Endured Instances of Relation

Romi Ron Morrison in conversation with Jara Rocha and Femke Snelting

After listening to your talk *The forgotten past of black computational thought,*[1] we would like to ask you about your specific understanding of what "difference without separation" could mean. We are trying to think about separation and difference specifically in relation to volumetric computational processes that de-flatten or re-flatten, model, capture, track and so forth.

I think entanglement is the word.

For me, your question seems to recursively return to this. Entanglement implies a relation. Perhaps one that evades or overdetermines what cannot presently be grasped but nonetheless, a relation. Entanglement is helpful for me to think through because it doesn't resolve into an easy self contained knowability, but it also doesn't mask itself within the complete opacity of being unknowable to the extent of any totality. Rather, entanglement moves towards a question of "how" and "what if". It refuses the punctuation of a period to give space for what follows. It is something we must work with outside of pursuits of resolution, and each attempt is one that strives for a better understanding of the richness of the relation. To engage entanglement in this way is a practice of endurance.

Thinking about the questions that you have asked to start this conversation, difference without separability is invested in these spaces of entanglement, or perhaps what Glissant would call a poetics of duration, of relation. This phrase "difference without separability" comes from Denise Ferreira da Silva's work. In her article, "On Difference Without Separability", da Silva gives a brief history of modern thought through Descartes, Newton, Kant, Cuvier, Boas and Foucault. She traces the ways that these "modern texts" scientifically image The World as an "ordered whole composed of separate parts relating through the mediation of constant units of measurement and/or a limiting violent force".[2] This separability is a constitutive component for ushering in modernity by which difference is rendered as fixed and irreconcilable. This negation built upon the overrepresentation of the human as Man, is what upholds the human (body as sovereign property) as a moral figure that necessitates the edgeless violence of enslavement and genocide on those deemed nonhuman or partially

human (body as flesh). This separability is a crucial modern text that fixes the present world in a scene of constant reenactment of these violences though the name of the violence has shifted and is proclaimed as national security, sovereignty, austerity, structural adjustment, sanctity of the family, or freedom. In *The forgotten past of black computational thought*, I speak of an operating system overdetermined by anti-black violence regardless of who the programmer is, I am speaking to the repetition of this logic of separability that is constituted through a justification of violence.

Separability is built upon a kind of racial technoscience. It severs the possibility of relation and masks entanglement in pursuit of the pure. There are only rounded decimals here, they always terminate. Thinking about your interest in "bodies" and the ways that they are rendered and constituted through volumetric digital technologies, this emphasis on separability is germane, as possible bodies become captured into standard fixed units of difference.

In hegemonic applications of computation, we see that separation is supposed to function as a neutral, necessary, efficient gesture. Do you think this is how anti-blackness ends up in the bowels of computation? Is it already prefigured in the binary "nature" of computing, not just as a technical basis, but also as an ethics a politics and material culture? Is separation where the coerciveness of computation stems from? And if computation is inherently anti-black, does it make sense to ask it to engage with other lives and relationalities, such as fair algorithms, data justice and infrastructures of care?

I return to this separability because it seems so central for understanding and rethinking both the violences and possibilities for computation. In my prior talk that you referenced, I am trying to make a connection between separability in the da Silvian sense and what David Golumbia calls "computationalism". Golumbia makes a distinction between computers and computationalism. For him computationalism "is the view that not just human minds are computers but that mind itself must be a computer—that our notion of intellect is, at bottom, identical with abstract computation".[3] Computationalism understands cognition itself as inherently a computing process, and by extension, all matters of phenomena in the world can be understood as a function of computation. Thinking about computationalism rather than computing or computation potentially frees the latter from the violences of the former and opens some space for

experimentation and reimagining. Computationalism inherits the violences of the modern text that da Silva details. Its central episteme upheld by irreconcilably fixed difference, universal measurements, and separation continues largely undisturbed.

How to think about messiness in relation to possible forms of computation? Flesh, complexity and mess are also already-with computation, not before or after data, but somehow simultaneous and constituent of computation and constituent of mess in reciprocity. How could computation and flesh together constitute more livable messes, if at all?

Sketching the shared contours between modernity, and its dependence on black and native violence, and to call it "computationalism" perhaps allows for computing to return to a much more expansive capacity that doesn't always require such violence. This is where I'm interested in speculation and in particular speculative histories, presents, and futures of computation that come out of the political, poetic, and erotic practices of blackness and fugitive fungibility. This thinking thrives in relationship to the work of black queer, trans, feminist scholars and artists such as Hortense Spillers, Sylvia Wynter, C. Riley Snorton, Tiffany Lethabo King, Tina Campt, Saidiya Hartman, Katherine McKittrick, and Marquis Bey. Rather than taking up the body as a site of the liberal human subject imbued with agency, ownership, and stability, these scholars theorize through the flesh and fungibility of blackness. Flesh is distinguished from the body as a result of the unimaginable violence wrought on black people in making them property, unfree laborers, and fungible sites of death, expansion, desire, sensuousness, and commodity. Spillers and King in particular write about the ways in which Black people under capture, conquest, and enslavement were made fungible. They were made into constantly exchangeable resources able to malleably stand in for any needs white colonizers could imagine. While fungibility is born from and determined by continuous violence, Snorton also notices the simultaneous life and possibility even in the shadow of such death. For Snorton fugitive fungibility marks a space of indeterminacy and possibility, which might open other ways of being outside the trappings of the human. This fleshy fungibility is a porous space to inhabit that exists in shared relations to land and other nonhuman and extrahuman others. It is a relation of entanglement. From this place I hope to speculate on different forms of computing that thrive in indeterminacy and work from an ethical relationship of entanglement.

Thinking computation from this place works from the assumptions that computation cannot be done away with as a means of addressing violence. It understands that computation is a method, practice, ideology, and episteme. And in its most hegemonic understanding is a very limited form of discourse. As many of the theorists above hold no romances about the extent and saturation of anti-black violence in the modern world, they also tend to the possibilities of life and living that extend beyond that violence. While violence cannot be ignored, it also doesn't overdetermine life to the extent of rendering it abject and wholly without. I believe it is possible to contend with the violences of computation while simultaneously lingering in the vitality of the flesh. To think and practice computing otherwise as technologies of the flesh that thrive within indeterminacy and interdependency. This is what informs where I think we might look to recover some of these forms. Within my work I look at practices of computation that live in the poetics, politics, erotics, and movements of blackness.

Through your studies of the legacies of code, you ask: What if computation engaged with indexing different zones of life, facilitated relationalities other than those of capitalist anti-blackness? Could you say more about the kind of computation this would generate, because you seem to call into question most of all that which is indexed and who is indexing, rather than indexing as a problem in and of itself? The question could also be formulated like this: is there space for attending to volumes technically in their singularity, while not reproducing the exclusions that the very techniques of measuring carry? Or, are there other uses of volumetric techniques that apply separation and indexing, while disassembling those practices from the episteme of exclusion?

As you referenced earlier, my interests in fugitive fungibility informs how I have been thinking about indexing and the database as a potential space to make connections and practice a kind of endured proximity by which we are in relation to that which we index. That we can be in a fungible relationship through porosity. That entanglement is allowed to exist and can be seen as a source for ethical encounter. I suppose this would drastically change how we consider indexing and what we consider indexing to be. Within current hegemonic practices of data capture and indexing the world through measuring, there are certain paradigms that need to be challenged. For me these primarily stem from separability by which measurement simultaneously fixes difference as stable and as irreconcilable. Rather, I believe indexing

can hold a different potential when deracinated from this episteme of separability. Instead I think of indexing as a way of accounting for an instance of something. And that because of its shared relations it evades static standardization and is instead in flux and changing. I suppose this gives more texture to the ways that I think about entanglement. Or to be more direct, I believe the benefits of indexing are temporally bounded. They are not absolute nor axiomatic. But I believe indexing can also serve to better emphasize the multiple relations between things in a much more robust way than simply the observable measured differences that scientific rationality often privileges. This form of indexing is malleable and contextual, it depends on the one indexing, the method, and on that which is indexed. Its endured proximity doesn't seek to remove complications through the rhetoric of universality or transparency, but is invested in the particular and chronic.

Computation and life ("bodies", spaces, relationalities) are already entangled in so many ways; they are mutually constituent, for example the category of life wouldn't exist without a whole apparatus of segmentation producing it as different from the non-living. To us it feels urgent to think with and towards computing-otherwise rather than to side with the uncomputable or to count on that which escapes calculation. What would it mean to critique math and quantification in their Modern shape, by calling for other logics instead?

In earlier writing, I have returned to theorist and filmmaker Trinh T. Minh-ha's practice of *speaking nearby* to illustrate this relationship.[4] In an interview with Nancy N. Chen for the *Visual Anthropology Review*, Minh-ha elaborates further: "In other words, a speaking that does not objectify, does not point to an object as if it is distant from the speaking subject or absent from the speaking place. A speaking that reflects on itself and can come very close to a subject without, however, seizing or claiming it. A speaking in brief, whose closures are only moments of transition opening up to other possible moments of transition".[5] I believe this could be an opening potential for indexing and the database, as a temporal marker of an instance of something in relation. What it tells us is not data about the essence of a fixed object, but of something caught in flux that we are in relation to.

I also think this is a place where different practices of computation can be speculated on. To be able engage this type of indexed entanglement, it opens questions of method or protocol. It requires

practice. More and more, I stick with computation to describe some of this complexity for a few reasons. The first is in refusing to relinquish computation as an already closed system that no longer requires definition. The second is in acknowledging the economic, cultural, imaginative, and disciplinary power that computation presently holds. And lastly, to speculate on the unique capacity of computation to contend with complex variables and their relationship to flux and modulation.

Speaking on this capacity, Édouard Glissant writes about the trappings and potential that the computer holds towards poetics. In his text, *Poetics of Relation*, Glissant briefly discusses computation and how it differs from poetry. On this he writes, "Accident that is not the result of chance is natural to poems, whereas it is the consummate vice (the "virus") of any self-enclosed system, such as the computer. The poet's truth is also the desired truth of the other, whereas, precisely, the truth of a computer system is closed back upon its own sufficient logic. Moreover, every conclusion reached by such a system has been inscribed in the original data, whereas poetics open onto unpredictable and unheard of things."[6] Glissant contrasts computation and poetry focusing on the closed, controlled, and binary character of computationalism. He understands it as a mechanism of separability. However, the potential for the computer when working outside of computationalism is not foreclosed. Just a few pages later he writes, "The computer, on the other hand, seems to be the privileged instrument of someone wanting to "follow" any Whole whose variants multiply vetiginously. It is useful for suggesting what is stable within the unstable. Therefore, though it does not create poetry, it can 'show the way' to a poetics."[7]

Because computation is able to contend with complex multiplicity Glissant leaves it open as a wayfinder towards a poetics. He makes a slight but crucial distinction that computation is useful for suggesting what is stable within the unstable. He doesn't state that computing itself creates stability or static fixed variables, but instead is able to suggest stability as an open and incomplete instance within a field of instability. While his first quote indexes some of the trappings of computation as a closed logic, he follows it by hinting at the possibility for computation to move through the complexities of entanglement. Perhaps at best, computation in this sense can hold the tension of indeterminacy without either becoming paralyzed or reducing the complexity of the Whole into predictable calculable units. Within this slight shift in language, computation is nudged open. It is made

porous again and moves towards the direction of a poetics. Perhaps then this porousness can allow for finding a poetics of space within volumetric capture, by underlining the stable and unstable within computation, and resituated computation as a manner and mode of engaging the entanglement between those two poles. It is a practice of "showing the way" to a relation. Both bodies and space in this mode of computation hold a certain openness. They cannot completely be foreclosed as inherently separable parts.

We wondered about the voluminosity of "bodies" but also of entanglement, and how to pay attention to it. Reading Denise Ferreira da Silva's email conversation with Arjuna Neuman about her use of "Deep Implicancy" rather than "entanglement", we were struck by the relation between spatiality and separation she brings up: "Deep Implicancy is an attempt to move away from how separation informs the notion of entanglement. Quantum physicists have chosen the term entanglement precisely because their starting point is particles (that is, bodies), which are by definition separate in space."[8]

So what if the spaces of entanglement provide a semiotic-material arena for cohabiting with and practicing 3D computation-otherwise? Could "Deep Implicancy" be where computing otherwise already happens, by means of speculation, indeterminacy and possibility located beyond, or below perhaps, normed actions like capturing, modeling or tracking that are all so complicit with the making of fungibility?

So this question of Deep Implicancy is interesting. I think in reading through da Silva and Neumann's email exchanges, I have a sense of the difference that she is trying to draw between entanglement and its inherent dependence on a kind of separability, because of its embedded focus on particles inherited from physics. Even things such as quantum entanglement or nonlocality, are still built from some kind of separability. I think that is an important distinction and contribution which breaks open some of my earlier thoughts on entanglement. That being said, I'm not sure I understand Deep Implicancy beyond the ways that it complicates the inherent separability within entanglement. It makes me want to ask, how does Deep Implicancy account for or contend with difference? It seems that there would still need to be room for variation or modulation. Perhaps even modulation and distance can become the language through which to speak to fluctuations, changes, variations, and instances within a

dynamic implicancy. Because then we are able to account for difference without flattening it to an equivalence or commensurability. This thinking on modulation and difference is very much informed by Kara Keeling's work in *Queer Times Black Futures*,[9] and Abdoumaliq Simone's work in *Improvised Lives: Rhythms of Endurance in an Urban South*.[10] In her discussion of James A. Snead's work on Black culture and repetition,[11] Keeling makes connections to the computational practice of modulation and incommensurability. Evoking Snead, she states, "repetition means that the thing circulates (exactly in the manner of any flow, including capital flows) there in an equilibrium". The "thing (the ritual, the dance, the beat) is there for you to pick up when you come back to get it". She argues that this repetition and the ability to return rather than progress allows for a kind of cultural coverage that builds spaces for the unpredictable, errant, and accidental to happen. Keeling sees this practice as a mechanism of modulation, a mode of social and cultural continuity, which does not rely upon commensuration. Instead, it makes "incommensurability" into a relation. Perhaps this incommensurability, the impossibility of neat resolve can provide a helpful language to engage Deep Implicancy and its relationship to difference.

The episteme of Modern technosciences classifies "bodies" as entities that occupy the dimensions of space and time at a certain scale, with a certain density, at a certain speed, etc. It is complicit with productivist, segregating, extractivist and deadly aims when calculating volumes of so-called bodies and their surroundings. But maybe such displacements, dimensional and material conditions, could also be of use for a disobedient rearranging of so-called bodies? How to think with possible forms of computation that do not leave its oppressions in place?

Simone picks up this relation of incommensurability and stretches it to describe the movements, motions, calculations, and alterations of bodies as they converge and depart in space. Simone describes these bodies as "technical forces" that "speak, spit, stomp, fuck, gesture, lunge, or hover". His understanding of space is constructed through these rhythms of endurance that bodies undertake in a constant renegotiation towards "a liveliness of things in general". For Simone, "endurance also entails the actions of bodies indifferent to their own coherence, where bodies proliferate a churning that staves off death in their extension toward a liveliness of things in general, and where bodies become a transversal technology, as gesture,

sex, gathering, and circulation operate as techniques of prolonging".[12] His writings on bodies as transversal technologies is really intriguing, in that they are always intersecting, crossing, and circulating. In doing so, it creates the spaces that they momentarily inhabit. The space does not precede the bodies. It is not a container in this analysis but is constructed through the circuitous gestures, gatherings, and sex of bodies churning together in incommensurability. Similarly, to Keeling's focus on repetition Simone offers us a musical lexicon of rhythm, refrain and pulse to find stabilizing moments that thrive in response to risk and incalculability. For Simone the refrain works as this stabilizing repetition that creates "contexts of operation that cannot be stabilized". Again, space for Simone is dependent and created through these undulating intersections of bodies that enact open modulating refrains. This works against easy practices of tracking or capturing, that volumetrically rendered spaces require, as it exceeds any preemptive containment. Space for Simone is not predetermined but is interdependent. More importantly, it is interdependent on the relations of bodies that evade stable categorization or coherence. Instead these relations are constantly modulating and shifting. Perhaps most beautifully, Simone articulates these intersecting modulations as care. On this he writes:

> *For the intersections among spiraling trajectories are a matter of care*[13]*, inexplicable care, rogue care, care on the run, a tending not to people or by people, but a care that precedes them. It is a care that makes it possible for residents to navigate the need to submit and exceed, submerge themselves into a darkness in which they are submerged but to read its textures, its tissues, to see something that cannot be seen. It enables them to experience the operations of a sociality besides, right next to the glaring strictures of their obligations, expulsions, and exploitation, something that enables endurance, not necessarily their own endurance as human subjects, but the endurance of care indifferent to whatever or whoever it embraces. This is a process that entails both composition and refusal.*[14]

Care here seems to emerge as an ethic void of preconditions. It simply is because it must be. It is a practice of endurance outright. One that enables fugitive flights, the promise of continued evasion, and a relation beyond commensurable equivalences. Perhaps this gives us more

texture for what a Deep Implicancy can offer, no longer entangled, but stomping, speaking, and spitting in a space made through care without preconditions, indifferent to quantification.

Notes

1. ↑ Romi Ron Morrison, "Speaking Nearby: The forgotten past of computational thought", paper presented at EASSST/4S *Conference: Crafting Critical Methodologies in Computing: Theories, Practices and Future Directions,* Prague, August 18-21, 2020.
2. ↑ Denise Ferreira da Silva, "On Difference Without Separability," in *Incerteza Viva: 32nd Bienal de São Paulo,* ed. Jochen Volz and Júlia Rebouças (Sao Paulo, Ministry of Culture, Bienal and Itaú, 2016), 57-58.
3. ↑ David Golumbia, *The Cultural Logic of Computation* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 7.
4. ↑ Nancy N. Chen, "Speaking Nearby: A Conversation with Trinh T. Minnh-ha," *Visual Anthropology Review* 8, no. 1 (Sping 1992): 87.
5. ↑ Chen, "Speaking Nearby," 87.
6. ↑ Édouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* (University of Michigan Press, 1997), 82.
7. ↑ Édouard, *Poetics of Relation,* 84.
8. ↑ Email correspondence between Arjuna Neuman and Denise Ferreira da Silva, 2017-2018 https://www.theshowroom.org/system/files/062020/5ef3716252712a038b005fbc/original/email_correspondence_AN_DFDS.pdf?1605089604.
9. ↑ Kara Keeling, *Queer Times Black Futures* (New York: New York University Press, 2019).
10. ↑ AbdouMaliq Simone, *Improvised Lives: Rhythms of Endurance in an Urban South* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019).
11. ↑ James A. Snead, "On Repetition in Black Culture," *African American Review* 50, no. 4 (Winter 2017).
12. ↑ Simone, *Improvised Lives*.
13. ↑ María Puig de la Bellacasa, *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More than Human Worlds* (University of Minnesota Press, 2017).
14. ↑ AbdouMaliq Simone, *Improvised Lives.*