

## On The Mainline: The Fugitive Materiality of Photography and Black Corporeality

Ricky Weaver

*I know Jesus is on that mainline  
Tell Him what you want  
Jesus is on that mainline  
Tell Him what you want  
Jesus is on that mainline  
Tell Him what you want  
Call Him up and tell Him what you want*

### Introduction (*Operator*)

“On the Mainline” is a photographic series I titled after a hymn I grew up singing in church. This is one of those old songs you hear elders humming while snapping peas or in lieu of someone’s testimony at a tent revival.<sup>1</sup> As a child, I loved the idea

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**Ricky Weaver** is an image-based Artist from Ypsilanti, MI. Her work investigates the indexical relationship between objects and images as a way of contemplating the potential fugitive materiality of the photograph and the body. Weaver’s Ontological Framework is centered on ancestral veneration, ritual, and ceremony as a modality of creation or attunement as praxis that has the potential to bring forth new information through the aesthetic/causal plane. Weaver received her MFA in Photography from Cranbrook Academy of Art in 2018. She has been awarded opportunities such as The Independent Scholar Fellowship at The Carr Center Detroit and the University of Michigan Institute for Humanities Exhibition and Fellowship Award. Weaver has exhibited in the US and abroad at institutions such as Saatchi Gallery, ParisPhoto, and ExpoChicago. She is currently appointed as Assistant Professor at Penny W. Stamps College of Art and Design at The University of Michigan.

<sup>1</sup> Tent Revivals are usually a week-long series of sermons that usually take place in the summer evening. A revival is intended to revitalize the spirit of the congregation. The

of picking up my Granny's rotary phone and calling "The man upstairs," requesting my heart's desires. As an adult, my understanding of God has grown to be a bit more complex, but the concept of prayer is still straightforward to me. Like calling the mainline, prayer is the practice of communicating with the heavens by way of intention. I thought a lot about the church mothers, my grandma being one of them, and how much they would say without speaking from their mouths. It's like heaven could hear them even when they couldn't hear themselves. They would signify with their bodies—witness with their *breath*. It might look like hands held high, or palmside up (a receiving gesture), or eyebrows raised on a swaying head, releasing an *mmm mmm mmm* from the mouth. This was my first lesson in a particular kind of gesture that surpassed all understanding but resonated in my gut. As I lived a bit more life, I would come to know other terminology to be a part of this lexicon. Lip-smacking, neck-rolling, eye-turning, head nodding, and the emphasis on breath stood out to me as conceptually and aesthetically similar to the body language of the women testifying. Both an "aesthetic proclamation of linguistic rupture that announces and annunciates."<sup>2</sup>

I photograph myself from neck to waist, wearing my black silk house coat tied at the hips. The gold nameplate necklace rests on the smooth skin of a collarbone, revealing the identity of the figure in the self-portrait. In the center of a mostly black photograph, in a deep black frame, hands adorned with mostly gold jewelry and black embellished stiletto nails are signing. It is not sign language but a chorus of colloquialisms—an *anthem*<sup>3</sup>. The specificity in this refrain, along with a "bi-lingual" requisite to access them becomes evident in the responses of the audience. Some viewers ask if they are seeing a representation of American Sign Language (ASL) and if the work has to do with being deaf or hard of

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event is held outside under a tent so that the sound of praise and worship stretches far beyond the church walls to the doors of the community. The open space also suggests room for guests as it typically draws neighbors and passersby.

<sup>2</sup> Ashon T. Crawley, *Blackpentecostal Breath: The Aesthetics of Possibility* (New York: Fordham University Press, 2017), 38

<sup>3</sup> Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. "anthem," accessed December, 2024, <https://www.oed.com>.)

This entry defines an anthem as both a rousing song associated with a particular group or cause and a choral composition with biblical roots used in church services, emphasizing its cultural and sacred dimensions. I use the term anthem as an alternative title to the photographic series "*On the Mainline*" to evoke a sense of multiplicity and a nod to an ancestral chorus from which the gestural language of subtle refusal in the images derives. I am connecting the "cause" of resistance back to the black church as an embodiment of African spirituality.

hearing. Others ask about the tips of the sharp nails pressing my flesh with an unknown amount of pressure, “Is this about self-harm?” While some inquiries could not escape the images that the black body and the woman body had accumulated over time, one gallery go-er, walks up behind me: “call him up” she says, and I respond before turning around, “and tell him...” in the grammar of a granny peeping over her glasses with a knowing look, we meet each other’s gaze and recite the end of the line together “what you want.”



**Photograph 1:** *Untitled*, Series title, “*On the Mainline*” (*Anthem*) Weaver, 2022.

This call, response, and collaboration has two functions; To be witness/ witnessed and to move the observer from spectator into the space of co-conspirator. The photograph becomes of a vessel whose function is to hold alongside its tendency to perform whose function is to disappear—evading capture.

This essay likens the materiality of the photograph to black corporeality as a metaphor for methods of escape. This writing charts the Photographs performative and metonymic relationship to image as *fugitive*<sup>4</sup>. It situates the embodied referential images or internal (re)presentations within the meta-archive, citing a developing ontology for images that offers both a method of concealment and a loophole of retreat behind the photograph from which to experience a “view from underneath the hatches”.<sup>5</sup> I am advocating for an approach to the medium that finds itself capable of transcending form through the same tactics used in flights to freedom that are both body and spirit (photograph and image).

### Section I (*The Mainline*)

Conceptualizing a fugitive relationship between photography and image will require a bit of scaffolding. Bentham’s concept of the Panopticon provides a conceptual link between photography and surveillance. The circular architectural design of the prison, allowing guards (watchers) to observe the prisoners (watched) highlights the watched subject’s internalization of constant observation rather than the act of actually being watched. The panoptic emphasis on visibility as control has become a part of what the photograph signifies, the ever-present power dynamic in watching.

One way to challenge this visibility is by separating the image from the photographic object. The terms photograph and image are often used interchangeably. Within the context of this offering and the ontology it will reference, it is essential to note the distinction I have made between the two. In *A Philosophy Toward Photography*, Flusser defines a photograph as a technical image

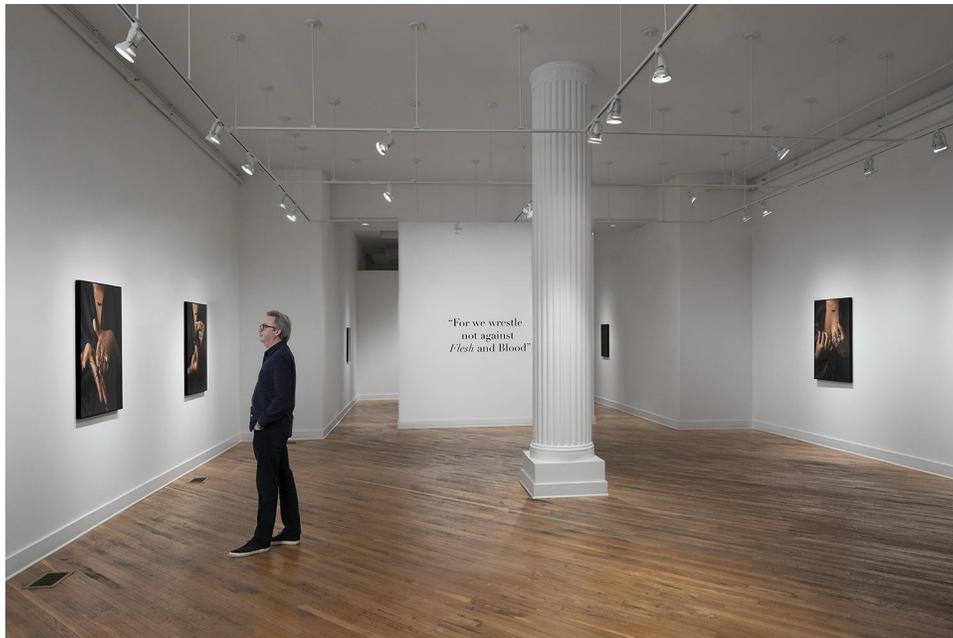
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<sup>4</sup> Fred Moten, Jack Halberstam, and Stefano Harney, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study* (Wivenhoe: Minor Compositions, 2013), 49.

<sup>5</sup> Simone Browne, *Dark Matters: On the Surveillance of Blackness* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015), 32. Browne discusses the 18 young negresses held underneath the small Turkish caïque carrying Jeremy Bentham on a journey that “ends in the Panopticon.” She asks us to imagine their perspective as “the view from underneath the hatches” as “another sight from which to conceptualize the operation of power” within a system where the power of the observer lies in their ability to see while remaining unseen.

produced by an apparatus.<sup>6</sup> An apparatus refers to a product of applied scientific text (an abstraction of the second order), making the technical image an abstraction of the third order, moving us further from *reality*. These are the types of images we encounter most frequently.

The other type of image Flusser refers to is a traditional image, which is ontologically different from a technical image as it is a direct abstraction from our concrete world and precedes written text by millennia. A lot of my questions and concepts around photography stem from my frustration with the proliferation and accumulation of technical images as they contribute to the production of subjectivity.<sup>7</sup> Technical images participate in reproducing the worlds from which they are derived. I tend to oscillate between interrogating how close we can get to a traditional image and how we might leverage the inherent obfuscation of the technical image as a kind of encryption.



**Photograph 2:** Installation view of Solo Exhibition titled, “Crucify my Flesh” featuring series, “On the Mainline” at David Klein Gallery, Detroit, MI. Photographer, PD Rearick.

<sup>6</sup> Vilém Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* (London: Reaktion Books, 2000), 14.

<sup>7</sup> Maurizio Lazzarato, *Signs and Machines: Capitalism and the Production of Subjectivity* (Los Angeles, CA: Semiotext(e), 2014), 24.

## Section II (Three-way)<sup>8</sup>

My practice is concerned with the consumption of black bodies in images (directly or implied) and how the legibility/illegibility of representations might avoid cooption and commodification. So far, I have only arrived at the notion that whatever technology we employ for image making, if we are attempting to arrive at something closer to “the real”, must come from and produce an affective relationship of and with the world.<sup>9</sup> It must ontologically reject the conventions of reproduction, like performance.

In *Unmarked*, Peggy Phelan asserts “all seeing is performative,” highlighting the constructed nature of perception. Seeing is not a passive act, but a dynamic process of receiving information shaped by context, intention, and the observer’s subjectivity. It is a performance. It involves a call and response between what is observed and how it is interpreted, revealing that our perception of reality is always mediated and influenced by cultural, social, and personal frameworks. Seeing is an embodied act of constantly producing and negotiating meaning. Image, as defined by the *Cambridge Dictionary*, is “a picture in your mind or an idea of how someone or something is”.<sup>10</sup> The definition evokes the concept of seeing. I am interested in images that perform — or *disappear*.

Flusser’s categorization of images requires a form that renders them vulnerable to reproducibility, surveillance, and other kinds of violence because they can be named and held —taken. I like to imagine myself working with a different classification of image, the *embodied image*. One that is the synthesis of the information we take in through our senses and sort through our perceptual filters.<sup>11</sup> The only apparatus required is the body. This nonmaterial manifestation

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<sup>8</sup> Before cell phones and screenshots, when you wanted to catch someone in a lie, you and your co-conspirator would first call each other. The primary caller would then “click over” to dial the suspect. Once the suspect answered, the primary caller would “click back over,” merging the calls without the suspect’s knowledge. The hidden caller had to remain still and silent—even holding their breath—to avoid detection. This method of covert communication serves as a metaphor for the way I am attending to the secret or *sacred* communication of co-conspirators through coded imagery.

<sup>9</sup> Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, eds., *The Affect Theory Reader* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 1–28.

<sup>10</sup> “Image,” *Cambridge English Dictionary*, accessed December, 2024  
<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/us/dictionary/english/image>.

<sup>11</sup> Michael Hall and Bobby Bodenhamer, *Meta-NLP Accelerated NLP Practitioner Training* (2012),

liberates the image from the form and thus eludes the vulnerabilities that come with form —an *uniform*.<sup>12</sup>

I make the claim that some images do not require a material form or in this case, a photograph. However, by definition, photographs require an image produced by a “camera,” making it a metonym for the image. Metonymy is a way of gesturing<sup>13</sup>. One could say the same for the way that *momma and n’em be signifying*.

I also contemplate Fanon’s *Black Skin White Mask*. In the chapter, The Black Man and Language, he posits, “A man who possesses a language possesses as an indirect consequence the world expressed and implied by that language,” the author signs our perception of reality is an implication of our collective subjectivity. An underlying question in my work is, ‘If the worlds we know are an implication of the languages we have access to, what are the worlds expressed and implied by the language of black women’s everyday cultural and spiritual practices?’ What happens when we recall languages from worlds where we have known freedom? Are subtle refusals portals to worlds that don’t require escape? Let me explain.

The gestures I referred to earlier in this essay as prayer and refusal represent a vernacular developed not in spite of, or merely in response to, but alongside a developing West—one that cannot exist without the murder, cruelty, and forced labor of Black and Indigenous people of color. To justify these atrocities and convince themselves and the public of their righteousness, “Black” had to be rendered as something other than human. Additionally, they had to believe that God granted man dominion over the earth and every creeping thing that creepeth.<sup>14</sup> The architects of the “New World” framed this worldview in a language that was inherently violent, anti-Black, and religious. This framing finds

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[https://www.academia.edu/33840507/META\\_NLP\\_ACCELERATED\\_NLP\\_PRACTITIONER\\_TRAINING](https://www.academia.edu/33840507/META_NLP_ACCELERATED_NLP_PRACTITIONER_TRAINING).

<sup>12</sup> An *uniform* is achieved through a methodology I refer to as *Escaping Form* — a process in which the form is reverse engineered from the desired internal (re)presentations using specific perceptual filters to organize perceptual information—serving only as a point of departure.

<sup>13</sup> Cambridge Dictionary, s.v. “gesture,” accessed December, 2024, <https://www.oed.com>.) This entry defines gesture as a movement of part of the body, especially a hand or the head, to express an idea or meaning.

<sup>14</sup> *The Holy Bible, King James Version*, Genesis 1:26, accessed December 2024, <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Genesis+1%3A26&version=KJV>.

one of its earliest visual manifestations in images like the diagram of the slave vessel *Brooks*.

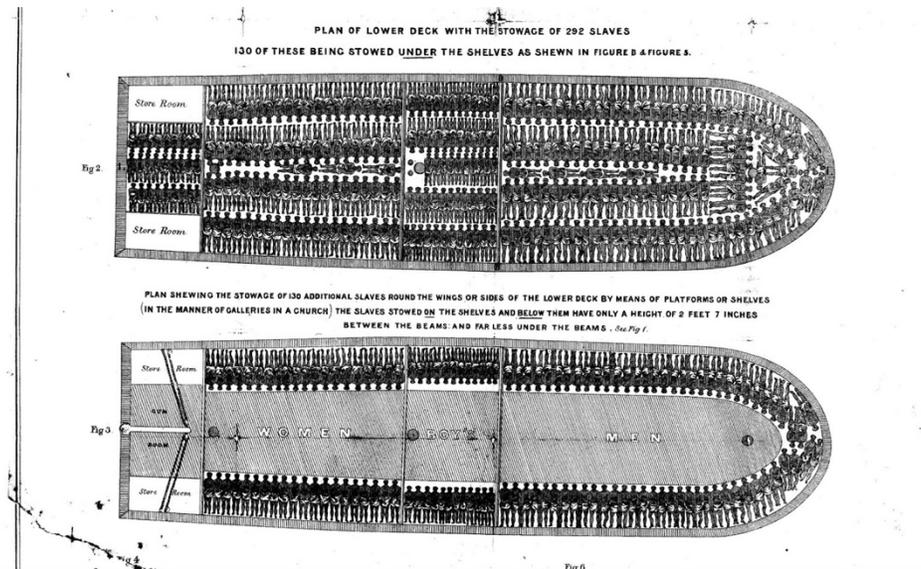


Figure 1: Plan for The British slave ship, *Brookes* (cropped). Library of Congress, Washington, DC (1789)

When Africans were captured, they were observed by their captors in contexts that had never previously existed. In turn, they communicated with each other under this gaze in ways that also had not previously existed. This is not to suggest that what I am describing derives solely in response to surveillance on the ships and plantations. Rather, it invites us to consider: What worlds dwelled within them that called forth this particular language of the dispossessed?

With a closer look at the at the description of a slave ship, one can see that each of the tiny black figures are not replicas of each other; rather, some have variously crossed arms, different gestures, or seem to turn to face one another, while some stare and look back at the gaze from nowhere, and in so being the Description of a Slave Ship can also be understood as depicting black looks and the trauma of the Middle Passage as multiply experienced and survived, and as hinting at the possible imaginings of what Omise'eke Nataska Tinsley terms "erotic resistance," that being the same-sex relationships forged because of and

in spite of this shipping arrangement, where formation of such relationships—like the intimate bonds of shipmates— itself was an act of resistance to “imperial desires for Africans’ living death. Such resistance was a refusal of the Babylon system, or , as Bob Marley sings in “Babylon System”, “we refuse to be what you want us to be / we are what we are.”<sup>15</sup>

The above paragraph from Simone Brown’s, *Dark Matters*, provides a close read of the diagram of the slave vessel. This observation provides insight into resistance practices born out of the conditions of “the hold” <sup>16</sup> One could also imagine that suffocating proximity, body arrangements, and constant surveillance created constraints around communication and within those limitations something *else* emerged.

Simone Browne writes that “The historical formation of surveillance is not outside of the formation of slavery”. She refers to the figures in the description of the ship as staring “back at the gaze from nowhere.” Thinkers like Fred Moten define fugitive as not simply about physical escape but rather an ongoing process of evading containment and definition, like the tiny crosshatch representations of captured Africans. These gestures, even in their representation, confront the images we don’t see and escape the form being presented to the viewer. It is as much about refusal and survival as much as it is an expression of freedom in what Brown has labeled as dark sousveillance;

...plots imaginaries that are oppositional and that are hopeful for another way of being. Dark sousveillance is a site for critique, as it speaks to black epistemologies of contending with antiblack surveillance, where tools of social control appropriated, co-opted, repurposed, and challenged in order to facilitate survival and escape. This might sound like a Negro Spiritual that would sing of freedom and escape routes...<sup>17</sup>

Brown names the Negro Spiritual as a gesture of possibility. The spirituals were a way of communicating under the constant gaze of colonial rule to plot their escape. The gesturing hands and overall aesthetic quality of the photographs in

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<sup>15</sup> Browne, 2015, p.50

<sup>16</sup> Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016), 68.

<sup>17</sup> Browne, 2015, p.50

“*On the Mainline*” function as acts of freedom or forms of dark sousveillance—performing as photographs, pointing to something *fugitive* by way of embodied images. I imagine this encrypted communication as a method of *flight*—pointing to worlds that don’t require escape.

### Section III (\*69)<sup>18</sup>

Meta-NLP, as described by Freeth and O’Connor, examines the principles and frameworks underlying Neuro-Linguistic Programming (NLP) techniques. The Meta-NLP goes beyond applying NLP tools; rather, the meta-structure is designed to ascertain how they influence perception and behavior. Freeth and O’Connor contend that the Meta-NLP not only refines existing practices but also opens avenues for broader applications, such as systems thinking, cultural analysis, and interdisciplinary innovation. By integrating these perspectives, Meta-NLP allows Neuro-Linguistic practitioners to critically evaluate and evolve the methodology, deepening their understanding of human cognition and the transformative power of language.<sup>19</sup>

The Meta-NLP Communication Model (Figure 2.1) illustrates the internal image as a gestalt of an external event after we have deleted, distorted, and generalized the information that our senses have gathered and sorted through our perceptual filters. This internal representation then creates a state of mind, influencing physiological responses and ultimately reactions and behaviors.<sup>20</sup>

Meta-programs are cognitive and behavioral patterns that act as perceptual filters, shaping how individuals process information and interact with the world. They influence attention, decision-making, and communication by prioritizing certain aspects of experience over others. Perceptual filters are results of Meta-Programs or structured ways of thinking that we have habituated (meta-stated)

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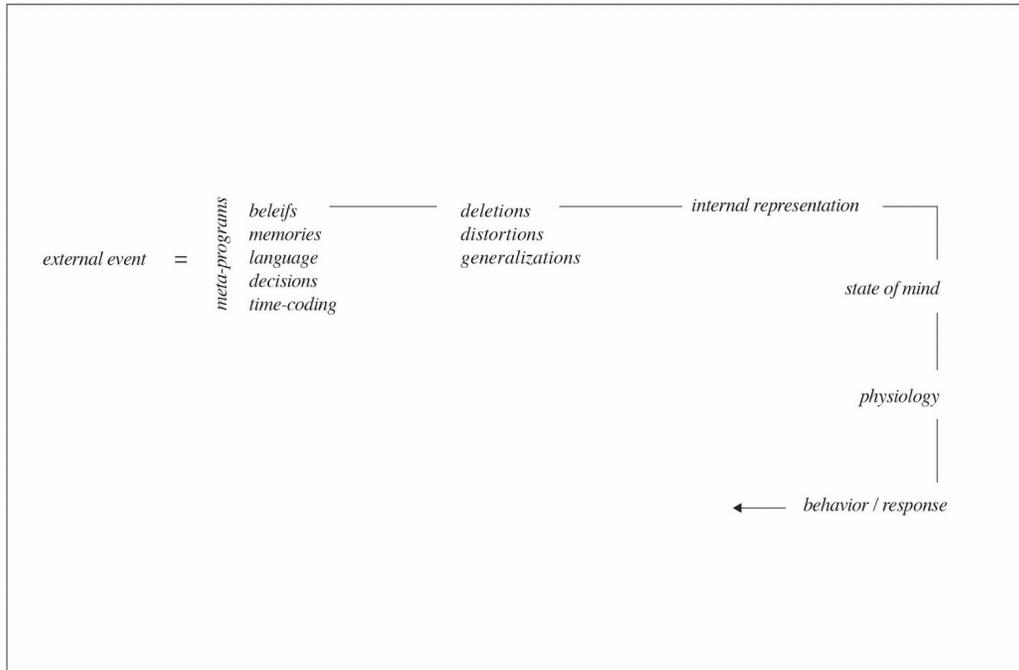
<sup>18</sup> Before caller ID existed, dialing \*69 and waiting to see who picked-up the phone was the only way to screen a missed call or identify an unknown caller. I use this as a metaphor to suggest a that there is a method for tracing information to its origin in the context of communication.

<sup>19</sup> Michael Hall and Bobby Bodenhamer, *Meta-NLP Accelerated NLP Practitioner Training* (2012), p.84

[https://www.academia.edu/33840507/META\\_NLP\\_ACCELERATED\\_NLP\\_PRACTITIONER\\_TRAINING](https://www.academia.edu/33840507/META_NLP_ACCELERATED_NLP_PRACTITIONER_TRAINING)

<sup>20</sup> This is the way I like to think about world building as an artist. We create objects, those objects provoke states, those states elicit responses. The accumulation of those responses at a broader scale have tangible consequences —culture.

into existence. A meta-state occurs when we have thoughts about thoughts. This pattern reinforces itself by creating a specific framing for our semantics.

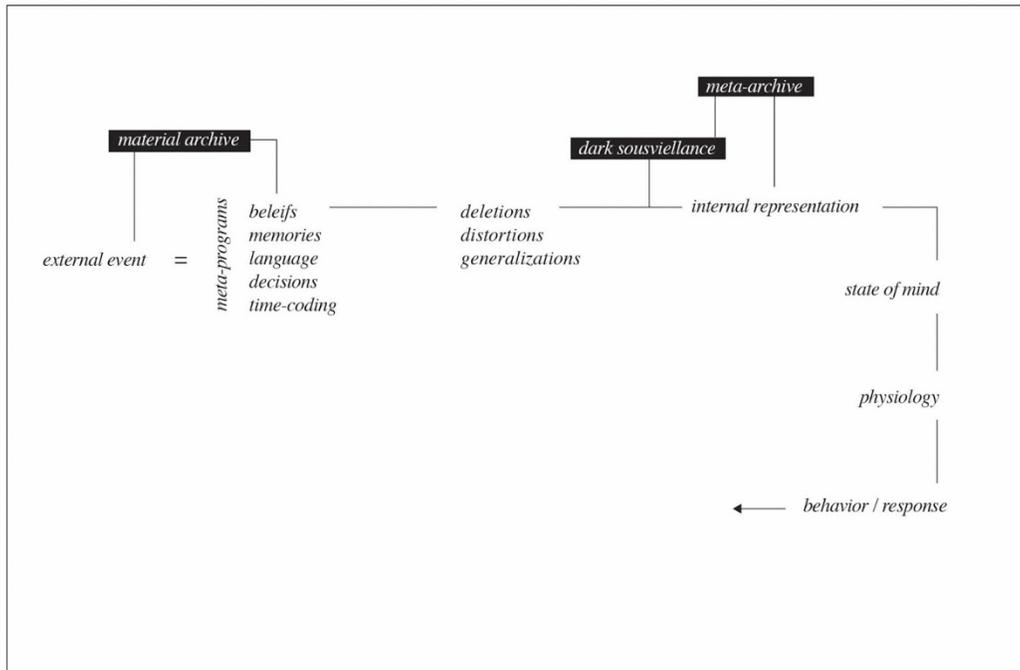


**Figure 2.1:** Illustrated version The Meta-NLP Programming Communication Model (Ricky Weaver, 2021)

I annotated the Meta-NLP Communication Model (Figure 2.2) to illustrate an Ontological Framework that is both ancestral and image-based as well as illustrates how certain experiences allow us to access certain information. I positioned ‘dark sousveillance’ between deletions, distortions, and generalizations, and the internal representation to show how a clear understanding of the observer’s framing can allow one to “hide in plain sight”. By anticipating how these filters shape perception, we can exploit them to manipulate what is deleted, distorted, or generalized.

For example, consider Henry “Box” Brown, an enslaved Black American born in Louisa County, Virginia, who mailed himself to freedom in a crate. Brown was a member of the First African Baptist Church where he sang in the choir. (I guess it’s safe to say Henry, like Harriet, and many others who sang of escape, *knew* those *hymns*). After his wife (who was pregnant at the time) and three children were sold away Henry devised a plan to escape. He packed himself into

a box labeled as “dry goods”, measuring 3 ft long, 2 feet wide, and 2.5 feet high. Sound familiar? Blending in with the rest of the Cargo he arrived in Philadelphia and began a new life. His success relied partly on the inability of observers to imagine an enslaved person possessing the intellect and agency to carry out such a plan. This reflects how deletions and distortions in the observer's framing allowed Brown to remain unseen. This is an example of necessary oversight or communicating from multiple registers.<sup>21</sup>



**Figure 2.2:** Illustrated version The Meta-NLP Programming Communication Model annotated. (Ricky Weaver, 2021)

I want to complicate and expand the categories of perceptual filters listed in the Communication Model by putting them into the context of the Black and African Diaspora. Scientific research has shown that genetic coding can be shaped by our environment. According to this science these experiences can be passed down as genetic coding. I wonder if Henry “Box” Brown's biological legacy of he and his ancestors spending months in “the hold” of ships like the slave

<sup>21</sup> Tina M. Campt, *Listening to Images* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2017), 18-45.

vessel brooks predisposed him to the conditions of fitting in small spaces for extended periods of time? If the conditions meant to break helped Brown to escape, what other fugitive methodologies did we inherit from them and how to we bring them forth?

The Meta-Archive is a self-referential index of internal images sitting in front of and behind objects, governing the way we experience, embody, and produce material culture. It consists of all the images embedded within the internal images that live in our bodies. It is generative because each image is a vessel or repository for another image that frames that image and so on. Image then becomes a metonym for imagination, forming new ideas, images, or concepts of external objects not present to the senses.<sup>22</sup> This framework, as it differs from the Meta-Model, suggests that the practice of acquiring certain states allows us to retrieve and produce embodied information as well. This is also the function of *ritual or divination*.

When it comes to the people of the black diaspora who were intentionally and violently severed from the culture of their lands, this way of seeing has worked to preserve and recall ancient ways of being. When enslaved Africans in America were denied the right to practice their spirituality, they cloaked their Orisha in the images of Catholic Saints and *carried on*.<sup>23</sup> West African practices continued to be demonized for centuries through mass media and other anti-black programs like cartesian philosophy and pop culture. Then, centuries later, many folks did not realize that what they saw in their elders' houses were ancestor altars and protection charms because they are unaware of the framing to see them as such. The Meta-Archive is essential to this methodology for making legible the aesthetics of fugitive practices we have inherited and identifying how they show up in the everyday (like a hand praise or a side-eye). If we condition or meta-state ancestral ways of being into our sensory processing programs by way of material culture we can collectively materialize more sustainable paradigms into existence. We can resurrect what has been forgotten to aid us in what is to come, and protect that knowledge by allowing it to remain *invisible*.

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<sup>22</sup> "Imagination," *Oxford Learner's Dictionaries*, accessed December 30, 2024, <https://www.oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com/us/definition/english/imagination>.

<sup>23</sup> Carry-On, as in to move forward and continue what you were doing; or as a back colloquialism meaning to 'cut up,' as in, "Y'all need to stop with all that carrying-on."

**Conclusion (*I was just calling, I ain't want nothing*)**

The Photograph and Black corporeality signify an inherently fugitive materiality as their indexical nature allows them to perform and disappear. This disappearance is possible through the misdirection of sign to signified. This is really a long-winded way to say *if you know you know* because you have known. The tense in the previous sentence is a nod to a version of temporality Christina Sharpe has called *the wake*—an urgent and necessary perceptual filter. The Meta-Archive ain't nothing new—it's just a name for an ancient technology our ancestors have been using long before us.

**A Note (*real quick, before I get off this phone...*)**

In the context of a growing surveillance state and censorship, there is an increasing urgency to preserve our archives and the worlds they link us to. How can frameworks, concepts, and methodologies like *The Meta-Archive* and *Escaping Form* liberate us from the conventions of the material world and provoke us into alternative practices storing, sorting, and conjuring up our ancestral and *otherwise* archives?

*Ase.*



**Photograph 3:** Untitled, Series title, "On the Mainline" (Anthem)  
Weaver, 2022

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