Decoloniality and Extreme Speech

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Abstract:

This paper offers preliminary arguments for a decolonial critique of vitriol and disinformation circulating on online media—a phenomenon that has raised moral panic among liberal minded critics. The decolonial critique developed here probes the roots of this moral panic and considers the limits of analysis arising out of such a panic. Rather than viewing this moral panic as an expected reaction to a crisis produced by digital communication, I emphasize the need for historical sensibility and argue that information disorder and hate speech are part of the global process of racialized colonialism that is now increasingly funneling affective infrastructures of the digital in its further perpetuation.

Keywords: Extreme speech, hate speech, online media, decoloniality, right-wing populism

"Digital revolution is destroying French revolution", rued a leading German journalist in a private conversation, when we were chitchatting about worldly affairs at a social club, just before the pandemic brought sweeping restrictions on physical gatherings. In stating the crisis so piquantly, she was voicing an anxiety that has gripped liberal voices lately. In her view, values of liberty, freedom and emancipation—established after so much struggle and with much historical weight—are now decimated by hate and lies of digital revolution favoring the far-right.

A similar moral panic pervades a section of influential academic analyses around what is seen as an explosion of "fake news", "filter bubbles", lies, vitriol, naked slurs and downright comical nuisance that has suffused digital social media conversations, from top leaders to ordinary users. Euro-Atlantic scholarship on this phenomenon sometimes shares the shrill rhetoric it disavows, partly in response to the unexpected rise of populist leaders in the West—

from Trump to leaders like Viktor Orbán in Europe who have unabashedly declared their political systems as illiberal democracies. The result has been a veritable expansion of studies on populism, which have also recognized that there is a real crisis in the liberal social order (Brubaker 2017; Kramer 2017; Postill 2018; Moffitt 2016; Bartlett, Birdwell, and Littler 2011).

A significant number of studies on online populism have pinned down the locus of trouble to irresponsible, yet charismatic populist leaders who have bypassed mainstream media and channelized social media to hoodwink general publics to fall into the trance of right-wing rancor (Schroeder 2018; Gonawela et al. 2018). Another body of work has drawn attention to vicious anonymity of online subjectivities that has let loose the most primal animosities of the humankind, now unmoored from shared values of responsibility, rational thinking and care (Rainie, Anderson, and Albright 2017). Both these lines of analyses have a grain of truth. Leaders are not unimportant and so is online anonymity. However, they reveal less than what is at stake. In response to the present crisis, studies have rested their case on observations about current media technological developments and charismatic leaders but glossing over interconnections and continuities underwritten by longer historical processes.

To advance an inquiry into these processes, this paper offers preliminary arguments for a decolonial critique of vitriol and disinformation circulating on online media. Rather than viewing moral panics and anxious commentaries around these developments as an expected reaction to a crisis produced by digital communication, I argue that coloniality *as a set of interlinked relations* is now increasingly funneling the affective infrastructures of the digital in its further perpetuation. Furthermore, the antithesis of rationality—affect, emotionality or irrationality—is not a sudden injunction by primal energies let loose by digital communication or populist leaders but a contradiction of the modernity project hidden in plain sight. Online hate speech—arguably the most striking symptom of affective digital communication—is part of the longer *global* process of colonial modern relations that unfold both within and as external forces in different societies.

Colonial relations could be traced along three lines:

- nation-state relations established by colonial power that frame the boundaries of minority/majority and inside/outside;
- market relations institutionalized by colonial power now manifest as uneven data relations;
- racial relations naturalized by colonial power that dispose people as objects of hatred.

Historically these interlinked relations have transformed precolonial societies in definite ways; for instance, in the Americas, the nation-state itself became a form of racial relation established by capitalist modernity (Quijano 2007). In a digital milieu, these sets of relations with colonial bearings are perpetuated by and shape Internet enabled communication. A decolonial critique entails foregrounding these relations for a radical review and re-articulation.

Without doubt, the project of decolonialization is much larger and encompasses the effort to bring non-Western experiences, worldviews and conceptual worlds in the historical longue durée of colonial entanglements to the foreground of academic knowledge creation and public thinking—an effort energized by reparation as one of the key guiding principles. Recent studies have extended and reexamined these perspectives within post-communist contexts by positioning Cold War politics as the afterlife of European colonialism (Shringarpure 2019) or highlighting post-Soviet histories to approach "coloniality outside the traditional Westcentric schematics" (Stefanescu 2012). However, I limit my intervention here to highlighting *types of relations* that western colonialism has canonized and institutionalized on a global scale, and their continued salience in the digital age. This analysis might be seen as a step towards a broad ranging epistemological and political critique envisioned by the decolonial project, and of the theoretical agenda to consider coloniality as a "*paradigm* of collective subordination that covers the broadest spectrum of subtypes and historical variations"; colonialism as a "*historical situation* in which a political and/or economic power displays a consistent colonial policy and practice of colonization"; and colonization as the "actual *process* and *practice* of initiating and maintaining colonial domination (Stefanescu 2012, p 11, original emphasis).

In advancing this inquiry, I take the framework of extreme speech as a point of departure. By turning the normative and regulatory question of classifying and isolating hate speech and disinformation into an analytical exercise to understand how this phenomenon has come about (Udupa 2017; Udupa and Pohjonen 2019; Udupa, Gagliardone & Hervik, forthcoming), the framework of extreme speech has emphasized that longer historical processes should be examined in relation to proximate contemporary contexts of digital circulation and practice.

Building on these methodological moves, the following sections will develop an approach to online vitriol and disinformation as a *global conjuncture*. With select ethnographic examples from India but also referencing cases in Denmark, the United States, and Chile, I will examine two aspects of the conjuncture, "participatory condition" and "data colonialism", and conclude by suggesting that colonial relations are the constitutive force of this conjuncture.

How then are the interlinked relations of the "colonial-modern matrix" (Walsh and Mignolo 2018) implicated in the current moment of online extreme speech? The first window, I suggest, is the "participatory condition" of digital capitalism and how it has come to be interwoven with affective economies.

Participatory condition, affective economies and the logic of positive abundance

Digital capitalism does not necessarily determine the content of participation to the last detail, although algorithmic tweaks are shown to have a real effect on content. More fundamentally, however, digital capitalism's force lies in the *rendition* of compulsive participation as a normative political behavior and socially desirable trait. Barney et al. (2016) have defined this as the "participatory condition": "a situation in which participation—being involved in doing something and taking part in something with others—has become both environmental (a state of affairs) and normative (a binding principle of right action)".

An illustrative case is the hugely active online Hindu nationalist volunteers in India, among whom I have been carrying out ethnographic fieldwork for the last seven years. These ideological warriors who envision a Hindu-first India are animated by an entrepreneurial spirit of scoring over their rivals through argumentative work online. Such activities of ordinary users are now actively courted by the right-wing political regime. Hindu nationalist volunteers engage in discussions on the mighty points of the ideology, gliding around a set corpus of themes, and by commenting, tagging, tweeting, retweeting and posting, reproduce the ideological formation from various points of entry and exit. This entrepreneurial work is shaped in part by online architectures that reward self-expressivity in a data driven marketplace that converts self-activity of online users into a commodity for data analytics—a line of critique now well known in critical scholarship on big data (Couldry and Mejias 2019; Milan and Trere 2019). Sangeet Kumar (2021) notes that "the affordances and default settings on social media platforms…reward self-revelation and disclosure while penalizing reticence and non-participation". The compulsion to participate connects with the related process of digital capitalism that merges leisure with labor (Ross 2009).

Embedded within the gigantic algorithm driven, data hungry machine of the "Big Other" (Zuboff 2019), patterns of content sharing are prodded by the rationale of *positive abundance via participation* as opposed to restraint and containment. Jason Harsin defines this as the "regimes of post Truth" that aim for managing attention and affect in ways that "power

exploits new 'freedoms' to participate/produce/express as well consume/diffuse/evaluate" (2015, p 1).

The logic of positive abundance and continuous engagement has tilted everyday forms of online exchange towards confrontational styles often referred to as "counters" in the Internet folk jargon. Very early during the fieldwork in 2013, I met a man in his mid 20s in Mumbai—smartly dressed, tech savvy and who called himself a "proud right-winger". He was one among the growing group of "Internet Hindus" (Hindu nationalist volunteers) who were ready to tell the world that "pseudoseculars" who hide their elitism behind the egalitarian promise of secularism had no place in an India they were about to decisively shape in the years to come. One of his key activities was to follow prominent journalists online, especially female journalists who worked for English language media, and "expose" their hypocrisy by publishing their "biased" reports or "incorrect" representation of "facts". He defined this rhetorical positioning and what he believed to be "fact-based" contestation as offering "counters". By 2017, "counters" had become an established practice not only among disparate ideological enthusiasts online but also for major political parties. During the runup to the 2019 general elections in India, the two major political parties, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) and the Indian National Congress (INC) had fully functioning units to prepare "counters" that aimed to match the "original" message from opposition groups in terms of the style, content and reach. If the "original" post operated on the terrain of "facts", counters would give "counterfacts" by trotting out figures, numbers and screenshots of earlier posts that "exposed the lie". If the original post was an abuse or an ad hominem attack, counters would be a "counterabuse"—equally brazen and "catchy". This way, political actors were drawn into and fed the continuous cycles of online engagement.

Market driven incentives for continuous engagement in online environments have deepened the tension between containment as a public interest value in speech governance as opposed to interests of publicity as an attribute of practical politics (Mazzarella & Kaur, 2009). In other words, idealized rational critical debate codified in speech governance laws in liberal polities has to contend with the affective dimension of practical politics. This tension is not an invention of digital communication but a political reality that precedes and exceeds it. William Mazzarella (2020) has elegantly elaborated on how this tension animates the constitutive ambiguity of public culture, and more fundamentally, of the social itself. Delving on the duality between "representation" and "participation", Mazzarella (2020) draws on Durkheim to point out that "society can never be, as it were, self-sufficient…it can never be immediately present to itself". "Any kind of consciousness", he continues, "is only possible through the detour of a

representation." In Durkheim's formulation, it is some material object that provides the fixture around collective sentiment to become conscious of itself. Moreover, "by the virtue of this fact it participates in the nature of this object, and reciprocally, the object participates in its nature". Mazzarella picks up the constitutive salience of "participation" in Durkheim's argument and elaborates further. Not only is "society" as a form of collective consciousness possible only through representation, but "this representation works by *participating* in the substance of what it represents" (original emphasis). Participation in other words is affective investment— libidinal energies that make the sign holding the collective "come alive". Recognizing affective investment in the very constitution of the social flies in the face of modern social theory that disavows enchantment in the name of secularism. "…modern social theory, secular as it seems, is actually organized around an occult kernel". Mazzarella describes this revelation a scandal: "This is a scandal for thinking democracy because, after all, leaving magic behind is part of what is supposed to separate liberal democracy from divine kingship".

Important as it is, the observation cannot stop with exposing the "scandal". It is helpful in so far as exposing the limits of the current moral panics in the West around digital communication and populism, and anxious commentaries about how digital social media are throwing up sentiments in all wrong places and in all wrong ways, instead of enabling rational critical thought. Such moral panics do not recognize the "scandal" of the "occult kernel" in secular modern theory: that affects and emotions have always been critical to collective consciousness of any sort, whether in the West or the East. The "structural constraint" of collective formation—that the social is only possible via representation and participation— places libidinal attachment at the very center of the formation of the social (Lefort and Macey 1991).

However, this recognition in itself does not say much about how affect travels, whom it courts and whom it touches as its subject (Ahmed 2004). It is not sufficient to point out that in the absence of material objects like a totemic sign or material bodies like the King as the locus of "collective effervescence", what we see now is "loose affect"—"sensuous social substance…is now at issue everywhere" (Mazzarella 2020). I agree with Mazzarella about the loosening of sensuous social substance, but it is not *everywhere* in the sense that affect has no patterns of flow or precipitation. The argument around loose affect might lose focus on the historical conditions that politicize affect in specific ways, carving the creeks and crevices where affect would gush out. Rather than taking loose affect as the obvious condition in the absence of a fixed locus such as the body of the monarch or totemic sign, it is important to

analyze historical conditions and accompanying economic transformations that give affect its specific tenor and target.

Wendy Brown's (2019) reading of Nietzsche in analyzing contemporary right-wing and white supremacist movements offers a segue. Brown draws on Nietzsche's discussion of "ressentiment" to understand contemporary trolling "as grievous, resentful energies—just the opposite of self-overcoming, proud, world-making energies of the powerful" (69). Ressentiment, she says, is "a vital energy of right-wing populism: rancor, grudges, barely concealed victimization and other affects of reaction are the affective heartbeat of internet trolling, tweets and speeches at right-wing rallies" (70).

In different ways, by recognizing the importance of affective charge for public cultures in the contemporary populist moment, both Mazzarella (2020) and Brown (2019), and recent studies on affect and emotions in the digital age of right-wing populism (Nagle 2017; Bangstad, Berstelsen, and Henkel 2019), have accomplished one important move. They have overturned the schema of the liberal center of calm rationality (the self-imagination of the West) vs the irrational, impassionate publics of the periphery (the rendering of the non-West). What has long been pointed out by postcolonial scholars is now acknowledged as a plain fact: there is no center and periphery when it comes to emotionality. This has not been as obvious for a majority of studies in the media development and media policy traditions engaged in tailoring solutions for hate speech. These studies implicitly assume that the emotionality of hateful speech in the global North is an aberration that stands in contrast to calm rationality as a default value of the postwar Western world. By the same token, studies on Africa, South Asia, and Southeast Asia have approached conflict as a propensity exacerbated by emotionally charged verbal cultures that are further amplified by long-standing ethnic, religious, and caste divisions. This heuristic division between the North and the South, and the accompanying conceptual construction of the rational center and emotional periphery, have ruled the world of hate speech scholarship for a long time. In an ironic twist, the expansion of the internet media has had an equalizing effect in terms of recognizing—at least in representation if not institutionally—that North America and Europe are no longer "exceptional" in terms of the violent emotionality of hate speech. This brings back the question of internet mediation.

Aside from the provocation to participate and its progeny in the form of "counters", there is something specific about online mediation that I will elaborate later, but for now, the question remains if it is only the internet, whatever it signifies, that drove "even" the publics in the "center" to get emotional?

Brown characterizes current explosion of "rancorous, disinhibited, anti-social and nihilistic aggression" as "aggrieved power" (2019, 61). Rather than overstating the case of Internet mediation, she indicts neoliberal reason for making white working and middle class inhabitants "angry", spurring them on to spew vitriol online. It is an important critique. However, the argument about aggrieved power as the outcome of actual economic conditions of deprivation of neoliberalism does not explain why the very beneficiaries of neoliberal economy are avid patrons of online vitriol or active abusers themselves.

Take the case of Lissy (pseudonym) that anthropologist Peter Hervik (Hervik, n.d.) portrays in his meticulous analysis of the resurgence of the right-wing in Denmark. Lissy is a millionaire, a well-heeled socialite. Hervik describes her as an active member of a closed Facebook group of approximately one thousand members that advocates the idea that immigration is a threat to Denmark's cultural homogeneity and national security. Among several incendiary tropes that inform her anti-immigrant politics, the ideology of spatial segregation of people stands out. Pointing at refugees who entered Europe in recent years, she states emphatically: "They have to stay where they belong, where they are at home, and they shall not care to expand without permission. Nobody has ever allowed them to expand. I have nothing against Muslims. If I travel to their countries, they can do whatever they like". Hervik (2011) takes this spatial ideology as a trait of neoracism which regards everyone (rhetorically) "as of equal morality and intelligence, but if you are in the wrong place, it is only "natural" that xenophobic reactions will occur" (see also Bangstad 2014). Dislocation is not only harmful for those who "receive" these refugees, Lissy and her compatriots avow, but to those who are migrating as well. Last year when I met a senior far-right activist in Munich, he described this position as "ethnopluralism". This "theory" promotes the view that it is important to ensure the *rights* of people to live where they belong since dislocation of all sorts can be "traumatizing". By appropriating the seemingly progressive tropes of dislocation and pluralism, these new articulations of anti-immigrant sentiments reframe exclusion as a matter of rights of people who leave their homeland. In this clever twist of tropes, people who support mobility are portrayed as the real villains who foreclose the possibility of rooted co-existence by stubbornly insisting on globality. Theories such as ethnopluralism cannot arise without the exclusionary ideology of nation states as distinct geographical spaces etched out during the colonial encounter.

The ideology of immobility glossed as ethnopluralism or rights of people to remain in their "homelands" are admittedly more contrived than the obvious racist comments that far right advocates express. Hervik's protagonist Lissy, for instance, gushes in impatience when

he asks her about the latest arrivals of refugees in Denmark. "We are a homogenous Norden in Europe", she asserts, "basically, I think it is beautiful. We, in Scandinavia, we form a distinct race (*folkefærd*). We are pale, light in our skin. We reason alike and we…we may ask when do people become genetically civilized. It is indeed a long process".

Lissy's restless wait for people to "become genetically civilized" signals deep subjectivities that belie explanations of neoliberal reason for white supremacist aggression. In this case, ressentiment as a mix of powerlessness, anger and envy makes little sense. Neither can this be defined as resentment. If resentment is like "taking poison and waiting for other person to die", patrons of vitriol in Hervik's study, with their sheer privilege, *can* make others to drink poison or make them die. Although Brown acknowledges that "some educated whites, racial minorities, the ultra-rich, the ultra-Zionist, and the alt-right" supported Trump, her elaboration of ressentiment is not meant to explain this odd motley of supporters. Above all, to see Trump's victory as the paradigmatic emblem of the crisis reveals the continued dominance of transatlantic concerns dictating the terms of argument for the rest of the world. This kind of analysis, critical as it is of liberal bigotry, glosses over the uneven ways in which the economic program of neoliberalism is rolled out around the world as well as the granularity of historical continuity that underpins what is anxiously termed as a strange "brew of bellicosity, disinhibition and rancor" (61). By considering neoliberalism as the pivot of problems, Brown is able to characterize white supremacists who indulge in online media vitriol as "malleable and manipulable, depleted of autonomy, moral self-restraint, and social comprehension" (75). From this characterization, it is a small step to explain away online aggression as misguided energies, cunningly shepherded by self-aggrandizing leaders under overbearing economic conditions wrought by neoliberalism. The assumption about manipulability of masses elides the grave history of systematic violence that installed unequal racialized relations through actions—past and present—that are orchestrated, directed and economic, in as much as they are helpless reactions of backbiting revenge.

Consider the instance of a train journey recounted by the Black feminist Audre Lorde– an episode elegantly analyzed by Sarah Ahmed (2004). Lorde recounts travelling with her mother as a young child when she encountered a white woman on a subway train to Harlem. The white woman's action to draw away from her and finally move out of the seat where she had clutched herself, provokes intense emotions in Lorde, pushing her to question herself if she had done any mistake that caused the white woman's eyes to enlarge, nostrils to flare. "The hate", as Audre Lorde sums up at the end of the passage. I will reproduce here a rather long excerpt from Ahmed's moving analysis of this encounter:

In the case of Audre's story, Audre's gestures mimic the white woman's. Her gaze is 'pulled down', following the gaze of the white woman. This pulling down of the gaze and the transformation of the black body into an object of its own gaze seems critical. The hated body becomes hated, not just for the one who hates, but for the one who is hated....When Audre's gaze is pulled down with the white woman's, she feels 'afraid'. She comes to recognize herself as the object of the woman's hate: she is 'hailed', in Althusser's (1971) sense, as the hated. The 'doing' of hate is not simply 'done' in the moment of its articulation. A chain of effects (which are at once affects) are in circulation. The circulation of objects of hate is not free. In this instance, bodies that are attributed as being hateful—as the origin of feelings of hate—are (temporarily) sealed in their skins. Such bodies assume the character of the negative. That transformation of this body into the body of the hated, in other words, leads to the enclosure or sealing of the other's body within a figure of hate. The white woman who moves away from Audre moves on, of course. Some bodies move precisely by sealing others as objects of hate (2004, 57).

The episode captures the unfolding of movement and closure: actions that create objects of hate as easily as they allow actors to exit the scene, leaving behind the person rendered as a hateful body to her own devices.

The rendering of bodies as hateful has continued into practices such as trolling and abuse in the disembodied worlds of online exchange through a similar process of movement and closure. One might reflect on the episode of troll attack on Mahafreedi (pseudonym), a journalist in Mumbai, in 2014 when she published a report that a right-wing public rally addressed by a prominent Hindu nationalist leader failed to draw crowds. For Hindu nationalist supporters online, her report smacked of dishonesty and elite contempt for the true voice of India. What started as a tirade of ridicule soon escalated to a full-blown intimidation. When I met her in her office in Mumbai, I saw her slipping to the edge of anxiety when she recounted how she withdrew from social media for some time because she fell ill after being subject to incessant trolling. In one instance, she was suspected to be a *Muslim*, in the next instance, she was called a *pseudoliberal.* Yet another tweet derided her as a *female* journalist whose reporting merits no serious treatment. As accusations hopped between tweets, hate transferred from one figure to the other, sealing Mahafreed's disembodied handle within a figure of hate

and contempt. Alexandra Deem (2019) has observed a similar course of movement and closure in the white supremacist movements online. In a pool of 120 top retweets around the hashtag #whitegenocide, Deem found that negative framing of non-white immigrants moved from one register to another in an interlinked affective space that stuck these figures together. Non-white immigrants were demographic threats in one instance, they were rapists in the next instance, and in yet another, they were criminals ready to loot the wealth. Deem elaborates:

> White-nationalist affective economies associatively stick an array of actors, objects, and symbols together so that the object of fear is never clearly delineated but composed of an expansive conglomeration of interrelated signifiers. This sort of "stickiness" is especially pronounced on Twitter where individual tweets form multimedia assemblages that combine textual and visual content to malign targeted groups (3191).

In these instances, hate does not "reside in a given subject or object", to quote Ahmed, "Hate is economic; it circulates between signifiers in relationships of difference and displacement" (2004, p 44). As expressions such as "rape-refugees", "pseudoliberals", "presstitute", "commies" and an ever increasing list of derogatory aphorisms, name calling, putdowns and sobriquets circulate on online media, "hate…[becomes]… distributed across various bodies" and "through the association between the figures…they acquire 'a life of their own' as if they contain an affective quality" (44).

Although Ahmed does not elaborate the point, mediation is involved in every step of the affective economy. Digital mediation materializes the surfaces of hateful bodies through association, alignment, displacement and "stickiness". If hate is part of the "production of the ordinary" (Ahmed 2004), digital exchange realizes it by bringing hateful expressions closer to one's everyday conversational realities—a certain mundaneness that muddles moral positions. Tagging onto small screen intimacy of digital exchange, hate evokes no moral judgement because it passes onto the ordinary. This passing on to the ordinary occurs in continuous loops, powered by systematic channeling of affect—of anger, glee, envy and transgressive pleasures of online vitriolic exchange—within the participatory condition of digital capitalism.[1] I have argued that fun is a particularly significant affective infrastructure in ramping up online extreme speech among right-wing ideological communities in digital environments (Udupa 2019). On quasi-public forums such as Twitter to image boards such as 4Chan, hate sticks to bodies through signs that are constantly innovated upon in "creative funny" ways, allowing the

affective economy of hate to spread horizontally. Analyzing the #whitegenocide hashtag on Twitter, Deem (2019) reveals how the emotional registers of fear and wry humor came together in several top retweets. Such interweaving was evident in tweets such as "African invader rapes 15 French Women to stop their racism . . . #nrx #whitegenocide," and "#Milwaukee Whites Being Hunted & Beaten by Blacks. Multicultural Enrichment for White Generosity Stop #WhiteGenocide." In both cases, "mainstream buzzwords like 'multicultural enrichment' and normative political prerogatives like 'stop their racism' are used in ironic juxtaposition with sensational accounts of non-White violence" (3193). In India, Hindu nationalists are adept at composing funny messages for online ideological battles while also deriving fun from making their hashtags to trend online. In these cases, fun greases the surface where hate could "slide between signs and objects" (Ahmed 2004, p 54).

The unabashed creativity of Internet vitriol and the metapractice of fun notwithstanding, hate does not move about in all directions. It is not a free slide. Ahmed reminds forcefully:

> The transformation of this or that other into an object of hate is over-determined. It is not simply that anybody is hated: particular histories of association are reopened in each encounter, such that some bodies are already encountered as more hateful than other bodies. Histories are bound up with emotions precisely insofar as it is a question of what sticks, of what connections are lived as the most intense or intimate, as being closer to the skin (2004, p 54).

Following De Genova (2010), we could define these historical conditions as "postcolonial metastasis". Assertions of aggrieved power common among white supremacists emanate not only out of structural subordination under oppressive market conditions but by a sense of dethronement—a product of far reaching processes of the global legacies of Empire. Crucially, through nation state relations canonized by colonialism, aggression wrought by imaginary wounds unfolds *within* different national and subnational contexts as racialized relations of majoritarian belligerence. Hindu nationalists in India, Sinhalese nationalists in Sri Lanka (Aguilera-Carnerero and Azeez 2016), Han nationalists online in China (de Seta forthcoming), the Sunni majoritarian politics around blasphemy in Pakistan (Schaflechner forthcoming), Duterte's trolls in the Philippines (Ong and Cabanes 2018), and online nationalists in Nepal (Dennis 2017) are some examples, and so are the meme makers in northern Chile who seize the mashup cultures of Internet memes to portray migrants from Bolivia and Peru as backward, dirty, uneducated, plunderers of limited resources and

contributors to cultural degradation (Haynes 2019). Such exclusionary discourses against immigrants (a category that emerged from the nation-state distinction between inside/outside) and minorities (a category that emerged from the nation-state distinction between majority/minority) are rife with racialized portrayals. Colonialism reproduced hierarchy and difference as an intrinsic feature of the modern nation state, and this process of racialization of social relations within the newly stabilized structure of the nation state was *global* in scope (Treitler 2013). To follow the argument advanced by Shankar (forthcoming), colonialism as a *global* process created "several interlinked racialization processes which cannot fit neatly into a single national racial formation project".

Racial formations intersect with and undergird ongoing market transformations, which are again global in scope. I will now turn to the far reaching effects of global digital capitalism manifest as uneven data relations, the second window of the "colonial/modern matrix of power" (Walsh and Mignolo 2018).

Racial nationalism and data colonialism

At the highest level, the very institutionalization of widespread market rationality evolved with the colonial project. In its latest manifestation as digital capitalism, market rationality has threatened to usurp life for data extraction, subjecting life forms to a relentless machine of categorizing, slotting, plotting and predicting behaviors to serve market interests (Zuboff 2019). The scale and ruthlessness of subjecting life to data extraction are akin to the ravaging effects of historical colonialism, as Couldry and Mejias argue:

> Data relations enact a new form of data colonialism, normalizing the exploitation
> of human beings through data, just as historic colonialism appropriated territory
> and resources and ruled subjects for profit. Data colonialism paves the way for
> a new stage of capitalism whose outlines we only glimpse: the capitalization of
> life without limit (2019, p 336).

Within this paradigmatic shift are heart breaking developments of differentiated exploitation and dispossession. If "forced labor and labor camps were the engine that ran European capitalism" (Menon 2020), digital capitalism today has spread the net for data along deeply unequal relations.

Consider outsourced labor arrangements that multinational social media companies have raised for online content moderation. General public got a glimpse of the shadow industry of digital cleaning through the acclaimed documentary film, "Cleaners" (directed by Hans Block and Moritz Risewieck), but critical scholarship has been focusing on the underside of takedowns and content removal for some years now. Political vested interests within specific national and regional polities that control the shadow industry play an important role, but what is equally troubling are the kinds and conditions of labor enlisted through exploitative arrangements of multinational social media companies. Such arrangements follow two decades of consolidating outsourcing work as the quintessence of flexible accumulation powered by digitalization—from pink collar jobs such as call center work to low-level technology jobs shipped to low cost destinations in the global South, placing demands on cognitive, emotional and cultural labor on unequal terms (Fabros 2016; Upadhya 2009). In a pioneering study on digital disinformation in the Philippines, Jonathan Ong and Jason Cabanes (2018) found that evidence about outsourced "digital sweatshop" political work is hard to gather (15). However, they have exposed the precarious labor conditions of disinformation workers who serve political clients by engaging in project based digital work characterized by 'race-to-the-bottom' work arrangements (see also Rongbin 2015). They further note that "casual workers" are forced to cope with stressful work on their own, "in the absence of clear guidelines, psychosocial support systems, or remuneration" (29). In a recent study on commercial content moderators, Roberts (2019) has shown that workers who sieve online content for violation of community standards and illegal content for Silicon Valley corporations are made invisible and forced to operate under opaque conditions of work. Commercial content moderators operating in outsourcing destinations such as the Philippines and India are not only low-paid but also rendered as low-status workers within the hierarchies of global corporations, partly since Silicon Valley avoids talking about "distasteful" work that has not yet found a "full-on computational solution" (Roberts 2019).

Yet another self-explanatory case for data colonialism is the uneven allocation of corporate resources for hate speech moderation globally. Facebook's hate speech moderation practice is a telling example. The company has consistently evaded demands for transparency in resources allocated to detect and remove hateful content. Nor are the principles guiding its Oversights Board open to academic scrutiny. During the runup to the 2019 elections in India, I participated in a discussion in New Delhi with a senior executive of Facebook who was flown down from the Silicon Valley to ensure that the elections in the world's "largest democracy" didn't spiral out of control for the company. During the interactions, the senior executive

squarely refused to reveal the number of human moderators or amount of resources allocated for moderating hate speech in India. I tried the same question in Singapore when we had the opportunity to interact with public policy managers of ShareChat, a messenger application popular in several regional languages in India. Yet again, there was no response. "We cannot reveal the figures", came the blunt reply. While such blatant lack of transparency calls for sustained regulatory intervention, there are also vast disparities and discrepancies in how social media companies are moderating hate speech in different parts of the world. In a detailed news report, *Time* magazine revealed that Facebook increasingly relies on artificial intelligence to detect and remove hate speech but machine learning competency is currently limited to a handful of languages (Perrigo 2019). In the third quarter of 2019, Facebook claimed that it removed seven million instances of hate speech, an increase of 59% against the previous quarter. Over 80% was detected by artificial intelligence. Perrigo (2019) points out that this seemingly impressive figure "conceals a structural problem: not all hate speech is treated equally". This gap has emerged because Facebook's AI systems are not trained equally for all the languages spoken in the world. Citing the hate campaign by the Assamese-speaking Hindu majority against the Bengali-speaking Muslim minority in Assam in India, Perrigo (2019) shows how messages that described Bengali Muslims as "parasites, "rats" and "rapists" and viewed at least 5.4 million times were not picked up by Facebook because it did not have an algorithm to detect hate speech in Assamese. A report by the advocacy group Avaaz has highlighted the gravity of the problem: "In the Assamese context, the minorities most directly targeted by hate speech on Facebook often lack online access or the understanding of how to navigate Facebook's flagging tools. No one else is reporting it for them either." Senior campaigner at Avaaz cited in the *Time* report described this as a "huge blindspot" of Facebook. In response to a global outcry about the Myanmar crisis (Lee 2019), Facebook expanded its resources and increased the number of Burmese language speaking human moderators to contain the online hate campaign against the minority Rohingya Muslims. However, similar efforts are lacking elsewhere. Efforts to close the blindspots around the globe have been neither uniform nor transparent. Facebook's algorithm is better equipped to handle the content in English, Spanish and Mandarin, allowing the company to address the spread of racial or religious hatred largely within developed countries and large economies. Time report points out that "languages spoken by minorities are the hardest-hit by this disparity".

Outsourced labor and wide disparities in hate speech moderation are just two examples. Examples abound in the domain of data collection, especially the manner in which social media companies exploit different data privacy regimes globally for data extraction; a recent UN

report cautioned that "developing countries risk becoming mere providers of raw data, while having to pay for the digital intelligence generated using their data"[2] Data colonialism, as the new social order, has led to highly uneven distribution of the costs and consequences of data-as-dispossession

Differentiated exploitation and dispossession of data relations have reached toxic levels in several countries by intersecting with racialized relations sanctioned by the nation state form. The recent misinformation campaign against Muslims in India during the Covid 19 crisis evidences the tyranny of digital data regime when it intersects with postcolonial fault lines. To contain the spread of Covid 19, the Indian government announced a complete lockdown in March 2020. The hastily announced and ill-prepared roll out of the lockdown led to thousands of migrant laborers strangled in horrific conditions when the police stopped them from returning to their villages. Small businesses were shut down and millions were confined to homes and exposed to police brutality even when they stepped out for essentials. The crisis got compounded by Islamophobic messages on social media that peddled rumor, conspiracy theories and lies about Indian Muslim groups waging a "Coronajihad" against the country. The latest object of Islamophobic outrage was Tablighi Jamaat, a Muslim religious organization, whose members had congregated for a religious meet in Nizamuddin near Delhi on 13–15 March 2020. Internet watchdog Article 19 has documented the "22 days of fake-news frenzy" sparked by "the government's profiling of the Muslim sect…cascading into hate speech and crimes against Muslims". Despite very low rates of testing that made contact tracing difficult or even impossible, the government claimed that the Tablighi meet was a "major national Covid-19 source". "Once the profiling was done", Article 19 reports, "a tsunami of fake news followed." A social media video on Corona showed an unrelated video of Muslims licking utensils and claimed that Muslims were licking the utensils to deliberately spread the virus (Chaudhuri 2020). In another video posted on Facebook, a Sufi ritual was portrayed as Muslims sneezing in unison to spread the virus in India. Debunked later by fact-checkers, this video was viewed more than 24000 times (Chaudhuri and Sinha 2020). Article 19 described the Islamophobic fake news cycle as mutually reinforced remediation:

> The fake-news cycle was clear: print and television media and social media were feeding off each other. Social-media users picked manipulated, exaggerated or fake news, spun it further, sometimes; in turn, the media picked up such posts and spun them as news.

Menon (2020) reveals further:

> The peddling of fake news and videos, and false claims about Muslims and Covid 19, emanated from every level of the RSS network [Rashstreeya Swayam Sevaka Sangha, parent organization for Hindu nationalist groups] – from the government to BJP MPs, Ministers, and BJP members, to BJP's IT Cell that runs its virulent social media campaigns.

What is seen in this situation is not a "strange brew of bellicosity, disinhibition, and an anti-democratic blend of license and support for statism" as Brown describes (2019, p 61), but a dangerous interweaving of racialized religious politics with the data infrastructure of extreme speech. This conjuncture underwrites and unfolds within relations of exclusion and exploitation canonized by colonial power in the nation-state form, now brutally perpetuated by regimes at different levels—global, national, regional and local. The turmoil, as Walsh and Mignolo (2018) convincingly argue, has erupted at different levels and along different axes of difference:

> By the 1990s, decolonization's failure in most nations had become clear; with state in the hands of minority elites, the patterns of colonial power continued both internally (i.e., internal colonialism) and with relation to global structures….The turmoil is now at once domestic, transnational, interstate, and global (p. 6).

Conclusion: Decolonial moves

In the foregoing sections, I have highlighted three interrelated sets of relations of the "modern-colonial matrix of power" (Walsh and Mignolo 2015) as the subject of the decolonial critique in the digital age.[3] As a critical perspective, decoloniality does not mean we reduce the whole of the human condition to colonialism as a particular historical event. Without doubt, affective energies that emanate from and animate Internet spaces should be analyzed within specific structures of animosities and speech cultures that undergird different societies. Digital extreme speech is an outcome of interlocking systems of coercion and power along various axes including race, class, gender, religion, and ethnicity that have precipitated the current global conjuncture (Udupa, Gagliardone & Hervik, forthcoming). Intersectionality invites attention to structures of power that preexisted or remained quite independent of colonial occupation. As

Thirangama, Kelly, and Forment argue, "there are multiple genealogies of distinction and prestige that underpin regional hierarchical structures, and which often come to mingle with colonial projects but are not invented by them" (2018, p. 165). There is also no denying that political consequences of extreme speech are ambiguous and context specific. Vastly divergent experiences, struggles, and subjectivities surrounding extreme speech hold the potential of "backtalking" (Stewart 1990) while unleashing acts of repression with numbing violence in other contexts. The field of media practice—what people do with media—imbues unpredictable outcomes (Udupa 2017; Udupa & Pohjonen 2019).

Yet, conceptualizing colonialism as a *set of relations* is important in tracking the overarching frameworks and historical continuities that undergird contemporary forms of extreme speech. We might call this *deep contextualization*. A decolonial critique developed in this paper suggests that *close contextualization* of proximate contexts—of media affordances in use or situated speech cultures—should go hand in hand with *deep contextualization* that account for grave historical continuities and technopolitical formations unfolding on a planetary scale.

Decoloniality provides a pathway for deep contextualization. As a generative critique, decoloniality pries open spaces and interconnections that shape contemporary processes of exclusion in a historical light. In this paper, I have advanced this agenda by revealing the work of three interconnected relations: market, nation state and racial relations that have turned Internet enabled media into a rambunctious cesspool of vitriol, slurs, name calling, and outright lies. Among other things, this implies overturning the schema of the liberal center and the emotional periphery that has long informed the traditional plotting of conflict-prone regions in media development scholarship. By the same token, the decolonial critique proposed here begins by taking note of the fundamental contradiction in the modernity project that relied on an affective basis for the very imagination of society as a collective entity.

The decolonial move charted in this paper is an effort to take the conversations beyond the transatlantic framing of "filter bubbles" and "echo chambers", and the underlying assumptions of technological determinism and presentism. It calls for probing the roots of the moral panic around actual or perceived crisis in liberal rationality, and instead, for reiterating *harm* as the organizing concept to explore online extreme speech with ethnographic depth. As an organizing concept, harm is not be confined to a legalistic sense of injury but might embrace a more encompassing sense of the conditions of dignity (Udupa, Kramer and Siddique, in review). The decolonial move envisions a shift of gaze towards harm as embodied conditions of dignity (and the lack thereof) among communities excluded within various sets of relations

that are canonized by historical colonialism and now reinforced by data colonialism. This is an area of needed focus in extreme speech scholarship, and a necessary element in the effort to bring history and ethnography into a field of growing urgency.

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[1] The situation is worsened by changes in the political economy of professional journalism that now relies more on "native advertising" (advertising unrecognizable as paid), social media trends as news sources (McGregor 2019 cited in Freelon and Wells) and "clickbait media" in which "legacy news organizations compete with low-cost, zero credibility upstarts who attract large number of viewers" (Freelon and Wells 2020, p 148).

[2] https://unctad.org/en/pages/PressRelease.aspx?OriginalVersionID=522 accessed 1 June 2020.

[3] I thank Max Kramer for pushing me to think in this direction.

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