

Dialogue- Assimilation- Subversion
Contemporary New Media Native Art in Canada
María Victoria Guglietti¹

*But we are the river,
the crossings continue throughout,
through the blood and the bone,
voices calling from each side.*
Ahasiw Maskegon-Iskwew, *ásowaha*²

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.³ 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.⁴

It is this evocation of the dialogue between Aboriginal⁵ stories and Western technologies, of the creation of a contact zone⁶ where "the white man's mask"⁷ -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.

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² Ahasiw Maskegon-Iskwew, "ásowaha," <http://www.eciad.bc.ca/~grunt/ahasiw.html> (accessed June 28th, 2005).

³ The exhibition's mandate was "(to) recognize a new generation of First Nations artists whose work was individual and personal, yet reflected a distinct cultural experience within mainstream North American art." Diana Nemiroff; Robert. Houle and C. Townsend-Gault, *Land, Spirit, Power: First Nations at the National Gallery of Canada* (Ottawa: National Gallery of Canada, 1992), 11.

The National Gallery was certainly not alone in its decision to organize an exhibition of contemporary Native art. The Canadian Museum of Civilization (Hull, Quebec) and The Walter Phillips Gallery (Banff, Alberta) also hosted shows that sought to respond to the turbulent climate initiated by the 500 years "celebrations" of Columbus' voyage and Canada's 125th anniversary.

⁴ Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun as quoted in D. Nemiroff, R. Houle and C. Townsend-Gault, 222.

⁵ I will use "Aboriginal", "Native" and "First Nations" as interchangeable terms.

⁶ James Clifford. *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997).

⁷ Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun as quoted in D. Nemiroff, R.Houle and C. Townsend-Gault, 222.

The present study concentrates on two Aboriginal on-line projects *CyberPowWow*⁸ and *Speaking the Language of Spiders*⁹. 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.”¹⁰ As Todd explains:

I seek to explore the “to and fro movement” between the Fourth and First Worlds, as I express self and culture. I hope that in encounters between the First and Fourth Worlds there can be not just conflict, but understanding that will result in new creation.

My approach to these artistic projects is highly indebted to the notion of cultural translation. 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.”¹¹ 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. Echo of Chow’s *translation* is found in *transculturation*, a term proposed as an alternative to look at processes often framed as “acculturation.” Transculturation, according to Rama

confirmed the existence, in an already transcultured contemporary culture, of a set of idiosyncratic values which could also be found in the remotest of its past history; and on the other, it simultaneously affirmed the existence of creative energy acting not only on its own inherited traditions, but on ones confirming from outside too.¹²

This process 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. I therefore propose to suspend all references to authenticity and origins to look

⁸ Shawennati Tricia Fragnito et al. The project is found at: www.cyberpowwow.net

⁹ Ahasiw Maskegon-Iskwew, Cheryl L’Hirondelle et al. The project is found at: <http://spiderlanguage.ca>

¹⁰ Loretta Todd. “What More Do They Want?” in *Indigena: Contemporary Native Perspectives*, eds. Gerald McMaster and Lee-Ann Martin (Hull, Quebec: Canadian Museum of Civilization, 1992), 75.

¹¹ Rey Chow, *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality, Ethnography, and Contemporary Chinese Cinema* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 184.

¹² Rama (1997) as quoted in John Kraniuskas. “Hybridity in a Transnational Frame: Latin-Americanist and Post-Colonial Perspectives on Cultural Studies,” in *Hybridity and its Discontents: Politics, Science, Culture*, ed. Avtar Brah and Annie E. Coombes (London; New York: Routledge, 2000), 238. The term was also coined by Mary Louise Pratt in *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 1992). I refer to this text again in my discussion of *CyberPowWow* and contact zones.

instead at tradition as a continuous process of re-invention, translation, protection, and exclusion. In this context, technology is defined as a set of practices –and discourses- that facilitates the communication and preservation of traditional values through a continuous process of renewal. If technology, as an entanglement of discourses and practices, 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.¹³ How does the historicity of the medium affect the narration and dissemination of Aboriginal stories on-line?¹⁴ How is this historicity negotiated by Aboriginal artists? How is the Internet “translated” to aboriginal terms? What can we learn from these translations?

This study is therefore an attempt at mapping the role played by technology’s mediation in the construction of Aboriginal stories, and the ways in which this mediation is questioned, silenced or subverted by artists involved in new media projects. I believe this is not just an issue of aesthetics but a matter of identity, as a quick look at the rich and polemic history of Canadian Aboriginal art reveals.

After all, as Thomas King wrote: “The truth about stories is that that’s all we are.”¹⁵

Bringing the Pow Wow to the Electronic Frontier: An exercise in “contact perspective”

CyberPowWow was first launched on April 5th 1997, as a website for the promotion and discussion of contemporary Native art. The official presentation was accompanied by two chat events at both Galerie Oboro in Montreal and Circle Vision Arts Corporation in Saskatoon. The project was originated by a collective of First Nations Artists called *Nation to Nation*, founded in 1994 by Skawennati Tricia Fragnito, Ryan Rice and Eric Robertson. *Nation to Nation* was committed to creating venues for the discussion of Native culture beyond regionalisms, and Internet seemed at the time a low cost medium to pursue that goal. Since its first days in

¹³ I hereby use the term *entanglement* in Nicholas Thomas’ sense of transaction of meaning through time. See Nicholas Thomas, *Entangled Objects: Exchange, Material Culture, and Colonialism in the Pacific* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1991).

¹⁴ I hereby use the term story to encompass the idea of tradition and transmission.

¹⁵ Thomas King, *The Truth about Stories: A Native Narrative* (Toronto: House of Anansi Press, 2003), 153.

cyberspace, *CyberPowWow* tried to challenge stereotypes of Native *resilience* to new technologies:

Our goal was to break down stereotypes about Native people's relationship to technology and demonstrate that Native artists have adopted digital technologies as a culturally relevant medium. We saw the Internet not just as a new technology but a new territory, one that we could help shape from its inception.¹⁶

This first version of *CyberPowWow* relied on a chat space called *The Palace*, shared with other participants involved in different chat events. A second version, *CyberPowWow 2* eliminated potential intrusions by presenting its own Palace. Eight Aboriginal artists intervened in the design of avatars and the customizing of the forum space¹⁷. A third development of the project, *CPW 2K: CyberPowWow* centered on issues of Aboriginal digital aesthetics and sought the participation of Aboriginal artists from Australia and the US, as well as non-Native artists.

After eight years of uninterrupted existence, the website has become a multimedia gallery, forum, archive and theoretical think tank. Among its contributors there are prestigious figures from the Native artistic community such as Rosalie Favell, Greg Hill, Ryan Johnston, Archer Pechawis, Edward Poitras, Jason E. Lewis and Ahasiw Maskegon-Iskwew. Today, *CyberPowWow 04* focuses on the protection and study of the on-line Native territory and cyberspace in general. To this end, Fragnito and Lewis have asked Native artists to explore the "unnatural resources" (data, pixels, bandwidth, access) found in this new on-line territory.

It is interesting to note that the Aboriginal adoption of the metaphor of cyberspace activates –and subverts– some of the popular ideas and practices associated to the Internet. The first obvious image is that of cyberspace as an "electronic frontier", popularized by Barlow and Kapor in the 1990's.¹⁸ Even if the metaphor lost its popular acquiescence, it can be argued that it was an influential way of thinking about the Internet as medium in the mid 1990's when

¹⁶ Archer Pechawis, "Not So Much a Land Claim," *CyberPowWow*, <http://www.cyberpowwow.net/archerweb/index.html> (accessed June 28th, 2005).

¹⁷ These were Edward Poitras, Ahasiw Maskegon-Iskwew, Sheryl Kootenياهو, Archer Pechawis, Lori Blondeau, Bradlee LaRocque, Ryan Rice and Melanie Printup Hope.

¹⁸ John Perry Barlow and Mitchell Kapor, "Across the Electronic Frontier," *Electronic Frontier Foundation*, http://www.eff.org/Misc/Publications/John_Perry_Barlow/?f=barlow_and_kapor_in_wired.interview.txt.

CyberPowWow was first conceived.¹⁹ I will consequently focus on what I regard as a translation of the metaphor of the electronic frontier in Aboriginal terms and its potential implications for the constitution of a Native space on-line.

According to early cyberlibertarians²⁰, cyberspace constituted a “frontier region” where “the old concepts of property, expression, identity, movement, and context... do not apply”.²¹ The idea of cyberspace as a land of freedom and limitless potential was consistent with the fast movement of decentralization of the Internet. If in the 1980’s the Internet was a medium limited to academic and military uses, the 1990 represents a decade of on-line entrepreneurial expansion, dominated by a rhetoric prone to Far West euphemisms. In fact, *Cyberspace and the American Dream: A Magna Carta for the Knowledge Age*, a cyberlibertarian manifesto issued for the first time in 1994, refers to cyberspace as the “latest American frontier”²² and advocates for an American rule of the vast on-line territory²³.

The frontier, as metaphor to frame the early development of cyberspace, alludes to anarchy and adventure while it silences the actual oppression of Native communities. The

¹⁹ Even if milder in tone, the mid 1990’s represent the emergence of cyberculture studies as a field of research. The agenda was largely dictated by the desire to *discover* and *map* what was then perceived as a new social space. The metaphor of cyberspace as a new territory with limitless potential for identity performance and community exchange was consistent with the postmodern climate, and inspired many researchers to focus on “the virtual as a coherent social space, and one in which new rules and ways of being and relating could emerge precisely because of the separation from the constraints of the ‘really real.’” Don Slater, “Social Relationships and Identity Online and Offline,” in *Handbook of New Media: Social Shaping and Consequences of ICTs*, eds. Leah A. Lievrouw and Sonia Livingstone (London; Thousand Oaks, California: Sage, 2002), 534.

²⁰ Winner defines cyberlibertarianism as “a collection of ideas that links ecstatic enthusiasm for electronically mediated forms of living with radical, right wing libertarian ideas about the proper definition of freedom, social life, economics, and politics in the years to come.” Langdon Winner, “Cyberlibertarians Myths and the Prospect of Community.” (1997), *The Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute*, <http://www.rpi.edu/~winner/cyberlib2.html>. I prefer the term cyberlibertarian for its political implications rather than the more artistic oriented “cyberpunk”, associated to the writings of William Gibson.

²¹ John Perry Barlow “A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace.” *Electronic Frontier Foundation*, http://www.eff.org/Publications/John_Perry_Barlow/barlow_0296.declaration

²² Esther Dyson; George Gilder; George Keyworth and Alvin Toffler, “Cyberspace and the American dream: A Magna Carta for the Knowledge Age (Release 1.2, August 22, 1994)” *The Information Society* 12, no. 3 (1996): 301.

²³ “What our 20th-century countrymen came to think of as the ‘American dream,’ and what resonant thinkers referred to as ‘the promise of American life’ or ‘the American Idea,’ emerged from the turmoil of 19th-century industrialization. Now it’s our turn: The knowledge revolution, and the Third Wave of historical change it powers, summons us to renew the dream and enhance the promise,” *Ibid*, 296.

frontier becomes the dream of expansion in a cyber *terra nullius*.²⁴ “What the frontier gives is the liberty to indulge licence within the brief of the civilizational stage directions, ‘to do’, as John Wayne apocryphally termed it, ‘what a man’s got to do,’” explains Sardar.²⁵ It is important to note that I do not intend to state a *direct* impact of the frontier metaphor on the actual uses of the medium, but I would not dismiss the influence of this framing on the way Internet was opened to commercial exploitation during the 1990’s and whose effects are still felt today. After all, what are the limits for individual and corporative *exploration* in a territory defined as *terra nullius*?

In *Museums as Contact Zones* Clifford argues that the frontier reveals a “European expansionist perspective (the frontier is a frontier only with respect to Europe).”²⁶ The frontier is a strategy for the visualization of new territories and cultures regulated by a logics of either/or. As a strategy, the frontier silences the “contact zone,” defined by Pratt as “a spatial and temporal copresence of subjects previously separated by geographic and historical disjunctures, and whose trajectories now intersect.”²⁷ It can be argued that the movement from frontier to contact zone is a question of *perspective* –and politics–, whose implications for the definition of difference are evident. It is a choice between *purity* and *contamination*.

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.²⁸

The CyberPowWow Palace is a safe space: guests are encouraged to engage in playful “dressup” behaviour. This is a deliberate strategy on our part. By creating a virtual space

²⁴ *Terra nullius* is a doctrine that “denies the existence of Indigenous people, in the sense that they do not legally matter when Europeans arrive, and who therefore have no history that matters.” John Giokas and Paul L.A.H Chartrand, “Who are the Métis? A Review of the Law and Policy, *Who are Canada’s Aboriginal Peoples: Recognition, Definition, and Jurisdiction*, edited by Paul L.A.H Chartrand, (Saskatoon: Purich Publishing Ltd., 2002), 107.

²⁵ Ziauddin Sardar, “Alt.Civilizations.FAQ: Cyberspace as the Darker Side of the West.” in *The Cybercultures Reader*, ed. David Bell and Barbara M. Kennedy (London: Routledge, 2000), 735.

²⁶ Clifford, 192.

²⁷ Pratt, 6. With this definition in mind, Clifford proposes a curatorial model for museums based on a “contact perspective”, in which collecting strategies are seen as part of a larger context of dominance, resistance and negotiation (Clifford, 213).

²⁸ Mihaela Kelemen and Warren Smith, “Community and its ‘Virtual’ Promises: A Critique of Cyberlibertarian Rhetoric.” *Information, Communication & Society* 4, no. 3 (2001): 370-387.

where the players could be anyone we hope to break down the barriers of race and class that separate us in our daily lives.²⁹

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 the authors question the notion of cyberspace as *terra nullius*:

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 (allowing military units to remain in contact after a nuclear attack). The ghosts of these designers, builders, and prime users continue to haunt the blank spaces.³⁰

If cyberspace promises the possibility of a Native territory “beyond the reservation,” a space 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.³¹ 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 opens the doors to 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”.³² A contact zone.

CyberPowWow 04 continues that expansion of Indian Territory beyond the reservation. By involving itself with fundamental questions about the nature and direction of cyberspace as a whole, the exhibition places itself – and Natives – into direct exchange with the wider virtual world. By reflecting on the past and seeking to understand how that

²⁹ “Not so much a land claim” (Pechawis 2005)

³⁰ Jason Lewis and Skawennati Tricia Fragnito, “Aboriginal territories in Cyberspace.” *Cultural Survival Quarterly* (Summer 2005): 30.

³¹ Jolene Rickard, “First Nation Territory in Cyber Space Declared: No Treaties Needed” *CyberPowWow*, <http://www.cyberpowwow.net/nation2nation/jolenework.html>

³² Pechawis, n.p.

history shares similar dynamics with the new New World, the exhibition helps ensure that there are no reservations in cyberspace.³³

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. It is in this sense that *CyberPowWow* owes as much to Rheingold³⁴ as to the traditional pow wow:

The use of the term “pow wow” automatically shifts the mental gears into overdrive. What do pow-wows have to do with cyberspace? “CyberPowWow 2” does not represent a shift in the intellectual paradigm of the west. **It is a very direct application of the palace software but somehow when you exit this site you definitely know you were in Indian territory.**³⁵

Storytelling on-line: Speaking the language of spiders and the hypertext aesthetics

If the lesson of *CyberPowWow* consists in complicating the metaphor of the frontier to propose cyberspace as a contact zone, *Isi-pikîskwewin Ayapihkêsîsak (Speaking the Language of Spiders)* presents a different case of appropriation and translation of the medium based on the notion of the *passage*.³⁶ The passage is the transit space *par excellence*, both a temporalization of space and a spatialization of time, a symptom of the modern time-space compression.³⁷

In *Hypertext Links: The Ethics of the Index and its Space-Time Effects*, Shields argues that the hypertext link creates a sense of space and time whose locality contrasts with cyberspace’s mythic totality. The link relates elements that can never be simultaneously seen; contributing to the imaginary mapping of cyberspace. It is in the link that the experience of the passage is most strongly felt.

³³ Jason Lewis “Terra Nullius, Terra Incognito” *CyberPowWow*, http://www.cyberpowwow.net/cpw04_text.html

³⁴ Howard Rheingold has been an early advocator of the potential of cyberspace to host a new form of community reminiscent of the *Gemeinschaft*. See Howard Rheingold, *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*. (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1993).

³⁵ Rickard, n.p., emphasis added. The “pow wow” event is a Native response to the governmental suppression of Aboriginal traditional gatherings and celebrations. It is also meant to promote the sharing of songs and dances among members of different Native communities.

³⁶ I am referring here to the Benjamin’s notion of *passage* as the heterotopic spaces formed by the arcades that soon became paramount for the emergence of the *flâneur*. See Walter Benjamin. *Charles Baudelaire: A Lyric Poet in the Era of High Capitalism* (London: New Left Books, 1970).

³⁷ David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990).

Shield's description of the link is reminiscent of Benjamin's *flânerie*. Indeed, the hypertext link requires a permanent wandering: it performs rather than visualizes...or it visualizes by performing. If the link enables navigation and, thus, the *discovery* of cyberspace's vast territory; it is also potentially disruptive. It can be argued that hypertext aesthetics relies on this potential disruption to trigger our curiosity and to question our "commanding vision."³⁸ Could this potential questioning be appropriated by Aboriginal artists?

Isi-pikîskwewin Ayapihkêšîsak (Speaking the Language of Spiders) is an on-line collaboration project to create an Aboriginal arts space whose artistic director is writer, new media and performance artist Ahasiw Maskegon-Iskwew. Collaborators include a varied group of Aboriginal artists such as Cheryl L'Hirondelle, Lynn Acoose, Greg Daniels, Elvina Piapot and Richard Agecutay among others. The project, supported by the Banff Centre, was initiated in 1996 and resulted in a multimedia hypertext that combines poetry, photography and computer generated images. As *CyberPowWow*, *Isi-pikîskwewin Ayapihkêšîsak (Speaking the Language of Spiders)* moves towards the constitution of a net of Aboriginal artists based primarily in Canada and the US. Indeed, *Isi-pikîskwewin Ayapihkêšîsak (Speaking the Language of Spiders)* is part of a larger context of Aboriginal new media artists networking began with *Drum Beats to Drum Bytes* (1994, Aboriginal Film and Video Arts Alliance and the Banff Centre for the Arts)³⁹ and followed by *Drumbytes.org* (2003, Ahasiw Maskegon-Iskwew et al.).⁴⁰

Unlike *CyberPowWow*, which emphasizes the creation of an on-line contact zone based on the simultaneity of the chat space, *Isi-pikîskwewin Ayapihkêšîsak (Speaking the Language of Spiders)* is an exercise in collaborative storytelling on-line. It can be argued that the project seeks to knit threads among different Aboriginal artists through storytelling and hypertext aesthetics. In fact, the project is inspired by the nêhiyawin (Cree) creation story based on a version by Simeon

³⁸ Shields, 147.

³⁹ *Drumbeats to Drumbytes* was the name of a think-tank formed by a group of Aboriginal new media artists gathered at the Banff Centre in 1994 to discuss the creation of Aboriginal networks for the collaboration and production of new media arts. It was co-chaired by Loretta Todd, Sara Diamond and Marjorie Beaucage. Ahasiw Maskegon-Iskwew, "Drum Beats to Drum Bytes" <http://drumbytes.org/about/timeline.php>

⁴⁰ *Drumbytes.org* was presented at the group exhibition *Language of Intercession* curated by Steve Loft for the Art Gallery of Hamilton in June 2003.

Scott, a resident of Fort Albany.⁴¹ The story tells how the first couple made its trip to this land helped by the spider's net, and how once there the bear taught them how to survive.⁴² Artists combined texts (poems, short stories) and multimedia images (photographs, digitally produced images) as an attempt to reconcile past, present and future by intersecting stories that refer to Aboriginal youths living in urban centres and reserves.

Isi-pikîskwewin Ayapihkêsisak (Speaking the Language of Spiders) is a piece about hope, despair, and tradition. The project examines the relationship between traditional Aboriginal concepts (Cree and Saulteaux) and the experience of Aboriginal street youth, and it was conceived and produced during a lapse of ten weeks at the Banff Centre.⁴³

Isi-pikîskwewin Ayapihkêsisak (Speaking the Language of Spiders)' 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. As viewers we are given the chance to return to the main grid at any time, a fact that discourages any attempt to consider the project as a linear narrative. In fact, we cannot but progress in a circular fashion, forced to return to the domain page to begin a new journey. However, no matter how many times we come back, the story keeps changing. If, as Shields notes, the link is an indication of "latent possibilities," these possible paths affect the present experience.⁴⁴ If stories are doomed to change each time they are told, the hypertext is the performance of this fate.

⁴¹ The story was translated to English and published by Douglas Ellis in the book *Cree Legends and Narrative from the West Coast of James Bay*. A transcription of this version was retrieved at: "Isi-pikiskwewin Ayahpikesisak (Speaking the Language of Spiders)" <http://spiderlanguage.ca>

⁴² Other sources that helped to conceive the project were Maskegon-Iskwew's performance piece *âsowaha* (Cree for *cross over*), a work on miscenegation and identity construction, the *Drum Beats to Drum Bytes* gathering and Circle Vision Arts Corporation, a collective of Native artists based in Saskatchewan. The artists forming the collective at the time *Speaking the Language of Spiders* was conceived were: Lynn Acoose, Greg Daniels, Elvina Piapot and Richard Agecoutay.

⁴³ "*Isi-pikîskwewin Ayapihkêsisak (Speaking the Language of Spiders)*" <http://spiderlanguage.ca>

⁴⁴ Shields, 153. About the relationship of oral tradition and the dialectics of preservation and change see Richard Bauman, *Story, Performance, and Event: Contextual Studies of Oral Narrative* (Cambridge; London: Cambridge University Press, 1986). Bauman explains the dialectics as a result of the interplay of the individual performer/narrator and the norms and social definitions that the narrative serves to reaffirm and disseminate.

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?"⁴⁵

The link creates *passages in between*, "leakage(s) from the latent to the manifest."⁴⁶ It is precisely this delay, the promise of what will follow, that undermines the myth of totality. As the flâneur whose wandering appropriates the urban topography, the link offers the possibility to make time and space "palpable," a experience that constitutes the core of the hypertext aesthetics.⁴⁷

In *Isi-pikîskwewin Ayapihkêsisak (Speaking the Language of Spiders)* this aesthetics is appropriated to create the conditions for the storytelling: the deferral, the desire, and the renewal. However, this is a renewal that negotiates the *verbal art* in the context of writing and reading.⁴⁸ If it can be agreed with Stewart that in the written word "the adjustable speed of narration, the manipulatability of the visual, turns the reader into a spectator enveloped by, yet clearly separated from, the time and space of the text," in the oral narrative this separation is less clear, complicating the individuation of the narrated event and the performance of the narrative.⁴⁹ In the verbal art audience and narrator enter the palpable space and time of the ritual. Benjamin argues that "the storyteller takes what he tells from experience –his own or that reported by

⁴⁵ Chow, 183.

⁴⁶ Shields, 156.

⁴⁷ Shields 158. By "palpable" Shield implies the actual experience of phenomenological distance and delay involved in the hypertext aesthetics and materialized by the link.

⁴⁸ Park acknowledges the mutual influence of the oral storytelling and the written text in his analysis of Korean p'ansori tradition: "Viewed as a nostalgic past, p'an could no longer served as an arena of unmediated and spontaneous connection between performer and audience but, rather, only as an induced and ideologized past. A ritual helps establish or restore emotional bonding in a group; insofar as Koreans' search for the past is genuine, their reconstruction, however spurious, should be efficacious." Chan Park, "'Authentic Audience' in P'ansori, a Korean Storytelling Tradition," *Journal of American Folklore* 113, no. 449 (2000): n.p., http://vnweb.hwwilsonweb.com.proxy.library.carleton.ca/hww/results/results_single_fulltext.jhtml.

In other words, oral storytelling cannot be understood in the same terms before and after the introduction of the written word as hegemonic technology of knowledge dissemination and documentation.

⁴⁹ Susan Stewart. *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection* (Durham and London: Duke, 1993), 9.

others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale.”⁵⁰ The *verbal art* of oral storytelling consists in creating a flow between performance and story, permanence and variation, audience and storyteller. It is this evident negotiation of the recurrence and the *punch line* that constitutes the economy of desire of oral narrations.

It can be argued that the hypertext challenges the *clear* separation of the narrated events and their reception by recreating a sense of oral communication in a predominantly textual oriented medium such as the Internet. The experience of delay, deferral and desire facilitated by the link, combined with the continuous recontextualization of the texts –the impossibility of accessing the hypertext as a *whole*, the inevitable *circularity* of its reading- enable the *translation* of the oral narration on-line.

In *The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov*, Benjamin defines storytelling as

the art of repeating stories, and this art is lost when the stories are no longer retained... The more self-forgetful the listener is, the more deeply is what he listens to impressed upon his memory. When the rhythm of work has seized him, he listens to the tales in such a way that the gift of retelling then comes to him all by itself. This, then is the nature of the web in which the gift of storytelling is cradled.⁵¹

It is the possibility of combining the permanence of the writing and the performance of the storyteller -the potential of repetition and renewal- that may motivate the adoption and translation of the hypertext aesthetics to Aboriginal terms. In turn, the “friction of distance” generated by the hypertext link complicates the construction of Internet as a “mythic land”, creating passages for the performance of time and space.⁵²

Exercises in on-line storytelling such as *Isi-pikîskwewin Ayapihkêsisak (Speaking the Language of Spiders)* are attempts at creating a dialogue between Western notions of writing, reading and archive, and Aboriginal modes of narration. It is the emphasis on the disruptive nature of the link that makes the translation of hypertext aesthetics productive for both the

⁵⁰ Walter Benjamin. “The Storyteller: Reflections on the Works of Nikolai Leskov.” In *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt, (New York: Schocken, 1969), 87.

⁵¹ *Ibid*, 91.

⁵² Shields, 157.

practice of on-line storytelling and the discovery of “a purified display of flow and desire caught within a rational technology that is antithetical to it”.⁵³

Conclusion: *Cultural Translation* as a strategy to approach New Media Native Art

In these pages I have proposed a strategy to approach New Media Native Art based on the notion of *cultural translation*. This 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”.

The analysis concentrated on two well known on-line projects: *CyberPowWow* and *Isi-pikîskwewin Ayapihkêsisak (Speaking the Language of Spiders)*. In the case of *CyberPowWow* the negotiation was found at the discursive level, in the definition of Internet as *frontier*. I have argued that this image, popular in the mid 1990’s when *CyberPowWow* was launched, had encouraged a specific framing of the medium as a territory for exploration and (capitalistic) conquest. *CyberPowWow* appropriates the metaphor of the frontier, revealing the cultural and political connotations associated to it, and therefore underscoring the historicity of Internet as a medium. *CyberPowWow* questions the definition of cyberspace as *terra nullius* and proposes the constitution of a contact zone.

The second case study, *Isi-pikîskwewin Ayapihkêsisak (Speaking the Language of Spiders)* is an exercise on Native hypertext aesthetics. Maskegon-Iskwew’s project translates the disruptive potential of the hypertext link to recreate the performance of traditional storytelling. At the same time, it undermines the notion of the internet as totality “outside time”, drawing attention to an economy of deferral and desire that operates in-between pages.

“I’ve heard this story many times, and each time someone tells the story, it changes”⁵⁴, King wrote in *The Truth about Stories*. This is the secret of storytelling. This is the condition of possibility of Aboriginal new media art.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ King, 1.

Maria Victoria Guglietti
Institute for Comparative Studies in Literature, Art and Culture (ICSLAC)
Carleton University
Ottawa, Canada
mvguglie@connect.carleton.ca

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