Sample | Signal | Strobe: Haunting, Social Media, and Black Digitality

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We came together in Mike Brown’s name, but our roots are also in the flooded streets of New Orleans and the bloodied BART stations of Oakland. We are connected online and in the streets. We are decentralized, but coordinated.

— The Ferguson Action Group

The history of blackness is testament to the fact that objects can and do resist. Blackness—the extended movement of a specific upheaval, an ongoing irruption that anarranges every line—is a strain that pressures the assumption of the equivalence of personhood and subjectivity.

— Fred Moten

Recursion is a function that delegates the processing of a problem to self-referential, iterative, and diminishing versions of the same function, bounded by an initial value and a terminating base case that are essentially the reminders of external determination acting on the system.

— Alan Liu

Perhaps it is unsurprising that so many narratives of the digital divide highlight Black technological deficit, but ultimately lack language for Black communities’ technological possibilities. This is especially striking in light of how quickly Black communities have been shown to adopt and adapt the affordances of new technologies. In regard to social media, for instance, contemporary African American youth are so much at the cutting edge that one must wonder if they are in fact ahead of the technologies themselves, gifting the world with speculative presents that many people would otherwise only imagine as futures. What would it mean to take this perception seriously, to attend to what the Black Quantum Futurism Collective describes as an “intersectional time orientation”? What kinds of critical
structures might be distilled from thinking about technological adoption as itself a kind of Black cultural practice, a practice wherein “the past and future are not cut off from the present” (Ayewa and Phillips)? What might it mean to articulate *techne* as endemic to African American experience, even if so doing means resetting how we describe or imagine the technical emergence of digital technologies?

Understanding the digital as both descriptive and generative of African American experiences of memory, space, and time resets the chronology for what we typically postulate as the technical device emergence of “the digital.” From a quantum futurist perspective, digital technologies are not merely metaphors for Black cultural production; emergent synergies between such objects and the spatial-historical assemblages of Black diasporic experience are taken as an occasion for what Siegfried Zielinski describes as media anarchaeology. As Michael Goddard notes, following Friedrich Kittler, anarchaeological approaches disrupt the linearity of technology-effect dyads by making space for articulating how various media assemblages have been shown “not to be implemented when this would have been first technically possible but only when the right socio-technical assemblage is able to make use of them” (1767). This is helpful in overcoming the presumption that certain populations are simply to be brought into technological advancement and instead directs inquiry toward understanding people as participating in mutually constitutive processes with technological innovation. By stepping away from “teleological medium narratives” (1776), we might therefore more easily understand, for instance, how Black Twitter existed long before the rise of the platform that we currently know as Twitter and thus find ways to critique Twitter as a precipitate of those traditions. “The digital” and “the technological” are important to thinking about Black life *not* because referring to the digital imparts saliency, nor because we must hunt for ways to make Black life relevant to the digital humanities. Black studies-inflected frameworks are important to digital humanities because at the technical core of so much contemporary technological innovation we find literal and figurative resonance with histories, materialities, and other structuring realities of Black diasporic experiences—digitality.

This chapter’s method is one of speculative frameworking, the purpose of which is to distill a critical approach that takes seriously the belief that DH scholarship is an especially ripe space for modeling and critiquing livable futures for people invested in using hardware and software to recover, center, or thematize the lives of marginalized communities. One might think here of Keguro Macharia, who uses thinking by Katherine McKittrick, Tavia Nyong’o, and Brent Edwards to show how

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

Speculation is also a mode of being-present where one is impossible.

Speculation and the anarchaeological underwrite this chapter's decolonial perspective on digital humanities because together they help get at what is at stake in understanding how digital humanities emerges structurally out of marginalized communities as much as the term also names a broad range of methods and approaches that might be brought to bear on various communities' cultural materials. In the hybrid form and method of its meditation, this chapter also pushes a bit against what might be perceived as the discursive demands of contemporary institutional digital humanities writ large. As Kim Gallon notes, via Matt Kirschenbaum, “A vibrant and critical discourse from #dhpoco, #transformDH, and HASTAC... among others, now serves to resist the academic hegemonies that may limit our understanding of what the digital humanities is and will be in the future.” Such a transformation is not only a matter of continuing to broaden capital D, capital H's capacity to name its critical intersections and the intersectional implications of its ways and means; it also means actively working to avoid reproducing the many ways that critical theory itself still struggles to bring more kinds of voice and perspective into the core of both its institutional and discursive work. Throughout I use repetition and close reading to perform a kind of genealogical work that is structured by this chapter's evocation of the haunted, digitized, transmediated dimensions of Black life. I use section headings to help track the recursion at the heart of this meditation on recovery and resistance. In their form they also hearken to the born-digital essays that bookmark this inquiry.

With that in mind, this chapter builds and rides a poetics of Black digitality by examining three roughly constituted transmedial assemblages: signals—how communities use compressed texts to come into being across time and space, samples—cultural performances that both crystallize and iterate signals, and strobes—oscillations that break the signal, event-times that capture the truth of the signal's displaced origin. Moving across these terms provides an opportunity for thinking intentionally but broadly about the affective life of social media utterances, with an eye to how social media works through us and against us, with us and without us. Digital social media platforms are important to this inquiry not only because they have been so heavily used by African Americans but also because social media experience can be productively understood as technically parallel to historically complex matters of cultural ownership, transmission, and participation in African American culture. Further, as Catherine K. Steele, Meredith Clark, and others have argued, developing multiple pathways into understanding how new technological formations mediate communication within and across Black communities carries renewed urgency as we look for ways to historicize and conceptualize phenomena like “Black Twitter” and the rise of social media activism, for instance the #BlackLivesMatter movement. Both social media activism and social
media participation require users to orchestrate complex movements between the embodied and the digital, the present and the past, the evidential and the ephemeral, the owned and the claimed.

<iirruption></iirruption>

Finding ways to ride the instability between to, from, or for structures the haunted nature of Black life. To be haunted is to experience other people’s memories with the affective impact of personal, firsthand experience, to both survive and operationalize the glitch, the break, the experience of blackness that Fred Moten describes as “an ongoing irruption that anarranges every line” (1). In Moten’s conceptualization, blackness names a state in which one is continually subject to reinscription by the eruption of the material and affective past out of the break and into the present. Because that eruption is also an emergence from oneself, it is more properly an irruption, that which heaves forward by turning inward, the body startled by a sharp pinch, Sankofa’s beak. Haunted is the state of before and after, how bass makes bones quiver before a comprehension of melody emerges, and how the memory of bass can ignite deep and spontaneous dance: the embodied experience of what Wai Chee Dimock describes as “diachronic historicism,” as she uses “resonance” to name how, “modeled on the traveling frequencies of sound,” we might visualize texts as “frequencies received and amplified across time, moving farther and farther from their points of origin, causing unexpected vibrations in unexpected places” (1061). Irruption thus names how our experiences of media as memory disaggregate the self into itself, much as a sample is always that little piece of what it was but also what can become, standing in for a spatial, temporal, or affective whole. Algebraic—Al-Jabr, the breaking of the bones—movements, disjunctures, and migrations become sites of renewed emergence; moments become touchstones for larger cycles of losing and remaking meaning, of transformation without restoration, the impossibly fluid flow of the popping and locking body, the DJ using two turntables to disaggregate songs into discrete soundbytes so that they might be used as if they were digital, isolating out samples and breaks so that old texts could be made newly resonant with always present futures, the cultural working of what Paul D. Miller describes as “an involution engine” (2). Black lives hearken to the digital because Black diasporic existence is a digitizing experience. Transfer, migration, metonymy: the break and the remix persist as both witness and feature of the multiple and continual experiences of forced migration endemic to Afro-diasporic life in the Americas—the Middle Passage, the auction block, the Great Migration—the digital. Digitality, life after the break, the enduring possibilities of Black futurities explicitly oriented against what Fikile Nxumalo and Stacia Cedillo cite as the “ever-shifting formations of the violences enacted by past–present plantation histories” (106).
Through, against, with, without: a social media feed is almost always similarly displaced from the space and time of a given user’s embodied present. At the same time, it is of course embodiment that brings social media into the realm of human experience, as a social media timeline algorithmically tunes itself to the rhythms and materialities of any user’s own prior physical presence. A social media feed, a timeline, is a software expression of a person's clicking, reading, pausing, returning, liking, and sharing. As Jocelyn Edens notes, “Contemporary technologies produce particular movements—the swipe, the scroll, the full-body interaction with a device. These gestures, or organized forms of movement that respond to an interface, are new embodied habits” (qtd. Chukwulozie).

Each of these embodied actions produces a material trace, as participation in social media transmutes both the work of daily living and the mediation of that living into different kinds of distributable emotional, cognitive, and cultural capital. In a deeply and mutually constitutive process, people operate as both subjects and objects of those technologies, providing the content that constitutes social media's feed—again, the physical acts that produce the algorithmic expression and, as Shaka McGlotten has brilliantly illustrated, data that can be exchanged as the financial capital that undergirds the system itself.

In the wake of particularly harrowing events, I watch as handfuls of friends and compatriots declare “social media breaks,” overcome with bone weariness. If we accept that social media participation is also an embodied relationship, then it follows that the data present might not necessarily square with a body’s drive to remember. In “On Seeing through Twitter,” Jeffrey Moro notes that even as so many contemporary framings of the digital and digital experience rightfully focus on disembodiment and accelerationism, it is important to register other kinds of digital experiences. For many members of marginalized communities, “social media over-concretizes lives in ways that bodies can’t sustain.” Moro goes on to discuss Web Smith’s description of dealing with the constant social media specter of Black people’s deaths. It is worth repeating here: “Twitter is suffering because it is the most accurate reflection of American society today. It’s not just what’s tweeted, it’s what isn’t tweeted. Each day, a new hashtag represents a dead child. Often, there is a filmed murder attached. Often still, we watch it.”

Social media experience is on the one hand absolutely concrete—when you post a tweet you are doing a material thing with a material process and a material trace—but that doing is immediately keyed to a time, a moment that will soon pass. At the same time, the experience of the moment of composing or reading or sharing does not in fact pass; it remains. “Each day, a new hashtag”: on the one hand, Smith’s observation comports with Manovich’s sense of the timeline in its temporal march. At the same time, “each day, a new hashtag represents a dead child” is also a keen-ing, as the march forward is in fact experienced as repetition, as entrapment in a
historical past of racial violence that refuses to pass. Each day, comma. A pause. A space impenetrable to me because its purpose is to factor Black death. The break.

#SocialMediaBreaks

This sense of remainder is also a technological reality. Even as posts move down the timeline, the user’s trace is never let go. On your return, the system returns this trace of you to you as you, insofar as the timeline purports to be algorithmically tuned to you, your preferences, your likes, your choices. One might think here of Wendy Chun’s description of the human experience of software, wherein our experience of an interface ideally works transparently, the mechanism out of sight. In its rendering of the experience of computing, “its combination of what can be seen and not seen, can be known and not know—its separation of interface from algorithm, of software from hardware—makes it a powerful metaphor for everything we believe is invisible yet generates visible effects” (Chun 2013, 17). Ghostly yet evidential, present yet temporally displaced, the user’s feeling of participation bridges this sense of you but not you, presence and action, as the sense that the distance between these perceived states must be experienced as easily navigable contributes to a platform’s affective power. In instilling in us a certain sense of time and then localizing that experience of time to specific platforms with distinctive interfaces, social media consolidates its status as a place, as a material localization of social and affective forces that constitutes something more and less than extensibility. It is all about you, literally moving with you when you are present, without you when you are not, but always awaiting your return.

<with or without you>

With you, without you: digitality can also be taken adjectively, as describing the mechanisms by which other people’s experiences emerge and reemerge across times and spaces that are separated and discrete. It is a way of characterizing the haunted nature of Black life, which in Haunting and Displacement I frame as a way of thinking about what it means to experience other people’s memories with the affective impact of personal, firsthand experience. A productive figure for haunting and digital experience can be found in Toni Morrison’s deployment of the notion of “rememory” in the words of her character Sethe in Beloved:

Someday you be walking down the road and you hear something or see something going on. So clear. And you think it’s you thinking it up. A thought picture. But no. It’s when you bump into a rememory that belongs to somebody else. Where I was before I came here, that place is real. It’s never going away. Even if the whole farm—every tree and grass blade of it dies. The picture is still there and what’s more, if you go there—you who never was there—if you go
there and stand in the place where it was, it will happen again; it will be there for you, waiting for you. (47)

There is something in Sethe’s claim about the abstract and the material that is difficult to suss because the abstract is nonetheless material to our living in the world. Even though it at first might seem like Sethe’s argument is mainly spatial—the rememory that waits to be “bumped” into—it is also useful to attend to how Morrison foregrounds “you,” which is to say that the rememory marks “you” as both subject and object of the past’s actions.¹ Because you are a discrete being, “you who never was there,” the encounter with a radically exteriorized and detached past, the sample, is an experience of irruptive emergence that is also characterized by expectation. Before you give me the details, I get it.

#sample

You learn of Michael Brown’s death in Ferguson, Missouri, and you already know what has happened. Each day, a new hashtag. In the wake of American terrors against people of African descent, diaspora itself becomes a sense of time, characterized by a resolute futurism underwritten by a continual sense of the abiding past, the timeline ticking with or without you. In this orientation, experienced events are characterized by where they fall on a scale of expectation. Most events have already happened because they will happen again, a temporal orientation around which every experience of space must bend; it is the still-living’s experience of what it means “to live in relation to this requirement for our death,” what Christina Sharpe characterizes as living “in the wake” of “specific and cumulative deaths” (7). Accounting for how Black life requires a capacity to constantly index Black death, and the intertemporal, crossroad processes that this instantiates, helps us conceptualize the digital dimensionality of Black diasporic life. Unmoored, at every instance of its emergence a sample potentially reproduces memory without origin, Moten’s anarrangement sublimated, the aesthetic emergences and emergencies of Black American social and historical condition. If you go there and stand in the place where it was, it will happen again; it will be there for you, waiting for you. Each day, a new hashtag represents a dead child.

A sample is able to resonate as meaningful by virtue of the power vested in the very fact of its recursive appearance, in its mortifying pronouncement of the right thing—the right utterance or gesture or beat, appearing at the right time for all the wrong reasons—a negative capability navigated in the wake of what Katherine McKittrick frames thusly: “The slave’s status as object-commodity, or purely economic cargo, reveals that a Black archival presence not only enumerates the dead and dying, but also acts as an origin story. This is where we begin, this is where historic blackness comes from: the list, the breathless numbers, the absolutely economic, the mathematics of the unliving” (16).
The “mathematics of the unliving” is a historical metadata that produces a sense of resonance beyond a discrete moment, producing a memory that circulates without origin. In moments of such experience, content and ownership are subordinated to haunting resonance and uncanny circulation. Qualitatively encoded in an experience of Michael Brown or innumerable other Black children’s deaths is the reiteration of a quantitative reality, what I have elsewhere conceptualized as the impact of the news of other people’s deaths. This is the pause between a death and its hashtag. A transmission. Brown dies and I get it. If I am not careful when I type McKittrick’s quote, my computer insistently autocorrects “unliving” to “unloving,” and I am moved to tears. This black box has grown from a ship’s hold in Africa.

#signal

As Wai Chee Dimock, Alexander Weheliye, Nicole Furlonge, and others remind us, Ralph Ellison was obsessed with sound in its most technical aspects, with signal processing, radio waves, and recording technologies. Furlonge, especially, has demonstrated Ellison’s repeated use of both technical and metaphorical figurations of frequency and amplification in his 1952 novel *Invisible Man* and how those figurations produce a poetics of corporeal listening: a kind of listening in which the discrete human subject is able to constitute a racialized self attuned to larger social environments (Furlonge, 6). Ellison’s protagonist, an unnamed and clueless Black college student, arrives for his first day of work in a paint factory famous for its production of the whitest of white paints, “Optic White.” He works for Lucius Brockway, who is responsible for running the machines that mix the paint, deep in the factory. Brockway’s blackness reinforces the scene’s irony, as expertise such as his constitutes the invisible labor that makes whiteness possible: he is one of the self-described “machines inside the machine,” who are the human analog to the drop of black paint that makes Optic White so white (Ellison, 217). The protagonist, whom Ellison characterizes as immune to irony and therefore also immune to other kinds of subtle or invisible social workings, finds himself unable to receive communications from Brockway at critical moments, almost causing an accident when he fails to respond to the buzzer’s buzzing, enraging Brockway:

> “What’s wrong with you?” he asked when the last valve was closed.
> “I expected you to call.”
> “I said I’d signal you. Caint you tell the difference between a signal and a call? Hell, I buzzed you. You don’t want to do that no more. When I buzz you I want you to do something and do it quick!” (Ellison, 213)

Here, the difference between the signal and the call is rooted in the narrator’s ability to distinguish between them: a signal is only recognizable as such after its receipt, in the sense that the signal triggers computational understanding, even as it does
not “tell” anything, in contrast to a call, a hail addressed to a specific subject. At first dismissive, the invisible man soon learns that not understanding the difference between a signal and call can be a matter of life and death. It does not matter that he thinks he should not have to know; what matters is what happens if he does not know to know, for it is knowing to know that pivots comprehension toward the unsaid, toward the meaningfulness compressed in a signal. Physical displacement, as well as the necessity that communication between Black people happens in the open but remains indecipherable to hostile listeners, historically produced the need and desire for new methods of cultural transmission, generation, and replacement. For Ellison, and more generally, this is not an argument about cultural membership; rather, attentiveness to the meaning behind that which goes unspoken can be understood as equivalent to having access to strategies for living, to knowing how to dodge or survive oppressive circumstances.

#Relation

It is important to note that, in its compressed and encoded state, the signal is meaningless without computation. Without a knowing site of receipt, there is only a trace without referent. In Ellison’s paint factory, the buzzing buzzer says nothing, but “is” everything. Brockway’s closing admonishment, “When I buzz you I want you to do something and do it quick!” speaks to this sense that what the signal demands is an absolute orientation to the sender, a state of already ready response. This notion of saying without saying is also, of course, the hallmark of coded language; for instance, how group members—communities, teams, cliques, generations—communicate their connection to each other. In this modality, backstories, grammatical elements, names, and other kinds of details can be left out of most utterances. Such things can be left unsaid because the speaker presumes that the listener “already” knows enough to produce the utterance or gesture’s connective tissue. To the person to whom the signal is actually targeted, the structural fact of compression itself produces a richer language, as the very absence of explanation or detail validates the person receiving the message as its proper and expected recipient.

One might think here of Jessica Marie Johnson’s description of what it means to work in archival spaces from simultaneously Black and digital perspectives. She emphasizes how the digital influences her understanding of how to read sources and how people in the past and present are engaged with each other; and how to read into things that are more ephemeral, like the moments in which we laugh, in which language changes, and the shorthand languages that we use among each other that define who is kin, friend, or enemy. Those moments or spaces that are more ephemeral are both analogous of social media spaces and also of the ways and moments that diasporic black folk have played in the fragments of the archives.
In Johnson’s articulation, digital experience is one wherein the encodings that bespeak community demonstrate the kind of fractal workings Édouard Glissant frames as Relation, and offer a glimpse into the kinds of possible love that Moten aligns with Black fugitivity: resistance, communality, shared hieroglyphics, the gestural, the things that come into being when we contribute to what is produced at the edges, to the creation of individual moments simultaneously curated as communal texts. Indeed, one might also think here of Emily Lordi’s articulation of “understatement,” in which she reads the ability to make art in an ensemble as “a function of interpretation—as an effect one creates through attentive, inventive listening instead of a static quality one detects or observes.” Lordi goes on, via Jean Luc Nancy’s “distinction between hearing and listening,” to align hearing with “‘understanding’ or ‘decoding’ the meaning of a sound.” In this paradigm, listening can be understood as a “self-reflexively creative act” (Lordi, 101). Through, against, with, without: by virtue of their compression and the contingent nature of their appearance, signals are encodings, invisible to some, lifelines for others. The very fact of compression and encoding itself transmits an immense amount of communicative power: the world of meaning encapsulated in the timely glance or the hashtag on one side, the quick suck of tooth or the retweet of receipt on the other. Signals and samples remind us that resistance is both form and practice. This black box has grown from a ship’s hold in Africa.

#rememory

In From #BlackLivesMatter to Black Liberation, Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor narrates the arrival of the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag, which was created in the wake of the announcement that George Zimmerman would not be charged in the 2012 murder of a seventeen-year-old African American child, Trayvon Martin:

Out of despair over the verdict, organizer Alicia Garza posted a simple hashtag on Facebook: “#blacklivesmatter.” It was a powerful rejoinder that spoke directly to the dehumanization and criminalization that made Martin seem suspicious in the first place and allowed the police to make no effort to find out to whom this boy belonged. It was a response to the oppression, inequality, and discrimination that devalue Black life every day. It was everything, in three simple words. (150)

Much like other kinds of coded language, #BlackLivesMatter compresses the specifics of what it references, what Taylor describes as “the oppression, inequality, and discrimination that devalue Black life every day.” At the same time, the hashtag also operates transparently, literally meaning what it says, even as the very fact of saying “it” is premised on the awareness of its opposite. One must assert that Black lives matter because the devaluation of the lives of Black people is experienced daily as
an equally simple formulation: “Black lives do not matter.” The signal quality of #BlackLivesMatter is thus foundationally embedded in the deep irony attached to any claim regarding the protection of Black people. To say that Black lives matter is to say out loud that Black lives do not matter and, in so doing, to reorient the present’s future: #BlackLivesMatter is thus ironically descriptive of the past and present while also asserting a belief in the possibility of future justice. As Melissa Brown has observed in the use of the similarly oriented #SayHerName, such hashtags are used to “raise consciousness,” enacted “through demands for action and affirmations to uplift victims of violence.” Recursive, the immediacy of #BlackLivesMatter draws on historical repetition: it always says everything. It is the suck of the tooth, the long stare across the room: “here is another example of Black lives not mattering.” But it also reorients discourse, projecting toward a newly future-oriented present: Black lives matter.

To say that hashtags like #BlackLivesMatter leave out the specifics is not to devalue their relationship to material conditions. Rather it is to highlight how the specifics of a hashtag’s references are localized to the moment of its utterance, producing a term that works folksonomically, that is both simultaneously owned and shared. Taylor’s insistence on the everydayness of the utterance also helps us understand how the meaningfulness of a tweet using the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag could be communicated in that tweet’s status as a repetition, albeit of things that have happened in other times and in other places and to other people. Still a haunting, yes, but also invoking a future haint of resistance against the necropolitical, to use Achille Mbembe’s term. Diasporic in its structural core, the #BlackLivesMatter hashtag enables digital activism, disaggregated action across discrete but also connected nodes. It enables not only activism in digital spaces, in other words, but also the use of “social network technology to organize and coordinate real-world action” (Brown, 1831).

#kairos

When the digital is understood as prior to the electric, we find more language for the analog relationships that were severed in the Middle Passage. By eliminating the possibility of return, enslavement split time, opening up a breach in which identity is constantly reproduced under the sign of an always already destabilized future. Moten’s irruption is both symptom and cause of this destabilization, both witness and feature of the multiple and continual experiences of forced migration endemic to Afro-diasporic life in the Americas—the Middle Passage, the auction block, the Great Migration: “the digital,” digitality, life after the break. Kelli Moore also hears, however, the capacity for a hashtag to move across experiential spaces in the term’s half-rhyme with àse, which makes conceptually available “the special languages of prayer and invocation” to thinking about what it means to find common cause under the sign of #BlackLivesMatter. Moore notes how “hashtag”
takes the special languages of prayer and invocation and in a double movement enshrines it as an interface. Àse is fundamental to Yoruba poetics and is performed in song, sculpture, textiles, scarification patterns and medicine. Phonemic awareness of the slant rhyme between hashtag and àse, black matter and black mater should draw our attention to the slippages and breaks between concepts. Slant rhyme, also known as “half,” “near,” “oblique,” “off,” “weak,” “imperfect,” “lazy,” rhyme, is marked by its definitional deficiency in relation to “perfect rhyme” or “true” rhyme. One way to appreciate slant rhyme is as rhyme in black, in the break. Attending to the pleasure of phonemic awareness is a commitment to the necessary compositional crime of black rhyme. In the case of #blacklivesmatter, àse compositional protocols break, transfigure, and slant between street and digital interfaces. The BLM hashtag is a bio-electronic song whose àse was powerful enough to socially organize and threaten enemies online while also gathering people in physical geographies.

By virtue of Moore’s rendition, we can see how a hashtag’s “double movement,” its simultaneous place marking of virtual and physical worlds, resonates with Orisha-haunted articulations of Èṣù / Eleguá and of the crossroads, which are spaces that work like roads or paths across spatial, temporal, or experiential registers: this is why Moore rightfully directs us to the hashtag’s status as mechanism, to interface.

Àṣẹ is power, the power to draw on relations to make or to transform. Following Moore, and put alongside Lordi’s rendition of accompaniment, àṣẹ offers a conceptual entry point into thinking about knowledge as a power that comes into being at the interstice of needing, listening, and acknowledging in situ, in community. Indeed, Emily Legg, building on the work of scholars of indigenous memory and history such as Kimberly Roppolo and Chris Teuton, also asks us to think very materially about how “storytelling as knowledge-making and a way of knowing is not placed within one individual who passes the knowledge down to others. Instead, it is knowledge that exists in a networked state with the role of the community as knowledge producers.”

Generative, kairotic, and recursive, a hashtag is able to resonate as meaningful by virtue of the power vested in the very fact of its appearance, in the rectifying and validating sense of its being the right thing—the right utterance, gesture, hashtag, meme—invoked at the right time for all the right reasons as negative capability is transformed into distributed community action. As Jack Halberstam has framed it, via Moten and Harney’s work on “the undercommons,”

It ends with love, exchange, fellowship. It ends as it begins, in motion, in between various modes of being and belonging, and on the way to new economies of giving, taking, being with and for and it ends with a ride in a Buick Skylark on the way to another place altogether. Surprising, perhaps, after we have engaged dispossession, debt, dislocation and violence. But not surprising when you have
understood that the projects of “fugitive planning and black study” are mostly about reaching out to find connection. (Halberstam, “The Wild Beyond”)

Algebraic, #BlackLivesMatter attempts the broken mathematics of the loving.

< Àse>

We can hear the digitality of #BlackLivesMatter’s political structure in the Ferguson Action Group’s statement regarding their operational rationale, in which they address an emergent political world wherein the technical affordances of social media platforms and tools like text messaging have vastly increased the organizational capacity of people who are geographically separate to engage separate and locally individualized action that nonetheless resonates with and contributes to a common cause:

We came together in Mike Brown’s name, but our roots are also in the flooded streets of New Orleans and the bloodied BART stations of Oakland. We are connected online and in the streets. We are decentralized, but coordinated.

In this structure, again, one’s encounter with a social media transmission, a signal, is also therefore as much an experience of repetition as it is one of discovery; action is played out as sample and remix. When their site manifesto states, “We came together in Mike Brown’s name, but our roots are also in the flooded streets of New Orleans and the bloodied BART stations of Oakland,” the Ferguson Action Group is reminding viewers that the organization’s political work has emerged in response to a series of events scattered across time and space, events that are fundamentally different in their occurrences, but that have occurred equally as consequences of sustained historical violence. The temporal and spatial difference evidenced in the utterance of each event ultimately signifies their commonality, making them recognizable as engaged in loops, samples, and signals, the play of difference and repetition. This sense of repetition also works to eliminate conceptual contradiction from the statement’s ending: “We are connected online and in the streets. We are decentralized, but coordinated.” Or, as Alicia Garza has noted, “Black Lives Matter is an organization and a network. We are a part of the movement, but we are not THE movement.” To use Hardt and Negri’s language, channeling Marcia Chatelain, “The BLM movement is a field of experimentation of new organizational forms that gathers together (sometimes subterranean) democratic tendencies from the past” (12). A diverse range of social media technologies have resolved this structure by enabling networks of temporally and spatially distributed actions that are nonetheless linked and describable via a core metadata, the ubiquity of Black death in America, and the need to transform the irruptive force of this repetition into a history that is actually past. Àse, ashé, axé.
<I yam what I yam>

It might be worthwhile here to take a methodological cue from Ellison’s own decision to frame *Invisible Man*’s symbolic structure around sound and light technologies, which undergirds his novel’s movement between the communicative possibilities of embodiment—gesture, glance, the hand’s flick—and the various technologies used to extend those possibilities. For if we move the term “signal” away from the gestural/physical and over to the digital, we gain insight into how the workings of digital electronics can thematize other kinds of configurations. A digital signal works by translating a text, a transmission, into a series of small formulas. By breaking down the text in this way, it greatly reduces the material quantity of the text. In its replacement of an original, signal compression greatly increases the amount of information that can be transmitted, stored, or shared in any given permutation of the signal. Rather than playback being a matter of amplifying a reproduction, digital playback instead requires decompression and decoding, which also means that representational fidelity is tethered to computational speed, to how much detail from the original can be bloomed or recovered from the compressed signal. “Compression,” here described as a digital phenomenon, can also be expressed, however, as an experience of memory: the worlds of affective recollection that unfold when Marcel Proust’s narrator tastes the madeleine, or the cascade of images and the smile that breaks across the invisible man’s face when, on the streets of a still-unfamiliar Manhattan, he bites into a roasted yam, the recursivity of which catapults him back to his own Southern past and declares, “I yam what I yam.”

</I yam what I yam>

In turning from content to form and then moving to understanding dissemination as a kind of content itself, we can begin to see how signals simultaneously support individual expression while also supporting that discrete expression as a repetition of some other knowing. The power of the signal’s efficacy is located in the flexibility of its signifying, a kind of constant and intense wordplay at the heart of African American signifying traditions, traditions that carry structural similarities to the folksonomic quality of user-generated social media metadata (i.e., “hashtags”). “Folksonomy” is the term Twitter developer Chris Messina adopted in 2007 to imagine and describe the functionality of social media hashtags. In addition to describing a software design that would increase the platform’s usability, the neologism is further conceptually enriched when set alongside Barbara Christian’s foundational description of Black theorizing, what she describes as Black cultural affinity for dynamic ideas:

For people of color have always theorized—but in forms quite different from the Western form of abstract logic. And I am inclined to say that our theorizing
(and I intentionally use the verb rather than the noun) is often in narrative forms, in the stories we create, in riddles and proverbs, in the play with language, since dynamic rather than fixed ideas seem more to our liking. How else have we managed to survive with such spiritedness the assault on our bodies, social institutions, countries, our very humanity? And women, at least the women I grew up around, continuously speculated about the nature of life through pithy language that unmasked the power relations of their world... My folk, in other words, have always been a race for theory—though more in the form of the hieroglyph, a written figure which is both sensual and abstract, both beautiful and communicative.

Hashtags are folksonomic because they are created by users without the guidance of a centralizing structure that underwrites that use. A hashtag’s meaning is made in the moment of its use, even as its communicative power emerges out of the fact of other people’s uses. In other words, to make or to use a hashtag is to participate in a milieu, in the “sensual and abstract” work of generating and engaging with digitally networked hieroglyphics; again what Kelli Moore characterizes as “attending to the pleasure of phonemic awareness” and committing “to the necessary compositional crime of black rhyme.” As a kind of sampling, the temporality of hashtag creation is in the present of user innovation, even as the power of that innovation simultaneously depends on how that use hearkens to a shared understanding: Àṣẹ.

The folksonomic is a kind of linguistic act that can thus be understood as similar to the kind of riff and improvisation attached to urban legend. As Patricia A. Turner reminds us, textual circulation in Black communities has historically been as much about the why, how, and when of dissemination as it is about a text’s isolatable message or denotation. When thinking about texts heavily circulated in Black communities, Turner tells us, it is more useful to look to “what in the texts themselves or in the circumstances of their dissemination gave them life and made African Americans willing to incorporate them into their repertoires,” rather than to imagine that text carries significant meaning beyond the need to transmit it (6). This is not unlike what is most observable about Twitter, particularly Black Twitter, which transacts on cultural codes that historically precede the platform, the Twitter platform having been made an extension of already powerful and already circulating representational habits based in the Black urban legend tradition. Aligning Black Twitter with the Black urban legend tradition is useful because it offers us a way to think about the nature of Black Twitter’s humor and its orientation to political action. Black Twitter is not a different software from “regular Twitter”; however, one could argue that it is used to generate a radically different virtual platform, sustained by tropes common to traditions of African American humor and politics, and participatory in the repetition of what is always already “happening.” For better or for worse, Black Twitter performs and reinscribes an idealized African American epistemological structure that is based in a demonstrated willingness to witness and to
testify to uncomfortable or otherwise unacknowledged truths that shade otherwise familiar objects: it is a kind of knowing continuously remade available to friend and kin, to adopt Johnson’s language again.4 Turner’s work helps us see how the very fact of sampling, much like encoding and compression, itself communicates: Have you seen this? Do you know about this? Repetition itself, hashtag, meme, rave, and rant, signals.

#recursion

That there is something to be apprehended at the edge of utterance also helps illuminate how signals and samples are temporally recursive. Like rememory, a signal informs but also reiterates the subjectivity of the receiver. With you, without you: At the moment of its appearance it is, to use Morrison’s language, “already there” and “waiting for you,” because “you” have come into being through the fact of its arrival. You get it. A signal simultaneously emerges from, is a constitutive part of, and also passes into the person to whom it has been sent. This sense of repetition verifies and validates Relation and contributes to the encoding and subsequent compression of the signal, as whatever is shared is received as yet another example of x. In this way, texts about the present can be experienced with the force of memory, as they are understood as sample data taken from a larger and longer signifying chain: iterative and confirming, not just memory but rememory. Following Moore, a hashtag’s linguistic, spatial, and temporal concatenation works as an invocation into a moment of Relation experienced with the force and power of an incantation: Barbara Christian’s hieroglyph in the moment of its digital and digitizing transmission, the other side of the pause.

</with or without you>

Signals gather individuals into Relation. Samples, meanwhile, validate and reiterate the relation. If the signal powers and is powered by Relation, the sample is its verification, the reminder of the signal’s power and the reinstatiation of the individual as both the producer and consumer of content. The narrative I have relied on has been mostly positive, but it is worthwhile to take a moment to acknowledge some of the uncomfortable connections between mediation, interpellation, and disciplina-
tion. As Jocelyn Edens reminds us, “An interface coerces movements into habits and constrains routines; it extends the capacity of the human body” (qtd. Chukwulozie). In requiring us to train our bodies to its use, an interface also of course extends what bodies can do. But in the case of social media, we must also conceptualize the costs of this increased attentiveness, of this increased capacity to send and receive signals, this increased capacity to ever more effectively produce, share, and accrete. And this concern is not with technology or mediation distancing us from things that are “real.” It is the opposite. Digitality, the affective and technical expression of
the recursive, is both empowering and disempowering, describing the immensely important cultural work of the sample and the remix and the *yasss girl* of Black Twitter, while also describing what it means to live one’s life as subject to the sudden reemergence of the traumatic. The timeline of pain, in the excess of suffering that it catalogs and in the reverberation of that suffering in the present, highlights a traumatic undercurrent to Black life, an undercurrent that can be materialized in personal experience or concretized and then amplified over social media.

#strobe

I am reminded here of a past experience, driving down the highway in the summer of 2015, at some point during the week following the death of Sandra Bland, an African American woman found hanged in her cell following her arrest for a routine traffic violation. The sun was out, and as I drove past the trees and past the buildings, the light on my hands and on the steering wheel had this sort of flashing dappled quality, going light and dark as the sun hit me differently in each moment. I did not notice it at first, even as I felt myself becoming increasingly agitated. The light was causing me to jerk, each flash responded to like a too-loud or startling noise. My physical response was an effect of the shifting light, but it was also of course paranoia, a really particular kind of dread at being pulled over. I could tell myself this because I knew that the flash was just an effect of light coming through the trees as I drove down the highway. But the flash of sun through my windshield, reflected on my arms. the uneven lighting speeding up and slowing down the appearance of my body, reduced me to a stop-motion parody: I experienced my own body as a kind of time-based media, as the flashes focused and froze me, focused and froze me, simultaneously inscribing me, capturing me, transforming me into a play of light, animating me. Sometimes you don’t just get it; sometimes you get got. This is when your body is getting it, with or without you.

In each duration I experienced the light’s inscription as an eruption of dread, as a consummation, the deeply rooted fear of flashing blue lights, interpellation. Algebraic—*Al-Jabr*, the breaking of the bones: my movement across space invites renewed interdiction by the state, the risk of transformation without restoration, the impossible stillness of the surveilled body—what in *Black Fugitivity and the Undercommons*, Moten and Harney frame thusly:

And so it is we remain in the hold, in the break, as if entering again and again the broken world, to trace the visionary company and join it. is contrapuntal island, where we are marooned in search of marronage . . . in (the) study of our sea-born variance, sent by its pre-history into arrivance without arrival, as a poetics of lore, of abnormal articulation, where the relation between joint and flesh is the folded distance of a musical moment that is emphatically, palpably imperceptible and, therefore, difficult to describe. Having survived
degradation the moment becomes a theory of the moment, of the feeling of a presence that is ungraspable in the way that it touches.

If signals might be understood as protection, as a way of transmitting important information under surveillance, then this is the call, the hail, the voice of the law feared at every turn. The play of light on my surface was experienced as an emergence from deep below. Irruption. #SayHerName.

Strobes interrupt continuity, breaking continuous surfaces down into pieces and parts, a flipbook animation moving too slowly, the herky-jerky grotesquerie of Tod Clifton’s Sambo doll (Ellison, 339). As I was driving down the highway I was not doing anything wrong. In fact I remember thinking — I’m not doing anything wrong — and then immediately hearing that as an echo of myself in a terrifying future, blandly saying a thing that would not matter in the face of state terror. In this moment I was haunted by the recent news of other people’s deaths, people with whom I share a similar position in a larger algorithmic structure, a racialized structure that continually miscalculates my meaning via a computational site to which I do not have access, but out of which emerges my value. My circumstances can quickly and at any moment be made to reiterate a racial past that is not of my discrete experience, but that can arrive in my present at will. This is not the world of causality; this is the language of ghosts, haunting, and simulation, sublimated in my participation in social media, but with that participation also supporting further irruption. As Web Smith frames it, “Twitter’s problem is its ability to trigger us. Every death reminds us that, even if we’re perfect, we may die today.” The arrangement of every line. Each day, a new hashtag.

This subject who is me, who looks, reads, glances, and clicks, is also an algorithmically reconstituted self, a computationalized self built out of those choices, with values added in the dark and reintroduced to me as an outcome, a model, an idea of me remastered as an aesthetic experience of a digital platform. What I would refer to as myself is always at a distance from these computational figurations, even as each figuration can claim a kind of technical, data-supported fidelity. But because the processes through which that figure has been constituted are obscured, black boxed, my experience of that figuration is also an experience of catching a glimpse of myself as an expression of some other system’s needs and desires: what Du Bois describes as double consciousness and what Moten describes as the nonequivalence of personhood (the figure, the social) and subjectivity. Even as I would like to avoid conceptualizing the Black and the digital only in metaphorical terms, it is important to note that algorithmic representation is indeed always figurative in the most basic sense. That which goes in is not that which comes out. Against this, then, is the ongoing irruption, the constant interruptive rearrivals of Black identity, which
I read as rendering a digitized human subjectivity that hopes to slip through the system with its compressions intact, a glitch in the machine. It is a subjectivity constantly under pressure from an unnamable past that itself without notice emerges into the present and undoes the present, but in so doing “traces the visionary company.” This too, then, is the work of social media, as it works through us and against us, with us and without us.

</àse>

NOTES

1. In *Haunting and Displacement*, I note, “The problem is not that this memory has agency, is waiting for you, but that there was in fact no you prior to this encounter. What at first seems a slip between time and place is thus revealed as a displacement, as you are made to know that that which constitutes you comes from elsewhere, and that it will come with or without your consent. It is there, waiting for you because 'you,’ as the subject of this narrative, have only come into being at the moment of this encounter. What Morrison writes as a single-layered phenomenon—a narrative of encounter: you are walking along and bump into something—is thus revealed as multilayered, multidimensional: rememory is actually a story of a self unselfconsciously accepting the self in its arrival from another time and from another place. The bump does not precipitate movement back through time; it precipitates an unfolding, a movement back into the self and out again. However, because the first inward turn is largely unconscious, it is experienced as a repetition rather than as an emergence”(8).

2. In *Invisible Man*, the protagonist’s failure to respond also reinforces his status as an intraracial outsider, in the sense that his simultaneous hubris and naïveté drive him to take occurrences as interpretable at face value, even as he is left literally staring at Brockway while the signal unsuccessfully demands his attention. Indeed, much of the plot of *Invisible Man’s* opening chapters is driven by its protagonist’s incapacity to read signs and signals, an inability that comes to stand in for his larger incapacity to understand or find shelter in Black communities. We are never told explicitly why the protagonist cannot seem to catch on, to “get it,” though we are given hints that, in choosing one kind of knowledge system over others, particularly didactic book learning over environmental absorption, embeddedness, milieu, he repeatedly misses opportunities to benefit from other people’s experiences.

3. Jessica Johnson has also evoked the crossroads shape of the hashtag in thinking about the kinds of transportations they make possible. In *Black Haunts in the Anthropocene*, I use the traditional Santería/Candomblé understanding that there are 256 paths or avatars to Esu as an occasion for thinking about computers, hardware, and loss. It is said that, in the New World context, all the paths did not survive the journey across the ocean.

4. To be clear, Black Twitter is not about the racial blackness of its participants; it is about its participants’ capacity to uphold and reproduce a set of sensibilities. Like
all samples, Black Twitter memes and hashtags speak to common experiences (real or claimed) and sometimes rely on nostalgia in place of actual shared pasts. It is important that the senses and boundaries of what gets talked about as Black racial identity are continually evolving: this kind of work—contestation, recognition, and struggle—is also germane to Black Twitter.

BIBLIOGRAPHY


