

Introduction

The Medium Is the Message, Revisited: Media and Black Epistemologies

I believe that the establishment of the American universities should recognize—and they will get nowhere otherwise, but will do a lot of harm unless they recognize—that black studies is not a concession to black students but a great opening and penetration into their own intellectual life and understanding. That here is an opportunity to extend the field of intellectual inquiry which they have neglected up to now, a chance to penetrate more into the fundamentals of Western civilization, which cannot be understood unless black studies is involved.

—C.L.R. James

For the past fifty years an important question has occupied many Black media studies scholars: What type of media theories should inform our studies of Blackness? While the question has led to serious engagements in the racial politics of representation (media content), questions regarding Blackness and media form remain far less explored.¹ To ask a question of media form is to begin not with an episode of a television series or web series, but to begin with those media technologies and media infrastructures that make an episode possible in the first place. And it is unlikely that such a media form approach, Black or otherwise, can ignore the significant work of the mid-twentieth-century Canadian theorist Herbert Marshall McLuhan.

From 1946 until shortly before his death in 1980, McLuhan was a professor of media studies and English at St. Michael's College,

University of Toronto.² One of McLuhan's most famous phrases, "the medium is the message," provides a good starting point to think about what constitutes "media" for materialist media infrastructural studies. In this phrase McLuhan pushed back against the idea that the message of any medium was its content (which is where much of Black media studies remains). Instead, he argued that the true message of media involved their transformation of human engagements in the world. According to McLuhan, media are not neutral representations of the world, but they shape the way we come to view the world entirely.

Relatedly, "the medium is the message" also allows for media studies scholars to read continuity into media—another area of difficulty for Black media studies and its overwhelming focus on media representations. For McLuhan, each new medium takes as its content older media, ensuring that there is never really something called new media at all. For example, for him, the content of a book is the phonetic alphabet, not the *Lord of the Flies*; the content of a film is photography, not *Nosferatu*. To focus solely on a book's or a movie's plot as the lone topic of analysis is to miss the centrality of multiple media that can make up the content of a book or movie. In essence, to reduce content to media representations leads to the Black media studies that currently exists—one that often centers analyses of media around the limited question of how racist (or antiracist) a particular representation of Black people is in a book, on television, in a movie, or online. For McLuhan (and for me), representations are not unimportant; they just remain a limited way to think about the fullness of media studies.

Still, it would be a mistake to assume McLuhan's analysis is bulletproof. Although McLuhan's theories allowed for new approaches in media studies, there are legitimate reasons for Black media studies to overlook his work. He had quite a bit to say about race, even as he is rarely remembered for this in much of the contemporary work that takes up his theories.³ And much of McLuhan's thoughts on race were far from sophisticated, as scholars such as Ginger Nolan and I have written about.⁴ However, the outright dismissal of McLuhan in Black media studies may have the effect of producing a body of knowledge in which the episode is overrepresented, while media form is highly neglected. Thus I continue to ask, can a materialist media philosophy, one that is inspired by McLuhan yet that he could never imagine, expand Black media studies further into new questions of materiality and media? And can McLuhan, and the mid-twentieth-century context in

which he theorized, provide us with clues for how a materialist media philosophy of Blackness could operate for the future?

What follows is not a book about McLuhan. Yet it is a book very much inspired by his work and cognizant of its problems. This inspiration has led to the development of what I call a Black media philosophy. A Black media philosophy requires recognition of the racial, gendered, sexual, and elemental/natural politics under the surface of McLuhan's philosophy (and McLuhan-influenced studies) and an understanding of the Black challenges to such Western politics. Such a Black media philosophy is made material via pulling together three areas of study. First, there is what Richard Cavell called McLuhan's media philosophy, which, for Cavell, is any study that examines mediation as "the ground of *our* knowing and being."⁵ In short, one of McLuhan's important interventions involves his ability to point scholars toward considering media as epistemological: media not only entertain us (representations, e.g., the focus of much of Black media studies); media also frame how we come to know the world and our relation to that world. Yet if we follow McLuhan's lead, as Cavell suggests, the construction of *our* knowing and being reduces being and knowing largely to Western, white, able-bodied, heterosexual wealthy men.⁶

The second and third areas of study that make up Black media philosophy are more important, as both necessarily upend the Western assumptions of McLuhan's media philosophy: Black studies and cultural studies, two distinct yet interrelated mid-twentieth-century challenges to the Western episteme that McLuhan often upheld.⁷ Born out of worldwide decolonial, Black radical, Marxist struggle as they are, Black studies and cultural studies would take materiality as one important area of analysis for challenging the Western episteme. It would be the challenge of this moment that C.L.R. James warned must not be ignored—even as scholars such as McLuhan would do just that. The remainder of this introduction centers such alternative epistemologies in my approach to media philosophy. To do so requires highlighting two mid-twentieth-century moments influential for media philosophy: McLuhan's *context* (and his limitations of theorizing race in that context); and questions of *materiality* in McLuhan's theory (which necessarily leads beyond McLuhan to questions of materiality in Black studies and cultural studies). Indeed, even as Black media philosophy remains cognizant of the historical-material context that McLuhan existed in, it also necessarily goes far beyond McLuhan to provide new epistemological questions for media studies.

MCLUHAN AND THE PROBLEM OF THE MID-TWENTIETH-CENTURY DERIVATIVE

McLuhan's fame in the 1960s and 1970s might be comparable today to such scholars as Cornel West or Noam Chomsky, but largely due to his media analysis, which McLuhan deemed as distinct from any social analysis. Unlike the overtly political West and Chomsky, McLuhan argued in his work and numerous personal letters that his analysis of media was designed to be impartial, so any social analysis that emerged was merely a reflection of the media.⁸ Yet similar to West and Chomsky, McLuhan's celebrity exceeded the world of higher education. In 1965 the popular Canadian magazine *Maclean's* dubbed McLuhan the "the high priest of pop culture" because of his prescient analysis of media.⁹ McLuhan's fame and his arguments led to open critiques of his work from important scholars of the mid-twentieth century, such as James Carey and Raymond Williams, who both argued that McLuhan was a technological determinist—the argument that technology on its own defines the development of all social structures and values in a society, regardless of human intervention.¹⁰ McLuhan made arguably the most public response to all his critics that any academic possibly could. Though not directly addressed to Carey or Williams, McLuhan made a short cameo as himself in 1977 in the popular Woody Allen film *Annie Hall*, where he delivered a line to an actor (Russell Horton) playing a professor at Columbia University: "You know nothing of my work."¹¹

The technological determinism associated with McLuhan's work would be well documented, particularly in another popular phrase attributed to him.¹² In addition to "the medium is the message," another popular mid-twentieth-century phrase that McLuhan would be associated with is the subtitle of arguably his most well-known book, *Understanding Media* (1964): "the extensions of man." For McLuhan, extensions would be a metaphor for all media. Importantly, media do not refer to the "news media," a term often derisively used today to describe television channels such as Fox News and MSNBC. Instead, McLuhan is most famous for arguing that a medium (or the singular of media) referred to any technology that *extended* the human senses. For McLuhan to say that a medium was an extension of the senses meant it would require the attention of specific senses. In his attempt to borrow from anthropological and psychological studies of the early and mid-twentieth century, for example, McLuhan argued (controversially) that the phonetic alphabet was not only a medium, but it extended the

eye, meaning the phonetic alphabet required an excessive attention of sight. For McLuhan, each medium similarly facilitated different sensorial involvements—from sight (the eye), to sound (the ear), to multisensorial (the central nervous system). In spite of the controversy, “media as extensions of the senses” was a phrase that pushed against the idea that the sole message of a medium was its content (where much of Black media studies still remains). Instead, McLuhan argued that the true message of any medium involved transformation of human engagements in the world, of which the senses were one example.

Such theorizations would make McLuhan popular in the 1960s. His *Playboy* magazine interview in 1969 is not only one of the more easily digestible pieces you can read of his theory, but it signified his rise as a North American popular intellectual. Although *Playboy* magazine is perhaps best known as a magazine of nude pictures, it also published interviews with influential and controversial figures of the mid-twentieth century. The magazine interviewed Malcolm X in 1963, Ayn Rand in 1964, and Martin Luther King Jr. in 1965.¹³ In his 1969 *Playboy* interview, McLuhan argued, among many things, that the changing politico-economic relations of a society were reflective of the media readily available in that society. Specifically, he argued that the 1960s, full of social-political unrest, were “not an easy period in which to live, especially for the television-conditioned young who, unlike their literate elders, cannot take refuge in the zombie trance of Narcissus narcissis that numbs the state of psychic shock induced by the impact of new media.”¹⁴

This meant, for example, that if you wanted to understand the reason why young people were protesting throughout the world in the mid-twentieth century, you would not find an answer in an episode of *Leave It to Beaver*. You would find it in the new media environment that television introduced into society—the medium that the youth grew up with in the mid-twentieth century that their parents did not have in their youth of the early twentieth century. Indeed, one of the main groups inspired by McLuhan during this time were the Youth International Party, or the Yippies. The Yippies were a radical, largely white countercultural revolutionary offshoot of the antiwar movements, who engaged in highly theatrical forms of protests. It would be in the Yippies, and their highly tele-visual forms of protests, that McLuhan would see representations of a new, younger generation, sparked by electronic, involved, multisensorial forms of media, specifically television.¹⁵

By the early 1960s, 92 percent of U.S. households owned a television

set.¹⁶ The new medium's pervasiveness led McLuhan to argue that the content of television was secondary to television's form, which, via the experience of everyone tuning in to watch a show at the same time (no matter its content), was influencing the new, younger generation to view themselves as a part of an electronic, connective whole—or the “global village.” Thus in the *Playboy* interview, McLuhan argued that the distinction between the numerous student protests and the repressive state responses to those protests was not a matter of youth ignorance versus adult intelligence, or vice versa, but of the different media that both generations grew up with in the home as children. According to McLuhan, the midcentury unrest was a product of a mere technologically infused generation gap, a distinction between a highly visual, literate, older mechanical generation, and a new, global village generation—the new media environment sparked by electronic media. Electronic children were now young adults, who were politically, socially, and even physically, in some cases, bumping up against their literate-trained, mechanical parents. This was the point of the Yippies, who sought to distinguish themselves from what they saw as a stuffy, mechanical, older generation. In some ways, and despite what some have called his conservatism, McLuhan was able to tap into an energy of multiple youth movements of his time, theoretically at least.¹⁷ While the radical, Black protest poet of the time Gil Scott-Heron famously argued that the “the revolution will not be televised,” I would like to think that McLuhan would not disagree, but he might counter with “the revolution will be guided by those who inhabit a televisual media environment.” Thus Scott-Heron and McLuhan agree; for both, episodes were not the most important thing to focus on when considering revolutionary change, meaning Scott-Heron was making a media studies argument, too.

Unfortunately, as McLuhan reduced the problems of the 1960s and 1970s to a media problem of the white familial structure of North America (i.e., the generation gap), he could not see that those leading the radical charge of the time were largely influenced by the Scott-Herons of the world (further discussed in chapter 3)—that is, the Black radical and decolonial movements of the time. In short, as suggested in his research archive from the 1960s titled “Negro,” even though McLuhan was cognizant of the Black radical movements in the United States and Africa during the mid-twentieth century, his ultimate conclusion of such Black radical movements was that they were representative of concurrent white movements.¹⁸ Black radical movements materialize in McLuhan's publications of the 1960s, then, as indistinct from the white

movements—merely derivative. The generation gap sparked by new media—inherently a familial gap—made Black radicalism a stepchild of white leftist movements.

It may not be too shocking that McLuhan's standard for understanding media assumed the white family as the norm. Indeed, he was giving his *Playboy* interview in the wake of the release of the 1965 report *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action*, by Daniel Patrick Moynihan, the former U.S. Assistant Secretary of Labor.¹⁹ Moynihan's report infamously described the Negro family as merely a deviation from traditional families (which meant "white"). McLuhan's attention to media form replicates the dominant mid-twentieth-century, highly racialized approach to Black people in both the academy and politics: a "normal" Black person was either seen as reducible to a mere reflection of what white Euro-Americans used to be in previous eras or reducible to what the most degraded, lower-classed white Euro-Americans are. Pulling more from the midcentury disciplinary assumptions made in anthropology and psychology than explicitly from Moynihan, McLuhan argued the former: that Black people were reflections of what white people once were, meaning that Black people were far more "tribal" than white people. In the disciplines of anthropology and psychology that McLuhan pulled from, often influenced by social Darwinism, humans developed in (technological) stages, and some were further along ("detribal," i.e., no longer tribal) than others (tribal, i.e., "backward," behind the detribal). Here Western Europe and North America presumably looked back at Africa, Asia, the Caribbean, Central America, and South America, as technological reflections of the West's own tribal past, rather than as the colonies from which both natural resources and people were extracted in order to build Western concepts of civilization and development. Although McLuhan was critical of the civilizational assumptions of media, he could not perceive that his weddedness to social Darwinian disciplinary thought during the mid-twentieth century required that Black people (and our presumably tribal media) only acted as measures of where whites once were (further examined in chapter 1).

While McLuhan argued that media could provide an explanation for the protests of the 1960s and 1970s, he implied that the protests were a product of new epistemologies (media split people into different ways of knowing the world); but epistemology remains white for McLuhan, no matter the generation. What he uncritically speaks to is what this book actively asks: How do we refute a media philosophy wedded to a logic of the same? Put simply, media not only teach us how to know,

as per McLuhan; they have also been deployed in the West to argue that all of humanity is known through Western media history, which assumes, as Achille Mbembe argues, “It is not okay for them [Negroes] *not* to be like us [whites].”²⁰ To paraphrase Harold Innis, the Canadian economist who was a central influence on McLuhan, the media that the West deployed produced the West as the monopolizer of knowledge. McLuhan’s argument assumed that we are all derivatives of white Euro-Americans, and all media served a Western, temporal, epistemological function: to show white Euro-Americans how far behind them we as Black people were.²¹

My own intervention takes McLuhan’s Western media philosophy seriously in order to blow up its limitations, which remain largely under the surface of much of contemporary media philosophy. For me, the “tribal people” and their media, argued to be windows into the past of the West, are indeed *media* themselves, if we follow McLuhan’s own in/famous definition of media as “any extension of man.” As I have argued, McLuhan’s usage of man as a metaphor for the human is largely a sensorial metaphor (an extension of man means media are an extension of the eye, of the ear, etc.); but McLuhan’s concept of the sensorial took for granted early twentieth-century (social) Darwinian sensorial orders, which held that Euro-Americans were presumably less sensorial (which meant further from “nature”) than Black and brown people.²² In short, McLuhan’s concept of man is, as Sylvia Wynter might argue, often *over-represented* as white, Western, middle-class, able-bodied, heterosexual, and male, building off a Darwinian-influenced sensorial foundation of what it means to be human (see chapter 1).²³

Here it is not surprising that McLuhan’s concept of the tribal mirrors critiques in Black studies of the “Negro,” imagined as a figure with a wholly different sensorial ordering than white people.²⁴ Like the tribal that exists only in McLuhan’s mind, what Ronald Judy calls the Negro is not about Black people per se but white imaginations of the Negro: “As a concept, *The Negro* is not an objective possibility; there is no way of knowing whether it is objectively real or not,” meaning that the Negro is a “problematic conception that can only be thought; it is an effect of discursivity.”²⁵ While Judy implies it, I explicate it: the Negro is a *mediator* (Judy calls it a “metaphor,” which for McLuhan, ever the rhetorician, is the same thing), it is a storage device for white imaginations, used to measure some (white) people’s assumed exit from nature and entrance into Western conceptions of humanness and civilization.²⁶ This is basically McLuhan’s definition of tribal media: that which lies

in proximity to nature, not civilization and, as such, is a mirror to show how far *we* have come. The Black media philosophy of this book takes seriously the racial implications of Western media philosophy's "we" and "our" to illustrate its limits for understanding Black people.

My work unearths another related, important limitation of McLuhan's media philosophy: What does a media philosophy that does not always already read the West as the measure of all other human's media engagements look like (explored in chapters 2 and 3)? This is neither to say that Western media are unimportant for Black people, nor is it to say that Black people have never deployed such media in important, radical, and joyous ways (indeed, I make no claims of any neat distinction between anything that can be called "white media" versus "Black media").²⁷ Rather, it is to say that the West's conception of media, as measures of the human, replicates a Western temporal logic that holds no universality for other genres of human. Thus Black media philosophy requires recognition of the racial politics of the Western episteme and a complex understanding of the projects that challenge such an episteme. The inability to understand the challenges is not a problem unique to media philosophy or McLuhan, but it is representative of the problem of the mid-twentieth-century Western academy that McLuhan inhabited.

The limitations of the mid-twentieth-century Western academy would be fully exposed by the exact people that the academy had always deemed as absent of knowledge: Black people. One year after McLuhan's *Playboy* interview, the important Black studies scholar C.L.R. James gave an interview, where he argued that Black studies introduced not simply a critique of Western society but a related critique of the society's order of knowledge—the very institution that McLuhan's work fit so well within. With the rise of C.L.R. James reading groups throughout Montreal, Ottawa, and Toronto in the 1960s, McLuhan would live to see the rise of the Black studies that James would be so central to, that which James warned was necessary if one hoped to comprehend the new epistemological frames that did not rely on white people as the sole carriers of knowledge.²⁸

But aside from seeing the founding of Black studies, McLuhan had little to nothing to say about the epistemological critiques that scholars like James would play a role in establishing. McLuhan's inability to understand the epistemological gauntlets that James threw down will continue to haunt contemporary scholars who seek to grapple with media form and materiality unless we name the problem and point

toward alternative solutions. This requires a new media philosophy (and history) that is up to the task of examining the interrelations between Blackness, media, epistemology, nature, and materiality. Indeed, Black media philosophy is different from Black media studies because it cannot exist without close attention to materiality and history, or that which includes and exceeds the representation. McLuhan provides some of that materiality and history, but it is necessary to examine how materiality and history are also connected to the development of two major intellectual tests to the Western episteme of McLuhan's time, both of which structure my own intellectual genealogy: Black studies and cultural studies. And, as this book makes clear, the materiality centered in Black studies and cultural studies hold strong yet unacknowledged links with the expansion of the discipline of my training, media and communication studies.

BLACK STUDIES, COMMUNICATIONS, AND MATERIALITY

Eleven months after the Russian satellite Sputnik entered outer space, the 1958 National Defense Education Act was released with the hopes of encouraging a largely scientific project in higher education, one that would keep the United States technologically apace with the Soviets. The U.S. government hoped the National Defense Education Act would provide another route to replicate the Western epistemological project. In part, the act was designed to provide affordable education to (white) students pursuing higher education, particularly in the realms of science, technology, and languages. Under this act the government sought to “provide that in the selection of students to receive loans from such student loan fund special consideration shall be given to . . . students whose academic background indicates a superior capacity or preparation in science, mathematics, engineering, or a *modern foreign language*.”²⁹ These particular studies were deemed “necessary to protect the financial interest of the United States.”³⁰

Notably, despite the context of the space race, scientific engineering was not the sole focus of the 1958 act. In the wake of World War II, and the start of the Cold War, the United States needed a new informational campaign against the Russians as well, aimed at “languages and areas.” The urgency of such an informational campaign was directly linked to the fact that the Russians had both beat the United States into space and they were actively calling for all Western nations