

# MAPPING THE UNFATHOMABLE FRONTIERS OF INDIGENOUS CYBERSPACE:

## A Survey of the Expanding/Contracting Boundaries of *Going Native on the Net*

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The English word **fathom** has two predominant meanings (and I am told that the same largely holds true for its Swedish variant). The most typical meaning in contemporary usage signifies ‘understanding: to come to understand something or someone.’ The nowadays less-utilized meaning denotes a ‘distance, specifically one originally based on the distance of outstretched arms.’

I find such co-implications between *understanding* and *distance* poetic, and also provocative when applied to an exploration of boundaries and communications in cyberspace. Taken together, the dual definitions of **fathom** produce a drama of two acts. In the first instance, they imply a physicality, wherein distance is best conceived with respect to our bodies, as an embodied spatio-temporal knowing (measuring/pacing out a foot, etc.). In the second instance, they imply metaphorically that to incorporate a new idea is akin to expanding, or stretching one’s mental horizon. In summation, then, gaining insight can figuratively be said to be predicated upon proximity; similarly, the closing of distance ostensibly promotes understanding, a conceptual grasp. Hence we arrive at a junction where the two significations of fathom coalesce and consummate the argument that the most profound forms of understanding take place face-to-face, within the distance of outstretched arms.

So, what does this foray into fathoming etymologies have to do with cyberspace? Well, granting this relationship between distance and understanding, it remains to be analyzed just how the multiple ways in which cyberspace is changing the nature of distance (through space-time compressions and flows theorized by many scholars) impact on our understanding of one another, on social relationships, on communicative action. In other words, what happens when face-to-face sociality - premised on a kind of understanding (albeit idealized) marked by the arms-distance between oneself and another - is relocated

by virtual sociality - premised on a kind of understanding (albeit speculated) marked by the arms-distance between oneself and the computerized screen that represents the other? Exploring this question entails a look at what happens to boundaries (indeed - what *are* boundaries?) in cyberspace. By boundaries I refer to divisions based on ethnicity, class, culture and ideology as well as divisions based on geography. Clearly, cyberspace, alongside other trends in globalization and planetary inter-connectivity, reconfigures conventional divisions in complex ways. As JoAnn D'Alisera notes: 'as transnational migration and connections brings distant worlds into immediate juxtaposition, the production of meaning can no longer be understood in terms of the classic distinctions: here/there, self/other, similarity/difference.' Here, I will illustrate some ways in which virtual sociality is indeed dissolving conventional divisions. Such blurring of boundaries heralds new prospects for tolerance; however, not all processes of boundary deconstruction are necessarily positive or empowering. Moreover, global telecommunications networks are equally engaged in etching new divisions between peoples, and - for better and for worse - in reinforcing existing ones. To demonstrate these challenges, I here survey ethnographic examples of how the Internet is implicated, on the one hand, in the erasure and contraction of boundaries; and on the other hand, in the expansion and multiplication of boundaries.

By and large, my examples are drawn from recent ethnographies of Internet use by indigenous and diasporic peoples; these cases are included in a volume I am editing entitled, *Going Native on the Net: Indigenous Cyberactivism and Virtual Diasporas over the World Wide Web*. This book focuses on the *who, what, when, where, why and how* of the increased use of the world-wide-web by marginalized peoples. In my presentation here, I will briefly sketch the details of these ethnographic case studies, and then speculate on their implications for cyber-democracy, the emergence of a global public sphere, and the future of indigenous identity and native political/cultural empowerment.

## **Indigenous and Diasporic Internet**

Internet use by indigenous and diasporic peoples has been increasing exponentially since 1997, the year in which I began research into this phenomenon. (Please note: In my discussion here I must necessarily gloss over the many challenges that online anthropology presents: including questions of authenticity, the crisis of representation, the conundrum of online methodology, and ethical dilemmas, to name a few). Specifically, with respect to indigenous cyberactivism, I have been studying how native peoples over the planet have been using virtual media both to enhance internal communications within their ethnic group (what I here call **intra**-tribal alliances) and also to forge external connections with

other native groups and thus across ethnic boundaries (what I here call **inter-tribal** alliances). There is also the notable expansion of connectivities between native and non-native peoples: these might involve, for example, the instrumental alliances of native peoples with grassroots activists for a common cause, as in environmental protection campaigns; or these might involve the growing number of chat sites and webpages where curious mainstream youth are chatting with native youth about lifeways, local culture, and global happenings (e.g., world music). Such proactive and/or pedagogical alliances are a form of solidarity networking; and represent what I have called a ‘virtual we’ phenomenon. With respect to the use of global telecommunications on the part of diasporic groups, studies have focused on the tenacity and transformation of a community dispersed across space/time and the emergence of translocal identities untethered from place.

### *Intra-Tribal Alliances*

There are numerous examples of intra-tribal alliances that I could cite, yet for the sake of brevity, I will mention only a few: the Sami, Inuit, Tongans and Hopi peoples. The northern Sami peoples are divided by linguistic barriers and by nation-state boundaries - no less than 4 countries separate them, as they are resident in Sweden, Norway, Finland and Russia. Their forays into cyberspace include the establishment of an Intranet site available only to members, with the express goal of linking across territorial and language divides in order to share information about Sami lifeways, like reindeer hunting, and to revitalize and teach Sami dialects. In its early years at the time of this writing, the Sami Intranet initiative already is proving to be highly successful venture (Kuhmunen).

The cyber-networks of Inuit peoples resident in remote regions of the Arctic likewise give evidence of the electronic solidification of intra-tribal alliances. Herein, mobile phones and Internet are ‘bringing together’ (into virtually proximity) populations who have historically been widely dispersed from Canada to Greenland, yet who have resonance in terms of mutually-intelligible cultural patterns and lifeways. In focusing on the dynamics between on-line and off-line sociality, Neil Blair Christensen makes the point that mental and social space are, as Lefebvre notes, aspects of a shared ‘reality’; thus, in computer-mediated space Inuit are engaged in practicing the utilization not just of cyberspace, but its recursive bonds to lifespace and physical space. The digital revitalization of Inuit identity thus has potential real-life implications at local, national and transnational levels.

Similarly, Helen Morton’s research into the chat sites of Pacifican Tongan youth with their peers at ‘home’ and in diaspora, demonstrates the multiple tiers of representation which challenge native groups who increasingly find themselves as global players with access to resources and potential voice. It is of interest to note that a current debate on Tonga.net over the use of English versus native languages has motivated some activists to

advocate a Tongan-only rule in order to supplant pidgin English. Such meta-reflexive discussions address the very question of the relationship between language and identity. Through these musings, diasporic Tongan youth are engaged in forging new conceptualizations of personhood which are interestingly both grounded in reawakening traditions and yet articulated at a global level.

The cyber-activities of the Sami, the Inuit and the Tongans discussed above can be characterized as contractive: that is, through their connections the physical world is shrinking. The word **contract** has a rich etymology: it derives from the Latin **contrahere**, meaning to draw together so as to become diminished in size, and also to draw together in agreement so as to make a formal contract. Thus, we can say that Sami are drawn together with other Sami, Inuit with Inuit, and Tongan with Tongan, via interactive communications technologies which shrink the globe and concentrate their identity-constructions. Such alliances erase some kinds of boundaries (notably national and linguistic); while etching other boundaries (notably, by reaffirming ethnic boundedness based on a relatively homogeneous identity-construction).

However, certainly not all uses of Internet on the part of native peoples involve the contractual construction of a reified, homogenizing identity. A case in point refers to the Native American Hopi among whom I have conducted anthropological fieldwork (both on-site and on-line). My research has been exploring certain ideological divisions *within* the tribe. Specifically, I have been studying how one faction, who call themselves the 'Traditionalists' and who eschew 'modernity' and such phenomenon as a monetary economy have themselves - ironically - turned to the Internet to broadcast their dissent from the official Hopi Tribal Council, whom they consider a puppet government under the control of the 'white man's ways'! In this case, the heterogeneity of Hopi identities are being broadcast in cyberspace as internal debates concerning 'true' Hopi identity are negotiated globally.

In a related trend, in my review of 'official' tribal webpages (albeit, their authenticity and authorship are always open to question, given the slippery and unverifiable nature of cyberspace) from 1997 to 2001, I encountered over time an increasing disavowal of homogeneity. In other words, many official websites by or on behalf of native peoples have transitioned from posting basically-blanket statements about 'our people' to posting the disclaimer that: 'this site does not necessarily represent the views and opinions of all our peoples.' In this and like scenarios, we witness how native identity-constructions in a global arena are not only being refined, but are also becoming more multiple and more nuanced. Herein, the expected boundedness of native identity is deconstructed, as the heterogeneity that is (always already) within native groups finds expression in new media.

### *Inter-tribal Alliances*

The rise in indigenous activism between native groups provides another illustration of the shifting role of global technologies and metanarratives in mediating local identities vis-à-vis a larger, spectating world. Maximilian Forte has studied processes of both online and offline community-building among the Santa Rosa Carib peoples of mixed African, Native American and European descent who are today resident in Trinidad and Tobago. The Santa Rosa Carib community seeks to articulate an indigenous identity that distinguishes them as unique within a creolized and pluralistic society. These claims are being developed in and through a local-global network of cultural brokers invested in the renegotiation of symbolic capital, particularly by reinventing important rituals like the Smoke Ceremony. By actively linking with the growing movements of First Nations (Canada) and American Indian (USA) activism, this small Carib community has situated itself into an extensive web of pan-indigenous symbols and internationalized resources. In a provocative twist, it is by first gaining clout in transnational channels that Santa Rosa Carib resurgent (one might say invented) indigeneity has subsequently been gaining clout locally.

While space/time preclude elaboration here of other examples of inter-tribal alliances, it is of note that native-native cyber-networking is quite energized and far-reaching: linking native peoples from Australia to the Arctic, and from rainforests to deserts. The resulting transfer of basic information, the exchange of similar sagas of oppression, and the sharing of strategies of resistance - all are indications of a growing cosmopolitanism of native identities, a cosmopolitanism that may yield greater indigenous voice in international arenas, as for example, in the United Nations. These inter-tribal alliances are also largely contractive, in the sense of forging a kind of contract, a consensual vision, between native populations.

### *Solidarity Networking*

There is also a vast array of world-wide-web links between native and non-native peoples for a variety of purposes, be it tourist promotion, pedagogical initiatives, or political activism. In the first instance, a large number of native-related webpages are entrepreneurial in intent. For example, the work of ethnographer Edmund Searles examines Inuit websites designed to attract tourists to experience sublime Arctic landscapes, to promote Inuit-produced arts and crafts worldwide, and to market Inuit traditional knowledge to prospective researchers. In their self-advertisements, Inuit both appropriate and transform stereotypes of Arctic igloos and polar bears, and package these images for global consumers. Herein, the information age has provided new venues for indigenous groups involved in the reconfiguration and production of 'tradition' as both lifeway and livelihood.

In the instance of political activism, my work has traced how grassroots activists from Rainforest Action Network are cyber-networking with Amazonian U'wa natives in remote jungles of Colombia to collectively fight the expansion of oil exploitation on aboriginal lands. Thus far, these goal-oriented coalitions have been achieving notable success through what I call a kind of *push-button activism* wherein online spectators are encouraged to download and email complaints to oil company executives and other global gatekeepers. The Uwa-Rainforest Action campaign is a keen example of the power of Internet to rally a dispersed, transnational public, or publics, for a common cause. A similar case in point is that of the Zapatista activists in Chiapas Mexico, who have achieved international visibility and a great deal of humanitarian support through their strategic web-based outreach under the guidance of subCommandante Marcos.

However, again, not all alliances between grassroots activists and native peoples have necessarily been celebratory or welcome. In this regard, I can cite the work of John Schaefer, who has been following the virtual nation iGhana, a website whose digital existence is bound to the real/imagined existence of Ghana. Schaefer examines a heated debate that began when a US-based environmental group, Friends of Animals, proposed repatriating to Ghana former circus and laboratory chimpanzees. On principle chat sites, iGhana largely rejected the proposed conservation and eco-tourism scheme. While many of the most vocal of the iGhana activists represented the elite of Ghana's diaspora, their discussions of the ape-repatriation proposal were discursively framed in idioms of marginalization: accordingly, concepts of invasion, infection, neocolonialism, and scientific racism were mobilized to defeat the agenda.

In thus considering native and non-native cyber-solidarities, it bears repeating that there are many examples where boundaries of culture, class, nationalism and ideology are, at least temporarily, being mitigated by bonds based in new ideologies, shared political agendas, and/or instrumental mutual goals. We can only speculate at this point as to the fate and future of such alliances like those between environmental activists and aboriginal rainforest inhabitants: will they create new pluralist 'publics' actively drawing boundaries between their form of globalism in order to wage war on the globalism of multinational corporations and so-called resource 'development' schemes?

### *Diasporic Communities*

For diasporic groups, a social personhood referential to a geophysical reality is precluded by disruptive immigrant and refugee experiences. An increasing number of immigrant peoples retain connections to the homeland and to each other via telecommunications networks. In this manner, they interact in multiple simultaneous worlds, yet it has also been argued that these networks create a singular social field in which long-distance

communication across national boundaries has become a significant part of the construction of a transnational identity that transcends diaspora. As such, seemingly disparate individuals form a community that is neither fixed in space, nor bound to a set of definable attributes, but is instead a fluid field of practices and meanings, negotiated in self-defining terms (D'Alisera). Because diasporic identity is an artifact of the diasporic situation itself, the resulting shape of identity that emerges may be something altogether distinct from a local, homeland identity. For example, Camilla Gibb's work among the Harari from Ethiopia explores how the world-wide-web has enabled Harari youth in diaspora in Europe and the USA to initiate a dialogue of what it means to be Harari. In seeking to anchor their disrupted identity in an empowering marker, their discourses both exaggerate the role of Islam in the Harari past and adopt it as a marker which provides them with a strong present referent to forge links with other, non-Harari, Muslims. The Harari case provides one of many examples of the use of Internet to perpetuate ethnic, cultural and/or national ties across nation-state boundaries, thereby blurring but also virtually extending these boundaries. Yet, the Harari case also underscores how the Internet can be used to create new boundaries - new forms of imagined community - as diasporic groups who endure the anomie of spatio-temporal displacement in real space, turn to cyberspace to find affirmation in a multicultural world. For Harari youth, however, the commonality they forge through pan-Muslim solidarities may problematically perpetuate their difference, and thus their exclusion from dominant Euro-American societies in which they reside.

Internet use by marginalized peoples thus suggests that the Internet allows for the *possibility* of the subaltern other's engagement with and talking back to a hegemonic Western(ized) self. Radhika Gajjala studies this issue in online exchanges of cyber-ethnographies and autoethnographies in India in relation to the Internet as a virtual techno-mediated panopticon. She argues that Internet performances and exchanges currently underway permit the articulation of subaltern voice, but do not show evidence of changing the structural and discursive appropriation of the other's self-narratives. Rather, in India (as elsewhere) cultural and material access to the Internet outside of the North is fairly class-specific and gender-controlled, leading her to speculate that what is currently visible online is a veiling of the 'subaltern.' This echoes the comments of Jerry Everard who states that online performances serve as 'represent[ation]s [of] the world to the West. The Internet is far from global but it serves to appropriate the idea of the global for western consumption. And there is a human cost to this process.' Different social realities - digital and material, virtual and real - produce variations of an embodied subject framed by hegemonic ideologies and discourses. The virtual environments within which subjects interact online are structured by the symbolic and technological realities of cyberspace, which, in turn, are produced in negotiation with hegemonic ideologies and structures of power. Therefore,

online interactions and the human subjects produced in interaction with new mediating technologies ultimately cannot be discussed in isolation from the cultural, social, political and economic contexts within which emerging technologies and new forms of communication operate.

The infrastructure of global telecommunications is not one of a borderless power. Rather Paula Uimonen's ethnography of the role of specific Internet pioneers, companies and NGOs in the rapid expansion and wide dispersion of the Internet in Southeast Asia assesses the sustenance of old power structures alongside the creation of new structures, in relation to building the information superhighway. The social dispersion of Internet usage indicates the enforcement of entrenched social and cultural boundaries at international as well as national levels, and is modified according to their ambitions.

Nevertheless, there are real indications for optimism about the equalizing and democratizing potentials of global telecommunications as vehicles to facilitate civil society. One of the most uplifting examples is that brought forth in the research of native ethnographer Rose Kadende-Kaiser, who has been studying Burundinet. This network enables Hutu and Tutsi Burundians in the diaspora to interact virtually at a time when face-to-face communications between these two groups is limited, and may be painfully foreclosed by the memories of the recent violence and massacres. Although these groups do not always agree on what should be done to end ethnic violence in their home country, they are also aware of the commonalities that link them as members of the Burundi community abroad. For example, they are fluent in Kirundi and French, the two official languages of Burundi that are also favored on Burundinet. They also have easier access to the Internet and better education in the diaspora. Shared language and cultural discourses serve as the foundation for the establishment of a community of network subscribers.

In the case of Burundinet, we witness - with hope - how boundaries of intolerance and misunderstanding just might be disintegrating through mediations in cyberspace, wherein 'virtual' communities are constructed according to basic principles of self-organization and free-association. Implicit in this arrangement is the perceived sovereignty of public digital space. However (and there seems to always be a counterbalance to keep in tensions the utopian/dystopian potentialities of cyberspace) at the other end of the spectrum, there are numerous examples of how boundaries of intolerance and violence are expanding and multiplying in cyberspace. William Taggart analyses how the second Palestinian Intifada generated a number of Palestinian groups working in cyberspace to promote their political agendas, using 'hacker' or what he calls 'hacktivist' techniques to conduct massive assaults on websites bearing the Israeli '.il' suffix. In retaliation, Islamic sites have been targeted by pro-Israeli 'hacktivists' like the 'm0sad team.' Taggart explores how warring factions of transnational 'hackers' are organized through methods of resistance, defacement, and

disruption to execute cyber-warfare on a global scale. In the case of Palestinian and Israeli hackers, we witness - with dismay - how boundaries of intolerance based in competing claims of indigenous homelands find new ammunition and new battlegrounds in cyberspace.

## Conclusion

Global communications engagements on the part of some of the world's most disenfranchised populations provide us with empirical affirmation of the notion that cyber-connections are bringing together new spaces of articulation, new relational solidarities, new configurations of community across the planet. If we take the conventional and superficial definition of boundary as meaning a 'dividing line,' then we can uncontentiously say that cyberspace has been dissolving divisions. Yet, I have argued that the dissolution of some boundaries has been concurrent with the intensification of others.

In this presentation, I have attempted to fathom the expanding and contracting boundaries of indigenous and diasporic cyberspace usage. My brief survey of ethnographies of Internet use by marginalized peoples has considered the ways in which global digital networks are reconfiguring the boundaries by which peoples have understood - have come to *fathom* - their identities, their subjectivities, their place in ever-shrinking, but simultaneously multiplying worlds. The ethnographies presented here attest that cyberspace is truly a terra nova: an alluring and promising and frightening new world as yet unmapped (and perhaps unmappable?). Sociality based on virtuality is to date, largely unfathomable - meaning both that it confounds measurement and that it is not reducible to easy comprehension - because of the heterogeneity of shapes it assumes. Nowadays, the **fathom** as a unit of measure is virtually obsolete, except for the determination of distances underwater. Perhaps this is poetic, as our current understanding of cyber relations is somewhat submerged under clouds of speculation, fuzzy concepts, and thin data.

It remains to be seen whether this unfathomability relates to our current dearth of knowledge, our lack of empirical material and the proper methodological tools on which to measure cyber sociality; or whether its unfathomability is intrinsic to the kinds of virtual distances that cyberspace entails. While I find appealing the very real possibilities of democratic empowerment and coalition building via cyberspace, I am bothered by a nagging worry: for every barrier that is blasted, so to speak, there seem to be new barriers emerging. Thus, I would sadly caution against Steven Clift's proposal that, regarding the question of e-democracy, we should: 'lower our standards and declare victory.' The best conclusion, to date, that I can offer - albeit an unsatisfactory one and hardly original - is that like any technology, the fate of global telecommunications depends on its users.

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