The (Black) Elephant in the Room: McLuhan and the Racial

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ABSTRACT

Background *This article combines Marshall McLuhan's media theory with the "racial contract" theory of political philosopher Charles Mills.*

Analysis *Mills critiques the older, Western "social contract," which holds that "Western man" moves from a "state of nature" (or McLuhan's tribal man) into "civilization" (McLuhan's detribal man and retribal man) via organizing with similar humans to establish the rules, laws, codes, guidelines, and, as is argued here, technologies necessary for human cohabitation. Mills argues that there are racial assumptions of the social contract, meaning only some are consenting signatories, particularly White men; thus, the social contract is actually a racial contract.*

Conclusion and implications *McLuhan's media theory is consistent with Mills' racial contract: tribal man resides in a state of nature, awaiting man's detribal or retribal benevolence.*

Keywords *McLuhan; Social contract; Racial contract; Tribalization*

RÉSUMÉ

Contexte *Cet article combine la théorie des médias de Marshall McLuhan et la théorie sur le « contrat racial » du philosophe politique Charles W. Mills.*

Analyse *Mills critique le vieux « contrat social » occidental, qui maintient que « l'homme occidental » passe d'un « état de nature » (l'homme tribal selon McLuhan) jusqu'à la « civilisation » (l'homme détribalisé et l'homme retribalisé selon McLuhan) en collaborant avec ses semblables afin d'établir les règles, lois, codes, directives et, tel que soutenu dans cet article, les technologies nécessaires pour la cohabitation humaine. Mills soutient que le contrat social comporte des suppositions raciales, du fait que certains hommes seulement—particulièrement des hommes blancs—en sont des signataires consentants; ainsi, le contrat social est réellement un contrat racial.*

Conclusion et implications *La théorie des médias de McLuhan est en accord avec le contrat racial de Mills : l'homme tribal vit dans l'état de nature, en attente de la bienveillance de l'homme détribalisé ou retribalisé.*

Mots clés *McLuhan; Contrat social; Contrat racial; Tribalisation*

Introduction

> As I've tried to point out, the one inexorable consequence of any identity
> quest generated by environmental upheaval is tremendous violence. This
> violence has traditionally been directed at the tribal man who challenged
> visual-mechanical culture, as with the genocide against the Indian and the
> institutionalized dehumanization of the Negro.
>
> —McLuhan, 1995, p. 256

Marshall McLuhan is not your traditional scholar of race. Yet, he seemed preoccupied
with the topic. In everything from *The Gutenberg Galaxy* to "The Playboy Interview,"
McLuhan (1967, 1995) wrote fervently about race. Whether he was talking about Kenya
or Europe; "tribal" or "detribal"; space or time; or "Negro," "Indian," or White men,
McLuhan's theories of media have always already assumed race, albeit not the most
nuanced theory of race. Indeed, McLuhan's association of Black and Indigenous people
as tribal builds off a long history of Western associations of tribalism with a presumed
intellectual and racial superiority over Black and Brown people, particularly in anthro-
pology and psychiatry (Hochman, 2014).

  While many theories of anthropology and psychiatry were structured on the racial
inferiority of the Black in comparison to the White, McLuhan sought to utilize these
theories in a White liberal way that would debunk racial inferiority. He situated race
not in biological, racial terms but in the different media people used; still, in doing so
McLuhan often replicated racial hierarchies. For example, in "The Playboy Interview,"
McLuhan (1995) associated much of the racial problems of North America with in-
creases in media development. Specifically, he argued that these racial problems were
a product of Western history, reflective of the linear development of "media environ-
ments." What began as a tribal media environment of multisensorial engagement
shifted to a detribal media environment, in which media played a role in fragmenting
the senses in favour of the eye (or a visual-mechanical culture), and finally transitioned
to a "retribal" media environment that was bringing the multisensorial component of
"tribal man" (McLuhan, 1995, p. 256) back in new fashion. Each of these environments
was reflective of multiple media: tribal man relied on media such as orality and picto-
rial writing; detribal man relied on media such as phoneticism and the printing press;
and retribal man relied on media such as electricity and television. And McLuhan
(1995) was far from shy about admitting the racial implications of these terms:

> The cultural aggression of white America against Negroes and Indians is
> not based on skin color and belief in radical superiority, whatever ideolog-
> ical clothing may be used to rationalize it, but on the white man's inchoate
> awareness that the Negro and the Indian—as men with deep roots in the
> resonating echo chamber of the discontinuous, interrelated tribal world—
> are actually physically and socially superior [under a retribal environment]
> to the fragmented, alienated and dissociated man of Western civilization
> [the detribal]. (p. 255)

For McLuhan, inferiority lies not in the blood but in the media used. Rather than any
one figure being racially inferior or superior, the media used by tribal man reflected

concepts of inferiority for those from detribal and retribal cultures. Still, because McLuhan appropriated tribal, detribal, and retribal concepts from scientific racism, race is an under-examined component of his theory.

With roots in racist anthropology and psychiatry, McLuhan's philosophy emerged directly from colonial relations (Nolan, 2018). As such, McLuhan's work mirrors the "racial contract" introduced by political philosopher Charles Mills. For Mills (1997), the racial contract is a critique of the older, Western "social contract" theory. The social contract holds that "Western man" moves from a "state of nature" (tribal) into "civilization" (detribal and retribal) via organizing with similar humans to establish the rules, laws, codes, and guidelines of living together, rather than living in a natural state—deemed dangerous, unprotected, and animal-like. The social contract was not a physical contract, signed by all Western Europeans long ago; it was an imaginary contract that was signed simply by agreeing to the rules, laws, codes, and guidelines of transforming Western conceptions of civilization. For some, the social contract involved the agreed-upon rules for the subjects who followed a kingship (Hobbes, 1965); for others, it represented a later agreed-upon rule of the liberal, secular democratization of the state (Rousseau, 1967). However, Mills (1997) argues that there is also a racial assumption of the social contract, one that means only some are consenting signatories. The only group capable of fully consenting to sign is White people in general, White men in particular, ensuring that the social contract was actually a racial contract. Mills argues that Black and non-Black people of colour cannot fully consent to sign the contract, as they are deemed not developed enough to fully come out of a state of nature. Herein lies the relation between McLuhan's media philosophy and the racial contract: McLuhan's tribal man resides in a state of nature, awaiting Western man's detribal benevolence (often dressed in a language of technological development) to bring the tribal into history, à la GWF Hegel (2001).

Mills' (1997) theory suggests a technological component that he does not examine, but it is elaborated on in this article. Indeed, the Western concept of linear development from a state of nature to civilization is largely a question of what McLuhan called media. Detribal and retribal man are signatories to the contract, which states that there are certain people (tribal man) who can never fully emerge from a state of nature. Even if using Western media, tribal man is deemed as unable to produce media on Western man's level. In contrast to the argument by McLuhan (1995), this is not to say that race has nothing to do with skin colour. Instead, it is to say that race is inseparable from the Western construct of time—a construct that is often measured via linear progress and also within the racialized/technological frame of Western development versus non-Western underdevelopment (Lim, 2009).

Rather than label McLuhan racist or argue that scholars should no longer use his work, this article proposes something far more complicated: McLuhan's media philosophy reflected a "racial/technological contract." This racial/technological contract reads Western temporality as measurable via the development of media, and such development is deemed off limits to some people due to their race. This article proceeds in three parts. First, it further outlines the racial contract put forth by Mills (1997). For Mills, the racial contract builds on a social contract, but this article argues that the

racial contract also holds a technological component. Second, it applies the racial/technological contract to McLuhan's work. Particularly, it considers media as part of the metaphorically signed contract between those who most closely represent "man" in Western discourses: White men. Third, this article investigates what constitutes media. Media are no longer limited to the radio, the light bulb, or the television, as per McLuhan, they also include Black bodies. Put differently, the Black body can be theorized as a medium, or an extension of Western man (Towns, 2018), one that extends man into what we now take for granted as White maleness. It concludes by thinking about how Black people have long criticized the reduction of their bodies to the media of White male utility and White male self-making.

The racial contract

For Mills (1997), the social contract holds within it an unacknowledged secret: the racial contract. Pulling from Rousseau's (1967) claim that "Man was born free, and everywhere he is in chains" (p. 7), Mills contends that the social contract is presented as the universal mode in which (Western) civilization emerges. In Mills' reading of the different iterations of the social contract, man emerged from a state of nature via moral and/or political contracts between himself and other men. Sometimes man enters a social contract through moral obligations, which state, for example, that murder is immoral; other times man enters into a social contract through political obligations, whereby, for example, an agreement is made to make political alliances with those who have more military might. But both moral and political contracts end with a social contract, a metaphorical agreement that legitimizes state power over individuals.

Through the contract, men come together to create Western civilization, meaning that when they metaphorically sign a social contract, their signatory relation forever takes Western Europeans out of a state of nature. One of the central components distinguishing those in the state of nature from those in civilization is "private property" (Rousseau, 1967). The capacity for the civilized to own private property is of necessity for the social contract, because all must agree on societal conceptions of public and private as legitimate, spatiotemporal markers of a civilized world. The civilized man, who emerges out of a state of nature, is a man who owns things and is not owned by anyone. For the man of social contract theory, civilization, individuality, self-determination, and private property go hand in hand.

For Mills (1997), these different iterations of social contract theory presume that everyone has the capacity to be signatories and/or owners. However, this assumes that both colonialism and transatlantic slavery were relations that the colonized and the enslaved agreed to. The social contract theory presumes the individualized right to consent; however, it does not take into consideration that there is a large amount of people in Western societies who are there not via consent but the overwhelming force of racial violence. To be enslaved, then, was not to enter into a contractual relationship with a White enslaver; it was to be the private property of an owner within a civilized society.

In terms of racial violence, White men largely make decisions about what to do with the Black and non-Black people of colour under colonial and slave rule. Thus,

the closest thing to the signing of a contract in these situations occurs not between enslaved and enslaver or colonizer and colonized but between colonizer and enslaver. A social contract is actually a racial and/or gendered contract that establishes the capacity of the White male to enact violence against both the colonized and the enslaved. The colonized and the enslaved are not represented in the social contract theory, as they were never signatories. They only make sense as man's private property: the objects that man makes his decisions about, the things that man signs off on, and the commodities that solidify man's own unique social relations of capitalism.

The implications of the racial contract for McLuhan's media philosophy open up space for a theorization of Blackness within media philosophy. As with other private property, media hold contractual implications, meaning that media are things that man makes decisions about—they are the private property he signs off on. Indeed, to "sign off" is itself a construct of a largely scriptural media economy, for Lisa Gitelman (2014), it is a construct between Western man, civilization, and technologies of inscription. Man is not just anyone who utilizes Western media, such as phonetic literacy or the printing press; man is a Western being, situated in time and space. If we follow McLuhan's early temporalization of media environments (from the tribal media to detribal media to retribal media), we can see that the amount of technological advancement of a culture is a measure of how far said culture is from the state of nature and how proximate that culture is to Whiteness. The tribal media culture is synonymous with the state of nature, or those Black and Indigenous people who are associated with media such as orality and/or pictorial writing. Via the adaptation of media such as the phonetic alphabet and the printing press, those (White people) who detribalize come together via an agreement (i.e., the signatory recognition of certain media as representative of humanity), and this supposedly allows them to emerge out of a state of nature into detribal civilization. At some point, the detribal head toward a new electric state, an environment where electric media are retribalizing the world, meaning the tribal social relations are making a comeback via electric media, only now led by Whites. McLuhan's conception of a media function, then, presumed a tripartite racial-social-evolutionary theorization of the world. Media are contractual, but largely for the White male population. Even as Black and non-Black people of colour may come to use media closely associated with Western societies, they are often deemed as exceptions or as only capable of using these media because of the (colonial) benevolence of White people.

Just as importantly, media technologies are also central mediators of man's exit from a state of nature. In "Exit and the Extensions of Man," Sarah Sharma (2017) similarly argues that there is a spreading White male fantasy of exit from dominant capitalist societal structures—a privilege inseparable from feminist, Marxists, and decolonial thinkers continually questioning White male supremacy. Sharma (2017) argues that the fantasy of exit is actually "an exercise of patriarchal power" (para. 4), and "ultimately an extension of man" (para. 7). Likewise, the exit from a state of nature remains the privileged domain of a few. It is a fantasy, but one that has material implications for those deemed not quite capable of exiting the state of nature; man's exit from the state of nature relies on his assumption that a large portion of people (White women, Black, and non-Black people of colour, etc.) can never fully exit the state of

nature in as successful a capacity as he did. Yet, everything about man points to his own inability to exit the nature he fabricated. Those who fall under McLuhan's detribal and retribal cultures pull from nature in order to make themselves into the civilized beings of Western society they imagine themselves to be. The state of nature is of necessity for the McLuhanesque detribal and retribal media to begin with.

In connecting the racial contract to McLuhan's theory, it is vital to acknowledge that development à la media philosophy has been steeped in racialized and gendered concepts of the world. From developed to underdeveloped, from First World to Third World, conceptions of technological progress fall along the lines of Western racialized/gendered, colonial projects. Another way to say this is that the man of arguably McLuhan's (2003) most famous book, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man,* was no universal descriptor of everyone; instead, man always represented humanness in Western racialized/gendered and mediated form.

Mediating the racial/technological contract

McLuhan's media philosophy reflected a racial/technological contract. His work provided the basis for thinking about media as contractual in two ways. First, his media were contractual but largely for a White male population. In short, developed media were useable by many, but often deemed the product of Western exceptionalism. And second, one of McLuhan's central metaphors, that media were extensions of man, exceeded the media he most often focused on and included the Black body itself. While McLuhan (2003) often discussed all media as extensions of the senses, he also argued that a media environment (such as mechanical or electric) resulted in new scales "introduced into our affairs by each extension of ourselves, or by any new technology" (p. 19). Extension, then, exceeded sensorial changes to include transformations of humanness. If we consider extensions as transformations in humanness, then they also merge well with colonial/capitalist extraction, in that the extraction of materials (minerals, elements, and even people) from Africa was a central process toward transforming "the West." In this light, Black bodies are some of the most overlooked media of media philosophy.

Theories of the social contract have largely universalized Western man, the figure who emerged from a state of nature through moral and political contracts with other men. Both Mills (1997) and Carole Pateman (1997) critique social contract theory for its assumptions that man is a self-determined individual who bases his subjectivity and civility off his capacity to control property (White women, Black people, and non-Black people of colour). Similarly, McLuhan (1995, 2003) suggested that tribal cultures were not only largely Black and non-Black people of colour but they were also produced as such by man, mirroring the popular use of tribalism in anthropology and psychiatry at the time (Hochman, 2014). Thus, the tribal man and his inability to fully emerge from nature was always already structured by the Western detribal and retribal classifications of what constituted both tribalism and man.

The tribal man did not initially refer to themselves as tribal or man. These classifications were applied from the outside. As Frantz Fanon (2008) argues, the racial classifications were not a choice, as "the black man has to wear the livery the white man has fabricated for him" (p. 17). McLuhan found inspiration to theorize a relation between media and Western classification in British-Kenyan psychiatrist John Carothers.

McLuhan argues that his media philosophy is heavily influenced by the work of Carothers (Theophanidis, 2013), who used tribal and detribal as terms to describe the Kenyans and Europeans, respectively. It was through Carothers's work, which could "return briefly to the native world," or "the non-literate world," that McLuhan (1967) argued it might be "easiest to discern the operation of phonetic letters in shaping our Western world" (p. 26). For Carothers, tribal man was descriptive less of media and more of the backwardness of Kenya, or what he classified as "the African mind." Carothers's detribal man was reflective of a Western conquest of nature—that feminized, racialized space from which Western man had long exited, moving him away from the tribalism the Africans were supposedly still stuck in. In short, through Carothers's study of Kenya, McLuhan presumed that Carothers had the ability to go back in time and see where Western man once was. The native world for McLuhan and Carothers alike was the Africa of their own making, a world of "primitive men" (McLuhan, 1967, p. 30), those who could not keep up with the technological overhauls of Western Europe and North American, and, thus, required Western assistance.

That McLuhan structured his media theory via a figure such as Carothers, whose work has been critiqued as racist in psychiatry (Fanon, 2004), means that McLuhan integrated the colonial constructs of humanity into his media theory. But unlike Carothers, McLuhan imagined this as an antiracist approach to media, one that suggested cultures with different media were not racially inferior, only different. Indeed, McLuhan (1995) dreaded the racial violence that he saw in the mid-twentieth century, arguing that "It has been a sad fate of the Negro and the Indian to be tribal men in a fragmented culture" (p. 255), and he prophesized that the Negro and the Indian might do better under the retribal, electric media environment in the future. Yet, McLuhan brushed over the importance of racial violence to Western self-concepts of humanness, which was necessary to produce something called Negro-ness and Indian-ness to begin with. Another way to say this is McLuhan paid too little attention to the violence of colonialism, which laid the foundation for Carothers to physically be in a place such as Kenya in the first place. Carothers classified the tribal within a physical and psychological framework of British colonial rule in Kenya, one that entered the African continent not only with the notion of Black inferiority but because of it (Nolan, 2018). Indeed, the perception of Black inferiority legitimized the British conceptions of a "dark continent"; a place without history and, thus, open for the extraction of natural resources and/or people for British imperial socio-politico-economic extension.

What McLuhan's theory opens up, then, is important not only for the disturbing racial implications of tribal, detribal, and retribal media cultures but also because it points toward a frame that much of Western philosophical discourses of the human have historically ignored: Western man does not exist distinct from Africa, Asia, or the Americas. Rather, he creates himself based on the violence that he can inflict against Africa, Asia, and the Americas and their different populations. Put simply, slavery and colonization are the political, economic, and racial foundations on which man defined his Western uniqueness: racial violence is central for the past and contemporary wealth and structure of Western society (Robinson, 2000). The importance of racial violence to the West is not as peripheral as McLuhan makes it out to be. While McLuhan clas-

sified Black people as part of a larger tribe that differed from White people's detribal-ization, he ignored that "not only must the black man be black; he must be black in relation to the white man" (Fanon, 2008, p. 90). Therefore, in McLuhan's (2003) posi-tion that media were extensions of man, he also unintentionally gestured toward the Black body as also a central extension of man (Towns, 2018). Through racial violence (slavery, colonialism, etc.), the Black body extends the West's contemporary socio-politico-economic standing, which man narcissistically frames as possible only by his own unique, developed hand. Because the West enjoys its contemporary status based on a history of racial violence, the Black body is man's ignored infrastructure in a world where racism and colonialism are deemed relics of the past.

There is a burgeoning list of scholars who are expanding McLuhan's media theory to understand infrastructure (Berland, 2009, 2017; Durham Peters, 2015; Parikka, 2015; Parks & Starosielski, 2015). In doing so, they point toward the transforming yet inter-connected relations between the construct of man, animals, weather, nature, and media. For example, John Durham Peters (2015) argues that media, as per McLuhan, can be flipped: media are not just environments but environments are also media. Relatedly, Jody Berland (2017) contends that Western constructs of nature, such as weather and animals, have always played a central role in mediating our physical and social bodies. And Jussi Parikka (2015) argues that the dominant focus on media as environments has often come at the expense of a critical interrogation of our geopo-litical environment, where our technological waste creates an increasing creep toward a world uninhabitable for people.

Western constructs of nature are media for Durham Peters (2016), Berland (2017), and Parikka (2015). Yet, there is also a sizeable portion of people who are racially clas-sified via an assumed proximity to nature (or a state of nature, as per the racial con-tract). Just as nature is deemed as a medium that man positions himself as overcoming (Berland, 2009), the Black body is an extension of Western man. The Black body can be thought of as an "elemental medium," or "an element, environment, or vehicle in the middle of things" (Durham Peters, 2015, p. 46). To say that the Black body is an el-emental medium is to say that man has used it as evidence of his distance from nature. The approach of the colonizer and enslaver to the Black body has mirrored the ap-proach of corporate capitalism to the environment: both are natural resources, without self-determination, that can be extracted to their excess for the politico-economic ben-efit/production of man (Yusoff, 2018). The concept of the Negro as an object, as a com-modity, as a medium is produced with the hopes of locking Blackness forever within Western constructs of nature. In short, Blackness functions by and for White and male anthropocentric self-conceptions; similar to nature, it is an extension of man into what we take for granted as White maleness.

The Black body is part of the racialized/technological contract, but its consensual signature appears nowhere. The violence necessary to apply the grammar of Blackness to some bodies (Spillers, 2003), to create the Black body itself, is inseparable from Western constructs of nature. Blackness is a necessary component of how White people can imagine themselves as the epitome of humanity. As a medium, the Black body extends Western man into his White maleness. This reconfigures much of the debate

on violence and humanness. To enact racial violence is traditionally deemed as "dehumanizing." However, this framework of dehumanization does not work here. To enact racial violence is to mediate one's relationship to humanness for us. The Black body confirms everything that those who have signed the contract have always already believed of themselves: racial violence only acts as a stepping stone, a signatory relation for proving some people's (Western) humanity.

The medium lacks guarantees

The Black body opens up space in media philosophy toward alternative interrogations of media: Black death and Black life. The construct of Black death does not mean devoid of life but rather closer to a state of nature, closer to constructs of space as feminized (Massey, 1994) and/or racialized (McKittrick, 2006), awaiting White male intervention. Indeed, the Western construct of nature becomes that which is deemed socially dead via a lack of self-determination and self-consciousness, characteristics associated with Western man. Without surprise, this definition of nature is comparable with the social death of Blackness (Sharpe, 2016)—that which positions Black people as non-beings without self-determination.

Still, there is Black life, here. This articulation of the Black body as a medium of White self-conceptions holds no guarantees. For example, as enslaved people fled via the Underground Railroad, they often used White, racist concepts of Blackness in their favour. The "lack of intelligence" often attributed by White scholars to Black enslaved people due to the lack of a paper trail on the Underground Railroad (McKittrick, 2008) can no longer be read as distinct from media; it also represented the enslaved using White technological arrogance as a cover for their escapism (Towns, 2016). Put simply, orality, star constellations, flagpoles, and even Black bodies mediated the enslaved's traversal of the Underground Railroad. For their own safety, media for the enslaved were not media for those pursuing them; instead, media were those extensions that White enslavers hopefully overlooked.

The medium lacks guarantees. Indeed, there continue to be alternative usages of media. The Black body is not exempt from these transformations. This article acts as an opening to not only think about the historical utility of the Black body for Whiteness but also the alternative uses of our own Black bodies that we can engage in. Indeed, if the Black body is a necessity for White self-conceptions, it holds the potential to rupture Western humanness itself. If Whiteness relies on a racialized/gendered extension to legitimate its overrepresentation as man, then man is also a media relation, one that structures his humanness off the Black bodies that he fabricated. Western man's humanity is revealed as far from universal, but as historically reliant on the level of racial violence he can inflict on certain people to maintain his position on the world. In the process, Black bodies encompass other ways of being human. Indeed, what are the enslaved of the Underground Railroad other than an alternative genre of humanity, in the face of an institution that legitimized a White genre of humanity as all there was? The enslaved did not run away to prove their humanity to White enslavers. They ran away to live an otherwise life that Western discourses of humanity either have not cared to theorize or have refused to recognize. Thus, the Black body is a medium, inseparable from Western humanness himself. Indeed, the Black body speaks to the in-

ability of the human to ever fully do away with or comprehend the racialized and gendered world that Western man created.

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