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# HUMAN NO MORE

Digital Subjectivities,  
Unhuman Subjects,  
and the End of Anthropology



## Technology, Representation, and the “E-thropologist”

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### The Shape-Shifting Field among Native Amazonians

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This chapter centers on both the familiar and the arrestingly new. On the one hand it is about my long-term relationship with the Waiwai (Carib-speaking Amazonians in Guyana and Brazil) as collaborators and friends, familiar territory for me. In fact, this territory is not only familiar but rather comforting to me.

On the other hand, this chapter is also about following them as they venture into cyberspace and online worlds—places with which they are relatively unfamiliar, but also places in which I am not a familiar participant. This aspect of emergence that is ongoing and shifting makes following ethnographic subjects into new spaces speculative. Their Internet forays make my ethnographic situations arrestingly new because in addition to the nuances that our mutual lifeworlds-in-progress may reveal in other spaces are the very real and increasingly relevant opportunities for pause and reflection, including the opportunity to deepen the significance of the reflexive exercise as method and to contemplate the utility of such reflexivity toward an emergent understanding of the shifting nature of the fieldwork process itself. Thrusting

the ethnographer into a new, interactive venue for participation with the members of a community with whom they have lived and worked in close somatic proximity brings to light the personal relationship the ethnographer has with this interactive venue. Following the Waiwai into online worlds is like traveling with them in other contexts—along rainforest trails, on winding rivers, or even, ultimately, into “hidden” cosmic and spiritual worlds—and yet these “new” Internet spaces are places I come to with some inherent bias based on my own experience.

But anthropology has been here before, even if I and my collaborators have only recently ventured together into “Cyberia” (Escobar 1994), and there are many things to consider and many trajectories to take. As Wilson and Peterson asserted in 2002, the transformations and changes that the Internet might bring about “have been less dramatic and more embedded in existing practices and power relations of everyday life” (Wilson and Peterson 2002, vii), and this is certainly the case among the Waiwai. On the other hand, it is also important to consider questions such as, is the concept of community itself misleading? and will an anthropological approach to these phenomena necessarily differ from other types of anthropological investigation? (ibid., viii). On the positive side for the e-thropologist, anthropology seems “uniquely suited for the study of socioculturally situated online communication within a rapidly changing context,” and it is an opportunity for the discipline to explore and theorize communicative technologies and cyber-created discourses and relationships (ibid.).

The creation of a virtual ethnographic paradigm is still and will remain “in progress.” While we grapple with ideas of the Internet as place or the Internet as cultural artifact, or both, ethnographic subjects interact with the Internet in exponential ways that are difficult to capture. Authenticity and identity become more nuanced and face-to-face ethnographic techniques are no longer possible (Hine 2000).

In a more localized sense, this chapter examines the collision of what is characterized as *modern* with what is desired to be *traditional*—that is, the imposition of Western, or perhaps better, the *technologized*, aspects of the human cultural experience on what is to some the iconized, unmodernized, unglobalized refuge of desire, the comparatively remote-dwelling indigenous Amazonian Indian or Amerindian. In this respect, interpretations of this collision resemble the denial of native agency in the face of overwhelming directed change, such as when Amerindians discard their feathers for trousers and dress shirts or take up shotguns over long bows, motorized cassava graters over handmade stone-encrusted grater boards, metal axes and adzes over stone implements, or even boomboxes for bamboo and bone flutes. These changes are viewed as forms of postcolonial victimization rather than conscious choices. We can comprehend the desire to be like the “unfettered” native Amazonian (the fetters in this case being the complexity of urban life,

the obligation to technology, and perhaps a sense of dehumanization), but we may not consider that they may actually want to be like us. This is especially true if this emulation involves aspects of what we consider our less-desirable selves, the part that is jaded and anxious and needs sleep aids, antidepressants, stimulants, and lattes to function.

In this context, indigenous forays into these other worlds are not met with the same acknowledgment or even praise that our own progressive directive often evokes. In other words, modernities, technologies, and virtual worlds are for other humans, not those that inhabit the forests of our Amazonian imaginations. Thus, the crossover can be quite jarring.

If we consider the construction and representation of Amazonians in terms of their cultural transformations over the past few decades, we recognize the emergence of an increasing number of images that juxtapose the native with the trappings and gadgets of modernity. In pictures that use seemingly incongruous juxtapositions, Yanomamo and Kayapo, in full feathers and beads, sport cameras, and a native Andean woman uses a cell phone. In the popular media *The Far Side* cartoon implies that "natives" hide their technology from anthropologists, and that "natives" want to use explorers' laptops to check their hotmail accounts.

Yet these images now seem to infringe on certain realities that take away from the humorous and the ironical, robbing them of their once humorous and ironical punch. Today a new set of similar, but different, images has emerged that represents something else. The feathered native with the flat screen and hands poised over a keyboard is no longer amazing but increasingly common, and the native in the trappings of Western conservatism as a GPS-wielding forest ranger does not provoke the same startled response.

In fact, the image of the native asking to use technology probably should be replaced by an image of the non-native interloper borrowing a native's computer to access a now distant world, and the same caption now describes a new possibility. The use of technologies introduced from outside sources and their integration with internal worldviews are not new courses of inquiry in Amazonian anthropology. Terence Turner's long-time study of the Kayapo's use of media technologies for their own uses is seminal and inspiring and has given special attention to the phenomena of indigenous media (Turner 1992). Before him, Faye Ginsburg ventured into issues of online worlds and the use of technologies by indigenous persons, asserting that a study of these habits has the potential to reveal transformations in cultural identities and innovate different perspectives on social process. Indeed, Ginsburg found that they use new forms of communication for internal and external communications, for self-determination, and for resistance to outside cultural domination (Ginsburg 1991). Later, Beth Conklin showed that the use of these same Internet and communication technologies has transformative

effects on Amazonian interethnic politics and self-representation and reveals some contradictions and potential liabilities (Conklin 1997). In these good works addressing indigenous Amazonians' use of new technologies, the issues of fieldwork and ethnography loom in the background. Thus, the project of confronting change and humanness among indigenous Amazonians also becomes a project about the continued relevance and shifting nature of fieldwork.

Elsewhere I have presented another aspect of cultural change for the Waiwai related to musicality and the construction of identity and personhood: a generational shift from the use of the flute to the use of the boombox as a communicative device (Hill and Chaumeil 2011). Here I underscore the uneasiness with which such shifts are perceived by Others.

Over two years ago I fulfilled a request by a young Waiwai man for a laptop computer. I was not the first one to introduce the Waiwai to computers; their ongoing engagement with the Conservation International (CI) agenda had already provided computer technology to their southern Guyanese village. But this previous computer experience had not included Internet access. I suppose such access was considered impossible given the location, logistics and cost. But once CI installed a satellite dish and paid for their \$250 a month Internet service, things were different. After the computer from myself and two others were being used in the village, I saw firsthand how technology engenders certain forms of outrage among others when juxtaposed to native Amazonians and how this is usually masked as some hope or desire to leave them untouched and untrammled by the rolling juggernaut of global engagement. I received a semi-anonymous e-mail from "Hawkfeather" regarding my part in the corruption of Amerindian society. "Why don't you just leave those poor people alone?" Hawkfeather wrote. "You won't be happy until they are all running around with cell phones sticking out of their ears and are just as depraved as we are." These are not the simple (or cognitively dissonant) accusations of persons not engaged or unfamiliar with online worlds and Internet access. From across disciplines, ideas about the ultimate utility and suitability of online communities and interactive discourse through cyberspace have begun to emerge. Against a backdrop of "Western concern" over the erosion of our intellects (Carr 2010), the Amazonian people I know have embraced cyberconnectivity in a way that has to be examined. As we worry over the "technopoly" emerging to potentially overtake our lives, other peoples in other cultural contexts are less concerned (Postman 1993). Musings of an almost self-help nature have emerged to confront "Western" discomfort with screens (on computers and the like), incessant self-reverence, and philosophical views on connectedness and the nature and meaning of solitary pursuits as well as the "inwardness of technologies" (Powers 2010). Amid these views, however, actual communities of persons from across indigenous Amazonia continue to appear online and to develop online identities, spending time in

these places in larger measures and participating with the rest of the connected world from within their rainforest homes. No one has yet had to tell them, "You are not a gadget" (Lanier 2010).

For over a decade I have witnessed Waiwai persons presenting and projecting themselves into a larger world and engaging in an ongoing discourse with globalization. Rather than passively observing the world, they repeatedly engage, preparing and delivering a version of Waiwainess that reflects these interactions and further underscores their own knowledge of the intersubjectivity of persons and the necessity of Others in the creation and maintenance of the self. Young men, just as with the boombox, are replicating Waiwainess with reference to both the past and the present in terms of power and prowess. The black-painted hunter is at the same time the keyboard-tapping e-mailer. But even as I make the attempt to follow the paths of their self-representation, I am met with more questions than answers.

The advent of cyberlife among the Waiwai follows a certain discernable pathway. The first use of this technology was by the gendered age grade of *karipamsham*, or newly adult young men, who now have introduced a familiar aspect of competition among computer users. A working knowledge of Internet "places" has come to be a key aspect in Waiwai young male personhood, just as prowess in hunting and having traveled to faraway places represented, and still represent, this same personhood. Within the last few months, older men—especially those in positions of leadership—have made a concerted effort to master the Internet. In addition, an absolutely new development—the entrance of Waiwai young women into these cyberworlds—has forced a consideration of the shifting expression and representation of gender among the Waiwai and what this shift may entail.

To show how the Waiwai have accessed other social worlds through the use of the Internet, we will consider one of the young Waiwai men. The images on his Facebook page show the young man in a variety of roles. For example, one image shows him in a Taekwondo uniform and pose, and another, in a gangsta pose with a knit hat, with dark glasses and headphones and making hand signs. Yet another shows him covered in soap while bathing in a creek, and another, with a laptop and clipboard, doing forest ranger work.

I have known this Waiwai man since he was a small boy. I saw him excel in the small village school and pass the national exams that allowed him the chance, and the hardship, of attending secondary school far from his village. He left the village at age twelve and returned at age seventeen, fully intent on marrying a Waiwai girl (which he did) and remaining not only a village member but a Waiwai man (which he has certainly become).

His foray into Facebook has some interesting aspects. He was introduced to it by the computer tech for Conservation International and quickly found that his old school friends had already discovered Facebook; thus, he joined to be able to interact with them. Without too much explication, one can see

the emergence of an online identity through the images he has chosen to represent himself. Here is his online profile:

CURRENT PROFILE STATEMENT = Rum 'til I die!!; Sex: Male; Birthday: November 20; Hometown: Brazil, Lethem, Guyana; Relationship Status: In an Open Relationship; Interested In: Women; Looking For: Friendship, A Relationship, Networking; Political Views: not interested; Religious Views: which ever; Mobile Number: +592-69\*\*\*\*; Skype name: \*\*\*\*\*; Yahoo ID: \*\*\*\*\*; Education and Work, High School: Aishalton secondary school '05.

But this Waiwai young man is also experiencing the development of a multifaceted identity, in which he is at the same time this person we see here and other “persons” that are situationally performed. As I explore his Facebook persona, I can't help but ask myself why does he not include other images that show him doing more “native activities”? I have many images of him in full black paint, shooting at targets with a bow and arrow, pounding fish poison in a rhythmic group on a large rock in the river, coming into the village with other hunters after a week or ten days with large baskets of smoked and fresh meat for village feasting, and dancing in the Umana Yana communal house at Kresmus.

It is at this point that I find myself questioning my ability to represent this person and this culture that I have known for so long. Do I know how this process is being enacted? Can I understand this construction of self that not only this young man, but other Waiwai men and women are engaged with in terms of some reflection of Waiwainess? And, if so, what will I ultimately want to say on their behalf?

How will I be able to address his and other Waiwais' multiple and complex entailments with the regional and global networks that they now not only have access to but actively seek to engage? And, perhaps even more challenging, how will I facilitate access to and potentially help to construct the emergent narratives of Waiwainess that their experiences create?

For now, a focus on the young male Internet users is also a focus on the next generation of Waiwai leadership. But it is not as if this generation is the first to move both figuratively and actually “out of the forest”; the preceding generation, of men now in their late forties, also struggles with technology and change, but they have used once-new technologies such as the radio, solar and limited electrical current, gas-powered generators, outboard motors, and small engines for years. In addition, it is not merely computers and the Internet that have come to the Waiwai village but also cell phones, MP3 players, and DVD players.

Although each of these changes seems to pose particular challenges to representation, one theme has remained consistently clear: that rather than becoming us through the use of our technologies, the Waiwai are using these

technologies to represent and maintain their own culture, as well as to fulfill their very real desire to project themselves through the space-time continuum.

This leads me to my first tentative conclusion: that is, the Waiwai, both young and old, have come to see the Internet, along with the computer that allows access to it, as the shamanic device of the young. Just as the shaman can access hidden worlds, find hidden individuals and entities, and communicate with beings and persons that others cannot, the Internet opens a cyberspace that is comparable to the shaman's space containing the places and worlds to which shamans have access and to which they routinely travel.

Because of my understanding of Waiwai production and projection of identity, it was less surprising to me to see them in a twelve-month period embrace e-mail and Internet technology as a form of communicative expression, injecting Waiwai patterns of representation, syntax, communication, and discursive relationships into the media they use to form and maintain relationships.

I cannot help but think, however, that it is perhaps more important at this point to focus on the nature of identity and the form of experience. As Neil Whitehead discusses in his article on "posthuman anthropology," Amazonian persons conceive of themselves and others as divisible and possessing an unstable materiality, meaning that they are material beings whose identities are not fixed but highly dependent on social context (Whitehead 2009). Although the concept of the instability of the human category is certainly not limited in space or time to Amazonia, the shamanic tradition in Amazonia nevertheless suggests that among other knowledges, shamans know the cosmological rules for the transformation of beings between ontological states. In other words, they are familiar with both the shifting, fluid concept of the person and the presence of the person.

The Internet and its ability to make present those who are physically absent or to "be" in terms of an intellectual or mindful presence in a place that one is not physically present seem shamanic. This immateriality of cyberspace, which might intimidate those grounded in a imperative of physicality, does not confound them; in their thinking, one is never really sure of the reality of any living being, because every being may in fact be wearing the disguise of another. Therefore, accessing and entering virtual worlds created by the "communicative programming" the Waiwai mainly explore and employ are comparatively easy for them. Because creating identities in a different space is a recognized activity, the possibility of existing in a space without a body is completely real for them in ways that it is not necessarily for someone like you or me.

For them, humans may not be totally human and may be composed, and probably are composed, of inhuman elements—hence the idea that an animal encounter is really an encounter with *toto*, or "someone," or that a person is capable of manipulating energies against or within another person without



being physically present. They have been sending such virtual messages and causations long before the advent of e-mail. Thus, they have little anxiety about the concept of constructing formless presence, especially in online situations and spaces. In this sense, they are not re-creating humanness but are perhaps engaging in a form and comprehension of humanness that has long existed in their own ontologies.

So again the question becomes not so much how the Waiwai and others might be doing this, although this process is certainly worth exploring, but how the anthropologist might attempt to share this disembodied, subjective experience. And perhaps for the Amazonianist, this entails a major shift in sharing “the field” with our ethnographic subjects. The somatic endurance requirements disappear only to be replaced by other requirements. In these subjective engagements, the field begins to shape-shift.

As the Waiwai experience change, new domains open for an anthropological praxis that responds to changing human experience more generally. Within these new domains, it seems relevant to remember what Neil Whitehead has also iterated, that ethnographers must further engage with their own reflexivity and that “such inadequate coverings as the fig leaf of scientific observation will now not be enough to hide the bulge of anthropological desire” (2009, 27). New methods of discussing the mutual construction of experience between ethnographers and their “subjects” will have to be created, and we will need to recognize that entering into certain forms of experience—sharing online space, for example—is actually another form of ethnographic performance.

In considering how to approach the phenomenon of Internet usage and “virtual” identity construction among the Waiwai, we might do well to consider the inversion of the formula of participant observation to that of an *observant participation*, which allows us to see ourselves as we work. This method suggests that concepts such as reflexivity are not merely a cue to be confessional but opportunities to create a purposeful research design that acknowledges the ethnographer as person-acting-in-the-world, especially when that world is a virtual one.

The repositioned ethnographer is then better able to contemplate such issues as change, humanness, and the relevance of fieldwork, or even the field itself. This does not necessarily mean replacing one field with another but—even more challenging—attempting to balance the multi-sited ethnographic project that shifts even as it is described.

For my own work, it means venturing into fields such as e-mail, Yahoo Messenger, Skype, each with its own set of peculiarities and each manipulated by the Waiwai to position themselves using these tools of modernity. The challenge for the e-thropologist or netnographer is to provide a context in which both online and offline worlds can exist as the actually do—simultaneously.

The phenomenon of online Waiwai is new and somewhat unstable. There

is no guarantee that they will be able to maintain their online presence in the face of having to pay for the satellite service that makes it possible, and there is little information to predict the direction they will go within their cyber-worlds, nor the space here to discuss all the cyber places they go and what they do when they get there.

Now, and I mean that literally, the Waiwai continue to hone their communicative skills using the Internet. But even as they do this, I have not seen the emergence of a "virtual community" among them. At present, they only interact with persons they already know from face-to-face contexts and who they anticipate to have face-to-face interaction with in the future. They also exist in a textual world rather than an oral/aural world when they e-mail, chat, and instant message. For all their ability to comprehend the disembodied person, they still rely on contextual face-to-face cues in their discourse; they have a strong concept of the *eye soul*, for example, and an equally strong concept of the necessity to develop senses that the Internet does not necessarily require. They do not use the Internet much for information technology, web searching, researching, and knowledge. They instead use it as they do all non-Waiwai things, from Christianity to boomboxes, as a device to project themselves into the consciousness of others, a way of revealing others through conversation, a way of cloaking themselves in possible identities, and, even if it still seems ironic to our jaded sensibilities, a way of remaining distinctly Waiwai.

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