

Book Review | Network Sovereignty: Building the Internet across Indian Country, by Marisa Elena Duarte (University of Washington Press, 2017)

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Countless computer science and information studies texts describe the World Wide Web and the internet as a new, electronic frontier. The invocation of “frontier” and *terra nullius* is often coupled with histories of computational development that de-emphasize the role of the nation-state in the creation of internet infrastructures and instead rhapsodize on the intent of its architects and their visions. There is recognition of the role of Advanced Research Projects Agency or ARPA (now known as the United States Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency) in developing the functionality of ARPAnet—the foundations of which form the technical backbone of the internet (Abbate, 1999, pp. 36-38). However, there is little work that explicitly links these technical projects with colonialism and settler colonialism. Critiques on the corporatization of the internet and representations of race online abound, yet both of these areas within critical information studies fail to consider how the dispossession of Native peoples animates settler ontologies embedded within information structures and facilitates the creation of internet infrastructures. Dominant representations of “the internet” as a singular, democratic, disembodied space work towards concealing the logics of colonialism and settler colonialism, specifically those related to the territory and land—what Patrick Wolfe calls the “irreducible element” of settler colonialism (2006, p. 388).

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Duarte's work attempts to "land" discussions of the internet as she addresses how Native peoples have engaged with information and communication technologies (ICTs) across Indian Country. Where dominant narratives de-emphasize land and material infrastructures, she highlights how digital technologies are dependent on local topographies. Duarte identifies her intention as threefold: to integrate Native and Indigenous approaches into the field of information studies, introduce the field and language of information studies to Native peoples and scholars, and consider how Native communities and tribal governments have negotiated both the complexities of representation online and the creation of internet and communications infrastructures (pp. 6-7). Duarte begins *Network Sovereignty* with a rumination on information flows and power that explicates how colonialism serves as the major socio-political context through which settler society understands technological advancement. Duarte adds, "In the modern settler imaginary, any Native or Indigenous use of modern technologies was unexpected precisely because Native and Indigenous peoples themselves were unexpected in the subjugated, mediated landscape" (p. 11). *Network Sovereignty* attempts to refute settler colonial stereotypes that associate Native communities and spaces with primitivism.

Duarte explores how communities have created and navigated modern techno-infrastructures through an exploration of several sites, including Pascua Yaqui's KPYY-LPFM radio station where she interviews Hector Youtsey, the manager who aided the tribe in setting up their station and helped them negotiate the FCC licensing regulations (pp. 38-39). She also briefly interviews Richard Alum Davis, the station manager at KUYI Hopi Radio and describes how station employees must also meet the needs of their local communities based on the "seasonal rhythms" and cultural protocols of its listeners (p. 46). Duarte meets with Police Chief Joseph Delgado at the Tohono O'odham Police Department to address the telecommunications network that must negotiate the borders of two settler states (p. 41). Her work also examines the creation and maintenance of TVDNet and the Southern California Tribal Technologies SCTT, as well as how the Cheyenne River Sioux Tribe and the Navajo Nation leverage and navigate tribal sovereignty through colonial juridical structures.

Duarte's research points to how each area holds its own particular cultural and physical topographies. As such, Duarte argues that there is no totalizing discourse that can adequately address the needs of all Native communities. In fact, framing the politics of the internet as an issue of mere access allows for the settler state to paternalistically deploy itself as a benevolent savior. Instead, each community must be allowed the right to self-govern and create an ICT infrastructure that

reflects the contours of its specific, geopolitical ecologies and histories (p. 43). The text closes with a two-pronged approach to building ICTs through Indian Country. In the first, Duarte suggests that new policies around Native ICTs must reflect the right to self-governance. She states that improving network functionality and navigating broadband policies mark just two areas that communities need to consider. In her second approach, she posits the decolonial potentials of flows of information. Duarte writes, “understanding how Native and Indigenous people use analog and digital systems to share knowledge toward self-governance and self-determination gives us insight into the subversive ways that Native and Indigenous people...[create] forms of resistance, endurance, and liberation” (p. 130). She adds that it is crucial to begin reframing discourses of technological access. She claims this decolonial reframing “reorients the technique of applied science toward meeting the goals of tribal communities” (p. 136).

While Duarte’s text promises a necessary intervention into thinking about computer technologies and the politics of sovereignty, the text favors a descriptive approach. In some areas, this approach is useful—most notably when Duarte breaks down technological jargon and techno-infrastructures. In other areas, the description results in sparse engagement with theory or feminist theory, which is evidenced throughout her selective citational practices in the field of Native studies and information studies. This lack of engagement often results in organizational issues in which core concepts are either reiterated throughout several chapters or are oversimplified. For instance, definitions and theorizations of sovereignty—a fraught concept in fields such as Native studies, critical Indigenous studies, and Native feminist studies—are represented with little complexity. The fieldwork itself, in particular, the interviews, provide little clarity or momentum within the work. In its shining moments, *Network Sovereignty* offers readers the opportunity to begin a critical conversation on the role of colonialism and settler colonialism in the creation of communication infrastructures, but the text’s uneven development makes it difficult to appreciate Duarte’s intervention.

References

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Author Bio

Sarah Montoya is doctoral student and settler on the ancestral and unceded lands of the Tongva at UCLA's Gender Studies program. Her work situates colonialism and settler colonialism as central to the creation and maintenance of computer and internet technologies and their material infrastructures.