

DARK DATA



places where our information matters more than we do

DARK DATA

September 11 - October 30, 2021

American Artist

Hannah Black

Stephanie Dinkins

E. Jane

Mimi Onuoha

Sondra Perry

Curated by Gee Wesley, Bianca Dominguez,
and Mae Miller

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Cover: Mimi Onuoha, Natural: or Where Are We Allowed To Be. 2021. 48 x 38.3 inches (each). Courtesy of the artist.

Gee Wesley

Dark Data presents the work of six artists who explore pervasive forms of data collection, mass-surveillance, and hypervisibility visited upon Black life through technologies of predictive policing, data-mining, algorithmic violence, and artificial intelligence. The project situates these emergent data technologies within a broader lineage of anti-Black surveillance and quantification. *Dark Data* highlights a host of artistic and social tactics exercised by Black practitioners to actively respond to these conditions through experimental archival strategies, inventive modes of technological encryption, and gestures of digital worldmaking.

The term “dark data” refers to information assets that are collected and stored by corporations and governments but which ultimately go unutilized due to constraints of storage or the expiration of the data’s relevance. While temporarily sourced and captured, these vast reserves of information are eventually purged, never to be monetized, analyzed, and assimilated into systems of control and profit. This exhibition explores the continuities between “dark data” and Black data, the latter defined by scholar Shaka McGlotten as the forms of data collection and quantification which, or pertain, to Black bodies, citizens, and consumers for the purposes of commercial profit and social control. *Dark Data* invites viewers to consider current technological efforts to quantify Black life alongside a broader lineage of Black surveillance and racial capitalism. A trajectory that extends from the middle passage, in which the Black body was quantified as a unit of value, to our contemporary moment, in which the Black consumer and citizen is figured in terms of revenue streams for commercial profit, vectors of risk in algorithmic systems of control, and data points within predictive policing programs.

This exhibition proposes “dark data” as both a method for imaging and imagining forms of technological opacity, digital encryption and online illegibility which challenge the surveillance and hypervisibility of Black life in the United States. As a term, “dark data” conjures the sinister ubiquity of involuntary and sanctioned data collection in contemporary society by corporations, social media, and the state, while also signaling the limits

of technological omniscience. This project figures “dark data” as a metaphor for fugitive practices that elude the quantification of Black life. Pointing toward the latent potential of “going dark,” as a practice of digital refusal allowing Black Americans to evade, question, and undermine technologies of capture.



Left: American Artist, *Untitled (Too Thick) III*. 2021. Aluminum phone housings, silicone, polyurethane, asphalt, wood, and Lightning cable. 3 x 6 x 52 inches. Courtesy of the artist. *Center:* Sondra Perry, *IT'S IN THE GAME '17*. 2017. Digital video projection in a room painted Rosco Chroma Key Blue, color, sound (looped). Commissioned by the Henie Onstad Kunstsenter, Oslo (HOK) and the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA), University of Pennsylvania for the exhibition *Myths of the Marble*. 16:20 minutes. Courtesy of the artist and Bridget Donahue, NYC. Still courtesy of Bridget Donahue and Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI), New York.

NOTES ON THE (HYPER)/(IN)VISIBILITY OF BLACK LIFE

This transcription is an excerpt from a Curatorial Walkthrough & Panel Discussion of Dark Data with EFA Program Director, Dylan Gauthier, Special Projects Director HC Huynh, and Curators Gee Wesley, Mae Miller, & Bianca Dominguez. This event was hosted in October 2021 by Black Fine Art Month.

Gee Wesley (GW): My name is Gee Wesley and I’m part of the curatorial team for *Dark Data* and the exhibition on view at EFA Project Space from September 11 – October 30, 2021. In this conversation, I and the rest of the curatorial team will provide remarks and reflections on this exhibition, its original impetus, conceptual underpinnings, and what drew us to this project and the open call at Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts (EFA). Together we hope to provide a walkthrough of this project and explore some of the key aesthetic strategies and socio-political questions posed throughout the exhibition.

Dark Data explores the pervasive forms of data collection, mass surveillance and digital hyper-visibility that are visited upon Black life through a range of technologies including predictive policing, data mining algorithms, artificial intelligence and other emergent internet and digital based technologies. The term “dark data” refers to information assets that are collected and stored by corporations and the government, but which ultimately go unutilized, typically that’s due to constraints of storage or the expiration of the data’s relevance. The phrase describes information assets that are temporarily sourced and captured. Yet these vast reserves of data are eventually purged before that can be monetized, analyzed or assimilated into systems of control and profit. *Dark Data*, then, conjures both the ubiquity of unsanctioned data collection by corporations and the state, while also serving as a metaphor for a host of fugitive practices that can help us elude the quantification of Black life. The artists included in the show embrace the idea of “going dark” through a range of practices of digital refusals and evading questioning, undermining technologies of capture and structures of hyper-visibility.

My interest in this project emerged from two sets of concerns: one being the social and the other artistic. The social considerations pertain to questions regarding Black life today and its relationship to power and visibility. The more aesthetic and curatorial dimensions are related to an interest in the work of a generation of artists who explored the internet as a medium and foil for approaching technological questions from a decidedly different perspective than the previous generation of now canonized internet artists such as Cory Arcangel or Oliver Laric. I will say more about these distinctions later, but for now, will turn it over to Bianca and Mae. Why did you want to join this curatorial project?

Bianca Dominguez (BD): I assisted in the curatorial team by coordinating the public programming. I was interested in this project because in the present day we are all confronted with a digital crisis that has never been dealt with before in human history, the relationship between man and technology/AI. AI has become weaponized to progress racial oppression and the dehumanization of Black and brown bodies. I am interested in utilizing public programming to provide educational resources to the public in order to help them understand how they themselves can practice digital refusal, how they can build autonomy in the world and translate that in the digital sphere. This work requires a huge conceptual undertaking. My hope is that this dialogue, along with the public programming workshops at EFA can provide necessary resources for how to practice digital refusal and abolitionist tactics.

Mae Miller (MM): Thank you both. Since this is Global Black Fine Arts Month, I will add that I applied to this open call shortly after I made an explicit decision to only devote my time and energy to creative projects that foreground radical and transformative approaches to Black studies and racial justice. My interest in *Dark Data* was about holding space for the urgent questions that shape Black life and politics in the present. There is always a sense of urgency that shapes the Black condition in the United States that is most often accompanied by the patronizing insistence that we wait patiently for change.

I was exhausted when I came onto this project, both in the sense of being dramatically overworked and by the political moment. As Black artists, writers, and cultural workers, we exist in this loop between erasure, tokenization, and the need to constantly demonstrate excellence to those who most often cannot or will not see. Only one of us can be in the spotlight. For me,

thinking along with the pieces in the exhibition and working in community with folks at EFA has provided a kind of reprieve. It has certainly offered generative openings for thinking about race, technology, and racializing technology in new ways.

For me, it was really the conceptual tensions between hyper-visibility, erasure, and extraction and the implications for how we understand Black life and anti-Black violence that drew me to this project. I am an interdisciplinary social scientist by training, and I have a Ph.D. in human geography. I entered the curatorial field and began engaging questions of aesthetics in my work quite recently. My writing is concerned with histories of racial-colonial surveillance and modes of resistance throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Much of my work is animated by the question of reconciling arguments from new media studies—the more recent generations of internet activists and technological strategies that Gee and Bianca mentioned—with the long histories of accounting through slave ledgers, the archives of colonial administrators, and the diaries of “explorers” who were in fact expropriators? How do we map these interconnected histories without flattening context and difference? What does digital abolition look like across space, time, and media?

The more that I sit with the work of *Dark Data*, the more I am struck by the artists’ collective refusal to repeat algorithmic violence or recirculate images of abjection through their work. Writing about the proliferation of video footage of police killings, scholar Ruth Wilson Gilmore has argued that these images most often produce pity or contempt, but rarely garner substantive social transformation or far-reaching political demands. The strength of exhibition with regards to abolition and the digital are twofold. First, the artists help us to understand the inner workings of technological systems through analysis of labor, capital, materiality, extraction, and algorithms. Thinking with Gilmore and with curator Legacy Russell, it is with this nuanced understanding of the inner workings that we can identify gaps, contradictions, and glitches that can help us to challenge and dismantle systems of oppression. This knowledge of inner workings can help us stretch the contours of how and where we define “the problem,” as we fold territorial struggles over mines in the Global South, exploited workers in data centers, and communities that are hyper-surveilled but rarely (if ever) seen as human into a shared political struggle. Second, the artists offer numerous tactics of refusal that subvert extant algorithmic violence through modes of humanization, programs that rewrite the scripts of communities and Black life, and works that reject the planned obsolescence of life and media. All of these tools can be



Installation view of *Dark Data*. EFA Project Space.

mobilized through struggle and as the practical application of “dark data” in action.

GW: This is a great place to transition into speaking about the specific artworks that are part of this project.

MM: Absolutely. Let me start with Stephanie Dinkins’ work. Dinkins contributions to the *Dark Data* show are twofold: the application and the prints. The app is called BCAI—or Binary Calculations are Inadequate—and it is available in the Apple and Google Stores. Upon opening the application, the user is invited to *donate* data in the form of textual responses or images. BCAI includes open ended prompts such as: How can your community take better care of itself? How do you care for black women? And what questions should we ask others donating data?

Much of Dinkins’ work aligns with what sociologist Ruha Benjamin has termed the “anti-Black box” of data algorithms. The “anti-Black box” is a play on the opaque and insidious processes that produce and populate purportedly race neutral technologies and the way that purportedly race neutral technologies ratify and reproduce anti-Black violence materially, as well as through discourse and representation. Dinkins’ emphasis on care, consent, reciprocity and queer notions of community and family work against racial capitalist logics. In the artist’s words, “By answering anonymously, you donate data to create more descriptive, comprehensive and supportive data sets that represent our communities with complexity, love and deep seated understanding.”

This work of *willful* and *consensual* recalibration through the embrace of human complexity is premised upon the agential act of donation in contrast to extractive technologies that reduce human life into consumption patterns and violently flatten biometric data and social connections to legitimate Black disposability as we see, for example, in the operation of gang databases in the U.S.A. and counterterrorism initiatives at home and abroad. The second component of Dinkins’ work for *Dark Data* switches sides.

The second component of Dinkins’ work for *Dark Data* indexes the limitations of existing algorithms, the GANS or generative algorithmic networks could not legibly reproduce images under search terms including “Black women smiling” or “sad black woman.” As a continuation of Dinkins’ body of work since conversations with *Bina 48*, Dinkins challenges us not only to understand these misrecognitions as technological failings, but as societal ones. The algorithms see exactly what they were taught to see. This not mean that a group of white supremacist

masterminds sat around table to discuss how to make algorithms racist or how much they hate Black women. Sure, there are extreme examples of Cambridge Analytica, but what the work of artists and scholars like Stephanie Dinkins and others have long argued is that the algorithms reflect widely held social beliefs and the interests of those in power. Technology does not make society more racist as the technological determinists would have us believe. Technologies amplify what is already there, sometimes for purposes of capital accumulation and social control. Dinkins invites users to imagine and build alternative technofutures by complicating how we ask questions and questioning societal values.

GW: I love this idea you offered of the “anti-Black box” through Benjamin’s work as a way of reading Stephanie Dinkins’ practice. The concept also resonates with the work of American Artist. Artist also challenges us to understand technological failings in relation to societal ones and he is similarly invested in the project of denaturalizing the architecture of digital technologies. American Artist makes work in a variety of forms, including sculpture, software, video. Their work mines histories of technology, race and knowledge production in order to highlight systems and inequity, power and control. The piece *Untitled (Too Thick, III)* that is exhibited in *Dark Data* is composed of aluminum, phone housings, silicone, polyurethane asphalt and wood. The sculpture stands upon a custom made base pedestal and includes a vertical stack of cell phones.

My readings of this work are deeply intuitive. This work stands to me as a reminder of the physicality of digital infrastructures and the environmental and socially destructive processes that both undergird and are perpetuated by internet-based technologies. *Untitled (Too Thick, III)* further engages themes of technological obsolescence through the combination the layers of now “old” iPhones and the geological blob that erupts out of the tower of the structure. These processes are often hidden behind the smooth surfaces of screens. The screen itself is often fetishized. We perceive it as unblemished until we break it, and our perception of this device that we cling to is often divorced from global supply chains. There are numerous forms of abstraction and extraction that go into the production of such technologies.

When introducing the work of American Artist, one thing I often find myself needing to explain is the artist’s unique name. So American Artist is not only the artist’s public moniker, but also their legally changed name. It is the name that appears not



Detail: American Artist, Untitled (Too Thick, III) . 2021. Aluminum phone housings, silicone, polyurethane, asphalt, wood, and Lightning cable. 3 x 6 x 52 inches. Courtesy of the artist. Top: Stephanie Dinkins, Binary Calculations Are Inadequate to Assess Us. 2021. Mobile app and website. Courtesy of the artist.

only on their artist website, but also on their driver's license and passport. This kind of legal name change, then, is not simply a discrete and performative act. It is a durational gesture. Artist's name is a recurring speech act that is reprised with each reference to the artists. I emphasize this here because a number of the artists in this exhibition address these notions of visibility and technological encroachment that extends both online and offline. Artist's name is an act of anonymity that obscures the artist's given name along with the racial, gendered and biological specificity of their identity, and digital traces. But, on another level, the name fixes Artist within this system of hyper-visibility. The uniqueness of such a name marks American Artist's circulation through contemporary art and society more broadly. It might be one thing to introduce oneself as American Artist to a collector or a curator, but its a whole other thing to do so to a landlord or a traffic cop. In a lot of ways, that sort of gesture exaggerates a condition that is fundamental to much of Black experience in the United States, whereby Black life is both unseen and overseen, or in political terms, underrepresented and closely surveilled.

MM: The tensions between over-surveilled and underrepresented and the strategic maneuvering that the name change poses within that space have important implications for how we understand possibilities and limitations of resistance and refusal. Mimi Ọnụọha engages some of these questions in *Natural: or Where Are We Allowed To Be*. Mimi Ọnụọha's artwork for *Dark Data* is called *Natural: or Where Are We Allowed To Be*. The piece takes cues from British Guyanese artist Ingrid Pollard's *Pastoral Interlude* (1988) which depicts Black subjects leisuring and laboring in the English countryside along with captions that speak to the erasure of Black presence in Britain and inseparability of these idyllic landscapes from the plantation. In her essay, "Natural" (2021; included in this catalogue) Ọnụọha writes that, "It is not that Pollard's subjects disrupt the English countryside but that England subscribes to a notion of nature that removes them from it. That this removal is treated as normal—as natural—is the myth that Pollard must push against." *Natural: or Where Are We Allowed To Be* engages in a similar process of denaturalization in the context of a tech world. In some images, the Black woman enacts a defiant gaze, and in others she simply rests. The piece invites the viewer to consider how erasure, racial violence, and Black abjection are all naturalized through digital technologies. The images are accompanied by captions that read, "Places where information matters more than we do," "It was ours all along," and "Steward not subject." If the work of artists such as Trevor Paglen has grappled with the vast

assemblage of undersea fibre optic cables that connect big data centers, Mimi Q̄n̄q̄ha's pieces further grapple with the material and embodied racial dimensions. *Natural: or Where Are We Allowed To Be* insists that we see Black women, study their labor and gaze, and unsettle or perhaps dismantle a technological common sense of erasure and devaluation.

Mimi Q̄n̄q̄ha's larger body of work foregrounds processes of removal and erasure within data sets and considers the complexities and contradictions of so-called missing data sets. Across her work, Q̄n̄q̄ha argues that the societal inability to see and value full humanity, rather than a lack of data itself, stalls transformative change. The issue, then, is not a lack of statistics or evidence of injustice, but a question of political willingness or ability to stretch the ways that we see in order to mobilize resources across scales. Importantly, the artist understands algorithmic violence as explicitly about how automated decision making systems inflict harm by preventing people from meeting their basic needs. This categorical expansion of violence to include the direct harm of targeted killing and the extraction or withholding of social resources—the technocratic calculus that drives what Ruth Wilson Gilmore has termed organized violence and organized abandonment—works in concert with the other artists in the exhibition to offer a capacious vocabulary that is grounded in collective and communal welfare.

GW: Hannah Black's work also contributes to this new vocabulary and stretches how we think about the praxis of “going dark” that formed the impetus of how this show took shape. Black began making these shame masks over the last few years. They reference the types of masks that were used in medieval Europe to publicly punish and police social behaviors such as gossiping or laziness. The masks reference a kind of bestiality that was meant to evoke a sense of racial otherness that cast someone as outside of society. Depicting the exaggerated features of rabbits, cows, and donkeys, among others, the masks perform the work of dehumanization while punishing those who could not or would not participate in the economic order of feudal and early mercantilist society. Consistent with the other works in the exhibition, Hannah Black's masks highlight the contradictions between social control through hyper-visibility and forms of anonymization of the individual whose full facial features can be seen but are not fully legible through the mask.

We can see the historical continuities of punitive carceral logics at work here. This opens up another kind of larger question about the duality of how strategies of control—and anti-Black

surveillance in particular—are exercised. Anti-Black policies of violence and economic disenfranchisement are employed through means that are pervasive but simultaneously anti-visual in many forms. For instance, by sourcing personal data sets through algorithmic operations, or through other technologies of quantification. These forms of control are tricky to visually detect in a way that seems distinct from the older Jim Crow structure in which racial stratification was exercised through the kind of knowing consent of a citizenry, and the obvious disciplining of a populous through visual means. In a sense something much more similar to the shame mask and how it relies on the visually designation of otherness to punish.

This raises a question that I think is at play in the space that many of these artists are working. How to negotiate this relationship to visibility, where on the one hand, we're confronted with ever more spectacular documentation of anti-Black violence, but then at the same time, the undergirding social stratification that produces that violence are perpetuated through really invisible forms of segregation and structural inequity that are harder and harder to track?

MM: Your comment opens up a lot of interesting questions for me that I will definitely be thinking through beyond this forum. We can think about the lessons that can be drawn from Medieval Europe in the present. There were certainly Africans in Medieval Europe, but racial categorizations were quite different in that era such that (anti)Blackness does not map easily as a trans-historical signifier or progression to Jim Crow. I do see the piece making interesting interventions into histories of punishment that chart a linear progression from the spectacular violence of hangings, public torture, and shame masks toward prisons as both a more “humane” form of punishment and one in which the self-shaming of the punished is meant to supercede the outward shaming of the public. For me, this duality of the spectacular violence in relation to those that are more hidden—think about how modern prisons are often built far away from where prisoners actually live—is what shifts through time. We have to understand how, why, and for whom these shifts take place, and I see Black's work teaching us that the shame mask is as much of a tool of the present as the past, especially if we think about credit scores or sex offender registries.

Let me now turn to the work of Sondra Perry. Perry's video installation *It's In the Game* was developed in response to a lawsuit over digital avatars in EA Sports games. Perry's twin brother, Sandy, was among the basketball players whose likenesses and

season statistics were sold by the NCAA without the player's knowledge, consent or compensation. Perry's immersive piece can be read as a radical project of humanization and an indictment of extractive technologies. The lyric refrain "You are everything, everything is you" is repeated throughout the 16 minute video as Sondra Perry and Sandy Perry share intimate stories through family photos, home video footage and accounts of teammates who were coming into their own as athletes. As Sandy explains, these players were from somewhere, somebody's roommate. They were growing as people.

The piece also has a deep historical commentary on the long histories of colonial expropriation, as it juxtaposes the contemporary stories of Black athletes with aural and visual acquisition notes of stolen Aztec and Easter Island artifacts that are currently housed in the Met and the British Museum. Like many of critics that have written about this piece, I was initially drawn to the sweeping questions about object hood and personhood across space time and to these historical continuities. Yet the more that I sit with this piece, the more that I'm confronted with the ways that historical metanarratives so often continue to flatten intimate moments and erase the possibilities of complex personhood. These descriptive details that are really shaping each player and person's individual identity kind of get erased really sort of make the sweeping narratives about extraction, expropriation and so on. And so I read *It's In the Game* as a provocation to also think about what is in what is and what cannot be in the game: the humanizing excess of being everything and the impossibilities of total capture.

GW: The final work I'll speak to is by E. Jane and entitled *You are a light shining (Maxine Waters)* (2020). Much of E. Jane's work explores themes of safety and futurity in relationship to Black femme identity. This work pays tribute to longtime U.S. Representative Maxine Waters, an unapologetic champion of numerous progressive causes and an outspoken critic of conservative policies put forward by former President Donald Trump and previous conservative administrations. Many Black women public figures, including Waters, have been targets of misrepresentation and misogynoir in mass media. I read the work as a gesture of radical care in which the name Maxine literally illuminates much of the gallery in lavender-colored neon light. E. Jane's work venerates the life of a Black luminary by registering her presence without capturing or surveilling it.

E. Jane's practice, like many of the artists in *Dark Data*, represents a departure from a prior generation of artists working

with technology. Among the tropes that defined that earlier set of canonized artists was the myth of the internet as a technoutopian sphere of free play which went hand-in-hand with the trope of the avatar. As a figure, the avatar represented the promise that users could "explore" and "discover" virtual worlds unencumbered by the limitations and realities of our offline identities, be that race, gender, sexuality, geography, or class.

Rather than framing digital technologies or the internet as this frontier or readily available resource to be captured, these artists problematize the notion that digital circulation can be innocent, whether that circulation pertains to images of Black death or the unconsented capture of Black life. While the performance of the self online may provide opportunities to rewrite our self presentation, our experiences nonetheless remain deeply programmed by our racialized and culturally encoded bodies.

MM: I just want to add a few more thoughts on the generation of internet scholars and artists from the early 2000s. So many of those texts really celebrated the democratic possibilities of digital connectivity and how it was going to flatten space and time as a great global equalizer.

I appreciate the work of some of these artists that are highlighting the inequalities and injustices that are reproduced through these seemingly race-neutral algorithms, as well as the new ways of engaging with the materiality of digital space. Scholars such as Camilla Hawthorne have further explored how internet cafes around the world and especially in immigrant communities in Europe are hyper-surveilled as part of counterterrorism and counterinsurgency operations. Black and brown folks cannot be trusted to just go and send emails to their family and loved ones without having to add all of this data and details of their lived experiences that folks who can afford to have personal computers in their homes do not experience in the same way. Libraries and other "public spaces" are also enrolled in this architecture of data monitoring. Especially in the last year, we have seen a resurgence of thought pieces recounting the myth of digital connectivity and successes of online education. In reality, most people do not have multiple devices or unlimited wifi/data, so we see an increasing digital apartheid rather than a leveling out. We have to hold all of these dimensions in tension as we build and imagine alternative tech futures.

GW: The collective process of working alongside you and Bianca has been really powerful for thinking about the spheres of technology. Algorithmic processes often get described in flat ways that

foreclose possibilities for agency and autonomy, even as agency and autonomy are always being produced and created. It is possible to be cynical about historical power structures and argue that we have been dealing with the same challenges for 400 years. But this also means that we have 400 years of tactics and strategies of how people found ways to survive, carry on narratives, and reinvent the world. From these archives one can turn to and maybe find analog solutions for digital problems.

MM: What you said made me think about some contemporary examples of resistance tactics. In Texas, people are flooding the abortion hotlines with memes and false stories in order to protect those whose are seeking out these much needed health resources. A few years ago at the height of the Standing Rock resistance, people were checking in and Standing Rock whether they were there or not. That really fucked with those algorithms and made it difficult to track who was actually there. These tactics are in many ways reminiscent of the collective tactics deployed to evade and divert slave patrollers in the Antebellum U.S. South.

BLACK DATA
Shaka McGlotten

Comedian, geek, and author Baratunde Thurston began his 2009 South by Southwest slide show “How to Be Black (Online)” with a very brief explanation of why black people are important: “we look good / history proves black people are the future / e.g. rock n roll / e.g. hip hop / e.g. ass/lip injections.”¹ His playful intro led into a more sophisticated, if also still comical, analysis of black online life. He noted in particular the waning “digital divide.” Blacks are online as much as whites if both tethered and wireless access are considered, and both groups tend to use the same sites, with a few exceptions.² Thurston also noted the persistence of racism on the web, a point also underlined by numerous scholars of race and the Internet.³ Thurston focused specifically on black use of Twitter, which he links to the call-and-response game of insults known as the dozens.⁴ Of course, tweeting blacks cause consternation among some whites: “Wow!! too many negros in the trending topics for me. I may be done with this whole twitter thing.”⁵

Thurston’s work on race and technology provides a template for my own efforts here. In this essay, I engage in a black queer call-and-response with a few key concepts circulating in network theories and cultures.

I use an eclectic group of artifacts—Thurston’s slide show, an interview with Barack Obama in the wake of the National Security Agency (NSA) surveillance scandal, the artwork of Zach Blas, and a music video about technology and gentrification—to proffer the heuristic, “black data.” This heuristic, I suggest, offers some initial analytic and political orientations for black queer studies to more fully engage with the theories, effects, and affects of network cultures. Although there are significant bodies of literature in science and technology, as well as cultural and media studies, that grapple with race and a handful of works that address sexuality and new media technologies, black queer studies, itself still a developing, loosely organized group of scholars and cultural practitioners, has not generated many analyses of the particular ways black queer people are interpolated by or employ new media and other technologies.⁶ Here, I use black data to think through some of the historical and contemporary ways black queer people, like

other people of African descent and people of color more broadly, are hailed by big data, in which *technēs* of race and racism reduce our lives to mere numbers: we appear as commodities, revenue streams, statistical deviations, or vectors of risk.⁷ Big data also refers to the various efforts of states and corporations to capture, predict, and control political and consumer behavior. Black data is, then, a response to big data's call, and here I offer readings that outline some possible political and affective vectors, some ways to refuse the call or perhaps even to hang up.

Black queer lives are often reduced to forms of accounting that are variously intended to elicit alarm or direct highly circumscribed forms of care. Statistics are used to mobilize people to fight HIV/AIDS—such as the fact that blacks account for 44 percent of new HIV infections.⁸ They are used to direct attention to the omnipresence of violence in black life or to the specific forms of violence directed against black LGBTQ people, as in the National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs' 2012 report, which notes that LGBTQ people of color are nearly twice as likely to experience physical violence as their white counterparts and that transgender people of color are two and a half times as likely to experience police violence as their white cisgender counterparts.⁹ Assigning numerical or financial value to black life, transforming experience into information or data, is nothing new; rather, it is caught up with the history of enslavement and the racist regimes that sought to justify its barbarities. Between the sixteenth and nineteenth centuries, more than twelve and a half million Africans were transported from Africa to the New World. Two million, and likely many more, died during the Middle Passage.¹⁰ A typical slave ship could carry more than three hundred slaves arranged like sardines; the sick and dead would be thrown overboard, their loss claimed for insurance money, as in the infamous Zong massacre. Other, more recent data circulate in the wake of the ongoing global recession and the protests against George Zimmerman's exoneration in the killing of seventeen-year-old Trayvon Martin: black families saw their wealth drop 31 percent between 2007 and 2010;¹¹ in 2012, police and security guards killed 136 unarmed black men.¹² In the wake of a spate of police violence in 2014 and the failed indictments of the police who killed Michael Brown and Eric Garner, an analysis by the investigative journalism site *ProPublica* showed that black males were twenty-one times more likely to be fatally shot than young white males.¹³ These realities have contributed to the growth of the Black Lives Matter movement.

It is tempting to ascribe these racialized accountings to the cruel systems of value established by capitalism, which seeks

to encode—quantify and order—life and matter into categories of commodity, labor, exchange value, and profit. Indeed, race itself functions as such as commodity in the era of genomics—a simple oral swab test can help you answer Thurston's question #howblackareyou, and you can watch others' reactions to their results on *Faces of America*, a popular show about genealogical testing. Yet as Lisa Nakamura, Peter Chow-White, and Wendy Chun observe, race is not merely an effect of capitalism's objectifying systems; rather, race is itself a co-constituting technology that made such forms of accounting possible in the first place.¹⁴ "Race as technology," Chun notes, helps us understand "how race functions as the 'as,' how it facilitates comparisons between entities classed as similar or dissimilar."¹⁵ Race is a tool, and it was intrinsic, not anterior, to constructions of capital, as well as to ideas about biology and culture. As Mel Chen puts it, race is an animate hierarchy, in which the liveliness and the value of some things (whiteness, smart technology) are established via a proximity to other things positioned lower or further away (blackness, dumb matter).¹⁶ "Wow!! too many negros in the trending topics for me" simply reiterates in the realm of microblogging hierarchical *technēs* of racism that see black people as polluting and therefore as distasteful or dangerous or that would deny information/technology to the subjects of discrimination.¹⁷

Of course, the above statistics are familiar, and while useful, they tell only very partial stories, reducing black experience to an effect of capitalism (a vulgar Marxism if ever there was one) or to a kind of numerology of bare life. In what follows I sketch a few different trajectories for black data. I performatively enact black data as a kind of informatics of black queer life, as reading and throwing shade, to grapple with the NSA surveillance scandal, new biometric technologies, and the tech-fueled gentrification of San Francisco. These readings (actings out?) also help to illustrate the ways black queer theories, practices, and lives might be made to matter in relation to some of the organizing tensions of contemporary network cultures: privacy, surveillance, capture, and exclusion. Black queers frame what is at stake in these debates insofar as we quite literally embody struggles between surveillance and capture, between the seen and unseen. Moreover, we have developed rogue epistemologies which often rely on an array of technological media and which help us to make ourselves present and to make ourselves disappear. In the reads that follow, I also gesture toward the virtual affinities black queer theoretical or political projects might share with cryptographic and anarchist activisms.

NOTES

I am grateful to E. Patrick Johnson for the invitation to participate in this volume and for his thoughtful feedback on earlier versions of this essay. Two anonymous reviewers also made suggestions that improved my discussion here. Key ideas in this essay emerged from discussions with Zach Blas. Other readers who offered important insights include Hentyle Yapp, Amit Gilutz, and Bill Baskin. This essay was completed in part through the support of a fellowship provided by the Alexander von Humboldt Foundation.

1. Baratunde Thurston, “How to Be Black (Online),” *Slideshare.net*, accessed July 1, 2013, <http://www.slideshare.net/baratunde/how-to-be-black-online-by-baratunde>.
2. At the time of Thurston’s presentation, for example, blacks tended to use Yahoo! and MySpace more than whites. Thurston, “How To Be Black (Online).”
3. For an extended but not exhaustive list, see Beth E. Kolko, Lisa Nakamura, and Gilbert B. Rodman, eds., *Race in Cyberspace* (New York: Routledge, 1999); Lisa Nakamura, *Cybertypes: Race, Ethnicity, and Identity on the Internet* (New York: Routledge, 2002); Nakamura, *Digitizing Race: Visual Cultures of the Internet* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008); Nakamura and Peter Chow-White, eds. *Race after the Internet* (New York: Routledge, 2011); Cameron Bailey, “Virtual Skin: Articulating Race in Cyberspace,” in *Immersed in Technology: Art and Virtual Environments*, ed. Mary Ann Moser and Douglas MacLeod, 29–49 (Cambridge: mit Press, 1996); Mark B. N. Hansen, “Digitizing the Racialized Body or The Politics of Universal Address,” *SubStance* 33, no. 2 (2004): 107–33; Jennifer González, “The Face and the Public: Race, Secrecy, and Digital Art Practice,” *Camera Obscura* 24, no. 1 (2009): 37–65; Andil Gosine, “Brown to Blonde at Gay.com: Passing White in Queer Cyberspace” in *Queer Online: Media Technology and Sexuality*, eds. Kate O’Riordan and David Phillips, 139–53 (New York: Peter Lang, 2007); Shaka McGlotten, “Ordinary Intersections: Speculations on Diference, Justice, and Utopia in Black Queer Life,” *Transforming Anthropology* 20, no. 1 (2012): 123–37.
4. For recent treatments of the dozens, see Ali Colleen Nef’s discussions in *Let the World Listen Right: The Mississippi Delta Hip Hop Story* (Jackson: University of Mississippi Press, 2009);

and Elijah Wald, *The Dozens: A History of Rap’s Mama* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012). For discussions of black Twitter, see Farhad Manjoo’s (in)famous “How Black People Use Twitter,” *Slate*, August 10, 2010, accessed July 1, 2013, http://www.slate.com/articles/technology/technology/2010/08/how_black_people_use_twitter.html; and Shani Hilton, “The Secret Power of Black Twitter,” *Buzzfeed*, accessed July 16, 2013, <http://www.buzzfeed.com/shani/the-secret-power-of-black-twitter>. For an excellent critical account, see Sanjay Sharma, “Black Twitter? Racial Hashtags, Networks, and Contagion,” *New Formations* 78 (2013): 46–64.

5. “omg! Black People!,” last updated July 1, 2009, <http://omg-blackpeople.wordpress.com/>.
6. For a few notable examples of literature in science and technology that addresses race, see Donna Haraway, *Modest Witness@Second-Millennium.FemaleMan-Meets-OncoMouse: Feminism and Technoscience* (New York: Routledge, 1997); Thomas Foster, *Souls of Cyberfolk: Posthumanism as Vernacular Theory* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005); Wendy Chun, “Introduction: Race and/as Technology; or How to Do Things to Race,” *Camera Obscura* 24, no. 1 (2009): 7–35; Chun, *Programmed Visions: Software and Memory* (Cambridge, MA: mit Press, 2011). On sexuality and new media technologies, see Campbell, *Getting It On Online*. Also see the essays in O’Riordan and Phillips, *Queer Online*. For recent discussions in black queer studies, see Allen, “Introduction,” and Shaka McGlotten and Dana-ain Davis, eds., *Black Genders and Sexualities* (New York: Palgrave, 2012). Also see E. Patrick Johnson and Mae G. Henderson, *Black Queer Studies: A Critical Anthology* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005). For exceptions to the lack of studies on the ways black queer people are interpolated by or employ new media and other technologies, see Dwight McBride, *Why I Hate Abercrombie & Fitch: Essays on Race and Sexuality* (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 88–133; Shaka McGlotten, *Virtual Intimacies: Media, Affect, and Queer Sociality* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2013); McGlotten, “Ordinary Intersections”; Herukhuti, *Conjuring Black Funk: Notes on Culture, Sexuality, and Spirituality*, vol. 1 (New York: Vintage Entity Press, 2007).
7. The notion of race as a technology is discussed by Lisa Nakamura and Peter Chow-White, Wendy Chun, and Beth Coleman, among others. Nakamura and Chow-White, for

example, discuss the “enforced forgetting” that deprived slaves of information (data) about their pasts: racism is a technology, “a systematic way of doing things that operates by mediating between users and techniques to create specific forms of oppression and discrimination” (3). Beth Coleman makes the connection to *technē* more explicit (and also thereby echoing Foucault). For Coleman, *technē* refers to an applied, reproducible skill; race thus emerges as a productive technique of power. See Nakamura and Chow-White, “Introduction—Race and Digital Technology: Code, the Color Line, and the Information Society,” *Race after the Internet*, 1–18; Coleman, “Race as Technology,” *Camera Obscura* 24, no. 1 (2009): 176–207. See also Chun, “Introduction: Race and as Technology.” For a discussion of discriminatory social costs that result from data mining, see Anthony Danna and Oscar H. Gandy, Jr., “All That Glitters Is Not Gold: Digging Beneath the Surface of Data Mining,” *Journal of Business Ethics* 40 (2002): 373–86.

8. “New HIV Infections in the United States, 2010,” *Centers for Disease Control*, accessed June 1, 2013, http://www.cdc.gov/hiv/pdf/HIV_infographic_11X17_HR.pdf.

9. “Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgendered, and HIV-Affected Hate Violence in 2012,” *National Coalition of Anti-Violence Programs*, accessed June 4, 2013, http://www.avp.org/storage/documents/ncavp_2012_hvreport_final.pdf, 9.

10. See the important and rich resources available at the Trans-Atlantic Slave Trade Database, accessed June 4, 2013, <http://www.slavevoyages.org/tast/index.faces>.

11. Signe-Mary McKernan, Caroline Ratclife, C. Eugene Steuerle, and Sisi Zhang, “Less Than Equal: Racial Disparities in Wealth Accumulation,” *The Urban Institute*, April 26, 2013, <http://www.urban.org/UploadedPDF/412802-Less-Than -Equal-Racial-Disparities-in-Wealth-Accumulation.pdf>.

12. Arlene Eisen, “Operation Ghetto Storm: 2012 Annual Report on the Extra-judicial Killing of 313 Black People,” *Malcolm X Grassroots Movement*, April 7, 2013, <http://mxgm.org/operation-ghetto-storm-2012-annual-report-on-the-extrajudicial-killing-of-313-black-people/>.

13. Ryan Gabrieleon, Ryann Grochowski Jones, and Eric Sagara, “Deadly Force, in Black and White,” *ProPublica*,

October 10, 2014, <http://www.propublica.org/article/deadly-force-in-black-and-white#update-note>.

14. Nakamura and Chow-White, “Introduction—Race and Digital Technology”; Chun, “Race and/as Technology.”

15. Chun, “Race and/as Technology,” 8.

16. Mel Chen, *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012).

17. Nakamura and Chow-White, “Introduction—Race and Digital Technology,” 3.

Full citation, McGlotten, C. (2016). “Black Data,” in *No Tea, No Shade: New Writings in Black Queer Studies* (Ed. E.P. Johnson). Durham and London: Duke University Press, pp. 262-286.

The concept of dark matter might bring to mind opacity, the color black, limitlessness and the limitations imposed on blackness, the dark, antimatter, that which is not optically available, black holes, the Big Bang theory, and other concerns of cosmology where dark matter is that nonluminous component of the universe that is said to exist but cannot be observed, cannot be recreated in laboratory conditions. Its distribution cannot be measured; its properties cannot be determined; and so it remains undetectable. The gravitational pull of this unseen matter is said to move galaxies. Invisible and unknowable, yet somehow still there, dark matter, in this planetary sense, is theoretical. If the term “dark matter” is a way to think about race, where race, as Howard Winant puts it, “remains the *dark matter*, the often invisible substance that in many ways structures the universe of modernity,” then one must ask here, invisible to whom?¹ If it is often invisible, then how is it sensed, experienced, and lived? Is it really invisible, or is it rather unseen and unperceived by many? In her essay “Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality,” Evelyn Hammonds takes up the astrophysics of black holes found in Michele Wallace’s discussion of the negation of black creative genius to say that if “we can detect the presence of a black hole by its effects on the region of space where it is located,” where, unseen, its energy distorts and disrupts that around it, from that understanding we can then use this theorizing as a way to “develop reading strategies that allow us to make visible the distorting and productive effects” of black female sexualities in particular, and blackness in general.² Taking up blackness in surveillance studies in this way, as rather unperceived yet producing a productive disruption of that around it, *Dark Matters* names the surveillance of blackness as often unperceivable within the study of surveillance, all the while blackness being that nonnameable matter that matters the racialized disciplinary society. It is from this insight that I situate *Dark Matters* as a black diasporic, archival, historical, and contemporary study that locates blackness as a key site through which surveillance is practiced, narrated, and enacted.

Surveillance is nothing new to black folks. It is the fact of antiblackness. This book is not intended to be a comprehensive overview of the ways that black people and blackness have come under, or up against, surveillance. Of the scholars that have written about surveillance as it concerns black people, many have taken as their focus the FBI Counterintelligence Program (COINTELPRO) that ran from 1956 until 1971 and that saw individuals and domestic political organizations deemed subversive, or potentially so, come under investigation by the bureau with the aim of disrupting their activities, discrediting their efforts, and neutralizing their effects, often through infiltration, disinformation, and the work of informants. Sociologist Mike Forrest Keen’s study of the FBI’s surveillance of sociologists such as W. E. B. DuBois and E. Franklin Frazier, David Garrow’s *The FBI and Martin Luther King Jr.*, Theodore Kornweibel on the FBI’s surveillance of the activities of Marcus Garvey and the United Negro Improvement Association through the use of informants and disinformation, or Carole Boyce Davies’s writings on the intense FBI scrutiny of Trinidadian activist, Marxist, and journalist Claudia Jones, for example, form part of this scholarly work. Other research examines policing with a focus on racism, state power, and incarceration, such as the works of Ruth Wilson Gilmore, Angela Davis, Joy James, Dylan Rodriguez, and more. James Baldwin, Toni Cade Bambara, bell hooks, and Ralph Ellison have all, in different ways, written on being looked at and on seeing black life. For instance, in *The Evidence of Things Not Seen*, James Baldwin describes black suffering under the conditions of antiblackness where, as he puts it, “it is a very grave matter to be forced to imitate a people for whom you know—which is the price of your performance and survival—you do not exist. It is hard to imitate a people whose existence appears, mainly, to be made tolerable by their bottomless gratitude that they are not, thank heaven, you.”³ Toni Cade Bambara’s call for emancipatory texts to “heal our imperialized eyes” as well as bell hooks’s naming of the interrogating, “oppositional gaze” as “one that ‘looks’ to document” form part of this critical take on black looks.⁴ Ralph Ellison’s critiques and quarrels with what is taken as canonical sociology and the ways in which much of its early racial knowledge production was achieved by distorting blackness has been detailed by Roderick Ferguson. In *Aberrations in Black: Toward a Queer of Color Critique*, Ferguson offers an analysis of an unpublished chapter of Ellison’s *Invisible Man* where he examines the ways that canonical sociology made itself out to be a discipline through the “sociologization” of black

sexuality by way of surveillance. On sociologization, Ferguson writes, “canonical sociology would help transform observation into an epistemological and ‘objective’ technique for the good of modern state power. This was a way of defining surveillance as a scientifically acceptable and socially necessary practice. It established the sociological onlooker as safely removed and insulated from the prurient practices of African American men, women and children.”⁵

As ethnography, tallying, and “statistics helped to produce surveillance as one mode, alongside confession, for producing the truth of sexuality in Western society,” when this mode concerned the measurement of black human life in the post-Emancipation United States, such racial logics often made for sociology as a population management technology of the state.⁶ One example of how such sociologization functioned in relation to blackness is “The Conflict and Fusion of Cultures with Special Reference to the Negro,” Robert Park’s 1918 address to the meeting of the American Sociological Society in which he stated, “The Negro is, by natural disposition, neither an intellectual nor an idealist like the Jew, nor a brooding introspective like the East Indian, nor a pioneer and frontiersman, like the Anglo-Saxon. He is primarily an artist, loving life for its own sake.”⁷ Park, who in 1925 would become president of the American Sociological Society, continued his address by saying, “The Negro is, so to speak, the lady among the races.”⁸ Park’s address is instructive regarding the tenets of gendered antiblack racism that shaped the discipline of sociology in the early twentieth century. It is accounts of blackness like these that influenced Ellison’s quarrels with sociological discourse, or what he called in his introduction to *Invisible Man* “the bland assertions of sociologists,” where in observing, tallying, quantifying, indexing, and surveilling, black life was made “un visible.”⁹

Dark Matters stems from a questioning of what would happen if some of the ideas occurring in the emerging field of surveillance studies were put into conversation with the enduring archive of transatlantic slavery and its afterlife, in this way making visible the many ways that race continues to structure surveillance practices. This study’s objects of investigation include the plan of the Brooks slave ship, the Panopticon, the *Book of Negroes* as a record of black escape from New York in the late 1700s, branding of enslaved people in transatlantic slavery, slave passes and runaway notices, lantern laws in eighteenth-century New York City that mandated enslaved people carry lit candles as they moved about the city after dark, a set of rules from the 1800s specifying the management of slaves on an East Texas plantation,

and the life of a young woman named Coobah who was enslaved in eighteenth-century Jamaica. If we are to take transatlantic slavery as antecedent to contemporary surveillance technologies and practices as they concern inventories of ships’ cargo and the cheek-by-jowl arrangement laid out in the stowage plan of the Brooks slave ship, biometric identification by branding the slave’s body with hot irons, slave markets and auction blocks as exercises of synoptic power where the many watched the few, slave passes and patrols, manumission papers and free badges, black codes and fugitive slave notices, it is to the archives, slave narratives, and often to black expressive practices, creative texts, and other efforts that we can look for moments of refusal and critique. Slave narratives, as Avery Gordon demonstrates, offer us “a sociology of slavery and freedom.”¹⁰ To paraphrase Gordon here, through their rendering of the autobiographical, the ethnographic, the historical, the literary, and the political, slave narratives are sociological in that they reveal the social life of the slave condition, speak of freedom practices, and detail the workings of power in the making of what is exceptional—the slave life—into the everyday through acts of violence.¹¹

Under these conditions of terror and the violent regulation of blackness by way of surveillance, the inequities between those who were watched over and those who did the watching are revealed. The violence of this cumulative gaze continues in the post-slavery era.

Extending Steve Mann’s concept of sousveillance, which he describes as a way of “enhancing the ability of people to access and collect data about their surveillance and to neutralize surveillance,”¹² I use the term “dark sousveillance” as a way to situate the tactics employed to render one’s self out of sight, and strategies used in the flight to freedom from slavery as necessarily ones of oversight. Using this model, but imagining Mann’s Veillance Plane as operating in three dimensions, I plot dark sousveillance as an imaginative place from which to mobilize a critique of racializing surveillance, a critique that takes form in antisurveillance, countersurveillance, and other freedom practices. Dark sousveillance, then, plots imaginaries that are oppositional and that are hopeful for another way of being. Dark sousveillance is a site of critique, as it speaks to black epistemologies of contending with antiblack surveillance, where the tools of social control in plantation surveillance or lantern laws in city spaces and beyond were appropriated, coopted, repurposed, and challenged in order to facilitate survival and escape. This might sound like Negro spirituals that would sing of freedom and escape routes, or look

CAUTION!!

COLORED PEOPLE

OF BOSTON, ONE & ALL,

You are hereby respectfully CAUTIONED and advised, to avoid conversing with the

Watchmen and Police Officers
of Boston,

For since the recent ORDER OF THE MAYOR & ALDERMEN, they are empowered to act as

KIDNAPPERS

AND

Slave Catchers,

And they have already been actually employed in KIDNAPPING, CATCHING, AND KEEPING SLAVES. Therefore, if you value your LIBERTY, and the Welfare of the Fugitives among you, Show them in every possible manner, as so many HOUNDS on the track of the most unfortunate of your race.

Keep a Sharp Look Out for
KIDNAPPERS, and have
TOP EYE open.

APRIL 24, 1851.

like an 1851 handbill distributed by Theodore Parker, a white abolitionist from Massachusetts, that advised “colored people of Boston” to “keep a sharp lookout for kidnappers” who would act as slave catchers under fugitive slave laws that federalized anti-black surveillance (above). In this way, acts that might fall under the rubric of dark sousveillance are not strictly enacted by those who fall under the category of blackness.

Dark sousveillance charts possibilities and coordinates modes of responding to, challenging, and confronting a surveillance that was almost all-encompassing. In the *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, Frederick Douglass carefully describes how surveillance functioned as a comprehensive and regulating practice on slave life: “at every gate through which we were to pass, we saw a watchman—at every ferry a guard—on every bridge a sentinel—and in every wood a patrol. We were hemmed in upon every side.”¹³ This sweeping ordering did not, of course, preclude escapes and other forms of resistance, such as antisurveillance “pranks” at the expense of slave patrollers by stretching vines across roads and bridges to trip the patrollers riding on their horses, or counterveillance songs, for example, the folk tune “Run, Nigger, Run,” which warned of approaching slave patrols.¹⁴ Recalling acts of antisurveillance and counterveillance, ex-slave Berry Smith of Forest, Mississippi, tells of “the pranks we used to play on them paterollers! Sometimes we tied ropes

across the bridge and the paterollers’d hit it and go in the creek. Maybe we’d be fiddling and dancing on the bridge and they’d say, ‘Here come the paterollers!’ Then we’d put out.”¹⁵ Such playful tricks were a means of self-defense. These oral histories of ex-slaves, slave narratives, and runaway notices, in revealing a sociology of slavery, escape, and freedom, recall the brutalities of slavery (instruments of punishment, plantation regulation, slave patrols) and detail how black performative practices and creative acts (fiddling, songs, and dancing) also functioned as sousveillance acts and were employed by people as a way to escape and resist enslavement, and in so being were freedom acts.

As a way of knowing, dark sousveillance speaks not only to observing those in authority (the slave patroller or the plantation overseer, for instance) but also to the use of a keen and experiential insight of plantation surveillance in order to resist it. Forging slave passes and freedom papers or passing as free are examples of this. Others include fugitive slave Ellen Craft escaping to Philadelphia in 1848 with her husband, William, by posing as a white man and as William’s owner; Henry “Box” Brown’s escape from slavery in 1849 by mailing himself to freedom in a crate “3 feet long and 2 wide”; Harriet Jacobs’s escape from slavery to a cramped garret above her grandmother’s home that she named as both her prison and her emancipatory “loophole of retreat”; slave spirituals as coded messages to coordinate escape along the Underground Railroad; Harriet “Moses” Tubman and her role in the 1863 Combahee River Raid that saw over seven hundred people escape enslavement in South Carolina; Sojourner Truth’s escape to freedom in 1826 when she “walked off, believing that to be alright.”¹⁶ Dark sousveillance is also a reading praxis for examining surveillance that allows for a questioning of how certain surveillance technologies installed during slavery to monitor and track blackness as property (for example, branding, the one-drop rule, quantitative plantation records that listed enslaved people alongside livestock and crops, slave passes, slave patrols, and runaway notices) anticipate the contemporary surveillance of racialized subjects, and it also provides a way to frame how the contemporary surveillance of the racial body might be contended with.

NOTES

1. Winant, "The Dark Matter," 10.
2. Hammonds, "Black (W)holes and the Geometry of Black Female Sexuality," 139.
3. Baldwin, *The Evidence of Things Not Seen*, 44.
4. Bambara, "Preface" in Julie Dash, *Daughters of the Dust*, xii; bell hooks, *Black Looks*, 116.
5. Ferguson, *Aberrations in Black*, 77.
6. *Ibid.*, 77.
7. Park, "The Conflict and Fusion of Cultures with Special Reference to the Negro," 129– 130.
8. *Ibid.*, 130. In *Aberrations in Black*, Ferguson discusses Park's address to the American Sociological Society through a reading of Baldwin's unpublished chapter. Ferguson notes that Baldwin was aware that this feminization was also about the queering of blackness, with the character Woodridge, a black queer professor who "represents the very nonconformity that Americanization programs were supposed to correct and canonical forms excluded," 59.
9. Ellison, *Invisible Man*, xv.
10. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters*, 143.
11. *Ibid.*
12. Mann, Nolan, and Wellman, "Sousveillance," 333.
13. Douglass, *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*, 103.
14. "Run, nigger, run, de patrole's a commin' / Run, nigger, run, de patrole's a commin' / The nigger run, dat nigger flew / The nigger tore his shirt in two / Run, nigger, run!" The interviewer who recorded ex-slave Aunt Ferebe Rogers noted that when asked about the song, "no amount of coaxing availed to make her sing the whole of the song, or to tell any more of the words." *Georgia Narratives*, vol. 4, part 3, in Work Projects

Administration, *Born in Slavery: Slave Narratives from the Federal Writers' Project, 1936–1938*, 214. An extended version of this song made an appearance in the film *12 Years a Slave* (2013). Also see Sally E. Hadden, *Slave Patrols: Law and Violence in Virginia and the Carolinas* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2001).

15. Berry Smith, ex-slave, Scott County, *Mississippi Narratives*, vol. 9, in Work Projects Administration, *Born in Slavery*, 129.

16. Mabee, *Soujourner Truth*, 13.

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Full citation: Browne, S. (2015). *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness*. Durham and London: Duke University Press.

NATURAL
Mimi Qnq̄q̄ha

A woman sits on a section of drystone wall in front of an uneven wire fence. Hills swell and press into the distance behind her. The cloth that wraps her hair matches the teal of the socks pulled taut over her pants. Her skin is dark. She looks away from the camera.

Each image in British-Guyanese photographer Ingrid Pollard's 1988 *Pastoral Interlude* series features two unlikely characters. The first is the English countryside, fulfilling a storybook role as the pinnacle of peace and leisure. In every print, Britain's Lake District unfolds in familiar scenes: lazy rippled creeks, idyllic cottages that poke out through pockets of trees.

But it is the solitary Black subjects who bring the series to life. In one photograph, a man stands knee-deep in a creek, body bent at the hips and face serenely turned toward the haul of a fishing net. In another, a woman peers at the landscape over a waist-high stone wall.

"It's as if the Black experience is only lived within an urban environment," Pollard (1988) writes under one of these photographs. "I thought I liked the Lake District; where I wandered lonely as a Black face in a sea of white. A visit to the countryside is always accompanied by a feeling of unease; dread."

A visit to the countryside is always accompanied by a feeling of unease. Where are the places that we are allowed to be? Pollard's figures seem to search for answers. They gaze over fences, into water, and through and within the natural world around them. They search despite, or because of, unwritten rules that govern their movements. These are rules that insist that even within their own land are places where it is unnatural for them, as Black people, to be. (Another caption reads: "The owners of these fields; these trees and sheep want me off their GREEN AND PLEASANT LAND. No Trespass, they want me DEAD"; Pollard 1988.)

It is a comfortable form of control, the easy certainty that purports to know where some people belong and others do not. Some of us get the inner city, the photos in *Pastoral Interludes* say, while others have the world at their disposal. The subjects within



So much data about Black people is out of the hands of Black people. what if we were in charge of the places where we are counted? what if we were in data centers instead of in the data?

Pollard's images are not out of place, but they are out of their *imagined* place. This is an offense just as dangerous.

The machine of contemporary American society insists that people have imagined places, and I have come to see that in the tech world, the preferred place for Black people is within data. In data sets we appear as the perfect subjects: silent, eternally wronged, frozen in a frame of injustice without the messiness of a face/accents/hint of refusal. It is easier to deal with data sets about Black people than it is to dwell on the great gears of a system that penalizes darker skin tones or to consider the resentment that generations of state-sanctioned neglect could breed. It is easier to see Black people as numbers and bodies than as encounters and people. When structural workings of racism meet the distancing power of quantification, both combine to freeze us in place.

In a sense, this experience is not unusual. Data-driven systems have a churning logic of their own that stems from data's ability to stand in for so much more: truth, certainty, insights, power. In an economy in which data can be slurped up for no justifiable reason beyond the tenuous possibility of future profit, the possession of data sets operates as a form of Foucauldian power-knowledge. As a result, datafication as a process is routine. Today, the fate of being relegated to a data set can fall upon anyone who dares own a device, send an email, or open a bank account.

What is unique are the ways in which data-driven stories concerning Black people begin, too often, from an assumption of disenfranchisement. This has only become more pronounced with advances in corporate and state applications of machine learning and automated decision-making systems.

So the stories have poured out: A software engineer discovering that Google's image recognition algorithms classified his Black friend as a gorilla (followed by Google's frantic update, which involved making gorillas unsearchable rather than correcting the mistake; Simonite 2018). The 2016 beauty contest in which algorithms charged with choosing the most beautiful images of women soundly rejected darker contestants (Levin 2016). The abysmally low rates at which a few large tech companies' facial recognition programs were able to recognize Black women and the cries in response from activists about whose aims would be furthered by improving those rates (Lohr 2018).

Countless more examples exist, but to list them is a trap. It is a trap into which I have already stumbled. My routine recounting of these events numbs their effect. It treats them as though they are surprising bugs rather than the latest edition of a time-old narrative. The more such recitations are invoked, the more they normalize the idea that routine suffering of Black people is natural and expected. This is what Saidiya Hartman (1997, 4) refers to as the need for Black suffering to be evidenced in "endless recitations of the ghastly," and it is a need that is impossible to satisfy precisely because it transposes pain into point rather than proof while reproducing the logic that declares that only data give credible testimony to this pain. And so the recitations become infinite attestations to an argument that is not intended to be won.

One of Pollard's most striking captions in *Pastoral Interludes* is a heated correction of the narrative that removes her figures' ownership of the lands upon which they stand: "A lot of what MADE ENGLAND GREAT is founded on the blood of slavery, the sweat of working people / an industrial REVOLUTION without the Atlantic Triangle" (Pollard 1988).

Pollard's work insists, over and over again, that the Lake District her subjects traverse is not what it seems. Though the land she situates her Black British subjects within is one to which they have always been tied, it is not the same as the conception of nature they confront. It is not that Pollard's subjects disrupt the English countryside but that England subscribes to a notion of nature that removes them from it. That this removal is then treated as normal—as natural—is the myth that Pollard must push against.

This is what the process of norming and naturalization do: they smooth out the complications of the fuller story in pursuit of a simpler one. But there is a cost to the exchange.

It is true that the tangled tendrils of empire, capitalism, and racism have led to the obscene brutality that accompanies the Black experience(s) in the US. It is true that data can and should be used to surface the specific trends and accounts that reveal this and could otherwise hide tucked away. The issue is not about what is true but about how the act of repeatedly focusing on only these things produces a woefully incomplete picture. Narratives tied only to disenfranchisement place Blackness into a box of fragility so that Black people are always in need of saving rather than justice or liberation.

And it is liberation that is at the heart of the matter. Liberation of movement and space, a liberation that allows Black people to exist across all the realms of our own lands, from concrete streets to muddy countrysides. Liberation from portrayals that flatten and reduce. It is a freedom to exist wholly, to hover out of frame, to be resentful and irresponsible, and to insist upon opacity while fighting for equity and disavowing intelligibility. It is a freedom beyond easy solutions or appeals, a freedom that steps over the invisible rules of public space with a lightness that alternately claims, reveals, speaks to, and catches all the things that have always been ours...



I wanted to be in the Room, to pretend to have control, to be in the places where our information is more valuable than us.

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I do not want to be the counter-narrative. I do not want to be the response, I want to be enough. It is as if to be Black you have to acknowledge your own pain before searching for joy but today I would like to skip the pain.

Full citation: Onuoha, M. (2021). "Natural," in *Uncertain Archives: Critical Keywords for Big Data* (Thylstrup et. al., eds.), Cambridge: The MIT Press.

INSTALLATION IMAGES



DARK DATA

SEPTEMBER 11 - OCTOBER 23, 2021

AMERICAN ARTIST
HANNAH BLACK
STEPHANIE DINKINS
E. JANE
MIMI ONUOHA
SONDRA PERRY

CURATED BY GEE WESLEY
CURATORIAL FELLOWS: BIANCA DOMINGUEZ AND MAE MILLER

Dark Data. EFA Project Space.

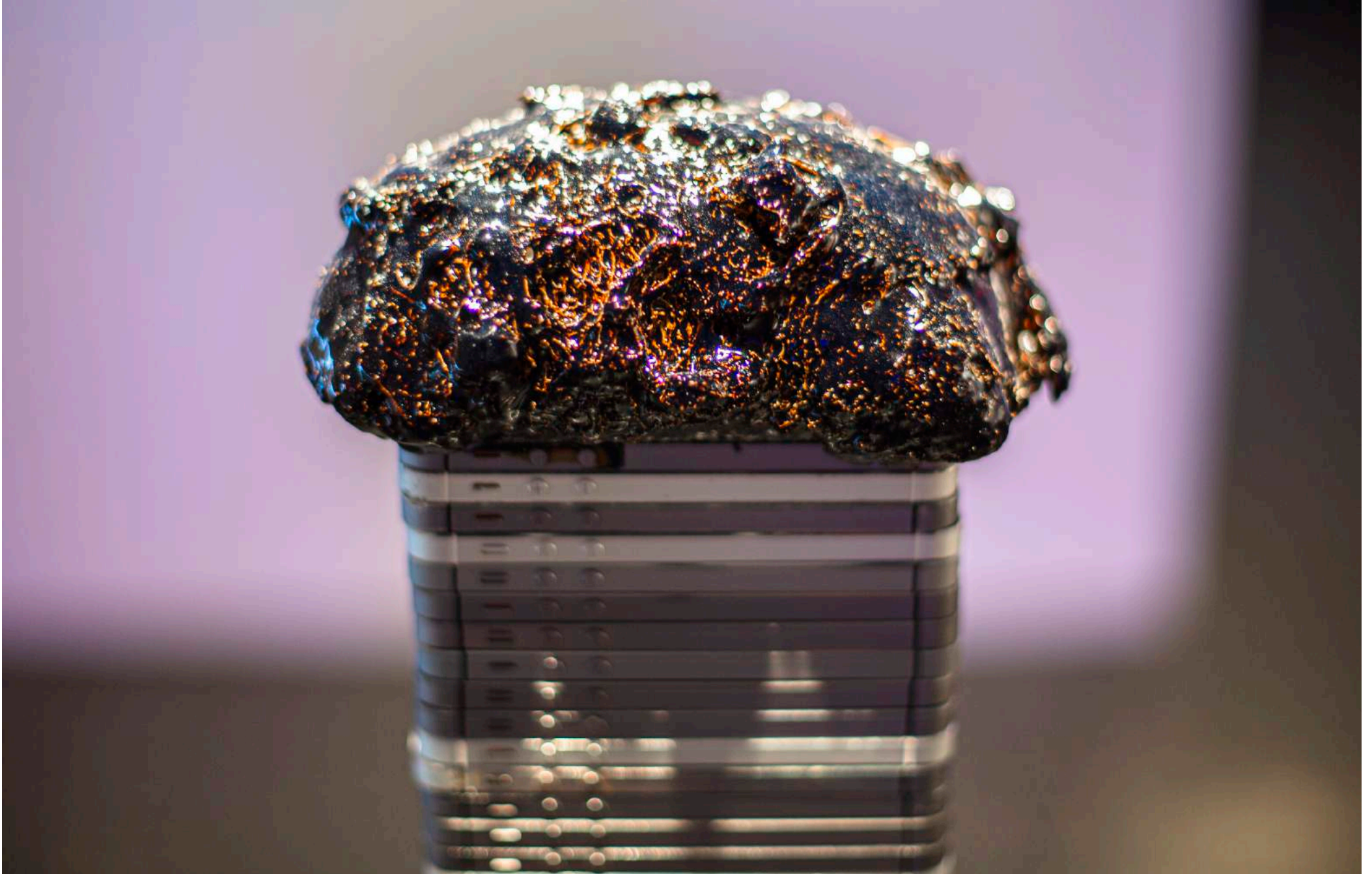


Left: Stephanie Dinkins, *A Beautiful African American Woman: Text to Image GAN -- RESULT*. 2021. Inkjet print. 20 x 20 inches. Courtesy of the artist; *A Beautiful Woman: Text to Image GAN -- RESULT*. 2021. Inkjet print. 20 x 20 inches. Courtesy of the artist; *A Beautiful Dark Skinned African American Woman: Text to Image GAN -- RESULT*. 2021. Inkjet print. 20 x 20 inches. Courtesy of the artist.

Center: Stephanie Dinkins, *Binary Calculations Are Inadequate to Assess Us*. 2021. Mobile app & website. Courtesy of the artist. *Right:* Mimi Çunçuha, *Natural: or Where Are We Allowed To Be*. 2021. 48 x 38.3 inches (each). Courtesy of the artist.



Detail: American Artist, Untitled (Too Thick) III. 2021. Aluminum phone housings, silicone, polyurethane, asphalt, wood, and Lightning cable. 3 x 6 x 52 inches. Courtesy of the artist.



Detail: American Artist, Untitled (Too Thick) III. 2021. Aluminum phone housings, silicone, polyurethane, asphalt, wood, and Lightning cable. 3 x 6 x 52 inches. Courtesy of the artist.



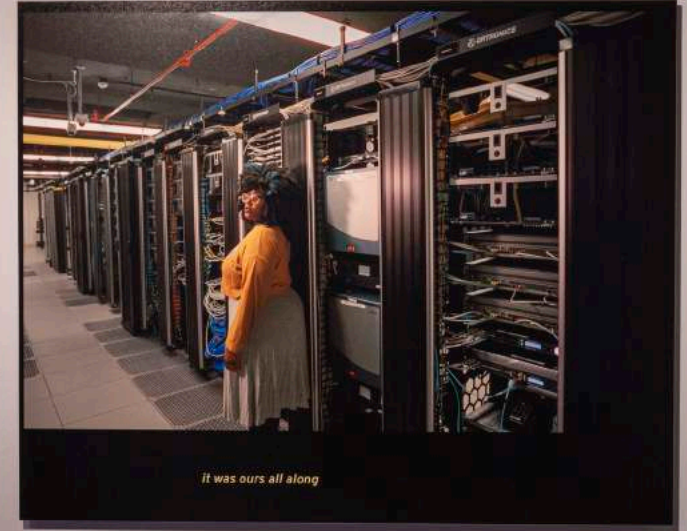
Left: Hannah Black, *Shame Mask*. 2018. Sculpture moldable plastic, and jewellery. 18.9 x 14.6 x 9.4 inches. Courtesy of the artist. *Right:* E. Jane, *You are a light shining (Maxine Waters)*. 2020. Neon. 33.75 x 17 inches. Courtesy of the artist.



Installation view of *Dark Data*. EFA Project Space.



Installation view: Mimi Qnqha, *Natural: or Where Are We Allowed To Be.* 2021. 48 x 38.3 inches (each). Courtesy of the artist.



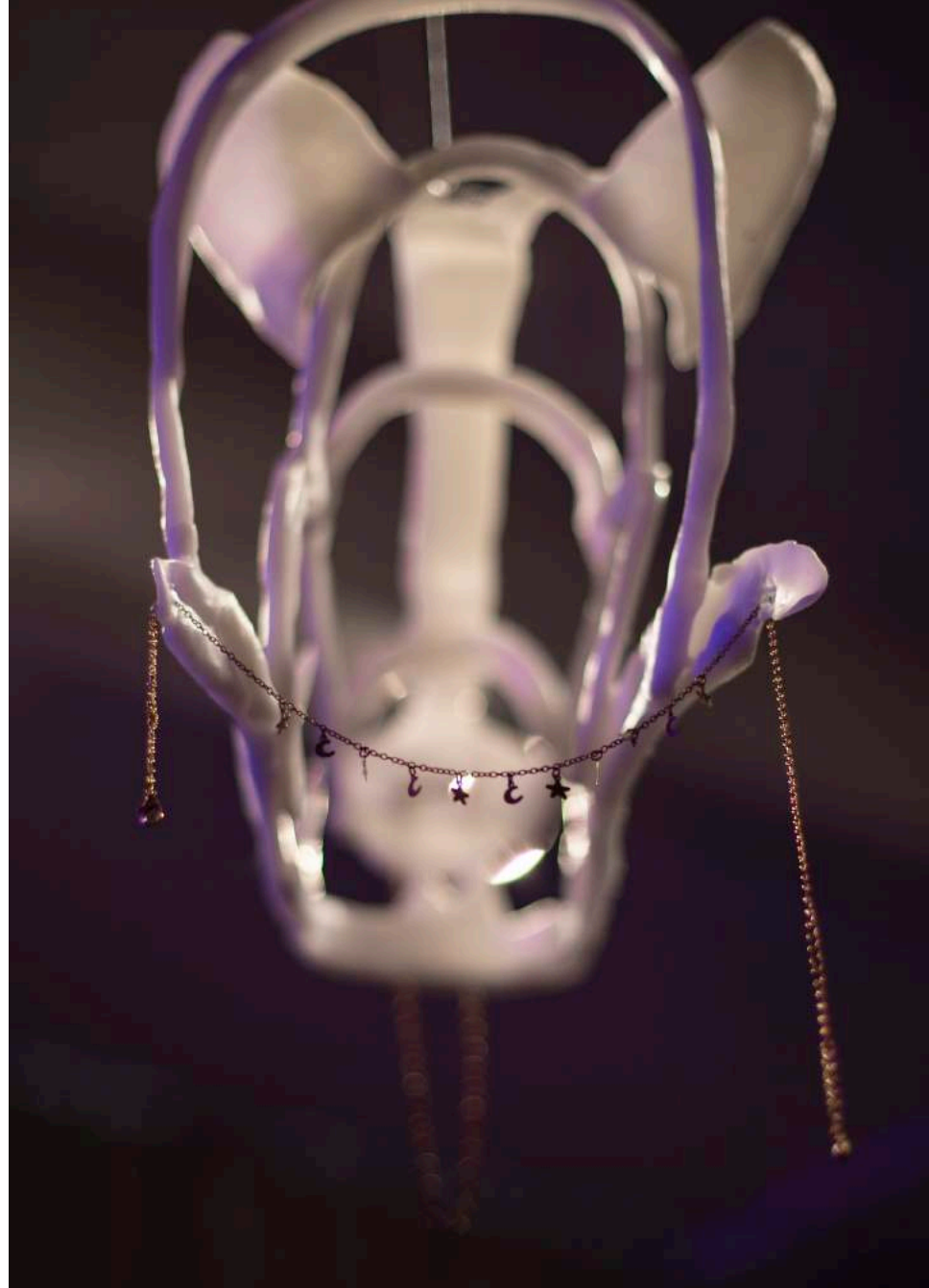
Installation views: Mimi Qunqha, Natural: or Where Are We Allowed To Be. 2021. 48 x 38.3 inches (each). Courtesy of the artist.



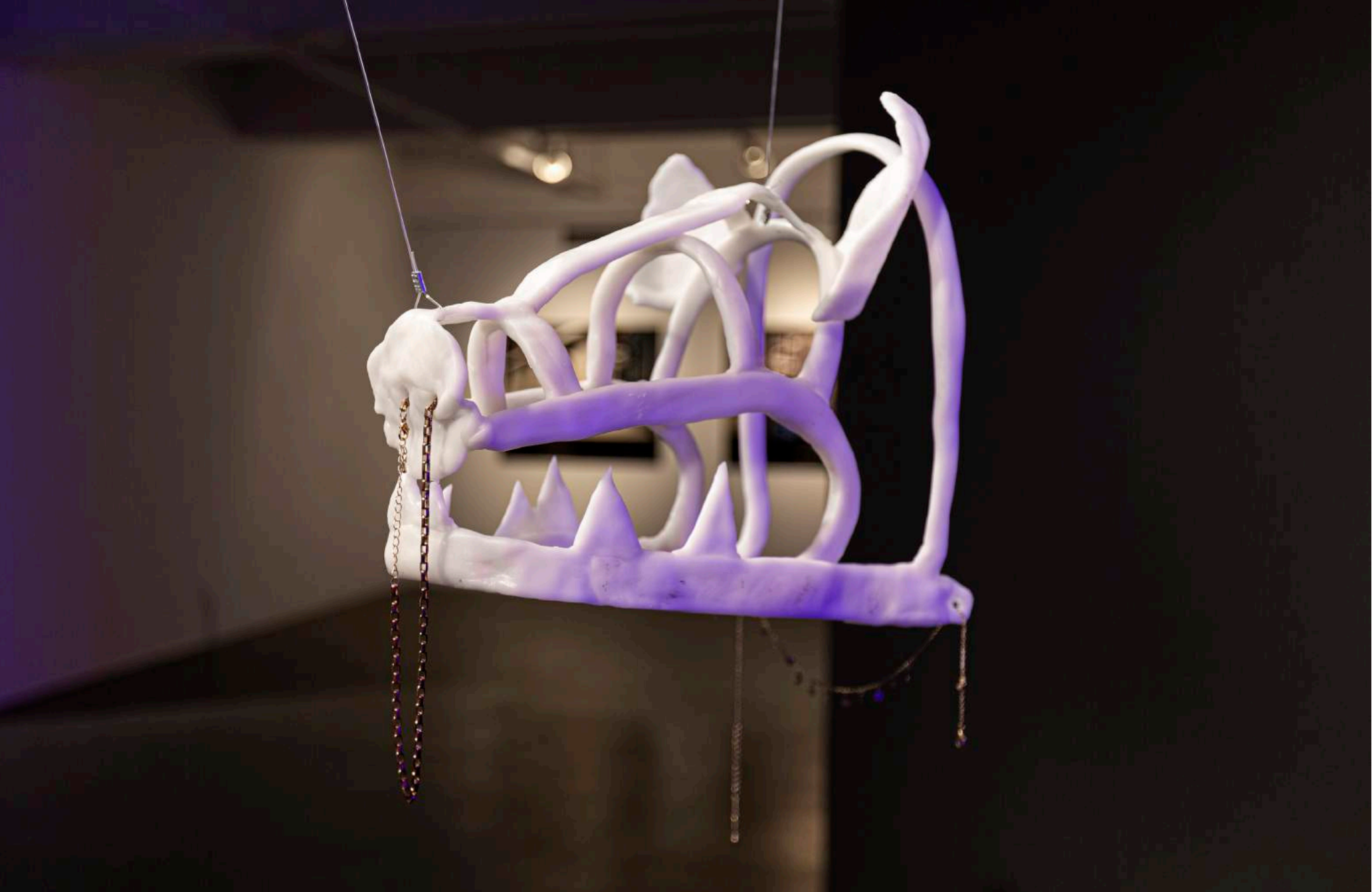
*Installation view: E. Jane, You are a light shining (Maxine Waters). 2020. Neon
33.75 x 17 inches. Courtesy of the artist.*



Detail: E. Jane, You are a light shining (Maxine Waters). 2020. Neon 33-75 x 17 inches. Courtesy of the artist.



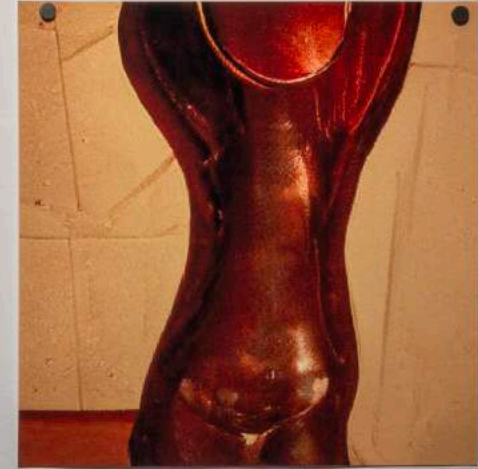
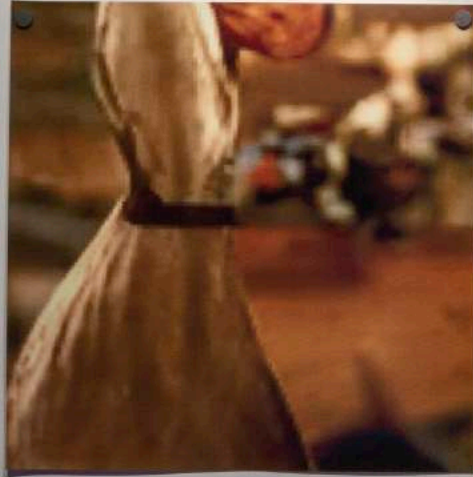
Installation view and detail: Hannah Black, Shame Mask. 2018. Sculpture moldable plastic, and jewellery 18.9 x 14.6 x 9.4 inches. Courtesy of the artist.



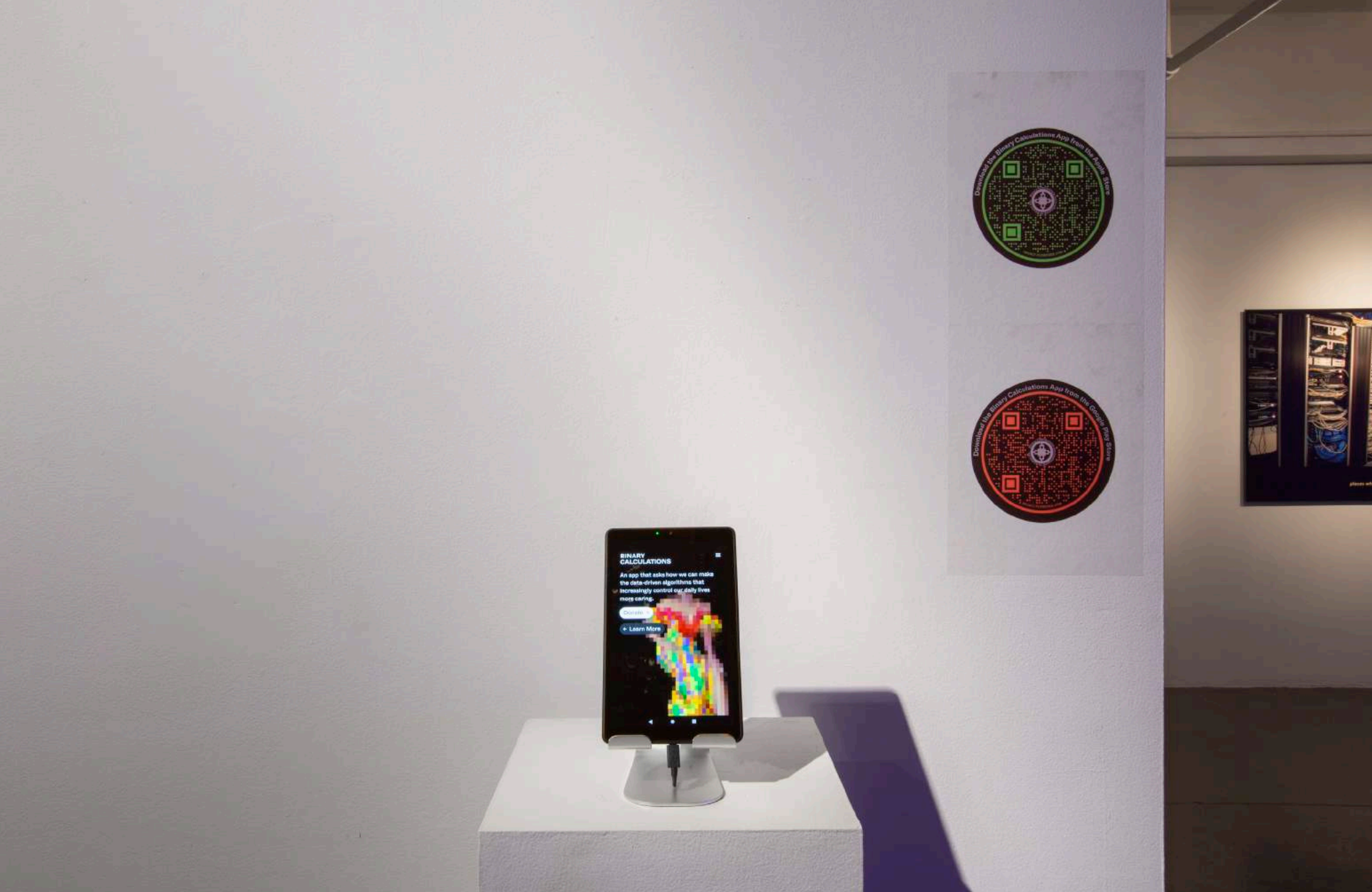
Installation view: Hannah Black, Shame Mask. 2018. Sculpture moldable plastic, and jewellery 18.9 x 14.6 x 9.4 inches. Courtesy of the artist.



Installation view of *Dark Data*. EFA Project Space.



Left: Stephanie Dinkins, A Beautiful African American Woman: Text to Image GAN -- RESULT. 2021. Inkjet print. 20 x 20 inches. Courtesy of the artist.
Center: A Beautiful Woman: Text to Image GAN -- RESULT. 2021. Inkjet print. 20 x 20 inches. Courtesy of the artist. *Right: A Beautiful Dark Skinned African American Woman: Text to Image GAN -- RESULT. 2021. Inkjet print. 20 x 20 inches. Courtesy of the artist.*



Installation view: Stephanie Dinkins, Binary Calculations Are Inadequate to Assess Us. 2021. Mobile app & website. Courtesy of the artist.



Installation view: Sondra Perry, *IT'S IN THE GAME '17*. 2017. Digital video projection in a room painted Rosco Chroma Key Blue, color, sound (looped). Commissioned by the Henie Onstad Kunstsenter, Oslo (HOK) and the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA), University of Pennsylvania for the exhibition *Myths of the Marble*. 16:20 minutes. Courtesy of the artist and Bridget Donahue, NYC. Still courtesy of Bridget Donahue and Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI), New York.

Thumbnail, detail: Sondra Perry, *IT'S IN THE GAME '17*.



Dark Data. EFA Project Space.

American Artist makes thought experiments that mine the history of technology, race, and knowledge production, beginning with their legal name change in 2013. Artist is a 2021 LACMA Art & Tech Lab Grant Recipient, 2021 Regents' Lecturer at UCLA, resident at Smack Mellon in Brooklyn, and an instructor of critical theory at the School for Poetic Computation. Their previous residencies include Recess, EYEBEAM, and the Whitney Museum Independent Study Program. They have exhibited at the Whitney Museum of American Art; MoMA PS1; Studio Museum in Harlem; Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago; and Nam June Paik Center, Seoul. They have had solo museum exhibitions at The Queens Museum, New York and The Museum of African Diaspora, California.

Hannah Black is an artist and writer working across installation, video, performance and text. In her often collaborative work, she uses her own writing as a starting point and blends theoretical, historical and personal material. Black's recent solo and collaborative shows include *Beginning, End, None*, Performance Space, New York (2019); *Some Context*, Chisenhale Gallery, London (2017); and *Screens Series: Hannah Black*, New Museum, New York (2016).

Mimi Oṅṅoḡha is a Nigerian-American artist creating work about a world made to fit the form of data. By foregrounding absence and removal, her multimedia practice uses print, code, installation and video to make sense of the power dynamics that result in disenfranchised communities' different relationships to systems that are digital, cultural, historical, and ecological. Oṅṅoḡha has spoken and exhibited internationally and has been in residence at Studio XX (Canada), Data & Society Research Institute (USA), the Royal College of Art (UK), Eyebeam Center for Arts & Technology (USA), and Arthouse Foundation (Nigeria, upcoming). She lives and works in Brooklyn.

Sondra Perry makes videos, performances, and installations that foreground digital tools as a way to critically reflect on new technologies of representation and remobilize their potential. Perry was born in Perth Amboy, New Jersey and currently resides in Newark. She received her MFA from Columbia University and her BFA from Alfred University. In 2015, Perry's work appeared in the *Greater New York* exhibition at MoMA/PS1. Other exhibitions include *Resident Evil* at The Kitchen, New York, *Typhoon Coming On* at Serpentine Galleries, London; *Trigger: Gender as a Tool and a Weapon* at The New Museum, New York; and *Disguise: Masks and Global African Art*, Seattle Art Museum. The artist has participated in residencies including CORE at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston and the Experimental Television Center.

E. Jane is an interdisciplinary artist and musician based in Brooklyn, New York. Inspired by Black liberation and womanist praxis, their work incorporates digital images, performance, sculpture, installation, and sound design. Since 2015, Jane has been developing the performance persona MHYSA, an underground popstar for cyber resistance. MHYSA operates in Jane's *Lavendra/Recovery* (2015–)—an iterative multimedia installation—and out in the world. Their new album *NEVAEH* came out in February 2020 on Hyperdub records in London. E. Jane received their MFA from the University of Pennsylvania and a BA in Art History from Marymount Manhattan College. They were a 2016 recipient of the Wynn Newhouse Award, a 2019–2020 artist-in-residence at the Studio Museum in Harlem, and are currently a Harvard College Fellow in New Media as a part of *SCRAATCH*.

Stephanie Dinkins is a transmedia artist who creates platforms for dialogue about race, gender, aging, and our future histories. Dinkins' art practice employs emerging technologies, documentary practices, and social collaboration toward equity and community sovereignty. Dinkins is a professor at Stony Brook University where she holds the Kusama Endowed Professor in Art. Dinkins earned an MFA from the Maryland Institute College of Art and is an alumna of the Whitney Independent Studies Program. Dinkins is a 2021 United States Artist Fellow and Knight Arts & Tech Fellow. Previous fellowships, residencies and support include the Stanford Institute for Human-Centered Artificial Intelligence, Data and Society Research Institute Fellowship, Sundance New Frontiers Story Lab, and The Laundromat Project. Her work has been featured in the *New York Times*, *Hyperallergic*, *Wired*, and the BBC.

Bianca Dominguez is an artist, curator, healing arts practitioner, and educator residing in Brooklyn, New York. She founded *Medicine For the People*, an ongoing curatorial project bringing together BIPOC healers and artists to cultivate communal sacred spaces and to engage in the intersectionalities of social practice and healing through the arts. She was a collaborative artist alongside Tanya Aguiñiga at the MAD Museum, located in Manhattan, performing *Performance Crafting: Backstrap Weaving* in 2018. She also has showcased at Arts Gowanus in Brooklyn, NY and in Staten Island at the Newhouse Center of Contemporary Art. Currently she is attaining a BA in visual arts at Columbia University and is the lead teaching artist at Church Street School for Music and Art in TriBeCa.

Mae Miller is a researcher, curator, and museum educator. Her work engages the politics, histories, and aesthetics of global Black freedom struggles. Miller is currently a Postdoctoral Fellow at UC Berkeley. She received her Ph.D. in Geography from the Graduate Center, City University of New York in 2020 and recently completed the Museum Professionals Institute at the Studio Museum in Harlem. She has previously lectured at Vassar College, and developed youth educational programming at the Museum of the City of New York, Gunnersbury Park Museum (London, UK), and Columbus College of Art and Design (Columbus, OH, USA). Her first solo-curated exhibition, *A Thousand Secrets*, will open at Apexart Gallery in New York City in June 2022 and explores themes of relational worldmaking through oceanic crosscurrents.

Gee Wesley is an arts organizer born in Monrovia, Liberia, and based in New York where he works as a Curatorial Assistant in the Department of Media and Performance at The Museum of Modern Art. Prior to joining MoMA, Wesley held roles as Program Director at Recess (Brooklyn, NY), Curatorial Fellow at SculptureCenter (Queens, NY), Curatorial Fellow at the Institute of Contemporary Art (Philadelphia, PA), visiting instructor at Bard College (Annandale-on-Hudson, NY), and adjunct faculty in the Curatorial Practice MFA at the Maryland Institute College of Art (Baltimore, MD). Wesley is a co-founder and board member of Ulises, a nonprofit art bookshop based in Philadelphia. He received his M.A. from the Center for Curatorial Studies, at Bard College.

Acknowledgements and Thank You

Land Acknowledgement

This is Lenapehoking, the Lenape homeland and gathering place for any Indigenous nations and beings. When the unceded earth breathes again, there will be Indigenous lives here, as there are now and have always been. It will still be Lenapehoking. We learn from the bedrock and commit to uplifting, honoring, and listening to those who are seen and unseen, present and future.

Rights and Permissions Acknowledgement

We would like to thank Duke University Press for allowing us to reprint excerpts from Shaka McGlotten's essay, "Black Data," which first appeared in *No Tea, No Shade: New Writings in Black Queer Studies*, (Ed. E.P. Johnson), 2016 and Simone Browne's book *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness*, 2015. We would like to thank The MIT Press for allowing us to reprint Mimi Ọnụọha's essay, "Natural," which first appeared in *Uncertain Archives: Critical Keywords for Big Data* (Eds. N. B. Thylstrup, D. Agostinho, A. Ring, C. D'Ignazio, and K. Veel), 2021.

Curator Acknowledgements

Gee: I'd like to express my deepest appreciation and gratitude to Dylan Gauthier, Judy Giera and the rest of the incredible team at EFA for their unending support, knowledge, and expertise to the development of this exhibition. I'd also like to thank many dear thinkers, friends, and colleagues who have helped in the development of the ideas of this project including Nana Adusei-Poku, Dawn Chan, Lauren Cornell, Shaka McGlotten, Jerome Harris, and Evan Calder Williams.

Mae: Thank you to Gee Wesley, Bianca Dominguez, Dylan Gauthier, and Judy Giera for their role in bringing the exhibition to life and of course to the artists for their visions and praxis. My thinking around technology and society has been shaped over

the years through conversations with Benjamin Rubin, Aaron Mallory, and Marcus Gilroy-Ware. Karabo Likhetha has provided invaluable emotional and intellectual support as I have taken the leap toward a more curatorial path and away from conventional approaches to social scientific research.

Bianca: I would like to express my gratitude to the curatorial team, Gee Wesley and Mae Miller, as well as Judy Giera and Dylan Gauthier for being devoted to realizing this exhibition. I am deeply inspired by the exhibited artists and their vision to reimagine a world that combats racial oppression. Lastly I would like to give thanks to Project Nia, each youth cohort member I collaborated with during the Abolitionist Youth Institute last summer, as well as the writer Paulo Freire, for leading me towards the path of justice through transformative education.

end_notes #10
DARK DATA

American Artist, Hannah Black, Stephanie Dinkins, E. Jane, Mimi Onuoha, and Sondra Perry

Curated by Gee Wesley, Bianca Dominguez, and Mae Miller

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EFA Project Space, launched in September 2008 as a program of The Elizabeth Foundation for the Arts, is a collaborative, cross-disciplinary arts venue founded on the belief that art is directly connected to the individuals who produce it, the communities that arise because of it, and to everyday life; and that by providing an arena for exploring these connections, we empower artists to forge new partnerships and encourage the expansion of ideas.

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Published October 2021
Design by Unyimeabasi Udoh
Editor & Publisher: Dylan Gauthier
Typefaces: Spectral and Letter Gothic Std
Photography: Yann Chashanovski
Printed by Endeavor in Long Island City, New York

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