

TRACE ROUTES

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What we understand our body to be, or to exist as, has been irrevocably complicated by the invention and expansion of the internet. As a public interacting with technology, we no longer exist as a singularly stable and defined, edge-bound being, as our data and lives leak out onto distributed nodes that augment our own sense of self further than it already is. Where we continue, where we are, even when we assume to be erased. Where and even *when* we think we are not. The perception of our body through information, as information, as a carrier and creator of information, as a subject of perception and object of translation. This appears, or rather, is felt as something media theorist Sun-ha Hong calls the “trace-body”: “When I feel my own trace-body as an absent presence, I am also experiencing what it feels like to have machines and databases mediate between me and myself.” A series of out-of-body experiences constantly overwriting, corrupting, glitching. We already contend with an unstable sense of self by just being human, but when faced with a multitude of other possible presences through the data profiles that we create ourselves, or through those that are created for and about us (with or without our knowledge) by corporate or governmental actors, this distribution across time and space feels necessary to account for through personal acts.

When something is lost or leaves us, or is taken away, we often look. In writing this for Mario, who himself had taken a journey to find his own trace-body, I looked to where others had sought to take their body across data lines, to cross boundaries and distances to see where bodies, machines and databases intersect, to see what could be found in letting go of the edges of ourselves. Perhaps, as Rebecca Solnit writes: “Getting lost is about the unfamiliar appearing.”

First, I found Diane, or more specifically, dianegoesforyou.com. Describing herself as a “living search engine”, Diane (real name Diane Rabreau) is a service solely for individuals. A person, who Diane has never met, marks a point of curiosity on a satellite image on Google Maps and asks a single question, such as: “What is there at the end of that road?” or “Is it possible to hide under this roof?” (as previous players have asked), and Diane will travel hundreds, if not thousands, of miles to find out (funds permitting). Diane then records videos and takes photos so you can see if there are, as you wondered, salamanders under that rock you saw from your couch, from your own view from space. Search engines are unimaginably fast. On a deep level, it is still incomprehensible to us that we are able to find out so much at the touch of a button, or to see the other side of the world from so far away.

The dream of technology, the one that is less scarred by the ruins of capitalism, still wonders at the fact that we can send messages in seconds, that our images can appear elsewhere, that we can be in two places at once, that our body can cross oceans in seconds. We are captivated by those that make journeys meant for non-human things. Henry “Box” Brown was the first person to mail himself across America, thus freeing himself from slavery in 1849, but W. Reginald Bray was the first to do so in order to test the infrastructure of the system itself. After successfully posting a bee and then an elephant, Bray posted himself in 1900, though it’s not clear how long it took or how many people were required to transport him to his final destination. What I think of now, when I think of Bray, is the early days of the postal service whose rules he was flagrantly exploiting with his eccentricity: he was known for trying to get letters delivered by just placing an image of its location on the front. At that time, of course, the system was small enough that it was easy to see its edges, and one could easily explain how a letter was sent. However, in our contemporary reality, explaining how a message reaches us feels like explaining a modern miracle. We fall into analogy as soon as we hit any degree of complexity.

Back in 2016, writer and artist Ingrid Burrington aimed to trace the physical infrastructure and major data centres of Amazon’s monstrous Amazon Web Services network, which, as of 2019, powered around 48% of the world’s public cloud infrastructure, via the United States. She drove to Northern Virginia—where many of the centres controlling the major AWS sites are located—as a starting point, and set off from there, recording and mapping each site to gain an idea of their overwhelming influence on the geography. Amazon’s reputation for withholding and limiting information (e.g., their energy usage statistics and carbon footprint) extends to the locations and number of their data centres, both active and inactive, so Burrington found some of the locations on Foursquare and others through municipal websites and news stories, such as one that caught fire during its construction in Ashburn, 30 miles north-west of Washington DC. By physically moving herself around a landscape that Amazon is carrying out a coordinated intervention on, Burrington found Northern Virginia to be “the heart of the internet”, which before that existed as a kind of “spook country...a constellation of intelligence agencies and defence contractors that went relatively unnoticed unless you literally landed on their doorstep”. Though she could not hold up a mirror and see her own data, she could see where it might move, a possible place where she might exist, even for a moment. By revealing the invisible infrastructure, the places where it was made possible, she was able to cut out a layer of the history and current state of the internet that wasn’t visible from the outside, to then see the mundane and banal parts, the labour and people, and the moving and broken parts. A journey that facilitated a slowing down, just enough to see.

In writing his email to me commissioning this text, Mario Santamaria outlined the details of his journey following the route of his own data: “Barcelona> Switzerland> Stockholm> Milan> Perugia> Bergamo. A 50 millisecond trip in 14 days.” In attempting to trace himself through the wilderness of an expanded and distributed data landscape, Mario was enacting a form of time displacement, navigating a body through a trace route, with a journey never intended for a body, but one which is visited by many, augmented and created by many hands. This journey, like Burrington’s and Rabreau’s, is a technological mimicry of sorts, the points of arrival and departure much like the computational counterpart of the trace route, but with the true nature of its permeability as unknown and indistinguishable as a complex system can ever be, be it human or technological.

However, the latter's reasons for complexity are less a matter of the psyche than a matter of the hyperobject of capitalism.

In *The Second Body*, Daisy Hildyard argues that “the body exists at different scales”, and speaks of realising the “horror which apparently comes from the fact that your body is a physical thing with porous boundaries”. When imagining our lives alongside the technological, we perhaps envisioned a slightly more consensual relationship to technology and the body. One that imagined augmentation and upgrades, not a distributed, atemporal body that we could not trace, which existed at speeds faster than us that we would never be able to catch up with, floating above us as spectres made of dust, plastic and wires. In making a journey with the body we can immediately perceive, with the explicit understanding of its edgelessness, and get a sense of the other bodies that exist, the other systems that arise, and the other realities that can be resurrected.

References

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