

Indigenous Designs, Planetary Media

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The title of my talk is a spin on the title of Walter Mignolo's book, *Local Histories, Global Designs* (2000) in which he powerfully argues for the importance of the geo-politics of knowledge as we consider definitions of the human, of language, and of reason. The world is understood through competing forms of local histories with global designs; local knowledges that constitute world views; and yet only one set of local histories, that of the Western Europe, has come to be the dominant global design, the universal framework of knowledge.

While recognizing the problems of colonial power and knowledge that Mignolo points to, I pose a reframing of the questions of the decolonial local and the colonial global through a discussion of indigenous design as planetary media, understood as instances of radically shifting amalgamations of media forms, knowledges, and peoples.

“Indigenous Design” is a phrase that is growing in both usage and polyvalence.

In its usage in information communication technology for development projects, it refers to local contexts of culture and knowledge that are engaged in the design process, to create appropriate tools to fit local needs and understandings. In this usage, indigenous refers to existing frameworks and in situ cosmologies.

Further, in indigenous education and activists contexts, building on the framework of cultural ecology, indigenous design has been proposed as a form of cultural preservation against invasive species of culture. Indigenous, in this sense, is deeply tied to local knowledges and the strategies of survival and adaptation of indigenous peoples and the cultural practices of a particular location.

Particularly in the case of digital media, indigenous design can be championed as a form of resistance against cultural globalization in the form of media monopolies that over-represent particular cultural knowledge over others. Emerging from a set of discourses that together can be understood as a theorization of media imperialism under capitalism (including the Frankfurt School, Gramsci, Althusser, and Mattelart) the idea of the hegemonic globalization of culture perpetuated by global media systems is widely understood as the rationale for the need for indigenous design. This understanding of the power of global media, whether conceived of as a movement that flattens, encircles, or infects, is that it is an imperial incorporation of epistemic, as well as geo-political, territory.

But the picture of a world now flattened by globalized corporate media has already been significantly interrupted by the diversity of the theories and practices of people, all over this world, who use digital media tools, and produce and read digital media texts, in the context of networked communication environments, even with varying levels of open or closed circuits, in their multiply constituted sites of engagement.

While not ignoring the monopoly of global media, and the geo-political centralization of the Internet in metropolitan centers, as well as the ongoing predominance of military and

security interests on the Internet, the sheer multiplicity of contemporary communication practices exceed the explanatory framework of imperial communications and open onto other horizons: the worldviews and social relations constituted in, by, and through these simultaneously connected local, global, multiple - and indigenous - environments.

These environments are themselves not fixed localities of digital media. Like other forms of life that are globally transient, transnational digital flows of media crisscross the planet, creating overlapping routes and matrices of cultural and political forces. And it is perhaps because of this inconceivability of the indeterminacy, and instability of global media, that in fact, indigeneity has been a powerful trope for anchoring global communication and further, human evolution. In 1967, as Marshall McLuhan writes *The Medium is the Massage*, he envisions expanded consciousness and egalitarian social relations as a return to earlier, purer forms of being – that of “primitive people.” In the book, he produces an image of the “Global Village.” The circle is native, tribal. The interlocutors appear engaged, joyful, pleasant, affirming. McLuhan and his collaborator Quentin Fiore image storytelling here as a primal, primitive scene. Of course they want to listen in. This image of the other is silent and it must be made to speak. So they electrify it, picturing it in a web of connections, mobile. In the center, a woman. She might tell a story next. This is global communication. It is the opening of the closed circles of minds, nations, continents, and bodies, a feast for the eye and the ear.

McLuhan posits this as a return:

Primitive and pre-alphabet people integrate time and space as one and live in an acoustic, horizon-less, boundless, olfactory space, rather than in visual space. Their graphic presentation is like an x-ray. They put in everything they know, rather than

only what they see. A drawing of a man hunting seal on an ice floe will show not only what is on top of the ice, but what lies underneath as well. The primitive artist twists and tilts the various possible visual aspects until they fully explain what he wishes to represent...Electric circuitry is recreating in us the multi-dimensional space orientation of the “primitive” (18-19).

Rather than compression, McLuhan posits here the expansion of time and space as a consequence of global communication. This expansion ensures a comforting return; an awakening to forms of past interconnection. The figure of the primitive person as pure sensorial embodiment recreates here the iteration of the bestial nature of the imagined natives of colonial accounts. Colonialism and imperialism figure the trope of the “Global Village.” Its futurity is told with coloniality’s linearity. The village connects the modern to the something thought to be prior, gouging more deeply modernity’s rut. This is what makes it new. This is what makes “new media.” Before modern subjects were modern, we had multiple temporalities. These multiplicities will be given back to us by the circuitry.

Importantly, these multiplicities enable the construction of new forms of seeing, and hence new ways of communicating, that exceed the written word. The “multi-dimensional” space of the global village is linked to the inability of the “primitive” to code. “Pre-alphabet people” exceed the fixed vanishing point of Renaissance perspective, the flat surfaces of Western visuality: “Their graphic presentation is like an x-ray.” Yet, the visuality of the “primitive” is caught in the aspiration of the West, modernity’s technological graphing, to see deeply, to see all, through a lens.

McLuhan’s assemblage of significations, the “Global Village,” evokes new forms of coloniality. To effect such an important return to our primitive humanity, tools must be distributed so that everyone can communicate and have access to knowledge. To know

where to send the tools, a cartography of access is created. This cartography echoes another one, the *Mapa Mundi*, the world map. This is a map of absences. It is the “Digital Divide.” Knowledge, civilization, is not shared equally around the world and these maps show where it is needed. Where it is needed is also where communication is not happening. This is where people need communication tools. The tools are taken there, and through this movement, the form of communication is re-signified as content. This creates a containable domain that is easily studied by the researchers. It also posits the makers and distributors of the tools as divine beings, as givers of consciousness, being itself.

But we are all located in assemblages of subjectivity, citizenship, nation-states, juridical zones, and local and global economies. Across these different scales, the directionality, speed and duration of communication are not consistent or predictable. The tools used to communicate are many, and the time-spaces of electronic communication is produced differently in multiple assemblages of tools, ideas, people and locales. Our bodies and the tools code and re-code each other. Multiple forces intersect and influence this incessant codification. Electronic communication can sometimes move quickly, sometimes not. There are a many ways to communicate, electric and non-electric, machinic and non-machinic, digital and non-digital. In each instance, there is a new meaning and a new movement of the technology, another transformation of being across consciousness and the apparatus. They are porous and infect each other. In different geo-political sites, with different bodies, the “Global Village” assembles and disassembles.

From Marshall McLuhan’s formulation of the “global village” to the more recent phrase “digital natives,” many seeking to understand the use of electronic forms of communication have sought ways to anchor it to the body, to locality, and to elemental personal and cultural

needs. This need to reinscribe digital tools into the deep psyche of humanity has resulted in a form of storytelling, a telling of the digital story as deeply connected to orality, and using the tropes of colonial history that create an evolutionary framework in which indigenous peoples signify a sensorial immediacy that, according to Marshall McLuhan, will be reproduced by global media.

The indigeneity as defined within this colonial matrix of power, constitutes a fantastical site of primal communication. From this perspective, the critical questions must be posed again and again of each project purporting to be a project of “indigenous design”: Which people and what forms of life constitute the “indigenous” of the “indigenous design”? What are the genealogies of those frameworks and cosmologies? Pointing to the larger question of how then, might we understand the indigeneity of digital media? Further, what terms should we use to engage with the digital media – the video, the websites, the films, the digital photographs – of indigenous peoples?

Media is already hybridized and is itself both invasive and indigenous. It is a tool that is relentlessly adapted in different contexts. It is planetary. Here, I echo the term of planetary as it is used by Paul Gilroy. The planetary is not the same as universal, but a postcolonial, and more broadly, decolonial, worldliness. The cosmologies of indigenous peoples as expressed in digital media may be understood as constituting a decolonial planetary – Indigenous designs that are not only of a locality, but more expansively, about the world.

Digital media is not a fixed site of intervention, either local or global. It’s both. It is variegated and lumpy, nested with other social, cultural, and economic factors in each site of

production. So, for example, many of the habits of thought that emerge from subaltern media studies, many of which operate on a binary of us/them/west/east/north/south are inadequate for the contemporary and historical task of the question of indigenous media, which is, and again, always has been, radically plural.

Catherine Walsh proposes the centrality of our ancestors, but towards a form of being, now, that is renewed and vigorously of the present. With the terms *ancestrality* and *lo propio*, she argues that the ancestral creates a particular sense of history and imagination. *Ancestrality* proposes an/other history from which to build practices and analyses of communication. It also privileges ‘old’ forms of communication that in modernity are construed as traditions that are not worth saving. This mobilizes a semiotics of cultural practices that have been anthropologized by the Western episteme as its evolutionary past, to create an entirely new temporal-spatial field of inquiry. Walsh also suggests ‘*pensamiento propio*,’ a relationality that while it suggests property or heritage, is not only for ‘us’: “Today indigenous and black peoples’ struggles are waged not only in local contexts but also in national and transnational spaces that cross and make fluid geopolitical as well as ethnic or racialized borders” (2002, 66). Walsh articulates the knowledges and histories of (de)colonized and diasporic peoples enriching each other towards a project of global proportions. This inter-relation enables a new epistemic ground upon which to birth a rhizomed semiotics that intersect multiple histories, forms and strategies across global colonialities.

There are communities of self-identified indigenous digital media producers whose work represents something other than “indigenous design,” and is, rather, a form of planetary

media –beyond “local” knowledges, they posit definitions of the world. Emphasizing the radical multiplicity of indigenous practices, in her book, Freya Schiwy, discussing contemporary video art by indigenous filmmakers in the Andes, emphasizes the non-alignment of this work with historical trajectories of alternative film and video internationally. The contemporary video work she studies uses conventional narrative formulas and visual tropes that are more resonant with mainstream television than with alternative forms of Third Cinema. This unexpected disjuncture suggests that the ways of knowing that precede this moment of mass adoption of digital technologies of communication may take shape in multiple forms, old and new.

This porosity and variety is evidenced in, for example, a recent call for entries for the 11th international festival of film and video of indigenous peoples, organized in Bogota Colombia:

We welcome the individual and collective participation of indigenous and non-indigenous people, professionals, amateurs and others interested in the audiovisual field. The same author may submit up to 2 works. The participation of works in the XI Festival will be voluntary and free (no registration fee required). Award Criteria Films and videos will be selected and awarded on the basis of the following criteria. [Works that]:

- * Best reflect the rights of indigenous peoples/first nations and peasants to freedom and self determination.

- * Promote the respect and dignity of indigenous peoples.

- * Alert and denounce the violation of rights, persecution and genocide suffered by indigenous peoples

- * Promote gender equality and the rights of indigenous women.
- * Contribute to the strengthening of indigenous identity and culture.
- * Highlight the cultural expressions in situations of loss and/or assimilation.
- * Contribute to organizational processes and struggles of indigenous peoples.
- * Express the notion of development from the indigenous perspective.
- * Promote intercultural dialogue.
- * Defend the right to communication and the creative use of narrative and aesthetic resources.

This radical diversity and emphasis on the uses of “narrative and aesthetic resources” echoes Catherine Walsh’s discussion of interculturality: In Walsh’s provocative formulation, she asserts the fundamental importance of a “paradigm of and from difference.” ‘Difference’ refers to both colonial difference – the subalternization of peoples and knowledges – but it also refers to the different positionalities of those subalternized subjects in the modern/colonial world-system with respect to specific regions, histories, languages and knowledges. These designs are multiple, producing a wealth of aesthetic and narrative resources for a telling of the decolonial planetary.

References

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