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Is She the Girl from the Anti-Video? On FKA twigs' Chronopolitics

Abstract: This contribution discusses three audiovisual works by British pop artist FKA twigs (*Papi Pacify*, 2013; *Video Girl*, 2014; *CAPRISONGS*, 2022), forwarding the notion of a Black feminist chronopolitics specific to them. Drawing on Black Atlantic Futurism, Black feminist and media theory, I not only ask how twigs adopts an asynchronous temporal orientation in order to disrupt the linear timeline of Eurocentric modernity but also intervene into naturalized distributions of power therein. These works allow us to glimpse at a utopia that speaks as much of the pleasurable, generative possibilities of a Now as of a decolonial future that gazes back upon the histories and embodied experiences of gendered, racialized and sexualized oppression.

Keywords: FKA twigs, Chronopolitics, Black Feminism, Black Atlantic Futurism, Time Axis Manipulation, Video Girl, Pop, Queer Futurity, Astrology, Black Technology

In Ethiopian-American R&B singer Kelela's 2015 video for *Rewind*,¹ we see the artist, her eyes set on the camera, approaching and distancing herself from the viewer amid flickering strobe lights. She tells a story of mundane heartbreak that happened to a friend: Being in a club, connecting with someone, leaving without expressing their interest in an overt way – trying to reconnect later, yet without luck.² This going backwards – spatially, as performed in the video, and temporally, as expressed in the song lyric's figurative use of the verb “to rewind” – implies that the chain of events could be altered, after all – maybe even to a different outcome of her friend's night out. Yet, the song indulges in this moment of in-betweenness and suspended possibility.

Going forward, I want to trace moments of restructuring time in the audiovisual works of another artist, London-based musician FKA twigs. I engage British cultural critic Kodwo Eshun's concept of an Afrofuturist chronopolitics as a sort of speculative media materialism, where rewinding a video or music tape provides an instructive point of departure. Through such speculation, I analyze how twigs' Black feminist sensibilities subvert the hegemonic orders usually layered in media time. Further, I draw on US-American cinema and media studies scholar Kara Keeling's work critiquing the cinematic, particularly her notion of imposing different “spatiotemporal coordinates”³

1 Kelela: “Rewind” (Official Video). Directed by Eric K Yue. 19 September 2015. Music video, 04:00. *You-Tube*. Available online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=py6PgXq0yDM> (last accessed 17 April 2022).

2 Ruth Saxelby: Kelela Decodes Every Track from her Hallucinogen EP. *The Fader* (15 October 2015). <http://www.thefader.com/2015/10/09/kelela-hallucinogen-track-by-track> (last accessed 17 April 2022).

3 Kara Keeling: *The Witch's Flight. The Cinematic, the Black Femme, and the Image of Common Sense*. Durham, NC 2007, 34.

which structure our perception of a social reality. I look at how twigs adopts practices of editing audiovisual material as they are common sense in popular culture to forward an artistic vision that in many ways disrupts the common sensibility of what we see when we watch a music video. What I propose, then, is not to regard practices of “time axis manipulation”⁴ as counter-hegemonic per se, given that the commercial(ized) art of music video production widely draws on such aesthetic practices. Instead, I explore twigs’ interventions as asynchronous to naturalized normative distributions of power, distorting the linear timeline of Eurocentric modernity as they allow us to glimpse at a utopia that speaks as much of the pleasurable, generative possibilities of a Now as of a decolonial future that gazes back upon the histories and embodied experiences of gendered, racialized and sexualized oppression. In line with Black critiques of time, this claim to structure and inhabit one’s own temporality constitutes a claim to agency.⁵

My contribution thus approaches the discussed materials through a lens of uncomfortable citational politics situated between a media materialist discourse (arguably hegemonic and Western) and queer and decolonial theory. I follow this question as it has been invoked in 1971 by Black US-American poet and critic Amiri Baraka, who at a time of national nuclear armament asked his fellow Black creators: If machines are extensions of their inventor-creators (a thought he attributes to cyberneticist Norbert Wiener), then what could a creation powered by a Black ethos accomplish?⁶

Ultimately, I aim to consider how twigs’ work complicates binary constructions between colonial/decolonial, hegemonic/subversive technology and regressive/progressive time that I circumscribe over the course of my argument. In light of this, I situate asynchrony as a temporal orientation in the audiovisual works of FKA twigs which takes into account both the inevitability of being situated *by* existing power relations in late racial capitalism⁷ as well as what resistance to them or negation of them might look like. In the last portion of this essay, I look at how twigs’ insistent orientation toward the future by adopting the popular culture and “technology” of astrology provides a means for building affective community, in which the *feeling* of a

4 Friedrich A. Kittler: *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, transl. by Geoffrey Winthrop-Young / Michael Wutz. Stanford, CA 1999, 34.

5 See for example, Rasheedah Philips: Organize Your Own Temporality. In: *Organize Your Own: The Politics and Poetics of Self-Determination Movements*. Chicago, IL 2016, 48–54.

6 Imamu Amiri Baraka: Ethos & Technology. In: *Raise, Race, Rays, Raze. Essays since 1965*. New York, NY 1971, 155–157.

7 The term “racial capitalism” denominates the mutual imbrication of racism and capitalism. It was introduced in 1983 by American Black studies scholar Cedric J. Robinson, who in his seminal book *Black Marxism. The Making of the Black Radical Tradition* traces the development of the modern world economic order as it constitutively draws on the forced labor and enslavement of “racially othered” populations. Cedric J. Robinson: *Black Marxism. The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*. Chapel Hill, NC / London 2000, 42–62.

time yet to come comprises dissent to the violently structured present and a notion of asynchrony to this very present as reparative strategy.⁸

1 A Speculative Media Materialism?

Taking his cue from British cultural studies scholar Paul Gilroy's *Black Atlantic* theory of transculturation, Kodwo Eshun theorizes a Black musical tradition he calls *Black Atlantic Futurism*. In his seminal 1998 book *More Brilliant than the Sun*, Eshun's theorization departs from the materiality at work in music production, as his stance seems decidedly media materialist: Terms such as Skratshadelia,⁹ the turntablization of Black music, the cuts and breaks in hip-hop – all refer to the manipulation of physical media allowing for a given temporal order to be reversed, interrupted, restructured, and rearranged.¹⁰ Here, Kelela's *Rewind* serves as a useful point of departure. Eshun recasts this going back and forth on the axis of recorded time as a notion of time travel, facilitating the creation of Afrocentric historical discontinuums.¹¹ While for German media theorist Friedrich Kittler, the breakthrough of recording technology marks the end of all history, superseded by the onset of a “media age,”¹² Eshun locates the creation of history and the rerouting of a digital diaspora precisely in the possibility of a revision and manipulation of time brought about by recording devices. For instance, as sampling appropriates the means of technological reproduction, it holds potential to subvert existing power structures: “Technology changes the form of power, the nature of identity, the essence of the enemy.”¹³ In light of this, Eshun's “Machine Music” methodologically comes from “freaking with the formula,” messing with time axes and rule books,¹⁴ altering time on the level of its material manifesta-

8 I would like to thank the editors for their comments and generous support, as well as Philipp Hohmann and Audrey Black for giving me notes and writing advice.

9 Kodwo Eshun: *More Brilliant than the Sun. Adventures in sonic fiction*. London 1998, -004.

10 In the German media theorist Friedrich Kittler's 1986 book *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, Kittler concedes audio recording technologies the ability to manifest the Lacanian Real materially, speaking of a spatialization of temporal phenomena in writing systems. See Kittler: *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, 15.

11 Eshun: *More Brilliant than the Sun*, 184.

12 Kittler: *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, 18; Drawing an analogy between the phonograph and the human brain, Kittler dismisses memory as a uniquely human capacity: “If the focusing of blurred mental images by way of attention amounts to nothing more or less than changing the time axis of acoustic events by increasing playback speed or indulging in time axis manipulation (TAM), then there is no reason to celebrate attention or memory as miraculous abilities.” Kittler: *Gramophone, Film, Typewriter*, 34.

13 Eshun: *More Brilliant than the Sun*, 122.

14 Eshun: *More Brilliant than the Sun*, 020.

tion. By rendering temporality intrinsically malleable, the materiality of media provides a means of speculation.

Technology in Eshun's analysis of African diaspora musical traditions is then not tied to a media determinist *a priori* condition of time-space or era; rather, he shifts perspective onto its use as a force enabling artistic as well as social agency. Consequently, Eshun views media technology not as restricted to the oppressive use of the "master's tools"¹⁵ but as simultaneously rewrought to form a liberatory force by way of musical expression. In the following, I argue that the work of FKA twigs continues to be situated in this double bind: While the disseminative structures of media and technology intrinsically bear potential for violence and exposure as becomes evident in the disproportionate surveillance and policing of Black and marginalized communities, twigs makes use of its emancipatory potential in rearranging not only acoustic but also audiovisual events.

In Eshun's theory of a chronopolitics, as in twigs' art, adjusting temporal orders according to one's own sense of time constitutes a claim to agency. Manifestations of Afrofuturism, as Eshun elaborates, constitute a retrospective as well as proleptic re-orientation of the reparative practice of counter memory associated with Gilroy's Black Atlantic tradition as response to the histories of slavery and racial violence.¹⁶ In this sense, such a chronopolitics does not pursue a revisionist project. Rather, as per Gilroy, chronopolitical interventions "infiltrate a Now,"¹⁷ intervene in the hegemonic notion of linear temporality and open up temporal orientations to a range of competing possibilities, future projects, and utopias.

Now, expanding on the idea of manipulated time based on materiality of media, I turn to the audiovisual exploits of FKA twigs, who uses the music video as a form to address structures of violence, while at the same time tapping its reparative potential. Thus, I ask how this work mobilizes asynchrony as a Black feminist chronopolitics which points to different modes of relating to present (temporal) orders and allows us to discuss the disruptive potential that being out of sync bears.

2 Performance as Black Female Labor: Diverting the Extractive Gaze in Video Girl, 2014

From the beginning of her career, being a dancer for various artists' music videos as well as in her independent work has informed FKA twigs' identity as an artist. In her

15 Audre Lorde: The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House. In: *Sister Outsider. Essays and Speeches*, Berkeley, CA 2007, 110–113.

16 Kodwo Eshun: Further Considerations on Afrofuturism. *CR: The New Centennial Review* 3/2 (2003), 287–302, here 289.

17 Eshun: *Further Considerations on Afrofuturism*, 297.

2014 *Video Girl*,¹⁸ twigs explores her position in the music industry in relation to questions of the surveillance and confinement of Black life, playing on tropes of “threatening” Blackness and a feminized notion of passivity.

As twigs' ethereal hums at the beginning of the track slowly give way to a rattling beat, the video's visuals conflate her lyrical account of being gazed at with a scene of a *white* man being executed by injection.

During the entire video twigs is positioned in front of a window, looking into the execution ward, watching calmly, sometimes averting her eyes. Yet her role beyond being a spectator, and even her relationship to the convict, both remain undiscernible. By the time her vocals enter, she appears under the scene's surveillance, dancing provocatively in a confined space while the convict remains tied to his deathbed. Juxtaposing this performance of hypersexualized femininity with the scene's CCTV coverage, the images are crosscut with twigs erupting in broad, aggressive dance movements so as to perform her version of “thuggish” Black masculinity, dressed in a coat of chain mail and bejeweled from headdress down to arms and fingers.

The song lyrics repeat the prying questions of people who approach twigs after recognizing her from one of the music videos she's been in: “Is she the girl that's from the video?” and her subsequent refusal to be identified as one of the dancers, while being visibly on top of her craft as both singer and dancer. If, as performance scholar Judith Hamera writes, “Dancing is work: a job, the product of labor,”¹⁹ then twigs' working body is a performing body and so is her performing body a working body. Her disidentification thus concerns not the profession and artistic expression of dancing as such but the music industry's structural default by which the labor of Black women becomes objectifiable and at the same time invisibilized.²⁰ The history of popular music throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries shows that the presence and celebration of Black artists and performers has not been inconsistent with the continued disenfranchisement of Black people as a direct continuation of the modern economic order, for which the exploitation of Black labor serves as a holdover from the plantation system to late (industrial) capitalism.

In the video, it seems that this refusal is reflected in the characteristics of twigs' dancing, her moving in and claiming of a space which is crucially a space of confinement (the execution ward) as well as a space confining her to the role of being a

18 FKA twigs (2014): “Video Girl.” Directed by Kahlil Joseph. 29 October 2014. Music video, 04:35. *YouTube*. Available online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2jhTiLuGezI> (last accessed 17 April 2022).

19 Judith Hamera: *The Labors of Michael Jackson. Virtuosity, Deindustrialization, and Dancing Work. PMLA* 127/4 (2012), 751–765, 752.

20 This observation calls to mind the 2019 video for *Cellophane*, in which twigs virtuously pole dances on a vast theater stage, thus colliding “high” and “low” art forms by elevating the “slum art” of stripping to the aristocratic scene of ballet. FKA twigs (2019): “Cellophane.” Directed by Andrew Thomas Huang. 24 April 2019. Music video, 04:21. *YouTube*. Available online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YkLjqFpBh84> (last accessed 22 February 2023).

dancer (the music video). The flow of her dancing is repeatedly interrupted, almost as if she is forced and struggles to persist, yet takes visible pleasure in the performance, in watching and in being watched. twigs' abrupt movements are chopped by flickering lights to the effect that they resemble the asynchronous, poor representation of low-resolution video. The constant suspension of action extends to the media technology at use, namely the recording of her performance on video as it manifests itself intradiegetically through the presence of the surveillance camera.²¹ In a sense, twigs' bodily performance of temporal interruption and suspended movement, while imitating the performance of technical media, evades a surveillance logic demanding complete transparency and legibility. Therefore, twigs adopts asynchrony as a dissident temporal orientation that actively destabilizes racial capitalism's hegemonic order by marking a difference linked to technical (dys)functionality²² from within the economic rationale of surveilling and policing Black life. Thus, FKA twigs' appropriation of media time diverts and re-directs gazes, including her own, and complicates the split between active/passive roles with regard to the extractive relations in the writing of recorded time, as well as Black (female) cultural production at large.

Toward the end of the video, the song stops to a change of scene: In slow motion, a Black man almost completely submerged in the dark background smiles to reveal his grills, or set of dental inserts derived from precious metals and stones, with blood dripping from his lips to the sound of a heartbeat. In this showing off of riches, time is both arrested and intensified. His grin seems to convey: "*My mouth isn't your gold mine. It's MINE,*" offering an inversion of the extraction economies profiting from Black life and art which twigs' lyrics address in relation to the development of her own career. In *Video Girl*, twigs addresses her role as a dancer standing in as "one" of the exceptional video girls sustained by an entertainment industry which capitalizes on the work of Black female performers, as the chorus goes: "Is she the girl that's from the video?" Here, I turn to Kara Keeling's work on Blackness and the cinematic, which picks up Frantz Fanon's assertion that colonial violence is a problem of time, as the constant re-instantiation of past trauma upholds the dominant order which continuously forecloses an equitable future beyond the Black/white binary. If Blackness is confined by its historicity, the cinematic apparatus facilitating the appearance of the past in the present actively reifies this colonial temporal relation, therefore proving "relevant to an understanding of how cinematic processes work to secure and maintain hegemonic political economies." In Fanon's writing as Keeling understands it, a Black person's becoming is

21 Simone Browne notes that surveillance cannot be studied without taking into account its racializing effects. By reifying boundaries along racial lines, practices of surveillance were historically constitutive of Blackness. Simone Browne: *Dark Matters. On the Surveillance of Blackness*. Durham, NC 2015, 8.

22 A similar relation between the (rhythmic) submission to music and servitude/bondage has for example been drawn in Grace Jones' *Slave to the Rhythm*, produced by Trevor Horn. Manhattan Island Records 1985.

overdetermined by and caught in the circulation of pre-given (cinematic) images and negative stereotypes. Fanon's Black experience is refused an ontological "own" and figures as a state of waiting, which, in his book *Black Skin, White Masks*, he compares to waiting for himself to appear on a movie theater's screen. Keeling writes:

In Fanon's case [Blackness] is to exist in an interval wherein the terms of waiting have been pre-ordained. What ends the wait is what has been anticipated, even when it is the black's explosion, and so the cycle continues and the interval endures. [. . .] The hellish cycle wherein the past constricts the present so that the present is simply the (re)appearance of the past, felt as affect, restricts by anticipating in advance the range of the black's (re)actions to his present experience.²³

Keeling's reading of Fanon discusses a Black person's self-recognition and simultaneously their disidentification with the images they are presented with as the temporal relation of the interval, proposing that this colonial mode of representation relies on a "closed cycle of anticipation and explosion."²⁴ These "excesses" of Black particularity disrupt a colonial order only to await its violent re-instantiation. Despite its immediate sanctioning, what Fanon calls an "explosion" contains the impossible possibility of decolonization by breaking this cycle of anticipation and violence.

In this sense, the last line in *Video Girl* – "I can't recognize me" – not only points to an inherent asynchronous disjunction in the cycle of mediated representation and artistic, economic, and self-recognition, it also denies twigs' Black feminist particularity access to such recognition within the hegemonic temporal orders. Due to this problem of the confinement of Blackness in the confrontation with the cinematic apparatus, Keeling departs from discussing the cinematic vis-à-vis a politics of representation, borrowing from French philosopher Gilles Deleuze's notion of the cinematic to complicate the quest for Black representation in light of its impossibility. Cinematic images, in Deleuze's understanding, do not merely represent, they form a material-affective layer in the construction of social reality.²⁵ Expanding on this notion of the cinematic, Keeling insists on the twofold affective (technological) constitution of Blackness *in the interval*: as a state of being stuck in this violent cycle of repetition and as the impossible possibility of an opening for an affective surplus, generated precisely within the sensory-material relations of cinematic images as they exploit and extend into social reality. Such a dynamic between a liberatory use of audiovisuality and the reinstitution of oppression is further explored in the generative gaps in twigs' earlier video for *Papi Pacify*.

²³ Keeling: *The Witch's Flight*, 36.

²⁴ Keeling: *The Witch's Flight*, 35.

²⁵ Keeling: *The Witch's Flight*, 31.

3 Papi Pacify, 2013: The Interval as the Expanded Now in Which Past and Future Collapse

In twigs' 2013 video for *Papi Pacify*,²⁶ the artist is alternately held, caressed, smothered, choked, and released by a Black man whose muscular, tattooed upper body takes up most of the screen. The scene presents an at once violent and sensual meditation on anxious attachment, with twigs' singing voice asking her partner repeatedly to "pacify her love"; this request is answered by fingering her mouth as if calming a baby with a pacifier. The black and white film images are stopped and rewound, progressing reluctantly, caught in rhythmic repetition. This inconclusive playing back and forth of the recordings initiates a redistribution of agency in which relations of power and desire are being negotiated.

If, in Fanon's formulation, Blackness is attributed a belatedness with regard to a hegemonic temporal and social order, I want to suggest the notion of asynchrony in the chronopolitics I'm discussing here as a way to relate to the twofold existence "in the interval," as Keeling puts it. States of "too late" or "too soon" weave around and in-between imposed temporal orders; they go along, but ultimately evade the imposition of a timeline dictated by the dominant regime of Eurocentric modernity. Keeling identifies the interval as the temporal structure of coloniality, foreclosing decolonial possibility in moments of waiting and suspended action, while at the same time providing an opening for new images and (counter-)memories challenging the very coloniality the interval has been instituted by.²⁷

Similarly, film theoretician Trinh T. Minh-ha casts the interval as a generative opening in (re-)arranging sound and images at the heart of cinematic practice: The interval "allows words to set in motion dormant energies and to offer, with the impasse, a passage from one space (visual, musical, verbal, mental, physical) to another."²⁸ As Trinh's intervals "designate a temporal hiatus, an intermission, a distance, a pause, a lapse, or gap between different states"²⁹ or modes of expression, they constitute a means of thinking/enacting relationality on the basis of their materialization.

Allowing for this kind of speculation in the interval, the relationship between domination and subordination that is mapped onto the gender difference in *Papi Pacify* is far from being obvious. twigs' head remains center of screen as she stirs the audience and her screen partner, exerting some sort of precarious control over the scene. To further sustain this uncomfortable balance, the video makes use of the dis-

²⁶ FKA twigs (2019): "Papi Pacify." Directed by FKA twigs and Tom Beard. 13 October 2019. Music video, 05:02. *YouTube*. Available online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OydK91JjFOw> (last accessed 17 April 2022).

²⁷ Keeling: *The Witch's Flight*, 40.

²⁸ Trinh T. Minh-ha: *Cinema Interval*. New York, NY 1999, xi.

²⁹ Trinh: *Cinema Interval*, xiii.

orienting effects of time axis manipulation. Adding to the affective structure of being in the interval, *Papi Pacify* generates the Afrofuturist temporality of an expanded Now in which past and future collapse, à la Eshun, and pleasure is derived from the supposed “threat” emanating from the Black male body. The reluctantly progressing back and forth between images produces temporal gaps and instigates “ways of being and connecting”³⁰ across the constrictions of time and space (as in Kelela’s *Rewind*, mentioned in the beginning) that exceed off-screen sociality by, for instance, complicating the binary between victim and perpetrator.

Despite the ostensibly heterosexual desire the viewer is presented with in the video, it might prove useful to point to queer critiques of time as they have adopted asynchrony, or states of being out of time or out of space, as a means of building affective communities. To American literary scholar Elizabeth Freeman, who writes her introduction to *GLQ. A Journal of Gay and Lesbian Studies*’ special issue on Queer Temporalities, this sensation qualifies as a queer phenomenon: “something felt on, with, or as a body, something experienced as a mode of erotic difference or even as a means to express or enact ways of being and connecting that have not yet arrived or never will.”³¹ Freeman’s suggestion resonates with José Esteban Muñoz’s concept of queer futurity, a concept which Muñoz, drawing on German philosopher Ernst Bloch’s notion of a “not yet,” uses to allocate future possibility to present moments of pleasure. In his 2009 *Cruising Utopia*, queer interruptions to normative time refuse recognition by hegemonic meaning-making systems and narratives of identity while providing alternative arrangements and relationalities of bodies in time and space – anticipating a “mode of being and feeling that was then not quite there but nonetheless provides an opening.”³²

twigs’ chronopolitics as I have so far described them rework technical media into challenging hegemonic constructions of a social reality (that is just as much an *audio-visual* reality) along with the common sensical distribution of power and agency therein, in order to create an open-ended possibility of a “radical Elsewhere.”³³ In accordance with the queer critiques cited above, twigs evokes a notion of futurity beyond the teleological concept of a future. Rather, as I explore by turning to the mixtape *CAPRISONGS*, in which FKA twigs and her collaborators envision such an Elsewhere as it is being enacted in modes of affective kinship.

³⁰ Elizabeth Freeman: Introduction. Queer Temporalities. *GLQ. A Journal of Gay and Lesbian studies* 13/2–3 (2007).

³¹ Freeman: *Introduction. Queer Temporalities*, 159.

³² José Esteban Muñoz: *Cruising Utopia. The Then and There of Queer Futurity*. Durham, NC 2009, 9.

³³ Keeling: *The Witch’s Flight*, 1.

4 Future as Felt Potentiality in the Present: Astrology as a Spiritually- and Future-Oriented Social Technology in *CAPRISONGS*, 2022

Concluding this essay, I want to consider such a mode of anticipating a future as *felt potentiality* in the present that might as well provide a reparative approach. On 06 January 2022, FKA twigs shared the following on her Instagram to announce the release of her mixtape:

hey i made you a mixtape, because when i feel you, i feel me and when i feel me, it feels good
 . . .
 CAPRISONGS is my journey back to myself through my amazing collaborators and friends.
 CAPRISONGS . . . it's bronzer in the sink, alco pop on the side, a cherry lolly, apple juice when ur
 thirsty, friends in the park, your favorite person, that one sentence somebody said to you that
 changed everything, a club pre-game, your bestie who is always late but brings the most to the
 party, meeting a friend at the airport, just togetherness
 my world
 london
 hackney
 la
 new york
 jamaica
 It's my stubborn caprisun ass telling me to work thru my pain by delivering at work, don't think
 just go studio and create my saggi moon being the enigmatic temptress craving the club, to dance
 and to be social and my pisce venus hot mess disastrous heart falling in love all over again but
 this time with music and with myself³⁴

Quoting the first line of mixtape opener *ride the dragon*, FKA twigs introduces *CAPRISONGS* as a “journey back to [her]self” for which she is indebted to her many collaborators and friends. She narrates herself through astrology, deploying a pop cultural reference system that anticipates the future in order to make legible a present feeling (herself) as part of an affective community spanning her diasporic, multi-local situatedness. As a cultural phenomenon, astrology has long been viewed – along with other categories of social “deviancy”³⁵ – as a feminized and racialized superstition and supplementary belief system “discordant with the now universal state of enlighten-

34 FKA twigs: *Instagram* (06 January 2022). <https://www.instagram.com/p/CYZeAVotLsp/?igshid=MDJmNzVkMjY=> (last accessed 19 April 2022).

35 In 1976, sociologist Robert Wuthnow contended that astrology is not a merely “countercultural phenomenon” in the San Francisco Bay Area but is most popular among “more traditionally marginal members of society” such as “the more poorly educated, the unemployed, the non-whites, females, the unmarried, the overweight, the ill, and the lonely.” See: *Astrology and Marginality*, *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* 15/2 (1976), 157–168, here 167.

ment.”³⁶ I am thus not trying to debunk astrology for its reliance on “pseudorationality,”³⁷ or even arguing that claiming the occult might challenge enlightenment common sense, for example by returning to an essentialized version of a “feminine” mode of being. Instead, I ask how embracing astrology and fortune-telling in FKA twigs’ *CAPRISONGS* generates modes of affective knowledge and community – a reparative feeling of togetherness – in the wake of (historical) trauma as it has been theorized by Black studies scholars.³⁸

CAPRISONGS being twigs’ record with the most featured collaborators so far, it mixes recordings of conversations between friends concerning everyday issues from relationships to self-doubt, a fortune-teller reading a chart, tongue-in-cheek reassurances to the fact that “the universe is SO powerful”³⁹ submerged in giggles. Its intimate narrative is down to the level of its production as a communal project. In this sense, twigs’ appropriation of astrology reminds us of bell hooks’ reworkings of popular self-help books and new age spirituality, where hooks’ Black feminist politics and thinking about love, community, and spiritual growth is informed by – yet fundamentally corrects – the way these books resituate a neoliberal version of individuality through the lens of the spiritual.⁴⁰ Writing about resurgent interest for a “new astrology” in 2019, author and cultural critic Lauren Oyler observes that astrology apps and social media deny users true agency, “not by suggesting the stars might be in control but by insinuating that taking control yourself is easy, a matter of identification.”⁴¹ Quite contrary to this assessment, twigs’ *CAPRISONGS* boast less about having overcome and taking control than they narrate an ongoing struggle to allow for vulnerability despite experiences of gender-based and race-based violence, past and present, which disproportionately affect women of color.⁴²

I propose *CAPRISONGS* adopts astrology as a social technology that is “spiritually oriented” to a future, a being that is not yet here. twigs’ use of astrology accommo-

36 Theodor Adorno: The Stars Down to Earth. The Los Angeles Times Astrology Column. *Telos* 19 (1976), 13–90, here 15.

37 Adorno: The Stars Down to Earth, 17.

38 See for example: Christina Sharpe: *In the Wake. On Blackness and Being*. Durham, NC 2016; Fred Moten: *Stolen Life*. Durham, NC 2018.

39 FKA twigs: *Meta Angel*, produced by FKA twigs and El Guincho. *CAPRISONGS*, Young/Atlantic Records. 2022, TC 00:32.

40 bell hooks: *All About Love. New Visions*. New York, NY 2000.

41 Lauren Oyler: Astrology Year Zero. *The Baffler* 43 (2019), 84–89, here 89.

42 Following her lawsuit citing an abusive relationship, twigs told the *New York Times* about her difficulties in escaping her abuser and going public: “I just thought to myself, no one is ever going to believe me. [. . .] I’m unconventional. And I’m a person of color who is a female.” Katie Benner / Melena Ryzik: FKA twigs Sues Shia LaBeouf, Citing “Relentless” Abusive Relationship. *The New York Times* (11 December 2020).

<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/11/arts/music/fka-twigs-shia-labeouf-abuse.html> (last accessed 26 April 2022).

dates Amiri Baraka's formulation of a new technology that essentially realizes the very humanistic ideals that – despite Adorno's assertion thereof – remain only partially implemented:

The new technology must be spiritually oriented because it must aspire to raise man's spirituality and expand man's consciousness. It must begin by being "humanistic" [. . .]. The technology itself must represent human striving. It must represent at each point the temporary perfection of the evolutionary man. And be obsolete only because nothing is ever *perfect*, the only constant is change.⁴³

On a more practical level regarding the uses of technology, FKA twigs released (along with the mixtape) a series of "anti-videos" for each song; they were one to two minutes long each and mostly produced within one day. According to the artist, the prefix "anti" refers to the fact that these videos are significantly shorter than the recorded tracks, juxtaposing sound and image to the opening of a further (virtual) interval which redefines the music video on its standalone visual terms.

The anti-video for *ride the dragon*⁴⁴ features shaky black-and-white-footage of a busy street in London as somewhere in the crowd the camera spots twigs wearing a durag. Seemingly by coincidence, she assembles with a group of like-tracksuited women on the front stairs of Hackney Town Hall. As they break into dance, the video turns into color. The scene is visually interspersed with grainy stills underlining the guerilla-sensible public intervention filmed sometime during the pandemic. We hear twigs saying they are doing a TikTok, yet filming and dancing are not allowed according to the town hall official. They are asked to leave and they do, taking their equipment with them, revealing the work process of shooting a video for a brief moment– only to resume their choreography later. In the meantime, the group continues taking to the streets, stopping by a convenience store to twerk down the aisles as captured by the surveillance camera. This display of everyday joy, as it is reflected in the arrangement of images including shaky iPhone video, surveillance footage, grainy color photographs, is paired with twigs' playful yet poignant lyrics: to "ride the dragon" serves as a further formulation of toxic attachment, a high induced by substance abuse (or choking, or mouth fingering). The work of grieving and letting go of these attachments, then, is not performed by shutting herself off from the world, but rather by nourishing intimate bonds: hey, i made you a mixtape . . .

⁴³ Baraka: *Ethos and Technology*, 157; for a secular formulation of this problem see Sylvia Wynter's argument for a *Second Emergence* of being human: Sylvia Wynter: The Ceremony Found. The Auto-poetic Turn/Overturn. *Black Knowledges/Black Struggles. Essays in Critical Epistemology*, ed. by Jason R. Ambrose / Sabine Broeck. Liverpool 2015, 184–252.

⁴⁴ FKA twigs (2022b): "ride the dragon." Directed by Aidan Zamiri and FKA twigs. 14 January 2022. Music video, 02:47. *YouTube*. Available online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yDhVqgeRPJ8> (last accessed 17 April 2022).

Ride the dragon claims public space by communally obstructing its logic of surveillance, implicitly revisiting the scene of confinement in FKA twigs' earlier work *Video Girl*. twigs' audiovisuals produce generative openings in their intervals, the gaps and glitches of media time, in order to form a passage between the here and now and modes of enacting futurity/otherwise. These works actively unsettle taken-for-granted relations of power as well as the distribution of agency and vulnerability.

5 Conclusion

In her essay on the temporal politics of self-determination in radical liberation movements, US-American artist and activist Rasheedah Phillips asks:

How does a radical movement conceive of its own future in the face of hostile visions of the future? When the future was never meant for them? How does one reconcile a temporal fatality offered by the mechanical linear timeline, with a belief in the temporal duration of one's own radical vision in change?⁴⁵

Likewise, FKA twigs' artistic vision, as I have argued throughout this essay, does not offer grand promises of a better future to come. Instead, embracing an "Afrofuturist" sensibility in which past, present, and future collapse, she works within the gaps, intervals, and asynchronies of a violently structured present in order to manipulate, divert, and reorientate a linear temporal order bound up with taken-for-granted power relations. Thus, for twigs, and contrary to what Phillips suggests, media technology is not a mere agent of the oppression and continued subordination to the "mechanical linear timeline" of Black and other marginalized peoples. It becomes a means of a liberatory practice, however conflicted with regard to the renewed traction of algorithmically implemented social inequality in the coded biases of new media technology.⁴⁶ Despite what is arguably an interpretive investment in the emancipatory nature of art, music, time-based media, and performance put forward in this essay in relation to the histories of Black female servitude and (performance) labor, twigs' chronopolitical interventions embrace technology's ambivalences. twigs' artistic practice neither purports a notion of technological neutrality nor enacts a technological determinism. Yet precisely this refusal to construe media technology as neutral allows the artist to grapple with the power relations embedded therein and to envision futurity otherwise.

⁴⁵ Phillips: *Organize Your Own Temporality*, 48.

⁴⁶ Ruha Benjamin: *Captivating Technologies Race, Carceral Technoscience, and Liberatory Imagination in Everyday Life*. Durham, NC 2019, 3.

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Song Directory

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