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Plotting on the blockchain. On the possibility of care among widespread logics of extraction

Inte Gloerich

Blockchains draw everything they touch into a market logic. Is resistance possible? Activist and artistic engagements with blockchain technology point to (at least) three different sets of tactics that aim to subvert this affordance of the technology. The first is part of an accelerationist logic: riding the waves of capital until capitalism finally crashes, funding alternative values with whatever profit was accrued while it lasted. The second are part of prefigurative politics: building alternative blockchain systems, often in the form of decentralized autonomous organizations, or DAOs, that perform a different kind of politics and social organization, for example cooperativism or self-organized art funding. Then, there are those that explore how blockchain's logics can be subverted to make space for different ways of relating in non-financial and more-than-human ways. In this short essay I would like to focus on this third tactic, and to explore what it might mean, I've been inspired by Patricia de Vries' take on "plot work as an artistic praxis" (2022) that builds on decolonial theorist Sylvia Wynter described as "the plot system" that represented small, imperfect corners of relative self-determination within the larger context of colonial plantations (Wynter 1971, 96). De Vries asks how artistic work, implicated as it is in institutional and capitalist logics, can perform plot work to create space for relating outside of those logics. But before I address this question, it is important to understand what Wynter understands as the logic of the plantation.

Blockchain as plantation

Sylvia Wynter writes that the West's colonisation of the Caribbean lays at the foundations of the emergence of capitalism. Western colonisers reduced "Man to Labour and Nature to Land" (Ibid. 1971, 99). To them, the nature they encountered was nothing more than a blank slate that was easily captured by a system of private ownership unfamiliar to the indigenous communities using it. At the same time, enslaved people were reduced to a dehumanized asset functioning as a cog in the machine of early global capitalism. Both man and nature were integral in the process of extraction of value back to the West, but both were treated without regard for their survival except in their one-dimensional purpose as a resource for profit on the market in the form of labour and land. Nature and indigenous people made way for plantations, and the value of harvested crops turned from something that could be eaten by the people that cultivated it – use value – to something that could be exchanged for money on the market – exchange value. To Wynter the emporium (shop) and the imperium (controlled foreign territory) come together in the plantation: domination through marketisation, marketisation through domination (Ibid. 1971).

Blockchain is like a plantation in that sense: those involved in it continuously seek un-captured territories for new exploitations under the header of value extraction. To exist on a blockchain, things need to be represented by tokens, which in turn transforms them into trade-able items that can be controlled in new ways through distributed governance structures. Think of NFTs that ‘save’ digital files from their unmarketability by proving which copy is the authentic original. Or, DAOs like Friends with Benefits that commodify community participation. Or, DAOs that tokenize pieces of rainforest to be governed by their global shareholders (e.g. Moss Amazon NFT and Single.Earth). Just like land and labour, these tokenized representations of the world are abstracted assets that promise a future stream of income that care little about the survival of the thing they represent (Juárez 2021). It’s not art that is at stake in NFT marketplaces, but the fluctuation of financial value; and despite claims about solving climate change, the rainforests themselves only become meaningful in those DAOs if they produce monetary profit for their shareholders.

What is the plot?

Wynter explains that plantation owners would give enslaved people little plots of land to take care of for themselves. However, this was not a compassionate gift: plots were given to drive costs down, to force slaves to produce their own food on hardly fertile ground that was useless to the plantation. But the plot also offered space for ways of being together that were not possible on the plantation, reinvigorating the values and traditions of African cultures in which earth and people are to be cared for in a spiritual and communal sense. While the plantation represents the institutions that order and control society, the plot is where “the roots of culture” can be found (Wynter 1971, 100). The plot offers room for alternative social systems, but Wynter is clear: the plantation and its market logics are strong and will endure. The plot engages with the same raw materials – ground, crops, etc – but in a fundamentally different way. It can provide “a focus of criticism against the impossible reality in which we are enmeshed” (ibid. 1971, 100). Everyone is undeniably involved in that which is critiqued, but participating in the plot means that there is ambiguity in that involvement. This is where resistance, however marginal, finds its breeding ground (ibid. 1971).

If blockchain is like the plantation, are there ways of engaging with it that constitute a plot? Bits of blockchain that represent culture rather than control? The abstractions of tokenization invisibilise the care that is needed to sustain that which is represented, and indeed, sociologist Kathleen Lynch writes that “the logics of care are antithetical to the logics of capital” (2021, 203). Care can thus be a chisel for blockchain’s plots to carve a space that is inherently different to their surroundings. Artist Sarah Friend concisely undermines the speculative finance of many NFT projects by programing her Lifeforms NFTs in such a way that they ‘die’ if they are not cared for. In her operationalisation of care, this means that the NFT has to be given away for free to someone else, who then takes over the caring responsibilities (Friend 2021). While this

project is quite simple and small – fitting for a plot – it offers up a different way of relating, not only to the NFT, but also to those around you, calling on them to care for instead of capitalize on something. Another example is the Corn Council, a DAO imagined as part of a speculative design research project by Heitlinger et al. (2021). Central in it is the wish to undo the alienation with the world that plantation capitalism produces (nature as land, man as labour). This DAO rewards “spending time with plants, [...] caring for them, kindling new care-taking relationships” (Heitlinger et al. 2021, np). Although they are tokenized, these rewards are not exchangeable and can only be used in the community in ways that support the commons. The Corn Council creates a multi-species community in which crops are stakeholders rather than commodities (Ibid. 2021). These are two budding examples of how blockchain’s plot might be thought of as places of care.

However, this tactic for engaging with blockchain hinges on the assumption that the technology is here to stay just like plantations existed for centuries. If blockchain-based tokenization represents the next phase of global capitalism, these might be life-saving tactics. It is true that no technology ever really goes away, but what can be done before it might become the dominant logic? There is subversive agency to be claimed in that process, both from within – e.g. how can blockchains tokenize in a way that reflects entanglement – as well as from without – e.g. which areas of life should be protected from tokenization? Right now, blockchain systems are still somewhat niche and there is still time to take a stand from without. Perhaps another tactic should also be explored: how to brace fragile life-sustaining elements against capture by blockchain’s logics?

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