

“HOW DO YOU SAY ‘SEARCH ENGINE’ IN YOUR LANGUAGE?”: TRANSLATING INDIGENOUS WORLD VIEW INTO DIGITAL ETHNOGRAPHIES”

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This year marks the 15th year in which I have worked with the Yoeme (Yaqui) Indians of northwest Mexico. What started as the attempt of naïve graduate student to find a site for MA thesis “fieldwork” has slowly and tenuously become a collaborative relationship, one to which I now bring digital video cinematographers to record rituals for web-based ethnographies. For years, when wanting to show my Yoeme friends the result of my research, I would only be able to say I presented a paper or wrote an article. Once I was able to hand them a completed and bound doctoral dissertation. As they are non-literate community, well, you can imagine that it was like handing them a paperweight or doorstop.

All of this changed last year when I returned to show them that I had completed a website about their culture, language and history. Opening up the laptop screen and navigating through the website, I explained what I thought they needed to know about websites, the internet, and computers. Here they were, living in mud-thatched huts, with little medical care in the village, with running water only an hour or two per day and unable to eat meat due to the cost of this pure protein and I am explaining to them that people all over the world have computers in their home. Since I had designed the website with the help of Yoeme from the other side of the US-Mexico border (imagine the standard of living that comes with having two successful casinos, your own medical facility and community center, etc), I was able to show the tribe in Mexico a website that featured their own language, their own aesthetics and also interpretive essays that focused on videos of their ritual performances. But I had two questions that I needed them to answer: 1) How would they change or add to this website? And 2) Do I have a right to “publish” the website?

In this paper, I want to address these two issues. How do indigenous groups, often living in sub-poverty conditions, want to use the globalizing technologies of the internet? How do they understand their place in the word wide web? Then, how do they make a place for themselves in this virtual world? Can community outsiders, such as me, help them develop self-representations on the web; and if so, how do we understand such representations and their contents (often images, words, or folklore) within the framework of intellectual property rights? I believe the context of my work with the Yoeme does, I feel, highlight the chasm we call the digital divide as well as the multiaxial nodes of articulation within the “property” and “commons” debate. I will first give a brief overview of the website I have collaboratively built with Yoeme individuals; then, I will discuss how the site has been received and the uses Yoeme Indians have for the site. Lastly, I will discuss how this counters simple notions of property as we see those notions develop from international political organizations (UNESCO and the United Nations).

In January 2004, I received a small amount of money from NYU’s Hemispheric Institute of Performance and Politics. Through Rockefeller and Ford Foundation grants, the Institute sought to help scholars and artists build on-line curations of multi-media materials focused on ritual, religion, politics or indigeneity in the Americas. These websites or “web cuadernos” were specifically asked to present ways that embodied behaviors participate in the transmission of cultural knowledge. (So in it’s original intent, the funds were given to us in order to record and transmit “knowledge,” an important node of inquiry to which I’ll return a bit later). Looking at a decade of field notes and the expectation

that in the upcoming year or so I'd be talking with publishers about a manuscript and its related media, I decided to accept the cuaderno funds based on several factors: I was being offered permanent NYU server space, an established interdisciplinary audience for discussion of my research and the cuadernos were explicitly intended to be open so that I could use mine as an archive, meaning it could hold audio and video clips for Yoeme community members as well as future readers of my future book.

The work building the web cuaderno ended up consuming the next 14 months.¹ Within that time, I also returned to the pueblo and filmed an elaborate deer dancing ritual performed by 14 ceremonial participants. Before and after that trip, the website consumed an incredible amount of time. Just some of the stages included talking with tribal collaborators about which photos could be used, working with web designers to build a Flash site so items could not be removable, working with translators to use Yoeme as the default index language, getting my field work film editor to develop short clips that could be transmitted and played on a variety of computer systems, determining culturally appropriate graphics. The differences between literal ethnographic representations and web-based ethnographies led to fascinating conversations which I hope to next work into a full manuscript (such as linear, progressive, literate logic vs. graphic logic; web surfers including Yoeme internet users vs. academic audience; multimedia vs. still photos; and bibliographic citations vs. permissions for media usage). The result was a web cuaderno that was the first ever to utilize Yoeme as the default language, though also included Spanish and English. The website offers moving pictorial timelines using archival photos; language exercises including audio and video clips of Yoeme oratory; an extensive bibliography of written, archival and video resources; a jukebox of ambient sounds from the pueblo where I work; previously filmed versions of specific dances that are compared to ones I filmed in my own fieldwork; narratives of their history and struggles and a discussion board for community contributions.

As I was starting to choreograph the placement of text and image, I began recognizing an uncomfortable parallel: man goes to tribe, man learns native knowledges, man takes newly acquired knowledge and uses technology to distribute widely. On the ground, some of my collaborators were also being told not to help me with my website. According to certain tribal officials from the Arizona Pascua Yaqui Tribe, not even tribal members had the right to share information with outsiders. According to here say, outsiders, including myself, were expected to seek all information from the Language and Education Director in Tucson.

Intellectual Property debates have often emphasized the disparity between tribal give and corporate take. As Plenderleith and Posey describe in *Indigenous Knowledge and Ethics*, the Urueu-Wau-Wau of Brazil have from time immemorial used tiki uba as an anti-coagulant (Plenderleith and Posey 2004). Since that knowledge is in the public domain, Merck Corporation patented this plant's use for heart surgery. Merck stands to make billions, legally. Since only a select numbers of countries have the technology to develop and/or exploit, we see not solely an issue of indigenous poverty, but indigenous communities within a larger rubric of neoliberal flow to the west: information, raw materials, resources, capital. Indeed, as George Martin and Saskia Vermeylen show, "a central tenet of neo-liberalism is that ideas, particularly those in a social context, can be individualized" (Martin and Vermeylen 2005). Individual property rights in fact drive the market. Moreover, in ways resounding with Darrel Posey's analysis, I was starting to see how intellectual property requires a specific act of invention, is subject to powerful national and corporate interests, threatens territorial and resource rights of indigenous peoples (Posey 2002) and as I found in my particular project, simplifies concepts of ownership.

As I noted, tribal officials in Tucson were getting word of my building a website and began notifying some of my collaborators that they were not to share tribal information with outsiders. In fact, the officials pointed out, the appointed directors of culture and language would be working on their own website which would be the main portal for community members to interact with the tribal administration. Such a website, they continued, would be accessible only with a password issued to tribally enrolled members. While I understood the uses for the tribal administration to build a website,

what I did not understand was how they expected to control the sharing of information, not only between their members and outsiders, but among members of other pueblos. The Pascua Yaqui Nation in Arizona has no jurisdiction or formal relationship to the Yoeme/Yaqui community where I work in Mexico. And while many Arizonan Yaquis understand themselves as living in a U.S. pueblo, they also frequently discuss their heritage in terms of lineage to one of the eight historic pueblos in Mexico. Since I have collaborators on both sides of the U.S.-Mexico border, I was in a unique position to discern different responses to “official” claims of ownership.

Because Intellectual Property rights can be obtained by legal entities, these “rights” must be registered by inventors and/or authors.² When working with folkloric or traditional materials, tribal communities can identify an elder or other member of the community as the “recorder” but then register the IP right in the name of the community (Brascoupe and Endemann 1999). The community members most likely to have the economic motivation and legal wherewithal for such foresight will be the elected officials or wealthier members who could further factionalize their communities. My collaborators who live both in Mexico and Arizona had the expected response: “Who are they to tell me who I can work with?” When I expressed concern that the official’s threats might be backed up with legal action if I represent tribal knowledge in the website, my collaborators laughed at the idea, saying that these politicians are simply trying to maintain control of what gets to count as “traditional” not because of their concerns for their culture, rather their desire to control culture. On the other side of the border, my collaborators had one simple response: “You refer those people to us. We decide for ourselves who we want to work with.” My main collaborators took it one step further asking for my cell phone so he could directly call the tribe in Tucson and give them a piece of his mind. He shook his head side-to-side at the thought of a tribal politician telling others that they could not talk with whom they wanted about what they wanted. Clearly, Intellectual Property seems to be the way to stop outsiders from coming and stealing knowledge; but in the case of my fieldwork and website, it also seemed to be the way for some insiders to keep it for themselves, out of the control of other insiders.

In order to determine for myself how I could best proceed with the building of the website, I determined that all film work would have to be done explicitly for inclusion on the internet. In other words, I had to change my “human subjects” forms that I read to my collaborators to include website production. Second, I decided that the website would need to be in-process, dependent upon Yoeme responses to what I had completed. In May 2005, I returned to the pueblo in hopes of sharing what I had completed and soliciting their opinions of how the cuaderno might need to be changed. Potam Pueblo, and Barrio Santemea where I particularly work, is mostly made up of mud-thatched carrizo houses. Every morning, water flows through an extensive underground series of garden hoses to provide water for an hour or two. Electricity in the homes is provided by a similar series of low-grade wires running from light pole to light pole. One in five families has TV; one in ten has a VCR; one in 1000 might have a DVD player. The community has three schools; none of them are “wired” to the internet. Compare this context to the one of the tribal council in Tucson which maintains two of the more successful casinos in the state of Arizona.

As Guillermo Delgado points out in his essay, “Solidarity in Cyberspace: Indigenous Peoples Online,” technology in Indian country tends to more often than not create a divided population: “In many cases, indigenous peoples’ ability to acquire new computer technologies has largely depended on personal ties and ability to network with core NGOs, universities and researchers. This has led to a “politics of exclusion” (Delgado 2002). The Yoeme case highlights this division because the tribal officials in Arizona have indeed constructed a tribal website which links everything from language lessons to employment opportunities at one of their two casinos. The council is composed of Yoeme women and men who have access to lawyers and daily access to computers and the internet. They drive cars to work and are familiar with “outsider” conflicts across the southwestern U.S. The Yoeme with whom I work in Mexico bring home a week’s pay of the equivalent of 25.00 US dollars; not a single Yoeme member of their pueblo has their own vehicle. The people with whom I work, it is interesting to note, do not see

their culture as being “at risk” of dying out or being stolen. They frequently refer to their own ritual sermons which state that Yoeme rituals are for the health of everyone in the world, not just Yoeme individuals.

In order to show my *cuaderno*, I took each of the performers a collection of still photos from the dance I filmed in 2004. Each performer also received VHS tapes of the raw video footage from that ceremony. Each performer also received a DVD copy of the website, in the chance that they might be able to access a computer either at one of the schools or in a nearby Mexican governmental building (health or pension services for example). To my main collaborator, I gave a laptop which was only functional at providing the website. I showed him the website on the first night of my visit. He made me read the Yoeme version aloud to the family surrounding us. I then showed him and his daughters how to “surf” the site and I left them for a few days with their laptop (literally the first “personal computer” in the village). Upon my return later in the week, I arrived to their house to see a group of elders gathered around the fire. Many of these faces were new to me, but they invited me to sit down as they began to talk about how much they enjoyed the website. They then handed me copies of maps, a folder of every letter ever written to the United Nations and another folder of all correspondences between the Mexican government and the tribe. They wanted me to add all of this to the website. Then they asked me to take the website on a tour of sorts, traveling over the next three weeks to other pueblos, schools, at one point even arranging a premier night with a feast for me and all the performers from the deer dance which has media prominence on the website. During that question and answer period, I was asked to return in January to film another ceremony so that “they could get it right on film for the kids to see in the future.” I passed out copies of the website, I collected some thoughts on how to improve the *cuaderno*. And during the next week of interviews, my main collaborator ended all of his audio recordings with his name, his address, and a request for anyone who has a problem with him sharing this information to come speak with him directly.

Since I came to this website project with a desire to better understand how knowledge circulates and is shared in a Yoeme “commons,” it was only appropriate to spell it out on the website itself. “Knowledge” in Yoeme is “lutu’uria.” By definition, “lutu’uria” is defined as “truth evidenced by social action and community performance.” Dancers literally say, “lutu’uriata yi’ine” or “I will go dance my truth.” With such a social understanding of knowledge, the Yoeme context seems particularly appropriate for questioning the “individual” component of intellectual property. And in describing the local politics surrounding who did or did not want information shared with me, the Yoeme context hopefully provides a specific example of where property rights assume a unified or locally agreed upon notion of “owner” or “artist.” So when asked if I agree with the protection of indigenous peoples’ heritage, I say “yes, of course.” But we must be careful of what we propose. Because after the United Nations responds by claiming that “[...] each indigenous community must retain permanent control over all elements of its own heritage [...]” and each indigenous community “always reserves a perpetual right to determine how shared knowledge is used” (Daes 1997: 4), then I have to ask “who gets to decide?” The elected officials? The indigenous people already able to access power and money? Not only must we, as laborers in the globalizing market of technologies (whether they be writing, printing, computing, or pharmaceuticals) be conscience of how our work affects economically disadvantaged communities; but we must also remain diligent that our (UN) laws to protect such communities do not further factionalize the haves from the have-nots. Colonization continues not simply under the rubric of war, but when we engender local changes in government and sovereignty under the pretense of “protection.”

Notes

1 <http://www.hemisphericinstitute.org/cuaderno/yoeme/content.html>

2 In Mexico, IP regulations are dependent upon three separate laws: Mexican Copyright Act (1984, 1991); Industrial Property Act (1991, 1993, 1994); and NAFTA (1994). None of the three laws set forth

enforcement policies or penalties that judges must follow. Additionally, none of the acts specifically set out protection of indigenous “heritage.”

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