



Whiteness and the Future of Artificial Intelligence

By Boima Tucker



For much of the nineteenth century, Sundays in an open field at the gates of New Orleans saw a spectacular congregation of human activity. Picture a hot, humid, swampy Louisiana summer day, the Spanish moss dripping from the trees, and the bass drum pulse reverberating as you approach a mass gathering at the fringe of the United States's most Caribbean city.

You'd see New Orleanians of all stripes, dressed in everything from the latest Parisian fashions to simple rags, standing around in circles, watching the most talented musicians, dancers, actors, and diviners of their city on full display.

If you could have angled your head to see inside the circle, you would be privileged to witness the diversity of humanity coming together. People from across Africa and the Americas co-mingling, sharing their culture, celebrating the arrival of the one day they can express their home and ancestral cultures in public.

Unaware that their communing would one day birth a novel culture, which would in turn branch out to influence cultures in the rest of the world, there must have been an urgent feeling to the gatherings, fleeting if not quite ephemeral, but temporary enough to make them feel dreamlike, religious even. As soon as that feverish dream of a day would break, they would be returning to

unpaid labor, toiling in fields or answering to the whims of their white masters. Because they were not, in the society in which they lived, human.

In 2018, after returning to the US from living in Brazil, I visited New Orleans for the first time. While there, I picked up a book on the history of [Congo Square](#), and in the following months I couldn't help from periodically daydreaming about the historical Sunday gatherings in that city. I drew parallels to the basement house party or the rented community center of my childhood in Milwaukee, where immigrants would dance the night away, speak in their own language, eat their own food, even worship in their own cosmos.

They were also there at the nightclub that I frequented as a student in Madrid, filled with young men who may have risked their lives crossing deserts and seas to arrive in Europe, and who now danced in the center of circles to Youssou N'Dour. Or they were in the hidden away bars and nightclubs of New York and San Francisco, where migrants of a variety of classes and national origins brushed up against each other, catching up on the latest sounds from their various home lands. They were also in online spaces, in which young people across the world found a foothold for expression, with various permutations of digital soul music pulsing on the parallel circuits of a global capitalism still guided by the logic of white supremacy.

Connecting a historical moment like Congo Square to my own experiences helped to [challenge lingering colonial logics](#) embedded within my imaginings of America's past. It particularly helped to destroy an [invisible line](#) that tends to be drawn between those whose ancestors arrived on these shores from Africa in bondage hundreds of years ago, and those who arrived more recently for other purposes. It forced me to recognize that African migration to the Americas (or elsewhere) can and should be thought of as a continuum, and the humanity of those who migrate, forced or by choice, is unbroken across [space](#) and [time](#).

Last summer, I sat in a parking lot in King City, California, a small town surrounded by mountains and endless fields of fruit and vegetables, listening to a local Spanish language radio broadcast. On it, alongside various Mexican regional musics, they had public service announcements about COVID-19 and ads for English language classes. King City sits in the heart of one of the centers of industrial agriculture in the United States.

The manual labor performed in this region is done by workers from Mexico and Central America, some undocumented, but all descended from people who occupied and moved around these lands freely for thousands of years. Largely invisible in nearby wealthy urban enclaves, they are an [integral labor force](#) that save for a periodic scapegoating, demonization, and [dehumanization in the media](#), isn't normally seen as [part of the nation](#)—let alone having their hopes, joys, or individual expressions considered in mainstream discourse.

So I sat there, listening to the bright horn choruses and upbeat snare drum rolls, and imagined that these local radio broadcasts served to provide a sense of community and humanity to their audiences, not unlike those of the Sunday gatherings in New Orleans two hundred years ago. Humanity denied, humanity reclaimed, the contours of citizenship and their interplay with labor are perpetually dancing at the edges of the settler colony.

Contemporaneous to the gatherings at Congo Square, the American settler colony was in an expansive phase [moving west](#) across the North American continent. Around the same time, European powers were doling out territories for themselves [in Africa](#), and across the world they accomplished these "civilizing missions" by pushing the existing inhabitants off of the land, killing or imprisoning them, or attempting to wipe out their way of life. The privileges of white settlers in these extensions of Europe were fortified by the legal structures of the colonial state. In the United

States, laws like the Homestead Act and the Second Amendment to the Constitution turned white frontier families into state-sponsored militias, their structural advantage scrawled across the physical landscape of the continent.

In the wake of the guns and military campaigns (sometimes manned by [colonised](#) peoples [themselves](#)), urban professionals of the colonial metropolises followed with their pens, phonographs, and cameras and became the documentarians of the folk culture of the marginals, misfits, Native Americans and Africans at the frontier (as well in the [working class neighborhoods](#) of cities). These [state agents and entrepreneurs](#) would chronicle the transition from an Atlantic society based on slave labor to capitalism. The legends they constructed would become the foundation for an imperialist ideology that continues to this day.

Starting around the mid-1800s, the US witnessed the rise in popularity of the blackface minstrel show. Through the medium of vaudeville, and with Congo Square as one of the [direct source materials](#), the minstrel show denigrated people of African descent (or [anyone deemed other](#) at the time), mocking the expressions of humanity that they managed, while simultaneously integrating them into the identity of the nation. This form of entertainment would produce America's first pop stars who would in turn become [global ambassadors](#) for the new American society that was emerging.

The legal mechanisms for enclosure in the [world of ideas](#) mirrored those of physical territory. As communication technology rapidly advanced, the mechanical copyright emerged to protect property in the cultural realm. This mechanism ensured a structural advantage for those with the resources to extract and define the value of the culture of those at the margins. The owners of patents and copyrights did more than just document their changing world, they also [ossified racial categories](#) and ushered racism along from the biological realm into the [cultural one](#). This was the foundation on which the global entertainment industries of today were built.

After the very slow and wrought process of abolishing Atlantic slavery, and the violent consolidation of the colonial territories, by the turn of the twentieth century debates about citizenship and civil rights would arise to mask the battlefield over humanity. As Native Americans were cordoned off to reservations, Africans in the Americas would be folded into the nation as Black (Negro, Colored, etc). And as the western literary genre moved from the written word to the screen, and the minstrel show moved from live theater, to radio and phonograph, to [film](#) and [television](#), the twin legacies of the fascination with and denigration of a dehumanized other would leave their mark on each.

White capitalist copyright owners would position themselves as the authoritative [gatekeepers](#) on the pure folk cultures of the inferior races, or white performers, on stage with their actual faces, would insert themselves as the [individual genius](#) responsible for the synthesis of a unique cultural innovation, the social relations behind the slick final product forever obscured. While various [cultural rebellions](#) have arisen throughout the years to counter these processes of dehumanization, the tools of extraction inherited from the nineteenth century have proven to be more than effective in upholding the logic of empire and [racial capitalism](#).

In parallel to this cultural push and pull, [a political debate](#) would arise amongst Black Americans over how to ([or whether to](#)) integrate into the settler colonial society. Visions of a return to Africa would [wax and wane](#), while an [anti-colonial politics](#) was [violently repressed](#). Ultimately, the call to [own property](#) as a way to secure one's [rightful place within the nation](#), the ghosts of [40 acres and a mule](#), would ring out loud [over the decades](#). This echo has found new life in today's discourse around race, resulting in an ascendant [black nationalist purism](#), particularly online. This trend is unfortunate. While there is certainly agency within the beauty and virtuosity that has come into the world as a result of the cultural resilience of African descended peoples in the Americas, it doesn't

mean that it is the result of some intrinsic quality unique to one racial group or national historical context.

In fact, [it could be argued](#) that the African retentions that remain in the Americas survived because the dominant systems either tolerated them or weren't able to read them as such. In other words: Black American cultures have arisen as a result of both black resilience *and* white supremacy. Still, America's Blackness is one of the most important cultural expressions of resilience and resistance in modern society. To put an [enclosure around it](#) only reinforces the settler colonial mentality, leaving the aims of [universal humanism](#) incomplete. Even those Africans at Congo Square, who helped start this whole thing in the first place, would likely remain outside of the gates.

Just over an hour drive from that King City parking lot where I was listening to the radio in Spanish, and on the western edge of the continental territory colonised by the United States, sits the headquarters of the world's [most valuable companies](#): Google, Facebook, Tesla, Apple—the heart of the global information economy. Even though the bubble of the California Gold Rush has long since burst (a process that seems to repeat itself every few decades), it has turned into a region with one of the largest concentrations of wealth in the world. If mass media was born amongst the colonization project of Euro-American imperialism, the dehumanization of non-European peoples, and the consolidation of racial capitalism, then today's information economy is also built upon that same infrastructure.

On the wild frontiers of the early internet, online communities emerged that would freely exchange infinitely replicable digital material. In what many thought was a new reality of a post-scarce digitally permanent world, the reign of the regime of copyright briefly found itself in crisis. Music was the most fertile ground from which to declare one's liberation, but it wasn't the [only one](#).

And while interaction with [the old guard of racial capitalism](#) allowed a tradition of [gatekeeping and cultural appropriation](#) inherited from vaudeville to continue, what had emerged within the confines of the virtual world—torrent libraries, file sharing sites, personal blogs, forums and chat rooms—collectively could be thought of as a sort of digital Congo Square. The response from the United States Department of Homeland Security, alongside other [policing efforts](#), was to [raid the safe houses](#) of free exchange and try and put an end to it all through intimidation.

Before the average uploader became [familiar](#) with the [DMCA takedown](#), some big companies looked at the anarchistic landscape and lured the loosely organized scattering of digital cultural producers onto their [free](#) platforms. Soundcloud, Youtube, Instagram, Twitter, etc all provided sleek design, convenience, and a veneer of protection from the harshest crackdowns by the state.

Yet, these platforms were not immune to the demands of capital or its watchdogs. Perhaps, they never were meant to be. Investors eventually wanted returns, and the landed copyright elite [needed their cut too](#), and whether planned or not, all the platforms would eventually make concessions that favored the [biggest property owners over the public](#). These concessions would eventually evolve into the phenomenon now popularly known as [surveillance capitalism](#).

Eventually, the ideological struggles of our time would also move on to the individualized “feeds” and “timelines” of the Silicon Valley platforms. No longer reserved for the stage of fights between or within nations, political speech is tailored, tracked, and manipulated in the interest of generating more interaction with [minimal regard](#) to the real world consequences. We may constantly [measure ourselves against](#) how we think other people might see us online, but when you strip us back down to our most human needs and desires, the questions that concern much of the population of this planet are fairly simple: What is the right of any individual human to exist wherever they are on Earth? And, under what conditions do they have a right to do so?

So today, across the world, young people leave rural communities to work in the fields, mines, and factories that fuel the supply chains of multinational corporations with the slightest hope that [integration into the global economy](#) will provide a better future for them and their families. Masses from the urban margins [take to the streets](#) with the belief that by facing state violence head on they might bring about a [more just reality](#) for their communities.

And, when members of both groups feel like they have no alternative but to [hit the unmarked highways](#) of the world's most dangerous [migration routes](#) and seek a better future elsewhere, they are doing so with the idea that the same world that can beam images and sounds via satellite to a mobile phone in their pocket must be able to [recognize a humanity denied](#) as a result of neocolonial economic, environmental, and military policy.

Like in the post-Reconstruction era in the US, many of the proposed solutions to the injustices that have emerged in the digital age have concentrated on finding technological fixes to restore (old) systems of fair(er) compensation for the output (input) of online denizens. However, rather than provide solutions to the structural inequalities inherent to capitalism, technological fixes such as [blockchain capitalism](#), cash app [mutual aid](#), personalized [sponsorship accounts](#), and other enclosure-oriented solutions ultimately retrofit the infrastructures of exploitation against the claims of universal humanism. While there certainly is value in building community online, especially as a form of resistance or resilience, the [question](#) remains: What forms of online participation emerge from the claims to humanity of the [marginals](#), [misfits](#), [Native Americans](#) and [Africans](#) at the frontier?

And in our resistance, we should also never forget that the reality of surveillance capitalism is that one person's individual wealth, clout, or social relevance is insignificant in comparison to the [aggregate picture](#) of all the behaviors of the world's population.

By the time the platforms had a monopoly on audiences, they no longer needed the cultural products they claimed to be supporting to have any exchange value at all (with human moderation becoming fertile ground for [corruption or payola](#)). While influencers try to squeeze out a few pennies from sponsors or trickle down monetization schemes based on clout they've managed to accumulate in their online and real world social networks, the runways of the digital future are paved with the promise of returns from the proprietary algorithms built on data hoarded from the behavior of the masses.

As it stands, a few companies, concentrated in specific geographic locations, fortified by an accumulated wealth never seen before, defended by the largest military force ever to exist, swallow and secure all the information we give them: our behaviors, our desires, all of our humanistic acts and expressions, and employ small armies to sort, categorize, process and program, with the end goal of creating an "[artificial intelligence](#)" that can ultimately [stake a claim to humanity](#) too.

However, unlike the popular science fiction fantasy in which the future battles for humanity will happen between [robots and humans](#), as big tech [plans an exit](#) from a planet [in crisis](#), our future struggles are more likely to look like the age old one of humans who can harvest the fruits of their enclosures versus [those of us](#) who [can't](#). So, if [blackness](#) is the foundational currency on which the capitalist information economy is built, what will whiteness mean to a cyborg.

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