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GEOGRAPHIES OF SELF-SUFFICIENCY: PROTOTYPING EXPLORATION, EXPERIENCE, AND ACCESS

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Introduction

Scrolling through Google Maps application or website, it is difficult to avoid Google Maps' hallmark promises of *explore* and *experience*. From calls to “explore and experience the world”, “discover new experiences”, “find places for you” or “have the confidence to explore, access to experience”, *explore* and *experience* (and their iterations of *discover*, *find*, and *access*) command imaginaries of unrestricted entitlement and complete control over one's personal domain. This Google Maps rhetoric reifies *exploration* and *experience* as desirable mobilities without acknowledging the politics they enforce and the relations to space they enact. This paper asks: in these projected geographies of self-assured navigation, who is the prototype that fulfills the fantasy of seamless mobility and unrestricted claims to space?

I divide this paper into three sections— Explore, Experience, and Access— to analyze what these modes are, what they are contingent on, who they prioritize and the harms they reinforce and reproduce. In the final section, Access, I address the limits Google Maps claims to space and present a necessary reorientation. I argue that Google Maps' imperatives to explore, experience, and access space are based on a colonial raced, classed, and ableist prototype—the self-sufficient user. In organizing space around the self-sufficient user, Google Maps extends and entrenches settler colonial dispossession and ableist gatekeeping. Ultimately, Google's imaginary of untethered exploration— the experience and access it engenders— carries a heavy weight.

Explore, Experience, Access

From the software, to interface, to Google's marketing, *explore*, *experience*, and *access* stand out as the maps' principal operations of location awareness. “Making the world your own” is a promise echoed by Google Maps Vice President Jen Fitzpatrick's (2016) pledge that Maps is “making it easy for you to explore and experience what the world

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has to offer.” Here, Fitzpatrick articulates Google’s principal modes of world making—*explore* and *experience*—centred on YOU. Shining the spotlight on YOU and your explorations and experiences, casts a shadow on the global infrastructures, protocols, and politics that make claiming space an alluring possibility.

I identify how exploration, experience, and access are spatial technologies that reify colonial assumptions of unbridled entitlement and universal entrée, based on what Simone Browne terms the “prototyping whiteness” (Browne, 2015). This paper identifies and unpacks the imperatives to explore, experience, and access that appear to make the world available and claimable for Google Map’s idealized self-sufficient user at the cost of reinforcing imperial violence and colonial expansion.

Here I find parallels with Jas Rault’s (2020) analysis of *transparency* and Kimberley Christen’s (2012) analysis of *open access* as communication technologies that leverages promises of accountability and truth in the name of entrenched colonial administration. Rault’s framework orients us towards seeing exploration as a tool of settler possession and entitlement. Exploration as spatial technology fails to contend with the violence these maps serve, which Eve Tuck and Marcia McKenzie (2014) mark as Indigenous erasure, Black Containment, Settler Ancestry – all which have been refused and fought by Indigenous and Black folks for centuries and continue in what Christina Sharpe (2018) terms “in the wake.” This trajectory of mapping sets the scene for how Google Maps frames exploration as a valiant discovery rather than a method of dispossession and erasure. Exploration is a technology shaped by what Sandy Grande (2014) calls a “colonial consciousness.”

I then relate this analysis broader claims to space within a social order that increasingly privileges the tech-savvy. I show how these emergent findings resonate with Noble and Roberts’ (2016) critique of the now-defunct Google Glass and promotion of the explorer appeal. Google Glass branded its users as “Explorers”. With highest concentration of Google Glass users the San Francisco Bay Area, Noble and Roberts draw attention to how the Google Glass Explorer’s unmistakable presence signaled gentrification and displacement at the hands of the wealthy Silicon Valley elite. Echoing to Browne’s “prototyping whiteness”, we see how it is only the most privileged who are even positioned to take up the mantle of self-sufficient explorer, especially in cities encoded with systemic anti-Black racism and anti-Indigeneity. In this context, simultaneous to the promise of exploration are ongoing negotiations of space based on personal and political “cognitive maps of safety and danger” organized around calculations and geographies of risk (Cadogen, 2016). Google’s coded depoliticization of spatial mobility (it’s for everyone! To go anywhere!) reifies mobility as a mode of power and exploration the means to attain it. Building a whole mapping infrastructure around the positionality of unbridled access erases so many urban experiences and reinforces racialized enclosures of space.

I close by broadening out modes of access based on understandings of care rather than the bulldozing of self-sufficiency, to demonstrate how access should not be a mark of exclusivity but a way of negotiating interconnectedness. I address the limits of Google’s branding of access through alternative frameworks of radical access from disability justice (Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2021) and critical access studies (Hamraie, 2017). What

these critical modes of access demonstrate are the hard limits to Google Maps view of “the universal” and how geographically insufficient Google Maps is in the face of all the radical spatial practices beyond the map.

Overall, this paper identifies how Google Maps’ orientations of location awareness are not simply acts of pinpointing location; they are a broader orientation towards self-sufficiency enabled through values of exploration and access that reflect the over-determination of platform and its implicit biases.

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