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DIGITAL TERRITORY, DIGITAL FLESH: DECODING THE INDIGENOUS BODY

Abstract

Western Indigenous cultures have been colonized, dehumanized and silenced. As AI grows and learns from colonial pre-existing biases, it also reinforces the notion that Natives no longer are but were. And since machine learning requires the input of categorical data, from which AI develops knowledge and understanding, compartmentalization is a natural behavior AI undertakes. As AI classifies Indigenous communities into a marginalized and historicized digital data set, the asterisk, the code, we fall into a cultural trap of recolonization. This necessitates an interference. A non-violent break. *A different kind of rupture*. One which fractures colonization and codification and opens a space for colonial recovery and survival. If we have not yet contemporized the colonized Western Indigenous experience, how can we utilize tools of artificial intelligence such as the interface and digitality to create a space that de-codes colonial corporeality resulting in a sense of boundless-ness, contemporization and survival?

*For to survive in the mouth of this
dragon we call America,
we have had to learn this first and vital
lesson – that we were
never meant to survive. Not as human
beings.*
*— Audre Lorde, "The Transformation
of Silence into Language and Action."*

Introduction

Aztecas del norte, mojados, Indigenous peoples, First Nations People, mestizas, Redskins, Indians, Native Americans, Natives, savages, minorities, at risk peoples or asterisks peoples are some names or codes the Indigenous body is subjected to using settler colonialist language. The settler *names* the Indigenous person or body which codifies and marginalizes.

Not only does AI learn from these colonial pre-existing biases that codify and marginalize, it also re-inscribes the notion that Natives no longer *are* but *were*. As AI codes Indigenous bodies according to its colonial input, it also classifies these communities into a marginalized digital data set, the asterisk, the code. As AI codes the marginalized Indigenous body, it reproduces historical erasure of Indigeneity which necessitates an interference. A non-violent break. *A different kind of rupture*. One that destroys the settler colonialist triad and interrupts AI bias and promotes survival.

Here, I summon the source from where Indigenous subjectivity originates by returning to the body and the land this body inhabits, by breaking the boundaries it is bound by and begin to speculate on the notion of *digital territory* and possibly even *digital flesh*.

This kind of return to, and rupture of, the Indigenous biologic is one of ontological abstraction: One which focuses solely on the Indigenous body and the removal of (colonial) codes this body is tied to. We must therefore confide in the biologic and the historical and thereafter, enter the digital. Simply put, we must go beyond the flesh.

By going beyond the flesh, we enter the digital. This is an attempt to de/reprogram the Indigenous/coded body by entering a digital territory, one that is made possible via the interface. The interface is the lacuna between human and virtual worlds. Such a lacuna situates the Indigenous body outside of colonial/physical territory. It disentangles territory and makes boundlessness possible for the Indigenous body to inhabit. This is *digital territory*. This is where one embodies *digital flesh*. Since the contemporization of Indigeneity is not possible within its current colonial paradigm, I am speculating on the radical possibility of colonial recovery within a posthuman digital framework.

Indigenous body, indigenous borders

The body is a biological figure that identifies and is identified by the space that surrounds it. It encompasses dimensionality and is encased within a dimensional structure. All bodies live in spaces that dwell within borders. However, spatiality for the Indigenous body is both territorial and historical, a byproduct of colonialism, a designation of territorial acquisition and forced migration. The body that was colonized will always be colonized, more specifically, the Indigenous body (of the West). The Indigenous body, however, is subject to colonialism and more specifically, *settler colonialism*, a term used to describe the colonialist relationship between the Indigenous peoples and the colonizer. The concept of Indigenous is inspired by Audra

Simpson who writes in her book, *Mohawk Interruptus*, that "'Indigenous' is embedded conceptually in a geographic alterity and a radical past as the Other in the history of the West" (7). Indigenous peoples are pre-colonial peoples with a narrative that is geographically, cosmologically and ontologically tied to their land (within Central and Northern Americas, for instance). Their relationship to land and identification as such starts with territory which carries a polyvalence regarding ancestry, origin, spirituality and so forth.

Specifically, the Indigenous body refers to the biologic, social, and political colonized Indigenous person of the West. Again, Simpson writes, "indigeneity is imagined as something entrapped within the analytics of 'minitorization,' a statistical model for the apprehension for (now) racialized populations 'within' nation-states" (211). The Indigenous peoples are minoritized and colonized. According to Simpson, "Because 'Indigenous' peoples are tied to the desired territories, they must be 'eliminated'; in settler-colonial model, 'the settler never leaves'" (19). Indigenous peoples had their land stolen and repurposed within the settler colonialist structure, one which assumes Indigenous erasure. Thereafter, spatiality for the Indigenous body is both territorial and historical, a byproduct of settler colonialism, a designation of territorial acquisition and forced migration.

In this way, space develops as a gesture of colonization where borders mimic this "system of dominance," and subjugates the Indigenous body (Osterhammel 4). Such a system aims to create a space of segregation where the Indigenous are territorially, socially and politically trapped.

When "borders are set up to define the places that are safe and unsafe, to distinguish us from them" (Anzaldúa 25), the Indigenous body is claimed not only by the settler but also by the borders that surround it.

Moreover, "a border is a dividing line [where] the prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants" (Anzaldúa et al.). Borders separate the settler from the Indigenous where the settlers "make Indigenous land their new home and source of capital" and the Indigenous are pushed out (Tuck and Yang 5). This record of geographical domination is a fundamental colonial classifier, also known as "settler colonialism," one which occupies and establishes the Native land through erasure (Tuck et al. 5). Furthermore, this spatial circumscription reattributes the Indigenous' overall experience in and of the world. By framing the Indigenous body between physical and political structures and by claiming their land, the settler erases Indigenous identity and history.

This total migration of force pushes the Indigenous body into a space of wilderness, the forbidden and the prohibited, the erased – a ghost territory. This demand is a process of naming or anti-naming the body that is forced out of their homeland. To name, or take one's name away, determines an engendered locality, i.e. coding the body, which is an "ordering of matter around a body" (qtd. in Hanson). As the Indigenous are coded, their body is degenerated from embodied corporeality to mere flesh. Hortense Spillers reminds us about the division between body and flesh, she writes

> [...] the distinction as the central one between captive and liberated subject-positions. In that sense, before the 'body' there is 'flesh,' that zero degree of social conceptualization that does not escape concealment under the brush of discourse, or the reflexes of iconography (67).

The body that is subjected to, imprinted upon, named or coded is done so according to its flesh. Where Frank B. Wilderson might

refer to the "presence of the body" ("The Inside-Outside of Civil Society") in reference to Spillers' notion of 'flesh', the Indigenous body who is re/moved and named suffers a similar antagonism.

The Indigenous loses their identity as well as their sense of belonging to their homeland. And since "flesh is the fundamental indifference between body and world" (Hansen xi), the Indigenous people suffer from this codification process done so by the settler. Again, Spillers' notion of flesh exemplifies this codification, as the flesh is positioned and held in line with 'captivity' (67). The flesh that is named and marked is imprisoned accordingly.

The marginalized space or territory binds the Indigenous body within borders, iconographically and geographically. Furthermore, the settler names the Indigenous according to their flesh which is a codified identification process that further marginalizes the body. Thereafter, the Indigenous body is referred to as, but not limited to the following names or codes; *Aztecas del norte, mojados,* Indigenous peoples, First Nations People, the *mestizos* (people mixed of Indian and Spanish blood), minorities, 'at risk peoples' or 'asterisks peoples', "meaning they are represented by an asterisk in large and crucial data sets" (Tuck et al. 23). This codification of naming a community of bodies or an individual body dehumanizes and colonizes the body being named/anti-named. It is this codifying that then serves as a placeholder for machine learning systems which conceive and reproduce colonization of the Indigenous body, commonly referred to as AI bias.

Indigeneity: Body memory and flesh memory

A history grounded in the removal and erasure of Indigenous culture, identity and bodies therein, encapsulates memories passed down through generations of misplaced and coded bodies, is carried through body memory and flesh memory.

Traumatic events the body experiences are passed down as bodily memories, encompassing a corporeal memory archive also known as *body memory*. Recent studies on epigenetics displayed in the article, "Trauma May Be Woven into DNA of Native Americans" insist that "our genes carry memory of trauma experienced by our Indigenous ancestors" (Pember). Meaning that "trauma experienced by earlier generations can influence the structure of human genes, making them more likely to 'switch on' [negative] responses to stress and trauma" (Pember et al.). More importantly, these traumatic experiences influence gene structures which are physically and psychologically revealed. They are expressed symptomatically; two examples are Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) and depression. For the Indigenous body, the suffering remains unresolved by proxy — to be Indigenous is to always be [in] the *trauma body*. That traumatic body memory lies dormant in the peripheral nervous system waiting to be triggered by reminders of the trauma event whether experienced personally, secondarily or genetically.

Another form of memory that is exhibited via the body is what Alikah Oliver called *flesh memory*. She defines flesh memory by first quoting the definition of flesh in the *American Heritage College Dictionary* and flesh memory later in her own words:

flesh (n): 1. the soft tissue of the body of a vertebrate, consisting mainly of skeletal muscle and fat. 2. the surface or skin of the human body.

flesh memory: 1. a text, a language, a mythology, a truth, a reality, an invented as well as literal translation of everything that we've ever experienced or known, whether we know it di-rectly or through some type of genetic memory, osmosis, or environment. 2. the body's truths and realities. 3. the multiplicity of language and realities that the flesh holds. 4. the language activated in the body's memory. (4)

These somatic experiences for both *body memory* and *flesh memory* are activated and felt as present when past traumatic or violent memories arrive or are triggered. For both types of memory, they require the body and the history of that body, a basis of ontol-ogy. A history grounded in the removal and erasure of Indigenous bodies encapsulates these types of memories.

Since trauma is an inherent part of the Indigenous experience, both biologi-cally (body memory) and ontologically (flesh memory), there is no way out. Recovery from colonization and trauma is challenged ac-cording to the body's situatedness. And since AI learns through the colonial paradigm, it is also re-colonizing and traumatizing the Indigenous body; thereby, digital colonization and artificial intelligence bias are also crucial to critically integrate.

AI bias

Since machine learning requires the input of categorical data, from which AI develops knowledge and understanding, compartmentalization is a fundamental behavior AI undertakes. As AI grows and diversity is tackled through the non-binary, or rather, *against the universal*, we fall into a trap of re-colonization, or *digital colonization*.

Two terms that *digital colonization* draws from are *data colonialism* and *digital colonialism*. *Data colonialism* "combines the predatory extractive practices of historical colonization with the abstract quantification methods of computing" (Couldry 1). And *digital colonialism* is "a quasi-imperial power over a vast number of people, without their explicit consent, manifested in rules, designs, languages, cultures and belief systems by a vastly dominant power" ("Resisting Digital Colonialism"). Both are hegemonic digital re-inscriptions of historical colonization. More specifically, each use and integrate methods of data collection via algorithms and machine learning systems which creates a general data identity stripping away any form of indi-vidual or body.

Furthermore, this kind of data collection serves as a type of surveillance which Gary T. Marx calls "the new surveillance" (206). This new form of surveillance is divvied up in ten sections, a few of which point directly to the sharing of data, the storing and compressing of data and specifically that "data collection is often done without the consent of the target" (Marx 218). Identity is not only generally based on the data that is collected, it refuses an ontological perspective. It disavowals the body, *the being*, the historicity one's body carries in body memory and flesh memory is dismissed, overlooked.

In other words, the data refuses to acknowledge the marginalized body, i.e. the Indigenous body in the margins, whilst re-marginalizing it which, in turn, is *digital colonization*. And since data collection has nothing to do with *beingness* or *the bodily* and because the historicity is so much a part of the Indigenous experience, and the experience

of living, more generally, it continues to erase history. It persists in colonizing and thus is how I am determining digital colonization through data collection systems. Such data collection systems, like the algorithm, are taught via machine learning, for example, to collect and produce categories of identification which further reduces the identity of the Indigenous body to a code.

Therein lies a danger: the codification process of AI engages in biases that classify, categorize and codify the Indigenous body even further. And because AI learns from pre-existing biases and collects data based on these biases which further marginalizes, it is not only re-colonizing, it is erasing what has not yet been contemporized.

AI is learning to perceive the world based on its colonial input, and is acting as a disembodied surveillance that re-categorizes bodies based on general data collection. Since AI codes and thus digitally colonizes through multiple factors such as AI surveillance systems and data collection, I want to meditate on the question: can AI provide a space for the Indigenous body to digitally reorient?

Digital territory, digital flesh

Settler colonialism, AI surveillance and data collection compartmentalizes the Indigenous body which paralyzes it to a constant state of colonization: "I cannot decolonize my body." There is no way out of this body, this trauma, this memory. There is nowhere to go. Now more than ever, with such embedded social, political and digital hierarchies, the Indigenous experience is at risk of historical erasure. The intermingling of each sphere produces a great need for disruption and

awakening, not a resistance or recalibration, because, remember, computers do not forget.

In order to disrupt the pre-existing colonial input of AI, the Indigenous body must interrupt their own subjectivity which relies heavily on history and territory. Herein lies the importance of ontological abstraction. The experience of trauma, whether it be displacement or otherwise, such as ancestral genocide or any other kind of violence against one's body, is ontological because it is implicitly biological and *being-oriented*. And abstraction allows for a different kind of experience or *beingness* to arrive.

Abstraction here is supported by Sylvia Wynter's notion of autopoiesis, a term used to describe "subjects given over to death within a certain regime of being human/ human knowing" (Hantel 3). The subjects who are "given over to death" (Hantel 3) are liminal in their colonized state of being. Fundamentally, a liminal subject is a colonized human being who is forced to *be* within a mode of constant survival.

Wynter's notion of the "liminal subject" derives from abstraction. It strikes a chord when expressing the body as biologic, autopoietic and perhaps even represented as a multispecies. Firstly, her liminal subject characterizes the subject as being on "the threshold of a new world in the midst of cultural ritual" (qtd. in Hantel 69). In this way, we can understand Wynter's liminal subject in terms of Indigenous culture and ritual practice. Perhaps the liminal subject is formed through an abstraction which allows for corporeal overrepresentation through means of survival.

This survival is exhibited through ritual. By returning to ritual, Indigenous peoples unify through memory and tradition and return to the cosmological. However, for colonized / Indigenous people, it is important to discover means of survival in a world

that was meant for its antithesis. It has never been safe to practice ritual, even on 'given land'. Indigenous peoples are killed off through historical mediums of representation as well as through technological representation. Meaning that this is a kind of 'death'. This death, or data-digital erasure, forces the Indigenous body to find new ways of survival.

And because the Indigenous body is stuck within a colonized world, territorially and digitally, it is important to imagine the 'other-worldly' to veer from settler colonialism. In this way, the Indigenous re-imagines their subjectivity through overrepresentation. For example, "the liminal subject assumes a structural role at the limit of the overrepresentation of Man, indexing an outside to our current descriptive statement by their very existence and paradoxical survival [...]" (qtd. in Hantel 70). Thereafter, as a liminal subject, the Indigenous is given opportunity to recover and possibly even reclaim, contemporize and survive.

This overrepresentation of the liminal subject, within a technological framework, is envisioned as *digital flesh*. However, prior to speculating *digital flesh* more elaborately, it is necessary to first understand the space the body needs to enter before the idea of *digital flesh* is even possible.

The Indigenous body must discover a sense of boundlessness that gives way to subjective interruption, therefore, the Indigenous body must reterritorialize where "each one of his [their] organs, his [their] social relations, will, in sum, find itself [themselves]re-patterned, so as to be re-affected, over-coded as a function of the global requirements of the world" (Guattari 10). To arrive at a space of reterritorialization, the liminal subject (as overrepresented) is placed outside of the parameters it is bound by. This kind of reterritorialization implies the need for a new landscape.

Digital lacuna:
The interface

By inserting the already codified body into a virtual and boundless landscape, Indigenous peoples disrupt their own subjectivity and corporeality as well as contemporize their bodies as memory systems and flesh. This break in the sphere opens a space for rearticulation.

The interruption is corporeal contemporization and survival. This is possible because datafication refuses an ontological acknowledgement. Though the Indigenous would not re-enter their territory and claim it back, as if it is even possible, the Indigenous would need to enter a technological posthumanist framework, the virtual, the digital via the *interface*.

However, before entering a borderless cartography, as made possible through machine learning, it is important to distinguish the differences between architectural and virtual spaces. As it is experienced in the physical world, architecture manipulates the body to move through space and thus the body forms an understanding of itself, creates meaning-making and applies knowledge to and of the world. Galloway writes on account of Deleuze, "that one should not focus so much on devices or apparatuses of power they mobilize, that is more on the curves of mobility and force," further explaining, "these apparatuses, then are composed of the following elements: lines of visibility and enunciation, lines of force, lines of subjectification, lines of splitting, breakage, fracture" (qtd. in Galloway 18). By applying these apparatuses to the Indigenous experience, a different landscape is possibilized, one that is not so manipulated or reduced to by AI.

The landscape portrayed here derives from *architectural technics*, a term used to describe the technological space architecture is

growing into, most specifically the *interface*. The interface is more than an infrastructural space. It is a threshold, a space of mediation between body and world, both physical and virtual. A gap. A lacuna. It is cartographic plasticity. "The interface is not something that appears before you but rather is a gateway that opens up and allows passage to some place beyond" (Galloway 30). It is in the space of passage between the physical and virtual spaces that is the break or disruption or rupture. The passage is the interface. This liminality between the physical and the virtual embodies movement though it is actualized as an interface.

By arriving into a space that is not named as imperial or colonial as such because it is its own structure outside of the body — a moving and/or malleable structure — it destabilizes normative corporeal thought, that which identifies the body as corporeal flesh.

Here, the Indigenous body speculates the possibilities of de/reprogramming *beingness*. A gesture of de-coding. The Indigenous body does not resist or protest *digital colonization* but navigates through it by entering *digital territory* via the interface. Within the digital space, the Indigenous body is then "over-coded," as Deleuze writes (qtd. in Galloway 18). However, the complexities of subjectivity greatly evolve regarding ethics here. Meaning, for example, subjective interruption between a *natural world* and a *non-natural or virtual/digital world* refers to multifarious meanings that transcend embodiment and require refusal.

Non-being & survival

The Indigenous body becomes something else. It becomes something other than only data. The Indigenous body becomes digital.

It becomes digital flesh. As it is placed in accordance with the interface, its meaning and identification extends beyond the boundaries of the embodied — the human/corporeal flesh and its nervous system.

The Indigenous body is no longer human flesh: it is a digital body. And by invocating Francis Bacon's notion of force, where the body serves as a mediating horizon between self and interface, the Indigenous body seeks to reestablish a grounding where experience develops as a somatic relationship between self and virtual, self and digital, a boundless space which delineates traumatization, i.e. colonization, by identifying the body beyond the corporeal and symbolic flesh into the space of the digital. The corporeal body here serves as Bacon's notion of force within a digital landscape.

Here, I lean on Galloway where he writes on two kinds of spatial digitality which are flat digitality and deep digitality, he writes, "Flat digitality results from the reduplicative multiplexing of the object" (68). And then he reviews deep digitality:

> *Deep digitality results from the reduplicative multiplexing of the subject. Instead of a single point of view scanning a multiplicity of image feeds, deep digitality is a questionof a multiplicity, nay an infinity, of points of view flanking and flooding the world viewed. These are not so much matrices of screens but matrices of vision. (Galloway 68-69)*

Thereafter, deep digitality is the kind of digital and territorial unfolding the Indigenous body would become into or through, as a gesture of reterritorialization, rupture and force.

This is not to say that this decentering of corporeality, this disembodiment, is a positive move toward transcendence, it is only stating that the interface possibilizes a

different kind of subjectivity, perhaps what Daniel Colucciello Barber refers to as non-being and the "*no*-thing" in reference to his interpolation of difference ("The Creation of Non-Being"). He first discusses the notion of being and writes, "being — or the possibility thereof — grounds itself not through its own coherence, but through an enactment of power that is staged by anti-black violence" (Barber et al.). Barber continues further by elaborating the existence of beingness or "non-being" as the refusal of beingness and the "*no*-thing," he states:

> *Difference antecedes both positive being and negative being [...] In other words, difference is not between opposed beings but in itself, autonomous from and antecedent to ever being or thing; difference is real, but precisely as a matter of non-being. Its reality is not the being of the thing, it is* no-*thing. (par. 13 et al.)*

In this way, we can apply non-being and Barber's definition of *no*-thing to the digitally incorporated Indigenous body. The Indigenous body acquires its own power or self-reclamation through difference and refusal. In this way, the Indigenous body refuses its colonial subjugation, or present-time beingness, by becoming or embodying the *no*-thing, as made possible through the interface, a deep digital lacuna between natural world and virtual or digital world. For the Indigenous body to enter a disembodied digital landscape is to perform a potential for survival and even contemporization. Hereafter, the Indigenous is not in recognition of Self (or beingness) within a geographical, political and colonial structure, the coherence here remains outside the body.

Thereafter, the refusal of colonization and codification gesticulates the Indigenous body to enter deep digitality terrain or *digital territory* and become or start to embody *digital flesh*. Both *digital territory* and *digital flesh* are made possible through machine learning and computation and enter a *deep digital territory*. This kind of embodiment of subjectivity or beingness perhaps is the non-being or the '*no*-thing' Barber (dis)assembles.

Of course, one must lean into the metaphor here and think radically about the Indigenous biologic and about digitality as immanent where machine learning facilitates what the Indigenous body becomes within *digital territory* as *digital flesh*, the multi-species, the liminal subject, the body that refuses colonization, negates beingness and welcomes contemporization and survival.

This is not a sim character or machinic extension of oneself. It disrupts subjectivity and mediates *beingness* outside the limits of general data collection. Outside of the flesh. It is unknown *digital territory*. And because it is unknown, it characterizes the uncharacteristic, the *non-being* or the '*no*-thing', an immanent adventure within the digital, one that looks back at colonialism and machine learning and enters the digital lacuna, making recovery and survival imaginable.

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