REVIEW ESSAY

The Code. Silicon Valley and the Remaking of America by Margaret O'Mara (2020) Penguin Books, New York, 512pp., $US20.00 paperback, ISBN: 9780399562204

ABSTRACT

Silicon Valley has emerged as the key metaphor of the innovation-led economic development in the 21st century. As the Valley's technology monopolies and utopias expand, there is a growing need for critical histories that help to ground and contextualize the futures that are spreading from San Francisco Bay. In this review essay, I suggest that a settler-colonial approach offers interesting possibilities for the creation of such histories. To demonstrate how such an approach works, I develop a settler-colonial reading of Margaret O'Mara's recent book *The Code: Silicon Valley and the Remaking of America* (2019). By critically analysing the key metaphors in O'Mara's celebrated book, the global and violent face of the Valley becomes visible. The settler-colonial approach, I conclude, offers one possible analytical approach to breaking the stranglehold of America-centred understanding typical of the histories of Valley.

Introduction

Marketed as the 'definitive history of Silicon Valley', Margaret O'Mara's *The Code: Silicon Valley and the Remaking of America* (2019) is quickly becoming the go-to book in narrating the story of the nerve-centre of techno-capitalism. By uncovering the webs among Valley, Wall Street and Washington, O'Mara skilfully connects the Valley to its modern American context. Despite the merits of *The Code*, O'Mara's framing of Silicon Valley as a modern 'only-in-America story' (pp.2, 7, 389) erases the systemic violence that is integral to the history and contemporary reality of the Valley. O'Mara's version of the Valley begins in the 1940s, remains largely within the borders of the United States and dwells on the elite stories of high-technology professionals, politicians and billionaires. Underneath this story, however, there is another valley, a valley of violence filled with indigenous and non-white protagonists whose histories O'Mara's narrative conceals. My purpose in this review essay is to make this expelled valley visible through a critical reading of some of *The Code's* key metaphors and slips of the tongue. These slippages take us into alternative origin points, geographies and protagonists that go beyond O'Mara's enclosed histories. Beyond the enclosed valley of innovation, I argue, lies a valley of settler-colonial expansionism**.**

O'Mara's modern American enclosure

O'Mara's structures her book as a chronological narrative. Starting from World War II and ending in 2018, O'Mara explores the role of the key individuals and institutions that gave birth to the networks of capital, technology and politics that created the Valley. Importantly, O'Mara demonstrates how the 'new economy was deeply intertwined with the old' (p.7), explaining how the technological revolutions 'from the Valley' were financed through defense funding, pension funds and gilded-age fortunes. O'Mara, like Mazzucato (2013), argues that it was ultimately the taxpayers' money – channelled into Stanford and startups – that produced digital revolutions, later commercialized by 'big technology' (pp.310, 352).

O'Mara's work is helpful in fleshing out the American institutional context of Silicon Valley. She challenges the libertarian self-image of the Valley by narrating how high-technology

leaders from Steve Jobs to Peter Thiel and the founders of Google have actively lobbied for deregulation and commodification of the internet in Washington, and benefitted a great deal from generous government subsidies, tax policies and low interest rates (pp.76, 124, 162, 220, 217, 352, 385, 391). O'Mara also emphasizes the crucial role of military interests in the makings of the Valley and helps to contextualize the emergence of the CIA's and the Pentagon's venture capital activities (p.385). The historical symbiosis between the US state and big technology becomes clear. Her work, however, fails to bring forth the systemic 'othering' that this symbiosis was founded upon in the 1940s. Indeed, from the Second World War to the Cold War and from the 'War on terror' to Trump's war on refugees and migrants, enemy images have shaped and directed the march of American innovation. Marginalizing this history, O'Mara reproduces these enemy images in her final pages (pp.398–403). For O'Mara, the authoritarianism, populism, racism and violence spreading through the digital networks of the Valley come from outside America, specifically from Russia and China. In her analysis, it is the lack of political understanding among the boy wonders of the Valley and their naivety that allow these bad actors to manipulate the Valley's wonders. Indeed, O'Mara seems rather blind to the anti-democratic forms of surveillance capitalism that thrive between big technology and the US government (Lyon, 2003; Zuboff, 2019), and to the systemic violence hidden in the very designs of big technology's digital networks (Bridle 2018; Ali 2017). In O'Mara's world, the authoritarian impulse of the innovation economy lies beyond America.

Importantly, O'Mara's enclosed modern temporalities and America-centred geographies are not unique, but characterize both critical (Walker, 2018; Bridle, 2018; Cohen, 2018) and celebratory (Berlin, 2017; Fisher, 2018; Lewis, 1999) narratives of the Valley. Indeed, the works that systematically link the Valley to global and connected histories and geographies have been few and far between (Pellow and Park, 2002; Spencer, 2019; Noble and Roberts, 2019). American exceptionalism emerges as the foundational myth from which the story of the Valley becomes retold. O'Mara's individualist and upper-class focus – featuring entrepreneurs, governors and presidents – is also typical of the enclosed histories of the Valley. Sometimes, following the liberal idea of 'diversity', she tells the stories of women and non-white 'techies'. Race, class and gender as analytical categories do not feature in O'Mara's work. Using *The Code's* keywords and insights as a point of departure, now I move to a settler-colonial and global reading that, perhaps, is better equipped to form a systemic image on the roots and current expansions of the Valley.

The allegories between settler-colonialism and Silicon Valley

As an alternative to O'Mara's modern America-centrism, I join with Noble and Roberts (2019, p.10) in suggesting that the linkages between the rise of the Valley and earlier and ongoing (settler) colonial and imperial processes are worth exploring. To read a text from a settler-colonial point of view is to focus on the returns and transformations of settler-colonial practices and stories that facilitate the dispossession, exploitation and appropriation of non-white territories, bodies and knowledge. While the analysis of settler-colonial continuities is particularly relevant in the context of settler-colonial states, such as the US, I approach settler-colonialism not as a fixed unique structure, but as one of the background literatures for understanding the continuations and transformations of colonial imaginations and practices in contemporary globalization. I particularly follow McElroy (2020a) who, by analysing the technology term 'digital nomad', demonstrates how transnational allegorical structures connect Silicon Valley to (settler) colonial fantasies and practices. O'Mara's work, unconsciously perhaps, reproduces such allegories and – as I suggest later – normalizes the material settler-colonial practices of dispossession on the ground.

The settler-colonial idea of the frontier is one of the key metaphors that finds a new home in O'Mara's narration on the expansion of the 21st-century digital economy in Silicon Valley. While O'Mara rightly observes that Silicon Valley finds frontier metaphors 'irresistible' (p.286) and carries 'plenty of John Wayne and very little native American history' (p.287), her narration of the Valley reproduces the white frontierism of the Wild West (Slotkin, 1973; Pippin, 2010). Thus,

she portrays Silicon Valley as an 'endless frontier' (p.17) where venture capitalists emerge as 'convention-bucking cowboys' (p.70) and entrepreneurs are 'high-technology cowboys and cowgirls' (pp.185, 317–18) riding into the *'terra incognita* of consciousness*'* (p.128). O'Mara's affinity to settler-colonial metaphors is, however, nothing new in the imaginations of techno-capitalism. As previous research has discussed, in both the classical settler-colonial frontier and the novel digital frontier, innovation and creativity are imagined to belong to the white brain and body that represents civilization and the future in a clash against savagery from the past (Slotkin, 1973; Pellow and Park, 2002; Thatcher *et al*., 2016; Kwet, 2019; Noble and Roberts, 2019; Tarvainen, 2021).

O'Mara's narrative of Silicon Valley also reproduces the Messianic, dualistic worldview characteristic of settler-colonial fantasies (Raz-Krakotzkin, 2000; Salaita, 2006; Drexler-Dreis, 2018). Thus, Silicon Valley appears as the 'the object of 'exodus[1]' (p.15) where 'technology-evangelistas', boy wonders' and 'missionaries' (pp.130, 147, 155) spread the 'Valley's magic' (p.304) on their 'computer crusades' (p.119). This eschatological drama, complete with crusades and civilization missions, is not unique to O'Mara's narrative, but at the very heart of Silicon Valley's mythology (Barbrook and Cameron, 1996; Geiger, 2020). The world is on the brink of techno-heaven or hell (the story goes) and the keys to salvation lie in the hands of the entrepreneurs (Farman, 2019). Interestingly, the idea that Silicon Valley is the portal to resurrection stems from an earlier settler-colonial origin story of California. The Spanish colonists named the lands of the indigenous nations 'California' according to a 16th-century novel written in Seville (Niederland, 1971). In this novel, California is imagined as a Christian space between exodus and redemption, located right next to the biblical paradise (Niederland, 1971, pp.486–90). To turn their utopia into reality, the Spanish colonists started bringing images of paradise and hell (printed in Seville) to the missions in California in order to remind the natives – the demonic savages – that it was they who had now reached the white shores of salvation (Haas, 2014). O'Mara's eschatological metaphors and personifications evoke these settler-colonial roots of California. The technologies in her tale are located in a colonial-Christian genealogy where particular divine bodies work at the forefront of a universal resurrection. Supported by such a colonial metanarrative, it is not surprising that the labour markets in Silicon California, as in Spanish California, are (crudely) white- and male-dominated (Wills and Rangarajan, 2017; Twine, 2018; Rangarajan, 2018). Behind these universalist crusader metaphors looms the reproduction and reimagination of a highly personal Eurocentric hierarchy of race (Bottici and Challand, 2019), a hierarchy that travels from the bodies and icons of Spanish missionaries to the technologies and their machines now creating homes and homelessness under the California sun.

While O'Mara also discusses the Valley's myths from a more critical perspective, the discussion ignores settler-colonial histories and violence. Reproducing the colonial spatial imaginations of California as the virgin and promised land of white American manifest destiny (Smith, 1950; Horsman, 1981; Slotkin, 1973), O'Mara portrays Silicon Valley as 'remote', 'young' and 'lightly settled', a place 'destined by geography for innovation', a 'place not bound by the past'. This imagined remoteness and youngness is all too similar to visions of indigenous territories as 'empty lands' destined to blossom under settler-colonial control (Benvenisti, 2000; Ramirez, 2007; Piterberg, 2008; Veracini, 2010; Fields, 2017). As Fields and Piterberg discuss elsewhere, the discourse of the empty land stands at the heart of settler-colonial projects, repressing the indigenous past and present into invisibility. In Silicon Valley's case, this past includes extraordinarily violent labour regimes and the dispossession of indigenous occupants from their land to satisfy progressive techno-visions (Pitti, 2018; Walker, 2018; Spencer, 2019). The attributes that O'Mara gives to her entrepreneurs are also worth noting: we learn that Valley's entrepreneurs are 'extraordinary and smart people' (p.19)' with 'elite brains' (p.21). O'Mara's entrepreneurs thus echo the imagined biological-cognitive superiority of the European colonists that became the self-fulfilling prophecy of colonial expansions and racialized regimes of labour (Miranda, 1988; McCormack, 2007; Toscano, 2018).

[1]Referring to the biblical story of the Israelites escaping from Egypt to the promised land.

The only mention of indigenous people in *The Code* is in the colonial techniques of appropriation and fetishization (Bhabha, 1999). The Silicon Valley entrepreneur is hence described as a 'high-technology nomad' (p.391) and part of a 'techno tribe' (p.117). In this tamed and post-industrial form, the indigenous are appropriated to accommodate white American belonging and expansion (Byrd, 2011; McElroy and Werth, 2019).

White stories, white matter

As the literature on settler-colonialism has long emphasized, the settler-colonial project is not merely symbolic or allegorical. Rather, the dramas and images of settler-colonialism interact with the material realities of dispossession and exploitation of the indigenous and the racialized (Piterberg, 2008; Veracini, 2011). In line with McElroy's (2020b) term 'double dispossession', I propose that the allegorical connections between O'Mara's version of Silicon Valley and the settler-colonial expansions should be seen not only as cultural curiosities, but as entry points to studying the speculative materialities of the 'innovation economy'. Indeed, a materialist reading of the stories of innovation is much needed as the whole growth model of Silicon Valley is based on speculative techno-financial imaginations where white spaces, knowledge and subjectivities are regarded as more 'creative' and promising than others (Noble and Roberts, 2019; Sassen, 2017; Ali, 2017; Bear, 2020; Tarvainen, 2017). While O'Mara recognizes the fact that Silicon Valley is a 'business of storytelling' (p.191) in which a venture capitalist invests with astronomical returns, she fails to recognize the colonial undertones of this story. I will illustrate the thread between the speculative stories and materialities of Silicon Valley by exploring the settler-colonial dispossession that is evident throughout O'Mara's imaginations on territory.

First, O'Mara's mental images of the original Silicon Valley as 'virgin' and 'empty' contribute to the Eurocentric and colonial logic of seeing indigenous territories as land without an owner (Fields, 2017). The problem with O'Mara's narrative is that, while she rightly recognizes that the existence of vast territories of 'dirt cheap land' was the key factor enabling the creation of Silicon Valley (pp.80–2), she forgets to ask how such cheap land came about. Emptiness was the competitive advantage of the Valley in O'Mara's story – 'there wasn't anything there to be displaced', she argues in her YouTube talk (O'Mara, 2019). This erasure of indigenous relations with the land is not just discursive but is also at the heart of the colonial-capitalist price mechanism – something that Jason Moore (2016) has described as the production of 'cheap nature'. In the Bay Area, this 'cheapness' was produced through dispossessing and appropriating the precolonial – indigenous – systems for organizing the reproduction of social life, land and labour. While O'Mara notes that large rancheros from Spanish and Mexican rule made it easy for future developers to occupy the region (p.65), the creation of the California mission system (involving ethnic cleansings, forced labour and the destruction of indigenous social and cosmological structures for governing and cultivating the land) is invisible in *The Code* (Pitti, 2018). O'Mara hides the whole destructive history of creating cheapness. The critical role of the US government in the creation of California as *terra nullius* (no-man's land up for grabs for privatization) is never mentioned (Margolin, 1978; Bauer, 2016). This is particularly striking since many of the places O'Mara highlights as the beginnings of Silicon Valley stand upon burnt indigenous villages and colonial missions. Such sites include the thousands of acres of land purchased by Stanford University's founders, referred to as the 'critical catalyst' for the Valley (p.17); and the Moffett field aviation hub (now belonging to Google) without which Lockheed Missiles, the Valley's largest employer, would not have entered the Valley.

O'Mara's blindness to the earlier, settler-colonial mechanisms for producing 'empty' and 'cheap land', I suggest, makes her oblivious to their returns in novel and highly predatory digitalized forms. Instead of the imagined cheapness, it is now the extraordinary expensiveness of urban central territories that pushes the racialized and the unwanted out to the frontiers of Silicon Valley (Walker, 2018; McElroy, 2020a). In other words, the techno-capital now creates *lebensraum* for white and 'productive' populations through speculating with the value of urban land and property

(Walker, 2018; McElroy 2020b). Rather than blatant gentrification, it might be more realistic to see the technology-expulsion as characterizing the long history of settler-colonial expansionism. In its current form, expulsion occurs through the highly speculative valuations assigned to technology companies that, in turn, attract massive capital and credit flows to real estate development (Walker, 2018; Iftikhar *et al.*, 2020).[2] In such cities as San Francisco, Seattle and Oakland, it is clear that the innovation economy is physically moving, migrating from suburbia to the city centres (Iftikhar *et al.,* 2020). Mapping the waves of foreclosures in San Francisco between 2011 and 2018, McElroy and Werth (2019) find that '69% of San Francisco's evictions have occurred within four blocks of technology bus stops'. This has led into shrinking share of Black and Latinx populations in the city,[3] turning it into white and upper-class territory. One-third of Bay Area residents want to leave the region that is becoming uninhabitable for them (Fimrite, 2016). The same developments are also evident in the wider Bay Area and in new high technology cities, such as Seattle (see Noble and Roberts, 2019, p.12). In the central district of Seattle, a historical centre for the Black community since 1920s, the proportion of African residents has dropped 6% since 2010, when Amazon started to take over the city centre (Morrill, 2013; McCartney, 2019). While the US technology giants are quick to join the anti-racist imaginaries – as in the case of Black Lives Matter movement (Paul, 2020) – their urban practices seem to reinforce racial divisions. Importantly, both in Seattle and California, local and federal government has paved the way for the colonization of the urban centres through 'competitive' and 'attractive' tax policies and regulations (Linebaugh and Rediker, 2000; Walker, 2018; Foroohar, 2019). While O'Mara briefly mentions the sky-high rents that push people out (p.271), systemic, racialized and classist expulsions remain at the margins of her analysis.

The settler-colonial myth of emptiness – the idea that the non-whites do not have valuable knowledge of land – is essential for the material expansion of techno-capitalism (Benvenisti, 2000). As Noble and Roberts (2009, p.15) put it, the myths of modern technology elites materialize into 'racial and gender signifiers that disproportionately consolidate resources away from people of color, particularly African Americans, Latino/as and Native Americans'. The disavowal of the non-white relationships to the land travel from the early agricultural fields to techno-urban paradises of settler-colonial capital. The dispossession of indigenous and Black people becomes entwined (Ramirez, 2007; King *et al.*, 2020; Salaita, 2016) – the settler-colonial project now dresses in silicon.

Towards global readings of the Valley

O'Mara's description of Silicon Valley as the 'land of America's future' (p.203) and the 'place of new starts, new ideas and dreams' (p.190) reproduces the myth of a purified beginning. a break in time from where futures begin. The settler-colonial approach of this review essay adopts another perspective: America and the model of Silicon Valley emerge as connected to Eurocentric and colonial materialities and myths. There are no empty times or empty spaces, and the luxury of forgetting pasts does not exist. By showing how O'Mara's histories and geographies leak other histories and geographies filled with violence, this approach strips the Valley of exceptionalism.

Most importantly, the settler-colonial approach puts the questions of territory and whiteness at the centre of these entangled geographies and histories. Thus, Silicon Valley's speculative imaginations of future abundance become connected to the earlier settler-colonial imaginations of improvement and civilization that devalue non-white belonging and ownership and institute Eurocentric hierarchies of labour and knowledge (Quijano, 2000; Fields, 2017; Bottici and Challand,

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[2]On the ways in which US government financial policies since 2008 have led to a Kafkaesque financial shell game pumping up the valuation of big technology see Foroohar (2019).

[3]The share of Black population in San Francisco city centre dropped from 17% to 6% between 1976 and 2015. Nearby Oakland has become the new frontier for technology companies (Twitter, e.g., recently established its headquarters there) and the share of Black population there dropped from 36% in 2000 to 25% in 2015 (Walker, 2018, p.207).

2019). Alongside temporal connections, the settler-colonial approach looks at processes in other settler-colonial frontiers. Thus, the whitening of American city centres in the name of innovation would be connected to whitening geographies in other places. The extension of Silicon Valley from the Bay Area to Israel/Palestine and to the startup nation of Israel (Tarvainen, 2017), for example, could be brought into discussion of the tangled geographies of settler-colonialism. To the list of Seattle, San Francisco and Oakland, such a perspective would add East Jerusalem and the Naqeb/Negev desert in Israel/Palestine. These two sites have long been the objects of the Israeli state's settlement project and have been considered future sites of Israeli innovation.

The arid areas in the southern Israel/Palestine (Negev/Naqeb), for example, provide illustration of the global Silicon Valley. There, the Jewish National Fund – historically responsible for organizing settlement and expelling the Palestinians from the land – is financing the construction of an Israeli Silicon Valley.[4] The aim of the plan is to attract 1.5 million new Jewish residents, from within and outside Israel, to an area that Palestinians regard as their homeland. As the official website states, the goal of the project is to expand the borders of a startup nation for the Jewish peoplehood (Keren Kayemeth LeIsrael Jewish National Fund, 2020). In similar vein, East Jerusalem (the internationally recognized capital of Palestine) is now to be integrated into the startup nation through an Israeli state-funded project, Silicon Wadi of East Jerusalem (Melhem, 2020). More than 200 Palestinian industrial buildings (in the occupied, economically deprived and physically enclosed East Jeruslem) are to be demolished in the plan (Zoffre, 2020). These projects that at first seem uniquely Israeli start to look rather like Israeli versions of the anti-indigenous and anti-Black geographies familiar in the American version of Silicon Valley. The transnational nature of this digital settler-colonialism becomes even more evident in that the largest investor in Israel's expanding technology sector is the United States, and particularly Silicon Valley-based companies and investors (Israel Innovation Authority, 2016).

The settler-colonial approach is, of course, but one perspective on the larger project of dismantling the temporal and spatial enclosures of the Valley. A whole array of critical-colonial approaches (Challand, 2020) should be used when the Valley's pasts and contemporary forms are analysed. Alongside critical-colonial literature, world-ecological (Moore, 2015) and other transformative and global perspectives (Gills and Hosseini, 2020; Santos and Meneses, 2019) should be central to such global intervention. Rather than seeing the Valley as a simple repetition of colonial history, the analysis should – without fetishizing the novelties of the Valley – remain open to the creative and unforeseen dynamics that do not fit any pre-existing box. Perhaps a highly critical reading of progressivist histories, such as O'Mara's, offers one way of seeing through the America-centred view of the Valley.

Acknowledgements

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[4]Under the banner of the Israeli relocation plan 2040. I am grateful to Michael Goldberg from the New School for Social Research for making me aware of this particular project.

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