not everybody's autobiography

I was in the midst of writing yet another superficial story on weblogging for the mass media, when I followed this link to Microcontent News and John Hiler's introductory piece explaining the site's mandate. It contains the following call to arms:

> The Personal Computing revolution was about the democratization of computing: the idea that anyone could have access to the power of a computer, without having to beg, borrow, and steal access to the mainframes and minicomputers owned by major corporations and universities.
>
> The Personal Publishing revolution seems like the inevitable follow-up: the democratization of publishing. It's another Promethean notion: the idea that anyone can start publishing anything to the world, using the Internet. And unlike the dot-com boom and bust, personal publishing is being driven by passionate hobbyists fueled not by greed, but by a burning desire to share their thoughts with the world.

Sound familiar? It should. As Margaret Wertheim points out in The Pearly gates of Cyberspace, this kind of techno-utopianist rhetoric has been with us since the 16th century. And with each passing wave of visionary fervour, the emergent reality has always been seen to fall short of the dream.

At a panel at this year's SxSW Interactive Festival, Cameron Marlow noted that his early research with blogdex demonstrates that the kinds of social networks being built in the online communities of personal publishers such as bloggers are not that much different from offline societal networks. His findings raise an important point, one that should be taken for granted by now. Cyberspace is not an escape from offline political, cultural, racial, and gender-based hegemony.

Nowhere was this more evident to me than at SxSW. Sure, I was moved by the warm enthusiasm of the personal publishing zealots, and I don't for a moment question their motivation, or wish to suggest that their voices have no part in the struggle for a democratic web. But when a group of nearly exclusively white, male, middle class American

web designers starts to talk about the fact that anyone has access to the online world, I get a really queasy feeling in my stomach.

Who is this "anyone"? SxSW takes place in Austin, Texas, only an hour's drive or so from the Alamo. I drank my Dos Equis, and scanned the conference crowd for a visible Latino presence. Just before attending, I had come across the work of ethno-cyborg Guillermo Gómez-Peña, an artist and writer living and working at the borders of the cyber-barrio. His words now affirmed my own bewilderment:

> We were also shocked by the benign or quiet(not naive) ethnocentrism permeating the debates around art and digital technology, specially in California. The master narrative was either the utopian and outdated language of Western democratic values or a bizzarre form of anti-corporate/corporate jargon. The unquestioned lingua franca was of course English, "the official language of international communications"... and largely de-politicized (i.e.postcolonial theory and the border paradigm were conveniently overlooked); and if Chicanos and Mexicans didn't participate enough in the net, it was solely because of lack of information or interest, (not money or "access") or again, because we were "culturally unfit".

Peña's paper goes on to cite an ad for AOL- "The world is waiting for you- so come on in!" This became an eerie echo of a similar invitation I heard at the conference when an audience member suggested that the peer-to-peer publishing network formed a "gated community." A panelist responded glibly, "well, come on in!" I repeatedly heard the argument that it is the outsider's hang-ups, fears and laziness that form the barriers against participation in these communities. Peña is only one of countless cyber-culture researchers documenting the weighty evidence against this sanctimonious assertion.

Austin is also home to Alluquere Rosanne Stone, another border creature. Stone researches gender, transgender, and performance theory in relation to the experience of the interface and the online world. She's the author of the War of Desire and Technology at the Close of the Mechanical Age, which should be listed in the "been there, done that" section of the booklist of anyone whose been thinking and writing about online communities. Sandy Stone was not in attendance

at the conference, and I wonder what she would have thought about the fact that the SxSW web award for "grrrl site" was won by whatsherface.com, a site produced by Mattel (yes... Mattel) that ostensibly helps young girls express their identity by giving them a "range" of candy-floss avatars to help them decide what clothes and make-up to wear, or to "load a guy" in the pursuit of the ideal crush. Yes, I hear Mattel is also coming out with a new Donna Haraway Barbie, complete with a variety of prosthetic accessories, and when you pull the string at the back, she giggles, "I would rather be a cyborg than a goddess." The fact that the whatsherface.com site was designed by a man is immaterial, though this was the cause for some embarrassed laughter at the awards ceremony. What is troubling is the fact that three of the five sites nominated for the grrrl site award were about fashion and clothes. Suddenly the Women's Television channel begins to look progressive. I was surprised the riot grrls didn't storm the awards and torpedo the place with tampons.

So, by now I'm waiting for the standard charge- "Why didn't you say anything about this at the conference instead of waiting to get home and hide behind your computer screen?" Well, for the record, I didn't wait. I brought these issues up in my conversations with a number of people- panelists and audience members alike. My conversants either appeared to not be particularly interested in these issues, or they didn't seem to understand the questions. Amongst my crew, all you have to do is say "race, gender, class," and immediately you know the territory. But whenever I tried to broach the subject at the conference, I distinctly felt that I was speaking a foreign language. And there wasn't an official forum for this kind of discussion. If you wanted to take up these issues, you had to roll your own. If the conference's web awards saw reason to have a category for grrrl content, however misguided and problemmatic their definition of that category might have been, then why did the conference not also deem it necessary to have a panel that took up notions of gender in online community? And finally, my job at the conference was to write another one of those generic introductions to weblogging that Hiler decries (although I thank him for the pity he extends to the plight of the mainstream journalist). Those relatively harmless discussions kept me fairly busy.

I'm not usually the one to raise these issues, anyway. Comparatively, I am not well-versed in the politics of gender and race. I usually don't have to play this role because in the cybercultural circles in which I travel, there are many voices sounding the call, and they've done so for a good 20 years at the very least. Hiler celebrates the fact that, in

spirit, the personal publishing industry is in the mid 70's. I, too, felt as though I was in a time-warp when at SxSW, but I don't want to go back to the "good-old days" because I know that they are the most pernicious consensual hallucination of the net. They simply do not exist. I cannot go back to a world before the cyborg manifesto.

Nothing is more dangerous than when the privileged voice declares itself neutral. The hidden and null values of the online personal publishing communities must be exposed and challenged. The debate must be politicized. We must be very careful and clear about what we mean when we say "we."

I am somewhat encouraged by the fact that the loudest celebrators of independent online content seem to be intelligent, compassionate, and altogether decent human beings. I trust that they would respond favourably to this challenge because I do believe them when they say that they want to hear new voices and that they want this community to be open to everyone. I trust that if they don't possess the language or desire to take up this challenge themselves, they will make a deliberate effort to encourage the participation of those that do. If next year's SxSW still wishes to address issues of content and community, a panel or two on gender, race and ethnicity in online communities and the politics of access might be a place to start.

I notice that Hiler has installed an automatic Google translator to mediate the sites from his referral logs- he need never directly confront the multiplicity of languages that somehow make their way across the border into this new frontier land. I, for one, still dream "not of a common language, but of a powerful infidel heteroglossia."

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