Nettrice R. Gaskins, *Solomon's Leap*, 2017. DeepDream Generator and Photoshop.

Algorithmic Analytics:

Race, Blackness and Data in Song of Solomon and "Alright"

NETTRICE GASKINS

Artist's Statement

My work explores the concept of "deep dreaming" as a way to create algorithmic art in real time and understand the process by which human and spirit beings surrender and take to the air. Algorithmic art can be found throughout history, from prehistoric basket weaving to generative art in the twenty-first century. In the latter half of the last century, with the growth in computer science and digital media the use of algorithmic procedures spread far beyond the dreams of the earliest practitioners. For this project, I used DeepDream, computer vision software that evolved from the study of pattern recognition in artificial intelligence or AI. DeepDream uses algorithms that can learn from and make predictions on data. Examples of this technology include self-driving cars and image and facial recognition. The use of AI algorithms, in this instance, move beyond prior conceptions of blackness, explores new questions, and develops new theoretical concepts that follow the development of visual culture in the twenty-first century.

This visual essay juxtaposes algorithmic art with images evoked by Toni Morrison in *Song of Solomon* and in Kendrick Lamar's music video for "Alright." In "Alright," Lamar hangs from a crane as he travels down the streets of Oakland, California. Lamar takes his leap but his ascension is cut short by a policeman's invisible bullet. In *Song of Solomon*, we do not know whether or not the protagonist Milkman Dead actually achieves flight or succumbs to death, joining his ancestors. It could be argued that Milkman has finally found what he was seeking for most of his life: the realization or fulfillment of his potential. The underlying theme of Morrison's novel and Lamar's video

— flight — considers the notion of consciousness in constant movement, while I used algorithmic art to explore movement and flight. The resulting images show how themes in literature, media, and AI systems provide information to explore territory previously uncharted, by surrendering preconceived notions of race, blackness (culture), and technology. ■

Endnotes

1. Michelle D. Commander, Afro-Atlantic Flight: Speculative Returns and the Black Fantastic. (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 3.

2. Roman Verostko, "The Algorists." Web. http://www.verostko.com/algorist.html.

3. Toni Morrison, Song of Solomon. (New York : Knopf, 1977).

4. Kendrick Lamar. "Alright." YouTube. 30 June 2015.

Figure 1. Nettrice R. Gaskins, *Not Doctor Street*, 2017. DeepDream Generator and Photoshop.

Figure 2. Kendrick Lamar, "Alright" (Directed by Colin Tilley and The Little Homies, 2015, Top Dawg/Aftermath/Interscope), frame grab.
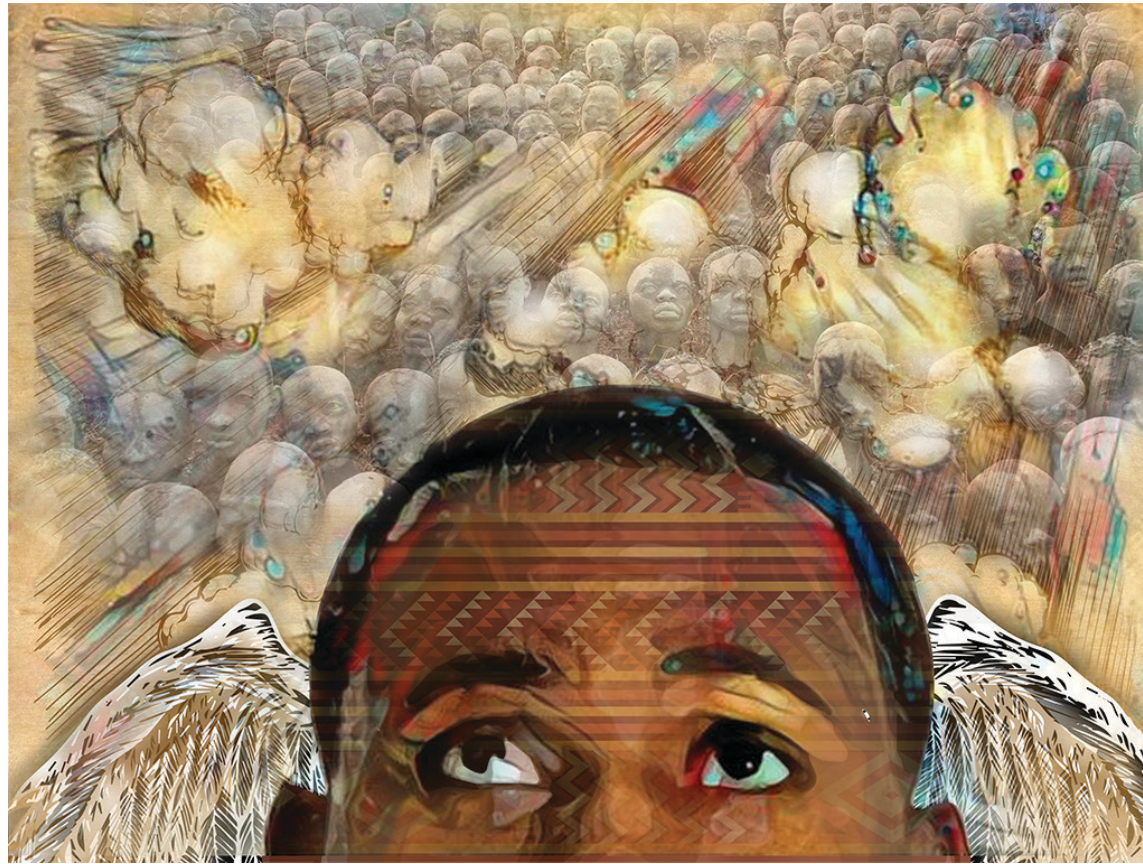
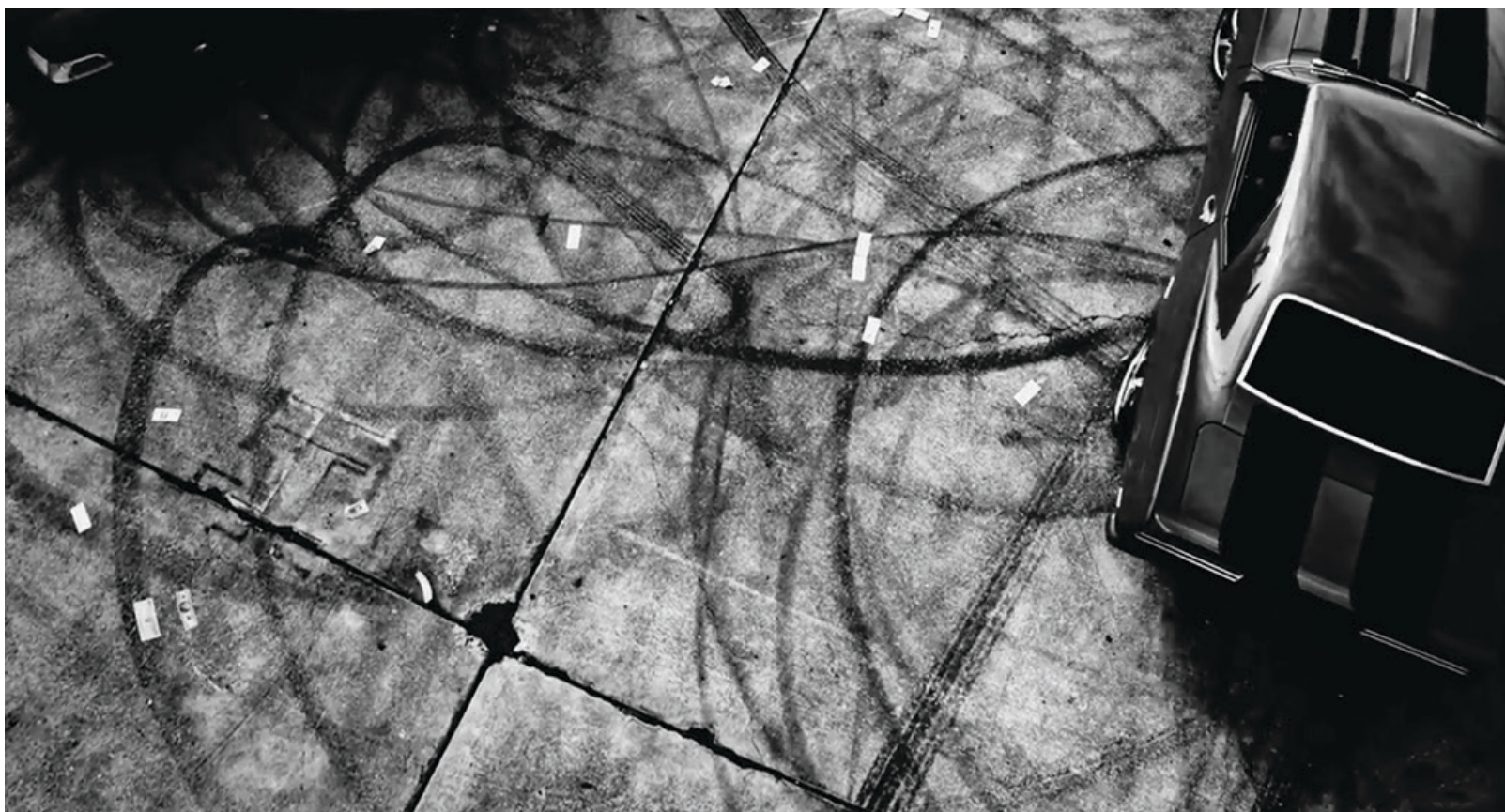Figure 3. Nettrice R. Gaskins, *Dreaming*, 2017. DeepDream Generator and Photoshop.

Figure 4. Kendrick Lamar, "Alright" (Directed by Colin Tilley and The Little Homies, 2015, Top Dawg/Aftermath/Interscope), frame grab.

Figure 5. Kendrick Lamar, "Alright" (Directed by Colin Tilley and The Little Homies, 2015, Top Dawg/Aftermath/Interscope), frame grab.

Figure 6. Nettrice R. Gaskins, *Breaking Free*, 2017. DeepDream Generator and Photoshop.

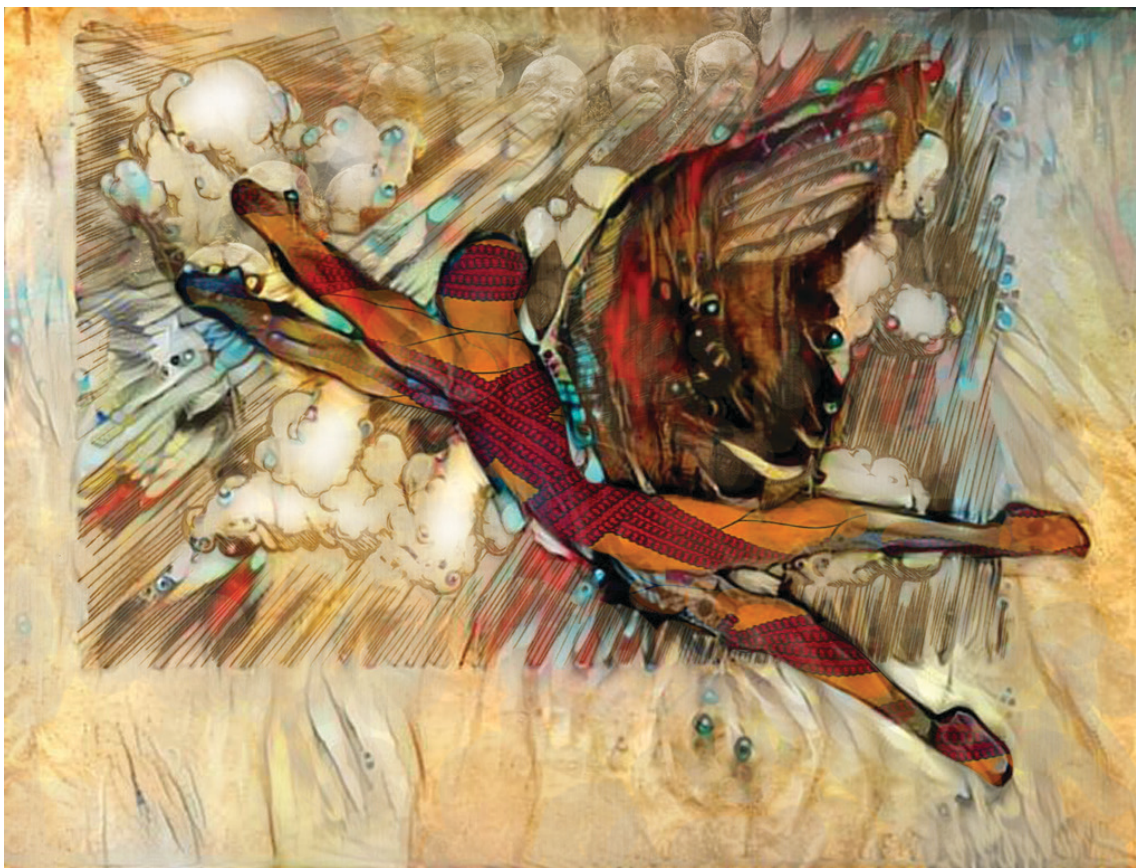Figure 7. Kendrick Lamar, "Alright" (Directed by Colin Tilley and The Little Homies, 2015, Top Dawg/Aftermath/Interscope), frame grab.