

The coloniality of desire: revealing the desire to be seen and blind spots leveraged by data colonialism as AI manipulates the unconscious for profitable extraction on dating apps

A colonialidade do desejo: revelando o desejo de ser visto e os pontos cegos alavancados pelo colonialismo de dados enquanto a IA manipula o inconsciente para extração lucrativa em aplicativos de relacionamento

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ABSTRACT

As AI penetrates increasing domains of everyday life, it is working to colonize and manipulate the unconscious for profitable extraction. This makes it important to remedy the harms of AI at the same time as those harms become harder to see. I detail the stakes of this development through an analysis of interviews and Reddit forums of users of dating apps. These apps are prototypical platforms penetrating AI ever deeper into the fabric of everyday life through a process outlined as data colonialism (Abolfathi & Santamaria, 2020; Clement, 2019; Narr, 2022; Romano, 2014; Srnicek, 2016). Data colonialism is a mode of dispossession through the extraction of data that perpetuates values forged during European colonization and its afterlife still felt around the globe (Césaire, 2001; Fanon, 2008; Federici, 2004; Hartman, 2022; Mbembe, 2017; Nandy, 1989; Patterson, 2018; Quijano, 2000, 2007), a mode of domination that has been influentially described as the “coloniality of power” (Quijano, 2000, 2007). As dating apps extract

RESUMO

À medida que a IA penetra em domínios cada vez maiores da vida cotidiana, ela trabalha para colonizar e manipular o inconsciente para uma extração lucrativa. Isso torna importante remediar os danos da IA ao mesmo tempo em que esses danos se tornam mais difíceis de ver. Neste artigo, eu detalho os riscos desse desenvolvimento por meio de uma análise de entrevistas e fóruns do Reddit de usuários de aplicativos de relacionamento. Esses aplicativos são plataformas prototípicas que penetram a IA cada vez mais profundamente no tecido da vida cotidiana por meio de um processo descrito como colonialismo de dados (Abolfathi & Santamaria, 2020; Clement, 2019; Narr, 2022; Romano, 2014; Srnicek, 2016). O colonialismo de dados é um modo de expropriação por meio da extração de dados que perpetua valores forjados durante a colonização europeia e sua vida após a morte ainda sentida em todo o mundo (Césaire, 2001; Fanon, 2008; Federici, 2004; Hartman, 2022; Mbembe, 2017; Nandy, 1989; Patterson, 2018; Quijano, 2000, 2007), um modo de dominação que tem sido influentemente descrito como a “colonialidade do poder” (Quijano, 2000, 2007). À medida que os aplicativos de

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datafied indices of unconscious desire from superficial swipes and subsequently mine this data with dynamic algorithms designed to determine the “thoughtfulness” and “attractiveness” of users (Fellizar, 2015; *Powering Tinder*, 2019), they compel users to think and behave in ways that perpetuate what I describe as the “coloniality of desire” undergirding this coloniality of power. Because this coloniality of desire feels like social death to those it renders invisible and generates stereotypes from superficial datafication, I suggest neither the lens of surveillance capitalism nor the individual privacy proposed as its remedy help to imagine how to decolonize dating apps. Instead of the liberal notion of selfhood as emerging through privacy, which was constituted from ideals of freedom borne of parasitic colonizers living off the social death of others (Patterson, 2018), decolonizing dating apps requires leveraging indigenous understandings of selfhood as only flourishing through community entanglements, something that others have forcefully argued is needed in the context of AI ethics more broadly (Escobar, 2018; Gwagwa et al., 2022; Ricaurte, 2022).

Keywords: coloniality; desire; artificial intelligence; dating apps.

The coloniality of desire can be traced back to the ritual of catholic confession beginning in the 13th century (Foucault, 1978), which called upon people to purify their souls by disavowing bodily impulses. By the 19th century, this ritual was adapted for secular power in the form of psychiatry, allowing power to take pleasure in extracting the truth of pleasure, in “captivating and capturing others by it” (Foucault, 1978, p. 71). This “biopower” fostered the life of European populations over and against populations deemed unworthy of life until it was applied to White bodies in Nazi Germany. Biopower then took on its neoliberal configuration, working through entrepreneurs of themselves looking to increase their human capital through racist dating practices (Foucault, 2010).

Online dating websites called upon entrepreneurs of themselves to maximize their romantic fortunes by quantifying compatibility through multiple choice questions, algorithmic assessments, and elaborate filtering mechanisms. As users answered questions and adjusted filters, their desires were constituted through this neoliberal apparatus encouraging them to sell themselves and assess the value of others with a market mentality (Heino et al., 2010; Illouz, 2007). This perpetuated the sexual racism prevalent in society (Curington et al., 2021; Hitsch et al.,

relacionamento extraem índices datados de desejo inconsciente de toques superficiais e, subsequentemente, extraem esses dados com algoritmos dinâmicos projetados para determinar a “consideração” e a “atratividade” dos usuários (Fellizar, 2015; *Powering Tinder*, 2019), eles obrigam os usuários a pensar e comportam-se de maneiras que perpetuam o que descrevo como a “colonialidade do desejo” subjacente a essa colonialidade do poder. Como essa colonialidade do desejo parece a morte social para aqueles que torna invisíveis e gera estereótipos a partir da dataficação superficial, sugiro que nem as perspectivas do capitalismo de vigilância nem a privacidade individual proposta como remédio ajudam a imaginar como decolonizar os aplicativos de relacionamento. Em vez da noção liberal de individualidade emergindo por meio da privacidade, que foi constituída a partir de ideais de liberdade nascidos de colonizadores parasitas vivendo da morte social de outros (Patterson, 2018), a decolonização de aplicativos de relacionamento requer alavancar os entendimentos indígenas de individualidade como florescendo apenas por meio das comunidades de engajamento, algo que outros argumentaram vigorosamente é necessário no contexto da ética da IA de forma mais ampla (Escobar, 2018; Gwagwa et al., 2022; Ricaurte, 2022).

Palavras-chave: colonialidade; desejo; inteligência artificial; aplicativos de relacionamento.

2010; Rudder, 2015), leading scholars to implore users to make more ethically informed choices when deciding with whom to date and encourage dating platforms to eliminate race and ethnicity filters (Curington et al., 2021; Hutson et al., 2018). While these appeals may have worked for users of dating websites, they are unlikely to remedy the coloniality of desire advanced on dating apps because rational user deliberation is detrimental to their business models (Narr, 2021b; Narr & Luong, 2022).

To imagine how to decolonize desire on dating apps it is important to understand the stark shift in ideology as neoliberalism gives way to data colonialism. Instead of a rational worldview calling forth entrepreneurs of themselves, data colonialism perpetuates the barbarism of the colonizer (Césaire, 2001), ritual of social death perfected in chattel slavery (Patterson, 2018), imposition of double consciousness upon the colonized (Du Bois & Marable, 2015; Fanon, 2008; Nandy, 1989), and naturalization of White, masculinist, heteropatriarchy through depictions of non-Europeans as sexually deviant (Benjamin, 2019; Noble, 2018; Patil, 2018). Data colonialism thus shows how accumulation through data extraction perpetuates a mode of power rooted in five hundred years of imperial domination (Couldry & Mejjias, 2019; Quijano, 2000). This power has rendered dichotomies

central to European epistemologies hegemonic around the globe, including the valuation of the soul and mind over the body, the separation of reasoning subject from objectified body, and the assumption that all intelligence comes from European civilizations (Quijano, 2007). Understanding this coloniality of power advanced by data colonialism is necessary for unpacking problematic forces on dating apps as they calibrate resources to generate mindless, habitual, and compulsive attempts at superficial recognition (Abolfathi & Santamaria, 2020; Clement, 2019; Courtois & Timmermans, 2018; Curry, 2021; Narr, 2021b, 2021a, 2022; Narr & Luong, 2022). This habitual engagement allows dating apps to datafy indices of unconscious desire and string it into a collective unconscious ripe for profitable extraction. This indicates the conscious racism, sexism, and normativity of gender and sexuality found in messages, profiles, and interface designs of dating apps (Bivens & Hoque, 2018; Byron et al., 2021; Ferris & Duguay, 2020; Lauckner et al., 2019; Lee, 2019; Murray & Sapnar Ankerson, 2016; Peck et al., 2021; Pym et al., 2021; Sullivan, 2021) is the mere tip of an iceberg perpetuating the coloniality of desire.

Outside of a broader data colonialism perspective, the racism informing dating markets is often depicted as a holdover from a racist past that will simply need a bit more time to dissipate as individual behaviors gradually conform to ethical ideals already widely held (Rudder, 2015). Highlighting the epistemological roots of colonial relations advanced through data colonialism renders this view untenable. Rather than waiting for people to become less racist or imploring users to act more ethically, data colonialism reveals persistence dualisms – sacred-profane, mind-body, rational-irrational, subject-object, colonizer-colonized, civilized-barbaric, black-white, and man-woman – that need to be deconstructed in order to eliminate its pernicious effects. While AI is purported to be intelligent, data colonialism shows that the large swaths of precarious workers it requires (Gray & Suri, 2019), historical marginalization it perpetuates (O’Neil, 2016), and colonial beauty standards it amplifies (Benjamin, 2019; Noble, 2018) are, at root, a matter of epistemic violence now perpetuated against the majority of the world (Ricaurte, 2022).

The ideology that AI is intelligent is central to its capacity to penetrate ever-deeper into the interstices of everyday life (Atanasoski & Vora, 2019). The coloniality of desire that I document in this article highlights the fact that this ideology resides within the body and unconscious more than conscious thoughts. It is spread by habituating users to the latest trending app through addicting protocols (Chun, 2016; Hayles, 2017; Paasonen, 2021; Pettman,

2016; Sampson, 2020), penetrating the home through the intimacy of voice (Hurel & Couldry, 2022), naturalizing AI directed learning at a young age (Hillman, 2022), and creating user resignation to algorithmic exploitation (Dencik & Cable, 2017; Draper & Turow, 2019). By cultivating habitual engagement that circumvents consciousness, tech companies leverage a libidinal economy borne of European domination (Beller, 2021; Clough, 2018). As Mbembe notes, we must face, head on, the ghosts – or people reduced to stereotypes – that emerge from this colonial unconscious if humanity is to be restored to those who are objectified by the coloniality of desire (2017, p. 32).

Uncovering the coloniality of desire embedded in the collective unconscious generated by AI requires an understanding of the long history of capitalist extraction through dispossession. Many have noted that this is ignored by Zuboff, who sees surveillance capitalism as a recent perversion of liberal progress (Barassi, 2021; Breckenridge, 2020; *Capitalism’s New Clothes* | Evgeny Morozov, 2019; Couldry & Mejias, 2021). I add to these critiques by noting that privacy as the obvious remedy to surveillance capitalism also ignores the relational locus of the self that has been detailed by many feminists, critical race, and queer scholars (Amoore, 2020; Berlant & Warner, 1998; D’ignazio & Klein, 2020; Haraway, 1990; Hayles, 1999; Noble, 2018). These scholars note that the self is always embedded in a matrix of sociopolitical forces that liberal humanists elide when they champion autonomy and freedom as the fount of selfhood. This liberal notion of selfhood ignores the community entanglements central to indigenous understandings of selfhood that were prevalent prior to the spread of Eurocentrism around the globe (Escobar, 2018; Gwagwa et al., 2022). It also ignores the dialectical emergence of ideals of freedom and liberal selfhood with the largest and most ruthless expansion of slavery and social death ever seen (Patterson, 2018). Decolonizing online dating may thus require actively rectifying the coloniality of desire by recognizing, responding to, and mitigating the ways in which data colonialism renders certain individuals socially invisible.

Methods

Because algorithms are proprietary, they are hard to study. This leads Kitchen to argue that critical algorithm scholars should use a combination of methods as compensation for the drawbacks of using any one single method in isolation (Kitchen, 2017, p. 22). I thus combine an analysis of interviews with a content analysis of Reddit forums in this paper. I explain why I use Reddit forums after describing my interviews.

Interviews

All aspects of my interview protocol were given IRB approval by The Human Research Protection Program (HRPP). 48 respondents were found using snowball sampling, starting with my own network of friends on Facebook and in real life. I invited anyone who had used a

dating platform in the past to participate. The most common platforms used by my respondents were Bumble, Tinder, and OkCupid. The average age of the sample was 32 years old. Three respondents were students, 41 were working in NYC, and four were unemployed. There were 18 men, 30 women, 29 white, 19 non-white, 27 straight, and 11 non-straight users. A chart of basic demographic information of my respondents is provided in the **table 1**.

Lisa	38	Asian	straight	woman
Sean	32	Indian American	straight	man
Amy	31	White	straight	woman
James	31	White	straight	man
Philip	21	White	straight	man
Tom	24	Black	gay	man
Leslie	34	White	straight	woman
Jenn	25	White	straight	woman
Neil	44	White	straight	man
Jon	20	Asian	straight	man
Ted	32	Middle Eastern	straight	man
Ben	28	Hispanic	straight	man
Kieth	25	White	queer	man
Roy	29	White	straight	man
Rick	31	White	gay	man
Mandy	38	White	straight	woman
Leah	26	Asian	straight	woman
Rose	30	White	straight	woman
Troy	35	Hispanic, Asian	gay	man
Lucy	40	White	straight	woman
Henry	36	White	straight	man
Jolene	25	Asian	straight	woman
Lina	52	White	straight	woman
Alicia	38	Black	straight	woman

Lory	46	White	straight	woman
Jenny	31	Asian	straight	woman
Alexis	56	White	straight	woman
Jeff	38	White	straight	male
Ada	38	White	straight	woman
Jane	39	White	straight	woman
Clair	34	Jewish	straight	woman
Daina	23	Arabic	heteroflexible	woman
Leo	27	White	polyamorous	man
Sandy	20	White	bi	woman
Hilary	24	White	straight	woman
Valarie	24	Indian	straight	woman
Stacy	20	Asian	pansexual	woman
Sara	49	White	straight	woman
Bob	28	White	queer, heteroflexible	man
Grace	38	Indian	straight	woman
Beth	37	Indian	straight	woman
Jean	34	White	straight	woman
Mia	36	White	straight	woman
Crystal	45	Black	straight	woman
Charlotte	29	White	straight	woman
Sophia	30	White	straight	woman
Ian	22	Indian	straight	man
Casey	21	White	gay	man

Table 1

The respondents were diverse in terms of nationalities, being originally from Spain, India, England, Australia, Peru, Sweden, China, and Japan. Interviews were open-ended to allow respondents to expand upon unique experiences. Interviews also included a “media go-along” protocol, in which I asked respondents questions as they

navigated their dating apps (Jørgensen, 2016). I do not consider this to be an ethnography because the interviews did not emerge from participant observation.

The interviews took 56 minutes on average. After transcribing them, I changed identifying information, coded them for recurring experiences, and grouped these

codes into broader themes using thematic analysis, critical discourse analysis, and Atlas.TI (Guest et al., 2012). Only a few of my respondents were familiar with the algorithmic systems used by dating websites or apps, as is consistent with other research on dating platforms (Sharabi, 2020; Tong et al., 2016). I thus also analyzed reddit forums to get a better sense of how some users conceive of the algorithms governing their engagement.

Content Analysis of OkCupid and Tinder Subreddit Forums

Algorithmic effects can be inferred from my interviews, but because Reddit users are technologically savvy (Sattelberg, 2019), they provide greater detail to flesh out how online daters perceive algorithms. Reddit forums also provided longitudinal data, with posts and comments spanning from 2010 to 2020, a period when perspectives of algorithmic media became more pessimistic (Dencik & Cable, 2017; Draper & Turow, 2019; Zuboff, 2019). While Reddit users skew White, young, and male compared to the US population (Clement, 2020; Sattelberg, 2019), the semi-anonymity of Reddit also allows users to express how they feel about politically volatile topics (Lee, 2019).

To home in on the most prominent themes discussed in these forums pertaining to algorithms, I searched for “algorithm” and sorted by the “top” posts of “all time.” I chose this “top” filter because I wanted to avoid privileging new posts, which happens in all the other sorting mechanisms Reddit offers. These other sorting mechanisms are useful for being part of the discussion. Instead of being part of the discussion, I wanted to analyze posts and discussions that had garnered the most attention. I thus read posts starting from the most popular until I reached thematic saturation, when no new codes were discovered in three posts and discussions in a row.

As my reason for analyzing Reddit forums was to get a better sense of how users perceive algorithmic recommender systems, I omitted posts about a “best message” algorithm and an “attractiveness scale” algorithm that OkCupid has used, which are not part of its recommender system. After excluding these posts, my sample included 25 posts and their comments from OkCupid’s subreddit and 14 posts and their comments from Tinder’s subreddit. I used thematic analysis to code these threads. I then collapsed these codes into broader themes. I also omitted the handles and identifying information of Reddit users in this article, as is appropriate when presenting online comments (Hallinan et al., 2020).

Findings

In the findings detailed below, I first show that becoming invisible feels like social death on dating apps. I then show that the blind spots generated from superficial datafication allow dating apps to extract unconscious desires from users.

The desire to be seen on dating apps

On dating apps, users worry that they have become invisible, both to other users and the algorithms that curate today’s dating networks. The following post from Bumble’s subreddit exemplifies this concern:

The first couple days I just right swiped away. Seemed like a goldmine when I got 10+ matches the first day. Only 2 or 3 that I was legit interested in, but still, if that kept going, I’d be sure to have some luck with it, right? Now, it’s been 5 days of no matches, so clearly, they put a block on my profile and it just won’t show. I even tried swiping left a bunch, to offset the ratio, and then actually went through and selectively swiped but still nothing. Also, I messaged the app support and they claimed my account was fine, but I don’t think they can see the algorithm has rendered my account unviewable. It’d nice if they could mention that it would happen before ruining the app for you.

The quote above is not unique. Bumble’s subreddit is filled with users trying to figure out how the algorithm works, how to game it to get more and better matches, and complaining about how rigged online dating is. This is true of Tinder’s subreddit as well. Users are concerned with how these algorithms work because they want the resources they allocate, such as quality profiles to swipe through and becoming more visible to other users. Through trial and error and paying attention to feedback provided by dating apps, users come up with theories about the best way to be seen and valued by algorithms (Bandinelli & Gandini, 2022; Ytre-Arne & Moe, 2021). Because the economy is now predicated on the promise of AI to deliver increasingly accurate predictions of user behavior by mining increasing amounts of data, the feedback users receive often compels users to feed apps more data in order to be discernible to algorithms and ensure one’s

selfhood by feeding and reproducing “a hunger for data on and around the self” (Fourcade and Johns, 2020, p. 809). In other words, users try to discern what algorithms want in order to become more visible (Cotter, 2019). It is worth noting that the OP in the quote above was concerned with an algorithm ostensibly devised to determine the thoughtfulness of Bumble users (Fellizar, 2015). While Bumble does not explain to its users precisely how its algorithm determines their thoughtfulness, the quote above shows that users try to provide this algorithm with behavioral data that it will determine to be thoughtful.

On Tinder’s subreddit, a similar concern with what is commonly referred to as an “attractiveness” scale is discernable. Users feel this scale privileges users who received a lot of right swipes, especially if they swipe left on people who swiped right on them. This is indicated by a post featuring a meme of Drake with two images stacked on top of each other. In the top image, Drake is shown scoffing at the idea of swiping right on someone who is super hot. In the bottom image, he is shown triumphantly swiping left on users that are way out of his league. This meme expresses the absurd satisfaction users get from swiping left (or disliking) users they find attractive. Swiping left on attractive users generates satisfaction because users are conditioned through algorithmic feedback to think Tinder uses an elo-inspired attractiveness scale to determine the visibility of users, with users receiving more likes than they give having a high rating and thus becoming more visible. Tinder has admitted to using just such a rating system but claims its algorithm is more sophisticated now (*Powering Tinder*, 2019). Despite this assurance, users are skeptical of this claim, noting that the vague description of how it now works sounds nearly identical to its old ranking system. For instance Arch (2020) says, “the Elo score and the new ranking system are almost the same. Despite Tinder officially announcing it as a completely different thing, there’s nothing to suggest that’s the case.”

On Grindr, users are not sorted by an algorithm but through filters that users choose. Casey explains that free filters include age, looking for, and tribe, such as “bear, clean-cut, daddy, discrete, geek, jock, leather, otter, paws, rugged, trans, and twink.” You can only use one filter at a time unless you pay for a subscription. Casey notes that a subscription also gives you access to more filters, such as”

height, weight, body type, sexual position, ethnicity, and relationship status. So, like if you are serious about using Grindr, you can find exactly what you need. – have you ever paid for it? – no but recently they had a promotion where it was like a

week free for that. So, I did that. It was crazy cause you could literally search for whoever you wanted. I put in like age, height, weight, race, position. I found exactly the person that I wanted.

While not an algorithm, this sorting process encourages users to objectify themselves and others in a way that reads them to be inserted into the coloniality of desire.

The “attractiveness” scale devised by Tinder, “thoughtfulness” scale devised by Bumble, and process of objectification on Grindr are prominent ways that the habitual behavior of online daters are coupled with interface protocols, algorithms, and sorting mechanisms today. In their desire to be seen and recognized by algorithms and others, users try to discern, through trial and error, how to be thoughtful and attractive to algorithms and by objectifying themselves. As the quotes above indicate, users work to become visible on dating apps by appealing to others as they swipe and scroll through images. It is thus worth taking a closer look at how users feel about these processes.

Superficiality of swiping and scrolling

Users feel that swiping for dates is superficial and unlikely to lead to quality matches because of the limited information that they think can be gleaned from swipes. Respondents note that swiping is an activity that they engage absentmindedly, and they usually base their swipes on the physical appearance of potential dates as indicated by their photos. Most users feel this is superficial and will not lead to the substantial connections they are looking for. For instance, Alicia says swiping is

really difficult for me because I’m not. My attraction generally isn’t driven by physicality, you know. And it’s so physical, you know. And it’s. – It’s physical but there is also like different kinds of pictures. Like he has a guitar there. Do you usually look at the face? – Yeah, I don’t look at like what they do. I don’t look at their like activities. When they are trying to show themselves in activities, I don’t care about that. – Haha, you just look at if you think he is attractive. – Yeah, and that’s hard for me. Because I’m not. I don’t think many men are attractive.... It’s just not the way I really experience men.

Many of my respondents felt the same way as Alicia and would often note that they wanted more information to

make decisions about whom to date, such as political beliefs, personality, moral convictions, etc. For instance, Diana notes that she liked to use OkCupid when it was more popular because it allowed her to see if her matches were into

politics or community stuff or care for the environment and stuff like that or traveling. ... Then, I look at their questions, and I guess there is like a few questions that I particularly care about. So, if they ... say that they won't date overweight people, that's a no. If they say that they wouldn't date people that are sex workers or that have been, that's a no. If they say that they don't like pubes, that's a no. Honestly, I'm not going to shave my pubes.

As OkCupid has lost much of its market share to swipe-based dating apps, users have become habituated to using swipe apps. Instead of reading through profiles to discern political beliefs and looking at questions to make sure there are no deal breakers, users quickly swipe through images like Jenn, who is explaining her swiping decisions to me as she swipes.

I don't like his face. I don't like his smile. Closed-mouth smile [swipe left] – No? [my words are in bold] – That's a bad sign. Come on! Closed-mouth smile in every photo. No bio. No nothing to redeem him. Financial analyst. So many negatives. Not good. – Well, here's an open mouth. – Yeah. I don't like his teeth. I don't like his whole head. It's a big head. Nope [swipe left]. This guy's going to be awful. He has such a tiny head. You can't see what he looks like. No, no, no, no, no, no, no, no. haha [she is swiping left with each "no" here]. I don't have to explain this do I? hahah. – I mean, all I'm going to have is just a bunch of noes. – Those were all weirdos. OK, they were all threes.

Because swipe apps are so popular, users feel they have to engage them in order to have access to quality dating prospects, even though they generally despise using them. Redditer's in particular are cynical about the superficiality of dating apps and their dominance within the dating app ecology. A typical example comes from OkCupid's subreddit: "the match % has gotten less helpful over time, and they [OkCupid] seem to be stubbornly focused on getting people to swipe instead of encouraging people to write and read thoughtful profiles. It's a shame." Thus, as the dating app ecology has morphed from dating websites to apps,

users understand that their engagement is being datafied to generate profits rather than compatible matches.

The new generation of apps may be even more superficial than Tinder. Jenn notes that on Happn

*each person's profile is a square and you just scroll, and so it's like even more shallow. Because with Tinder you thought it was shallow with just swiping left and right, but with Happn you can scroll through ten profiles in a second. Because the active scrolling through your news feed. – **So you can't even see what they look like.** – I know. But you become like a computer, you know what I mean? Where you're just like, you already know the ratio of like the eyes to the lips and to the everything and you're just scrolling, you already, like, know. It's sick, it's not a nice thing to treat people that way.*

This grid feature is similar to how Grindr functions. Grindr is used by men who have sex with men and is the first dating app created. By comparing different interfaces, Rick argues the amount of information on profiles influences how people view each other.

I think they skew the way you look at people in different ways. So, OkCupid is really about crafting a profile and making yourself seem like an individual. And then, you know, Tinder you only have a few sentences to describe yourself. So, it's usually something generic and quirky. You know, I have a sense of humor. This is one funny thing about me. And then, you know, it's four pictures of you. And then Grindr, you know, is just your, like, your headshot, for lack of a better term, and then two words about you. But no one really reads the words. So, I think they all come with really different expectations.

Rick is implying here that as one goes from OkCupid to Tinder to Grindr, the reduction of information on profiles leads to expectations that do not align with his desire for a substantial connection. This lack of valuable information from which to discover compatible others was a key theme in most of my interviews

In today's dating app ecology, particular kinds of information useful for monetization (e.g., images that encourage swiping and scrolling) are prevalent while other kinds of information (e.g. political convictions that users consider more important for compatibility) are not. As Calzati notes, datafication is "the translation of human

experience into a set of discrete givens,” which necessarily foregrounds certain aspects of a process while leaving other aspects “in the background” (2021, p. 924). This process of ignoring much information is inherent to an economy founded on big data. As Thatcher and others have outlined: “conversion from an individual datum to an aggregated, digital commodity necessitates linking data across users, spaces, and times. These amalgamated data become necessarily large (‘big’) and thus a site for algorithmic selection, interpretation, and analysis as to what data to include and exclude” (2016, p. 995). Thus, while the epistemological orientation of big data is that meaning emerges naturally from the “quantification of life” (Thatcher et al., 2016, p. 992), dating apps indicate that correlations found in big data are often lucrative because of the information they ignore. As I show below, the lack of information that users think would be beneficial to know on apps perpetuates the coloniality of desire.

Coloniality of desire

The coloniality of desire on swipe-based dating apps perpetuates social invisibility through algorithmic valuations of attractiveness and thoughtfulness generated from the superficial information gathered from swipes. How this works is illustrated by Jenn as she swipes through images after explaining that she did not like Coffee Meets Bagel because it was full of “nerdy Asian guys”:

I just don't like that it is like part of his face. [swipe left] – Oh, because it's like the side of his face? – Yeah, and he's not smiling too – This next one is smiling. – I don't like this one. I don't know. I'm just not into his look. – You can see more of his face. Any particular part of the look that you do not like or is it something you just can't explain? – Yeah, I just don't like that at all. – Like the sunglasses are too flashy or something? – I don't like the beard. [swipe left] -- Okay that makes sense. Another guy with a beard? – [swipe left] No it's just not attractive to me. [swipe left] – Him neither? – Not him either. Not him either. [swipe left] – You seem to swipe a lot to the left. – Yeah, if there is no picture then definitely not. [swipe left] This one is like blurry. – He is blurry? – He looks like kind of smart though, so I will look. – Okay, he has glasses. Looks like a dancer. – Oh that's weird no, yeah no. [swipe left] – No? – No, sunglasses you can't really see, I just feel like they have

something to hide, you know? [swipe left] – If they have sunglasses? Okay. – No, he has a kid, even though he might say that is my nephew, I still won't. [swipe left] – Even though, huh? – This one is all blurry. [swipe left] I don't like his sunglasses. [swipe left] – What's with the sunglasses on all of these guys? – I just don't like it. – Yes, I understand, I don't know why people would put sunglasses on their first picture. – Not attracted to Black guys. [swipe left]

Jenn finds it hard to feel attraction when part of the face is hidden, if it is blurry, or if a beard or sunglasses are covering it up. For Black guys, however, no face is sought. Mbembe is useful here. He says that race replaces the

face by calling up, from the depths of the imagination, a ghost of a face, a simulacrum of a face, a silhouette that replaces the body and face of a human being. Racism consists, most of all, in substituting what is with something else, with another reality. It has the power to distort the real and to fix affect, but it is also a form of psychic derangement, the mechanism through which the repressed suddenly surfaces. When the racist sees a Black person, he does not see that the Black person is not there, does not exist, and is just a sign of a pathological fixation on the absence of a relationship. We must therefore consider race as being both beside and beyond being. It is an operation of the imagination, the site of an encounter with the shadows and hidden zones of the unconscious. (Mbembe, 2017, p. 32)

Jenn does not indicate that she feels bad about discounting Black guys for dates. But Lory finds it important to insist that she is not racist after she quickly swipes left on a Black person's profile.

I'm not usually attracted to men who are chubby, but it really depends. But he looks a little sloppy. – To chubby? – No just sloppy, and ... I feel like it's so much easier for you guys to take care of yourself than it is for us to So, when you're not doing it, I feel like that's a bad sign.... Gosh this whole conversation is making me feel like a bitch.... But I have also had amazing physical relationships with men who are a little bit bigger, or one in particular was phenomenal. But we also met in person, and so, I got to know him. So, if I'm just going by a

*photo at first it's just, I can't do it.... [swipe left] Sometimes I can tell when guys are dumb, I know that's really mean. Sometimes I can tell, or they are from the background that is just not going to understand quality. It's all superficial, but then I always do a little more research. [swipe left] So, this guy I don't normally, I don't love bald. And he doesn't say anything. But he has a really good face, so why not [swipe right]. [swipe left] Did you see what just happened? – **You swiped left right away.** – I usually am not attracted to African American – **Oh, okay.** – It's extremely rare, although there is someone in my life that I dated recently who is actually Caribbean American. Usually, I'm not attracted. So, I was thinking if anyone ever saw me do that, they would think that I am a racist. But I'm not. I just know. I'm not usually attracted to Asian men either. And then I had a bad experience with an Indian man. – **How did you meet the person that you went out with?** – We worked together. We worked together. And it was lovely.... It's weird. It's hard to explain. And he's a lovely, lovely man. He's beautiful. I don't know how to explain it.*

Lory finds it hard to explain how lovely she found a Black man despite knowing that she is rarely attracted to Black men. And while her rejection of men for superficial reasons makes her feel “like a bitch,” her immediate rejection of a Black person’s profile, despite my insistence that she linger on each profile to explain her thought process, does not make her feel racist. This immediate reaction prior to conscious judgement points to the entrenched nature of the coloniality of desire. As Wilderson III notes more generally, “when driven by the force of one’s unconscious one often plays out one’s role with a deeper sense of commitment to maintaining the paradigm of despotic violence into which one has been stitched and stamped from the beginning.” (2020, p. 86)

While Jenn and Lory show how apps extract the coloniality of desire from users, Tom describes how it feels to be on the receiving end of racist valuations on dating apps.

I'm a huge fetish. Like on Grindr people are ruthless. Like on Grindr so many headless torsos telling you like, “no spice, no rice, or no Blacks, or no fatties, or Whites only, or Blacks only, and stuff like this. And some guy messaged me, “I like the chocolate's cream.” And I'm like, “oh boy.”

That's what I woke up to this morning. What am I doing? One guy, because Grindr didn't originally have that account system, that cloud-based service. If you would get on Grindr, you'd hate your life after a while, and you'd delete it. And you'd be like, “what am I doing?” And you get back on. And it's this whole cycle. But there's people that message you. And you block them. And it's this whole cycle. And then, this one time, there was this guy who would always message me, and I said after a while, “what are you doing? You know I don't really want to talk to you.” And then he calls me the N-word. And he blocks me. And I'm like, “OK. Cool.” So, that's how I woke up one morning. And that was an interesting experience. And you can do it. Whatever. Because it's mostly anonymous anyways. Or as anonymous as you want it to be. But it's really interesting. So, seeing that especially conflict with different virtues around me definitely made me more cynical or skeptical of the idea of relationships.

Tom, waking up to a gaze addressing him as a fetish or an n-word, begins to see his desire for a relationship and emotional connection as a “weird obsession,” which he notes has been stricken from his psyche.

Discussion/Conclusion

The findings above show that reducing information available on dating apps makes a deliberate attempt to assess the compatibility of users all but impossible. This leads users to become resigned to swiping or scrolling based on stereotypes rather than information they care about, such as political alignment. This also allows for the amplification of coloniality through a distributed unconscious undergirding AI, where users can distance themselves from thought processes steeped in coloniality that are often racist and unconscious, while nevertheless becoming inextricably embedded within those thought processes. Black men and women experience this distributed unconscious as becoming invisible within dating networks. As this invisibility is experienced as social death, surveillance does not point to the harm of AI-driven capitalism. Instead, the harm of AI-driven capitalism is the ghostly return of racist ideologies advancing the coloniality of desire as an intricate component of the formation of self and individual private choice. Instead of individual privacy and autonomous selfhood, then, imagining solutions to data colonialism requires an acknowledgement of the coloniality

of desire affording surplus pleasure for some over and against the social death of others. It is this distributed unconscious of AI that must be interrogated as we transition from neoliberal subjects to objects conforming to the dictates of data colonialism, where algorithmic assessments of attraction and thoughtfulness ostensibly made through intelligent algorithms colonize and manipulate the unconscious for profits. In this context, seeing privacy as a panacea for data colonialism is a ruse allowing us to ignore the work needed to create public spaces where recognition is afforded to all. Instead of starting from a notion of

the self based on privacy, where people are free to be invisible, we should instead start from the idea that we are inextricably tethered together, all the way down to a distributed unconscious undergirding AI. This may seem dystopian, but this premise is necessary for imagining how to eradicate the coloniality of desire. Only from within this collective unconscious, by understanding our position within it, can we strike the spark that will set this iteration of the plantation ablaze, burning it down “from the inside out” (Wilderson III, 2020, p. 103).

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