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Prolegomenon to the Decolonization of Internet Governance

Syed Mustafa Ali

“As wars have been won and lost on the battleground of ideas, leverage over the narrative is paramount.” (Franklin 2009, p.222)

“One’s ideas and analysis must strive to make sense of the world in a way that facilitates both private and collective action.” (Mueller 2010, p.255)

1. Introduction

Does Internet governance need to be decolonized? If so, why? How can Internet governance be ‘colonial’ (thereby necessitating decolonization) if the colonial project is a thing of the past? And even if Internet governance is a colonial phenomenon, what might it mean to ‘decolonize’ Internet governance, and how should this be carried out?

In what follows, and drawing on previous work outlining a ‘decolonial computing’ (Ali 2014, 2016), I argue that insofar as Internet governance is a (late) modern phenomenon, it is thereby also necessarily⁷¹ colonial, and that decolonizing this phenomenon – assuming this is possible – is not only desirable but necessary for advancing social justice, both locally and globally. I further hold that the latter project must become focal and that ‘Internet Governance in the Global South’ should be understood in terms of an embrace of the ‘decolonial option’ (Mignolo 2010), viz. preferential disposition towards

⁷¹ A similar claim regarding the *necessity* of computing being considered colonial *insofar* as it is a modern phenomenon was made in an earlier work (Ali 2016). With hindsight, I suggest that this claim should have been articulated in a more nuanced fashion in order to draw out the *particular* (that is, specific, non-universal, non-totalizing etc.) nature of the claim; in short, not *everything* that is modern is *thereby* colonial for if the converse were true, it would lead to the rather unfortunate if not bizarre conclusion that decolonial and critical race theoretical discourses, which are themselves modern phenomena insofar as they are articulated within a modern / postmodern context, would *also* be colonial discourses. That said, I stand by the view that computing, as a *particular* phenomenon and one that is socio-technical in nature/essence, is indeed colonial in nature, as is Internet governance as I will attempt to demonstrate in what follows.

those located at the margins or ‘periphery’ of the world system and reparations as compensation for the persistent legacy effects of colonialism. Adopting this normative (political, ethical) orientation points to the possibility of an Internet governance *of, by and for* the Global South rather than one framed in terms of the possibilities of ‘inclusion’ into an extant, incursive, hegemonically ‘Northern’ (that is, ‘Western’, West-centric etc.) system of Internet governance, albeit one that is, I would suggest, arguably being ‘masked’ (obscured, occluded, hidden), intentionally or otherwise, through advocacy of multi-stakeholder approaches⁷².

Yet in order to begin to think about the ‘what’ and ‘how’ of *decolonizing* Internet governance, I hold that it is necessary to first interrogate – that is, ‘question concerning’ – the ‘essence’ (that is, the nature, ‘what-ness’ and ‘how-ness’) of the Internet, governance and Internet governance with a view to disclosing their hegemonically colonial nature. In order to do this in such a way as to further the project of local and global social justice, I suggest the desirability of adopting a broadly phenomenological approach, viz. ‘getting back to things in themselves’, albeit one informed and qualified by critical race theoretical and ‘decolonial’ insights in which body-political (‘who’), geo-political (‘where’) and other concerns related to epistemology and ontology are centred. In short, my concern is to think about what is – or *should* be – preparatory for – that is, prior to – any attempt to think about the decolonization of Internet governance by providing means by which to interrogate the power-relational structures of the Internet, governance and Internet governance relative to issues of ‘knowing’ and ‘being’. Why might such ‘preparatory’ inquiry be *necessary*? I would suggest that the simple answer to this question is that there is far too much taken for granted – politically, economically, socially, culturally, ethically etc. – in discussions about Internet

⁷² In terms of related precedents to the argument presented herein, reference should be made to Bhuiyan (2014) who considers Internet governance *and* the Global South, and Zapata Rioja (2014) who considers Internet governance *from* a Global South perspective. However, I want to consider what it might mean to think about Internet governance *in* the Global South, and adopting a somewhat Foucauldian perspective, I want to suggest the need to consider the preposition ‘in’ as referring both to Internet governance *over* the Global South by those exercising power from a dominant and currently hegemonic position situated outside it – that is the Global North, ‘the West’ etc. – in contrast to Internet governance done *of, by and for* the Global South itself – that is, by those attempting resistance to the global hegemon. As will be seen in what follows, my point of departure for such a ‘both-and’ conceptualization of Internet governance ‘in’ the Global South is a ‘decolonial’ extension to world systems theory that requires considering core-periphery (or ‘West’-‘Rest’) relationships in terms of ‘residual legacy system effects’, viz. the persistence of ‘coloniality’ or the social, political, economic, cultural, epistemological and ontological structuring logics of colonialism, on those located at the periphery of the world system from the perspective of those so located.

governance; far too many assumptions and predispositions that remain hegemonically and tacitly operative in the background, shaping the boundaries (limits, borders) and contours (landscape, topology) of this discourse, not to mention setting its terms (that is, its ‘logic’ or grammar⁷³ and ‘lexicon’ or vocabulary), and that a ‘hermeneutical’ or interpretative inquiry is warranted in order to disclose this background with a view to attempting to forge new decolonial ‘horizons’ including, specifically, those associated with Internet governance. Hence, the need for a *prolegomenon* – that is, a preliminary critical discussion serving to introduce and interpret a future extended work – to the decolonization of Internet governance⁷⁴, an attempt at providing a theoretical ‘lens’ and making a methodological and conceptual contribution towards thinking about the issue of Internet governance from a ‘critical’ perspective, that is, one engaging considerations of power. To this end, an attempt is made to disclose what might be described as the operation of a tacit ‘racialized colonial governmentality’ within Internet governance *discourse* with a view to preparing the ground for the decolonization of Internet governance *per se*⁷⁵.

For this reason, while concurring with the views expressed in the two quotations at the start of this chapter, in what follows I attempt to make the case for adopting a *decolonial narrative* in order to make *decolonial sense of the world* as a preferred orientation relative to other approaches vis-à-vis thinking about Internet governance in/for the Global South.

This chapter has two parts:

In Part I, I begin with a brief presentation of the phenomenological approach informing my argument, drawing attention to important notions such as ‘world’ and ‘horizon’; I then go on to explore in some detail the modern world system, its origin in European colonialism and its fundamentally racialized nature as the ‘background’ or ‘horizon’

⁷³ Drawing on the thinking of the later Wittgenstein, Pole (1958) describes grammar as “the form in which we represent the world; it is like a scheme for a map which for different purposes might be drawn according to different projections.” (p.36)

⁷⁴ In this connection, Odysseos’ (2017) proposal attempting to set out the terms of a prolegomenon in relation to any future decolonial ethics is timely.

⁷⁵ In this preparatory work, there is either no engagement with or only brief exploration of issues which tend to be the focus of mainstream Internet governance debates. These include ‘critical’ analyses of the control and ownership of critical Internet resources (CIRs), power-relationships associated with the setting of technical standards and protocols etc.

within which Internet governance operates. Following this, I briefly describe what is meant by ‘decoloniality’ and ‘decolonial computing’, contrasting the latter with earlier and related ‘critical’ approaches to ICT including those articulated from the periphery, as well as those ostensibly evincing a preferential orientation towards it.

In Part II, I begin by outlining my decolonial computing approach to mounting a critique of some contemporary ‘mainstream’ – and North-centric (or West-centric) – Internet governance discourses⁷⁶. My particular concern is to explicate, through close, decolonial reading⁷⁷, the tacit, yet possibly unintentional, operation of colonial logics in certain views about Internet governance articulated by (DeNardis 2014) and (Mueller 2010, 2017)⁷⁸. In this connection, I draw attention to three issues that I suggest are ‘entangled’ with the issue of ‘alignment’ which I maintain constitutes a preeminent site for the operation of racialized coloniality in Internet governance discourse: (1) how Internet governance is discursively-framed, by whom and for what purposes; (2) the relation of prior extant network formations – social, political, economic, technological, cultural etc. – to emerging socio-technical networks such as the Internet, web and social media vis-à-vis reproduction of world systemic power-relations; and (3) the persistent yet masked illiberalism of Western conceptions of liberal political and economic order under colonial modernity.

I then go on to present an extended decolonial reflection on NWICO and WSIS with a view to drawing attention to power-relational shifts in Internet governance discourse that resulted in deferral of the decolonization project, and conclude by offering some brief recommendations about how to proceed with decolonizing Internet governance vis-à-vis the issue of alignment and its ‘entanglement’ with Internet fragmentation.

⁷⁶ It is important to appreciate that North-/West-centric views can be articulated by those body-politically marked as ‘non-white’ and geo-politically situated in the periphery of the world system – more specifically, located outside ‘the West’; however, I suggest that such articulations should be understood as informed and inflected by coloniality.

⁷⁷ My decolonial approach to reading should be understood as broadly methodologically-informed by critical discourse analysis (Fairclough 1989) and loosely drawing upon certain ideas associated with discourse theory (Sayyid and Zac 1998).

⁷⁸ It must be appreciated that in referring to the ‘tacit’ nature of coloniality ostensibly evinced in the discourses of theorists such as DeNardis and Mueller, I am not suggesting that such logics are being deployed *intentionally* in the sense of involving conscious and/or wilful intent on their part; rather, that their discourses are marked by a certain *intentionality* (‘aboutness’, ‘directedness’) insofar as they are shaped by prior goal-directed intentional actions on the part of other historical discursive actors, traces that have become embedded as part of a shared social-psychological ‘background’.

Part I

2. Phenomenology: 'World' and 'Horizon'

For present purposes, and drawing upon the sociological and phenomenological account presented by Berger and Luckmann (1966), it might be argued that a 'world' is a socially-constructed reality in which people find themselves and which they shape through various kinds of action, both individual and collective. Thus, a 'world' is the inter-related totality of things both natural and artifactual, which in the contemporary 'information' era includes computing and ICT systems, network infrastructure, and various technical institutions and governing bodies responsible for the maintenance and regulation of the former. However, it is important to appreciate that this way of thinking about 'world' tends to obscure certain fundamental – or 'foundational' – considerations relating to the site and operation of power and its role in bringing forth such a reality – that is, constituting the being (or ontology) of a world. The philosopher Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) famously stated that the stone is world-less, the animal is poor in world, and the human is 'world-forming' (Heidegger 1995). Granted the correctness of this statement, what such an articulation omits to consider – intentionally or otherwise – is the asymmetric wielding of power by different agents (embodied subjects), differently located in time (history) and space (geography), in relation to such world-forming action; in short, Heidegger's world-forming 'human' is a universalizing abstraction that 'masks' (conceals, occludes) the operation of differential power, and, *a fortiori*, the tacit Eurocentrism of 'the world' (Maldonado-Torres 2004, 2010), both of which must be taken into consideration when thinking critically about Internet governance insofar as it is a phenomenon in 'the world'.

In what follows, I will have recourse to the concept of 'world' advanced by philosopher and decolonial theorist, Enrique Dussel, as presented in *Philosophy of Liberation* (1985), which he frames as follows:

World is ... an instrumental totality of sense. It is not merely an external aggregate of beings but the totality of the beings that are meaningful to me ... The world is thus the system of all systems that have humankind as their foundation ... The everyday world, the obvious one that we live in each day, is a totality in time and space. As a temporal totality, it is a retention of the

past, a launching site for the fundamental undertakings projected into the future, and the stage on which we live out the present possibilities that depend on that future. As a spatial totality, the world always situates the 'I,' the person, the subject, as its centre; from this centre beings are organized spatially from the closest ones with the most meaning to the ones furthest away with the least meaning – peripheral beings. (pp. 22-24)

Dussel's conception of world, and his framing of it in terms of a spatial-temporal totality – or rather, a geographical-historical 'matrix' (Quijano 2007a) – within which are embedded differentially situated subjects, viz. those at 'the centre' (or 'core') and those at 'the margins' (or 'periphery'), is useful insofar as it points to the existence of a historically-sedimented and futurally-oriented background 'horizon' against which both human beings and various humanly-constructed 'things' (objects, processes, events etc.) and 'artefactual' systems must be positioned in order to make sense of them. The importance of this finding for the present study is that the Internet (as sociotechnical), governance (as political) and Internet governance (as ostensibly institutional⁷⁹) are all artefactual systems (and processes) and hence, must all be positioned in relation to 'the world'. Yet, phenomenologically-speaking, the existence of the world as a 'horizon' for 'historically-shaped' and 'futurally-oriented' projects necessitates that, beyond interrogating the nature of *particular* systemic artefacts such as the above, there is a *prior* need to subject the broader totality that is 'the world' itself to interrogation with a view to understanding *its* embedding, systemic nature and, from a critical race theoretical and decolonial perspective, this means interrogating the origins of the modern world system and the nature of its political ontology.

3. The Modern/Colonial World System

A review of the vast and expanding literature on Internet governance readily evinces that 'mainstream' discourse, including that which claims to engage with 'critical' or power-relational concerns, tends to focus on ostensibly technical issues of end-to-end connectivity, openness, standards and interoperability, and social concerns about an ongoing commitment to 'network neutrality', the trade-off between privacy and

⁷⁹ The qualifier 'ostensibly' is necessary insofar as it is an aim of this study to interrogate whether governance is necessarily institutional.

security, and the continued ‘stability’ and ‘universality’ of the Internet in the face of the alleged ‘threat’ of fragmentation, whether posed by democratic or ‘authoritarian’ governments⁸⁰. Crucially, in relation to what was stated in the previous section, this discourse tends to operate against an assumed liberal, if not neoliberal, background ‘horizon’ wherein matters relating to political-economy and culture in computing and ICT contexts are framed in terms of notions metonymically associated with modern capitalism such as free markets⁸¹, unrestricted flow of goods and services, democratic governance, progress, development etc.⁸²

However, adopting a *decolonial* perspective requires us to reconsider the nature of neoliberal capitalism by situating it in relation to the long *durée* of the modern world system and its origins in European colonialism. Decolonial thinking traces its origins to Marxist world systems theory, dependency theory and area studies, yet goes beyond these frameworks by considering the nature of the world system from the experience of those located at the non-European margins (or periphery) of this system rather than those situated at its European core; furthermore, and crucially, decolonial thought necessitates thinking about the nature or constitution of the world system in terms of the construction of core-periphery relations *foundationally* predicated on processes of ‘racialization’⁸³ and the production of an asymmetric ‘West-Rest’/Europe-non-Europe/North-South binary, thereby calling into question

⁸⁰ Other obvious threats include cybercrime and cyberwar, neither of which are considered here. Regarding the term ‘authoritarianism’, it must be noted that its deployment is necessarily informed by commitment, tacit or explicit, to a particular sociopolitical formation as normative, articulated from a particular site of enunciation; in short, there is nothing ‘neutral’ (or objective) about the term ‘authoritarian’ – it is ‘politically-loaded’ through and through. For a useful critique of how this term is deployed for Eurocentric/West-centric purposes, see Sayyid (2005).

⁸¹ For ‘Leftist’ critiques of the ideology – and rhetoric – of ‘free market’ capitalism under neoliberalism, see Amin (2004) and Tandon (2015) among other works.

⁸² Crucially, I suggest that this is the case both for those apparently committed to the hegemonic capitalist project such as Mueller (2010, 2017) and DeNardis (2015, 2016), as well as those explicitly committed to ‘subaltern’ anti-capitalist / anti-imperialist positions such as Abu Bhuiyan (2008, 2014) insofar as both groups frame their positions in relation to the modern world system as capitalist.

⁸³ According to Miles (2004), ‘racialization’ refers to “any process or situation wherein the meaning of ‘race’ is introduced to define and given meaning to some particular population, its characteristics and actions.” (p.348) Extending this view, Hesse (2007) maintains that rather than being necessarily correlated with the presence (or absence) of material markers on the body, “racialization [is] embodied in a series of onto-colonial taxonomies of land, climate, history, bodies, customs, language, all of which became sedimented metonymically, metaphorically, and normatively, as the assembled attributions of race.” (pp.658-659).

‘economistic’ characterizations of the world system as capitalist⁸⁴. In this sense, and at a minimum, it is necessary to talk about the modern capitalist world system as *also* a colonial racist world system (Quijano and Wallerstein 1992a), and decolonial interrogation of the contemporary world system should be seen as exposing the ‘dark underside’ (Mignolo 2011) of Western modernity as a racist colonial order⁸⁵. While this ‘West-Rest’ binary can, and should, be unpacked along body-political and geo-political lines – that is, in terms of how different bodies are ‘raced’ differently in different ‘zones’ of the world system – the formative ‘entanglement’ of race with ‘religion’, notwithstanding the contested nature of the latter as a universal category, should not be ignored: as Pasha (2017a) has rightly argued, there is a tendency of postcolonial and decolonial theorists to operate within a ‘secular’ (that is, post-religious) framework⁸⁶ which obscures consideration of persistent ‘theo-political’ forces at play in the modern/colonial world system⁸⁷, a failing to which he draws attention in the context of discussing how to move beyond the Eurocentrism of mainstream and ‘critical’

⁸⁴ Such ‘foundationalism’ should not be understood as implying a commitment to a position structurally-analogous to that assumed in Marxist infrastructure-superstructure analysis wherein economic phenomena are held to determine political, cultural etc. phenomena. While race / racism / racialization might function as a ‘primary contradiction’ (Mills 2003), and concurring with Quijano (2007b) that “the idea of ‘race’ is surely the most efficient instrument of social domination produced in the last 500 years” having been “imposed as the basic criterion for social classification of the entire world’s population [and] taken as the principal determinant of the world’s new social and geocultural identities” (p.45), it is by no means the only such ‘marker’ of difference, nor are all other markers / contradictions to be reduced to it. According to Quijano (2007b), “‘racism’ in daily social relations is not, to be sure, the *only* manifestation of the coloniality of power, but it is certainly the *most* obvious and the most *omnipresent*. For this reason, it has remained the *principal* arena of conflict [emphases added].” (p.46) Expanding on this view, Grosfoguel (2011) argues that race should be understood to function as an *organizing principle*, ‘transversally’ structuring a number of ‘entangled’ hierarchies including, but not limited to, the epistemic, spatial, sexual, economic, ecological, political, spiritual and aesthetic. For present purposes, it should be noted that included among such hierarchies is “a media/informational hierarchy where the West has the control over the means of global media production and information technology while the non-West do not have the means to make their points of view enter the global media networks.” (p.10)

⁸⁵ In this connection, Bhabra (2014) maintains that, for Quijano, “the modernity that Europe takes as the context for its own being is, in fact, so deeply imbricated in the structures of European colonial domination over the rest of the world that it is impossible to separate the two: hence, modernity / coloniality.” (p.118)

⁸⁶ As an aside, I suggest that critical race philosopher Charles W. Mills espouses such a ‘secular’ commitment when referring to the triad of race, class and gender to the exclusion of ‘religion’ in his various works.

⁸⁷ In this connection, I have elsewhere drawn attention to the sedimented, historically-constitutive antagonistic negative dialectical relation between Christendom *cum* Europe *cum* ‘the West’ and the Islamicate world, a relationship that, I aver, persists and informs the ‘background’ of the post-modern/post-colonial era (Ali 2017).

approaches to international relations, the latter being of obvious relevance to the discourse of Internet governance⁸⁸.

On this basis, and following the lead of seminal decolonial thinker, Frantz Fanon (1986), I want to argue that when thinking about, speaking of, and acting in the ‘modern world’, we need to understand the latter as ‘The World’ – that is, *the* global hierarchical system of domination, whose dominant core lies in ‘the West’ and whose subaltern periphery is constituted by ‘the Rest’ (Hall 1992), which emerged as a historically-unprecedented phenomenon during what has come to be known as the long *durée* of the 16th century commencing with the Columbia voyages in 1492 CE⁸⁹. In addition to ‘the West’ and ‘the Rest’– and the ‘West’ can include ‘Eastern’ constituents such as Japan (a case of the exception *confirming* the rule) – ‘The World’ goes by many other names articulated with increasing intensity, clarity and visibility in the contemporary era: coloniality of power (Quijano 1992b), racist culture (Goldberg 1993), global white supremacy (Mills 1997), the modern racial world system (Winant 2004), the Orientalist world system (Samman 2008) and the colonial matrix of power or modernity/coloniality (Mignolo 2011) among others. What is common to all such ‘namings’, if only in terms of a Wittgensteinian shared ‘family resemblance’, is the centrality of *race* as a unifying principle in their articulation

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⁸⁸ In this connection, the present work should be seen as aimed at contributing to what Mills (2015a) refers to as the ‘unwriting and unwhitening of the world’ which he explores in the context of ‘critical’ international relations theory and which I engage in relation to internet governance.

⁸⁹ According to Wallerstein (2006), “the history of the modern world-system has been in large part a history of the expansion of European states and peoples into the rest of the world” (p.1), commencing with the so-called Columbian “voyages of discovery” in 1492 CE which resulted in the emergence of a racial-capitalist world system. This global modern/colonial order was predicated on a set of unequal relationships between the colonial power and the colony, and between the colonists – or colonizers – and the indigenous population – or colonized. Such relationships assumed the form of an ensemble of socio-cultural norms, attitudes, and practices in which race as naturalized, heritable (or reproductive), hierarchical (or taxonomic) exclusion, rather than capital, functioned as organizing principle.

⁹⁰ The literature on race / racism is vast and somewhat eclectic, and engagement with it is clearly beyond the scope and remit of this study. For present purposes, it should suffice to invoke the postcolonial/decolonial conception of race / racism articulated by Hesse (2004, 2007), viz. that phenomenon tied to processes of ‘racialization’ which give rise to a series of Eurocentric material ‘assemblages’ (systems of classification, taxonomies etc.) emerging in the context of European colonial expansion during the long *durée* of the 16th century. In passing, it should be noted that while an emerging body of scholarship offers the prospect of revising the onset and periodization of race/racism, I would suggest that in its *systemic*, *binary* and *globalized* form, Hesse’s account remains authoritative, if not definitive (or exclusive).

3.1. Decolonization, Post-Colonialism and Coloniality

Although formal ‘boots on the ground’ colonialism ended in the 1960s as a consequence of various national decolonization struggles, the decolonization project remains unfinished insofar as the contemporary ‘postcolonial’ situation is marked by a condition of ‘coloniality’ that involves: (1) an ongoing legacy of colonialism in contemporary societies in the form of social discrimination, which has outlived formal colonialism and become integrated in succeeding postcolonial social orders, both core and periphery; and (2) practices and legacies of European colonialism in terms of the persistence of certain ‘sedimented’ colonial ways of knowing and being – that is, colonial epistemology and ontology – based on systems of categorization, classification, and taxonomisation, and their manifestation in histories, knowledge structures, artefacts, and technologies including, I want to suggest, those of relatively recent origin such as the Internet. In this connection, and by way of preparing the ground for the presentation of certain arguments in Part II, it is imperative to note that an expanding body of scholarship produced by critical race philosophers and decolonial theorists has made – and *continues* to make – an arguably convincing case that *actual* social, political and economic liberalism was forged upon racist and ostensibly ‘illiberal’ foundations including colonialism, indigenous genocide and slavery (Mills 2017).

Building on such arguments, I want to suggest that Internet governance and its associated discourse, irrespective of whether the latter is ‘mainstream’ / liberal, ‘critical’, postcolonial or even decolonial (as is the one presented herein), tacitly operates against a background ‘horizon’ of coloniality. If this is true, then the ‘what’ and ‘how’ of the Internet, governance and Internet governance, and the latter’s tendency to discursively frame and concern itself with issues of network neutrality, openness, standards and interoperability, stability and universality (as against instability and fragmentation), must be understood as *potentially*⁹¹ informed and inflected by the differential body-political and geo-political – and possibly also theo-political (given the ‘entanglement’ of race and religion mentioned earlier) – orientations of those generating this discourse; in short, there is a need to consider ‘race’ and ‘place’ in the modern world

⁹¹ This qualifier is necessary so that I am not understood to be positing the *actual* orientation of any stakeholder, however bodied and located, as wholly determined by such embodiment and world-systemic situatedness.

system vis-à-vis the historically-informed dispositions and biases orienting the futurably-directed projects of power-relationally differentiated discursive stakeholders⁹².

3.2. A Brief Note on ‘Westphalian State-Centrism’

While an understanding of the background ‘horizon’ that is the modern/colonial world system with its attendant structuring logic of racialized coloniality is key to the decolonial argument presented herein, there is another, related issue that needs to be briefly discussed insofar as it speaks directly to how the matter of ‘alignment’ is framed in Internet governance discourse, viz. *the global nation-state system*.

Mainstream Internet governance discourse almost invariably tends to be articulated against the backdrop of, and centre upon, the Westphalian international state system⁹³. Appreciation of this fact is crucial since ‘Westphalian state-centrism’ tends to obscure the relational background, both geographical and historical, against which the Westphalian interstate system itself emerged. In this connection, I maintain that, notwithstanding the fictive Eurocentrism of a ‘Westphalian narrative’ that purports to trace the origins of the contemporary inter-state system to the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648 CE (Kayaoglu 2010)⁹⁴, it is imperative to think about the Westphalian interstate system in relation to the long *durée* history of the modern/colonial world system emerging in 1492 CE. In short, the ‘Westphalian setting’ should be understood as embedded within an encompassing ‘colonial setting’, and that the latter informs and

⁹² Pre-empting criticism of this line of argument on the grounds that it evinces a commitment on my part to some form of crude ‘identity politics’, I should like to suggest that such a move is decolonially-suspect in that it tacitly attempts to re-centre a Eurocentric conception of politics, irrespective of whether liberal / individualist or Marxist / class-based in orientation, that is fundamentally economistic. Beyond this, and drawing on arguments presented by Sayyid and Zac (1998), I should like to suggest that *all politics is identity politics* in that political subjectivity and agency is necessarily tied up with questions of identity and difference; further, that it is not possible to understand political identity outside of discursive articulation. In short, (political) identities are *products* of discourse.

⁹³ I aver that Westphalian state-centrism sets the terms of debate irrespective of whether one is arguing for the central role of the state in matters of Internet governance (Goldsmith and Wu 2008) (Salhi 2009), or contesting such centrality (DeNardis 2014) (Mueller 2010, 2017) etc. along multistakeholder lines.

⁹⁴ In this connection, it is interesting to note that Mueller (2017), an opponent of Westphalian state-centrism vis-à-vis Internet governance, maintains that “it is common to assert that the nation-state system has been in place for centuries. While that is true of a few major European powers such as France and the UK, which took their familiar form since the seventeenth century, most of Europe’s political units took the form of multinational empires and most of the non-western developing world was subject to colonial powers. Not until the US-imposed post-WW2 postcolonial order was in place can one clearly say that the international system was based on a society of sovereign nation-states.” (p.153)

inflects the political structures associated with the former⁹⁵. Granted the validity of this claim, it would appear to suggest that transitioning to a *post-Westphalian* state-centric political reality would not necessarily entail transitioning to a *post-West*-centric reality since coloniality stands in a contingent relation to Westphalian state-centrism and can persist beyond the nation-state system. For example, and as will be argued in more detail later, ‘network colonialism’ – that is, the operation of colonial logics in global / transnational networks such as the Internet, web and social media – is not only possible but, I suggest, *probable* given (1) the historical ‘entanglement’ of prior extant ‘legacy system’ networks with such ‘emergent’ socio-technical network formations, and (2) the operation of network effects including ‘preferential attachment’.

4. Decoloniality and Decolonial Computing

Having described the colonial nature of ‘the world’ within which the Internet, governance and Internet governance are embedded as socio-technical, political and institutional phenomena, it is necessary to briefly clarify the idea of ‘decoloniality’, explain what is meant by ‘decolonial computing’ and suggest why the latter approach is preferable to other related earlier ‘critical’ orientations vis-à-vis Internet governance in/for the Global South.

4.1. Decoloniality

In addition to (1) dating the onset of the condition of modernity and/or the modern world system to European colonialism and the long *durée* of the 16th century, (2) understanding this system as global and *racialized* – thereby entailing the need to engage critique of capitalism in terms of *racial* political economy – and (3) insisting on the *persistence* of structural colonial logics or ‘coloniality’ into the contemporary postcolonial era, decolonial thought and praxis – that is, *decoloniality* – is also characterized by adoption of what decolonial theorists Walter D. Mignolo and Madina Tlostanova (2006, 2009) refer to as ‘delinking’ and border-thinking, viz. consideration of the ‘body-politics’ and ‘geo-politics’ of knowledge – that is, *who* is thinking / knowing and from *where* – engaging thereby with the *material* dimensions of epistemology in contrast to the abstract / disembodied ‘theo-politics’ and, following secularization,

⁹⁵ I assert this in full recognition that it might be necessary to situate the European colonial enterprise in relation to antecedent events including the Crusades commencing in 1095 CE (Ali 2017).

‘ego-politics’ of universalizing Eurocentric epistemology by thinking from the margins (borders, frontiers, periphery). Crucially, such ‘materiality’ is not that of the race-less / de-raced structures of political economy or culture, but that of the corporeal experiences of those who have been excluded from the production of knowledge by colonial modernity. In addition, according to Mignolo (2010a), decoloniality “is not an interdisciplinary *tool* but, rather, a trans-disciplinary *horizon* in which de-coloniality of knowledge and de-colonial knowledge places life (in general) first and institutions at the service of the regeneration of life [emphasis added].” (p.11) On his view, decoloniality necessitates integrating the concepts of coloniality, modernity, and decolonisation of knowledge by thinking about history (time) in relation to geography (space), thereby providing the basis for subjecting the idea of a single linear time and associated notions of ‘progress’ and ‘development’ – both of which appear in Internet governance discourse⁹⁶ – to critique in terms of the operation of power, and motivating the shift away from a universal perspective towards a ‘pluriversal’ perspective – that is, a worldview constituted from multiple sites of enunciation, pre-eminently those situated at the margins of the world system⁹⁷.

⁹⁶ Consider in this regard the following statement contained in the NETmundial Multistakeholder Statement (NETmundial 2014) related to ‘Human Rights and Shared Values’: “all people have a right to development and the Internet has a vital role to play in helping to achieve the full realization of internationally agreed sustainable development goals. It is a vital tool for giving people living in poverty the means to participate in development processes.”; and the following in relation to ‘Access and low barriers’: “Internet governance should promote universal, equal opportunity, affordable and high quality Internet access so it can be an effective tool for enabling human development and social inclusion.” Other statements in this document reinforcing the commitment to development include the following: “Internet governance should promote sustainable and inclusive development and for the promotion of human rights”; and “all stakeholders should renew their commitment to build a people centred, inclusive and development oriented Information Society as defined by the WSIS outcome documents. Therefore in pursuing the improvements of the Internet governance ecosystem, the focus on development should be retained.” For detailed critiques of ‘development’, ‘progress’ and related notions as Eurocentric, see Sachs (2010). For a critique of ‘developmentalism’ or “the fetishization of development”, see Dirlik (2014), and critique of ‘development as colonialism’, see Goldsmith (1997) and Rist (2008).

⁹⁷ According to Bhabra (2014), “Mignolo develops Quijano’s earlier theoretical work and, in particular, further elaborates his conception of modernity/coloniality in the context of the work of epistemic decolonization necessary to undo the damage wrought by both modernity and by understanding modernity/coloniality only as modernity. The decolonization of knowledge, he suggests, occurs in acknowledging the sources and geo-political locations of knowledge while at the same time affirming those modes and practices of knowledge that have been denied by the dominance of particular forms. He is not arguing simply for a geo-politics of location as central to any academic endeavour, but rather a consideration of what that geo-politics enables to be known and how it is to be known. The key issue for Mignolo is not only that epistemology is not ahistorical, but also, and perhaps more importantly, that epistemology ‘has to be geographical in its historicity’.” (pp.118-119)

4.2. Decolonial Computing

Computing is inherently colonial in some sense since as a modern phenomenon, it is founded upon, and continues to embody aspects of, colonialism. I suggest that this holds for specific kinds of computing such as ubicomp, which has been said to be driven by a ‘colonial impulse’ (Dourish and Mainwaring 2012), as well as other areas of computing such as HCI, AI, robotics, ICT4D, ‘Big Data’ / data science and Internet governance. In fact, and as argued elsewhere, computing *per se* should be understood as characterized by an ‘expansionist’ thrust associated with the transformation of the modern world through incessant ‘computerization’ (latterly ‘digitalization’ and more recently, ‘datafication’) and the rise of a purportedly global ‘information society’ following the ‘cybernetic turn’ of the 1950s (Ali 2016). Crucially, this expansionist thrust is hegemonically-Western, computing emerging in the West (primarily Britain and the US) against the background of inter-European conflicts (WW2) and post-war ideological conflicts (The Cold War), both of which need to be considered in relation to the periphery as non-European world (WW2) or Third World (The Cold War), respectively⁹⁸. In the context of the present study, particular attention needs to be afforded to the ‘supremacist’ motivations underpinning the race to develop a global information network or Internet, and in this connection Barbrook (2007) provides an account which I suggest merits engaging with at some length insofar as it provides a number of important insights that other more mainstream, liberal and somewhat ‘technophilic’ accounts have tended to ignore⁹⁹.

⁹⁸ In this connection, consider the military setting against which two ‘founding fathers’ of modern computing, Alan Turing and John von Neumann, developed their ideas: Turing, a mathematician, cryptographer and computer scientist was involved in the war effort as a code breaker at Bletchley Park during WW2; von Neumann, a mathematician and computer scientist, played a decisive role in the US Cold War effort.

⁹⁹ In this connection, consider, for example, the authoritative account of Naughton (1999) for whom “it’s always earlier than you think. Whenever you go looking for the origins of any significant technological development you find that the more you learn about it, the deeper its roots seem to tunnel into the past.” (p.49) In this connection he is led to ask: “how far down should we drill in seeking the origins of the Net? Given that a large part of my story is about computers, should I go back all the way to the 1830s when Charles Babbage developed detailed plans for what he called the ‘analytical engine’, a device capable of performing any arithmetical operation in response to instructions contained on punched cards?” (p.50) On his view, “any starting-point for an historical trail is likely to be arbitrary.” (p.51) From a critical race theoretical and decolonial perspective, I would suggest that this is not the case; rather, than the choice of starting point is determined by ethico-political orientation. It should be noted, however, that Naughton is well-aware of the centrality of The Cold War vis-à-vis emergence of the Internet: “the Internet did not originate in one blinding, ‘Eureka!’ moment. But if one had to put a finger on the spark that lit the fuse, one would have to say it happened on 4 October 1957 – the day the Soviet Union launched into orbit a

4.2.1. The (Cold) War for Internet Supremacy

According to Barbrook (2007), “the imaginary future of artificial intelligence disguised the original motivation for developing IBM’s mainframes: killing large numbers of people. During the Cold War, smart advertising had to hide horrific use values ... The horrors of the Cold War present had been successfully hidden by the marvels of the imaginary futures.” (pp.50-51) While framing the development of such ‘AI-for-death’ technology in terms of the targeting of Russian cities, I want to suggest that this target of the Western ‘war-machine’, although quite real, was relatively recent in origin when considered relative to non-Europe, the target of Western colonial violence for the past five centuries¹⁰⁰. Barbrook goes on to state that “because of the nuclear stalemate in Europe, the most important front in the Cold War was the propaganda battle ... The long-term security of America’s sphere of influence now required more than the ‘hard power’ of military and economic pre-eminence. The US elite also had to achieve *supremacy* in the ‘soft power’ of ideological and cultural hegemony [emphasis added].” (p.84) Regarding the Cold War origins of the Internet, he maintains that “when, in the early 1960s, the CIA alerted the US government to the danger of falling behind its rival in the race to build the Net, ARPA was given the responsibility for fighting this new battle on the technological front of the Cold War.” (p.151) According to Barbrook, the CIA argued that “the technological race to develop the Net had become the key contest which would decide whether America or Russia would lead humanity into the information society. The superpower that owned this imaginary future had *hegemony over the entire*

bleeping football called Sputnik.” (p.77) While the origins of the Internet in the efforts of various engineers receiving ARPA funding is widely recognised, he maintains that under J.C.R. Licklider’s brief leadership of ARPA’s Command and Control Division, its vision transitioned from a military outlook to a “*utopianism* which maintained that computer technology held out the promise of a better world [emphasis added]” (p.82) Against this technophile perspective, and following Barbrook (2007), yet reframing the latter’s Eurocentric / West-centric Marxist narrative in the context of considering global core-periphery modern/colonial power relations, I want to suggest that Western ‘utopianism’ should be understood as a ‘neo-colonial’ attempt to project some form of *Eurocentric universal* (Wallerstein 2006) – rhetorically-camouflaged as progress, development etc. – onto the world.

¹⁰⁰ In this connection, Blaney and Ticker (2017) raise a number of pertinent questions: “How can we think of the Cold War as a long-peace, given the vast body-count across the globe? How is a liberal peace consistent with liberal colonial wars? Why do the field’s foundational stories revert to World War I and not the administration of race relations and external (and internal) colonies?” (p.301) In addition, there is the matter of the ‘Orientalization’ of the Soviet Union by the US and its allies during The Cold War, arguably drawing on long durée sedimented Western Orientalist predispositions, to consider; in this connection, see (GoGwilt 1995) and (Bonnett 2002) among other works.

planet [emphasis added]” (p.164); and on the matter of the emergence of the ‘information society’, he maintains that:

Across the ideological spectrum, possessing the prophecy of the Net had become a claim to political power. When the owner of the future controlled the present, geopolitical rivalries and class conflicts were focused upon the struggle between opposing definitions of the global village. At various times from the 1950s to the 2000s, the information society has been identified as a state plan, a military machine, a mixed economy, a university campus, a hippy commune¹⁰¹, a free market, a medieval community or a dotcom firm. During these five decades, these rival definitions came in and out of fashion as the fortunes of their promoters waxed and waned. Only one principle remained constant throughout. If about nothing else, the rival ideologues agreed that building the Net was making the future society. (p.273)

While broadly concurring with Barbrook’s reading of the Internet and the information society as ‘entangled’ with competition over ‘planetary informational hegemony’, from a critical race theoretical and decolonial perspective, I would suggest that his Marxist ‘core-centric’ interpretation of such Cold War developments results in a framing of the issue in classist and economistic terms, viz. the Internet as a vehicle for neoliberal capitalism and US imperialism¹⁰². On a decolonial framing, it might be argued that the race for the net was tied up with the need for ‘the West’ (under US leadership) to maintain, expand and refine global white (cum Western¹⁰³) supremacy under contestation both at home and abroad, *ostensibly* from the Soviet Union (‘The East’) but certainly from the decolonizing Third World (‘the Rest’)¹⁰⁴.

¹⁰¹ For a ‘subaltern’ structuralist critique of ‘countercultural’ readings of the Internet and ‘information society’, see (Aouragh and Chakravartty 2016).

¹⁰² There is also the matter of the *European* origin and arguably *Eurocentric* logic of Marxism to consider; on this point, see Mills (1997, 2003) among other works.

¹⁰³ On the discursive shift from ‘white’ to ‘Western’, see (Füredi 1998) and Bonnett (2003, 2005).

¹⁰⁴ On the ‘entanglement’ of Cold War politics with what African-American sociologist W.E.B. DuBois described as “the problem of the 20th century” (1903), viz. “the problem of the colour line” or racism, see (Füredi 1998), (Borstlemann 2001) and (Westad 2017). Notwithstanding gains accruing from civil rights struggles in the particular local context of the US, and those associated with anti-colonial movements more globally which resulted in the formal independence of previously colonised peoples, the ‘decolonial project’ remains unfinished and, importantly, continues to be deferred if not thwarted by hegemonic players in the

In terms of the relevance of The Cold War to matters of Internet governance, it is intriguing to note that in an essay entitled ‘Are we in a Digital Cold War?’ aimed at mounting a historically-informed critique of the idea of contemporary ‘Cyber Cold War’ emerging in the aftermath of the Dubai World Conference on International Telecommunications (WCIT), Mueller (2013) maintains that “the very act of framing the problem in that way ... contribute[s] to the militarization of the Internet and foreshadow[s] a bleak future: an Internet policy landscape dominated by national security concerns and great power conflict.” On his view, “the best response to the challenge [of a posited Cyber Cold War] would be a historically informed review of the nature of the Cold War, coupled with a dispassionate analysis of its similarities and differences to the current cyber situation.” Crucially, Mueller explicitly holds that such a “larger perspective on the Cold War is important to students of Internet governance.” Yet what is the *scope* of this ‘larger perspective’? Mueller goes on to present a core-centric / West-centric and Westphalian nation state-centric reading of The Cold War as the final struggle in a long war “over the nature and constitution of the 20th century nation state”. Nowhere does the ‘entanglement’ of the Cold War and the colour line, both local / national and global / transnational, feature in this account; rather, there is an overriding state-centric concern with ‘militarization’ of the Internet, ignoring the possibility that, from a critical race theoretical and decolonial perspective, the Internet was already militarized as a multistakeholder informational space geared towards maintaining – and expanding – Western *supremacy* through political, economic, cultural and other means. In short, I want to suggest that Mueller’s ‘larger narrative’ of ‘the long war’ (over nation-statism) ultimately constitutes an ‘intra-core account’ that serves to occlude the *long durée* historical war against the peripheral(ized) ‘other’.

4.2.2. Decolonizing Computing

Decolonial computing (Ali 2014, 2016) is a recent proposal that attempts to engage with the phenomenon of computing from a perspective informed by (even if not situated at) the margins or periphery of the modern world system wherein issues of ‘body politics’ and ‘geo-politics’ of knowledge are analytically foregrounded. Decolonial computing, as

world system such that the problem of the 20th century continues as the problem of the 21st century, albeit a problem arguably assuming an increasingly socio-technical – more specifically, digital, data-centric and networked – form.

a critical project, is about interrogating who is doing computing, from where are they doing it, and how (that is, in terms of which knowledge paradigms); on this basis, issues of race, and not merely ‘culture’ and ‘power’, are brought into bold relief, prompting the need for critical thinking about what freedom, inclusion, diversity and equality might mean from a world systems perspective informed by a preferential option for the peripheralized – that is, an ethical commitment to effecting compensation and/or reparations for the persistent ‘legacy effects’ of colonialism. Researchers and practitioners adopting a decolonial computing perspective are required, at a minimum, to do the following: firstly, consider their geo-political and body-political orientation when designing, building, researching, or theorizing about computing phenomena; secondly, embrace the ‘decolonial option’ as an ethic, attempting to think through what it might mean to design and build and *govern* computing and ICT systems with and *for* those situated at the peripheries of the world system, informed by the ways of thinking and knowing (epistemologies) located at such sites, with a view to undermining the asymmetry of local-global power relationships.

4.3. Related Precedents and Their Limitations

In closing this part, I turn to examine some related ‘critical’ approaches to engaging with ICT phenomena – more specifically, Internet governance – drawing attention to their perceived limitations from a decolonial perspective with a view to making the case for the adoption of a decolonial computing approach to Internet governance.

4.3.1. Postcolonial Computing/ICT

The potential utility of certain ideas drawn from postcolonial studies for disclosing the persistence of colonial epistemologies in computing has not been lost on theorists and practitioners. In this connection, ‘post-colonial computing’ (Irani et al. 2010) (Dourish and Mainwaring 2012) (Philip et al. 2012) has been proposed as an analytic lens and guide to praxis in which questions of power, authority, legitimacy, participation, and intelligibility in contexts of cultural encounter against the backdrop of contemporary globalization are centred. Notwithstanding the contribution that such a stance might make vis-à-vis interrogating Internet governance discourse, I suggest that it suffers from three drawbacks relative to a decolonial computing approach: (1) a tendency to focus on *local* manifestations of power, conceptualizing these in post-structuralist terms

which go back to Foucault, rather than engaging with *global* structuralist framings in terms of asymmetric power relations¹⁰⁵; (2) a tendency towards privileging ‘culturalist’ perspectives over and against maintaining a sharp focus on concerns of (racial) political economy; and (3) a tendency to engage with the legacy effects of colonialism from the 18th century onwards rather than date the onset of colonialism to 1492 CE and the long *durée* of the 16th century.

A somewhat different ‘postcolonial’ approach to ICT, drawing on the work of Marxist economist Samir Amin and others, has been proposed by Abu Bhuiyan (2008, 2014) who argues for engaging Internet governance issues from a critical Global South perspective along ‘postcolonial’ and ‘Third-Worldist’ lines¹⁰⁶. While useful in terms of providing for a critique of the imperialist and neo-colonial drivers underpinning capitalism in its neoliberal form, I would suggest that this approach has limited *decolonial* value on

¹⁰⁵ According to Franklin (2004), “no technology stands above and beyond those who design and control it. In that respect, ‘we’ get the Internet ‘we’ deserve. Critical social constructivist, feminist, and postcolonial approaches to ICTs in general, and the Internet/World Wide Web in particular, would focus on the class/status, race/ethnicity, and sex/gender exactitudes and nuances of online–offline (re)articulations of structural power. They would aim to examine inner and outer tensions of these everyday tactical and strategic operations, and demystify assumptions about sex/gender, race/ethnicity, and class/status in the process. They would all want to underscore how the tale of non-elite and ‘non-Western’ practices of everyday life online is just as cogent, just as vibrant, and just as crucial to debates about the present and future of ICTs in any ‘new world order.’” (p.228) While conceding that such critical approaches to ICT phenomena in general, and Internet governance more specifically, can be used to disclose the relevance of non-Western practices and formation, I would suggest that Franklin possibly overstates the case for ‘resistance’ by virtue of a post-structuralist appeal to Foucauldian analyses of power as diffuse and locally-operative, obscuring more structuralist accounts which continue to emphasize the hegemonic, if not supremacist, nature of ‘core’ power relations within the world system; for a useful critique of such post-structuralist approaches drawing on Frantz Fanon’s decolonial thought, see (Ciccariello-Maher 2006). I would suggest that, ironically, Franklin (2011) herself concedes the facticity of ‘Western’ technological hegemony (*vis-à-vis* non-Western subaltern resistant technological formations) in stating that although “initial designs and intentions can change as technologies are used, subverted or redesigned according to different principles”, nonetheless “as generational layers of programs they can also become difficult to redirect. Integrated systems and their increasing levels of complexity and long-term investment commitments thereby start to take on a quasi-autonomous quality [emphasis added].” (pp.13-14) Beyond this, there is a need to consider the problematic nature of invocations of the ‘intersectional mantra’, viz. “class, race and gender”, which Johar Schueller (2005) argues is a hallmark of white feminist thinking, and which obscures asymmetric, non-homologous differences between various structural power relations.

¹⁰⁶ For example, Abu Bhuiyan (2008) maintains that “when the information society project is seen from a postcolonial subject position, it seems like a neocolonial project with a goal to expand information capitalism across the South.” On his view, ‘postcolonial’ refers to “an epistemological position that is in opposition to colonialism”, a position he develops “by combining the elements of postcolonial theory and critical political economy.” (p.100) This stance appears closer to a decolonial orientation than the postcolonial orientation associated with ‘postcolonial computing’ insofar as it advances an oppositional rather than merely pluralizing / decentering orientation; however, Abu Bhuiyan’s commitment to interpreting the world system as capitalist rather than as colonially-racialized results in a rather historically-truncated and geographically-Eurocentric framework.

account of its Marxist orientation wherein economic issues remain determinative relative to others, while the issue of race and its 'entanglement' with political economy in the modern/colonial world system, viz. *racial political economy*, remains somewhat obscured. In appealing to anti-imperialist currents and precedents within world systems theory and dependency theory in order to frame the world system in neo-liberal / capitalist terms, I aver that Abu Bhuiyan's approach suffers from a theoretical shortcoming in that it does not take into consideration Quijano's extension of world systems theory incorporating the foundational and constitutive role of racial colonialism in the formation of the modern world system (Quijano and Wallerstein 1992a)¹⁰⁷. On this basis, I would suggest that any attempt at thinking about Internet governance in (of, by, for) the Global South along anti-imperialist lines is problematic since it misconstrues the nature of 'the world' (system) and the place / position of Internet governance, as a sub-systemic phenomenon, within it vis-à-vis the centrality of the systemic, structuring logics of race / racism / racialization¹⁰⁸. In addition, his position evinces a rather

¹⁰⁷ According to Grosfoguel (2011), "the old Marxist paradigm of infrastructure and superstructure [needs to be] replaced by a historical-heterogeneous structure ... or a 'heterarchy'... that is, an entangled articulation of multiple hierarchies, in which subjectivity and the social imaginary is not derivative but constitutive of the structures of the world-system ... In this conceptualization, *race and racism are not superstructural or instrumental to an overarching logic of capitalist accumulation; they are constitutive of capitalist accumulation at a world-scale*. The 'colonial power matrix' is an organizing principle involving exploitation and domination exercised in multiple dimensions of social life, from economic, sexual, or gender relations, to political organizations, structures of knowledge, state institutions, and households [emphasis added]." (p.11) On this basis, he maintains that referring to "the present world-system [as] 'capitalist' is, to say the least, misleading. Given the hegemonic Eurocentric 'common sense,' the moment we use the word 'capitalism,' people immediately think that we are talking about the 'economy'. However, 'capitalism' is only one of the multiple entangled constellations of colonial power matrix of what I called, at the risk of sounding ridiculous, 'Capitalist/Patriarchal Western-centric/Christian-centric Modern/Colonial World-System.' Capitalism is an important constellation of power, but not the sole one. Given its entanglement with other power relations, destroying the capitalist aspects of the world-system would not be enough to destroy the present world-system. To transform this world-system it is crucial to destroy the historical, structural, heterogeneous totality called the 'colonial power matrix' of the 'world-system' with its multiple forms of power hierarchies." (p.12)

¹⁰⁸ In this connection, and in the context of a critique of the view that rising wealth in the non-Western semi-peripheries of the modern/colonial world system appears to provide empirical evidence contradicting arguments for the continued centrality of race as organizing principle, Boatcă (2017) maintains that the reality of "semiperipheries more generally (Western and non-Western) in lending stability to the system by replicating, mirroring and disseminating racialized mechanisms of endless accumulation of capital at different levels in the structural hierarchy ... does not amount to the nonwestern semiperipheries' ability to overturn *the racializing logic on which endless accumulation has been premised since the emergence of the modern/colonial world-system*, and should not be mistaken for it [emphasis added]" (p.2); going further she states that "even if not all racists are white, racism in the world-system is premised on colonially enforced whiteness. In this context, whiteness is just as much a geopolitical category as it is a racial designation." (pp.7-8)

uncritical embrace of Westphalian state-centrism in relation to the matter of Internet governance¹⁰⁹, resulting in the occlusion of non-statist political formations that transversally inform and inflect the issue, not to mention a certain ‘developmentalism’ at work in his line of argument¹¹⁰. Yet notwithstanding such criticisms, I would suggest that from a decolonial perspective, Abu Bhuiyan is surely correct in arguing that “with the end of the modernization project, the US¹¹¹ needed a new project to carry out its hegemony” and that “information society seems to be the new project.” (p.104)¹¹²

4.3.2. Electronic Colonialism Theory (ECT)

Abu Bhuiyan (2014) asks: “Which theory of international communication helps us understand the role of the global south in Internet policymaking? Theoretical approaches employed to explain interstate relationships regarding communication resources include cultural imperialism, the globalization paradigm, and regime theory. Of these theoretical perspectives, cultural imperialism was the earliest, while the other two are recent additions to communication studies.” (p.8) According to McPhail (2014), however,

¹⁰⁹ For example, Abu Bhuiyan (2014) maintains that “global Internet politics is primarily a conflict between states—the United States of America and the states of the global south—since the US controls Internet policymaking. The states of the global south have been oppositional and acquiescent at the same time toward US-sponsored Internet policies. They do not oppose the neoliberal policies promoted by the US, but ask for an international framework to govern the Internet so that they can work as equal partners to the US in setting norms for the global Internet.” (p.8) Insisting on “the need to resort to state theory” (p.15), he maintains that “states are in the driving seat of Internet policymaking at both national and supranational level. The US and the global south are two key actors here.” (p.16) Yet *is* state-centrism the *appropriate* frame in which to think about the Global South?

¹¹⁰ Consider, in this connection the following statement: “Since northern societies have moved along the path of the information society, southern societies cannot afford not to follow because the world is now more interconnected than before. Southern societies are now in many ways more dependent on the North than before.” (p.113) I would suggest that Abu Bhuiyan here fails to engage – and *contest* – the ontological ‘horizon’ of development *per se* insofar as his argument operates *within* this horizon, seeking an-‘other’ development rather than, for example, a *post-development* paradigm.

¹¹¹ Crucially, in relation to the line of argument presented herein, Abu Buiyan (2014) maintains that “politically, there is little difference between the *values* of the US and the EU, although they sometimes differ from each other on global political and economic issues.” (p.5) Similar to Barbrook (2007), Abu Bhuiyan (2008) refers to the information society as “the new imperialist ideology” (p.112).

¹¹² Grosfoguel (2011) maintains that “during the last 510 years of the ‘Capitalist / Patriarchal / Westerncentric / Christian-centric Modern / Colonial World-System’ we went from the 16th Century ‘christianize or I shoot you,’ to the 19th Century ‘civilize or I shoot you,’ to 20th Century ‘develop or I shoot you,’ to the late 20th Century ‘neoliberalize or I shoot you,’ and to the early 21st century ‘democratize or I shoot you.’” (p.37) Drawing on Abu Buiyan’s analysis, it might be argued that Grosfoguel’s position needs to be augmented with ‘informationalize or I shoot you’, such ‘informating’ assuming various forms including, arguably, proposals to engage with the Internet of Things (IoT), a development which, I suggest, should be understood as a form of settler colonialism via embedded technological proxy – a case of ‘bits in the ground’ as contrasted with the boots on the ground approach of historical colonialism.

“earlier attempts at theorizing have failed to develop models or research agendas that match the reality of the contemporary role of global communication. Theories of modernization, dependency, and cultural imperialism have failed to satisfactorily explain global communication. The old theories only explain part of the global picture.” (p.289) In place of such theories, he proposes Electronic Colonialism Theory (ECT) which should be applied in combination with world systems analysis¹¹³. Originating in the 1980s, *electronic colonialism*¹¹⁴ is concerned with “the dependent relationship of poorer regions on the post-industrial nations which is caused and established by the importation of communication hardware and foreign-produced software, along with engineers, technicians, and related information protocols. These establish a set of foreign norms, values, and expectations that, to varying degrees, alter domestic cultures, languages, habits, values, and the socialization process itself.”(p.13)¹¹⁵ According to the originator of the theory, world system theory (WST) makes it possible “to decipher some of the structural cleavages in the international communication field. It approaches the nations of the world through an *economic lens*” whereas ECT “basically views the world through a *cultural lens*. These two theories, WST and ECT, help unify the various stakeholders as well as identify their collective impact on globalization.” (pp.vii-viii) Insofar as a synthesis of WST and ECT engages with economics and culture, but does not embrace the ‘decolonial turn’ vis-à-vis engaging with the persistent legacy system effects of racialized colonialism and adopting a preferential option for the periphery, I

¹¹³ McPhail (2014) claims that “combining the two theories provides the most powerful explanation of the contemporary phenomenon of global communication that is available to students, policy analysts, corporate planners, and researchers alike.” (p.294)

¹¹⁴ According to McPhail (2014), “over the course of history, there have been only a few major successful trends in empire-building”, viz. (1) military colonialism of the Greco-Roman period, (2) militant Christian colonialism during the Crusades, and (3) mercantile colonialism commencing in the 17th century CE up to the mid-20th century after which time it was superseded by electronic colonialism (pp.11-12). Interestingly, he maintains that “the second phase, the brutal Christian Crusades against Muslims and other religions, has reappeared” (p.303), thereby pointing to the ‘entanglement’ of race and religion in the modern/colonial world system briefly discussed earlier in the present work.

¹¹⁵ McPhail (2014) maintains that “whereas mercantile colonialism sought to control cheap labour and the hands of labourers, electronic colonialism seeks to influence and *control the mind*. It is aimed at *influencing attitudes, desires, beliefs, lifestyles, and consumer behaviour*. As the citizens of peripheral nations are increasingly viewed through the prism of consumerism, influencing and *controlling* their *values, habits, and purchasing patterns* becomes increasingly important to multinational firms [emphasis added].” (p.13) I would suggest that this way of thinking only deals with ‘one direction’ of the electronic – or rather, *digital* – colonial project insofar as it fails to engage with more contemporary ‘extractive’ forms of digital colonialism associated with Big Data mining and ‘surveillance capitalism’ (Zuboff 2015), as well as that which arguably takes place as ‘settler colonialism by technological proxy’ via the Internet of Things (IoT).

would suggest that this approach suffers from drawbacks similar to those evinced by the postcolonial approaches discussed previously.

Part II

5. Decolonizing Internet Governance

In contrast to the aforementioned approaches, recent ‘critical’ engagements with Internet governance and policy have tended to be framed in terms of Foucauldian governmentality (Antonova 2014), Bourdieu’s field theoretic conception of capital (social, economic and cultural) and/or Latourian actor-network theory (Pohle et al. 2016), the latter being a preferred framing within STS (Musiani 2015). Complementing such studies, in what follows, I shall attempt a preliminary decolonial computing critique of what has been described as the ‘core’ issue associated with Internet governance, viz. “the problem of alignment” (Mueller 2017, p.71). My critique is informed by a consideration of the body-politics and geo-politics of knowing (epistemology) and being (ontology) of dominant, if not hegemonic, discursive stakeholders articulating the ‘nature’ (what-ness, how-ness) of Internet governance alignment. In addition, it should be understood to be informed by an ethical commitment to embracing the ‘decolonial option’, viz. preferential orientation towards those sited at the margins or borders of the modern/colonial world system – the so-called ‘developing’, ‘Third’ or ‘Fourth’ (*sic*) world that is the ‘Global South’ – motivated by a concern to effect compensatory (reparational, corrective¹¹⁶) justice given coloniality, viz. the systemic regulatory structural logics informing the historical colonial project that are its persistent ‘legacy system’ effects in the contemporary era.

Granted that the Internet should be viewed sociotechnically as a network of networks (Daigle 2015) and that its structure and governance are indeed *contingent* phenomena (Clark 2016), it is crucial to appreciate that neither currently nor *originally* were these infrastructural phenomena decentralised in nature (Mathew 2016)¹¹⁷. Building on this

¹¹⁶ For an exploratory account, sketching out the contours of what is meant by ‘corrective’, as contrasted with ‘distributive’, justice, see (Mills 2017).

¹¹⁷ Contrary to the claims advanced by left-leaning proponents of the Internet such as Benkler (2016) as well as those of a more liberal persuasion such as Naughton (1999).

line of analysis, I aver that the *what* of the Internet cannot be separated from its *how* and that the latter needs to be understood in terms of settlement or ‘sedimentation’ of power manifested both through infrastructure (protocols, standards, commitments to openness, interoperability, end-to-end connectivity etc.), but also through dominant worldview or ideology, the focus of the present study. Thinking about *how* to decolonize Internet governance necessitates considering the dating / history of this phenomenon in relation to its location / geography. From a decolonial computing perspective, I maintain that dating the onset of Internet governance to the last 25 years in relation to an emerging governance of/by the Internet of Things (IoT) (Howard 2015), or dating its ‘prehistory’ to “the period from the mid-1960s to the mid-1990s before the Internet became the mass phenomenon it is today” (Ziewitz and Brown 2013), is problematic on account of a certain Eurocentric/West-centric occlusion of the causally-overdetermined and racially-inflected facilitating backdrop to the emergence of the Internet and its governance structure(s) as described in Part I. In short, whether 25 years or almost 60 years, I suggest that such mainstream ‘core-centric’ accounts present far too truncated a historical – *and* geographical – frame within which to understand the (racial) political-economy of Internet governance vis-à-vis the Internet and its governance as phenomena embedded within the ‘horizon’ of the modern/colonial world.

In what follows, I present a ‘close’ decolonial and critical race theoretical reading of some standard works on Internet governance, viz. those of Mueller (2010, 2017) and DeNardis (2014) with a view to disclosing – perhaps even ‘unmasking’ – the operation of colonial logics informing their discourse¹¹⁸. These works have been ‘targeted’ for critique on account of their authoritativeness and ostensible representativeness vis-à-vis ‘mainstream’ – that is, hegemonically-liberal – thinking about Internet governance in relation to the matter of political alignment¹¹⁹. However, before presenting my critique, it

¹¹⁸ In this connection, I want to argue for the need to relate concerns about *governance* (rules, regulations, standards, institutions etc.) to *governmentality* – that is the logic of power – albeit not necessarily in Foucauldian localizing terms.

¹¹⁹ Commenting on an earlier draft of this essay, an anonymous reviewer asked how Internet governance is a *colonial* construct, and how exactly *colonialism* is present in concepts such as net neutrality, openness, interoperability, etc.? I should like to argue that Internet governance is a *colonial* construct insofar as both the Internet and its governance emerge in the context of a world system whose knowledge structures continue to bear the imprint of a politics tacitly if not explicitly inflected with coloniality. If Mueller (2017) is correct in identifying the ‘core’ issue of Internet governance with (political) alignment, and insofar as the world system continues to be marked by coloniality and/or white supremacy as a political system (Mills 1997), then Internet governance’s *de facto*, if not *de jure*, alignment is both racialized and colonial. In short, I want to suggest that if/when alignment is taken into consideration, and when alignment is understood in

is necessary to set the scene by presenting some illustrative examples of mainstream Internet governance discourse.

6. The What and/or Where of Internet Governance

According to DeNardis (2014), “the primary task of Internet governance involves the design and administration of the technologies necessary to keep the Internet operational and the enactment of substantive policy around these technologies. This technical architecture includes layer upon layer of systems including Internet technical standards; critical Internet resources such as the binary addresses necessary to access the Internet; the DNS; systems of information intermediation such as search engines and financial transaction networks; and network-level systems such as Internet access, Internet exchange points, and Internet security intermediaries.” (pp.6-7) Crucially she maintains that “Internet governance scholarship has historically focused close attention on two areas: national regulatory frameworks and the governance role of ICANN and associated institutions that manage critical Internet resources” (p.22), and that it is enacted via various routes including technical design decisions, private corporate policies, global institutions, national laws and policies, and international treaties (p.23)¹²⁰.

According to van Eeten and Mueller (2012), “participants in the Internet governance field take a distinctively global governance perspective on the topic. They look at the Internet holistically as a globally interoperable system and think of governance as something characteristic of it *as a system ...*” One consequence of this focus on the Internet as systemic is that

long durée world systemic terms, the colonial nature of Internet governance readily becomes apparent. Regarding ostensibly ‘technical’ matters such as net neutrality, openness, interoperability, etc., I suggest that insofar as these technical issues are actually *sociotechnical*, interrogation of their *social* dimension necessitates interrogation of the social ‘background’ against which they operate. I would go further to suggest that viewing such matters as (purely) technical in nature results in obfuscation of the ‘core’ issue of alignment, regardless of whether such a move is intentionally motivated or otherwise, and a focus on the politics of technical infrastructure and commitments to certain long-standing principles which appear neutral yet are readily exposed as colonial when understood as ‘entangled’ with the issue of alignment. In this connection, DeNardis’ (2014, 2015, 2016) ostensible ‘bracketing’ of alignment as a ‘secondary’ matter pertaining to *use* relative to ‘primary’ technical concerns is particularly problematic.

¹²⁰ In a later work, DeNardis (2015) asserts that “much attention to Internet governance focuses on the global institutions of Internet governance (e.g. ICANN), content regulations, the public interest implications of technical design, or, increasingly, the role of technology corporations in establishing public policy.” (p.8) Crucially, her concerns centre on the stability, interoperability, security and resilience of the Internet, as well as fostering ‘globally inclusive’ discussions on the future of Internet governance (DeNardis 2016).

Scholars who are habituated to thinking of governance and regulation as something that occurs at the national level may have trouble coping with the new global institutions, and vice versa. This disjunction is reinforced by the tendency to think of governance as being produced by, or taking place in, formal organizations with explicitly institutionalized rules and procedures ... Thus, venues such as the ICANN, the Regional Internet Address Registries, the WSIS or the IGF become valorized as the key sites of Internet governance. The aggregate effect of decentralized decisions and adjustments made by ISPs, other organizations that operate networks and various jurisdictions, are not classified as part of the same process – even though the latter often have much more profound effects on the evolution and use of the Internet than the ICANN or IGF.” (p.727)

For this reason van Eeten and Mueller are led to maintain that “the WSIS and IGF provide very little, if any, actual governance ... most of the stakeholders with actual control over Internet resources are not participating in the IGF. The ICANN and the Regional Internet Registries (RIRs) are the main actors for which a plausible claim can be made that they shape the evolution and use of the Internet, but the governance of Internet identifiers has only a limited impact on such matters as content regulation, security, intellectual property and e-commerce.” (p.728) In this connection, van Eeten and Mueller maintain that “the field assumes Internet governance to take place at these institutions and then asks questions about the institutions themselves, rather than conceptualizing Internet governance and studying where and how it is actually taking place” (p.729); further that “in most areas, governance of the Internet takes place under ... low formalization, heterogeneous organizational forms and technological architectures, large numbers of actors and massively distributed authority and decision-making power.” (p.730) Crucially, on their view, such conditions “usually point to market and network governance.” (p.731)¹²¹ Perhaps most significantly, they argue that “use of the label ‘Internet governance’ needs to be re-thought and changed. The field would benefit greatly from expanding to include innovative areas such as the economics of cybersecurity, network neutrality, content filtering and regulation, copyright policing

¹²¹ In this connection, they maintain that “prices and markets, traditional hierarchical firms, hierarchical state power, interpersonal and inter-organizational networks and new, scaled-up forms of peer production are all present in Internet governance.” (p.732)

and file sharing, and interconnection arrangements among ISPs.” On their view, “we need a new conceptualization of governance that ... would accommodate the diversity of governance on the Internet, from centralized, formal global institutions such as the ICANN all the way to the emergent order that arises from the interactions among thousands of ISPs and their users.” (p.730)

7. The ‘Core’ Problem of Internet Governance: A Decolonial Interrogation

Notwithstanding the brief account of the nature and location of Internet governance vis-à-vis identification of issues, stakeholders, institutions etc. as presented above, in what follows attention is focused on “the problem of alignment” which Mueller (2017) insists is “the *core* Internet governance question of our time” and “the arena for a world-historic struggle between established institutions of communications governance and the new societal capacity created by globally networked digital devices [emphasis added].” (p.71)¹²² In this connection, I want to suggest that a logic of racialized coloniality is deeply embedded in this ‘core’ and subject ‘the problem of alignment’ to decolonial interrogation along three lines with a view to exposing (1) how certain phenomena are deferred and/or ‘bracketed’ from consideration through discursive framing and identification of actors in mainstream Internet discourse¹²³; (2) the operation of shared, albeit tacit¹²⁴, ideological dispositions informing the worldview of those producing such

¹²² It is interesting to note here the difference between Mueller’s ‘core’ of Internet governance and DeNardis’ (2014) reference to its ‘heart’ which she identifies with the following issues: “freedom of expression online, Internet infrastructure security and stability, the policy role of Internet companies, the efficacy of Internet protocols, globally coordinated Internet control systems such as the DNS, and the relationship between intellectual property rights enforcement and Internet architecture.” (p.6)

¹²³ According to Mueller (2017), “to question alignment is to question key aspects of the geopolitical order that has been in place since the nineteenth century at least, and fully realized after World War II.” (p.73) However, I suggest the need to think about the modern/colonial world system as operative at a *deeper* level than the Westphalian inter-state system. In the present work, I focus on Mueller’s core issue of ‘alignment’, yet suggest that the way it is framed, viz. in terms of an opposition between statist and trans-statist network governance formations, is flawed, if not obfuscatory, from a decolonial perspective insofar as it obscures consideration of the world systemic backdrop to the Internet governance debate.

¹²⁴ Throughout this work, my use of ‘tacit’ should be understood in the sense of implied, inferred, unspoken etc., and as ‘entangled’ with phenomena of silencing (erasure, occlusion etc.) However, it must be emphasised that such ‘silencing’ should not be understood as necessarily intentional in the sense of conscious or wilful; rather, as social-psychologically *dispositional* and the result of embedded processes of historical enculturation. On the operation of the latter, see Brubaker et. al (2004), Sullivan and Tuana (2007) and Fricker (2007) among other works.

discourse; and (3) the need to interrogate the possibility of ‘rhetorical overplay’ in the invocation of ‘network effects’¹²⁵.

Common to different mainstream accounts of Internet governance is the identification of essentially three types of actor and/or stakeholder, viz. states / governments, markets / corporations, and civil society participants (including NGOs), in both technical (setting of standards, maintenance of infrastructure etc.) and policy-making capacities. What tends to be obscured, intentionally or otherwise, in some of these accounts is a sense of the *close coupling* of hegemonic Western – more specifically, US – actors, both governmental and corporate, at a crucial stage in the ‘developmental trajectory’ of the Internet, viz. its transition from a communications technology built by the engineering and academic community against the backdrop of the Cold War, to a facilitator of commerce. Viewed in this light, Mueller’s (2017) insistence on separating out issues of *alignment* (as political) from *fragmentation* (as technical) should be seen as problematic insofar as it indicates commitment to a liberal worldview vis-à-vis political economy, moreover one in which the liberal political-economic orientation of the Internet as a sociotechnical phenomenon is somewhat obscured (whether intentionally or otherwise). Contra Mueller, I want to suggest that hegemonic (US) motives behind the advocacy of non-state Internet governance were *not* historically rooted in concerns about co-option of the technology in pursuit of nation-statist political ends, but rather in concerns about how to most efficiently transition developmentalism to its next stage, viz. core-centric ‘network capitalism’ – or rather, network *colonialism*¹²⁶.

¹²⁵ This line of critique is directed principally at Mueller (2017). For an account of how rhetoric can be intentional (in the sense of bearing traces of historically-sedimented prior intent) yet neither conscious nor wilful, see (Farrell 1995).

¹²⁶ In this connection, Singh (2009) and Carr (2015) present useful accounts of the Clinton-Gore administration’s support for transitioning the Internet (and web) into a commercial platform operative along globalized, neoliberal lines. According to Singh, Clinton and Gore both “believed that the US government should avoid regulating cyberspace activities, and urged the *private sector to lead the way in transforming the digital world* ... In Europe, other states were similarly inclined ... Governments *entrusted* nonstate actors to set rules, fearing that the rigidity of their own institutions would *slow or obstruct the development of information technology* ... The private sector, with its free enterprise and competitiveness, was considered better suited to take the Internet to the next stage [emphasis added].” (p.212) Carr (2015) draws particular attention to this development in order to make the point that there is a *particular* political-economic logic at work here, viz. US-hegemony through US-dominated neoliberalism; however, I suggest thinking about this ‘baton-passing’ from state to non-state commercial actors in terms of the *militarized* logics of colonialism, viz. colonizing states opening up colonized territories for commercial exploitation. Singh, by contrast, is much more restrained in his analysis: “What led the US government to diffuse this technology throughout the world, which had its origins in the country’s security apparatus? The clues to this can be found in the demands for networking and, especially since the Clinton administration,

7.1. Discursive Frame

Adopting a discourse theoretical position, Sayyid (2013) maintains that “given the discursive character of social life it follows that social actors do not pre-exist any discursive articulation but rather are products of it.” (p.280) From a decolonial perspective, I suggest that this points to the need to disclose the tacit discursive ‘background’ operative within mainstream Internet governance discourse with a view to revealing ‘silences’ (and erasures), irrespective of whether intentional (conscious, wilful etc.) or otherwise, and the impact of such phenomena on the formation of actor / stakeholder identities and their concerns.

7.1.1. Governance and (Post-)Statism

Adopting a state-centric point of departure, DeNardis (2014) maintains that *governance* “is traditionally understood as the efforts of sovereign nation states to regulate activities within or through national boundaries” (p.11), and that it involves “the exercise of power to enact a certain set of public interest goals” (p.23). Yet in the context of Internet governance, she maintains that *privatized* forms of governance “directly delegated from government authorities to corporations” have emerged, and that “private corporations enact policy not only in carrying out their core functions but also as actors responding to events on a larger political stage.” (p.12)¹²⁷ It is important to note here the tacit invocation

in electronic commerce ... but *it's too early to tell if state control and electronic commerce are co-joined ... Electronic commerce and state control are moving in tandem for now but not because commerce is following flag or because the flag clearly understands its interest in electronic commerce terms* [emphasis added].” (p.220) Crucially, Carr (2015) maintains that “it was within this ... context of the government taking initiative and ‘leading the private sector to water’, that Internet governance arrangements began to develop” (p.646) and that “synergy between the dominant US private sector and the US government serve to aggregate rather than balance or counter power in the multistakeholder process” (p.656); further, that “the [private] sector derives legitimacy in the context of Internet governance from ... its discursive alignment with civil society interests.” (p.655) On the matter of state-market or government-corporation alignment, Howard (2015) maintains that Western governments and corporations have shown an increasing tendency to ‘co-join’ in pursuit of ‘shared interests’. Yet what are these interests? Howard points to national security concerns and the threats of cybercrime and cyberwar among other issues; however, if the unit of analysis is shifted along decolonial lines, it might be argued that underpinning such ‘shared interests’ lies a possibly tacit commitment to maintaining, expanding and refining the operative racialized logics of colonial modernity. In this connection, consider Carr’s (2015) assertion that “Internet governance does have some distinctive features but it is a subset of challenges defined by shifts in ‘the character of global problems, the nature of actors, and the perceived limitations of international measures to govern the planet’.” (p.644)

¹²⁷ Crucially, DeNardis (2014) maintains that a “confluence of issues – governmental privatization of some state functions, the increasing influence of industry on esoteric areas of regulation, and the ways multinational corporations have a de facto global policy making function – has called attention to corporations as forces of public policy interventions. Recognition of the governance effects of private

of a Westphalian state-centric¹²⁸ conception of governance wherein the background operation of modern/colonial world systemic *governmentality* remains undisclosed with respect to ‘public interest goals’ and the ‘larger political stage’.

According to Muller (2010), governance refers to “the coordination and regulation of interdependent actors in the absence of an overarching political authority” (p.8), while “global governance suggests that some steering and shaping function exists, but is less hierarchical and authoritative. Thus, Internet governance is the simplest, most direct, and inclusive label for the ongoing set of disputes and deliberations over how the Internet is coordinated, managed, and shaped to reflect policies.” (pp.8-9) Explicitly aiming to steer a course between cyber-libertarianism and state-centric political realism in thinking about Internet governance, Mueller (2010) argues that “the Internet puts pressure on the nation-state in five distinct ways. First, it globalizes the scope of communication ... Second, it facilitates a quantum jump in the scale of communication ... Third, it distributes control ... Fourth, it grew new institutions ... Finally, it changes the polity.” (pp.4-5)¹²⁹ In relation to the last of these points, he goes on to argue that “by converging different media forms and facilitating fully interactive communication, the Internet dramatically alters the cost and capabilities of group action. As a result, radically new forms of collaboration, discourse, and organization are emerging. This makes it possible to mobilize *new transnational policy networks* and enables *new forms of*

ordering has led some individual corporations and industry coalitions to develop voluntary and self-regulatory business practices that adhere to certain ethical standards and social values.” (p.14) What is somewhat obscured here, unintentionally or otherwise, is the tacit *ideological* commitment to a liberal if not neoliberal worldview informing such ethical standards and social values – moreover, a liberalism that is de-raced / race-less and whose Eurocentric/West-centric orientation remains occluded.

¹²⁸ In this connection, DeNardis (2014) holds that “diffusion and privatization of governance, and private reactions to governance delegation, does not in any way suggest the demise of territorial states in regulating the Internet. Indeed, state control of Internet governance functions via private intermediaries has equipped states with new forms of sometimes unaccountable and non-transparent power over information flows.” (p.15)

¹²⁹ Mueller (2017) criticizes state-centric approaches to alignment on the grounds that “it is not about defending territorial exclusivity, it is about eliminating barriers within a globalized virtual space.” (p.87) On his view, the Internet “lowered the entry barriers to global power projection in the cyber domain. It created a public infrastructure that gives almost any well-organized actor the potential for transnational operations in cyberspace.” (p.87) However, I want to suggest that this view is problematic insofar as Mueller does not consider that it is ‘standard operating procedure’ within colonialism to project developments originating locally / nationally onto the global stage; in addition, no attempt is made to engage with *economic colonialism* – or what McPhail (2015) refers to as ‘electronic colonialism’ – nor with the radical asymmetry in power between different actors. While Internet connectivity and access might facilitate ‘upwards mobility’ in *absolute* terms – and even this claim is contentious given recent reports of an expanding digital divide (Huawei 2017) – it is important to consider the possibility that such changes do nothing to narrow *relative* divides between historically dominant and subaltern actors and may, in fact, *exacerbate* such differentials.

governance as a solution to some of the problems of Internet governance itself [emphases added].” (p.6) On his view, “it is possible to conceive of a different kind of political space more suited to the politics of Internet governance. One’s position in this space is defined by *where one locates oneself* in a space defined by two axes. The first pertains to the status of the territorial nation-state in communications governance. The second identifies the level of hierarchy one is willing to countenance in the solution of Internet governance problems [emphasis added].” (p.255)¹³⁰ What is absent from such post-statist framing is any recognition of, let alone engagement with, the pre-statist reality of world systemic colonial modernity as a long *durée transversal* racial factor informing and inflecting the policy of Western governments, corporations, NGOs and other emerging actors. While appreciating what is *new*, from a decolonial perspective, there is a need to consider what is *old* in the sense of persistent (re-iterated, reproduced) background structuring logics¹³¹.

¹³⁰ Consistent with his liberal / individualist worldview, Mueller refers to “where one locates oneself”, thereby pointing to a certain decision power associated with identity-formation. Yet what about body-political marking and geo-political location as *given* in relation to the *a priori* structures of coloniality informing the modern world system? In this connection, I would suggest that Mueller’s bi-axial framework is revealing insofar as global, transnational networking is framed as “denationalised liberalism” (p.256).

¹³¹ Regarding the issue of network versus hierarchy (Mueller’s second axis), I want to suggest that this binary occludes the emergence of hubs resulting from the ‘entanglement’ of prior extant networks based on asymmetric power relations and network effects operative in emerging networks, the latter of which Mueller (2017) refers to repeatedly. In short, while hierarchies are, by definition, not ‘flat’, it should not be assumed that networks are either. Mueller (2010) has argued that a “key factor affecting one’s position in political debates is one’s stance toward the competing values of liberty and equality. Because the freedom to exchange information and to associate with other network participants corresponds closely to [denationalised liberalism], and because all forms of egalitarianism require a hierarchical power to level differences and redistribute wealth, the liberty equality trade-off is to a large degree captured by the network-hierarchy axis.” (p.259) Crucially, Mueller (2010) maintains that denationalised network “liberalism is not interested ... in using global governance institutions to redistribute wealth. That would require an overarching hierarchical power that would be almost impossible to control democratically; its mere existence would trigger organized political competition for its levers, which would, in the current historical context, devolve into competition among pre-existing political and ethnic collectivities.” (p.270) In response to this, I suggest that insofar as networks are not flat, Mueller’s argument falls flat (*sic*), viz. it is incorrect to map the liberty-equality trade-off onto network-hierarchy structure. On the contrary, I maintain that egalitarianism is only *contingently*-dependent on hierarchy and might be effected by other means including those that are network-based. In addition, I should like to draw attention to Mueller’s rhetorical characterization of networks as ‘peaceful’ and formed on the basis of ‘free association’ (p.257), and his ideal ‘denationalised liberalism’ as involving “unilateral action in anarchic fields,” or the “peer production of governance.” Contrary to Mueller, I should like to argue that networks are far from being free associations: given network effects and power laws in the context of extant asymmetric power relations, networks *can* be – and under colonial modernity in fact *are* – coercive, but in a possibly more subtle way than hierarchies; on this point see Lake and Wong (2007).

7.1.2. Stability

According to DeNardis (2014), “Internet governance conflicts are the new spaces where political and economic power is unfolding in the twenty-first century” (p.1), and she points to “the rising privatization of global power and the embedded politics of technical architecture” maintaining that “questions of governance at these control points are questions of technical and economic efficiency but also expressions of mediation over societal values such as security, individual liberty, innovation policy, and intellectual property rights.” (p.2)¹³² Once again, what is somewhat obscured here, intentionally or otherwise, is tacit appeal to a *liberal* framework of values wherein individualist concerns are considered paramount while issues of social justice and egalitarian redistribution are either marginalised or completely absent¹³³. In defense of this rather ‘oppositional’ critical race theoretical and decolonial reading of her position, consider DeNardis’ assertion that “the preservation of the Internet’s *stability* and *security* parallels other *global* collective action problems that have cumulative effects on all nations [emphasis added]” (p.16), which, I aver, points to a West-centric liberal prioritization of stability (or order) relative to justice (or compensation)¹³⁴.

¹³² DeNardis (2014) rightly argues that “arrangements of technical architecture [are] arrangements of power” insofar as they “embed design decisions that shape social and economic structures ranging from individual civil liberties to global innovation policy” (p.7), yet “the sometimes esoteric nature of these technical governance mechanisms that keep the Internet operational belies the substantive public policy decisions embedded in these mechanisms.” (p.9)

¹³³ Against this claim, it might be argued that DeNardis (2014) *explicitly* states that “it is tempting to romanticize Internet architecture and governance as innately embodying democratic values of *equality*, participatory openness, and multistakeholder oversight but there are several problems with this narrative [emphasis added].” (p.15) However, I would suggest that the invocation of *equality* itself points to a liberal worldview insofar as an *egalitarian* commitment to reparations / compensation for the legacy system effects of colonialism remains unarticulated, the tacit assumption perhaps being that *illiberal* governments (among ‘the Rest’) are responsible for a lack of parity between Internet governance stakeholders under a multistakeholder arrangement. In support of this reading, consider that DeNardis goes on to state that “*in a significant portion of the world*, Internet governance control structures do not embody democratic values but involve systems of repression, media censorship, and totalitarian surveillance of citizens [emphasis added].” (p.15) Yet DeNardis goes on to concede that “in parts of the world that do privilege freedom of expression online, there are nevertheless all-pervasive systems of data collection, retention, and sharing that serve as the underlying business models enabling free email, search, social media, news, and other forms of complementary information intermediation. This digital shadow of trading privacy for free private goods serves as an agonistic check on notions of democratic online governance.” (pp.15-16) DeNardis here refers to a ‘digital shadow’, but does not engage with the ‘dark underside’ of late capitalist modernity founded upon and reproductive of colonial logics. In short, what of the ostensible necessity of an *antagonistic* / ‘oppositional’ check arguably required by a commitment to reparations based on an understanding of the legacy system effects of racialized contractual global governance under colonial modernity?

¹³⁴ According to DeNardis (2014), “the local value of stable and secure global Internet governance is inestimable in contemporary societies dependent on networked technologies to handle basic business

7.1.3. Openness and Freedom

Similar to the way Mueller (2010, 2017) frames the issue of Internet governance in state-centric terms, DeNardis (2015) maintains that “beyond the intrinsic public interest implications embedded in keeping systems of Internet infrastructure operational, another feature of Internet governance involves the phenomenon of governments attempting to use the very infrastructure of the Internet for geopolitical objectives having nothing to do with Internet operations.” (p.2) On her view, “exertion of state power by seeking modifications to Internet architecture must be accompanied by concern for the implications of these technical alterations for Internet stability and security and the characteristics necessary to preserve or promote a free and open Internet.” (p.9) DeNardis (2014, 2015, 2016) makes repeated appeal to the importance of Internet ‘stability’, ‘freedom’ and ‘openness’, yet her rhetoric, informed by a commitment to STS-based analysis, avoids any serious engagement with the West-centric nature of Internet governance vis-à-vis the tacit embedded geopolitics of Internet operations including both earlier technical and later civic and commercial operations which occur against the backdrop of a hegemonic and West-centric neoliberalism¹³⁵. In short, no attempt is made to interrogate the colonial, let alone racialized, nature of the ‘free’ and ‘open’ sociotechnical space that is the Internet (web and social media).

7.1.4. Universality

DeNardis (2016) maintains that “the *economic and social promise* of bringing the next billion people online usually assumes the ongoing growth and availability of a universal Internet. But the Internet of the future has many possible trajectories. One twenty-first-century Internet policy debate concerns whether cyberspace will continue to expand into a universal network or fragment into disjointed segments based on geographical borders or proprietary ecosystems. *Tensions between network universality*

transactions, the movement of currency, and the exchange of financial securities ... No less than economic security, modern social life, culture, political discourse, and national security are at stake in keeping the Internet globally operational and secure.” (p.17) From a decolonial perspective, I would suggest that what is somewhat obscured here is the role of Internet *stability* in maintaining global West-centric hegemony at the expense of global justice. For a useful discussion of the tension between prioritizing ‘order’ over justice in the context of the legacy system effects of racialized coloniality, see Pasha (2017b).

¹³⁵ As she states, her concern is with developing a proposal for “the technological characteristics and policy frameworks necessary for affording the Internet with a sustained capacity for *ongoing global growth and openness* [emphasis added].” (DeNardis 2016, p.1).

and enclosure reflect conflicts among public-interest values in cyberspace, such as national security versus individual rights, and freedom of expression versus privacy [emphasis added].” (p.1) Commenting on proposals to locate data within nation-state boundaries, DeNardis (2015) argues that “‘holding’ data in a fixed location is incompatible with engineering principles like reducing latency, load balancing, and basic traffic engineering. It is also incommensurable with *business models predicated upon global customer bases and workforces*. As civil society advocates have expressed, it moves the Internet from a de facto *universal* network to a world with country-specific ‘Internets’ that don’t connect with each other to form today’s global network [emphases added].” (p.5)¹³⁶ While conceding that “a world with access divides, language barriers, and economic disparities hardly constitutes a universal Internet” (p.8), it is crucial to appreciate (1) that the ‘digital divide’ is here being framed in somewhat reductive terms of *access* (rather than *use*, not to mention *control* and *ownership*), and (2) that an economic backdrop of neoliberal globalization is tacitly being invoked, the implication being that the ‘universality’ of the network is universally universal rather than ‘Eurocentrically universal’ (Wallerstein 2006) – that is, hegemonically West-centric¹³⁷. In

¹³⁶ DeNardis (2015) goes on to maintain that “the desire for a consistent and universal system in which any device could reach any other device has always been a given for the public Internet.” (p.8) On her view, “data localization laws could result in the ‘Balkanization of the Internet’ and constitute a challenge to the ‘free and open Internet that we benefit from today.’” (p.5) However, it is unclear whether such a ‘desire’ is as *universally* held by Internet governance stakeholders / actors as implied; in addition, and returning to the theme of ‘openness’ and ‘freedom’, this is a liberal, perhaps even neoliberal, narrative that obscures the asymmetric nature of openness vis-à-vis who *can* (actually) benefit from the Internet. According to Carr (2015), “despite the US government emphasis on Internet Freedom, the US private sector has arguably done more to ‘Balkanise’ the Internet than any other actor through the promotion and enforcement of digital rights management and it has been able to rely upon US government support throughout. The overlay of a sovereign map on top of the Internet has most effectively been established through a combination of location based services, intrusive software applications that exploit user privacy in return for services and the promotion of international norms that allow for the control of information on commercial but not cultural or political grounds.” (p.655) On the matter of ‘Balkanization’, Mueller (2017) rejects the use of this term in relation to the technical fragmentation of the Internet which he considers a near impossibility given network effects. An important issue to consider in relation to the invocation of ‘Balkanization’ concerns rather widespread Western tendencies to frame it in relation to oppositions between ‘Western democratic’ and ‘non-Western autocratic’ (or authoritarian) state formations; in this connection, see (Sayyid 2005).

¹³⁷ In this connection, Mueller (2017) points to “the principle that the Internet should be unified and unfragmented” (p.4) which sat alongside commitments to ‘RESILIENCE’ and ‘STABILITY’ in the NETmundial outcome document from 2014 (pp.4-5). For Mueller, “NETmundial was only one of the many manifestations of a *world-embracing universalism or globalizing tendency* that has always been present in the technical vision of the Internet [emphasis added].” (p.5) What is obscured here, intentionally or otherwise, in the focus on universalism and globalism in relation to *technical* vision is the *social* dimension of the Internet as sociotechnical system, viz. an ‘entanglement’ with asymmetric power relations.

addition, I would suggest that framing the issue in terms of universality versus *enclosure* involves recourse to the historical experience of European feudalism while obscuring historical colonialism and the persistence of racialized coloniality in core-periphery relations. While not wanting to suggest any intent (conscious, wilful) on her part, I suggest that such a move has the consequence of deterring the possibility of enclosure (or protectionism) being seen as a temporary, tactical *resistant* response on the part of non-Western nations to the ongoing operation of the racialized political economic logics underpinning Internet (web and social media) operations.

7.1.5. Connectivity

Regarding the issue of ‘connectivity’ as an intrinsic good, DeNardis (2016) maintains that “while the digital realm is still in its infancy, this capacity to connect ubiquitously to the Internet, regardless of location or access device, has become an implicit assumption of the twenty-first century.” (p.1)¹³⁸ Yet is this assumption ontological (factual) or deontological (normative)? In short, is inter-connectivity an intrinsic good, and if so, why is this held to be the case and by whom?¹³⁹ Is this view ‘universally’ held? Given the racialized colonial nature of the global political economy, is it not possible that reference to ‘capacity to connect’ masks (obscures, occludes), albeit unintentionally, the possibility of being connected by a hegemonic other – that is, to be colonized through connectivity?

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¹³⁸ In this connection, Carr (2015) maintains that “the fact that the Internet *works* on a functional level so very consistently is a significant triumph of global collaboration over competition” (p.643), yet insists that “interpretations of what it means for the Internet to ‘work’ are subjective and this in itself is a question that should be opened up for debate.” (p.643) Further, that “beyond the most basic intent that the network functions in a reliable manner, there are many competing ideas about what constitutes a ‘good’ or ‘open’ or ‘secure’ Internet. For example, an Internet that is secure for the producers of intellectual property is primarily of interest to those who produce it, not those who consume it.” (p.652) It should be noted that Mueller’s (2017) entire discourse ostensibly pivots around issues of *access* and *consumption*, issues of production and hegemony tending to be ignored.

¹³⁹ DeNardis (2016, p.2) presents a graphic summarizing the results of an international survey into “How much do you agree or disagree with the following statement? ‘Affordable access to the Internet should be a basic human right.’” It is interesting to note that all countries who *strongly* agreed rather than merely *somewhat* agreed with the notion of affordable access being a basic human right are located in the Global South. Does this indicate a colonized mentality vis-à-vis internalization of the idea of the intrinsic goodness of access and connectivity along with embrace of progressivist and developmentalist logics, or might it point to attempts at ‘levelling’ the playing field through participation? Either way, I would suggest a certain failure to understand the racially colonised nature of Internet governance as hegemonically West-centric is likely manifest.

¹⁴⁰ I aver that a similar line of critique applies regarding issues of ‘empowerment’ and ‘inclusion’ where “policy makers and entrepreneurs investing in information and communication technologies assume that

7.1.6. Multistakeholderism

According to Carr (2015), one key area to analyse in terms of the operation of discursive framing is “the multi-stakeholder model of global Internet governance [which] has emerged as the dominant approach to navigating the complex set of interests, agendas and implications of our increasing dependence on this technology. Protecting this model of global governance in this context has been referred to by the US and EU as ‘essential’ to the future of the Internet.” (p.640)¹⁴¹ While critical of multistakeholderism on account of its tendency to obscure persistent asymmetric power relationships between different stakeholders, Mueller (2010, 2017)¹⁴² and DeNardis (2014, 2015, 2016)¹⁴³ nonetheless embrace some form of qualified commitment to this paradigm. This is significant when considered in light of Mueller’s (2010, 2017) arguments for corralling the role of the nation-state in Internet governance, ostensibly with a view to minimizing the prospects for politicization of the Internet¹⁴⁴; however, adopting “a Gramscian approach to

building the necessary infrastructure is not only possible, but will empower citizens to participate in the global digital economy, access knowledge and engage in lawful communication with others, regardless of location or type of device.” (DeNardis 2016, p.1)

¹⁴¹ According to Carr (2015), “multi-stakeholderism has become almost synonymous with global Internet governance” (p.641), and “the discursive power of ... concepts [associated with multistakeholderism] is as significant and as interesting as the power that is generated through the actual functions and practices they refer to.” Crucially, Carr maintains that “multi-stakeholder Internet governance serves largely to reinforce existing power relations rather than disrupt them. Specifically, the multi-stakeholder model in Internet governance privileges the interests of those actors that were instrumental in establishing it – the US government *and those whose interests align with a US agenda* [emphasis added].” (p.642)

¹⁴² Mueller (2010) maintains that “at worst, it offers a simple-minded communitarianism that implies that all political, economic, and social conflicts can be resolved if everyone involved just sits down and talks about them together. By focusing almost exclusively on the interaction or dialogue among stakeholders, it tends to evade or ignore issues of rights, access, power, and related issues of institutional design.” (pp.264-265)

¹⁴³ According to Carr (2015), “DeNardis argues that the decentralised and diverse nature of multi-stakeholder Internet governance is its strength and indeed, she regards it as a major factor in the ‘resilience, stability and adaptability of the Internet’ ... [Yet] one of the fundamental problems with the current arrangements is that rather than disperse power to a wide range of actors, multistakeholderism reinforces existing power dynamics that have been ‘baked in’ to the model from the beginning. It privileges north-western governments, particularly the US, as well as the US private sector.” (p.658) In this connection, it should be noted that DeNardis concedes that “global Internet choke points do exist. Despite the decentralized physical geography of the Internet and the diversity of institutions overseeing this infrastructure, *there are centralized points of control*. Some are virtual; some are physical; some are virtually centralized and physically distributed. All are increasingly recognized as points of control over Internet infrastructure [emphasis added].” (p.11) This view arguably contrasts somewhat with that of Mueller (2010) for whom “most of the real-world governance of the Internet is *decentralized and emergent*; it comes from the interactions of tens of thousands of network operators and service providers – and sometimes users themselves – who are connected through the Internet protocols [emphasis added].” (p.9)

¹⁴⁴ In this connection, Carr (2015) points to “a persistent concern that involving states in Internet governance practices and processes will see the Internet mired in politics.” (p.652) Yet I would suggest that

hegemonic power [which] focuses on controlling narratives, setting the agenda and defining the terms of reference in order to minimise (or delegitimise) dissent” (p.642), Carr maintains that “the narrative about the need to limit government involvement in multi-stakeholder Internet governance does not impact on all states to the same extent. Because the US has been so successful in embedding its view in multi-stakeholder Internet governance practices, functions and norms, it and states aligned ideologically with its ‘Internet Freedom’ approach can afford to promote a view of limited government involvement. Essentially, this serves to limit *oppositional* government input.” (p.653)¹⁴⁵ Moreover, “limiting government involvement relative to other stakeholders however, is essential to *maintaining the status quo* in Internet governance – an outcome that is most favourable to those actors that helped establish it in the first place [emphasis added.” (p.651) While it might be argued that Mueller (2010, 2017) explicitly rails against US-centrism, it is crucial to appreciate that his criticism is directed at US-centrism in the *statist* terrain of government, not at the US-centric ‘free market’¹⁴⁶.

Adopting a position informed by feminist and postcolonial thought, Franklin (2009) argues that “translocal, transnational, and supraterritorial trajectories and alliances overlay domestic–international demarcation lines as multilateral institutions broker ‘multi-stakeholder’ meetings” and that “the terrain (the whereabouts), the actors (the “who”), the stakes (what is it all about), and the means, are *increasingly multi-sited and multidimensional rather than vertically integrated, geographically contained, analogically disseminated* [emphasis added].” (p.223) On this basis she insists that “reducing everything to a Manichean battle between the State and its Discontents ... can also mean missing crucial nuances, opportunities, and moments for resistance and change as the script, casting, location, and final production are finalized.” (p.225)

the Internet is, and always was, politicized; further, it is a liberal conceit to assume that the site of politics lies with states to the exclusion of markets.

¹⁴⁵ Crucially, Carr (2015) maintains that “diplomatic leveraging is very much a part of global Internet governance”, drawing attention to “the diplomatic power of the US and its supporters like Australia and the EU” (p.654). I would suggest that what is missing here is recognition of a ‘factor’ that *transversally* informs and inflects alignment in the modern/colonial world system, viz. race; in this connection, see Lake and Reynolds (2008). In short, notwithstanding the importance of her Gramscian line of critique, Carr (2015) arguably shares the same de-raced / un-raced understanding of the world system as liberal commentators such as Mueller and DeNardis in referring to “the dominance of liberalism in the last quarter of the 20th century” (p.643), yet failing to appreciate *actual* historical liberalism as fundamentally racialized.

¹⁴⁶ In this connection, Carr (2015) holds that “attempts to limit government involvement in the multi-stakeholder process ... serve to preserve the status quo by actually limiting *oppositional* government influence that might promote views counter to those held by the ‘north-west’ states.” (p.654)

Granted, yet if the decolonial framing of the issue as presented herein is accepted, insofar as decoloniality is only contingently framed in *state*-centric terms, it might be that such a line of argument does not hold true in respect of the world system *per se*¹⁴⁷. I should also like to suggest that such ‘postcolonial’ framings, made by a focus on the *local*, viz. ‘the State and its Discontents’, tend to obscure the possibility of thinking about non-Western statist interventions in relation to a decolonial project aimed at *globally* decentering West-centric domination of the Internet¹⁴⁸.

7.1.7. Identity and the Digital Divide

According to DeNardis (2014), “the study of Internet governance is a much narrower scholarly field of inquiry within the realm of Internet research just as the practice of Internet governance is narrower than the broader area of information and communication technology policies. *To draw these boundaries*, it helps to explain what the field addresses versus what it typically does not address [emphasis added].” (p.19) Crucially, on her view, “these boundaries are narrower than the capacious topics addressed in some venues, such as the United Nations Internet Governance Forum (IGF), which have included topics on *the digital divide*, digital education, and how the Internet is used generally [emphasis added].” (p.20) DeNardis goes on to assert that “Internet governance questions address technological design and administration, issues generally distinct from questions about content” (p.20) and that “examples of content-related topics generally *outside the field of Internet governance* include ... *societal usage* issues including *digital equality, social media communities, or identity formation* and human interconnectedness ... Global Internet governance concerns generally do not address patterns of Internet usage by various constituencies [emphasis added].” (pp.20-21)¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁷ As should be apparent at this point in the presentation, I suggest that state-centric readings fail to adequately theorize – and ‘name’ – global hegemonic power, viz. racial coloniality, and that Franklin is ‘guilty’ of such a failure.

¹⁴⁸ Adopting a similar post-structuralist position to Franklin, Singh (2009) has argued that “if interactions change actor identities and meaning of the issues they pursue, actor preferences cannot be taken as constant as do structural analysis where power structures determine preferences prior to any interaction.” (p.220) I am inclined to think that this line of argument affords too much agency to non-statist resistant formations and occludes the operation of historically-sedimented dispositional logics, which are non-determinative yet structurally-biasing in the *global* context of core-periphery relations under colonial modernity. In addition, and as will be argued in Section 7.3, network effects operative in the Internet (web and social media) mean that while the *location* of hegemonic power – and thereby its *identity* – might shift/morph into a more diffuse formation, such power *remains* core-centric and racialized.

¹⁴⁹ According to DeNardis (2014), “the objects of Internet governance inquiry are technical architecture, the private and public entities and rules that control this architecture, and policies about this architecture.

Mueller (2017) is even more emphatic about the need to exclude the digital divide from Internet governance discourse arguing, in the context of a discussion about Internet fragmentation, that “while it is certainly true that those who have no access to the Internet are not able to communicate over the Internet, it is *absurd* to bundle this problem – *which is both undesired and unintended* – with intentional decisions to block users from accessing services or content that they are fully equipped to reach. Access limitations caused by a lack of development constitute a *limited* Internet, but not a fragmented one [emphasis added].” (pp.32-33) Yet from a decolonial and critical race theoretical perspective, I would suggest it is far from clear that the digital divide was ‘both undesired and unintended’ given its ‘entanglement’ with prior ‘divides’ under colonial modernity, and the goal, whether tacit or explicit, of maintaining Eurocentric/West-centric hegemony under contestation¹⁵⁰. Beyond this, there is Mueller’s reference to a ‘lack of development’ to consider in terms of its appeal to developmentalist logic and rather unfortunate ostensible framing as a ‘blame the victim’ narrative.

While accepting that Internet governance is “a complex matrix of technical standard setting, resource allocation, legal arrangements and the control of access and information online” (Carr 2015, p.645)¹⁵¹, and ostensibly targeting DeNardis (2014, 2015, 2016), Carr goes on to state that “very often in debates about global Internet governance, the *focus* is on *technical* coordination which is much easier to agree upon. This is obviously a significant element of Internet governance but very often, technical decisions and standards have political implications that cannot and should not be ignored. Framing Internet governance as ‘technical’ provides a discursive mechanism for inoculating the issues from important and inescapable political debates [emphases added].” (p.644)¹⁵² From a decolonial perspective, I want to argue that excluding – or

Studying Internet governance generally does not address the effects of Internet use or the meaning of content but does address the technologically mediated control of content or the rights of users in accessing this content.” (p.21)

¹⁵⁰ In this connection, I should also like to draw the reader’s attention to the earlier discussion of the Cold War origins of the Internet and the shift in roles of state/government and market/commerce vis-à-vis maintaining U.S. hegemony as the Global North entered a purported ‘information age’.

¹⁵¹ I would suggest that focusing on *access* serves to occlude, albeit unintentionally, issues of usage, ownership and control.

¹⁵² From a decolonial perspective, such debates would involve interrogating commitments to stability, universality, interoperability, network neutrality, openness etc. in terms of their complicity with – if not conduciveness for – the maintenance and expansion of racialized colonial West-centric capitalism.

‘bracketing out’ – the digital divide from Internet governance is a pivotal move in terms of setting – and ‘policing’¹⁵³ – the boundaries of what constitutes *legitimate* Internet governance discourse from a tacitly liberal, if not neoliberal, perspective. DeNardis’ drawing of boundaries is a tacitly *political* move in that the decision to separate concerns about content and issues to do with the promotion of digital equality – not to mention a commitment to reparations (compensation, corrective justice) for the legacy system effects of colonialism – from Internet governance results in maintenance of the status quo and its reinforcement via network effects¹⁵⁴. Crucially, this way of framing the contours of Internet governance *discourse* – or terms of the ‘language game’¹⁵⁵ – functions to determine the identities¹⁵⁶ of Internet governance stakeholders / actors insofar as excluding consideration of the digital divide / digital inequality results in deterring and deferring decolonial interrogation of the racialized ontology of Internet governance actors¹⁵⁷.

7.2. Ideological Assumptions

According to Mueller (2010), “to make sense of our environment we must be able to name phenomena, come up with explanations, and develop guidelines about how to respond. In such an environment it is not only discrete ideas, but also ideologies that become important. Ideologies are systems of ideas that strive to provide coherent explanations

¹⁵³ Such ‘policing’ might be understood in Foucauldian terms, viz. as the disciplining effects of the knowledge/power regime of Internet governance discourse.

¹⁵⁴ In this connection, and in the context of the WSIS, Abu Buiyan (2014) draws attention to the fact that “the global south opposed the ICANN model of Internet governance and proposed to *expand the rubric of the Internet governance framework by including measures related to the digital divide, multilingualism, Internet security, and intellectual property rights*. It opposed unilateral US control of the Internet root and demanded equal participation [emphasis added].” (p.18)

¹⁵⁵ According to Murphy (2002), “different groups will make different rules that will structure the use of a technology. These rules become policies governing the networks. People with an opportunity to gain access to a network must accept the rules by which the system is structured.” (p.30) While accepting that such rules will emerge as outcomes of struggle / contestation for hegemony, it is important to appreciate that in the case of the Internet, many of these systems – or layers – of rules (protocols, standards) have already become sedimented.

¹⁵⁶ Mueller (2017) maintains that “there is no denying the linkage between group identities and state formation”(p.138), yet goes on to ask whether “the community connected via cyberspace [is] capable of the kind of solidaristic identity sufficient to forge a political unit” (p.139). I would suggest this is a state-centric reading of the relationship between statism and identity-construction and that it is quite possible to conceive of political identity in alternative terms, for example, in relation to body-political marking and geo-political situatedness in a racialized world system.

¹⁵⁷ Carr (2015) might argue that DeNardis’ framing is West-centric and hegemonic in the Gramscian sense of structuring discourse in such a way as to prevent the articulation of alternatives to liberal capitalism; however, this reading fails to engage with the racialized coloniality of liberal discourse.

across a wide range of social, economic, and political phenomena. Political ideologies tend to fuse the normative and the positive; they provide a framework for analysing events and evaluating or recommending specific courses of action in line with a set of values.” (p.254) Crucially, and as stated earlier, what is obscured here, intentionally or otherwise, is the role of ideologies in occluding (blocking, deterring, deferring) other discursive possibilities¹⁵⁸, corraling discourse within specific limits (boundaries, borders)¹⁵⁹.

7.2.1. (Not-so) Veiled Orientalism and Racialized Developmentalism

In the context of discussing whether we are in a digital cold war, Mueller (2013) asks whether “there [is] an ideological division in the world comparable to the capitalism/democracy vs. socialism/communism dichotomy”, arguing that “in the Internet sphere, yes there is – partially. But a vitally important historical distinction is that this division is not led or defined by states.” On his view, “there is an ideological division around two distinct issues. The first is the appropriate institutional form of Internet governance, the other pertains to the substantive aspects of communications policy.” Crucially, in relation to the issue of governance forms, he maintains that “*younger* states and *authoritarian* states favour a pre-eminent role for sovereigns in communications policy, and would rely on the negotiation of intergovernmental

¹⁵⁸ In this connection, and expounding on the Lacanian psychoanalytic idea of ‘foreclosure’, Hesse (2014) maintains that “foreclosure refers to the preemptive exclusion of possible references and their locutions from the realm of the symbolic, the field of representation or discourse. Although foreclosure is a structural feature of all discourse, of interest are the hegemonic effects of specific strategies, since what is foreclosed is the possibility of particular representations. Hence certain redacted themes or objects become unsayable, lacking in referentiality because they are routinely prohibited by the conventions or rules of what can be formulated in a particular discourse. Foreclosure makes certain expressions impossible, insofar as the locutions that would allow that expression have already been denied any existence within the valorized discourse ... Foreclosure makes it possible for some things to be formulated in what is said, written, or represented and others not. The ‘action of foreclosure’ is repetitive and quotidian because its proscription of particular discursive terms, themes or questions is never finalized; the conventional, hegemonic or normalizing discourse remains ever threatened by what has in effect been constitutively foreclosed. This suggests that political and hegemonic strategies can be invested in seeking to secure particular repetitions of the conditions of impossibility and possibility in what is thinkable and sayable.” (p.290)

¹⁵⁹ Significantly, Epstein (2010) holds that historical factors “can be constitutive of concepts themselves ... not just causes for why concepts have arisen.” (p.14) Consider, in this connection, Mueller’s (2017) statement that “not until the US-imposed post-WW2 postcolonial order was in place can one clearly say that the international system was based on a society of sovereign nation-states.” (p.153) Decolonially-speaking, this statement is problematic insofar as the postcolonial era is marked by the persistence of globally structuring colonial logics (economic, cultural, political etc.). On this basis, it might be argued that Mueller is endorsing, albeit unintentionally, a ‘colonial post-colonial’ worldview.

agreements for global governance. The other side, which is led not by specific states but by private sector actors in the technical community, business, and to some extent civil society, supports the organically developed Internet institutions (Mueller, 2010), which represent transnational governance and more open, bottom-up, participatory institutional mechanisms [emphasis added].” Somewhat provocatively, I want to suggest that there might be a certain tacit Orientalism at work here in ‘bracketing’ reference to *younger states* with *authoritarian states*¹⁶⁰; perhaps even more controversially, that the adjective ‘younger’ might not be used here simply to mean ‘newer’ but also in the sense of ‘less mature’, thereby indicating tacit, albeit possibly unintentional (in the sense of unconscious, not wilful etc.), invocation of a *developmentalist* conception of racialized coloniality. I suggest that this argument is supported by Mueller’s assertion that increased nation-statist intervention vis-à-vis Internet governance should be viewed as a *retrograde* step, viz. “the *younger* nation-states – the ones that only just emerged in the post WW2 period – seem to be the most strongly committed to a *backwards-looking*, sovereigntist or neo-Westphalian approach to Internet governance [emphasis added].” (Mueller 2013) In this connection, it should be noted that McPhail (2014) provides the basis for quite a different reading, arguing that “two major changes occurred during the late 1950s and early 1960s that set the stage for the fourth and current era of empire expansion ... [1] the rise of nationalism and decolonization, centred mainly in developing nations, and [2] the shift to a service-based information economy among core nations. The service economy relies substantially on satellites, telecommunications, and computer technology to analyse, transfer, and communicate information. It renders obsolete traditional national borders and technological barriers to communication.” (p.12)¹⁶¹ In short, just as the periphery was entering into a period of nation building, the

¹⁶⁰ Against this, it might be argued that Mueller (2013) maintains that “in many respects, the battle over the vision of Internet governance cannot be characterized entirely accurately as between *authoritarian, undemocratic* states and *liberal, freedom-loving* states, but also and more centrally as a conflict between long-established, cosmopolitan states and newer states still insecure about their sovereignty [emphasis added]”. Notwithstanding this statement, I would suggest that recourse to the idea of ‘cosmopolitanism’ coupled with a certain tacit commitment to developmentalist logic arguably speaks to the contrary.

¹⁶¹ Crucially, McPhail (2014) maintains that “cultural reproduction theorists view international media initiatives as a means of reproducing and socializing students in peripheral nations into knowledge systems that make them more compatible with Western ideals and, equally important, Western consumer values.” (p.28) I suggest this extends to the knowledge system that pertains to the discourse on Internet governance which is dominated by ‘Northern’ voices tacitly committed to liberal, neoliberal and/or libertarian capitalist political-economic paradigms. However, it should be noted that from a decolonial perspective, McPhail’s account falls short in framing the issue in terms of ‘cultural domination’ insofar as this tends to occlude considerations of racial political economy.

core transcended nationalism to transnational globalization, viz. an ‘iterative’ shift within the developmental logics of a ‘programmatically’ racialized coloniality that I suggest was intended to perpetuate – if not widen – a relation of ‘parallel development’ between core and periphery¹⁶².

7.2.2. Rhetorical (Racial) Liberalism

Mueller (2010, 2017) explicitly¹⁶³, and DeNardis (2014, 2015, 2016) somewhat more implicitly, champion a commitment to political and economic liberalism. For example, in the context of a critique of the notion of cyberwar, again framed in relation to concerns about a possible digital cold war, Mueller (2013) claims that “cybersecurity threat-mongering actually militates against the Internet freedom agenda of the liberal democratic states. It leads to the concentration and centralization of power (both political and economic) not to its decentralization and diffusion.” In addition to the need to problematize the centralization–decentralization argument¹⁶⁴, I want to suggest that Mueller’s rhetorical appeal to liberal democracy obscures, albeit unintentionally, the historical fact that liberalism as a political and economic philosophy was conceived in the European cum Western core *in relation to* illiberal colonial practices carried out by core states in the periphery; further that *actual* liberalism as opposed to *ideal* liberalism was – and arguably remains – thoroughly racialized in nature. Contrary to Mueller, I maintain that liberalism was *never* about ‘global diffusion and decentralization of

¹⁶² Crucially, I want to insist that this view should not be seen as belonging to the genre of ‘conspiracy theory’; rather, that it should be understood as a historically-informed decolonial and critical race theoretical analysis of *possible* responses of/by hegemonic white colonial formations to contestation.

¹⁶³ Mueller (2010) states that his “normative stance is rooted in the Internet’s early promise of unfettered and borderless global communication, and its largely accidental and temporary escape from traditional institutional mechanisms of control. The expectations and norms created by the early Internet were *radically liberal* in nature, and gave new vitality to ideals of freedom of expression in politics and culture, and to concepts of freedom of exchange and open, competitive entry into information and communication markets in the economic sphere [emphasis added].” (p.5) He goes on to assert that he is “using the terms *liberal* and *liberalism* the way Europeans use them (i.e., in their correct, historical sense). *Liberalism* means policies and philosophies that favour individual liberty and choice.” (p.262) Mueller (2010) criticises US-centric right-wing market liberalism (pp.262-263), yet ostensibly fails to appreciate that *actual* liberalism operative in the world was – *is* – structurally-informed by racism, and how this racial factor might function as a dispositional factor in relation to preferential attachment operative within scale-free networks such as the Internet, web and social media.

¹⁶⁴ See Section 7.3 of the present work.

power', but at most its *partial* diffusion *locally* among core states along a 'racial gradient' of whiteness¹⁶⁵.

According to Mills (1997), during colonialism, "the polity was usually thought of in racial terms, as white ruled, and this perspective would become global in the period of formal colonial administration. Political theory is in part about who the main actors are, and for this unacknowledged polity they are neither the atomic individuals of classic liberal thought nor the classes of Marxist theory but races." (p.113)¹⁶⁶ More recently, Deneen (2018) has argued that liberalism is built on a foundation of contradictions: it trumpets equal rights while fostering incomparable material inequality; its legitimacy rests on consent, yet it discourages civic commitments in favour of privatism; and in its pursuit of individual autonomy, it has given rise to the most far-reaching, comprehensive state system in human history. However, following Mills and others, I would suggest that it is not so much a case of *contradictions*, implying oppositions *within* a shared 'horizontal' space, viz. society, but rather a case of 'structurally-relational' oppositions operating *between* racialized 'vertical' zones¹⁶⁷. Crucially, Mills maintains that "racial liberalism" is the central ideological formation of the modern Western political tradition, global white supremacy's self-legitimizing master narrative, and that *ideal* liberalism is an *idealised* fiction grounded in *actualised* violence towards what it designates as the illiberal 'other', the subject of colonialism, genocide, slavery and war¹⁶⁸.

¹⁶⁵ For detailed accounts of the racialized origins and operations of liberalism, see Mills (1997, 2015, 2017) and Losurdo (2011); for a more general critique of Western culture as racist, Western state formations as racial, and the operation of racialized logics under neoliberalism, see (Goldberg 1993, 2002, 2008).

¹⁶⁶ Mills (1997) goes on to state that: "the absence from most white moral/political philosophy of discussions of race and white supremacy would lead one to think that race and racism have been marginal to the history of the West. And this belief is reinforced by the mainstream conceptualizations of the polity themselves, which portray it as essentially raceless, whether in the dominant view of an individualist liberal democracy, or in the minority radical Marxist view of a class society." (p.121) However, "black activists have always recognized white domination, white power (what one writer in 1919 called the 'whiteocracy,' rule by whites), as a political system of exclusion and differential privilege, problematically conceptualized by the categories of either white liberalism or white Marxism." (p.131)

¹⁶⁷ Seminal decolonial theorist Frantz Fanon describes this in terms of 'the line of the human' separating the zone of being or whiteness (which Mills describes as the space occupied by 'persons') from the zone of non-being or blackness (that is, the space occupied by those racialized as sub-persons / non-persons).

¹⁶⁸ I should point out, for the record, that Mills (2017) is not dismissive of liberalism *per se*. On his view liberalism "has been *complicit with* rather than *condemnatory of* group subordination", yet "black radical liberalism reverses these normative priorities and makes corrective justice its central concern. Marxism is accurate in seeing exploitation as central to the polity but weak on normative theorization (Marx's original dismissal of 'rights' and 'justice' as bourgeois concepts). Hence the need for a synthesis with liberalism." (p.209) Yet is such a black radical synthesis with liberalism consistent with the latter's commitment to the autonomy of the individual, minimal state interference and a 'free-market' economy? In short, arguments against essentialism notwithstanding, is it ultimately coherent to invoke the signifier liberalism in opposition

If Mills and others are correct about the history (and contemporary reality) of *actual* liberalism, how should one view – and, more daringly, attempt to explain (or make sense of) – Mueller’s explicit and DeNardis’ implicit commitment to mainstream – that is, racialized – versions of the liberal project? Perhaps the answer to this question has to do with the tacit operation of what Mills (1997) refers to as the ‘epistemology of ignorance’, which he refers to in a later work, more specifically, as the phenomenon of ‘white ignorance’ (Mills 2007, 2915b). According to Mills (1997), a ‘very limited number’ of (racial) differences were *intentionally* selected by those responsible for establishing the modern racial world system¹⁶⁹; however, subsequent to its establishment, the system has been maintained by what he refers to as an “inverted epistemology, an epistemology of ignorance, a particular pattern of localised and global cognitive dysfunctions (which are psychologically and socially functional)” that involve “white misunderstanding, misrepresentation, evasion, and self-deception on matters related to race” (pp.18-19)¹⁷⁰. Crucially, white ignorance “should be seen as a particular optic, a prism of perception and interpretation, a worldview [and] whatever the overarching theoretical scaffold, ‘whiteness’ needs to be playing an appropriate causal role in explaining the generation of mistaken cognitions; it cannot be merely a matter of ignorance among people who are white. The possible causal factors are multiple (and not at all necessarily mutually exclusive): *socialization into a racist belief-set or a Eurocentric normative starting-point, inherited culture and tradition, inculcated social amnesia, typically skewed inferential pattern, deficient conceptual apparatus, material group interest, or epistemically*

to such liberal principles, not to mention the failure resulting from the successful application of those principles?

¹⁶⁹ Invoking contractarian thinking, Mills *methodologically* (as opposed to literally) describes this in terms of the putative ‘signing’ of a ‘Racial Contract’.

¹⁷⁰ Importantly, Brubaker et al. (2004), along with others, have shown that perception is conditioned by conceptual categories and classifications that are socially-informed which means that what and how things are perceived will, to some extent, reflect the power relations existing in a given society. According to Mills (2007), it is this fact of social cognition (conception, perception) that helps to explain what was previously described as an ‘epistemology of ignorance’ under conditions of systemic racism or white supremacy. It is important to appreciate that Mills’ approach is fundamentally *epistemological* and *normative*, focusing on ‘white ways of knowing’ in which racialized cognition is characterised as ‘ignorant’ and ‘misinformed’, whether passively and actively. In this connection, I suggest that his account contrasts somewhat starkly with poststructuralist decolonial readings which see racism as both *rational* and *normative* relative to the project of maintaining white supremacy (Goldberg 1993), thereby indicating, against Mills, the absence of a universal, ‘foundationalist’ vantage point from which to determine the moral / ethical correctness or otherwise of racism. In addition, there is a need to question Mills’ focus on issues of epistemology vis-à-vis alternative approaches that are more ontological in orientation.

disadvantaged social-structural location [emphases added].” (Mills 2015b, p.218)¹⁷¹ On this basis, I want to suggest that an inherited, sedimented background of Eurocentrism / West-centrism informs the ‘material group interests’ and shapes (bounds, limits) the discursive ‘horizons’ of mainstream Internet governance commentators such as Mueller and DeNardis¹⁷².

Regardless of whether the above ‘explanation’ is correct and accepted as such or otherwise, I would suggest that Mueller’s and DeNardis’ advocacy of liberalism vis-à-vis Internet governance is decolonially untenable, and that their appeal to a multistakeholderism that includes state/government, market/corporations, NGOs and various other organizations including those concerned and charged with maintaining the technical operation (stability, openness, connectivity, interoperability etc.) of the Internet must be viewed as suspect in that it fails to take into consideration the fundamental ‘entanglement’ of states and markets (and other actors) within the overriding and underpinning systemic logic of racialized liberalism¹⁷³.

7.2.3. A (Racialized) Network Nation

Consistent with the critique of statist alignment of Internet governance outlined in (Mueller 2010), Mueller (2017) presents four main arguments in favour of a shift to

¹⁷¹ Put simply, Mills (2015b) maintains that “the political economy of racial domination required a corresponding *cognitive* economy that would systematically darken the light of factual and normative inquiry [emphasis added].” (p.217)

¹⁷² Mills (2015b) maintains that “the successful whitewashing of [the colonial] past is manifest ... not merely in particular proscribed belief-sets but in the way *competing conceptual frameworks and their related categories now appear odd*, perhaps even bizarre, to us. It is hard for us even to grasp them because of the deep cognitive naturalization of Eurocentrism and whiteness in our outlook. The very space and time of the polity – what could be more fundamental? – are being challenged insofar as the nation-state seems the ‘natural’ political unit, located in a sequential temporality of antiquity/medievalism/modernity, with modernity marking the advent of moral egalitarianism in the West ... But alternative categorizations of both space and time are possible that would bring to cognitive salience the existence of *larger supra-national political entities of domination and subordination*, which are normatively characterized by the inequality of most of the world’s population under ‘modern’ Western racial rule [emphases added].” (pp.222-223) To what extent does the decolonial critique of mainstream Internet governance presented herein, which points to white supremacy as a ‘large supra-national’ polity formation *transversally* informing and inflecting multistakeholder configurations (nation-statist, corporate, non-governmental etc.) of Internet governance, appear ‘odd’, perhaps even ‘bizarre’?

¹⁷³ In this connection, I concur with Mills (2015b) who maintains that “the overcoming of past and present white ignorance would require a systematic excavation of the shaping by racial ideology and racial liberalism of both past theory (the social sciences and humanities; the relevant natural sciences, such as biology and physical anthropology) and practice (law, public policy, government), and an uncompromising investigation of *what the purging of its legacy in the contemporary world would require of us, both nationally and internationally* [emphasis added].” (pp.221-222)

transnational network liberalism: “[1] communications globalization is, on net, an overwhelmingly good thing for humanity ...Its benefits, however, accrue only if it is subject to the discipline of end user choice, which creates a congruence between the costs and benefits of the filtering and the entity doing the filtering” (p.18)¹⁷⁴; “[2] the threats of technical fragmentation are overblown. The Internet is not breaking apart. The network effects and economic benefits generated by widespread connectivity — the sinews that hold the Internet together — are powerful and growing” (p.18); “[3] the rhetoric of fragmentation can be used to camouflage the more important issue, which is the question of alignment, the perceived need to re-align control of communication with the jurisdictional boundaries of national states ... [Hence, there is a need to consider] the problem of network-state alignment” (pp.18-19); and “[4] there is a need to challenge] the equation of free, open, globalized communications with the supremacy of the US government. Given the dominance of US firms and the stated objectives of American policy, it is, I admit, easy and tempting to view things that way. But that viewpoint is based on obsolete, state-centric assumptions. It fails to recognize the degree to which cyberspace is creating its own polity with its own interests, one that is not conjoint with the interests of specific states. Indeed, if all we can see in the struggles over Internet governance is the question of which state comes out more powerful than its rivals, then our mentality has advanced little from seventeenth-century mercantilism.” (p.19) On this basis, Mueller (2017) maintains that “if national alignment is the problem [the solution must be] a move away from national sovereignty and towards popular sovereignty in cyberspace” (p.19), raising the question as to whether there can be “a cyber-version of nationalism, an Internet nation so to speak, that forges its own political identity and provides the impetus for transnational forms of Internet governance” (p.20)

¹⁷⁵

¹⁷⁴ I suggest that the claim that globalized communications is an ‘overwhelming good for humanity’ is largely rhetorical in nature and that its liberal (if not libertarian) framing obscures the fact that the Internet is embedded in a racialized modern/colonial world system, such racialized coloniality both informing and manifesting itself through network effects, and that it is not a level playing field of ‘end users’, but rather an asymmetric terrain dominated by West-centrism and global white supremacy.

¹⁷⁵ But what is the nature (or constitution) of this populous (‘the people’), and what of prior asymmetries borne of persistent legacy system effects that inform and inflect this emergent network popular sovereignty? Interestingly, Mueller (2017) recognizes the need to consider the differential composition of ‘the people’, citing the US Commerce Department’s National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) “transferring oversight of the IANA functions to ‘the people’ of the Internet, and providing the institutional mechanisms through which any of those people with the awareness and capacity

Yet if the above critique of liberalism as racialized is sound, where does this leave Mueller's proposal for aligning – and devolving – Internet governance matters to a global 'net nation'? Mueller (2010) argues that transnational networked liberalism “moves decisively away from *the dangerous, conflict-prone tendency of other ideologies* to build political institutions around linguistic, religious, and ethnic communities. Instead of rigid, bounded communities that conceal domination with the pretence of homogeneity and a 'collective will,' it offers governance of communication and information through more flexible and shifting social aggregations [emphasis added]” (p.269); on his view, “globalizing the capabilities of social democracy *without tempering it with liberalism*, and without bringing into being a wide-ranging public sphere that transcends territorially limited cultures and language communities could be *quite dangerous* [emphasis added]” (p.261). Accordingly, he insists that “there can be no *cyberliberty* without a political movement to define, defend, and institutionalize individual rights and freedoms on a transnational scale [emphasis added].” (p.271) However, if Mills (2017) is correct in arguing that *actual* liberalism, both historically and in the contemporary era, is racially-inflected¹⁷⁶, it would appear that Mueller's proposal for an Internet governance regulated by a post-Westphalian 'net nation'¹⁷⁷ subscribing to 'transnational

to participate could construct the new order.” On his view, “the global multistakeholder community was, in the end, any group *sufficiently mobilized* around Internet governance issues to weigh in” (p.134), yet he concedes that “of course, there were imbalances and biases in the composition of this community. There is no need to be naive or romantic about the construct 'the people' ... [However,] it does mean that the process was open to anyone and that those who did participate were *sufficiently inclusive* of the affected stakeholders to make the output an acceptable basis for governing [emphases added].” (pp.134-135) I would suggest that Mueller's articulation in terms of groups sufficiently mobilized obscures, perhaps unintentionally, the fact that openness to participation was determined by *ability* to mobilize which is arguably informed by legacy system effects vis-à-vis power; to paraphrase Orwell: “*Ideally* all people are participants; *actually*, some people [can] participate more than others (and some might not be able to participate at all).” In addition, it is unclear what criteria of 'inclusive sufficiency' is operative here since Mueller concedes that it was not determined by demographic factors: “It does not mean that the geographic origins, ethnicities, languages, and religions of the involved population exactly matches their distribution in the world population.” (p.135) Mueller refers to 'affected stakeholders', but given that different stakeholders are affected differently depending on their body-political marking, geo-political situatedness and alignment with power in the modern/colonial world system, I would suggest that this points more to *differentiation within* 'the people' rather than their *identity* as a 'net-nation'.

¹⁷⁶ In short, what of the historical legacy situation informing an emergent 'cyber nationalism'? And what if this cyber-nationalism turns out to function as a network-based mask for sedimented world systemic identity formations operating in a diffuse transnational informational space? Once again, I want to suggest that such a line of questioning should not be seen as belonging to the paranoid genre of 'conspiracy theory', but rather as *decolonially-prudent* speculation informed by the historical experience of the past 500 years of colonialism, imperialism and Eurocentric racism endured by 'the wretched of the earth'.

¹⁷⁷ I suggest that the hegemonic racial composition of this 'net nation' needs to be understood in relation to network effects preferentially favouring 'early adopters', 'front runners', 'pioneers' (*sic*) etc., and that the

network liberalism' is at best inappropriate for, and at worse stands in oppositional relation to, an Internet governance in/for the Global South¹⁷⁸. At a minimum, I suggest the need to ask Mueller for *whom* is a commitment to globalized social democracy 'dangerous'?

7.3. Network Effects

In order to understand how racialized coloniality informs and inflects Internet governance vis-à-vis appeal to 'network effects', both in terms of possible 'rhetorical overplay' as well as possible 'strategic concealment'¹⁷⁹, there is a need to clarify the structure – or rather, *topology* – of the Internet (web and social media) and its governance. According to Zapata Rioja (2014), "the Internet carries itself a non-hierarchical, decentralized and distributed participation of users and developers" while there are "points of centralized control and key gatekeepers in the Internet governance field" (p.77). Drawing on the work of feminist cyborg-theorist Donna Haraway, and using an STS-based analytical framework, Mathew (2016) appeals to the notion of situated knowledges and contestation in order to present a similar view, framing the Internet as a distributed and contested, rather than 'flat' and decentralised, socio-technical space¹⁸⁰. According to Mathew, while "the early Internet did appear decentralised to its users ... the experiences of apparent decentralisation and control are

following observation of Turner (2006) on the 'countercultural' roots of Silicon Valley cyber-culture is particularly insightful in this connection: "Race relations echoed patterns found elsewhere in the counterculture ... what kind of world would this new [countercultural, cyber-cultural] elite build? To the extent that the Whole Earth Catalog serves as a guide, it would be masculine, entrepreneurial, well-educated, and white. It would celebrate systems theory and the power of technology to foster social change. And *it would turn away from questions of gender, race, and class, and toward a rhetoric of individual and small-group empowerment* [emphasis added]." (p.97)

¹⁷⁸ As stated previously, Mills (2017) suggests that liberalism is politically, economically and morally irretrievable *unless* radically transformed along 'black radical' lines thereby effecting redistribution (of wealth, power, personal worth etc.); yet according to Mills (2015b) "a reconstructed and racially sanitized past is crucial for the pre-emptive blocking of the question of the dependence of current white wealth and privilege, both nationally and globally, on the historic racial exploitation of the labour, land, and techno-cultural contributions of people of colour." (p.223) Once again, I want to suggest that it is unclear whether such a *transformed* liberalism ultimately remains 'liberal' in orientation.

¹⁷⁹ In referring to 'strategic concealment', I should point out, once again, that this is not necessarily conscious or wilful, but rather quite possibly motivated and effected by the operation of tacit dispositional logics that are of a social-psychological and 'background' nature.

¹⁸⁰ On his view, a "shift in perspective, from decentralised to distributed, is essential to understand the past and present Internet, and to imagine possible future Internets which preserve and support the public good." (p.1) Yet *what* is 'the public good' and *who* gets to define it? To what extent does this position invoke, albeit unintentionally, an abstract universalizing concept masking asymmetric power relationships between differently-marked actors?

both constructed over an underlying infrastructure which was never decentralised, nor designed with decentralisation as a goal.” Supporting his argument with an analysis of a key technology of the Internet, viz. the BGP (Border Gateway Protocol)¹⁸¹, Mathew maintains that “the Internet is better conceived of as a distributed system – rather than a decentralised system – with varied centres and concentrations of power in its construction [and that] *decentralisation was not a design goal*, nor the actual outcome, in the creation and subsequent operation of BGP, and by extension, of the Internet [emphasis added].” (p.2) Mathew’s argument is important in terms of thinking about the topology of the Internet, viz. as distributed¹⁸² rather than decentralized, and is consistent with empirical findings demonstrating that the Internet is a scale-free network (as are the web and some social media networks) (Barabási and Bonabeau 2003) (Barabási 2003) (Guadamuz 2011)¹⁸³. Mathew “take[s] topology as a central problem in the analysis of governance, to understand how coordination, collaboration, and power relationships function through topological positions and structures”; more specifically, “how the topological forms of Internet infrastructure *interact with the practices and social formations involved in operating Internet infrastructure*; and how these interactions structure the governance of Internet infrastructure [emphasis added].” Crucially, on his view, “the power and authority required to engage in governance *flow from topology* [emphasis added]” (p.4), yet “the structure of the networks in which infrastructure is deployed ... interact with the development of practices, standards and political economy of infrastructure.” (p.4) In this connection, Mathew has drawn attention to “changing forms of governance across different periods in the history of the Internet, through

¹⁸¹ Mathew (2016) describes three phases in “the evolution of the relationships between technological form, control and topology which were required to govern Internet routing”, viz. (1) centralised control, (2) hierarchical control, and (3) poly-centric control (pp.2-3).

¹⁸² ‘Distributed’ should be understood here in the ostensibly paradoxical sense of ‘decentralised centralization’, and not in the sense that Baran used this term in his seminal 1962 paper, “On Distributed Communications Networks” (RAND Corporation Papers, Document P-2626), viz. in contrast to centralised and decentralised.

¹⁸³ According to Barabási and Bonabeau (2003), “many networks [including the web] are dominated by a relatively small number of nodes that are connected to many other sites. Networks containing such important nodes, or hubs, tend to be what we call ‘scale-free,’ in the sense that some hubs have a seemingly unlimited number of links and no node is typical of the others.” (p.52) Crucially, they maintain that while random networks are ‘deeply democratic’ in that “most nodes will have approximately the same number of links.” (p.52), scale-free networks follow a power-law distribution: “In contrast to the democratic distribution of links seen in random networks, power laws describe systems in which a few hubs ... dominate.” (p.53) However, it is not just the web and social networks that are scale-free, but the physical infrastructure / connectivity of the Internet itself: “the routers connected by optical or other communications lines” have a network topology that is scale-free (p.53).

distinct articulations of technological form, control and topology.” (p.3) While concurring with the importance of adopting a *historical* approach to the political economy of infrastructure (and beyond to higher layer network phenomena including those associated with the web and social media), I want to suggest, on the basis of earlier arguments, the need to consider a geographically wider and historically *longer durée* historical background to the one engaged by Mathew and the role of ideological dispositions – specifically, coloniality and the ‘legacy system’ effects of racialized liberalism – informing practices vis-à-vis emergent network topology and its relationship to prior extant world systemic network formations¹⁸⁴. In this connection, Franklin (2011) has argued that “Internet governance, despite its being based on a functional form of geographical distribution rather than central location ... is nonetheless culturally and geopolitically concentrated.” (p.14) While concurring with this assessment, I want to suggest that this concentration needs to be unpacked in terms of how racialized coloniality *diachronically* connects different network formations, and how network effects involving preferential attachment mobilize liberal dispositions that are racially inflected.

For example, Mueller (2017) both demonstrates an awareness of and makes explicit reference to the importance of network effects in arguing against the possibility of Internet fragmentation. On his view, “network benefits exist when the value of a product to its users increases as other users adopt the *same* system or service ... Once a certain threshold of other users is attained, however, there will be enough benefit to keep users there – and to start attracting others ... [This] process of achieving critical mass is path-dependent ... A model of network growth will exhibit multiple equilibria, depending on who joins *and in what sequence* [emphasis added].” (pp.44-46) What is not engaged here, despite the tacit appeal to temporality in acknowledging the importance of ‘sequence’, path-dependency and ‘critical mass’, is any consideration of the possibility of *diachronic* / historical ‘entanglement’ of such network effects with prior extant network formations¹⁸⁵. While recognizing the importance of preferential attachment and the

¹⁸⁴ While Mathew (2014, p.20) is cognizant of the importance of the ‘race factor’ vis-à-vis thinking about infrastructure, he does not engage with this issue at length, nor along critical race theoretical and/or decolonial lines – that is, in relation to colonial modernity as a racialized global phenomenon of long *durée*.

¹⁸⁵ In this connection, consider the following important remark made by Lake and Wong (2007): “There is, we suspect, an important “life cycle” in networks, missed by those who study only well-developed or already successful networks. Self-enforcing networks based on reciprocity may well reflect *earlier*, more power-based structures and, in crisis, may manifest the power that remains latent in central nodes

power laws operative in scale-free networks resulting in a ‘rich get richer’ situation (Barabási and Bonabeau 2003), Mueller frames this effect in economic terms, thereby failing to situate this phenomenon in relation to the legacy system effects of colonialism – that is, the racialized structural logics of coloniality informing and inflecting social networks – which persist into the postcolonial era¹⁸⁶. Consider, in this regard, preferential attachment. How might this be informed in the context of social networks? I would suggest that the deferential standing afforded those situated in the core of the world system and racialized as white might count as factors. I further suggest that this point is of crucial significance in thinking about the role of long *durée* historical factors and the identity of socio-political actors in network formation: insofar as the Internet was a Cold War technology emerging in the global context of a racialized modern/colonial world system and the local context of a racial-liberal state – the US – in which white (male) individuals, institutions and collectives were ‘front-runners’ / pioneers / ‘frontier colonists’ (Sardar 1996) in an emerging constructed ‘cyberspace’, power-laws and the ‘rich get richer’ phenomenon associated with preferential attachment occurred¹⁸⁷. In this sense, the Internet and subsequently the web and social media – all of which were and continue to be globally-dominated by white (male) front-runners who ‘got in front’ by virtue of the legacy system effects of colonialism and

[emphasis added].” (p.11) On their view, there is a need to consider a political model “of both network creation and diffusion ... focus[ing] on the widespread activation of a particular set of beliefs with differential costs and benefits from within a larger universe of existing beliefs that, in turn, creates a network where none previously existed.” (p.14) What is missing here, I aver, is consideration of how a prior extant scale-free network might inform the scale-free structure of a posterior emerging network, although I concede that this might be implicit in Lake and Wong’s reference to the role of “earlier, more power-based structures” in relation to network life-cycles. Put simply, I want to suggest that the emergence of the Internet needs to be understood as a sociotechnical ‘iteration’ within the long *durée* ‘programmatic’ onto-logic of racialized modern/colonial domination.

¹⁸⁶ In short, no attempt is made to engage with *constitutive* (generative, productive) historical relations between different network formations, nor with racial hegemony as a factor in the structuring of such relations vis-à-vis network effects.

¹⁸⁷ In this connection, Lake and Wong (2007) observe that “agenda-setting power is particularly crucial – and, in fact, most clearly evident – at the network *formation* stage and may become less overt subsequently as it attains the status of a *norm* within a *stable* network ... both power and norms are emergent properties of networks. They are not given by external forces, but arise from the self-interest and practice of the members of the networks themselves.” (p.17) In this connection, consider DeNardis’ (2014) liberal *celebratory* invocation of network effects, viz. “many coordinating efforts have produced the *overall salutary network effects of interoperability, economic competition and innovation, relative security, and freedom of expression* [emphasis added].” (p.24) On her view, “successful global Internet governance functioning is necessary for *localities* to reap the network effects of Internet architecture [emphasis added].” (p.18)

white supremacy which involved holding ‘The Rest’ back¹⁸⁸ – should be seen as phenomena that emerge through processes ‘entangled’ with a tacit yet embedded racialized colonial logic¹⁸⁹; in this connection, Guadamuz (2017) has recently argued for the need to consider network effects in relation to the phenomenon of ‘digital colonialism’¹⁹⁰.

¹⁸⁸ The phenomenon referred to by dependency-theorists as ‘the development of underdevelopment’.

¹⁸⁹ Lake and Wong (2009) argue that political power can be an emergent property of networks, found most likely in scale-free structures; further, that central (or more connected) nodes can influence a network directly or indirectly and thereby shape the ends towards which the nodes collectively move: “Both distributed and small world networks possess little potential for power differentials, given the redundancy of connections and the equitable distribution of links in both types of structures. Highly connected nodes in scale-free networks, on the other hand, are likely to be the most powerful. Because of their critical role and the likely dissolution of the network should they be eliminated, central nodes can exploit the value created by the network to gain influence over other members. When distributional conflicts arise, these hubs are more likely to be able to impose their preferences on others. More directly, they will be able to move the network in directions they prefer and extract a relatively greater share of the network’s value. The differential power of nodes emerges from the pattern of interconnections within the network. Central nodes can also capitalize on that “structural” power by making the network more efficient and valuable to its members, further enhancing the power of the central node. The emergence of power within networks is a dynamic and self-reinforcing process.” (p.10) Crucially, however, they maintain that “over time, the power of [a] central node may appear to recede. Once the innovation has diffused broadly, and a network is created around selected principles, the network appears to become self-sustaining. As the network matures, the original innovation is ‘normalized’ such that nodes within the network can barely imagine that it could have been otherwise. Nonetheless, even though it is seldom made manifest, the power of the central node still resides in the background and, indeed, grows ever stronger with the success of the network.” (p.16) I would suggest this applies to the longe durée ‘diffusion’ of white supremacy – and the desirability of (proximity to) whiteness – as a global system in its various political and economic incarnations including the Westphalian interstate system and the neoliberal economics associated with globalization.

¹⁹⁰ Guadamuz (2017) maintains that “Western digital dominance ... has various explanations. The Internet itself started as a US military research network, so US-based services and developers had a starting advantage. For a large period of time, Internet governance relied on US-centric ICANN (which has since undergone internationalisation efforts). Furthermore, early venture capitalists invested mostly in US companies, and this dominance carried forward. Network theory teaches that early advantages are often difficult to overcome, and the network favours winner-takes-all from an architectural perspective. Furthermore, the US was able to convert this early advantage in expertise and funding into large corporations. Finally, potential competitors have been more inward looking, and not intent on global dominance. China has developed hugely successful companies like JD, Tencent, Baidu, and Alibaba which rival US counterparts in size, but these are mostly directed towards the internal market. The same happens with other successful companies such as Flipkart (India), B2W (Latin America), and Odigeo (Europe). The result is a US-centric Internet from the perspective of infrastructure and content. From the infrastructure level, the largest hosting, domain name, storage and content delivery networks are US companies. In content, Google and Facebook stand alone in their dominance of what people see and read around the world. The problem is that the content dominance becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, as these companies use their already strong dominant position to maintain the market dominance in what is often called the ‘rich-get-richer’ effect. Newer content providers in developing countries are competing with companies that have considerable resources, infrastructure, and consumer recognition.” From a decolonial perspective, I would suggest that his analysis falls short in terms of its rather truncated history, and failure to situate the military origins of the Internet against the backdrop of an attempt to maintain Western

Mueller also maintains that “after nearly all users have converged on a single network, *inertia* or *lock-in* tends to set in ... Inertia is created by the participants’ general unwillingness to give up the network benefits achieved once everyone else has converged on a common platform. Just as a user’s decision to join the network was dependent upon the decision of others to also join, so a user’s decision to abandon a network for an incompatible alternative will be strongly affected by the level of network benefits he might have to sacrifice by moving to a new network.” (p.47) Crucially, in the context of discussing the issue of ‘alignment’, Mueller maintains, against a Westphalian-centric backdrop informed by a commitment to political and economic liberalism, that a state’s “limit[ing] the cross-border movement of ... data [creates] an island that destroys the network effects and efficiencies of the global Internet.” (p.93) Here we ostensibly find a prizing of network effects and Internet efficiency in and of themselves. Yet what if these are subjected to other, overriding concerns? I would suggest that a tacit ‘Eurocentric universal’ (Wallerstein 2006) narrative of technological progress and free-market capitalism under neoliberalism is at work here, along with a certain ‘rhetorical overplay’ in the appeal to ‘inertia’ that, intentionally or otherwise, results in deterring and deferring decolonizing efforts that might be enacted by non-Western governments¹⁹¹.

Finally, attention should be drawn to the fact that network effects are ‘entangled’ with, if not generative of, the global digital divide, the latter of which both Mueller (2017) and DeNardis (2014) have argued should not be seen as an Internet governance issue as shown earlier. Crucially, according to a 2017 GCI (Global Connectivity Index) Report

hegemony and (white) world supremacy in the Cold War context following WW2. Thus, while Guadamuz points to the relationship between network effects and digital colonialism, he fails to relate both to the long *durée* history of colonialism, the core-periphery network that is the modern/colonial world system, and how persistent colonial logics operative in prior extant networks have contributed to the emergence of the Internet itself. In short, no attempt is made to engage with the ‘iterative’ racialized historical relationship between network formations.

¹⁹¹ I would suggest that this occurs through a tacit depoliticisation involving appeal to network effects as ‘natural’ phenomena; in this connection it is important to note that according to Barabási and Bonabeau (2003), “knowledge of a network’s general topology is *just part of the story* in understanding the overall characteristics and behaviour of such systems.” (p.59). Regarding the issue of ‘naturalization’ of network phenomena, Sholle (2002) maintains that “the cultural and political struggles that set in place the functions of ... new media have been to a large extent settled, and these cultural and political formations are now embedded in these technologies; they form the ‘unconscious’ of the new technology which tends to become invisible. As a result, the new media have taken up the appearance of nature.” (p.14) While concurring that such technologies have become sedimented, I draw attention to Sholle’s reference to ‘political struggle’ and the ‘appearance of nature’ in order to point to the *persistent contingency* of the Internet and the possibility of it being opened up / unsettled / de-sedimented as a site for decolonial struggle.

(Huawei 2017), due to network effects, the digital divide has become “a digital chasm”. The report goes on to state that 2017 “could conveniently be characterized as a meeting of ‘digitally-developed and digitally-developing’ nations – an evolution from the ‘digital have and have-nots’ of previous years.” (p.2)¹⁹²

In the following, penultimate section, I present an extended decolonial reflection on NWICO and WSIS with a view to drawing attention to power-relational shifts in Internet governance discourse that resulted in deferral of the decolonization project preparatory to concluding in the final section with some brief recommendations about how to *resume* and proceed with decolonizing Internet governance, targeting the issue of alignment and its ‘entanglement’ with concerns about a possible future ‘fragmentation’ of the Internet.

8. ‘From NWICO to WSIS’: Decolonial Reflections¹⁹³

During the 1960s and 1970s, “Southern countries called for a New International Economic Order (NIEO) to end economic imperialism and a New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) to eliminate cultural colonialism” in order “to create a balanced flow of information and cultural resources in the world and ... be economically and culturally self-reliant. They placed their demands at UN forums, mainly UNESCO and the International Telecommunication Union (ITU). However, they could not achieve the goals.” (Abu Buiyan 2008, pp.110-111) According to Carlsson (2005), “the new international information order rested on four cornerstones, the ‘four Ds’: *democratization* of the flows of information between countries; *decolonialization*, i.e. self-determination, national independence and cultural identity; *demonopolization*, i.e. setting limits on the activities of transnational communications companies; and *development*, i.e. national communication policy, strengthening of infrastructure,

¹⁹² The report further states that: “a three-year observation of the GCI data reveals a widening S-curve, indicating deepening inequality. The numbers tell the story: In GCI 2017, Frontrunners pulled far ahead, improving their GCI scores by 4.7 points, and Adopters by 4.5 points. But the Starters lagged farther behind, improving their GCI score on average by only 2.4 points. We are witnessing an ICT version of sociology’s ‘Matthew Effect,’ where the ‘rich get richer and the poor get poorer’ *based on accumulated advantage over time*. Policy makers in the Adopters, and especially in the Starters, must consider the growing inequality as it will have continued consequences on their ability to compete and sustain economic growth. The Frontrunners’ *growing advantage* is based on a head start in ICT Infrastructure deployment as well as expertise in five core technologies: Broadband, Datacenters, Cloud, Big Data and IoT. The GCI data show that investment in ICT Infrastructure initiates a chain reaction leading to Digital Transformation, with Cloud as a catalyst for that reaction [emphases added].” (pp.3-4)

¹⁹³ For extended historical analyses of the political shift from NWICO to WSIS as well as the earlier background of UNESCO involvement, see Carlsson (2005) and McPhail (2014).

journalism education, and regional cooperation.” (p.197) In this connection, McPhail (2014) presents a slightly more nuanced analysis of NWICO, drawing attention to the *racialized* factor associated with colonialism: “*Colonial domination, neocolonialism, racial discrimination, apartheid, media images, cultural imperialism, chronic imbalances, Western hegemony, and violations of human rights were all subject to severe criticism [emphasis added].*”¹⁹⁴ However, he maintains that “the anti-colonial rhetoric of the [proposed] new order was harsh [and] although the goals of the new order were lofty, its real objective was to *shift international power from Western core nations to a loose coalition of peripheral regions, Arab OPEC regions, non-aligned nations, and socialist countries (namely, the USSR).* The next goal was to effect a change in sociocultural priorities under the protection or guidance of NWICO [emphases added].” (p.54) Yet *was* this the case? Was the ‘real objective’ of NWICO about shifting power relations from ‘the West’ to ‘the Rest’, or was it (merely) about decentering the former in order to create a polycentric world order? Notwithstanding the answer to that question, it is important to appreciate that NWICO was ultimately abandoned on account of Western pressures which included the withdrawal of substantial financing to UNESCO, the original sponsor of NWICO¹⁹⁵. According to Carlsson (2005), “the efforts of third world countries to bring about thoroughgoing reform of the information and communication order within the framework of UNESCO, the principal norm-setting international forum in this area, failed. A political idea had to be sacrificed for the sake of development assistance.” (p.203) Crucially, in this connection she maintains that during the 1980s “the West put development and aid issues squarely on the agenda and managed to *turn the focus away from their own roles* and onto conditions in the third world countries. The international dimension was diluted, as it had been in the MacBride Commission’s work. In this we can perceive a crossroads for UNESCO on the horizon, a

¹⁹⁴ McPhail (2014) insists that “historically, the debate [on NWICO] was about aspects of electronic colonialism that the core nations did not want to hear about, deal with, or come to terms with. (p.62)

¹⁹⁵ Western governments and their media openly opposed NWICO. Carlsson (2005) maintains that UNESCO was “criticized for inefficiency and for having become ‘politicized’. *The prominence and influence of third world countries* in UNESCO in the early 1980s, a result of Director-General M’Bow’s policies, *was a source of constant irritation [emphasis added].*” (p.203) According to McPhail (2014), on their view – and it is a view, I argue, that continues to be upheld by Internet governance theorists such as DeNardis (2016) and Mueller (2010, 2017) – “only an open and free flow of information is viewed as being fully consistent with the goals of a truly free [society].” However, consistent with the position argued herein, McPhail states that “critics maintain that the free flow is really a one-way flow – from core nations to other regions of the world, with little or no reciprocity.” (p.9)

point at which the organization would have to choose between continued work on a new information order and a more decided focus on development and aid issues [emphasis added].” (p.201)¹⁹⁶ From a decolonial perspective, I want to suggest that this was, in fact, a strategic move on the part of ‘the West’, diverting the Global South from focus on NWICO in order for the Global North to consolidate its hegemony in the next ‘iterative phase’ within a (racialized) developmentalist trajectory – the transition to a global information order. In this connection, it is imperative to consider the ‘entangled’ histories of the shift from economic liberalism to neoliberalism commencing in the 1980s¹⁹⁷ with the shift in use of the Internet as a purportedly libertarian communications medium originally built by researchers to a vehicle for commercial exploitation¹⁹⁸.

¹⁹⁶ According to Carlsson (2005), “the [MacBride] Commission’s thinking alternated between the modernization and dependency paradigms; the concept of neocolonialism confronted decolonialization. But, above all, the recommendations suggested a third, alternative concept of development.” (p.212) While correct, Carlsson appears oblivious to the various critiques of dependency theory vis-à-vis the decolonization project mounted by contemporary decolonial scholars described earlier, yet appears to concede the link between modernity/coloniality and development, viz. “even if the points of departure and terms of reference used today are quite different from those [articulated in the proposal of a NWICO] in the 1970s, ‘development’ is still bound up with the modernist project of the Western world” (p.213).

¹⁹⁷ See Bessis (2001) for a useful account of the shift from economic liberalism to neoliberal ‘free-trade’ globalization commencing in the 1980s in the context of a long durée history focusing on the triumph of ‘Western supremacy’. Bessis’ account is relevant in the context of the decolonial reading of the modern/world system presented herein insofar as it engages with a range of issues that need to be taken into consideration when thinking through the nature of the present including the conquest of the Americas, the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, the growth of ‘scientific’ racism, imperialism and the scramble for Africa, ‘The White Man’s burden’ and ‘Manifest Destiny’, decolonization and the rise of ‘The West’, the ideology of development, and structural adjustment programmes associated with the IMF and World Bank. Crucially, according to Milanovic (2005, p.50), during the period 1960-1978, the mean unweighted income of ‘the Rest’ relative to ‘the West’ increased; this corresponded to the period following the anti-colonial independence struggles when economic liberalism and development were on the agenda. However, during the period 1978-2000, the mean unweighted income of ‘the Rest’ relative to ‘the West’ decreased. This corresponds to the onset of neoliberalism and globalization, a period in which the Internet transformed into a communications for commerce (or economic exploitation) medium driven by West-centric capitalism.

¹⁹⁸ Carlsson (2005) maintains that “the development of innovative information technologies and the ongoing processes of deregulation and concentration of ownership have spurred the pace of globalization.” (p.204) According to Clark (2016), “there is one set of actors that has faded from view: the federally funded research community that designed and built the Internet. From one point of view, this trajectory is proper: they did their job, the commercial world has taken over, and the Internet is now an engine of economic innovation.” (p.16) I want to argue for reinterpreting this somewhat *apolitical* techno-centric narrative in terms of the ‘operational logic’ of colonialism, viz. *military* intervention as facilitating precursor to/for *commercial* exploitation. While it might be argued that the Internet was not *imposed* on the periphery through military intervention, this argument fails to appreciate the *broader* Cold War context within which the Internet emerged as described earlier, and the possibility that ‘the net’ (web, cyberspace) was opened up as a ‘frontier’ from a US-dominated core that was later extended to the rest of the world through neo-liberal informational capitalism; on this point, see Sardar (1996).

Yet the issue of transitioning to a more equitable information order remained on the agenda. In this connection, the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS)¹⁹⁹ was a two-phase United Nations-sponsored summit on information, communication and, in broad terms, the information society that took place in 2003 in Geneva and in 2005 in Tunis. One of its chief aims was to bridge the global digital divide separating rich countries from poor countries by spreading access to the Internet in the developing world²⁰⁰. According to Abu Bhuiyan (2014) the WSIS should be seen as “a triumph of neoliberalism in global communication policymaking, as it did not make any efforts to critique the existing neoliberal political and economic environment within which decisions about ICTs are made” (p.3), the focus of WSIS being inclusion²⁰¹ (into the neoliberal order) and development as a means by which to bridge the digital divide²⁰². Carlsson (2005) maintains that “among the fundamental ideas behind the WSIS is an ambition to create a more inclusive Information Society and to bridge the digital divide in a North-South perspective.” (p.213) However, McLaughlin and Pickard (2005) maintain that “in allegedly offering a venue in which all stakeholders were welcomed, the WSIS process would unfold in such a way that, with few exceptions, *everyone would remain in*

¹⁹⁹ According to Abu Bhuiyan (2014), “the WSIS in global communication [is] the third attempt of the UN system to deal with communication. The other two events [being] the codification of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in 1948 and the movement for a New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO) which took place throughout the 1970s.” (p.2)

²⁰⁰ In its Declaration of Principles, ‘Building the Information Society: A Global Challenge in the New Millennium’, the following statement was issued: “We, the representatives of the peoples of the world, assembled in Geneva from 10-12 December 2003 for the first phase of the World Summit on the Information Society, declare our common desire and commitment to build a people-centred, inclusive and development-oriented Information Society, where everyone can create, access, utilize and share information and knowledge, enabling individuals, communities and peoples to achieve their full potential in promoting their sustainable development and improving their quality of life, premised on the purposes and principles of the Charter of the United Nations and respecting fully and upholding the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.” From a decolonial and critical race theoretical perspective, the demand for reparations for the persistent legacy effects of colonialism, not to mention the Trans-Atlantic slave trade and its role in ‘kickstarting’ the Industrial Revolution, is notable for its absence.

²⁰¹ McLaughlin and Pickard (2005) concur with this view, seeing the WSIS as a manifestation of the neo-corporate mode of governance at the global level. On their view, “the price for inclusion ... has been the erosion of an oppositional civil society” and ‘corporatist’ – that is, stable, co-operative integration – adoption of / assimilation into neoliberalism (p.357). However, like Abu Bhuiyan, McLaughlin and Pickard frame the issue in economic terms, thereby occluding the operation of racialized colonial logics.

²⁰² Regarding this divide, Carlsson (2005) maintains that “the relationships between the wealthy countries and the poor countries of the world that the MacBride Commission described at the end of the 1970s still seem to prevail, essentially unchanged, albeit some of the terminology is new. Today we speak of ‘the digital divide’ which ... actually consists of several ‘divides’: *a technological divide ... a content divide ... a gender divide ... and a commercial divide.*” (pp.204-205) Once again, I would suggest that what is omitted here, intentionally or otherwise, is the embeddedness of such divides within the divide that is ‘the global colour line’, viz. the long durée racialized ‘divide’ operative within and underpinning colonial modernity.

their place [emphasis added]" (p.367); on their view, "pluralistic approaches [such as multistakeholderism] eventually corrode into the marginalization of groups whose aims do not coincide with the demands of the neoliberal economic imperative." (p.368) Yet if the tacitly racialized logic of development remains unexplored and uncontested, to what extent is the digital divide *bridgeable* given the 'iterative' and relational nature of both development and the divide? Insofar as the WSIS agenda is tied to Millennium Development goals etc., I want to contest more mainstream readings of the 'failure' of the development project and argue instead that development has been *successful* for 'the North' if and when understood as a means by which to retrench hegemony under contestation²⁰³. Insofar as multi-stakeholder co-option – framed somewhat economistically along Eurocentric lines by McLaughlin and Pickard (2005) as 'neo-corporatism' in the service of neo-liberalism – and an ongoing commitment to the development paradigm continue to inform Global South engagements with Internet governance, I want to suggest that such stances will continue to reproduce asymmetric power relationships²⁰⁴; in this connection, consider that the discussion of Internet governance issues reported in the WSIS Forum 2017 Outcome Document (WSIS 2017) is framed in terms of multistakeholderism, ICT4D and sustainable development, with no reference to the persistent structural legacy effects of colonialism – that is, coloniality – in the proceedings²⁰⁵.

²⁰³ According to Padavani and Nordenstreng (2005), "information systems, communication gaps, development divides and the role and responsibilities of national and international actors have been keywords in both processes [i.e. articulation of a NWICO in 1976 and the WSIS in 2005]. Yet it has been surprising to notice how the WSIS developed in the absence of any historical perspective. The present communication context, with its globalizing dynamics, trends towards an 'informational paradigm' and emerging transnational actors, is profoundly different from that of the 1970s. Yet most of the developments we have witnessed in recent years find their roots in technological, societal and political changes that can be traced back to the time when proposals for a NWICO were debated." Crucially, they go on to assert that "this 'historical gap' is a major constraint ... *It is not just an innocent neglect but a deliberate omission.* In any case, lack of historical depth in facing contemporary communication challenges reflects a dubious tendency to understand such challenges as novelties on the world scene, inviting public institutions to respond with a short-sighted political approach ... by looking at the political dimension of international debates ... we can better understand similarities and differences in the contexts within which issues have been and are debated. We can identify *the continuity in problematic aspects of communication as a central element in societal organization.* And we can identify *specific interests and power relations that underline contemporary priorities in the shaping of policies* [emphases added]." (p.265) I want to suggest that 'iterativity' in the sense of discursive re-articulation of racialized onto-logics should be understood as at work here.

²⁰⁴ On this point, see Sachs (2010, pp.1-5).

²⁰⁵ It is interesting to note that no mention of the legacy system effects of colonialism, not to mention the necessity for compensation / reparations in respect thereof, appears in the NETmundial Multistakeholder Statement (NETmundial 2014). In this connection, Zapata Rioja (2014) argues that "the innovations in the

Padavani and Nordenstreng (2005) maintain that “WSIS [was] predominantly built on an information technology approach, and this is naturally too narrow and shallow for any serious analysis. NWICO was quite the opposite, with predominantly a political approach. However ... we should not reduce the issues to either politics or technology but aim for a balanced analytical approach where politics and technology have their proper place along with other relevant factors ... too much politicization tends to both reduce critical understanding and hamper practical action. The NWICO story shows that a promising beginning may turn into a fruitless political shadow play which effectively blocks even small reforms.” (pp.268-270) Regarding the point about ‘relevant factors’, as I have attempted to argue herein, these need to include those that operate *transversally*, both geographically and historically, such as racialized colonialism; on the matter of ‘over-politicization’, I would suggest, to the contrary, that ‘under-politicization’ – or rather, non-disclosure of that which is *already* politicized – and a focus on *reform* rather than *reparations* will not provide the necessary orientation to effect the decolonization of Internet governance²⁰⁶.

According to McPhail (2014), “the peripheral nations still cling to NWICO in the face of greater core nation media pressure to adopt Western philosophies, products, and practices ... Yet for the most part NWICO is a dead issue.” (pp.62-63)²⁰⁷ Can that which is ostensibly ‘dead’ be brought back to life? Interestingly, McPhail appears to concede such a possibility²⁰⁸ and consistent with this position, I argue for the need to forge a

manners of participation of NETmundial, that is a broader and inclusive MSM [Multi-Stakeholder Model], do not solve the power differences when it comes to the struggles to govern the Internet at the global level. Indeed, the São Paulo statement displays its weakness because despite its innovations, the core of the document was much influenced by the holders of central Internet governance apparatus, that is, the US government through NTIA, ICANN and the 1NET institutions.” (p.84)

²⁰⁶ Going further, and building on a line of critique initiated by Andrejevic (2013) vis-à-vis postcolonial and post-structuralist tendencies towards localism as blocking (deterring, deferring) more structuralist and globalist analyses and calls for transformation, albeit ‘extended’ to incorporate critical race theoretical and decolonial concerns, I should like to suggest that such ‘small reforms’ should be viewed as obfuscatory, albeit unintentionally.

²⁰⁷ Consider, in this regard, the following remarks from Mustapha Masmoudi, a NWICO actor: “The challenges of the past are still with us. Nowadays, the global flow of information is neither freer nor more balanced ... The tendency towards monopolistic Internet governance has not decreased, while the digital divide is growing more acute. The reflections about the New World Information and Communication Order certainly inspired the drafters of the WSIS resolutions. According to the ICSCP report, this new order was but a step in a long journey, aiming at establishing new bases of communication in all societies and between all peoples. This accounts for the renewed questioning of the current world order by South participants at the Summit.” (Masmoudi 2012, p.28)

²⁰⁸ In this connection, McPhail (2014) states that “despite the fact that some proponents still champion this vision, many believe that NWICO can no longer be taken seriously. Even UNESCO, where much of the

‘post-NWICO’ – or ‘NWICO 2.0’ – agenda along post-economistic and post-developmental lines consistent with the broader decolonial project – a project that was forestalled following decolonization and formal independence in the 1960s.

9. Concluding Decolonial Recommendations

McLaughlin and Pickard (2005) maintain that “the ‘information society’ is a label suggesting a brave new world marked by new dynamics and radical breaks with past relations – an ideological assumption connected to earlier post-industrial and neoliberal rhetorics that privilege easily commodified information over communication processes ... At a time when it is not practicable for governments to de-link from neoliberal globalization, visions based in technocratic and market-led approaches to development arrive packaged in the language of emancipation.” (p.366) While broadly concurring with their analysis, I want to problematize their rather economistic (that is, class-based) interpretation of ‘de-linking’, which goes back to Marxist economist Samir Amin, and consider alternative understandings of de-linking in relation to a topical issue within Internet governance discourse, viz. concerns over possible Internet ‘fragmentation’ due to increased statist action by non-Western governments – specifically, China, but also Russia and to a lesser extent Iran – as expressed by DeNardis (2015, 2016) and others. While some commentators such as Mueller (2017) are dismissive of such concerns on the grounds that network effects make *technical* fragmentation almost impossible and that the ‘real’ problem is (statist) *alignment*, I want to suggest that such assertions are perhaps most usefully understood as rhetorical moves resulting in deferral of the decolonial project²⁰⁹, that the issue of fragmentation is far from settled, and that it is productive to think about the issue in terms of a *decolonial* conceptualization of ‘de-linking’²¹⁰. For Mignolo (2010b) this means engaging with a ‘border thinking’ that

debate took place, has abandoned it. *Yet NWICO may be born again because of the deep divisions which emerged from the World Summit on the Information Society (WSIS) ... NWICO’s ultimate goal was a restructured system of media and telecommunication priorities in order for LDCs to obtain greater influence over their media, information, economic, cultural, and political systems. For LDCs, or peripheral nations, the current world communication system is an outgrowth of prior colonial patterns reflecting commercial and market imperatives. NWICO was promoted as a way to remove this vestige of colonial control [emphasis added].*” (p.9)

²⁰⁹ On this point, I again refer the reader to Farrell’s (1995) discussion of the possibility of rhetoric as intentional (in the sense of ‘directed’) yet unconscious / not wilful.

²¹⁰ Mueller (2010) contrasts the ‘cyberimperialism’ of those committed to nationalist hierarchical control “who would globalize governance through the extraterritorial application of one state’s laws and power” (p.258) with denationalised network “economic and social liberalism” (p.259). However, I would suggest

leads to a “de-colonial epistemic shift [that] brings to the foreground other epistemologies, other principles of knowledge and understanding and, consequently, other economy, other politics, other ethics” (p.307) By way of a decolonial recommendation, I want to suggest taking seriously a de-linking extended from the epistemological realm into ontological terrain – more specifically the socio-material space of the Internet²¹¹. More concretely, it might be *necessary* to oppose a commitment to Internet ‘universality’ and ‘openness’ in favour of statist alignment as a temporary tactical maneuver within a strategic decolonial ‘horizon’. Following Mignolo (López-Calvo 2016a, 2016b), I should like to suggest that moves by non-Western nation-states to exert local governmental control over the Internet – perhaps even its limited ‘fragmentation’²¹² – might better be understood as *de-Westernizing* ‘decentering’

this framing in terms of the opposition between a single ‘cyberimperial’ state and a transnational liberal network obscures the possibility of a collection of states creating a transnational network bloc opposed to the continued operation of racialized liberalism.

²¹¹ I would suggest that such an extension is fully consistent with the aforementioned decolonial conception of delinking and might even be latent within it insofar as Mignolo (2010b) states that “if delinking means to change the terms of the conversation, and above all, of the hegemonic ideas of what knowledge and understanding are and, consequently, what economy and politics, ethics and philosophy, *technology and the organization of society* are and should be, it is necessary to fracture the hegemony of knowledge and understanding that have been ruled, since the fifteenth century and through the modern/colonial world by what I conceive here as the theo-logical and the ego-logical politics of knowledge and understanding [emphasis added].” (p.313)

²¹² In the context of discussing the Domain Name System (DNS), Mueller (2017) maintains that “if an alternative DNS root was adopted by a significant portion of the world’s Internet users and could stay in existence for a long period of time, it would meet all the criteria for technical fragmentation ... But how likely is this to happen?” (pp.58-59) He considers “defection from the ICANN root for political reasons”, conceding that it “is conceivable that a national government with a large population, *or a coalition of them*, could establish an alternate DNS root and coerce their national ISPs to point at it. But even in these cases, network effects would trump the desire to split [emphasis added].” (pp.59-60) In short, any such attempt at fragmentation is doomed to failure on account of network effects: “the network effects and economic benefits of global compatibility are so powerful that *they have consistently defeated, and will continue to defeat*, any systemic deterioration of the global technical compatibility that the public Internet created. The rhetoric of ‘fragmentation’ is in some ways a product of confusion, and in other ways an attempt to camouflage another, more inflammatory issue: the attempt by governments to align the Internet with their jurisdictional boundaries. The fragmentation debate is really a power struggle over the future of national sovereignty in the digital world. It’s not just about the Internet. It’s about geopolitics, national power, and the future of global governance [emphasis added].” (p.3) Once again, the issue is framed in state-centric terms, viz. as a power struggle between national governments and proponents of transnational network liberalism. Yet to what extent might this be a rhetorical strategy designed to maintain the status quo in the face of de-Westernizing, if not decolonizing, contestation by non-Western national governments? Is it not possible that Mueller is, albeit unintentionally, leveraging the argument for network effects for *political* purposes? According to Barabási and Bonabeau (2003), network effects are *not* fully determinative of structural outcomes. Is it possible that Mueller is here *overplaying* the power of network effects, viz. engaging power laws along Foucauldian ‘disciplinary’ lines with the (possibly unintended) consequence of forestalling resistance to the modern/colonial order including alleged emerging ‘post-Westphalian’ transnational liberal network nation formations? According to Mueller (2017), “the inertial power created by

moves within a terrain governed by the operation of neoliberal logics²¹³. While these do not constitute *de-colonial* moves *per se*, I would suggest that transitioning to a decolonial orientation is not precluded; rather, the possibility of *facilitating* a decolonial shift presents itself, viz. de-Westernization as decolonial precursor condition²¹⁴.

In closing, and somewhat ironically borrowing from Mueller's (2010) articulation about 'cyberliberty' discussed earlier yet repurposing it in pursuit of a decolonial project²¹⁵, I should like to argue that there can be no *cyberjustice* without a decolonial movement to advance and secure redistribution of wealth and power – and personhood (that is, personal worth) – more generally on a global scale, thereby effecting the necessary compensation and reparations in respect of the legacy system effects of five centuries of European colonialism²¹⁶. In short, I insist that it is imperative to embrace the 'decolonial

two decades of convergence on the ICANN root is enormous." (p.60) Granted, yet is it *insurmountable*? Would this not be to naturalize and thereby depoliticize the ontology of the Internet, rendering it something beyond / outside of history? Is this not tantamount to endorsing socio-technical determinism? I would suggest that Mueller's entire argument against fragmentation – or rather alignment – turns on a defence of globalized liberal 'free-market' information capitalism as *a fait accompli*. Yet as argued previously, in the modern/colonial world system, this also amounts to an argument for digital *colonialism*.

²¹³ In a study aimed at attempting to articulate Internet governance 'from a Global South perspective', Zapata Rioja (2014) concludes by proposing a "heterarchic broad Multistakeholder transnational model for Internet governance, with bodies that act like imagined centers [which] could be one of the fundamental innovations the Global South can bring about to the Global Internet governance of the 21st Century." (p.89) While well-intentioned, it is unclear *how* the shift from a hegemonically – and thereby *hierarchical* – core-centric / West-centric multistakeholderism to a *heterarchical* distribution of power is to be effected.

²¹⁴ Of course, the possibility of indefinite *deferral* of the decolonial project by such non-Western, non-West-centric statist entities also presents itself.

²¹⁵ Mueller (2010) maintains that "calling for sustainability, the elimination of poverty, and social justice is one thing; it is quite another to have an ideology that provides a political movement with pragmatic guidance on how to deliver those things to a global polity." (p.260) Going further he argues that he considers the possibility of social democrats being "even more radical and mobiliz[ing] for the creation of a completely new, transnational sector specific redistributive *state* for communication-information technology [emphasis added]" (p.261), yet against this asks "what kind of a global polity would effectively combine the populations of North and South America, Europe, Africa, Russia, India, and China into a cohesive public?" (p.261) I would suggest that critical race theory and decolonial thought indeed provides the requisite *ideology* to effect social justice and that decolonial computing, with its embrace of the 'decolonial turn' and preferential option for the peripheralised, provides the required *orientation* for thinking about how to effect compensatory / reparative action in a global Internet governance context (Mueller's reference to "global polity" is problematic insofar as it does not focus on the differential positioning of body-politically marked and geo-politically situated actors within the global racialized political sphere, viz. core and periphery.) Mueller (2010) maintains that "contemporary social democrats involved in Internet governance ... continue to articulate high-sounding norms and political goals and do not worry much about how to deliver them." (p.262) Granted that the matter of identifying appropriate *institutional means* by which to effect compensatory social justice remains outstanding, does Mueller really mean to suggest that such goals should not continue to be articulated *a fortiori*?

²¹⁶ In this connection, Zapata Rioja (2014) argues that "the crisis of the liberal and representative democracy in our times, visible in the deficits of credibility and legitimacy, has given space for diverse democratic experiments and initiatives where the tensions between democracy and capitalism, and

turn' and preferential option for the racialized periphery²¹⁷. In this connection, Mills (2015b) has argued that “achieving a new world will require an admission of the white lies that have been central to the making of our current unjust and unhappy planet. Global justice demands, as a necessary prerequisite, the ending of global white ignorance” (p.225), and what he has referred to elsewhere as the ‘unwriting and unwhitening of the world’ (Mills 2015a). In the context of the present study, I conclude by asserting that this needs to extend to mainstream white ignorance concerning the discourse on Internet governance.

The decolonial writing is on the wall.

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between distribution and recognition have generated new social contracts that intend to be more comprehensive, inclusive and just.” (p.86) Drawing on the work of Portuguese decolonial theorist Boaventura de Sousa Santos, he maintains that “one fundamental difference between the transnational political struggles of our times with the traditional Western modern paradigms of social transformation – that is revolution, socialism and social democracy – is that the former are submerged in the logic of politics of equality (redistribution) and politics of difference (recognition).” (p.85)

²¹⁷ In this connection, it is crucial to bear in mind the following observation of Carlsson (2005) regarding the UNESCO MacBride Commission Report, *Many Voices, One World. Communication and Society, Today and Tomorrow* (1981), viz. “unless the necessary changes [to the global information order] were made *in all parts of the world*, it would not be possible to attain freedom, reciprocity or independence in the exchange of information worldwide [emphasis added].” (p.199) In this light, it is imperative to make a concerted effort to translate the ‘decolonial turn’ and ‘decolonial option’ into institutional forms, *both* within periphery / ‘Rest’ and within the core / ‘West’.

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