

Poetry Against Calamity

Post-capitalist Economic Media and the Decolonization of Money¹

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Jonathan Beller

Pratt Institute, US

Abstract

“Economic Media” conceptualizes the already well advanced convergence of communications media and monetary media that currently subsumes species creativity to the detriment of planetary well being and ecology. The calculus of exchange under racial capital threatens to fully colonize daily life, converting even poetic aspirations for a better world into fodder for capital extraction. How to keep practices of radical care, food assistance, mutual aid and liberation from collapsing back into feeding racial capitalism, its computational colonialism and Neo-imperialism? A perennial question, navigated here through a critique of the political economy of mediation and the social relations its global operating system would organize—paradigmatically through and as social media, but effectively everywhere. In this essay, this navigation takes the form of an hypothesis offered in the imperative: We must attack money and we must decolonize it. Money as a digital system of writing has been vertically integrated into all other digital systems such that its logic overdetermines the parameters of life. Such an attack—waged not in place of other struggles but as a way of securing their gains—entails seeking a new type of writing, beyond contemporary digital archiving and accounting, that allows for the people to

collectively write our own futures in accord with our own values, in expressions denominated by our own activity and activism. I call this writing decolonial ecography and see it as necessary to the flourishing, which is to say the materialization of the poetics of an abiding and yet-emergent Communism.

Keywords

Decolonization, Ecography, Cryptocurrency, Poetry, Money, Economic Media

Feel what I feel when I feel what I feel
When I'm feelin', in the sunshine!
Everybody loves the sunshine.

—Roy Ayers

You are cordially and indeed enthusiastically invited to participate in the investigation indicated by the prose that follows this opening salvo. Though written with the conviction that the strategic offer here articulated has become, through long effort, relatively coherent, it is very likely that the torquing of various concepts stresses them beyond easy recognition—some sentences may require a patient attention normally reserved for poetry. It is a lot to ask. The historical and indeed financial evisceration of language forces us (that is semantically, but also politically forces us) to make words do new tricks, tricks that do not collapse back into more lubrication for capital and fascism. To avoid such collapse, we must literally change our minds and our reading-writing practices—no easy task. Ultimately we must also transform the media that platform our thoughts and communiques. In a growing body of work I have endeavored to script a pathway to such change incrementally by attempting a thoroughgoing reconceptualization of a primary substrate of expression itself, that is, of language/writing in its particular historical condition as currently captured by computation and financialization. There appears below new terminology including the term “economic media” — a concept created to expand our understanding of media that simultaneously transmit semiotic and economic values and that will be further defined here through its rhetorical and grammatical positioning in relation to other concepts, and that awaits further definition by others. This process of reconceptualization is in fact a principal means by which I, with my limited capacities, have endeavored to change my own mind and practices and to begin to walk a path that leads out of racial capitalism. My proposition regarding the reading-writing practice here is to let this work percolate and stimulate where it may, and further, I request that where necessary the reader-writer open themselves to more conscious participation in a set of mutations that, according to the logic of this piece have happened, are happening and, in the

most significant gesture here, must consciously happen if we are to overcome global capitalism, along with its fascisms and climate change. Breathe and breathe in the trans-subjective. The reader-writer may see and feel that the political and indeed historical injunction expressed here is not only to reconceptualize socio-semiotics and their relation to production under conditions of financialization and racial capitalism, but to begin to alter the *technics* of expression at the level of transmission, archivization, datification and machine architectures. Without a doubt there are mistakes and incomplete ideas herein and the presentation is admittedly flattened by the compression of the multiple forces being constellated through a soico-cybernetic approach, but I would wager that if the reader-writer feels their way they can also test many of the ideas by engaging in a hermeneutic process and interrogating the sentences should they develop an interest in doing so. In that, I suppose, this text is like many other (poetic) texts—it would resist premanufactured thinking and coheres as one learns how to read-write it. Where it differs from many however, is that it is designed to pay communist dividends. Nonetheless, I apologize in advance for any unnecessary difficulties I may have inadvertently introduced here.

–JB, May 30, 2022

We begin with the following processes and historical structures expressed as noun phrases: Colonization, dispossession, forced migration, militarization, global hunger, heteropatriarchy, homo/transphobia, racism, climate injustice, the possibilities of classless societies and of emancipation from oppression, the legacies of social differentiation, problems of individuality, alienation and psychopathology, extrajudicial killings, failed and future revolutions, fascist states. Unsurprising that the text before you (like the world around you), in wishing to transform the current calamities, seeks significant aspects for the addressing of local and also world-historical problems in the yet-living and new knowledges of the politically marginalized, and in the socialities and world-making capacities of the oppressed. It should also be unsurprising that counter-power is to be found in the aesthetic, the affec-

tive, the organizational, the resonant, the performative, the cybernetic—the living tissues that mediate our objects, be they nouns or machines.

However, the key question posed on this occasion regards especially this last notion, the cybernetic interdependence of all planetary denizens: the emerging *media* of the social, psychological and ecological interconnection and disaster. We refer to the objectified and objectifying processes whose functionality overdetermines the conditions of living: textualization, photography, datification, computation, monetization. Therefore the question of cyber-mediation must also include the question of the *media* of reparative expression and decolonial resurgence. In a world with so much pain and so many cries, lamentations and organized actions against oppression, we ask aloud: How can we keep the calls and struggles for solidarity, for justice, for liberation from oppression from being absorbed and reincorporated into what are now the default racial capitalist production regimens? How to keep practices of radical care, food assistance, mutual aid and collective concern from collapsing back into feeding racial capitalism and its mediation of life on Earth? A perennial question, one urgently posed by capital's power to turn revolt into profit. What may be surprising here is the *strategy* by which we propose to navigate *the political economy of mediation and the social relations that its global operating system would organize*. We propose it in order to move towards an answer that is *not* supportive of neo-liberal sharing in the dividends of global extraction. There is no neo-liberal solution just as there is no end to world-historical violence under racial capitalism. In what follows, this navigation takes the form of an hypothesis offered in the imperative: We must attack money and we must decolonize it.

With this theme of an an attack on money for the purposes of its (and our) decolonization in mind and in the imagination, explored through teachings from the critique of political economy, we aim for something unorthodox: *to reimagine the protocols of monetary media in order to transcend racial capitalism and its colonial order*. It's ordering. Critical race theory, feminism, abolition feminism, media theory, decolonial writings and radical finance would indicate that such transformation is only possible if we constantly access our aesthetic and affective capacities as a poetics of relation: their/our powers of

persistence, survival, and facility for relation, forms of knowledge and care that can be mounted against, in spite of, and in excess of oppression. And radical transformation that would include liberation from various forms of oppression as well as decolonial resurgence is possible only as a collective and, ultimately, a global project—as *practice* and as *politics*. We could even say “as program,” a program, or rather a programming, for the overcoming of racial capitalism and a revaluation of value(s).

Existing monetary media (for the moment, think “money as capital”) have through and as computation grafted themselves to all other media forms—monetization underpins social mediation (as language, practice, information, etc.) at 0 to n levels of remove—today all utterance and all expression is tied to computation and financialization, just as plastic and pollutants permeates the global ecosystem. The tractor beams of finance leave no utterance uninflected. The current program for global expression, which is at base a financial one, entails a continuous reprogramming, a semiotic and financial re-encoding of the *futures* scripted and thus articulated by capital. Through a kind of cybernetic *detournement*, these futures must be redirected, as co-authored futures (this term is intended in both the temporal and financial sense, and authorship here expresses both the author-function and authority). The co-authorship and indeed collective authorship of futures is to be understood here as a practical poetics of both expression and production. It involves not only new modes of expression, but new forms of writing and of platforming writing. A poetics of relation may yet inform our futures, our post-capitalist economies to be.

Many recently published and forthcoming books, among them Dean Spade’s *Mutual Aid*, Arturo Escobar’s *Designs for the Pluriverse*, Safiya Umoja Nobel’s *Algorithms of Oppression*, Mark Alizart’s *Cryptocommunism*, Robert Meister’s *Justice is an Option*, Boaventura de Sousa Santos’s *The End of the Cognitive Empire*, Bauwens, Kostakis and Pazaitis’s *Peer to Peer: The Commons Manifesto*, Fred Moten and Stefano Harney’s *The Undercommons*, and also their *All Incomplete*, Kara Keeling’s *Queer Times, Black Futures*, Jayna Brown’s *Black Utopias*, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson’s *As We Have Always Done* are reaching for this beyond capital. *From within it*. From a within that is also a

without—an “immanent outside.” In different ways, yes, but there is widespread agreement regarding the pernicious bankruptcy, accumulated injustice, and global failures of the current system. These books and their discourses are among the conversations that we would engage here. Ambient in the ether we find sustained attention to problems with logistics, informatics and computation, attention to postcapitalism, attention to abolition feminism, to afro-futurism and Black futures, and to decolonization. We find anti-imperialist, workerist and queer positions. Those seriously seeking post-capitalist alternatives are aware of the violence of settler colonialism, of land-grabbing, radical dispossession, genocide, policing militarization, fascism, imperialism, economic extraction and outright war. We are aware of this thing called racial capitalism and that, as Jodi Melamed says, “racial capitalism is capitalism.” And then there is the protest and forced migration rising up on our screens and in the streets all around the world.

But writing cannot simply remain what we know as writing if our criticisms and laments are to be much more than poetic gestures and beautiful hauntologies. From (and as) the living remains of communism (our anarchist) we must seek, and seek practically, collectivization. The poetic function of our texts of liberation contains within itself the world-making crystals of radical social change. In preserving the legacies of struggle and the calls for justice by revitalizing them in the present, they already program changes in sensibility and sociality that could change the world. However, much of the disruption created by these programs is enclosed by the media-environment, which is to say the semiotic and financial limits imposed by capitalist hegemony.

The collectivization of the means and media of production, and for now let’s also say a redistributing of risk (and reward) by collectivizing, democratizing and communizing the authorship of the *terms* of value (yes, the terms), which means, precisely, *its expressions, its abstractions, its codes* becomes the fundamental political challenge of the 21st century. We seek to intervene in systems of accounting and of account and the forms of numeracy that inform, encode, and functionalize expression. We must explore the integrated circuits between expressivity and the registration, archivization and

functionalization of all forms of writing in the social. For some of us, it may be difficult to understand dollars, RMB, Euros, Pesos and Rubles as forms of writing, units of account inscribed on media, capable of producing state changes in ledgers, just as it is sometimes difficult to remember that computation is also writing—algorithmic writing—1s and 0s registered and erased according to rulesets.

However, keeping in mind social media, attention economy, ordinary wages and forms of servitude, we may observe that these and other forms of monetary writing are everywhere active and include but are not limited to monetization, ledgers of account, the issuance of credit and debt, the development of synthetic financial instruments and contracts, and the speed-of-light computational processing of these inscriptions. A moment's reflection reveals that such forms of writing, either as bank ledgers or as the 1s and 0s electronically inscribed to record and process these ledgers (or, for that matter, inscribed when you post on Facebook), are indeed fully integrated with one another as moments of capital investment and stand at the ready to quantify and absorb nearly all social activity via networked computation. Information is at present inseparable from banking, both endogenously within the financial system and exogenously throughout the social and indeed perceptible world. We note that this process of encoding by means of information bound to capital and particularly fixed capital exercises a profound force of overdetermination on the future. Those who have accumulated value through the historical dispossession of others organize the future so that their capital may increase through a compounding of injustice.

From Marx (by way of Max Haiven), we can say that value is encoded in commodities. It is encrypted in their "hieroglyphics" (Marx) and decrypted in markets through pricing. Laundering injustice (Joque), this encryption collapses social meaning (as well as history, experience and narrative) both in commodified objects and in what will become computationally legible as "information." Value and money have themselves *become* information whose full amplitude as the abridgement of complex networked processes is never to be restored by capitalism. Although the historical transition from commodity to information is a leap akin to that figured in the dissolve from

bone as pre-historic murder weapon to spinning starship in Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey*, this mutation of the commodity form into its actually existing future as informatic matter describes our situation. The state change in matter introduced by labor to create commodities have become the state changes introduced in discrete state machines. The objectification of labor, as commodities and now as information, and the placing of these products on the market by institutionalized regimes of racial capital (a placement that is at once posited and presupposed by informatics) serves to drive the further extraction of vitality from the people of the world, creating ever more massive accumulation of capital for a few and mass dispossession as well as ecological collapse for the many.

From the remains of Communism we seek responses to counter-histories *anarchived* by the commodity form and its imaginaries, yet written in lives of struggle. The ghosted lives entombed in the production of our objectified world arrayed through vast injustice, haunt and clamor. These ghosts would and do speak in and through today's myriad oppressed. Positing a strategically synthetic set of moves this writing calls for radical and indeed revolutionary modifications to what is already a cyber-social relationship to a historically emergent logic of risk, to what, in *The World Computer* I called "computational racial capitalism" (Beller 2021). Our objects and our monies, let's imagine, might transmit information differently, might host a different order of social relations that at present are collapsed and repressed in the connectivity and functionality these forms currently provide. They might unleash historical repression and express the claims of the oppressed. We call on the term "economic media" to serve as both the concept capable of diagnosing the harrowing computational *convergence* of expressive media with financial media and as a *strategic* understanding of the current relations of racial capitalist extraction that will illuminate what is to be done.

In what will no doubt be controversial, the energies informing this exercise of writing would strive to hasten the opening up of the design space and programming capabilities of what we critically identify as *economic media* to what Fred Moten and Stefano Harney call "the undercommons." To attempt even to imagine this coalescence, to imagine under-commoning economic

media is to think dangerously, to risk mixing the sacred and the profane, to risk handling a double-edged sword, and to risk betraying that which, because of its intimacy with the legacies of survival under conditions of irredeemable oppression, is most beautiful and real. To dare to imagine money as a medium not just driving struggle and producing such immense and innumerable suffering, but as a medium *of* struggle, of complex expression, and of liberation in the deepest sense, means that we first grasp critically the relationship between money and writing, that is, between monetary media and semiotic expression. It means that we critically analyze money itself not just as a system of accounts, but as a form of writing and as a medium capable of *collateralizing* expression (Kockelman). Under capitalism, denotation, demarcation, archivization and semiosis itself become means to collateralization. Collateralization affects the field of the possible (the relational) that would otherwise be endemic to expression. Heliotropically it bends the growth of meaning towards the fusion-light of racial capitalism since only that which can feed itself by means of its flux (or that which protects itself through opacity) is slated to survive.

Whether as an archival mark on a stone tablet indicating the number of cattle owed, or as a database of user information, written marks, when strictly bound to economics, create forms of credit which can be used to procure liquidity. Collateralization processes expand and exercise their logic on the semantic field and simultaneously organize and affect practices of all kinds. Sovereign states, banks, creditors, insurance companies, media companies use these recording strategies to securitize assets such as citizens and debtors. States' credit-worthiness is indexed to the condition of their citizenry and tax base, media companies' market caps are indexed to their user-base. With computational media (social media most obviously, but really all computational media), and the emergence of *computing platforms as fixed capital* we see that writing and discourse itself have been commandeered by this process of collateralization. It is not just the fact of users but their expressive power that is collateralized. Influencers and other forms of attention aggregation express the fractal logic of this value-capture and collateralization by means of digital inscription. Capital moves in and through

our meaning making, capturing our product and turning the platform risk inherent in the expense of capture into wagers on value. This information, itself the result of computation and of the colonizing computation of the social, amounts to a structuring of new types of assets that can be borrowed on to fund its further development as media of value extraction.

To imagine money as a medium of struggle, expressivity and even liberation means that we go back to the origins of writing in cuneiform and recall that these first semantic inscriptions were indeed methods of account (Sachy)—in all senses of that word. And it is also to recall that there have been and still may be methods of account that are not capitalist. If it seems unnecessary to remark that non-capitalist forms of accounting *may* still exist, the reader has not, in my view, fully gleaned the depths of informatic colonization. Although the extensive encroachment on general semiotics by monetary media has been fundamental in executing the programs of racial capitalism over the past several hundred years, we wager that we might yet take back the powers of inscription and abstraction. Notably, the earliest writings in Mesopotamia were promissory notes, records of credits and debts. Writing, it seems, has always been an account of values that transmits and indeed becomes a means to further create values in the future. And yet writing could and did do so much more (and less) than capitalism, it could, even as it transformed species life, speak to experiences and futures far beyond the purview of value, that is, of *the value form*—the form of value indexed to labor time and its historical alienation. Capital, speaking very generally, has transformed, erased or vectoralized these processes according to its designs. And indeed, writing-as-monetary-media, has in fact reasserted over other modes of writing this primary function of economic accounting almost paradigmatically today, albeit in a register that is oftentime unconscious, since it is ordinarily perceived to be distinct from the immediacy of expression.

This generalized writing, namely that of information and its transaction in and as markets, collected through ubiquitous computing, becomes the omnipresent other scene of nearly all expression's double-articulation as semiotic expression and as data on computational substrates. As Google's

self-renaming as Alphabet might testify, language in the present historical conjuncture, now carries with it, *avant la lettre*, the logic of capital even in its most intimate expressivity. Language has become a site and indeed means of capitalist production (Virno), which is to say racial capitalist production. We could say that since writing has been subsumed by information, meaning has been besieged by the totalitarianism of financialization and with that, the politics of capitalist precarity. Thus we see the crisis in the distribution of wealth, in health, in governance, in gun control, in ecology and in our inability to say anything about it that has real structural transformational effects.

Today, with the full financialization occurring as the colonization of the lifeworld by informatics, it is as if every utterance has become, inescapably, a wager on the value form—an effort to get a return on investment. Our speech, like our postings, teaching, talking and writing, has become a wager within capital to get more capital. Increasingly this situation prevails across regions and cultures and permeates every aspect of everyday life. Each speech act or written word becomes in effect a derivative, a risk instrument seeking liquidity (currency, “likes,” and yes, money) as access to a share of the social product. Therefore, in response to the fetishism around human capital as the soul which must be put to work in capitalist production, we must *reverse subsume* the poetic expressivity that lies in the word (and indeed in art, photography, in music and in making) and seize the word (and allied forms of expression in every art, including the most ordinary and mundane arts of mankind life) as a medium for the transmission and creation of values, *plural*. These values, the deeply plural forms of care that exist only in sharing and relation, cannot be severed from their implantation and expression in forms of community and solidarity nor collapsed back into the value-form of racial capitalism—what we here refer to as “value”—if they are to retain their character, their qualities, and also, their revolutionary power. They are concrete, local, specific, relational, even if they must seek their way in a matrix of datification and abstraction.

Poetically, analytically, pragmatically and technically, we must recognize monetary media themselves—dollars, pesos, and their ledgers of account—as *protocolized* forms of writing. States write on bills, banks receive bills and

issue depositors credits written on their ledgers. These forms of writing and the derivatives thereof extend throughout the world system as the financialization of nearly everything and have set their designs on all other forms of expression. Media companies, universities, students, the poor are all subject to the codes of capital and bound by its protocolization of the rules of inscription. Who can issue their own money?—a key question. Monetary media are forms of writing that absorb and re-articulate other forms of mark making. We might repurpose these various media of inscription to mean otherwise, to mean and thus *to do* things other than what is done by existing monies and their derivative forms of capitalization. We might seek values-transmission media that do not produce accumulation on one side as a direct function of dispossession on the other—as occurs in the wage relation or in interest bearing capital that in the last instance metabolizes labor. We might seek monetary media that are not colonizing, extractive and racializing in their very implantation and utility, as are the current forms of economic media, but rather serve to sustain, organize and foster practices of freedom, decolonization and emancipation. Monies for poetry and revolution means currencies of poetry and revolution. These imply alternative methods of account. (Lopez)

Knowing full well that monetary media and its accounting practices have been drivers of capitalist expansion (Lenin, Luxembourg), colonization (Cesaire), epidermalization (Fanon, Hall, Browne), we should seek to intervene in the methods of inscription essential to capitalist economy, as well as the network of inscriptions ordained by money as capital. Monetary inscriptions, the methods of issuance and account of current money, along with its invested algorithms of datification, securitization, and monetary issuance, must be revealed as *protocols* of measure and accounting. Furthermore, we must become fluent in how these protocols are networked through institutions, imaginations, communications and nearly all other social practices. We must recognize that these protocols, globally networked and operating in accord with mathematics, are, despite their often unspoken claims to conceptual neutrality, nonetheless always already political. To want to understand money as such, as a network of networks, indeed as a *global computational*

operating system, (built “behind our backs”) means also that we imagine the possibility of making conscious what is socially unconscious, and beyond that, reprotocolizing systems of account and thus also of issuance.

For the moment, we break off here, having, I hope, glimpsed the necessity of re-protocolizing the global operating system that is the integrated financial and informatic world of racial capitalism, its economic media and the world computer. We will find, I think, that just as importantly as rerprotocolizing networks of account (how accounting is administered, how credit is issued and value apportioned) we also become fluent in *how to denominate values*. The futures that our protest and higher acting call into being must become the bases of values. Such denominations will program by encoding the performances of the refusal and indeed prohibition of extractive relations because they will provide economic options that allow the active, real-time election of non-extractive socio-economic activity. We may choose and create cooperative, decolonial currencies as vectors of becoming, rather than, rather than national ones so long as we can design and host such on computational platforms that are also and at the same time collectively owned. This emergence is a matter of technics, politics and poesis— strategies of engagement with space, time, computation and relation that would allow historical claims to persist semiotically and economically in order to realize our highest aspirations and most sacred hopes. The values we express must indeed back our expressions and not be liquidated (as they currently are) by their form and platform.

This persistence of plural, collective values in ways capable of altering the probability distribution of possible futures, can only be done if our most dear collective values which I will but summarize and abstract here as love, solidarity, sustainability, justice, humility, and mutual aid, are able to materially organize economy itself. Expression must not be subsumed by capital but, in the decolonization of economic media, must ordain economic and social relations through sharing risk and equity in ways that are equitable, sustainable, mutually aiding and just. Economy must itself become poetry. This means that we create cyber-social networks whose practices and practitioners (we are already here) are dedicated to specific forms of

liberation and social justice and whose participants themselves—by means of their sociality—may back the currencies we ourselves issue on a new type of network. We need to create alternative currencies whose purchase on the future increases as the power of our social movements increase. We might mint tokens designed for just these purposes similar to the way we mint images and poems. And we might create currencies that are non-extractive, capable of abstraction without extraction. We are talking about semio-monetary forms fostering stranger mediated solidarities rather than colonizing through territorialization and extraction as do current monies and communications. Semio-monetary forms that create concrete kinship, solidarity and shared equity by sharing risk and futurity. Social media and cryptocurrency provide the way forward as they are, in their current form, the means by which new collective organization has been empowered and is expressed, even as this emergence is also exploited by platform owners and the fixed capital of computing and institutions. We must learn to collectivize our capacities for collectivization and to render the econometrics of such organization *cooperative* and assure that platform equity is collectively held. This would be but a first phase, a generalization of ownership moving towards a dissolution of ownership. A collectively expressive financialization moving towards the ultimate anachronization of finance. A material expression that reveals the signature of all in each and every object.

Therefore, we must embark on the decolonization of economic media and of money itself through a reimagining and re-engineering of the protocols of writing. Urgently we must learn to understand and remake economic media in order to re-engineer the grammar of the multitude. Only through a reworking of the protocols for the writing processes that comprehensively inscribe expressivity, finance, and computational code can we sustainably create interconnected friend2friend economies, expressive of mutually agreed upon values because working toward the performative realization of those values: economies that are functional, sustainable, non-extractive, just, abundant, poetic, loving, beautiful. Post-capitalist. Decolonial. Communist.

Note

1. This text is adapted from a work in progress provisionally entitled, *Of Communism: Notes for the Decolonization of Money*.

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