

Extensions after Man: Race, Counter/insurgency and the Futures of Media Theory

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Abstract

This article returns to the geopolitical scene and racial logics that provide the underacknowledged conditions of Marshall McLuhan's *Understanding Media* and, specifically, its well-known proposition that media should be understood foremost as 'outerings' or 'extensions of man'. Attending to the structuring inheritances of racial slavery and the plantation system in this founding statement of mid-twentieth-century media theory, as well as its debt to the literary and intellectual movement of the Southern Agrarians, I consider how the racializing figure of 'Man' conserved by the nascent field of media studies was contemporaneously brought to crisis by black (and) anticolonial freedom struggles. Arguing for the need to reread the career of western media theory through its political vocation in attempting to manage this crisis, the article concludes by turning briefly to a revisionary account of media and exteriority also circulated in 1964: the revolutionary intellectual James Boggs's 'The Negro and Cybernation'. Boggs's writings, which situate emergent forms of computing and cybernation within a longer materialist genealogy of race, capitalism and technology, offer both a proleptic critique of the early disciplinary formation of media theory and a divergent set of coordinates for approaching media technology on the terrain of black political struggle.

Keywords

Black freedom struggle, history of media theory, James Boggs, Marshall McLuhan, race, technology

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Among the many technocultural refrains disseminated through Marshall McLuhan's *Understanding Media*, it is perhaps the aphoristic statement on media as 'extensions of man' whose world-historical conditions remain most occluded by the ascension of 'McLuhan' as the synecdoche that today often stands for media theory's institutional origin story. Writing on the eve of the U.S. Civil Rights Act of 1964 and in the midst of the revolutionary upheavals of mid-twentieth-century black (and) anticolonial freedom struggles, McLuhan would famously define *extension* as the horizon of man's relationship to media technology in general. Hailed by McLuhan (1994/1964: 80) as 'outerings' of man's corporeal and psychic faculties, media are variously said to extend the reach of the human body in physical space, the organization of the human sensorium, the affinities of human community and the 'condition of consciousness' (McLuhan, 1994/1964: 60) itself.

In the wake of *Understanding Media* and the indelible mark it has left on the field formation of media studies, critics have since tended to attribute the theoretical innovation of McLuhan's (1995/1968: 237) claim that 'technology is an extension of our own bodies' to the mid-century encounter with those profound changes wrought by what he dubbed the electric media. For students of race, colonialism and black studies, however, what remains most striking about McLuhan's proposition is not its novelty but rather its haunting resonances. This is because McLuhan's philosophical anthropology of media rehearses a long-standing western tradition predicated on the condensation of technological extension and the figuration of the slave.¹ In other words, the discursive outline of this media concept finds its unacknowledged conditions of possibility in the dominative inscription of the enslaved African, who, within the archives of racial modernity, was designated as an artificial 'extension and instrument of the master's absolute right or dominion' (Hartman, 1997: 120) – that is, as an extension of (western) Man.²

By re-encountering McLuhan's text through these disavowed lineages, I seek in this essay to register how the constitution of the object of western media theory, as well as the field's axiomatic subject, emerge through the presupposition of regimes of violence and dispossession that have largely been left unarticulated, as Stuart Hall (1996) might say, due to the methodological norms and periodizing impulses of our (inter)disciplinary protocols. This disarticulation, I contend, has had enduring consequences for the intellectual, pedagogical and political formation of media theory as it is taught and practiced today. First, it has tended to reauthorize the ruling fiction of a West and a western media theory uncontaminated and unconditioned by the constitutive operations of race, anti-blackness and multiple colonialisms. Second, it has obscured the existence and persistence of insurgent intellectual-political traditions that have reconfigured the question of media beyond the topographies of western racial humanism in which this question has historically been entwined (see Weheliye, 2002). To resituate the precept of media extension within the entangled histories and contemporary machinations of chattel slavery, coloniality and racial capitalism is therefore to argue that we must approach media theory as a contested scene of knowledge production embedded within ongoing struggles over the racializing regime of Man who stands at the centre of *Understanding Media* and to whom dominant theories of media have been intractably addressed. It is also to inquire into the potential histories of media theory opened by black theoretico-political practices that have *refused to extend Man* and that have convened the undoing of what Sylvia

Wynter (2015: 202), across her oeuvre, has identified as Man's imperative to replicate 'our contemporary. . . sociogenically encoded, Western-bourgeois world system'. Blackness and black struggle, in this regard, fundamentally disorganize the subject of media theory, its disciplinary imagination and its potential horizons.

To adumbrate these still-contested horizons, this essay returns to the geopolitical scene of McLuhan's 1964 monograph and sketches some dissident futures for media theory that this historical moment alternatively brought forth. In so doing, I argue that the putatively universal figure of Man conserved by *Understanding Media* – and the media-theoretical apparatus that this figure continues to uphold – was contemporaneously brought to crisis by black (and) anticolonial freedom struggles. By reconsidering the mid-century institutional and intellectual thrall to the media concept as, in part, responses to these movements, we can dispense with an understanding of media theory as the inevitable academic counterpart to technical innovations in the means of communication. Instead, media theory and its contradictory institutional forms come into view within a wider constellation of social movements and intellectual struggles over the meanings of technology and communication and their capacities, alternatively, to 'resolve' and to heighten what the Detroit-based revolutionary intellectual James Boggs (2011/1979: 307, 308) once called 'the crisis of Western civilization' that had been initiated by the 'tremendous struggles against colonialism and neocolonialism' and 'the crisis the black movement created in all American institutions'.

Arguing for a rereading of the career of western media theory through its political vocation in managing this crisis, I conclude by turning briefly to a revisionary account of media and extension also circulated in 1964: Boggs's (1966) 'The Negro and Cybernation', which was delivered at the First Annual Conference on the Cybercultural Revolution. Boggs's insurgent work, which situates emergent technologies in relation to the afterlives of slavery and the crises of racial capitalism, offers a crucial location from which to rethink the conditions under which the (western) concept of media emerged and was – and might still yet be again – disrupted.

Media Theory and the Imprint of the Plantation

Slavery provides the occulted schema that set the career of western media theory in motion. In *A Map to the Door of No Return*, the author and theorist Dionne Brand (2001: 30–31) writes incisively of the twinned logics of enchattlement and extension that bind the racial to the technological at the threshold of the modern world: 'Slaves became extensions of slave owners – their arms, legs, the parts of them they wished to harness and use with none of the usual care of their own bodies. . . These captive bodies then become the tools sent out to conquer the natural world'. Designated as a prosthesis of the captor's will, the captive body is brutally conscripted as the infrastructure and equipment through which white civic personhood is manufactured. In the racial order and proprietary structure that Brand identifies, the expropriation and dispossession of enslaved African and black diasporic peoples aim to mark the captive as an extended and divisible part of the owner that is at once corporeal and metaphysical, material and symbolic. Within this ruling episteme, the enslaved are doubly inscribed as media. Black physical, cognitive, intellectual, affective and reproductive capacities are wielded not only to

augment the master class's bodily and perceptual reach but also to serve as the means and media for the captor's surrogate encounter with and conquest of the world.

Reading back into the history of western media theory from the perspective of Brand's text throws into relief the status of the media-technological imagination in a world made by the accumulated violences of racial bondage, the slave trade and the plantation. Indeed, if it has become customary to remark that the horizon of media is ineluctably global (Rajagopal, 2009, 2013) – or, as McLuhan would have it, generative of a global village (Carpenter and McLuhan, 1960: xi) – Brand's insight into the pernicious identification of racial blackness as media that inaugurates the modern West reminds us that the paradigm of media obtains its authority at a nexus of race and violence that is always already global. From this vantage, it makes little sense to attribute the globalizing character of media to any narrowly-conceived history of technological development, or to install media as the promissory harbinger of a global utopianism to come. Rather, we can observe that the episteme of transatlantic slavery forms a key coordinate in setting the parameters for knowing and imagining the very concept of media as such.

Returning to McLuhan's mid-century treatment of Man and his mediatic extensions, the racial cleavages that pervade the human-technology relationship consolidated through transatlantic slavery are at once preserved and disavowed. To be sure, McLuhan's rewriting of medial extensions in environmental terms – as total ecologies that actively shape our perceptual and cognitive sensibilities – revised the racial and colonial discourse of technological instrumentalism illuminated by Brand. At the same time, however, it revived a project of racial governmentality that once again called upon media to extend Man at a moment of crisis, as heterogenous black freedom and decolonization movements would unravel western Man's protracted annexation of the human (Wynter, 2003: 311–312). Within this setting, 'media', particularly in their electric form, appeared in the late 1950s and 1960s as a key watchword and discursive resource pressed in service of the image of an inclusive, integrated society that was nevertheless predicated on the rearticulation of racial and colonial order. As Ginger Nolan (2018: 2–3) has shown in her study of colonial rule in Kenya and its imprint on McLuhan's thinking, the 'global village was modelled on colonial strategies to transform. . .the decolonizing world in such a way as to safeguard British economic and political interests in the aftermath of independence'. Significantly, this abiding preoccupation with racial blackness and the containment of anticolonial and revolutionary struggle through the incorporative powers of media was not limited to McLuhan's fixation on the African continent. McLuhan's (1963–1965, 1968a) research archive for his 1960s monographs included dozens of newspaper clippings all classified under the heading of the question of the 'Negro', including multiple articles concerned with black insurgency across North America and Africa – from Canadian news reportage on the founding of the Organization of African Unity in 1963, to the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee's condemnations of U.S. imperialism, to popular reviews of Eldridge Cleaver's *Soul on Ice*. In envisaging a new media environment that might demobilize these insurrections by interpellating movements for black freedom and self-determination into a coercive frame of global incorporation and uneven inclusion, McLuhan's text turned to what I have suggested is a founding scene in the history of western media theory: the plantation.

For McLuhan (1994/1964), the ascendance of electric media harboured a redemptive promise of return. In the face of a modernity structured by fragmentation and division, *Understanding Media* (p. 349) prescribed the restoration of an ‘organic unity’ and ‘an instant inclusive embrace’ through the supplementary power of teletechnologies. This thrall to a mediatic organicism runs across the trajectory of McLuhan’s oeuvre and leads him to a revisionist fantasy of the plantation system that anticipates and textures his racializing appraisals of the so-called new media. This trajectory comes sharply into focus when McLuhan’s media theory is placed beside an earlier series of articles that he published in his friend Allen Tate’s journal *The Sewanee Review*, a major vehicle of the Southern Agrarian movement in literary criticism. The Southern Agrarians were an influential group of writers and critics based largely out of Vanderbilt University in Tennessee. Throughout the third and fourth decades of the twentieth century they championed a pastoral retreat to the ‘fullness of life as it was lived in the ante-bellum [*sic*] South’ (Ransom, 2006/1930: 14) in opposition to what they deemed the abstracting, fragmenting and mechanizing strictures of industrial modernity. In this, the Southern Agrarian group – of which McLuhan was a formidable fellow-traveler – projected an imagined organic and sensual wholeness onto a mythic tradition of white U.S. southern ruralism, which within their Euro-supremacist optics was lauded as European art and culture’s true heir. Against this tradition, the Agrarians counterposed a corporate capitalist ethos that they aligned exclusively with the northern United States.³ Theirs was a ‘will to autarky’, to invoke Édouard Glissant’s (1997: 67) phrase for the murderous phantasm that conjures the plantation as an enclosed and self-sufficient circle, both independent from the global circuits of colonial capital accumulation and void of the otherwise futures and reformations of humanity that the plantation continues to birth. In issuing a critique of capitalist modernity premised on a valorization of the white planter class, the Agrarians reprised and modulated a set of nineteenth-century defences of racial chattel slavery that asserted the despotic order of the plantation as a benign or ‘protective’ alternative to the fiction of universal equality proffered by the wage (Barrett, 1999; Gayle, 2009/1970). Within their brutal internal logic, African American mass movement from the U.S. South to urban centres in the present was conceivable only as a symptom of industrial capital’s transgressions and its erosion to the salubrious environment of the U.S. apartheid regime. Effecting a massive displacement of the slave mode of production from the development of racial capitalism’s world-system and naturalizing the white settler colonial theft of Indigenous lands, the Southern Agrarians thereby inscribed a white supremacist and aristocratic politics within an aesthetic doctrine that insisted on a concrete communion with the natural and the organic.⁴

By the end of the Second World War, the agrarianist ideal was made further untenable by the wide-scale introduction of mechanized agriculture and the decline of southern sharecropping and its system of debt-bondage. However, far from heralding their demise, the Agrarians’ methodological and political tenets – and, in fact, many of the Agrarian critics themselves – migrated to the Anglo-American literary enterprise of the New Criticism. As Lindon Barrett (1999: 134) meticulously expounds, the New Critical commitments to organic poetic form and to ‘the literary text as an “autonomous” object in and of itself’ reprised at mid-century the antiblack project of the Southern Agrarians, at once preserving in aesthetic terms the racialized desire for organic unity and granting the literary a determinate value bracketed from its ‘extraliterary’ social and historical

mediations. Importantly, however, this racial project also found acute expression beyond departments of literature as well. Although it has been less remarked upon, the activity of the Southern Agrarians would, through the work of McLuhan, exert no less of an influence on the shape of media theory in the twentieth century and beyond. Indeed, *Understanding Media*, a book whose title cited the popular 1938 textbook *Understanding Poetry* co-authored by former Agrarian Robert Penn Warren, already alerts us to this wide-spread dispersion. Yet just as literary critics have often eclipsed what Addison Gayle (2009/1970: 189), practitioner and scholar of the Black Arts Movement, apprehended in 1970 as the pervasive ‘agrarian formula’ central to the academic consolidation of English literary study, media theorists today continue to narrate our disciplinary history untethered from the romance of the plantation to which the field’s critical inheritances remain bound. As McLuhan (1987/1964: 296) would plainly profess just months before the publication of *Understanding Media*, ‘new electric technology favours the old southern cohesion of awareness’.

It is thus worth underscoring that many of the alleged antinomies between mechanical and electric media evoked across McLuhan’s (1947) later writings – the rational and the tactile, the fragmented and the holistic, the uniform and the unifying – derive their basis from a set of earlier polemics waged on behalf of the ‘passionate life’ of the ‘agrarian society’ (p. 360). In his essay ‘The Southern Quality’, for example, McLuhan advances a defence of the concrete aesthetics and the harmonic affiliation with nature said to be the crucible of the southern tradition. This tradition, McLuhan (1947: 375) contends, preserves ‘the passion of a civilized person for whom action is repugnant or unthinkable unless the whole man is involved’. It safeguards a ‘classical humanism’ in a world where an integrated communal life finds itself assaulted by the mechanical ‘technology of the North’ and the modern dream of ‘an atomized industrial community’ (McLuhan, 1947: 366, 372, 374). Such a denigration of (mechanical) technology might seem surprising from a theorist who has become synonymous with the incursion of technological problematics into the humanities and for whom media and technology figure as interchangeable terms. Nevertheless, we can trace a direct line of continuity between McLuhan’s literary criticism and his media theory that hinges on a shared account of social cohesion through the dissimulation of racial violence and the containment of black life and black resistance that conjoins the two. To read these founding statements of mid-twentieth-century media studies as agrarianist documents is to grasp that what appears in McLuhan’s criticism as the distinction between an abstract modernity and the humanistic passions of the plantocracy re-emerges in his media theory as the distinction between the psychic and social formations that mechanical and electric technologies are respectively said to augur.

McLuhan’s revanchist articulation of a white plantation romance may initially appear to sit in tension with what Wendy Hui Kyong Chun (2014: 38) has cogently observed as McLuhan’s ‘vilification of slaves’ throughout *Understanding Media*. In that book, slavery is consistently expunged from the scene of modernity and located within an ancient, proto-European past. In McLuhan’s (1994/1964) invocation of the ancients he contends that ancient slavery inaugurated a rise in specialization and mechanical fragmentation that ultimately precipitated ‘an atmosphere of slaves’, inducing a kind of general enslavement to the logic of abstract mechanism whereby ‘every Roman became. . . a

slave' (p. 21). When McLuhan (1994/1964) does then move to situate slavery on the terrain of modernity, it is to suggest that the fragmenting logic of ancient slavery has been intensified such that 'Western man' is now enslaved by 'the specialism of mechanized industry' (p. 73). The excision of racial slavery from *Understanding Media* thus effectively displaces a structure of antiblack violence onto the critique of a particular medium's supposedly essential form and its deleterious effects on Man. Accordingly, for McLuhan, slavery survives in modernity foremost through mechanical media – and the logic of mechanization that they follow – rather than in the actually-existing regime of racial slavery that underwrites the agrarianist ideal he persistently lauds. In this employment of media transformation, whiteness emerges as the primary locus of injury, as well as the beleaguered subject for whom the new media instantiate the possibility of social redress and sensorial repair.

By contrast, when McLuhan (1960a: 574) turns in a contemporaneous essay from the ancients to 'the penetrative powers of the cotton plantation economy', missing from his analysis is any trace of the fracturing partitions of the sensorium incarnated by Greco-Roman slavery and of which modern mechanical media are made paradigmatic. In fact, in the 1960s McLuhan (1960a: 574) would retain the plantation as an exemplary instance of a media environment heterogenous to the 'statics' of mechanized culture. Wielding as his authority the folklorist Richard M. Dorson, McLuhan (1960b: 91) characterizes the plantation as a medium that facilitated a shared oral culture through the 'interplay' between 'white planters' and 'pre-literate Negroes'. Evacuating both the structuring terror of the plantation and the differential modes of black social and political practice that resisted this terror, he (McLuhan, 1960a: 574) rescripts racial slavery as a media ecology of sentimental connection and dynamic communication before likening these 'patterns of human association' to those provoked by the 'resonating radio'.

The echoes of the plantation that McLuhan hears on the radio signal the muted in/audibility of racial blackness by which 'media', as a discursive figure and an institutional rubric, achieved its theoretical currency. Here, McLuhan both recasts the plantation as a specific medium and activates the plantation as an allegorical form through which a *general theory of media* comes into being. In so doing, he bequeaths a philosophy of media that simultaneously embeds and encrypts antiblack violence within its constitution of the media concept as such. The destruction of a medium – indeed, every plot against the plantation (Wynter, 1971) – is incessantly relegated to 'the position of the unthought' (Hartman and Wilderson, 2003). In this regard, McLuhan's treatment of the 'pre-literate Negro' transmutes the persistent policing of black writing under the threat of death, as well as the privilege afforded to alphabetic inscription as a racializing technique of humanization in the western idiom (Judy, 1993), into the natural conditions of pastoral conviviality secured through a shared medial surround. In turn, the electric media mark a restitution and extension of the plantation in the present, a preservation of racial order that is rationalized through an appeal to the (re)unifying properties of new media and the negation of the disruptive force of black collective autonomy.

Consider, for instance, McLuhan's (1968b: 2) claim in his essay 'Black is Not a Color' that television provokes a reparative means to render the 'American middle class' an 'overwhelming ally' of the 'American Negro'. This still inchoate mediatic arrangement is described by McLuhan as the corrective to a racializing impulse epiphenomenal to the

mechanistic, segmenting medium of print. As he tells his reader, 'to the post-literate TV generation there are no Negroes. There are only people' (McLuhan, 1968b: 2). Explicitly bringing his distinction between mechanical and electric media to bear on the etiology of the racial, McLuhan (1968b) here impresses that 'literate, visual man lives by classification' (p. 1) and, consequently, the mechanically-induced drive towards classification must itself be understood as the motive force of racial antagonism. Let us first observe that, within this argument's causal logic, typographic media, with their propensity to fragment the senses and the world, institute an attachment to racialization and the reproduction of racial difference; by contrast, the organic and participatory totality of the televisual incarnates a resistance to the logic of division, for which racial blackness in particular is made to stand as the emblematic sign. We will by now recognize the agrarianist problematic of a lost plenitude that delimits the terrain for this refashioning of the racial as a medial-cum-moral quandary of 'division'. Moreover, this will to repletion, as this passage makes clear, is itself replete with a 'logic of obliteration' (da Silva, 2007: 155) that presupposes the necessary disappearance of the 'Negro'. And yet, to decipher McLuhan's specific contribution to media theory as a *governing* discourse of race, I want to insist that such formulations are not simply the extension of a general epistemological priority afforded to technics across his thought-system; they are, instead, indices of the political imperatives of Man that an emergent tropology of media would come to extend.

Indeed, as 'Black is Not a Color' unfolds, the progressive movement from print to television, from non-relation to non-blackness, that guides this essay's schematic narrative is stalled by the arrival of what the text designates an incipient 'civil war'. Of 'the Negro himself', McLuhan (1968b: 2–3) writes, 'the danger of civil war will come from. . . ethnically-dominated unions, for whom literacy and its hardware technology are still a novelty'. McLuhan is characteristically enigmatic here regarding the details of these 'ethnically-dominated unions'. Yet one might surmise he has in mind the autonomous activity of the Revolutionary Union Movements that were contemporaneously coming to prominence in and beyond the Michigan automobile industry and, in particular, the Dodge Revolutionary Union Movement (DRUM) founded by staff members of the radical community-based newspaper the *Inner City Voice* (Flatley, 2012). DRUM's membership famously broke with the white liberal leadership of the United Auto Workers union to coordinate an intensive cycle of wildcat strikes – the first of which occurred in July 1968 (the month of McLuhan's essay's publication) – directed against the antiblack practices of both the auto industry management and the UAW bureaucracy, as well as the heightened violences of assembly line speed-ups and compulsory overtime imposed through the partial automation of the shop floor (Georgakas and Surkin, 1975). Crucially, this resurgence of black militant self-organization, which specifically targeted the machinery of fixed capital as an antagonistic terrain of struggle, coincided with the burgeoning field of media theory's intense promotion of 'new media', a rubric under which TV coalesced with technologies of automation and cybernation (see McLuhan, 1994/1964: 349). It is within this conjuncture that the logic of McLuhan's moral drama of television and print literacy comes more plainly into view. We will recall that, according to McLuhan, it is foremost a structure of medial difference that drives the coming 'civil war'. Against the reparative ambitions of the 'TV generation [for whom] there are no Negroes', this war is one initiated by those for 'whom literacy' is 'still a novelty', a

position that 'Black is Not a Color' (McLuhan, 1968b: 2) assigns not only to the 'ethnically-dominated union' but to the 'American Negro' writ large. As waves of black urban rebellions after 1964 contradicted the ideology of democratic exceptionalism asserted by the U.S. state in the wake of juridical civil rights victories, McLuhan's text would thus attribute these uprisings to an emergent black preoccupation with racial classification and fragmentation propelled by a supposedly belated mass literacy. Within this framework's underlying terms, the primary agency of a recalcitrant racialism is thereby imputed to black people themselves and, more precisely, to the excessive affectability of blackness by the (outmoded) medium of print.

The rhetorical force of this set of claims, which ultimately links the dissemination of electric technologies to *an opposition to opposition itself*, lay in its capacity to conjoin the ostensibly novel promises of 'new media' with extant liberal frameworks that sought the restoration of the ethical legitimacy and futurity of the (white) nation-state. From this perspective, the ascendance of 'media', as trope and technology, can be reappraised for its contribution to a U.S. Cold War strategy that required the strategic suture between a nation-state discourse of racial 'equality' framed within the idiom of liberal rights and the realigning imperial ambitions of American statecraft (Melamed, 2011; Singh, 2004; Von Eschen, 1997). It is also on this basis that we can begin to understand the early ideological production of 'new media' as a regulatory effort to counter and forestall the power of what McLuhan (1968b: 4) pathologizes in this essay as the 'matter of Negro violence'. Above all, though, what becomes clear here is that McLuhan's much-maligned 'technological determinism' would be better conceived as already spoken by a prior determination of the racial. Through the subsumption of material contradictions into a developmentalist history of technological change, racial blackness reappears in the text of western media theory as a stage of medial difference to be overcome and resolved within the futural unity of electric order.

I propose that we treat such arguments neither as exorbitant to what we now term media theory nor simply as an expression of the white supremacist setting in which one particular theorist's thinking unfolds, that is, as heterogenous to our field's 'proper' object of knowledge. Instead, we should re-encounter these statements as productive elements of a regulative regime, one whose founding abstraction serves to formalize media as the binding agent that predicates and sutures civic order through the installment of shared repertoires of common sense and sensation. Viewed in these terms, the link that tethers the West's racial organization of the world to the theoretical architectonics of media is found not only in the supposition of racialist typologies and conceptions of technological development (Hochman, 2014) but also in the antiblack dreamwork of a reintegrated totality without fissure, contradiction, remainder, or redress.

1964 and the Futures of Media Theory

1964 was the year that McLuhan's *Understanding Media* helped consolidate the name *media* as both an emergent institutional heading and a metonym for the vicious return of the same garbed in the promise of the new. It was also the year that the theorist, organizer and autoworker James Boggs would deliver a lecture, later published in 1966 under the title of 'The Negro and Cybernation', that offered a revisionary treatment of electronic

media parsed within a longer materialist genealogy of white supremacy, capitalism and technology. In opening his talk, Boggs first turned to an analysis of the cotton gin so as to interrupt a progressivist historiography of technology that asserted the development of industrial machinery had brought about the displacement of the trade in black flesh. This was a historiography, in other words, that brokered a structural homology between the enslaved and the tool, and hence dissimulated the ongoing history and future of black political struggle by purporting the technical determination of abolition's past and future unfoldings. Engaging this history of struggle from the perspective of the present, Boggs (1966) recognized a decisive transformation introduced by cybernation and computing – namely, the mass expulsion of black poor and working-class people from the relations of production: 'cybernation is going to make their occupational rôle obsolete' (p. 170). While painstakingly aware of the massive devastation manufactured through this planned obsolescence and its constitution of what he elsewhere called 'surplus people' (Boggs, 2009/1963: 36), Boggs also located a surplus political power occasioned by these upheavals in the fields of computing and technical automation. 'Negroes are still at the bottom', he (Boggs, 1966: 171, emphasizes his) stressed, 'but on the *outside* rather than on the *inside*'. Contra McLuhan's partnering of extension with incorporation, Boggs's (1966) account of technology brought into view a very different mode of *outring*, one revealed by the 'technical question' but in the last instance 'political' in its form (p. 171). Where McLuhan articulated electronic telecommunications and the technical automation of production to the externalization of human consciousness on a global scale, Boggs established in these same forces an emancipatory opening to unleash black collective autonomy outside and against the regimes of domination and exploitation that the nascent field of media studies was primed to legitimate and maintain.

In 'The Negro and Cybernation' and other essays and pamphlets from this period, Boggs (1966) contended that such processes of *outring* brought to veritable crisis a certain strategy of incorporation, one in which 'integration' could serve as 'a solution for our old problems' (p. 171). 'Automation and cybernation', Boggs (1969: 11) writes, 'have made these blacks expendable to the economy, but they have also liberated blacks for the first time in their history on this continent from the necessity to work on behalf of white development'. In advancing this argument, Boggs developed a political and critical lexicon that extricated black freedom from the activity of labour as the horizon of what it means to be human. As such, his intervention in the early discourse of cyberculture foregrounded computing and automation as forces of heightened contradiction that made available a 'revolutionary potential' through disconnection from the circuits of 'white economic, political and social values' (Boggs, 1969: 11).⁵ What Boggs perceived in those rebellions that McLuhan had engulfed as media effects was, in fact, a different kind of medium altogether. Here is Boggs writing with his comrade and partner Grace Lee Boggs: 'They establish a form of communication among the oppressed themselves. . . Rebellions break the threads that have been holding the system together and throw into question the legitimacy and supposed permanence of existing institutions' (in Boggs, 2011/1976: 198). As a communicative form and a milieu of self-activity, the rebellion instantiates at once a gathering and a rupture. It is a message addressed by itself and to itself. Concomitantly, as an ongoing social practice, it moves by way of an interruption or an irreparable break, as the collective inscription of a desire not for smooth

transmission within a given system but rather for the necessity of that very system's destruction. During a period when myths of connectivity and decentralization as virtues in themselves became increasingly cathected to the sign of media, the Boggses distilled the theoretical and practical exigency of harnessing, organizing and extending those insurgent intensities generated by mass uprisings towards the unfinished projects of seizing power and crafting alternative ways of being human together.⁶

As one prominent critic (Peters, 2015: 16) has recently observed, the year 1964 inhabits a signal position within the history of media theory, one whose transformative effects still reverberate across the field today. Boggs's (1966) staging of the 'new cybercultural society' (p. 172) on the terrain of black radical possibility instigates a proleptic critique of this history and, specifically, the concept of media and its attendant racial-capitalist logics that were gradually taking shape at the very moment of his writing in the mid- and late 1960s. What would be required of a media theory that begins to take the generative, disruptive pressures of Boggs's theoretical and activist work? It would involve, in the first instance, learning to read the geo-epistemological protocols of western media theory in their intimate entanglements with a counterinsurgent project that sought to manage precisely the revolutionary potentials and freedom struggles that Boggs outlined, practiced and inspires. Such a rereading would attend to the racial not as a site of omission from the inaugural statements of western media theory but rather as an enabling condition of their material production and conceptual elaboration. This demands confronting how the very qualifier 'western' and its persistent suture to the institutional heading of 'media theory' cohere on the basis of what Lisa Lowe (2015: 39) has called an 'economy of affirmation and forgetting', in which the narration of media as a condition of freedom emerges in the disavowal of unresolved and accumulated histories of captivity, violence and dispossession. The refusal of the dreams of the plantation that have authorized media theory's disciplinary imagination begins with those philosophies and praxes of freedom – beyond the order of Man and its terms of media – that are foreclosed by these narrations.

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Notes

1. As is well known, Aristotle (1992: 1968) had already remarked as early as the *Eudemian Ethics* that 'the slave is as it were a part and detachable tool of the master, the tool being a sort of inanimate slave'. Sylvia Wynter (2003: 286–303) has elucidated how the neo-Aristotelian discourse of the metaphysical slave would prove central to the early modern production of the 'phenomenon of race' through the codification of a civic humanist order that partitioned the figure of Man from his racial others.
2. The title of this essay signals my tremendous debt to Wynter (2003, 2015). For Wynter, the mononym Man instantiates one particular western and westernized mode of being human authorized by the sociogenic codes of racial and colonial modernity that is, crucially,

- non-identical to the human as such.
3. Du Bois's (1998/1935: 3) foundational insight into the globality of racial slavery within the history of capitalism's development, organization and expansion makes clear the incoherence of such regionalist arguments: 'Black labour became the foundation stone not only of the Southern social structure, but of Northern manufacture and commerce, of the English factory system, of European commerce, of buying and selling on a world-wide scale'.
 4. Despite the regionalism espoused within the Agrarians' polemics, an animus against the international spectre of communism also markedly contoured the movement's antiblack premises. This is particularly evident in some members' responses to the international amnesty movement in Scottsboro, Alabama, where eight black teenagers, who had been held captive and sentenced to death by the U.S. state in 1931, were defended by the Communist Party USA and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People in concert with transnational black radical organizations such as the International Trade Union Committee of Negro Workers (*The Negro Worker*, 1931). One Agrarian, for instance, decried that 'the Scottsboro case' had 'furnished a series of irritants that combined with the pressure of uniform wage rules to make race relations more disordered' (Donaldson, 2001/1934: 87). Such reactionary and inextricably racialized anticommunist commitments go some way towards further clarifying how an ostensibly regionalist intellectual formation would come to leave a formative trace on the globalizing ambitions of an incipient media studies during the Cold War.
 5. On the differences between Boggs's assessments of automation and those previously developed by the Correspondence Publishing Committee, the independent revolutionary organization of which Boggs was a central participant until 1962, see Ward (2011).
 6. For the Boggses' account of *way* as an unceasing activity, see Boggs, Lee Boggs, Paine, et al. (1978: 163).

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