Searching for a Center in the Digital Ether: Notes on the Indigenous Caribbean Resurgence on the Internet

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"I went on the Internet to find out who I am". These words of a Trinidadian resident in Canada were offered as part of an explanation of how she came to probe her own aboriginal ancestral origins as a person who once saw herself as being only of "mixed" descent, in a family where some relatives preferred to label themselves "French". She went on the Internet in 2003 and encountered the website of Trinidad's Santa Rosa Carib Community (SRCC),[1] which I designed and maintain as the "webmaster" of the SRCC. It is not an entirely unique story. Many Trinidadians, especially those residing overseas, possibly longing for the place in which they truly fit in as persons at "home", seeking to gain knowledge of their home, longing for a sense of rootedness, and using the technology at their disposal, have come to re-identify as Amerindian descendants in their adult years. This is a heavily loaded bundle of partial explanations, yet one that largely resonates with what I have distilled from over six years of correspondence with dozens of Trinidadians online, and what I have also witnessed from the feedback provided to various sites by expatriates of the Dominican Republic and Puerto Rico.

The Internet, in and of itself, has no creative agency--it is simply a medium. These are not "Internet Indians", as if the Internet possessed some agency to create identities and senses of belonging, as if the Internet somehow elicited identity positions that individuals and groups never had before. The Internet is a medium that conveys certain possibilities to those who are already predisposed, to some degree, to position themselves and re-articulate their identities as Amerindian descendants. The plethora of websites by Caribbean Amerindians, especially Puerto Rican Taínos, stressing the message, "we are not extinct", has served to build a new field of possibility and a new space for identity which older media, often monopolized by more

conservative scholarly interests, left largely closed (see Forte, 2002). Thus far, it is admittedly the case that I have reduced a complex phenomenon to a simple and unequivocal search for one's identity using a special medium, which like a fast food outlet, immediately delivers a consumable good on demand.

Some difficult questions need to be addressed, therefore, if we are to more fully appreciate the Internet as a new platform in the international "resurgence" of contemporary Amerindian identification. My intention is to focus on the practices of building a Caribbean indigenous presence online that aids dispersed individuals and groups in finding a sense of belonging, a "home", in the process of articulating their own representations as indigenous. In my attempt to realize this intention, I will raise two questions. First, to what extent has the Internet been useful in furthering Caribbean indigenous goals of self-representation, regional organization and actual change "on the ground"? Secondly, what are the challenges facing Caribbean indigenous utilization of the Internet that limit their presence or the character of their representations?

The reason for asking these questions and not other perfectly valid and interesting questions is not an indication of an attempt to secure a premature closure of inquiry. The primary purpose of these questions is to explore and chart Caribbean indigenous cultural practice through engagements with Internet media on personal and collective levels. This is by no means the only angle by which we can appreciate the flourishing growth of Caribbean indigenous websites, but it is one way of arriving at an understanding of the relevance that Internet media have for the forms of practice and organization that we refer to under the heading of the "resurgence" of the indigenous Caribbean. These novel means of communication impose certain constraints even

while they open up new opportunities for self-representation. We need to understand the nature of those limitations in addition to the ways Internet media are used and engaged.

What is "New" about Indigeneity Online?

The Internet provides a qualitatively new and contemporary arena for identification as Amerindian, whether Carib or Taíno as the cases tend to be. First, in those cases involving solitary persons using the Internet to document, verify, or give new voice to their self-identification as indigenous, one may detect a certain degree of individuality in search of a community. On the other hand, the Internet serves as yet another membrane for collecting stories and images of the tribe, transmitting these directly, even if not face to face, with the newest members of a tribe that is constantly in the process of remaking itself. The Internet serves, to use Ginsburg's metaphor, as "screen memories" helping to encode and establish presence where presence is precisely what has been under threat: "indigenous people are using screen media not to mask but to recuperate their own collective stories and histories…that have been erased in the national narratives of the dominant culture and are in danger of being forgotten in local worlds as well" (Ginsburg, 2002, p. 40).

Secondly, while speaking of deeply personal needs for belonging, the mode of interaction often proceeds without face-to-face interaction and without a shared geographic locality for the interactions, though the latter is not always true of course. As some have already observed in studying interpersonal relations on the Internet in broader terms, the Internet "enables two qualities that individuals can find empowering: anonymity and intimacy" (Doheny-Farina, 1996, p. 65). Through the Internet, some individuals may come to perceive themselves as indigenous

with the aid of others engaged in the same process. I will return to this issue in the seventh point below.

Thirdly, the Internet arena for this identification is substantially wider in spatial terms, extending well beyond the Circum Caribbean, and is shaped by the acceleration of communication in temporal terms. This dimension of the internationalization of Amerindian identification speaks to a uniquely contemporary situation that is not only indicative of the fact that there is a "resurgence" of this identification, but it can also show us the extent to which wider spheres of this resurgence can occur in and through the Internet, that is, as a result of the Internet's existence.

In line with the last point, one can see that the Internet has increasingly become a significant vehicle in the propagation of a transnational, indigenous Fourth World (Prins, 2002, p. 72). As Prins recognized, the Internet "enables tribal communities and individuals to represent themselves and to do so largely on their own terms and according to their own aesthetic preferences" (2002, p. 70). The question of "transnationalized indigeneity", to the extent that one can meaningfully speak of this, represents an important paradox of indigeneity: seemingly free floating whilst emphasizing local rootedness (see Clifford, 1994). As Dávila (1999:25) explains, Taino groups and associations "have tended to conceptualize themselves not so much in nationalist as in diasporic terms." In addition, Dávila found that most of the Taíno revivalists were either born or raised in the US, with most residing there, and it was in the US that "most of the Taínos recouped their indigenous identity" (1999:19). It seems that for many of the individuals I encounter both online and in person, identification as indigenous is developed and defined, in part, in and through a transnationalized network of representation. Returning to the case of the Trinidadian woman who spoke at the outset of this chapter, she had also accompanied

Canadian aboriginals in various protest marches, had studied Canadian aboriginals in various texts, and had "traveled" across a spectrum of indigenous websites until she found her way back home, so to speak, in examining Trinidadian aboriginal websites. Clifford's paradox can be seen in two different ways: individuals in the diaspora, seemingly free floating, while home remains in place, where they left it; or, individuals are rooted wherever they are, and home (meanings and images of home) is seemingly lifted from a place and appears to be free floating over members of the diaspora.

Fourth, there are important parameters conditioning, even constraining, this phenomenon of indigenous resurgence practiced via the Internet, which I very loosely refer to as "Internet indigeneity", that is, indigeneity partly conceptualized and practiced in and through the Internet. By and large, only very few indigenous Caribbean communities have been in the position to make significant and sustained use of the Internet. We can thus discern a spectrum of representation from the Greater Antilles to the Mainland in terms of the decreased occurrence of what we might call critiques of "extinctionist" discourse (i.e., emphatic repetition of the thesis that no Amerindians remain in a given territory), proceeding through the region from north to south. At the same time, we see the increasing dominance of the number of websites by Caribbean Amerindians as we move back from south to north. Most websites are by self-identified Taínos from Puerto Rico; the fewest are by Guyanese Amerindians. Significantly then, the theme of disputing extinction makes its presence felt heavily in the narratives of these websites of the Greater Antillean diaspora. In an attempt to underscore Amerindian survival, some websites have seemingly taken revenge against older scholarly orthodoxies that asserted extinction, by stressing, maybe even over communicating in some cases, the degree of social and cultural continuity. For my part, I do not lament the polemics that result from the clash of two

extremes, given that they serve to admit the fact that there is a debate to be had (e.g. Borrero, 1999) and that older orthodoxies merit intense critical scrutiny (see Barreiro and Guitar *et al*, this volume).

Fifth, like previous media, use of new media such as the Internet are tied up with issues of power. Both Turner (2002) and Alia (1999) observed how involvement in film and television production, as well as journalism, among the Kayapo of Brazil and the Inuit in northern Canada, offered a means for some to graduate to higher political status within native communities, helping them to become more prominent as political leaders, or simply cementing their claims to authority through media use. As Turner observed with the Kayapo: "political acts and projects, such as a young leader's claims to chiefly authority, that in the normal run of Kayapo political life would remain relatively contingent and reversible, can be represented by video in ways that help establish them as objective public realities" (2002, p. 87). To a limited extent, this may also be true of some of the Taíno websites, insofar as claims to communal and inter-communal leadership are made most forcibly, and visibly, through the Internet. Indeed, the Internet can be used in those cases for organizations to indirectly contest each other's claims to authority.[2]

Sixth, the Internet has gone a long way towards enabling some Caribbean aboriginals, especially those who are best positioned to make use of it, to affirm self-determination in their own self-representations. As Turner found in the case of video, new techniques of representation may empower persons to transform their stock of social and cultural forms (2002, p. 80). The very practice of representation helps to establish the reality being recorded on Taíno websites, for example (see Turner, 2002, p. 87).

Seventh, unlike previous media, the Internet provides the basis for new ways of building and expressing community, for bringing the solitary "surfer" back "home". As Steven Jones

explains, resonating with the declaration at the start of this paper, "we are struck, as we use the Internet, by the sense that there are others out there *like us*" (Jones, 1997, p. 17, emphasis in the original). Being on the Internet is a time to be alone and yet with others, Jones adds (1997, p. 17). Community is experienced imaginatively, even by the solitary surfer, in the surfer's process of establishing relevant and potentially meaningful connections in the process of navigating across related websites: "the World Wide Web, exists as a set of connections from one text to another, providing for choice in navigation from text to text" (Jones, 1997, p. 28). Connections are also developed by more communal means. Indeed, there is already a significant range of literature pointing to the emergence of communities online, no less "real" than offline communities: "community exists in the minds of the participants; it exists because its participants define it and give it meaning" (Fernback, 1999, p. 213). As Fernback extends this argument, if communication is at the heart of "community", then, "community is real whether it exists within the same physical locality or half a world away via the telephone wires" (Fernback, 1999, p. 213). The development of indigenous community online is not any more imaginary than the development of other mediated forms of collectivity, including nationalism (see Anderson, 1991). In fact, given the pronounced degree of interactivity of these new media, where the allegedly passive media consumer of the past has largely vanished, communities mediated by new media may be far less fictive than established forms of nationalism. Though it may be practiced through a non-place such as the Internet, online indigeneity is place-oriented: Trinidad and Puerto Rico, for example, still figure prominently in the minds of online site producers and associated visitors as respective locations of Carib and Taíno cultures.

In other words, we see the development of a community of webmasters, discussants, and correspondents, some of whom may have little interaction with each other offline, especially

where geographically dispersed. The centrality of the role of the Internet in this new phase of indigenous resurgence in the Caribbean is that a much broader, transnational set of associations and linkages can be built, gathering disparate individuals and groups, in both the homeland and the diaspora, into one 'web' of mutual recognition and self-definition. Home is thus both a place and a practice. The Carib-descended Trinidadian web surfer is producing "home" by seeking it. The online community to which that Trinidadian may find herself gravitating towards may not be locale-dependent, but it certainly is locale-oriented. At the foundation of this community is the presence of common symbolic meanings, ultimately of greater importance than mere co-presence in one geographic point (see Cohen, 1989).

Representing Caribbean Indigeneity on the Internet

The first question I posed at the outset was: to what extent has the Internet been useful in furthering Caribbean indigenous goals of self-representation, regional organization and actual change "on the ground"? There are three distinct elements to this question, all focused on the ability to realize some of the positive potentials of the Internet, from the viewpoint of furthering and deepening Caribbean indigenous resurgence.

Beginning with self-representation, the Internet is allowing relatively marginalized groups to recover a history and identity that colonialism, in large part, helped to erase or distort, and which dominant social science has unfortunately helped to inscribe. The online assertions of survival are able to attain visibility precisely because the offline realm places many more constraints on the dissemination of these assertions. Indeed, this becomes painfully evident given the fact that there are no professional historians or anthropologists who are from the Island Caribbean apart from the few who contribute to this very volume—otherwise, Caribs and Taínos,

by and large, are spoken for, and spoken about, by others, with agendas that only infrequently emerge from within these communities. The Internet allows for a reversal of that history of asymmetrical power, in that now Taínos, for example, can engage in their own self-exploration and self-expression, utilizing historical resources, artistic expressions, and contemporary images to produce a Taíno discourse of presence. It is important to note that, even in cases where they have contracted non-Taíno webmasters, websites such as those of the United Confederation of Taíno People, the Jatibonicu Taíno Tribal Nation, and especially those sites completely crafted by the site owners themselves, such as those of Baramaya, Biaraku, and Valery Nanaturey Vargas' Bohio Bajacu, Taínos themselves have full control over content creation, image composition, and communication with visitors.

This is a remarkable turn of events, more than may be realized at first: for the *first* time in *written* history, those identifying themselves as Taíno Indians are able to speak directly to the wider world. Histories of the Taínos featured the latter largely as mute spectators to their own destruction; no wonder then that contemporary history written by speaking Taínos is so disturbing to some that they prefer to believe these are somehow "fake" Taínos. The Internet, as a "technology of representation", has also played a revitalizing role, "as a self-conscious means of cultural preservation and production and a form of political mobilization" (see Ginsburg, 2002, p. 41). With the advent of the Internet, one may witness a considerable degree of reversal of previous invisibility and distorted representations, along with a certain increase in inter-group communication. The creation of websites, by and for the region's aboriginal communities and descendants, has helped to emphasize themes of cultural survival, outline current organizational efforts and practices centred on the revitalization of traditions on a regional scale, and they have aided in directly challenging age-old colonial stereotypes of the "cannibalism" of the Caribs, or

the "extinction" of the Taínos, at least to a greater extent than before the Internet. Taínos in particular have been steadfast and diligent in tracking down sites that continue to misrepresent their ancestors, or their current situation, and have worked their way into various editorial and other contributing positions on diverse open source websites. They have also attracted the interest and support of numerous agents behind American Indian websites, many of which list Taíno organizations as respected and recognized entities that they view as members of a joint, pan-Indian struggle.

In helping to promote the visibility of peoples long believed to have been extinct, or ignored for being minorities, the Internet also helps to *embody* and *embed* groups facing difficulties in gaining offline acceptance as "indigenous." It simultaneously facilitates mutual online and offline recognition between these groups, thereby lending further authority and authenticity to any given group in its respective offline context(s). In addition to outside networking and recognition, there is a growing network of interlinked, mutually referring, Taíno websites that now build on each other's online presence. In the case of these Taíno networks on the Internet, we can delineate patterns of association and commonality. Via regular exchange (electronic newsletters, e-mail petitions, mailing lists, listservs, newsgroups, message boards, chat rooms, and individual e-mail messages) these sites build common interests (e.g. affirming Taíno survival, seeking recognition as Taínos). They do so through related content (commonly reproduced essays on Taíno history and culture, and common links to similar archaeological sites and language resources, etc.), shared perspectives and symbols (petroglyphic icons, *zemis*,[3] animal figures seen as sacred symbols in Taino cosmology). By cross-referencing, the granting of awards, hyperlinks, webrings and the like they form boundaries of mutual advantage. More than that, they are demonstrating Taíno culture by putting it into practice.

The observation that the Internet has aided some Caribbean indigenous groups in better representing and projecting themselves externally, while aiding them in collaborating and communicating internally, that is, amongst themselves, seemingly conflicts with the fact there is no single representative association uniting all of the disparate groups, nor any one website to which all the rest act as tributaries or derivatives. We have therefore arrived at the second element of the first question from the opening of this article, involving regional organization. As indicated by Palacio (this volume), the biggest effort yet at fostering some inter-island indigenous unity, has largely collapsed, at least for now, that being the Caribbean Organization of Indigenous People (COIP). The COIP never had a website of its own, and indeed went into decline before the Internet arose in most of the COIP member territories. Even now, the presence of the Internet in the indigenous communities that constituted COIP is quite uneven, in some cases non-existent. The Garifuna, especially those resident in New York and Los Angeles, like the Taínos, have been at the forefront of developing some astoundingly comprehensive, well designed, richly informative websites. Websites from Garifuna in Belize or other parts of Central America, on the other hand, are virtually non-existent. Only in the months before this article neared completion, did the Santa Rosa Carib Community in Trinidad obtain one single computer, with a dial up Internet connection, and this is used purely for downloading. The diversity of interests between Island and Mainland groups, the former acutely concerned with identity politics, and the latter more concerned with material politics, makes single and unified collaborative projects very challenging. Of course, as is to be expected, there are degrees of distrust and antipathy within and between diverse groups that render any strongly centralized and planned common effort almost untenable, at present, assuming that is even a goal to which these diverse groups ought to aspire.

On the other hand, at least at the academic level, the Internet has allowed for the formation of an "invisible college" in the form of the Caribbean Amerindian Centrelink (www.centrelink.org) and Kacike: The Journal of Caribbean Amerindian History and Anthropology (www.kacike.org).[4] Indeed, this very volume is an expression of that collaboration between contributors who, in most cases, have yet to meet face-to-face, and who have worked on both the Centrelink and Kacike (including Barreiro, J. Bulkan, Collomb, Estevez, Ferbel, Guitar, and myself). Given the absence of "competitors" online, by default a certain degree of "centrality" has been achieved, one that in many ways has aided in spreading recognition of Caribbean indigenous peoples among the broader Internet public.

This then takes us to the third element considered here, that being the degree to which one might argue that activities on the Internet have helped to promote change "on the ground". On one level, it may be true for others, like it was for myself until the late 1990s, that we knew of no contemporary Taíno people until we saw them on the Internet. Indeed, this "first encounter", between the non-aboriginal Internet visitor (like myself) and those representing themselves as Taíno (for example) can produce results unwelcome to the Taínos. The medium of the encounter can produce an unconscious biasing effect: "I only saw them online, because they only exist online. These are Internet Taínos, not *real* Taínos". This is not speculation either, though the statement itself is a fictitious example—one need only consult the many postings in various newsgroups hosted by Google, or look at discussions between contributors to Wikipedia, to see that this bias is shared by a number of individuals. Then there are those who look to see where some of these Taíno organizations are "based". They will find, as in the case of the Jatibonicu Taíno Tribal Nation, that it is headquartered in New Jersey. This produces a second bias: "As they are based in New Jersey, they are fake Taínos, because Taínos are indigenous to

the Caribbean". Indeed, this reference to New Jersey is also not speculative—fused with malice, vulgar accusations of fakery abound online, famously focused on "New Jersey". The consideration that indigenous people, *like other people*, are often forced to move, is simply not entertained. Instead of thinking of Taínos *in* New Jersey, detractors recast them as "New Jersey Taínos", meant to ridicule, of course, as Taínos are not indigenous to that state. The "New Jersey Taínos", which would be the equivalent of "Maryland Maasai", are meant in such constructions to be seen as "out of place", rendering their pronouncements "out of line".

Why would anyone wish to "fake" being a Taíno? After all, it is not as if there have been any proven material rewards associated with this identification. This is an issue that hostile critics fumble over repeatedly, producing contradictory and unsubstantiated assertions, clearly rooted in prejudice, and often expressed in forms of juvenile literary excreta e.g.: (a) the aim is to get a casino (Who says so? Where is such a casino to be located? In New Jersey? Are there not American Indian nations in that region who might have something to say about immigrant Taínos claiming their lands as indigenous peoples? A casino back in Puerto Rico then? How would that work, as they apparently reside in New Jersey?); or, (b) they are trying to evade their "blackness" (Can anyone cite a representative number of examples to support the assertion? If Indians with "one drop" of African blood are evading their "blackness" by proclaiming themselves Indian, then what do we say of Africans with "one drop" of Indian blood who proclaim themselves African?). Indeed, "black" is taken as the "normal", "natural", and unquestionable default identity of Caribbean peoples in such arguments, and anyone claiming a distinct history must be motivated by a sinister, separatist agenda. Lurking in the background are unexamined and thus unquestioned attachments to outdated ideas of assimilation and evolution, better suited to the era of scientific racism than the post-colonial period.

These “first encounters” on the Internet can therefore produce unforeseen outcomes, especially where viewers are in the grips of antiquated pseudo-anthropological assumptions that Indians do not change, do not marry non-Indians, do not move, do not use the Internet, and are supposed to remain poor. This is a burden of biases that is uniquely applied against indigenous peoples, a burden that the Internet may not mitigate, but *may* ironically reinforce. This may be especially true in cases of individuals for whom valid and reliable knowledge is that which appears in print and which precedes the Internet. In these instances, the Internet may be seen as more telephone than library, meaning a tool that anyone can use, and one that every “con artist” will use.

Countervailing tendencies can also be witnessed, that is, where online visibility has helped to embody groups who otherwise might not have been noticed or distinguished and who--given this virtualized visibility and embodiment--subsequently gain recognition. More than that even, the Caribbean indigenous persons and groups representing themselves online can help to attract and encourage many in the diaspora to overcome previous stigmas attached to aboriginal ancestries, i.e., stigmas of poverty, ignorance, backwardness or “cannibalism”. In this case, the Internet is more like a register and a library for those who use it.

As the webmaster for the Carib Community in Arima, Trinidad, I have created venues for online visitors to express their opinions, having accumulated in the process a number of electronic “guest books” filled with interesting ethnographic data that were voluntarily supplied. I printed out these many entries, along with individual e-mail messages, and passed them along to the leadership of the Carib Community. What struck all of us was the emotional intensity of the messages, as if a burden of repressed associations had been lifted, allowing some to finally express their desire to proclaim their Amerindian ancestry; the fact that many of these

Trinidadians abroad were proudly proclaiming their Amerindian ancestry, together constituting a number much larger than the numbers involved in the Carib Community in Arima; and, their apparent patriotism. One representative example of a statement sent by a Trinidadian resident in California was the following: "My grandmother's grandmother was Carib and I have cousins in Arima who are married to pure Carib Indians. We do have to keep *our* culture alive and there's no better way to doing it than through this medium" (emphasis added). In this case, the author of the message is identifying with Carib ancestry, referring to Carib culture as her own ("our culture"), and in fact praising use of the Internet for achieving cultural survival and recognition. As another correspondent wrote, "it is wonderful to see that our original culture has moved into the new age". Others clearly indicate, echoing the quote at the opening of this chapter, that materials on the Internet have aided them in their personal process of re-identifying with their Carib heritage and overcoming past stigma: "At one point in time, I would never have…thought to reveal my heritage. I felt that most people viewed us as being extinct, thanks to one-sided history books. Now, whenever I am approached, or someone assumes that they know my background, I am very pleased to proclaim who I AM. I appreciate the fact that this site exists". Some Trinidadians abroad indicate that they look to the Internet, at least in part, for information on their Carib roots: "I would like to learn more about my Carib roots from Trinidad, where I was born". Affective ties to their Trinidadian home is also expressed by self-identified Carib descendants abroad: "Knowing about my homeland means a lot to me".

The presence of Trinidadian Carib materials on the web has also attracted very interesting feedback from individuals across the Caribbean and its diaspora. Messages have been received from self-identified Amerindian descendants, or from those related to them, from places about which little knowledge of such populations is available. Examples include the following: "I live

in Anguilla, BWI (a British possession). Most of our island's native inhabitants (including my in-laws) were born of the union between Irish Settlers and Arawak Indians"; from Curacao in the Netherlands Antilles, one person wrote, "my grandfather was an Arawak Indian"; from a young woman in Guadeloupe, a French Overseas Department, "My grand-mother who is now 96 years old is part Carib. She was born on the island of Marie-Galante"; and, from St. Thomas, in the US Virgin Islands, one wrote, "my family on my father's side are from Nevis. My grandmother would tell us when we were little that she was Amerindian and that our people lived in Nevis for centuries and centuries. In the words of my aunt they always lived there. When the Europeans began coming and bringing slaves, they moved to the mountains". Some authors of online postings also seek to use the medium as a means of communicating with other Caribs, for example: "I am a Vincentian Carib living in America. Would love to hear from other Caribs".

There are no apparent material or political agendas that surface from such messages, which instead seem to focus on affective ties and self-knowledge. "Race" or "physical appearance" is possibly of limited importance to such online Trinidadians and other Caribbean nationals. Though this is not a scientific survey based on a representative sample, a voluntary guest poll for anonymous users (safeguarded against repeat votes from the same computer) was hosted on the Carib Community website for five years. The results are interesting, and open to multiple interpretations. In defining what it is that makes a person "indigenous", only 19% chose "race, physical appearance". The same number chose "it's all subjective". The overwhelming majority responded with a combination of "proven aboriginal ties to the land" (37%), "the persons *say* they are indigenous" (7%), and "observable cultural difference" (17%). With such polls one cannot know for certain that Trinidadians or other Caribbean nationals posted the votes. However, given consistent traffic statistics for the sites concerned over several years, a

majority of visitors are from Trinidad and Tobago itself, the rest being from Canada, the US, and the UK, and it therefore seems likely that these visitors posted most of the votes.

Feedback from individuals in the Dominican Republic has also been forthcoming in response to articles posted in the online journal, Kacike. Expressions range from pride and gratitude for making available information on indigenous cultural survivals in the Dominican Republic, especially through a special issue edited by Lynne Guitar. Some visitors feel encouraged that their own ideas on indigenous cultural survival have been furthered and deepened, or simply articulated, by what they have read online: "I never realized how much of my own lifestyle has survived from my Taíno heritage….American textbooks had me in fooled in thinking that we Dominicans were just symbolizing a culture that was 'extinct'. I grew up in *el campo* [countryside] and much of what was in [the] article applied to my vocabulary, cooking style, and cuisine." Similar responses have been received from Cubans: "I thank you for publishing these enriching articles and I agree with the fact that the indigenous presence in Cuba is not extinct, as it is evident in our diet, several traditions, and words that enrich our language". The "extinction" theme appears to have been increasingly eroded, and references to print sources that endorsed this theme are looked back upon as having been misleading.

Taíno tribal organizations have also received considerable feedback as recorded in their online guest books. The United Confederation of Taíno People (www.uctp.org), as just one example, received responses that are primarily focused on pride, self-knowledge and genealogy, rather than any overtly material- or politically-oriented messages, like the anti-Taíno critics would have us expect. Illustrative of these comments are ones that state, "let's all get together and share our pride by helping each other with informative material", which again affirms the role of the Internet in this collective knowledge sharing enterprise that could not be realized prior

to the emergence of the Internet on anything other than a restricted local scale. The Internet acts as a bridge between what visitors had already learned offline, in many cases, and what is now given new voice online: “Thank god for this site; my grandmother would talk to me about my Indian background and it’s good to finally see some of it on the Web. I was born in New York, but like all the rest of us ‘Newyoricans’, I am always holding on to my *Boricua* heart”. Websites such as those of the UCTP thus allow some to develop a sense of an indigenous home that is rooted, not in the US, but in Boriquen, the indigenous name for Puerto Rico: “if it were not for them [the UCTP] I would have been lost. I am now home with my own kind”. As another visitor expressed this sense of belonging: “I was so alone...to realize that there are people somewhere in the world just like me and to finally put meaning and a sense of stability to all those nameless yearnings is quite overwhelming”, a comment that was affirmed by another visitor, “I always wanted to know about my native roots, now that I have a computer I don't feel like a freak anymore”. This sense of belonging to a larger community, finding a sense of home, was condensed in one emotionally striking message: “All I can do is read and cry not really knowing why I'm crying but finally finding my place in the world. Thank you for helping me find my identity as a human being.” For some, the Internet is clearly the means through which they explore themselves as Taíno and find their way back to a symbolic homeland, in communion with others online: “I am a Taino descendant that, regrettably, has lost his way….That's about to finally change”. Having experienced a past when the stigma of shame was attached to Taíno identity—“as a child my grandmother told us we were Indians. My father unfortunately was ashamed of his ancestry, so he never spoke of it or his childhood”—sites such as that of the UCTP help some to overcome this stigma, to feel “more proud then ever now knowing that the new generations are learning about their roots”, as another visitor explained. While websites

such as the UCTP are likely not creating anything that was not already present offline, what they do is provide some inspiration and encouragement: "I plan on soaking in every last drop of knowledge available and embracing my ancestry. I think this site, along with others devoted to Taino/Carib heritage and history, will become an excellent starting point in my journey. Keep up the great work, as your site may inspire others to do the same!"

Also critical is the fact that members of other indigenous communities in the Caribbean now have a means for engaging in exchange with Taínos in the US, by first making contact through the Internet: "I am indigenous from the Warrau nations of Guyana South America and I would like to exchange views, way of life, and common problems that the indigenous people face on a daily basis." Indeed, this new means of networking that renders distance immaterial has afforded the UCTP the means for a considerable expansion of its web of ties and connections, as noted on the front page of the site where they list all of their affiliated partner communities across the Caribbean. This, when supplemented by the extensive travels of the head of the UCTP, Roberto Mucaro Borrero, enables the creation of inter-tribal linkages that have not been possible for a large part of the history of the Caribbean since European conquest. Likewise for the Santa Rosa Carib Community, the development of their online presence since 1998 has attracted the attention of journalists, researchers, and other indigenous groups, with the apparent result of a significant increase in their networking and exchange activities. What we have then, at least as some likely results of the Internet, are stronger senses of self-identification as indigenous, coupled with increased regional networking, even in the absence of a central organizing body such as COIP.

The Limits of Indigenous Resurgence via the Internet

The second question I raised at the start of this chapter concerned the challenges facing Caribbean indigenous utilization of the Internet. In speaking of the practice of indigenous resurgence by way of the Internet, we must, at least for now, respect the fact that there are practical, material constraints on Internet access, and Internet use, for indigenous communities in the region. Sometimes, groups in North America will attempt to aid in expanding the communication facilities of those in the Caribbean, one of the most notable examples that I am aware of being the UCTP's gift of a Fax machine to the Santa Rosa Carib Community, which has been put to very intense use. Nevertheless, there are no Carib websites that emerge directly from communities in Dominica, St. Vincent and Trinidad (see Forte, 2003), even when they have actual Internet access.

The fact remains that there is far more information on the Internet *about* Caribbean aboriginals than there is *by* them. In addition, amongst the indigenous population of the Americas as a whole, there is differential representation on the Internet, with websites from Latin America and the Caribbean far outnumbered by those from Canada and the United States, even though the latter two nations have an indigenous population that is only a fraction of that of South America. This trend suggests that primarily North American representations of aboriginality, and issues and debates peculiar to North America, become the dominant representations, even if not exclusively so.

Further study is needed to understand why indigenous persons and organizations with Internet access, in Dominica and Trinidad for example, have not used those resources (thus far) to create any of their own websites. Indeed, one very common feature, widely remarked upon by many of us outside of those territories, is that the Caribs of Dominica simply use their machines as download devices. This is also true, for now, of the Santa Rosa Carib Community. E-mails

sent to these communities are never returned. Websites have been downloaded in these communities, extensively and painstakingly in some cases, making copies of each and every page of sites that sometimes have dozens of pages, but no independent production of their own has been forthcoming. One has to hope that this is not a sign of new media, like previous media, being absorbed into a cultural mode of spectatorship.

Conclusions: Centering Indigenous Identities Online

Cyberspace—a non-space on its own—is being adapted to individual and group strategies for creating a sense of place that incorporates a wide variety of geographically dispersed persons. Without that sense of place, there can be no ideas of roots, no vision of a home, and no basis for self-identification as indigenous. That is not to say that the Internet is the sole or primary means by which that sense of place and associated identifications are being created. The Internet does not have any power to create identity positions that individuals and groups never possessed before. What the Internet does provide is a vehicle, convenient to those who have access, to coordinate and communicate ideas of indigeneity and plans for organization. What the printing press was to European nationalists, the Internet is to aboriginal activists. The Internet will, I believe, eventually be regarded as the primary communication medium of the ongoing indigenous resurgence that has been taking place in multiple locations around the planet.

Caribbean indigenous peoples with an online presence have developed a web of mutual recognition and self-definition. In the process, individuals who conceptualize their indigeneity by multiple paths are called to belong to a vision of home, one that is both place and practice. Taíno activism on the Internet has enabled the recovery of a history and identity that had been marginalized, reduced to a symbolic category without a living reality, and treated at best as

something to be commemorated rather than experienced personally. From this vantage point, the Internet has afforded the means for reversing previous invisibility while aiding inter-group communication among a variety of Caribbean indigenous peoples. As the vehicle for a collective knowledge sharing enterprise, the Internet has been important for networking on a scale that was previously beyond reach, as well as enabling self-definition on terms chosen by participants. This medium has played an important role in fomenting a broader resurgence of indigenous self-identification. As Ginsburg noted, "media practices are part of a broader project of constituting a cultural future in which their [indigenous peoples'] traditions and contemporary technologies are combined in ways that can give new vitality to [indigenous peoples'] life" (2002, p. 43). By allowing indigenous participants to self-determine their own representations and write their own histories, presenting images of themselves as *present*, one might agree with Prins in noting the "current relief from visual imperialism afforded to indigenous peoples by the web" (2002, p. 72).

A less cheerful assessment might call attention to the fact that while indigenous practices on the Internet have been successful in encouraging and shaping indigenous self-representations, amongst those who are already predisposed to identify as indigenous, representations to hostile segments of the external audience have been less successful. It is impossible for contemporary Taínos to explain their identity to individuals who refuse, in advance, to admit that they could ever be speaking to Taínos. All the Internet has done is to make the debate public, and to transform the debate into two separate monologues. As a number of observers have recognized, "cultural biases that exist offline can be made manifest online in a variety of ways; therefore, the net is rarely a refuge from those biases" (Doheny-Farina, 1996, p. 65; see also Nakamura, 2002). We must also be cautious in admitting that conclusions made about a "moving target", a process in motion, may simply be invalidated by future developments.

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[1] The SRCC website can be found currently at http://www.kacike.org/srcc/.

[2] See for example the websites of the Jatibonicu Taíno Tribal Nation at http://www.taino-tribe.org, and the United Confederation of Taíno People at http://www.uctp.org.

[3] Usually carved from wood or stone and not much bigger than can be held in a hand, these are seen as containing spirits and are often associated with shamans and chiefs, sometimes depicting skeletal yet fertile representations of shamans.

[4] The term "invisible college" is now widely used with reference to scientific exchange across locales, especially through electronic circuits of communication. The term has been in use for some time as reportedly coined by Robert Boyle for referring to a small cluster of intellectuals in 17th century England. See also Crane (1972).