DECOLONIAL DIGITAL SENSIBILITIES: EXPLORING THE MARGINS OF SOCIAL ENGINEERING THROUGH DIGITALLY-INFLECTED CONSCIOUSNESS AND ITS DESIRES, AFFILIATIONS, SUBJECTIVITIES, AND IDENTITIES

SENSIBILIDADES DIGITALES DECOLONIALES: EXPLORANDO LOS MÁRGENES DE LA INGENIERÍA SOCIAL A TRAVÉS DE LA CONCIENCIA CON INFLEXIÓN DIGITAL Y SUS DESEOS, AFILIACIONES, SUBJETIVIDADES E IDENTIDADES

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Abstract: An important part of e-colonial theory asks questions about how digital structures attempt to create dependency on electronic and online communicative devices, for information and social interaction. In the same way that transportation infrastructure and unwalkable cities forced people into automobiles in the twentieth century, digitized conditions now attempt to bind freedom and community action with specific behavior, material consumption, and the use of physical apparatus that access digital spaces. The passive enculturation (first-culture-learning) that occurs through constant contact with these e-spaces, and how these platforms are instruments of cultural and social engineering, are important axes of critique amid hyperdigitization. My argument examines the embodied nature of digitized cognition and the neoliberal social engineering projects, posing solutions that move toward moderating the severity and human costs of the digital tide.

Keywords: Decolonial Digital Humanities, Digital Culture, Neoliberal Digitization, Digital Behavior, Social Engineering

Resumen: Una parte importante de la teoría e-colonial plantea preguntas sobre cómo las estructuras digitales intentan crear dependencia en los dispositales digitales, para la obtención de información e para la interacción social. La construcción de carreteras y ciudades no caminables obligaron al público a utilizar al automóvil en el siglo XX: las condiciones digitalizadas intentan vincular la libertad y la acción comunitaria con comportamientos específicos, incluyendo el consumismo y el uso de aparatos físicos que acceden a los espacios digitales. La enculturación pasiva (adquisición de una primera cultura) que sucede por contacto constante con e-espacios, y cómo estas plataformas son instrumentos de ingeniería cultural y social, son ejes importantes de crítica en medio de la hiperdigitización. Mi argumento examina la cognición digitalizada y los proyectos de ingeniería social-neoliberal, planteando soluciones que intentan moderar la severidad y los costos humanos de la marea digital.

Palabras clave: Humanidades digitales decoloniales, cultura digital, digitalización neoliberal, comportamiento digital, ingeniería social.

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For most of human history people changed technology.
Now technology changes people.
Fabio Farsi

An important part of e-colonial theory asks questions about how digital structures attempt to create dependency on electronic and online communicative devices, for information and social interaction. In the same way that construction of transportation infrastructure and unwalkable cities forced people into automobile usage in the twentieth century, the recent upsurge of hypercommunicative digitized conditions (which, like automobile-utopias, are often supported by both corporate and state initiatives) attempts to bind freedom and

community action with specific behavior, material consumption, and the use of physical apparatus that access digital spaces. The passive enculturation (first-culture-learning) that occurs through constant contact with these e-spaces, and how these platforms are engaged as instruments of cultural and social engineering, are important axes of critique amid this period of hyperdigitization. The neoliberal fictions embedded in the devices and their platforms promote tropes of e-participation as agencies of supposed equality, inclusion, and organic community development, without acknowledgment of the racist, sexist, classist nature of the platforms themselves. Like automobile-interpellated realties, digitally-inflected desire, performance, emotion, community-structure, among many other realms of human experience, are reshaped in ways that recreate and maintain colonial relationships among communities and individuals.

In this frame of inquiry, this paper asks: "How can citizens of digitized societies author their own lives?" My argument attempts to address this uncertainty in ways that are attuned to the embodied nature of digital cognition (that is, the ways exposure to digital devices influences cognition), and to the neoliberal digital social engineering projects (largely founded on machinations of Western national models in relation to language, industrialization, and consumerism), lending attention to some specific solutions that may move toward moderating the severity and human costs of the digital tide.

These questions relate to inner, perhaps the innermost, dimensions of the human existence -- specifically, the role of authority: be it cultural, social, political, familial, spiritual, linguistic and so on, what conditions and agents make people obey? My analyses are developed in relation to Vamsi Koneru's "Migrant Mindfulness", Lefebrve's *Rhythmanalysis*, and Latour's technological mediation. These are each projects of non-sovereign, atomized understandings of cultural performance and social experience that cut across many axes of ostensibly present realities. What is feasible, what is apparent, what an encounter might do, and the scale and the scope of the engagement and its entangled effects in relation to class, sexuality, ethnicity, fantasy, desire, projection, performance, and attachment all interplay in important ways with and per

digital interfaces. While these hinge upon exterior conditions (environment of experience, in this case digital), they are developed as interior (mind and body synergistic) competencies. In a sense, the perspectives developed here reconsider *the digital space of experience* as a part of consciousness –that is, embodied consciousness– and asks questions about how successful the platforms are in manipulating awareness, consciousness, identity, community bonds, desire, and other horizons of being human.

In the sixties, Marshall McLuhan's groundbreaking work observed that "this is the Age of Anxiety for the reason of the electric implosion that compels commitment and participation" (13). As Andrea Righi argues, "the assimilation into what he called the electric (what we now call the digital) is complete" (1). A principal intention of digital technologies is to alter how one experiences reality through mediation of thought, interaction, identity, desire, community-sentiment and being, in attempts to shift both attitudes and action toward three ends*: activity, participation,* and *consumption.* After an examination of the widespread (and ostensibly voluntary) utilization of digital platforms, (asking "What representational *authority* is hidden in the digital?") and a discussion of the colonial iterations of neoliberal information saturation (asking "What are the manipulations trying to achieve, and why?"), the argument builds on uncertainties developed by Andrea Righi in *The Other Side of the Digital* (chapter 1), considering pragmatic approaches that gesture toward undoing some of the core tenets of the digital storm. Bringing attention to the metanarratives of neoliberal digitization resituates critique in ways that unlink it to a degree from the certainties that posit digital life as the only socially participatory –therefore civic and virtuous– form of existence.

Heidegger's *Being and Time* outlined insights around the notion that when a device breaks, it enters into consciousness. Technologies like the automobile and hand-held-devices, then, are forced into the structure of daily life (by the state and corporate entities); but *only* when they stop working is a device extricated from a contextual, passive existence, into a necessary object. "Depositamos nuestra confianza," argues Héctor José Huyke, "en la tecnología y obviamos el proceso de pensar rigurosamente sobre la manera

en que cierta práctica de invención y de innovación ... ha venido a impactar la condición humana en general" (1). Technology-as-core-necessity-of-life has been called "tool-being" by Graham Harman (2002), a form of reality in which objects take on metaphysical dimensions that have orientational effects on human decisions, emotions, consciousness, thoughts, and actions. There is some variation in how these objects (automobile, hand-held devices, search engines) link to "inner" human processes –while some adopt, others reject technology; many lack access to them altogether. The degree of variation is determined to an extent by the material conditions of existence. For instance, if one lives in a food desert, industrialized transportation is required for sustenance. Similarly, the ways emergency alerts have been digitized –from sirens and other local alarms toward text messages–requires digital devices and the electricity to power them. As these circumstances creep into all dimensions of the human condition –social interaction, food consumption, medical care, and so on– the industrialization of each person's action is linked to the physical apparatuses in ways that benefit corporate profits and the state entities that maintain them.

These technological designs are conceived with two principal ends: 1) that the devices appear passive and innocuous by not receiving our direct attention (only when they break do they enter into thought) and thus, they become biotechnical components of consciousness; and 2) that the usage of a device becomes necessary for life itself (be it for food consumption, healthcare, or emergency alerts) which ensures the proliferation of profit for the entities that celebrate, promote, produce, and sell them. As Lisa Parks notes, "Most people are socialized to know very little about the infrastructures that surround them in everyday life, whether electrical systems, sewer pipes or broadcast networks" (64). This extends into cultural and social networks of power, symbolized and codified into languages, laws, images, acceptable forms of behavior, and other aspects of the social milieu. As these infrastructures influence cognition and behavior, not only are people socialized to be unaware of the systems, the devices are engineered to be invisible and appear transparent, democratic, organic, and pre-integrated with a physical and social environment. To belabor the obvious, the technology is designed to appear natural and

therefore it is *socially out of the ordinary* and sometimes *physically impossible* to live without it.

We are faced with multiple social and cultural engineering projects through these devices, and the digital invasion is not unlike other grand narratives: the presence of people of European descent in the Americas is natural or positive; "progress" (with its automobiles and industrialized existence) is beneficial for humanity; monotheistic and secular monotheistic projections (claims) of truth, morality, being, ethics, and so on, are not only appropriate but mundane and natural. "While some linguistic and cultural variation may be permitted," argues Anthony Richmond, "the networks will be the vehicle for transmitting a single dominant ... ideology" (299). If traditional grand narratives and digital ideologies are pre-legitimated uni-knowledge that is largely unexamined – and they fall apart under scrutiny– what is the authority that compels people to obey? The elision of object-subject in the technological narrative redirects this key inquiry: it moves the interaction away from a dominant group's *exigency* toward *participation* as the node of dominance; else these devices (cars or smart-phones), one *makes a decision* to be apart, isolated, and external to the doings of society. The myth that it is *a person's decision* to participate or not is a mechanism that reinforces the passive infrastructure of dominance in ways that parallel traditional media, be them street signs, dictionaries, televisions or other manifestations: the infrastructural design makes avoidance of the tools a social and physical burden. As soon as the notion that "We must have these things, otherwise we'll be out of touch," passes the threshold into received knowledge, it ceases to be understood as a colonial exigence (Herlihy-Mera chapter 3).

Chomsky and Herman's model in *Manufacturing Consent* maintains that power narratives, when they saturate a person's reality, can, over time, have transformative power. Relating this frame in e-realms, a commonplace action of web-searching –an activity *supposedly* generated by the user herself or himself– is not an act realized in isolation but rather one charged by your IP address; a singular, nonhybrid language imposed by the platform and browser; and the presumptions that corporations have about your economic status and sexuality, political stance and age, among other conjectures, all

of which are combined into the user interface before one opens the portal. The "best" results that appear at the top are prescripted in terms of presenting the things the algorithm speculates the user is most likely to consume. The intentionality in Google and the other ostensibly organic tools is concealed by saturating the user in similar nodes of information in every e-interaction: the repetition of comparable information in audio, video, text, social and news media, among other controls, lulls a user into passivity, acceptance, and confidence in the platforms.

In this way, the saturating narratives are "grand" but also "individualized" through the pre-informational web that determines what a user experiences. Jean-François Lyotard distinguishes between metanarrative (*métarécit*) and grand narrative (*grand récit*) in ways that are sometimes elided in translation from French to Spanish and English (29, 30). The verb he chose for the phenomenon is "récit" –to recite, or say over and over; the term has a literary significance as well, but the important axis is the *repetition* of material, not its retelling, critiquing, reflecting, or interpreting. Part of Lyotard's critique is avoidance of the verbs "raconteur" or "conter", as "récit" is a method to express rhetorical distance from the anecdotes themselves; since recitation is a ceremonial, non-interpretive form of communication, his use of "récit" emphasizes the nonsense of the "big story" itself and therefore of the power it wields.

The digital narrative is like this. It is one more narrative about narratives, one that is recited through various media on various devices. It reaches into and nuances historical meanings and how we experience reality and community, boundaries and spaces, culture and identity, emotion and knowledge; and it influences each one. The digital tide offers a social legitimation in its ostensibly organic nature, but it is neither organic nor passive but violent and colonial. The e-empire has already been designed and implemented –in the automobile inasmuch as the hand-held device– and so the corporate utopia has been realized: the paradise, the ideal, the neoliberal domination has largely happened unchecked– and the *complacency* that people have before contesting this situation confirms the success of the imperial initiative. It is a challenge to abandon digital life just like it is a challenge to abandon automobile life. The state

comes closer and closer to making it impossible –and sometimes illegal– to abandon those devices (cars and hand-held machines). Lethargy only closes the circle, the complacency itself places users into complicity with the structures that dominate them.

In a large sense, this very *weariness* before *anything but the digital* is the goal; its emergence represents an important part of the neoliberal conquest. Users are inevitably disengaged and over-saturated by digital systems, but one can never disconnect from them. Just as physical exhaustion characterized the industrial revolution, mental weariness is symbolic of a new period of social engineering in which the digitized citizen is mapped, controlled, manipulated and often forced, by means of their own interactions –for example, scrolling through ads to see the news. The ostensibly voluntary nature of these interactions reinforces the power of the e-system and increases its already comprehensive role in human affairs. Authority succeeds when coercion is participatory (i.e., when people believe it is voluntary) because anything done by force may be examined –but questioning the ostensibly voluntary act (for instance, thinking –and believing– that 2020 US presidential election was fraudulent) is also to question democratic rights of participation and expression.

Decolonizing Digital Spaces

We are different people online compared to offline, and this same "difference" occurs in other parts of life: the ways we describe ourselves and our communities, the referents that we engage as pillars of being, are not universal but shift depending on our cultural and linguistic context, and the media of communication. As Vamsi Koneru notes, "People score differently on cognition tests; tell stories differently; name their communities differently, and self-identify differently depending upon where they are, with whom they are speaking, and in what language" (1). This phenomenon –or something similar to it– also occurs in digital spheres, so looking down into a smartphone is like changing languages or even nations; we communicate differently, have different desires, needs, emotions, sentiments, attitudes, opinions, communication tendencies when online vis-à-vis offline (Wardynski 1). There are three important aspects concerning how the digital

influences human affairs: 1) the manipulation occurs every time we put our eyes on a screen; 2) device-usage has been shown to be detrimental to our emotional and physical health; 3) and our online time affects –often negatively– our offline time. If the material and ideological conditions of existence in the digital empire are changing, rapidly and disruptively, *how might digital spaces be decolonized?* Huyke deftly argues that this should be "un progreso diferente, más satisfactorio, más feliz, más diverso, más cercano," and that "nuestro recurso principal es el análisis crítico" (2).

1) **Critical Reflection on Digitally-Inflected Cognition:** Examine the psychology of digital understanding and digital experience more in terms of its *embodied nature*, and explore the elusive but authoritative consequences of repeated cultural and linguistic patterns (e.g., pushing English and US cultural symbols on Puerto Rican IP addresses) on consciousness. Develop perspectives concerning how digital interfaces influence the brain, and subsequently emotions, thought, motivations, relationships, communities, and identities. Support research on how devices seize attention, consciousness, and direct these into patterns of thought, behavior, and consumption. In disseminating these reports, direct critique at the uniformity of weaponizing technology to impose unequal relations between communities, and the notion that technological implementation is an appropriate justification for exploitation, imperialism, and   violence.

2) **Contest the E-Empire of the Mind:** While things digital often pose in the veneer of organic sovereignty and green movements, they subtly cultivate toxic myths: that social media are liberating, that data streams put us in touch with others; that handheld devices enhance awareness and participation. Since much of the empirical data on those topics contradict the neoliberal program of disinformation, this situation requires a popular awareness on what the e-empire is doing to the mind, and how the digital path is not the only one for human existence, autonomy, happiness, or participation.

Encourage community initiatives, public institutions (universities, municipalities, nations, etc.) and private entities (restaurants, businesses, corporations, etc.) to sponsor "offline" days, weeks, months, or years. Designate some public spaces (buildings, plazas, campuses, libraries and other areas) as "offline," where digital devices are not permitted and wifi and cellular phone service are not available.

3) **Digital Bill of Rights:** If other forms of life are to be replaced by data streams, people should have a right to information that is not misleading, false, or coercive. As the existing systems (largely limited to user-flagging and corporate moderation) have failed with catastrophic consequences, develop methods to vet content and regulate e-media that would protect viewers from false and deceptive content (and protect people from users who have seen and believe false content). Bring the rigor of print journalism to all online spaces. Regulatory structures could uphold these rights, holding the corporations responsible retroactively. The Digital Public Policy Forum report "Poisoning Democracy: How Governments Can Address Harmful Speech Online" includes a proposal to establish a "Moderation Standards Council," which would enact a digital counterpart to existing broadcasting regulations and standards concerning communication, and thus reduce the convenience and legality of disseminating grisly, counterfactual, and hazardous content through e-media (McKelvey, Tworek and Tenove 1).

4) **Considerable Acceptance of the Digital as part of Evolutionary Cognition:** Perhaps the least satisfactory of these options, the digital reconfigurations could be perceived as an evolutionary part of cognition, similar to the ways it has been treated in science fiction (*Star Wars, Star Trek, Black Mirror*, etc.). Reconceptualize the nature of being, of life and death, of community and distance, of memory and emotion, of identity and agency, in relation to the shifting and invasive nature of digitized-

consciousness. If this dystopian path is inevitable, it should occur reflectively, collaboratively, and slowly.

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