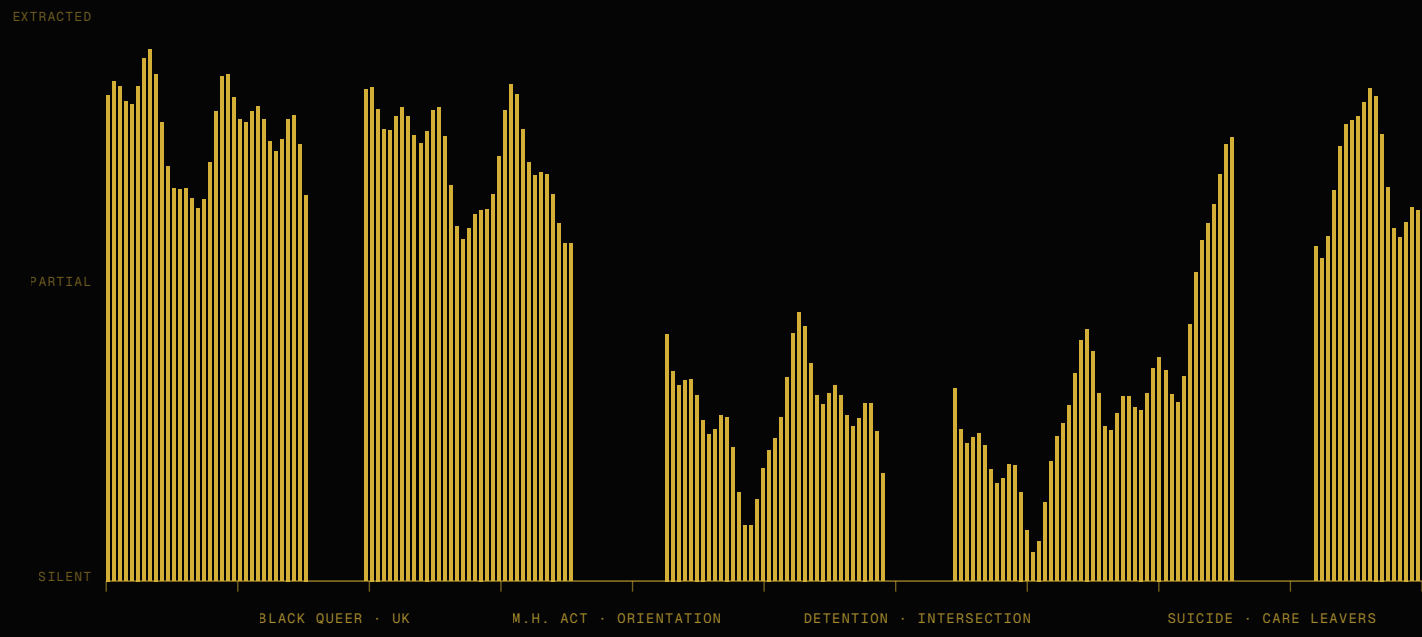
DATA CAPITALISM & ALGORITHMIC RACISM

From the plantation to the platform — and the visibility missing in between.

// THE TWIN HARMS — EXTRACTION & ERASURE



From the plantation to the platform — and the visibility missing in between

Last spring at a Black Mental Health and Wellbeing Alliance webinar I tried to name something that had been bothering me for years.

Every Pride season our community gets a very particular kind of visibility. Feather boas. Glittery cowboy hats. A photo opportunity for the mayor. It is wonderful in its place. It is also not the visibility that ends up in a commissioner's spreadsheet.

What we are missing is the other kind. Decision-maker visibility. The cross-tab that makes us countable. The line item in the funding stream. The named intersection in the policy document.

For the people in the webinar, this landed as a question of communications. It is not. It is a question of data — or rather, of its absence. And the absence is political.

This report is about two harms our communities suffer in the same digital infrastructure. The first is the more familiar one — extraction. We are surveilled, scored, sorted, sold. Our data, our labour, our images, our pain are harvested and monetised by platforms whose interests are not ours. The second is less often named, and in some ways worse — erasure. We are mis-counted, under-counted, or not counted at all. We are absent from the databases that determine where public money flows and which services exist. The cell is empty where our name should be.

Both harms operate through the same systems. Both are political. Both have been with us much longer than the digital infrastructure we currently blame.

This is the first of two reports. This one names the problem. The next names what we are building in response.

SECTION 01

The ledger

The systems extracting from our communities today are not new — they are old systems running faster.

Data Capitalism, as Yeshimabeit Milner and Amy Traub describe it in their 2021 Demos report of the same name, is the convergence of inequality and the data revolution. It is an economic model in which data has become the primary currency of extraction, and in which big data and algorithms are the tools by which power consolidates along lines of race, class and gender. The pattern they describe is structural, not technical. It is also old.

The Dutch East and West India Companies — the leading corporations in the trans-Atlantic slave trade — were the world's first multi-national data operations. At their height in the 1600s and 1700s they held, in proportional terms, more wealth than Apple, Google and Facebook combined. Their record-keeping systems — "Negro Accounts," "Livestock Accounts" — calculated purchase, depreciation and death of human beings using identical metrics to those used for non-human cargo. The reduction of human life to neat empirical rows and columns predates the spreadsheet by four centuries. It was always a technical-political project, designed to allow people who profited from violence to remain unaccountable to the people they profited from.

The lineage continued. The Home Owners Loan Corporation maps of the 1930s — as N. D. B. Connolly's A World More Concrete documents in detail — gave bureaucratic veneer to discrimination, turning popular racial prejudice into mortgage policy and producing real-world consequences that compound across generations. Seventy-four percent of the areas the HOLC deemed hazardous in 1933 remain low-to-moderate income, under-resourced and neglected today. As Milner and Traub put it: this is not by accident, but by design.

The ZIP code, originally a postal tool, became the digital record-keeper of those 1930s grades. Modern machine-learning models do not need to "see" race to discriminate against it. By using the ZIP code, an insurance algorithm in any redlined city can charge a Black family hundreds of pounds more than a white driver in a nearby high-crime commercial district. The data is the artefact; the artefact carries the policy.

The lesson, before we get to the more interesting question of what to do, is this. The technical capacity to dehumanise via data has been with us for four hundred years. What is new is the speed and the scale, not the structure.

SECTION 02

The first harm: weaponization

When data is extracted from us, it is then used. The use is the harm.

The activist Hamid Khan, who has organised for over a decade against the LAPD's predictive policing programmes, puts it more bluntly than any academic would — "racism in-racism out." His critique of Operation LASER and the wider apparatus of predictive surveillance is structural. The input data — historical arrest records, "field interview" stops, gang databases — encodes decades of over-policing. The algorithm reproduces that bias and calls it prediction. Demos cite Khan's phrase as a foundational claim in Data Capitalism and Algorithmic Racism. It is worth holding.

Joy Buolamwini calls the same phenomenon by a slightly different name — the Coded Gaze. In her 2018 Ford Foundation essay introducing the concept, she describes algorithmic bias that can lead to social exclusion and discriminatory practices — "the systemic bias embedded in software by designers who represent a narrow, often white and male, perspective." The harm follows the perspective. When the people who build the systems do not see us, the systems do not see us — or they see us wrongly. Robert Williams was wrongfully arrested in Detroit in 2020 on the basis of a facial-recognition match generated by a system already known to fail more often on Black faces. The system did not see him. It produced something that looked enough like seeing to allow a warrant to issue.

Ruha Benjamin's Race After Technology (Polity, 2019) names the broader phenomenon the New Jim Code — the use of big data and algorithmic systems to entrench racial inequality under the guise of innovation. The dressing changes. The structure does not.

These harms are not abstract. They are interpersonal, and they reach into the workplace. Algorithmic management is the working face of the same logic. Amazon warehouses use "Time off Task" scanners that track worker effort by the second; workers — disproportionately Black and brown — skip bathroom breaks to avoid an algorithmically triggered termination. Gig platforms use surveillance to manage workers while classifying them as independent contractors, allowing the parent companies to skim around twenty per cent of value while side-stepping minimum wage and safety regulation. As Milner and Traub describe it, the modern scanner is the direct descendant of the plantation overseer's ledger. Same logic. Updated tools.

In the UK, the extractive harm is less dramatic only because we are not yet using the technologies at the scale the US is. The Metropolitan Police's Gangs Violence Matrix has been the subject of repeated complaint by the Information Commissioner's Office. Big Brother Watch has documented expanding deployment of live facial recognition at public events. Where US-style surveillance technologies have been imported, they have brought the bias with them. There is no British exception.

And the next frontier — the one that ought to concern us most — is policy that makes the extraction invisible. The Project 2025 platform in the United States proposes barring federal agencies from collecting race-based data altogether. This is not a step away from algorithmic racism. It is a step toward making it invisible to the law while leaving the people it harms more exposed. Where the US goes on the right, the UK has historically followed within a decade. We should plan accordingly.

SECTION 03

The second harm: erasure

There is a second harm, less often named, that is in some respects worse than extraction.

The Sovereign Frontier — an independent 2026 synthesis of Indigenous and Black data sovereignty work — draws the distinction sharply. While the weaponization of data causes direct harm, the erasure of data creates a secondary form of institutional

violence. The Permanent Commission on the Status of Racial, Indigenous, and Tribal Populations in Maine, in their 2025 Data Justice paper, goes further. Both the collection of data by the state, as well as the absence of it, has resulted in the marginalization of minority communities. Visibility, in other words, is not a binary. There is the visibility that makes you legible to surveillance, and there is the visibility that makes you legible to provision. Marginalised communities tend to receive an excess of the first and a deficit of the second.

The artist Mimi Onuoha's Library of Missing Datasets — referenced through AISP's racial-equity-in-data-integration toolkit — names this with characteristic precision. Onuoha treats the absent dataset as a primary artefact in its own right. That which we ignore reveals more than what we give our attention to. Spots that we've left blank reveal our hidden social biases and indifferences. Her practice is to make the missing visible — to convert absence into evidence.

The political stakes are concrete. The Stanford Social Innovation Review pieces by Porter, Bradford and Le have catalogued the consequences. When law enforcement misclassifies kidnapped people as runaways. When missing and murdered Indigenous and Black women are filed inconsistently or not at all. When demographic categories used to compose national datasets contain no slot for the lives lived inside them. The absence is not bureaucratic. It is institutional gaslighting — what authorities use to downplay valid community concerns by citing a lack of data. The result is predictable. Undercounted communities lose political representation and billions in federal funding. What is not counted does not exist for purposes of money or policy.

This is the frame I have been trying to name. We do not have a comms problem. We have a data problem. The visibility our community needs — the visibility that lands in a commissioner's spreadsheet, the cross-tab that makes us countable, the line item that determines whether our mental health is funded next year — is the visibility we are systematically denied. Not by accident, and not because of any single decision. By the long-running design of databases that were built without us in mind, by funders who do not require demographic granularity in returns, by policy frameworks that record "BAME" and call it a day.

The UK has its own infrastructural attempt at this, and its own cautionary tale. Black Thrive Lambeth's Research Institute and Observatory linked NHS Mental Health Trust data with primary care data and UK Census variables — household poverty, social isolation — to track a cohort of 19,800 people with severe mental illnesses over a minimum of eight years. The linkage was rare. The cohort was significant. The Observatory was the kind of community-led data infrastructure that the rest of the digital-rights conversation talks about wanting. The National Lottery grant that funded it was originally intended for ten

years. It was cut after three. A researcher involved in the project described the cut as a funding cliff. She was right. The infrastructure of our visibility is fragile because the funding politics is not aligned with what such infrastructure requires.

This is the second face of data injustice. Not just what is taken from us. What is never built for us — or what is built and then defunded.

SECTION 04

The shape of a response

These twin harms — extraction and erasure — demand more than resistance.

Resistance alone is defensive. It assumes that the relevant action is happening on the other side of a wall we are pushing against. But the more interesting work is on this side. The work of building infrastructure that does see us, count us, and serve us — because no-one else was going to.

A response is already under way in the UK. It is small, dispersed, and rarely treated as a movement. Knowle West Media Centre in Bristol builds digital tools to give local residents control of their own data, including an energy app that lets people with solar panels track their generation and use, so the data about their community belongs to their community. The Bristol Cable, the same city's independent media cooperative, builds its own membership and democratic-participation systems in-house, preserving members' privacy by keeping data off third-party platforms. The Digital Commons Co-Operative repurposes the data normally used by real-estate companies to identify luxury-flat plots, and turns it over to local communities seeking affordable housing. The Onion Collective in Watchet, Somerset, partners with the game developers Free Ice Cream to power Understory — a mapping tool that visualises the hidden connections that bind a community together. Each one is a piece of community-built infrastructure responding to a specific kind of data marginalisation. Each one is small. Together they constitute a sector.

BLKOUT sits in this landscape, doing the same kind of work in its own particular context. Three projects, in particular, are worth naming as evidence of the response. Ivor's Compass, a one-month project built around the life of Ivor Cummings — five essays, a thirty-five-person workshop in which the participants made a graphic novel together, a Nugent / Aaron Douglas-style chromatic-reveal exhibition, a hundred free digital journals, and a seven-direction chatbot, all on a grant of two thousand five hundred pounds. Critical Frequency, a five-year programme to retune the diagnostic, evidence and intervention frequencies of the UK mental-health system for Black queer men — grounded in operational network science, sitting inside a six-piece architecture of cultural curation, broadcast, commons substrate, advisory practice and solidarity infrastructure, with the full proposition at critical.blkoutuk.com. AIvor, our platform's guide and curator — an avatar of Cummings, by design and not deepfake — who walks people through news, events, personal-development tools and Black-queer-curated social media, and who can also signpost crisis support and hold a difficult moment at two in the morning when one comes. Heritage. Policy. Platform. All three built around the same question: who are we not reaching? All three costing less than one consultant's scoping document.

The next report — Strategic Roadmap: What We're Building, and What Travels — is about those three, and about the broader pattern they are part of. What it costs to build infrastructure like this. What governance it requires. What of it transfers to peer organisations and what does not. And the invitation, finally, to do this kind of work alongside us — not by adopting our software, but by adopting the question, and answering it in your own context with your own community.

This report ends with the diagnosis. The structures we are inside have always been able to dehumanise us. We are inside a longer version of an older project. The opposition to it cannot only be opposition. It must also be construction — slow, situated, modest, real.

I want to close where I began. The frame this report offers — extraction and erasure as twin harms, construction as the necessary response — did not arrive in my head whole. It arrived in dialogue, in the webinar I opened with, where the questions and insistences of others shifted what I thought I was seeing. The reframe was the room's, not mine. That experience is the method. The solutions worth building are not handed down. They are made in conversation with the people who will use them — and shaped, sometimes substantially, by what those people say back. How the work gets made prefigures whether the work is worth making at all.

What we are building, and how it sustains itself, is the next report.

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ROB BERKELEY · BLKOUT UK · ROB@BLKOUTUK.COM · BLKOUTUK.COM/COMMONS