

Technologies of Rebellion: technology and the posthuman social in Earl Lovelace's *Is Just a Movie*

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Abstract

Earl Lovelace's 2011 novel Is Just a Movie imagines the arrival of the "age of technology" in Trinidad. Set mostly in the 1970s and 1980s, it ponders the apparent failure of the emancipatory hopes associated with independence, then the radical politics of the 1970 Black Power Revolution to ask about the role of technology in cultural and social life, and the potential for technology and culture to remake the social. Refusing both technological determinism and development discourse, both of which are portrayed as forms of neocolonialism, the novel instead insists on the possibility of a politicized and emancipatory engagement with technology that emerges from a longer history of Caribbean proto-posthumanist thought and the cultural technology of the Caribbean Carnival.

Keywords: Earl Lovelace, technology, Caribbean, carnival, neoliberalism

1. Is Just a Movie

Is Just a Movie is set in the 1970s in the small town of Cascadu, in the years after the short-lived Black Power Revolution in Trinidad. The narrator, the formerly successful, now washed up calypsonian King Kala, the self-styled poet of the revolution, is bereft after the failing of the uprising, when he, like many other men in the town, auditions as an extra for a Hollywood film being shot on the island. The movie industry, according to the producer and the media coverage, promises "local talent wedded to foreign technology" (Lovelace 21), and of course the film maker "have his people, *foreign industry*, that he bring with him" (21, italics in original). King Kala soon understands the role assigned to the Trinidadians in the film: "Local talent. Our role is to die" (23). Most of the extras, who play stereotyped Africans in grass skirts in this "jungle" film, obey the director's instructions to die unobtrusively, "falling down and dying just so" (25). Although they recognize the insult of the role they have been assigned, they insist that it doesn't matter—"is just a movie" (29). Only King Kala and one other man, Sonnyboy, refuse, with King insisting that "it is as human that we must die" (28), but such deaths do not

suit the filmmakers: "The quality of our dying is an embarrassment to them. We dying too slow. We wasting too much of the Whitepeople time" (27). King Kala and Sonnyboy quit the film, and the novel then tells the story of them and many of the other residents of Cascadu over the preceding and following years.

This scene introduces the key themes of the novel: the value, meaning and work of culture in a globalizing world of neocolonial relations; selfhood and humanity; and the place of technology in all these realms: in cultural practices, in relation to the self and community, and in the emerging geopolitical order. Towards the end of the novel these questions are revived when the narrative pivots into a bitter satire of neoliberal development politics. A miracle occurs—the resurrection of a woman named Doreen, giving her powers to heal the sick and grant other wishes—and a storm of prosperity, development and international interest breaks over the island: new oil and gas fields are discovered, and thousands of tourists expected. When a crime wave threatens the nascent tourism industry, a foreign expert suggests the problem is "people who wanted the impossible"; as a solution is for "the state and private enterprise ... to join together to rid the

people of unrealistic and stifling dreams” (315). So begins “the programme to buy up useless dreams,” promising not only money in exchange for dreams, but also “the freedom associated with people who had surrendered their dreams”, and, above all, *development*: the slogan of the programme is “dreams gone, development take over now” (316). Crucially, this buy-back scheme from the government is made possible not only by the sudden wealth of Trinidad, but also by foreign technology, as the government and local experts explain to the people. According to the Prime Minister: “This is the age of technology. The leading nations have everything down to a science and there is no longer any need for their people to dream. Everything has already been thought through.” The “experts from the university” agree: “We don’t need to think again. There is no point in reinventing the wheel. The technology is available and we have the money to purchase. We just have to follow” (316). Just as dreams in the form of unrealized potential are deemed “encumbering” (315), the Prime Minister and university experts’ vision brands “technological dependence” (Cooper 5) as “freedom.”

In this vision, technology is purchased for the purposes of “development”, which means “to give us here everything they have there” (309). Not only are the aims of “development” here unquestioned and assumed to be universal, there is also a particular form of technological determinism at work: the assumption that the purchased technology will have the desired effects, and that those effects are inherent—and inherently desirable, because they constitute “progress”—and thus outside political and social control or influence. This serves to naturalize the effects of the government’s development program, which are nonetheless telling:

In the days to come, the experts continued to work feverishly in preparation for the influx of tourists. They tilted the savannah to face the sea. They take what used to be Shannon cricket ground, where Learie Constantine, C.L.R. James, and Pascal used to play, and make a car park. They build a curtain of buildings to drape the waterfront so that the working population

would not be distracted from their labours by the sight of the sea. They hang buildings over the street to block out the sun so that we would have the gloom of the city of London. They had wanted fog, but they discovered that due to a clerical error it had not been budgeted for. But that would be a problem easy to correct, the contractors said, since once the paperwork was done and the money allocated, it would be a simple matter to pipe in the vapours of sadness from the reservoir hanging over the slum settlement we knew as The Beetham. (311)

In this satire of “development,” the landscape is rearranged, the weather engineered, and history erased. Even the Trinidadian carnival is to be shortened, standardized and rearranged in order to create an “efficient show” (311) for the visitors. Technology has the function of reshaping Trinidad to conform to the desires of international business and Western tourists. It transforms the natural and built environment according to the norms of the City of London—both the historical colonial power and the contemporary centre of global financial capitalism—while *preserving* existing social relations of exploitation, inequality and poverty. Despite the sudden wealth generated by the miracle of Doreen’s resurrection, the material circumstances, labour conditions and suffering of the local people go unchanged—indeed they must be perpetuated to guarantee the progress promised by “development.” [1]

The continuity between historical colonialism and this technological neocolonialism, in which Trinidadians cede power to both thinking and technology developed elsewhere without any benefit to the local people, is soon made explicit when the international visitors arrive for Carnival. They include “Christopher Columbus; Sir Francis Drake; General Sir John Hawkins,” prominent colonial officers, writers and artists from the eighteenth to twentieth centuries, as well as “architects from the World Bank, city planners to take us into the Developed World” (323). These visitors portray the contemporary “success” of Trinidad as a result of the “wisdom” of the (former) colonial powers: “an achievement whose foundation is your stable labour force and

your educated elite ... laid by us in an earlier time”—a claim that a government minister is happy to parrot, assuring the visitors that Trinidadians “still have a lot to learn from you ... you have laid the foundations of the society we now enjoy” (324). In response, King Kala reflects on those forgotten by this neocolonial rewriting of Trinidad’s history: the “ordinary people” whose “resistance gave us a sense of self, whose artistry speaks for our humanity and whose struggle turned plantations into the battlefields for humanness” (324-25). In between King Kala’s insistence at the film shooting at the beginning of the novel that “it is as human that we must die” (28) and his reminder towards the end that humanness was not simply granted to colonized and enslaved populations, but had to be won by them in centuries of struggle and cultural creation, the novel traces the late twentieth century struggles of its characters to stay human amidst poverty and oppression, and asks what it means to be human in the “age of technology” (316) announced by the Prime Minister. It does so by tracing the stories of the people of Cascadu in the years before and after the Black Power uprising, in a series of vignettes often narrated via a focus on a particular object, tool or device. I argue that the novel should therefore be understood as a recent iteration of a long history of Caribbean thought on the definition and limits of the human, but also as a contribution to debates on the relationship between technology, culture and the social.

2. Critical Humanism and Posthumanism in Caribbean Thought

At least since the mid-twentieth century, Caribbean thinkers have frequently drawn attention to dehumanization as a technology of colonialism and called for forms of critical humanism in response to the “narrow and fragmentary, incomplete and biased and, all things considered, sordidly racist” (Césaire “Discourse” 37) definition of the human, or Man, and the attached “rights of man” that emerged from the European Enlightenment. In his *Discourse on Colonialism*, Aimé Césaire summarized it simply: “colonization = ‘thingification’” (42). Thingification, for Césaire, involves brutalization

and the deliberate destruction of the past—for both colonized and colonizer—as well as the justification of this destruction via a discourse of development: “They talk to me about progress, about ‘achievements,’ diseases cured, improved standards of living. ... They throw facts at my head, statistics, mileages of roads, canals, and railroad tracks” (“Discourse” 42-43). In response, he demands “a humanism made to the measure of the world” (“Discourse” 73). Césaire’s humanism may be termed a “situated humanism,” in which “particular peoples in specific historical situations, as well as their situated thinkers, could offer concrete forms of life as global gifts that could indicate how to live a more fully human life” (Wilder 593). Frantz Fanon’s work shares with Césaire an analysis of colonialism as destructive of the humanity of both colonized and colonizer, however he is critical of what he sees as the essentializing tendencies of Négritude. Perhaps most significantly, Fanon conceives of a “new humanism” (*Black Skin* 9) and a “new humanity” (*Wretched* 2) detached from history—which, in his view, has been destroyed by colonialism—and instead forged entirely in the struggle for national liberation: “the ‘thing’ colonized becomes a man through the very process of liberation” (Fanon, *Wretched* 2; cf. Klinger).

More recently, Sylvia Wynter has updated this Caribbean critique and tradition of critical humanism for the new millennium, stating that “all our present struggles with respect to race, class, gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity, struggles over the environment, global warming, severe climate change, the sharply unequal distribution of the world’s resources ... —these are all different facets of the central ethnoclass Man vs. Human struggle” (260-61). By “ethnoclass Man,” Wynter means the Western bourgeois conception of the human and its struggle to maintain its privilege, as opposed to “securing the well-being, and therefore the full cognitive and behavioural autonomy of the human species itself/ourselves” (260). Wynter positions herself as a follower of both Fanon and Césaire, but she widens their critique of colonial humanism to a broader timeline, insisting that it is relevant to more contemporary concerns such as climate change, but also offering a long genealogy of Man not

limited to the concept of “race” and European imperialism, but including also the intellectual history of Renaissance humanism, then the rise first of the physical sciences, then of the biological sciences. The alternative conceptualization of humanism that Wynter offers in response is perhaps unexpected. Central to the problem, in Wynter’s view, is a biocentric conception of Man, that is, the Darwinian understanding of humans as natural organisms enables the naturalization of current social realities, a refusal of politics and political responsibility, and with it the naturalization of the “Color (cum Colonial) Line” (322) that continues to designate and divide the deserving and undeserving, now functioning “at all levels of the social order” (323) and not strictly tied to race or colonial status. (Wynter’s theory of the naturalization, multiplication and deterritorialization of the line of inclusion/exclusion from the category of the fully human or Man thus has substantial affinities with what Boaventura de Sousa Santos calls “abyssal thinking”). Within this conceptualization, nonwhite people may be accepted as “honorary humans” (329), but are more likely to be relegated to the subhuman in order to enable the reproduction of the current social order. As an alternative, Wynter returns to Césaire’s call for “a new science, beyond the limits of the natural sciences ... a science in which the ‘study of the Word’ ... will condition the ‘study of nature’” (Wynter 328). That is, she calls for a new perspective, overcoming the cultural-epistemological divide between the natural sciences and humanities/social sciences, in order to open up “a new frontier” onto “a nonadaptive mode of human self-cognition” (331). Rhetorically modelling this epistemological bridge, Wynter calls for a poetic science of “nature” by drawing on recent evolutionary theory to conceptualize a “nonadaptive mode” of human self-understanding—that is, one that allows for mutations, drift or recombinations—and she cites the physicist Heintz Pagels’s book *The Dreams of Reason*, which argues for randomness and complexity to destabilize dominant paradigms. In addition, Louis Chude-Sokei identifies in this passage the “eminently science fictional” trope of the “new frontier,” and suggests that Wynter’s reading of Césaire demands “new genres of the

human made necessary due to the remarkable growth of computer capacity and our increasing dependence on them as a material site of memory” (Chude-Sokei 201). Chude-Sokei, like Alexander Weheliye (“Feenin”), therefore insists upon recognizing Wynter, alongside some other Caribbean writers, as a posthumanist thinker, and indeed on recognizing a longer history of what he terms “Caribbean pre-posthumanism” that prefigures the geographical and temporal timeframe often according to posthumanism, that is, the United States or Europe and USA in the late twentieth century. [2]

Amidst the surge of scholarly interest in posthumanism in recent years, there have also been voices of dissent and caution, in particular from black scholars and people of colour, in general arguing that “much of posthumanist thought as well as animal studies suffers from an often unmarked Euro-American focus and through that, ironically, a philosophical resuscitation of the status of ‘the human’ as a transparent category” (Livingston and Puar 5). If posthumanist thought is understood as a call to move “beyond the human,” this poses a range of questions and problems for black people and black thinkers. Lewis Gordon points out that “dominant groups can ‘give up’ humanism for the simple fact that their humanity is presumed, while other communities have struggled too long for the humanistic prize” (39). Zakiyyah Iman Jackson asks, “what and crucially whose conception of humanity are we moving beyond?” (“Outer Worlds” 215, italics in original). Jackson has elsewhere criticized many posthumanist scholars’ ignorance of decolonial thought as a significant forerunner of their own challenges to Enlightenment humanism (“Animal”). While some scholars therefore conclude that posthumanist thought offers no potential for a decolonial or emancipatory philosophy or politics (e.g. Brennan), others argue that so-called critical posthumanism must become more critical—more attuned to questions of race and inequality, and more aware of the work of non-white and/or non-Western scholars and traditions in thinking through and beyond the human (e.g. Islam; M. Jackson; Luisetti). Accordingly, recent years have witnessed a significant number of books in particular on race or blackness and nature,

particularly “the animal” or animal studies (e.g. Bennett; Boisseron; Z. Jackson, *Becoming*; Johnson; Kim; Montford and Taylor; Suzuki), but—with the notable exceptions of Chude-Sokei and Weheliye—far fewer on race or blackness and technology or nonhuman matter within a broadly posthumanist framework. [3]

One reason for this is perhaps that technology is in general undertheorized, as books on the meaning, philosophy and social effects of technology commonly assert. According to Carl Mitcham, “Technology, or the making and using of artifacts, is a largely unthinking activity. It emerges from unattended to ideas and motives, while it produces and engages with unreflected upon objects” (1). Donald MacKenzie and Judy Wajcman agree, writing that “we live our lives in a world of things people have made. Mostly we take that world for granted.” The reason, they suggest, is the dominance of technological determinism, so that “technological change seems to have its own logic, which we may perhaps protest about even try to block, but which we appear to be unable to alter fundamentally” (1). Langdon Winner suggests two reasons for this “technological somnambulism:” first, the “astonishing hold that the idea of ‘progress’ has exercised on social thought during the industrial age”—and the assumption that progress stems primarily from new technologies—and because the relationship between humans and technical things is seen as “too obvious to merit serious reflection” (5). In postcolonial contexts, however, this is not necessarily the case. There, “European (and, as the last century unfolded, American) technological intervention was characterized by violence—a physical and epistemological violence directed against past practices and outmoded technics; but also a current violence expressed through technologies of warfare and policing, of rapacious land appropriation and mineral extraction, of intrusive medicine and coercive public health” (Arnold 87). In these contexts, technological time is frequently out of joint, as Arnold further notes: “while colonies and ex-colonies might sometimes be the dumping ground for Europe’s unwanted goods and obsolete technologies, they might also be favored sites for the development of the most modern technologies” (89).

I suggest that *Is Just a Movie* should be read as a rare reflection on the politics of technology in a world of global inequality and neocolonialism and a literary contribution to the tradition of Caribbean critical posthumanist thought identified by Chude-Sokei—a critical posthumanism thought through everyday technology rather than nature or non-human animals (both of which barely feature in the novel). While so-called transhumanist thought looks forward to “a radical transformation of the human condition by existing, emerging, and speculative technologies” (Ferrando 3), this emerges from a philosophical tradition that uncritically endorses a teleology of progress and that does not seek to deconstruct or question the genealogy of the “human.” In the field of posthumanism that has emerged from poststructuralist and deconstructionist thought and anti- and postcolonial critiques of the “human,” and particularly in literary studies work within this field, the focus has instead more commonly rested on deconstructing the human/animal or human/nature distinction (albeit with some notable exceptions [e.g. Hayles]). In this context, the work of Weheliye and Chude-Sokei is particularly important, but while they focus on cultural phenomena such as electronic music and science fiction, arguing convincingly both for a black posthumanism and for the centrality of race to the history of thinking through the impact of technology on the social, I suggest that Lovelace’s novel instead explores the everyday (but far from mundane) cultures of Trinidad, especially those associated with Carnival, and the relationship between the self, the social, and everyday technology. The novel draws attention to mostly ordinary technical objects that are shown to have an outsized role in constituting and reconstituting selves and communities. Although published in the digital age in 2011 and satirically referencing social and political developments in Trinidad in the twenty first century (around the time of the global financial crisis, sparked by the far-reaching decisions of “machinic actors” [Pöttsch and Hayles 98]), the novel takes place somewhat earlier, covering a period from the late 1960s to the early 1990s, thus anchoring its reflections on technology in the era of Trinidad’s independence and extending into

the era of neoliberal globalization. It therefore extends Earl Lovelace's central concern with, in his own words, "independence ... [in] all its aspects, its flaws as well as its promise" (qtd in Grau-Perejoan 207) to ask how technology shapes the social in Trinidad, what a decolonial relationship to technology might look like, and how, in an age of technology, Trinidadians might "reclaim rebellion" (Lovelace qtd in Grau-Perejoan 211) to further the unfinished project of independence.

3. Technological assemblages in *Is Just a Movie*

The film shooting at the beginning of *Is Just a Movie* and the satire of neoliberalism and development politics at the end frame technology—without the term being defined any further—as both *foreign* and *lacking* in Trinidad. Trinidad may have other resources, like "local talent" (Lovelace 21) or the miraculous powers of the resurrected woman Doreen, but it apparently has no technology nor technological knowledge of its own. The "useless dreams" (316) of the local people—dreams for a better life and a different, more just society—are to be exchanged for the "useful knowledge" (Berg) of technology and development. This vision of technology as a property of elsewhere (presumably primarily the "West"), transferred to Trinidad, is a throwback to earlier, and distinctly colonialist, modes of historiography in the history of science and technology, in which modern technology was assumed to be "a boon bestowed by technologically advanced civilizations on societies considered 'backward,' even 'primitive'" (Arnold 86). In both Arnold's summary of the historiography and the vision of the Trinidadian politicians and academics in the novel, technology is not only Western (ignoring, indeed denying the possibility of indigenous and non-Western technologies), but it is also assumed to be neutral and apolitical. When technology is imported, it is presumed to travel intact, so that it functions in the same way in every context. (If not, then it is the context, whether racial, cultural or geographical, that is assumed to be at fault: "If such technologies failed, it was because local populations, stubborn

or misguided, were unable to appreciate their benefits or local physical conditions militated against their effective use" [Arnold 87].) The novel questions all of these assumptions, although it is concerned less with the recovery of indigenous technologies and scientific knowledges, more with a consideration of the uses, meanings and effects—political, and social and personal—of mostly everyday technologies. It thus corresponds to the historiographical mode Arnold categorizes as "postcolonial" (87), and affirms the "provocative" notion that "technical things have political qualities" (Winner 19). In doing so, it further develops a technological understanding of culture itself: culture as a technology for reprocessing and reprogramming the social.

In the years after the demise of the Black Power Revolution at the beginning of the novel, the people of Cascadu continue to search for and dream of a better life on the island. They seek joy, selfhood, recognition, identity and community—that is, to stay human—through various means: in political parties, in intimate relationships, in sport and music, in work, and, for a brief period, in an ethnic chauvinism that promises people a "secure place" (Lovelace 183) as an African or Indian at the cost of denigrating Caribbean cultures such as calypso and Carnival. In narrating these experiences of political organizing, work, love, friendship, celebration and more, the novel draws attention to the central role of technology and technological objects in these experiences and relationships. In numerous scenes of the novel, the narration crystallizes around a particular object: a steelpan, a deck of cards, a microphone, a pair of binoculars, a letter, a van, a loudspeaker, gasoline lamps and flambeau, a cricket bat, a black beret, a car, a red flag, a piano, a zipper, a bucket of mud. Many of these technologies of everyday life have an intended practical use, some a more symbolic value. In all cases, however, the novel draws attention to the way in which the objects function beyond their intended or practical function. These technologies are revealed to be neither entirely subject to human control nor entirely autonomous; rather, these technologies are instead bound into complex processes of the making of the social and the

self.

In this regard, two scenes of the novel featuring a steelpan are instructive. In the development satire at the end of the novel, culture is also set to be reshaped in the pursuit of profit and according to the perceived desires of the tourist industry—monumental, commercial, assimilated to European traditions, or museumized. An opera house is built, “a monstrous structure to dwarf the savannah,” a copy of Disneyland is constructed, and a “symphony orchestra from the steelbands” (310) created.

A “tourist village” is built in Cascadu, including “a steelband yard where they had pan tuners demonstrating the process by which oil drums were turned into musical instruments” (305). This is a rare acknowledgement of the existence of local technology, but in a setting which exoticizes, primitivizes, dehistoricizes and desocializes the technical process. The “tourist village” carries uneasy overtones of “native villages” at colonial exhibitions; it is inexplicably built in Cascadu rather than Laventille, the deprived district that is the historical home of the steelpan; the process of producing the steelpan is assumed only to produce the practical object—the musical instrument—and not the maker, the player, the listeners, the dancers, or the community; and even the practical object is not for playing in a real life context but has a primarily economic function: to entertain visitors to the “tourist village” and tempt them to pay a fee to “join” a band and play the instruments.

This vision of memorialized and commercialized Trinidadian culture stands in stark contrast to the process of making a steelpan described in an early scene of the novel. A vignette from Sonnyboy’s childhood in Laventille describes in detail the relationship between his father Lance and his steelpan: “every Monday and Tuesday midday he would go to the empty train carriage at the railway station to jam with the fellows from the abattoir, each man beating out the rhythm on his own pan or calling out the ringing rejoicing spirit from his own piece of iron” (40). Lance forgets his pan one day, and when he gets it back it has been beaten out of shape, leading him to spend days and weeks trying to repair it. This process of tuning the pan soon becomes less a strictly

musical technology—designed to produce an instrument with a particular sound—and more a technology of producing the self and the social, yet this process is not driven in any sense by the practical function of the object: “in pounding to find the lost note, Lance had begun to hear a note that as yet hadn’t made a sound. And what he was doing now was trying to get not the note he had lost but the note behind that note, a note unsounded and sacred and surprising and potential—to get that note to sound” (41). Rather than a technological determinism in which the social is transformed by the new capabilities offered by a technology, here the self and social are remade via the making process and from within the social, described in religious and transcendent terms: “a growing congregation” of other men gather to watch him, “cheering him on as he journeyed into the heart of the pan,” and he himself becomes “spirit, Ogun” (42).

A similar process soon becomes apparent in other scenes, as in the relationship between Franklyn, his cricket bat, and the community in Cascadu. When Franklyn goes in to bat, everything and everyone in the village stops what they are doing to watch, and they experience it not as observers, but as participants: “when Franklyn batting we were the ones batting” (89). For as long as he holds the cricket bat in his hand, he represents the community as a whole, he becomes a “mirror” and a window: “we would see ourselves in contest with the world” (89). Franklyn alone does not hold this power—as soon as he puts down his bat after getting out, this function is lost, and day-to-day life in Cascadu whirs into action again. Instead, this is the power of a social-cyborg assemblage of Franklyn, his bat, his batting ability, and the attention and psychic investment of the villagers. The cricket bat, in Franklyn’s hands and with the attention of the village upon it, is attributed a particular agency, it appears to speak, voicing the political questions that will later be taken up by the Black Power revolutionaries and some of the characters: “just when the keeper feel he have the ball in his fists, his bat come down sweet and long, long and sweet, slap, between the keeper and slips, *How you going to stop we? How you go keep we down?*” (89, italics in original). In the narration, King Kala speaks of

“the poetry of his batting” (85).

This is one of the significant modes of technology in the novel, a mode in which technology functions very differently than in the Trinidadian government’s vision, and also quite differently than in most philosophies of technology. While the cricket bat, in its function as an instrument with which to strike and propel the cricket ball, might reasonable be understood as a replication and extension of the human body, as in common understandings of technology as “organ projection” (Mitcham 23-24), such a conceptualization of technology cannot account for the additional effects of the Franklyn–cricket bat–spectators assemblage on the consciousness of the villagers or the pace of life and work in Cascadu. Lance’s steelpan has at first a concrete use as a musical instrument plus an instrument of selfhood and community in binding Lance to the other men and bringing out the “ringing rejoicing spirit” (40). Upon losing its initial, practical function it becomes a spiritual and symbolic object that generates self and community through its promise of transcendence and newness, so that the object, individual and collective are bound together in their shared transformation, yet Lance can hardly be understood as a hero inventor—the effects of the process of repairing the steelpan are clearly collective, not individual. Similar, if somewhat less idealistic and mystical, hybrid assemblages and transformational relations are found throughout the novel, such as when Sonnyboy is equipped with a pair of binoculars during the Black Power uprising and “with the binoculars glued to his eyes ... he searched the crowd, for what, he wasn’t clear” (72). Sonnyboy, in particular, tries to use technology and its potential to remake selves and social relations in his repeated attempts to “get people of the town to see the man he really was” (79)—via a van, a microphone, a loudspeaker, a car. Technology in the novel is not a tool, however, and cannot be harnessed easily to human desires or intentions, as becomes sadly clear in another scene when Claude, sensing he and his wife “had been drifting apart” (252), seeks to reverse that trend by zipping up her dress—only to have the zip break in his hand, so that it instead becomes “a sign, an event in its own right, for them to

witness together the blight that had ensnared their relationship” (255).

The unfolding process of the co-constitution of the self, the social and the technological object in these scenes has affinities with Bruno Latour’s concept of “mediation,” that is, an understanding of relations between (human and non-human) actants as “concatenations of mediators where each point can be said to fully act” (59). This means that human intentions do not determine the outcomes of the events that such associations become; rather, such events are characterized by an “*under-determination of action*, from the uncertainties and controversies about who and what is acting when ‘we’ act” (45, italics in original). Latour’s theory of mediation has been criticized, however, for its refusal of historicity—a criticism that takes on particular pertinence in the Caribbean context of the novel. Jeff Kochan writes:

On the one hand, Latour is committed to the fundamental historicity of all phenomena—everything comes into being through a historical process of mediation. On the other hand, he seems unwilling to allow any historicity with respect to the phenomenon of mediation itself—mediation is the agent of historical change but is not itself subject to historical change. (584)

In Kochan’s reading, Latour’s refusal to consider the historical origins and development of mediation makes his theory one of disavowed technological determinism, despite Latour’s railing against such positions. In the context of the Caribbean world of the novel, another much more immediate problem is apparent: in a society deeply shaped by colonial politics of technologies—from the colonial industries, such as sugar plantations, established on the island, and the associated technology of slave labour, to later colonial policies of underdevelopment—and by post-independence politics that has often resulted in the neglect of science, technology and infrastructure, history is an inescapable force in the hybrid assemblages created by human–object interactions, and in the social relations that result. Certainly, as a range of recent scholarly work attests, “technologies and

human lives are mutually embedded, enabling, and determining” (Schatzki 91), but this insight should not only be accounted for in writing history, but must itself also be historicized. The actant assemblages of the novel do not arise out of nothing; rather, history and the currently existing social is another actant or “mediator” in the assemblage.

The novel offers a glimpse of the weight of history in the meaning and work of technology in a vignette involving a red flag. The Black Power Revolution is underway and King Kala and the other revolutionaries are planning a demonstration in Cascadu. Only one Indian-Trinidadian man, Manick, plans to join the demonstration, and he foments “trouble” among the other revolutionaries with his request to carry the red flag—the “principle symbol of the Black struggle.” The revolutionaries are unable to resolve the political questions that Manick thereby exposes: “if he was one of the fellars, one of us, if we were in this together, how come he wasn’t allowed to carry the red flag? And, if he couldn’t carry the flag, what was his position in this demonstration? Why should he be there at all?” (Lovelace 162). In this particular constellation of the flag, the Trinidadian men of African and Indian heritage, and Trinidad’s complex colonial history of slavery and indentureship and the stratified multiracial society that it has generated, the flag can no longer function as a symbolic technology of “the Black struggle,” but rather works to expose the undertheorized nature of race, “blackness” and solidarity in the Trinidadian Black Power movement. Ironically, Manick not only wants to carry the red flag but to make a speech addressing that history: a speech portraying indentureship as a technology of social stabilization, of maintaining colonial power and the extreme exploitation of the African population. The speech goes unsaid, however—the trouble over the red flag causes Manick to leave the Black Power movement, and the political confusion this incident generates continues to haunt the narrator in the following years.

The idealistic, almost mystical function of technology in the scenes with the steelpan and cricketbats is represented in tension with the history and material reality of life in Cascadu, which

both sets limits to the transformations enacted by such object–human–social assemblages and provides them with a decidedly political, rather than purely spiritual dimension. Lance’s search for transcendence runs up against the fact that “the world didn’t stop demanding money for things” (42): his search for newness in the steelpan is not helping to feed his family. Franklyn’s poetic batting and its clock-stopping effect on the village comes to an abrupt end when he is killed by the police under mysterious circumstances in the aftermath of the Black Power uprising. Structural poverty, disadvantage and state repression destroy or put a stop to the transformation of the social effected by these assemblages; at the same time, those material conditions fuel the political demands that also emerge, albeit with limits, from these cultural practices. The transcendence of these scenes is therefore not the technological enchantment David Noble describes as an “other-worldly quest for transcendence and salvation” (qtd in Ferrando 36)—an attitude to technology traceable to Friedrich Dessauer (Mitcham 29-33) and categorized by Francesca Ferrando as typical of the current transhumanist discourse on technology. Rather, it is a transcendence of the self *as constituted by current social relations* in order to imagine an alternative social. The novel is neither technophilic nor technophobic, but techno-critical: it asks what counts as a technology, by focusing on everyday, ordinary technologies rather than spectacular new inventions, and how humans and communities and technologies interact, are imbricated, constitute each other in historical, political and material contexts. Technology, at times, enables political insight and vision and new ways of being and relating, and this potential is embraced by the novel. This understanding of technology, however, is also shown to be not limited to the technological objects described so far, but also to be found in other cultural practices, which are thereby recast as cultural technologies which similarly work to enable a “reprogramming” of the social. The best example of this technology is no foreign import, but a Trinidadian original, in which the spiritual transcendence hinted at in Lance’s making of the steelpan takes on a decidedly embodied and immanent form: the

Carnival mas.

4. Carnival as a Technology of the Social

Lovelace has written about the powerful joy of Carnival and its relation to Caribbean personhood and humanity before, particularly in his 1979 novel *The Dragon Can't Dance*. In *Is Just a Movie*, the function of Carnival as a technology of the self and the social is made much more explicit via the novel's focus on technological objects and its satirization of a neoliberal development discourse that frames technology as the solution to global neocolonialism and local political cowardice. The novel frames Carnival first as political resistance, as in the brief history offered by a man in Laventille: "We know that what the mas was doing was fortifying a community, was holding up a people their system had set about to waste down. We know that celebration was not just mindless fun, it was rebellion, it was community, it was creativity" (225). Later, for Claude, it is religious:

When the sun come up he see in the eyes of the people on the roadside looking on at him the magnificence of this ordinary raggedy bunch daubed with mud, knitted by this love and community and peace, the feeling inside him so holy in raised in him again the sense of people their beauty. By the time the morning was over, Claude felt touched by everybody in the band. He was ready to go again. And he saw that this was what would save him, this little Carnival Jouvay band. All the grandiose dreams he had about the future were collapsed into this little band. (245)

Claude finds in this Carnival band—a spontaneous formation of friends and strangers—a deeply moving sense of humanity and community, but it soon becomes clear that Claude's type of investment in Carnival, his hope that it will compensate for the many frustrations in his life, is an error. Year after year, he tries to recreate this spontaneous Jouvay band and is disappointed that it is not exactly the same, seeing this as evidence that "the people had no responsibility, no commitment" (247). But in the final year of the story, during the Carnival shortly

after the miracle of Doreen, the selling of dreams and the frenzy of "development," he embraces this randomness, understanding it suddenly as a radical political and social formation of its own: "it hit him, the sense that we were the people we were waiting on. It was an awesome feeling and frightening and grand and so simple" (341).

In this formulation, Carnival is an embodied experience that enables a reassessment and reconfiguration of the social and political. It is not so much political action itself, as in the earlier claim that "it was rebellion," but rather it makes visible political potential and, after years of frustration with the failed hopes and politics of independence, inspires a sense of democratic responsibility: "we were the people we were waiting on." Similarly, it does not permanently reshape social relations or forge community, but rather enables a glimpse of the potential thereof. This political insight and thus the function of Carnival as a technology of the social is enabled by its specific iteration as a Caribbean technology of the self. Technologies of the self are defined by Michel Foucault as those technologies "which permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality" (18). The state—and the self—which is strived for is, of course, in part culturally and historically specific, as other scholars following Foucault have explored in more depth (Martin, Gutman and Hutton). In Lovelace's novel, Carnival is shown to be a technology of the self that is a posthuman, intra-active practice. The selves that are created in and through Carnival emerge only in and through cultural practices enacted with technical and human others; these enable the characters to see "that self of themselves" (344) that emerges, temporarily, at Carnival each year. This is not a lost or true self, but rather a future self: Carnival is described as a rehearsal for the society to come, the society that Lovelace understands to be the project of independence. Even as that society remains on the horizon, however, the practices of Carnival refuse the atomistic self and the neoliberal mantra of "no alternative" proposed by the

novel's other technology of the self: the selling of dreams. The dream scheme is also a technique of the care of the self and of governmentality, and thus appropriately run by the "Ministry of National Security and Mental Health" (316). The renunciation of dreams promises the "freedom" of a self unencumbered by hopes for social change and which has replaced collective aspirations with consumer goods. In contrast, Carnival is a technology of the self that is also a political and social technology: it does not offer a concrete political program but it makes possible the belief that politics and the social might be otherwise. Carnival is therefore not a cultural product or industry, but a collective practice that enables collective and self knowledge and transformation—it is what might be termed a "cultural technique" (Krämer and Bredekamp; Siegert). This radically opposes the separation of culture and the social implied in the claim of the title of the novel—the claim of "is just a movie" that cultural representations and embodied participation in culture do not matter, that they are simply entertainment, rather than actants in processes of constituting the social.

This vision of Carnival aligns with Césaire's understanding of humanism as comprising "concrete forms of life as global gifts that could indicate how to live a more fully human life" (Wilder 593), yet it might be better understood, I suggest, as a *posthumanist* understanding of technology, culture and the social. Indeed the novel's reflections on the co-constitution of these forces, and its location of this in Caribbean cultural practices such as Carnival, suggest a more significant role for Caribbean literature, culture and critical thought in posthumanist philosophy than has so far been widely acknowledged. Gavin Rae suggests that "posthumanism tries to overcome the humanist human–technology opposition by showing that human being does not simply have an instrumentalist relationship to technology, but is, in fact, intimately and ontologically connected to technology" (52). According to Ferrando, posthumanism "investigates technology as a mode of revealing, thus re-accessing its ontological significations in a scenario where technology had been repeatedly reduced to its technical endeavors" (44). Thus both Rae (following Don Ihde) and Ferrando

therefore turn to Heidegger, and particularly his concept of technologies as either "revealing" or "enframing," to conceptualize a posthumanist understanding of technology in social relations. In Heidegger's formulation, technologies are potentially "revealing" or a *poiesis*, that is, they may bring forth something that is not fixed in advance. Modern technologies, however, instead generally function in the mode of partial or limited revealing that Heidegger calls "enframing:" framed in entirely utilitarian terms, measurable and available, and conceived of as outside sociopolitical agency (Heidegger; see also Ferrando 39-44; Rae 60-63). Countering readings of Heidegger as a technophobe—perhaps most prominently from Latour (cf. Kochan)—these thinkers instead understand Heidegger's work as central to a posthumanist attitude to technology that understands it as central to and intertwined with the human, and deeply political. In Ferrando's reading of Heidegger, "technology per se is not the problem; the problem lays in how human societies approach it, that is, the sociocultural oblivion of the poietic power of technology is the problem" (42). Returning to Césaire and Wynter, however, we can recognize a comparable Caribbean tradition of decolonial, emancipatory thought, as in Césaire's concept of "poetic knowledge" (Wilder 589) and Wynter's call for a "nonadaptive" (331) conceptualization of the human, characterized by randomness, mutations and recombinations.

Lovelace's identification of Carnival as a technology of the social demands a reassessment of the technological determinism promoted as "development" by the Trinidadian government in the novel. Instead of "development" and techno-colonialism understood as the end of politics and the end of dreams, the novel insists on maintaining the project of independence—understood not in formal terms, but in the way formulated by thinkers like Césaire, who understood decolonization as "a world-historical opening, opportunity, and responsibility to remake the world," the aim of which "was not only political independence, but what Marx ... called "human emancipation" on a global scale" (Wilder 586)—and updating it for a more technological age. In contrast to the violence of the development discourse of technology—seen

in the violent reconstructions of the landscape and built environment, the destruction of history and the violence of perpetuating poverty that the “development” programme entails, and then manifested in the wave of killings and violent crimes that it suddenly brings forth—the novel offers the chaotic, fragmented, decentered repetitions and recombinations of Caribbean culture and particularly Carnival, described by Antonio Benítez-Rojo as “aesthetic whose desire is nonviolence” (21), revealing these as a model, a technology, or in Benítez-Rojo’s terms, a “machine” with which to think through the challenges of new technology—a means to approach the “age of technology” in the spirit not of defeatist techno-colonialism, but emancipatory techno-rebellion.

Endnotes

[1] This section of the novel is properly a satire, and not a dystopic vision: a wall was built around Beetham Gardens in Port of Spain, Trinidad as a “beautifying touch” (that is, blocking the view into the neighborhood) in preparation for the 2009 5th Summit of the Americas in the city (“Wall built”).

[2] See also Weheliye, *Phonographies* and *Habeus Viscus*.

[3] For work on the relation of race and technology generally, see e.g. Nakamura and Chow-White; Nelson, Tu and Hines. See also *The Postcolonial Science and Technology Studies Reader*, edited by Sandra Harding.

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