affinities—and the drive to commit violence that lies latent in them." However, as she continues, "jargon is a form of language that *seems* to authenticate identity—but only seems to…the illusion it offers is of timeless 'human' experience…as it makes the human condition—or rather, human conditions *as they are at the time of speaking*—appear unchangeable".[202] Ultimately, Palantir's data narratives can only ever be notional and representational at best. They are the result of an attempt to pin human complexity down and name its component elements,

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[198] Moira Weigel, "Palantir Goes to the Frankfurt School," *B2o*, July 10, 2020, 4.
[199] Moira Weigel, "Palantir Goes to the Frankfurt School," *B2o*, July 10, 2020, 9.
[200] Moira Weigel, "Palantir Goes to the Frankfurt School," *B2o*, July 10, 2020, 11.
[201] Moira Weigel, "Palantir Goes to the Frankfurt School," *B2o*, July 10, 2020, 11.

Weigel does offer Karp some amusing grace in her critique of his dissertation ending; it is possible that he reached the end goal of his planned analysis, but it is also possible that because "he was writing in a non-native language; like many graduate students, he may have finished in haste."

but ultimately are only examining the data from the perspective of their ontology at one point in time—hardly an objective truth.

Though Karp foregrounds his investor's call and media appearances in the idea that well-executed software opens up societal possibilities on the basis of "true" information, his dissertation makes clear that Palantir is more interested in detailed data structures than data ethics. If this is the case, and at the very least his committee agrees because he was awarded the doctorate, Palantir's software is simply a large-scale application of this principle. The whole point of Palantir Gotham is to analyze all possible information and read the patterns that jump out as a subconscious data truth. The "conscious attitudes and overt arguments"[203] of the analysand matter less than the networked patterns of objects, properties, and relationships imbued within that rise to the surface through analysis, for these patterns are the veracity in the data model that Karp seeks to pin down. So much so does Karp understand this pattern-matching to reveal concrete truths that the pattern structure within PG is called an ontology, which is literally a philosophy of how we understand the very nature of being through classification and organization—PG's pattern matching is meant to reveal the subconscious structures of being and existence that percolate through the dataset.

Key to all of this reading is the fact that the objects being analyzed — people and the situations in which people find themselves — are quite literally dehumanized. This is evident in the striking USMC definition of ontology, which quietly reveals that code-level dehumanization is the point of ontology: the "transform[ation] and integrat[ion]" of raw data into "data objects and associated properties that *represent* real objects in the world".[204] For all of Karp's preaching

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[202] Moira Weigel, "Palantir Goes to the Frankfurt School," *B2o*, July 10, 2020, 13.
[203] Moira Weigel, "Palantir Goes to the Frankfurt School," *B2o*, July 10, 2020, 11.
[204] William Sapp Capt., "Palantir Integration in III MEF: Fully Exploiting a Capability," *Marine Corps Gazette*, November 2015, 61.

about citizen ethics, the whole point of PG is to render people as textual objects, a compilation of information than can be sorted, stored, and acted on as needed. Under this frame, the analyst has "authority over the text [they are] analyzing," which "presumes the [analysand] to be ignorant, if not innocent, of what [they] *really* [have] at stake".[205] By patterning our data, Palantir knows our subconscious truth better than we do. The only difference between Palantir Gotham's Object Explorer and the Federal Bureau of Investigation's General Index is scope and speed, which serves to highlight the fact that Palantir Gotham began as Palantir Government. The whole point according to both founders was to legitimize the state by doing what the state does more accurately and efficiently than the state can and then offering to help the state, with the Californian ideological understanding that if Palantir bet wrong, their market (also known as the U.S. government) would not adopt their software and the company wouldn't be profitable. As Karp opens his investor's call by stating, they bet right, and investors can bet on them.

Clients using the licensed software can create their own data classification structures to hang on top of the objects-properties-relationships framework that further drill down into data narratives. What Palantir does *not* analyze is the unconscious aggression behind these dynamic ontologies itself. Ontology is ultimately a discursive framework created by a human being to discuss the world; a grammar of being. This is the same hubristic trap into which the FBI falls; both take a conservative desire for a transparent and uniform citizenry as the best model for national (or universal) information ethics without ever questioning their desire for transparency or uniformity. In reality Palantir is not all that dissimilar from jargon as Karp lays it out in his dissertation; the same way jargon reveals unconscious aggressive drives in its rhetorical delineation of networks, Palantir Gotham too reveals unconscious aggressive drives on the part of the client. Data is just a collection of observations about the world. Big data is a lot of

[205] Moira Weigel, "Palantir Goes to the Frankfurt School," *B2o*, July 10, 2020, 11.

observations about the world. The only consciousness present, subconscious or not, is that of the data analyst "substitut[ing] correlations that it treats simply as given" for "the temporal gaps and spaces of ambiguity that drive psychoanalytic interpretation".[206] This is software as jargon, built on unquestioned ontologies and marketed to the government and other clients with heady intellectual jargon. This is all meant to posit Palantir as present and dynamically engaged when they in fact sit at a great distance from potential harms. Put differently, as Black technocultural theorist Marisa Parham noted in a 2020 lecture "data does not speak. We speak for data".[207] The question then becomes, who is speaking our data and how?

Interestingly, Karp does not believe that tech companies should be in control of deciding whether they can make decisions with social impact. This is where things start to get slippery; Palantir enjoys great flexibility in an under-regulated data tech market largely invisible to everyday citizens (even as it acts upon them), but Karp believes the government and these uninformed voters are ultimately the ones responsible for curtailing his corporate flexibility. He "does not believe that these [ethical] questions" about what the software does and who can use it "should be decided in Silicon Valley by a number of engineers at large platform companies."[208] To my highly skeptical mind, this sounds like scapegoating legislators should the free market not solve for any issues that arise through software use. Though Karp places the responsibility for Palantir's actions at the feet of democratically-elected legislators, from where we sit in 2021 the government is just now starting to learn how tech platforms work, let alone how they think. Palantir has only had to answer to itself and as of last year, its shareholders. Ever the ethicist, Karp lays out how Palantir frames ethical calls in lieu of the state, posing a series of questions:

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[206] Moira Weigel, "Palantir Goes to the Frankfurt School," *B2o*, July 10, 2020, 13.
[207] Kim Gallon and Marisa Parham, "Session II" (Lecture, #unsilencedpast, Barnard Digital Humanities Center (virtual), July 16, 2020), https://vimeo.com/user104328319.
[208] Alex Karp, "Palantir CEO Alex Karp on Software & Society,"

1. Under what conditions can one use the software?
2. Who can be surveilled?
3. How does the surveillance happen?
4. How is the data managed?
5. What is the consequence of surveillance?

He continues,

> "I believe every single one of those questions has to be decided by society in an open debate, and the enforcement of which has to be clear and transparent."[209]

This is a stance aided by the SAAS model. At the end of the day, Palantir is just a company providing a service. It has no actual hand in what its clients do with or as a result of their services and never actually has to make any ethical calls about client data itself. It is easy to say there is an ethical obligation to assist the government when their assistance doesn't require much client-facing work on Palantir's side, beyond plugging relevant datasets into the application to start things up and perhaps building out a new feature or two, and they never have to get truly involved in the government dirty work that results from the analysis.

Palantir employees likely do not find themselves subject to the kind of surveillance that result from their software either; the company moved its headquarters to Denver from the Bay Area shortly before going public,[210] and I haven't found evidence that the Denver Police Department contracts with Palantir. However, the Chicago Police Department (CPD) and the surrounding Cook County Sheriff's Office (CCSO) do contract with Palantir to license their

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https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PzM0LzybwG4.

[209] Alex Karp, "Palantir CEO Alex Karp on Software & Society," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PzM0LzybwG4.

[210] Taylor Hatmaker, "Palantir Moves Its HQ from Palo Alto to Denver as Plans to Go Public Percolate,"

software. In 2013, the CCSO paid nearly $2M for a "Palantir Government Perpetual License"; as I mentioned earlier, a small note at the bottom of the price quote notes that Palantir Government has since rebranded to Palantir Gotham.[211] This means that as I sit at my computer on Chicago's Southwest side typing these very words, I am subject to the surveillance dragnet created by Palantir Gotham and its software afterlives.

Thanks once again to the efforts of amazing investigative journalists working through MuckRock, I was able to get my hands on a variety of Palantir-related documents released through Freedom of Information Act requests (see Watching.Black note in introduction). The trove includes user guides to a Palantir application built on the Thomson-Reuters CLEAR dataset. Of particular interest to me are a series of documents detailing contracts between Palantir, the Chicago Police Department, and the Cook County Sheriff's Office starting in 2012. The set of documents includes emails between the information technology teams at the Chicago Police Department and Cook County Sheriff's Office, some of which reference the use of CLEAR datasets and the Palantir application. Much of my understanding of how Palantir Technologies and Palantir Gotham work comes from these documents, which has been absolutely invaluable to this chapter.

I am originally from Chicago and though I went to graduate school in New York State I wrote my dissertation in Chicago, and I have many immediate family and friends who live here. It is a complex but unfortunate reality that the Chicago Police Department is a constant presence in all areas of the city. From my fellowship-year apartment window in the white upper middle class gentrified Edgewater neighborhood, ten minutes from Lake Michigan, I saw police

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TechCrunch, August 20, 2020, https://techcrunch.com/2020/08/20/palantir-denver-hq-ipo-direct-listing/.

[211] Palantir Technologies, "CPD File 16-0614 - PG Quote" (FOIA dossier, Chicago Police Department Office of Legal Affairs, 2015), <watching.black/files/exhibits/show/palantir-ccso-cpd>.

conducting traffic stops on a nearly weekly basis. At my mother and grandmother's two-flat in Black working-class West Englewood, where I completed the bulk of this project, there is a ShotSpotter on the corner; ShotSpotters are active microphones listening for gunshots, in order to flag police and trigger a rapid response in the hopes of catching gun crime in progress. The police occasionally just sit on that corner under the ShotSpotter or casually roll down the street a couple times a day, driving the wrong way down our one-way street as a subtle reminder that civilian laws do not apply to them. As a Chicagoan, I want to understand how the technology being used to police me operates; as a Black code studies researcher interested in surveillance, I want to see if this particular Palantir client actually fits Palantir's ethical model.

As previously stated, this dossier was released by the Office of Legal Affairs at the Chicago Police Department under the Freedom of Information Act. The request asked for "all communications with Palantir Technologies Inc, aka Palantir, including" company presentations, company documents, any contracts, audits, progress statements, performance assessments, internal and external reports about Palantir software, and documents listing payments made to Palantir (*P056205 Response Letter*)[212]. Due to the broad nature of the request, the released documents compile information from both CPD and CCSO spanning from 2012-2017. The dossier includes city financial records, contracts, Palantir application guides, and emails recounting the CPD's attempt to implement Palantir applications in their workflow and link up with existing CCSO Palantir workflows. The most critical documents for this chapter are available on watching.black, and I will add more documents over time as the project continues. For my analysis here, I am going to zoom in on a couple of documents that I found particularly revealing as a way to work through Karp's ethics test.

[212] Palantir Technologies, "CPD File 16-0614 - Response Letter" (FOIA dossier, Chicago Police Department Office of Legal Affairs, 2015), <watching.black/files/exhibits/show/palantir-ccso-

The first email from 2012 flags Palantir as a potential candidate to be used in predictive policing. Predictive policing is the theory that one's potential "risk of becoming a victim or possible offender" in a crime, such as "shooting or homicide" can be calculated by combining "numerous sources of information to analyze crime".[213] This is the very task for which Palantir was built; seeking out subconscious or otherwise hidden relationships between propertied objects, regardless of the surface-level object narrative. This level of civilian analysis has resulted in the Strategic Subject List, a "computerized assessment tool" by which individuals are "identifie[d] and rank[ed]"[214] according to their risk score. The risk score is based on analyzing a number of factors:

> "The number of times an individual was the victim of a shooting; the individual's age during latest arrest; the number of times the individual was a victim of aggravated battery or assault; trends in criminal activity; the number of prior arrests for unlawful use of a weapon; the number of prior arrests for violent offenses; the number of prior narcotics arrests; and gang affiliation".[215]

This variable list is a dynamic ontology. On top of objects-properties-relationships, each of these variables can be overlaid as a sort category to sift through what could be millions of data points. While sorting, the program knits together a picture of one object (a living person), their

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cpd>.

[213] Rashida Richardson, Jason M Schultz, and Kate Crawford, "Dirty Data, Bad Predictions: How Civil Rights Violations Impact Police Data, Predictive Policing Systems, and Justice," *New York University Law Review* 94, no. 2 (2019): 208.

[214] Rashida Richardson, Jason M Schultz, and Kate Crawford, "Dirty Data, Bad Predictions: How Civil Rights Violations Impact Police Data, Predictive Policing Systems, and Justice," *New York University Law Review* 94, no. 2 (2019): 208.

[215] Rashida Richardson, Jason M Schultz, and Kate Crawford, "Dirty Data, Bad Predictions: How Civil Rights Violations Impact Police Data, Predictive Policing Systems, and Justice," *New York University Law Review* 94, no. 2 (2019): 208.

properties (arrest data), and relationships with other objects (people connected through arrests for violent crime or gang affiliation). Though I don't have a document directly linking PG to the Strategic Subject List, there are multiple emails detailing system glitches as Palantir developers connected the CPD Offender Images database to the Palantir platform, which in 2014 "serve[d] as the data analyst platform for the CCSO" (*Offender Images*)[216]. Given that offender images (mugshots) are taken at the time of arrest, data run through PG was certainly part of the Strategic Subject List. The Strategic Subject List or a similar platform has been in use by the CPD since 2012,[217] and it would make sense to integrate PG into this program once the $2M contract was signed two years later.

Even if it not fully integrated, Palantir would have been privy to information about the existing data analysis strategy being used by the CPD and CCSO particularly as it concerned PG, of which the Strategic Subject List would have been a part, and Palantir data results would have likely been read against or alongside the Strategic Subject List as that deep network analysis is the whole point of the software. Karp's ethics test begins by asking under what conditions one can use PG. It appears that helping or working in parallel with the construction of a civilian network dataset that as of 2017 included 398,684 people and yet "was not successful in reducing gun violence or reducing the likelihood of victimization" yet "raised significant privacy and civil rights considerations" is an acceptable PG use case.[218]

This also spotlights an answer to Karp's second question—who can be surveilled?

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[216] Palantir Technologies, "CPD File 16-0614-Offender Images" (FOIA dossier, Chicago Police Department Office of Legal Affairs, 2015), <watching.black/files/exhibits/show/palantir-ccso-cpd>.
[217] Rashida Richardson, Jason M Schultz, and Kate Crawford, "Dirty Data, Bad Predictions: How Civil Rights Violations Impact Police Data, Predictive Policing Systems, and Justice," *New York University Law Review* 94, no. 2 (2019): 208.
[218] Rashida Richardson, Jason M Schultz, and Kate Crawford, "Dirty Data, Bad Predictions: How Civil Rights Violations Impact Police Data, Predictive Policing Systems, and Justice," *New York University*

Alongside this question I wonder about the data narratives being written of those who can be surveilled, and it is interesting that Karp does not ponder the narrative question in his ethics review. In keeping with his dissertation viewpoint, his questions ask about the precursors to, the infrastructure around, and the aftermath of surveillance, but not so much the act of surveillance itself. In one email a CPD commander says that the Intel group at the CCSO "love [Palantir]," which they are using with "CLEAR Arrest data, among other sources," and notes that CPD is interested in the platform particularly "for violent crimes / gun / gang crimes" (*Interoperability*)[219]. It is impossible to not read this as code for low-income Black and Latinx Chicagoans based on my experience of seeing Black and Latinx family, friends, and acquaintances be heavily profiled and captured along these lines. A ShotSpotter sits on my corner in West Englewood even though I heard drive-by shootings while living on the predominantly white northside. Gun crime is sadly not unique to Black spaces in Chicago, and yet there was no ShotSpotter on my block in Edgewater.

The Strategic Subject List shows this statistical discrepancy; according to independent analysis of the Strategic Subject List, "fifty-six percent of Black men under the age of thirty in Chicago have a risk score…more than one third of individuals on this list have never been arrested or a victim of a crime, and almost seventy percent of that cohort received a high risk score".[220] Surveillance for violent, gun, and gang crimes takes place, and policing strategies are built that surveillance data, but crime numbers do not shift. A look at these data points' lived experiences would likely reveal a greater need for socioeconomic resources, child and family

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Law Review 94, no. 2 (2019): 208-9.

[219] Palantir Technologies, "CPD File 16-0614-Interoperability" (FOIA dossier, Chicago Police Department Office of Legal Affairs, 2015), <watching.black/files/exhibits/show/palantir-ccso-cpd>.

[220] Rashida Richardson, Jason M Schultz, and Kate Crawford, "Dirty Data, Bad Predictions: How Civil Rights Violations Impact Police Data, Predictive Policing Systems, and Justice," *New York University*

support, and mental/emotional healing from social and generational trauma. But, the algorithm intentionally doesn't account for these nuances, only object relations. Black people are overrepresented in this object narrative, and yet these deep insights into Black and brown ontology by Palantir and other such technologies don't seem to match anybody's reality.

Of course, Palantir is not on the hook for how CPD uses its software, making it easier for the company to approve client use cases. The software-as-a-service model removes Palantir from deep involvement in and responsibility for how its clients use its software, in spite of their commitment to well-executed integration. This bears out in its contract with the Cook County Sheriff's Office, which outlines Palantir's contractual commitments and indemnity. Palantir wants clients to hit the ground running with its software. The CCSO contract, based on Palantir's contract with the county of San Mateo, CA[221], includes a three month timeline for full integration and a "committ[ment] to delivering operational results within a matter of weeks" (*CCSO Contract*[222]). In the first three weeks of the contract, Palantir promises that "data sets" will be "analyzed" and the CCSO's "custom ontology" will be "created"; by day sixty, the "system" is "operational"—users trained and actively using the platform; initial results delivered".[223] Palantir also promises "desk-side analytical support…as needed throughout the contract period",[224] and

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Law Review 94, no. 2 (2019): 209.

[221] It is worth noting that San Mateo is a 20 minute drive north of Palo Alto, the location of Palantir's former headquarters. Contracting their software north of Palo Alto means closer to San Francisco and Oakland, increasingly gentrified urban environments once heavily populated by people of color and queer folks, and farther from Cupertino (home of Apple) and Stanford University to the south, though Menlo Park (home of Facebook. Inc) is right on the southern edge of San Mateo County. It also means that, depending on where they lived, Palantir employees were not necessarily subject to surveillance analysis by Palantir software.

[222] Palantir Technologies, "CPD File 16-0614 - CCSO Contract" (FOIA dossier, Chicago Police Department Office of Legal Affairs, 2015), <watching.black/files/exhibits/show/palantir-ccso-cpd>.

[223] Palantir Technologies, "CPD File 16-0614 - CCSO Contract" (FOIA dossier, Chicago Police Department Office of Legal Affairs, 2015), <watching.black/files/exhibits/show/palantir-ccso-cpd>.

[224] Palantir Technologies, "CPD File 16-0614 - CCSO Contract" (FOIA dossier, Chicago Police Department Office of Legal Affairs, 2015), <watching.black/files/exhibits/show/palantir-ccso-cpd>.

the document later details exactly what that entails.

At the same time, Palantir's contract explicitly states that it is not responsible for anything that its clients do with Palantir Gotham or as a result of its analysis. Karp purports to be a philosopher spreading the discipline of software as language; in reality he and Thiel lived together while attending Stanford Law and both know where to draw the legal line for *their* protection regardless of the rhetoric. In item 13.2 of the CCSO contract, it explicitly states that

> "Customer represents…to Palantir that it will not use the Products for any improper or illegal purposes, including but not limited to (i) discrimination, (ii) harassment, (iii) compromising information and data security or confidentiality, (iv) integrating information that has been obtained in violation of any applicable contractual agreement or local, state, or Federal laws, regulation, or ordinance, (v) violation of privacy or constitutional rights of individuals or organizations, and/or (vi) violation of local, state, and Federal laws, regulations, or ordinances. Customer, not Palantir, remains solely liable and responsible for all data that Customer stores, integrates, or imports in the Products ("Content"). Customer acknowledges that all Content that Customer that Customer accesses and/or produces through use of Products and the conclusions drawn therefrom are done at Customer's own risk and Customer will be solely liable and responsible for any damage or losses to any party resulting therefrom".[225]

On some level this is logical contract language for any software company. Part of the benefit of providing software using the SAAS model is that the platform is not liable for what its users do with the platform. Section 230 of the US Communications Decency Act states that "no provider

[225] Palantir Technologies, "CPD File 16-0614 - CCSO Contract" (FOIA dossier, Chicago Police Department Office of Legal Affairs, 2015), <watching.black/files/exhibits/show/palantir-ccso-cpd>.

or user of an interactive computer service shall be treated as the publisher or speaker of any information provided by another information content provider".[226] A platform provider cannot be held liable for content produced by its users and vice versa. This arguably makes sense in the case of a platform like Facebook, where billions of users are able to post literally anything to the platform. As we are currently learning through Facebook and Twitter there is not an efficient way to police what people say and do on a platform, and until Donald Trump forced Facebook and Twitter's hand the best practice was to not take responsibility for it. Palantir, however, is not the same as Twitter. it seems rather insidious to me for Palantir to be able to create such a powerful data software targeted at narrative analysis and recreation, particularly one so heavily based in a particular worldview, moral philosophy, and ethical stance, and one geared toward making abstract data actionable, and yet not be responsible for what comes of that software and those actions.

This is not to say that there are no guardrails at all. According to the CLEAR Application user guide, a user "must enter a code for all three Permissible Purpose Code fields": a Gramm-Leach-Bliley (GLB) code, a Driver's Privacy Protection Act (DPPA) code, and a Voter code.[227] These codes correspond to three different protected datasets. The Gramm-Leach-Bliley Act protects consumer financial data,[228] the Driver's Privacy Protection Act protects motor vehicle record data,[229] and voter registration records are also protected according to state laws.[230] These

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226 US Congress, "US Communications Decency Act," 47 U.S. Code § 230 (2018), https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/47/230.
227 Palantir Technologies, "CPD File 16-0614 - CCSO Contract" (FOIA dossier, Chicago Police Department Office of Legal Affairs, 2015), 7, <watching.black/files/exhibits/show/palantir-ccso-cpd>.
228 Federal Trade Commission, "Gramm-Leach-Bliley Act," Government, Federal Trade Commission Business Center, n.d., https://www.ftc.gov/tips-advice/business-center/privacy-and-security/gramm-leach-bliley-act.
229 Palantir Technologies, "CPD File 16-0614 - CCSO Contract" (FOIA dossier, Chicago Police Department Office of Legal Affairs, 2015), 7, <watching.black/files/exhibits/show/palantir-ccso-cpd>.
230 Palantir Technologies, "CPD File 16-0614 - CCSO Contract" (FOIA dossier, Chicago Police

are all datasets that every American adult is entered into multiple times, just by virtue of having a credit card or loan, a state-issued ID or Driver's License, and being registered to vote. As such these databases are heavily protected, lest an errant user become privy to what amounts to a consumer data-based FBI General Index. In order to access searches involving this type of data, a user must have a code indicating a "permissible" use for the data, under threat of violating federal and state laws. At least according to this particular CLEAR Application manual, Permissible Use Codes are the main (if not the only) user-facing guardrail around randomly pulling sensitive government data.

I would like to believe that this is enough, and that with this protection in place Palantir can feel confident that its application is being used only for the greater good. However, who defines what a permissible use is, and who defines the "several possible exemptions for individuals and entities to access DMV-based personal information"?[231] Who is to say a user, or a data provider for that matter, can't just lie and deal with the fallout later? LexisNexis was sued in 2016 for selling traffic crash report information to personal injury lawyers, protected data under the DPPA.[232] This particular lawsuit dealt with police data from Schaumburg, IL, a Chicagoland area suburb, and LexisNexis is one of the databases specified in the CCSO contract. The car accident at the center of the lawsuit took place in January 2015, at the beginning of Palantir's contract period. LexisNexis attempted to get the lawsuit thrown out by arguing that traffic report data is public information as it is part of regular police duties, but the judge rejected this argument and

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Department Office of Legal Affairs, 2015), 7, <watching.black/files/exhibits/show/palantir-ccso-cpd>.

[231] Palantir Technologies, "CPD File 16-0614 - CCSO Contract" (FOIA dossier, Chicago Police Department Office of Legal Affairs, 2015), 7, <watching.black/files/exhibits/show/palantir-ccso-cpd>.

[232] Jonathan Bilyk, "Judge: LexisNexis Can Be Sued under Federal Privacy Law for Selling Crash Reports to Lawyers," *Cook County Record*, August 25, 2016, https://cookcountyrecord.com/stories/511000741-judge-lexisnexis-can-be-sued-under-federal-privacy-

allowed the lawsuit to proceed.[233] This is only one of many recent lawsuits against LexisNexis for data selling, and to me represents a fundamental chip in Palantir's seeing orb — the ethical and software guardrails seem to be based on a rather high level of trust in those who are part of the surveillance network. LexisNexis was surely bound by a provider agreement with the CCSO and a user agreement with Palantir to not sell DPPA data, in addition to the legal ramifications of the act itself, and they did so anyway.

To Karp's larger question of data management, a 2014 email identified another hole in the CPD database workflow. As Palantir developers worked to connect CLEAR mugshots to Palantir, they realized alongside their CPD contacts that nobody actually knew where these images were stored on the server. The obvious answer, a database named "cpdimage," would not allow developers to gain access. The alternative answer was that mugshots were stored in the arrest record database in individual profiles, but the developers couldn't find where that database would be. In 95% of cases this would seem like a rather innocuous oversight, simply a matter of finding and connecting to the correct database. Though I am not a corrections officer or a database administrator, from the perspective of heavily investing time and resources in smart (algorithmic) policing, it would seem rather important to be able to correctly identify the mugshot database the first time one is asked, rather than sending a developer on a wild data chase to find it. The earlier chapter mention of mugshot databases was from an email six months later than this one, meaning Palantir developers still had to circle back to finding the mugshot photo database *six months* later. Rather than flag this as a potential data management issue, the Palantir developer asked the client to help him help them; he impressed upon them that "it would

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law-for-selling-crash-reports-to-lawyers.

[233] Jonathan Bilyk, "Judge: LexisNexis Can Be Sued under Federal Privacy Law for Selling Crash Reports to Lawyers," *Cook County Record*, August 25, 2016, https://cookcountyrecord.com/stories/511000741-judge-lexisnexis-can-be-sued-under-federal-privacy-

significant enhance user experience and utility if [Palantir] had images to add to the individual records".[234]

From all this, I am left asking if we as surveilled citizens can truly trust the methods and actors by which surveillance takes place. Even if we can trust that the structures work effectively and efficiently, can we trust that these structures work in our best interest? Karp poses this question in his ethics test, asking how surveillance happens, but he and Thiel operate from the position of American exceptionalism. The resounding corporate stance, if somewhat qualified, is that surveillance happens safely and securely in America. We can trust the institutions that collect our data, even if we may not trust their analytical capabilities. Even if I shared this belief, emails between CPD and CCSO officers would quickly lead me to believe otherwise. In one email from a law enforcement listserv, a CPD commander is jokingly congratulated on being the first "cohort member" to attract negative press for policing actions. The attached article is a Daily Caller article headlined "Chicago Police Develop Real Minority Report Computer to Predict Crimes," and the officer goes on to explain that the article references new work with Palantir. Others on the email thread make lighthearted jokes; it is a little chilling to see officers casually joking about a surveillance network tangibly affecting everyday people.

Far more chilling is an email thread between that same CPD commander and a deputy sheriff with the CCSO. From the thread, it appears that both of them were in a meeting listening to a presentation for a Palantir competitor software, and they were emailing back and forth hoping to escape the meeting as soon as they can. The deputy sheriff joked that the meeting "might end with [her] punching this woman in her face :)," to which the commander replied

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law-for-selling-crash-reports-to-lawyers.

[234] Palantir Technologies, "CPD File 16-0614 - Mugshots" (FOIA dossier, Chicago Police Department Office of Legal Affairs, 2015), <watching.black/files/exhibits/show/palantir-ccso-cpd>.

"[he] wish[ed he] hadn't left [his] Taser at home". Later the deputy sheriff complained that she can't leave the meeting because "Olivia Pope won't stop talking," and the conversation continued as normal.[235] Not only are these two state officials casually joking about being violent toward a citizen, it becomes clear from the "Olivia Pope" title that they are specifically talking about being violent toward a Black woman coworker. Not that any reason would justify their comments, but they say this for no other reason than their shared feeling that her presentation is boring and maybe repetitive. The casualness of their jokes plus the fact that they are IT professionals joking around on their work email accounts shows that they aren't worried about being caught nor severely reprimanded, which suggests to me that this is not the first time such sentiments were casually shared in this way. These are literally the people in charge of Chicago's countywide surveillance. The deputy sheriff plays a large support role in Palantir's implementation at the CCSO; other emails show her organizing administrative elements like officer software training. The commander she was emailing was the point person for the Palantir contract at the CPD; his Twitter profile states that he is now the chief of the Bureau of Technical Services with the CPD.[236] Here we have state agents being openly anti-Black racist in an email chain joking about very real anti-Black violence based on their feelings, and yet Chicagoans are supposed to trust these same agents to oversee a surveillance network spanning the entire county.

This particular email thread stands out to me because I know the CCSO deputy sheriff personally. Names and email addresses were not fully redacted in the FOIA file so I was able to see who actually sent the emails. When I saw her name next to her words and the punctuating smiley face my blood ran cold from the recognition. A quick Google search located the deputy

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[235] Palantir Technologies, "CPD File 16-0614 - Olivia Pope" (FOIA dossier, Chicago Police Department Office of Legal Affairs, 2015), #, <watching.black/files/exhibits/show/palantir-ccso-cpd>.

[236] Jonathan S. Lewin, "@CPD_Tech Profile," Social Media, Twitter.com, accessed July 2, 2021,

sheriff's LinkedIn profile, where I was able to verify that she is indeed the same person who helped coordinate my high school debate tournaments nearly fifteen years ago.[237] I debated with the Chicago Urban Debate League in high school, an organization specifically designed to use policy debate as a networking and postsecondary opportunity gateway for inner-city high school students. I never felt particularly comfortable around her then though I couldn't name why, but my fourteen-year-old gut instinct appears to have been correct. The person doing diversity and inclusion education work on behalf of Black and brown youth like myself became an officer threatening to punch a Black woman peer in the face because she was bored.

What are the consequences when racist and violent officers read algorithmically to make policing decisions? Based on the information at hand one might reframe the last question in Karp's ethics test, what is the consequence of surveillance, as such. When the Drug Enforcement Agency (DEA) used Palantir Gotham to solve the 2011 murder of an Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) agent, their data analysis turned up more than just one murderer. The application returned a "network map of individuals and organizations that resulted in the arrest of 676 people across the U.S., Mexico, and South America, along with the seizure of 467 kilograms of cocaine, 30 kilograms of meth, and 282 guns".[238] From the corporate and government perspective, these are excellent and ideal surveillance consequences. But what of those 676 people? Their narrative status is not much different than the 398,684 Chicagoans on the Strategic Subject List, written into a network narrative of gang and cartel related crime. 131,566 (33%) of these citizens had no actual relation to any criminal activity despite being spoken by the software as such.

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https://twitter.com/cpd_tech?lang=en.

[237] Brittney Blair, "Brittney Blair LinkedIn Profile," Social Media, LinkedIn, accessed May 15, 2021, https://www.linkedin.com/in/brittney-blair-a11545b4.

[238] Christopher Brown, "Borrowed Palantirs," *Review: Literature and Arts of the Americas* 48, no. 1

Critically, the Strategic Subject List variables are based on prior arrest data rather than conviction data. This means that connected datasets more accurately reflect status quo policing measures rather than actual convictions for target crimes[239] . Bracketing anti-Black racism within the court system, the citizen data being fed into PG reflects policing based on current CPD and CCSO practices, rather than reflecting the rates at which gun and drug crime actually occurs. Simply put, arrest data reflects the "unlawful and biased"[240] policing leading to high arrest rates among Black and brown Chicagoans. Arrest data is not the same as conviction data, which would theoretically represent when crime actually occurred versus when it was accused, though unlawful and biased conviction occurs as well. Rooting algorithmic speculation in arrest data means the criminal data narrative is biased against whoever the police *feel* the criminals are. As illustrated in emails above, it may not be in everyone's best interest for the police to act on their feelings. Policing on the basis of a biased data narrative creates more biased arrest data, particularly when the "CPD's SSL enforcement indicates arrests as a primary outcome, and in some cases a stated goal",[241] and particularly when CPD and CCSO officers have been documented engaging in anti-Black violent rhetoric to blow off steam. Furthermore, research shows that CPD officers were not well trained "on how to use the SSL predictions which resulted in officers merely increasing contacts with individuals on the list";[242] more SSL arrests and thus

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(2015): 35.

[239] Rashida Richardson, Jason M Schultz, and Kate Crawford, "Dirty Data, Bad Predictions: How Civil Rights Violations Impact Police Data, Predictive Policing Systems, and Justice," *New York University Law Review* 94, no. 2 (2019): 208.

[240] Rashida Richardson, Jason M Schultz, and Kate Crawford, "Dirty Data, Bad Predictions: How Civil Rights Violations Impact Police Data, Predictive Policing Systems, and Justice," *New York University Law Review* 94, no. 2 (2019): 209.

[241] Rashida Richardson, Jason M Schultz, and Kate Crawford, "Dirty Data, Bad Predictions: How Civil Rights Violations Impact Police Data, Predictive Policing Systems, and Justice," *New York University Law Review* 94, no. 2 (2019): 210.

[242] Rashida Richardson, Jason M Schultz, and Kate Crawford, "Dirty Data, Bad Predictions: How Civil Rights Violations Impact Police Data, Predictive Policing Systems, and Justice," *New York University*

more SSL data to feed back into PG and other such systems. Because PG is trained to look for patterns, it will continually sift through SSL data, flag individuals who appear to check variable boxes, and return reports networking hundreds of thousands of strategic targets on the basis of the ontology it is given.

From the software as a service perspective, and from a speculative "Western constellation" against China perspective, a 66% accuracy rate is probably not that bad. Almost three-fourths of the time, the data narrative is true. More accurately, almost three-fourths of the time the algorithm returns an object network that verifiably meets the parameters of its base ontology. Whether or not that narrative is an accurate representation of that object's reality is a question Palantir does not actually ask of the program, because then the application would have to actually look at and contend with PG real world impacts. This is no different than Karp choosing not to discuss the actual anti-Semitism present in the jargon he analyses in his dissertation, analyzing instead for the metalevel fact of its existence. When Karp says that Palantir "makes sure the data is actually preserved in a way that guarantees its veracity,"[243] he belies a desire to preserve data for its veracity according to the analyst taking control of the data, not the citizen subjects of surveillance. If Karp was meaningfully invested in the consequences of surveillance, Palantir would have to contend with at least one hundred thousand lives negatively affected by predictive policing at the hands of its software and one of its clients. Of course, the contract states Palantir isn't liable for the reality it helps to create.

As pointed out in the Object Explorer manual, the point of a data ontology is to "drill down" to "the outcomes you desire".[244] The CLEAR PG implementation allows phone searches,

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Law Review 94, no. 2 (2019): 210.

[243] Alex Karp, "Palantir CEO Alex Karp on Software & Society," https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PzM0LzybwG4.

[244] Palantir Technologies, "CPD File 16-0614 - PG Object Explorer" (FOIA dossier, Chicago

which return "information related to a phone number, including subscriber name (person or business), address, and carrier data," and "may also include applicable consumer bureau data and utility records,"[245] as well as person searches, which return "information related to a subject using public record proprietary data" as well as "consumer bureau data, phone numbers, utility records, death filings, associated drivers licenses, health care provider information, and any criminal or arrest records".[246] Just in these two searches lies a wealth of information through which a dynamic ontology is meant to sift, with the purpose of revealing the information pattern the analyst seeks. The most basic report returned from both types of search lists "primary subject information" and "information on 1st degree relatives, neighbors, and associates, which include listed phone numbers and most recent addresses," and the most comprehensive report is a subject data biography[247] multifaceted beyond FBI Director Hoover's wildest dreams[248]. Quite literally, citizens unrelated to the initial search are connected. This creates the path leading to a multinational 676-person DEA network or a 398,694-person SSL, almost 15% of Chicago's 2017 population. Even if we buy the Strategic Subject List's logic and believe in the analysis behind it,

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Police Department Office of Legal Affairs, 2015), 4, <watching.black/files/exhibits/show/palantir-ccso-cpd>.

[245] Palantir Technologies, "CPD File 16-0614 - CCSO Contract" (FOIA dossier, Chicago Police Department Office of Legal Affairs, 2015), 6, <watching.black/files/exhibits/show/palantir-ccso-cpd>.

[246] Palantir Technologies, "CPD File 16-0614 - CCSO Contract" (FOIA dossier, Chicago Police Department Office of Legal Affairs, 2015), 11, <watching.black/files/exhibits/show/palantir-ccso-cpd>.

[247] Palantir Technologies, "CPD File 16-0614 - CCSO Contract" (FOIA dossier, Chicago Police Department Office of Legal Affairs, 2015), 19-20, <watching.black/files/exhibits/show/palantir-ccso-cpd>.

[248] Palantir Technologies, "CPD File 16-0614 - CCSO Contract" (FOIA dossier, Chicago Police Department Office of Legal Affairs, 2015), 20, <watching.black/files/exhibits/show/palantir-ccso-cpd>.

According to the CLEAR guide, "information returned will include the subject's name, aliases, social security number, dates of birth, address and phone history," the potential for "consumer bureau agency" information, and will comb state and federal databases to summarize the subject's "Federal and State Sanctions, NPI [national provider identifier] records, Assets, Driver Licenses, Nationwide Healthcare

a 66% accuracy rate means 33% of those on the list have absolutely nothing to do with drug or gun crimes but were hailed in a language that speaks them otherwise. This is ontology as jargon actively seeking information to narrativize rather than ontology passively arising from a metalevel.

What is personally at stake is the fact that CPD could easily craft a strategic data ontology for Palantir to implement that includes me and my younger sister. Let alone being Black and working class (revealed in census data and all consumer financial data tied to our immediate family), our state identification, voter registration, and taxes all list an address in a low-income, high-violent crime neighborhood in Gangster Disciple territory. We could come up in an associates search for any of our neighbors (mostly underemployed Black men between twenty-five and forty, surveillance targets whether warranted or not), and my cell phone associates me with them and other young Black men in Chicago via carrier location data and messaging data. Absent fathers being a longstanding trope used to pathologize Black families, our father's Cook County death certificate could be a big flag. What would likely save us is our birth-certificate assigned gender, and our educational and work affiliations. Though, as a CPD officer reminded our then-teenage brother upon demanding he produce documentation, my brother's expensive Catholic prep school ID made him little more than a "smart nigger".

In the nineties, our older brother was a Black man under thirty in Chicago — a subject profile at a social peak of crime and racist policing, which is how he was mistaken for someone else on that Westside block and accosted by police. He's now a college-educated Black man over thirty in Redondo Beach, CA, but whenever he comes home he links up with our neighbors like they're still ten years old playing outside. A Provider Comprehensive Report for him would

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Licenses, Business Associations, Property Ownership…Vehicle Registrations, *and much more*" (emphasis mine)

return not only the CPD data narrative, but also the Los Angeles Police Department narrative. These most complex Palantir reports return "information across all states associated with the subject,"[249] and the LAPD is another one of Palantir's clients (it is probably safe to assume most large metropolitan police departments are). Anytime he drove his truck or his motorcycle from the oceanside to the city of "Los Angeles since 2015, the police [could] see where [my brother's vehicles were] photographed, when [they were] photographed, and then click on [his] name to learn all about [him]"[250] as tracked through two states. Would the data narrative speak us to the cops who sit on our southeast corner as strategic subjects, or would it speak us as a senior financial analyst/small business owner, a doctoral candidate in literature, and a dancer/videographer? Under Karp's logic as manifested in Palantir, the state data points of our lives can be analyzed to reveal the aggression that lies within us whether we know it is there or not. Thankfully the material world is more opaque than a *palantír* can reflect and more nuanced than a dynamic ontology can veritably map.

If software is a language, and Palantir a vanguard software, it runs into all of the same language issues pointed out by deconstructionist literary criticism. Languages are coded by flawed people, shipping with bugs between sign, signifier, and referent that ensure no two people attach the exact same signifier data to the same sign. Instead of using technology to create an on-ramp toward linguistic clarity, Palantir Gotham is more like a surveillance ouroboros. Biased data enters an algorithm overlaid with a biased information ontology, and the algorithm returns a biased narrative with shaky social referents that then informs biased action. Like Pippin in *Lord*

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[249] Palantir Technologies, "CPD File 16-0614 - CCSO Contract" (FOIA dossier, Chicago Police Department Office of Legal Affairs, 2015), 20, <watching.black/files/exhibits/show/palantir-ccso-cpd>.

[250] Caroline Haskins, "Scars, Tattoos, And License Plates: This Is What Palantir And The LAPD Know About You," *BuzzFeed News*, September 29, 2020, https://www.buzzfeednews.com/article/carolinehaskins1/training-documents-palantir-lapd.

of the Rings, just because one can look into the *palantír* does not mean one knows how to see or read what is there. The *palantír* returns a veritable message to anyone who looks; this does not mean that what the *palantír* says is real.

Chapter 4 - *Riot*: Erotic Analysis

It cannot be simply a cosmic coincidence that Palantir Technologies CEO Alex Karp's mother, Leah Jaynes Karp[251], is an accomplished artist whose work "layers fabric, photographs, and everyday objects to link family ties and cultural ties".[252] There does not appear to be much public information available about Jaynes Karp or her art, save for a couple of older art reviews from newspaper archives. A 1986 *Chicago Tribune* review of a show at the Museum of Contemporary Photography of Columbia College Chicago describes her art as "border[ing] on folk art";[253] it is folk art in the sense that it deals with family and home, but Jaynes Karp and her co-exhibitor Bea Nettles were more interested in folk remix and playing with representational objects. A Black midwestern Baptist preacher's daughter who "marrie[d] into a Jewish family and ha[d] two sons," Jaynes Karp's art examined the patterns resonating across time and culture that create new family narratives.

For example, one piece involved Karp affixing "snapshots and other family memorabilia onto poster-sized fans that resemble the smaller variety used during Baptist church services," and her multimedia collages "sugges[t] a layering of generations that make up a family and, in a broader sense, a culture".[254] In effect, Jaynes Karp conducted multimedia analysis of her family data. She networked the artifacts of her life and represented "themes of continual change" endemic to Black art as a "layering of experience".[255] Not unlike the erotic compositions Lorde

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[251] Ruchi Gupta, "How Did Alex Karp's Views Lead Palantir out of the Silicon Valley?," *Market Realist*, October 23, 2020.
[252] Abigail Foerstner, "Two Artists' Mixed Media Works Are Slices of Their Lives," *Chicago Tribune*, September 5, 1986, https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-1986-09-05-8603060652-story.html.
[253] Abigail Foerstner, "Two Artists' Mixed Media Works Are Slices of Their Lives," *Chicago Tribune*, September 5, 1986, https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-1986-09-05-8603060652-story.html.
[254] Abigail Foerstner, "Two Artists' Mixed Media Works Are Slices of Their Lives," *Chicago Tribune*, September 5, 1986, https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-1986-09-05-8603060652-story.html.
[255] Abigail Foerstner, "Two Artists' Mixed Media Works Are Slices of Their Lives," *Chicago Tribune*, September 5, 1986, https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-1986-09-05-8603060652-story.html.

wove of her mother's West Indian data, Jaynes Karp compiled family and cultural ephemera to create a separate sphere in which she and her multicultural family were the episteme.

None of the articles I found detail how growing up surrounded by his mother's art practice affected Karp's worldview; Karp's family background rarely enters into conversations about him[256]. One article does state that Karp considers his parents to be "hippies" who "participated in labor rights demonstrations and political protests and took their young son along with them,"[257] so Karp did grow up in a politically radical and leftist environment influenced by his parents' politics. All that I have found about how he conceptualizes his position at the head of the surveillance network, producing state software used to keep tabs on networks of black and brown bodies, is that he feels "somewhat vulnerable" because he is biracial.[258] His personal identity is ultimately his business, and is not as relevant to my thinking about Palantir's analytics as the fact that he grew up surrounded by Black data remixing. His mother was quite explicit about the fact that she created art as a Black woman and mother. Her art was not representational or notional, in the way that she felt being categorized solely as "women's art" limited the way she was read by audiences, because that basic framework "didn't seem to be professionally legitimate to [her]". The ontology that did make sense to her, her intersectional artistic framework was "black," "woman," and "mother". As she framed it, "It's all me and I'm not willing to give up any of it".[259]

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[256] Interestingly, one of the autocompleted Google searches related to Alex Karp is "Alex Karp hair," which to me reveals our incredible American ability to spot and read race and ethnicity in any context. Articles rarely discuss Karp's personal life, very few articles mention his parents at all let alone that his mother is Black, and yet his hair triggers a question for those who look at him.

[257] Ruchi Gupta, "How Did Alex Karp's Views Lead Palantir out of the Silicon Valley?," *Market Realist*, October 23, 2020.

[258] Ruchi Gupta, "How Did Alex Karp's Views Lead Palantir out of the Silicon Valley?," *Market Realist*, October 23, 2020.

[259] Abigail Foerstner, "Two Artists' Mixed Media Works Are Slices of Their Lives," *Chicago Tribune*,

In this chapter, I move from Palantir Technologies to consider a similarly layered poetic antidote to the privatized public data state they attempt to create. In response to the assassination of the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. on April 4, 1968, Black Chicagoans rioted on the South and West sides of the city[260]. The Westside bore the brunt of the damage: two days following the riot, "only ash and rubble remained along a 2 mile stretch of Madison Street, and some areas of Roosevelt Road and 63rd Street".[261] In response to the riots, Pulitzer-winning poet and Black Chicagoan Gwendolyn Brooks wrote a short chapbook, *Riot*, chronicling the events with an eye toward rebuilding the Westside. I argue that her erotic way of chronicling and analyzing the data surrounding this traumatic moment for Chicago's Black citizens stands in stark contrast to the top-down ontological framework sold by Palantir to the Chicago Police Department. In the same way that Jaynes Karp layered her life artifacts to create an subject narrative in excess of each object on its own in its usual context, Brooks creates a subject narrative layering multiple creative and cultural Chicago registers. Defying her literary critics on both sides, Brooks pushes toward an erotic data rhythm through which to read Black Chicagoan trauma for Black Chicagoans.

Much like Jaynes Karp's multimedia art, Brooks wove Chicago information drawn from the public record and her experiences as a Black citizen through her poetry. Indeed, critics assess her 1969 three-part chapbook *Riot* similarly, praising how "[*Riot*'s second poem] uses collage"[262]

September 5, 1986, https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-1986-09-05-8603060652-story.html.

[260] To learn more about the 1968 riots and how they affected Chicago, I highly recommend checking out the essay I cite in this article. "Rage, riots, ruin" is a 2018 multimedia essay produced by the *Chicago Tribune* on the fiftieth anniversary of the riots, featuring photographs and video from during and immediately after the riots juxtaposed against a portrait of the Westside today.

[261] Tony Briscoe and Ese Olumhense, "Rage, Riots, Ruin," *Chicago Tribune*, August 16, 2018, http://graphics.chicagotribune.com/riots-chicago-1968-mlk/index.html, 5.

[262] David Baker, "Mundane and Plural: Riot," in *The Whiskey of Our Discontent: Gwendolyn Brooks as Conscious and Change Agent*, ed. Quraysh Ali Lansana and Georgia A. Popoff (Chicago: Haymarket

as a tool to layer observations and narratives of the 1968 King assassination riots on Chicago's Westside. The poem plays out in three movements: "Riot" depicts the life and death of white elite John Cabot at the beginning of the riot, "Third Sermon on the Warpland" delves into the riot itself, and "An Aspect of Love, Alive in the Ice and Fire" reflects on the riot's aftermath. The poems are centered on "West Madison Street",[263] the street on which 116 establishments were destroyed along twenty blocks (three miles) between Damen Avenue and Pulaski Road, resulting in nearly $10M in uninsured damage to stores and businesses.[264] Fifty years later, around fourteen percent of the vacant land in Chicago is on the Westside, around these areas.[265] A multicultural and intergenerational word and sound collage of the events written soon after they took place, the poems pay homage to the changed city landscape and call to action the Black communities forever affected by the riots.

However, *Riot* and its immediate predecessor *In the Mecca* (1968) are often critically read through the framework of Brooks's decision to leave her large mainstream trade publisher Harper & Row and begin publishing with Black owned small presses — Broadside Press, based in Detroit, and later Third World Press, based on the Southside of Chicago. As such, critics seem to read *Riot* for evidence of how this financial decision affected Brooks's poetics. In my research I found two main critical camps: white aestheticists reading Brooks for whether she reflected white cultural politics across her career and particularly after 1967, and Black Arts scholars reading post-1967 Brooks for how she reflected Black revolutionary politics and dismissing anything else as catering to white aesthetics.

Books, 2017), 123.
[263] Gwendolyn Brooks, *Riot* (Detroit: Broadside Press, 1969), 12.
[264] Tony Briscoe and Ese Olumhense, "Rage, Riots, Ruin," *Chicago Tribune*, August 16, 2018, http://graphics.chicagotribune.com/riots-chicago-1968-mlk/index.html, 9.
[265] Tony Briscoe and Ese Olumhense, "Rage, Riots, Ruin," *Chicago Tribune*, August 16, 2018, http://graphics.chicagotribune.com/riots-chicago-1968-mlk/index.html, 5.

One white aestheticist considered Brooks's decision to leave Harper's "a profoundly anti-economic move," given that she was leaving behind their "widespread distribution and publicity" networks,[266] a line cited across other essays. Another read Brooks alongside pre-modernist poet Walt Whitman in response to 2014 riots in Ferguson, MO, bookending his analysis of Brooks's inability to escape the "erasures of history and nature" in *Riot* with Whitman's ability to be "reborn in the song of the hermit thrush…one of the great acts of transcendental imagination".[267] Another author compared Brooks to Whitman as well; she read the third poem as "push[ing] back against the popular white vision" of Black rioters by presenting to them "an indelible portrait of black people as individuals—in this case, as giddy, optimistic lovers, not as 'types' or 'rough ranks'," simultaneously working to "reinscribe a Whitmanic vision of democratic ideals" through Black Arts Movement politics.[268] Yet another argued that across her career Brooks "forced" the Romantic lyric poem, her beloved sonnet, to act "as public speech"[269] in order to foreground questions of address and audience. One such essay used American history, going back to the Revolutionary War, to justify Black rioters' violence as "consistently a way of achieving political change throughout the history of the United States",[270] seeming to imply that without the long history Black rioters are slightly less justified.

A couple of critics read her post-1967 work, particularly *In the Mecca,* through the structures of modernist architecture in Chicago. These essays spent pages cataloguing every

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[266] James D Sullivan, "Killing John Cabot and Publishing Black: Gwendolyn Brooks's Riot," in *Critical Insights: Gwendolyn Brooks* (Hackensack, NJ: Salem Press, 2009), 318.
[267] David Baker, "Mundane and Plural: Riot," in *The Whiskey of Our Discontent: Gwendolyn Brooks as Conscious and Change Agent*, ed. Quraysh Ali Lansana and Georgia A. Popoff (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2017) 127.
[268] Meghan O'Rourke, "The Eros in Democracy," *Poetry* 210, no. 3 (June 2017): 254.
[269] Lesley Wheeler, "Heralding the Clear Obscure: Gwendolyn Brooks and Apostrophe," *Callaloo* 24, no. 1 (2001): 227.
[270] Annette Debo, "Reflecting Violence in the Warpland: Gwendolyn Brooks's Riot," in *Critical Insights: Gwendolyn Brooks*, ed. Mildred R. Mickle (Hackensack, NJ: Salem Press, 2009), 305.

salaciously racist mainstream media depiction of the predominantly-Black Southside apartment building, from the beginning and ending of its initial all-white tenancy through its ”plight”[271] of Black residents to its eventual destruction, as a way of proving why Brooks’s poetic intervention was so needed. While certainly interesting, these architectural readings at times felt as though they replicated the very harms they meant to critique.

In reading essays concerned with white aesthetics in Brooks, I began to notice a few patterns. Writers would focused on analyzing the eponymous first poem to make sense of the violent ending that befalls the protagonist, walk through the depictions of violence in the second poem, and touch on the third poem. Some essays focused solely on the third poem, which can be easily read as a love poem; I didn’t encounter a white aesthetic critic who delved into the multifaceted second poem nearly as closely. They would invariably reference her 1967 shift and quote Brooks expressing a Black nationalist sentiment, often Brooks’s 1968 interview in *Ebony* magazine where she stated that she is “absolutely free of any fear of what any white critic might say because [she] feel[s] that it’s going to be most amazing if any of them really understand the true significance of the struggle that’s going on”.[272] Interestingly, many of the same writers expressed the sense that, even after their careful analysis, Brooks, and *Riot* in particular, was still largely opaque: her “approach to [the] legacy [of architectural modernity] is oblique,”[273] ”her imperatives perplex as much as illuminate,”[274] *Riot* is “an intense, interiorized, self-referential work that feels more fragmented than complete…more post modernist than finished or tidily

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[271] Jo Gill, “Gwendolyn Brooks and the Legacies of Architectural Modernity,” *Humanities* 8, no. 4 (October 22, 2019).
[272] James D Sullivan, “Killing John Cabot and Publishing Black: Gwendolyn Brooks’s Riot,” in *Critical Insights: Gwendolyn Brooks* (Hackensack, NJ: Salem Press, 2009), 322.
[273] Jo Gill, “Gwendolyn Brooks and the Legacies of Architectural Modernity,” *Humanities* 8, no. 4 (October 22, 2019), 1.
[274] Lesley Wheeler, “Heralding the Clear Obscure: Gwendolyn Brooks and Apostrophe,” *Callaloo* 24, no. 1 (2001): 227.

coherent".[275] I found this critical pattern frustrating because it both revealed Brooks's preference for how her texts should be read, and then seemed to falter in going the distance to understand Brooks from her own perspective. I do not at all find literary critics as blatantly harmful as a state-sponsored data analysis company like Palantir Technologies, but I feel there is a similar push to craft an ontological frame and place it onto Brooks's corpus, claiming mastery over the text while reading it as an outsider with half of the necessary knowledge.

Black Arts critics, on the other hand, found Brooks opaque for totally different reasons. Despite the difficulties of using white modernist frames to read Brooks, this camp felt that Brooks's work, particularly pre-1967, was *too* white; they classified her poetic aesthetics as being too convoluted, and her revolutionary politics too sterile. This general sentiment is summed up most succinctly in the preface to the first volume of Brooks's autobiography, *Report from Part One:*

> *"Annie Allen* (1949), important? Yes. Read by blacks? No. *Annie Allen* more so than *A Street in Bronzeville* seems to have been written for whites. For instance, 'The Anniad' requires unusual concentrated study. She invents the sonnet-ballad in part 3 of the poem 'Appendix to the Anniad, leaves from a loose-leaf war diary.' This poem is probably earth-shaking to some, but leaves me completely dry. … *Annie Allen* is an important book. Gwendolyn Brooks's ability to use their language while using their ground rules explicitly shows that she far surpasses the best European-Americans had to offer. There is no doubt here. But in so doing, she suffers by not communicating with the masses of

[275] David Baker, "Mundane and Plural: Riot," in *The Whiskey of Our Discontent: Gwendolyn Brooks as Conscious and Change Agent*, ed. Quraysh Ali Lansana and Georgia A. Popoff (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2017), 123.

black people."[276]

Though Black Arts critics recognized that all of Brooks's poetry was important, they drew a clear line between that which they felt relied heavily on European poetics and that which reflected Black Arts Movement aesthetics, "black poets clean[ing] house and carv[ing] their own statues into what they wanted themselves to be, regardless of who was watching and with even less regard for what critics, white and black, said".[277] Writing winding tomes filled with sonnets and Classics-referencing epic poems did not fit the Black Arts aesthetic, argued its critics, partially because the average Black reader could or would not understand their usage. In addition, these were solely European forms — Brooks's achievement in winning the Pulitzer Prize for *Annie Allen* was one of formal mastery and showmanship, rather than personal artistry and linguistic play. At the end of the day, Black readers just wouldn't get her poems no matter how celebrated, and the movement cast her early work aside.

However, even in reading Brooks's late work, the engagement with Brooks's ideas seems to remain in the realm of the material context in which the work is made. Though Brooks still "include[s]" formal European poetics, such as "blank verse…long-swinging free verse, the couplet, the sonnet, and the ballad," the post-1967 work "resembles a man getting off meat," it is "fat-less". When praising *Riot*, the above Black Arts critic (a Chicagoan himself) says simply that "Brooks was not only asking critical questions, but seeking substantive answers." More important is the fact that she "began her association with one of the newest and most significant black publishing companies in the world, Broadside Press, under the quiet and strong editorship of Dudley Randall".[278] The critic goes on to discuss Brooks's issues with Harper & Row,

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[276] Gwendolyn Brooks, *Report From Part One*, First (Detroit: Broadside Press, 1972), 17.
[277] Gwendolyn Brooks, *Report From Part One*, First (Detroit: Broadside Press, 1972), 21.
[278] Gwendolyn Brooks, *Report From Part One*, First (Detroit: Broadside Press, 1972), 24.

highlighting her choice to leave as a sign of a larger wave among Black Arts-affiliated writers.

I find this reading frustrating as well for what it implies about Black aesthetics and reading audiences. As cultural scholar bell hooks argues in "An Aesthetic of Blackness: Strange and Oppositional," such a reading of Brooks's early work appears to "dismiss all forms of cultural production by African-Americans that did not conform to movement criteria," and in so doing "did not allow for recognition of multiple black experience or the complexity of black life." These are "aesthetic practices…based on the notion that a people's art, cultural production for the masses, could not be either complex, abstract, or diverse in style, form, content, etc."[279] A Black Arts reading seems to argue that Brooks using poetic forms created by European writers in her earlier work, such as the sonnet, was only ever an engagement with white aesthetics, not dissimilar from critiques made against early Black poets and writers such as Phyllis Wheatley, which was grounds for its dismissal.

Simultaneously, or perhaps for this very reason, comes the argument that the "average" Black reader is not interested in such poetic forms and will not read a text by a Black author that uses them. I find that this is no different than claiming Brooks's readers would not or could not understand, let alone appreciate, Brooks's prosody in its fullness. As hooks frames it, despite "insist[ing] that [the Black Arts Movement] represented a break from white western traditions…the assumption that naturalism or realism was more accessible to a mass audience than abstraction was certainly not a revolutionary position".[280] This position posits that the consumers of a $1 poetry volume are less concerned with aesthetics than they are content; affordable content for Black audiences inherently means simple and overburdened by a particular

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[279] bell hooks, "An Aesthetic of Blackness: Strange and Oppositional," *Lenox Avenue: A Journal of Interarts Inquiry* 1 (1995): 68.
[280] bell hooks, "An Aesthetic of Blackness: Strange and Oppositional," *Lenox Avenue: A Journal of Interarts Inquiry* 1 (1995): 68.

kind of Black revolutionary politics. This mindset only serves to maintain dominant information economies constructed for white reading audiences. It reads like two ways of saying Black readers are unintelligent — as actual readers, and as cultural consumers. We aren't sophisticated enough to pick up on complex wordplay situated in a nuanced context (perhaps rap music, hip hop culture, and its various precursors are aesthetic anomalies), and we don't read hard books, so writers should not create aesthetically groundbreaking texts about Black culture with Black readers in mind.

Whether or not the reader will do the extra work to understand the totality of references made in a poem is a problem all creative writing, and frankly all scholarly writing, suffers from. Much (though not all) of the work written and circulating in scholarly information economies is inaccessible to many outside of those spheres. This is not a problem inherent to *Annie Allen*; I would argue instead that it is a factor of how insular those information economies are and remain, because both sides of the cultural transaction assume the other side is not interested in what they have to offer. Rather than expand culture by exposing readers to new ways of framing ideas, revolutionary critics seem to want a monolithic culture that keeps everyone in line with the revolution. I think this gets at the heart of why Brooks' choice to publish Black was so radical. In doing so she was not making a claim on Black aesthetics, but rather Black information economies. She wanted to create media in a way that expressed her reality while financially supporting institutions committed to a multiplicity of Black people writing and speaking themselves for themselves and each other.

A third critical camp rears its head at times as well, in between white aestheticists and Black Arts critics; the camp of Black poets and writers who feel that Brooks actually loses some of her artistry after 1967 when she begins to write with a revolutionary focus. For example, one

critic argues that "when Gwendolyn Brooks aligns herself with the Black Arts Movement her poetry loses a fundamental ground, except the book *Into* [sic] *the Mecca"*[281]. Another critic frames the issue as a feeling that "she abandoned her prosodic gifts even as she exchanged a high literary idiom for a decidedly more demotic one".[282] As I will argue in the rest of this section, however, that is simply not the case. Though *In the Mecca* is held up by Black writers as the example of Brooks blending artistry and revolution to its greatest effect, this is a conversation she continues in *Riot* to great effect. Even as she is documenting a moment in time, she continues to be influenced by and play with classical poetic form and meter, pushing at the boundaries of both genres in order to make sense of this traumatic and pivotal experience.

To a certain degree, Brooks is in alignment with the Black Arts stance; after all she submitted a preface with this critique of her early work as part of her autobiography. She makes the clear delineation in her thinking herself, stating in her autobiography that after a surprising reception during her 1967 Fisk University Writers' Conference, she herself realized there was a "New Black" reader. She sensed "a general energy" vibrating from "the young blackness [she] saw" in attendance[283] and compared the way this audience "coldly Respected" her but expressed "jubilee in Jubilee Hall" at the arrival of radical Black Arts poet Amiri Baraka in the middle of her reading.[284] Her "new black" reader, she perceived, operated on the basis of bitter invisibility and incomprehensibility—they felt themselves "understood by *no* white. Not the wise white; not the Schooled white; not the Kind white;" even "[b]y many of his own *brothers* he is not

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[281] Quraysh Ali Lansana and Georgia A. Popoff, eds., *The Whiskey of Our Discontent: Gwendolyn Brooks as Conscious and Change Agent* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2017), 18.
[282] Carl Phillips, "Brooks's Prosody: Three Sermons on the Warpland," in *The Whiskey of Our Discontent: Gwendolyn Brooks as Conscious and Change Agent* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2017), 131.
[283] Gwendolyn Brooks, *Report From Part One*, First (Detroit: Broadside Press, 1972), 84.
[284] Gwendolyn Brooks, *Report From Part One*, First (Detroit: Broadside Press, 1972), 84.

understood".[285] Before 1967, Brooks's "own blackness [had] not confront[ed her] with a shrill spelling of itself" crafted from European definitions. Not unlike Audre Lorde connecting to a West Indian heritage more expansive than that depicted on her school's atlas maps, Brooks realized that "America's social climate…was trying to tell [her] something Websterian. Yet," despite "what [her] little green *Webster's New World*" had defined the word to mean, she "always felt that to be black was good".[286]

Born June 7, 1917 in Topeka, Kansas, Brooks's Southside Chicago childhood (her family moved to Hyde Park when she was five weeks old)[287] as she describes it in her autobiography was marked by order and respectability: she and her brother Raymond had a working father and a college-educated stay-at-home mother who baked, helped with homework (having been a teacher before marriage), sang soprano, and encouraged her daughter to write. They lived in a Black neighborhood, attended a Black church, had birthday parties filled with "half-hysterical little guests" wired from "large frosted cakes…found at Frozen Arts, just off 43rd and Cottage Grove" and a present-laden Christmas tree every year. Her mother declared at an early age that she would be "the lady Paul Laurence Dunbar,"[288] and she became attached to poetry at an early age. While she was never taught that Blackness was anything but good, she notes that "[n]ot one celebration in my black household or in any black household that I knew featured any black glory or greatness or grandeur".[289] During 1941-1949, "that "wobbly black phase" when Brooks and her husband wrote less and hung out with "merry Bronzevillians" more ("There were always weekend parties to be attended,")[290] they threw Langston Hughes a birthday party at their "most

[285] Gwendolyn Brooks, *Report From Part One*, First (Detroit: Broadside Press, 1972), 85.
[286] Gwendolyn Brooks, *Report From Part One*, First (Detroit: Broadside Press, 1972), 83-84.
[287] Gwendolyn Brooks, *Report From Part One*, First (Detroit: Broadside Press, 1972), 47.
[288] Gwendolyn Brooks, *Report From Part One*, First (Detroit: Broadside Press, 1972), 56.
[289] Gwendolyn Brooks, *Report From Part One*, First (Detroit: Broadside Press, 1972), 44.
[290] Gwendolyn Brooks, *Report From Part One*, First (Detroit: Broadside Press, 1972), 68.

exciting kitchenette" on 63rd and Champlain. Black people being Black in their Black space, and the inherent goodness of it all, were always central in Brooks's life, a fact she may have taken for granted earlier in her literary career.

At Fisk, however, Brooks realized that understanding her new reader required

> "an exceptional Doctorate which can be conferred only upon those with the proper properties of bitter birth and intrinsic sorrow. I know this is infuriating, especially to those professional Negro-understanders, some of them so *very* kind, with special portfolio, special savvy. But I cannot say anything other because nothing other is the truth".[291]

Brooks was coming to understand the idea that, for her "new black" readers, blackness had transformed from a basically good albeit complicated element of one's identity to the jubilantly radical and oppositional foundation of one's politics and way of being in the world. Young Black Arts writers were undergoing an ontological shift revealing itself in the very "*gestures*"[292] of her audience members, and Brooks's innovation with sonnets left them feeling cold because they did not move to the same rhythm. Despite already having cemented her place in the American literary canon, in that moment Brooks understood herself "qualified to enter at least the kindergarten of new consciousness" (86) in understanding their new politics. She was understanding that "black fellow-feeling must be the black man's encyclopedic Primer…the black emphasis must be, not *against white*, but *FOR black*".[293]

Her shockingly cold 1967 reception doesn't trigger a sudden realization of Brooks's own Blackness in her writing, as the two were never mutually exclusive. Blackness and literature

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[291] Gwendolyn Brooks, *Report From Part One*, First (Detroit: Broadside Press, 1972), 86.
[292] Gwendolyn Brooks, *Report From Part One*, First (Detroit: Broadside Press, 1972), 84.

existed intertwined in Brooks's life since birth, and Black sociocultural identity was central to her writing and understanding of herself as a writer from the beginning. As early as 1945, Brooks reflected such concerns in letters to her editor at Harper & Row; one such letter sees her struggling with feeling pulled to discuss Black life as a Black writer without "indulging self-pity".[294] I posit that she saw shifting sociopolitical and socioeconomic imperatives behind being a Black writer, and began to move differently in that space as a result.

In response to her Black Arts critics, though, I believe Brooks would echo Leah Jaynes Karp's sentiment that "[i]t's all [her] and [she's] not willing to give up any of it".[295] As hooks continues in her essay, Black "discourse on aesthetics need not begin with white western traditions," yet at the same time "it need not be prescriptive. Cultural decolonization does not happen solely by repudiating all that appears to maintain connection with the colonizing culture." Furthermore, and I think most critically for Brooks's oeuvre, is hooks' call that we "dispel the notion that white western culture is 'the' location where a discussion of aesthetics emerged…it is only one location".[296] Brooks's relationship to literature becomes clear in her autobiography description of her creative writing class syllabi at Columbia College Chicago — in teaching poetics, she makes clear that the entirety of existing form and thought is available to her, and she does not feel the need to be aesthetically hemmed in by her politics. Her syllabus, particularly in the way she describes it, truly functions as a collage, an information pocket storing the bits of data Brooks aggregated in her literary study to create poetics and literature. She "cannot create a poet," but she can offer that which she knows:

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[293] Gwendolyn Brooks, *Report From Part One*, First (Detroit: Broadside Press, 1972), 45.
[294] Jacqueline Goldsby, "'Something Is Said in the Silences': Gwendolyn Brooks's Years at Harper's," *American Literary History* 33, no. 2, 245.
[295] Abigail Foerstner, "Two Artists' Mixed Media Works Are Slices of Their Lives," *Chicago Tribune*, September 5, 1986, https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-1986-09-05-8603060652-story.html.
[296] bell hooks, "An Aesthetic of Blackness: Strange and Oppositional," *Lenox Avenue: A Journal of*

> "…a teacher can explain the 'wonders' of iambic pentameter, can explain how the Shakespearian sonnet differs from the Petrarchan…with Spenserian optional…the ballad, blank verse, free verse, the Japanese forms haiku and tanka, the verse play, the "Beat" poem, the heroic couplet…poetry new and old, poetry recordings, writing-within-music…panel discussions, debates, round-robin response…verse play enactments, book reviews…A.B. Spellman's 'We must, ultimately, be estranged from the dominant culture. This estrangement must be nurtured in order to generate and energize our black artists.' Or Larry Neal's 'Required is a critical reexamination of Western political, social, and artistic values'…Or Alain Robbe-Grillet's 'Nothing is as fatal to literature as a concern with "saying something." The world is neither significant nor absurd. IT IS—quite simply.'…Or perhaps 'What IS Art?' (Oh boy!)"[297]

Rather than Brooks basing her early aesthetic in a white European tradition and moving outward from there, as is so often claimed of her, I read this list as drawing from poetic, philosophical, and formal traditions across the world and from within her community. This description shows Brooks to be a true scholar not of "their language" and "their ground rules" but of poetry and culture, and thus able to pull from anywhere to convey her thoughts and feelings in writing. Brooks might also agree with hooks in saying that "a radical aesthetic acknowledges that we are constantly changing positions, locations, that our needs and concerns vary, that these diverse directions must correspond with shifts in critical thinking".[298] In correspondence with shifting thinking, Brooks (and her legion of creative writing students) have access to a range of techniques and starting points with which to frame said thought.

Interarts Inquiry 1 (1995): 69.

[297] Gwendolyn Brooks, *Report From Part One*, First (Detroit: Broadside Press, 1972), 81.

[298] bell hooks, "An Aesthetic of Blackness: Strange and Oppositional," *Lenox Avenue: A Journal of*

I find it ironic that, despite landing on opposite sides of a question of Black surveillance, on an ideological level the Black Arts critical stance plays out similarly to the state data surveillant stance. Both camps look at a group of people, in this case Black people in Chicago, and attempt to (re)frame their lived experiences in line with their own political ends. In both cases, there is an ontological framework that classifies certain information and frameworks as valuable, certain information and frameworks as irrelevant, and categorizes lived experience according to their calculated results. Highly speculative, both attempt to delimit human experience and expression in order to garner a particular future result, whether it be Black arrests or Black revolution. Along these lines, a radically experimental poetry collection about a Black woman surviving the city can be summarily dismissed as "boring," and a 300,000-member slice of the city messily expressed in that collection can be summarily targeted as vaguely dangerous, whether or not the full available information actually plays out that reality. In both cases, someone is being scanned and spoken for, and acted through or upon.

In response to the watchers, whether it be the American state-sponsored Sauron's Eye or the comrade-critics-in-community, Jaynes Karp and Brooks, and Audre Lorde "remain passionately committed" to hooks' alternative:

> "an aesthetic that focuses on the purpose and function of beauty, of artistry in everyday life, especially the lives of poor people, one that seeks to explore and celebrate the connection between our capacity to engage in critical resistance and our ability to experience pleasure and beauty. [They] want to create work that shares with an audience, particularly oppressed and marginalized groups, the sense of agency artistry offers, the empowerment." Ultimately, "[m]any underclass black people who do not know

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Interarts Inquiry 1 (1995): 70.

> conventional academic theoretical language are thinking critically about aesthetics…We must not deny the way aesthetics serves as the foundation for emerging visions."[299]

This is simply another way of framing the erotic, a measure and representation of the depth of one's chaotic feeling. What does it mean to measure one's life not through data ephemera (paper or digital), but in the ability to explore, engage, and experience? Fundamentally this is a question of meter vs. rhythm. The watcher seeks to represent itself as dynamic and involved, but truly seeks an state of empowered stasis where its metrical data scan/delimit/delete/update processing is disguised as dynamism, as algorithmic intelligence. The poetic artist, on the other hand, seeks the rhythm of the erotic, the rhythm of sensory data as it is distilled into revelation over the beat of the watcher.

Brooks makes clear that certain critics simply will not understand her work because it was not written for them. She's referring to white critics when she says this in *Ebony* magazine, but I wonder if she wouldn't also include some of her Black Arts comrade-critics in the same category. After all, she notes that "[b]y many of his own *brothers* [the new black] is not understood",[300] let alone by white critics. Both groups define Brooks's oeuvre by the fact that the work before 1967 was more aesthetically complicated and less Black and the work after this year was less aesthetically complicated and more Black; this distinction feels a bit like an unwillingness to read any of these titles, particularly *Riot,* on their on terms. Brooks's grinning author photo on the chapbook back cover is captioned, in part, that *Riot* "arises from the disturbances in Chicago after the assassination of Martin Luther King in 1968".[301] The goal of *Riot*, as I read this caption, is to represent Chicago in the aftermath of collective trauma based on the observations and notes

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[299] bell hooks, "An Aesthetic of Blackness: Strange and Oppositional," *Lenox Avenue: A Journal of Interarts Inquiry* 1 (1995): 71.
[300] Gwendolyn Brooks, *Report From Part One*, First (Detroit: Broadside Press, 1972), 85.

of one person.

I caught some of the poem's many references to Chicago immediately, but it wasn't until I began delving into all of the references she makes throughout the poem, conducting the kind of close-reading critics assume a reader won't perform, that I realized *Riot* in fact very distinctly maps Chicago. Before my reader might try to claim that I only close-read this text because this is part of my trade as a literary critic, thus proving correct the critique, I would posit that I had to research references in this poem because it represents Chicago twenty-five years earlier than the city I know. I can imagine a 1969 Westside reader that does not have to look up the context around a Melvin Van Peebles song or a Madison Ave. restaurant, and I asked my mother what something in the text meant more than once. I read *Riot* aloud to one of my Southside neighbors and he immediately commented that he felt located in the text because of the Chicago details; he noted the reference to Polish sausages appearing in one of the second poem's two sonnets. In this text, Brooks accomplishes something she notes with great admiration about Langston Hughes's poetics: "[m]ightily," she "use[d] the street. [Sh]e found its multiple heart, its tastes, smells, alarms, formulas, flowers, garbage, and convulsions. [Sh]e brought them all to [her] table-top. [Sh]e crushed them to a writing-paste. She [her]self became the pen…"[302]

This refusal to view a text (whether a chapbook, a person, or a city) on its own terms feels particularly troubling in this case as a mirror of the ways that non-Chicagoans, and those who are in charge in Chicago's political networks, read and speak the city and its problems. Rather than understanding the city and its inhabitants on their own terms, a higher-level system of understanding is hung on top of it. Violence by Black people in this city, whether it be everyday gang violence or the citywide outbursts of looting during summer 2020 Black Lives Matter

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[301] Gwendolyn Brooks, *Riot* (Detroit: Broadside Press, 1969).
[302] Gwendolyn Brooks, *Report From Part One*, First (Detroit: Broadside Press, 1972), 71.

protests is read as a threat to be heavily policed to no end. This violence is not read as "the language of the unheard". When I listen to events such as these, I hear a loud and violent desire for access and community resources. Nobody on my block has ever asked for 24-hour audio surveillance, or a National Guard soldier to keep watch outside their house, or for river-bridges to be raised and trap them in the locus of an inferno. Endlessly, people have asked for the socioeconomic resources to enact self- and community revitalization, to be freed from cycles of generational trauma and structural oppression.

In thinking about *Riot* and Brooks's commitment to Black information economies, it is important to underline the innovativeness with which *Riot* was conceived, produced, and published. As Jacqueline Goldsby argues in her essay "'Something is Said in the Silences': Gwendolyn Brooks's Years at Harper's," Brooks didn't burn the bridge with the New York City-based Harper & Row when she switched to Broadside Press. Rather, in *Report* she states that she "left Harper not because of any difficulty therewith, but simply because [her] first out is to the estimable, developing black publishing companies".[303] She wanted to reach a younger Black audience while she was still publishing with Harper's, and then took her new experience in trade publishing to Broadside Press in an effort to help expand its market.

However, Brooks's time at Harper's was not wasted. While she was there, the press was beginning to explore producing trade paperbacks in addition to their usual trade hardbacks, and they wanted to use Brooks's 1963 *Selected Poems* to test the idea of doing a split-run poetry book, where copies of a title are printed in both formats. With the paperbacks, they were able to also test pricing the book lower to reach a wider audience, in particular "the young people in and out of college who care more actively about poetry".[304] Whereas the hardbacks were priced at a

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[303] Gwendolyn Brooks, *Report From Part One*, First (Detroit: Broadside Press, 1972), 77.
[304] Jacqueline Goldsby, "'Something Is Said in the Silences': Gwendolyn Brooks's Years at Harper's,"

more typical $3.95, the paperbacks were priced at $1.65. As a result, *Selected Poems* immediately sold its entire paperback print run and more had to be quickly bound, which was easily possible because of the book's format. In the words of Brooks's editor, these sales were "a delight and satisfaction"[305] that continue to influence publishing today.

This is one of many "publishing knowledges" that Brooks took with her from Harper's to Broadside Press, and clearly influenced the production and marketing of *Riot.* In writing for Black audiences, and turning toward Black information production economies, Brooks crafted a text that brought her complex literary play even closer to the masses. Broadside Press was able to produce *Riot* and sell it for $1, even lower than the high-selling paperback *Selected Poems* released by Harper & Row a year earlier. Brooks "donated to the press her share of proceeds from sales"[306] in a clear sign of her commitment to small Black press economics, and considering the legacy this press has left behind it is clear that their marketing and production vision was successful. For example, Broadside Press published and sold Audre Lorde's 1973 National Book Award-nominated poetry collection *From a Land Where Other People Live* for $1.50.[307]

Brooks doesn't pivot away from mainstream publishing nor the depths of poetics when she publishes at Broadside. Instead she wholeheartedly turns toward supporting and creating media for a Black midwestern information economy. It is through this economy that she brings *Riot,* an erotic analysis of Black revolution as it played out on the West Side of Chicago, written with a Black Chicagoan readership in focus, and in stark contrast to the official data narratives produced

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American Literary History 33, no. 2, 260.

[305] Jacqueline Goldsby, "'Something Is Said in the Silences': Gwendolyn Brooks's Years at Harper's," *American Literary History* 33, no. 2, 261.

[306] D. H. Melhem, *Gwendolyn Brooks: Poetry & the Heroic Voice* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1987), 190.

[307] Gloria House, Rosemary Weatherston, and Albert M. Ward, eds., *A Different Image: The Legacy of*

by the state and news organizations as well as the aesthetic goals of her Black power comrades. Brooks' goal is to speak a people seeking aspects of love and connection while caught between a raging fire in their community and the cold iciness of the state, and I read her work as an innovative way of analyzing information and a path toward a radical Chicago narrative. She plays with poetic aesthetics and information narratives to force a careful reader to slow down and question how and why they read poetry, and Black Chicago citizens, the way they do.

For one, Brooks is totally unwilling to give up the sonnet, even as her Black Arts critic bemoans the "sonnet-ballad" in *Annie Allen* and her Black literary critic bemoans the feeling of its loss. A form commonly associated with Shakespearian love poems, it is "ideally suited to religious devotion, elegiac mourning, political protest, philosophical reflection, and topographical description,"[308] and Brooks utilizes the sonnet form to each of these ends in her work. Sonnets and sonnet-like poetic structures appear in *Riot*, acting as a heraldic and heroic if mournful voice representing the Westside and continuing the Southside conversation Brooks began in *A Street in Bronzeville* and *In the Mecca*. In particular, she uses sonnets to question, mourn, memorialize, and herald those who are often spoken for by structures and leaders — Black women experiencing trauma, and gang members.

I say sonnets and sonnet-like structures because nothing in *Riot* appears as a strictly formal English or Italian sonnet. From "the Italian *sonetto*, a diminutive version of *suono*, meaning 'sound'",[309] sonnets have taken on a rigid structure over time. Traditionally, these are fourteen-line poems split into sections, all written in iambic pentameter with a particular rhyme scheme. Italian sonnets divide the lines into an octave (eight lines) and a sestet (six lines) with an *abba abba cdecde* rhyme scheme; English sonnets nuance the structure a bit more, dividing the octave

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Broadside Press (Detroit: University of Detroit Mercy Press and Broadside Press, 2004), 14.
[308] Stephen Regan, *The Sonnet* (Cambridge: Oxford University Press, 2019), 1.

into two quatrains (four lines) and the sestet into two tercets (three lines) with an *abab cdcd efef gg* rhyme scheme. Though rigid, this structure allows sonnets to take on a conversational energy, "encouraging the progression of thought in meditation, reflection, and intellectual debate".[310] This progression can also extend across poems as the questions that arise in one sonnet "inspire[s]" another, "to the extent that individual poems and groups of poems appear to be in conversation with each other".[311] Though she may not maintain the rigid adherence to the rhythm and rhyme of a European sonnet, what she retains in her fourteen-lines is an energetic and highly political as she "reflect[s] on the meaning and value of the world around [her]",[312] sounding an erotic narrative of that world and the people who inhabit it across the city and its texts.

First appears Brooks's sonnet to the Motherwoman on page sixteen. This "woman is dead,"[313] ostensibly from the violence of the riot. Mayor Richard J. Daley had given a "shoot to kill" order for arsonists and a "shoot to maim" order for looters, and as Brooks describes on the next page the official record coming from the *Chicago Sun-Times* states that "nine die".[314] According to the *Encyclopedia of Chicago*, eleven people died that day, 48 were wounded, and over two-thousand arrested.[315] It is unclear whether there was a woman among them; nevertheless, Brooks stretches the fourteen-line form to encapsulate the messy data of one woman's life as it forever changed that day.

I see her choice to eulogize the Motherwoman as a continuation of the conversation she begins in "the mother" from *A Street in Bronzeville*. "the mother" is about the emotional

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[309] Stephen Regan, *The Sonnet* (Cambridge: Oxford University Press, 2019), 5.
[310] Stephen Regan, *The Sonnet* (Cambridge: Oxford University Press, 2019), 5.
[311] Stephen Regan, *The Sonnet* (Cambridge: Oxford University Press, 2019), 13.
[312] Stephen Regan, *The Sonnet* (Cambridge: Oxford University Press, 2019), 13.
[313] Gwendolyn Brooks, *Riot* (Detroit: Broadside Press, 1969), 16.
[314] Gwendolyn Brooks, *Riot* (Detroit: Broadside Press, 1969), 17.
[315] Chicago Historical Society, "West Madison Street, 1968," in *The Electronic Encyclopedia of Chicago* (Chicago: Newberry Library, 2005).

aftermath of an abortion, as the speaker finds that "[a]bortions will not let you forget".[316] The poem opens by detailing elements of motherhood that the speaker of the poem, ostensibly a Black woman resident of A Street in Bronzeville, will never be able to experience as a result of her decision, itself a list ranging possibility; the mother will "never neglect or beat / Them," but she will also never "scuttle off the ghosts that come".[317] Simultaneously, she asks her aborted child for their grace and understanding for this painful decision; "even in [her] deliberateness [she] was not deliberate".[318] the mother readily admits that she "knew" her aborted children, "though faintly, and [she] loved, loved" them,[319] but felt that ending her pregnancy was a choice she had to make. Brooks does not get into why the mother made this choice in this poem, but I would argue that she begins to have this discussion in *Riot,* in the Motherwoman sonnet:

1 A woman is dead.

2 Motherwoman.

3 She lies among the boxes

4 (that held the haughty hats, the Polish sausages)

5 in newish, thorough, firm virginity

6 as rich as fudge is if you've had five pieces.

7 Not again shall she

8 partake of steak

9 on Christmas mornings, nor of nighttime

10 chicken and wine at Val Gray Ward's

11 nor say

[316] Gwendolyn Brooks, "The Mother," in *A Street in Bronzeville* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1945).
[317] Gwendolyn Brooks, "The Mother," in *A Street in Bronzeville* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1945).
[318] Gwendolyn Brooks, "The Mother," in *A Street in Bronzeville* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1945).
[319] Gwendolyn Brooks, "The Mother," in *A Street in Bronzeville* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1945).

12 of Mr. Beetley, Exit Jones, Junk Smith

13 nor neat New-baby Williams (man-to-many)

14 "He treat me right."[320]

Though the Motherwoman in *Riot* finds herself on the Westside, we begin to see the kind of life that the mother had access to because of her abortion. This fourteen-line section does not adhere to a strict rhyme scheme beyond the opening slant rhymed couplet, and finds itself using iambic trimeter as often as pentameter, but adheres to the underlying "discursive structure"[321] of the sonnet as she progresses through a narrative of the events and ephemera surrounding the Motherwoman in death. Chicago datapoints enter the conversation as well, illustrating the city even as the sonnet mourns and herald's one Black woman's freedom.

Sonnets are traditionally an octave/two quatrains and a sestet/two tercets; Brooks inverts the structure for the Motherwoman sonnet to give us a sestet sliced into two tercets and an octave of two related quatrains. The sestet locates the Motherwoman in the riot space — she lies dead among boxes in lines 1-3, evoking random violence and the litter that lies in the street. However, these boxes are located in a specific place, for they once held hats and Polishes (line 4). This brings to mind Maxwell Street, the near Westside open-air market area known for its economic opportunity and its Polish sausages. The woman, as once did the sausages, lie "in newish, thorough, firm virginity / as rich as fudge is if you've had five pieces" (5-6).

The description ties the Motherwoman to rich and ripe flesh, a connection that takes on a social layer in the sonnet's quatrain. Dead in the street, she can no longer enjoy a delicacy like "steak / on Christmas morning," nor can she enjoy "nighttime / chicken and wine" at the home of Southside artist Val Gray Ward. Ward, the founder and director of Kuumba Theater, was an

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[320] Gwendolyn Brooks, *Riot* (Detroit: Broadside Press, 1969), 16.
[321] Stephen Regan, *The Sonnet* (Cambridge: Oxford University Press, 2019), 6.

active member of the Chicago Black Arts Movement scene and among the Black literati scene of the sixties.[322] Brooks includes a particularly evocative photograph of Ward performing at the *Wall of Respect* mural on 43rd and Langley in *Report from Part One*, and a candid photo of her and Ward's husband Francis chatting at a New Year's Eve party a few pages later, ephemera both of her life and the Motherwoman's life.

The sonnet's final quatrain highlights the men the Motherwoman can no longer enjoy, men that would otherwise be nameless and faceless in the record of the riot. "Mr. Beetley, Exit Jones, Junk Smith," and "neat New-baby Williams (man-to-many)" are four random men on the Westside chasing after any "firm" and "rich" woman that catches their eye. In a different context these four men might appear on a post-riot suspect list or a Strategic Subject List; here, they represent the loss of intimate pleasure for the Motherwoman, a pleasure indirectly taken away by the riot. Never again will she be able to fool herself into believing that these men "treat [her] right" (line 14) in order to guiltlessly enjoy their company, which Brooks frames as a beautifully messy element of being alive and unencumbered.

The fact that the poem highlights the Motherwoman's social circle rather than her children both calls to mind the freedom the mother of *A Street in Bronzeville* gains with her "deliberate" choice to end her pregnancy, and also foregrounds details of the true community loss that day. The Motherwoman is free to mingle with Black artists and entertain Black lovers because she does not have children; at the same time, the massive destruction and loss that day affected and interrupted people's lives on a micro level. The complexity of Brooks's erotic reading is that it encompasses the chaos and messiness of the 1968 riots and the cultural energy that fostered them, as it locates itself in an individual. Rather than simply deliver a historical narrative, or a

[322] HistoryMakers, "Val Gray Ward," in *The HistoryMakers Digital Archive* (Chicago: HistoryMakers, June 2, 2002), https://www.thehistorymakers.org/biography/val-gray-ward-39.

political narrative, or a Black power narrative, Brooks adopts one Black Chicago citizen's perspective and goes back and forth between sympathy and wariness of the violence that day. She understands that a riot is the "language of the unheard," and yet points out that people like the Motherwoman suffered greatly too for no other reason than being at the wrong place at the wrong time. The sonnet, as well as our memory of the riot, must encompass information about both sides.

The *Sun-Times*, on the opposite page positing itself as the official record and fact-checker (offering a hotline to phone in order to check news-related rumors), doesn't capture the record of the Motherwoman's death, and the work is left to Brooks. This sentiment, that the work of memorializing is left to Brooks, is echoed in the next section. Rather than succumb to "your deathintheafternoon, / kill 'em, bull! / kill 'em bull!," it is "yell[ed]" by "Yancey, a twittering twelve" that "[w]e'll do an us!".[323] Through Yancey, Brooks repudiates white European narrative interests. Not only will we question and discard the *Sun-Times* record, but we will question and discard the modernist writer Ernest Hemingway and his 1932 non-fiction *Death in the Afternoon* on Spanish bullfighting.[324] In the face of institutions that seek deathintheafternoon, the news media and modernism, Yancey proclaims that "we'll do an us" — we'll do our own stories that decenter the multiple exposures of public death and replace it with the sonnet-sound of the Motherwoman as she moved in life.

One page later comes another sonnet, titled "A Poem to Peanut":

T A Poem to Peanut.

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[323] Gwendolyn Brooks, *Riot* (Detroit: Broadside Press, 1969), 16.
[324] Simon & Schuster, "Death in the Afternoon by Ernest Hemingway," Publisher's Page, Simon & Schuster, 2021, https://www.simonandschuster.com/books/Death-in-the-Afternoon/Ernest-Hemingway/9780743237147.

1 “Coooooool!” purrs Peanut. Peanut is

2 Richard—a Ranger and a gentleman.

3 A Signature. A Herald. And a Span.

4 This Peanut will not let his men explode.

5 And Rico will not.

6 Neither will Sengali.

7 Nor Bop nor Jeff, Geronimo nor Lover.

8 These merely peer and purr,

9 and pass the Passion over.

10 The Disciples stir

11 and thousandfold confer

12 with ranging Rangermen;

13 mutual in their “Yeah!—

14 this AIN’T all upinheah!”[325]

The Motherwoman sonnet stretched the form to interrogate the erotic depths of one life in community; the Blackstone Rangers sonnet adheres more closely to a traditional English form, continuing the critical reflection on Chicago gang life that Brooks begins in *In the Mecca*’s “The Blackstone Rangers”. In so doing, she explores and documents the erotic depths of this culture, nuancing the Black Chicago citizen depictions produced by the Chicago Police Department and its algorithmic allies while also offering critiques of her own.

In discussing the Blackstone Rangers and their actions during the riot, Brooks gives us fourteen lines entirely in iambic meter. The first quatrain, dedicated to a leader named Peanut, describes the fact that he, known to the government as Richard, is both a “Ranger and a

gentleman" (line 2). This quatrain sets the rhythm of the rest of the poem and gives greater insight into Brooks's use of the sonnet form. Peanut, a gang leader and a gentleman, acts as a "signature" timing and measuring the actions of his men, a "span" connecting communities, and a "herald" of non-violence. For, in the face of a state and a city police force that predicts violence in relationship to Chicago gangs, Peanut did "not let his men explode" (line 4).

According to *The Almighty Black P Stone Nation* by Natalie Y. Moore and Lance Williams, the Blackstone Rangers spent a great deal of time leading up to the riots building connections with Chicago Civil Rights and Black Power organizations. In particular, the Stones marched and protested alongside Dr. King, serving as bodyguards when King was assaulted by white counter protestors in the then "racist Marquette Park" in Englewood and debating revolutionary ideology with the nonviolent leader.[326] When rioting began after King's assassination, "over sixteen thousand federal troops, federalized Illinois National Guards, and Chicago police" were deployed across the South and Westsides, turning many Black communities across the city into "police state[s]".[327] However, it was Blackstone leader Jeff Fort who declared in the *Chicago Daily Defender* newspaper that, in King's honor, Stones would "do all [they] can to preserve peace in our community"[328] in a show of their commitment to King's mission.

In the next quatrain, the switches between iambic pentameter to iambic trimeter underline the rapid pace with which other members of the Main 21, the Blackstone Rangers leadership body, fell in line with Fort's declaration. First "Rico," then "Sengali" (Blackstone spokesperson

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[325] Gwendolyn Brooks, *Riot* (Detroit: Broadside Press, 1969), 18.
[326] Natalie Y. Moore and Lance Williams, *The Almighty Black P Stone Nation: The Rise, Fall, and Resurgence of an American Gang* (Chicago, Ill: Lawrence Hill Books, 2011), 41.
[327] Natalie Y. Moore and Lance Williams, *The Almighty Black P Stone Nation: The Rise, Fall, and Resurgence of an American Gang* (Chicago, Ill: Lawrence Hill Books, 2011), 81.
[328] Natalie Y. Moore and Lance Williams, *The Almighty Black P Stone Nation: The Rise, Fall, and*

Leonard Sengali),[329] then "Bop" (Main 21 member Lamar "Bop Daddy" Bell),[330] then "Jeff" Fort, then "Geronimo", then "Lover". Lover is a reference to the love-relationship depicted in "The Blackstone Rangers" poem, where "Jeff. Gene. Geronimo. And Bop."[331] are represented as "THE LEADERS" at work in the organization. From this repeating line, "Lover" replaces "Gene" in the lineup[332] in reference to Eugene "Bull" Hairston, another early Blackstone leader.[333] Quickly, with the rapid pace of two iambic trimeters tumbling into a pentameter line, Blackstone leaders tell their foot soldiers to stand down. Rather than involve themselves, the call comes from leadership to "merely peer and purr" (line 8) at the raging violence.

The traditional Italian sonnet calls for a shift at line 8, "the unequal relationship between octave and sestet" offering "enormous semantic potential in terms of how a sonnet might progress and open up multiple perspectives and interpretive possibilities".[334] Though the sonnet opens with two quatrains, distinctly highlighting one leader and then the actions of his peers, the poem critically shifts at line eight to highlight in one complete sestet that "The Disciples stir[red] / and thousandfold confer[red] / with ranging Rangermen" (lines 10-12). In response to the riots, "one thousand Blackstone Rangers me[t]…and pledge[d] to react nonviolently to King's death".[335] The gang violence narrative as presented by the police and the news is usually focused on conflicts between two gangs, extrapolating that high rates of violence and death are ultimately

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Resurgence of an American Gang (Chicago, Ill: Lawrence Hill Books, 2011), 82.
[329] Natalie Y. Moore and Lance Williams, *The Almighty Black P Stone Nation: The Rise, Fall, and Resurgence of an American Gang* (Chicago, Ill: Lawrence Hill Books, 2011), 36.
[330] Natalie Y. Moore and Lance Williams, *The Almighty Black P Stone Nation: The Rise, Fall, and Resurgence of an American Gang* (Chicago, Ill: Lawrence Hill Books, 2011), 35.
[331] Gwendolyn Brooks, *Riot* (Detroit: Broadside Press, 1969), 18.
[332] Gwendolyn Brooks, "The Blackstone Rangers," in *Blacks* (Chicago: Third World Press, 1987), 4.
[333] Natalie Y. Moore and Lance Williams, *The Almighty Black P Stone Nation: The Rise, Fall, and Resurgence of an American Gang* (Chicago, Ill: Lawrence Hill Books, 2011), 8.
[334] Stephen Regan, *The Sonnet* (Cambridge: Oxford University Press, 2019), 7.
[335] Natalie Y. Moore and Lance Williams, *The Almighty Black P Stone Nation: The Rise, Fall, and Resurgence of an American Gang* (Chicago, Ill: Lawrence Hill Books, 2011), 82.

the result of multiple parties at war and constantly attacking each other, and violently capitalizing on negative aspects of community life. This is a narrative that conveniently elides the structural issues that foster gang violence, such as a lack of community, family, and mental health resources, but the narrative also keeps efforts to fight gang violence on the database microlevel—connecting, isolating, and eliminating networks of warring parties rather than the issues affecting them as a collective.

In this sonnet, however, the critical shift at line 8 is a move from the personal to the unified collective, one thousand plus people called by a desire to put status quo politics aside in favor of achieving the "changes [they] hope to bring about."[336] The Disciples and the Rangers combined to form more than one thousand instances in which the objectified subject defied its object narrative as it is typically coded. Despite being datafied as network nodes, the algorithm doesn't seem to imagine the possibility that those nodes can network to trigger something greater. This is a real-life unity that continued past the march; "a month went by with no shootings or killings," evidence that the unity expressed in King's death "brought unprecedented peace between the Blackstone Rangers and the Disciples"[337]. Though the peace did not last forever, it still stands as a small but meaningful sign that those involved were concerned not only with what they did, but also the greater potential of their collective action, born from a shared love for Dr. King and what he represented nationally and in Englewood, Chicago.

This is the erotic excess Brooks not only captures but formalizes in her Blackstone sonnet, a set of evidence that rarely if ever makes it into formal data records. Where the white aesthetic critic mentioned earlier in the chapter felt that Brooks "forced"[338] this Romantic lyric form to

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[336] Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (New York: Crossing Press, 1984), 54.
[337] Natalie Y. Moore and Lance Williams, *The Almighty Black P Stone Nation: The Rise, Fall, and Resurgence of an American Gang* (Chicago, Ill: Lawrence Hill Books, 2011), 84.
[338] Lesley Wheeler, "Heralding the Clear Obscure: Gwendolyn Brooks and Apostrophe," *Callaloo* 24, no.

operate as public address, aesthetic archive moments like this show how Brooks rather expanded the sonnet meter to encompass different ways of moving. According to the state data narrative, gang members are key Strategic Subjects; algorithmically, they should have been on the front lines of community violence. However, they move to a rhythm that the surveillance algorithm cannot account for, a rhythm that exceeds their networked metadata. Rather than participate in the violence, they adhered to higher political goals, and this is how Brooks captures them.

Brooks captures the surveillance algorithm similarly in its contradicting and contratemporal rhythms on the sonnet recto page. The first line, delivered in iambic pentameter, captures the watcher's perspective on the Stones, the GDs, and Black Chicagoans as a whole:

"But WHY do These People offend *themselves*?"[339]

Brooks uses text styling to heavily emphasize the pentameter rhythm of this line, capturing the full emotional weight of each word as it is delivered by its speaker. "Why" is capped to highlight the perceived irrationality of rioting and destroying property in the first place. "These people" is capitalized in a way that both spotlights and obscures. The rioters are given a proper noun distinction, rising to the level of an object with unique characteristics and parameters that can be outlined and delineated from others in its category, but it is an object meant to erase the critical subjective differences between the rioters and dismiss their political objectives as a dramatic WHY. The dramatic illogicality of rioting is summed up in the italicized "themselves"; if there *is* a rioting logic, the watcher does not *at all* understand why one would direct their riotous energy toward themselves.

The Blackstone recto watcher moving in iambic pentameter is a voice closely aligned with a conservative perspective that does not or innocently refuses to understand the structural basis

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1 (2001): 227.

[339] Gwendolyn Brooks, *Riot* (Detroit: Broadside Press, 1969), 19.

out of which urban violence derives, and the dramatic violence of their innocent refusal is a treacly weight dripping from each downbeat in the sentence. This is surveillance erotics (as opposed to erotic surveillance) — a strong feeling nearing chaos that measures the ways in which the watcher moves in their doing.

For, this is a discursive rhythm the watcher forces on the watched, while the watcher switches up the beat. Even as the Blackstone recto watchers metrically dismiss the rioter's cry for help as histrionics, in broken iambic lines the watchers also say

"It's time.

It's time to help

These People."

The watchers do not understand why the rioters need help, and still cannot delineate the rioters' subjectivity beyond the monolithic object of These People, but they almost instinctively know too that the timing is right for them to help. Perhaps it is a function of proximity. Like the white protagonist of *Riot*'s opening poem traveling only twenty miles south from suburbs to be met by the "sweaty and unpretty," the Blackstone recto watchers can see the rioters. The rioters are not 'those' people over there, they are 'these' people over here. However, 'these' carries with it a level of disgust, difference, and separation even in proximity; to the watchers, the rioters are not 'my' or 'our' people, a distinction with the space to give way to understanding. "My" people would require a lessening of the emphasis of "*themselves*"—at the end of the day, the rioters are still "them," a separate group overlapping only by virtue of visual proximity.

However, the Blackstone recto watchers also represent a voice of resolute action. Brooks' erotic surveillance must too include surveillance erotics (the chaotic information rhythms to which the watcher captures) as one element of the chaotic distance between self and excess for

Black people in Chicago, because surveillance erotics drive mainstream actions and archives. They (the title Brooks assigns the Blackstone recto watchers) appear in relation to the Blackstone sonnet as the *Sun-Times* appears to the Motherwoman; the official record in recto, however inaccurate. Despite the erotic unity between the Blackstone Rangers leadership and then with the Gangster Disciples, the official record will show that These People offend *themselves*. WHY, we do not know, but It's time to help These People. When They help, however, the help comes with algorithmic erasure.

In her use of language and form, Brooks conducts an erotic analysis of the 1986 King assassination riots, set to the rhythm of Black Chicago citizens. Brooks uses with iambic meter inside and outside of the sonnet structure, using iambic pentameter to advance her sociopolitical argument in certain textual moments and other iambic meters in other moments to advance other points. She then directly aligns music and movement with revolutionary philosophy, sounding a Black revolutionary ideology through which her Chicago people can move to heal their personal and political hurt. Though, to a degree, Brooks doesn't understand why one would direct their riotous energy toward themselves either. For her,

> "a clean riot is not one in which little rioters
> long-stomped, long-straddled, BEANLESS
> but knowing no Why
> go steal in hell
> a radio, sit to hear James Brown …
> and sun themselves in Sin."

> "However, what

is going on

is going on."[340]

This passage appears to run counter to the tone of the entire rest of the poem in defense of the rioters and their actions; here, Brooks admits that even she cannot find the logic in why rioters would express their anger by turning their neighborhood into hell and then steal radios from this hellish inferno to listen to funk and jazz. This riot feels small by comparison, and it feels dirty. This is a critique reminiscent of many made during the 2021 summer riots responding to the death of George Floyd. There was little objection made by sympathetic watchers when downtown Chicago's luxury shopping district was looted in political fury, but there was a cry of outrage as rioters moved in all directions into working class neighborhoods of color and began looting. Some felt as though rioters were destroying the very property they should be fighting for and felt shame at news coverage of rioters carrying away expensive consumer goods from store after store.

However, if one considers funk, for example, not as a "reactionary mechanism" but instead as "a simultaneous creation of new knowledge and an acquisition of knowledge through the body to counter imperialist or colonial appropriation of bodies and cultures…that originate in a sensorium predating empires of knowledge" as L.H. Stallings does in *Funk the Erotic*, funk becomes "force, not power".[341] The rioters do not have the power to erase empires of knowledge whether they riot or not, but they can use force to create new sensory registers of being—this is erotic excess. Even as Brooks closes her assessment of the rioters in funky sin with a rather dismissive pass, the facing page returns Brooks to the realm of communal grace and understanding, forcing the reader critical of looting to expand how they view the rioters and

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[340] Gwendolyn Brooks, *Riot* (Detroit: Broadside Press, 1969), 14.
[341] LH Stallings, *Funk The Erotic: Transaesthetics and Black Sexual Cultures*, The New Black Studies

travel with her. The rioters have created a hell because "fire…is their way of lighting candles in the darkness,"[342] a grammar with which an unheard voice can speak. A White Philosopher character responds to the inferno that "it is better to light one candle than curse the darkness".[343] This is a quote commonly attributed to former Illinois governor Adlai Stevenson on the death of First Lady Eleanor Roosevelt about the power of her actions in the face of adversity, but in the face of the rioters' desperation one tiny candle is not enough to spark needed change.

Countering fire with a candle is simply one more sign that "You do not hear the remarkable music" of "our chains," says the Black Philosopher in response, who must also admit that

"our chains are in the Keep of the Keeper
in a labeled cabinet
on the second shelf by the cookies,
…There's a rattle, sometimes.
You do not hear it who mind only
cookies and crunch them."

Despite the proximity of the cookies and our chains, You who are only interested in sweets (like John Cabot) and sweetness (like the Blackstone recto watchers coming to help "These People") will reach for sweetness and be unable to hear the sound of chains over the sound of crunching cookies. In many ways this feels like a map-metaphor for Chicago itself; the repetitive "C" sounds give way to this city curved around a lake. In the downtown Loop, saccharine morsels sit waiting to be consumed in proximity to the communities chained in captivity circling the downtown area. Everything sweet is downtown. The train and expressway systems are designed to travel from the suburbs to the Loop without having to enter or even see the working-class and

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Series (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015), 5.
[342] Gwendolyn Brooks, *Riot* (Detroit: Broadside Press, 1969), 15.

working-poor neighborhoods that ring downtown; those of us living in those neighborhoods are penned in the Keep of the Keeper that travels over our chains but can't hear the chains' remarkable music as they busily crunch sweetness. However, sugar melts in fire; cookies left baking brown until blackened. The result of Brooks' erotic analysis is a record that is less interested in factual clarity and more interested in the "remarkable" rhythm of the "*black*blues," a melodiously messy interior-life exploration and record of how the "young men" actually acted that day and how "Motherwom[e]n" were affected. An inferno "curse[s]" adversity, "inverting the deeps of the darkness"[344] as the rioters sought new rhythms through which to understand themselves and the depth of their need whether it be chain-rattling in the streets or stealing sweet flat screen TVs.

I'm reminded here of Toni Morrison's analysis of her archive task as a Black writer in "The Site of Memory"; "the remains, so to speak, at the archaeological site—surface first, and they surface so vividly and so compellingly that I acknowledge them as my route to a reconstruction of a world, to an exploration of an interior life that was not written and to the revelation of a kind of truth"[345]. Brooks finds herself literally at the site, a Westside Chicago archaeological dig. Out of those remains rises "Phoenix…unafraid," a newly-feathered body taking flight from the smoldering remains. As I alluded to in the beginning, this is not really how the narrative ends; the Westside remains ravaged and underdeveloped in the wake of the King assassination riots. However, this is a "philosophy about art in which the focus centers not on what is beautiful, but what is funky."[346] It is the Black Philosopher who "will remember" that "There, they came to life

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[343] Gwendolyn Brooks, *Riot* (Detroit: Broadside Press, 1969), 15.
[344] Gwendolyn Brooks, *Riot* (Detroit: Broadside Press, 1969), 15.
[345] Toni Morrison, "The Site of Memory," in *What Moves At The Margin: Selected Nonfiction* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2008), 74.
[346] LH Stallings, *Funk The Erotic: Transaesthetics and Black Sexual Cultures*, The New Black Studies Series (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015), 4.

and exulted," screaming their riot language so loudly that it drowned out the sound of cookies. The riot language also drowned out the rattling of their chains; in that moment of exultation, "the hurt" was "mute." This is the unwritten interior life that Brooks brings to the archive, erotic poetry as a revelation of information and truth distilled to bear on our lives and the "changes we hope to bring about" as a means of reconstructing a world, even if only in data.

When I first read Lillian-Yvonne Bertram's "A New Sermon on the Warpland" as it is published in *Travesty Generator,* I was immediately struck by the highly-grammatical textual pattern. Each of the printed poem's stanzas follows a uniform pattern:

A NATION OF [nouns]
[location]
[gerund verb]
ANY MEANS NECESSARY
TO REFUSE ERASURE BY ALGORITHM

to a produce infinite stanzas of poems, including:

A NATION OF ROOTS
IN FRONT OF A WINDOW ABOUT TO BE BROKEN
CONJURING
ANY MEANS NECESSARY
TO REFUSE ERASURE BY ALGORITHM

Bertram's poem takes shape in two ways: as a printed poem, and as an artificial intelligence-driven poem generator in the style of poet Gwendolyn Brooks. As Bertram describes in a 2021 interview,[347] the project's "grammar…comes from *A House of Dust*," which is as a "widely-known exemplar of computer-generated poetry…but the corpus is different. The corpus includes work/words/text by Gwendolyn Brooks, but isn't constrained by that—I've added my

[347] I first encountered Bertram's work at their talk during the Black as X series hosted by the African American Digital Humanities Initiative at the University of Maryland. I followed up a few months later to see if I could ask a few questions about their work, and they graciously agreed. A full interview transcript is included in the appendix.

own text and ideas to it[348]". By grammar, Bertram refers to the structural logic of the program: a randomizing function picks a choice from an array, and then that choice slots into its place in the poem. Though the algorithmic logic is not from Brooks, the linguistic structure and corpus of the program is. Rather, the dataset is Bertram's erotic representation of Brooks's corpus, in excess of it; starting from Brooks, Bertram also includes the text and ideas to which they were led by Brooks and *Riot.* This erotic data overlays the borrowed grammar, creating a structure altogether new, through which the same data is passed to create an erotic object.

A House of Dust is written in Python, but I thought about how to write the code in HTML/JavaScript I'm most familiar with[349]. This is also the language in which *A New Sermon* is written, taking the algorithmic (process) structure of *A House of Dust* and recreating it in a new language. Based on this electric poem, as well as the printed *A New Sermon* itself, I thought that Bertram's code was built using loop formulas—algorithms designed to run themselves on loop, creating an index point for each result—and passing a corpus of words through it.

When I looked at the code behind *A New Sermon*, though, it turned out that Bertram wrote the dynamic computational poem additively, "without the continuous looping[350]" built into the grammar of *A House of Dust*. In Bertram's version, there are five datasets made of multiple alphanumeric strings[351] stored in separate arrays (data containers): Using a JavaScript

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[348] Bertram, Lillian-Yvonne, Black Computational Poetics, 09/21.

349 Though Python is an object-oriented programming language, and HTML & JavaScript work together to power the web browser window, the languages are interchangeable for a simple and straightforward program such as this. Visit https://nickm.com/memslam/a_house_of_dust.py to view the A House of Dust Python code on which A New Sermon is based.

350 Bertram, Lillian-Yvonne, Black Computational Poetics, 09/21.

351 Though we read the text inside of a string as words and sentences with meaning, a string is understood by a computer simply as combinations of letters, numbers, and spaces. In a different order, the letters and numbers might combine to form the pathway in a URL address—what human eyes read as a random jumble of letters and numbers at the end of a website is actually a set of instructions pointing to a server file. Further driving home the discursive point, text strings must be enclosed by either single or double quote marks so that the function will ignore the text in between and not try to read it as actionable information.

select_random(x) function and a jQuery $().append function, a random string is selected from each dataset and appended directly to the body of the browser window (much like a document body).[352] As strings append together, an entirely new data object—a contained snapshot of Brooks and Bertram's emotion combining together—is created in real time. This emotion picture poem moves down the page with a certain ephemerality; once it reaches the bottom of the page, the newly created poem is gone.

To be clear, there is no functional difference in the program between the way I wrote it and the way Bertram wrote it, and the difference in lines of code between three loop formulas and six append formulas is negligible. The loop function slots each word into its spot in the HTML page layout. This processes faster because less information on the page must be updated every time the page loads and re-runs the function (rather than returning four randomly selected sentences, this loop function only needs to return select words). It also means less characters are stored in each string as it only stores one or two words rather than a full sentence, thus optimizing the amount of data stored in each array. Still, is the same program in the browser (albeit less decorated and missing certain features, like infinite scroll or a randomizing function).

As *A New Sermon* is written though, each piece of information comes in its data-rich context. I find this project so interesting precisely because in it Bertram foregrounds the question of what it means to write, or code, that which we desire, and how that desire reveals itself on the code level. Though people do not have to read code in order for it to work, there is a deep emphasis within programming communities on writing "clean" and well-annotated code that can be easily read by other people. Practically this is so different programmers can understand and continue to work on program code after its original authors have moved on, but this practice also

[352] Bertram, Lillian-Yvonne, "A New Sermon on the Warpland index.html," 2019, a-new-sermon-on-the-warpland.glitch.me.

highlights the fact that codes are data-based texts constructed and written by people to be read both by computers and by people. Furthermore, like a poem, program codes can both sublimate and illuminate that which their author desires.

Bertram makes the point that their algorithmic work comes partially out of a desire for more Brooks poems, because "she doesn't get the credit she deserves". They also readily admit that *A New Sermon* doesn't actually satisfy this desire "because it would be wrong to say that the projects actually produce Brooks poems, they generate homages[353]". Even in datafying Brooks' corpus, the algorithmic result is an object that represents an erotic connection to the subject rather than replicating the subject as data. Even as Bertram might want more Brooks poems and recognizes that no code can move beyond the level of algorithmic representation, they argue that this erotic object still does the important work of "keep[ing] Brooks's name and her writing more present in people's minds[354]" — returning the reader to the *actual* subject rather than the datafied one.[355]

Though it would be faster and easier to write a function that produced each stanza by passing sets of words into object of speech parameters, and creating a new stanza object at each index point, on the code level reads as an entirely different program with a different impetus. Each word would move into the function without its erotic context around it, a felt context drawn from Brooks by Bertram for this poetic movement. As Bertram writes the program, each word string is coded with its erotic depths—not simply 'roots', but 'A nation of roots'. "Roots" is not stripped-down information passed into the "noun" parameter of the "A nation of" line in the algorithm; rather, "A nation of roots" is passed into the function together, a complete sentence in

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[353] Bertram, Lillian-Yvonne, Black Computational Poetics, 09/21.
[354] Bertram, Lillian-Yvonne, Black Computational Poetics, 09/21.
[355] Admittedly, this is the path I took; even as a Chicagoan, I discovered *Riot* from listening to the earlier mentioned talk Bertram gave on these very projects, a discovery that gave rise to the

itself.

This method also distinguishes two methods of reading the result itself; as Bertram points out, their poems can be read "as just being a four line poem that is generated infinitely, or four different lines generated one after the other[356]". Though each stanza appears in the browser window as a four-line poem, the text strings containing each Brooks phrase actually append to the browser window body individually, one at a time: From the code perspective, it is possible to read all of the lines together as a complete erotic text, or read each line as a complete erotic text, or read them as erotic couplets. The one section of the stanza that does not randomly select is the closing phrase "any means necessary to refuse erasure by algorithm," which is coded separately as two strings: 'any means necessary' and 'to refuse erasure by algorithm'. Separately these phrases seem to pull at opposing ends of the Black revolutionary timeline, with Malcolm X's famous phrase on one side and subverting technocultural futures on the other side.

Together, the phrases represent both Bertram and Gwendolyn Brooks's erotic impulse; any means, whether creative, physical, economic, or algorithmic, to refuse erasure under the revolutionary technologies and social processes that code Black women's existence and human subjectivity writ large. Every four line poem is punctuated by this multifaceted reading, both refracting the other again ever so slightly. Erotic objects create space for and perhaps necessitate multifaceted reading.

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previous chapter of the project.

[356] Bertram, Lillian-Yvonne, Black Computational Poetics, 09/21.

Chapter 5: *Pynk*: Erotic Objects

"We don't need another ruler / all of my friends are kings
I am not America's nightmare / I am the American Dream.

We don't need another ruler / We don't need another fool
I am not America's nightmare / I am the American Cool."
— Janelle Monáe
"Crazy, Classic, Life," *Dirty Computer* (2018)

What does it look like to return data to the body, to the senses? I conclude this journey through data analysis by returning to *Dirty Computer* and Janelle Monáe. The same way Audre Lorde in *Zami* took in the data of her mother and the women she loves, an erotic dataset cataloguing the strength and depth of feeling in a way that exceeds the structural boundaries placed around the data, and processes it into poems and a kind of life (though she had no model), Jane 57821 takes in the erotic data of her non-normative community in all of its struggle and joy and process it into their own algorithmic identity, a chosen identity. Emotion pictures are erotic data objects, and the algorithmic identity that results, the kind of life that results, is celebrated by the self and demonized by the corporate state. This is a cyborg identity — born of the creator's data, "escalating dominations of abstract individuation",[357] but enacting a life exceeding that data and escaping its boundaries.

On the first page of Toni Morrison's *A Mercy*, a novel filling in the American archive with an erotic record of pre-American Black life, the enslaved African protagonist Florens asks, "can you read?[358]" In *Dirty Computer*, Janelle Monáe's 2018 emotion picture, The Memmotron operators (Cleaners[359]) are erotically illiterate. As *Dirty Computer* progresses and Monáe's character Jane 57821's mental data is reviewed and processed, one Cleaner becomes increasingly

[357] Donna Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto," in *The Cybercultures Reader*, ed. David Bell and Barbara M. Kennedy (New York: Routledge, 2001), 292.
[358] Toni Morrison, *A Mercy* (New York: Random House, 2008), 1.

bothered by the fact that he can't recognize the datatype. Officially, the Cleaners are supposed to watch everything, sort through the files, and only delete *dirty* memories, leaving everything else intact. In practice, the more senior Cleaner repeatedly tells his junior to just delete everything. After watching file #070270 ("Django Jane"), instead of immediately deleting the file the junior Cleaner pauses and says, "I don't know what this is. It doesn't even look like a memory. What is that, is it a dream?".[360] This unreadability is irrelevant to the senior Cleaner, who tells him to "delete it and move on";[361] two ways of dealing with data opacity. The idea seems ridiculous to the viewer because we know the emotion pictures depict a young queer Black person and their friends living their best lives, but this is the very information that does not compute to the surveillance state. It is read as threatening, dirty, and in need of immediate deletion, *whatever* it is. It is ultimately Jane 57821's data opacity, and that of their friends, however, that facilitates their escape.[362]

Files #203206 ("Crazy, Classic Life") and #509268 ("Screwed") are recognizable as memories. Full of sex, drugs, and rock & roll, they depict cool kid parties and their aftermath timestamped as having taken place around 50 days prior.[363] File #070270, which appears to the viewer like a more traditional non-narrative music video, appears illegible in the Memmotron as erotic information excess. There is no timestamp, and the protagonist appears to be Jane 57821 but is not experiencing an past event, which confuses the watchers. Instead, they are putting a "flag on a whole 'nother planet,"[364] visually outlining a sociopolitical ideology that "attends to and exceeds" both the contours of their earlier android persona Cindi Mayweather and "the

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[359] Andrew Donoho and Chuck Lightning, *Dirty Computer*, 2018, 00:03:33.
[360] Ibid., 00:21:56.
[361] Ibid., 00:22:25.
[362] Ibid., 00:21:30.
[363] Ibid., 00:14:46.
[364] Janelle Monáe, "Django Jane," *Dirty Computer* (Wondaland Arts Society & Atlantic Records, 2018).

contours of the masculinist fantasia that is commonly taken as the black revolutionary imagination in popular culture".[365] They ditch their traditional black and white tux for a series of colorful suits, stiletto heels, and coordinating kufi hats, strutting back and forth for the camera. The Black Panther-referencing Black Girl Magic Dancers dance behind and around them, alternating between robotic and fluid choreography. As they rap with a cocky energy missing on previous albums—Monáe has clearly become more confident in their flow over the years— they "ain't hidden no mo / moonlit nigga, lit nigga".[366] In tune with their cockiness, this line reminds the listener of the moment at the peak of their music career when they paused and starred in two Academy Award-winning movies, 2016's *Hidden Figures* and *Moonlight*; it is also a reminder of both movies' central plots, where Black women and Black queer men find ways out of hiding and learn to stand in their intelligent multishaded truths, finding a freedom similar to Jane 57821's.

In the emotion picture, however, moonlight illuminates non-normativity as a recurring visual theme. Throughout files #203206 ("Crazy, Classic, Life"), #509268 ("Screwed"), and #7779311 ("Make Me Feel"), dirty computers are framed are classical punk art. Throughout, we see shots of individuals or friend groups standing together and looking straight at the camera, physically framed by something around or behind them (often doorways or cut-out walls, fluffy pink labia-shaped pants in one moment). We often see Jane 57821 framed by beautiful women, subverting the music video trope for its erotic power not unlike Lorde tracking herself through women. Every group of friends is distinctly dressed—some painted head to toe, some tattooed head to toe—but they all look effortlessly put together and fully self-possessed. #203206, itself

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[365] Adrienne Brown, "New Formation: Janelle Monáe's Radical Emotion Pictures," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, May 28, 2018, https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/new-formation-janelle-monaes-radical-emotion-pictures/, 6.
[366] Janelle Monáe, "Django Jane," *Dirty Computer* (Wondaland Arts Society & Atlantic Records, 2018).

framed and activated by a call for "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness"[367] depicts an afternoon dance party taking place in a dried-out fountain in a mansion garden. The EP's decadent aesthetic, partially shown through the elaborate and highly curated outfits worn by party attendees, is a mosaic of freedom and difference. As Monáe sings in "Crazy, Classic Life," she and her friends are not "America's nightmare," their algorithmic designation, but they are "the American cool".[368]

In[369] these images, Jane elevates herself and her friends to the level of high art, an ethereal timelessness that liberates them from immediate datafication. Black bodies, queer bodies, and non-normative bodies appear like beautiful statues in the garden. Thrown into colorful relief against the sharp starkness of their grey-white background, it is the bodies rather than their concrete surroundings reflecting liveliness and dynamism.

Though[370] the revelers are unaware, this is their last supper. In the moments before their betrayal, they paint the picture of salvation through radical self- and community love, with a defiant Jane 57821 in the center surrounded by a table with many seats and more space around it. This decadent defiance is also what makes them dirty and in need of cleaning in the surveillance network's scan.

The same bodies appear like dewy flowers in the desert as Jane 57821 and her friends pull up to the Pynk Rest Inn.[371] Situated as an oasis, the Pynk Rest Inn is filled with a Zami community of beautiful Black women at rest and play, afforded a recharging leisure institutions and pop culture routinely deny us. However, the Pynk is not simply the space of

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[367] Andrew Donoho and Chuck Lightning, *Dirty Computer*, 2018, 00:05:23.
[368] Janelle Monáe, "Crazy, Classic, Life," *Dirty Computer* (Wondaland Arts Society & Atlantic Records, 2018).
[369] Andrew Donoho and Chuck Lightning, *Dirty Computer*, 2018, 00:06:38; 00:16:10; 00:24:32; 00:25:28; 00:29:44.
[370] Ibid., 00:09:38.

#carefreeBlackgirls doing #BlackGirlMagic, as Black women's radical dynamism can often be reduced to. Rather, the Pynk is a space to vision what it means to remain truly magical and truly dirty while living under constant watch.

In that, I am drawn to the way "Pynk" uses fingersnaps to sonically delineate a rhythmic structure of Black women watching back and moving to our own rhythm. In the American cultural context, we snap our fingers when we want others to look at us, and we snap our fingers to keep time. The importance of being seen keeping time can be summed up in the entire cultural narrative around clapping and snapping on beats 2 and 4 instead of beats 1 and 3; we jokingly (but not really jokingly) delineate entire groups of anonymous people along the line of who is snapping and clapping "on beat," though the fact that 2 & 4 is "on beat" rather than 1 & 3 is as arbitrary as it is deeply musically embodied.

Fingersnaps can be heard under each verse, holding a meter that draws attention with a sound not unlike a film camera endlessly clicking or a tracking device methodically ticking. It is not entirely clear that this sound is a fingersnap when listening to the song, but in the emotion picture the first movement made by a character is the opening fingersnap,[372] and women rhythmically snap their fingers to the music until the chorus and choreography start, inviting the viewer the look.

While this is happening, the women on screen are engaged in various leisure activities: some members sit poolside, sipping umbrella drinks and sucking popsicles;[373] some lounge on fluffy pink pillows wearing pink satin underwear embroidered with the call "THIS PUSSY GRABS BACK".[374] Some sit at tables in a restaurant[375] while some are outside working out.[376]

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[371] Andrew Donoho and Chuck Lightning, *Dirty Computer*, 2018, 00:00:00.
[372] Andrew Donoho and Chuck Lightning, *Dirty Computer*, 2018, 00:00:00.
[373] Andrew Donoho and Chuck Lightning, *Dirty Computer*, 2018, 00:00:00.
[374] Andrew Donoho and Chuck Lightning, *Dirty Computer*, 2018, 00:00:00.

Everyone is engaged in rest, play, relaxation, and rejuvenation, with very little of it directed at the camera and the audience. We as the viewer being called by the fingersnap are being invited if not directed to watch Black women playfully loving and enjoying our own bodies and each other's bodies. Where other memories are clearly framed as us watching the Cleaners scanning Jane 57821's past activities, the snaps pull the audience into the Watcher's seat and implicate us in the act of capturing Jane and her friends. Importantly, the visitors at the Pynk Rest Inn watch back. On nearly every other beat, a Black woman stares straight into the camera while doing whatever she is doing as though daring the viewer to take offense. These visitors make clear that the act of looking goes both ways, and Black women's countersurveillance doesn't interrupt their leisure.

Each verse of the song offers a Pynk dataset to be viewed (captured) in time with the snap: As fingers snap under the verses, information passes into the system. The phrases stored in the object above are lyrics used to describe Pynk in the song, separated by verse. Pynk is many things. Each of the lines references the body, highlighting the Pynk existing at the "crossroads…coated in the woman's power."[377] Pynk is lips, tongues going down and around, skin, beyond thighs, brain folds, blushing inside, sun going down, where its deepest inside, paradise—and more, each line ending with an appended phrase opening the possibilities of the line to whatever the listener imagines. This information is at once clearly about the body and totally opaque, chaotic, and erotic. Pynk starts in the body (rather the body starts in Pynk) and extends to the depths of desire on many levels; a desire for sensual connection, a desire for "my favorite parts," but also a desire for depth and a desire for truth.

This connection between fingersnaps and recording also shows up clearly in "Video

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[375] Andrew Donoho and Chuck Lightning, *Dirty Computer*, 2018, 00:00:00.
[376] Andrew Donoho and Chuck Lightning, *Dirty Computer*, 2018, 00:00:00.

Phone," the 2009 song by singer Beyoncé. More so than the easy connection between *Lemonade* and *Dirty Computer* as visual albums, this early track has been really helpful in thinking about Pynk's fingersnaps as a metaphor for allowing the self to be recorded, because this is explicitly what Beyoncé tells her viewer over the fingersnap beat. "Video Phone" appears on *I Am…Sasha Fierce*, an album that saw Beyoncé establishing a more mature and unique performance identity in her third solo album post-Destiny's Child. This album was also released the year after the iPhone 3G, representative of a cultural moment in which a phone with an incredibly high-quality video-capable camera was quickly becoming a mass market consumer item.

In 2009, many of the most basic cell phones came with a low-quality camera that took photos and possibly also videos. The iPhone was first released in 2007, blowing existing mobile computers (i.e. Palm Pilots) and networked mobile phones out of the water and effectively becoming the prototype smartphone device,[378] with a high-quality camera as a key feature. Despite this major tech impact, adoption rates remained somewhat steady across the first two years. Adoption jumped significantly in the first quarter of 2009[379], reflecting increased sales of the iPhone 3G over its predecessor. The 3G device introduced 3G network connectivity, "a GPS sensor for location monitoring," and the App Store, "transforming the iPhone from just a mobile device capable of accessing the internet to a full-blown computing platform".[380] For many users, the iPhone (or Samsung's Android OS-powered smartphones) eventually took the place of a digital camera and a video camera.

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[377] Audre Lorde, *Zami, A New Spelling of My Name*, 1st ed. (New York: Crossing Press, 1982), 252.
[378] Lisa Eadiciccio, "The First iPhone Changed the World Forever -- See How Apple's Iconic Smartphone Evolved over the Past Decade.," *Business Insider*, December 9, 2019, https://www.businessinsider.com/apple-iphone-evolution-first-iphone-every-model-2019-12, 5.
[379] David Curry, "Apple Statistics" (Business of Apps, August 16, 2021), https://www.businessofapps.com/data/apple-statistics/, 5.
[380] Lisa Eadiciccio, "The First iPhone Changed the World Forever -- See How Apple's Iconic Smartphone Evolved over the Past Decade.," *Business Insider*, December 9, 2019,

In the moment that mobile video technology was finding its way into the mass market, Beyoncé released a song proclaiming "if you want me, you can watch me on your video phone…when I call, they better see me on your video phone".[381] In the remix music video, featuring Lady Gaga, figures with cameras for heads circle Beyoncé as she dances in the center.[382] Body rolling and finger snapping[383] so hard her arms crack like a whip, she keeps time and demands our attention, teasing the viewer with her allowance of capture. It is as though Beyoncé is teaching her viewer how to use their video phone, giving instructions on how to mediate her through this emergent technology. The openness of the invitation to look is juxtaposed against shots of Beyoncé and Gaga shooting cartoonishly-painted guns ranging from pistols to semiautomatic rifles across the video. Though the guns shoot cartoon lights,[384] the wordplay and sonic play in interchanging shooting a video and shooting a gun reminds the viewer how powerfully important both acts are and returns power to Beyoncé. Even if we (via the camera-headed figures) are allowed to look and capture, Beyoncé can shoot to kill.

I find this ironically compelling for two reasons, connected to but separate from the snap. One, even though the song is named "Video Phone" there are no actual mobile phones in the video, let alone video being filmed on a phone. One could read this as a badly-produced video (many contemporary reviewers do), but to me this reveals how on-the-cusp of emergent technology this song really was; the phrase "video phone" was recognizable to an average Beyoncé fan as relating to a cellphone with camera capabilities and as a signal of capture desire, but the image of a cell phone recording a video did not connect in the same way. Now, it is nearly impossible to go anywhere or do anything without the possibility of another person

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https://www.businessinsider.com/apple-iphone-evolution-first-iphone-every-model-2019-12, 6.

[381] Beyoncé and Lady Gaga, *Video Phone (Remix)*, I Am...Sasha Fierce (Columbia, 2009).

[382] Beyoncé and Lady Gaga, *Video Phone (Remix)*, I Am...Sasha Fierce (Columbia, 2009).

[383] Beyoncé and Lady Gaga, *Video Phone (Remix)*, I Am...Sasha Fierce (Columbia, 2009), 00:00:52.

recording it; the image of the outstretched forearm, vertically positioned hand, and splayed fingers acting as smartphone tripod (or selfie stick[385] holder to the truly committed) for a recording in progress, no matter how inappropriate the setting, has become globally ubiquitous. This is a technocultural choreography brought to us by mass market smartphone adoption—consider that cameras and an active photography culture existed for nearly two hundred years before our current choreography around recording was developed. In 2009, however, this song discussing mobile device recording only ever shows physical cameras; the heads of the camera-headed figures look like huge DSLR cameras. Though we had a social narrative for a video phone in 2009, we did not yet have a shared movement language.

This song and video are further striking because Beyoncé is demanding that we capture her, well aware the audience really does want to capture her and can't. In a digital practice that has only solidified since 2009, Beyoncé is *incredibly* elusive. The only video information about her is curated, edited, and released by her or people paid by her, an ownership over privacy and selectivity that few if any other celebrities have. Even when Beyoncé is captured on terms outside of her control, as was the case with the infamous video of her and singer/younger sister Solange in an elevator fighting with husband/rapper Jay-Z, she is able to seamlessly spin/recode the capture back into her narrative: "of course sometimes shit go down when it's a billion dollars in an elevator[386]". Yet, "Video Phone" dangles capture in front of the audience almost a reminder of exactly what we cannot capture, and in doing so reminds us of the power of being able to control our own capture.

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[384] Beyoncé and Lady Gaga, *Video Phone (Remix)*, I Am...Sasha Fierce (Columbia, 2009).
[385] As a reflection point on how consumer cameraphone technology shaped discourse around recording and sharing the self, it is worth remembering that the word "selfie," let alone the selfie stick and selfie culture, did not exist in 2009 and I would argue *only* exist because of the nearly universal adoption of smartphones.
[386] Beyoncé and Nicki Minaj, ****Flawless (Remix)*, Beyoncé (Columbia, 2014).

Beyoncé makes this point to great effect years later on the "Savage" remix with Megan Thee Stallion. Within the day after she rapped the line "hips TikTok when I dance, on that Demon Time she might start an OnlyFans,"[387] the subscription-based content provider OnlyFans experienced a 15% traffic spike[388] from listeners running to the site in hopes that she actually *had* started a page. Though I love this energy and am always here for Black women controlling digital discourse, I am slightly ambivalent about this sentiment. Beyoncé references three popular platform innovations for creators, particularly virtual sex workers, to take control over and monetize their recording. OnlyFans is a general subscription content site but has overwhelmingly been used by folks selling erotic pictures and videos as a platform to establish and maintain a virtual fanbase. Many OnlyFans creators take advantage of the TikTok algorithm & its autoplay features to advertise and drive new viewers to their pages; users who are already looking at erotic content on TikTok are more likely to be shown more erotic content, so hopefully will come across their posts and click over to OnlyFans for more.

The same is true of Demon Time, a double entendre referencing both late-night erotic energy and a late-night Instagram-based streaming strip club. At the beginning of the coronavirus pandemic, many folks finding themselves suddenly furloughed or unemployed turned to OnlyFans and virtual sex work as a socially distant and relatively straightforward way to make money. Demon Time was a way for exotic dancers and patrons to connect virtually during the pandemic, since strip clubs and close contact were out of the question and many dancers were ineligible for unemployment benefits.[389] Dancers would join an IG Live hosted by the Demon

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[387] Megan Thee Stallion and Beyoncé, *Savage (Remix)*, vol. Good News (300 Entertainment & 1501 Certified, 2020).
[388] Marlow Stern, "Beyoncé Gives Adult Site OnlyFans Big Bump with 'Savage' Remix Shout-Out," Daily Beast, April 30, 2020, https://www.thedailybeast.com/adult-site-onlyfans-experiences-big-beyonce-bump-following-savage-remix?ref=home.
[389] Zachary Harris, "What Is Demon Time? Instagram's 'After Dark' Craze, Explained," *Complex*

Time page and dance from home for five minutes. A link to the dancer's Cashapp would be pinned to the top of the chat, and viewers were heavily encouraged to tip just like a strip club. Any blue-check account (indicating a verified celebrity user) viewing the stream was required to instantly tip at least $200 or the stream would be ended and the blue-check account blocked[390]. In addition to instant money via Cashapp (every dancer appearing on the first Demon Time Live made at least $1000 in five minutes), dancers pinned links to their OnlyFans pages, private Snapchat accounts, and other erotic subscription services, "us[ing] the exposure to bolster their own personal brands[391]".

On the one hand, I appreciate Beyoncé rapping about these technocultural innovations, all examples of regular people subverting the digital tools available to get what they need, because the platforms don't give creators the same recognition. Instagram viewed Demon Time to be in violation of user conduct policies and routinely deleted the account hosting the streams.[392] In August 2021 OnlyFans announced that it would be banning sexually explicit content, arguing that hosting the content made it difficult for major financial institutions to work with the platform. The site heavily tries to market itself as a general content platform; its marketing material advertises subscribing to "cooking and fitness users while playing down the extent to which the core business is porn".[393] They quickly reversed the decision after massive outcry, but the ease of their ability to deny their platform to erotic content creators on the basis of their

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Magazine, April 22, 2020.

[390] Zachary Harris, "What Is Demon Time? Instagram's 'After Dark' Craze, Explained," *Complex Magazine*, April 22, 2020.

[391] Zachary Harris, "What Is Demon Time? Instagram's 'After Dark' Craze, Explained," *Complex Magazine*, April 22, 2020.

[392] Zachary Harris, "What Is Demon Time? Instagram's 'After Dark' Craze, Explained," *Complex Magazine*, April 22, 2020.

[393] Alex Hern and Jim Waterson, "Why OnlyFans Had Second Thoughts on Banning Sexually Explicit Content," *The Guardian*, August 29, 2021, https://www.theguardian.com/technology/2021/aug/29/why-onlyfans-had-second-thoughts-on-banning-sexually-explicit-content.

dirtiness reflects how important it is for an international popstar to casually name-check this very dirtiness—specifically, a Black woman popstar name-checking an erotic dirtiness for which Black women are routinely vilified.

At the same time, this is a tongue-in-cheek name-check, because the whole joke is that Beyoncé is the absolute last celebrity who would be on Demon Time or start an OnlyFans. We can imagine the regular people Beyoncé Knowles-Carter and her husband Shawn on demon time[394], a midnight-hour timescale full of raw sexual energy that might make her want to act like a cam girl (see "Partition" and "Drunk in Love" from 2013's *Beyoncé*), but there is no universe in which Beyoncé and Jay-Z start an amateur porn career. Though coming from humble beginnings, they will never again be financially desperate enough to even consider turning to virtual sex work as so many women, men, and non-binary folks did during the pandemic. This context ever so slightly shifts the power of Beyoncé moving web traffic to OnlyFans — surely many OnlyFans creators actually did benefit from this spike, but it is a capture reality that Beyoncé doesn't actually have to consider seriously because of the pop cultural power and capital she holds. The tease is so effective because the desire for capture grows the less Beyoncé shares.

Megan Thee Stallion shares much more, but establishes control over the terms of her recording as well. Beyoncé's host on the "Savage" remix, Meg entered rap stardom in the Instagram era with her breakout summer 2019 hit "Big Ole Freak," her first charting track; it is because of her and this song that we now have Hot Girl Summer, a seasonal discursive

[394] More smartphone discourse: "demon time" comes from the popular use of the smiling purple horned demon emoji (😈) to show sexual desire. According to *New Words for Old: Recycling Our Language for the Modern World*, the word "emoji" is a Japanese portmanteau of "picture" and "character" (as in linguistic character, or letter). Even though emotion is not actually in the word as it appears, it's fascinating to think about how the widespread use of emojis as digital emotion pictures metaphorically influences how we act those emotions.

phenomenon. She is also helpful in understanding the desire for capture because she regularly references the demand for pictures and videos of her. Continuing Beyoncé's pandemic amateur porn talk, on "Body" Meg boasts that she's "a hot ebony, they gon click it if it's me, all my pictures been gettin' these niggas through the quarantine".[395] Calling herself a "hot ebony" references the metadata category to which internet porn aggregators assign Black women. Even though she is also very unlikely to ever appear in a video or photo on an internet porn aggregator, she is boasting that people would click the video if she did.

Much more likely to appear would be a pornographic deep fake, where an artificial intelligence generator trained with Megan Thee Stallion's corpus would be used to digitally stitch her head onto a performer's body in erotic content; even in the world where we can assume that (barring a cloud server hack) any hot ebony content featuring Meg is fake, viewers will still click the video. To her this is because her pictures—her endless Instagram feed of photos, videos, and streams of her cosplaying, partying with friends, jet setting, relaxing, practicing show choreography, being a college student and anime nerd, and being a discourse-defining rapper—got her 26 million followers through the boredom and anxiety of being stuck inside during a global pandemic. Megan Thee Stallion is hyperaware of the strong desire to capture her body, and in the style of Beyoncé is saying that her audience can access her capture but on her own terms (and for her own financial gain).

Beyoncé and Megan Thee Stallion's continued meditation on recording stands in contrast to the way they discuss themselves in relation to the mirror as a lens for self-capture: It is to themselves in the mirror that Beyoncé and Megan Thee Stallion look and talk. In a sense, they are like everyone else in that they too enjoy looking at themselves and their bodies in motion; both known (and at times degraded) for being very shapely, they confirm that they spend all day

[395] Megan Thee Stallion, *Body*, Good News (300 Entertainment & 1501 Certified, 2020).

in the "mirror just to stare at [their] own posterior"[396] and flip[ing their] hair and look[ing] back while [they] twerk in the mirror".[397] They both know their fans want to see them doing these things as well, but in the mirror the fans fall away and the performance capture becomes about themselves. Like Jane 57821 and her community at the Pynk Rest Inn, like many regular Black women and others whose bodies are explicitly and implicitly sexualized and degraded, desired for capture, dissection, and dehumanized, they enjoy looking at their bodies enjoying dirty leisure.

Their self-watching and resulting pleasure is the critical enjoyment in excess of but intertwined with their public capture. Beyoncé and Megan Thee Stallion know everyone wants to look at them, so they demand our eyes but only when it suits them and enjoy themselves regardless. Jane 57821 doesn't have the same access to opening and closing the lens, as evidenced by her surveillance and imprisonment, but she does have the ability to activate erotic excess as mystery. Or, as she says on the hook separating the fingersnap verse from the chorus:

> "Sunny, money, keep it funky,
>
> Touch your top and let it down"[398]

On the chorus, the minimalist fingersnap fades into the background of a full percussion melody, sounding more like the rhythmic tapping of a cymbal than a fingersnap or a camera click. The women on camera shift energy as well: once staring back at the camera mid leisure, they move with freedom and direct their energy at each other instead, singing and dancing along to the melody over the words "yeah, something like that. Boy its true, if you got blue, we got the

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[396] Megan Thee Stallion, *Thot Shit*, vol. Something For Thee Hotties (300 Entertainment & 1501 Certified, 2021).
[397] Megan Thee Stallion and Beyoncé, *Savage (Remix)*, vol. Good News (300 Entertainment & 1501 Certified, 2020).
[398] Janelle Monáe, "PYNK," *Dirty Computer* (Wondaland Arts Society & Atlantic Records, 2018), 00:01:42.

Pynk."[399]

This line is often read directly as a reference to binary gender, in combination with the fact that all of the Pynk Rest Inn visitors present as women, to argue that "Pynk" is just a mainstream feminist Pussy Power anthem. However, I find that the emotion picture transcends binary gender politics to encompass the erotics of being dirty. On the last song of the album, "Americans," the color blue is attached not to masculinity writ large or even penises explicitly but the reproduction of innocent American exceptionalism, of which patriarchal sexism is one part. The song's sexist narrator, who "likes [their] woman in the kitchen, and "pledge[s] allegiance to the flag…with a big old piece of American pie," also "keep[s their] two guns on [their] blue nightstand".[400] This verse is prefaced by a set of nonsensical seeming idiomatic riddles reflecting on American exceptionalism, but these are phrases that Jane 57821 must return correctly to the Memmotron in the course of her cleaning as a quality control check;[401] when she is able to stop thinking clearly and monotonously spit out phrases, when she can accept and integrate the blue, Mother Victoria will be able to trust that she is whitewashed clean.

Thankfully, Jane 57821 and her friends possess Pynk knowledge and can move to the rhythm of its erotic excesses. Top let down and free, they keep it funky on the chorus. This is "funk as a philosophy about kinesthetics and being that critiques capitalism and the pathology of Western morality" and yet "provides innovative strategies about work and sexuality" because kinesthetics and capitalism are "linked".[402]

Even if one can read the Pynk data captured and transmitted kinesthetically via the fingersnap,

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[399] Janelle Monáe, "PYNK," *Dirty Computer* (Wondaland Arts Society & Atlantic Records, 2018), 00:01:42.
[400] Janelle Monáe, "Americans," *Dirty Computer* (Wondaland Arts Society & Atlantic Records, 2018).
[401] Andrew Donoho and Chuck Lightning, *Dirty Computer*, 2018.
[402] LH Stallings, *Funk The Erotic: Transaesthetics and Black Sexual Cultures*, The New Black Studies Series (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015), 3.

there is no guarantee that one will understand it. Blue is too invested in the narrative that America is a golden land of freedom, a freedom sustained by cleaning its tarnished and dirty citizens, to open itself to Pynk possibilities and understand the data. Even as blue tries, whether just by looking at Jane and her dirty friends or by attempting to understand, all Jane offers is a breezy "yeah, something like that." This line spins both ways however, as it also encourages her friends in their freed movement: "yeah, something like that!"

The freedom to move unconstrained (and unnoticed) is all too often monetized or outright limited if one is dirty. However, Jane, her friends, and the Pynk Rest Inn visitors activate Pynk as a sensual and sticky self-possession that gives way to an erotic archival mysteriousness. This is the same energy with which Megan Thee Stallion stares at her own posterior and Beyoncé looks back to twerk in the mirror. They all break out of the frameworks of their traditional capture to be chaotic and do the absolute most, but for themselves and their friends. This is erotic excess as it attempts to be captured in data and social code; those under watch find other objects by which to capture and share the mysteries of their excesses.

Here, it becomes clear that obfuscation, even as it provides a way out of tracking, is truly a visual framework of the oppressor. New Dawn's sightedness as surveillor receives primacy, and in that framework it appears as though dirty computers are deliberately including elusive and illegible information in order to trick the system. But dirty computers don't choose obfuscation, they choose life in all of its erotic chaos. In attending to and exceeding the boundaries around Black life and American life, Jane 57821 and Janelle Monáe's emotion pictures distill data that is often left out of or deleted from the narrative, namely carving space and a big stage for Black women, queer folks, and non-normative folks. In "Americans," the song playing while Jane and their friends escape New Dawn, Monáe even includes the need for "poor whites" to "get a shot at

being successful[403]" — there is space for *everyone* to be seen and get free from the blue. The chaotic choice to live is rendered obfuscated by systems that can't accurately record that choice and readers that cannot make sense of it. Black folks, queer folks, non-normative folks—dirty computers—simply exist. Existing means making out with your Black poly triad on a sunrise-bathed beach after giving each other stick-and-poke tattoos. On some bodies the choice to simply exist is algorithmically coded as a societal threat, triggering a surveillance structure that necessitates escape. As Monáe raps in "Crazy, Classic Life,"

> "we was both running naked at the luau /
> We was both on shrooms praying face down, waist down /
> … All I wanted was to break the rules like you /
> All I wanted was someone to love me too /
> … I was kicked out, said I'm too loud /
> Kicked out, said I'm too proud[404]"

All Jane and her friends want is the freedom that "you" (a middle-class white American) possess to exist. Having been asked more than once to leave a restaurant in my tiny graduate school town, I and my friends charged with being Black, brown, queer, and loud, I can relate to this desire to be allowed to just be.

Jane 57821 wants to be close to Zen, Ché, and their community; she doesn't even seem to completely know what a dirty computer is. Despite being strapped to a table with strange machinery attached to her head, when Mother Victoria first commands Jane to repeat the words

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[403] Janelle Monáe, "Americans," *Dirty Computer* (Wondaland Arts Society & Atlantic Records, 2018).
[404] Janelle Monáe, "Crazy, Classic, Life," *Dirty Computer* (Wondaland Arts Society & Atlantic Records,

"I am a dirty computer, and I am ready to be cleaned",[405] she glances around as though the whole event is a joke, like she is being Afrofuture punked. She doesn't see herself as an information device, let alone a dirty one; she sees herself as a living erotic being. In fact, many of the memories represented in the emotion picture visualize the polyrhythms of Jane 57821 coming to accept herself in all of her weirdness and illegibility in the context of our conflicted world.

It is this erotic self- and community love, illegible to mainstream surveillance and yet deeply etched and embodied, that facilitates the trio's escape. Despite their growing involvement with each other over the course of the memories, arms and lips intertwined as a constant clear marker of beautiful Black queerness, being queer doesn't save them any more than being Black does. If this was the case, Zen would have been able to escape cleaning, but she did not, and Jane 57821 is unable to fight being cleaned as well. Naming queerness and Blackness as the radical and disruptive force only serves to re-center and re-empower the gaze that feels disrupted and threatened by their existence, framing queerness and Blackness in terms of a surveillance gaze that does not understand them and has no intention of doing so.

When it comes to their actual escape, the emotion picture slips toward a traditional love-conquers-all plot. Even as she is losing her memories Jane 57821 feeds Mary Apple 53 bytes of information about her life as Zen, including the fact that they were in love, fulfilling a promise Jane made to Zen at the Pynk Rest Inn: "if my memories never come back / I'll still remember where we first was naked at".[406] Jane re-dirties Mary Apple 53's mind with the love she still remembers, having been treated with the Nevermind multiple times already, and these erotic uploads sow doubt for Mary Apple 53.[407] Jane 57821's crucifix tattoo, a literal emotion picture

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2018).
[405] Andrew Donoho and Chuck Lightning, *Dirty Computer*, 2018, 00:03:17.
[406] Janelle Monáe, "PYNK," *Dirty Computer* (Wondaland Arts Society & Atlantic Records, 2018).
[407] Andrew Donoho and Chuck Lightning, *Dirty Computer*, 2018, 00:01:02; 00:39:34.

storing the erotic information of their love, finally triggered Mary Apple's memory. When Mary Apple 53 touched the ink etching, information came flooding back to her. We learn that she actually drew and etched the tattoo herself, a visual reference to the fountain party shown in file #203206 when Jane 57821 was seated in the middle of the last supper table. Jane, who reconnected with Ché at the party, met Zen there for the first time, and they escaped capture together when the party was ambushed.[408] By the time Zen drew the tattoo and etched it onto Jane's forearm[409] it is clear all three have grown quite close as they sit together kissing, cuddling, and creating art.

That the love is queer is truly beautiful, and the underlying queerness of *Dirty Computer* is certainly one of its most generative and exciting elements if only for its necessary depiction of Black femme community. In terms of their escape, however, their queerness is almost irrelevant, present in the film only as beautiful memories of intimacy allowed to fade into their private lives rather than thrust into the foreground as the evidence of radical politics. More radical is love having stored the erotic data of their lives together as an emotion picture, deeply etched and fighting to re-surface in both of their brains. The emotion picture triumphantly proves Virgin Victoria's warning to Mary Apple 53: "a dirty mind will do anything to survive".[410]

These emotion pictures even hold erotic data that transverses the digital emotion picture and real life. "7779311," a 1982 song by The Time, was written and produced by iconic funk singer and multi-instrumentalist Prince. He was one of Monáe's main musical influences and mentors, the traces of his sound appearing all over Monáe's oeuvre. The song "Make Me Feel" sounds so much like a Prince joint a listener might expect him to duet the chorus á la *The Electric Lady*'s "Givin' Em What They Love". In her *Rolling Stone* interview though Monáe says

[408] Ibid., 00:10:01.
[409] Ibid., 00:40:19.

point blank that "Prince did not write that song…It was very difficult writing [*Dirty Computer*] without him,"[411] her mentor having passed away in 2016. Naming the "Make Me Feel" emotion picture after a similar Prince-produced song includes Prince and his multifaceted erotics on a song clearly inspired by both. Even if he could not be present during the album's creation to offer input, his deeply felt energy and information are still encoded in the emotion picture. It is quite touching to think of file #7779311 as encoding neither Jane 57821's nor Janelle Monáe's data, but Prince's data as artist and mentor. The Memmotron cannot possibly account for Prince's erotic energy inside of Jane 57821's head, but an emotion picture as data object can hold both.[412] In *Dirty Computer*, obfuscation operates on two levels—through Jane 57821, but also through Monáe herself. Jane escapes because she is able to obfuscate herself and her community in a critical moment. Janelle Robinson also remains just as mysterious as they have been since they first donned the Cindi Mayweather persona. Jane 57821 *might* be a direct representation Janelle Monáe because they are similarly named, but the name Jane is also commonly used in the US to denote an anonymous or unknown woman. An incredibly savvy artist and businessperson who seamlessly navigated the transition from music to screen back to music, and is no stranger to making bold artistic and political statements, I can only imagine that if Monáe wanted us to know something about them, they would tell us. If *Dirty Computer* was autobiographical and this was critical to understanding the emotion picture, that would be evident. How can the viewer know whether the narrative depicts the life of the ever elusive Janelle Robinson, or the life of an every person Black queer femme living under an oppressive police state? Furthermore, why does

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[410] Ibid., 00:38:48.
[411] Brittany Spanos, "What Makes Janelle Monáe's America's Most Revolutionary Artist," *Smithsonian*, December 2018.
[412] Andrea Park, "Prince: Janelle Monáe Celebrates Her 'fearless' Mentor, Says 'He Stood for the Weirdos,'" *Entertainment Weekly*, April 23, 2016, https://ew.com/article/2016/04/23/janelle-monae-celebrates-mentor-prince/.

it matter whether or not Janelle Robinson is legible to us if Janelle Monáe is sharing her art?

It is interesting to me that reviews read *Dirty Computer* as the data of Monáe's life with a near desperation to connect, going as far as to praise the emotion picture for finally dropping the "braininess of her visual referential field"[413] and instead giving the viewer a simple plot about a relatable vision of queer Black womanhood. One reviewer reads "sometimes I'm free" in "I Like That" as the freedom to share information about her personal life, having been liberated from the need to hide behind the mystery of "convoluted" braininess as a form of "protect[ion]"[414] against grounding her allegories in her personal reality. However, we don't actually learn anything new about Janelle Monáe Robinson in *Dirty Computer*. Monáe has always sung about being an awkward and slightly outcast Black girl learning to love herself as a powerful Black woman, which is why many of her fans (myself included) first connected with her music over a decade ago. Reading through the 2018 *Rolling Stone* cover interview where Monáe opens up about being pansexual, there are multiple moments where she stops *just* short of saying that *Dirty Computer* is fully autobiographical, and indeed multiple moments where her interviewer is forced to write a sentence like "her activism isn't the focus of *Dirty Computer*, but it's there, hovering above every note".[415] Though *Dirty Computer* is often viewed as Janelle Monáe dropping her android shell and baring their real self to the world, I see this as obfuscatory sleight of hand, for Robinson's social media audience instead of Jane's state surveillance.

It is easy for a viewer to then want to slip between Janelle Monáe and Jane 57821 as they

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[413] Adrienne Brown, "New Formation: Janelle Monáe's Radical Emotion Pictures," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, May 28, 2018, https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/new-formation-janelle-monaes-radical-emotion-pictures/.
[414] Adrienne Brown, "New Formation: Janelle Monáe's Radical Emotion Pictures," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, May 28, 2018, https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/new-formation-janelle-monaes-radical-emotion-pictures/.
[415] Brittany Spanos, "What Makes Janelle Monáe's America's Most Revolutionary Artist," *Smithsonian*, December 2018.

are closely named and related, opposite each other on the *Dirty Computer* album cover, particularly as Monáe has had a long practice of keeping certain information about herself away from the public. Now that she has dropped the Cindi Mayweather persona, the desire to know concrete facts about Janelle Robinson runs rampant. Less a direct reference to Janelle Robinson however, I think "Jane" underscores the fact that anyone different could be Jane. She is an anonymously named everywoman character living her life with her lovers and forced to contend with the data state. This isn't the same as Janelle Robinson publicly outing herself as dating Tessa Thompson; "the actress has been rumored to be Monáe's girlfriend, though Monáe won't discuss her dating life".[416] If anything, what has been simplified in the transition from Cindi Mayweather to Jane 57821 is the metaphor Monáe uses to explicate surveillance capitalism. Fritz Lang's silent sci-fi film *Metropolis* (1927) and its Marxist underpinnings is a tougher reference to unpack than New Dawn, because companies like New Dawn grow richer and more powerful by the second in our world.[417] Jane 57821 is not a window into Monáe, but a mirror reflecting the good and the bad of America and the social data economy of which Monáe is a part. In *Dirty Computer* she claims the freedom to be mysterious, in all of its utility. At the end of the picture, Monáe and Jane 57821 are both freeassmuthafuckas[418] — in control of their data narrative, determining when they are free and where they remain a mystery.

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[416] Brittany Spanos, "What Makes Janelle Monáe's America's Most Revolutionary Artist," *Smithsonian*, December 2018.
[417] Janelle Monáe, "@JanelleMonae Twitter Profile," Twitter.com, May 2021, https://twitter.com/janellemonae?lang=en.
[418] Ibid.

RETURN

"..when one talks about 'black youth culture as a technological culture,' one has to specify that it's a technological culture that's almost entirely on the receiving end of a river of 'stuff,' in which the young consumers have nowhere near what we might call equitable input. In short, to look at any of these black cultural youth movements as an easy and happy development blossoming uncritically from the overwhelmingly white world of high-tech production that, yes, makes the culture possible, is, I suspect, thoroughly to misread the fiercely oppositional nature of this art…a specific miss-use and conscientious desecration of the artifacts of technology and the entertainment media."

"Black to the Future"
Samuel Delany

"Let's go down by the riverside,
leave your problems all behind
you can rest troubled minds
down by…the riverside"

"Riverside"
Kirk Franklin featuring The Family & God's Property

"Take me to the river,
my soul is looking for a word from God"

"Sally Ride"
Janelle Monáe

In this concluding section, I consider my own experiments in erotic data poetics, examining technocultural choreography as it moves at the riverside.

I have been an iPhone user since my first year of college, one of the many from my affluent prep school who switched to the iPhone 3G from our beloved high school Blackberry Curves. Despite the deep class difference at my school, a microcosm of Chicago's socioeconomic stratification despite being a public magnet school, and the many ways this stratification played itself out, nearly everyone had a smartphone. Unlike the Blackberry, iPhone ownership *required* paying for an internet data plan because every device element (except, ironically, the phone) required the internet, a not insignificant cost to many new adoptees. While many in my generation have stories of overrunning our text message plan limits in middle

school[419], the smartphone era also brought expensive unlimited messaging plans to support the growing pace of our digital communication. The transition from a phone with a tiny QUERTY keyboard to a fully touchscreen device with one button was drastic. However, I'd posit that part of why Apple and Samsung have the market shares they do comes from the device's ability to teach users as they use the device, making adoption seamless.

All technologies have choreography. As soon as you turn a smartphone on, the device is intimately teaching you how to move your fingers around it in time to its meter. A dance lesson so seamless you barely feel yourself moving, dazzled by the blue lights backlighting the sleek glass screen. The phone teaches us how to swipe and touch to get what we want; it teaches us the exact amount of pressure to apply to its glass screen to get a menu to open. The phone strengthened our pinky fingers and thumbs as we learned to use them as tripods; it drew upon the muscles we fine-tuned in our T9 texting days as it taught both thumbs (or, more skillfully, a single thumb) how to independently do the typing work of ten digits. Because I have short fingers I have to use my entire hand to hold my iPhone; the device has taught my fingers step by step how to reposition the device and secure it at different angles in my palm to reach different areas of the screen, and then added an interface gesture to this tiny hands choreography (swiping down from a specific area to drop the screen and make previously hard-to-reach areas easily accessible).

A decade from adoption, I now keep my device screens on their dimmest level and wear blue-light blocking computer glasses. I also noticed myself learning new choreography recently, when I upgraded from the iPhone 8 Plus to the 12 Pro Max. Nearly ten years of dancing with the iPhone has taught my brain and fingers what to expect where. Now using a device designed

[419] I strongly remember a very stern lecture from my father about data usage after accruing a $500 monthly phone bill texting my friends about our seventh-grade drama; an expanded

without a home button, my brain sought out the functions I knew to expect and my fingers still slid across the six-inch screen seeking new spots of interaction. I did all of this using a gestural corpus Apple has spent ten years teaching me. Even though the iOS user interface is slightly changed with each update and was totally redesigned with the button-less iPhone X, users can quickly pick up the new choreography; the iPhone X outsold the previous model by nearly double within two months of its release.[420] I attribute that partially to the fact that users rarely need an instruction manual to *start* using a new Apple device. The device begins to teach the user, or modifies the user's behavior, almost immediately. Even an untrained user can get pretty far with the device before needing help, and many of us have developed the digital limberness to use our phones while holding one to two other things in the same hand. Quite literally, we move with technology and in fifteen years have taught ourselves very different ways of moving in order to remain close to technology.

Technology, as sci-fi writer Samuel Delany described, comes floating to consumers (particularly those shut out of the design processes) down the endless marketing river of "stuff" and things; all that the things require of us is the desire to move and be moved in the wake. Learning how to dance with the 12 Pro Max, I am reminded of my maternal grandfather and grandmother's first experiences with the iPad. In their late seventies at the time, they were fascinated yet somewhat wary of the power contained in the devices. They absolutely loved it when I showed them their childhood towns in Alabama and Arizona on Google Earth or pulled up old Bobby Blue Bland performances on YouTube, but shied away from learning the choreography themselves. I once asked my grandfather why he didn't want to learn and he

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messaging plan came soon after.

[420] Shona Ghosh, "This Chart Shows iPhone X Adoption Has Overtaken the iPhone 8 and iPhone 8 Plus," *Business Insider*, December 13, 2017, https://www.businessinsider.com/the-iphone-x-has-a-higher-adoption-rate-than-the-iphone-8-and-iphone-8-plus-2017-12.

explained his fear that he would do something wrong. Describing to him that the iPhone was designed to ward against error didn't help; he maintained his fear that he would touch the one button and somehow break the device. He was scared of all the harm and damage that could be contained in one movement, scared that the phone would not be able to dance with his stroke-stiffened fingers. He didn't know the young hip choreography and was unwilling to be lured into the dance by the promise of endless possibility. Apple Inc.'s $2.24T[421] market cap is a clear sign that we are rapidly losing this fear.

This seamlessness is largely due to the way a phone's user interface (UI) is designed, known as UI/UX design. In the same way that the device teaches a new user how to touch it, UI design focuses on lessons learned from natural human movement and interaction patterns that can be applied to a device. For example, the fact that our smartphones wake up when we raise them to our eyes is a calculation that people expect to see detail when we look at and focus on something. The phone dances one step further and immediately presents us with the information it thinks we most want to see, notifications of those (person and platform) that have tried to reach out to us, without having to push a button first.

Now, social media companies look to push the choreographic relationship between social technology and the human to the next level. At the end of October 2021, amidst a fury of regulatory and consumer scandal, Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg announced that the name of the Facebook parent company was hereby renamed Meta to reflect the future of the company. The "dream of social technology," as Zuckerberg explained in his founder's letter upon the announcement, is "a feeling of presence—like you are right there with another person or in

[421] Mark Kolakowski, "At $2.08 Trillion, Apple Is Bigger Than These Things," Investopedia, March 17, 2021, https://www.investopedia.com/news/apple-now-bigger-these-5-things/.

another place."[422] As such, this social giant will be pivoting from facilitating media to building the metaverse, "an embodied internet where you're in the experience, not just looking at it."[423] Essentially, Zuckerberg hopes to knit a digital space-time fabric through which all of our social interactions are mediated; an entire data universe on the meta level of human experience.

Practically this amounts to an upgraded version of the virtual reality-scape Facebook Inc had already been investing in for years; it bought the VR startup Oculus in 2014 for $2.3B USD.[424] Tech critics make the argument that this is a way for Facebook to lock onto an older generation of users; whereas younger folks tend to gravitate toward different social media platforms, the company hopes to serve as a platform for virtual workspaces of the future. They imagine a world where users "will be able to teleport instantly as a hologram to be at the office without a commute…your perfect work setup with multiple monitors…[will] be holograms designed by creators all over the world."[425] The metaverse will be facilitated by "different devices—augmented reality glasses to stay present in the physical world, virtual reality to be fully immersed, and phones and computers to jump in from existing platforms."[426] The company stands by the premise that "this isn't about spending more time on screens; it's about making the time we already spend better."[427] The idea seems paradoxical at first but reveals that what Facebook feels is missing from the relationship between human and technology is a nerve-level seamlessness, total corporal synchronicity between people and their machines. I already own an Oculus Quest but being the leader in consumer virtual reality devices is not enough for Facebook; the company wants to teach me how to move *through* the Oculus rather than with it.

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[422] Mark Zuckerberg, "Founder's Letter," *Meta*, 2021, https://about.fb.com/news/2021/10/founders-letter/.
[423] Mark Zuckerberg, "Founder's Letter," *Meta*, 2021, https://about.fb.com/news/2021/10/founders-letter/.
[424] Luke Plunkett, "Facebook Buys Oculus Rift For $2 Billion," *Kotaku*, March 25, 2014, https://kotaku.com/facebook-buys-oculus-rift-for-2-billion-1551487939.
[425] Mark Zuckerberg, "Founder's Letter," *Meta*, 2021, https://about.fb.com/news/2021/10/founders-letter/.
[426] Mark Zuckerberg, "Founder's Letter," *Meta*, 2021, https://about.fb.com/news/2021/10/founders-letter/.

In many ways, this takes the question of technocultural choreography to another level. Facebook until this point has been beholden to the choreography we have been taught by our smartphones. It is primarily a platform company, producing apps that users can access on any device they own. It has had to conform to the regulations of device and software manufacturers, namely Apple and Alphabet, in order to continue to ship its products through the App Store and the Google Play Store. In the wake of scandals like Cambridge Analytica, where it was exposed that Facebook facilitated user data harvesting and aggregation by third-party companies to be sold to political campaigns,[428] Apple (like Palantir) has gone to great lengths to position itself as a data protector invested in the idea that "privacy is a fundamental human right" and "what [we] share from [parts of our lives], and who we share it with, should be up to [us]."[429] It positions itself in opposition to companies like Facebook and has redesigned the App Store to force developers to be open about the user data they collect and how it is used. These changes affect developers like Facebook, and train the user to expect developers to be data-transparent (though it is less clear that this stance compels Apple to be more transparent about how *it* uses data). By creating its own platform delivery mechanism, Facebook can avoid following Apple's rules.

Facebook is surprisingly explicit about this shift away from Apple's App Store culture. In the founder's letter, Zuckerberg submits the Metaverse as a network "built by creators and developers making new experiences and digital items that are interoperable and unlock a massively larger creative economy than the one constrained by today's platforms and their

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[427] Mark Zuckerberg, "Founder's Letter," *Meta*, 2021, https://about.fb.com/news/2021/10/founders-letter/.
[428] Carole Cadwalladr and Emma Graham-Harrison, "Revealed: 50 Million Facebook Profiles Harvested for Cambridge Analytica in Major Data Breach | Cambridge Analytica | The Guardian," *The Guardian*, March 17, 2018, https://www.theguardian.com/news/2018/mar/17/cambridge-analytica-facebook-influence-us-election.
[429] Apple Inc., "Privacy," Apple.com, n.d., https://www.apple.com/privacy/.

policies[430]". Later in the letter, he appears to fire directly at Apple, claiming that one of the biggest lessons Facebook has learned in the past decade is "what it's like to build on other platforms. Living under their rules has profoundly shaped [Zuckerberg's] views on the tech industry. [He's] come to believe that the lack of choice for consumers and high fees for developers are stifling innovation and holding back the internet economy."[431] He seems to frame Apple's move toward data protection as a path away from consumer choice, and wants to instead stage Facebook as the company of creative freedom and access.

However, even in news releases Zuckerberg admits that the Metaverse is five to ten years in the future. One might wonder as many reporters have why Zuckerberg would choose *right now* to change the company name and pivot the mission. The cynical reading, partially true to be sure, is that the company hopes to distract from the document release and media tour of former Facebook developer and whistleblower Frances Haugen, who has made it her mission to inform the world of how Facebook's data aggregation and platform design really work and how its harmful design choices are capitalist choices and not programming mandates. What better way to distract from the revelation that the company is founded on exploiting and monetizing users than waving a brand new shiny digital object before our faces, spiking the share price in the process?[432]

I think the more foreboding reading is that the company and its founder hope to mentally

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[430] Mark Zuckerberg, "Founder's Letter," *Meta*, 2021, https://about.fb.com/news/2021/10/founders-letter/.
[431] Mark Zuckerberg, "Founder's Letter," *Meta*, 2021, https://about.fb.com/news/2021/10/founders-letter/.
[432] Unfortunately, instead of Facebook's share price spiking, shares in a Canadian company called Meta Materials spiked 30% on the news instead; apparently investors mistook the company for the newly-named Facebook, thinking that the company's Nasdaq ticker name had changed as well, but it will not change until December 1.

Shalini Nagarajan, "Facebook Changes Its Name to Meta, and Shares Soar - but for a Canadian Meme Stock, Not Zuckerberg's Rebrand," Business Insider, October 29, 2021, https://markets.businessinsider.com/news/stocks/meta-materials-stock-price-facebook-meta-

and physically prepare us to enter the Metaverse when it finally does appear. This feels particularly evident in the choice to frame the Metaverse as primarily an alternative content delivery system for developers looking to escape rules and fees brought on by the App Store. Rather than just releasing a new product that could massively fail, Facebook is releasing the *idea* of a new product for its users to desire. By releasing the idea into the public consciousness before it fully exists, the public can have all of their arguments and get used to the idea before it is a reality. Facebook can continually tailor its marketing to assuage user fears, push for favorable legislation, and tailor its product development around those user fears. I see this as a gamble that over the next five years, developers will grow increasingly frustrated by the App Store's rules, and users will grow frustrated by the feeling that their digital public commons is being controlled by a few engineers at platform companies. In this context, the idea of a Metaverse made by us for us can proliferate through the public consciousness with increasing levels of desire attached, choreographing how we move through the Metaverse before we are ever in the Metaroom.

Even as they dream big, Facebook still "need[s] to make sure [they] don't lose too much money along the way."[433] The greater value of constructing this new technocultural choreography is that Facebook can create a larger and more pervasive mechanism for accessing and acting upon user data. As Haugen's document release showed, Facebook Inc. is facing an "existential threat" in that younger tech users don't use Facebook at all and are using Instagram less and less,[434] which means fewer users entering Facebook Inc.'s existing data pipeline. Repeated scandals have tarnished the company image, and increased regulator interest has hampered the company's traditional slash-and-burn competitor tactics. One can imagine an

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rebrand-meme-stock-reddit-2021-10.

[433] Mark Zuckerberg, "Founder's Letter," *Meta*, 2021, https://about.fb.com/news/2021/10/founders-letter/.

[434] Sheena Frenkel, Ryan Mac, and Mike Isaac, "Instagram Struggles With Fears of Losing Its 'Pipeline': Young Users," *The New York Times*, October 16, 2021, sec. Technology,

alternative timeline where Facebook Inc. just continued to buy and integrate all of its foes in the competition for consumer eyes, as it did with Instagram, WhatsApp, and Oculus, until it controlled the entire social fabric. With the Metaverse, Facebook is attempting to unilaterally build an entire social fabric and its underlying data ontologies to see and control all of the data that flows in and out. By becoming a complete dataverse, Facebook can monitor what all users are doing at all times and use that information to its own financial ends. This is what Facebook already does with its social media platforms—imagine if multiple elements of the lived social experience were filtered through the digital mesh of the Metaverse? From workplaces, to public events, to intimate personal connections, the belief is that "the metaverse can enable better social experiences than anything that exists today"[435] using virtual reality to enhance everyday interaction.

*riversides*2106, the digital choreography project I began with Chicago-based choreographer Michelle Penn, began three years before this shift to the Metaverse, but in essence asks many of the same questions Facebook poses from the opposite end of the equation. We began *riversides* seeking to understand what happens when choreography enters the virtual reality space. This project was awarded grant support from Engaged Cornell and the HistoryMakers Digital Archive, giving us access to archives, technology, and travel we could not have imagined or made possible otherwise. With this support, we fashioned a project that explore[d] how two black women can use emergent technology to excavate and capture bodily history in a way that pushes an art discipline and its academic study forward. We proposed a week- long dance workshop for black women dancers in Chicago to explore choreography through virtual reality (VR). Our main objectives [were] to research how choreography is a tool to express and record

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https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/16/technology/instagram-teens.html.

[435] Mark Zuckerberg, "Founder's Letter," *Meta*, 2021, https://about.fb.com/news/2021/10/founders-letter/.

narrative, to research how virtual reality technology can be used a tool to rethink traditional modes of viewership, to engage our dance community in methods for using emergent technology in their creative work, as well as in producing and recording their own narratives.

Quite literally, we were thinking about technocultural choreography from our perspective as dancers rather than platform users. The goal was to consider how the process and result of choreography would change if we were moving with an audience viewing us in 360° rather than from a traditional proscenium stage, and how we might use those changes to our advantage in the pursuit of choreographing our own narratives and experiences. Movement tracks an impulse to explain or explore the world through the body and into the extremities, through rhythm. When a dancer moves a body part in a certain way, that movement captures and releases information from the self, specifically made for a viewer; this is erotic data spun into emotion pictures. Choreography is another structure of capture and release, working to move erotic information from the body to an external object form that can be transmitted to another, namely another dancer. From this perspective, we wanted to understand what happens when this vector of erotic capture and release intersects with a vector of technological capture and release.

Similarly, movement tracks the same impulse to explain or explore through the body and into the extremities/into rhythm. When a dancer moves a body part in a certain way, that movement is one instance of capture and release; aggregating, analyzing, and acting on the particles of somatic impulse crystallizing themselves as movement. Structures of capture and release work again to move movement from the body to its external substrate, choreography. Much as with music and sound recording, the movement of artistic expression as somatic data from the fluid human body to the recording medium is a complicated transition. Capture and release in this context becomes all the more complicated as the dancer moves across cultures; all movement can

exist and move through all bodies, but not all movement can be read in the same way across space, time, and body. This is the nature of performance, and part of what makes movement and choreography such an interesting code to consider. As performance scholar Diana Taylor argues in "Acts of Transfer,"

> "the repertoire…enacts embodied memory: performances, gestures, orality, movement, dance singing—in short, all those acts usually thought of as ephemeral, nonreproducible knowledge…[it] both keeps and transforms choreographies of meaning…Dances change over time, even though generations of dancers [and even individual dancers] swear they're always the same. But even though embodiment changes, the meaning might very well remain the same. The repertoire, then allows scholars to trace traditions and influences."[436]

Movement is inherently ephemeral, and even choreography is a failed attempt to delimit this ephemerality. As Michelle and I well know, former teammates on our elementary school's competitive dance team, you can teach 10 dancers at the same performance skill level the exact same choreography, and you will still have 10 different bodies moving in their own ways. One can record those 10 dancers performing on opening night, record the performance again on closing night, and even if all 10 dancers do every movement exactly as choreographed the two performances will not be the same. The best choreographers work with this ephemerality rather than around it, using movement as a space into which a dancer can pour themselves rather than being limited by it. However, there is still an inherent tension between the fact that movement is ephemeral and choreographic codes are not. Somehow, choreography *must* pin down the

[436] Diana Taylor, "Acts of Transfer," in *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in the Americas* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 20.

information underlying movement for that information to be understood by successive generations of dancers.

This beautiful tension is reflected in the name of our project. *riversides* comes from *Down by the Riverside*, a team routine set to "Riverside" by gospel singer Kirk Franklin featuring The Family and God's Property. Though we attended a non-religious public school and weren't a religious team, performing all dance styles including world dance, *Down by the Riverside* was a praise dance routine choreographed by our coach our first year on the team and taught/performed every year after. The routine blended a distinctly Black movement vocabulary with our team's technical ability, involving solos and powerful group movement while dancing and fanning ourselves with gold church fans. Though the actual steps were not complicated, much of the power came in the emotional weight that our team brought to the routine. Though we were middle-schoolers, we were instructed to dance with the sense that we were a group of women releasing our pain and hurt by the riverside, looking to be baptized and spiritually renewed in the water, and we all pulled upon our homegrown knowledge of Black church spaces and the experience of release to bring that emotion to the routine. Though the dance literally changed every year, the emotional information and movement quality remained the same. It was a routine for which our team became famous, performing it at many events and fundraisers across Chicago including the morning news.

Every year, teaching the routine to our teammates and reconfiguring the formations and solos became like a rite of passage as we remembered the eighth-graders we'd lost and welcomed the fourth-graders we'd gained. In a real way, it was the passage of Black spiritual erotic data and team institutional data from year to year, taking on a power as an institution of its own. It is information that remains coded into our muscles even sixteen years after we graduated

from the team; we practiced and performed the dance so many times in so many contexts that we can perform it still from muscle memory. *riversides*2106, then, asks the question of what it means to intersect this kind of deeply felt choreographic connection with tech futures (2106 being a century after we graduated from eighth grade).

As grant projects do, *riversides* took on a life of its own. Our project was about virtual reality, and we had the opportunity to present on our early dance and virtual reality research under the theme of captures and releases at the 2019 American Studies Association conference in Honolulu, HI. Throughout our time on O'ahu, Michelle and I found ourselves continually thinking about what it meant for us to be both American and Black in Hawai'i. At the same time that our ancestors' personhood beyond agricultural production was being sociopolitically negotiated on the mainland, American plantation owners in the economically colonized Kingdom of Hawai'i were plotting to eliminate the monarchy and reigning Kalakaua dynasty by overthrowing Queen Liliuokalani. On the morning of January 17, 1893, a group of plantation owners delivered a proclamation by proxy "to be used in deposing the queen, abrogating the monarchy, and establishing a provisional government to exist until terms of annexation had been arranged with the United States"[437]. This external American control would remain in place until Hawai'i was designated a US state in 1959.[438]

We had not previously encountered the intersection of American enslavement and postwar Reconstruction and American colonial expansion in this way, and yet found ourselves trying to

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437 Ralph Kuykendall, The Kalakaua Dynasty: 1874-1893, vol. III (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 1967), 599.

438 Despite Hawai'i's legal status as a US state, key kingdom institutions remain. 'Iolani Palace, built in 1882 by King David Kalakaua I and serving as the home of the last monarchs from King Kamehameha III through Queen Liliuokalani, is the only active official royal state residence in the US. According to kumu, the palace also had electricity and communications technology before the White House did.

GoHawaii, "Iolani Palace," The Hawaiian Islands, n.d.,

navigate the complexity of that history as we tried to figure out what it then meant for us to learn hula. While on O'ahu, we lucked into the opportunity to take master classes with Kumu (*teacher*) Hula Ka'llihiwa Vaughan at Hālau (*school*) Hula Ka Lehua Tuahine, an award-winning[439] hula school that happened to be offering hula experiences on Airbnb.

Colonial American tourism in Hawai'i is marked with a wonderous exoticism deriving from an violently Orientalist colonial fascination with the Pacific kingdom. We were in fact taught a hula by an elementary school teacher, a white woman who claimed to be blood-descended from Queen Liliuokalani and thus conferred her hula knowledge with a layer of deep authenticity, only to learn decades later through *riversides* research that the dance we learned is one of the cheap modern hula imitations taught to western tourists at their Waikiki hotels. Indeed, this is how we first encountered Ka Lehua Tuahine as well; because of her hālau's status, kumu was asked to host master classes as an Airbnb experience for tourists coming to the island, to enter a real hula environment and see O'ahu outside of the constructed theater that is Waikiki.

However, the shared language of movement and dance training, and to some extent our Blackness, spoke louder than our Americanness did. Michelle and I presented ourselves as dancers trained both in classical western forms and African diasporic dance forms, and openly as Black women researchers with a complicated relationship to the United States hoping to understand Hawai'i in its own non-colonial context. As soon as we entered the studio and began

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https://www.gohawaii.com/islands/oahu/regions/honolulu/iolani-palace.

439 Ka Lehua Tuahine competes regularly at the Merrie Monarch festival, started and honoring King David Kalakaua I's hula patronage. He was also called the Merry Monarch for his positive energy and general love of merriment, and the festival celebrates hula tradition through competition; school teams compete against each other, and solo dancers compete for the title of Miss Aloha Hula. The hālau was awarded first place in its division as recently as 2015 (1), led by 1995 Miss Aloha Hula (2) Kumu Vaughan.

1: "2015 'Auana Awards," Merrie Monarch Festival, 2015, https://www.merriemonarch.com/2015-auana-awards/.

2: "Kumu Hula Hiwa Vaughan Profile," Hawaiian Culture Center, n.d.,

talking to kumu and her kokua (*assistant/company captain*) Kamaile, they switched up the plan for our master class. Instead of just learning some basic history and hula steps, kumu delivered an detailed hour-long lecture about Hawai'i, the indigenous Hawai'ian monarchy, and how hula's choreographic traditions are specifically designed to keep this information dynamically alive before we learned one step. She was open about the fact that she felt she could trust us with her cultural data because she felt our shared kinship as dancers, she understood that we understood America's colonial legacy as scholars and deeply as the descendants of enslaved Africans, and we respected the history and culture of the kingdom. In the end, she was so taken with the speed and fluency with which we picked up the steps and enjoyed the experience such that she invited us to come back a few days later for another class, where we learned a modern hula, and stay for a company class where they performed a couple of selections for us after we showed what we had learned. She also gave us permission to record her lecture and our classes, but with conditions around what we could share, and we recorded the entire experience in 360°.

Even before movement begins, hula movement is grounded in information rooted in the land and earth itself. Dancers must "adorn themselves with that of nature," because the "land is what gives us life. That mana, that *spirit*, it comes up through our bodies and we're able to tell these stories. So, it makes the most sense that we would adorn ourselves with the things of nature so we can help to give life to them."[440] As she lectured, we braided tī leaf leis to wear while dancing, an important element of the stage and community ritual around hula. She complimented us on our quick and neat tī leaf braiding, muscle-memory skills (perhaps a technocultural choreography) honed from a lifetime and generational history of braiding Black hair. The interlocking of nature, information, and movement becomes immediately apparent in the name of

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http://en.poepoehcc.com/instructors/kumu/.

[440] Ka'llihiwa Vaughan, Hula History Interview, November 4, 2019.

the hālau, Ka Lehua Tuahine. Lehua is the name of the first flower to bloom after the natural landscape has been changed by a volcanic lava flow; tuahine is the specific name for the rain that falls in the Manoa Valley on O'ahu where the school is located. Every time one says the name Ka Lehua Tuahine they are calling to present and releasing the ka (*power*) of those first flowers to bloom after great destruction, nurtured by Manoa Valley waters.

Kumu explained to us that hula is specifically designed and tasked with encoding cultural data and transferring it via encoded movement. As she described,

> "[in] traditional hula, the dancers, and the school, and the teacher are all tasked with holding onto and telling the stories of our people. Most people think, oh, hula's just a physical art form and whatnot, but really the dancer has a full and in-depth understanding of the story that's being told. That one song is a wealth of information, and they have to in turn take that in and be able to give life to that….this is one of the things King Kalakaua said; "hula is the language of the heart, therefore the heartbeat of the Hawai'ian people". In every song, there's language, there's traditions, there's culture, the stories, everything about us is wrapped up in that song, and in the dance. And so when we dance it, we literally do open up a portal to the past, and give life to it."[441]

This, to me, sounds like another way of framing technocultural choreography. Hula choreography is a code writing the cultural history of the Hawai'ian people, but in a way that is highly regimented and process oriented. This choreographic code data could not come without its ritual context. We could not learn the movement without understanding the history of Hawai'ian land and topology, the history of hula as a movement language and a cultural practice, and the history and lyrics of the chant that accompanied the dance, honoring King David Kalakaua I:

Eia nō Kawika
Ka heke a'o nā pua

Kauila ma ka hikina
Mālamalama Hawai'i

Ku'i e ka lono Pelekani
Ho'olohe ke ku'ini 'o Palani

Na wai e ka pua i luna
No Kapa'akea no ka makua

Ha'ina 'ia mai ka puana
Kalani Kāwika he inoa
Here is David
The greatest descendent

The light is coming from the
East Brightens Hawai'i

The news spread to England
And the Queen of France

Who is the greatest person
He is the son of Kapa'akea

Thus ends the song
For David is his name[442]

In many ways, what we ultimately found from this digital dance experiment is that our recordings could not truly encompass the erotic energy present in the studio that day, though our recordings exist as another technocultural object altogether. Critically, Taylor continues her earlier quote from above as follows:

> Certainly it is true that individual instances of performances disappear from the repertoire….The live performance can never be captured or transmitted through the archive. A video of a performance is not a performance, though it often comes to replace

[441] Ka'llihiwa Vaughan, Hula History Interview, November 4, 2019.
[442] J Kealoha, "Eia Nō Kawika" (Hālau Hula Ka Lehua Tuahine, n.d.).

the performance as a *thing* in itself (the video is part of the archive; what it represents is part of the repertoire). Embodied memory, because it is live, exceeds the archive's ability to capture it. But that does not mean that performance—as ritualized, formalized, or reiterative behavior—disappears. Performances also replicate themselves through their own structures and codes. This means that the repertoire, like the archive, is mediated. The process of selection, memorization, or internalization, and transmission takes place within (and in turn helps constitute) specific systems of re-presentation. Multiple forms of embodied acts are always present, though in a constant state of againness. They reconstitute themselves, transmitting communal memories, histories, and values from one group/generation to the next. Embodied and performed acts generate, record, and transmit knowledge."[443]

I think what matters in our lessons with kumu is less that we were able to immersively record and transmit the experience, but that despite the technology there was a deeper emotional register constructed and conveyed. In kumu's technocultural choreographic framework, a critical distinction was made between what we were able to keep and what we were able to share. It is no accident that kumu taught us mainland Americans a hula honoring King Kalakaua, a benevolent ruler who traveled Europe sharing Hawai'ian culture out of pure pride and was repaid with the destruction of his monarchy. This is indigenous information, literal historical data, that we brought back with us to the mainland to share, yet another reflection on the American colonial project. Our tī leaf leis serve as a small yet spiritually meaningful piece of O'ahu on the mainland—mine has held up over these past two years, though we were instructed to bury our leis once they'd disintegrated as a honoring way of returning these tools to the earth.

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[443] Diana Taylor, "Acts of Transfer," in *The Archive and the Repertoire: Performing Cultural Memory in*

What makes this point clearly to me is the fact that kumu had her company perform a hula we were allowed to record and not allowed to share on the internet—kumu specifically instructed us not to put the video on Facebook. This hula and its accompanying chant honor Poli'ahu, the snow deity believed to live at the summit of Maunakea on the island of Hawai'i. Earlier that year, the company had performed the hula on Maunakea as part of protests against the University of California's Thirty Meter Telescope, planned to be the largest telescope in the Northern Hemisphere situated on the sacred slopes. Kumu described the performance as electrifying, describing how she felt the ground shaking under their feet as though the mountain was affirming and feeding into their power. Importantly, she felt that the spiritual and political codes within the hula were too sacred to put on Facebook without her direct control over them. It was part of the honor within our shared space as dancers that we have not and will never share the video, but the experience and this lesson on the boundaries around technoculture fed directly into *riversides.*

After entering this beautiful and enriching movement community, Michelle and I immediately made plans to return to O'ahu and Ka Lehua Tuahine as soon as our semesters and funding would allow. We had not planned for our project to detour into studying hula alongside virtual reality, but were interested to see where this intervention might lead. The start of the coronavirus pandemic three months later eliminated those plans and upended our lives as it did everyone's; we were lucky to have been able to travel at all, and soon found ourselves unable to meet in person to dance let alone travel back to O'ahu. The pandemic brought out different kinds of technocultural choreography, as we held ballet classes with each other over Zoom and experimented with choreography asynchronously.

*riversides*2106 has since broadened to explore movement through technology writ large. Centering Black women's lived and not-let-lived experiences, we choreograph and perform

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the Americas (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 20-21.

virtual(it)y. We push boundaries around digital media and Black womanhood, re-imagining and transforming technology for our own uses.

APPENDIX

Kumu Hula Ka'llihiwa Vaughn

Hula History

Hālau Hula Ka Lehua Tuahine
O'ahu, Honolulu, Hawai'i
November 4, 2019

KV: Traditional hula. The dancers in the school and the teacher are all tasked with holding on to and telling the stories of our people. Most folks think hula is just a physical artform and whatnot but really, the dancer has a full and in-depth understanding of the story that's being told. That *one* song is a wealth of information. They have to, in turn, take that in and be able to give life to that. But they can't do that by themselves. They have a chanter to do that for them. As I said I'm all over the place, but it will make sense eventually!

When Airbnb came across us, I didn't even know what Airbnb was. And so I was approached, would I like to have an experience? And so I thought, my father being who he is, and understanding his job and trying to educate, and I recognize what our people are experiencing at the current moment. We are not even ten percent of the population at this point. Our language is dying…and so we kind of have a revival of our language coming. So hula—and this is one of the things King Kalakaua said—hula is the language of the heart, and therefore the heartbeat of the Hawai'ian people. So when you analyze that, its like in every song, there is language, there's tradition, the culture, the stories, everything about us is wrapped up in that song, and in the dance. And when we dance it, we literally do open up like a portal to the past, and give life to it. So when the experience came up I said well, you can go to Waikiki, you can learn the hukilau, but you really truly wouldn't be experiencing what really is hula.

There's two types of hula—traditional and modern. The modern is just as much a part of

our culture, it's just the way its done [performed]. Hukilau would fall in the modern section. I saw the things that happened in Waikiki, you know, the girls and the flowers, and that's [hula]ish, okay, but I thought it would be unique to have a traditional experience, where you're accompanied—where you learn the full movements, or at least some of them, and are able to tell a story. But you'd have to have some background and understanding, right? For me, that would be important to teach you the true experience, so then you have me accompanying you with the chanting and the gourds and all that will hopefully come to light.

So, here we are in this moment. And its nice because its one on one, sometimes we have a larger group but I get to plant these seeds, and you have a different outlook on Hawai'i now. Being here learning hula is of the utmost importance. We've got schools all over the world; Japan has *thousands* of schools. I actually have a school in Japan (*laughs*), a really tiny one! But they never ever get the full experience because they're not here. They don't have feet to the ground, right, [they] don't smell the flowers, [they're] not feeling the wind, the rain, the view. Everything about it is captured in a memory for [them]. So! I told you I'm all over the place.

So Kamaile brought — she's gonna work on this right now. That is called a tī leaf. And part of the experience was, real dancers adorn themselves with that of nature. We believe that the ground and the land is the most important. Right now we've got all kinds of battles going on in the courts about our land. We [indigenous Hawai'ians] have very little control over it. But the land is what gives us the life. That mana and spirit comes up through our bodies, and we're able to tell these stories. So, it makes sense that we would adorn ourselves with the things of nature so that we can help to give life to them. I mean, you could also do a little lei lesson in Waikiki, with the flowers and the needle, and do that. But this is another traditional type of lei that you're going to make, and you're probably going to be really good at it (*laughs*).

LMA: Sweet!

MJP: Perhaps (*laughs*).

KV: I'm sure (*laughs*). So leis are—typically the garland is circular. And what we're making is actually gonna look like a rope. And then we're going to put that around your neck, and then close it so its a complete lei. So the one thing before we get started is to make sure that— it's so weird when I have to say this, but it is true to our culture, so women who are carrying babies are hāpai, or pregnant, wouldn't normally wear a closed lei. So if that is the case today...okay. Are we all g?

MJP: I'm not pregnant. (*laughs*)

LMA: (*laughing*) No.

KV: (crosstalk) I know its such a weird — (*laughing*) So Hawai'ians believe that whatever we do on the outside is mirrored on the inside. So if we wear a closed lei, the thought is that the umbilical cord will wrap around the baby's neck. And for us, in my lifetime, I've seen that happen so many times.

MJP: That actually happened to me, literally.

KV: Yeah?

MJP: My umbilical cord was wrapped around my neck three times.

KV: Really? Woooow. Yeah — to kind of avoid all that, for us, and its hard for me to like not say it [ask about pregnancy], right? I have to. Its been uncomfortable at times (*laughs*), it was so cute, we had one girl who was hāpai and she came with her parents, but I couldn't tell, you know? And then afterward she was like oh no don't worry my parents know and I was like, oh thank god.

MJP: (*laughs*)

LMA: Oh no!

KV: You know, I don't want to be the one!

MJP: Right!

KV: It's funny cuz we—I wear this [lei] all the time but if I showed up here without this necklace [lei] on, you know someone might look at me like, what's going on with you? (*laughs*) and they'd wonder if there was a reason why I wasn't wearing it, you know? And that's typically how we find out somebody is carrying a baby. Anyway — so the tī leaf, which you can see there, and I'm gonna let you hold the front of it — this leaf comes from a plant called the tī, or kī. I totally hit the ground running and I'm all over the place, right on. (*searches in browser*) oh that's an okay picture…um, there, it looks like that, growing. If you took a drive — how long have you guys been here?

MJP: We got here Saturday night.

LMA: Yeah, we're here basically Saturday to Saturday.

KV: And you spent most of your time in Waikiki, or did you get out of the city?

MJP: So far we've just been in Waikiki.

KV: Are you guys gonna take a cruise or get around outside of Waikiki?

MJP: We want to…we don't have specific plans but we have a couple of things, like someone told us like going somewhere to a beach that has dolphins —

KV: Oh yeah that's Circle Island, just jump in the car and do a lap. There might be some tours or even some Uber guys who might do it for a deal, but anyway. If you drove around by the houses, you can tell who is a local family because they have this growing in their front yard, or around the perimeter. The reason for it is that this symbolizes protection.

KV: And the reason for it is that this symbolizes protection; so that means super Hawaiian

family. You can tell, oh, Hawaiians live there. Right. Um, but leis can be made out of feathers. Um, like, geez, I'm missing all kinds of stuff. Where is she [Kamaile]? Um, anyway, feathers shells. Um, wood, you name it. Um, jeez. Anything and all the different kinds of flowers, but we're careful about what kind of flowers we use because we have—there's meaning for everything. Everything has this backstory behind it. Um, including the chants and songs. Typically the regular, the older chants and even the newer ones. Um, you might see like, you know, um, the words translated in English are like, oh, you know, the flower that blooms in the rain on the Mount or whatever. And really that's like a man and woman, you know, making love. I mean, we'll never get that from the English translation, but then every story has like a hidden meaning. [*To Kamaile*] I jumped all over the place. I need your help!

KF: Yeah!

KV: I need you to pull up Hiwa Vaughan, I didn't even, I didn't even talk about her [inaudible] thing.

KF: Okay.

KV: Cause then it gets to the lei. So — oh look, she [Kamaile]'s on it. Thank God. Are you on her? I'll look for Niihau shell.

KF: I got Niihau shell.

KV: Anyway, I told you, my father was, um, my mom is also a Kumu Hula, so I have the title of Kumu. Um, and that happened in 2006. I've been in a love relationship with the hula, which we would call it, since I was three. So 41 years now, um, I graduated in 2006 and, um, that took four, three to four years of training. So even though I got danced hula all my life, there's this rigorous training that you have to go through, um, to attain levels. Um, typically you go 3-4 years and hit level one, 3-4 years, level two hit four years, three, they have Hawaiian names for

it. I won't bore you with that. Um, but I, I just skipped all of it and went right to the top. Um, I didn't know that was going to happen, but you never know what's going to happen until it happens. It's super spiritual. There's all these, um, ceremony and things that happen and signs that the elders follow. And when they get the sign, then they know what to do. Um—is that my mom?

KF: That's mom.

KV: Okay. That's my mom. Um, so she is, she's famous in her own, right? She's um, a kumu hula and she graduated with me, even though she spent a lifetime. She didn't really dance her whole life, but she is an expert in research and lei making and language. So she is a language teacher, Hawaiian language teacher, thank God, we need her. Um, and she's also an expert in lei, all, all kinds of lei-making, every kind you can think of. Um, oh, there it is. Okay. So that—these lei here are, um, little tiny shells like that big they're called Niihau shells because they typically live on the island of Niihau on the shores and beaches of Niihau, which is a private island that we can't go to unless you have special friends or whatever. And my mom has that, but you can collect them on the neighboring island of Kauai, um, which they, they typically go up on the shores of Kauai as well of that kind. Those kinds of leis are not even no joke, like 10 to $20,000 a lei.

MJP: Wow, that says $32,000.

KV: No joke. Um, and that's because of the time it takes to collect the shells, organize them and then hook a little tinier hole—

LMA: Oh you have to poke the hole?

KV: Yeah, and then string them one-by-one.

KF: —*crosstalk*—Yeah, you sort them by color, by size, its really—

KV: I mean, you know, I don't even know, I own one lei and it's like, one row (*laughs*) cuz I can't afford it. I'm hoping my mom's gonna will them to me (*laughs*).

LMA: Absolutely!

MJP: Wow…

KV: Um, so, you know, so like Hawai'i has some great treasures, so my mom is a master at lei making, but, um, and all the other kinds of leis that we have and lei styles, but she's also a master [inaudible] master of making this, this kind of, um, um, weaving and it's called, um, lauhala. It comes from a tree called the, the hala tree. What are you on?

KF: Hala?

JPat Brown

Writer, editor, and former MuckRock researcher
February 9, 2021

Though my research on Black women writers and data surveillance went through many iterations, the project truly took off when I first located Audre Lorde's FBI dossier and noticed that Lorde talks about encountering the FBI in her autobiography. I found Lorde's dossier on MuckRock, a "non-profit, collaborative news site that brings together journalists, researchers, activists, and regular citizens to request, analyze, and share government documents, making politics more transparent and democracies more informed." The collaborative both sends and facilitates document requests under the Freedom of Information Act, making it possible for researchers like myself and casual readers alike to dive right into active participation in this critical work. I returned to this incredible resource again and again during my research both to find more files and to gain a better understanding of how to read, understand, and contextualize government documents.

During my research I spoke with JPat Brown, the researcher who requested Lorde's dossier during a Black History Month FOIA project. The project sought to request the files of as many Black people as they could and made them publicly available on the MuckRock website, making it possible for me to find Lorde's dossier in one Google search. Brown, alongside MuckRock researchers B.C.D. Lipton and Michael Morisy, also published a collection of FBI files in a three-part series from MIT Press: *Writers Under Surveillance*, *Activists Under Surveillance*, and *Scientists Under Surveillance.* Though he no longer works in the field, he was generous enough to talk with me for over an hour about the process of requesting Lorde's files and the larger context of American federal surveillance.

This interview has been edited for length and clarity. Special thanks to P. R. Alexander for transcribing.

LMA: So, I wanted to talk pretty broadly about government document research. I'm pretty new to the field, but I'm writing about Audre Lorde's dossier in my dissertation. I'm trying to compare the file to Lorde's own writing about her life and I find it kind of difficult to even know how to read FBI files, and how to read the truth of the file. How do you start to sort through that, or do you sort through it at all? What I'm struggling with in a real way is not knowing whether to frame these files as an institutional record clearly conveying the institutional story, or can we say that the files are just factually wrong, or it's just two competing histories of the same events?

JPB: Totally, yeah. Did you read the article I think I sent right out back when you first reached out, "How to Read an FBI File: A Beginner's Guide"? This is a bad answer but I really think it's all of the above. Sometimes you're dealing with people with very specific viewpoints that come out through the text; sometimes it's just people trying to repeat rumors that they heard without validating those statements. One of those things you'll see constantly throughout the different FBI files is, "This is just for information purposes," or "No actions recommended based on that," and that is essentially just like, we're just passing on what we've heard; we don't necessarily have to do anything, it's just so you know what information is out there. And I feel like that sort of sets the tone, where you can see some really outlandish stuff, but that's just because someone was literally being paid to tell people what they want to hear, was providing that information. And the FBI doesn't necessarily legitimize it, but at the same time, if they felt there was an opportunity in which that information would be useful, then they could lean back on that.

I think it's kind of an interesting thing when you're reading a lot of these files, because the

information by itself isn't necessarily actionable or important, but if the FBI ever decided it should be, then they have a place to build off of. I think that's just one of the things the FBI used to always argue: we keep information on everybody, but don't worry; all of this is just for our own purposes, it's not like we're going to do anything with it. But the subtle part of that is, if we decided to do something with it we very much could.

LMA: Would they then *try* to correct the incorrect information? Something that kind of struck me about Audre Lorde's files is that the file spelled her name with the Y at the end as it is legally spelled. She spelled her name differently than her legal name by choice, but it was just so surprising to me the kind of fidelity that they had to the kind of narrative they wanted to produce of this person, versus the narrative that this person produces of themselves. Because I would think that both would be important and actionable from their perspective.

JPB: So I think that's where you're obligated to ask, what are the specific purposes of the different types of FBI file? A lot of the internal files are just stuff they built off their own records and stuff they use for their own cross-referencing; a of that is pulled from public records that were available, and those are, you know, very limited. Other than that, it's based off of interviews with contacts of people associated with this person. So unless they interview that person directly and they say, "here's my truth and I want you to correct the record," which they probably wouldn't do anyway; they would just be like, "Here's an additional resource that we're pulling from. It's not really an interest in fidelity in the higher sense, much as it is about collecting all the sources available of which that individual would be able to just be one additional resource. Does that make sense?

LMA: Yeah. And do you think that that's sort of the point of the FBI files? I guess that's another question that I have; what is the purpose of filing people in this way?

JPB: It's a really good question. I think the easy answer is that there's a lot more tied to this. I think the simplest answer is that the FBI is basically operating as sort of Google or a Facebook of the day. I used to joke about how like, J Edgar Hoover was the architect of the modern world, in that, this was the idea that you could just type a name in and all this basic biographical information would come up. In many ways it's what the FBI's real purpose was; there's many cases where people, for school reports, would write the FBI and be like, "Oh, I wanna know if this person's still alive or dead," and the FBI would respond, "This person's still alive and they live at blah blah blah Lane.

LMA: Woah, that's intense!

JPB: Yeah! No, no, I know. It's this idea of record-keeping as something that is both inherently sinister and benevolent at the same time. That's why I feel like the FBI, when it was accused of keeping files on Americans, fell back on the same lines: it's not like we keep these records simply for wrongdoing, we keep them for our own information in case anyone needs them. Everything exists in this sort of neutral place until they feel it is necessary for them to reference this information. How they reference and use this information exactly has always been a very "soft-power" element of the FBI; I think one of the rumors about J Edgar Hoover's longevity is that if you just keep records on everybody, even if you don't actually do anything with them; the fact that you've created this illusion of this all-knowing figure, causes people to be less lightly to wanna cross you. And I think that's what a lot of the FBI's power projection was like, "Yeah, we have all of this information; we can now evaluate and see how much of it was true or not," but just keeping that information itself and being able to know that someone's gonna be making a decision based off it; that is the institution that exists all around you, and you should be aware of

it.

LMA: And how did they actually compile this information? I really appreciate the Google and Facebook comparison because that's literally the comparison I'm trying to make in my dissertation; the data surveillance state we exist in has always existed, and its names have been the FBI and the CIA.

JPB: Yeah, absolutely, and I'm so glad you mentioned that because I feel like that's one of the things they used to tell people. It feels almost archaic to look at FBI files and be like, "Oh, can you believe the government had a file on XYZ," but now, everyone has a file and it's out in the open and people usually populate the information willingly.

LMA: What were the collection practices? We're giving the information willingly now but how was the FBI collecting information on citizens? Looking at the file on leftist poet Muriel Rukeyser, it's so fascinating to see how much of the information just came from flagging change-of-address notices as she moved around and her mail went to different places, just as a way of noting wherever she was in the world in their files. Does information tracking sort of happen in that kind of passive way, or is it usually more active?

JPB: Well, a little bit of both. They were actively tracking some people, but the people that overlapped with the subject usually became part of that passive surveillance. The FBI, especially throughout the Audre Lorde period; it's main goal was to go after communism and really, this fear of Soviet power. And as a result, they were given a lot of discretion to go after anyone with left-leaning approaches and anyone who could be a communist. Since a lot of those networks overlapped with other radical networks; once the FBI tracks one person you are given a lot more. The FBI can then go and, in many cases break into people's houses, check their record books, they can check their mail, they can follow them around.

The James Baldwin book [*Writers Under Surveillance*] on the other hand is a great example of like, once Baldwin figured out he was a target for this kind of surveillance, he just sort of openly acknowledged it and spoke to the surveillance in his life knowing that it would all end up in the FBI file in some capacity. I think part of that was about making people aware that there is this data collection going around them and the other part is sort of just this, be careful who you know, and hope you're on the passive side of this collection. Once you've ventured onto the active side, then it's more just a matter of waiting until the collect the right bit of information about you. And going back to that article I wrote, this is one of the things I reference from *Unlocking the Files of the FBI*, which is David Langbart [and Gerald Haines]'s book. That is just a good resource to have in terms of understanding what is the specific meaning of these different types of files.

LMA: That's a super helpful citation. So what drew you all to Lorde's file in general? I ask that because it's weird to me that I could not find Audre Lorde's files in the online FBI vault itself; I only found it because I happened to be Googling FBI files, happened to come across the MuckRock website, and found Lorde's files there. Since her files have been released to MuckRock, it's surprising that they're still not in the vault.

JPB: I feel like the vault is very *interesting*. The FBI usually points to the vault as a sort of a way of counting how much has been preemptively available. But it also has this pretty nasty history of taking information down from the vault and not telling anybody? And also presenting the information from the vault as thought it was the sum total of all that information so… I think a really great example of that is Martin Luther King file; like, there is, maybe, not even a tenth, but like one percent of the total FBI file that has been produced regarding Martin Luther King has been made available on the vault, but if you go to the vault, it will present it as that is all the

information that has been made public. So there's this separate kind of, bait and switch that goes on, where like, the idea of preemptive disclosure is one of the reasons that makes me uncomfortable because it sort of- you're very much like, left at- the agency is required to air its own dirty laundry, and it also sort of gets to congratulate itself on doing so; and while controlling what it decides to release, and there's no real control over how long it's going to be made available there. So I feel like the vault is one of those things like- like I'm really glad that it's out there, but I'm also sort of weary of that impact of not- of like, lacking a sort of neutral archive of this thing that is not connect to the agency itself, if that makes sense.

LMA: Mmhmm. So do you think it'd be worth it to request Lorde's files again? It's surprising to me that they are so intense and comprehensive up until the 70's, and then the file just stops. That seems wrong, honestly (*laughs*).

JPB: Well, yes. And that's the thing where like- the really frustrating thing with like, coping with these types of records is because, like- there is what has been released already, there is what has been released to the National Records and Archives Administration; there is the material that was held in the secondary FBI, like, records building that flooded back in, I think, 2011, that destroyed about seventy-five percent of these files. I remember… So its- anything that is older than 1955 is kept in a paper, non-digitized copy at a secondary archive location, that I think is right outside Annapolis, and that place was hit with massive flooding during- I'd have to double check- I think it was around 2011. There's another- there's a civil right's activist researcher who, we got copies of some of the file names of what was destroyed, and the researcher was able to recognize how many of those were really important FBI, like civil rights surveillance records, just destroyed overnight because there was no digital record of it. So all of this is to say, you're dealing with a situation in which there isn't information out there; it's impossible to know how

much information is hiding out there in the National Archives, hiding somewhere in the sub archives, some completely destroyed, never existed- it's like you're never able to know what the full thing is- which all this to say, you can request more information- and I'm just looking at the most recent request someone did on Audre Lorde- and they pass them on to the National Archives, and you can then request that information from the National Archives, but even the Archive isn't quite sure what they have; the FBI files, and those files are insanely backlogged- to the point where I wrote an article about how, shortly before I left MuckRock, about how there has been this one activist who famously sued the FBI and got access to his 118,000 page FBI file. And when I asked for a copy of that file, they said it had been moved to Archives, where it had gone from processed to unprocessed, and now if they wanted to release it, they would be able to release it to me over the course of the next hundred years. (*Both laugh*)

LMA: So they really just- it sounds like- find all kinds of institutional reasons to obfuscate this information. Like, obviously a flood is unavoidable but…

JPB: But the fact it wasn't digitized.

LMA: Right.

JPB: And it was able to be destroyed so easily- Yeah! And I think that it's also tricky 'cuz you wanna ascribe this sort of, like, intentional malice, but at the same time it's just not important to them. It's less critical to keep a record of things that they have done, that they can give- that general historians can use to point out the sort of abusive powers they have used, versus just like leaving them in a box, hope no one asks for them, and then if a flood comes and knocks them out, then it isn't necessarily malicious on their part, however, dot dot dot. (*LA laughs*)

Lillian-Yvonne Bertram

Black Computational Poetics

September 2021 (via email)

Bertram is a poet & assistant professor of English at the University of Massachusetts-Boston. They are the author of five chapbooks: *Travesty Generator, Personal Science, But a Storm is Blowing from Paradise, A Slice from the Cake Made of Air,* and *How Narrow My Escapes*.

LMA: *What is Black computational poetry, and how did you arrive at this medium?*

LYB: I am not sure that Black computational poetry is even an official "thing", but it's what I've been calling a subset of the creative work I do where the interest is defined by foregrounding the intersection of Blackness (history, authors, Black-authored texts, culture, etc) with computational tools like coding and programming. It's a very long story how I arrived at this, and stretches back decades, even though I have only been practicing computation for about 4-5 years, off and on. Because it's a subset of my creative work, it's not what I do "full time" as a writer. (What I do full time as a writer is teach, to be honest, and attend meetings.) The short recent version of the story is that when I began teaching myself coding and programming, I had and have several interests in what it can do. Computational poetry is its own medium, and I became most interested (around 2016-2017) in what computation can do when it's thinking about Blackness and Black liberation. A lot of computational poetry and poetics uses or manipulates pre-existing text, so for me, I decided that the "default text" (taken broadly) for whatever I did, had to be Black (also taken broadly).

So maybe Black computational poetry is a thing.

LMA: *What Gwendolyn Brooks text did you use to make up your datasets (just Riot, or other text*

as well), and how did you make that decision? I am interested in how you think about data itself and building a corpus in the course of this project.

LYB: For *Forever Gwen Brooks*, that "dataset" is the text of the book *RIOT!* In that sense, that project is "contained" or "constrained" by that dataset, by design. I am not sure when I made that decision, but it was toward the start of the project because I think there's a point where "some data" could become "all the data" if you're not careful. What's meaningful to me about the project is that it's about *RIOT!,* and not about *all* of Gwendolyn Brooks's writing (for now). It's about reading *RIOT!* through one of Brooks's grammatical and syntactical structures (the closing poem). It also made sense to me/makes sense to me to start with some boundaries or limits on the project to keep it manageable.

LMA: *How did you create the data schema/grammar you used to build Forever Gwen Brooks, and what changed (conceptually and/or in the code) when you built A NEW SERMON ON THE WARPLAND?*

LYB: *A New Sermon on the Warpland* predates *Forever Gwen Brooks* by some distance, and that poem participates in a long-standing history of remixing the poem *A House of Dust* by Alison Knowles and James Tenney. *A House of Dust* is widely-known exemplar of computer-generated poetry and relies on a mechanism (a "slot" generator and randomization) that I also use in *Forever Gwen Brooks*, but without the continuous looping. So the grammar of *A New Sermon on the Warpland* comes from *A House of Dust*, but the corpus is different. The corpus includes work/words/text by Gwendolyn Brooks, but it isn't constrained by that—I've added my own text and ideas to it, or vice versa.

In terms of the concept and the code, *Forever Gwen Brooks* is bound by the ~1000 words in *RIOT!.* Each stanza in the House of Dust code is syntactically the same. You could also read it

as just being a 4 line poem that is generated infinitely, or 4 different lines generated one after the other, and so on. It's a very simple program, and the original code doesn't mark the categories as being associated with parts of speech, like verb tenses and the like. The success of *A Sermon on the Warpland* in terms of working with relatively simple concepts certainly helped me pursue something like *Forever Gwen Brooks* because you can use those concepts to very powerful and complicated ends.

LMA: *Given the history of Black data and the present uses of artificial intelligence, do you have complex feelings around using artificial intelligence in your poetry? If so, how do you begin to make sense of them?*

LYB: Of course. I am still trying to make sense of these feelings. In some ways, it is not unlike or radically departing from other forms of machine or analog algorithmic intervention. "Artificial intelligence" is also a very generic term for a broad set of mechanistic practices. As a "catch all" term, it's useful, but obscure, and sometimes I want to move away from using it because it's hard to know what it really means. At its simplest, my use of artificial intelligence is using the mathematical and computational processing power of the computer to sort and arrange textual data either at random or according to a syntactical structure I've predetermined. I could do this "by hand", but it takes a lot longer. At its more complex, I use language models that make predictions about text based on the patterns that have been discerned from vast amounts of textual data. Artificial intelligence writ large, especially as regards to things like predictive policing or job interviews or credit scores or facial recognition—is incredibly problematic, especially for Black people and Black data. I won't get into all of it here because there are other scholars, like Ruha Benjamin, that talk more competently about these aspects. The problems AI can cause for Black and Brown people are endless, which is partly why I say I am "electrifying"

the process of sorting and selecting words. It's like flipping through a dictionary at random (or as close to random as you can), or rolling a handful of dice and picking a word based on the numbers that come up. I guess what I'm saying is that I make sense of it by clarifying what I am actually doing with so-called Artificial Intelligence.

Now, when it comes to predictive text generation, and using text as data, I think there is a tendency to conflate textual data with the corporeal body. Since a lot of what I do uses corpora of text written by Black authors, I think of my projects as being intentionally Black. Obviously, I think there's something significant in that otherwise I would use just "whatever" textual data. Conversely, projects that use, say, Shakespeare as the corpora strike me as fundamentally white. I realize this sounds like I am making a distinction between Black text and White text, which feels dubious at the same time that it doesn't feel incorrect. I guess I should say "Black-authored" text and "white-authored" text, because social position does influence textual production.

I think this is both useful and limiting. If the text is a "body" we can talk about text in very affective and corporeal terms. We can "do violence" to the text through erasure, for example. We can erase "the body" through textual silence or absence. We can accomplish complex and rewarding readings by embracing the corporeality of text. We can "make present" the body/bodies through alternative reading and writing practices. I think talking about text as data is a way of talking about text, but not a way of altering what text *is*. I don't think text is *not* data just because we don't always talk about it like that, if that makes sense. But is text an actual *body*? There is part of me that wants to say "these two things are not analogous" and to suggest that what happens to text is equivalent to what can happen to a physical body, is problematic. Can we *treat* text (as a form of cultural production) in the same ways that we treat other cultural

bodies? Yes. But I do not think the effect is the same, and I do not think that that not-sameness means one is always going to be more or less significant or impactful than the other. So I am using processing power to manipulate text written by Black authors, for the purpose of amplifying and proliferating Black-authored text and drawing more attention to it. At least, that is my motivation and intention. Whether or not my deployment of this intention is successful is another story.

LMA: *In your Black as X talk, you made a comment that really stuck with me. While introducing the project, you mentioned that you did both of these projects partially out of a desire for more Brooks poems. Why Brooks, and why poems two and three of Riot? Do your computational projects satisfy this desire?*

LYB: At its simplest, I think Gwendolyn Brooks is an incredible poet. I also think she doesn't get the credit she deserves. Her work is really, really, good. Her early work falls in a time period that was so heavily dominated by white male poets, and she was read and supported mostly by white poets and reviewers who appreciated her talent *in spite of* being Black and applauded for not "sounding" or writing in ways that stereotyped and pigeon-holed Black writers. Her early work was also, I think, famously complicated and I don't think (white) people knew what to make of it until her more legible Black Arts Movement-era work. She's most well-known for "We Real Cool" and yes, that's a great poem, but she *did* write a lot of other work and so I am motivated to continually force myself (and others) back into the depth of her oeuvre. I don't know if my projects satisfy my very personal desire for more Brooks poems because it would be wrong to say that the projects actually produce Brooks poems, they generate homages. What they do satisfy, I think, is the desire to keep Brooks's name and her writing more present in people's minds and they expose people to her work outside of "We Real Cool".

LMA: *In a February 2021 presentation, Palantir Technologies CEO Alex Karp stated that "software is the language of our time" in reference to the high power and accuracy of the company's data analysis software. As a literature scholar, a poet, and a black computational developer, how do you respond to that idea and what it means for the future of technology and language?*

LYB: That's an interesting statement and an interesting question, and that guy is probably trying to court investors. It sounds like a very tech-bro thing to say. I don't know if I agree with it, but I don't think it's incorrect. People make software to tell machines (computers) how to work and what to do. I think I would have to know how Karp is conceiving of "our time"—what is that duration or generation? It sounds like "right now" but that "now" also includes 70 years ago. Let's say it *is* "the language of our time" and possibly one of the most influential or significant, but it's certainly not the *only* language of our time.

I guess my response is that I think it's a fascinating idea. It's a good reminder that languages, like alphabets, are ever-changing and surround us in surprising ways. Computers and software are, and can be, writing and language machines. The machine has a language. Why not learn it, write in it, experience it?

Also that video of Karp walking and talking on the snowy trail is hilarious. It looks like he just stepped out of his cross-country skis. Why he thought that was the moment for an investor pitch, I don't know.

If software is the language of our time, per Karp, this makes me think of Mark Marino's important book, and initiative, *Critical Code Studies,* where he says "programming is one of the key literacies of our age." Not the only literacy, but an important one nonetheless. I am inclined to agree with Marino.

LMA: *Is there a question you wish someone would ask you about Travesty Generator or Black computational poetry, and what is your answer?*

LYB: I think I would like people to ask, or think about, *Travesty Generator* in relation to my previous work. TG is my most well-known work, which is very exciting, but there's three other books that predate, and lead into, TG. TG marks a point in my artistic and creative trajectory, and I'd like people to look at the work as a whole.

LMA: *Is there any black computational work in the pipeline that you'd like to share?*

LYB: Administrating during the pandemic burned me out and I wasn't able to produce anything. I've also been forcing myself away from the computer and outdoors, which is always very beneficial to me. Everything has been on hold while I "steep" and give myself time to rest and think. So while there is work in the pipeline, it's a very long pipeline and won't be visible in the pipe for a quite a while yet.

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