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The Sound & the Surplus: Speculation as a Radical Mode

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Abstract: Speculation is a futurist practice of looking outwards in which the subject turns to other realities in the face of a crushing here-and-now. It is from this premise, which draws from José Esteban Muñoz’s *Cruising Utopia* (2009) and Fred Moten’s *In the Break* (2003), that I set out to understand how experiential, literary, and artistic speculation acts as a rejection of the capitalist and colonial structures of this world. Through a conversation with the aforementioned theorists, as well as other queer, posthumanist, and radical black thinkers, this project will analyze three different instances of speculation. First, a queer nightclub in New York which enacts a glitch between temporalities; next, a Dominican sci fi novel by Rita Indiana that shows how remixing *queers* time and narrative structure; and finally, a video art piece where artist Mickalene Thomas subverts the imperial male gaze, cutting into normative power and creating a break from which speculation can arise. Although these artistic forms of speculation by no means exhaust speculative potential, they sound out expressions of radical imagining that effectively draw the contours around this practice. I argue that the act of speculating towards other worlds by subjects historically excluded from the category of the Human is a radical refusal of the established order, and an embrace of the spaces between so as to find happiness and self-determination.

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Introduction

How do we account for desires that are not possible in this world? Or for moments when time moves in ways that are not quite right? How can we understand sounds that have no clear source, unfolding histories to reveal new ways of being? We can only do so by coming to the conclusion that there is a surplus to the immediately discernible. Those who turn to other worlds in the face of the contradictions of this one know this. I will refer to this turning to the elsewhere as ‘speculation.’ Speculation reminds us that we are not trapped. It helps us decipher our longing for an elsewhere and synthesize it into new worlds. The persistence of this practice proves that survival is not just food, shelter, and water, but also the imperative of imagining.

Traditionally, speculation has been tied to science fiction genre, which was later expanded to the more inclusive ‘speculative fiction.’ That said, the practices of speculation deployed in this project are, unlike that of the genre of speculative fiction, specific to those whose histories have been excluded from hegemonic memory, as will become apparent later in this introduction. In other words, speculation is a practice of unfolding that which has been hidden and consequently imagining a future that stands in opposition to the present. Speculation begins with a desire for more than what is in front of our eyes. These imaginings are necessarily political, as they challenge not only the status-quo, but the entire structure that produced the status-quo. Those who have benefitted from the power structures of the present, namely capitalism and colonialism, do not need to look outwards for self-determination. In contrast, the same moves that deny marginalized subjects full access to the category of the Human in the present manifest their ability to speculate.
In his book *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (2014), queer theorist and performance studies scholar José Esteban Muñoz argues that the present, or the “here-and-now,” is a colonial fortress of erasure and violence, constructed by white male victors (Muñoz 3). It has no room for queers, people of color, the disabled, poor, or the disenfranchised. Muñoz’s understanding of the here-and-now acknowledges that no amount of work within the colonial system will create that room, and therefore a radical looking outwards is called for (1). Thus, the subaltern and the marginal speculate into the future, resisting the present completely.

Even as a practice of futurist imagination and fabrication, speculation is intrinsically tied to the realities of systems of this world. Speculation is always looking back to the past to understand the present— never isolating these imaginings from what has already occurred, making itself known through sounds that resonate through histories and into the future. This practice is grounded in the empty space created by the material dispossession of people through capitalism and colonialism. Thus, in order to understand speculation, we must reach backwards to draw out those histories of dispossession that created that space in the first place.

**A Brief Account of Capitalism, Race, and Dehumanization**

The histories of dispossession that serve as the root from which speculation grew require us to begin in 1492, when colonial ships snaked their way across oceans, sailing out from Europe to the rest of the world. For the next five hundred years, colonists set up political, economic, and social structures whereby resources and people were stolen from Africa, the Americas, and Asia, and funnelled into North America and Europe. Capitalism and wealth flourished in the “societies Monopolia,” (Marx 172) industrializing production, building cities, and arming militaries. This parasitic system exists today under the guise of neoliberal ‘growth’ and ‘progress,’ wherein
national prosperity is praised while its violent effects are denied. (Hear Dick Cheney in a PBS history special: “Millions of people a day are better off than they would have been without [free] trade developments. Without globalization. And very few people have been harmed by it” (Cran; PBS, 2002)). The engine of globalization and expansion ran on exploitative labor, which was racialized by the realization of the simultaneous value (and nonvalue) of the slave as a commodity (Moten 9; Reed 50). This realization prompted the mass kidnapping and enslavement of Africans during the four centuries of the Transatlantic slave trade, during which the industrialized world developed. The European settlement of the Americas in particular grew in direct relation to Indigenous genocide and African enslavement. Institutions were built on the backs of slaves and laws were written to keep free labor enslaved. Consequently, the American continents saw the most pervasive alignment of blackness and slavery. As Adolph Reed has written, this alignment “sharpen[ed the] distinctions between slavery and indentured servitude, and the institutional establishment of black and white… as distinct, mutually exclusive status categories” (50). As laws and society were built around slavery and the maintenance of a subjugated class of black people, the concept of race itself formed and codified. “Race has been and continues to be unthinkable without racism,” writes Reed (50). In the U.S., colonial domination opened the door to this mental construction of a hierarchy of skin tone. All around the western world, black bodies, packed into slave ships in the most efficient arrangement possible, became the most valuable commodities in the capitalist market, and were rendered subhuman.

Posthumanist, Afrofuturist and many black radical theorists move from this history of the creation of race as a means of subjugation to the constructed category of the Human itself. Just as
race is nonexistent without racism, so the Human cannot exist without the subhuman. The subhuman is a nebulosity area outside of the category of Human, given corporeal form but not function. As those with power, land, money, and whiteness accumulated capital and became desperate to keep it, human subjectivity became conditional and bound to the exchange value of the body. It might be useful here to look to Karl Marx who, in Chapter 31 of Das Kapital, writes that

the turning of Africa into a warren for the commercial hunting of black-skins signalised the rosy dawn of the era of capitalist production. These idyllic proceedings are the chief momenta of primitive accumulation…. The treasures captured outside Europe by undisguised looting, enslavement, and murder, floated back to the mother-country and were there turned into capital (Marx 173).

We must first acknowledge Marx’s acute summation of the way exploitative capitalism fueled industrial production (the colonial structures of this process go unnamed but are heard nonetheless), and dissonant violence of “these idyllic proceedings.” Yet Marx’s opposition to the hegemonic economic discourse does not extend to an understanding of the racist ideologies that justify capitalism and the slave trade. His use of the term ‘blackskins,’ as though African bodies were animal pelts to be bought and sold by tanners, signifies what Fred Moten has called “the ontological conversion already in effect” (van Veen 67).

Whether intentionally or not, the category of the Human conceptualized by enlightenment rationalism was never meant to include all humans. As a result, the collateral category of the subhuman, emerged as an underlying imaginary which justified and made palatable the violent enslavement of people insofar as they were no longer people. In her Cyborg Manifesto (1985), Donna Haraway writes, “the discursive tie between the colonized, the enslaved, the noncitizen, and the animal—all reduced to type, all Others to rational man, and all essential to his bright
constitution—is at the heart of racism and flourishes, lethally, in the entrails of humanism” (Haraway 18). Hence the Human came to exist in opposition to, and as a category protected from, the subhuman commodity. And, as Haraway reminds us, liberal humanism has done nothing to undo the status of those rendered subhuman.

**Unexpected Sounds and Posthuman Bodies**

In his book *In the Break: Aesthetics of Black Radical Tradition* (2003), Fred Moten, a poet, black radical theorist, and professor of performance studies at NYU, critiques another of Marx’s passages, wherein Marx imagines commodities speaking. In the scene in question, Marx’s pretend commodities postulate their own value “in the hands of man,” and equalize their exchange-value (“a pearl or a diamond is valuable as a pearl or a diamond”) (Marx 176-177). In Marx’s telling, a commodity can only know itself in its own exchange and its exchange-value, in other words only reflected in the enhanced wealth of its owner (Moten 9). For Moten, Marx’s simultaneous enforcement of value as capital and his enactment of this strange ventriloquism denies the commodity any possibility of speech. Moten asks that we read this passage ‘sonically’—that we listen to the “absence of sound” under imposed speech. Because, in his insistence that the commodity cannot speak, Marx was not listening to the essential commodity of his time: the enslaved body. He did not anticipate their improvised sound, did not realize that their sound travels through walls and in unexpected ways.

The subaltern speaks through ambivalent vibrations, which reverberate at imperceptible frequencies. These ideas align with Homi K. Bhabha’s “Signs Taken for Wonders,” which functions as a critique of Gayatri Spivak’s “Can the Subaltern Speak?” Bhabha, while
acknowledging Spivak’s immense theoretical contributions through her essay, diverges from Spivak on her unambiguous concluding line: “The subaltern cannot speak” (104). Less of a fatalist, Bhabha writes that there are colonial ambivalences through which the subaltern speaks, although not in the framework of colonial speech (Bhabha 154). Fred Moten’s assertion that the commodity does speak runs somewhat parallel to Bhabha’s theory of ambivalence. The subaltern sounds that Moten writes about resist in their very emittance, rejecting “the liberal humanism that reinforces the objecthood of black bodies” (Young 45). Moten writes that the reproductivity of black performance is a performance of the commodity speaking. In defying their lack of innate value, objects that speak create a different kind of value, untraceable and intangible in the capitalist market. “The sound within black performance is of a utopic, improvised desire for freedom that spills from the mouths of objects denied their preexisting value” (Young 45). The commodity, the subaltern, the object speaks, but not in a way we can recognize. Their speech is rather improvised sound, speculating, turning to the elsewhere.

The subaltern (the body dehumanized and rendered commodity) emerges in opposition to and as a foil for the modern subject. Reiterating the constructed states of these categories, it might be useful to bring in a third category— that of the marginal. The Congolese philosopher V. Y. Mudimbe defined marginality in *The Invention of Africa* (1988) thus: “Marginality designates the intermediate space between the so-called African tradition [or the subaltern] and the projected modernity of colonialism” (Mudimbe 2-3). In the colonial construction of the world, the marginal subject is forced into a constant state of desire. Marginal subjects are typified as desperate to get economic and social access to the category of the modern. Focusing on the United States for a moment, we could say that the myth of the American Dream invites the
marginal to labor harder, break the body, and sell the soul in order to become recognized as a proper modern subject. Their suspended status between subaltern and modern is also a product of a visual mapping practice in which people born into situations where they might have access to wealth and power are still denied that access on account of their perceived race, ability, or gender expression. This project is built on the idea that it is in this denial that the marginal subject gains the ability to speculate.

As the subaltern sounds and the marginal speculates, they reject the category of the Human completely, becoming ‘posthumans.’ According to Hershini Bhana Young, author of “Twenty-First Century Posthumans,” posthumans insist on “re-temporalization and nonlinearity,” and “oppose uncritical echoes of the white liberal humanist subject” (Weheliye qted. in Young 45). Young reserves the category of the posthuman for black subjects, who have a “history characterized by the lack of recognition of black humanity,” which “has resulted in the yearning black subject always already turning elsewhere, to alienness and posthumanity” (Young 47-48). The work of thinkers such as Young, Moten, and Mudimbe call attention to how the black experience specifically reveals the workings of modern capitalist exploitation. Young understands the exclusionary category of the Human to have given black subjects greater access to the posthuman. Moten meanwhile frames this posthumanity in terms of the denial of speech for black bodies, resulting in unexpected sounds that transcend the normative human capacity. Mudimbe points to the intermediate space between the Human and the subhuman, where even as black subjects gained legal status as humans, they are still relegated to marginalized subjectivity.

The violent processes of exploitation and dehumanization that perfected the institution of slavery extend beyond the black experience, but are always informed by these same processes.
Speculating towards Utopia in spite of the Here-And-Now

Taking a cue from postcolonial and posthumanist theory, speculation emerges not only as a part of subaltern and marginal existence, but as inherent to those existences. The very lives of the subaltern and marginal are speculative in their persistence of life in the face of the crushing dismissal of their humanity. Following Fred Moten’s understanding of improvised sound emitting from the break, we can say that subaltern speculation takes the form of sound because the commodity is not meant to speak. Nevertheless, its insistence on speech, which Moten says takes the form of sound, is thus inherently speculative. The marginal subject does have the ability to speak, however that speech is surveilled, policed, and dimmed by the weight of their imposed desires to be modern. Those who speculate know that marginality is a fixed coordinate, and reject the cycles of labor and heartbreak that hang on the bodies of marginal subjects. Marginal speculation often looks like art, music, activism, self care, sex— radicality existing in the smallest, most quotidian moments, but rooted in self-determined happiness. Fred Moten reminds us that black radicalism is always related to material loss, and a despair about the organization of things (93). And indeed, it is the phenomenon of utopic aspirations and political despair that leads to this deconstruction of ontology, and the creation of the posthuman being.

Exploring expressions of this radical looking outwards, professor and critic Laura U. Marks writes about the traces of the past in speculations of the future in her essay “Close Up: John Akomfrah and the Black Audio Film Collective; Monad, Database, Remix: Manners of Unfolding in The Last Angel of History.” The instances of speculation I will lay out in this
project are manifestations of Marks’ concept of ‘manners of unfolding.’ For Marks, History is made of carefully chosen segments of the past, cast in bronze and polished into a Confederate statue. It excludes and debases, ignores and progresses, and that which is left— ruins and palimpsests— is folded up, requiring an almost physical effort to uncover from the ruins. Conceptualized through an engagement with black science fiction, manners of unfolding would then be “forms of historiography that would make sense of perceptible artifacts” (Marks 113). These practices of acknowledging and re-mixing the past play with, knead, and rework hegemonic, colonial history, sometimes revealing that which has been covered up (Marks 113).

Speculation is hard work, but not in the capitalist sense of productivity and money-making. Rather it is work outside of the colonial-capitalist labor system. It could be better constituted as play: work in liminality, which takes the form of the anti-structure, a spatiotemporal threshold. British cultural anthropologist Victor Turner describes liminality as the place where “profane social relations may be discontinued, former rights and obligations are suspended, and the social order may seem to have been turned on its head” (Turner 59). In liminality, in fact, there is no social order, which is often a system derived from the colonial arrangement. The liminal is completely invisible and prohibited in normative society, but there are spatiotemporal areas where doorways to liminal space open up. These areas are what Turner calls liminoid, set aside from the mainstream of productive events. Turner names “universities, institutes, colleges, etc.” as liminoid spaces, yet he remains behind institutional walls. I would argue that less institutional spaces such as street corners, parks, nightclubs, dance halls, forests, and even our own bedrooms can also be liminoid. Liminoidal spaces are areas of exception embedded within normative systems, and those systems can exist in public space just as they can
in institutional space. Relying solely on institutions to provide these spaces of possibility denies people the agency to create them on their own. Turner writes that liminoid spaces provide “all kinds of freewheeling, experimental cognitive behavior as well as forms of symbolic action, resembling some found in tribal\(^1\) society…” (65). Thus, liminal spaces disguise themselves as liminoid so as to be able to exist in the normative world.\(^2\) The liminoid becomes a portal into the liminal.

The act of speculation articulates a desire for other realities, and a knowledge that they exist. Speculative practices supersede the label of the postcolonial because they do not simply exist in a world which has experienced colonialism, but rather work outside or against the enduring structures of colonialism. In this, speculative practices pick up on Bell hooks' suggestion when she writes that “postcoloniality is a critical location that, ironically, often maintains white cultural hegemony” (hooks 66). Instead, hooks proposes anticolonialism, of which she says that the “discursive practices of anticolonialism… decenter, interrogate, and displace whiteness” (hooks 66). In its disavowal of colonial and capitalist systems and its embrace of the liminal, speculation is an anticolonial move.\(^3\)

In this sense, speculation belongs to those who are left out of hegemonic knowledge, whose pasts are erased, and whose futures are denied by the normalizing forces required to keep the modern subject in power. Both the subaltern and the marginal can speculate in this manner,

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\(^1\) The word ‘tribal’ connotes a worldview wherein non-western societies are temporally pinned down in the past, understood as ‘primitive’ or ‘backwards.’ In quoting Turner using this word in this sense, I also critique what it implies, and acknowledge the history of this kind of racism in the field of anthropology.

\(^2\) I will exemplify this later in the project in my analysis of a queer dance club.

\(^3\) Once again, although speculation is anticolonial, it is not exhausted by that adjective. This is because the word ‘anticolonial’ is to be attributed more aptly to societies where there is active occupation and colonialism such as Puerto Rico or Gaza. In these places, there is anticolonial resistance that is not a theoretical, but rather an everyday practice.
but the normative modern subject cannot. Of course, the modern subject has the ability to imagine things beyond the apparent, but their form of speculation derives from a dissatisfaction that does not cross the bounds of the possible (Muñoz 48). This is not the kind of speculation that will be interrogated in this project, because it does not question the structures of the here-and-now. Marginal and subaltern speculation rejects the colonial arrangement, embracing “unadapted persons and confused minds” (Mudimbe 5), who have themselves been rejected from the here-and-now. José Esteban Muñoz juxtaposes his notion of utopic, imagined queer futurity with the concept of a future rooted firmly in the present:

Heterosexual culture depends on a notion of the future: as the song goes, ‘the children are our future.’ But that is not the case for different cultures of sexual dissidence. Rather than invest in a deferred future, the queer citizen-subject labors to live in a present that is calibrated through the protocols of state power to sacrifice our liveness for what Lauren Berlant has called the ‘dead citizenship’ of heterosexuality (Muñoz 49).

For Muñoz, these are two distinct and almost oppositional futures. Any dreams of a queer future negate a straight future, and call for a speculative, “refunctionized notion of utopia in the service of subaltern politics” (Muñoz 49). These politics exist in utter antithesis to the present politics of surveillance and colonial-capitalist power. A societal structure that exists in service to subaltern politics is therefore rendered to the utopic imaginary. Enacting such a societal structure would require a complete refunctionalization of every aspect of the heterosexual, white supremacist culture of the here-and-now. As such, it is impossible to achieve through liberal policies or acts of state recognition, such as the legalization of gay marriage, a measly invitation to take part in a dead citizenship.
Queers who have refused that invitation have instead chosen to look elsewhere. We can see how these theorizations are materialized today: in October of 2018, the Trump administration announced that it was considering erasing the legal existence of gender nonconforming people by defining gender as what appears on birth certificates. If this were to go through, the gender variant population would not legally exist in the here-and-now. However, many members of that community have stated that they have already opted out. Thus, in the parameters of gendered power, a marginal population has recognized the need for a radical looking outwards, whereas a cisgendered population does not require speculative play to affirm their own existences.

The practice of opting out from the here-and-now—playing with temporality—, is a defining feature of looking outwards. It appears in Afrofuturist apocalypse stories, or in the sampling and remixing of songs into the hip-hop of the 1990s. Temporal play could also be thought of as a queering of time. Turner writes that “in liminality people ‘play’ with the elements of the familiar and defamiliarize them. Novelty emerges from unprecedented combinations of familiar elements” (Turner 59-60). These familiar elements can be understood as palimpsests, or traces of the past that appear in other temporalities. Thus, play in queer time is temporally anti-linear, meaning that it cannot be done in, say, the nine-to-five workday. Gage of the Boone, the founder and curator of Spectrum and the Dreamhouse, the queer nightclubs I will be analyzing momentarily, explains this idea thus:

In terms of time: our [queer nightlife people’s] world is nocturnal... we are awake when that whole other world is sleeping. I feel like I’m the most creative at night. And my brain works best, and I don’t even know why. It’s almost like there’s more energy or the fact that so many people are in dreamland, there’s more space to operate in reality.
The money-making thoughts of people awake in the daytime crowd the airwaves, squeezing out speculative frequencies. Gage experiences this as an increased creativity, and a heightened brain function, which surely points to a need a different kind of thinking than those who thrive in straight time. It is precisely the question of what makes this kind of queer thinking, this speculative thinking, different that drives this project forward. What makes speculative play resistant to the normative world, and how, in turn, is speculation itself a form of resistance?

Additive by its Very Nature

José Esteban Muñoz writes that queer utopias are additive practices, not just in that they are the sum of many things, but as a continual process characterized by its summation. I would likewise characterize speculative practices as visible only in the addition of thought and play, which is constantly redefining a practice that is not definable in this world. All the voices and sounds of the dead and alive who long for utopias only augment their existence. My own reading is an additive practice as well: I do not take the texts and incidents I will be analyzing as examples of speculation, but rather as sounds that resonate in the way speculation resonates, that is, outside of the normative, outside of capitalism, and outside of colonial systems of domination. In order to understand speculation as resistance, I will be looking to some of that speculative thought and text which can illuminate not just the nameable qualities of speculation, but also its intangibility.

I have chosen to analyze three speculative incidents, all rooted in artistic practices. The first is a nightclub in Ridgewood, Queens called the Dreamhouse, which has been operating since 2011, although before 2014 it was at a different location in Williamsburg, Brooklyn, and
went by the name Spectrum. The Dreamhouse is a profoundly queer institution. My analysis of the club will be rooted in José Esteban Muñoz’s *Cruising Utopia* and will be focused on the way that the Dreamhouse operates in liminal space, speculating towards utopias and resisting capitalist and colonialist systems, specifically heteronormativity and cis supremacy. I look at the Dreamhouse, Spectrum, and the community around these spaces as one project: a polydimensional body of text, existing in multiple temporalities and media.

The second text I will be analyzing is *La mucama del Omicunlè*, a 2015 novel by Dominican author Rita Indiana, which acts both in style and content as a work of speculative fiction. *La mucama del Omicunlè (The Maid to the Omicunlé)* is an overwhelming and somewhat absurd book, not quite sci fi, but certainly other-worldly. Indiana is first an author, second, and briefly, an electronic merengue artist, a role she embodies as a performance art piece. Using many of the motifs of Afrofuturism and Magical Realism, *La mucama* is a queer remix of Caribbean worlds and American pop culture, speculating across oceans, genders, and temporalities. My analysis will trace the moves of remixing as a manner of unfolding, as per the scholar Laura U. Marks.

Finally, I will look at two video art pieces from the same series titled *Je T’aime* (2014) and *Je T’aime Deux* (2016) by the New York City based artist Mickalene Thomas. These pieces are sets of short clips of Thomas and her girlfriend in bed together, allowing us to quietly observe their intimacy and love. I am interested in these pieces as speculative musings on black queer love and joy, whose serenity lies in stark contrast to the rest of Thomas’ body of work. In

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4 Shortly after finishing this thesis, an English translation of this book, entitled *Tentacle* and translated by Achy Obejas, was published by And Other Stories.
these two videos, Thomas plays with the concept of the gaze to create a break from which speculation can arise.

As can be gleaned up to this point, my writing on speculation is informed by feminist, anticolonial, and most of all posthumanist views that reject the concept of “minoritizing” discourses. According to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, minoritizing discourses matter to some because of their identity or status, but can be ignored by those who have the privilege of not caring (85). Instead, posthumanist discourses move past this liberal humanist notion and unfold the violence of ontological processes of categorization (Snaza 41).
Chapter 1
The Glitch: Dancing over the Threshold at the Dreamhouse

You enter the Dreamhouse through an odd, long, low building on Wyckoff Avenue in Ridgewood, Queens. Before you even reach the entrance, something catches your eye from above. Two flags— one blue pink and purple, one rainbow— signal a break in the landscape. They mark what Muñoz following Ernst Bloch calls an “anticipatory illumination,” a potential glimpse into another world. The flags atop the Dreamhouse have a “surplus of affect and meaning,” which send a shiver down your spine as the not-yet-conscious arrives (Muñoz 3). The top of the facade of the Dreamhouse is lined with opaque glass circles, a few of which are cracked or missing. A stone awning reaches down to the concrete sidewalk with a series of iron wrought columns, hanging over two small stone gardens and the entranceway. The door is a metal slab with no handles, so you knock, waiting for whoever is within to open.

Let’s pause at this moment, just before you’re about to cross the threshold, about to move from the grey city block into the club. It took a lot of work to get here: some hours of primping, trying on outfits, meeting your friends for the drink(s) that will loosen your muscles just enough to let in the rhythm of a deep bass beat. The anticipation is now unmatched, a fire growing in the belly that at once holds memories of parties past and promises for what’s to come. If we stick to Muñoz, we can name this a distinctly queer feeling, a feeling which exists in liminal space, belonging to the past and the future, but not to the present (Muñoz 3). The ephemerality of a queer feeling is almost imperceptible in straight time, but in queer time, this feeling is a galactic event. Exploding into a supernova, the force of it rips a hole in straight spatiotemporality, creating a small glitch. Standing in front of the club, the glitch shimmers in front of you and, where the metal door used to be, velvet curtains now welcome you inside. You step over the
threshold, the sound hits, and the darkness swallows you up. Outside, the glitch has vanished, leaving the street deserted.

Queer dance clubs like the Dreamhouse are outposts of queer spatiotemporality, a universe of its own that resists parallellity, refusing to reflect the straight world. Drawing from Jack Halberstam’s understanding of queer time and straight time as different universes, I propose that clubs like the Dreamhouse offer a doorway between the two worlds (Halberstam 1-4). These glitches, which often appear as science fiction magic, technological mistakes, and pauses in the norm, are cracks in both space and time. They are thresholds to the speculative world. From Wyckoff Avenue, the Dreamhouse appears as a nightclub, presenting a form of leisure which is acceptable insofar as it is recognized as liminoid space. Its true form, as a liminal freak playground, must remain illegible and hidden from the world if it is to survive. (This satisfyingly secretive idea appears in many children’s tales: the portal to Harry Potter’s world is visible only as a dirty bar in the middle of London to the non-magical; Peter Pan only appears to those children who really believe in magic.) Queer dance clubs like the Dreamhouse are two-way mirrors, presenting to both the liminoid and the liminal. The Dreamhouse exists liminoidally as a nightclub. Even some of their patrons may never see the other side of that mirror, because glitches require intense speculative play to cultivate. But for those who have access to that form of play, one spatiotemporal system will open up and another will be visible. The club does not take kindly to those who flit in and out, wanting fresh air or to meet a friend and return. The glitch weakens when not taken seriously, so once you are in, you stay there.

Inside the Dreamhouse, you encounter its many rooms. It can be easy to get lost, but getting lost is a necessary part of accessing the liminal. Around you, people dance, drink, make
out, yell. You are truly surrounded, immediately part of the performance. As Laura U. Marks has written, “the contagious rhythms and overwhelming bass sounds of the Black techno musics… make their arguments by making you dance. They demand that your body discover new feelings to go with the unnatural new sounds” (Marks 113). She calls this effect “embodied anti-naturalism.” And it is true, nothing inside the Dreamhouse is natural. Bodies take on strange shapes, rising a few feet off the ground on gargantuan heels. Mirrors line the walls; the club is infinite. In the center of the stage is an enormous disco ball hanging off the ceiling on chains. It rotates slowly, like the earth on its axis, marking the rising and falling of the music. All the light in the club is reflective, emanating from this pulsating, silver heart. Marks says that the way we can perceive a practice of unfolding is through “the feeling of [one’s] hairs standing on end” (113). I would postulate that the aesthetic play of decorating, curating, dressing up, putting on makeup, and creating ambiance at a place like the Dreamhouse is a concerted effort to make our hair stand on end, unfolding, remixing, and dancing into the liminal.

Fig. 1 The Dreamhouse at rest. My own photograph (2018).
Time operates at a peculiar tempo at the Dreamhouse. It reacts to the emotional rhythms of the music and whips around the bodies of twirling dancers. One minute might seem not only longer than it would be in straight time, but deeper. A minute might hold the intensity of the first time you lay eyes on the cutie you go home with later, or the eons before the bass drops. The visual density of the Dreamhouse draws out that minute further: you look around at the posthuman bodies of the dancers, who play out cyborgian fantasies in front of your eyes, and their intricacy is intense enough to slow down time. But just as you thought the night might last forever, you realize it is very late (or very early) and the party's over. Speculative time can be a little disorienting.

This disorientation is no accident. In an interview I conducted for this project with Gage of the Boone, they said, “I love to create a space where people can get disoriented; where you can kind of be like “so wait where am I?”” Gage, along with the other people who play tirelessly at the Dreamhouse to make events happen, sometimes will begin setting up for a Saturday party on a Tuesday, changing the internal landscape of the club. “I never want my surroundings to be the same,” they say, “I’m like ‘wait hold on! I’m changing constantly, this space has to change with me.’ It’s really one of those things that it would be way easier if I didn’t do it, but it would have been way more boring if everything looked the same all the time” (Boone). “How does one stage utopia?” asks Muñoz (97). The hours and days that the curators of the Dreamhouse spend staging the Dreamhouse speaks to some force deep within the club that requires a makeover. In a capitalist society, such work would be ridiculous and unproductive. So it is play, rejecting the very idea of productivity.
My own experience of Spectrum and of the Dreamhouse, beginning when I was sixteen, revolved around the understanding that these clubs were a different world from what I was used to. Dancing there possessed my whole being in a way that I had never experienced. There was a feeling that people had flown in from outer space to be at the function; their silver dresses flowing behind them, they sighted the flags on top of the building and landed for the night. Unaware of any of the workings behind each event I attended, and only hearing about them through friends, they seemed to simply blossom from the ground up. These mysteries were of course part of Spectrum’s allure. As I arrived for New Year’s Eve celebrations, or their monthly dress up party KUNST, the door person accepted my shitty fake ID every time. At the time I relished the feeling that I was tricking adults into thinking I was four or five years older than I really was, but of course they knew I was a teenager. I know now that they understood that these queer wannabe punk teens needed an escape to the elsewhere.

I want to dwell for a moment on the importance of this escape. These queer spaces such as the Dreamhouse were not places for queers to be free, but rather to be fugitive. José Esteban Muñoz quotes Theodor Adorno in saying that ‘sexual liberation’ as integration is “mere illusion:” the same way “bourgeois society overcame the proletarian threat by incorporating the proletariat” (54). There is no possibility of a queer body being free in straight time, thus the utopian longings of queer nightlife will always be fugitive. Spectrum and the Dreamhouse operated in liminal space, as outposts of queer spatiotemporality, and away from the purview of the panopticon.5 Michel Foucault writes that “full lighting and the eye of a supervisor capture

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5 The panopticon is the Foucauldian concept explaining the workings of a surveillance society, which he expressed by discussing Jeremy Bentham's 1791 proposal for a circular-shaped prison with cells arranged around a central watchtower. In Bentham's conception, the prisoners could be observed at all times by the guards, but more importantly made the prisoners feel that they were being observed, and they thus acted as though they were
better than darkness, which ultimately protected. Visibility is a trap” (200-201). As the disco ball slowly spins, rays of light bounce off the mirrors on the walls, only then falling on the bodies moving along the dancefloor. Darkness surrounds, and we are protected.

I would like to contrast the experience of going to Spectrum and the Dreamhouse with a time I entered a space that, while visibly gay, remained in straight time. We entered the leather bar on West 28th street through a marked front door. The space was filled with sweaty, ripped clones, the word MEN glowing from one wall in ten-foot letters. Within ten minutes, we were back out on the street, having been easily located by a latex-dressed vigilante and told that women were not welcome. This leather bar was enacting heteronormative policing of their customers; despite being a gay bar, it was not queer. This experience left me with a hollow feeling, not exactly because we were kicked out, but because we were identified as “women” onsite. How did they know what gender we were? Half of the people present did not identify as women. These were not the workings of a queer space, but one that, to quote from Muñoz, had “adopted the state’s policies,” reproducing the panopticon (57). On the night I was there, the bar enforced the states policies by bifurcating gender and denying the existence of non-conforming bodies. Amongst my queer friends, calling something ‘homonormie’ is worse than identifying something straight— it connotes a malicious assimilation, one that hurts the queer community, and chips away at fugitive space. However, the homonormative reproduction of state policies has benefits for the leather bar. In their assimilation to the here-and-now, they become somewhat more acceptable in the gaze of the state, and therefore can exist legally, without as much surveillance as a queer space would have. According to Foucault, the panopticon is most

observed. This is a way of understanding the ways in which the state can surveill its subjects without having to be present at all times.
successful in that the surveillance reproduces itself in the minds of subordinate subjects who become vigilantes, becoming “the principle of [their] own subjection,” like the person who identified us at the bar (Foucault 202-203).

Queer nightclubs like Spectrum and the Dreamhouse, on the other hand, exist in fugitive space, and are therefore constantly under threat. Muñoz talks of ephemeral gestures as queer evidence, which appear in the past as memories and future as potentialities, but not in the present, because they are gone before you can even know that they were ever there. “The key to queer evidence,” he writes, “and by that I mean the ways in which we prove queerness and read queerness, is by suturing it to the concept of ephemera” (65). Glitches are fragile, and resist being read in the here-and-now. Case in point: midway through writing this thesis, the Dreamhouse announced its unexpected closing. “While our first space [Spectrum] dissolved in the gentrification of Williamsburg,” Gage wrote on Facebook, “The Dreamhouse has proved to be much too expensive and we have been non stop trying to catch up or even come up with our operating costs” (Boone). The Dreamhouse never charged exorbitant cover fees because it understood its role as a provider of fugitive space. The announcement of their closing was met with profound sadness by the queer community in New York, but also an understanding of the inevitability of this happening. “A place like that was never going to last too long, or it would stop being a place like that,” my friend said to me.

Gage of the Boone continues to throw KUNST parties, now at more mainstream spaces like the Brooklyn nightclub, Elsewhere. The Dreamhouse is far from forgotten, but New York City moves on. Spectrum and the Dreamhouse now exist in the imaginary of those who danced there, went to workshops, helped run it, or simply heard their friends tell of it. Understanding
ephemerality as queer proof is to understand the histories of violence perpetrated against queer, black, and brown people that leave a trace not visible in straight time. In this way, “queerness has a vexed relationship to evidence” (Muñoz 65). The Dreamhouse stands as irrefutable proof in queer time, lingers only as a trace in straight time. Laura U. Marks explains the manner of unfolding from ruins, gleaning clues of folded histories that leave only palimpsests, as always leading to the heartbreaking conclusion that there is no progress, only devastation. She quotes Walter Benjamin saying, “To articulate the past historically does not mean to recognize it ‘the way it really was’ (Ranke). It means to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at a moment of danger.” (Marks 115). But this seizure (understood as both the taking hold of a memory and as a sudden fit— the demonic attack of another temporality), Benjamin warns, can also be “homogenized into a dominant narrative of history that serves the ruling class” (115). Some histories might have to remain folded in order to preserve their fugitivity. In the here-and-now, in the face of commodification being the only gauge of success, failure is the modality of queerness.

The glitch in the front door of the Dreamhouse has closed up, but perhaps this was the only way to preserve that particular monad of a speculative world. For the Dreamhouse to have become less fugitive, more homonormative, would have been more heartbreaking than its closure. So, the Dreamhouse remains as a surplus of affect, lingering only in the reflection of the disco light at some other club, in some other place, reminding its past patrons of a night they spent in queer time.
Chapter 2
The Data Thief: A Remix of Rita Indiana’s La mucama del Omicunlé

La mucama del Omicunlé (2015) starts out violently. At the house of the revered and powerful santera Esther Escudero, the doorbell rings out the sound of a wave, signaling that someone is outside. Acilde, who works as a maid for Esther, activates the security camera in their eye, and sees a Haitian man sprinting through the streets in front of the house. Immediately, a government device recognizes the foreign body running for his life and throws a deadly gas on the man, killing, and then disintegrating him.

When beginning a novel, a reader must situate themselves in an unknown world through the eyes of characters in the book. Acilide's reaction to this violent event is almost nonexistent. Waiting until the body of the Haitian man is no longer moving, they take out a bottle of Windex and wipe down the windows, cleaning them of the “sticky soot” that appeared after the man was annihilated. As this scene announces, La mucama, a sensationaly speculative novel, takes place in a world of ruins. The Caribbean Sea has become a poisonous pool of death with nothing living left in it. Strange machines and new technologies have defamiliarized the Dominican Republic of 2038, but its people remain complicated, tender, and knowable. Any attempt to dominate this text is foolish, and it is wiser to simply allow yourself to be overwhelmed. Laura U. Marks advises something similar for The Last Angel of History: “I found that briefly renouncing the academic Sir Nose approach so as to pay attention to the feeling of my hairs standing on end alerted me to the moments when Last Angel was performing something particularly deft” (112). In paying attention to that feeling, the reader must let the sea, which looms large in La mucama,

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6 A priestess of santería, the Afrocuban religion derived from Yoruba religions of western Africa.
7 Although Rita Indiana moves from using ‘she’ to ‘he’ pronouns when Acilde obtains their gender transformation, I will be using ‘they’ pronouns in order to stabilize this slippage.
wash over them. In it, they will see a jumble of jetsam: Santería candles, CCTV spy cameras, an mp3 of Donna Summers’ *I Feel Love*, references to H.P Lovecraft and Ed Wood, and a washed out flyer warning of environmental apocalypse.

In this chapter, I am tracing Marks’ analysis of *The Last Angel of History*, whose protagonist, the Data Thief, moves in comparable ways to Acilde, the hero of *La mucama*. The Data Thief is a being from the future who travels back and forth through time, stealing artifacts from different times and spaces of black history in order to find clues to a long-forgotten and now ruined universe. Acilde and the Data Thief are both time travelers, shapeshifters, and are both trying to gain a speculative knowledge that has been hidden in the folds of history. Rita Indiana also acts as a kind of Data Thief, gathering bits and pieces of Dominican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, mainland American, and Spanish culture and remixing them into her novel. Some might see this as a process of cultural randomization, or as an attempt to create some kind of transculturation, but it is too calculated to be entropic or assimilatory. I interpret Indiana’s amalgamation of cultural signifiers as an acknowledgement of the interconnectivity of the diasporic mind. It might be useful to think of this acknowledgement as what George-Graves has called *diasporic spidering*. In “Diasporic Spidering: Constructing Contemporary Black Identities,” George Graves uses the African folk character Anansi, the trickster spider, to put forth a theory according to which the African diaspora, and black identity, is a constantly expanding, morphing system, “becoming a contemporary active process—an act, a performative” (George-Graves, 37). Anansi’s only constant trait is redefinition: Anansi is a character of ever changing genders, origins, opinions, and loyalties. The spider also physically enacts the technological process of spidering out, wherein the structures of the internet web shift
temporally and spatially, hyperlinking different nodes of reference, changing definitions. A
diaspora’s identity likewise changes in response to “how other identities are shifting in a look by
an individual, less to the past than the present and future” (George-Graves 38). The matrix of
identities in La mucama mirrors the mental technology of shapeshifting that diasporic people go
through in response to the postcolonial reflective identities around them.

I also understand Rita Indiana’s narrative structure and diasporic spidering as a form of
remixing. According to Laura Marks, remixing is a sonic manner of unfolding that “appropriates
to diasporic aesthetics” (129). Originating in hip-hop’s sampling methods, it is a practice that
makes “[linear] time irrelevant” (Marks 129). Indiana’s writing is so densely intertextual and
moves through different temporalities so quickly, that it feels like a cut-up or a montage. I am
choosing to focus on the sonic version of remixing. In this move, I echo Fred Moten, who writes
that as the “organizational principles break down, their breakdown disallows reading… and
becomes, for reading, the occluded of language: sound” (44). Letting this book express its
speculation sonically, I am choosing to listen to it rather than read it. Listening to its sound, as
Moten and Marks suggest, might reveal that which is hidden or folded up. And paying attention
to the feeling of our hairs standing on end might be the only way to truly listen.

To put it briefly, in this chapter I will argue that in its improvisational structure, La
mucama del Omicunlé is a profoundly queer novel, both its attention to queerness of sexuality
and gender and in its structural critique of normative storytelling. As a queer, speculative novel,
La mucama turns away from accepting any form of hegemonic structure as a given, demanding
to be listened to and not read. Thus, I hold that Rita Indiana makes visible the fact that
speculative work as always queer in its antinormativity.
Rita Indiana’s own story mirrors the shapeshifting of her book. She was born in Santo Domingo in the Dominican Republic in 1977, but grew up partly in New York. The daughter of a mobster who was assassinated in the Bronx in the 1990s, six-foot-two and openly queer, she is an author and an electronic merengue artist. In 2008, she created a performance art piece embodying a traditional merengue musician, writing an album, making music videos, and performing on stage. Her album *El juidero*, Dominican slang for ‘the one who escapes,’ became unexpectedly and incredibly popular, and for a brief moment she was a real pop star. After three years, she went back to writing books, much to the frustration of her thousands of fans.

Indiana’s mix of identities, as well as her insistence on not being labeled, is important context in understanding *La mucama del Omicunlè*. In the name of giving a clear exposition of the novel and to be faithful to the book's complexity and often absurdity, in what follows I will offer an extended account of the plot, interspersed with my own analysis. My method is an attempt to preserve the remixed qualities of Indiana’s speculation and of the book’s structure. Thus, the manner of unfolding that is remixing works both within the novel and outside of it, its multiplying and scrambled effect reverberating into the analysis of the work itself.

The Omicunlè from the title of the book is Esther Escudero, a powerful witch and advisor to the Dominican president in the year 2038. Esther embodies a mix of a ruthless sorcerer and lesbian abuelita. Acilde, our protagonist, got the job as her maid after performing oral sex on and subsequently being raped by Esther’s right hand man, Eric, when Acilde was turning tricks on the street. As Esther’s *mucama*, or maid, Acilde tends to the house and cooks for Esther, all the

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8 This is another instance of a Acilde exhibiting very little visible trauma after a violent incident, in this case the rape. This is partly because they spent a large portion of their young life in violent situations, and partly through that same mechanism of violence juxtaposed with apathy that Indiana uses to create dystopian feelings in *La mucama*. After he rapes them, Eric takes Acilde out for lunch and offers them the job.
while saving their money for the thing they most desire in the world: RainbowBright, a new medical technology that allows one to physically change genders in the space of a few hours.

Through a series of strange and startling circumstances that would take too long to go into here, Esther ends up dead and Acilde on the run, carrying Esther’s most prized possession: the last remaining sea anemone, presumed to be extinct. Acilde contacts Eric to ask him for help hiding and finding RainbowBright. Eric complies and, in a ritual that is half sci-fi technology and half santería, administers the drug. Eric attaches the anemone to Acilde’s head and begins chanting in Yoruba to assist in the transformation. Over the course of just a few hours, Acilde’s body painfully turns into that of a cis man. This process both mirrors and defies the current technology of transness. By speculating about a drug that could complete a gender affirmation seamlessly, without any scars, and in only a few hours, Indiana is looking outwards to the ‘not-yet-conscious,’ a Muñozian term for the futurist imaginings of queerness. And yet, in connecting the transformation to pain, Indiana plants herself in the history of transgender heartbreak and physical pain. A liberal humanist might have written Acilde’s change as a snap of the fingers, as Cinderella’s fairy godmother’s wave of a wand. Indiana’s posthumanist speculation denies the contentment with the present that would have allowed for a painless transformation.

In creating the fictitious RainbowBright, Indiana also utilizes one of the most common motifs of Afrofuturist work, that is the intertwining of black cultural and religious practices with futuristic technology. Throughout La mucama, Indiana imports Afrocuban santería, a religious practice rooted firmly in Cuba, into the Dominican Republic (Lefever, 318). This is an example of Indiana’s remixing of cultures. In the world of La mucama del Omicunlé, even the president
of the Dominican Republic is a practitioner of santería and has made it the national religion. This would be unheard of in our world—aside from being a Cuban practice, santería is mostly a religion of African descendents, not a practice the racialized island of the Dominican Republic would take on as its official religion. The way in which Rita Indiana creates fabulations, another manner of unfolding according to Marks, and remixes cultural signifiers into a new track produces a surplus. That is, the effect of not being able to experience the whole of, say, santería in its normal context, forms new connections, creating a surplus of affect and meaning. This surplus, according to Muñoz, “promises a futurity, something that is not quite here” (7). The surplus overwhelms, unable to be read as a whole, it demands to be heard.9

As Acilde gains the body they have always wanted, Eric dies, his life seemingly sucked out by Acilde’s new form. During all of this, Esther’s image appears and informs Acilde that now, in their true body, they are the Olokún, a polygender Yoruba god who rules the sea.10 The Olokún, says Esther, must go back in time and save the Earth from environmental apocalypse. Through the help of the Dominican president, Acilde takes up residence in a jail cell, and begins to travel back in time. While his consciousness speeds away, Acilde’s new body rests on the hard bed in the cell in 2038. They do not fully disappear, but rather enact a split wherein they can only be in another time when the body in their here-and-now is unconscious. In this restrictive move, Indiana never lets the reader forget Acilde’s status as a marginal embodied subject. She does not

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9 Both José Esteban Muñoz and Fred Moten write about an instance that the speculative fiction author Samuel R. Delany described in his memoir *The Motion of Light in Water*. Delany was told by a friend to go to the piers on the Hudson River in downtown Manhattan, where there were a set of empty cargo trucks that gay men sought out to have sex. Delany described the rhythmic, cut-up, occluded quality of the scene, writing that “no one ever got to see the whole.” The need to be clandestine and marginal created an inability to understand the scene as a singular event. Instead, Delany chose to be overwhelmed by it, allowing this vision to be heard rather than read.

10 The Olokún is a Yoruba god(dess) of wealth and fertility. They are alternately portrayed as male and female and are always associated with the sea. Originating in West Africa, the Olokún also appears in Afrocaribbean religions, and in some South and North American black traditions as well (Nevadomsky & Rosen).
present the illusion that their body could be free, but rather shows that in time travel, Acilde’s mind is fugitive. Queerness, according to Muñoz, is always a longing; it exists in the “was-once-conscious” and “not-yet conscious,” but not in the here-and-now (Muñoz, 3). In another refusal to adhere to liberal humanism, Indiana presents Acilde’s queer imaginings as a utopic longing.

Rita Indiana writes her way into different consciousnesses without much preamble, leaving the reader to play catch-up to her rapid exchange of perspectives, temporalities, and worlds. Accordingly, we are suddenly in the mind of Argenis, a failed artist working at a call center in Santo Domingo in 2008. He is a bitter divorcé, addicted to cocaine, and in debt. We learn about his frustrations in art school: Argenis had incredible talent, painted like a renaissance master in fact, but he couldn’t make art that was of his time, and never truly found success. One day, after having been fired from his job, he sees a familiar face walking by his house. It is Giorgio Menicucci, a wealthy and well-liked art patron who, spotting Argenis, quickly turns and walks away.

We move backwards in time again to learn that Giorgio arrived on the shores of the Dominican Republic in 1991 when his naked body was found by a fisherman in a hole in the ocean full of sea anemones on a beach called Playa Bo. He picked his name out himself—Giorgio, after Giorgio Moroder, disco producer and the creator of “I Feel Love,” by Donna Summer; Menicucci after his father who he never met. It is Acilde, conjured into the past and into a perfect man, who assumes a remixed name for their new self. Giorgio looks like Robert de Niro in \textit{The Godfather II}, has a beautiful, rich wife, and made his own money by becoming a famous chef. In Acilde’s own short life this was their other big dream: to get cooking lessons and
become a chef. Thus, Acilde’s utopic longings are realized only in this alter-reality. Now Giorgio and Linda, his wife, run an artist colony and an environmental sanctuary called the Sosúa Project on Playa Bo, the same beach in Sosúa where Giorgio was found as a boy. Somehow charmed by Argenis, they invite him to their retreat with a posse of artists: Iván, a Cuban curator who is guided by the voices of orishas he hears in his head, Malagueta, a Dominican baseball star-turned performance artist, and Elizabeth, who recently got into DJing and now considers it her artform.

Argenis is out of place at Playa Bo, bored and insecure about the other artists’ work, and irritating them in turn. Giorgio appears peripherally, orbiting the story as the reader desperately attempts to understand his histories, which remain resistant. Indiana’s carefully constructed narrative refuses to unfold easily. Marks refers to this manner of unfolding as ‘aniconism,’ “a strategy of denying images (and sounds) altogether, causing them to remain folded” (Marks 121). Indiana’s particular form of aniconism displaces the center of the narrative, in this case that of Giorgio/Acilde, instead weaving together an off-center queered narrative structure. José Esteban Muñoz writes about queer refusal as a “mode of resistance as refusal or escape [which] resonates with many patterns of minoritarian resistance to structures of social command.” Thus, aniconism could also be seen as “a strategy of refusal or defection” from normative storytelling (Muñoz 177).

Back on Playa Bo, the artists go snorkeling in the water during which Argenis, guided by a brashness bordering on stupidity, dives down into a hole full of sea anemones. He suffers a full-body allergic reaction to the sea creatures, and the other artists must drag him out of the

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11 A ‘malagueta’ is a type of hot chile pepper used in the Caribbean and in Brazil, particularly in the Bahia region.
water to save him. This is in contrast to Giorgio’s quasi-birth out of the same hole full of anemones when he first appeared in this temporality. Laid up in bed recovering, Argenis begins to hallucinate, although his daydreams are so real that it seems that he is actively travelling back in time. A group of Bucaneros, fugitive pirates from the 17th Century who are nationless, landless, and multiracial, are stealing and skinning cows on Playa Bo. The Bucaneros are outside all purview of enfranchised populations, and offer a kind of anarchism that manages to hold an apocalyptic futurity as well as being a memory from the past. They are the fleeting image of a hidden alternative to the colonial histories that are knowable. In the group is a Taíno man, a black man, and a white man, whose collaboration is not a part of the stories of which we have heard. They embody a palimpsest of something fugitive, which, to restate Walter Benjamin’s phrase, has flashed up “in a moment of danger” (Marks 115).

The Bucaneros’ leader, Roque, puts Argenis to work. Argenis is suspended between his present and the 17th Century, and it becomes difficult to tell which is more real, and which he enjoys more. One day, his mind with the Bucaneros, Argenis witnesses one of the pirates beheading another directly in front of him. Seemingly for the first time in the novel, a character has a traumatic reaction to the violence in front of them. Argenis screams and attacks the murderer, causing Roque to have to restrain him. He falls ill in 2001 Playa Bo, bedridden for days, and having screaming waking nightmares. Giorgio comes to visit him in his bed:

With his four eyes closed, Argenis felt a body get into the cot with him, it curled up next to him and rocked him. One hand caressed his stomach, which tensed up without pulling away… he guessed what route the hand was taking, and let it happen. He had waited centuries for this suck… He forgot the little French guy, the art at Playa Bo, forgot his own name… Argenis opened his eyes, anesthetized, and saw Roque finally lifting his head (Indiana 126, my translation).
Here we see an insistence on marginal freedom as existing only in queer, fugitive time. Argenis’ bliss in this moment supersedes sexual pleasure, and moves into the realm of queer ecstasy, which Muñoz writes of as a “crossing of the river,” a little death. “Queerness’ time is the time of ecstasy” (Muñoz 187). Argenis falls in love with Roque, his hallucinated pirate, and feels free for the first time in his life. He begins to make engravings for the pirate, but continues to do no work for Giorgio at the artists’ colony. More and more, he chooses to be in the 17th Century instead of in 2001. The trajectory of violence, a traumatic reaction, and the discovery of marginal, queer freedom, which exists only in fugitivity, connects his queerness to both pain and ecstasy.

This passage also shows Rita Indiana deftly merging Giorgio and Roque into one being. The author stacks temporalities on top of each other in *La mucama del Omicunlé* like the floors of a building. Looking down from the roof of the building, the reader sees some things line up. Things are both multiplied and merged: Argenis has “four eyes” because he lives as two beings. At the same time, Giorgio and Roque become one, their images flickering in front of each other, and multiply endlessly, two mirrors facing each other, unable to tell which image is the original. Characters fall through the floors of these multiple temporalities, straight time giving way to queer time, queer time giving way to straight time, and on and on. Acilde begins their life in straight time as a marginal, teenage sex worker in the wrong body. They move into their mind, onto a floor where they embody a rich, straight, cis man. In this temporality Argenis is trapped, marginal, maligned by his peers. He is an artist who belongs in the 17th Century, who experiences love and passionate sexuality in the 17th Century. His queer temporality is just as real as Acilde’s, both of them seeking out time alone and unconscious to be able to experience ecstasy.
Things begin to fall apart. We move faster through temporalities as Indiana remixes more intensely, sampling deeper cuts. Back at the Sosúa Project, Argenis becomes angrier and angrier, lashing out violently, spending hours in his room pretending to paint. The Spanish are closing in on the Bucaneros, who are living as fugitives. Argenis and Roque decide to bury the engravings on the beach. In the future, Acilde asks for more time in jail from the President, who is getting impatient, waiting for the Olokún to come up with a plan to save the world from environmental catastrophe. But, at the same time, Acilde is enjoying their life as Giorgio too much. They start forgetting their mission and their life in 2038, just as Argenis forgets his art and is own name in the ecstasy of his sexual encounter with Roque.

As Giorgio and the artists celebrate their upcoming art opening on the beach, they are also celebrating the breaking of ground for their environmental sanctuary lab. Argenis realizes the shovels are digging into the beach in the exact location where he and Roque had buried the chest of his engravings. He rushes over, trying to stop them from discovering what had been buried three-hundred years ago. The beach suddenly glitches between Argenis’ two realities: Roque and Giorgio are standing in front of Argenis and in one fluid motion they both hit Argenis across the face. Argenis, whose colliding worlds have merged together again in a moment of utmost intensity, is carried off and kicked out of the sanctuary. A man shows up whose job it is to “give life to objects from other times:” an archeologist who dusts off Argenis’ engravings and declares them “genius” (Indiana 172-173). Argenis’ talents, never recognized in his here-and-now, are lauded as brilliant in his was-once-conscious past imaginings (Muñoz 3).

The day of the opening comes and Elizabeth, one of the artists at Playa Bo, presents her final project to the artists’ colony and their guests. The project is a dance mix to be played at the
party. Rita Indiana spends almost four pages describing Elizabeth’s mix in painstakingly minute detail:

The music for the party, a three hour mix, traced a flowing line between Toña la Negra to Goa trances, and would mine the shadowy, threatening path and delirious sweetness of minimal tech, deep house, and drum & bass, Afrocuban chants, samples of the voice of Héctor Lavoe and Martin Luther King and Gertrude Stein. During the third hour’s climax, before jumping from a hammer beat to a cyber-hippie ocean of repetitive trance music, she would throw down a little of Donna Summer’s “I Feel Love,” and Jacques Cousteau’s voice from *Haiti: Waters of Sorrow*. The effect was tragic, inspirational, and contradictory: the French explorer’s predictions about the future of the island’s marine life would hang in the air for a few seconds before the bass would drop again, like a tsunami, over the dance floor (Indiana 154-155, my translation).

This montaged description of a remix cuts deep into the amalgamation of cultural identities and multitemporal worlds. The remix suspends any ease of transportive function, instead presenting listening as the only option to experience the whole. Rita Indiana offers us a sonic cuttup, which demands to be listened to, it cannot be read. She uses diasporic spidering to weave together Puerto Rican salsa singer Héctor Lavoe, the religious radicalism of Martin Luther King, and a queer icon like Gertrude Stein. Through remixing on her Technics 1200s, Elizabeth sounds out these voices. As the bass beat loops again and again, these histories reverberate through different temporalities. “From a majoritarian point of view,” writes Laura Marks, “the idea of remixing history sounds capricious and irresponsible; but not so for Afrofuturists. Remix as a manner of unfolding takes a point of view from the underside of majoritarian history and perceives the power of the remix to release energy from hitherto unimagined connections” (129).

This pent-up, sexual energy released by the process of remixing is on display in Indiana’s passage. She writes of the “delirious sweetness of minimal tech” and of the “third-hour’s climax,” which speaks of the unmistakable sexuality of not only music and dancing, but of the
rhythm of the remix. Yet again invoking Donna Summer’s “I Feel Love,” which she seems to love as much as I do, Indiana connects this sexual energy to the posthumanism of disco: we hear the unearthly quality of Summer’s voice sounding out over the repetitive computerized beats of Giorgio Moroder. In the invocation of the documentary Haiti: Waters of Sorrow, we hear the voice of French sea captain Jacques-Yves Cousteau lamenting the environmental catastrophe of Haiti’s waters. Cousteau at once throws the pitying colonizing gaze on the island that was the first to throw off the colonial empire and predicts the future apocalypse in a monad of sci-fi perfection. Finally, the bass drops “like a tsunami,” and the environmental catastrophe, an orgasmic armageddon, hits the dancefloor. "The effect,” writes Indiana, “was tragic, inspirational, and contradictory,” which is a pretty good description of her own novel.

As Elizabeth's remix resonates out onto the beach, she pauses to feed a little green pill of ecstasy to Giorgio. He begins to feel the effects of the drug, and everything is suddenly right in his world. Noticing a group of people huddled at one end of the party, Giorgio goes over and sees a young man breakdancing in the middle of the circle. The spell breaks as he realizes who it is: Said Bona, the future president of the Dominican Republic, who will, decades later, accept biological weapons from Venezuela and doom the environment, and everyone in it. This is the moment for which he has lived twenty years as Giorgio Menicucci, for which he was dispatched as the Olokún. His mission is to warn Bona, currently a twenty-year old graffiti artist, not to take the weapons. But then he begins to think. If the seas had not been poisoned, if earth had not begun to disintegrate, will the Omicunlé, Esther Escudo, save Acilde from the streets? Will Giorgio disappear? He sees his beautiful wife, the sun setting on the beach, feels the ecstasy scampering across his neurons, and closes his eyes. Behind his eyelids, he sees the sleeping pills
Acilde stole from their cellmate, sees them swallowing the pills down and lying back onto their cot. He sees Roque and his men falling from the bullets of the Spanish, and his mind goes blank. Giorgio opens his eyes and finds himself waving goodbye to the future president without having said a word. *En poco tiempo se olvidará de Acilde, de Roque, incluso de lo que vive en un hueco allá abajo en el arrecife.* “In a short time,” Indiana writes, “he will forget Acilde, forget Roque, and even forget what lives in a hole down there in the reef” (Indiana, 181; my translation).

In their choice to close the glitch between temporalities, Acilde’s suicide in 2038 marks an opting out of straight time. As they cruise into their own utopia, Acilde completes a queer failure and becomes eternally fugitive, free to exist solely in their queer time. Why should they, as a marginal queer subject, be expected to save the straight world? Born into the wrong body, abandoned by their parents, and forced to labor for most of their young life, they feel no allegiance to that temporality. Instead, Acilde chooses to remain in queer time, where they are rich, successful, and have a beautiful wife. They entered the break and found that it was more livable than anything they had experienced in straight time. The president and Esther could not have expected this, because they had stakes in the here-and-now.

In *In the Break*, Fred Moten tells us of a crack in Billie Holiday’s voice, describing it as the “extremity of the instrument, willingness to fail reconfigured as willingness to go past… The crack in the voice is an abundant loss, the strings a romance with what she don’t need and already has” (Moten, 107). The modern subject never expects the marginal and the subaltern subject’s willingness to fail— it is, as Moten says, the willingness to go past. The willingness to go past, to go beyond, to speculate into the elsewhere breeds “new coefficients of freedom” (Moten, 108). Queer failure is the necessary play of speculation, that which undoes and moves
beyond the material. This is a pessimistic structure, but Muñoz reminds us that utopian longing stems from a dissatisfaction with the here-and-now, a cosmic form of pessimism.

As we have seen, the power structures of the world in *La mucama del Omiculé* are also queered—they rest in the hands of the marginal and the subaltern. Rita Indiana places the Dominican Republic at the center of the world in the novel, a clear decentering of hegemonic politics, as the environmental apocalypse seems to be only stoppable through the actions of the Dominican president. The president himself is somewhat of a marginal subject, at least in his youth. He is described as a kid from the block, doing graffiti, and spoken word, and breakdancing, arts that have historically belonged to marginal young people of color. He takes political advice from a santera, and contracts a queer teenage maid to save the planet. The location of the apocalypse in environmental catastrophe is also a strategic move by Indiana. The possibility of an environmental apocalypse looms in the imaginary of this current, real-life world, and the citizens of the Caribbean are already experiencing its early tendrils in real time. Hurricane María was nothing if not an apocalyptic event for the nearby island of Puerto Rico, prompting a speculation about the future of an island that had already experienced armageddon.

In his essay, “The Armageddon Effect,” Tobias C. van Veen writes that Afrofuturist theory teaches that the apocalypse always occurs in the past tense. The moment that the first person became commodified and sold as a slave, the world ended. “Total cultural destruction and dehumanization under slavery had already happened,” he writes, “What comes after the End Times?” (van Veen, 65). What comes after is speculation in spite of the commodification state. When there is “no ‘normal’ to return to” (van Veen, 64), the marginal and the subaltern subject express themselves in speculative knowledge. *La mucama* is the literary echo of this knowledge.
In this book, Rita Indiana speculates in remixed time loops, the same cuttup playing over and over, bringing us back to where we started. Giorgio chose to accept that the normal was gone forever, and crossed over into a speculative existence. He understood that armageddon had been in effect the whole time.
Chapter 3
Other Ways of Looking: Mickalene Thomas and the Appositional Gaze

For the third and final incident of speculation, I turn to the American artist Mickalene Thomas, born 1971 in Camden, New Jersey. Thomas is known for her enormous, colorful paintings and collaged photographs of black women. These works are overpowering in their joy and sexuality. They create a sonic boom in any space where they reside, daring you to look anywhere else. For this project, I am focusing on two quieter works of hers, but ones with no less intensity. *Je T’aime* (2014) and *Je T’aime Deux* (2016) are two split-screen videos with black and white shots of different parts of Thomas’ body and those of her girlfriend, Racquel Chevremont. The videos are painfully intimate. You are in bed with them, stared at the way they would stare at each other. Thomas invites you to look specifically at the sexiest parts of their bodies, her lens framing Chevremont’s breast, Thomas’ stomach, their fingers intertwined. The sonic elements in these two pieces are a mixture of indistinguishable noises, water, scratching, rustling, and sexually suggestive rhythms of breath. The sound increases both the intimacy and the montage quality to the work.

In *Je T’aime*, the first shot of Chevremont shows half of her face, the rest covered by her arm. She stares straight at you. The other screen is taken up by what takes a moment to be recognizable as Thomas’ naked side, her hand carefully caressing her own hip. Together, the two halves of bodies are one. In what follows, I take this new body as a posthuman monument to radical black, queer joy. *Je T’aime Deux* expands to four screens, but retains the black and white and the same slow intimacy. The expansion of demands on the viewer’s gaze reinforces the fact that speculation signifies through its imperative to overwhelm the senses. It is impossible to look at all four screens at once, but you are forced to try to lace them together in some way. Again,
instead of attempting to read what is in front of you, it is better to allow the body to experience
the work through all the senses at once. They are slowed-down cut ups, whose “rhythm releases
an energy that the spectator's body absorbs” (Marks, 116).

Much of what I have discussed until now has been grounded in a pessimism and a
discontent with the here-and-now, which serve as a pathway to speculation. Thomas’ work,
however, relies on an optimistic focus that lends itself to meditations on love, joy, and beauty.
The titles of these two videos are unabashedly romantic— speaking to an assuredness about the
perfection of the moment that Thomas is capturing. Saidiya Hartman identifies the “critical labor
of the positive” as a “resolutely counterhegemonic labor” in artistic representation of being black
in America (hooks, “Diasporic Landscapes of Longing,” 67). This critical labor of the positive is
in no way to be confused with a contentment for the here-and-now. Futurism, most notably
Afrofuturism, has often been separated into categories of pessimism and optimism. While I do
not see such a clear-cut distinction, particularly not in the wider frame of speculative work, it
bears mention that Thomas’ artwork moves from a distinct basis of focus.

According to hooks, the counterhegemonic labor of the positive could also be called an
“oppositional worldview,” a moniker that hooks applies to the photographic and textual projects
of Carrie Mae Weems, a major icon and mentor of Mickalene Thomas. These works, according
to hooks, portray a “worldview, wherein intuition, magic, dream lore are all acknowledged to be
other ways of knowing that enhance our experience of life” (hooks, “Diasporic Landscapes of
Longing,” 67). This is almost a definition for speculation, and is certainly reflected in Thomas’
work which, builds from a foundation of fantasy that is simultaneously closely tied to the
quotidian. The moments chosen for Je T’aime and Je T’aime Deux are utopic monads of paradise
housed in the most domestic setting possible: the bedroom. The melding of magic and the everyday is fundamental to the speculative and central to Thomas’ videos.

Within her discussion of the oppositional worldview, hooks writes about the oppositional gaze of black women, an aspect of the worldview (hooks, “The Oppositional Gaze,” 94-105). The concept of ‘the gaze’ in art theory has seen many iterations and usages as understandings of power and identity have shifted. It is generally used to explain the way that the practice of looking in art constructs power dynamics between the looker and the looked upon. The gaze has long been considered a purveyor of power and imperialism, piercing and penetrating the looked-at, holding its subjects down with an invisible force. According to Martin Jay in *Downcast Eyes: The denigration of vision in Twentieth-Century French thought* (1993), sight was celebrated by Enlightenment thinkers as “the noblest of the senses,” the objective truth, the only way to rationality. Postmodernist and poststructuralist theorists such as Michel Foucault, tasked with the undoing of this rationality and modernism, regarded sight as a oppressive instrument of normative power, specifically for Foucault as a surveillance of sexualities. Jay provides an important critique of Foucault’s homogenization of gaze, and his refusal to “offer an antidote” to this totalitarian panopticism (Jay, 413). He writes:

With characteristic ascetic rigor, Foucault thus resisted exploring vision’s reciprocal, intersubjective, communicative potential, that of the mutual glance… Foucault may have focused so insistently on the dangers of panopticism that he remained blind to the other micropractices of everyday life that subvert its power. For all his professed interest in resistance, Foucault may have too hastily absorbed all power relations into one hegemonic ocular apparatus. (Jay, 414-415).

In understanding sight and the gaze as having singular and total function, Foucault ironically provides it with that power. For Foucault, any act of looking thus becomes malicious: a function
of the surveilling evil eye. I argue, as does Jay, that sight has dynamic power, not limited to imperial oppression. This antiocularism arose in intellectual feminist circles as well, as thinkers such as Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray privileged other senses like touch and smell in their theoretical work. They connected ocularcentrism to phallocentrism, an easy linguistic connection to make (after all, in English the gaze ‘penetrates’), and perhaps connected touch with female sexuality; Irigaray wrote that “the eye objectifies and it masters” (Irigaray, 50 in Jay, 410). Still, Kristeva, Irigaray and Foucault, along with their poststructuralist and feminist contemporaries, discussed the gaze as total and imperial, patriarchal and unwavering. Yet, there are other ways of looking. In Foucault et al’s distilled postcolonial construction of sight and gaze, there is no room for speculation. Against this antiocular tradition, the texts I have studied here posit that marginal subjects, who have historically been only looked at, have found ways of looking back. Mickalene Thomas’ work shows that gaze can in fact subvert power, thus creating the space for speculation to arise.

Gaze is arguably the most talked-about aspect of Thomas’ body of work; analysis of the way she alters normative power structures through gaze appears in all sorts of art magazines and exhibit reviews.12 The subjects of Thomas’ photographs and paintings signal upon first glance a comfortable dynamic in which the spectator is permitted to look at the sexualized black female body without hindrance. But this is a ruse. Thomas’ subjects stare back, subverting the spectator’s, particularly the white male spectator’s, gaze. Bell hooks would call this the oppositional black female gaze, or when the subject looks back—a direct glare that reflects the power of the gaze, bouncing it back onto the spectator. In “The Oppositional Gaze: Black female

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spectators,” hooks writes that there is “a power in looking,” particularly for black people who have been historically “denied their right to gaze” by white people. “Spaces of agency exist for black people, wherein we can both interrogate the gaze of the Other but also look back, and at one another, naming what we see… One learns to look a certain way in order to resist” (hooks, “The Oppositional Gaze,” 94-95). The word ‘look’ offers the double possibility of actively seeing and of seeming to be one way, the subversion of the black gaze of resistance simultaneously taking action and forming the self. In this way, the self can be created through the gaze. A self formed through the oppositional gaze occurs in “moments of rupture,” making resistance an ontological question rather than an optional one.

Bell hooks formed her self through the resistance of her gaze. She describes learning to connect with the world through an informed opposition, rather than disassociating from the world: “When I returned to films as a young woman, after a long period of silence, I had developed an oppositional gaze. Not only would I not be hurt by the absence of black female presence, or the insertion of violating representation, I interrogated the work, cultivated a way to look past race and gender for aspects of content, form, language” (hooks, “The Oppositional Gaze,” 98-99). The postcolonial ‘flipping of the script’ that Foucault and others enacted in their understandings of the gaze left little room for marginal agency. Hooks attests to the fact that she was able to gain agency through an oppositional way of looking, which perhaps Foucault did not need as a white man.

Mickalene Thomas unquestionably forms the self through the direct oppositional gazes of the black women she paints and photographs. Almost without exception, her subjects stare
directly back at the viewer (and the artist), with an unwavering gaze. And yet she has stated that she is much more concerned with the relationship between herself and her subjects than she is with the final image she creates. This can be seen in her most recent travelling show, *Muse*, which acts as an ode to the women she paints and photographs. This is a direct criticism to the nameless portrayal of countless black women subjects in the history of ‘western’ art. Thomas’ concern with the space between artist, subject, and spectator points to a different way of looking, one that I am most interested in for the purposes of this project. In the *Je T’aime* videos, it would appear that Thomas and Chevremont are looking back at the viewer, but really they are looking at each other. They stare at each other through the viewer, their gazes glancing off the viewer’s body and bouncing back onto the screen. Fred Moten would call these gazes appositional, a move which he describes thus:

> Whereas a powerful strain of postcolonial theory structures itself as the reversal of that direction and its gaze, I’m interested in the discovery of a necessary appositionality in this encounter, an almost hidden step (to the side and back) or gesture, a glance or glancing blow, that is the condition of possibility of a genuine aesthetic representation and analysis— in painting and prose— of that encounter (Moten, 34).\(^\text{13}\)

\(^\text{13}\) Emphasis is Moten’s
Moten critiques the penchant of postcolonial theory to simply reverse imperial and colonizing power dynamics, which often renders marginalized bodies as victims without agency. His shifted focus to the “hidden step” of appositionality opens up into primordial space, creating the potential for “a genuine aesthetic representation and analysis” by encompassing agency and complexity in the status of the ‘looked at.’ While oppositional gaze is a direct stare back at the spectator, appositional gazes are quicker, glancing side eyes that make room for play.

Appositionality decenters western obsessions with ocularism, but does not deny the potentiality in looking, as Foucault did. Moten calls appositionally “a vocal exteriority,” that is, it is more focused on the way something is said than what is said. It is a sonic emphasis that requires the listener to drown out the actual speech: “the extremity that is often unnoticed as mere accompaniment to (reasoned) utterance” (Moten, 34-35). Appositionality creates the break wherein speculation can arise. Once again, we are listening to the visual instead of reading it.

Returning to José Esteban Muñoz, we might say that he would understand appositional gazes as queer ephemeral gestures. Based on Jacques Derrida’s concept of trace, ephemeral gestures are “rarely obvious” because they need to “stand against the harsh light of mainstream visibility” (Muñoz, 65). Cruising glances over the shoulder offer discrete proof of queerness, appositional nods from one butch to another as they pass each other on the sidewalk are these hidden steps, visible only to some.

Mickalene Thomas conjures appositional gazes by using multiple figures to destabilize the space between spectator and subject. In *Sista Sista Lady Blue, from Odalisque* (2007), a woman sits on a couch in the center of the frame, staring into the distance, behind the viewer’s back. Already, she is looking elsewhere, unconcerned by your interest in her. It takes a minute to
notice another figure, reflected in a mirror to the left of the first woman. She is relaxed, her hand on her hip, smoking a cigarette. At once, the spectator realizes the two figures are looking at each other, rendering the viewer uninvolved, irrelevant. Thomas has completely erased the authoritative power of the spectator’s gaze. Instead, she forefronts the space between these two women. In this space, the break, potentiality blossoms. In the *Je T’aime* series, Thomas punctures the normative gaze so fully that once again, the viewer is rendered almost inconsequential. She sets up appositionality only by tricking the spectator into thinking that she and her girlfriend are staring at them. Imagine for a second that the camera was positioned above the bed, the viewer looking down on the figures of Chevremont and Thomas staring at each other. A spectator would have an uninhibited view of two bodies, the imperial male gaze playing out with all its normative force, the black female subjects denied the possibility of staring back. Thomas’ choice to place the spectator in the middle of the two lovers forces a queer confrontation that places the spectator in an uncomfortable, liminal position, specifically in the break.

Mickalene Thomas has described the videos as “voyeuristic” (*As If* Magazine), however, I would argue that the videos are only posing as a voyeuristic. Bell hooks writes that in the 1991...
film *Daughters of the Dust*, two black, female characters “display their bodies not for a voyeuristic colonizing gaze, but for that look of recognition that affirms their subjectivity— that constitutes them as spectators” (hooks, “The Oppositional Gaze,” 104). *Je T’aime* is a creation of self through the Thomas’ display of her own body. In the recognition of her subjectivity, and of her role as a spectator, Thomas confuses the hegemonic power of the normative gaze.

In *Je T’aime*, the break is aesthetically presented in the split screens. Thomas cuts up the bodies of her and Chevremont, creating a new posthuman form. Her willingness to play with the human body disinvites liberal humanism, forcing the spectator to hear the piece rather than see it. Laura Marks writes that “montage turns up a monad,” which is a particularly dense fold: “a breach in the seemingly inevitable progression of time” (Marks, 118). For these videos, Mickalene Thomas cuts into time, drawing out monads of particular tenderness and love. The speculative scenes in this series run counter to the normative status of queer black women, imagining a world that is at once utterly personal and ever-expanding.

In the aforequoted text from *Downcast Eyes*, Martin Jay wrote that “Foucault may have focused so insistently on the dangers of panopticism that he remained blind to the other micropractices of everyday life that subvert its power” (Jay 414-415). These other micropractices, or other ways of seeing, are fundamentally rooted in the everyday, as Jay says. Quotidian speculations, such as the *Je T’aime* series, are perhaps the most important manifestation of speculative longing. They offer ephemeral proof of another world and articulate utopic longings that resist the exclusivity of some other forms of speculation.

I chose to end with Mickalene Thomas’ little monads of black, queer joy in an effort to articulate the simultaneous banality and cosmic event that are these micropractices of
speculation. In addition, the critical labor of the positive that is Thomas’ work stands in contrast to the tales of queer failure from the Dreamhouse and from Rita Indiana’s novel. Having resisted the gaze that would have cut through the moments of bliss in bed with her girlfriend, Thomas is able to relax in the break. In a dark room of the museum where Mickalene Thomas’ exhibition Muse is showing, the video loops again and again. As the two figures appear on screen once more, staring at each other, Thomas speculates this moment into the eternal.
Conclusion
Utopia, Ecstasy, and the Comedown

Whether ending in queer failure or in joy, all three of the speculative incidents analyzed in this project have remained in the break, in queer time, and have chosen not to come out. The Dreamhouse died and subsequently sealed its glitch to the outside world, lingering as a memory in the minds of those who danced there. Acilde chose to remain in their queer time imaginary in *La mucama del Omicunlé*, and died in the normative world. And even if Mickalene Thomas’ video doesn’t end with such explicit demise, the looped shots of her love scene will probably live on past her own life, preserving that edenic bedroom in the break even as the bodies of those in the videos cease to exist. In seeing the very different ways these three incidents ended in the elsewhere, we can hear them as generative practices of speculation, not as examples of a prepackaged method. Like the utopias mentioned briefly in the introduction, speculation only exists as an additive practice. This means that the incidents themselves are constantly renegotiating the space around speculation. The three incidents articulated in this project serve as ways to understand the potentiality of speculative worlds, but never to define speculation itself.

Listening as these speculative incidents sound out longings for other worlds, we can hear them enacting a surplus, which exists as bits and pieces of a whole that cannot be read. These incidents are echoes of that longing for a speculative time and place, imagining a surplus into being because marginalized people desire more. In a talk entitled the “Public Feelings Salon” at Barnard in 2011, José Esteban Muñoz said, “Enduring is not a minimalist practice.” For Muñoz, to endure is to understand that there is more to be desired, more than just the structure we were taught to live in. This anti-minimalism is a radical surplus that lies folded up, hidden both in the
past and in the future. To unfold it is to speculate, to crack open the floor and the ceiling and all the walls, and find a surplus of affect and emotion and meaning. This surplus is ecstasy.

Ecstasy refers both to the drug, officially called MDMA, and to the feeling and state of being ecstatic. The word ecstasy comes from the Greek *ekstasis*, meaning “standing outside of oneself,” or “out of place.” This seems to imply that the emotional intensity of ecstasy is so great that it supersedes the self. The ecstatic self transcends the boundaries of the normative human body, becoming an emotionally queered being. Muñoz puts it more directly: “Queerness’ time is the time of ecstasy. Ecstasy is queerness’ way” (187). In the ecstatic realm, everything functions purely affectively, without the constraints of normative time. Therefore we can say that the ecstatic is the speculative. This can be seen in the state of bliss reached at the Dreamhouse (in addition to any ecstasy actually being imbibed), in the moment Giorgio/Acilde decides to remain in queer time (during which they were also actually on ecstasy), and in the intensity of the love and desire in Thomas’ video pieces. Ecstasy is a state of radical emotion, of leaving everything else behind except for emotion. In this way, ecstasy resists all surveillance—a purely emotional being cannot be surveilled, because they contain only intangibilities, fugitive from all categorization. The gaze of the panopticon cannot travel through the glitch.

Ecstasy has a peculiar relationship to time. Rather than move inside of time, ecstasy dances with it, gracefully flitting in and out of temporalities. “Knowing ecstasy is having a sense of timeliness’s motion,” writes Shane Vogel in “By the Light of What Comes After,” “comprehending a temporal unity, which includes the past, the future, and the present” (250). Thus, the ecstatic realm is indubitably speculative. Ecstasy also understands the dualities of pain and pleasure, life and death, and good and evil inherent in all things that a feel-good
neoliberalism chooses to ignore. Just as Rita Indiana did not deny the pain it would take to transform genders, for example, or just as all the pleasurable nights at the Dreamhouse came with the knowledge that they would one day have to end, so ecstasy acknowledges the comedown. In the infamous Bernini sculpture of Saint Teresa, her ecstasy is defined by the ambiguity of whether her imminent penetration will be orgasmic or deadly. There has always been a duality of good and evil in religiosity, but in contrast to the Christian separation and delineation of Heaven above and Hell below, ecstasy understands the duality as one. Just as there is ‘temporal unity’ in the ecstatic there is also moral unity, which acts also as a negation of top-down morality. The ecstatic is the emotional break, wherein the consciousness becomes open to temporal and moral confusion. It is a request to step out of time and stand beside it, relying solely, as Fred Moten advises, on improvised sound. As ecstasy posthumanizes our emotions, it lets go of the idea that there are ‘good’ and ‘bad’ things to feel.

The symptoms of travel in the ecstatic realm bring us to what is often the pharmaceutical cause of the emotional break. In his book, *Generation Ecstasy* (1999), British music journalist Simon Reynolds calls MDMA the ‘we’ drug, writing, “The energy currents that MDMA releases through the body could be compared to theories of a life force that have been promulgated by various ‘vitalist’ philosophers, mystics,
poets, and physicians from the eighteenth century to the present: Mesmer’s ‘magnetic fluid,’ Whitman’s ‘body electric,’ Reich’s orgone” (Reynolds 90). The vitalists’ premonitions of a life force that rocked the whole body and transported the soul were technologized into a little pill that turns the brain into an emotional supercomputer.

Taking ecstasy can often feel like all the voices in your head of self-doubt and criticism are gone, thereby freeing you up to express love, dance the way you want to, speak what is on your mind. Not everybody’s experience is positive of course, but in general, people report a lifting of weight from the consciousness, and a reduced inhibition. My own experience with ecstasy has always been tied to dancing, which in itself is a transportive function. I feel closer to the speculative elsewhere than ever when a weight which I can only attribute to capitalism, to patriarchal structures, to self-consciousness about my body or my words, is lifted.

But not all transport via ecstasy takes place at the party. A recent episode of the Gimlet podcast The Nod featured the story of a psychological study being conducted to see if MDMA could treat racial trauma. Racial trauma, or race-based trauma, is itself a fairly new term in psychological literature. It is a form of PTSD that has been identified in many black and brown people, and is a reaction to both violent and everyday insidious acts of racism (Williams and Leins 2016). In listening to the episode of The Nod, I was struck by the description from a black therapist named Sara who went through the treatment as part of a training to be able to administer it. As the drug begins to take its effect, Sara says she felt like she was dying. She is visited by the image of her grandmother, whose death was traumatic for Sara’s family. Sara explains that the image of her grandmother was “the energy of her,” rather than the human version of her. And then, says Sara,
She takes me to this place that the only way I know how to describe it is kind of all there is. This space of openness and oneness at the same time, it's a place that I call home… No body, no me. I'm just life in its essence. Freedom… It's beyond anything I've ever felt in my body. It's probably the best I've ever felt in my body, there was so much joy in the sense of like ease and peace and relaxation… I no longer had to exist in the space of ‘shoulds’ and ‘oughts’ and you need to do this to be safe… It was just I could be, I could just exist. *(The Nod)*

Sara took ecstasy, and ecstasy took her through the glitch. Her description of a place that is “all there is,” where there is “openness and oneness at the same time” is a description of the elsewhere, of queer time, of an anti-structural world. During her medically-induced trip into the speculative realm, Sara was able to momentarily slide out from under the weight of racism, of traumas both generational and lived. Her grandmother, appearing as a trace from the past, leads her to a place where she is completely fugitive from the here-and-now. In that place, she can “just exist,” which speaks not only to the violence of the here-and-now, but the need for a radical speculative mentality to merely exist in peace.

And this glimpse at peace and speculative potentiality did not leave Sara when the drug wore off. The host asks her what changed after she did the treatment, and she responds:

What was released was the frozenness that I had experienced in my body… I was able to feel again, I was able to move again… Something that was unexpected for me in this experience was this sense of freedom and these new emotions that I was able to experience because… I know in my social circles, people don't experience that joy on a day to day basis… if I could gift that to black folks in particular… it'll help” *(The Nod)*.

Once she had performed this looking outwards, Sara was able to gain an emotional knowledge that there is more than the here-and-now. With that knowledge, some of her trauma was released— not in a way that made it go away, but in a way that allowed her to feel that trauma in a healthy way. Early proponents of MDMA coined the term *entactogen*, literally, to ‘touch
within,’ to describe the drug, differentiating it from ‘uppers’ like cocaine, which give one an engrandized, false sense of self (Reynolds 83). MDMA might be considered more of a laterally moving drug, connecting the user to both their inner and outer worlds. It makes sense then that ecstasy would be used in therapy, particularly to treat trauma. Trauma gets buried in the depths of the psyche, causing a traumatized person to have a hard time feeling any connection with their outer world.

I reproduced Sara’s account of her experience not to show why MDMA is a good tool in therapeutic psychology, but to show how important the drug’s effects were to her. In gaining an ability to perform a radical looking outwards, Sara was able to feel free in a way she never had, and consequently was able to feel her emotions more fully. This personal form of speculation spiders outwards as we consider it on grander levels. Work within the system, as within Sara’s definable world, will never reach the ecstatic realm, because it does not look outside the existing framework. Liberal calls for inclusion do not suffice because they do not account for the need to speculate, to know that there are other worlds. Political philosophy scholar Jakeet Singh said at a recent talk at Oberlin College that the danger of calls for inclusiveness is that we are merely giving in to a form of capitalist expansion nicely packaged as liberal inclusion (Singh “Our History is Our Future.” Oberlin College). He says that by being included in colonial, settler-society, we are condoning that society, and all its systems of power and exclusivity. Inclusion means legitimizing the framework, which does not challenge the originary. A radical looking outwards is called for.

We must insist on the surplus, on the ecstatic, on the speculative. Inclusion is not enough. We must make space for speculation, which can mean artistic practices, like the ones analyzed in
this project, but also speculation for new political frameworks, for marginal happiness, for new sounds. Everyone has a right to ecstasy. As mentioned earlier, the ecstatic realm is safe from the panopticon, and this takes on a new meaning when considering Sara’s story of feeling free of the panopticon of racism. Perhaps what it did for Sara was cut out a double consciousness and leave her with just her own. Perhaps ecstasy rid Sara of what W.E.B. DuBois described as “sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity” (2-3). We must insist on other ways of looking, which resist the panopticon. We must move to the ecstatic.

In the comedown, things settle back into their well-worn places. As we feel ourselves in the here-and-now again, a feeling of enduring loss comes back to us. In Joshua Javier Guzmán’s essay, “Notes on the Comedown,” he reflects on the loss of José Esteban Muñoz, who died fairly suddenly in 2013, and on brown loss and queer loss in general. The comedown, Guzmán writes, reveals “how brownness marks an enduring materiality but also how this materiality is really a vital loss that persists in the here-and-now as the loss of a then-and-there” (60). Brownness and queerness mark a surplus of loss. Recalling how Fred Moten wrote that black radicalism is always related to material loss (Moten 94), we can connect the comedown to a recognition of the devastation written into the enduring existence of brownness and queerness. This could also be construed as ‘resilience,’ but that perspective fails to feel the loss as fully as that which remains. In the comedown from the ecstatic realm, this loss is felt fully, as the absence of traumatic weight is more apparent after it has been realized. This is the concept of ‘wokeness,’ wherein the more we know about the devastation of the here-and-now, the harder it is to accept the here-and-now as all there is. Guzmán explains that the comedown “is composed of what Shane
Vogel describes as an ‘eventology of the ordinary,’ which permits us to think of the comedown as affectively rendered within the everyday, making the everyday eventful” (60). We begin to see the everyday as different, strange. Nothing is as it should be, and we begin to understand that the speculative is perhaps truer than the here-and-now. Thus, as we experience the comedown and see the here-and-now in this new light, with new sounds, we collectivize and then radicalize.

In order to collectivize, we must reject minoritizing discourses wherein those with privilege are somehow excused from the negative effects of oppressive power structures. In the wake of this rejection emerges what Fred Moten calls, ‘the coalition.’ As he puts it so well: “The coalition emerges out of your recognition that it’s fucked up for you, in the same way that we’ve already recognized that it’s fucked up for us… This shit is killing you, too, however much more softly, you stupid motherfucker, you know?” (Moten, The Undercommons 140). That is to say, what Moten calls "the coalition" is necessary, for there is no collective future without it, even in the farthest reaches of speculative ecstasy. When the comedown is effectively collectivized, and we settle back into the here-and-now, it is possible to move from a collective grief to a collective awakening. This position is echoed in Muñoz, who in his call to take ecstasy, wrote, “We must vacate the here-and-now for a then and there. Individual transports are insufficient. We need to engage in a collective temporal distortion” (185). And indeed lonely comedowns will not do either. To acknowledge the loss and also have the wherewithal to keep going requires a collectivism that is inherently anti-capitalist in its refusal to attend to the loneliness that is required of individualism. It is possible to collectivize with both the knowledge that there is more to this world than what we see in front of us, and with the understanding that we are coming back into the space between.
As we comedown from the ecstatic realm, we take some of the ecstatic, some traces of queer time, back with us into the here-and-now. We come back a little more lost, fitting in to the here-and-now perhaps a little less easily. Muñoz writes that “being lost, in this particular queer sense, is to relinquish one’s role (and subsequent privilege) in the heteronormative order. The dispossessed are appropriately adept at critiquing possession as illogical. To accept the way in which one is lost is to be also found and not found in a particularly queer fashion” (73).

Ultimately, we must get lost to speculate. We must lose our purpose, our productivity, our sense of direction, our confidence in the here-and-now. Only then can speculation enact a radical resistance. In order to perform this radical looking outwards, we must acknowledge hidden histories and accept non-productivity. We must play.
Works Cited


Boone, Gage of the. Interview. By Emma B.B. Doyle. 26 Nov. 2018


