Nutha Planets: On Telos and Digital Blackness

Louis M. Maraj <louis_dot_maraj_at_ubc_dot_ca>, University of British Columbia https://orcid.org/0000-0003-3871-4888

Abstract

This short reflective essay meditates on how/why digital Blackness need not strive to recover or repair humanity for Black peoples. It questions the teleological drive for building Black digital archives and technologies motivated by representational politics. The foray performatively suggests otherwise by leaning into Sylvia Wynter's (2007) notion that such folding into the figure of the human — overrepresented by Western Man — snuffs polyvalent and polysemic pluralities for Blackness.

I don't know where to pinpoint a start to my work in digital humanities. Maybe it began on instant messaging platforms like AIM or MSN Messenger, truncating, puttying, and shaping language for new platforms. Maybe it was in re-watching early viral videos — "Chocolate Rain" still is and always will be a bop — and thinking they related to something that might mean identity. Or perhaps it came earlier with the affective thrill on hearing the distinct buzz of a dial-up internet connection, so foreign a sound whirring through Caribbean breeze. I know it wasn't in a classroom, or — no offense Mavis Beacon — learning how to type, or formatting a resume in MS Word '95. See, the appeal of the digital to me, an "inside chile" growing up in Trinidad (face usually in a book or screen) never was assimilation into some larger arc of intellectual or technological "progress" or change; one thing that drew me in to thinking about the ways digital technologies culture us or how we culture them was possibility. And I don't mean possibility in the "discovery" or "recovery" sense: I refuse the idea that the goal of Black digital technologies and their uses remains building some Black canon of texts, some particular archive of artifacts, a catalogue of ways of being in the world somehow authentically emerging from "Black experience." I also refuse the notion that "Black digital humanities" might help us find some place among the long arching shadow that is the figure of the "human," even as snuff videos stay circulating of cops killing us with pleas for humanity on social media. I suppose possibility, to me, conjures constant shift(in')-forms.

Following Black feminist scholars and activists who take up approaches to digital humanities situated in a Wynterian theoretical genealogy, like Tara L. Conley and Ashley Greene Wade for example, I understand digital technologies and media for their viral potentials to undercut the overrepresentation of man as Western bourgeois male subject, as human [Conley 2017] [Greene Wade 2017]. But my hope in virality lies not in building a single vision or static versions of what might mechanize responses to Sylvia Wynter's call for "new genres of being human" [Wynter 2007]. Nah, I believe that virality inherently offers — through distribution — constant space for mashing up contexts, artifacts, identities, and the very frameworks on which settler-colonial, racial capitalist projects lie. We need not construct or overrepresent sub-genres of what being "human while Black" might look like by digital means and watch them appropriated toward our own demise. The plurality of Wynter's call (in *genres*, rather than genre) suggests that Black studies might offer the digital the idea that no single "human" or "humanistic" metric, discipline, or idea may measure or signify Blackness *in toto*. #BlackGirlMagic, #BlackBoyJoy, #BlackLivesMatter, none need look or mean one way because Blackness don't need to look one way. Magic, joy, whatever don't have to *matter* according to normative (affective) scripts. Difference — which Achille Mbembe reminds us Blackness signifies in extremity — rather, suggests we could augur n/other planets: places, terrains, digital geographies where reiterative negation of otherhood might help us fever dream something different [Mbembe 2013]. Together, by using digital media to turbulently disturb, spread, alter any received sense of what we are or could be in the continued heat of racial capitalism, let's dream nutha planets.

Works Cited

Conley 2017 Conley, Tara L (2017). "Decoding Black feminist hashtags as becoming." *The Black Scholar*. 47.3: 22-32.

Greene Wade 2017 Greene Wade, Ashleigh (2017). "'New genres of being human': World making through viral blackness." *The Black Scholar*. 47.3: 33-44.

Mbembe 2013 Mbembe, Achille (2013). *Critique of black reason*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Wynter 2007 Wynter, Syvlia (2007). "On how we mistook the map for the territory and reimprisoned ourselves in the unbearable wrongness of being, of desetre: Black studies toward the human project." In L. R. Gordon and J. A. Gordon (eds.) *A Companion to African American Studies*. London: Wiley-Blackwell. 107-118.