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"The Parable of 'The Monkey,' or: How Artificial Intelligence is More Like Monkeys Than Machines

Christine Mungai

I live in Nairobi, famous for being one of the few capital cities in the world that has a national park within city limits. Nairobi National Park, just across the highway from my neighbourhood, has a large variety of wildlife including lions, buffalo, giraffe, and zebra, as well as hundreds of bird species, but the animals that we see most frequently are the vervet monkeys.

The monkey troops are clever, persistent, and daring, especially when they are hungry. They know which window leads to the kitchen, with a potential reward of food, and which window would lead to a futile bathroom or bedroom. Once they are successful in stealing food, they will keep going back to that house, which I find remarkable in a neighbourhood where all the houses look similar. And although they will first target fruit lying around, they also quickly learn other non-fruit food items are tasty and interesting—once, they stole a packet of uncooked spaghetti from our kitchen, and then perched on the roof to happily crunch at the long spaghetti, holding them in between their fingers like one would when snacking on hors d'oeuvres.

We've lived here for two years now, and I've seen a few little ones grow. As they watch their surroundings intently, clinging to their mothers' bellies and when they're older, balancing precariously on (mostly defunct) landline telephone wires—a quick escape route—I get the sense they must be learning the secrets of successful house-raiding. It's generational transmission of knowledge.

A few years ago, a vervet monkey jumped over the electric fence at Gitaru Power Station in central Kenya, the biggest power station in the country in terms of installed capacity. The monkey—later described as "rogue" or "mischievous" in media reports—landed on a transformer, tripping it.[1] This triggered a cascade of events that resulted in shutting down the entire national grid as failsafe mechanisms themselves failed, and the country was without power for three hours.[2] (That monkey survived, but incidentally, encounters with power lines are a major killer of monkeys in Kenya).[3]

These stories can be replicated all over the global south. In Cape Town, South Africa, baboons break into houses and cars to steal food, and threaten city residents with their inch-long fangs.[4] In Lopburi, Thailand, authorities are grappling with a surge in the population of long-tailed macaques; they are particularly attracted to sweet drinks like soda and sweet fermented milk, which end up rotting their teeth.[5] And in Jaipur, India, troops of rhesus macaques grab fruit from market vendors and have even been known to pick-pocket residents; 90 percent of their diet now comes from foraging among humans. They eat what people eat—chocolate cookies are an apparent favourite.[6]

In all these instances, monkeys have mastered living in human-built environments, learning how and where to find food by recognizing human patterns and habits, using stealth and cunning to forage for food, teaching their young which window to go into, or which packaging on a bottle is a sugary drink and which one is just boring old water.

How can we relate this version of intelligence to how we think of predictive learning systems and artificial intelligence?

In my mind, monkeys represent a version of non-human intelligence, but we don't usually relate them to our current understanding of artificial intelligence. That's a "tech" term, and it almost goes without saying that the dominant imaginary of machine learning (ML) and artificial intelligence (AI) is racialized as White. Technology can be and is racialized, even if we are not always conscious of the racial milieu that undergirds tech discourse: just typing "robot" or "artificial intelligence" into a search engine will give results of stock images of white plastic humanoids.

Not only this, to imagine machines that are intelligent, professional, or powerful "is to imagine White machines because the White racial frame ascribes these attributes predominantly to White people," researchers Stephen Cave and Kanta Dihal argue in their paper "The Whiteness of AI."[7]

Even in the dominant sci-fi narrative tropes that depict power struggles between humans and AI, or to imagine machines taking over and dominating humans, is to imagine an intelligence racially coded as White. "When White people imagine being overtaken by superior beings, those beings do not resemble those races they have framed as inferior," Cave and Dihal write. "It is unimaginable to a White audience that they will be surpassed by machines that are Black. Rather, it is by superlatives of themselves: hyper-masculine White men like Arnold Schwarzenegger as the *Terminator*, or hyper-feminine White women like Alicia Vikander as Ava in *Ex Machina*."

Where does that leave people of colour? Either below the status of the intelligent machine, which is already happening as algorithms increasingly make automated decisions that disproportionately affect people of colour around the world, or, Black and Indigenous people are completely excluded from the imaginary of future utopias and dystopias, rendering those worlds—and the decisions today that could ultimately create those worlds—one-dimensional, and predominantly catering to White anxieties about power and domination.

How much more could we gain if we think of non-human intelligence not through the single frame of Whiteness, but through the frame of the cheeky, daring, and sometimes dangerous primates that live in cities all over the global south—monkeys, like AI, thriving

in human-built ecosystems, recognizing patterns, mastering predictive analytics, subverting failsafe mechanisms, sharing data through memory and (generational) transmission of knowledge? And with humans having taken over ecosystems that were previously wild, and then monkeys reversing that occupation in some sense and re-establishing themselves in urban environments, could AI's potentially do the same—inhabiting spaces that were once only human?

To be sure, even with this new, fresh perspective, we cannot slide past the centuries of painful racist imagery that have compared and even equated Black people specifically to monkeys. It's a trope to dehumanize Black people that continues to be incredibly hurtful. In the Middle Ages, Christian discourse recognised simians as devilish figures and representatives of lustful and sinful behaviour.

And today, algorithmic bias is making this even worse: last year, Facebook users who watched a newspaper video featuring Black men were asked if they wanted to "keep seeing videos about primates" by an artificial-intelligence recommendation system. And in 2015, Google's Photos app labelled pictures of Black people as "gorillas."

What I'm proposing here is not to elide these painful facts, but that we subvert the use of this imagery, by esteeming primates' unique yet non-human intelligence, and placing them in that very category Whiteness believes can only be reserved for "hyperwhite" artificial intelligence.

This kind of imagery would bring the chaos of artificial intelligence front and centre, instead of the situation we now have, where it is frequently assumed that AI is as clean and tidy as those white plastic humanoids. It would also bring into focus the unpredictability and potential endurance of these new technologies. Monkeys are messy, and they frequently evade human methods to control them. But they are also an integral part of nature, not to be dominated or exterminated, but to be lived with. This goes against the contemporary anxieties presented by the White imagination in science fiction narratives—the fear of being colonised and dominated. In this way, I'm arguing that our non-White, African, framing of technology, and what it represents, which is a realist understanding that not everything in the world can be ruthlessly contained, or else is an existential threat. On the contrary, you might not be happy with a troop of monkeys raiding your kitchen, but you could still watch with a mixture of awe and annoyance as they crunch spaghetti on your rooftop.

Technology doesn't have to be fixed into the framing that the White imagination has set for it so far. In any case, it is so much more fun and generative to think of ML/AI

systems like monkeys rather than black boxes or even white plastic humanoids. We lose so much richness in this discourse if we ignore the metaphor and analogies of dominant non-human intelligent life that is the bane of life in cities all over the global south, and their potential outsized impact, like that little monkey that shut down an entire country's electrical grid.

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Endnotes

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(7) Stephan Cave and Kanta Dihal, "The Whiteness of AI," *Philosophy & Technology* 33 (2020): 685–703. https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s13347-020-00415-6#Abs1.

(8) See: www.barazalab.com.