

VIRTUAL ETHNICITY: The new digitization of place, body, language, and memory

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ABSTRACT: *Ethnicity* represents a challenging category of selfhood, even for societies sharing a material lived reality. In cyberspace, ethnicity becomes even more confusing. If ethnic affiliation truly depends upon material phenomena such as body or place, what scope, if any, is there for construction of “real ethnicity” in the deterritorialized disembodied virtual spaces of the Internet? In this paper, I present arguments for the recognition of virtual identities as “real,” and I also argue that the material world is, in itself, interwoven with elements of virtuality. I go on to consider the ways in which new virtual communities may attempt establish virtual ethnic identities in cyberspace.

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Ethnicity and Selfhood in Modern Society

ethnicity: A highly elastic concept applied to groups who say they share or are perceived to share some combination of cultural, historical, racial, religious, or linguistic features. Ethnicity also often implies shared ancestral origins; thus there is thematic overlap with the older concept of peoples and some modern notions of race.

(Oxford Dictionary of the Social Sciences, 2004)

Ethnicity is a much contested term today, as are the related notions of *race*, *nation*, and *culture*. The meaning of ethnicity is complicated by new understandings of its origins in the logic of European colonial expansion and of

its problematic, retroactive, and romanticized invocation in nationalist movements past and present. To give one example, the collective myth of Poland as an ethno-religious nation of Slavic Catholics has only very recently been challenged by what Magdziak-Miszewska (2001) sarcastically describes as the “discovery” of hundreds of thousands of Germans, Ukrainians, Lithuanians, and other minorities in Poland. Continuing unmasking of such ethnicity myths and the frequent resistance to such unmasking expose the degree to which ethnic pedigrees have been constructed to support political goals. Similarly, postcolonial theorists have demonstrated how European colonizing powers routinely employed artificial biologized notions of race/ethnicity to construct racial hierarchies that privileged Europeans – notions that still influence relations of power in contemporary societies such as the United States today (Bhatia, 2002). The ever-changing categorizations of ethnicity offered by government census-writers (see, for example, reporting on census data as collected by Statistics Canada, 1977) are further evidence of the degree to which “ethnicities” have been instrumentally constructed (and reconstructed) for sociopolitical ends.

And yet, the desire for and expression of ethnic identification as an indicator of affiliation or collectivity remain strong. Ethnic labels still denote an almost tribal form of (literal) identity, as “sameness.” Principally a group construction, ethnicity can act a resource for self-organization and differentiation of “others” (Zurawski, 2000), and indeed some theorists who are otherwise wary of essentialist characterizations of ethnicity as a “stable, presocial centre of identity” (Poster, 2001, p. 148) nevertheless recognize the political and social power of organizing resistance and solidarity movements around notions of racial or ethnic identity.

In the modern West, understanding of ethnicity as a component of identity is further complicated by perspectives that position identity as primarily a feature of the individual. Martin (2004) has noted that many Western “self theorists” have developed notions of selfhood that revolve around what Taylor (1989) and Cushman (1995) have called the “punctual self” or the “empty self” – a self that is “cut off from its historical, cultural terrain,” lacking “community, tradition and shared meaning,” and “removed from the sociocultural meanings and practices that actually constitute it” (Martin, 2004, p. 25). In spite of the broad Western cultural attachment to “independent” selfhood (Markus & Kitayama, 1991), ethnic affiliations seem to persist, evolve, and re-emerge.

Ethnicity, situationally defined via confusing assertions and confluences of shared culture or shared biology, or both, therefore represents a challenging and apparently paradoxical category of selfhood, even for societies sharing a material lived reality.

Ethnicity in the Global Village

A number of theorists have implicated mass media and electronic communications in the continued transformation of ethnic identities. Marshall

McLuhan first coined the idea of the “global village” as one in which a new tribalism was emerging, characterized by both increasing “sameness” and increasing differentiation at the micro-level (Poster, 2001). Zurawski (2000) extends this notion to the Internet era and proposes in a quasi-Hegelian dialectic that the globalized communications of the Internet have impelled a new interpenetration of local and global identities. He argues, “‘Global’ makes no sense without a contrasting feeling of ‘local’ ” (Chapter 8.1, online), suggesting that continuing technological development and globalization are actually catalyzing a kind of reactive identification with local ethnicities. Poster (2001) suggests, moreover, that these are “postmodern ethnicities,” functionally different from pre-modern “natural parochialism” (p. 148). Recognizing that globalized Internet communications actually create new virtual spaces for social life, Poster wonders whether such spaces may be fostering a new form of planetary culture in which alternative forms of “virtual ethnicity” are emerging. He asks:

Can there be a form of culture that is not bound to the surface of the globe, attaching human beings to its particular configurations with the weight of gravity, inscribing their bodies with its rituals and customs, interpellating their selves with the force of traditions and political hierarchies? ...is virtual ethnicity a transgression of essentialism in all its forms, including that of Western rationalism? ...What is the fate of ethnicity in an age of virtual presence? (p.150)

Here I explore the possibilities for, and challenges to, construction of authentic ethnic identities in the virtual worlds of cyberspace. I examine some common understandings of what constitutes “real” ethnicity, and I survey current theoretical perspectives on the virtual. Finally, I consider the ways in which new virtual communities may attempt establish ethnic identities in the virtual spaces of the Internet.

“Real Ethnicity”

Is there a real or true measure of ethnicity by which virtual ethnicity can be assessed? Perhaps most consistent with the punctual selves of Western society are the conceptions of race and ethnicity hypothesized by modern science. These narratives, vested as they are with the power of “scientific authority,” can be viewed as more sophisticated incarnations of the centuries-old pseudo-biological arguments that “blood will out” (Lewontin, 1991). Contemporary versions tend to anticipate essentialist understandings of racial and ethnic identities that might be inscribed by the human genetic code. The Human Genome Project (Human Genome Program, U.S. Department of Energy, 2004) is perhaps the best-known player in this modern scientific project. In an introductory essay entitled “To Know Ourselves” (Human Genome Program, U.S. Department of Energy, 1996), the Human Genome Project website claims: “The sequence of our genome will ultimately allow us to unlock the secrets of life’s processes, the biochemical underpinnings of our senses and our memory, our development and

our aging, our similarities and our differences.” In spite of such grand claims, however, existing genetic data tend to argue *against* any possible simple genetic or biological definition of ethnicity. Attempts to construct genetic characterizations of racial groups have largely been unsuccessful beyond very broad generalizations about the frequency of this or that genetic mutation in a large population. Indeed, current data suggests that people within “ethnic groups” are, on average, slightly *more* genetically different from each other than they are different from individuals in other groups (Bamshad & Olson, 2003). No genes have been identified that allow unequivocal placement of an individual within an “ethnic group.” Populations may share some common genes, some degree of ancestry can be traced using selected markers, but there is no such thing as a “pure” human population—millennia of trade, travel, and intermarriage (that is, of social interaction) have seen to that. Nonetheless, it remains common for populations to conflate inherited characteristics with ethnicity – an interesting phenomenon that lies beyond the scope of this paper.

Conceptions of ethnicity that rely more heavily on notions of shared culture and history are illuminated by theorists such as Paul Connerton (1989) and Maurice Halbwachs (as cited in Connerton, 1989) who explore the ways in which groups and societies continually construct “collective memory” as part of their shared identity. Connerton (1989) argues that ritual performance – including ritualized speech acts – contributes powerfully to the construction of social or collective memory: the collective habit-memory of a group. Habit-memory is not “historical memory” (the remembering of a series of historical events), nor is it “cognitive memory” (the conscious remembering of facts, data, or knowledge). Instead, it is characterized as an almost unconscious and socially-embedded ability to reproduce a certain kind of “performance.” Performative ritual itself is a kind of re-remembering, an important re-enactment of the ritual itself, and not necessarily, if ever, a re-enactment of a prototypic or historic “event.” It can be observed in practices ranging from participation in ancient religious rites and ceremonies, to the conscious construction of new rituals. By way of example of the latter, Connerton describes the new commemorative practices of the Third Reich, whose “calendrical liturgy” (p. 41) included ritual speeches, ceremonies celebrating the joining of the Hitler Youth, and solemn processions or military parades marking selected political victories. Interestingly, although Connerton’s social constructivist view is in almost direct opposition to the genetic determinist perspective, this theorist also stresses the importance of the body. In addition to the spoken word, Connerton argues that performative meaning is “encoded in set postures, gestures and movements” (p. 59). The historian Pierre Nora (1989) makes similar arguments about the construction of “pre-modern” memory, arguing that identification of the group, or ethnicity, is formed “in gestures and habits, in skills passed down by unspoken traditions, in the body’s inherent self-knowledge, [and] in unstudied reflexes and ingrained memories” (p. 13).

Halbwachs (as cited in Connerton, 1989), meanwhile, discusses the frequency with which collective identity is tied to physical space: the land. He maintains that

the “mental spaces” of social memory (and, I would argue, ethnicity) always “receive support from and refer back to ‘actual material spaces that particular groups occupy...and that the relative stability of physical places gives’ an illusion of not changing and of rediscovering the past in the present” (p. 37).

If the material phenomena of land, body, ritual, and speech are, or have been, critical in the historical construction of ethnic affiliation and collective identity, what scope, if any, is there for construction and maintenance of ethnicity in the deterritorialized disembodied textual virtual spaces of the Internet?

Virtuality, Immateriality, and Ethnicity

Concerns about the Internet as a problematic site for construction of authentic identity and ethnicity persistently revolve around its “virtual” nature, its immateriality. The places and spaces of the Internet, its landscape and the beings that occupy it, are constructed and represented almost entirely through text. Indeed, Poster (2001) characterizes the human culture of online spaces as “doubly mediated” (p. 152) – not simply mediated by language, but removed a second time by the conversion of language into digital text.

In cyberspace, bodily markers of ethnicity such as physical attributes and vocal accent are invisible, and bodily participation in gesture and ritual is impossible. Zurawski (2000) points out that the physical body is, in effect, “banned from the Internet” (even though engagement with the communications of cyberspace still involves the processing of sensory impressions). Anecdotal evidence and a growing body of research data indicate that the greatest challenge that online communicators (and especially novice online communicators) report is construction of what they consider to be a satisfactory or authentic identity in cyberspace and in interpreting online identities created by others. Routinely, this challenge is articulated as a problem of disembodiment or deterritorialization. Rutter & Smith (1998) note, for example, that in their study of a regionally-based social newsgroup in the UK, communicators showed a real desire to paint “physical pictures” of themselves in the process of identity construction and frequently included details of physical attributes and age. In a message posted to an online forum, another cyberspace communicator writes, “Before you read on make sure you have a photo...I will not answer to anyone I cannot imagine physically” (p. 201). Considering deterritorialization, on the other hand, Anderson (1995) worries about the role that the “Creoles” of new online Middle Eastern Diaspora communities may play in the destruction of “liberal, humanistic traditions of Islamic and Arabic high culture” (p. 15). Removed as they are from their Middle Eastern countries of origin and convened instead in virtual spaces, their ethnicity and sense of “what is ‘cultural,’” he suggests, are no longer informed by the institutions, individuals, and authorities of the homeland.

In all, understandings of the virtual are routinely positioned as false, inauthentic, or in opposition to the real. I suggest, however, that the perception of online

identities as inauthentic is the product of two great sources of confusion: the degree to which virtuality is real and the degree to which real processes of identity construction in daily (material) life involve elements of the virtual.

The Reality of the Virtual

What do we mean by the virtual? In the literature of cyberspace scholarship, some writers envision the cultural sphere of cyberspace as radically new, postmodern, or revolutionary (in the Kuhnian sense of shifting paradigms), which signifies a drastic break with traditional cultural patterns of community, identity, and communication. Schirmacher (cited by Orvell, 1998) writes, for example, "Today's reality points to an immense shift: the emergence of artificial life as the reality for human beings" (p. 13). In similar vein, Nora (1989) implicates *electronic communications* in the disruption and reconfiguring of ethnicity. Electronic communication, he argues, "has substituted for a memory entwined in the intimacy of a collective heritage" (p. 7-8) and has introduced a completely new economy of the identity of the self, in which ethnicity is no longer a collectively constructed phenomenon, but one that is disseminated, individualized. It is "as if an inner voice were to tell each Corsican, 'You must be Corsican'... [or] to be Jewish is to remember that one is such" (p. 16). Poster (2001) goes as far as to suggest that Internet technologies have actually brought into being a "second order of culture, one apart from the synchronous exchange of symbols and sounds between people in territorial space" (p. 13).

Other writers (Orvell, 1998; Miah, 2000; Žižek cited in Poster, 2001) suggest that virtual reality is simply a further "sophistication of virtualness that has always reflected the human, embodied experience" (Orvell, p. 25). Orvell argues that "debates about postmodernity have evinced a kind of amnesia about the past" (p. 13), and points to continuities between virtual reality and the Romantic imagination. He offers, for example, a comparison of "the rhetoric of technology and the rhetoric of Romantic poetry" (p. 13) which both celebrate what Coleridge called the "esemplastic" or shaping powers of the Romantic imagination. The poet Emerson, for example, drew upon the language of manufacturing processes in his 1836 romanticization of the powers of man over nature, writing: "He forges the subtle and delicate air into wise and melodious words" (p. 14). Oliver Wendell-Holmes (cited in Orvell) went even further in his 1859 paean to the stenograph, not simply reporting on its capacity to reproduce reality, but imagining his physical involvement in it: "The mind feels its way into the very depths of the picture. The scraggy branches of a tree in the foreground run out at us as if they would scratch our eyes out" (p.12). Emerson's visions of man forging nature, Poe's dreams of a perfect timeless landscape, and Wendell-Holmes' admiration of and participation in reproductions of reality predate and prefigure the virtual disembodied worlds of cyberspace, according to Orvell.

Poster (2001), on the other hand, energetically critiques such denials of the novelty of the virtual – and re-emphasizes the significance of *immateriality* in the

virtual, arguing that “what is virtual about the Internet...is the simultaneity without physical presence, even the physical presence of the voice” (p. 157). Poster predicts that the cultural consequences of this innovation *must be* “devastation for the modern” (p. 13) and argues that virtuality represents an occasion for the articulation of “new figures of ethnicity” (p. 158). This writer nevertheless sees a relationship of reciprocity between the real and the virtual, rather than a fundamental discontinuity. Virtual ethnicity does not simply take on *any* form, he clarifies, but always refers back to historically bound forms of ethnicity that can be traced locally in the cultural and geographical sense. Cyberspace offers a “new translational logic,” facilitating new perceptions, representations, and interactions with ethnicity (Zurawski, 2000). “The virtual must be understood as a historical articulation of the real” and as an articulation that is “fully as actual as any other such articulation” (Poster, 2001, p. 164).

Perhaps even more meaningful for this present consideration of the authenticity of the virtual is Pierre Lévy’s (1995) assessment of the distinction between the real and the virtual. This writer explores two oppositions (taken from Deleuze, 1992) in the Western philosophical tradition: the real/potential opposition, and the actual/virtual opposition. Whereas traditionally, the potential has easily become the real, more “invention” has been required for the virtual to become actual. Lévy argues, then, that “virtual” is not opposed to “real” but to “actual,” and that Internet technologies are the inventions that are blurring the actual/virtual distinction. Actuality and virtuality are, in fact, two modes of reality, and rather than a “disembodying of information”, digitalization should be seen as a “virtualization” – a shift between modes of reality (cited in Poster, 2001, p. 164).

What becomes clear from this survey of perspectives on the virtual, in spite of their supposed opposition, is the degree to which the virtual is confirmed as a new form of reality. Whether we accept Poster’s postmodern analysis of virtuality as a translation of actuality, Orvell’s (1998) assessment of cyberspace virtual reality as continuous with the Romantic imagination, or the optimistic analysis of Lévy (2001), who characterizes the Internet as “a technical materialization of modern ideals,” it becomes possible to reject any simple characterization of the virtual as a “false instantiation of the real” (Poster, 2001, p. 164).

The Virtuality of the Real

Conversely, in assessing the authenticity of virtual ethnicity, it is important to critically examine the assumed reality of the material elements upon which authentic or historical ethnicity depends: land, body, and speech. I want to suggest here that to a large extent we already experience these tools of ethnicity construction as virtual.

Both in theoretical accounts of construction of collective identities (Connerton, 1989), as discussed, and in popular pseudo-scientific conceptions of authentic ethnic identity, the body looms large. But can we rely on the body as always non-

virtual, persistently present? In his work *The Absent Body*, Leder (1990) surveys a number of theoretical perspectives that reveal the ways in which our bodies are frequently absent in daily life, “whether forgotten, alien, uncontrollable, or obscured” (p. 219). On the one hand, argues Leder, human experience is incarnated: we experience the world through our senses, relate to others via gaze, touch, speech, emotions. On the other hand, and paradoxically, the body is characterized by absence – “one’s own body is rarely the thematic object of experience” (p. 1) – whether one is reading a book or engaged in a fiercely physical sport. Leder explores at length the body’s tendency to disappear from awareness and action: the body at times projects outside itself into the world (as with communication technologies); at times it recedes from conscious perception and control. Sometimes the body simply “moves off to the side”; “at any time, parts of the surface body are left unused or rendered subsidiary, placed in a background disappearance. It has, in fact, a tendency towards self-concealment” (p. 69). Leder goes as far as to observe that Western (material) society is typified by a “disembodied” style of life, in which shelters protect us from engagement with the outside world, prosperity alleviates physical need and distress, machines divest us of physical work, and technologies allow us to transcend our natural limits. Leder’s perceptive assessment of the absence of the body from much of everyday life must prompt us to reconsider our continual referencing of “real” bodies in determination of ethnic identities.

An ingrained attachment to or affiliation with material spaces and physical places is also frequently invoked as an indicator of ethnicity. Must such places be materially experienced by the individual whose ethnicity refers to it? In his classic text *Imagined Communities*, Benedict Anderson (1991) argues that most national and ethnic communities are imagined because members “will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (p.6). Anderson suggests that print-capitalism and the resulting broad dissemination of ideas and shared stories in vernacular languages perform a culture-unifying or collectivizing function. Print, he argues, allows the development of “new ideas of simultaneity,” new “ways of linking fraternity.” and the creation of ideas of “imagined community” (p. 35). I suggest that these same processes may also contribute to a collective imagining of material spaces. Print capitalism initiated – and later media developments have continued – the production of collective imaginings of shared physical places that may never have been visited in “actuality.” Which of us has seen Nunavut or traveled to the coast of Labrador? Yet we carry within us a shared sense of “our” place named Canada. As an interesting example, Poster (2001) points to land-affiliated ethnicities, such as Jewishness, that have survived in the absence of “a grounded space.” If, as Connerton (1989) implies, ethnicity truly involves remembering (habit-memory), I nevertheless suggest that memory is continually dissociated from material place, and often occurs instead via what Poster calls “nonspatial mediations” (p.167) that offer virtual experiences of space/place.

In sum, then, I have first presented arguments for the recognition of virtual spaces and identities as real, and now I propose that the material world in which we lay such store for authenticity is, in itself, interwoven with elements of virtuality. Indeed, Orvell goes as far as to suggest that the distinctive feature of contemporary (Western) culture is “precisely its inauthenticity,” in the sense that “everything around us tends to channel our lives toward some final reality in print or on film” (p. 22). We have, says Orvell, moved beyond “the pleasure of possessing the facsimile that puts us as close to the real as we can come,” and instead “we have made a virtue of virtuality” (p. 22). In its endless series of representations of representations, Orvell argues that the United States itself has become a Virtual Culture, one in which the representation is craved over the reality. The line between the virtual and the real is hopelessly blurred, I suggest, with the one interpenetrating the other and existence in cyberspace representing no real signifier of authenticity.

Virtuality, Actuality, and Language

Some may argue, however, that inasmuch as the virtual spaces of cyberspace exist as places built only from text they can never be considered to be actual, but are only mediated, forever distanced from reality by “the symbolic coding [that] intercedes between individual consciousness and experience” (Poster, 2001, p. 152). Does the linguistic-textual nature of the virtual world finally relegate it to the category of “less-than-real”?

As early as 1878 Nietzsche offered an answer to this concern, theorizing that language itself is a second or ‘virtual’ world that stands against and outside the “real.” He argued that language is “separate from the world” and “master of it” (as cited in Poster, 2001, p. 152). Today, “decades after the linguistic turn, this position may be accepted without argument” affirms Poster (p. 153). In other words, and in spite of our attachment to the material, we are forced to acknowledge that all our experiences, our relation to the world, and our constructions of ethnicity and identity – whether virtual or material – are, in some sense, constructed by language.

As a subset of language, virtual worlds are constructed of written discourse, or text, not “speech,” and a number of theorists (Ricoeur, 1981; Ong, 1977; McLuhan, 1964) have theorized that in itself the shift from speech to writing/print has contributed to a further “alienation within the human lifeworld” (Ong, p. 17). Ricoeur argues that text, as an instance of written discourse, involves four forms of what he calls “distanciation” that differentiate it from speech. Firstly, in text the interplay between saying and meaning is broken. Second, text allows the intentions of the speaking subject and the meaning of what is said – dimensions of meaning that overlap in speech – to drift apart. Third, in text the specificity of addressivity is lost, and words are shared with an unknown audience. And lastly, while the shared circumstances of speech (with speaker and listener participating) provide some degree of “referential specificity,” these shared

circumstances are lost when discourse becomes textualized (Thompson, 1998). Ricoeur's analysis suggests that it is only the speech manifestation of language – another instantiation of materiality – that permits the true collectivization of and sharing in meaning that is required for construction of ethnicity, as proposed by theorists such as Connerton (1989). Poster (2001) even characterizes speech as the final strands of materiality that are lost in the emergence of virtual cultures.

I would like to suggest, however, that the language of virtual worlds should no longer be viewed simply as text. I concur with Lévy's (2001) McLuhanesque proposition that while the original development of writing "wrenched messages out of context, separated them from the point of origin" (p. 98), the nature of cyberspaces reattaches the meaning of text messages to context. While print contributed to the universalization of thought – the collectivization of imagination and meaning that Anderson (1991) has described – it also ensured that meaning remained unchanged by interpretation or translation. The text-language of cyberspace, by contrast, resists any closure of interpretation, any universal fixity of meaning, because in cyberspace texts are no longer "fixed." In the virtual world, any text can be fragmented, reassembled, and interconnected with other text. This plasticity is, Lévy (2001) suggests, reviving "ancient and folkloric traditions of games and rituals – [organizing] our participation in events rather than spectacles" (p. 285) – writing/creating rather than reading/receiving. Though appearing as print, the writing of the virtual world is text that is becoming speech.

Virtual Ethnicity and Textual Speech Acts

I have suggested, then, that the virtual and the real (or the actual) are not clearly demarcated, as some would have us believe, but are intimately interwoven. The real is peppered with elements of virtuality; the virtual is no less real for lack of materiality. Both worlds are mediated by language: speech, text, text-becoming-speech. What are the implications of these realizations for the construction and maintenance of identity and ethnicity in the virtual spaces of the Internet? Should we simply expect to find digital equivalents of materially-referent ethnic identity construction presented in text? Or will the new linguistic and communicative forms of cyberspace permit alternate constructions of ethnicity (that are no less "real")?

Paul Ricoeur's ideas from his 1992 work *Oneself as Another* seem useful, here. First, Ricoeur offers an analysis of the self as divided in a way that usefully reflects that material/virtual dilemma of virtual ethnicity. We constantly conflate two distinct notions of identity, says Ricoeur. *Idem*-identity rests in the physical, and carries notions of identity as "sameness." It does not, however, give any answer to the crucial question of identity, "Who am I?" This depends, rather, on *Ipse*-identity, better characterized as "selfhood" – a form of identity that is not dependent on something permanent for its existence.

Next, Ricoeur develops a hermeneutics of selfhood (*ipse-identity*) as created through what he calls an attestation (belief) of truth or certainty about self. Attestation is a testimony – a testimony that Ricoeur sees as performed through repeated (ritualized) “speech acts” by the individual self, an assurance that the self believes in the truth or validity of something, the assurance of being oneself acting and suffering. This assurance remains the ultimate recourse against all suspicion, says Ricoeur. Even if it is always in some sense received from another, it still remains self-attestation (Vessey, 2002). In the case of identity, such ritual attestation not only offers the possibility of construction of a dynamic and narrative self, it defines a character or individual as being an agent of action: a constructive act. As Ong (1977) affirms, “the spoken word is always an event...an action...an ongoing part of ongoing existence” (p. 21).

With particular relevance for ethnicity, I propose that the ritual speech acts of individual attestation in the material world are the sub-elements of group ritualized performance in the construction of collective identity of which Connerton (1989) speaks. Collective attestation facilitates the construction of identities that rest on affiliation, such as ethnicity. In the virtual world of the Internet, where “speech acts” are presented through text-as-speech, I predict that we will increasingly find new evidence of individual and group ritual “text acts” through which individuals agentially and dynamically attest to their ethnicity. Poster wonders whether “the form in which language is exchanged...affects the cultural construction of the world and subject positions within it,” not in a technologically deterministic sense, but in the sense that “technical forms do open possibilities and do contain constraints” (2001, p. 153). Exploring the possible new forms of attestation made possible by text-speech-technology of virtual spaces will begin to illuminate the new rituals of virtuality that we use to define ourselves.

Conclusion

At last, then, it becomes clear that the challenges to, and possibilities for, ethnicity in cyberspace are not induced by any problem of the virtual, but simply by the complex ways in which “technologies of symbolization are positioned in complex relations to other social practices [and] are mutually transforming” (Poster, 2001, p. 154).

The paradigm shift initiated by Internet technologies is not, I suggest, a new virtuality, but is instead the transformation of text into a form of speech, re-associated with individual and context, that makes it available as a tool for individual and group attestation of identity and ethnicity. I disagree with Poster when he claims that online interaction “would tend to dissolve ethnicities to the extent that they are based...on presence in space and on ancient, common rituals” (p. 160). On the contrary, I suspect that existing ethnicities will be presented in new ways in digital worlds, but will increasingly come to co-exist

seamlessly with new forms of ethnicity in a spectrum of ethnicities that are more, or less, virtual.

As an example of the former, I offer here a personal introduction posted to the discussion forum of a multicultural online course:

My name is Gad Gidon, my traditional name inherited from my grandfather is T'musta7. I am from Mount Currie also known as the Lil'wat Nations within the tribal territories of the St'at'imc Nation...a language grouping of Eleven First Nations Communities.

(Chase, Macfadyen, Reeder, & Roche, 2002)

Embedded in the virtual, this writer makes reference to material phenomena that we can nonetheless recognize as virtual or imagined to some degree: familial inheritance (always contestable), physical place (which of us will ever see Mount Currie?), the real-but-imagined belonging to a defined ethnic community, and the reference to a common group language (which may in reality be spoken by very few members).

The so-called technologies of symbolization may also permit the construction of new forms of ethnicity through digitally-mediated attestation of or performance of ethnicities that rely on new forms of "imagined materiality": attachment to digital virtual spaces, use of invented languages and codes, membership in non-material imagined communities. Lévy's (2001a) notion of the Internet as "collective intelligence" may offer a more accurate vision of the production of new virtual ethnicities because it situates the individual in a virtual object that is understood to be unfinished, and contingent. The Internet, says Lévy, offers an imaginary in which "identity [and thus ethnicity] is a temporary fluid link to a process of creation," and a subject position that is "never before" rather than "always already" (p. 170).

Perhaps the greatest challenge of digital virtual reality for us moderns, then, is that it forces us to give up our rather suspect reliance on the material as proof of authentic ethnicity. Instead, we are forced to recognize and acknowledge the great degree to which our identities are always already constructed as dynamic narratives through speech, performance, and the laying down of habit-memory. As Žižek argues, experience of the virtual forces us to reflexively consider reality and "retroactively enables us to discover to what extent our self has always been virtual" (as cited in Poster, 2001, p. 155).

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