

Dialogue- Assimilation- Subversion: Contemporary New Media Native Art in Canada

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In 1992, Salish/Okanagan artist Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun presented a virtual reality installation *Inherent Rights, Vision Right, at Land, Spirit, Power*, a show organized by the National Gallery of Canada during the celebrations of Canada's 125th birthday. The work consisted of an electronic mask and an electronic-motion hand and was aimed at introducing the viewer to the artist's religious practices:

"I have been a Blackface dancer eighteen years now, a masked dancer, a Sxwayxwey dancer since I was fourteen. I have been able to draw from these native experiences, combining them with western world experiences and technology to make my work. Employing technology that in the past has been used against native people." Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun

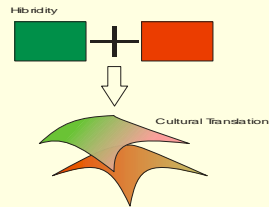
It is Yuxweluptun's evocation of the dialogue between Aboriginal stories and Western technologies, of the creation of a *contact zone* where "the white man's mask" -the virtual reality helmet- grants access to the loghouse, that motivated this investigation of similar experiences of cultural translation that challenge the opposition (Aboriginal) tradition/(Western) technology.

The present study concentrates on two Aboriginal on-line projects *CyberPowWow* (Shawennati Tricia Fragnito et al.) and *Isi-pikiskewewin Ayapihkésisak-Speaking the Language of Spiders* (Ahasiw Maskegon-Iskwew et al.). This choice reveals my interest in projects that manifest the need to move beyond the exploration of digital aesthetics *per se* in order to use the Internet as a medium to recuperate the "Aboriginal right to name." (Todd 1992)

Cultural Translation: Towards a Model

In *Primitive Passions*, Rey Chow investigates the relationship between translation and tradition, and concludes that "translation is a process in which the notion of the 'original', the relationship between the 'original' and its 'derivations', and the demand for what is 'natural' must be thoroughly re-examined." (1995, 184)

Chow's notion of translation challenges the binary opposition original/derivative by proposing a model in which both terms are equally contaminated and in continuous dialogue.



The notion of translation is crucial to understanding why the on-line projects studied cannot be reduced to binary oppositions such as tradition vs. technology or to simplistic accounts of hybridity.

In this context, technology is defined as a set of practices –and discourses- that facilitate the communication and preservation of traditional values through a continuous process of renewal. Technology, as an entanglement of discourses and practices in permanent negotiation, has an impact on processes of identity construction. It is therefore critical in the economy of tradition, and not just an alien element that threatens the *authenticity* of traditional values. I thus propose to look at tradition as a continuous process of re-invention, translation, protection, and exclusion. **How does the historicity of the medium affect the narration and dissemination of Aboriginal stories on-line? How is this historicity negotiated by Aboriginal artists? How is the Internet translated to Aboriginal terms?**

Bringing the Pow Wow to the Electronic Frontier: An Exercise in "Contact Perspective"

Conceived in the midst of the "cybercolonial enterprise," *CyberPowWow* is not strange to some of the tropes associated to the cyberlibertarian discourse: disembodiment, community, freedom of expression, fluid identities.

However, these tropes are continuously challenged by the memory of the suffering of Native peoples during European settlement. This continuous questioning of the meaning of the electronic frontier is evident in a recently published article by Fragnito and Lewis, where it is questioned the notion of cyberspace as *terra nullius*.

If cyberspace promises the possibility of a Native territory that can be shaped to meet the needs of the Native community, this territory is marked by both a will of total vision and control manifested by the metaphor of the frontier, and the Aboriginal memory of oppression. It can be argued that in Native terms the frontier is always a contact zone.

To look at cyberspace from a contact perspective implies the recognition of the different stories (practices, experiences, discourses) that contribute to shape the Internet as a social space. This awareness of the historicity of the medium facilitate the questioning and subversion of Internet's mediation. In *CyberPowWow* this awareness has turned the site into a contact zone where the phantoms associated with colonial and capitalistic greed are challenged. **If *CyberPowWow* is conceived as a territory, this is a land that is not occupied but constituted through storytelling. This is why *CyberPowWow* cannot be but a gathering site, "a place where 'Native meets non-Native', be it technologically, socially, or culturally".** (Pechawis 2005) **A contact zone.**

The tribalism of the virtual community promoted by many cyberlibertarians, with its parochial undertones and its explicit references to a mythical and *pure gemeinschaft*, is appropriated and subverted by presenting the communal experience as a movement towards contact, sharing and contagion.



Shawennati Tricia Fragnito et al. *CyberPowWow* logo and icon, www.cyberpowwow.net



if Aboriginal peoples learned one thing from contact, it is the danger of seeing any place as *terra nullius*, even cyberspace. Its foundations were designed with a specific logic, built on a specific form of technology, and first used for specific purposes... The ghosts of these designers, builders, and prime users continue to haunt the blank spaces. (Fragnito and Lewis 2005, 30)

Storytelling On-Line: *Speaking the Language of Spiders* and the Challenge of Hypertext Aesthetics

Unlike *CyberPowWow*, which seeks to create an on-line contact zone based on the simultaneity of the chat space, *Isi-pikiskewewin Ayapihkésisak (Speaking the Language of Spiders)* is an exercise in collaborative storytelling on-line. **Artists combine texts (poems, short stories) and multimedia images (photographs, digitally produced images) in an attempt to reconcile past, present and future by intersecting stories that refer to Aboriginal youths living in urban centres and reserves. *Isi-pikiskewewin Ayapihkésisak (Speaking the Language of Spiders)* is a piece about hope, despair, and tradition.**

Isi-pikiskewewin Ayapihkésisak (Speaking the Language of Spiders)' first domain page is presented as a grid with different icons that transports the viewer into indexes of stories. Each story has its own rules of navigation. In some cases there is a main text that is read in a linear fashion by simply scrolling the text bar, but in other cases the story can only be viewed by clicking on different portions of the screen.

No matter how many times we come back, the story keeps changing. If, as Shields notes, the link is an indication of "latent possibilities" (Shields 2000, 153) these possible paths affect the present experience. If stories are doomed to change each time they are told, the hypertext is the performance of this fate.



Ahasiw Maskegon-Iskwew, *Isi-pikiskewewin Ayapihkésisak (Speaking the Language of Spiders)*, http://spiderlanguage.ca/images/sprints.html

But, isn't this the fate of tradition? Isn't this permanent renewal the condition of the story's survival as tradition? It can be agreed with Chow that "tradition itself is nothing if it is not transmission. How is tradition to be transmitted, to be passed on, if not through translation?" (183)

The link creates passages in between, "leakage(s) from the latent to the manifest." (Shields, 156) It is precisely the promise of what will follow, that undermines the myth of totality. The link offers the possibility to make time and space "palpable," a experience that constitutes the core of the hypertext aesthetics.

In *Isi-pikiskewewin Ayapihkésisak (Speaking the Language of Spiders)* this aesthetics is appropriated to create the conditions for the storytelling: the deferral, the desire, and the renewal. This is the promise of the passage that disrupts the temporality of the reading. As Stewart indicates: "the adjustable speed of narration, the manipulability of the visual, turns the reader into a spectator enveloped by, yet clearly separated from, the time and space of the text." (1993, 9)



Ahasiw Maskegon-Iskwew, *Isi-pikiskewewin Ayapihkésisak (Speaking the Language of Spiders)*, http://spiderlanguage.ca

This separation is what the hypertext challenges and what constitutes its main attraction for the recreation of a sense of oral communication in a predominantly textual oriented medium such as the Internet.

It can be argued that it is the possibility of combining the permanence of the writing and the performance of the storyteller -the potential of repetition and renewal- that motivates the adoption and translation of the hypertext aesthetics to Aboriginal terms. In turn the "friction of distance" (Shields, 157) generated by the hypertext link complicates the construction of Internet as a mythic landscape, creating passages for the performance of time and space.

Cultural Translation as a Strategy to Approach New Media Art

To approach new media Native art based on the notion of cultural translation means looking at Aboriginal interventions in new media as processes in which technology is negotiated to meet the needs and concerns of a growing and creative Aboriginal community.

These projects also represent a chance to challenge definitions of traditions, and Aboriginal traditions in particular, as static and "outside history".

"I've heard this story many times, and each time someone tells the story, it changes," King wrote in *The Truth about Stories* (2003). This is the secret of storytelling. This is the condition of possibility of Aboriginal new media art.