



# Artificial reproduction? Tabita Rezaire's *Sugar Walls Teardom* and AI "liveness"

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## Abstract

Much more than their machinic reality, current iterations of AI rely on imagined divisions of human and non-human properties and skills that have genealogical ties to colonization. For this reason, research efforts have recently been made to historicize these imaginaries, connecting them to colonial ideals that delegate black and brown colonized people into the realm of the non-human. Atanasoski and Vora (Surrogate humanity. Race, robots and the politics of technological futures, Duke, Durham and London, 2019) have called this a "surrogate humanity", where narratives of autonomous technologies function to disappear precisely the formerly colonized peoples that are enveloped in its production process. At the same time, the gendered and racialized roots of this maternal figure represents an opportunity to uncover and critique the invisibilization of embodied resources necessary to produce AI, precarious bodies labouring to produce algorithmic infrastructures in a manner that can be considered in a genealogy of carework and reproduction. These genealogies complicate the detachment suggested by the surrogate figure and go beyond it to proclaim a more generative function of the relationship between the black maternal figure and AI. The article analyses Tabita Rezaire's multi-media artwork *Sugar Walls Teardom* to think through decolonial and queer renderings of the black female bodies upon which technological imaginaries rest, to extend beyond AI surrogacy and towards notions of kinship, care and world-making by producing an AI aesthetics that is relational, embodied, and celebratory of other ways of liveness.

**Keywords** Tabita Rezaire · Decolonization · AI · Captive maternal · Care · Critical race theory · Aesthetics

## 1 Introduction

Perhaps, the most central aspect of contemporary discourse on AI is its crafting of the human–labour relation—either in narratives of replacement, for example, in discursive negotiations on the future of work in industry 4.0, or in the question of discrimination, for example, when AI fails to recognize trans or black and brown Uber drivers, thus locking them out of their workplace (cf. Ernst et al 2019; Chun 2021). Accompanying this development is an increased interest in speculative and artistic negotiations of AI, which harness the broadness of the term to produce own visions of a world with agent, sentient, or conscious machines.<sup>1</sup> The human/machine divide that AI seems to be foreclosing is today more than ever a point of negotiation as to which humanity is

recognized within public space, now legitimated through computer vision and responsive machines. However, instead of opening up this relationship to transformative ways of knowing and being, AI infrastructures still seem to merely reproduce a constant more of the same. AI enthusiasts, but also some of its critics, seem to remain stuck within a *modus operandi* that is incapable of truly imagining a decolonial unlearning. This unlearning begins with an acknowledgement of ongoing colonial violence. As Neda Atanasoski and Kalindi Vora (2019) have prominently argued, more often than not, discourses on machinic automation negate a caveat of historical materialism, which posits the white subject as the human of progress, while invisibilising the

<sup>1</sup> For example, Inke Arns (2017) discusses a number of such works playing with the relationship between essential workers and technological infrastructures in two exhibitions she curated ("Alien Matter" in 2017 and "World Without Us" 2016), where the anthropomorphization of AI corresponds with the disappearance of the labourer's body. Christoph Ernst, Jens Schröter and Andreas Sudmann (2019) not only relate this problem to the discourses on future of work, but also autonomous weapons and language translation, thus showing

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labour and infrastructure provided by black and brown bodies. In such a reading, contemporary AI discourse is but the latest in a whole series of anthropomorphic and automated devices and machines that make disappear the black bodies whose exploitation undergird western societies' wealth and productivity.

This colonial continuity lies at the heart of French Guyanese artist Tabita Rezaire's work. Across several multi-media artworks and installations, Rezaire points towards the slippages between technological development and racial subjugation. But centrally, Rezaire's work negotiates a decolonial approach towards thinking technologies, which centres upon and departs from black female figures in generative ways. This allows Rezaire to frame technologies—and in extension the somewhat elusive concept behind the term “Artificial Intelligence”—as spiritual, embodied and erotic. While Atanasoski and Vora come to a conclusion that technology must be refused, because it cannot be ameliorated, Rezaire's art reworks and reformulates technological potentials for a turn towards healing mediations, which she hopes might recover embodiment, spirituality and erotics in decolonial ways. Rezaire does so, not by proposing that the master's tools can in fact tear down the master's house, but by pointing towards a speculative, unalgorithmic understanding of the technological, which she locates within the womb. This distinctively ‘maternal’ reading of technology opens Rezaire's work up to a rethinking of generative technologies, which proposes a different, more open and less categorical framework of artificial intelligence. I propose this non-categorical relationship to AI to be understood under the framework of “liveness”. Liveness shifts the focus of AI to its relations and embodiments, and it can suggest a different understanding of AI that does not rely on categorization in a normative way. The following article centres on Rezaire's multi-media collage *Sugar Walls Teardom*, to argue for a specifically generative understanding of the slippage between the black femme and her womb, read as data, technology, and the liveness it may produce—both in a technological and performative sense. In the multi-media installation, Rezaire not only harnesses the history of science, and technology as a case thereof, but proposes an open and speculative renegotiation of how to understand Artificial Intelligence—and in fact any emerging technology produced as ‘new’—through the lens of historical and contemporary black maternal figures. Understanding AI as an iteration of the black maternal—and indeed, with Joy James, as a “captive maternal” (James 2016)—undoes the perhaps somewhat fatalistic stance with which Atanasoski and Vora's analysis

ends, to focus instead on a generative function of this figure, one that produces something like ‘liveness’ (cf. Soon 2014) for a body never intended to inhabit AI infrastructures in liveable ways.

I will first introduce Rezaire's multi-media installation *Sugar Walls Teardom*, to then connect it to a genealogy of the captive/black maternal (cf. James 2016). Zooming out onto what can be read as a historical precursor to Rezaire's work, *Sugar Walls Teardom* will be put in conversation with the story of Joice Heth, a slave that came to be framed first as George Washington's wet nurse, and later as a “curiously constructed automaton” (Barnum 1855). Exploring these slippages between technology and a distinctively feminized/maternal figure beyond the distinction of labour that is either productive or reproductive allows for me to not only regard their victimization and the violence posed against them, but the figure's inherent “productivity and its consumption” (James 2016) that animates this world, but also allow for leverage against it. In my reading, the artwork performs liveness in a way that ambiguates the proposed human/machine labour relations of contemporary AI discourse by questioning that divide and its ties to and dichotomies of productive and reproductive capacities. Such slippage excavates other kinship-practices and relations in more-than-human worlds by rearticulating technological notions of data, information and liveness, detaching them from colonial ideologies of liberal subjectivity, and extractivism as progress.

## 2 The womb is the original technology': human-machine slippages and the captive/black maternal

In 2016, French Guyanese artist Tabita Rezaire presented her work *Sugar Walls Teardom* at the Goodman Gallery in Johannesburg, South Africa. The installation consists of a pink gynaecological chair with a mechanical arm that holds up a screen. Instead of an ultrasound, the screen shows a video that mixes cheesy dotcom aesthetics with 3D models and merges them into a virtual collage.<sup>2</sup> The chair is reclined, it looks like a throne to an erotic queen, or like her torture site (perhaps both), and the video picks up on this ambivalence, as it seems to respond to the room in terms of both aesthetics and content. This video (or video collage) is the central piece of the installation. It begins with a golden curtain, which opens up in a heart-shaped form to display an image of another gynaecological chair, mirroring

Footnote 1 (continued)

how deep “autonomy's” ties are to a Eurocentric understanding of the universal.

<sup>2</sup> Although the setup is most definitely part of the installation narrative, the analysis will mainly concern itself with the video, as I was not, unfortunately, a visitor of the original exhibition, but have instead engaged with Rezaire's portfolio courtesy of the artist.

the installation setup itself. The echo-image of the chair is suggestive of a continuity from analogue to virtual space, an overlap, perhaps, of material and virtual realities. Elevator music underlines the cheesy effect of the opening sequence, situating it within late 90s/early 2000s dating show aesthetics, while the actual content of the video is reminiscent more of a science fair demonstration of the chair's properties and features. The short film's intro ends by zooming into a 3D modelling of the artist who has placed herself on the chair. The viewer sees her recline in the typical position at the gynaecologist: head laid back, legs open, feet up high in the chairs stirrups. The act of reclining is accompanied by several screens that emerge to surround the artist in the chair, facing outwards to publicize the artists position to surrounding viewers. The screens are suggestive of the fact that the recline might not be all consensual, that the artist might in fact be held down and be on display for an external, technological gaze. They are not passive objects; later, the viewer learns that they are enveloped in, or symbolic of, modernity, slavery, genocide, wombicide, science, capitalism, patriarchy. Usually a window to an otherwise world, to nascent life, the screens surrounding the artist here suggest an unwanted publicity, an invasion into the artists most intimate secrets hidden within her womb.

The publicity that the many interfaces are suggestive of emphasizes the violence inherent to the technological and medical gaze of the cameras—Rezaire references the lack of self-determination womxn<sup>3</sup> have in a birthing process that builds upon troubled histories of dispossession, colonialism and slavery. These cameras and screens as complicit technologies in the racial and heteropatriarchal surveillance apparatus open up into an ambivalent collage that references (and later physically attacks) a figure of Dr. Marion Sims, the doctor celebrated as the father of modern gynaecology. Sims experimented on thousands of slave womxn, operating on them without anaesthesia, due to the common belief at the time that black womxn do not feel pain. Of all the womxn Sims experimented upon, only three names are known: Anarcha, Betsey and Lucy. Rezaire dedicates her work not only to those three known, but to all “unnamed wombs” (Rezaire 2016, n.p.) that were traumatized, tortured and killed in the name of modern gynaecology and all

prosperity and life that emerged from its science and technologies. The collage pays tribute to these three womxn, and to many others suffering in the name of progress and the development of modern science, with medicinal and other technologies presented as specific iterations of a broader technoscientific regime built upon the exploitation of their bodies. This regime is centred on a disappearance of the very same black womxn, who the video presents as central to the infrastructures and medicinal practices we know today: Next to Anarcha, Betsey and Lucy, Henrietta Lacks receives special mention as the former slave, whose cervix-cells were stolen from her womb. These cells became the first to be sent into space, the first cells that became replicable stem cells and are used to this day in cancer and AIDS research and have been crucial for making these diseases survivable. As the video narrative reveals, these cells never died. Rezaire's collage thus confronts the problematic transhumanist and posthumanist discourses that imagine eternal life through technological interventions and data processing—not only going into the very depth of the human body, extracting even cells from people turned into objects, but also the narrative accounts that occlude these bodies as objects of—and not contributors modern science and technology.<sup>4</sup> Instead, the honouring of Sims, transhumanist endeavours to overcome mortality, technological experiments with cryonics or prostheses are all undergirded by—and, the narrative urges, should account for—these earlier practices of violence that enslaved, colonized and racialized womxn have been and continue to be subjected to.

Rezaire's depiction of the womb as the central place from which information, data, and liveness emerge sets out to question the disembodied notions of contemporary technology discourse, to argue instead, as the video states “the womb is the original technology” (Rezaire 2016, n.p.). This iteration marks a turning point and Rezaire's narrative turns from mourning and anger to revenge. An intergalactic uterus shoots at references to Sims, the stories become bathed in blood. Then, the narrative turns yet again, to present what looks like an image search that depicts white reproductivity. Representations of white women holding babies to their chests and smiling into the camera are disrupted by the sudden appearance of layered and altering images of the ancient birthing practices, where womxn birthed among womxn or by themselves, with the help of communal technologies and ritual practices. The viewer sees iconic images depicting centuries-old cosmologies of womxn birthing without men, in communities, at home, with human and non-human midwives and companions. Pink lettering demands the return of “orgasmic birth”, which refers to indigenous birthing

<sup>3</sup> Rezaire uses the term womxn to refer to people, whose wombs have been dispossessed throughout the work. However, she does not re-essentialize the connection between “woman” and womb, indeed, the x implies a crossing out of this connection that implies an inclusion of different iterations of femininity beyond the biological. In the womb meditation that makes up the final part of the multimedia installation, Rezaire explicitly calls upon people without wombs to participate in the collective experience she makes possible. Following this suggestion, I use the term womxn, not to designate the existence of a uterus, but to point out a specific type of labour in which people are or become feminized and disappear.

<sup>4</sup> Of course, recognition does not mean reparation. I do not speak of freedom, but, with Joy James, of leverage (cf. James 2016)

practices that do not traumatize, but stimulate the maternal body by providing comfort, relaxation and, indeed, erotic stimulation. In the final segment of the video, Rezaire, now calm and soothing, invites the viewers to participate in a healing meditation that sources information and energy from the centre of the womb-area.

In its first part, *Sugar Walls Teardom* prominently articulates Neda Atanasoski and Kalindi Vora have called “surrogate humanity” (2019). The concept of the surrogate foregrounds the disappearance of black and brown labour and enslavement for the sake of white narratives of progress. It points towards the disappearance of the body of the enslaved standing in for the master, the vanishing of native bodies necessary for colonial expansion, as well as invisibilized labor including indenture, immigration, and outsourcing. The claim that technologies can act as surrogates recapitulates histories of disappearance, erasure, and elimination necessary to maintain the liberal subject as the agent of historical progress. (Atanasoski and Vora 2019).

The history of the anthropomorphic machine in particular is central here, as it illustrates both the desire for a compliant and subservient other to take on arduous or monotonous essential labour, and the disappearing labour of black and brown people in mines, server farms and data training centres that is necessary for machines to gain “intelligence”. The fact that Amazon named their data training platform Amazon Mechanical Turk shows consciousness of a longer lineage of dehumanization that hinges on the race/technology slippage upon which early industrialization is not only crafted, but actively made possible.<sup>5</sup> These positions are racialized and feminized not because of biological ideals about race and gender, but because these can easily attach themselves to and indeed are complicit in crafting the histories of oppression from which they first emerged (cf. Nakamura 2014; M. Rhee 2016; J. Rhee 2018; Jones

2021). Surrogacy, as theorized by Atanasoski and Vora, points towards these complex relations and their embeddedness in white desire that imagines a subservient other which disappears racial tensions. Of course, these tensions merely disappear from sight.

Although the authors decidedly position their work within feminist (intersectional) frameworks of race, one arguably undertheorized aspect of the concept of the surrogate is a closer interrogation of the complicated relations of care that surrogacy, in the reproductive sense, enables, when thought of as not only a stand-in, but through the function of the maternal. This ambivalent relation is at play in *Sugar Walls Teardom*, as the named and unnamed slaves are addressed in their specifically reproductive function which fixated them, but also allowed for a generative potential that Rezaire identifies as echoing well into the—technological—architecture of the present. Rezaire’s insistence on the womb as the original technology lends itself to a genealogy of reproductivity as an inherent feature of sensing and emotional AI.

This more sense-oriented and emotive understanding of what AI should and can do is not only a product of artistic intervention. Indeed, it is gaining currency on the market after previous iterations of AI have focused more on accurate prediction and identification (cf Amoores 2020). AI no longer merely needs to automatically identify users and their content, but humanoids like care robots and home assistants are envisioned as sensorial, responsive and emotionally attached in a way that evokes an entire range of historically feminized capacities of care (cf Agostinho 2021). These modalities of sensing allow me to expand Rezaire’s work to take into focus a second early crossings of the automaton and the black female figure that departs from the namesake of Amazon’s clickworkers, the Mechanical Turk. For this early automaton enabled a crossing of the non-human sensing machine and the ‘captive maternal’ in the figure of Joice Heth. Much like the figure of the surrogate, Joy James’ captive maternal describes a figure invisibilized and captured within certain frameworks of labour and disappearance. However, James’ figure points towards the reductive capacities in thinking the figure ‘merely’ as reproductive, as tied only to a dutiful notion of care and obligation. With James, I argue that the centrality of the captive maternal in all its infrastructural and essential labour, is suggestive, if not of power or agency, then at the very least, of leverage.

Joice Heth was a slave that came to be the possession of Phineas Taylor Barnum, an American entrepreneur and showman, in 1835. Barnum had bought Heth, because he had been assured that she was, in fact, George Washington’s wet nurse, and 155 years old. Common practice at the time, there was little necessity to explain Heth’s suitability as a performer, but Barnum’s memoirs describe her like one would describe someone born for the spotlight; despite—or because of—her appearance that seemed to be considered

<sup>5</sup> “The Mechanical Turk” as the most famous ‘artificial intelligence’ *avant la lettre* came to be known, consisted of a large box with a puppet attached to it, which supposedly commanded an automatized chess-playing machine. The puppet was dressed in Ottoman robes and a turban, to suggest the inspirited exoticism that occupied the Western imaginary of the East. Of course, the machine was an elaborate illusion, which made it look like chess pieces were moved through autonomous workings of the machine, while in reality, a chess master hid inside the box and controlled the pieces with pulleys and levers. But the automaton also doubles as a reference to the fact that the success of early industrialization was in large part due to the slave-like labour conditions in the colonies, which allowed the countries of the West to prosper. “The Turk” has inspired poetics such as those of Edgar Allan Poe and is an introductory example to Walter Benjamin’s “On the concept of history”. Until this day, “The Turk” is evoked in genealogies of the automaton and informs notions of AI, as variations of the chess-master-machine have continuously been employed to measure the level of “intelligence” in the machine. When a machine was said to supersede human intelligence in 2016, it was because it had mastered the complex Asian board game Go better than any human had.

a curiosity in itself. Age or disease had made her small and crooked and stiffened her limbs. Her body was completely immobile, except for her right arm, which, as a bemused visitor commented, she used mainly for smoking (Barnum 1855). She was blind and her eyes had sunken into their sockets to a point that they could only be guessed at; she had long, thick fingernails and toenails, but no teeth. Descriptions posited her as a “living mummy”, already suggesting an intimacy to objecthood, already implying her social death. Nevertheless, perhaps to evade any suggestion of coercion, Barnum describes her to have a lively and sparkling personality. She liked to sing songs, talk about religion and tell stories of “little George” (ibid.). In Barnum’s memoirs, Heth is described as chatty, seemingly unaware of her weathered appearance (ibid.). Whether Heth really had found pleasure in niceties with her audience or whether she was simply making do with an impossible situation we will never know, but her performance delighted the crowds and drew audiences in droves. They came to see the founding father’s mammy, listen to her stories, and, as a result, made Barnum a considerable fortune.

Heth’s authenticity had previously been guaranteed by her “shrivelled skin” or “crooked limbs” (ibid.), or by the objectification that was deemed viable due to her race. But as the year progressed, people seemed to be getting bored with the spectacle that was merely aesthetic, as visitor numbers were dwindling in late 1835 (ibid.). At this point, a fortuitous meeting between Barnum and the engineer Johann Nepomuk Maelzel, owner of the famous and original “Mechanical Turk” that had been constructed by Wolfgang von Kempelen, reformulated the once-mammy into a second, famous automaton. It is thus no coincidence that after Barnum’s meeting with the mechanic Maelzel a new theory appeared in the daily papers to reanimate the spectacle and mystery of the potential wet nurse Joice Heth. An anonymous visitor wrote a letter to the newspaper, stating that the old slave was not a flesh-and-blood human being at all, but an automaton, made of “whalebone, Indian rubber, and numberless springs ingeniously put together, and made to move at the slightest touch, according to the will of the operator” (ibid.). This theory brought a new wave of visitors to the exhibition, driven by the idea that they could see for themselves whether the slave was ‘real’—that is, human—or ‘merely’ a sensing machine (cf. Chude-Sokei 2015).

As Louis Chude-Sokei writes, Heth’s story is telling for a way of understanding the emergence of industrialization, where machines were considered to be inspirited and have their own agency, a narrative that is rearticulated in its lineage and transported to what would later be called artificial intelligence. But her story also shows how aesthetics are informed by pre-existing constructions and material conditions of colonialism and slavery and the care and kinship structures these conditions have produced, and which need

to be considered when machines are once again understood to be gaining “intelligence” or “autonomy”.<sup>6</sup> The framing of Heth as an automaton, her certified artificiality brought forth through the meeting with the famous Turk, animates a genealogy of the sensing machine that originates in the maternal performance of a black womxn. The sensorial realm of immobile limbs made to move “at the slightest touch” suggests an affective world that is directed towards liberal white subjectivity, as it has to respond to—and recognize—white visitors as human. This sensorial realm is suggestive of a ‘surrogate’ reading, which considers the sentient and emotive capacities inscribed in today’s most prominent AI driven technology products such as home assistants and smart technologies. But the acknowledgement of the sensorial realm within the human/non-human slippage, and its attachment to the captive/black maternal presents a complexification of the consciousness/liveness imaginary within colonial ideology, which already escapes the fixation to invisibility that the concept of the surrogate seems to denote.

The example of Joice Heth then attests to the way these historical materialities effect specific aesthetics that inform and accompany the domestication of early technology frameworks and frameworks of the non-human. Joice Heth became artificial, because she was already considered not-quite human due to a specific material constellation that slavery and colonialism had brought about. However, the narrative of her maternal relationship to the founding father George Washington arguably posits her within a constellation that mere surrogacy (as disappearance) cannot account for. Intrigued by the recurring maternal figure within these examples of human machine overlaps, I argue that the framework put forth by Atanasoski and Vora remains tied to the productive/reproductive dichotomy and thus to some extent overrides the function of black female enslavement that both undergirds and buttresses this distinction. The captive maternal is evocative of Atanasoski and Vora’s concept of the surrogate, but also expands beyond it to signal towards the “limits of theory that rationalizes the avoidance of interstices or gaps in the world through the consumption of maternal lives and bodies” (James 2016). Tracing sentient and emotive AI back to the maternal figure of Joice Heth means targeting precisely these interstices and gaps in which the black/captive maternal may unfold its generative power. In this way, building upon the captive maternal as inscribed into digital and ‘autonomous’ technologies, anthropomorphic AI not only rearticulates the history of disappearance of the black and brown bodies, but is also suggestive of new kinship mechanisms through and with technologies—which—in

<sup>6</sup> In the colonial context, intelligence itself was defined through aesthetic properties that were generally ascribed to settlers, while the presence of any capacities of the mind were denied to colonized folks

the process of acknowledging the conditions of coloniality may very well serve to also create the possibilities of moving towards decolonization, although possibly foremost in a speculative sense.<sup>7</sup> It is this world-making capacity that Rezaire, too, channels by placing herself on display in the gynaecological chair. Rezaire is aware of the complicity that the technosocial gaze has with the histories that disappropriated Anarcha, Betsey and Lucy, Henrietta Lacks and other black womxn through time, but also aware that she does not want to deepen the wound by repeating the inquisitive gaze upon these historical figures. Instead, she posits herself as both complicit with and victimized by these histories, a positioning which also allows her to rise above the anger and revenge that drives the narrative in the first half of the video collage. The second half of the video narrative, which focuses on technology as a spiritual practice, allows for a liminal awareness of decolonial being-with, articulated through mediation and speculation which remains grounded within the very space and infrastructure of the digital. Such critical speculation in the arts opens the gateway to think through indigenous and other forms of kinship relations beyond the human that do not—cannot—figure—or compute in the contemporary form of racial heterocapitalist iterations of AI, but find expression in the arts as the virtual mirror both of existing society and what it might potentially become (Burrough and Walgren 2022). These kinship relations are evocative of drag families, queer sisterhoods and black care relations, which are a response to colonial violence, but also a turning away from its claim to ownership inherent to the denomination of mere ‘surrogate’. The captive maternal thus acknowledges the exploitation, violence, assault and contempt that the black femme, or those “feminized into caretaking and consumption” (James 2016) endure, but also that the foundational function of the captive maternal gives it leverage in a way that articulates if not agency, then at least some form of excess that reaches beyond the immobile relations of surrogacy and/as disappearance. I want to pick up on that complication, to argue that going beyond the mere notion of the reproductive not only ensures, but also can also undermine (or queer) heteropatriarchal futurisms inscribed into AI, so as to move towards decolonial connectivity and a sensorial realm that interrogates AI as ‘liveness’.

<sup>7</sup> Whether or not this is already decolonization has been subject to debate in the past. Especially Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang’s text *Decolonization is not a Metaphor* (2012) boldly and respectfully states that the liberation of the mind is not enough by any standard of decolonization. However, brought together in conversation with concept of critical fabulation, one can also note that reiterating the racism and material dispossession that black bodies are made to endure brings no new knowledge about the way to overcome these colonial trajectories. Instead, I build upon Sylvia Wynter’s claim that “the bourgeoisie order itself creates the condition of possibility of its own subversion” (Wynter, cited in McKittrick 2021).

Such an imaginary centres on indigenous, black, brown and other communities that have historically engaged in different forms of care and kinship, which may very well enable a futurism that is not heteropatriarchal, one which refuses to dwell in the negativity Atanasoski and Vora propose, but also rejects liberal human subjectivity and its colonial order.<sup>8</sup> Thus, acknowledging the fact that there are different ways of “making kin” (Haraway 2016, Lewis et al. 2018; TallBear 2018), allows me to excavate decolonial notions of kinship in relation to technology, which always already exist even in conditions of and through bodies assigned to social death. Acknowledging that care and infrastructural work is central to any process of worlding, the question in following is whether there is not a specific aesthetic practice that can be retrieved from contemporary negotiations of AI to express more ambivalent notions of the surrogate/maternal poetics inherent to it. In line with an image of the maternal, I propose for this generative power to be framed as “liveness”, as a capacity to perform something that resonates with and reaches towards another performance of life and who may count as living.

### 3 Patches and rifts: recoding liveness

In the last part of *Sugar Walls Teardom*, the ‘patches’ depicting ancient and indigenous cosmologies of birth remain clearly distinct from the images of white reproduction they cover, signalling that all futurisms must reckon with the histories that have shaped them. Katrin Köppert has argued that Rezaire’s collage itself is a form that relies on the patching and hoarding of images and data. Köppert sees the practice of “patching” in particular as an attempt to both value and begin to overcome painful experiences evocative of colonial violence. The traumatic histories are not erased by the process of overcoming, but remain visible in scars and “rifts” (Köppert 2021, 2022) that are exemplified through the collage form as well as the way Rezaire has modelled the content. The “rifts” Köppert sees in these patches represent a continued incompatibility between the two narratives of white and decolonial reproduction, an impossibility of merging them seamlessly into each other (ibid.). The traumatic histories, these patches suggest, might heal, but this healing will scar and leave the sufferers marked, thus foregoing any

<sup>8</sup> Perhaps relevant for this context is that a similar debate is happening between Afropessimism and Afrofuturism as critical dispositions with regards to blackness and the historical relevance of the transatlantic slave trade. While Afropessimism questions the possibility of any form of black liveliness to emerge and be acknowledged in this world, Afrofuturism dares to imagine a future in which this world that thrives on anti-blackness has ended (cf. Morais dos Santos Bruss and Williams 2021).

notion of a return to ‘wholeness’ or pre-colonial innocence. Picking up on this notion of patching allows me to read a second paradigm of the maternal into Rezaire’s work, which picks up on the notion of liveness in coding to return it to the notion of liveness in reproduction as an ancient combination that exceeds far beyond the modern scientific framing of the biopolitical human body and heteropatriarchal family.

Liveness in digital coding must be understood as a socio-technical practice, which “is about digital life (related to life span and health conditions of a network/artifact/software), regulatory controls, social relations, production, reproduction and population” (Soon 2014, n.p.). “Liveness” as sensation, Soon tellingly writes, is embedded in a complex infrastructure that is itself neither “real time” nor alive, but—as is central for this argument—is a performative practice that emphasizes relations, as it is experienced through an aesthetics that itself has a material, albeit invisible backend, while certain content is foregrounded (ibid.). The experience of liveness thus means to forget the complex ubiquity behind the intimacy with the object understood as “live”/life, to engage with its allure of immediacy and autonomy. Theorizing AI and coding practices, Winnie Soon’s own work demonstrates liveness through a Facebook API patch, which interrupts the users’ navigation of the website by responding to clicks with suddenly emerging images (patches) of a famous internet cat. Liveness is experienced by the disruption of the cat-patches—the immediacy of apparition suggests liveness not only in temporal terms of simultaneity, but, as Soon argues, as a more-than-human understanding of what it means to be alive, beyond the complexities of biology (ibid.).<sup>9</sup> Understanding the patches in Rezaire’s collage in this way—as instances of performed liveness—complicates the temporality and bio-/anthropocentrism of digital technologies as neutral tools. It also complicates the notion of liveness inherent to the non/life that enslaved womxn lived, points towards the joys they may have experienced in the gaps not recorded in the archive, and the generative power this joy and togetherness may potentially still carry well into the present. Rezaire’s depictions of birthing womxn and ancient symbols of liveness, or, frankly, life (such as the *Ankh* symbol that appears several times) are not seamlessly embedded into the template of white reproduction and technological futurism conflated in the concept of the surrogate. The patches emerge in a whole range of aesthetics and forms, signalling to the diversity of what has been subsumed into a monolithic imaginary of indigenous life before colonization. These patches do not essentially evoke “liveness”

<sup>9</sup> Here, it might make sense to engage with Sylvia Wynter’s critique of biocentrism, which denigrates “life” to biological frameworks, themselves embedded in colonial violence. As Wynter has argued, biocentrism not only falsely reduces life to biology, but also makes impossible any iterations of black “liveness” (cf. Wynter 2003).

as “real time”, for they appear in a preconstructed video narrative. Instead, liveness here is a force emerging from centuries of indigenous womxn practicing their own and diverse range of generative codes through the technology of the womb, and the information (genetic and relational) that can emerge from it. The patches thus signal towards a different temporality than the sequential logics of western modernity, indeed, they call upon a past that references a future different from the one the (technological) present beholds. In this way, the patches that begin to overwrite, but do not cover up or seamlessly merge with the templates of white motherhood, articulate a sense of “liveness” that engages in other temporalities, and other iterations of the relationship with the non-human over distinct notions of kinship, care and erotics that are evocative not only of the concept of the captive maternal, but also of Rezaire’s own care for the ancestors to whom contemporary technosocial regimes owe an “unpayable debt” (Ferreira da Silva 2022). Therefore, I see them articulate difference without a distance from technology per se, but from the levelling of womxn to objects of white progress and technology is set as relation, desire, and generative practice, rather than a dead object or tool.

Rezaire channels eros, desire, and a sensual relationship to one’s own body and the womb as a site of power, thus reworking the sensibilities of Heth, whose affective and sensational function was limited to a mere performance of liveness instead of an actual life in Barnum’s memoirs.<sup>10</sup> A decolonial liveness, on the other hand, produces a continuous creation of difference which is unwilling to fit into existing categories of modernity that Rezaire, too, hopes to leave behind. This does not mean that there is no specificity or order within the patches of liveness, indeed they follow their own logics and the patterns are experienced, rather than pre-configured. In this vein, the video installation does not remain caught up in fatalism with regards to the historical and ongoing traumatization and exploitation of black and indigenous womb technology and information. The layers of the video collage suggest openings and slippages that understand womb technology as generative, producing not only (human) babies, but information, love, healing, community and desire—and thus centre on the generative potential of womb-technology as liveness, beyond a colonial and biopolitical gaze.

<sup>10</sup> This resonates with Donna Haraway’s passing mention of how Zoe Sofia taught her that all technologies are reproductive (cf. Haraway 1992), and in extension, with the notions of surrogacy introduced as a gendered figure above. But bringing in Haraway here is productive further, as she points out the implied repetitiveness (“and boredom”, she states) of reproduction that suggests cloning the “the one true copy, mediated by the luminous technologies of compulsory heterosexuality and masculinist self-birthing” (ibid).

In the speculative instances described as “healing” (Rezaire 2016, n.p.), the video shifts to Rezaire, now poised at the centre of a hypnotic background, legs opened up into the air in a V-shape. Still facing the viewer in a version of the *Paripurna Navasana* (a Kemetic yoga pose commonly known as boat pose in English) Rezaire confronts the biopolitical regime depicted throughout the collage with an anti-colonial definition of (generative) reproduction:

“Womb birth is not only life but ideas, potentials, possibilities and manifestations. Through our womb we can access all that has been and all that will be, as our wombs voice is deep, wise, ancient, powerful.” (Rezaire 2016, n.p.)

Rezaire’s position—facing the viewer “with head and cunt” (ibid.)—is both confrontation and invitation. The invitation is not sexual in a heteropenetrative sense, but excavates the eroticism that non-reglemented anticolonial relationality promises. Resistant to narratives of feminine virtues and passivity, Rezaire’s pose suggests an invitation to witness, indeed to engage with the light (evoking associations of pure information) that is literally shining from the space between her raised legs. Instead of disappearing behind her creation, Rezaire is bodily car(ri)er for a womb that takes centre stage, acknowledging the fact that information and data can be emancipatory only when the body that produced its/their liveness is considered and honoured. Such a reading evokes indigenous and queer notions of kinship, relationality and care, to argue against their disappearance and posit their wombs as central to the development of technologies. Going well beyond the heteropatriarchal myth of the nuclear family implied by the concept of surrogacy, Rezaire’s video shifts to a “making kin with machines” (Lewis et al. 2018), a notion that centres on indigenous philosophies of liveness and the technologies such philosophies might create. Such a shift in narrative opens into an understanding of technologies as sensory and informational “live” bodies and entities amongst others, which accounts for the slippages between racialized peoples and technologies, while also thinking beyond the need for a liberal subject that governs both.

## 4 Conclusion

In the analysis of Tabita Rezaire’s *Sugar Walls Teardom*, a different understanding of AI as posthuman companions comes to be. Before the mentioned theoretical backdrops, the artwork acknowledges surrogacy as the very condition not only of black disappearance, but also decolonial rebellion in the form of an aesthetics that excavates kinship, care, and liveness, rearticulated in the field of AI art. Information, here, is not the seemingly neutral categories feeding an algorithm, but emerges from the bodies and histories that are made to disappear in contemporary AI narratives. In such an expanded notion of surrogate

humanity, the colonial regime of correlation and categorization that belies contemporary informational governance is disavowed for the sake of embodied, emotional and sensorial data and information that rests in the body, and particularly in the womb. Rezaire’s aesthetics intervene into the technological regimes that continuously construct AI in the logics of white reproductive futurism by revealing the bodies these futurisms necessarily build upon, womxn slaves such as Betsey, Lucy and Anarcha, or Henrietta Lacks. Contrary to the fabulation of the automaton, which delegates embodied life to infrastructural disappearance, Rezaire’s collage aims to reproduce liveness unaffected by colonial extraction. *Sugar Walls Teardom* explores the racial history of surrogate technologies and how they have relied on black and brown peoples to forsake their reproductive capabilities, but Rezaire also goes beyond their objectification to suggest this connection between the womb and technology as reproductive, maternal and “live”. In doing so, she renegotiates notions inscribed into AI as autonomous, intelligent, or conscious, which draw upon categorization and correlationism developed in the colonial encounter. These notions continue to inform AI aesthetics, and in the face of Rezaire’s work, it is no wonder that imagining a “live” and conscious AI usually ends up with the agent robot turning against its human creator, because the conditions of its creation are oppositional to the unfolding of its liveness (cf. Atanasoski and Vora 2020).

Instead of relying on these same mechanisms that seek to disembodiment correlationism and categorization as “general” intelligence, Rezaire’s work thus not only explores certain ethical dimensions of AI that are reducible to better data or more inclusion. Instead, she presents an imaginary that rubs up against the reproductive notion of futurity central to racial capitalism and how it informs the technopoetics of artificial intelligence. *Sugar Walls Teardom* constructs a decolonial liveness that looks to acknowledge and heal traumas of the past and enter into more caring relations. What could technologies give life to, if we were to take seriously their potential to nurture, produce and build worlds? What kind of data would emerge from an acknowledgement that data and information are embodied categories with specific histories, and therefore extraction might mean pain and violence? What kind of an ethics lies beyond such an acknowledgement? Rezaire does not necessarily respond to all these questions, but proposes they be thought through continuously in technology discourse and aesthetics to inform other material/maternal realities of AI.

**Data availability** The author declares that [the/all other] data supporting the findings of this study are available within the article.



## Declarations

**Conflict of interest** On behalf of all authors, the corresponding author states that there is no conflict of interest.

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