

Ezekiel Dixon-Román and Jasbir Puar

Mass Debilitation and Algorithmic Governance

01/11

e-flux journal #123 — december 2021 Ezekiel Dixon-Román and Jasbir Puar
Mass Debilitation and Algorithmic Governance

Ezekiel Dixon-Román

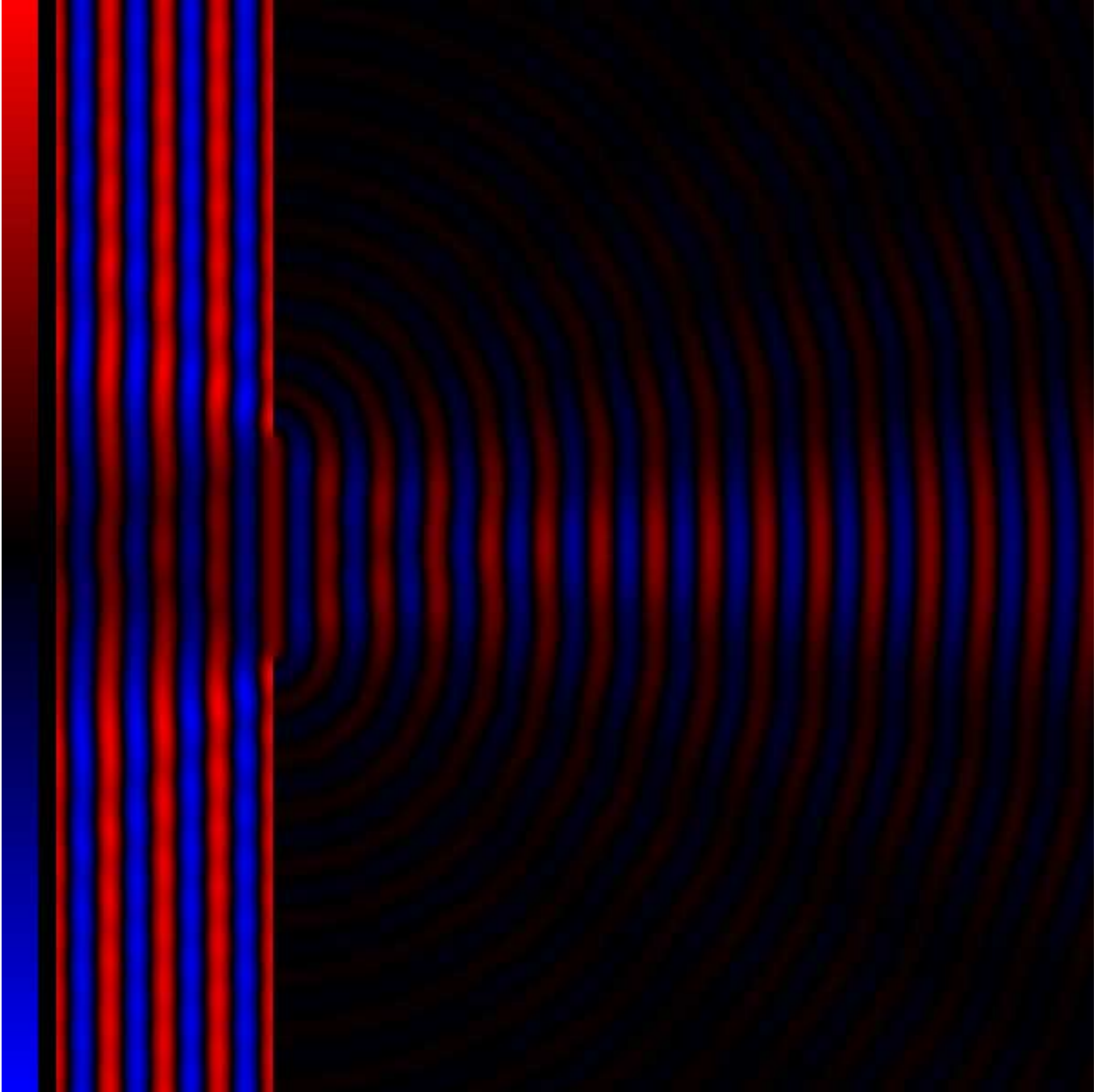
I trust that the unindexed lies of our world and the evidence of what transpired are not blueprints for emancipation, or maps to our future, but instead are indicators of the ways in which the brutalities of racial encounter demand a form of human being and being human that newly iterates blackness as uncomfortably enumerating the unanticipated contours of black life.

– Katherine McKittrick, “Mathematics Black Life”

In her article “Mathematics Black Life,” Katherine McKittrick’s interpretation of the indexes of colonial and anti-Black violence as “uncomfortably enumerating the unanticipated contours of black life” is not simply an alternative reading but a line of flight from the damned and pejorative narratives of Black life.

In my 2016 article “Algo-ritmo,” I hyphenated the Spanish word for algorithm, creating a portmanteau consisting of the words “something” and “rhythm.”¹ I played off the word “rhythm” to speak to what Derrida calls iterability in speech acts. Derrida argues that what makes speech acts effective are their iterability, that is, their repetition with alterity. For Derrida, it is alterity that enables conditions of possibility as opposed to determination – conditions of play. What McKittrick calls for in “Mathematics Black Life” is an alternative reading of the enumeration of colonial and anti-Black violence that renders an other-wise² understanding, one that is based on an onto-epistemology that accounts for Black survival and those who lived.

McKittrick’s focus on the “contours of Black life” as well as my focus on the “ritmo” of algo-ritmo imply patterns or rhythms that I would like to focus on here. I will argue that these patterns or rhythms are where the art or poethics of quantification lie. This is particularly important given that I will argue that algorithmic governance is a process of recursive rhythms and patterns. These rhythms and patterns are what preemptively shape a racializing affect, or what Jasbir Puar calls “slow life and debility.”³ I argue that algorithmic governance is made up of a system of modulating diffractive mechanisms (or diffractive modulators) that seek to compress the information patterns and rhythms of the world. Here, I see the potential of a poethics of other-wise diffractive patterns toward rerouting the onto-epistemology of the recursive system of algorithmic governance. I turn to algorithmic governance first.



Scalar plane wave diffraction on a slit of width being 4 wavelengths; Neumann boundary condition. License: Creative Commons CC0 1.0 Universal Public Domain Dedication.

The Rhythms of Algorithmic Governance and Racializing Affect

Since World War II, societies have been shifting from systems of institutional enclosures that discipline citizens' ways of being to systems of infinite and continuous modulating mechanisms, which generatively control access to institutions and human behavior.⁴ Digital technologies and the "internet of things" have enabled increasingly distributed logics, rationalities, and practices of governance via cybernetic systems of communication and predictive control. While sovereign, discipline, and control technologies of capture continue to exist in concert, it is increasingly control that becomes the dominant logic of systems of governance.

Within this context of cybernetic systems of governance, control has become the guaranteed form of "truth." That is, the assured path to "truth" is to shape the futurity of "truth" in the present. Thus, rather than try to prevent or deter the existence of what is empirically verifiable, cybernetic systems of control work via a play on temporality that manufactures a becoming-*assemblage* such as an event, organization, or body in the form of a threat, an anxiety, or desire to mold futurity in the present (or present futurity). In other words, regardless of whether a becoming-*assemblage* is empirically or objectively verifiable, a future event is constructed based on already existing predispositions or beliefs. The operative logic for such an environment of manufactured futurity is preemptive action.⁵

Preemption is an operative logic that works on a temporality which constructs a threat, anxiety, or desire as a futurity, based on an affective fact that can never be verified or falsified because it is constantly deferred into a conditional future. The *modus operandi* of preemptive logic is the generation of actions based on already existing predispositions or the visceral bodily responses of past conditionings activated in the present (or presenting pasts). The affect produced by a supposed threat based on present futurity and presenting pasts, a "history of the present," is a form of control that is ontogenetic (relating to the development of an organism). This creates what Brian Massumi calls *ontopower*: the power of emergence and the becoming-sovereign of those determining the operative logic.⁶

Algorithmic governance produces a facade of ultimate objectivity, where the former legitimated and authorized authority is displaced onto the instrumental aspect of technology, leaving nothing or no one to appeal to.⁷ Given that the predicted threat or event is in the future, what evidence, conditions, or rationale can one

appeal to when it comes to the predictive statistical and psychometric classifications of algorithmic governance? There are no actual actions or event to defend, only the "history" of individual data reagggregated with other data.

My intervention is not based on a critique of exclusion⁸ but rather on an inherited onto-epistemology of the algorithm, an ontological process of becoming, and the epistemological processing of information. Here, algorithmic governance entails a potentiation⁹ of value from and through machines in order to produce a recursive reconfiguration of being. This recursion of reconfigured being is based on a transparency principle that the formation of the post-Enlightenment subject relies on. It assumes hierarchies of human difference that continue to haunt the machine. Thus, rather than ask the question of who is included in the design of technology or how "difference" is coded into the machine, I am interested in the techno-social system's onto-epistemology, which is shaped by the colonial logic of the post-Enlightenment subject.

This cybernetic system of governance processes patterns and rhythms of information that the system seeks to compress into its existing logics. In algorithmic governance the existing logics are based on the predefined operationalization of laws and policies. Algorithmic modulators process the information patterns and rhythms, attempting to enfold the variability of knowing into the political-judicial, transparent, or self-determining subject. The patterns and rhythms of this recursive system include the regular generation of data through individual digital interactions and individuals' encounters with state institutions, the regular training of algorithms on available data, and the selective use of training data. Algorithms are systematically used to inform institutional decision-making and the shaping of behaviors and social interactions, due to the violence of the inability to make just decisions. The futures of algorithmic prediction already become the past, as the social is forged through the individual data generated for algorithmic compression. It is important to note that this process of recursion is not a process of reproduction but rather a spiraling regeneration of the post-Enlightenment subject.

These rhythms of algorithmic governance then become a significant driver in a shaping of time and space that modulates the speed of life, what Puar calls "slow life." The patterns are random, yet rhythms are calculated – for instance, when it comes to practices such as Israeli state checkpoints in Palestine. These rhythms are related to biopolitical technologies and logics of uncertainties that bring into

03/11

e-flux journal #123 — december 2021 Ezekiel Dixon-Román and Jasbir Puar
Mass Debilitation and Algorithmic Governance

emergence an assemblage of racialized ontologies. This is based on a recursive modulation of temporality that aims to *slow down life*, even in the face of the speed of modernity. Here, I think Sylvia Wynter's sociogenic principle (the principle of the sociopolitical constitution of the flesh/body) is helpful to rethink how the algorithmic rhythms and patterns of sociopolitical relations become ontogenic via the flesh/body, shaping the neurobiological structure of the flesh, and as such creating what I've called racializing affect.¹⁰ My articulation of racializing affect borrows from Michelle Stephens in her book *Skin Acts*, where she argues that the flesh can be felt and mimetically shared with others.¹¹ The racializing affect of the flesh is the ontological remainder of the skinned body – the material remainder of the symbolic and discursive constitution of the skin. For Massumi, the process by which affect is racialized is the proprioception that enfolds the sensations of the skin into the material memory of the muscular body and autonomic system. Stephens argues that this material remainder is where one finds the racialized body, a Black subject standing before the symbolic race. Racializing affect is inseparable from the patterns and rhythms of techno-social systems and the historicity of colonialism, which reduce and stretch temporality while modulating the speed of life.

These modulated patterns and rhythms, which have been exceptionally felt during the Covid-19 pandemic, can be understood in terms of "diffraction." In my dialogue with Ramon Amaro in this issue, I mention the potential of diffraction for computationally identifying, undoing, exorcizing, or conjuring the bodies of the racial Other in their diffractive wake. I'd like to unpack this a bit further as I conclude with a focus on the diffractive apparatus of algorithmic governance.

Diffraction and a Black Feminist Poethics

Diffraction is a concept from theoretical physics that refers to the bending of wave patterns when they are obstructed by an interfering object.¹² The waves bend and spread as they are obstructed. When witnessing diffraction, our gaze is not focused on sameness, as it is when witnessing reflection, but rather on the material differences that are being produced. In other words, diffraction produces differential material wave patterns that can be better understood as produced relational and connected differences. This is what da Silva characterizes as "difference without separability."¹³

I'd like to briefly use the example of Facebook's advertising API. Although users are not able to gain direct access to the proprietary

advertising algorithm of the API, it is possible to figure out what the algorithm is doing via a series of experiments. In a study conducted by Ali et al., the researchers sought to do just that.¹⁴ Through their study they learned that, while advertisers can specify the parameters of the target populations they would like to reach, Facebook's advertising algorithm employs an automated optimization procedure that deploys the advertisement to users beyond the initial demographic. In other words, Facebook is running automatic text and image classification on advertisements in order to calculate a predicted relevance score for users. This alters who sees an advertisement before users even interact with it. In addition, this study found that the amount of money invested in Facebook advertisements, the content of the advertisements, and user intra-actions with advertisements (i.e., generated clicks) shaped who became digitally interpellated by the advertisements. When the researchers created a bodybuilding advertisement, they found that it was delivered to over 75 percent of men on average, while a cosmetics advertisement they created was delivered to over 90 percent women on average. Although we may not know the specific algorithms of the Facebook API, we do have a good sense of its diffractive force.

Facebook's advertising API is based on an autopoiesis and a recursive system that seeks to regenerate its logic as exemplified in its diffracted patterns. Patterns, rhythms, intensities, entangled relationalities, material movement, and temporal entanglements are diffracted and becoming processes. The recursive system is finite, while the information rhythms and patterns are infinite, thus when the recursive system seeks to compress indeterminacies it produces diffracted patterns and rhythms of discontinuity or disjuncture. In a system of autopoiesis, the algorithm will seek to regenerate the changing logic of transparency, as in the Facebook API. Yet, in a system of allopoiesis – that is, a system that is fundamentally open to the potential of epistemological transformation – the diffraction of the creative indeterminacies of Blackness will open up the system to patterns and rhythms other-wise, even toward what Luciana Parisi has called a xeno-patterning or alien intelligence.¹⁵ In the case of the Facebook API, the algorithm does not only shift from delivering the advertisements to those predicted relevant to those predicted irrelevant, but more importantly, the automated text and image classification system is continuously altered, throwing any normative distinction between relevant/irrelevant into flux.

It is here that I see Denise Ferreira da Silva's

articulation of a Black feminist poethics as helpful, particularly toward the development of the art or the poethics of quantification.¹⁶ Through a Black feminist poethics, da Silva seeks to push a thinking and reading of text without modern categories. As she argues, it is via the formalizations of law, policy, calculation, measurement, and computation that Blackness's creative potential is arrested. She pushes us to consider how modern categories, especially of time, history, and development, have shaped a text or an event and, as such, to address colonial and racial subjugation. As she states:

For the Black Feminist Poethics, a moment of radical praxis acknowledges the creative capacity Blackness indexes, reclaims expropriated total value, and demands for nothing less than decolonization – that is, a reconstruction of the world, with the return of the total value without which capital would not have thrived and off which it still lives.¹⁷

This is a practice of thinking and reading that forces one to locate or identify the haunting logics of what happened that's immanent in what is currently happening, how what is happening anticipates what is yet to happen, and how what happened is already immanent in what is yet to happen. Yet, I also want to argue that what da Silva pushes us to consider is a radical recursive praxis, one that is allopoethic, works without modern categories, and is open to the creative potential of Blackness. Such a system, what I might characterize as a poethics of quantification, would enable the transformative potential of diffracted patterns and rhythms of onto-epistemologies other-wise, while also enabling the potentiality of alternative futures.

Jasbir Puar's Response

From the vantage point of "the algorithm," it may be commonsensical to claim, as does Dixon-Román, that "it is increasingly control that becomes the dominant logic of systems of governance." And yet, many have concerns about privileging only a Deleuzian perspective, given that Deleuze pronounced some thirty years ago that hacking is replacing striking.¹⁸ I continue to ask, as I did in *The Right to Maim*, how sovereign, disciplinary, and control modalities of power exist not only "in concert," as Dixon-Román acknowledges, but more trenchantly in such enmeshed forms that the continued deployment of these conceptual rubrics may not elucidate much about contemporary arrangements of power. Foucault himself was interested in a more porous and less teleological indexing of these powers.¹⁹ Indeed, as John Modern asks, "What

difference ... does the algorithmic difference make?"²⁰

We might want to keep in mind such a question, otherwise we submit to the intractability of surveillance capitalism that minimizes, if not dismisses, the 250,000 Punjabi farmers who launched the largest strike-protest in human history, which continues more than a year onwards; or the unprecedented anti-colonial revolt across the fragmented parts of Palestine that erupted in May of 2021; or Amazon workers all over the US who are refusing to work. The strict delineation of hacking and striking unwittingly resituates a progressive teleology of modernity, and also reinforces an asymmetric geopolitical ordering (which leads me to the geopolitics of racial ontology that I discuss below). To hone the articulation of cybernetic logics of governance with their fleshly actualization – actualizations that he argues operate through the right to maim as a "first principal" – Modern helpfully parses out the "metaphysics of the right to maim" from the "physics of maiming." The integration of discipline and control may well render their distinctions moot and transform them into what Helga Tawil-Souri, Omar Jabary Salamanca, and others have theorized as an "asphyxatory regime of power."²¹

[center]Jasbir Puar

"Slow life" is a concept I have been thinking about with reference to Palestine to posit a relationship between settler colonialism, what Jackie Wang calls carceral capitalism, and the modulation of registers of capitalist time. These registers include historical/civilizational time, the "stealing of time"²² through the expansion of labor time, the refusal or withholding of temporal simultaneity so coveted in our connective technologies that signal modernity, but most significantly, the cordoning off (and thus the creation) of space through time. Time and space are not exponentially compressed, endlessly linked, nor interfacing more rapidly than before, but rather are a series of discontinuous refractions that are recursive. The cordoning off of space through time relies on the physical architectural structures that are understood as obstacles to "free-flowing" speed, rhythm, and pace: checkpoints, circuitous highways, settlement locations, and the partitioning of land and populations into areas A, B, and C. Nothing ever happens "on time." As Rema Hammami and other scholars on Palestine have pointed out, the stretching of time – the West Bank is both smaller, because movement is short-circuited, and larger, because it takes longer to move from one place to another – is not a by-product of

05/11

e-flux journal #123 — december 2021 Ezekiel Dixon-Román and Jasbir Puar
Mass Debilitation and Algorithmic Governance



Khaled Jarrar, *Blood for Sale*, 2018. Courtesy of Open Source Gallery. Photo: Stefan Hagen.

surveillance; it is the point of surveillance.²³

Uncertainty becomes a primary affective orientation, a folded-into-the-flesh condition of possibility, an ontology of the “flesh as felt,” what Dixon-Román calls “recursive rhythms and patterns” that “preemptively shape a racializing affect.” (Alex Weheliye’s work on “racializing assemblages” also comes to mind here.²⁴) Dixon-Román articulates a version of slow life when he states that “Racializing affect is inseparable from the patterns and rhythms of techno-social systems and the historicity of colonialism, which reduce and stretch temporality while modulating the speed of life.” I have elsewhere described the racializing of affect, or something akin to it, as the “geopolitics of racial ontology ... that examines the regulation of affect as a racializing form of control.”²⁵ I emphasize geopolitics in order to situate bodies in the specificity of techno-social systems that interface and instrumentalize the historicity of colonialism, while also cautioning against theorizing a “locationless notion of ontology.”²⁶

Uncertainty, as theorists of computation and algorithms alert us, is already embedded in the calculus of statistical probability as the factor of the indeterminate. The indeterminate is the ontological capture of uncertainty by the algorithmic governance of the bio-necro-political state, an already anticipated moment when preemptive power directed towards shaping outcomes is exceeded by the emergent potentialities of those outcomes. In other words, preemptive power does not so much desire to control the emergence of the uncertain, but to create and direct uncertainty – the certainty of uncertainty. Slow life as I have understood it is therefore a reckoning with the capitalist captures of uncertainty. Questions then arise: Do (Palestinian) indeterminacies disrupt these calculative logics? What are the interstitial ontologies of the body that knows anything can happen or the body that is always prepared for something to happen, when uncertainty is not just something niggling the liberal subject but a foreground condition of being?

I have called this kind of relation between time and space “time itself.” Time itself, I argue, is not the same as the time lost to the continual expansion of labor time and the re/production of the laborer and her/their/his ability to get to and undertake labor. Time itself does not hew to the past, the present, nor the future as primary referent points. As a stratum of matter, time itself, as an affective modality, is not of the laboring body but of the para- and sub-individual capacities of bodies. Unlike affective labor, time itself refers to the laboring of affect, a laboring that contributes to the capitalist profitability and expansion (that is, the deepening entrenchment

of technologies of containment globally) of occupation-as-land-use. Time itself is less a stripping-away of individual properties than an endless interfacing of individual data and metrics. Time itself is not extracted from individual bodies, but is produced through the endless circuitry of individual material. Time itself is individual time.

What is at stake in untangling the workings of the individual? What is the corporeal in these individual processes? I am interested in how individualization is both digital and of the flesh, involving a series of recursive relationalities, as well as being a way of “unseeing” and reseeing corporeality. Following from Katherine McKittrick’s call for “an alternative reading of the enumeration of colonial and anti-Black violence,” Dixon-Román argues for attention to what he calls the “art or poethics of quantification.” The art of quantification is exemplified in a 2018 performance piece by the artist Khaled Jarrar: in front of Wall Street, Jarrar sold a ten-millimeter vial of his own blood at the daily stock price of global arms industry companies, such as Smith & Wesson. The art of quantification is inseparable from acts such as the tallying of the number of knees shot by the IDF during the Great March of Return in Gaza. Or we can think about the “epidemic of blindness” in Kashmir, the result of the targeting of more than three hundred eyes with pellet bullets since 2010, or more recently the blinding of hundreds of protesters in the uprisings in Chile in 2019.

This art exceeds the process of tabulation, as it involves a scrambling of fleshly registers, of limbs, of organs, of blood. To explain and redress the violence of individualization, there is often a recourse to the presumed relay of humanism: the perpetrators have to dehumanize the protestors, or have never humanized them, in order to be maim and kill them. Debates about humanizing targets of violence and capital exploitation, however, do little to help us comprehend individuals as the unit of maiming, and in fact may lead us astray from a more succinct analysis of circuits of capital. Individualization does not rehearse the primacy of human forms and in fact exploits humanist attachments to these forms. If we are to understand something, anything, about what Joseph Pugliese calls a “more-than-human biopolitics,” it is that the individual, not the individual, is the instrumentalized unit of such a biopolitics.²⁷ This is a biopolitics conditioned not through humanity nor even on an interspecies spectrum but through pure capacitation and its metrics. It is also important to note that the art of quantification informing individual economies does not demote the individual to a stripped-down individual; in other words, the individual-individual relation is not a correlate to the

07/11

e-flux journal #123 — december 2021 Ezekiel Dixon-Román and Jasbir Puar
Mass Debilitation and Algorithmic Governance

human/de-human one. As Dixon-Román notes in his theorization of “haunting” as, for instance, recursively embedded in a recent *New York Times* piece on “fake faces,” dividual data does not so much strip the individual to a dividual data set; rather, these data sets are integrated into serial relationalities that inaugurate a “new” face that never was and is yet to be.²⁸ Dividual data thus productively induces forms of relationality that do not so much erase the individual nor even redistribute it, but de-exceptionalize it through the potentiation of as-yet-to-be-known relationalities that are immanent in the present renderings of past data. Dixon-Román explains that this is a process of “produc[ing] a recursive reconfiguration of being,” the post-Enlightenment subject that “assumes hierarchies of human difference.” Insofar as any “sum” of dividuals do not a human make, I would propose that Dixon-Román’s being in question is not necessarily only of the human, but also of the dividual.

In light of Dixon-Roman’s invocation of Massumi’s preemptive ontopower, it’s important to note that Massumi’s belated analysis disregards the massive literature generated in the wake of 9/11 by critical race theorists grappling with state practices. These practices include demands for immigrants racialized as terrorists to self-report citizenship status to impel preemptive detention and deportation. Black feminist scholarship such as the luminous *The Other Side of Terror* by Erica Edwards makes clear that soft tactics of counterinsurgency are also technologies of preemption.²⁹ It is also crucial to sketch a distinction here between preemptive and prehensive power, in part because it is not simple to parse them. If the preemptive is a mode of using information and calculation to create, delimit, or derail a certain event, to shut down the indeterminant effect or proclivity, the prehensive is a mode of intervention, modulation, and titration into what is understood to be lively beyond preemption. That is to say, the preemptive seeks to eliminate that which is indeterminate while the prehensive accepts the indeterminate, entertains it, plays with it. The prehensiveness of algorithms does not revolve only around “representations of data,” nor is it solely a “tool to accomplish tasks,” but it also fosters “occasions of experience” that are neither driven fully by computation nor that which is external.³⁰

There is indeed slippage between the preemptive and the prehensive; they are nested technologies of temporality. Preemption is in part a narrative strategy – “Gaza will be uninhabitable by 2020” – that assists the power of the prehensive to mess with vitality, with excess. In this sense, maiming as a strategy is

not about preempting resistance, but about encountering, indeed prehending, the impossibility of such preemption, of stripping the body of resistance. The notion of un/inhabitation is less a humanistic measure and more a pronouncement of the uneven demands to survive forces of exploitation and disposability. The livable/unlivable binary is usurped by the prehension of incremental degrees of being.

There is another form of dividual-making that is not reliant, or solely sustained by, data-driven technologies, an interfacing of computation sovereignty and a more banal and mundane sovereign right to maim, an imbrication of sovereign, disciplinary, and control forms of power. Israeli soldiers’ descriptions of sniper targeting suggest there is a proprioceptive process that is parallel and akin to the data dividual process of sensing, sifting, sorting.³¹ Dividualizing does not break down or dismember the body (knees, ankles, limbs); rather, it does not recognize these disparate elements as part of a composite in the first place. The target is not the body, not even the body’s limb, but simply the/a limb. The flesh as felt takes on a slightly different valance of racializing affect here. One learns not to see the limb as missing a/the body. Spatial intimacy is what allows, rather than thwarts, seeing a human arm or leg as “a part” that floats free of the human form, available to the sniper/cop/soldier as perceptually decoupled from the body. The intimacy that is produced with the part has as its corollary the situatedness of the rest of the individual’s body. This relational frame of sight dividualizes by “unseeing” the body as a composite and situating these parts in a “more-than-human” biopolitics among other organic and nonorganic entities, be they infrastructural, ecological, biophysical, interspecial. In this visual-to-data economy, the dividual lends itself to a ground-zero analysis of fragments that are not of a whole, but instead embedded in the process of titrating life through bodily metrics and sub-individual capacities. The composite of the body is irrelevant; it is unimportant that it exists. While the maimed individual is (fantasized as) available for empowerment and prosthetic technologies/apparatuses, *the dividual is a communicated expectation* and a corporeal training rather than an ideologically driven representational figure; it relies on soliciting the plasticity of parts. Understanding the fleshly rendering of dividuals entails apprehending something beyond the body signified “in the dialectical form.”³²

Maiming therefore acts as source material for renewing settler-colonial subjectivity. What is at stake is not reproduction that buttresses the biopolitical state, but the regeneration of the

08/11

e-flux journal #123 — december 2021 Ezekiel Dixon-Román and Jasbir Puar
Mass Debilitation and Algorithmic Governance

metrics of capacitation. Maiming is the reiterative performative of the (founding?) event of settler colonialism that contributes to its enduring structure; maiming rehearses the violent separation of bodies from land. The recursive temporality of settler colonialism is therefore a process of settler regeneration and renewal. We could surmise that the right to maim is differently accentuated than the right to kill, because it avails this recursive process, as another precondition for settler-colonial occupation. Patrick Wolfe has importantly argued that settler colonialism is a structure, not an event, stressing that elimination of the native is not accomplished only via one-off genocide.³³ The endless repetition of the founding moment renders porous the limits of the event in time, such that event and structure are no longer opposed, nor do they disappear each other. Events of maiming compose the debilitating structure of settler colonialism, a recursive structure.

The question then is how the recursive creates the potential for remaking time, for inhabiting temporalities askew. Where is the potential in dividual economies?³⁴ We do not yet know what kinds of rearrangements of domestic and political spheres can be generated from these scenes of mass debilitation. We come to Spinoza – what can a body do? – through the bio/necropolitical, asking: How do populations live the unlivable? As the becoming-pandemic introduces novel precarities while reinforcing old ones, we will be asking these questions again and again. I am struck by the emptying out of the ethical that Denise Fererria da Silva points to when she states: “I am interested in the ethical indifference with which racial violence is met.”³⁵ If, per her work and others, mass debilitation is the precondition for the existence of this thing called humanity, then the ethical is still within the frame of the human and cannot address the dividual uses of data and information, and the force and necessity of a nonrepresentational critique becomes all the more apparent.

Ezekiel Dixon-Román’s Response

Khaled Jarrar’s performance piece is a political intervention. He performs the quantification of the valorization of life by tying the value of Palestinian blood to the shares of US military or weapons manufacturers such as Smith & Wesson. I am especially struck by this example that Puar refers to because it uses the art of quantification to make a sharp critique of the violent material effects of disaster capitalism. This quantification is analogous to what Katherine McKittrick might speak of as “Mathematics Black Life,” in relation to biopolitical technologies and the logics of

uncertainties that bring into emergence an assemblage of racialized ontologies. This mathematics is based on a recursive modulation of temporality in order to *slow down life*, even in the face of the speed of modernity. This is especially compelling when considering the calculation of the number of knees shot by the IDF in Gaza or the “epidemic of blindness” in Kashmir and Santiago.

The focus on the dividual in a biopolitics of debility and the slowing-down of life is striking. Puar states: “Dividualizing does not break down or dismember the body (knees, ankles, limbs); rather, it does not recognize these disparate elements as part of a composite in the first place. The target is not the body, not even the body’s limb, but simply the/a limb.” This is a profoundly important point that I don’t think can be glossed over. It gets at what is at stake in the focus on the dividual, a consideration that is often situated or deployed without a serious threading of the political and social through the dividual. Jarrar’s performance piece and the example of the number of knees or eyes shot makes the violence explicit and speaks to the biopolitical work the dividual does.

When the dividual is thought of in relation to the human/inhuman divide, Puar brings us right to the ethico-political. As Puar states, referencing Joseph Pugliese, “If we are to understand something, anything, about what Joseph Pugliese calls a ‘more-than-human biopolitics,’ it is that the dividual, not the individual, is the instrumentalized unit of such a biopolitics.” I appreciate this argument about the ways in which the dividual is haunted by the category of the in/human and, as such, shaped by the post-Enlightenment subject. Given that the axioms of the techno-scientific developments of modernity include colonial logics of racial hierarchies as inscribed by temporality, spatiality, sequentiality, and separation (among other terms), the dividual data that is generated and processed is also an effect of the post-Enlightenment.

In thinking with Puar, this raises many questions: What is the distinct performative work that the dividual does in contrast to the individual? In what ways might the dividual be more haunting than the individual? I’m also intrigued by a generative line of inquiry here, one that speculatively questions the conditions and processes for an opening, a rupturing, and even a fugitive potentiality in computational systems. For instance, what happens when there’s a shift in material and discursive conditions? What if the recursive system does not maintain an autopoietic posture toward indeterminacies and becomes allopoietic and open to xeno-patterning? What might the dividual become?

And what political work might the individual do? Puar's engagement with the individual not only clearly positions the political but also raises new questions for excavation, ones that might give new ethico-political value to Jarrar's performance piece, while interrogating the violent biopolitics of the inhuman.

x

e-flux journal #123 — december 2021 Ezekiel Dixon-Román and Jasbir Puar
Mass Debilitation and Algorithmic Governance

10/11

Ezekiel Dixon-Román is an Associate Professor in the School of Social Policy & Practice at the University of Pennsylvania. His research seeks to make critical interventions towards re-theorizing the technologies and practices of quantification that he understands as mediums and agencies of sociopolitical systems, whereby race and other assemblages of difference are byproducts. He is the author of *Inheriting Possibility: Social Reproduction & Quantification in Education* (University of Minnesota Press, 2017), and the guest editor of "Control Societies @ 30: Technopolitical Forces and Ontologies of Difference" (Social Text Online, 2020).

1 Ezekiel Dixon-Román, "Algo-Ritmo: More-Than-Human Performative Acts and the Racializing Assemblages of Algorithmic Architectures," *Cultural Studies-Critical Methodologies* 16, no. 5 (2016).

2 By "other-wise," I am referring to the onto-epistemologies of the Other.

3 Jasbir Puar, *The Right to Maim: Debility, Capacity, Disability* (Duke University Press, 2017).

4 See Gille Deleuze, "Postscript on the Societies of Control," *October*, no. 59 (1992).

5 See Brian Massumi, *Ontopower: War, Powers, and the State of Perception* (Duke University Press, 2015).

6 Massumi, *Ontopower*.

7 See Antoinette Rouvroy and Thomas Berns, "Algorithmic Governmentality and Prospects of Emancipation: Disparateness as a Precondition for Individuation through Relationships?" *Réseaux* 177, no. 1 (2013).

8 This is a critique that is based on a politics of representation and a logic of inclusion. While representation and inclusion are necessary for addressing certain matters, they are not enough to transform the norms and epistemologies of power and decision-making. For further discussion on this, see Denise Ferreira da Silva, *Toward a Global Idea of Race* (University of Minnesota Press, 2007).

9 Here, "potentiation" refers to the shaping of potential under conditions of uncertainty.

10 See Sylvia Wynter, "Towards the Sociogenic Principle: Fanon, Identity, the Puzzle of Conscious Experience, and What It Is Like To Be Black," in *National Identities and Sociopolitical Changes in Latin America*, ed. Antonio Gomez-Moriana and Mercedes Duran-Cogan (Routledge, 2001); and Sylvia Wynter, *Human Being as Noun? Or Being Human as Praxis? Towards the Autopoietic Turn/Overtun: A Manifesto*, 2007 https://www.scribd.com/document/329082323/Human-Being-as-Noun-Or-Being-Human-as-Praxis-Towards-the-Autopoietic-Turn-Overtun-A-Manifesto#from_embed.

11 Michelle Ann Stephens, *Skin Acts: Race, Psychoanalysis, and the Black Male Performer* (Duke University Press, 2014). Here, Stephens is building on

Hortense Spillers's conceptualization of the flesh in "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (Summer 1987). As Spillers insightfully states, "Before the 'body' there is 'flesh,' that zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse or the reflexes of iconography" (67).

12 See Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Duke University Press, 2006).

13 Denise Ferreira da Silva, "On Difference Without Separability," in *32nd Bienal de São Paulo: Incerteza viva* (Fundação Bienal de São Paulo, 2016) https://issuu.com/amilcarparker/docs/denise_ferreira_da_silva.

14 Muhammad Ali et al., "Discrimination through Optimization: How Facebook's Ad Delivery Can Lead to Biased Outcomes," *Proceedings of the ACM on Human-Computer Interaction*, no. 3 (2019).

15 Luciana Parisi, "Xeno-Patterning," in *Angelaki* 24, no. 1 (2019).

16 Denise Ferreira da Silva, "Toward a Black Feminist Poethics: The Quest(ion) of a Blackness Toward the End of the World," *The Black Scholar* 44, no. 2 (2014).

17 Da Silva, "Toward a Black Feminist Poethics."

18 Deleuze, "Postscript on the Societies of Control."

19 See discussion in *The Right to Maim*, 21–25.

20 John Modern, "In the Age of Cybernetic Systems What Like a Bullet Can Undeceive?" *Political Theology*, April 29, 2021 <https://politicaltheology.com/in-the-age-of-cybernetic-systems-what-like-a-bullet-can-undeceive/>.

21 Helga Tawil-Souri, "Digital Occupation: Gaza's High-Tech Enclosure," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 41, no. 2 (2012); Omar Jabary Salamanca, "Unplug and Play: Manufacturing Collapse in Gaza," *Human Geography* 4, no. 1 (2011).

22 Julie Peteet, "Stealing Time," *Middle East Research and Information Project*, no. 248 (Fall 2008) merip.org/2008/09/stealing-time/.

11/11

e-flux journal #123 — december 2021 Ezekiel Dixon-Román and Jasbir Puar
Mass Debilitation and Algorithmic Governance

23 Rema Hammami, "On (Not) Suffering at the Checkpoint: Palestinian Narrative Strategies of Surviving Israel's Carceral Spaces," *Borderlands*, vol 14 no 1: 2015.

24 Alex Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus: Racializing Assemblages, Biopolitics, and Black Feminist Theories of the Human* (Duke University Press, 2014).

25 Puar, *The Right to Maim*, 136.

26 Puar, *The Right to Maim*, 55.

27 Joseph Pugliese, *Biopolitics of the More-Than-Human: Forensic Ecologies of Violence* (Duke University Press, 2020).

28 See in this issue Ezekiel Dixon-Román and Ramon Amaro, "Haunting, Blackness, and Algorithmic Thought" <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/123/437244/haunting-blackness-and-algorithmic-thought/>.

29 Erica Edwards, *The Other Side of Terror: Black Women and the Culture of U.S. Empire* (NYU Press, 2021).

30 Luciana Parisi, *Contagious Architecture; Computation, Aesthetics, and Space* (MIT Press, 2013), xvii.

31 See Hilo Glazer, "'42 Knees in One Day': Israeli Snipers Open Up About Shooting Gaza Protesters," *Haaretz*, March 6, 2020 <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/premium/MAGAZINE-42-knees-in-one-day-israeli-snipers-open-up-about-shooting-gaza-protesters-1.8632555>.

32 Denise Ferreira da Silva, "1 (life) ÷ 0 (blackness) = & – & or & / &: On Matter Beyond the Equation of Value," *e-flux journal*, no. 79 (February 2017) <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/79/94686/1-life-0-blackness-or-on-matter-beyond-the-equation-of-value/>.

33 Patrick Wolfe, "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native," *Journal of Genocide Research* 8, no. 4 (2006).

34 The brilliant constellation of thought generated by and between Hortense Spillers and C. Riley Snorton on ungending, fungibility, and fugitivity is inspiring here. See Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar," *Diacritics* 17, no. 2 (1987); and Snorton, *Black on Both Sides: A Racial History of Trans Identity* (University of Minnesota Press,

2017).
35 Da Silva, "1 (life) ÷ 0 (blackness)."