

Refusal as Care

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In this data-laden reality we call the (post-)modern world, the moral aspirations set forth by the post-war period seem to falter under the pressures of a growingly mechanistic and codified techno-colonial hegemonic logic. The cybernetic underpinnings of society redefine the conditions of livability. Digital products became prosthetic memory repositories of sorts, as once predicted by Marshall McLuhan, yet with applications and operative models arguably very far from the media theorist's wildest imagination.¹ Manufactured memories—images, stories, and other inscriptional forms—are virulently transmitted through platforms which, themselves, profit off artificial models of sociability.

By now, we are all aware that the dream put forward by the Internet pioneers has never been fulfilled.² Instead, this dream has become a waking nightmare, subsumed by the capitalist-colonial military-industrial complex. And while the techno-scientific apparatus that drives and upholds the capitalist-colonial order thrives in manufactured opacity, we are bombarded everyday by what seem to be the endless effects of its violence. To name just a few: the military deployment of AI data systems to commit war crimes and perpetuate genocide in Gaza, with companies such as Palantir benefitting directly from—and contributing directly to—this carnage;³ ICE's pervasive use of AI surveillance technologies in the kidnapping and disappearance of people branded 'illegal' and 'aliens';⁴ and the unabated land theft and environmental degradation that continues to unfold in order to build, power, and cool the data centres these technologies depend on.⁵

Thinking through data centres, one of the latest frontiers of colonial violence, we recognize what the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy calls the 'resource-ravenous' nature of these vampiresque technologies, who report that

1 Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*, London and New York: Routledge, 1964.

2 Dmytri Kleiner, *The Telekommunist Manifesto*, Amsterdam: Institute of Network Cultures, 2010.

3 Amber Rahman, 'Explainer: The Role of AI in Israel's Genocidal Campaign Against Palestinians', *Institute for Palestine Studies*, 16 October 2024. Retrieved from www.palestine-studies.org/en/node/1656285 on 18 April 2026.

4 Steven Hubbard, 'ICE Uses a Growing Web of AI Services to Power Its Immigration Enforcement and Surveillance', *American Immigration Council*, 18 December 2025. Retrieved from www.americanimmigrationcouncil.org/blog/ice-uses-ai-immigration-enforcement-surveillance/ on 18 April 2026.

5 Jen Deerinwater and Jesse Deer In Water, 'Progress or Digital Colonization? AI Data Centers Spark Debate on Native Lands', *Cultural Survival*, 22 March 2026. Retrieved from www.culturalsurvival.org/news/progress-or-digital-colonization-ai-data-centers-spark-debate-native-lands on 18 April 2026.

‘a conventional data center—think cloud storage for your work documents or streaming videos—draws as much electricity as 10,000 to 25,000 households, according to the International Energy Agency. But a newer, AI-focused “hyperscale” data center can use as much power as 100,000 homes or more.’⁶ In the same report, the Institute refers to Meta’s Hyperion data centre, with a building planned in Louisiana that ‘is expected to draw more than twice the power of the entire city of New Orleans once completed’.⁷ Billionaire Kevin O’Leary’s Stratos data centre, currently being planned in Utah, is expected to draw 9 GW of electricity at full buildout while emitting an estimated 7–8 GW of waste heat.⁸ This massive power draw is equivalent to the average electricity demand of all of New York City and more than double the power currently consumed by the entire state of Utah. When contrasted with global energy disparities—for example, Angola’s entire national power capacity sits at 9.9 GW—these complexes of extractive infrastructure will inevitably compound existing socio-economic chasms, with brutal consequences that will be disproportionately shouldered by populations of the Global majority.⁹

These resource-intensive infrastructural vampires are also hedging water consumption to levels arguably nearing extinction in this age of climate crisis.¹⁰ The Lincoln Institute of Land Policy cites a paper by Google, reporting the company had used ‘more than 5 billion gallons of water across all its data centers in 2023, with 31 percent of its freshwater withdrawals coming from watersheds with medium or high water scarcity.’¹¹ Many of these data centres employ water-intensive evaporative cooling systems where approximately 70–80% of the withdrawn freshwater is evaporated into the atmosphere, while the remaining portion is discharged back to local

6 Jon Gorey, ‘Data Drain: The Land and Water Impacts of the AI Boom,’ *Lincoln Institute of Land Policy*, 17 October 2025. Retrieved from www.lincolnst.edu/publications/land-lines-magazine/articles/land-water-impacts-data-centers/ on 18 April 2026.

7 Ibid.

8 Leia Larsen, “‘So much worse than I even thought’: Utah’s “hyperscale” data center could create massive heat island near Great Salt Lake,” *The Salt Lake Tribune*, 7 May 2026. Retrieved from www.sltrib.com/news/environment/2026/05/07/utahs-data-center-could-create/ on 23 May 2026.

9 ‘Angola Energy 2025: Angola Power Sector Long Term Vision’, República de Angola, Ministério da Energia e Águas. Retrieved from www.angolaenergia2025.gestoenergy.com/en/conteudo/generation-0 on 29 May 2026.

10 Donna Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016.

11 Gorey, ‘Data Drain’.

infrastructure as wastewater,¹² which is often contaminated with heavy metals (such as zinc, copper, and chromium) from system corrosion, alongside toxic chemical additives like biocides and corrosion inhibitors.¹³ This scene seems to be scripted after other notorious cases where government structures at various levels prioritize corporate greed over the well-being of living beings and the wider ecosystem. Beyond the promises of economic gain, these operations of resource extraction extend into the necropolitical domain: such data storage-fuelled earthmoving raids are leading to new nuclei of targeted death, along the lines of what has been happening in Cancer Alley, Louisiana.¹⁴ Data centres at once occupy the land and consume energy and water needed for more-than-humans to thrive in sympoetic entanglements, while producing and inducing sterile, toxic materialities that negate the very conditions of life. Although different in content, these forms of extraction and dispossession are the latest iteration of the logic of coloniality and imperial plunder. Indeed, to echo Slavoj Žižek, Frederic Jameson, and Mark Fisher, it remains the case that it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of capitalism.¹⁵

While these concerns seem to be somewhat far removed from the pristine museum conservation lab, this is more than a contextual backdrop: the inherent intraconnectedness of digital infrastructures and their techno-scientific apparatus make any claim of political neutrality or ignorance ultimately void. To think through ‘green’ and ‘archiving’ now, perhaps more than ever, requires a thorough reformulation of our ethical aspirations. Care is as much a practice as it is a political proposition. Sometimes contained in the smallest acts, other times violently pushed forward, care is always aspirational. In what follows, we consider the potential of refusal as a site of care ethics in heritage practices, including conservation.

12 Miguel Yañez-Barnuevo, ‘Data Centers and Water Consumption’, *Environmental and Energy Study Institute*, 25 June 2025. Retrieved from www.eesi.org/articles/view/data-centers-and-water-consumption on 29 May 2026.

13 Craig Carlson, ‘Data Centers and Water Use’, *nature forward*, 4 February 2026. Retrieved from www.natureforward.org/data-centers-and-water-use/ on 29 May 2026.

Joe Wilkins, ‘Amazon Data Center Linked to Cluster of Rare Cancers’, *Futurism*, 29 November 2025. Retrieved from www.futurism.com/artificial-intelligence/amazon-data-center-oregon on 29 May 2026.

14 Public Health On Call, ‘Louisiana’s “Cancer Alley” Is More Deadly Than Previously Imagined’, *Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health*, 4 August 2025. Retrieved from <https://publichealth.jhu.edu/2025/the-shocking-hazards-of-louisianas-cancer-alley> on 29 May 2026.

15 Mark Fisher, *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?*, New Alresford, Hants: O Books, 2009.

Rethinking Care

Within the GLAM sector, care is often put forward as a synonym for conservation, collection management, and archiving—to care for objects, to care for memories, to care for heritage and its manifestations.¹⁶ In the last decade, museological discourse has begun to engage more explicitly with *care ethics*, particularly through the moral and political philosophy of Joan Tronto. The politics of care, however, long predates Berenice Fisher and Tronto's definition.¹⁷ Reproductive labour is just one example, and the ethics therein have been widely embodied, lived, and produced by women in working-class and BIPOC communities at large, as described, for example, by Silvia Federici in *Caliban and the Witch*.¹⁸ Writing from the perspective of Indigenous Studies and thinking-with a critique of colonial care regimes, Eva Jewell also elaborates on the ways in which state-sponsored and institutionalized projects of cultural erasure labelled as 'care' have been historically wielded as a tool of colonialism, noting that: 'There is a deep-felt recognition that "care" for Indigenous Peoples is not actually care at all. Care is harm, care is violence, care is misery, care is death, care is genocide.'¹⁹

Out of the five care categories proposed by Tronto—caring about, taking care of, care-giving, care-receiving, and caring with—research in the field of conservation engaged with Tronto's proposition often situates capacious forms of care within the category of *caring-with*, bringing to the fore the multilayered dimensions of the inherent relationality established among the object-conservator-museum-community nexus.²⁰ We see that, for example, in Annet Dekker's approach to networks of care; in Pip Laurenson's engagement with affect theory; in Rebecca Gordon's exploration of Indigenous storywork ethics and people-centred conservation; in Nina Owczarek's work

16 The acronym GLAM stands for 'Galleries, Libraries, Archives, and Museums'.

17 Berenice Fisher and Joan C. Tronto, 'Toward a Feminist Theory of Care', in *Circles of Care: Work and Identity in Women's Lives*, eds. Emily K. Abel and Margaret K. Nelson, Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1991.

18 Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation*, Brooklyn: Autonomedia, 2004.

19 Eva Jewell, 'Towards an Anti-Colonial Feminist Care Ethic', in *Making Space for Indigenous Feminism*, ed. Gina Starblanket, Halifax, NS: Fernwood Press, 2024, pp. 168–192.

20 Joan C. Tronto, *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care*, London: Routledge, 2020.

on the ethics of collaboration and participation; and in Rita Canhoto et al.'s reflections on relational conservation as *caring with*, to name a few.²¹ And while care ethics discourse has proliferated in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic, much of the day-to-day practices in museum and institutional contexts surrounding care still reside within the procedural; 'collection care' still remains firmly entrenched in normative practices that obfuscate the relational and political dimensions of care.

This is particularly acute for both documentation and digital preservation practices. To move from the procedural necessarily implies becoming attuned to and accounting for the inherent relationality of all processes. Once we take this to heart, the notion of networks that superimposes the separation of these agencies into simply connected nodes seems insufficient. Here, we propose instead a posthumanist and specifically agential realist reading of infrastructures to guide our discussion, one that affirms how 'relata do not precede relations'.²²

Infrastructures can be considered a mesh of human and non-human material-discursive repertoires, assembling systems, processes, governance, people, and objects into intra-active practices.²³ Time can produce cuts into these infrastructures in ways that exhaust the observational or inscriptional form.²⁴ Produced through intricate and always-compounding relations, the implications of these infrastructures are far from immaterial, and neither objects, museums, nor ourselves can ever be 'outside' of the infrastructure. At the limit, there is no outside the infrastructure: all material-discursive practices are inexo-

21 Annet Dekker, 'Networks of Care', in *The Networked Image in Post-Digital Culture*, eds. Andrew Dwedney and Katrina Sluis, London: Routledge, 2022, pp. 189–207.

Pip Laurenson, 'The affective turn and the management of conservation within the museum', *Journal of the Institute of Conservation*, Vol. 48, no. 3, September 2025, pp. 244–255.

Rebecca Gordon, 'Indigenous Storywork as an Ethical Guide for Caring With Social Practice Artists', in *Prioritizing People in Ethical Decision-Making and Caring for Cultural Heritage Collections*, ed. Nina Owczarek, London: Routledge, 2023, pp. 24–41.

Nina Owczarek (ed.), *Prioritizing People in Ethical Decision-Making and Caring for Cultural Heritage Collections*, London: Routledge, 2023.

Rita Canhoto, Rita Macedo, and Joana Lia Ferreira, 'Conservation as caring with: reflections on relational conservation with the Memory Group of Trafaria', *Journal of the Institute of Conservation*, Vol. 48, no. 3, September 2025, pp. 279–293.

22 Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2007.

23 See: Mattia Frapporti, *Governo materiale: Il potere politico delle infrastrutture*, Milan: Meltemi Editore, 2024.

24 Marina Vishmidt, 'Between Not Everything and Not Nothing: Cuts Towards Infrastructural Critique', in *Former West: Art and the Contemporary After 1989*, eds. Maria Hlavajova and Simon Sheikh, Utrecht and Cambridge, MA: BAK and The MIT Press, 2017, pp. 265–269.

rably connected, continually enfolding, transforming, and producing cascading effects on one another in a process of intra-active (re)configurations. Thinking through collections care and within the ‘caring with’ paradigm proposed by Tronto means to be attentive and responsive to the ‘rich embodied, enmeshed, and layered network of agencies’ that comprise, for example, digital cultural heritage, as Fiona Cameron puts it.²⁵ She elaborates, ‘[t]hese agencies comprise the various concrete, geomaterial, energetic, physical, social, technical, machinic, and physiological forces [...] all of which operate across the interdependent layers of global computational infrastructures.’²⁶ To rehearse an ethics of refusal we will first trace some of the effects of the infrastructural dynamics emerging in the collection care sector.

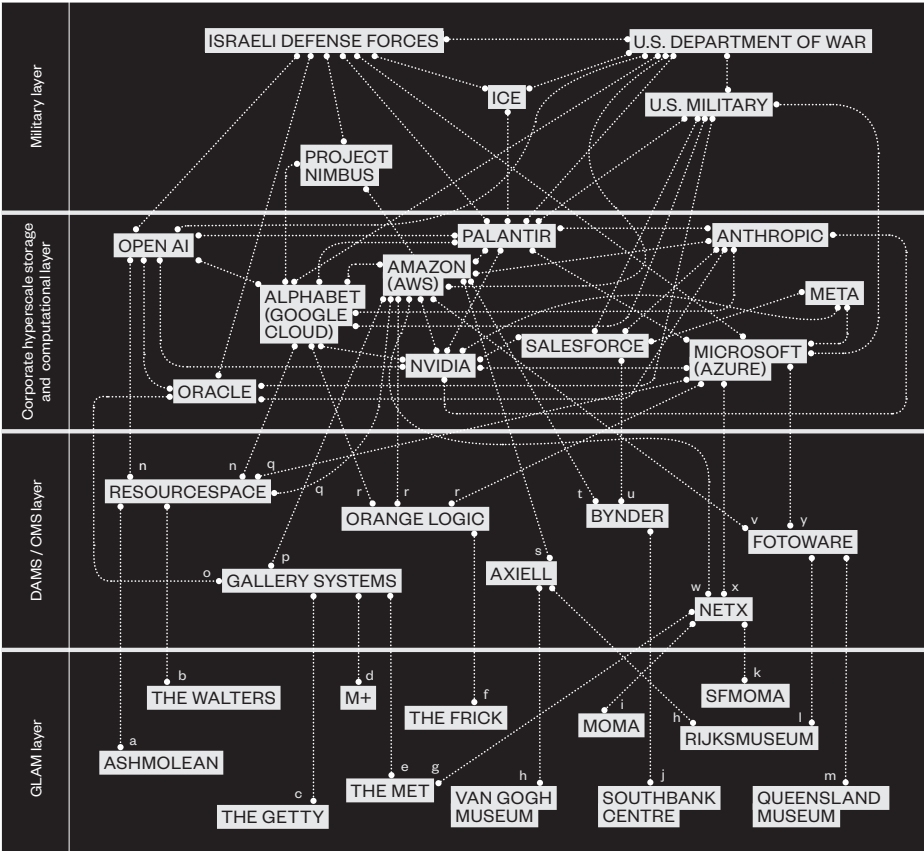
No Outside the Infrastructure

The means by which we distribute, consume, and collect digital media have changed considerably in the last two decades. This is particularly visible through the expansion of subscription-based models and new forms of what Nick Srnicek calls platform capitalism, which have largely supplanted previous models.²⁷ This encroachment is already visible in the heritage sector through the proliferation of proprietary, subscription-based ‘solutions’, particularly Digital Asset Management Systems (DAMS) and Collection Management Systems (CMS). Institutions lacking in-house IT departments or the knowledge and technical skills to manage servers and self-host digital preservation systems are particularly attracted to these neatly packaged software solutions, and we can only expect this tendency to rise as technologies become intentionally more black-boxed, since that obscurity is one of the guarantees of Big Tech’s profit margins. Take as an example the collection management services offered by zetcom—the developer of Museum-Plus—to institutions like the Louvre (FR) or the Design Museum (UK). The company brands SaaS (Software as a

25 Fiona Cameron, *The Future of Digital Data, Heritage and Curation in a More-than-Human World*, London: Routledge, 2021.

26 *Ibid.*, p. 135.

27 Nick Srnicek, *Platform Capitalism*, Cambridge, MA: Polity, 2019.



A non-exhaustive illustration of some of the entangled relationships constituting the GLAM-Military-Industrial Complex Nexus. The bottom two layers are referenced as these connections are less well documented in relevant literature and media.

We recognize that these relations differ both in nature and scope, and that this schematic presents a partial and flat view of an infrastructure that is multidimensional, continually enfolding and reconfiguring, and often purposefully opaque and undisclosed.

a. <https://www.resourcespace.com/blog/ashmolean-case-study-blog>
b. https://www.resourcespace.com/downloads/casestudies/The_Walters_Art_Museum-ResourceSpace_Case_Study.pdf
c. <https://www.gallerysystems.com/j-paul-getty-museum-los-angeles-county-museum-art/>
d. <https://www.gallerysystems.com/mplus-case-study/>
e. <https://museumdigitalculture.prattsi.org/a-deep-dive-into-mets-collection-information-digital-work-system-17c1c909ee5f>
f. <https://www.orangelogic.com/glam-dam>
g. <https://www.netx.net/case-study/metropolitan-museum-of-art>
h. <https://www.axiell.com/uk/solutions/historical-arts-collections/>
i. <https://dam.moma.org/app/>
j. <https://www.bynder.com/en/customers/>
k. <https://www.netx.net/case-study/sfmoma>
l. <https://www.fotoware.com/resources/webinar-events/webinar-rijksmuseum>
m. <https://www.fotoware.com/blog/how-queensland-museum-enhances-digital-preservation-workflows>
n. <https://www.resourcespace.com/knowledge-base/plugins/>
o. <https://ideas.gallerysystems.com/rs/962-HZY-660/images/AboutTMS.pdf>
p. <https://www.gallerysystems.com/about-us-3/secure-compliant-and-trusted-hosting/>
q. <https://www.resourcespace.com/blog/official-docker-image-available>
r. <https://www.orangelogic.com/cloud-platform-in-digital-asset-management>
s. <https://www.axiell.com/blog-post/watch-migrating-emu-to-cloud-remote-access/> (through case study with The Oxford University Gardens and Museums)
t. <https://www.bynder.com/en/blog/amazon-web-services-bynder/>
u. <https://www.bynder.com/en/our-partners/salesforce/>
v. <https://careers.fotoware.com/pages/about-us>
w. <https://www.netx.net/blogs/using-amazon-s3-storage-with-netxposure>
x. <https://www.netx.net/product/partners>
y. <https://www.fotoware.com/blog/microsoft-azure-ensures-top-level-security-for-saas>

Service) as an option ‘particularly well-suited to organizations with minimal to no IT support’.²⁸ They continue by stating that SaaS ‘is designed so that all IT infrastructure is outsourced: your software and data are installed on a secure server hosted by zetcom. As no local installation is required, SaaS offers the optimal and most cost-effective solution.’²⁹ The issue, however, is not reducible to individual vendors, but to the infrastructural entanglements in which they are embedded that bind cultural institutions to the same technical and economic systems that underpin contemporary regimes of surveillance, warfare, and environmental depletion.

Many of the leading DAM vendors partner with hyperscale cloud service providers. The partners of Bynder, for example—marketed as an ‘AI-powered DAM’ system—include both Amazon Web Services (AWS) and Salesforce, the former of which provides cloud computing services for the US Department of War (né Defense),³⁰ and the latter of which recently signed a \$5.5 billion contract with the US military.³¹ Other leading vendors, including Gallery Systems and Axiell, offer ‘managed cloud’ services undergirded by AWS that further obscure these dependencies while deepening them in practice. That is also the case, for example, of NetX, whose ‘DAM+’ product has achieved widespread global adoption—including across the GLAM sector, with a client portfolio boasting flagship cultural institutions like MoMA and the Met.³² Among the partners disclosed by NetX Inc., we can find AWS, which is the source of most of Amazon’s operational income (reportedly 100% in 2017),³³ and Microsoft Azure, a cloud computing platform, supporting ‘compute, storage, networking, databases, analytics, AI and security’.³⁴

28 ‘museumplus: Web-based Museum Management’, *zetcom*. Retrieved from www.zetcom.com/en/museumplus-en/ on 29 May 2026.

29 Ibid.

30 ‘Cloud Computing for U.S. Defense’, *Amazon Web Services (AWS)*. Retrieved from www.aws.amazon.com/federal/defense/ on 18 April 2026.

31 ‘U.S. Army Awards Salesforce \$5.6B Contract to Accelerate Military Modernization and Department of War Readiness’, *Salesforce*, 26 January 2026. Retrieved from <https://investor.salesforce.com/news/news-details/2026/U-S-Army-Awards-Salesforce-5-6B-Contract-to-Accelerate-Military-Modernization-and-Department-of-War-Readiness/default.aspx> on 18 April 2026.

32 ‘Case Study: MoMA’, *NetX*. Retrieved from www.netx.net/case-study/moma on 18 April 2026.

33 ‘Case Study: The Metropolitan Museum of Art’, *NetX*. Retrieved from www.netx.net/case-study/metropolitan-museum-of-art on 19 April 2026.

34 Nick Srnicek, ‘Value, rent and platform capitalism’, in *Work and labour relations in global platform capitalism*, ed. Julieta Haidar and Maarten Keune, Cheltenham: Edward Elgar Publishing, 2021, pp. 29–45.

35 ‘Our Partners’, *NetX*. Retrieved from www.netx.net/product/partners on 18 April 2026.

Companies like Amazon and Microsoft scaffold their now-apparently-ubiquitous model by relying on large-scale investments in hyperscale cloud infrastructures that are beyond reach to any potential competitors.³⁵ And even where data is not directly stored with hyperscale cloud service providers, vendors frequently rely on shared inter-connection layers provided by firms such as Equinix. This is to say that what appears at the interface level as a discrete heritage preservation tool is, in fact, dependent upon a highly consolidated and globally distributed infrastructural substrate. What is framed—or marketed—as convenience or innovation is, in effect, a delegation of technological responsibility to a small number of corporations whose business models are deeply entangled with state power. Where data is shared or stored outside the museum walls, this concern is sharpened by the risk of vendor lock-in and the jurisdictional reach of instruments such as the US CLOUD Act, which can extend foreign government access to data stored by US-based companies regardless of location.

At the computational level, features such as automated tagging, image recognition, and semantic search—deployed in systems like ResourceSpace or FotoWare—are commonly powered by machine learning services such as Google Cloud Vision or Microsoft. These services are developed within techno-industrial ecosystems oriented simultaneously towards commercial profit and optimization, state security, and military application. Even where collection data is not directly incorporated into general model training, it is folded into processes of system optimization through fine-tuning, feedback loops, and the economic demand that sustains large-scale AI development. Here, echoing Srnicek, we can observe that museums are producing surplus value through forms of collection care, which can be later appropriated by these large technology conglomerates.³⁶ In this way, heritage institutions become a part of the operational environment through which such systems are calibrated, tested, and normalized, while also indirectly endorsing these tools, which, in turn, feed off the symbolic capital accrued by museums as public institutions.

The relationship here is not one of direct data extraction from heritage collections, but of shared infrastructure: the same cloud environments, the same computational frameworks, and very often the same corporate actors. Value is extracted through these infrastructures in the form of rent, where Big Tech controls a scarce asset that users pay to access, with scarcity compounded by the growing black-boxing and integration of services, fuelled by monopolistic logics and ambitions to enclose all aspects of life.³⁷ External dependencies on these services are expanding—for now, anything from cloud storage provision to software integration, optimization services, and cloud computing; future aspirations include intelligence.³⁸ These dependencies are expected to impact all dimensions of collection care work in the museum, from labour conditions for culture workers—which have been declining steadily with the expanding capitalist extraction of cognitive labour—to the care of collections, digital and otherwise. Complicity with this model of global platform capitalism also implicates cultural institutions both with global capital infrastructures and the military-industrial nexus that is galvanizing their development. This convergence becomes explicit in projects such as Project Nimbus—the \$1.2 billion joint contract between Google and Amazon providing cloud computing infrastructure and artificial intelligence to the Israeli government and military—as well as in AI-assisted ‘kill chain’ systems like Lavender and other reported programs sometimes referred to as ‘Where’s Daddy?’³⁹

The uncritical adoption of ‘AI-powered’, hyperscale cloud-based data storage and computing, controlled by these few corporate actors, entails not only the relinquishing of data sovereignty, but also further participation in a broader techno-political economy in which the boundaries between cultural stewardship, data extraction—or indeed appropriation—and militarized computation are increasingly indistinct. There is, in this sense, no meaningful ‘outside’ to this infrastructure—only varying degrees of

37 Ibid.

38 Thibault Spirlet, ‘Sam Altman says AI will eventually be sold like electricity and water — by companies like OpenAI’, *Business Insider*, 13 March 2026. Retrieved from www.businessinsider.com/sam-altman-ai-utility-electricity-water-openai-2026-3 on 18 April 2026.

39 Al Jazeera Staff, ‘What is Project Nimbus, and why are Google workers protesting Israel deal?’, *Al Jazeera*, 24 April 2024. Retrieved from www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/4/23/what-is-project-nimbus-and-why-are-google-workers-protesting-israel-deal on 18 April 2026.

proximity, opacity, and accountability. The ethical problem, then, is not simply one of procurement, but of unwitting complicity. To adopt these systems is to become further enmeshed within the necropolitics of techno-capitalist-colonial hegemony: an infrastructural order that concentrates power, extracts value, and enables forms of automated perception and decision making, as readily mobilized for cultural access as for surveillance and targeting, while increasingly optimizing the conditions for fully automated genocide, domicile, and ecocide.

The Ethics of Refusal

Our present condition certainly feels daunting. And although the sheer volume and impact of the insurmountable violence that is being fuelled by Big Tech has no parallels, there is precedent and hope in resistance and solidarity movements, of the past and today. In 1675, in response to unrelenting colonial encroachment and violations of Native sovereignty, Pometacomet—the Pokanoket chief and sachem of the Wampanoag—lead a coalition of Algonquian-speaking nations across southern New England in a series of raids that would later be known as Pometacomet's Resistance (or King Phillip's War). Fast forward to 2016: water protectors at the Dakota Access Pipeline protests, led by local Standing Rock Sioux Tribe communities, remind us that 'water is life' (*Mni Wiconi*) in their ongoing struggle against settler colonial land dispossession and ecological degradation through oil pipeline construction and fracking. Most recently, organizers from the Muscogee (Cree) Nation have taken this fight to the data centres.⁴⁰ Indeed, the settler colonial project continues, consolidated and refactored under techno-capitalism—and so with it, the resistance. History suggests that both violent and non-violent resistance can be, at once, effective and futile, and ink continues to be spilt over their ethical stakes.⁴¹ But, indeed, all acts of insurgence, uprising, and ultimately revolution depend on a very first act: an act of refusal.

40 Cheyenne McNeil, 'In Indian Country, Data Centers Come With a Familiar Threat of Colonialism. These Organizers Are Fighting Back', *Mother Jones*, 7 April 2026. Retrieved from www.motherjones.com/politics/2026/04/data-centers-indian-country/ on 18 April 2026.

41 Judith Butler, *The Force of Nonviolence: An Ethico-Political Bind*, London: Verso, 2020.

Refusal is the minimum unit. Strikes are built on refusal, and so are all actions of collective bargaining that are termed *short of a strike*. Indeed, refusal is what makes the political power of workers visible as ‘intimately connected to the productive power of wage labour’, to quote Mario Tronti.⁴² In a society based on production—a condition that is inescapable to museum workers—strike emerges as an instrument of immediate, and yet momentary, refusal. As Tronti defines it, ‘a refusal of the command of capital as the organiser of production: it is a way of saying “No” at a particular point in the process and a refusal of the concrete labour’.⁴³ To refuse beyond these minimum gestures thus means to withdraw more than one’s labour-power—to negate the very necessity of the infrastructures underpinning techno-colonial-capitalist logics, or, as Tronti tells us, to refuse ‘to continue to build on the old foundations. Man, Reason, History, these monstrous divinities will need to be fought and destroyed as if they were the power of the bosses.’⁴⁴ Refusal is therefore the process of denying participation in institutions, processes, systems, and forms of biopolitical power undergirding the infrastructure. This is, however, quite far from just doing nothing; it is an active political position that refuses participation if it is set under specific terms.

In this sense, refusal comes as a next step to what Jonathan Ashley-Smith calls the ethics of ‘doing nothing’.⁴⁵ For Ashley-Smith, doing nothing is an ethical decision if it is identified as the most appropriate choice—one that does the most good—for a given context:

In conservation decision-making the option of ‘doing nothing’ to an object may be selected for several reasons. The choice may be driven by an unwillingness or inability to ‘do something’ or it may be the result of a conscious preference for preventive actions.⁴⁶

42 Mario Tronti, ‘The Strategy of Refusal’, *Semiotext(e)*, Vol. 3, no. 3, 1980, pp. 28–34. Retrieved from <https://libcom.org/article/strategy-refusal-mario-tronti> on 19 April 2026.

43 Ibid.

44 Ibid.

45 Jonathan Ashley-Smith, ‘The Ethics of Doing Nothing’, *Journal of the Institute of Conservation*, Vol. 41, no. 1, January 2018, pp. 6–15: 15.

46 Ibid.

Here, however, we are proposing refusal as method, linking it to Indigenous affirmations of sovereignty through acts of refusal and, ultimately, as a refusal of institutional (and state) power through practices of subjectification. As Rachel Flowers explains: ‘Refusal is simultaneously a negation of access to information and resources, as well as an affirmation of sovereignties.’⁴⁷ In some instances, Indigenous knowledge or cultural expressions that are sacred or fundamentally ‘incommensurable’ with settler knowledge systems and logics may be best cared for by in fact withholding their ‘shredding’ through settler, museological, and archival apparatuses.⁴⁸ Specifically, in refusing to engage with settler systems and institutions—particularly around their efforts to collect, extract, expropriate, make comprehensible, and capitalize on Indigenous cultures, knowledges, and lands—refusal can function as an assertion of sovereignty and a practice of cultural preservation, safeguarding, and care in its own right.

Echoing Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen here, we can also postulate refusal not solely in opposition to the institutional mesh of colonial violence, but as an active gesture towards abolition. In many ways, it is in refusal that the strength of the masses persists. It is no surprise that a recent report by *Wired*, based on more than one thousand unpublished documents, unveiled that the US Department of Homeland Security, FBI, and Fusion Centers are seeking to surveil people and groups considered to be ‘anti-technology extremists’.⁴⁹ In their report, *Wired* cites the New York Intelligence and Counterterrorism Bureau, which states that ‘the chaotic atmosphere that may result from emergent AI technology in the next five years may fuel large-scale protests that devolve into civil unrest and anti-tech violent extremist activity, especially in large urban areas such as New York City.’⁵⁰ In a similar manner, it is no coincidence that this biopolitical push coincides

47 Rachel Flowers, ‘Refusal to forgive: Indigenous women’s love and rage’, *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, Vol. 4, no. 2, December 2015, pp. 32–49: 33.

48 ‘Incommensurable’: Aileen Moreton-Robinson, ‘Incommensurable sovereignties: Indigenous ontology matters’, in *Routledge Handbook of Critical Indigenous Studies*, eds. Brendan Hokowhitu et al., London: Routledge, 2020, pp. 257–268.

‘Shredding’: Ariella Aisha Azoulay, *Potential History: Unlearning Imperialism*, London: Verso, 2019.

49 Daniel Boguslaw, ‘US Law Enforcement Warns of “Anti-Tech Extremism” as AI Hatred Grows’, *Wired*, 26 May 2026. Retrieved from www.wired.com/story/us-law-enforcement-warns-of-anti-tech-extremism/ on 29 May 2026.

50 Ibid.

with the hyperscaling of data centres that will make this level of mass surveillance possible. The surveillance, criminalization, and prosecution of refusal are essential mechanisms, through which the state guarantees the material conditions necessary for the continued extraction and accumulation of capital. In the case of the US, institutions are not only complicit, but they are also deeply implicated in this logic.⁵¹ That is why we must additionally ponder the refusal of refusal—that is, the ultimate rejection of a system that parasitically extracts from and excludes the marginalized in the first place. As Rasmussen posits in relation to recent protests against the polycrisis context we are faced with:

[They] are no longer about getting recognized by institutions or securing a share in running the whole thing[....] The refusal of refusal extends the struggle beyond reformist or terrorist dead ends and suspends the heated struggle for identity. We take to the streets for Palestine and for Black lives, but something other than the oppressed and oppressive representations emerges when we find one another there, together: new forms of life that cannot be recognized by late capitalism's diverse modes of control and necropolitics.⁵²

Refusal of capitalist logic in itself exhausts the modernist form, metabolizing a vitalist, affirmative ethics.

Conclusion

Sustainability debates have long been concerned with the culture–nature nexus. Still, the tools and frameworks used to measure, audit, and mitigate the effects of what Jason Moore calls the Capitalocene have fallen short when prompted to consider the larger ramifications of the enclosed infrastructural dynamics underpinning our digital

51 As an example, Palantir currently has a \$10 billion contract with the US Army. See: Samantha Subin, 'Palantir lands \$10 billion Army software and data contract,' *CNBC*, 1 August 2025. Retrieved from www.cnbc.com/2025/08/01/palantir-lands-10-billion-army-software-and-data-contract.html on 29 May 2026.

52 Mikkel Bolt Rasmussen, 'Refusal of the Refusal', *e-flux Notes*, 21 November 2025. Retrieved from www.e-flux.com/notes/6783422/refusal-of-the-refusal on 19 April 2026.

condition.⁵³ The discourse around accountability in relation to ‘green’ or ‘sustainable’ practices inevitably circles back to carbon calculations and offset. But even the adoption of such quantitative tools for accountability fail to encompass the increasingly enmeshed materiality of the infrastructure. In their article ‘Embodied Colonialism, Post-Colonial Counternarratives and Archives of the Future’, authors Nathalie Frankowski, Cruz Garcia, and WAI Architecture Think Tank note how such tools do not account for ‘the historical impact of resource extraction on landscapes and peoples, potentially overlooking the ecological, social, and political damage caused by colonialism.’⁵⁴ They propose, instead, to replace the notion of ‘Embodied Carbon’ with ‘Embodied Colonialism’, as a ‘pedagogical, design, and representational tool [...] to expose the social, political, and economic forces that drive environmental destruction’; one that ‘reveals the hidden costs of extraction, the displacement of communities, and the disruption of ecosystems, offering a more holistic understanding of the relationship between colonialism and ecological damage.’⁵⁵

The GLAM sector is at a crossroads: one option is to continue blindly down this path of colonization by Big Tech, with potentially damaging and certainly unknown consequences, relinquishing any form of sovereignty and any expectation of transparency. While the latter remains mostly an ethical question, the former has been a topic of discussion and concern in our field for the last twenty years. Despite our collective anxieties over the ‘external dependencies’ of complex digital heritage objects, as well as concerns around ‘environmentally friendly’ or ‘sustainable’ practices, we have somehow directed less critical concern to the external dependencies of our digital infrastructure. We have instead become increasingly reliant on and subservient to corporatized technologies and the will of the capitalist class controlling them, which has prioritized financial aspiration and capital accumulation over ethical concerns that we agree form the foundation of this field.

53 Jason W. Moore, ‘The Capitalocene, Part I: on the nature and origins of our ecological crisis’, *The Journal of Peasant Studies*, May 2017, pp. 1–37.

54 Nathalie Frankowski, Cruz Garcia, and WAI Architecture Think Tank, ‘Embodied Colonialism, Post-Colonial Counternarratives and Archives of the Future’, in *Architecture as Environmental Media*, ed. Daniel Jacobs, London: Routledge, 2025.

55 Ibid.

There is, of course, another path: one of refusal and reclamation by rejecting the status quo of techno-colonial-capitalist encroachment and seizing the means of production. To achieve this, we propose a stance of infra-structural disentanglement. As just one example, institutional software procurement—including Digital Asset Management Systems (DAMS), Collection Management Systems (CMS), and enterprise backups—must be treated as an ethical act with profound environmental, social, and political consequences. In this context, enacting a policy of proactive refusal requires institutions to—at a minimum—explicitly disqualify vendors dependent on, or with commercial ties to Big Tech hyperscalers, namely Amazon Web Services (AWS), Microsoft Azure, Google Cloud Platform (GCP), and Oracle Cloud. Instead, they should mandate independent, sovereign cloud or on-premises deployments that reject military-surveillance alignment and require absolute ecological accountability over hollow carbon offsets. This is, in fact, not a radical take: it directly aligns with the European Commission’s Cloud Sovereignty Framework, as well as the EU Corporate Sustainability Due Diligence Directive (CSDDD), which mandates identifying and addressing potential and actual adverse human rights and environmental impacts across organizational value chains and business partnerships.⁵⁶

This structural pivot mirrors frameworks like the CARE Principles for Indigenous Data Governance and the Montreal Declaration for Responsible AI, which both stress the need to retain autonomy and control over data, governance, and ethical accountability in the face of our increasing dependence on proprietary platforms and hyperscale providers.⁵⁷ We can also look to the pioneering efforts of TRANSFER Data Trust around data sovereignty and federated, peer-to-peer data hosting, as well as the Institute for Technology in the Public Interest’s TRANS*Feminist Counter Cloud Action Plan.⁵⁸ This slow, feminist-led initia-

56 European Commission, Directorate-General for Digital Services, ‘Cloud Sovereignty Framework: Version 1.2.1 – Oct. 2025’. Retrieved from https://commission.europa.eu/document/download/09579818-64a6-4dd5-9577-446ab6219113_en on 29 May 2026.

57 Stephanie Russo Carroll et al., ‘The CARE Principles for Indigenous Data Governance’, *Data Science Journal*, Vol. 19, November 2020, pp. 1–12.
Montréal Declaration for a Responsible Development of Artificial Intelligence, Université de Montréal, 2018. Retrieved from www.declarationmontreal-iaresponsable.com/.

58 Kelani Nichole and Filecoin Foundation, ‘Ecosystem Spotlight: TRANSFER Q&A on Preserving Artistic Value with Decentralized Technology, Data Sovereignty, and Harnessing Value of

tive has similarly proposed alternative models to for-profit hyperscale cloud infrastructure in favour of low-energy and local hosting federated services. Together, these efforts reflect a growing recognition of what stewardship and care in the digital age truly require: affirmation of our planetary intradependency; refusal of complicity in the ambitions of a corporatized technology sector that prioritizes profit above our collective wellbeing; and reclamation of autonomy over the infrastructure through which we store, distribute, and access our heritage.

The refusal we are proposing here is not an abdication of professional responsibility towards the care of heritage objects, digital or otherwise. Rather, refusal is an assertion of sovereignty and a move towards the abolition of our dependency on and subservience to a colonial techno-capitalist order whose infrastructure relies on our compliance and extraction while foreclosing the conditions of our collective futurity and flourishing. Refusal is not solely an individual act, but rather one that thrives in communion, solidarity, and collective action. In this sense, refusal can be understood as a method of caring for and *caring-with* objects, alongside all living beings, lands, skies, and waters.

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Data', Filecoin Foundation, 1 February 2024. Retrieved from <https://fil.org/blog/ecosystem-spotlight-transfer-q-a-on-preserving-artistic-value-with-decentralized-technology-data-sovereignty-and-harnessing-value-of-data> on 18 April 2026.

'NEoN Trans*Feminist Counter Cloud Action Plan', Wiki of The Institute for Technology in the Public Interest, 30 May 2023. Retrieved from www.titipi.org/wiki/index.php/Counter_Cloud_Action_Plan on 18 April 2026.