Aboriginal Narratives in Cyberspace

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When Crees speak of Canada, they mean Ka-Kanata-Aski, "the land that is clean." To be Cree is to be Nee-yow, "We who are members of that Nation of people who are part of the four seasons."[1]

The word Ka-Kanata signifies Cree narrative history and philosophy about "the clean land" and means more than an absence of garbage.

A clean land. Clean, not as synonymous with pure, as in the Garden of Eden, but clean meaning a balance and harmony amongst "All the Relations" who share the land. A clean land that the people must protect.

What then does the new territory called cyberspace mean to aboriginal people? If it is really a place, albeit under construction (and which at the same time will not really be there when it is there), what can we name it? Can we name cyberspace the way we name other technologies, from sewing machines to chain saws? Can it, like television, be called "a talking box of space"? Will we name cyberspace a talking web of clouds? A land of mists where shadows chase shadows or a dream world with no memories or traces of before?

Can our narratives, histories, languages, and knowledge find meaning in cyberspace? And above all, can cyberspace help keep Ka-Kanata a clean land?

For instance, will the need for fossil fuel for endless commuting be reduced as Corporate Virtual Workspaces are created in cyberspace? Or will CVW alienate humanity even more from the land, allowing as yet unheard of ecological abuse?

Will cyberspace enable people to communicate in ways that rupture the power relations of the colonizer and the colonized? Or is cyberspace a clever guise for neocolonialism, where tyranny will find further domain?

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 tradition or a past?

In other words, what ideology will have agency in cyberspace?

Some might say that cyberspace marks the end of ideology, the end of history. In cyberspace everyone will have free and equal access regardless of origins. Difference will be mutable, no one group will prevail because, after all, you can be anything or anyone in cyberspace.

But will cyberspace duplicate what already exists—with virtual malls, as constructed by the world of commerce, and virtual museums, as constructed by the academy, or virtual arcades, as constructed by the entertainment industry? Remember, cyberspace started as a virtual war zone, as constructed by the western military.

Much has been written about the origins of cyberspace, from the psyche that imagined it to the technology that has created it. Those origins are important to examine when talking of creating aboriginal meaning in cyberspace.

Some have said cyberspace is "Platonism as a working product." Here, "with an electronic infrastructure, the dream of perfect *forms* becomes the dream of *information*. . . Filtered through the computer matrix, all reality becomes patterns of information."[2] Here, the idea of the universe as imagined by Plato takes shape.

Perhaps these patterns in cyberspace will be imagined as liquid light, like a neon sign shining slick and menacing by a wet road at midnight. Maybe cyberspace cities will be built as if of crystals that shimmer in a sunless sky. And along the roads and highways of this geography, information will flow like blood, in a space where there will be no flesh and shapes will shift like shadows on the wall.

Propelling humanity to this place, to the perfect *forms*, is Eros "to extend our finite being . [and] to see more and to know more deeply." And to do so, Eros "inspires humans to outrun the drag of the 'meat'—the flesh."[3]

In this ontology of cyberspace—hell of western thought—the tension between the need to know all, to emulate *visio Dei,* and the limitations of the body and the senses, of the physical world, creates a need—for a new site for the "heart and mind" of man (although in the *Terminator* films the "heart and mind" of man was reborn in the machine, yet the machine hated humankind and sought its destruction).

Western culture is not the only one that seeks to know. The quest to find the essence, the unifying structure, "the mind of God," is shared across cultures. In native culture we too have stories in which our Prometheus—a trickster— seeks out fire or the sun, tricking his father, or a great chief, or an old woman, to give up the flame or light so that the people can have warmth and see the day. In other words, our cultures are dynamic and also seek knowledge, seek understanding (and, in contrast with Judeo-Christian belief, knowledge is not seen as potentially dangerous). Wesucechak, the Cree trickster, is, after all, always going walking, always on a journey toward understanding. But there is no Platonic effort to separate ideas from the world or, like Descartes, to separate the body from the mind. Nor is there a need to be like God.

Instead, all in the universe is endowed with spirit and intelligence, from which ideas flow. It has become almost trendy to mention, but in this world view there is no separation of body, mind, spirit, and heart. The body is of the spirit—the mind of the heart. I may stretch the credibility of the more scientific-minded, but imagine our view as resembling string theory: All life is connected throughout the universe. Yet we are of the earth, responsible for our existence in our territories, responsible for caring about the life around us. Though life is hard, there is joy. The land is the culture, the old people say—in contrast, even opposition, to that which says the mind is the culture.

It is not so odd, then, at this stage of late capitalism in the project called western culture, that cyberspace is "under construction." It has in fact been under construction for at least the past two thousand years in Western cultures.

A fear of the body, aversion to nature, a desire for salvation and transcendence of the earthly plane has created a need for cyberspace. The wealth of the land almost plundered, the air dense with waste, the water sick with poisons: there has to be somewhere else to go.

If you could imagine human consciousness as a fractal geometry, then trajectories of western consciousness would spiral and billow. Here, Eden, Plato, calculus, Descartes, technocracies, and cyberspace are very much part of the "fragmented fractures, self-similar shapes of fractional dimension" of western consciousness.[4]

What if aboriginal consciousness was fractalized, would cyberspace as articulated be part of our geometry of philosophy? Would we have imagined cyberspace? Would we have created cyberspace? I think not—not if cyberspace is a place to escape the earthly plane and the mess of humanity. And not if it is a place of loss or death, where we are to be reborn inside the machine.

Are there points of potential convergence between these world views in cyberspace? The aboriginal idea that all "elements of being, spirit and flesh, sky and earth, can be inhabited simultaneously without active differentiation"[5] may have parallels in the experience of cyberspace. However, the aboriginal view expresses how all life is interconnected; there is no disconnection from the material world. The transformation that is a regular experience in native narratives is not like the experience of escapism in western narrative nor the disembodiment of cyberspace. When Wesucechak changes a young man into his grandfather, he does not become his grandfather. He simply takes on the memories and knowledge of his grandfather, while remaining his grandson. It is a world of subjects to subjects, consciousness to consciousness.

While it may be seductive to draw parallels between aboriginal concepts of transformation, or shape-shifting, and disembodiment in cyberspace, to do so without a philosophical shift would be simplistic. Perhaps some insight can be found in the relationship of animals and humans. A hunter does not get animals because he is a good shot. You could say animals choose to give themselves to the hunter as part of an "old agreement," a symbiotic relationship in which animals and humans communicate. In this view, shape shifting does not

occur simply for the thrill of a new body. Instead, shape shifting has purpose—very often a healing purpose.

Cyberspace is here, though, as are native Indian people. In the to and fro of these times, the question is, Can native world views—native life—find a place in cyberspace? Although native world views cannot be easily typified, it is fair to recognize that they embody the desire for harmony, balance, and unity because the universe is viewed and experienced as a place of harmony, balance, and unity. Within this world view, the individual is endowed with the freedom to express and experience singular emotions and thoughts, which are then shared with the community through narrative, ceremony, and ritual—and this reflects the dynamic nature of the universe, of creation as harmonious, balanced, and whole.

How do these concepts fit into cyberspace when cyberspace has been created within societies that view creation and the universe so differently—one that creates hierarchies of being that reinforce separation and alienation with one that seeks harmony and balance with the self and the universe?

At 4Cyberconf, in Banff, during one of the panel sessions, Leroy Littlebear, a professor of native studies and a lawyer, said to the delegates that they should stop this pursuit of cyberspace, if only for a while. In fact he went further and said, "Go talk to trees and to rocks." He also talked about cyberspace as a metaphor and of the West's seeming need to create metaphors instead of emphasizing life.

I imagined him speaking to Columbus, or the conquistadors, or Champlain, or Ponce De Leon, wondering out loud, "What is your journey? What will you do when you get there?"

These words "go talk to trees and rocks" were seized upon. Some in the audience seemed to sigh, perhaps wanting Leroy to be their prophet; maybe they longed for some peace and quiet in the forest. Others seemed to resist and some snickered, perhaps thinking Leroy was referring to the Indian version of "stop and smell the roses."

These reactions, not atypical, seem to offer little thought about the consequences of the journey or the responsibilities in this new territory. Instead,

these reactions seem to speak of desire and need for more, always more.

Western culture seems to want everything, to go everywhere. Wants that seem endless, like the hunger of a baby bird, a featherless little dinosaur with its beak open so wide you can see right into its stomach. The desire to know, seek new experience, take new journeys, create light, has somehow grown from a flame to a forest fire that burns everything in its way.

"Talk to trees and rocks" seems too simple for such a hunger. What will cease the hunger, the appetite, if only for a moment?

Of course, in a world with a legacy of colonialism, the hunger of Western culture is threatening and frightening. We have had to feed that hunger, with the furs of animals and flesh of fish and the gold and silver of our lands and ourselves as fearsome mysteries in the West's drama of itself.

In cyberspace, that appetite could well consume "the native," and it has already begun. Terrence McKenna and the advocates of the cybershamanism would take the imagined mind, the supposed dreams of the native, and discard the body—the reality of our lives and the meaning of our shamans. I am no shaman nor their spokesperson but I have been taught that a shaman seeks to restore harmony within the individual, community, and universe. Cybershamanism seems to have developed messianic undercurrents that seem to reflect its advocates' desires more than an understanding of shamanism. Shamans are humanitarians, I have learned, here to gain knowledge and protect the people and the land, not to transcend the earthly plane.

I could continue with how western culture's hunger has damaged the world for everyone. And it is not only the hunger of the West, but the hunger of imperial, colonial, patriarchal orders globally. The philosophy of Indian country, however, is not to be used for a witch hunt. In the imagining of cyberspace, perhaps there are points where aboriginal philosophy can have influence. Tribal cultures are not all oedipal plenitude, we cannot make cyberspace purer for the white folk, but we can concern ourselves with the effect it will have on "the clean land."

One of the basic tenets of our philosophies is a concern for future generations. Each generation considers the consequences of its actions, of its presence not just on the next generation, but often the generation five or seven times hence.

What if with each technological advancement the question of its effect on the seventh generation was considered? Some would say this would limit development. On the other hand, could not such a question free us from the technologically deterministic models that seem to be so persistent today? Neither capitalism nor Marxism feel the need to ask questions about future generations. (Well, they do ask the questions, but the answers are essentially utopian.)

Consider the development of the car, for instance. What of the availability of fuel? What of the consequences of road building? What of? What of? Of course western culture knew little about the environment when the car was invented. The point is precisely to ask the questions about possible scenarios beyond the immediate gains.

Cyberspace will not simply create a new machine, it will fuse human and machine. What then of the world it will create for seven generations hence? Will there be no need for grandparents? Will travel become minimized so that roads fall into disuse? Will paranoia increase? Will there be the need for more or less fluoride in the water? Will we ever see the moon again?

Who considers the seventh generation when creating spaces and narratives in cyberspace? What about virtual museums, virtual malls? Why are these institutions recreated in cyberspace, when cyberspace is supposedly heralding a new world of anarchy or democracy (depending on the age of the heralder)? What will be the consequence for future generations of internalizing the power relation that museums, malls, and arcades imply? What change will occur to their sense of freedom, their free will, as the power relationship between those who own information and those who access it remains much as it does today or perhaps even regresses to feudal ways?

Information as experienced in space and time in a place beyond space and time will no doubt change consciousness. But to what end? Information will no longer be traded within invisible structures of power, but rendered in digital

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virtual worlds. What kind of information? For what purpose? How will class structure and questions of equity be addressed? As we speak, will our e-mail addresses place us in groups of elites or in groups of plebes?

Much of the future of cyberspace is unknown, and the mystery of its future is fetishized. Questions are indeed asked, but the long term is eschewed in the interest of immediate rewards—corporate, scientific, political, or psychological. And these are not just questions for so-called futurists to ask, but for the makers of fiber optics, for CEOs of cable companies, for computer scientists, for artists, for teachers.

There is an attitude shared by some that somehow cyberspace will replicate tribal society. In this view, cyberspace by virtue of its nature will restore spiritual elements absent from western life, cause the breakdown of central authorities, and renew communal values.

If this was the case, then concern for the future generation would become standard. But so-called tribal behaviors that do not incorporate the respect for consequences have no meaning. I have talked to too many Anglo-Canadians whose idea of "tribal" concerns freedom from consequence. (The very concept of tribal has to be interrogated—that which we as native people enact and that which western culture imagines.)

When native people say that the past is in the future, that the future is knowable, it is not some mystical rant but is rather the result of planning and consideration. As well, it draws on an understanding of the interconnected nature of all life. Prophetic belief and skill aside, there is a relationship to time and space that is not restricted to the moment at hand.

Consider Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun's virtual reality work *Inherent Rights, Vision Rights*. Lawrence is an internationally recognized artist whose work has been exhibited throughout the world. In his paintings and new media work he draws equally from the surrealist movement and landscape tradition and from Northwest Coast art practices. He creates canvases that tell stories of the genocide of Indian people and the destruction of the land—often with humor. While working in a contemporary art milieu, he uses stories and images to
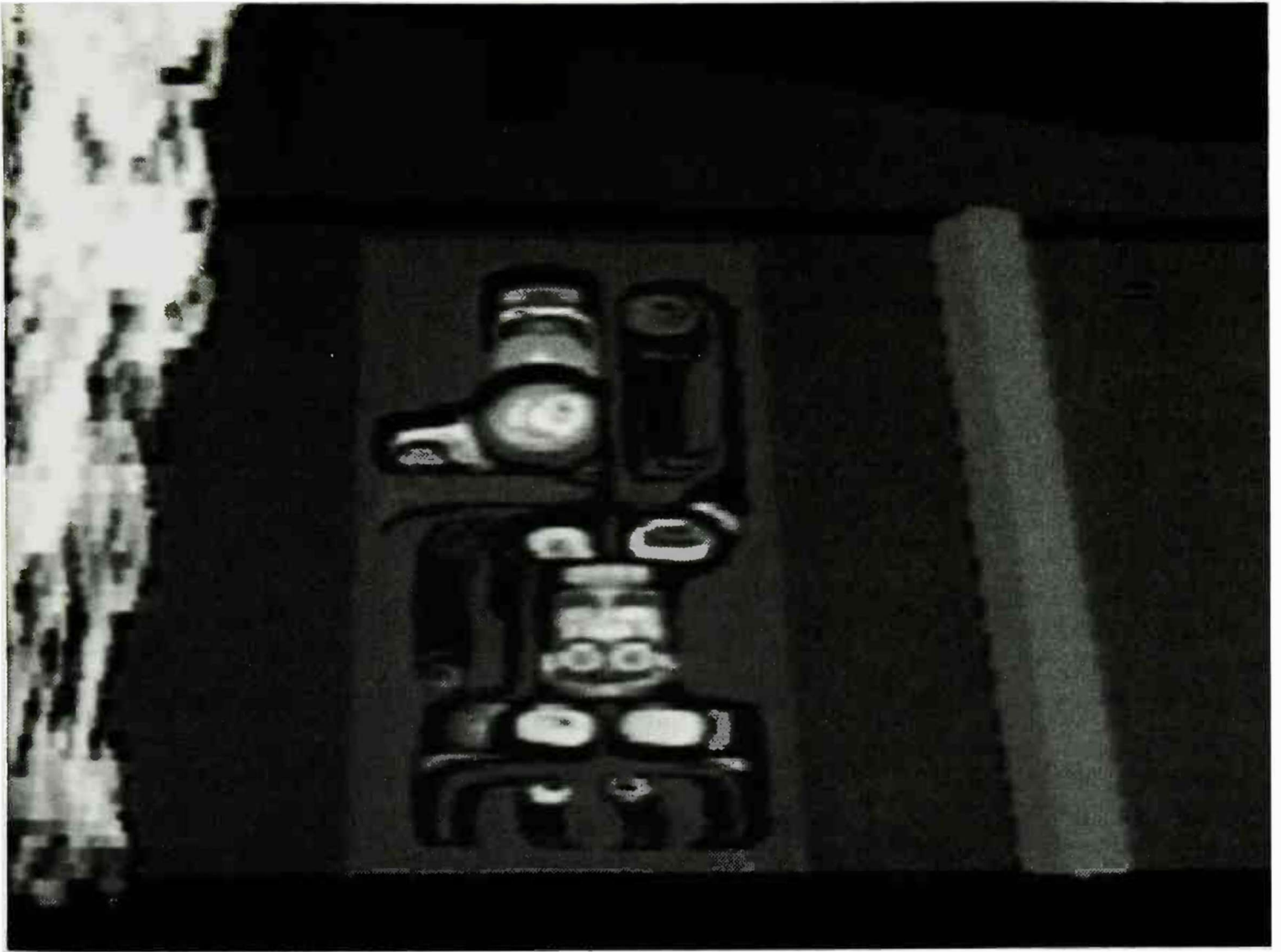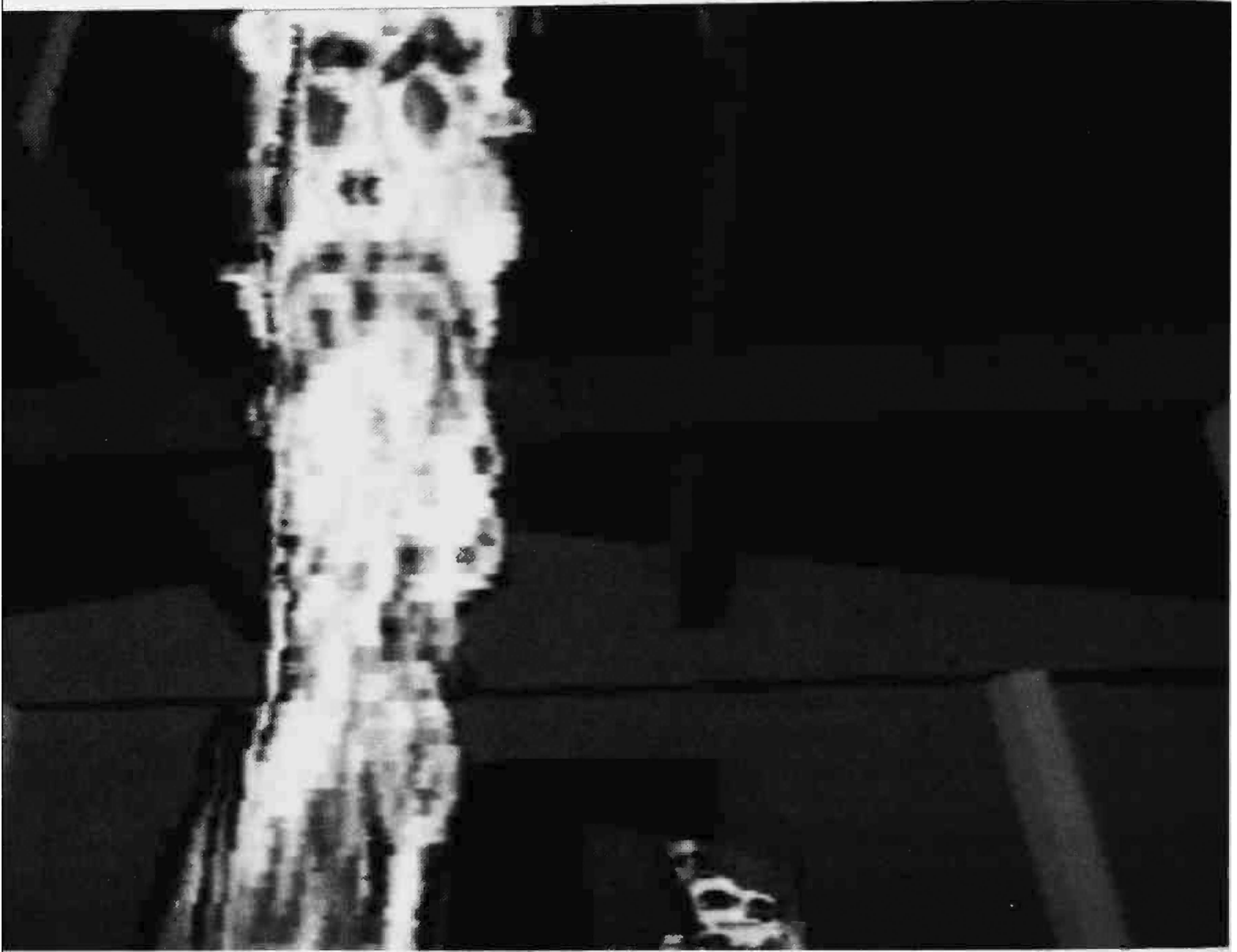
25. Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun, *Inherent Rights, Vision Rights* (1992), frame grab of the bear inside the longhouse.
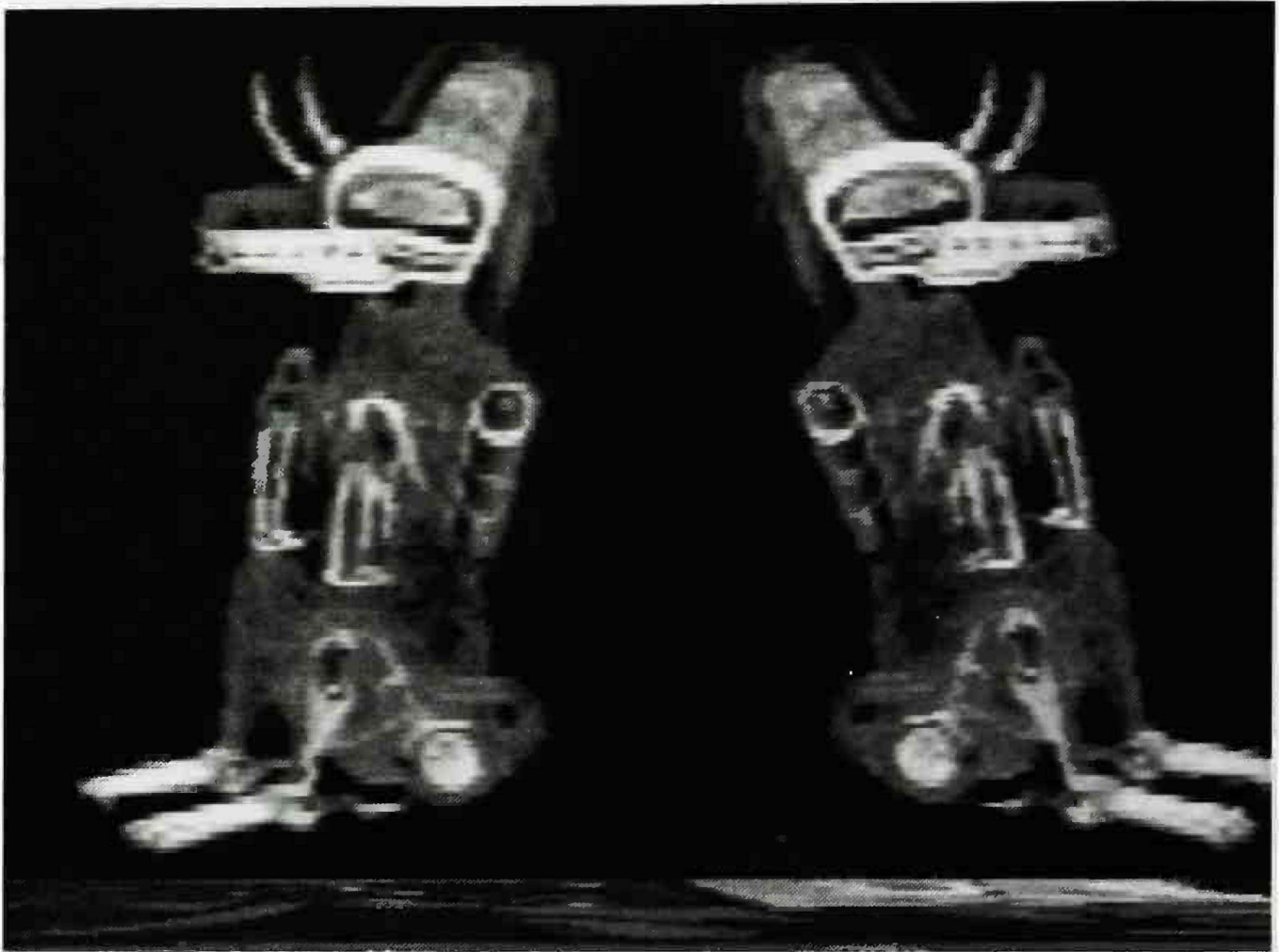
26. Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun, *Inherent Rights, Vision Rights* (1992), frame grab of the dogs standing guard at the back of the longhouse.
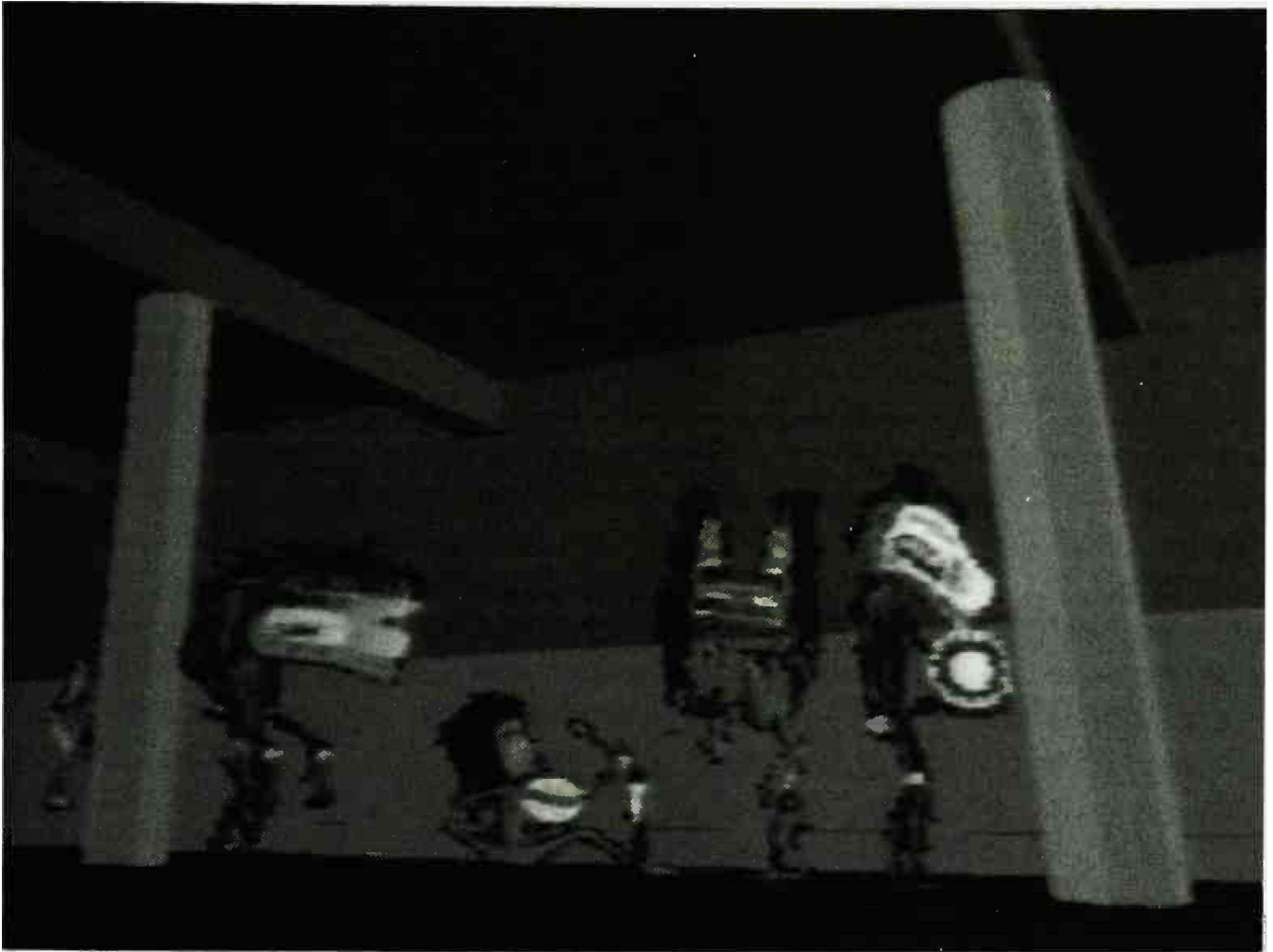
27. Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun, *Inherent Rights, Vision Rights* (1992), frame grab of dancers in the longhouse.

Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun, *Inherent Rights, Vision Rights* (1992), frame grab showing the face in the fire.

demarcate space and time just as they were and still are used in traditional art forms. The story and the history are written on the land.

In Yuxweluptun's virtual environment project there is no helmet, no way to seemingly escape the space you occupy. Instead a kiosk with a viewer, like an old-fashioned stereoscope, allows entry into the work. Once inside, the viewer experiences time. The time of walking from the outside to the inside. The time of listening to a dog. The time of hearing the roar of the fire as the wood burns. Time passes. And there is space. There is a door to enter, to define the outside of the longhouse from the inside. There are four walls and a roof. The smoke rises upward to exit out the smokehole.

Of course, we are in a virtual environment, and the space and time are no more then 1s and 0s organized in front of our eyes, on the screen, and the fire never burns out.

In the majority of virtual environments that I have experienced there is a suspension of time. You move through a seamless-experience corridor with little to mark the beginning or the end. This may serve to undermine the metanarratives of society, no doubt. Here you can experience space without limit. But, to paraphrase, if poetry requires the willing suspension of disbelief, then here virtual reality/cyberspace requires the "willing suspension of the flesh."[6]

Yuxweluptun does not want you to forget your body. Your identity is as intact here as it might be in the material world. You hear your feet along the small pebbles on the ground and will see them should you look down, since you are not immersed in a helmet. Even as you glimpse how Yuxweluptun prays, in the longhouse with the spirit world present, you do not become Yuxweluptun nor a persona he has created through narrative. You are yourself, and must own your feelings and your experience.

In this world a different concept of narrative incorporates agency, which could influence ideas about cyberspace. Here, narrative is derived from story-telling and oral tradition. Storytelling is not exclusive to aboriginal cultures; it is shared around the world, from Herodotus to Scheherazade. Theorist John

Berger explains that "very few stories are narrated, whether to idealize or to condemn; rather they testify to the always slightly surprising range of the possible. Although conceived with everyday events, they are mystery stories."[7] Walter Benjamin compared storytelling with the novel and concluded that in storytelling, "the most extraordinary things are related with the greatest accuracy, but the psychological connections of the events are not forced on to the listener. . . It is left up to him to interpret things the way he understands them."[8]

Yuxweluptun invites you into the mystery of the everyday. You must define yourself in relationship to the story around you. You are not witness to an ethnographic containment where in the gathering of data you become a hero. Instead you are challenged to "portray yourself," to make your own "psychological connections," since you are your own author.

One could say the experience of cyberspace offers the reversal of narrative as derived from storytelling, a return to an oral tradition, albeit created by text on an electronic screen (for now).

But the parallel would be too easy. It seems to be that despite the subversions of gender transgression, of the experience of nonlinear narrative, of fragmented identities, cyberspace and virtual reality are still anchored to reenactments of western cultural consciousness.

These narratives in cyberspace and VR repeat the traditions of western narrative. Each one experiences their story as a hero asserting his will over others.

In western tradition the hero is like a hunter who gets his prey because he is the best shot or has the best gun or maybe just because he is the hungriest.

In native cultures the hero is like a hunter or gatherer who is only one part of a series of transactions, a process of communication and exchanges between human and animal and the universe.

In scientific terms, maybe the difference is like viewing the universe in classical Newtonian physics of local and mechanistic concepts or in newer concepts that incorporate "non-locality, wholeness and enfoldedness."[9]

In the potential enormity of cyberspace and the seeming limitlessness of VR, the universe seems more "mechanical and separate" than "connected and

immanent." The alienated psyche of western man and woman cannot find relief in cyberspace and virtual reality. You can go anywhere, be anyone-but you are still alone.

As science changes, perhaps the universe will be imagined in ways that reflect our interconnectedness. As cyberspace develops, perhaps it will examine augmented versus immersive technology. Perhaps it will explore narrative forms in which you do not leave your body or soul. Just as the storyteller doesn't control the psychological connections of the listener, just as the shaman doesn't invade your mind, perhaps we can create new narratives where you must call upon your own powers and your own words.

There may be other ways to imagine cyberspace, not as a place born of greed, fear, and hunger but instead a place of nourishment. A place where people can find their own dreams. Not just fantasies of abandon, but dreams of humanity and of ways to keep the land clean.

Notes

1. Harold Cardinal, "A Canada What the Hell Is It All About?" in *The Rebirth of Canada's Indians* (Edmonton: Hurtig, 1977).

2. Michael Heim, "The Erotic Ontology of Cyberspace," in *Cyberspace: First Steps,* ed. Michael Benedikt (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991).

3. Ibid.

4. John Allan Paulos, *Beyond Numeracy* (London: Viking, 1991).

5. Julian Rice, "How the Bird That Speak Lakota Learned a Name," in *Recovering the Word,* ed. Brian Swann and Arnold Krupat (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987).

6. John F. Friesen, unpublished essay, Vancouver, 1994.

7. John Berger, *The Sense of Sight* (New York: Pantheon, 1985),

8. Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller," in *Illuminations: Walter Benjamin,* ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken Books, 1969),

9. F. David Peat, *Einstein's Moon* (Chicago: Contemporary Books, 1990).