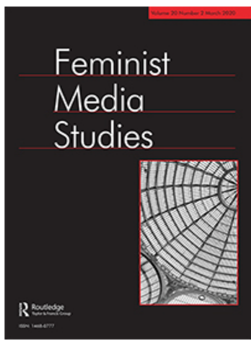

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Meeting place: bringing Native feminisms to bear on borders of cyberspace

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It is meaningful, given the special theme of this issue of Commentary and Criticism, to offer a reminder that borders are not conceptualized in terms of divisions in many Indigenous worldviews, and particularly within Native feminist worldviews. While borders are typically described in terms of control—as bounded or containing—they can also be described as flows (Doreen Massey as quoted in Mishuana Goeman 2009) and affective processes. A river, for example, often a separator on locational maps, is a place where Indigenous peoples can meet to discuss issues, celebrate events, and engage in togetherness and diplomacy. These borders are nodes of relationality, where past and future stories of people, spaces, and non-human beings collide to form slices of knowledge. As materially new terrains are built, namely cyberspace, Indigenous bodies traverse and analytically negotiate their various borders and the geographic grammars that describe them. This short essay is intended to provoke more thought around how and why we project "worldly" geographies onto cyberspace, and if there are more feminist ways of seeing and being there.

Grammars of cyberspace

Cyberspace, constructed as a vast interconnected assemblage of digital energy, has been anticipated and imagined by techno-optimists for its potential to act as a new gathering place. However, cyberspace has been discoursed and materialized in a manner that frames it as commodified land, reproducing colonialism as well as the exclusionary gendered and raced notions that undergird it. While feminist media studies play an important role in critiquing various -isms[1] in technological environments (Mia Consalvo 2003), it still could benefit from decolonial Native feminisms approaches in light of several problems in the field. For one, there is a rampant misunderstanding when conceptualizing Indigenous peoples as a race versus citizens of nations in discussions of identity politics and technology. Another separate, but important, issue regards a noticeable lack of Native feminist perspectives and citational erasures in feminist media studies. This prevents Indigenous cyber or networked feminist concerns from rising and represses different strains of "truth in the emotional content of this felt knowledge: colonialism as it is felt by those whose experience it" (Dian Million 2008, 272).

Cyberspace as the new or last frontier (Dave Healy 1997) is a tired but useful metaphor to start this discussion. Problematically, this draws from historian Frederick Jackson Turner (1893) thesis on how democracy was constructed at the war-stricken

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borders between Indigenous peoples and invaders and through the tropes of wilderness and civilization in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Within this conception, land itself is a body framed as feminine, as Mother Nature, and as colonizable or rape-able. To extend the frontier grammar (Dolores Calderón 2014), the Internet and cyberspace more largely are similarly spoken about in terms of war (cyberwar, doxxing), terrain conquest (owning networks), and rule (punishable laws and paternalism over which country can sell the next generation of wireless telecommunications technology). In a political economic sense, the nation-state model has mapped its borders, in the divisive sense, onto the Internet producing structures of subjective ownership. For example, the US, China, and Russia are instrumentalized as inventors, cyber-cops, or trouble-makers (hackers, political influencers). Indigenous nations and communities also have their roles, sets of protocols, and understandings of cyberspace and continue to regulate large-scale ICTs for governance and self-determination (Marisa Duarte 2017).

Programming language and building borders

An inherent limitation is that these borders that divide regions of cyberspace, or alternatively bring groups together, are built using programming languages that reflect imperial linguistic features, thus also raced and gendered. As more than a method of encryption, code is what Lawrence Lessig 1999 famously refers to as law; it is a tool that enables/controls digital architecture. A better-known set includes C, C++, Java, Python, HTML, Machine Language, and Assembly Language, and these are fairly global in their accessibility. Their keywords/commands are typically in English, and non-English-speaking countries often also develop programming languages in English to increase usability, and uptake. At their core, these scripting and programming languages are shaped by English and the worldviews that permeate them. They are often critiqued by feminists for being highly procedural, containing markedly linear functional logic, and claiming pretenses of objectivity and mutuality (Sherry Turkle and Seymour Papert 1990). When building blocks (code) of cyberspace are subject to an imperial linguistic regime, Indigenous peoples must negotiate them, enter into a politic of refusal (Audra Simpson 2007), or as some Indigenous computer scientists are doing, create their own programming languages.

In a theoretical sense, language of any kind is an aspect of identifying with a community, creating and reflecting boundaries of communicative possibility. As Benedict Anderson ([1983] 2006) shared, “through that language, encountered at mother’s knee and parted with only at the grave, pasts are restored, fellowships are imagined, and futures dreamed” (Anderson [1983] 2006, 154). Programming language is essentially a set of instructions and the first language that “actually does what it says” (Alexander Galloway 2004, 165–166). It talks in genie, responding to commands that are not necessarily subserviently fulfilled but impacted by culture (Fox Harrell 2003). So, to that end, is the dream purely prediction and execution, or is it more profound? While there is little space to address all these questions here, I ask them to generate thought about the importance of questioning the future that coding, as a global language, dreams of or limits for Indigenous peoples.

Stewardship, relationality, and daydreaming

Language, land, lifeways, and cyberspace are now interconnected, and Native feminisms offer ways to reimagine cyberspace that open up more productive relationships with digital spaces and the affective capacity of Indigenous embodiment within them. First, I argue that it is actually productive to mobilize feminist decolonial concepts that have been ascribed to physical geographies. Native feminisms, a diverse body of theory and practice, underline settler colonialism and attend to issues of land dispossession and gender in tandem (Sandy Grande 2015). Rather than land being conceptualized in terms of property and patriarchal domination, land is respected for having its own sovereignty. This helps reframe cyberspace as a place where Indigenous people can assert digital *stewardship* within. In this understanding, Indigenous peoples earmark domains for sustaining and creating cultural (technological) protocols while guarding against other concerns. These include environmental problems of e-waste, cyberwar, algorithms of oppression (Safiya Noble 2018), and other strains of human and resource exploitation. Feminist media studies scholars should recognize that they are also likely culpable in dispossession and need to assume some responsibility to live more responsibly on the homelands stewarded by others, regardless of the materiality.

While stewardship is a healthier relationship to cyberspace than ownership, projecting features of land onto cyberspace generally risks reifying colonialist/imperialist imperatives. The purpose is not to provide a decolonial version of a colonial metaphor, but to underscore the sovereignty of lands and agency of non-human beings predating conquest. Cyberspace can only then be culturally reproduced as a semblance of relationality from a Native feminist perspective. This shifts conversations of property and ownership to connections that are "familial, intergenerational, and instructive" (Kate McCoy, Eve Tuck, and Marcia McKenzie 2014, 9). Borders, within this relational grammar, are analytical outlines that are interpreted through stories, mythologies, and sensory experiences. What a relational approach affords is seeing digital spaces and meta-digital things as living, breathing, sentient beings (Jason Lewis, Neolani Arista, Archer Pechawis, and Suzanne Kite 2018) worthy of respect. This stands in contrast to capitalist logic that dismisses all things digital as profitable, destroyable, servile resources.

Feminist cyborg theory does imaginatively reject dualisms, essentialism, and marginalization which hinder relationality between beings and "the commons" (Donna Haraway 2006). But it could benefit from engaging in dialogue regarding Indigenous conceptions of border relationalities and interstellar relationalities to make clear how we are a networked connection of objects, energies, animals, geological formation, the cosmos, and its energies (Lou Cornum 2015, para. 13). Similarly, it is productive to momentarily consider cyberspace as perhaps, a different form of connected consciousness. Roger Simon's 1992 conception of "disruptive daydreaming," that Native feminists Leilani Sabzalian (2019) and Susan Dion ([1959] 2009) in the field of education advocate for in different contexts, is useful here.

> Disruptive daydreams are fragments of existence within which the necessity of the given historical forms of our daily lives are refused as we embody momentarily alternative[s]. (Simon 1992, 9)

Rather than pure means of utopian escapism, cyberspace affords Indigenous peoples alternative means to actively take up space, and specifically to use technologies, as has been part of protocol since time immemorial, to engender a sense of convergence and futurity.

Final thoughts

The ways colonial notions of places, borders, and tools in cyberspace are challenged will be embodied and colored by a complicated history. But how cyberspace is being thought about in relationship to colonialism is an important step in considering what the future may look like for Indigenous communities. In this sense, feminist Indigenous computer scientists, scholars, artists, and media practitioners have a distinct responsibility to steer and shape that future. While this essay traces a fraction of cyber-feminist concern, the hope is that it provokes awareness, thinking, dreaming, and action by feminists, both Indigenous and educated ally, to push back against colonialism embedded in taken for granted digital places. As Eva Mackey (2016) asserts, "how we might decolonize is not pre-scripted" (191). One productive place to draw attention to is the scripting and programming languages, loaded grammars, and the borders that define these digital places. Cyberspace, despite its myriad oppressive qualities, is a home of feminist knowledge production, a meeting place. One that we should steward and form restorative relationships with.

Note

1. For example, racism, sexism, capitalism, ableism, militarism, classism.

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