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"Where are you from?": The Networked Sphere

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Abstract:

This paper discusses a project that explores the convergence of technological and social space in six urban centers in the Americas and Europe. It investigates the public sphere around issues of migration, nomadism and notions of a better life. It sketches a genealogy of media practices that are a backdrop for the project, and draws attention to how new media forms amplify these traditions. It concludes by addressing some of the difficulties of integrating technological and social space across contemporary global sites, due to the digital divide between technologically developed and developing zones.

Keywords:

global media spaces, online video, webcasting, database, public sphere, visual ethnography, cultures/languages/identities, migration, nomadism, better life.

Introduction

"Where are you from?" synthesises many of my explorations regarding translocality, the hybridisation of media, and the convergence of technological and social space in the urban environment. It received a Canada Council Media Arts Research Grant in 2002.

The project is entwined with a set of existential concerns encapsulated in the title of Paul Gauguin's 1897 painting: *Where do we come from? What are we? Where are we going?* [1] It juxtaposes culture and technology to explore the boundaries between how we imagine the world and our place within it. Information and communication technology is used to explore aspects of globalization such as migration, nomadism, hybrid identities, language convergence, and electronic mediation. Stories from transitional human subjects in six world cities are video taped during public performances, Webcast Live (when possible) and stored in a growing database. The stories tell where people come from and

where they go to in search of a "better life", and reveal that contemporary notions of place and belonging are complex, hybrid and in a continual state flux.

I frame the project around my nomadic personal geography in six cities: Montreal, Toronto, Chicago, Mexico City, Buenos Aires and Paris. These cities I have lived in occupy a position of centrality or periphery that are relative in the cultural universe. For example, Buenos Aires may be a center in the imagination of a migrant from Peru, but a periphery for a nomad/passenger-by from Tokyo, itself a globalised center containing numerous local peripheries. I am interested in the complex relationships between centers and peripheries found in both local and global environments, specifically within the context of the emerging "networked city" that impacts traditional analog urban networks.

"Virtual" spaces enabled by the telephone, television and the Internet, influence and interact with "real" urban places creating new zones that combine architecture, media spaces and information/communication technologies. As a result, cities, or certain parts of these cities, gain in symbolic centrality, thus in importance, while other cities -or parts of them- lose in relevance and even disappear from mental maps. It appears that the emerging information/communication networks correspond to the given logic of economic expansion of urban structures to which they are attracted, and that they are thus enhancing, to some extent, existing centralities. (Sikiaridi & Vogellar, 2000) [2]

In the "Where are you from?" project, I seek to reveal these dynamic, complex relationships between people and places. To this end, I create communicational spaces in carefully selected public urban locations where citizens-at-large share personal stories that integrate images of self and translocal experiences. I launch conversations with a simple question that everyone can relate to: "Where are you from?" I then involve participants in a discussion about where they come from and where they are going, presumably to seek a "better life."

The online environment used for broadcasting as well as for archiving stories, is a transcultural possibility space of dialogue and conversation (Hayles 2005) [3], a space of reception and exchange where viewers may not only see and hear (Live) video taped strangers telling stories on the Internet, they may also participate by contributing a story of their own. Thus, the project converges the movement of populations and technologically mediated stories of these populations on the Internet with the aim of exploring cultural identity issues around contemporary notions of a "better life".

Locating and archiving culture

The quest for a better life -- often located elsewhere -- is endemic of modern living where "home" is no longer a fixed place. In his book *The Location of Culture*, Homi K. Bhabha (1996) claims that: "It is the trope of our times to locate the question of culture in the realm of the beyond, " [4] a word that marks progress by promising the future. Bhabha claims that for many, the promise of a better life allows for the re-definition of place and belonging in a hybrid site often located between cultural traditions and historical periods.

Along similar lines, social anthropologist Arjun Appadurai (1996) views electronic mediation and migration as the most important factors defining today's global world. He claims that territoriality is replaced by translocalities, thanks to migrating peoples as well as to the electronically mediated movement of ideas, values, life-styles, and everyday lives that modify cultural spaces and cultural worlds [5]. My interviews conducted between 2002 and 2005, support Bhabha's and Appadurai's arguments by presenting "social actors" that negotiate hybrid identities and multilevel affiliations to home and nation.

"Where are you from?" creates a forum for discussion and a live archive on contemporary notions of a "better life". The work is inscribed at the crossroads between current documentary ethnographic practices, and new media forms in order to capture, disseminate and archive cultural content. The capturing of information occurs during Live events in 6 cities and in 3 languages. I incorporate techniques of investigation and recording used by visual ethnographers who acknowledge the importance of understanding people's cultural practice from within the everyday settings in which they take place (eg. Janet Cool's *Home Economics*, 1994). This cultural material is disseminated in two ways. Firstly, as "raw data" (or raw material) through Live Webcasts that follow the logic of immaterial memory systems pertaining to oral culture. Secondly, as an online "digital database" of Video on Demand.

This archive is made up of video taped material that has been reprocessed, stored and linked in a non-hierarchical and non-linear fashion. Visitors may access these stories randomly through an interface composed of a vocabulary of frequently used words extracted from the interviews. This feature reflects the flexible and labyrinthine structure of oral culture, as opposed to the linear, hierarchical structure of written records: archives aimed at control both of the recorded items and of the people and processes that these recorded items stand for, as in the case of historical archives and national administrative records. (Brouwer & Mulder, 2003) [6] (Screenshots of "Where Are You From")

Both Webcasting and VOD databases, provide the artist with a new platform for the free distribution of video content. In this sense, it allows for the re-appropriation of personal power within the context of the public sphere and the dissemination of a more eclectic range of views. These factors are significant because by subverting institutional power systems, such as those imposed by traditional broadcasting and administrative archival methods, the artist can contribute to the transformation of how knowledge is produced, exchanged and stored, so that information may be reused and recombined to create the world in a different light.

The evolving "Where are you from?" project is intended as a heterogeneous, mutable, interactive and open-ended one, allowing participants drawn from different cultures to inscribe meaning. The project can incorporate image and text-based exchange made possible by emerging technologies (mobile, wireless devices with video-capture capabilities) where multiple threads from participants may coexist. In all of these instances, "virtual/real communication allows users to coexist/operate in several 'worlds', to be 'atHome' and at the same time itinerant and 'distributed', offering alternative possibilities of presence and encounters." (Paraguay / Pardo, 2001) [7]

Mediated encounters and the networked city

Connectivity has become the defining characteristic of our times, with nodes where electronic information flows, mobile bodies, and physical places intersect. William Mitchell (2003) postulates that in the past, "networks would mostly have been maintained by face-to-face contact within a contiguous locality - a compact, place-based community. Today, they are maintained through a complex mix of local face-to-face interactions, travel, mail systems, synchronous electronic contact through email, and similar media." [8] He argues that increasingly, our sense of continuity and belonging derives from being electronically networked to widely scattered people and places.

The electronically wired city is quickly becoming a prosthetic extension of the human body. But, despite claims about decentralisation brought about by the emerging networked society, parallel contradictory tendencies of concentration and deconcentration still apply today. The city is still seen as brain or centralised communal 'thinking space' because power and skill concentrates in a few central nodes that are major international financial and business centres. One cannot overlook the fact that market forces mainly drive the expansion of information and communication technologies.

"Particular combinations of fixed capital and human expertise enable specific nodes within the global urban system, to play enhanced roles in the arena of cultural and economic production." (Grandy, 2004) [9] That is to say, these electronically networked spaces -- the networked spaces that would enable the Webcast of "Where are you from?"-- happen to have a geographic shape and result from a marketing synergy -- investments in specific places -- made by institutional and corporate interests that establish and maintain them. In addition, these entities can control the form these networks take, as well as their content. This is a matter of concern because media networks have a tendency of being segregative spaces that are but the magnification of tendencies already visible in "real" space.

It is fruitful to notice the emerging fusions of analog space and digital networks, and how these electronically networked sites impact public space. Wired as well as wireless-enabled urban spaces attract new social formations in specific physical structures: "stable institutions of hospitality" (Raqs Media Collective, 2003) [10] such as universities and libraries, corporate and commercial spaces -- "Starbucks" being one example. These sites where technological and social space converge, contribute to the evolution of new communities, social systems and cultural meanings.

But, while such electronically networked spaces in cities are quickly becoming a reality that affect small pockets within certain urban centers, one cannot ignore the real state of global media spaces: the fact that there exist devastating polarities and exclusions determined by economic disparity and access to technology in different world cities (and zones within them). The increasing divide between networked and non-networked spaces within cities as well as globally, will result in increasing polarities in social formations and cultural meanings. I witnessed such polarities in the process of working on "Where are you from?" in Buenos Aires, Mexico City, Chicago, Paris, Montreal and Toronto. Interestingly, this project has brought to light the dichotomy between urban social space and technology.

In their book *Mapping Cyberspace*, Dodge and Kitchin (2001) explain that a new urban spatial logic designed around electronic networks, has not replaced the old one around which many diverse social relations are built. In their words: "geography continues to matter – as an organising principle and as a constituent of social relations." [11] I prefer to see the new spatial logic as an extension rather than as a replacement, as an amplifier that can generate new hybrid social spaces. In my project, I am interested in seeking out the urban locations where networked spaces, old and new, geographic and electronic, intersect.

The problem is that, as it stands right now, the sites where technological space and face-to-face social space intersect in interesting ways, are still few and far between. Interests that do not attract a hybrid population across different constituencies and age groups, control these new spaces that are, in turn, scripted by the nature of the homogeneous inhabitants they attract. In the majority of the cities I researched, this audience tends to be predominantly young, affluent, male, and white. This is not at all the type of population that would shed light on cultural identity across differences of race, class, gender and historical traditions, as cited earlier in reference to Homi Bhabha's viewpoints.

Cities continually adapt to the movement of ideas, values, life-styles, and influences that are brought in by migrants (people who immigrate), nomads (passers-by between places), locals who travel and return, by electronic mediation, and by an economic and technological synergy that takes advantage of urban resources. But, because technological development is linked to economic production, and because there exists an economic disparity between developing and developed cities, change happens at different speeds in different local and global zones. I have witnessed such a phenomenon while living in six cities in the Americas and Europe over a couple of decades, and confirmed it recently while conducting the "Where are you from?" project.

Access to technology throughout global sites is still unbalanced. This phenomenon is inhibiting the development of electronically networked spaces, as well as the social systems and cultural meanings that can evolve from them. Finally, transformations will inevitably happen, but they will happen at different rhythms, implicating initial polarities and exclusions.

I think that one should take advantage of the fact that a new spatial logic is in the making and take measures to influence its shape by creating networks of communication where new and old forms and modalities can co-exist in diverse ways. To counterbalance the privatisation of spaces of social interaction, urban and regional planners should work on the development of public spaces that are "hybrid", combining "real" and media networks with a public concern in mind (the efforts made by New York City Wireless being one example).

These could be visible or invisible networks, small group or large group networks, linking geographic and electronic environments. Whatever their form or scale, I think that they would function more equitably if they embodied restorative communal strategies that circumvent established power relations.

In spite of the impact of globalisation (and the electronically networked city is a contributing factor), old social networks around which the functioning of cities depend: community and its rules, its language, its exchanges, its behaviours, and its memories, can and should influence the way in that new electronic networks intersect with them.

It is my belief -- and I do not think that this is an impractical utopian wish -- that the new spatial logic should be inclusive and hybrid, and should create a culture that people will want to be a part of because it is woven into the rhythm of the everyday, with its variability and plurality, respectful of the specific relationships between the local and the global that make up the cultural landscape of each place.

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Pat Badani is an inter-media artist working with new technologies and their current discourses. Her works embrace net.art, performative situations, photography, video, installation and research in visual culture to examine notions of space, place, cities, communication and global processes. Badani received a B.F.A. from The University of Alberta in Canada and an MFA from the School of The Art Institute of Chicago. She has taught and given lectures in Canada, Mexico, France and the USA, and is currently Assistant Professor of Integrated Media at Illinois State University.

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