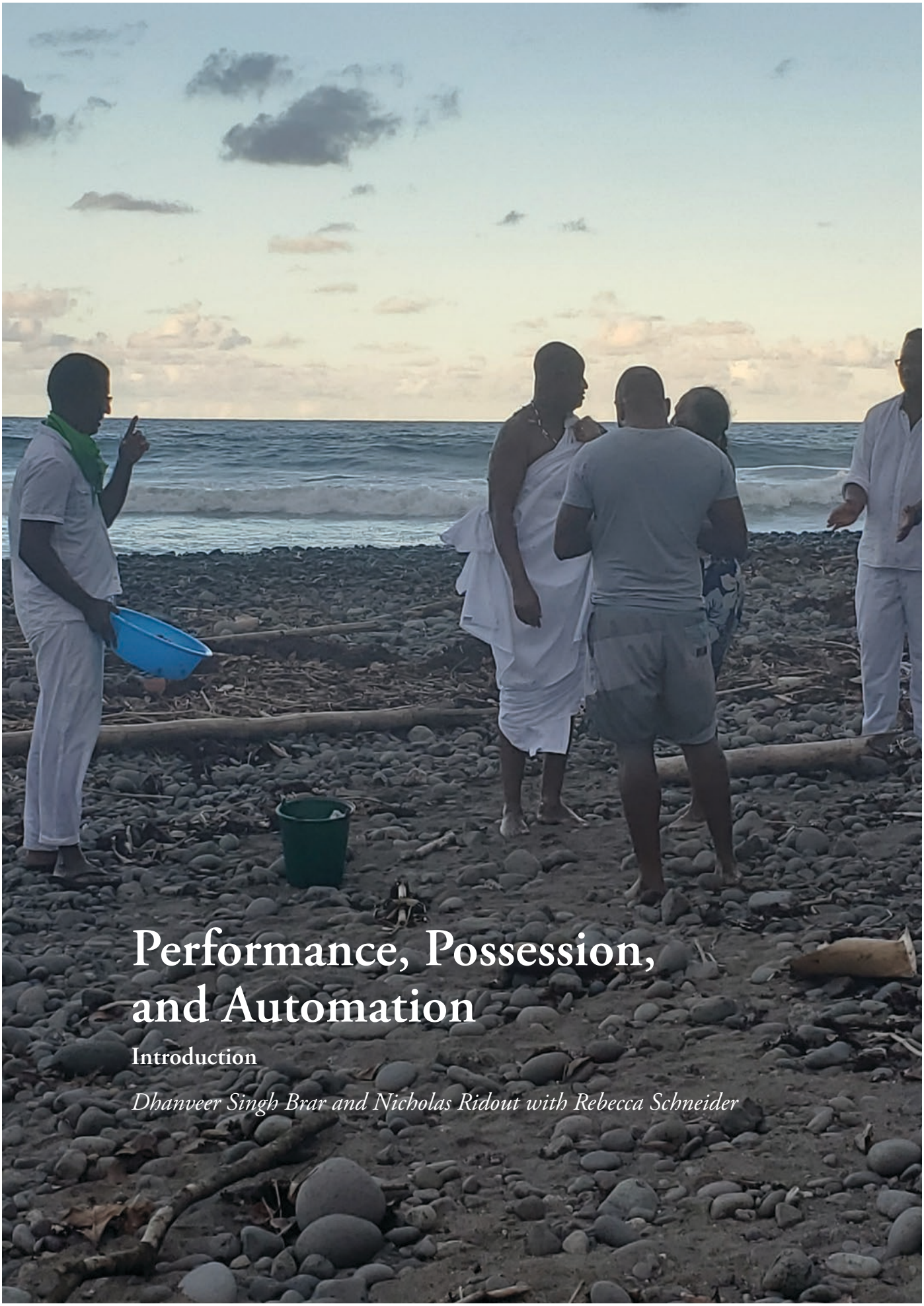

Performance, Possession, and Automation

Introduction

Dhanveer Singh Brar and Nicholas Ridout with Rebecca Schneider

This *TDR* Consortium issue presents research and thinking developed within and around a three-year research project, "performance, possession + automation." Based in the UK, funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council, and led by Dhanveer Singh Brar, Nicholas Ridout, and Orlagh Woods, the project has brought together academics and artists to investigate, through the practice and study of performance, the resistant power of "spirit" possession and the contemporary rise of automation—and the entanglement of both with histories of colonial slavery. In this special issue, Brar and Ridout are collaborating with Rebecca Schneider, who has been involved in the project from the beginning, to bring out a selection of writing that we hope will give *TDR* readers a sense of some of the ideas that have motivated us and kept us thinking together, and which we will be looking to carry forward in the coming years.

In his history of the Haitian Revolution, *The Black Jacobins*, C.L.R. James makes two brief observations—to which he barely returns—that we have decided to take seriously as an invitation to thought. His first observation is both brief, and maybe a little contentious:

> The slaves worked on the land, and, like revolutionary peasants everywhere, they aimed at the extermination of their oppressors. But working and living together in gangs of hundreds on the huge sugar-factories which covered the North Plain, they were closer to a modern proletariat than any group of workers in existence at the time, and the rising was, therefore, a thoroughly prepared and organized mass movement. ([1938] 1989:85–86)

That the rising was organized is well-attested. That the nature of its organization was owing to its actors' resemblance to an industrial proletariat is a more provocative claim, which Nick Nesbitt, for example, argues cannot be sustained if one is to maintain a precise definition of what Marx meant by the term "proletariat."

> It seems to me fair and even compelling to ask whether the terms of James's presentation, both literal ("proletariat") and implied (plantation slavery as proto-industrial capitalism), actually correspond to Marx's uses of them. I believe in each case the answer is no. (Nesbitt 2019:5)

This is clearly not to deny the historical reality of a direct relationship between plantation slavery and capitalism, well-established and much discussed over the last century, in works dating back at the very least to Eric Williams's 1944 *Capitalism and Slavery*, published six years after James's

Figure 1. (facing page) Henri, Zola, and Zola's assistants, known as badji-cans*, stand on the beach in Sainte-Marie, Martinique, 15 November 2020. See "Preparing in Dispossession: Praise for the Recreation of All" by Ronald Rose-Antoinette. (Photo by Ronald Rose-Antoinette)*

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1938 history, and alive today in the context of contemporary automation, in texts such as Meredith Whittaker's "Origin Stories: Plantations, Computers, and Industrial Control" (2023).[1]

What Nesbitt insists upon, though, is that the plantation was industrial but not yet capitalist, because a capitalist mode of production involves a distinctive set of social relations (property, family, law) that were not part of the plantation economies of the Caribbean, whatever the contribution those economies may have been making to the development of capitalism, with its ultimately distinctive mode of production, in both Europe and the Americas. So, while there may indeed have been a necessary structural transformation in the mode of production between plantation slavery and industrial capitalism, there are nonetheless features of the former that the latter found useful in and beyond that transformation. And we might say, in this respect, that when considered in a global perspective, this transformation was (and continues to be) an example of what Trotsky called combined and uneven development, a process that typically involves the persistence of aspects of prior modes of production amid and alongside the operations of a new one ([1929] 2010). This unevenness is a feature often identified as characteristic of the transition to capitalism in the lands of what Immanuel Wallerstein has accustomed us to think of as the world system's "periphery" ([1974] 2011a; [1980] 2011b). The feature that we want to identify as having been seized upon and systematically developed for use within the new capitalist mode of production is automation as a method or technology for the management of labor.

So the organizational capacity of the Haitian revolutionaries might be understood, in a revision of James's rhetorical move, as attributable to their experience of a labor management technology to which, within a new (fully capitalist) mode of production, the people of an actual industrial proletariat were later to be subjected. It's a capacity that arose, therefore, not from their self-recognition as proletarians, in the sense that Marx gave the term and which James inherits, but from their experience as the subjects of an experiment in industrial labor management and its systematization. They were, in other words, humans who came to feel more intensely than anyone in a system in which the maximization of value-realization is to be the goal, that the worker is, in the last instance, disposable. Their revolutionary capacity arose, we suggest, as a distinctive culture, developed in the context of this deadly regime, a culture that must also be recognized as distinctively modern, if not yet distinctively capitalist, or, for that matter, anticapitalist.

Here is how Sidney Mintz characterizes this Caribbean "modernity":

> Accordingly "modernity" as used here refers not only to the technological accompaniments to industry, but also to its social organizational sequelae: to the circumstances for meeting and relating; to ways of socializing without recourse to previously learned forms; to an acquired matter-of-factness about cultural differences and differences in social style or manners; and to a social detachment that can come from being subject—while recognizing one's own relative lack of power—to rapid, radical, uncontrolled and ongoing change. (1996:296)

So, what about this "social organization"?

A few lines after James compares the Haitian revolutionaries to an industrial proletariat, he makes another, similarly almost throwaway claim: "Voodoo was the medium of the conspiracy" ([1938] 1989:86). He has in mind, of course, the role of vodun or vodou[2] in the assembling and inspiring of the uprising, and, most particularly, its now legendary manifestation at Bois Caïman in 1791, where, it is reported, religious practitioners Dutty Boukman and Cécile Fatiman led a vodou ceremony. James bases the second scene of his 1934 play, *Toussaint Louverture: The Story of the Only*

1. Additional key texts that we have drawn upon for our understanding of the plantation and its afterlives include Beckert and Rockman (2018); Beckford ([1972] 1999); Best and Levitt (2009); Burnard and Garrigus (2016); Mintz (1985); Nesbitt (2022); Rosenthal (2019); Thomas (2019); and Woods (2017).

2. James used the familiar spelling, voodoo, but we prefer to use the spelling more frequently used in Haiti, and in recent scholarship, which is vodou.

Successful Slave Revolt in History, on this event, albeit with almost no explicit presentation of vodou itself. But, as the historian of Haiti Laurent Dubois, notes, it was vodou, a cultural practice of which music and dance were vital elements, that helped give shape to the social organization that was the Haitian Revolution: "there is little doubt that, in one way or another, religious practices facilitated the process of its organization" (2012:101). Music and dance, then, have something to do with planning. Stay with us here.

Our question, throughout the three years of this project, has sometimes emerged in this form: Does the industrial proletariat, or any of its contemporaries, successors, allies (in the lumpenproletariat, the surplus populations, the refuse), have its own vodou? Throughout these three years we have found ourselves returning again and again to a 1977 text by Sylvia Wynter that, we still think, offers the most expansive and exciting way of pursuing this question.

In "'We Know Where We Are From': The Politics of Black Culture from Myal to Marley," Wynter concretizes a powerful and synoptic rewriting of the history of the Caribbean based on her engagement with the intellectual tradition of Marxism (including the work of both James and Williams) by tracing connections between the resistant Jamaican spiritual practice of myal and the emergent cultural form of reggae, as exemplified by the music of Bob Marley and its roots in Rastafarianism ([1977] 2022). She explains how the religious and cultural practices of Rastafarianism repeat the withdrawal from conditions of intolerable enslavement on the plantation achieved in earlier practices such as myal, doing so in response to the plantation's legacy in the incipient automation of late 20th-century capitalism.

> It is therefore, from this slave plantation cosmos [...] that the syncretic Afro-religious cults were to withdraw, as also will the later millenarian one of contemporary Rastafarianism, from what has become, as the successor to the slave plantation's cosmos, the now post-colonial [...] fully globalized contemporary techno-industrial order. (Wynter [1977] 2022:477–78)

She then identifies black musical performance as a transformation of the spiritual flight from the carceral experience of the plantation into a political claim, not just for freedom, but for happiness in the present:

> While if in the rituals it was the techniques of possession which breached the iron walls of the prison of their everyday slave plantation existence, black music, from the spirituals to the blues to jazz and all its variants, and now to Marley and Reggae, secularized the formerly spiritual religious ecstasy, displaced it into an aesthetic space, where it made the ultimate revolutionary demand, *the demand for happiness/fulfillment now*. (486–87)

Wynter's claim might be extended to imagine that this demand for "happiness/fulfillment now," which she invites her readers to think is articulated from within this aesthetic space of musical social organization, might also be a moment of that happiness itself. To imagine, that is, that the activity of thinking and feeling together involved in the formulation of the demand—music as planning—is a source of fulfillment, more than merely an anticipatory experience of what an alternative reality might feel like to live in. It may therefore be possible—under certain and specific historical conditions—to generate an actual experience of another way of being in the world and to plan its production, even, or perhaps especially, from within a world where those other damn forces of production are subjecting you to the multiple psychic and material shocks of labor management.

What sort of cultural spiritual resources or technologies might people lay a hold of or manufacture to help them deal with or make alterations in the slice of life cut for them by capitalism today?

That's one of the questions we've been trying to think about in "performance, possession + automation."

Can we imagine, even, that the vodou, the myal—or more generally, the possession—of the subaltern classes of the fully industrial, or postindustrial, or the more general category of those repeatedly fucked-over by the otherwise unevenly combined and developed economies, might not have

to look like something authentic or pre- or postcapitalist (as though vodou, or anything else, were authentic, anyway, or precapitalist, for that matter)? That it might look, sound, feel like automation, even? Like it is inhabiting the most intimate dialectical relation to the automation of industrial and postindustrial economies? And that performance might be one place to go to find it?

Let us try putting this all another way: how does it—automation—feel? How does it—possession—feel?

The story of love and hate has been around, so they say, for as long as people have walked the face of the earth. We all know how it goes. Love and hate act like they are opposed to each other, they tell us they are forces that compel us to either create or destroy. One fills our hearts with generosity unbound; the other shows us how far our cruelty can go. But we also know the story is never as simple as it appears. What we learn when we look a little closer is that there is a thin line separating the two. They are not all that far apart. And in that tiny, marginal space between them, what flourishes is desire. When we profess hate, desire means all the bile we pour out has lurking in it a confession, one that whispers our real needs. And sometimes, as much as we want to love—love something, love someone—desire rears its head and sends us into a tailspin. By the time we recover our senses, our love has been broken, perhaps lost forever.

Well, the story of automation and possession is much like the one of love and hate. Except at the thin line apparently separating these two experiences, what we find is play. Despite what you hear, automation is nothing new. It has been around a good long while now: look back over the past 500 years, and wherever there are people being dehumanized, you will find that automation is usually the culprit. When it comes to possession, it is not just something the ancients did in their free time to get out of their minds. We try to convince ourselves that we are now masters of our own domains, but the spirits pop up in the most unexpected places to remind us who the hell is in charge. So, play, like desire, is unfair. It really messes us up. Automation is forever an unwanted guest in the rooms where there's play going on. And we do not like to admit it, but those bastards running things know they never have us working harder than when we think we are at our leisure.

If automation is simultaneously a kind of disaster for human life and something that's felt as a chance at freedom, then perhaps the feeling of automation is rhythmic. Its closures and openings feel like a series of breaks and continuities between manual and cognitive dexterity, the impossible demands placed upon hands and the resulting necessity for hands to innovate. Survival motion set to music. Because when faced with the feeling of automation, we are given problems to solve. Where do we go when our worked on and worked over bodies are no longer required? We go inside to the places in our head or to some point in the small of our back. Automation presents us with a crisis and an opportunity. In this state of emergency, we once again have to look to the social for our emergence.

Another way to think about this rhythmic experience: finding ways to give our powers full play. Automation, if faced up to as a reality, without nostalgia, could allow for the development of life as an alternative activity where we can set off on a quest for human freedom. Play becomes a form of life-work. Lines are blurred and creativity is able to ensure the existence of the organism beyond economic imperatives. It is no good trying to manage the transition from an old to a new despotism. Instead, we must figure out ways to inherit the anticipations. If advancing out of here together is our intention, then we need to fold spirit and cosmos into new experiences of surplus social potential.

Returning to our earlier question: how does it—automation—feel? How does it—possession—feel? The difference between the benign and the fraught is dissolved when seeking out possession as an alternative to automation. Upon entry into this other field of play, it is worth remembering that control is never the same again. You cannot choose who is mounting you, as a spirit does the possessed body. A power stronger than itself, you sign a spectral contract. It means accepting that any program or platform we devise will be interrupted, interfered with, encroached upon, and

displaced. Planning, though, will persist the same as it ever was. Or let us invite brother Gil to try putting this all another way:

> I have no idea how many times I've been asked what I call my music, or how many jokes I have thought up to substitute for a serious answer: "I call it collect," I might say, "I call it mine," was another.
>
> [...]
>
> In truth I call what I have been granted the opportunity to share "gifts." I would like to personally claim to be the source of the melodies and ideas that have come through me, but that is just the point. Many of the shapes of sound and concepts have come upon me from no place I can trace, notes and chords I'd never learned, thoughts and pictures I'd never seen—and all as clear as a sky untouched by cloud or smog or smoke or haze. Suddenly. Magically. As if transferred to me without effort.
>
> [...]
>
> These have been gifts from the Spirits. So perhaps these songs and poems are "spirituals." [...]
>
> Don't ever let the spirits die. (Scott-Heron 1994)

This issue opens with an essay by Deborah A. Thomas, who offers both a theoretical grounding for thinking about bodily sovereignty and an on-the-ground account of a practical embodying of such theory in kumina, a practice brought to Jamaica by indentured laborers from the Kongo region after the abolition of slavery. It is to kumina that Sylvia Wynter refers when she writes of myal, a kind of possession that, Thomas writes, "heralds [...] the return of ancestors, and a surrender to spirit" (18). This is a surrender that requires work—organization, planning—to achieve the attunement in drumming and dance that might give human powers their full play. This potential is what emerges from the kumina festival, "Tambufest," which Thomas has been coorganizing for the last five years with Junior "Gabu" Wedderburn, Nicholas "Rocky" Allen, and the St. Thomas Kumina Collective. Emerges, that is, from coorganization as such.

Luis Rincón Alba gets his chills at carnival. There he finds in the "musical mechanism" of Colombian salsero Joe Arroyo an instantiation of human relations grounded in "intercorporeal and crosstemporal solidarity" (47) that resists capitalism's tendency to separate the living from the dead, the spectators from the actors. In Alba's account, Arroyo's use of the Cuban clave as the rhythmic and mathematical framework for his composition resembles reggae's beat in its tendency towards the autonomous—capable of producing an experience of what Sylvia Wynter, in that favorite text of ours, calls "happiness/fulfillment now."

Ronald Rose-Antoinette's story is his own. Or rather it is a story about his involvement in a collective ceremony in the town of Sainte-Marie, Martinique. Rose-Antoinette does more than give a first-person account of his participation. He uses the people, the location, and the gestures of the occasion to slip into a meditation on "the meticulously sensuous and alluring sociology of black life as such" (65) carved out on an island forever marked by plantation economics.

Arabella Stanger's essay, developed in dialog with Seke Chimutengwende, Adrienne Ming, and Isaac Ouro-Gnao, brings Seke Chimutengwende's dance performance, *It begins in darkness* (for which Ming, Mayowa Ogunnaike, and Ouro-Gnao were cocreators), into contact with her own experience of dance training and its representation in two movies, *The Red Shoes* (1948) and *Suspiria* (2018). She suggests that a "collective kinetic grammar" (85) might be mobilized to make something that could "loosen the imaginative and material grip of possessive individualism, a socio-economic system predicated on individual bodily sovereignty" (69) precisely by setting itself moving inside the genre of horror and the architecture of colonial whiteness.

In her meditation on re-memberment, white-outs, and blackness, Maurya Wickstrom brings the work of the composer, performance artist, and singer M. Lamar and the poet Nathaniel Mackey

into startling relation with one another. She shows how states of being conjured by both artists, operating "in conjunction with automation, can create a replacement or substitution or palimpsest (or maybe all of these) for possession" (90). This is therefore a conjunction in which techniques for generating altered states animate a drift in which both the key terms of our project come under pressure, even as they appear, ever more, to resemble one another.

Shane Boyle wants to make sure that we don't fall for the latest version of the "dematerialization" thesis, most misleadingly deployed in analyses of a contemporary economy supposedly liberated by automation from its destructive relationship with the planet's material. He takes up this task by attending to performances that engage with the material realities of the contemporary extractivism upon which so much technological innovation depends. These are performances that also embrace either a kind of machinic use of the body (as in the work of Otobong Mkanga) or a gender-fluid conception of human subjectivity that exceeds the norms of the sovereign and definitively gendered subject of colonial regimes (Seba Calfuqueo). While embodying alternate subjectivities, or, perhaps, sovereignty, these works, he suggests, issue compelling cautions regarding the extent to which "technological innovation amplifies capital's capacity to plunder its peripheries" (117).

The central character in the story Vincent Pisters Møystad tells is Kuwasi Balagoon, a member of the Black Liberation Army incarcerated in the 1980s. Møystad uses a personal training book and program Balagoon wrote in prison (which was later published) to explore what he meant by living a life of total autonomous resistance. Balagoon's exercise book is really part of a larger story, Moystad informs us, one centered on "the intensification of automation and the eliminationist logics of deindustrializing racial-carceral capitalism from the 1960s into the present" (124).

Emma Bennett is at home, mainly, for the thrills. In the physical tingle of ASMR video consumption (a possible salve to the weary brow of the worker) she identifies an imaginary relationship to work itself. In the online stagings of professional scenarios out of which ASMRtists fashion sensations for their clients both real and imaginary, these affects turn out to depend on some of the most material realities of a "digital" economy. Is this how automation feels, then?

In this issue's concluding essay, Konstantina Georgelou offers a reframing of the action of Gezi Park's "Standing Man" as an instance of someone being captured in a cross-temporal moment rather than asserting themselves as an icon of self-possessed individual resistance. Georgelou thinks through the implications of this idea in relation to other historical experiences of possession and choreomania. That it was a man who stood in Gezi Park, she shows, was key to its viral appearance as an instance of heroic action rather than a moment of passivity of the kind that has so often been differently gendered in accounts of possession. What then are the implications for dance as a practice, she asks, of a movement away from the choreopolitics of a bounded subject?

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