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On Black Media Philosophy, by Armond R. Towns. University of California Press, 2022, 225 pp.

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In *On Black Media Philosophy*, Armond R. Towns discusses the relationship between Blackness, commodification, ecology, and communication throughout history. Towns is concerned with how Blackness and Black people have challenged, as well as been oppressed by, white Western male conceptions of communication. In addition, Towns argues that Black media studies has been too focused on the content of cultural phenomena while largely ignoring issues with form. Towns's goal in the book is to rectify this gap in scholarship and highlight issues with the theoretical assumptions that media users or consumers are white. To support his points about Black epistemology and engagement with media, Towns focuses in Chapters Two to Four on specific historical incidents including, in order, the Underground Railroad, the Black Panther Party, and the killing of Michael Brown and its aftermath in Ferguson, Missouri. The book is grand in scale, but succinct at the same time. Towns's arguments are well organised and progress nicely from chapter to chapter. While breaking new ground, Towns, at the same time, also falls into the trap he is arguing against: homogenous assumptions of media viewers. Despite framing himself as a Black feminist new material scholar, Towns often ignores intersectional ideological positionalities that might complicate his argument which, at present, implicitly assumes a unified Black viewer or experience. Despite these shortcomings, I recommend the book, especially the early chapters, as they break new ground and challenge theoretical concepts of media form. I will expand on my position and the content of the book below.

There are two terms that are used throughout the book that are key to understanding Towns's arguments. The first is "media." In the title, *On Black Media Philosophy*, and the book, media is derived from the plural form of "medium". Medium is also the root of the word "mediated". This layered approach to "media" means that Towns examines Blackness in his book as a middle ground or something through which information passes. The second key term to Towns's argument is "Negro". Towns builds from Ronald Judy's definition of "Negro" whereby the term is used as a reductive and mediated construct (8). Towns states in his Introduction, "[t]he Negro is the *middle point*, if we go back to the original definition of media as middles" (21). Blackness and Black people are seen as the matter through which cultural ideas pass, those ideas being rooted in white supremacist oppression. "The Negro's media function is to act as Western bourgeois man's self-measure" (21). This leads Towns to declare in his introduction that alternatives are needed as well as "a new media philosophy (and history) that is up to the task of examining the interrelations between Blackness, media, epistemology, nature, and materiality" (10), thus, moving away from white-centred conceptions and ideals of communication.

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Towns often quotes and is in theoretical conversation with mid-twentieth-century Canadian theorist Herbert Marshall McLuhan. Particularly McLuhan's popular assertion that "the medium is the message" (2). Towns notes, "[i]n this phrase McLuhan pushed back against the idea that the message of any medium was its content" (2). Towns believes that Black media studies is stuck in an antiquated phase of critiquing issues of content, including stereotypes of Blackness in media, that ignore advances in media studies that are focused on form. He argues that Black media studies needs to engage with the form of media more readily as the way cultural phenomena is created is crucial to how humans engage with and understand the world. This is important since, in contemporary times, the form of media is focused on an assumption that white males are the target audience and Blackness is used as a tool in media to enforce difference. Towns posits, "[w]hat happens if we do not see Western man (white, male, heterosexual, able-bodies, middle-classes, cisgender) as the measure of all humanity?" (16). This sentence sets up several of the author's key critiques and subsequent chapters whereby he looks at historical examples of Black uses of media that negate, successfully and unsuccessfully, the assumption that the implied media spectator is white.

In Chapter One, "Technological Darwinism", Towns argues that Black people and culture have always been used to gauge whiteness. Whiteness has always been tied to progress and Black culture is always viewed as needing to catch up and being closer to nature. This is embedded in a story from the journals of the evolutionist Charles Darwin. In Darwin's journals from his voyage that led to the creation of his canonical work *On the Origin of the Species, by Means of Natural Selection,* he noted he had been intimate with a "full-blooded negro" whose name and gender are never revealed. Darwin was trying to understand the breadth of humanity, including Blackness, through sexual interaction with a nameless Black person aboard the ship. Building off arguments from McLuhan and others, Towns asserts "Blackness as an alternative conception of humanness, one never reducible to Western epistemological structures" (43). However, Darwin's act of questionable intimacy (Towns calls Darwin's act "rape" due to the racial power imbalance) can be looked at as another example of a Black body being used as a medium or tool by a white man in a position of power.

Chapter Two, "Black Escapism on the Underground (Black) Anthropocene", is where Towns demonstrates how Black forms of media have historically had the power to subvert white supremacy. The author states that stories and histories of the Underground Railroad are littered with instances of white benevolence, but Towns argues that it is Black forms of media and communication that led to the successful escapes of former Southern United States slaves. Essentially, Black slaves used white ignorance of non-written media against their white enslavers to escape. This included knowledge on how to navigate using the North Star, indicative stick and rock formations, and songs that had escape routes embedded in their lyrics. These messages could be hidden (or sung) in plain sight since white enslavers did not understand their meanings or their significance, nor did they believe that Black slaves were capable of communication since slaves were the medium, not the subject of their existence. "Black runaway enslaved people used [Black-coded media] to escape enslavement and imagine spaces beyond their commodification" (55). This is a historical instance where the form of the media was not based on white understandings of the world, but, rather, on Black epistemologies.

Towns builds from his established arguments, especially those pertaining to McLuhan's and Darwin's work, in Chapter Three, "Towards a Theory of Intercommunal Media". The chapter

focuses on the work on Huey Newton, the Black Panther Party leader. Newton believed that mass media could be a revolutionary tool that could connect Black and brown people across the globe. However, the intercommunal concept of media posited by Newton was also challenged using mass media as a tool to continue to expand the capitalist and imperialist projects of the West, especially the United States. Towns ties all of this to the energy crisis of the 1970s. When oil prices rocketed, the ability of white colonisers to physically be in the places they hoped to control became more financially difficult. Television, newspapers, and radio were a way to continue to spread capitalist ideas across the globe and continue the colonisation and subordination of masses of people through the media they consumed. However, in this time the focus of colonisation also changed from exploiting and extracting labour and materials from colonised areas and peoples, to turning Black and brown people into good consumers. So, while Newton thought of the progress and proliferation of mass media forms as something that could bring oppressed groups together across the globe, these same tools were also being used in a different way by existing white colonialist and capitalist structures to oppress the very same groups of Black and brown people that Newton hoped to form into a global "intercommunal" movement.

In Chapter Four, "Black 'Matter' Lives: Michael Brown and Digital Artifacts", Towns looks at the murder of Black teenager Michael Brown by police office Darren Wilson and the judicial and digital aftermath. Wilson's testimony from his grand jury trial (where he was exonerated) is scrutinised in detail, especially Wilson's use of the word "demon" to describe Brown. Towns argues that "demon" is just an updated term used in place of the n-word. In addition, Towns discusses the proliferation of animated accounts of the interactions between Brown and Wilson that lead to Wilson killing Brown. The amateur animations and videos that were circulated in the media (but not used in the judicial hearings) largely used Wilson's account of the fatal events in lieu of contradictory evidence or accounts. Towns notes, "Brown was acted by and for Wilson and the digital animators, in ways that mirror what the Negro has signified throughout Western discourses: *matter*, or elements that have no self-determination" (141).

The first line of the conclusion of *On Black Media Philosophy* states, "This book illustrates the interconnected relationships between media, gender, sexuality, race, Blackness, and alternative forms of humanness" (149). I disagree with this point, however. The one area that needs expansion or improvement is the book's intersectional approach. Since arguing against the idea that the implied consumer of all media was white and male, it is disappointing that Towns's discussion of Blackness did not include more intersectional discussions of female, queer, migrant, or other ideological positions. For instance, in Chapter Three, "Toward a Theory of Intercommunal Media", there were many allusions to the seminal Audre Lourde work *The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House* and her argument that oppressed people cannot use the same tools to dismantle systemic racism and sexism that their oppressors used to build a cultural structure of injustice. However, Lourde's work is not mentioned. In addition, the only woman to be substantially quoted in the same chapter is Black Panther leader Elaine Brown, but her presence is largely used to convey information about conversations that she had with her predecessor and paramour, Huey Newton. Likewise, Chapter Four's argument about racialised police violence could have connected further with similar scholarship from feminists. Chapter Four does include a small section about how the use of the word "demon" and the pronoun "it" by Wilson helped to degender Brown and turn him into matter. This argument seems derivative of, or at least in conversation with, a wide body of feminist work on female objectification in media including work

by Laura Mulvey, Jean Kilbourne, and bell hooks. In addition, this chapter could have been strengthened by the inclusion of Kimberlé Crenshaw's work regarding intersectionality and the differences in the coverage of police violence against Black men versus police violence against Black women.

On Black Media Philosophy is only 225 pages in length with four chapters sandwiched between introduction and concluding sections. Armond R. Towns's positions are interdisciplinary, woven together nicely, and vast in scope. An example is in the conclusion of the book where Towns ties together environmental justice and reparations, two topics that I do not have enough space to cover in this review since there is so much complexity to Towns's other central arguments. Although I do want to highlight one of Towns's final statements about environmental justice and reparations: "Much of this rethinking of reparations could look like the free relocation of Black and brown people to locations that will in the future receive far less flooding and wildfires, or (for the love of God!) fixing the water filtration systems in Flint, Michigan, or other forms of transformation that we have not even imagined yet" (165). I agree wholeheartedly with Towns: for the love of God fix the water systems in Flint, Michigan!

The diversity of Towns' sources are reflected in the forty-nine pages of footnotes and bibliographical entries. The expansive references are also helpful for scholars who want to engage further in the diverse conversations where Towns's work is situated. The expansive arguments coupled with the abbreviated length makes the book deep but, also, digestible. *On Black Media Philosophy* is appropriate for advanced undergraduate theoretical courses (400-level), graduate students, and scholars interested in Black studies, cultural studies, literature, media, and human ecology. It may also appeal to those working in art, literature, and history.

Despite my disappointment with the lack of feminist scholarship and other intersectional positions in the book, I recommend the book as parts of it break into new and interesting territory regarding the unexplored junction of media form and Black studies. I would just recommend that the book be explored alongside feminist scholars such as those I have cited: Crenshaw, hooks, Kilbourne, Lourde, and Mulvey, whose work predates and interrelates with several of Towns's positions in *On Black Media Philosophy*.

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