

RESPONSE TO M. SHAPIRO'S "DIGITAL FRICTION SURFACES AND NEW ALTERITY FORMATIONS"

Katrien Pype

PYPE, Katrien (katrien.pype@kuleuven.be) – KU Leuven University, Netherlands;
University of Birmingham, UK. ORCID: 0000-0002-7766-1902.

Shapiro's provocation piece on digital infrastructures and their impact on alterity formations offers a stimulating framework to think about contemporary subjectivities. His notion of "friction surfaces" captures well the ways in which digital interfaces mediate connections between humans and systems. The observation that these data fragments can become self-referential and even autonomous raises important questions about agency and representation in digital environments. He argues that our "data doubles" are not only "containers we inhabit" but they are "fragments of [a] person that in the context of a friction surface stand for its entirety". The digital fragments of our minds increasingly enter into metonymic relationships with non-humans, even to the extent that our "digital data-double(s)" become self-referential and can lead lives of their own. Shapiro pushes us to rethink agency, vulnerability, and the ontological status of the person in digital registers.



Figure 1 – The pastor De La Foi is giving online directives for prayer. Time of grace.
Source: Screenshot of video from De La Foi's Youtube channel (available at: < https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9K3Fn_Vpuzo >).

In the opening of the essay, Shapiro describes a change: “[i]ntegration of datascares into everyday routines erodes the once-stable threshold between actual and virtual environments”. The question is in how far that “threshold between actual and virtual environments” has ever been stable? Is Shapiro’s premise not based on a secular lifeworld, with a stable “mind” autonomously governing the person? How far is this desire to blur the boundaries between the actual and the virtual only connected to digitalization? The increased importance of new age religions and manifestation rituals in the Global North (and its internet worlds included) hints at the importance of such entanglements in religious imaginaries.

Drawing from ethnographic research in Kinshasa, where lifeworlds are animated both by material and spiritual forces, the premise of subject-thinking centered around an autonomous mind seems less applicable. Humans participate in a second, spiritual world through an invisible body (for Christians “the soul”), and through material but foremost invisible interactions with spirits. The anthropological exercise, then, is to imagine that an invisible entity (not unlike the mind, though in a Christian context described as the soul) at the center of the subject. For many Kinois, one’s invisible body is wrapped in a human, physical shell through which the invisible-visible human nexus participates in the material world. That physical body constitutes only one of various possible externalizations of the person. Others are one’s name, one’s shadow, one’s photograph, etc. Furthermore, for many Kinois, the spiritual world is the “real”, complete, whole universe, while the material world is incomplete, fragmented, and constantly changing. In such a context, humans are constantly on the move, “becoming”, while multiplying material and immaterial emanations of their spiritual entity. These are necessary practices in a trajectory of “becoming”, becoming “complete”, and “becoming one’s destiny”. To make this more concrete: Kinshasa’s Pentecostals consider that the Christian God has given a “star” to every individual which needs to be cared for in order to materialize the success that God has reserved for its children. Prayers, compliance to a Christian moral lifestyle, and searching for the completion of God’s destiny are practices of care for the “soul” which also facilitate the actualization of the virtual. In similar vein, Wariboko describes for the Kalabari philosophy (eastern Niger Delta region in Nigeria) that humans are born with a wide range of human potentialities, the “not yet”. “Destiny” is the actualization of these human potentialities and is therefore a “virtual self” (2022: 25). This virtuality needs to be unfolded, actualized, in order to attain a state of human flourishing. In such animate contexts, the person is already considered to be dividual, composite and incomplete (Nyamnjoh 2023). Pentecostal Kinois and Kalabari people are fully familiar with fragmentation of the person and with being embedded in metonymic relationships to these fragments.

Wariboko's explanations are helpful to (maybe) re-enchant the key concepts of "the actual" and "the virtual". After all, in the animate contexts described earlier, the "virtual" is not a derivative of the "actual", nor is it the outcome of the imaginative *praxis* of actual humans, and it is certainly not the space of self-representation of modern personhood (Newell and Pype 2021: 8). Rather, the virtual is intimately tied to the sacred, to the hidden (the occulted), and to the unfulfilled, because "not yet". The virtual is a generative dimension of the actual, and a locus of causation and transformation (Newell and Pype 2021: 12). Such a framing of the virtual re-roots it in African worlds. It also invites us to think of the virtual in multiple forms. After all, if we agree that the occult world, inhabited by spirits and our invisible person (the soul, or whatever word one uses to reference a spiritual essence of a person), constitutes one type of virtuality, a spiritual virality, then we must contend that there exist different, multiple kinds of virtuality. There is thus a need to qualify the new virtuality that emerges with digitalization. The world of data-doubles then could be named "the digital virtual", for example.

The Kinois ethnography also inspires me to rethink the notion of "friction surfaces", and to understand them rather as "access points", – technical and symbolic openings through which forces (human, spiritual, capitalist) can act upon persons. Technical access points transmit wifi signals and allow for the exchange of data between various devices. More than "friction surfaces", the concept of "access points" suggests exchange (facilitating the metonymic relationship) and vulnerability. After all, access points are gateways for (invisible) powers, signals, messages, attacks, and so on. Furthermore, just as bodily orifices or personal names can be sites of vulnerability in spiritual cosmologies, digital identifiers can become conduits for extraction and manipulation, often without informed consent. In optimal circumstances, we fully "control" our social media avatars, our digital "cookies", our digital exchanges. We decide whether we accept cookies to be stored; we determine the design of our avatars; and we choose with whom to interact online and with whom not to. Yet, just like the bodily orifices, our name, our photographs, our saliva, fingernails, blood, etc. – the classic points of access and risk for spiritual contamination –, these digital "access points" can provide other forces (spiritual, capitalist, human) with access to our reputation, our mind, and our environment.

The main argument of Shapiro's provocation is that an "accelerated datafication" reverses the relationship between the "mind" and its representation. Digital data-doubles increasingly become self-referential, and thus lose their metonymic quality. Our digital "cookies", our digital addresses, and our digital(-ized) images can gain (monetary or other) value without us being informed about it, let alone having given (informed) consent. Our digital "selves" then suddenly become "digital others", which can lead – in hidden,

opaque fashion – lives of their own (see our work on cryptopolitics, Bernal, Pype and Rodima-Taylor 2023).

Couldry and Mejias (2019) frame this as a new form of colonization; from an Africanist perspective, the metaphor of “bewitchment” (*kindoki*) may be equally apt. Both describe conditions in which agency is displaced and control over one’s invisible self is lost. A bewitched person does not have any control over their invisible self (the soul, mind, energy, vitality, etc.). Other (human and nonhuman) powers or forces have taken over and steer the mind, mouth and body of the bewitched person. In Pentecostal discourse, such a state signals spiritual death – the ultimate rupture of the body-soul nexus. Identity theft through the capture of one’s digital fingerprints, digital signature, electronic mailboxes, and the take-over of social media accounts and other spaces of digital self-representation are dramatic events in which the connection between the person and their digital “selves” is dissolved in a similar fashion as the condition of the bewitched person. Data doubles that begin to lead lives independently from the initial referent (the “mind”), suddenly become total Others. In these moments, data doubles cease to function as extensions of the mind/invisible person operating in spheres of influence that may remain opaque to legal and administrative systems, and beyond the individual’s awareness or consent. This analogy emphasizes the potential impact of digital infrastructures on our contemporary subjectivity. Both bewitchment and data colonization involve a loss of control over an entity that is intimately tied to the person – whether the spiritual invisible entity or the digital self – and both open spaces for external powers to act upon and through that entity.

Shapiro’s provocation encourages us to investigate subjectivities in the digital era, especially with regards to autonomy, representation, and agency. It also offers a valuable starting point for comparative reflection across ethnographic contexts. I have contextualized the technological dimensions of digital subjectivity further by adding a spiritual framework through which people make sense of fragmentation and multiplicity. My “enchanted” perspective has furthermore allowed me to question the premise that the “treshold between actual and virtual environments” has once been stable. Shapiro’s provocation thus does more than signalling a shift. Rather, it calls for a rethinking of what it means to be a person in a world where the virtual is not only multiple, but also becomes more and more present.

REFERENCES

- BERNAL, Victoria, Katrien PYPE, and Daivi RODIMATAYLOR (eds.), 2023, *Cryptopolitics: Exposure, Concealment, and Digital Media*, coll. Anthropology of Media, vol. 12. New York: Berghahn Books. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.3167/9781805390299>.
- COULDRY, Nick, and Ulises A. MEJIAS, 2019, *The Costs of Connection: How Data Is Colonizing Human Life and Appropriating It for Capitalism*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- NEWELL, Sasha, and Katrien PYPE, 2021, "Decolonizing the virtual: future knowledges and the extrahuman in Africa", *African Studies Review*, 64 (1): 5-22. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1017/asr.2020.88>.
- NYAMNJOH, Francis B., 2023, *Incompleteness: Mobility and Conviviality – Ad. E. Jensen Memorial Lectures 2023*. Bamenda, Cameroon: Langaa RPCIG.
- WARIBOKO, Nimi, 2022, *The Split Time: Economic Philosophy for Human Flourishing in African Perspective*. SUNY Series in Theology and Continental Thought. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.