Conversation

Black Studies and/as Media Theory:
A Conversation with Armond Towns

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Introduction

On November 26, 2020, the *Canadian Journal of Communication* met via Zoom with Armond Towns to discuss his work. Towns is a professor in rhetoric and communication studies at the University of Richmond and has published widely on the intersections of Black studies[1] and media theory, often by engaging the work of Marshall McLuhan. He is also author of a forthcoming book, *On Black Media Philosophy*, to be published by the University of California Press. The conversation is edited for clarity and length.

Chris Russill (CR): Armond, I wanted to begin by inviting you to situate your work. You engage with many of the people and positions found in materialist traditions of media theory. I'm thinking here of the work you've done on Marshall McLuhan, Harold Innis, Paul Virilio, James Carey, Jonathan Sterne, and the contemporary problems you've taken up, like digital activism, surveillance, policing, and mobility. Yet your engagement with enduring figures and problems in the field is always mediated by work done in Black studies, including work I often associate with Black Canadian thought, an incomplete list of which includes Aimé Césaire (2001), Frantz Fanon (2008), Sylvia Wynter (2015), Katherine McKittrick (2006), Afua Cooper (2006), David Austin (2013), Rinaldo Walcott (2001)—a very, very incomplete list. As a result, while we might understand your work as bringing wider considerations of race into the foreground of communication and media theory, as an object of study that the field is now interested in, this strikes me as too circumscribed a way of thinking about what you're doing. I read your work as situating media theory as a racialized formation, as a medium of racial violence, and as an important site for the question of what it is to be human. If this is an acceptable way of describing your work, I wonder if you might speak to the traditions, problems, styles of thought that inform your way of posing questions to media theory.

Armond Towns (AT): Yeah, I mean I guess first I'll say that that's a very good way of describing my work. I've been really thinking about race as one analytic that I'm interested in. But more broadly, I'm interested in the different approaches that can be taken through Black studies to what it means to be human, which is really a central theme of Black studies. So one of the things I've been asking in my work is what is the relationship between Black studies' and media theory's approach to the human? In my forthcoming book, *On Black Media Philosophy* (2022), I've been thinking through the historical emergence of both projects [Black studies and media theory], which are, interestingly, happening around the same time, the mid-twentieth century. Right? Like on the one hand you have media and communication theory, which kind of contradict and also push against dominant Western logics of the mid-twentieth century. On the one hand, you could say media theory fully accepts the Western logic because it accepts the Western terms of the human at the time; but it also challenges that logic because it pushes beyond media representations as the sole organizing principle of media studies. On the other hand, you also have Black studies, which shatters that entire Western logic of humanness, calling us to rethink the human and providing a new way to think about knowledge, which is what makes me think of scholars like Sylvia Wynter (1995, 2015) and Aimé Césaire (2001), that's partly how I read their projects in Black studies.

So, I believe that Black studies really provides us with a particular theoretical-methodological approach to the world, and I mean the world really without hyperbole. Black studies has been, I think, popularly viewed as a discussion of race *only*, but it actually points far beyond race, right? [It points] to a reorientation of the world, a reorientation of what we can consider knowledge. So, what I've been arguing is that for media theorists, Black studies points us to understandings that include and exceed race, such as epistemology, capitalism, war, colonialism, gender, sexuality, fascism, and even this is a limited list to understand what Black studies can provide. But I think that, you know, when we bring Black studies into media theory, many assume that race is the only thing that you can find. But Black studies shows us that we can find much more, like alternative expressions of humanness and knowledge, which media and communication theory often ignores. So, yeah, that's kind of what I've been wrestling with the past few years.

CR: Yes, I agree, no question. You mention methodologies and approaches; I'm wondering if we might talk a bit about the techniques or ways of working that you've drawn upon. I know Wynter and McKittrick have been influential for you. One of the distinctive aspects of Wynter's (1995, 2015) thought is the way she situates ideas of the human within a longer history of Western humanism that is also a history of colonization, slavery, and epistemological rupture. I'm always

struck by the way she narrates the significance of Columbus's voyages in overturning ideas that were held about the uninhabitability of this region of the world, and the way the human is often articulated to cosmological questions of planetary inhabitation (and of whose inhabitations count). Obviously, we do not live within an unbroken historical continuity, and biological knowledge generally trumps cosmological knowledge in our moment, but this wider history of humanism has a gravity that continually pulls on our bodies, laws, and politics, even as specific articulations of the human may shift rapidly (Wynter & McKittrick, 2015).

AT: Yeah, definitely. I think that your questions on Columbus and un/inhabitability really resonate with my other answer, which is to say: this is how we can say that Black studies is talking about so many different things that are about race but also not necessarily *only* about race. And that's why the 1492 moment has been a long-standing project in Black studies with people like Sylvia Wynter (1995) and John Henrick Clarke (2011). There's also the newer work from Tiffany King (2019) that considers the relationship between Black studies and 1492 as well.

But maybe I should start by saying that Wynter is one of the biggest influences on my work. Inspired by Wynter, what I've been trying to do is really write an alternative genealogy of media and communication theory, specifically arguing that there's no real distinction between what I'm calling media, inscriptions, and Wynter's reading of the science of the word. Wynter and Lisa Gitelman (2014) really give me the tools to do this work: the book that I'm writing or the book that I've completed, which is also really pointing to the book that I want to write next. What I'm doing in both books is saying that Black studies provides an alternative materialist form of media and communication that has largely been ignored inside our discipline. If we accepted media as we theorize it in media theory as epistemological, which I think is really centrally McLuhan's argument and scholars like Richard Cavell (2016) and Gitelman (2014) have said, you know, this is what McLuhan is really saying: media are always epistemological, they record the Western episteme and they become the presumably acceptable modes of recording that Western episteme, which ultimately ends up associating certain media (books and the phonetic alphabet, for example) as knowledgeful. But if we accept that, we also have to consider our media as central to the replication of a particular *Western* racial/gendered epistemological order.

So that's where I really lean heavily on Wynter. In particular, her reading of Césaire and the science of the word is central to what I'm calling media. The way media theory talks about inscriptions really aligns with what Wynter (2015) is calling the "science of the word" (p. 209). So in my reading of Wynter, she's contrasting the science of the word against a discussion of how the West theorizes its construct of the human. Specifically in this kind of post-Darwinian,

turn-of-the-twentieth-century moment, the West privileges science in the categorization of the human, privileges science in the categorization of the word. What Wynter argues is that, alternatively we should think about the word as in fact organizing what we call science. And this would be to say that the mythic/word (or medium, for me) organizes a Western concept of the biological, rather than the other way around. Hence, the word is an *inscription* of the biological, right—it builds it up, centring one genre of the human as though it is representative of all of us.

If we accept McLuhan's (2003) and [Walter] Ong's (2012) premise that we can think about the word as a medium, then we have to resituate Western media as an organizing principle of a specific genre of human, and we now walk around as if that human is representative of all of us. This is like a story that we've been telling for so long that we no longer view it as a story. Therefore, while McLuhan gets us to understand media as epistemological, Wynter and scholars like Katherine McKittrick (2006), Simone Browne (2015), and Ronald Judy (2020) really provide me with generative tools to understand how important Western, raced, and gendered assumptions are for McLuhan's epistemologies.

CR: Thanks, that's great, and a nice way of helping bring Wynter's work together with media theory. Can we talk a bit about Wynter's reading of Césaire, Fanon, and her approach to the science of the word? I find it interesting how she provides both evolutionary and historical accounts of a science of the word and of the way that words, stories, and symbolic communication encode conceptions of the human within us. Maybe encode isn't the best word at this moment. But communication inscribes us biologically, physiologically, neurologically, such that "we" are inscribed by knowledges of "humanity" that we live out through our institutions and sociality to devastating effect. This claim is perhaps not so novel, but the description of the processes of autopoesis and sociogeny that make this so … they do not dispense with the materiality or scientific understanding of the body. It isn't a scientific skepticism really, but Wynter still illustrates the historical nature of the epistemes structuring the racialized ideas of the human that animate us materially, biologically, physiologically, neurologically. So, to use some broad signposts, the project is not an understanding of the essence of what it is to be human or a dissolution of the human into a social construction or a posthumanism, as that is usually described … and I really love that the human isn't abandoned to the terrain of biological thinking such that mediation comes into the foreground, at least on this reading of Wynter's work. But the necessity of Black studies to this realization is something I wanted to hear more about. How struggles with "dysbeing," the struggles with the othering processes that uphold racist conceptions of the human … it sometimes seems she is saying that double consciousness facili-

tates a mode of questioning that recasts our usual understanding of nature with respect to processes of sociogeny. … I know that the notion of consciousness isn't usually emphasized in materialist media work, but maybe this is something you could speak to? I have Wynter's way of working with Césaire and Fanon in mind with this question.

AT: Yeah, Wynter is highly influenced by Fanon, I believe, because Fanon doesn't fully abandon the human but resituates the West's biological assumptions of humanity as highly social. Wynter (2015) has this chapter, "The Ceremony Found," where she basically is saying that the science of the word and sociogeny are these two interrelated projects, right? That Césaire and Fanon are getting at similar themes inside of their different words, and one of the things that, you know, Fanon (2008) does in *Black Skin, White Masks* is in his discussion of sociogeny, he talks about how he can kind of go through life as a body schema, right, that's moving and doing things and not really thinking about how he is moving through the world. So it's a section in the book where he says, you know, I know if I need a cigarette I'll reach down into my drawer, I'll pull out the cigarette, I'll light it, and it's not really something that I'm thinking about. But when I step onto a train and a small white child says, "look Mom, a Negro," in that moment, I am quite literally like, my body is ripped apart. In those moments, I am not just a body, I am a *Black body*, and my Black body is central to these white people's imagination of themselves in this moment. And that in and of itself says that my body, as the Negro, does work for someone else in that violent moment. This ruptures my body schema; I am no longer moving through the world without thinking about my race.

CR: Mm-hmm, yes.

AT: And I think that Wynter (2015) is saying this kind of mid-twentieth-century moment of people like Césaire and Fanon is really pointing us to the fact that this older kind of post-Darwinian moment, which she calls "Man2" (p. 202), is bumping up against the fact that there are alternative understandings of what it means to be human, which is to say that Fanon *never* solely exists as that body *by* and *for* the white people on the train. Fanon's discussion, and the science of the word as well, is a way of getting to that, of saying, you know, the idea that Darwin has provided us with some neutral descriptor of the world, it's really just a myth, it's just a story, which, of course, is not to say it's not real. We've gone through, you know, this increasing secularization of knowledge but what we've really discovered is that these are just alternative theodicies. This is kind of what Lewis Gordon (2013) is arguing: that science and capitalism become a new form of Western religion that is viewed as if it is not religious at all. But this confluence of science and capitalism really takes very similar principles of older

Western religious thought, right, and this is what Wynter is arguing with her shift from "Man1" to "Man2" is that, you know, it's not a neat break of just complete secularity forever. Instead it's this secular gradation, where Western religion doesn't ever fully die but re-emerges in Western societies in different ways.

So I think that, you know, with the science of the word and sociogeny, what Fanon and what Césaire are saying is that this kind of older model that assumes that humanity is described *only* in Western secular terms doesn't neatly fit onto our bodies, as Black people. And if we're here, we're alive, we're human, then there must be another form of humanity, completely unthought by the West, completely ignored. And really I think that's what Black studies is about; it's about those other forms of humanity and how they move through the world in ways that are not necessarily a reaction to the West but always *extra*, always more than the West can comprehend.

CR: I'm struck by the blend of historical patience and political urgency found in this way of keeping the human in the foreground, it maintains the non-homogeneity of the human as a distinctive feature of our thought without dissolving the question of the human into ever more refined analyses of difference. You are resolute in showing how this question of the human is operative, how we live out answers to this question, but without eliminating the political urgency of the philosophical-historical-cosmological contexts you are engaging.

You deal constantly with different forms of racism and patriarchy in your work. Yet, you rarely seem to analyze racism and anti-Blackness as constituted through techniques of dehumanization. Your work isn't built around a politics of recognizing Blackness as human in the way we currently understand the human, nor [is it] interested in dispensing with or shrinking down the significance of the human either. There is another analytical approach here, isn't there?

AT: Yeah, I think that what I hear you talking about is a necessary interrogation of humanness that does not say that we, as Black people, are some degraded form of white people, which has been a long social Darwinist position. In some ways, I see similar arguments operating in today's discussions of the human, such as posthumanist discourses that, you know, have in their most kind of crude forms—I don't want to say all posthumanists, for sure—but in their most crude forms have said that *we* just have to move away from this human and go to something else. I think that the problem with that kind of argument is that it assumes that we all already agree on what the human is, that we have just accepted that we understand the human and now must move beyond it. Ruha Benjamin (2019) said something similar recently. The problem, of course, is that, you know, who even has the capacity to say let's move beyond this, let's just completely throw away this human concept and go to something else? This assumes that we are all human in the exact same way, that my humanness is al-

ways already your humanness. And disproportionately what we find is that it's Western Europe and North America, you know, it's these places where the discussion of the posthuman push is centred. And as Black people, we're like, before we move beyond the human that Western theory fabricated, as if it represents all of us, can you posthumanists even understand radically alternative conceptions of Black humanity?

The thing I've been really trying to analyze with the human, which points to the work of people like my friend Neel Ahuja (2016), is what is this *human* that people want to move beyond? How do we get to a place where we can say, alright now it's time to be posthuman? And I think that has a lot of implications for race and gender and sexuality that we have to really take into consideration because I think those capable of, you know, moving beyond the human are really kind of doing a different project from what Wynter or McKittrick or all these important Black studies scholars are talking about. In my own work, I'm saying that as a discipline—and I consider myself a Black studies scholar, but I'm trained in media theory—as a discipline, I want to ask, when we talk about the human, when we talk about what it means to be human, *who* is the human in media theory? What does it mean to be human in those disciplinary terms? I think that conversation has to be [had] before we can even get to a point where we say, alright let's just leave th**e** human behind.

CR: Mm-hmm. Yeah. I am definitely partial to approaches that look critically at the systems of knowledge that define and describe and depart from the human. I find myself drawn to the notion of "planetary humanism," not as a way of advancing cosmopolitanism but [of] allowing critical scholarship on humanism and race to engage climate change by recognizing the way Man1 and Man2 rendered large portions of the planet uninhabitable. In Wynter's history, for example, the current concerns with climate change remain articulated to a cosmological dimension that is part of this wider colonial history (Wynter and McKittrick, 2015). This seems crucial to retain in a moment when Dipesh Chakrabarty (2009) and Bruno Latour (Latour and Lenton 2019) appear to emphasize discontinuity with colonial histories. I'm thinking of how Dipesh Chakrabarty (2009) mobilizes the planetary sciences as a distinct if not incommensurable system of knowledge to those developed through critiques of modernity, globalization, postcoloniality, yet it seems this isn't true when these matters are taken up in Black studies. I think it is fine to say with Chakrabarty (2009) that scientific notions of the planetary are structured by the question of inhabitability and that obviously the notion of humanity cannot be left unaffected by planetary shifts that are undermining the conditions of inhabitability for biological life. But Wynter (Wynter and McKittrick, 2015) has shown how central this logic is to the

European history of humanism. It feels like Wynter's history of humanity is linked to planetary cosmologies at the outset. In the Black radical tradition, the concern with the planetary, colonization, slavery, environmental inhabit-ability all seems interconnected, fundamentally co-constituted …

AT: One of the things I see you getting at is this interrelationship between colonialism, the planetary, and environmental destruction, right, which is also interestingly a component of my work. My book is actually in an environmental communication series, so I've always found it really interesting to think about the relation between the climate crisis and media theory. Even in our kind of contemporary media theory work, we can see elements of scholars who are interested in this—I'm thinking about your own work (Maddalena & Russill, 2016) but also Jussi Parikka (2015), Nicole Starosielski (2015), John Durham Peters (2015), Mél Hogan (2013). All of this work is kind of pointing to this relationship between what we can call nature and media.

If you think about media materiality, then the depletion of natural elements that go into our media in our contemporary Western societies also holds a relationship to the killing of our planet. Parikka (2015) argues that we walk around with pieces of Africa in our pockets, as golds and mercuries make up much of our devices. So what I've been doing in my book is outlining how this concept of nature is often highly Western, and that means it's also highly reliant on colonial concepts of nature that assumes that nature is a thing that Western man transforms by and for his benefit. It's not shocking, then, that we can say that some people have been deemed closer to nature than others in the West. This is one central theme of V.Y. Mudimbe's (1988) *The Invention of Africa.* What he argues is that Africa and some of its people are imagined as if they *are nature* within the Western imagination. In the process, I argue, we cannot ignore that some African people's transformation into Negroes—which is inseparable from racial violence—some people's transformation into Negroes sounds similar to the way that we've theorized media, à la Parikka (2015). And this would be a *racial/gendered, white supremacist relation*, which is to say this points to a limitation of media theory: if we take media theory seriously, especially when considering who the human is in media theory, then it cannot account for Black people *outside of us being Negroes* because it accepts a colonial construct of nature. What I do in my book is use Black studies to push beyond this media theory limitation (again, Black studies points to and beyond race). So our discussion of the climate, of planetary destruction, is always about how our media play a role in our contemporary crisis but also about how the destruction of our natural environment is consistent with the destruction of some people's way of life and even some people's actual bodies.

CR: I don't think you can say that frequently or loud enough. It isn't enough to document how nature is understood as standing reserve or as an extractable re-

source. We need to better historicize the knowledge we draw upon and dislocate when telling the stories that we do about the relationship of media and environment. I appreciate that in your work and in Yuri Furuhata's (2014) work, Caren Kaplan's (see Kaplan, Loyer, & Daniels, 2013) work, Jeremy Packer and Joshua Reeves' (2013) work, and in many of the others you have mentioned, many of which suggest a military relation is necessary to secure a certain knowledge of the environment. What I find crucial is the way this reduction to nature operates within the history of colonialism and extraction. The reduction to nature seems bound to historical justifications for displacement from land. At first, these lands in the Americas are understood as uninhabited in the dominant worldviews of Europeans. Columbus and others show up and of course these lands are inhabitable because humans are living here. But, if people live here, then this poses problems to the development of colonialism and systems of transatlantic extraction. Is this wider colonial history implicated in the reduction to nature that you're seeing as operative here? If so, then as Kyle Whyte (2017), Kim TallBear (2020) and others have noted, planetary crisis is not so new, and the disastrous dislocations of climate change are intense enough but of a longer history. It seems a key point of intersection between Black studies and Indigenous resurgence in the materialist approach you are developing.

AT: Yeah, I think so. You know one of the things that Wynter (1995) argues in her chapter, "1492," is that with this 1492 moment, we can point to a longer relation of planetary crisis. With this moment came this massive new world view and part of that new world view was really pushing against older European ideas of Christianity, European ideas of knowledge, particularly the idea of Europe as being this kind of chosen place that just wasn't completely destroyed by the floods of the Bible. So the idea being that other land west of Europe must not exist, and when Columbus gets to the Americas, that idea is shattered. There's clearly something and someone else there. There are other lands, there are other people, and this, to some extent, points to a push toward secularity, that says our previous Western religious orders are no longer holding. So then you have to rewrite this new land, this new population into terms that you understand. And part of that rewriting, under colonial terms, often involved a conflation of some people—the Indigenous and the African population—with nature. So one of the early British laws in North America basically said that under the colonies, the Negro and the Native were basically land. They were like trees: you could buy and sell them as property. That conflation of certain people with the land is something that Tiffany King (2019) talks about, it's a long project that happens in the West of situating certain people and certain bodies as closer to nature than others. So then we have to say, well what does the West mean when it says nature? What is this thing that we call nature? Does that idea,

this older colonial idea of nature, does that inform our contemporary discussions of climate crisis and the makeup of our media technologies? I think it does, which would mean planetary crisis is not a new relation but much older than popularly discussed.

McLuhan and media studies
CR: Let's bring McLuhan in.

AT: Yeah I love talking about McLuhan. I think that, like most media theorists, I have such a weird love-hate relationship with McLuhan. You know when I was in graduate school and I read McLuhan for the first time I was like, wow, this is so exciting! And then I kept going and I was like, oh no, it's still good but it's getting a little racist at points.

CR: Do you remember how you first came to him? How you first responded to this racism?

AT: I'm pretty sure the first bit of McLuhan (1962) I read was *Gutenberg Galaxy*. It was either that or *The Mechanical Bride* (McLuhan, 1995). I'm actually not entirely sure anymore. I mean this is ten years ago at this point. But, yeah, it was one of those pieces and either way I was just kind of blown away. As a scholar from the U.S., the way that we by and large talk about media is by media representation. This movie or this TV show is racist because of a particular scene, and McLuhan is like, that's not what I'm interested in. It's not that representations are unimportant but that's not the thing that I'm going to focus on. So that was a re-orientation for me and once I read that I couldn't go back, I couldn't unsee it. But I also believe that people in Black studies have, for legitimate reasons, not taken up McLuhan's work. This is not surprising: there are points where McLuhan relies on scientific racism to make essentially what we could probably call a culturally relativist kind of argument. But I do believe that inside of McLuhan's mistakes, we can see an understanding of what he imagines the West to be, particularly how the West imagines itself, which points me toward Black studies.

   With that being said, one of the things that drew me to McLuhan's work is thinking about how central Western epistemology is to it. His idea of media as these shifts through tribal, de-tribal, re-tribal cultures speaks not only to the ways that he imagines different people—and I think we should acknowledge that those imaginations are disproportionately racialized: the Negro and the Native are two figures that he largely associates with tribal media—but tribal, de-tribal, and re-tribal also assumes that the West holds the neutral epistemological terms necessary to classify *all* people throughout the world. He assumes that by using psychological and anthropological studies, the West provides neutral descriptions of the world's people. And one of the things that I've been arguing for years is that due to these Western assumptions, we can say that

McLuhan's media theory is structured on racialized assumptions, *even when he doesn't mention race at all.* The human that McLuhan assumes—what he calls man—is white, it's male, it's middle class. So even the tribal media cultures that he discusses are essentially temporal markers of where white Euro-Americans *once were.* This accepts the West as the measure of all other humans. So I think scholars like Sarah Sharma (2014) are saying something similar: even when race and gender are not explicitly mentioned, they haunt McLuhan's media theory and its temporal terms. So while I love McLuhan, I find so much interesting in his work, I try to keep in mind those limitations as well when I work through his theories.

CR: Yes. I want to hear more about how you found similarities and built connections between McLuhan and Black studies. You read Fanon with and against McLuhan—is "with and against" the right description?—and you use them to recast ideas of knowledge and mediation. Yet, it is impossible to ignore how McLuhan's thought gains wider attention with his departure from the critical discourses of modernity and industrialization that animated his earlier work. It is hard to ignore how the inescapable disruptions of anti-colonial struggle are situated by McLuhan not as a rejection of European humanism, of colonialism, of racial capitalism but as a more general condition of societal unrest that is determined by shifting medial systems. It reads as denial and as a structurally conditioned exclusion from thought that is needed to retain the very notion of humanity that is being contested in these struggles and wars. Your work makes it impossible to ignore this aspect of McLuhan's thought, this displacement of anti-colonial knowledge, but then this also seems to be what makes McLuhan interesting to you. This observation does not lead you to dismiss or reject his work.

AT: In the introduction of my book, I'm talking about this exactly. I'm saying like, McLuhan theorizes during a particular conjuncture, the mid-1960s moment, right, he's got this really big popular buzz. In the U.S. in particular, the yippies love him. There's this kind of mid-twentieth-century cultural, social, political movement around the world, and McLuhan's response to this worldwide social upheaval is that it is largely due to a Western, techno-familial generational gap, disarticulated from the Cold War, racist, sexist, homophobic, and colonial relations. He's basically like, "The white family is breaking up." The yippies have gone away from, you know, the older family values and that's kind of the problem of society, and electronic media (television) are one reason for that. It's not *Leave it to Beaver* but it's the television, the idea that we live in this global village where, you know, we are all watching the same thing at the same time, and it's not that the content is the thing, but it's the fact that we're all doing it together, we're all participating at the same time. So media are reducible to a white generational gap for McLuhan.

The thing that I'm saying in my forthcoming book is that McLuhan's analysis of the conjuncture is not only mistaken but it interestingly leaves out the fact that there's so many Black and brown people throughout the world that are inspiring *all* the white protests. Like in the U.S. alone, Black Power is one central organizer of a lot of the white student movements. Black studies also emerges at this time, inspiring not just Black students but students of all backgrounds, as well as the rise of other academic disciplines. So ignoring all of this speaks to McLuhan's assumption of what it means to be human that comes through in his media theory—that this white familial generation gap is the thing to pay attention to, though much of the world is saying otherwise. At the height of McLuhan's popularity, for example, C.L.R. James (2009) talks about African and Caribbean decolonial wars at this time, like, massively, right, and it's just, you know, in my intro what I want to do is centre McLuhan in this time period, but point to things that he's not paying attention to, especially in the academy. And what he's not paying attention to is the emergence of Black studies. You see the emergence of British cultural studies as well. You see the emergence of far more critical approaches to the institution and to knowledge that McLuhan is kind of a part of, but also never fully. Of course, McLuhan's pushing against the dominant communication and media theory at that time, he's pushing against the Shannon-Weaver model of communication. But he's also still very much aligned with the dominant models because he accepts Western human terms as foundational. So I'm really trying to wrestle with that, and I don't think that dismissing McLuhan is the way to do it. One of the things that I've really learned and loved about Black studies is that it's not really about who you read, it's *how* you read them. I think that you can read McLuhan in a way that says, yeah, he's wrong, he's got problems, but what can we do with a Black studies reading of McLuhan? I don't want to celebrate a *Black McLuhan.* I want to write a Black materialist read of media theory through highlighting the utility and limitations of McLuhan. And that's what I've been trying to do in my work.

CR: Yeah, I completely agree. Let's work though some strands of this reading a bit. As I see it, a problem with McLuhan's way of mobilizing a media theoretical explanation is the way that the societal upheaval created through anti-colonial struggles is instead explained as the consequence of media technical evolution. But you don't get stuck on that—and, as I say that, I realize that McLuhan is hardly unique in looking to displace colonialism, slavery, and Black studies from philosophical thought. You don't ignore it either, but what you fasten on is how McLuhan opposes bio-centrist accounts of humanity by making media evolution, not biological evolution, the determinative force in shaping society.

AT: Mm-hmm.

CR: So, the displacement of the hold of the biological on the human, the denaturalizing of the way humanity is understood, this move allows one to resituate biological knowledge as one way of mediating what the human can be, one way of figuring the capacities of the human, but only one, and it is this displacement of the priority of biological knowledge by mediation that brings the idea of the Black body as media or extension of man into the foreground of your thought. So, if we say that media externalize us, if we say they externalize our physiological and sensing processes, and if we say that the development of technological media are tied up with this externalizing and extending of bodily capacities, then the intellectual and technical developments through which we know our bodily capacities is an effect of mediation, not a reflection or simple expression of our biological nature. Or, maybe another way of saying this is to claim that our biological nature is determined in part by the knowledges that mediate it to us … and in the mid-twentieth century, it is often the physiological and psychological knowledges that are relied upon to conceptualize body and mind. So there is a loop of sorts in the McLuhanist approach through which media technologies and techniques do not just incorporate a knowledge of bodily processes but then act back upon these bodies to discipline or tune those capacities. So, in a sense, we inhabit mediation. But, to stay with the key point, these media don't simply reflect biological processes but instantiate gendered and racialized notions of the human via discourses of biology or natural being. The key is refusing the reduction of the human to the biological if we hope to understand its racialized character.

AT: Right, right.

CR: What Wynter might then redescribe in the language of word and symbolics to discuss autopoesis through sociogeny, but that I think you describe through the notion of mediation—

AT: Yeah, yeah.

CR: Thanks for letting me stammer though ideas that you always explain much more elegantly. … So, if I'm reading you right, this is how the question of the human is shifted to the plane of mediation, and this is one way of bringing Black studies and media studies together.

AT: You know I think for me, the work of Lisa Gitelman really helped me think through this and her idea of inscription devices as these epistemological projects. Essentially, what I read her saying is that, you know, we should move away from McLuhan's idea of print culture, which assumes that there's this print culture, distinct from electronic culture. Instead, we should think about our media as different iterations of inscription and different forms of recording. So once I got there and I got to the epistemological claims that Gitelman's (2014) making, I think it became a little easier for me to see where Wynter's (2015) science of

the word fits in there. We can think about the science of the word as itself a particular form of inscription that has similar epistemological implications to it. I think that that's kind of how I'm bringing all of that together with McLuhan.

Part of what you were pointing to early in the question was also the different types of study that McLuhan uses, like the physiological kind of arguments that he's making, and in my work what I find interesting is that McLuhan read similar research as Fanon. In the archives at the University of Toronto, McLuhan also has a copy of Fanon's *A Dying Colonialism*, so what's interested me is that these are figures who exist at the same time, they're reading similar texts and reading each other and it's like they're coming to different conclusions. So McLuhan and Fanon both read J.C. Carothers, for example, who was a British psychiatrist who was talking about the ways that Black people in Kenya were behaving under colonization (1953). Now McLuhan takes that as the basis for his discussion of tribal and de-tribal, which is what Carothers is going to talk about when he talks about how people of African descent, no matter where we grew up, are different from Euro-American white people. Carothers (1953) argues that unlike Euro-American white people (de-tribal), we, as Black people, just have an inherently tribal nature inside of us that we can't fully leave behind, no matter where we live. And Carothers is going to say that this defines the colonial situation and McLuhan is going to accept that as the basis for tribal media. McLuhan's (1962) going to say that this is what's found by Carothers and we can just apply this to media theory. And Fanon (2004) is going to say that, well, Carothers doesn't even understand the colonial situation. Carothers has no clue what the situation is, but what he does is he assumes that his framing is itself kind of this neutral, scientific reading of what Kenya is. No, Fanon says, Carothers is *producing* what Kenya is, ultimately revealing the West's social Darwinian, technological-temporal assumptions. And that is really how I am approaching everything that McLuhan does. It's through that lens that McLuhan's media theory is really a reflection of the West, *not Kenya*, it's a reflection of what his human is, and we have to, to some extent go back and read what he was reading in order to understand such thinking. I think that McLuhan to some extent disagrees with Carothers. I don't think that McLuhan believes that the tribal is racially inferior to the de-tribal. He's viewing this more as this kind of step, this kind of social-evolutionary step—you go from one, to the next, to the next, whereas Carothers views them as far more derogatory. But because McLuhan accepts Carothers' system, the disagreement doesn't matter, right? McLuhan accepts the terms of Carothers as if they are neutral, which reifies the dominance of one form of humanness.

CR: Right. I think this illustrates how the influence of humanism is wider and more enduring than we sometimes accept. And the necessity of knowing something about Africa to make claims about the human. It seems the connections

are more on the surface in McLuhan's work than in many other cases of media theory. Of course, in Fanon's case, there is no question. But if we cancel McLuhan, however wrong or racist or ridiculous he and his source material might often be, we lose this thread where we are forced to address the connections. I feel that Pal Ahluwalia (2005), Amin Alhassen (2007) and others have made these points about the necessity of acknowledging African thought and politics, not as something we should include to be global or cosmopolitan in our outlook but as something constitutive to the history of how we currently think. They show how frequently poststructuralist and materialist thinkers are shaped by the sorts of historical engagement you are identifying here.

AT: At least the way that I'm thinking about it, McLuhan and Fanon are—and this is probably part of my training, like my training is really media theory and British cultural studies, and I don't really know how to separate them—and I think that McLuhan is interdisciplinary, right, that's part of how he builds his media theory, which is interesting because it's happening at the same time as the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies is emerging in Birmingham in 1964. But I think that for me, McLuhan and Fanon are people to *think with*, which means that I can see where they're flawed, I can see how they're wrong, but I'm more interested in saying, what can we build from them?

A lot of my students, especially my grad students when I was at the University of Denver, they were always like, why are we reading these old, dead white men? Let's just throw them out. And that can be a legit position for some people. But again, I'm like, it's about *how* you read them. A reading does not have to mean a confirmation or affirmation of scholarship. A reading can give you a way to view a larger system of knowledge. I use both of them in ways that say, well, what can we do now? What can we build from this? What can we say from these two figures that have largely just not been thought about together at all, even though they're operating in a similar time period, reading the same texts, and going in very different directions? What can we do if we were to read people like Fanon and McLuhan together? My way may not be the only way, it may not even be the correct way, but it is one way.

My next book, I'm really going to be looking at the work of C.L.R. James in relation to Harold Innis because I think, like Jody Berland (2009) argues, that Innis is a theorist of colonization and that's basically C.L.R. James' project as well. And also thinking about Innis' (2008) discussion of time and space biases at his particular McCarthyite time. There's a critique of capitalism in there. It's like, is he writing this in a way that is designed not to ruffle too many feathers? Is Innis' massive detail a way of secretly talking about contemporary capitalism in a way that says, well Canada, as being kind of in between the British and the French and the U.S., exemplifies the limitations of the colonial-capitalist Western spatial

bias? And C.L.R. James (2009) just being like: Let's just openly critique capital-ism throughout the world. We're going to start with Lenin and we're going to start with Trotsky and Tousaint L'Ouverture and Fidel Castro and George Pad-more and that's going to be our approach. I'm really interested in reading with but also against these kind of canonical media theorists that I think actually, in many ways, align with some of the Black studies work that inspires me.

#SayHerName, Black Lives Matter, digital activism
CR: I want to talk a bit about digital activism and some of your engagements with contemporary events if that's okay.

AT: Yeah that works.

CR: Perhaps we can start with #SayHerName and your efforts to situate the poli-tics of digital activism. It is not surprising that a media theorist would reflect on what we affirm and participate in when we engage politically through digital plat-forms and their interfaces. Yet, you have no interest in deflecting or deflating the urgency of the interventions you study when raising these questions. I wonder if you might say more about your approach to doing this work. I'm thinking in par-ticular of how you bring McKittrick's work on Black geographies together with an analysis of digital media in your #SayHerName piece (Towns, 2016).

AT: Yeah I mean, I think that one of the things that I guess personally I try to think about with digital activism, especially because I have so many students in-terested in digital activism, is to get them to understand that all forms of ac-tivism have to be highly materialist, concerned with the material transformation of the world. I have a lot of students you know that are like, if I post this thing online then I've done it, that's it, I'm an activist. I think that learning this rela-tionship between the digital and the material really helps them to understand not only that an online post is not all but that the digital and the material are not distinct. It's not that the digital is somehow non-material and then the world is material, but they are interconnected, so our thoughts and actions must be as well. So that's part of how I try to get my students to think about activism contemporarily.

Research-wise, one of the things that's really struck me about the digital is the shift in the concept of commodification where not only do we make the con-tent online but our digital selves become commodified as well. In this context, we move away from a world that's associated commodification largely with the bodies of Black and brown people to the idea that everybody is open for com-modification. So, in many ways, I believe that the conception that we are all open to commodification has structured also a transformation in activism where people increasingly believe that, like my students, simply making an online com-ment or making a meme can be viewed as a form of activism. And what's sad is

that we don't see a decrease in the killing of Black and brown people by the state but we do see an increase in the idea that *we are all the same* online because we are all open to commodification. And I think this can be dangerous, not because I only want Black or brown people to be viewed as commodifiable—there's nothing inherently liberatory about that—but there's a lack of understanding of how central shifting concepts of commodification have been for some people's lives over others throughout the West. So this lack of understanding of the changes in commodification can make some activists—not all, of course, but some—ignore the material implications of structural change. So in my work, I remain interested in thinking about the commodity not as an end, right, but like Marx argued long ago, as a way to think about surplus, which is to think about that which exceeds the commodity. So with that being said, the question of media materiality, the commodity, as per Innis, that is what I see as a central component of Katherine McKittrick's (2006) work on space, in thinking about how space itself is structured by Western concepts of knowledge.

CR: Yeah, that's great. You know, I sometimes forget that the world hasn't left behind distinctions between materiality-immateriality, and that just because we are trained to think otherwise doesn't mean that distinction isn't still ingrained in the ways that interfaces and software and political possibilities are presented to people.

AT: Yeah, I have students right now who are calling for the establishment of Africana studies at the University of Richmond and they're like, oh if I just post a video we'll get it. And I'm like yeah, there's a little more to it. We have to have all of that together. This is what I love about teaching—we're bringing our students through our work. And by teaching them, we also learn our work better. We learn how to express our work better.

CR: I find myself thinking about the systems of knowledge and experience that have to be interrupted by our conceptions of the digital for one to think that's the way that political change happens. It isn't to say the students you mention are thinking in this limited way. But I think this illustrates how the digital networking is linked to a banalization of democratic values—Jodi Dean's (2005) helpful with this sort of thing, right? The language of democracy and participation and freedom is layered into a technological system that extracts for the purposes of capitalist accumulation and, as you said, commodification. This is why I appreciate how you mobilize McKittrick's language of Black geographies (Towns, 2016). The harassment, control, and murder of Black women as they're moving, which figures Black mobility as a threat, this broader history must shape digital networks because these networks are material and part of the wider physical world. I think this was impressed upon me by some of the work that Judith Nicholson (2016) has done, and by the work that Jo Farrall (2020)

has done into the struggles over the digital traces of Sandra Bland's life after her confinement and death, the way that digital traces from her life were accessed, resignified, and recirculated to mobilize narratives that could move news media off of questions of police brutality and Black feminist critique by mobilizing popular racist stereotypes. The governing of digital and physical mobility seems connected in the sense that broader systems of power shape the policing of the movements of Black people through physical and digital infrastructure. The way the police officer is following Sandra Bland to wait for the tiniest departure from the law, say a lane change that wasn't initiated early enough, seems akin to the tracking of networks for digital traces that can be mobilized to reproduce our systems of policing. I thought the way you mobilized McKittrick to bring those questions together and to ask about the conception of digital activism we rely upon was important (Towns, 2016).

AT: Yeah, I mean McKittrick is another figure that has just been really big in my work and I think that what I've really found interesting in McKittrick is that I could see McKittrick operating in the work of Jonathan Sterne (2006), you know, the kind of discussion that is really coming out of the James Carey critique that media theorists are building in the 1990s and early 2000s. That is this discussion of the relation between communication and geography, and the inseparability of the two terms. Of course, Carey (2008) makes the argument that the meaning of these two terms were once the same, but their meanings separated only recently with the emergence of the electronic telegraph. The critique of Carey says that there was never a full break between geography and communication, but they remain linked. Now the discussion of geography/communication that Carey and his critics have is not racialized, but McKittrick (2006) says, *all* of the discussions of Western geography are extremely raced/gendered. Through that I was able to see how, you know, our discussions of media, of communication, are material *and* raced/gendered as well. So McKittrick, right, is like well, now we have to think about space as a question of materiality inseparable from race, gender, sexuality. In fact, these relations inform the Western concept of geography itself.

So what I was able to pull from Carey (2008) is 1) that our discussions of media are productive of space. They are inseparable from these discussions of geography. But if we accept that, then McKittrick (2006) is like, 2) these discussions of space, of geography, must have these racialized/gendered elements to them as well. To me then, McKittrick opened the door for media theory to be Black studies, and vice versa. Media theory gives us a way into materiality that is really central to the work of McKittrick. So *Demonic Grounds* (McKittrick, 2006) was really an eye-opening text for me in graduate school.

CR: Yeah, yeah, so that's like 2005, 2006, *Demonic Grounds* (McKittrick, 2006)?

AT: Yeah, 2006, I think. And so Jeremy Packer and Craig Robertson (2006) edit that collection, *Thinking with James Carey*, which I think comes out the same year? And Jeremy's going to be central to me understanding that critique of Carey, even beyond that book. But I was reading both of those books together and it's like, yeah, there's a lot of overlap here. So those two texts really were helpful for me for thinking about how could I try to say something that brings both disciplines together. I could go on and on about my influences but those are two different texts that are foundational for me.

CR: Yeah, I find that helpful because the politics of symbolically recognizing the specific acts of police and state murder that Black Lives Matter or #SayHerName have mobilized around, the wider engagement with those movements is often circumscribing politics to questions of inclusion at the level of representation and content, while continuing to displace and exclude the histories and knowledges that animate those movements. The movements get reduced in public discourse to questions of tactics and spectacle as if there isn't a history of Black intellectual and political thought to shaping these moments. The failure to engage intellectually with "defund the police" is a good example. Like it or don't, but don't pretend there isn't a ton of thought worth engaging behind it. I feel the surge in anti-racist statements by universities is another example. Lots of empathetic statements and EDI [equity, diversity, and inclusion] committees, but our commitments to supporting the knowledges and people necessary to meet the moment, it is hesitant if not absent.

AT: Right, right.

CR: The way that these traditions of thought appear in your work as co-constitutive of a critical history of humanism, I feel it lets us reground the field historically in a significant sense. You said earlier that you were writing from the position that distinctions between Black studies and media studies don't or shouldn't matter. I like that. I like saying that our work isn't defined in distinction from all others by virtue of its subject matter but that the field gains its salience and significance as a meeting place for different ways of thinking about mediation and communication.

AT: Yeah and, you know, thinking about McKittrick, I am imagining my work as trying to do similar things, like she's pushing disciplines like geography in the way that I want to push media theory. Doreen Massey (1994) does a similar thing earlier, like around feminist geography and this critique of David Harvey and the time-space compression argument. But McKittrick's (2006) discussion of Black geographies I see as doing a similar intervention into geography, and I've been trying to do the same with media theory. So although McKittrick is not talking about media explicitly, through centring McKittrick's work, I began to see media theory's time and space as racialized/gendered.

CR: True. And the reading practice too. I think Tiffany King (2019) makes this point about McKittrick in her recent book. In the years between *Demonic Grounds* (McKittrick, 2006) and now, King (2019) points to the practice of preparing and learning to be ready to hear, care, notice … there's care taken to be attentive to the consequences of a damage-based way of continually narrating violence. And so the necessity of reading practices that open up to a broader conception of Black life and human futurity, it seems to animate the way you work and read too …

AT: Yeah, yeah, I mean, this was kind of a debate between [Saidiya Hartman] and [Fred Moten] about, you know, what does it mean to replicate violence in our texts as Black studies scholars? Does that replication of violence itself just kind of continue the violence over and over again? And I see McKittrick (2006) as kind of doing a similar thing with, you know, this discussion of Black life, the idea being that Blackness is not just this discussion of death, of just sadness and nothing else. But Blackness is an articulation of a very different conception of life, and I think what I'm really interested in in this next book is really historicizing that: the idea of Black life. You look at the emergence of Black studies and you start to see this mid-twentieth century discussion that Black people are having and it says, basically, we're *not* Negroes. And this is going to be the title of one of Sylvia Wynter's books: *Don't Call Us Negroes* (1992). What's happening at this time is people are saying: that concept of the Negro is this older, white imagination of who we are and instead what we're going to do is we're going to put forward "Black," and "Black" is going to be a new iteration of what it means for us to be human. It's not just death, it's not just, you know, we have no optimism at all. It's actually a complete rejection of that older project. It's a complete rejection of white imaginations of what Black people are. So, in part, it becomes "Black studies" because "Black" is this a complete rejection of this older, Western model of defining what we are as humans. And I think that that's been the project of McKittrick (2006), it is to say, hold up, let's go back to this older discussion of what Black is and think about that as not just a discussion of death but also a discussion of life. This has been a long discussion of Black studies in Black Canadian thought, going back to the 1960s C.L.R. James reading groups throughout Canada.

CR: It reminds me that I wanted to ask you about Mbembe's (2019) way of gathering together work by Césaire, Fanon, Wynter, Gilroy … if you don't mind, let me read what he says in *Necropolitics* and you can respond if you like:

> the critique of Western humanism is not a mere historical account of what happened — the book of atrocities. It is also the mourning of what was lost, in a way that does not dwell on the trauma, in a way that allows the survivor to escape the curse of repetition, to put the debris together again. In this tradition, to mourn what has been lost

> (critique of Western humanism) is akin to returning to life the harvest
> of the bones that have been subjected to the forces of desiccation in
> an attempt to render the world habitable again and for all. (p. 161)

You are probably noticing that I'm drawn to the question of habitability …
but Mbembe (2019) came to mind in thinking about scholarship that recognizes
without repeating violence, that doesn't hide violence but that also reorients
scholarship to questions of how Black lives have lived that violence, so that in-
stead of always starting over again with spectacular images of Black suffering to
mobilize wider concern among white people, as our news and social media al-
ways seem to do …

AT: Right, right.

CR: … that one finds a wider interest and more expansive starting point …

AT: Yeah and, you know, what I've been trying to outline in my book is that
there's this purposeful distinction made in the mid-twentieth century North
American context between the Negro and Black people. The Negro is increas-
ingly about the way that the state, the way that racism defines us, which is to
say that of course Black people face violence or Black people face racism and
discrimination, but it's to say that that doesn't solely define who we are. There's
clearly more outside of that violence and that death. We don't just sit in the
house and cry all day. We create alternative means of life and alternative means
of thinking. That in and of itself points to different forms of epistemology. So I
am really interested in thinking about how is it—and C.L.R. James (1989) kind
of says this in *Black Jacobins*—but how is it that this population that has faced
so much continues on? Right? Like that's the interesting theoretical point, that
despite all of the violence, despite all of the forms of oppression and hatred, you
have populations that continue on and live life in ways that Western Europeans
and North Americans cannot fully understand. And that to me is interesting.
There's an excess there that points to a different form of humanity that I really
want us to think about for media theory.

CR: I can't think of a better place to leave it for now. Thanks so much for taking
the time.

Note

1. The decision by the authors to capitalize Black throughout this conversation was informed by con-
temporary discussions about capitalization, including but not limited to those shaping similar deci-
sions at CBC News and the Columbia Journalism Review. The capitalization of Black is in reference
to a people who have politically identified as a community and this practice reflects common usage
in Black Studies scholarship and beyond. The decision not to capitalize white is also informed by
these discussions and recognizes its different set of meanings and historical association with white
separatism and supremacy.

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