Imagining Drumbytes and Logging in Powwows:

A History of Community Imagination in

Canadian-Based Aboriginal New Media Art

by

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ABSTRACT

This thesis proposes a history of community imagination within the Aboriginal new media field in Canada. Aboriginal new media art is an artistic field that emerged in the mid-1990s, when Aboriginal contemporary artists and cultural producers adopted the Internet to articulate a presence online. A significant aspect of Aboriginal new media art is its commitment to develop, perform and represent community through technological means.

The central argument of this study is that Aboriginal new media art is an artistic field where community is imagined and practiced. This work of imagination does not passively reflect cultural relations of production and reproduction, but mediates these relations, affecting the development of the field. At a theoretical level, this study develops a program that bridges the gap between studies of community imagination and imagined communities. To this end, it engages with an interdisciplinary body of work that encompasses the sociology of culture, cultural studies, community informatics and research on online communities and sociality. At a methodological level, this thesis reconstructs the development of community imagination through the discursive analysis of online projects as well as interviews with Aboriginal new media artists, government art officials and Aboriginal curators. As a result, the history of community imagination is divided in three moments, each defined by a hegemonic model of community imagination: community empowerment, community as online performance and community as poetics.

For
Caecilia
and
Raphael

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PREFACE

I decided to investigate the imagination of community in the Aboriginal new media art field in order to challenge the still pervasive stereotypes of Aboriginal resilience to technology and romanticizations of Aboriginal tradition and community. The reason why I focused on an artistic field rather than other cultural phenomena is because Aboriginal artistic practices have always been regarded as crucial in the production of collective identity and knowledge. In fact, it was Métis political leader Louis Riel who, in 1885, highlighted the crucial role of artists as cultural mediators and leaders: “My people will sleep for 100 years, but when they awake, it will be the artists who give them their spirit back.”¹ In their search of new modes of artistic expression, Aboriginal new media artists have demonstrated that the Internet can be a medium of Aboriginal expression and a means to create and empower community.

In an article published in 2005, Aboriginal video and new media artist Dana Claxton notes that: “Contemporary Aboriginal art in Canada has played several roles, one of which is pedagogical in nature.”² These words indicate Aboriginal artists’ awareness of their own role in the dissemination and preservation of their culture. Contemporary Aboriginal art is not just the expression of an individual aesthetic vision but a platform where tradition, identity and community are negotiated. The main goal of this thesis is to explore this continuous and fascinating work of imagination.

¹Manitoba Metis Federation, “Louis Riel Quotes.”

²Claxton, “Re:Wind,” 16.

The historical reconstruction of community imagination in the field of Aboriginal new media art is an academic enterprise that would have been impossible without the participation of Aboriginal new media artists, curators, funding officers and cultural facilitators. Their stories are vital to reconstruct the practices of community that preceded, followed and emerged from the projects. These stories were gathered through a series of interviews conducted between April 2007 and March 2008; further details of the interview process can be found in the Appendix.

Despite the important role played by the interviews in this project, it would be inaccurate to label my relationship with my informants as “collaboration.” My contribution is timid compared to what I learnt and gained from our dialogue. Also, a true collaboration would have involved the artists’ participation in the development of my methodological and theoretical framework. I did not request this kind of participation nor did my informants demand it.

The fact that this is not a collaborative project does not mean that I was not obligated to be true and loyal to the stories that were entrusted to me, a non-Native and an outsider to the Aboriginal new media art community. I feel particularly honoured by my informants’ warmth, time and trust, which in some cases were motivated by the fact that I was a doctoral student from Argentina and, as such, I was not perceived as belonging to a particularly powerful group. I followed an ethical protocol in my interviews and I analysed the stories that I collected using the theoretical and methodological tools that I believed could best reconstruct the work of community imagination in Aboriginal new media art. While the use of these tools imposed foreign frameworks to the material, they

also helped to highlight practices and discourses that were not always explicit in the scarce literature of Aboriginal new media art.

Finally, I am infinitely grateful to the Banff New Media Institute (BNMI), its past directors Sara Diamond and Susan Kennard, and the staff of the Banff Centre's library and archive for their support and orientation during this research. Diamond and Kennard, in particular, opened the doors of the BNMI to me and spent valuable time discussing the Centre's involvement in the formation and development of the Aboriginal new media art field.

INTRODUCTION

I want to think about "imagined communities" in relation to the politics of cultural production: the projection of socio-cultural positioning through strategies of production. Although I cannot finally answer these questions here, I want to ask: what kind of "community" do aesthetic strategies articulate/imagine? And if this is aesthetically produced, what political effectivity or social meaning does it have?¹

That is also the whole paradox of how highways separate more than they connect us (...) The whole idea that networks are going to get us all together when in fact they are just completely isolating everybody. So, I think (...) that there is a thread line in Aboriginal new media art. I think you are right. We use technology to connect rather than isolate or separate.²

In 2004, I discovered *CyberPowWow*, an Aboriginal online gallery and new media art project while surfing the Internet in search of Canadian-based new media art. I was interested in the project because it seemed to contradict the individualism visible in large part of the international new media art production, while reformulating many of the tenets associated with the early and largely neoliberal cyberspace. The discovery of *CyberPowWow* led me to other Aboriginal new media art projects: *Drumbytes.org*, *ArtinJun* and *StormSpirits*. Soon, I noticed that some names kept reappearing in different projects and that, in many cases, the works were linked, forming a fluid network of projects, people and practices of production.

The discovery of this online network triggered a series of questions about the nature of community and, in particular, the way community is articulated *in* and *through* cultural production. But the sociological approach to cultural production that regards culture as responding to changes in social forces seemed insufficient to explain community imagination in Aboriginal new media art. Neither the view of cultural

¹Born, "Afterword," 282.

²Archer Pechawis (Aboriginal new media artist), in discussion with the author, March 2008.

production as producing autonomous imagined communities appeared adequate. Many of the Aboriginal new media artists and curators had met each other before and after the Internet. Have the nature of these relations changed with the Internet? If so, how?

In the afterword of *Rock and Popular Music: Politics, Policies, Institutions*, Georgina Born proposes a study of community in relation to cultural practices that is ample enough to encompass prior sociocultural identities and culturally imagined communities. By the end of her essay she poses a series of questions that I cite above and that have inspired this study: "What kind of 'community' do aesthetic strategies articulate/imagine? And if this is aesthetically produced, what political effectivity or social meaning do these imagined communities have?" Born's questions challenge ordinary approaches to cultural production and studies of "imagined communities" and "communities that imagine" in general.

Moved by these questions I propose an interdisciplinary history of community imagination in Aboriginal new media art. This is a story about how a small group of Aboriginal new media artists, institutions, cultural producers and critics spread across Canada have imagined, built up and negotiated community for over 14 years. It is also a reflection on the nature of community, its fluidity and the pervasive – and modern – anxiety associated with it. Moreover, it is a journey through a complex network of political, cultural and technological mediations and actors (i.e. the Aboriginal artistic community, the Internet, the Canadian government, the cyberlibertarian movement in the U.S and the Aboriginal community at large), responsible for shaping a multifaceted and transient Aboriginal voice online.

The association of community with imagination is not new. Since the publication of Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, studies of imagined communities and communities' imagination have proliferated in the field of cultural studies, sociology of culture, art history, musicology, visual culture and communication studies.³ I do not intend to simply add to this body of work, but to challenge the rather artificial boundary between imagined communities and communities that imagine. This challenge comes from looking at imagination as a practice that is as much a productive cultural and social force as it is conditioned by sociocultural factors. The case of Aboriginal new media art is a good example of this double nature of imagination. On one hand, community is a central concern of Aboriginal practitioners dealing with new media technologies, and particularly, the Internet. Aboriginal artists pursue community not just when they make art, but when they network with peers and create online galleries. In fact, Aboriginal new media artists are often well-known members of the Aboriginal media art community and the performance art world and, as such, belong to a network of artists, curators and cultural producers that were well aware of each other before the popularization of the Internet. "We had already gone virtual before virtuality was even a thing it was talked about. On a level we were already a virtual community," notes Aboriginal new media art veteran Cheryl L'Hirondelle.⁴

Aboriginal new media art is a network of artistic and institutional practices engaged in the production of electronic and digital artworks. A large part of the works

³Anderson, *Imagined Communities*.

⁴Cheryl L'Hirondelle (Aboriginal new media artist and curator), in discussion with the author, September 2007.

and artists explored in these pages fall actually into the category “Internet art,” an umbrella term that refers to a diversity of web-based art practices whose forms range from alternative browsers and hypertext projects to online communities and software activism.⁵ Rachel Greene views Internet art as interlaced as much with issues of access to technology and political decentralization as with artistic strategies of appropriation, dematerialization and participation.⁶ Unlike other forms of non web-based digital art, Internet art focuses on the communicative aspects of the medium.

“Internet art,” “new media art,” and “networked art” are often interchangeable in the literature on Aboriginal new media art. I decided to refer to “Aboriginal new media art” in these pages because, in most cases, this is the term used by Aboriginal artists. In theory, however, the notion of new media art is broader and includes not only web-based works but also interactive multimedia installations and virtual reality environments.

The working hypothesis of this study is that Aboriginal new media art is a field where community happens. Indeed, a quick tour around some well-known Aboriginal new media art projects reveals a tightly knit and multifaceted web, constituted by individual and collective online galleries, blogs, chat spaces and personal webpages. The complexity of this web is remarkable considering Aboriginal peoples’ difficulties in accessing technology and know-how. Lower income and education levels together with geographical isolation are major obstacles to Aboriginal peoples’ engagement with technology. This worrisome situation contributes to casting an image of Native resilience to technology, an image that is also nurtured by romantic visions of Aboriginal culture, as I discuss in chapters 1 and 4. This stereotype of resilience is clearly undermined,

⁵For a definition of new media art see Tribe and Jana, *New Media Art*.

⁶Green, *Internet Art*, 8.

however, by the increasing number of Aboriginal online initiatives that, as in the case of Aboriginal new media art, are produced despite financial and material constraints. In fact, while most projects rely on the technical and financial support of institutions such as the Banff New Media Centre, the Canada Council for the Arts, the Department of Canadian Heritage, provincial funding, local art galleries and online art servers, many works are individually financed.

The association between Aboriginal new media art, networking and community dates from the early 1990s, when a group of Canadian and U.S based Aboriginal filmmakers, video artists and cultural producers gathered at the Banff Centre for the Arts to discuss the possibility of developing a nation-wide computer based multimedia telecommunications network. The meeting was called “Drum Beats to Drum Bytes,” and targeted a growing Aboriginal community of artists, filmmakers and researchers working with languages, music, visual and performing arts. Even the most cautionary voices within the Aboriginal artistic community believed the Internet had the power to alter how humans relate to each other and to the environment.

Although the “Drum Beats to Drum Bytes” gathering was preceded by a series of online Aboriginal incursions, it is a milestone in the discursive association of Aboriginal artistic creativity, the Internet and community empowerment.⁷ As I explore in the next chapters, this particular association distinguishes Aboriginal new media art from non-Aboriginal new media art, and shortens the distance between Aboriginal new media art and community media practices. In fact, the idea that Aboriginal new media artists are responsible for translating Aboriginal cultures online and bridging the gap between the

⁷For more information about these first Aboriginal incursions online see Masayesva, “Indigenous Experimentalism.”

Internet and their communities of origin is still very much present in the imagination of Aboriginal new media art.

At a theoretical level, this thesis introduces community as an instance of cultural production. In fact, Aboriginal new media art is a field where a self-identified community (i.e. Aboriginal contemporary artists) produces community (i.e. an Aboriginal presence online), which in turn makes available new reconfigurations of community. It would be, though, erroneous to conclude that community is hereby presented as *just* an artistic practice. Community is culturally mediated by political, economic, artistic and historical practices.

This particular definition of community requires an approach that considers cultural practices as mediating sociocultural identities. This study therefore focuses on a sociology of culture *à la Raymond Williams*, a “historical sociology” that, unlike other forms of sociology of culture, does not neglect the actual cultural forms and, in line with cultural studies, stresses the mediating power of culture. In this context, cultural production – and cultural practices in general – are “not simply derived from an otherwise constituted social order but are themselves major elements in their constitution.”⁸ From this perspective then Aboriginal new media art is an ensemble of practices that mediate – and not simply reproduce – community.

The combination of sociological and cultural studies approaches to cultural and artistic practices reveals the interdisciplinary intention of this research. I believe that only this interdisciplinary focus allows the study of Aboriginal new media art as a network of social actors (i.e. artists, institutions, critics, audiences) engaged in practices that not only result in artworks, but in pre-existent and new practices of community.

⁸Williams, *The Sociology of Culture*, 12-13.

I am interested in studying community in connection with Aboriginal new media art as a reaction against the naturalization of Aboriginal community. References to Aboriginal culture rarely question the meaning of Aboriginal community. Instead, it is often assumed that Aboriginal communities are territorial and rooted in tradition. These popular assumptions have little to do with Aboriginal peoples' views or with actual studies of Aboriginal socialization. The fact is that, as it happens with the notion of tradition, the meaning of community within Aboriginal cultures is the object of continuous reconfigurations. These changes respond to decades of Aboriginal exposure to modern definitions of identity, society and, of course, community. My dissertation research is, therefore, meant to complicate the notion of Aboriginal community by mapping how, in the context of Aboriginal new media art, community is the result of complex translations of Native and non- Native definitions of community, identity, modernity and technology.

Given the importance attributed to technology and online sociality in Aboriginal new media art, this research aspires to contribute to our understanding of online sociality and the discourses that inform it. As I discuss below, Aboriginal new media art does not only propose the representation of contemporary Aboriginal cultures, but the constitution of an online network that links Aboriginal artists to Native and non-Native audiences. Like other discourses about online sociality, Aboriginal new media art has appropriated many of the tropes of the "digital sublime" (i.e. the association of new media technologies with progress and development, and the imagination of the Internet as a space of exception where history can be reverted).⁹

⁹I borrow the term "digital sublime" from Mosco, *The Digital Sublime*.

Last but not least, this research is meant to fill a void in the already scarce literature on Aboriginal new media art. Although Aboriginal artists have been producing online artworks for over a decade, research on Aboriginal new media art practices in Canada is recent and scarce. It often takes the form of reviews of online artworks and manifestos by Aboriginal new media artists. In most cases, online artworks are discussed either within the framework of Aboriginal aesthetics or as a matter of identity politics. A remarkable effort to break with this trend is a series of essays recently published by the Walter Phillips Gallery in association with the Art Gallery of Hamilton and Indigenous Media Arts Group, suggestively entitled *Transference, Tradition, Technology: Native New Media Exploring Visual and Digital Culture* (2005). The collection edited by Melanie Townsend, Dana Claxton and Steven Loft, concentrates on the relationship between tradition and new media technologies and discusses the potential contribution of Aboriginal new media art to cultural survival. The underlying assumption present in most of these essays is that Aboriginal artists engaged with new media technologies operate at the communal level, as mediators between Native and non-Native worlds. This is an assumption that intrigued me and set this research in motion. If Aboriginal new media art practices constitute what Loft calls “an aesthetic of nexus” between Aboriginal traditions and contemporary art, Indigenous cultures and new media technologies, this negotiation is also affected by the institutionalization of Aboriginal new media art.¹⁰ And this institutionalization depends in turn on the legitimization of Aboriginal artists before local and international audiences, as both Indigenous peoples and contemporary artists working with new media technologies. Collective identities and communal affiliations are then crucial to the constitution of Aboriginal new media art. However, if it is true that

¹⁰Loft, “Aboriginal Media Art,” 101.

Aboriginal new media art produces community, what is the face of the community represented? Can we talk about community in singular? What are the effects of this imagination?

While these questions could lead me to unexpected paths, there are certain roads that are beyond the aim of this project. One of them is the evaluation of Aboriginal new media art in terms of its artistic value. This dissertation is neither a critique of Aboriginal online artworks nor an art history study. Nor it is a history of Aboriginal new media art, even if the historical reconstruction of Aboriginal new media art's practices is a major part of the analysis. Nor it is a study of Aboriginal Internet uses, despite the important role attributed to technology in Aboriginal new media art's imagination of community and the fact that some practices of community are also new media practices. Finally, it is neither a theorization of Aboriginal community, given that I do not intend to provide an ultimate definition of Aboriginal communality. In sum, this thesis is only an investigation of one particular instance of a community imagining community, which neither exhausts the discussion of Aboriginal communality nor evaluates the artistic contributions of Aboriginal Internet art.

The goal of this study is to investigate how cultural practices, i.e. Aboriginal new media art, produce community. As I stated above, this project is located at the intersection of sociological and cultural studies' approaches to cultural production. From the sociology of culture and the sociology of art, I adopt a perspective that moves beyond the cultural text to reveal the complex web of relations of production, mediation and reception involved in cultural practices. Under this light, Aboriginal new media art becomes a field of practices, relations and actors engaged in the production of meaning

and artworks. However, this view of art as social practice is not enough to explain how culture produces community. What is necessary is an approach that focuses on the *productivity* of culture, that is, how culture *produces* sociocultural identities. This productive aspect of cultural practices and artifacts should not be overestimated, considering that, as Born observes in the case of music practices, “sociocultural identities are not simply constructed in music; there are ‘prior’ identities that come to be embodied dynamically in musical cultures, which then also *form* the reproduction of those identities – no passive process of reflection.”¹¹ I believe that the intersection of sociological and cultural studies approaches to cultural production can be a productive exercise in itself.

Finally, this dissertation project is based on two assumptions. First, it depends on the notion of community as an open process that involves symbolic, communicative and imaginative practices. This definition of community poses community as a set of social practices whose “variable nature... cannot simply be equated with particular groups or a place.”¹² Secondly, this research project relies on an understanding of discourse as a social practice, in other words, as “a socially and historically situated mode of action” that is socially shaped and socially “constitutive.”¹³

The first three chapters of this thesis give shape to community as an object of study, trace different theoretical and disciplinary approaches to community and cultural and media production and outline its theoretical and methodological approach. Chapters 4, 5 and 6 present the analysis of community in three different “moments”: networking, formation and institutionalization of the Aboriginal new media art field. Each moment

¹¹Born, “Music and the Representation/Articulation of Sociocultural Identities,” 32.

¹²Gerard Delanty, *Community* (London: Routledge, 2003), 3.

¹³Fairclough, “Critical Analysis of Media Discourse,” 309.

focuses on a particular – and hegemonic – articulation of community and describes how this articulation emerged and affected, in turn, the Aboriginal new media art field. In chapter 7, I conclude with the limitations and future trends in the articulation of community within the Aboriginal new media art field and explore theoretical and methodological limitations and findings.

CHAPTER 1

NATIVE AND NON-NATIVE IMAGINATIONS OF COMMUNITY

Our communities are not cemented in unity and belonging, but in the transformation and difference that is constructed in our ongoing struggle with power relations. The dynamic process of building and rebuilding individual and collective identities centres on conflicting social imaginaries and their ideological messages.¹

Gail Guthrie Valaskakis' words address the core of the problem in defining community: its ambivalence, its fluidity and its permanent rebuilding. In this section, I am interested in mapping, first, the contested history of community as a modern and western obsession, and second, the pervasiveness of these historical articulations of community in both Native and non-Native political, urban and artistic discourses.

Even before Aboriginal artists imagined community online, the boundaries of what is understood as Aboriginal community were always shifting. These shifts are particularly evident in the formation and institutionalization of the Aboriginal art world in Canada. Aboriginal artists have engaged in the definition of contemporary Aboriginal identity and community since the beginning of Aboriginal political resistance. However, they did not operate in a vacuum. The meaning of Indianness and community has been actively negotiated by Natives and non-Natives since contact.

The romantization of Aboriginal culture and community dates back to the early days of contact. Figures such as the noble savage and the tribe have been instrumental in the definition of both European and Native experiences in North America for over 500 hundred years. Since the mid-1800s, Europeans regarded "Aboriginal culture" as an alternative to the evils of modernity and industrialization, while, in practice, the period is

¹Valaskakis, *Indian Country*, 45.

the most oppressive and obscure in the actual relations between living “savages” and North Americans of European descent. In the 20th century, the essentialist image of noble savages living in harmony with nature served to silence the less glamorous conditions of actual reserves and urban settlements, where Natives struggled with poverty and isolationism. During the last half of the 20th century, counterculture and new communalist movements were the protagonists of a new phase in the long history of romantizations of Aboriginal culture and community by seeking refuge in abstract notions of tribalism and Indianness. This process of romantization, however, was further complicated by the rise of Aboriginal political activism and its adoption of pan-Indian identifications and romanticized figures to denounce the difficulties faced by “real” Natives before non-Native audiences.

During the last half of the 20th century, the negotiation of the meaning of Aboriginal community took place in a context of rapid increase of urban Native populations. This shift – partly due to the appalling conditions of reserves and the search for jobs and education – contributed to the redefinition of the meaning of Aboriginal community. Severed from their land, urban Natives – many of them artists and intellectuals – began challenging the romantic and politicized notions of Aboriginal community and identity. This history of community imagination is the background of Aboriginal new media art’s imagination of community.

Community as a Problem

The modern notion of community emerged as a result of a process of differentiation between the private and the public spheres.² References to community before the 19th century failed to differentiate between community and society. In classical Greece, for example, community was the “essence of society.”³

In *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Jürgen Habermas explains how a double movement of State interventionism in the private sphere and privatization of the public function undermined the division between State and society. This division sustained the public sphere in western societies. One of the symptoms of the increasing imbalance between public and private was the progressive identification of private and intimate spheres; the latter associated with the home and the intimate circle of family and friends.⁴ The realm of commodity exchange (the market), once private, became more public, while the intimate sphere shrank. By the mid-19th century, for example, the State began administering universal education, which further reduced the influence of the intimate sphere. The shrinking of the private realm deepened the division between the political and the civil realms. The more the bourgeois withdrew from his public responsibilities as citizen to find refuge in the intimate sphere, the more he felt alienated from society.⁵

²Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*.

³For an overview of pre-modern definitions of community see Delanty.

⁴Sennett, *The Fall of the Public Man*.

⁵The roles of *homme* and *bourgeois* are the basis of the modern market society. “The fiction of a justice immanent in free commerce was that rendered plausible the conflation of *bourgeois* and *homme*, of self-interested, property-owning private people and autonomous individuals per se.” Habermas, 111.

The increasing dissociation of the citizen and the private man encouraged the polarization of community and society. Society became an impersonal domain, often linked to the State, while community became increasingly associated with the intimate sphere. The balance between private man and citizen that Jean-Jacques Rousseau had proposed as the basis of modern society was now under threat.⁶ Ferdinand Tönnies' *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft* echo this imbalance: "All intimate, private and exclusive living together, so we discover, is understood as life in *Gemeinschaft* (community). *Gesellschaft* (society) is public life – is the world itself."⁷ By proposing community as an alternative to society's impersonal relations, Tönnies epitomizes the bourgeois attempt to reappropriate public life as private man. The original connection between bourgeois and private man was erased, permitting the identification of community as the site of the bourgeois experience of humanity:

The obsession with persons at the expense of more impersonal social relations is like a filter which discolours our rational understanding of society; it obscures the continuing importance of class in advanced industrial society; it leads us to believe community is an act of mutual self-disclosure and to undervalue the community relations of strangers, particularly those which occur in the cities.⁸

If Rousseau had accepted the theoretical possibility of a community outside the law, this community was, for the Swiss philosopher, lost. The community of the "first men" belonged to the time before time, outside modernity. By opposing community to society, Tönnies followed Rousseau's steps and radicalized the myth of community. The

⁶Rousseau, *Du contrat social*.

⁷Tönnies, "Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft," 7.

⁸Sennett, 4.

quest for community was now a modern problem that demanded the rupture from modern society.

This opposition of community and modern society, and modernity in general, turned community into a strategy of resistance. It is under this light that we should understand the aura attributed to community in contemporary western societies, that “warmly persuasive” character identified by Raymond Williams in *Keywords*:

Community is the warmly persuasive word to describe an existing set of relationships, or the warmly persuasive word to describe an alternative set of relationships. What is most important, perhaps, is that unlike all other terms of social organization (state, nation, society, etc) it seems never to be used unfavourably, and never to be given any positive opposing or distinguishing term.⁹

The tension between individualism and community is at the core of contemporary imaginations of community. The drama of the modern community is that it fails to meet the needs of individualism. This sense of failure animates the imagination of community in late modernity, which often takes the form of radical rejection of modern individualism. Communitarian reformulations of community, for example, aim to counter individualism by encouraging communities based on loyalty and responsibility. This is the program proposed by Amitai Etzioni, one of the leading voices of communitarianism:

Correcting the current imbalance between rights and responsibilities requires a four-point agenda: a moratorium on the minting of most, if not all, new rights; re-establishing the link between rights and responsibilities; recognizing that some responsibilities do not entail rights, and most carefully, adjusting some rights to the changed circumstances.¹⁰

⁹Williams, *Keywords*, 66.

¹⁰Etzioni, *The Spirit of Community*, 4. Communitarians vary in strength and radicalism. Delanty defines Etzioni’s work as an example of “governmental communitarianism.” Delanty, 87. However, other more moderate versions of communitarianism, such as the liberal communitarianism of Alasdair McIntyre and Charles Taylor, attempt to “update” liberal notions of individualism with the needs of an increasing global –and multicultural– society. See Taylor, “The Politics of Recognition.”

However, Etzioni's community is, at best, ambivalent. It targets individualism but dilutes the State in a largely depoliticized community that presents citizenship as a moral question. In this context, political decisions are privatized and made within the community. Communal institutions become the arena of this new privatized politics. Etzioni imagines the new communitarian society as a "community of communities."¹¹ The communitarian program was soon appropriated by political leaders to soften the impact of economic "restructuring."¹² The communitarian community will also reappear in the digerati imagination of virtual communities as a privatized public forum.

Despite communitarian interventions, contemporary theorizations of community are often tainted with disenchantment. Zygmunt Bauman, for example, argues that the dilemma of the modern community is the balance between freedom and security: "Missing community means missing security; gaining community, if it happens, would soon mean missing freedom."¹³ For Bauman the modern obsession with community is a mechanism of protection against isolation and fragmentation. However, a community that allows unrestrictive individualism cannot hold together. Community is thus a failed attempt to reconcile the demands of individualism and security. The community that Bauman portrays is asphyxiating. It is a community of sameness, the suburban ghetto:

Where the state has failed, perhaps the community, the *local* community, the physically tangible, "material" community, a community embodied in a *territory* inhabited by its members and no one else (no one who "does not belong"), will purvey the "being safe" feeling which the wider world evidently conspires to destroy?¹⁴

¹¹Etzioni, 146.

¹²Delanty, 87.

¹³Bauman, *Community*, 4.

¹⁴Ibid, 113.

To counteract the contemporary atomization of life and its subsequent feeling of insecurity, Bauman calls for a return to the principles of retribution and obligation towards others.

In a similar vein, Jean-Luc Nancy questions the association of community with individualism by arguing that *being human* demands being exposed to others:

Having access to what is *proper* to existence, and therefore, of course, to the proper of *one's own* existence, only through an "expropriation" whose exemplary reality is that of "my" face always exposed to others, always turned toward an other and faced by him or her, never facing myself. This is the archi-original impossibility of Narcissus that opens straight away onto the possibility of the political.¹⁵

According to Nancy, proof of this intimate connection between the essence of man and community is everywhere in western tradition. This explains the continuous search for community. Nevertheless, this same tradition not only failed to realize community, but prevented community from having any political consequence. In fact, for Nancy community is *being in common* and not just *common being*; it is existence without fusion, without communion: "Being *in common* means... *no longer having, in any form, in any empirical or ideal place such a substantial identity, and sharing this* (narcissistic) '*lack of identity*.'" ¹⁶ Community is the interruption of infinitude, the subtraction of identity, the balance of differences. For Nancy total fusion does not lead to community but to totalitarianism.

In response to Nancy's *Inoperative Community*, Maurice Blanchot explores the reasons why community is impossible:

¹⁵Nancy, *The Inoperative Community*, xxxvii-xxxviii.

¹⁶Ibid, xxxviii.

Si le rapport de l'homme à l'homme cesse d'être le rapport du Même avec le Même mais introduit l'Autre comme irréductible et, dans son égalité, toujours en dissymétrie par rapport à celui qui le considère, c'est une toute autre sorte de relation qui s'impose et qui impose une autre forme de société qu'on osera à peine nommer « communauté ».¹⁷

The individual existence reclaims community. However, community's tendency towards communion moves against the individual's search for immanence. If community hinders communion, it also facilitates the knowledge of what cannot be known: the ecstasy, the exteriority, the exposure to the other. The ecstasy is the realization of human finitude. The liberal notion of individual as independent being prevents the individual's knowledge of his/her being as finitude. The ecstasy is, thus, the experience of what cannot be known. For Blanchot, the "negative community," the experience of the impossible, is the ultimate – and the only possible – experience of community.

A malaise with modern individualism is also found in Michel Maffesoli's neo-tribalism. His notion, which became popular in the media and cultural studies fields to describe contemporary collective engagements with media and culture, is a compendium of modern tropes regarding community and society.¹⁸ He regards neo-tribalism as a symptom of the saturation of individualism. Neo-tribes react against the homogeneity typical of individualist communities by proposing a fluid community of interest. It is intriguing though that Maffesoli's chooses the term "tribe" to refer to communities on the go when tribes are often anchored in a territory. Neo-tribes reject the stability of the *Gemeinschaft* and project an image of community without borders based on a quasi-

¹⁷Blanchot, *La communauté inavouable*, 12.

¹⁸See Maffesoli, *The Time of the Tribes*. The notion of "neo-tribe" had a strong impact on subcultures and new media studies. For an example of debates over the use of the term to describe contemporary subcultures see Hesmondhalgh, "Subcultures, Scenes or tribes? None of the Above." For a famous appropriation of neo-tribes to describe new forms of sociality in the context of mass consumption see Shields, "The Individual, Consumption Cultures and the Fate of Community."

mystical vitalism. This is why, for Maffesoli, the experience of postmodern tribes is forever present and intense. Neo-tribes represent the return of well-known western romanticizations of the barbarian, the primitive and the archaic, in a move that is not far from Tönnies' nostalgic *Gemeinschaft*.

Romanticizing Aboriginal Community: Countercultural Movements Go Native

The return to the tribe to describe postmodern communality is not surprising. The figure of the noble savage has been central in narratives of authenticity that constitute western modernity. Linked to the colonial enterprise, the figure represents freedom, liberty and nature and was instrumental in shaping a modernity emptied of European traditionalism. The noble savage represents an alternative to Christianity, modernity and industrialization: "Antimodern campers played the primitive authentic against modernity's inauthenticity in order to devise a better modern."¹⁹ It also served to justify the oppression of Aboriginal peoples in the Americas by either reducing them to the helpless role of naive primitives or by turning them into irredeemable savages.²⁰ In North America, particularly in the United States, the mythical noble savage evoked virtues that helped to produce a national identity different from Europe (i.e. physical strength, untamed courage and authenticity). James Carey discusses the characteristics of this identity in "The Mythos of the Electronic Revolution":

¹⁹Deloria, *Playing Indian*, 102.

Lears traces this search of authenticity to the end of the 19th century, when American antimodernism took shape as a response against an "overcivilized modern existence." For Lears, the quest for authentic experiences privileged "more intense forms of physical or spiritual experience." Lears, *No Place of Grace*, xiii.

²⁰The contradiction between the idealization of the "savage" and the impulse to subjugate him is found at the core of the colonial enterprise: "This is, of course, the familiar contradiction we have come to label noble savagery, a term that both juxtaposes and conflates an urge to idealize and desire Indians and need to despise and dispossess them." Deloria, 4. See also Ellingson, *The Myth of the Noble Savage*.

as dreamed by intellectuals, preached by ministers, painted by artists, romanticized by politicians, dramatized by novelists, this [American] society was to be located symbolically and literally midway between the overdeveloped nations of Europe and the primitive communities of the western frontier.²¹

This move depended, however, on the marginalization of real Native populations, which were regarded as having lost touch with their traditions and cultures.

A more recent facet of the North American fascination with the noble savage and the Aboriginal way of life is found in the new communalist and countercultural movements that emerged in the 1960s. Largely white and middle-class, communalists withdrew from politics and society, searching for refuge in rural and marginal areas where they could build a new social order. In this withdrawal from society the new communalist movement continued the modern tradition of opposing community to society.

For the new communalists, the ideal community was the “tribe.” Imagined as a warm and essential form of human social life, the communalist tribe was a new chapter in the long history of European constructions of the Aboriginal Other.²² New communalists regarded “primitive” and “essential” lifestyles associated with Aboriginal cultures as paths for self-transformation: “The lure of the countryside also meshed well with countercultural fascination with Native Americans, who were frequently seen as

²¹Carey and Quirk, “The Mythos of the Electronic Revolution,” 118-119.

²²“The communalists used Indianness in the hope of establishing a particular kind of organic community, political in its exemplary social nature and self-transforming in practice.” Deloria, 158. The use of Indianness by white, middle and upper middle-class North Americans continued throughout the 80s and 90s in what is known as the New Age movement. Dagmar Wernitznig summarizes the politics of this more recent imagination of Aboriginal identity and culture: “At the core of white shamanism, there linger strategies of postcolonial paternalism. This means that going native in white shaman style does not so much evolve from an essential urge for ‘Indianization.’ The emphasis, rather, is on ‘out-Indianing’ genuine Native Americans through spiritual retribalization.” Wernitznig, *Going Native or Going Naïve?* 2.

embodying a profound natural wisdom long lost to non-Native peoples.”²³ This primitivism emphasized self-sufficiency and survival over consumerism, environmentalism over industrial contamination and, in some cases, tribalism over a class system. However, the Native tribe that the communalists were willing to adopt as the ideal form of a new social order had little to do with the historical experience of Native peoples. In practice, only few new communities had real contact with Native peoples in reserves.²⁴

The lure of Indianness attracted not just communalists, but also white radicals associated with the New Left and the student movement. It was particularly within the last group that Aboriginal activists found supporters and a repertoire of images easily available to communicate with non-Native audiences: “With white radicals appropriating Indian symbols and native people reinterpreting those symbols and launching their own, Indianness became a potent political meeting ground.”²⁵ The image of the Aboriginal warrior resisting colonial subjugation, for example, played an important role in the popularity of the Red Power movement among non-Natives.²⁶ Emphasis on spirituality and tradition also proved crucial in gaining non-Native sympathies.

²³Miller. *The 60s Communes*, 153.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵Deloria, 163.

²⁶In the U.S. the support of white radicals to the Red Power movement was evident in the seizure of Alcatraz Island (1969-70), the Trail of Broken Treaties (1972) and Wounded Knee (1973). See Deloria, 163. For a detailed account of these events see Chaat Smith and Warrior, *Like a Hurricane*.

Aboriginal Politics and the Imagination of the Pan-Indian Community

In every Nation, in every Clan
 The Elders to a person,
 Whether a woman or a man,
 Shared a common truth,
 One truth to understand,
 That the spirit of the people
 Is equal
 To the power of the Land.²⁷

Inspired by the Civil Rights and the Black Power movements, the Red Power movement gained momentum in the U.S. and Canada between the late 1960s and 70s. The movement facilitated the consolidation of Aboriginal politics and the diffusion of a “supratribal consciousness” based on elements of pan-Indianism.²⁸ Simultaneously, the movement sought to strengthen its bonds with local communities, adopting the reserve as a privileged site of Indianness. If pan-Indianism eased the communication with non-Native supporters and served as a common ground to urban Native alliances, tribal identifications were the norm in Native-Native relationships. The negotiation of pan-Indian and tribal identifications would become a distinctive feature of this period of political activism.

Stephen Cornell sees two processes at the basis of Aboriginal political resurgence: Indianization and tribalization. The first notion refers to the construction of an Aboriginal identity beyond local differences.²⁹ Indianization has its roots on European racial thinking that demanded the grouping of individuals in “races.” The notion of “Indian” not only served to construct an Aboriginal otherness, but became a figure later adopted by Natives in their relations with Europeans. As such, it was used to negotiate the conditions of

²⁷Redbird, “The Power of the Land,” 28.

²⁸Nagel, *American Indian Ethnic Renewal*, 12.

²⁹Cornell, *The Return of the Native*.

actual Natives. The problem with “Indianness,” however, is that it has no referent; it is a figure that constructs a reality beyond the everyday experiences of Native populations.³⁰

The second process identified by Cornell is the politicization of the tribe “as the dominant category of Indian group organization and self-concept.”³¹ This is also the result of European views on group dynamics, which demanded the centralization of different lineages into a unit (tribe or nation) with which to negotiate. Later, a period of isolationism into reserves reinforced local differences and attachment to the land. However, while both processes described by Cornell have been taking place since the early days of contact, it was only in the last half of the 20th century that “Indian identity joined tribal identity as a basis for political action on a large scale.”³² Alan Cairns identifies a similar trend in his study of Aboriginal/non-Aboriginal relations in Canada.³³ He observes that Aboriginal nationalism focuses almost exclusively on land rights associated with reserves. Moreover, references to nationhood have challenged traditional assimilation policies and, more recently, have served as an argument to support self-government claims. Finally, the rise of Aboriginal nationalism has complicated the view of the English and French as “founding nations” of Canada.³⁴

The tactics of the Red Power movement incorporated many of the figures that had circulated in the North American imaginary for centuries and that contributed to romanticize – and alienate – Native peoples:

³⁰“The *indian* is a simulation, the absence of natives.” Vizenor, *Fugitive Poses*, 15.

³¹Ibid, 72.

³²Ibid, 108.

³³Cairns, *Citizens Plus*.

³⁴Phillips, “Disrupting Past Paradigms,” 77.

The poses of tribal radicals seem to mimic the romantic pictorial images in old photographs taken by Edward Curtis for a white audience. The radicals never seem to smile, an incautious throwback to the stoical tribal image of the slower camera shutters and film screens. The new radicals frown, even grimace at cameras, and claim the atrocities endured by all tribal cultures in first person pronouns.³⁵

Despite its popularity, the Red Power movement soon showed signs of divisions in its Native files, particularly among those supporting the use of force and those involved in tribal councils closer to the federal government. These tensions also reveal the collision between local and global strategies, tribal and supratribal imaginaries, urban and reserve Natives. By the end of the 1970s the movement dissolved. According to Joanne Nagel, its main legacy was the promotion of cultural ethnic renewal, particularly among urban Natives who sought to reconnect with local traditions and celebrations.³⁶ The return to the reserve typical of the 1980s and 1990s was not always easy given the skepticism of local communities to what was felt as an inauthentic move. As I discuss later, this division between urban- and reserve-based Natives is a common trend in Canada and the U.S.

Unlike the American Red Power movement, which was largely led by urban and academic Indians, Aboriginal resistance in Canada often emerged from reserves around land claims, health and education concerns.³⁷ The influence of the American Red Power Movement and the American Indian Movement was mostly felt in British Columbia and was never strong enough to build a long-lasting formal alliance between Canadian and

³⁵Vizenor, *The People Named the Chippewa*, 130.

³⁶Nagel, 196.

³⁷Cardinal, *The Unjust Society*, 103-104.

American activists.³⁸ However, more radicalized groups, such as the Mohawk warriors, adopted the rhetoric and tactics of the American Indian Movement during the Oka crisis.³⁹

While also divided around tribal and pan-Indian imaginaries, the efforts of Canadian Aboriginal organizations often concentrated on the reserve. The first steps towards political organization date back to the early 20th century in British Columbia and focused on land claims. It was only in the late 1940s that the North American Indian Brotherhood was created to represent Aboriginal peoples at a federal level. As in the case of the U.S, Aboriginal organizations were resisted by government bureaucrats, who considered Aboriginals unprepared to handle their own development. Geographical distance and funding restrictions were also major obstacles to political organization, leading to a decline in activism between the mid-1950s to the 1960s.⁴⁰

Pan-Indian Aboriginal resistance was triggered by Aboriginal opposition to the “Statement of the Government of Canada on Indian Policy,” issued by Pierre Trudeau’s government in 1969. The “White Paper,” as it was soon called, mobilized Aboriginal peoples all over Canada against a clear political move to abolish Indian status. Trudeau’s renunciation of the White Paper was interpreted as a sign of the increasing power of

³⁸While the Red Power movement refers to the whole series of public demonstrations by Aboriginal peoples during the 1960s and 1970s, the American Indian movement was created in 1969 to channel Aboriginal protest mainly in urban centres. The organization lasted a decade and then disintegrated.

³⁹Valaskakis, 57.

⁴⁰Cardinal, 102.

Aboriginal politics, which now counted with a strong pan-Indian organization: the National Indian Brotherhood (NIB).⁴¹

Despite the success against the White Paper, pan-Canadian Aboriginal efforts were undermined by disagreements between status Indians and non-status Indians and Métis over strategies. While the first group insisted on pursuing claims on the basis of treaty promises, the second group preferred to use the umbrella of Aboriginal rights.⁴² This conflict echoed the tensions between tribal and supratribal strategies within the American Red Power movement and reflected important differences in the way Indianness and community were defined. According to Cairns, “if the vehicle is nationalism, the instrument is self-government, and the goal is the preservation or enhancement of culture, then attention will be focused exclusively on the territorially based community.”⁴³ While, as I discuss below, the reserve still influences urban Aboriginal imaginaries, those severed from the reserve and exposed to a pan-Indian rhetoric would be prone to question the territorial basis of Indianness as a collective and an individual identity.

The 1970s represent a turn in Aboriginal politics. During this decade the NIB sought the alliance of other international decolonization movements. The move is consistent with the American Indian Movement’s support of other minority groups in the U.S during this period. Despite this turn towards a more political definition of Aboriginal identity, tensions between status and non-status Indians intensified with the creation of the Assembly of First Nations (AFN). The AFN, which emerged during the negotiations

⁴¹See Miller, *Skyscrapers Hide the Heavens*.

⁴²Ibid, 339.

⁴³Cairns, 185.

around the Constitutional Act of 1982, was formed by status Indians and claimed to represent the different Aboriginal “nations.” Future negotiations between the AFN and the federal government would stress the needs of status Indians and reserves in detriment of the increasing urban – and often enfranchised – Native population.

The search for alliances beyond the colonial nation-state borders is typical of Aboriginal nationalism and pan-Aboriginal imaginaries. While many Aboriginal nations are circumscribed within modern Canadian borders, other Aboriginal nations, such as the Mohawk, Oneida and Cayuga, extend beyond Canadian borders. On the other hand, Aboriginal activists – many of them artists exposed to pan-Indianism in urban centres – have created working alliances with other members of what George Manuel denominates “Fourth World.”⁴⁴ According to Manuel, members of the Fourth World are stateless and marginal nations, mostly constituted by Indigenous peoples. Whether the focus is on the Indigenous nation or on the global Indigenous community, the effect is similar: the imagination of community against the colonial nation-state.

The relatively recent emphasis on nationhood is another symptom of the complex repertoire of identifications present at the core of Aboriginal politics. On the one hand, the term “First Nations” seems to privilege the status of traditional local communities or bands and their rights to the land by reviving the terms of the Royal Proclamation of 1763.⁴⁵ As I discuss in the next section, the figure of the nation does not seem to leave room to less formal and traditional experiences of community such as urban networks. On the other hand, the term is also a pan-Indian figure that highlights the common

⁴⁴Manuel and Posluns, *The Fourth World*.

⁴⁵The Royal Proclamation issued by the British Crown established the boundaries of the new British province of Quebec and provisions concerning the lands occupied by Aboriginal “nations.”

experience of different Aboriginal groups. In any case, the invocation of “nationhood” underscores Aboriginal claims to self-government before national and international bodies while it marginalizes off-reserve groups.⁴⁶

The tensions observed in both the American Red Power movement and Aboriginal political institutions show the fluidity of notions such as Indianness and community. Grappling with this fluidity has been a major concern of Aboriginal intellectuals since political resurgence:

Today, Native lawyers, writers, and artists are ensnared by representations of Indian warriors, the new postcards of Indians asserting self-determination. Native people themselves struggle in the current battlegrounds of cultural encounter, claiming and disclaiming these conflicting representations of power in the past and political possibility on the present.⁴⁷

An important element that complicates contemporary definitions of Aboriginal identity and community within and beyond Aboriginal politics is the long-standing link between Indianness and land. Land rights underlie the fight for self-determination and sovereignty. Treaties still determine the right to Aboriginal status. Different relations to the land divide urban and tribal identities, producing tribal and supratribal identifications. The pivotal role of land in the definition of Aboriginal identities and community should come as no surprise, though, given that negotiations between Natives and non-Natives has always centered on “land.” In this context, land has not just meant access to resources, but has involved the political and cultural domination of one group over the

⁴⁶“Since the early 1980s so called-Indians take increasingly a ‘nationhood’ approach in both national and international political arenas to express their special status as first occupants of the territory now known as Canada, and to make their claims relevant within the context of the legal state.” Krosenbrink-Gelissen, “First Nations, Canadians and their Quest for Identity,” 331.

⁴⁷Valaskakis, 68.

other.⁴⁸ The fight over “land” became a complex process by which European settlers sought to control largely unknown Native cultures. The link between Indianness and land is evident in the Canadian reserve system, which, originally instituted by the British Crown in the 18th century as a “protection” of the rights of Indigenous peoples to the land against rural settlers, became a crucial instrument of surveillance and confinement throughout the 19th and mid-20th centuries once Indigenous peoples no longer served as allies to the British in their fight against Americans.⁴⁹ The Enfranchisement Act issued in 1869 by the new Dominion of Canada considered the “vanishing” Aboriginal peoples and their reserves the “responsibility” of the federal government and the parliament, highlighting the paternalistic and colonial definition of Aboriginal peoples that enabled colonial institutions, such as residential schools and agricultural programs, to dominate the relationship between Natives and non-Natives until the emergence of Aboriginal resistance.⁵⁰ Hugh Brody observes that while the reserve provided the basis for the protection and continuation of traditional lifestyles, constituting a mythical site of Aboriginal revival, it also “facilitated the process whereby Indians in so many places have come increasingly to endure in distressed enclaves, on diminishing islands of Indian life.”⁵¹

⁴⁸Ibid.

⁴⁹For a detailed account on the changing relationship of Native and non-Native peoples and its effect on the recognition of Aboriginal and land rights see Miller.

⁵⁰During the 19th century the number of Aboriginal peoples in North America decreased, a trend that was reverted in the mid-20th century. This demographic decrease, added to a changing role of Aboriginal peoples from allies to colonial subjects, reinforced the colonial belief in the imminent “disappearance” of Aboriginal peoples.

⁵¹Brody, *Maps and Dreams*, 68.

The resurgence of Aboriginal politics in the last decades of the 20th century coincides with an intellectual climate prone to question colonial definitions of space and identity. The association of difference to an autonomous space, typical of modernity and found in a wide range of expressions from anthropological accounts of otherness to the lure of primitivism, sustained the power relation between colonizer and colonized. By associating Natives to specific spaces, European settlers also sought to control the way Natives would interact with each other and define themselves. In Canada, the Indian Act of 1876, the reserve system, the anthropological collection and, later on, the residential schools are all instruments of modern spatio-temporal discipline: the Native will either become fully assimilated and “present” or fixed to the permanent spatio-temporal difference of the anthropological account and the reserve, the marker of “Aboriginal land” *par excellence*.⁵² In the same move, however, non-Natives erased the traces of their own intervention producing an impossible Aboriginal otherness (i.e. the savage, the primitive tribe). With the advent of postcolonialism and globalization, this modern politics of difference became increasingly porous and problematic, leading to alternative spatio-temporal identifications.⁵³ Among these new identifications are the figures of the urban Aboriginal and the pan-Aboriginal urban community.

⁵²Edward Said refers to the modern compulsion to discipline the other by means of spatio-temporal imaginations in his well-known study of Orientalism: “It is enough for ‘us’ to set up the boundaries in our minds; ‘they’ become ‘they’ accordingly, and both their territory and their mentality are designated as different from ‘ours.’ (...) The geographic boundaries accompany the social, ethnic, and cultural ones in expected ways.” Said, *Orientalism*, 54.

⁵³ “In the pulverized space of postmodernity, space has not become irrelevant: it has been *reterritorialized* in a way that does not conform to the experience of space that characterized the era of high modernity. It is this that forces us to reconceptualise fundamentally the politics of community, solidarity, identity and cultural difference.” See Gupta and Ferguson, “Beyond ‘Culture’,” 6-23.

Regardless of the influence that long-standing disputes may have had on Native relationships with the land, Aboriginal peoples experience land in a distinctive way. They regard space as lived space, already inscribed in a temporal dimension. This experience of the land is usually collective, framed by practices that produce a symbolic definition of community.⁵⁴ Valaskakis brilliantly summarizes this spatio-temporal dynamic:

A Native community's observation or experience of place, land, and environment, gives rise to the Indian spiritual myths and stories that construct the tribal sense of past; and these narratives move through time in collective memory and oral tradition, building a sense of community that is place-centered.⁵⁵

While Natives and non-Natives often reduce land to either the background of Aboriginal struggles or the permanent site of reconstructed notions of tradition and difference, the memory of the lived land challenges any definite understanding of land and community. Valaskakis notes that the centrality of land in contemporary Aboriginal imagination has contributed to further “deterritorialize place and community, and politicize land and spirituality” by proposing land as an experience that defines Aboriginal identity.⁵⁶ Synonym of tradition, history and culture, land – and not territory – becomes the new ground of the imagined community.

It is not surprising then that this distinctive spatio-temporal dynamic of land, responsible for producing community, has been the focus of contemporary Aboriginal intellectuals and activists since political resurgence. Emptied of local references and

⁵⁴See Cohen, *The Symbolic Construction of Community*.

In his ethnographic work among the Beaver peoples of Northern British Columbia, Brody had members of the reserve draw maps of their “land.” The result is a complex cartography that reveals an Aboriginal perspective of land that indissoluble links land with fauna, resources, spiritual life and stories. See Brody, *Maps and Dreams*.

⁵⁵ Valaskakis, 99.

⁵⁶ Ibid, 94.

associated to a deterritorialized notion of land, community becomes a site of self-determination where pan-Indian, tribal and European imaginations converge. These “new” definitions of land and community are problematic for many “traditionalists” who regard pan-Indian appropriations as foreign to their own experiences.⁵⁷ In the language of Aboriginal political resurgence, community represents, simultaneously, traditional ways of life, a particular lived space, and, as George Morgan argues, a sacrosanct “state of being.”⁵⁸

Parallel to the deterritorialization of land, contemporary pan-Indianism seeks to extend the borders of the place-centered community to include Native experiences beyond the reserve and, more recently, beyond the modern nation-state. To this end, contemporary Aboriginal art and politics has engaged in a politics of tradition that recuperate practices and narratives of the land, producing a sense of community that is no longer centered on a specific place.⁵⁹ Nowadays, community is experienced not just in the reserve, but in the pow-wow, the urban friendship centre, the Native art gallery, and, as I demonstrate in these pages, cyberspace. All these sites are simultaneously local and pan-Indian and propose a collage of old and new practices.

⁵⁷Describing the experiential differences between leaders of the American Indian Movement and members of the Leech Lake reserve, Vizenor notes: “The political ideologies of the radical tribal leaders are reactions to racism and cultural adversities; that much all tribal people have in common; but the radical rhetoric of the elders was not learned from traditional tribal people on reservations or on tribal communities.” Vizenor, *The People Named the Chippewa*, 130. Vine Deloria further explores the differences between pan-Indian and tribal definitions of land, community and spirituality in Deloria, *For This Land*.

⁵⁸Morgan, “Aboriginal Politics, Self-Determination and the Rhetoric of Community,” 371.

⁵⁹The politics of tradition alluded in this paragraph refer to those processes of objectification that reify while dismissing specific elements of a culture for political purposes. Land is one of these elements. It is important to note that the politics of tradition is not always an invention of tradition but, as in the case of North American Aboriginal politics, an appropriation and, in some instances, an “inversion” of colonial and tribal stereotypes. For a further discussion on the politics of tradition see Thomas, “The Inversion of Tradition,” 213-232.

These new imaginations of community and land have become so entrenched in contemporary Aboriginal culture that they were the topic of the landmark show “Reservation X: The Power of Place in Aboriginal Contemporary Art,” curated by Gerald McMaster for the Canadian Museum of Civilization in 1999. The exhibition showcases the work of seven American and Canadian Aboriginal artists who question and extend the notion of home and community and explore their own role vis-à-vis their communities of origin.⁶⁰ The exhibition reflected the difficulties that Native intellectuals face when defining community. Despite individual differences, the artworks represent community as something larger than the reserve, forcing a redefinition of the reserve as a site of identification. In his curatorial essay McMaster observes: “The rural and the urban now make up two discursive spaces or communities that form the new reservation narrative.”⁶¹

The “New Reservation Narrative”: Urban Aboriginals Imagine Community

The possibility of imagining community beyond the reserve has denaturalized Aboriginal identity and facilitated the emergence of an identity politics. An important factor that contributed to this new imagination of community by Aboriginal activists was the development of a distinct urban Aboriginal culture and identity from the mid-20th century. Today, over 50 per cent of Aboriginals live in cities. Urban Natives challenge many Native and non-Native assumptions about Aboriginal identity and community, in particular the seeming uncontested association between Aboriginal community and land present in Aboriginal national discourses. As I discussed above, the influence of both

⁶⁰ The artists were Mary Longman, Nora Naranjo-Morse, Marianne Nicolson, Shelley Niro, Jolene Rickard, Mateo Romero and C. Max Stevens. See McMaster, *Reservation X*.

⁶¹ Ibid, 21.

Aboriginal political activism, largely urban based, and urban pan-Indianism forced the progressive deterritorialization of “land” facilitating new imaginations of community.

Contrary to the modern stereotype of the Native as “fixed” to the land, Aboriginal people are increasingly urban and mobile.⁶² Native peoples switch residences and communities at a much higher rate than non-Native Canadians.⁶³ Migration from reserves to urban centres is a phenomenon that has been on the rise since the 1950s, particularly among young adults in search of job opportunities and women who are single mothers or who seek to break free from economic stagnation.⁶⁴ This rise also responded in large part to a demographic growth in North American Aboriginal populations, which further strained reserves and forced migration to the cities. Despite this move from reserves to urban centres, the urban Aboriginal population is mainly constituted by non-registered Aboriginals and Métis and, in Canada, tends to concentrate in the prairie cities.

While cities might seem to offer the chance of better living conditions, urban life is far from easy. Unemployment and lower incomes are more frequent among Natives than among other groups.⁶⁵ Access to federal funding and band privileges are also problematic for a vast portion of urban Aboriginals who are neither registered nor recognized band members. Provincial and municipal bodies tend to regard Aboriginal issues as a federal concern. The federal government has historically focused on the needs of Aboriginals living on reserve. Aboriginal representative bodies, focused on land rights claims and self-government, often ignore the concerns of urban Natives in their

⁶²See Appadurai, “Putting Hierarchy in Its Place,” 36-49.

⁶³Statistics Canada, “Aboriginal Peoples in Canada in 2006.”

⁶⁴Norris, “Contemporary Demography of Aboriginal Peoples in Canada,” 211.

⁶⁵Peters, “Aboriginal People in Urban Areas,” 306.

negotiations with the federal government. Only in the last decades, did federal, provincial and municipal governments begin instituting programs for urban Natives. It is also only in recent years that urban Natives became accepted by the general population, though they are still stigmatized. Until the 1980s, Aboriginals were regarded as culturally unfit for urban environments, a view that reveals the pervasive conceptualization of Aboriginal culture as somehow opposed to the modern lifestyle associated with North American cities.⁶⁶ However, urban Natives have recently questioned this assumption, insisting on the need to reinforce Aboriginal culture to cope with the difficulties of urban life.⁶⁷ To this end, support for urban Natives now encompasses access to cultural programming such as language training and introduction to Aboriginal philosophies and traditions with the aid of elders and volunteers. This cultural training is usually in the hands of friendship centres, voluntary associations that provide urban natives with cultural and social activities. For many, friendship centres substitute the absence of a daily link with their culture and family.⁶⁸

Urban Aboriginal organizations have been crucial in the development of urban communities. Indian clubs first appeared in Toronto, Vancouver and Winnipeg in the early 1950s. These clubs were gathering and networking places for Aboriginal migrants in large urban centres. In the 1960s, the first friendship centres appeared to aide migrants in their adjustment to the urban environment. By then, urban Natives were already regarded as a “problem” by non-Natives. At that time, the centres focused on referrals

⁶⁶Ibid, 319.

⁶⁷Urban Natives voiced this concern during the National Round Table on Aboriginal Urban Issues sponsored by the Royal Commission on Aboriginal peoples. Ibid, 320.

⁶⁸Cooke and Bélanger, “Migration Theories and First Nations Mobility,” 153.

and counselling in matters of employment, housing, health and education. In the 1970s, the federal government acknowledged the important role of friendship centres as sites of socialization by creating the Migrating Native Peoples Program. The initiative provided funding for friendship centres, which until then had relied on voluntary work and private donors. A decade later, the program became the Aboriginal Friendship Centre Program, which stressed housing strategies and employment training. Today the program sustains a network of 117 friendship centres across Canada.⁶⁹

In 1996, the Royal Commission of Aboriginal Peoples recommended the development of a network of Aboriginal institutions to cope with the needs of a fast growing urban population.⁷⁰ Though it acknowledged the work of friendship centres and other Aboriginal agencies, it argued that many organizations were competing for funding with non-Aboriginal institutions and they were still below the radar of many urban Natives seeking help. In its final report, the Royal Commission maintained the hegemonic view of urban Aboriginal populations as disadvantaged and at risk of cultural erosion. This view, shared by the federal and provincial governments, still encourages initiatives that focus on funding services for individuals while ignoring the emergence of an authentic urban community sustained by a network of cultural education centres, spiritual organizations, Aboriginal political councils and artist-run centres.

The Royal Commission's view also reveals the long-term association of Native identity to the land. If urban Natives' identities are particularly in danger, this is because they are somehow displaced from their "land," even if the majority of urban Aboriginals are non-registered. Once again, land is presented as a privileged site of Native identity

⁶⁹National Association of Friendship Centres, "Our History."

⁷⁰Newhouse, "The Invisible Infrastructure," 245.

and a synonym of the reserve. The terms of the Royal Commission echo the centrality of land and nation in the negotiations between the federal government and Aboriginal representative bodies, which often result in a general disregard of urban claims. Lacking an explicit connection to the “land,” urban Natives do not fit well into the rhetoric of self-government that dominates legal discussions between Aboriginal national and regional bodies and the federal and provincial governments. Chris Andersen and Claude Denis have recently pointed out that the framing of Native discussions with the government as nation (state)-to-nation (state) negotiations privileges “the political claims of Aboriginal communities and organizations situated on defined territories.”⁷¹

Despite their disadvantageous stand in political negotiations at the federal and provincial levels, urban Aboriginal communities began fighting for self-government rights by challenging hegemonic imaginations of Aboriginal community and identity during the last few years:

Urban Native communities produce chains of meaning – cultural forms – that adhere specifically to the mental and physical geography of the city and as such may from time to time produce political projects that conflict with those issued by land-based Aboriginal communities.⁷²

These cultural forms include pan-Indian expressions such as traditionalism, language regeneration projects, and particularly, networking initiatives that connect Aboriginals from different cultural backgrounds.⁷³ Urban organizations demand more funding and autonomy to create programs that address the structural needs of urban

⁷¹ Andersen and Denis, “Urban Natives and the Nation,” 382.

⁷² Ibid, 385.

⁷³ Friederes defines this type of pan-Indianism as “reformist.” Emerged in the urban context, reformist pan-Indianism has strong links to non-Native culture and focuses on the promotion of traditional values and the integration of Natives into the urban fabric. Leaders of reformist pan-Indianism are usually university educated and middle-class. See Frideres, *Native Peoples in Canada*.

populations, which not only encompass housing and employment, but cultural orientation, traditional values and a sense of identity. They also operate as a representative body before the federal government, as in the case of the National Association of Friendship Centres, which in 2008 issued a public questionnaire to all federal candidates regarding their views on urban Aboriginal issues. However, urban politics is undermined by a lack of homogenous political representation. In the last years the Assembly of First Nations, the Métis National Council, the Inuit Kanatami, the Congress of Aboriginal Peoples and the National Association of Friendship Centres all claimed to represent urban Natives' interests.⁷⁴

The main challenge of urban Aboriginal communities is their diverse constitution. Members belong to many Aboriginal groups and comprise registered and non-registered Indians and Métis. Unable to legitimize their membership by claiming a historical connection to the land they now live in, urban Aboriginals build up community by invoking a shared experience and common interests and needs.⁷⁵ In her investigation of mixed-blood urban identity, Bonita Lawrence found that urban Natives have developed different strategies to anchor their Native identities when a direct link to "land" is impossible: the "recuperation" of ancestral ties based on memory and blood, the learning of a Native language, participation in urban organizations and involvement in different forms of urban traditionalism.⁷⁶ These strategies are facilitated by increasing access to resources made available by friendship centres and cultural institutions.

⁷⁴Hanselmann, "Ensuring the Urban Dream," 172.

⁷⁵While many Canadian cities are built on traditional Native land, not all urban Natives have links to those territories.

⁷⁶Lawrence, *"Real" Indians and Others*, 199-201.

Urban Native identities question not just the association of identity and land claimed by some Aboriginal political bodies, but the meaning of Native identity altogether. However, this process is highly ambiguous, revealing the long-lasting influence of colonial discipline in urban imaginaries. Deterritorialized notions of “land,” which associate land to specific cultural practices and traditional knowledge, turn land into something larger than the reserve. That “something,” which involves contact with other Natives, can be “recovered” and practiced in urban centres. This pan-Indian perspective on “land” simultaneously deterritorializes land and territorializes identity by maintaining the link between identity and a largely imagined cultural territory. Identity is also complicated by the importance attributed to Indian status as a marker of Indianness, which evidences that, for urban Natives, the reserve is a privileged site of heritage that still defines Native identity.⁷⁷ Deprived of that connection with the reserve, heritage is actively pursued in pan-Indian ceremonies and events facilitated by friendship and cultural centres, and in the frequent contact with other urban Natives. These practices and relations are the basis of urban Native communities.

The sense of being a minority among other minorities, particularly in large cities, is also an important factor in the development of an urban identity. Apropos James LaGrand observes that “sticking together against stiff challenges was an understandable and reasonable adjustment strategy by Indian people moving into the city.”⁷⁸ While cultural differences at the tribal level are acknowledged and expressed in the urban context, the ethnic diversity of the city has impinged the development of strategies that

⁷⁷Ibid, 230.

⁷⁸LaGrand, “Urban American Indian Identity in a US City,” 269.

reinforce common Aboriginal traits. It is under these circumstances that the pan-Indian vocabulary becomes useful.

The ambiguous stance toward Indian status manifests the pervasive influence of the Indian act in the definition of Indianness as a primordial land-based identity and community as a land-based collectivity. The Indian Act defines a status Indian as: a) any male person of Indian blood that belongs to a band, b) any child of this person, and c) any woman married to this person. In 1985, with the passing of Bill C-31, enfranchised Aboriginals who had lost their status after receiving university degrees, living off the reserve, serving in the military or marrying a non-Native man had their status restored.⁷⁹ The result was the creation of a category of Natives with Indian status and without band membership, given that bands had the final decision regarding membership. While for years Indian status and band membership were intimately connected, the amendment to the Act severed this link. Bill C-31 was an important factor in the imagination of community and belonging among urban Aboriginals, many of which are contemporary artists.

The link between land, identity and community was also severely affected by urban experiences of mobility and loss of status.⁸⁰ While pan-Indian recuperations of “Aboriginal culture” provide a repertoire of images that are invoked in the development of an urban Native community, this imagination of community depends on imaginary representations of the reserve:

These irregular pieces of land that represent a collective past and the prospect of an illusive future are homelands for Indians, regions where community signifies

⁷⁹Cooke and Bélanger, 149.

⁸⁰Lawrence, 230-231.

not only being home but also being grounded in the prospect of returning home, or just having a home. Beyond the poverty and problems, reservations signify the remembered, imagined, or lived communal experience.⁸¹

As a privileged site of Indianness, the reserve is the place where urban Natives with band affiliation and/or status reconnect with family, language and tradition. It is also the place that Natives leave in search of opportunities and better quality of life. For those born in the city without kin connections to reserves, the reserve is the impossible home, a place that can only be imagined.

Imagining Community within the Aboriginal Art World

In 1982, the year that the Canadian government recognized Aboriginal rights in the constitution, the Norman Mackenzie Art Gallery in Regina presented the landmark exhibition “New Work by a New Generation.” The show, curated by Aboriginal artist Robert Houle, was the first major presentation of contemporary Aboriginal art, and opened on the occasion of the World First Nations Assembly in Regina. For McMaster, the exhibition represents a crucial moment in the development of what he suggestively calls “a new tribe,” a group of young Aboriginal artists, professionally trained, fluent in non-Native vocabularies and urbanized.⁸² “New Work by a New Generation” made evident a process that had begun in the 1960s: the emergence of the “Aboriginal” artist in contrast to tribal or band artists operating within traditional languages.⁸³ Contrary to well-known tribal artistic expressions, the discourse of “Aboriginal art” combined pan-Indian

⁸¹Valaskakis, 244.

⁸²McMaster, “The New Tribe.”

⁸³Though the distinction still persists, the boundaries between traditional and contemporary Aboriginal art are increasingly blurred as contemporary artists keep quoting traditional imagery, strategies and forms and traditional artists are experimenting with less conventional forms and visual vocabularies.

recuperations of tradition and Native visual imagery, tribal references and fluid manipulation of non-Native visual vocabularies and strategies. The emergence of a clearly bounded discourse to name specific artists and practices indicates the existence of what Howard Becker calls an “art world,” that is, a network of people, practices, rules, conventions and works.⁸⁴ This art world would be the future base of the Aboriginal new media art field.

The first generation of “Aboriginal” artists reached mainstream recognition in the 1960s, during the rise of Aboriginal politics. Their discourse is one tinged with political references and questions about identity. Unlike tribal artists who worked within the confines of their bands or reserves, Aboriginal contemporary artists soon developed a group consciousness that extended beyond the reserve to include artists with similar aesthetic and political concerns. This incipient sense of community became evident with the development of Aboriginal art groups that claimed to represent the interests of Aboriginal artists.

Aboriginal art activism began in the mid-1970s with the creation of the Professional Native Indians Artists Incorporated (PNIAI) in Winnipeg. Artists in this group were both Canadian and American and included Daphne Odjig, Jackson Beardy, Eddy Cobiness, Norval Morrisseau, Carl Ray and Joseph Sanchez. The group was later known as the “Indian Group of Seven” and their goal was to collect funds that would enable Aboriginal artists to pursue an artistic career, to reach young artists in reserves and to establish a fund for a scholarship program for emerging young artists.⁸⁵ Fluid exchange

⁸⁴Becker, *Art Worlds*.

⁸⁵Martin, “First Nations Activism through the Arts,” 78.

between American and Canadian Native artists continued throughout the years and resulted in shows, curatorial projects and, more recently, online works.

PNIAI disbanded in 1975, a year after its creation, but the organization left an important precedent for future groups by focusing on Aboriginal artists as a collective. It also opposed Indian Affairs' newly created National Indian Arts and Crafts Corporation (NIACC), whose mandate was to represent "Canadian Indian arts and crafts in Canada on matters of policy, program and guidelines."⁸⁶ PNIAI resented the fact that Indian Affairs' marketing strategy did not differentiate between arts and crafts. NIACC sought legitimacy by inviting Aboriginal artists to join an advisory committee but the experiment failed because artists insisted in a marketing model that differentiated fine arts prints and crafts. Conflicts between Aboriginal artists and government-dominated marketing strategies continued despite the fact that NIACC was successful in creating a stable market for Aboriginal art prints, which in turn encouraged the emergence of many Native-run silkscreen shops dedicated to the reproduction of Aboriginal artworks. This emerging industry would become a matter of contention, particularly within contemporary Aboriginal art groups that were cautious about the commoditization of Aboriginal art. The reproduction of prints also created copyright conflicts between artists and silkscreen shops.⁸⁷

The intermingling of art and politics has been a constant in Aboriginal arts since the mid-1960s. In 1967, Native artists and activists set up the "Indians of Canada Pavilion," an exhibition about the history of Aboriginal peoples in Canada in the context

⁸⁶As cited in Martin, 80.

⁸⁷The issue of contemporary Aboriginal art's marketability was a main topic of discussion during the IV National Native Indian Artists' Symposium that took place in Lethbridge in 1987.

of Expo 67, in Montreal. The curatorial committee also commissioned works from a group of contemporary Aboriginal artists from across Canada. These works were displayed outside the pavilion. The intervention gave artists a collective awareness that was missing until then.⁸⁸

Drawn by the success of the “Indians of Canada Pavilion,” Aboriginal communities and the federal government worked together to open cultural centres in reserves. Some of the centres that emerged during this period are the Ojibwa Cultural Foundation in Manitoulin Island and the Woodland Cultural centre in Brantford, Ontario. These centres promoted the reunion of established and young Aboriginal artists and the exhibition of contemporary art in reserves. From the same period is the polemical Manitou College at La Macaza, Quebec. The college encouraged students to address political and social issues as well as traditional spiritualism. Due to political effervescence, the college closed its doors in 1976.⁸⁹ The Saskatchewan Cultural College in Saskatoon was also created in the mid-70s, and emphasized the blend of contemporary and traditional modes of expression under the direction of Sarain Stump. In 1977, the college moved into the University of Saskatchewan where it became a BFA program led by Bob Boyer. Despite long-term efforts to bridge the gap between contemporary

⁸⁸“Expo 67 did do something – it brought a group of artists together and allowed them to make a statement together. It wasn’t a positive one, but it did give them the format.” General, “Indian Artists or Artists Who Are Indian?,” 36. Sherry Brydon makes a similar argument in “The Indians of Canada Pavilion at Expo 67”: “The Indians of Canada pavilion marked several significant developments. For the audience, it presented the vitality and diversity of contemporary native cultures. For native artists, it helped to create an international audience for native aesthetics and established a basis for national communication among artists.” Brydon, “The Indians of Canada Pavilion at Expo 67,” 61.

The contemporary Aboriginal artists showcased were George Clutesi, Gerald Tailfeathers, Noel Wuttunee, Ross Woods, Norval Morrisseau, Fracis Kagige, Alex Janvier, Tom Hill, Jean-Marie Gros-Louis.

⁸⁹See Hill, *Beyond History*, 5-15.

Aboriginal artists and reserve-based audiences, contemporary Aboriginal art is still largely an urban phenomenon.

In 1978, contemporary Native artists gathered at the first National Native Indian Artists' Symposium in Manitoulin Island. The symposium sought to connect artists of Aboriginal descent and provide them with information about services and resources available at the provincial and federal levels. The main concerns of contemporary Aboriginal artists were to achieve recognition as artists, gain access to mainstream artistic venues and nurture new generations of Aboriginal artists. Despite the early success of these gatherings, there were already tensions within the Aboriginal art world by this time, particularly between tribal artists and modernists. The first group, rooted in the reserve, continued to make art for communal practices, even if many of these works were actually reproduced for sale among tourists and collectors of "Indian art."⁹⁰ The modernists, instead, demanded the recognition of their work as "art" and began to lobby for access to mainstream art institutions. They also emphasized their link to Indigenous culture, maintaining tradition as a crucial source of inspiration. Tensions between these two groups can be interpreted as a response to non-Native categorizations differentiating between crafts and "high art."⁹¹ In his introductory remarks to the "New Work by a New Generation" catalogue, Robert Houle, a leading voice among modernists, expresses his frustration with the confinement of contemporary Aboriginal artists into ethnographic categories and the reduction of modern Aboriginal art to an abstract manifestation. For

⁹⁰This process of commercialization is discussed in McMaster, "Tenuous Lines of Descent," 93-119.

⁹¹"The divisions between fine art and craft continue to operate, and professional art school training continues to be regarded as 'higher' qualification than traditional apprenticeship. With the acceptance of some kinds of contemporary art, other kinds have become less visible." Berlo and Phillips, *Native North American Art*, 238.

the Saulteaux artist and curator, Aboriginal artists have created a new language that combined Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal sources in the recuperation of Aboriginal spirituality:

To perceive the new generation of native artists as a symbol of revolt against existing conventions, or as a touchstone of tradition in search of new methods to express a new vision, is to reaffirm of the most important aspects of native cultures, the capacity to harness revolutionary ideas into agents of change, revitalizing tradition.⁹²

The divisions between arts and crafts and commercial art and “art for art’s sake” echo the tensions between pan-Indian and tribal imaginaries. For traditionalists, the modernist language was western and inauthentic, while for modernists, tradition was fluid and informed new vocabularies. The differentiation of contemporary Aboriginal art from craft would be necessary to establish the boundaries of the Aboriginal art world.⁹³

The 1980s represent an important decade in the institutionalization of Aboriginal art. Until that moment, the definition of Aboriginal art had been in non-Native hands, except for exceptional interventions of few Aboriginal artists and curators as in the case of Expo 67. However, in the 1980s the Aboriginal art world began to change when professionally trained Aboriginal artists reached maturity and partial recognition in the non-Native art world. In 1986, the National Gallery of Canada purchased its first contemporary Native art piece, Carl Beam’s *The North American Iceberg*, a turning point in the way the Gallery viewed Aboriginal art.⁹⁴ It was also during this decade that many

⁹²Houle, “The Emergence of a New Aesthetic Tradition,” 4-5.

⁹³Becker also points to the “complicated relations” between arts and crafts and regards them instrumental in the specialization and institutionalization of art worlds.

Pierre Bourdieu has also discussed the tensions existing between commercial and art for art’s sake ideologies. For the French sociologist, commercial art is necessary to establish the position of art for art’s sake practices and practitioners. See Bourdieu, “Flaubert’s Point of View,” 192-211.

of these artists ventured into curatorial and critical practices, contributing to the development of the first body of literature on contemporary Aboriginal art. This literature helped establish conventions and practices by outlining concerns, themes and vocabularies of contemporary Aboriginal art. These conventions and practices facilitated in turn the development of an autonomous Aboriginal contemporary art world.

The 1990s mark a shift from modernist to postmodernist discourses within the Aboriginal art world. Typical of this shift is the emphasis on cultural difference, pluralism and identity.⁹⁵ It is during this period of interrogations of modernist principles that contemporary Aboriginal artists focused on their own relationship with tradition, community and the effects that the category Aboriginal art had on their art making. It is not uncommon during this period to see contemporary artists returning to the reserve to reconnect with their communities of origin. However, these returns were neither permanent nor did they succeed in bridging the gap between contemporary artists and local Aboriginal audiences present for over 20 years. In a conversation with James Luna and Richard Hill about the relationship between contemporary art and Aboriginal audiences, Rebecca Belmore admitted that “I don’t really feel that I work for my community, my home and my own family or relations or people that I know (...) I do get to connect with Indian people, but not always.”⁹⁶ Seeking “home” in the reserve represented contemporary Aboriginal artists’ need to construct their individual identities by following the steps of Aboriginal activists in the 70s. As a marker of tradition,

⁹⁴In 1983 The National Gallery was advised to change the policy that excluded Aboriginal artists (the policy made an exception for Inuit Art). See Townsend-Gault, “Translation or Perversion?” 91-105.

⁹⁵See Nemiroff, “Modernism, Nationalism and Beyond,” 15-41.

⁹⁶Hill, Luna, and Belmore, “It is Very Rewarding If It Works,” 30.

Aboriginal culture and community, “land” was – and still is – for many Aboriginal artists, a site of authenticity.

As the vast literature on globalization indicates, the search for authenticity in “locality” is also a response to globalization.⁹⁷ In *Perspectives on Global Cultures*, for example, Ramaswami Harindranath explains that the local promises “resistance and liberation” against modern universal narratives.⁹⁸ However, the local “revival” contributes to the fragmentation of the modern nation-state and is, in some instances, complicit with global capitalism, which, according to Bauman requires fragmented and weak states to grow.⁹⁹ In the field of culture, global localisms have ambivalent results. By focusing on “particularistic politics, reassertion of traditions and negotiations with global practices and forms,” they grant visibility to otherwise invisible cultures.¹⁰⁰ However, the impact of this visibility can be undermined by, first, the multiplicity of voices that compete for recognition and, second, the reduction of local differences to a domesticated difference by corporate (global) media and global art markets. In the field of contemporary Aboriginal art in Canada, the dialogue between localism and globalization is evident in the simultaneous references to national differences and the

⁹⁷See, in particular, Appadurai “Grassroots Globalization” and *Modernity at Large*; Steve Dietz “Translocations.”; Hitchcock, “Conclusion: Culture and Globalization”; Médam, “Ethnicité et cité”; Oguibe, “Reverse Appropriation”; Ong “A Better Tomorrow?”

⁹⁸Harindranath, “One Global Culture or Many?” 21.

⁹⁹Bauman identifies the simultaneous trends of localism and globalization as “glocalism,” which he defines as “the coincidence and intertwining of synthesis and dissipation, integration and decomposition.” See Bauman, “On Glocalization,” 42.

¹⁰⁰Harindranath, 24.

global discourse of “Aboriginal rights.”¹⁰¹ With the popularization of the Internet and the emergence of the Aboriginal new media art scene, the dialogue between localism and globalization will be evident in the artists’ involvement with local communities, the collaboration with Aboriginal artists from Australia and the U.S, the incorporation of cosmopolitan cybercultural imagery and the dissemination of traditional values and practices online.

Changes were also perceived at the curatorial level during the 90s. Survey exhibitions were slowly replaced by thematic ones. Examples of the latter are: “Land Spirit Power” (National Gallery, 1992), “Indigena: Contemporary Native Perspectives” (Canadian Museum of Civilization, 1992) and “Reservation X: The Power of Place in Aboriginal Contemporary Art” (Canadian Museum of Civilization, 1998). Collaboration between Native and non-Native curators also became more frequent.

An important instance in the institutionalization of Aboriginal art was the creation of the Society of Canadian Artists of Native Ancestry (SCANA) in 1985. SCANA assumed the role of advisory board to the Indian Art Centre at the Department of Indian Affairs in matters of Aboriginal art’s marketing and policy. It was also instrumental as a link between artists and provincial, federal and corporate funding bodies and as a promoter of Aboriginal art and artists.¹⁰² SCANA also sought to connect artists and non-Native arts officials and curators through a series of symposia. In 1987, the fourth symposium entitled “Networking” focused on creating tighter links between established

¹⁰¹ Aboriginal or Indigenous rights refer to the rights of self-determination and self-definition. The UN Working Group on Indigenous Populations, first gathered in Geneva in December 2007, has been instrumental in the development of an international language of Aboriginal rights.

¹⁰² Lee Ann Martin, 82.

and young Aboriginal artists, mainstream art institutions and federal and provincial funding bodies. SCANA coordinator, David General, made this point clear in his introductory remarks:

The only way that we can resolve any of the matters or issues at hand is to collect the minds and the souls and the hearts of everybody who is involved with it, rally political support, media support, and get these things to happen.¹⁰³

The symposium explored fundamental issues regarding the development of Aboriginal art as a fully constituted art world: the relationship between mainstream art institutions and Aboriginal artists, policies of acquisition and exhibition of Native art, the connection with Native American artists, and marketing strategies. More than 100 artists and curators participated in the symposium, a majority of whom were contemporary artists. The meeting also illustrated the complex web of actors involved in the production, distribution and exhibition of Aboriginal art: museum and art gallery directors, critics, academics, curators, artists, government officials and audience members. As in any art world, Aboriginal art had its identified problems, such as the resistance of mainstream art institutions to pay sufficient attention to the acquisition and exhibition of contemporary Aboriginal art and an endemic lack of funding and scholarship. Additional important evidence of the advanced state of institutionalization experienced by Aboriginal art at the time of the symposium was the debate over the definition of Aboriginal art. The label “Aboriginal art” carries Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal assumptions of what Indianness and authenticity mean.¹⁰⁴ If Aboriginal artists were recognized as artists by the

¹⁰³Young Man, *Networking*, 7.

¹⁰⁴Townsend-Gault highlights the historicity of Aboriginal art when she defines the category as “a shared socio-political situation, constituted by a devastating history, the powers of the Indian act, the social geographies of the reservation system, by tribal and local politics, by the shifting demographics of the non-Native in a pluralist society, and by the worldwide ethnic renewal.” Townsend-Gault, “Translation or Perversion?” 94.

mainstream art world, would that compromise their Aboriginal identity? Was the label “Aboriginal art” a way of protecting the “new language” developed by contemporary Aboriginal artists? What were the long-term implications of a label such as “Indian art” created by government and art galleries as a marketing tool and adopted by Aboriginal activists seeking to create a space for contemporary Aboriginal expressions? Encouraged by a postmodernist climate and two decades of Aboriginal activism in the arts, these questions produced a discourse about Aboriginal art that gave meaning to a whole range of relations and practices.¹⁰⁵ It was within this field of relations that the Aboriginal new media art scene would emerge.

The most important achievement of SCANA in almost two decades of activity was to facilitate the formation of a loose network of Aboriginal artists and curators. The Aboriginal art world has rare chances to gather as a community, given the geographical dispersion of artists across cities and reserves. This is a problem that is still largely unresolved and has motivated the first artistic incursions into the World Wide Web.

The loose nature of the Aboriginal art world led many contemporary artists to question their position vis-à-vis their local – and often urban – art community, the mainstream art world and the largely imagined Aboriginal art world:

Aboriginal artists, like all aboriginal people, leave in highly contestable spaces – spaces that continually collide and mix, spaces that will forever negotiate. The artist, however, sees these spaces – and their negotiation – as stimulation, finding themselves living or practicing both in, and between many communities. Consequently they use art as a means of persistence and identity.¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁵It is important to note that there are remarkable similarities between the discourses of contemporary Aboriginal art in Canada, U.S and Australia. While the comparison of these discourses is beyond the scope of this thesis, these similarities have facilitated the formation of alliances between Indigenous artists in the three countries. Aboriginal new media art is not an exception to this trend.

¹⁰⁶McMaster, 59-60.

The continuous negotiation of the artist's location complicated the definition of Aboriginal art. This is an issue that is beyond aesthetics and it refers to the relationship between artists and government policies and marketing strategies, and to the location of the Aboriginal artist in relation to Aboriginal culture and tradition. "Aboriginal," McMaster writes, "seems an inescapable identity."¹⁰⁷ This is an identity that bonds as much as divides, given that many Aboriginal artists find the identity overtly restrictive while others embrace it. These different positions explain the tensions within the Aboriginal art world, between those located at the peripheries, in the "border-zone" according to McMaster, working as artists of Native descent, and those for whom being Aboriginal is the core of their practice.¹⁰⁸ Skawennati Tricia Fragnito refers to these tensions in "Five Suggestions for Better Living," an artistic and curatorial manifesto representative of a generation of Native artists that joined the Aboriginal art world in the early 1990s. Fragnito calls for a Native art that refers to individual stories, accounts of hybridity and urbanization. However, she is well aware that there is a risk in telling these unusual tales of difference:

I believe the main reason artists are not doing this kind of work is that they know there is a good chance they will lose their Native status if they do. I am not referring to the government here; I am referring to the fear that our own artistic community will cast us out.¹⁰⁹

For Fragnito, Native art is art made by Native people, regardless of the content and form of the artifact. This definition will be appropriated by many Aboriginal new

¹⁰⁷McMaster, "Towards an Aboriginal Art History," 88.

¹⁰⁸McMaster, "Borderzones," 85.

¹⁰⁹Fragnito, "Five Suggestions for Better Living," 231.

media artists whose work challenges explicit formal and content connections to Aboriginal history and visual traditions.

The federal patronage of “Indian art” after WWII produced a definition of Aboriginal art consistent with the modern definition of “Indianness” discussed above: Aboriginal art consists of artifacts produced by local communities for traditional purposes. The authenticity of Aboriginal art was intimately associated with the space of production. Art created in bands or tribes was assumed to be closer to tradition, given that the reserve and the local Aboriginal community were – and are – still regarded as privileged sites of Aboriginal tradition and culture. The first wave of modern Aboriginal art posed a clear challenge to this definition. It was mostly produced in cities by professionally trained artists in line with modernist vocabularies. It focused on individual perspectives of a collective past and present. Regardless of whether artists actually sought to contest hegemonic definitions of Aboriginal art and Indianness, the fact is that the emergence of modern expressions demanded new curatorial, critical and even political practices and frameworks. The founding of the Indian Art Centre in the 1970s with the mandate of creating an art historical record of artists of Native ancestry, the creation of cultural education centres with the federal government support for the exhibition and promotion of Aboriginal art in local communities and the shift in curatorial emphasis from anthropological to aesthetic categorizations are all symptoms of a gradual change in the way Aboriginal art, and Aboriginal culture in general, were defined.

“By the mid-1980s the influence of Indian nationalism, combined with the new language of identity politics, resulted in the construction of a ‘Native identity’ that we are

only now beginning to reflect critically upon,” notes Hill.¹¹⁰ This emphasis on collective identity did not eradicate individual perspectives and the long-standing disconnection between contemporary artists and reserve-based audiences, but it encouraged the reading of contemporary Native art within the framework of a sometimes monolithic “difference.” This is the “difference” that young Native artists such as Fragnito question. The adoption or rejection of the category “Aboriginal art” produces, first, the boundaries between Aboriginal art and non-Aboriginal art, and, secondly, a series of positions (i.e. resistance, compliance) and strategies (i.e. reformulation of stereotypes, contestation of museum practices, reinvention of tradition) within the Aboriginal art world.¹¹¹

A long-term issue of heated debate within the Aboriginal art world is the need for gaining access to exhibition venues. However, in the 1990s, the debate changed course when some Aboriginal artists and curators began insisting on the need to create Aboriginal venues and bypass public institutions. Some of the Aboriginal new media art projects reviewed in this thesis were created in response to this need. Also during this time, well-known Aboriginal institutions, such as Urban Shaman Gallery in Winnipeg and the collective Tribe in Saskatoon, were created to cope with the demands of an increasingly institutionalized art world. Despite the increase in Aboriginal venues, some Native artists and curators seek to avoid isolationism by continuing the battle for access to mainstream art institutions. With this goal in mind, the Aboriginal Curatorial Collective (ACC), officially incorporated in 2006, has been lobbying for the creation of curatorial positions for Native artists and curators in mainstream art institutions. Since the

¹¹⁰Hill, “After Essay- And Also...” 277.

¹¹¹These strategies are discussed in Townsend-Gault, 99.

ACC's formation, the National Gallery has created a permanent Aboriginal curatorial position and an Aboriginal curatorial residency.

While Native artists are increasingly accepted by the non-Native art world, professional training, urbanization, and exposure to postmodern theory have posed challenges in their relationship with First Nations communities in general.¹¹² This gap between local communities and the Aboriginal art community does not just echo the indifference of general audiences toward contemporary art, but highlights the position of privilege enjoyed by the Aboriginal art community.¹¹³ Access to education, professional training and, potentially, provincial and federal government officials is rare among Aboriginal peoples living in both rural and urban settings. This situation is only now being acknowledged by some Aboriginal artists, who have turned to community-based art, site-specific strategies and even new media in an attempt to reconnect with Aboriginal audiences.

During the last decade the boundaries of the Aboriginal art world became more defined as specialized venues and a body of academic and non-academic criticism proliferated. Aboriginal art also enjoys recognition in non-Aboriginal circles as a series of solo shows opened in recent years in mainstream art institutions (i.e. "Norval Morrisseau: Shaman Artist," at the National Gallery of Canada; "Daphne Odjig: Forty Years of Prints," at the Canadian Museum of Civilization). Aboriginal artists were also chosen to represent Canada at the Venice Biennale in 1995 (Edward Poitras) and 2005 (Rebecca Belmore), and were awarded several distinctions, such as the prestigious Governor General's Awards (i.e. Alex Janvier, Kenojuak Ashevak, Alanis Obomsawin, Tom Hill

¹¹²Hill, 273.

¹¹³Bourdieu, *Distinction*.

and Edward Poitras). In line with the international art fair and festival frenzy, the Aboriginal art world now counts with its own series of festivals, such as *Terres En Vues*, *First People's Festival*, *ImagineNATIVE* and *Dreamspeakers*, where established and new Aboriginal filmmakers, video and multimedia artists have a chance to showcase their work and initiate collaborative projects with Aboriginal artists outside Canada. A new generation of Aboriginal curators are making inroads into mainstream art institutions (i.e. Greg Hill and Steve Loft at the National Gallery, Adrian Stimpson at the Norman McKenzie Art Gallery), and artist-run centres. Since the early 90s, the Banff Centre for the Arts held residencies for established and emerging Aboriginal artists in a wide range of programs and in 2007 it managed to resurrect the almost defunct Aboriginal Arts Program, created in 1993, by appointing Sandra Laronde as director.

Despite these promising signs, being a contemporary Aboriginal artist can still be isolating and demanding. It often requires leaving the reserve or band to pursue professional and educational opportunities. It demands the learning of non-Native vocabularies and strategies while conforming to certain expectations of what contemporary Aboriginal art is, even if these expectations are still a matter of contention. It is not surprising, then, that Aboriginal artists have sought the company of other Native artists in associations, training and venues, and that these instances of networking have been instrumental in shaping a collective identity (i.e. the Aboriginal artist), a category (i.e. Aboriginal art), a discourse (i.e. Aboriginal art history) and a community (i.e. the Aboriginal art world).

Aboriginal artists still struggle to imagine community. This struggle can be read as another instance of the long-term fight for controlling the definition of "Indianness."

Making art that looks and feels “Aboriginal” grants access to the Aboriginal art world and the (imagined) Aboriginal community, and secures the authenticity of both work and artist. The problem for Aboriginal artists, however, is that this security is never definitive. The meaning of Aboriginal art is never stable. The symbolic boundaries of community are never fixed.

As I discuss in the next pages, Aboriginal artists would bring to the Internet this long history of community imagination. This move, motivated by communication, aesthetic and political concerns and needs, would reaffirm and challenge how community has been negotiated within the Aboriginal art world. The incorporation of the Internet as an aesthetic tool, communication medium and gathering place would expose Aboriginal artists to new practices of community and identity formation, many of which would change the dynamics of the Aboriginal art world. In turn, the Internet’s cultural determinations, its associated uses and discourses, would be also questioned by a group of Aboriginal artists for whom community is never a given.

CHAPTER 2

THE STUDY OF COMMUNITY

From a theoretical perspective, this thesis proposes a study of community as produced by and involved in media and cultural practices. This ambitious program demands engagement with extensive literature encompassing the sociology of culture and art, media and communication studies and cultural studies. In this section I review different disciplinary and theoretical approaches that have inspired and given shape to my research project. Some of these approaches became fundamental pieces in my theoretical and methodological program, and will be explored in greater detail in chapter 3.

Part of the practices of community I study in the next chapters can be described as new media practices. The Internet is a central actor in the consolidation of the Aboriginal new media art field. The medium is also the preferred scenario of community media activities that result in a repertoire of images and practices of community. These mediated – and imagined – forms of communality affect in turn the form and practice of community. From this perspective, this thesis not only proposes a definition of community as symbolically constituted and imagined, but engages with – and challenges – the emergent field of community media studies.

While the Internet is a crucial actor in this thesis, the practices of community observed in Aboriginal new media art are not just new media practices. Community is also culturally produced. Since the publication of Williams' *Marxism and Literature*, the study of cultural production is no longer dominated by a homology model that regards culture as a reflection of social changes. Recently, cultural studies and the sociology of

culture have focused on the potential of culture to mediate and produce social effects. This thesis also belongs to this line of research.

Community

Community has been the focus of academic study since the early 20th century. A systematic approach to community contributed to a better understanding of the symbolic, normative and semiotic processes involved in its constitution and development. It also questioned the traditional connection between community and territory.

One of the first scientific approaches to community is the work of the Chicago School, which studied the development of local community in an urban setting. The Chicago School refused the nostalgia of previous theorizations of community and focused on actual forms of communality.¹ Research focused on local communities, characterized by frequent interaction, face-to-face relations and a sense of comradeship. The Chicago School approach relied on particular observation and resulted in the definition of types and functionalist explanations. The School's association between community and locality would dominate future studies, not just in sociology, but in social work, urban studies, urban planning, public policy and medicine until today.

Within anthropology, community became the focus of structuralist and systemic approaches. In *The Ritual Process*, for example, Victor Turner regards social life as constituted by experiences of structure and *communitas*. Based on his anthropological observations among the Ndembu, in Zambia, he defines *communitas* as a moment in

¹“The general theme of the Chicago School was one of the crisis and decline of community. However, these works did retain a basic faith in the possibility of community and, perhaps, too, a wider faith in the promise of modernization to deliver a just society.” Delanty, 51.

time, an instance rather than a locus, which occurs when “social structure is not.”² For Turner, *communitas* is present in all societies under three forms depending on how it relates to structure: 1. existential or spontaneous, 2. normative, and 3. ideological (i.e. utopian communities). The second and third forms are already within the domain of structure.³ The main difference between *communitas* and structure is that if structure is permanent, *communitas* occurs during brief marginal experiences that Turner defines as *liminality*. He notes: “The ‘essential *We*’ has a liminal character, since perdurance implies institutionalization and repetition, while community (which roughly equals spontaneous *communitas*) is always completely unique, and hence socially transient.”⁴

For Turner, community is symbolic and depends on differentiation. The liminal experience produces a sense of community, injecting life into the social structure and strengthening the communal bonds. Two decades later, in 1985, Anthony Cohen developed the symbolic structure of community even further. In the highly influential *The Symbolic Construction of Community*, he proposes community as the result of semiotic processes of differentiation. He defines community as an “aggregating device” instead of an “integrative mechanism.”⁵ This means that community is inherently discordant rather than homogenous. Cohen also observes that the symbolic world that people create is “a kind of fantastic reconstruction of empirical society,” which suggests that imagination intervenes in the construction of community.⁶ While Cohen makes no reference to

²Turner, *The Ritual Process*, 126.

³Ibid, 132.

⁴Ibid, 137.

⁵Cohen, 20.

⁶Ibid, 63.

imagination per se, his model of community reveals an intrinsic tension between aspirations and existence.

The rise of communitarianism and new social movements associated community with resistance and dissent. Communitarian communities, communities of dissent and communities of resistance are based on voluntary action, shared ideas and a sense of collective identity, and denote the radicalization and politicization of community began in the 1970s. They are also evidence of a new type of community: the communication community. Communication communities depend on communication rather than territory and kinship. They privilege process over structure, stressing the semiotic negotiations involved in integration and belonging. If the model of symbolic communities developed in anthropology reveals the semiotic basis of community, communication communities highlight how these semiotic processes occur in everyday communication. As I discuss below, Anderson's "imagined community" would successfully combine both models.

An important contribution to sociological theorizations of community is Barry Wellman's *Networks in the Global Village: Life in Contemporary Communities*. In this work he moves beyond the argument of the lost community and the association of community with locality. The target of his criticism is the notion of the territorial community. Wellman's argument is that by studying community at the local level, researchers have reinforced the image of community as a stable and long-term structure. In contrast, his social network analysis focuses on social relations, shifting the emphasis from solidarity and locality to social relations. In Wellman's hands community becomes a matter of contact, which explains the popularization of this view among proponents of virtual communality. In practice, social network analysis begins by specifying a

community and a set of relations. The focus is on the ties among social actors, whether humans or other, living or non-living actors.⁷

Anderson's *Imagined Communities* had a profound impact on the study of community. In this now canonical work first published in the early 90s, the American scholar regards the nation as an "imagined political community," that emerged towards the end of the 18th century in the western world, but later became transplanted to other regions as part of the European colonial enterprise. For Anderson, imagination is a necessity, given that most communities, including the nation, are constituted by people who do not necessarily know each other personally:

All communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact (and perhaps even these) are imagined. Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined.⁸

Anderson does not define community at any point in his work. He only provides hints of what he assumes community entails: "Regardless of the actual inequality and exploitation that may prevail in each, the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship."⁹ Horizontal structure, comradeship and, ultimately, a feeling of proximity are all characteristics of the traditional *Gemeinschaft*.

The idea that modern imagined communities are culturally mediated is crucial to Anderson's argument. In fact, what made the modern community imaginable is the "half-fortuitous, but explosive, interaction" between capitalism, the press and idiomatic

⁷An alternative to social network analysis is actor network theory (ANT). ANT adopts from social network analysis the focus on ties between actors. Originated in the sociology of science, the approach refutes any assumption of the social, posing society as a question that can be partly answered through the micro-analysis of networks.

⁸Anderson, 6.

⁹Ibid, 7.

diversity.¹⁰ For Anderson, the development of modern systems of production and the invention of new technologies of communication added to the fragmentation of the old linguistic order based on Latin provided the conditions for the imagination of the modern nation. The imagination of community involves then shared semiosis and communication. Moreover, the idea that community is mediated by sociocultural factors, and not simply an a-priori structure, prepared the terrain for extensive work within cultural studies, media studies and anthropology. For instance, in *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, Arjun Appadurai investigates the relationship between electronic media and the construction of new collective subjectivities and “imagined worlds.”¹¹ This work represents, simultaneously, a profundization and a simplification of Anderson’s thesis. On one hand, Appadurai offers a systematic account of the work of imagination in a global world. On the other hand, his emphasis on electronic mediation and migration seems to shadow other possible cultural mediations.

For Appadurai, imagination is a “form of work” and a “form of negotiation” between individuals.¹² It is a social force that animates practices and forms of agency. Imagination in this context is different from individual fantasy. It is collective and fed by a vast repertoire of images, locally and globally produced:

The world we live today is characterized by a new role of imagination in social life. To grasp this new role, we need to bring together the old idea of images, especially mechanically produced images (in the Frankfurt School sense), and the French idea of the imaginary (*imaginaire*) as a constructed landscape of collective aspirations.¹³

¹⁰Ibid, 43.

¹¹Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, 3.

¹²Ibid, 31.

¹³Ibid.

The contemporary spread of imagination has resulted in a series of “imagined worlds.” These symbolic worlds depend on a continuous flow of images and narratives that are appropriated and translated into a wide range of micronarratives. Appadurai develops a theoretical artifact to study the different dimensions of these global cultural flows: “scapes.” Ethnoscapes, mediascapes, technoscapes, financescapes and ideoscapes are all landscapes of economic, cultural and political exchanges, which not only reveal Appadurai’s training as anthropologist, but his long-term interest in spatial relations.¹⁴ Scapes serve Appadurai as a conceptual tool to map movements of people, images, technologies, money and capital and ideologies. He defines, for example, mediascapes as

image-centered, narrative-based accounts of strips of reality, and what they offer to those who experience and transform them in a series of elements (...) out of which scripts can be formed of imagined lives, their own as well as those of others living in other places.¹⁵

Mediascapes permit us to conceptualize cultural consumption in a global scenario. They also propose imagination as a force operating beyond the nation.

Imagination shapes community by linking a series of personal and collective experiences that are mediated by past and present sociocultural conditions.¹⁶ If in the case of Anderson the latter are capitalism, the press and the emergence of national languages, for Appadurai those conditions are the spread of electronic media and mass migrations. In

¹⁴See Appadurai, “Putting Hierarchy in Its Place” and “Sovereignty Without Territoriality.”

¹⁵ Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, 35.

¹⁶Marcel Stoetzler and Nira Yuval-Davis have recently explored the potential of imagination as a social force: “Imagination constructs as well as transforms, challenges and supersedes both existing knowledge and social reality.” Imagination “links knowledge to social agency and (social as corporeal) experience.” As in the case of Appadurai, the authors regard imagination as originating in the everyday experience of subjects. This range of experiences provides the material for social change. Imagination, thus, is “shaped by the contradictory unity that ‘the social’ and ‘the individual’ form.” See Stoetzler and Yuval-Davis, “Standpoint Theory.”

both cases, the imagination of new forms of collectivity is a process that requires the denaturalization of community. No longer an assumption; community becomes a cultural artifact, the product of cultural practices.

Anderson's "imagined community" and Appadurai's "mediascapes" would trigger the study of deterritorialized national, diasporic and transnational communities' engagements with media. These studies would focus on how these communities use media to imagine new collective identities and how these patterns of production/consumption reinforce, challenge or modify previous national affiliations and identities.¹⁷ While this thesis certainly engages with Anderson's notion of "imagined community," I find that the notion of "mediascape" does not fully map the communal practices under study. In the context of Aboriginal new media art, community happens offline as much as online.

Community and Media Practices

The link between communication and community has encouraged the study of communal bonding not just through interpersonal communication, but through language (standpoint theory, muted group theory, rhetorical communities, discourse communities) and media (community media, audience research).

The study of the relationship between community and media dates back to the first decades of the 20th century, when under the auspices of the Chicago School, Robert Park investigated the role of community press on identity formation among immigrants.¹⁸

¹⁷See Attallah and Shade, *Mediascapes*; De Jong, Shaw, and Stammers, *Global Activism*; and Karim, *The Media of Diaspora* among others.

¹⁸See Park, *The Immigrant Press*.

In the early 1950s, Morris Janowitz and Robert Merton studied the relationship between geographical communities and the press.¹⁹ Janowitz focused on the community press and its effects on the local community, while Merton researched patterns of interpersonal influence among newspaper and magazine readers in a local community.

The study of community in relation to media gained momentum in the late 1960s and early 1970s. At that time, the development of portable video recording, cable television distribution systems and local radio equipment encouraged the proliferation of community media initiatives, many of which fell under the umbrella of alternative media.²⁰ The romanticization of community observed in countercultural movements and the rise of communitarianism contributed not only to the pursuit of communal appropriations of media, but to the study of these by what became the field of community media studies.

While community media projects often differ in scope and professionalism, they are usually grassroots and involve some degree of community participation. As such, they underscore the possibility of a more direct intervention in media production by people who have generally no voice in mainstream media and formats. As a result, community media studies differentiates between community media and community uses of commercial or public media. This distinction will become problematic with the popularization of the Internet.

¹⁹See Janowitz, *The Community Press in an Urban Setting*; and Merton, "Patterns of Influence."

²⁰For Chris Atton alternative media encompasses not just political and resistance media but also newer cultural forms such "zines and hybrid forms of electronic communication." Atton, *Alternative Media*, 7.

Community media scholars complain about the marginal status of community media in media studies, even if in recent years the former has rapidly expanded.²¹ By associating resistance to reception, Cultural Studies has also ignored community media strategies.²² Further, community media's link to geographically based communities contrasts with postmodern challenges to traditional notions of community. This assumed stability of community is one of the weakest features of an otherwise growing area of study.

Research in community media studies usually focuses on media practices –always local and with a hint of resistance. Those practices might affect communal practices but, in general, there is no intention to question the nature of the community that uses media, or the effects of media on the way the community defines itself. As Ed Hollander, James Stappers and Nicholas Jankowski observe: “Concepts such as ‘community media’ and ‘community communication,’ apart from their normative connotations, refer to the study of communication structures and communication processes within a distinct social setting – a geographical community or a community of interest.”²³

Since the popularization of the Internet in the mid-1990s, researchers have begun the study of what is now called community informatics.²⁴ In most cases, research focuses on local communities' use of the Internet, but there is a growing interest in electronic community networks. Unlike “virtual communities,” electronic community networks

²¹This expansion translates in a series of publications launched in the last five years: Howley, *Community Media*; Rennie, *Community Media*; Fuller, *Community Media*.

²²An exception from this is Cultural Studies' interest in subcultural resistance.

²³Hollander, Stappers, and Jankowski, “Community Media and Community Communication,” 20.

²⁴Day and Schuler, “Community Practice,” and Jankowski and Prehn, *Community Media*.

became a social movement in the late 1970s, when the general public gained access to personal computers and the Internet was transferred from military to civilian control. The first electronic community networks appeared in academic settings, but the privatization of the Internet permitted local communities and communities of interest to acquire online access. Originally, these local networks had an independent life, but they were soon assimilated by the fast growing Internet in the late 1980s. At that time, many of them would develop into virtual communities.²⁵

Community informatics is preoccupied with the local community's engagement with the Internet. While the assumption is that the introduction of ICT would be beneficial to the community, there is a growing awareness among researchers that the digital divide is not just a question of access but of know-how and usage.²⁶ As community media approaches, community informatics assumes community and reduces the question of media effects to a pragmatic evaluation of development. In other words, for community informatics the role of the Internet is limited to assist in the development of the community.

While community informatics focused on local electronic networks, the study of virtual communities encompasses a wide range of disciplines and approaches. The publication of Michael Benedikt's *Cyberspace: First Steps*, Steve Jones' volumes on cybersociety and virtual culture, Sheryl Turkle's study of online identity formation and Lev Manovich's systematic approach to what he called "the language of new media"

²⁵Some of the forms of what Jankowski calls "physically based virtual communities" are Freenets, PENs, community information networks and digital cities. See Jankowski, "Creating Community with Media," 41.

²⁶Taylor and Marshall, "Community Informatics Systems."

exemplifies early academic attempts to assess the impact of the Internet on social life and to map what were then considered new forms of sociality.²⁷

The early stage of what was later called “cyberculture studies” dedicated considerable time and effort to the study of community online.²⁸ These communities could be the expression of local community or have no binding to any local group.²⁹ Regardless of its form, academic work concentrated on the effects of virtuality on socialization, which was seen as having characteristics of its own.³⁰ The view was that the Internet’s compression of time and space had encouraged a widespread sense of disembodiment and co-presence.³¹ Disembodiment had allowed, in turn, the possibility of choosing one’s identity and relations, freeing the online user from any attachment to traditional forms of socialization. The model of community that emerged from online interactions at the time coincided with Maffesoli’s neotribe.

The virtual community that these early studies traced was the direct result of technological mediation. In fact, in less academic and more popular accounts, the virtual

²⁷See Benedikt, *Cyberspace*; Jones, *Virtual Culture and Cybersociety 2.0*; Turkle, *Life on the Screen*; Manovich, *The Language of New Media*.

²⁸In 2000 Routledge published *The Cybercultures Reader*, an anthology of classic texts on cyberculture, cyberfeminism, cybersubcultures, and race and the body in cyberspace. The book is a symptom of the legitimization of an area of studies emerged only a few years before. See Bell and Kennedy, *The Cybercultures Reader*.

²⁹Virtual communities will be often defined as communities of interest or communities of practice. Both terms originated in the field of organizational studies to describe groups of people who share a concern, a set of problem or a common interest. See, for example, Wenger, McDermott and Snyder, *A Guide to Managing Knowledge*.

³⁰The most important argument supporting the uniqueness of virtual communality is Rheingold, *The Virtual Community*. See also Allucquère Rosanne Stone, “Will the Real Body Please Stand Up?”

³¹This is a view that predominates even among critics of virtual communities and cyberspace. See Robins and Webster, *Times of the Technoculture*; Willson, “Community in the Abstract”; or, more recently, Barney, “The Vanishing Table.” From a political economy perspective, the work of Vincent Mosco focused on the impact of “cyberspace” on the politics and uses of the Internet. See Mosco, *The Digital Sublime*.

community was the community of the future, the necessary solution to the decay of traditional notions of communality.³² These futuristic dreams of borderless communities faded once the Internet lost its novelty and the commercialization of cyberspace gained ground.

Not all academic writing about virtual communities was celebratory during this early stage. When compared with – largely nostalgic – offline communities, virtual communities appeared as more individualistic, interest-driven, commodified, anonymous and closed.³³ However, as in the celebrations they criticized, most of these assessments of virtual communality assumed the existence of an independent social space online.

With the burst of the dotcom bubble at the beginning of the 21st century, cybercultural studies matured. The original emphasis on virtuality receded as historical and sociological accounts began evaluating the Internet as a communication medium. Increasingly, studies contextualize virtual communality by incorporating it into offline parameters of socialization. As the independence of virtual communities became less radical, concerns with the nature of virtual communality left room for questions about the way online and offline communities develop online.³⁴

In terms of methodology, an overwhelming majority of studies of virtual communities have focused on the textual production of sociocultural identities. This is in large part due to the fact that early forms of online sociality (MUDs, MOOS and BBSs)

³²This was a popular argument among cyberlibertarians. For a critical analysis of cyberlibertarian rhetoric see Keleman and Smith, “Community and its ‘Virtual’ Promise.”

³³See Barney, 2004; Borgmann, “Is the Internet the Solution to the Problem of Community? ”; Diani, “Social Movements Networks”; Donath, “Identity and Deception in the Virtual Community; Fernback, “The Individual within the Collective.”

³⁴A useful review and evaluation of communication studies approaches to virtual community since the beginning of the Internet until today is found in Feenberg and Bakardjieva. “Virtual Community: No ‘Killer Implication.’”

were based on textual exchanges rather than graphical interfaces.³⁵ A famous example of this approach is Ananda Mitra's study of an East Indian BBS. Mitra, following Anderson, proposes a reformulation of the notion of community vis-à-vis Internet use. The author regards these online groups as platforms where offline identities are negotiated and even reformulated. This negotiation takes place at the discursive level. The community formed online has no actual home other than cyberspace. It is constituted by East Indian exiles and immigrants living in different western countries. Mitra observes that these online exchanges among immigrants produce "new images of community and nation."³⁶ The study is typical of a transitional period from theorizations of new media as an independent social space to the recognition of the Internet as a communication medium.

In recent years, ethnographic approaches are complicating earlier textual analysis, resulting in more nuanced descriptions of online sociality and the refraction of attention from effects to uses.³⁷ In this context, the work of Nancy Baym is a pioneer in this transition. Baym focuses on soap opera bulletin boards, a group she knows first-hand. Her study highlights the influence of offline factors on the creation of new sociocultural identities and norms of interaction online. These factors are: external context, temporal structure, system infrastructure, group purposes and the characteristics of participants.³⁸ Rather than the direct result of virtuality, online communality is revealed as a complex series of mediations taking place both online and offline. Finally, in that same study, Baym suggests four questions to guide future research:

³⁵MUDs stands for multi-user dungeons, MOOS for object-oriented MUDs and BBS for bulletin board system.

³⁶Mitra, "Virtual Commonality," 678.

³⁷Slater, "Social Relationships and Identity Online and Offline."

³⁸ Baym, "The Emergence of Online Community."

What forces shape online identities?
 How do online communities evolve over time?
 How does online participation connect to offline life?
 How do online communities influence offline life?³⁹

While the notion of online community permits the study of online sociality, the recognition of offline factors intervening in the production of online communities also allows the study of community beyond the borders of new media. Similarly, the fact that community might precede online use does not necessarily mean that online mediation does not affect how the community defines itself and acts beyond online interaction. As Baym's study demonstrates, communities that originate online often move beyond the strict margins of the Internet, encouraging a redefinition of communal identities and practices. A model that assumes community as either before or after online mediation loses sight of the fluidity intrinsic to community formation. This is also the view of Wellman and Milena Gulia who propose studying virtual communities as expressions of larger social networks.⁴⁰

As both a cultural artifact and a set of cultural practices, the Internet mediates community. While this mediation might be revolutionary or just innovative, it is always affected by the situated experience of participants. This explains why the form adopted by online communities is not just the effect of virtuality, but of multiple online and offline mediations. The tracing of this complex process of mediation is one of the goals of this project.

³⁹Jankowski, 44.

⁴⁰See Wellman and Gulia, "Virtual Communities: Net Surfers Don't Ride Alone."

The Cultural Production of Community

While a large part of Aboriginal new media art's imagination of community happens online, the practice of community is not limited to online communities or community media practices. The work of imagining community can also be found in the many organizational and institutional practices that constitute the Aboriginal new media field as well as in artists' representations of community in their online work. This means that community is culturally produced through communal practices of representation, production, distribution and reception. If some of these practices revolve around the Internet, they are not just media but cultural practices at large.

Moreover, my focus on community formation and dynamics confuses the boundary between consumers and producers. The study I propose does not discuss the reception of Aboriginal new media art beyond the borders of the Aboriginal new media art community. In fact, Aboriginal new media art's audiences tend to be highly specialized and largely constituted by members of the field. In addition, if community happens before, during and after cultural production, the community is not just the producer but also the recipient of a repertoire of images and discourses that affect the formation and practice of community. In the context of this study, then, cultural producers are also consumers of culture. This aspect of my study highlights the restricted view of production of large part of studies of cultural production. To move beyond these limitations, I would engage with subculture and post-subculture studies, not because I consider Aboriginal new media art a subculture, but because I find this line of study potentially corrective to cultural production approaches.

Despite being a study of cultural production, this thesis not only takes into account institutional, organizational and symbolic interactions among cultural producers, but recognizes the different Aboriginal new media art texts (e.g. artworks, critical and curatorial essays, artists' manifestos) as crucial instances of community imagination. These texts not only produce textual communities, that is, communities of producers and recipients of texts, but textual articulations of community, that is a repertoire of images that reinforce and produce sociocultural identifications.

Since Williams proposed culture as mediating reality, the question of whether culture reflects or produces reality has been slowly replaced by a debate on the limitations of this mediation. This debate pervades the fields of cultural studies, particularly between the more post-structuralist American school and the more sociological and Marxist British line, and the sociology of culture; though it is in the latter where it seems to be more pressing and acute.

In general terms, sociology of culture is the study of organizational, structural and social aspects of cultural phenomena. This study, particularly in the U.S, has often treated culture as a black box, reduced to a symptom of larger social relations. In a traditional sociological perspective, "culture" is a synonym of "social." This sociological perspective was further complicated in the 1950s with the advent of the "production of culture perspective." According to Richard Peterson, one of the most important voices of this movement, the production of culture perspective "focuses on how the symbolic elements of culture are shaped by the systems within which they are created, distributed, evaluated, taught and preserved."⁴¹ However, despite focusing on symbolic production, this approach employs the analytic tools of the sociology of organizations and

⁴¹Peterson and Anand, "The Production of Culture Perspective," 312.

institutions. Culture's content and form become, then, dependent on the contexts of creation, manufacture, distribution and use.⁴²

Though also preoccupied with occupational and institutional aspects of cultural production, Becker's symbolic interactionism differs from the production of culture perspective in its emphasis on social actors' interactions. Becker's focus is the interactions encouraged by art production, to the extent that he defines art as the product of a series of "patterns of cooperation" among actors.⁴³ These patterns of cooperation constitute what he calls an "art world"; that is, "the network of people, whose cooperative activity organized via the joint knowledge of conventional means of doing things, produces the kind of artworks that the art world is noted for."⁴⁴ While I will refer to the importance of this definition in my theoretical and methodological program (chapter 3), Becker's "art world" dissolves the materiality of the work of art, reducing it to a web of interactions. As a result, the work of art loses its semiotic specificity. On the other hand, Becker's work has helped to popularize the interactionist notion of "world," that is, the constellation of meaningful aggregated relations. Compared to the production of culture approach, which employs a homology model to understand the relationship between cultural practice and the sociocultural environment, "social worlds" map the symbolic exchange among participants that result in a repertoire of shared meanings.

The partial disregard of culture's interpretation and meaning – an endemic problem of American sociology – has been the target of recent criticisms. In the last decade, the search for meaning within the sociology of culture motivated a series of

⁴²Santoro, "Culture as (and After) Production," 9.

⁴³Becker, ix.

⁴⁴Ibid, x.

studies that regard culture as an autonomous field, subsuming the social under an all-encompassing “culture.”⁴⁵ In response to these culturalist efforts, Bennett refutes any identification between culture and the social and proposes the study of culture as a historical institution.⁴⁶ For Bennett, culture is no longer a form, a reflection, a series of texts, but a historical set of institutionalized knowledge and practices, a historical mode of assembly of heterogeneous actors. Bennett’s approach blends Bruno Latour’s actor-network-theory (ANT) and Michel Foucault’s notion of “apparatus” and the genealogical study of culture, economy and the social.⁴⁷ The way culture affects the social sphere depends, according to Bennett, on the organization of the intervening actors. The difference between the social and cultural spheres is found at the organizational and institutional levels. Moreover, Bennett, following Latour, refutes any a-priori definitions of culture. The question remains though: what makes culture different from the social? This is a question that Bennett does not address in his model. Instead, he incorporates ANT as tool for cultural analysis in a move to wipe out “invisible structures,” culturalism and a definition of cultural practice as *just* a matter of representation.⁴⁸ Another attempt to employ ANT in the sociological analysis of culture is Antoine Hennion’s focus on the material mediations intervening in the production and consumption of cultural artifacts.⁴⁹ For Hennion, the study of material mediations can potentially redirect the attention to the

⁴⁵For a more thorough account of the development of cultural sociology see Alexander, *The Meaning of Social Life*.

⁴⁶See Bennett, “The Work of Culture.” This article is a direct refutation of Cultural Sociology’s main tenets.

⁴⁷As it often happens with appropriations of Latour’s work, Bennett chooses to ignore Latour’s refutation of the category of the “social” to concentrate on the methodological benefits of the actor-network approach. For an insight of Latour’s definition of the social see *Reassembling the Social*.

⁴⁸Bennett, “Making Culture, Changing Society,” 614.

⁴⁹ Hennion, “Baroque and Rock.”

artistic object, often dismissed in sociological accounts. Hennion's call for a return to the specificity of the cultural object is tied to the recuperation of culture as distinct from other social processes.

Bourdieu's influence in the development of sociological approaches to culture, and particularly art, is undeniable. Bourdieu's approach to culture and art historicizes modes of cultural production and reception, while emphasizing the structural dynamics of both "fields":

A work of art, for Bourdieu, is therefore neither the solitary expression of an artistic genius nor the simple expression of the artists' social origins. Rather works of art are produced by the meeting of the habitus, which reflects the social origins and personal trajectory of a given artist, and a field, a structured space of possibles, of competing genres and styles, possibles themselves determined by the historical evolution of the field.⁵⁰

While Bourdieu almost disintegrates the notion of artistic text by focusing on the forces and practices that constitute the field of production, he rejects the hypothesis of culture as a passive reflection of social forces. For Bourdieu, the field of cultural production enjoys relative autonomy in relation to the field of power to which it belongs. This autonomy is relative because, as Bourdieu cautions, "the struggles within the field of power are never entirely independent of the struggle between the dominated classes and the dominant class."⁵¹ Change is the consequence of struggles within the field. The role of the researcher is, then, to document the evolution of this struggle.

Originated out of the need to inscribe the work of art within the larger context of social forces, the sociology of art has often reduced the artwork to either an ensemble of social factors or a product of social practices. Wolff discusses this limitation in a paper

⁵⁰Lane, "When Does Art Become Art?" 37.

⁵¹Bourdieu, "The Field of Cultural Production," 44.

suggestively published in Lawrence Grossberg, Cary Nelson and Paula Treichler's famous anthology *Cultural Studies*: "The problem is that mainstream sociology, confidently indifferent if not hostile to developments in theory, is unable to acknowledge the constitutive role of culture and representation *in* social relations."⁵² Wolff argues instead that the materiality of the text should be maintained, though avoiding the textualization of social relations. In other words, Wolff proposes the study of the cultural artifact in an approach that integrates textual analysis and the sociological investigation of organizations, institutions and practices of cultural production.⁵³

This attention to the specificity of the work of art is not just a methodological question but a theoretical one. It implies the recognition of culture's productivity vis-à-vis the social sphere. For Wolff, the specific program of the sociology of art is to look at artistic practice as "situated practice," which implies "the mediation of aesthetic codes" and "ideological social and material processes and institutions."⁵⁴

Within the context of cultural studies, the study of cultural production has oscillated between sociological and formalist approaches to culture. While the first approach risks the dissolution of culture's form and material specificity and the text as a signifying instance, the second perspective tends to overemphasize and freeze the moment of textual embodiment, losing sight of the relationship between culture and the social order.

⁵²Wolff, "Excess and Inhibition," 710.

⁵³Ibid, 713.

⁵⁴Wolff, *The Social Production of Art*, 137.

In *The Sociology of Culture*, Williams imagines cultural studies as an approach that regards cultural practices as “not simply derived from an otherwise constituted social order but (...) as major elements in its constitution.”⁵⁵ For Williams, cultural studies approaches culture in its materiality: its relations, its forms, its institutions, its practices of mediation. His concern is the production of artistic forms and his methodology bridges the gap between sociology of culture and literary analysis. In his hands, cultural studies becomes a “distinctive mode of entry into general sociological questions.”⁵⁶ This negotiation of the sociological and literary fields consumed his whole academic life and resulted in a move from early incursions in language and social meaning to the development of a distinctive materialist analysis of culture. This program, which moderates the rather determining role attributed to social reality by the more “sociological” sociology of culture, is also a good counterbalance to more formalist approaches to cultural phenomena.

The tension between sociological and formalist approaches to cultural phenomena is not a “privilege” of the sociology of culture. Richard Johnson identifies two distinct views of cultural phenomena within cultural studies: the “structuralist” perspective, associated with semiotics and formal analysis of texts, and the “culturalist,” whose source of inspiration is anthropology and sociology.⁵⁷ While I find the “culturalist” label misleading, given the similarity of this term to the culturalist school within the sociology of culture, Johnson’s mapping of the divide complicates any quick association of cultural studies with formalism: “Cultural Studies does not prize the text in itself but rather seeks

⁵⁵Raymond Williams, *The Sociology of Culture*, 12-13.

⁵⁶Ibid, 14.

⁵⁷Johnson, “The Story So Far,” 293.

to shift it from centre stage. In the end, our objects are not texts but the ‘forms’ that people live by, in each moment of their circulation, including their textual embodiment.”⁵⁸

For Chris Rojek, cultural studies’ emphasis on textual representation and consumption practices is only a moment in its history.⁵⁹ However, this moment has emphasized “the inexhaustible dynamics of cultural styling and the prolific and subtle inventiveness of cultural resistance.”⁶⁰ The cultural process is, thus, reduced to the text and its – often resistant – readings. An emphasis on cultural production seems to risk the resurrection of the dead author. This textual moment has been challenged by a more recent move toward the production aspect of culture, in particular, the study of the impact of governmental policy making on cultural production and consumption.

It is perhaps Bennett who best expressed this increasing interest in cultural production in the now well-known “Putting Policy into Cultural Studies,” in which he contests the neo-Gramscian stress on consumption and hegemony to focus on production and policy. For Bennett, neo-Gramscian approaches “rest upon a view of culture which sees it as, chiefly, the domain of signifying practices.”⁶¹ Drawing on the work of Williams, Bennett proposes culture as a historical construction, a move that intends to recuperate the institutional and political conditions of cultural production from oblivion.

⁵⁸Ibid, 297.

⁵⁹Rojek, *Cultural Studies*, 54.

⁶⁰Ibid, 54.

⁶¹Bennett, “Putting Policy into Cultural Studies,” 25.

To trace the intricacies of cultural production and their effects on the social, he suggests the genealogical analysis of different “cultural technologies.”⁶²

In line with Bennett, Georgina Born suggests a definition of cultural production as “involving imaginative and aesthetic constructions;” that is, “a composite of discursive, technological and social mediations.”⁶³ For Born, the process of cultural production cannot just be reduced to economic and social imperatives. Production is also effected by sociocultural identifications, historical aesthetic imperatives and individual agency. This view of cultural production counters both deterministic accounts of culture as an effect of the social order, and an overemphasis on cultural consumption as the privileged site of cultural politics:

Cultural works are produced not through some kind of monadic “auto-reproduction” or intertextual “auto-transformation” of existing generic and discursive forms, not through some illusory transparent, circular market movement by which producers simply read off and implement the “needs” and “desires” of consumers, but through the conditioned interaction of originating subjects with extant forms, and, in some cases, extant audiences.⁶⁴

Cultural production is a process that fuses individual creativity and economic and social conditions, imagination and actual forms and audiences. It is this multi-faceted process that defines culture’s productivity as a question of mediation. The recognition that culture is affected and affects the social order extends the notion of politics beyond resistance and beyond the moment of textual embodiment, while representing a return to Williams’ program and a bridge between cultural studies and sociological approaches to the study of culture. This study is located precisely at this crossroad.

⁶²Ibid, 31. Although Bennett does not define “cultural technology” in the essay, technology is used here in a Foucauldian way to allude to the “disciplinary” work of culture.

⁶³Born, “Afterword,” 272.

⁶⁴Ibid, 275.

The question of whether community comes before or after cultural practices is closely related to the role attributed to cultural practice. As I discussed above, this thesis views cultural practice as affected and affecting the social order. Consistent with this view, this study also regards community as happening before, during and after the practice of Aboriginal new media art. It also views Aboriginal new media art practices as effecting how the Aboriginal arts community imagines community.

Cultural studies, media studies and the sociology of culture have all explored the relationship between collective identities and cultural practices. However, it is largely cultural studies that has focused on the active role of cultural practices in the shaping of collective identities and community.

The first attempt to map collective cultural practices within the field of Cultural Studies is Richard Hoggart's *The Uses of Literacy*, an ethnography of the everyday life of members of the northern English working class published in 1958.⁶⁵ Hoggart's focus on class responds to the Marxist agenda of cultural studies' earlier members and initiated a tradition within British cultural studies. Histories of popular movements and class formations, media audiences and urban subcultures are all part of this tradition. Hoggart's work also proposed a methodology that would be followed by future subcultural studies by concentrating on a group and observing its use of discourse and artifacts to produce meaning.

The work of Dick Hebdige has become intimately linked to the development of the subcultures field. His study of youth subcultures in Britain proposes subcultures as communal and symbolic engagements with late industrial culture. Subcultures express

⁶⁵See Hoggart. *The Uses of Literacy*.

themselves through the creation of styles, which involves the hybridization of previous styles from available imagery and material culture. This hybridization results in new identities and, according to Hebdige, in “relative autonomy” in a social order dominated by class and professional status.⁶⁶ In later work, Hebdige admitted having overlooked the power of commercial culture to appropriate and produce subcultural styles. In a similar vein, Phil Cohen’s study of housing estates in working class areas in East London is also an important referent that not only discusses “style” but historicizes it, bringing to the forefront social, cultural and historical factors that contributed to the semiotic process.⁶⁷ His adoption of ethnographic, semiotic and historical analysis complicates Hebdige’s approach. In later years, scholars have questioned the oppositional and resistant character of subcultures, their gender politics and the apparent homogeneity and locality of their expressions.⁶⁸ This questioning was part of a larger revision of cultural studies’ overreliance on Gramsci’s model, which, since developed by Stuart Hall in the now canonical “Encoding/Decoding” essay, had oriented the critical analysis of media reception.⁶⁹ The transition from a text-reader model toward contexts of consumption, influenced by Bourdieu’s work, affected the study of subcultures. Also recently, mass communication and media studies have adopted subcultural studies to counterbalance the

⁶⁶See the editor’s discussion preceding Hebdige, “The Function of Subculture.”

⁶⁷Cohen, “Subcultural Conflict and Working-Class Community.”

⁶⁸The post-subcultures field emerged in the 90s as a critical response to the notion of subculture developed within the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies at the University of Birmingham. Post-subcultures studies question the subversive implications of style and, even, the notion of subculture as an appropriate theoretical artifact. See Muggleton and Weinzierl, *The Post-Subcultures Reader*.

⁶⁹For a complete critique of the Gramscian model see Bennett, “Putting Policy into Cultural Studies.”

hegemony of quantitative approaches in audience research. As a result, new notions such as “fans” and “users” emerged.

Originally, the notion of subculture implied locality. For the last thirty years this has no longer been the case. Henry Jenkins’ studies of Star Trek fans, bloggers and gamers demonstrate that affinity and group identity are the result of a complex network of shows, films and books as well as conventions and gatherings.⁷⁰ In a similar vein, the notion of “affective alliance,” developed by Grossberg in 1984, has been instrumental in the theorization of media subcultures and other mediated group formations.⁷¹ Grossberg alters the traditional *modus operandi* of subcultural studies by inverting the terms of analysis. Rather than looking at how individuals use music, he explores how music produces “the material context within which its fans find themselves.”⁷² In this context, the notion of “affective alliance” describes the network of practices, events, artifacts, cultural forms and experiences that permits and organizes our “affective investment in the world.”⁷³ This analysis complicates the semiotic approach, favoured by Hebdige, by incorporating non-discursive practices to the dynamics of fandom. Most importantly, it suggests that music not only works at a discursive level, providing fans with a repertoire of symbols and images to produce meaning, but at an even deeper level, bringing together “disparate fragments of material context of the everyday life of its audiences within

⁷⁰See, for example, Henry Jenkins, *Textual Poachers: Television, Fans and Participatory Culture and Fans, Bloggers and Gamers*.

⁷¹See Grossberg, “Another Boring Day in Paradise.”

⁷²Ibid, 478.

⁷³Ibid.

different rock and roll apparatuses.”⁷⁴ Music is not just the ABC of subcultural identity but the material basis of identifications.

Grossberg’s “affective alliance” reappears in Straw’s notion of “scene.” Straw develops this theoretical and methodological artifact in an attempt to study how musical practices “produce a sense of community within the conditions of metropolitan musical scenes.”⁷⁵ Musical scenes are spaces where multiple musical practices coexist.⁷⁶ Through his focus on how musical practices produce and mediate sociocultural identities, Straw’s scene leaves room to observe different trajectories of change, the formation of coalitions and the creation of affective links. While I regard Straw’s notion of musical scene more useful at a methodological level, as a strategy to map the complex web of art works, social relations, and discourses that constitute an artistic discipline, his model takes into account the social conditions of cultural production while concentrating on culture’s productivity. It is also successful in challenging the boundaries between producers and consumers of cultural artifacts moving beyond the limits of the subculture studies field.

Grossberg and Straw pose important challenges to the notion of subculture, particularly with regards to its assumed immediacy and overemphasis on consumption. The CCCS’ concept of subculture has traditionally defined subculture as a “rigid, reified and realist entity, rooted in underlying class relationships.”⁷⁷ In the 1990s, this concept was challenged by scholars who started investigating subculture as produced through

⁷⁴Ibid.

⁷⁵Straw, “Communities and Scenes in Popular Music,” 495. The notion of musical scene draws heavily from Bourdieu’s concept of “field,” Miede’s analysis of the circulation of cultural commodities, and De Certeau’s microsocial approach to change.

⁷⁶Ibid, 494.

⁷⁷Muggleton and Weinzierl, 10.

rather than preexisting media discourse. Under this view, best represented by Sarah Thornton's study of club subcultures, group identity is no longer stable and localized but fluid and nomadic.⁷⁸ The emergence of the post-subculture field served as an umbrella for the various challenges and alternatives to traditional understandings of subcultures that appeared in the last 15 years. Influenced by Bourdieu's work on taste, Judith Butler's performativity and Maffesoli's neo-tribes, the post-subculture field would propose subcultures as fluid, global, nomadic and no longer "heroically" subversive.⁷⁹

As important as subculture and post-subculture studies have been in mapping the impact of cultural practices in the formation of sociocultural identities, the terms only describe in part the phenomena I study in this thesis. The Aboriginal new media art network is not a subculture but a group of artists and curators that share, for the most part, an ethnic and cultural background and an occupation, while identifying with a set of values and causes. These cultural producers are not operating as consumers of popular culture but as producers and consumers of avant-garde art. As such, the Aboriginal new media art network appears as more rigid than a post-subculture and less explicitly political and tied to a "style" than the traditional notion of subculture. The emphasis on consumption that still pervades subculture and post-subculture studies also contrasts with my focus on cultural production. If, within Aboriginal new media art, consumption and production are sometimes confused, Aboriginal new media art is primarily a field of cultural production.

On the other hand, what this thesis draws from the study of subcultures and post-subcultures is the idea that groups form their identities through an active engagement

⁷⁸See Thornton, *Club Cultures*.

⁷⁹Muggleton and Weinzierl, 6.

with media discourses and material culture. Once dissociated from the strict sphere of consumption, the view of culture as producing sociocultural identities is an important counterbalance to the sociological approaches to cultural production that I reviewed at the beginning of this section.

In *Western Music and Its Others*, Born proposes an interdisciplinary model to map the relationship between community and cultural practices. By merging diachronic (historical/genealogical) and synchronic (structural) approaches to cultural practices, the author suggests looking at cultural articulations of sociocultural identities in terms of “quasi-temporality, a series of distinct potential moments or forms.”⁸⁰ In other words, the polarity between cultural constructions of community and culture as a reflection of community is deconstructed as soon as the development of the cultural phenomenon is taken into account. The model permits us to study community within and outside discourse, as producer and product of cultural practices. Following Born I suggest that the relationship between sociocultural identity and culture can be mapped as a continuum ranging from culturally imagined communities to the representation of prior sociocultural identities.⁸¹

A good example of this type of approach is Danielle Fuller’s use of “textual community.” In *Writing the Everyday: Women’s Textual Communities in Atlantic Canada*, Fuller explores the constitution of communities around the practices of reading and writing in Atlantic Canada. Textual communities are formed by writers, listeners,

⁸⁰Born, “Music and the Representation/Articulation of Sociocultural,” 35. This diachronic/synchronic model appears in Born’s *Rationalizing Culture* and was influenced by the work of anthropologist Marshall Sahlins, who combines structuralist and historical approaches in what he denominates “historical anthropology”: “The great challenge to a historical anthropology is not merely to know how events are ordered by culture, but how, in that process, the culture is reordered. How does the reproduction of a structure become its transformation?” Sahlins, *Historical Metaphors*, 8.

⁸¹Born, “Music and the Representation/Articulation of Sociocultural Identities,” 35.

readers and the texts that gather them. In the traditional understanding of textual communities, the text is more a “pretext” than an actor in the formation of communities. In Fuller’s hands, however, the notion of “textual community” becomes a theoretical and methodological artifact that not only maps the practices and relationships involved in writing and reading, but produces knowledge that influences future practices. Fullers’ model combines a sociological interest in the social and economic forces that intervene in the creation of art and a focus on subaltern agency, derived from her engagement with feminist standpoint theory. Textual communities provide Fuller with a perspective that explains the production of situated knowledge outside formal institutions: “Literary work takes place within a series of interconnected textual communities, or reading, writing, and publishing communities. Different kinds of texts are created within these networks, and these, in turn, enable the production of other types of writing.”⁸² For Fuller, the text becomes a point of articulation as well as an object around which relations and knowledge are produced. This back and forth movement between a community of texts and textual communities complicates any linear understanding of the relationship between cultural practice and sociocultural identities. This is also my ambition for the present study.

⁸²Fuller, *Writing the Everyday*, 5.

CHAPTER 3

THEORETICAL AND METHODOLOGICAL PROGRAM

In the last chapter I situated this thesis at the intersection, first, of communication studies' research on online communities and community informatics and, second, sociological approaches to cultural production and cultural studies' investigations of culturally produced sociocultural identities. I also explained how neither of these different lines of work provides a theoretical artifact that successfully maps the continuum between a community that imagines and an imagined community that I observe in Aboriginal new media art.

The scarce literature on Aboriginal new media art does not provide many analytical models either. Its approach is largely impressionistic and comprises critical essays of individual works, reviews of exhibitions, manifestos and artists' writings. The more theoretically inclined writings dedicate some lines to the definition of Aboriginal new media art, though the major concern is the formal and conceptual review of individual works. An engagement with this heterogeneous body of work is nevertheless necessary to assess how the main actors of the field conceptualize their own practice.

To counter this theoretical and methodological vacuum, this chapter proposes a theoretical model that involves two main moves: 1. the spatialization of Aboriginal new media art in line with concepts such as "field," "art world" or "scene" in order to trace how community develops through social relations of cultural production and 2. the study of Aboriginal new media art works as "lived forms," in line with Williams' sociology of culture. The first move is necessary to understand how Aboriginal new media art mobilizes people, resources and meanings that effectively produce imaginary allegiances

and a group identity. These allegiances can certainly be traced in the artworks, but there is always the risk of considering the text as a “symptom” of something that happens elsewhere, a mere reflection of changes that precede the cultural artifact. Privileging the artwork can also relegate para-textual practices of community to the background. Rather than reducing the work of art to just a by-product of “social changes” or overstating the importance of the work of art as the main instance of sociocultural identification, the spatialization of Aboriginal new media art shifts the attention from texts to relations that happen in – but also beyond – the work of art.

The second move is necessary to counter the main limitation of this spatial approach. As I noted in chapter 2, in “fields,” “scenes” and “art worlds” artworks are platforms where social relations occur. A rigorous application of these notions can easily result in an analysis that privileges the “social” over the mediating power of cultural production. To balance this potential risk, I adopted Williams’ sociological approach and, particularly, the notion of “lived form.” This concept preserves the material specificity of the work of art, demanding the researcher’s attention to the work’s form, while inscribing the artwork in a complex network of institutions, formations, social relations and processes. This focus on the work of art is not mere formalism, but an acknowledgement of the mediating power of culture. If maintaining the balance between these two moves proves challenging, I believe it is necessary to fully explore the continuum between culturally imagined communities and the representation of prior sociocultural identities suggested by Born.

These two theoretical moves encourage a methodological approach that combines synchronic and diachronic tracings of community articulations. In the last section of this

chapter I describe the historical/discursive strategy I followed inspired by the work of Williams and Norman Fairclough.

Aboriginal New Media Art as Object of Study

Canadian-based Aboriginal new media art is an artistic field largely outside the radar of critical reviews. Despite more than 14 years of innovation and effort of Aboriginal new media artists in Canada, documentation on works and exhibitions is scarce and impressionistic. To map the early days of Aboriginal new media art – the first years of visibility and discovery of the new medium – it is necessary to rely on first-hand sporadic accounts published online. Though valuable, this documentation is often inconsistent, providing little sense of historical development of the field, and concentrating instead on the discussion of formal characteristics of the works and technical requirements.

A symptom of the progressive institutionalization of Aboriginal new media art was the appearance of critical reviews, often signed by artists and curators involved in the field. Midway between reviews and manifestos, this early criticism not only evaluated the works formally and conceptually, but also initiated debates about the nature of Aboriginal new media art. With the advent of online galleries and the inclusion of Aboriginal new media artworks in contemporary art exhibitions, this criticism became more focused and theoretical, inscribing Aboriginal new media art into the history of Aboriginal contemporary art.

It is only in 2005, with the publication of *Transference, Tradition, Technology: Native New Media Exploring Visual and Digital Culture*, that Aboriginal and non-

Aboriginal artists and curators attempted a systematic approach to Aboriginal new media art. The publication, inspired by the exhibitions “Language of Intercession” and “Back/Flash,” traces the history and development of Aboriginal new media art as a “movement” that comprises video, media installations, independent film, web-based and digital works.¹ The collection frames Aboriginal new media art as simultaneously a contemporary Aboriginal artistic practice, a new – and sometimes radical – appropriation of “western technologies,” and a new field of Aboriginal negotiation of tradition and aesthetics. In turn, Aboriginal new media artists are introduced as mediators between Aboriginal communities and mainstream audiences, responsible for translating technology into Aboriginal terms and documenting Aboriginal culture and traditions.

As I mention in chapter 1, Native artists and curators conceive their practice not just in relation to the art world but to their communities of origin. It is therefore not surprising that Aboriginal new media art is discussed beyond the narrow field of Aboriginal aesthetics. In fact, many of the contributors of *Transference, Tradition, Technology* worry about the potential impact of the Internet’s politics (i.e. the fact the Internet is an American and European development originated for military use) on Aboriginal new media practices. Loretta Todd is perhaps the most skeptical voice in the publication. Her contribution questions the Internet’s adequacy to become a medium of Aboriginal expression. She rejects cyberspace’s celebrated disembodiment, which she claims is the result of a western “fear of the body, aversion to nature, a desire for

¹In his foreword to the book Anthony Kiendl, the director of the Walter Phillips Gallery at the time defined Aboriginal new media art as a movement. See Kiendl, “Foreword,” viii.

The exhibition “Language of Intercession” was curated by Steven Loft and presented for the first time at the Art Gallery of Hamilton, in 2005. “Back/Flash” was curated by Dana Claxton for the Walter Phillips Gallery in Banff, Alberta, that same year.

salvation and transcendence of the earthly plane.”² Moreover, Todd regards cyberspace as a symptom of western ambitions of absolute control, an emulation of the “visio Deo.”³ While Todd’s denunciatory tone does not represent the majority of Aboriginal new media artists, her words make explicit some of the early skepticism within the Aboriginal artistic community. In a similar vein, though more moderate in tone, Victor Masayesva’s “Indigenous Experimentalism” presents the Internet as a potential vehicle of colonization that requires the active and cautious intervention of Aboriginal practitioners. For Masayesva, this intervention assists in the development of a “language of intercession” that mediates between past and present, and Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal meanings.⁴ These concerns about the role of the Aboriginal new media artist and the development of an Aboriginal aesthetics online will reappear in my conversations with Aboriginal new media artists.

For the authors of *Transference, Tradition, Technology* Aboriginal new media art is an artistic practice that conceptually and formally engages with new media technologies. The different contributions focus on a series of works that illustrate different uses of the technology. Unlike more biographical approaches, works are not just considered as individual but collective strategies; as examples of Aboriginal engagement with technology. Candice Hopkins, for instance, writes: “Constant change, adaptability – the inclusion of new ways and new materials – is a tradition that our artists have particularly celebrated and have used to move and strengthen our societies.”⁵ This

²Todd, “Narrative in Cyberspace,” 155.

³Ibid.

⁴Masayesva, “Indigenous Experimentalism,” 177.

⁵Hopkins, “Interventions in Digital Territories,” 129.

insistence on looking at Aboriginal new media art as a collective response makes clear the long-lasting influence of identity politics on Aboriginal art. Artistic expressions are never just individual, but echoes of an Aboriginal voice.

In his contribution, “Aboriginal New Media Art and the Postmodern Conundrum: A Coyote Perspective,” Steven Loft discusses how Aboriginal new media artists translate technology. He defines Aboriginal new media art as “the practical application of electronic and digital production media and the interrelationships created by its use.”⁶ This definition is relevant to this study because it suggests that Aboriginal new media art does not just encompass the production but the reception of works. Loft’s view is the closest to my own conceptualization of Aboriginal new media art as “field.”

Ahasiw Maskegon-Iskwew was not only a leading Aboriginal new media artist, but one of the few theorists in the field. In the article/manifesto published in *Transference, Tradition, Technology*, Maskegon-Iskwew portrays Aboriginal new media art as a practice located at the intersection of art and community media. For the artist and curator, Aboriginal new media art is a “networked art practice” that contributes to “interdisciplinary and cross-community dialogues.”⁷ This distinctive view of Aboriginal new media art was influenced by Maskegon-Iskwew’s contact with the Aboriginal Film and Media Arts Alliance in the early 1990s. The idea of the Alliance at the time was the development of a nation-wide computer based multimedia telecommunications network for Aboriginal artists and cultural producers. Maskegon-Iskwew expanded this idea by

⁶Loft, “Aboriginal New Media Art and the Postmodern Conundrum,” 94.

⁷Maskegon-Iskwew, “Drumbeats to Drumbytes,” 191.

proposing networking as an artistic practice. This is evident, for instance, in *Drumbytes.org*, where he develops a space for open communal information aggregation.⁸

The definition of Aboriginal new media art as “networked art practice” challenges the notion of what is understood by art, suggesting alternative approaches beyond the formal and interpretative analysis of works. If Aboriginal new media art can be read as a networking activity, the focus of the analysis is no longer the work of art but the actual practices of networking. This shift from works to practices is the first step towards the study of Aboriginal new media art as a field of relations.

From Texts to Spatial Relations

In *The Field of Cultural Production*, Bourdieu lays out the basis of a sociological – and structuralist – approach to art production. He regards the study of art as the tracing and explanation of “structural relations between social positions that are both occupied by social agents which may be isolated individuals, groups or institutions.”⁹ Bourdieu defines art as a field of relationships between the space of positions and the space of position-takings.¹⁰ Positions depend on the “possession of a determinate quantity of specific capital (recognition) and, at the same time, by occupation of a determinate position in the structure of the distribution of this specific capital.”¹¹ Positions are not just based on talent but on institutional factors, such as the norms of the artistic field, peer-recognition, critical reception and market response to the artist’s work. On the other hand,

⁸Maskegon-Iskwew, “Rationale: Drumbytes, Wiki and Free Hosting,” n.p.

⁹Bourdieu, “The Field of Cultural Production,” 29.

¹⁰Ibid, 30.

¹¹Ibid.

position-takings refer to the actual “manifestations of the social agents involved in the field.”¹² Examples of these are artworks, manifestos and institutional documentation. The analysis of position-takings focuses on the relationship between position-takings and actors’ possibilities, not just in terms of subject matter and ideology but also form.¹³ As manifestations of social agents, the analysis of position-takings also reveals changes in positions.

The notion of field is meant to map change within a structure. According to Bourdieu there are two factors producing change: social actors’ struggles to improve their positions in the field and the constant tensions between position-takings and the space of possibilities available. As a result, the relationship between positions and position-takings is never stable. The continuous struggle between those who possess cultural capital and those who aspire to possess it leads to a fragile balance.

Despite a certain hint of determinism in the relationship between positions and position-takings, Bourdieu warns against reducing the field of cultural production to a reflection of economic forces. In fact, the field of cultural production is relatively autonomous in relation to the field of power to which it belongs.¹⁴ Culture refracts the economic world, mediating economic, social and political determinations.¹⁵

As a paradigmatic position-taking, the artwork depends on the relationship of positions. It is a manifestation devoid of agency. This dependency becomes evident in Bourdieu’s analysis of Gustave Flaubert’s *Sentimental Education*. Bourdieu scrutinizes

¹²Ibid.

¹³Ibid.

¹⁴Ibid, 38.

¹⁵The field of artistic production is regulated by the law of disinterestedness, in explicit opposition to the interest ruling the economic field.

form and content to learn about Flaubert's literary field. This sociological approach differs from hermeneutic readings or sociological explanations that link the work of art to socio-economic determinations. For Bourdieu, the work of art is a product of a field that has its own dynamics and rules: "To speak of "field" is to recall that literary works are produced in a particular social universe endowed with particular institutions and obeying specific laws."¹⁶ Similarly, the "struggle for recognition" between artists and critics produce schools, movements and genres.¹⁷

Bourdieu's model does not consider artistic agency. The artist seems to follow a predetermined script, while artistic "creation" is reduced to a rather mechanistic choice among a repertoire of possible position-takings. This apparent disregard for agency is linked to Bourdieu's theory of practice. For Bourdieu, the social world is "a system of objective relations independent of individual consciousness and will."¹⁸ Practice, though, is different from a purely mechanical reaction to stimuli. It is the result of a long process of institutionalization and normalization through which certain strategic responses or *habitus* are internalized and turned into "immanent laws."¹⁹ Dispositions, the product of *habitus*, respond to the needs of objective structures such as language or economy. Therefore, for Bourdieu, "the history of the individual is never anything other than a certain specification of the collective history of a group or class."²⁰ The institutionalization of practices silences their original function and meaning, attributing to

¹⁶Bourdieu, "Flaubert's Point of View," 163.

¹⁷Ibid, 106.

¹⁸Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, 4.

¹⁹Ibid, 81.

²⁰Ibid, 86.

practices a rational explanation while elevating them to the level of discourse. But practices precede discourse. This is why, for Bourdieu, the nature of practice is not in discourse but in the external determinations that produce it. In the case of the field of artistic production, the analysis of the work of art never begins with the text itself but with the observation of the struggle between positions and dispositions.

The idea that artistic production constitutes a field that mediates both meaning and social determinations is fundamental to this thesis. While this is not an actual study of the Aboriginal new media art field, the systematic description of the field's rules and dynamics facilitates the understanding of how community is imagined. The community or communities imagined in Aboriginal new media art are not simple reflections of communities found outside the field of Aboriginal new media art. Neither are they *sui generis* products of artistic imagination.

Becker's "art world" provides another insight into the dynamics of artistic production and a useful strategy to transform Aboriginal new media art into a field of practices. The main difference between Bourdieu and Becker's strategies, though, is that for Becker the field of artistic production is like any other occupational field, while for the French anthropologist it has a distinctive dynamics. For Becker, artistic production consists of networks of collaboration regulated by aesthetic conventions. As with Bourdieu, Becker focuses on social relations, the "art world." Also as with Bourdieu, he is not particularly interested in the aesthetic value of works but in what these reveal as products of symbolic interactions. The task of the social scientist is, thus, the tracing and analysis of social relations in search of symbolic processes of knowledge and identity construction.

While less structuralist in tone than Bourdieu's field, Becker's definition of the "art world" as "the network of people whose cooperative activity is organized via their joint knowledge of conventional means of doing things" has a similar methodological effect when applied to an artistic discipline. Art worlds highlight the social relations that constitute artistic production and the complex web of actors involved in the production of cultural meaning.²¹ If many times the term "art worlds" limit expressivity to conform to conventions, they also provide artists with material support, aesthetic values, know-how and a sense of belonging. The idea that the social relations involved in cultural activity define the meaning and form of art and motivate different forms of social aggregation is crucial for this study.

The model proposed by Becker is also useful in explaining changes in social relations as a result of formal, conceptual or technological innovations. It also reveals how conventions and values mediate these innovations. If, as in the case of the field of cultural production, art worlds experience continuous change, only few changes have the power to subvert established patterns of cooperation: "To understand the birth of new art worlds, then, we need to understand, not the genesis of innovations, but rather the process of mobilizing people to join in a cooperative activity on a regular basis."²²

Becker dedicates the last chapters of *Art Worlds* to explore the dynamics of innovation and change. He observes that innovation spreads quickly locally, within a

²¹Becker, x.

²²Ibid, 30. Both Becker's art world and Bourdieu's field are not appropriate models to explain radical change or subversive practices. This potential "flaw" has been underlined by Angela McRobbie, who in her review of Bourdieu's work noted that "the great disappointment of Bourdieu's writing is that there is so little possibility of radical social change, that everything is always already inclined towards conformity and social order." McRobbie, *The Uses of Cultural Studies*, 141. In defense of Bourdieu's field, we could question to what extent "radical social change" occurs with the frequency, force, and "breackneck" speed that McRobbie suggests.

rather reduced circle of face-to-face interactions.²³ Once beyond these limits, the extent and speed of innovations decrease. This explains why experimenting groups remain local and participants often cluster around production centres. Becker also demonstrates that the fate of innovation depends on the patterns of collaboration that sustain its dissemination. Technology's availability, the existence of distributors and audiences' receptivity also contribute to the spread of new forms and art worlds.

Institutionalization only starts once the innovation is accepted and recognized beyond the limits of the local scene: "Work that aspires to be accepted as art usually must display a developed aesthetic apparatus and media through which critical discussion can take place."²⁴ Becker's theorization of aesthetic innovation is particularly relevant to this thesis because it provides a theoretical and methodological base to understand Aboriginal new media art's spread and institutionalization and the impact of this development on cultural production.

Following Becker, I propose Aboriginal new media art as a relatively new art world whose spread depends on information exchange. In recent years, the young art world began a process of institutionalization that resulted in the development of an aesthetic rationale and the labeling of new media projects as art. Despite this specialization and aesthetization of what used to be highly hybrid practices, halfway between communication and art, Aboriginal new media art has maintained its relative independence from both the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal art worlds, becoming a "new field." As I discuss in the next chapters, this institutionalization has affected the way community is imagined.

²³Becker, 314.

²⁴Ibid, 339.

A third model or strategy that gives shape to Aboriginal new media art is Straw's notion of "scene." While I reviewed this notion in the context of cultural studies' approach to the role of culture (chapter 2), I am interested here in discussing how this strategy can contribute to a theoretical and methodological conceptualization of Aboriginal new media art. Straw defines a scene as a "cultural space" where cultural practices coexist.²⁵ Within that space of practices, there are mechanisms of differentiation that define the boundaries of a given field. Influenced by Bourdieu's field, Straw turns towards the reconstruction of a cultural terrain as an antidote against sociological production/consumption models and hermeneutic approaches.²⁶ The notion of "scene" also complicates Bourdieu's model, particularly with regard to the mechanics of change. For Straw, change adopts the more general sense of "logics" and is tied to the progressive circulation and differentiation of cultural forms. Two processes set in motion a cultural scene: the struggles for prestige and status among members, and the continuous transformation of social and cultural relations in the area/s where the scene emerges.²⁷ Cultural scenes are, thus, the result of participants' input as much as the consequence of changes in social conditions.

David Hesmondhalgh notes that, in the hands of Straw, "scenes" move beyond the rigidity of local-based communities, accounting for actual – and global – flows of music

²⁵Straw, "Communities and Scenes in Popular Music," 494.

²⁶"The complex and contradictory quality of cultural texts – to which cultural studies research has been so attentive – has prevented neither their circulation within societies nor their alignment with particular population groups and cultural spaces from following regularized and relatively stable patterns. If this predictability is the result of semantic or ideological contradictions within these texts usually being resolved in favour of one set of meaning over others, then an analysis of those more general patterns, rather than of the conflicts which unfailingly produce them, may have a provisional usefulness at least." Ibid, 495.

²⁷Ibid, 496.

production and consumption.²⁸ In the context of alternative rock, for example, the notion of “scene” maps the development of this rather ambiguous musical genre by revealing three constituting factors: the emergence of specialized venues, increased access to a wide range of musical practices and genres and the existence of affiliations between various musical communities. This mapping of the terrain of alternative rock unveils a logic that could have never been traced by simply looking within the musical text or by referring to larger social phenomena.

An important feature of Straw’s model is the connection between the development of scenes and communities. In his analysis of the dance-music scene, for example, Straw notes that “processes of historical change within dance music (...) respond to shifting relationships between different (primarily urban) communities.”²⁹ Affiliations and differentiations between and within communities of producers and consumers explain the dynamic of cultural forms. On the other hand, institutions and sites of cultural production, distribution and reception often affect the development of these communities. In sum, for Straw, social relations produce forms as much as forms produce social relations.

The conceptualization of Aboriginal new media art as a “field,” “art world” or “scene” shifts the focus of analysis from texts to a space of practices and forces. These practices can potentially generate a sense of shared identity or can negotiate or reinforce an identity that precedes the constitution of a specific cultural terrain. As the review of Bourdieu, Becker and Straw’s notions also reveal these practices are not always present in the cultural text. They exceed it, requiring an analysis that traces them in institutions, venues, norms and forms. It is William’s sociological program that will provide the

²⁸ Hesmondhalgh, “Subcultures, Scenes or Tribes”

²⁹ Straw, 502.

analytical tools to explore these practices in-depth while maintaining the specificity of the work of art.

Tracing Community in the Aboriginal New Media Art Field

Once the terrain is prepared, there is still an unavoidable obstacle that should be solved prior to the analysis: the definition of community practices. In these pages, community is a cultural articulation aimed at giving shape to sociocultural identities. This articulation represents prior sociocultural identities as well as produces culturally imagined communities. In both cases, culture mediates community. This intimate relation between community and cultural practices means that the community of Aboriginal new media artists cannot be dissociated from the practice of Aboriginal new media art. Aboriginal new media artists build up communal relations through their art not just by activating a repertoire of images about community in their works, but by identifying and representing themselves and their peers as Aboriginal new media artists before funding bodies, critics, academics and the audience in general. As I discussed in chapter 2, Anderson's "imagined communities" is crucial to my operational definition of community.

In methodological terms, community can be traced in all instances of cultural production: cultural institutions and formations, the social relations of the means of production, the actual cultural forms, the processes of social and cultural reproduction and the problems of cultural organization, as outlined by Williams in *The Sociology of Culture*.³⁰ Cultural institutions, for example, play a crucial role in the process of

³⁰Williams, *The Sociology of Culture*, 30-31.

Aboriginal new media art's institutionalization. Mainstream art institutions, artist-run centres, funding bodies, art magazines and festivals have all contributed to define Aboriginal new media art by granting – and also restricting – access, facilitating specific forms of exhibition and distribution and by consolidating a still-emergent audience. This institutional apparatus also provides different venues where the transient network of Aboriginal new media artists, curators, critics, funders and audiences meets.

William's notion of cultural formation is particularly relevant to this study. Formations are the variable relations of social producers that happen outside institutions. Less formal than institutions but still an important source of group identification, formations are flexible, and often temporal, coalitions. According to their internal organization, we can differentiate between those based on formal membership, those organized around a collective public manifestation and those "in which there is *conscious association or group identification*, either informally or occasionally manifested, or at times limited to immediate working or more general relations."³¹ In emergent fields such as Aboriginal new media art, formations cushion the often-difficult relation between individual artists and mainstream institutions. Examples of formations in the field of Aboriginal new media art are the network of artists dedicated to the discipline, the occasional collaboration of artists and curators for exhibition purposes, the temporary relationships between art institutions and Aboriginal new media artists during the set up and organization of shows or the meeting of audiences and artists during shows and festival presentations. These formations can potentially contribute to a feeling of camaraderie and group identification.

³¹Ibid, 68, my italics.

The sociology of culture has often concentrated on the social relations of the means of production. In the context of Aboriginal new media art, these relations are the process of art making and the relations among artists, technicians, funders, curators, critics and Aboriginal cultural communities involved in it. As Becker observes in *Art Worlds*, the making of art requires the participation of multiple actors, and these relations, in turn, constitute an art world. As in the case of formations, social relations of the means of production may encourage a sense of belonging among participants of the art world or field.

The study of forms differentiates Williams' sociology of culture from more orthodox versions. Recent debates within the sociology of art have pointed at the pervasive neglect of the work of art and have proposed new strategies to recuperate its specificity within sociological approaches.³² Eduardo de la Fuente, for example, notes that the "new sociology of art" has felt the need to "grapple with the aesthetic properties of art."³³ De la Fuente identifies Becker and Bourdieu as the main sources of the "orthodoxies" that have mobilized the sociology of art since the 1970s. These orthodoxies are: "a preference for studying the concrete networks of artistic production and consumption; and a skepticism towards the worldviews of artists and the art worlds they

³²For an insight into this debate see Inglis, "Thinking 'Art' Sociologically."

³³De la Fuente, "The New Sociology of Art," 410. While the sociology of art moves towards the recuperation of the works' specificity, the field of visual culture questions the primacy of art in the study of visual phenomena. Visual culture focuses, both, on the social construction of the visual and on the visual construction of the social. The emergence of visual culture challenges the boundaries of art history by incorporating some of the debates around culture's productivity that I discuss on chapter 2. For a definition of Visual Culture see Dikovitskaya, *The Study of the Visual After the Cultural Turn*; Mirzoeff, "The Subject of Visual Culture"; and Mitchell, "Showing Seeing."

inhabit.”³⁴ For De la Fuente, the recognition of the aesthetic properties of the work of art should be in line with social constructivism and avoid unnecessary essentialism.

Williams’ program counters more orthodox sociological approaches. His sociology of culture includes the analysis of cultural forms, that is, a semiotic approach to genres and style, sensitive to the social, economic and cultural specificities inscribed in any formal choice. For Williams, the attention to cultural forms differentiates his sociology of culture from more orthodox versions. In the context of this project, the analysis of cultural forms consists in tracing how new media art’s rules and genres, the works’ dynamic and the historical context of production and reception of works have all facilitated the imagination of community online. The analysis should also be sensitive to the negotiation of these rules and genres by Aboriginal new media artists and the way other Aboriginal artistic traditions may influence formal choices.

The processes of social and cultural reproduction refer to the myriad of relations triggered by the dissemination of the work of art. These relations involve artists, audiences, critics, funders, curators and art institutions. For Williams, the analysis of processes of social and cultural reproduction also implies the consideration of the work of art’s multiple technological mediations. In the case of Aboriginal new media art, the study of technological mediations is a major concern, given that this mediation is central to the survival and definition of the work of art as a new media art piece. The study of these mediations can also explain the form, fluidity and variety of imagined communities online.

Finally, the consideration of problems of cultural organization is linked to the analysis of all the components previously mentioned. The complex dynamics between

³⁴Williams, *The Sociology of Culture*, 412.

artists, formations, institutions, audiences, materials and forms has a necessary impact not just on the evolution of Aboriginal new media art as a field, but on the way Aboriginal new media art mediates community.

Williams' model proposes the tracing of relationships between institutions and formations, and on the other hand, material means and forms. This analysis is different from explaining the material specificity of works as a consequence of relations between artists, formations and institutions. Williams considers the material reality of the cultural artifact a variable per se, integral to the cultural process.³⁵ Methodologically, this view requires an analysis of the artifact that is sensitive to its materiality and its historicity. In fact, Paul Jones notes in his critical assessment of Williams' sociology of culture that the British scholar "exposed the failings of what he called elsewhere the *projection* of formalist devices and systems as social processes, and likewise the comparable 'anti-sociological' *reduction* of practices to (formalist) forms and, especially, texts."³⁶

It is in *Marxism and Literature* that Williams dedicates time to examine the relationship between forms and institutional practices. He considers forms as "lived forms," sign-systems that are "at once specific cultural technology and a specific form of practical consciousness."³⁷ The theoretical notion of "lived form" counters the textualism of the later Birmingham tradition by focusing on the development of the work of art as a social and artistic function and a set of formal devices and innovations. It is particularly this aspect of Williams' sociology of culture that I find most useful to complement the

³⁵"We can go a long way in the sociology of culture by studying cultural institutions, formation and means of production. But at some point we are bound to stop and ask if what we are studying, however it may be in its own terms, is sufficiently central to its presumed subject. We now have the sociology, it is sometimes said, but where is the art?" Ibid, 119.

³⁶Jones, *Raymond Williams's Sociology of Culture*, 139.

³⁷Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 140.

spatialization of Aboriginal new media art. The definition of the work of art as “lived form” makes evident the historicity ingrained in each work by making this interpretation conscious and by linking it to the values of the period to which it belongs.

The notion of “lived form” defines the work of art as an ensemble of specific issues, modes of interpretations, genre conventions and forms. As “lived forms” artworks are social as much as individual products, everyday instances of cultural mediation. My intention in this study is, then, to follow Williams’ sociological program, in particular the interconnection of all instances of cultural production and, particularly, the role of the work of art as a “lived form,” while introducing discourse analysis as a methodology to actively trace the dialogue between community practices and representations. The influence of Williams’ program on this project is also evident in the historization of community articulations, as I discuss below, which challenges textual and structuralist approaches to cultural artifacts and cultural production respectively.

The Discursive Analysis of Community Articulations

The process of imagining community within the Aboriginal new media art field involves a network of artists, institutional actors, material means, forms and audiences. These relationships result in a series of discursive (i.e. artworks, manifestos, curatorial and critical assessments) and non-discursive (i.e. networking processes) articulations of community. Given the historical nature of this study, the tracing of these articulations consist in the collection and analysis of a series of texts that reconstruct over fourteen years of discursive and non-discursive practices of community.

Most of the information I used to reconstruct this history originated from interviews with artists, curators and funding bodies. Interviews were open-ended, lasted from one to two hours and covered a wide range of themes: analysis and genesis of artworks, personal background, involvement in the Aboriginal new media art scene, activism online and current activities. This information played a double role. On one hand, I obtained details about meetings, networking activities and funding obstacles that enriched my knowledge of routines and practices involved in Aboriginal new media art. On the other hand, the interviews contextualized my analysis of artworks and critical material.

The methodological work of this thesis is not just reduced to mapping discursive traces, but assessing the way in which discursive practices of community affect social practices. In other words, it is about exploring the productive tensions between discursive and non-discursive practices of community. To this end, the work of Norman Fairclough has been an important referent in the development of a methodological program. For Fairclough, “discourse has effects upon social structures, as well as being determined by them, and so contributes to social continuity and social change.”³⁸ Discursive practices of community are not just utterances, but social practices that can effect change. However, as Fairclough notes, change is not a necessary outcome given that discourse also contributes to reproduce existent social conditions, as Michel Foucault has brilliantly argued in his series of genealogical studies.³⁹

³⁸Fairclough, “Discourse as Social Practice,” 1.

³⁹See, for example, Foucault, *Madness and Civilization*; *Discipline and Punish*; and *The History of Sexuality*.

Fairclough's critical discourse analysis consists of three main steps: description, interpretation and explanation. Description is the first approach to the text and focuses on its formal characteristics and how these characteristics represent social practice and produce the identity of the reader. Interpretation and explanation move beyond the text and concentrate on the relationship between the discursive practices observed in the text and the text's social context. In this thesis, this analysis involves the description of formal strategies that articulate community online and offline (i.e. technological applications, artistic genres and vocabularies, Aboriginal artistic traditions, etc), and the interpretation and explanation of these articulations vis-à-vis the larger context of Aboriginal mediations of community.

Fairclough's model easily identifies text with written text. The analysis of visual discourse poses its own challenges. Particularly important is the identification of key themes (i.e. allusions to community or to a broader Aboriginal identity) and intertextual relations (i.e. common references, quotations, formal differences) in order to trace relationships between artists and artists and institutions.⁴⁰ A necessary referent to this type of visual analysis is Foucault. In his analysis of *Las Meninas*, for instance, he traces the production of a monarchic order by dissecting gazes, gestures and characters' positions within the painting.⁴¹ However, his approach is far from Erwin Panofsky's iconography.⁴² He does not intend to analyze the painting per se, but to show how Velazquez's masterpiece produces power.

⁴⁰See Gillian Rose, *Visual Methodologies*. Rose dedicates two chapters to visual discourse analysis, differentiating between a more Foucauldian line, whose emphasis is on "effects of truth," and a more institutional line, which focuses on practices of production and consumption. I intend to blend both lines in my analysis.

⁴¹Foucault, *The Order of Things*.

A limitation of this model of visual discourse analysis is the neglect of “social practices of discourse.”⁴³ The production and consumption of images, often placed in the periphery of the image, condition the discourse’s productivity. A comprehensive discourse analysis of visual material should incorporate these social practices in the analysis by examining the conditions of production and consumption of visual texts. A well-known example of this approach is John Tagg’s *The Burden of Representation*, where he studies both photographs and the conditions of their production and consumption. Studies of technologies of display, as in the case of Tony Bennett’s *The Birth of the Museum*, contribute to an awareness of how to extend the limits of the visual text in the analysis. My approach to Aboriginal new media artworks emphasizes the image as much as its social conditions. Methodologically this translates to first, the identification of formal strategies, themes and intertextual references, and second, the texts’ conditions of production and consumption. The idea is to identify how community is imagined visually and then trace the social life of those visual articulations.

The Historization of Community Articulations

The discursive analysis of community is insufficient to comply with a synchronic-diachronic mapping of a community imagining community. The discursive practices of community, manifested primarily in the work of art and in networking practices among artists, have a history. As Williams demonstrates in his sociological program, the inscription of the work of art in a historical context does not reduce history to a background, but highlights how these historical articulations of community depend on the

⁴²See Panofsky, *Meaning in the Visual Arts*.

⁴³Rose, 170.

meanings of community that circulate in a specific time and place and on the activity of different institutional, cultural and political actors, while simultaneously enriching these meanings and how these actors understand community.⁴⁴ The historical approach to the imagination of community also permits us to effectively study how discourse affects and is affected by social reality.

In response to this two-way approach to community within the field of Aboriginal new media art, I divided the analysis into three different “moments” that map the development of community imagination and imagined communities in Aboriginal new media art. These moments capture not just different mediations of community, but how these relate to their historical contexts. I chose the term “moment” over “stages” or “phases” to discourage the understanding of this “history” as a linear account of events. Instead, the historical analysis I introduce in the next pages is meant to be read as the tracing of transient and iterative meanings that refute the constraints of linearity.

⁴⁴In fact, Williams regarded his new sociology of culture as “overlapping” in some areas with history and art history. See Raymond Williams, *The Sociology of Culture*, 31.

CHAPTER 4

NETWORKING: THE COMMUNITY EMPOWERMENT MODEL

In 1994, a group of Aboriginal artists, curators and cultural producers gathered at the Banff Centre for the Arts in Banff, Alberta to discuss the design of a “computer-based nationwide communication system.”¹ The meeting was called “Drum Beats to Drum Bytes” and it was sponsored by the Aboriginal Film and Video Alliance of Canada and the Banff Centre. The imagined network would be a communication and information tool for Aboriginal artists and cultural producers and educators. Technologically ambitious, it would use a multimedia platform, which allowed text-based online discussions, email service, database capacity and broadcasting space for artworks produced in other media and for network presentation.² The network imagined by the drumbytes party was one of a kind. It moved beyond both the text-based format of the First Nations Confederacy of Cultural Education Centres’ network and the cutting-edge, urban and multimedia networks created by artists in Toronto (i.e. Matrix) and Vancouver (i.e. ANIMA).

“Drum Beats to Drum Bytes” was a landmark event in the history of community imagination within the Aboriginal art world because it inspired what Williams calls a cultural formation, that is, an informal network of Aboriginal artists and cultural producers, and a discourse about technology and Aboriginal community that would reappear in future Aboriginal online art projects. However, these discourses and practices were not radically new. A look at the development of Aboriginal media and new media in Canada permits us to identify some long-lasting concerns that are at the core of the

¹Trujillo, “From Drum Beats to Drum Bytes Conference,” 1.

²Maskegon-Iskwew, “The Moccasin Telegraph Goes High-Tech,” 26.

imagination of the drumbytes network, particularly the association of technology with community empowerment and the explicit goal of using media to preserve local knowledges. The imagination of a network to connect a geographically dispersed community of contemporary artists and media producers also indicates the Aboriginal arts community's lasting concern with networking, which, as I discussed in chapter 1, dates back to the days of SCANA and the beginnings of political mobilization.

Since the early days of Aboriginal new media art, the link with the Aboriginal media art community and the Aboriginal media industry was never fully severed. According to Becker, this close link is a recurrent phenomenon in media-based worlds. Apropos, he observes: "Artists in various media-oriented worlds may try to achieve similar kinds of things in their work and may share ideas and perspectives on how to accomplish them."³ In fact, a review of the early days of Aboriginal new media art confirms Becker's observation. Many of the artists involved in the imagination of the drumbytes network belonged to already established media arts groups, bringing their own agendas to the emergent field, the most evident being a drive for social action and a view of technology as a tool for community empowerment. Even when associated with the new field, Aboriginal new media artists continued to move beyond the field's boundaries, alternating between video, film, multimedia performance and new media. The initial close tie between the Aboriginal media movement and the emergent Aboriginal new media art field contributed to the framing of Aboriginal new media art interventions as part of a longer history of Aboriginal media-based community empowerment projects.

³Becker, 161.

While, eventually, this framing would compete with the growing importance of aesthetic concerns, it would nevertheless underlie the recognition and legitimization of Aboriginal new media art as an artistic field. The original framing of Aboriginal new media art interventions as by and for community empowerment would also influence Aboriginal new media art practice. Community would become, then, a recurrent reference and a source of value.

Aboriginal Media in Canada: Imagining the Local

The flourishing of Aboriginal media dates back to the 1970s, when the federal government tacitly recognized the existing Native communication societies by creating a funding program –The Native Communications Program (NCP).⁴ The NCP, which lasted until 1990, supported over 20 Native communications societies, running Aboriginal print and radio initiatives across Canada. Its mandate was “to enable Aboriginal peoples to develop and control modern communications media, systems, networks and newspapers,” and establish funding for training and operational expenditures.⁵

Aboriginal communication societies are closely connected to the emergence of Aboriginal politics discussed in chapter 1. The creation of media outlets was encouraged by Native political leaders in their fight to develop political awareness within and beyond the reserve. The release of the White Paper in 1969 moved Aboriginal political leaders to

⁴Just in the field of print journalism, before 1970 there were around 40 Native publications issued by government and non-Native groups. Since then, 90 Aboriginal publications have appeared in Canada. See Avison and Meadows, “Speaking and Hearing.”

My definition of Aboriginal media encompasses pan-Canadian Aboriginal broadcasting and urban- and reserve-based community media services,

⁵Demay, “Clarifying Ambiguities,” 96.

create a unified resistance, which in turn inspired the emergence of new media outlets and the development of older ones. Aboriginal media producers became key actors in the race towards self-government by encouraging the formation of an Aboriginal public sphere.⁶ The Native Communications Program complicated the connection of Aboriginal media and Aboriginal politics by restricting funding to non-political communication societies, registered as voluntary organizations and by being operated by Native people for Native people. The connection between Aboriginal media and politics was further affected by the termination of the Native Communications Program in 1990. The lack of federal funding forced Aboriginal media to move into more commercial models to attract both Native and non-Native audiences.⁷

The same year the Native Communications Program was eliminated, the Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission (CRTC) issued the Northern Broadcasting Policy, a salient step towards the development of Aboriginal broadcasting.⁸ The policy focuses on expanding the production and distribution of programming in Native language and about Native cultures. The first government-sponsored communication project took place in northern Canada among Indian and Inuit communities in 1971. Community radio and community video were some of the initiatives supported by the government. The National Film Board of Canada was particularly interested in working on video production with Inuit populations to increase

⁶Avison and Meadows.

⁷Ibid.

⁸Valaskakis, "Communication, Culture, and Technology," 63.

their participation in northern communities.⁹ To this end, it initiated a series of workshops to train members of local communities.

The 1970s mark a period of increasing Native exposure to broadcast media. It is also during these years that Aboriginal people gained awareness of the need to take control of their own image and, as I observed in chapter 1, began forming groups with explicit political agendas. For instance, Inuit in northern Quebec protested attempts to extend CBC's service to the North without any relevant Aboriginal programming.¹⁰ This fight was not just about content and their rights as recipients, but about the right to have a say in production and distribution processes. Satellite became the next focus of Aboriginal action, particularly in northern communities. Experiments with interactive audio and direct video through satellite connection led to the creation of the Inuit Broadcast Corporation (IBC) in 1981. IBC was the first Native television network in North America and allowed Aboriginal control of content production and distribution beyond the local level. Also in 1981, the CRTC began licensing programs produced by Aboriginal communication societies in the Northwest Territories and Yukon. In 1983, the first Northern Broadcasting Policy was issued to ensure the participation of Native people in broadcasting. With the creation of Aboriginal Peoples Television Network (APTN) in 1999, Aboriginal broadcasting was given a boost after the cuts in funding during the Mulroney government affected the functioning of local Native communication societies.

⁹Ibid, 71.

¹⁰Ibid.

The development of Aboriginal broadcasting is the result of a timely convergence of governmental and Aboriginal interests.¹¹ The beginning of Aboriginal broadcasting happened in the North because it was there that the federal government feared a loss of national sovereignty as a result of the increasing penetration of American broadcasting. Northern Broadcasting became, then, a priority and was regarded as an instrument of sovereignty, modernization and community empowerment of a population that had only occasional contact with mainstream Canadian culture. On the other hand, for Aboriginal people, the exposure to southern media represented both the threat of acculturation and a possibility for empowerment through the adoption of non-Native technology. This ambivalence is found at each instance of the Aboriginal appropriation of non-Native technology and media, and it is connected with definitions of tradition as either rigid and anchored in the past or fluid and adaptable to changing environments. Finally, the marginal characteristics of the Arctic and subarctic environments also facilitated the evolution of alternative media. The federal government encouraged Aboriginal experimentation with satellite technology, which in turn provided important feedback for future governmental initiatives. For First Nations communities, access to media was crucial for political and community empowerment. Aboriginal broadcasting was a vehicle to voice their language, traditions and concerns within the boundaries of the Aboriginal audience and even beyond.

While the convergence of interests of federal bureaucrats and Aboriginal communities facilitated the boom in northern Aboriginal broadcast after the mid-1970s,

¹¹Roth, *Something New in the Air*, 9.

this has not been the case for all Aboriginal media. In southern communities, funding cuts have forced Aboriginal communication societies to look for a wider audience base and the incorporation of commercial models inspired by non-Native networks. This move towards non-Native audiences challenged the federal policy objectives of “native language reinforcement, affirmation of cultural identities, and presentation of a native perspective.”¹² Targeting non-Native audiences was questioned also by members of Aboriginal communication societies who feared a departure from self-development goals. Others welcomed the aperture to new publics, regarded as a sign of maturity and self-determination towards a multicultural society. The diversity of Aboriginal cultures and experiences has also proven to be a challenge, demanding a continuous balance between local diversity and pan-Indian imagination.

The establishment of APTN in 1999 was motivated by the success of Television Northern Canada (TVNC), created only eight years earlier to serve northern communities. At that time it was the only television network exclusively dedicated to Native content in the world. TVNC began contemplating the possibility of distributing its programs nationwide and applied for a broadcast licence in 1998. APTN was not only approved by CRTC, but it was “granted mandatory carriage on basic cable and satellite services throughout Canada and with a \$0.15 fee per subscriber per month in the South.”¹³ Today, APTN is a fully constituted public service network that has lately began supporting

¹²Ibid, 178. Buddle argues that the discourse surrounding Aboriginal broadcasting, which tends to stress the “singularity of an ‘Aboriginal perspective’” relies on the colonial production of difference that resulted in an absolute Aboriginal otherness. The stress on Aboriginal difference to justify Aboriginal broadcasting policies by federal and provincial bureaucrats can be read as another example of fabricated Indianness as discussed in chapter 1. See Buddle, “Aboriginal Cultural Capital Creation,” 14.

¹³Ibid, 23.

emerging Aboriginal broadcasters and media artists in Canada. Its programming integrates regional and international content. In the last years, APTN has incorporated commercial strategies to sustain itself and to attract a more diverse audience. One of APTN's main problems is the difficulty it has in reaching reserves and bands with no cable or satellite services.¹⁴ Another obstacle to a truly pan-Aboriginal representation in APTN's programming is technical. While some Aboriginal communication societies have managed to update their analog equipment to meet APTN's digital standards, there are still many societies left behind.

Aboriginal media activism in Canada has ensured the recognition of Indigenous communication rights. These rights are seen as crucial "to build community, reinforce cultural identity and support the activities and values of Native lifestyles."¹⁵ The history of Aboriginal media in Canada is the history of networks of activists and professionals who decided to fight not just colonial stereotypes but Native geographical dispersion, cultural loss and local isolationism. In this context, media becomes an instrument of a politics of identity that emerged in the 1990s and that informs a large portion of Aboriginal cultural expression as discussed in chapter 1.

Aboriginal media in Canada shares many of the traits of what anthropologists and media scholars have identified as "Indigenous media," that is, a "form of cultural activism" and "an emerging genre."¹⁶ Except for institutions such as APTN and TVNC, whose audience-base and wide coverage made them unique worldwide, Indigenous media

¹⁴Roth notes that 35 per cent of Aboriginal peoples that live in reserves did not have access to APTN in 2005. See Roth, 211.

¹⁵Roth and Valaskakis, "Aboriginal Broadcasting in Canada," 221.

¹⁶Faye Ginsburg, "Mediating Culture," 211. See also Ginsburg, "Indigenous Media."

are usually small-scale, low budget and locally based and are facilitated by the introduction of affordable equipment and training to local communities. This is the case for many Aboriginal communication societies dedicated to print media, radio and even low budget video production. However, access to these media outlets is still largely restricted to local communities and specialists, with occasional mentions in film or media festivals.

Unlike mainstream media, Indigenous media is assumed to play a crucial role in the articulation of cultural identity.¹⁷ Emerged as a delineated cultural phenomenon during the 1970s, Indigenous media projects are the result of Aboriginal attempts to control the production and distribution of their own images through the appropriation and reformulation of non-Native media practices. As aforementioned, the effervescence of Aboriginal politics and the spread of multicultural policies during the 1970s and 80s in countries such as Canada and Australia, urged First Nations peoples to question the terms in which they were represented. Within the Native files, access to media was the key to reverting negative representations. However, this “reversal” has proven to be more complex. While invocations of difference are common in Aboriginal media discourse, a look at Aboriginal media production and practices suggests a process of reproduction, transformation and mediation of non-Native media practices and technology, Indigenous traditions and contemporary Native experiences. The result is the production of new collective identities that simultaneously preserve and challenge traditional practices and meanings:

¹⁷This is different from asserting that Indigenous media is by default “resistant.” The reading of Aboriginal media – and Aboriginal new media art for that matter – as distinctly resistant or accommodating obscures the complex process of cultural mediation that underlies those practices.

Indigenous media offers a possible means – social, cultural, and political – for reproducing and transforming cultural identity among people who have experienced massive political, geographic, and economic disruption. The capabilities of media to transcend boundaries of time, space, and even language are being used effectively to mediate, literally, historically produced social ruptures and to help construct identities that link past and present in ways appropriate to contemporary conditions.¹⁸

This mediation targets both Natives and non-Natives. It produces knowledge about the past and present and, through the same process, imagines new collective identities and forms of commonality. This process is evident, for example, in the way Aboriginal media negotiates the local as the source of information and collective identity. The local – imagined as the reserve – is preserved as the privileged site of knowledge and Aboriginal identity. It is where Aboriginal experiences happen. However, as in other areas of contemporary Aboriginal culture, Aboriginal media has stretched the boundaries of the local to incorporate stories and images that construct more “universal” – or pan-Indian – experiences (i.e. references to urbanization and to Aboriginal rights over territorial notions of nationhood and efforts to contextualize the Canadian Aboriginal experience within larger international frames). This “reaching out” not only serves the financial needs of endemically underfunded organizations by permitting access to larger audiences, but it also illustrates the dynamics of Aboriginal cultural persistence that demands that Aboriginal people create and recreate a repertoire of images that include contemporary Native experiences. As Kathleen Buddle observes, however, this reaching out, particularly among urban media activists, risks alienating Native audiences who often “expect from their ‘representatives’ a somewhat more grounded rhetorical discourse of recognition – one that generally plays out the duplicity of White and Native ways, one

¹⁸Ginsburg, “Indigenous Media,” 94.

defined through the continuity of habitation, natural connection to the land, and more unified version of selfhood.”¹⁹ This dynamic of cultural persistence is also found in the contemporary Aboriginal art world and recent Aboriginal explorations of new media technologies.

As will become evident in the review of Aboriginal new media and Aboriginal new media art fields, Aboriginal media can eventually serve to imagine “inter-and intra-community connections” eroded by urban migration and cosmopolitan lifestyles.²⁰ By incorporating present Aboriginal realities to reconstructions of Aboriginal traditions and language, Aboriginal media contribute to imagine a contemporary Aboriginal identity that is simultaneously linked to and dissociated from the local. This collective identity – i.e. “Aboriginal difference” – functions as a site where urban and reserve-based Aboriginals can temporarily imagine communal bonds.

Aboriginal New Media: The Internet as Communal Promise

Aboriginal access to new media reflects the diversity of present Aboriginal experiences. In 2000, Statistics Canada found that Aboriginals online tended to be urban, employed, educated and young, the same characteristics observed among non-Aboriginal users.²¹ The 2000 General Social Survey and the 2001 Aboriginal Peoples Survey

¹⁹Buddle, 29.

²⁰Ibid, 20.

²¹Crompton, “Off-Reserve Aboriginal Internet Users,” 8. Aboriginal ancestry is a category used by Statistics Canada to refer to people who maintain having an Aboriginal background.

It should also be noted that “off-reserve” is not synonym of “urban Native,” even if a majority of “off-reserve” Natives are urbanized. Off-reserve Aboriginals may also be located in rural areas, sharing many of the life conditions of reserve groups, including Internet use.

suggested that place of residence was a major barrier affecting Internet use. Off-reserve Aboriginals living in rural communities were less likely to use the Internet on a regular basis than their urban counterparts. High cost, restricted access and lack of training – all factors associated with remote and rural Aboriginal communities – were also significant.²²

Statistics Canada's findings confirm a situation that was suggested by the slow development of Aboriginal connectivity in remote and rural communities in Canada. Since the mid-1990s, Aboriginal communication societies have lobbied the federal and provincial governments to invest in telecommunication networks in reserves. Until that time, Internet was largely available by local call only in southern and urban regions while northern and rural areas had to pay long distance charges. In 1995 the CRTC was encouraged by Aboriginal representatives to instigate the government's provision of affordable access to ICT to groups not necessarily served by the private industry. That same year, the Community Access Program (CAP) and the SchoolNet project were introduced to help Canadians to access the Internet.²³ Under their umbrella, several Aboriginal communities received funds to establish "e-centres" in schools, libraries, and community and friendship centres. First Nations SchoolNet focused on connecting Aboriginal schools in reserves by providing funds for satellite services in areas lacking regular infrastructure. Both CAP and SchoolNet became cornerstones of the 1997 Connecting Canadians Program, which supported community economic development,

²²Ibid.

²³Internet for Everyone.ca. "Community Access."

While CAP is still running despite increasing budget cuts, SchoolNet was recently terminated together with other development programs under the Connecting Canadians umbrella.

online education, e-commerce initiatives, Canadian content online and government online projects. In 2001, a Broadband Task Force report identified First Nations, Inuit, rural and remote communities as a priority for “broadband deployment,” confirming the digital divide between reserve, off-reserve and urban Aboriginals.²⁴ The report, entitled “The New National Dream, Networking the Nation for Broadband Access,” made recommendations on how to implement high-speed broadband Internet services nationwide.²⁵ Additionally, the Broadband Task Force had been asked to develop a strategy to reach that goal by the year 2004. Though the recommendations seemed promising to Aboriginal leaders that were lobbying for funding for broadband access for Native communities, the federal government failed to meet the recommendations in full by assigning only a portion of the funding suggested by the Task Force and the Industry Minister at the time, Brian Tobin.²⁶ The plan of the Assembly of First Nations was to link over 600 communities through a broadband network, the National First Nations Network.

Since the mid-1990s, Aboriginal groups have participated in the building of a First Nations’ presence online by focusing on funding and infrastructure needs of local communities, public and private access, and more recently the training and incentive of Aboriginal cultural practitioners to produce Aboriginal content online. Aboriginal groups have partnered with the federal government in education and e-business projects, and a number of Aboriginal service providers have emerged in the last ten years to meet the needs of local communities. These new IT entrepreneurs have been assisted by different

²⁴See Bredin, “Bridging Canada’s Digital Divide.”

²⁵National Broadband Task Force, “The New National Dream.”

²⁶Barnsley, “Native Groups Ponder Life after Tobin.”

federal initiatives, such as the Aboriginal Business Canada, a program by Industry Canada that supports Aboriginal businesses and entrepreneurs, and the \$1.25 million dollars awarded to seven Aboriginal Networking projects by Canada's Advanced Internet Development Organization (CANARIE) in 1997. By 2002, the majority of First Nation schools were connected through SchoolNet and an estimated 70 per cent of the communities counted with a CAP site.²⁷ Access to the Internet from homes has been more difficult to achieve given the endemic lack of infrastructure and the resistance of private service providers to invest in remote and rural communities.

The shift of emphasis from infrastructure to content happened sometime around the mid-1990s when Aboriginal communities began enjoying some exposure to the Internet and started to question the relevance of mainstream online content in their everyday lives.²⁸ However, the production of online content demanded "broadband solutions of bandwidth sufficient to carry multiple voice, video or data channel simultaneously."²⁹ This was a limitation that also affected Aboriginal artists, as a review of the drumbytes network suggests. The broadband requirement was consistent with the federal government's vision of broadband connectivity in every community by 2004. Despite the budget constraints mentioned above, broadband services have become a reality for some Aboriginal communities through a series of local and regional

²⁷Ibid.

²⁸In practice, communities had no direct influence on the community empowerment projects such as SchoolNet. Their opinions were periodically surveyed or collected by local facilitators. See Fiser, "A History of Policy Change."

²⁹Ibid, 9.

The demand of bandwidth capacity to produce and distribute multimedia content was an early need of Aboriginal media and new media artists involved in the building of the drumbytes network.

partnerships between the provincial networks, the federal government and Aboriginal businesses since 2000. Less ambitious than the Assembly of First Nations' national network, these networks allow videoconferencing and high-speed IP applications and generally focus on e-health and distance learning applications. A successful example of a regional Aboriginal broadband network is K-Net, which serves northern areas of Ontario, Manitoba and Quebec. K-Net is a program of Keewaytinook Okimakanak, a non-for-profit organization established by a First Nations Tribal Council representing six Aboriginal nations. The program serves around 70 First Nations and 30 non-Aboriginal communities by providing a private broadband network and aiding Aboriginal communities to develop and run their own networks. K-Net also delivers training and support to Aboriginal youth.³⁰ In 2000, K-Net introduced MyKnet.org, a system of over 30,000 homepages for users in Northern Ontario. The online social network is free of charge and advertisements, and serves around 50 remote First Nations communities. Its main role is to connect people who are geographically dispersed.

Aboriginal development of local and regional networks followed the community-based orientation of Aboriginal media. The local community is the privileged scenario of Aboriginal new media initiatives. Except for the Assembly of First Nations' references to a "national First Nations network," pan-Indian discourses are less evident in the brief history of Aboriginal new media than in the development of Aboriginal media. Instead, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal actors involved in the conception and implementation of Aboriginal new media have sought legitimization by appropriating more "globalized" discourses such as the promise of an "information revolution." In a discussion paper

³⁰O'Donnell and others, "Community-Based Broadband Organizations."

issued in 2005 the Aboriginal Voice Culture Working Group, a collaborative team led by members of the federal government and Aboriginal organizations, invoked the power of the Internet to “propel” cultural renewal:

ICT is having a transformative impact on our everyday economic, social and cultural lives. The new technology, especially the Internet, holds promise for Aboriginal nations and the hope for the future is that ICT can be effectively and appropriately harnessed by Aboriginal peoples to propel forward their process of cultural renewal.³¹

The association of technology with cultural renewal is neither new nor exclusive to Aboriginal peoples. A number of communication and cultural studies scholars have traced the history of this association in the context of different technological inventions.³² In every chapter of this old infatuation with the supposed power brought by new technologies it is possible to observe the same discursive strategy: the imagination of technology as a source of information, and the pairing of information with economic, social and cultural progress. Kevin Robins and Frank Webster argue that access to information has always been central to capitalist systems.³³ Information renders subjects visible and facilitates their control and disciplining. To access information is to participate in a regime of power that continuously produces information to maintain the status quo. It is not by chance, then, that technological developments that promise to widen the access to information are simultaneously feared and celebrated as the ultimate

³¹Nickerson, Kaufman, and the Aboriginal Voice Culture Working Group. “Aboriginal Culture in the Digital Age,” 1.

³²Carey; Robins and Webster, “The Long History of the Information Revolution”; and Wiston, *Media, Technology and Society*.

³³Robins and Webster, 63.

vehicle to achieve democracy and a true “information age.”³⁴ This characterization of the Internet as a vehicle that announces the advent of a new age is found in the federal government’s adoption of Daniel Bell’s notion of the “knowledge age” to describe the potential benefits of ICT in the social, cultural and economic spheres. In 1997, for instance, the Information Highway Advisory Council insisted on making technology available to remote populations as necessary to Canada’s role in the knowledge-based society: “Access to the Information Highway is critical to Canada’s future as a knowledge society and its success as a knowledge economy.”³⁵ In this context, the exclusion of Aboriginal peoples was regarded as affecting Canada’s status in the new knowledge-based world. Since then, a series of initiatives such SchoolNet, CAP and Connecting Aboriginal Canadians have been launched in consultation with Aboriginal organizations such as the Assembly of First Nations, the Inuit Tapiriit Kanatami, the Congress of Aboriginal Peoples and the Métis National Council in order to bridge the digital divide identified by the IHAP and Broadband Task Force. Aboriginal political leaders’ continuous demands of funding and infrastructure to bridge the digital divide are also based on some of the ideas behind the “knowledge age” discourse, in particular, the belief in the power of online information to ameliorate the social, cultural and economic conditions of Aboriginal communities. Internet is framed as both a tool to access

³⁴Though more cautious in his appraisal of the information age than Daniel Bell, Manuel Castells considers the information age as “an interval characterized by the transformation of our ‘material culture’ by the works of a new technological paradigm organized around information technologies.” Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society*, 28. In *The Coming of the Post-Industrial Society*, Bell regards knowledge as the most salient characteristic of the Post-Industrial society. The advent of the knowledge age is manifested in the increasing relevance gained by knowledge and knowledge activities. For Bell the “Technetronic Age” and the knowledge society are synonyms. See Bell, *The Coming of the Post-Industrial Society*.

³⁵Information Highway Advisory Council, “Preparing Canada for a Digital World,” 41. The Information Highway Advisory Council (IHAC) was instituted by the federal government in 1994 to develop a strategy regarding Internet use that would best suit Canada’s needs.

information and knowledge and a “window” to contemporary Aboriginal culture and traditions.³⁶ However, questions about the nature and quality of online information and whether this information actually addresses Aboriginal diversity and contemporary realities have been rarely at the core of strategic planning during the early phase of infrastructure development.³⁷ Discussions around federal strategies have tended to assume the beneficial nature of information and focus instead on distribution, training and technological upgrading.

A second frame that is invoked to legitimize the introduction of ICT in Aboriginal communities is the association of the Internet with community empowerment.³⁸ Even if cautious before the optimism exuded by government bureaucrats and some Aboriginal political leaders, Aboriginal new media practitioners have tended to highlight the crucial role of online information in communal, cultural and economic renewal. George Baldwin, an Aboriginal leader in American Indian telecommunication policy and technology and “Drum Beats to Drum Bytes” participant, summarizes this view:

The changes to society brought by communication technologies are profound. It is imperative that tribal policy makers begin to develop a critical perspective for

³⁶In 2000, the Canadian government in partnership with Aboriginal organizations and the private sector launched the Connecting Aboriginal Canadians initiative “to ensure that Aboriginal socio-cultural and economic development objectives are supported by new information and communication technologies.” Alexander, “Wiring the Nation! Including First Nations?” 278. A year later, and within the context of Connecting Aboriginal Canadians, the federal government inaugurated the Aboriginal Canada Portal online in collaboration with Aboriginal organizations.

³⁷As it will become evident in the discussion of Aboriginal new media art, concerns about the politics of the Internet would slowly appear in discussions centered on Aboriginal new media production and within Aboriginal groups with enough exposure to the Internet and to literature about the Internet.

³⁸Kyra Landzelius identifies four goals in connection to Native new media that reinforce the association with a community empowerment frame: “community services (the circulation of information and resources to local residents); image management (...); sovereignty campaigns or movements (including solidarity networks); and indigenous cosmopolitan networks.” Landzelius, “Introduction: Native on the Net?” 6.

understanding Network Information Systems, NREN, and information policy in order that we possess our share of the technology and shape it to our own needs.³⁹

Baldwin believes in the Internet's potential to enhance communal autonomy and self-determination even when concerned with the passive attitude of many Aboriginal users.⁴⁰ In fact, his words stress the potential of the Internet to change – for better or for worse – the dynamics of Aboriginal communities. For Baldwin, the nature of this revolutionary change depends on the capacity of Aboriginal peoples to appropriate the technology and direct it towards their own agendas. The same argument was invoked by Aboriginal media practitioners involved in the development of Aboriginal broadcasting.

Strategies such as SchoolNet, CAP or Connecting Aboriginal Canadians also reinforce the association of Internet use and community empowerment by privileging public access to Internet stations over home-based use. While this is largely due to infrastructure limitations and high costs, public Internet access in community centres and schools have contributed to frame the Internet as a technology that is used *in* communal contexts *for* communal goals. The communal tone of Aboriginal new media initiatives contrasts with more individualistic constructions of the Internet among non-Native users, which present it as a vehicle of self-discovery and unrestricted freedom.⁴¹

At a discursive level, the framing of the Internet as a community-based technology portrays the Internet as an instrument of communal cohesion that facilitates communication among community members and between the community and the outside

³⁹Baldwin, "Public Access to the Internet." NREN stands for National Research and Education Network, a specialized internet service provider that supports education and community empowerment needs.

⁴⁰Ibid.

⁴¹See Turkle, 1995; Stone, 1991, and my discussion of cyberlibertarian ideology in chapter 5.

world. This discursive frame depends on two rhetorical moves. First, it builds on the already discussed idea that the Internet enables access to information, knowledge and, therefore, progress. And, second, it activates a definition of community as based on communication rather than kinship or territory: “Communication communities are not shaped by relations between insiders and outsiders, but by expansion in the community of reference and the construction of discourses of meaning.”⁴² The notion of communication community follows the Habermasian definition of communication as a means of social integration.⁴³ To base community on communication is to regard community as a more temporary and fluid project, which explains the popularity of this vision of community among theorists of virtual communities. The idea of a community based on communication has also been central in the development of community media theory and, more recently, in the theorization and practice of Indigenous media, which focuses on the role of media in the negotiation of Aboriginal identities and traditions. In the context of Aboriginal new media discourses and strategies, references to communication communities coexist with symbolic and territorial visions of community. If the Internet is an instrument of community empowerment, it is because it enables Aboriginal communities to bridge local insulation and imagine a cultural identity that buttresses the boundaries between Natives and non-Natives.

Aboriginal new media has also faced the reticence of some traditionalists and neo-traditionalists who regard technology as a colonial tactic and define tradition as opposed to modernity. However, this reticence is not mere rhetoric but is based on a long-term and

⁴²Delanty, 130.

⁴³Ibid, 114.

widespread scepticism towards the Canadian government's attempts to "ameliorate" the quality of life of Aboriginal communities. Though more timid, this ambivalence towards new media and its effects would also emerge during the early days of Aboriginal new media art.

Aboriginal Artists Adopt the Internet: The Drumbytes Network

The association of the Internet with community empowerment would be central in the formation of the Aboriginal new media art field. Early Aboriginal new media projects would engage with the Internet for communication and communal bonding, appropriating formats and strategies that were successful in Aboriginal new media. With time, these formats and strategies would be used in artistic exploration and thus altered, forming a new repertoire of position-takings. However, as Bourdieu suggests, changes in position-takings are connected with changes in the space of positions. In the context of Aboriginal new media art this means that, despite the influence of Aboriginal new media during the formative period of the Aboriginal new media art field, many Aboriginal new media artists were already media artists before becoming new media practitioners. This exposure to video and film would affect not just future new media production and reproduction, but the position of artists in the emerging field. Unlike Aboriginal new media producers, *Aboriginal new media artists have always defined themselves as artists.*

In April 1991, a group of Aboriginal filmmakers and media artists and activists formed the Aboriginal Film and Video Art Alliance during the "New Visions" Canadian Aboriginal Film and Video Makers Symposium in Edmonton, Alberta. The goal was to

provide support to individual Aboriginal media artists and to regional Aboriginal media arts organizations in their pursuit of self-determined opportunities to reclaim our histories and reinforce the health of our cultural expressions for the future of the media arts.⁴⁴

Since its beginnings, the Alliance considered “self-government in the arts” its primary concern, making evident its view of Aboriginal media art as an artistic practice and a means toward social action.⁴⁵ To this end, it sought the development of venues and resources for Aboriginal artists and the recognition of the non-Aboriginal media arts community through workshops, festivals and collaborations with alternative and mainstream art institutions.⁴⁶ The Alliance did not rely on a hierarchical structure but it was organized, in words of Aboriginal filmmaker Loretta Todd, as “a circle of people who really believe in the principle of collective action, who really have a relationship to their community, who want to preserve the power of the storyteller.”⁴⁷ In 1993, the Alliance became a partner with the Banff Centre for the Arts, thanks to the mediation of Sara Diamond, the then director of Television and Video Program at the Centre, and in consultation with Todd. The partnership provided the Alliance with access to infrastructure, resources and a visible physical location. Apart from organizing gatherings and workshops in Banff, the Alliance established a series of media arts organizations in the Prairies, British Columbia and Ontario that lasted throughout the 90s. Another

⁴⁴Aboriginal Film and Video Art Alliance, “Native Net: Its National Significance,” 1.

⁴⁵Asked about the goal of the Alliance at the time of its partnership with the Banff Centre, Marjorie Beaucage, the Alliance runner, referred to what it was understood as “self-government in the arts”: “We were also negotiating at that time self-government in the arts, in the sense of trying to have our ways of telling stories and our ways of recognize as ours. And also not having them stolen by others like cultural appropriation of our stories, as it was going on at that time.” Marjorie Beaucage (Aboriginal filmmaker and media artist), in discussion with the author, January 2008.

⁴⁶Ibid.

⁴⁷Loretta Todd as cited in Ginsburg, “Resources of Hope,” 43.

important contribution of the Alliance and the Banff Centre partnership was the establishment of the Aboriginal Arts Program at the Banff Centre, which today supports the professional development of Aboriginal artists in a wide range of disciplines.

The formation of the Alliance was a salient episode of a history that dates back to the 1970s, when Aboriginal media artists began experimenting with video in artist-run centres and production facilities such as Video In and Western Front (Vancouver), Vtape (Toronto), EM/Media (Calgary), SAW Video (Ottawa) and Charles St. Video (Toronto).⁴⁸ These artists faced the double challenge of achieving recognition as Aboriginal artists and as video artists.⁴⁹ Unlike other artistic disciplines, video art required Aboriginal artists to move to big urban centres where they had access to training, production and distribution facilities. This explains why, since its beginnings, the Aboriginal media art scene has been urban and experimental, keeping a fragile balance between western formal innovations, Aboriginal tradition and social activism. Masayesva argues that Aboriginal media artists' aesthetic is shaped as much by western visual vocabularies and routines as by early communal experiences. The result is a work of art that follows a "third arm aesthetics," which he describes as "the defining moment is the pounce, which is executed not by the first or the second hand, but by the third hand – the flourish of the Indigenous aesthetic."⁵⁰

As in contemporary Aboriginal art, the link to a – largely imagined – community

⁴⁸Claxton, "Re:Wind," 18-19.

⁴⁹In the early 1970s, the video art scene was still largely underground, confined to alternative venues and in search of distribution facilities. For a discussion of the early years of video art in Canada, particularly its development in the West Coast, see Abbot, "Contested Relations: Playing Back Video In."

⁵⁰Masayesva, 168.

of origin becomes the justification for most Aboriginal media art practice. Aboriginal media artist Dana Claxton, for example, considers Aboriginal media art as a recording and interpretation of decolonization and “an expression of our cultures.”⁵¹ As I discussed in chapter 1, this feeling of communal bonding with a culture and a community that were left or never fully experienced is typical of urban Aboriginal media artists, trained in non-Native institutions and belonging to multiple communities (i.e. the contemporary Aboriginal art world, the video art community, the local urban art scene). This return to an imagined community, which animates most contemporary Aboriginal art making, can be read as a manifestation of the same politics of difference that, as Valaskakis and McMaster argue, underlie Aboriginal politics and most areas of Aboriginal culture today. In order to construct the work as “Aboriginal,” Native media artists would learn to negotiate individual and collective imaginaries.

Faye Ginsburg describes the sense of community found in the work of urban media artists as “less bound by specific cultural rules” than media production in remote communities.⁵² The goal of many Aboriginal media art projects is the revival or creation of social relations that used to be anchored in the local and that are now changed by the dynamic of Aboriginal urbanization and mobility. This concern with imagining new and old social relations through artistic practice explains the legitimization of Aboriginal

⁵¹Claxton, 16.

⁵²Ginsburg, “Embedded Aesthetics,” 368.

media art in terms of social action.⁵³ A similar dynamic would be found in the early days of Aboriginal new media art.

The Native Net multimedia telecommunications network became an Alliance's priority in 1993, when the Banff Centre's New Media Research Program committed resources and staff to set up and develop the network.⁵⁴ The primary role of the Native Net would be to serve as a communication tool to strengthen the Aboriginal media industry by providing users with a bulletin board system and a distribution system.⁵⁵ The network envisioned would offer three applications: a skills bank, email and a computer based catalogue. The skills bank would function as a job bank, connecting producers with artists, technicians and resources, while the email service would allow users to communicate with each other. The computer based catalogue was conceived as a database of productions' descriptions and critical material. Finally, the "distribution system" was the Native Net's ability to transmit multimedia content to other Aboriginal media professionals and the Aboriginal community at large. Consistent with the rhetoric that framed other Aboriginal new media initiatives, the Alliance presented the Native Net as an instrument for community empowerment: "The Native Net will play an important role in stimulating professional and economic development for both isolated and urban

⁵³Ginsburg argues that unlike non-Aboriginal production, Aboriginal media work is valued in terms of its capacity to recreate, embody and sustain certain social relations that define Aboriginality.

⁵⁴The Banff Centre began the research and development of artistic applications of virtual reality and multimedia in 1991. With the support of the Canadian Workplace Automation Research Centre, it developed a five-year strategic plan to investigate digital multimedia (i.e. virtual reality, networked communication, digital video and audio). See The Banff New Media Institute, "Banff New Media Institute: New Media Research 1993."

⁵⁵Aboriginal Film and Video Art Alliance, 2.

Aboriginal cultural communities.”⁵⁶ However, it was often vague when it came to explaining what other communities, apart from the Aboriginal arts community, would be served by the new network.

From January 1993, when it “acquired the support and expertise necessary to investigate the possibilities of a multimedia database/ bulletin board system” to the “Drum Beats to Drum Bytes” gathering in March 1994, the Alliance worked frantically with the En’owkin Centre and the First Nations Technical Institute in the design of a network that could meet the needs of the Aboriginal arts community.⁵⁷ The main concerns at this point were technical (i.e. system requirements, structural model, access), financial (i.e. funding sources and model) and cultural (i.e. the development of a technical model that respected Aboriginal values and priorities). Facing the strains of geographical distance and budget restrictions, the Alliance counted on the spontaneous collaboration of members via email and on brainstorming sessions with artists, technicians and producers during gatherings at the Centre.⁵⁸

Neither the idea of a Native Net nor its name were new. Since 1990, some Native people in the U.S were already connected to a “NativeNet” and enjoyed the benefits of the BBS system. This network supported grassroots communication and was framed as a communication and information tool.⁵⁹ Other experiments in online networking in

⁵⁶Ibid, 3.

⁵⁷Jurak, *Native Net*, 1.

⁵⁸These communication exchanges were often taking place on the Native-L list supported by Trujillo’s NativeNet project.

⁵⁹Based on the Internet, NativeNet was first accessible to academics, students and university staff that enjoyed the benefits of an Internet connection. Lately, Gary Trujillo, founder and operator of the Net, and Peter d’Errico, professor at the Legal Studies Department, University of Massachusetts and involved in

Canada were the First Nations Confederacy of Cultural Education Centres' BBS, the Montreal-based BBS "The Igloo Station," and within the arts community, collaborative multimedia networks in Toronto (Matrix) and Vancouver (ANIMA).⁶⁰ While important models, these networks fulfilled only in part the Alliance's expectations. They were primarily local and text-based. The Alliance's imagined network, on the other hand, should be able to support multimedia content as in the case of Matrix and ANIMA while still committed to Aboriginal needs and worldviews. However, references to these needs and worldviews were often more intuitive and less clearly articulated than the financial, technical and structural ones.

In 1994, the Alliance was ready to host a think-tank to discuss the ultimate shape of the network. Todd, Diamond and the Alliance runner, Aboriginal media artist Marjorie Beaucage, became crucial facilitators of the event. In preparation for the gathering, the Alliance commissioned Aboriginal filmmaker Murray Jurak to report on the Native Net and that, in consultation with Aboriginal media producers, evaluated the benefits of telecommunications to the Aboriginal media arts community. The report concluded that there was a need for a "rapid, user friendly, non-linear communication system."⁶¹ It was still undecided, though, whether the Net would be organized around a central computer or as a series of nodes connected to the Internet. It also identified technical training as a

American Indian rights cases, began working on extending the Net to Native peoples and forming a community of Native peoples prepared to set up the system in remote communities. Trujillo, "From Drum Beats to Drum Bytes Conference."

⁶⁰ Accessible through a dial-up modem, the BBS system gained popularity between the 1980s and early 1990s as a software that permitted the sharing of messages or files on a network. With the advent of the Internet and the organization of content in webpages, the BBS lost popularity even when web-based versions were developed.

⁶¹ Jurak, 1.

major consideration. According to Jurak, the benefits of the BBS in relation to print media, which until then was the preferred method to distribute information within and beyond the Aboriginal media arts community, were: the creation and promotion of employment, the transfer of training and skills, efficiency and cost-effectiveness.⁶² In line with the view that attributed to the Internet the potential for cultural renewal, these benefits seemed to be a natural consequence of adopting a technology assumed to enhance communication. Given the “evident” advantages of the new medium, the ambitious plan of the Alliance was to “propel the network to prominent position within the industry by fall 1995.”⁶³ To this end they needed to bring on board as many Aboriginal cultural centres, media and production facilities, and federal and provincial cultural officers as possible. The Banff Centre was an ideal partner in this respect, given its reputation as a high-end research facility and cultural engine. This partnership with the Banff Centre will be significant given the central role played by Banff and Diamond in future relationships of production and reproduction. Jurak also estimated that the cost of setting up and developing the network to meet the Alliance’s goal was \$250,000, and included marketing activities, product development, training, employment, programming and distribution. In terms of the audience that the network could target, the report considered Aboriginal students as primary potential users, followed by young professionals and media executives. In order to serve Native students, the Alliance aimed to bring institutions that already had Internet connection on board, such as Native friendship centres, Native employment centres, the National Film Board, band offices, the

⁶²Ibid, 7.

⁶³Ibid, 9.

Inuit Broadcast Corporation, SCANA and artist-run centres. Some of these institutions had shown interest in participating in the Net and in training Aboriginal media producers in the use of BBS.⁶⁴ Finally, Jurak's report framed the imagined Native Net as a service that the Alliance would provide to the Aboriginal media industry and arts community. As a service provider, the Alliance would have to engage in promotion and marketing strategies aimed at attracting new clients.

The "Drum Beats to Drum Bytes" gathering took place from March 12 to 15, 1994, and reunited Aboriginal filmmakers, media producers, artists, academics and technical experts. Aboriginal performance and multimedia artist Ahasiw Maskegon Iskwew, a central figure in the future Aboriginal new media art field, led the event. In a typical Banff Centre fashion, the gathering combined presentations, brainstorming sessions and a performance/chat session with participants of the conference "Seduced and Abandoned- The Body in the Virtual World," which was taking place at the Institute of Contemporary Art in London. Besides the actual performance, which focused on the nature of virtuality and the Internet's potential to trespass material boundaries, the chat event permitted Aboriginal artists to explore the communication and artistic potential of online "live" telecommunication.

The think-tank centered around five areas in relation to the future network: standards and ethics, designs of systems and programming, network delivery, multiple uses and funding. "Strong concerns" such as cultural appropriation, misrepresentation

⁶⁴Ibid, 18.

and exoticism, which were associated with an open network, were also discussed.⁶⁵ Contrary to the Alliance's expectations, the drumbytes' audience was cautious of embracing online networking. Many participants were sceptical about the politics of the Internet and ICTs in general. Jurak attributes this scepticism to the fact that many artists were not familiar with the technology and did not understand many of the technical discussions that took place during the think-tank: "First Nations were not early adopters of technology. They were suspicious about [it] (...) They were talking in terms of colonialism (...) That wasn't at all. But if you don't understand something you automatically think the worst out of it."⁶⁶ This ambivalence towards the Internet permeated the discussions, which stressed the need to design a network that was easy to access and use and that prioritized training, information and language preservation. A concern with the potential uses of the cultural information made available online moved the participants to consider not just issues of copyright, moderation and protocol, but the need for a closed network, restricted to Aboriginal artists and cultural communities. The network imagined should also permit artistic autonomy and facilitate self-determination in consonance with the Alliance's principle of self-government in the arts.⁶⁷ To this end, it should grant free and equal exchange of information among members. As with other BBSs, the network was imagined as a horizontal and decentralized "*venue* for arts,

⁶⁵Aboriginal Film and Video Art Alliance, "Drum Beats to Drum Bytes: Discussion Summary," n.p.

⁶⁶Murray Jurak (Aboriginal filmmaker), in discussion with the author, March 2008.

⁶⁷Aboriginal Film and Video Art Alliance, "Drum Beats to Drum Bytes: Discussion Summary," n.p.

cultural and educational policy development,” in stark contrast with the vertical and hierarchical organization of mainstream artistic institutions.⁶⁸

The imagination of the Native Net as a space was consistent with the popularization of cyberspace as a metaphor to evoke the Internet and its potential uses. Beaucage recalls, for example, that: “We wanted to have more of a spiderweb design for our way of telling stories and of networking and the Internet was [the] kind of place to explore that communication.”⁶⁹ The cyberspace metaphor, first introduced by William Gibson in his sci-fi novel *Neuromancer*, was quickly appropriated by early adopters of online networking as a way to describe not just the technological characteristics of the Internet, but the individual and social experiences associated with its use. For instance, Benedikt defines cyberspace as “a parallel universe created and sustained by the world’s computers and communication lines.”⁷⁰ Free of material constraints and beyond racial and gender differences, cyberspace would become the necessary referent in network development among groups of digerati in the early and mid-90s, and would also spread among Aboriginal new media artists experimenting with the World Wide Web. It is important to note, though, that while the Native network was imagined as a space where a geographically dispersed community could gather to develop skills and exchange information, the network itself differed from cyberspace in that it was not yet considered as an independent space for the creation of new communities or an exploration of the aesthetic potential of the Internet. In fact, the Alliance’s network was considered at all

⁶⁸Ibid, my italics.

⁶⁹Marjorie Beaucage, in discussion with the author.

⁷⁰Benedikt, *Cyberspace: First Steps*, 1.

times an Aboriginal media initiative for the development of a range of different “offline communities”:

The gathering indicated that a commitment to enriching communications resources for isolated and rural First Peoples cultural communities was a significant aspect of the network and that software training and access to technology combined with community-based, culturally specific development of network services should be a priority in constructing the network.⁷¹

Unlike other Aboriginal media projects, however, the Native Net did not have a local focus. It was meant to primarily serve the Aboriginal media arts community and potentially remote and rural Aboriginal communities. If it sought community empowerment, the community aided was neither territorial nor an online phenomenon, but a communication-based imagined community. As a participant in the drumbytes think tank, L’Hirondelle notes that the Aboriginal media arts community and the Aboriginal arts community in general, “w[ere] already a virtual community” before the Alliance proposed the idea of a network.⁷² Geographically dispersed but sharing an agenda and a loose sense of collectivity, the Aboriginal arts community would work to articulate a collective identity, within and beyond the community, at a pan-Indian level, in conferences and associations as I discussed in chapter 1. In this context, the network imagined was only a new means to continue the work of identification by creating a new opportunity for communication and interaction. L’Hirondelle confirms the drumbytes party’s view of the network as a communication means and a community empowerment tool: “We were talking about ‘look, there is this device. We don’t have to be phoning

⁷¹Aboriginal Film and Video Art Alliance, “Drum Beats to Drum Bytes: Discussion Summary,” n.p.

⁷²Cheryl L’Hirondelle, in discussion with the author.

each other over long distances. We don't have to fax (...) Here is something that is going to enhance [us]'. ”⁷³

Another element that confirms the network imagination as a community empowerment tool and enterprise is the inclusion of elders as mentors and consultants: “It was felt that an essential aspect of the network was the involvement of elders in providing guidance and leadership especially in regard to culturally sensitive information and materials, mentoring relationships and network parameter establishment.”⁷⁴ While this is the only mention of elders’ participation in the network, the reference reveals the Alliance’s attempt to first, negotiate the risks of diffusing cultural sensitive information online and second, bridge the gap between the Aboriginal media arts community and Aboriginal cultural communities by invoking the auspices of shared cultural authorities. In other words, if Aboriginal artists were the creators of the network, the elders would both provide the necessary cultural approval and help imbue the project with a sense of “Aboriginality.”

The network proposed by the Alliance never fully materialized, at least not in the way it was planned and proposed in the early 90s.⁷⁵ The Aboriginal media arts community’s suspicion toward the Internet is only one of the reasons why the Alliance’s plans were halted. Another reason was the increasing commercialization of the Internet

⁷³Ibid.

⁷⁴Aboriginal Film and Video Art Alliance, n.p.

⁷⁵Maskegon-Iskwew would set up and develop a drumbytes network almost ten years after the gathering with significant technological and conceptual modifications. The new network was called *Drumbytes.org* and will be discussed in chapter 6.

which turned cyberspace into “no longer a space we wanted to partake in.”⁷⁶ The privatization of the Internet, which occurred in the early 90s, led to the convergence of grassroots networks and commercial online systems and the commercialization of applications such as BBS and email. This commercialization of what, until then, was known as an open and democratic medium, began gaining momentum in the mid 90s, when the World Wide Web became popular and service providers began to displace more independent networks. Despite the government’s interest in connecting Aboriginal communities and the Alliance’s goal of becoming the network provider, the commercial model of the Internet was at odds with a vision of the network as a community empowerment tool. In fact, Aboriginal new media projects have always required funding incentives to succeed given Aboriginal communities’ lack of infrastructure and know-how and service providers’ reticence to invest in low profit areas.

The “Drum Beats to Drum Bytes” gathering was, nevertheless, a landmark event in the development of the Aboriginal new media art field. In theoretical terms, it inspired a cultural formation, provided models for future relations of production and reproduction and established formats and strategies for future projects. From a discursive point of view, the network evidences the association of the Internet with community empowerment as well as Aboriginal artists’ concern with identity politics and pan-Indian reconstructions of tradition and locality.

The group of Aboriginal artists brought together by the drumbytes network would survive the Alliance’s own partnership with the Banff Centre, dissolved six years later.

⁷⁶Marjorie Beaucage, in discussion with the author.

The gathering also moved the Aboriginal arts community to consider the new medium as a tool and a space that Aboriginal people should not just use but make their own. In Bourdieu's terms, the imagination of the drumbytes network was pivotal in delineating future positions (i.e. artists, institutions and funding bodies committed to the development of Aboriginal art and artists online) and position-takings (i.e. a body of informal and formal writing about online communality produced by artists and cultural producers associated with Aboriginal media art, future strategies of online networking such as BBS). The changing, and sometimes conflicting, relationship between the space of positions and the space of position-takings would become more complex with the increasing institutionalization of the field.

While the association of community empowerment and artistic practice would be a feature of the emergent Aboriginal new media art field, aesthetic considerations would increasingly overtake communication needs. As I discuss in the next chapters, this move away from a community empowerment framework would be in large part caused by increasing recognition of Aboriginal new media art as an emergent art field, with specialized venues, critics and language. Aboriginal artists' online projects and interventions began to be framed by artists and critics as "artistic expression" rather than examples of Aboriginal media, preparing the terrain for a new scene. Moreover, increasing individual private access to ICTs and the popularization of free email services and chat tools such as Window's messenger and Google talk, turned BBS into an outdated application. Aboriginal artists would no longer need to create a specialized network from scratch when various commercial applications were available. Instead, the Aboriginal new media art field would increasingly focus on how new media could be

appropriated to meet Aboriginal values and languages and how the Internet could be used as a means of Aboriginal artistic expression. This focus on the aesthetic, political and cultural potential of the Internet would also appear in non-Native new media art projects, which shows the progressive identification of a portion of the Aboriginal new media art field with the international new media art movement. Last, the popularization of the Internet and the lower costs of production and distribution of online works would facilitate individual production and the increasing isolation of new media artists, which would in turn affect the imagination of community.

CHAPTER 5

THE FORMATION OF THE ABORIGINAL NEW MEDIA ART FIELD: COMMUNITY AS ONLINE PERFORMANCE

The popularization of the Internet and the World Wide Web changed how Aboriginal artists imagined the Internet and its relationship with community. The last half of the 1990s is a formative period in the brief history of the Aboriginal new media art field. It is during this time that we observe Aboriginal new media artists developing, what Bourdieu calls, a “position” in the emerging field. According to the French sociologist, positions are determined by peer-recognition, norms, critical and market receptions. For Aboriginal new media artists this means the development of a group identity, fostered by projects that encourage artists to perform community online.

Access to new visual applications, multimedia software and faster connections moved artists to explore not just the communication potential but the aesthetic possibilities of new media. As I discuss in greater detail in chapter 6, the development of an aesthetic discourse and conventions is, as Becker notes, crucial to the formation of an art world and a symptom of its institutionalization. Also as a result of this exploration, Aboriginal artists became familiar with a series of discourses about the Internet that framed the new medium as an independent social space. Aboriginal new media artists adopted and transformed these discourses to meet the needs of the Aboriginal arts community and what they imagined were the needs of Aboriginal cultural communities. This translation, however, would also affect how community is imagined and practiced. The most evident sign of this change is the shift of emphasis from community

empowerment to the constitution of communities online and the conceptualization of cyberspace as Aboriginal land.

As I discussed in chapter 2, the community model inspired by the main voices of the early cyberculture was the communication community. While not always acknowledged, the work of Wellman proved particularly influential in the imagination of virtual communities. According to cyberculture pundits such as Howard Rheingold and John Perry Barlow, virtual communities connected people emotionally and intellectually and, unlike territorial-based communities, were independent from material constraints such as geography and ethnicity. It is not surprising, then, that the notion of a “virtual community” would appeal to those Aboriginal new media artists, who, based in cities, struggled to identify and communicate with reserve-based audiences. If virtual communities promised community beyond territory and history, the community performance model that emerged during these years in the Aboriginal new media art field can be regarded, then, as a new attempt to build up community beyond the reserve, while strengthening the links among geographically dispersed artists involved in new media.

While the community empowerment model would still surface in many Aboriginal new media art projects and practices, the possibility of creating a community online as a result of artistic and communicative practices would haunt the imagination of Aboriginal artists involved in new media. This engagement with the Internet at technical, aesthetic and political levels would contribute to differentiate Aboriginal new media art from Aboriginal media.

The imagination and practice of community as online performance also coincided with the delineation of not just a space of positions, but also a series of position-takings

typical of Aboriginal new media art. Aboriginal artists interested in new media began producing collaborative and individual work online, proposing creative alternatives to BBS networking and setting up virtual spaces for the preservation of language, the storing of cultural information, the exhibition of art and the creation of virtual communities. New Aboriginal “new media” artists, curators and critics would emerge together with this repertoire of position-takings. Some of these “new” Aboriginal new media artists had participated in the “Drum Beats to Drum Bytes” workshop and had frequented the Banff Centre and the Banff New Media Institute. Others, formed in artist-run centres in Vancouver, Toronto and Montreal, began experimenting with the Internet as a natural continuation of their video and performance practice.

As Straw argues in his notion of “scene,” the circulation of new cultural forms such as online communities and virtual galleries would propel new social and cultural relations that would become instrumental in the delineation of the new scene. A symptom of this progressive change would be the newly gained recognition among critics, institutions and audiences, who began meeting in online venues and openings. In some cases, the participation of known Aboriginal artists and the support of mainstream art institutions eased the legitimization of the projects as art, as in the case of Maskegon-Iskwew’s *Speaking the Language of Spiders* and L’Hirondelle’s *Dene/Cree ElderSpeak*. With time, the adoption of some of the strategies and the language of the already established new media art field would help solidify the categorization of Aboriginal new media art projects as art, which in turn would impact on how community is imagined.

A crucial instance in the consolidation of the Aboriginal new media art field is the launching of *CyberPowWow*. The project illustrates the patterns of cooperation between

cultural producers that, according to Becker, underlie the emergence of a new art world. Originated in 1997 in Montreal, *CyberPowWow* became a platform where Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal artists, curators and audiences met, interacted and discussed First Nations art. This networking happened “live” online thanks to the use of a chat application called *The Palace*. For the first time since the imagination of the drumbytes network, it was possible to imagine community not just as recipient and user of technology, but as a product of its application.

Toward an Aboriginal New Media Art Field

In 1996, Maskegon-Iskwew together with a group of Aboriginal photographers, poets, and visual artists, created *Isi-pîkiskwêwin Ayapihkêsisak* (Speaking the Language of Spiders).¹ The online collective project addresses everyday concerns of Aboriginal street youth (drugs, HIV, prostitution, identity, etc.) and connects these experiences to the traditional rhythms of Saulteaux cosmology.² Co-produced with the Banff New Media Institute (BNMI), the piece links poems and images and arranges them in nine sections, each one responding to different aspects of the Saulteaux cosmological cycle.³

¹Some of the 14 artists and cultural producers that participated in the project are Cheryl L'Hirondelle, Lynn Acoose, Greg Daniels, Elvina Piapot, Joseph Naytowhow and Richard Agecoutay. According to Diamond, all participants had either experienced life on the street or had worked with groups living in the streets. See Diamond, “Mapping the Collective.”

²The Saulteaux peoples were originally part of the Ojibwa group. With the fur trade, they moved to the West from Sault Ste. Marie and northern Michigan areas.

³These are: “The time before language,” “the creation of the sky woman,” “the arrival of Nenabose (flood and recreation of Earth),” “humans/Manitous, giants and powerbeings acquire domains and transform the earth,” “time of setting order,” “winter of survival,” “making territory” (humans ordering society and the making of prophecy), “spirits bring gifts,” and “dawning of seventh fire” (a new order).

The Salteaux cosmological cycle describes the creation of the Earth and humans, the constitution of society and the advent of a new order. Unlike the Biblical creation story, the Saulteaux version involves a complex negotiation between humans, powerbeings and natural beings. At the beginning, the continuous fights between the original men moved the Great Spirit to purify the Earth with water. A great flooding covered the Earth, destroying everything except for Nenabose or Nanaboozhoo, a cultural hero recurrent in the Ojibwa and Anishinabe creation stories. Nenabose and the animals swam the waters and collected some soil. This earth was used to create a new Earth. Following the creation of the Earth, humans instituted a new social order. In the context of *Speaking the Language of Spiders*, this cycle of creation and renewal frames the different stories of abuse, exclusion, isolation and cultural disconnection that characterise the everyday life of marginalized urban Aboriginal youth. The reference to traditional creation stories also indicates the project's debt to a pan-Aboriginal recuperation of tradition to promote a sense of community and identity among urban populations.

The connection between past and present Aboriginal realities is formally achieved through the use of a hypertext format. As Rob Shields notes, the hypertext link relates elements that are not simultaneous, creating a sense of continuity in the convoluted geography of cyberspace.⁴ The link produces a "here" and "now," formed by elements dispersed across time and space. In Maskegon-Iskwew's project these different components converge in the main page, also called the "domains page," which presents a series of nine icons or domains, each one standing for an element of the Saulteaux

⁴See Shields, "Hypertext Links," 147.

cosmology. Some of these icons are figurative, such as a snail which represents “the underwater time” or “the time before language,” a blue human figure which stands for “the arrival of the skywoman” or “the creation of the world and the first humans,” a bison which indicates “the arrival of Nenabose” or “flood and recreation of Earth,” a human torso which signals the “time of superbeings” or “humans/Manitous, giants and powerbeings acquire domains and transform the Earth.” Other icons are less denotative and more abstract such as those that indicate the stages of the constitution of society: “time of setting order,” “winter of survival,” “making territory,” “spirits bring gifts”, and the institution of a new order or the “dawning of the seventh fire.”

As in a typical hypertext, to launch the project and explore each stage of the cosmological cycle the viewer should click on an icon. What follows is a seemingly endless succession of photographs, digitally produced images and texts. Each one of these pages or “frames” presents a poem and a series of illustrations. Despite the strong primary colours of the visuals, the text tends to dominate the layout of the different pages. Poems are usually in the centre of the page, against a black background. Small windows with visuals are placed on either side of the text. An icon representing a bison or a spider returns the viewer to the domains page.

Conceived a few months after the “Drum Beats to Drum Bytes” gathering, the project was inspired by Simeon Scott’s version of the Cree creation story.⁵ While the website does not directly refer to the Cree creation story but to the Saulteaux cosmological cycle, Scott’s story triggered the concept of *Speaking the Language of*

⁵The 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 Maskegon-Iskwew, “Isi-pikiskwewin Ayahpikesisak.”

Spiders as the project's title suggests. According to this narrative, the first human couple descended to the Earth through a spider web and, once there, the bear helped them survive. The story illustrates animistic principles and how these infuse Aboriginal relations with the environment. Animism regards nature as animated by spiritual forces and, as such, a crucial actor in the creation and well-being of humans.

Scott's version of the Cree creation story moved the artists to translate animistic principles online. Animism demands a responsible use of technology that departs from the excesses associated with a Heideggerian notion of modern technology.⁶ The translation of animistic principles had been a matter of discussion during the "Drum Beats to Drum Bytes" gathering. It was then that many of the participants had voiced their concerns about the viability of this translation. Todd has summarized this scepticism in her influential essay "Aboriginal Narratives in Cyberspace": "Will cyberspace enable old knowledge to be experienced and expanded or will cyberspace create the present anew each day, so that there never again is a tradition or a past?"⁷ As a "Drum Beats to Drum Bytes" alumna, Maskegon-Iskwew's intention was to respond to this scepticism in an aesthetically ambitious project. The result is a piece that combines formal exploration and an interest in community empowerment and cultural preservation.

The engagement with the community empowerment model observed in the imagination of the drumbytes network is not just pursued in the translation of traditional cosmologies and moral teachings online. At the production level, *Speaking the Language*

⁶"The revealing that rules in modern technology is a challenging [Herausfordern], which puts to nature the unreasonable demand that it supply energy which can be extracted and store as such." Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," 320.

⁷ Todd, 180.

of Spiders is an exercise in collaboration that strengthened an incipient network of Aboriginal artists and curators and non-Native producers interested in new media. In fact, the project brought together 14 artists dispersed across Canada to imagine a reservoir of cultural knowledge during a ten-week residence at the Banff Centre. What these artists had in common was their previous acquaintance with Maskegon-Iskwew, who knew Lynn Acoose, Greg Daniels, Elvina Piapot and Richard Agecutay in his capacity as acting executive director of Circle Arts Corporation, and had met L'Hirondelle during the "Drum Beats to Drum Bytes" gathering. L'Hirondelle, in turn, brought Naytowhow to the team. The connection to the Banff Centre had been possible thanks to Maskegon-Iskwew's close relationship with Sara Diamond, the BNMI director. This relationship ended up being crucial to the production of the project because it opened the doors to facilities, funding and know-how.

By exploring the possibilities of collaboration, *Speaking the Language of Spiders* adhered to one of the main goals of the network imagined by the drumbytes group: the strengthening of the Aboriginal arts community. This collaboration is still the work of a community of artists that precedes the project, unlike future pieces in which online collaboration performs community online. As Maskegon-Iskwew recalls:

The project began with introducing Simeon Scott's version of the nêhiyawin creation story and the text of *Children Shining on the Moon* to the artists and engaging in a dialogue about how an online collaborative creation project might be shaped. The core of the dialogue revolved around examining the relationship between historic traditional Aboriginal concepts and contemporary cultural experiences – especially those of Aboriginal street youth. The organizational form emerged as a casual structure with artists contributing to the work at different times over a ten week residency at the Banff Centre for the Arts in 1996. While the organizational model was flexible to allow for different working styles, the production process itself was very intense due to the nature of

the subject matter we were trying to approach – it seemed at times like a dangerous task.⁸

The team behind *Speaking the Language of Spiders* was heterogeneous. It comprised a wide range of expertise, from photography to poetry, from storytelling to programming. Many of the participating artists had no previous experience with ICT and could not be considered new media artists. The role of the Internet in this context was, thus, to serve as a “focal thing,” an artifact around which a group of artists gathered to explore the potential of online expression. According to Albert Borgmann, focal things are meant to produce practices that instil a sense of community.⁹ This idea of the Internet as a focal thing would be extensively explored by Aboriginal new media art in subsequent years. In the case of *Speaking the Language of Spiders*, the practices encouraged by the Internet not only produced a collaborative cultural database, but strengthened the links among members of an otherwise dispersed artistic community, resulting in a “cultural formation.” According to Williams, cultural formations are variable relations among producers that are less formal than institutions. Some of these relations, such as the long-term collaborative relationship between Diamond, Maskegon-Iskwew and L’Hirondelle, would influence the direction of the Aboriginal new media art field in Canada. In Becker’s terms, the project was also instrumental in setting future routines of collaboration and reaffirming the role of the Banff Centre and the BNMI, in particular, as a catalyst of Aboriginal new media production.

⁸Adams and Maskegon-Iskwew, “Crossing the Divide.”

⁹Barney, 43

An example of the practices that emerged around the project was the celebration of a sweat lodge at Banff. Cheryl L’Hirondelle, in discussion with the author.

Speaking the Language of Spiders indicates the formation of the Aboriginal new media art field because it departs from previous communication attempts, to claim an artistic and cultural identity and, thus, proposes a specific position-taking: a “First Nations art web.” This artistic identity is confirmed by the careful arrangement of visuals and texts and the translation of the hypertext strategy for aesthetic and communication purposes. The project resists the documentation of Aboriginal youth’s reality, as in typical community media projects and, instead, alludes to it through poetic language, visual collages and pictorial abstraction. Further, like other contemporary Aboriginal new media art projects, *Speaking the Language of Spiders* was quickly recognized as an artwork by the mainstream art world and showcased in art venues such as the Dunlop Art Gallery (1997) in Regina; the Canadian Cultural Centre (1997) in Paris; and the Walter Phillips Gallery (2003) in Banff. This recognition was due in part to the Banff Centre’s support and to the participation of well-known Aboriginal artists in its creation. However, its identification as new media art would only come later once other Aboriginal new media artists and curators began situating the piece as central to an Aboriginal new media art canon, as I discuss in chapter 6.¹⁰

Introduced as a “First Nations art web,” *Speaking the Language of Spiders* is both a continuation and a shift from the “Drum Beats to Drum Bytes” agenda, which demonstrates the close connection between the adherence to the community empowerment model and the development of the Aboriginal new media art field. This connection demonstrates the role of the work of art as a “lived form,” producing specific

¹⁰The piece was showed in 2005 at one of the most important Aboriginal new media art venues in Canada, the New Media Gallery of Urban Shaman artist-run centre.

allegiances between producers, audiences and discourses that facilitate the formation of the Aboriginal new media art world. In general lines, the more the projects imagined community within the frame of community empowerment, the less clear the differentiation between Aboriginal media and Aboriginal new media art. On the other hand, the more the projects facilitated the development of the Aboriginal media and new media art communities, the more differentiated these communities and their products became. This double movement explains the ambivalent character of many of the early Aboriginal new media art.

Speaking the Language of Spiders also pursues the “Drum Beats to Drum Bytes” gathering’s goal of exploring the Internet’s potential to preserve Aboriginal languages and traditions. As the work of Bonita Lawrence suggests, this revival of Aboriginal tradition was not just a concern of Aboriginal artists, but was in line with contemporary Aboriginal attempts at reconstituting community beyond the reserve. The inscription of contemporary – and largely urban – Aboriginal experiences of drug and sexual abuse into the Saulteaux cosmological cycle provides a temporary “home” to realities that are otherwise marginalized in Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal romantizations of community.

Maskegon-Iskwew’s project also deviates from the “Drum Beats to Drum Bytes” agenda when it seeks the development of Aboriginal youth through art, activating a definition of art that had animated Native artists’ activism since the 1970s: “In Aboriginal cultures the artist is not an individual doing self-expression. Artists have a responsibility to give back to the people.”¹¹ This definition of community empowerment hence differs from the community empowerment model mobilized by Aboriginal media and present in

¹¹Marjorie Beaucage, in discussion with the author.

the imagination of the drumbytes network. First, it targets a community that is not local but highly dispersed and abstract. “Aboriginal youth” is a group that transcends the limits of the reserve or the urban community. Second, it did not seek the direct involvement of Aboriginal youth in the design and development of the project. On the contrary, Native youth is just one of the groups targeted by a project that introduces development as the result of dissemination of information through artistic means. Finally, *Speaking the Language of Spiders* has an explicit aesthetic goal, even when the participating artists had the improvement of an important sector of the Aboriginal community in mind.

While *Speaking the Language of Spiders* is one of the first self-proclaimed Aboriginal web art projects in Canada, it was not the first Native artwork that explored the aesthetic potential of new media. 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.¹² The work, co-produced with the Banff Centre, consisted of an electronic mask and an artificial hand and introduced the viewer to the artist’s religious practices. However, unlike *Speaking the Language of Spiders*, the work was shown and received as an art piece in a gallery setting, posing no major challenges to critics, institutions or even audiences. Compared to *Inherent Rights, Vision Rights*, Maskegon-Iskwew’s project has a hybrid nature, halfway between Aboriginal media and

¹²The 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.” Nemiroff, Houle, and Townsend-Gault, “Land, Spirit, Power,” 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.

art, a feature present in most Aboriginal projects during this early phase. This hybridity is not just a prerogative of Aboriginal new media art, but a characteristic of early new media art projects.

The popularization of the Internet and the invention of web browsers facilitated the development of the new media art movement beyond the restricted field of artistic experimentations with computers, which had been taking place since the early 1960s in research centres across the developed world. The avant-garde of artists exploring email and BBS welcomed the Internet as a sign of a new area of artistic exploration. The development of graphic interfaces also attracted artists from more traditional disciplines, who were drawn to the Internet by the communication potential of the new medium and the possibilities of working with images and sound online. Recognition from artistic institutions followed the popularization of the medium when in 1997 new media art was first shown in “Documenta X” in Kassel, Germany.¹³ In Canada, in the mid-1990s, The Banff New Media Institute and The Daniel Langlois Foundation (Montreal) became two of the most important centres for research and development of new media art. The Canada Council for the Arts contributed to this quick institutionalization by establishing funding for new media art and audio works in the late 1990s.

According to Mark Tribe and Reena Jana, new media art is a “subset” of two well-known artistic movements: Art and Technology, and Media Art.¹⁴ The first one refers to aesthetic experimentations with robotics, while the second movement focused on the aesthetic potential of different media (e.g. video, film, radio). New media art also

¹³Tribe and Jana, 9. Tribe is founder of *Rhizome.org*, a database and community platform for the discussion and promotion of new media art.

¹⁴Ibid.

shares with Modernist movements a tendency towards formalism, which moved some new media artists to explore the language of software and networks.¹⁵ An avant-garde ethos also propelled artists to break with the institutionalized art world, seeking refuge among digerati and hackers. This association with digital culture placed new media art at the fringes of the mainstream art world.

Unlike earlier avant-garde movements, the new media art scene is fragmented, volatile and global. It originated in Eastern Europe, where under the label “net.art,” it opposed the mainstream art world and the capitalist frenzy of Eastern European governments. This anti-establishment sentiment would become less noticeable with the incorporation of new media artists into the mainstream art world.

Since its beginning and due to its marginal status within the art world, new media artists have relied on email and chat as alternative channels for the discussion and dissemination of works. As a result, a series of specialized BBSs such as *The Thing* (1991), *Syndicate* (1993), *Nettime* (1995) and *Rhizome* (1996) emerged as international venues where large part of the theorization of new media art took shape. These online fora facilitated in turn the birth of online communities formed by audiences, critics and artists. New media artists have also created opportunities for face-to-face interaction such as conferences, performances and international exhibitions that have contributed to the formation – and survival – of a new media art scene.¹⁶

¹⁵For a discussion of formalism in new media art see Stallabrass, *Internet Art*.

¹⁶“A continuing and intense conversation –online but also face-to-face- takes place between Internet artists who make up a small but quite cohesive world.” Stallabrass, 110.

Even among those formalists interested in the intricacies of code, interaction has often been seen as a significant feature of new media art practice.¹⁷ In some new media works, however, it is more than a feature or a means of legitimization; it is the “medium or canvas.”¹⁸ This is the case of online-based networked art, a genre that explores the aesthetic and social implications of communication.¹⁹ New media networked art produces “situations” that bring to the fore the poetics of networking.²⁰ In early new media art, and Internet art in particular, networked experiences were humorous attempts to destabilize passive consumption.

The central role played by networking in these works leads to another important feature of new media art: collaboration. If collaboration is a recurrent practice of Modernist art, which attacked the individualism and exceptionality of the bourgeois artist, it becomes a necessity in many new media artworks.²¹ The centrality of networking as “subject matter” demands the participation of peers and audiences in the production of the work. But collaboration is not only needed at a material level, to make the work

¹⁷David Ross, director of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art and an early theorist of new media art, highlighted interaction and audience’s participation as key features of the new artistic discipline: “Never before has the ability of the work’s critical apparatus been included in the actual work itself, so that the work and its critical reception and its transformation in relation to its reception, in fact, is all the same thing. There’s an absolute collapse of space that we all thought was as distinct and unchallengable (sic) as the space between readers and writers.” Ross and Slayton, “Transcript of Lecture by David Ross.”

¹⁸Neumark, “Art/Activism,” 15.

¹⁹Saper, *Networked Art*.

²⁰This “situationist aesthetic” is not new. The “Situationist International” was a cultural and political movement emerged in the early 60s that denounced the commoditization of all aspects of modern life. The situationist aesthetic attacked the materiality of the object, seen as the basis of commoditization.

²¹“We note that the historical avant-garde movements negate those determinations that are essential in autonomous art: the disjunction of art and the praxis of life, individual production, and individual reception as distinct from the former.” Bürger, “The Negation of the Autonomy of Art by the Avant-Garde,” 50.

happen; it is imperative at a semiotic level, to produce its meaning. The network's arbitrariness, its form and its social implications become the work of art and not just the background. This artistic experimentation with the political, cultural and aesthetic implications of communication complicates any easy categorization.

Despite the use of a popular medium, new media art's audiences have been largely restricted to technologically inclined connoisseurs fluent in contemporary art strategies. Its flirtation with political activism, technological language and formalism has contributed to the alienation of new media artists from mainstream audiences, even after the recognition of well-established art institutions and government agencies. Collection and conservation of new media art pieces is also a challenge, given the ephemeral nature of most works, which rely on quickly obsolete technology and platforms.

The Aboriginal new media art field shares some of the characteristics of the new media art movement at large. It surfaced in the peripheries of the art world. It combines political, cultural and aesthetics goals. It develops alternative venues for the promotion and discussion of works. And, as the drumbytes network demonstrates, it does not hesitate to use the Internet as a tool to strengthen the links within a highly dispersed community. In this context and as we observed with *Speaking the Language of Spiders*, the collaboration in and around the Internet contributes to the slow development of a scene sustained by, what Grossberg calls, "affective alliances" articulated around the use of new media. These alliances would originate, first, around the Internet, as in the case of *Speaking the Language of Spiders*, but would later be produced online, changing not just how producers interact, but how they regard themselves as a group and ultimately differentiating the Aboriginal new media art scene from Aboriginal media. Apropos,

L'Hirondelle recalls that, during the realization of *Speaking the Language of Spiders*, the artists and curators that collaborated in the project celebrated ceremonies.²² The impact of these alliances generated around the practice of new media art would last even after the project was launched.

On the other hand, Aboriginal new media art does not explicitly oppose the art world nor does it attack capitalism. In fact, in line with the identity politics that permeates Aboriginal contemporary art and activism, the Aboriginal new media art's agenda blends the needs of a portion of the Aboriginal arts community, and a – largely imagined – pan-Indian cultural community, with aesthetic exploration. If, like the international new media art movement, Aboriginal new media art is political, its main goal is not to undermine the commoditization of art and everyday life but to preserve Aboriginal culture and languages and strengthen Aboriginal communities through communication and artistic means. Compared to new media artworks from artists such as Alexei Shulgin, Josephine Bosma or Heath Bunting, Aboriginal new media art projects are less exploratory and formalist, and closer to community media initiatives.²³

The hybridity of Native projects and practices also has its roots in the way Aboriginal artists regard artistic practices and disciplines. Beaucage notes that “a lot of the artists are quite interested in everything and don't pursue one thing (...) People cross-over all the time.”²⁴ This multidisciplinary explains the fact that Aboriginal new media

²²Cheryl L'Hirondelle, in discussion with the author.

²³Bunting, Bosma and Shulgin together with Vuk Cosic and Olia Lialina are early practitioners of net.art. This group represents the most virulent branch of Internet art practices, radical in its politics and experimental in its aesthetics.

²⁴Marjorie Beaucage, in discussion with the author.

artists are never just committed to new media. The nomadic nature of the Aboriginal new media artists has brought to the Aboriginal new media art field concerns and practices that belong to other disciplines, such as video and performance art.

The early hybridity of Aboriginal new media art projects is evident in *Dene/Cree ElderSpeak: Tales of the Heart and Spirit*, a community-based new media art initiative by L'Hirondelle. The artist had been among the few Aboriginal new media artists to embrace the category at an early stage and to frequent, thanks to her close relationship with Diamond, some of the representatives of the net art scene and the new media art world in general. A "Drum Beats to Drum Bytes" alumna, L'Hirondelle had been introduced to computers in the 80s, when she was still involved in the artist-run centre movement in Calgary. A musician, performance artist and cultural activist, L'Hirondelle discovered the cultural potential of the Internet at the drumbytes gathering. Later on, she would participate in *Speaking the Language of Spiders*, a project that helped consolidate a friendship and a future working partnership with Maskegon-Iskwew. L'Hirondelle's hands-on experience with the Internet came from her work as an Aboriginal liaison for Jon Ord's cross-cultural educational project *Kids from Kanata*. The initiative established network connections between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal schools.

"I think in terms of language. I think the reason I always loved the html [is that] because, for me, that is the connection to language."²⁵ For L'Hirondelle working online is ultimately about "expressing a voice," while graphic user applications work at the level of the image, the "skin."²⁶ The interest in language and voice moved the artist to develop

²⁵Cheryl L'Hirondelle, in discussion with th author.

²⁶Ibid.

a bare aesthetics that centered on the exploration of html code and the logic of databases. However, for L'Hirondelle, expressing a voice is not limited to the intricacies of software. She is also interested in the communicative potential of the Internet, which explains the ambiguity of much of her new media production. In *Dene/Cree ElderSpeak*, for example, an online project she developed with Maskegon-Iskwew and Naythohow for the Meadows Lake Tribal Council, she explored the storytelling potential of the Internet by creating a cultural database that, in its latest version, combines audio and text. As with *Speaking the Language of Spiders*, the project indicates Aboriginal new media art's strong debt to a community empowerment model.

The history of *Dene/Cree ElderSpeak* began in 1995, when L'Hirondelle was invited by Circle Vision Arts Corporation's program officer, Lynn Acoose, to become an artist-in-residence at Wapimon, an on-reserve artist-run centre in northern Saskatchewan. There, she met Naytowhow, the newly appointed Meadow Lake Tribal Council storyteller in-residence, whose job was the promotion of storytelling in the community. L'Hirondelle and Naytowhow formed the duo Nikamok and soon began making music and telling stories. Two years later, once she became storyteller in-residence for the tribal council, they started the *Dene/Cree ElderSpeak* project.

Dene/Cree ElderSpeak is described by L'Hirondelle as "an online archive of elder's stories elucidating Dene and Cree cultural values."²⁷ The project combines the artist's interest in community art and ICT. The original version was completed in 1999, and was meant to reach the nine communities within the Meadow Lake First Nation. The website presents 16 stories that illustrate different aspects of Dene and Cree cultures (e.g.

²⁷L'Hirondelle, "Aboriginal Story in Digital Media."

respect, humility, love, faith, kinship, etc.). Designed by Maskegon-Iskwew, the piece became technologically obsolete and was re-launched in 2004 with the support of the Banff Centre and curated by L'Hirondelle in number 17 of *Horizon Zero*, the Banff Centre's online publication dedicated to new media and digital arts in Canada. As part of this update, each story is now preceded by an audio piece, in which Naytowhow introduces the storyteller, explains his or her background and the circumstances in which the story was heard. English and French transcriptions are also available, as well as general linguistic explanations of Dene and Cree and a pronunciation guide. The addition of a search option permits the viewer to look for specific terms in Dene, Cree or English in the texts.

The goal of the website is "to make stories from the Elders more available within the community, and to transfer skills in new digital production techniques to community youth by hiring established Aboriginal artists who could pass on their knowledge."²⁸ To this end, L'Hirondelle and Naytowhow adopted the role of editors in charge of collecting, transcribing and, in some cases, translating the stories for its online presentation. This editorial role suggests the collaborative nature of the project. Indeed, in *Dene/Cree ElderSpeak*, the community participates in the making of its own image.

While the Meadow Lake Tribal Council requested that the artists help the community collect and disseminate the stories, it was L'Hirondelle and Naytowhow who first thought about using new media. The long distance between communities and the great number of Métis and Bill C-31 connected to the Meadow Lake Nation in northwestern Saskatchewan made almost impossible for Naytowhow and the elders to

²⁸L'Hirondelle. "Tales from the Heart and Spirit."

visit the schools on a regular basis. The artists then proposed a bi-monthly newsletter that was distributed to 500 schools in the area. Each number introduced a story and a set of values for discussion in the classroom. Later, L'Hirondelle's experience with the Internet and her friendship with Maskegon-Iskwew facilitated the creation of an online database that preserved the stories collected throughout the years.

The 16 stories included in the database reconstruct a community anchored in tradition and territory. References to territory are present at the level of the text and in the visuals, such as the digitally manipulated photograph of teepees and forest that accompany the title of the project. The stories, which illustrate the different values of the Dene and Cree worldviews (i.e. obedience, respect, humility, faith, compassion, happiness and freshness, forgiveness and love, cleanliness, thankfulness, sharing, strength, survival, hope, wisdom, self-reliance), are invariably situated in the land. In fact, it is not unusual that the storyteller begins the story by introducing the audience to a specific location:

I am Jonas Larivierre. I have not always been from Apâsihk (Canoe Narrows). My parents always moved from place to place. That was the way of life back then. Their main place of travel and movement was northeast of Canoe Narrows. As a young man in 1918, one of the places I travelled to was located north of Wêyakwin, called Pêyâsiw Acih (Thunderbird Hill), also known as Molonosa. This journey to Pêyâsiw Acih is a long story, however, I will tell you the short version.²⁹

Or

At one time the Cree from around the Meadow Lake area made a cache where they kept their dried meat and berries in birch bark baskets. My grandfather had built one such cache.³⁰

²⁹Larivierre, "Wisdom."

³⁰Gladue, "Strength."

The community that emerges from these stories is consistent with the popular identification of community with land pointed out by Valaskakis and discussed in chapter 1. As in *Speaking the Language of Spiders*, the community represented precedes the project, which shows that the project still follows the community media model. The mediation of technology amplifies the reach of oral storytelling and promises to mitigate the threat of language loss, oblivion and indifference:

Joseph's [Naytowhow] initial visits found several Elders reluctant to go to schools, due to previous visits where they found the classroom setting and the children's inattentiveness a deterrent. Equally distressing at the time was the high ratio of non Cree and Dene speaking youth in these classrooms. The Elders were however interested in having the students hear their stories, and hopefully be influenced by the values their life experiences demonstrated. The next step then became to collect stories, to be told by Joseph to the youth on behalf of the Elders.³¹

At first sight, *Dene/Cree ElderSpeak* is closer to Aboriginal new media initiatives than to new media art. As with other examples of Aboriginal new media, it originated in the reserve and was produced in collaboration with community members. It has an explicit educational purpose that is achieved online by using the website in the class, and offline by training youth in new media. Most important, the project is framed as a community empowerment initiative; it is meant to serve as an archive, communication tool, and means to strengthen the community's identity through storytelling. Formally, the project has a straightforward structure: the stories are listed by title, name of elder and value that they represent. As in any other hypertext, each title is a link to a page containing a story. The stories have no single illustrations and the only distinctive image is a photograph of the elder from whom it was heard. The text is organized in two

³¹L'Hirondelle, "Tales from the Heart and Spirit."

columns, the left one in English and the right one in either Dene or Cree. No icons or graphics divert the attention from the text.

The austere presentation contrasts with the strident colours of *Speaking the Language of Spiders*. And unlike the latter, no indication of artistic purpose is permitted to categorize *Dene/Cree ElderSpeak* as new media art based on a reading of the work. In fact, if it was not for the fact that L'Hirondelle frames the project as "net art" in her CV, the website could have been just considered as an Aboriginal new media initiative.³²

L'Hirondelle's view of the Internet as an instrument to "enhance" community, and her commitment to community art are important influences in *Dene/Cree Elderspeak*.³³ As McMaster points out, Aboriginal artists have "returned" to community in search of roots and inspiration since the 70s (chapter 1). Within contemporary Aboriginal arts communities, remote communities, and particularly reserves, are still regarded as the privileged locale of tradition and Aboriginal culture. This journey to the reserve and other remote communities is also influenced by an avant-garde impulse to fuse art and real life, an impulse that is at the core of the community art movement as well. L'Hirondelle is not indifferent to these influences. In fact, she acknowledges the central location of community in the Aboriginal art world's imaginary and the impact of this concern on the making of *Dene/Cree ElderSpeak*: "We realized that these were good stories that should go on the Internet and it was also in this case about community because there was this notion that we were worrying about in the contemporary art community... you know (...)

³² The project was also included in an edition of *Horizon Zero* dedicated to storytelling and curated by L'Hirondelle. *Horizon Zero* was BNMI's new media art publication. Its editor in-chief was Diamond.

³³ Cheryl L'Hirondelle, in discussion with the author.

we have this new thing called ‘community.’”³⁴ The aesthetics and goal of *Dene/Cree ElderSpeak* are not isolated phenomena but reveal, once again, the early hybridity of the Aboriginal new media art field and the influence of the community empowerment model on how artists regarded technology and their own roles as new media practitioners.

In 2004, L’Hirondelle would combine new media, performance and community art in a project called *Echoes and Transmissions*, co-produced with Aboriginal curator Candice Hopkins. The project involved the organization of audio and video workshops and a pirate radio broadcast with members of the Morley reserve, in Alberta. Four years later, L’Hirondelle would return to work with communities, this time in Regina, producing collaborative audio works with elders.

L’Hirondelle’s more exploratory works date from the early 2000s, and were partly influenced by Heath Bunting, whom she met during the Aboriginal Streams workshop at the Banff Centre. Bunting was developing Radio 90 in Banff, an Internet and fm cellular radio station. L’Hirondelle not only shared with Bunting an interest in music and radio, but a vision of new media art as oriented towards cultural activism: “I really connected with what he had to say. There were things that he talked about that had not been talked about within the Aboriginal world around net art and new media.”³⁵ Apart from being a representative of the “net art” current within new media art, Bunting was a “forerunner” of the Web 2.0 model and the model of online convergence.³⁶ Moved by Bunting’s view of new media art and her own interest in community art, L’Hirondelle would help expand

³⁴Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

the range of position-takings by producing pieces that would incorporate many of the strategies that came to be identified with the new media art movement (i.e. appropriation, hackerism, database development) and a model of online convergence that invited viewers to intervene and alter the work. And by defining these works and the relations of production around them “net art,” L’Hirondelle helped delineate the position of the Aboriginal new media artist. Unlike *Dene/Cree ElderSpeak*, however, these later works would be framed and distributed as net art and shown in artistic venues. As I explain in chapter 6, the adoption of strategies associated with net art would result in a less ambiguous production, closer to the new media art movement in spirit and consistent with the institutionalization of the Aboriginal new media art field.

The stress on aesthetic exploration observed in *Speaking the Language of Spiders* permitted the slow delineation of the Aboriginal new media art field. While during this early stage the hybridity between communication and aesthetics dominated the emergent field, a more systematic exploration of the aesthetic potential of new media emphasized the differences between Aboriginal new media and Aboriginal new media art. This dynamic is explained by Bourdieu:

Every position-taking is defined in relation to the *space of possibles* which is objectively realized as a *problematic* in the form of the actual or potential position-takings corresponding to the different positions; and it receives its distinctive *value* from its negative relationship with the coexistent position-takings to which it is objectively related and which determined it by delimiting it.³⁷

The early hybridity of the Aboriginal new media art field and the scarce production of artworks permitted ambiguous projects such as L’Hirondelle’s *Dene/Cree*

³⁷Bourdieu, “The Field of Cultural Production,” 30.

ElderSpeak to be classified as new media art despite its strong link to Aboriginal new media practices and forms. In Bourdieu's terms, the value of *Dene/Cree ElderSpeak* is dependent on the space of possibles. The increasing specialization of practices and conventions and a larger number of works labelled as "art" within the Aboriginal new media art field would contribute to more rigid classifications.

In his analysis of innovations, Becker highlights the importance of a "developed aesthetic apparatus and media through which critical discussion can take place."³⁸ The role of the Banff Centre, and the BNMI in particular, was vital in this respect. Banff provided artists with material and intellectual resources, artistic recognition, and most important, a physical location for the production and discussion of works. Under the mentorship of Diamond, Aboriginal artists such as Maskegon-Iskwew or L'Hirondelle would collaborate in projects that, despite their hybridity, would claim an artistic identity. In Williams' words, the influence of the Banff Centre, and the BNMI in particular, would affect not just the relations of cultural production, but the practices of cultural reproduction associated with Aboriginal new media art. Throughout the brief history of Aboriginal new media art, the Banff Centre would coproduce works, host exhibitions and facilitate the publication of material about Aboriginal new media art. As I explain in chapter 6, this active role in the promotion of the emergent field will be instrumental to its institutionalization. In addition, Diamond's theoretical inclination and interdisciplinary goals influenced the agenda of Aboriginal new media art by introducing Aboriginal artists to digerati, programmers, philosophers and new media artists in workshops and symposia. Some of these artists, thinkers and cultural practitioners, such as Celia Pearce

³⁸Becker, 339.

or Sheila Urbanoski, would participate in Aboriginal new media art projects.³⁹ Another important effect of Banff's gatherings and workshops was the exposure of Aboriginal artists to a series of discourses about technology and online social phenomena that would facilitate the shift from an early community empowerment model to a view of community as online performance.

CyberPowWow: The Imagination of Community as Online Performance

The role of community in Native new media art projects slowly shifted from target or partner in artistic productions to subject matter. In line with networked art, community would not be just the recipient or producer of the work of art, but its product. The new role assigned to community manifests changes in relations of cultural production and reproduction and in "lived forms." Aboriginal new media artists began performing community online and, thus, developed new aesthetic strategies to achieve this goal, such as online communities and virtual galleries. These new strategies would be crucial, in turn, to consolidate the allegiances between practitioners, curators and institutions. Virtual galleries would also provide a new venue for the dissemination of artworks.

The community empowerment model, which drew Aboriginal new media projects closer to Aboriginal media, lost its pre-eminence once Native artists began identifying their work as art. Despite these early identifications, it would take some time until the

³⁹Video game programmer and researcher Celia Pearce has been an active presence in the Aboriginal new media art scene since its early days. A frequent participant in BNMI's symposia, Pearce met Fragnito in Banff and, since then, she has been involved in some of the artist's projects such as *Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace*. Sheila Urbanoski is a technical project manager and website developer who has frequented the BNMI's symposia and workshops. She is one of the non-Aboriginal artists that participated in *CPW 2K: CyberPowWow*.

boundaries between Aboriginal media and Aboriginal new media art became clear, as the analysis of *Speaking the Language of Spiders* and *Dene/Cree ElderSpeak* suggested.

The increasing exposure of Aboriginal artists to a series of discourses that portray the Internet as a social space influenced the transition from a community empowerment model to the performance of community online. If the Internet had served the Aboriginal arts community as a “focal thing,” creating opportunities for networking, strengthening the links between members of the geographically dispersed Aboriginal arts community and disseminating the necessary information for the maintenance and consolidation of communal relations, its role was now to provide a virtual space for the gathering of artists and curators and, most important, the creation of community and the development of the Aboriginal new media art scene.

The search for a communal territory to perform community is not surprising given the long lasting connection between community and land in Aboriginal imaginations of community (chapter 1). Despite geographical dispersion and in an ambivalent relation to Wellman’s view of community as sustained by social relations, the small group of Aboriginal artists involved in new media art could not fully dissociate community from place. As Hopkins notes in a recent interview with the team of *Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace* (AbTeC): “Native people have a strong desire to create community and create territory wherever they are. Cyberspace is no exception.”⁴⁰

⁴⁰ Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace, “Interview with Candice Hopkins.”

Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace (AbTeC) is an initiative of Aboriginal new media artists and scholar Jason Lewis in partnership with Fragnito and Pearce. AbTeC is a network of artists, programmers and academics involved in a series of projects that investigate “innovative methods for First Nations to participate in networked culture to tell our stories while populating and shaping cyberspace itself.” AbTeC, “Home.”

This shift towards the imagination of community as performance is evident in *CyberPowWow*, a project that has become a synonym of Aboriginal new media art. The project highlights the role played by artworks in the formation of affective alliances among producers, curators and funding bodies. These alliances, sustained by the development of the community as online performance strategy, would be crucial in the delineation of the Aboriginal new media art scene.

In 1997, First Nations artists Skawennati Tricia Fragnito, Ryan Rice and Eric Robertson launched *CyberPowWow*, an online gallery and chat room dedicated to the exhibition and discussion of Aboriginal contemporary art. Rice, Fragnito and Robertson had met in Montreal, while there were students of Fine Arts at Concordia University. The trio had formed the collective *Nation to Nation* only three years before the birth of *CyberPowWow*, with the specific goal of creating new venues of exhibition for young Aboriginal artists, who were in the fringes of artistic mainstream venues and the established Aboriginal arts community. Fragnito, exposed to the Internet at Oboro, a new media centre in Montreal, introduced the idea of *CyberPowWow* to the group as a logical continuation of the community events that the group had been organizing since 1994.⁴¹ The collective was committed to breaking away from the constraints of the gallery system and at the time the Internet seemed a low cost medium to pursue that goal.

By 1997, the Internet had become a popular medium, a paradigm of the new global economy, and the centre of a digital utopianism that had quickly spread in the media. This technological utopian vision, fuelled by programmers, cultural gurus and lobbyist of Silicon Valley, presented the Internet as a technology that could fulfill, both

⁴¹Some of these are *A Celebration of Art* (1994), *Art Bingo* (1994) and *Native Love* (1995).

the dreams of the old new communalists and the needs of the economic technocracy emerged in the late 1980s. This vision, popularized in books such as *The Virtual Community: Homesteading at the Electronic Frontier*, and magazines such as *Wired* or *Mondo 2000*, proposed the Internet as a space – a “cyberspace” – where a communion of minds could finally be realized.⁴² In cyberspace, community would not be restricted by distance or differences in race and gender. Cyberspace had become an authentic *tabula rasa*, where historical differences were systematically downplayed.

The cyberlibertarian movement, largely responsible for the hype surrounding the Internet, originated in the U.S. in the 1970s. Its ideology combined elements of the hippie movement and libertarianism, and its focus was the development of a network architecture and culture.⁴³ Constituted by a heterogeneous mix of old new communalists and programmers, the movement gained momentum in the late 1980s and early 1990s. That was a period of utopia, of promised new worlds, of information revolutions. The discourse of the early cyberculture was plagued by references to “out-of-body experiences, digital forms of consciousness and virtual gender bending.”⁴⁴

⁴²What made the cyberlibertarian discourse influential at a time when the Internet was being widely adopted was the lack of a coherent counter discourse. According to David Silver, cyberculture studies only reached a certain maturity in the late 90s, once the Internet lost part of its novelty. Until then, the approach to cyberculture had been largely descriptive, simplistic and celebratory. Another factor that contributed to its influence was cyberlibertarians’ easy access to media and political and economic spheres. In fact, the movement counted with allies such as the then American vice president Al Gore. See Silver, “Looking Backwards, Looking Forwards,” 61.

⁴³ Lovink, “Cyberculture in the Dotcom Age,” 330. Langdon Winner defines cyberlibertarianism as “a collection of ideas that link 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.” Winner, “Cyberlibertarian Myths and the Prospects of Community.”

⁴⁴Ibid, 338.

According to cyberlibertarians such as John Perry Barlow, Esther Dyson, Kevin Kelly and Louis Rossetto, cyberspace was an autonomous domain that followed the market's rules.⁴⁵ In fact, for cyberlibertarians, laissez-faire was a synonym of freedom. State interventionism was regarded with outrage. Ironically, cyberlibertarians seemed to overlook the fact that the Internet was born in the barracks as an instrument of national security. With time, and thanks to the intervention of programmers associated with the countercultural and new communalist scenes, a series of local networks began servicing areas outside the Internet's reach. Once the Internet was opened to commercial interests, these networks were absorbed by corporate service providers. The development of the alternative – and marginal – local network scene became the background of the cyberlibertarian movement.

While associated with the counterculture, the cyberlibertarian movement was far from the politics of the New Left. Its trust in the market and silence over questions of race and gender placed cyberlibertarianism close to the right wing neoliberal orientation of the Reagan and Bush administrations. The elitism of cyberlibertarians, who were mainly white, male and educated and with little to no contact with minority groups, contrasted with the movement's call for a dematerialized equality. For cyberlibertarians, the virtual space inaugurated by the Internet permitted the abolition of all physical differences. Free from material constraints, the mind could act freely, seeking the fulfillment of individual needs. However, in line with Gregory Bateson's *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*, the development of the mind depended on the collaboration with others

⁴⁵Kelly helped launch Wired in 1993 and was its executive director until 1999. Rossetto is co-founder and former publisher of Wired.

and with the natural and social surroundings.⁴⁶ It is not surprising, then, that cyberlibertarians would seek the constitution of communities online. In turn, “virtual communities” promised the fulfillment of the old new communalists’ dream: the withdrawal from society’s evils and the construction of a new and alternative society.

For Turner, the image of the electronic frontier gives away the link between cyberlibertarians and the new communalist movement.⁴⁷ As I explored in chapter 1, new communalists moved to remote areas where to create alternative communities. The open and wild spaces of New Mexico and Arizona became the scenario of communalist experimentations. As was the case with 19th century pioneers, new communalists were in search of the frontier experience. With the advent of online networking, the new communalist imagery resurfaced among digerati, many of whom had been part of the old new communalist movement and regarded the Internet as a new – and improved – chance to achieve the new communalist dream. This is how the “electronic frontier” and the “virtual community” images became “key frames” to understand the nature of the Internet.⁴⁸ The fact that many cyberlibertarians were journalists aided the popularization of these images.⁴⁹

The definition of community that the cyberlibertarians promoted was an updated version of the community of shared consciousness proposed by new communalists. The

⁴⁶Turner, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture*, 123. This view of the mind is found in Pierre Lèvy’s notion of collective intelligence, defined as “networks of knowledge production, transaction, and exchange.” Lèvy, *Collective Intelligence*, 2.

⁴⁷Turner, 141.

⁴⁸Ibid, 142.

⁴⁹The movement also counted with their own publications, such as the *Whole Earth Review*, *Mondo 2000* and *Wired*.

term “virtual community” appeared in print for the first time in an article written by Rheingold for the *Whole Earth Review* in 1987.⁵⁰ He later expanded the notion in the famous *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier* (1993), where he defined virtual communities as “social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace.”⁵¹ The term quickly appealed to the corporate sector, which sought to associate it to their online economic enterprises. But most important, the notion also influenced how online networking was understood and imagined.

Rheingold’s definition is based on his experiences as a member of the WELL, the popular San Francisco Bay area BBS system launched by Stewart Brand and Larry Brilliant in 1985. The WELL gathered a heterogeneous mix of pundits, journalists and entrepreneurs, who, marked by their countercultural past, regarded online networking as virtual communality. Rheingold imagines community as a spontaneous gathering of people who share common interests. The virtual community is presented as a new – and ultimate – development in human interaction, praised for its equality and convenience in times of globalization and apparent disintegration of traditional social institutions (e.g., nuclear family, territorially based communities).⁵²

⁵⁰The *Whole Earth Review* was created by journalist and entrepreneur Stewart Brand in 1985. The publication was influential in the definition of cyberculture and served as a forum to the cyberlibertarian movement.

⁵¹Rheingold, xx.

⁵²See Turner, *From Counterculture to Cyberculture*; and Putnam, *Bowling Alone*.

The metaphor of the virtual community was the perfect fit for the electronic frontier. In the virtual community, individual expression and interests take precedence over obligations. This individualism is consistent with modern and postmodern definitions of community highlighted by Bauman, Agamben and Nancy (chapter 1). The metaphor also dissociates community from any historical reference by proposing spontaneous contact without any mention of “material” differences such as race or class: “[In cyberspace] we do everything people do when people get together, but we do it with words on computer screens, leaving our bodies behind.”⁵³

It was Barlow who first described cyberspace as an electronic frontier, blending the new communalist dream with Gibson’s imaginary world. The term cyberspace had been in use even before *Neuromancer* to describe experimentations with virtual reality and hallucinogens. However, it was only in Barlow’s hands that cyberspace began to be used to describe the technological, biological and social space produced by online networking. In “A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace,” for example, a manifesto that Barlow wrote in 1996 to protest the passing of the Communication Decency Act, he defined cyberspace as “transactions, relationships, and thought itself, arrayed like a standing wave in the web of our communications. Ours is a world that is both everywhere and nowhere, but it is not where bodies live.”⁵⁴

Barlow’s cyberspace was influenced by the pundit’s experience in the WELL. The association of cyberspace with the frontier experience became common in 1990, when Barlow created the Electronic Frontier Foundation in response to a series of high

⁵³Rheingold, 58.

⁵⁴Barlow, “A Declaration of the Independence of Cyberspace,” 28.

profile government crackdowns against hackers. The Foundation defended free speech and digital laissez-faire and would have a significant impact on debates about regulation throughout the decade.⁵⁵

As in the case of cyberspace, the notion of the frontier has a rich history beyond the countercultural movement. It represents the “hypothetical border-land between civilization and the wilderness.”⁵⁶ The image is not only attractive because of its exoticism, but because it promises the richness of an untamed land. However, the frontier has also a dark side that was systematically occulted in the cyberlibertarian discourse. Apropos, Joseph Lockard notes that: “These periodic bouts with techno-frontierism, as we are now witnessing in cyberspace, are an exercise in avoiding history’s ugliness. The frontier destroyed as much as it created.”⁵⁷ In fact, government officials have long used the term to justify political and military interventions in uncharted territories.⁵⁸ Nowhere is this coupling of governmental and countercultural agendas more evident than in Esther Dyson, George Gilder, Alvin Toffler and George Keyworth’s “Cyberspace and the American Dream: Magna Carta for the Knowledge Age.” The document appeared in 1995 and was representative of a small group of “insurgent Republicans” associated with the then Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives, Newt Gingrich. The group not only failed to distinguish between individual freedoms and corporate interest, but regarded the settlement of the “electronic frontier” as a “divine mission” comparable to

⁵⁵Turner, 172.

⁵⁶Healy, “Cyberspace and Place,” 55.

⁵⁷Lockard, “Progressive Politics,” 223.

⁵⁸Turner, 229.

the colonization of the Wild West.⁵⁹ Behind the Magna Carta's pompous rhetoric there was the attempt to ideologically support the principles of the new knowledge economy:

The central event of the 20th century is the overthrow of matter. In technology, economics, and the politics of the nations, wealth – in the form of physical resources – has been losing value and significance. The powers of the mind are everywhere ascendant over the brute force of things.⁶⁰

The definition of community implied in the cyberlibertarian electronic frontier was imbued with technological determinism and a nostalgia that reveals the romantization of traditional Aboriginal experience as pointed out by Deloria and discussed in chapter 1. In effect, the cyberlibertarian ramblings about community always had an urgent tone; a new and radical form of communality was seen as the necessary outcome of the information revolution. This community promised to fulfill the dream of collective transcendence by liberating the mind from its dependence to the physical realm. However, the cyberlibertarian imagination of community was also ambivalent. On the one hand, in line with the communitarian project discussed in chapter 1, cyberlibertarians regarded the loss of communal values as a mortal wound to moral values and individual identities. On the other hand, community in its traditional form was seen as atavistic.

As a modern expression of the longing for community, the cyberlibertarian dream of community was infused with a radical individualism that moved cyberlibertarians to reject all forms of interventionism. Mihaela Keleman and Warren Smith note that this

⁵⁹Ibid, 231. In their rebuke of what he calls "the Californian Ideology," Richard Barbrook and Andy Cameron argues that in the hands of cyberlibertarians "the path of technological progress didn't always lead to 'ecotopia' - it could instead lead to the America of the Founding Fathers." Barbrook and Cameron, "The Californian Ideology."

⁶⁰Dyson and others, "Cyberspace and the American Dream," 295.

individualism drove online communal practice; interaction was just a means towards self-fulfillment.⁶¹ The virtual communities that cyberlibertarians proposed were communities of sameness. But the cyberlibertarian imaginary was not just selfish. It was “apolitically political” in the same way new communalists were. The celebration of the market and the apparent withdrawal from the evils of society only reaffirmed the status quo. As the old new communalists, cyberlibertarians did not seek to change society but to escape from it. The disproportionate belief in the power of technology reduced social and historical differences to a matter of choice. Finally, the appropriation of the frontier imagery revealed the same romanticization of the Wild West and the Aboriginal Other observed in the new communalist movement.

Though geographically and intellectually far from the cyberlibertarian movement, the artists behind *CyberPowWow* were not indifferent to the popular imagery that surrounded the Internet. The image of the Internet as a social space, for example, proved to be particularly useful in the construction of an imagined locality. *Nation to Nation* did not have an institutional space where work could be permanently displayed or artists could gather and discuss the concerns of the community. Until 1997, the group had had a nomadic life, moving from event to event. The arrival of *CyberPowPow* would slowly change these dynamics. Rice explains that:

So it was pretty much to establish an Aboriginal place within the new World Wide Web (...) It was one of the places where we [Aboriginal/Non-Aboriginal] got to go at the same time, where we were not 50 years behind because history or whatever. We were right there, there were people doing it. So it was this idea of establishing a presence in the Web.⁶²

⁶¹Keleman and Smith, “Community and its ‘Virtual’ Promises.”

⁶²Ryan Rice (Aboriginal artist and curator), in discussion with the author, April 2007.

The possibility of creating a gathering space online would gradually transform the relations of production and reproduction that were already in place and that revolved around the Internet as a “focal thing.” The possibility of collaborating online would undermine, with time, the influence of production centres such as the Banff Centre or Oboro, while facilitating artistic exchanges with artists in the U.S. and Australia. In terms of cultural reproduction, the creation of online galleries would also permit the distribution of online works outside the circuit of mainstream museums and galleries. These changes in relations of production and reproduction should be understood as affecting and responding to changes in Aboriginal new media art practices and “lived forms.” And the most evident result of these changes is, as Straw argues, the development of a scene, whose characteristics I explore in detail in the next chapter.

The first version of *CyberPowWow*, presented in two chat events at Oboro and Circle Vision Arts Corporation, depended on the free chat application called *The Palace*. A second version, *CyberPowWow 2*, sought further independence by developing its own Palace. Eight Aboriginal artists were invited to design avatars and customize the chat space. These were Lori Blondeau, Sheryl Kootenyahoo, Bradlee LaRocque, Maskegon-Iskwew, Archer Pechawis, Melanie Printup Hope, Edward Poitras and Rice. A third development of the project, *CPW 2K: CyberPowWow*, centered on issues of Aboriginal digital aesthetics and encouraged the participation of Aboriginal artists from Australia and the US, as well as non-Native artists, in the design of avatars and web-based works. A last version issued in 2004, *CPW04 Unnatural Resources*, discussed the meaning and feasibility of an Aboriginal territory online.

CyberPowWow was a project with many layers. The first layer, the website, followed the conventions of a traditional art gallery: a white background and a series of icons representing works and texts, carefully lined up. This careful arrangement was organized as a hypertext: each icon led the viewer to either a work or a curatorial text. The logo of the project, three teepees connected with a wire on top of the Earth and the legend “an Aboriginally determined territory in cyberspace,” was always visible, at the top of the page. Within the complex architecture of the project, this first layer was just the point of entry. In fact, it was only after downloading *The Palace* that the viewer could visit the actual online gallery. *CyberPowWow*’s gallery also followed the parameters of traditional galleries. It had an entry hall, where visitors took up an avatar, followed by a series of rooms where web-based work was showcased. Typically, Aboriginal artists were invited to design avatars and environments that could be experienced by viewers that joined the chat. The artists invited had not always worked with the Internet, though with time, many of the participants of *CyberPowWow* (i.e. Fragnito, Ryan Johnston, Jason Lewis, Pechawis and Buffy Saint-Marie) became associated with the Aboriginal new media art field. During the chat events these guest artists guided viewers through the shows, and it was not uncommon to witness discussions about Aboriginal art and contemporary art in general. The rest of the time, the gallery was open to visitors that, after having downloaded the application, could browse the works and interact with other occasional participants.

Fragnito discovered *The Palace* at a *Studio XX Wired Women/ Femmes* evening in 1996. The software could be downloaded for free and permitted the creation of a private chat environment with relative ease. The use of the software was a far cry from the rather

rudimentary knowledge that most participants had. Indeed, while Fragnito envisioned the chat as an opportunity to discuss art, most participants regarded the chat event as a chance to explore an unknown medium and to talk to friends. In 1998, however, *The Palace* was no longer supported and Fragnito had to look for ways of resuscitating a version of *The Palace* that did not depend on the main provider. After many attempts to recreate the application by using different software, Fragnito contacted one of *The Palace*'s creators, who provided her with enough tools and information to keep the software running.

While the online gallery remained open throughout the year, most interaction occurred during *CyberPowWow*'s biennial chat events. These events or powwows were celebrated in artist-run centres and galleries, where participants were invited to view new digital work showcased in the website and to chat with other Native artists and audiences. Once in the gallery, more savvy participants taught other visitors how to browse the Internet and join the chat. This on-site collaboration was one of *CyberPowWow*'s many strategies to instill a sense of community among participants. The idea of calling these events powwows instead of just openings shows the project's debt to pan-Indian imaginations of tradition and its orientation towards community building. The last of these powwows took place in May 2004, and shortly after that *CyberPowWow* ceased to exist, remaining only as a database of Aboriginal new media art. Technical difficulties, lack of funding and the enormous time and effort that the project required from its main operator, Fragnito, are all factors that, ultimately, brought it to an end.

The story of *CyberPowWow* illustrates the difficulties faced by any emerging art world. For Becker, the success of an art world depends on the mobilization of people and

resources.⁶³ *CyberPowWow* faced know-how and funding restrictions that are not unusual in other Aboriginal new media art projects. In fact, according to Rice, *CyberPowWow* was a project “ahead of its time.”⁶⁴ As I discussed in chapter 4, the Internet had barely reached Aboriginal remote communities at the time, and the majority of those in urban areas had only online access at public terminals. Added to this restriction, *CyberPowWow*’s artistic nature might have contributed to alienating those outside the urban arts community. Despite the use of new media, its audience did not vary much from the one that followed *Nation to Nation*’s previous events. Most online interaction took place in the context of *CyberPowWow*’s openings. These two-day events, hosted in art galleries, drew an urban audience interested in contemporary Aboriginal art and a few outsiders curious about the technology.⁶⁵ While the network of participants that joined *CyberPowWow* extended from Charlottetown to Montreal, the spread of the network is less connected to the use of new media than to the support the project received from the artist-run centre scene.⁶⁶ In effect, apart from the early collaboration with Circle Vision

⁶³“To understand the birth of new art worlds, then, we need to understand, not the genesis of innovations, but rather the process of mobilizing people to join in a cooperative activity on a regular basis.” Becker, 310-311.

⁶⁴Ryan Rice, in discussion with the author.

⁶⁵The difficulty in attracting Aboriginal audiences is a problem of many contemporary Aboriginal artists and curators. Rice, for example, referred to this problem when I interviewed him in April 2007: “There are these barriers; there are these rules that govern these spaces around art (...) Creativity, traditionally, is celebrated more... you can touch, you can smell. So *CyberPowWow* comes from that interaction. And it could only exist with the community and I think that’s when the downfall is now because the community doesn’t have... may still have no access to it...”

The lack of proper measuring techniques also makes difficult the assessment of Aboriginal new media audiences. This was mentioned by Steve Loft in our interview in July 2007: “You can track the number of people. You can track how long they stay. You don’t know more.”

⁶⁶In *CPW04: Unnatural Resources* the network of gathering sites included The Walter Phillips Gallery at the Banff Centre, EMMedia Gallery in Calgary, Tribe in Saskatoon, Urban Shaman in Winnipeg,

and Oboro, *CyberPowWow* received support from institutions such as the Banff Centre and Tribe Inc., in Saskatoon.

According to Fragnito, the project was successful at instilling a sense of togetherness online, even if it never evolved into a permanent space, an artist-run centre that the community would fully appropriate.⁶⁷ As in the “real” powwow, participation was sporadic, often restricted to the actual offline event, when the community had access to computers and was guided in the use of *The Palace* application.⁶⁸ Funding restrictions also limited the scope of the project, forcing *CyberPowWow* to return to an only-Native environment in its last version.

“I had been thinking a lot at that time about Native artists and communities and how Native artists were sort of really flung across,” Fragnito recalled at a CRUMB Seminar in 2001.⁶⁹ The idea of building up an Aboriginal space online where artists could meet and show their work was a new take on an issue that had troubled the Aboriginal arts community since the first SCANA meetings: the lack of Aboriginal artistic venues. However, what distinguished *CyberPowWow* from previous Aboriginal new media projects was its understanding of the Internet as a territory that could be claimed and appropriated by the community, as the project’s identification as an “Aboriginally determined territory in cyberspace” suggests. The imagination of cyberspace as a social

InterAccess electronic media arts centre in Toronto, Artengine in Ottawa, Oboro in Montreal, Eyelevel Gallery in Halifax and Confederation Centre Art Gallery in Charlottetown.

⁶⁷Skawennati Tricia Fragnito, in discussion with the author, January 2008.

⁶⁸Ryan Rice, in discussion with the author.

⁶⁹CRUMB stands for Curatorial Resource for Upstart Media Bliss, a collective based in the U.K. Fragnito’s presentation took place during the seminar “Curating New Media,” organized by CRUMB and held at the Gallery of Ottawa in 2001. See Fragnito, “Distribution.”

space and the community as online performance model that evolved from it would have a lasting influence on the Aboriginal new media art world and future Aboriginal new media art projects.

CyberPowWow's "Aboriginallly determined territory" appropriated the cyberlibertarian representations of the Internet as a "frontier" and as a "knowledge space" that were widely available in the mid-1990s. In fact, *Nation to Nation* proposed to conquer and settle in cyberspace in line with the most radical cyberlibertarian rhetoric. The engagement with the discourses surrounding the Internet became more pronounced in *CPW 2K: CyberPowWow* and *CPW04 Unnatural Resources*. By this time, Fragnito was the project's only operator and producer. The curator's interest in technology, the incorporation of Aboriginal artists such as Pechawis, Lewis and Johnston, who were already working with new media, and the support of Diamond, were all factors that facilitated the project's engagement with cyberculture.⁷⁰

In the first *CyberPowWow*, references to the "conquest" of cyberspace and the frontier experience are subtle. The most evident allusion, apart from the website's logo, is the title of Rice's work, "We come in peace." The general mood is exploratory, even cautious, as in Audra Simpson's "Lola BigBear, Love and the Net," a piece about the risks – and potential – of online anonymity.⁷¹ Despite this timid approach, the overall image of the Internet is positive. The new medium is regarded as "the latest story-telling

⁷⁰Ryan Johnston is a Banff-based designer who collaborated with Fragnito and L'Hirondelle. Archer Pechawis is a curator, performance and new media artist. Jason Lewis is a digital artist and assistant professor in the department of Digital Image/Sound and the Fine Arts at Concordia University in Montreal.

⁷¹Audra Simpson is a Mohawk anthropologist. See Simpson, "Lola BigBear, Love and the Net."

medium,”⁷² a powerful cultural repository, and the home of a new pan-Indian community:

Even though we know that First Nations always had contact with one another, our communities until recently, were isolated by a certain regionalism, one that was perceived as much as it was physical, because. I think, in our collective mind we felt restricted by the reservation system.

The events of 1990 (widely known as the Mohawk Crisis) helped to change that (...) Since then, a new community has been forming, one whose membership criteria is self-determined, not imposed by colonialist guidelines. This community doesn't have a territory, because it doesn't need one: it has the infinite expanses of cyberspace.⁷³

References to the “frontier” became more obvious in the last two

CyberPowWows. In *CPW 2K: CyberPowWow* for instance, the goal is to explore “the space where Native meets non-Native.”⁷⁴ Historically, this border zone was the frontier, the “site of epic conflict and covert desire,” as Pechawis elliptically describes it. In an attempt to subvert the historical implications of the frontier metaphor, Pechawis and Fragnito, *CPW 2K*'s curators, invited Native and non-Native artists to collaborate in the design of the “Aboriginally determined territory.” However, despite the celebratory tone of the curatorial essays, this “branching out” was a polemical move on Fragnito's part. At the time, the dialogue between the Aboriginal and the non-Aboriginal art worlds was not usual and seemed to contradict the identity politics of much of the Aboriginal contemporary art scene (chapter 1). Even for Fragnito, “branching out” did not mean the dissolution of the project's Aboriginality. On the contrary, the curator's idea, expressed sometime later in “Five Suggestions for Better Living,” was to create opportunities for a

⁷²Fragnito, “CPW:FAQ.”

⁷³Fragnito, “Moccasin Telegraph.”

⁷⁴Pechawis, “Not So Much a Land Claim.” *CyberPowWow*.

more inclusive Aboriginal arts community: “There is strength in numbers. I propose that if you are an Indian and an artist, you are automatically an Indian artist.”⁷⁵ Fragnito would further explore the idea of extending the definition of Aboriginal art and Aboriginal identity in general in later projects such as *Imagining Indians in the 25th Century*, which I discuss in chapter 6.

It is only in *CPW04: Unnatural Resources* that the electronic frontier is directly referred to by co-curator Jason Lewis: “If we consider cyberspace to be another frontier undergoing colonization, and if we’re concerned with how that colonization plays out, might we not do well to reflect on the historical course of colonization in this continent?”⁷⁶ Lewis’ reference connects the frontier metaphor with that historical ugliness to which Lockard alludes. The tone of Lewis’ essay suggests scepticism and an awareness of the politics associated with the image: “By reflecting in the past and seeking to understand how that history shares similar dynamics with the new New World, the exhibition helps ensure that there are no reservations in cyberspace.”⁷⁷

What Lewis adopts from the frontier metaphor, though, is the idea that cyberspace is a *terra nullius*: “Cyberspace has no native population that might contest the notion that it is *terra nullius* and thus subject to control by the first immigrants who might claim it.”¹ The doctrine of *terra nullius* permitted the colonization of the American West by ignoring Aboriginal peoples’ rights to the land under colonization.⁷⁸ As such, the doctrine

⁷⁵Fragnito, “Five Suggestions for Better Living,” 232.

⁷⁶Lewis, “Terra Nullius, Terra Incognito.”

⁷⁷Ibid.

is inseparable from the frontier experience; it is the legal artifice that justified the colonization of Aboriginal land.

Lewis' ambivalent adoption of the frontier metaphor reveals a critical engagement with cyberlibertarianism. On one hand, the metaphor permits *CyberPowWow*'s participants to imagine the Internet as a territory that can be "colonized" and profited from by a largely deterritorialized Aboriginal arts community. To avoid falling into the colonial undertone of the metaphor, however, *CyberPowWow*'s team imagines cyberspace as *terra nullius* and introduces the project as an Aboriginal solution to the excesses of both pioneers and "rapacious capitalist(s)."⁷⁹

CyberPowWow's critical engagement with cyberlibertarianism also affected how the project imagined community. In "First Nation Territory in Cyber Space Declared: No Treaties Needed," one of the texts that accompany the *CyberPowWow 2* exhibition, Aboriginal art historian and artist Jolene Rickard regards *CyberPowWow* as a new pan-Aboriginal strategy to move beyond the restrictions of the reserve system: "CyberPowWow 2 is an odd talisman but nevertheless an indication of how Native

⁷⁸About the *terra nullius* doctrine, Giokas and Chartrand, "'Who are the Métis?' A Review of the Law and Policy," 107.

⁷⁹Lewis, "Terra Nullius, Terra Incognito."

This imagination of cyberspace as *terra nullius* would be later questioned by Fragnito and Lewis in an article published in 2005, a year after the termination of *CyberPowWow*. In this essay, the authors recognized the possibility of a built-in online politics:

Since its beginnings, cyberspace has been imagined as a free and open space, much like the New World has imagined by the Europeans (...) But 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.

See Lewis and Fragnito, "Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace," 30.

people are struggling to subvert the colonial borders of the reservation.”⁸⁰ For Rickard, the space provided by *CyberPowWow* is home to an increasingly deterritorialized community. However, unlike *Speaking the Language of Spiders* or *Dene/Cree ElderSpeak*, this community does not precede the project; it is constituted by it:

“CyberPowWow 2 is a site set up to create a Native cyber community. We are all part of it.”⁸¹ This “cyber community” presents many of the characteristics identified by Rheingold. It is a community of interest, constituted primarily by contemporary Aboriginal artists interested in new media. It is also a community of equals, where free expression is nurtured. Finally, it is a community where some individuals choose to remain anonymous behind their avatars.

On the other hand, *CyberPowWow*’s imagined communality also challenges the virtual community metaphor by proposing offline interaction as necessary to the community’s growth and development. In fact, *CyberPowWow* never fully developed as “just” a chat room or online gallery, but depended on the offline openings and gatherings to maintain the online community alive. As Fragnito explains,

The idea that only being on the Internet wasn’t good enough. When I first started it I knew that not everybody would know how to use the Palace and not everybody would know how to use the World Wide Web or browser. So what I wanted to do is to make sure that people did come together in groups, at real places which have since come to be called “gathering sites,” where they could help each other access the internet; help each other to learn how to use the Palace, talk to one another and of course eat food.⁸²

⁸⁰Rickard, “First Nation Territory in Cyber Space Declared.”

⁸¹Ibid.

⁸²Fragnito, “Distribution.”

In his discussion of art worlds and innovation, Becker notes the fate of innovations depend on technological know-how and access, and on distributors' and audiences' receptivity. *CyberPowWow* is a perfect illustration of this dynamic. It lasted while its main contributors maintained the relations of production and reproduction necessary for its survival. However, *CyberPowWow*'s biggest obstacle throughout its life was the Aboriginal arts community's ambivalence towards the Internet. "I feel tired sometimes and I do feel sceptical and I do wonder why I bother trying to use this medium to talk about being Native when people (...) think of the Internet as such a commercial place that it couldn't even be used as art."⁸³ This ambivalence was not new. It had been present since the first day, during the "Drum Beats to Drum Bytes" gathering, and it was a reaction against the increasing commercialization of the medium. Nevertheless, *CyberPowWow* was a crucial step in the constitution of a "cultural formation," that is, a small group of artists who were not just interested in the Internet, but identified as Aboriginal new media artists. By embracing the position of the Aboriginal new media artist, artists such as Pechawis, Lewis and Fragnito, already known in the Aboriginal contemporary art world, helped to legitimize the emerging scene.

The adoption of the "virtual community" as a strategy for the consolidation and expansion of the Aboriginal arts community contrasts with the community empowerment model prevalent within the emergent Aboriginal new media art field. *CyberPowWow* imagined community as a product as much as a producer of Aboriginal new media art. This community was constituted not just by Aboriginal artists, but by non-Native artists

⁸³Ibid.

and cultural producers who sympathized with Aboriginal artists. While the inclusion of these non-Aboriginal members proved to be controversial, the project revealed the increasing questioning of the identity politics pursued by Aboriginal artists since the 60s and discussed in chapter 1. Similarly, the search of an online territory for a deterritorialized community demonstrates, first, the persisting role of land in the imagination of both Aboriginality and Aboriginal community and, second, the influence of the cyberlibertarian imaginary on the artists and curators involved in *CyberPowWow*. The artists behind the project regarded the “colonization” of the online territory as a necessary step to the constitution of a virtual community. In line with pan-Indian imaginaries, the imagination of this new “land” was deterritorialized in the sense that it refuted any association with specific reserves. The pan-Indian association between community and land could be easily translated online thanks to the popularization of the cyberspace metaphor. If the Internet was a territory, it was possible to imagine an “Aboriginally determined territory in cyberspace.” Finally, the construction of an online art gallery is consistent with Native artists’ plight for mainstream recognition.

The practice and imagination of community as online performance was an important step to extending the reach of Aboriginal new media art beyond the drumbytes circle towards the artists-run centre scene, funders and non-Native audiences.

CyberPowWow was an important catalyst in the formation of alliances that, as I explore in the next chapter, would facilitate the development of the Aboriginal new media art scene. The celebration of chat events at artist-run centres extended Aboriginal new media art’s exposure beyond the Internet and the BNMI, and the imagination of an online territory provided the emergent Aboriginal new media art field with a strategy to bypass

mainstream art galleries and institutions. It is in this sense that we can agree with Williams that *CyberPowWow* is a “lived form” that not only mediated already existing needs and discourses, but facilitated a new imagination of community, which in turn would affect future practices of production and reproduction in the Aboriginal new media art field.

While the “virtual community” strategy was not as successful as *CyberPowWow*’s team would have wished, it certainly influenced future projects. The next chapter will be dedicated to exploring the transition from a model of community as online performance, inaugurated by *CyberPowWow* and followed by Maskegon-Iskwew’s *Drumbytes.org* and Steve Loft’s *Storm Spirits*, to the consolidation of community as poetics.

CHAPTER 6

THE INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF ABORIGINAL NEW MEDIA ART: COMMUNITY AS POETICS

When an innovation develops a network of people who can cooperate nationwide, perhaps even internationally, all that is left to do to create an art world is to convince the rest of the world that what is being done is art, and deserves the rights and privileges associated with that status.¹

With the advent of the 21st century, more Aboriginal artists began adopting the Internet in their practice, encouraged by the popularization of the World Wide Web and the increased access to computers, software and bandwidth. Parallel to this trend, Aboriginal new media artists started to be recognized as such and, after over six years of working online, began developing their own venues and critical framework. This is a period of consolidation of the Aboriginal new media art world, during which Aboriginal new media artists defined their position and position-takings vis-à-vis other artistic disciplines and the new media art world in general.

Two factors facilitated the consolidation of the Aboriginal new media art field. First, Aboriginal new media artists began engaging with the aesthetic potential of the Internet. This engagement resulted in an increased repertoire of practices and strategies, – in Bourdieu’s terms a space of possibilities – associated with Aboriginal new media art. The development of this repertoire would prove crucial to the articulation of an aesthetic rationale that, as Becker notes in the quote that opens this chapter, legitimizes Aboriginal new media art works as not just “art” but “new media art.” As a corollary, the emphasis on aesthetics would differentiate Aboriginal new media art from Aboriginal new media,

¹Becker, 339.

reducing the ambiguity of early projects and distancing Aboriginal new media artists from a community empowerment strategy.

Second, as I argued in the previous chapter, the focus on collaboration, typical of the community empowerment and community as online performance models produced what Williams calls a “cultural formation,” an informal network of artists, curators, organizations and audiences engaged in the making and reception of Aboriginal new media art. As I also noted in chapter 5, this collaboration had different forms depending on how Aboriginal practitioners conceptualized and used the Internet. At first, artists gathered around the Internet to create works at production facilities. As Becker observes, during this stage in the life of an emerging art world “the circle of cooperation does not go beyond the face-to-face interaction of a local community.”² Later, with the popularization of the Internet and cyberculture debates, Native artists began collaborating online. This shift coincided, and facilitated, a move from a community empowerment model to a community as online performance model.

Virtual communities contributed to bridge the geographical distance that separated artists in the Aboriginal contemporary arts community (chapter 1). The community as online performance model influenced the creation of online venues, such as *CyberPowWow* and *Drumbytes.org*, where artists could gather. Online collaboration and virtual territories dedicated to the discussion and exhibition of new media art contributed to, first, the artists’ *esprit de corps*, a sense of shared interest and common goals that would help delineate the boundaries of the Aboriginal new media art field, and, second, the recognition of the projects as art. The rise of the Web 2.0 and its emphasis on

²Ibid, 314.

social networking would invigorate the community as online performance model, even after the bursting of the dot-com bubble and the decay of the cyberlibertarian imaginary.

The institutionalization of Aboriginal new media art gained momentum in the early 2000s, when projects multiplied, festivals began showcasing Aboriginal new media art and federal and provincial funding bodies created funding for the emergent field. This is the moment when the Aboriginal new media art field became a well-delineated “scene,” which, according to Straw, presents differentiated and coexisting practices, coalitions and a repertoire of forms that “work to produce a sense of community.”³ However, this period of institutionalization also coincides with the weakening of ties among Aboriginal new media artists. Access to hardware, software and private Internet service allow artists to work in isolation, no longer needing the support of production facilities.

Mainstream recognition has reinforced the artistic nature of Aboriginal new media art projects, severing in part the original relationship between Aboriginal new media art and Aboriginal media. Today, the artistic nature of Aboriginal new media art projects takes precedence over its communicative function. This aestheticism impacts on how community is imagined. The more Aboriginal new media art emphasizes its artistic nature and severs its early connection to Aboriginal media, the more community becomes a poetics rather than a participant in the production process. The role of the work of art during this period is to mediate this new imagination of community and, consistent with its status as “lived form,” contribute to the institutionalization of the Aboriginal new media art world.

³Straw, 495.

The Persistence of Community as Online Performance:

Drumbytes.org and Treaty Card

The exploration of virtual communality did not end with *CyberPowWow*. In 2003, Maskegon-Iskwew gave a new impulse to the community as online performance model by resuscitating the old drumbytes network. In *Drumbytes.org*, an “open communal information aggregation project,” Maskegon-Iskwew, a webmaster with APTN at the time, proposed a platform for the development of a nation-wide computer-based multimedia telecommunications network of Aboriginal media and new media artists.⁴ Maskegon-Iskwew’s commitment to the community empowerment model is visible in the project.

The artist came up with the idea of *Drumbytes.org* during the “Drum Beats to Drum Bytes” think-tank. The project had been suspended until 2002, when Maskegon-Iskwew invited a group of Aboriginal media artists and cultural producers to discuss the “Drum Beats to Drum Bytes” report during the “Bridges Consortium II” at the Banff Centre.⁵ As in the 1994 think-tank, concerns about the preservation of Aboriginal languages and intellectual property dominated the agenda.⁶ The group also reviewed Aboriginal new media art projects in search of future strategies to secure an Aboriginal

⁴Maskegon-Iskwew, “Rationale.”

⁵“Bridges” is an international consortium dedicated to the exploration of interdisciplinary collaboration in art, culture, science and technology founded by Celia Pearce and Sara Diamond. The first consortium was held at the Annenberg Center in 2001. The Aboriginal artists and cultural producers that participated in the event were Cheryl L’Hirondelle, Ahasiw Maskegon-Iskwew, Mike MacDonald and George Baldwin.

⁶Sara Diamond (ex director of the Banff New Media Institute), in discussion with the author, March 2008.

presence online.

In June 2003, Maskegon-Iskwew presented *Drumbytes.org* at the group exhibition “Language of Intercession,” curated by Steve Loft for the Art Gallery of Hamilton. The project was simultaneously introduced as an “online community” and a new media art project.⁷ A year later, Maskegon-Iskwew got permission from the then Head of the Aboriginal Arts Department at the Banff Centre, Marrie Mumford, to use the name *Drumbytes.org* for his new project. From that moment until 2005, the artist worked with Aboriginal artist Elvina Piapot, with whom he had collaborated with in *Speaking the Language of Spiders*, on an updated version of *Drumbytes.org*. This new version was brought to a halt by the sudden death of Maskegon-Iskwew in September 2006.

Drumbytes.org was an open source project modeled after Wikipedia – the famous self-generating online encyclopedia – that adopted the principles of a free Web-hosting community. This means that the platform was open to anybody who wished to partake in the project, even though as in the case of the drumbytes network, the main target was the Aboriginal arts community. Both tool and space, the project was divided into three sections: “tipiwiki members camp,” a customized platform for the development of a free Web-hosting community; a section dedicated to new media art news published by the members of the community; and a homepage with the project’s general information. The tipiwiki application was free, and it only required members to register a username and password to join in.

⁷Maskegon-Iskwew, “About.”

“Open communal information aggregation” refers to collaborative and communally regulated processes of knowledge construction, which often benefit from free Web-hosting services. In the case of *Drumbytes.org*, the network relied on the use of a wiki-based content management system (CMS) called tikiwiki. Tikiwiki is a free software and open source CMS that allows data management online via a browser. In Maskegon-Iskwew’s hands, the tikiwiki application became the “*tipiwiki*,” the actual “members camp” where the community posted news, exchanged advice and discussed themes connected with the Aboriginal media art and new media art fields. The *tipiwiki* was particularly austere compared to *CyberPowWow*’s exuberant colours and did not have the explicit aesthetic intention of *Speaking the Language of Spiders*. It was, in fact, organized as a newsletter with a big window of text in the centre and a series of commands on the left side of the screen. The lack of imagery and the predominance of earth tones throughout the page evoked the dryness and the austerity of Indian camps of the American and the Canadian West, a reference that is further reinforced by the name “*tipiwiki*.”

The development of the *tipiwiki* application reveals that, like *CyberPowWow*, *Drumbytes.org* still adheres to a view of the Internet as a social space and follows the community as online performance model. It is therefore to be expected that the project engages with metaphors such as the “electronic frontier” and the “virtual community.” However, conceived in 2003, *Drumbytes.org* faced a different discursive scenario that preserved and reformulated some of the early tenets associated with cyberspace. This new scenario is characterized by growing concerns about cyberspace’s commercialization and

its potential effect on users' freedom of expression.⁸ A symptom of this change in popular perceptions is the open source movement's popularity.

Despite discursive differences and strategic tensions within the open source movement, the general trend is to resist any corporate attempt to control cyberspace by appealing to horizontal, and often anarchic, forms of online organization. The model of community proposed is loose and based on shared values such as free software and collaboration.⁹ Unlike the model of virtual community proposed by Rheingold, the open source movement imagines community as a "great babbling bazaar," where members drop by and exchange information at their own convenience.¹⁰ While still consistent with Wellman's social networks and the idea of communication communities, the "bazaar model" lacks the sharing of feelings and warmth mentioned by Rheingold as one of the characteristics of virtual communities. Indeed, the most important value within open source communities is rational knowledge. Status within open source networks is, thus, dependent on the quality and usefulness of the contribution.

The ideology of collaboration and spontaneous sharing has traveled well beyond the technological sectors, and it is now being adopted in different fields such as journalism, art, and science.¹¹ This shift has enriched the definition of open source to encompass blogs, video and photo sharing. In all incarnations, collaboration and sharing constitute a "creative commons," that is, an informal community based on free exchange of information and knowledge.

⁸See Mosco, *The Digital Sublime* and Zittrain, *The Future of the Internet and How to Stop it*.

⁹Ljungberg, "Open Source Movements as a Model for Organizing."

¹⁰Raymond, *The Cathedral and the Bazaar*.

¹¹Coleman, "The Political Agnosticism of Free and Open Source Software."

The image of a “creative commons” is present in the imagination of cyberspace since the Internet’s popularization. A well-known and fully articulated version of it is found in Pierre Lévy’s notion of “collective intelligence,” defined as “networks of knowledge production, transaction, and exchange”.¹² For Lévy, the development of this collective intelligence is crucial for the successful realization of the “knowledge age.” Collective intelligence depends on unrestricted mobility and individual ethos. It is in this emphasis on “freedom” and “openness” that Lévy’s words foresee the ideology of the open source movement. If collective intelligence requires a commons, this commons is regarded as an instrument to achieve the full realization of the individual’s potentialities in a world where history and difference have been wiped out.

The open source model found an appropriate platform in the Web 2.0.¹³ The new “architecture of participation” is based on social software that permits users to generate content instead of simply consuming it.¹⁴ Examples of Web 2.0 applications are YouTube, a web video sharing site, Flickr, a community photo sharing application, or Wikipedia, the famous online thesaurus. The Web 2.0 replaced the Web 1.0 since the burst of the dot-com bubble, marking a shift from commercialization to participation. Tim O’Reilly, author of the Web 2.0 concept, observes that

the central principle behind the success of the giants born in the Web 1.0 era who have survived to lead the Web 2.0 era appears to be this, that they have embraced the power of the web to harness collective intelligence.¹⁵

¹²Lévy, 2.

¹³The open source movement is older than the Web 2.0. Open source networking dates from the beginning of the Internet, in the 1960s. The term “open source” came about later, in 1998, with the formation of the Open Source Initiative, founded by Eric Raymond and Bruce Perens.

¹⁴Singel, “Are You Ready for Web 2.0?”

¹⁵O’Reilly, “What is Web 2.0.”

O'Reilly's words reveal the persistent influence of early 90s conceptualization of cyberspace as a virtual social space. The invocation of collective intelligence connects the Web 2.0 concept to the cyberlibertarian imaginary.

As cyberspace depended on the myth of virtuality without differences, the Web 2.0 model enshrines participation and associates it with democracy. Web 2.0 applications permit spontaneous forms of collaboration and collectivism.¹⁶ These new forms of participation challenge the hierarchical structure of traditional organizations and the broadcast model of information distribution. In fact, applications like YouTube and personal blogs "democratize" the production and distribution of information, defying its traditional channels. In this context, the rise of the open source movement is both cause and effect of the Web 2.0. Open source practices encourage horizontal modes of interaction, often transitory and interest-driven.

While *Drumbytes.org* was influenced by the principles of the open source movement, the translation of these principles evidences the lasting influence of the community empowerment model. In fact, unlike the commons evoked by the open source movement, the community imagined by *Drumbytes.org* was not just an online occurrence, but pre-existed the project, which shows Maskegon-Iskwew's loyalty to the network imagined in the drumbytes gathering. Loft made the project's target clear in his curatorial essay that accompanied the official presentation of *Drumbytes.org* at "Language of Intercession":

¹⁶It has been argued that the participatory potential of blogs and podcasts is different from an open source operating system such as Linux. Blogs and podcasts are produced as shared by "prosumers" that utilize commercial content manager Web platforms.

Ahasiw Maskegon-Iskwew uses new technologies to support, strengthen and enrich Native cultural communities by establishing a nation-wide computer-based multimedia telecommunications network for Aboriginal and Indigenous artists working in digital media. This network allows artists to discuss such issues as establishing cultural protocols in creating new media works or using Indigenous cultural material.¹⁷

As a “lived form” the project also followed *CyberPowWow*’s translation of new media art’s strategies and cyberlibertarian imaginary to strengthen the relations of production and reproduction among Aboriginal media artists, curators and audiences. For instance, the project provided the Aboriginal media arts and new media arts community with a tool for information, collaboration and exchange and a venue for promotion of Aboriginal new media art, while permitting the incorporation of the open source model and the imagination of a creative commons as not just aesthetic forms, but communication strategies. This double intention shows that *Drumbytes.org* is still a hybrid project that negotiates the community empowerment and community as online performance models.

In line with *CyberPowWow*, *Drumbytes.org*’s main target was the community of Aboriginal media and new media artists that, despite geographic dispersion, were already meeting at conferences, exhibitions and artist-run centers. The role of *Drumbytes.org* was, in this context, to operate as a more permanent social space, where the largely imagined Aboriginal media arts community could gather and grow. Maskegon-Iskwew describes this community as “broadly distributed, nomadic, yet intimately connected.”¹⁸ The reference to intimacy challenges the informal, sporadic, and often anonymous interventions of members of the “creative commons,” while it associates the project with

¹⁷Loft, “Language of Intercession.”

¹⁸Maskegon-Iskwew, “Rationale.”

more traditional definitions of virtual communality. In practice, participation was seldom anonymous and members often recognized each other, at least by name.

On the other hand, the framing of the project as an “online community” was also a departure from the community empowerment model that had inspired Maskegon-Iskwew during the drumbytes workshop. As a result, the community imagined by Maskegon-Iskwew was not just located outside the project, as a recipient of a tool for its development, but was also imagined as part of its structure, as a community that is built and performed online. Compared to *CyberPowWow*, however, the role ascribed to both participants and technology in the community performance was ambitious.

Drumbytes.org did not rely on offline events to encourage participation. As in the “creative commons” model that serves as a reference to the project, participants were expected to spontaneously commit to the online community.

While *Drumbytes.org* follows the “Drum Beats to Drum Bytes” agenda, the community imagined was open to new members rather than being restricted to the Aboriginal media arts and new media arts communities. This important difference reveals Maskegon-Iskwew’s view of community and online networking, a view that had already challenged the opinion of many of the participants to the “Drum Beats to Drum Bytes gathering.” Apropos, L’Hirondelle recalls that “Ahasiw and I wanted Drum Bytes to go on and I remember the discussion *Drumbytes.net* or *Drumbytes.org*, because *it is an organism that grows*.”¹⁹ On the other hand, as in *CyberPowWow*, the fact *Drumbytes.org* was open to non-Aboriginal members did not undermine the clear Aboriginal identity of the project and the social space created. This Aboriginal identity was evident in the

¹⁹Cheryl L’Hirondelle, in discussion with the author. Italics are mine.

playful references to the teepee in “tipiwiki,” and the allusion to drum beats in “drumbytes.” Further, *Drumbytes.org* was an Aboriginal venue and tool that was meant to serve the needs of a pan-Indian Aboriginal media arts community. The opening of the space to, potentially, non-Aboriginal peoples responded more to a need to promote Aboriginal art and knowledge than to incorporate non-Aboriginal participants to the community:

Drumbytes.org provides a space for contributing to the growing body of knowledge about Aboriginal media art works, artists, presenters, distributors and critical theory. It is a development studio, presentation vehicle, and promotional tool for Aboriginal artists creating work specifically for networked presentation, for any other works that can be re-versioned to benefit from web presentation, and a communal space for development and dialogue on issues of historic and contemporary Aboriginal arts critical theory.²⁰

While the abrupt end of the project complicates any assessment of its success and its impact on the future development of the Aboriginal new media art field, *Drumbytes.org* was faced with some of the difficulties present in other Aboriginal new media art initiatives. According to Aboriginal curator Barry Ace, co-founder with Maskegon-Iskwew of the Aboriginal Curatorial Collective (ACC), the tipiwiki application was too complicated and after Maskegon-Iskwew’s death, it became even more difficult to maintain.²¹ Added to this, there is no indication that the project had been adopted en masse. For Loft, with whom Maskegon-Iskwew developed *Storm Spirits*, an online Aboriginal new media art gallery, *Drumbytes.org* was “ahead of its time.” “People were not used to social networking. It just didn’t happen,” he notes.²² Despite these

²⁰Maskegon-Iskwew, “Rationale.”

²¹Barry Ace (Aboriginal artist and curator), in discussion with the author, April 2007.

²²Steve Loft (Aboriginal curator), in discussion with the author, July 2007.

difficulties, the project was successful in incorporating the open source strategy to the repertoire of positions-takings of the growing Aboriginal new media art field.

L'Hirondelle's *Treaty Card* proposes another application of the community as online performance model that also announces the imagination of community as poetics. The project, premiered in 2002 at the Mendel Art Gallery in Saskatoon, is a web-based work where viewers can log-in and create their own treaty card or modify their existing one.²³ In line with L'Hirondelle's interest in language and code (chapter 5), the project is organized as a series of pages that explain and provide users with the tools to create their own treaty card. Viewers access the project by clicking on a treaty medal. The project's home explains the goal of the work and summarizes the history of the treaty card in Canada. In the lower portion of the page, a series of commands organize the information presented in the site. "Display," for example, shows previous treaty cards, while "search" permits viewers to look for specific cards in the database. "Create" leads viewers to a page where they can fill the information they want to appear in their treaty card, including a photo or image. "Help" clarifies the terminology used in the form. "Use" explains when and how the card can be used. "Comments" lists all the comments left by viewers and users of the site. Finally, "links" and "shoutouts" introduce, respectively, links to other pages in connection to Aboriginal treaties and the list of people and organizations that participated in the realization of the project. The option "exit" returns the viewer to the first page.

²³The Indian status card is a document issued by Indian and Northern Affairs Canada that certifies that the cardholder is a registered Indian.

The project has been shown in several occasions in the context of new media and contemporary art exhibitions since 2002. Some of these shows are "Database Imaginary," curated by Anthony Kiendl (2005-2006), "Grrls, Chicks, Sisters and Squaws: Les citoyennes du Cyberspace," curated by Fragnito (2006), and "21," curated by Eldwood Jimmy (2007).

Typical of L'Hirondelle's new media work, the artist appropriates the colours and pattern of the actual treaty card as part of the website's background (the red and white colours of the Canadian flag and a red band on the top of the page with the shape of a Canadian flag in black superimposed).²⁴ But the appropriation does not end there. The treaty card created online is identical to the official Indian status card. In *Treaty Card*, L'Hirondelle's intention is that those creating their cards can use them in real life, challenging governmental regulations. As I discussed in chapter 5, appropriation is a well-known strategy in the new media art field, particularly among "net artists" such as Bunting, Shulgin or Bosma. *Treaty Card* reveals the lasting influence of Bunting on L'Hirondelle's practice.²⁵

Treaty Card also engages with some of the concerns about identity present in contemporary Aboriginal art (chapter 1). More specifically, the project explores how Aboriginal identity is constructed vis-à-vis the Indian status card and challenges the role played by the Canadian government in this process of identification and community building. L'Hirondelle questions, for example, the colonial imposition of an identification card on only one of the treaty parties: "Perhaps this is why the card is a Canadian government issue and doesn't acknowledge the original treaty agreement as much as it still attempts to control the identity & movement of the card holder."²⁶

Unlike *CyberPowWow*, *Treaty Card* does not propose an alternative – virtual – territory for those disenfranchised, but provides viewers with a tool to re-imagine

²⁴L'Hirondelle would explore a similar strategy of appropriation in *ArtinJun*, where she introduces a cracked version of the Artengine gallery website. The work is explored in this chapter.

²⁵See chapter 5 for more information on L'Hirondelle's exposure to net.art's strategies and Bunting's work in particular.

²⁶L'Hirondelle, "About."

themselves and their attachment to land and community. Without eliminating territory from the dynamic of Aboriginal identity, *Treaty Card* is in line with pan-Indian definitions of identity that dissociate Aboriginality from the reserve and reconnect it to a universal notion of “land” (chapter 1). The double move of appropriating the treaty card as a marker of Aboriginal identity, while challenging its colonial implications, is an example of pan-Indian deterritorializations of land and re-territorialization of identity observed in urban Aboriginals and disenfranchised groups (chapter 1). In fact, many participants are disenfranchised Aboriginal people who seek to reconnect with their imagined origins. As Valaskakis notes, in their attempt to claim land, Native North Americans employ strategies of difference that appropriate, recall and oppose popular stereotypes and romanticizations of Native identity. L’Hirondelle’s project is an example.

Treaty Card is not just a platform to create documentation, but an archive of previously designed cards. The section “display” lists all the cards by legal name, alias and date and place of birth. L’Hirondelle humorously calls this list “ndn band roll,” where ndn is the name that the artist uses to refer to her body of work. This “band roll” includes some curious cardholders such as the former U.S. vice president Dick Cheney, alias “The Boss Man,” and the former U.S. president George Bush. The possibility of accessing previously created cards reveals that, like *Drumbytes.org* and *CyberPowWow*, *Treaty Card* displays the traces of online interventions. However, in L’Hirondelle’s project, those participants leaving traces are not expected to belong to a community that precedes the project, but to form through it, constituting an ephemeral community of interest. In effect, *Treaty Card* is only complete as long as people create treaty cards and display them. It is only then that the project can actually challenge the dynamics of

colonial identification. Like *CyberPowWow* and *Drumbytes.org*, it is through this online participation that a “ndn band” emerges.²⁷

The main difference between *Treaty Card*, *CyberPowWow* and *Drumbytes.org* is the function assigned to the community imagined and the impact of this imagined community on Aboriginal new media art’s relations of production and reproduction. As we observed in the case of *CyberPowWow* and *Drumbytes.org*, the community as online performance model was oriented towards the strengthening and promotion of a community primarily constituted by Aboriginal media and new media artists and curators. The strategy was in fact successful given that the community as online performance model not only inspired collaboration among artists, but provided the Aboriginal new media art field with a space of positions and position-takings.

In L’Hirondelle’s work, on the other hand, the online performance of community is not directed towards the Aboriginal new media art world, but towards general Native and non-Native audiences, and has no explicit intention to strengthen the bonds among Aboriginal new media art practitioners. Unlike community media projects, the community does not precede the work and the project is explicitly framed as new media art. In the context of *Treaty Card*, then, the performance of community online becomes an aesthetic strategy whose goal is to question governmental identity politics. The early hybridity between Aboriginal new media and Aboriginal new media art seems to have dissipated once the work of art is purposely severed from the dynamic of the art world to which it belongs. The privileged function of the lived form is now to crystallize

²⁷ About the “ndn band,” L’Hirondelle explains that “some of the people that log on and make cards. I don’t know them (...) what I got out of it is that there is a whole age range disenfranchised, mixed blood, middle age Aboriginal people from all over the world who see the site as a way to get their card.” Teachers and curators have even asked the artist for permission to use the work to illustrate discussions about Aboriginal treaties and land in the classroom. Cheryl L’Hirondelle, in discussion with the author.

the aesthetic conventions and strategies of an art world that is seeking legitimization. As a result, the community imagined in the artwork and the community involved in its imagination would become more distant and disconnected.

If the work of art is increasingly a platform to negotiate new conventions and aesthetic procedures, this gradual transformation should not be interpreted as a direct result of institutionalization. Changes in the space of positions certainly affect the space of position-takings but, unlike Bourdieu, I would add that changes in lived forms also affect the development of the field as a whole. With the institutionalization of Aboriginal new media art, discussed in the next section, the gap between Aboriginal new media and Aboriginal new media art became more pronounced. The community empowerment model, typical of Aboriginal media initiatives and present in early Aboriginal new media art projects, receded. The death of Maskegon-Iskwew, a strong supporter of community empowerment through new media art, helped to further widen the gap between the two scenes. The community as online performance strategy, which helped in the formation of the Aboriginal new media art field, would also recede as specialized social networking applications such as My Space, Facebook, LinkedIn or Friendster would provide ready-to-go options for the communication needs of artists and curators.²⁸ The

²⁸An example of Aboriginal artists' adoption of more specialized social networking application for communication and development purposes is the Aboriginal Curatorial Collective (ACC)'s use of online applications such as tikiwiki and facebook. ACC was founded by Ace, Rice, Maskegon-Iskwew and Native sculptor Ron Noganosh to advocate, support and promote on behalf of the Aboriginal arts community. The advocacy group has an institutional address at the Rama reserve, in Ontario, but lacks a permanent gathering site. At first, ACC counted with a tikiwiki to distribute the information among members. However, the application proved to be too complex and, after the death of Maskegon-Iskwew, the ACC board decided to implement a bulletin board instead. Today, the website provides information about the advocacy group, explains its mission and lists its members. News, publications and an online gallery that features a temporary solo exhibition of Aboriginal artists curated by ACC members are recent additions to the site. Last year, ACC opened a facebook account which today counts 406 members. The application expands the possibilities of the BBS system, facilitating multimedia exchanges and links to members' facebook accounts.

institutionalization of Aboriginal new media art marks a period in which Aboriginal new media artists gained an increased awareness of their new position as “Aboriginal new media artists” and their belonging to a growing Aboriginal new media art field. The creation of online venues and an incipient body of critical writing would contribute to legitimize Aboriginal new media art, not just by defining what Aboriginal new media art is, but implicitly, what it is not. Following Cohen, this process of institutionalization can be regarded as a series of symbolic practices that affirm and reinforce the boundaries of the Aboriginal new media art community.

The Institutionalization of the Aboriginal New Media Art Field

Aboriginal new media art begins in a very real way in (...) “Drum Beats to Drum Bytes”. That is when it found its own voice. You have key players as Ahasiw [Maskegon-Iskwew], Cheryl L’Hirondelle, Skawennati Tricia Fragnito (...) The things that came out of that were *CyberPowWow*, things like *Drumbytes* the website and the network. Everything kind of flows from that.²⁹

As I pointed out in chapter 5, the recognition of Aboriginal new media art as art is an early phenomenon that was influenced not just by the evident aesthetic intentions of most works, but by the involvement of established Aboriginal artists and curators in their production and promotion. Despite this early success, the recognition of Aboriginal new media art as a “new scene” is an ongoing process. As Becker argues, an important factor in the legitimization of an art world is the development of an aesthetic rationale that, in the present context, permits the labelling of Aboriginal new media art not just as art, but

²⁹Steve Loft, in discussion with the author.

as “new media art.”³⁰ Since the early 2000s, various members of the Aboriginal new media art world have mapped the emergent field by compiling lists of artists and works, reviewing strategies and practices and creating venues for the discussion and exhibition of new media art.

In 2002, for example, the late Aboriginal video and new media artist Mike MacDonald presented a provisional Aboriginal new media art canon at Bridges II. This included the online work of Canadian artists such as Jackson2Bears, K. C. Adams, Fragnito, L’Hirondelle, Maskegon-Iskwew, Edward Poitras and Jeff Thomas, as well as American, Australian and New Zealanders such as Buffy Saint-Marie, Jenny Fraser and Lisa Reihana. MacDonald’s canon was the first attempt at mapping the activity of Aboriginal artists online, without reference yet to the existence of an Aboriginal new media art field. The tone of the presentation was humorous and defiant:

In the early 90s I met the director of a new media school in Vancouver. She wanted to know if I had a web site – in those days I didn’t even have a computer. She asked why Indians were not in the Web and argued passionately that we should be. “Good God,” I thought, “This woman is like a missionary – the Christians have been trying to save us for five hundred years – now the geeks are going to do it.”
In fact, even then there were Indians in cyberspace.³¹

In the talk entitled “Indians in Cyberspace,” McDonald identified Aboriginal presence online with the work of Aboriginal contemporary artists, failing to discern between personal pages, online galleries and net art pieces. MacDonald’s presentation was reproduced in the first edition of *Conundrum Online*, Urban Shaman Gallery’s e-zine, launched by Maskegon-Iskwew and Loft in April 2005. *Conundrum Online* focused

³⁰Becker, 164.

³¹MacDonald, “Indians in Cyberspace.”

on “Aboriginal art and culture in the digital land” and featured reviews of digital work as well as in-depth articles on Aboriginal contemporary art.³² The art magazine did not differentiate Aboriginal new media art from Aboriginal contemporary art, even if it dedicated considerable space to review Aboriginal new media art projects such as L’Hirondelle’s *ArtinJun* (2003- Present), Fragnito and Lewis’ *Ohen: Ton Kariwatehkwen- Greetings from the Technological World* (2001), or Dana Claxton’s *The Patient Storm* (2005).

Another contemporary effort to map Aboriginal artists’ presence online is L’Hirondelle’s *ArtinJun*, a “net.art intervention and an homage to Aboriginal artists on the net.”³³ The website, begun in 2003, is a bulletin board, online gallery and new media piece that replicates the design of *Artengine*, an artist-run Internet site and server that hosts the project. At first, L’Hirondelle downloaded images from *Artengine* using cracked software.³⁴ Later, she refined the piece during a residency at Centre for Art Tapes in Halifax. A first version was officially introduced during “Dak’ Art-Lab,” at the sixth Dakar Biennale in May 2004.³⁵ In response to changes introduced in the original *Artengine* website, two more iterations followed in 2005 and 2008.³⁶

³²The four numbers of *Conundrum Online* were released between April 2005 and June 2008.

³³L’Hirondelle, “Who is Artinjun.ca?”

³⁴“The site is based on the design and existence of *Artengine* who also host the project on their server. Most of the code and images are theirs the code copied using a browser or with More, then altered using Pico on my secured space on their server with images from their site downloaded and altered using a cracked version of Fireworks.” Ibid.

³⁵The Dakar Biennale showcases work by contemporary African artists. In 2004, Sara Diamond was invited to preside over the international exhibition of 33 artists from 15 African countries as well as experts from Austria, the U.S. and France. The Dak’ Art-Lab is a laboratory of art and technology opened to artists interested in developing digital art.

³⁶The piece is still under construction.

L'Hirondelle's appropriation of *Artengine*'s visuals is evident in the choice of colours, fonts, logo and background. However, the artist added her own interpretation and commentary to the original platform. For instance, the image that frames the logo in the main page, a photograph of buildings and electrical wires symbolizing modern technology in the urban setting, was replaced with a similar photograph that introduces a series of black birds standing on electrical wires. The birds humorously comment on modern technology's limitations vis-à-vis nature. Similarly, the command French in the upper right section of the *Artengine* site, which allows viewers to access information in French, disappeared and was replaced by "Nêhiyawin," a Cree command. These subtle changes respond to L'Hirondelle's overall goal of

investigating my interests and commitment to nehiyawin (Cree worldview) based on values, roles and responsibilities and a relational existence with the natural laws and a less propriety view of existing in proximity to beings and things; and correlations to that of anarchy, infiltration, intervention, open source, copyleft and piracy.³⁷

But *ArtinJun* is not just a comment on the aesthetics of piracy, copyleft and open source. It is, above all, "an homage" to Aboriginal interventions in the World Wide Web. These range from personal websites to new media art pieces created by artists "in any discipline who self-identify as indigenous" and with some degree of interactivity.³⁸ L'Hirondelle introduces these works in a typical hypertext fashion: each Aboriginal artist listed is a hyperlink to a new media project.

The appropriation of the *Artengine*'s format is part of a larger body of work – to which *Treaty Card* also belongs – that explores different strategies of intervention,

³⁷L'Hirondelle, "ArtinJun."

³⁸Ibid.

infiltration and anarchy, and proposes a more direct relationship with the audience. In the latest version of *ArtinJun*, for example, L'Hirondelle, who until recently chose the featured artists herself, allows viewers to send a biographical statement and a link to their online work for inclusion in the site. This work has to be consistent with the site's mandate to support and promote Aboriginal interventions on the Internet. *ArtinJun*'s focus on appropriation and collaboration not only makes evident L'Hirondelle's familiarity with new media art strategies (chapter 5), but her commitment to open source and Web 2.0 forms of collaboration. Although less evident than in *Treaty Card*, online collaboration is a component of *ArtinJun*.

But L'Hirondelle's project does not just engage with the aesthetics of piracy. *ArtinJun* is above all a venue for the promotion and discussion of Aboriginal "technological based art."³⁹ L'Hirondelle's project does not just map Aboriginal new media art, but Aboriginal artists and cultural producers online. These artists are not just Canadian, but American, Australian and New Zealanders "concerned with technological innovation, both online and in the physical, realtime world."⁴⁰ Following the steps of *CyberPowWow* and *Drumbytes.org*, the last version of *ArtinJun* allows these artists and other members to discuss their art and receive updates about new work online by subscribing to two mailing lists, *Artinjun Artlist* and *NDNSPAM*.

Intended as a forum for the promotion and discussion of Canadian digital arts, BNMI's online magazine, *Horizon Zero*, also played an important role in the mainstream recognition of Aboriginal new media art projects and artists. *Horizon Zero* was created by

³⁹Ibid.

⁴⁰L'Hirondelle, "ArtinJun."

Diamond with the support of the Department of Canadian Heritage and the Banff Centre in 2002. For four years the publication reviewed work by Aboriginal new media artists such as Fragnito, Jackson 2Bears, L'Hirondelle, Lewis, and Hopkins. Part flash animation and part html, *Horizon Zero* dedicated each of its 18 numbers to a different aspect of digital culture. In number 17, "Tell," Diamond examines the emergent Aboriginal new media art field in an article entitled "Aboriginal New Media at Banff: A Story of Gift and Exchange."⁴¹ In this text published in 2005, Diamond outlines the Aboriginal new media art scene while highlighting general trends: "Since the rise of new media and the Internet, Aboriginal cultural producers, programmers, social activists, and artists have engaged with these media as creative and communicative tools."⁴² The director of the BNMI at the time mentions *Speaking the Language of Spiders*, *Inherent Rights Vision Rights* and *CyberPowWow* as examples of this engagement. "All of these pieces are compelling in their use of space, their relational and discursive patterns of narrative, and *their powerful sense of communal identity and contribution*," she later adds.⁴³ For Diamond, Aboriginal new media art has adopted structures and languages typical of new media to share stories and knowledge and to produce a sense of community online. But Aboriginal engagement with new media does not stop here. Native artists have begun looking for ways of building up tools that reflect Native views and values, using Aboriginal languages' structure as their model. Finally, Diamond emphasizes the important role played by the Banff Centre, and the BNMI in particular, in

⁴¹Diamond, "Aboriginal New Media at Banff."

⁴²Ibid.

⁴³Ibid, italics are mine.

assisting Aboriginal artists in the production of works. Diamond's piece is important because it demonstrates the existence of Aboriginal new media artists and not just Aboriginal artists working online. The label is also ambitious: it is applied to Aboriginal artists across Canada, Australia and the U.S.⁴⁴

According to Williams, the differences between a cultural formation and an institution are their duration and flexibility. While the former are temporal and flexible coalitions, institutions are lasting and more rigid. At the beginning, Aboriginal new media art was closer to a cultural formation than an institution. However, recent factors such as the emergence of a critical discourse, the recognition of the field by mainstream institutions and critics, the consolidation of a space of positions and position-takings and the slow development of aesthetic conventions are all symptoms of institutionalization.

In 2006, Urban Shaman launched *Storm Spirits*, an online gallery dedicated to Aboriginal new media art . Curated by Maskegon-Iskwew, the initiative was the culmination of a process, began with MacDonald's canon, that resulted in the differentiation and naming of the emergent Aboriginal new media art field. The idea of *Storm Spirits* is a corollary of "Language of Intercession," the exhibition that Loft had curated for the Art Gallery of Hamilton in 2003. According to Loft, the show "was about contextualizing new media in the space (...) but it didn't really allow the art to be centre stage."⁴⁵ This limitation moved Loft and Maskegon-Iskwew to plan an online space where works could be experienced in full. The opportunity to put the idea in effect came when Loft discovered the Virtual Museum

⁴⁴A similar approach is found in Diamond, "Reframing the Cathedral."

⁴⁵Steve Loft, in discussion with the author.

Canada (VMC) program. The VCM is an initiative of the Canadian Culture Online Program created in 2001 to support the digitalization of federal, provincial and municipal collections. The program hosts over 500 virtual exhibits from a wide range of institutions. The VMC's funding is substantial: 100,000 dollars that, in the case of Urban Shaman, represents the yearly costs of artists' fees, hardware and technical expenses.

The support of the Department of Canadian Heritage proved to be instrumental yet also problematic. Since the beginning of Urban Shaman's relationship with the federal government, the perception was that *Storm Spirits* would not be an easy fit to VMC's mandate. *Storm Spirits* is not a traditional gallery. It is an online project that investigates Aboriginal new media art's contribution to Aboriginal media art history.⁴⁶ Unlike previous Aboriginal new media art projects that showcase works (e.g. *CyberPowWow*, *ArtinJun*, *Drumbytes.org*), *Storm Spirits* is explicitly introduced as an online gallery dedicated to "Aboriginal new media art." In the upper section of the page, a series of commands permit the viewer to browse current, past and future online exhibitions. As in traditional shows, a curatorial essay accompanies each exhibition.

The problems with VMC began when Maskegon-Iskwew and Loft invited L'Hirondelle to present *Wêpinâsowina*, a new media piece that examines the possibility of disseminating a Cree worldview (nêhiyawin) online. *Wêpinâsowina*, "offering" in Cree, is a website that invites viewers to leave a prayer and to explore different links to divination and meditation online. Consistent with L'Hirondelle's new media aesthetics, the project avoids aesthetic formalisms and focuses instead on interaction. Unlike *Treaty Card* or *ArtinJun*, however, there are no visible traces of the prayers left by visitors in the

⁴⁶Maskegon-Iskwew, "Storm Spirits: The Cultural Ecology of Aboriginal New Media Art."

site, which suggests the limits of technological mediation when it comes to the translation of spiritual practices online.

According to Loft, the Department of Canadian Heritage objected to some of the formal characteristics of the project, such as L'Hirondelle's choice of earth tones and the project's "technological complexity," even when the project is considerably less technologically demanding than other pieces in the site.⁴⁷ In fact, as I explain below, L'Hirondelle's use of Quick Time in this work is restricted. Despite Loft's complaints, *Wêpinâsowina*, the first new media piece to be showcased in Storm Spirits, was not featured in the gallery, but only showcased through a link.

Loft's conflict with the federal government is an interesting illustration of the impact of Aboriginal new media art's hybridity on audiences and funding bodies. The tensions between the Department of Canadian Heritage and Urban Shaman were caused by different perceptions of Aboriginal new media art. While the government regarded the gallery as a communication platform and the works as messages, for Loft, the project fostered artistic exploration online. Urban Shaman refused to alter L'Hirondelle's project because it would have interfered with the artist's intention.

Maskegon-Iskwew envisioned *Storm Spirits* not just as an online art gallery, but as a curatorial project, whose meaning surpasses individual showings. In fact, the full name of the project is *Storm Spirits: The Cultural Ecology of Aboriginal New Media Art*, which makes explicit his intention to historicize Aboriginal new media art according to an "ecological paradigm." For Maskegon-Iskwew, this historization should pay attention to

⁴⁷Steve Loft, in discussion with the author.

how local resources developed to nurture producers,
 how changes in regional and national cultural meteorology supported and
 constrained production, recognition and support,
 how communal networks of interaction, inspiration and presentation waxed and
 waned,
 and how new media art practice came to be established within these processes.⁴⁸

The ecological paradigm demanded the inscription of artworks in a larger cultural and historical process, typical of the “new Art History.”⁴⁹ But *Storm Spirits* is not an isolated attempt at developing a rationale for Aboriginal new media art. Maskegon-Iskwew’s curatorial program had been first introduced in an article published, at around the same time, in the anthology *Transference, Tradition, Technology: Native New Media Exploring Visual and Digital Culture* and entitled “Drumbeats to Drumbytes: Globalizing Networked Aboriginal Art.” The essay explores how Native new media artists negotiate animistic principles online and locates Aboriginal new media art within and beyond the traditional art world. According to Maskegon-Iskwew, Aboriginal artists brought the translation of animistic worldviews into cyberspace. This translation is not just a cultural exercise, but an act of political and cultural self-determination: “Networked art practice is becoming a crucial framework for the emerging recognition and empowerment of Indigenous cultures around the world.”⁵⁰ These words reveal, first, Aboriginal new media art’s commitment with identity politics in line with much of the contemporary Aboriginal artistic production and, second, the pan-Indian spirit of the field, which extends beyond the reserve to encompass Aboriginal peoples across the world.

⁴⁸Maskegon-Iskwew, “Storm Spirits.”

⁴⁹The New Art History names a series of developments within art history, which opened the discipline to a social historization, encompassing the study of ideologies, power relations and identity politics. See Harris, *The New Art History*.

⁵⁰Maskegon-Iskwew, 192.

For the co-founder of *Storm Spirits*, Aboriginal new media art is, necessarily, networked art, because it sets in motion a networked sensitivity characteristic of animism. “The cultures of animist peoples require a continual sensitivity to, and negotiation with the cultures of all of the beings and forces of their interconnected worlds,” he explains. From this perspective, it is not strange, then, that many Aboriginal new media artists have insisted on facilitating communal networking online.

Maskegon-Iskwew’s understanding of Native new media art is clearly influenced by the “Drum Beats to Drum Bytes” gathering, and Aboriginal contemporary art’s engagement with identity politics as pointed out by McMaster and discussed in chapter 1. The artist views the Banff gathering as the original impulse of what became the Aboriginal new media art field. Moreover, Aboriginal new media art contributes to Native self-determination by facilitating the communication of cultural values and traditional knowledges within and beyond Aboriginal communities. This definition, which underlies *Storm Spirits*, moved Maskegon-Iskwew to produce works that blend aesthetic exploration and online activism.

Despite the strength of Maskegon-Iskwew’s vision, Loft did not see *Storm Spirits* as a platform for Indigenous activism but as an online art gallery. “I have a hard time conceptualizing the whole web. So, I said, let’s find our little place on that because even a little place is a big place,” he remembers.⁵¹ This view predominated in the project, particularly after the death of Maskegon-Iskwew. Since then, *Storm Spirit*’s mission has remained within the confines of the art world, becoming the only venue exclusively dedicated to the exhibition of Aboriginal new media art.

⁵¹Steve Loft, in discussion with the author.

The development of a body of critical work about Aboriginal new media art was not just important in terms of legitimization of the emergent field before funding bodies, audiences and peers, but in establishing conventions and rules for future production and reproduction. Apropos, Becker states that “a coherent and defensible aesthetic helps to stabilize values and thus to regularize practice.”⁵² And regular patterns of cooperation and practice are, for Becker, essential to the survival of the field.

Although *Storm Spirit* has played a crucial role in the recognition of Aboriginal new media art as a new artistic field, for Loft the project fails to “engage” the audience.⁵³ This means that the gallery functions as a presentation venue rather than a platform for dialogue and information exchange. The Urban Shaman team is, thus, looking for ways to add some interactivity to the project, which implies changing how new media art is conceptualized. According to Loft, *Storm Spirits* still curates new media art as any other form, privileging the aesthetic over the communication aspect of the projects: “I have to get outside this mode of thinking where I say I get a writer and we do an essay. And no, this is different. We have to really take advantage of the work.”⁵⁴

Far from contradictory, Loft’s words points at the hybrid nature of Aboriginal new media art. He regards Aboriginal new media art as different from other disciplines because of its communication potential. As I argued in previous chapters, this hybridity has confused the boundaries between Aboriginal new media art and Aboriginal media since the “Drum Beats to Drum Bytes” gathering. While, with time, Aboriginal new

⁵²Becker, 134.

⁵³Ibid.

⁵⁴Ibid.

media art's institutionalization as an art field subdued this early strong communication character, the link with Aboriginal media still influences how the field is framed. This connection is also evident in the occasional reappearance of community empowerment and community as online performance models in contemporary Aboriginal new media art production.⁵⁵

Aboriginal new media art's institutionalization was triggered by a series of practices of community that, as I explained before, created a series of affective alliances between artists, curators and critics who shared an interest in the communication and aesthetic potential of new media. The appearance of critical writing dedicated to Aboriginal new media art in the early 2000s gave new impulse to the process by incorporating Aboriginal new media art works and artists to the history of Aboriginal art. This association with already legitimized formats, institutions and art worlds is a well-known strategy of institutionalization, as Becker observes in *Art Worlds*: "Aspirants construct histories which tie the work their world produces to already accepted arts."⁵⁶ The framing of Aboriginal new media art as a recent chapter of Aboriginal contemporary art has contributed to the severing of the initial link between Aboriginal new media art and Aboriginal media. The move from framing Aboriginal new media art in terms of "presence," as in MacDonald's canon, to Maskegon Iskwew's historization of the field as an emergent artistic discipline is evidence of this.

A landmark in the legitimization of Aboriginal new media art is the anthology *Transference, Tradition, Technology: Native New Media Exploring Visual and Digital*

⁵⁵ *ArtinJun* is a good example of the persistence of these models in the way Aboriginal new media art imagines community.

⁵⁶ Becker, 339.

Culture, a compendium of critical essays on Aboriginal media and new media art. The book appeared in 2005, and was co-edited by the Banff Centre's Walter Phillips Gallery, the Indigenous Media Group and the Art Gallery of Hamilton.⁵⁷ The authors in *Transference, Tradition, Technology* tie Aboriginal new media art to the history of Aboriginal media art, following the steps of *Storm Spirits*.⁵⁸ In fact, most authors in *Transference, Tradition, Technology* define new media art as not just web-based art, but video, media installations and independent film.

In his two contributions to the volume, Loft, for instance, regards new media art as "the practical application of electronic and digital production media and interrelationships created by its use."⁵⁹ This definition takes into account the work of art as much as the interaction resulting from its production and reception. Loft also argues that Aboriginal new media art cannot be reduced to a matter of identity politics, but should be considered as a question of Aboriginal aesthetics.⁶⁰ Finally, he notes that Aboriginal new media artists are the "outgrowth of a distinctively Aboriginal visual and literary culture," which distinguishes Aboriginal new media artists from non-Aboriginal new media artists and from more traditional Aboriginal practitioners.⁶¹ What makes

⁵⁷The Indigenous Media Group is a Vancouver-based organization dedicated to promoting Aboriginal media art.

⁵⁸Many of the Aboriginal artists and curators associated with new media (i.e. Steven Loft, Marjorie Beaucage, Ahasiw Maskegon-Iskwew and Loretta Todd) contributed to the publication

⁵⁹Loft, "Aboriginal New Media Art," 94.

⁶⁰Ibid, 96.

⁶¹Ibid, 101.

Aboriginal new media artists unique is their blend of oral traditions and everyday visual and media culture.⁶²

The placement of Aboriginal new media art in the history of Aboriginal art runs parallel to a second framing: the presentation of Aboriginal new media art as a recent episode in the history of Native experimentation with technology. This framing is evident in Hopkins' contribution, in which she explores how Aboriginal new media artists translate traditional knowledge online: "Native world views have found a place in cyberspace. (...) Cyberspace has been occupied, transformed, appropriated, and reinvented by Native people in ways similar to how we've always approached real space."⁶³ In Hopkins' essay Aboriginal new media art transcends a simple aesthetic function to become another platform to negotiate Aboriginal contemporary culture. Masayesva's contribution presents a similar argument. In "Indigenous Experimentation," he explores the existing dynamics between Aboriginal artists and new technologies. For Masayesva, Aboriginal media artists face a permanent tension between their culture of origin and the formal training received in non-Aboriginal institutions. In this context, the artist's communal memory mediates media production, conferring the work of art a unique perspective. This cultural mediation is not limited to the form of the work but also affects how the technology is conceptualized and used.

Hopkins and Masayesva's articles show, first, the different and predominant discursive strategies involved in the institutionalization of Aboriginal new media art and, second, the long lasting connection between technology, community and aesthetics in the

⁶²Ibid.

⁶³Hopkins, "Interventions in Digital Territories," 135.

definition of the new field. However, if these discourses are instrumental in conferring Aboriginal new media art critical recognition, they could also reduce Aboriginal new media art to a simple “expression” of either Aboriginal media arts or Aboriginal engagement with technology. This is a risk that Aboriginal new media art faces today, given that, as Straw observes, scenes originate out of processes of affiliation and differentiation among producers and audiences. The survival of the Aboriginal new media art scene depends on its ability to differentiate its relations of production and reproduction from the Aboriginal media art scene and the contemporary Aboriginal art world in general. And to achieve this it not only requires a body of critical work that legitimizes Aboriginal new media art as an authentic and novel expression, but cultural forms such as *CyberPowWow* or *Drumbytes.org* that nurture alliances among producers, curators, funders and audiences that sustain and develop the emerging scene.

Aboriginal new media art’s institutionalization is not restricted to critical recognition. Access to funding is vital to maintain the field’s relations of production and reproduction. In 1998, the Canada Council created specific funding for Aboriginal media and new media artists after thorough consultation with the Aboriginal arts community.⁶⁴ For the Council, Aboriginal media art includes video, film and new media (i.e. internet art, audio art, radio art). The program focuses on the development of emerging, mid-career and established artists. While in theory, Aboriginal media and new media artists could apply to the general media and the new media art programs, only a few actually

⁶⁴These consultations took place during a conference organized by the Canada Council in Ottawa, entitled “To See Proudly- Advancing Indigenous Arts Beyond the Millennium.” The conference was the culmination of a dialogue began in the late 80s.

did. According to Ian Reid, the Aboriginal media arts Program Officer, Aboriginal artists felt that the general programs were closed to them.⁶⁵

Despite the increasing amount of new media artworks, new media art is still a small component of the program. Most grant applications come from media artists in more traditional disciplines such as film and video. For Reid, this is natural given the small number of Aboriginal artists dedicated to new media. "It is a very interesting microcosm of the art world," he observes.⁶⁶ While, within the Aboriginal media arts program, the boundaries between Aboriginal media art and Aboriginal new media art are loosely defined, the working definition of new media art in Canada Council's new media arts program is much more strict. It excludes any use of new media as a broadcasting tool, concentrating on artistic applications of technology such as digital and web-based art, robotic art, installations and electronic art.

The funding for Aboriginal new media art and new media arts in general did not fully solve artists' funding restrictions. The main limitation for Aboriginal new media artists applying to provincial and federal grants is the lack of proper representation at funding juries. If the number of Aboriginal artists experimenting with the Internet increased during the last few years, the amount of artists recognized as Aboriginal new media artists has stayed almost the same. As a result, there are only few artists that qualify as jurors specialized in Aboriginal new media art.⁶⁷ Another important funding

⁶⁵Ian Reid (program office, Aboriginal media and new media art, Canada Council for the Arts), in discussion with the author, January 2008.

⁶⁶Ibid.

⁶⁷L'Hirondelle succinctly explains the situation: "If they are going to get one Aboriginal net artist in that jury is going to be probably me. Unfortunately that is how it is. I am not trying to be egotistically but

restriction is tied to the Internet's loss of momentum. In fact, the spread of new media technologies and the production of websites en masse have undermined the lure of online projects for young artists, audiences and also grant juries.⁶⁸ Novelty is often a requirement for funding.

According to Becker, institutionalization is not complete without recognition beyond the strict borders of the field. For Aboriginal new media arts, the possibility of exposure beyond a small group of connoisseurs came when ImagineNATIVE festival created the category "Best New Media" in the early 2000s. The yearly festival, which takes place at different downtown locations in Toronto, showcases works by Aboriginal filmmakers, video and new media artists. For the festival's selection committee, Aboriginal new media is defined as "web-based art works which create use of interactive information and communication technologies."⁶⁹ This definition has changed throughout ImagineNATIVE's short life. At first, the category was broad enough to include web-based content in general. Lately, as a symptom of Aboriginal new media art's institutionalization, it was narrowed down to focus on web-based art work, excluding personal websites, commercial sites and sites that showcase other artistic disciplines.⁷⁰ Recent winners of this category include L'Hirondelle's *Horizon Zero* number 17 in 2005 and *Wêpinâsowina* in 2006, Pechawis' *An Indian Act: Shooting the Indian Act* in 2007, and Chad Solomon's online comic strip *Rabbit and Bear Paws* in 2008. With over 16,000

there are probably not a lot of people that is going to get what my work is about." Cheryl L'Hirondelle, in discussion with the author.

⁶⁸Marie-France Thérien (program officer, Media Arts section, Canada Council for the Arts,) in discussion with the author, February 2008.

⁶⁹Danis Goulet (ImagineNATIVE's artistic director), in discussion with the author, May 2008

⁷⁰Ibid.

people attending the festival every year, ImagineNATIVE represents a chance to access Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal audiences, and the media and new media arts community at large.⁷¹

Aboriginal new media art has also gained access to mainstream art venues. As I mentioned in chapter 5, Diamond was an important early supporter of Aboriginal new media art. In 1997, she took *Speaking the Language of Spiders* to the Canadian Cultural Centre in Paris and, almost a decade later in 2005, she curated *Horizon Zero* number 17 at the “2nd Beijing International New Media Arts Exhibition and Symposium.” The publication was curated by L’Hirondelle and included work by L’Hirondelle (*Dene/Cree ElderSpeak*) and writings by Hopkins. The Banff Centre was also involved in the production of *CyberPowWow 2K: CyberPowWow* and Diamond supported not just the production of the project, but its promotion abroad. Outside the BNMI’s sphere of influence, art galleries such as the Dunlop Art Gallery, Tribe.Inc., The Walter Phillips Gallery and the Edmonton Art Gallery have also invited Aboriginal new media artists to present their work in the context of Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal exhibitions. Last year, ImagineNATIVE organized a survey show to celebrate the 10th anniversary of the media and new media arts festival. The exhibition, entitled “Codetalkers of the Digital Divide (Or Why We Didn’t Become ‘Roadkill’ on the Information Superhighway),” was curated by L’Hirondelle and featured many artists associated with the Aboriginal new media art scene as well as contemporary Aboriginal artists and filmmakers who have engaged with

⁷¹Ibid.

the Internet in search of alternative modes of expression.⁷² The show, presented at ASpace Gallery in Toronto, claimed to contextualize “Aboriginal new media practices pre-Internet to what they have become in the current Web 2.0 paradigm.” The reference to becoming a “roadkill on the information superhighway” is a direct allusion to the debates occurred during the drumbytes workshop.

The popularization of the Internet has also contributed to Aboriginal new media art’s institutionalization. Lower equipment costs combined with faster Internet connections have facilitated an almost unobstructed access to new media technology. This situation carries two important consequences that affect the practice of Aboriginal new media art. First, production centres are no longer crucial to Aboriginal new media art production and, secondly, the Internet lost its aura of novelty. As I observed in chapter 5, during most of the 1990s, production centres were crucial in the production of works and in the development of networks of collaboration between artists. This is particularly true in the case of art worlds involved in technological innovation, as Becker argues in *Art Worlds*.⁷³ He also notes that the dissemination of conventions, technology and know-how permit the geographical spread of the original art world. This can be observed in the Aboriginal new media art world, as most members work largely in isolation, transforming new media art into another studio-based practice to the detriment of collaborative experimentation. This decentralization of new media production has impelled artists back

⁷²The artists featured were Jackson 2bears, Jimmie Durham, Ahasiw Maskegon-Iskwew, Mike MacDonald, Alanis Obomsawin, Melanie Printup-Hope, Buffy Sainte Marie, Jennifer Wemigwans and the Inuit collective Isuma.

⁷³Becker, 321.

to their local arts communities, in turn losing some of the earlier contact with their new media art peers.

The decentralization of Aboriginal new media art production has also affected the Banff Centre's role as a training and production facility. Since the beginning of Aboriginal new media art, the Banff Centre played a crucial role in the formation of coalitions and networks of practice that resulted in the Aboriginal new media art world. The transfer of Diamond from the BNMI to the Ontario College of Art, where she is now president, did not help the situation. According to L'Hirondelle, who sat for years on the BNMI's advisory committee, the institute is now focused on attracting institutional partners for its new media initiatives.⁷⁴ Diamond's personal interest in interdisciplinary collaboration and theoretical reflection proved instrumental to set in motion the emergent field. Aboriginal new media artists also lost an important ally when Marrie Mumford resigned as artistic director of the Banff Centre's Aboriginal Arts Program in 2004, leaving the section acephalous until 2007.⁷⁵

Aboriginal new media artists have also experienced difficulty recruiting younger artists, who find that the Internet is too commercial and familiar to consider it as a medium of artistic expression. "I always look for young Native people that I can mentor in this work," Pechawis notes, "and there are not that many around. It is not that sexy. Native youth want to be rappers."⁷⁶ Some more established new media artists have also moved away from the Internet into areas such as mobile media, responsive materials,

⁷⁴Cheryl L'Hirondelle, in discussion with the author.

⁷⁵Choreographer, dancer, actor and producer Sandra Laronde was appointed as director of Aboriginal Arts in November 2007.

⁷⁶Archer Pechawis, in discussion with the author.

artificial environments such as Second Life (as in the case of Fragnito), and robotics. The difficulty in attracting younger practitioners is a potential threat to the survival of the field given that, as Becker observes, “art worlds decline when some groups that knew and used the conventions which inform their characteristic works lose that knowledge, or when new personnel cannot be recruited to maintain the world’s activities.”⁷⁷

Aboriginal new media art’s institutionalization is not a surprising phenomenon. It is the result of years of collaboration and online production. While this institutionalization is sometimes challenged by practices and projects that evoke the early hybridity between communication and art, the field seems to follow the path of the international new media art movement. As in the Aboriginal new media art field, net artists, and new media artists in general, have gained access to mainstream art institutions. Museums and art galleries not only collect new media art but commission it, often creating online venues exclusively dedicated to the exhibition and discussion of these pieces. Institutions such as the Whitney Museum (New York), the Walker Art Center (Minneapolis), the Centre Pompidou (Paris) and the Tate Gallery (London) hold monthly exhibitions of new media art, becoming major actors in the critical recognition of the field.⁷⁸ The curation and conservation of new media art is, nowadays, at the centre of debates, conferences and international organizations such as CRUMB, which demonstrates the coming of age of a field that only a few years ago celebrated its ephemeral character. Perhaps one of the least explored, but most evident traits of the old

⁷⁷Becker, 349.

⁷⁸The British collective’s *Mongrel*, well-known for its online subversive interventions, was a recent protagonist of a famous episode of new media artists’ assimilation by mainstream art institutions. The Tate Gallery commissioned Graham Hardwood, one of *Mongrel*’s members, to create work for its online gallery. The artist created a mirror site that reflects on Tate’s collection and promotional material. See <http://www.tate.org.uk/netart/mongrel/home/default.htm>.

“new” media art field, whether Aboriginal or non-Aboriginal, is the loss of the innocence that moved new media artists to explore a medium that seemed unique and full of potential.

The Imagination of Community as Poetics: *Plain Truth*, *Wêpinâsowina*, *Ten Little Indians* and *Imagining Indians in the 25th Century*

With the institutionalization of the Aboriginal new media art field, the Aboriginal new media art community has become more delineated, even if those limits are often challenged by Aboriginal new media artists who occasionally explore other media (i.e. Pechawis, L’Hirondelle, Fragnito) or by Aboriginal artists who sporadically adopt the Internet as their medium of expression (i.e. Edward Poitras, Dana Claxton, Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun).⁷⁹ In terms of how artists imagine community online, the original ambiguity between art, communication, and technological exploration, typical of the early years of the field, seems to have dissipated, resulting in a growing polarization between projects that claim an artistic status and projects that are defined as community media. As I discussed in the analysis of L’Hirondelle’s *Treaty Card*, there seems to be a growing disconnection between the community that imagines and the imagined community observed in the work of art.

⁷⁹Pechawis combines his interest in new media with a solid body of performance work. L’Hirondelle is also a performance artists and a musician who has been recently involved in pirate radio projects. Apart from his recent work in Second Life, Fragnito is also a curator. Edward Poitras was an earlier adopter of the Internet. His work *In-X-Isle*, co-produced by the Banff Centre, was released in 1997. Best known as a filmmaker and video artist, Dana Claxton’s online video *The Patient Storm* premiered at *Storm Spirits* in 2006.

The progressive institutionalization of Aboriginal new media art has influenced how community is imagined. In the last five years, Aboriginal new media art has experienced the gradual marginalization of strategies, such as community empowerment and community as online performance, that proposed community as a collaborator and a participant. What we can observe today is the increasing “textualization” of community. This means that community, when present at all, is imagined as a “poetics” rather than an actor. The early participation of community in the making of the work of art has now been replaced by a community whose chances of participation are reduced. In tune with other contemporary Aboriginal art expressions, Aboriginal new media artists refer to community indirectly, as a poetics, when they interpret Aboriginal traditions and language, challenge Aboriginal stereotypes and colonial definitions of Aboriginality and claim certain contemporary and urban experiences as distinctly Aboriginal. While, as Valaskakis argues, these evocations contribute to the repertoire of images that define Aboriginal collective identity and community belonging today, they also reveal the reduced participation of actual communities in the work of art, now relegated to the role of audience, and the central role of the artist in the production of Aboriginal new media art.⁸⁰

The consolidation of a network of Aboriginal new media artists, the recognition of Aboriginal new media art projects as art by funding bodies and mainstream art institutions, and the popularization of online applications, know-how and Internet access have facilitated the institutionalization of Aboriginal new media art. This recognition, however, has affected how artists collaborate and produce work. Pechawis describes the

⁸⁰“In the process of being shared with others, storied referents and reciprocal practices build the collective experience of communities.” Valaskakis, 110.

changes he experienced as a new media artist working with a technology that is now more user-friendly and available, at least for those in urban centres and with some formal training: “Before you had to go to Video In, you had to go to some access centre to do what you had to do... For me in the 90s going to Banff was... scary... Now... I have everything I need in my studio.”⁸¹

Private access to equipment and know-how that was previously the monopoly of big production facilities has had a negative impact on Aboriginal new media artists’ collaboration. Becker notes that in the beginning of any art world, groups gather locally around resources and know-how until the networks that sustain the life and spread of the art world consolidate.⁸² In the context of Aboriginal new media art, the network first gathered around equipment and know-how found in a few centres (i.e. The Banff Centre, Oboro, Western Front). Today, the Internet is no longer a “focal thing” that forces the community to gather physically. Many Aboriginal new media artists produce work from beginning to end with little assistance. As Pechawis notes: “To me the exciting thing of going to Banff right now isn’t about gear but about community (...) it is about going to collaborate with people because, yeah, being a new media artists is about isolation. It is lot of isolation.”⁸³ Loft confirms this longing for community:

We really need to get together, we need to start doing that again because we are sort of just doing it in isolation and that is always so difficult. We don’t have a mainstream artist establishment, technology establishment. We are geographically dispersed and there is still few of us.⁸⁴

⁸¹Archer Pechawis, in discussion with the author.

⁸²Becker, 320.

⁸³Ibid.

⁸⁴Steve Loft, in discussion with the author.

This isolation, in turn, affects the dynamics of community within the work of art. The growth of individual projects has necessarily diminished the role of community as collaborator in the production of the work, typical of the community empowerment and community as online performance models. When invited to participate, the community, often a misnomer for “audience,” is asked to interact with an already finished work.

The artists’ isolation during production has not dissolved the networking that gained momentum during the “Drum Beats to Drum Bytes” workshops, the four iterations of *CyberPowWow* and the *Drumbytes.org* experience. Aboriginal new media artists are still aware of belonging to, at least, a loosely defined network. When I asked the artists I interviewed for this thesis about their peers and allies, the names listed often coincided: Archer Pechawis, Skawennati Tricia Fragnito, Steven Loft, Ahasiw Maskegon-Iskwew, Cheryl L’Hirondelle, Jackson2Bears, Jason Lewis, Sara Diamond, Jason Baerg and Candice Hopkins. This network becomes tangible in the distribution and critical phases and was the result of affective alliances nurtured by projects such as *CyberPowWow*, *Storm Spirits* and *Drumbyte.org*. The emergence of Aboriginal new media art friendly venues such as *Storm Spirits*, Grunt, Video In and Western Front, the latter in Vancouver, funding officers such as Reid or curators and critical thinkers such as Loft, Hopkins or Diamond are indispensable to the dynamic of the emergent scene.

Isolation has not stopped the work of imagination. The articulation of community as poetics is a symptom of the marginalization of community from the work of art. Absent from the production phase, community, when present, becomes more often a referent and in some cases, a vague concept of belonging. However, this progressive shift towards the imagination of community as poetics should not be considered definitive.

What we observe today is the rise of a discursive strategy and routines of production that were previously marginal. Similarly, earlier models such as community empowerment and community as online performance have not disappeared but remain, for now, residual. Following Williams, what the emergence of community as poetics reveals is that “the formal innovation is a true and integral element of the changes themselves: an articulation by technical discovery, of changes in consciousness which are themselves forms of consciousness of change.”⁸⁵ In the context of Aboriginal new media art this means that the predominance of community as poetics not only indicates changes in relations of production, such as the increasing isolation of Aboriginal new media art producers from their peers and from their cultural communities, but reinforces this distance by reducing community to a poetics. As I discuss below, the textualization of community contributes, in turn, to dissipate the early hybridity between Aboriginal new media and Aboriginal new media art strategies. The recognition of Aboriginal new media art projects as art has an impact on the reproduction of the field. Aboriginal new media art is today more frequently showcased in art galleries than it was before.

The imagination of community as poetics emerges in some recent projects by well-known Aboriginal new media artists. In February 2008, for example, *Storm Spirits* showcased Aboriginal artist Jason Baerg’s *Plain Truth*. A painter, a media producer and a curator, Baerg regards digital technology as an extension of painting and drawing: “My relationship with the digital arts really stands out of the need and the desire to push drawing and painting to new boundaries.”⁸⁶ In this context, the Internet serves him to

⁸⁵Williams, *The Sociology of Culture*, 142.

⁸⁶Jason Baerg, in discussion with the author, October 2007.

reach a wider audience, beyond the strict confines of fine arts circles. The artist began experimenting with technology briefly after obtaining a BFA degree from Concordia University, Montreal, in 1999. His new media work involves the production of web-based art, digital compositions and animation for online and offline exhibitions. This body of work was nominated for ImagineNATIVE's "Best New Media Award" in 2006 and 2007. In both occasions Baerg was introduced as a new media artist.

In *Plain Truth*, Baerg proposes an online environment that simulates the Great Plains and invites viewers to explore the space on a turtle ship. The project, a macromedia flash animation, reproduces the aesthetic of virtual worlds such as *Second Life*.⁸⁷ However, unlike *Second Life* or *CyberPowWow*, there are no avatars to guide the trip. Instead, Baerg reproduces the universal point of view of someone sitting on an aircraft.

To access the project, the viewer should click the play button located at the bottom of a small portal. This door has an oval window in the centre, through which the viewer can gaze at some clouds drifting in the sky. Once in motion, a turtle-ship irrupts in the sky. The turtle descends to the Earth through a pole, but suddenly stops and hops back, reaching a land mass above the sky. This island is connected to the Earth through the pole and resembles the Great Plains. It is divided in four equidistant pods linked together by a bridge located in the centre of the island. It is there that the turtle-ship lands. Once on this world above the sky, the viewer becomes a navigator in command of a

⁸⁷Second Life is an online 3D virtual world developed by Linden Lab in 2003. The application was inspired by Neal Stephenson's *Snow Crash*, a novel that, like *Neuromancer*, imagines a new virtual world parallel to real life. Users of Second Life, also known as "residents," adopt avatars to interact. See Stephenson, *Snow Crash*.

mechanized map that mirrors the island. The soothing audio, composed by Macroform, reproduces drumbeats and bird calls.⁸⁸

Baerg's project is not just an online environment, but a virtual exhibition. Each of the pods of the island, which according to Aboriginal curator Kathleen Ash-Milby is in fact Turtle Island, presents four monitor-shaped rock formations featuring a series of abstract paintings, the *Plain Truth: RYBW Series*.⁸⁹ The digital compositions cite the colours of the medicine wheel (red, yellow, black and white) and contain references to contemporary urban Aboriginal experiences such as a computer network diagram indicating exposure to technology or a group of suitcases that allude to contemporary Aboriginal mobility across nations and to and from urban centres (chapter 1).⁹⁰ The viewer faces each monitor at a time and can zoom in the paintings at any moment by just clicking on them. Unlike *CyberPowWow*, this individual and frontal view of the work of art reproduces the viewing conditions of the art gallery, except that in *Plain Truth* this is even more abstract and individualized. Not only are the viewers alone in front of the work of art, but by being able to zoom in and out, they can actually isolate the work of art from its environment.

Developed in *Unreal Engine*, a game engine created by Epic Games, *Plain Truth* evokes the aesthetics of graphic adventure video games such as *Myst*.⁹¹ Viewers can navigate the space by either hitting the continue button located in the bottom of the screen

⁸⁸Macroform is one of the artists who belongs to the open source music collective *Opsound*. His music can be downloaded for free at <http://opsound.org/artist/macroform/>.

⁸⁹Ash-Milby, "The Plain Truth."

⁹⁰Ibid.

⁹¹*Myst* is a graphic adventure video game created by Robyn and Rand Miller. The game proposes a journey into an imaginary island.

or by using the abstract map under the image and jumping from pod to pod. Half online gallery and half environment, it is not surprising that Ash-Milby's links *Plain Truth* to *CyberPowWow*:

The idea of creating virtual indigenous space has been percolating for many years, most notably with the launch in 1997 of the *CyberPowWow* by Mohawk artist Skawennati (...) More recently, virtual communities for Native Americans have been created in *Second Life*TM, albeit with numerous interest groups created for curiosity-seekers and members who want to "play" Indian. The technological virtuosity of the holographic reality experienced in science fiction such as *Star Trek*TM has not yet been achieved, but the yearning for virtual communities remains unabated. The *Plain Truth* represents a new expression of this desire.⁹²

The creation of a virtual space ties the project to *CyberPowWow*, except for the fact that there is no actual community gathered in the space. While in *CyberPowWow* the works were situated in an online gallery and in *Plain Truth* these are part of a landscape, *CyberPowWow*'s experience is more distant from a traditional gallery than Baerg's project. In the former, works were not just meant to be featured in a gallery setting, awaiting reception, but required the interaction of viewers and artists. In *CyberPowWow*, the online reception of art was communal.

In *Plain Truth*, the focus is not the community but the individual. The recreation of Turtle Island suggests the existence of an Aboriginal community without realizing it. Markers of a quasi-universal Aboriginality (i.e. the medicine wheel, the turtle) populate the environment, indicating that those grounds are Aboriginal territory. The creation of an environment that is distinctly Aboriginal suggests that land is still an important referent in the articulation of Aboriginal community and identity (chapter 1). However, unlike previous imagined Aboriginal territories (i.e. *CyberPowWow*, *Drumbytes.org*), the viewer is left alone to experience the space.

⁹²Ash-Milby, "The Plain Truth."

Community is even more elusive in L'Hirondelle's *Wêpinâsowina* (offering), an online database previously discussed in the context of *Storm Spirits*. In this work, L'Hirondelle invites viewers to write a prayer online in an attempt to connect to ancestors and spirits. The project also permits the artist to continue her long time search for modes of translating and preserving traditional knowledge online, in this case *wêpinâsowina*, a central element of *nêhiyawin* (Cree worldview).⁹³ Finally, the piece explores the potential and limitations of two central components of new media art's language: databases and Quick Time animations.⁹⁴

As I indicated before in this chapter, *Wêpinâsowina* is consistent with L'Hirondelle's bare aesthetics. At first sight, the project is text-based with no explicit visuals or animations that distract viewers from its main focus: the offering. The main page introduces the artist's statement. As in *Treaty Card*, a series of commands at the top of the page permits the viewer to navigate the website. "Links" present a list of links to sites about divination and prayer flags. "Pray" introduces a white window with a heading "make a prayer" and a button under it that reads "offer prayer." Viewers are invited to write a prayer in the window and offer it. As in any other database, the prayer is matched with a series of tags already selected by L'Hirondelle, such as "earth," "water," "peace," "sky," or "sun." If there is a match, a prayer flag will appear in the window.⁹⁵ This flag is a Quick Time movie that shows a waving fabric. The color of the flags depend on the

⁹³This search had begun in 1995 with *Dene/Cree ElderSpeak*. See chapter 5.

⁹⁴Manovich defines the database as a basic computer form together with the navigable space. See Manovich, *The Language of New Media*.

⁹⁵In the Tibetan tradition, prayer flags are pieces of fabric hang outdoors, usually in sets of five colours (green, yellow, red, blue and white) symbolizing the natural elements. The Cree use of prayer flags is also meant as an offering and a symbol of the connection with the spiritual realm.

prayer entered (e.g. a blue flag for the keyword water, a yellow one for sun, a green one for earth, etc.). However, when the prayer entered has no recognizable keyword, the viewer should either rephrase the prayer or send his or her prayer to the artist so it can be incorporated to the database.

As with *Treaty Card* and *Dene/Cree ElderSpeak*, *Wêpinâsowina* explores the aesthetic, cultural and subversive potential of online databases. Unlike these works, however, the database is not accessible at first sight. There is no catalogue of keywords or list of titles from where to choose. If all databases are arbitrary to a certain extent, *Wêpinâsowina* reinforces the arbitrariness by not only reducing an endless variety of prayers to a number of tags, but by hiding those tags from the users.⁹⁶ Moving through the database becomes, then, a matter of finding the “right” word. But is not the same with prayers?

Somewhat similar to Tibetan observances, the hanging of prayer flags is to make contact with the spiritual realm. *Wêpinâsowina* is my attempt to say that even in cyberspace – our ancestors and the spirits are witnessing us and that *guidance is possible if we use our words in a good way*.⁹⁷

While *Wêpinâsowina* explores the translation of an important aspect of the Cree worldview online, this exploration does not target a specific community nor seek the constitution of a community online. The project transcends the strict boundaries of Cree nations to address a universal audience. In fact, in the “homage” section dedicated to the late Andrew Naytowhow, the Cree Elder who culturally approved the project, his son

⁹⁶Databases are arbitrary because they are finite collections of items and, as such, selections. As Susan Stewart notes, “to ask which principles of organization are used in articulation the collection is to begin to discern what the collection is about (...) The collection is not constructed by its elements; rather, it comes to exist by means of its principle of organization.” Stewart, *On Longing*, 154-155.

⁹⁷Cheryl L’Hirondelle, “About.” *Wêpinâsowina*. Italics are mine.

Joseph Naytowhow makes explicit the potential audience of L'Hirondelle's

Wêpinâsowina:

I felt good that some aspect of nêhiyawin could be and would be educating other human beings or "our relative" as we are often told to acknowledge the other nationalities living also on our mother, the earth. In that way it would help these beings also.⁹⁸

Unlike *Dene/Cree ElderSpeak*, the project did not originate in a local community nor does it seek the development of a specific group. It was developed by L'Hirondelle and created for exhibition at *Storm Spirits*. Similar to *Treaty Card*, *Wêpinâsowina* neither displays traces of community interventions nor leaves room for gathering of a community online. Influenced by pan-Indian views of tradition beyond territory, the online offering takes place in a largely anonymous environment, in solitude and far from the communal gaze.

While L'Hirondelle's *Wêpinâsowina* proposes an individual act, community is not absent from the project. *Wêpinâsowina* is not any prayer; it is a fundamental notion of the nêhiyawin (Cree worldview). By experiencing *Wêpinâsowina*, we are invited to witness and experience the translation of a communal practice whose goal is the building of spiritual and communal bonds that transcend time and place. The translation of *Wêpinâsowina* alludes to a community that happens elsewhere, in the communal ceremony, in the spiritual realm, beyond the viewer's presence. As L'Hirondelle explains in the site:

From my years and experience living in northern Saskatchewan with the Naytowhow family, nêhiyawin (cree worldview) is a process of many ceremonial and social societies that observe, celebrate our talents and gifts, and enact our

⁹⁸L'Hirondelle, "Homage."

ongoing relationship with nature and the phenomenal connections that exist with the natural and spiritual worlds (...)

With this offering, it is my intention to present an option for insight into a similar process. It is not meant in any way as a joke or substitution or artifice, but a gentle and pleasing reminder that wherever we are, we can hope and pray – and that the wind indeed continues to blow and carry our hopes and dreams, worries and woes to be heard by our ancestors and all the spirits.⁹⁹

References to urban Aboriginal experiences are at the core of Jackson2Bears' new media installations. For this young urban artist immersed in DJ and VJ practices, new media encompasses online production, software development and live performance.¹⁰⁰ In *Ten Little Indians*, for instance, a flash animation video produced in 2005 and distributed online, 2Bears appropriates Mother Goose Favourites' version of the children's song *Ten Little Indians*, and mixes it with vocals, scratches and hip hop breaks.¹⁰¹ 2Bears defines the three-minute long music video as a "playful cultural critique," where he documents and critiques the Aboriginal stereotypes present in the famous children's song.¹⁰² Motivated by his own memories of the song and his experience as a Mohawk child growing up in an urban setting, 2Bears situates the song in the context of a school, citing the aesthetics typical of animated sitcoms such as *South Park*.¹⁰³

⁹⁹Ibid.

¹⁰⁰DJ stands for disc jockey and VJ for video jockey, is a performance artist that creates video and moving images for screening at concerts and clubs.

¹⁰¹2Bears, "10 Little Indians."

¹⁰²Adams, "Ten Little Indians: An Interview with Jackson2Bears."

¹⁰³*South Park* is an animated sitcom created by Trey Parker and Matt Stone that focuses on four children and their adventures in a small Colorado town. The aesthetics of *South Park* resemble little children's cartoons (bright and plain primary colours, geometrical forms and an abundance of frontal perspective). The content, though, targets an adult audience.

In an interview for *Trace Online*, Jackson2Bears refers to his own memory of *Ten Little Indians*: "I grew up in Brantford, Ontario, just outside of the Oshweken reservation where my father was born. I was sent to a predominately white school, and at the time I was the only Indian kid in my elementary class. It was *Indian week* and we were learning about the *noble savages* that once roamed the land that we now proudly call Canada. As part of our learning experience, we were instructed in a sing-a-long with Mother Goose's

The presentation of *Ten Little Indians* online defines the project as an artistic initiative even before the actual video begins. The website simulates an old-fashioned movie theatre. The video screen stands against a black background with long red velvet curtains hanging on each of its sides. A control under the screen permits the viewer to pause, forward or rewind the video anytime. *Ten Little Indians* begins with a series of shots that simulates a journey from outer space to the Earth and into a Canadian classroom. In the classroom, a teacher is making his students play the *Ten Little Indians* song while he empties a bottle of prescribed drugs.

2Bears' rendering of the "ten little Indians" evokes popular stereotypes of Aboriginal peoples in North America (i.e. the Oka warrior, the West Coast Native, the Shaman, the Inuit). These ten little Indians are chased by a blond woman holding a baking stick while three white farmers sing the song. In an autobiographical move, 2Bears represents himself as one of the little Indians. This Indian, who is wearing a Haida mask, is the one playing the song on a record player and working with a synthesizer.¹⁰⁴ The video finishes with the camera undoing the original journey from the classroom to the school to the sky and back to the Earth. This ending suggests that the chasing of the *Ten Little Indians* continues today. As 2Bears explains: "Though there is now some

rendition of the *Ten Little Indians* tune – a modified version that included a couple extra verses added to the original. So, I'm asked to stand at my desk, and during the chorus the others would point at me and sing '... what are you doing you bad little Indian ... looks like you're eating, you bad little Indian', and so on. Now, what makes things worse is this: I actually remember liking it." See Adams, "Ten Little Indians: An Interview with Jackson2Bears."

¹⁰⁴Despite being a Mohawk, 2Bears studies and works in Victoria, British Columbia, close to the area where the Haida peoples live.

awareness of these misleading stereotypes (political correctness and all that) (...) the tradition of cruel and unjust stereotyping continues.”¹⁰⁵

For Jackson2Bears, community is a synonym of culture: “What I work with is not just samples, it is not just Iroquois. It is Navajo, it is Cherokee, whoever. I often try to see myself in a larger community context. Certainly, all Indigenous peoples.”¹⁰⁶ This pan-Indian view of community is in large part the result of Jackson2Bears’ upbringing in downtown Toronto with a Mohawk father and a Dutch mother. In *Ten Little Indians*, this pan-Indianism is visually evident in 2Bears representation of the ten little Indians as all sharing the same features but wearing simplified versions of national markers such as a mask, in the case of the Haida Native, or a bandana covering the face of the Mohawk warrior. Moreover, *Ten Little Indians* is not a piece that focuses on a specific nation but denounces the misrepresentation of Aboriginal peoples in popular culture:

For decades the media has been shaping the public perception of Indigenous people through stereotypes like: the town drunk, the wise elder, or the noble savage, and almost always portray Native people as either primitive, violent, or as dependent and helpless. So my question is how do you think these stereotypes are affecting the identity of Indigenous youth? How are we to negotiate a path around these media representations to the truth about our people?¹⁰⁷

When 2Bears began his artistic practice, he rejected any, even remote, association with Aboriginal art. “I often tried to hide the Indigenous work in my practice,” he recalls.¹⁰⁸ However, as many young practitioners, he slowly reconnected with his cultural community through his art. Unlike a previous generation of Aboriginal artists that

¹⁰⁵Adams, “Ten Little Indians.”

¹⁰⁶Jackson2Bears (Aboriginal multimedia artist), in discussion with the author, October 2007.

¹⁰⁷Adams, “Ten Little Indians.”

¹⁰⁸Ibid.

returned to the reserve in search of cultural roots (chapter 1), 2Bears researched Iroquois music and, in particular, media stereotypes that were popular during his childhood and adolescence. Having access to technology during his formative years, it was only a matter of time until he connected his Native background and new media.¹⁰⁹ Despite producing in isolation and performing in non-mainstream artistic venues such as warehouse parties and clubs, 2Bears feels comfortable within the Aboriginal performance and new media fields as a quick review of his curriculum vitae suggests. In 2007 for instance, ImagineNATIVE invited 2Bears to perform live at the “New Media Mashup,” a one-night special event, where he presented *The RedSkin Imaginary*, a new media performance that blends music and video animation before the Aboriginal media and new media arts communities. In 2008 he participated in a panel on tradition and Aboriginal new media and film at the “Transporters Symposium: Tradition and Innovation in Contemporary Aboriginal Art,” which was held at the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria, Victoria, British Columbia. 2Bears and Fragnito were the two representatives of Aboriginal new media art at this event. His work has also been shown in art galleries such as the Art Gallery of Greater Victoria (Victoria, B.C.) and international new media festivals such as Digital Art Weeks (Zurich, Switzerland).

While *Ten Little Indians* was triggered by personal memories, 2Bears avoids the format of the memoir. His video not only critiques, but adopts the forms of popular culture: the video clip, the cartoon, the children’s song. In fact, Jackson2Bears introduces the project online as “a kind of resistance strategy, and through the adoption of the music

¹⁰⁹2Bears’ father worked repairing and assembling computers at home.

video form, seeks to undermine and expose these mistruths that are present today within North American Culture.”¹¹⁰

Even if 2Bears does not regard himself as an activist, the piece is meant to raise awareness of the stereotypes that circulate in the media and that influence how Aboriginal peoples – those disconnected from their communities of origin in particular – articulate their identity. The target of this awareness is a loosely defined pan-Indian community that is never directly addressed in the work. This community has no role assigned in the work other than being a recipient. Unlike other new media art works analysed in this thesis, interaction is reduced to a minimum. The work of art is neither a communication means nor a territory that the community can appropriate.

Within 2Bears’ body of work, the Internet plays three main roles. It is a communication medium that allows the artist to distribute his work without mediators. It is a sampling medium, providing the artist with jpegs and You Tube clips that he incorporates in his multimedia installations. And, it is a networking tool that allows the artist to connect with peers and audience members interested in his work.¹¹¹ However, there is no evidence in *Ten Little Indians* nor in 2Bears’ discussion of the work that the Internet was used for explicit community building purposes, to target a specific community whose development is sought, nor to form a community online. In fact, when I asked him whether he had ever been involved in community-based or community empowerment work, he replied: “No, not really. I have a kind of really general

¹¹⁰Jackson2Bears, “10 Little Indians.”

¹¹¹Jackson2Bears, in discussion with the author.

engagement.”¹¹²Community, in Jackson2Bears’ work, is a referent he occasionally alludes to and a loosely defined audience.

A more textual engagement with community is not a privilege of young Aboriginal new media artists. As I discussed above, veteran new media practitioners such as L’Hirondelle and Fragnito have also developed a more distant engagement with community in their web-based work. In *Imagining Indians in the 25th Century*, for example, Fragnito proposes a journey into the history and future of Aboriginal peoples in North America. The artist produced the web-based work for the millennium show “I. Witness,” which opened at the Edmonton Art Gallery in 2000. Catherine Crowston, the curator of the show, had initially invited Fragnito to create a *Palace* version of the exhibition.¹¹³ However, due to time constraints, the initial idea was set aside and the artist produced, instead, a website. Unlike *CyberPowWow*, *Imagining Indians in the 25th Century* is a work commissioned for a mainstream art gallery to an already recognized Aboriginal new media artist.

Imagining Indians in the 25th Century is a millennium piece for a millennium show.¹¹⁴ The website invites the viewer to travel through one thousand years of Native history guided by a Mohawk-Italian paper doll called Katsitsahawi Capozzo. In each of the ten stops in the journey, the viewer can see Katsitsahawi’s outfit and read an entry of her journal. Stops are in chronological order, though Fragnito begins the journey in the year 2000 from where the viewer can move to the past or to the future. Each stop

¹¹²Ibid.

¹¹³“I. Witness” gathered a group of Aboriginal artists such as Gerald McMaster, Jane Ash Poitras and Tom Hill. The exhibition explored two pivotal moments of Aboriginal recent history: The Report of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples and the arrival of the new millennium.

¹¹⁴Skawennati Tricia Fragnito, in discussion with the author.

coincides with landmark events in the history of Native peoples' relations with non-Natives, with a few additions of future "historical" events: 1490- Tenochtitlan, 1615- Pocahontas in England, 1680- Kateri Tekahkwitha, 1806- Sacagawea on the Lewis and Clark expedition, 1969- Occupation of Alcatraz, 2000- Katsitsahawi, 2121- Raven, 2273- Pow wow, 2374- Chacotay, and 2490- Edmonton Olympics.

The formal style of the project is inspired by paper doll sets. Every stop in the millennium journey presents Katsitsahawi's clothing and accessories against a white background. Unlike real life paper dolls, however, the viewer should only click on a small mirror to witness Katsitsahawi's transformation. Similarly, a red journal icon permits viewers to read Katsitsahawi's entry. A small wheel on the right top corner of the page allows viewers to move to other stops in the timeline.

For Fragnito the project not only portrays Aboriginal peoples as surviving colonialism, but peacefully outnumbering non-Natives by the year 2490: "What the piece is about for me is, yes, it is imagining us in the far future and we are still there. And, yeah, we are kicking ass but we haven't done it through war or hate or negative feelings."¹¹⁵ For instance, by the time of the Edmonton Olympics, the last stop in the journey, 90 per cent of the athletes and the majority of the government and professional bodies are of Aboriginal descent. Aboriginal peoples have also gathered under The First Nations Confederacy of Turtle Island and wear their own flag.

Imagining Indians in the 25th Century narrates Native history from a female perspective, highlighting historical, and almost legendary, Aboriginal women such as

¹¹⁵Ibid.

Pocahontas, Kateri Tekahkwitha and Sacagawea.¹¹⁶ Though her view of these women is not always positive, Fragnito moves against the grain of traditional historiography, where women are rarely present.¹¹⁷ But her project is not just an exercise in alternative historiography or sci-fi imagination. It is a comment on the way Aboriginal peoples constitute and imagine community. In line with her views on Aboriginal art that I introduce in chapter 1, Fragnito proposes a notion of identity that does not dictate a specific “Aboriginal” behaviour and that is not restricted by blood quantum or colonial impositions:

I used to think that it was horrible that Pocahontas married a colonizer. But you know, she probably never thought it was a big deal, not in a political way, anyhow. I am sure she never thought it would put her own identity in any kind of jeopardy. In her mind, and her family’s too I bet, she would always be Indian. Marriage couldn’t change that. Wearing cotton dresses instead of a buckskin apron couldn’t change it. Even trying out a new religion wouldn’t make her any less Indian than she was. It is only in the year 2000, the way we look at Indianness, that it makes her seem like a traitor at worst, or very, very short sighted at best.¹¹⁸

Unlike *CyberPowWow*, where the performance of community online was the main goal of the project, Fragnito refers to community and collective identity at a textual level. This engagement with community is more mediated than in *CyberPowWow* because there is no actual participation of the community – contemporary Aboriginal

¹¹⁶Pocahontas was the elder daughter of Powhatan, chief of the Algonquin Confederation in the area of Virginia, U.S. In 1614, she married the Englishman John Rolfe and traveled to England. Kateri Tekahkwitha was a Mohawk girl who was born in 1656 and converted to Christianity at an early age. Devoted to the new Faith, she died at the age of 24. Sacagawea was a Shoshone Native who helped in Meriwether Lewis and William Clark’s expedition across the U.S.

¹¹⁷For instance, Fragnito writes about Kateri Tekahkwitha: “It is really difficult for me to see Kateri as a role model. Everything she did seems so unhealthy, in both mind and body. What was she thinking? And what are people in the year 2000 thinking, wanting to make her a saint? Why do we need an Indian saint? To me it’s just another feather in the cap of those who tried to destroy us.” See Fragnito, “1680- Kateri Tekahkwitha.”

¹¹⁸Fragnito, “1615- Pocahontas in England.”

artists, Aboriginal new media artists or curators – during the production and dissemination of the work of art. As in the rest of the works introduced in this section, community is imagined as a recipient, even a theme, located outside the work.

Already explicit in the title of the work, *Imagining Indians in the 25th Century* is about imaging an alternative way of defining Aboriginal community. “It is all about shifting the way we think about our Nateness,” Fragnito observes.¹¹⁹ She criticizes blood quantum as a colonial measure appropriated by Aboriginal peoples to exclude mixed blood Natives. Apropos, she writes in Katsitsahawi’s entry for the year 2000: “I can’t understand why Indians agree to measuring our community this way. We shouldn’t be asking people to leave, we should be inviting them in. The more the merrier, strength in numbers and all that.”¹²⁰ Fragnito’s imagination of community in the 25th century questions bloodline and colonial systems of identification that circumscribe community rather than opening it up to new members. As a result, her definition of community is largely pan-Indian, encompassing urban Natives, Métis and status and non-status Natives, as her dream of a First Nations Confederacy of Turtle Island reveals:

Through the efforts of the first Aboriginal Olympic medalists, such as Jim Thorpe (1912), Alwyn Morris (1984) and Waneek Horn-Miller (2004), a flood of First Nations athletes began competing for the countries where their bands were located. There were Cherokees competing for the United States, Mohawks playing for Canada, and Mayans winning medals for Mexico. They excelled in many events, like the Decathlon, Kayaking, and Wrestling. Curiously, it took a long time for us to get into Archery.

They say that the Olympics aren’t supposed to be political, but who believes that? The first time our athletes wore the new flag, it was a major source of pride, and it

¹¹⁹Ibid.

¹²⁰Fragnito, “2000- Katsitsahawi.”

showed. The First Nations Confederacy of Turtle Island won record numbers of medals.¹²¹

The fact *Imagining Indians in the 25th Century* was produced while *CyberPowWow* was still active seem to contradict the linearity of the history I constructed in this thesis. The challenge of this linearity was precisely my goal when I chose to conclude this chapter with Fragnito's work. In *Imagining Indians in the 25th Century*, Fragnito activated a discursive strategy that was already present in earlier works, as part of Aboriginal new media art's aesthetic exploration and increasing institutionalization. The recent differentiation between Aboriginal media and Aboriginal new media art projects only turned a "structure of feeling" into a privileged strategy. In other words, the predominance of the imagination of community as poetics reveals that Aboriginal new media artists not only regard the Internet as a communication medium but increasingly, as an instrument to explore and express an artistic vision that, in some cases, refers to community.

While the three imaginations of community explored in these pages became predominant in an almost chronological order, these articulations also coexisted. While since the mid-1990s there have been Aboriginal artists using new media to refer to community, the community empowerment and community as online performance models did not disappear with the institutionalization of Aboriginal new media art. What changed during these 14 years of community imagining community is the centrality of these models and their effects in the constitution of an Aboriginal new media art field.

Similarly, the institutionalization of Aboriginal new media art is far from being a *fait accompli*. Contemporary Aboriginal art is largely multidisciplinary and Aboriginal

¹²¹Fragnito, "2490- Edmonton Olympics."

artists are often comfortable in multiple genres and fields of practice. What seems undeniable, though, is that 14 years ago, Aboriginal new media art was not even a phrase. Today, as I explain in this chapter, there are not only artworks labelled as new media, but artists, curators and online galleries dedicated to it. This network of actors is not just linked through conventions, relations of production and reproduction and works of art, but through the laborious work of imagining and practising community.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSIONS

In March 2007 the Aboriginal Curatorial Collective organized a conference in Saskatoon. The meeting was called “Corralling Art: Aboriginal Curatorial Practices in the Prairies and Beyond,” and gathered Aboriginal curators, artists and representatives of provincial and federal museums, galleries and funding bodies. Towards the end of the last day the organizers presented a “new media” panel moderated by Claxton and with Pechawis, Loft and Baerg as speakers. The participants introduced their current activity and discussed the difficulties faced by those who ventured into this “new” field. Baerg and Pechawis highlighted the potential of the medium for young Aboriginal artists while Loft referred to his efforts to balance artistic freedom and funders’ demands. A few metres from the podium, L’Hirondelle asked questions and interjected anecdotes. The conversation revealed that the participants not only knew each other, but shared an *esprit de corps*.

This *esprit de corps* is not surprising. During more than 14 years, Aboriginal artists have used the Internet to communicate, collaborate and produce work that has alternatively focused on developing, performing and representing their community. This work of imagination resulted in a loose network of artists, curators, practices and audiences, whose goal was the production, distribution and reception of Aboriginal new media art. Despite the lasting enthusiasm to experiment with a medium that is no longer “new,” the future of Aboriginal new media art – and of this network – is uncertain. The recognition of Aboriginal new media art as an artistic field has cleared up the original

confusion between Aboriginal media, new media and new media art practices, resulting in works where the communication and collaborative components are less evident and central. The incipient critical work on Aboriginal new media art suggests a discursive framing of the field as a new chapter of the history of Aboriginal media art as well as the history of Aboriginal appropriations of non-Native technologies. What these contending discourses underline is the dynamic tension between art and communication that has animated the field since its beginnings. This tension is a source of vitality because it has moved artists to not just express themselves, but to collaborate and to communicate within and beyond the contemporary Aboriginal art world, forming alliances and imagining affiliations that would transcend the online realm.

A Study of Community Imagination and Imagined Communities

In these pages I reduced Aboriginal new media art's complex work of community imagination to three moments. Each moment corresponds to the predominance of a model of community that affected not just the artworks, but the practices and actors involved in their production and reception. In the context of this thesis, "model" and "strategy" are interchangeable synonyms and refer to those practices that articulate community at a textual and non-textual level, affecting the production, circulation and reception of the work of art. Models and strategies of community not only define community as "the Aboriginal cultural community," "the reserve or the local community," or "the Aboriginal media art community," but they also assign specific roles to the artist and the community and help define the projects as either "art" or "communication." For example, the first

model, community empowerment, coincided with the emergence of the field and the first steps in the popularization of the Internet and BBS applications. This was a moment of great confusion between communication and art, when the focus was on using the Internet to strengthen communal bonds and securing a “presence online.” In line with contemporary Aboriginal art, the communities articulated during this period were not always territorial and local, as in many Aboriginal media initiatives, but pan-Indian. The community empowerment model is tangible in projects such as the drumbytes network, *Speaking the Language of Spiders* and *Dene/Cree ElderSpeak*.

The community empowerment model is a strategy that originated in Aboriginal media. The assumption is that technology, if managed correctly, is a vehicle to articulate a voice and aide in the development of the community that is the target of the initiative or the manager of it. The concerns surrounding this model typically include the effects of technology on the community and the appropriateness of reproducing local knowledge online. The appearance of this model in the early days of the Aboriginal new media art field is not surprising. At this time, many of the artists involved in new media were veterans in media arts and Aboriginal media. Those practitioners brought to the emergent Aboriginal new media art field two discourses about technology – and ICT in particular – that circulated in Aboriginal media: technology as an instrument of cultural renewal and technology as a tool for community empowerment. This early communication agenda would remain throughout the years, even after the institutionalization of the field.

The first Aboriginal new media art projects often depended on collaboration. The Internet was a relatively new medium at the time and few Aboriginal artists knew enough

about it or had access to equipment to produce works on their own. Production facilities such as the Banff Centre became crucial in the creation of works. But the Banff Centre was not only a production facility. Led by Diamond, the Banff New Media Institute at the Banff Centre would introduce Aboriginal new media artists to international new media and net artists, academics and software developers. Collaboration during these days was a technological requirement and inspired an ethos associated with community empowerment.

The popularization of the Internet in the mid-1990s influenced how Aboriginal artists regarded ICT. Graphic applications and faster connections permitted artists to explore the aesthetic possibilities of the new medium. They also became familiar with popular and academic representations of the Internet as an independent social space. Moved by sci-fi images of matrixes and frontiers, Aboriginal new media artists began imagining community online. These exploratory approaches to cyberspace enriched the community empowerment model that was still prevalent. Projects such as *CyberPowWow* or *DrumBytes.org*, for example, proposed Aboriginal artists to engage with the Internet not just as a “focal thing,” but as a social space that can sustain an Aboriginal territory online.

The community as online performance model would activate the traditional association of community and land. As I discuss in chapter 1, land has always been central in the articulation of Aboriginal identity. It is therefore not surprising that contemporary Aboriginal artists have reflected on the meaning of land to question traditional and colonial definitions of Aboriginal identity. In line with this reflection,

Aboriginal new media artists have imagined cyberspace as an alternative home for an urbanized and dispersed Aboriginal arts community. The occupation of cyberspace, however, would also affect how community is articulated online and offline. In fact, the existence of an online space would encourage the gathering and performance of community online. This online performance would in turn reinforce earlier alliances and add new members to the loose network of Aboriginal new media artists and curators. These alliances would become crucial in the development of the Aboriginal new media art scene.

The development of an online and offline network of artists, curators and critics invested in new media art triggered the institutionalization of the field. Counting with its own positions and position-takings, the emergent field was slowly recognized by mainstream art galleries, artist-run centres, festivals and the larger Aboriginal arts community. This recognition would increase the number of Aboriginal artists experimenting with new media. This new cohort of artists would bring their own vision of what new media art meant, which in many cases encompassed online videos, installations and performances that used the Internet as a platform. Paradoxically, this aperture would force the marginalization of strategies associated with Aboriginal media, which demonstrates the growing importance of aesthetic exploration in the definition of the emergent field.

The recognition of Aboriginal new media art in artistic circles was not the only factor affecting the dynamic of the field. Increased familiarity with and access to the Internet permitted artists to work independently from production facilities. This move

away from production centres to private studios affected collaboration. Individual authorship would slowly become the norm and individual agendas would prevail.

Changes in positions and relations of production and reproduction would influence the imagination of community. Community would become less localized as artists worked in isolation. Abstract and pan-Indian references to community would also become more prominent. In this context, community, when present, would be associated with general articulations of Aboriginal identity, tradition and history. Similarly, community would figure less as a participant and more as a recipient of the work of art.

The history of community imagination that I trace in this thesis is more complex and less linear than these paragraphs suggest. The prevalence of a model of community does not imply the disappearance of the others. In fact, community as online performance is not a break from the community empowerment imagination, but a variation of it. While community has always been imagined as motif, it is only in the last few years that this articulation has become hegemonic.

The Meaning of Community

This study of community imagination within the Aboriginal new media art field was not intended as just a case study, but as a reflection on the meaning and practice of community today. What this thesis demonstrates is that, at least within the Aboriginal new media art field, community is an ongoing process of imagination that involves communication and shared – though not necessarily permanent – spaces and practices. The small size of the Aboriginal new media art community allows artists, curators and

producers to know each other personally, reinforcing the work of imagination described by Anderson and Appadurai. In addition, unlike Wellman's social networks, the communities practiced and imagined by Aboriginal new media artists cannot do away with place, a long-term marker of Aboriginal identity. In their brief history as a field, Aboriginal new media artists have insisted on creating virtual territories, online galleries and powwows in an attempt to buttress their online networking. Face-to-face gatherings, meetings and workshops are also strategies that anchor the otherwise volatile community to the land. This explains why the recent trend towards studio-based production and isolationism has affected the original bonding among Aboriginal new media artists and has encouraged the rise of more textualized imaginations of community. As I discuss in chapter 1, this focus on land is neither new nor exclusive to Aboriginal new media art. Land is inseparable from the Aboriginal imagination of collective identity. The contemporary deterritorialization of community, evident in the proliferation of imagined communities and mediascapes, does not mean the complete dissociation of community practices from space.

As I repeatedly noted in the analysis, Aboriginal new media art's imaginations of community also have a pan-Indian undertone. Aboriginal new media art is not a local movement but a field that encompasses urban artists and curators from various national affiliations. Aboriginal new media artists and curators are also used to frame their work and practices in terms of a largely abstract "Aboriginal difference." References to "Aboriginally-determined territories," "Aboriginal presence" or "Aboriginal new media art" stress shared interests instead of local agendas. Concerns with language preservation,

the technological mediation of tradition and the dissemination of cultural knowledge evidence the continuation of a pan-Indian agenda which began with the friendship centre movement and the politicization of urban Aboriginals. In the context of Aboriginal new media art, pan-Indian references became more frequent with the marginalization of the community empowerment model.

Aboriginal new media art's imagination of community is also an expression of identity politics. Aboriginal new media art is influenced by the same politics that have marked the discourse of contemporary Aboriginal art for the last 40 years. My intention when discussing the increasing textualization of community and the aesthetization of Aboriginal new media art projects was to highlight the actual division between communication and artistic goals in Aboriginal artists' online practices. While this division affects how community is imagined and practiced, leading to the institutionalization of the field, it is by no means a depoliticization of artistic practices. Politics are still present – and pressing – in recent textualizations of community, as the analysis of 2Bears, L'Hirondelle, Fragnito and Baerg's works reveal. Neither the textualization of community implies that artists have lost interest in collaborating with local communities.

The role of imagination in the development of the Aboriginal new media art field is undeniable. Imagination sustains and impels the practices of networking, production and reception of works. The models of community that I identify in this thesis are not just effects of routines of production, distribution and reception, but strategies that orient the constitution of community around and through technology. Even in recent times, when

community is often a motif, Aboriginal new media artists still produce works that can potentially function as sites of pan-Indian identification.

Another important lesson of this study is that the survival of community seems to depend on its flexibility to adapt to historical and cultural changes. The appropriation of the Internet by Aboriginal artists is a more recent example of a long history of creative strategies to protect and disseminate Aboriginal culture and communities. While this appropriation has involved engagement with a series of discourses about the Internet whose politics are dubious at best, Aboriginal new media artists have also been conditioned by their own agendas. This explains the emphasis on community empowerment while artists were fighting for mainstream recognition and Aboriginal people were struggling to access more affordable Internet connections. The insistence on securing an online presence was also a response to the termination of the Native Communications Program in 1990 and the lack of proper representation in non-Native media, most evident during the Oka crisis. This fight for presence has become less pressing – though no less important – in recent years, when Aboriginal media slowly reached mainstream audiences and even public acclaim with the success of APTN and the recognition of Isuma Productions in venues such as Sundance and Cannes. This recognition coincides with Aboriginal new media art's transition from community empowerment to community as motif.

Theoretical and Methodological Program: Possibilities and Limitations

From a theoretical point of view, this thesis proposes an interdisciplinary approach to cultural mediations of community. This means that community not only represents prior sociocultural identities, but is culturally imagined through a series of discursive and non-discursive practices that constitute what I define as Aboriginal new media art. This work of imagination is not passive but affects communal practices. My ambition with this study was to add to the scarce body of work that develops strategies to study community as both product and producer. To this end, I engaged with an interdisciplinary body of work that encompasses the sociology of culture, cultural studies and research on online communities and community informatics.

The sociological approach to organizational, structural and social aspects of cultural phenomena was a fundamental component of my theoretical and methodological program. Becker's *Art Worlds* was the most important source within this body of work given his interest in mapping the cultural production of symbolic worlds. Becker's notion of "art world" permitted the study of practices that produce, legitimize and distribute Aboriginal new media art and contribute to the formation of a network of artists, curators, critics, funders and audiences. This network was crucial to the institutionalization of Aboriginal new media art because it sustained the practice and imagination of community. In turn, the consolidation of Aboriginal new media art as an "art world" forced the differentiation between Aboriginal new media art and Aboriginal new media, which led to a hegemonic model of community that represented rather than performed or developed community. Becker's art world was also crucial at the methodological level,

because it prepared the terrain for the tracing of community imagination. By conceptualizing Aboriginal new media art as an “art world” I could move beyond the actual works of art and consider Aboriginal new media art as a network of practices.

Despite its usefulness, Becker’s approach focuses on symbolic exchanges and tends to overlook the problem of change in art worlds. While he dedicates one of the last chapters of *Art Worlds* to change, Becker’s view privileges continuity. Change is an element that can alter the patterns of collaboration, but does not define the art world *per se*. Bourdieu’s view of the artistic field as a “field of forces,” on the other hand, attempts to negotiate the structural tendency of synchronic analysis and the historical emphasis of diachronic perspectives. While my thesis does not concentrate on struggle, Bourdieu’s view of struggle and change as constitutive of the field of artistic production was an indispensable complement to Becker’s approach. Bourdieu’s field was useful to map the dynamic between positions and position-takings, that is, between relations of production, reproduction and works of art. As the analysis demonstrated, the development of a network of artists associated with Internet art practices facilitated the gradual emergence of a repertoire of forms and strategies to develop, perform and represent community online. However, as the analysis also shows, the representation of community online is not just a mechanical response to changes in the space of positions, but a mediation that would affect future relations of production and reproduction. To solve this shortcoming of Bourdieu’s theoretical apparatus I incorporated Straw’s notion of “scene.” Straw complicates Bourdieu’s field by focusing on the role of cultural forms in the shaping of the field. In the context of Aboriginal new media art, the notion of scene would emerge in

chapters 5 and 6, once the field began its process of differentiation from Aboriginal media. As I point out in these chapters, projects such as *CyberPowWow*, *Drumbytes.org* and *Storm Spirits* have propitiated affective alliances among producers and works that would sustain future relations of production and reproduction of the field. These alliances would also facilitate the differentiation of the Aboriginal new media art scene and the Aboriginal media and new media scenes by permitting the circulation of works, critical work and strategies associated with new media art.

The application of Bordieu, Straw and Becker's theoretical artifacts was necessary to, first, spatialize artistic practices and, second, focus on the historical evolution of community imagination and imagined communities. However, as I argue in chapter 3, this spatialization could easily reduce cultural production and community imagination to simple reflections of changes happening in the "social realm." To explore the mediating role of the work of art in community imagination I appropriated Williams' sociological program and his notion of "lived form" in particular. "Lived forms" highlight the productivity of cultural production without restricting the analysis to pure textualism. In chapter 5, for instance, the analysis of *CyberPowWow* illustrates the work's cultural mediation. *CyberPowWow* does not just document imaginations and practices of community gestated outside the work of art, but generates affiliations and practices of community, such as virtual communality, that helped define the Aboriginal new media art field. Later, the articulation of community as motif will distance the community that imagines from the imagined community, differentiating Aboriginal new media art from Aboriginal media and new media.

The impact of Aboriginal new media art's "lived forms" is not restricted to the Aboriginal new media art field. Since 1994 Aboriginal new media art has enriched pan-Indian imaginations of community and locality by proposing artistic and technological strategies to imagine community beyond the constraints of territory. For instance, when L'Hirondelle created *Treaty Card*, she was not just reformulating traditional definitions of community associated with "land," but challenging this association by permitting viewers to create their own treaty card and form part of the "ndn band" online. Her piece not only provides the means to perform identity but creates a space for the constitution of a pan-Indian community online. Similarly, when Maskegon-Iskwew launched *Speaking the Language of Spiders* he was not just adopting a community empowerment strategy already known to the Aboriginal media community. The project transformed the community empowerment model by applying it to an artistic context and for artistic purposes. As a corollary, the realization of the online collaborative project consolidated the links within an emergent group of Aboriginal new media artists and between the former and the BNMI.

A large portion of the Aboriginal new media art production of culturally imagined communities takes place online. As such, this work also contributes to the extensive literature on community media and online communities reviewed in chapter 2. As in typical community media approaches I focused on a specific community, a loose network of Aboriginal new media artists, curators and cultural producers. Like community media analysis I paid attention to practices and routines, identifying community strategies and trends. Unlike this body of work, however, I did not assume the form and extent of the

community under study. This radical departure highlights what I consider two main limitations of community media research, namely, the rigid way in which it defines community, and the tendency to overlook the reciprocity between community media uses and the culturally imagined communities produced by media. By proposing community as an open question I provided a more nuanced account of how a community engages with media, not just for strict communication purposes, but as a way to define itself.

This study does not easily fit the literature on online communities either. While the community as online performance model was crucial for the institutionalization of Aboriginal new media art, the history of community imagination is not restricted to online networking. In fact, even during this period in the development of Aboriginal new media art, community practices extended well beyond cyberspace to encompass cultural relations of production and reproduction.

While not explicit in my theoretical program, the work of Aboriginal theorists such as MacMaster, Fragnito, Valaskakis, Masayesva, Maskegon-Iskwew and Loft was important to map Aboriginal understandings of art, community and artistic uses of technology. MacMaster and Fragnito's writings, for example, were crucial to explore the difficult position of Aboriginal contemporary artists vis-à-vis reserve-based audiences and fixed notions of tradition. Valaskakis was the most important source in my discussion of contemporary Aboriginal imaginations of community and, in particular, the association of Aboriginal community with land. Masayesva's famous essay "Indigenous Experimentalism" pointed to the continuous negotiation of Aboriginal artists that explore technology in their artistic practices; an assumption that underlies my analysis of

Aboriginal new media art projects. Finally, Maskegon-Iskwew and Loft's writings on Aboriginal new media art document the link between communication and aesthetic exploration present in Aboriginal new media art practices.

At a methodological level, this study required a balance between discursive and historical approaches to community imagination and culturally imagined communities. This means that I could neither assume the meaning or the extent of the community that imagined community, nor reduce the practices of community to a series of artworks. If Aboriginal new media art projects loom large in this work it is not because they are more significant than other practices of community. It is simply because there is no record of the endless exchange of emails, phone conversations, and face-to-face dialogue that accompanied each project, manifesto and critical essay. In my attempt to trace more than 14 years of community imagination I was limited to the works, a few pieces of critical and artistic writing and the recollections of curators, producers and artists I interviewed.

The historization of community imagination also involved the discursive analysis of interviews, critical material and artworks. For that purpose, and inspired by the work of Fairclough and Foucault, I searched discursive continuities and discontinuities in these diverse Aboriginal new media art texts. The balance between synchronic and diachronic approaches proved to be challenging also at this stage. The historical approach privileged continuity over contending and marginal discourses. The presentation of the different imaginations of community in moments contributed to the linearity of the account. Further, the spatialization of Aboriginal new media art reinforced this linearity by focusing on the field's structural dynamic over change. While this linearity was

unintended, and a clear limitation of my methodological approach, a stress on discontinuity would have obscured the developing relationship between the community that imagined and the culturally imagined community.

Protected by the interdisciplinary orientation of this thesis, I enjoyed the freedom of appropriating strategies and theoretical constructs that belong to different fields of study. These appropriations are often unorthodox and clearly “undisciplined.” The invocation of sociological approaches to art did not result in a sociological analysis, at least not one that regards culture as a reflection of social forces. Similarly, the emphasis on culturally imagined communities does not imply a textualization of community practices.

The Future

My interest in mapping specific instances of Aboriginal imaginations of community and Aboriginal communal practices should not be interpreted as the last word on an area that urgently needs more in-depth studies than the one I propose. The meaning of Aboriginal communality and Aboriginal imaginations of community are areas often overlooked by community media and community empowerment approaches. My contribution to this area of research is limited but nevertheless relevant. It proposes Aboriginal practices of community as complex and fluid, and discourages rapid assumptions that link Aboriginality to locality and even to fixed notions of tradition.

The early connection between Aboriginal new media art and Aboriginal media is an interesting addition to the history of Aboriginal media and broadcasting in Canada.

However, this thesis is not a study of Aboriginal media nor does it attempt to map the field in-depth. Aboriginal new media art has a very close connection to Aboriginal media and new media but, as I demonstrated in this work, it is above all a recognized artistic field. As such, it has engaged with discourses, practices and actors that are current in the Aboriginal contemporary art world.

Despite Aboriginal artists having been involved in aesthetic explorations of new media technology since 1994, this thesis is one of the few academic works in Canada that maps the development of the field. However, my focus on community resulted in a partial history that lacks the formal approach typical of art monographies. I believe the field deserves a comprehensive history that not only centers on networking and communal practices, but includes a more systematic approach to the works.

At the beginning of this chapter I mentioned that the future of the Aboriginal new media art field is uncertain. This is so not just as a consequence of the textualization of community imagination. The future also depends on the development of Aboriginal definitions of community, the political standing of Aboriginal communities vis-à-vis the federal and the provincial governments, the evolution of the Internet and the changing dynamics of the Aboriginal contemporary art world. What seems certain, though, is that Aboriginal artists would bring their quest for community to future explorations of “new” technologies and media. As Hopkins observes in one of the few critical essays on Aboriginal new media art: “Operating through networks and across geographical divides is a concept and an action that has always existed in Aboriginal communities – enacted

through such things as storytelling, the moccasin telegraph and ancient trade routes.”¹

Aboriginal new media art is only the latest episode of a much longer and richer history of a community engaged in its own imagination.

¹Hopkins, “Making Histories Our Own,” 343.

APPENDIX

1. The Interviewing Process:

The historical and discursive tracing of community articulation in the Aboriginal new media art field was mostly based on information gathered in 18 interviews with Aboriginal new media artists, curators, funding officers and cultural facilitators. The interviews were conducted between April 2007 and March 2008. They typically lasted one hour and were face-to-face (except for the phone interviews I conducted with Sara Diamond, Marjorie Beaucage, Jennifer Wemigwans and Murray Jurak). In all cases I let the informants decide the place and time of the interviews. Following Carleton University's ethics protocol, I began my interviews by disclosing the nature of the research. I also explained to the participants how I was going to use the stories that they were about to entrust to me and whether there were any implications associated with their participation. Finally, I asked my informants for permission to record the stories and I transcribed them verbatim for future analysis.

While I planned a semi-structured format for the interviews and I developed a list of topics and questions I intended to address, my main priority was to let the informants freely articulate their own stories. The following questionnaire sample was often used as a guide and adapted according to the participant's experience and role in the Aboriginal new media art field:

Do you consider your online artwork/curatorial practice as "Aboriginal new media art"?

What made you incorporate the Internet in your artistic/curatorial practice?

What is the goal of your work?

What is your relationship with the contemporary Aboriginal art scene?

Is there such thing as an “Aboriginal new media art movement”? If so, what is the goal of this movement? Do you feel you belong to it?

Have you perceived any changes in the way Aboriginal artists use and regard the Internet?

Do you think Aboriginal new media artists form a community? If yes, why? If not, why not?

What is your relationship with other Aboriginal and non Aboriginal artists working with the Internet? Are you in contact with them? Do you feel you belong to a new media movement or an artistic avant-garde?

In what sense is your work Aboriginal?

How do you see your relationship with the Aboriginal community/communities?

Do you think Aboriginal new media art may contribute to strengthen a Native presence online? If so, why? If not, why not?

What is the audience of your work online?

Have you received support from the Canadian government, private institutions, or other provincial or federal institutions to do your online work? If so, how would you describe this support?

What is your relationship with the Banff New Media Institute? How would describe the role played by the Banff New Media Institute in the practice of Aboriginal new media art?

It is important to note that, while I conducted 18 interviews, not everyone I interviewed is cited in the thesis. However, in every case the information that I gathered served to contextualize the Aboriginal new media art field and provided valuable insight about practices and imaginations of community. In other words, the fact that I did not allude directly to some of my informants does not mean the information was not used in some way.

2. The Participants:

The following is a complete list with the participants' names and biographical information. I also provide the date, time, duration and location of each interview. The entries follow a chronological order.

Barry Ace: Ace is an Anishinaabe (Odawa) curator, artist and founder of the Aboriginal Curatorial Collective. He was Chief curator and acting Chief of the Indian and Inuit Art Centres at the Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development from 1994 to 2001. His multidisciplinary work in the field of painting, textiles and object-based work addresses contemporary Native identity. He has participated in exhibitions in Brandon, Montreal and the Canadian Museum of Civilization in Ottawa.

My interview with Ace took place on April 16, 2007, in a cafe in Ottawa and lasted one hour.

Ryan Rice: Rice is a Mohawk curator and artist from the Kahnawake reserve, in Quebec. He has studied in Concordia University, the Institute of American Indian Arts and, most recently, he received a Masters degree from the Centre for Curatorial Studies, Bard College, New York. He is co-founder of *Nation to Nation* and participated in the famous new media art project *CyberPowWow*.

I interviewed Rice on April 18, 2007 at Carleton University's Art Gallery (CUAG). Our conversation lasted an hour.

Steve Loft: Loft was the artistic director of Urban Shaman when I interviewed him at a pub in Winnipeg, on July 7th, 2007. That same year he left the Winnipeg-based Aboriginal artist-run centre to take up a position as Aboriginal curator in residence at the National Gallery of Canada in Ottawa. Loft is a Mohawk of the Six Nations, a curator, writer and media artist. He is also a central theorist of Aboriginal new media art and has contributed to the institutionalization of the field through exhibitions such as “Language of Intercession” and the founding of the virtual gallery “Storm Spirits.” Loft has also written about new media art in the landmark collection *Transference, Tradition, Technology: Native New Media Exploring Visual and Digital Culture* (2005).

My conversation with Loft lasted almost two hours.

Susan Kennard: Kennard is the past director and executive producer of the Banff New Media Institute (BNMI) at the Banff Centre. Prior to her work in Banff, she worked as a TV producer and a writer and broadcaster for various radio stations in Calgary, Montreal and New York.

I interviewed Kennard at the Banff Centre on July 27 and 28th during the “Connected Knowledges Network” workshop, which was organized by the BNMI and the Still Water Group of the University of Maine.

Cheryl L’Hirondelle: L’Hirondelle is a Métis, Cree and German multi and interdisciplinary artist, musician and curator who lives in Vancouver, British Columbia. A central figure associated with the Aboriginal new media art field, L’Hirondelle has not only produced many net art works that explore the meeting and translation of a Cree

worldview and contemporary technology but, in 2009, she curated a survey show on Aboriginal new media art entitled “Codetalkers of the Digital Divide (or Why We Didn’t Become ‘Roadkill on the Information Superhighway’)” at A Space Gallery, Toronto. The self-declared “net artist” also participated in the two “Drum Beats to Drum Bytes” think - tanks and collaborated with Ahasiw Maskegon-Iskwew in the new media art projects *Speaking the Language of Spiders* and *Dene/Cree ElderSpeak*.

I interviewed L’Hirondelle in a cafe in Calgary on September 20th, 2007. Our conversation lasted two hours and a half.

Jason Baerg: Baerg is a visual artist who identifies as “born to a strong Cree Métis mother and a father with a PhD and two Masters degrees.”¹ The creator of the new media art project *Plain Truth* among other digital works, Baerg received his academic formation at Concordia University, where he received a Bachelor in Fine Arts. He later pursued graduate studies in new digital media. Baerg has shown his work at the Banff Centre, the Indian Art Centre at Gatineau and the Library of Congress in Washington D.C.

The interview with Jason Baerg took place in Toronto, at a restaurant, a few blocks from his studio on October 20th, 2007. Our meeting lasted an hour.

Jackson2Bears: 2Bears is a Kanien’kehaka (Mohawk) multimedia artist from Toronto who currently lives in Victoria, BC. A PhD Candidate at the University of Victoria, 2Bears challenges past and present stereotypes of Native people and explores

¹Aboriginal Curatorial Collective, “About Jason Baerg.”

the aesthetics of Aboriginal identity. His digital remixes are influenced by electronic music and DJ/VJ culture.

I interviewed 2 Bears in a cafe in Toronto on October 21st, 2007. The meeting lasted one hour. The artist was attending the ImagineNATIVE festival and had performed at the festival's New Media Mash-Up event.

Marjorie Beaucage: Beaucage is a Métis filmmaker, cultural worker and community-based video artist. In 1994, she was the Aboriginal Film and Video Art Alliance runner. She was a central figure in the organization of the first "Drum Beats to Drum Bytes" workshop.

I interviewed Beaucage on January 22, 2008. Our phone conversation lasted 40 minutes.

Graham Thompson: Thompson is a new media artist who self-identifies as a member of the Métis nation of British Columbia. He currently lives in Ottawa where he is dedicated full-time to his artistic practice. Thompson's work involves immersive audio-visual environments and Internet-based work. He has participated in solo and group exhibitions in Canada as well as in Taiwan, the Philippines and Afghanistan.

I met Thompson in a cafe in downtown Ottawa on January 28th, 2008. The interview lasted two hours.

Ian Reid: Reid is the Aboriginal Media Arts program officer at the Canada Council for the Arts in Ottawa. He is in frequent consultation with the Aboriginal media and new media arts communities.

I interviewed Reid in his office at the Canada Council on January 30th, 2008. Our conversation lasted one hour.

Jason Lewis: Lewis is an Aboriginal digital artist and associate professor of computation arts at Concordia University in Montreal. Lewis studied philosophy and computer science at Stanford University and art and design at the Royal College of Art in London. A frequent participant in Banff Centre think -tanks, Lewis developed a strong link with the BNMI and the Banff Centre. A co-curator of *CPW04 Unnatural Resources*, Lewis' work was showcased in *Storm Spirits* and *Horizon Zero*. His latest project is *Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace*, a network of academics, artists and technologists based at Concordia, demonstrates Lewis' commitment to empower Native people through the use of new media.

I met Lewis in his office at Concordia on January 31st, 2008. The interview lasted 90 minutes.

Skawennati Tricia Fragnito: Fragnito is a curator, writer and artist of Mohawk and Italian ancestry living in Montreal. A central figure in the Aboriginal new media art field, Fragnito studied fine arts at Concordia University. Her work includes *CyberPowWow*, *Imagining Indians in the 25th Century*, and *80 Minutes, 80 Movies and 80s Music*, a digital video she presented at the exhibition *Language of Intercession*. A co-

founder of *Nation to Nation* and, most recently, *Aboriginal Territories in Cyberspace*, Fragnito is currently working on the writing and production of Second Life movies.

I interviewed Fragnito in Lewis' office at Concordia University in Montreal, on January 31st, 2008. Our conversation lasted one hour.

Marie-France Thérien: Thérien is program officer of Media Arts at the Canada Council for the Arts in Ottawa. I interviewed Thérien in her office for an hour on February 1st, 2008.

Archer Pechawis: Pechawis is a performance and new media artist, curator, writer, filmmaker and educator of Cree and European ancestry. A member of Mistawasis First Nation of Saskatchewan, he was born in the community of Alert Bay, Vancouver Island and lives in Vancouver, British Columbia. Pechawis received multimedia training in The Western Front, one of Canada's first artist-run centres. In his multifaceted work he explores the intersection of Cree culture and technology. Besides this rich artistic production, Pechawis teaches performance and digital media for the Indigenous Media Arts Group.

I interviewed Pechawis in his home in downtown Vancouver on March 4th, 2008. Our meeting lasted one hour.

Dana Claxton: Claxton is a filmmaker, educator, video and new media artist of Hunkpapa Lakota ancestry, who currently lives in Vancouver. Claxton's family fled the U.S., as part of the 19th century migration of the Dakota Sioux to Canada, and relocated

in the Wood Mountain reserve in Saskatchewan. Claxton began her artistic career in the video scene in Vancouver and her curatorial work includes the video and new media show *Black/Flash*, which she presented at the Banff Centre's Walter Phillips Gallery. Her writing about new media was published in *Transference, Tradition, Technology: Native New Media Exploring Visual and Digital Culture* (2005). Claxton has also taught new media at the Emily Carr Institute in Vancouver and has been involved in Aboriginal media initiatives such as the Indigenous Media Arts Group (IMAG) and the Independent Aboriginal Screens Producers Association (IASPA).

I interviewed Claxton in her home in Vancouver on March 6th, 2008. Our conversation lasted an hour.

Jennifer Wemigwans: Wemigwans is an Ojibwe (Wikwemikong First Nation) new media producer, writer and PhD candidate at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education at the University of Toronto. She lives in Toronto. In 2001, she created Invert Media, a company that has produced various educational new media projects such as *Four Directions Teachings*, a website that explores Mi'kmaq, Mohawk, Ojibwe, Cree and Blackfoot traditional teachings. In 2009, *Four Directions Teachings* was included in the show "Codetalkers of the Digital Divide (or Why We Didn't Become 'Roadkill on the Information Superhighway')," thus giving recognition to Wemigwans's work is within the fields of Aboriginal new media and new media art.

I interviewed Wemigwans on March 10th, 2008. The phone conversation lasted 40 minutes.

Murray Jurak: Jurak is an Aboriginal filmmaker and president of the DreamSpeakers Festival. He is associated with the Lower Nicola Band in the Edmonton area. Jurak was asked to prepare the Native Net report prior to the “Drum Beats to Drum Bytes” think -tank, which was held at the Banff Centre in 1994.

I interviewed Jurak on March 11th, 2008. Our phone conversation lasted approximately 30 minutes.

Sara Diamond: Diamond has been the president of the Ontario College of Art since 2005, when she left her long-term position as director of the Banff New Media Institute (BNMI). Born in New York, Diamond moved to Canada with her family as a child. She studied communication and history at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver. A video curator, cultural critic, TV producer and educator, she began her artistic career as a video artist in Vancouver in the 1980s. Her work is part of the collections of the National Gallery of Canada, the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Canada Council Art Bank and the California Institute for the Arts. Diamond has also taught at the Emily Carr Institute, the California Institute for the Arts and the University of California in Los Angeles.

Diamond moved to Banff in 1992 and began her work at the Banff Centre as artistic director of media and visual art until 2003, and since then as director of research of the Centre until 2005. She created the BNMI in 1995, which she directed until 2005.

Diamond’s commitment to Aboriginal new media began at the Banff Centre where she facilitated the BNMI’s co-production of *Speaking the Language of Spiders* and

CyberPowWow, among other projects. She also founded the online publication *Horizon Zero* and invited Cheryl L'Hirondelle to curate Issue 17, entitled "TELL."

I interviewed Diamond on March 12, 2008. Our phone conversation lasted 30 minutes.

Additional Sources and Information:

In April 2008, I contacted **Danis Goulet**, artistic director of the ImagineNATIVE festival since 2003. Goulet provided information about the festival and its Aboriginal New Media award.

Despite the crucial role played by **Ahasiw Maskegon-Iskwew** in the development of the Aboriginal new media art world, I was unable to interview the Cree/French Métis artist, writer and curator: Maskegon-Iskwew died in September 2006, a few months before I began with my interviews. His work encompasses performance and web-based work and has contributed to the institutionalization of the Aboriginal new media art field through the organization of the two "Drum Beats to Drum Bytes" workshops, the production of *Speaking the Language of Spiders* and *Drumbytes.org*, as well as through his participation in *CyberPowWow* and *Dene/Cree ElderSpeak* and the launching and development of *Storm Spirits*.

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