

Krystal Maughan

A(rchipelago) P(ensée) in AI

In *Glissant and the Middle Passage* (Drabinski, 2019), John E. Drabinski talks about what it means to define Caribbeanness on its own terms. He defines the word “archipelago thinking” as it relates to the re-centering of thought in the context of not just geography, but of cultural aesthetics. The term archipelago, as a breaking up of separate islands that simultaneously exist together acknowledges the trauma and loss of slavery, and also collectivizes this memory of thought as a means of dealing with this trauma.

To Drabinski, this fragmentation (represented by the journey through the Middle Passage and of the collective memory of trauma through separation and disconnection from one’s land) is the beginning of thought, the reimagining of the world as it *could be*, without white Western tradition. I painted this piece as a futuristic reimagining of the world through the lens of a black technologist and contractor who works at a high-tech company wearing handcuffs, spied on by a camera embedded in their lanyard. In their dreams, they imagine a world where there is collectivism through archipelago thinking and the remembrance of historical trauma, even as they work alone by day, independently and without power (in the same way that small nations are, by themselves, often powerless against imperialist colonial countries). As I was reading the book “Black Software”, which fills in knowledge about the history of Black technologists (a story that has been ignored for too long), it struck me as how similar this history was to archipelago thinking, and reconstructing the history of what it means to be a part of Computer Science, to be a computer scientist, and to walk in the path of those who had been a part of that world existing as islands, eventually forming their own archipelago; from AfroNet to spaces on BBS (bulletin board system). In both the colonial independence of the Caribbean archipelago and of the histories of Black technologists, it was a vision of self-determination and a longing to control one’s own destiny, to have one’s own space, that created such spaces.

Today, when we think about Artificial Intelligence, we think about data, about how data is fragmented through encoding and then reconstructed with new meaning, and how that new meaning has been weaponized against underrepresented communities; data colonialism. We think about low paid contract workers in technology performing *Ghost Work* (Grey and Suri, 2019) for minimal wages, which in itself results in mental trauma. Author Jeremy Glick, in the book “The Black Radical: Tragic Performance Aesthetics and the Unfinished Haitian Revolution”, reimagines a *liberated aggregate of selves*, this collective amalgamation of fragmentation through self-determination and rebirth through art (Glick, 2016). How can we reimagine these problematic data spaces as new ones that prioritize the needs of those most underrepresented and most taken for granted?

References:

Gray, Mary L. and Suri Siddharth, “*Ghost Work: How to Stop Silicon Valley from Building a New Underclass*”, 2019

Glick, Jeremy M., “*The Black Radical Tragic: Performance, Aesthetics, and the Unfinished Haitian Revolution*”, 2016

Drabinski, John E., “*Glissant and the Middle Passage*”, 2019

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