Refusing the Internet, Resisting Colonization: Building Collective Leverage

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I've never had a smartphone, and when people see me pull out my phone, they make comments. My standard response is, "I'm living in the future." By saying this, I'm being a bit of a troll; generally people look back at me with even more confusion than before, unsure if I'm being absurd or if I'm delusional. In refusing the smartphone, and disagreeing with the convention that we will all maintain mobile connection to the internet at all times, I am trying to prefigure a world that relates to the internet in more careful and ethical ways. Darin Barney writes about refusal and resistance as "suited for the time between present disagreement and possible futures that have yet to arrive" (forthcoming, p. 12). I am writing from a place of disagreement—not with the internet, but with an uncritical adoption of the internet that treats its consequences as neutral and its ubiquity as settled—and living towards more responsible futures.

In this paper, I will describe my approach to resisting or refusing the internet and how it aims to support the development of an informed collective awareness—what educational activists, following Paulo Freire (1970), call conscientization—in relation to the oppressive structures associated with the online world. I will explore the complexities of resisting or refusing the internet in light of the colonial and capitalist forces that naturalize and promote problematic structures within or that underlie internet usage—often in covert ways through which the user is unknowingly complicit in their own subjugation and in the exploitation of others. The ultimate objective of this project is to prefigure more responsible digital praxes that can be realized through and as direct actions that reorient our relationships with systems of oppression connected to the internet.

Method: 2020 Offline

I am about to spend the year offline. The desire to live without the internet comes from the place of disagreement I described, and I hope that this refusal "exposes the potential for a reordering of parts" (Barney, forthcoming, p. 3) in relation to the role of digital tools in our lives and learning. This project, that Barney (2018) may describe as a "conscious withdrawal of efficiency" (p. 145), aims to "exacerbate relations (exploitation, racism, sexism, etc.)" (p. 146) inherent to digital systems. By spending a year offline, my goal is *not* to advocate that others follow suit, but to use the experience as a disruption that results in challenges and frustrations which bring to a fore the problematic relations underlying our internet usage. With these in view and with the connections I am building through my offline year, I will use this project as a platform for considering how we can exist responsibly within the ruling relations (Smith, 1990)

that organize the online world. When discussing the ruling relations connected to the internet, I am referring both to those that organize the material reality or labour that power the internet, as well as those coordinating the digital experiences of users online. Barney suggests that being-in-refusal "negates the hold of the existing order of relations and affirms the continuous possibility of being otherwise" (forthcoming, p. 3). Spending a year offline aims to uncover the hold of the current ruling relations that coordinate how online one is expected to be and how one is expected to be online—for school, work, socializing, and logistical or personal uses. When I tell people I'm spending a year offline, most are surprised to realize that being anything other than always online is even an option. I will also use the experiment as a year to affirm alternative possibilities and to listen to others and share back ways of being otherwise—less online, or using the internet more critically.

Being able to spend a year offline is a great privilege. Most people's professional lives alone would not be able to accommodate it. This sets me apart from many of the communities that rely most on the internet—both directly and for the highly problematic labour involved in its operation. Ruha Benjamin notes that:

> the capacity to refuse rests upon a prior condition of possibility—that one has been offered something in the first place. Such offering, in turn, implicitly sets one apart from those who have been altogether neglected and excluded, so as not even to have the chance to refuse. (2016, p. 5)

There are over three billion people today who do not have regular access to the internet, many of them living in the developing countries that are most impacted by the problematic labour practices and resource exploitation associated with the industries of the internet (Amen et al., 2017; Roberts & Hernandez, 2019; Qiu, 2009). Refusing the internet aims to uncover the power imbalances between myself—a settler doing graduate work at McGill University in Tiohtiá:ke/Montreal—and these communities, as much as it hopes to reveal the ways in which me and internet users in my community are also subject to these same problematic ruling relations. It is important to note though that although we may be subject to the same ruling relations, my position within them is different, and I am subject to their effects in less devastating ways than many other communities.

To call my experiment a resistance (Coulthard, 2014) or refusal (Simpson, 2014) risks appropriating a praxis with a deep importance to decolonization and indigenous struggles. In the

conclusion to Coulthard's *Red Skin, White Masks,* he discusses strategies for decolonization. These strategies rely on non-indigenous allies to help build "the significant political leverage required to simultaneously block the economic exploitation of [indigenous] people and homelands while constructing alternatives" (2014, p. 173). This strategy, Coulthard asserts, relies on establishing "relations of solidarity and networks of trade and mutual aid with national and transnational communities and organizations that are also struggling against the imposed effects of globalized capital" (2014, p. 173). In considering my time offline as resistance or refusal, I aim to highlight the ways the internet—materially and experientially—makes internet users both subject to the negative effects of globalized capital and responsible for many other communities' much more serious struggles with similar effects. Recognizing this affinity *and* complicity is not just a framing by which I can assert a solidarity between internet users and indigenous struggles of resistance or refusal; rather, it affectively ties all of us, as internet users, to the struggle in ways that plant the potential for the significant political leverage Coulthard suggests is needed. As my offline year progresses, I would like to reflect on how I belong or relate to (and do not belong or relate to) different communities that are struggling against global capital, and I will trace how this position changes—if it changes—over the course of my year without internet

As Tuck and Yang (2012) stress, "[d]ecolonization is not a metonym for social justice" (p. 21) and it is important to differentiate oppressions that can be disrupted by awareness alone—like, perhaps, internet users exploited by how their online data is used against them—from oppressions that can only be overcome through awareness along with serious material change—like decolonization. I am learning from indigenous struggles but the struggle to resist the internet is not decolonizing unless it is directly tied to the materiality of the internet and the repatriation of land. Tuck and Yang (2012) describe several superficial moves that settlers often take towards assuaging their colonial guilt, and in resisting the systems of oppression tied to colonization, it is important to be on guard against allowing "*conscientization* to stand in for the more uncomfortable task of relinquishing stolen land" (p. 19, italics in original). Tuck and Yang (2012) point out that "Freire's philosophies [related to conscientization] have encouraged educators to use 'colonization' as a metaphor for oppression" (p. 20). In this paper, as I discuss various exploitive relations in connection with the internet, it will be important to keep in mind the distinction and the connections between colonial exploitations and other systems of oppression.

Background: The World Wide Web of Oppression

Although the internet continues to be used as a domain for organizing resistance to exploitive or oppressive relations (Duarte, 2017; Jackson, 2018; Mercea, 2011), the infrastructures and devices that allow us to go online are tied to exploitive globalized distributions of labour, often along colonial lines (Dyer-Witheford, 2015; Fuchs, 2014; Huws, 2014; Nakamura, 2013; Navarro-Remesal & Zapata, 2018; Roberts, 2016; Tricontinental, 2019). Coulthard (2014) claims that the state's "economic infrastructure… is core to the colonial accumulation of capital in settler-political economies like Canada's" (p. 170). With digital technologies driving Canada's economy (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2017; Lamb & Seddon, 2016), colonial accumulation here is increasingly tied to the internet. Additionally, this accumulation of capital has relied on an increasing amount of energy and resources, which has led to serious environmental and ecological impacts (Ahmed, 2018; Hogan, 2015; Terranova, 2007) and further colonial control of indigenous lands (Barker, 2009; Coulthard, 2014). As internet users, we are responsible for global systems of oppressive labour practices and for ecological degradation. By using "electronic gadgets [we are]…complicit in coltan extraction in Congo, outsourced labor in China, e-waste in Pakistan and gadget consumerism in the West (Molleindustria, 2011, np). In terms of users' own experiences online, the way data is used both impacts users themselves and other communities; data that is gathered on internet users contributes to objectifying relations that facilitate systemic power imbalances and the further commodification of people and natural resources (Nieborg, 2017; Kennedy, 2016; Kop, Fournier, & Durand, 2017; Williamson, 2016; Zuboff, 2015). This burgeoning coordination of global economic infrastructures plays a fundamental role in Coulthard (2014)'s conception of colonial accumulation.

With growing understandings of how we relate to the systems of oppression online or that facilitate online services, we become consciously situated "within the production and consumption of technology and technological devices and assume our responsibility in the consequences of these processes" (Navarro-Remesal & Pérez Zapata, 2018, p. 3). Assuming responsibility, for Navarro-Remesal and Pérez Zapata (2018) has to do with generating "lines of resistance against the neocolonial systems of a globalized world. This resistance is not only a matter of awareness, but a direct call to action" (p. 5). In discussing how awareness compels people to action, Navarro-Remesal and Pérez Zapata (2018) bring in the idea of shame:

> we are entertained at the cost of others' suffering and we cannot escape the fact that our daily lives also rely on them. It aims to shame us into action…[n]ot in vain did Jean-Paul Sartre remark in his preface to Frantz Fanon's *The Wretched of the Earth* that 'shame, as Marx said, is a revolutionary sentiment' (Sartre, in Fanon, 2002: 14). (p. 7)

Whether or not shame can lead to a revolution in our relations to global distributions of exploitive labour has yet to be seen. Awareness, though, is a necessary starting point for any kind of conscientization and change. (However, as Tuck and Yang (2012) stress, awareness cannot stand in for change.) Especially considering the persisting utopic visions of online potentials—fed by the capital or colonial enterprises that rely on them—changing our relationship to the internet will rely on revealing the hidden connections between the digital world and colonization or other systems of oppression. Writing about relations of ruling, Smith (1987) claimed that once these underlying relations are uncovered, "the mutual determination of relationships between positions can be grasped" (p. 135). My year offline aims to clarify some of these relations in order to "offer something like a map or diagram of the swarming relations in which our lives are enmeshed so that we can find our ways better among them" (Smith, 1987, p. 122).

One revelation I aim to uncover relates to how new automation connects to exploitive labour. Contrary to the dream that internet automation decreases the need for human labour, in the competitive accumulation necessary for capitalism and colonialism "the overall thrust must always be to enroll and transform more of humanity and nature into business' workforce" (Lohmann, 2019, p. 45). Lohmann (2019) suggests that much of the new work that results from automation "will be what is commonly referred to as shitwork, or low-paid or non-paid precarious work of a devalued or invisible kind" (p. 45). He discusses maintaining machines, dealing with waste, and navigating ecological disasters as just some of the labour resulting from new forms of automation. The other significant kinds of work that go into automation relate to online algorithms and the data needed for them to function. Ordinary users are doing this work on an ongoing basis, like "when Google Translate or police image-recognition software parasitize the voluntary, almost unconscious linguistic work of hundreds of millions of smartphone owners exchanging gossip or snapshots on Facebook or other platforms" (Lohmann, 2019, p. 50). In today's data-driven economy, Benjamin (2019) points out that "people's primary value hinges on the ability to spend money and, in the digital age, expend attention...browsing, clicking, buying" (np).

In my refusal to use the internet, I will highlight and investigate the ways my relationship with consumption and labour changes, and I will interrogate what relations become clearer when examining how or why people do things online in the ways that they do. I will materially, in a very small way, resist what economists are calling surveillance capitalism (Zuboff, 2019), the totalizing omniscience of the algorithms that our data becomes. At the same time, I will bring attention to it. Benjamin (2019) asserts that within surveillance capitalism, "attempts to opt out of tech-mediated life….threaten the digital order of things" (np). Without being offline, if users are careful with how they surrender their data, refusing this type of casual and unpaid work—even insofar as it may seem to benefit them—then the companies gathering our data "won't be able to make a profit…if they can't keep up with the flow of culture" (Lohmann, 2019, p. 50). Bringing attention to how the internet and digital devices are connected to relations of oppression aims to allow individuals more power in deciding how they will engage and in what ways they might not want to.

Discussion

The ideas of refusal and resistance may be valuable to my offline project for both engaging how the internet and digital devices are connected to relationships that facilitate oppression and exploitation—specifically in regards to labour, resources, and data—and for considering how to approach my year offline so I build community and momentum towards "the significant political leverage required" (Coulthard, 2014, p. 173) for constructing alternatives to exploitive ruling relations. In *Mohawk Interruptus,* Audra Simpson's ethnography about Mohawk people's refusal to embrace Canadian citizenship, Simpson suggests that these refusers "are reminders, sometimes indecipherable announcements of other orders, other authorities, and an earlier time that has not fully passed" (2014, p. 5). This paper, written a month before my year without internet begins, aims to frame my offline project as a reminder of the political powers that have naturalized internet omnipresence and as an announcement that we can refuse the internet—or resist an uncritical uptake of digital technologies—in symbolic and material ways.

The Internet's Ruling Relations: Colonized Subjects

As a high school teacher reading *1984* with my classes, I often encountered students who claimed they saw no need for privacy and that they appreciated predictive advertisements and algorithms. I kept thinking about these students as I read Coulthard (2014)'s analysis of the powerful pscyho-affective state by which dominated subjects contribute to the ruling relations

through which their exploitation is coordinated. As Coulthard (2014) explains, Fanon described this with the term "'colonized subjects': namely, the production of the specific modes of colonial thought, desire, and behavior that implicitly or explicitly commit the colonized to the types of practices and subject positions that are required for their continued domination" (p. 16). Because of the distinction between colonization and other forms of oppression, I am hesitant to draw parallels between colonized subjects and the way people opt into online platforms that gather their data in order to manipulate and exploit them. Both are certainly contexts of domination, but the impacts of colonialism are more fundamental, existential, and unbalanced than the ways internet users are exploited. However, an important parallel to draw is that even through non-forceful means, exploitation is still possible. In the case of indigenous people, Coulthard (2014) is suggesting that "colonial relations of power are no longer reproduced primarily through overtly coercive means, but rather through the asymmetrical exchange of mediated forms of state recognition and accommodation" (p. 15). Online, many users opt into the latest devices and services, voluntarily sharing their data and information in exchange for recognition socially and institutionally (Alaimo & Kallinkikos, 2016; Cohen, 2016; Kennedy & Moss, 2015).

Benjamin points out that "[i]t is coercive to say one has a choice, when one of those choices is automatically penalized" (2016, p. 15). Because of the importance of online recognition for users' personal and professional lives and the potential alienation and difficulties one may experience from opting out (boyd, 2014; Couldry & Mejias, 2019), the choice to participate with these digital tools and platforms is not always free and fair. Far from being colonized subjects—as was problematically suggested in Couldry and Mejias (2019)'s recent article about the exploitation of humans through data—internet users are indeed subject to "master-sanctioned forms of recognition…essential in maintaining [dominant] economic and political structure[s]" (p. 26), structures that also contribute to colonial power. Although many people may appreciate the online convenience that these oppressive structures facilitate, people's understandings of the exploitive implications of these technologies—for themselves, for the under- or unpaid labour underlying new forms of algorithmic intelligence and automation, and for indigenous peoples' lands and resources—could help them make more informed decisions to consent or refuse online possibilities.

Collective Change: Building Political Leverage

Barney comments on American social critic Rebecca Solnit's 2019 essay about "individual heroism" (Barney, forthcoming, p. 5) versus what anarchist theorist Olson (2009) describes as "the necessary, difficult, slow and inspiring process of building movements" (p. 41). Solnit critiques individual heroism and proposes that change comes from "the ability to coordinate and inspire and connect with lots of other people and create stories about what could be and how we get there" (Solnit, 2019, np in Barney, forthcoming, p. 6). In refusing the internet, and doing a solo experiment like the one I am doing, I do not want to make the project about myself. Rather, my experience aims to build a network of awareness and action that turns the focus on the structures and institutions coordinating our online lives and the related consequences for social and environmental justice.

In order to ensure my action is collaborative and able to connect what I prefigure to others in their busy digital lives, I will be mailing monthly updates to around two hundred people who have signed up to receive them. In these updates, I will share experiences and strategies related to being more critically digital. These letters will also include monthly challenges motivating the community of recipients to explore and disrupt or reform particular organizing relations underlying problematic structures or tendencies connected with our online lives. Additionally, each update will include questions or prompts as invitations for people to share back stories or reflections. These will be included in future mail-outs.

The goal of my project is not to inspire people to spend a year offline themselves, but to build collaboratively from the community of connections established through my mail-outs towards reconsidered praxes of digital use. Considering the massive complicity that internet users have in capitalist and colonial structures—often simultaneously as both the exploited and exploiter—ordinary people whose data is being gathered are implicated with under or unpaid labourers in developing countries and indigenous people whose lands and resources are being exploited—categories that bleed into one another. Of course there is a big difference between the colonizers and the colonized and massive power differentials between how I may be oppressed by my online experience, and the oppressions faced by someone working at a Foxconn factory or an indigenous person whose traditional territory has been made unusable by a massive server farm. The solidarities and links I am trying to build with colonial resistance and refusal have to account for the different positions of colonizers and the colonized. But building solidarity amongst these groups may provide potential for political leverage, especially as it joins together

ordinary people who may not traditionally have aligned themselves with oppressed groups. Olson (2009) suggests that "revolutionaries don't make revolutions. Millions of ordinary and oppressed people do" (p. 41). Thinking about digital oppressions in particular, the importance of collective commitments to change cannot be understated. We are the users of and the fodder for online exploitation and although our coordination by states and corporations is powerful, we can make changes together.

Conclusion: A Year Offline as Direct Action

In the final chapter of *Red Skin, White Masks*, Coulthard discusses actions taken by indigenous activists to pressure "the state to curtail its colonial activities" (2014, p. 166). Coulthard (2014) goes through three reasons why he thinks these actions, practiced symbolically to advocate for further material change, "ought to be considered 'direct action'" (p. 166):

> first, the practices are directly undertaken by the subjects of colonial oppression themselves and seek to produce an immediate power effect; second, they are undertaken in a way that indicates a loosening of internalized colonialism, which is itself a precondition for any meaningful change; and third, they are prefigurative in the sense that they build the skills and social relationships (including those with the land) that are required within and among Indigenous communities to construct alternatives to the colonial relationship in the long run. (p. 166)

The goal of my offline year is not just to be offline but to symbolically advocate for and to materially work towards further changes in how we relate to the internet and how online services contribute to systems of oppression. For that reason—and not to suggest that my offline project is directly decolonizing—I would like to conclude by considering how my internetless year might also be framed as direct action.

First, spending time offline and building a community around the experience can remind internet users that their online experiences benefit from the exploitation of colonial flows of labour, land, and resources. Additionally, the way their data is captured and used against them online situates users themselves as subjects of oppression. Through refusing the internet in public ways and sharing the reasons why—reasons that people may otherwise have no idea about or may not be relating to their own everyday practice—I am encouraging others to rethink and resist certain online experiences. Together then, we "seek to produce an immediate power effect" (Coulthard, 2014, p. 166). Refusing the internet, although a symbolic resistance, has direct

material consequences. Secondly, many internet users psycho-affectively accept their status as dominated and look past certain problematic aspects of their relationship with the internet. The awareness and conscientization involved in and promoted by refusing the internet supports a loosening of internalized oppressions, "which is itself a precondition for any meaningful change" (Coulthard, 2014, p. 166). However, as stressed by Tuck and Yang (2012), loosening of internalized oppressions is only a step towards material changes. Finally, spending a year offline is meant as a "prefigurative" (Coulthard, 2014, p. 166) task that can remind people of the offline or reformed-online "skills and social relationships" (Coulthard, 2014, p. 166) that will be required "to construct alternatives" (Coulthard, 2014, p. 166) to oppressive ruling relations. Affirming the viability of doing things without the internet serves as practice and a model for a world where we will no longer normalize our complicity in the oppressive relations of capitalism and colonization. Refusing the internet for a year not only works towards certain material goals symbolically but at the same time enacts them directly and with material consequence. Through community and collaboration, I hope that the symbolic potential of resistance can be realized towards more substantial changes.

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