Media-N

Introduction: The Afterlives of Data

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What is a digital afterlife? Several recent television shows and novels have imagined near futures when one can live forever in a virtual Elysium after physical death. A 2016 episode of *Black Mirror,* "San Junipero" (directed by Owen Harris), prototypes a metaverse afterlife in which the deceased, digitized and uploaded, inhabit simulations of their favorite decades, surrounded by other data-ghosts as well as those preparing to fully cross over. The episode ends on an up note, with the protagonists coming to terms with mortality by joyously realizing they never have to die. Only the final shot delivers a dystopian glimpse of the infrastructure needed to sustain this computational heaven: an army of autonomous robotic arms tend the blinking lights of a dark and cavernous server farm. Heaven, now an archive-*cum*-videogame, precariously relies on fallible equipment and corporate stewardship. Neal Stephenson's epic 2019 novel, *Fall; or, Dodge in Hell*, on the other hand, makes the environmental and infrastructural costs, as well as the existential threats, of such an afterworld central: once whole brain emulation is perfected, the entire global economy reorients toward the industry. No one saves for retirement or even lives in the now; all energy and affect belong henceforth to the great hereafter. Amazon's series *The Upload* (2020–) transforms these weighty concerns into a comedic farce, in which it is no longer clear who is alive and who is dead. Eternity comes at a steep hourly data rate and living forever is just a means of continuing to spend and consume.

Lodged at the center of each version of this fantasy of immortality, if only in a disembodied digital form, is the realization that our data does, indeed, already have a life of its own. It will outlast us and be pushed into the service of political and social ends to which we never consented. "Data bodies" endure in the wake of our biological deaths; "Life" on social media—to the degree that anyone has a life on social media—scrolls on and our data continues to be productive by shaping models, training algorithms, and populating archives. As a corollary, our afterlives have a carbon footprint, a material existence as a deluge of data points in circulation, being aggregated and mined along with the living by the reaping of algorithms. There may be a Heaven, or Hell, or purgatory, or blank abyss awaiting us; but, even now, there is certainly a place where we all go, and that is our afterlife *of* data, our afterlife *as* data.

Writing in the 1990s, the tactical media collective Critical Art Ensemble (CAE) already saw the power coalescing around the data body.

> The most frightening thing about the data body is that it is at the center of an individual's social being. It tells the members of officialdom what our cultural identities and roles are. We are powerless to contradict the data body. It is the word of law. One's organic being is no longer a determining factor, from the point of view of corporate and government bureaucracies. Data have become the center of social culture, and our organic flesh is nothing more than a counterfeit representation of original data. (Critical Art Ensemble, *Flesh Machine: Cyborgs, Designer Babies and New Eugenic Consciousness* [Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia, 1998], 146)

CAE's grim provocation in 1998 now seems like a commonplace from our contemporary state of resigned acquiescence to the logic of corporate and state data capture. This special issue of *Media-N* explores the increasingly blurred line between the biological body and the data body, between the "immateriality" of data and the massive infrastructure that supports it. The essays contained within attend to various "afterlives" of data and ask how we can trace the materialization, circulation, preservation, and transformation of data across the thresholds of biological death and format obsolescence, as well as data's shift from physical embodiment to digitization. The concept of the "afterlife of data" thus names not only the uses of our data bodies (before and after our lives have ended), but also the material fate of data that enters one of many kinds of afterlife—from rotting in an e-waste dump to being preserved in refrigerated data centers and vaults, encoded into our genes, or literally launched into the heavens.

The afterlives of data are long. The standard practice of preserving both analog and digital data provides the conditions for outmoded and historically biased information to be resurrected and transubstantiated into new tools, such as facial recognition technology, predictive software, and other under- and loosely regulated systems of surveillance capitalism. These systems contribute to decisions on the length of prison sentences, the employability of a job applicant, and so much more. They attain a level of agency that outstrips that of the humans navigating this turbulent new world. For example, web users click reCAPTCHA boxes to access their own bank accounts, showing that they are indeed human, while simultaneously doing the unpaid labor that refines the vision of machines.

The articles, interview, and artist projects in this issue address the ways the material conditions of data and art are shifting, and how thinkers, artists, and scholars can offer crucial scaffolding for understanding how we arrived here. The issue presents prehistories of data models we take for granted and provides historical contexts that clarify what is new and what is not, helping us to see where we now might be headed. NFTs, DNA data, the sensuous traces of e-waste, facial recognition software trained on marginalized subjects, and the institutionalized processes of dispossessing human subjects from their colonial contexts all present ways in which data comes to have an afterlife that haunts our present and potential futures.

In "Archiving for Extinction," Mél Hogan and Sarah Roberts consider three archival case studies that maintain a "fundamental adherence to a belief that humanity itself can be adequately represented and thus fully, wholly, and totally preserved in data." Central to their discussion is DNA as both a category of data willingly surrendered by consumers for novel information about themselves and as a future site for data storage. Hogan and Roberts describe the way data usurps the human and comes to stand in for human knowledge, becoming more valuable than human life. The authors show how technologists are leaning into this logic by creating an "archive for

extinction": that is, an archive for the time beyond the destruction of Earth and all the people on it, thus inverting the narrative of technological and social progress that fuels contemporary discourses of innovation and disruption. Archives for extinction, then, premise a moment when there will be no one left to look at them. These are, the authors argue, nihilistic endeavors disguised as hopeful, such as current fantasies of using human ingenuity and perseverance to colonize Mars or other projects posited on the collapse of Earth's ecosystem and the potential end of life.

The idea that humanity itself can be adequately represented, captured, and preserved in data resonates with the conditions Brett Zehner examines in his essay, "The 'Situation' in Micronesia: The Rise of Behavioral Dispossession." Zehner analyzes the "algorithmic" procedures that enabled mid-century American anthropological researchers in Micronesia "to construct a controlled environment, dividing human actions from their social context." By attending to this particular moment in the prehistory of digital dividuation, Zehner points to the misleading ideology of Silicon Valley, which constructs and maintains a narrative about what is new by denying the many grim histories that, if told, would make clear what led to these "innovations," "disruptions," "solutions," "discoveries," and "breakthroughs." He traces how behavioral scientists "dismantled the self-possessed subject as the prime unit of decision-making." Zehner reminds us that algorithms are not new; they are simply instructions, and these procedures can become repeatable recipes for dispossession and dehumanization.

This is not to say that there is nothing new under the sun; rather, there are continuities and discontinuities cohering in whatever we call "new" at any given time. Lengthy afterlives often unfold from technologies embedded in cognitive, perceptual, and social processes that historical thinking associates with the past: the old, the obsolete, the outmoded. Zehner provides an account of data mining as, simultaneously, a new medium and "as a mutation of persistent dispossessive techniques, specifically those of racial capitalism." The essay establishes a prehistory of data colonialism that insists upon an awareness of the racial dimensions of behavioral dispossession, within a methodology that holds that all capitalism is racial capitalism.

Similarly, Nina Dewi Toft Djanegara looks to how individuals unknowingly participate in the creation of data sets that train machine learning algorithms attempting to perfect facial recognition. By applying for a passport or crossing a border, or simply becoming ensnared in a structurally racist criminal justice system, the data bodies of individuals are resurrected into afterlives that affect the futures and freedoms of others. Her article, "Ghosts in the Machine," tracks how images that are captured, either with consent or coercively, for one purpose end up being embedded in new contexts and technologies by populating AI training sets. Her archival and ethnographic research illuminates the conditions that gave rise to machine vision and facial recognition systems and adds new layers to the ethical questions that haunt the creation and use of biometric data sets. Alongside the practices of US border regimes that attempt to standardize subjects, Toft Djanegara discusses artistic interventions, such as Martina Bacigalupo's *Gula Art Studio*, to examine how what is left out of the official archive can be reappropriated to produce counter archives and alternative afterlives. As AI art-making devices proliferate, such as Google Open AI's Dall-E to Midjourney, the integration of AI, machine vision, and other tools in the production of digital art will continue to raise ethical questions. What are the resource requirements for the production of these works, from electricity to caches of image sets, some of which may be portraits of people who did not consent to having their likeness used in this way?

Ricky Crano's article, "The [Dissipative] Joy of Accounting," stages a return to the "dead" concepts of authenticity and uniqueness in art, once so central to traditional understandings of aesthetic and market values. Crano argues that NFTs have complicated this industrial-era debate by reducing the value of art entirely to its transactional history and provenance. Walter Benjamin's canonical 1935 essay on the ways in which mechanical reproduction altered our relationships to art objects by destroying their uniqueness but simultaneously opening up new forms of political engagement, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," haunts Crano's essay. If film, as a medium, was finally able to represent and express the political, social, and aesthetic rearrangements of the industrial age, NFTs, he argues, have produced for our era "a subjectivity commensurate with the prerogatives of new regimes of data power and algorithmic governmentality." The excitement surrounding NFTs and the blockchain have concealed a "reactionary project," he argues, that augments "the regime of private property," simultaneously dampening the potential for moving aesthetic experiences and exacerbating the current climate crisis. Ultimately, Crano's assessment of NFT art is quite grim, holding little hope for the kinds of utopian or liberatory potentials lauded by NFT proponents. In Crano's account, in the era of NFTs, the afterlife of art is just data.

On the other hand, in co-editor Brian Michael Murphy's interview with Asad J. Malik, we see an engagement with NFTs and the metaverse situated as not only new realm of economic exchange, but also as expansive site of imaginative play. Malik's past projects include creating NFT holograms of Black originators of popular TikTok dances that reroute revenue back to these innovators whose work has been appropriated by young white female TikTok stars. Since the interview, Malik has launched other projects, such as Jadu AVAs, a series of 11,111 AR avatars for use in Jadu's Web3 gaming platform, developed in collaboration with blockbuster director Michael Bay. Minting some of Jadu's NFTs will require collectors to physically travel to a specific site on Earth, perhaps adding another layer to what Crano's argument could effectively critique. Such provocations, however, elicit excitement about NFTs from Discord and other engaged communities: NFTs become elements in AR gameplay, act as social beings that provoke and organize travel across space, and magnetize sites for resources and infrastructure.

This issue also contains two essays by artists describing their work and its intersections with the afterlives of data. Artists making interventions in the entanglement of human and machine, of expenditure and ecology, of labor and automation, of techno-utopian futures and a present marked by catastrophic extraction must consider some combination of historical context, technical specificity, and the ongoing reproduction of oppressive structures, even as Big Tech touts "disruption," and "moving fast and breaking things." Regrettably (but not surprisingly), some things are not being disrupted or broken, such as white supremacy, the continuation of centuries-long deskilling of laborers across the globe, and heteropatriarchal bro leadership. In fact, they seem to be growing stronger, as techno-corporate leaders successfully embed old ways of thinking and seeing into the newest forms of machine learning and vision.

In "Smellscaping Guiyu," Tinghao Zhou attends to the material and affective dimensions of smell to document the prolonged afterlife of media objects that are "intimately intertwined with the life and livelihood of the local workforce and community." Zhou aims his intervention at the underregulated, highly toxic afterlife of digital technology as e-waste. Western postindustrial nations dispose of e-waste by exploiting environmental laws of developing countries in Asia to "camouflage their capitalist and neocolonial logic as an ideal of globalization." But Zhou's artwork is not simply a critique of a dastardly logistical scheme; it also argues that these "dead" materials

restructure and reorganize the human sensorium. Following Sean Cubitt's work on how human bodies become absorbers of toxicity in digital lifeworlds,[1] Zhou details a smell walk and invites us to engage with the endurance of digital technology through the most ephemeral sense, smell. He extends his research and fieldwork into future plans for an installation that will destabilize the dominance of visuality and will help us think through information and experience that resist traditional modes of material capture and preservation.

In "Unburning: Technics of Opacity, Oversight, and the Police Surveillance State," Abram Stern demonstrates that metadata can serve as a site for artists to (re)create, provoke, bend, and remix official records. Using FBI surveillance footage of the Baltimore uprisings in 2015, Stern devises a process that defamiliarizes metadata, troubling the authoritative gaze from above that structures the footage. They invite new modes of seeing and witnessing for contexts when the maelstrom of anti-Black violence and surveillance, combined with a call for the enactment of whiteness and/as overseeing, clouds the official visual and legal records. Stern pulls apart the mechanisms of surveillance to reveal how the technology's forms of documentation, glitches, and moments of inoperability show that "digital time is not as hegemonic as it sometimes seems." In their project, machine-readable code becomes a script for human voices, slowing the hyper-speed of computation down to the flow of everyday spoken language, opening up space for intercutting algorithms with sound and video projections. Collaborating with Margaret Laurena Kemp on a five-hour performance that adapts W. E. B. Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk*, Stern uses the reappropriated data to reframe a seminal moment in the archive of American racial violence. In this way, a moment of reduction and compression becomes a generator of alternative times and other ways of looking, which gesture toward a possible future unstuck from the hold of the plantocracy that still conditions race and resistance to oppression in the United States. If there is a liberatory potential to be located in the afterlives of data, perhaps it is through this kind of intervention in archival slivers, in acts of making strange the evidence disseminated by the state to legitimate its authoritative gaze and to justify its violent reactions against anyone perceived to be a threat.

Three thoughtful reviews round out this special issue of *Media-N*. Kaitlin Forcier maintains the issue's interest in NFTs and the blockchain ledger as archive in a review of Domenico Quaranta's 2022 book, *Surfing with Satoshi: Art, Blockchain and NFTs*. Jaleh Mansoor reviews *The Imitation Game: Visual Culture in the Age of Artificial Intelligence* at the Vancouver Art Gallery. If art is one potential afterlife of a data set, Mansoor argues that AI has yet to successfully achieve this end, but it may still have a future. Finally, April Riddle reviews Jacob Gaboury's *Image Objects: An Archaeology of Computer Graphics* (2021), which excavates "dead media objects," such as early computer graphics images, to expose how they have had long afterlives, shaping the physical and digital objects that make up our contemporary world.

As this issue goes to (digital) press, the technologized edifice of racial capitalism shows signs of exhaustion. Meta just laid off 11,000 workers, followed by Amazon's announcement that they, too, would soon lay off nearly as many. The FTX crypto exchange collapse exposed the ways that unchecked socioeconomic privilege, delusional speculation, and derivative assets will combine to produce toxic effects—or, that is, that they will do so as long as financial institutions continue to use the 2008 crash as a kind of playbook, rather than seeing it as a cautionary tale. Elon Musk has added Twitter to his eclectic intergalactic investment sandbox, creating disorienting, if also comedic, effects. It is now quite clear that the concentration of wealth and power in the hands of a

few (though increasingly numerous) billionaires will not solve for the existential threats caused by racial capitalism and ecocidal resource extraction run rampant.

The work in this issue rejects the nihilism that poses as utopian longing, embodied in the dream of an off-world human future. Rather, it looks to art, scholarship, theory, reflection, and critical thought as vital resources. The possible afterlives of data are nearly infinite. The essays, artworks, and interview in this issue show that the accumulated data sets of the past few centuries can be weaponized to damaging effect or they can be mobilized to resist and otherwise slow the gearwork of oppression. As new forms of data capture, aggregation, and mining emerge, and as old forms are redeployed, we hope the writing here offers models and pathways for questioning, for intentional creative intervention, for experimentation, for play, for writing futures that do not presume the death of Earth.

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ENDNOTES

[1] Sean Cubitt, *Finite Media: Environmental Implications of Digital Technologies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 119–20.

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