Thomas F. DeFrantz • Philipa Rothfield
Editors

Choreography and Corporeality

RELAY in Motion

Contents

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Afrofuturist Remains: A Speculative Rendering of Social Dance Futures v2.0

Thomas F. DeFrantz

This essay offers speculative rendering of black social dance as a site of creative future recovery that might operate outside of current structures of racial understandings. In 2016, black social dances materialise as spectacular manifestations of both youthful innovation within, as well as wilful resistance to, narratives of state-sponsored and generationally activated social controls. These dances offer gestures of musical and physical willfulness that trace routes of intellectual, social, and desirous exchange. An Afrofuturist rendering of black social dance might reconstitute aesthetic motion as a centre of a willingness to not know what could be termed impossible, by way of dances cast as gestures against a socially proscribed 'directed doing'. This dancing without obvious intention asserts black presence amid race-based disavowal.

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1

My oldest brother had a birthday party recently. He shares a birthday with Abraham Lincoln, the United States President who issued the Emancipation Proclamation into law, thereby altering the legislative course of black creativity and dance. One way to narrate emancipation might take into account the concept of freedom as a thing bestowed from a (white) position of corporate power that enables movements across landscapes to seek an elusive American joy. I'm thinking of this emancipation and its effect in terms of allowing black social dance to emerge by legislating its possibility across territories, and making legal space for the enlargement of a social circle. The Emancipation Proclamation predicted that Congo Square, the site of dance that occupied a particular place in New Orleans for enslaved people to dance and share song in the nineteenth century, might now be possible anywhere in the country.[1]

My family decided to surprise my brother by showing up from across the country on February 12 to his house in Indianapolis Indiana—the house that I grew up in. The house is where I danced as a little boy; drawing choreography charts with stick figures, convincing my friends to roll around in the grass with me this way or that to see which felt better; hunting in the attic for some evidence of my parents' childhoods. As a child, I loved spending time in these attic archives, rummaging through boxes and imagining dances that my parents and my oldest brother and sister had done before I was born.

The house isn't huge or tiny. It does have space for dancing, especially in its long, narrow, living room. My sister-in-law hired a DJ to orchestrate the musical offerings and be responsible for the flow of dance throughout the evening. About 75 people came to the party. I knew maybe 20 of these: the family and extended family. The others were friends of my brother and their children and grandchildren; parishioners from my brother's church; people from his work; his real estate and insurance clients. As soon as the DJ started offering up sound, many of us danced. Middle-aged, elders, teenagers, children, and infants took turns on the floor lined by a mantle and a non-working fireplace on one side and a long sofa crowded with onlookers and witnesses on the other. The narrow space for dancing could accommodate maybe eight people at a time in the myriad iterations of 'slide' dances summoned by electronic call: the cha-cha slide, the salsa slide, the electric slide. My sister-in-law and her friends favoured these dances that offer instruction as they unfold. Dance instruction songs arrive

within fertile and secure structures of engagement in African American communities; according to historians, this genre of dance music predates the civil war, Emancipation, and recorded music to fulfil a trajectory without seeming end.[2]

The evening went along. We talked to each other about current adventures and future ambitions, and rotated through Chicago-style stepping, open-form dancing, and movements half-remembered from social dances no longer in fashion. Later, mostly family filled the living room, and after the birthday speech of thanks to all for coming, a spontaneous circle emerged. 'Cousin M in the house' the cry rose, 'cousin M in the house,' and surprised my nephew M. M is a serious, yet always smiling, 15-year-old who recently designed a business leasing healthy-snack concession machines to a public school in the Hayward, California school district where he lives. Handsome and tall, M is a church-going bodybuilder who plays basketball in two different leagues, and someone I've never ever seen dance.

M's entire physique perked up at the challenge of the call. And the call to dance is a challenge; a reminder to participate in the social capacity of black creativity through public-private dance within the circle. His smile stiffened a bit as the calls grew in volume, 'Cousin M in the house, cousin M in the house.' I wondered what would happen, and joined into the chant. 'Cousin M in the house.' M launched himself toward the centre of the circle, and with no seeming effort, offered up a rhythmically astute and compelling version of the dance *du jour*, the Dougie. Slicking back imaginary hair, or arms forward, as if driving a car; popping his knees against the rhythms of sideward sways of his torso; dropping his shoulders and neck, tilting, smiling, collected, and complicated. He danced like a jock, subtle yet energetic, with intention and focus. A cheer rose up, and we sent celebratory energy toward him, crossing into the circle, enjoying a surprise visit of engaged physicality and identity-laden dance. He danced, and we all knew him differently because of it.

A few calls later, attention turned to 'Uncle Tommy in the house' and I offered a version of a voguing deathdrop—without the death-defying part; it was probably more of a lean down to the ground. We dispatched various siblings, cousins, nieces and nephews in this manner, until the DJ changed the beat to something more up-tempo that cleared the circle for the youngest dancers to continue. And as we witnessed, they went into the 'stanky leg' and even a little 'Crank Dat, Souljah Boy'. These dances involved my niece, and the children of some friends, all conjuring verbatim versions of the official music videos for the associated songs.

Suddenly, my niece called out, 'Let's do Poison!' Now, 'Poison' was a briefly popular hit for the recording group Bell, Biv, Devoe from the 1990s that emerged from an invented (corporate) 'New Jack Swing' sound, with a patently electronic drum-machine back beat, and a groovy deep bass line. It's a silly song, often lampooned, but one that is very easy to dance to. An agreement flourished, and the DJ—whose name I never learned— found the track and dropped the beat. After some tentative movement, everyone but my niece gave up and retreated from the dance.

Now this is surely the moment when the anecdote might end, after some generous group communion in movement, and some happy, unexpected surprises on the dance floor. But my niece would not be deterred by our rickety memory. She pulled out her laptop, fired up YouTube, and located the music video. 'Now, how did that step go?' she asked, scrolling through the video to the dancing parts, which are actually rather few in this particular video.[3] She cried, 'Look, look, that's the step! C'mon!' And so she danced, gathering a curious adolescent or two by her side to do the aerobic, pumping 'Poison' steps of days gone by.

For me, the unexpected reference to the music video signalled a shift in the ways that technologies of dance circulate archival information, and how that information may be deployed. We've long thought of music videos—whether the shiny corporate versions, or the suddenly famous homemade YouTube versions—as 'preferred iterations' of popular music that provide a secure visual narrative to accompany the very portable, mechanically reproduced musical invention.[4] But the social shift to music video as authoritative document of authentic gesture bears scrutiny. In this anecdote, we travel from the pre-emancipation dance instruction song, which in its earliest forms involved a caller who demonstrated the preferred dance movements to the dancing group; leap-frog to the simple and ubiquitous line dance instruction songs, that match movement to shifts in musical accompaniment in phrases that are easily learned quickly by groups of dancers in live social circumstances; move to social dances like the Dougie or even Souljah Boy, that are likely seen first through media in small groups or in private and then adapted for social exchange; and finally land in an immediately mediated party space that recovers bits of dances in specified orderings to be performed as they were once, somehow intact as moving image. As if they were video games that require participation, Poison, or Single Ladies, or Thriller, become touchstones of dance communication and physical ability; entirely mediated spectacles corporealised in a constantly reforming socialscape. The incorporation of

the music video into the birthday party signals an Afrofuturist remains. I mean, it's not as though we needed the video to know how to dance with each other, is it?

The story of my brother's birthday party and the many detours of memory and affiliation bound up with its telling demonstrate how social dance might be imbricated within black social life. I'm curious about the ways in which that social life recurs through the dance itself, and how its memory and narration might be mobilised toward an imagining of black futurity. In the context of the United States, so much of black social life continues to be bounded by white supremacist action, from police killings and overwrought scrutiny of black lives, to the devaluation of black modes of expression outside of the realms of misogynistic, homophobic iterations of popular culture. And yet, social circulations are generated through dance, and possibilities emerge from the engagement of aesthetic gesture in these exchanges. My stories recursively remind me that social dance in these sorts of private settings *matters,* and that today's account of the birthday party has an analogue from 20 years ago, and, of course, 20 years hence. These refashioned circulations of the social in social dance, at the birthday party, convince me to reimagine Afrofuturist remains.

2

We go back to imagine what could be next. This is a 'what if' sort of proposition, a riff on alternative alignments of capital and dance-making; the applied science of the physical embedded within the social; a doing enlivened by a being. Dancing situated as a local present that animates memories of deep compassion. To me, dance is often an act of compassion, a moving into an unknown space that can be enlivened by a generosity of memory. Africanist dance is a trust, at once physical and communal; it has to be recognised to be circulated, and its traces exceed its manifold emergences for dancers and witnesses alike. These lingering allusions to an inevitable social context bind dance to its presence and presents; its here and now. Afrofuturist allusions imagine ahead, toward an unknowable circumstance that may involve untested applications of science in technologies not yet developed.

In the Afrofuture, dance arrives as a memory of something personal and impossible; an emancipated dance of communion that can be entirely mediated and digitally exchanged. This is the dance that most everyone can engage somehow; the dance of the family transmitted anew. This

eternally forward-looking dance accommodates new technologies—the LP, the CD, the video game, the hologram—to replenish communication among people. The Afrofuturist remains are pre-, pure- and post-human iterations of corporeal connectivity: dance born of a belief in the social essence of creativity.

Typically, Afrofuturism is narrated in terms of speculative science fiction laden with fantasy imagery of aliens and cyborgs; Funkadelic music and its progeny, the electronic, vocoded soundings of a digitised black soul; festooned costuming that references other-worldly space-travelling indigenous populations; and the ironic implications of dense cultural criticism projecting an impossible future rife with black corporealities cognisant of middle passages. Irony is surely a key component of how Afrofuturism achieves social traction. Common assumptions surrounding a future/presence of blackness might assume an assimilation that could render the black unrecognisable; a hue among many without specific cultural imperatives. Afrofuturism, though, assumes a tangible black affect present in an entirely mediated future; not a future without race, though one with an abeyance of racism; not a future without black ministries, though one with a release from the primitive-naive analyses consistently associated with the black church; not a future without black subjectivity, but one that evades the inevitable yoke of subaltern status. Instead, it is a future of queer, trans- and hetero-sexual black women engaged with the fabrication and deployment of technologies. But more than this; black women of all ages engaged with these technologies. Geeks, glamour-pusses, and 'round the way girls' alike. Athletes, nerds, shy boys, and wanna-be bangers, too. Grandparents, toddlers, middle-aged brothers on the cusp of senior status. How can we people—the drylongso[5]—project ourselves into an Afrofuture with any vestige of the complexity that our dancing selves routinely engage?

British theorist Kodwo Eshun and American artist DJ Spooky (Paul Miller) narrate the musical in Afrofuturism as breakbeat science, or rhythm science, which suggests the alignment of so-called hard scientific analyses—beats per minute, tiny differences in particular technologies of musical production, engagements with software and hardware, histories of invention and product creation—with the undeniably soft esoteric spaces of playful literary translation.[6] As a concept, breakbeat science legitimises Africanist rhythmicity to post-Enlightenment doctrines of value. In writings, recorded explorations, and performances, breakbeat or rhythm science authors fast-forward to a somewhat obscure space where concepts

of affect are defined by their digital coding, and still allowed to be mysteriously fun.

Cultural historian Alondra Nelson opened a productive intellectual space to consider Afrofuturism when she edited an important issue of *Social Text*, in which various authors explored the fact of black people living with tools of technology; how artists identify with Afrofuturism in order to resist the label of 'nerd'; and the ways that an emergent Afrofuturism could counter the negative ontological placement of blackness in Western modernity.[7] Literary theorist Alexander Weheliye is especially eloquent in this latter motive, when he notes that 'inscriptions of humanity in black culture provide particular performances of the human—singularities that always incorporate their own multiplicities'.[8] Weheliye notes that the performance of the human in black literature and music can mark 'the boundaries and limitations of the human itself'—a capacity bound up in histories of capital, captivity, and labour. Drawing on black performance, Afrofuturists continually remark the boundaries of queer, freedom, and individuality within a group dynamic. This is because Afrofuturists have to refer to the group from which they teleport forward, even if only to productively disidentify.

3

James Brown opened artistic space bound up with Afrofuturism in his many performances that predicted the inevitability of funk.[9] Brown's astonishing resourcefulness as a bandleader and dancer established terms of engagement with creative ritual and vernacular excellence. Brown's dancing became classic Afrofunk as he honed it in repetitions that confirmed a future within articulated dances of the everyday. This section of the essay refers to Brown as my brother, in the appellation that confirms black kinship across ethnicity, class, or geography.

My Brother, the Dance Master

My brother is a better dancer than I. My brother can call down the spirits, he can raise up the haints. He can focus his energy *just so* and make you see the impossibility of rhythm. Beats that don't really exist, but show up just in time to be on the ONE.

When my brother dances, crowds gather. They help him along, because that's what we do as an audience; we help the performer. But he doesn't

need any help; he can dance. Somebody told me that my brother was a boxer, and a sprinter, and that's why he's such a good dancer. That may be true, but I don't think it matters. When he dances, we don't care how he trained. We want to be in the presence of the thing he does. His performance is full. It shifts time. It falls back and reaches forward.

My uncle had the lindy hop. When he danced, he had a partner, and they took to the floor in unruly accord; pushing against boundaries of rhythm as a unit; never agreeing with the musicians about melody or phrase. Their dance was a race against time; a challenge between them and the musicians to see who could go faster and still keep sight of the One. Watching my uncle taught me something about speed and possibility. He danced to move the future, to bring it closer, or maybe to throw himself and his partner there already. His dance was so fast!

My brother moves quickly, but his dance isn't about speed. You can't be funky ahead of the beat; you would have to back phrase for that. Back phrasing is one of the great innovations of African American performance, and when dancers do it, and do it well—you just didn't know such a thing was possible. See, back phrasing in music—we get. That's what the gospel choir does when it sits back behind the three, waiting for the Spirit to arrive, laying the groundwork, making room between the beats for the breath to fill it in. But dancers don't back phrase all that often. I mean, to back phrase movement, you have to be able to understand the futurity of song. You have to know there's going to be a 'one' that you can dance around—dance behind—or you wouldn't want to bother. I mean, if you're gonna bugaloo behind the beat—and my brother loved to do that move—you have to know where the beat *really* is to get behind it. Now, most dancers get ahead of themselves, in a hurry to show off how much they can do inside the four. Lindy hop, Charleston, whacking, running man, hammer time—these forms pursue time in an effort to obliterate patience. Like my uncle's dance.

But my brother is after something else. He wants the swing and swagger punctuated by an adjustable insistent pulse, a pull back away from the front that moves to the rear. So many of his dances pull back—working centripetal forces winding inward toward the beat without stopping at it. His dances turn in on themselves, stutter over their own statements, blur architecture through arrhythmical popping back. Snapping back, like bad hair. Bad hair. Superbad hair, coiled so tight you might miss the strike until after it has already slapped you down. These are dances of submerged power, covered by cool, with the occasional punch thrown in lest you

forget whence it came. Or what it can do. Knock you down while the band plays on. Work around the beat; work around. Dances that are subtle in their vigour.

You see, dance is memory in direct action. Dance is both a reminder of what was, and who was, when, and a harbinger of what can be. When we dance, we put action to impulse; we do. Dance can be smart or stupid, but it is still something that is done in its moment, made in its emergence. And when you're dancing, or watching my brother dance well—you start to remember what it is to match breath to thought and desire.

Dance is, after all, a great barometer of possibilities for social movements. Social movements are built in relation to the group in purposeful accord, in my family, that means rhythmic accord and some communal pleasure mixed up in the work of protest. We can 'fight the power' and do the bugaloo at the same time; it's all good. Some of our dances are actually transcripts of resistance, like the parody embedded within the cakewalk or the impossibility of the aerial steps of the lindy hop; the unlikely freezes of b-boy battles. Some of the dances are just fun, and that's okay; revolutions need to be fun for the folks and we have to dance along the way. Why else would we have a funky chicken or a rubberlegs/whirlygig? But we sure love our Electric Slide, our Eagle Rock, our Madison, our Kid 'n Play. We like to do it all together, all in the group, at once. When we dance together we consecrate possibilities of our group; we acknowledge that our action can produce change.

But sometimes I get tired and have to come off the floor. Sometimes I don't have the dance to make; the fire in the belly ebbs, and the beat dims. Then, someone else has to dance; someone else has to dance for us. We need to witness as someone else makes the spirit visible; someone else brings the cross-rhythm to the fore. Someone who can focus and channel, align, arrange, conduct, construct, predict, and mis-step. Miss the step sometimes so we can see the effort and enjoy the success. Dig in, push and find a lost movement, the thing beyond the tired. Demonstrate or encourage us by way of example. Show us how it's done. Bring us back to life by doing the work. Doing the work. Doing the work.

Now me? I don't dance into the trance too often, even though I've read about that in the diaspora, traditions where the dance produces itself over time, to move the dancers through time. Into the spirit house. Well, maybe I do know something about it—I do dance House—but I also know it's something I can only get to sometimes. My brother is more devout than I. He runs the sanctuary. He falls under to rise over, he slips

into the darkness. What amazes is that he can do it in the glare of the spotlight, with dozens, hundreds, or thousands of us watching. Maybe our looking inspires, but I don't know. I think of our gaze as scrutiny like surveillance that must be manipulated to be endured. I mean, it's one thing to dance in order to revive the flagging spirit, but something else again to dance because others demand it of you. Got to do something to rechannel the gaze from scrutiny into wonder. Make it theatre. My brother sure knows how well enough. Many of his slips into a paralysis of motional excess are staged, simulacra of the dance in the trance. Faintings borrowed from the spirit house for the popular stage. But then, maybe they're real enough. After all, how many times did he fall? And then, doesn't he really fall? I mean, *really* fall? Sometimes he even screams. And that sound lights up the hairs of my eyebrows, surprising me with the current of energy, jump-starting rhythm.

My brother is a dancing master. Like those before him with that status, he shows us what to do, and how to do it so that it can mean. He shows us soul as a capacity; a passion, an insight. A professional soul man. He can mobilise the nation—this is the real nation time—through his moves. It's something that men do; this 'leading us all' thing, because in my family, that sort of sacrificial stance is supposed to show how to 'take the first hit'. I don't mind this, just so it doesn't mean that the only way to move with authority is in the front. Yes, courageous men are dance masters, but everyone else is in there sharing the beat and exploring its shape. And maybe we don't need to master the dance so much as find its flow. And see what it tells us.

I have another brother. He doesn't dance so much, my other brother. For a while he was into music and worked as a DJ, playing for weddings and what not. But then he stopped. He works for a bank. My other brother has a son, M. He's shown me a step or two. He's a very good dancer. Like his uncle, my brother.

4

Eshun notes that Afrofuturism confirms upon Africans in diaspora 'the right to belong to the Enlightenment project, thus creating an urgent need to demonstrate a substantive historical presence'.[10] The Afrofuturist impulse needs histories to stabilise its ambitions. Within the context of the United States, those histories have been written in grand achievements by trailblazers, or, more generally, as stories of lack, neglect, and degradation.

It's no secret that when we say 'race and technology' in the USA, we slip into the coded language of 'black and white'. Race is black; technology, white. This assumption surrounds conversations about the 'digital divide' that separates white households and their more privileged access to broadband technologies from black and latino households. The divide keeps people of colour separate from twenty-first-century technologies of connectivity; always at a disadvantage to the general terms of access enjoyed by others. Race, in these conversations, stands in for black disadvantage.

Race and technology are at the heart of Afrofuturist explorations. Race is reconceived from an indicator of black lack to point toward the black roots of aesthetic resource. A large part of the forward-leaning nostalgia for an Afrofuture involves a nagging desire for more people of colour to have access to the technologies that might enhance black life in the twenty-second century. The Afrofuture suggests sites where black geeks and programming innovators create methods for other black people to recognise themselves among digital signalling. This recognition involves innovations that expand representations of black social dance as they might be connected to everyday dances that black people engage. Contemporary dance film, often discovered as examples of music videos, offer two-dimensional examples of Afrofuturist dance. The striking collaborations of Afro-electronic composer Flying Lotus with young dancers demonstrate nearly unimaginable gestures of dance. In 'Never Catch Me', street dance artist Storyboard P twists and pulls his body through slinking, staccato gestures of elastic resilience, gliding and floating through a concrete landscape.[11] He contorts himself across a row of motionless, sentinel-like witnesses, who watch, unblinking, as he bends himself backwards into a car through its open window. Storyboard P's unique artistry references black social dance, but extends its possibilities toward a singular type of dance. Moving in reference to the future-retro sounds of Flying Lotus, Storyboard P becomes a harbinger of dances-to-come by way of his otherworldly gestures and blankly odd rhythmic phrasing.

Storyboard is one Afrofuturist artist among many working at the site of mediated performance. Recently, Michael Jackson and Tupac Shakur have each been revived as dancing holograms in mass musical concerts.[12] Their gestures and dances constitute visual remains of capitalism's advance against black lives, available again now to those who saw them when they lived. Those who never saw them alive experience them as they might see Storyboard P, on a screen, mediated, and as a reference to the preferred black dancer: cold, without smell, unable to physically respond or

to intellectually engage. Their dance is proscribed by their mediation as an endlessly repeatable loop of digital code.

When journalist Marc Dery coined the term 'Afrofuturism' he noted that black futures were already in creative play in various idioms—graffiti, literature, beat-making, rapping, music-making.[13] Africanist modes of performance *sampled*, at their very essence, and these modes prefigured methods of adaptation like code hacking because they are already built around dissident strategies of analysis, manipulation, and improvisation. Africanist expression manipulates data to create unexpected aesthetic stances that will not deny black presence.

The Afrofuturist space shimmers in anticipation of a future always just beyond imagination. Afrofuturists demonstrate responsibility 'towards the not-yet, towards becoming'[14] to create aspirational space that speaks to social ambitions enlivened by artmaking practice. This may be something like the queer utopia that theorist José Esteban Muñoz[15] predicts, one that is always out of reach, in part because its value lies in its pursuit. Muñoz wonders about queerness as horizon, or queerness as an ideality; a horizon imbued with potentiality. Queerness as a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel 'beyond the quagmire of the present'. Like Afrofuturist performance, Muñoz's queer futurity imagines itself ahead toward possibility.

But Muñoz's queer dance is 'hard to catch', while Afrofuturist performance arrives emphatically present and unavoidable. It creates archive in its most spectacular manifestations, leaving remains as provocative as its fantasy-laden imagery, but also in its social dances engaged by children and grandparents imagining forward by re-membering older dances. Pace Schneider,[16] its remains in terms of *body* are processes and relationships; its values are created in the emergent archive of dance, and that archive tilts continually forward by referencing its past accumulations and improvising on their contents.

Speculation is an economic approach to building wealth based on analysis, conjecture, and risk. Afrofuturism participates in a speculative economics of black creativity that exceeds expectations of its disciplines or its standards. It surprises by its implication of the everyday within the technologically inflected future of black life. It imagines black corporealities as mainstream in futuristic iterations; it speaks of black lives as rich in nuance and availability. Afrofuturism deploys strategies to reflect on past actions and histories as we imagine new modes of computation and performative interactivity. In the Afrofuturist space, previous social exchanges are con-

tinuously referenced, in the service of a black pause. A black pause, where Afrofuturist remains reach multidirectionally, aligning both a particular and a situated possibility for social, familial, communal, technological, and of course, corporeal presence. A black pause that allows us to consider the impossible objects of social dance and, most importantly, an impossible, unalienated black subject in motion.

Notes

1. "NOLA History: Congo Square and the Roots of New Orleans Music."
2. Banes and Szwed, "From 'Messin'Around' to 'Funky Western Civilization': The Rise and Fall of Dance Instruction Songs."
3. "Bel Biv Devoe, 'Poison.'"
4. Rose, *Black Noise: Rap Music and Black Culture in Contemporary America*.
5. Gwaltney, *Drylongso: A Self-Portrait of Black Life*.
6. Eshun, *More Brilliant than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction*, also Eshun, "Further Considerations on Afrofuturism;" Miller, *Rhythm Science*.
7. Nelson, *Afrofuturism: A Special Issue of Social Text*.
8. Weheliye, "'Feenin': Posthuman Voices in Contemporary Black Popular Music," 30.
9. DeFrantz, "Believe the Hype! Hype Williams and Afro-Futurist Filmmaking."
10. Eshun, "Further Considerations on Afrofuturism," 287.
11. Flying Lotus. *Never Catch Me*.
12. Biddle, "Tupac Hologram Wasn't a Hologram," Respers, "Michael Jackson's Hologram: Creepy or Cool?"
13. Dery, *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture*.
14. Eshun, "Further Considerations on Afrofuturism," 289.
15. Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia,* 1.
16. Schneider, "Performance Remains," 100–110.

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