You Can't Count Your Way Out of This

Fugitive Computing and Practices of Care

by Romi Ron Morrison

This is not an act of recovery to assure you all that Black people have indeed done some shit with numbers, nor is this a fetishizing of quilts as computing objects, though they are. It is an argument for forms of computation that subtend "the beauty of black ordinary, the beauty that resides in and animates the determination to live free, the beauty that propels the experiments in living otherwise" — embedded in technologies of the living, connected to care work, to relation, to difference, and to contention.

This article is an abridged version of "Voluminous Disintegration: A Future History of Black Computational Thought," forthcoming in *Digital Humanities Quarterly.*

Excerpt from "Wayward Lives, Beautiful Experiments," Saidiya Hartman.

We are in a moment of radical reimagining and visceral reconnection. Caught between two worlds, we are catching glimpses of the new one in the fall of the old. Built on the longstanding rigorous work of Ruth Wilson Gilmore, Mariame Kaba, Andrea Smith, INCITE! Women of Color Against Violence, and Angela Davis, amongst many many more, known and unknown, abolition has announced itself within the popular imagination. We are seeing abolitionist organizing in the flourishing of public acts of rebellion, mutual aid projects, community accountability practices, transformative justice trainings, people gathering everyday to block evictions, calling in organizers, and hosting popular education workshops beyond the university. This organizing can also be seen in the connections made between surveillance technologies and carcerality. Increasingly, pressure is being placed on the ban of facial recognition technology as well as of big data itself.

Embedded in these calls is a politics of refusal. To refuse the grammar of the present order. To come together in all the ways that are sought to be exorcised, messy, spilling, and raucous.

Translated from Michel Foucault's term, "dispositif", in his 1977 interview "Confessions of the Flesh." The "apparatus" refers to the institutional, administrative, and physical structures through which power relations are formalized.

Based in Denise Ferreira da Silva's piece, "Toward a Black Feminist Poethic." She uses poethics to describe a speculative manner of thought to think the world differently, beyond the trappings of linear rationality that underpin Eurocentric colonization.

It is the time to ask: Why does anti-Blackness seem to perpetually overdetermine and saturate the operating system regardless of who is programming it? How do we begin to move to forms of critique and resistance that relinquish a certain focus on the apparatus and begin to disassemble the episteme, that seemingly transparent foe that perpetuates the endless production of violent techne? How might this make desirable the pursuits of situating computation elsewhere and towards a poethic of endured proximity?

Endured proximity refuses imaginations of the world in which calculable measurement is the only relationship between things. Endured proximity pushes us to meaningfully engage difference as a relationship that we are entangled within. Only by doing this will contemporary flights of liberation be imaginable.

Introduced in Foucault's text, *The Order of Things*, *episteme* comes to mean the unconscious beliefs that structure scientific knowledge in a particular time and place.

As used in Martin Heidegger's *The Question Concerning Technology*. Heidegger uses *techne* to mean a practice of revealing or bringing forth. It is connected to making not just objects but knowledge and discourse. This differs from common understandings of technology as a tool or instrument.

I look for this endured proximity through a reading of the Freedom Quilts, a clandestine system of mapping escape routes for enslaved Black people, as a vital form of computation. Quilts were constructed according to a technical protocol of sewn symbols, stitching patterns, and tied knots. This quilt code includes ten primary patterns and a number of secondary patterns. Each pattern had two meanings: signaling when to prepare to escape and giving clues to indicate safe routes of passage. After leaving the plantation, enslaved people would encounter quilts bearing single patterns left in public to air. Following these codes, they would know when to gather the tools they needed for the coming journey, the time to escape from the plantation, ways to navigate hundreds of miles to destinations in the North, how to calculate mileage between safe houses, local topography, places to find fresh clothes and shelter, and practices for recognizing other confidants.

Knowledge thrives through circulation and exchange. It is shared, encoded and stored through social relationships. Data likewise is organized to be exchanged and read by another person or machine, it also thrives through circulation and is dependent on its mode of transmission. Though data is discrete, it only abstractly represents phenomena far more continuous and entangled. It requires work to attain such distinction. Capturing, cleaning, and formatting are not natural processes but demand physical, emotional, and intellectual labor. Therefore, data is built upon embedded social relations. It is a relation between semblances of ourselves and how we engage change.

Created in quilting bees on plantations, the Freedom Quilts bring this social relationship to the forefront. Quilting bees were collective circles of primarily women and some men that sat together and constructed quilts in collaboration.

Because these quilts were often sourced from various spare pieces of fabric, they were piecemealed and required numerous people to collect and plan each quilt. Quilting bees were social spaces and sites of convergence, as they were vital stops along the plantation grapevine.

Quilting bees became important gatherings where enslaved people "were able to compile facts regarding geography, landmarks, places to avoid, obscure trails, mileage, and the locations of safe places where food and rest were waiting... Many escaping slaves knew where to go and how to get there. Former runaways shared their own tactics and routes of escape. Most early escape attempts were individual efforts by slaves, not part of any organized cooperative ventures headed by Northern abolitionists."

J.Tobin, R. Dobard, *Hidden in Plain View: A Secret Story of Quilts and the Underground Railroad*. (2000). First Anchor Books, New York, NY, p 74.
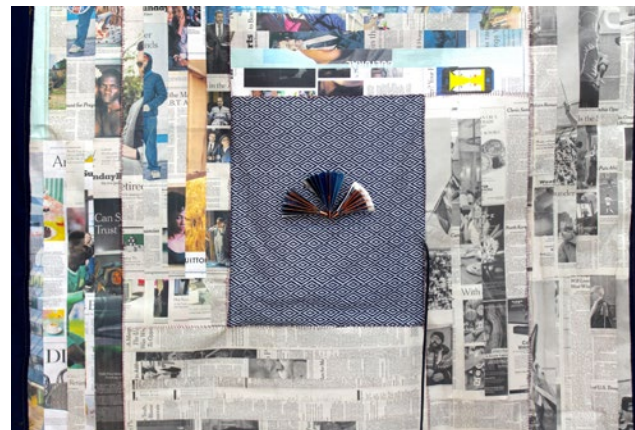
As Tobin and Dobard document, sites such as quilting bees became gathering spaces through which communication between free Black people in the North, white abolitionists, and the enslaved took place across numerous plantations and regions. Black peoples before capture, from various geographic, historical, and cultural sites, were not fixed in their ultimate difference upon which the only mediation could be found through measurement. Instead, enslaved Africans held onto their cultural memories and combined them with others stolen from their lands to create new creolized, semiotic systems. This meant working within the entanglements of difference to communicate with each other, circulate knowledge, and to build wholly different cultural systems within the diaspora. This is how the Freedom Quilts were made, as a vital form of Black computational practice that forces us to rethink what computing can be, when freed from its dependence on colonial pursuits of managing bodies, spaces, and resources.
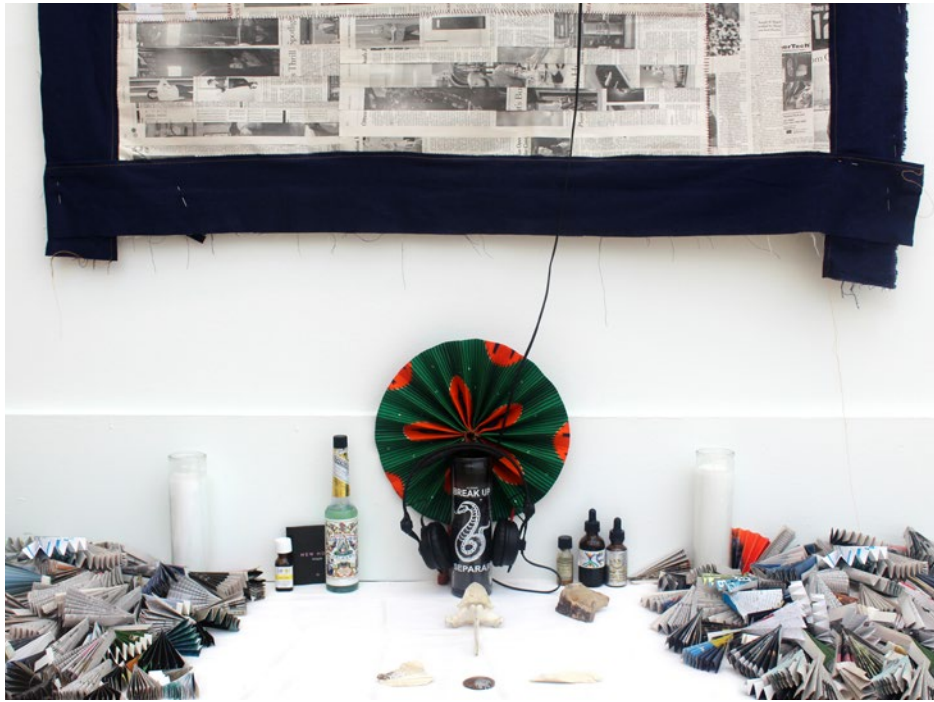
When we carve out time and space to pay homage to an aspect of life, we are engaging in a ritual. *Rituals of Black Fugitivity: Protection* is a mixed media sound installation that includes a large interactive quilt made of repurposed newspaper, fabric, and conductive thread. The quilt is stitched from numerous rectangular strips of overlapping and fragmented newsprint in the symbol of the Log Cabin. Within the fugitive practices of the Freedom Quilts, the Log Cabin was a code used to signify a space of sanctuary, or rest, within the violent landscape of Plantation Capitalism. *Rituals* stages a scene of stolen time by which Black people carve (im)possible moments of freedom through ritual practice. This scene falls out of linear progressive time and compresses space–time, folding the past into the future, where ritual meets technology, and thread meets circuit. At the center of the quilt are three folded paper fans triggered by touch that play a series of sound compositions detailing my own rituals for daily protection.

By using the term "Plantation Capitalism," I am referencing Clyde Woods' work in *Development Arrested: The Blues and Plantation Power in the Mississippi Delta*. Here, Woods argues that the Atlantic Slave Trade is a pillar for the origins of capitalism due to the totalizing control over land, labor, people, finance, and information flow that the plantation gave rise to.

Sound works as an invitation, and voice finds dialogue within the interface of the quilt. By listening to my rituals for protection it asks you to consider your own. This installation is a database that requires us to step into it, it is a space, a carved respite. It is not important if our experiences are commensurable or equivalent, they need not be measured, the interoperability of the exchange is partial; what is important is that we are engaged in a relation. The datum is not separate from my body, or the accrued practices of imagination and rebellion that my ancestors continue to carry. This relation is one that we contend with through maintaining an endured proximity outside of measure. This means that as we measure and collect data about the external world, we cannot continue to think of ourselves as transparent or inconsequential in our relationship to what is being indexed. Instead we must contend with our relationship to the index, to see ourselves in the Black spaces of its stolen time, and in relation to fugitive knowledge. It suspends the question of technology from being answered, and leaves open room for ritual techne to wander.

The question of technology: technology is suspended, or left open as a question without a definitive answer.

Here the digital is returned to the digit, to the hand, to haptics, and texture, and textiles, to the process of making through material and proximal relations to each other, to making through endured engagements with difference. My engagements with fugitive computation are indebted to understanding this natural disorder, this turn to ensuring a future through fugitive acts taken now. To move beyond the paralysis of precarity, preparing a new world in the shadows of the old.